

WISHBONE

LAUREN P. BURKA

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Wishbone

TOP SHELF

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Chapter One

Wishbone's accustomed alley smelled of the catch dragged from the harbor to the fishmongers. To be fair, so did most of his customers. The only light spilled from the Royal around the corner, where the beer was cheap, yet so foul that Wishbone couldn't bring himself to drink it. The alley was not well-traveled after the sun went down. Wishbone could rely upon two or three other boys who worked within shouting distance to come running if a customer gave him trouble. Lane kicked like a cart horse, and Kestrel (who only passed as a boy if he wore makeup on his wrinkles and kept to the shadows) could use the knife he carried.

The crowd that spilled from the Royal's narrow front door swirled as a covered coach and pair nudged around the corner. There were no arms painted on the coach's sides, but graceful construction and the beautiful matched pair of bays signaled money. The Royal's clientele moved toward the coach. Then, realizing that the glass-shielded coach lamps did them no favors, they scrambled back from the illumination. The gleaming horses' hooves slipped and sparked on the cobbles, but neither the coach nor the man driving it seemed lost on the narrow street. The gray-cloaked coachman snaked the driving whip gently over one mahogany flank, indicating, perhaps, what he might do to any who impeded their progress. The lamps were bright enough to lay bare Wishbone's territory all the way to the end, and he was not pleased with the exposure.

The coach halted opposite the barrel Wishbone used for a seat. The bays pricked their ears and glanced about in disapproval. The door opened, and out stepped a swirl of black: a cloak like folded wings, a wide-brimmed hat, gloves, boots, and layers of fine cloth that reflected or absorbed the faint light, whispering of money.

He was tall. That much could be seen through his enveloping clothes. He moved with easy balance over the slick cobblestone way. The cold made his breath into a jet of vapor. His hair was thick, curled, and dark with tiny, gleaming flecks of gray. What could be seen of his complexion was darker than usual, like a heavily-tanned sailor's, only silk-smooth. His eyes had irises the color of violets and no visible whites; the pupils were slit up and down, like an animal's.

Wishbone shivered. Did the gloves conceal fingers with extra joints, as rumor said? A fragrance emanated from Wishbone's guest. Musky and spicy, as if a predator beast had slept in a bed of rare herbs, it was detectable even over the foul air of the alley. Unlike every other customer who had come to Wishbone, this one appeared neither ashamed nor furtive.

"You're a shih-aan," said Wishbone.

"And you are a human," said the shih-aan. He smiled, revealing the point of a fang. "I offer you my hospitality tonight."

Wishbone cocked his head. "Is that all you offer?" he asked.

The shih-aan's smile did not waver. "Twenty-five crescents."

It was a respectable sum for a night's work, though not as much as Wishbone might expect from a client who wore such clothes and commanded such a coach. But whores who left the relative safety of the docks for the wealthier parts of town did not always return. What could his friends do then, tell the city guard?

He'd heard stories about what shih-aan did to humans. Plenty of men would swear they knew of someone who'd been gutted and cut into steaks by one of the demon creatures. If you pressed them about it, though, it always happened back during the war, and there were soldiers who had collections of shih-aan ears taken on the battlefields of Feras-aan. Since the treaty, a few shih-aan had always lived in Bronlyn Harbor, trading in fine cloth, building ships and not, generally, eating anyone. Still, there were stories.

Wishbone knew he should decline. Kestrel, who had lived so long through an abundance of caution, would never have considered the offer.

On the other hand, storms had kept the fishing boats to harbor for the past three days, and the sailors and fishermen were saving their coins for hot stew and beer. Wishbone's purse was flat. What the inhuman customer might do to him was theoretical, whereas his fate at the hands of the dock patrol if he didn't have bribe money tomorrow was more certain.

"Forty crescents," said Wishbone.

Gloved in black velvet, the shih-aan's fingers touched Wishbone's cheek. "I am intrigued," he said. "Why do you think that you merit such a sum?"

Keeping his eyes on the shih-aan's, Wishbone kissed the gloved fingertips. "Find out," he said, "or get out of my alley."

That earned him another smile. "What is your name?" asked the shih-aan.

"Wishbone."

"Forty crescents," the client agreed. "You may call me Sir." For so much silver, the shih-aan could call himself King Rendel the Third if he wanted.

Wishbone left at the heels of the shih-aan, equally hooked by money and fascination. The cloaked driver held the coach door for him as if he was someone important. Sir followed him inside and latched the door with those impossibly graceful hands.

As the carriage negotiated the narrow streets between the dock and the Hill, Wishbone tried to relax into the fine leather seat and act like he did this sort of thing every day. Sir clasped long-fingered hands upon one knee and appeared to doze. Wishbone tried not to stare. He kept

glancing under his lashes at the demon who had bought him for the evening, looking for signs he had made an irretrievable mistake.

The carriage door opened in the secluded courtyard of a detached, two-story house with a garden gone dead for the season. Lamplight brightened windows on both floors. Stone gargoyles lurked amongst the cornices, casting disturbing shadows into the trees.

"Inside," said the shih-aan.

They entered though the front door. A servant bowed and took the shih-aan's cloak and hat. Young and male, neither shih-aan nor human, he had mahogany skin and black hair exactly the same color as the bay horses. His ears were slightly pointed. He was strikingly handsome, and Wishbone wondered why, with such a dish at home, the shih-aan fished for meals down by the docks.

"Good hunting, tonight, Sir?" asked the servant, in passable Bronlyn tongue.

Sir lifted the servant's chin with one finger and kissed him shamelessly on the mouth. The ardor and the fearlessness of that kiss went straight to Wishbone's loins. The two spoke for a moment in a tongue made all of sibilants and liquid trills. The shih-aan patted Wishbone on the shoulder. "Follow Terefar. He will guide you to a bath." Sir turned his back and mounted the stairs, disappearing upward past a painted landscape and a gilt-framed mirror.

Wishbone stared at Terefar, feeling smug, because no matter what Wishbone smelled like, Sir had chosen him for the night. The servant dropped his eyes, took up a candle from a claw-footed table, and opened a door. Wishbone hurried after him toward the back of the house.

The bathroom had a tiled floor and a half-filled sunken tub. A stove against the back wall held three steaming kettles. Terefar lit a lamp that hung from a wall bracket and emptied the kettles one at a time into the bath.

"Please," he said, and pointed to a tray of soaps and oils, a robe hanging on a hook, slippers, and a pile of towels on a little table. "Leave your clothes here. They will be returned." He spoke hesitantly, as if he had to think before pronouncing each word.

Wishbone waited until Terefar had closed the door before he stripped down and dipped a toe into the bath. The water was pleasantly warm. He slid in and grabbed for a bar of soap that smelled of lavender. The soap foamed between his hands, and Wishbone slid it all over his body as the luxurious water soothed away the late autumn chill.

He unbraided his hair and opened a tiny bottle of expensive-smelling oil. Ducking his head under the water, he scrubbed his scalp with the oil. Dirt and dead hair floated on the water's surface.

By then the bath was beginning to cool. He climbed out and picked up one of the towels. He dried himself completely, then wrapped the plush robe around his body and stuck his feet in the slippers. There was a wooden comb, a razor, and a tooth stick on the table beneath a mirror. He

worked the comb through his pale hair until he'd got most of the tangles out, then set it back in a braid. His three chin hairs hadn't re-emerged since the last shave two days ago at the public baths, so he ignored the razor.

Wishbone looked at himself in the tall mirror. The public baths had mirrors, too, but usually he was in too much of a hurry to take in the details of his person. His face was thin, as was his body, hidden in the oversized robe, and an old scar made his upper lip look crooked. His eyes were a pale blue, not exotic and green like Lane's. With his hair tied back in a braid, his ears stuck out. He undid the braid, towelled his hair dry, and used the comb to straighten the part. Finally, he made use of the tooth stick, which tasted of cloves.

Opening the door, Wishbone found Terefar waiting with his candle.

"Follow, please," said the servant. He turned without waiting, and Wishbone hurried after him, down the hall and into the kitchen. An enormous, iron stove radiated heat, warming the air and the stone floor. Copper pots hung in ordered rows from hooks on the walls. Rows of little bottles with unreadable labels filled the shelves. A bent old woman with dark skin and pointed ears like Terefar's was placing a plate and goblet on the table. But for her exotic looks, this could have been any well-appointed kitchen.

The plate held slices of beef cut thin and laid out like a fan around a small mound of mashed parsnips. The food was hot, though the meat was pink and bloody on the inside. It tasted pleasantly of pepper. Wishbone ate every scrap before taking up the goblet. The wine was cool, honey-colored and sweet, as unlike the sour beer he drank at the dockside taverns as well water was unlike the sea. Wishbone swallowed it down and felt the warmth penetrate his insides.

"You are finished?" asked Sir's pretty servant, who had stood behind Wishbone's chair the whole time. "Then come with me."

They passed up a narrow back stair to a carpeted hallway. The walls were covered with heavy tapestries woven with pictures of human lords and ladies at the hunt, in their gardens, dancing. Terefar knocked on one of the doors, waited for an answer, then opened it and ushered Wishbone inside.

Wishbone expected a bedroom. Instead, this looked like a drawing room. Sir lay back on a brocade-covered lounge chair, reading a book. Freed from the hat, his curled hair spilled down past his shoulders in a thick fall of darkness. The small amount of skin that showed glowed a burnished tan in the light of the roaring fire. The door closed behind Wishbone with a click that made him jump. Sir smiled, this time showing both canines, so long and sharp that Wishbone wondered how he shut his mouth without puncturing his lips. Wishbone noticed the coils of rope on the floor next to Sir's chair. They worried him. He'd been bound by clients before. Usually they displayed more enthusiasm than skill, and he had to pretend that he couldn't get loose. Sir struck him as the sort who wouldn't use something he couldn't use well, though.

"Your name is not a common one amongst your people," said Sir, marking the book and placing it on an end table. "Tell me how you acquired it."

Wishbone tugged the robe more snugly around his body and looked away from Sir's inhuman face. "There's a child's game. The breast bone of a goose or a turkey is shaped like a bow. One child grasps each end, and they make wishes. Secret wishes. Then they pull on the bone until it breaks. The child with the biggest piece gets their wish.

"There's a trick to it. If you let the other person pull while you hold your end steady, you almost always get the bigger piece. I used to win all the time, and my little sister would cry and tell my father I'd cheated. He patted me on the head and called me his Wishbone." Sorrow like a physical blow to Wishbone's breast came with the memories of his father calling him something else when the man had stumbled on Wishbone and Athel the smith's son behind the barn. He mastered himself, but it appeared that the shih-aan's predator eyes missed nothing.

"What did you wish for?" asked the shih-aan.

Wishbone shook his head. "It might still come true."

The shih-aan tugged his gloves free and fanned his fingers so that Wishbone could see the extra joints on each one. "Perhaps even tonight. Remove the robe."

Wishbone untied the belt and let the robe drop to the floor. It felt decadent to be naked. Even in warm weather, his alleyway business was transacted half-clothed. Only a rich man could afford a fire like this in his private parlor.

"Turn around."

Wishbone wondered if the shih-aan liked what he saw. How did a skinny dock whore measure up to the well-groomed, exotic creature he had met downstairs?

"Spread your legs. Bend over and part your buttocks with your hands."

Shivering, Wishbone complied. This wasn't what he'd expected at all, and he kept the agreed sum in mind as he displayed himself in this ridiculous manner. The fire-lit air stroked his arse-hole, still damp from the bath.

"Your obedience pleases me," said Sir. "You may approach."

What a pompous ass, thought Wishbone. But his intended retort died as he turned around and saw that pointed smile again. He was exactly where no whore wanted to be -- in a private home on the Hill, naked, with a pile of rope and a client toothed like a bay shark.

The shih-aan placed a pillow on the floor next to the lounge chair and directed Wishbone to kneel upon it. Sir clasped his warm hands at the small of Wishbone's back, restraining Wishbone gently while leaning over to press his lips against Wishbone's throat. A line of kisses burned across Wishbone's collarbone and up the left side of his neck. He squirmed, then sank his face in the shih-aan's dense hair as the tongue-tip probed his ear, painting it in little spirals until the

pointed tongue reached the center. The touch brought to mind other, more intense penetrations, but offered no hope of release. Wishbone moaned in pleasure and confusion, drowning in the velvet-clad limbs and rich scent of the shih-aan's body. Teeth caught his ear lobe and bit down. Startled, he tried to pull backward. The arms tightened. The shih-aan was at least as strong as any human who had ever before embraced Wishbone.

"I will not injure you," Sir whispered into his ear. "But you are wisest not to struggle."

The shih-aan brushed his lips against Wishbone's. There was no hint of stubble, and Sir's face was as smooth as a young girl's. He ran his tongue under Wishbone's upper lip and held it in his teeth. Fear and arousal mixed deep in Wishbone's belly, each enhancing the other.

Wishbone found himself drenched with curiosity over what Sir hid beneath those fine clothes. Would there be extra nipples, as the rumors said? Did Sir have pubic hair like a man's? Fur on his body? Was his cock long, or thick, or both? Where would he want to put it? Wishbone's own cock stirred as the shih-aan's clever fingers stroked his body and his imagination.

Sir's tongue slid deeper into Wishbone's mouth, while those fingers pinched his nipples. Wishbone felt himself sag helplessly in the shih-aan's arms. He leaned his forehead against Sir's knees, while the long, long fingers combed through his hair.

Taking both of Wishbone's hands in one of his own, Sir pulled Wishbone up and over his lap so that the young man's arms dangled on one side of the lounge chair and his bare legs on the other. Wishbone felt the fingers covering every inch of his skin from nape to buttocks, pausing to trace the pale lines of ribs, the knobs of spine. His prick, pressed down against the side of the chair, went as stiff as a mast. This was nothing like the brutish couplings of his trade. There was a potent sweetness to the shih-aan's demon hands, and a lack of haste, as if Wishbone's pleasure was far more interesting to the shih-aan than his own. The fire warmed Wishbone's rear, while his face remained exposed to the room's cool drafts. If it wasn't for the growing pressure in his loins, he would gladly have enjoyed being stroked this way until dawn.

One long finger came to rest at the very base of his spine. Wishbone squirmed, but a fist tangled in his hair, holding him fast. The finger stroked his cleft until he bit his lip to keep from whimpering. The finger retreated suddenly, and Wishbone heard the sound of a jar opening. When the finger returned, it spread something cool and silky into his cleft, making lazy circles, pausing occasionally to penetrate the opening by no more than a single joint.

Wishbone must have made a sound, because the shih-aan laughed. "What a greedy little arse you have," he said.

"Yes, Sir," mumbled Wishbone into the side of the lounge chair.

The shih-aan slid out from under Wishbone and turned him onto his back. Taking up a rope, the shih-aan looped it around Wishbone's wrist. Wishbone tensed. He pulled against the iron grip of the shih-aan's hands. Sir brought Wishbone's wrist to his mouth and fluttered his tongue against the pulse point. Not a command, but a seduction, the insidious pleasure stole all resistance from

Wishbone. The shih-aan bound Wishbone's right wrist to his right ankle and his left wrist to his left ankle, folding his knees up and spreading his legs wide. Wishbone's buttocks rested at the edge of the lounge chair. Sir rolled up one sleeve, dipped his fingers into the jar, and reached down between Wishbone's parted legs. A log in the fire popped, and Sir's eyes glowed red.

This time, the slight penetration by a single finger made Wishbone cry out. It was delicious, but it wasn't enough, not even when a second finger joined the first, and then a third. He kept his eyes on the shih-aan's and tried to beg for more that way. Sir's fingers pressed against Wishbone's insides in a way that a cock never had. There had to be more, and if Wishbone didn't get it, he thought he would die of disappointment. And more he got, though not as he expected. Sir opened him wider with one powerful hand. His arm muscles bulged in his dark velvet clothes. The supple, greased fingers stirred Wishbone until he couldn't help but lift his hips and force himself down onto them. His insides rippled, and Sir twisted, and then, much to Wishbone's surprise, the entire hand slid inside.

Wishbone panted. Sweat streamed down his armpits. His defeated ring kissed the shih-aan's wrist. Wishbone had never felt so completely filled, or so helpless. Why wasn't he the one giving pleasure? Their eyes were locked together, and Wishbone felt as if that gaze was also a penetration. The fingers curled into a fist that rocked inside him, forcing clear fluid from his stone-hard prick and wordless cries from his mouth. Sir smiled down at Wishbone, lips parted as if to drink in his cries, eyes slightly unfocused with concentration. His fangs gleamed.

Without breaking the rhythm of their coupling, the shih-aan eased himself down on one knee and bent his head forward so that his long curls spilled over Wishbone's loins. Hidden behind the curtain of hair, his breath caressed Wishbone's tight, furry scrotum and throbbing cock. The tip of a pointed tongue traced the head.

Wishbone felt lost. He'd been more in control bent over a barrel than trapped by a hand that filled him and a tight set of lips that threatened to empty him. Sir's throat tightened on Wishbone's cock. Then Wishbone felt the points of the shih-aan's fangs against his shaft, and he panicked.

His body tensed as his legs kicked against the ties. He tried to pull himself backward, away from the teeth, but the knuckles jammed against his wide-stretched ring. He groaned, this time in pain. Tears leaked from the corners of his eyes.

Sir released Wishbone's prick with a flourish of tongue. "I warned you not to struggle," he said from behind his hair. "I gave you my word that I would not hurt you. Do not anger me by causing me to break it."

Wishbone exhaled, feeling the tears spill down as his lower body unclenched by tiny degrees. It was not the threat that made him do it, but the steel in the voice. Sir spoke as if it was impossible that he could be disobeyed, thus Wishbone gave him obedience. The merciless hand slid deeper in, as if it could split Wishbone in two, and the fingers, with their extra joints, did things to him that no human could achieve. Lips brushed Wishbone's prick, which had grown, if anything, even harder. Sir's other hand worked on a nipple that tightened between the tips of his fingers. Wishbone felt the tight sheath of Sir's throat take him in, while the tongue probed the root of his

cock. The whole time, the fist that impaled him continued the motion like a boat riding low waves before a storm, pressing each time against the secret places inside Wishbone's body. The room filled with Wishbone's rising cries and the wet sounds of sucking.

When the storm broke, Wishbone screamed fit to bring the dock patrol down upon their heads, if they hadn't been locked in a house on the Hill, in a room with no witness but the fire. His nether muscles fought to expel the hand that only pressed more deeply and wrung more desperate spasms from his cock, spilling the sea into the shih-aan's mouth.

When Wishbone's throat had gone all hoarse from crying out, when his balls had emptied and his muscles had turned to jelly, Sir slid a hand free and untied the binding on Wishbone's legs. He opened a dresser drawer and brought out a towel that he used to wipe down his hand and Wishbone's arse. He took a soft woolen blanket from the same dresser and laid it over Wishbone's body, then placed another log on the fire. Wishbone was asleep before Sir left the room and only woke at dawn when Terefar brought him his clothes and a small, leather purse with more than forty crescents.

Tonner was awake when Wishbone knocked on his door.

"You look like you've had a night to remember," said the burly sail-maker.

Wishbone staggered theatrically inside the tiny room and fell back on the bed.

Tonner laughed, but softly. The walls were thin between apartments, and not everyone would have awakened yet. "Would you like some tea while you tell me about it?"

"Please."

Tonner poured two cracked ceramic mugs and handed one to Wishbone.

The sail-maker had close-set eyes, broad shoulders and a broken nose. He allowed Wishbone to sleep in his bed during the day in exchange for certain favors. One of them was a narrative of the previous evening's adventures.

Wishbone stared at the water-stained ceiling. "I went up the Hill and got fucked senseless by a shih-aan."

"By the Unnamed Gods, Wishbone," Tonner sputtered into his tea. "What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking about this week's hush money."

"I'd have loaned you the coin."

"That's very sweet of you, but I know you don't have any coin to speak of. If you did, you

wouldn't be re-using those tea leaves."

"Well, there's truth to what you say," Tonner admitted. "You survived. Tell me all about it. I heard that shih-aan have great big spikes on their yards."

Wishbone opened his mouth and hesitated. The truth seemed unreal now. At the same time, his feelings were so tangled that he wasn't sure he wanted to share them with anyone. He felt cheated that the shih-aan had given him no moment of sweet weakness to savor, and Sir's body remained a clothed mystery. So he made up a tale in which all the usual perversions were indulged, where he'd ridden a cock (unspiked) instead of a fist, and that of prodigious size indeed to account for how sore he was.

"Certainly too sore for another ride this morning," he concluded.

"You must be dead," said Tonner. "I'll call a priest."

"I'm serious!"

"It'd be the first time. Now be good and turn over."

Tonner's cock wasn't that long, but it was thick. Wishbone winced at first at the friction in his well-used ring, but soon found himself struggling as always to take Tonner's meaty thing further in while he worked his own cock with one spit-slicked hand. He arched his back and bit the bedclothes to muffle his cries. The spilling, though, was a pale echo of the one given by the shih-aan. Probably Wishbone was just tired. He pulled up his trousers, and something fell from the pocket.

"What's that?" asked Tonner, as he settled his own clothes.

"A bonus for a job well done." He picked up the comb. It appeared to have been carved from a golden seashell. The ripples in it fascinated the eye and pleased the hand. A graduated series of purple stones were set along the back so that they caught the light. "They left me alone long enough to search through some drawers, and I found this on the bottom where it might not be missed." He offered it to Tonner. "Looks like a better prize than the tin ring I lifted last week."

Tonner took the comb in his hand, then dropped it and backed away. His eyes opened wide. "That thing is cursed."

"This?" Wishbone picked up the comb again. He felt nervous when he closed his fingers on it, but that was entirely reasonable given that he'd stolen it.

"I don't know how you can stand to touch it," said Tonner, "But I want it out of the apartment immediately."

"Can it wait until after I've slept?" asked Wishbone. He was in a hurry to move the comb, as well, but Davvy wouldn't have his booth open until much later.

Tonner shifted from foot to foot. "I'll allow that," he said finally. "But I want it gone. Now I've got to open the shop."

"Hold up." Wishbone fished in his purse for a crescent. "Buy us some new tea, hm?"

Chapter Two

Wishbone slept until sunset. He visited Vessa, the laundress, because his clothes really were getting a bit rank. After he'd paid her and redeemed his other outfit, he went to see Davvy at the fence's booth in Three Pillars Market.

Davvy was locked in negotiations with a woman of a certain age over a pair of earrings. Wishbone had a seat on a stool and waited for the haggling to wrap up. Davvy adored haggling, almost as much as he adored the smooth, heavy coins brought by his trade. Wishbone had trusted him to dispose of similar bonuses in the past. When at last the woman accepted Davvy's price and took her coins away, Wishbone placed the comb on the wooden counter.

"How much for it?" he asked.

Davvy picked up the comb and squinted at it. Unlike Tonner, he didn't drop it. Neither did he look pleased.

"This is shih-aan work," he said.

"If you say so," answered Wishbone.

Davvy sighed. "They don't sell their jewels, at least not often. There is so little shih-aan work on the market that any buyer will recognize its unusual nature and ask questions. I'm sorry, Wishbone, but I can't handle this for you. Perhaps if you bring it to one of the places on Pin Street, you'll find a jeweler who will buy it for the metal and gems."

Wishbone felt a sudden twinge of anxiety at the thought of the comb pulled apart, the gold gone one way, the gemstones -- the color of the shih-aan's eyes -- gone another. "It's worth more whole," he said.

"It's worth nothing whole," snapped Davvy. "If you show this to anyone else, I'd thank you not to mention my name."

Wishbone thanked Davvy politely and didn't start cursing until he was well out of earshot.

By then, the Church bells were tolling the end of services, which was about when he should be in the alley waiting for his regular customers to arrive. But it occurred to him that hanging out in the same spot might not be healthy if the shih-aan missed the comb. He'd have to find a new place to lurk and pass the word on through the other dockside whores so that business could find him. Meanwhile, he had plenty of crescents to spend, so taking a night off wouldn't hurt.

The early crowd had thinned out at The Scuppers, so there was a spot at a bench by the fire. Wishbone paid for a bowl of cod stew and a mug of beer. The stew was nearly tasteless, but hot, and the beer was, as usual, nearly sour. Wishbone had been tempted to cross over to Weaver's Market and buy something better for supper, but that could wait until he found a fence less skittish than Davvy. He had tucked the comb in the inside pocket of his coat and tried not to

think much about where he'd hide it if he couldn't move it quickly.

He was scraping the last bit of potato from the bottom of the wooden bowl when a shadow fell over him and hands gripped each of his shoulders.

"Wishbone, my lad! We've been looking all over for you."

Wishbone's stomach clenched. "Captain Gertom. A pleasure to see you."

"You think so?" said Gertom, an officer of the Dockside Patrol. "It's more a pleasure for some than for others." His subordinates laughed. The three men clanked when they moved. Armored in chain mail, helmets, and steel-toed boots, they carried swords, though Gertom's looked so rusty that the most damage it could do was probably lockjaw.

The landlord busied himself drying a tray of mugs while the customers who were still awake and sober got their hats and coats and headed for the door.

Gertom stepped in front of Wishbone and sat down on one of the abandoned benches. The pair of flunkies tightened their grips.

Gertom was short but broad, with a pig's nose, little piggy eyes, unshaven jowls and fists like hams. He thought he was both funnier and more intelligent than he really was, but neither mattered since anyone who didn't laugh at his jokes would be crawling home. Even Wishbone managed a weak chuckle.

Gertom's matched uniformed flunkies followed him precisely because of his talent for squeezing money out of the people he was supposed to protect, and out of a shared taste for the painful mayhem Gertom inflicted on anyone who feared the law more than its rogue agent.

"Let's have our cut, lad."

Wishbone reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of royals and handed them back over his shoulder. It was more than he owed, but maybe the shiny metal would distract Gertom.

"Hm. Where did you get that? I think we'll be taking this out back. Men?"

Wishbone bit back a curse. He'd mistaken Gertom's mood; perhaps it hadn't mattered once he caught the dock patrol's attention. If he'd gone to Weaver's Market they might have forgotten him, or they might have arrested him for obscene acts on his return instead. No matter what happened now, Wishbone would probably survive it if he was sufficiently entertaining.

The two guard lieutenants grasped Wishbone by the upper arms and pulled him to his feet. He dropped the bowl, which went spinning into a corner. The bench fell over, and he tripped on it as they walked him to the back door. Gertom grabbed a torch from the bracket. Wishbone's pulse pounded in his throat.

But for the torch light, the alley behind The Scuppers was pitch-dark. A man passing by on the side street ducked back to use the tavern's open privy. He stared at the three guards and the one captive whore, then hastily shoved his prick back in his pants and went in search of a more private place to piss.

The men holding Wishbones arms tightened their grips so that the bones seemed to grind together. Gertom transferred the torch to his left hand and used the right to punch Wishbone in the gut. Retching, Wishbone sagged to his knees, but the men on either side pulled him back up and slammed him back against the wall.

"Think you're pretty smart, don't you?" asked Gertom.

Wishbone drew in a shuddering breath. "No, Captain."

"Hiding from us was the stupidest damn thing you could have done, you filthy pervert."

Wishbone opened his mouth, but Gertom stepped back and kicked him in the balls, moving to one side as Wishbone lost his supper.

Gertom's ham hands scrabbled at Wishbone's belt. "I don't know where you got a fat purse like this," said the captain, "but it's safer with us." More laughter came from his men. "Stand up straight when I'm talking to you, filth."

Gasping for breath and shaking, Wishbone straightened his knees. His guts and his loins screamed at him to curl up in a ball before he got hit again, but he did not dare.

Gertom's fist slammed into Wishbone's left eye, bouncing the back of his head off the bricks. Lightning split his vision, then everything went mercifully dark.

Tonner's jaw dropped, and his eyes opened wide like little moons.

"Who did this to you? Was it the demon?"

Wishbone walked inside and sat down carefully on the edge of the bed. His left eye was swollen shut, and he ached all over, including in some places where they must have kicked him after he passed out. He'd spent the night out cold behind the Scuppers and only got to his feet, soaked with dew and covered in bruises, at dawn.

"No. Men. Dock Patrol."

Tonner cursed, then opened up the stove and tossed another precious piece of wood inside. "I have to run to the shop," he said, "but I'll grab you a clean bucketful from the pump before I go. I've still got the crescent you gave me. I'll stop by the apothecary's on the way home."

"Bless you," said Wishbone.

After Tonner brought the bucket upstairs, Wishbone stuck his shirt in it and held the wet cloth to his eye. It stung. He managed to drink some of the water, then heated the rest in the kettle and used it to wash as best he could. Wishbone curled up shivering under Tonner's blankets, but couldn't find a position that didn't hurt.

Tonner returned at sunset with a pair of baked potatoes, some willow bark, and a jar of something that smelled like camphor. Wishbone ate his dinner while Tonner rubbed the ointment into the parts that he couldn't reach himself.

"I've had worse," said Wishbone. "No, really, this time I'm not pissing blood. But I won't be able to work until my face heals up."

Tonner said nothing, but Wishbone filled in the bits the other man wasn't saying while he drank down a mug of bitter willow bark tea. He could presume upon Tonner's generosity only so far. The medicines would have used up that single coin, and Tonner didn't earn enough to feed them both for long. Wishbone had left the comb wrapped in the shredded remains of his coat at the bottom of a garbage pile. He wondered what would happen if he tried to sell it again, or if Tonner had been right the first time and the thing was cursed.

"I have an idea," said Wishbone.

"I'd be glad to hear it, because I've got no ideas at all."

Wishbone shook his head. "I was mostly thinking out loud. But if you would let me hole up here for the next two days until the worst of it passes, I'll set things right after that. I'll sleep on the floor when you're here."

Tonner shrugged. "You can stay. I just hope you're not planning to do anything stupid."

"I'm done with stupid for a long time," Wishbone lied.

The cold drizzle soaked Wishbone thoroughly before he got to the spot where he'd hidden the comb that dawn, so he wouldn't have to take it back to Tonner's. He was not surprised to find the terrible thing untouched. Wrapping his arms around himself, he wished the coat was salvageable, but it was ripped, soiled, and soaking wet, too miserable for anyone to have even touched. By the time he'd reached Bowknot street, the unofficial lower border of the Hill, the drizzle had turned to a lashing rain. His bruises stung, then sort of went numb, and his left knee clicked like an old man's.

He'd been in the carriage the last time, but he had a pretty good sense of direction. Wishbone trudged on past the walls and gates of fine houses, pausing at crossroads to wipe the rain from his eyes and check where he was. In a way, the weather was fortunate. The only people out were

in a hurry to get inside, and no one stopped to ask Wishbone what such a miserable creature as himself was doing in such a nice part of town.

The gargoyles looked less scary in the rain. Their noses and eyes dripped as if they'd all caught cold. As would Wishbone soon enough if he didn't get out of the weather.

He took a deep breath, gathered his courage, stiffened his resolve, did all those other little things that didn't in fact help much, and pulled the bell rope.

After a short wait, Terefar answered the door. The dark-skinned servant stared with his mouth open, then shut it and put on a perfectly blank face just a moment later.

"May we help you?" he asked.

"It's me, Wishbone, from three nights ago. I must speak with Sir."

"Sir is not here."

Wishbone bit his lip. "Please, let me stay until he returns. I won't drip on anything."

Later, Wishbone was to learn that he owed a lot to Terefar's being unaccustomed to making decisions. "If you'll come around the back," he said, slowly and precisely, "I'll let you into the kitchen."

The old woman was baking bread. Sitting in a chair next to the vast oven quickly took the chill away and nearly dried Wishbone's clothes. Terefar brought him a towel, and the cook, grumbling, made him a mug of hot milk. The light was seeping away from the glass windows before the sound of carriage wheels on gravel interrupted the steady beat of rain on the roof. The front door opened, and Wishbone heard Terefar speaking in that other language and Sir's unmistakable low voice answering the same way. Wishbone shivered for reasons that had nothing to do with cold.

The day vanished entirely before Terefar returned to the kitchen.

"Sir will see you," he said. "Please follow me."

In the same drawing room, Sir sat on the same lounge chair, reading what might be the same book. He placed the book on the end table and looked Wishbone up and down, paying special attention to the black eye, which was starting to turn green around the edges.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?" he asked.

The memory of lying impaled on that couch returned with such force that Wishbone forgot everything he was going to say. Instead he dropped to his knees and held out the comb.

Only the crackling fire broke the long silence. Sir got to his feet at last, crossed the room, and

plucked the comb from Wishbone's fingers.

"Shame on me," he said. "I didn't even notice it was missing."

Wishbone said, "Someone told me it was cursed. Did it make me return it?"

"Indeed. It was a gift from a lover, and the spell against theft is part of the craftsmanship. There are three conditions necessary to break the spell. You have fulfilled the first by returning the comb."

"And the second?"

"You must surrender yourself to the authorities and accept whatever punishment they decree."

"No!" Wishbone jumped to his feet, then slumped back down, dizzy with fatigue and pain. "Do you have any idea what they will do to me?"

"I do not," said Sir, "and yet, it would not matter if I did. I have no power over the spell."

"If they find out what I am and why you brought me home, they'll bind my legs together and dump me in the harbor. And they'll throw you in afterwards."

Sir sniffed. "Almost every shih-aan in Bronlyn Harbor bears diplomatic credentials. No one under the King's authority will ask such questions."

"There must be another way. There *has* to be."

"You would be welcome to seek it on your own, but spells are not known for their patience, or their precise aim. Instead, I suggest you accept an invitation to stay the night, though in light of your past behavior, you'll sleep locked in the woodshed. Tomorrow, I'll bring you to the House of Justice, and you'll put this behind you."

Wishbone wrapped his arms around his knees and wept, silently, but with all his remaining strength. It felt horrible. He hadn't even cried when father cracked him across the face with the rake handle and he'd run away without any shoes.

