



## KEI'S GIFT

Copyright © 2004 Ann Somerville

### BOOK ONE – DARSHIAN CHAPTER 1

---

*Boiling the rind of tido palm fruit produces a gum which is inert and non-poisonous. If a way of strengthening it could be found which would let it be drawn into threads, I believe it would make....*

“Kei! Kei! Hurry, we need you!”

Kei hurriedly dropped the book he'd been reading, and oophed as he caught the wildly running child in his arms, forcing him to stand still. Risa's face was red from exertion, and stained with tears, which wasn't at all like the stoic seven-year-old. Terror and anxiety rolled off the child in powerful waves. “Calm down, Risa. What's happened?”

“Accident. Kiln exploded.” The words were gasped out in between harsh sobbing breaths, as fresh tears began to fall down Risa's dirty cheeks.

*Blessed gods.* He'd heard a loud bang, but had been too absorbed in his papers to think too much of it. “Risa, how many hurt? How bad?”

“My father...Misek, and uncle.... I think...Pa's dead, Kei.”

He had to hurry, but there was always time to calm the distressed. *First thing in a crisis – keep people calm.* “Risa.” The little boy wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and looked at him. “I need you to help me. Will you do that?”

He deliberately kept his voice low and gentle, putting his hand out to hold the boy's. Risa nodded, and sniffled. “Good. I need you to find Myka. She's selecting herbs in the garden. I want you to tell her to come to your family's workshop, and not to stop to collect anything. Tell her I have the kit.” Risa nodded again. “Repeat, please.”

“Fetch Myka, tell her to come to our place, not to stop, you have the kit.” Another tear trickled down. Kei noted that the child's clothing was torn, possibly from the explosion.

“Good lad. Are you hurt?” He ran his hands quickly over the child's body but could see no blood, and the boy was moving easily.

“No. Kei...Pa....”

“No, not yet, Risa. Myka, then find me. Go.”

Risa ran out of the hut. Kei stood and quickly began to check his kit, the cleansing liquid, the soap, sutures, and pain drugs, making sure nothing was missing from the neat pack always kept on the workbench. It only took a minute before he could grab it and the box of bandages and head out the door, knowing he had to expect the very worst.

As he ran towards the site of the explosion at the outskirts of the village, he could see his clansmen rushing in the same direction, several people shouting at him to hurry, even though he was already moving as fast as he could. He ignored them in favour of mentally preparing himself for what would need to be done and who he wanted to help him. Myka, certainly. Possibly Reji, if he was there – no, wait, Reji had gone north again yesterday. Damn. He would probably need to carry out field surgery, and was already assessing the people running to the accident, noting who was there, and whom he could ask to clear the area. He grabbed the arm of a tall brawny man as he dashed past. “Wait! Peit, I need you!”

His cousin stopped. “What do you need, Kei?”

“Keep everyone back when we get there. Stick with me, and help me control things.”

“Of course,” Peit said, grim faced. They were already almost at the workshop and Peit bellowed. “Everybody *back*! Let the healer through!” Not content with using his powerful voice, he began to push people aside. Kei followed in his wake, hoping no one would be offended at the rough handling, but he needed to get to his patients if there was to be any hope of saving them.

There were more people inside, but these, Kei did not ask Peit to move. Three men lay on the floor inside the blasted workshop, being attended by Risa’s mother, sister and his cousin. The damaged kiln stood in the corner, metal and bricks strewn all over the floor. Rin’s workmen were dowsing the last of the fires that had sprung up. It was serious enough, but the explosion didn’t seem to be as extensive as the one Kei had seen as a child, although the carnage looked just as bad.

“Meis? What happened?” he asked of Risa’s mother as he knelt by her husband. He placed his fingers on the artery in Rin’s neck, and was relieved to be able to prove Risa had been mistaken, at least for now. He didn’t wait for an answer as he scanned Rin’s body, noting that someone had already tied bandages over wounds in the chest and shoulder. Bad enough – he would need Myka’s help, but for now, he would have to ask Rin’s wife to help her husband. “Here, put this dressing over the one on his chest – no, don’t

take it off!" He guided Meis' hand and got her to hold the thick bandage in position.

"Rin, Ban and Misek were working near the kiln when it blew – there must have been some kisu in that ore," Meis said quietly. Kei nodded – it was always a risk with pujum, that it would be contaminated with the rare but explosive impurity. "Kei.... will he survive?"

"I don't know, Meis, but I need to find out who is actually hurt worst."

"Kei!" He lifted his head to see his sister run though the door and over to his side, kneeling down. "Oh, no, Rin...."

He felt as she did, seeing their father's best friend in this condition, but there was no time for emotion. "Myka, you and Meis try to control the bleeding. I'm going to assess Ban and Misek."

His sister nodded, drawing bandages out of the box and handing them to Meis to add to the ones already applied. Kei hadn't dared turn Rin over, only lifting him a little to see if he was bleeding at the back, but it looked as if all three men had been facing the explosion, their front sides catching the impact of the shrapnel from the kiln. He moved to kneel next to Misek and suppressed his shock at the sight of the young man – his face was a bloody mess, and there was a gaping hole in his side against which his younger sister, Pijli, was pressing an inadequate dressing. He quickly assessed that Misek was still alive – just – he was in worse condition than his father, although he was still conscious, incredibly. "Myka! I'll need to operate on Misek. Set up while I check Ban."

Silently his sister obeyed, and Kei thanked the memory of his mother that he had someone so reliable to work with him.

The worst was the last. Ban was dead – probably killed outright. His son, Banji, was kneeling at his side, and lifted horrified eyes to Kei. "How?" he whispered. "It was so fast."

"I know," Kei said gently, looking past him to Peit and signalling his cousin to come over. "Banji, I need you to go with Peit. I have to help Rin and Misek. We will pay honour to Ban when I've finished."

"Kei...Pa is dead."

"I know, Banji-ki." Kei wanted to keep his clothes clean for the surgery, so he didn't hug his friend as he would have liked to, but he put all the sympathy he could into his voice. "Please help me, Banji. I need room and to be able to concentrate so I can save the other two. Can you do that?"

Banji's eyes were full of tears but he nodded slowly, and let Peit help him to his feet. Kei only waited a moment to confirm that Peit was leading Banji out

of the workshop, before he turned back to Misek who had passed out in the brief interval his attention was elsewhere. Probably just as well. Myka had laid his instruments out on a clean sheet and found him a bucket of clean water. He washed his hands with soap and then began to cut Misek's clothes away from his body. It immediately became obvious how serious his injuries were, and Pijli screamed quietly at the sight of torn gaping flesh and the edge of bone where the ribs were broken. Myka put her arm around the younger girl's shoulders. "Pij, go to Rin. Help your mother."

She almost shoved Pijli towards where her father lay, but Kei knew it was kinder than asking her to watch him delve into her brother's guts. His own stomach rebelled a little at the thought too, but he knew how to deal with that now. He could draw on his training – not only that of his masters in Darshek, but of his mother, so patient and clever as she had taught him – to centre himself and calm his nerves, focusing his energies. He forced himself to ignore everything around him except his hands on Misek's body, and the body itself. He closed his eyes. Blood was his great enemy in this situation, obscuring the real damage, blinding his path, and stealing the life away from the patient. His mind's energies narrowed down to the hole in Misek's side, and as they descended, he stopped the blood pouring out of the larger veins and arteries, clamping them down so Misek would stabilise enough for Kei to search for the shards of brick and metal he knew were most likely buried in his gut.

And there they were – several large, sharp pieces of iron which had both cut and smashed their way into Misek's insides, doing great harm in their passing. Each would need to be removed with care, and the bleeding behind them staunched. Kei opened his eyes, and found Myka waiting with needle and gum stitches. "I think he has a chance," Kei said in response to her unasked question. She nodded. He knew she wouldn't expect him to lie or make things out to be better than they were. "Is Rin stable?"

"We've slowed the bleeding. He has a large piece of metal in his shoulder. I could try and move it, but I think it would be better if you did it."

"Yes. Just keep him still, the bleeding under control, and I'll see to him. Meis?"

"Calm," she said briefly, glancing in the direction of their other patient. Both Kei and Myka had kept their voices deliberately low. "She knows what needs to be done."

"And so do I. I'm going to remove the shrapnel, stop the bleeding and stitch."

“His face?”

“Will have to wait – it won’t kill him. Oh – wait.” Stupid of him not to have checked, he thought angrily. Kei closed his eyes and looked inside Misek’s skull – as he suspected, the man had been knocked out briefly by the blast, and awoken again, but Kei found deeper damage, bleeding in the brain, which he suppressed with care. Foolish. He’d allowed himself to be distracted by the blood, just as his teacher and his mother had both warned him against, and Misek had nearly paid the price for that inattention. The head wound would have killed Misek almost as fast as that in his gut. Kei took precious seconds to check that Rin was not similarly and silently dying, but the big man was not so precarious. Kei could now give all his concern to the patient in front of him.

It was a slow business, because he did not want to cause more damage in the removal of the metal, but there was so much he needed to do – no point in stopping Misek bleeding to death if he died of a gut infection days later. Myka sponged away blood, and washed away the detritus from bowel and stomach with a distillation of nitre weed that would inhibit infection, as Kei eased fragments of metal from Misek’s intestines and liver, stitching, clamping and pushing organs and broken ribs back into position, all the while keeping an ear on his breathing, and an eye on his colour.

Kei wasn’t sure how long it took, except that it took a long time, and he swayed a little on his knees as he laid the last dressing over the neat stitches and the drain in Misek’s side. “Kei, do you need a rest?” Myka asked quietly, a supporting hand on his shoulder. Healing with his thoughts always took so much out of him.

“Later. Can you clean up his face? I need to see to Rin. We can make Misek handsome later.”

“I think one eye is blinded, Kei.”

“Yes, I know, but better one eye and alive, than dead with two. You know how to deal with that. Let me know if you can’t.”

She grimaced at his words, but set to as he moved back to Rin’s side. Meis was holding her husband’s hand, and stared at him as he knelt. Pijli had gone – Kei had been too occupied to know where or why. “Misek?” she whispered.

“I think he’ll live, Meis. Can you help me with Rin?”

“Yes.” Still little more than a whisper, but Meis was a calm, sensible woman and he could rely on her not to have hysterics at the sight of her husband’s injuries. Actually, when he removed the bandages, it wasn’t as bad as he feared, the shoulder injury being the most serious, although several other bad

cuts would need stitching, and he had lost a regrettable amount of blood. He washed his hands and set to work once more.

It took nearly as long to attend to Rin as it had to help his son, because although his wounds were somewhat less dangerous, there were more of them, and, just as Kei was finishing, Rin began to rouse, and struggle. Meis and Kei had to hold him down while Myka made him swallow a sedative potion. It took some time before Rin calmed – Kei wasn't going to work on a struggling patient, so he had to wait until it took effect before continuing. *A patient in pain fights himself and the healer*, he knew only too well. Finally Rin settled, his body relaxed, and the bleeding his struggling had reawoken began to ease again. Kei could finish his methodical repairs of the long lacerations.

At last he was done, and he washed his bloodied hands off as he assessed the damage to Misek's face. The young man would have some ugly scars as a result of today's mishap, Kei thought regretfully. Still, he was luckier than Ban, and it was possible to adjust to the loss of an eye. Satisfied both men were stable, he stood and stretched, feeling the ache in his back and his knees. His body told him it had to be nearly three hours that he had been crouched over his patients. Now he could pay attention to his surroundings, he realised Peit had barricaded the door against the curiosity of the clan, and inside the ruined workshop, it was curiously quiet. Now he had time to regret the death of Ban, a good, honest man who had been so very kind to him, and spare a thought for his friend, Banji and how the loss of his beloved father would be affecting him.

"Peit? We need to get Rin and Misek out of here, back to their house."

"Leave that to me," Peit said commandingly, throwing open the door he was barring. "Oy, you and you. We need two litters. And someone send for Kento, he can start on the workshop."

Past Peit's broad shoulders, Kei could see twenty or more heads, probably only a fraction of the people who would be waiting anxiously for news of their friends and relations – as everyone was to everyone else here, he thought wryly. "Peit, we need a shroud."

Meis spoke, her eyes wounded but her voice firm and low, as calm as it always was. "No, Kei. I will provide that. Have my brother taken to our house." Of course. Ban, a widower, still had his sister and his son to carry out his burial rites.

Peit nodded and bellowed an order for another litter to be brought. Kei laid a hand on Meis' shoulder in comfort, feeling her pain at her brother's death

and also her relief that at least her husband and son were alive. “Thank you, Kei,” she said. “Erte would have been so proud of you.”

“If I were a tenth of the healer she was, Meis, I would deserve that praise. I will come to your house later, but they mainly need rest and liquids when they wake. Myka can bring you a supply of dressings shortly and we’ll administer pijn as needed.”

Meis bowed in acknowledgement. Kei found a stool in the ruins and sat down heavily. Now he had completed the surgery, he felt weak with tiredness, his body claiming payment for the substantial debt of energy his gift had used. Myka, long used to this phenomenon, took charge of things, supervising the careful transfer of the three men onto the litters. Meis covered Ban’s face with her scarf and walked behind his body as it was carried out of the workshop.

Myka began to clean up the bloodied bandages, storing them carefully for rinsing, boiling and reuse. Kei could only watch. He needed to eat and to sleep now – he rarely used his powers so intensively nor for so long, and wished yet again he was truly Gifted, so that such task would not debilitate him so. His patients would appreciate the faster service too, he thought.

Myka came to him, the kit over her shoulder, one hand holding the bandage box, as she shoved her shoulder under his arm. “Come on, I know you’re about to faint.”

“No, I’m not,” he protested feebly, but his legs did seem awfully wobbly as he stood.

Everyone seemed to have gone once they went outside – probably headed to Rin’s house to see if they could help, Kei thought. He was glad – he couldn’t have handled a crowd. “Kei?”

Myka stopped, so Kei had to, and he looked down to the source of the voice. “Risa?”

“Pa’s not dead, Kei?”

Kei knelt – well, slumped to the ground, would be a more accurate description – and looked at the boy, who was hiding at the side of the workshop. He beckoned him closer, and took the opportunity to make sure he hadn’t missed an injury in his earlier quick check. “No, he’s not dead, Risa. Nor is Misek.”

“Uncle Ban?”

Kei shook his head. “I’m sorry, Risa. I couldn’t help him.”

Risa nodded as he looked at the ground. “I was scared, Kei. Pa looked dead and Ma was crying.”

“Yes. But he’s going to be all right. Your Ma will be sad though.”

“Uncle Ban died.”

“Yes.”

Myka cleared her throat. “Risa, your mother will be worried about you. Why don’t you go help her look after your father and brother?”

“Yes, I will. I just...thank you, Kei.”

Kei put his hand out and patted Risa’s messy hair. “I wish I could have helped your uncle. Now run along.”

Risa gave him a quick, surprising hug and then ran along the street towards his family’s home. Kei slumped some more, and groaned. “I can’t get up.”

“Come on, you lazy brat.”

Kei smacked her lightly on the backside. “Some respect for your brother and your senior, woman.”

“I’ll respect you more when you’re not kneeling in the dirt, covered with blood.” But she knelt down beside him. “It was amazing, watching you. It always is...but today.... Meis is right. Ma would have been proud.” She brushed her hand along his cheek.

He leaned into her hand briefly. “Everything I can do, I can do because of her and Pa. I just wish I had finished my studies.”

Her large, dark eyes were soft with sympathy. “Ban would still be dead, Kei. Not even Ma could bring the dead to life.”

“I know...just...poor Banji-ki. It’s not fair – his mother six months ago, now Ban. He was just starting to smile again.”

“Well, there was one thing Ma always said which I know was absolutely true, Kei. You can’t solve everyone’s problems for them. Banji-ki still has a family.”

“And I have you, Mychichi,” Kei said gently, using her childish nickname, laying his head on her shoulder.

For a moment, she allowed the embrace, and then she stood, hauling him up with the surprising strength which came close to matching his own for all he was a head and a half taller. “Now, home, to rest and to wash. You smell of blood and shit, brother mine.”

“You’re a hard woman, sister mine.” But he let her help him up, glad of her strength and her presence and wondering what in hells he would ever do without her.



“Now, if I didn’t know you so well, young Sei Arman, I would say you were worried about something,” Karus said, leaning back into his chair, his



weathered face wrinkling into a smile. "But since I know you never let your emotions distract you to such an extent, I shall blame a bolt from the god of mischief, Akan, for the fact you seem to be unable to play a simple game of kezi tonight."

Arman sighed and pushed the kezi board away. "Apologies, Karus-pei. I don't wish to contradict your belief in your knowledge of me, but I am worried, in fact."

Karus' eyes grew serious. "The new campaign? It's not like you to fear a battle, my boy."

"I don't fear it, Pei. I question...." He fell silent. They were alone in Karus' study, but his elderly tutor had a staff just as any well-to-do man had, and who knew who was listening at doors?

Karus waved a dismissive hand. "We're alone, Arman, and you know my people have no interest in politics. I would remove them in an instant if I thought they did. You question...the motivation, perhaps?"

"The wisdom, more like. Her Serenity's ambitions are laudable, they bring glory to the race of Prij. But...."

Karus was watching him intently. "But...?" he prodded gently.

"But," Arman said slowly, "fifteen hundred miles of mountains and desert seem a heavy dowry to accept with Darshek's port and trading routes. We've taken twenty years to truly control southern Darshian, Pei. It's brought us great benefits, and the Prij grow stronger for having this land as their own. Will we say the same in another twenty years, when we have been forced to hold the north with all our armies engaged as invaders, and we have been stretched thin for all that time?"

Karus nodded. "You have said this to her, no doubt?"

"Not as such, Pei. Her Serenity doesn't care for naysayers, not when it touches her pride."

"Ah, yes. But to Ritus, Jozo? You have said as much? Do they agree?"

"Ritus only wants what Kita wants. Jozo.... Jozo, I think, has some sympathy with me, but not enough to bring it up to her. Certainly the Lord Commander isn't going to. No one else seems bothered at all, and I am but the junior general, Karus-pei," he said dryly. "I must not exceed my position."

"Yes, true," Karus murmured. He began to clear the pieces from the kezi board, and put them into the leather pouch. "But you're not afraid for yourself? That the mission across the mountains will not succeed?"

"Of course not, Pei. Niko, lord of the heavens, sets our span of life and I can only trust to his wisdom."

“Very pious, very true, my boy. But I would be sad if that span of life were not to extend for a few years longer.”

*You’re probably the only one*, Arman thought bitterly, but then scrupulously amended that thought. Loke would mourn him, and so would Tijus. Their father would regret the chance to further his dynasty, but Arman knew perfectly well that his death would not grieve his father half as much as that of his brother’s. It was just, since Arman scarcely cared about his father’s well-being either. It had been a long time since they had eyed each other with anything approaching affection.

Of course, Mayl would bury him with appropriate rituals and much obvious weeping, he thought, his mouth twisting sourly as he thought of his wife. *And then pass many happy hours thinking of how to spend her inheritance, free of her tiresomely stolid husband*. No, Mayl would not care in the least if he were to die on the desert campaign. Her only concern would be extracting the widow’s allowance from the crown for his funeral.

“You’re full of solemn thoughts tonight, Arman – not auspicious for a general about to lead a major mission across unknown territories.”

Which was true enough, Arman thought. “Again, apologies, Pei, but perhaps I should be going. We’re leaving at dawn and I want to be rested.”

He helped his former tutor stand up, mindful of his arthritic hips. Karus laid a fatherly hand on his shoulder. “At least you’re taking Loke. He’ll make sure you eat and rest properly. My mind is much relieved by this.”

Arman couldn’t resist a smile at the thought of his irrepressible page. “He wouldn’t hear of me leaving him behind this time, and in truth, it will make my task more pleasant as well as easier.”

“Then it is as it should be,” Karus said, his eyes twinkling again. “So I will say goodnight, my boy, but not goodbye, and I expect a more satisfying game of kezi upon your return. In the meantime, I beg you, do not tell any one who taught you the game. I fear for my reputation.”

