

THE SWITHIN

CHRONICLES 3:

THE COMET COMETH

Sharon Maria Bidwell

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Dedication

To the love of my life, always.

To Brian, my father, who hoped to live to read the trilogy, but alas only read book one. Dad, here it is. I'm sorry you didn't get to read it but thank you for wanting to.

Prologue

Black silence oversees the death of tramps,

No voices raised, no eyes drenched with tears, and

No stars ablaze on high, and certainly no comets.

Reserve thy wrath for more noble deaths.

Let rest he who has come to the end of wanderings.

-- Swithin Prophecy

The depths of the abyssal..

Only blackness existed, total, without a pinprick of light.

Reaching out, he believed himself blind, without sight, until there, a star, one golden spot of illumination. The spot of light danced across the back of his hand, burned his skin, and then vanished. In anguish, he cried out. Unseen walls closed in on him, made it difficult for him to breathe. In seething rage, he panicked.

He drew in grit on a hasty breath, hearing only the thudding, pounding beat of his heart in his chest. Ice coalesced, forming crystals, small stabbing icicles spearing him inside. He closed his eyes, pushing back the darkness. The panic eased. He slowed his racing heart and forced out the tension.

With otherworldly senses at his disposal, he used his power and listened. He coughed, and the sound echoed back from a greater distance than he had imagined. Reaching out once more, he tried to take a step, only to discover he couldn't. Something tugged at his other wrist, holding him fastened. He called the power without hesitation, burning away the restraint. He made his way across the floor, sliding his feet slowly. Bending down, he touched hard, compacted earth. Standing, he moved forward once more.

A hand pressed against him and spun him around in another direction. He cried out and stumbled. Hastening away, he reached the wall by colliding with it, in pain. Roots scratched at his skin, clawing at him. Soil crumbled under the tips of his fingers. He flinched, insane with dread in an instant.

Staring blindly, he quickly shut his eyes when they began to sting. He turned away, blinking, his eyes tearing. The quiet drumming sound of earthen clumps made him freeze as surely as the ice that resided so close to his skin. He feared the earth falling in on him, burying him alive.

Had he died? Once he would have welcomed death; now, he didn't.

A hand closed over his, and he started, gasping. The gesture opened his mouth to a different kind of invasion. Someone moaned against his lips, and he recognised the way this person kissed. He tugged his lover into his embrace. They clawed and grasped. Clothes ripped, and shredded garments fell whispering over now-bare skin, providing its own kind of satisfaction.

Let me in.

He stopped, frowning, catching the arms of the other person. He couldn't be sure which of them had spoken. Did he utter the plea, or did his love cry out to him? Was the plea physical or spiritual?

Peace, contentment; a smile spread over his lips, as at once he understood. It was both his plea and that of the other. It was both corporeal and mystical. They wanted everything from each other. I'll never leave you. The light had brightened, yet he could see only the lips of the other man, the smile appearing rueful upon hearing his pledge.

You won't have to.

The truthfulness of that tore apart his desire. Terror stabbed his heart. I won't lose you, he insisted, but it sounded too much of a plea for his liking. Some said to lose hope was to reach the depths of the abyssal. They said it was the last song a spirit ever sung. He clung, yet the body in his arms melted. Vaporious fog floated free of his grasp, then stroked him, mocking, dispersing even as he reached for it. It faded and was gone.

Reaching up, he rubbed the side of his face in frustration. His fingers snagged his hair, pulling it down in front of his eyes. He froze in fear. He was Shavar, the Comet, a man with long, chestnut brown hair, but the strands in his vision were the palest blond, almost white like ice.

Markis awoke, clamping down on his shout, swallowing Uly's name, though the lump that formed in his throat threatened to choke the life from him.

## Chapter One

Frowning, Uly strained to look upward. It did no good. What little he could see of the fastenings about his wrists in no way helped his situation. Expertly tied, the fine leather strips only tightened the more he pulled on them, though somehow, they appeared to have a limit. When he first felt them constrict, the breath had caught in his throat, and he almost panicked. He had no wish to cut off his circulation. As tugging on them alone or twisting his wrists did no good, he had studied them to see if he could figure out the fastenings. No luck there. Unfortunately, the movement exposed his throat.

He swallowed, aware of the radiant glint teasing the corner of his left eye. A stray beam of light struck the blade and sent dancing illumination about the room. He watched one bright spot on the ceiling before he closed his eyes and gave himself over to the darkness.

The blade didn't touch his throat, but something else did. It took him a moment to realise he felt the soft lick of a tongue as a backdrop against the sharpness of teeth. He swallowed and felt the movement of his throat against another's mouth. The teeth snagged his flesh, hurting, while the blade cut through the last garment. The sense of vulnerability won out over embarrassment. The clothes, thin and fragile, offered no real barrier, but strange how one thought of them as so important. When faced with an intruder, the first reaction was to grab for one's clothing.

Something sharp scratched along the line of his jaw. It took him a moment to recognise it as merely a fingernail. He opened his eyes and turned his head to the side. The knife was gone, along with his clothes, the blade's only purpose to divest him of his garments. Perhaps if he hadn't been on his back on the bed, the man above him would have removed his clothes some other way.

Of course, in any case, he now lay naked.

'Lie still, or I'll tie your feet as well.' The voice emerged soft, but retained an edge to it. Somehow, the instruction made Uly's flesh jump and twitch more freely. Fingers stroked his skin, lazy, examining. Strangely, the touch contained nothing sexual. It was as though the man merely inspected what he held captive, perhaps judged the quality. The examination made Uly shiver in equally strange combinations. The touch moved to places that were more intimate and he

twisted, trying to ease away from those questing fingers.

'Right now you're only hurting yourself. You don't want me to hurt you.' The words sounded just as calm and quiet, but they made Uly grow still for all that. Something existed in that voice; not a boast, but a certainty. This man knew how to hurt him in numerous and varied ways. The other man in the room just sat, quietly watching.

One bright thought burned in his mind: Markis. Markis would save him.

The hands traced over his flesh. "You have soft skin."

The idea flashed in his mind of how much had changed. Once, he'd suffered from calluses and tough, thick skin on his hands and feet. Other people had taken him in, accepted a street thief into a palace, cleaned him up and fed him. He looked so different now that sometimes, when he caught sight of his image, he would stop, startled and shocked, to see his reflection.

Once more, a fingernail raked down over his skin, this time down the left side of his chest in a direct line to his nipple. He expected it to divert, to go around that small nub, but it went straight over it, sharply. He arched, hissed out his breath. Finally, he fell back, gasping. The nipple grew rigid in shock and, to his dismay, so did other things. Sweat broke out on his skin; the man laughed, before leaning forward to lick.

'Salty,' the voice whispered.

Uly turned his head away, trying to hide his face against his arm. A hand gripped his chin between finger and thumb, and jerked his head back again.

'Don't look away from me. Open your eyes.'

He shook his head. He kept the back of his head pressed into the bed, but he wouldn't open his eyes. The hot pad of a thumb stroked over one eyelid, then pressed just enough for him to be aware of it.

'Eyes are for seeing,' the voice said, threat making it husky. Uly didn't believe the threat, but just the thought made his blood run cold. His erection subsided.

"Take it easy on him." Finally, the second man broke his silence.

'He has to learn the hard way.' The man said hard with some amusement as his weight came down. Though he kept his eyes closed, Uly was aware they were almost face-to-face and definitely cock-to-cock. The weight grew uncomfortable until his ribs ached, and he struggled to breathe, three of his senses engulfed with the man's heat and solidity, his smell, the sound of his breathing. Uly let out a small moan and, somehow, even received a taste of him on the heated air emanating from their conjoined flesh. Finally, the man eased his weight back enough so that Uly could breathe again, but that only made him realise the man had leaned on him on purpose. He lay trapped, no way out. He panicked.

Writhing, twisting, a lonely wail sounded from deep in his throat. His breathing grew ragged no matter how much he tried to keep his breath even.

"You'll hyperventilate."

He heard, but didn't care. He thrashed, wriggled, and twisted, aware of how much this made his skin encounter his assailant. A hand tightened to hold him still.

'Open your eyes. Open your eyes! Look at me!'

The voice had grown callous, unyielding. Uly's eyes snapped open. Seeing the room somehow helped him win out over his panic. He didn't look at the man, though, only saw him as a blurred, dark image as his gaze slid away. He couldn't get free by struggling; he found it to be merely exhausting. He glanced over to the other man who had paused in what he was doing. The man held a quill dipped in ink over a parchment. The scratchy sounds it made as he wrote had fallen silent. A look of doubt drifted into that second pair of dark eyes, and a flash of hope engulfed Uly.

A hot, wet mouth covering his sore nipple drove the hope back. Uly whimpered. The sensation moved from hot to cool as the man pulled back. Uly heard a sigh.

'Uly.' The voice called to him, softer now. The man's weight settled at his side. A finger trailed down the side of his face to his chin. "If you want out of this, you know what you have to do."

He did, but he couldn't. He opened his mouth, and no word emerged, even though it lay on his tongue as though it held weight. All he needed to do was say one word: shere. It meant dearest, beloved, but in the context of a plea. One said it when wanting to end an argument, for example.

'Uly.' The voice became half-whisper, half-seduction. His gaze slid towards the man's dark eyes. They stared at him intently. "You know this is just a game, right? You know we're not going to hurt you?"

He did, and yet he didn't. It wasn't so much that he feared physical harm, but there seemed to be another kind of pain underlying all this. They had taught him another ancient word. Sema, which meant tame. They called this game semaris, which meant taming; but, as he was discovering, the meaning went far deeper. He didn't have a good enough reason to say sema yet. That came later, apparently, though he only vaguely understood the concept. Shere was for safety, sema for acceptance. He wasn't sure he accepted anything, but he had no idea if he could have said shere right now if his life depended on it, and he didn't understand why. One little word would put a stop to this. Could it be part of him didn't want it to end?

Ryanac's dark eyes regarded him, flicking back and forth, searching his gaze. "I'll never hurt you," Ryanac reiterated. "This is about taking you further than you may want to go, but not more than you're ready for or can stand."

He had gone far enough for today, apparently, and without his having to say so, Ryanac looked as if he knew it.

"You're not ready for this," he said. Leaning down for the knife, he brought the blade up to cut the straps. Uly felt a strange combination of relief and disappointment. A cry left his lips before he could prevent it. Ryanac looked at him with a look of surprise, and then grinned. One of those large hands stroked his hair, his face. "It's not over, just postponed," he said. "We can do other things." The man was a strange combination of brutality and gentleness, as well as many other things. He was Markis's personal guard, best friend, and lover. Just as Uly was Markis's lover. The situation made for a peculiar, yet dynamic, relationship. Even Uly accepted something vibrant existed between the three of them.

Turning his gaze to the other side of the room, Uly stared at the second man. Markis sat looking through official documents, signing them, or making amendments. He wore a bright blue robe shot through with silver. He had watched the whole thing.

'I tried,' Uly murmured by way of apology. The Swithin way allowed for pairings of more than two people, and Uly was very aware that Markis wanted him to feel comfortable around Ryanac. They weren't lovers yet, not truly, and Uly wanted to share affection with Ryanac for his own reasons as well as to please Markis, the man who was the Swithin king as well as the man he loved. Markis shook his head, set down the quill, and rose from the chair. Slowly, he approached the bed, and

then climbed up onto it, finally lying down on Uly's left side. The two men effectively sandwiched him, one clothed, the other naked.

Markis brought his face close and stroked Uly's brow with his fingers. "You didn't have to play Ryanac's game."

The big man shot him a look as though to say it wasn't entirely his fault. Then he let it go and turned his attention to Uly, who squirmed a little under the gaze of both men.

"I thought you might enjoy it."

"I..dd." He wasn't sure he should admit to that.

Markis smiled. "Do you know how long you've been at this?"

Uly shook his head. It felt as if hours could have passed, but he believed it could only be a few minutes since Ryanac had tied him down.

"Almost an hour. As long in your bonds as out of them."

Uly blinked. He could accept that Ryanac had taken a great deal of time tying him and removing their clothes, but according to Markis, almost the same amount of time had passed since then. He tugged at his lower lip with his teeth, in thought.

Markis let out a groan. "I do wish you wouldn't do that," he said.

Uly blinked again, surprised by Markis's complaint. Ryanac chuckled.

"No, he doesn't," the guard said. "He's just moaning because it makes him want to do this."

A hand turned his head. The man's mouth joined to his, the tongue parting his lips. Their mouths fed. As one kiss ended, another began; clearly, the sight had proved too much for Markis to resist. By the time Uly opened his eyes, he had been thoroughly kissed by both men. His heart and other things pounded. They weren't through talking about what had happened, though.

"You managed to trust me for quite awhile there," Ryanac said into his ear.

Uly turned his head, voluntarily this time. "I do trust you." Those dark eyes moved back and forth again, searching, examining. Ryanac's stare made him feel he should elaborate. "It's just." Words failed. They knew what caused the panic. It didn't seem fair that bad memories should interfere with his making future ones, even though he'd made peace with much of his past. He'd lived rough on the streets where he came from, before he met Markis, and a long time ago he'd had reason to fear large, rough men such as Ryanac. Such men had taken someone he cared about from him, or wanted nothing from Uly that he wanted to give. Ryanac and Markis weren't like that, though. They were nothing like the men where he'd been born and raised. Uly lay between them, aware his pale blond hair was a sharp contrast to theirs.

"You don't have to do this again."

Markis's offer was welcome, yet how could he explain that he wanted to? "No. It". Helped? Uly's thoughts moved away from the men on the bed, even from the desire that hummed quietly over his skin. Letting go, putting his trust in Ryanac, had terrified him at first, and then his emotions changed.

"Uly."

One of the men was calling to him; lost in thought, he couldn't distinguish which one. He looked into Markis's eyes. "It helped," he admitted, frowning as he did. Ryanac's chuckle tickled his ear.

"I thought it might."

Still frowning, Uly looked at him. "Why?"

The guard's large, thick fingers were surprisingly soft as they drifted over his skin, tracing lazy circles. The touch stirred and tickled; the sensation remained even when the touch moved on.

"Change things. Use it. Make it something else," Ryanac whispered. As he spoke, something inside Uly grew quiet, settled.

He still suffered from the occasional bad dream. These dreams irritated more than frightened him, although that wasn't entirely true. He did fear them. He also resented them interfering with his new life. What these men were trying to show him wasn't about ending the dreams. Ryanac had told him next time he dreamed and became aware of it -- as he confessed he often did -- he should follow the dream to its conclusion. Watch it as an observer, not a participant. In these dreams, he always fought. He didn't want to see the thing he feared because.

Uly sighed. Both men looked at him in puzzlement, but he shook his head. He didn't die at the end of the dream. He already knew that without going to the end. In the dream, he knew what was coming almost as if he experienced a premonition, and what he knew would happen was that he faced a separation. The dream took Markis from his life, took Ryanac. He wasn't dying; rather, it felt as if someone took the people and things he loved away from him. This was what he feared now. Maybe losing people he loved was something he'd always feared. Either those that showed him affection left, or others took them away from him. His birth parents had sold him, his adoptive parents looked after him only for a time, and then men had taken a good friend who cared for him from Uly's life. Maybe if he could accept his fear existed, it would cease to haunt him. A dream was just a dream, after all. Ryanac wanted him to take control of the dream, just as here he'd been the one in control, even when tied to the bed. This game ended on one little word that was his to say.

"Sema," he said. The word whispered out between his lips, although he wasn't entirely sure why he said it. He sensed it, though. For the first time, it felt as if his consciousness touched on what they were doing.

A slight frown tightened Markis's brow. For a moment, he even wondered if he'd truly heard Uly say sema just now. He studied Uly's expression, looking for signs of comprehension. When he saw what he was looking for, he smiled. "It seems you did learn something."

When Ryanac first suggested this, Markis had instantly objected. Uly and Ryanac weren't lovers in their own right yet. He sometimes wondered if they ever would be. Uly let the big man touch and pet him, and sometimes in the heat of a tangled, sweating mass of bodies, the once street thief let go, clutching at the big man's arm or hand, even leaning into and resting against him, but so far the desire for comfort appeared to dominate their relationship. Still, listening to his friend's arguments, Markis had eventually done what he always did, and put his faith in Ryanac.

Part of Uly letting go of his past required acceptance. Bad things had happened to him, and Uly had once attempted to bury them where they would never see the light of day. All this achieved was for his memories to lie dormant, ready to surface at inauspicious moments. They had convinced Uly that if he didn't accept his past, face it, and move on, it would affect him for the rest of his life. Uly didn't have to confess that he was so used to things going wrong in his life that he expected something to take this new life away from him. Markis feared the same thing. He just



wouldn't let his fear rule him. If Uly lived only in fear of what might happen, he'd gain little joy from the good things in life. He didn't want that for Uly. Both he and Ryanac had thought the art of semaris would help. Markis had tried to explain it to him, but the young man struggled with the concept. Now, apparently that moment had occurred naturally. If you could call someone tying you to a bed natural. Still, it seemed as if Uly finally understood what the word sema meant, but Markis wanted to be certain of it.

"You understand what it means now?" Markis asked him.

Uly gave a single nod of his head. "Letting go. Accepting." His gaze wandered across the ceiling. His brow tightened into a frown. "Yet it goes deeper than that. It's about making acceptance a part of you, and it's about trust. It's almost intangible. You're in control even though it appears you've given your will over --"

Markis stopped Uly speaking by pressing his fingers to the younger man's lips, before his mouth ran away with him. "Close enough for now." Markis's smile broadened. "And you're correct in that it's difficult to put into words, anyhow. I can see a hint of understanding in your eyes, and that will suffice."

"A few more lessons wouldn't hurt." Ryanac chuckled.

From the look in his eyes, Markis let Uly know Ryanac was just being Ryanac, and he didn't have to do anything he didn't want to do. "That's up to Uly," Markis told his friend. He turned his head to look at the discarded and now sliced garments. "Although if we keep destroying clothes like this, we'll have the seamstresses after us."

Uly blushed. Perhaps he even remembered the night Markis had sliced his nightshift from him, the first night they had made love. They shared a moment, smiling at each other. Ryanac broke their reverie, pulling Uly's head around to face him.

"You're hard as a rock."

Uly blinked as though he didn't understand the words. As one, the three men glanced down. Uly's blush deepened in colour. His erection had subsided, but sometime during the conversation, perhaps due their amorous kisses, his wanton flesh had risen to the occasion. Rather than take blood from his erection, his blushing appeared to pump more into it. He twisted as though he would struggle out from between the two of them, but he had nowhere to go. Ryanac caught Markis's eye and, barely faltering, Markis caught hold of Uly's hands.

Markis watched Uly's face for any true objection. Those grey eyes flicked to where Markis gripped him firmly around his wrists over the cords, and then Uly shook his head. "Don't tie me. Not now."

"I won't," Markis promised, but he moved Uly's hands above his head as he did so. Lowering his face, he whispered against Uly's lips. "Grip the headboard." Frowning, Uly hesitated, but then did as Markis asked. Uly's fingers encircled the wooden spindles in a light grasp. "Grip them as tight as you want or need to," Markis told him. The frown only deepened. Markis couldn't help smiling. "You'll know what I mean. Lie back, sweet Uly. Lie back and enjoy."

Soft kisses whispered over Uly's brow, his closed eyelids, his cheeks, and his mouth. The two sets of lips felt disembodied. He was aware only of their touch, not the bodies of the two men kissing him. Somehow, they managed to hold their distance. When fingers began to stroke his neck, he jumped. More feathery, light kisses calmed him. Equally light caresses whispered over his skin, from his neck to his shoulder, back to his collarbone, and then in a direct line down the centre of his chest to his navel and back up again. He lost track of which fingers belonged to

which man. This time, when the strokes played out over his shoulders, they whispered down his sides to his ribs. His nipples stiffened in response as they passed close but failed to make contact. A small gasp left his throat, and he bit his lip, hoping they would stroke over those small, taut nubs on the return journey. They didn't. He moaned in protest, feeling heat rush back into his face as he did. He hadn't meant to make a sound. His grip on the wooden headboard tightened, then relaxed. He let one hand drift down.

'Keep hold,' Markis said softly. 'Nothing's going to keep you there but willpower. If you let go, we stop.'

Uly swallowed, lost to the darkness behind his eyelids. Slowly, he opened them. Both men lay there calmly, one on each side. Markis still wore the robe, but the two sides had separated. The sight of Markis's skin flashed beneath like a dark promise. Something in his eyes said he meant what he said. If Uly released his grip, both men would stop what they were doing. Something argumentative rose up inside him. He wanted to tell Markis he wouldn't play this stupid game, but he couldn't do it. Part of him wanted them to keep touching him, but it was more than that. He was being foolish and the game wasn't stupid. Part of him recognised the emotion behind his resistance, and it had more to do with him not giving in to what others wanted of him. What Markis offered though, had nothing to do with that. The heart of this game was benevolent. Ryanac had started the game, and this was just a continuance of it.

'Close your eyes for a little while,' Ryanac told him.

Open them, close them. When would Ryanac make up his mind? Despite his mental protest, Uly closed his eyes. At once, the touch of the two men whispered over him, up and down his skin, moving in. When he was certain that one of them would touch a nipple, had to for they were so close to it, and he was even turning, seeking their caresses, they fooled him again. A hot, wet heat engulfed both nipples at once. Two tongues swirled and pressed into him, teasing the firm flesh.

Uly arched, cried out, and almost lost his grip. His head thrown back, his eyes suddenly shot wide open, and he stared at the spindles in the headboard, tightening his grip with one hand and flailing to grab the one from which his other hand had slipped. He heard a chuckle and realised that both men were laughing. Thankfully, they didn't stop. In the wake of their caresses, they now licked and bit until Uly struggled to remember he needed to maintain his grip. Between the two of them, they were making him dizzy. He couldn't hold on for much longer, and yet he squeezed the spindles with his fingers even as the thought occurred to him.

All he needed to do was let go, and they would stop. The pleasure crested, no longer the shivery need of growing arousal. He lay drenched in necessity. Their mouths worked on his neck and chest. Their fingers fluttered over his legs, stroking his inner thighs. His testicles tried to crawl up into his body even as they swelled in anticipation.

'Please,' he whispered, his eyes now alternately fluttering open, then closing. Markis's mouth broke away from his skin.

'What do you want, Uly?'

He shook his head. He didn't know. He gasped as fingers worked into the heat of his groin where his leg joined his body. The backs of their hands touched his scrotum, lifted his balls, only to move away again. Certain the move was deliberate, he cursed. They laughed in unison. Still no one had touched his cock. It lay rigid up the line of his stomach.

'We can both fuck you,' Markis offered.

Again, he shook his head. No, he didn't want that. He didn't quite know what they had in mind, but

he wasn't ready for that from Ryanac yet. It alarmed him to consider that Markis might be using the moment to persuade him, but he had to put that down to his suspicious nature. Either he was willing to trust Markis or he wasn't. There could be no questioning in their relationship. No doubt, Markis just made the offer. What happened was Uly's choice. It would always be his choice. He believed that. As for the two of them doing it together if Markis meant. Well, he wasn't ready to let anyone besides Markis use his mouth, and he had only done that once. The experience proved less than wonderful, his anticipation turning out to be better than reality. Markis enjoyed taking that tender flesh in his mouth and appeared to gain more than passing satisfaction from the knowledge that he could cause Uly's descent into blissful, heady convulsions. Uly wanted very much to return the favour, but feared it would be yet another dismal failure. Markis had said it wasn't a failure, but Uly had choked. Things hadn't gone the way he wanted. Until they did, he wouldn't be happy even though he was under no pressure.

Trying to pull in his wandering thoughts, Uly considered that he had all the time he needed, yet he feared the passing of time itself. He had learned that things changed, moments passed, never recaptured. What if his fears grew out of proportion? What if he lost Markis or Ryanac someday, somehow, and always regretted not seizing such moments?

'Uly.' Markis was stroking his lips, Ryanac his side. As he looked at Markis, his love, the guard kissed his shoulder. The two men continued to touch him. Their fingers drifted, sliding across his belly, combing through the soft, pale blond hair at his head and groin. The touching of hair was an intimate act between the Swithin, no matter where on the body. Uly loved fingers raking over his scalp. Now they raked over the tender flesh surrounding his cock, too.

He wanted to relax into the sensation, but some other part of him remained tense, wondering what was coming, what they were going to do. What he truly wanted was to be more of a participant. Often, he didn't understand his own reluctance. He wanted this. He wanted them. It was just Ryanac. His biggest problem was Ryanac, not that he wanted the man to stop touching him.

Their teasing continued. He was half-glad things hadn't escalated, half-disappointed. His whole body pulsed, but his cock throbbed most of all. He had lost the steady rhythm of his breathing, but didn't know when it had happened. They played his flesh as though it were an instrument, mimicking, duplicating what the other did on either side in almost perfect unison. They followed the same sequence, even stroked the back of his calves, circled around his knees with their fingers. They had tried to touch his feet, but he kicked out almost violently. He couldn't stand having his feet tickled. Uly couldn't help shivering under their touch. He pulled away and leaned into it by turn, never sure what he truly wanted.

'Lie back and let us bring you,' Markis whispered. Not knowing the expression, still it spoke to something deep inside him. Yes, bring him to fruition. Uly whimpered in reply.

This time they pinched his nipples, causing pain. Instead of flinching in fear, he gritted his teeth against a groan as it flashed white heat down to his testicles. To his shame, a bead of moisture left a glistening trail across his stomach. The air felt cooler where it caressed the wet skin, and a moment later, Ryanac dipped his fingers into the moisture. Uly closed his eyes, refusing to watch as embarrassment won out over desire. Ryanac's touch moved away, only to return a moment later to repeat the gesture. This time Uly raised his head to see Markis lick Ryanac's fingertips. He was sure Ryanac had licked them the first time, Markis the second.

He couldn't stand it. He wanted off the bed. He just wanted it to end. Yet he felt pinned. Uly stared upwards at his hands in amazement, fingers glued to the wooden spindles as though his life depended on it. The two men made love to his body, took pleasure as they gave it, and he strained for their contact as much as he tried to pull away from it. The inner argument would tear him apart if it continued like this. Surely, it had to.

Markis must have seen where his gaze lay. "All you have to do is let go."

He shook his head. He wanted to, but he couldn't. He wasn't even certain Markis meant the spindles. A hand stroked the side of his face, calming in its familiarity.

"You can let go if you want." As with many things, Markis's suggestion definitely contained a double meaning.

This time, Uly shook his head frantically, tossing it from side to side until his hair lay in strands across his face; he lay breathless, and sweat broke out over his body.

"What? What is it?"

Damn! Markis could be as relentless as Ryanac at times. He couldn't say it. He wouldn't.

"No!"

"What? You don't have to do this. You can let go, and it's finished. Tell us what you want, and we'll do it, or lie back, say nothing, and let us bring you. Let go, and it ends. You can end this."

"No."

"No what?"

"Hmph." That wasn't quite a word or a whimper.

"Uly."

"I don't want to." The words tore out of his throat, but felt ripped from somewhere deeper even than that. They spilled up from his chest, his stomach, and lower things. "I don't know what I want, but I want something. I can't. You can't just stop."

If they left him now, he would be lucky if he could move. He already felt wrecked. The thought of them leaving him there, still yearning, seared him more than his desire.

The door to Markis's private room opened, and the man turned his head. Uly couldn't see past him, but he tensed, gripping the headboard now for other reasons. Thankfully, whoever it was, his body lay mostly hidden beneath the two men. Of course, in certain situations that might have been awkward, but these men were Swithin. Their race calmly and frequently took lovers of either sex. Still, even Markis seemed less than pleased by the interruption.

"Get out," he said, coolly enough.

"I just!" Tressa's voice began, and Uly pictured the small Swithin queen standing there, dark eyes flashing, the light making her equally dark hair gleam, her expression startled, irritation and impatience winning out over any embarrassment.

"Not now!" Markis snapped, losing his steady tone, and a little yip sound filled the room, followed by the door banging shut. "You still need us?" Markis whispered, at once turning his attention back to Uly.

The interruption might have, probably should have, cooled his ardour, but it hadn't. Uly hesitated, and then nodded, closing his eyes as he did. Every part of his body felt tight. So much tension surely made his body stiff, unyielding, yet one part of him surrendered freely enough. Markis's lips covered his and he opened his mouth to the kiss, letting Markis tease his tongue into a dance.

He almost screamed, the sound muffled, fading into Markis's throat, as Uly's cock plunged into a hot, wet cavern. He hadn't done this with Ryanac. He hadn't done anything as remotely intimate. The man's mouth drew, sucked, and plunged. His tongue stroked.

Uly trembled, all of his muscles tight and straining against the onslaught. Even though he still gripped the spindles, only Markis's weight held him down. The man breathed the word, "Hush," into Uly's mouth. A sound of protest escaped him in response. He couldn't form words, but the complaint was clear. The tip of Ryanac's tongue probing the small hole at the end of his cock made him gasp, then moan. The sounds came thick and fast in sharp contrast with one another, denial and plea all at once, and Markis drank the noises down. How could he argue verbally with Markis when his body betrayed him so apparently?

"You can say no, Uly. You can let go." Dark, chocolate brown eyes with golden flecks in them stared at him as a backdrop to the words. Uly swallowed, searching that gaze. Reassurance existed there. He could stop this if he chose. The pleasure mounted, and Ryanac responded in kind. He sucked as though his only purpose in this world was to draw out Uly's need and seed both. Uly wanted release, and not just from sexual torment.

Something in his expression must have changed. Uly both felt it and saw the evidence in the slight smile that suddenly touched Markis's lips.

"By the comet," Markis whispered, stroking his forehead. "You are so beautiful. Even more so in your anguish." His words triggered something inside Uly. His heart and other things broke apart. He erupted, sending stream after stream into the depths of Ryanac's throat. He might have spilled every drop into those depths if the big man hadn't pulled back. Even then, Ryanac didn't let go until Uly fell back, spent. Uly finally released the spindles. His arms lay dead, unable to move. Markis turned his head as Ryanac moved up the bed. Uly watched the two men kiss, blinking a moment later in surprise as he realised they were surely sharing his seed. Ryanac's bright eyes turned to him. One of those huge hands gripped his chin.

"Taste yourself on my lips," Ryanac said, and by the time Uly understood what the big man meant, they were already kissing. Markis must have taken most of Ryanac's offering, but there was still a taste. Uly flushed hot, moaning gently at the thought of what they did. Worse, Markis watched him. That both alarmed and sent a thrill of excitement through him. When they parted, he shot a shy glance towards Markis. There was nothing appalled in that gaze. Nothing agonised, nothing painful. Taking courage, Uly looked up to Ryanac's face, but his gaze went no further than the man's mouth. He stopped and stared at the other man's lips. So recently, this mouth had drifted over his skin. This mouth had taken in his most intimate flesh and fluids. More than that, Ryanac had wanted to do so; he had enjoyed it, taking as much pleasure as he gave.

Wanting to give Markis just as much pleasure as he received, still Uly hesitated, afraid of failure and thereby appearing foolish. The knowledge burned brightly in Uly's mind that he would have to learn how to do so by experience.

## Chapter Two

'What is it?'

Markis stood staring down at the small woman who was his wife, and therefore the Swithin queen. They had wed out of duty rather than love, but he more than cared for her, even if she did drive him to distraction at times. The four shared the royal suites, a series of interconnected rooms. The arrangement gave them individual privacy as well as places to share and relax together in various degrees of work or leisure. Two hours ago, Tressa had barged into his room. Markis wouldn't have minded the intrusion so much, or been so snappy with her, if she had

knocked.

"I think I insulted one of the servants." Tressa sat still, her back as stiff as a tree trunk, her hands clasped tightly together in her lap. This wouldn't be the first time she had insulted someone, inadvertently or otherwise.

Markis sighed. "What did you do this time?"

Her mouth opened, and her expression hardened. Maybe she intended to argue with the "this time" comment. She seemed to experience second thoughts, and then she told him the problem.

"Whaaatttt!" His roar filled the room, winged its way out through the door and down the corridor.

Tressa stood up, her small hands clenched into fists at her sides. "I honestly did not think she would be offended. It was a simple error. After all, she is a servant."

"That means she works for us." Markis advanced on her, and he was half-mad with rage, half-delighted that she stood her ground. She clearly struggled to do so, but her feet remained planted. "I don't know what 'servant' means where you come from, but here it is a job someone does. They are not slaves or whores to satisfy our whims."

"I know that, but --"

"And besides, you shouldn't even be thinking of such a thing. You should have spoken to me. If you're uncertain, you check with me. Tressa, by the comet, you've been here for weeks. It's about time you started to understand our way of life. Uly picked it up quicker than this, and he's had as many, if not more, disadvantages."

"I --"

"What? What are you going to say now to try to talk your way out of this?"

"I meant no harm. I thought the girl would be grateful."

"Grateful?" Her explanation stopped Markis in his tracks. He seriously had no idea what she meant.

"I thought she would enjoy a queen's attention. And I was." She bristled, all taut sinew that trembled. "I was not looking to. I was just." She took a breath and appeared to rally her thoughts and emotions. "I was curious!" She glared up at him, her eyes bright, defiant. "You you said! You said that the Swithin could take lovers of either sex. You have Uly. You have Ryanac."

He couldn't deny that, but the two men were her lovers as well, if only on occasion. Except. He tried to remember when she had last shared anything more than affection with Uly, and as for Ryanac. Something nagged at the back of his mind, but he couldn't quite follow his train of thought; he was too busy gritting his teeth against the disapproval in her voice. It didn't come from the fact that he had male lovers, and he never heard it when she spoke of Uly. What irritated Tressa was the idea that he continued a relationship with his guard. Her logic had puzzled him, but now he began to see why. To her, "guard" probably meant little more than servant, and clearly, in her society, servant didn't mean equal. She knew the Swithin didn't feel the same way, but knowing it and saying she understood weren't the same as living by those rules and values. Every time he thought they had moved on a little from her backward upbringing, something else rose to the fore. Saying that, he wasn't even sure how much his relationship with Ryanac was truly an irritation to her any longer. He was sure she just used the situation to bait him.

"They are your lovers, too."

She shook her head for some reason he couldn't fathom. "I thought".

"You thought what?" he prompted in a gentler tone, or maybe he was just that weary.

"I thought I would finally have enough men to satisfy me, but when I am sharing you with them, there is still not enough to go around."

He stared, feeling his eyes grow slowly wide. Azulite women were highly sexed, yet as a race, they dictated their women not touch themselves. When Markis had married the princess, she had agreed willingly to their union, and to the Swithin way of life. She'd known that Markis had male lovers, and expressed an interest in the idea that they could be her lovers too. Since then.

By the comet, she probably had a point. He wasn't oblivious to Tressa's needs. He had expected her initial hunger to diminish, and it had, somewhat. Just as he'd expected, once free of her race and the chastity belt her father had ordered placed on her, Tressa's appetites were now less excessive. Yet when he neglected her needs, the catlike side of her nature emerged, and she had sharp claws, this one. He loved her for it. A Swithin man in his prime could easily manage intercourse two or three times a day, but as she had just stated, he had more than his wife to satisfy. Not only did the men in his life drag him from her side, but duties sometimes took over until the early hours of the morning, by which time all he wanted to do was sleep. There were three of them to love her. It shouldn't have seemed daunting, but there were days when even he wasn't in the mood and none of them wanted sex on demand. His reluctance had nothing to do with a marriage largely based on convenience, or even that he had loved Uly and Ryanac long before Tressa entered his life. He loved her well enough, but even that had nothing to do with his prowess. No matter which of his lovers clicked their fingers, if anyone expected him to come running, he would have felt resentful rather than aroused.

Of course, he had told Tressa the Swithin had nothing against masturbation, but he couldn't expect her always to take care of her own needs. Like Tressa, he had experienced a long period of celibacy. The touch of his hand would have been gratifying, but not entirely. Eventually, one craved the touch of another's skin. What with his taking the crown, the wedding, and then his father's death, he had neglected her. Some days, he had even neglected Uly. None of this, though, gave her the right to make demands of another human being.

"We consider what you did assault. You certainly molested the young woman."

"I did not --"

"Did you touch her in the least way without her permission?" Markis ignored the satisfying shade of red that infused Tressa's face. She dropped her gaze. Tressa had a strong will, but when she made a mistake and he caught her in error, she went on the defensive. It was her worst fault. Oddly, this time she remained silent. "If you touched her without her permission, then you molested her." He watched her face. Finally she spoke.

"I only took hold of her arm to stop her from walking away. Her refusal was one thing, but I could not believe a servant had the right to turn her back on me."

"If you wouldn't accept her refusal, she had every right." Markis studied Tressa's face, picturing the scene. Tressa had bestowed nothing more than a chaste kiss close to the girl's lips, probably as she said, out of curiosity, but when the girl had reacted in a negative way. Yes, he could imagine the scenario. "You believed you could persuade her. That she wouldn't wish to refuse a queen." Tressa made no reply, but her colour deepened, although that hardly seemed possible. "Where is she?"

"With the other maids. They were going to tell you what had happened. I told them to wait, and I would do so."

At least she had kept to her word, but time had passed while he'd been with Uly. No doubt the staff no longer believed her.

"I honestly did not take her seriously." Tressa stared up at him. Her expression appeared genuinely anguished. "I laughed." Her voice sounded bewildered almost as if she couldn't believe it herself. "I do not know even what I intended to do with her, but she never gave me the chance. She said no, and I laughed. I thought she was teasing. I honestly." Her words failed her and Tressa stood there, hands clasped in front of her, looking nothing like a queen.

"Come with me," Markis said, taking her hand. She stiffened as though she might resist, then she followed him.

\* \* \* \* \*

"They were very understanding," Tressa said. She sounded relieved more than repentant.

"So they were, and you apologised nicely. Now we shall have to punish you for it."

Her dark eyes swivelled up to his gaze. "I said I was sorry."

"You're not, though. You are sorry the girl was unwilling. You are sorry you had to tell me." Her anguish was genuine enough, but Markis could tell that she still completely failed to understand why the girl was reluctant. In Tressa's culture, no doubt such servants would consider it a great opportunity to catch the eye of royalty. Tressa accepted she had done something wrong, but Markis could tell that she didn't truly understand why it was wrong. She had even admitted that she could not believe they would insist on bothering him over what she considered such a foolish matter. Fine. He would show her how it felt to have someone do something to you that you didn't want. Tressa carried on speaking, unaware of the rather dark thoughts he cast in her direction.

Her face drew into a frown. "It is not that simple."

"It never is."

She snorted. "I am a queen and born an Azulite princess. I am above punishment." Her tone implied she didn't believe his threat.

They walked along a corridor that led directly to their main suite. Markis had taken Tressa to face the servants. There he had made her sit and explain the life of an Azulite woman. Tressa had acted in a regal manner, facing the girl calmly, asking forgiveness. In error, earlier in the day she had tried to coax the young woman to nothing more than a flirtation. Even so, harmless as that appeared, when the woman had refused, Tressa had tried persuasion, finally grabbing the woman's wrist when she'd tried to leave the room. To exacerbate the misdemeanour, Tressa had laughed, dismissing what she thought was the woman's teasing. In Swithin society, a refusal was graciously accepted; no one trod on another's feelings even if not reciprocated, and to use sex against one of their kind was a most grievous insult. The women, shocked by their queen's upbringing, had given her absolution. Still, it had been a delicate situation. If any of the household staff had continued to feel wary around the Swithin queen, it could have caused disquiet in the palace. Markis had taken the hand of the maid, and kissed it by way of apology. To touch Shavar without permission could warrant death. To have Shavar touch you willingly was a great honour. The girl had flushed appropriately with pleasure, but he hated manipulating her like that all because of Tressa's foolishness.

No, he couldn't blame her entirely. This was her nation's fault, her father's fault, and by the comet, his own fault. He would have to do something about that, but now there was the small matter of punishment. He might have let it go had she not snorted at him, had she not taken on such



mighty graces, and had she not declared herself above punishment. No one was above punishment. Not even Shavar, should he do wrong. In her land, she wasn't above her father's right to place a chastity belt on the women of his household, and yet here she was above anyone telling her the right way to behave? He thought not.

As they turned the corner and walked through the door of their suite, Markis captured her hand, aware of how fragile her wrist was and how he could easily break it. He had no wish to do so, but he squeezed enough for her to feel his strength. She was lucky. If Ryanac had taken hold of her wrist in such a mood, he might crush it by accident.

Tressa gasped, staring at him in obvious surprise. As he turned towards his room, she tugged, trying to go in the other direction. He pulled her along.

'Wh-what are you doing?'

'I'm going to show you what it feels like to be in another's power and helpless. Something you should know already, but seem to forget too easily.'

'You cannot mean it.' Her voice sounded incredulous. He glanced at her.

'Oh, but I do.' He walked into his bedroom, drawing off the belt that held his scabbard and sword. Markis always carried at least one weapon when out of his rooms, even in other parts of the palace. He tossed it aside onto a chair, and then walked towards the bed, Tressa twisting and struggling, prying at his fingers all the while. He wanted her to stop resisting, afraid he might actually bruise her, but he wasn't going to let go so easily.

'You have no right to chastise me.' She sounded truly indignant.

'And you had no right to molest another human being!' Markis spun around and dragged her up against him. His common sense and knowledge of her background warred against his anger, and behind that, the comet frolicked. Sometimes his anger could get the better of him; it stirred the comet, and that in turn stirred his anger. All these things combined forced him into seeking some semblance of peace. Unfortunately, the sight of Tressa's righteousness blazing across her face, and the words that fell from her mouth, did the opposite.

'I can accept I did something in error, but I fail to understand why the girl finds me undesirable. Why are you not surprised she resisted?'

He stared for a moment, speechless. 'Are you truly that self-obsessed?'

A frown creased her brow. 'No. That is not what I meant. I am pretty. I am a queen.'

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. 'You know very well what you did was wrong, and you know why. Don't ever do that again.' He trembled in the grip of barely suppressed rage. 'Damn it!'

Not even aware of what he intended, Markis sat down, dragging Tressa across his lap as he did so. It had taken a great deal of persuasion to get her out of Azulite dresses, which were boned and confining. The Swithin garments suited her better, making her appear waif-like and delicate. The illusion did things to his heart and cock, but as he dragged up the many fine layers of her skirts, he didn't care how she looked. Markis just wanted to get to her bottom. He tore the undergarments away. The shock of that made her stop wriggling. She gasped and froze in what had to be disbelief. The sound of his slap sounded like a crisp, sharp crack in the otherwise silent room.

She jerked in his grip, before coming still again. Her reaction was surely due to shock, and he might have let her up, but she suddenly started to struggle and, unable to help himself, Markis

held her down with one hand, bringing the other down in a smooth, arcing curve to her flesh. Her slim, tight flesh jiggled under the onslaught. She writhed, squealed, and both the sound and the movement brought out his darker side. The comet and his cock swelled in unison. She felt one, if not the other.

"You you pig!" Tressa cried out.

He answered her with another slap, this one harder. The flesh whitened, and then slowly turned red. Markis actually giggled. A chuckle followed, and it wasn't his. Looking up, he stared into Ryanac's eyes. The big man lounged in the doorway. Once, he hardly ever saw Ryanac out of uniform. Lately, although the man never went outside without his armour, it gratified Markis to see his friend in more relaxed garments. The soft drape of the tunic over loosely flowing trousers accentuated interesting places and hung to hide the promise of other equally interesting things.

Tressa tensed, turned her head, apparently saw Ryanac, and doubled her efforts. She struggled, and for one moment, almost slipped from his grasp. Markis leaned into her and slapped several times in succession, gradually increasing the power behind his hand. He stopped when a small sob escaped her. Rather than let her up, he simply stopped holding her down. Still, she lay across his lap, a fine tremor making all parts of her quiver. Her skin glowed hot to the touch. He slipped his fingers into the valley between her thighs, seeking something lower.

"You're wet, Tressa," he told her, when he was certain. A cry of humiliation, not pain, left her lips, and when she tried to wriggle free of his lap, he let her. She surely felt the sting of his wrath, but he hadn't hurt her. She was just infuriated.

"You do not understand," she told him. "You talk about insulting people, and now you offend me! I do not understand why this small slur matters so much to you, to a king."

"Because she's a person! More than that, she's one of my people. I protect them, from the lowliest working man to the highest royal, and that includes you. It includes that maid, her family, Ryanac, and his mother. If I can't protect them, it means I avenge them. I do the best I can for everyone in my kingdom, living on my land. I might own the ground from the sea up into the mountains, down to the valley, but I cannot do what I want with it on a whim. I swore to protect the land and the people who reside on it, not abuse them!"

"So, as king, if you had an eye for someone, and they refused, you would not feel slighted?"

Markis jerked in surprise. He took a deep breath. "Is that what you thought the woman did? Insult you?"

Tressa hesitated, and then nodded.

"It's no insult, and no; I would not feel that way if someone refused me. Position does not grant you such privileges. At least not on my lands. You know what it is for someone to have control over you when it's unwanted. Would you honestly want to make someone else feel that way? The way men of your race make women feel?"

He finally got through to her. He could see that by the widening of her eyes. For the first time today, she looked truly remorseful.

"No. You could have just said that, of course. Not!" She swallowed, clearly not wishing to refer to the spanking she'd just received. "I rather feel that you used this as an excuse just to..." Clearly, she still couldn't voice the fact that he'd spanked her.

"The true question is, do you want him to continue?" Ryanac's sardonic voice filled the room as though it were treacle.

Tressa whirled on the other man. Even only able to see her face from one side, Markis could see her eyes blazed.

"Of course, Markis only just warmed you up. I've got bigger hands." The guard even looked at them as though offering her proof. "I could really heat things up for you." Ryanac winked.

Tressa, clutching her skirts, glared from Ryanac to Markis, and then back again. She let out a sound that came close to a growl. "You are insufferable!" she snapped at Ryanac, to which the big man only laughed. Tressa ran from the room, ducking beneath Ryanac's gaze as she passed him. She left Markis sitting there with her arousal drying on his fingers.

Markis leaned back against the bed on his elbows. His legs, bent at the knees, hung over the edge, feet pressed to the floor. He had worn an official jacket over his casual garments to go talk to the women, but he had unbuttoned it as they made their way back. Still, right now, Ryanac looked more relaxed and the more casual of the two men.

Kicking the door shut after Tressa's hasty departure, Ryanac sauntered over to the bed and looked down at Markis, raising an eyebrow in question. Markis shook his head.

"Don't ask. Just another of Tressa's errors." They were growing used to them. "I shall have to apologise. She didn't know any better."

"How many times are you going to say that? How many times will you make excuses for her?" The big man stood between Markis's knees, arms folded across his chest, his gaze lazy but intent.

"I seem to recall you telling me to be patient."

"I did, but she could test the patience of" -- Ryanac smirked -- "the comet. I don't believe she's always as innocent as she seems. I don't believe she makes so many mistakes."

Markis raised his eyes in question.

"I believe she is testing her limits. Testing you."

The concept was interesting. Markis noted Ryanac's gaze flickering over him. "Stand up," the guard suddenly instructed, stepping back a little to give him room to do so. Frowning lightly, Markis sat up, and then finally rose to his feet.

"Take off the jacket."

He hesitated, but then did as Ryanac asked.

"And the tunic."

This time, he took a longer pause before drawing it over his head.

"Now the trousers."

His frown increased and so did the length of time that he dithered. Markis searched Ryanac's gaze, his expression tightening in question yet smiling a little along with the frown. Ryanac gave him no clue as to his thoughts. Kicking off the indoor slippers that the Swithin wore, Markis let the pants drop and stepped out of them. He wore no undergarments. He expected Ryanac to start stripping but, instead, the other man walked around him. Pausing at his side, Ryanac turned his head towards him, and Markis copied the action. He was suddenly very aware of the other man, of his bulk. They were near enough the same height as to make measuring superfluous. Ryanac

had enough muscle to make him wider. He had a broad chest, large hands, and a cock to match. Markis swallowed, but before he could open his mouth to speak, Ryanac took hold of him, and Markis was suddenly falling. The sensation confused both him and the comet. He was Markis Shavar Sardian, the designation of Shavar referring to the power at his control. Stories said that once, a comet fell upon the world and only one man walked from the destruction. That man was the first Swithin king, and Markis was his descendant. The comet often behaved as if it was a thing alive, part of him, yet separate. Now, it roiled but didn't know how to react. Those large arms caught him as Ryanac took Markis's vacated spot at the end of the bed, and the guard unceremoniously dumped him over his lap. Shocked into silence, Markis had time to consider how his and Tressa's positions had changed. He moved to push back and rise up, but a hand gripped the back of his neck, forcing his head down, taking the strength out of his resistance. Blood ran to Markis's head, making his temples throb, and then the grip eased up, and he lifted his head. A little dizzy, Markis blinked a few times and gave a slight shake of his head to clear it. A hand caressed his backside so that even as his head cleared and the rush of blood receded, he became aware of how vulnerable his posterior felt in this position.

"Ryanac, you don't mean to." Markis barely got those words out when the hand descended. The sound reached his ears before the stinging sensation crawled over his skin. Ryanac barely let him breathe again before he landed two more well-timed and perfectly placed slaps, landing all three in the same spot. What initially stung now begun to radiate as heat and some pain. Ryanac had large hands, and he could hit incredibly hard. Aware that the slaps were just that, and that his friend kept his strength in check, did little to ease Markis's concern. If the guard kept this up, he wouldn't be sitting down to dinner tonight. Already the skin felt sore.

He opened his mouth to say something, anything, that might end this. Maybe he meant to say that was enough now, and that Ryanac had had his fun. The hand, though, laid little light slaps across the whole of his buttocks, and even his lower back and upper thighs. Markis began to wriggle, not in pleasure, but with escape in mind. Ryanac chuckled.

"You said Tressa was wet, but now you're so hard. I have to wonder if you're leaking as much as she did."

The words stilled his efforts. Ryanac was right. His cock jutted, poking into his friend's lap. Even as he inwardly argued that he was Shavar Sardian, the Swithin king, another part of Markis considered how he looked draped over Ryanac's lap, and he could stifle the groan no longer. One more slap -- the hardest yet -- struck home, and then Ryanac pushed him to his feet. Markis felt relief, then disappointment, then embarrassment, and irritation over the disappointment.

The big man sat on the end of the bed. His gaze drifted from Markis's face down over his heaving chest to his cock, and back up again. His smirk looked too knowing, too full of promise.

"Go see your queen," Ryanac told him. "Take that to her." His head gave a slight nod, gesturing towards Markis's erection. The guard spun him around. "Not too pink," he muttered. "I don't think she'll notice your guard spanked you." He said the last into his ear, having stood. The hot breath that carried the words made Markis close his eyes and shiver. Once more, Ryanac chuckled, then walked around him and slinked out of the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tressa wept into her pillow. Markis reached out a hand to touch her, and she pulled back. He had never seen her cry. He would have thought someone close to her had died if he didn't know better. He didn't think Tressa would cry like this, particularly over getting her bottom slapped, even knowing that someone else had witnessed it.

"Tressa?" He said her name softly, making it a question. Settling onto the bed beside her, he braced his weight on his hand. Unfortunately, he had inadvertently sat on the side that bore most

of Ryanac's enthusiasm. He winced, grateful that Tressa couldn't see it, her face currently buried in her arms as she lay face down. She sniffed and then looked up at him through a cascade of black hair.

"I keep getting things wrong. I keep making mistakes."

He wanted to calm her, but maybe it would be best if he let her rant a little. "We all make errors."

"I am a queen. I should know better." The childish, self-pitying tone left her voice. She sounded angry and possibly irritated with her own actions. That explained her tears well enough to Markis. He gave a small laugh.

"Since when is it written that makes us less human? Kings and queens can make the biggest mistakes of all, because what they do is doubly important." She turned, rolling first to her side, and then sitting up. His mouth twisted to the side when Markis saw she could sit with little problem. He was finding it difficult.

"That is the trouble." She looked up at him, with what he believed were genuine tears on her face, judging by her expression. "I spent years doing what I could to change things, but I could do little. The rules and regulations set by my father dictated my behaviour. I am a king's daughter, and I have always been proud of trying to do better. Today I behaved just like my father. I took my frustrations out on some poor woman rather than face the problem, rather than talking to you about it. They taught me this is not something you discuss with men, not even your husband. You do not talk about the needs of your body, whether they stem from some physical problem or desire, and you never talk about your emotions."