What had he expected from the shih-aan? A reward for returning something he stole? At least he'd believed that things would stop getting worse.

Sir pulled a rope, and a bell sounded somewhere in the house. A moment later, Terefar appeared, conversed briefly with Sir, then disappeared and returned some time later with a tray. Sir took a heavy mug and a handkerchief from the tray and offered them to Wishbone.

Wishbone blew his nose on the handkerchief and sniffed at the mug. It contained hot, spiced wine, which he sipped carefully. The deep aches seemed to lessen, so he drank down more of it. When the mug was almost empty, his head nodded suddenly, and he dragged himself back

awake with effort.

"That wasn't just wine, was it?" he asked.

"Laudanum."

"Bastard."

Sir made a sound that could be a laugh. "You will not feel anything until you wake tomorrow. Be grateful."

Wishbone opened sticky eyes. He was in a place pitch-dark but for the dim light entering through cracks in the walls. He lay beneath a pile of what smelled like horse blankets and smelled even more like wintergreen. Climbing to his feet, he bumped into a mound of corded wood. This, then, was the woodshed. Lovely. He thought about trying to see if the door was really locked and, if so, to break it open, but he felt too cold and sore to bother. Wishbone crawled back under the blankets and stayed there until Terefar opened the door.

"There is a bath for you," said the servant. "Please come."

The sunken bath was full of warm water, and the kettles were steaming on the stove again. Wishbone stripped off and climbed in once more. He used the lavender soap to clean days of hard living off his skin. Things seemed to hurt less than they should. The painful clicking in his left knee had vanished. Thick ointment had been packed onto his bruises. When Wishbone got out and looked at the mirror, the swelling around his eye was half gone, though it displayed even more colors, as if it was a week further into healing. He touched the flesh gingerly, and it stung, though less than it might have. It seemed that Sir had brought a physician to attend him while he slept. After pouring another kettle into the bath, Wishbone climbed back in and soaked and tried not to think about what was coming later.

When at last Wishbone's toes started to wrinkle up, he got out and wrapped himself in towels. There was a set of old clothes folded on the chair. He held them up and examined the fine cloth and the worn seams. The clothes looked as if they might have belonged to Terefar and were loose on Wishbone. The pair of shoes beneath the chair had hardly any sole left, but fit well enough. Wishbone was looking in the mirror to adjust the unfamiliar collar at his throat when Terefar knocked on the door, then opened it.

He said, "Cook has laid out breakfast for you. There is enough time to eat."

Enough time before what, exactly? Wishbone wasn't sure he was hungry, but there'd been little enough to eat for the last two days, and he didn't know when he'd get another offer. So he followed Terefar to the kitchen and sat down to a plate of bread and cheese and a glass of milk. He ate slowly, but Terefar kept telling him to hurry up.

Sir wore a finer set of clothes than Wishbone had ever seen before, all dark green velvet with white ruffles at the throat and wrist. His broad-brimmed hat was black, with a matching green plume. He took Wishbone's elbow in an iron grip. It hurt, but it was soothing, too, in that neither escape nor injury was possible. Sir's gaze was equally powerful. It bound Wishbone to his side like a chain. When the carriage arrived, he saw Wishbone seated first and followed after.

The House of Justice lay down the hill and past the fish market. Sir kept his hard hand on Wishbone's elbow as they dismounted the carriage and plunged into the crowded, domed center of the King's legal bureaucracy.

Sir brought them first to the guardsman at the front desk and explained that he had a confessed thief in hand. The guardsman lifted his helmet, scratched his head, and asked Sir to tell the whole story. Then he vanished and returned with a clerk who asked for the story again. It seemed that thieves were brought in the back, wrapped in chains and accompanied by patrols. No thief had ever walked into the front door and thrown himself on the guards' mercy. No one was exactly sure what to do with Wishbone, and having a shih-aan involved wasn't helping their confusion. They were worried about offending Sir, but no one was quite sure how to avoid it.

Finally, a very senior bureaucrat led them into the office of an army commander who looked like everything Gertom wasn't -- lean, intelligent, well-groomed, without a speck of rust on his kit anywhere. Wishbone had the unpleasant feeling that the commander knew exactly what sort of a creature he was. The bruised face probably didn't help him any.

"So he stole a valuable comb from you, but he gave it back?"

"That is correct, commander," said Sir.

The man tapped his fingers on his parchment-piled desk. "The penalty for theft is the loss of one hand."

Sir's hand twisted Wishbone's elbow before he could say anything or bolt, which had begun to seem like an acceptable idea.

"As you say," said the shih-aan. "But consider that he did confess."

"What about it?"

"Perhaps the King would permit mercy."

The Guard Captain's eyes narrowed. "I'm not sure why you're speaking for him. If we take his hand, he probably won't be stealing again."

"You needn't concern yourself with his future behavior."

Wishbone wanted to ask him what he meant, but Sir's attention was elsewhere. His manner toward the commander invited agreement. It seemed as if the commander would have to work to

argue, and he was a busy man. Finally, the commander shrugged.

"He's saved us the expense of a trial, and it's less work for us to brand him anyway."

The commander dug up a quill and a bottle of ink from his desk and began writing something on the back of a scrap of parchment. He then rang a big, brass bell, and an officer appeared at the door.

"Get a set of manacles, Draffer, and take this piece of refuse to the cells. Here's the custody order. Don't lose it this time."

The officer took the piece of parchment. His lips moved while he read it. Then he nodded and exited the door.

Wishbone looked up at the shih-aan and, to his own surprise, said, "Don't leave me." Sir raised an eyebrow so angled with amusement that it cut.

But Draffer had returned with heavy manacles and set about locking them onto Wishbone's wrists. He gave a yank on the chain and dragged Wishbone out the door while Sir was still thanking the commander.

They traversed the open, domed space, weaving between desks, clerks, and piles of law books. Draffer brought them to a wide stairway, which got narrower as they descended until it opened into a stone corridor lined with bars, stinking of piss.

"Got an odd one for you," said Draffer to the huge man who stood up from a chair by a stove to greet them. He read the custody order out loud, including the part about the brand to be laid on the prisoner's face. Wishbone, who had been hoping against hope that they'd mark his back instead, twitched so hard that the chains rattled.

Draffer cuffed him, not hard, but on the left side of his head so that it hurt all over again. "No trouble from you, now."

The jailer scratched his armpit. "Pertram is out with an ague. I could do it myself."

"Nah," said the officer. "They're being careful with this one for some reason. More than your job's worth if you miss and take his eye out. We'd better lock him up until Pertram's back."

"Sounds wise. There's only three men in number eight. Let's toss him in there."

And cell number eight was where Wishbone spent the next several days.

One of the three cellmates was drunk, and the others seemed too morose to talk, and Wishbone didn't have anything he wanted to say to them anyway. The drunk man sobered up and started shouting gibberish. He went on for so long that one of the other prisoners hit him, but it only made him louder, and the jailer threatened to chain the lot of them up against the wall if they

didn't keep it down. The stone walls dripped with moisture that soaked the straw on the floor. Twice a day the jailer gave them bowls of greasy oats. He brought a bucket full of water and took away the one with the slops, though not quite often enough. In spite of the stink, Wishbone's nose refused to shut down.

Captain Gertom appeared on the second day and stood leering at Wishbone through the bars.

"I hear they're going to brand you like an ox, filth. I'll be watching for you when you get out, yes I will. I'll make certain to search you often, 'cause too much coin on a branded thief, well, that probably means you stole it, right?"

As if he'd have enough money to be worth robbing. Even the customers who paid for his arse liked to see a pretty face on the other end. The rake handle scar had been barely acceptable. A brand would cut his usual price by half, at least. And it would attract more attention from even honest guardsmen, who were more dangerous in their own way than Gertom.

Gertom left, and the no longer drunk man resumed his incomprehensible ranting. Nothing could distract Wishbone's mind from the image of a hot iron searing his skin. The manacles started to blister his wrists. The babbling man was removed and another shut in. A priest came to speak with Wishbone, but he'd never had much to say to the Unnamed Gods. The priest kept trying to draw him out on his various sins, but finally left in a huff when Wishbone cursed him out.

Wishbone tried not to struggle the morning that they came for him. It might have worked if Sir had been there, but without the voice and the firm hand, Wishbone kicked and screamed and tried to bite until the jailer thumped him on the back of the head.

They dragged him down the long, cold hall past rows of packed cells into a room as hot as one of the priests' hells and dumped him in a heavy chair built of old, black timber. Straps tightened around his body, and some sort of clamp with threadbare padding fastened down so he couldn't move his head. He was stuck facing an unnerving collection of iron tools on the wall. Some of them looked sharp. The blunt ones were even scarier.

A man who was probably Pertram added some coals to a brazier and pulled out a wooden-handled iron rod with an X-shaped end.

"Look here, Denley," said Pertram. "Always make sure your brand is hot enough. You'd think it was a mercy to use a cool iron, but the hotter it is, the less likely ill humors will set in afterward. This dull red will not do.

"We always gag them. Not that we care if they curse or spit, but if they bite themselves they can bleed all over. And guess who has to clean it up? The piss is foul enough."

Denley was a tall, stringy young man with spots and the eager manner of an apprentice. He handed some sort of strap to Pertram, who tried to force part of it between Wishbone's clenched teeth.

"They always do this. It's easy enough to get a man's mouth open," he said, pinching Wishbone's nostrils closed. "No need to break their teeth. Unless it's on the order, and I have a tool for that."

Wishbone gasped for breath. Pertram shoved the dirty strap into his mouth and buckled it behind the chair. Sweat streamed down Wishbone's armpits. He wasn't sure what he had expected, but the drone of Pertram's lecture and the indifference to Wishbone's person was somehow more horrible than any amount of menace.

Pertram turned to the brazier. "Ah," he said. "This is how you want it. Note the exact yellow color around the outside, with the hotter core. It's important."

Then, fast, so fast that Wishbone didn't have a chance to flinch, Pertram turned and pressed the iron to his right cheek just above the strap.

Wishbone howled into the gag. His vision dimmed. The stink of scorched meat filled his nostrils, and melted fat dripped down his chin.

"And that's all there is to it, really. Go tell the duty jailer we'll be ready for the next one presently."

Wishbone couldn't walk. The jailer and another man dragged him up three flights of stairs, through a fenced yard filled with guardsmen and horses, and out the back gate of the House of Justice. They dropped him on the rutted, freezing ground and left him.

A pair of footsteps approached, and Wishbone tried to push himself up before someone kicked him. But the boots that stopped in front of him were familiar. Wishbone raised his eyes.

Sir had not left him after all.

He wore a heavy overcoat and a blue plume in his hat. Ruffles as white as the puffs of his breath peeked out from under the yards of fine black wool. There was no pity on his face, or anger. Sir unfolded a cloak, set it across Wishbone's shoulders, then hauled the young man to his feet. Sir got his shoulder under Wishbone's arm and walked him to the carriage.

The Church bells had just rung noon, and the streets were crowded with other wagons, pedestrians, and sedan chairs. The coach inched its way toward the Hill. Wishbone's face throbbed with a pain that went to the bone.

"So what's the final condition?" he asked, with a voice gone hoarse and broken from screaming.

Sir regarded him for some time. "You must apologize to me."

Wishbone wanted to scream again.

Every Church day for years, he had sat on the hard bench between his father and little sister, silently praying to the Unnamed Gods to take away his sinful desires, and they did not listen. As he grew older, his parents had brought an endless parade of farmers' daughters, like fat, placid pigeons, to meet him and insisted that he make a choice. He'd tried to explain to them that he did not wish to marry, but they did not listen. When his family found out the truth, they'd been too busy shouting and beating him to listen.

Wishbone had stolen the comb without a prick of conscience because he had needed the coin in ways the well-dressed, well-fed shih-aan could never comprehend.

"None of this is my fault," he said.

Sir raised an eyebrow. "After all you've survived, you would feed yourself to the spell?"

"It's my choice."

"I am disappointed," said Sir. "But it is indeed your choice." He opened a small door that communicated with the driver's box. "Hold the carriage at my word," he called.

"Seeing as we're not moving," came the reply, "I may as well, Sir."

Sir opened the carriage door.

"Get out," he ordered.

Wishbone nearly did. It was so hard to disobey Sir. But he found himself on his knees on the carriage floor, babbling that he was sorry, so sorry, and begging to be allowed to stay. A passing pedestrian stared into the carriage at the strange tableau until the shih-aan reached over and snapped the door shut. He tapped the carriage wall again.

"Continue. When you are able," he said. The coachman made a muffled answer.

Sir took Wishbone's cold hands between his gloved ones. "I accept your apology," he said, "and I will not insult you by questioning your resolve in asking to stay with me.

"I can offer you steady meals, a place to sleep, and protection. In exchange, you will do as you are told. You will obey all members of my household as if they spoke with my voice. You will accept any correction I consider necessary, without complaint. You will not leave the house without my permission. I want your word on these things, and I want you to understand that there will be consequences for breaking it."

"Another spell?" asked Wishbone.

Sir laughed. "I studied the craft once, but an effective working of that sort is beyond me. I can cause you to regret breaking your word without magic."

Wishbone kissed the gloved hands and, to his embarrassment, splattered them with tears. He felt like the knight in a soppy tavern song, on his knees begging forgiveness from his one true love. "You have my word."

"Good." Sir patted him on the other cheek. "Now do sit down. I swear, Wishbone, you attract the most appalling stinks. Until we get you back in the bath, I'd prefer a little distance between us."

Wishbone bathed in a cloud of laudanum. By the time he had dressed, a physician was waiting for him in the downstairs parlor.

"I only just put this one back together for you," said the physician to Sir, in a Bremmian accent. "You should take better care of your toys."

Sir shrugged. "I retained you because you have an excellent reputation for medicine. For opinions, I would have brought in a priest."

"Very well." The physician grasped Wishbone's chin and turned his face from side to side. The man's face was very square, his eyes gray, and his own jaw bristling with a pale undergrowth of stubble that hadn't been tended for days. "The brand is cleanly done and will heal if you don't put butter on it or other such foolishness. I'll provide you with an ointment for when it starts to itch and which will also help heal the blisters on his wrists. He's taken another knock to the head, but his pupils are the same size. If he passes out, has blurry vision or vomiting, I will refer you to the senior man of my order, who has some skill with head injuries. Laudanum is permitted for the pain, but be sparing with it and don't add a habit to his afflictions."

"Thank you," said Sir.

Terefar brought a coin purse and handed it to the physician with a bow. When the man had gone, Sir asked Terefar to sit in one of the chairs, which the servant did with every sign of unease.

"Stay awake, Wishbone," said the shih-aan. "This concerns you."

Wishbone blinked and remembered in time not to rub his eyes.

Sir said, "My household has some difficulty keeping scullery boys." He curled his upper lip to display a single canine. "I cannot think why." He shrugged. "Wishbone will be taking up that duty after he has recovered."

"But..." Wishbone bit his lip.

"You have something to say?" asked Sir.

"No."

Sir turned to Terefar. "Cook will have the managing of him, but I expect you to show him where things are kept and what needs to be done, to begin teaching him to speak Krih-aan and to improve your grasp of the Bronlyn tongue while you do. Am I understood?"

"I hear, Enshan," said Terefar.

"Very well," said Sir. "The cot in the store room will serve for Wishbone. Terefar, guide him there before we have to carry him."

Chapter Three

Wishbone knew he should be grateful. He had a warm place to sleep, easy duties, and all the scraps he could eat. His face still itched where the brand was healing over, and he couldn't stand to look at himself in the mirror, but things could be much worse.

It seemed, however, that certain bodily hungers would not be sated. Sir had first brought him to this house for sex, but did not invite him back to that room upstairs. It tormented Wishbone to know that Sir slept a few doors away and a floor up and never laid a hand on him.

Wishbone had spent almost every night of the past few years getting fucked to the limit of his endurance, and it wasn't for the coin alone. He adored the friction, the pressure, the tastes and smells of men. He missed sailors with their rope-calloused hands and the shy, eager businessmen who snuck off to visit him after their families had gone to bed. He missed the Bremmians who practiced the strange custom of circumcision. The feel of their cocks had intrigued his hands and mouth. There was one customer who paid to watch Wishbone pleasure himself. He gave the biggest tips when Wishbone enjoyed himself the most, and was almost impossible to fool. One peculiar man paid extra for the privilege of stuffing the coins up Wishbone's arse. Another bit him all about the shoulders, like a stallion covering a mare. Some spilled inside him, and some spilled on him. Wishbone missed them all, handsome and homely alike. He missed Tonner, as well, and Kestrel, who had taken in a shoeless run-away and given him a little affection and a lot of lessons.

There had been danger and discomfort and the ever-present risk of rape. There had been men who hated themselves, or Wishbone, because of what the priests said about two men together, and the constant threat of death by the hand of Justice. There were rowdy Lannarian mercenaries, who delivered more threats than coins when they were too drunk to achieve an erection.

But there was also joy in selling pleasure. If Wishbone could have tolerated celibacy, he'd have kept his hands off of Athel the smith's son and never had to leave home. Now his life as a whore was over. He was forbidden to leave the house and afraid to show his shame-marked face outside anyway. Aside from Terefar and Sir, the only other man in the house was Wenley, the coachman, who slept over the stables. Though he was human, he had no interest in human company beyond that necessary for his duties.

Wishbone woke up at dawn every day and went to work peeling, scraping, sweeping and washing for Cook, who spoke not a word of the Bronlyn tongue, but could point well enough. He hauled water and firewood and cleaned the oven. When he lay down at night in his cot and eased his lust with his own hands, he stared into the dark and imagined what Sir might be doing to Terefar. Whenever Terefar stopped by the kitchen to convey some instruction from Sir, Wishbone was nearly angry enough to spit.

Thus one afternoon, a month after his arrival, Wishbone was peeling an endless pile of parsnips when Terefar arrived in the kitchen and spoke briefly with Cook.

The servant turned to Wishbone. "Sir wishes me to teach you some words today, and how to bow

properly."

Wishbone just missed cutting himself with the paring knife. "I'm supposed to peel all of these, and then there's the carrots."

Terefar said, "Cook says you can finish later. Now come with me."

More unwelcome work. Wishbone glared at Terefar, who dropped his eyes. So far, Wishbone had not managed to provoke Terefar once, and his failure to get any reaction -- however faint -- from the servant stoked his anger higher.

"No."

"But Sir said..."

"If it's that important, Sir can come and tell me himself."

Terefar seemed puzzled. He stood still for a moment longer, then backed out of the kitchen. After he had gone, Wishbone went back to work on the parsnips, making bits of them fly in all directions.

A few moments later, Sir indeed appeared in the kitchen. Cook put down her spoons and bowed, not rising until Sir spoke to her, when she returned to basting a roast.

Wishbone laid the knife on the table. Weeks had passed since he'd caught more than a silhouette of the shih-aan at the end of the hallway. He had forgotten the presence, the scent, the violet irises and slit pupils, the air of complete and unshakable competence. Now it was difficult to remember why disobedience had seemed like a good idea, but there was a burning core of anger inside Wishbone. He held onto it, even in the chill of Sir's shadow.

Sir grasped him by the hair and pulled him, with astonishing strength, out of the kitchen, up the back stairs, down the hall and into the sitting room, where Terefar stood to polite attention. Wishbone had dreamed of coming back up there. Sir kicked him in the back of his knees and dropped him to the floor.

"You will do as you are told. You will obey all members of my household as if they spoke with my voice. You gave your word, Wishbone." Sir did not raise his voice, but his disappointment was palpable. Every word stung.

"Yes, Sir," was all he could think to say, as he stared down at the carpet.

Sir's booted feet stopped right under Wishbone's nose. He resisted the urge to kiss the instep.

"Why invite the pain of correction?"

Well, there was no point in lying. "Because I prefer it to being ignored."

Sir switched to his own tongue, speaking rapidly. Terefar answered, then opened the far door, entered, and returned with a pile of rope. Sir seized Wishbone's right wrist and ankle, nearly lifting him by them, and bound them with loops of silken rope. Sir treated the left wrist and ankle the same way.

Picking him up by the hair again, Sir tossed him forward over the foot of the lounge chair, yanked his trousers down and pulled his shirt up. A long double loop of rope encircled Wishbone's waist and down between his legs, slithering tightly into his cleft. A hard tug on it spread his buttocks. Wishbone's face heated with humiliation. Another piece of rope got wrapped around itself and shoved between Wishbone's teeth. The gag stretched his mouth open so that drool began to leak out the corners.

"Perhaps you believed I would punish you with my own hand," said Sir. "You have not earned that privilege. I have ordered Terefar to beat you for me. Since he is a gentle soul and not normally inclined to give hurt, I offered him an incentive. If he makes you cry, he can have you."

Being bound took away Wishbone's self-restraint. He spewed muffled curses around the gag and writhed against the ropes, but the chair did not move. It seemed an unusually sturdy piece of furniture. Wishbone had a moment to wonder if it was built with such activities in mind before a strap sliced into his exposed arse.

For a gentle soul, Terefar had devilishly good aim. The strap wrapped on Wishbone's hips and between his thighs, leaving behind stinging flowers of pain. Wishbone chewed hard on the gag, as Terefar took advantage of Wishbone's obscenely spread buttocks to try to land the strap end right in the cleft. When he succeeded, Wishbone wrenched at the ropes and tried hopelessly to pull his legs closed and protect his tender ring from the strap.

Terefar could wear himself out. Wishbone was tough and accustomed to ill-use, and no one was going to make him cry but Sir. But what had the shih-aan said? The members of his household spoke with his voice. What was done by his command was done by his hand.

Then Terefar figured out that by swinging under-handed, he could thump Wishbone right on the balls. It didn't hurt like the kick from a steel-toed boot, but the pain was obscenely intimate. The strap swung under a second time, and a third, wringing a sob from Wishbone. Sir spoke, and Terefar dropped the strap.

The shih-aan picked up Wishbone's head by the gag-rope and examined the tears at the corner of one eye. He snapped an order. Cloth rustled. A tidy pile of Terefar's clothes formed on the chair.

Wishbone couldn't see the other two, but he could hear them. Clothed limbs stroked bare flesh, and the air filled with the soft, wet sound of kisses. The scents of their bodies changed. Terefar made a muffled moan, then got down on his knees behind Wishbone and rubbed his cock head up and down the exposed cleft. He gripped Wishbone's hips and leaned forward to let his weight force his shaft inside the tender opening.

The penetration burned, and not just because of the strap's awful kisses or that Terefar seemed to use only spit for lubrication. Wishbone was out of practice. Terefar's cock felt much bigger than it probably was. Wishbone wanted to clench down and fight against the invasion at first, but he couldn't do it. The bitter pride that had driven him earlier had deserted him, leaving nothing behind but lust. And he needed to be filled. His hunger made him cry into the gag and press back against the ropes and try to spit himself on Terefar's erection.

He had nearly worked himself to spilling when Sir spoke. Terefar made a breathy answer, grasped Wishbone's hips and slowed his stroke to a long, deep tease. Wishbone wailed his frustration. He wanted to entwine his legs with Terefar's and pull them closer together. Had he not been gagged, he would have humiliated himself further by begging for Terefar to handle his prick.

Sir snapped a single syllable. Terefar pumped his hips several times, then froze as his seed spilled deep inside Wishbone. He groaned and then laid his cheek down on Wishbone's back as the last shudders of pleasure drained from him like the tide. Sir spoke again. Terefar hastily pulled out and pressed his lips against the small of Wishbone's back, a tender gesture that left Wishbone deeply puzzled. Sir helped Terefar to his feet. The servant gathered up his clothes and followed the shih-aan through that far door that must lead to Sir's bedroom.

Sticky, exhausted, and frustrated beyond measure, Wishbone remain bound to the chair as his cock sank and fluids dried on his skin. The door did not block all the sounds, so Wishbone could hear thumps, cries, and a shout that could only belong to Sir. When the firelight had almost gone, Terefar reappeared, dressed and tidy, with not a hair out of place. He built up the fire, then tugged on the rope ends so that the net that bound Wishbone to the chair unraveled. Too stiff to move, Wishbone whimpered as the blood flowed back into his extremities.

"Sir orders you to dress and return to your parsnips," said Terefar. He patted Wishbone's hip and left the room.

Chapter Four

When he started paying attention, Wishbone learned a lot from the kitchen.

The bread and milk were for the staff, as were most of the vegetables. Sir ate little beside red meat, from the finest steaks reserved for nobility to organ meats that no one but the most humble of peasants would touch. He would eat fish, but only the top catch and never salted, smoked, or otherwise preserved.

Sir usually ate alone in his drawing room, but he did have guests in the dining room from time to time. Then cook would prepare creamy soups and elaborate platters garnished with pastries shaped like swans and dolphins. Terefar, dressed his best, would serve at the table. Wishbone never saw the guests, just the dirty plates. He didn't mind much. The house staff was so familiar with his marked face that they didn't seem to notice anymore, but he couldn't bear the thought of a stranger staring at him.

He did overhear Sir's guests. Many of them were human, and they spoke of trade. Sir brokered the furs and precious metals produced from human lands for fine wines, spices, and linens transported from Feras-aan on shih-aan trade ships. Trade generated sums of money difficult for Wishbone to imagine. The money built ships that generated more trade, supported shih-aan businesses in town, and purchased substantial -- if wary -- courtesy from the King, his ministers, and his Justice officers.

His shih-ann guests were members of the diplomatic mission and some of the traders who had settled, warily, in town. They would stay after dinner when Sir would bring out the best wines and they'd play a sort of board game with a hexagonal grid and carved stone pieces that looked like little bridges. Sir, always so somber, seemed to take great joy in these games.

Wishbone spent about an hour or two per day in the downstairs parlor with Terefar, learning Krih-aan and fine points of etiquette that had never been relevant before in his life. Being alone with Terefar was awkward at first, but Sir's favored servant never once said anything about what they'd done upstairs in the drawing room or even gave him a smug look. Wishbone couldn't figure Terefar out, because he would have behaved with much less grace had their positions been reversed. Even the firm touch of Terefar's hands when he corrected the angle of a bow or showed how to take or hand things without drawing attention was passionless and practical.

Terefar had started by asking if Wishbone could read. Wishbone had never gone beyond psalters and had always felt that written language was tainted by contact with the Unnamed Gods. Nevertheless, Terefar dug up daunting piles of Krih-aan writing -- shopping lists and invoices, a dusty old children's book, tax information. Wishbone decided that reading all of it was better than another beating, but only just.

Spoken Krih-aan was almost impossible to manage until he started pretending that he had really big teeth that got in the way of his tongue. The vowels were strange, liquid things, rising and falling like tides as they passed through the mouth. When he mastered one word, his reward was to learn another one. The lectures on proper behavior made even less sense.

"Rise from a bow after a slow count of three," said Terefar. "And remember, you do not meet the eyes of a shih-aan."

"Why?"

"To look in the eyes is a threat."

Wishbone considered. "I've looked in Sir's eyes a lot."

"Yes, and I think he finds it amusing. But if you do it before other shih-aan, he will put you in your place, and you will not find that pleasant."

"What about before you?" Wishbone asked.

Terefar winced. "Best not to try it."

"And why not simply call him by name?" he asked. "It seems easier."

"Names are shared between parents and cubs, siblings, lovers. You are not any one of those to him. Other shih-aan will name him by title and Zanshin. Using his name would be a great rudeness and would invite a duel."

"Zanshin?"

They bounced meanings back and forth between them until Wishbone got the sense of the word. A Zanshin was an extended family plus all the souls considered property, like a clan from the sagas.

"Still," Wishbone said, "Not to use someone's name. This sounds ridiculous. "

To his surprise, Terefar laughed. "And to wathara. We think our masters spend long winter nights awake, thinking up new titles and new ways to insult each other and provoke duels to settle honor. But the proper Krih-aan word for Sir is Enshan, and it's safest to name other shih-aan Enshan unless you are told otherwise."

"Is there anything wrong with calling him Sir?" asked Wishbone.

Terefar shrugged. Wishbone wondered why, if all the words were so different, a shrug had the same meaning. "It wouldn't be acceptable in Feras-ann," said Terefar. "But we aren't there. Call him Sir if you must. And if he calls you Anshan, that is the proper word for a subordinate."

"What does Sir's title mean?"

"He is Master of Games," said Terefar.

"That doesn't sound so lofty."

"Ah, but it is," said Terefar, so full of pride that he nearly squirmed. "Most titles are earned from a Guild after some fairly standard training. His was bestowed by acclaim. He is only the third this century."

Wishbone's mind began wandering. He remembered the feel of lips pressed to the small of his back and the last time he'd felt another man's cock inside him. On impulse, he turned and caught Terefar by the back of his neck and brought their lips together. Terefar gasped, but did not pull away. Wishbone put every scrap of experience into the kiss, while one hand stroked Terefar's back and the other tickled the point of one ear.

Terefar abruptly turned his head to one side, put a hand on Wishbone's chest, and pushed them apart.

"No."

"Why not? You liked that."

"There is no pleasure for me, except at Enshan's word."

Terefar's eyes opened wide as the front door rattled open.

"Say nothing!" he whispered, and ran for the hallway to take Sir's coat and hat.

Wishbone returned to the kitchen baffled by the thought that any man would give that much control over his body to another. What could possibly be worth it?

That night, in a fit of frustration, he brought a well-endowed parsnip to his cot, along with some tallow, and made himself spill from the penetration alone. Afterward, he lay across the cot, panting and shivering, and wondered if he already knew the answer.

Chapter Five

The weather was still cool and damp, but a fine green fuzz coated the trees. Wishbone spent part of each day working in the kitchen garden for cook. He returned to the house covered with dirt and was allowed a brief soak in the bath before joining Terefar in the parlor for language lessons.

Terefar found a stitched, written pamphlet filled with Krih-aan on one page and Bronlyn tongue on the other, with many hand-written corrections. Wishbone's comprehension grew, and he could follow most things said to him, provided the speaker was slow about it. He could scarcely follow one word in three of the rapid conversations between Sir and a shih-aan guest. Terefar gained proficiency in Bronlyn tongue, hesitating less and making fewer awkward word choices. But while Wishbone could understand why Sir wanted Terefar to speak well with humans, he couldn't imagine how it would benefit Sir for Wishbone to learn Krih-aan.

One evening, Terefar came down to the scullery while Wishbone was washing up from supper.

"Sir wishes to see you upstairs," he said. "Finish your work, then make yourself presentable."

Wishbone paused, elbow-deep in a kettle of hot, scummy water. Some time in the last few months he had forgotten that upstairs existed.

"He wants to see me? Have I done something wrong?"

"Sir does not entrust me with his reasons. But I can't think why you should worry. I will start a kettle in the bath for you."

Washed and wearing fresh clothes, Wishbone took a candle and hurried up the back steps. He paused at the door, wondering what to do, and then knocked as Terefar always did.

"Enter."

It wasn't until after Wishbone had shut the door behind him that he realized Sir had spoken in Krih-aan. No candles were lit, only the fire and the shih-aan's eyes. There was a pillow on the floor by the chair.

"Kneel."

Wishbone sank to his knees on the pillow.

Sir switched to Wishbone's native tongue. "You are not so thin as you were. I am pleased."

"Fattening me up?" asked Wishbone.

The corner of Sir's mouth quirked. "Adult humans are rather gamey. Or so I have been told. On the other hand, Cook is talented with a braise."

Wishbone bit back the urge for sarcasm. In reward, Sir's many-jointed fingers played with his hair. Wishbone wanted to lean into the hand like a dog would, but held himself still under a touch so soft it almost hurt.

"You believe Terefar is a servant," said Sir. "It is a convenient fiction in Human lands. It would be more truthful to call him a pet. Terefar and Cook are wathara, a race that mine domesticated centuries ago. Terefar adores me with all his heart, and if I sold him, he would adore his new master just as completely. You might find his almost bovine placidity puzzling, but no more so than he finds your crimes, your sarcasm and your petty rages."

Wishbone wondered if he should feel insulted. But the fingers moved under his hair and handled the tense parts of his back and neck with just enough pressure to relax them completely.

"How is this possible?" he asked. Wishbone tried to imagine graceful, immaculately-dressed Terefar for sale like a horse at auction. Humans sometimes got sold into slavery, usually to pay off debts. What crime had an entire race committed to earn that punishment?

"They lost a war," said Sir. "At the time, domestication was considered a kinder fate than putting the survivors to death. Now there is some debate. The wathara language is dead, except for rare books in the back shelves of libraries, and none but scholars can read their poetry without translation. They will create no more. If that was the only loss to the world, perhaps we should still consider what we did to them a crime.

"Remember that your species and mine have already fought one war."

"But we nearly defeated you," said Wishbone. His breath caught as one finger teased the very inside of his ear.

"That is what your kings tell you, and your warlords, and your priests. But it is not the truth. The human invaders had seen us duel with our hands, but did not understand that many shih-aan learn the spear and the longbow as well. The ships brought enough warriors to our coastal towns to make a close battle, only considering the population of males. Human females are beaten to a passivity that rivals that of the wathara. Not so the shih-aan. Our women lead our Zanshin, and they lead in battle. There is *nothing* more dangerous than a shih-aan female with cubs. Their battle rages strike fear in the hearts of other shih-aan, and for your people it must have seemed like the seventh Hell opened up and swallowed them.

"There were other errors more of interest to a military historian, but your people were slaughtered. Anyone who says otherwise lies to you."

It was a strange thought to Wishbone. He had no love for kings or priests, or the military represented by Gertom's dock patrol. But he couldn't easily imagine them lying. He did not worship the Unnamed Gods, but he had believed that they watched him and judged, and that they'd never tolerate untruth from the mouths of their earthly representatives. Until now.