Arman hung his head in mock shame. “No, Karus-pei. I’ll do better, I promise.”

“Good. Now, farewell until our next meeting, Arman. A safe and profitable venture, if the gods so will it.”

“If they so will,” Arman responded with formal correctness. Karus patted his shoulder and then walked away, leaning heavily on his walking stick. Arman made his way through the darkened house to the front door, noting that Karus had been right – his servants were all asleep or busy elsewhere. It was very late, after all. Only a single sleepy footman greeted him at the door, unlocked

it and bade him goodnight, before securing the door once more behind him. It didn't do to be careless in Utuk.

The lateness of the hour did not mean he had to walk to his own house alone. A slight figure had slipped out of Karus' house with him and now took up position a respectful two paces behind him. "Did you beat him?"

"Hardly. Did you get some sleep, Loke?" Arman had wanted Loke to be well rested, but had also wanted to spend the evening with Karus. Loke had been under orders to find a quiet spot and have a nap for a few hours.

"I was going to, but then I started talking to Matez and I forgot."

He resisted the urge to cuff his disobedient servant for neglecting himself this way. "I hope you follow my orders better than this on the march, my lad, or I'll be forced to discipline you in front of my troops."

"Yes, Sei Arman." Arman didn't have to turn to know his page had a cheeky grin on his handsome face. "But that would be a good thing, would it not? Showing the stern, ruthless hand of the mighty Sei Arman, who no man would dare defy?"

"Loke?"

"Yes, Sei?"

"Shut up."

"Yes, Sei."

Arman shook his head. In truth he would cut his hand off before he laid a finger in true anger on Loke, and Loke would cut his head off rather than require such an action, but for some reason it sometimes amused his cheerful, helpful friend to become a parody of an obsequious servant in public. Arman suspected he thought it made Arman look more dignified. Arman thought it made him look like he should spank his page.

But Arman honestly didn't care. No noble in his acquaintance had a squire more devoted, or a more loyal attendant. And none that he knew of, could call their page a true friend, as he had no hesitation in doing with Loke.

"We leave at sunrise, Sei?"

"Yes, Loke. So I'll need to be up at least an hour before then."

Loke sighed heavily. "That means I have to get up even earlier than that."

"Yes, you will and then you'll be sorry you didn't get that rest."

"Probably. It's a hard life in the army, Sei Arman."

Arman glanced at him. "You could stay behind, lad, just as I wish you would."

"No, can't do that, Sei, I would never sleep wondering who was folding your shirts."

Now Arman did stop and lightly cuff the back of Loke's head. "I can and do fold my own damn shirts, you disagreeable child. I'm not some fancy boy that needs my robes gilded before I set foot in public."

Loke grinned and appeared to consider. "I think a little guilt might look rather nice on you," he said solemnly, and danced away from Arman's hand again. He grew serious. "My place is at my master's side, Sei Arman."

"I'm not...." *Your master*, Arman wanted to say, but there were people about, and Loke invested a lot of effort into preserving the myth that he was but one of Arman's servants, a favoured one, yes, but still knowing his place. That Arman never thought of him as anything but a friend, and never had done, was something known only to them, and one or two of Arman's close companions, such as Karus. Friendships with one's servant did not befit the son of a senator, even if his 'servant' was well-born too. "Loke, I have a foreboding about this. I wish you wouldn't come."

"I wish you wouldn't go, Sei," Loke said in a low voice. "For I too have forebodings."

"I have no choice but to do my duty, Loke." He nodded at the soldiers standing guard at his front door, acknowledging their salute.

"And that's my answer too, my master." Only Loke could make that term seem affectionate, as he rushed ahead of Arman to open the door to Arman's house, holding it open for him.

Arman's footman wasn't sleepy, but he was a good deal more surly than Karus', scowling at Loke for daring to bring his impertinent self back so late. He wiped the scowl off his face as Arman frowned at him. "My mistress said to tell you, Sei Arman, that she is waiting for you on the southern verandah."

"At this hour? Surely she's gone to bed."

"No, Sei Arman. She specifically bid me tell you that she would be waiting for you."

"What in six hells...?" He bit off his oath. "Very well. Loke, you really must get some sleep now – and be ready an hour before sunrise."

"Yes, Sei."

Arman watched Loke walk off towards their quarters, his step still cheerful despite a long night keeping vigil. The boy honestly had reserves of energy that made Arman feel twice his age, not a mere eight years his senior.

Arman turned to the footman. "I'll go to my lady. No one else is to be admitted tonight."

"No, my master." There was no affection in *his* use of the words.

Arman grimaced as he stripped off his cloak, handed it to the servant, and then walked along the halls to the southern wing. What did Mayl want? The woman could barely manage the courtesy of friendly conversation, and the gods knew Arman never sought an excuse to talk to her. He left the running of his house to her, and wanted nothing more to do with it. All he asked was that his private rooms were left strictly alone, and that his meals, those few he was present for, didn't contain poison. She could – and did – do what she liked after that.

She was reclining on a couch, facing into the garden, but at his step, she rose gracefully to greet him. If he didn't know what a mind her looks concealed, he would have found her an appealing sight this evening. She was carefully made up, dark accents around her admittedly flawless eyes, her pale blue gown a new one, he thought, and chosen to flatter her excellent figure. Once, he had thought her not unpleasant to look at but that was long before they were married. There was no chance of him feeling that way now. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, husband. Would you like some wine?" She was already pouring out a glass. He wondered if she would dare poison it, but decided to trust his fate to the gods, as he always did. He trusted them a lot more than he trusted her.

"Thank you. What did you want to see me about?"

"So abrupt, Arman. Can't a loving wife offer a cup of wine to her husband, on a warm, fragrant evening before he leaves for months on a campaign?"

He bit back the instinctive sarcasm. "I suppose." He took the glass from her hands, but didn't drink from it. "Mayl, I have to depart very ear...."

"I went to the Temple of Isik today, Arman." Her voice took on a silky purr. "The priests told me that my fertility is high tonight."

Arman stared at her, his heart sinking. "Your fertility?"

"Yes, husband," she said, stepping closer, and rubbing her hand up his arm. "I'm very fertile tonight."

Arman realised he was still holding the glass, and took a big gulp of the wine, hoping the acidity would wash away the taste of his revulsion. "So you want to...."

"Yes, Arman." She moved to his side. "After all, you will be away for many weeks, perhaps, and your father has waited a long time for a grandson...."

Arman tossed the glass out into the garden, taking a vicious delight in the noise of its breaking and her wince. He hoped it was one of her better goblets. "My *father* is not going to determine when I have sex, Mayl," he said coldly.

Her eyes narrowed, but then she smiled. “Ah, but your wife can,” she said sweetly, not so subtly reminding him that a wife – especially one publicly noted to be at high fertility – had a right to request sexual services from her husband, and refusal both damaged his honour and could be used against him as a cause for divorce.

He looked at her in disgust. “You want a child so badly?”

“It is my duty, Arman. Perhaps a child will fill my empty arms when my husband is away on his campaigns – or carousing with his friends.”

That stung his conscience. However much he loathed this woman, to deny her the chance of motherhood on that account was wrong and cruel. And he *did* spend most evenings away from the house when he was actually in Utuk, which was usually less than half of any year, and never for more than a month at a time. “All right.”

Now her smile was triumphant. “Come now, Arman, you needn’t look so stricken. After all, what do I lack that you might want in any other companion?”

*A pair of smiling green eyes and an honest heart*, he forbore from saying. “We’ll use your rooms?”

“Yes, husband. Everything is prepared. My maids were very pleased at the prospect of us fulfilling our marital duties.”

*So she’s prepared her witnesses in advance*, he thought sourly. “I wonder that you would want to talk about something so intimate with the servants,” he said, a cutting edge to his tone even as he followed after her.

“Oh, Arman, the birth of your heir is something which concerns everyone here. Of course they want to know about it.”

Arman really wondered what it would be like to be wanted as a partner or a son for himself, rather than for the output of his balls. He rather wished his fertility testing at puberty had been less emphatic. His father wouldn’t have bothered with his dynastic games if there had been no chance of a child from the union, and no respectable aristocratic woman would tie herself to a sterile man, however distinguished. *Should arrange to have my damn testicles permanently damaged in a riding accident one of these days*, he thought. *That would teach them*. But it was already too late to prevent the loss of four years of his life in this loveless union.

He hadn’t been in Mayl’s bedroom in over a year – that had only been because he’d been drunk off his feet after a state dinner and she had persuaded him to spend the night, rutting until he passed out. He didn’t remember a lot about that evening, for which he was thankful. She’d clearly

been hoping that would be sufficient, but she hadn't caught. He wondered if it would be any different tonight.

The room was certainly laid out for a seduction. Sweet incense filled the air, and the covers on the bed were laid down, flowers on both pillows. "Overdoing it a little, aren't you, Mayl?"

She laughed. "You never know, Arman. You've never really given me a chance to prove myself a worthy bed mate. Perhaps if you tried it sober, you might enjoy it."

He winced again at the accuracy of her barb. Their few couplings, even on their wedding night, had always been when he or both of them had been drinking. In fact, he realised he'd never had sex sober in his life, except with himself, and it wasn't Mayl to whose memory he jerked off. "Apologies. I have been less than fair to you, and derelict in my conjugal duties."

"Never mind," she said, taking him by the hand and leading him to the bed. "Let's begin anew, Arman. Let's learn how to treat each other with respect, so that your child will be born under auspicious beginnings."

The mention of a child effectively robbed him of what little enthusiasm he could muster, and he could only watch as she disrobed, with, he had to admit it, grace and sensuousness. Nude, she was perfect, a body any artist would love to sculpt or paint. Many men, of a certainty, would consider themselves blessed to have her in their bed. Unfortunately he wasn't one of them. He'd never been able to lust where he did not like, and he assuredly did not like. "Arman? May I undress you?"

He started to object automatically, but then stilled his hands. "If that is your pleasure, my wife."

She smiled pleasantly at the rare use of her title, and slid his outer coat off his shoulders, letting it slip to the floor. He suffered having his shirt similarly treated, and couldn't help blushing as her fingers tugged at the ties on his trousers. Her hand cupped his groin suggestively, and his cock responded to the pressure, mindless organ that it was. "My, perhaps you're particularly fertile tonight too."

He pushed her hand away, impatient with the whole thing and wishing she would stop harping on about pregnancy. He stripped efficiently, picked up his clothes and folded them neatly, almost grinning as he remembered his words to Loke earlier. Pouting, she climbed on the bed and waited for him to stop fiddling, which was only delaying matters, he knew.

He'd gone into battle with less trepidation than he felt approaching his marital bed. But then he didn't usually go into battles without any idea of what was expected of him. "Er...is there something I should do for you first?"

She tugged his arm and made him sit next to her. He let her kiss him. "You could try being a little more cooperative," she chided. "I am your lawful wife, Arman, not a Darshianese whore."

"Apologies," he said with empty politeness, and wondered if the Darshianese whores were sweeter to kiss. He'd never allowed himself that kind of release, always rather pitying anyone who had to turn to that profession, but he'd seen some of the half-naked women hanging around the docks, and sometimes caught himself wondering what that smooth brown skin would feel like to stroke, or if the long hair would feel like the silk that it seemed to resemble. He'd once walked down a back lane in a small town in the south, and seen a woman fellating a man in the shadows – not a whore with a customer, but lovers, by the way they acted. He'd been horrified at their lack of shame, but as he'd touched himself that night, the memory of the woman's hair as it tumbled down her back, the slick length of the man's cock as it slid between her lips, and the way his hands had trembled, fingers tangling in her hair as he had cried out at his climax, drove out the vague fantasies of imagined sex with the idealised blonde that was all he usually had to arouse himself with. Those memories were ones he tried not to encourage.

Mayl was as close to the Prijian ideal of beauty as it was possible to get, and she left him colder than if he'd tried to have sex with a corpse. But she was here, right now, and no fantasy. He had to participate, not just watch, this time. She guided his hand to her nipple and he rubbed it as she seemed to want. She seemed to enjoy it, moaning a little as she lay back on the bed and spread her legs. "Touch me," she said in a throaty voice.

"Where?"

"Here, silly," she said, pushing his fingers into her cleft.

He couldn't really recall doing this before, so he was able to lose himself somewhat in the novelty of it, the strange silkiness of her sex. She squirmed and sighed appreciatively, and he found that fascinating, wondering what he had done to elicit that response. Was this it...? Yes, it had to be, as her back arched, so he did it again.

He had no desire for this act with her, but he felt guilty at having chained his wife in a loveless, childless marriage which surely gave her no more satisfaction than it did him. So he resolved to make this enjoyable for her,



taking his time in learning what got the best response, and exploring lower into her cunt which seemed to excite her wildly.

Something about the way her skin felt, or perhaps the smell of her excitement, or the sounds she was making, was finally wringing a response in him – to his definite relief, he found he was getting hard. He fisted his own cock even while he continued to finger and pleasure her. How long should he do this? He had no idea what she expected in that way, but she was less restrained than him about demanding what she needed. After just a couple of minutes, she cried out, “Fuck me, Arman, please fuck me,” as she writhed on the bed like someone suffering from a fever.

Somewhat taken aback at her language, but relieved at not having to guess what he needed to do, he climbed on top of her. She slung a leg over his shoulder, and took his cock in her hand, guiding it to her cunt without the least shyness. He slipped in with surprising ease – for some reason, he expected more resistance – and then instinct took over where experience could not guide him, her cunt slicker and more insistent than his own hand could be, waking up vestigial memories how this should go, and what he needed to do. He let her movements set the pace, which seemed almost frantic, even desperate as she urged him to thrust harder, deeper, faster, overriding any distaste he felt at the situation, now only driven by the need to come and come hard inside her.

When he did, he was almost shocked, his body shaken by a climax stronger than any he could remember. He felt weak in all his limbs, and had to remember not to collapse on top of her, like an oaf. He moved her leg and flopped over onto his back at her side. He hoped that had been adequate, at least for a first sober effort. It took a little while to recover his breath. At last, he remembered his manners and turned to her. “Was that...all right?” He couldn’t remember if she had received satisfaction – or even how he would tell. He was aware it hadn’t been a very skilled performance.

She raised herself up on one elbow and gazed down at him. “That was exactly what I wanted.”

Something in her voice seemed off. He pushed himself back and looked at her, her smug expression, the way her skin seemed to glow and the subtle roundness of her stomach, and he suddenly realised what he was looking at. His eyes narrowed in anger. “Did the priests say for how *long* you had been ‘highly fertile’? And how were you planning to pass the child off if I hadn’t fallen for this charade tonight?”

She made no attempt to deny it. "There's nothing you can do about it, Arman. The child will bear your name and be seen as the fruit of our union."

"I could renounce you as an adulteress."

"But you would still have to raise the child, Sei Arman," she said coldly, rising from the bed to find a robe to cover her nakedness. "Somehow, I doubt you really want to expose yourself as a cuckold."

He got up too, grabbing his pile of clothes and clutching his boots in one hand. "Then I wish you joy of your baby, Sei Mayl. But this is the last time I fall for this, statement of fertility or not. I won't keep more than one bastard of yours here, and if you make a move to divorce me for dereliction, I'll send you away and expose the child to the gods' mercy. My father can have his grandson, you can have your pet. But come near me again, and I'll make you pay for it, have no fear of that."

She sneered. "Perhaps it's for the best. After all, a man who would screw his serving boy isn't much of a prize as a father or a husband, is he?"

He took a step towards her, and despite his ludicrous state, she cringed slightly, as if she feared being hit. *As well you might, you scheming slut.* "What are you talking about?"

"Loke. Everyone knows you're fucking him, Arman. Even my maids pity me having to endure the shame of a husband who would stoop to a servant for his pleasure, rather than do his duty to his marriage and his line."

He raised his fist, and only by a supreme act of will, did he restrain himself from striking her. "You go too far, woman, and you don't know the least thing about it. But if I ever 'stooped' to fucking Loke, rest assured, I could never feel as filthy as I do right now. His soul is pure, as is his body. You, on the other hand, are nothing but a whore in heart and mind – and your cunt is just higher priced than the 'welcome' girls in Urshek-si."

She hissed and for a moment, he thought she would jump at him, which would let him release some of the savage physical need to avenge her treachery. But she restrained herself. "Get out."

"With pleasure. But first – who is he?"

"No one you will ever discover, Arman. You'll never find out from the servants – they're totally loyal to me."

He badly needed to drive that smug smirk from her face. He leaned forward, and she retreated a little. "Ah, yes, but I have only to call on Her Serenity's spymaster to make enquiries for me. It is, after all, of some security significance if the wife of one of the Serenity's generals is screwing around

with a faceless stranger. Of course, that might make things awkward for you at court....”

“You wouldn’t! Everyone would know!”

“Yes. They would, wouldn’t they?” he said calmly, not giving a damn about his personal reputation, and at this point in time, not caring much about his family’s either. “So you would do best to keep this man hidden very well indeed, Mayl, dear. Because if this ever comes to light, be assured I will destroy him and I will destroy you. You will lose far more than I will.” He turned his back on her, not bothering to dress – if he shocked the servants, then it was all their disloyalty deserved. “Sleep well, Mayl. I hope you think it was all worth the price.”

He left to the sound of her spitting fury, and forced himself to saunter carelessly, nude, through his home, carrying his clothes and his shoes like an escapee from a brothel. Fortunately, he encountered no one and he closed the door of his bedroom behind him with relief.

“By all the gods, Arman! What happened to you?”

Loke – who should have been asleep. Arman wondered if his friend had a sixth sense like the Darshianese myths claimed some of their people had, at least when it came to Arman. Impervious to his surprise, Loke relieved him of his clothes, tsking over his state, and offering him his robe. Arman refused it with a shake of his head. “No, I need a bath. I need to wash the stink off me.”

“It’s midnight, Arman. There won’t be any hot water.”

“Then cold will do, Loke.”

Loke frowned at him. “Give me a few minutes. Honestly, Arman, and you want me to let you go on a campaign on your own, when you can’t even look after yourself in your own home.”

*Home*, he thought sourly. *Hardly*. He sat in a chair, impatient to get the taste and feel of his bitch of a wife off him, and reluctantly admiring how well he’d been played. Yes, he could expose her and even rid himself of the cuckoo child, but she was right about it causing him a good deal of embarrassment and trouble. In the end, he didn’t care. He wasn’t going to get a child on her, not now, not ever, so what did it matter if the blood in the brat was his? Only his father cared about such things, and only so long as his elder brother failed to produce a son of his own. The second he did, Arman’s son would be of no interest. Arman had a sufficient sense of fairness that he would not make the child suffer for the failings of either parent, legal or otherwise. There might be some sense of satisfaction in raising it to be a

decent honourable person against its heritage, but he doubted Mayl would let him interfere with its training.

He was suddenly weary, soul sick and tired in body. "It's about time," he growled at Loke when his page reappeared, hauling a bucket of steaming water.

"Now hold your tongue, Arman, and be grateful I'm not making you freeze your balls off," Loke chided as he poured the hot water into the hip bath, and went to fetch the ewer to top it off.

"You say that as if I could possibly have a use for them."

Loke stilled, obviously struck by the bitterness of his tone. "What happened?" He indicated Arman should get into the bath – it was shallow, but he had bathed in far less water before.

"Mayl's pregnant. She was trying to secure my attention to the child after the fact."

Loke was no fool. "She's trying to pass it off as yours? So tonight...."

"First and last time I'll ever go to her bed as a willing and sober participant. I feel dirty."

Loke knelt, and took a dipper to pour water over him. "I can imagine," he said in a low voice. "I'm sorry, Arman."

Arman shrugged. "I suppose it was inevitable. I don't exactly pay court to her, and she's an attractive woman."

"If you like reptiles, yes, I suppose she is. Who's her lover?"

"No idea. I only care if it threatens more than my pride. You never heard a hint about this?"