She took a deep breath and looked at him. "I did that girl wrong, and I wronged you as well as myself. I am just afraid that I will continue to make such mistakes. That I cannot be the queen you need or the woman I desire to be."

Reaching out, he smoothed her hair to one side. "You are already becoming that woman."

A small smile touched her lips in what might have been gratitude, and then she lowered her head. "I find it awkward to talk to you. I know I can be brazen." The use of such a word amused him. "I know I spoke in such a manner when first we met".

"You were out to impress me," he said lightly. Her head lifted. Her eyes were wide. He had surprised her. "You succeeded," he reassured her. "It might have been a show for my benefit, but that was still the true Tressa. The one who makes mistakes and hides things from me is your father's daughter." He took her hand and placed it over his erection through the robe he had slipped over his body. "I have neglected you largely due to a busy schedule, but things will calm down now. That is not the only reason, however. I wasn't even aware of it until today, but the Tressa I know I would gladly bed in an instant. The woman who lets the teachings she wishes to escape haunt her is what keeps me from your bed on occasion."

He raised a hand, forestalling her protest. "I'm not saying this to punish you. My intent is not to be mean. I'm only telling you how I feel, and from now on, I want you to do the same."

She nodded after a moment.

"Are you still wet?" His question made her eyes flash in something he could not describe. Surprise, certainly, though he could sense underlying emotions, perhaps anguish, perhaps embarrassment. "I'm talking to my queen, remember." The small rebuke did the trick. Again, she nodded, swallowing. He took her hand and pressed it against his desire. Her hand moved slowly up his length.

A noise he expected would sound rather like a growl lodged in his throat. Despite her eagerness, he still had to take it easy with Tressa, and that included holding in some of the grunts that usually slipped so readily from him. Coming to his knees, he gathered her up in his arms and linked his fingers through her hair. Tressa nearly always wore it loose, though she sometimes dressed it up into some complicated coil on top of her head, and the colour was so black he often itched to touch it. He loved the sight of Uly and Tressa close together. They looked like sunshine and night. When he lowered his head to kiss her, he spread his fingers deep into the cascade of her hair. Rather than plunge his tongue directly into her mouth, he licked her lips until he drew out a sound. He might still hold back now and then, but he wanted Tressa to let go completely. The day she screamed as she raked his back would be the day he growled.

The dress parted under his grasp; the sound of the fabric ripping shattered the silence of the room. Markis winced inwardly even as he did it. He had forgotten his oath to stop ruining clothes. When he had set out to take Tressa for his bride, he had imagined someone so different despite her reputation for being a sexy little thing, but she never tried to hide or cover herself when the two of them were alone and the situation turned to sex. Tressa showed her lack of sexual knowledge in other ways. She knew she was beautiful, but one did not have to be the most attractive person in the world to exude confidence. On the other hand, a person could be stunning and be terribly inept. Tressa showed her lack of knowledge in her eagerness. He had ignored it until now, willing to let the fire inside die down. Now he had time to teach her. He stroked her gently, moving his hands away from hers when she tried to hurry him. He kissed over her face before moving to her lips again. He flicked his tongue against hers, refusing to let her draw it into her mouth. He worked his fingers across her ribs then down, counting them. Clearly, she wanted his hands to work up to her nipples. He would have grinned at her frustration if he were not so busy teasing her mouth with his tongue.

"Touch me, Tressa."

She did and he almost flinched from her near violent effort. Uly had been in many ways as much, if not more, ignorant in sex, and even he knew not to grab a man's cock so. Of course, he had one. Still, Uly battled with an odd reluctance to touch, although he had his moments when desire won. Markis frowned as he took Tressa's hand in his, stopping her onslaught. Why had he never seen the disparity before? Uly tended to lie back and let others make love to him. Tressa practically threw herself at him. Between the two of them, he was beginning to feel far older than his years.

"Not like that. This way." He guided her hand, teaching her how to pleasure him. "There's a time for fast, and a time for slow." Certain she had the rhythm, he let the open robe fall off his shoulders onto the bed. Her head was level with his chest, so rather than alter position to claim one of her nipples, he placed her mouth over one of his. "No teeth," he said, a little too quickly, but he had a genuine, sudden fear of what she might do. "Be gentle. A light swirl of the tongue."

Her mouth remained a pressing, yet unmoving, heat for a moment, and then a wet swipe made him draw in a breath. His head fell back, his mouth gaped, and he closed his eyes. As her mouth drew his nipple into a light suck, Markis closed his mouth and swallowed. He loved women as much as he loved men; he truly did. Sexual preference had no basis on who he loved most. The only trouble was, when someone sucked at him, he wanted to suck in return. He could fulfill that desire to some extent with Tressa, but she wasn't ready for that today. Even a woman as easily aroused as Tressa needed her senses stimulated, built upon. He looped a hand behind her head and drew her face up to his kiss. He sucked at her mouth, her chin, moving around to her ear, seeking the ticklish spot he knew existed there.

She giggled and squirmed when he found it, gasping as the light-hearted play turned to something darker as he gathered her in against his body. The movement made her release his erection, which he immediately rubbed against her belly. She dug her nails into the sore areas of his backside as he did. No doubt she simply needed something to cling to, but unwittingly she

brought him agony as well as ecstasy. He jerked, a low pulse throbbing through his groin.

'Damn!'

She looked up to his face. "What is it?"

"I wanted to take this slow, show you how good it can feel when you take your time, but my body has other ideas."

"Nice to know I can affect you."

He didn't have the heart to tell her part of it was Ryanac's doing, but that was his own fault. He should never have spanked her. Even considering what she had done, such an action was uncalled for. He was Swithin, and it was wrong to do something like that without the right intentions, without an agreeable partner. Worse, he should have known better than to continue it in front of Ryanac. The scene had set his flesh buzzing. Tressa's arousal now perfumed the air, and set the rest of his senses ablaze. She was right, though; she did affect him.

Laying her back on the bed, he struggled to keep his touch light as he explored her. Her hands roamed eagerly. Then a frown touched her face, and she slowed, trying to copy him. The fact that she did both amused and pleased him. He moved his fingers in light, lazy circles over her hips and thighs, gradually drawing in and then sweeping back, moving closer to her centre on the return journey. When he finally traced her nether lips with his fingers, he traced her mouth with his tongue. She opened her mouth to try to capture the snaking movement; at the same time, her hips lifted. Her legs fell open and moist heat warmed his fingers, trying to capture them. Deliberately moving his hand into a position where it was possible, he slipped his little finger inside her. The sensation had to be light, tickling, and far from the fulfillment she craved. He almost laughed when she growled out her frustration against his mouth. Despite the fact that his cock twitched and throbbed, strained against his personal need as though it could track the way to her entrance, he refused to give her anything bigger until she moaned. Even then, he offered her only another finger. When she went to grab his cock, he caught hold of her wrist and kept her questing fingers at bay.

She shivered as though strong emotions played havoc with her, too powerful to contain by mere flesh alone.

"Please, oh please, I want you inside me," she finally begged. He was very happy to oblige. Catching her gaze with his, he saw a similar knowledge seated there. This was not to be the slow, unhurried affair he had wanted. The feel of her slickness easing over him set his teeth on edge. He turned his mind to affairs of state, to what they might have for dinner, to drifting clouds he could see through the open window. It gave him enough time to give her the strokes she needed as he ground into her pelvis, making sure she got the friction where it mattered most. She bucked, clenched, her internal muscles pulsating around him, and sent him over the edge. Despite his promise to remain silent, he cried out. It hardly mattered. He didn't think Tressa could hear him over her own shout.

### Chapter Three

"All that fancy grub you get at the palace, and you still scoff down my food as if it's the best."

Uly looked up into the woman's face, realised he had a scrap of meat hanging from his lips, and sucked it into his mouth. The others around the table laughed good-naturedly, and his face grew warm.

"Oh, don't get me wrong," Ditta said, setting yet another dish on the table and finally sitting down. "It does my heart proud to see someone enjoy my cooking."

As she looked around the table, it became apparent that she included Ryanac and Markis in this, and quite rightly. The food they received at the palace was truly wonderful, but even Markis usually ate more than his share at this table. Uly had thought meeting Ryanac's mother would be a daunting exercise. He shouldn't have worried. He didn't know why, but having met Markis's father shortly before the man died had given him the idea that it was best to avoid all parents. Even if after that initial meeting he'd wanted to avoid Ditta, he wouldn't have wanted to avoid her cooking. He chewed, swallowed, and dithered over whether to take another helping of potatoes. He didn't know what she did to them, but they were like no kind of potato he'd ever eaten. She cooked them, and then smashed them to bits, but whatever she stirred into them gave them such a wonderful flavour.

Ryanac must have seen where he looked for the guard set another scoop on his plate without his asking. "Uly knows what it's like to go hungry," he remarked. The comment was true, but still it made Uly's heart start in his chest. Would he never be able to forget? Strangely, the moment he thought it, Uly wasn't sure he wanted to. If he forgot where he came from, he would have to set aside how he and Markis had met. It had been a strange journey, but looking back on it now, he remembered many moments with fondness.

"Don't we all," Ditta commented, then blinked and lowered her head as though she'd said something out of place.

"There were those in the palace that moaned about the rationing and having to have plain food, but I was not one of them," Markis said gently.

"I didn't mean --" Ditta began.

"Not at all," Markis interrupted. "I can only say that I would not have been as tolerant of them as my father was."

Uly had no idea to what Markis referred, but he knew that what Markis's father had chosen to tolerate and what upset him seemed to have no basis in logic.

"We had a bad year when Markis and I were still young, close to a famine," Ryanac explained. He glanced pointedly at Tressa's plate. She was the only one picking at her food, and she hadn't put much on the plate. She saw him watching and flushed.

"I am not used to such fare," she admitted. "It is very good."

"You're kidding. It's wonderful." Uly blurted out his opinion before he gave his words any consideration. Everyone around the table laughed, and Tressa looked immediately uncomfortable. She didn't exactly squirm, but he could recognise the signs. The small princess had done a lot of squirming since becoming Markis's bride. So much had happened in the last three months. Before Markis's father died, Markis had taken his place as the Swithin king. Strange emotions accosted Uly that day, watching Markis accept a crown he would never wear again, the adornment part of the ceremony, not intended for wear at any other time. If one hadn't known, they might have taken the look on the old king's face for one of pride as he set the crown on his eldest son's head. Markis and Lerai had loved each other in their way, but that didn't mean they liked each other or always agreed.

Uly might have believed the ceremony for Markis's indoctrination splendid if prior to that event, Markis hadn't officially married Tressa in Swithin tradition. The ceremony actually turned out to be light and simple, heart lifting even, but undoubtedly lavish. Just lavish not in any way Tressa or Uly expected. A full Azulite ceremony entailed many songs and petitions; the service could take



up to two days. Of course, Tressa and Markis had not been able to spare the time, being that they had stolen her away in the dead of night. From the look on Markis's face when she explained the full ritual, he was very grateful they'd forgone such lengthy proceedings.

The Swithin ceremony was sumptuous in that people festooned the city. This was common, though usually kept to the district where the intended couple lived. With it being the prince's wedding, the whole city celebrated. Everyone wore white, and flowers fragrancd the air. Everywhere Uly looked, people had decked out the city in flowers or paper shapes and lanterns. The main colours were white with hints of red or gold. Markis had told him white was for peace, red for love, and the gold for the comet, of course.

On her wedding day, Tressa had looked beautiful in a simple white gown, with red and white flowers in her hair. Markis looked equally splendid in white. Much to Uly's shame, he had struggled to stand by while the couple took their vows this second time, for watching Markis wed once was bad enough, but twice almost broke his heart, no matter how much he understood that Markis needed a queen and knew that Markis truly loved him, would not leave him. The Swithin way allowed the prince to have more than one love, but that didn't explain the strange relationship Markis shared with Ryanac, for the two men had known each other since childhood. That was why they sat now in Ryanac's family home, sharing a meal the guard's mother had prepared.

Uly gazed around the table. The four of them took up one end of the table while Ryanac's family occupied the other. Ryanac's mother, Ditta, sat at the side, and yet somehow her setting was undoubtedly the head of the table. Everyone looked to her as though she were the hub of the home. Eldon looked like his son; or rather, Ryanac took after his father, but the older man didn't have his boy's bulk. No one did. It had come as quite a shock to learn Ryanac was one of four children. The Swithin seldom had such large families. Ryanac's sister had embarrassed Uly on his first visit, when she had stared him in the face and told him he was cute. His face had burned bright red while Ryanac told her to leave him alone.

"He's more than cute," Ryanac had told her, "but he's taken and got more than he can handle."

"Like what?" she demanded.

"Like me." Ryanac winked. It had taken Uly a moment to realise what the guard suggested. It wasn't strictly true. They were intimate, but they had not shared full sex. That was his fault. He didn't know why he held back, but he did. Markis had told him either it would happen or it wouldn't, and he didn't have to apologise whatever his decision, but Uly found it unnerving. Almost as unnerving as the way Ryanac's sister continued to stare at him every time he visited.

He leaned towards Ryanac now, lowering his voice. "I thought you said, among the Swithin, a refusal is accepted."

"It is," Ryanac murmured, barely moving his lips.

"Then why does your sister keep looking at me every time I come here?" It wasn't that he didn't like the girl, but his heart lay with Markis.

"I said we accept it. Lalia is a law unto herself and doubts my word. You haven't exactly refused her to her face. She won't do anything, though. She'd need Markis's permission even if you were agreeable, and there's no chance of either. She's just looking." Ryanac turned his head to gaze at him. "You're pleasing to look at."

Uly tried not to appear thrilled by the comment but was aware he failed miserably. Ryanac just grinned.

\* \* \* \* \*

'Memories?' a warm female voice asked at his back

Markis jumped. Ryanac's mother had caught him staring at the barn. She came down the wooden steps of the porch and sat down beside him. It occurred to him that his father would never have approved.

This was their third visit in as many months. It would be nice if they could keep coming to dinner like this. Markis knew how much Ditta appreciated her son coming home even if it were only once a month, even if he was only a few miles away living in the palace. He had kept her son from her long enough. Besides, he liked these visits as much as Ryanac did.

'I'm sorry about your father,' she said.

So was he, but not in any simple way. Pinching the bridge of his nose, Markis closed his eyes tight for a moment, and then let that train of thought go. That chapter in his life was over with and done. He and his father had not parted as friends, but neither had they been enemies. It was less than he had hoped for, more than he had expected. 'Thank you,' Markis muttered.

'I hope you're taking care of my son.'

The comment made him bark out a laugh, and then he looked at her, aware his eyes were a little too wide. He had been away from the farm too long himself. He had forgotten how much Ditta could surprise him. The uncanny feeling that they were talking about something he would rather not discuss with Ryanac's mother made Markis look away again. Her deportment was calm, and her face looked serene enough, but she had meant what she said and not in any one way. She meant Ryanac's general welfare, but she meant something else too. There was no reason, as Swithin, for them not to be open about such things, but Ditta was not the type of woman you wronged even if you were the king.

'He's taken well care of.' His tone sounded neutral enough. From the corner of his eye, Markis watched a smile play about her lips. She sat as he did now, her hands clasped, her arms encircling her knees with her feet on a lower step down from the one on which she sat. The setting sun sent a reddish glow across the ground.

'That Uly's a one,' she said suddenly. 'He's brighter than he looks, but he's used to hiding it. He loves you to bits, but he also likes and admires my son. I can't make out what he thinks of that Tressa, though.' Her eyes shifted towards him, but she dragged her gaze away again before it settled. 'Not that I know what to make of Tressa myself.'

It lay on the tip of Markis's tongue to remind the woman that she spoke of the Swithin queen. He didn't for all of the reasons he had already thought of and because it amused him to listen to her. 'She's had a restrictive upbringing. I'm sorry she wasn't hungry --'

'Hungry, my arse. She doesn't like my food, but that doesn't bother me. Besides, Ryanac said she's had problems adjusting to some of the plain food as well as some of the spicy stuff we serve here. Azulite dishes seem to be somewhere in between.'

'That's true,' Markis admitted.

'What does Uly think of the more spicy stuff?' Ditta asked, as though it had only just occurred to her.

'He loves it.'

She sniffed and smiled, looking pleased. 'I knew he would. He's hot under the skin, that one.'

Markis looked down, wondering what Uly would make of the comment. He wished Ryanac were out here to hear it, and then realised he was probably spying on them right now. The skin at the back of his neck prickled. Yes, Ryanac was definitely around. He should have known the man wouldn't let him out of his sight, not even on his mother's farm, not even with Antal, Uly's protector, out there in charge of the small regiment of guards they had brought with them. Ditta had sent the men food when Ryanac explained they couldn't come in for dinner because they had a job to do. Used to be, she had said, that you didn't have to take such precautions on Swithin land, and she was right, but someone had tried to kill Uly in recent months. Antal had taken the arrows meant for him and nearly died. They were being cautious.

"A day on the farm would do Tressa the world of good," Ditta remarked now, and Markis couldn't help smiling. He glanced at her and saw her looking at him.

"I'll take that under advisement."

"Good."

"You do realise she flinches every time you call her Tressa, especially when you refuse to tack her title on to it," he said.

"Why do you think I do it?" She turned her head then, leaning a little away, possibly so she could take in his face more clearly. "You don't expect me to start calling you Shavar or Sardian, do you?"

"No." He answered her firmly enough.

"Good. I never have done that. You feel like one of my own. How can I go around calling you after a sodding comet? Makes no sense to me."

Markis tried not to laugh, afraid she would slap him for it.

"I admit I call Tressa by her name because it irritates her, but I also do it because I've called you all by your names instead of your ranks. Always have; always will. Giving herself graces, that one, and that maid of hers, head up her arse if ever one could manage such a position."

Idelle had only come out to the farm once and had met her match in Ditta. Every time since, the old woman had bowed out of a visit, complaining of a headache.

"If that's the sort Tressa had to grow up with, no wonder she's the way she is."

There was some real sympathy and understanding there, at least. "She's doing better every day."

"Really?"

He nodded.

"I'll take your word for it, then." She patted his hand. "We'll give her time, and if time doesn't sort her out, then I will."

He could only hope that for Tressa's sake, time would do the trick. Before he could say anything, Ditta reached out and ruffled his hair. "You're a good boy," she said. "You always were."

This time he couldn't disguise the incredulity in his face. He stared at her, aware she mussed his hair up enough to pull a few strands from the braid into an unruly loop. The Swithin considered it intimate to touch another person's hair, but Ditta even managed to turn that into something else. He glared at her, and she smiled back at him, her gaze daring him to say something. King or not,

he was just a little boy to her.

‘Oh, don’t look at me like that,’ she said when he was still undecided what to do or say. ‘I always knew you would call for my son. I knew one way or another your paths would cross again. If it weren’t your doing, it would have been his. I knew that the day you wandered in here as a boy, all hurt and banged up.’

‘You couldn’t have.’

‘Hmm. Well maybe that’s an exaggeration. You were young, but I knew you would be friends. There was a day, though, when you were old enough, when I saw him look at you, and I knew how he felt. That last summer it wasn’t just a crowded house that made us let Ryanac sleep in the barn.’

He couldn’t help it. Despite being a grown man, despite being Swithin and the king, Markis blushed. The heat burned even his eyes. Luckily, she wasn’t looking at him. She was looking at the barn, but he wasn’t sure if that didn’t make matters worse.

‘You’re good for my son. He’s good for you. You’re good for each other. Tressa you care for, and Uly you love, but my son. That’s something else.’ She nodded now, slight movements of her head as she considered this. ‘You needed a marriage for you needed a wife, and despite what I say, Tressa’s a good choice. Her faults lie in being unsure of herself as a woman, but as a queen, I’ve watched her, and she’ll rule well by your side. Uly gives you life, strength that even the comet cannot provide. Ryanac the two of you need each other.’

‘I need Uly. I need Tressa.’

She turned her head to face him. ‘You need Tressa, hmm? You need a queen, not the woman.’

He shook his head. ‘I would miss sleeping with a woman on occasion. I don’t prefer men. I just love Uly more than I love Tressa.’

‘Of course you do. Uly is your Samir. Tressa could never be that. You had to marry too soon. You like each other, care about each other, love each other, and respect each other. Your heart will splinter the day she dies, but when that happens, you will survive. If you lost Uly before his time, you would never recover.’

Markis flinched. He wanted to deny her words but couldn’t. ‘That’s a weakness,’ he said.

‘To a king, yes. To a man, no.’

Markis frowned. He wasn’t at all certain he should allow her to continue this conversation. ‘That still doesn’t explain Ryanac.’ His ambiguous feelings had bothered him for some time. Odd that Ditta should touch on them.

She shrugged. ‘You need each other.’

‘You keep saying that.’

She sighed. ‘You’re asking yourself the wrong questions. You and Ryanac both.’ She turned her head as she said that, and a moment later, Ryanac detached himself from the corner of the house and stepped out of the shadows. Markis stared in surprise. He hadn’t seen him there. From the look on the guard’s face, the man knew it too, but amidst the amusement, Ryanac also looked serious. He stared intently at his mother.

‘Uly is Samir to you, and you are Samir to Ryanac, right?’

Markis wanted to say no, but Ryanac had told him so once. He didn't believe Ryanac had discussed his feelings with his mother, but he didn't doubt Ditta's intuition for a moment. When Ryanac said nothing, Markis gave an uncertain nod.

"If Ryanac became Samir to Uly, you would have a perfect triangle. With the three of you complete, you'd make peace with Tressa."

His frown tightened in perplexity. "That's ridiculous." He wanted to take it back the moment he said it. He felt like a small boy who would never have said such a thing to this woman. Rather than tell him off, she raised her eyebrows.

"I'm just saying that you're making this far more complicated than it has to be. For the Swithin, when a union of more than two happens, it's because feelings are mutual for all concerned, but you two had feelings for each other before you found Uly, feelings that had not been allowed to run their natural course."

Markis winced. He seemed to have developed the habit tonight, and the action reminded him of when Uly had been nothing more than a street thief. When he had first come to live with them, Uly had flinched at every little thing. The idea that Ryanac's mother could make a king flinch would have been laughable if he were not the one doing it.

"Oh, we're so open, but we don't talk about what Shavar has to go through to take care of us all." Ditta sounded far too amused. Was this where Ryanac got his strength and humour from?

What she said was true, though, and he had told Uly that once. Shavar were men of the royal line who could tap into the power of the comet. The Swithin way made love and sex open and uncomplicated, but they didn't talk about Shavar-in-training needing to remain celibate because no one wanted to contemplate such a thing. Ryanac had turned that belief on its head. Markis couldn't help but wonder what Ditta would think if she knew her son had seduced him against all the rules, even if he would be eternally grateful that the man had. If not, he would still be struggling to control the comet -- well, more than he was -- and he wouldn't have a relationship with Uly. As for the complicated matter of love and sex, Uly had in turn messed that up for him.

"The point is, you and Ryanac never had the time you both needed."

"We have had a lot of time since." He felt his face warm again as he said it, but Ditta was far from embarrassed.

"A few months? You are making a fool of yourself talking like that."

"Mother." Ryanac spoke gently enough, but in warning.

"Oh, shut up! Don't 'Mother' me." She turned her attention back to Markis, who couldn't help wondering how she knew he and Ryanac hadn't been intimate for many years. "You two weren't complete when you found Uly. What you feel for Uly is so intense, it's like a shadow over the sun. It's blocking what you feel for Ryanac."

Markis shook his head.

"Don't argue." As Ryanac took a step forward, Ditta turned her head to him. "You lay a hand on me, boy, and you'll regret it."

Struggling to get over anyone calling Ryanac "boy," Markis held a hand up in the air between them as though he could separate them with that simple gesture. All he needed was the two of them fighting over this. Ditta stared at him and sighed in apparent frustration.

"If you were all equal, you wouldn't suffer any of this."

"Tressa will never be equal to the rest of us." He hated to say it, but realised the truth of it.

"Of course she won't. Royalty marry out of duty. You love each other well enough and you will grow to love each other a great deal more, but you didn't choose each other. Thankfully, you like each other enough for it to suffice. Once you're certain of where you all stand and what you mean to each other, she will be free to seek her own happiness. It has nothing to do with you preferring men, as you seem to think I was accusing. If you had met the right woman at the right time, she might have been your Samir before Uly ever was, and if I were you, I would drop the concept entirely. This idea of Samir is outdated."

Markis swallowed as he stared at her, aware of what she saw in his face. He couldn't do it. Uly was his Samir, and there was nothing he could do about that.

"Think about it. Why do we do that? We allow ourselves more than one love, yet still search for that all important, all consuming passion with someone else. Uly's your Samir, all right, because you're drowning in him."

"What if I want to?" The words slipped from his lips in a whisper.

"I would say well enough if my son weren't caught up in the tide."

"Mother, please."

"Hush. All I'm saying is that if you two had been allowed to love at the right time in your life, then you would have been ready for Uly. You wouldn't feel this dissent."

Markis wanted to ask her how she knew such dissent existed, but he couldn't, and it had nothing to do with being king.

"If Ryanac becomes Samir to Uly, then the three of you will have balance."

Against his wishes, he could feel himself growing angry. Wanting to take the words back even as he said them, still they ground out between gritted teeth. "What if I don't want him to be?"

Her eyes glittered. "That's the rub, isn't it? You want my son, but the question is, do you want him enough? You can glare at me all you want. You know I'm right. Those golden flecks in your eyes are all very pretty, but they hold no weight with me. You're playing at being a happy family right now. Stop playing and be one. Now go." She jerked her head towards the yard. "Go off to the barn until you cool down."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dismissed. Dismissed to the barn as if he were a little boy! The trouble was, he had gone.

Markis paced, raking his fingers through his hair until they snagged and loosened the braid. He looked up as Ryanac marched through the door. Not knowing what to do, but aware no one should see him looking like this, he tugged the clip from his hair and shook it partly out of the braid. His hair never tangled, but tonight everything had it in for him.

"Here." Ryanac reached out, but Markis stepped back. His fingers pressed into his scalp under his hair; his arms were up and out to the sides. Certain he looked demented, Markis gazed at Ryanac from under his brow. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know how to make it right. His mouth felt dry; his heart pounded. He closed his eyes. The moment he did, Ryanac closed the

gap, laced his hands through Markis's arms, cradling his head to his chest. The man's proximity reminded him of the last time they'd both stood here in the barn. That time he had knelt at Ryanac's feet.

"I didn't mean it," Markis gasped out. He had, though. He had meant what he said, and Ryanac knew him too well to believe any different.

"Stop torturing yourself like this. We've been in each other's minds. I know your heart. I knew it anyway, but the abyss confirmed it."

Markis didn't want to think about their sharing the strange place where the comet took his mind. He wasn't sure he could do that again. It had served a purpose in their relationship and in helping him to control the comet, but it could become addictive, and he could lose himself in the sharing. They had decided to stop for now, and if they ever did it again, it wouldn't be often, not until Markis truly had control of the comet, if he ever did, or until they found harmony.

"I know part of you wants to keep Uly to yourself, but you'll find no peace in it." His guard hesitated. "Not while I live."

Markis looked up, his eyes wide and damp. He stared at his friend in undisguised horror. "Don't say such things. Besides, I've shared Uly with you often enough."

"Yes, you have, but you've always been there. He may come to me some nights to sleep, but you know that's not about sex. Part of you wants to keep him away from everyone when you are not around."

"That's not." He stopped, unsure what he had intended to say. That's not true. That's not Swithin. Either seemed appropriate.

"I hate that I'm hurting you. You're Samir to me, and I should be Samir to you." Ryanac's hand clamped down on him when Markis tried to jerk away. He couldn't break that strength without using the comet. With one hand clamped at the nape of his neck and one clutching his arm, he wasn't going anywhere. Ryanac forced him to meet his gaze. "I hate that your duties stopped us becoming what we could have been."

It was easy to note that Ryanac had referred to his duties, meaning Shavar, the Comet. Academy life had separated them, but that wouldn't have kept them apart. Enforced celibacy had kept them apart for years while they slept only a few yards distant. More than a wall and a door had separated them, and all for nothing. Markis wanted to spit, but it wouldn't rid him of the bitter taste in his mouth. "I sometimes wonder if I hadn't found Uly, if you and I".

Ryanac gave him a little shake. "Don't be stupid. My mother already called you a fool. Without Uly, you wouldn't have let yourself love anyone. We would be living as we were, enjoying each other's company and never being honest about how we feel even while knowing it. My mother's right, though she didn't say it well enough. Don't you see?" A shadow made the guard's eyes so dark they looked almost black, apart from one pinpoint of light. Markis couldn't look away from them. "If I became Samir to Uly, it wouldn't take him away from you. I would never do that, even if I could. If that happened, we three would become Samir to each other. That's what my mother was trying to say. We would be complete, and then even Tressa would have her rightful place with us. There would be no pretence."

Markis blinked. Slowly, he dropped his gaze, taking in what Ryanac had said. The grip lessened; Ryanac jerked him forward, gave him a rough kiss on the forehead, and then let go.

"You look a mess," he said, and Markis let loose a brief laugh. Those large, firm fingers began to work out his braid and comb through his hair in place of a brush. Finally, Ryanac gathered

Markis's hair into a tail and used the clip to fasten it at the nape of his neck. "I like your hair loose best of all, but if not, then I like it like this. It suits you more than the braid."

"Now you tell me," Markis said, "after I've been wearing it this way all these years." He wasn't just talking about his hair, though. Ryanac drew him back against his chest.

"You don't have to pretend with me. I want your pain as well as your joy and your pleasure."

Markis took a moment, lifting his hand to touch the back of Ryanac's and stroking the flesh. "What you say makes sense," he said. "The trouble is how we are to accomplish it. I don't like the thought of manipulating Uly like that."

"We don't manipulate him. It happens, or it doesn't. I won't guide him." A wry grin broke out over the guard's face as Markis turned in his arms in surprise. "If I do, his feelings won't be genuine. I don't want his love if it isn't real."

They would have to accept it might not happen, then. "We might never be complete," Markis said.

"True. Would you give up what we have, though?"

Markis drew in a breath and let it out, shuddering as he did. "I would never have believed it could hurt so much to love someone."

"Shaylah," Ryanac said. It was an insult in the old tongue. It meant blind, or someone who refused to see the truth. "You and I have hurt for too many years to play that game."

## Chapter Four

"Does that conclude the affairs of state for today?" Markis scanned the council chamber. Most of the men present nodded. A few exchanged glances. Stargazer stood up and approached the podium from which he would address the room.

"There is a small matter," the old man said. He cleared his throat then, his almost milky-white gaze gliding over the room. They shared a history, an unpleasant one. As the most powerful of his father's sons, Markis had acquired the best of the seers and advisers. Stargazer had been the one in charge of his training. Markis had always suspected, and personal experience had confirmed, that Stargazer was too heavy with the lash and other punishments. The old man had a tendency to bully that did not sit well with their new king. Alas, the old man held a lot of sway.

"You have now taken your rightful seat." The pause was hardly noticeable, but did not escape the king's attention. "The king." Again, the old man cleared his throat. "Excuse me. Alas, your father has left us, and his burial is complete. We feel it best that our lives settle as soon as possible. That is why I feel it is my duty to mention the subject of serelia."

Markis tightened his jaw. He remained motionless. To his right, Ryanac might as well have been a statue. Tressa, seated at his left, displayed no outward emotion, but she lightly tapped her fingers against the arms of the seat, indicating her puzzlement. They had set up a few such signals. Markis was having trouble responding to this one. He feared what might emerge if he opened his mouth. He didn't need to see his reflection to know his gaze had gone flat and dull. The trouble was, Stargazer probably recognised the signs by now. Most would fear Markis's temper, but not Stargazer, not here in a room full of people.

"We will not discuss this," Markis finally managed to say. Perhaps that wasn't the wisest choice, but he could have chosen worse words. Stargazer spread his hands before gripping the podium



again. It might have been a gesture of defeat, or it might speak to the rest of the assembly: "See, what did I tell you?" No doubt Stargazer had predicted his reaction.

Markis glanced about the room, moving only his eyes, and only as much as necessary.

"We feel that as you have breached protocol before we advised, now is as good a time as any."

The old man meant that Markis had a sex life against the wishes of the council. Markis was sorely tempted to reply that he thoroughly enjoyed breaching protocol.

"I believe your king told you this was not up for discussion." Pride won out upon hearing Tressa's supporting words. Tressa had no idea what they were talking about, and he could think of no way of telling her without blurting it out. That would let the rest of the assembly know of her ignorance, and it would probably shock her. Yet she hid her lack of knowledge and spoke up in support.

"Forgive me." Stargazer gave a slight bow. He may have intended it for both of them, or either. His next sentence he definitely aimed at Markis, though. "We feel that perhaps it might help to calm things down. It might make our queen feel more settled, make her feel that this is her home."

Tressa's hand tightened around the arm of the chair. From a distance, the movement was likely inconspicuous. This wasn't a signal, just a genuine gesture of concern.

"Your queen not only knows this is now her home, she is happy here. There is nothing that needs calming down, and I would thank you not to speak of my wife as though she is not in the room."

A whisper went through the crowd at the reprimand. Once again, Stargazer gave a slight bow, this time only with his head. "My most sincere apologies. I realise that these matters are delicate."

"So delicate that perhaps they should not be discussed in council," Tressa said.

Markis smiled. Tressa had chosen her words carefully. No one but he and Ryanac would know she hadn't a clue what they discussed.

"I beg to differ, my queen. Anything that involves the future of our race should be open for honest discussion."

"The future" -- Markis stressed the word -- "is hardly at stake."

"And if something should happen to you?"

Damn. By the comet, Tressa had to have gleaned the idea by now. He would have preferred the opportunity to speak to her alone.

"I have two brothers."

Stargazer grimaced and lowered his head. His movements were well-timed and chosen. "Alas for us, your brothers are not as strong." The double meaning wasn't lost on Markis. Stargazer would have preferred another on the throne. Stargazer now raised his head and looked around, catching the eye of every man and woman in the room. Unsure if he could see that far, still Markis had to acknowledge it didn't matter if the man could see beyond the end of his nose. His purpose had been to draw every eye towards him.

"What makes the comet?" Stargazer began, as though addressing a classroom of students. "What makes a man Shavar?" He turned his attention back to Markis as though he indeed needed to lecture their king. "Elements of the comet run in the blood. A comet fell upon the world and only one man walked free. That first person did not fare well, as many believe. He died within two

years, and if he had not fathered a child, the comet's power may have died with him. There would be no Shavar. There would be no one here."

Pure nonsense; surely, the others could see that. Even without that survivor, others had been out of range. They would still exist as a people, and they would still need to govern the populace. Stargazer spoke as though to children. Did the others here believe that without Shavar they had no purpose?

"That child suffered many ailments for the rest of his life, as did his children and his children's children. Gradually, though, things changed as they so often do with time. Instead of growing weak, descendants became strong. Yet it is usually the firstborn son that is the strongest, and Leraï had only one brother who died young."

This was true. Markis's grandmother had died giving birth to a third son, and shortly after, her husband followed her to the grave, possibly due to grief. Markis's father had taken the throne sooner than he'd ever anticipated, which was partly why Markis forgave the man his bad temperament. Due to these events, Markis could understand why the subject of offspring was troubling to the Swithin, but it was unfair for Stargazer to use it to stir discontent, and Markis was certain that was the man's only reason to mention it here and now.

"The power diminishes in those further away from the direct royal line. Only the king's sons become Shavar with the eldest taking the throne. So it has always been." Stargazer had turned in a slow circle as he said this last. Now he came back to face the front and stared at the throne. "And now there is you."

That was an ill-disguised insult if ever there was one. In his peripheral vision, Markis saw Ryanac move his head down. The gesture barely moved the man's head an inch, but more than enough to show that Stargazer had just pissed Ryanac off.

"If you had children now, we could breathe easy knowing that the line continues strong. If any problems occur".

Markis had had enough. The deliberate pauses were getting on his nerves. He rose to his feet. From where he stood, he looked down at the assembly. "If there are any problems, we will seek the advice of a healer when that time comes. When the time is appropriate. Now, if there is no other business to attend to".

Stargazer let forth a gasp that sounded too like an incredulous laugh for Markis's liking.

"Forgive me," the old man said once again. "I must be too used to dealing with your father. I am shocked that you refuse to discuss this."

"I do not refuse to discuss this when the time is right, but even then I will discuss it with the appropriate people. Do not suggest that I would take the matter of children lightly." For the Swithin, it was a most grievous insult to do such a thing.

"I meant no such thing."

Markis captured his tongue between his teeth, and it took all of his willpower not to bite in order to hold in his words. He would achieve nothing but personal pain that way, but he needed to choose his words carefully. "Then I ask your forgiveness if I am mistaken, but being Swithin, you will understand why you are standing on very unstable ground."

Another murmur ran through the council, but this one was in assent. Markis bowed to the council and turned to leave, holding out a hand to beckon and take Tressa with him.

"I really must insist." Stargazer spoke up. A collective gasp stilled Markis's forward motion. He turned his head to the centre of the room, squeezing Tressa's hand, which he had taken, as he did.

"I take it you did not see me bow to leave the room." Alas, he had to give the old man something, a way out of this. Stargazer knew that, of course.

"I am sorry. My sight does fail me at times."

"Yes, it does," Markis replied. He wasn't referring to the old man's eyes, but probably only Stargazer would know that.

"Even so --"

"Take care." Ryanac's voice rang through the room.

Stargazer blinked in apparent surprise. His gaze shifted about the room as though he searched for the source of the voice. "You have your guard speak for you in open council now?"

"I do not speak to the council. I speak as Sonndre, protector. I will guard the king against all threats, even insults."

"I hardly see --"

Another voice broke into the assembly. The position of the old king's protector allowed Harton a council seat. He stood up. "I would never have allowed you to speak to my king this way. Ryanac acting as Sonndre is within his rights to reprimand you."

Even from this distance, Markis could tell Stargazer didn't take his defeat well. "Very well." Stargazer looked away. "I will leave this matter for another, more appropriate day."

Markis could have walked from the room, but he didn't. "You will leave this matter for eternity."

The old man had turned to shuffle from the podium. Now he looked back, his mouth agape, always the consummate performer. "I must insist --"

"Insist?" Markis let go of Tressa's hand and took a step down. Ryanac moved closer to him. Markis stared at the old man a minute and then let his gaze sweep over the room. "I will not bear this kind of insolence from anyone. I will not" -- he mentally apologised to Tressa for what he was about to say -- "bring a woman home as my bride and impregnate her right away!"

All whispering stopped. Silence became the monarch for a painful span of time. Then Markis said, "You insult me by your insistence that we speak of this now, and that we speak of it here. You insult my wife more by insisting that she should carry my child a few weeks after her arrival. If it happens, it will be the natural course of things, or it will be when we plan." His gaze raked the room; he copied the technique Stargazer had used, waiting for everyone's attention. "We are Swithin. What is happening to us that any one of us would contemplate behaving in such a way?"

A few murmurings begged his forgiveness for the old man. Stargazer clenched his fingers into a fist. His face hardened, but he couldn't say a thing. To do so would strip him of his council seat or worse. As Markis walked away, he almost wanted the old man to say something. He had never wanted to punish someone so much in his life, and he didn't like the feeling at all.

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"Serelia means pregnancy?" Uly walked at Markis's side.

Markis nodded. "It means to be fruitful, particularly in regards to a woman."

Uly ruminated over what he had heard of the meeting. "Considering what happened, Tressa is taking it remarkably well."

Markis sighed. "She does well in matters of state. It's only personal problems that get the best of her."

"Stargazer insulted you."

"As good as."

"He's either brave or stupid."

As Markis looked at him, Uly tried to keep a straight face but failed. His lips broke out into a smile. Markis shook his head but smiled back.

"I love to see that smile of yours, or hear you laugh."

Uly shrugged. "Strangely, I understand that."

"Why strangely?"

He gave another shrug. "I like to see you happy too. I just didn't know what that meant once."

They continued walking along the corridor. Uly had waylaid Markis on the way to another part of the palace. Ryanac and Antal followed on their heels, at a polite distance. Uly found it comforting and creepy, even amusing. They both had their shadows. Somehow, Ryanac being Markis's lover made his presence easier to bear. Uly didn't want Antal for a lover, though.

"How does...?" Uly paused. Markis looked at him with an expression he had come to understand meant he waited to hear the question. "How does a woman avoid catching a child?"

"Catching? I've never heard that expression before. That makes it sound as if it happens by accident. I didn't know until I met Tressa, but Azulite women take the same herbs the Swithin do. Once, her people used to feed their women concoctions that as good as poisoned them over time. Thankfully, they're no longer that backward."

"So Tressa is taking these herbs?"

Markis nodded. "Yes."

"And when she wants a child, she just stops taking them?"

"Yes. It might take a few weeks for her system to adjust or." Markis sniggered. "Well, they aren't completely trustworthy. Accidents do happen, but as Swithin, we do not sleep with anyone with whom we would not consider taking on such a responsibility. We do not have to marry for a child, but both take care of it."

"Then what if...?" Again, he hesitated. Again, he received that look. "What if Tressa became pregnant by me or Ryanac?"

"Does fatherhood frighten you?" Markis sounded amused.

"Yes. No." Who was he kidding? "Yes! That's not it, though. How would we know?"

"You mean whose child it was?"

Uly nodded.

"For one thing, if it's a girl, we'll know it's not mine."

He frowned, not understanding.

"Ever since the first man walked from the comet, his descendants have always been boys. Don't ask me why. As a race, we have no preference. This seems to be out of our control. If the child is a boy, well" -- his gaze wandered over Uly's face -- "if it looks anything like you, I think we'll know. If it looks Swithin, then I'll test it."

Test? Markis must have seen the look on his face.

"When the child is a few weeks old, I'd be able to tell if it has any power of the comet at all. If not, then we would know it was Ryanac's child. That's all assuming Tressa caught with child. I hope we will have the opportunity to plan our children more carefully."

It sounded straightforward enough. Something else bothered him, though. "What if I wanted a child someday? Would Tressa have to be the mother?"

Markis turned his gaze ahead. "No, but she could be."

"If I want her to be and she's willing?"

Markis nodded.

"You don't want me to have anyone else, do you?"

Markis laughed. "We have quite a large enough family already, don't you think? Even in our society, two is usual, three is accepted, and four is unlikely. More than four people living together is extremely rare."

"That's not your reason, though." For a moment, Uly believed the other man wouldn't answer him.

"No," Markis finally admitted. "No, it's not." He glanced sideways. "Even I have a heart only so large. I won't hold you to me, but I would find it difficult to share you more than I already do. I want you with me."

Uly tried to think of something intelligent to say. All he could manage was a smile.

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Markis almost groaned when he saw Kilan step out into the corridor ahead. He was Markis's youngest brother, and he had already tried to waylay him once today. Knowing Kilan, he would just keep pestering until they spoke.

"I heard what the old fart said," Kilan declared, in his usual abrupt manner.

Markis stopped to hug his brother. Kilan had been away until recently. He had just started his training at an academy when Markis arrived. The young man had travelled all that way to start training only to travel back home again to see his father die. Now, several weeks later, he was home yet again, suspended for continually showing disrespect, the report said. Markis had shouted at him, told him how disappointed he was in him, but unfortunately, Ryanac always

backed up his harangues with a grin.

'Don't say that,' Markis said. 'This is the type of behaviour that's got you into trouble.'

'I just speak the truth.'

Markis sighed. 'And you don't need Stargazer mad at you. I can't send you back to the academy while you continue to behave like this.'

'Good. I don't want to go.'

Markis stopped in his tracks and looked at him. He glanced up and down the corridor, but thankfully, only the five of them were present. 'Don't say things like that.' Acceptance into an academy was a great honour. Of the king's sons, it was expected.

'Why? Because they drummed it into us from an early age? I told Father how I felt. He screamed and threatened me more than you do. Knowing he was ill, I promised I'd try. I think he thought once I got there that I'd have no choice. Then I discovered that it's all too easy to piss people off so they'll get rid of you.'

'No,' Markis said. 'It isn't. Only you can do that.'

Kilan shrugged. 'What can I say? You have your gifts, I have mine.'

'And now our father is gone, your discipline falls to me. Or maybe I could just hand the duty over to Harton.' As their father's Sonndre, that was permissible. Kilan's eyes narrowed.

'You wouldn't do that.' They both knew Harton would be hard on him. 'Oh, come on.' He fell into step beside Markis as the king marched off. 'I tried it. I hated it. You can't send me back. I want to stay here with you. You can train me and teach me the comet.'

Once more, Markis stopped walking. 'No, I can't.'

'You mean you won't.'

'He has a point,' Ryanac chimed in. Markis shot him a look. Kilan took the opportunity to step closer.

'I'm never going to be as strong as you, but with your help, I could be as strong as Mairtin, if not stronger. I'm faithful to you. Do you really want Mairtin watching your back rather than me?'

'Don't talk that way about our brother.'

'Why not? I can't stand him.'

Ryanac bent forward with laughter.

'Don't look that way,' Kilan continued, clearly in reply to the expression on Markis's face. 'I know you don't like him any more than I do.'

Markis closed his eyes. Worse than Ryanac's laughter, which in some ways he expected, he could now hear Antal sniggering. He opened his eyes and glanced at Uly, only to see that even he had a smile on his face. Ryanac knew what Mairtin was like and how Markis and his middle brother shared an uneasy alliance and a less than loving relationship. Ryanac knew of all the pranks and the bullying Markis had suffered at Mairtin's hand, but how much did Uly realise this? What had he heard about Mairtin or what had Ryanac and Kilan told him?

Of course, Markis had suffered much of that in order to stop Mairtin turning his animosity on Kilan. Markis had done everything possible to protect Kilan, being that the youngest of the three had been a big enough disappointment to their father due to his rebellious nature. Of course, even though Kilan was their father's biggest disappointment, Markis was the second for his habit of questioning. Markis had always wanted explanations even when he obeyed but he usually complied. Kilan simply hardly ever obeyed at all, and if he did, he grumbled about it. Markis had long accepted his father was easiest to love from afar. More recently, he had disobeyed their father in political matters and brought an Azulite princess home as his wife.

Even though Markis had no wish to remember certain aspects of the day he'd returned home, his mind flashed on it now. The meeting with his father had been far from pleasant; he'd learned Mairtin was already in residence, with Kilan on the way. Even on that inauspicious day, Markis found it easy to speak with love when mentioning his youngest brother, but Mairtin. He was glad Mairtin had left to return to his duties as soon as their father's funeral took place.

Struggling not to grimace, Markis shook his head in admonishment at the other men. Even so, he couldn't help remembering how he and Ryanac had once joked over Mairtin having no problem with celibacy. However, Ryanac had also pointed out how quick Mairtin rushed to the king's side, the implication being that the man's behaviour was sycophantic at best, scheming at worst. Mairtin was more than four years younger than Markis, yet something about the man made one think of him as older. Perhaps that was partly the reason their father favoured the middle son, though how anyone could fail to notice that Mairtin preferred isolation, was sullen, judgmental, cruel, and selfish, was beyond Markis. He didn't want to feel this way, but he didn't trust Mairtin and never would. By the comet, he didn't even like him. He feared Kilan saying something that would reach their brother's ears.

"You're speaking inappropriately about our brother and in front of". He hesitated, unable to say it.

"What? The wrong people?" Kilan's gaze darted left and right. "These are just about the only people I would trust with my life."

"And if one day you speak like this in front of the wrong person, then that will be exactly what you are doing. People have killed each other over less."

Kilan looked about to argue the point, and then he nodded and stepped back. "Fine. I'll curb my tongue if you will let said tongue and the rest of me remain here." The younger man looked into his eyes. "Please, Markis, I can't go back. I hate the life."

"The discipline would do you good."

"It's not the discipline. It's getting up before the cock crows."

Markis hated it, but a smile tugged at his mouth. By the look on his face, Kilan knew he had won.

"Ryanac and Antal can teach me to fight the way they teach Uly, and maybe I can help your Samir. And you can teach me the comet."

Markis shook his head.

"You have more control than you let the council know." A hint of anger crept into Kilan's voice when Markis opened his mouth. He was about to deny it, but Kilan could only guess at his intent. "By the comet, Markis, you're not even taking lessons any longer. You think others don't notice? I don't know what you did or how you did it, but our father continued to have lessons until ten years ago. That wasn't just because the strongest seers and advisers switched to you. He had all the control he was ever going to have. Even when they left, lesser advisers guided him in practice for

another couple of years. Shavar practice and train all their lives. You've just stopped. That's what has pissed Stargazer off. That's why he tried to antagonise you. I don't know what it is you know, but you know something about the comet I don't, and without your help I face years of misery trying to control it, and it starts a couple of years from now. I don't want to start then. I want to start now, and I don't want all that torment. I've no patience for it. If I were in your place, I would do everything I could for you. If you know something that will help, why won't you offer it to me?"

"That will piss Stargazer off even more," Ryanac remarked.

No doubt Ryanac intended the comment to help. It was certainly a way for Markis to back out and tell Kilan that what he proposed was out of the question. Instead, it caused a slow smile to stretch Markis's lips. He nodded at Kilan. "Yes," he said. "It undoubtedly will."

## Chapter Five

Uncertain as to what had made him look up from the book, Uly hesitated. He almost went back to reading it, so caught up in the pages was he. Once, when he first gained access to the Swithin great store of books, he had allowed himself only to read the didactic volumes, feeling sure that if Markis found him reading books that contained stories, he would have berated him for wasting his time. Markis had told him there was no shame in reading purely for pleasure. It cleared the mind and cleansed the spirit, and, he had said, Uly would be surprised what he might learn reading stories. In time, he had come to understand. The stories were starting to give him a greater insight into the mind of the Swithin people. As he grew to understand them, he had begun to feel more at home.

However, the volume in his hands wasn't a storybook, but he found it highly entertaining and enlightening. He couldn't see how three men could possibly get into such a position, but he turned the book and suddenly the image became clear to him. Was this what Markis meant when he said the two of them could fuck him?

He was busy squirming in his seat and trying to get over the hot flush that had taken him over when he noticed movement at the periphery of his vision. Even so, he almost lowered his head and went back to reading. Then, trusting his instincts, he set the book aside, rose up out of the chair, and padded quietly to the door that led into one of the connecting hallways. He was in time to see Tressa disappear around a corner, dressed somewhat unusually for her position as queen. In sudden alarm, Uly broke into a jog and hurried after her.

"Tressa!" He hissed her name, soft and low, yet with an underlying chastisement. He knew all too well that she was up to something. Tressa, about to turn another corner, started and looked at him, first in what had to be horror, and then in irritation. His gaze ran up and down her clothes. She wore the dress of a servant. The outfit was dark and somewhat drab, though altogether feminine, its purpose not for social standing but for practicality. Some of the women wore trousers to work in, but some preferred a dress. It really depended on the chore at hand. Tressa looked as if she intended to go to market. "What are you doing?" He hadn't meant to sound so disapproving, but he couldn't help it.

"It is none of your business."

"If I stand by and do nothing and you get into trouble, Markis will make it my business."

She dithered, guilt and frustration warring in her expression. "Uly, please, I just want to go somewhere."

"Where? Where can you possibly want to go that Markis would not take you?"



She set her teeth together and pulled back her lips. He wouldn't have been surprised if she had snarled at him. "That is just it. I do not wish someone to take me somewhere. I wish to go where I want without an armed escort."

Once, not so long ago, Markis had told them they would have been able to do just that. Uly understood how she felt. Markis also found the situation frustrating. "Things are unsettled right now. He's only trying to protect us. Even Markis goes nowhere without Ryanac. You know that."

"Then call the guard on me. Shame me. I will be gone an hour only."

He shook his head. He couldn't do that. She would never trust him again, and that might put her in danger one day. She turned to leave, and Uly took another step after her. "You cannot go out there alone."

She stopped, looked back at him. Her gaze flicked up and down, and then she smiled. "Then come with me."

The look in her eye had him worried.

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"Why could I not wear the plain dress?"