"I saw the carnage. I smelled it. I watched my mother fall with a sword through her belly. I

nearly dedicated my life to the arts of battle. Then I changed my mind and studied games instead."

"Why did you..."

Sir tugged on Wishbone's hair. "Hush. The Zanshin Council are conservative, for most are female and do not travel far from home. They have not changed our official category for humans to reflect your apparent sentence. If they do not, then the best your people can hope for in the coming war is domestication for the survivors. I believe that humans may not be domesticated, and that even if we succeeded, we would destroy something at least as valuable as wathara poetry."

Wishbone's forehead wrinkled. "Shih-aan can send us an embassy but still not believe that humans can think?"

Sir laughed. "People of all races are capable of inventing fantastic sophistries if doing so will protect them from the need to change their minds."

Wishbone wasn't positive he knew how all those big words fit together, but from what he gathered, it was very likely true.

"You know there will be a war?"

"I am certain of it, if there is no successful intervention. The eldest council members want to see their progeny safe from invasion before they pass on. The youngest have not known war and think a battlefield smells of glory. The only difference between the last war and the next is that the Council will bring it to Bronlyn. Do you care if your race survives, Wishbone?"

Wishbone turned the thought over. He held a lot of anger toward some other humans, but he didn't think he could wish them dead for it.

"I don't know," he said.

The finger traced his jaw. "Fair enough."

"Why tell me this?"

"Games and strategy are two different words in the human tongue, but not in mine. I am the premier strategist of my generation. I have spent years amongst humans, learning, thinking, and making sense of them to the rest of my race. I believe I can convince our leaders that humans are flawed but sentient. No easy solution by genocide. I miss my home, but I will not willingly return before I resolve the current diplomatic stalemate."

"And you don't worry that I'll pass your war plans to the King's men?"

Sir laughed. "Oh, Wishbone, it pains me when you try to be clever. Think what happens if you

bring your branded face to the King's intelligencers and accuse me."

Wishbone flushed, while all the time Sir's fingers stroked his hair.

"So what do you want me to do?"

"I believe you could be of assistance. You may walk the streets of Bronlyn Harbor and not be noticed while you discover some things for me."

Wishbone met Sir's eyes before he could stop himself. "As you've said, every person who looks at my face will see a criminal. Don't make me go."

Sir reached into a pocket and pulled out a thin, gold chain with a pendant formed out of a many-faceted stone. He fastened it around Wishbone's neck.

"Go look in the mirror," said Sir.

Wishbone unbent his stiff knees and went to gaze in the dimly-lit mirror over the mantelpiece. He gasped, overwhelmed with confusion and joy. The brand had vanished, as had the scar left on his upper lip by the rake handle years ago. His face looked completely normal, except that the straggly hairs on his chin needed tending. Such magics as that pendant were forbidden by order of the Church, though obtainable for fantastic amounts of money.

"This is an illusion, but a strong one. It will hold as long as you wear the pendant."

"Thank you, Sir." The words were inadequate, but perhaps Sir understood how Wishbone felt to look at his own face again without shame or bitter reminders.

The shih-aan got to his feet and placed his hands on Wishbone's shoulders. They looked at each other in the mirror. The firelight picked out dark red threads in the black silk of Sir's shirt and the sliver of violet around the black of his expanded pupils.

"So you brought me home just to be your spy?" asked Wishbone. He kept his eyes on Sir's in the mirror, daring the shih-aan to do anything about it.

"You know that is not the case."

"Then why leave me to rot downstairs for five months?"

"Because you earned a penance for stealing from me, and, as you made clear, there is no pain worse for you than being ignored."

"I paid for what I did!"

"You paid the spell," said Sir. "You still owed me. In particular, you owed me proof that you would not offer such an insult a second time."

Wishbone bit back a word that would have earned him an entirely new penance. "This is unfair. You make me do anything you ask, like you did with the army commander. It started when I let you bring me home, though I knew the danger. Is it a spell?"

Sir looked puzzled for a moment, then he laughed. "True, there is a charm I use to make dealing with humans easier. It works on bureaucrats who otherwise would take no responsibility, and it softened the army commander who would have ordered your hand struck off. There is always some risk of detection, and if the Council-in-Exile knew I'd used it on your behalf, they would not be pleased. But I have never used it *on* you. If I had, you would not have stolen from me, nor would you have disobeyed me when I ordered you out of the carriage, nor could you now summon such defiance when you speak to me. You are not enchanted. You are in love.

"Oh, I realize that it is not with me. You were on the streets for a long time, and you would have given your heart to any male who offered you shelter and affection."

This was what love felt like? The tangle of feelings inside Wishbone, the need to please Sir and to be near him, the acceptance of punishment and the need -- requirement, almost -- for forgiveness? The priests had spoken of love. They said it was a blessing given by the Unnamed Gods to a man and a woman, and Wishbone had believed them. Nevertheless, he had told men he loved them before. Money bought a lot from him, and that included any words a customer wanted to hear. He'd just never believed that love could mean something to him, that what he did with men could be anything but a pleasant though soulless coupling. Sir had just given him a staggering gift.

"You're wrong," said Wishbone after a long silence. "It's not any male. It's you."

Sir's expression changed in the mirror. His serene composure slipped. It reminded Wishbone of watching a man's face when he spilled and pleasure stripped his soul naked, if only for a moment. It amused him just a bit, that he had surprised Sir.

"I *see*," said Sir.

His hands dropped away from Wishbone, and he stepped back to pull the bell rope. Wishbone wondered if he had said something terribly wrong.

Terefar appeared at the door and spoke with Sir. Wishbone didn't even try to understand them. Several minutes later, Terefar returned with a tray. He set it down on the end table and disappeared behind the door to Sir's bedroom, whence came the sounds of him building up the fire.

The shih-aan picked up the bottle and the knife from the tray, examined and then peeled away the seal. After he extracted the cork, he poured a pale gold wine into one of a pair of glass goblets, tasted it, then took up the bottle again to fill them both. He handed one to Wishbone.

Wishbone expected Sir to say something, but he drank in silence. Finally, Wishbone took his

own sip. The wine was thick, sweet, potent, and tasted of honey and roses. Terefar emerged from the room, bowed to Sir, and was dismissed.

"The fire will be hot," said Sir, gesturing with his goblet. "Join me."

Inside the room, they both drank again, then laid their glasses and the bottle on a table next to the bed. Sir sat down on a chair upholstered to match the one in the drawing room. He lifted a foot. Wishbone stood staring at him for a moment, then, feeling foolish, got down on his knees and hastily pulled the suede boot off of Sir's foot. The other boot required an extra tug. Wishbone stepped out of his own shoes and set them next to Sir's.

The room was paneled in dark wood and shadows. A large writing desk carved with scrollwork stood against the far wall. The huge bed had deep blue curtains open on the side of the fire and a canopy that concealed the beams over top. Sir slid an arm around Wishbone's waist and led him over to the pillow-strewn, linen sheets.

"I will tell you my name," said Sir. "I want you to know it, but you may not use it outside this room, and not in front of Terefar. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Sir."

"I am Shieh Yeras Senjian, where Shieh is my title, Yeras is my Zanshin, and Senjian is my given name."

Senjian. A name and more, a private token between Sir and his intimates. Wishbone wondered what Terefar might think, then realized that the wathara must never find out.

"Kiss me," said Senjian. "You've been waiting for months. Show me how much you want me."

Wishbone brushed his lips back and forth against Senjian's until the shih-aan's mouth opened, his breath whistling through his teeth. Wishbone slid his tongue inside and past the threat of the fangs. The shih-aan's mouth tasted of wine. Wishbone's tongue drew a delicate shiver from Senjian, muted by three layers of clothing.

The shih-aan broke the kiss. He unlaced Wishbone's shirt, pressing his lips to each piece of exposed skin until the shirt slid off Wishbone's shoulders, exposing the nipples. Senjian took them one at a time into his mouth, biting down to the edge of pain. Wishbone let himself sag into the strong hands. The shih-aan ran his tongue up under the chain that held the pendant, then licked the pulse point at Wishbone's throat, and then kissed his neck up to his left ear.

Between sharp little bites, Senjian whispered to him. "At the beginning of time I would have considered you prey and hunted you to your death. It is long since my people ceased to hunt anything that can speak. But make no mistake -- you are still prey, and this is still a hunt." As he spoke, five sharp points pricked Wishbone's chest just short of breaking the skin.

Senjian held up the hand so Wishbone could see. From the tip of each finger protruded a curved,

sharpened, inch-long claw. Wishbone stiffened in Senjian's hands, but the time to fear those weapons had been before he had, unknowing, taken them deep in his arse. He leaned forward and kissed the fingertips. When the claws had retracted completely, he licked the longest finger and then took it deep into his mouth, as if it was a prick. He tried to find the claw sheath with his tongue, then probed each of the joints when he could not and stretched his tongue to lick the tender skin between fingers.

The shih-aan growled and pushed Wishbone onto his back. Senjian ran his fingertips over Wishbone's long-neglected cock, which was painfully stiff trapped in cloth. Senjian set it free, then bent down to take just the head in his lips. He licked at the tiny hole. Wishbone whimpered at the sweet but insufficient stimulation. It was probably bad manners to thrust up into the shih-aan's mouth. He was still prey.

Senjian released the cock and stripped off Wishbone's clothing. He placed a thick pillow in the center of the bed and laid a towel over it, then rolled Wishbone over onto the pillow. Bent over and spread, Wishbone heard the sound of the jar opening.

"Part you buttocks for me," said Senjian.

Wishbone remembered the first time he had done this for Sir and how silly it had seemed. He felt those clever fingers spread cool lubrication into his cleft. The shih-aan's digits circled the outside for so long Wishbone wanted to scream. Finally, the shih-aan slipped a single finger, one joint at a time, into that greedy opening. Wishbone arched his back. The fingers retreated, teasing him, until his leg muscles gave out and he fell flat on the bed, panting, arms aching from holding himself open. Crushed beneath his belly, his erection twitched in time with his pulse.

The finger returned, with company this time. Wishbone drank in the pressure until a third finger intruded. He gasped, tensed, and let his hands fall away as the sudden discomfort jolted him. Just when he might have wanted the fingers gone, they remained lodged deep inside him.

"I can't," he said.

"You took my entire hand before."

"It's been too long. I want to, but I can't."

"You will not disappoint me."

Wishbone groaned. But he was not so concerned with disappointing Senjian as with denying himself the pleasure of the shih-aan's hand.

The fingers disappeared, leaving behind a burning that was half lust and half pain. Wishbone heard the sound of wine pouring. Senjian held a half-full glass to his lips, and he drank it down. The wine warmed his belly. Even his cock tingled with it. Senjian turned his attention to caressing Wishbone's heavy scrotum where it peeked out from beneath his body until Wishbone strained to spread his legs wider. A hand gathered up his balls and squeezed them until they

seemed to grow heavier with unspilled pleasure. Wishbone arched his back, begging without words. He was ready.

Three fingers pressed his ring open, forcing more lubrication inside. Wishbone bent his knees, bit the covers, and pushed back as hard as he could stand. The fingers stroked him open wider until Senjian could press downward on the spot that made Wishbone's balls pull up to his body and sent a thrill of pleasure all the way down to his toes. The widest part of the shih-aan's hand was lodged against the inner ring. His other hand stroked Wishbone's tensed back.

"Breathe in."

And when he exhaled, the entire hand slid inside. There was no pain, only the most profound pressure as the extra-jointed fingers curled into a fist and seemed to touch every inch of his body from the inside. Moans, curses, and incomprehensible pleas spilled from Wishbone's lips. The hand slid back out, leaving only a finger to tease him. He got his knees underneath him and pushed back, swallowing the hand, which pumped his ring until he nearly spilled. Senjian had an uncanny sense of how close Wishbone was and ceased to move whenever he got to the edge.

"What did you mean earlier this evening when you said not any male, but me?" asked Senjian, only slightly breathless.

It took a moment for Wishbone to understand what the shih-aan said, and even then he had about the same ability to speak as one of Senjian's velvet gloves. The hand resting on his back stroked him, then the claws extended, creating five points of sensation more urgent than the hand up his arse.

Wishbone spat out the mouthful of blanket he'd been chewing. "Sir?"

"Tell me. Say the words."

What had he meant? Wishbone had sunk into a deep sea of feeling, and words seemed slippery as little fishes. This was important.

"Senjian, I love you," said Wishbone.

The hand twisted. Wishbone cried out as the final pleasure took him. His stretched ring spasmed, nearly forcing the hand from him as his balls emptied in hot spasms. Senjian's other hand stroked his back with the claws out, a playful threat that made him clench down and the moment stretch on.

And then he was done, and the hunt was over. The hand slid free. Senjian reached for a towel and wiped his hands, then the crack of Wishbone's arse. Wishbone's eyelids drooped under the weight of spent pleasure and wine.

He would not sleep. He was sore all over, and tired, but he vowed to himself that he would not doze off until he had looked into Senjian's eyes while the shih-aan spilled. There were no more

orders to obey, no commanding voice, no further penetrations of body or will. So Wishbone rolled over, stretched, and got up on his knees.

Senjian lay back against the pillows with the wine glass in his hand. Wishbone met his eyes and stared until the shih-aan looked away. What would Terefar think of that? Again, he'd never know. Wishbone plucked the glass from Senjian's hand, set it down on the table, and leaned forward. Their lips met. Remembering how Senjian had sucked him with such skill, Wishbone pressed his tongue against the roof of Senjian's mouth, right where a cock head would press, and then thrust in and out, as if his tongue was a cock. He was rewarded with a helpless little moan, and he ran his hands down Senjian's sides.

It took Wishbone a moment to identify the tension in the shih-aan's body, mostly because he didn't believe it at first. It was fear. But many customers had come to him frightened. A good whore knew how to soothe and placate. He wondered why his clawed, fanged lover might be afraid. Then he remembered that Senjian was very far from home. It might be easier for him to strip and pleasure a human than to be stripped and pleased himself, safer to be the hunter than the prey. Love could be more dangerous than claws, however sharp.

Kneeling astraddle the shih-aan's lap, Wishbone continued the kiss while one hand slid lower. He found the bulge trapped down one trouser leg and squeezed and petted it with his own fingers, less dexterous than Senjian's, but no less effective. The shih-aan hissed into his mouth, then turned abruptly away. Wishbone knotted his fingers in Senjian's hair and pulled the shih-aan's head around until he could use his lips and teeth on one ear.

Perhaps his behavior might be considered disrespectful. Perhaps Senjian would order him to stop. But Wishbone did not think so. The bulge grew under his hand. Senjian's legs tensed, and he made a soft noise deep in his throat as Wishbone's tongue found the center of his ear. By then, Wishbone's fingers had discovered something at the back of Senjian's neck that caused him to stop what he was doing and start unwrapping the shih-aan's layers of clothing as if opening a gift. He stripped off the black velvet waistcoat, the silk shirt, and the plain, white linen undershirt. Senjian made a half-hearted attempt to block Wishbone's hands, but Wishbone used his weight to pin the shih-aan to the bed when he moved too much. Senjian could probably toss Wishbone across the room, should he choose to, but his body yielded to Wishbone's hands and mouth as if he'd decided to lose just this once. Wishbone unhooked the fine buttons and spread the clothes wide open.

The front of the upper body revealed was not so different from a man's. Senjian's hairless chest displayed only two nipples, in the proper places. But the hair of Senjian's head continued down his back as a black mane with a tiny sprinkling of gray, cut close at the back of his neck, but lengthening below. Wishbone unbuttoned the fine wool trousers and eased them off one leg at a time, then unwrapped the silk loincloth. The thighs were long and well-muscled, the genitals strikingly bare. The mane grew shorter and narrower down his back, the curl disappearing, tapering to a stripe of soft fuzz just above his arse.

Senjian lay face-down on the blankets, his head turned on a pillow, shivering. Wishbone realized that he must be cold and pulled a blanket over the both of them, then lay down next to him and

nibbled on the neatly trimmed nape. Senjian moaned. Delighted with the novelty, Wishbone probed the curly mane with his tongue, finding the short, velvety undercoat beneath the wiry curls. Here and there he found the track of an old scar, nearly vanished from the skin, but still visible as an interruption in the mane, and wondered about the cause. The fur tasted sweet and musky, and licking it made him thirsty. He poured himself the last of the wine and drank it down. Senjian remained stretched out beneath the blanket in a pose of stunned languor.

Returning to the bed, Wishbone folded the blanket up from the bottom and kissed the small of Senjian's back. He covered the last of the fur with kisses until he reached the cleft. He paused for a moment to watch the corded tension ripple through Senjian's muscles, then extended his tongue. Senjian tensed. Wishbone probed in the cleft, deeper, until the shih-aan abruptly spread his legs. Wishbone used his hands to part the buttocks, then licked the shy little ring until the moans coming from Senjian's mouth were nearly continuous. The ring seemed so vulnerable compared to the rest of the shih-aan's body. No claws defended it, nor fangs, not even a wisp of hair. Wishbone stiffened his wet tongue and pressed until it slid inside the opening. He savored the taste of the shih-aan's body, like and not like a man's. Senjian arched his back and bent his knees for all the world like a harbor alley whore spreading himself for a customer.

It would have been interesting to continue and see if the shih-aan could spill this way, but Wishbone had promised himself he'd see Senjian's face. There would be other times, and besides, he found it amusing to transmute fear into frustration. He sat up and patted Senjian on one buttock.

"Turn over."

Senjian shuddered, then complied. The cock jutting up from his loins was a little thick and very long, dark red and blue veined. Wishbone lowered his lips to the head. He couldn't feel with his mouth any difference between a man's prick and this one, save for the lack of pubic hair. After all, among men cocks varied even more than faces. There was a foreskin that rolled under his tongue, and a spot under the head so sensitive that Senjian moved his entire body when Wishbone licked it. The fluid that leaked onto Wishbone's tongue tasted different, and the sweet musk was as thick as the velvet of Senjian's clothes. He moved down and took Senjian's balls into his mouth. The scrotum was so smooth, smoother even than a man with a fetish for shaving could make his. Wishbone imagined the balls growing heavy with unspilled seed.

With some regret, Wishbone sat up from his feast. Senjian's breath caught, then whistled out of him. Wishbone smiled to himself as he searched behind a stack of towels for the jar. The tease would add spice to the eventual spill.

There wasn't much left in the jar, but it would have to be enough. He straddled the shih-aan's legs, scooped up the ointment in one hand, and smeared it down the length of Senjian's pulsing cock. He kept an eye on Senjian's reddening face as he pumped the cock with his hands. When Senjian was starting to writhe under him, Wishbone climbed on top, leaned forward, and eased himself down so that the greased cock slid into his opening.

It hurt a little, but he stifled the wince and watched the pleasure wash over Senjian. The shih-

aan's slit pupils were dilated and his head thrown back. Wishbone bit his lower lip and bent his knees to give himself leverage. They moved together, making long, slow strokes that burned Wishbone's insides. He wiped his hands on one of the discarded towels and gripped Senjian's so that their fingers interlocked.

"Harder," he demanded, arching his back, straining his thigh muscles so that Senjian might take him more deeply.

Senjian pumped with his hips. Wishbone's prick started to stiffen again, but he wouldn't let his own arousal distract him from the pounding he was getting, the deep violet gaze like a separate penetration. Their eyes remained locked together until Senjian's face turned cherry red and he went completely still. He wailed like a man run through with a sword made of pleasure. Wishbone savored that precious moment of soul-nakedness, the end of the hunt, and he felt each spilling pulse of the cock inside him as if it was his own.

The shih-aan's eyes closed. Wishbone released his hands and lay down on Senjian's smooth chest, feeling the slick cock soften and slip out. Senjian kissed his lips and pulled the blanket over them both.

Wishbone let his eyes close. This time sleep was waiting for him.

A slap on the arse woke Wishbone. He blinked in the sunlight of a strange room from between silken sheets. His body felt sore in places and most pleasantly used all over.

"We have a busy day ahead of us," said Sir, fully dressed, with just a hint of dampness in his hair. And he was indeed Sir again, not Senjian who had spread his buttocks for Wishbone's tongue last night. It wasn't just the clothes, but the manner, which Sir wore like an enveloping cloak. The intimacy was not gone, merely put away until Sir needed it.

"I'm taking you to the tailor, the cobbler, and the barber. We'll be moving you to one of the attic rooms. Oh, and I must hire another scullery boy. There's a robe for you here and a bath downstairs. Get up!"

When Wishbone didn't move, Sir pulled the blankets down. Freezing, Wishbone grabbed the robe.

"One more thing. You will no longer pleasure yourself without my leave."

"What?" Half-awake, Wishbone wondered if this was a punishment for his outright insubordination in bed the previous night.

"You will be a far more entertaining toy when denied release," said Sir.

"How would you even know if I did?" Wishbone demanded.

"You would lie to me?"

Wishbone considered. "I couldn't."

"Well then." The shih-aan smacked him again. "Go."

Terefar must have worn himself out hauling water for two baths. He looked out of breath, but he still made sure that the tray contained what had become Wishbone's favorite soaps and oils. This time Wishbone examined his face carefully in the mirror, then used soap and the provided razor to remove his unruly chin fuzz. Sir was right -- his face had lost the sharp angles etched by too many missed meals. It had not yet acquired the distinctive lines of a face that smiled often, but there were hints that it might, given time.

It was so tempting to lie in the hot water and recall every bit of last night's bed play, but he hadn't been given the time. Wishbone soaped his sore arse, then scrubbed rapidly at the dried fluids on his body. He let the heat ease his stiff muscles before climbing out and pulling on the clothes left for him. Wishbone wolfed down bread and milk in the kitchen, then hurried to the front hall. He made a careful bow to Sir, then follow out the door.

The carriage was waiting for them in the pleasant morning sun. Wenley drove them down the Hill and into light morning traffic. Wishbone tried not to squirm too hard on the padded carriage seat as his arse burned.

Before Sir had brought him home, Wishbone had known that his life would end with an early morning plunge into the cold harbor, with his limbs loosely shackled to prolong the struggle and make a harder death. Every bit of joy in his life had been stolen from the Unnamed Gods. Yet the time of ending might be further in the future and the pleasures meanwhile so much sweeter than anything he had the right to expect. He did not know if he'd be given the choice of staying in Sir's bed, but he had been given the chance to love, something he had not thought possible.

"Now that you know more about my reasons for living among humans," said Sir, over the sounds of the carriage, "I offer other thoughts for you to weigh. One day I will return to Feras-aan. If I asked you, would you come with me?"

"Of course."

"Last night glitters in your eyes like stars. Would you give away your freedom after one good fuck?"

Wishbone said nothing.

"If you wish to join me, you must improve your language skills and your behavior a thousand-fold. For all that service does not come naturally to you, you will be measured against the likes of Terefar, who has been bred and raised to it. If you want to come home with me, strive in the next few months to become worthy."

Wishbone schooled himself to silence. Though he couldn't deny the sense of what Sir said, it was hard to give his heart away and be told the next morning that his feelings were not important. And again, while the tasks that Sir had set him might be difficult and filled with unexpected complexities, Wishbone had no reason to believe they might be beyond him.

The carriage rolled to a halt. The coachman set the brake. They climbed out to a part of town, on the other side of the bay, that Wishbone had seldom seen. Tailor and dressmaker shops lined both sides of the street. Wishbone could read enough to see that they approached the one shop on the street with a plaque written in Krih-aan.

Huge front windows let in the spring sunlight. A shih-aan with gray hair stood up behind the counter. Sir greeted him. Wishbone hastily bowed as well, eyes down. The two shih-aan were in rapid conversation about the proper cut of clothes for Wishbone, appropriate colors and delivery times. Wishbone maintained an expression of polite disinterest. He glanced about the shop at the bolts of cloth, the tailor's dummies, the spools of thread and piles of trim.

Sir addressed Wishbone. "Follow Aré Varas into the back and strip to your underclothes so he can measure you."

The room behind the curtain was packed almost solid with bolts of cloth. Wishbone did as he was told, and the tailor stretched his limbs and held up lengths of string, pausing to make notes on a small slate. The spring chill made Wishbone shiver. Finally, the tailor patted Wishbone on the shoulder and set the slate down on a shelf. Wishbone struggled back into his clothes without knocking down anything and rejoined Sir. The two shih-aan concluded a rapid discussion about completion dates and prices. Wishbone tried not to let his surprise show when he deciphered how much Sir would be paying for his new clothes.

"The cobbler next," said Sir, when they had exited the shop.

They returned to the carriage for a bumpy ride over the sunken cobblestones of Breakwater Street. Wishbone had once earned himself an old but serviceable pair of boots by sucking the prick of a cobbler in a shop on Breakwater, but he didn't recognize the door and didn't look too hard either. They entered one of the smaller shops that absolutely reeked of fine leather. A human clerk emerged from the back when the bells on the front door rang.

"Good morning," said Sir. "I wish to purchase boots for my servant."

Wishbone bowed to the clerk, whose eyes narrowed. He seemed to consider before answering. "As my lord wishes." He turned to Wishbone. "Sit down on this stool and take off your shoes." He measured Wishbone's feet, listened to Sir's requirements, then negotiated the price and delivery time.

When they had returned to the carriage, Wishbone pondered whether to tell Sir what he had noticed in the shop. He decided that speaking out of turn might be unwise, but that keeping silent would be worse.

"Sir," he said, "the clerk overcharged you by the same amount again."

Sir raised an eyebrow. "I thought the price was high, but I've bought boots from that shop before."

"That may be," said Wishbone, "but I don't think the clerk was overly pleased to see a shih-aan with a human servant."

"Why do you suppose that?" Wishbone could barely hear Sir's voice over the sounds of the coach, but the tone made him shiver.

"There were certain looks he gave you when you had your back turned. And there was the way he touched me. I can't quite explain it, but I've been touched by a lot of men. I've learned to tell if someone is more likely to beat me up than to pay, and this felt like that."

Sir tipped his head back and tapped his knee with gloved fingers.

"I'll speak of this to the master when we pick up your boots."

Clearly his years among humans hadn't educated Sir about all fine points of human behavior. "Forgive me, Sir, but only if you can be absolutely certain that the master does not share his man's opinions."

For several blocks only the sound of the wheels and the city outside broke the silence.

"Do you believe this clerk's opinion is likely to be common?"

"I don't know, Sir."

"You will tell me of any similar observations you make." His eyes narrowed. Sir was angry, and Wishbone felt only a little less afraid knowing that the anger was not directed at him. "More likely to beat you than to pay, you said? You have no reason to fear. No one will lay a hand on you while I have breath in my body."

Wishbone felt warm as he digested Sir's words. It was a strange feeling to know that someone considered him worth defending.

"Thank you, Sir," he said.

The last stop was the barber's. The shop's proprietor was human, but unlike the shoemaker's clerk, he kept any opinions on shih-aans and human servants to himself. He washed Wishbone's hair in a sink. A comb and a scissors made rapid, precise motions over Wishbone's head. When the barber was done, Wishbone hardly recognized the man in the mirror. For one thing, he looked quite handsome. The hair trimmed tidily to shoulder length added something subtle to his appearance. Wishbone thought it might be maturity.

Wishbone hadn't realized how tired he was until they returned to the carriage. He'd spent the entire trip countermanning his instinct to steal anything that came to hand in case it might be useful later. He blinked to keep himself awake while Sir explained Wishbone's next duties now that he'd been promoted out of the kitchen. It seemed that Sir wanted him to go to Church.

"I owe you no explanations for my orders," said Sir, "but I will indulge you this once, as I have some idea how difficult you may find the task. The Council-in-Exile supposes that the Church is far more likely than the King to make decisions that lead to war. The royalty have benefitted from peace. But the Church was a significant supporter of the last war. Since shih-aan do not worship the Unnamed Gods, theologians preached that we have no souls. Humans kill more easily if they believe the target is not a person. We wish to know if this view is still widely held. There are sixteen individual churches within the city walls and twelve more within reach of public coach routes. You will visit each one and report to me a summary of the sermons and something of the reaction of the congregation. Do they doze or lift their voices in agreement? I will also wish you to bring me the names of the presiding priests if you can discover them.

"You'll start tomorrow."

Sir was right. Wishbone wanted to vomit at the thought of entering under the Church's roof again. Nevertheless, this was an order from Sir. Wishbone would obey.

"Sir," asked Wishbone, "have the shih-aan no gods of your own?"

"There are tales of the gods living amongst us in the early days of the world. We believe that they gave us the laws and precepts that separate us from animals. Some theologians tell that they left us so that we might mature, as a cub grows to adulthood. Others believe that they left us because we broke the laws, and that they will return once we have achieved perfection."

"Which do you believe?"

"What I believe does not matter to the gods," said Senjian.

By then the carriage had brought them back home. Wishbone joined Terefar in cleaning out the attic room where he was to sleep from now on. The dresser held some moth-eaten clothes left behind by the house's previous tenants. They salvaged what they could from the drawers and sent the rest down to the kitchen for rags. Wishbone swept the floors and used the broom on the spider webs. Terefar found clean sheets for the soft bed and a set of drapes for the south-east facing window. Then they both cleaned the old ashes from the little stove and checked the chimney, finishing just as supper rolled around. Afterward, they split up the task of cleaning the pots.

When Wishbone obeyed Sir's summons to the drawing room, his erection made negotiating the stairs awkward. The cut of his clothes did not make his arousal too obvious, but he was sure Sir could tell. Wishbone waited and tried to calm his breathing while Sir fed the fire.

"While your status in my house has changed," said Sir, putting away the poker, "Terefar's has not. I will be bringing him to bed tonight."

Wishbone bit his tongue as he felt Sir's eyes on him. He wanted to cry, "Unfair!" But he knew that since he'd entered Sir's house, anything Sir wanted was fair. Wishbone kept his eyes on the floor and said, "I understand, Sir."

Sir crossed the room, tipped Wishbone's face up with a finger under his chin, and kissed him tenderly on the mouth.

"Get some rest," he said.

Easier said than done. Wishbone lay in his new bed while memories of the previous night unwound behind his closed eyelids. His prick stiffened again, and he desperately wanted to stroke it. If anything, that kiss had made the need worse. But Sir might inquire, and Wishbone could not lie to Sir. Wishbone couldn't even think of a punishment he dreaded as much as Sir's disappointment. Instead, he lay naked in the dark and let the cold drafts drain the arousal from his body until it became possible to sleep.

Chapter Six

The new scullery boy was a girl. Her name was Telia. She came from a work house that offered indifferent shelter to women who had no family to care for them, but who were too proud to whore. She wore a severe, wool smock that was too short for her. Wishbone walked her through the kitchen and the storerooms, showed her the pump, where the brooms were kept, and the cot in the store room where she'd be sleeping.

And then she burst into tears. After a very puzzled Wishbone found a cloth and put the kettle on for tea, she blew her nose noisily and started apologizing.

"You must think I'm very foolish," she said, sniffing. "I had a position. But the master did something that was... not proper. I kicked him in the shin, and he sent me back to the work house. He told them terrible lies about me, and they believed him and would only give me a position that no one else would accept. The work house said I'd be safe enough here, but they said that about the last place, too. I'm sure they wouldn't lift a finger if I got eaten all up like a veal calf."

Wishbone poured Telia some tea.

"Bless you," she said, and blew her nose again. The cup shook in her hand.

"Shih-aan do not eat people," said Wishbone. "And Sir would not let any harm befall you under his roof."

"How long have you been here?" she asked.

"Since the end of autumn."

"He's not hurt you in any way?"

"No." Strictly speaking, it wasn't true, but the details were less important than the reassurance. "Besides," he said, "if anyone did something improper in the kitchen, Cook would probably take a frying pan to their head."

Telia's eyes opened wide. "Cook isn't, well, she isn't human, is she?"

"No, but she's a good person. So is Terefar. Wenley is human, but he doesn't talk much to anyone who isn't a horse. Cook doesn't speak our tongue, but Terefar does. And he knows his way around here much better than I do. Ask either of us if you need help finding something."

She smiled shyly over her cup. "Thank you."

By the time Sir called for Wishbone that afternoon, he'd done some thinking.

"Sir," he said, "I think you should buy Telia some new clothes. She has only that one smock to

her name, and she's grown out of it. No honest woman dares show that much of her legs."

"Very well," said Sir. "I have no objection to the expense, but I have no time to see to it. You may bring her to the tailor."

"Not a tailor, but a dressmaker."

Sir rolled his eyes. "Is this one of your species' incomprehensible customs that only a woman may see enough of a woman to measure her for clothing?"

"I'm afraid so," said Wishbone

"Find a dressmaker, then. Is there anything else you recommend for my new employee?"

"Yes, Sir. Would you consider installing a bolt on the inside of the store room door?"

"I might. Why would I?"

"Because her last employer abused her. Offering her a locked door to sleep behind will reassure her better than anything I could say."

"Wenley will have a bolt or will know where to get one. Be sure to speak with him before you go."

Sir produced a coin pouch and held it out for Wishbone. It was surprisingly heavy.

"These monies are intended to cover meals and the like while you are out visiting the Unnamed Gods. If you feel that buying supper or drinks for other others might gain you useful information, then do so." He gave an indulgent smile. "There is enough for clothes for Telia and any small amusements that take your fancy."

Wishbone already knew where he'd be spending some of the money. He walked down the Hill in the sunshine, dodging carriages and carts. Heading toward the increasingly potent smell of fish, he crossed the city's biggest open-air market to a row of warehouses that served various specialties in the shipbuilding trade.

Tonner's sail-making business laid claim to a loft over a small forge. Sails draped the railings and nearly blocked the stairs where an apprentice perched, setting rivets. Tonner blinked when he spotted Wishbone, then his eyes opened wide. He hastily returned his full attention to arguing with a merchant over a batch of mildewed canvas. When he had finally brow-beaten the man into providing a refund and taking the stricken goods, he hopped over the counter and stood awkwardly in front of Wishbone. An embrace seemed unwise.