Loke poked him in the chest with the dipper. "You think I would have heard something like this and not told you?" he said indignantly. "Of course not. I don't gossip with her people – they don't like me and I don't care for them. You know that," he added in soft reproach.

Arman laid his hand on Loke's blonde head and tousled his hair. "Sorry, Loke, yes, I do know that. Gods." He scrubbed at his skin, and Loke passed him a soapy cloth so he could wipe the stain from his person. The water wasn't all that warm, and much as he would have relished a long soak, he had to be up in just a few hours, a long journey by sea ahead of him.

Loke handed him a towel so he could dry off, and then his sleeping robe. "You won't let this depress you, will you, Arman?" he asked, his expression earnest. "I mean, it's done with, unless you intend to divorce her and I can't imagine that you will."

The lad knew him too well, Arman thought ruefully. “No, I won’t, and no, it won’t depress me. It’s...just one of those things. I’ll do my job, she’ll raise the bastard, life goes on. So long as she doesn’t interfere with me, I don’t care what she does.”

Loke gave him a warm smile. “That’s good. Now, shall I brush your hair?”

“I can brush...oh, all right,” Arman said with an indulgent sigh. Loke really seemed to enjoy being a body servant, however much Arman insisted he could do for himself, and he couldn’t deny that the young man’s hands on him soothed his spirit in a way that a thousand Mayls could never hope to do. He sat back on the bed and let Loke’s skilled fingers tease out the tangles of his unruly hair, and relaxed as he began to brush the long locks into order.

He was falling asleep, and before he knew it, Loke was easing him down to the bed, and stealing away. Arman caught the sleeve of his robe to stop him. “No, sleep with me tonight, Loke. I could do with not being alone.”

“If you like,” Loke agreed easily, delaying only to blow out the lamp before climbing back onto the bed and under the covers next to Arman. Arman put his arm around him and hugged him close, enjoying the clean warmth, the honest smell of his friend. Loke got comfortable, used to Arman’s occasional need for company at night, and his own from time to time. “Still wish I didn’t have to get up so early,” he grumbled.

“Apologies, Loke,” Arman said with less than total sincerity. “You can rest on the boat.”

“I’ll be too busy puking,” Loke said mournfully.

“Aye, I know, but then you’ll sleep when we get to Urshek. Now be quiet, my friend. And thank you.”

“No trouble, Arman,” Loke said with a yawn. It only seemed seconds before his breathing evened out – Loke had always slept like a baby, easily and completely and anywhere that he could. He was the least troubled and troublesome person Arman had ever encountered. It was one of the many reasons that Arman loved him utterly. If Arman’s marriage were not such a joke, he supposed that he would be lying with his wife in his arms, and his body would respond in a different way, but he didn’t need that as much as he needed the comfort of Loke’s pure trust.

He thought about Mayl’s vicious, spiteful words over the gossip concerning the two of them. *If only you knew the truth of it, Sei Mayl, you would cringe at how you fail in comparison, in virtue and in beauty.* But she could not ever damage his friendship with Loke. They had something few husbands and wives ever had – and if he had to endure a bastard masquerading as his own

child, and a wife with a stone for a heart, just to keep Loke at his side, then he would. It was a small enough price to pay for perfect companionship.

## CHAPTER 2

---

*The nitre herb is a deadly poison to humans and to other animals, but drives away infection from any wound. It is reasonable to postulate that such infections are caused by animals too small for us to see, and that they, as we, are poisoned by the nitre. If this is so, if a poison which affects these small animals can be found, which does not poison a larger creature, it might be possible to cure internal disease.*

Kei frowned, reading his late father's words yet again. He'd never been convinced by the reasoning. His teachers in Darshek held to the view that disease and infection was itself caused by different poisons, and the cure lay in finding antidotes to those. The problem with the poison theory was in determining how such poisons got into the body, and affected different people differently, or not at all. The problem with his father's theory was that invisible animals were just a crazy idea.

It hadn't stopped his father devoting much of his experiments to finding his 'benign poison' as he called it, and his diaries were full of notes on his having sampled this or that tincture, sometimes with unfortunate results. Not that it was his experiments which had killed him in the end, Kei thought regretfully. This room, with the jars of dried herbs and bags of obscure minerals, his books and his diaries, was deeply redolent of his father and his ever curious, ever questioning mind. Kei missed his Pa all the time, but never more than when he was in this room. No wonder it was here, rather than in their marital bed, that his mother had chosen to die. She must have felt close to him here, just as their son did.

If he could find a treatment for bej, then he would at least redress a little of that cruel loss, but he seemed to be no closer to an answer than his father had been, for all that he had puzzled over it on and off for years. It was a capricious and deadly disease. A baby might survive it, a grown man in the fullness of his powers, such as his father, might be dead in two days. It struck without warning, seemed not to be infectious the way common diseases such as colds were, and no herb or drug known in Darshian seemed to affect it. All a healer could do was try to alleviate the excruciating pain and fevers, and hope the patient's body would not fail. His mother had known that, but even so, her grief and guilt had overcome her duty to her children and her clan.

Kei shook his head. Dwelling on this did no one any good. He bent to his father's notes again, extracting his own from the neatly written pages. As he glowered at some symbol his father had used which he didn't recognise, a ball of flame appeared under his nose. He reared back in shock, scrubbing at his face, even though he hadn't been burned in the least. "Did I frighten you?" a lazy voice drawled from the doorway.

"You know you did, Reji," Kei said crossly, but couldn't hold back a broad smile as he turned and saw his friend, all dusty and travel stained, his hand still outstretched from having evoked his little flame sprite. "You're back sooner than expected."

"Yes, I know. And I'm badly in need a drink."

Kei got off his stool and walked over to his handsome visitor, who immediately enveloped him in a crushing hug and kissed him, thrusting his tongue without any invitation into Kei's mouth. Kei grinned and met the challenge, rubbing himself against Reji's hard, lean body. "Hmmm, just a drink?" he said, arching an eyebrow.

Reji kissed him again. "Maybe...for now, healer. But later, I might need your help."

"Oh? For a medical condition?"

"Yes. I have this really hard...."

"Hard...?" Kei murmured, teasing Reji's nipple through his shirt.

Reji's voice cracked. "...Leg...."

"Oh. Your...leg. And what might your...leg...need?"

Reji cleared his throat, but it seemed his voice was still a little hoarse. "A rub...might need a rub...later."

The way Reji was grinding against him, 'later' might not be all that long. His lack of control amused Kei no end. It had been two months since they'd seen each other, and while he had no doubt Reji had taken his pleasure in the fleshpots of Darshek, his friend's lustiness would be needing the edge taken off it after over three weeks on the road. He nudged Reji's thighs apart with his knee, and slid his leg up inside Reji's, pressing against his groin. "I don't just rub legs," he said huskily.

"Gods, Kei, stop or I'll embarrass myself."

"Not just him," Kei heard someone say in a dry tone. "Reji, you have no sense of propriety in the least." But still, Myka came over to them, Kei being abruptly abandoned so his little sister could also be kissed enthusiastically, and hardly more appropriately. "You stink, Rei-ki."

“Ha, and so would you, Mychichi, if you had been on an urs beast’s back these three and a half weeks past. My balls feel like they’re made of wood, they’ve been banged about in the saddle for so long.”

She smacked him for the indelicacy, gave him another kiss, and then stood back to look at them. “A meal and a drink, then? Kei, I bet you missed lunch.”

“I was just....”

“Buried in Pa’s notes again, yes, I know.” She sighed. “Come and eat, you two.”

The three of them prepared an early supper, Reji confessing that he’d not eaten since breakfast and that he felt quite hollow. Myka plied him with bread and cheese and plenty of beer, which made him tipsy and even more mellow. Kei idly wondered if Reji would be up tonight for more than a bit of companionable fumbling and cuddling, which was very nice in itself, although he had to admit his body could do with the release of more strenuous activity. It had been a busy couple of months, what with the kiln explosion, and then there had been an outbreak of lung fever, not to mention two births and a host of injuries and minor illnesses among the children of the clan. “How is Misek?” he asked Myka.

“Very low, Kei. I’m still worried about him.”

Reji glanced at Kei. “Ah, yes, Fedor told me about the accident. These are the injuries he got when Ban was killed? Does he feel guilty about that, perhaps?”

Kei shook his head. “Not really. He’s been in a lot of pain, especially from his eye, but I’ve not let him have as much pijn as he could have. I don’t want him addicted. I think it’s just everything, the severity of his injuries, Ban dying.... Doesn’t help that he hasn’t been able to help rebuild things. At least Banji’s had that to occupy himself.”

Reji nodded. “I can see that would frustrate him. Perhaps I’ll visit him tomorrow.”

Myka set a bowl of gike plums in front of them. “I think that would be good, Reji. So, what news from Darshek? Did you bring our medicines? And the journals?”

He laughed and held up his hands. “All safe, Mychichi.” He got to his feet a little unsteadily, and went to the front door of the house where several large packs were tidily stacked. Kei helped him drag them over to the table where Myka, eager to get her letters and the new ointments, rapidly unpacked them. “You know, I spent three hours unloading and settling accounts, and then all I could think of was who made the best beer in Ai-Albon. If your esteemed



father hadn't kept me so long wanting to know the latest gossip, I'd have been here an hour earlier."

Kei still had to remind himself not to correct people who referred to his uncle as his 'father'. Strictly speaking, it was true now, but he couldn't even bring himself to call Fedor 'Pa' to his face. Nothing would ever stop the unpleasant jolt when people referred to his father, and they didn't mean the man Kei had loved and honoured and still grieved for.

"Never mind Fedor, Reji," Myka said impatiently. "What's happening in Darshek?"

Reji sprawled in his seat, his long legs stretched out under Kei's chair. "Well, the big news is that Lady Nera is finally pregnant."

Myka's eyes grew big. "Really? Oh that's wonderful. It's been so long, I thought perhaps she was an infertile after all."

"Or her husband was," Kei pointed out. Being an infertile himself, he found it hard to rejoice overmuch at other people's fortune in that respect, but he recognised it was good news.

"I also heard there are whispers of an army build up in Urshek again," Reji said, his expression solemn. "It's got people worried."

Myka looked at Kei, and reached for his hand. "Perhaps the southern clans are restless again. They won't come across the mountains. They would have done it by now, if they could."

"Perhaps not, Mychichi. It's not like we can stop them if they do get across. The cannons of Darshek all point towards the sea," Reji pointed out somewhat sourly.

Kei didn't want to think about the Prij, because thinking would just make him anxious. "If they did not, they would still be no use, and there is no use in worrying if there is nothing we can do," he said, reaching across and topping up Reji's cup. He went to pick up one of the satchels which he knew held letters and the latest writings from the masters in Darshek, but snatched his hand back as it was slapped. "Ow, Myka! What was that for?"

"You're had your head buried in books long enough, Keichichi," his sister scolded, wagging a finger at him. "Why don't you walk Reji home? I could do with some peace and quiet."

Kei nearly rolled his eyes at Myka's unsubtle matchmaking. As if she ever had to encourage Kei to spend time with Reji, especially after he got back from a trading trip. "Maybe Reji's comfortable where he is, Myka. He hasn't finished his beer, after all."

She got up, picked up their cups, filled them to nearly overflowing and walked to the front door, holding the cups out like bait. "Come take your beer, and then you and Reji can have a nice evening catching up with each other while I read my letters, and wash my hair, and have some time to *myself*."

Reji lifted an eyebrow. "Do you get the sense of being unwanted, lover?"

"A mere suspicion, my friend. A gentle hint, nothing more. Perhaps we should ignore it. It might go away."

"Kei! Do you want to be wearing this ale?"

"Now, now, Mychichi, that would be a terrible waste of your finest brewing," Kei said, grinning as he hauled Reji to his feet. Reji immediately put his arm around his waist. "What do you say, Reji? It's pretty irresponsible of a brother and a healer to leave his sister all on her own."

"I think, Kei, you're pushing to smell like a brewing vat." Reji tugged him to the door, picked up his saddle bags over one arm, and collected his cup with the other, somehow managing to contrive a deep, courtly bow without spilling a drop. "Thank you, lady Myka, for your good drink and kind company."

There was enough sincerity in his words to wring a blush from Myka, and she smiled as he kissed her cheek. "And I *don't* expect you back tonight, Kei."

"No, my lady Myka," he said with an even deeper bow, and then a brotherly kiss on her cheek, before he collected his own drink, and took a swallow from it to stop it spilling. "Myka, should I stop in and see Misek?"

She hesitated. "Perhaps tomorrow, Kei. Banji was with him when I left."

"Banji was helping or making it worse?"

"Um, better, I think. I think Misek was being brave for him, and I think that was good."

"Well, you know him best, Myka. If you need me, you know where to find me." He pulled her close briefly. "And if you need me to come back tonight, I will," he whispered.

"Kei, you'll just be at the end of the street and I'm eighteen years old!"

He grinned. No point in pushing it, or, as Reji said, he would shortly smell of beer. "Come on, Reji. The gods only know what perverted things she's planning to do in our absence, but I suppose if I'm not here to be scandalised...."

"Kei, I'll take a broom to you!"

She actually laid hands on the besom before Reji hastily shoved the door open and dragged a laughing Kei outside. "She's got a temper on her, I don't know who she got that from. Your parents were so mild-mannered."

“Oh, Ma had a temper in her too when she got really worked up. She just picked her battles.”

Reji lit a small fire sprite to guide their way. People were mostly inside, setting down to their own suppers, the smell of cooking fires and food heavy in the evening air, the low calls of the urs beasts settling down in their pens, and the harsh cries of the krak-krak birds over the trees as they flew down to roost, the only sounds in the village. “Have Rin’s family rebuilt?” Reji asked quietly. His concern was natural. Rin was well-liked, and his family brought a steady income into the village, although the ore was little use directly to the village itself.

“They’ve started. It was one of the lesser kilns, one they were thinking of knocking apart and rebuilding anyway. Meis thought originally it was kisu contamination, but now Rin believes the kiln was ready to give out. If any one blames himself for Ban’s death, it’s Rin.”

“It’s just ill luck. This talk of blame gets no one anywhere,” Reji said with some impatience.

“People can’t help it, Reji,” Kei said, stepping through Reji’s front door into his small house. It seemed scarcely big enough to hold such a tall and brawny man, but Reji always said it suited him fine. Kei took their cups of beer and set them on the small table. “Someone they love dies or get hurt, of course they feel guilty.”

Reji took Kei into his strong arms, and Kei nestled against him. He’d missed the feel of Reji against him, the way his long, dark hair felt under his fingers, how they fit together, two tall men almost of the same height, hip to hip and firm thigh to thigh. “Yes, and then two people I care very much about are left without their parents, for no good reason that I’ve ever been able to see.”

Kei pushed him away a little. “Ma was sick, Reji. Sick in mind and heart and she had no healer but me to help. I should have been here, don’t blame her. I don’t want to listen to this again.”

Reji sighed. “I’m sorry, Kei, I shouldn’t have said that.” He pulled Kei close and pressed a kiss on his forehead. “Sorry, little brother.”

“Huh, not so much with the little, you big oaf. You know, Myka was right about one thing.”

“Oh yes?” Reji asked, slipping his hands up inside Kei’s shirt, making him shiver.

“You do stink,” he said, grinning, ducking away from Reji’s grasping hands. “We could wash each other’s backs.”

"Maybe I want to bathe alone, since I'm so offensive," Rei said, his quirked mouth making a liar of his tone.

Kei insinuated himself close again and looked soulfully into his eyes. "Would you deny me this little pleasure, Rei-ki? I mean, it's been two months since I was able to run my hands here...", he slid his hand up under Reji's shirt and along the fine skin over his ribs, "or touch you this way," his other hand cupped Reji's groin carefully, applied just a little pressure, "or lick your...."

"Enough!" Reji growled as he crushed his mouth on Kei's and kissed him hungrily. "Gods, Kei, were you always this infuriatingly desirable, or have you been practicing?"

"Just...ah...missing you...oh, yes, do that again...."

And then Kei gave up teasing, because he needed to concentrate on the wonderful things Reji was doing with his mouth and his hands, and talking was by no means what he wanted to be doing for the next few hours with his lover.



"The winds are with us, Arman. A good omen," Jozo said, coming to the rail of the ship.

"That it is. I hope the weather holds until we cross the mountains."

"I hope this blasted secret route is as good as the mapmakers claim," Jozo replied, his lips pursed. "I don't fancy being on top of an urs beast on a mountain pass if there's a rock slide."

"Trust in the gods, Jozo," Arman said calmly, slightly amused by Jozo's anxiety. Jozo far preferred to travel by boat or on foot to riding an urs beast, disliking the hairy animals intensely – but there was no doubt that they were supremely well adapted for the Darshian terrain. The smaller, lighter jesigs were fine on Kuplik and the rest of Kuprij, but would make heavy going of the sand and long mountain passes. Arman rode either as and when needed, and rather enjoyed the higher seat and rocking motion of the urs beasts. They made an imposing impression en masse, for certain, which was often useful in suppressing rebellion.

"I'd rather trust in decent maps, Arman." Arman frowned at his impiety, even though he too, like any decent military man, wanted good intelligence and maps to guide him as much the will of the gods. "I hope those idiots in Urshek have got the supplies right this time. We can't go scampering back there from mid-Darshian because they haven't calculated the weight of lem

flour properly. Morale is going to be hard enough on this campaign as it is, without the men going hungry.”

“Jozo, we’ve spent months on this. Ritus will have impressed on the granary merchants the importance of the task to Her Serenity.”

Jozo barked out a laugh. “And if that doesn’t put the fear of the gods into them, nothing will.”

“General Jozo? Sei General Arman?”

Arman turned and saw his staff sergeant waiting politely. “What is it, Staff?”

“The priest is ready for the sacrifice, and begs your attendance on the quarter deck.”

Arman nodded, and the staff sergeant left. Jozo groaned. “Ugh, the smell of burning blood always makes me want to vomit. Maybe I’ll go join Loke and his bucket.”

Arman grinned and clasped his fellow general’s shoulder firmly. “I thought you were made of sterner stuff, Jozo. That’s not much of an example to set the men.”

“Half of them are puking too. Why aren’t generals allowed to be sea sick?”

“Because it would harm the dignity of the crown, that’s why. Come on.”

Their troops and what seemed to be most of the ship’s crew were assembled on the deck, and the ship’s captain was waiting with the elderly priest for Jozo and Arman to join them. They took their place behind the priest on the poop deck, behind his portable altar, and waited for him to begin.

The priest lifted his hands to the sky, and spoke in a high quavering voice. “Lord Niko, ruler of the heavens, we ask your blessing on this mighty venture, so that your people may spread the glory of your name, and crush the ignorant.” Arman winced as the man’s voice cracked unpleasantly on the last words, and hoped the gods would not take offence.

Rather more certain in his actions than in his voice, the priest took a black feathered fowl from the basket next to him, and, holding it over the brazier, slit its throat neatly, the blood hitting the coals with a sizzle and a sickening stench. The dying bird struggled briefly, then was still. The priest dipped his finger into a bowl of sacred oil sitting on the altar and smeared it along the cut in the bird’s neck, before nodding to the three military leaders, who came closer and knelt in front of him, heads bowed. “Bear the mark of this offering to Lord Niko, and let your deeds be also an offering to him, so that he will bless and guide them,” he said to each in turn, using his thumb to make a bloody smudge on their foreheads.

Arman murmured, “May he bless them,” as he received the mark.

They remained kneeling as the priest cast the corpse of the fowl across the railing, into the water. "Lord Quek, ruler of the seas, also bless this endeavour for the glory of your brother Niko, and all the gods. Preserve this ship from harm."

The sailors among the assembled men quietly chanted the name of the god Quek, needing a special contract with him since their very lives routinely depended on his mercy, as the priest muttered a few more prayers and then doused the brazier with the last of the oil, making it flare up and spatter, clouds of acrid smoke briefly billowing up, before he quenched the fire with a dipper of water.