"Because we would not have been able to cover your hair so effectively. And this way, they will just think a noblewoman is out with a servant."

On a hot day, many Swithin women wore a long drape of cloth over their heads. The colour, and the way Tressa had pinned it, showed that he had long hair beneath, but it appeared to be brown rather than blond. He didn't know how she had created the illusion, but somehow it worked. He could live with it. The long, gauzy dress was another matter. She had padded the top half so that he looked feminine. They had even argued over that. He didn't need to look well endowed, just disguised enough that no one would spare him a second glance. Though, dressed as he was, he didn't see how people could fail to give him a second look. The dress, thankfully, flowed out in loose layers. Still, he worried every time the wind blew in such a way that it clung to him. He wore only undergarments, and feared someone would see things that had no business being part of a woman's anatomy. The paint on his face was another matter entirely.

"I don't want red lips," he had told her.

"You have rosy lips anyway. The colour will suit."

"No. It will look too gaudy. We don't want to be noticed, remember."

In the end, they had chosen a rosy pink, only one shade darker than his natural lip colour. It also didn't clash with the white and pale green dress so much. The dress was ankle-length and initially he'd worried that he would trip in it. Luckily, there weren't many stairs to negotiate. The shoes were flat, and many Swithin women were tall. Still, Uly drew on his experience of being a street thief, and of how to hunch and make himself look smaller. The necklace she had chosen managed to weigh heavily between his fake breasts.

"Stop fidgeting." She slapped his hand away.

"I'm sorry. I'm not used to there being more out front."

"Women adjust their breasts once when dressing. If you keep touching them, people will notice."

He turned his head to look at her. "Do I really look like a woman?"

She regarded him seriously, and then nodded. "You will do." They had made it down to the courtyard. A group of women, servants and otherwise, were about to head out into the marketplace. Uly almost stopped breathing as Tressa pulled him towards them, feeling certain they would identify Tressa even if they failed to recognise him. However, no one even glanced their way. They were too busy arranging shawls, picking up baskets and talking. These women were free to leave. The guards wouldn't check them on the way out, only when they returned to the palace. "Hurry." Tressa tugged on his arm and they joined the back of the queue. Uly tried not to look at Tressa, but she immediately began chatting to him about fabric and how he needed a new dress. Uly glanced at her in question. She rolled her eyes at him, and he almost flushed in embarrassment. Obviously, if they talked to each other there was less chance any of the other women would engage them in conversation. Besides, all of the women were well engrossed with each other, chatting amongst themselves.

He glanced at her hair, then quickly looked away. Strangely, she had managed to hide his hair better than her own. Most Swithin had brown hair, mostly a dark shade, which was a good thing. Black was a little more unusual, though Ryanac's hair was so dark as to be almost black if you didn't count the silver streaks in it. Only a little of Tressa's hair peeked out, but someone might notice. No one did, but then the guards weren't looking for their queen dressed as a servant, and Tressa had used the headscarf more to conceal the lower part of her face, which on such a hot day she could get away with. The guards had no reason to believe their queen would sneak out of the palace. Not even Uly could believe they were being so stupid.

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Uly looked back wistfully at the palace walls. This reminded him of a time in his homeland when he had snuck out and then tried to sneak back in without Markis's knowledge. He would never have believed he would do such a thing again. That gave him pause for thought.

"How will we get back into the palace?"

"We can worry about that when the time comes."

He grabbed her by the arm and drew her into a side street. "You have no idea?"

"We will think of something. If I have to, I will just announce us."

"Dressed like this?"

"Well, maybe I can take your dress, and you can go naked."

"No chance." Although, even as he said it, he wasn't sure what would be worse. He tried to weigh the consequences of the guards seeing him naked, or in a dress. "Besides, then Markis will know."

"It will not matter then. I will have done what I wish."

"He'll skin me."

She snorted. "He will shout and rant, and then he will hug you, tell you not to frighten him again, and kiss you all over."

"Should that make me feel better? I'm hurting him. We're hurting a lot of people doing this." Uly reached up to run his fingers through his hair, remembered the scarf, and stopped before he messed up his disguise.

When Tressa spoke next, at least her tone possessed a little contrition. "We will sneak back in, if able. I will take the heat of his wrath."

Regrets were worthless. They were here now. "Where are we going, anyway?"

"There is this place I have heard of, where the women go. I want to see them."

Having no idea what she meant, Uly fell silent and followed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Outrage did no more for his temperament than regrets. Still, it irked Uly to think that Tressa could climb a tree better than he could. Of course, the dress might have had something to do with it. In the end, he had stopped and tucked the skirts into his undergarments. They were lucky the tree was large, in full foliage, and on an empty street. The avenue ran between two tall and long buildings. No one had a reason to walk down this road unless on the way to the haven.

Tressa turned her head and shot him a look of disapproval as he cursed again. Uly bit back his cry, though he doubted anyone inside would hear. Those within made too much noise.

As he crawled to where Tressa lay on a long, wide branch, the hum of life rose up to greet him. The sound was that of an area filled with people. Uly couldn't isolate any one conversation but he could hear the cadence of voices, punctuated by musical notes of laughter. As Uly looked to see what captured Tressa's attention, heat rushed into his face. On the other side of the wall lay a formal garden. It sported an open area in the middle filled with water. There were such rooms in the palace. Uly hadn't understood why anyone would want such an expanse of water inside a building, but they lined it with tiles and filled it with water. Antal was still giving him swimming lessons. Markis, though, also had a private place they called the thermai, or hot baths. This had a large pool, as well as smaller areas. One contained hot water that bubbled, and one they often filled with liquids to soften and scent the water. The four of them could have bathed together, but so far, he had only shared it with Markis. This pool looked similar, but was far larger and in the open. Even as he watched, a woman swam in the water below, and another one slipped in to join her. They were both naked.

Around the pool, women sat in sheltered areas, talking, sipping from tall glasses, and sharing small portions of food. Some combed another's hair. He started in shock, and if the branch had been any narrower, he might have fallen out of the tree as two of the women kissed.

"What is this place?" he whispered.

"It is for women only. The men have such a place too, I have heard, and there is another that men and women may share. It is a place of rest. It is not open to children, and they tolerate no argument within the walls. They practice massage, treatments to revive the skin and mind. You can visit alone, or with a friend or lover."

"If you wish to come here, I'm sure Markis could arrange it."

She nodded. "He could, but I wanted to see it first for myself. I wished to understand."

"Understand what?"

She pointed. "That."

The two women still kissed, only even as Uly watched, their touch grew more amorous. One stroked her fingers lazily through the fine hair masking the other woman's sex. One finger

disappeared between the soft folds that Uly knew were barely concealed there.

Uly closed his eyes and turned his head away. It was silly, really, for him to find this disturbing. He and Markis were lovers after all, and he knew that this way of life applied to women as well as men. He didn't mind in principle, but he didn't like spying on them. The growing pressure at his groin inflamed his guilt. He would never be able to walk back to the palace without someone noticing. Worse, he might not be able to walk at all. He crawled backwards. "I will wait for you on a lower branch," he said. Tressa glanced at him, clearly amused by his discomfort, but he didn't care.

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They had tried two entrances. This, their third attempt, seemed just as fruitless. They couldn't find a way into the palace without someone noticing. Seen, the guards would question their identity -- although in all likelihood they would know it already -- and they had no explanation as to who they were but the truth.

"I will go in while you hide. I will explain to Markis that you are out here. He will come for you. The guards need never know."

"I don't want Markis to know. I don't want him to see me like this," Uly practically growled at her.

"Maybe if we."

They turned and bumped into a man. "Pardon me," the man said, moving to step aside, and then he paused, taking a second glance. Still, they might have got away with it if colour hadn't rushed into Uly's face as he recognised the man just before he recognised them. "Sardia?" Harton asked, using the queen's official rank. The man dipped his head and tilted it to one side. His eyes widened, and then Harton glanced around with an expression close to fear on his face. "Samir?"

Uly's heart sank to his toes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Markis circled Uly. His gaze slid up and down continuously. Uly tried to remain motionless. Earlier, he had asked short of pleading for Harton to allow him to change. Harton had just stood there and stared at him until he lowered his gaze. He hadn't asked again. The man was clearly upset with them for risking their lives out on the streets unaccompanied. He'd practically dragged them back to the palace, all the while berating them for being so stupid. Harton had waited out here with him in the main living space while Markis exchanged words with his wife.

At first, Uly had felt almost grateful that Harton was the man who found them and taken them back into the palace, managing to conceal their identity. He hadn't been so pleased when the man had taken a hard, fast grip on them, and directed them both straight to Ryanac. The big man's eyes had flashed in surprise at the sight, and then his lips had twitched with amusement. Anger quickly chased Ryanac's natural enjoyment back. He had asked Harton to wait with Uly while he and Markis "consulted" with the queen in her private part of the suite. Although it was not possible to hear the discussion from where Uly stood, at one point a crash shattered the silence. Uly couldn't imagine the men throwing things, so it must have been Tressa throwing objects as well as a tantrum.

Now Harton had left and, still in the white and green dress, Uly stood in front of the two men. Markis pulled the shawl from his hair. Uly stared at the floor and tugged at his lower lip with his teeth. Realising he did and knowing Markis would notice the gesture, he forced his mouth still. Two fingers pressed under his chin and lifted his head. He caught Markis's gaze, and then Shavar circled him again. Apparently, he wasn't supposed to look down. He closed his eyes.

'We didn't tell you to close your eyes, Uly.' This was Ryanac's voice, and the command sounded so like part of the game they had played a few days ago that he opened them in surprise.

Markis stopped pacing. 'What do you think?' he asked. It took Uly a moment to realise the question wasn't for him.

'He's a pretty little thing,' Ryanac remarked. Moving forward, he looked into Uly's eyes, and then cupped the artificial breasts. 'Pity these don't feel real.'

Feeling cold and hot all at once, Uly jerked away. Unfortunately, that meant his gaze met Markis's. He quickly looked down. He had experienced many things in his time with Markis, including fear, hate, pain, confusion, guilt, desire, and love. He'd often felt wrong or awkward. The men were playing with him, partly in fun, partly to embarrass him. He couldn't blame them on either count. They were unhappy with him right now, and he understood why. He would have apologised if it would have done any good, but it wouldn't turn back time.

Ryanac pulled the stuffing from the dress. The gesture came as a relief, though it was humiliating.

'Please let me go to change.'

'I don't think so,' Markis said, his voice flat. That tone hurt most of all. Markis took Ryanac's place as the other man moved aside. 'Where did she go?'

The space between his eyes twitched. Uly could only think that Markis hadn't asked Tressa, she wouldn't say, or he wanted to see if they told him the same thing. His fondness of Tressa warred against his loyalty to Markis. In the end, the greater emotion won out. Besides, he was in enough trouble for one day. He told them what they had seen, flushing a little when he spoke of the two women kissing.

Ryanac laughed. 'She wanted to see two women.' He glanced at Markis. He sniffed the air. 'Is that a brew of trouble I can smell?'

'Shut up!' Markis snapped, and Ryanac did as instructed for once, but the grin remained. Markis glanced at him. 'You're no more amused than I am.'

Ryanac raised his eyebrows.

'All right, we are slightly amused, but that doesn't forgive what they did.' Markis turned his attention back to Uly.

'I know,' Uly said.

'If you know, you shouldn't have done it.'

'She would have gone alone.'

'You should have stopped her,' Markis said. Ryanac made a small sound. Markis sighed. 'You should have told someone who could have stopped her.' Ryanac sniggered. 'You should have told someone who could have tried to stop her.' Markis glanced at the other man as if to ask if that declaration was acceptable. 'What you shouldn't have done was go with her. I'm grateful that you did, but you're probably in more danger than she is. In truth, neither of you should be in danger in the city at all, but until I feel certain you're safe, please don't do something like this again.' Somehow, Markis managed to sound angry, weary, and frightened all at once.

'Not to mention what the council would have made of the spectacle.'

Uly couldn't be sure if Ryanac intended the remark to amuse, or if the big man was being facetious. At last, though, Markis's lips twitched. As those warm brown eyes looked at him, the coldness fled; desire bled in. "I may love you," Markis said, "but do this again, and I'll have no choice but to be your king rather than your lover. If I have to lock you up for your safety, I will."

"You're not going to punish me, then?"

Markis stared him down. "What are you? A child I should send to his room? You may have been once, in manner if not in age. I sent you to bed with an empty stomach once, as a chastisement, but I believed we were past such things. Do you need me to punish you as though you were a child?"

Uly couldn't help it. The memory might be of a cruel night, but now it made him smile. He tried to school his lips quickly, but didn't manage it in time.

"I'm not going to be the one to punish you," Markis said, and the comment wiped the smile from Uly's face. He didn't know what Markis meant, but he sensed he wouldn't like it. "And I think if you like this dress so much, you can spend the rest of the day in it." Uly almost groaned.

Now the two men moved closer, hemming him in. Hands examined, grabbed. They touched him often enough, but somehow their doing it now, when they were rightfully mad at him, caused Uly to squirm. Ryanac dropped down behind him, reached under the dress, and pulled down his underwear. Static made the gauze cling to his flesh. Markis's fingers took the necklace from his throat. Now he wore only the dress, but he remembered Tressa applying the soft grey colour to the skin around his eyes and the rosy lipstick to his mouth. Markis tilted his head, and the next thing Uly felt was Markis's tongue flicking between his painted lips. Ryanac's hands tugged on the fabric, making it shift against his skin.

"Tell us to stop," Markis said, breaking the kiss.

"Markis," Ryanac complained.

"Tell us to stop, and we'll stop," Markis repeated, ignoring the rebuke. "We're not going to force you into anything."

The big man gave a soft curse. "I don't know about you, but I can hardly resist."

"We're not taking. We'll give," Markis said, "but only if he says yes." He dropped to his knees.

In the Swithin world, silence meant yes. Uly wasn't sure it meant the same thing to him, but desire mixed with a little alarm captured his breath. Markis and Ryanac effectively squeezed him between them. Even as he looked down, Markis lifted two of the gauze layers, holding them aside. With the last finest layer left, he used it to wrap up Uly's cock and balls. Unable to help it, he swelled, and then there was heat and wetness, soft depths followed by the strange sensation of coolness. As Markis bobbed his head, the gauze made Uly ever more sensitive. He could feel the heat more; he could also feel the cool air as it rushed in the moment Markis's warm lips receded.

Behind him, Ryanac also fiddled with the dress. Those big hands grabbed his cheeks, pulling at them, separating. A thumb pushed that last layer in against him. He frowned, puzzled, then let out something close to a cry of pain, though he felt anything but. Ryanac's hot, wet tongue flicked back and forth and then circled his entrance. He had never felt such a thing. The sensation slammed up through his body with such force his legs gave way. Both men caught and held him in place, though he had no idea how. The waves built, cresting, no longer situated just at his groin, but running over his skin. The feeling set even the backs of his arms tingling. If he said no

now, he didn't think either of the two men would believe him. He wouldn't have believed him either. They had a word, the one you said if you truly wanted this to end. He couldn't think of it, remember it. There was that other word though, the one that meant tame as in surrender. He whispered it so low that he doubted anyone could hear it. Nevertheless, his body heard, and it gave in to the pleasure.

Time lost meaning. Ryanac and Markis played him until he couldn't tell which hands belonged to who, which hot tongue entwined with his. He only came to his senses when he opened his eyes to the sight of Markis's face so close to his, the man devouring him almost with every kiss as Ryanac knelt before them devouring two cocks at once. To feel his hard, overheated flesh pressed against Markis's and engulfed in such slick heat went beyond description. As if he were aware Uly had opened his eyes, Markis opened his. The look in those dark eyes was almost challenging. A tear leaked from the corner of his eye, though Uly didn't understand why he felt so close to crying when all he could feel was sheer bliss.

He was sorry for putting his life at risk. He had wanted to keep Tressa safe, but the true reason he'd gone with her was he felt as tired of the palace as she was. He'd be honest with Markis as soon as the time was right, which was not while they kissed. Markis turned his head, gathering up the tear on his tongue and taking the salty taste to Uly's lips. To his surprise, Uly sucked hungrily at the taste. He wanted to drown in this, in anything, in passion if that was what it took to kill this restlessness that ate away inside of him. Markis told him the sea tasted of salt, but he had yet to see it close. Fine; as one could drown in the sea, he would drown in Markis. It didn't matter that it was Ryanac's hot mouth that they spilled into, only that Markis's heat and smell surrounded him and the sight of the man's dark gaze made him shout out some unintelligible sound.

If Tressa could hear his cries, she probably thought they were inflicting some terrible punishment upon him.

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Uly opened his eyes to find he lay on one of the couches. He still wore the dress, though Markis had thrown a cover over him. The wind blowing through the open doors leading out to the balcony had grown chilly, but it brought a sweet scent, so they often left them open until the last possible moment. The atmosphere in the room was one of peace. Uly huddled beneath the blanket, more content than he had a right to be. Dress or no dress, he intended to go back to sleep. A sound off to the side made him open his eyes again. Antal stood there, looking at him.

Suddenly afraid of seeing the look on Antal's face at the sight of the dress, Uly gripped the blanket and held it tight. It occurred to him there might be traces of paint on his face, but he felt certain that Markis had kissed and licked it all away.

"How could you?" Antal said. Uly would have preferred to hear more force behind it. He didn't know what to say. He just stared. "I nearly died saving your life, and this is what you do?"

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry," Antal repeated. He looked thoughtful. "Funny. That is what I used to say to my parents when I was a child."

The fun-loving Antal had gone. This young man looked very serious. It suddenly dawned on Uly that this confrontation was his punishment.

"Markis gave me a choice. I can step down as Sonndre to you. He'll find you another protector. Is that what you want?"

Uly shook his head. No, that wasn't what he wanted. He had argued against anyone putting his

life in danger for him at first, but these people considered the position an honourable one. It meant something beyond his understanding. It meant something to Antal that he had chosen to accept the position as Uly's personal guard.

"To be Sonndre takes trust. I know Markis has run off on Ryanac at times, but Markis is a man with a wealth of experience that with luck you will never need. You've led a difficult life, but there are still darker sides to life from which Markis will spare you if he can. Markis has the comet, and he has fighting skills. You have street smarts, and you learn well, but you are not ready to be out there by yourself, not with some unseen threat against you. One day, maybe you will. That day, if you run off, I'll curse you the way Ryanac curses Markis, but I'll forgive you for it. This is a partnership. A relationship. You have to trust me to do everything in my power to keep you safe, but I need to be able to trust that you won't do such foolish things. Now give me your word."

Uly swallowed, and it hurt. "I swear it. On my life."

Antal blinked. "Let's just hope it won't come to that." He turned and left the room.

Sighing, Uly sat up. He didn't know if Markis truly wanted him to wear the dress for the rest of the day, but neither the garment nor the stains on it made him feel soiled. The look he had seen in Antal's eyes served quite well enough for that.

## Chapter Six

From the corner of his eye, Markis saw Ryanac walk by the store, stop, take a step back, and look in. Markis turned his head away before they could make eye contact through the open doorway. Covertly using the reflection in a mirror that stood in the corner of the store, Markis watched the big man stand there, ignoring the people who bumped into him. It wasn't like Ryanac to be rude, so he was impolite out of amusement.

A moment later, the guard walked over and lounged against the doorframe. Markis finally turned his head to look directly at Ryanac, as the man's bulk blocked the light. "If you're going to come in, then come in. I can't see anything with you eclipsing the day."

Ryanac blinked, started slightly, and then unfolded his arms and moved inside. Markis struggled not to smirk. It wasn't often Ryanac forgot his size. To remind him of it was a rare treat. Ryanac peered over his shoulder, leaning in so they could speak quietly, although the storekeeper had backed into a corner. She had gabbled at first, upon finding the king in her store, and it had nothing to do with embarrassment. The Swithin rarely suffered embarrassment; at least not over sex. She just didn't seem to know how best to serve him, so she had given him too much advice until he told her he needed a few quiet moments in which to think.

"What kind of example are you setting when you skip out on your captain? We berated Uly and Tressa about this."

"And as Antal said, if they were as skilled with a sword as I am and had the use of the comet, we wouldn't worry so much."

Ryanac looked at him. The heat of that gaze slid up and down the side of his face. "I still worry."

"I know that," Markis said gently, putting all his feelings into his voice. He smiled wryly. "If I hadn't skipped out on you, we never would have found Uly." He spoke of a long-ago night when he had gone out alone, and the thief had tried to rob him.

"Fine. You win." Ryanac turned his attention to the items the storeowner had kindly laid out on the



counter. The velvet backing softened the sound, but this many crystals together gave off a quiet hum. "For Tressa or Uly?"

"I thought both."

"Good." The grin found its way home. "Having trouble choosing?"

"You could say that."

Ryanac studied the items. He pointed to a few. The woman moved hesitantly towards them. Markis nodded. "Put the others back." She did and then moved away again. Markis studied the remaining items, picking one up to feel the weight. He finally found one he liked. He chose a flat one to go with it, just the right size and shape.

"May I choose Uly's?"

Ryanac's question took him by surprise. Markis lowered his head, not from embarrassment but for privacy. "You've never been inside him."

"I'll take your advisement then, but I know what I'm looking for." Ryanac went through those in front of him. He ended up with three possible choices, weighed them in his hand, discounted one and ended up with two. "Which do you think?"

Markis examined them. "This one," he said finally.

"Same one I was looking at."

They nodded to the woman who approached, put the unwanted ones back, took the items they had chosen, and proceeded to package them.

"I want to pay half the cost of Uly's gift."

Markis raised an eye. "I won't even ask why."

"You planning on giving Tressa hers tonight?"

"Yes."

"Can it wait until tomorrow?"

Amused rather than irritated, although a little put out his surprise would have to wait, Markis asked, "Why?"

"Because Uly and I are spending the day together. It will be a perfect end if you'll allow me to present our gift to him then. If you give Tressa's hers before then, he might discover the crystals exist and it will spoil the surprise."

Ryanac had a point. If Tressa had too smug a look on her face, Uly might well ask why. "I'm going to speak to Harton about your plans for tomorrow right now," Markis said, though that wasn't what he was thinking. A trace of uneasiness crept through him.

"That's not what's bothering you."

"Damn it, Ryanac." Markis looked to the side to make sure the woman wasn't listening. "Why did we have to share the comet if you can read my mind without it?" They had learned how to share the abyss on the two-week journey to the city, and that meant sharing their very essence.

'Because it helped you learn control, and we wanted to share feelings, not thoughts.'

Markis gritted his teeth. He had to force the words out. "Are you planning on seducing him?"

The big man shrugged. "You know me. I never plan anything."

That was half a lie, half truth, and told him nothing. Ryanac's gaze moved towards the woman who had finished packaging their gifts. "We'll talk about it later," he said.

\* \* \* \* \*

'Do you really want to do nothing but sit on the council?'

Harton laughed at the question. He threw back his head as he paced, arms folded. Not many would have come before their king and paced in front of him. They would have stood still and bowed their heads in respect, but Harton had been his father's captain, his Sonndre, for too many years. They had not been Samir to each other, but the rest held true. Harton hadn't always liked Markis's father, but he had been loyal to him. It made Markis wonder if Ryanac ever disapproved of the things he did. He didn't wonder for long. Harton had spoken openly to his father most of the time. Ryanac would tell Markis what he thought no matter what. Ryanac's too blatant honesty was one of many things in their relationship that he relied on.

So Harton paced, but they were friends, and this was hardly a formal meeting.

'I wondered how long it would take you to come to this,' Harton said. Markis raised an eyebrow. Harton shrugged. "Well, since I found those two wandering around outside anyway. They both looked quite fetching in a peculiar way."

"You're avoiding."

"And you're complicating my life."

While that was true, it didn't account for Harton's agitation. Markis could feel the tension in the man mounting. He could almost taste it. "So you want to do nothing but vote on the council and sit in the sun when you're not?" His father was dead. Harton had the right to retire and an automatic seat on the council for services rendered.

'I do have other things in my life. Your own Sonndre is a man, not just his duty.'

Markis gave that comment the pause it deserved: none. "Ryanac has his duty and sex."

Harton smirked. "I hear they're one and the same."

"The earth shifts," Markis said. He meant Harton stood on unstable ground. There was no shame in Markis's relationship with his guard, but it was impolite to mention it the way Harton had.

"So bury me if you can."

The animosity in Harton's voice was unexpected. Markis barely hesitated in his reply, though. "I could."

'But you won't.'

Markis looked up into the other man's face, still trying to figure out why Harton appeared so unhappy. The proposal wasn't so out of the ordinary, and even if the suggestion was unwelcome,

Harton had the right of refusal. He didn't have to take on another post. Why didn't the man just say no if this proved so upsetting? "Don't mistake friendship and the emotion that comes with it for weakness. You would have to push me more than that and more than most for me to retaliate, I admit, but that does not mean I won't."

Harton studied him, and then dropped his gaze in a gesture of submission. "I had to be sure."

"As do I. I could do with another sword I can trust." Markis had asked Harton to act as a secondary guard to keep his family safe until they could be sure that whatever threat there was to Tressa and Uly had passed. That duty, if Harton took it, would begin with covering Ryanac's back when he took Uly out for the day.

Still Harton hesitated, and for such a long time that Markis almost recanted his offer. When Harton spoke, it was almost as if something tore the words from his throat. His face looked quite red.

"You have it," Harton sighed. "I don't even know why I'm saying yes. I thought I had had enough of babysitting." He still sounded disgruntled about the post even if he had accepted. Markis now felt uneasy and doubtful. Harton's attitude was thoroughly perplexing.

"They're not babies, and you might find. Well, compared to Tressa, you might find you preferred my father's wrath." Markis sighed inwardly. This was not the time, but he needed to ask. "Why did my father dislike Azulites so?"

Harton appeared grateful to hear the conversation move forward. "Your mother loved one."

The easy admission made Markis raise his head. He couldn't help wondering whether Harton would have told him so if it weren't for the fact that the man clearly wanted to change the topic. "What?" Markis couldn't believe what he'd heard. Harton laughed at the expression on his face.

"That's right. She loved one. He was travelling through and caught her eye."

"She disobeyed the king's wishes?" Markis pictured the calm, dignified woman he remembered. As far as being Swithin went, he'd always found it difficult to imagine her in his father's bed, let alone anyone else's. She always seemed more than satisfied with just one man, and loving to her sons, yet somehow aloof to others.

"She didn't even ask him."

The initial shock gave way to anger. Markis wanted to call Harton a liar, but he knew better than that. He released the clenched fists he had made, but too late. Harton's gaze flickered from his hands to his face.

"She loved him," Harton continued. "Oh, she liked, even loved, your father, but she never looked at him the way she did that man. Your father threatened his life, and your mother said she would cut his balls off while he slept if Lerai hurt him. He believed her, and so did I. Therefore, Lerai tolerated this man as her lover while he was here, knowing he would go on his way in a short while. Your father could be wise at times."

Markis wanted to ask for more details, and yet, at the same time, he didn't. This was his mother they discussed. Harton would only say more if he asked. He shook his head.

"Even so no. That's not a good enough reason for his feelings. It would be for some men, but not my father, and not a Swithin man. He already disliked them; I know not why. This just added to it."

Harton shrugged. "You are likely right. I have wondered as much myself, but that was one thing

your father never confided in me.”

“I once thought my parents loved each other.” Markis hadn’t meant to say that aloud, or at least not in such a way, in such a tone of voice.

“They did love each other. You are complicating things. Your mother had one lover in all the years she stood as queen. Your father had many, but they did not have what you have. They had no Samir, either of them. They loved each other and that should have been enough, but it wasn’t. I often thought a third and mutual love could have joined them more than their volatile hearts could. Many Swithin live in pairs only, but in this one case, your parents could have done with a third. But your father would not have another male and your mother would not have another female to share their bed or their lives. Both were too dominant, and I don’t mean sex. Neither would give. Both saw their own sex as a threat.”

“Are Shavar destined to always live this way?”

“Do you not love your queen, then?”

That tone was a little too mocking for his liking, but Markis could think of nothing to say. Would it always be the way of Sonndre to answer back? Harton smiled.

“She brings a smile to your face. As many frowns, there are as many smiles.”

“That’s just women,” Markis retaliated.

Harton laughed. “It has nothing to do with it, and you know it. Uly and Ryanac do the same. Uly makes you smile the most.”

Markis shrugged. “Well, Ryanac.” He said that name as though that explained everything about the man and, of course, it did. “Sometimes I just feel as though I never knew my parents. Worse, I feel they didn’t know each other.”

“They knew each other more than either of them could stand.”

Markis failed to see how that was supposed to make him feel better. “Time is wasting. I have your first assignment for you.” He told Harton what it was.

“You want me to keep chipmunks from nibbling Uly’s toes?”

“It’s not chipmunks I’m worried about.”

Harton searched his gaze. “I know about the attack that Antal took on Uly’s behalf. We all do. Nevertheless, that’s not the only thing I see in your eyes. I don’t suppose you would like to tell me the size of the critter we’re out to catch.”

“I’m not sure. I’m hoping you might know it when you see it.”

“Ryanac, Antal, me. You’ve chosen well.” Harton paused. If one could judge by his expression, it looked as if he wanted to say something, but had not the heart for it. “I will do what I can to keep Uly safe.”

Something muted the man’s voice. Harton sounded almost melancholy. Still, Markis gave him a nod in acknowledgement over his skill. It wasn’t ego, just the truth. He turned to leave the room, then paused. “Oh, I know what my father was like, but just so that you know, Ryanac doesn’t baby-sit me.”

Harton pursed his lips and smiled. He made an odd gesture with his head. "Whatever you say, Shavar Sardian. Whatever you say."

Markis forced a grin. He didn't feel like it. He wanted to argue. He just didn't have that much breath or time to waste, no matter how long he lived.

## Chapter Seven

"Are you going to be this sullen for the rest of the outing?"

"What? No." Ryanac's remark broke into Uly's thoughts. He turned his head to look at Ryanac, frowning. "I'm not sullen."

Ryanac gave him a look that said he most certainly was. Well, maybe a little.

They were alone. When Ryanac had said he would take Uly out to the woods, Uly hadn't believed him. After all that fuss, he didn't think Markis would agree, even though he had explained how cooped up he felt. Ryanac had kept his word, though, and that made Uly suspicious.

"What are you thinking?"

"When did you and Markis decide to arrange this excursion? I have a feeling you discussed this for some time."

Ryanac chuckled. "How fast they grow up."

Uly looked at him, and it took all his restraint not to poke out his tongue. Part of the reason he kept his mouth closed was that he didn't know what Ryanac would do at the sight of his tongue.

"You're right, of course. We thought it would do you good."

"Isn't it dangerous?" Uly let his gaze wander over the forest.

"Not with me to guard you. None of us can stand to live in a cage permanently. Besides, we aren't as alone as you think. Harton is out there."

Uly gave a small start in surprise and once more scanned the trees.

"He's not right here with us. He's just keeping an eye on things. He'll check out anyone who shouldn't be in this part of the forest." He'd already explained to Uly that this area was private to royalty or by invitation only, for conservation purposes. "No one else knows we're here, though, and I don't intend for anyone to see us. They think we have you shut in your room right now, and we were happy to let them believe so. They all believe Markis is mad at you for something, although they don't know what and don't really care. Some are uneasy. Some feel pleased by the prospect. They would like to see you in the wrong, see Markis angry with you."

Uly sighed. "Some will always think of me as a thief." He frowned. "I didn't think the Swithin would hold such prejudices."

"You were ~~are~~ a thief, Uly. It's not a profession we take kindly to, even if you did it out of necessity, and even if Markis has made use of your skills. No one cares that you were poor. Now be quiet a moment."

Uly looked once more to the forest. Ryanac had chosen this spot for a reason. Uly just didn't know

what that reason could be. Birds called to each other in the overhead branches. Trees taller than the palace did their best to block out the sky. Where it broke through in places, the sky was a rich, clear blue, and golden light beamed down in streams to the forest floor. They lay on soft mulch. He could smell nothing but rich earth. A lower canopy of leaves hid them from view so they could peer out unseen. What Uly didn't understand was why they were hiding.

"Why are we wait -?"

Ryanac lifted a hand and pointed. The animal walked sedately into the clearing. Uly had never seen such a creature before. It stood on four slender, fragile-looking legs. The animal's belly appeared full and rounded, and it flicked a white tuft of a tail. The head was small and pointed with oval ears that swivelled about in search of a sound. The eyes were dark, gleaming. Spots adorned its back. As if anticipating his question, Ryanac said, "It's a deer, or in this case a doe, the female of the species. It's a young one, though. The male has antlers."

Uly had no idea what antlers were, but he decided not to ask. He would find out for himself in the Swithin library. He learnt many things in the library, not all of them good. He would also look up more details about this strange creature. He watched it for a few minutes as, once satisfied the area was safe, it bent its head and began to nibble at something on the forest floor. After a while, he glanced at Ryanac. The man always carried a sword, but this time he had brought a bow as well.

"You're not going to kill it?" Uly whispered. Ryanac looked at him, a grin playing about his lips. The man could be so infuriating. Uly frowned at him on purpose.

"No. We're not hunting. Deer meat is tasty enough, but I wouldn't take such a young, fertile creature unless we were desperate for food, and if I could help it, not even then. You try to kill the stags. That's the males."

"Why?"

"If you have too many stags to the number of does, they fight. They gore each other to death."

"With what?"

Ryanac's face drew down in obvious confusion. "With their." He stopped and turned his head to look at Uly. "You don't know what antlers are."

To think he had tried to hide it, only to give himself away. Uly didn't know what to say, so he shrugged. "If you were starving, you would have to kill one of the does, wouldn't you?" He just wanted to change the subject.

"Not necessarily. There's plenty to eat in the forest, though you might find some of it unsavoury."

"Like what?"

Ryanac looked about. He reached out and lifted a piece of timber from the ground. Beneath, long, white bugs that looked like caterpillars squirmed. "Good nourishment," Ryanac remarked, and then put the wood back, silently laughing at the expression Uly pulled.

"I told you my title of Silas meant forest dweller. You might not like how I did it, but I would keep you alive out here and in worse conditions even than this. You've lived on the streets. I would have thought you had survived on some unsavoury things."

"I have," Uly admitted. "Not bugs."

"You're lucky."

"No." Uly shook his head. "It never occurred to me, but I think the insects you would find where I come from would be likely to poison you."

"What makes you say that?"

Ryanac sounded genuinely interested to hear his reasoning. The peculiarity of the conversation struck Uly as bizarre. "They look poisonous."

"You're not far off track. Some insects have bright colours such as red or yellow markings to fool a predator, but most of those in your homeland you would find disagreeable."

Now Uly grimaced. "Please don't tell me you tried the insects while you were there."

Ryanac laughed quietly, though the doe had wandered to the edge of the clearing. "No. I didn't eat any of them, but I checked out a lot of the area and the things in it. I was there a long time, remember. Even as Markis's guard, I had time on my hands. Besides, my reports were intended to be useful."

"Isn't that a little too like work? What did you do for fun?" Uly's face grew warm and he lowered his gaze. Knowing Ryanac as he did, the question was no doubt foolish. Ryanac now watched him, not the animal. "That is".

"Sex, Uly. When I wasn't working, I had sex, or I would read. Yes," he added as Uly's eyes widened. "Ryanac. Can. Read. He can also write or dance if you play the right tune."

The thought of the big man dancing caused Uly to bark out a laugh. The sudden sound startled the doe, and she darted off.

"She would have gone soon, anyway," Ryanac said, rising. He held out a hand and helped Uly to his feet. "You didn't have to laugh, though." He took Uly's hands in his and twirled him around. The large man was surprisingly light on his feet. Where the leaves made Uly slip, and the roots threatened to trip him, Ryanac might as well have been flitting about on solid ground. This time when Uly laughed, it was closer to delight than surprise.

Ryanac stopped moving, pulled Uly closer, and lifted his face by the chin. His thumb stroked back and forth. "Do you know how good it is to hear you laugh?"

Uly couldn't help feeling pleased, but lowered his gaze. "So everyone keeps saying."

"There's the truth of it, then."

The moment grew quiet, containing a strange intimacy, almost poignant. Uly swallowed, unnerved. If Ryanac had kissed him just then, he would have let him. He wasn't sure he didn't want the big man to do so, despite his ambiguous feelings towards him, but Ryanac stepped back.

"Come on. Let's try to find you a stag so I can show you what antlers are. We'll stop for lunch soon."

Uly fell into step. "So long as it's not bugs," he said.

The other man laughed, turning as he walked to look back, yet still managing not to trip up. He might get the hang of it eventually, but this was Uly's first experience of such terrain, and he would have ended up on his backside. He couldn't believe how jealous he felt. "Not bugs," Ryanac promised, patting the pack he carried. "I brought provisions."

\* \* \* \* \*

The Swithin preferred to divide rooms with screening decorated with intricate fretwork. Markis and his entourage segregated their private rooms in the usual way. This allowed cool breezes to move more freely. If anyone required privacy, the Swithin used heavier, more complex screens, or attached drapes to the light ones. This also allowed for easy reorganisation of the area if one required it or grew bored.

Tressa's dressing area lay to the rear of her bed. Markis sat down and waited. He had an awareness of his groin almost as though it was the dominant area of his body. Right now, maybe it was. He had no idea exactly what was going on in Uly's room. Ryanac and Uly had returned from their day out in the forest. He both itched to know what was happening and longed for ignorance. His frustration grew in part because he felt irritated by his own emotions. Markis loved them both, and the Swithin way dictated there was no cause for jealousy. He partly longed for the two most important men in his life to make love. It might cure all this uncertainty. It should, anyway. Markis feared it might do the opposite. He longed for the act of love to bring them together, but deep down, he believed it would take more than that. Uly and Tressa weren't Swithin. They were an unknown equation that complicated his life no matter how he felt, no matter how much he needed them, even if that need was for disparate reasons.

Markis had always thought, if the time came for Ryanac and Uly to come together as lovers, that he would be part of it. He imagined sharing an evening, and lust getting the better of reticence. Ryanac had said he harboured no plans to seduce Uly tonight, but then he said he had no plans for that any night. How the big man could be so calm about this was beyond Markis. Ryanac would just grin that grin of his, and assure Markis if it were going to happen, it would happen in its own good time. All Ryanac intended to do tonight was present Uly with their gift, just as Markis now intended to do with Tressa. Setting the crystals aside in the padded box, specially made to contain the vibration, Markis stood up and paced. He did not have long to wait. Tressa emerged from the dressing area, stopping short when she saw him and gasping a little.

"I did not hear you enter."

In truth, he had been deliberately quiet, wanting to ambush her. That small sound of fear made his heart rate increase. Why a woman often instilled that in a man when she squealed or whimpered, he had no idea. So saying, sometimes he experienced the same reaction with Uly, and especially with Ryanac. If he managed to make Ryanac lose his self-control, it seemed only fair some part of his body should celebrate it.

Where he stood, shadows swathed the room. As Tressa turned, Markis moved towards her until he was close enough to grasp her by the shoulders. Tressa gave a small cry that sounded like surprise. Giving her no time to resist, Markis dipped his head and nuzzled her hair, and then her neck. The tension in her eased. Tressa softened, leaning her head back, her weight taking her into his embrace. It also put her into contact with the hardness at his groin. At once, Tressa reached for him, but Markis deftly caught her hand, laced her fingers with his, then brought them up to his mouth and kissed them.

"Not tonight," Markis said, though in truth he didn't know if he would be able to abide by what he intended. Tressa's brow drew down in puzzlement. "Let me please you tonight. I have something for you."

Markis guided Tressa, persuading her deftly into undressing as they moved. As each inch of skin manifested, his eyes feasted, and so did his lips and tongue. He nibbled and licked her elbows, both at the back and in the tender spot of the bend. He sucked her collarbone. He gathered the sweat that had collected between her breasts, and cooled the heat beneath them with his tongue. He bit at her stomach, drawing the soft tissue between his lips. He slathered her hips and kissed



her thighs, mouthed the backs of her knees and ran his tongue along the arch of each foot. He made her jump and twitch by turn, but finally she lay on the bed, languid. He kissed away every line of tension but one.

Finally, Markis lay over her and fed from her mouth, his fingers entangling in her hair. When he broke the kiss, she stared up at him, frowning.

"Why do you still have your clothes on? Why are you not naked against me?" A mischievous grin stole over her face. She wiggled her hips. "I can feel you want me."

He swallowed in order to stifle a groan, and it made his throat hurt. "I told you I have something for you. I want you to just lie back and enjoy it." He stroked her temples as he said this. Her gaze asked the question. Markis reached for the small box and showed her its contents. He began to explain how and why the Swithin used the crystals.

While he talked, he removed the crystal from the box, set the box aside, and then turned his full attention to her. Beginning with a gentle stroking, his fingers worked towards probing her sex. When he did, he found her wet. Markis smiled. Despite Tressa's apparent reluctance, anticipation won out. Azulite women had their toys. Their men just pretended they didn't; the women hid them so well, they seldom found them. This was a toy they didn't have. It occurred to him that despite the cost, they could have a new export.

Shaking off the idea, although it had the desired effect of easing his personal discomfort to think of mundane matters, he turned his attention to where she needed it most. Markis couldn't help it. The sight of her gaping, slick folds made him bite his tongue. He desired to taste her. The moment he did, he lost what little respite he had gained. Lying between her legs, Markis pressed his length into the coverlet. The garments he wore were loose, but still it felt as though he might tear a seam from the pressure of his hard-on alone. He gave himself a mental shake, determined to stick to his plan.

To begin, he held the crystal, letting the vibration pass through his hand into her body to soften the sensation. Still she gasped, all too soon writhing; therefore, he slipped the long, wide crystal into her sooner than he had expected, but she was ready. She tossed her head, clutched at the covers, sent the pillows flying. The moment he added his tongue to the game, Markis sent her over the edge. Tressa squealed without apparent shame. By the time she opened her eyes, her bosom heaved with life, but her gaze and the noises she made remained incoherent, even dazed.

Markis drew the wicked instrument out of her, allowing her respite until she calmed. Finally, her dark eyes moved down until her gaze settled on him. He shook his head, though truly he had no idea if she silently asked a question or pleaded with him to stop.

"We're not finished yet," he told her.

Tressa's eyes widened, but he eased the crystal back into her and began to corkscrew it, pull, and plunge. Her first orgasm had made her sensitive, so he kept away from the most obvious and distended part of her sex, not wishing to cause her pain. When she made a small sound of complaint, he pushed the crystal into her and set his finger behind it, pushing it towards the front. As she fought this new sensation, he reached out and took hold of the second crystal.

She started, almost sitting up when he laid it on the lower part of her stomach.

"Lie down. Keep still," Markis ordered. Her expression looked stunned, but he couldn't tell if it was from pleasure or his command. Even more amazingly, she did as he told her.

Markis slowly worked the second crystal down, setting it on her mons and then in the curve of skin just above her sensitised flesh. He looked up the length of her body.

"You might want to hold on to something like the headboard," he told her.

This time, her expression went through phases: puzzlement, irritation, and then alarm. Her hands reached for the headboard blindly. With a grin that he was sure could only look wicked, he left the long crystal to vibrate inside her. She might push it out with the force of her orgasm, but otherwise it wasn't going anywhere. Markis let its weight hold it in place, giving up trying to grasp it with his slick fingers. Taking care to part her just the way he wanted, Markis braced himself to hold her body in place. He paused for just a second, holding the crystal above where he planned to lay it. Then he pressed it home, holding it lightly so as not to interfere with the vibration, but hard enough so her movements didn't toss it aside. The crystal had a perfect weight to it. It fitted her sex just the way he wanted. It nestled as though it had found the right home. It lay still, happy.

Tressa, on the other hand, bucked just as he knew she would. This time she screamed, but the sound definitely wasn't one of pain. As swiftly as her orgasm rose, he removed the crystals to let it ebb. These toys took some getting used to. Knowing how she would feel, Markis lay the crystals aside. Tressa turned, curling her body away from him. For several moments, she lay there, lost to the world as the smile on her lips spread full-blown. The smile was so wide, Markis reached out with the desire to touch her lips. He traced Tressa's mouth with his fingers, smearing her lips. He hadn't meant to; his fingers were that drenched. His little queen surprised him when her small pink tongue snaked out and licked her lips in a gesture of satisfaction. Slowly, she opened her eyes.

"I like your gift," she told him. "How can I ever repay you for it?"

Earlier, his only plan was merely one of satisfying her and then leaving her to sleep or experiment with her new toys alone. Now, he couldn't take his gaze away from the sight of her lips, her tongue flickering out in the occasional lick. The movement increased. Her tongue slid back and forth. He shifted his gaze up to her eyes. Pretty. Markis's thoughts were no more eloquent than that. Pretty face, pretty eyes, pretty little mouth, and a temper to quell a king. Even in the midst of desire, Markis was very aware that he still had much to learn about his queen. She looked back at him. He swallowed, his cock jerking so hard he convulsed. She grinned, sat up, and helped him unfasten his clothes. Moments later, she showed him how wide she could open that pretty mouth.

Only later, when they both lay replete, did Markis's thoughts wander to what was happening elsewhere in another room of the suite.

## Chapter Eight

Uly yawned. His day in the woods had been an enlightening one. He had seen another side to Ryanac that confused him. Questions hounded him, but he didn't know how to ask them; he didn't want to spoil the mood. He ached from the unusual exercise, but not unpleasantly so. They had both been a little grubby and sweaty on their return. The moment he set eyes on his own Sonndre, Uly had smiled at Antal and received a nod, which was better than being ignored, but he had hoped for a smile in reply to his. Uly had been quiet after that, during the walk back to his room. Ryanac, probably sensing something of his thoughts, had walked in silence at his side. Nothing the big man could say would make him feel better. Uly couldn't regain Antal's trust just like that. He had to earn it. Knowing that was one thing. Having the patience for it was something else. There was no sign of Markis. Uly had thought to question the king's absence and then dithered over whether he should. It wasn't as if Markis had confined him to his room or even the palace, not as long as he went out with someone, but the rumour they had allowed to swell that Markis wasn't happy with him right now wasn't altogether a lie. Uly had more than one person's trust to win back.

By the time he gathered the courage to inquire as to Markis's whereabouts, Ryanac had escorted him all the way back to his room.

'Bathe,' Ryanac had told him. 'I'll bring you some food in a bit. I can see you're tired. I'd be surprised if you weren't.'

So, instead of asking after Markis, Uly had followed Ryanac's suggestion. He had bathed and changed. Now, he sat on his bed dressed in a night sidon, the male nightshift, watching the sky turn yellow and pink. What blue remained changed as he watched; it was a soft shade of mauve by the time Ryanac knocked. Uly called him in.

In his armour, the big man always looked huge. He still looked huge, but the loose tunic and pants he wore instead brought out another part of his personality. Ryanac always looked so different, as though in wearing different clothes he possessed a different purpose. The clothes he had chosen to wear to the forest were lighter than his usual garb, soft shades of brown and green as camouflage. When Uly had remarked on them, Ryanac had said they suited him more when there had been no silver in his hair. Uly couldn't tell if the humour was self-deprecating or whether Ryanac made fun of him.

Ryanac handed Uly the tray that he carried, and then slid onto the bed. 'I thought we could share and watch the sunset together.'

They sat and ate in silence until the sky changed to grey. 'Where's Markis?' Uly finally asked.

'With Tressa,' Ryanac said, lightly enough, but immediately Uly sensed that the other man watched his face rather than the sky now.

'He's spent more time with her than with me the last few days.' Uly deliberately set out to keep his voice steady. Even so, he was surprised he managed to keep his tone even.

'He's more upset with you than her. He's not doing it for that reason, though. He's trying to get Tressa more settled, and if he spends too much time with you, he will just give in and forgive you too quickly.'

Uly couldn't keep his face straight. The smile slid too easily to his lips. He even showed his teeth, something he had never done previously. Uly liked clean teeth, but out on the streets, clean teeth meant the wrong kind would have sought his mouth for another use, so Uly had kept his mouth closed. The thought made the smile slip. Fingers pushed his hair back from one side of his face, and then moved down through the strands, combing it out. He had no way to tell what Ryanac could read on his face and almost dreaded to hear what the other man might say. Yet again, Ryanac surprised him.

'I think this is long enough to braid,' Ryanac said. 'I could try, if you will let me. You could surprise Markis in the morning.'

Part of him wanted Markis to braid his hair, especially for the first time, but the idea of surprising him was equally enticing. 'Now?' Uly asked quietly. No one slept in such a braid unless travelling.

'We can try it now, and if it works, I'll do it again first thing in the morning if you want.'

The harmless act was regarded as intimate, but after the day they had shared, Uly felt he owed Ryanac more than that. He had even seen a stag and now knew what antlers looked like. He had also seen several large birds, eaten lunch by a waterfall, and tasted wild berries that Ryanac had assured him were safe to eat. He had breathed sweet, clean air and felt free. He'd also felt safe and at peace. He owed Ryanac a thank you for such a wonderful day, but he owed him for more than that. Uly nodded his consent.

He sat cross-legged in the middle of the bed as Ryanac moved behind him. The brush and Ryanac's fingers moved through his hair. To start with, Uly was too aware of the underlying tension simmering throughout his body. He wasn't entirely sure what caused his anxiety, but Ryanac could surely sense it. Tired of being afraid, of worrying about too many things for most of his life, Uly took a deep breath, closing his eyes as he did. As he released it, he let the tension within him ease, giving himself over to the sensuousness of the moment.

'Can I ask you a question?' he finally asked, eyes still closed.

'If I can ask you one.'

Uly remained silent for a moment, listening to the brush move through his hair, feeling its light tug. 'Me first,' he said. He could imagine Ryanac smiling. 'You seem a different man in the woods.'

'Is that supposed to be a question?' The voice held amusement, but that wasn't exactly unusual.

'I mean. What are you doing here? It seems wrong for you to be in the palace, in these walls. I can't quite see you on the family farm either, but I can see you living --'

'What? In the woods?' Ryanac interrupted. 'Doing what? Talking to whom? That existence would be too lonely even for me.' The brush stopped moving. A soft sigh followed. 'You're right, though. I couldn't work the farm. The life I chose allowed me to see other parts of the world. In the end, it took me to where I belonged.'

'By Markis's side,' Uly remarked. He managed to make the comment sound casual enough.

'Yes. And I'm Swithin. This is my home. I love the woods. When things are more settled and we have the time, both Markis and I hope to show you more of our land. It's diverse, and the king doesn't have to spend his whole life here. There will be times he has to travel, visit other lands, other dignitaries. We'll go with him and explore the world at his side. Our lives won't exist solely within these walls. That's why Markis and I want you to develop your fighting skills. Better safe than sorry, and now's the perfect time while you decide what you want to do with your life.'

That was something else Markis had discussed with him. Right now Uly's life consisted of lessons, training, and his developing relationship with these men, but Markis had spoken of a time when Uly could take on a more active role in the household or choose an entirely different profession outside of the palace. So far, what he might want to do with his life, other than spend it with Markis, escaped him. Markis assured him he had plenty of time in which to decide after he completed his belated education.

'You've only been here a few weeks,' Ryanac continued. 'Are you truly that bored already?'

'Is that your question?'

Ryanac flicked a finger against the back of his head. 'Cheeky.'

Uly uttered a gentle laugh. 'No. I'm not bored. Just'.

'You needed some fresh air. We knew it even before you said so. Did it help? And no, that's not my question either.'

'It helped.' One day free of confinement hadn't solved everything, but he felt calmer tonight. 'What did you want to ask?'

The fingers worked, beginning to twist the braid. 'How are things between you and Markis?'

Uly frowned. "I don't understand."

"Ignoring your recent debacle, how are things when you're alone?"

Uly had thought what he had asked was personal, but now hearing Ryanac's question, he squirmed. "I'm missing something here."

"I mean sex, Uly, and you know it. There." Ryanac let go of his hair, apparently finished fashioning the twist.

Uly reached up and touched the braid. It reached only just past the top of his spine, but he hadn't thought it was long enough to reach that far when braided. He'd had so many haircuts just to even out the length. It surprised him. "How does it look?"

"Go see for yourself."