"Wishbone! I'd heard... well, nothing good, actually."

Wishbone smiled. "Fortunately you heard wrong."

"How have you been?"

"Well enough." Wishbone got out the purse and counted some crescents. "This is for you."

Tonner looked stunned. He didn't ask where Wishbone had come by that kind of money, but pocketed it quickly.

"I don't know if you'll be seeing me much again," said Wishbone. "It might be best if you didn't. But I didn't want to just disappear. You sheltered me when I needed it."

"You take care, then," said Tonner.

Wishbone turned and hurried down the stairs before things could get any more awkward. By then the bells were ringing, and it was time to face the Church of the Unnamed Gods.

Back in the muddy province where Wishbone had grown up, priests came around once a week to use a building occupied on other days by traveling Justices, tax collectors or dentists. The benches could be stacked against the walls to make room for other activities. Nothing distinguished a rural church from a large barn except that it was built of stone.

In the city, the Unnamed Gods laid claim to palaces that rivaled the King's. Stained glass windows painted the air inside, while outside angels competed with carved saints and allegories for space among the columns and elaborate slabs of architecture. Priests in gold-embroidered robes presided over three services every day. Well-dressed servants, whose duties kept them at their masters' command later in the day, went before dawn. Families brought their children in the afternoon. The bulk of worshipers attended in the evening services, after they closed their workshops and put away their sewing, repenting of their sins before planning new ones over supper. The devout could find a spot in a pew every day of the week.

In theory, the bishop oversaw all of Bronlyn's churches and inspected the orthodoxy of all teachings. The bishop, however, was ninety years old. According to rumor, he never strayed far from his chamber pot and had more interest in directing prayers for his salvation than approving sermons.

Wishbone walked into Harmony Bridge Church at the tail end of the crowd and sat in the last pew. He looked out over the sea of bowed heads. By now Wishbone was so used to looking at Sir and Terefar and even Cook that all the pale hair seemed odd.

The service opened with hymns that sounded quite pleasant if one only listened to the choir's voices and not the words they sang. The priest -- a tall man, bent like a heron in robes -- led the congregation in prayers. Wishbone found that he remembered all the words. There followed a sermon. The priest declared to his congregation that only the love of the Unnamed Gods could save them from the Eleven Hells, and that the soul could not receive their love while the body succumbed to animalistic rutting. The Unnamed Gods would pardon all but the most severe sins in exchange for tithes given in true humility, he reminded the flock. Then priests in less elaborate

robes walked up the aisles with collection boxes. Wishbone dropped in a penny only because it would look odd if he didn't.

Wishbone pushed back against the crowd and worked his way toward the front. He watched the parishioners queue up to shake hands with the chief priest until one of them said the man's name. Then he let the crowd swirl him out the doors into the early evening. The flood of people split into rivers filling the wide streets on either side of Harmony Bridge. Wishbone turned downhill toward the docks.

Wishbone's feet did not remember the rhythms of the neighborhood. He was wearing some more of Terefar's hand-me-downs, well-worn, and did not look particularly conspicuous. But he didn't feel all that safe, either. The all-pervasive smell of fish was stronger than he remembered. Passing through narrower streets and alleyways lit by tavern lanterns, he nearly tripped over an unfamiliar whore with a customer. He backed away hastily, returned to one of the main roads, and began his search again.

He found Kestrel before full dark. Like Tonner, Kestrel almost didn't recognize him at first. Kestrel's eyes narrowed in the dim light.

"Wishbone."

"Kestrel. Care to join me for supper?"

"The Scuppers?"

"I'm buying."

"Are you? Crown and Anchor."

As they walked up the street, Wishbone asked, "Have you seen Lane?"

Kestrel didn't answer immediately. Wishbone felt a chill from the other man.

"Lane is no longer with us," Kestrel said finally.

There was no good answer to that.

The Crown and Anchor offered spit-roasted mutton and the best beer on this side of the harbor. Wishbone could feel Kestrel's eyes on him as they ate. It wasn't altogether a friendly gaze.

Dockside whores had very little, but they held onto their pride. They had to pay bribes for their safety, but at least they didn't pay taxes to the King. They didn't eat often enough, but they also were free of the casual abuse suffered by apprentices. Kestrel could see that Wishbone had gained weight and had more coin on hand than any dock whore saw at once and had made the correct conclusion. Wishbone was now a kept man. Kestrel might secretly wish for the comfort and safety that Wishbone enjoyed, but with the claws of age marking his face, he was not likely

to get it. What he could not get, he would not want. The proper attitude of a whore to a kept man was contempt.

"So who holds your leash?" asked Kestrel, when all the food was gone and he was nursing the last of his beer.

Wishbone decided not to insult Kestrel further by lying.

"I live with a shih-aan up the Hill."

"You don't do anything by halves, do you?" He downed the last of his beer. "Thank you for supper. I must be getting back to work."

"Wait."

Wishbone fished a few crescents out of his purse and set them in a stack on the table.

"For you," he said.

Kestrel stood up, turned his back, and walked out of the tavern.

Wishbone made most of the coins vanish and used the rest to pay for supper. It occurred to him that Sir might talk about Wishbone's having choices about his future, but the dockside alleys might not be an option any longer.

He took a detour up Bent Street on the way home. Bent was too twisty and crowded even for sedan chairs. The only men in sight wore clever masks made in the likeness of bulls, roosters, hawks and hounds. Women made up the bulk of the crowd spilling out into the cool evening. Their skirts were shorter even than Telia's outgrown smock and cut way low at the neck, low enough to consign them to one of the minor hells. They wore bright earrings and paint on their faces. They flirted with the masked men and disappeared with them through the well-lit doorways. Occasional cries from the upstairs windows brought cheers and applause from the crowd. The contrast with the dim, solitary alley posts of the men who worked the docks was deeply depressing.

A few of the women wore proper garments and sat on their stools knitting socks. They sold the appearance of respectability like any other fetish. Wishbone approached some of the women and asked them where they bought their clothes. They answered and asked, giggling, if he was going to wear the dresses himself. He said yes, to general mirth, and gave them some pennies for their time.

Chapter Seven

Wishbone breathed a sigh of relief when he was under Sir's roof again. He presented himself to Sir in the drawing room and drank the offered glass of wine.

"Tell me about your visit with the Unnamed Gods," said Sir, as Wishbone knelt on the cushion by his chair.

Wishbone related the priest's name and the words of his sermon gathered by Wishbone's excellent memory.

"There was nothing said of shih-aan," he said, "but as I looked over the carvings, I had a thought. The demons have wings and cloven hooves, but they also have enormous teeth and claws. The priest spoke of demons and the temptations they offered. He said they are well-dressed, wealthy and sophisticated, and that dealing with them tarnishes the soul even more than fornication does, and much more than strong drink. I remembered after the sermon that we always called shih-aan demons."

"What caused you to remember?"

"I took an old friend to supper. I told him what I was up to now, and I think that he despises me for giving myself to one man, and the more so to a shih-aan."

"You used to think me a demon."

"I didn't mean..."

"I know what you meant."

Sir leaned over and parted Wishbone's lips with a many-jointed finger. He worked it in and out of Wishbone's mouth. Wishbone licked and sucked hungrily at the length of the digit until Sir abruptly pulled it away.

One night apart from Sir felt so much longer. Wishbone needed release. Sir wanted to play. The wet finger returned to explore the inner shell of Wishbone's ear. The too-slight penetration made him squirm and pant. There was no possibility of spilling from something so gentle, like the touch of an angel's feather.

"Tell me," said Sir, "when you sold yourself, did you ever allow a client to hurt you for money?"

"You *are* a demon," said Wishbone.

"You are evading me."

"There's very little that money couldn't buy from me, until you brought me home. I'm not ashamed."

"Shame is a human affectation, and I care nothing for it. Would you deny me what you once sold a client?" asked Sir.

"I'm sure you could find a reason to punish me if you wanted one," said Wishbone.

Sir said, "This is not a punishment. A different kind of hunt, perhaps."

"You want my consent to play the pain game?"

Sir laughed. "Pain game. Such a clever phrase in a language that does not often impress me." He ran his fingers through the length of Wishbone's hair, over and over. "Play with me, Anshan."

The Krih-aan word felt like a caress.

"Play with Terefar," suggested Wishbone, wary.

"Ah." The sigh was long and a little tired, soft as the touch of Sir's fingers in Wishbone's hair. "Wathara are perfect servants. Perfect, but limited. They will obey perfectly. While it is intoxicating to break a shih-aan who falls to me in a duel and offers up his body in exchange for his life, to do the same thing to a wathara is empty cruelty with all the flavor of ashes. They have learned their lessons so well that not one of them would dare raise a hand to a shih-aan." His eyes narrowed. "How does a human play the pain game? Wishbone, how do you?"

How indeed? Wishbone tipped his head back and met Sir's glittering eyes while he caught the long fingers between his teeth. He sucked on them again, working his tongue between the digits. Then, without taking his eyes from Sir's, he bit down as hard as he could.

Sir shoved his hand into Wishbone's mouth so that he stabbed the soft upper parts with his blunt fingernails, and Wishbone was forced to scramble backward on hands and knees, gagging.

"So *that* is how you play," said Sir, with a smile full of delight and teeth.

The slap came so fast that Wishbone couldn't even see to duck. Sir kicked Wishbone so that he fell onto his face and set a booted foot on his neck. This was where obedience ended, for the game demanded something else entirely from Wishbone. He wondered if he would still think this was a good idea the next morning.

The bell rang, the one attached to the rope that hung over Sir's couch. Terefar opened the door a moment later. Wishbone tried to shift his weight so he could unbalance Sir, but the pressure on his neck nearly cut off his wind. Sir ordered Terefar to move the wine to the bedroom and to light the fire. Then Sir dragged Wishbone into the bedroom by his hair.

In the dim light, Sir opened the wardrobe with his other hand and removed several lengths of silk rope. He bound Wishbone's wrists together, then looped rope around his chest and over his shoulders, tugging Wishbone back and forth as he built a harness. At last, Sir flipped the long

end up to a hook that Wishbone had never noticed protruding from the ceiling beam and pulled Wishbone onto the tips of his toes.

Wishbone tested his bonds. He was held firmly upright. None of the ropes cut into him, and the harness could take all of his weight without letting him fall. He made a series of experimental twists and pulls, rocking himself in the bonds, fighting them, at last nearly wearing himself out proving that there was no escape. The ropes around his chest pressed into the flesh so that blood built up, throbbing behind his nipples. His cock throbbed much harder.

Sir drank from a glass and watched Wishbone's diminishing struggles with hard, violet eyes. Terefar finished with the fire, dusted off his hands, and fled the room without looking back.

"Senjian?" Wishbone said, in between gasps for breath.

The shih-ann crooked an eyebrow at him. Wishbone spat, and by sheer luck caught Senjian on the cheek. The shih-aan reached up and thoughtfully wiped the spittle away. Then he held up a hand and unsheathed his claws. Wishbone swallowed and wondered if a provoked shih-aan would damage him, and if so whether he'd feel proud of the scars.

Senjian's hands flashed, and Wishbone's shirt fell open. Senjian sliced ribbons out of the expensive clothes sewn to his order until he had exposed most of Wishbone's torso. The waste was appalling. The claws stroked his chest, circling his engorged nipples. Wishbone felt the sweat soak his armpits and start to drip. Senjian leaned forward and kissed him on the brow just as he bore down with his claws and pierced each nipple half-though.

Wishbone screamed, which was unfortunate, because the sudden movement of his chest made the pain radiate like flames from the point of penetration. Blood dripped over Senjian's fingers. He twisted the flesh until Wishbone screamed again. Senjian wrapped another rope around Wishbone's chest, positioned to bind his nipples. When Wishbone could open his eyes again, the shih-aan looked infinitely smug.

Tears dripped down Wishbone's cheeks.

"Mercy," he whispered.

Senjian adjusted the ropes, tightening the one across Wishbone's nipples, feeling Wishbone's hands and loosening the ropes a hair when he felt how cold the skin had gone.

"No. But if you promise not to spit it at me, I'll give you the rest of my glass."

Wishbone nodded, conserving his energy for the game. The wine glass touched his lips. He drank all he was given.

"Wish you had behaved better now?" asked Senjian. He leaned over and tasted Wishbone's tears.

"Not as much as you might think," Wishbone said, trying and failing to catch Senjian in a kiss.

"After all, the game pleases you, does it not?" He could see Senjian's erection jutting forth. Eventually, Senjian would tire of these games and split Wishbone open with that thing. Probably not soon enough.

Senjian cut away the ragged arms of Wishbone's shirt and slid his claws under the waistband of Wishbone's trousers. Ripping them open, he exposed the curve of Wishbone's buttocks. Senjian moved behind Wishbone's tense body and embraced him. The bulge of his cock pressed into Wishbone's cleft. Senjian's hands played with the rope binding Wishbone's nipples like a musician tuning his instrument. Wishbone gasped and whimpered, grinding his body against Senjian's erection and weeping as every helpless motion brought searing heat to his nipples.

The claws removed the last scraps of cloth concealing Wishbone's cock. Senjian moved gracefully to his knees and kissed the head. Wishbone thrust forward and buried his erection in the shih-aan's throat, though Senjian's teeth threatened to do damage every time Wishbone's desperate struggles got him an inch of penetration. Senjian's pointed tongue played with the foreskin. His hands controlled Wishbone's hips, which had started to pump in desperate need. When Wishbone's cock had grown to its full size, Senjian sat back on his heels and whipped a cord around it. The cord was much narrower than the bindings used on Wishbone's body. It looped snugly at the head, binding the shaft and then the balls, transforming swelling pleasure into a beast with teeth. The ends anchored Wishbone's prick pointing upward to the knot where the ropes crossed at his chest.

Senjian stood and gave one of the ropes a tug that pulled Wishbone right off his feet. His fingers trailed the length of Wishbone's back, probing between his buttocks, giving the merest penetration. Wishbone arched his back, trembling under Senjian's touch, certain that he was finally about to get fucked.

"I own a small selection of instruments designed for the pain game," said Senjian. "Nothing like what I have at home, but sufficient to break you. Some are faster, and some more thorough. Some leave no marks, and others draw blood."

Senjian's finger pulled back until it rested against his opening. Wishbone felt the sharp prick of a claw. He fell off his feet and hung, trembling, in the ropes.

"Tell me," said Senjian. "How shall I play with you?"

How indeed? Should Wishbone try to surrender now? Hope for mercy if he begged? Wishbone realized, to his surprise, that he wanted anything but mercy.

"Senjian," he said, "mark me."

"You are brave," said the shih-aan.

Wishbone gritted his teeth. "No, I'm not. I'm just tired of hearing you blather on."

Wishbone watched the graceful lines of the shih-aan's body in firelight as he opened the

wardrobe again. He looked -- and smelled -- more aroused than Wishbone had known him. How long had it been since anyone had made Senjian work this hard?

Senjian removed a coil of something black from the wardrobe. He took a gray piece of cloth to its surface to buff away a coating of what looked like solid, rendered animal fat, releasing the scent of fine leather into the room. The thing seemed to move of its own accord in the firelight.

"I do apologize for disturbing you further with my voice," said Senjian, smiling. "This is a fine instrument indeed, and I think you are best served by knowing something of its nature."

Wishbone sighed in frustration.

"It is a single-tailed whip, six feet long, braided from the supple hide of an animal I killed with my own hands. It obeys me well. The handle is weighted with lead for balance. The thong is made up of layers -- one core and alternating bolsters and plaits. The fall is thin enough to cut like steel wire, and the silk popper on the end may be replaced when it wears out. It has not been used in years, except to practice on pillows, and it is thirsty."

Senjian stroked Wishbone's cheek with a loop of the single tail thong. Wishbone turned his head and kissed it with a show of fearlessness he did not feel. The popper flickered and stroked Wishbone's flanks. Stepping far back, Senjian tossed the popper so that it cracked in the air over Wishbone's back. Wishbone gritted his teeth. The fall cracked next to his ear, then ruffled his hair. Then it sliced Wishbone right across his shoulders. It left behind a burn, the center of a ripple of feeling that spread through Wishbone's body and merged with the pulse from his tight-bound cock.

Wishbone screamed.

Senjian stung Wishbone's right calf, then his left, alternating between the two until Wishbone fell hard against the harness. Senjian targeted the backs of Wishbone's knees and then his thighs, stunningly accurate, even in the dim light. Wishbone flinched at each blow. This was not like any sort of pain he had experienced before. He could not escape it by tensing or relaxing anything.

The long lash landed right along the lower curve of Wishbone's buttocks. It made no crack, only a dull thud as it expended all of its energy against a poorly-padded piece of Wishbone's anatomy. Struggling demanded too much effort, and Wishbone hung in his bonds without any strength or will. He felt as if there was no part of him not made of pain.

Senjian's shadow moved, and the whip fell across Wishbone's back like a thunderbolt. A cascade of parallel cuts inches apart followed it. The shadow moved again, then Senjian laid down a second row of stripes perpendicular to the first set, so that each bite of the whip crossed several others. The blood pulsed angrily under Wishbone's skin, and where the marks crossed he bled.

Wishbone shrieked, his serenity in tatters. He gasped for breath, yanking the rope that savaged his nipples. It was no longer possible to hold still.

Then Senjian began to sting the planes of Wishbone's body that had so far been spared. The single tail snapped between his legs, marking the insides of his thighs so that he attempted to escape by spreading them wider. It swung at his belly, landing finger-breadths away from his cock several times before catching him on the head. Dreadful noises escaped from Wishbone's mouth. Senjian raked Wishbone's upper arms hard enough to draw blood again. Pausing to bind Wishbone's left ankle and then tug it up behind him, Senjian wrapped the rope between ankle and thigh so that Wishbone could not put it down. Then he flicked the popper over the exposed sole. The sensation was, if anything, crueler than when the lash had bitten Wishbone's erection.

The worst of it was Senjian's insistence on symmetry. He always balanced a cut on the left with one on the right. Thus, Wishbone was soaking in dread when Senjian released his left foot and then bound his right the same way. Wishbone squirmed helplessly and threw his weight against the harness when the single tail bit at his toes, wrapped around his foot, and licked his ankle.

But Senjian was not finished. He released the right foot. His other hand probed Wishbone's much-softened cock. The thin cord that bound it wasn't even snug.

The shih-aan made a soft hiss. "Need I tell you that I am displeased?" His fingers pinched and probed, spreading the slight moisture over the head. Barely extended, his claws tested the velvet length. "Do not require another reminder."

Wishbone started to beg this time, though he knew that nothing coming out of his mouth made any sense. Senjian cupped Wishbone's chin, pressing his lips to silence. Another rope snaked around Wishbone's waist and down between his legs, the knots precisely placed to give Senjian leverage. One tug of the rope bent Wishbone forward. Another one spread Wishbone's buttocks wide apart. A long finger stroked Wishbone's arsehole so that he couldn't help but press back against it, his limbs taut and back arched. Then the finger vanished.

The stroke of the whip was not hard, but it didn't have to be. The single tail cut upward at the most tender flesh between Wishbone's forcefully spread buttocks. Senjian stood by while Wishbone thrashed for a few moments. When Wishbone's struggles abated, Senjian laid down a series of strokes on the same spot. Thinking he was finished, Wishbone allowed the tension to leak out of his limbs. The single tail sliced into his arse again. Wishbone wailed. But the returning fingers found his prick hardened to a respectable degree. If only he could rub his erection against Senjian's hand.

Wishbone bit his lips. There was no more sound but his sobs and the crackle of the fire and the whisper of movement as he shifted his weight from one sore foot to another. Senjian wiped Wishbone's nose with a soft cloth. His fingers stroked the welts that carved Wishbone's skin.

"Thank me, Wishbone, my Anshan," said Sir.

Something hot and defiant flared inside Wishbone. "Fuck you," he said.

Coiled, the horrible whip landed on the bed. A hand loosened the bindings on Wishbone's prick

and then wrapped around the shaft, tight enough to be pleasant, but too far back to stimulate the head. Wishbone's hips moved without any will of his own. Senjian planted a kiss on the back of his neck. Desperate to get as much friction as he could before Senjian changed his mind, Wishbone fucked his hand. The fingers loosened, fell away. Wishbone groaned in frustration. All of his welts seethed, the more so when Senjian stroked them. His hand returned to Wishbone's cock. Wishbone's hips moved again to the limits of the bindings.

Senjian turned Wishbone so that his upper body just leaned on the bed, then loosened the bindings. Fingers, lubricated this time, stroked him open. Wishbone heard the sounds of clothing unfastening and could see the motion of Senjian's shadow and feel the hands gripping his hips. After the merciless bite of the long whip, Senjian's cock pressing against his tight entrance felt almost too gentle to stir Wishbone, like the single fingertip exploring the center of his ear. He got his tender feet beneath him and pushed back, while Senjian stood still with his cock head just stretching the opening, stroking the welts on Wishbone's back and the twin flowers of pain that were his nipples. Wishbone groaned. Anger melted under the sensation of a cock pressing into Wishbone's hungry rear entrance.

"It is not permitted for a shih-aan to use any instrument of pain on another without passing a test administered by the Guild of Rope and Lash." Sir's cock gave Wishbone a scant inch of precious friction. "You may surmise then that I've known the attentions of the single tail. I was so sure of myself the first time I challenged it. There are no restraints for such a test. I had to wrap my arms around a post and hold my tongue though force of will." Another thrust, deeper, in the rhythm of the tale. "And so I failed the first time and was left with a year to wait before I could make another challenge. I had to beg the house whip-master to make of me someone who could pass. Even so, it was a close thing, and I was much humbled." Senjian's hand stroked Wishbone's cock that had not softened since the last warning. He thrust again, and Wishbone groaned. "Yet is its bite not seductive? The histories maintain that the single tail was created to approximate the kiss of a god, which is so sweet yet so much more powerful than a mortal body can stand."

Another thrust buried Senjian's full length inside Wishbone, while claws pinched the head of his cock. Wishbone's mind drew him a picture of a younger Senjian, one with no dusting of gray in his hair. The shih-aan's body was stripped bare. His arms were wrapped around a post, his head thrown back, his cock hard as a mast and his body straining as a single tail laid down the scars in his mane for Wishbone to uncover years later.

"Thank me, Anshan," said Senjian once more.

Wishbone spilled, surprising himself. His seed painted his belly and splattered thickly on the floor. He clenched down on Senjian's cock, which stirred him with maddening precision. Claws raked his cock and one nipple, drawing out the sensations of spilling beyond the point of madness.

"Thank you," he sighed, as Senjian's thrusts rocked him harder and faster. To his surprise, he meant it.

Chapter Eight

The next morning, Sir brought out a salve that would help heal the small wounds of the single tail and applied it liberally to Wishbone's body, even to his prick and down between his buttocks so that he spilled again. After Wishbone dressed, the salve started to work, painting him all over in itches so that he was hard put to stand still. When he dressed, the rasp of fabric on his welts made him bite his lips, and not just from pain. He felt so aroused that one kiss from Sir would have made him spill in his clothes, and it was just as well that Sir pushed him out of the bedroom in order to write letters.

Terefar dug up an old cloak of Sir's that was a little heavy for the spring sunshine, but made a modest enough wrap for Telia to wear into town. Wishbone walked her down the Hill.

"Pardon me for fussing, Wishbone," she said, "But you seem unwell. Have you hurt yourself?"

"I strained myself lifting crates for Sir," he said. "It is a small thing, and I thank you for your concern."

The delicate creature seemed satisfied.

They came upon the dressmaker recommended by the girls of Bent Street. Indeed, the shop was tiny, but every bit as respectable-looking as Wishbone had been led to expect. The woman clerk showed Telia bolts of fabric that made her eyes open wide. The two of them vanished into the back to measure Telia, then returned to make some final choices. The clerk dug up a dress left behind months ago by a client who never paid and took it in while they waited. Wishbone counted out a small stack of coins from the pouch that Sir gave him. They were told to return the next week to pick up the dresses. Afterwards, Wishbone walked back up the hill with the happiest scullery girl in all of Bronlyn.

Wishbone had just enough time to grab a meal from cook before heading back down to town for Church. This time he visited the one on Breakwater Wharf. The priest was gray-haired, wrinkled, and one of the shortest men Wishbone had ever seen. He had to stand on a box to see over the podium. He hurled his voice like a weapon. It bounced off the back wall as he railed against strong drink, hot baths and low necklines on women, but he reserved special venom for fornication. Every debasing pleasure in life, he declared, would be repaid with ages of agony after death. Wishbone tried to sift his words for messages that Sir would want to know, but it seemed that the priest had no opinion on shih-aan and his sermon had no hidden meanings. He believed that his entire congregation was destined for one of the eleven hells and the only question was which one. By the time services let out, Wishbone's ears were ringing. Glancing in the eyes of the dispersing congregation, he wondered why anyone would sit through all of that voluntarily.

On the way out, Wishbone saw a few guardsmen loitering across the street. One of them was certainly Gertom. He slipped through the crowd and down a side street. It wasn't possible to tell if Gertom saw him or not, but he seemed to feel the guard captain's eyes burning into his back the whole way up the hill. He found himself clutching the pendant around his neck as if it would

protect him.

Wishbone spent the night alone in his room. He found himself awake, desperate to touch the marks Sir had left on his body and the burning spike between his legs. He listened to the darkness for a hint of what Sir was up to with Terefar, but the only sounds were in his imagination.

The next day was the first genuinely warm one of the year. Wishbone and Terefar lay on the carved wooden benches under the maple tree. Its leaves were not yet thick enough to block the sunlight. Bunches of thyme flowered along the vegetable garden border. Birds nested on the house's gargoyles. Every so often the sounds of a distant coach or Wenley hammering on horseshoes disturbed the sounds of bees. Wishbone wondered what he'd be doing now if he'd stayed in the provinces with his family. Probably hauling stones out of the way of the plow or spreading cow manure in the corn fields. He stretched his back and legs, still sore from the pain game, and relaxed them one muscle at a time. Sir's harshest attentions lasted so much longer than the pleasure and satisfaction of a spill.

"Terefar," he asked, "can shih-aan see in the dark?"

"Not in complete darkness," answered Terefar. "But the light of a single candle to them is like daylight to us."

Interesting. Wishbone would remember that Sir could see him even when he couldn't see Sir.

"What was it like to grow up with the shih-aan?" he asked.

"I will tell you, but only in Krih-aan."

Wishbone sighed and composed himself for the hard work of listening. "All right," he said.

"We grow up with our families," said Terefar. "We certainly meet shih-aan when we are young, but they don't take much interest in us until we're at least twelve years old. Then they begin examining, testing and training us for various duties, choosing the ways we will serve them. Many wathara work in fields and vineyards and have little contact with our masters. But a few are chosen to serve shih-aan directly as cooks, secretaries, and household attendants. I remember my parents' joy when I was selected for bed service.

"The shih-aan have rules about how wathara may be treated, but even so, some of us have an easier life than others. My parents were happy that I would not face years of sunburn, scrapes, and heavy lifting. I'd be working inside, as a shih-aan prince's treasured Anshan." He smiled up into the maple branches at fond memories. "Of course, they don't teach the bedroom arts until we are older. The details are kept from us until then. It seems a tantalizing mystery. Our older siblings and cousins may let drop a hint or two, just enough to fuel feverish young dreams. And what we hear all seems so unlikely, physically. Then one evening we are brought to bed for the

first time. It's not as we imagined, but better. So much better. But that's just the beginning. And so are the three years of lessons."

Wishbone considered his own fumbling introduction to sex and thought that the wathara had an easier time of it. He couldn't understand the unhappiness Sir seemed to harbor for their transformation to the docile, selectively-bred creatures who fit so well into this life. Except, perhaps, that they no longer had the capacity to make any choices about it.

He picked the Krih-aan words with care. "Shih-aan have a lot of rules."

"That is because shih-aan have claws and teeth and a fierce love of fighting, especially with each other. They have books governing the treatment of every member of the Zanshin, shih-aan and wathara both, and the rules are attributed to the gods. Those that break rules may be severely punished. When I was quite young, a Zanna, the mother of a Zanshin, was found to manage her house so poorly that her wathara were starving and her males scarcely better off. After a lengthy investigation by the Council, she was condemned and executed. Her house was divided amongst other Zanshin, and her own name obliterated."

"It sounds to me as if the death of her name might have been a worse punishment than the death of her body."

"You're right," said Terefar. "You're starting to think like them."

Wishbone wondered if that was a compliment. Something about the story nagged at him. "How many males did she have?"

"I don't remember the exact number, but for a house that size, five or six would be reasonable."

"Huh. Are there fewer females than males?"

"Male and female are born in the same numbers. Females are more often culled than the males. Only one Zanna is needed for each Zanshin, and battles between sisters for the privilege can be destroy a lot more lives than culling. Females have the option of renouncing Zanshin leadership and the right to breed, and some do make that choice. Zannas are responsible for all members, shih-aan and otherwise, and that means they receive all the blame for trouble."

"What does a Zanna do with so many males?" Wishbone asked, still circling the subject with fascination and disbelief.

"Depending on the time of year, much or nothing. A female goes into heat in the spring. A female in heat will wear out all the males she chooses." He laughed at the look on Wishbone's face. "I'm just happy enough that wathara and shih-aan females do not share any attraction. As you may tell, I'm more than a little afraid of them." Terefar stretched.

"I don't understand," said Wishbone. "Females don't even bed their males for most of the year? What do the males *do*? Are there enough wathara for all of them?"

"They bed each other often enough. And loudly enough. Some old Zanshin halls have thin walls, so you can always tell who is with whom." He chuckled.

Wishbone squinted as the sun moved further overhead. "I didn't think before that Sir's taste for other males might be considered normal for a Shih-aan. Among humans it is a whispered thing at best, a crime at worse."

"Well, you are correct that two males in bed together is scarcely cause for comment. But for Sir to take a human... Well, there are no rules for that. I hear he plans to bring you home. I don't know how he'll manage the turmoil if so. But that's none of my concern."

Of course, Sir had told Wishbone more or less the same thing. A Zanshin consisted of shih-aan first and wathara second, with no place for humans. Wishbone did not like to think that he might become a point of contention. Sir must believe the risk was worth it. Wishbone let the sun soothe away the concern.

"I'm so glad it's finally getting warm," he said.

Terefar snorted. "This is not warm. I've got a second shirt underneath this one to keep the chill off."

That was another sign, Wishbone thought, that Feras-aan was someplace completely different than this one. If he was to go there some day, he'd have to be ready for changes much stranger than the weather.

Wishbone had settled into the pew and stayed awake, with some effort, during the hymns and opening of the service. Then the priest mounted the podium. He was tall and built like a bull, with a thick neck and powerful limbs. His garment was plain black and a little worn around the stitching, and his eyes were sharp enough to cut. He spoke, and suddenly there was no danger of dozing. The priest's voice was not particularly loud, but it shook the dust off the rafters.

"There is a grave threat to the order created by The Unnamed Gods," he said. His voice had a seductive rhythm, like a chant. "The Unnamed Gods are not pleased with King Rendel or with Bronlyn or any of the other kingdoms. The omens are plain to anyone with eyes. Soulless creatures walk untroubled among us. Their wealth is gained at the expense of starving human babies. Our king has been seduced by their poison-laden gifts. The time to destroy them is not yet, but the Unnamed Gods have entrusted their faithful with instructions."

The congregation stirred and buzzed, each member knowing that *he* was one of the faithful, a special confidant of the Unnamed Gods.

"Do not trade with the soulless or patronize any business that does," he said. "If you pass one on the street, spit on his shadow. Join the King's armies, for while Rendel is by no means pure in

motives or agency, the armies will be commanded some day by leaders who are."

Wishbone memorized every word.

Chapter Nine

Telia had spent the entire afternoon slicing onions and went to bed early with a cold wet towel on her face. The smells of half a spring lamb roasting filled the house under Cook's tender ministrations. Terefar brought up many bottles of wine from the cellars and drilled Wishbone on the labels and the order in which to serve them.

The Council-in-Exile was coming to dinner. It gathered often at Sir's house, because it was the one of the biggest available, and because consensus proclaimed his Cook the finest of all. By tradition, all business would be transacted before the meal so that the smells of food would curb the tongues of any who might otherwise be long-winded. While they talked, they would drink the finest imported wines. Wishbone would be serving the wine.

Apparently this was an important part of Sir's overall plan. Wishbone wasn't clear why, but he did know that his behavior would be under scrutiny that evening and was frankly terrified.

The other shih-ann arrived in ones and twos, in coaches like Sir's, on horseback, or on foot. Wenley gathered the visitors' mounts, coaches, and coachmen on the side of the house, where a fire was burning outside and meals were available for both horses and men.

The visitors took their seats in a half-circle of chairs, facing the fire. Wishbone watched Sir greet each one and matched the memorized identities to faces as he served the first bottle.

Diah Jojaan was the most distinctive. He was older, and his graying hair was done up in a braid with ribbons that matched his elaborate clothing. The Zanshin Council had given him a pile of made-up titles so that the human King would accept him as an ambassador. He tended to dress with a duke's ostentation as well. His true title -- Diah -- could be translated as "honored scholar." He was by no means the highest ranked of the group, but no one in Rendel's court knew that. He had taken over from the previous ambassador two years ago and might not be relieved for another two years. Wishbone gathered that the others felt a certain pity for him that he must so frequently endure the company of humans, their dubious foods, artless wines and graceless behavior.

The distinction of highest rank was arguably held by Mai Zarian. His title could be translated as "balancer," and he had the responsibility of making final decisions. He was tall, lean, and did not speak often.

Sem Arasheyr was the secretary. It was easy to underestimate his importance from the translation of his title. He kept the cyphers and official records of the mission and was a sorcerer of some note. Wishbone suspected that his illusion pendant originated with Sem Arasheyr.