That was their signal to stand. Arman was glad of the god's mark on his face, but it itched rather unpleasantly. *Reminding me of the bargain*, he thought. A continent's subjugation for the glory of the gods.

The priest bowed to them and withdrew. Arman also bowed to the captain. "A propitious beginning, Ard Peku." It was always good to show proper respect to the man who held your life in his hands, at least while they were on the water. Besides, the captain was the best and most senior in Her Serenity's navy. Nothing had been left to chance on this campaign.

"That it is, Sei Arman," Peku rumbled. "A fair wind, a clear sky. Lord Quek smiles on this work, and on your journey."

"I can only hope he does," Arman agreed. "Right, Jozo, I'm going below to get some rest. I'll join you for lunch if you haven't tossed your guts by then."

Jozo was looking a little green around the gills, it was true, and he gave Arman a sour look. "Do you have any weaknesses at all, Arman? You don't get hangovers, you're never sick, and you love the sea. It's unnatural."

Arman laughed and clapped his shoulder. "It can't be unnatural if the gods have willed it thus. Go, drink some wine, it will clear the stink from your mouth."

Jozo grumbled, but headed in the direction of his cabin, very likely to follow the advice. *Poor Jozo*, Arman thought. He was getting more set in his ways every year. Arman was very fond of the older man, who had been his mentor and who had pushed for his promotion to the rank of general at a ridiculously young age. Arman's family background had helped him win the sovereign's favour and thus promotion, but that hadn't been all there was to it. He worked hard not to dispel Jozo's faith in him, or to show any weakness that might make an observer question his fitness for the role. *Seems I do too good a job*, he thought wryly, *if Jozo thinks I have no flaws*. He had plenty, he well knew. He just didn't believe in giving ammunition to his enemies.

He knew well enough what to expect by now when he reached his cabin, so he wasn't revolted by the smell of sickness. Loke, poor lad, had missed breakfast, but still hadn't held onto the little that was in his stomach. The odour of vomit hung in the air. Arman covered the bucket with a drying cloth, which cut down the smell, then poured out a small glass of wine and moistened another cloth with clean water. He sat down on the bed next to his suffering page, stroking back his sweaty blond fringe off his pale face. Loke's eyes told him eloquently of the misery he was suffering, and he shivered as Arman wiped his mouth and face clean. And this was on a good trip, he thought fondly. Loke on a ship in foul weather was possibly the most pathetic creature that could ever be seen, but there was nothing any physician could do about it. Arman had discovered that letting him ride it out and rest was the best thing for him, and he usually recovered quickly enough after the journey, that was for sure.

"Here, Loke, rinse your mouth with some wine." Loke gave him a queasy look but let Arman help him up long enough so he could rinse and spit into the bucket. Arman urged him to take another swallow, because he was convinced it would help settle him a little, and then got Loke to put his head on his lap, so he could stroke his hair and keep the cloth on his face. "My sad little landlubber," he said gently.

"Sorry, Arman," Loke whispered, thick misery in his voice.

"Don't be a fool, Loke. Even General Jojo gets sick on a boat. Just rest and we'll have you on dry land soon enough."

Loke just stared back with a bleary confused expression, clearly not entirely himself at that moment. Arman made him close his eyes and began a careful massage at the base of his neck which he hoped, at least on past experience, might let Loke sleep out the worst of his seasickness. It seemed to work, the tense unhappiness in Loke's face easing and his body going limp. Arman got comfortable, leaning against the back of the bunk. He had nothing else to be doing right now, nowhere else to be for the next few hours, and he'd had little sleep. The stuffy warmth of the cabin soon had him dozing too, but his dreams were troubled, and his rest less than restful. He hoped this did not bode badly for the rest of his journey.



Kei reached out to wave his fingers close to the little fireball floating above his bare chest, using his gift to see if he could make it change direction. He could, but only a little – he had more luck making it change shape slightly,

forming a long bright peak above the main orange ball. "I wish I could do that," he said drowsily.

"Make fire? Damn useless power, Kei. I can light my path, or start the stove, or a pipe. That's about it. Not like you, healing people."

Kei got his fingers a little too close to the flame, but Reji snuffed it out before he could get burned. Immediately, another sprite formed, this time over his belly, and was joined by another which orbited it gracefully, merging and splitting from it in a seemingly unrepeating pattern. Kei didn't mind being the stage for the dance of fire. The warmth from it was curiously pleasant, and he trusted Reji not to set fire to anything important. "It's so beautiful, Rei-ki," he murmured. "No one can see what I do inside a body. This...this makes people happy."

Reji floated the sprite up Kei's body until, with a slight whoof of air, it popped out of sight right in front of his nose, which made Kei laugh. "So I see," Reji said. Kei felt too lazy to shift and look up at Reji's face to check, but he knew he was smiling. "But is it worth the price?"

Now Kei did twist, and found Reji looking back at him with an odd expression. "Huh?"

"I saw you when I mentioned the Lady's pregnancy, little brother. It still bothers you, being an infertile, doesn't it?"

"And it doesn't bother you?"

Kei felt Reji's shrug as much as saw it. "I've got used to it. Not having ties has its advantages too, you know."

Kei kissed his lover's broad chest, and licked off a little of the salty sweat raised by their lovemaking. "Why do you come back, Reji? I mean, to Ai-Albon. There's so much more for one like us in Darshek." He reflected that the matter was even more strange when one considered Ai-Albon was only Reji's adopted home. He'd moved from his birth village even before he'd reached his majority, offering to apprentice with the traders in Fedor's clan with whom his own family were loosely related by marriage. He'd never gone back home after that, and had in time, become the main trader for the village, his seniors having decided to settle down and farm quietly after thirty years of travelling.

Reji tangled his hand in Kei's hair and tugged him up for a kiss, and then to settle him more comfortably in the crook of his neck. "More what, Kei? More of this? Any more of 'this', and my balls would fall off from overuse."

Kei pinched him and made him yelp. "Don't be a fool, Reji. But that's along the lines of what I mean. There are more of us, more chances for... love, more companionship.... here, there's only you and me."



“Is that not enough, Keichichi? You and Myka, my dearest friends, a task that I’m good at, the chance to let my hair down every few weeks in Darshek – what more do I need? The crying shame is that *you* are not there, my friend. You belong at the academy.”

Kei sighed. “I’m needed here. I’m happy here, with Myka.”

Reji tilted his head up. “If Erte had not died, you wouldn’t be here,” he said in a low, serious voice.

Kei pulled his chin out of the gentle grasp. “If Ma were alive, I wouldn’t be needed. I can’t leave Ai-Albon or Myka. I don’t know what your point is, Reji.”

“None, save that every argument you make to stay, I can make to stay. This is my home, I have a necessary function, and I have people I care for. Darshek is fun, but it’s not my home. Ai-Albon is, more so than ever Ai-Darbin was. So, have you finished with this silly line of questioning?”

Reji was always wiser and more quick-witted than him, Kei thought ruefully. He doubted it was just the extra seven years of experience that made it so. “Sorry, Reji. I suppose I’ve been thinking today how much I wished I had access to the academy library, but knowing I need to be here. I was projecting my own impatience onto you, and seeing discontent where none existed.”

Reji chuckled and hugged him closer. “That’s all right, little brother. If you were always sweet-tempered and logical, I would find it boring and then I *might* have to flee to Darshek for my fun.”

Kei put an exaggerated pout on his lips, as he slid his hand under the blankets to see if there was any chance of another round before they fell asleep. Ah, and it looked like the extra seven years wasn’t slowing Reji down at all. “Shall we make sure you’re not bored, old man? I wouldn’t want you to up and abandon me, after all.”

Reji growled suddenly and pounced, making it very clear that ‘old’ and ‘bored’ were not words he wanted applied to him any time soon, and in a very short time Kei was going to feel very ‘abandoned’ indeed.



It was a habit Arman never mentioned to his fellow generals, but he liked to walk through the camps of an evening. Wearing a cloak to cover his hair and his uniform, he would pass unobtrusively through the lines to measure the mood of his troops, to see what concerned the common soldier, what were their fears, their hopes, their complaints. Aware that he was treading close to actual spying, he made it a point of honour to never hold a grudge against a man he heard grumbling about the generals, or to treat them any differently.

He had certainly heard enough comments about his own person to keep his ego in check, although he didn't mind particularly being considered a 'tough bastard but fair, mind you'. He'd discovered Jozo was well-liked, and criticised only for his occasional conservatism. Ritus suffered more harshly, being described variously as 'a silly old ditherer' and 'an old maid', neither of which was particularly fair to the seasoned general. Arman liked the old man a good deal, but his good points admittedly weren't those which would appeal to the ordinary foot soldier.

Tonight he passed silently through the rows of tents as his men sat around campfires, eating their supper. He heard several soldiers complain they had not kept any food down at all that day – he hoped any effects of seasickness would not linger, for they had a hard, long march ahead of them tomorrow. Most were simply concerned about filling their bellies, too hungry and tired to talk much, but Arman came up in the shadows behind a small group who had finished their food, and were smoking a last pipe before retiring to their tents to sleep. "I hear them Darshianese got men who can fry your eyeballs when they look at you," he overheard one say. "I heard they got men who can throw stones through the air bigger than a jesig, and throw fire like the rest of us would toss water from a bucket."

"And where did you hear this rot, eh, Rokus? Been listening to that woman of yours with her imagination again?"

"She heard it from her sister, who owns a bakery right here in Urshek, you bastard. Them Darshianese are wizards, everyone knows that."

"Some wizards," an older, deeper voice rumbled. "The Prij took them over pretty quick, and they don't fight back hardly at all." Not, Arman thought wryly, strictly true, but these soldiers were perhaps apt to dismiss the now-quelled rebellions in some of the minor towns and rural areas, although they were bloody enough at the time.

"Yeah, but look what they did at Kurlik Pass. Blocked it for an eternity. That's wizards for you."

His companion cuffed Rokus' head. "They triggered a landfall, you fool. And that was the lot – they never did anything to get south Darshian back, did they?"

"Maybe they don't want it. Maybe they's just hoping we'll cross them mountains and fall into a trap. I heard the desert is full of ghosts, and them desert folk, they can talk without moving their mouths."

The rest of them scoffed. "You've been drinking green beer again, Rokus." The apparent leader of the group stood. "I'm for bed, had enough of wives'

tales,” he said with a stern look at the unfortunate Rokus. “One things for certain. Them Darshian folk are heathens and the gods protect the Prij, not them. I never seen no ghosts, or people throwing fire and until I *do*, my lad, I’ll trust my own eyes and no one else’s. As for the rest of it, Lord Niko minds Her Serenity, and Her Serenity minds us, and that’s all I need to know.”

There was a rumble of agreement, and although Rokus’ expression was discontent, he didn’t argue with the speaker. Arman drew back, and slipped away before they could notice him lurking.

Interesting. He’d heard these rumours of men with supernatural powers before, of course. The Darshian myths were part of their primitive animistic religion, and Arman had long dismissed them as unfit for an intelligent person to pay any attention too. So, apparently, did the Darshianese, who had readily adopted the religion of their masters as self-evidently superior. Arman was only concerned if these myths were to affect morale in any way, but it seemed his soldiers’ common sense was overruling the fanciful, which was encouraging.

However, he knew something they did not. The blocking of Kurlik Pass had *not* been a simple rockfall. The pass had been mined with powerful explosives and when the Prij had invaded and taken over Urshek, the mines had been triggered by the retreating northerners, sending thousands of tons of rock into the narrow pass, effectively cutting northern Darshian off from contact with the south, save by sea, which traffic the Prij dominated with ease.

The loss of the land route had been a blow, but the temporary setback had proved in the end most beneficial to the Prij in closing and defending the border. Nonetheless, it had irritated Her Serenity’s father, then sovereign, that the Darshianese had a weapon the Prij did not. He had ordered, as had his daughter after his death, that all efforts be made to discover the nature of the mysterious explosive, one far more powerful than the uko powder the Prij used in small bombs and their ship cannons, but in the twenty years since the pass was blocked, the Prijian armourers had not been able to recreate it. It was thought to be the same explosive which powered the huge cannons which overlooked Darshek’s harbour and which, together with the natural mountain barriers to the sides and behind Darshek, made the northern capital impregnable while at the same time allowing it to dominate the trade to the north, especially with Andon.

At least until now, Arman thought grimly as he walked back to his tent, keeping to the shadows. The discovery of a previously uncharted route through the southern range had suddenly made Her Serenity’s long-held

ambitions possible, and a plan had been drawn up by the Lord Commander to choke off Darshek's supply routes from the south and from the sea. Arman's forces were the first phase of the attack, to secure control of the main inland trade route and the seven large villages along it which acted as trading centres for the surrounding farming lands. Rare mineral ores were mined at Albion, Darbin and Vinri which were of apparent importance to Darshek. By controlling these villages and the access through the Kislik range to Darshek plain, the Prij would control both grain and mineral trade, as well as communications between north and south. Once these had been taken into Prijian hands, the supplies diverted south to Urshek and beyond that, to Kuplik, a siege would commence seawards, with the Prij navy creating a blockade outside the range of the mighty cannons, preventing goods and boats from Andon and other ocean trade routes entering the territory.

It was a long-term strategy, but a sound one so far as it went, and Arman's qualms were for after the success of the siege and Darshek's capitulation, rather than the possibility of that capitulation. He had his orders and he would obey them. They were to sweep forward through the trade route to Kislik, the last village before the pass through the northern mountain range some hundred miles from Darshek, where a defence fort would be established under Jozo's command as a northern barrier against incursions from Darshek itself. Troops would be left at the villages between there and the southern border, and thus communications and supply lines would be crucial as they would be stretched over thirteen hundred miles. They had a thousand men to command and to control initially. Once defence posts were set up, more would follow, and yet more would sweep across the continent to bring the law of Kuprij, once Darshek fell.

Even the first thousand soldiers needed a lot of leem flour, equipment, and pack animals, all of which had to be squeezed through this new pass through the mountains. Arman wondered if it would not have been better to put that manpower to clearing Kurlik pass, even if their engineers were unable to divine a method of doing so at this moment in time, but the army were committed now to the present course of action. Time and the will of the gods would tell if Her Serenity's judgement was correct.

He pulled back the hood of his cloak before approaching his tent and got a perfectly ordinary salute from his watch. Inside, all was orderly and quiet, his pallet tidily made and ready for occupancy, his papers stacked neatly on a travelling desk, Loke waiting patiently for him in welcome. He had to admit that despite his misgivings, having his page with him was a wonderful luxury.

He felt much more at home in this rough army tent than he ever would in a house run by Mayl, and here he had warm eyes and a welcoming smile to greet him. Here he knew he was wanted for himself.

Supper was waiting for him too. Loke took his cloak from him, and gave him a cloth to wipe his hands and face before he sat down to a meat stew, fresh bread and a mug of the local honey beer, which smelled inviting and tasted even better. He noted that Loke, serving himself and sitting cross-legged on the rug to eat, had colour in his cheeks and was falling on the food with a good appetite too, apparently none the worse for the long day on the boat, and his seasickness. At least they would all eat well for the next few days, until the fresh meat and vegetables were replaced by hard rations for however long it took to obtain new supplies from the villages and farms on the other side of the mountains. "So, are the men ready for the march?"

"They seem in good heart. Some fanciful notions about the Darshianese, which you might expect. Tell me, Loke, if I said I'd seen a man throwing fire, would you believe me?"

Loke grinned and put his chin on his hand to look at him. "No, Arman, but I would believe you believed it. I would then be forced to find Lord Blikus and ask him to have you taken into custody for your own protection."

Arman grunted, amused by the cheeky but honest response. "The foolish things people believe, Loke, never fail to surprise me. Gods are the gods, men are men. As if Lord Niko would permit a man to steal the power of the gods, especially a heathen Darshianese."

"It's just the superstitions of the simple-minded, Arman. I'd be more worried about falling off an urs beast into a ravine than whether someone was going to cast fire from their fingers, or make the winds carry me away."

"Don't," Arman said, his voice gruffer than he meant it to sound, not even liking to joke about Loke being hurt. He just couldn't shake the feeling of foreboding he'd had about this march ever since Loke said he was going to go with Arman this time and that was the end of it. "You should finish up and get some sleep. It's another early start. Better get used to it."

"Yes, Sei Arman," Loke said mournfully.

"I warned you, Loke."

"Yes, Sei Arman. You most certainly did."



It rained during the night, and the gentle patter on the roofs, and the trickling of the water into the deep storage cisterns was a restful sound for

Kei, lying comfortably in Reji's arms. Somehow it always made him feel more cheerful, knowing their water supply was being fortified, the crops assured. Not that having noisy, enthusiastic sex with a willing, talented lover wasn't guaranteed to make him sleep like a baby to begin with, but the rain was a nice addition to his morning. It had stopped by the time he stretched extravagantly, and turned to find Reji watching him with lazy, heavy-lidded eyes. "Morning. Sleep well?"

"Hmmm, like a rock. I'm starving."

Reji grinned at him and poked him on the nose. "I've nothing in my pantry, Keichichi, so we'll have to go and beg breakfast from someone."

Kei yawned, not really wanting to move, but he couldn't lie abed all day. "I said I would visit Misek today – why don't we go to Rin's house and beg there? I know they'll want to see you."

"What an excellent idea. You're not only good-looking but clever. Why don't you marry me, Kei?"

"Because you snore and hog the blankets, that's why," Kei said with a grin, jumping out of the bed before Reji could exact revenge for the insult. He pulled his clothes and boots on while Reji was still struggling out of bed – he wasn't someone who appreciated mornings when he had a proper bed to leave, which was rare enough for him – and splashed water on his face, before tossing Reji's shirt at him. It was a fine morning, and as they walked out into the ever bright sunshine, the village looked newborn, dust washed away in the rain, the droplets of water yet to be burned away in the day's heat sparkling prettily. It was a day to feel good to be alive, and Kei felt the most light-hearted he'd been in months. Possibly as much as he'd felt in the year and a half since his mother had taken her own life.

"You're looking cheerful, Kei."

"Yes, I am, aren't I. Life is good, don't you think?"

Reji put his hand on his shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "Yes, it is. Like I said, there's not much more a body could want but good friends, good food and a useful role to fill."

"True, very true."

Their long legs carried them in short order to the front door of Rin and Meis. Kei knocked and walked in without waiting for a response, sure of his welcome. The family were at their food, but Meis got up and clasped her hand to her breast. "Oh my, Reji. I'm so glad you're back."

Reji swept Meis into an embrace, and she buried her face in his chest. Kei looked at Rin in sympathy – Rin and Meis were as devoted a couple as one

could wish, but Meis had suffered a heavy loss with the death of her much loved brother, and her emotions were still troubled. Rin clearly found it hard to deal with sometimes. It was the reason, Kei was forced to admit to himself, why he had sent Myka in his place as often as not – he found his own heart rubbed raw by Meis' grief. But this morning Reji's calm and cheerful mood buffered her distress, and Kei could feel less guilty at having avoided this family who were among his oldest and closest friends. He pulled up a stool and sat down next to Misek, whose face still bore the hideous marks of the explosion. "How do you feel, Mis?"

"Better, Keichichi." His friend gave him a brave smile. "I slept well. The rain helped."

"So it did." Surreptitiously, Kei used his gift to check the way Misek's eye was healing, concerned at the prolonged pain. There was still some inflammation, but it shouldn't explain.... Wait, there *was* something. Had he overlooked the solution all this time? "Mis, I want to check your eye. Are you finished eating?"

"I suppose so. Is something wrong?"

"Not sure. It won't take long."

Rin was giving him a piercing look from under bushy eyebrows, worried and a little fearful at this fresh threat to his family. "Do you need help, Kei?"

"No, it's fine, Rin. I think there's something I can do to help the pain. It will take but a moment, but I'd prefer the privacy. Would you all excuse us?"

"Kei, shall I come with you?" Meis asked, her voice trembling ever so slightly. Pijli and Risa were watching the conversation in silence, big eyes wide, their worry for their big brother clear.