Scrambling from the bed, Uly scurried over to stand in front of the mirror on the wall. He hardly recognised his reflection. The braid made his face look very clean, more mature. His eyes shone. "Which do you prefer?"

"I like both. Your hair up or down. It really depends on what you're doing. The braid will be good for formality. I'll make the council start to look at you differently."

Wondering why his hair didn't simply unravel, Uly reached back to see how Ryanac had fastened the end. He touched a solid ornament that he recognised as a clip of the type that most Swithin men used. He turned his head to look across the room at Ryanac, who still sat on the bed. The man grinned and fingered the now loose ends of his braid. He'd clearly used his own clip. "Will you take mine down for me?"

The question took Uly by more than surprise. He was instantly stupefied. He'd never imagined Ryanac asking him such a thing. The idea worried him, pleased him, and even aroused him, all at once. Uly just stood there, realised he gaped, closed his mouth, and nodded. Seeing as Ryanac had just braided his hair, the request was normal enough. Why then did it make his stomach tight? Slowly, he approached the bed.

"You didn't answer my question," Ryanac said, handing him the brush and turning so Uly could get to his hair.

Hesitant, Uly grasped the end of the long braid and began unravelling it. He tried to touch it as little as possible, but as the hair escaped, it writhed over his hands like snakes. He stopped. "You've watched us together. You know how we are."

The big man turned his head and looked down. Uly didn't have time to disguise the fact that he was rubbing his hands together as though they had touched something loathsome. He met Ryanac's frown with one of his own. The big man tsked.

"This is your problem. Undo my hair. Touch it. Run your fingers through it."

Ryanac couldn't force him, but a hint of command existed in the man's voice. Besides, he was being silly. Uly did as Ryanac instructed as quickly as he could, which was far from the Swithin way, but even so, the more Ryanac's hair fell free, the more it tumbled over his hands and arms, the more his fingers plunged into it, the more he liked it, and the more his stomach drew into knots. Ryanac caught his hands. Only then did Uly realise his own breathing had grown erratic.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Ryanac pulled him onto his lap, ignoring the slight sound that fell

from Uly's lips even though the man must have recognised the noise as complaint. Uly didn't know quite how it happened, but one moment he was protesting, though unable to form words, and the next he found himself kneeling with a leg each side of Ryanac's hips. The man let go of him and then drew the tunic over his head, revealing that broad chest. Uly swallowed, and the sound was too loud and the sensation almost painful. He opened his mouth to say he knew not what, and shifted slightly as though to move away.

'Keep still for me,' Ryanac said, the simple command somehow stealing Uly's free will. He sat as Ryanac's fingers began a delicate trace of Uly's nipples through the fine linen of the sidon. When Uly squirmed, Ryanac repeated the command for him to keep still. Lowering his mouth, Ryanac made the fabric wet, leaving two dark spots, beneath which two small peaks jutted out. The sensation of Ryanac's hot mouth and then the cooler air rushing in drove desire downwards into more intimate flesh.

'Please don't,' Uly managed. The knots in his stomach had drawn into a dull ache. He started to regret having eaten this evening.

'We've done more than this together. Even in private.'

That was true, but somehow tonight this situation possessed a different feel; he feared it might go beyond fondling. Uly frowned so hard it made his face ache. Ryanac took hold of his hands and led them to his chest. Uly's fingers spread out against the firm pecs, hesitant, almost as though they were of a separate mind, unwilling. When he tried to pull away, Ryanac held his hands there. Then he took one of Uly's hands and guided the thumb and finger over one of his nipples.

'Pinch,' he said.

Uly shook his head.

'Why not? Because it's something you'll be doing to me, and I won't be doing to you?'

Again, Uly shook his head, still frowning. 'I don't understand.'

'You always prefer us making love to you, Uly, although with Markis you lose your inhibitions occasionally. I can't say you and I have made love yet. It's more like foreplay.'

He didn't want to talk about that. 'I touch Markis.'

'Yes, you do, but mostly you do it to please him. You even want to touch him, and he knows, but you hold back more often than not. You wait until one of us instigates sex. You seldom go to Markis when you want sex, and even when you do, you hang around or cuddle up, hoping he'll get the message. You seldom ask, and you're seldom aggressive. Even in the midst of sex, I've seen your hands wander to his cock and then away again before you grasp it.' He took hold of one of Uly's hands and pressed it down between them over the hardness there. 'When you want to touch someone and that person is willing, then you touch them.'

'I do,' Uly complained. 'I have.' He tried to pull his hand free. The flesh gave a twitch, probably unintentional on Ryanac's part, just natural, but the sensation and the underlying heat made Uly's throat go dry.

'You touch him lightly as though he will break. That's not what he wants. Too often, you do what he guides you to do. Only then, when your body overrules your mind, do you ever let go. You nearly always think too much at the start. Why are you afraid to take pleasure as well as give it?'

Uly stopped fighting, only too aware he lacked the strength to pull away. The heat of Ryanac's cock spread through his palm, and he just sat there. He wanted to say he still failed to

understand, but that would be a lie. "I tried to once, and it didn't go the way I imagined it would. I guess I don't know how to," he said quietly.

Ryanac sighed and let go of his hands. Uly began to move his hand away from that solid heat, but for some reason, he stopped short of doing so.

"How many months have you been lovers?"

"It seems like ages, but not that long."

Ryanac's smile was wry. "No, you're right. It's less than six months. A lot has happened in that time. It just makes it seem longer. Still, you should know each other better by now."

"Sometimes." Uly stopped, glanced at Ryanac, couldn't look at the man while he held his hand against Ryanac's cock, and so moved his fingers to the man's thigh. "Sometimes I want to touch him somehow, somehow, but I'm not sure he'll like it, or if it's what he wants at the time, so I wait."

The other man looked thoughtful. "The best sex is when those involved are all taking part. You keep this up, all you will do is break his heart." Ryanac ran his fingers down Uly's sides. "I think it's time you took pleasure. I think it's time you learnt how to ride someone."

A soft trembling took control of his hands. His pulse sped up. Ryanac's hands moved over him, caressing, seeking out his contours through the fabric. "Lift up. If we rip another garment, the seamstresses will scream the palace down."

Uly began to shake his head, but only met that unforgiving gaze. To his horror, Uly found he was obeying as Ryanac pulled the linen free of his legs. A hand kept Uly on his knees.

"You don't have to do this," Ryanac said. "You don't ever have to do anything with me if you don't want. You know how to make this stop."

Feeling a little detached from his body, as though this were unreal, Uly nodded. He remembered the word. As to whether he wanted this to stop. He hesitated, and Ryanac waited. He didn't know if he was ready for this, yet even as he considered, Uly accepted he would never be ready. He trusted Markis with his life and his heart, but Ryanac was an entirely different enigma than that of the king. It wasn't that he mistrusted the big man or lacked faith, he just. He loved him, but not in the way he loved Markis. He held back because he knew that they weren't a perfect union. Uly wanted Markis to himself but accepted that, as a king, Markis needed a wife.

Ryanac was another matter. If he didn't trust what Markis felt for him, Uly might have considered Ryanac as competition. Still, he was very aware of the attachment the two men shared and of what it might stop him sharing with Markis. He accepted the requirement that Markis as king needed to wed and provide an heir, but he had read in the Swithin library that people of the same sex could wed, and Markis had once said that a union of more than one was perfectly acceptable in Swithin culture. Why, then, had he not asked Uly to marry him? He could only surmise that Ryanac was the problem.

The two men had known each other for a great deal of their lives. They loved each other and Uly knew what Markis wanted. He wanted Uly to love Ryanac as well, and he did. He just couldn't bring himself to love Ryanac in quite the same way. He wanted to. Uly was even aware of how easy it was to fall for Ryanac, but still he held back. He knew what Markis hoped would come from their lovemaking, and it wouldn't..

"It won't work," Uly whispered, afraid to voice his thoughts, but unable to keep silent another moment. He stared into Ryanac's eyes, amazed that he could meet that gaze without turning away. Tears stung his eyes. "It won't work. It won't do what Markis wants."

Those large hands cupped his face. Ryanac's gaze studied his. "I know," the other man said. Uly frowned, asking the question with his eyes. Ryanac smiled ruefully for once, then leaned in to kiss his lips softly before he pressed their foreheads together, and then looked into his eyes once more. "I know, Uly. I know sex won't bring us together the way Markis hopes. Sex and love aren't always the same thing."

"Then why?"

Ryanac laughed gently, a slight frown playing over his face. "You really have to ask? Because I want you. Because I love you in a way that makes it right. I desire you, little one." As always, it made Uly shiver with an odd pleasure to hear the pet name, even though he was far from little. So saying, anyone was little compared to Ryanac, and right now, Uly felt small. "Our making love will not hurt what we have. If I thought it would, I would get someone to tie my hands behind my back before laying a finger on you, but while it won't do what Markis hopes, I know it won't hurt." The grip of Ryanac's large hands tightened significantly. "You're questioning so much right now that it isn't the time to worry so much about the future. You're questioning yourself, your strengths, trying to find out who you are. No one can give you the things you're looking for. You need to seize them. This isn't about Markis or what he wants. There's simply no reason for us to be apart. No reason for us not to share the best and worst of ourselves. Make love with me, Uly. Make love because we can and without hurting anyone else. Because we want to. Because we get one life, and moments such as this are worth more than coin."

Tears threatened, but Uly denied them. Surely he had grown into enough of a man not to cry so readily? The pain of accepting that he could not be as close to Ryanac as he wanted dulled the moment, but the idea that Ryanac wanted him sent an undeniable thrill through his limbs. Uly felt detached as Ryanac pulled the sidon over his head and tossed it aside. He sat there naked, and Ryanac's hands went back to caressing him, bare skin against bare skin now, as his thumbs brushed his already hard nipples. Only then did Uly accept that this was happening. He'd consented. He wanted this. His only regret was that he might never feel as close to Ryanac as he did to Markis, and he didn't understand why. Surely something could change their relationship for the better? Dipping his head, Ryanac sucked a nipple in and then bit in barely suppressed savagery. Uly reared up, his head falling back, but he was pinned by Ryanac's mouth at his chest, those large hands at his hips. A lick took back some of the pain.

"Ready for me to do that to the other one?" Ryanac asked, smiling. All Uly could do was stare. He should have been prepared for the sensation, but this time, the pain shot down through him, tightening his testicles. He writhed, making a small, desperate sound. Ryanac leaned back, fishing something from his pocket. He withdrew a small box and, awkwardly with one hand, flipped open the lid. Inside was a strange pink object. Uly frowned. Ryanac put the object in Uly's hand. So startled was he that he almost dropped it.

"I'm going to stretch you a little for me. You'll also like it." The item was heavy and seemed to be made of some type of rock and yet it thrummed.

"How?" was all he could manage to ask, and then a dark thought took precedence. "You planned this."

"No. Not exactly. I was bringing it to you anyway. Markis bought such a present for Tressa, though hers is a different shape. It's a crystal," Ryanac explained. "This one is shaped to stretch that sweet little rosette of yours. Many crystals vibrate, though usually at a frequency we can't feel. This type is difficult to cut without breaking or spoiling the vibration, so it's rare and expensive. I bought this for you. Well" -- he gave a wry smile -- "Markis had trouble choosing one for you, so I helped and asked to share the cost. I want you to keep it, wear it, and enjoy it. You can wear it to prepare yourself for me or for Markis, or simply use it for your own pleasure. Trust me. You'll like it." Ryanac took hold of it and slid his mouth around it. He also licked a finger. He moved that hand



down with the now glistening object and passed it beneath Uly's body. Uly gasped as the finger circled him and then slid in a fraction. He contracted automatically.

'Breathe. Relax.'

A hard tip pressing into him replaced the finger. It moved back and forth, each time pressing a little more into his body. Only the width of his hand in length, the object possessed a narrow tip that then flared out into a span probably no more than the circle of his fingers. There it dipped in and then flared out again to a flat base. Even so, Uly remained convinced it would never slip easily into his body, so flinched in surprise when it did. The vibrations simply fought against his body's natural urge to contract. Smooth with a gradual expansion, the crystal defied his body's natural resistance. The sensation made him gasp. He could feel the flat base sitting snugly against him.

'It's shaped so you don't lose it. It won't slip out or into you. You can wear it anytime. Out and about, in bed at night, though I'm not sure you would manage to sleep with it.'

The crystal still vibrated. It provided a shivery, pleasant sensation. Uly was very aware that his breathing grew rapid. Apparently, Ryanac also noted that Uly had begun to breathe rapidly.

'Stay kneeling.' A hand took hold of his, guiding. 'Stroke your cock.'

Embarrassment sent the pleasant sensation back for a moment, but Uly couldn't deny it for long. He tried to do what Ryanac said as the big man lay down. Lifting his hips, Ryanac pushed off his trousers, and then sat back up, leaning around Uly. From the way the guard moved, Uly guessed that Ryanac pushed the trousers to his knees, then used his feet to kick them off. He caught at Uly when he almost unbalanced as Ryanac undressed. Ryanac lay back again, Uly now straddling his hips. Placing one hand behind his neck as a pillow, Ryanac placed the other hand over Uly's, the one that still clasped his cock.

'Don't be in such a hurry.' He spoke softly, the words slithering around inside Uly's mind, stroking his thoughts and emotions, coaxing him to give into desire. The area that contained the bed was large, yet right now, it felt much smaller, private and intimate. With Ryanac's help, Uly settled the strokes into a soft, languid rhythm. It was similar to the way Markis sometimes touched him, but he had never done it like this. In the past, this act had always been hurried. Since meeting Markis, Uly had never masturbated. The heat in his face told him he blushed.

'How do you expect to know how to please Markis if you don't know how to please yourself? You should take your time over this. Find what you like best.' Ryanac spoke so calmly, so matter-of-fact, that Uly fought his embarrassment more than he fought the other man's guidance. Ryanac wasn't patronising him. He was in safe hands and had nothing to fear. Anxiety still fluttered around, but Uly pushed it back for now.

'I thought.' He stopped, feeling humiliated by what he had been about to say. Ryanac raised an eyebrow. 'I thought one did this just to --'

'What? That it was just a way to get off? There's more to sex than that. You know that by now.'

Embarrassed by the chastisement, Uly opted for silence. He moved as Ryanac's hands dictated, Ryanac remaining on his back and drawing Uly down onto him. One of those large hands then gripped Uly about the back of the neck, angling his head for a kiss. Uly offered no resistance; he loved kissing.

'What are you thinking?' Ryanac asked.

Uly laid spread across the huge frame, feeling the contrast of hard and soft. His legs were wide

open, his knees drawn up on either side of Ryanac's hips. The position made him feel like a frog. It also left a wide, gaping hollow between his legs. If anyone had stood in the right position, all his intimate bits would be on display. Only the fact that no one stood behind him to look kept him still. The cooler air at his back was another sharp contrast against Ryanac's heat.

"I don't know why, but it always surprises me that you kiss like that," Uly confessed.

Odd now, to think of all the times they had spent together. Ryanac kissed softly or roughly, depending on what they were doing. Usually Markis's kiss was somewhere between both. If Uly had needed to put a word to it, he would have called those kisses enticing. They made him want to copy the movements. He always expected Ryanac to devour him and, sometimes, he did, but often the kisses were almost painfully light, teasing, constantly changing, moving away from his mouth to his face and then back again. Finally, Ryanac caught his lower lip and nibbled on it. It made Uly smile somewhere deep inside. He had a habit of chewing on his lip. It felt odd to have someone else do it for him; odd but pleasant.

"You think I should kiss more like this?"

This time Ryanac's mouth was hard, bruising. The big man broke away, holding Uly's head in his large hands. Uly's lips felt swollen, tender. The huge hands covered each side of his face completely, and a sudden awareness of the strength in them engulfed him. It should have made him afraid, but it didn't. Ryanac wouldn't hurt him. The certainty of that struck him as never before. The idea also caused pain. He and Ryanac had talked about fear long ago when they first met. The lesson continued, apparently. Uly never believed Ryanac would hurt him, but he had always thought it was because of what Markis wanted. Now he knew it was because of what Ryanac felt for him. He just didn't know if he could let himself feel the same.

"Your turn," Ryanac said, his voice sounding a little husky. "What do you want?"

He barely needed to think about that. The crystal trembled within him. The sensation grew, rather than diminished. It crept up through to his stomach, then up the line of his chest towards his heart. He involuntarily squeezed down on it, and even that turned out to be pleasant. He wanted something larger within him now, though he pushed the thought of how large out of his mind before he grew afraid of it. Ryanac wouldn't hurt him, not even like that. He didn't know how, but the big man would take care of it. Before that, he wanted another kiss, so he said so.

Ryanac smiled. "Then you're going to have to do the kissing." He lay back and waited. Uly blinked, hesitated, tried to crawl up, couldn't, then frowned when Ryanac laughed softly and deigned to lift his head enough so he could reach. He wanted to scold the guard, but his lips were suddenly too busy.

Need. Uly had never spared much consideration for the word in his old life. He liked it. It was a good word. It contained a pure meaning that couldn't be more complete in his understanding than it was right now. He had reached this moment often with Markis. The trouble with Ryanac was. Well, he wasn't Markis. He wasn't doing all the things Markis would be doing. He wasn't doing anything.

Part of him was. The man twitched beneath him, but otherwise the man's cock just lay there. Uly tried to rock his hips so their cocks would rub. In this position, it strained his legs and he couldn't get enough friction. His hands slid on the sweat that had pooled on Ryanac's chest -- most of it Uly's -- and gasped when Ryanac caught him before he slipped.

"See what it's like making love to a dead fish?"

Uly swallowed. "I do not make love like a dead fish! I" -- he gasped in air -- "never laid here like you're doing."

'No. You do wriggle a lot.'

Uly's eyes went wide. He just couldn't help it. His lips parted to form a protest, but he couldn't think of one. He did wriggle a lot. He rather enjoyed it.

Ryanac grinned up at him. 'You like this body?'

Heat crept into his face, perversely cooling his sweat. His hair fell down one side of his face. Somewhere in the midst of all this, he had lost the clip, and Ryanac's fingers had done the rest of the unravelling. He began to lie, feeling foolish because he knew Ryanac wouldn't believe him, and nodded. 'Who wouldn't?'

'Then do what you want with it.'

Ryanac pushed, and Uly slipped back. Sitting up, Ryanac fiddled about under him. There was a gentle tug, and then the crystal was gone. Fingers played around him, into him. Grasping Uly by the waist, Ryanac reached towards the table where every Swithin kept a supply of oil, dipping his fingers. The first touch was colder than Uly expected, and he jerked. One, two, and then three slick fingers slowly worked their way into him. Uly gasped from the shock, and then darkness descended. Only then did he realise he had closed his eyes. He took the feeling into him, into places nowhere near where those fingers touched.

He opened his eyes only when Ryanac stopped. The big man lay back, handing him the pot. 'Grease me,' he said.

Uly's eyes had their own agenda. They instantly flicked down to take in the sight of that cock. It flexed towards him even as his gaze fell upon it. Damn if he wasn't blushing. He expected a derisory remark. Ryanac continued to surprise him.

'I want you to touch me. You have no idea how long I've wanted your hand around me.'

Spurred by the depth of emotion in Ryanac's voice, Uly watched his hand reach out as though he had no control over his own appendage, but he kept the fingers spread, just trailing them up the length. He needed the dry touch. He needed to feel the heat of it. Ryanac closed his eyes as Uly's fingers gripped. He kept his eyes shut even as Uly anointed him. The privacy allowed him to watch the large man's face as he learned to touch him. His fingers encircled the shaft, pumping up and down; his thumb slipped over the head to spread both the grease and natural moisture.

Ryanac hissed in a breath between his teeth and caught Uly's hand in his. 'Enough.' His eyes opened slowly. 'Keep that up, and it'll be over. You're not the only one who's been waiting.'

Knowing what Ryanac wanted, Uly tried to get into position. He quickly realised this wasn't going to work. He frowned at Ryanac's answering smile. 'Are you laughing at me?'

'Far from it. I'm frustrated on your behalf. Uly, just about any position a man and a woman can do, so can you. You want help?'

Squirming under that intense gaze, it took effort, but he nodded. He gaped and ached, feeling empty without at least the crystal inside him. He didn't know why Ryanac insisted he be on top, but it was quite possible he would agree to anything right this minute if it meant that he and Ryanac finally fucked. He didn't know why he wanted this so much, why this minute, but he did. Maybe he was just tired of feeling uncertain, tired of waiting. If he were careful, they could share pleasure and he could still keep a small part of his heart in reserve.

When he felt the first nudge, he changed his mind. A warm hand embraced the back of his neck.

"I'm not too big for you. I'm just right. Don't flinch. Feel." Ryanac punctuated the words with kisses, arching his spine, angling himself up into Uly as he did. Feeling was the problem. The breach eased more than one kind of tightness. They managed the first couple of inches, which left Uly trembling physically and emotionally. Ryanac lay back slowly, his hands guiding. He rocked his hips gently.

"Take over," he instructed, and instinctively, Uly knew how. He didn't have to think about it, didn't want to. His body knew what it wanted, and he let it rule over his heart. He rose up, pushed down, dropping lower with each downward motion. His fingers clawed at the chest beneath him. He scratched, rocked, plunged, and plummeted. He barely heard when Ryanac told him that was the way to use him. He already knew.

Lust ruled out over love, and for once, Uly let it. Beneath him lay a good-looking and well-endowed man who wanted him, although sexuality in this instance didn't matter. He'd never questioned his choice. He had once told Tressa that it felt as if the universe had chosen for him, and now he felt it more than ever. He loved Markis for who he was, whatever body he occupied. He cared for Ryanac for the very same reasons. Ahh, but this.

Uly closed his eyes and gave himself over to the pleasure. Ryanac was right; he questioned too much, and he was tired of it. He questioned his very existence some days. He rode, that glorious penetration drawing forth a sweet gratification that felt almost sinful. Up and down, back and forth; Uly could no longer contain his moan of. He didn't know what the sound that tumbled from his lips signified. In any case, it caused him to open his eyes, and the expression on Ryanac's face was one he was afraid to decipher. He thought the tears vanquished, but he was wrong. He wanted to turn his head but even as he made the slightest gesture to do so, Ryanac twitched beneath him, and he knew the big man would grip his face in that unforgiving grasp if he tried to look away. Uly stared into those dark eyes, certain of the anguish he displayed on his face. If he blinked, he would cry.

Ryanac saw him in a different way than Markis did. Markis saw all the good in him, but Ryanac paid witness to the darkness that resided there, too. Markis was aware of it, but Ryanac's eyes said that he saw all of Uly, everything he had been, was, and could be, and accepted him on a level that had nothing to do with sex or even love. Ryanac saw life for what it was, as harrowing as it was beautiful. For Markis and Ryanac, sex was not just for pleasure and no mere expression of love.

Uly frowned, uncertain how that sudden insight came to him, but he remained convinced of the rightness of his perception. He loved Markis -- he did! -- but in the beginning Uly looked to him almost as proof that he had a reason to exist. Ryanac. He'd never looked to Ryanac for those reasons. For protection, maybe, but not for confirmation of who he was, because somehow it felt as if Ryanac already knew him, understood him in a way that Uly had only recently begun to know himself. He didn't want to love the big man. Uly wanted to blame him for his anxiety, but it was hardly the guard's fault that Markis loved Ryanac as well. The big man truly was too easy to take into his heart.

The prickling behind his eyes spread into the back of his nose. Uly's eyes filled with tears. For Ryanac, sex was no mere expression of love, no more than it was for Uly now. He doubted it ever had been. This dance denied extinction, no matter who the participants. Uly moved in denial that anyone or anything could ever take the people he loved from him. The realisation finally made him blink, and tears spilled out to roll down his face. With the tears came a kind of release he didn't even understand, but he instinctively knew that this would never have happened with Markis. Only Ryanac could break down his defences like this. Markis loved him too much to pay witness to these tears, let alone cause them.

Uly had believed that he'd made peace with his life, but he'd been lying to himself all this time. Yet oddly, his life now made him so much more aware of what he had lost, or what he'd never had

before and now did. He'd craved love, but he only recently accepted that he didn't need love to prove his worth. He was happy for the first time, but he wanted to cry for the people he'd known and lost, as well as all that he'd suffered. Ryanac didn't come from the streets, but he knew what went on in the world on a different level than Markis. Somehow, that made Ryanac more of an equal. Uly couldn't cry like this in front of Markis. Not now. He loved him too much.

As if Ryanac knew, one of those large hands pressed in a solid line at his back, pulling him closer. Uly wanted to bury his face in the man's neck, but the position wouldn't allow for it.

'Uly.' Ryanac whispered his name only, but the sound of so much empathy in the man's voice forced a sob from Uly's throat. Incredibly, even as they fucked, Uly wept, but each tear tore his misery out of him. He didn't understand what he was grieving for, but he felt as though each moment that passed cleansed him of something filthy he hadn't even known he carried. Uly slammed down, gasping, feeling the man's testicles smash against his body. He couldn't tell if Ryanac's answering grunt was one of pain or satisfaction. Not only his cock wanted to burst; Uly wanted his spirit to rupture, to soar, to let go. He wanted to share more than mere pleasure with this man, and the narrowing of Ryanac's gaze told him that the big man knew. Still, some part of Uly kept his love in reserve, so Uly shared his tears. Ryanac lay passive, but need drove Uly on, for Ryanac watched him as though he witnessed something beautiful. Forgetting his embarrassment, Uly took his own cock in hand and began to stroke it, matching his rhythm to the gliding, pumping, blinding friction. He burned. Was it possible for blood to boil? It wasn't enough.

'Please,' Uly whispered. 'This isn't what I need.' His eyes closed in helplessness even as the words spilled from his lips, and at once, Ryanac gathered him up. He might have questioned how the big man could keep their bodies pressed together like this as he turned them, if he wasn't so aware of that remarkable strength. Uly lay pinioned, Ryanac's hips driving into him now. Those incredible hands restrained his, and it was just what he needed. He met Ryanac's gaze just before he arched his back, which rolled back his head and eyes both. He became what he wanted: a thing of sensation, stretched, open, and not just where that wonderful cock lay buried inside him. He wanted something, someone, to tear open some unseen barrier. He opened his eyes to meet that dark gaze as he bubbled over. Flesh swelled, gushed forth, making him writhe with pleasure mixed with pain, gasping as he felt liquid heat both leave and enter his body.

Uly continued to shudder, trapped under Ryanac's heaving musculature. Uly's breathing was almost ragged; the slightest movement reminded him that they lay still fastened together, but not only the spike of delight that came from that sweet tickling sensation made him whimper. He lay there and cried, the big man still holding him until his crying eased.

## Chapter Nine

His pillow rose and fell softly, breathing. From within, he could hear the steady pulse of a heart beating.

Uly opened his eyes. His pillow was Ryanac. His first instinct was to turn his head and look up. He had tensed to do so, but he forced his body to relax and lie still, listening to the heart's rhythm, feeling the warm skin against his cheek. Ryanac always smelled like a cupboard that had once contained spices. The thought made Uly smile. He did turn his head and look up then, unsurprised to see Ryanac looking at him. The man would have known when he woke. He would have felt Uly tense. Sometimes, Uly half believed the man never slept, or kept one eye open.

His mind swiftly relived the events of the night, of Ryanac stealing his voice with kisses and answering his need with his superior strength. Then later, after considerable rest, Uly recalled lying on his front, Ryanac's wicked tongue delving in, ticking that sweet spot, making him cry out. Ryanac turning him at will. Ryanac sucking and making him suck. Ryanac inflaming his senses

and blocking his thought processes so that it felt as if he'd turned into a thing of flesh, an animal with no sense of time or intellect. It occurred to Uly that at any other time in his life he would have felt abused. All he felt now was content, replete. Heat seeped into his face. Ryanac let loose a low chuckle. "Going shy on me now?"

Before he could try to form an answer, one of those huge hands gathered up his head and drew him forward into a kiss, but Uly resisted. "I haven't cleaned my teeth," he said. Ryanac let out another warm, creeping chuckle and gave him a closed mouth kiss anyway. They looked at one another, Uly frowning slightly. "What's changed?" he asked at last. He couldn't put a name to it but something felt different this morning.

Ryanac studied him, looked about to speak, then shook his head and said nothing.

"I'm not wrong, though."

"No." The other man spoke quietly. "You're not wrong."

It looked as though he might say more, but at that moment, a quiet rapping came at the door. Markis's voice drifted through. "Ryanac, we have council in the time it will take to walk there."

Ryanac's eyes grew wide. "I'm coming," he shouted, and the sound rumbled through his chest beneath Uly's hands. Standing up and somehow scooping Uly into his arms at the same time, Ryanac set him back down in the bed and drew the cover over him. "You have made me late for the first time in years."

Uly stared up at him. "I can't imagine you ever being late."

That grin appeared. "You didn't know me at the academy."

The big man stooped down to kiss his forehead. Then he was gone in a hurry with an armful of clothing. Apparently, he intended to dress on the way.

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"What happened last night?"

Ryanac didn't answer immediately. They had paused once in the main suite while Ryanac drew on his trousers. He had pulled on a tunic while they walked. Now he stopped again to pull on his boots. Thankfully, in this morning's meeting, Ryanac wasn't required to wear full armour. He usually did, but not always. They reached the end of a corridor and stopped again. Markis held out the last piece of the man's clothing, though this was made of leather and served more like a shield for the body. It wouldn't withstand the heaviest or sharpest blade, but it would help deflect it, and save the wearer from a dagger strike. It protected the organs in the body.

They were off again, Ryanac gathering up his free-flowing hair. There wasn't time for him to put it into a proper braid. He began to pull in back into a ponytail. It would probably garner a few raised eyebrows. In truth, Markis didn't care, and he knew Ryanac well enough to know the big man took such criticism lightly. Those dark eyes glanced at him, aware he had been watching.

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"I had no idea you weren't getting ready. I know you once had a penchant for crawling out of bed late in the morning, but you've never let me down."

Ryanac winced. "I was sleeping soundly until I felt Uly wake up."

Taking this on board, Markis set his mind to how that was a good thing, but images of how they might have been lying, and what had made Ryanac sleep so heavily, fluttered through his head.

"You're going to have to take lessons on how to school that face of yours."

Wondering what his expression had revealed, Markis said, "I'm not upset."

"I know that."

The king stopped walking. He gripped Ryanac's arm tightly. "We'll be late," his guard said, his voice rising in pitch with that almost ever-present amusement.

"This is more important."

"Taking my appearance into account, if we're late, they'll think it's because we were fucking."

"Ryanac."

The big man grimaced. "We made love," he said simply.

"So you did seduce him. You finally had sex with him." And I wasn't there.

"No. The opportunity was there, and I took it because the moment was right. You're not listening to me. We made love."

The significance of those words finally filtered through to him.

"I know what you're thinking," Ryanac said more gently, "but if you had been there, it never would have happened. You're his focus, just as you are mine. We needed the time alone, and it was the right moment for it."

Markis narrowed his eyes in question. Were they finally a family? He never got the chance to ask the question aloud. Ryanac shook his head and dashed his hope.

"It's too soon for that. Uly has to find peace within himself first."

Once more, Markis experienced that irritating feeling that he was king and he should know more than he did. Somehow, Ryanac was nearly always one step ahead of him. "Hasn't he found peace here, with me?"

Ryanac opened his mouth, and then snapped his teeth together.

"If you call me shaylah, so help me we'll end up brawling," Markis meant it, and the look in Ryanac's eyes told him the man knew it. Alas, all it did was make him laugh.

"He needs more time."

He stared into those dark eyes, and they gazed back calmly. "That's all you're going to tell me?"

"That's all you need to know."

Only Ryanac could make him feel like the little boy who had once fallen down a well, and always Ryanac was the one to rescue him. The comet didn't have a spark on Ryanac, and neither did he.

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Markis stopped just outside the council's chambers. He had heard a few petitions from the general populace, as was his duty, grateful that there were not many today. Then they had dealt with general matters. When anything had come to a vote, Stargazer made a point of deferring. He had the right to step out of the running. The final decision always fell to the king or the person in charge, whether the vote tied or not. For those posted in an outlying area where the king was not present, one could send an appeal against a ruling, in effect to petition the king to overrule it. Thankfully, that hardly ever happened. Whatever the circumstances, it was unusual for anyone to abstain unless he or she lacked enough knowledge to provide a true judgment. For someone to hold back on every issue was unheard of. Markis ignored the old man's stubbornness, and by the end of the session, he could see Stargazer struggling not to grit his teeth. At least one of the old man's hands had balled into a fist.

'Why did he want me to challenge him?' Markis said softly. Ryanac looked at him, although they both knew Markis wasn't truly asking.

'I can't see what he would gain from it,' Ryanac stated.

Markis shook his head. 'Neither can I.' He gave a slight nod to Harton, who stood in the distance with Kilan. People believed his threat that he had sent Harton to discipline his brother. He had done no such thing. Harton was providing protection to all of them. He had brought Kilan here at his command. 'What are you doing next?'

'I thought I would give Uly a combat lesson.'

'Good idea.' Markis hated to say it, but only a foolish man ran from the truth. 'I'll meet you after we're both finished.'

He walked off, aware Ryanac waited until he stood with Harton. Only then did the big man let him out of his sight.

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Examining the blade Uly carried, Ryanac whistled. He had scrutinized it more than once, aware the dagger was a gift from Antal. They called this type of blade a reaper. It curved from the back of the handle into a second blade. The user could use it to thrust forward, but could equally slice an opponent on the return journey. If a person tried to twist it from your grasp, the fighter might cut their fingers or sever them. The object was wicked and beautiful all at once.

'A word of advice. Don't ever betray Antal's friendship. You only give something like this to someone you consider worthy, someone who is as good as a member of your family.'

Uly hadn't realised. Now he felt even more ashamed for having snuck off with Tressa.

They stood in an open forecourt, where Tressa and Antal waited for them. Uly still wasn't sure what had happened. Tressa had picked up a sword, hefting it as though she knew what she was doing, and looked at Ryanac. He laughed while moving in, most likely to disarm her, and she somehow moved into the big man's body, making him turn to keep her in sight. Ryanac motioned to slap her with the sword, and she managed to get there before him. She hit him hard with it, too. By the look on his face, she surprised him, and few fighters did that.

Now she returned from the other side of the forecourt, interrupting them. 'Mind if I take over?' she asked demurely. Ryanac inclined his head. She moved around him to Uly.

'These moves will not apply to you, but I am short and small, and you should know how such a fighter might react. Many believe that those lacking in height and build cannot fight. It is more a matter of technique and skill. We simply need to learn how to fight a different way and you have



to recognise those moves. In truth, there are few truly great warriors no matter what their size, and while I am at a disadvantage, being small and being a woman means others often overlook me until it's too late. Do not make that mistake whether your opponent is male or female."

Uly glanced from Tressa to Ryanac. "I'm not really going to need to know all this, am I?" He disliked the idea of training to protect himself. He disliked the idea of having to face down a person who was smaller than he was. The very idea felt wrong, somehow.

"I've told you more than once that Markis wants you able to protect yourself though he hopes you never need to," Ryanac said. He inclined his head toward Tressa. "Listen to her. She's right. A small fighter simply has other considerations. They can be as good if not better than you can, though. A smaller person requires different armour. One without bulk, something lighter perhaps, but the vision is the most important thing. A small person needs to be able to look up. The wrong armour will impair a short opponent. The right armour makes their protection equal. As a race, we generally hate to wear anything constricting over the head, but in the midst of battle even I have resorted to a helm."

Tressa snorted. Ryanac looked at her. "How do you manage to sound so informative and arrogant all at once?" she asked.

He raised his brow. "Arrogant?"

Tressa ignored him. "A smaller fighter will use their eyes rather than tilt their head. Do not think for a minute that they are unaware of anything. If you can force your opponent to move his or her head, it affects their balance. Likewise, such fighters tend to have fewer adornments though I am pleased" -- Tressa shot Ryanac a glance -- "to say that the Swithin work their armour for practical rather than fanciful purposes. Full battle gear includes knees and thigh protection." She glanced back over to Ryanac as she paced. "This is for fighting a smaller opponent. No point protecting your body if someone small rushes in and severs a leg. The boots are well designed and protect you here."

She tapped the back of Uly's ankle with the sword and made him jump. Uly resisted looking down, but waited to see if he felt pain. He didn't, so apparently she hadn't cut him.

"No point in getting your tendons cut so you cannot walk. Boots also need to fit right. You cannot slide around in them and fight well. Footwear should not be too heavy, but should grip the ground well. Always wear protection here." She slipped a hand between his legs and cupped him. Her grip was solid. Uly stared down into her dark eyes while Ryanac's chuckle sounded in his ear. She still didn't let go of him. Tressa hadn't touched him intimately for several weeks. He doubted they would ever be lovers again. Their relationship now was one very much of friendship. It suddenly occurred to him to wonder if Markis even noticed. Her grip tightened, drawing his attention back to the moment. "Even women wear such protection if they know anything about fighting. These parts are vulnerable and tender. It does not do well to get kicked in them or have someone grab you." She gave him a slight twist. He nodded to indicate he understood the warning, and she let go.

"Another way to tell if a fighter knows what he or she is doing is by their choice of weapon." She looked at Ryanac.

"If you're choosing a sword, then once grasped by the hilt, the point should just touch the ground." Ryanac demonstrated. "However, just because you face an opponent with a sword that is longer do not assume he or" -- he glanced at Tressa -- "she does not know how to use it. They may have picked up a discarded blade if necessary. It may hinder, and you can use that. Just don't rely on it. Don't take anything for granted."

"Watch a smaller fighter's stance." Tressa moved in front of him, her feet apart, one foot leading,

knees slightly bent. Her rear foot angled away from her body. She held her upper body upright. She made leaning movements first one way then the other, but stayed erect the whole time. "Try it."

He copied her. His weight felt centred in a direct line to the ground.

"If your opponent leans forwards, try to take advantage of it. It will throw your adversary off balance and slow movement." She then went on to demonstrate the differences in how a shorter opponent would hold a sword. Gradually, Uly realised that this lesson was teaching him how to look for weaknesses. As Ryanac said, he could not rely on anticipation, as any movement might be a ruse, but that did not mean he should ignore the probability either.

"Someone of my height should work on a good defence, but that does not mean stand there and take every hit. He or she will, when taking the offensive, choose the moment carefully."

"The biggest problems small fighters face is in moving backwards," Ryanac added.

Tressa looked at Ryanac with a considering look, and then shifted her gaze back to Uly. "He's right. I would move in an arc, never in a straight line. Fighting someone as large as Ryanac" -- she ignored his derisive snort -- "I would use my speed, and keep the curve tight. He can snort all he wants. That is how I got past his defences."

"Plus I wasn't taking you seriously." He bowed his head and spread his hands. "What can I say? You had me."

"If the fight were real, I would have injured him, if not killed him."

A shadow seemed to flitter over Ryanac's face, though it came from within.

"Shall we teach him what points to aim for?" Tressa asked.

"Let me." Antal at last interrupted. He gave Tressa a small bow. "Good fighting, my lady. I was glad to witness it."

Uly moved his gaze from one to the other, and back again. Antal's grin was for Ryanac's benefit, but the young man refused to look at him. Ryanac was too easy to bait sometimes, but not often. You just had to take advantage of it, and the idea that Tressa had bested him, if only in play, was too good to waste.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kilan and Harton fell into step with Markis. Kilan looked eager, questioning, and a little fearful combined. Thankfully, though impetuous, he could curb his tongue at the right time. They moved towards the royal suite, but then set off down a side corridor to another private area. Finally, they came to a small door. Markis turned to Harton.

"Make sure no one enters. No matter what you may or may not hear, that also applies to you. Ryanac is the only exception."

Harton nodded. No hesitation or curiosity showed on his face. He had served Markis's father, and he had now promised to serve him. Markis couldn't have been more grateful.

Inside the room, Markis told Kilan to stay where he was. He drew a key from his pocket, entered another room, and there opened a secret compartment in a heavy piece of furniture, removing a book. When he returned to the outer room, he was pleased to see that Kilan hadn't moved. He set the book on the desk and opened it. Leaning on his knuckles, he looked at his brother, waited for

his gaze to wander from the book to his face, and said, 'I have something to show you. Prepare for your first lesson.'

\* \* \* \* \*

Uly had gone through much of this before, but he went over it again now, practicing the basic strikes that would allow him to win almost all his fights. Of course, his opponent would likely know these moves too, and the fight he lost might be his last. He was beginning to feel slightly queasy.

During the last few months, Ryanac had trained him in most forms of weaponry but even now, weeks into Uly's training, he would snap out the most unexpected questions, testing Uly's memory. Now Ryanac asked Uly to list the most vulnerable areas of the body. Uly replied and as he spoke, Ryanac and Antal took turns interrupting him, adding to his knowledge.

Hamstring disables, torso for death. Then use stabs and slices to the arms and legs for injury, blood loss, and to slow them. If you managed to cut away several fingers, hands or arms, of course, the person had trouble fighting back even if the shock of it didn't disable them directly. Despite advising protection against blows to the legs in general, Ryanac, Antal, and Tressa warned injuries below the knees were not uncommon with axes that could cut through most armour. The words circled in his mind.

Antal told him stories of people with head injuries still killing several more before they succumbed. Ryanac told him that, on the Kimber Pass, he had found a man with both legs severed. It had happened simultaneously, one stroke. He was just describing how a cut to the face, particularly above the eye, could result in blinding an opponent with blood when Uly threw down the sword and walked away.

He only moved a few paces before he fell to his knees and buried his face in his hands. He stayed that way until he felt a hand at the nape of his neck. From the size of it, it could only be Ryanac. He lowered his hands. Tressa and Antal were gone. Ryanac crouched beside him.

'It's fine, Uly. I'm not asking you to hurt anyone.'

'You are, though.' Uly looked up at him.

'I told you, I'm teaching you in the hope that you'll never have to use the knowledge.'

'I understand that, but'. He didn't know how to explain, or maybe he just didn't want to. Ryanac waited for several seconds.

'Speak truthfully.'

Uly didn't answer. Something had changed between them. He felt close to the man, physically and emotionally as never before. 'Last night, you spoke of love, and today you talk of killing in the same voice.'

'You know how many men I have killed?'

Uly shook his head.

'Neither do I. I refuse to keep count of it. I've only done it in times of war, to defend my people and Markis. I even refused to fight once. I didn't agree with one particular campaign, and I still believe Markis's father was wrong that day.'

'What happened?'

"I should have lost my rank. They should have dismissed me. Sent me home to work on the farm and possibly face charges. If a certain captain of mine. Well, let's just say if we hadn't been friends, and if he hadn't understood part of me would die if I had to fight that particular battle, I wouldn't be where I am and who I am now." His voice grew softer. "We Swithin talk well, but like any nation, we're only as good as those who rule us. Markis's father wasn't a bad man, but he wasn't the best either. I bided my time and waited for the day Markis would take his place. Even if I couldn't be part of it with him, I longed for that day."

Ryanac stayed crouched, silent for just a moment before continuing. A gentle breeze stroked Uly's face and stirred his hair. "The one battle I was proud to fight was at the Kimber Pass. We fought off a savage race that would kill children in their beds, but I took no pleasure in it. I did it because it needed doing." He turned his face towards Uly. "That's what I'm asking of you. I want you to know how to fight and stay in practice. I wish on the comet you will never need to use it, but I would not have you defenceless, unable to protect yourself or those you love."

"You're telling me to kill someone, and I'm afraid if that time ever comes, I'll let you down."

"No, Uly. That's not possible. I can't tell you to kill. I do know if you ever need to, it will be in self-defence or protecting someone you love, but I can't make that decision for you. I just want you to know how if you have to protect yourself. I want you to have the choice."

"What if I don't make the choice? What if I freeze?"

Ryanac sighed. "The greatest warrior can freeze. I can't predict what will happen any more than you can. I don't believe it will, though. I believe your street smarts will kick in. You're a survivor, Uly, and that includes protecting those you love." Ryanac stared at him a few moments. "Enough for today."

Uly nodded his agreement to both counts. "You understand why I feel ill?"

Ryanac studied him a moment, and then nodded. "I believe so. Do you want to tell me, though?"

For some reason, Uly did. He needed to say it aloud. "I don't feel sick from the thought of hurting someone, though I feel that too. I feel sick from the thought that I now believe I could, if I had to, if they drove me to it." Uly raised his head and gazed at the sky. "Some days, I don't feel like me anymore. I look in the mirror, and I don't recognise me, but it goes deeper than that. I'm different. I've changed."

"You think that's a bad thing?"

Uly looked to the other man. "Isn't it? Am I still the person Markis fell in love with?"

A smile tugged at Ryanac's lips. "Uly, you are very much that person. You've always argued that Markis is a good man. Well, so are you, and even someone forcing you to do something bad for the greater good won't change that. Don't you feel it's about time that you accepted that?"

As much as Uly was grateful to hear Ryanac's words, he still had doubts. Maybe he'd changed so much, and that was what kept Markis from asking him to wed. Maybe none of this was Ryanac's doing.

## Chapter Ten

"We told you we'd teach you the Swithin way," Markis said, laughing. He grabbed at his queen and dragged her onto the balcony, waving at the people below. Tressa squealed and tried to pull

away. When he wouldn't let her go, her hands fluttered upwards to cover her naked breasts. Markis wouldn't let her do that either.

"It's nothing to us. They'll consider it weakness."

Her eyes blazed, but he stared her down. They weren't having sex, the day was too hot for it, but they were as good as naked due to said heat. They seldom got such days as this, and Tressa and Uly appeared grateful to hear it. Usually the winds from the valley cooled the air. The cliffs protected Swithin country from the heat of the desert, but some days the air grew still, and if it did this during the summer, they had the occasional day like this where the heat was oppressive. Markis had warned them they might get a thunderstorm later. On such a day, most Swithin went about practically naked, covering only so much as to protect their skin from the sun. Being inside, Markis had donned nothing. He had intended to put on some light undergarments, but Ryanac refused to wear anything. Feeling that Tressa would feel more awkward with the large man being the only one naked, Markis had joined him in his nudity. Uly wore loose-fitting trousers, silk, tied with a cord at his waist. Tressa had appeared fully dressed. Both of the Swithin men had tried to talk the others out of their clothes. Uly had finally given in around midday, realising there was nothing sexual in it. They were all too listless. Tressa had remained adamant for another hour, then wilted. Finally, she had allowed Markis to coax her out of her top.

He had been trying to get her out of the rest of her clothes by playing and teasing. He couldn't understand why a woman so highly sexed worried about nudity, especially when the three of them regularly saw her body.

"It is just not done," Tressa had snapped. "People do not walk about naked, not even in front of those they have sex with."

According to Tressa, she saw the four of them being naked together in the bedroom as an entirely separate issue. The absurdity of her statement got the best of Markis. He didn't know quite how it had happened, but they had ended up in a chase. The day was too hot for running, but seeing Tressa flee from him had stirred something in his blood. They had run out of the main part of the suite along the private corridors to the main section. They had passed one servant and one guard. Antal had stood there gaping. Busy wondering whether the sight of the king chasing his queen surprised Antal, or their state of undress, it failed to register in Markis's mind that Tressa had taken a wrong turn. For a woman trying to hide her nudity, she had done a poor job of it.

The balcony was a high one, thankfully, and the square it overlooked small. Those below were persons assigned to the palace and not members of the general populace. Still, the same rules applied. If Tressa made an issue of their nudity, they would notice it. If she ignored it, so would the people below.

"Just nod to them, Tressa. Wave. Then you can go back inside." To her due, she did as Markis asked. Aware of Uly at his back, standing out of sight, he reached out a hand. The pause grew so long he began to believe Uly wouldn't take it, but finally those long, slim fingers slipped into his. Markis pulled him to his side. Together, the three of them gave a bow to the crowd. He let go of Tressa's hand, and she managed to make it look not too much of a scurry as she disappeared into the palace.

Turning, his arm around Uly's waist, the sight of a face caught Markis's eye down in the crowd. Most of them looked happy to see Markis with his family. Some acted disinterested -- they saw the king and his consorts on a regular basis, and the day was unbearably hot -- but there was one baleful eye among them: Stargazer. Markis knew how Stargazer felt about him. It wasn't as if the old man hadn't stared at him so hatefully before, and yet something was different. That hate encompassed not only him but Uly as well. If Markis didn't believe it impossible, he would have sworn he could feel what the old man was feeling right now, but that was ridiculous.

Even as he denied the idea, the comet moved inside him. The space between him and Stargazer shortened. Part of him separated, as though he could become some disembodied thing. The sensation wasn't unlike how he sometimes felt when his mind, spirit, or awareness entered the abyss. This time, it was more horrid even than that, for he sped down towards those milky eyes, entered the old man, caught just a glimpse into his mind and then jerked back violently, slamming into his own body. The skin prickled at his neck, and it was all he could do not to scan the surrounding rooftops. He could only hope Stargazer remained unaware of what had happened, and from the way the man continued to stare, Markis could only surmise this was the case. Trying not to hurry, he moved Uly towards the door. The young man went willingly but tensed in his embrace, a direct result of sensing the anxiety that now thrummed just under Markis's skin.

Once they were inside, Ryanac shut the door. This was such a strange thing to do on such a day that Markis and Ryanac stared at one another. Uly's gaze flicked back and forth between them.

'Why didn't you come outside?' Uly asked Ryanac.

Markis was grateful one of them had broken the silence. Tressa had fled, probably deeper into their suite, but he couldn't think about that right now. Markis was trying not to shake. He felt sick. He was aware that Ryanac knew something was wrong, but he couldn't explain right away. He needed to catch his breath. Ryanac's gaze finally slid to Uly.

"The public wouldn't mind Markis and me fucking, but they would mind seeing me out of armour. I'm supposed to be his guard." His gaze came back to Markis's face. "That was a stupid thing to do."

'I know that now.'

'We nearly paid a price for such carelessness and overconfidence once before.'

'I don't need you to remind me.' They had grown complacent. Believing themselves safe on Swithin land had nearly cost Antal his life and would have cost Uly his if Antal had not thrown himself in front of him. Antal had survived because Markis had healed him with the power of the comet. Some members of the council, especially Stargazer, had not only hidden the knowledge of this healing power from him, they regarded it as forbidden. Markis only knew of it because he had asked Uly to steal a book from Stargazer, who too many saw as just a harmless old man, the same man he had just seen down in the square. He sighed. "I'm not used to feeling unsafe on home ground."

'I know.' Those simple words held significant weight. "Now do you care to explain what just happened out there?"

Uly looked from one to the other. "What are you talking about?" he asked.

He deserved an answer. They both did. Markis didn't want to voice his thoughts, though. Once spoken, he couldn't take the words back. Ryanac and Uly just stared at him, waiting. He finally said the name, but he phrased it as a question aimed at Ryanac. "Stargazer?"

The guard didn't question why Markis reached this conclusion but gave it some thought first. Then he gave a slow nod. "It's possible, but tell me why you think so."

Markis tried to explain what had just happened out there but found it difficult, being as nothing like it had ever happened to him before. How had the comet known? Ryanac voiced almost the same thought.

"That damn power of yours acts as though it's alive sometimes. Even if it is, why would it know Stargazer is to blame?"

Uly frowned, and then his eyes widened. "He tried to kill mhhfff --"

The sentenced ended on a muffled sound as Markis put a hand over his mouth and ushered Uly back towards the main part of their suite. Almost there, he looked to Ryanac. "I don't know, but I saw enough to suspect. I don't know why the comet reacted that way, why it affected me. Maybe it was because of what I was feeling. His was the only malevolent face in the crowd, the only one down there with so much hatred in his expression, the only one who looked disgusted. By the comet!" Markis turned away and only just managed to refrain from stamping his feet or throwing a punch at the wall. "If I'd let the comet have its way, maybe I could have learned everything. I just couldn't stand touching that man's mind for a moment. If it's true, what do we do?"

"Nothing for now."

He opened his mouth to protest, but Ryanac shook his head. "Even the king cannot accuse someone without proof, especially someone in such a position."

The guard only gave voice to Markis's thoughts and probably said it for Uly's benefit. He didn't have to like it, though. "We could be wrong."

"The way he just looked at you?"

"You saw?"

"I saw."