The title Nei had no good translation. Terefar said to think of it as "honored." Nei Edaza and Nei Merkedis had no clear function in the Council, but were included because their Zanshin were too large and important to overlook. They would spend a year or two adding diplomacy to their list of skills and credentials before returning to Feras-aan.

Last to arrive was Ah Jinráo. His title meant "defender." He held responsibility for the mission's safety, both physical and moral, for to a shih-aan these things were the same. He was easy to identify, for he bore a deep scar across his right brow. The healers of Feras-aan -- far more talented than human healers -- could have removed it, but he kept it as a bitter reminder of some past failure. His duty naturally opposed Sir's. The Zanshin Council had charged Sir to increase the shih-aan race's knowledge of humans with an eye toward resolving the sentience question. Because Sir spend so much time walking among humans, and had gone so far as to bring one home, Ah Jinráo felt (with some justification) that the dangers to the mission had increased. Over the last half-year their relationship, never cordial, had soured.

Wishbone wondered if his well-groomed, well-trained presence was designed to soothe Ah Jinráo or to provoke the defender. Either was possible. He had been instructed to act as if he understood little or nothing of the conversation and -- especially in the case of Ah Jinráo -- not to raise his eyes or draw attention to himself.

Sir performed a bow so deep and graceful that Wishbone doubted he could duplicate it.

"Welcome, Council-in-Exile, to my home."

"Is that your domesticated human?" asked Ah Jinráo. He was examining his full wineglass, as if he'd found something drowning in it.

Sir bowed again. "Humans cannot be domesticated," he said smoothly, "but you will find his service acceptable."

"Will you two duel and get it over with?" interjected Nei Edaza.

"This is not the time," said Mai Zarian.

"At least not until after dinner," added Diah Jojaan, the diplomat.

Everyone except for Ah Jinráo chuckled.

Sem Arasheyr, the secretary, opened a leather case and passed out a bundle of papers to each member. Wishbone knew what this was about, at least. He had related the Church sermon to Sir as best his memory would allow. Sir had made a transcript of it, and Sem Arasheyr had made copies. Now the Council were reading it. The pages turned in silence.

Nei Merkedis said, "What is the significance of this?"

A look of pain briefly crossed Diah Jojaan's face, though possibly only Wishbone was free to notice it. He drained his glass, and Wishbone hastened to fill it.

"I believe this may be the wedge we've been looking for," said Sir.

"How so?" asked Nei Edaza. "I agree that this priest acts without respect or honor toward his

superiors, but a transcript like this won't be proof of harm. Or gain us anything even if we destroy the priest."

"If he acts alone," said Sir, "you are correct. But priests are creatures of authority among humans. We looked to the Church because we believed that it influences opinion. It is the key to why our diplomatic relations have progressed so far, and not far enough. If this priest has a network of supporters, we can trace them, manipulate them, expose them."

"We don't have the resources for that," asserted Nei Edaza.

Wishbone's nostrils twitched. A cloud of promising smells rolled in from the kitchen. Cook was doing something with rosemary and butter. Even the intent shih-ann paused in their debate.

Sem Arasheyr recovered first. "We have more than you might think."

"You speak of the craft," said Diah Jojaan. "These tasks are within your ability, Sem Arasheyr?"

"I assure you that this is so," said the secretary, who was also a sorcerer. "My talents remain at the service of the Council-in-Exile. Until now I have lacked only suitable targets."

Ah Jinráo sipped his wine and made a face. "I thought we agreed that the risk was too great."

"Not if we wish to show progress to the Zanshin Council after so many years gathering intelligence," said Mai Zarian. "We've been very safe, but very slow. Shieh Yeras, you've made good use of this human Anshan. Continue to do so. We will follow up on your information."

Several moments of silence passed.

Diah Jojaan stood up. "Now we dine."

Senjian lay flat on his back in bed, still fully dressed, with one arm over his eyes. Unsure what else to do, Wishbone crawled onto the bed and laid his head on Senjian's chest.

"You did well," said Senjian. "I am not so certain about myself, though. I will have to do something about Ah Jinráo."

"Not a duel?" asked Wishbone.

"You had better hope not. I have put little practice into such things since leaving Feras-aan. Ah Jinráo does little but practice these days. If we fight, I lose. If he makes your presence the point of the duel, I will be forced to send you away. No, there will be another way to handle him."

There it was again -- the one bitter thorn in the sweet garden that Wishbone's life had become. As always, Wishbone ignored the thorn until such time as it would inevitably snag him.

"Meanwhile, the mission advances. That is the important part."

Turning against Senjian's body, Wishbone unfastened the layers of garments until he had bared some of the shih-aan's chest, then began to press his lips and tongue against the exposed flesh. Senjian tensed for a moment, then the stress leaked out of his body. Gripped Wishbone by the hair.

"Yes," he whispered. "That."

For the first time, Wishbone noticed that they'd been speaking entirely in Krih-aan. He let Senjian's hand guide him lower and still lower. Wishbone unfastened the waist of Senjian's trousers, drew out the cock that was half-hard already and took it between his lips. For the moment, at least, Senjian would not regret bringing Wishbone home.

Chapter Ten

Summer arrived accompanied by thick, damp morning mists and hot, heavy stinks that only the strongest breezes could sweep away. It was cooler up on the Hill than down by the harbor, but not by much. The fires that warmed Sir's bedroom had dwindled until the hearth stood cool most evenings. At the same time, calls for Wishbone to attend Sir in that room also dwindled. Wishbone was both relieved and sorry that Sir did not ask him to play the pain game again.

He did not think that Sir neglected him in favor of Terefar. From the quantity of paper and swan feathers that vanished into his bedroom, the writing desk got most of his attention.

Still, going to sleep alone pained Wishbone. He dreaded bedtime, for his body's demands hounded him in the dark and made him feel like a boy whose parents beat him for staining the sheets. He wished that he could either obey and be satisfied, or disobey and be punished. He didn't seem able to manage either.

Three days had passed since Sir had invited Wishbone up to his room. Thus, Wishbone was deeply relieved when Terefar passed on the word that Sir had asked for him, and puzzled when he arrived upstairs to find Terefar waiting, too.

A candle brightened Sir's writing desk where he bent over a piece of paper. Wishbone glanced out the open window at the nearly vanished light, then over at Terefar, who waited, utterly still, his eyes down and his hands clasped together behind his back. Self-conscious, Wishbone tried to imitate Terefar's relaxed posture, but his attention and eyes kept wandering to the men to either side of him.

"Wishbone," said Sir, "I'm nearly finished. Cease fidgeting so I can hear myself think."

Stung, Wishbone felt his face heat. He concentrated on a spot in front of him on the floor while Sir's pen scratched across the paper. At last Sir stretched and took the candle to his night table.

"It has occurred to me," he said, "that I no longer have the vitality necessary to keep two young males entertained while I also attend to my duties for Council. A solution presents itself." He climbed onto the bed and got comfortable against the pillows. "You two will join me in bed and entertain each other. Wishbone, Terefar will do anything you ask, provided you do so in Krihaan."

Startled, Wishbone looked over at Terefar. The wathara, whose manner had remained pleasant but aloof for months, glanced up under his lashes and licked his lips in a way that would have gotten him arrested if he did it in public.

"How do I ask you to suck my cock?" asked Wishbone.

Terefar laughed.

They ended up sprawled across the foot of the bed half out of their clothes while Terefar

explained some fine points of the Krih-aan tongue. Wishbone learned three words for cock -- one polite enough for discussions with physicians, one quite rude, and another even ruder word that rhymed with so many other words that it was usually reserved for insults. They paused to review words for kisses. Wishbone discovered that the points on Terefar's ears were extraordinarily sensitive. Tonguing them could draw remarkable noises from the wathara. The breezes through the windows cooled the sweat on their bodies as their hands summoned more.

Terefar's skin was dark and warm under Wishbone's hands. He smelled spicy, and his eyelashes were very long against his cheeks when he closed his eyes. Wishbone uncovered more of Terefar's body, revealing body hair in similar amounts and places to his own, and learned words for these things as well. He felt a sharp pang as he looked over the handsome and suddenly willing wathara, a pleasing bedmate, but not the one he craved. He had just time enough to savor the irony of a whore growing picky before Terefar pressed his growing cock against Wishbone's and lust spiraled up Wishbone's spine.

It took some time for Terefar to translate the rest of the idiom for cock-sucking. Krih-aan offered a choice of phrases for variation of the act -- one phrase for using the tongue, another for lips, one for actively sucking a cock, and one for passively allowing the cock to thrust into the mouth. As he grew more aroused, Wishbone found it harder to focus on Krih-aan words, or any words at all. When he stopped asking Terefar, ever obedient, would stop doing.

Finally, when Wishbone was nearly in tears, Sir said to Terefar, "You may finish him off. Do not hurry."

Terefar's tight lips circled Wishbone's cock head, and the wathara's warm hands cradled his balls. It felt like Terefar's tongue was more dexterous than Sir's hands. Wishbone's toes curled. He turned his head slightly so that he could see Sir lying curled up against the pillows, sipping his wine. Sir's eyes were half-closed, amused, and his smile both tender and cruel. It was obscene that Wishbone should experience such skillful pleasure not by Sir's hand. But there was no doubt that Terefar had a talent for bed play honed by years of training, and that he could keep Wishbone on edge as long as he chose.

Indeed, Terefar drove Wishbone toward spilling and pulled him back with a sharp nip or by turning his mouth away more times than Wishbone could count, and the tender spot beneath the head of his prick grew sore from the constant attention. Terefar did not seem to tire either. Wishbone twisted his hips and tried to hold Terefar's head, but Sir ordered him to be still.

When Wishbone was finally allowed to spill, he screamed himself raw while his pulse thundered through his body. Terefar sucked hard to extract the last bit of fluid from Wishbone's cock, then showered it with increasingly unbearable kisses as it shrank in size and grew in sensitivity. Finally, Wishbone was allowed to sit up and accept a glass of wine while Terefar rested his head in Wishbone's lap.

When he could speak again, Wishbone asked, "How may I please *you*?"

Terefar spoke two words in Krih-aan. He and Sir looked into Wishbone's blank face and laughed.

"I shall take that glass, Wishbone," said Sir. "Lie face down and spread. Your talent for this particular act by no means shames you before an expert."

Wishbone felt his face burn. He lay down on the cool sheets, stung just a bit by memories of the last time Terefar had him. Wishbone would rather have saved this intimacy for Sir. But while his heart was not eager, the rest of his body was. Terefar's lips pressed wetly at the back of his neck, between his shoulder blades, and still lower. Wishbone arched his back while his hands twisted the covers. A single finger traced the length of his spine, over and over, stopping each time at the top of his cleft. He spread his legs, inviting that touch lower. At the same time, his lips parted, and he began making groaning sounds of need. He turned his head to the side and caught Sir's eye. The corner of Sir's mouth lifted just a hair.

"He is paying more attention to me than to you," said Sir.

"That's rude, Enshan," said Terefar. "But I ask you not to punish him on my behalf."

Sir got to his feet and opened the wardrobe door. Wishbone stiffened under Terefar's hands. "Your generosity has been noted, Anshan," said Sir, "but Wishbone must learn proper bedroom manners. He behaves as a novice, and that is how we will treat him."

Wishbone had imagined all sorts of dire instruments of punishment, but Sir removed only a heavy, black scarf. He wrapped it around Wishbone's eyes, behind the head, then forward to tie at his throat.

"Wishbone," he said, "remember that less pleasant restraints are available at any time."

It was unfair. He hadn't been warned that he was doing anything wrong. But presumably a gag awaited him if he tried to point that out. There was no reason why a correction had to be fair so long as it pleased Sir to do it.

There was a sound of a jar opening.

"Thank you," said Terefar.

Without any way to see, Wishbone found himself moving, rubbing his cock on the bed covers and arching his back. Fingers cool with lubricant opened Wishbone with unexpected gentleness. Terefar's warm limbs folded over his and fit the two of them together.

Wishbone's body knew what he needed better than he did. He squirmed until he had impaled himself on Terefar's cock. He wrapped his legs around Terefar's and pulled them closer. Drops of sweat landed on his back and trickled down his flanks.

"Oh. Enshan, he is every bit as good a ride as you promised, and much more fun willing than not."

The warm praise stroked Wishbone like another hand. Terefar's body shifted, and his cock, buried deep between Wishbone's buttocks, summoned the most intense sensations of lust so that Wishbone cried out and spilled again, body tensing and releasing around that sweet spike of flesh.

"Not much control, though," said Terefar, a little breathless.

"Indeed." The bed creaked as Sir's weight shifted. As the sound of his pulse quieted, Wishbone could hear the other two kiss. "Perhaps I will have you educate him later. For now, you have done well."

Wishbone heard another kiss, a sobbing sound from Terefar.

"You may spill," said Sir.

It seemed to Wishbone that while humans had little use for pleasure other than to condemn it, shih-aan -- with wathara as their accomplices -- had made their appetites into an art. Terefar's pleasure expanded to touch all of Wishbone's senses. The cries that spilled from them merged. Wishbone could not see, but he could imagine Sir savoring their passion as it drained away with the last of the day's heat.

Chapter Eleven

A shih-aan ship, the *Praefah*, arrived in the harbor on a hot summer morning. Sir had Wenley hitch the horses for a trip down to the docks to pick up his mail. Official correspondence arrived through the Council-in-Exile, but there were letters and small packages from Sir's Zanshin on every ship, and the shih-aan found them vastly comforting. He brought Wishbone along to help carry them to the coach.

By the time the coach reached the dock, the cooling shadows had disappeared and heat radiated up from the stone and wood surfaces of the pier. The sun beat at their heads like an enemy. The dockworkers and errand boys moved as slowly as they could get away with without earning a beating.

The *Praefah* floated in the molten harbor. Boats traveled in both directions -- offloading trade goods, bringing on casks of water and provisions. The shih-aan sailors' skin was burnt light-brown, and their hair faded by the sun and salt. In port they wore bleached linen shirts that covered their most obvious bodily differences from humans, but only the officers wore gloves. One officer met Sir on the dock and passed on some gossip along with the mail.

Wishbone balanced the stack of packages and letters in his arms while they walked back to the carriage. He was thinking of the cool wine cellar back at Sir's house as Sir opened the carriage door. Even the bay horses between the carriage shafts seemed to droop.

Something darted from the crowd, incongruously swift. Wishbone dropped all the mail as Sir slammed him against the side of the coach. There was a sharp cry, and a wet cough, and something heavy falling.

Wishbone straightened up. "What was..." He stopped as the scene registered on his eyes.

A man lay on the cobblestones. A knife had fallen from his hand, and his throat had been ripped clean out. A long spray of his blood dyed the road, a stack of barrels, and two or three bystanders. Sir's dark sleeve was torn half off his right arm.

"Get the mail," he said, his voice as cool as water. He bent over stiffly and plucked the knife from the ground with his right hand while his left gripped his right upper arm.

Wishbone heard Wenley's voice soothing the dancing horses as he hastened to gather everything into the carriage. At least one package had smashed inside when it hit the cobbles. It made sad little crunching sounds as he handled it. As he bent over to pluck the last letter from under the carriage wheel, he noticed a small splatter of blood at Sir's feet. His mouth went dry.

After the coach door had slammed behind them and Sir had ordered Wenley to hasten home, Sir handed the knife to Wishbone.

"Cut strips out of my clothes and bind my arm," he ordered, as the carriage lurched. His face looked pale. The glove on his right hand had shredded when his claws came out.

Wishbone got on one knee to balance himself and went to work on the ruined sleeve. It was a tricky job, but the knife was sharp. The slash went high up the back of Sir's arm, and it bled freely over the coach seat and Wishbone's hands. Well then, he had never been squeamish, and Sir needed him. Wishbone pulled the first loop tight and yanked a small sound from between Sir's teeth.

"You are doing well," said Sir.

The carriage hit a bump. Wishbone dropped the knife, then fished it up from under the seat. He made more loops around Sir's arm and tied them off. The fabric was dark enough that he couldn't tell if he'd stopped all the bleeding.

Whipping around the last corner, the carriage rocked to a halt in the familiar front courtyard. The horses were blowing from the run. Drawn by the unusual commotion, Terefar opened the front door.

His eyes opened very wide as he saw Wishbone help Sir onto the front walk. Sir directed the two of them to gather all the mail and the knife from the carriage and gave Wenley a set of instructions before walking into the shade of the house. He dropped into one of the parlor chairs and let his head hang.

Terefar stood frozen over the pile of mail, staring helplessly at Sir. Wishbone gave him a gentle push.

"Would you get him some wine?" he asked.

Shaking himself, Terefar ran back through the kitchen to the cellar stairs. Wishbone followed him. In the heat of the kitchen, Cook and Telia were slicing a cold roast of veal and speaking in a sort of pidgin that they had evolved over the past months. They stopped as Terefar ran past them and looked up, puzzled, at Wishbone.

"Excuse me," he said. "Telia, would you search the downstairs closet for any linens we put aside for rags and bring them to the front parlor?" When Telia had vanished, he asked Cook to heat some water.

Terefar returned from the cellar with a bottle, but his hands were shaking too hard to open it. Wishbone suggested that Terefar go look after Sir. Taking the bottle from him, Wishbone opened it and poured off a glass. When he returned to the parlor, Terefar was kneeling with his head in Sir's lap. Wishbone handed Sir the glass. He lifted his head long enough to take a swallow. The skin around his eyes was the color of a bruise.

"I was saving this vintage for a celebration," he said wryly.

Telia edged into the parlor with the rags. She saw the mess and dropped everything. Wishbone patted her on the arm.

"Please go help Cook draw water," he said. She gave him a grateful look and hurried away.

Blood trickled down Sir's arm. Wishbone loosely wrapped a rag around the wound and spread some others beneath. The clatter of hooves drew him to the front door. He opened it to the Bremmian physician as Wenley took off again.

"In trouble again?" asked the man. He frowned, as if trying to decide what was wrong -- or not wrong -- with Wishbone's face.

"Not I," said Wishbone. He directed the physician into the parlor. The physician looked over the bleeding shih-aan.

"I've not treated your kind before," he said. "Anything I do is as likely to make you worse as not."

Sir drained his glass. "After the great battles of Feras-aan, my people learned, as we pieced together the survivors, that treating flesh wounds, at least, is the same for both races. Please be so kind as to return the favor."

The physician shrugged and began laying out instruments from his bag onto an end table. "May I offer you laudanum?"

Sir shook his head, then winced. "I'll need my wits about me. The wine will have to do. Have you everything you need?"

"I lack only a bucket and space to work."

Sir prodded Terefar. "Bring us a bucket, then go lie down," he said.

Terefar backed away and got to his feet. He looked much worse off than Sir, but returned a moment later with a bucket before vanishing up the stairs, retching.

Wishbone watched the physician's movements for a moment, then ducked in to fill Sir's tightly-held glass and backed out before he could be in the way. The physician ignored him, uncorked a bottle of what smelled like spirits of wine, and poured it over the wound. Sir arched his back and made a noise so disturbing that Wishbone nearly followed Terefar upstairs to hide, except that he was sure he'd be needed. Indeed, the physician set Wishbone to ripping up the rags and fetching boiled water, while he cut away the edges of the wound with a scalpel.

The carriage returned once more to the front yard, moving slowly to accommodate the exhausted horses. Wishbone opened the front door to the diplomat, Diah Jojaan. He dropped his eyes and bowed.

"Yes, yes," said the shih-aan ambassador. "Save your excellent manners for some other time and take me to him now."

Wishbone stood hastily and directed Diah Jojaan to the downstairs parlor. The physician was setting neat stitches into Sir's arm with a curved needle.

"Don't get up," said Diah Jojaan, speaking in Krih-aan.

"I've failed the Council and the mission," said Sir, biting his lip hard as the physician set another stitch.

"How so? If I understand your coachman, you were attacked."

"I let my rage act for me. I killed the attacker. The humans will not be well pleased with such an act. In any case, he is not available for questioning." He shook his head. "I did a remarkably poor job of blocking his knife."

"Don't criticize yourself. Others will, and I'd rather see you prepare a defense. I will help as I can. If you've already surrendered in your mind, though, I'll be wasting my time and my honor on a lost cause."

Sir sighed, then winced as the physician set another stitch.

"Allow me a moment of self-pity, while we're still alone," said Sir. "I promise you a fight worth backing. Meanwhile, I have a bottle of that excellent Red Tarevras open. Shall I offer you a glass?"

Several footsteps clattered on the front walk, and a heavy fist pounded on the front door. Diah Jojaan stood up.

"Perhaps in a moment," he said. Then, to Wishbone, in human tongue, he added, "I will handle this guest for you. Fetch me a glass while I do so."

Wishbone went to the kitchen. On the way he paused by an open window to listen to the shih-aan diplomat being politely obstructive to the King's Justice.

"I do apologize for the inconvenience," said Diah Jojaan. "Shieh Yeras is indisposed. In fact, this house is considered sovereign territory of Feras-aan's ruling Council, and you should reconsider what you propose in light of our mutual treaties."

And such. At once Wishbone saw Diah Jojaan's words as a kind of spell that made the house into another place. It was a spell more powerful than steel and the silken strings of bows, for it placed them all beyond reach of weapons. It seemed very much like what Sir meant to do on a grander scale, to make a war between humans and shih-aan impossible.

Eventually, Diah Jojaan sent the armed would-be guests away and returned to the parlor for his glass of Red Tarevras, which he drained methodically. The physician tossed a sodden pink piece of linen into the bucket with a damp splat.

Diah Jojaan examined his empty glass. "Good stuff," he said. "I'm delighted you found the occasion worth serving it."

Sir laughed. The physician, meanwhile, was smearing something strong-smelling down the length of the stitching. Anchoring a strip of torn linen at Sir's shoulder, he began winding the bandages over the arm.

"I'll return this time tomorrow to change your bandages," he said, and handed the bucket to Wishbone. "Be sure you burn all of this." He began replacing his instruments in his bag.

"I owe you, physician," said Sir.

"Tomorrow will be soon enough. Other patients require my attention today."

"Very well. You have my thanks for now."

After he had gone, Sir said to Wishbone, "I'll need your assistance in changing my clothes. Come upstairs with me. We shall entrust to Diah Jojaan the door and any further visitors."

Up in the bedroom, Sir assembled an outfit from out of the drawers and the wardrobe. Wishbone was mildly surprised to find that only the wardrobe's topmost shelf contained coiled ropes and the instruments of elaborate bed games. The rest of it was full of clothes. With Wishbone's hands to help, they got Sir buttoned into a creamy shirt cut loosely about the back and arms just as the front door opened. Sir looked at himself in the mirror and frowned. By the time the door opened a second time they managed to get his hair in order.

"I nearly forgot to ask," said Sir. "Did you recognize the man who attacked us?"

Wishbone thought of the man as he lay on the ground. He remembered tattered clothes and colorless hair, but nothing familiar about the face and nothing remarkable but the fact that he was dead.

"Not in the least."

On the way downstairs, Sir said, "Go to the cellar and look for the other bottles like the one Terefar brought up. They should be against the north wall, half-way up the shelf. Bring up at least three more and prepare to serve them to the Council-in-Exile."

Wishbone did as he was told. He had the bottles assembled in the kitchen and the first one uncorked before the rest of the Council members arrived. He began filling glasses. Unlike previous occasions, they drank silently. Nei Merkedis was the last to join them.

Sir stood up before the cold hearth. "Forgive me," he said. "I am injured and cannot render you proper courtesy. Thank you for assembling at such short notice."

"You have been in some sort of altercation?" asked Nei Edaza.

"Indeed." Sir described the attack down at the harbor, concluding with the attacker's demise.

Sem Arasheyr said, "One thing is not clear to me. You blocked the attack, but it does not seem from your description that it was aimed at you."

Sir nodded to the scribe. "I believe that the attack was aimed at my human Anshan."

Wishbone's pretense of not understanding the conversation was sorely tested. He filled another glass without spilling anything.

"Indeed," Sir continued, "I would not have been injured if I hadn't pushed him out of the way and put myself in front of the knife."

Ah Jinráo stood up. His face was dark with anger. "Your human brings us nothing but danger. I will see an end to your entanglement with it."

"I nearly think you are challenging the wrong party," said Diah Jojaan. "Shieh Yeras has taken a battle injury. I, for one, would think you neither brave nor clever to assign blame to him."

"Nor I," said Mai Zarian.

Ah Jinráo looked for a moment like he was determined to blame someone and didn't much care who before he sat down again, fuming.

Sem Arasheyr cleared his throat. "What might your human have done to draw this sort of attention?"

Sir nodded to him. "As I have mentioned before, even humans who tolerate our presence in this land look askance at one of their own in our company."

"Did he know the attacker?" asked Diah Jojaan.

"Not in the least."

"How was the knife held?" asked Ah Jinráo.

"Overhand," answered Sir.

Ah Jinráo made a face. "An amateur."

"Riddle me this," said Diah Jojaan. "Does anyone know that the attack wasn't aimed at you?"

Sir said, "No one outside of this room."

Diah Jojaan rubbed his hands together. "Unless the Justice officers have different information, we will say nothing about the true target. A well-respected merchant, one under the aegis of our diplomatic mission, was attacked in broad daylight. Their king will be begging to hand us reparations by this time tomorrow. I'll refuse of course. But if anyone is foolish enough to declare differently, they'd be admitting to suspicious knowledge indeed. Does anyone disagree with this course of action?"

No one did. A few Council members stirred as if they would rise.

"One more thing," said Sir. "We know nothing yet of who planned the attack or what they would have accomplished. I don't think any of us believes this was a completely isolated incident. I, for one, consider that my performance was... poor. I should have been able to take the man's knife away and hold him until the Dock Patrol arrived. That I could not do so is a greater threat to my own safety than any number of human assassins."

He bowed stiffly towards Ah Jinráo. "I have neglected my fitness to fight for too long. You're the most qualified defense trainer of us all. After I heal, will you return me to a level of ability sufficient to face the expected threat?"

Ah Jinráo stirred warily. "And I will do this from duty alone?"

"Choose your compensation. I so offer, before witnesses."

"A generous offer indeed," said Mai Zarian. "I suggest you accept it."

"Three nights," declared Ah Jinráo.

Wishbone watched the narrowed eyes, shifted weight, and thoughtful looks among the Council and wondered what the shih-aan meant.

Sir bowed again. "I accept."

After this, the Council departed, all except Diah Jojaan. He and Sir finished the wine as the sun dropped lower in the sky.

"That was brave of you," said Diah Jojaan.

"If you say so," replied Sir. "I was thinking it made the upcoming interview with the human authorities seem trivial." He poured the last two fingers of wine from the bottle into his glass. "I only regret that I shall have jiadzi hanging over me for at least a couple of months. But then one could argue that such a conclusion has been inevitable for the last year, if not much longer. At least this way I shall see an end to it."

An hour after Diah Jojaan left, and just as Wishbone got the front parlor clean, the Justice officers returned with an entire patrol behind them. They seemed almost disappointed that Wishbone let them straight inside. It was a very different meeting than the previous one. Sir sat,

while the humans all stood. There was no wine given to any of them.

Sir offered bland, slippery answers to their questions. No, he did not know the man who attacked him. Yes, he had the knife that was used. Yes, they could have the knife. He had run home without waiting for the dock patrol because he was injured and gravely concerned for his safety. How could they expect otherwise? Eventually the officers gave up and left, with only the knife in their custody.

Chapter Twelve

After a stop in the kitchen to eat cold roast veal, Sir went to bed. Wishbone waited as long as he could stand, then knocked on Terefar's door until the servant came out, hastily dressed and groggy.

"What does *three nights* mean?" Wishbone asked him.

"It's *jiadzi*. A dueling forfeit, or sometimes a punishment. One shih-aan becomes the property of another for a brief time. Three days is traditional. Why?"

"It's how Sir is compensating Ah Jinráo for sharpening his fighting skills."

Terefar's eyes opened wide. "Oh, really."

"I still don't understand."

"The loser becomes property of the winner for three nights. And the two days between, of course. He has no rights during this time and may be used in any way the winner chooses. Permanent injuries are rare, since the fines are enormous."

"Property? As we are to Sir?"

"Exactly," said Terefar. "It's not such a horrible thing as you seem to think from the look on your face. It's no worse than what would have happened had Enshan lost a duel, and this way he avoids an admission of fault."

"In this case, Ah Jinráo gets paid twice. He gets to pound Enshan into the ground for weeks of practice fights, then he gets his three nights of *jiadzi*. He'll forgive a lot for that. But you haven't said anything about how Enshan is."

"Oh. The physician seems to think he's fine, though he looks awfully sore to me."

Terefar glanced down the hall at the closed door to the upstairs parlor. "I'll have to wait until tomorrow to see him. I wish I hadn't got so ill, but I don't think I've ever seen so much blood before in my life."

"You haven't spent much time on a farm, then," said Wishbone.

"I'm grateful for that. Now I'm going to look for something to eat."

They headed down to the kitchen. Cook gave them cold roast beef and slices of bread to make sandwiches, and they drew a bucket of water from the pump to drink.

"So what brought on this attack?" asked Terefar, as they ate. "Do you even know?"

Wishbone put down his sandwich. "I can't believe I almost forgot. I mean, I was thinking about Sir and Ah Jinráo... but anyway. Sir says that the attack was aimed at me, and I'm not sure why that would happen." Something tickled the back of his skull, and he remembered what Sir had said to him months ago. "Sir said that no one would lay a hand on me while he had breath in his body, but I never imagined that he'd put himself in front of a knife for me."

"Never bet against Enshan," said Terefar. "Now why would anyone attack you?"

Wishbone thought about what Sir had said about the reactions of other humans. Captain Gertom's face came to mind. "I wish I knew, if only to be sure it never happens again."

"But explain to me. Everyone seems resigned that Sir and Ah Jinráo will fight in some way. Why is this?"

Terefar tapped the spot over his eye. "It's about Ah Jinráo's scar. And duels. Every cub will duel nearly from the day he turns adult and joins his Zanshin of marriage -- about sixteen years old -- until he grows out of dueling lust -- about thirty years. Much longer for some. Whenever there is some doubt about relative ranks, there is a reason to fight. No cub believes he will ever lose interest, and no mature male can quite remember why he spent so much time and energy on it. The histories tell that once duels were fought to the death. We think they made that up."

Wishbone laughed. "Who is *we*?"

"The wathara," said Terefar. "We honor our Enshans, but we don't always believe them, and this piece of drama has the feel of their invention. Etiquette is observed scrupulously in all phases of a duel, providing many opportunities to take offense and call another duel. The females don't care what the males invent as long as they spend their energy out from underfoot. In any case, the males fight until one yields. And while most of the fighting is barehanded, some prefer the new arts of sword and bow. But a large minority of duelists favor games such as riverbridge above all."

"Sir is an expert at riverbridge. Perhaps a player of historic ability. Furthermore, he showed his first flashes of brilliance when he was quite young. The game requires a perfect memory and a cool head, especially when played for stakes. And shih-aan rarely waste their time dueling for anything trivial. Imagine watching the game pieces dwindle, and they are all that stand between you and poverty, or disgrace, or three nights of jiadzi, then loosing your temper and making that fate certain."

"Shieh Yeras could make anyone -- novice or master -- lose concentration, while his never slipped. Imagine the astonishment of the observers of a certain game when, after a subtle but constant parade of errors, Shieh Yeras leaped to his feet, cursed, and tossed the board across the room."

"He paid his three nights, and there was much laughter at his expense. But there had been numerous side-bets to the game, all made through agents."

"Why would anyone do that?" asked Wishbone.

"What?"

"Make a bet with someone they didn't know?"

Terefar looked puzzled for a moment, then his expression cleared. "Ah. The Guild of Gamblers. A seal in their name guarantees that an agent, or whoever he represents, can back a bet."

Wishbone nodded. "I understand, I think."

"So the nine shih-aan who had bet on a sure thing found themselves in forfeit, and none knew who held their markers. Weeks passed. At last, Shieh Yeras showed up at the Zanshin Hall of a losing gambler with a marker in hand, demanding payment. A more complex game was thus revealed."

"But wouldn't that be cheating?" asked Wishbone.

Terefar shook his head. "Throwing a game convincingly is considered more difficult than winning. It's a different kind of game, that's all." He continued. "Each marked shih-aan waited for Shieh Yeras to collect, and most of them trembled as more time passed. Given the odds on the original challenge, they had wagered high for the chance of gaining anything. Some unfortunates paid in treasure, even items from Zanshin coffers that never should have been wagered, and Shieh Yeras was enriched beyond measure. Others paid out their losses in commercial influence. There was plenty of jiadzi. He took a friend's political rival, stripped him, shoved a leather phallus with a horse tail up his arse, and bound him to a post outside one of the major cloth exchanges just before opening. Needless to say, that one's career never recovered."

Wishbone laughed, then stopped. He might not see it the way a shih-aan did, but he imagined all of Sir's victims waking up some morning and realizing they'd been snared for weeks and had only just noticed. Then word had begun to circulate about the fates of the others, and Sir had fallen upon them one at a time.

"One marker, suitably used, destroyed the current relationship of one of Shieh Yeras's old romantic rivals. A well-known braggart stayed quiet for a long time after he spent three nights calling Shieh Yeras Enshan. And other gamblers were snared to satisfy various lusts. As you might imagine, they were considered to have paid the dearest. Shieh Yeras had already earned an Adept's title from Rope and Lash, and he was well known for how he put his skills to use.

"The last marked one had not the wisdom of the rest. He was young, impulsive, not yet much accomplished, but attractive enough. Shieh Yeras might have included him as an afterthought. One might suppose the cub knew this. Unable to stand the wait, he challenged Shieh Yeras to bare-handed combat. The stake was his freedom from the original bet, against a greatly increased period of jiadzi."