Kei smiled his most reassuring smile. "Calm down, everyone. It's a very minor check I'm doing, nothing more."

"Ma, don't fuss," Misek said, getting to his feet, and indicating Kei should follow him up the stairs to the room he now shared with Banji.

Banji was still in bed, most unusually, but he sat up and rubbed his eyes as they came in. "Kei? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Banji, except you missing your breakfast." Kei couldn't feel any indication from his friend that he was ill or depressed particularly, other than the ever-present sadness over the death of his parents. "I just want to look at Mis' eye."

"Oh. Shall I leave you alone?"

"No, no, I only wanted a little peace while I did it. Mis, just sit, relax."

"What did you see, Kei?"

Despite his reassurances, Misek's anxiety was rising, which was exactly what Kei did not want. "Not sure. Nothing that will make it worse. I need you to relax. Close both eyes, and slow your breathing. The way I showed you, you remember."

Banji had got out of bed and padded closer. "Let me," he said quietly, sitting behind Misek. "Lean on me, Mis. Breathe with me."

Kei was astonished – he hadn't realise Banji had taken on Misek's rehabilitation to this extent – and grateful, because as his chest came in contact with Misek's back, Misek's anxiety dropped right off. "Well done, Banji-ki," Kei murmured, and Banji gave him a pleased, shy smile.

His patient was as ready as he could wish. "Mis, I think there is a chip of bone pressing on a nerve. I couldn't really sense it before because of the swelling, and I need to check, but if I can move it away from the nerve, it might stop the pain."

"Please, Kei, it's enough to make me want to gouge a hole in my head."

The quiet desperation in Misek's voice made Kei even more determined to get the bottom of this puzzling pain. "Silence now, Mis. Let me concentrate. Banji, just keep doing what you're doing." As Misek's good eye was closed, he could mouth at Banji, "this might hurt."

Banji nodded, and put his arm around Misek's chest as if in comfort. Kei closed his own eyes and then concentrated. The damage had been savage – Misek was lucky that the metal shard that had destroyed his eye had not gone a different path and drilled into his brain and killed him. Myka had done a good job cleaning and dressing the blinded eye. On the surface, the healing was proceeding well, but underneath.... He took his time, knowing he was causing no pain in his careful investigation.

And there it was, what he had sensed earlier. He'd once tried to describe what he 'saw' with his powers to Myka, but had given up – there were just no words. Perhaps it was how a blind potter would know the shape of a pot from the information in his fingertips, the way Kei could imagine the shape and position of the fragment, which was deeply buried in the nerves at the back of the eyes. "Right, Mis. There's a bit of bone as I thought. I'm going to move it. It might ache a bit, but I need you to keep still. Be brave now, my friend." He reached for Misek's hand, now damp a little from worry, and held it tight. Banji nodded again, expression calm, his attention all on their friend.

It was equally impossible to describe to Myka how he moved things. It wasn't like using his hands, or his body at all. He just...wanted it...and the



small thing would shift infinitesimally. The trick here was in not doing more harm removing it than leaving it where it was.

A grunt from Misek, and his hand jerked. So it was hurting. Kei stopped, and let his friend catch up. Then, a tiny bit more, and then again.

Slowly, the tiny fragment was moved out of the nerves and into newly formed scar tissue, along soft flesh. "Now, Mis," Kei said, and made a single last effort. Misek gasped, Kei having to hold his hand down, Banji gripped the other. A tiny spurt of blood at the corner of Misek's eye, and he cried out as the tiny chip flew out across the room, landing who knew where. Kei immediately grasped his head and kept it still. "Wait, just wait, Mis. Ride the pain, it will get better."

Misek's breathing was no longer calm, as he panted against the pain in his eye. Banji held him all the while. But then, in a surprisingly short time, Misek relaxed, and he opened his good eye. "It...stopped. Oh gods, the pain...." He twisted to look at Banji. "Banji-ki, it doesn't hurt any more."

Banji hugged him. "I'm glad, Mis. So glad."

Kei never loved his title of healer more than when he saw the joy that came when a patient stopped hurting, when they finally truly realised that they would one day be well. The smile on both his friends' face was worth all the wealth in Darshian. "I'm glad I came by to beg for breakfast after all," he said with a grin. "And now, Banji-ki, you can tell me why you're still in bed. I know you're not sick." For some reason, Banji blushed, a wave of pleased embarrassment flowing off him, and Misek grinned like a conspirator. "All right, what are you not telling me, you two?"

"Nothing," Banji said, standing up in a rush, and grabbing his trousers. "Mis, is there any food left?"

"If Reji hasn't eaten it all, there should be."

"Reji? You never said he was here!" Banji grabbed his shirt and pulled it over his head as he stalked across to the door. "Reji! You there?" They heard him calling as he stomped down the stone stairs.

Kei looked at Misek in surprise. "What in hells...? Mis?"

"Sorry, Kei, it's his secret," Misek said with a shrug. "Thank you...gods, I feel so much better, Kei. You don't know what it was like, never being free of pain."

"No," he admitted, now looking over Misek critically, "I don't, thankfully." But he could guess – the marks of sleeplessness, the untidy way Misek had braided his hair, the lines around his mouth, all spoke of the way the chronic agony had eaten at his soul. Another task for research, Kei vowed. Some kind

of non-addictive pain relief that could help with such things. Perhaps something that might treat the cause of the pain, as well as the pain itself. There must be something they could use.

“Feh, here I am, just chattering, with all you’ve done for me, and you’ve not had your own breakfast yet. Come on, or Reji will have eaten us out of house and home.”

His lover’s appetite was as legendary as his good temper, and with as much justification, so Kei really feared there would be nothing left for him, but Meis shooed him onto a stool and put hot cakes, butter and honey in front of him – a veritable feast, which made his stomach gurgle in anticipation. Reji reached out a hand to steal one of the cakes, but Meis slapped his hand even before Kei could open his mouth to protest. “No. Healer’s fee,” she said, her worn face now split by a smile. “Thank you, Kei. Your family are a blessing on mine.” She bowed deeply in thanks, and from his seated position, so did Rin.

“The blessing is in being able to serve,” Kei said in formal response, but with heartfelt sincerity. Yes, life was good.



He hadn’t expected trees. He hadn’t expected green at all. In fact, the landscape was so little like southern Darshian, Arman wondered if he was on the same continent at all. The mountains had been difficult, far more rugged, far higher and more dangerous than any on Kuprij. Men had been lost, it was hardly surprising, but with good discipline, he and Jozo had managed to keep the deaths to less than ten. It had taken them three tortuous days to get across, sleeping on narrow trails, sitting huddled together for warmth, wrapped in blankets, shivering in the chill air. At least they hadn’t tried it in winter, he thought, shuddering at the idea of trying to traverse those sharp, hostile peaks when they were deep in snow. They would have to return in the rainy season, but by then, he hoped the engineers would have tamed the pass a little. If not...they would lose more men, of a certainty.

Loke had trudged at his side, holding on to his saddle, refusing to ride behind him as Arman offered, claiming he had enough vertigo without being raised a urs beast’s height in the air. There were many times when even Arman had had to dismount too, and walk, trusting to the sharp, sure-footed hoofs of his animal to lead him safely through. If Her Serenity imagined this hidden passage was the new route through which trade goods would flow back and forth between the two halves of Darshian, Arman thought grimly, she was much mistaken. But once Darshek was under their command, and

the secret of the explosives were learned, it might be possible to re-open Kurlik pass. Or maybe the northerners knew another route. In any event, they had to press on.

Morale had lifted as they began their descent, and once they had reached the plains, with much rejoicing and a sacrifice to Lord Niko in gratitude for allowing a relatively safe march, the men were visibly heartened. A base camp for the receipt of the hostages was established near woods at the foothills. A hundred soldiers were left there to build barracks, to form what would become a fort guarding the new pass. Jozo's engineers were already planning ways of making the journey less dangerous, with ideas for bridges and tunnels that would doubtlessly give cheer to Her Serenity and lighten the public purse a great deal.

Jozo marched on with Arman and the regiments. The first village had offered no resistance, and the hostages were already on their way back to the base camp to await the return of the main force. Five days later, the next village had been slightly less passive, but with farmers and farm implements against seasoned soldiers and swords, the outcome was entirely predictable, and after a few cracked skulls, a second group of ten men and women were sent back to join the first group. Arman began to believe that it might indeed be possible to hold this vast territory as Her Serenity hoped – he hadn't thought the Darshianese would give up so easily, or be so defenceless.

Loke spent much of the day with the supply train, riding occasionally, more often walking. Arman felt a little bad about that, leaving an educated, well-born lad to muck in with the cooks and the common soldiers, but Loke never complained when they caught up with each other in the evenings, his nature as bright and irrepressible as ever, his attention to Arman's needs not at all diminished by his inevitable fatigue. The supplies would normally be a point of vulnerability but with the lands behind them suppressed, and being a good way distanced from any possible fighting at the head of the line, Arman judged Loke was safe enough there. They all were safe enough – it was beginning to look as if this campaign was going to be one of the most peaceful in Prijian history.

Arman was almost, he was ashamed to say, beginning to enjoy the march. The landscape was flat but hardly stark, and there was enough variety, enough trees, and fields of crops, and waterholes, to give rest to the eye. The hunting was good, and between that and the sequestered harvests, the supply situation was no longer a concern. It was one of the reasons the push had been made at just this time, when the crops were in, and the granaries

still high. It would mean a lean year for the villages, but if it drove some of the people towards Urshek in search of food and work, that was no bad thing. They didn't need the population maintained at its present level to keep the productivity high, and it would make the slow dominance by the expected Prijian colonists, with their higher fertility, all that much easier.

Four weeks after the start of the campaign, Jozo called a day's halt to give the men a rest, to allow them to fix broken equipment, to wash themselves and their clothes, and do all the many small tasks that accumulated without attention when an army was on the move. They were ahead on time, having taken the territory to this point much more quickly than expected – the third village on the route would be reached in twenty-four hours, so they would surprise the villagers at dawn. For now, the army was camped out near a large waterhole near one of the rare high features in the landscape, a huge sandstone outcrop weathered by the wind and carved by it into strange shapes and hollows. Arman examined it thoughtfully as he ate his breakfast out of doors, eggs of a type unfamiliar to him, and hard camp bread, which was unfortunately not. "I've a mind to climb that," he said to Loke, nodding at the outcrop. "Fancy a challenge?"

"Why not? It makes a change from smelling urs beasts' farts."

Arman wagged his knife at his page. "No complaints. You asked for it."

"Yes, I know. I don't mind, honestly. I think I'm an inch or two shorter than I was, though. Worn off at the ankles."

Arman grinned at the idea. "I think, if anything, you're an inch or two taller. You've not finished growing."

"I'll never be a giant like you, Arman. I wonder you don't take a nosebleed sometimes when you stand up."

Arman flicked a crumb of bread at him. "Enough of that, lad. You'll be near as tall as me, when you're my age."

"If I live so long, I may do," Loke said with a smile as he gathered up the plates, washing them up quickly so they could make their excursion. Arman dropped in on Jozo to let him know where they were going. "Do you want to come with us?"

Jozo held up his hands. "No, thank you. My knees would never forgive me. Arman, is it wise? We're in enemy territory."

"I think I feel more in danger walking the streets of Utuk. The army has the place secured, and it's not like the Darshianese have some hidden skill at guerrilla warfare. They don't make much of a foe."

Jozo grunted. "Maybe they send all the feisty buggers up to Darshek, and the placid ones stay to work the land. All right, but if you fall off that thing and break your foolish neck, I'll weep no tears for you."

"The gods forbid. I'll be back in a few hours. The thing isn't that big."

He found Loke waiting patiently, sensibly carrying a pack which doubtless held water canteens, with a rope looped over his shoulders. "I can't believe you talked me into climbing something again," he muttered.

"Urs beasts farts? Remind you of anything?"

"Ah. Yes, now I recall."

It was another hot day, even though they were supposedly coming into winter. It had rained in the night a couple of times, but the ground had not stayed wet for more than an hour or so, and hadn't inhibited their progress in the least. The earth here seemed to soak the water away like a sponge. Arman wondered where it went. There was a lot more vegetation than the rainfall and the surface waterholes would apparently sustain. Calling this land a 'desert' was inaccurate, to say the least.

It wasn't like climbing the basalt and granite mountains on Kuplik, something Arman had done a few times for amusement and with serious intent. The curves of the sandstone were almost womanly by comparison, but unlike a woman's body, they offered few handholds. Arman was forced to recall long-unused skills to find places for his feet, to anchor himself so he could haul Loke up. A few scrubby bushes, a few wind-scooped holes, Loke's rope used judiciously, and with a good deal of grunting and sweat, they finally hauled themselves over the crest, where they found a flat platform on which twenty men could comfortably camp, if they were so minded.

Arman squinted at the horizon, and the long expanse of dusty brown terrain, broken liberally by green that were probably trees along waterholes and streams. He supposed if they had come a few weeks earlier, there would have been the gold and rusty reds of grain fields too. It was very unlike the land in which he'd been born, with its high peaks, lush narrow valleys, and racing, vigorous rivers. The area around Utuk was less mountainous, but nothing like this.

"So, was it worth the climb? What do you think of the view?"

Loke sank to the ground, legs crossed. "It's flat. Very flat. And look, over there – more plains, which are also flat." He grinned. "But it's nice enough. How far do you think we can see?"

"Oh, fifty miles or more. Look, I think that might be Darbin there...see? The smoke?"

Loke squinted. "Yes, I think I see it." He sighed. "I can't help but feel sorry for them. We're about to turn their lives upside down."

"In the short term, yes, we are. In the long term, if they're sensible, they will benefit from being part of the empire. We don't want them to stop doing what they do, only who they send the fruits of their labours to. It's Darshek we want."

"Yes, I know, you don't need to explain," Loke said in faint reproach. "Still...I'm glad I'm of the Prij. Those Darshianese hostages weren't expecting their lives to take this turn. I hope they will forgive us, in time."

"They likely will, Loke. People want stability. If we give it to them, they will forgive the trouble now." *Well, we hope*, he added, if only to himself. Loke's earlier remark came back to Arman now. "And what of you, my friend? What do you want from life?"

Loke looked at him in confusion. "Want, Arman? Why, nothing more than this. To serve you, to help you enjoy what time you have to yourself. Is that not enough?"

"Aye, at seventeen. But at twenty-seven? Would you wish to marry?"

"No, Sei Arman."

The emphatic response surprised him. "No wish at all?"

"None, Arman."

Loke was uncharacteristically unforthcoming, so Arman left it aside for now. He would tease a reason from him later, perhaps. "Well, there are other things. I could pay for you to study again, if you wished. You could become a tutor in a nobleman's home, build a reputation and a fortune the way Karus has."

Loke twisted around to look at him. "Do I displease you, Arman? Do you want me not to serve you any more?"

His eyes were wide-eyed, and slightly hurt looking. "Not at all, my friend," Arman reassured him quickly. "But it's selfish of me to keep you as a servant, when you could do something else if you wished."

"Arman, your family gave me and my mother a home and a role when my father died. I have never had a moment's regret over that. I have blessed the day I was set to serve you. Please don't ask such questions. I'm happy with you, and will be until you no longer wish me to stay."

Arman put his arm around Loke and hugged him to his side, regretting the inadvertent hurt he had caused. "My apologies, Loke. I was only trying to be a friend."

Loke rested forgivingly against him, his slight body a comfortable weight to hold. "As you ever are, Arman. A true and kind friend, the best I could ever wish for. Please don't send me away."

"I won't," Arman murmured, his lips against Loke's hair. "I'm sorry, lad. Forget I spoke, and don't let the fate of the Darshianese concern you either. The Prij are just rulers, as you know."

"Yes. It's a fair land, but I think I like Kuprij better, for all the sea does such cruel things to my guts. It's disquieting, being so far from water, is it not?"

Arman supposed it was. He didn't tend to become attached to his surroundings in that way, and was still curious enough to enjoy new sights, new adventures. One day, he supposed, he might be like Jozo, and see it all as a necessary evil, liking nothing more than to retreat to the comfort of the tent and his house at the end of his campaigns, but perhaps it was the lack of hospitality in Arman's home which made him less wedded to his comforts. Perhaps, he thought, being candid as he tried to be with himself, it was because he had his home with him, that he could be content.

But he said nothing of this to Loke for fear of being seen as sentimental and putting a burden of responsibility on young shoulders that already carried so much. Still, if Loke was waiting to be sent away, he would be waiting a very, very long time.



It had been a good harvest this year, Kei was pleased to note, and the surpluses across the outlying areas would feed Darshek well. The clan had spent a furious week bringing in their own grain from the local farms, and another week threshing and storing. Already the winter crop of beans was being planted, ready for the rains which would come in a month or so. Peit and the hunters had returned with several good-sized wild jombeker carcasses, many desert hisks, valuable for their meat and their fur, and cages of live wildfowl, so the harvest feast would be a rich one. There would be plenty of other contributions, not only for the celebrations, but to tide them over the coming season. Tido trees had been stripped of their fruit, baskets of gike plums and refik berries collected, some for the feast, most for drying. Bee hives were being robbed of their honey and their wax, and any big oroj cricket that crossed a child's path was likely to be pounced on with glee and stuffed in a cage, since they made good eating and were delicious roasted.

For days now, there had been a flurry of baking and brewing, houses being cleaned, clothes being mended and new ones made for the night of the

ancestors. Kei was glad Reji would be here for that this year, even though he would leave shortly after, taking grain and dried medicinal plants to Darshek. No pujum ore this time, although having just taken a load north, it wouldn't be expected. By the time he returned after the rainy season, Rin's family should have got a good supply ready for him, since the kiln was now rebuilt.

Kei had done his bit towards cleaning the house, but had kept out of Myka's way as she cooked, since she tended to become rather irritable when she was baking. Instead, he worked with Reji, helping him make minor repairs to his house, checking his larders, and making love as the mood took them. He would miss Reji more than usual this time, Kei thought. It had been a happy month, no serious illness in the clan, the successful harvest putting everyone in a good mood, and with the anticipation of the feast a cheerful occupation. For the first time since he had returned from Darshek after his parents' deaths, Kei felt entirely comfortable in his skin and in his role in life.

This morning, he and Reji were taking a walk, spending a last day together being idle before Reji left to go north again. Everywhere people seemed busy, rugs being shaken at doorways, brooms busy, here and there men on roofs, or patching walls. Kei felt positively debauched not to be similarly occupied, but not so guilty that he was going to help – he had completed all his own tasks the day before, and Myka had again forbidden him to spend the day at his books, so unless he wanted to be unusually altruistic, he had no one but Reji with a claim on his time. He spotted two familiar figures heading out of the village, and called to them. "Banji-ki! Risa! Wait for us!"

Banji turned at his hail. "Good morning, Kei, Reji. I was going to collect some gren nuts for Meis."

"Is she going to make gren cakes? The ones with honey and pyjk berries?" Reji rubbed his stomach appreciatively, which made his friends grin. Meis' gren cakes were something of a speciality of her family. "Can we help?"

"Sure, but I don't want you eating what we collect before I get them back to Meis. She wants them for the feast tonight and she'll skin me alive if I don't bring enough home."

Kei was content to join in the excursion. Reji did love gren cakes, after all. Risa slipped back and took his hand in friendly fashion, swinging a woven basket in his other hand. Kei looked down at him. "How come Pij and Misek aren't helping?"

"Pij is baking, and Misek's helping Uncle Lev tan a hide. And then Pa wants him to help him with the storage shed. We all are, when we get back."



The blessings of a large family, Kei thought. Meis and Rin were already unusual in having three children by blood, and now Banji had been adopted too, they had a family the size of Fedor's. And all of *their* children were fertile.