Why? Why, why, why would Stargazer do such a thing? There was no love lost between them, but all the same. "Maybe it was a single incident." Markis felt foolish even for saying it. Maybe Stargazer had made only one attempt on Uly's life so we can forgive it? Markis deserved the contemptuous look Ryanac sent his way.

"And that makes it forgivable?"

"No, but" Markis paced, ran a hand through his hair. He had it tied in a ponytail. His action was so violent it pulled a few strands loose, snapped the clip. His hair fell around him in a dark cloud. Even in the midst of anxiety, he could see Uly and Ryanac took note of this. Their admiring glances gave him a little shiver of pleasure. Uly bent to retrieve the clip.

"I did steal the book," Markis whispered. "I used Uly to do it, and Stargazer knows. This could be my fault."

"Don't do that to yourself." Ryanac sounded less than pleased.

"The book has helped you?" Uly asked. Markis nodded. "Then it was worth it. I'll steal you ten such books if they help give you peace."

The emotion behind the words warmed more than his heart. He and Ryanac exchanged a look.

"We watch. We wait," the big man said.

"The two things I hate to do most."

Uly smiled at his reply. Ryanac chuckled.

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The knowledge that Stargazer might have had something to do with the attempt on Uly's life ate away in Markis's gut, but there was nothing he could do about it now. He wondered what was keeping Uly. The young man had gone off to another part of the suite to fetch a book to read. The world had fallen silent and still. Breathless, it waited.

Tressa shivered and ran her hands up her arms. "What is that?"

"The impending storm I predicted."

"How can I feel it? It is as though it has life."

"Oh, it has life." Markis paced. The atmosphere made him restless. He would calm only when the storm broke and maybe not even then. Ryanac watched him, clearly amused. His friend knew how storms affected him. Once, they had made love in the rain, but that was long ago before they went off to separate academies.

"Should we not close the doors?"

"If we do that the suite will quickly grow warm. The eaves should protect the balconies from the rain. If any water gets in it won't damage the floors as they are marble. Just be careful not to slip on them." The heat of the day had faded with the light, but the air held weight. Oppressive, heavy, it bore down on them all. In the distance, a long rumble crawled through the night. Tressa jumped.

"Afraid, Sardia?" Ryanac asked lazily.

She turned to glare at him. They were all still dressed -- or undressed -- as before. Tressa had kept her top off when sweat had started to trickle down her sides. She refused to give up her skirts. The material was Swithin produced and gauzy, but Markis wouldn't have wanted even that against his skin. It clung to her in dark patches. "I am afraid of nothing," she barked.

"Except nudity." Ryanac was clearly in a mood to annoy her.

Her gaze narrowed. "Casual nudity is unnecessary."

"So are clothes in here on a hot day."

Tressa clearly wanted to argue but didn't seem to know how. "You Swithin can be very frustrating," she finally said.

"We Swithin just accept the natural way of things, and aren't you Swithin now? I recall someone very much wanting to leave her backward nation behind. Now she argues with the very way of life she wanted."

"I do not argue. I just think you take it to extremes."

Ryanac shrugged. "Perhaps. Better we take acceptance to extremes than oppress the masses into believing the natural state of their own lives is a sin."

Her mouth snapped shut. "I do try, you know," she said, a moment later.

"I know." The tone in which the big man spoke was amazingly warm and gentle. Tressa looked at him, clearly suspicious, and then gave him a small smile. Ryanac reached for her hand. Openly uncertain, she took it. He pulled her onto his lap. He half-sat, half-lay on a couch, his legs straight out. Pulling Tressa above him meant they shared a lot of skin contact.



She laughed and then told him to let go. He shook his head. "I want a kiss."

"I refuse."

Again, he shook his head. "No, you don't."

If Ryanac said she didn't, then Markis tended to believe him. Tressa only wanted to refuse in order to refuse, not because she didn't want the kiss.

"I am your queen. I order you to let me go. In fact, I order you to run me a cool bath."

He laughed. Tressa blinked in what seemed to be genuine surprise. Markis echoed the emotion. Up until that point, he had believed she teased. "You order me," Ryanac said. Unfortunately, Tressa clearly took it to mean he was actually asking. She nodded.

"You order me, Samari, a captain of the guard, to run you a bath?"

A frown drew down her brow. "Yes."

Ryanac glanced from her to Markis's face. "That's a good one."

She looked from one to the other of them. "If Markis asked you to run him a bath, what would you do?"

The dark eyes that had been sparkling with merriment grew hard. "I would run it for him."

"Then I do not see the difference."

The time had come for Markis to speak up. "I would ask him. I would not order him." Her frown increased.

"He serves you. He takes your orders."

"He takes my orders when related to his job." Most of the time. "If Ryanac ran me a bath, it would likely be because he meant to share it."

She set her lips in a determined line. Ryanac brushed his fingers down the side of her face. "I swear you argue with us just for the sake of it. Now give me that kiss and make up." She shook her head, but Ryanac's patience had run out. Markis opened his mouth to say something, but too late. Ryanac lifted the small woman into a position where he could steal a kiss. Even from this angle, Markis could see she fastened her teeth against his lip. Ryanac's eyes had gone back to twinkling. He spoke against her mouth so the words sounded muffled.

"If my lady bites, I will bite back."

She drew back instantly.

"Stop fighting me. You want the kiss as much as I do. You only deny yourself. You've not touched anyone but Markis for weeks."

Markis blinked. That was what had bothered him recently. He'd noticed but pushed it to the back of his mind. No wonder she'd been so frustrated, and as to why. Tressa tutted. Her protest broke in on his thoughts, and Markis was glad of the distraction. He felt too hot, too listless to give the thought much consideration. He chose to think over it another day.

"I am your queen. Why should I do what a mere guard says?"

Ryanac's eyes widened. He tilted his head to one side and peered past her to Markis. "Mere?" he asked. Markis couldn't help it; he smirked.

"You are supposed to do what I say," Tressa insisted.

"Lady, I don't even do what Markis says."

Markis rolled his eyes in fake frustration and pouted. "Not even if I say please?"

"Oh, the two of you!" Tressa began to push at Ryanac's chest, but she might as well have pushed against one of the marble floors or the walls. All she managed to do was wriggle against him, something he clearly enjoyed. She gasped, stilled. Markis swallowed. She had to feel the solid length of Ryanac's cock pressing into her. The gauze parted under Ryanac's hands, and Markis closed his eyes. The seamstresses were going to throw a fit.

"I hear you're not getting enough, Tressa," Ryanac said. Somehow, he had managed to position her perfectly. By relaxing his grip her weight drew her down his body. She slowly drifted down onto his erection. Her eyes widened, and her mouth parted as she did, but her gaze swiftly turned distant. From Markis's position, he had a fine view of Ryanac's cock sinking into the depths of her sex.

"Is this enough for you?" Ryanac whispered, bringing their faces together though he had to curl his body to do so. He took his kiss.

Markis watched; his cock stirred. Ryanac laid back, seemingly content, arms behind his head, ankles still crossed, with Tressa securely skewered. Markis still watched, waited with Ryanac for Tressa to regain her composure. Perhaps composure wasn't the right word. Consciousness was closer to it. She stared into Ryanac's eyes, tried to move, found she couldn't. The acute angle clearly didn't allow her to move up his body without considerable strain to her arms and legs. The effort would forestall her pleasure. She couldn't slip down, for she was as far down as the rigid length inside of her would allow. The only way Tressa could have sex was at Ryanac's command. He proved this a moment later when he reached for her. Gripping her around the waist, he moved her easily back and forth, up and down.

If she had opened her mouth with the purpose of a protest, her moan drowned it out. The angle, the way her legs were wide open, the tightness of their groins, had to give her the greatest stimulation. Markis grew hard. Ryanac's gaze flicked to his cock and then up to his face.

"Why don't you go find Uly?" he said. He looked down into Tressa's eyes. "The queen and I are going to get reacquainted."

"So much for being king and you taking my orders," Markis remarked.

Ryanac looked up at him, his hands behind his head once more, Tressa waiting, pinned to his cock. The guard's tongue snaked out to touch his middle two front teeth and licked the midpoint of his top lip. The gesture, though peculiar, said that Markis would pay for that remark. He didn't know whether to fear the idea or look forward to it.

\* \* \* \* \*

The wind stirred Uly's hair. Not used to it being so long, it felt strange, sensual. Uly had never understood the idea of sensuality until he met Markis. He clutched at the doorframe. The room behind him lay in darkness, darker even than the night. He didn't think anyone out there could see him, but he couldn't be sure. He wanted to step outside but stood huddled against the doorframe.

'What is it, Uly?' The voice coming so softly out of the gloom at his back made him jump. He hadn't heard Markis approach. Of course, the man was barefoot, bare of anything. Uly didn't as much as look at him; he just clung to the edge of the door. Gentle fingers stirred the hair at his neck. 'What's wrong?'

His throat felt dry suddenly. He swallowed, and then licked his lips. Aware of Markis's gaze, still Uly stared out into the night. The wind picked up. It blew oddly, both cool and hot at once. It tickled over his skin, then whipped at it. If the doors weren't pinned back, they would have banged in the wind. The whisper and rustle of leaves was the only sound, yet that suggested something soft. The motion in the night was primordial, called to his basic needs. He wanted to run like an animal, wild and free. He had done that once on the streets, but it hadn't truly been freedom. You couldn't be free while you struggled for the next crust of bread to eat. There were many types of cages.

'I feel trapped.' The words left his lips before he realised what he intended to say. Markis drew close but didn't touch him. He was just a warm presence at his back.

'Why? Have I done something wrong?'

Uly shook his head. 'No. You've never made me feel trapped. You've always made me feel free.' If the realisation and admittance stunned him, it had to do something to Markis. Finally, Uly looked at Shavar from the corner of his eye. His words had an effect. That dark gaze lay in shadow apart from a small pinpoint of light, yet he could feel the weight and heat of Markis's gaze.

'Even when I dragged you unwillingly into the palace?' There existed something sardonic in the voice. Uly gave him a wry smile.

'No. Not then, but soon afterwards. I can't explain it. It just felt right.' He had looked back out into the night, but now he faced Markis, pressing his back into the doorframe, edging a little into the room, hunching as though he could make himself small. He was tall, though not as tall as Markis. He hadn't hunched for months, if he discounted the incident with the dress. His skin twitched as though it were a separate thing and wanted away from his flesh. His blood flowed too fast. 'There's much I didn't realise at the time, but it felt right to be with you. Like I had found home.' He deliberated over the word, but it rang true.

Markis looked away. 'I'm sure a palace would feel like home to many who lived on the streets.' The words were full of a quiet bitterness. Uly shook his head, reached out to touch Markis's arm, then let the hand fall back to his side.

'I don't mean the palace. I mean you. I felt at home with you.'

A rumble growled through the sky. A bright flash lit up the darkness, then was gone, leaving a reproduction as an image at the back of his eye. Uly cowered.

'Are you scared of the storm?'

He couldn't tell if Markis wanted to offer him comfort or felt disappointment to think he would be scared of such a thing. 'No,' he said. 'Not the storm.'

'What then?'

'Someone tried to kill me.' He looked up into Markis's eyes. 'I knew it, have known it all these weeks, but I didn't feel it until earlier. You tensed, and I felt your fear.'

'I'll do my best to protect you.'

Uly laughed, and it contained a sick sound. "I'm glad you didn't promise to succeed."

Markis sighed. "Ryanac and life have taught me the futility of that. I could promise to save you and fail too easily. I can only promise to do my best."

"Good. That's good enough." Uly glanced outside. He didn't want to look at Markis while he said the rest. "Can someone see us from here?"

"No."

"If I went outside would it make me a target?"

"No. Not even an archer could aim at arrow at you here. There's nothing nearby to aim from."

"The trees?"

"You can hear them, but the sound travels. They are further than you think, and the angle is wrong."

"I thought so, but I".

"You were afraid to step out."

"I didn't want to get myself killed doing something so innocent yet foolish. I didn't want you to find me with an arrow in me because of something silly." He looked back to Markis now, ready to say what he had to say and look at him as he did. "I felt your fear," he whispered, afraid now that the noise of the fast approaching storm would make his words inaudible. "I felt your love."

He could hardly see Markis now. The shadows drew in with the storm.

"You know I love you."

"I know it, but today I felt it. Felt your pain, your fear." Tears pricked the back of his eyes. Even as he willed them away, they filled his eyes and overflowed. Markis brushed a tear from his cheek, took it to his lips and licked it away.

"What's wrong?"

Something crashed in the distance. Even Markis turned his gaze, but they couldn't see what it was and could do nothing about it. There was a smell like the sharp scent of the woods. It didn't belong here. It came from within the storm, making the hair on the back of Uly's arms crawl to attention. The night had become wild and reckless. It spoke to something inside him.

"I've never told you," Uly said. "I love you."

Markis opened his mouth to speak, but Uly shook his head.

"No. Don't tell me I have, for I haven't. I chose my words carefully that day we first arrived here," he said, referring to when Markis had taken him out on a horse to see something of the surrounding lands. They had stood in a garden looking out to the horizon and talked about love, but he had not said the words. "I told you I cared for you. I told you what I thought of you. I don't recall using the word love. I was too afraid. Don't tell me I don't have to say it. Don't tell me I've shown you, or you know from things I've done. You've said it to me, but I've never said it back. I want to tell you. You have to know. Without you, I would never have known what it was like to love someone and feel loved in return. I love you."

If anyone saw Markis now, they would see only a man, not a king or Shavar. He looked helpless. He gave a slight nod. "We love each other then. Something we already knew."

Uly returned the nod. "Yet though I was afraid to say it, I never feared it the way I do now." Markis frowned, waiting. Uly already knew the question. "I've never wanted anything for myself." He shook his head to stop Markis's interruption. "I've desired food and shelter, but I've never wanted anything that wasn't immediately important."

"That's not true," Markis said. "You sought comfort."

Uly didn't want to think what that meant, but he couldn't deny it. He had experienced very few sexual encounters before meeting Markis, and those with men had nothing to do with affection. He had learned early in life how to be a good thief. He had learned from the best. He hadn't tried to sell his body for the coin itself, but some saw it as an easy option. He had found it to be no such thing. He had tried it in search of affection, and when he quickly realised that was not part of the act, he stopped, and went back to picking pockets until the day he had tried to steal a prince's purse.

"Maybe I did, but I soon gave up on it. You're right, though; I wanted love. I just didn't know it. I didn't know what love was or how to recognise it. I didn't know what I felt for you except a wish for you to want me. Now I wish." He broke off, his throat choking up, his tears getting the better of him. More of them ran down his face. "I wish you didn't."

Markis looked lost, in pain with his confusion.

"If something happens to me, you'll be hurt." Markis reached for him, but Uly took a step to the side, away from his touch, ready to fly if he did. "If you love someone, it makes you vulnerable."

"You must have known that."

"I did, but I didn't feel it until today. It's as if I can feel the knowledge of what that means crawling under my skin. I don't want to hurt you like that. I don't want to be the cause of so much pain."

"Is that why you've been afraid to admit you love me?"

Uly started, searched Markis's gaze. So the man truly had known it all this time.

"And if something happened to me?" the king asked. "How would you feel?"

Uly couldn't bear it. More tears fell. They just kept running from his eyes as though he carried a personal storm. "Might as well cut out my heart," he whispered.

"See? It goes both ways." Markis took a step forward. They were almost touching. The span of a hand separated them. "Uly, what you don't see is that love also gives you strength. It makes you fight, stand up for what's right. It makes you face your fears, be brave. It gives your life purpose, meaning. Trust me. I spent too long caring about someone from afar even when he sat right next to me."

Even though Uly was aware that Markis didn't mean it, the mention of Ryanac right now almost made him wince. Ryanac. Always there was Ryanac. Even as Markis continued, Uly took in the truth of the king's words, for he felt cut open and bleeding right now.

"That would never have changed if it weren't for you. Love can be the cruellest thing in the world. It can cut you as sure as any knife. You won't see blood seeping, but you bleed all the same, but only with love are we whole. Life without it is a very empty thing, or can be. I was a very empty thing without you."

'Isn't that worse? If something happens to me, doesn't that make it worse?' Uly refused to think of anything else but what Markis meant to him and he to Markis.

'Of course it does, but the only way to avoid that is not to ever love anyone, and that isn't living at all. Trust me, I know.' Markis stared directly into his eyes. Outside, the storm raged. The sky crashed, the clouds broke open, and rain started to pour. Both he and Markis visibly breathed in the scent it brought forth. 'You give me strength. I don't want to be in the world without you, and if someone or something takes you from me, or me from you, that isn't our fault.'

Taking his hand, Markis led Uly out into the world. The overhang acted as a canopy. It shielded all but the very edge of the balcony from the rain. Uly leaned out, tipped back his head, and let the rain wash away his tears. When he opened his eyes and stepped back, he was soaked. The rain had drenched his hair and water ran down his skin. Droplets snaked down his torso, slightly warm and yet so cool they made him shiver. Markis's heat touched his back. Fingers drew his wet hair together and set it to one side. Warm lips kissed his ear, and a tongue licked delicately. Turning, Uly clawed his fingers into Markis's hair, snagging his scalp. He pressed their mouths together hungrily.

Markis stiffened and then gave in to the assault. That slight pause caused a spike of pain to erupt through Uly. Ryanac was right, then. He seldom took the initiative, so the moments when he did stood out. They turned, clutching frantically. Nails raked and hands grabbed, unable to touch enough, get close enough. They opened their legs and rode each other's thighs, drenched from the rain now, aware of the storm as something wild and stirring, as intense as their feelings. It wasn't enough. It would never be enough. The rain poured down so heavily, Uly could have tipped back his head and probably drowned in it. He wanted to drown in Markis. He needed to be inside him.

When Markis took his hand, Uly followed where the king led. Their grip had none of either man's underlying desperation in it, not the desire that thrummed along Uly's skin or the longing he could see in Markis's eyes as the man glanced back at him. Uly's hand lay relaxed in Markis's firm but gentle grasp. Uly felt almost languid until they reached the bed.

Almost as if Markis knew what Uly wanted, he slid onto the bed, turning to lie on his back. Then Uly lost track of time, of how they moved from one moment to another. He felt it on some level below rational thought, where he sensed he could stop thinking of himself as human. He could imagine that was how the minds of animals often worked, focusing on the basic needs of life: food, safety, and sex. The idea that he was striving to let his mind close down to the level of an animal no doubt should have alarmed him, but it didn't. Uly tried to drive conscious thought from his mind even when Markis handed him the oil, even when Uly applied it to Markis's intimate flesh, even when he slipped his fingers inside the man.

Sweat trickled from one side of Markis's face, and Uly itched to wipe it away, to lick it up, to taste the saltiness of it. He would have to crawl around Shavar's body to do that, or crawl up and over him. He couldn't move, and his fingers were far too busy in retrospect. Heat and slickness grasped at his fingers, sucking more of them in. Something frantic stared out at him from Markis's gaze. That long chestnut hair fanned out around the man, over him, stroking his flesh as he breathed. His mouth moved in a single word spoken in silence. Please.

Looking down, Uly watched his fingers disappear into the king. Into the prince. Into my prince. King he might be now, but to Uly and Ryanac, this man would always be their prince. A small earthquake took up residence in the body lying at his knees. The eyes closed, the man's back arched, and the head went back. The movement plunged Markis down onto his questing fingers without Uly having to do a thing. He looked up, once more checking, wanting to trust his eyes. The long, firm shaft jerked and drooled out another thin, clear stream onto the king's belly.

Watching as he slid his cock into another's flesh widened Uly's eyes. He could hardly describe it. This feeling was amazing, too glorious for words. The heat, the pulsating clenches, those words just weren't enough. Uly started to rock his hips unintentionally. Last time they had done this, it had been Ryanac's initiative. This time, he was in control. A moment of self-doubt almost stopped him. The almost perfect cry that left Markis's lips caused Uly to saw back and forth instead. The idea struck him as foolish now, but when they had first become lovers, Uly had believed he would be there for Shavar's use, and he had accepted that until today. Now he wanted them to make love in so many ways, ways he hadn't learned by experience yet, only desire. Joined in penetration, his cock speared up into Markis, his frenzied hips pushing, pulling, pounding, and rolling, their bodies synchronised. Uly looked into Markis's face and saw only peace.

The sure knowledge that he could have Ryanac this way if he wanted brought forth his embarrassment, but now he recognised the emotion for what it was, merely a way to escape his true feelings. He hid behind fear and embarrassment as something he usually found comforting, something he clung to whenever he feared to let go. What did he have to fear but having his feelings hurt, or someone using his needs and desires to humiliate him? No one would do that here, not intentionally. That meant he needed to accept this way of life to find peace.

Now was not the moment to consider his reservations. Uly turned his mind to using the man beneath him, to taking his pleasure. Markis didn't seem to mind at all. He caught Uly about the hips with his ankles, drawing him in, forcing him to strike up into him in a hard, deep plunge that had to hurt. It even wrung a grunt from Shavar's throat, but Uly and Markis rocked as one now, a perfect rhythm that had nothing to do with their minds and everything to do with their bodies. It felt too good to stop, too painful to continue. He would have closed his eyes, turned his head aside if Markis's gaze hadn't latched on to his, one of Shavar's hands clutching the side of his face, holding his head in place. There was nowhere else to look, nowhere else to run. Uly pressed his cock home, guiding it with his hand if he needed to, burying inch after inch in a quick rush of desire, almost hating the moment when he had to withdraw in order to plunge once more. He wanted to plough into Markis, pushing past more than that tight ring. Little spasms met his onslaught, Markis's body almost fluttering around his buried cock so that Uly drove forward to the hilt, his heart and desire wanting to split Markis apart. His own flesh lurched, strained. His heart stuttered.

Uly couldn't close his eyes against the king as he erupted inside of him. Even as the ultimate pleasure of the moment made him shudder, there seemed something sinful in it. Not in what they had done but that he, Uly, someone born to live and die on the streets, should spill so deep inside such a man as this seemed wrong. If it had not been for the Swithin invasion, if he had not tried to take the wrong purse at a fortunate moment, he would never have known such bliss, and he wasn't sure he was entitled to it. The sight in Markis's eyes banished the thought. Glazed from lust and yet bright with love, those eyes were a deep abyss Uly willingly fell into.

## Chapter Eleven

The view was spectacular. Markis watched Ryanac staring out at the city, but he looked no further than the vision of the man, and that was even more of a spectacle. He had followed because it was unusual for the big man to slip away like that, quietly, as though he didn't want anyone to notice. Markis had followed him out onto one of the balconies close to the roof. Ryanac did not move. His gaze roamed but he could have been a statue otherwise. He didn't fool Markis. His guard knew of his presence.

Markis walked across the roof, savouring the early breeze that slipped into the opening of his robe, and which parted the garment. With the passing of the storm, the air had cooled.

'What's wrong?' he asked directly. 'You hated seeing me with him?' This morning over breakfast, he and Uly had gazed starry-eyed at each other. He couldn't help it even though Ryanac had rolled

his eyes and tutted.

‘No,’ Ryanac said, still gazing out at the landscape. ‘I love to see you with him.’

Not willing to have Ryanac hide his feelings, Markis stepped in front of him, leaning against the balustrade, aware Ryanac would not tolerate it. Even an archer would have a problem sending an arrow this distance but even so, Ryanac grabbed him by the shoulders and tugged him back from the edge. The big man’s gaze flicked to where the robe gaped, clearly displaying Markis’s body. Markis couldn’t keep the smile from his face upon seeing Ryanac swallow.

‘Jealous? It’s not the Swithin way.’ He mocked the guard with words that had fallen from his own lips once.

‘Not exactly.’

‘You chided me for similar emotions, and you don’t feel this way regarding Tressa.’

‘That’s different.’ He tried to walk away, but Markis caught hold of him. Ryanac’s gaze went immediately to the yawning gap of the robe. ‘Stop trying to distract me with the glorious sight of your gorgeous body.’

Markis laughed. He just couldn’t contain it. He gathered up Ryanac’s face and kissed him gently. ‘What did you do to Uly the other day?’

‘I showed him how to take what he wanted.’

‘And I thank you for it.’

The other man shook his head. ‘I’m not jealous, you dolt. I think you have problems to face that staring at Uly over breakfast won’t solve. You have personal and practical problems to deal with, but I can see by the look on your face that I’ll get no sense out of you this morning, so I made myself scarce. You just look altogether too smug and satisfied that I could barely stand it. Only I used to be able to make you look that way.’

Tracing his lips with a thumb, Markis said, ‘You still can. You still do. Ryanac, I need you with me. I want you with me. You’re the one I called, the one I trusted when it felt as if I didn’t have a friend in the world. I will always need you.’

‘You’re overcompensating,’ Ryanac teased.

‘Doesn’t mean it isn’t true.’ They kissed again, briefly. When Markis pulled back, he said, ‘I’m going to change and then give Kilan another lesson.’

‘You still think this is wise?’

Markis searched his eyes. ‘You don’t?’

‘I trust Kilan. He can be a bit unpredictable, though.’

‘He’s young.’

‘That’s my point. He’s barely a man.’

Markis couldn’t seem to stop grinning today. He could still feel Uly inside him. He had only to close his eyes, and he could feel their bodies pressing. He still smelt of Uly. He hadn’t washed him off his skin. ‘We were young once.’



'Not as young as you look. Stop grinning. It's irritating.'

He laughed. 'Now you know how it feels. We were discussing my brother.'

'I trust probably about a dozen people in this world.'

'That many?'

Ignoring the interruption, Ryanac said, 'That includes the four of us, Harton, and Antal. I also trust my parents and my siblings, but I do not even trust them with your life. I wouldn't take the chance.'

'So, not Kilan.'

'Not with your life, not with Tressa's or Uly's. No. He needs to prove himself and grow in age and wisdom first.'

Markis stood there holding his friend's hands in his. He took a few moments to consider his words, knowing how Ryanac would react. 'There's a passage in the book,' he began, 'where two Shavar can combine their strength.' The look of alarm he expected appeared instantly. He gave Ryanac's hands a little shake. 'This wouldn't be a case of my handing control over to Kilan, but more like his adding his strength to mine. I'm stronger than he'll ever be. I know. I've tested him. He couldn't take over, and if we do this, he will have to trust me not to cripple him.'

'You've told him this?'

'Yes. We haven't tried it yet.'

'Why?'

'It's too soon. He's not ready. He has many years of training ahead of him even with my help, but it could come in useful someday. I also think I might be able to speed up his training.'

'How?'

He hated it when Ryanac got like this. Terse questions that demanded a direct response were difficult to avoid. He broke contact and paced. 'If I could show him.'

'Show?'

He sighed. There was no getting away from this. 'If I take Kilan into the abyss, I believe one Shavar could teach the other control by showing him the power that exists, letting the man and the power taste one another.' He ran a hand through his hair. 'I don't know how to explain it.'

'You don't have to. I shared the abyss with you. I know the taste.'

Markis turned back, surprised. 'I didn't think you would understand why I chose that word.'

'I understand, all right. I just don't have the ability to do anything with it. I also think you're right about teaching someone that way. I think you could cut it down to months, if not weeks or days.'

'No argument?'

'Don't look so surprised. No. Not if you're certain. Just do one thing for me.'

'What's that?'

'Start out slowly.'

Markis laughed again. "I shall have to."

'Why?'

'Kilan's petrified.' His laughter rolled around the balcony.

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Markis took a perfunctory wash, still not wanting to swab Uly's scent from his skin. It always reminded him of cut grass and cool breezes. He would bathe tonight and then, with any luck, rub that scent all over him again.

He stopped by to have a word with Tressa before going about his duties. There was no council today. He had a few chores to do that did not require Tressa's presence until later. He wanted to check if she had her morning planned, though even if she wanted to use the time just being lazy, that was fine by him. She had mentioned a wish to continue her education, something Azulite women were discouraged from doing, sometimes forcefully. Tressa had learned almost everything she knew against her father's wishes and knowledge. Markis wanted to have a word about that too.

She was brushing her hair when he knocked, then entered at her call. She lay the brush aside and waited demurely.

'I apologise,' Markis began, "if Uly and I were insufferable over breakfast."

A small smile crept over her face. "Not insufferable." She looked thoughtful and then her gaze flicked up to his face before she looked away. Clearly, she chose her words carefully. "I just wish I felt that way about someone."

Markis sighed inwardly. He sat down, taking one of her hands in his. "At least we are now being honest with each other. You've not had sex with Uly since we arrived, have you?" She shook her head. "And Ryanac?"

'I consider Uly more as a friend, and Ryanac as'. She hesitated. "There have been a few occasions, and last night was nice, but Ryanac irritates me. I despair over him as much as I admire him. I know he is more to you than your guard, but it frustrates me. I do not wish to be Uly's lover, and Ryanac. I would prefer not to be intimate with him either. I think of him more as convenient. Last night was about lust for me, not love. They both care for me, and we share much, including respect, but nothing as strong as what you feel for them. I am sorry."

Markis held up a hand. "Tressa, you and I married for duty, but we like each other and share a great deal of love. We both know you do not sit in my heart the way Uly or Ryanac do. They simply fulfilled all that I needed before you and I ever met. I wouldn't give you up though, if I had any say in it." He knelt in front of her, and gently lifted her face. "I just wish I knew what I could do to make you happy. I cannot always be here for you, and it is not always because of them. Often, it is duty. Often, I am working late. I am aware of the nights Uly crawls into Ryanac's bed just to have someone near him as much as the nights you spend alone. I gave you the toys to help satisfy your somewhat inexhaustible needs, but if you know of something that would provide you with comfort, then I happily grant it. Be honest. Does a female lover interest you?"

Her colour deepened, but then she nodded. "The idea intrigues me, but I have not found someone yet. If I do, I have no wish to share her." Tressa gave him a guarded look.

"If you do, then do not hesitate to talk to me. I would be quite happy for you to have someone independent of us to love. There are quite enough of us already, don't you think? I just want you to be happy, and if you think this will do that, you have my blessing."

Tressa searched his gaze as though seeking the truth of his words. "If I could find a woman to love, I would consider it seriously. The men here are not the men of my world, but the companionship of women seems to give me something I cannot find elsewhere. It has crossed my mind that a woman to love would suit me well. Forgive me, but I need something aside from duty, aside from the rest of you. I want someone for me."

"There is nothing to forgive. Be careful while you" -- he hesitated -- "explore your feelings. There are things you cannot speak of." She gave him a look of sufferance, and he bowed his head in apology. No. Tressa would not be that foolish. "I am proud to have you with me. I shudder to think of the life I might have left you to face and hope in time we can change things for other Azulite women."

Her face dissolved into an expression of mirth and delight. "I am just thinking of my father having apoplexy. If we can do this thing together, you will have served me well, and I will do my best to honour us both." She clutched his hand and kissed it. "Thank you." She looked into his eyes, hers simmering with what could only be happy tears. "Markis, as much as I hope to find true love as you have, I do want a child one day, and I want very much for it to be yours. I could not think of a better father. Thank you for this life. Thank you for sharing it with me."

## Chapter Twelve

"Did you have a written or verbal agreement?"

This was the fifth time Tressa had interrupted the plaintiff's diatribe. It wasn't so much that what he had to say was unimportant, but that he said too much of it. The man stopped, glanced at the queen, and then looked back at Markis as though seeking his advice. Markis sat and said nothing. He understood the man's surprise. His mother had often sat at his father's side as though she were a statue. As queen, his mother had stood on almost equal footing with her husband. All Swithin women did. People were only a little less in awe of her because she wasn't Shavar, the Comet. That fell to the king and his sons. Where his mother was concerned, her silence had mainly been a lack of interest and the fact that his father tended to forget and ignore everyone's opinion but his. His parents had loved each other in their way and just as well. No one but his mother would have had the grace to put up with his father.

So far, Tressa had shown she had a wise mind, and he had made a point of consulting with her before passing judgement. There might be times when he wasn't available, and he was happy to share this particular burden. He wanted Tressa to understand the people and their laws. He wanted a queen to make both his nation and him proud. So far, she had only slightly stumbled, and he had been on hand to correct any errors. In time.

Markis became aware that he frowned, and his expression was making everyone uneasy. He wasn't sure why, but he felt uneasy as well, and it had nothing to do with the proceedings. Tressa tilted her head towards him and whispered that the man was lying. She also told him why she believed so and he agreed with her reasoning. He took a moment to reflect, staring the man in his eyes as he did. He also used the time to try to decipher his emotions. His stomach was beginning to churn. In fact, he'd felt queasy for some time now, and he didn't know why. He was aware of his power and tapped into it quietly. That was undoubtedly the source of his discomfort, but he couldn't understand why. Even as he opened his inner vision, stars began to wink out as though they expressed an ill omen. He nodded in reply to Tressa's question as he tried to settle. Tressa turned her attention back to the now uneasy-looking man.

'May I offer you a word of advice?' she began. Her question stumped the petitioner. All he could manage was a nod.

'When you lie, it is best not to ramble on so. Too much information can be more telling than too little.'

The man paled before their eyes, colour leaching from his skin even as Markis watched. He couldn't keep the slight sneer from his lips. He had thought the man would put on a better show than this. There was a penalty for lying to the council. There were punishments from fines to more physical expenses, though Markis preferred not to use them at all and certainly as a last resort. This was not just kindness. He had always believed that it was best to use an excessive punishment wisely and rarely. The Swithin did not have a high crime rate, and whilst their justice system largely believed in an eye for an eye in extreme cases, they reviewed no felony without balancing it with a good blend of common sense.

'Why did you lie?' Markis asked calmly. Inwardly, he was starting to feel anything but calm and even wondering if he was coming down with some illness. He tried to concentrate on the petitioner. If he had good reason, Markis intended to fine him and have his business audited, but he would forgo the imprisonment and hard labour. The man was about to explain when the door to the council burst open. A guard with the rank of Sedryche stood in the doorway. He tried to enter more calmly than he had opened the door, stumbled, opened his mouth to speak, and finally got out, 'You have to come. It's'.

Markis raised a hand, silencing him. The comet flared, and Markis knew immediately what had brought the guard here, and why he felt unwell. Ryanac was dying. The very idea almost stole his breath and ability to think. He shook off the lethargy that stole over him. Markis, already standing, snapped a quick order as he hurried down the steps. Council closed for the day, and the claimant's future would have to wait. All he had room in his mind for now was Ryanac's fate.

\* \* \* \* \*

A gal'in already stood over the big man. The healer looked up as Markis reached the guard's side. 'We found this buried in his armour.' The healer held up a small dart. Markis recognised it immediately. Markis spared a glance at his friend's face and then looked at the healer, who shook his head. Clearly, the man had already decided Ryanac's destiny.

'Get Meira,' Markis snapped, knowing the source of the dart. He didn't know if he could heal what ailed Ryanac with the comet, and even if he could, knowing what the dart had introduced into Ryanac's system would help. Knowing the poison might help him seek out the affected organs quicker.

'Sardian'.

The voice sounded patient and patronising. He didn't look to see where the protest came from. He just shouted. 'Get Meira! Now!' He was aware of Tressa standing at his side, looking to his face, but he ignored her question for now. He had no doubt she wondered who Meira was, and she had good reason. He couldn't spare the time to explain. He gripped Ryanac's hand, and his friend's eyes flickered open. The gaze looked dim and distant. Coldness crept over Markis's skin. He looked up, scanned the room.

'Where's Uly?' People around him looked bewildered. They exchanged glances, looked around.

'Has anyone seen him?' Tressa enquired.

He was glad Tressa had asked the question. His voice would have wavered.

"Your pardon." Harton broke in on the assembly. He pushed them out of the way if they were too slow to move. "May I suggest we clear the room?"

It took Markis a moment to grow aware of an audience. The only thing that permeated what would have been an otherwise silent room was the sound of Ryanac's ragged breathing.

Pull yourself together. He balanced on the edge of panic, but he had to take control. Something existed in Harton's tone, more than the mere suggestion. He nodded, still not trusting his voice. When Harton had pushed the last person out of the room, including the healer, the guard closed the door and turned so he could lean against it.

"As you know, Uly and Ryanac were out with two braces this morning." A brace was a dozen men. They should have been safe. "There was an accident down at the western creek. The bridge had collapsed as the river was too full from the storm."

Ryanac had escorted Uly on another excursion so the young man didn't start climbing the walls. Markis had intended to take Tressa shopping in the city later. "Get to the point," Markis snapped.

"I will. There's time before Meira gets here."

"As long as she gets here in time," Markis replied. He hadn't meant to say that aloud, but no one mentioned it.

"A carriage had fallen in, and someone was trapped. The guards stopped to do the only thing they could."

He nodded in understanding. They had stopped to help.

"Ryanac," Harton paused. "I'm only guessing in part, but I know Ryanac, Uly, and two other guards turned back to warn those further down to stay away from the stream. The water was flowing so hard, it had eroded much of the embankment; it will need work to make it safe again. They couldn't spare more men, and I have to wonder if Ryanac didn't sense danger. He would have put Uly's life first."

Markis shook his head. "He would have tried to save the people." He said it, although he knew that wasn't entirely true.

"No." Harton took a step away from the door. "He protects you, and that means he protects what you love. He would have thought of Uly first, same as Antal would."

He had forgotten Antal. Glancing at him now, Markis could see the young man looked flushed. His gaze was all for Ryanac. He too had to be wondering what had happened to Uly. The only reason Antal hadn't gone with him was that Markis had told him not to. Things were still a little strained between Uly and Antal, and that was not a good thing between a person and his Sonndre, his protector. In addition, Antal, like any man, needed some time off. They had finally compromised, with Ryanac and Antal swapping positions for the day, acting as Sonndre to the other man's ward. Antal had stood at Markis's side in council. Uly had been with Ryanac. He should have been safe.

"What happened?" Markis hissed out between his teeth, asking the question to which only Ryanac could provide the answer.

A knock sounded at the door. Harton opened it and let Meira in, the other healer, so recently dismissed, scurrying in on her heels. He carried her bag, and Markis was certain it was Meira's idea rather than the healer's decision. He was aware of Harton speaking to someone through the

open door, but he turned his attention to Meira.

She was a tall woman, half Swithin, half Kita. No one trusted the Kita. The Kita had frowned upon Meira's father and his union with a Swithin woman. They had victimised the family, and eventually attacked the two lovers, dumping their bodies on Swithin land while the mother was fully pregnant. Somehow, she managed to stay alive until someone found her. She died, so the stories said, gasping out her story, explaining her plight to the Swithin guard who found her. The man took her hand and nodded to her. That nod told her to let go. She slipped away, and he cut the baby from her, bringing it into the world seconds after its mother's death. The Swithin retaliated. The Kita fled the border where their lands met, and Meira became Swithin. Some, though, could not forget what the Kita had done even if she had been the victim. For the Kita, such an act was all too common, and many mistrusted Meira by association.

Still, Meira had devoted her life to healing. She was the best healer Markis knew, but not all would trust her even though she helped run the treatment centre. She didn't even look at him, just went to the dying man on the table. Ryanac was dying right in front of them; Markis had no delusions about that. The ragged breathing had become little hitching gasps.

He wanted to use the comet to heal Ryanac, but he already knew this was poison and without knowing which one, he might do more damage than good. This wasn't like searching to seal a knife or arrow wound, and he had limited experience with using the comet to heal. Also Markis tried not think of the other problem facing him, but he was struggling to connect with the comet at all.

Meira took the dart. Her green eyes met his gaze for a moment, but she said nothing. Markis didn't expect her to speak unless it was necessary. When she focused like this, you could barely get a word out of her. Besides, she didn't need to say a word; that look was enough. The dart was of Kita origin and they both knew it. Meira dropped the dart into a solution she had emptied into a glass. She gave it a small shake, and then set it aside.

"Help me," she said, and slapped Markis's hand away as he went to help her. "Your hands are shaking too much," she told him. Harton and Antal moved forward and removed Ryanac's armour and some of his clothing. While they did, Harton spoke.

"The moment Ryanac arrived, they sent out patrols. They've just informed me that they intercepted a rider on the way here, one of those that went out this morning. They found bodies. The two guards are dead. There's no sign of Uly."

Markis wanted to show surprise, but he couldn't. He just nodded and watched as Meira used a knife to cut away the tunic to bare the big man's chest and shoulders. It took all Markis had not to giggle. He swallowed the wild hysteria, but she glanced at his eyes, and at once, he knew it had to show on his face. She shook her head. She pressed a hand to Ryanac's chest and then her ear, presumably to hear his heart beating. Standing up, she touched her fingertips to the sides of his face, and then pressed gently as she travelled down under his jaw and the sides of his neck. Her eyes gazed off to the side as unfocused as her patient's. A slight frown touched her brow.

"Turn him," she said. This time she made no objection when Markis helped. Ryanac was a large man. Right now, he was also a dead weight. Markis suddenly hated the expression with a passion.

Lifting the black and silver hair out of the way, Meira bent her head to examine the right side of his neck where it joined the scalp. This close, Markis could see her pupils narrow in concentration. Deftly, she plucked something small from Ryanac's neck.

"Damn, he's a wise man," Meira whispered softly. Markis frowned at her. She stood, nodding. "You can lower him now." She held up a second tiny, feathery object and looked to the others. "This is a

Kita dart," she explained before sniffing it cautiously and then setting it carefully aside. She looked at the solution in the glass containing the first dart. The liquid had changed colour. Meira frowned.

'How would you know that?' Harton asked. The question was nothing personal. Markis's father had never liked Meira, and it naturally made his guard wary.

'She would know,' Markis said. He made sure his tone told Harton to drop the subject and trust his judgement. Meira had no knowledge of her father's race, but she looked more Kita than Swithin.

Years ago, a Kita trapper had taken a fancy to her, and decided to change his choice of animal to hunt. She had been his prisoner for three days before they had rescued her. Markis was sixteen at the time. Meira had a couple of years on him, yet it was not the age of years that shone in her face. To look at her, one would have thought she was younger. Look into her eyes, and she looked older than her years. Meira had refused to speak of what the trapper had done to her. She also refused to speak of what she had done to the trapper, but he had been bruised and bleeding by the time they found them. Running, he had fallen into one of his own traps. What sent shivers up a man's spine was that the trapper had cause to run from Meira. The guards who rescued her had not bothered to bring the Kita man with them. Rumour was Meira had left him in his own trap. She hadn't spoken of it since, and Markis wouldn't bring it up now. He knew, and that was enough.

'It looks like a feather,' Tressa said.

'It is, of sorts,' Meira explained. 'Though it looks soft, it isn't. It would have felt like an insect sting. If Ryanac had slapped at it, he would have embedded it, and it would have killed him quicker.'

That was why she had called Ryanac wise. Markis didn't like her expression.

'So what's killing him?' Markis needed to know which poison before he could do anything. Her expression changed. She now looked resigned.

'Heart's ease.'

'That's impossible,' the healer pronounced in shock. Meira gave him a brief glance. Markis ignored the healer, was even about to berate Meira for wasting time talking to the man, when he noticed her hands had been busy all the while. She hadn't wasted a second.

'Are you going to argue about it, or are you going to help?' she snapped at the galin.

Markis stared at Ryanac with barely suppressed panic. Heart's ease came from the Yeda plant. Used in minimum quantities, it could help a heart condition and many other ailments. It calmed. It slowed things down. Too much of it, and it had the opposite effect. He could understand the healer's outburst. It would not be easy to administer such a drug without holding the patient down. To think they had done it with something resembling the smallest feather..

'His heart's working too hard,' Meira said, and it was only then that he realised she had been explaining the condition to Tressa as the small woman moved to follow her orders. Tressa would make a good daïmean. He would have laughed if the situation weren't so dire.

Ryanac's heart is working too hard, and it will kill him.

Markis looked at Ryanac's condition, truly looked at him. From the sounds issuing through his throat, Markis expected the man to look pale, but his skin displayed an unhealthy redness as though he had burned in the sun. The big man had to steal each breath, dragging it down into his throat. His lips possessed a blue tinge. Meira would do what she could, but there was little hope. Grief closed Markis's throat, made his heart stutter as though he too were poisoned. His eyes ached, but he refused the tears. He didn't have time to give in to them.

'Why?' Markis said. 'Why let him live long enough to get here, but not long enough to give me a message?'

'I think they already delivered it.' Meira didn't look up, just bent down, grabbed something from the floor, tossed it to Markis, and turned back to her patient in one smooth movement. He caught it without thinking. 'He had it in his right hand. He dropped it just now when we turned him.' Her green eyes flickered up to his face. 'Your Samir has blond hair, does he not?'

It still hadn't registered until her words confirmed it. He had seen it, but refused to accept. He stumbled, and Harton's hand caught him under the elbow, stopping him from going to his knees. The sight chased away his grief, his pain, his fear. He only felt numb. He was right in thinking he couldn't even feel the comet. That too had deserted him in light of this horror. Someone had Uly. Whoever that someone was had cut off that length of hair that Uly had finally managed to grow long enough to twine into a braid.

## Chapter Thirteen

'What are you capable of?'

Meira had sent everyone else from the room, or at least made the attempt. Aware Meira never did anything without a reason, Markis had ordered the rest to leave. He stared at her now, frowning. 'I don't know what you mean.'

She looked at him, her head tilted sideways. 'I saw Antal when he first came in mere days after having three arrows in him. Most believed he had been lucky. I don't believe in luck.' She advanced around the table towards him. 'I've always believed the comet was for more than destruction. I think your father did too, once. I think he saw the fact that he was never able to use it for more as some kind of betrayal, almost as though the comet had withheld its full potential on purpose. He couldn't bring himself to blame his own faults, accept his lack of strength or understanding. He might have been a different man, once.' She raised a hand as though she would touch him, and Markis took a step back. A small smile played over her lips.

'You're not meant to touch me without my permission,' he said. His voice held no power, but at least it didn't waver.

'As if I believe you'll put me to death for it.' She touched him, her fingers pressing into his neck over the pulse. She stood almost as tall as he did. 'I believe you are a different man. I believe you are what your father would have liked to be. I believe he never reached his potential.' Her gaze slid away towards her patient. 'I've done what I can. All it means is that he is dying slowly, instead of quickly. He is unconscious and will soon slip into a sleep he will never wake from unless you do what you can.'

Markis searched her expression while the thud of his pulse beat at his neck as though she held his heart trapped under her fingers. Ryanac had such a pulse. Everyone did. Ryanac's was fading even as they stood here. 'I healed Antal.' Even as he said the words, he knew he was taking a risk. Strangely, it wasn't Meira he feared, but the council. He didn't know who to trust anymore, but he had to trust someone. Why not someone with such an unlikely background?

'Why have you not tried to heal your Sonndre?'

'I'm not sure I can. It only seems to respond to unnatural deaths.'

'And you don't think being poisoned is unnatural?'



'I don't know.'

'What aren't you saying?'

Markis raised his gaze to the ceiling. "The comet save me from perceptive women."

'I have no sense of humour,' Meira told him. It was a warning, and he heeded it.

'I can't'. He struggled for a way to tell her. "I can't feel the comet." He looked at her then, right into her eyes. "I've tried. I can't feel it. It's like it's not there."

'It's there. You're just blocking it.'

Markis slapped her hand away from his neck. He could no longer stand the press of her fingers, the thudding sensation. It faded almost as though his heart had stopped beating. Perhaps, in a way, it had. "Why would I do that? If I could save him, do you think I wouldn't?"

'It's not your choice. It's your emotions.'

'My emotions usually bring the comet forth.'

"And what would that do? When you're upset like this?"

'It would be destructive.'

'So you're suppressing it. You have to let go.'

He shook his head, only to feel Meira's hands on him, shaking him. Her green eyes glittered with something that looked terribly close to anger.

'If you want him to die, then stand there feeling sorry for yourself. If you want to try saving him, then be the comet!'

\* \* \* \* \*

I hoped to see you here. The abyss swirled and glittered, full of wry amusement. What took you so long?

DONT START. THIS IS HARD WORK.

You're.?

HEALING YOU, YES. Relief and doubt danced with one another. DONT EVEN SUGGEST IT.

Ryanac thought otherwise. He believed he was dying, but along with the thought, there came the awareness that Markis knew everything he thought and felt. Almost instinctively, Ryanac tried to reach for reality. He couldn't find it. Alarm was the sharpest emotion in the abyss now. It even dulled Markis's grief. They hadn't done this for some time, but had learned to share minds during the two-week journey here to the city. Markis never expected or wanted to be sharing the abyss like this. He couldn't hide his fear.

Am I dead?

DONT BE AN ARSE. HOW COULD I BE HEALING YOU?

Give a dying man a break.

YOU'RE NOT DYING.

And you're a terrible liar.

YOU MIGHT NOT DIE.

Why can't I wake?

MEIRA SAYS YOU'RE IN A SLEEP YOU MAY WAKE FROM OR NOT.

Meira, huh? The amusement bled back in then went away just as quickly. I don't have time for this. I don't have time to lie here. I have to find --

ULY. I KNOW. Markis tried to clamp down on his despair, but he couldn't hide his pain. He couldn't lose them, either one or both. He would die inside. Ryanac wasted no time poring over his emotions.

I tried to hold out. I tried to stay awake to tell you what happened.

TELL ME NOW.

\* \* \* \* \*

The air possessed a cool quality the way it always did when one stood near free-flowing water. Ryanac scanned the surrounding trees as unobtrusively as possible.

"Shouldn't we help them?" Uly's voice broke in on his concentration.

Glancing at the river, Ryanac shook his head. "There's more than enough in the water already. We can't get close without shoving those already helping aside. We need to warn people to stay away from the embankment, and I want to get you away from here."

He could tell by the younger man's expression that he had understood him. Uly swallowed. "You think there's danger?"

"I'm not certain, but I'd rather be safe." He spoke only the truth, but some instinct told him that if he stayed with the greater number it would result in a large-scale attack, in more deaths. Something was wrong here. Ryanac wasn't sure the damage had only been caused by the weather. Who would have known they would be out here today? He wanted to ignore his suspicions, but he couldn't. Ryanac called out to a couple of the guards standing nearby. The four of them turned to the road. Some minutes later, the guard made a hand signal. Ryanac made one back. Uly frowned. He wouldn't know if it meant someone followed them, and maybe that was just as well. He hadn't started or shown his fear, giving Ryanac good reason to be proud, but he didn't know Uly's limit yet. He didn't know what would break the man's spirit or his nerve.

The skin on the back of Ryanac's neck prickled. The first rider didn't come from the back, but ahead. He tensed, even as he recognised the horse belonging to Kilan. The rider raised a hand in what seemed to be greeting, and then, in the distance, there arose the sound of a large commotion. Uly started; his horse lost its rhythm, making the young man fight the reins. The guard at his side had drawn his sword, but he suddenly yelped, slapped at his neck, flinched again, and slid from his horse. A stinging pain hit Ryanac in the side of the neck as the other man touched the ground, but he ignored it. He turned his horse to protect Uly, even as armed men rushed out of the woods. He managed to say, "We can take them," and then dropped his sword. Staring down at his hands in horror, Ryanac had to accept that they had no strength in them,

even as he fought it. He understood what the dart meant, but nothing he knew could work this quickly. He should have been able to fight long enough to send Uly on his way. He slid out of the saddle, hearing Uly call his name on the way to the ground.

He lay on his back, staring at the sky, the sound of the sea in his ears.

Not the sea. My blood.

Gritting his teeth, he pushed to his knees even as someone said, "Drop it." On hands and knees, Ryanac turned his head to Uly. They had cut the second guard down; the man lay in a pool of his own blood mingled with that of the two men he had taken down with him. Uly stood with a sword in one hand and the reaper blade Antal had given him in the other. Several men stood just out of his reach. Of the five, one man lay on the ground quietly moaning and another knelt much as Ryanac did, only cursing. Both bled. Ryanac was suddenly sure that Uly could take the other three, which left three at his back. Pity he wasn't in the running. A sudden trembling ran through his hands. Even if he reached his sword, he wouldn't be able to grasp it.

It can't end like this, with my not being able to help him.

"Drop the weapons, or he dies. He's dying right now while you delay us. If he gets back to the city quickly, someone might be able to help him. If he doesn't, the poison will kill him." The man speaking had a scarf over his face. He walked his horse forward to the first dead guard. "This one had more than twice the dosage. He's dead already. We're not going to hurt you. Just take you with us."