"Never bet against Sir," said Wishbone.

"Indeed," said Terefar. "The discomfort of waiting is considered a part of *jiadzi*, and the timing part of the esthetics. Challenging these things is boorish. Shieh Yeras had no reason to grant the cub's request, but did so, and won, perhaps just to teach him that lesson. Sir did some damage in the fight, and the cub had to go home and rest for a few days under the attentions of a healer before he could even begin to pay what he owed. Three *times* three nights." Terefar drank a mug-full of water and wiped his forehead. "A shih-ann who is foolish enough to gamble against his elders' advice can not expect those same elders to buy him out of trouble."

Cook arrived with a side of veal in her arms. Just behind her Telia hovered in the door with a basket of wood. Wishbone and Terefar realized they were in the way of the kitchen staff. The two of them grabbed their mugs and knives, swept the table free of crumbs, and resumed the conversation in the upstairs room most shaded in the evenings.

"*Jiadzi* longer than five nights is not common," said Terefar. "And it is rare that a shih-aan who has neglected training from the Guild of Rope and Lash can resist an Adept's attention for long." Terefar paused and looked sideways at Wishbone. "Do you remember shih-aan share given names only between intimates? Parents, paramours, children."

Wishbone gave a guilty start. He had known. He'd just never quite grasped what it meant. When it crossed his mind, and it did about once a day, that Sir had never said that he loved Wishbone, Wishbone obviously wasn't thinking. Sir had taken Wishbone's love that night and given him back something that meant much more to a shih-aan.

"Yes," he said. "I remember."

"For an enemy to know it..." said Terefar, "well, it's difficult to describe how distasteful they find it, how vulnerable it makes them. Shieh Yeras had the given name out of the cub by the first morning. Now imagine for a moment. Shieh Yeras stood there in some cellar with a cub crying his eyes out on the floor and realized they had eight days of *jiadzi* to go, and they were starting to look like the most boring eight days ever. So he gave the cub a day to rest, in hopes the cub would recover some strength. It didn't work."

"How do you know all of this?" asked Wishbone.

"Bear with me," said Terefar. "So he took another day, and this time he got some rest. The cub got none, but was left in the dark, bound in a position of discomfort. The cub was cold, and shih-aan hate to be cold. He got some water and a chance to stretch every so often, but no other mercies. Meanwhile, Shieh Yeras rested and spent some time consulting books on relevant topics, looking for ideas. And he found one, whether from a book or his own head.

"Shieh Yeras brought the cub out from whatever cellar he'd been using as a dungeon. He gave the cub clothes, a good meal, wine, and comfortable pillows to lie upon. Then, as the sun set, Shieh Yeras began a seduction. The cub, meanwhile, had neglected some aspects of his own erotic education. In particular, it is wise to experience your first penetration in bed with someone who cares for you and not, for instance, with someone who won you in a bet. He was so many

times vulnerable to Shieh Yeras, who had his name, his arse, and had rescued him from an indescribable black pit. And yes, I realize that Shieh Yeras had put him there to begin with, but I doubt his victim was thinking so clearly. The cub spent all night wrapped in the most skillful pleasure that Shieh Yeras could devise, and that is considerable. Then Shieh Yeras woke him up at the crack of dawn, stripped him bare, bound him, and hauled him to the top of the stairs."

"Wait," said Wishbone. "Let me guess how this part of the story went. The cub promised him anything if only he didn't have to go back down. But what would he have left to offer?"

Terefar said, "Not much, as Shieh Yeras was careful to point out. Most of what the cub tried to offer belonged to his Zanshin or was already forfeit to Shieh Yeras. And Shieh Yeras was growing impatient. Soon the cub would lose the privilege of walking down the stairs and would be carried instead. Though there might be a chance... no, there was not. Shieh Yeras could never make such an offer. He'd be asking the cub to trade a torment that would last another five days, more or less, for a stain on his honor that would not fade for years. There was no choice between the two."

Wishbone rolled his eyes. "So what did the cub do to himself?"

"He wrote out a document giving Shieh Yeras permission to record every part of the jiadzi, with commentary, and give it to Rope and Lash for the entertainment and education of its members.

"I assume it had his name on it?" asked Wishbone.

"Not his given name..."

"Of course not. I mean title and Zanshin."

"Yes," replied Terefar.

"Let me make another guess. We're talking about Ah Jinráo, aren't we?"

Terefar said, "Well, he was Nei Jinráo then, but it's the same shih-aan. Now you realize that this was only one morning. Shieh Yeras untied Nei Jinráo and brought him back to bed. Then when they awoke, they ate and shared more outrageous lovemaking until dawn, when the entire drama was repeated. In fact, Shieh Yeras walked Nei Jinráo to the brink and allowed him to sign away something four times, until the end, when he would not be persuaded for anything. Shieh Yeras took Nei Jinráo downstairs into the dark and made sure that he had plenty to add to his report. Rope and Lash loved it. They created a title just to bestow on him.

"Yah Jinráo got the scar on his face from Sir. During the duel, I suppose?" asked Wishbone.

"Yes. And he kept it as a reminder. When his Zanshin allowed him to choose a path, he trained for a Defender. That way he could spend all his days perfecting himself, so that when he got the chance to challenge Shieh Yeras again, he would win. He also spent time at Rope and Lash. He didn't make Adept, but he earned a lesser title that marked him as capable enough.

"But Shieh Yeras was far too wary to let their paths cross, and eventually the dueling lust waned from him. But not yet from Ah Jinráo. Then the council called them both to this mission, for each is considered the best at what he does. It became Ah Jinráo's duty to protect Shieh Yeras's life.

"If we opened him up and sliced his liver in half, it would be green all the way through."

"Sir's throwing this game," said Wishbone. "He will get something more important from losing, but meanwhile he will have to pay." He shivered. "I could never think that way."

"That's how he plays us out of a war," said Terefar. "And if you look at it the right way, it's how he saved you from a man with a knife. He's never afraid to use himself as a game piece, no matter what the game. All the same, there is a tragedy to this one. Those who made the decisions to staff the mission did not know about the history of Shieh Yeras and Ah Jinráo, or forgot the urgency of the desires and grudges that tormented them once as well."

Wishbone experienced new feelings when he contemplated Sir and Ah Jinráo. He'd spent months at the mercy of Sir's sharp claws and strong hands. Every pleasure and agony Sir had taught him had been seething in his imagination. What would it be like to turn around and perform such acts on Sir? Wishbone wanted to bend him over, open him up and explore every secret so revealed. Wishbone might dream of forcing his prick into that opening where his tongue had been, but the dream seemed more tantalizing than likely.

What Wishbone wanted to do for love, Ah Jinráo demanded for the sake of a grudge. It seemed desperately unfair. It was also distracting, especially when Wishbone should have been sleeping.

Thus, Wishbone attended Sir in the drawing room the next day with bleary eyes indeed. Sir had already endured a change of bandages, and a lengthy interview with a much more deferential agent of the King's Justice, and looked more tired than seemed possible. He didn't remark on Wishbone's sleepless appearance and probably thought it was due to worry.

Sir said, "The King's Justice told me that our attacker was a man known to be violent who had come into money in the past few days. He was almost certainly hired, but they don't know by whom or why. Tell me of anyone or anything you know that might shed some light on what happened yesterday."

With his head in Sir's lap and many-jointed shih-aan fingers tangled in his hair, Wishbone told Sir all about Gertom and the other unsavory members of the dock patrol who treated the boy whores as targets and sources of ready cash. He felt once more the storm of Sir's anger, no less frightening for that it was targeted elsewhere.

"They would not be pleased if they thought I escaped the branding iron. They might even worry that I could make trouble for them somehow. Like the cobbler's clerk, they will believe there is

something unclean about my association with a shih-aan. Whatever you or I may think of them, they probably attend Church every week and may even believe that putting down a wretched boy whore is a favor to the Unnamed Gods."

Sir's fingers stroked his hair. "I shall find time to include them among the mission's targets." He tugged gently at a strand of Wishbone's hair. "You served me well yesterday, Anshan," he said. "I must reward you tonight."

Wishbone's fondest wish did not come true that evening; he did not get to spend it alone with Sir, who seemed far and away too drained for such activities. Instead, Terefar, under Sir's direction, bound Wishbone to the bed and made him spill so many times that the wathara's mouth and hands could wring only dry spasms from Wishbone's cock. Then Terefar turned him over and rode him until he spilled once more.

Wishbone could not be wakened until lunchtime the next day. Afterward, the Bremmian physician arrived to tend Sir's wound, and the downstairs parlor became a makeshift surgery again.

"You're healing well," said the physician, "but not entirely free of ill humors. I will soak your arm in salted water as hot as you can stand and then lance what is needful. Remember, more heat means less lancing."

They got Sir's arm settled awkwardly in a meat dripping tray. The physician applied cloths soaked in boiling, salted water to the wound. After an hour of that, he got out his knives.

A knock on the door announced Ah Jinráo.

"Forgive me that I do not rise," said Sir, when Terefar had seen the defender inside.

Ah Jinráo made a gesture. "Forgiven." He toyed with his wine glass. The Bremmian physician applied his knives.

Despite an obvious attempt to demonstrate otherwise, Terefar was not at ease in Ah Jinráo's presence. After Terefar brought up a suitable wine, Sir dismissed him upstairs. That left Wishbone to serve. He stood at flawless attention with the wine bottle, daring Ah Jinráo to criticize him on anything.

Ah Jinráo sat on the edge of a chair and stared at the cut. The thick scar on his brow curled. He seemed more fascinated than he wanted anyone to notice, even as the physician expelled something unpleasant from Sir's flesh.

"So. To what do we owe the honor of your presence, Ah Jinráo?" asked Sir.

"Your safety has always been my responsibility in this benighted land," he said, the corner of his mouth delicately curled. "Now I find myself with an additional investment in your health. How long before your stitches will hold for lessons?"

Sir nodded and switched to the tongue of Bronlyn. "How long until I am healed enough for heavy work?" he asked the Bremmian physician.

The physician eyed the two foreign gentlemen and perhaps picked up some of what went between them. "The gods alone may answer," said the physician.

"Will you offend them if you guess?" asked Sir. His cheek twitched as the knives did their work.

"No, but I have no further information than what they choose to say."

Sir nodded. "The physician's gods will not provide us with an answer today."

Ah Jinráo settled for the moment while the physician finished and then packed up his kit. When the physician had gone, Ah Jinráo stood and reached for Sir's arm.

Wishbone stood, set the bottle on the end table, and caught Ah Jinráo's wrist. Ah Jinráo's claws extended, and he hissed, staring down with narrowed eyes at the creature who dared touch him, who he could not in turn toss across the room.

"Your feelings regarding Shieh Yeras are well-known," said Wishbone, in perfect Krih-aan. "You would not like it to be said that you touched him before time."

"You will punish this piece of trash," said Ah Jinráo, visibly trembling, as the tendons of his wrist corded under Wishbone's grip.

Sir raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

Ah Jinráo twisted his arm loose and tossed the glass aside so that it spilled on the carpet. He spun on one heel and departed the room and then the house, at some haste. Sir held still until the front door slammed and the footsteps had retreated down the front walk. Then he laughed until tears leaked from his eyes.

Wishbone mopped up the spilled wine, then handed a clean cloth to Sir to wipe his eyes.

"I'm sure there's a reason why you should not have done that, Wishbone," he said. "But for the life of me, I can't think what it was. You're quite correct; he doesn't dare hurt you. You've just proved that you can speak the tongue at the worst possible time for young Ah Jinráo. As for me, well, he owes me a world of pain already, and there is no room for him to act yet. Not impossible, but I've already judged the risk and found it acceptable. I will *never* forget the look on his face. When you have the carpet cleaned tomorrow, do send him the bill."

"You show such enthusiasm for baiting him, Sir," said Wishbone. "Do I misunderstand the nature of the payment you make to him? Could you be looking forward to this?"

Sir was facing the other way, but the sudden tension of his spine, which lasted for only a

moment, was more eloquent than words. Then it was gone, and Sir turned to face Wishbone.

"You are human," he said, "and what shih-aan do makes no sense, because humans have their own ways to be horrible to each other. Yet, if you suggested to a shih-aan that dueling -- with the ritualized beating, torture and rape of the loser -- should be abolished, you would find his claws in your gut." Sir picked up the bottle and drank from it.

"Incidentally, wathara are great gossips, and I assume that Terefar already told you the story? Good.

"I did nothing wrong to the cub. In fact, enthusiasts documented the original game of riverbridge, and all subsequent moves of what was essentially one larger game, and enshrined it in the Guild hall for posterity. It was not the only game that earned me my title, but it formed a good part of my early acclaim.

"Years after, I could easily have done something about the mess I made of the cub, however, I realized that I had been unwise. Perhaps I should have figured it out when Nei Jinráo started wearing that scar like a favorite piece of jewelry, but back then I thought it the mark of a game well-played. We are so stupid when we're young.

"I used the privileges of Zanshin and duty to shield myself from a challenge. Ah Jinráo believed that if I had dueled him, he would win. Further, he believed that I had shattered him, that he would not be whole again until he shattered me in turn, and that I owed him to make him whole."

"Would he have won?" asked Wishbone.

Sir drank down the last of the wine. "Now that depends on the method chosen. Complex customs govern the choice. If I maneuvered to choose the method that gave me the most advantage, I would have left the lingering impression for Ah Jinráo and other observers that I was afraid to risk anything. Reputations are vulnerable to such infelicitous outcomes. On the other hand, he could have cornered me into challenging him and had his pick of ways to put me down."

Wishbone opened another bottle. There was no glass for him.

"Oh, drink from the bottle," said Sir.

After taking a swallow and passing on the bottle, Wishbone asked, "So why didn't you do something when you had the chance?"

"A mature shih-aan loses value to his Zanshin to the extent that he loses his dignity. There is no scandal in cubs brawling. But I could not perform my duties if my counterparts were laughing at me behind my back."

Sir shrugged. "I considered other options. I could have wooed him. A love affair might have been pleasant, or bitter, but it would have been private. Unfortunately, it would have taken time, and I did not have any. I was working toward a mission that would be the culmination of my

life's training."

"And then you ended up on the same boat with him," said Wishbone.

"Ah, the sting of irony," said Sir. "But there's a pearl concealed in the muck of it all. We're now in human lands. A five-month round-trip tends to cool the urgency of any news. There is no reason word of the whole sordid matter must cross the water, and if it does, it will no longer be interesting by the time it arrives. The misfortune is mine to bear alone. If my Zanshin ever learns, they can safely ignore it.

"The mission needs him, and that means I need him, cooperative, without a grudge. There are too few of us to risk divisions in an emergency."

Wishbone accepted the bottle back from Sir and drank. "So why provoke him?" he asked.

"Because Ah Jinráo's hate has festered like a wound, and I want it brought to a head so I can lance it properly."

"I wouldn't buy that one at a discount, Sir."

"You wouldn't? I wouldn't either." Sir leaned against the window's edge and contemplated the deep slant of the light. "He has taken control away from me. I'm not used to it. I don't like it. For now, I can take it back by angering him. By making it worse."

"That's not wise," said Wishbone.

"You should know," said Sir. "You provoke me so well. Bring the bottle here."

Sir took the bottle from Wishbone hands, took a swig, then tangled his fingers in Wishbone's hair. Tipping Wishbone's head back, he pressed their lips together and trickled wine into Wishbone's mouth. Wishbone drank deeply. Sir pressed his erection against Wishbone's hip.

"I should be working," whispered Sir. "Come to bed with me."

"I hear, Sir," said Wishbone.

Chapter Thirteen

The day before the lessons were to begin, they removed all the furniture and paintings from the parlor and rolled up the carpet. Since the appointed day was hot, Terefar helped Wishbone mix wine with cool water. Then the wathara disappeared upstairs, presumably to hide under his bed. A pile of towels lay upon one old chair. Sir's hair was braided, and he wore the oldest clothes he had to hand.

The knock on the front door arrived exactly on time. Sir stood and dusted himself off. Wishbone answered the door. He bowed to Ah Jinráo, led the shih-aan to the parlor, then backed into a corner and pretended to be invisible. The visitor set down a bag on the floor.

"Anshan," said Ah Jinráo, and gave an abbreviated bow of a sort that Wishbone had never seen before. Unlike all previous visits, Ah Jinráo was serious and composed, with no hint of malice about him.

"Enshan," said Sir. He crossed his arms over his chest, bowed from the waist, and stayed there.

"Rise. Let me see your hands."

Sir held out both hands, palms up, and extended his claws. Ah Jinráo squeezed each fingertip in turn, locking the claw in place while he examined it. Wishbone squinted until he could see that the claws had been filed to the quick. Ah Jinráo finished with Sir's hands, and they both pulled off their boots and stripped to the waist.

Wishbone blinked. Of course there would be as much variation in shih-aan physiques as there was in humans, but he hadn't been prepared for the sight that greeted his eyes. The voluminous clothes that the shih-aan preferred had hidden much. Sir was a little taller, but Ah Jinráo must have outweighed him by half as much again. His body rippled with as much muscle as a war horse's, yet there was nothing less than graceful about him. In comparison, Sir was as willowy as a dancer. Their manes were different, too. Sir's was much longer. Did they grow differently, or did Ah Jinráo trim his? Wishbone felt his prick stir as he appreciated the differences between the two bodies.

Ah Jinráo took some long strips of cloth from his bag. The shih-aan wrapped each other's hands and forearms, turning and folding the cloth and at last tucking in the ends. Then they took a step back from each other. Their hands came up.

Ah Jinráo moved first. His right hand dropped. Sir stepped backward. Ah Jinráo followed him, making a small motion of his hands that provoked another retreat from Sir. Sir moved to one side the next time he stepped back, as if he would unbalance Ah Jinráo. Instead, the other shih-aan glided forward, slashed at Sir, and stepped back.

"Stop that," said Ah Jinráo.

Sir shuddered, then brought his hands up again. Four long, red lines appeared on his chest.

Wishbone wanted to wince, but for Sir's sake he stayed as still as a trapped mouse.

They moved fast the second time, sometimes too fast for Wishbone to follow. Senjian had learned the lesson and did not retreat. He favored cuts, which seemed suited to his longer reach. Ah Jinráo's stabs were faster, though. Wishbone could see what Ah Jinráo was doing. He challenged Sir's right side, but pulled back every time. Sir's arm was too low to block anything Ah Jinráo threatened to do, and he seemed tired already. At last, Ah Jinráo struck at him. Sir staggered backward, clutching his upper arm.

Ah Jinráo glanced at Wishbone. "You. Be useful and fetch him a rag, then me a jug."

Sir was standing upright when Wishbone brought the towel. The cuts on his chest were too shallow to bleed much. But Ah Jinráo had clawed him down the right arm, neatly parallel to the scar left by the assassin's knife. The new cut was just deep enough to drip, especially where it crossed the trails of sweat painted on Sir's body. That must sting. Sir didn't meet his eyes. Wishbone turned back to the table and picked up one of the heavy jugs. Ah Jinráo took it from him, slung it over a shoulder, and drank from the wide mouth.

The shih-aan faced off again. Sir made several attempts to slice at Ah Jinráo, but he didn't have the speed to pull it off. Ah Jinráo stepped to one side. Sir lost his balance. There was a flurry of motion, and when they came to rest, Ah Jinráo had Sir turned, his left arm bent up behind his back. A thumb claw touched Sir's right eyebrow, symmetrical with the scar on his own.

"I should not have been able to do that to you," he said. Then he dropped Sir, stepped back, and planted a heel in Sir's chest with a thud that shook the windows. Sir landed on his rear with the wind knocked out of him.

"Why do you mock me?" snarled Ah Jinráo.

Sir gathered his limbs together and folded himself in a deep bow, face-down on the floor.

"Forgive me," he said. "This is not mockery. Enshan, I am no longer a worthy opponent for you. Thus I need your help. Please, train the one I am, not the one you wish me to be."

Ah Jinráo set his foot on Sir's braid.

"This will take much longer than I expected," he said.

Sir sighed into the floorboards. "I offered you a choice of payment. Perhaps, had you known, you would have demanded four nights of jiadzi."

Ah Jinráo laughed. "It is still a long way to nine. Anshan, I accept. We have no witnesses, though."

"Of course we do," said Sir.

"That? Your creature would witness against you?"

"My name is Wishbone," said Wishbone, "Not *creature*. I won't witness for or against anyone. But if asked, I'll tell exactly what I heard."

"Do you begin to understand that of which we speak?" asked Ah Jinráo, one eyebrow lifted.

"I believe I do," said Wishbone. "And from what I hear, Sir deserves all of it."

"Ouch," said Sir.

Ah Jinráo took his foot off of Sir's hair. He reached down, gripped Sir's wrists, then helped him to stand.

"We'll start again tomorrow," he said.

"I hear," said Sir.

After Ah Jinráo had gone, Sir sagged back against the wall like a broken stick puppet.

"Hand me a jug."

Wishbone watched Sir grip the jug and wondered if he'd end up holding it while Sir drank. But Sir managed somehow.

"Now go to the stables and ask Wenley for a bottle of that horrible-smelling green stuff he puts on the horses' legs. And do hurry."

Wishbone got the bottle from Wenley and put some thought into how he'd recovered from his worst nights. Then he drew buckets of cold pump water, soaked some of the towels in them, and packed them around Sir in the bathtub. Before Sir could start to shiver, Wishbone dragged him out of the tub and brought him upstairs wrapped in a robe.

There in the bedroom, Sir became, for a while, Senjian again. Wishbone got to work with Wenley's horse liniment and the heels of his hands. This was something that whores did not do for customers, because it took too long. But they did it often for each other at the end of a long night, and Wishbone's hands still had the knack. At last, Sir's body no longer felt like it was made of broken seashells. When the bedroom and Sir's body stank of fermented herbs and nothing odd could be smelled, he slipped a tiny dab of laudanum in Sir's wine.

"That was fun to watch," he said. But it hadn't been. Wishbone was angry. Not at the fighting practice, which seemed necessary, but at what would come afterward. Jealousy burned him as if he'd swallowed hot coals.

"Glad I amused you," said Senjian. Wishbone's heart would break watching what Ah Jinráo did to Senjian.

Wishbone said, "Especially the part where you gave yourself to a fourth night of -- what did you call it? -- ritualized beating, torture and rape? Are you *sure* you won't enjoy any of that?"

Sir rolled over and got his legs under himself. He sat up and leaned back against the pillows, where he caught and began unfastening his braid.

"I've enjoyed any and all of it, at the hands of someone who cared for me. As have you, I might point out. Ah Jinráo would be the first to tell you that he acts only to satisfy himself.

"Wishbone, I allow you many liberties, but that sort of insubordination is not one of them. Bring me whatever meat Cook has for dinner. You may please yourself with Terefar. In fact, you should consider yourself obliged to see that he gets some attention. But leave me alone until tomorrow morning."

Wishbone cursed himself a bit after he left the food and remembered what else Sir had said, that what shih-aan did to each other made no sense, because humans had their own ways of being horrible to each other. Even if there was truth to what Wishbone said, Sir would never thank him for saying so. Maybe Wishbone should just keep his mouth shut and expect Sir to beat him when he opened it.

He rested for a moment in the cooling hallway before knocking on Terefar's door.

Chapter Fourteen

The next day Sir didn't stir until late morning. Wishbone had been listening. He waited outside the door until Sir called for him, then entered and dropped to the floor at Sir's feet in his best approximation of the bow he'd seen Sir perform yesterday and waited for Sir to beat him.

Sir got to one knee next to him and stroked his hair. "Where did you learn the profound abasement, Anshan?"

"Watching you," said Wishbone.

"You lack polish," said Sir, "but I'm still impressed. Did you dose my wine?"

"I did," said Wishbone, and tried not to tense up. It would only hurt worse when Sir struck him.

Sir sighed. "You are wiser than I. I would not have slept without it." He took Wishbone's hand. "Rise," he said.

Wishbone got to his feet and accepted an embrace and a kiss from Sir and allowed himself a sigh of relief.

"Now we've got another long day ahead of us," said Sir. "Let us begin."

Wishbone again oversaw the watered wine and towels for the two sparring shih-aan. It was hard to watch Ah Jinráo keep just outside of Sir's reach as they moved across the parlor floor, slapping him, cutting him, and occasionally knocking him down. But Ah Jinráo spoke mostly to offer instruction. He helped Sir to rise after a fall.

"None of this means he is not angry," said Senjian, when Wishbone sat astride him and worked horse liniment into his ribs. Bruises were beginning to flower beneath his skin. "But he is saving it until a more suitable time. He teaches me defense, and I teach him manners." He winced.

Wishbone had learned fast that if something was sore enough to make Senjian wince, then he was to press harder, not leave it alone. He found the disordered piece of flesh and dug in his knuckles.

"I have a question for you," he said.

Senjian took a deep breath and released it slowly. "Ask away."

"I've been taking so much care of you. Why not Terefar?"

"Do you think you are doing something wrong?" asked Sir.

"No. But I still do not understand why me instead of him."

"He fears Ah Jinráo, and he cannot bear to watch his Enshan hurt."

"But isn't this his duty?" asked Wishbone.

"No, it is yours. But to answer the question I think you ask, if there were no alternative, or if I wanted to be cruel to him, I could force the issue. But if there is one thing our parents beat into us from a young age, it is that we do not hurt wathara. We do not strike them harder than they can bear, and we make allowances for their limitations. We bred the fight out of them. They cannot defend themselves, so we must give them no cause. Ever."

"But you can damage a cub you won in a bet?"

"Yes?"

Wishbone waited for a moment, but nothing else was forthcoming. He realized that Senjian really didn't understand the question. Wishbone settled for digging his elbow into something tender instead of getting an answer.

Senjian groaned and shuddered. The sound and movement, coupled with Wishbone's position kneeling astride Senjian's thighs, were so suggestive that he had to hold very still for a moment to give his erection time to sink. From the looks of things, Senjian would not bring Wishbone to bed until after Ah Jinráo had finished him. While Wishbone couldn't complain about having Terefar as a regular bedmate, he still considered this another reason to be jealous of the twisted bond between Senjian and Ah Jinráo.

Weeks passed. Ah Jinráo declared the work satisfactory, in that he would allow his name to be associated with Sir's in the Guild of Defenders without any embarrassment. The changes in Sir's abilities were obvious, even to Wishbone's eyes. Sir put on enough muscle to require a new wardrobe, and he was much less sore after each session. After the last time, Sir made a profound abasement and lay on the bare floor to hear Ah Jinráo's final instructions.

"Anshan, you will wait," said Ah Jinráo, pacing the length of Sir's body. "I will come for you on sunset of the fifth evening. Bring nothing with you. Wear nothing you care about. You will remain my property for four nights thereafter, and I will return you to your house the following morning." He paused for a moment so that his toe was a hairsbreadth from Sir's nose. "Unless you extend your jiadzi."

Wishbone watched Sir make the slightest twitch, then lie still. He did not quite understand what he was seeing, only that there was still a fight going on between the two of them, and that Sir was losing.

"Five and then four, Enshan," said Sir. "I hear."

Sir lay there, having received no instruction to rise. Ah Jinráo dressed and took his leave. Finally,

Sir rolled over and sat up on the floor.

"I knew what I signed up for," said Sir. "And yet I did not know. Until now."

Wishbone wondered if perhaps Sir still didn't know, but said nothing about it.

"Do you need anything from me?" he asked.

Sir said, "Yes, I do. I will go eat, as I seem to do so often these days. When I finish, I expect to find you stripped down on my bed, waiting for me."

Wishbone smiled. "I hear, Sir!"

Chapter Fifteen

On an unseasonably cool, autumn evening, Sir vanished into a carriage with Ah Jinráo. Wishbone watched the carriage turn a corner and disappear, then realized he was chewing on his nails and went back inside to read the note that Sir had left for him.

Mai Zarian will send for you. Dress your best and treat him with more respect than you do me.

Sir had arranged for Terefar to attend Diah Jojaan, explaining to Wishbone that the diplomat deserved more sweetness in his life. The wathara had already gone. Wishbone got dressed, packed another set of clothes, and said farewell to Cook and Telia. Then he boarded the little one-horse trap that Mai Zarian sent for him and rode to the other side of the hill.

Wishbone had been there before to carry messages. Mai Zarian's home was low and unobtrusive on a dead-end street. An impeccably polite wathara saw Wishbone inside to a well-appointed parlor rich with wood and brocade wall panels. Conscious of his instructions, Wishbone stood and didn't move even to scratch where his collar itched. He did not sit down until Mai Zarian arrived and told him to. The wathara brought them warmed wine and set a candle upon the table.

"Look at me," said Mai Zarian. "Eye to eye."

Wishbone did so, feeling painfully self-conscious. He observed the extra touch of gray in Mai Zarian's straight hair and the subtle signs of age that the candle revealed about the shih-aan's face. His eyes were a shade of gold that threw the slit pupils into sharp relief. Wishbone kept wanting to look away from the shih-aan. A hand with long ringed fingers grasped his chin, making such a move impossible. The fingertips were warm and sensual and moved over Wishbone's face in such a way that he became highly aware of the claws hidden inside. Mai Zarian was mesmerizing, and Wishbone wondered how anyone who had met the entire Council-in-Exile could believe that Diah Jojaan was the senior member.

"Might I see what he sees when he looks at you? Perhaps." Mai Zarian sat back. "Do you know why you are here, human?" he asked.

"To distract me from thinking on what's happening to Sir right now," said Wishbone, and took a sip of his wine before it cooled.

The corner of Mai Zarian's mouth quirked. "Not only that," he said, in a voice so soft that Wishbone had to lean forward to hear him. "I am to instruct you in the nature of the Kyashan. By now you may know something about Zanshin and titles and how they fit together. But not all shih-ann are exactly suited to the structure we've built for ourselves. Over the course of our lives, we must in turn lead and follow, command or give way. One who cannot give way is culled. But what of one who cannot lead? Some are not capable. Others have the ability, but take no joy in it. In rare cases, one loses the right to it through the commission of a great crime. We rule that such ones should always be commanded, owned and protected by other shih-aan. They wear kyah -- rings in their ear lobes. They are also valued, for while they may be bought and sold the same as wathara, they haven't had their fangs pulled. They are stronger, more capable, and may be trained

to many of the same skills as their masters. It is for the earrings that they are called Kyashans.

"Now consider. Shieh Yeras wishes to bring you when he returns to Feras-aan. He will use you to force a resolution to the question of human sentience at last, and if he is successful, he will be allowed to keep you. Yet we must find a way to fit you within the puzzle that is the shih-aan world. We could devise some new category, yet that might be more threatening to our conservative Zannas than your mere presence. Here the issue is not that you cannot give an order, but that no one would follow you without a fight. If we name you Kyashan and bind you to Shieh Yeras, then no one has cause to feel threatened. This is not, perhaps, all we might want for humans. But it may be all we can achieve for this generation.

"This is not just your fate. Your race lies under grave threat if it moves against us. A positive answer to the sentience question constrains us to look for solutions other than extinction. Do you hear me?"

Wishbone nodded.

"Now, attend," said Mai Zarian. "If you come back to Feras-aan, you may be granted the protection of law and custom, or you may not. If not, you will be sent back here, probably with some compensation for your trouble. If you are, you will never speak your milk-tongue again. You will wear a ring in your ear, and you will belong to Shieh Yeras. If you belong to Shieh Yeras, you belong ultimately to Zanshin Yeras."

Wishbone felt his pulse pound and his mouth dry as he listened to Mai Zarian open a way past the thorns in the garden.

"If Shieh Yeras should choose to sell you, you will have no say. If Zanshin Yeras decides to sell you, Shieh Yeras will have no say. Should Shieh Yeras predecease you, something that is possible given your relative ages, his Zanshin will dispose of you as it sees fit. Shieh Yeras will lie down with others according to custom and desire, while he will command or constrain your pleasure, loan you to others, punish or train you. If you anger or shame him, he will sell you. Some shih-aan will deny you even the small honor you are owed as Kyashan and treat you with nothing but contempt. You will answer them with perfect courtesy.

"Do you accept everything I say with your full heart?"

"Yes," said Wishbone.

"Why?"

Wishbone opened his mouth.

Mai Zarian moved too fast for Wishbone to see. The points of his extended claws brushed Wishbone's throat. His golden eyes narrowed. "If you breathe a word to me about your eventual fate amongst humans, if you make Shieh Yeras -- a shih-aan of tremendous honor, accomplishment, intelligence and passion -- to be the lesser of two evils, I will slit your throat

and toss you into the bay."

"Ah," said Wishbone, swallowing. "He already owns me. That won't change if he leaves me behind."

Mai Zarian sheathed his claws, and Wishbone started breathing again.

"Very well," said the shih-aan. "Shieh Yeras tells me that you read well enough. Can you read this?"

That was another thing to like about shih-aan. They never asked, "Are you sure?" They did not often hide their motives, or expect him to hide his own. If they wanted something, they demanded it. Wishbone could please anyone who was so direct with him. There was something important about Sir hidden underneath those other thoughts, but it vanished before the business at hand.

Mai Zarian laid out a paper on the table between the wine glasses. Wishbone leaned forward and followed the angled words with his fingers and tried not to let his lips move. The paper said that he, Wishbone, would offer himself as Kyashan to Shieh Yeras should the demand be made. He would have no rights -- except the right to be free of serious injury. There was a blank space for his signature. Wishbone re-read the document. Then he looked up at Mai Zarian.

"Is there a pen? Please?"

Mai Zarian clapped loudly. His wathara appeared with a tray of quills and ink. Wishbone could not generally write well, but he could sign his name. Terefar had showed him a literal translation of it and made him practice until he could get all the lines right and not spatter anything. He did so with great care on this paper. Then, along with Mai Zarian, he watched the ink dry.