Risa was a solemn child, but he seemed happy enough today. An air of melancholy still clung to Banji, Kei thought, but his friend had borne the loss of his father better than he and Myka had feared. Myka had helped, Kei knew, as had Misek. The disaster which had befallen Rin's family had damaged them but had not destroyed them, for which Kei, and all their friends and clan, were thankful. Even Meis' grief was abating a little. Reji had done much in that regard, Kei thought, giving his lover's back a smile as he remembered.

As if he were a mind-speaker and not a fire-shaper, Reji turned and grinned, falling back and putting his arm around Kei's waist. "What are you smiling about, Keichichi? It makes me think you have mischief planned."

Kei shoved him away. "Oh, ho, as if I would have a chance with you around, oh master prankster. You had better be on your best behaviour tonight, or the ancestors will steal you away for their amusement in the other world, for I'm sure they need a laugh or two, eh, Risa?"

Risa smiled. "Poor Rei-ki would get no gren cakes then, would he, Kei? There aren't any gren nuts in the other life, I bet."

Reji swooped him up and tickled him. "And how would you know that, Risa-ki? For all you know, the gren nuts are even *better* there, and they have nothing better to do than to make cakes and sweets all day long. Maybe the spirits will take *you* too, to make you find the nuts for them, huh?" He set Risa down, and the child immediately began to run ahead of them, Reji pretending to chase, as if his long legs were somehow no match for the stubby ones of a child.

Kei shook his head fondly. "Such energy," he said, wiping his forehead as if merely watching Reji made him sweat.

"I know," Banji said with a resigned sigh. "I get tired just thinking about him."

They continued to walk along towards the far edge of the waterhole, where the gren bushes grew in scattered clumps, but as they did, Kei noticed Banji had something on his wrist, a dark circlet poking out from under his shirt sleeve. He caught his friend's hand, and grinned as he recognised what it was he was looking at. "And who's become your sweetheart in arms and heart, Banji-ki?" he asked slyly, touching the hair bracelet.

"None of your business, Kei," Banji said, tugging his arm away.

"Oh, Banji," Kei said in a faked hurt tone, realising this was a perfect topic for teasing. "You can tell me, I'm your best friend."

“Not on your life, Kei. And I would appreciate you not bringing this up in front of Meis or anyone else,” Banji said stiffly.

“You’re really worried?” Kei tugged his friend to a halt. “Banji, if you’re pledged, this would be good news for everyone.”

“I’m not damn well pledged, Kei! It’s a hair bracelet, nothing more. My father has only been dead three months, it’s unseemly to talk of more.”

“Oh, urs piss, Banji. Ban would tell you that too. Nothing would give him greater joy than if you pledged to someone, found someone to love you.”

“Yes, well, love is another thing altogether,” Banji muttered, walking on. Kei was puzzled at the emotions he could feel coming off his friend. There was irritation, and sadness, and...confusion too. Was this girl playing with Banji’s affections?

“Maybe I should speak to her, find out if she’s serious, Banji-ki.” He squinted at his friend’s face which he found suddenly was an inch from his. He couldn’t move back because Banji had taken his shirt in a death grip. “Oy, oy, no need to get rough, Banji!”

“I don’t want you speaking to anyone! Damn it!” Banji shook him a little and let him go. “Just let things move as they will, and if and when I want to tell you about it, I will. Until then, I’ll thank you not to harass me over it, Kei.”

Kei held his hands up in surrender. Banji could take things so seriously at times. “As you wish, Banji. Just don’t get your heart broken, or the girl pregnant, until you’re sure, all right?” Banji grunted and began to walk away. “I hope she’s pretty, though.”

“Kei, shut up.”

“But....”

“Shut up or I’ll stuff a fistful of gren nuts where they’ll do the most good in shutting you up.”

“Er. All right.”



The army marched on Darbin village shortly after dawn, Jozo and Arman at its head in full regalia, the better to awe and impress the barbarians. The noise of the trumpets and drums was enough to raise the dead, and it brought the villagers out in seconds. It seemed they were early risers in this part of world, for the adults were all fully dressed, and grim-faced. The men carried work axes and forks, but it was only for show as it had been in the previous two villages, and there was no actual resistance. Arman indicated to his lieutenant to ride forward, and read out the terms of their surrender. He paid

no attention to his officer, instead scanning the assembled people, assessing their reactions, and wondering who would be selected as hostages. They had allowed the villagers to select their own up to now, reserving the right to replace any that were not suitable. There wasn't a vast choice here – there were few men and women in their prime, mostly children and middle aged folk. A village in trouble, he thought dismissively, dying on its feet. Prij was doing it a favour in taking charge of it.

The lieutenant had finished his announcement, and now demanded the clan head to step forward. Interesting – a woman. He hadn't known the Darshianese had female clan heads. Arman had just opened his mouth to comment on the fact to Jozo when he heard a curious whistling noise, and then an enormous crack of an explosion behind him. Immediately, there was chaos, dust and smoke rising and billowing everywhere, choking and making eyes water, the urs beasts rearing and screaming their terror, people scattering in all directions. "Hold the line, hold the damn line!" Arman yelled, pulling hard on the reins and trying to keep his seat on his bucking mount, before gaining control and plunging to the front of the turmoil. "Staff! Hold them under control! Lieutenant, what the hells just happened!"

Jozo was already leading the rounding up of the scattering villagers, and tightening the circle around the hamlet. Arman scanned desperately to see where and what had been hit. "Lieutenant, report, damn it!"

"A bomb was thrown, General. I think it's the supply train."

*Loke.* Arman yanked on the reins, whipped his mount into a gallop and charged through the ranks, men scattering from his path. Ahead, lay carnage. Dead or injured beasts, men crushed beneath them. Already others were trying to pull them free, and to capture the animals which had panicked. Arman searched desperately. "Loke! Has anyone seen Loke!"

He dismounted and ran to the centre of the destruction. "Loke! Has anyone seen my page!"

"Sei Arman! Over here!"

He wheeled and ran to the man who'd called him. Loke was half trapped under a dead urs beast. "Get him out! Get this thing off him!" Arman leant his bulk and strength to the task of rolling the enormous corpse off Loke's legs, and the second he was free, Arman knelt beside him, ripping off his helmet and setting it beside him. Loke's face was white and one hand clawed at an injury in his side. Blood seeped through his fingers. "Get me a medic, now!"

Arman was aware of activity in response to his words, but all he could see was Loke's face. "Loke, speak to me. Open your eyes, lad." He cupped Loke's chin. "Loke, it's Arman."

Loke's eyes were squeezed shut in obvious pain, but he forced them open, and tried to smile. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. "Arman," he whispered. "Hurts...."

"We'll soon have you fixed, Loke. Where in six hells is that cursed medic!" he bellowed.

A man pushed through the watching soldiers. "Here, Sei Arman. Let me look at him."

Arman sat back, gnawing worry eating at his insides, as Loke was prodded and questioned, and the injury to his side was revealed. A bandage was pressed against it, then the medic stood. "We need to get him out of the sun, onto a pallet."

"Erect my tent," Arman said to the soldiers around him. "Do whatever he needs." Five of them immediately left to carry out his orders. "Can you heal him? Is it serious?"

The medic indicated he should move away a little, out of earshot. "Sei Arman, I'm sorry...but the injury is grave."

"Yes, I can damn well see that – can you heal him?" he demanded impatiently.

"No, Sei Arman. I cannot. I can make him comfortable, but the wound is mortal."

"No!" Arman gripped the man by the shoulders and shook him. "No! Do something, stop the bleeding! I won't accept it!"

"I'm sorry, " the medic said calmly. "It is as the gods wills it, Sei."

Arman gave the man a hard look. "You will do what you can to save him or I'll cut your throat."

"Sei, the boy's guts are pierced. It might take a few hours, or a day, but there is nothing I can do. I swear by Lord Niko."

Arman swore and pushed him away, stalking over to where Loke lay and kneeling beside him, reaching for his hand, and brushing his long fringe off his forehead. "Arman?" Loke whispered. Arman leaned forward to hear him better. "Are you angry?"

"Not at you, my friend. I want to move you out of the sun. Can you bear it? I'll be as quick as I can."

"Hurts, Arman. I...I'll try."

"That's my boy," Arman murmured gently. He checked where else Loke was hurt – he had a broken leg, by the look of it. He took his knife and offered the handle to Loke. "Bite down, Loke. I'll be as careful as I can."

Loke nodded and accepted the wooden handle, but his muffled scream as Arman gathered him into his arms was still piteous, pain tears running down his face. Arman moved as fast as he could, yelling at his men to get out of his damn way, as he headed towards where his tent was already standing. His pallet had been unrolled, although nothing else was set up. He laid Loke down and called for cloths and water so he could wipe Loke's face. He eased the knife out of Loke's mouth. There were teeth marks in the hardwood. "Brave lad. It'll be all right."

Loke seemed to be unable to speak, his mouth drawn down in tight agony. Arman twisted around and saw the medic standing there. "Can't you do anything for his pain?"

"He could take some wine, Sei, although with the stomach wound, it might make it worse. General, there are other wounded men I can help. I must attend to them."

Arman wanted to scream at him that nothing was more important than saving Loke, but the soldier in him recognised the validity of the point. "Go, do what you can, and return as soon as you can. Send someone in to assist me."

The medic bowed, retreating out of the tent. Arman stripped off the rest of his armour, leaving it where it fell, and resumed his place at Loke's side. Shortly after, a soldier came bearing a bowl and a towel, which Arman dipped into the water and then wiped over Loke's sweaty face. "Bring me some wine," he ordered. "And find out who threw that bomb and have them kept at my pleasure."

"Yes, Sei General."

The soldier left. Arman continued to wipe Loke's face, until a little reason came back into his eyes and he relaxed a little. Loke's hand seemed to be reaching for him, so Arman caught it and held it gently. "There, better?"

"Yes." Barely more than a breath. "Arman, am I going to die?"

"No, you're not. Not if I can help it. Just rest, Loke. Let me look after you for a change."

"I...I stayed at the rear." Each word was gasped out, and sweat broke out on Loke's brow. Arman wiped it away. "Your orders."

"Yes, you obeyed me. It's my fault, Loke. I'm sorry."

Loke's grip on his finger briefly tightened. "Not...your fault. Arman...please...my mother...a letter."

"You don't need to write her a damn letter," Arman said gruffly. "You'll see her soon enough."

But Loke was determined, tugging on his hand. "Please...Arman, write for me."

"No, damn it!"

"Please." Loke's hand brushed his cheek. "You're weeping."

"No, I'm...Loke, you're not going to die!"

"But if I do...Arman, please...." He coughed a little and his mouth clenched tight in pain. "I beg you...."

Arman wanted to howl with grief. Instead, he found his pack, dumped in the corner of the tent, and pulled out his diary. "What do you want to say?"

Eyes awash with tears, Loke managed to smile in thanks, and then dictated a few simple lines of love and devotion to his mother. Arman held the book so his friend could shakily sign his name with the quill, and then Arman blotted it carefully before storing the book back in his pack. "You can give it to her yourself in a few weeks."

"Of course." His eyes closed as a spasm of pain hit him. "I'm cold, Arman."

Arman yelled for blankets to be brought, and more bandages, as the one at Loke's side was soaked. If they could keep the bleeding under control, surely a strong, healthy boy like Loke could defeat this? The medic hadn't even bothered to set his leg. The blankets were brought, as were the bandages and finally the wine. Arman replaced the bandage over his belly, and covered him with two blankets even though the tent was stifling hot. He tried to help the boy to some wine but Loke refused. "Feel sick. Sorry."

"Never mind, lad, it doesn't matter." The only thing that Loke seemed to want was for Arman to hold his hand, and while he wanted that, Arman would not move from his side.

Outside, he could hear shouting, and much activity. He should, he knew, feel guilty for abandoning his post. He would apologise to Jozo later. But while his dearest friend lay injured, Arman could not find the will to leave him.

Reports came in, delivered with an obvious respect for what was happening in Arman's tent. Five soldiers killed, three injured, one seriously. The person or persons who threw the bomb had not been discovered, the villagers had been rounded up and were all under guard. Two urs beasts were dead, but the village had enough to replace them.

Arman listened to it all, not really caring. All he could really hear was the harsh sound of Loke's breathing, and the small choked whimpers he made, trying to hide the extent of his pain from his master. To look at the boy, you

would never suspect him of such strength, a slight, fair creature, with eyes which seemed to draw you in with their sorrow when he was sad, and which lit up his face when he smiled. There was good breeding in Loke, and an iron will. Arman prayed hard to Lord Niko that he would spare his friend.

The day wore on, the heat got worse. So did Loke, who began to ramble a little, having a mumbled, mostly incoherent conversation half with Arman, half with his dead father. Arman did his best to follow him, wiping his forehead, and despairing at the cold feel of it. He changed the dressing again – the bleeding was a little abated, but not much. Loke still refused wine, but allowed Arman to trickle a little water into his mouth. It only made him cough and choke, so Arman stopped and helped Loke sit a little until he could breathe.

The medic returned, Arman wasn't sure how much later. Regretful eyes, damning words – nothing had changed, he said. "But the bleeding is slowing," Arman hissed, drawing the man out of the tent so Loke could not hear him.

"Sei, he's bleeding inside. I've seen this before."

"Then why in the name of all the gods don't you know how to treat it?"

"It's been tried, General. The patients suffer agonies, and die of infection anyway. None survive. I wish I could offer you better news. Loke is a good lad."

"Get out of my sight," Arman growled. The man nodded and walked away, unperturbed by his general's anger. Such acceptance only made Arman more enraged, but there was nothing and no one he could vent his anger against.

He turned to go back into the tent, but heard his name called. He stopped and waited for Jozo to reach him. "How is he?"

"The medic says he's dying. The man lies, Jozo."

"A gut wound, I heard. I'm sorry, Arman."

"Everybody's sorry, no one has an answer." He forced himself to rein in his bitter temper. "I apologise for leaving you to deal with things...but when I saw..." He shuddered and drew a breath. "Have you found the perpetrator?"

"Not yet. We've secured the supplies and hostages have been selected. We won't move until you're ready."

*Until Loke dies*, Arman realised he was saying. "They will pay for this outrage, Jozo. Loke was no threat to them. We have killed no one on this campaign."

"No, Arman, I know that, and they will pay, I promise you. But for now, you're relieved, my friend. Go to him and give him comfort."

"Wait – the men who died. I don't want their bodies anywhere near this wretched village."

"We'll carry out rites for them tomorrow, Arman. Don't trouble yourself." Jozo clasped his shoulder. "I know this is hard, my friend. But it's war."

"Loke is not at war with anyone," Arman bit out, and shrugged off Jozo's hand. "I will be on duty tomorrow."

"As long as it takes," Jozo said kindly.

Arman stalked back into the tent, and was immediately struck by the stink. Loke had soiled himself, and was distressed by it. "Never mind, Loke, it's nothing," Arman said gently, soothing his anguished friend's embarrassment, cleaning up unobtrusively and settling clean blankets around him. Even these gentle careful movements caused Loke acute pain. Every bitten off cry was like a knife in the heart to Arman.

But at last he was settled again. "I'm so cold, Arman. Hold me?"

"Of course." He tucked more blankets around the shivering body and sat on the pallet, lifting Loke's head and shoulders into his lap. "Is that better?"

"Yes," Loke sighed. "It doesn't hurt so much now."

"That's good," Arman said with a sinking heart, for he knew this was not relief that came from anything but the beginning of the final struggle. Unbidden, tears began to trickle down his cheeks, but Loke's eyes were closed, so he could not see them, thank the gods. He forced himself to smile, so that his voice sounded cheerful. "Did I ever tell you about the time Tijus and I stole two jesigs and decided to race them across my father's garden? I was only eight."

"No," Loke whispered. "Tell me."

So Arman told him about the escapade and the unholy mess they'd made, then about the time they trained Karus' pet tuktuk bird to swear. And how he had once tried to make the fish in his mother's pond turn pink by feeding them clisel berries, but all it did was to send them into a frenzy and the gardener had had to net them and separate them before they fought themselves to death. Loke laughed a little, even though it clearly hurt him. "You...were a bad child, Arman."

"Very naughty. Karus said I was one of the worst boys he'd ever taught."

"And...the best...man. He said...you...the best man...."

"Only because he never taught you, my friend." There was no colour at all in Loke's face now, and his breathing was ragged, each breath a struggle. Arman helped him sit up a little, which eased his breathing, but pained him so much that Arman had no choice but to let him lie still. "Loke...I need to tell you...."



Loke opened his eyes a little – even that effort seeming to exhaust him. “Yes?” A word or a puff of air, it was hard to tell.

“I have always valued you, Loke. I wish I had made that plainer.”

“You did.” The barest whisper. “Always...felt treasured.”

“You were. You are. I love you, and I can’t bear.... Please don’t go, Loke. Stay with me.” Tears dripped unhindered down Arman’s face. He brushed them carefully off Loke’s hair where they had fallen.

“I’ll...try. Don’t...weep. I...love...Arman.”

Arman bent low and kissed Loke’s forehead, and laid his hand on Loke’s cold cheek. Loke reached his own hand up and weakly held Arman’s fingers as Arman grieved as silently as he could, his sorrow a wild, uncontrollable agony in his chest, the depth of his loss immeasurable and indescribable.

He didn’t know when Loke finally passed. All he knew was that Loke’s hand had dropped away, and the shallow breaths had ceased, the body that had suffered so long, now lax and free of pain. He still checked, his palm against Loke’s mouth, a finger against the missing pulse. Then he slid out from under Loke’s shoulders and laid his head down gently, before bending and kissing the cool forehead again. “Farewell, dear friend. The gods grant you a home in the heavens.”

He covered Loke’s face with the blanket and then stood. He pulled his armour back on, strapped on his sword, and walked out of the tent. Two soldiers stood on guard. “No one goes in,” he said curtly, then he strode off towards the village, calling for someone to fetch Jozo, and for the men to fall in behind him.

He found the villagers assembled in the main square, kneeling in the dirt, under close guard. “Which one of you threw the explosive?” His anger was cold as snow in his chest.

No one responded to his call, so he stalked over to the clan head and dragged her up by her hair, drawing his sword and holding it to her throat. “Let the man who threw the bomb step forward, or she dies now.”

At first there was no reaction, but as he pressed the edge of his sword against the woman’s neck, a voice cried out in distress. “No! It was me, don’t!”

Still holding his captive, he scanned the prisoners. “Come forward, you coward.”

A teenaged boy stood, and was immediately dragged out and over to Arman, being cast on the ground in front of him. Arman pushed the clan head away from him. “Who is kin to this boy? Who are his mother and father?”

A man and a woman stood, and were also dragged over to him. Arman had them held facing him, as he pulled the boy up, his arm around his throat. "You are his parents? Answer me!"

"Yes, lord," the woman said, her voice trembling. "He is our son, our only child. Please, I beg you, be merciful."

"Merciful," Arman repeated with heavy irony. "I know another woman with an only son, an only child. At least, she *had* a son. I have his last note to bring to her. Will that comfort her, do you think? Will she rejoice to know that her child, who never harmed anyone or anything in his life, was killed by yours? I think *not*," he spat at her in anger. "You ask for mercy?" He took his sword and thrust it suddenly up under the boy's ribs. He heard him choking, and let him fall to the ground. "There is your mercy. You can bury him. That's more than she will have."

The woman screamed and fell to her knees, clutching the boy's body to her chest. The man looked at Arman in anger, and raised his hand, but he was knocked to the ground before he could strike. Arman ignored him and stepped away from the pitiful scene, in which he had no further interest. "This is how it will be, you honourless bastards. You kill one of my people, we will kill yours. If you kill my soldiers, your hostages will die, and we will take more. If you strike again, your village will be razed to the ground and every one of you sent to work in the torkezi mines until you die of exhaustion. The Prij will not tolerate rebellion. I will not tolerate cowardice. I will pray to Lord Niko for the rest of my life that yours will be short, miserable and filled with grief." He spat on the ground to show his disgust. "This village is damned. I curse it and all of you."

He turned. Jozo was watching him with an unreadable expression, and as Arman approached, he gripped his arm. "Don't tell me I shouldn't have done that, or we will be at odds," Arman said through gritted teeth.