His eyes closed, and Ryanac blinked to clear them. He swayed, unable to help, using all his strength not to keel over in the grass. He managed to turn his head to look at Uly and made a small movement with his head, no.

Uly looked at him and then lowered his gaze and let go of his weapons, letting them fall to the ground.

"Help him up on his horse."

For a moment, Ryanac had thought they meant Uly, and then hands were lifting, pushing him. This close to, he wanted to get his hands on the men touching him, but he just didn't have the strength. He tried to cling to the horse and couldn't do that either. Someone bound one of his hands to the pommel of the saddle and wrapped the reins around his free hand so he couldn't let go. He just had time to turn his head to look to where Uly was now back in the saddle as well.

"One last thing," The man moved his horse next to Uly's. Reaching out, he gripped Uly's hair, making him gasp as he wrenched him to the side. The man laughed. "You call this a braid?" With his sword, he cut through it. Uly's eyes went wide. He lifted a hand to grab at the raw ends of his hair.

Anger, worse than the idea of being poisoned, flashed through Ryanac. That braid meant something to Uly. It had taken ages to grow. It wasn't just hair. It was a symbol of what he wanted to be and what Markis meant to him. These men had no right to take it. Someone handed the braid over and pushed it into Ryanac's hand. Somehow, he managed to close his fingers around it.

"In case you die on the way," someone said, laughing.

He swallowed around a tongue that felt swollen. His and Uly's gazes met. "I'll find you," he managed to say. Those grey eyes bore into him, cool and clear. Then Uly nodded.

"I know it," Uly said, and then someone slapped Ryanac's horse on the rump and sent it running.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Come on. Wake up!"

Markis had spoken aloud as well as within the abyss without meaning to. It hardly mattered. He and Meira still had privacy. The only person in the room with them lay under him. Aware Meira watched him more closely than he liked, Markis could do nothing about it. At first, he had sent a little of his power into Ryanac. The same way he had healed Antal, he had calmed Ryanac's heart. It wasn't enough. His friend had slipped into that strange sleep between death and life by then. If it hadn't taken him so long to grasp the comet..

No. Don't think about that. It wasn't his fault. If he was guilty of anything, it was having grown accustomed to the comet obeying him. Either that or loving too much. He had calmed his friend's heart enough that Meira had been able to administer another drug without it killing him. Together they worked on Ryanac, she with her medicines, and he with his power. He'd had it in mind all along to try to reach Ryanac through the abyss. So she watched him, and her expression revealed she knew something was happening even if she failed to understand it. In the end, he had stripped off most of his clothing and lain on top of his guard. It wasn't necessary, but skin-to-skin contact made this easier.

Are you lying on top of me?

He almost laughed in relief. YES.

Eye to eye, mouth to mouth, cock to cock?

He did laugh. Meira started and took Ryanac's hand as though to protect him from the crazy man.

Meira's holding my hand.

YES. CAN YOU WAKE UP?

Surprise shifted the stars, made them tumble. A little fear gave them a red tinge. The thought that he didn't have time for this turned them yellow.

WHAT? YOU DONT HAVE TIME FOR DYING?

I refuse to die like this. I'm not ready.

AND I'M NOT READY TO LOSE YOU, SO OPEN YOUR FUCKING EYES AND WAKE UP!

Ryanac struggled against something unseen. What is that?

It felt as though a weight clung to him. On the other side was an absence of weight, a lightness of being. Ryanac let the weight cling to him, but it eased up. He rose closer to the surface before exhaustion dug its claws in.

REST A MOMENT. Even as Markis waited with him, the king's mind wandered back to the look on Uly's face when he had tossed the blades down. He struggled to understand it.

Not resignation or surrender. Apology.

APOLOGY?

He couldn't stand by and let me die if there was a chance. Uly lowered his gaze in apology to me. I wanted him to fight and save himself. He couldn't do that.

NO MORE THAN YOU COULD DO FOR ME, OR I FOR YOU. Markis would give up his life for Ryanac or Uly. Ryanac would die for either of them. Now, it seemed Uly would do the same for them. IS THAT IT? ARE WE FINALLY COMPLETE? The irony that they could be whole now while one lay dying and the other under threat did not escape Markis.

Not yet. I have to keep my promise to him.

"You can't do that if you die on me!" He spoke aloud.

I heard you.

I KNOW.

In the abyss, Markis turned to look at Ryanac. His form shone with a sickly, green tinge. Blackness spilled from his mouth. Only one kind of blackness had a right to exist here, and that darkness belonged to the comet. Markis took hold of his friend's hand. When he told Ryanac to open his mouth, he did without hesitating. Markis sealed their lips together, sucked the black poison out. The comet didn't like it. Gold light rushed in and dispelled the darkness. Markis and Ryanac rose out of the abyss with a shout.

#### Chapter Fourteen

"Who would do such a thing and why?" Tressa ran her hands up and down Ryanac's arm as she spoke. She had taken to unconsciously touching him. They had sent Meira out of the room and called for Tressa, Harton, and Antal. Tressa was still acting as Meira's aide, and the larger woman's approving glances hadn't escaped Markis's notice. He just didn't have time to pay attention to them. Tressa glowed under those complimentary looks, though. Now, with Meira out of the room, Tressa appeared ashen as she turned her full attention to Ryanac. The big man's pallor had gone from red to grey, but he still managed to look better than when he had first opened his eyes. Markis watched the big man place a hand over Tressa's, bringing her movements to a halt. She looked down at him where he lay.

"I'm all right," Ryanac reassured her. "And thanks for asking me not to die."

She blushed, which made Ryanac grin at her despite everything.

"You heard that?"

"We all heard it," Markis said. When those in the room had been arguing or talking by turn, Tressa had held the big man's hand and begged him not to die. She had also pleaded and threatened him by turn. "Like he said. He's all right."

"I only wish we knew Uly was," Tressa grumbled.

"He is." Markis caught his guard watching him and looked away. "I'm sure he is."

Harton spoke up. "We have an old saying that no one dies until everyone has given up hope or hope is taken away from us."

The saying covered Markis's slip well enough, but that wasn't what he had meant.

"You're sure she's right, and this is a Kita dart?"

"Yes. I recognised it. It's the poison that's unusual."

"No Kita would do this alone. They're too broken up, disbanded. Someone trying to make it look like the Kita?" Antal's interruption was timely, and Markis couldn't help admiring the way the young man was managing to hold his nerve. Antal was clearly agitated.

"It's possible. Ryanac?"

"I'd like to say there was definitely a Kita amongst them, but I'd hate to be wrong. They weren't all Kita; there could have been one or two."

"The others?"

"Swithin."

Antal swore eloquently.

"They won't hurt him," Ryanac added. "They'll let you know what they want soon enough."

Markis nodded. "In the meantime, I think we should prepare your funeral." Ryanac raised an enquiring eye. "I don't want anyone outside of this room to know you're alive." That dark gaze stared at him. He didn't have to use the comet to know what Ryanac was thinking. The news would break Ditta's heart. He couldn't help that. Ryanac's mother would understand and forgive them, and if they survived this, he'd willingly withstand anything, even Ditta's wrath.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Any luck?"

Markis shook his head. "I can't do it."

"Maybe you're trying too hard," Ryanac suggested.

"Hardly."

To Markis, it felt as though they had wasted most of yesterday. All morning, council had taken up his time, and then he had healed Ryanac. Most of the night, they had talked. They had patrols and scouts out there, but so far, they'd discovered nothing. Ryanac was the best tracker they had, but Markis couldn't let him go out there. Besides, right now Ryanac couldn't track his own footprints, and Markis had told him so. The man had only managed to stand unaided in the last hour. Colour had started to seep back into his face, but occasional shivers wracked him. Markis wanted to be part of the search, but whoever sent a message would send it here. Markis had to stay where needed, and he required privacy to try to find Uly with a different method. He'd already made one attempt to find Uly by using the comet. That too had failed.

"I didn't want to leave him," Ryanac explained. "I knew you were the only one who might be able to save me. Alive, I could fight. I was too weak to stay, and I couldn't help him by dying."

"I know that. Are you trying to convince me or yourself?"

"You need sleep," Ryanac told him, obviously preferring not to answer.

Markis shook his head slowly.

"Yes. Lie down with me. Sleep with me. Just a couple of hours and then try again."

"I don't think I can."

"Me neither, but we should rest."

Even as he briefly closed his eyes, Markis became aware he could sleep. He would sleep. His body would have its way with him. He relented. He barely managed to walk over to the bed and fall onto it. Ryanac was a comforting line at his back.

"I nearly lost you," Markis whispered, fighting slumber. "I can't lose Uly. We can't touch peace only to lose it so quickly."

An arm slipped around him, pulling him into his guard's embrace. "I can't lose him either," Ryanac said.

\* \* \* \* \*

"We've found him."

Markis heart sped up in his chest, and then he realised they meant Kilan.

His youngest brother sat slumped in a chair. Meira already attended to him. He flinched as she touched him, but he clearly thought better of refusing. His left eye was swollen shut, and his face didn't look much better beneath it.

"He has a broken cheekbone," Meira pronounced.

"What happened?" Markis demanded. Kilan looked up at him with his one good eye.

"Someone hit me," he snarled. "Isn't it obvious?"

"What's obvious is that Ryanac and Uly saw you just before they were attacked."

"As I saw them. Then everything went black. I didn't have time to react." Kilan meant he'd had no time to draw on the comet or reach for a sword, but only Markis and Ryanac knew that. No one but they knew how far Kilan had advanced with control of the comet. "The next thing I know, I woke up halfway down the river, my coat snagged on something, and I had to shout for help for ages until someone pulled me out."

His speech emerged oddly formed. No one noticed how many muscles there were in the face until you had to move them when they were damaged. What Kilan said confirmed the reports, but innocent or guilty right now, Markis didn't care. "I don't have time to find out if you're telling the truth. I have to trust you. If you're innocent and I sound accusing, I'm sorry, and ask you to forgive me. If". He bent over until they were eye to eye. "If I ever find you had something to do with this, I will dig out your eyes, pull out your tongue, and personally feed them to you."

That one bloodshot eye stared back at him. "Fair enough," Kilan finally said. A hint of anger crept into his voice. "Bearing in mind I had nothing to do with it, I forgive you that threat." The anger eased. "I'd feel the same way."

"Would you carry out the threat, though?"

At the sound of Ryanac's voice, the young prince spun in his seat, and then jumped to his feet. "They're saying you're dead!" He winced even as he spoke.

'Let them say so,' Ryanac said. "Answer my question."

Kilan glanced at Markis. "I'm not sure I'd stop at the eyes and the tongue."

Ryanac's laugh bounded around the room. "I've decided I like him," he said.

'If you've finished bonding' -- Markis reached a hand out to his brother -- "I need your help."

Meira looked up in alarm. "He needs treatment."

'It can wait.'

'I can give him something for the pain.'

'No!' Markis glanced at the women, then at his brother. Kilan tried to frown, then winced again. The hand in Markis's grip tightened in reflex. Even that small gesture had to hurt. "I need your help," Markis said. "I need your strength."

## Chapter Fifteen

The air in the pool area was humid. Uly licked his lips, taking the moisture from his skin. He drank down a few droplets, but it only seemed to fuel his thirst. He looked at the blue, green, and white mosaics as he turned his head, reflecting on how beautiful and delicate the patterns were. It must have taken a long time for artisans to line the floor and the walls with the decorations.

A splash of water drew his attention. The movement of water sent shimmering waves of light dancing up the walls and over the ceiling. "Markis?"

"Come into the water, Uly. It feels wonderful."

Those dark brown eyes stared up at him. Where Markis's hair touched the water, it fanned out behind him, carried on the surface. He could see through the clear water. Water distorted the image, but Uly had no trouble making out the line of that glorious body. He slipped down into the water, grinning. Markis moved back to receive him. Uly waited for his hair to touch the water. He imagined it floating outwards, dark and pale tendrils entangling, even as he wrapped his body around Markis. The water entered his mouth, and he drank it down. Why was he drinking the pool water? Even as he had the thought, the water caressed the back of his neck, but not his hair. He reached up and touched the back of his head. His hair was shorter now than it had ever been, severed. He cried out.

'Looking for this?' Markis held up the braid in front of him. Uly screamed. The sound tore through his throat, and he winced with the pain of it.

HOLD ON, ULY.

Markis?

Opening his eyes, the room swam into Uly's focus. Dark panelled walls, dark beams, and no natural light all conspired to make Uly feel as though someone had buried him before checking to see if he had died. He ran a tongue along his lower lip and wished he hadn't. He'd not had a drink since he and Ryanac started out yesterday morning. He had once lived with hunger and even thirst, but he had never gone this long without a drink of some kind. Even his race had sense not to waste clean, fresh water. You learned to collect rainwater, drank from horse troughs, begged and stole it. He had stolen water rather than coin when he had needed it.



His lips were sore. They were going to crack shortly. His throat was one long line of soreness inside and out, not least of all because of the thick leather collar that held his head upright. When he moved his head, he could hear a faint clank of a ring at the back, probably hammered into the wood of the post. He wanted to swallow and struggled not to. It wouldn't help. It would only hurt.

He didn't know the men, didn't know what they wanted. They had strapped him to a post. Even unconscious, he couldn't fall. He had either slept or passed out.

Hurry, Markis. Find me.

Markis would do everything he could, but so would Ryanac. The big man had promised him.

\* \* \* \* \*

'Did you find him?'

'Not the location, but I touched his mind. He's alive and as well as he can be.'

Combining his and Kilan's power helped Markis focus. He was tired, though, and Kilan was in agony. He had finally let the young man have treatment. He wouldn't be any good for another couple of hours yet. What Meira had given him for the pain would interfere with what Markis needed him to do. When Meira asked why he hadn't helped Kilan to heal, Markis had told her the injury wasn't unnatural. This was partly true. While the young prince had obtained it because someone had whacked him, the injury was simply that and far from life-threatening. Whether or not he could heal it was questionable. In truth, though, as it was no threat to Kilan's life, he didn't intend to try yet, if he did at all. What they did when adding Kilan's power to his, and what he had done to speed up his young brother's learning, was similar to sharing the abyss. Healing was another form of intimacy. He had learned that the time he healed Antal, and he had no desire to share it with Kilan at present. He trusted no one but Ryanac right at this minute.

'I need to rest. Then I'll try later.'

'They'll be in touch soon.' Ryanac was probably right.

'They had better be.'

'You said he was as well as he can be.'

'He is.' Markis looked Ryanac in the eye. 'He's thirsty.' It sounded simple, but thirsty didn't cover it, and Uly's need for water would only grow.

\* \* \* \* \*

'Not going to ask who I am and what I want?'

Uly shook his head. The collar rubbed his neck as he did.

The man chuckled, but it had none of the warmth of Ryanac's laugh. The eyes were green, and they glittered. 'Why not?'

He didn't want to talk to this man at all, but the answer was too direct. His lips pulled apart painfully as he opened his mouth. 'I'm not the one you need to tell.' The words rasped out. The man laughed again, but made no mention of the raw sound. Uly didn't know how long he could go without water. He couldn't last as long as he could without food. He had gone past the hunger, glad no one had been in the room to hear his stomach growl. Somehow, he didn't think they would

have taken pity on him. More likely they would have found it amusing.

"You're right, of course." The man looked across the room to someone at his back and nodded. This wasn't the first time this had happened. Whoever it was, he or she never spoke, and Uly couldn't turn his head to see who it was.

"While we wait, let me introduce you to Tihea."

The door was at his back, together with the unseen accomplice. A rustle of garments announced another stranger. Uly didn't think he cared who it was, but the sight of the woman as she came into view couldn't fail to capture his attention.

She wore a long, tight-fitting gown. It had what he had come to learn, through tearing so many garments and annoying the palace seamstresses, were darts sewn at strategic places to make the garment fit to her curves. The outfit looked something like a cross between a dress and a robe now that he saw it more clearly, and the pattern was so bright that it caught the stray strands of sunlight that filtered through the roof.

Uly had thought the room deep underground, nothing more than a box, but he had been mistaken. Sometimes he could hear people walking overhead, as though they walked on nothing but boards, but he hadn't bothered trying to call out. This wasn't some city street. Last night, he had heard rain, and it had dripped into the room, even onto his head. He had wished it would rain harder so he could tilt his head and drink it, but he feared what it would do to the room. Would a heavy downpour turn the floor to mud or crumble the walls? This room was only just below the surface. He didn't entirely understand it though he had tried to. He would pay more attention later when he was alone again. In the meantime, the woman stood in front of him, her posture and gaze almost demure.

The pattern of her clothing was black, white, green, and deep pink. A green sash tied the garment at her waist. Under that gown, she had an incredible figure. As to her face, she was beautiful. Her hairstyle consisted of hard, straight lines that one might have called severe, but the darkness of it set off a porcelain white face. The eyes were the same green colour as the sash, deeper in colour than the man's were. The eyes were oval. As much as she looked like the man, she also seemed different.

"This woman is of my race. We train our women to one purpose. Well ~~two~~. We do need to procreate."

Uly tried to swallow and couldn't. Why bring her here? Uly didn't want anything to do with her. Something made him twitch away when she drew near.

"Don't do that. We don't wish to spoil the entertainment."

That was what he feared. The situation nagged at him. The only entertainment that would amuse this man would be something likely to upset someone else. Granted, Uly was upset enough, but he didn't believe the man cared what he thought of him. Like Uly's thirst, either it didn't bother the stranger or it served his purpose.

The woman undulated as she moved towards him. There was no other word for it. She knelt at his feet, her hands reaching up to unfasten his garments. He would have kicked her if he could.

"How long until the portal?" In whatever way the reply came, it happened in silence. The man nodded and glanced at Tihea. "Prime him."

What the.?

She licked her lips, not so much in seduction but to wet them. Her breasts stroked his thighs through the two layers of cloth -- her dress and his trousers -- and he could feel how full they were. Lifting his tunic, she nibbled at his stomach. He sucked in a breath and drew in his rib cage, but he had nowhere to go. Her hands lingered, trailing over his skin. Much to his dismay, he felt a response in obvious places. He longed for another's caress, but her movements were gentle.

Searching for a distraction, he heard a one-sided argument at his back and, as one person either couldn't speak or didn't want to, two sets of footsteps left the room. Uly took his chance. He glanced down at the woman.

'Don't do this,' he whispered. It hurt to speak, but he had to stop her.

Her eyes lit up in question. 'Why not?' She seemed genuinely puzzled.

'I don't want it.'

'It will bring you pleasure.'

Pleasure was the last thing on Uly's mind and he doubted he'd feel any such thing in his current condition. The woman genuinely appeared to be unaware of even this simple logic. 'That kind of pleasure I don't want.'

'Nonsense.'

He blinked. He hadn't expected that response. 'You do get that I'm captive?' Her eyes held no warmth and even less understanding. 'Do you even like me?' He didn't know why he asked, but he could think of nothing else to say.

'I serve my purpose.'

Uly lay his head back against the post. What kind of people had caught him that they trained women to be like this?

\* \* \* \* \*

'How can you be so calm? Sometimes, I swear you don't have feelings. How else can you find everything so bloody amusing?'

The big man turned his head slowly. He still looked calm, placid almost, but there existed a hard line to his jaw that Markis recognised. He had just pissed Ryanac off, and Markis at once regretted his words. He lowered his head in shame and apology. Ryanac spoke quietly.

'I'll ignore that because I know you're having a hard time sitting still and waiting. You're going to have to trust my word that I am anything but calm.'

'Boys.' Tressa took a hesitant step forward. Ryanac shot her a look that stopped her in her tracks. It took her a moment, but where she didn't seem able to approach them physically, she let her voice carry. Spreading her hands as though to show she held no weapon, she said, 'We are not the enemy. The enemy is not here in this room.'

Ryanac snorted. Only the three of them were present. Markis frowned. 'First, my apologies. Second.' He shrugged in apparent helplessness. Ryanac stared at him for some moments before he spoke.

'I let him down.'

Markis opened his mouth to argue, but didn't get a chance.

'I let him down!' the big man insisted, pushing away from the wall where he leaned. 'We keep falling into the same trap. We think we're safe on this land because we always have been.'

'We've been careful.'

'Not careful enough.'

'Do not even suggest Uly should not have gone out that day,' Tressa interjected. 'I am used to a life spent mostly indoors, but Uly is not. He did nothing wrong. You did nothing wrong.'

'I don't know.' Ryanac paced, running his fingers through his hair. It swung freely, the ends brushing his hips, and Markis thought of the coil of pale hair he'd put in his pocket. Uly's hair would grow, but it would take time, and in cutting it, they had taken something from him. Ryanac came to a stop.

'I failed him, and in that I failed you.' Something in his tone made Markis stare. He had never heard the big man sound so lost. He stood there, one arm across his body, gripping his other arm at the bicep, that arm bent up, the hand reaching to clasp and rub at the back of his neck. The position made Ryanac look huddled, tight, wound. 'I thought the worst thing I could ever feel was if you died because I failed you. Now I know there're things equally worse.'

'I don't blame you.' Markis took a step forward just as Tressa had, but the look in his friend's eyes stopped him. His foolish, impatient tongue had run away with him in fear, and now Markis regretted the words that had started this, even if Ryanac claimed to dismiss them. 'You nearly died. I'm not going to blame you for being poisoned.' To his horror, those dark eyes turned bright, started to glisten. Ryanac was trying not to cry.

'I should have stayed down at the river. I should have.'

'Why did you leave?'

'People needed warning, and it didn't feel safe.'

'I've learned to trust your instincts. You don't know what might have happened if you had stayed.'

'Something dire?' Ryanac laughed, but it held no humour.

'The slaughter of innocents, maybe. I know you followed your instincts for good reason. Maybe they would have killed all the guards with these darts, farmers, women, and children. The position was vulnerable. I would have made the same decision. Right now, Uly's alive, and you survived. I'm sorry for the men that died, but not as sorry as I could be. I'm glad it wasn't more.'

Ryanac closed his eyes and then opened them again, jerking slightly. It had been a mistake; the gesture of closing his eyes had caused the tears to fall. In another part of the suite, someone knocked. Harton would answer it, but Tressa, perhaps overcome with shock at seeing Ryanac cry, said she would go and walked away. It left the two men alone for the moment.

'If Uly's hurt like this before his time, you'll die inside, and it won't be something I can fight. That's not something my skill with a sword can rectify. You'll hurt, and I'll feel the pain of you hurting, but more than that' -- Ryanac looked up, clearly not even trying to hide the misery on his face -- 'I'll kill me too. I don't want anything to happen to him. I never thought anyone would be as important to me as you are, but you're together now. I can't separate you, not in my head, not in my heart'.

Two quick strides closed the distance. Markis took Ryanac's face in his hands. They touched

foreheads, sharing the space, the air between them warmed by their bodies and their breath. "You know what you mean to me. Losing you like this would have killed part of me, too. You survived for me, and Uly still lives. Don't let whoever has done this win."

Ryanac finally gave a soft laugh. "To think we wanted this."

"Samir," Markis said with a snigger. "I'm beginning to hate that word."

"It's Meira." Tressa interrupted them.

Pretending that Ryanac had died had left no reason for the healer to stay. However, as Meira insisted she would need to check in on her patient, Tressa had said she would call for the woman with the pretence of feeling unwell. In some ways, Tressa's small build worked in her favour. Many took it upon themselves to assume she was weak and frail. For her to say she needed help due to the stress of the situation would fool most people.

Markis looked to Ryanac's face to check he had regained his composure. He nodded.

"Shall I bring her in?"

"I'll go out to her."

That made Markis smile. He leaned in. "The comet forbid you should show a sign of weakness."

"Fuck you," Ryanac whispered.

Markis forced his smile wider and was glad it only took a little effort. "One day soon," he replied, gratified to hear Ryanac groan.

## Chapter Sixteen

"You should be in bed."

"I'm not keen on going to bed alone. Unless you're making an offer."

Meira gasped and pulled back a little. She looked genuinely shocked. She glanced at Markis. "Is he always like this?"

"Worse. And don't knock it. I'm grateful for it. It means he's getting better."

Now it was Ryanac's turn to look at him with a shocked expression.

"I meant it," the healer said, returning to the subject of bed.

"Look, I know I owe you, and I thank you for helping to save my life, but I know when to lie down and when to move. I've been resting. I need to get this stiffness out of my joints." Ryanac rolled his shoulders as he said this. Any other time, Markis would have admired the movement. He still did, but his heart wasn't in it. Even so, he wasn't the only one noticing the play of muscle under the skin. To watch Ryanac move was almost mesmerising. He opened his mouth to make another joke because the situation called for it, and they needed it, when everyone in the room, including him, stopped whatever they were doing and turned their heads, gazing around. Markis's skin itched.

"What is that?" Meira was the first to ask.

'I'd say it was the comet, but' Ryanac looked at Markis in question. He could only shake his head. If he had lost control, it might have felt like this, but he hadn't even opened himself to the abyss.

'I'm not doing it,' he said, realising that the words were to confirm it to himself as much as anyone else. The golden light sparkled in his eyes, making him think he had been mistaken, until he realised he could see it in reality. Suddenly, he knew what was coming. 'Ryanac, hide,' he hissed, but the big man was already moving and had apparently worked out quite a bit of that stiffness. It was always a wonder to watch such a large man move so lightly and easily when he had to. He slid behind a piece of furniture, taking Meira with him, pressing her against him and a hand to her mouth as he did. Antal emerged from another part of the suite, apparently having felt the approach of something.

'Harton's guarding the door,' Antal said even as Markis shot a look at him. He gave a slight shake of his head, and Antal stopped short, standing at the edge of the door, waiting. With Tressa standing at his side, Markis turned to face the portal as it opened.

\* \* \* \* \*

She kissed, licked, and nibbled his neck. She had also pinched and scratched. At first, Uly had given her no response, but her lips were soft, and her tongue active. Under other circumstances, he had no doubt her technique would work, but he doubted he would remember her. Her unwanted attention made him squirm. His rapid pants came from frustration rather than arousal and only served to hurt his throat, yet he welcomed the pain now.

'Ease off.'

Uly hadn't heard the man return so, taken by surprise, he jerked in his bonds. The woman obeyed the order. She ran a finger up the inside of Uly's thigh, stroking lightly. So far, none of her caresses had been intimate. Uly only hoped she kept them that way. He turned his head aside as much as the collar would allow. She knelt, staring up at him in obvious puzzlement, which perplexed Uly in turn. He wasn't sure what baffled her. He wasn't even hard, but if that weren't due to his dehydration, then he wouldn't be happy about this in any case. He was glad his body failed to respond. His trousers pooled at his ankles, but his tunic was long enough to leave him some dignity. Whatever this was, whatever they trained this woman for, he couldn't call it sex. It didn't even feel like ravishment. He didn't want her, but he didn't particularly care either. If she had tried to put him inside her, it would have been another matter, but he saw her as an orifice. If she had been soft and animated like Tressa, he could have felt something for her, but this woman was so distant she didn't even seem real.

Uly could have let the moment pass and not cared if the wall in front of his eyes hadn't wavered. He stared, quite forgetting the woman now on her knees, as a bright gold spot appeared. Then it grew. As it expanded, his eyes grew wider. Beyond he could see a white room sectioned off by partitions made of elegant fretwork. A man turned, cried out. Beside him, a little at the rear, there stood a small woman. Uly closed his eyes against the sight of Markis and Tressa.

\* \* \* \* \*

It took all Markis had not to focus his gaze on Uly, or the woman kneeling at Uly's feet. He made himself stare at the man standing in the foreground. On the outside, Markis remained calm. Inwardly, he panicked. Even in a brief glance, Uly looked tired. He struggled in his bonds, making a futile effort to get free. It pained Markis that Uly should turn his head aside, as far as the collar around his throat would allow, as though in shame. Tressa drew in a very deep breath. Markis could hear the passage of air through her nose as she breathed in. Anger radiated off her in waves. He didn't even need the comet to feel that.

The man was Kita, but no surprise there. Markis could see no others in the room, but he suspected someone hovered just out of sight, and he now knew whom. Only someone who could control the comet could create something like this. He could see little of where they were keeping his Samir, alas. The portal extended only as far as they required. Still, he tried to take in every detail he could without making it too obvious.

"What do you want?" he asked.

The man laughed, and Markis would have liked to say the sound possessed bitterness, but that would have given it more emotion than the laugh actually contained. "Do you get that from this one" -- the man jerked his head in Uly's general direction -- "or he from you? Direct, to the point."

"It's a common enough trait in men of action."

"Action?" The Kita sneered. "You fool yourself. This naive young man will never be more than a lay, and I suspect a complacent one. Like all Swithin, you let your cock rule."

Seeing as the very existence of this portal proved this man was conspiring with someone Swithin born and raised, the accusation was a clumsy attack. "Our hearts rule our cocks. Your assumption is a common mistake." As for naive and complacent, Markis wanted to argue with that. Uly wasn't naive, just hopeful and optimistic. Many mistook him for innocent when he was anything but. As for complacent, well, up until recently, this man had a point, but not anymore. An image of the other night, lying back under the young man's hands while Uly took what he wanted, shivered through the king. He struggled not to shiver in reality. The man would mistake that as a sign of weakness when it was pleasure only. Besides, Uly did not give in easily. He had witnessed firsthand from Ryanac's eyes the sight of the two men Uly had sliced open, one of them at least terminally. Uly had his first kill and probably didn't even know it.

"Weakness," the man muttered, meaning Markis's reference to hearts and, therefore, love.

"Another common mistake." Tressa spoke this time.

The Kita glanced at her. "You have this female. She looks like a good orifice." He jerked his head, indicating Uly. "Why do you prefer this one's hole?"

This time, Markis struggled not to smirk. It would take more than a few insults to upset Tressa. Her expression had changed, but not to one of anger. She looked at the Kita with open disdain, and the man didn't like it. He looked ill suddenly. Tressa's expression was not enough for him to take it out on Uly, though. This man wanted something, and Markis intended to keep that foremost in his mind. The kidnapper was unlikely to lose composure over mere words either, unless they were particularly taunting. "It is not a person's body that makes them important to you. It is the person inside the shell. It would take too long for me to explain it to you, and even then, you wouldn't understand."

"Using that philosophy, what would you do if I damaged the shell? Would you still love him?"

If he said no, the man wouldn't believe him, so Markis said the only thing he could. "Yes."

"Shall we test the theory?"

Markis dithered only slightly, quickly recovering and swallowing the flash of panic. For an instant, he faced the fear that the man might actually start cutting on Uly even though it was unlikely at this stage. This was just delivering a message. Actually carrying out any threats would likely come later, if it came at all. Markis meant his word. He would love Uly no matter what, but that wasn't the point. This man had no right to threaten to disfigure or kill someone. The king vowed silently that this Kita would never get to threaten anyone else. Markis gave himself a mental pat

on the back by managing to sound lazy, even bored.

"You waste our time. What do you want?"

The man smirked. "The book."

Markis almost blinked, and then struggled to hold the man's gaze so that his eyes began to water and sting. He paced a little to hide the fact he needed to blink, and rearranged his expression. "There are many books in the Swithin library."

The man just sighed. "And there are books that aren't."

Well, he had known it wouldn't work, but he'd had to say what the Kita expected. "When and where?"

"You give in so easily?"

Knowing this type of man, Markis took a wild but knowledgeable guess. "I'm sure you know I don't, but I assure you I will if I have to. I can see neither of us has the patience for this."

"Not the patience perhaps, but I was looking forward to baiting you."

"You've done that."

The man shook his head. "You're weaker than I thought."

"What some consider weakness, others consider strength. Think what you will. When and where?"

"I'll let you know. I think we'll keep Uly for a little while. He might even grow to like our form of entertainment."

\* \* \* \* \*

Uly had listened to the conversation, but he wouldn't look. He wouldn't! He turned his head, pressed it into his shoulder as far as the collar would allow. It hurt to do so, but he wouldn't look. Even when a hand roughly jerked his head back to the front, he refused to open his eyes.

"If you don't open them, I'll burn them out."

Not doubting the man's word, Uly opened his eyes, but he gazed off to the side, not wanting to look at Markis.

Don't touch me. Don't touch me. He now understood why the man had brought the woman here, as another way to hurt Markis. He heard her shift at his feet and waited to feel her touch. He didn't want Markis to see her touching him. He couldn't stand it if..

"Uly."

At first, his name failed to register.

"Uly."

He didn't want to look, but something in that voice called to him. Markis sounded so calm; curiosity made Uly glance up from beneath the unruly strands of his fringe. The king walked forward, surely drawing closer to the portal. He looked tired, and it pained Uly to know he was the cause of that. It also made him feel warm inside. His cock twitched, and it had nothing to do with



Tihea's hands on his thighs. She hadn't started to do anything to him yet, but her tongue flicked out to touch her lips in what looked to be anticipation. Markis stared, but Uly couldn't hold his gaze. Then Markis made the shape of a V with two fingers. He pointed them outwards to Uly, and then turned them around as he brought his hand to his face in front of those dark, chocolate brown eyes. The gesture was almost universal: look this way, your eyes to my eyes. Markis stared and Uly looked back at him. From the corner of his eye, he could see his captor frowning.

Markis smiled. "If she touches you, imagine it's me. If you need to spill, then do it for me. Let me see you."

Uly's response was unexpected and immediate. He became acutely aware of the dingy room, of the ties that bound him, of the woman. Undoubtedly, if he were not so dehydrated, her methods would usually work if the man gave the order, but undoubtedly this man didn't care whether Uly grew hard or not. Tihea's purpose was to cause humiliation, but the shame of what his captor might order the woman to do to him slipped away. Right now, as far as Uly's heart was aware, Markis was the only one with him. He could see Tressa looking regal, standing straight and proud, and no doubt hiding the fact that her stomach churned. The set of her lips gave away her anger but only because he knew her so well. Even so, even she didn't matter. Nothing mattered but that smile, that dark gaze, and the intelligence, the knowledge shining out of them. They were alone. It didn't matter how many people stood around. He and Markis were together. Maybe that was why Markis hadn't broached the subject of marriage. Maybe he didn't need to. Uly was willing to believe that nothing could bind them tighter than they were now.

Reality rushed in only when the man moved in front of him, breaking the vision. A hand came down, aimed at the woman, and he slapped her away. She fell back. Thankfully, the tunic was long enough to cover Uly, though he didn't care one way or the other right now.

"I've killed your guard. You think I won't kill this one?"

The words shattered what little peace Markis had given him. Ryanac couldn't be dead. Uly stared at Markis, making a slight movement of denial with his head. It couldn't be true. To his dismay, Markis looked away, and grief welled up so suddenly, Uly had to bite his lips to keep from crying out. Tears stung his eyes, and he fought them; he didn't have enough moisture left in him to cry and besides, he would grieve another day, when he had made the man who had done this pay.

"You think to gain my obedience by trying to humiliate us," Markis said, "but we are above that."

"You think so?"

Markis stared at the man. "What one does to the flesh does not have to taint the spirit. A body can suffer abuse, be destroyed, but that is your shame. It does not belong to the person who suffers at your hand."

Uly had to wonder if this line of conversation was a wise one, but he needed to trust that Markis knew what he was doing. Even as he thought this, Markis's voice hardened. "You hurt Uly, and I'll destroy the book if I have to, before I let you have it. You hurt him, and I will use it to hunt you down to the end of my days."

"And then you'll kill me. Yes, I understand." The man said it as though it were unimportant.

"No," Markis said, and something existed in the way he said it that made even Uly feel cold. "I won't kill you. I'll make sure you live." Somehow, he made that offer sound worse. The kidnapper hesitated, and then he grinned, though he looked sickly.

"We understand each other then."

"Yes. Uly." Markis replied to the other man, then called for his attention. "Is there anything you require?"

The sudden question confused him, but he struggled to pay attention. He required his freedom, but aside from that..

"I'm sure you would like a bath, but I doubt he will grant us that. Is there anything else?"

"Yes." Uly had almost shaken his head but then remembered. If his legs were free, he would have kicked himself. Markis had mentioned a wash. Had the pool been only a dream then, or had Markis sent him a message? "Water. I'm thirsty."

"If he dehydrates or starves."

The man waved a hand in irritation. "I'm sure you're going to specify."

Markis smiled. "You do understand me. Plain, clean water; no meat, nothing rotten. If you feed him something that makes him sick, I'll take that as unkindly as if you didn't feed him at all."

Uly frowned, wondering why Markis had told them not to feed him meat. Then he remembered the insects Ryanac had shown him in the forest, and he understood the specifications. Of course, that brought forth the memory of that day in vivid colours. He would never see Ryanac again, and as the portal faded, he barely managed to hold on to a last glimpse of Markis.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Kilan?"

"No." Markis paced, aware of five pairs of eyes in the room watching him, grateful they could talk without hindrance due to Kilan's absence. Harton had intended to escort the healer out, but she had asked to stay, and Markis had allowed it. He trusted her, mainly because his father never had. Perhaps not a good enough reason, but he preferred his instincts. Ryanac made no dispute of her presence; they might have use of her skills, and she had seen too much already. Best they kept her close. She also seemed to offer Tressa some comfort, and he was aware of how Tressa must feel, surrounded by so many large men. Meira kept glancing at Ryanac until Tressa looked at her. Meira stared back. At least it took her mind off Ryanac. The woman had slapped at him as they rose from behind the couch. Apparently, he had pressed her to his naked chest all the while, and Meira didn't appreciate a hand over her mouth. She had told him in no uncertain terms she would have bitten him if not afraid he would yell. She was not a child, she said, who didn't know when to be quiet. Hiding was the right time for such a thing. As far as everyone outside of this room was concerned, Ryanac was dead, and that was to their advantage. They had hidden from those on the other side of the portal.

Markis's "no" had been in reply to Ryanac's question over whether Kilan was involved.

"Then Mairtin."

"Yes."

"Is there any way to find out if he's where he should be?"

Markis sniggered. "Not without him knowing I'm looking."

"Not that it would make a great deal of difference."

"No, but it's a waste of resources. It would prove nothing, and I cannot openly accuse him."

Meira looked at all their faces in turn, then at Markis. "Forgive me, but am I the only one missing something? What was that thing?"

He didn't need anyone to speak to know some of the others felt wary of her question. He didn't have time to calm them, to soothe prejudices his father had once demonstrated. "It's a portal. Only one who has the power of the comet can do such a thing."

"Not even then without access to certain knowledge. You can't afford to be wrong." Ryanac's statement dropped into the conversation like a stone.

Markis shifted his gaze to his friend. For the first time since he was poisoned, Ryanac looked like ~~well~~, like Ryanac. He had a bright determination in his eyes that Markis only noticed now because it had so recently been lacking. This was the spirit of the man, and he was glad to see it returning. Only four people had looked at the book since Uly had stolen it for him. That included him, Ryanac, Uly, and Kilan. Without the book, no one would know such a thing was possible.

"It didn't feel like Kilan's energy. I can't say it felt like Mairtin's. I don't know what he feels like." He gazed at the sea of questioning faces. Only Ryanac knew what was going on. He sighed. "Don't interrupt me. There's a book I shouldn't have, according to certain sources. I've learned a lot from it, mainly how to control the comet and what the power is truly capable of doing. That includes a certain amount of healing, though I prefer to keep that secret. The type of damage I can heal varies, and it takes its toll on me. So far, I've used it ~~selfishly~~. For personal reasons."

Meira shrugged. "Any healer has to make a choice who to save sometimes. Mostly we try to do it objectively, rationally. Between a younger man and an older one I loved, I'd save the one I loved. Where is it written that Shavar stops being human?"

Smiling at her, Markis nodded in gratitude. He noticed Tressa smiling at the taller woman.

"Stargazer?" Ryanac just had to ask, but he was right. Everyone in this room had a right to know.

"It's so obvious I'd like to be mistaken, but I know he's involved in this. He's the one I took the book from," Markis admitted to the others. "He also spent a great deal of time with Mairtin while I was at the academy, until my father sent him to oversee my training with the comet. There's no knowing what happened during that time."

"Why should such a man have the right to keep a book about the comet from Shavar?" Harton enquired.

"My father never saw such a book?" Markis believed not, but Harton's question prompted him to ask.

Harton hesitated, and Markis took it that the man felt more than a little annoyed with the idea of Leraï possibly having kept secrets from him. "If he had, I'm sure he would have healed your mother."

"As I said, the power varies. It might not have been possible." Probably not, as her death was one of illness, but he hadn't the heart to explain or the time to try. Even knowing he would fail, Markis would have tried.

"If Stargazer has a hand in this, we should question him," Meira said.

"We should, but we can't."

"We cannot?" Tressa looked at him.

'Not without proof.' This was the first time Uly's Sonndre had spoken aloud. Antal was older than his years.

Markis sighed. "If I accuse him, I have to admit to taking the book."

"You would do that for Uly, though," Tressa said.

'I would, if it would do any good. Stargazer will use it as an excuse to retrieve the book and tie everything up in argument for days. That won't get me Uly's safe return.'

'He'll have to admit to keeping it from you.'

'What would that matter if others on the council already know?' Markis was aware he sounded bitter. "As I believe a very few do. Then those that don't will waste time arguing with those that do. I believe Stargazer convinced his followers that what they do, they do for Shavar's own good. Someone convinced them when my father ruled, and the same thing obviously happened to his father before him. No one man should have the power I have, not truly. No one man should have the power to dictate and dominate the rest of the council, but I believe Stargazer does. He at least rules them enough to delay things, and that I cannot afford. If I take him into custody, it will upset them. Mairtin no doubt knows I'm aware of his part in this. That's why he provided this little demonstration. I cannot let my suspicions delay things. Mairtin would know that. I can't do anything that would impede his wishes. I can't do anything that will throw light on the book. Not yet. That's why he took Uly. This is his delay, his way of forcing me to wait, to risk no more than a normal search and keep my accusations quiet until the book is out of reach and I have no proof."

'I would exchange the book and then use the comet to kill him.'

This was the first time Tressa had said something that sounded remotely stupid, even if he did appreciate her reasoning. "How can I do that? I have no wish to kill my brother even if I don't particularly like him, unless he forces me to it. Once accomplished, even the Swithin will look to their Shavar for an explanation. Without one, I will have committed a crime. The only way I can rule as a criminal is to rule by force, and I will not do that."

"You would hand yourself over? How can they punish a man with so much power?"

'By death.'

"You would let them kill you?" Tressa looked completely perplexed. "Surely a man who could stop such a thing and still let it happen would be too good a man to commit such a crime in the first place?"

"Your thinking would give some people pause. Others would view it as remorse. But no. I'd not give up my life. I would have to leave, go into exile. I would not go willingly, although --"

'We would go with you,' Ryanac interrupted.

'I know.' Yes, Uly and Ryanac would follow him. They would have little choice, but that's not why they would follow him. The idea was even tempting. Markis ignored the teasing amusement in the big man's eyes. He spoke to his wife. "You see now what having one man with so much power does to the people he rules over? The people love Shavar. They also fear him."

"Then they do not know you."

She said it with such assurance that Markis gaped. The compliments were coming thick and fast today. He looked around at them all and saw faith, trust, and love, in various proportions.

'Why keep a book you never intend anyone to read?'

'For historical reasons,' Antal murmured in answer to Meira's question. 'Or because you're waiting for the right person you think is fit to read it.'

'If Stargazer thinks that man is Mairtin, he's crazy.' Ryanac met Markis's gaze. 'I've read some of it, and you're the only man I know I would trust it to.' Markis had never received such a direct compliment from Ryanac in front of so many others. His face felt warm. 'I hate to say it, but in a peculiar way, Stargazer is right. No Shavar should have the book without others to guide him.'

'Which is what the council was for.' Antal sounded suitably angry and disgusted.

'You'll hear no argument from me.'

Antal looked from Ryanac to Markis. 'So the comet can do other things, like the portal.'

'Yes. I've never tried it, though I've read the passage.'

'Can you step through it?' Antal sounded hopeful.

'No. It's not an opening. It's more like an image sent long distance from one mind to another. I'm not even sure it would work without a Shavar at either end.' This was the reason he knew the person involved had to be Mairtin, for Kilan was here in the palace.

'Bugger,' Antal remarked. 'I was hoping we could gain some advantage.' He looked up, clearly startled when Markis laughed.

'There is something I can tell you.' The king lifted his head, his gaze wandering over the ceiling, although that wasn't where he looked. 'Uly is not that far away.'

'Be more specific.'

He should have known to expect that remark from Ryanac. 'I can't. Not yet.'

'You might be able to, though?'

Much of this conversation had to be lost on most of them in the room, but to their credit, they only asked pertinent questions, which meant hardly any. Markis would tell them what to do, and they would do it. 'Given a few quiet moments, I'm certain of it,' he replied.

'Then you shall have it,' Tressa stood up. 'I will talk to the council and tell them that during this difficult time, I will see any petitioners, and even council members will have to come through me to see you. Any disputes I cannot deal with, I will set aside to await your advice. I will keep everyone away from you. Markis, you will locate Uly, and Ryanac will rescue him. He will take Meira and Harton with him. I am sorry, Antal.' She turned her gaze to the young man. 'I know you want to go, but it will be too obvious. I also need someone by my side to make certain the council takes me at my word. You may be young,' she said, as if she were not young herself, 'but I am certain you can do it. If this Kita gets in touch again, Markis will bargain with him and make it appear as though he is doing everything as they wish it.' She turned back to her husband. 'That is the plan, is it not?'

Markis gaped, and then closed his mouth with a snap. 'Ryanac is too sick.' He said the words without thinking. Ryanac swore softly, but clearly enough for all to hear. His eyes were bright.

'I promised him,' he said meaningfully.

"You need time to recover."

"Time we do not have," Tressa reminded him. "That is why Meira will go with him and Harton as his second sword."

"Ryanac is Silas," Antal added. "No man can navigate the woods as he can."

"How do you know he's in the woods? I haven't even located him yet," Markis said. Antal rolled his eyes at him, and shared a glance with Ryanac. They clearly knew something he didn't. It made Markis feel insignificant.

"Didn't you hear the birds singing?"

He hadn't. He had tried to pick up something, but all he had seen was a dirty room with Uly trapped in it. It had taken Markis some time to realise that it reminded him of a vague dream he'd had some weeks ago. Now, he needed some quiet time to recall it. He had no idea if the comet had tried to warn him. It had never shown him anything to do with the future before, but someone had to write the Swithin prophecies. He couldn't entirely trust what he had dreamed, but neither could he ignore it.

"He's right," Ryanac remarked, looking at him but giving nothing away in his expression. "I couldn't see much, but I could hear."

"I also noticed the shadows," Antal said

"Shadows? Why do I feel stupid for asking?"

"People walked above. When they did, earth rained down like snow."

"The walls were soil!" Realisation crept over Markis insidiously. "Damn. The ruins."

"Which ones?" Ryanac asked him. There were at least ten such places in the woods, scarred from time and battle, where the Swithin had grown in population and moved on eventually to build the city. They had left the ruins to history. "We still need you to locate him. If we try to mount several rescues at once, they'll see us coming and move him, or worse. That's another reason I have to go and go alone."

"With Meira and Harton," Tressa said.

"All right." Ryanac spared her a quick glance. "They think I'm dead. They won't see me coming."

"Won't Harton's absence from council seem strange?"

"With me dead, they'll think you've taken him on as temporary Sonndre."

Of course. Markis would have seen that if he'd stopped to think. He was missing many things, but his audience had the grace to keep quiet and grant that his thoughts were in turmoil. "I can't just sit here while you all go to save him." He sighed. "But I have to."

"You have the hardest part," Ryanac told him. "You have to wait and do nothing."

"It's just as well," Markis remarked. "I'm too distraught. I might make a mistake. Bantering with the Kita when he contacts me, I can do. You all prepare. I'll locate Uly."

"One more thing," he said as they all hurried to obey. "If it is Mairtin, he's not after Uly. He's after me."

It's not just the book he wants. He knows I won't hand it over without Uly in exchange, and even if I have him back I'll hunt down whoever did this. He wants something else in this. There's something he hasn't given away yet. Ultimately, I believe he'll have control over me, or he'll see me dead. It's the only thing that makes sense. He'll try to take control first, though."

"Why?" Tressa asked

"I promised the Kita if anything happens to Uly, I'll make sure he lives. My brother has a similar mind. If he can control me, then he will delight in gloating."

"If you're going to kill someone, you should kill them, not brag about it." Ryanac sounded very decided about that.

"I agree, but as a family, we do not take kindly to betrayal. I can't help it. It's the one way in which I'm like my father." He met Harton's gaze as he said it. "If it's Mairtin, he's up to something, some way to control my actions that I've not figured out yet." He stared at Ryanac. Their gazes met. Markis wanted to tell Ryanac to save his Samir, but the big man had already made that promise to Uly directly. He didn't need to ask. Ryanac would save Uly, or he would die trying. If both men died, Markis would live only long enough to find those responsible. Then he would take himself off somewhere isolated and quiet and use the comet to extinguish his light. Even Ryanac didn't know he knew how to do that, but he could. He had learned much from the book. Markis could call the power and hold it within, rather than release it or send it back to the abyss. The comet slept within him, and he could awaken it. If he lost control, it was a great threat to the world, but if he had control and kept it within him, the only one it would blast to oblivion was him.

Tressa was the last to leave. She touched him lightly on the shoulder, as though afraid he would break. "I hope by the comet that you find Uly," she said, and left. He didn't sneer until she closed the door. Tressa had made the same mistake as most people. All too often, people prayed to the comet while speaking to him. All too often, everyone forgot he was one with the comet.

## Chapter Seventeen

"He's not far. Could be to the west."

"That's still a large area. Maybe the Prion or the Eastwood ruins. Maybe the Western Circle." Ryanac listed the possibilities.

Markis's brow narrowed in concentration. He sat cross-legged, eyes closed, Kilan's hands in his. Both men sat within a thin golden haze. Kilan looked to be in pain. "Not the circle. At least I don't think so. More like".

Kilan gasped, breaking the connection. The haze faded. "I'm sorry. I can't. I can't bear the sensation another minute. I feel as if my brain's melting."

Markis opened his eyes. "No. I'm sorry. I'm pushing you before your time. I wouldn't if --"

"If it wasn't necessary. I know. I want Uly back too. I like him, and he's good for you. I just". Kilan circled his fingers at his temples. "It's not the pain. I just can't focus. I could confuse the issue more than help. We've narrowed it down. We can't afford to get it wrong now. I still don't understand how you can even do this".

Two choices. Markis looked at Ryanac. The Prion and the Eastwood both lay in the same direction but then they split into a full quarter of a circle. If they chose the wrong one, it would take them miles in the wrong direction. Now, Kilan looked up from where he sat, elbows on his knees,

still rubbing his temples. His gaze darted between them.

"You've shared the abyss with Uly," he blurted. So Kilan had guessed why Markis could use the power to track Uly like this. Markis hadn't even wanted Kilan to know that such a thing was possible yet, but he needed his brother's help. The younger man sounded suitably shocked. "You've shared it with Uly and your guard. Markis. That's forbidden!"

"Most of what is in the book is forbidden, apparently. It's a little late for you to worry about that now. Are you in this or not?" Anger seeped into his voice. Ryanac laid a hand on his shoulder. Just as well. Kilan's next words did nothing to help.

"I meant it's specifically forbidden to do such a thing with a normal person."

"Does that make Uly and Ryanac less than us or the two of us abnormal?"

His brother blanched, his face turning whiter, highlighting the strain they both suffered. "I'm no --"

"No what? Freak?"

"Take it easy," Ryanac said, his warm voice soft. Markis slapped his hand away and rose to his feet. Ignoring the guard, he gazed down at his brother.

"If you thought my being your brother would make me an easy teacher, you are mistaken. If you want, I'll hand you back to the council and let them oversee your training. A few hard months with me, or choose a couple of decades, no sex, lessons where you call the power, and it has nowhere to go but to wreak havoc with your bowels. It even splits your skin, so you can sit in blood and piss, listening to old men preach how they know best while your balls want to burst for want of release, or your skin aches for one friendly touch".

He had taken a step towards his brother, only realising it when Ryanac's arms slid under his, the hands going behind his neck and gripping. His friend, his personal guard, held him captive the same way he had once held Uly so long ago. Markis wanted to struggle, but knew he couldn't break the grip. He shouted at Kilan instead. "Get out!" His brother obeyed him, pressing a hand over his mouth as he left.