"In reality," said Mai Zarian, "Zanshin Yeras is unlikely to sell you unless something drives it to financial desperation, at which point you're better off under another Clan's roof. And Shieh Yeras will make some provision for you, as necessary. Yet, if you do not understand what it means to be owned they way a shih-aan born understands, you cannot consent to it. Your consent is necessary, all-encompassing, and final. No one will ask you again.

"We should get you something to eat," he said. "Then we'll spend the rest of the time before bed teaching you some of the endless collection of titles you'll be expected to know."

Over the next two days, Wishbone's head started hurting from all the titles stuffed inside it along with the variations in Krih-aan pronouns and verbs of the formal mode, something Wishbone had escaped learning until then. On the third evening, a messenger arrived out of the pouring rain. Mai Zarian brought the note in and read it before the fire.

He said, "Shieh Yeras will be detained for an additional night."

Wishbone spat out a stream of burning curses. Quick as a snake, Mai Zarian's hand, heavy with rings, struck Wishbone across the mouth so that he tasted blood. Wishbone dropped to his knees and pressed his forehead to the ground.

"Do you know why I struck you?" asked Mai Zarian.

"No," said Wishbone.

"If you do not know why you are being punished, you will ask. Always."

Wishbone climbed to his feet. "Mai Zarian, what have I done wrong?"

"Drawing attention your owner's difficulties shames him, and in any case, it is a liberty forbidden to a Kyashan. Fortunately, we have an extra night to train you. Get up."

Mai Zarian called for his wathara, who brought a pile of coiled rope. The shih-aan looped it around Wishbone in that familiar way that tugged his wrists upward behind him. The silk rope slithered twice around Wishbone's chest and snugged tighter so that his nipples began to throb. In fact, he felt himself becoming aroused in spite of all of his wishes, but Mai Zarian did not notice. Instead, the shih-aan left him facing the corner farthest away from the fireplace, about a step back so he couldn't lean on anything.

"If I look in and see you've changed position," said Mai Zarian, "You'll spend all of tomorrow this way."

"I hear," said Wishbone.

Of course, no one could stop him from thinking about Sir. Wishbone listened to the rain coming down on the window. He was far enough away from the fireplace to feel the chill. Didn't shih-aan hate cold? That would be easy to use against Sir in this weather. But cold was a simple form of pain. The complex tapestries of lust and anguish shih-aan wove for each other were far more frightening and, Wishbone had to admit, far more interesting. Wishbone tried to picture what Ah Jinráo was doing to Sir right now, but he had to admit that his imagination failed him. Even the slight erection brought on by the binding ropes faded as the discomfort of staying in position increased. Wishbone turned his thoughts instead to the overlooked implications of becoming Kyashan.

A shih-ann born would know when to ask questions, when to express an opinion or when to demand something. Wishbone did not. That meant in most cases he'd have to stay quiet until he was alone with Sir and couldn't embarrass anyone. This would be hard. In fact, it might be harder than getting sold to a stranger. He hadn't known about it when he signed the paper, but it wouldn't have changed anything if he did. Wishbone loved Sir. He would be worthy. It wasn't enough to err and submit to a beating later.

Wishbone flexed his upper body within the limits of the ropes. It would be a long two days

before Sir came home.

Chapter Sixteen

Mai Zarian gave Wishbone one last piece of advice before sending him home.

"If Shieh Yeras does not ask for comfort," he said, "offer none. This may be your hardest lesson."

There were some things Wishbone knew would be needed. He asked Cook to make some broth and spent the rest of the dawn hour hauling water to the bath along with wood to heat the kettles.

Sir arrived shortly after dawn. He disappeared into the bath for a good hour, then went up to his room. He did not stop by the kitchen or speak to anyone. Wishbone took a deep breath and examined the bathroom. Sir had left behind some clothes not his own, in poor condition, and some fairly filthy bath water, which Wishbone let run down the drain.

The next morning, Terefar returned. Wishbone took note of how the wathara did not seem anxious. There was nothing Terefar could do to help, so he picked up his household duties again, tackling the grocery bills, laundry and other tasks that had been neglected in his absence.

When Sir still hadn't emerged that morning, Wishbone decided that waiting might not be quite so wise after all. Mai Zarian needn't know. Sir's door wasn't bolted, so Wishbone opened it.

The curtains were closed, so it was a little hard for Wishbone's human eyes to see. There was a dark lump under the blankets exactly in the middle of the bed. Wishbone fetched an armload of wood and built up a fire. When it was crackling, he brought up some hot meat, wine and a pitcher of water and left them on a tray by the bed. When he returned that afternoon, the food and drink were gone.

Wishbone rebuilt the fire once more, so the room was nice and warm. He sat down on the chair.

"Talk to me, Sir," he said.

"You have my name," said the lump under the covers.

"Talk to me, Senjian."

"What do you want me to say?"

Wishbone said, "To start with, if you want more food or drink, you can ask for it, or get it yourself."

"Fair enough."

"Shall I get out the horse liniment?"

Senjian turned onto his side and sighed. "You'll need the salve. There are extra jars on the top

shelf of the wardrobe."

Wishbone got a jar. He opened the curtains on one of the windows and let some light fall across the bed. Then he gently unwrapped Senjian from layers of blanket and bathrobe. Wishbone gasped. Senjian's mane had been shaved off from the collar all the way down. He'd lost some weight. But that wasn't all.

"Impressive, isn't it?" said Senjian.

"What did this?" Wishbone held out a hand, but couldn't bring himself to touch the crisscross welts that marked Senjian's flesh. Some of the welts had blistered, and many had broken the skin. Wishbone could nearly feel the heat with his hand.

"Canes," said Senjian. "He used each one until it broke, tossed it and took up another one. The amusing part is that he must have imported the canes from home some time in the last few months. So expensive. So pleasing to know I was worth that much to him."

Wishbone leaned forward and kissed a particularly hard-marked spot on Senjian's right shoulder blade. Senjian gasped and nearly flinched, then seemed to realize that it didn't hurt. He lifted his body just a bit as Wishbone planted more kisses further and still further down, then sighed with frustration when Wishbone stood back up.

"Bear with me," said Wishbone. He took the top off the jar and scooped out a generous handful of salve.

Senjian made a soft sound as Wishbone spread salve over his back.

"What hurt the most," said Senjian, "is how he got the fifth night out of me. I wanted him to promise to have the scar removed. And he promised. But if not? It was not worth it. His scar; his choice."

"Let it be past," said Wishbone.

"Not yet. But soon. I will not duplicate Ah Jinráo's obsessions. I will let my soul heal with my body."

More salve, more hard but pleasant work stroking it into Senjian. Wishbone let his hands drift closer to the cleft of Senjian's arse. Senjian's stiff, sore body responded without shame or hesitation, arching more each time. Wishbone gave a smile that Senjian couldn't see and finally parted the shih-aan's buttocks with his well-salved fingers. Senjian gasped. But Wishbone only stroked the sore outer ring once before pulling back.

"Turn over," he said.

Senjian seemed to recollect a shred of dignity. He tugged the robe across his shoulders and turned. The welts were fewer, not laid on so hard. Wishbone traced the bruises at the corners of

Senjian's mouth with his fingers.

"Being mouth-fucked is perhaps not so submissive an act for us as for humans. We have fangs. But an iron ring roped behind the teeth will force the mouth wide open, rendering our fangs irrelevant. And us fairly stupid-looking, as well," he added wryly.

Wishbone kissed the corners of Senjian's mouth, then slid his tongue between the bruised lips, in and out. Senjian sighed and then tilted his head back. Then Wishbone sat back on his knees and began salving the front of Senjian's body. The pattern to the welts became apparent as he worked. They were each placed upon a part of the body padded by muscle. Thus the back, buttocks, and mid-thighs were heavily marked; the chest, belly, fronts of the thighs and even the feet less so; and the rest not at all. Anything that could mark like that could cut someone open if laid on without care. Wishbone wondered what the training for using such an evil thing was like.

Senjian's cock, which had begun to rise, showed no marks beyond those left by binding cords. This meant no salve was needed. It was so tempting to reach down and handle it, suck it, perhaps even ride it. But it seemed to Wishbone that the proper way to handle a desperately vulnerable shih-aan was tease him until he cried and then -- yes -- bend him over, open him up, steal all of his secrets and use them against him until he spilled so hard the stars shattered.

Tomorrow.

He wiped his hands and watched the look of disappointment spread across Senjian's face roughly the same time that the smell of cooking intruded on the bedroom.

"You should eat," he said. "Come, get dressed. Let's go downstairs and devour whatever is making that smell. You haven't seen Terefar in a week."

Senjian rolled over, stretched and smiled. In spite of the game that Wishbone was playing with the shih-aan, the smile melted his heart.

"You're right," said Senjian. "We shall go."

The following afternoon was dull and chill. Wishbone lit a fire to warm Senjian and a few extra candles so he could see well enough. Then he sat down and stroked the shih-aan's healing body over and over, dabbing salve on the parts that needed it. He looped his tongue around the knobs of spine that would soon be hidden by the stubble of a re-growing mane. Wishbone's right hand moved lower by degrees until his fingers rested on the top of Senjian's cleft.

The shih-aan breathed harder, face hidden beneath his hair. He moved against Wishbone's hand, as if by doing so he could compel the fingers to enter him. Wishbone sat back and wiped down Senjian with a towel. There was an open bottle of wine on the table. He poured two glasses and handed one to Senjian while he drank from the other.

Senjian sipped the wine, then swallowed half the glass. He tossed his hair out of his face and stared at Wishbone with hungry, violet eyes.

"Fuck me," he said.

"I'll hurt you," said Wishbone.

"Hurt me," said Senjian.

Wishbone backed out of the bed and sat on the chair. Senjian's gaze followed him.

"Is that an order, *Sir*?" asked Wishbone.

Senjian jerked as if he'd been slapped.

"I've heard so much about how shih-aan both lead and follow, but I didn't know you could do both at the same time," said Wishbone. "Or did you want to submit to me, but not so very much? Have it hurt, but only a little? Go ahead -- demand that I ravish you and see how much you like it. *Sir*."

Time passed, marked by the dance of the fire. A moment passed before Wishbone identified the sound Senjian was making as laughter.

"It is a peculiar wound you give me that draws mirth instead of blood," said Senjian. "But I concede the point." He pulled himself together and executed something that resembled a profound abasement on the bed.

"Enshan, from now until dawn, I am your property."

It was a powerful move on Senjian's part and might have disconcerted Wishbone if he hadn't already laid plans. Wishbone's heart raced. He'd waited a long time to have Senjian at his mercy, and he would not hurry. He opened the wardrobe and took a coil of rope from the top shelf.

"Kneel up, Anshan," he said.

Senjian got up on his knees. The marks left by Ah Jinráo resembled writing, messages. *Touch him here*, they said to Wishbone. *And this way. He can't resist it. I know.*

Already Senjian had an erection like a mast. For years he'd had few bedmates aside from a wathara who could not possibly sate his darker needs. Had Senjian realized what he was doing when he brought home someone who could?

Reaching behind Senjian, Wishbone looped a silken rope around the shih-aan's wrists, then turned the ends and wrapped them crosswise. He bit the back of Senjian's neck making him shudder and his breath catch in his throat.

Wishbone turned Senjian and made sure the shih-aan was watching while he pulled the two-inch-diameter iron ring from his pocket. He dangled it in front of Senjian's wide eyes by one of its straps. Wishbone remembered the look on Senjian's face some days ago when he had finally realized how much trouble he was in with Ah Jinráo. His expression looked about the same now. His prick stayed stiff.

"Wenley is very resourceful," Wishbone said. "He thinks I needed this for a horse, though. Open. Wider."

Wishbone slid the ring into Senjian's mouth, lodged it behind his fangs, and buckled it in place. A second strap fastened around Senjian's neck like a dog's collar, anchoring the ring more securely. Wishbone took a rope and looped it between the strap and the knot that secured Senjian's hands, stressing his neck. The straps and the rope divided his body into bite-sized pieces, marking him as well as welts could. Wishbone watched a drop of sweat bead on the end of Senjian's nose. He leaned forward and put his tongue in the shih-aan's mouth, running the tip up between lips and teeth, tasting the cold iron of the ring. He tongued the spot at the roof of Senjian's mouth where a cock head would press and reached down to gather up Senjian's balls and squeeze them. Each time, Senjian responded as if he'd spent his life training for the pleasures of submission and nothing else. It was nearly a crime to let such a beautifully-tuned instrument go unplayed.

Wishbone kissed him on the brow and then the eyelids, pressed his lips against the planes of Senjian's face, licked the shih-aan's throat and bit his ears. At last, he tugged Senjian's hair so that the shih-aan tumbled forward, landing with his face landed at the edge of the bed. Unfastening his trousers, Wishbone stroked his own cock until it swelled. He cradled Senjian's head with his hands and opened the shih-aan's throat with the resulting erection. Senjian, who had taken his length easily when in control, could only choke when he wasn't. Wishbone worked his hips and trembled from the pleasure of fucking a helpless Senjian.

"You look nice like this," said Wishbone at last. He'd learned a lot of self-control over the past months, and he used all of it while he spoke. "And you feel nice. Not nice enough. No one would pay money to have your mouth."

Senjian snarled. Wishbone seized his hair, leaned forward and blocked his breath with a mouthful of cock. He watched the muscles tighten along the shih-aan's back. It was tempting to beat him, to use a strap or something that didn't require any special skill. After the canes, though, he doubted he could do make an impression with a blow. His original plans were sound. Wishbone held on tight to Senjian's hair and fucked his mouth until spilling hot seed that overflowed the shih-aan's lips. When the red thunder behind his eyes receded, taking with it the sharpest of the sexual hunger, Wishbone got down on his knees and kissed away the wonderful mess he'd made.

The writing desk held a wooden box of trimmed swan quills. Wishbone took one and returned to the bed, where a sweaty, bound shih-aan waited face-down for him. Senjian couldn't see what he was doing and sprang about a foot straight up when Wishbone stroked Senjian's shoulder-blade with the feathery part of the quill. Wishbone moved the feather over a hair and stroked Senjian

again. The shih-aan shuddered violently each time, then even more so when Wishbone turned the quill around and used the nib, drawing tiny marks on the skin of his neck and shoulders, his maneless back, and his buttocks.

In Wishbone's experience, most men didn't like so delicate a touch, and those who did couldn't stand it juxtaposed against anything hard and heavy. From the looks of it, shih-aan worked the same way. Wishbone paused to pick up Senjian's head by the strap that held the ring and kissed him thoroughly. The shih-aan seemed relieved, perhaps, to be given a break from a torture as vicious in its own way as anything Ah Jinráo had done to him. Just a break, though. Wishbone was far from finished.

Wishbone unfastened the ropes that bound Senjian's neck and hands, but left the ring in his mouth. Wishbone tossed some more wood on the fire and got comfortable on the bed.

"Spread your legs," he said. "Reach back and part your buttocks with your hands."

Nearly a year had passed since Senjian had said almost the exact same words to the dock whore and amateur thief he'd brought home. Wishbone recalled the first night in Sir's parlor, the commanding power of his voice, his many-jointed fingers, the sensations of his fist lodged deep in Wishbone's arse. He remembered the feelings -- fear, curiosity, pleasure and shame. Perhaps some of those same feelings painted Senjian's skin with blushes and made him breathe like a cart horse after a climb up a long hill.

Senjian held himself open while Wishbone stroked that other, secret ring with the feather. The shih-aan's fingers were slipping in his own sweat, however, and he could not quite hold still. Eventually, he lost his grip. When he got back into position, Wishbone started using the nib to prod that sensitive piece of flesh, and Senjian didn't last half as long.

Wishbone swatted him on the arse and then stripped off his own clothes. He took up a handful of salve and started working his cock to its full size again. Then he straddled Senjian's arse, digging fingers into the shih-aan's hips. He speared the shih-aan and, using all the patience granted by the earlier climax, entered as slowly as he could stand. Wishbone hardly felt himself moving. Senjian mewed with frustration and writhed against the iron grip on his hips that prevented him from thrusting back. The deeper Wishbone's prick opened him, the louder Senjian's desperate growls and breathless panting. The shih-aan's overheated flesh reeked of sweat and unsatisfied desire.

Wishbone changed the angle of entry and leaned forward to place little bites all over Senjian's shoulders. He ground his hips and forced his way deeper into the shih-aan's beautiful body. The spark ignited deep inside his balls and burned its way out of his cock until he cried out. He clawed at Senjian with his inadequate human fingernails and felt the lust spill from him.

Lying across Senjian's body, Wishbone felt his pulse calm and his lust subside. He regretfully uncoupled their bodies, unfastened the straps and removed the ring. Rubbing Senjian's stiff jaw with one hand, he leaned forward and ran his tongue over Senjian's lips and teeth. The shih-aan's erection had flagged a bit. He'd probably given up on spilling himself before morning.

Wishbone took a half-empty glass of wine from the table and held it for Senjian, who drank it all down.

"More?" asked Wishbone.

Senjian nodded, and Wishbone poured him another glass, which he drank more slowly. Wishbone put the glass down and built up the fire once more, so that firelight stroked Senjian's flanks and sparked in his eyes. He licked a trickle of spilled wine from the corner of the shih-aan's mouth and took up a coil of rope.

"Turn over," said Wishbone.

Senjian turned onto his back. Wishbone bound his limbs wrist to ankle, taking a moment to ensure that the ropes were not too tight. He positioned the shih-aan with his arse rested just at the edge of the bed. Senjian's eyes opened wide, and his limbs tensed against the rope for a moment as he seemed to realize what Wishbone planned to do with him. Wishbone cradled Senjian's legs and nibbled on the crook of his knee.

"What do you fear?" asked Wishbone.

The shih-aan pulled once on the ropes, as if to assure himself that he had no choices left. He smiled and let his eyes close.

"Nothing," he whispered.

"Then maybe you aren't paying attention," said Wishbone, and he scratched a line down the front of Senjian's prick with the nib of the quill.

The look on Senjian's face nearly made Wishbone laugh out loud. Senjian tried to kick, but he was too well tied. Wishbone prodded him from cock-head to scrotum, using the feather and the nib until the pen was quite ruined, and he took up another one. Which is what finally broke Senjian.

"Dammit! Wishbone, those things cost money!"

"Really?" said Wishbone. He moved the quill tip to the tiny opening in the shih-aan's cock.

Senjian's thighs quivered. "Mercy," he whispered.

"Why should I? I've only got you until sunrise."

Senjian said, "You learn fast."

"I do. And I want something out of you."

"Ask."

And that was another pleasant aspect of being so firmly on top. Wishbone could force Senjian to listen. Since the shih-aan supposed he already knew so much about humans, perhaps he didn't feel the need to bother when he wasn't tied up.

Wishbone said, "You think I can't tell how much you love where you are right now, how much you've missed it over the last few years? Everything you do to me is something you crave for yourself." He stroked Senjian's cock-head with the quill. "So calling another male Enshan makes you hard. You called shame a human affectation. I don't understand why you feel so much of it. Any whore who wants to stay well-fed knows how to dominate a man who is best pleased that way. But instead of asking me to satisfy you, you lied to me. You gave yourself to someone who does not love you."

Senjian twitched.

"I will no longer trust you to tell me what you want. It will be like *jiadzi*, only it will not end. You won't try and avoid it by having Terefar here always, or anything clever you can think of. You will be owned when I choose to own you. And I know you'll probably take it out on me the next night. I'm sure that will be part of the fun. Say that this will be so, or else I shall release you and never speak of it again."

Senjian sighed. "All you require of me is yours, Enshan."

"Good," said Wishbone, and put the quill aside. "You'll excuse me if I don't make you sign anything."

Senjian's desperate laugh turned into a moan as Wishbone swallowed his cock. He used his tongue on the underside of the head and the little hole until the shih-aan squirmed desperately against the ropes, then let the cock pop out of his mouth and jut straight up, pulsing and neglected.

Wishbone turned his attention in other directions. Opening a jar, he coated one finger and used it to stroke the shih-aan's cleft from underneath. After a brief initial struggle, Senjian surrendered to the slight pressure, and Wishbone's finger sank inside the shih-aan. Wishbone soon had two and then three fingers inside Senjian's burning ring, and the shih-aan was breathing hard and had gone very still except where his nether muscles fought to open.

This would be a tricky thing to work. Wishbone's hand was wider across than Senjian's, and he didn't have the extra joints or the flexibility they gave. This was not the sort of penetration that could be forced, and he wasn't about to order Senjian not to disappoint him. How far Wishbone got might be entirely up to how much Senjian wanted him inside. Wishbone stopped using his mouth on Senjian's erection, because the stimulation seemed to distract him from the business at hand.

Wishbone eased his hand back out a bit and coated the wide part with salve. Then he returned to

pressing against Senjian's spread-open ring and making a mess of the bedclothes. He found a rocking motion that seemed to work. He might not get his hand inside, but Senjian would spill this way. He wiggled his fingers against that spot all the way inside against the front of the shih-aan's body.

"Shih-aan have names for these sorts of things. Do you have one for this?"

"The flower of nine," said Sir, breathless.

Wishbone pressed a knuckle against that flower and rocked his hand a little deeper while the shih-aan's ring stretched. He had an idea then and got his shoulders under Senjian's legs. Now that the shih-aan had some leverage, he used it to push himself down onto Wishbone's hand. He wanted the penetration. Wishbone remembered the feeling, when he didn't know that a hand could fit all the way inside him. He had known only that he loved the sensation of something pressed so tight against his flower of nine, and that if he didn't get more of it he was going to die of disappointment. Wishbone held still, felt Senjian move, and at the exact right moment twisted his wrist. His hand slid all the way inside.

They were both still for a long time. Even Senjian's breathing was calm as the bay on a windless afternoon.

Wishbone felt his hand curl into a fist. He leaned forward and tongued Senjian's cock-head again. He felt the climax build in Senjian's belly and thighs, and then come rippling down as the shih-aan's powerful muscles squeezed his hand numb. Even Senjian's toes curled as he shouted. Working his hand in more deeply, Wishbone was rewarded with cries he'd never heard from Senjian before as the climax released his lover from years of hollow need. Wishbone swallowed all of the shih-aan's spill, rested for a while with his hand still deep inside Senjian, and pushed his helpless lover up the peak a second time. The third and final climax had to be cajoled, sucked, and wrung from Senjian, but the raw pleasure of it was worth the sore muscles Wishbone knew he'd have the next day. The weight of his hand drew it gradually free from Senjian's stretched opening. He untied the ropes, coiling each one with care. After Senjian relaxed into a doze, Wishbone wrapped him in blankets, then climbed in beside him.

Wishbone woke Senjian just before dawn the next morning and turned him face-down for another ride. Afterward, they lay in the dark. Senjian shivered, and Wishbone moved to wrap himself around the shih-aan like a blanket. Senjian's fingers tangled for a moment in Wishbone's necklace.

"It's been nearly a year since I stole a comb from you," said Wishbone.

Senjian said, "Diah Zeram will be amused when I tell him."

Wishbone folded his arms more tightly around the shih-aan's chilled back. "Who is Diah Zeram?"

"He liked combing my hair, so he made me a comb with amethysts to match my eyes before I

left."

"Ah."

"He worked the spell into the comb for practice."

Wishbone slid out from under the covers and shivered into a robe.

"Where are you going?" asked Senjian.

Fumbling, Wishbone kissed his cheek. "Not far," he said.

Wishbone built up the fire from coals to something hot enough to please Senjian. He lit a candle and brought it to the next room where he set it down upon the chest of drawers. The comb was in the same place beneath a pile of folded blankets. Wishbone picked it up and brought it back to the bedroom. There he coaxed Senjian out of the covers and sat down to comb his hair.

A short time passed, during which Senjian made all of the sounds and movements of pleasure. Wishbone said, "No wonder he enjoyed combing you."

"It is rather a pleasant weakness," whispered Senjian.

"How long have you been away from home?" asked Wishbone.

"Four years," said Sir. "Two spent on Anemaline Isle unlearning most of what I thought I knew of humans. Two years here now."

Wishbone ran the comb all the way down Senjian's mane and was rewarded with a shudder and a long moan. To one side the window lightened to gray.

"How many humans have you bedded besides me?"

"Three," said Sir. "All on Anemaline. To be precise, one of them never made it to bed. It was a warm night, and I had him on the beach.

"I thought I'd gotten over the curiosity, and maybe I had. But even the least interesting of the three gave me something pleasant to remember." He sighed. "None of them knew my name. None of them ever made me kneel."

Wishbone licked Senjian's ear. "Once in a while you'll be sitting in a Council meeting and you'll feel a bite itching, or you'll have to be careful of how you sit down, or maybe you'll need to be a little wary around Terefar if you don't want him to know what I did to you the night before."

Watery sunshine splashed across the eastern window. Senjian seized Wishbone by the throat and flipped him onto his back.

The shih-aan said, "Some other time." He wrapped his other hand around Wishbone's scrotum and extended his claws.

"I hear, Enshan," said Wishbone. It was tempting but pointless to fight.

"Never doubt me," he whispered, through a haze of pain.

Chapter Seventeen

Wishbone wondered if Terefar could tell what had changed. He knew that the wathara could ignore anything that didn't fit into a servant's comfortable world, and envied him the ability. If Wishbone used to feel that Terefar was a lesser companion than Senjian, he changed his mind. Terefar was skilled and above all calm. Bedding him was satisfying and restful, though when Senjian was present he made sure that Wishbone stayed as submissive as possible to the wathara. Wishbone didn't mind.

Bedding Senjian, on the other hand, was intense and exquisite and a lot of work. Wishbone did not make the shih-aan submit too often. In spite of his threats, he would watch the pressure of conflicting need build up in Senjian. Every time they entered the bedroom there would be a flicker of eye contact and often a sigh of disappointment from Senjian before he tore into Wishbone like a starving dog. And then, when he stopped expecting it, Wishbone would order him to his knees.

There was a purpose to Senjian's actions now beyond gratification or revenge. He seemed to have decided that if he would be kneeling to Wishbone, then Wishbone must be better trained. Senjian demonstrated how he could have escaped the ties that Wishbone had made that first night with little effort and promised to do exactly that if Wishbone did not improve. Embarrassed, Wishbone learned and then practiced on his own. The next time he bound Senjian, the shih-aan was not able to escape.

The following step was clearly harder, for Senjian had some difficulty putting into Wishbone's hands the means to give more pain than he could manage with a quill. Back in Feras-aan, Wishbone would have started learning with a much shorter single-tailed whip. The only one available, however, was Senjian's own. Wishbone could feel exactly what Senjian meant when he said that the single tail belonged to him alone. But it didn't seem to mind Wishbone's hand. He began, under Senjian's direction, taking aim at pillows and coins dropped on the bed. Wishbone wore gloves and a leather jacket to protect himself from the lash gone astray. The long lash was harder to control at low speeds, so Senjian stood well back, giving directions and visibly seething with jealousy.

Finally, Senjian stood gripping a bedpost while Wishbone made a mark on one shoulder blade with charcoal. Senjian held onto the post while Wishbone erased as much of the mark as possible with the single tail without touching the rest of Senjian's skin. Senjian never let go, though he was sorely tested when a poorly aimed stroke wrapped around his ribs. Wishbone was no longer allowed any defense against his own mistakes. He didn't even wear a shirt, and his arms were covered with whip bites.

When they changed places, Senjian savaged Wishbone with all of his strength until Wishbone pleaded for mercy. He never got it. Senjian would pull him to his feet and stand him up to the post again.

"You chose this path," he said. "After we return to Feras-aan you may be in a position to go to Rope and Lash and stand for the test. I will expect you to pass the first time."

Then, as Wishbone clung to the bedpost, Senjian got down on his knees and kissed Wishbone's prick, which instantly grew. Wishbone groaned. His hands tightened on the post until his knuckles turned white. Senjian opened his throat to take the cock and stroked the underside with his tongue. The instant Wishbone's hips started pumping, Senjian stood slowly, trailing kisses up Wishbone's flank, nuzzling the welts, biting the back of his neck.

"You will always bear pain best with a hard cock. Keep it that way, and I will satisfy it when I have finished with the whip."

And it all came to pass as Senjian said.

Later, Sir decreed a change in Wishbone's relationship with Terefar. No longer did they lie together for the pleasure alone. Instead, Terefar became Enshan and Wishbone an Anshan who must offer all the courtesies appropriate to their temporary stations.

"There are five Guilds dedicated to teaching pleasure," said Terefar. "I spent three years under the instruction of the adepts of The Flower's Kiss. I've been asked to teach you all I know in a fraction of that time." He smiled. "Let's get to work!"

Terefar began teaching Wishbone many previously unconsidered aspects of using his mouth. Wishbone had mostly experienced oral penetration as a passive act. Terefar showed him how he could take a measure of control instead. With a little work, a mouth could create enough pleasure that the cock's owner lost the strength to do anything but lie back and sigh. Wishbone learned to lead anyone through multiple levels of delight while the candles burned down so that the eventual spill was that much more potent.

Then, Wishbone learned to channel his own pleasure. He lay for hours on his back with his cock in hand, bringing it to hardness but not completion. Gradually, the exercise transformed from a bitter tease to something deeply peaceful. Soon, Wishbone could maintain the balance of pleasure, even when Terefar used hands and mouth in an attempt to push him over the edge. To Wishbone's delight, he found that Senjian could not match his new-learned endurance. With enough self-control, Wishbone could fuck the shih-aan until he cried. Wishbone's new fascination with provoking extremes of emotion and sensation were matched only by Senjian's desire to share each one.

Wishbone remembered precisely how he felt when he first met Sir in an alley down by the harbor. The shih-aan had been so serene and confident and had controlled Wishbone so easily. What a pleasant surprise to discover that dominance was but one aspect of his soul, and that it could be stripped from him like layers of clothing.

Lying on top of Senjian, balls deep in him, Wishbone bit the back of his neck until Senjian shuddered. He adored yanking the shih-aan back from the abstractions of pleasure to answer questions. "You've been training me. Honing me, even. Making me into the key that unlocks you." He worked his hips so that Senjian gasped and shuddered beneath him. "Which of us dominates the other?"

Senjian caught his breath, turned his cheek upon the covers, and opened one violet eye. "Does it matter?"

Chapter Eighteen

Wishbone used to dream of attending solstice festivals.

The rumors would drift into the harbor alleys -- along with free-spending clients drunk on festival cheer. Acquaintances who worked in kitchens told of platters piled high with roasted swans, candied vegetables, and breads rich with ginger and candied fruit. There were in addition cream soups, vast carafes of wine, and potent, imported cordials. Gifts were exchanged in grand salons: gems and jewelry, furs, bolts of embroidered velvet, hunting hounds and incense. Sold, these gifts could have fed a whore for months.

Now, Wishbone was in the kitchen at Duke Arlefantar's reception, and he wanted to go home.

As member of the Bronlyn merchant community, Sir was invited to all the best events. He had even given a small party of his own, though it was presented by hired servants, and Wishbone and Terefar were free to hide upstairs. But when Wishbone was accompanying Sir as his valet, hiding was not an option. He felt miserably exposed. Worse than that, he had to spend the evening trapped with humans. Perhaps the astonishing part was that he didn't think of them as *other* humans.

Wishbone had always felt a distance between himself and his own kind. Now they seemed loud, twitchy, flatulent, careless of each others' boundaries and full of frivolous noises. Many of them smelled like they needed to bathe. They were equally wary of him. He'd arrived in the company of a shih-aan. Rumors swirled around him like a cold draft. The humans gathered in clumps to speak of him, stare at him, and point. He couldn't believe he was one of them.

That night, Sir went to bed and then awoke desperately ill. He voided the entire contents of his guts and stomach, then drank some warm broth and lost that, then some tepid water and lost that. Terefar seemed admirably unconcerned, bringing anything that Sir called for to drink, clean clothes and more blankets without a sideways glance. Sir grew no worse; he grew no better. He asked Wishbone to hunt down the Bremmian physician, then passed out.

Thus, Wishbone found himself in the carriage in the snow, shivering with his hands tucked up in his armpits as Wenley drove him to the Bremmian temple on the other side of the bay. Since they took their calling seriously, the Bremmians wouldn't turn anyone away no matter how late the hour or miserable the weather. However, he had some trouble recalling the man who had aided Sir before. By the time he found the right physician, the night was far advanced. Wenley whisked them back across town. Wishbone sent Wenley back out with some instructions before following the physician upstairs.

Sir was in bed, unconscious, his pulse fast and slight, skin cool to the touch. Terefar sat next to him, holding an unresponsive hand.

"Direct us," said Wishbone to the Bremmian.

The physician crossed his arms and stood very still while he looked Sir up and down. Wishbone

expected some sort of argument and was surprised to get none.

"There's a bath downstairs?" asked the physician.

"Yes."

"Let us bring him there."

Wishbone sent Terefar on ahead to draw water. He and the physician carried Sir down the stairs and into the bath room. The physician examined Sir's eyelids and gums by the light of an extravagance of candles, then reached into his bag and pulled out three vials. He set them up in a line on the table while the first buckets of water began to heat on the stove.

"I will need to purge him," said the Bremmian physician. "If he was a human, I'd know exactly which of these to use. But if he was a human, he'd be dead. Too strong a dose will kill him," he said, pointing to one vial. "As will too weak a dose," he said, pointing to another. "Even the dose in between that you see here may allow him to die through lack of swift action. I cannot pick which one, but you know him. You know how he eats, how he sleeps, how he exercises. How strong is he? Tell me."

Wishbone bit his lip and nearly could not speak against the pressure of responsibility. "He's strong by any measure. And I don't think he'd allow death to come after him by means of a purgative. Too embarrassing."

The physician quickly discovered that Sir had fangs. He wedged a small piece of wood between the shih-aan's jaws so neither of them would get bitten. Then the Bremmian uncorked the vial and poured the wretched-smelling contents down Sir's throat.