"No, you did what I would have done. Do you want any more executed? We lost five other men."

Arman glanced back at the villagers. The mother with the dead boy was still crying over his corpse. "No," he said coldly. "For once I started, I would want every one of them destroyed and that is not Her Serenity's will. But I want the camp moved, Jozo. I don't want to breathe the same air as these curs a moment longer."

"Yes, of course, I've already given orders." Jozo hesitated. "And Loke...?"

The sound of the name made his eyes fill again, but when he spoke, his voice was cold and calm. "I will see to him. He is still in my care."

Gren nuts were plentiful this year, but Banji still had to wrestle Reji to prevent his friend stealing so many that they wouldn't have a respectable amount to take back to Meis. Reji was still cracking them cheerfully as they walked back. "You'll have no appetite tonight," Kei warned.

Reji only grinned and tossed another shelled nut into the air before catching it and chewing it. "Oh, I'll have an appetite, I promise you. I'll be stocking up for the long ride, when I have nothing but camp cakes and dried berries to eat."

"Huh. Stock up any more, Rei-ki and you'll have to ask Myka to let out your trousers."

Reji stuck his tongue out at him. Kei rolled his eyes and dropped back to where Banji and Risa were walking more slowly. "Can I beg a handful of nuts for Myka? She's fond of them."

"Only if you don't give them to that glutton," Banji said, scowling at Reji, but he filled Kei's pockets anyway. "You should run home before he strips you to find the food. He's worse than a tuktuk."

Reji heard that comment, and turned to sniff indignantly at them. "If you're going to be abusive, I'm going home. I'll see you later, Kei, if you can manage not to be mean to me for more than five minutes at a time."

Kei made a rude gesture at his lover's departing back. "That damn man," he said with a sigh.

"Kei, do you love Reji?"

"Eh? What kind of question is that, Banji-ki? And in front of Risa too."

Risa scowled. "Love talk, yuck. I'm taking these home to Ma before someone steals them." Banji ruffled his cousin's hair and gave him the other basket to carry, still only a small load for Risa's sturdy legs.

They were left alone and Kei stopped walking, instead heading over to the edge of the waterhole, so he could sit in the shade of a tido tree. "Why the sudden interest in my feelings for Reji? You're not going to declare you love me yourself?" he teased.

"Gods, Kei, you're just the most irritating person. I don't know why I bother trying to have a serious conversation with you."

Something was biting Banji's tail today, that was for sure. "Neither do I, Banji. The answer to your question is that of course I love him. It's not romance, it's more like...well, brothers or something. We've known each other

a long time. It's just really easy with him. And since we're the only infertiles, it's not like we've got many other choices."

Banji stared. "Is that all it is? Just for want of something better?"

"Hells no. It's just lucky we like being together, that's all I meant. If we didn't, we'd have nothing, most likely."

Banji nodded, as if that was clear enough for him. "But when did your feelings change? I mean, you didn't always want to sleep with him, did you?"

"Of course not. He was seventeen when he got here. I was only ten. What in hells do you take him for?" Kei said, grinning at Banji's discomfort. "I don't know when, Banji. Something just...clicked when I got back from Darshek, and we got into bed and we liked it. I keep expecting him to say he's found someone in the city, and I'd say good luck to him if he did."

"But that would leave you alone."

"Yes, I guess it would. But I've got no claim on Reji, and I don't want one. He's too free a spirit." He flicked a grass seed at him. "Want to tell me what's got you in such a mood? Is it this person who I'm not allowed to mention?"

Banji gave him a look which told him Kei was right. "It's just...if you've known someone for a long time, why do you start seeing them differently? Is it just...being close to them all the time? Just convenience?"

"Banji-ki, promise not to hit me for this...but you wouldn't be talking about my sister, by any chance?" Banji's blush was all the answer Kei needed. "By the gods, that's wonderful!"

"No, it's not," Banji said with a grimace.

"Hey, you're not going to malign my sister to me, are you? Myka's got her faults...."

"No, gods damn you! You're not *listening*!"

"You're not *telling* me, Banji. What in hells is the problem?"

"The problem is that I used to help your mother change Myka's nappies for her and I'm not sure that I'm not just feeling grateful for her being kind after Pa was killed." Banji's expression was pure challenge. "Plain enough for you?"

"Yes, but I still don't see the problem. Reji cleaned up more than a few skinned knees for me so I didn't have to bother Ma. It sure doesn't bother him when we're making love. As for the other thing...what does it matter why you become interested in someone? Myka doesn't feel sorry for you, I know that. She's kind, but she's not *that* kind."

"I know. But I shouldn't feel like this when Pa's only been dead three months. I feel like...."

“Like he would think you didn’t love him? Banji-ki, I told you, Ban and Kleta would be the first people to tell you to go on. Myka loved and honoured them, so did I. And you know they loved us.”

“I know....” Banji was still troubled.

Kei slung an arm over his shoulder in comfort. “Banji, I have no fears you would lead my sister on or play with her heart to hurt her. She would never do that to you. I think you should talk to her. She’s easy to talk to. The hard bit is shutting her up.”

“Huh, you’re the one to talk. I just don’t want to give her expectations, Kei. I don’t know that I’m ready for anything. It’s been such an awful year.”

Kei hugged him closer, and leaned his chin on his shoulder. “I know. So does she. You like her, right? And she must like you if she gave you the bracelet. Has she said more?”

“No.”

“So what makes you think she wants more at the moment? She’s had a hard time too, Banji. I say, just have fun and comfort each other and see what happens.”

Banji looked dubiously at him. “You don’t mind? I’m not going to find Fedor telling me to marry her or else?”

“Are you going to get her pregnant?”

“No, we’re being careful.”

Kei blinked at the news that not only had his sister and his best friend been carrying on a little romance behind his back, but they’d been having actual sex too. “All right, if she catches, Fedor would surely take the child if you really don’t want to wed her, but it will cause ill-feeling for a while. Just don’t rub people’s noses in it, and don’t make it impossible for her to find someone else, if you really don’t love her. That’s all I ask. She’s a sensible girl, Banji-ki, and you’re an honourable man. I’d love to call you brother, but don’t let me pressure you.” He squeezed Banji again and let him go. “Now....”

His words were cut off by the brutal sound of the clan’s summoning horn – his blood ran cold as he heard the code for ‘emergency, all to come’. “Let’s go.”

They ran as fast as their legs would carry them towards the village, caught up in minutes in the rushing crowd. Fedor was standing on a stool at the top of the square, calling for everyone to be quiet. Kei recognised Duka, the mind-speaker from Ai-Tuek. Since Ai-Albon didn’t have a mind-speaker of its own, if there was an urgent message from the south or from Darshek, either Duka, or Meko from Ai-Beyto to the north, would ride to deliver it. As it was several

days' ride in either direction, it was only ever undertaken for the most serious of reasons. From the look on Fedor's face, and the emotions Kei could feel, the reason was indeed grave.

The clan settled down and Fedor cleared his throat. "Friends, I have serious news from Duka. I'll let her explain. Please, hear her out. Time is very short."

He stepped off the stool and Duka took his place. "The Prij are invading," she said. The blunt news sent shock waves through the crowds. "They overran Ai-Rutej eight days ago, and Ai-Vinri five days later. They're taking hostages, and quartering soldiers on the town. The Rulers of Darshek know about it, and have instructed all the clan heads to send who they can north to Darshek, to keep only enough in the villages to not make the losses obvious – and not to offer resistance." A murmur of anger rippled through the clanspeople. "No, wait, it's only until they can mount a defence. They will rescue the villages and the hostages, they swear – but they don't want anyone to die fighting the Prij, and they don't want an all out war with the Prij while there are still people undefended. They need time to plan an attack and to know what the Prij are planning. On our own, we can't defeat them. We can only give in temporarily. The healer of Ai-Rutej is a mind-speaker. She reports the hostages are being well treated, and for the moment, are in an encampment at the base of the Treyk Mountains. The Rulers don't believe they will be harmed, so long as we do not fight back. There is no advantage to the Prij in doing so."

"Are we to just let them take people away without a word of protest?" someone shouted furiously. Kei recognised Reji's voice.

"For now, yes," Duka said. "Fedor, I think you better take over." She avoided looking towards Reji as she climbed off the stool.

"People, we have no choice. We can't fight the Prij, we can only try and protect the most vulnerable. Reji, how many people can you guide to Darshek, if you take all but two urs beasts and all the wagons? How long would it take you if you have people on foot?"

Reji pushed his way to the front of the crowd, his expression angry. "I can take everyone! Fedor, don't let the Prij have them!"

"Reji, if they find the village deserted, not only will they know we know, but the ruse will not work anywhere else. We can't move everyone fast enough – the army is coming north at a forced march pace, Duka says. So please, hold your temper, and answer me."

“A hundred or so,” Reji said in a tight voice. “It will take four weeks, if everyone’s on foot, longer if we’re unlucky with the weather or a wagon breaks down. Three wagons and six beasts can carry supplies for that many for that long. If we can resupply en route, we can make better time because we can have more riding. We can’t carry enough water, but we’ll have to stop to let the beasts drink anyway.”

“Do you think you can take them off the regular route safely?”

“In places. Not all the way, and it will slow us down. It would be better to try and outrun them on the main road. We have to be there before the rains come, Fedor – the wagons will get bogged.”

“Very well, please start the planning, and be prepared to abandon the wagons if you have to finish the journey by beast and on foot. Now, the Prij are only taking men and women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. The prime of the clan,” Fedor said heavily. “Therefore, I propose we send away as many of us in that group as we can, and any older children who can handle the walking. No infants, no mothers with children afoot, the Prij apparently don’t want them either. Myka, you’ll go because they’ll need a healer. Please start a list. I want no arguments, and those chosen must be ready to leave in two hours. I have spoken.”

Fedor looked very old as he delivered his edict, which must have hurt him cruelly, Kei knew. People began to argue and exclaim around him, as Kei pushed through to his sister’s side. “Myka, I’ll fetch paper for making notes. I’ll be staying. I’m infertile, the village can spare me.”

His sister gave a little cry of distress. “No, Kei, you’re our healer!”

“Another reason to stay. There’s no time to argue. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Fedor had recruited Peit and Rin to help keep order, but it was still difficult to get through the press of the crowd so he could run to their house and fetch paper. When he got back to the square, Banji and Myka were arguing furiously. “You will *not* stay, you idiot!”

“I have to, Myka! Some of us have to!”

Meis and Rin were watching the two young people scream at each other, looking upset and conflicted. The rest of the clan were ignoring them, caught up in their own little emotional storms, trying to determine who should go or stay. Myka just wasn’t going to be able to do this without help. “Right, listen up!” Heads swivelled at Kei in surprise – he wasn’t one for making his voice heard in public. “Banji, Myka, you both go, as does Pijli and Misek.”

“Not me, Kei – they won’t take someone damaged.” Misek forced his way forward, and crossed his arms across his chest. “Meis and Rin still have two children safe, and two to comfort them.”

“All right.” Kei walked around the assembly quickly, nominating the ones to go and to stay. People were so stunned, and perhaps so used to his making decisions affecting their welfare, that they let him get away with it, only arguing a little in favour of one child or sibling or other where they thought he had missed something important. By the time he had done, and the names noted, Fedor and Rin had regained control of the situation, able to handle the surprisingly few complaints. There were one hundred and fifteen names in the end, but Reji, returning to the square to check on proceedings, said he could handle that. He said he could maybe squeeze a few more in, but Fedor told him that it was better to have a number he knew he could handle. It left two hundred and seventy souls in the village to face the Prij.

Kei grabbed Myka’s arm and forced her back to their house. “Pack, Mychichi.”

“I’m *not* leaving you behind.”

“You are, if I have to drug you and every other person on the list and have Reji carry you like sacks. Don’t you see, Myka? At least some of us are guaranteed to be safe, and you can help Darshek prepare the defence. They will come, I know they will.”

“No!” she yelled. “Kei, you’re in that age group, they’ll take you for sure!”

“So they may. It’s only for a little while, Myka. They don’t seem to be harming anyone if they don’t resist. Please, girl, do your duty. I can’t be in both places at once.”

“Kei,” she said, throwing herself at him, and sobbing. “I can’t, I can’t leave you.”

“And I can’t either.” Kei lifted his head to look at Reji, standing in the doorway. “This is a stupid idea. I’m not doing it.”

“So you’d rather Myka was taken a hostage?”

“I’ll go in her place.”

“You’re too damn old,” Kei said roughly, “and they want women too. Will you two stop being so damn indulgent and get on with it? Reji, you have orders, go carry them out.”

“So eager to see me gone, Keichichi?” Reji came to him, and put his arms around him and Myka both.



"I want you to protect my sister, my best friend, and my clan. *Your* clan." He seized Reji's head, kissed him almost cruelly, then pushed him away. "I refuse to discuss this any more. Myka, I order you to pack."

Her face had been red from crying but now it flushed in anger. "You're not my father."

"No, I am." Fedor walked in and stood in front of them. "And I order it too."

"I hate you, Uncle," Myka spat.

"Myka! Retract that!"

Fedor held up his hand. "No, Kei, let her say her piece. I'm not very fond of me either, right now. Reji, don't make me beg. You are the only person we can ask to do this. Danak and Bei are too old to make the journey. If you refuse, we're lost."

Reji glared, but then he relented. "All right. Myka, go pack."

"I hate you too, Reji. You're both traitors to Ai-Albon."

"Yes, yes. Go pack, girl." Reji's shoulders slumped. Kei came to his side and lent him his support, metaphorically. "It's still risky, Fedor."

"Tell me something I don't know. I have faith in Darshek, though. I will rest easier if you have our future safe. We will keep yours safe if you will do the same."

"Aye, Fedor." Reji hesitated. "What of Ai-Darbin?"

"I don't know, Reji. I'm sorry, I wish I had news. There are other groups on their way, we might see the first of them tomorrow. If the Prij stick to their present path, we won't encounter them for three weeks. You have a good head start, if you go now."

"Yes. I've sketched a plan. Come to my house and I'll show you while I pack. Kei? Will you make sure Myka goes?"

Kei nodded. "I will if I have to tie her up. She'll be there." He gave Reji a nudge. "Go on."

Reji gave him a troubled look, but he walked out with Fedor beside him. Kei collapsed onto a chair, his mind in turmoil. Was it only a few minutes ago that his worst problem was negotiating a love match between his sister and his friend? At least Banji was going. Kei was prepared to tie *him* up too, if he had to.

Damn, and he was wasting time. The group of refugees would need medical supplies, and Myka was in no state to plan or to pack them. Quickly he went through the stores, dividing drugs and equipments and bandages into unequal piles. He reserved the things which Myka had no experience of using, which were few enough, and gave her a larger portion of pain killers

and nitre distillation, as it was likely the travellers would suffer more than the usual amount of minor injuries. Kei wished he could go – not for his own safety, but because it pained him to let his patients out of his sight.

A thump behind him made him turn, so suddenly he nearly knocked a canteen of nitre distillation off the table. It was Myka, her pack thrown on the floor, tears streaming down her face. “Kei,” she whispered, her expression miserable as she stood with her arms wrapped around herself.

He took her into his arms, and rocked her, tears springing to his own eyes. It was at moments like this he missed his parents more than ever, because he needed their strength. “It will be all right, Mychichi,” he murmured. “You have a great responsibility, but you’ll be able to carry it, I know.” He let her cry a little longer, but then he made her stand up and wipe her eyes. There was so little time. “Here, you need to check these and make sure you have what you need.”

Appealing to her professional side stopped the tears, and she switched into her healer’s role in a way that made Kei’s heart proud. *Ma would be so pleased with her*, he thought. She asked for fewer bandages, some more sutures, and blister cream, which Kei had completely forgotten. By the time Fedor knocked on their door again, she was calm, and as ready as either of them could make her.

Kei picked up the medical supplies and they headed to the urs beasts pens. There was a bewildering level of activity, and everywhere voices were raised, in anger, in grief. The only consolation was that the chosen travellers seemed to be assembling, and the emotions of the families left behind, while deeply troubled, were not excessive. There would not be, Kei was confident, any wild or hysterical scenes. After the first shock, people seemed to have accepted the necessity of the plan.

Reji was too busy to talk, merely directing him to the beast on to which the medical supplies should be packed, and how. Kei had often helped his lover with preparing for his journeys, and so was able to efficiently and quickly stow the supplies, before pitching in to help load the other animals. Much of the food which had been assembled for the feast that evening, was now going into the wagons to feed those who had to walk over six hundred miles before they reached safety. He tried not to think all the things that could happen to Reji or Myka or Banji in that time. It never did any good to dwell on the worst.

At last, Reji announced he was ready. Fedor shouted for the travellers to come forward and be marked off, so Reji and Kei could check they were prepared and fit. No one was missing, no one had to be rejected. Everyone

was near tears or actually crying. Kei felt almost ready to pass out from the overload of reflected emotion, but he knew he had to force himself to be strong until the travellers left.

Fedor called for silence. "Clan Albon, today is a dark one, make no mistake. We owe a debt of gratitude to Duka for taking a great risk to come and warn us, and to Reji for agreeing to shepherd our people to safety. Those who go, those who stay, have a heavy burden to bear – let us do so bravely. Reji, go with our thanks, return to our joy."

"Yes, Fedor. I won't fail the clan."

"Father, I won't fail the clan either." Myka came and knelt before Fedor. "And I am truly sorry for my words earlier," she said in a quiet voice, which only Fedor and Kei could hear.

Fedor laid his hand on her head. "My sister's child, my daughter, my heart is heavy, but I'm proud of you." He urged her to stand, so he could kiss her cheek. "Erte watches over you, Myka. Erte and Keiji both watch over you." He embraced her briefly, then turned her towards Kei. "Say your farewells, Myka. Everyone, a few moments, no more."

Kei went to her side and hugged her. "You know I'll miss you every moment of every day, sister mine."

"And I you, brother mine. Please don't die."

Kei laughed, but it felt more like crying. "I will do my very best," he said gravely. They clung together for a moment or two, but Kei had other farewells he had to make. "I'll see you soon, Myka. Before the year is out."

She pushed him away. "Go see Banji and Reji." She walked away before he could call her back.

Reji was watching him, a grim set to his mouth. Kei was suddenly unsure he was welcome, but then, in a few swift strides, Reji was with him, and crushing him close. "Every instinct I have is screaming at me to drag you away, Kei. This is so wrong, I don't know what to say."

Kei had no response to this, so he let his lips do something else but talk. There were tears in Reji's eyes now – hells, in his own too. "Don't damn well die," Reji said tightly. "Don't get hurt, and for the gods' sake, don't draw attention to yourself, Kei."

"I will do my best. You too, Rei-ki."

Reji held him almost painfully close, and then shoved him away. "Enough. I'll never go if I hold you a moment longer. Be here when I get back, little brother, or I'll be damn angry with you."

Kei saluted shakily. "Aye, Reji. Now go."

For a few moments, he was left abandoned, surrounded by weeping families all caught up in their own pain, but then his name was called, and Banji was there, grabbing his shoulders and shaking him. "You – you're making me go." Banji was crying, anger and grief warring in his eyes. "Why? My family are here. Damn you, Kei!"

"Your family is there too, Banji, and your future. I need you to look after my sister, you urs-witted fool, and *your* damn sister. You have to look after all the sisters and sons and brothers and daughters! They need you, they need Myka, they need Reji. Gods damn you, Banji." He grabbed Banji and hugged him fiercely. "Don't hate me, please don't hate me."

Battered too long by too many strong emotions from all sides, Kei's control over his gift at last started to shatter despite his desperate efforts to maintain it, and for a few moments, he couldn't tell where his own feelings stopped and those of the angry, worried people around him started. His vision began to sparkle and his legs felt weak, like he was about to faint.

Banji realised something was wrong. He dragged Kei away from the main crowd, and made him sit down against a wall, crouching next to him, a hand on his shoulder. "Damn fool," Banji said, stroking his face. "Won't you ever learn not to take everything on yourself?"