"Let go of me," Markis snapped the moment the door closed.

"No. Not until you calm down."

He struggled, tried to push backwards, tried to twist, tried to kick. The kick might have worked if Ryanac hadn't kicked him first, lightly, in warning.

"Calm down, Markis."

"I'll hurt you." The only way he could do that was with the comet.

"No, you won't." That warm voice sounded so self-assured. "You love me too much."

Despite everything, he made Markis laugh. The humour dissipated, turning to pain. "You trust me that much?"

"I trust you with my life, my heart, my spirit. If you don't know that by now, you never will. Right now, Uly's trusting you as much as I am." He relaxed his grip, and Markis turned.

"How long have you been mine?" Markis asked him. He watched the smile appear and grow.



'Since you fell in a well, and I jumped in to save you.'

'We were children.'

'So? It's not unusual for children to grow up together and fall in love as a result. Often, those are the strongest relationships.' Ryanac's gaze flicked from side to side. 'Don't you remember what happened? You can look into my mind and see it, but I can tell you. I jumped in to save you, true. Yet when I asked you to trust me, you just did. You swallowed your panic and did what I told you without question. You trusted me to save you. How is that different from my trusting you every day since? You'll never let me down because it's not possible. You can't fail me. If I had died the other day, it wouldn't have been because you hadn't tried.'

'You should listen to your own words.'

The smile turned rueful. 'I know. But I made a foolish promise, and right now, Uly thinks I died and cannot keep it. I would spare him both pains. We need you, so hold it together. Apologise to your brother. Also, stop threatening him with what will happen if you stop the lessons. If he needs to know how bad the alternative is, I'll be the one to tell him.'

\* \* \* \* \*

When Markis walked into the room, Kilan stood bent over the sink. He took a mouthful of the running water, rinsed out his mouth, and spat. There was a sour smell to the room.

'Did I make you sick?'

The younger man shook his head. 'No. My headache did.' He closed his eyes, frowning, pinching the bridge of his nose. 'Were the lessons really as bad as you said?'

'Worse.' Markis crossed the room and leant against the edge of the basin. He took hold of his brother's hand and squeezed. 'If you doubt me, Ryanac has just said he will describe them to you.'

'I thought he wasn't allowed in during a lesson.'

'You ever tried telling Ryanac he can't go somewhere or do something?'

'I wouldn't like to.'

They rested a moment, and then Markis said, 'I came in to ask if you wanted a break, perhaps to eat.' Kilan looked positively ill at the thought. Markis smiled. 'I remember how that feels.' He paused, about to make a confession. 'What I'm pushing you to do is similar to a lesson. It's too much too soon, and I had promised myself I wouldn't do this to you. I should have warned you, but I was afraid you'd refuse.'

Understandably, the other man didn't look pleased, but his expression quickly changed. He shrugged. 'I would do the same for someone I loved.'

'Still, I don't like using people.'

Kilan looked up. 'You're a king. One day you may have to. There's one difference between you and our father, and it's a big one.' They looked at each other. 'If you think our father ordered men to their deaths easily, you're mistaken, but he didn't pay it any attention either. He accepted it had to be done so he didn't think about it afterwards. You would do the same, but you'd cut yourself up about it. Do that too often, and you'll cease to exist in the manner we know you. Ryanac is going out there to be ruthless. What do you think he's going to do?' Kilan's bright gaze looked a little feverish as it darted back and forth. 'When he finds Uly, he's going to gut every person who stands

between them. He'll be as ruthless as he needs to be, no more and no less. I suggest you do the same, so forget what I said in there. I had no right. You don't need to apologise, and you didn't have to explain yourself either. You're my king as well as my brother. It may not always feel like it, but the Swithin people need you."

"You trust me as your king?"

Kilan nodded.

"You trust me as your brother?"

He hesitated this time, but clearly only in confusion. He nodded again.

"Then maybe there's something else you do need to know. About Mairtin."

Kilan's gaze narrowed, and Markis began to tell him about the portal and the person responsible.

## Chapter Eighteen

"You'll wear a groove in the floor."

He had decided Uly was no more than thirty miles away. That meant the Eastwood. Ryanac had left a few hours ago after making Markis and Kilan promise to stay close to each other as though they were small boys. With Antal guarding Tressa, and Harton off with Ryanac, it did leave Markis feeling strangely exposed. Ryanac had stood at his side as an almost constant companion for so long that more than a few hours apart left him feeling isolated.

Alone.

He loved Tressa. They would have a fine life together. He cared for his youngest brother. Harton and Antal were excellent Sonndre, but none meant as much to him as the two men who couldn't be with him right now. Faith. He had to have faith. Uly would hold on. Ryanac would save him. They would be together again.

"Are you all right?"

His brother, who had just complained about his pacing, now looked at Markis with an uneasy expression.

"I wouldn't say that exactly. I'm as fine as I can be."

A knock came at the door. Both men jumped and swung their gaze around to look at it. Kilan stood up, hesitated when Markis looked at him, and then shook his head before marching purposefully across the room. Markis stood there, feeling foolish. This was ridiculous that a young man only a little more than half his age should be acting as his Sonndre, but he and Ryanac had insisted.

Someone spoke through the slight gap in the door. Kilan's expression was unreadable but somehow priceless. He nodded and closed the door, leaning against it for a minute. "That was someone informing us that our brother has just arrived." He looked up, eyes just a little too wide. "Is it me, or has the world suddenly become a very strange place?"

"Strange and awkward. He'll want an audience."

His brother's gaze roved about the room. "We can't have him here. He'll be asking to see Ryanac's body as it is. I'll have to stand guard and make sure no one gets in."

He winced. Kilan was right, of course. Mairtin would want to stand over Ryanac's corpse and gloat. That brought bile to the back of his throat, but the situation could work in his favour. It wouldn't look so strange for him to refuse, as even if Ryanac were dead, there was no way Markis would have let Mairtin anywhere near him.

"I don't like this." Kilan sounded as though he might vomit again.

"I know, but he won't do anything obvious. You can serve me best by staying here as you say."

The younger man's gaze grew troubled. "Are you sure he's involved? Are you so certain he's to blame?"

"I don't see who else it can be, and his arrival is somewhat timely." Markis drew in a breath and drew on a coat that looked more official. He looked up as he straightened his cuffs. "I guess I'm about to find out the truth."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Greetings, brother." Mairtin walked down the corridor towards Markis, a broad grin on his face, though "walked" was rather too mild a word for it. Behind him, his retinue scurried to keep up. It took all Markis had not to pull away when his brother clasped him about the shoulders in a hug. The hug was hard, tight, without affection, but that wasn't something the others could see. Only the one receiving the hug could feel the lack of love in it. Mairtin drew back, still smiling. Then his face grew troubled. "I came as soon as I heard. How may I be of service?"

They fell into step and walked towards the council chambers. There were private rooms there, and Markis would make use of one of them.

"I would like to pay my respects to the body."

"I would rather you didn't for now." Markis spoke carefully, aware those around them could overhear.

"I understand. Would you permit me to arrange the disposal? Or Kilan? I hear he is here." Mairtin shook his head as though sadly. "I suppose we should lament that our brother was sent home from the academy in such a shameful way, but we may as well make use of him. I'm sure even he wouldn't mess up Ryanac's funeral."

"I really haven't given it much thought."

"My dear brother, we have to. The body --"

"I have encased the body in ice and will do so every few hours." He looked at Mairtin directly as he paused by a door. Men rushed forward to open it. He gave Mairtin a gentle smile. "Don't forget, I am the comet. The body will wait until I am ready to bury it, and that will not be until Uly is safely returned to me so that we can do it together with the proper respect. Shall we talk in here?"

Mairtin gave a slight bow of his head. "Of course."

Markis stepped through the doorway first, leaving Mairtin to nod to those behind to close the door. The king went and sat behind the great desk, his fingers laced, the tips of his thumbs pressed together. The two men stared at each other for a moment.

"I take it there are to be no more portals," Markis said.

Mairtin smiled. "It was flashy, I admit, but it did what I intended it to do."

He didn't just mean contact. Mairtin had wanted Markis to know he was involved.

"I'm stronger than you." Even as Markis said it, he realised it sounded churlish, but his brother would know he didn't mention this simple fact out of vanity. There was a question in there. What did Mairtin hope to gain?

"I came for the book, Markis. That is all."

"The only way you can keep the book is to keep Uly, and I cannot allow that."

"Why? What will you do? Fight me for it after I have it?"

His brother had a fair point but Markis didn't believe this was simply going to be an exchange. Even if that were true, no way could he sit by while Mairtin used the book wilfully, and his brother knew it.

Mairtin moved forward, removing his cloak. He sat on the edge of the desk, which put him in a position towering over his king. Their father would never have allowed it. Markis ignored it. If his brother wanted to think he could win the battle with these petty victories, then he was happy to let him. "I'm guessing Stargazer's part in most of this, but how does he fit into your plans now?"

Mairtin let out a snort. "He doesn't."

"Does he know that?"

"No, and I don't care if you tell him. He won't believe you."

"I don't suppose he would. I'm just surprised, is all. I'm amazed the old man would agree to let you read the book any more than he wanted me to see it."

"He always planned to let me read it. He planned not only for me to read it but to teach me what lay in its pages. He was most put out when they sent him as head of the seers to oversee your training."

Markis kept his face neutral as though none of this was news to him, but it was a struggle. Could it be resentment had something to do with way Stargazer had treated him all these years? He must have given something away in his face, or Mairtin was just guessing. His brother laughed.

"Oh, he was hard on you, but the lessons have been as hard for me. I know what it is like to want release and have to deny it. I know what it's like to see your blood seep through your skin."

"It never seemed to bother you. I never heard you complain."

Mairtin sneered. "Unlike you, not all of us whine. I accepted what I had to do." He stood up, paced in a tight circle, and looked back. "Who are you to break the rules? What kind of Shavar Sardian can you make if you cannot deny your own body's demands? It's a cock, Markis, nothing more. You are supposed to control it, not the other way around."

"It does not control me. My heart does."

His brother's gaze swept up and down over his body, making his skin crawl, but Markis did not respond. "Pitiful things," Mairtin said, and Markis felt certain he referred to heart and cock both.

"I chose to embrace life as well as the comet, and the strange thing is, despite all the protestations I keep hearing, despite those that insist I did the wrong thing, it has made me stronger. I don't see what you hope to gain. I don't see why Stargazer preferred you learn from its pages."

"Clearly the old man's favouritism disturbs you." Mairtin appeared to find the idea amusing. He ignored the question in Markis's statement. "I'll make you an offer. Give me the book and I'll take Stargazer with me as a favour. Do that, and I will arrange for Uly to be returned to you."

"Once you've left. Once you're safely many miles from here."

"Yes."

Markis shook his head, bringing the tips of his fingers up to his lips in thought. He stood and faced the other man. "Even without the book, I am still stronger. I don't trust you. How do you know you can trust me? I won't simply forget that you betrayed me. That you are." He stopped. He had to pretend that Mairtin was responsible for Ryanac's death. Thinking back on how his friend had looked lying there at the edge of that dark precipice made it easy. "You killed my friend. You hold my Samir. Why should I let you walk?"

"How can you not? You have no proof. The only proof you have convicts you as well. You took a book from the council."

"Most of the council don't even know it exists."

"And most of them are old, foolish men who will take exception to the fact they weren't told. It will cause years of unrest, and once again, the Swithin race will look weak as it did when our father grew sick. The Azulites don't like you right now. They might take more kindly to another king on the throne, one who has not soiled one of their women."

Now he knew where Mairtin was going with this, but he might as well make him say it. "I would not let them invade." Markis let a little of his despair and weariness creep into his voice.

"Come now," Mairtin said. "There's no need for this falsehood between us. We both remember what happened at places like the Kimber Pass. Your friend fought there. He almost lost his life there, as did many Swithin. Even when our father was strong, he could not be everywhere at once. We hold the power of the universe, yet we are men and have our limitations. The Azulites will not go to war over one little princess, especially after what it is rumoured you did to her. They will consider it only if they think they can win."

So his brother intended to betray more than their family. "You against me?" Mairtin nodded. "I'm stronger."

"So you keep saying, but they don't know that. Besides, I have learned a few things from the book before our father foolishly sent Stargazer to oversee your studies. Then the silly old man wouldn't hand it over. He said I needed him." Mairtin put all his disgust into that one word. "I told him his guidance wasn't necessary, which you've proved. Still, I had access to it before you did. Oh, you've learned some things from the book too, of course, but I have the advantage."

The old man had possessed the book for a long time. Markis had learned many things since acquiring it, but there were many more. Stargazer could have passed over something important, something that would destroy Markis without the need to have access to the comet's full wrath. Stargazer had had the book for many years, almost all his life. The old man knew just what to look for, and yes, he would be happy to teach Mairtin, so despite his brother's protestations that he no longer needed Stargazer's help and he would take the old man with him as a favour to remove him quietly from Markis's sight, Markis knew better than to believe him. The difference this time would be that Mairtin would not allow Stargazer control of the book, but he would let the old

man help him. The advantage in Mairtin's case would be an eager teacher, something Markis had never had, apparently.

"You accuse me, and you will weaken our race even within these walls." Mairtin's voice broke into Markis's thoughts. "While we are arguing, other races will take advantage of it. You need to prove what I've done, and you don't have proof. It will take years for them to sort out the mess."

"So you want me to step aside?"

Mairtin seemed to consider it. "One day perhaps. Right now, I need time, and you are going to give it to me."

"You will truly return Uly to me?"

"If you behave. Even if I don't, even if I were to kill him, you would have to still weigh up what I have said."

"You kill him, and I don't have to accuse you. I could kill you one night while you rest in your bed."

"You could, but I intend to be vigilant. Ryanac is dead, and he's the only one I would have worried about besides you."

Markis almost smirked. In a way, it was a compliment to his Sonndre.

"With him gone, you are the only true threat to me, and I plan to keep track of where you are at all times."

"All this to be king?"

"No. All this to be Shavar. You're strong, but Stargazer believes one can learn that strength as well as inherit it. The book will give me the edge. Still, I have no desire to control the petty squabbles of the council or hear petitions. Perhaps in time we can put this behind us. Perhaps we can rule together."

Was Mairtin that arrogant to believe this drivel? "To do what? I take it you mean to leave it to me to hear all the petty petitions while you wield the power."

"There are lands to be conquered."

"We already control more than half of the natural world. The only army with a hope of opposing us is the Azulites, and that would kill so many on either side it would breed disease and famine. Neither of our nations wants this. What more could you possibly want that you don't already have?"

"I want the comet."

It felt as though someone had doused him with cold water. His face gave away nothing, but it didn't have to.

"I can see you understand me." Mairtin paced away, then back again. "They give us lessons and tell us to tame the comet, to control it, and all the time they are lying. The comet twists us and bends us, makes us bleed. We use it but we never truly own it."

Despite his anger and disgust, Markis couldn't help feeling a certain kinship born out of understanding. "It doesn't have to be that way."

"What other way could it be?"

"You can exist alongside it." He had never given it words before, but ever since that night when Ryanac had made him break his vow of celibacy back in Uly's homeland, and he had gone on to love Uly as a result, that was how it had been. The comet no longer twisted him as though at its whim. It played alongside him, not with him as the plaything. It still had its way with him sometimes, but those moments lessened each day.

"I don't want to exist with it. I want to rule it."

"Why?" The question seemed to take his brother by surprise. Mairtin paused, considering, and for one bright, brief moment, hope stirred within Markis. Then he watched his brother shake his head.

"Stargazer is right. You are weak." Mairtin stepped to his side. "You'll do as I say, or I'll kill Uly just to spite you and do this the long, hard way. I'll take our nation into war just to fuck you over. Don't doubt it. Be a good boy, and just maybe I'll give Uly back to you, but either way, he's not yours anymore. I can kill him from a distance, just you remember that."

Markis opened his mouth to ask what he meant, but Mairtin strode to the door. "The book tonight, Markis, or Uly won't just die. I'll make sure he dies cursing your name." He opened the door and left Markis to his thoughts.

Kill Uly from a distance? What did he mean? If that were true, it changed things. Mairtin could force Markis to rule in name only, until such a time as he could steal Markis's power and add it to his own. These secrets had to lie in the book. Markis held no doubts that Mairtin still intended to have his power or kill him and take it that way. If that happened, what of Kilan? Mairtin being able to hand Uly back to Markis and yet still kill him. If Mairtin could do that, what would he do if he found out about the rescue? Markis looked towards the window. He wouldn't know what had happened for a few hours yet, and the rescue was already under way. He could do nothing to stop it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thump. Uly opened his eyes as the familiar patter of falling soil quickly followed the noise. He coughed and blinked. It was uncomfortable standing like this, but his bonds restrained him so that he had no fear of falling. Even slumped, the collar wouldn't choke him, just be damned uncomfortable. He had managed to sleep a little, although the naps were intermittent and of varying lengths. He longed for his bed. No. He longed for Markis's bed.

It would just be him and Markis now, and he should have felt glad about that, but he couldn't. Ryanac loved the same person Uly loved. Ryanac had cared for him also, more perhaps than Uly had ever accepted or realised until recently. Uly feared what was going to happen to him. He feared for Markis, and what might become of them, but right now grief overshadowed those things. Uly missed the big man.

Fingers gently patted his face. He blinked, opening his eyes, not aware until that moment that he had closed them.

"You can stop crying. Now keep still."

He didn't believe in phantoms.

"What?" The other man sounded amused.

Uly mumbled aloud. "I said I don't believe in phantoms."

‘Neither do I. I guess that’s a good thing. Keep still.’ Those so-dark eyes stared at him, and a large hand held his face while Ryanac worked what looked like far too large a blade between his neck and the collar. It pulled at his neck, hurting as the blade sliced the leather, but Uly gritted his teeth and bore the pain. He sighed as the leather parted, and he could move his head. Ryanac crouched in front of him. Apparently, the guard had chosen the most uncomfortable restraint first, and now he was going to move on to freeing Uly’s legs and his arms. Uly understood why. No longer completely pinned, his muscles were reacting. He didn’t even think he would be able to walk.

‘Are you real?’

He heard that low, familiar chuckle. His groin was close to Ryanac’s face, and for some reason, he felt no surprise when Ryanac lifted the tunic and gave his naked cock a quick kiss. His captors hadn’t bothered to pull up his pants, let alone tuck him in.

‘Real enough for you?’

‘No. I want more than that.’

The big man’s lips twitched. He stood up, moving to Uly’s arms at last. ‘I’m sorry we had to make you think I was dead.’

‘You wanted someone to think so, obviously.’ His kidnappers had given him water and a little bread, but his voice still croaked. Ryanac set him free, and Uly tried to move, but he stumbled instead. His limbs wouldn’t obey him. Ryanac looped an arm around him and practically tucked Uly under his arm to carry him.

‘Let’s get you out of here.’

‘What about.’? He let the sentence trail away as Ryanac’s gaze slid his way.

‘Maybe when we reach the top, you shouldn’t look.’

Whatever carnage lay in wait, it must have occurred quietly. Uly hadn’t heard a struggle, nothing he wouldn’t have assumed to be more than natural movement, though for some reason he could all too easily imagine the bloodshed. Uly shook his head. ‘You said you would come for me, and here you are. I don’t care what you did. I only care that you’re alive.’

In that moment, Ryanac’s grin was the most beautiful sight in the world.

## Chapter Nineteen

He had killed them. He had killed them all.

Despite his brave words, Uly had been tempted to do as Ryanac said, not to look. He couldn’t do that. Ryanac had kept his word so the least Uly could do was keep his. He wouldn’t fear the man or feel disgust for anything he did. If there was one thing he had learned about Ryanac, it was that he did no more than he needed to, but no less. Uly hadn’t asked his captors to kidnap him. He had the least respect for that form of terrorism. They had threatened the person he loved by using his physical and emotional safety as blackmail. These men deserved retribution. Even so, to see a dozen men lying still and silent unnerved him. Ryanac and Harton had done all this.



A woman he had never seen before, who they called Meira, accompanied them to see if he was well. She also watched over Ryanac as though she were his mother because he was still recovering. Uly hadn't noticed, but once she mentioned it, he detected the dark shadows around Ryanac's eyes, the odd pallor of his skin. Regarding the dead men, Uly had expected blood and gore. There was a little blood only. They had dispatched these men, swiftly, noiselessly. That such large men could drift through the forest like spirits and deal out such a silent end was unsettling. Uly had known violence in his life, but it had always been messy, involving scuffles, movement, and noise.

By the time they helped him onto a horse, it was not solely his ordeal that made his actions slow. His limbs were numb and so was his mind. In the end, Meira had said she would share a horse with him until he felt stronger. It made sense. Although Meira was far from small, she weighed less than Harton or Ryanac. Even a Swithin steed could not carry one of Ryanac's size plus another person for long. Uly balked at the idea of anyone getting close enough to smell him. He'd spent almost three days strapped to a post, and more than his spirit was soiled, but none of them seemed to care. He had begun the journey back to Markis with Meira's arms wrapped around him, but his gaze had been for Ryanac alone. Ryanac had killed all the men at the ruins except one. The Kita lay trussed over the back of one of the man's own horses. Harnessed to the saddle, he could not fall, but the ride was surely a test of endurance. Likewise, Tihea sat bound to another steed, in a more comfortable position, though gagged. Uly gave a brief thought as to her future.

A third of the way home, Uly had felt strong enough to carry on unaided. Meira had given him something bitter to drink, and though this seemed unkind for one who was thirsty, it helped restore him. As they stopped for a short break, he finally drank his fill of water. He gulped it down, certain it would make him sick, yet unable to stop. Whatever Meira had given him had done its work. The water gushed down his throat, out of his mouth, ran down his neck to soak his clothes, and still he glugged it. As the water ran over his chin and chilled his neck, Uly closed his eyes in a brief moment of personal pain. A couple of days ago, the water would have soaked his hair. Almost as though he had known what Uly was thinking, Ryanac reached out and fingered the ragged ends of his hair.

"It will grow," he said gently. "You know what it reminds me of, and what it will remind Markis of?"

Uly shook his head, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"The night we found you. The night our lives changed."

Uly shook his head. "You changed Markis's life. You made him give in to desire." He had learned that Markis had finally allowed Ryanac into his bed after so many years of abstinence. A couple of days later, Markis had taken Uly to his bed.

"You think I never tried previously? Oh no, my sweet young man. If it weren't for you, he would never have given in. He gave in to me because ultimately he wanted you. In doing so, we found each other again, but then we had never really lost each other. Circumstances kept us separated in body if not heart. You closed that final gap. You gave him back to me."

"So you got what you wanted, but he still sent you here to find me."

Those dark eyes studied him. "You still doubt my promise? You doubt I meant it?"

Fear and guilt made Uly turn aside. One of those so large hands cupped his face and turned him back.

"Are you always going to doubt us? Or is it just me you doubt? Your death would break something inside my prince, but for a long time now, I have known it would also break something inside me. Look at me and tell me you don't feel the same. Tell me you could bear to lose one of us."

'King.'

'What?'

'You called him a prince. He's now a king.'

Those lips twitched and then drew into a lazy smile. 'He's my prince, and he'll always be my prince to me. And you're avoiding my question.'

Uly struggled with what little remained of his dignity, but still his tears came on a tide of emotions that crumpled his face. 'I'm being selfish. Something is bothering me, but it's a selfish something, and it doesn't matter. Not really. I thought you were dead,' Uly managed to say as Ryanac opened his mouth, perhaps to interrogate, and then the sobs overtook him. Those big arms engulfed him, and he pressed his face into Ryanac's warmth, into the darkness of his body, breathing in his scent, forgetting the irrational shame of desperately needing a bath. No way did he smell of spring grass but, of course, Ryanac didn't care. The others had to have heard and they needed to get back to the palace, but for a few minutes Uly cried, and they let him.

Slowly, his crying eased. 'Why?' he murmured, still clinging tight to Ryanac's warmth. 'Why so often do we realise what we have only when we're close to losing it?'

Ryanac gave forth a soft chuckle. 'That's human nature, I believe. But now you know, and you haven't lost me.'

Words to express his feelings escaped his grasp. Uly merely clung, his fingers pressing, nails digging in such a way that could only be painful, and Ryanac let him. They needed to continue homeward, but for a few seconds, Uly needed to feel the reality of the man holding him more than he needed to breathe. Still, he struggled for composure. He longed to get back to the palace. He longed to see Antal and Tressa. He longed for their hugs and kisses. He longed for more water. He needed food, a wash, and sleep, and he didn't even know in which order. Most of all, he needed Markis, but that was not to be.

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'He knew the moment you returned, but he can't come right now.' Antal stood there with an almost apologetic look on his face. The news made Tressa frown. Ryanac looked troubled. Harton and Meira appeared calm. So, too, outwardly did Antal, but Uly could recognise the signs of agitation in the other man. Antal was his Sonndre, his protector. He probably believed he had failed in his duty. Uly would have to knock that idea out of him, maybe quite literally, but right now he was too tired. Of all of them, only Meira's serenity seemed genuine. She handed him a cup with a green liquid in it. He eyed it dubiously.

'I don't think you are going to get much chance to rest. This will keep you on your feet. I can give you more, but eventually you will need sleep.'

The very idea that she would give him such a thing made the hair prickle on the back of his neck. Having washed and eaten a small meal, Uly longed for bed. She might well be calm, but Meira wanted him awake and alert when a healer should prescribe rest. That did not bode well. He drank the concoction down without further hesitation, blinking in surprise when the taste did not make him immediately try to spit. It tasted as green as it looked, as though he were chewing grass, but he could cope with the flavour. The true torture was the knowledge that Markis was a few corridors away, and he could not see him. Judging by the look on Ryanac's face, the big man suffered this as much, if not more.

Tressa stood up. 'I should make an appearance, and I will stop by to see Markis.' She turned her

head to Antal as she moved towards the door, but he just stood there. "Antal, you must come with me. Uly has Ryanac. Markis will have Harton now he is back."

It made the most sense. Harton would be an obvious choice to replace Ryanac until Markis appointed a new Sonndre. Everyone still believed Ryanac dead and Uly kidnapped. To maintain that appearance, Antal would have no one to guard but Tressa. The young guard clearly knew this, but his eyes and the set of his jaw said he didn't have to like it. One of the first things he had done was to hand Uly back the weapons he'd had to discard the other day. The reaper blade was a constant companion now. Uly stood up and grasped the young man's arm as he made to move by. "Serve me by keeping her safe," Uly said. Antal nodded and left.

"That was a good thing you just did." Ryanac's quiet tone was the very voice of reason.

"Even though he knows that out of any of us, Tressa is the least under threat right now?"

"Even though. You reminded him that people are out to get us and in that none of us are safe."

Uly sniggered. "So loving someone really does make you weak."

"The strength it gives us outweighs the weaknesses."

Uly turned his head to look at Ryanac. "I never said I would have it any other way."

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They had decided the best place for Uly and Ryanac to hide was in Uly's room. Meira had stayed in the main part of the suite, and she would have raised an alarm. Still, Markis remembered to knock before opening the door. He had no wish to have Ryanac half strangle him before the man realised who he was choking. With the shutters closed and the drapes drawn, he met perpetual twilight. The moment Uly caught sight of Markis, he flung himself from the bed, across the room, and into Markis's arms.

Markis held him, feeling the heat of Uly's face against his, the hot tears. His fingers trailed up from the nape of Uly's neck to the back of his head. Uly stiffened in his arms as he did, but Markis still entwined his fingers in the now short hair. For a while, there was only silence; they needed no words.

"Are you all right?" Markis pushed Uly back so he could see his face.

"I was so thirsty," Uly said.

"I know."

"It wasn't a dream, then."

"No. Or think of it as a dream I sent your way." Despite everything, he couldn't help smiling at the sight of those cool grey eyes. "Is there anything else? Did they hurt you?"

Uly sniffed. "They wouldn't let me clean my teeth," he whispered.

Markis blinked, and then glanced at Ryanac. The big man struggled with his expression, but the smile won out. He laughed gently. Markis looked back at Uly's face to see those grey eyes twinkling with mirth. "Why, you," he said, then said no more as he brought their lips together in a kiss.

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"You killed them all?"

"All but the Kita and the woman."

"They're safe?"

Ryanac raised an eyebrow as if to say, You have to ask? "The woman is complacent enough and hidden. The Kita is in a secure place, bound and gagged. No one but a Swithin noble knows how to open hostage cuffs."

"I know, but Stargazer is a noble. So is Mairtin."

"That sounds like a contradiction even as you say it. You're right, of course, but they don't know he's here." His friend's eyes narrowed. "We have Uly back, but nothing else has changed. You still cannot openly challenge your brother without proof. The Kita may give you that advantage."

"I intend to use him, but that is not why I wanted you to bring him to me."

"Why then? It would be safer to kill him."

"I know," Markis said, "but he may yet prove useful. Besides, I made him a promise." By the look on Ryanac's face, he could tell that the man remembered which particular promise. The only thing he didn't know was how he meant to keep it.

"You've hardened."

Unfortunately, Ryanac didn't mean sexually. "They took Uly from me. They nearly killed you. I have no mercy left."

One of those large hands touched his arm. "Don't become your father."

"I won't, but our enemies will learn there are consequences."

"You look more tired than you should. What have you been doing? I take it you intend to let me in on the plan?"

Markis told him. Ryanac stared, his mouth agape. Under other circumstances, Markis might have chided him. As things stood, he understood Ryanac's shock.

"You cannot mean to do this."

"I can, and I will." Markis sighed. "It's been a long day." Unfortunately, it looked as if it was going to be an even longer evening.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I need to take Ryanac with me."

There was little difference in their height. Markis stood maybe half a head taller than Uly, yet always he dipped his head just a little bit to look at the younger man. Uly always tilted his head back. It brought their bodies into perfect alignment.

"I'm afraid to let you both out of my sight," Uly whispered.

"No more than I you, but it is necessary. Meira is here, and Tressa and Antal will return to you

shortly. Then you will all join me in the council chambers. There I want you simply to answer any questions put to you, truthfully.”

Uly nodded, grabbing at Markis as he made to move away. “Be careful.”

Running his fingertips down one side of Uly's face, Markis told him, “Always.” Still Uly clung to him.

“Whatever happens, don't give him the book.” His grip tightened. “Not even for my life. Promise me.” They'd discussed the possible consequences should it fall into Mairtin's hands.

Markis swallowed. His heartbeat picked up. “Do you know what you're asking?”

“Yes. Now more than ever.”

Uly's nails were digging into his skin. Markis welcomed the small pain.

“Believe me, I know now more than ever what one of us dying means. I know what it will do to you, but you're a king. You have to do what's right. If you don't do what's right, who will?” Those cool grey eyes beseeched. “We will always love each other. Nothing will change that. But we need to be able to look at each other. If your people suffer because of something you did or didn't do, we would only see pain in each other's eyes.”

When did Uly get so wise? Markis needed to go. He gently pried Uly's fingers loose. “I will not give him the book. That must not happen. But my people may yet suffer for it.”

“Is it the right choice? The lesser evil?”

“I believe so.”

“Then that is good enough.” Those grey eyes flicked back and forth. “I trust you.”

Markis was glad to hear it but just wished he could trust himself half so well.

## Chapter Twenty

Finally! Uly stood up as he heard approaching voices. One of them was undoubtedly Tressa. Even so, Meira looked pointedly at him, and he moved quickly into the shadows. The door to the main area opened, and Tressa walked in. Both she and Antal looked pensive until Uly stepped out of concealment. Then their shoulders visibly relaxed.

He and Tressa stared at each other. “It is almost time,” she told him. Although Markis had not divulged his entire plan, they had agreed on two things. Markis was going to confront his brother, although he had assured Uly he would not hand over the book. Then they were going to meet in the council chambers. Tressa had organised an unscheduled meeting. There, Markis was going to produce the Kita who had kidnapped Uly. Uly could identify him and the Kita could identify Mairtin, although Markis didn't expect him to give in so easily. Stuck between two comets, one wrathful, one more powerful, Uly almost felt sorry for the Kita. Other aspects of the plan remained murky. They had to believe, had to have faith, in Markis. When it came to that, none of them even hesitated.

Tressa turned her head slightly and inclined her head even less. The gesture was sedate and queenly. Meira returned the gesture, making Tressa raise an eyebrow. A smile teased her lips, and then Meira gave her a comical curtsy and backed off. “I will await your return,” she said. “One or more of you may have need of me.”

"That is satisfactory," Tressa replied, as though it was her decision. Uly frowned, sensing some strange kind of performance had just passed between them, almost as if they teased one another. Too tired to consider it now, Uly fell into step at her side, aware of Antal flanking him.

"I hope it's going well," Uly murmured, trying to seek some semblance of peace. He was prepared, but even so, it amazed him he wasn't visibly trembling right now. Meira's potion was probably the only thing keeping him on his feet. Right now, Markis and Mairtin were talking somewhere in the palace, and no one knew what the outcome would be. Even with Antal at his side, Uly had never felt so exposed.

When Harton appeared at the door leading into the suite, Uly was grateful for it. They still had unseen enemies. Men were loyal to Mairtin. Stargazer should be with the others called to council chambers, but they could not guarantee it, and they knew not how many men were in league with the old man. There were too many variables.

Uly offered Harton a small smile in gratitude. He still hadn't thanked him for the rescue. Harton returned the smile and reached out to clasp his hand. Uly took it, and as he did, Harton pulled him forward at the same time, lifting his leg so that he kneed Uly firmly in the stomach. Uly gasped in shock even as the blow stole his breath.

\* \* \* \* \*

"We had an agreement."

"No. You dictated my options. I then went away to contemplate them and choose a path of my own." Markis spoke calmly.

"You have no choices. I've covered everything."

Markis shook his head. "The only hold you have on me is Uly."

"That and the threat of plunging our nation into war."

Again, Markis shook his head. "If it comes to that, so be it." For the first time ever, he gave Mairtin a reason to blink. His brother gave a soft, incredulous laugh.

"You wouldn't do that."

"A wise man once taught me that he would rather fight hand to hand than see me suffer in misery." It took all of Markis's self-control not to look towards the area where Ryanac hid. He would have preferred it if they could have had Ryanac sneak up on Mairtin and have done with this, but the place Mairtin had agreed to meet to exchange the book didn't allow for it. Besides, Markis wasn't just out to thwart his brother's plans and save Uly. He wanted to keep Ryanac safe as well. That meant he had to do most of this himself.

"You selfish bastard." Mairtin sounded somewhat shocked, somewhat delighted.

"Maybe you're right, and that does make me selfish, but what is the use of a nation who lives in fear of those who would terrorise us? An even wiser woman taught me that. She wants a king she can be proud of, and I plan to give it to her, to everyone."

"Who in the name of the comet are you talking about?"

"He's talking about my mother," Ryanac said from the shadows. Markis experienced an almost childish pleasure in seeing Mairtin jump, although his brother quickly regained his equanimity. His

smile this time seemed a little self-deprecating.

'I underestimated you, and I seem to have asked the wrong questions.'

Markis denied the frown that threatened to take over his expression. He had no idea what Mairtin meant by that comment, but the icy fingers of unease began to caress the back of his neck. "You no longer have a hold on me," Markis said.

'Uly's life?' Mairtin made it a question.

Markis shook his head.

'Why? Because you think you rescued him?'

Now those fingers stroked his spine. He wanted to tell Ryanac to go find Uly, but he couldn't do that. Ryanac would not leave him, and Uly had Antal, although as Sonndre, the man was young. Harton was guarding the Kita. Perhaps he should have left Antal guarding the Kita and sent Harton to.

The warning fingers stopped stroking. They gripped his spine, making him gasp in pain, and it was almost impossible to disguise the sudden terror that ensnared his heart. The expression on Mairtin's face said his brother knew it, too.

\* \* \* \* \*

Four men came in at Harton's back. Even as Harton let Uly drop, he brought his sword around. Any other time, Antal might have had the advantage. Harton had expertise and size, but Antal possessed speed. Five against one outnumbered him, and in that, Antal lacked a few years yet. Tressa picked up her skirts and ran back, deeper into the royal suite. Uly couldn't blame her, even though he resented it. The five men bore down on Antal while Uly struggled to regain his breath. He drew his sword even as he rose to his feet, but he held back. Any other day and he would not be as impaired as this, but he still needed rest. He would do Antal no good just yet. He might even get both of them killed. He needed to catch his breath.

He managed to stand, and was about to move in to join the fight, when he saw Tressa coming back down the hallway. She didn't run, just walked quickly, but the blade she carried was far too heavy. Still, she had no doubt been in a hurry and grabbed the nearest weapon. That wasn't what made him hesitate, however, but the pure fury that blazed from her eyes. That and her hair flying out in her wake, her pale, slim legs naked, scissoring in a sharp movement. She had stripped off the dress and walked forward in her undergarments, arms and legs bare, small breasts quivering in the cloth shaped to cup them. Lace and muslin covered her most intimate parts, yet they also seemed to draw attention to them. The distraction was enough for Antal to slice one of their attackers open.

Harton also saw her coming. He gave a quick nod, and all four survivors rushed in on Antal even as Uly cried out, "No!" The move was clearly premeditated. Antal could not avoid all four blows. Uly launched himself forward and deflected a killing strike. Tressa stabbed at another enough to make him turn aside, so Antal could dispatch another assailant. Alas, that still left three men alive. Harton lunged for Uly. Antal put himself between them, and Harton's strike hit home. Uly's wide-eyed gaze met that of his guard's, perceiving a familiar look in those amber eyes, the same look that had been in them the day he'd taken the arrow strike meant for Uly. Antal expected the blow to take his life. Harton apparently had other ideas. The blade slapped into Antal's head, and for a brief instant, Uly expected to see the head roll away. Only when Antal's knees gave out and the young man folded up into a heap on the floor, did he realise that Harton had slapped him with the flat of the blade. The young guard was out cold, stunned, possibly dead, but just as probably alive.

The two men turned on Tressa, and Harton turned to Uly. His gaze darting to Tressa, Uly saw her parry, moving closer to Antal as she did. She moved as she had said a small fighter did, in an arc, not a straight line. Uly wasn't small, but Harton was indeed taller. Uly started to draw on all the advice he could remember. Antal had dropped his blade and, with a flick of her foot, Tressa sent it flying up into the air into her left hand. Apparently, she intended to fight with both. He wanted to help her, but he couldn't. He saw blood fly from one of the men's arms and sent a silent plea to the comet to keep her safe. She might be able to handle the other men, but Harton would beat her into the ground. He had to entice Harton away from her. Apparently, Harton happily obliged.

"I'm not here to kill you. Not unless I have to."

"Like I'm going to believe what a man waving a sword has to say." Uly backed away, angling his body to keep Harton in sight at all times. He didn't care if it were true. Only three things came to mind. Harton was here to kill him, hurt him, or kidnap him. Kidnapping made no sense as Harton had helped to rescue him. Either he lied, or he awaited some signal, or he meant to hold Uly as a threat against Markis and he refused to be used like that again.

"Come, la ruan, let's dance," Harton said.

"Fuck you," Uly replied, backing away as he did. The only other person to throw that insult his way had been Markis's father when they first met. It meant "thief" and not in any nice way. He hadn't accepted it from the man who was then the king, and he wouldn't accept it from anyone now. Harton's gaze flicked to the sword in his hand. The man's grin looked a little insane, a little sickly. Uly pushed his thoughts and questions aside. He had no time for them right now. If he lost concentration, he would lose the fight.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You're out of options. Give me the book."

Markis crouched and set the book on the floor. He stood and put his foot on it.

"Back away," Mairtin said.

"I will. In a moment." He wanted to hurry this, but he couldn't. If he did, Mairtin might react by using the comet. "I have something to say first."

Mairtin looked to the side as though considering it. "Very well," he said, as though there were plenty of time.

"You were right. I was wrong to take the book. The council was wise to keep it from too many, but they were just as wrong in trying to do good, and that's the problem. As Shavar, that's the problem we face. We have to weigh up what we want for ourselves against what we need to do for the greater good. No one man should have this book. No one man should have such power, but I can't do anything about that. I know the power exists. It's part of me. I can only use it wisely."

"I hope you're going somewhere with this." Mairtin managed to look bored.

"I am. I can't let you have the book."

"I'm not giving you a choice."

"You don't have to give me anything. The choice is mine. You would use the book to rule in fear. You would be worse than our father ever was. He wanted to wipe out the Azulites for a personal vendetta. You would wipe them out just because you could. No man like you should rule as king."



No man like you should have this book."

"I'll kill Uly." Mairtin managed to sound more amused than insistent as though he toyed with Markis.

Markis nodded. "I gather you've already sent someone to try."

"Just a precaution. I can call him off."

"Then I have to trust that together, those I love can defeat him." They had known this could happen. The trouble was, no one had suspected that man would be Harton. Uly was still alive. That was all the comet told him. Right now, even Ryanac didn't know such a close friend had betrayed them. Markis didn't have time to enlighten him and one of them worrying was enough.

Mairtin took a step forward. "I'll have the book and if not now, another day. You only stall."

Markis shook his head but stepped back. Mairtin moved in, bending just as Markis wanted him to, hands reaching out, fingers clawed to snag the book. Markis drew on the comet, focused his will, and sent it into the pages. The parchment caught, flames flickering. Mairtin cried out, and instead of drawing on the comet as he should have done to put out the flames, he tried once more to grab it. The flames sparked higher, hotter, engulfing the book. Mairtin flinched back, holding his scorched fingers to his chest. He glared at Markis across the conflagration. "Are you mad? We've both lost out."

"I've lost nothing," Markis said. "That's the difference between you and me." Mairtin jumped. He slapped a hand to his neck, his eyes going wide even as he did. He had just driven the dart Ryanac had shot deeper into his neck. Obviously realising what it was a moment too late, Mairtin stared at his brother with a stunned look on his face.

"You can't kill me," Mairtin said, even as the dose Meira had put in the dart drove him to his knees.

"I'm not trying to kill you. Just weaken you." As Markis expected, Mairtin called upon the comet. Markis drew on it also, putting all he had into trying to shield Uly. He touched Uly's mind, felt the calm exterior of someone in the midst of a fight where the fear and panic lay buried. Mairtin's mind snaked in at the edges.

"I told you I could kill him from a distance," Mairtin hissed, throwing what sounded like all his disbelief over Markis's actions into his voice.

"I know," Markis said. He had spent the available time poring through the pages until he had found the truth of his brother's statement. He even knew how to do it himself, but had not the training. Markis had been right in guessing that Stargazer had taught his brother a few things from the book, and Mairtin had later confirmed it. Unwise as that was, Stargazer had not trusted Mairtin to possess the book. Not such a foolish old man, then. No doubt he had distrusted his usefulness in Mairtin's eyes minus the book.

"And you still...?" Mairtin's shock gave Markis a precious second to strengthen the shield, but it was not enough. Markis was stronger, but Mairtin had used this abhorrent skill on many previous occasions. Markis didn't intend to kill Mairtin, just disable him for now. The poison had to work before.

Ryanac had taken a step forward, clearly hoping to hasten things. Mairtin's gaze shifted, and Ryanac stopped still. If the big man wasn't moving, it was because he couldn't. Half glad that Mairtin seemed unable to do more than keep Ryanac at bay while trying to attack Uly, Markis set his mind to protecting his Samir, hoping that the strain of trying to do two things at once would mean Mairtin struggled to hurt either of the men he loved. Markis couldn't even use Kilan to strengthen him. To do so might have done more harm than good when he didn't know what he

was facing. Besides, Kilan was off doing something else.

\* \* \* \* \*

‘I’m sorry, little one, little thief.’

So far, Uly kept his fear and anger at bay. Neither were good things when fighting for your life. The anger bubbled up inside him so fiercely at the sound of Harton’s words that he feared his blood might boil. How dare Harton use those phrases? He was Ryanac’s little one, and Markis’s little thief, and no one had the right to call him little other than the two men in his life. They used it as a term of affection, for it had no bearing on his size or height. Uly stood taller than Markis’s shoulder, and Harton knew that. Harton used the term to provoke him, but he wasn’t stupid enough to fall for it. It took Uly a moment to register the “sorry.” Harton was apologising for having to kill him. It made no sense. Sweat trickled down from Harton’s forehead, making the tall man blink. Something was wrong, and Uly failed to understand what and couldn’t spare the time to question it. He was vaguely aware that Harton poured sweat in comparison with their exertion, that his muscles were tense rather than relaxed, and that his slashes with the blade were too jerky. Blood flowed where Uly had managed to slice Harton in three places.

The tall man still looked mildly surprised that Uly had managed to cut him, but Uly couldn’t put those wounds entirely down to his skill for he was tired. Harton simply wasn’t fighting as well as he should have. The tall man looked even more surprised when he moved to swing the killing blow. Harton stopped, sword raised in what would have been a perfect swipe if he had let it drop. Uly would have struggled to parry the blow, and if that strike hadn’t killed him, all Harton would have had to do was follow it through with another. Uly was running on instinct and the desire to live, but Harton possessed greater skill and strength. Uly parted his lips, trying not to go numb with the realisation he would probably die in the next few seconds, when Harton hesitated. Uly stumbled back, seeking a reprieve. He expected Harton to follow, and he did for a single pace. Then he simply stopped. Everything grew still, motionless for a precious heartbeat.

Harton’s gaze slid to the side as Meira emerged from behind him. Whatever she had used, she left it impaled in his back. Blood marred her hand. Harton stared at her, his mouth agape, blood spilled over his lips. His arm started to lower in what would be a wide sweep that would take the woman’s life. Uly knew he had killed the day men attacked him and Ryanac, but that didn’t feel real. This would feel real. Harton had been a friend. This was the moment Uly dreaded, but when it came to it, he didn’t hesitate. He scrambled forward, pulling the reaper blade free as he did, and drove it in deep.

Harton stared at him from a heartbeat away. The man’s sword clattered to the floor.

‘You don’t get to call me little,’ Uly said, as though he needed to back up the physical statement of the blade. Even as he finished speaking, pain exploded in Uly’s head.

\* \* \* \* \*

‘No.’

The word belonged to Mairtin, not Markis. Markis was winning, but he didn’t know at what cost yet. He could see his brother’s face as though through a mist. The other man grew weak, but Uly’s mind might yet be ripped apart before he died. Markis was beginning to wish he’d let Meira use a stronger dose, but he hadn’t wanted to kill Mairtin, just cut his connection to the power. Mairtin pulled on the comet, healing himself even as he attacked, but it cost him. He couldn’t destroy Uly and save himself at the same time, but he was trying. Mairtin no longer attacked Ryanac. The power itself was what now kept Ryanac out. Markis couldn’t help Ryanac get closer to Mairtin and he couldn’t raise a personal shield. If Markis dropped the power he sent to shield Uly, the young man would die. That left Markis open to Mairtin’s attack.

It happened so quickly that Mairtin pulled back from the power even as he struck. Markis had no choice. He let go of Uly and struck back, not certain what he did. Gold flashed, and then went out. Everywhere Markis looked, he saw only black.

\* \* \* \* \*

Uly rolled over on his side, hands flying to his head. He shook, convulsions throwing him on his back. He was only vaguely aware of others in the room. Tressa eased him into her lap while Meira held him down with her weight. "Thank you for staying hidden, as I asked," Tressa said.

"I found it difficult to obey, but you were right. I don't usually take orders so easily, not even from a queen."

Clearly, Tressa had given Meira an order to stay out of sight until she gained an advantage.

"I know the feeling. Uly, hold on." An edge of panic crept into the small queen's voice. Uly couldn't help it; he rolled in her lap and a gurgling sound he couldn't believe he was capable of making forced its way out of his throat.

"Antal, help me," Tressa cried out. So Antal still lived, although the moan he uttered announced that he was maybe the worse for it. Uly was aware of his blurred image as Antal stumbled across the room to fall to his knees at his side, and then Uly gave up trying to focus on the world and closed his eyes.

Fingers pried at his lips, and Uly did what he could to help them open his mouth, fighting the cramps that seized his muscles, making him jerk. Something slipped between his teeth, keeping him from biting or swallowing his tongue. Somewhere in all this, he could hardly fathom that he heard Harton's voice. "Hold on. Even now, Markis fights to keep you safe."

\* \* \* \* \*

Markis sensed movement, and a hand grabbed him, pulling him to his feet. He swayed. Somehow, he knew Ryanac stared at his face. "I can't see."

A dim shape waved in front of him, and he slapped the hand away. Ryanac barked out a light laugh that was full of relief rather than mirth. Gradually, the world swam back into focus. Ryanac's questioning expression grew serious. "You're not talking about your sight, are you?"

"I was partly, but it's returning. The abyss is black."

Ryanac's grip tightened and shook him. "What has happened to the comet? Where is Uly? Is the comet gone? Is something blocking it?"

Markis shook his head. "Not exactly. It's still with me, yet not with me."

"You're making no sense."

Even as Ryanac said it, Markis knew what was wrong. "It's stayed with Uly." He looked into Ryanac's eyes. "It's fighting to keep him alive." He looked at his brother's unconscious body. "Bring him."

Markis stumbled a few times in the first two corridors. After that, he ran.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tressa looked up, tears pouring down her face. She didn't sob, just wept. Markis found the sight strangely eerie. He fell to his knees and slid the last few paces. Reaching out, he took Uly's head from Tressa's lap where she knelt. Meira checked Uly's pulse, laid her head on his chest. If he breathed, Markis couldn't see it. She shook her head.

"He lives but barely. I can't tell what's wrong with him."

They all ignored the ragged breathing coming from Harton's throat. Somehow, the man remained upright, though a quick glance revealed Uly's dagger protruded from the man's stomach. His little thief had fought for his life, and yet he still lay here, so close to death. Markis's heart swelled with pride and anguish both. Having put Mairtin down on the floor, Ryanac stood, staring down at them, so still he might as well have turned to stone. It looked as though he might never move again, until someone came into the room. He whirled, but Markis already knew the newcomers would be Kilan and the man he had sent his youngest brother to fetch. His brother shoved Stargazer into the room ahead of him.

"You were right," he said. "He tried to kill the Kita."

"I did nothing wrong. He tried to hurt --"

"Shut up!" Ryanac warned.

Markis ignored them and, more focused now, he eased into Uly's mind. He found nothing.

No. That couldn't be right. He closed his eyes and concentrated. Time slipped away too quickly, and he almost gave up hope. A single star winked at him. He followed it. It moved away, growing distant. He gritted his teeth, aware of a man protesting over his treatment. Stargazer.

Markis opened his eyes. His throat was dry. Sweat trickled down his brow. Tressa wiped it away before it ran into his eyes. How many minutes had he been trying?

He looked at Harton. He looked at Stargazer. The old man fiddled with his robes, taking care of his appearance. "No questions? No shock?" Markis asked him.

Stargazer blinked, glanced at Harton sitting in a slowly spreading pool of his own blood. "I am sure there is an explanation."

Harton laughed. The sound rattled in his chest. A single drop of blood ran out of his mouth. "Don't even try."

"I have no idea what you are talking about, and I really must protest -- yee.ck." Stargazer made a very strange sound as Ryanac grabbed his arm and twisted it.

"Just one more word," the big man warned. They all just stood or knelt there, a silent and peculiar tableau.

"Why, Harton?" The question slipped from Markis's lips. He didn't even care, but he could stand the ominous silence no longer.

The tall man grimaced, though possibly not from pain. "It was your father's wish. Mairtin was his favourite. You know that. Your father was Samir to me, but I was never Samir to him. I loved him even when I hated the things he did. Your mother and I shared that in common. I made your father a promise before he died, one he wrung from my lips."

Markis's gaze narrowed. "I love Ryanac, and he is as good as Samir to me that I may as well call him such."

"You can't have two -- guggkkk."

Ryanac silenced the old man yet again. Markis continued. "Still, I would never".

Harton laughed, and then coughed as the gesture spilt more blood from his lips. "When your father wanted something, he had methods to make you see things his way. You've not read everything in that damn book yet. I hope you never do."

So when Harton said his father had wrung a promise from him, maybe he literally had. He'd also lied when he'd told Markis that his father had no knowledge of it. No, he hadn't lied. He'd parried the question.