What came back up smelled even worse. Wishbone stepped out of the bath for a breath of air the moment that Terefar let Ah Jinráo in through the front door.

Ah Jinráo stepped forward, then stopped as if he'd run into a wall. His hand went to his nose. A burbling shout from Sir nearly got him moving again.

"What *is* this?" he asked.

"Shieh Yeras has been poisoned," said Wishbone.

"Who told you that?" asked Terefar.

"Does this terrible illness come upon shih-aan often? No? Ah Jinráo, this is a crime. I've sent word to Diah Jojaan, and he can call whatever others he sees are needed. But in case something else happens, I thought you should be here."

Ah Jinráo nodded, then took up a station outside the bathroom door. He did not lean against the wall, but stood straight, arms relaxed, eyes moving. Only a slight tension around his jaw showed

his internal state. Sir had been attacked again, and the defender was not in place to block the strike. This was not his fault. Sir and the rest of the Council-in-Exile had made a series of moves to bring their enemies out from cover. They had succeeded. Ah Jinráo would not thank Wishbone for pointing this out.

Eventually the physician confirmed that indeed Sir was going to live, though he'd hate all them in the morning for making sure of it. The physician returned to his temple bearing a pot of some of the stuff expelled by Sir during the worst part of the night. By then, Diah Jojaan had arrived, along with the rest of the Council-in-Exile.

Sir had revived enough to get cleaned up and dressed. Wrapped in blankets, he sat before a huge fire laid by Terefar. Cook examined his pulses with the concern of a physician, then vanished into her domain. The smells of beef broth overlaid with exotic spices soon billowed from the kitchen.

Sem Arasheyr said, "We did not think that these creatures would use such a crude weapon."

"Humans disgust me," said Ah Jinráo. "So much effort to preserve their little lives and mediocre culture..."

Mai Zarian moved toward Ah Jinráo. Except for Sir, seated and wrapped in blankets, the rest of the shih-aan took a step backward. Mai Zarian laid a heavy hand upon Ah Jinráo's shoulder in a manner that, from the defender's reaction, included a good amount of claw.

"You shame yourself," said Mai Zarian. "Unless you have much neglected the study of history, you know we've done that and worse to each other. If you are only prepared to treat those who look like you as worthy of defense, you don't deserve your title. I thought you were the best defender available. The calculation must have stopped at the hands and overlooked the heart."

Ah Jinráo looked down. "Forgive me," he said.

Mai Zarian said, "Eventually."

Cook carried a steaming mug out of the kitchen and set it in Sir's hands. He nodded to her, sipped the contents, and sighed.

"More impressively poor planning on my part. At least no one suffered by it except for me."

"Shieh Yeras, you can't say that yet," said Diah Jojaan. "This move may have brought them into the open for us. Poisons are traceable. We'll know more when the sun comes up and the human justice agents awaken, but I would bet a bottle of Blessed Ukaso that our enemies have bound themselves in a neat package for us."

"I'll take that bet," said Sir.

"Cynic," said Mai Zarian.

Sir raised the mug to him and drank it down.

By then, the morning light had touched the window. The snow had ceased falling, but it left behind a blanket that muffled horses' hooves and the boots of soldiers until they were at the door.

Wishbone hastened to answer the knock. When he opened the front door, he was face-to-face with the commander he recalled from the day Sir dragged him to the House of Justice to get his face branded. The man didn't seem to recognize him. Wishbone led him and his two lieutenants into the parlor. A small company of soldiers waited in the front driveway.

"The King takes the safety of our shih-aan visitors seriously," said the commander, after he bowed and introduced himself. "But beyond that we received a message from the Bremmian physicians last night. They alerted us that they recovered a poison sample from Shieh Yeras. The poison used is called Etafa Blue. Possessing it has been considered a crime against the Unnamed Gods since time immemorial, and anyone convicted of its use will lose his life and his chance of salvation. The Church is taking over the investigation immediately. Those responsible will be found and executed. You need have no further fears for your safety."

Diah Jojaan made a polite gesture to the commander. "On behalf of our rulers at home, I offer our deepest thanks."

There was more said, but Wishbone was relieved when the commander had gone. He hadn't been able to interpret the looks the shih-aan were giving him, but Wishbone still expected him to burst into flame.

"You owe me a bottle," said Sir to Diah Jojaan.

"Bastards," said Sem Arasheyr. "They'll round up and murder their scapegoats. In our names."

"Think," said Mai Zarian. "Yesterday we hadn't determined that the Church was our primary opponent. Now we are sure of it."

"You may be right," said Sir. "If so, we have gained an advantage." He accepted another full mug of broth from Cook. "May the next move not take quite so long, nor have such an outcome."

Chapter Nineteen

During his convalescence, Senjian taught Wishbone to play riverbridge.

For a while after the poison incident, Senjian mostly slept. Then, since he had lost so much flesh, he mostly slept and ate, leaving bed to receive a seemingly endless series of gifts from Duke Arlefantar. Their host for the solstice had lost considerable face over the poisoning and was desperate to disown the acts of servants who were arrested and condemned by the Church. There was no strength in Senjian for the normal businesses of trading and spying, but he could sit up in bed and move the carved stone bridge counters over the honeycomb board.

Wishbone found he had a knack for keeping moves in his head. From there, he built up an understanding of strategy and soon could play well enough to provide Senjian with a modest challenge. As his understanding of the game progressed, so did his picture of the culture that had devised it. He could almost visualize the warm, lush land of many rivers, the bridges that turned the rivers from barriers to tactical crossings, and the formalized battles fought by Senjian's ancestors back and forth across these bridges.

"Or each hexagon is status, title, and influence. Or a powerful Church, corrupt Justice, and an indifferent King," said Senjian. "Or again, gifts that bear spells, as did the comb. Each gift presented to a human, who may put it away in a drawer with similar gifts or, if we are fortunate, carry it with him."

"How so?" asked Wishbone. He clicked a piece down onto the board.

Senjian stared at it for a long moment, though he seemed to see something else.

"My predecessor spent five years making sense out of human diplomacy and left behind a legacy of reports," he said. "He changed nothing. On the other hand, no one tried to poison him, so I can't entirely fault his methods. He did not consider using crafted gifts to follow the movements and contacts of humans, perhaps because such things are easily countered in Feras-aan. Even if he had, turning information into knowledge, and knowledge into a plan, may have exceeded his capabilities.

"The Council has invested much in me, and I in turn have invested much of my reputation in the eventual success of the mission. But beyond that, I have some plans for my opponents. The warmongers, the poisoners, the employers of assassins. The ones who tried to take you from me. I will kill them."

Senjian blinked, focused on the board, and made a move. Wishbone looked down at the board and realized that he there were no legal moves remaining. He had thought he was doing well, but had fallen into a trap. For a moment, he felt sorry for Senjian's enemies, but the moment passed.

The day dawned clear and unseasonably warm, with a wind that rattled winter's bare tree

branches. The weather omens turned sour by noon. Indefatigable Cook complained about sore knees. Rising winds spooked horses, and one carriage was left smashed to kindling along the route down the Hill. Fishing boats that had gone out in the morning returned to harbor early where the sailors battened them down for a storm.

Wrapped in a heavy cloak, Wishbone hurried from cloth merchant to wine trader, bearing Sir's messages. Since Sir had recovered from the poisoning, he was eager to make up for lost time. Each message represented a promise to exchange lots of goods ranging from the contents of entire warehouses to single caskets of the most valuable gems. Though those items might remain in storage for the next several weeks until the ships dared make the crossing, the transactions would not wait. Wishbone finished the last errand as the light turned the color of a bruise and the first heavy drops of rain spattered the paving stones. Wishbone had his head down, so he ran right into the man who blocked his path.

"Slow down there, Wishbone. I have some friends who would like to talk to you."

It was as if the storm had dropped buckets of cold water down the back of Wishbone's neck. He looked up at Captain Gertom's face and took a step backward and almost onto something sharp in the hands of a Dock Patrol man. Two men with blades in hand moved in on either side from the curtains of rain.

"You're not going to do anything stupid, are you?" asked Gertom. His smile was perhaps the worst part of the whole affair. It was huge and pink and dripping with rain. Wishbone had never seen the Captain look so happy and couldn't imagine that it boded well for him.

"I asked you a question, filth."

"No," said Wishbone, dropping his eyes hastily. "Nothing stupid."

One of the men sheathed his sword and started binding Wishbone's hands. The rope was coarse hemp and thin enough to bite through Wishbone's skin and grind his bones together. Another rope, tied in a noose, snugged around his throat. The men took off at a trot, dragging Wishbone with them through the deepening puddles.

Wishbone's heart, a step behind the danger, started to pound. He blinked away cold water and tripped, falling to his knees in a puddle. Gertom aimed a kick at his ribs, but the man who had roped Wishbone stepped between them.

"You'll have your chance," he said to Gertom. "Get him out of sight first."

They took several turns off the main harbor roads and emerged in a section of warehouses. Wishbone thought that some of the buildings that housed more expensive goods might have guards. If so, they'd all gone under shelter. At last, his captors pulled him into a warehouse that backed up against one of the harbor's steep cliffs. Inside waited a half-dozen more men, some clearly standing watch, the others playing at dice. The newcomers piled around the small fire that provided light and heat to the empty warehouse. Gertom tossed the end of Wishbone's noose

over a rafter above their heads then dumped the water out of his helmet. He lit a torch at the fire and held it up close to Wishbone, his eyes narrowed in disgust.

"I will skin him," said Gertom, his foul breath washing over Wishbone's face. "Skin and gut him. Feed his eyes to the fishes. And his fingers. And toes." Gertom paused, having run out of ideas. "And his diseased privates. To the fishes."

"Later," said the man who had roped Wishbone, who seemed to be in charge. "Remember your orders." Free of his sodden cloak, his armor gleamed. He looked like an Army officer, and so did about half of Wishbone's abductors. Unlike the dock guard, they did not dice, but stood and watched and checked their bowstrings.

Gertom subsided, muttering, and moved closer to the fire. Water began to pour through a poorly-kept part of the roof and puddle on the floor.

Wishbone closed his eyes. The wet rope started to dry and tightened around his neck, forcing him to stand up straighter. He'd ducked fate for over a year, but it had been deferred, not evaded. Sir might notice when Wishbone failed to return when expected, but he would not know where to look. If he did, he might share Wishbone's fate. Wishbone was going to die in a leaky harbor warehouse. From the looks of it, the death that awaited him would be crueler than drowning.

Someone knocked on the warehouse door. The Army officer motioned to two of the bowmen, who stepped forward and set arrows to strings. He opened the door, then stepped back and bowed. A man dressed in priest's robes entered and acknowledged the bow with a gesture, then looked Wishbone up and down.

"Well done," he said. "Send the rest of the messages as planned." He stepped further inside and spotted the dice game. Leaning forward, he snatched the dice and tossed them into the fire. "You befoul yourselves," he said.

Wishbone wondered if the Dock Patrol would argue with the priest, but they gave him wary glances and a wide berth.

"Blessed Father?" said Gertom.

"Yes?"

Gertom shifted from foot to foot. "The boy whore. He was branded. How come his face is unmarked?"

The priest took the torch away from Gertom and held it up to Wishbone's face. Wishbone met his eyes and recognized the man who had given the provocative sermon, who had called upon his flock to spit on the shadows of shih-aan.

Wishbone had never once mistaken a man's attraction for him. He had staked his livelihood -- and occasionally his life -- on his ability to tell who wanted a sexually available man. The priest's

ice-gray eyes were liquid with desire. He reached out and gripped Wishbone's chin.

"You will answer to the Unnamed Gods for your sins," said the priest.

Wishbone lowered his eyes, drowning in confusion. How could a man look at him like that and speak damnation at the same time? The priest's fingers snagged Wishbone's necklace and yanked, breaking the chain. He held up the pendant and let its facets turn in the torchlight.

"Foul demon magic," said the priest. He ground the pendant beneath his heel and spat on the remains. "We will crush them as I crush this piece of their work."

"Ah," said Gertom. "He's been damnably hard to kill, as well. More magic?"

"Luck," said the priest. "Which has run out."

Gertom nodded. "Very good. So, what are we waiting for? You promised me his life."

The priest looked Gertom up and down with contempt that was entirely lost on the Dock Patrol man. "You have your instructions," he said. "Now be quiet."

Gertom leaned against the wall behind Wishbone and prodded him with the point of a rusty sword.

Wishbone felt the chill air on his face. He couldn't see the difference, but he knew that the brand and the old scar from the rake handle had been laid bare. It seemed he would be denied even the comfort of illusion as he waited to die.

Time passed, marked only by the muttering of the various guards and the misery of hemp cords biting into Wishbone's wrists and neck. Twice the guards answered the door and admitted more priests. Wishbone thought he recognized one of them from a Church visit. Wishbone's bladder filled. Since there seemed no other way to manage, he emptied it into his clothes. No one seemed to notice.

Wishbone observed two things at the same time. One was a faint creak originating above his head. It was barely detectable over the rattling the storm was giving the building, but Wishbone could still hear it. The other was the unmistakable aroma of shih-aan. It was not Sir. Wishbone wondered how the men around him could fail to notice. But if they hadn't, he would make sure that no movement or sound from him could give it away. And he wasn't even sure what he refrained from giving away. It might be hope. Wishbone remembered what Terefar had said more than once: never bet against Sir.

A knock rattled the door. Gertom got to his feet, sheathed his sword, and drew a knife, which he held against Wishbone's throat while he lifted the torch high in his other hand. Unlike the sword, the knife was sharp. The other guards drew swords or aimed arrows at the door while the most senior of them opened it.

Sir stepped inside. Streams of water ran off his sodden cloak and pooled on the floor at his feet. He did not look at Wishbone, but bowed to the humans.

"You sent for me?" he said.

Wishbone felt Sir's voice like a touch and longed for the feel of his arms, at the same time wishing Sir miles away from the warehouse, away from the thirsty arrows aimed at his vitals. There was something strangely vague about Sir's silhouette. Firelight and the reflections off the puddles made him difficult to see. Wishbone tried not to stare. The taut rope around his throat vibrated as if something was touching it in the dark over Wishbone's head.

"Closer, demon," said the first priest. "Step into the firelight, where we may look upon you properly."

Sir stepped forward and drew off his wet cloak into one arm. Arrow points moved to follow him. "I believe that I was invited here to discuss a ransom for my servant, not for a theological disputation. But I would be pleased to accommodate you either way."

The first priest stepped forward and stared at the shih-aan across the fire.

"Kill him," he said.

Three hungry bows fired. Three arrows thudded into the door. Sparks fountained up toward the roof as Sir tossed his sodden cloak over the fire. A weight dropped from the rafter onto Gertom, whose neck cracked and popped like a dry stick. Gertom's torch arced across the warehouse and dropped straight into a puddle, where it was extinguished. The rope around Wishbone's neck--held only by a remaining strand -- parted. A push from a strong arm knocked Wishbone to the floor. Human voices rose from a confused babble to shrieks as they tried to pin down their enemies in the dark and died by their hands instead. Wishbone gasped at the tearing sound that came from somewhere above him and the warm splash on his cheek.

Several moments passed in silence. Light flared as Sir lifted a torch away from the coals of the fire. His outline wavered like a reflection on water, and liquid death dripped from his hands. Little could be seen of his face but his fangs and a smear of blood on his mouth. Bodies lay broken in the puddles at his feet. Ah Jinráo rose from a crouch over Wishbone's prone form. The defender picked over the dead human bodies sprawled on the floor until he found an unstained piece of clothing, which he used to clean the blood off his hands. Surprisingly tender, he did the same for Wishbone's face, then broke the cords binding Wishbone's wrists and helped him to rise.

A shadow detached itself from the far wall. "They're all dead," said Mai Zarian. "Shieh Yeras? We need you."

Sir shook himself violently and wiped his mouth on a clean bit of sleeve. "I'm here."

"We are only half-done," said Ah Jinráo. He picked up Gertom's corpse by the arms and dragged

it closer to the fire.

Sir reached up, took something off his neck, and dropped it into a pocket. Instantly he became easier to see. Wishbone watched the three shih-aan arranging the bodies of dead guards and priests. They fired arrows into some and set up others to look like they had stabbed each other. Even one of the priests had a penknife, which Ah Jinráo placed in the throat of a second one.

"All of them in one move," Ah Jinráo said. "I'm impressed."

"Account for every crafted item," said Mai Zarian. "And every sign that we were here."

"Death by theological disputation," said Ah Jinráo, who seemed to be enjoying himself.

Outside of the now-reeking warehouse, they stopped to wash off blood under a downspout. Wenley and the carriage waited three streets over.

Chapter Twenty

"The news is all over court," said Diah Jojaan, late the next morning. "There is no sign that anyone disbelieves the trick you played with the bodies. If the King does, he does not care because we have given him some openings to clean house in the less loyal parts of his military. With so many well-regarded Church leaders out of the picture, he will have more opportunities to shape popular opinion. Publicly, I'm as surprised by all this as anyone."

Sir nodded and held his hands out to the fire. He hadn't slept at all. After a hot bath and dry clothes, he still shivered.

Wishbone remembered Sir up to his elbows in blood and the look on his face as he crouched over a pile of dead humans. It was hard not to fear being alone with him just a little. Still, Wishbone wanted to cry in his arms for hours, but Sir hadn't said a word, let alone taken Wishbone aside.

"That was the best-played game I've ever seen," continued Diah Jojaan. "It's a pity that the moves and the outcome won't be more widely shared. You've broken a diplomatic impasse that has lasted for twenty years. Now will you reward yourself with a few hours of sleep?"

Sir rolled his eyes, thanked Diah Jojaan, and went to bed. When sunset painted the high cliffs over the harbor and no guards had knocked on the door, Sir seemed to relax at last. He continued to ignore Wishbone, who had moved past weepy and onto annoyed and thence to tired.

Sem Arasheyr arrived after dark. He spoke with Sir alone for a while. Then Sir called Wishbone to join them. Sem Arasheyr handed Wishbone a pendant and smiled.

"Try it on," he said.

Wishbone settled the necklace around his throat with trembling fingers, then looked into the hand mirror that Sem Arasheyr held out for him. The brand and scar on his face had disappeared again.

Wishbone made a bow of thanks. Sem Arasheyr laughed and raised Wishbone to his feet.

"Do not thank me," he said. "An illusion is a poor solution. I hope that we'll have a healer's services to offer you soon, and then your scars will no longer trouble you."

Shortly after Sem Arasheyr left, Ah Jinráo arrived. He sat with Sir in the parlor and spoke very quietly for a long time. Ah Jinráo abased himself to Sir when Wishbone brought in the wine, as if the defender had waited until that moment to be sure that Wishbone saw.

"You were right," he said to Sir, "and I was foolish. I offer you all honor and my right hand to defend you should you ever need it." He accepted a tender, lengthy kiss, his eyes closed with apparent pleasure.

Wishbone remembered Ah Jinráo breaking Gertom's neck and standing guard over Wishbone during the spasm of violence in the darkened warehouse. He was grateful, yet watching the two of them kiss fanned the dormant flames of jealousy. He wondered what game Sir was playing (for Sir was always playing a game). What did Sir expect Wishbone, ignored, to feel when forced to watch Sir toy with Ah Jinráo?

Later, Terefar took Wishbone aside.

"I know only a little of what happened," he said, "but I hear you were very brave."

Wishbone embraced Terefar.

"Thank you for the compliment," he said, and rubbed his cheek against Terefar's hair.

"How unexpectedly pleasant to see," said Sir, coming upon them in the hall.

Terefar dimpled and bowed. Sir raised and kissed his pet, then sent him off to help tidy the kitchen.

"Wishbone," said Sir, his violet eyes gleaming in the hallway's low light, "join me upstairs."

Wishbone climbed the stairs behind Sir. His heartbeat raced as he wondered what Sir would have to say to him at last.

They passed the parlor and entered the bedroom where Terefar had already laid a fire and lit candles. Senjian dropped to the floor before him in a profound abasement. How did Senjian made a gesture of humility so achingly graceful? Why did Wishbone get hard watching it? He wanted to break Senjian's composure, tangle his hair, tear his clothes and spill on his face.

"Wishbone, I have failed you," said Senjian. "I knew in advance that they planned to take you and that they would use a ransom negotiation as a pretext to lure me to them. Nevertheless, I allowed them to do it. I dangled you before them as bait. I put your life at risk."

"You made me into a game piece," said Wishbone.

"There are no words sufficient for an apology," said Senjian.

"Apology?" snapped Wishbone, his tangled feelings scorched to ashes by anger. "Why do you think I need one? I belong to you, and if you needed a game piece, then you had only to use me." He shook Senjian by the hair. "I know what you're doing. You want the release of the whip, but you're too ashamed to ask for it. You sly bastard, no wonder you've spent the day making me jealous. This time you will ask for the whip. Else, I swear, I will walk out of this room and won't ever come back unless you order me to."

Senjian was still for a long time. Then he knelt up and unfastened his trousers. The curved spike of his cock jutted free. The head was huge and dark. Senjian rested his palms on his thighs, on

either side of the eager flesh. "I can lie, but my cock never will," he said. "I have played both sides of the pain game for my entire adult life. I envy you every time I make you scream. You let yourself feel so much more than I can bear. Please, Enshan. Make me bear it."

Wishbone prodded the shih-aan's balls with the toe of his boot. "You call me Enshan, but you don't mean it," he said. "You don't want to be hurt. You want to be pleased."

Senjian swallowed. "Have no mercy on me, else I will die of disappointment." He lowered his hips and ground his stiff prick on Wishbone's instep.

Catching Senjian by the hair again, Wishbone brought the shih-aan's eyes up to meet his. "I don't care what you think you want this time," said Wishbone. "I'm not stopping until I've broken you."

"As it should be, Enshan," said Senjian.

Wishbone fed Senjian two of his fingers, turning his hand over until he stroked the roof of Senjian's mouth. Senjian groaned, licking with his pointed tongue, demonstrating what he'd love to be doing to Wishbone's cock.

"Now strip off so I can feed you to your own whip," said Wishbone.

While Senjian rid himself of his silk and velvet armor, Wishbone took some ropes and the single-tail from the wardrobe. He gave the whip a half-hearted flick. It was too long for what he wanted. Instead, Wishbone doubled the long lash. It folded naturally half-way along where the thong narrowed. He laid the whip on the bed and turned to where Senjian knelt on the floor, his darker skin gilded by firelight, the tear on one cheek brighter than his lowered eyes.

Wishbone bound Senjian, crossing snug ropes around his chest and securing his hands at the back of his neck. "Is this what you want?" Wishbone asked, stroking Senjian's cheek with the looped whip. Senjian lowered his head and kissed the lash. Wishbone trailed his fingers down the twisted cord of scar on Senjian's arm where the shih-aan had blocked an assassin's knife. Then Wishbone unfastened his own trousers and leaned back against the bed. He took out his half-hard cock and grabbed Senjian by the back of the neck.

"Please me," said Wishbone. Senjian closed his eyes, opened his mouth and breathed on the head. He rolled back Wishbone's foreskin with his pointed tongue.

Wishbone swung and cracked the loop of lash across Senjian's shoulders. The shih-aan yelped. A long, curved welt painted his exposed skin, darker and heavier on the side where the thong was thicker. Wishbone's cock hardened. The tight grip of the ropes and Wishbone's hand in the shih-aan's hair prevented him from turning aside. The heavy lash fell again and again, making Senjian shudder and cry. His tears poured down, soaking Wishbone's trousers where Senjian pressed his cheek against them. Dark red welts overlapped on either side of his mane-covered spine.

"I told you to please me," Wishbone snapped, gripping Senjian's hair and shoving his cock

between Senjian's lips. "Make me spill," he said. "I'll turn you over and spare your back." The lash bit again, and Senjian wailed around the mouthful of hard flesh. Senjian's tongue rasped the under-side of Wishbone's cock head and lapped at the balls, attempting in vain to unravel Wishbone's self-control. Wishbone put all his strength into the next three whip strokes.

Senjian broke. He threw himself flat on his face. His back was striped in vivid lines, with darker marks where welts crossed. Wishbone picked the shih-aan up by his hair and filled Senjian's mouth and throat with a cock. Tears and snot streamed down Senjian's cheeks. Wishbone fucked Senjian's throat until he spilled all over Senjian's face and onto the floor.

"Clean that up," said Wishbone.

Senjian glanced up at him, puzzled and sticky. Wishbone shoved his toe into Senjian's scrotum just hard enough to make him double over, gasping, then stepped on the back of Senjian's neck, forcing his face down into the puddle on the floor.

"Damned fastidious demon beast," said Wishbone. "I told you to clean up!"

Senjian licked at the spill, then dove in, gasping with pain when Wishbone beat him across the back again. At last, finished, he pressed his cheek against Wishbone's instep, as if such tender submission could buy him a shred of mercy.

Wishbone pulled up Senjian by the binding ropes, turned him, and shoved him onto his back. Senjian howled when his welts scraped against the bedspread. Wishbone laid the coiled single-tail next to Senjian's head. He flicked his fingertips at Senjian's nipples, which had swollen in the grip of the ropes. Senjian moved to try and avoid the pinches Wishbone delivered to the tender points of his flesh, then bit at his lips to keep from crying out as every movement scraped his welted back on the bed.

Wishbone forced Senjian's legs wide open and pinned the shih-ann down with a hip pressing into his heavy balls. Wishbone wished he had claws, but seemed to be making the shih-aan dance nicely with just his fingernails. At last, he took up the single-tail whip again. He ran the short, braided wrist loop through his fingers. The lead weight in the handle added force to the hard smack of the loop on one nipple. Senjian wrenched his body against Wishbone's legs, then held very still indeed as Wishbone raised the whip handle.

"Do you feel enough yet?" Wishbone asked.

"Yes, Enshan. Thank you. It is enough."

Wishbone spun the handle once and cracked the wrist loop across Senjian's chest. The shih-aan screamed. "Liar," said Wishbone. He took a step back and swung harder, marking each hardened nipple with red, then slicing into Senjian's belly, and finally lashing his cock back and forth with the wrist loop. Senjian's cock stiffened even further so that the purple head pointed at Wishbone while the shih-aan cried like a child.

Leaning forward, Wishbone took an abused nipple in his mouth and bit down. Senjian arched his back, forcing his body against Wishbone's lips. Wishbone bit the other nipple, then brought his mouth up to torment Senjian's ears with alternating licks and bites.

Senjian whispered "please" over and over, begging for something he could not name. Lowering his lips to the head of Senjian's sore cock, Wishbone flicked it with his tongue until Senjian's voice dissolved into wordless howls. Moving down to his knees, Wishbone sucked Senjian's hairless balls into his mouth. Desperate for more friction, Senjian wailed with frustration and squirmed to move his cock against Wishbone's tongue.

Climbing to his feet, Wishbone turned Senjian once more, put a knee between Senjian's legs and spread them as far apart as they would go, then used a rope to hitch the harness to the hook overhead. Even stripped of all grace and poise, weltd and bound, Senjian's body made Wishbone's breath catch in his throat. He ran his fingers down through Senjian's curly mane and cupped one round buttock in his hand. Senjian moved against Wishbone as much as he could before the ropes brought him up short.

Taking up the whip again, Wishbone stepped back and cracked it in the air. Senjian strained fruitlessly to close his legs and protect his genitals. Wishbone let the lash, slow and teasing, slither over Senjian's skin. Every time Wishbone moved or flicked the whip, Senjian tensed his body, then groaned when no blow followed.

"Bear this for me," said Wishbone, and cracked the lash sideways across both taut buttocks. Senjian staggered, but the ropes held him on his feet. Blow after carefully-targeted vertical blow landed, some marking one buttock, some the other, some seeking out the flesh between the thighs and the vulnerable genitals. Some of the welts blossomed liquid red. Wishbone watched Senjian struggle to stay still, then flinch, then struggle all over again. He paused to bite the back of Senjian's neck.

Then, drawing together all of his strength, Wishbone cracked Senjian three times across the buttocks and thighs. After a pause when they both gathered strength, he struck three times again. Lost in the rhythm of the whip, and unable to escape it, Senjian arched himself to meet the lash, over and over.

Finally, Wishbone could not ignore the ache in his arm and slowed down. With the precision that Senjian had drilled into him, he landed the fall on the tender flesh of Senjian's cleft until the shih-aan extended his claws in an attempt to get at the ropes. Wishbone whipped his fingers, then pressed the dry, rough whip handle against Senjian's opening and twisted it all the way inside. Senjian writhed. He seemed to want the penetration, yet there was nothing gentle about it. Wishbone pressed down on the handle until he could tell by the sounds that Senjian made that he probed that flower-of-nine. He fucked Senjian until the shih-aan thrust back to meet the cruel penetration, then pulled the whip out. Senjian's body, streaked with sweat, blood, and less savory fluids, heaved as he drew breath through a throat raw from screaming.

The tension of unspilled pleasure held Wishbone up on his feet. He found an open jar of lubricant in the wardrobe and used a handful to stroke himself harder, then slid his cock head up

and down Senjian's cleft. He forced his erection into the shih-aan's tortured ring. Senjian twisted his hips and pushed back. Wishbone licked and bit at Senjian's back, his bound arms, the welts that cut into his mane, and split Senjian open with his cock.

"You've been good, Anshan," whispered Wishbone into the shih-aan's ear. "You will do one more thing for me."

Senjian bit back a miserable little cry. But Wishbone was unwinding the rope from his wrists, releasing one hand and rubbing it a bit to restore circulation, without breaking the rhythm of their bodies. Wishbone spread some lubricant over Senjian's fingers and brought his hand down to his own swollen cock.

"Spill for me," Wishbone said.

Senjian's body jolted as he took his cock in hand. Wishbone controlled the rhythm with a tight grip on Senjian's balls. Senjian cried out and pumped his hips as he spilled. Wishbone felt the spasms wring his cock, but did not give in to passion just yet.

"Thank you, Enshan," Senjian said, shuddering, when his pleasure was over and done.

"*Never* forget who owns you," Wishbone whispered into Senjian's ear.

Senjian turned his head on the bed. One violet eye fastened on Wishbone's.

"I love you, Wishbone," said Senjian.

Wishbone leaned forward and laid one kiss on Senjian's cheek while he clasped the shih-aan's hands in his own and hammered into Senjian's tight, sore arse. What could Wishbone say to love?

"My name," said Wishbone, "is Jenry."

And then there was nothing left to say. Wishbone's pulse roared in his head, and he clawed and bit and thrust into Senjian until his passion spilled from his cock into his lover.

Sir announced that he'd be selling the house to Diah Jojaan, who would remain in Bronlyn for the foreseeable future. Cook went with the kitchen. Terefar, whose improved grasp of human language and customs would be helpful, and whose sweet manner and lovemaking skills would be a great solace, went with the bedroom. Wenley, who didn't care who lived in the house, went with the stable.

Wishbone would be leaving with Sir. And since Wishbone had signed Mai Zarian's paper months ago, Sir did not ask him *are you sure?* Wishbone might be accepted, or not, but he'd signed away his choices. It only remained to wait for the first ship into harbor now that spring had arrived.

Wishbone caught up with Telia one morning as she cut vegetables for the evening's stew pot. Though not a hint of green touched the rear garden so early in the spring, the sun was warm enough that the door and all the kitchen windows were open. Telia looked up at him and smiled nervously.

"Hello, Wishbone," she said, then set her knife down and folded her hands in her lap.

"I wanted to tell you not to worry," said Wishbone.

"Thank you," she said. "It's not easy, though."

"Diah Jojaan is every bit as honorable as Sir is," said Wishbone.

Telia was the only member of Sir's staff who worried. She didn't have the serenity that being owned gave to Wishbone and the wathara, or Wenley's indifference.

"We're not going just yet," said Wishbone "So I was hoping you'd let me teach you something important."

"What is that?" she asked.

"You told me that the last man you worked for did something wrong, and you kicked him in the shin? Well, I'd like to show you where to kick a man so that he won't be able to bother you."

Telia looked dubious, but she nearly fell over laughing when Wishbone disappeared into the store room and returned to the kitchen with the front of his pants stuffed full of rags and a pie pan. The laughter helped more than any reassurance to accustom her to the idea of kicking a man in such an unspeakable part. Soon enough, Wishbone could be confident that the scullery girl would defend herself if it ever became necessary.

He just had enough time to put his clothes back together before he had to answer a knock on the front door.

The visitor was a messenger who left the sealed paper with Wishbone, who brought it to Sir in the parlor. Sir opened and read it and then -- to Wishbone's surprise -- he blushed.

"It is probably just as well that he waited until now," said Sir, as he sat down before the hearth. "Neither of us would have gotten much work done otherwise."

"Who?" asked Wishbone. He hadn't really expected an answer and was surprised to get one.

"Mai Zarian. He has ordered me to attend him tonight to discuss his final report to the Council."

Wishbone looked the shih-aan over, observing a certain aura to him only seen before when Sir called Wishbone Enshan. "He doesn't only want to talk, I gather," said Wishbone.

"There is a serenity to kneeling to someone who is incalculably stronger than I am," said Sir. "So strong that struggling or evading his command is unthinkable, and who values my submission exactly as it is worth."

"You don't need to excuse yourself to me," said Wishbone. "He's interesting. I'm only sorry I won't get to know him better." He stepped up behind Sir and curled his fingers in the shih-aan's thick, black hair. It was a terribly disrespectful thing to do where anyone might walk in and see, and Wishbone half-expected a slap. Instead, Sir let his head fall back and opened his mouth for a long, deep kiss. Wishbone bit the shih-aan's lips possessively. "How fortunate that the welts I gave you last night are still fresh. You'll tell Mai Zarian how you got them?"

"Oh yes, Jenry," said Senjian. "I will tell him."