"Then why help us rescue Uly only to see him die now? How?" Ryanac asked the question, and for a split second, Markis hated him for it. Yet the big man only asked what Markis was wondering. Markis could not accept that Uly would die. Aware the pain of that possibility cut as deeply into the big man, he didn't know how Ryanac managed to utter the words.

"Believe me." Harton began, only to have his words taken over by another fit of coughing. When he managed to breathe again, he said, "I have done everything I could not to be a part of this. I've been under a compulsion to live, unable to tell you the truth, and unable to disobey, but I gave nothing away. I kept the fact that Ryanac was alive a secret. I could because Mairtin and Stargazer never thought to ask me if he lived. I had no orders not to help you rescue Uly, so I could do that too. I did what I could, when I could. Mairtin suspected you would try to keep the book so he sent me as the threat. He once forced me to look at the abyss."

Markis grimaced. He'd taken Ryanac's spirit into that strange place more than once, but his guard had always been willing.

"Since then he's been able to send me instructions over a short distance. If you chose to disregard the threat then --"

"If you didn't hear otherwise, you were to kill Uly. Your sword or Mairtin's power would do the trick. If Mairtin couldn't have the book, he'd take everything he could from me."

Harton nodded. "I hoped you'd win. Part of me has always hoped you'd win, despite".

The words trailed off. The man said the last of what he needed to say with his eyes. Markis could hardly comprehend the twisted logic. To kill for your Samir in order to save him or her was one thing. To kill after he was gone, not out of revenge but because he wanted you to, and to kill someone you liked, that you even considered a friend. No, he could not get his mind to grasp that, even if Harton wasn't responsible as he claimed. Was the comet truly capable of rendering such a compulsion on a human being? Especially since Harton had hoped to fail from the beginning?

Harton hoped to fail from the beginning. Harton wanted to die.

Markis tried to imagine carrying that kind of anguish inside him while turning a cheerful face to the outside world, and he couldn't. Even in the midst of horror when taking lessons to control the comet, he hadn't wanted to die. He had wanted to be free from the stress, from the agony, from the loneliness of it, but he had delighted in life.

Markis's gaze flickered to Harton's hand over the blade. Uly's dagger was the only thing stopping the guard from bleeding out right now. He could offer to save him. The man must have read it in his face. He shook his head. "Don't. Use your strength to do what you can for Uly. I never wanted to hurt him." He glanced at Mairtin's immobile form. Even as he did, the prone man gave out a soft moan. His skin looked flushed. Meira's toxin, the heart's ease they had used to poison Ryanac,

was now doing its job on Markis's brother. "It's finished. If you can take my life and give it to Uly, then do so."

All this time, Markis had been stroking both sides of Uly's face with his thumbs along the cheekbones. He looked down. He felt numb, yet was aware that the pain of loss hovered so close that he could almost taste the salt of tears on his lips. Anger lay barely suppressed. Anger and grief warred, combined, revolved, called on the stars that were his to command. He realised he was gritting his teeth, that his expression surely displayed a terrifying rictus when his jaw began to ache.

All he had ever wanted was to keep good people safe, to rule well, to find love, and have some peace in his life. Was that really asking for so much? His father had often made Markis cry when he was a boy; as an adult, Markis's relationship with his father hadn't amounted to much. Still, he'd held on to faith that his father had done what he thought was right. That his father had treated him in such a way that he believed would make Markis strong for the greater good. Now, even from the grave, his father reached out to take what he loved. He hadn't even aimed that animosity at Tressa. That, Markis could have at least understood, for his father had hated all Azulites. Instead, his father reached out to take the one pure thing Markis had in his life, and in doing so, he'd almost taken Ryanac from him as well. His father wanted to leave him broken, and had used Harton, someone he knew that they all trusted, in such a despicable way. Markis couldn't imagine using Ryanac that way. He couldn't. It was unthinkable. Unacceptable! Take Harton's life and give it to Uly. If he could, he would. Wrong or right, Markis just didn't care. If he could, he would.

Markis at once called the abyss, went into it, following a path to his brother. Mairtin cried out as though he felt it coming. When he found Mairtin, Markis enclosed him in the abyss.

\* \* \* \* \*

What?

Mairtin's confusion swirled as a pulsing green and yellow nebula. The colour reminded Markis of bile. Knowledge and realisation brought forth small, black empty spaces that grew as though they would expand and suck in the comet, and then Markis's consciousness. For all he knew, maybe they would. His life for Uly's; Markis could live with that. Even as the thought occurred to him, he felt the comet shudder at the very idea; it wouldn't let Markis exchange his life, but it gave him an alternative. The black holes started to draw in all that yellow and green sickness.

You can't do this. You daren't. You don't want to. I know you. You don't want to do this.

Markis drew in a deeper breath and almost sighed. I DON'T, BUT YOU LEAVE ME NO CHOICE.

Mairtin started another protest, but Markis filled the abyss with his intention and determination. He didn't even know if it were possible. He just fed his heart's pain into the void, let the comet see the truth of who he was and what he wanted, and what it would mean for them. The comet replied. Mairtin gave them no choice, and in that, the power granted Markis absolution even as it did the impossible.

A hand shook him. Markis tried to respond but was aware only nonsensical noises fell from his lips.

"Markis, you're not making any sense." Ryanac's voice sounded close by. "I don't know what you did, but it's impressive."

The words made Markis open his eyes; the slowly moving ball that hung in the air just a few feet in front of him drew his attention. He blinked, trying to make sense of what he saw. When he realised what he had done, a sharp cry left his lips. "I did this evil thing?"

"To do something horrible does not make you evil. Concentrate." Ryanac offered good advice, but even so.

Markis stared at his brother, who was dead and yet alive. Yes, this was evil, but he hadn't intended this. The perfect sphere was the only thing holding his brother together. The comet had separated him. Each bone, muscle, vein, and sinew were perfectly connected yet perfectly detached. Mairtin still lived, but only because this state had halted the progress of the poison and kept him contained. Even if he wanted to, Markis had no idea how to put him back together.

He feared to look at the other people in the room, to witness their expressions, but he gazed at them anyway. He was surprised to see none of them looked especially shocked. Surprised, amazed maybe, but not exactly disgusted. Perhaps they had suffered too many shocks for one day.

"Even I would not have taught this part of the book to Mairtin." It was strange to hear Stargazer say such a thing.

"I haven't read this." Or had he? Perhaps he didn't need to or. "Maybe I should."

"How? I thought we destroyed the book," Ryanac said.

"You did wh-ahhh?" Stargazer twisted under Ryanac's grip with an agility belying his age.

"I didn't destroy it. Just its form. I put it back where it belongs. I've given it to the abyss."

"Markis." A soft female voice broke in. Meira had taken hold of his wrist. "Uly's not breathing. His heart no longer beats. Let him go."

He looked down once more at the now quiet being nestled in his lap. Uly's face shone with an inner light, the perfect embodiment of peace, but it was of a peace come too soon in his young life. Uly was not ready to die, and Markis was not ready to let him go. "Not yet." Even as he thought it, the answer came to him.

"Let him go, Markis." Ryanac said it gently enough, as though afraid something inside him would break. Still, his voice wavered, and Markis had never heard the big man sound that way before, as though something inside his guard had broken already. Still Ryanac flinched as Markis glanced at him; worse, he flinched from whatever he saw in Markis's eyes, on his face. Markis didn't even try to guess what expression he wore.

"Saysiah," Markis whispered. Harton had given him the answer.

Ryanac frowned, shaking his head, trying to be the voice of reason. "Even you can't bring him back from the dead."

"Can't I?"

"No, you ca-ahhhhh." Stargazer's protest cut off on a cry.

"Don't you ever learn?" Ryanac said, twisting the old man's arm so hard that he might have collapsed if it weren't for Ryanac's grip.

"That doesn't really exist. Does it?" Antal sounded more interested than shocked by the idea Markis had voiced. Meira placed a hand over her heart, and then reached for Tressa's hand. His queen hesitated, and then slipped her small hand into Meira's larger grip. It didn't take much for Markis to sense the unease they shared.

"This is evil," Stargazer hissed, bearing the pain of Ryanac twisting his arm up his back.

"Is it?" Markis asked, as though from a distance. It should have taken effort for him to talk while he did this, but it didn't. It didn't seem right that it cost him so little. "The comet can heal an unnatural death. Mairtin stole Uly's life, and now he's going to give it back. This isn't up to me. If the comet didn't want this, it wouldn't let me do it."

He had closed his eyes, but now he opened them. Stargazer gasped. Others placed a hand to their mouth, or turned their heads. Even Ryanac backed up a step. He didn't need anyone to tell him what they saw in his eyes. The stars had come out. "I understand now, something none of those who trained Shavar ever did. The man is the comet, and the comet is the man, and we don't like being used badly."

Saysiah: resurrection. It was just a word, a story, a legend until now. Markis now knew that everyone shared the abyss. It was where life started and where it would end to begin anew. Their planet was one among the stars. Ryanac had once told Uly that some people believed all life was made from the stars. That statement was truer than they realised.

Still, it should have cost him, but he sought out the threads of his brother's life, drew on them, and pulled them into the abyss where Uly lay waiting, ready to live. As Uly gasped and opened his eyes, Harton pulled the blade from his stomach, choosing to die. Maybe for Harton, it was easier than living with the knowledge of what the man he had loved had been capable of, as well as his part in all this. Still, Markis wasn't certain the man deserved to die, but he could do nothing about it. He was too busy saving Uly's life.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Markis had left the council arguing amongst themselves. For the most part, it seemed they would take his word. Perhaps the sight of Tressa dressed in only a robe over her underclothes and splashed with blood had silenced their complaints. Some of the blood was hers, some belonged to the men she had killed. She had a couple of cuts, none too deep. Markis had offered to heal her, though he felt bone weary. She had refused immediate attention, saying Meira could stitch her injuries after the council meeting. Only then had Markis realised she had not only spared him the effort, but kept her wounds as evidence for the meeting itself.

Then again, maybe Stargazer confessing all had convinced them. He had kept his part in this to a minimum, of course. He made no mention of the book and set a scene of brother against brother. He had never realised that Mairtin's ambitions stemmed so high as to take the throne. He berated the man's arrogance. He portrayed a man who was not only so self-deluded as to believe his power outweighed that of the true Shavar, but a man who would use threat and terrorism when all else failed. As he only slightly deviated from the truth, Markis let him ramble. In exchange, he had promised to let him live. Two days hence, Stargazer would step down from the council saying that these events had proved too much for him. As to his punishment, that would have to be private, and Markis was unsure what that should be. Part of him wanted to strangle the man with his bare hands despite his promise, but he had looked genuinely shocked to see Uly die and terrified to see him arise. Markis had no wish to rule in fear, but he took a perverse pleasure out of the terror he saw in the old man's eyes whenever Stargazer glanced his way. Ryanac had suggested it might be more of a torture to keep him guessing and they might have use for him one day. He might not have many years left besides, and he would live them quietly, away from all he had ever wanted. Wherever Markis finally let the man reside, he would be as good as a prisoner for the rest of his life. Markis would put him somewhere he could do the least harm and arrange to have him watched carefully. In exchange for his life, Stargazer had imparted a list of names. Even now, arrests were in progress.



They would do the best they could with the woman, Tihea, but how well she could overcome her training remained in question. As for the Kita, Markis had kept his promise. He'd let him live. As to punishment, he couldn't think clearly enough right now to decide, but watching the man's face as they'd bound him in chains had told Markis the man might have preferred death to the loss of liberty.

Making his way back to his rooms now, Markis ruminated that what remained of his brother might also have had something to do with the council's decision to deem their king wise. If they were shocked, none could be more shocked than he was. Markis had no idea he could do such a thing; he certainly wasn't sure if he would have been capable of it if he had realised exactly how the comet intended to carry out his wishes. He wasn't proud of what he had done. He certainly hadn't planned it. He could only hope he never had cause to do such a thing again.

Some of this must have revealed itself on his face. He walked Tressa back to their apartments, where Antal rested under Meira's attendance. The young man would be all right, Meira had said, but he'd suffered a nasty concussion. She insisted on taking care of him, and Antal -- after obtaining Ryanac's promise to not let Uly out of his sight -- had acquiesced. Clearly, the young man's head hurt, and apparently, none of them wanted more contact with anyone outside of their group than was necessary.

Tressa stopped just inside. She turned and reached up to clasp his face. He had to dip his head to allow her to reach. She stared into his eyes as though searching. "Let it go," she said softly. "You did not ask to be pushed into doing such a thing."

"No. But I didn't have to finish it this way."

Her brow drew down in a slight frown. "Of course you did. You could not stand by and let Uly die if there was something you could do to save him. No more than I could. I will not have you punish yourself for the rest of your life over another's infamy. You are a good man at heart. That is all I know and all I need to know."

He put his hands over Tressa's where they touched his face. "Thank you," he said.

She smiled at him. "Markis, if anyone seeks you out, I will keep people away from you this night. When things are more settled, I wish to talk to you about arranging a visit to my homeland."

Markis almost groaned. The last thing he wanted to do was make the two-week journey back to the Azu Plains. Tressa patted his hand with a sardonic patience, as though she knew what he was thinking. "I wish to take a retinue to ensure my safety, although I do not believe that is strictly necessary, but most of all, I wish to take Meira with me." She flushed. "Are you angry with me?" she asked softly.

"Not if Meira is willing, which clearly she is." There had been no time for anything to happen between the two women, but Markis was aware of the attraction.

She sounded relieved and then said in a rush, "I think it is time I showed Azulite women that they do not need the men, and taught the men that they should be a little more grateful for what they have in their lives."

Setting Tressa and Meira on the Azulite nation; now there was a thought. He nodded. They would speak of it another day.

"Now go," she told him.

He opened his eyes wide in surprise. Tressa's lips pulled back into a smile. "Go. Go to the thermai.

Ryanac and Uly need you tonight. I just need my bed.”

She swayed, and the movement made him realise that she was practically asleep on her feet. He understood. Ryanac had taken Uly to the thermai as soon as possible. Markis had agreed it was a good idea. He had dearly wanted to join them, but now that he could, he wasn't sure he should. “I'm not certain I have the energy for anything more than sleep.”

“I am sure Ryanac will think of something to compensate for that.”

A twinkle in her eye made him suspicious, but she patted his cheek, kissed his lips, and turned away. Meira awaited her at the door of the suite. He had set guards on the apartments, and Antal would sleep within tonight, as would Kilan. The rooms were safe. He walked unaccompanied down to the thermai. Word was spreading of what had happened. He had no wish to rule in fear, but their enemies would think twice before attacking them now.

A guard he recognised as one of Antal's brothers bowed to him at the door of the thermai. He said nothing but returned the nod before stepping inside. Markis ignored the areas for preliminary washing, the rooms meant for acclimatisation to heat. His need and the hollow sound of water dripping, then rippling, drew him deeper in. He began to shuck his clothes as he advanced.

Ryanac rose from one of the pools and ascended the steps, water cascading down his body. He gestured with his head, directing Markis to look over his shoulder. Uly lay on one of the padded tables designed for rest or massage. Apparently, he slept, but to see him lying silent and immobile gave Markis a start. A hand touched his bare hip just above the line of his breeches, which he had yet to remove. He looked down into Ryanac's upturned face.

“He's fine. Just tired, as we all are.”

The big man stayed where he was, knee-deep in the pool. The rest of him displayed a fine sheen of water that left little glistening trails and droplets. The man's large hands pulled Markis's final garments down. He had already kicked off his boots at the entrance. It was impolite to walk into the thermai in footwear. Indeed, clothes were almost as unsuitable, but he had been unable to wait. He braced a hand on Ryanac's shoulder in order to step out of his clothes.

He expected Ryanac to draw him into the water, but instead the large man ascended the last couple of steps and took his hand. Ryanac led him to one of the smaller pools where they used cleansers. Not such a bad idea. He carried the stench of sweat and other things on him. Markis knelt in the water, letting Ryanac unfasten his hair and then wash him. He closed his eyes and basked in the simple pleasure of the sensation of Ryanac's touch. In many ways, this had nothing to do with sex. Much of the Swithin way was about contact.

“You did this for Uly?”

“Yes. He tried to help me get clean, but after we had managed to wash my hair, I finished the rest. I took him in to steam, and he fell asleep in the heat, so I carried him out and left him to rest.” The fingers stopped moving. “Washing my hair upset him. I told him his would grow back. He knows it will, of course, but he has every right to be pissed.”

The hands began moving again, and this time the movement drew Markis back. Part of the cleansing pool had another level, a small shelf. One could sit in shallow water to groom or receive attention from another person. Markis usually shaved in the morning, but he allowed Ryanac to move the blade smartly over his skin. He dozed, coming awake and laughing softly when he felt Ryanac rub his face against his cheek. Their faces were as smooth as they could be.

"I'm not finished with you yet," the big man whispered as he slipped down into the water. Markis opened his mouth to enquire what he had planned, when a hand grabbed him at the back of both knees and pulled him forward. He gasped, eyes opening wide. Ryanac had set himself between his legs and the big man's hips stopped Markis from slipping off the shelf. Ryanac was already applying lather to unusual places.

"What do you think you are doing?"

"Hush. This isn't for me. It's for Uly."

As much as he desired to know what Ryanac had in mind, the very fact that he had no idea what was going to happen, together with the mention of Uly, kept Markis from asking. He swallowed instead. Those dark eyes glanced his way. A smile played about the man's lips. Ryanac set the soap aside and lifted the blade. His eyes grew a little more serious. "Keep still," he said.

Uly was aware that Markis had arrived some time ago. He could hear his and Ryanac's voices, though he couldn't make out the words. Although sound travelled in here, it echoed strangely off the walls, distorting the sound and direction. He put a hand to the back of his head and felt the ragged strands. His hair had looked worse than this once, and Markis wouldn't care what he looked like. Others had told him he had died earlier that day, and they said Markis had brought him back. Some part of him had been aware of it. He had almost slipped away and only a thin thread had held him connected to the world. He had recognised the feel of Markis tugging on that thread. Then life had exploded inside him, making his body shake and his eyes open only to discover he was blind with sight, deaf with sound, awash in pain and pleasure, with sensation. He had told Ryanac he thought he could smell and taste chocolate in that moment. If Uly could believe them, and he had no reason not to, he had died, and now he lived. Markis wouldn't care about his hair. Still, he fingered the strands and blinked away his tears.

Raising his head, Uly searched the room with his gaze and made out movement in one of the cleansing pools. He sat up, and then stood, slipping from the table's edge soundlessly. Naked, he padded over to the pool, his feet making soft noises against the tile. The two men surely heard his approach, but Ryanac kept his gaze focused on whatever he was doing, and Markis lay with an arm covering his eyes. Uly stopped at the edge of the pool, staring down, stupefied at the sight that met his eyes. A moment later, Markis peeked out at him from beneath his arm.

"Uly," Markis said. The king's body reacted, twitched, including his cock. Ryanac hissed.

"Stop it."

"Let me up."

"No." Ryanac glanced up. "Uly isn't going anywhere, and he'll be in our arms soon enough. I have a blade in one hand, your genitals in another. I suggest you keep still."

Even as Uly watched, Ryanac made a precise sweep with the razor and removed more hair. Uly blinked, once, twice, three times, and then looked at Markis in question and puzzlement.

"It's just a game, Uly," Ryanac said, although he wasn't looking and couldn't possibly see the expression on his face. "I thought we could do with a bit of silliness right now."

He couldn't argue with that, but he had no idea what Ryanac meant. One thing was certainly true: whether Markis wanted this or not, he daredn't move.

Rinsed and denuded, still Ryanac wouldn't let Markis and Uly touch. The king glared at the large man as he pulled him from the small cleansing bath and then pushed him towards the larger, medium-sized pool. Feeling odd and indeed somewhat silly, Markis struggled not to cover his groin. Being Swithin, he thought nothing of nudity, but he had never felt so exposed. From the look on Ryanac's face, the big man knew it, too. Once in the water, Uly finally came into his arms. They held each other, foreheads resting together. They didn't kiss. They didn't speak. They didn't have to. Finally, Uly said, "Thank you." He said it so quietly it might have been a sigh.

"No." Markis shook his head, lifting his hands to touch Uly's face. "You have nothing to thank me for. Where you are concerned, I can admit to being selfish." They kissed, softly, gently, and it had little to do with sex even when their cocks rose and brushed each other. This need went beyond simple physical yearning. Soft, golden curls tickled his naked groin, and he groaned into the mouth under his, rolling his hips. Even though their mouths remained joined, Uly laughed, and the sound vibrated down into Markis's throat. Their tongues danced and so did their hips. Markis breathed in deep, his chest expanding, moving his stomach in a light caress of naked skin. Under the smell of perfumed oils and the odd musk of steam, he became aware of another scent. It was heady and sweet. Markis opened his eyes and looked to the side. Uly followed his gaze.

Ryanac sat on the edge of the pool, with what they called a brazier lit on the tile at his side. It was small, used for heating oils and perfuming the air. The man stirred whatever sat in the cup over the flames, and then noticed them watching. He grinned and slipped down into the water, easily lowering his weight. "Come here, Markis," he said. "Let Uly have his treat."

Markis moved away slowly, their bodies separating, skin sliding, fingers lingering until Uly had to let him go. He wanted to move with him, but also wanted to see what was about to happen first. Uly had a feeling he would join the other two men soon enough.

He watched Markis's questioning look, the king's gaze searching his Sonndre's face as those large hands gripped him about the waist and hips, lifting him. Ryanac took his weight, lifting Markis up out of the water to sit on the edge of the tile. Markis's eyes still looked to Ryanac. He didn't look so much like a king in that moment but perhaps more like the small boy who had fallen in a well so many years ago. Uly had heard the story. Even now, Ryanac's attitude was one of offering comfort and protection. Whatever bond they had forged between them that day, it would last the rest of their lives. Uly was part of that bond now, as well.

At last, Markis turned his head and directed his gaze down to the brazier. His brow lowered, and his eyes flashed puzzlement that quickly turned to surprise, and then something Uly could only describe as astonishment. Markis barked out a laugh. "You can't mean to".

Ryanac interrupted him with a chuckle. To Uly's surprise, Markis blushed. It was true. A person really did blush with his entire body and not just his face.

"Get over it," Ryanac told his king. "This is for Uly, not you, though I think you'll enjoy it as well." One of those large hands pressed into Shavar's stomach, guiding him. Ryanac had thoughtfully provided thick towels for Markis so he could lie down. Markis hesitated and made Uly frown. What would make Shavar reluctant? Still, Markis finally lay down, a small gasp leaving him as Ryanac clasped and separated his legs. The sight of the pale, denuded skin made Uly look away for a minute. When he managed to look back a few seconds later, Ryanac was watching him, one side of his mouth pulled up into a wicked-looking smirk. "We need your help," he said.

Uly, grateful that he was more than waist-deep in water so that his cock did not break the surface, moved closer. Ryanac lifted the cup and poured the contents over Markis's groin. The king jumped at the first splash, and then the dark liquid poured in a steady, thin stream. With deft

movements, Ryanac coated Markis in chocolate as though he were pouring it over a cake. The fluid moved with substance, but it slid like liquid silk. It had a rich, glossy texture that clung, adhering to the skin in all the right places. It coated Markis's cock in thin ribbons, pooled into his groin, trickled down to his naked sac. A single drop dripped into the water. Ryanac even distributed it over Markis's thighs, and then let the last drop fill his navel. To Uly's horror or delight -- he couldn't tell which -- his mouth flooded with saliva. He swallowed, only just managing not to lick his lips.

Warm lips kissed the side of his face just in front of his ear, and only then did he realise that Ryanac had put the cup down. Markis had gone back to covering his eyes with an arm. "I didn't think you would want any hair in the way of this," Ryanac whispered. He didn't. Markis lay there, naked, his chestnut hair snaking around his body in long semi-wet tendrils. He was a sweet feast for the eyes and tongue. The only thing Uly would have liked more was to see those chocolate brown eyes, but Markis hid his face. If he didn't want this.

Uly ran a hand along one thigh, spreading the chocolate. He took his fingertips to his lips. Shortly after removing his touch, Markis peeked out at him from under his arm. Even in the dim light, his eyes shone with a mischievous glint. His gaze flicked to Uly's fingertips at his lips and stared as he licked them as though mesmerised. Markis was blushing again.

He didn't know why he chose to speak to Ryanac rather than Markis, but Uly said, "If he doesn't want this."

Ryanac laughed. "Are you kidding? What man wouldn't want your sweet lips? He blushes not from what we are doing, but by how you see him." Fingers trailed up and down Uly's spine, making him shiver despite the humid heat. His nipples hardened, and Markis's glance told him his king had noticed. "Even as Swithin, we can be overcome by what we desire. It is not your desire that undoes him but his own."

"Could you not talk as though I'm not here?" Markis murmured. It made Uly smile and Ryanac chuckle.

Warm lips and breath whispered and tickled at his ear. "Do you not want your treat?" Ryanac asked him, no doubt aware that he did want it.

"I'm not very good at this," Uly admitted in a small voice. Markis gave a small shake of his head denying this. Ryanac's lips teased his ear.

"It takes practice. I've a feeling, before we leave here, you'll be very good at this and a few other things besides."

Uly swallowed, unsure if his heart pounded from Ryanac's words, or from the look in Markis's eyes. Taking one last look at Markis's partially hidden gaze, he looked down at the body Ryanac had so carefully prepared for him. He could do anything pleasurable with it that he wanted, and Markis would not only let him, he would rejoice in it. The certainty washed away his hesitation. He had as good as died today. He could not deny himself this.

For the first time, Uly understood that part of sharing pleasure for the person receiving was the giver wanting to do so. Such sharing was mutual. His fingers reached for those soft thighs, which still had a smattering of hair. It didn't matter that the chocolate had coated him there. He would only lick and kiss. He was going to suck in places that were more intimate. His tongue slid upwards, taking the sweet taste into his mouth. He didn't worry about how much he would get on himself. He could wash it off afterwards. A quiet tension thrummed under his touch. When Markis sighed and finally relaxed, Uly gently touched his hanging sac. He pulled on it gently, his fingers sliding in the liquid velvet. As he did this, he became aware of a warm, wet heat against his spine. Ryanac's tongue danced over his vertebrae, licking out to the side from hip to hip and back again.

Questing fingers snaked between his thighs.

Uly couldn't help it. He opened his legs, sighing, when warm, knowing fingers cupped his testicles. His mouth opened before he intended it to, his tongue snaking out to tease Markis's shaft. Glancing up the length of Markis's body, he could see that his king's eyes peered over his shoulder towards Ryanac. He was certain the two men were looking at each other, and Uly didn't care. He widened his legs, arching his hips.

Markis had seen the movement as Uly had meant him to. Those dark eyes flicked down to his face, and Uly stared back. Easing up but not breaking eye contact, Uly made a circle of his thumb and forefinger. He licked his lips and tasted chocolate on them. He could feel a peculiar sensation of something sticking to his skin at the right side of his jaw. It had to be chocolate. He captured Markis's cock in his hand and attended to him with some long, slow strokes back and forth along his entire length. He smiled, knowing he had done it just right when Markis groaned, closed his eyes, arched his back, and the arm covering his face fell to the side, clawing at one of the towels.

Their gazes no longer locked, Uly took the chance to look down at the strange but arousing sight of pink skin smeared with his favourite sweet treat. The chocolate possessed a glossy appearance, but even as he watched, the head of Markis's cock took on even more of a shine. He gave it a gentle squeeze and watched the ensuing moisture ooze out the tip. His mouth fell open at the sight. His tongue hung slack. Uly wanted to cover the smooth glans with his mouth, but resisted because he also wanted to savour the moment. He dipped his head instead, widening his mouth to take in a testicle. A strange roundness filled his mouth, at once hard yet delicate. Uly sucked on one and then the other before a greed he didn't understand took over, and he wanted both.

A sound somewhere between a scream and a growl erupted from Markis's throat. If Ryanac weren't helping to hold him, he might have kicked Uly into the water. It made Uly pause. He had been gentle despite his need, but he had to wonder if he became lost in the sensation he might suck too hard.

"He's all right, little one," Ryanac said. A slight chink of sound made Uly look up. Ryanac had set another cup on the brazier and he had a good idea what was in this one. A hand stroked his back. "Hush. You don't have to do anything you don't want. Not now. Not ever."

Oh, but I do want. Uly swallowed. He didn't know what tugged the words from his throat, but they came unbidden. "Do what you want."

"What?"

It took him a moment to realise that both Ryanac and Markis had asked the question. Their bodies grew still. They waited. For some reason his answer carried great significance. He gave a passing thought to shaking his head and saying nothing, but it went just as quickly. "Do what you want. Both of you. I want you to do what you want."

Hands grabbed him. Markis reared up and claimed his mouth for an instant before he curled back down, this time holding his weight on his elbows so he could watch. The movement let Uly do what he wanted, to run a hand down from Markis's neck, all the way down over his chest and then his stomach to a straight line to his cock. Markis had intentionally or inadvertently shifted into a better position. Uly no longer needed to strain to hold him in place. He dipped his head, glancing up as he did. Staring into Markis's eyes, he opened his mouth. His lips parted and slid down over the soft plum of Markis's cock. It throbbed on his tongue. He came off, blowing gently where his mouth had made it wet. He could taste something besides the chocolate. Uly closed his eyes now, lost to the moment, licking and kissing, his tongue snaking into that small slit, sliding down to lap at the V-shaped place at the back. He licked down and around, coming up in a long swift line, engulfing, taking the length down in one long, rapid stroke. It pressed into the back of his

throat too briefly to make him choke, but he wanted it deep in his throat for longer than that. Uly had learned by example and instinct showed him the rest. He opened his throat, took a breath, and went down. Once there, he stilled.

Markis was having trouble seeing the room. As Uly enclosed him in the heat of his throat, and more than that, held him there, he blinked to clear his mind and his vision. The pulse in his cock matched his heartbeat. The heat that radiated from his skin had nothing to do with the humidity in the room. It matched the heat he could see in Ryanac's eyes. The big man stared at Uly's mouth, and Markis's gaze followed his before they glanced at each other briefly. Markis had only seen this look on Uly's face once before, and that was long ago, just before he truly kissed him for the first time. He looked adrift, at peace. Even as nature forced him to come up for air, Uly did it with a sigh that shivered over Markis's cock, into his balls, up through his stomach, his chest, and into his heart.

Those cool grey eyes opened and looked into his, and Markis lost any semblance of control. His hips thrust; noises erupted from his throat. He leaned up on one elbow and cupped Uly's head with the back of his hand while Uly licked and sucked. He didn't have to see to know what Ryanac was doing. For the second time that night, the big man lifted a cup from the burner. Markis gathered Uly up, holding him while one of Ryanac's large hands dipped down under Uly's stomach and lifted him from the water. Uly gasped, no doubt at the feeling of Ryanac lifting him, as well as the warm oil splashing down. Markis let go. Ryanac held Uly now, one hand taking the weight, the other working the oil into him. The sight of Uly's face was too much. He looked a little surprised and yet desperate at the same time. Markis grasped the back of his Samir's head, clenching his fingers into the hair just the right side of pain. When Uly did nothing to stop him, just looked at him with that cool trusting gaze, he tugged Uly's mouth back to where it belonged.

Somehow, the two men held Uly pinned. He had never doubted Ryanac's strength, but he had no say in how they held his body. If he stretched out with his feet, he could just touch the floor of the pool with his toes. Uly would have giggled if Markis hadn't made his intention clear and shoved his head down. The movement contained a suppressed kind of violence that he welcomed. Fingers pried at him, delved, opened him, widened, until he squirmed, begging with his body for more. A soft roundness replaced the fingers, and he pushed out, inviting it in. Just inside, Ryanac's cock went still, the big man waiting for Uly's body to open to his need. While Ryanac did this, Markis's hand still clasped Uly's head, but Uly had control of the motion now. He suckled and heard Markis hiss. The hand fell away from his hair. Two long, hard lengths inched into him until he could take no more. He was full.

Uly squeezed with unseen muscles and swallowed at the same time, making both men gasp. Two answering throbs pulsed through two depths of his body. He caused this. They had him pinned, but Uly had just as much control. That hard, tight rosette closed around the base of one cock while his lips closed around the other. He moaned long and deliberately, twisting his head and straining his eyes until he could see Markis gazing at him. Short, hard thrusts assaulted him from both ends and he welcomed them with an open body, mind, and heart. His cock was hard, throbbing, caressed by the water but craving a touch. They weren't going to touch him, not yet. Uly was aware of that without having to ask. This wasn't about him finding release; it was about them. They would take care of him afterwards. He didn't need reassurance to know that. They would take care of him and make him scream out their names as they did, and he was willing to scream. He wanted to cry, to sob, but it had nothing to do with pain or misery, but everything else. This was pure joy. They took only what he gave, and he was willing to give it all. Use me, use me, use me, fuck me. He had died and now he was alive. Now he understood what Antal had said to him when he had nearly died from the arrow attack: You performed this dance because it let you know you were alive.

Use me, fuck me, use .

Markis and Ryanac answered his silent plea as though he had shouted it aloud.

Markis couldn't hold back. He exchanged a look with Ryanac to let him know he was close, and then he looked back to Uly's face. He reached out and touched Uly's jaw in warning, but he already knew Uly wasn't going to pull back. As his balls drew up, Uly closed his eyes, and Markis couldn't have that.

'Don't close your eyes,' he said hoarsely, almost desperately. 'Look at me. Let me see.' If Uly couldn't do that, he would have to be the one to pull away. It had to be everything or nothing. His cock grew harder and throbbed, but he couldn't tell if that was just timing or the sight of those cool grey eyes as they opened to his plea. The pulse beat through him and he spilled. Markis half expected a look of regret to enter Uly's eyes, but instead the young man moaned. He sucked, swallowed, sucked some more, licked gently, and even dipped his head to recapture what had escaped his lips. Markis had never seen anything so erotic or beautiful in his life.

Ryanac took him away from Markis, that incredible strength easing him free of both their bodies. Water engulfed him, sluicing away the chocolate and other fluids. Uly dipped into the water, opened his mouth and let it enter, washing over his tongue. Ryanac's erection nudged his hip as the big man turned him in his arms. The expanse of Ryanac's chest filled his vision and then Uly slowly looked upward, his gaze hungrily feasting on every inch of skin until it lingered on Ryanac's mouth a moment, before finally reaching the other man's eyes.

He came for me, rescued me.

Ryanac had kept his promise, and fought for him as surely as Markis had. Even as he thought of the other man, Uly felt Markis slide his arms around him from the back, but something tenuous existed in the king's touch. At once, Uly understood. He needed to share this moment with Ryanac first, and Markis stood by giving them the time to. To what? He searched Ryanac's dark eyes and saw what Markis surely saw there every day. Ryanac's surety shone out from the man's eyes. His actuality, his confidence, his strength, his self-possession, his loyalty, and his love. Once you found a place in Ryanac's heart, Uly now understood you never had reason to doubt your place in this man's life. The love he shared with Markis was just as certain but different, somehow, less tangible.

'I want you both,' Uly suddenly said.

'You have us,' Markis whispered.

Uly shook his head, realising he would need to clarify. 'I want you both inside me.'

Ryanac's gaze flicked over Uly's shoulder, and Uly was sure he and Markis exchanged a questioning look.

'Uly.' Ryanac's voice was low, a warning against pain; Uly was certain of it. 'There is such a thing as being too greedy.' The big man gave him a way out as always, as he and Markis always would, turning it into a joke.

'I know it's possible.' Uly, shivering now, stood between the two men, even though there was no way he could be cold. He feared they might refuse him out of worry, and he was so sure, so



ready.

"You've been reading too many books," Markis said, gently kissing his shoulder and then his neck.

Uly flushed. He had indeed read about it in a book. "Please." He struggled to keep his voice steady. Surely they could taste his need. His skin was alive with sensation, with what they had done already and what he longed to do.

"Uly." Markis's voice urged caution simply by saying his name.

"I'm ready," Uly insisted. "I'm." He closed his eyes, shook in their hands, the two men having to hold him upright now. "I want this." That last left his mouth on practically a hiss. "You can prepare me. You can call the abyss."

Even as he said the words, Markis's hand slipped down, examining him. Uly hissed, rolling his hips as Markis's fingers explored. His reaction surely affected their king as Markis took him into his arms and gnawed on his neck. Leaning back against Markis, the fingers of the man's right hand delving into him, Uly closed his eyes as Markis's left hand fastened around his neck, tilting his head for a kiss. When they broke apart, Uly felt Markis's consenting nod at the side of his face just as he opened his eyes. Markis apparently intended the signal for Ryanac. The big man grinned just short of a leer, but he didn't fool Uly for a minute. The heated look he saw in the man's eyes was only partly due to lust.

"We need somewhere more comfortable."

There were plenty of comfortable places in the thermi.

They'd dipped back into the cleansing pool for a quick wash before retiring to the rest area. Here, Ryanac pulled several of the mats from the massage tables and laid them out on the floor. Uly was right in telling Markis to call the abyss. It would numb any pain, but more than that, it would coax his body into obeying so that any pain would be minimal anyway. Yet Markis didn't have to tell Ryanac that for this work, the more consumed by passion Uly was, the better and easier it would be. Uly knelt like a rag doll between them. He moved where they directed. He never even hesitated to open his mouth for Ryanac. The soft sucking sounds his mouth made kicked Markis's own desire back to life. Uly's ministrations were not what he could call tentative, but Markis knew that Uly's love for Ryanac had changed. He knew it anyway, but the way Uly used his mouth spoke of love, not sex. Markis knew the difference and so did Ryanac, even if Uly didn't consciously realise what he was doing. Clearly, Ryanac struggled to pull back, and Markis suspected it was more due to the look on Uly's face than what he was doing.

The big man lay down, taking Uly with him, pulling him into his embrace. "You've ridden me before, little one," Ryanac whispered, guiding Uly into the right position. Uly just made an "um" sound while busily sucking on one of the big man's thumbs. Markis went weak at the knees.

Markis reached for the oil Ryanac had set close by. He used it to work Uly open, his heart and cock hitching when Uly made small moans in his throat.

"You want me again?" Ryanac asked him, kissing him, and when the kiss broke, Uly let out a soft sigh.

Uly didn't know what was wrong. He couldn't believe he was behaving like this, and yet he couldn't stop, didn't want to. He was so tired of being afraid. He'd died today, and after that, what did he

have left to fear? Certainly nothing that Markis or Ryanac would do to him.

'What's wrong, Uly?'

Opening his eyes, Uly became aware of the small sounds he'd been uttering, and that he'd pulled his expression into a frown. He knew what Markis was about to say, and if not Markis, then Ryanac: that he didn't have to go through with this.

'Set me free,' he whispered before he even realised he was going to say it.

'What?' both men asked, and he could hear the puzzlement in their voices.

Uly shook his head. 'I can't explain it. Open the abyss, take us into it, and you'll know.' He hadn't quite shared the abyss the way Markis and Ryanac had, but Markis and he had made love with the comet once, and he knew. He knew it would be all right.

'Markis,' Uly pleaded. 'Trust me.'

Clearly confused and uncertain, Markis did as he asked. A moment later, Markis gasped, and his shock had nothing to do with the encircling ball of light.

'It's clean.' Markis didn't have any other words to explain how the comet felt. All he could see was Uly turning his head to look back at him. Uly and Ryanac were with him here in the abyss, and they felt the same thing. He looked at Uly, questioning.

'I told you once that the evil I felt in the abyss wasn't yours. I realised earlier when you brought me back that it was your brother's.'

'I didn't.' Markis didn't know how to complete the sentence, but here he couldn't hide his thoughts.

'No. You only gave me his life force, not the darkness inside him. Markis, don't ever think that. You can feel the truth of that here. It's clean. I'm clean. I'm free.'

He was. Markis didn't quite understand how, but all the doubts Uly had carried, all the shame, all of it had died, maybe the same time Uly had died earlier. Uly forgave Markis for Mairtin's death, and here in the abyss, the hearts of the men he loved told him he needed to do the same. He hadn't even realised he was hanging on to it, so wrapped up in righteous anger and justification had he been until now. Closing his eyes, Markis focused on the two beings here with him, sharing the abyss, and let go of his guilt and shame on an outward breath. That still didn't explain.

'I need you both,' Uly said, and rather than use words, he opened everything he was, everything he had been, everything he hoped to be. Markis shuddered.

'Damn, Uly, you're beautiful.'

He was. Uly was light and optimism, hope and expectation. Ryanac was strength, passion, steadfastness, and wisdom. Markis was. He frowned. No, he couldn't be, but the two men answered him that yes, he was; he stood for integrity, faith, truth, and love. They were complete in such a way that nothing was or should be anathema between them. They could share anything, for they had just shared their very essence, their spirits.

The physical union over the spiritual was unnecessary, but Uly craved it in such a way he felt

certain he would go out of his mind if they didn't fulfil his desire. He heard Markis say "Sshh," and Ryanac whisper, "Hush," and then he lost his mind in sensation. As well as Ryanac's cock, he could feel Markis's fingers easing their way in. Even as the penetration felt as though it might be too much, the abyss shivered over their skin. Markis shielded them, Uly could tell, for he wasn't feeling what the other two felt; not yet. He feared he might go crazy when Markis finally let the full weight of the abyss descend, and he couldn't bring himself to care.

He heard Ryanac's soft chuckle, all too aware that the big man knew his thoughts. So did Markis. They knew.

'Uly, of course I want us to wed.'

Confusion washed in. Then why.?

Ryanac laughed gently. "Uly, pay attention," Ryanac said. Uly obeyed and the answer came to him. A union such as the one he wanted usually involved all partners marrying. Markis was already wed to Tressa. For Uly to marry him, Uly would have to wed Tressa, and that wasn't what Markis wanted. Markis was right, for Uly had no wish to marry the small woman, no matter how much he liked her. Markis wanted to join with Uly and Ryanac. He'd been looking into their laws, trying to find some way that they could take vows independent of Tressa. Of course, Sardian and the council wrote the laws, so in time, anything might be possible.

Markis's laugh gently chided him for his doubts. His warmth wrapped Uly in love. Intimate flesh stretched and opened. Their skin stroked him, calming. The abyss shuddered around them, waiting, almost as pensive as the men. An alternating rhythm old as the world kicked in. Uly could have sworn that below the waist, he was on fire, but it was a good heat. He could only guess what it felt like to Markis and Ryanac rubbing, pressed so tightly together, using him to.

Markis dropped his control in a way that Uly suddenly knew he had never done before. Uly was not only himself, but he was also the two men, all three sensations overlapping, drowning them, flooding in and out of them even as their bodies erupted in the only physical way it could short of splitting. Now they all knew why Markis's skin sometimes split in a lesson. This passion was too large to contain within a single human frame.

They flooded him with liquid warmth, and it wasn't enough. It would never be enough. They quivered, spent, still aware of each other, and yet the abyss hadn't finished with Markis. The man at his back went into spasms, shuddering; only Ryanac's tight grip held him in place. The abyss spiralled, rolled Markis, dragged the man in its wake, and then waited for him. Ice encased him, and Uly could feel it, knew Ryanac's teeth ached with the pain, and then it eased, the golden spiral of stars growing tighter, pressing, constricting finally sinking into Markis's skin.

By the time Markis opened his eyes, they were lying in a huddle, aware of each other in reality and in the abyss, but also as separate beings, physically and spiritually. Uly blinked, glancing once more into the abyss. He could see the power, reach out to touch it if he wanted, but it wasn't his to command, though he could share it if that's what Markis wanted. He could also see all the knowledge of the book just out of his reach. He drew back. That knowledge was for Markis to use.

"You never choose the easy route," Ryanac remarked, clearly trying to lighten the moment.

'I didn't do that. Uly did.' Markis sounded as though he needed to think to get the words out.

"You don't have to fight it anymore," Uly said, suddenly sure that he was right. "The comet is one with you now."

Markis's chocolate brown gaze, complete with golden flecks, flicked towards his face. They stared

at each other. "You're right. It's mine now." His fingers traced Uly's face. "Thanks to you."

Uly couldn't keep the smile from his face. "It wouldn't have happened," he said, "if I hadn't realised I was where I belonged, and that where I belong is wherever the two of you are."

\* \* \* \* \*

Later, Uly moved his head from where it rested on Markis's chest and looked up to his face. He waited until Markis opened his eyes and looked down at him. "I get it now," he whispered. "Sereik, sex. How it means harmony as well as conqueror, why it's so important to the Swithin. The harmonious state of being."

"To give pleasure to each other," Ryanac said, his voice from where he lay reverberating through Uly's skin. The big man stroked his hip.

"You definitely have been reading," Markis whispered, a gentle smile on his lips.

Uly nodded. "It's entrenched. Most people are born with it, to give pleasure, to receive it. I understand it. I love it. I surrender to it." He lay his head down on Markis's chest, and closed his eyes, content.

Epilogue

The end.?

Markis looked up as Ryanac and Uly entered the room. He glanced at the blond man, but right now, his gaze had to be for Ryanac. "Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked.

The big man's face broke into a broad grin. "Are you kidding? Anything that is yours is mine, and mine is yours. You know that. We share each misery and each joy." Ryanac looked down at the struggling bundle in Markis's arms.

A small hand reached out and tugged on Uly's hair as it always did. It had been two years since someone had tried to take Uly from Markis. During the kidnapping, they had severed Uly's braid. Uly's hair had grown since then and now hung in a soft drape over his shoulders. Uly seldom braided it except at the sides to keep it from falling in his face. It was one of these slender braids that the baby tugged on as Uly leaned over. Much shorter strands that one could hardly call a fringe lay over his brow just above each eye, leaving the centre of his forehead bare. Markis always liked to place kisses there. He liked to place them everywhere else as well, of course.

There were other changes. Uly had taken to wearing rings on his fingers and toes. He had balked at the idea of having anything pierced, but he liked these adornments, and Markis liked them on him. For some peculiar reason, Samir throughout the city had taken to wearing rings halfway up the fingers in front of the second knuckle. He wasn't sure if Uly copied the trend or had started it.

He turned his head and glanced at Tressa. She sat on the couch with a soft, bemused look on her face. There was also something patronising in the look, but there was no malice. She saw him watching and lowered her gaze with a small smile. She knew that he knew her too well by now. She loved them, her "boys" as she had taken to calling them. None of them were boys, but they were hers in a strange way, although they stood separate from her as well. Tressa had a female lover in the form of Meira. What they shared she kept private, and Markis was happy to allow the relationship inasmuch as he allowed her anything. Tressa took what she wanted and it pleased him to see her happy. The three men stood apart from her as Samir. It didn't seem possible, but Ryanac's mother had been right. They now had the perfect relationship, and Tressa

had found her own happiness.

"You'll take her as yours?" Markis turned his attention back to the baby girl in his arms.

Ryanac gave him a suffering look. He didn't have to ask why. Ryanac would be as good as a father to this child. Uly just smiled, taking hold of the end of one of his slim braids and stroking the baby's face with it until she laughed. Uly's jaw was a little sharper now, older. His eyes were just as cool, but sometimes they held a sharp intelligence that hadn't existed before. Still, Markis liked Uly's eyes best when he was in bed, adrift with bliss. He loved every kiss because Uly still craved it like the first kiss.

Ryanac's face had softened by comparison. He didn't look any different, certainly not in size or in age. He just looked content. Markis had named the child Sarad after the official, but little used, name of the Swithin City because he was determined to give her all the training he could to survive anything an enemy threw at her. When Sarad had been born, and she hadn't looked anything like Uly, the council had surmised she must be Ryanac's. Even he and Uly had looked at Ryanac and Tressa in question. Even though Tressa had only slept with Markis with the intention of getting pregnant, being a girl meant that surely the child couldn't be his. That was two months ago. Sarad was Swithin all right, but only Markis went to Tressa's bed and then only occasionally. That meant..

"She's strong," he said. "Watch." Holding her in one arm, he brought up his right hand and formed a clawed circle with his fingers. He called the comet, formed in into a tight circle at his fingertips, and then formed the light into a small ball he could hold. Sarad laughed, held her hands out to the glowing light and touched its surface. Her fingers ran over it as though it were solid, which it wasn't. Uly caught Markis's gaze with his, and at Markis's nod, he pressed a finger against the ball. His finger passed into it. He drew his hand back quickly.

"It kind of tickles and stings at the same time."

"Not to me. Certainly not to her. If I let her, she could roll it along the floor and play with it." Markis let go of the light, dispersing it, and grew serious. "I hate this." He didn't have to say any more. The two men standing next to him both nodded. It was safer for her that they let people believe Ryanac was her father for now, probably for many years to come. Tressa moved towards them and took the baby for feeding. Shavar weren't able to have female children. Their offspring to date had always been males. There had never been a female Shavar in all of their history. Yet again, Markis and Tressa had broken the rules.

"Trust you to be different," Ryanac said as though he could read Markis's mind.

Markis watched the two most important women in his life move away and didn't realise his expression was pensive until Ryanac lay a hand on his shoulder, and Uly snuggled into his embrace, worming his way in against him in the way that Markis could never refuse, no matter how stressed or how tired he felt.

"She'll be fine," Uly whispered.

"She has three fathers, not one," Ryanac said. "She has us as teachers."

"She has us to look after her, and she will live the Swithin way of life." Uly's hands moved up Markis's back, and his head tilted. Cool grey eyes looked into his as Ryanac enclosed both of them in his arms; the guard was the only one of them who could do that with room to spare.

"Tell me, Ryanac," Markis said. "Do we belong to each other, or do the two of us belong to you?" Ryanac laughed. Uly searched Markis's face, stroked his lips, his gaze telling him everything was going to be all right.

"I love you," Uly whispered. Ryanac chuckled. Between them, no matter what they might face, somehow these men always managed to make Markis smile and lighten his heart.

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## Glossary

Markis -- pronounced Mar-ques (Marques: Portuguese--nobleman) Shavar (Hebrew--comet)

Uly -- pronounced Yuli (Ulysses: Latin--wrathful) Samir (Arabic--entertaining companion)

Ryanac -- pronounced Ryan-Knack (Ryan: Irish--little king) Silas (Latin--forest dweller)

S-names are designations rather than names.

Swithin -- strong

Simeon -- little hyena (a scavenger)

Sidon -- a male nightgown

Sidony -- a female nightgown

Safiyah -- best friend

Samir -- entertaining companion

Shaylah -- blind (someone who refuses to see)

Dai'mean -- soother

Ga'lin -- healer

La Ruan -- thief (insult)

Semari -- captain (industrious leader)

Sedryche -- line shieldsman (battle chieftain)

Seberto -- flank shield (glorious)

Sarris -- reserve shield and troops (troops of a fort)

Sarvis -- spearman (skilled)  
Serrick -- spearman (mighty)  
Sarrette -- spearman (brave)  
Serves -- polearms (army warrior)  
Saldorra -- archers (winged gift)  
Sedek -- successful (in training)  
Sonndre -- personal defender  
Sardian -- king  
Sardia -- queen  
Serelia -- pregnancy  
Sereik -- conqueror (love and sex)  
Shere -- beloved; a plea  
Sema -- tame (acceptance)  
Semaris -- taming (a sexual practice)  
Saysiah -- resurrection  
Sarad -- survivor; also the official name of the Swithin city and the name of Markis's daughter  
THE END

Sharon Maria Bidwell

Sharon Maria Bidwell was born one New Year's Eve within the London area. Since having her first short story accepted and the editor announcing her as "a writer who is going places," her work -- poems, short stories and articles -- have appeared steadily in print and online publications. Previously, she kept the erotic side of her writing separate. The genre appealed, though, as it allows her the freedom to create something more expressive, less oppressive. She firmly believes that having a chance at such "free reign" reflects favourably in her work. It has always been a part of her personality in that she likes surprising and delighting people. She links her most favoured and often most successful work closely to fantasy, though her writing crosses genres.

She loves reading, the movies and going to the theatre and spending time with a few very special

people. Her friends are waiting to discover something she isn't good at. She often thinks about moving but lives primarily in a world of her own. Visit this diverse writer's site at <http://www.sharonbidwell.co.uk>, or her MySpace page at <http://www.myspace.com/aonia>.