"I don't...don't have any choice," Kei said, his voice breaking. People didn't understand soul-touchers any more than they did mind-movers. "Oh, gods, Banji, just go, and leave me be. I can't bear it any more. It hurts so much."

He rested his face on his folded arms, just wishing the travellers would go before he disgraced himself further. He felt Banji's arm around his shoulders. "There's only a moment or two, Kei," Banji whispered. "I'm sorry. I don't hate you. I'll look after Myka, I swear. We will come home to you."

"Yes," Kei whispered. "Gods, Banji-ki."

Being physically distant from the others helped a little. Banji let him rest for a short moment, but then made him stand. "You'll worry Myka. Be brave just a little longer, my friend, and then go to Misek. He will look after you. Meis and Rin will care for you as their own. I have their word on it."

Kei wiped his nose on his arm. "You've had me adopted again, Banji?" he said with a forced grin. Banji's face was a blurry, wavering thing in front of him. "Isn't once enough?"

"Obviously not. Kei, they're calling me. I have to go." Banji pulled him forward and kissed his forehead. "Be well, Kei."

"And you, my friend."

Banji slipped away. The roars of the urs beasts drowned out the sounds of crying and lamenting. Kei slumped to his knees again. The emotional overload had seared him to the point where he only felt numb, physically and mentally. He didn't even watch the caravan head up the street, or try to catch a last glimpse of his sister or his friends. He couldn't stand one more blow this day.

Strong arms pulled him up, and then a weathered, kind face peered at him.

"Un...uncle Fedor. I'm sorry...."

Fedor's hands were all that were holding him up.

"Come with me, lad. Now is no time to be alone. You'll stay with us tonight, we'll drink to our ancestors, and then you can rest. You have suffered the most of any of us today, Kei. I'm sorry."

It was too much, finally. His uncle, now his father, held him as, overwhelmed and heartsick, he wept for those he loved that he feared he would never see again.



It was a tense, unhappy three weeks. The village which had once rung with the calls of children playing, of men and women engaged in work for the good of all, was now a quiet, sullen place. Children stayed inside, their parents afraid to lose sight of them. Husbands argued with wives who wept for offspring now sent away perhaps forever. Kei, who had lost all those he could talk to easily about such matters, withdrew into himself, spending most of each day on his own, sitting by the waterhole and gnawing on his worries when he wasn't occupied making up drugs and distilling nitre weed and pijn. His clansmen's emotions were like acid on his soul, and when he felt so raw, so full of grief and pain, he couldn't bear it for more than a few minutes in anyone else's company before he was forced to seek solitude. His aunt Sira and Meis took it in turns to feed him and offer him a place to sleep, but most nights, he went back to his own, lonely house, which still smelled a little of his and Reji's lovemaking, and cried a little before he finally slept. The nights were full of anxious dreams.

Duka stayed with them two more nights to let her hard-worked urs beast recover before she headed back to Ai-Tuek at speed, and so was able to tell them the grim news that someone had been killed by the Prij in Ai-Darbin. It lent weight to the decision to offer no resistance, but it was a very cold comfort.

Every few days brought a brief visit from escaping villagers, bringing news, seeking news, taking some supplies and leaving behind people who were coming close to breaking under the strain. Those of Ai-Tuek arrived the day Duka was due to return home – some of her people begged her to go with them, but she was determined, she said, to stand with the village. Besides, they needed their mind-speaker.

The travellers from Ai-Darbin arrived four days later, and they heard more about the killing. A young boy, cut down without trial or mercy in front of his parents, for the crime of trying to fight back against the invaders, as if this wasn't the most natural reaction of any person to their home being threatened. The name wasn't one Kei knew, so at least it wasn't one of Reji's close kin, but it still made the blood run cold to hear the tale. At least all the villages save Ai-Rutej had had time to send people away – they carried the hopes of so many, these tired, strained young men and women, too young really for the burden. Kei treated the refugees for burns, scrapes, blisters, and in a couple of cases, sprained limbs and cracked ribs from falls. Otherwise, they were in good health, and despite being unutterably weary from the journey, which was already weeks long for some, the determination to continue burned bright. As well it might, Kei reflected sourly. They at least weren't sitting decoys, awaiting an uncertain fate.

So in a way it was a relief to see the distant clouds of dust that heralded the arrival of the army. Everyone had been carefully schooled how to react, how to behave, the children drilled remorselessly so they did not let the slightest hint slip that all the villagers were in fact not present. The hostage list was prepared in advance, although Fedor wasn't sure the Prij were going to let them choose, not after what happened in Ai-Darbin. Kei knew he was certain to be chosen. They were taking the oldest child of the clan head in every village, or the oldest niece or nephew where there was no child of the right age, and in Ai-Albon, that meant him, if they didn't want Fedor's fifteen year old son, Lori, to go in his place. Those named on the hostage list were to be carefully stationed at the front of the assembly, the better to catch the eye of the Prij commanders. They had done absolutely all they could do, to minimise the harm to the village and the clan. All they could do now, was wait.

They heard the army long before they saw them. The noise was terrifying, like rolling thunder, a cacophony of drums and horns which battered one down. It was easy to seem frightened and overawed when the mass of urs beasts lumbered towards them – it wasn't really a pretense at all for Kei. The sun glittered off hundreds of chest plates and spearheads, and angry looking

banners fluttered in the breeze. The villagers waited in the square, Fedor at their head. No one said a word, not even the children. Misek stood at Kei's back, his hand on his shoulder, a silent comfort as much as any could be.

At last the drums and horns stopped and several men on urs beasts came forward to the head of the massed soldiers. Two were clearly high ranking, possibly the leaders, dressed in brilliant armour from head to foot, high plumes of feathers on their helmets making them seem like giants. Kei couldn't see their faces, but he got the strongest impression of deep hatred from one of them. Hatred and pain, powerful and raw enough to make him feel sick. A lesser ranking officer had ridden to the front, and was making a speech in oddly accented Darshianese.

"People of the village of Albon, it has pleased Her Serenity, the gracious Kita Ruj Kemi, beloved of Lord Niko, to take you and your property under the protection of the empire of the Prij. From hence forth, all goods and products of this village belong to the empire and you will obey the laws and edicts of Kuprij. You will supply as evidence of good faith, ten people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five that are in fair health and body. These will be kept in the gracious custody of Her Serenity, as a bond for your continued co-operation. Her Serenity leaves for your protection a cadre of soldiers who will guide your relations with the Empire and ensure cooperation. If any soldier is harmed, one of your people will be maimed in like kind. If any soldier is killed – all your people in custody will be executed as an example to all and a further ten removed. If the crime is repeated, your village will be destroyed and every occupant taken into slavery and kept enslaved to the fourth generation."

The man rolled up the paper from which he read, and moved back. One of the senior officers rode forward a little. "Let the clan head come forward." This man spoke far better Darshianese, but his voice dripped with scorn. It was from him Kei could feel the hostility.

Fedor stepped out. "I am clan head. Fedor of Ai-Albon. Who am I addressing?"

"I am Sei General Arman of the Prij, co-commander of this army. Fedor of Ai-Albon, you have to the slow count of one hundred to choose ten hostages. After that, we shall choose for you. Your oldest child must be among the ten. If you have none old enough, choose a child of your nearest kin. Begin."

Fedor nodded, and as a drum began to tap out the count, he swiftly walked along the front of the gathered crowd, making a slight show of having to decide. Kei couldn't help wanting to cringe as his uncle's hand tapped his

shoulder, for all that he was so well warned. "It is done," Fedor said, before the count was two thirds complete.

"Lieutenant, escort the hostages to their homes to pack. Each must take two days' water, and two weeks' dry food. Clan head, you will provide us with a sack of grain for every ten persons in your village. You will provide quarters for our men at the point closest to your grain stores. If there is any resistance, we will kill all concerned. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, my lord."

Fedor stood proud but the officer speaking to him turned his beast and rode off, without even bothering to acknowledge his acquiescence. *Arrogant bastards*, Kei thought angrily, but then his arm was seized and he was dragged further away from the assembly, as were the other hostages.

Two soldiers apiece came up beside them. "Move, you have to pack," he was told in clumsy Darshianese and then marched between his guards to his home. He had long ago decided what to pack, but still had to actually do it since it would seem suspicious to be ready. His clothing and personal effects were no difficulty. The medical supplies were more of a problem. "What is this?" one of the men wanted to know, picking up a bottle of nitre distillation.

Kei explained it in simple words, as if to a child. "It's medicine for wounds. It's deadly poison, so you mustn't drink it."

The soldier put it down hastily. "Do you think we should let him take it?"

"Can't see how it will harm anyone but himself. Prisoner, if you or anyone else harm themselves, or come to harm, your fellows will suffer the same fate as you, do you understand that?"

"Yes, sir. I take responsibility for all such matters."

The older of the two soldiers nodded. "All right. If you want to pour poison on yourselves, that's up to you. Hey, you can't take those!"

Kei spread the surgical kit out. "Can they be kept safe if I need them? They can do no harm if you keep them."

"I'll make arrangements with our medic and seal the things up. Better give me that poison stuff too."

Kei had expected this, but he hoped the medic was a reasonable man. If he needed the things in a hurry, a delay could be fatal.

The bandages and ointments were passed without comment, and so he was ready in a very short time. He found his hands were shaking, and clenched them into fists at his side. No amount of preparation could ready him for being taken from his home under guard. The two men guarding him seemed reasonable, but he could detect a lot of hostility from the other



soldiers, contemptuous looks thrown in the direction of the villagers, even some fear, which seemed odd, considered how badly the Darshianese were outnumbered.

He was taken back to the square where his fellow hostages were also assembled. He could feel their fear, and see it in their eyes. He tried to look reassuring, because that was what he did as a healer. He got a slight response, lips a little less tight, but not much. Not surprising, he thought.

The lieutenant spoke to the other top officer, who nodded. The lieutenant carefully noted down the name of every hostage, and had Fedor sign the list. "Fedor of Ai-Albon, your mark on this document shows you have agreed that these men and women stand as your bond of good behaviour. Retribution for any crime against Kuprij will fall first on them. You may say a brief farewell on behalf of their families."

Even knowing in advance what was coming, many people were weeping, but Kei was proud to see that no one was breaking down, or shaming those who had to go by begging them to stay. Fedor was stiff-backed and every inch the clan head as he clasped the hand of each hostage and kissed their cheeks. When he got to Kei, he saw Fedor's eyes were awash with tears. "My son, my nephew," he said so quietly that they were the only ones who could hear. "I wish there was some other answer."

"There isn't, my father. I will wait for the joy of seeing you again – and the rest of my family."

"As will I." He hugged Kei tightly. "Gods, you are so like Keiji, but you remind me of her too. It hurts to let you go, my last tie to Erte."

"I'll be back, father. I promise." Kei made him let go – he couldn't handle Fedor's pain and his own, if he was going to stay calm. His control had not been the same since the day Myka and the others left. He suspected something had broken inside him that day, but there didn't seem to be anything he could do except try and stop people aggravating the injury.

There was so much he wanted to say to Fedor now the time had come, so many things he wished he could do. He had trained Misek and Meis as much as he could to act as healers, but they could still only handle the bare basics. If there was a serious outbreak of illness, or another kiln explosion, people would die because he wasn't there. He bit his lip from saying as much. Lori was too young to make this journey. His 'brother' was much better able to handle it.

There was no time left. The lieutenant's patience was at an end, and without further ceremony, Kei and the others were marched out of the village.

Kei didn't know whether what was happening was an ending or a beginning, but it was as painful as birth, and as much cause for grief as dying.

Hope was the only comfort they had now.



Jozo was very pleased. "Another annexation gone smoothly, eh, Arman? In two weeks we'll be at Kislik, and you can turn back towards home."

*Home*, Arman thought dully. *I have no home now*. "Doesn't it strike you as strange that it has been so easy? These curs today didn't even make the pretense of a protest. It feels wrong, Jozo."

"Come now, Arman. What are a couple of hundred simple, superstitious barbarians like that going to do when they see a thousand of Kuprij's finest come over the horizon? They're too busy shitting themselves to fight."

"Yes, but if the Darshianese were to attack Utuk...."

"Which the gods forbid," Jozo quickly interrupted.

"Which the gods would never allow," Arman agreed impatiently, "but say they did, even the smallest child would stand to defend the city. None of them seemed to care."

Jozo swept his hand around. "Would you want to die for this? Utuk's a proud, ancient city. This is just farmland."

"As you say. I'm going to take a guard and ride on ahead. I don't want to be near these people."

"All right. Arman...I know you grieve, my friend. But this hatred, it's not like you. It's not the spirit that makes a good general either." Jozo's eyes were kind, worried for him.

"Don't tell me how I should feel, Jozo. So long as I do my job to Her Serenity's satisfaction, no one will have a complaint. She'll be pleased to have her empire expanded."

Jozo shook his head. "Very well, if that's how you want to play it, I won't press you. I'll see you at the camping grounds at noon. Maybe you should see if you can hunt us up some meat. I'm tired of eggs."

"Perhaps." Arman turned his beast, and signalled to his men. He had to get away from these cursed Darshianese.

He ordered his guard to stay well back from him. He didn't expect any danger, but if he were entirely honest, he didn't really care if an attack came. It was hard to care about anything at all any more. The only emotions he felt were grief and hate, and the latter only in bursts. Most of the time, he felt dead inside, wanting to *be* dead. He avoided Jozo as much as he could, and

had no interactions with his men except the necessary acceptance of meals, or receipt of information. Contact with other people made him ache, because they were not....

He couldn't even think the name without his vision blurring with tears. He couldn't use his knife any more, because of the teeth marks on the handle and what they meant. He avoided his diary, with the pale blond locks stored with the last message to a mother as yet unaware of a loss that was choking Arman to death. When he lay on his pallet at night, more often than not, his hand drifted to touch a slim, warm shoulder that wasn't there any more.

It drove him to long walks at night, around and around the perimeter of the camp, desperate for the physical exhaustion which would let him sleep without dreaming of smiling bright eyes, or hearing again the last, agonised breaths. Every blond head in the camp caught his eye, every clear, light voice drew his attention. He could simply not school himself not to look or be fooled for that tiny moment in time.

He was aware he was neglecting his duties. Jozo had come the closest yet to a complaint about it today, and then only in the mildest way, but Arman knew that if they were in the middle of a serious fight, he would be a major liability. Not even for the honour of his name could he bring himself to care.

His thoughts turned to the village they had taken over today, and he gritted his teeth in disgust at the calm way the people had given up their hostages, as if their children and their brothers and sisters were nothing to them. Savages, every one of them, unfeeling, incapable of deep emotion, without honour or decent creed.

That...what was the cur's name? "Fedor," he said, spitting. Hadn't even hesitated to push his son forward. It would serve Her Serenity better to cut all their throats, so they stopped being a burden on the Empire. The gods forbid that the blood of Prij and Darshianese ever mixed. The barbarians were an offence against nature. Even their colour marked them as defiled.

But that made him think of purity and innocence, which led him back to the subject which was never far from his mind, and the callous Fedor and his worthless village slipped out of his thoughts.

Once he returned to Utuk, he would ask Her Serenity to relieve him of the necessity of ever setting foot in this cursed land again, and perhaps then he would begin to heal. It would at least mean he would never look at these dark-eyed murderers again.



Kei wondered if he would ever again know what it felt like to not be exhausted and hungry and thirsty. After nearly three weeks on the move, it seemed his whole world had narrowed to the simple task of merely keeping up right and moving. The first few days were raw hell for all of them. He had to treat and bind blisters the size of tuktuk eggs on all their feet, and sleeping on hard ground, wrapped only in thin army blankets and each other for warmth against the frosty clear skies, meant they started each day more tired than when they went to sleep. Their escort wasn't cruel, and would moderate its pace to fit the weakest members of the group, but it was still relentless, keeping them on their feet from dawn to dusk, with infrequent breaks, inadequate water and indifferent food. This on top of the anxiety and the fear that everyone was feeling, and which Kei had to endure ten times over.

As they got used to the hardship, things were a little easier, although they were all worn very thin. No one spoke as they walked, needing the energy just to keep moving. The rainy season had started, and there were days when all they could do was trudge through the mud and the wet, protected by their oilskins. It seldom rained all day, and there were only two nights when they'd had to sleep sitting up, a single piece of oiled canvas over their heads as shelter. It could have been, Kei readily acknowledged, so much worse. At least they weren't bound or chained, and the escorting soldiers, while on the whole not being that friendly, did what they could to help the hostages survive their ordeal. A couple of them, those who spoke slightly better Darshianese, were even disposed to linger and talk to them after the communal evening meal. From them, Kei learned his first words of Prijian, and encouraged the soldiers to keep teaching them the language. They were determined to take every scrap of advantage passed to them, to learn what they could of their enemy, and most of all – to survive. Even those with him who he could hear weeping quietly into their hands at night, were determined to get through this and one day go home.

Kei and Fedor had tried to choose the toughest, the strongest and the most stable of the available adults to carry out the role of hostages. Kei had known every one of them all his life. Peit had even seen him being born. Urki had given him his first kiss and told him she would marry him – albeit when he was five and she was seven. At twenty, Kei was the baby of the group, but as clan head's son, even if only by adoption, and as healer, he found himself their unofficial leader. It was a role with which he was uncomfortable, but he supposed it was inevitable they would turn to someone to take the position. Personally, he thought Peit was a more natural choice, but even he deferred

to Kei. He couldn't argue with them over it without causing them more distress.

Because he was picking up Prijian quickly and because he was careful to cultivate any sign of friendliness shown towards them, the soldiers seemed to treat him as the spokesperson for the hostages. The increased interaction meant he learned even more of the language, which was not that different from Darshianese in structure and even in some of the words, a coincidence which intrigued him. The difficulty with Prijian was that it was so bound up with the highly ordered culture, with its ranks and formalities, that there were many words for the same thing, with different intonations conveying quite different meanings for the same word, often with insulting effect. Kei suspected he wasn't exactly learning Prijian at its purest or most elegant from the soldiers who were all illiterate and as superstitious a group of men as one could ever meet.

Their religion baffled him, and the fatalism about everything being down to the whim and will of apparently capricious deities was frustrating. It was a subject which occupied his thoughts a good deal on the apparently endless march, offering some distraction from his physical misery. He couldn't understand how apparently rational humans could honestly believe that cutting a bird or an urs beast's throat would alter the mind of one of these supposed super beings, nor why no one had seemed to question why two people making the same sacrifice with the same wish, should get such different results. He wondered what kind of society the Prij had that was sustained on such a fallacious basis.

He had known the Prij knew nothing of Gifts. This he had been taught at the academy, along with the fact that the Prij had no gifted folk at all. It was not in their blood, apparently. The Prij had heard rumours about some of the powers of the truly Gifted, and dismissed them as useless barbarian myths, which was all to the good in the present situation, but Kei couldn't help resenting it a little that simple provable facts such as Gifts were considered fantasies, while the capricious and contradictory members of the pantheon worshipped by every Prij were believed to be as real as their own parents, without the slightest evidence to prove it. He was going to have to learn diplomacy if he was to survive in such an irrational culture.

They passed by the villages taken under Prijian control, but were not allowed to approach them. Instead they were encamped a couple of miles beyond the village itself while some of their escort were sent to resupply and presumably retrieve any communications. Kei couldn't get any feel for how

many soldiers were actually scattered across Darshianese territory. The force that had surrounded Ai-Albon seemed enormous, a sea of men and weapons, but their day to day contact was with the same twenty men who refused to discuss the army or its disposition with them at all, beyond simple explanations about ranks and forms of address. There might be thousands and thousands of Prij invading, equally there might only be a few hundred. Kei wasn't a military tactician, so he had no idea how many would be needed to subdue a continent. All he could tell was that, apart from their irrational religion and stratified social structure, the Prij were a warlike and aggressive race, at least en masse. Individually, they seemed much like the Darshianese. He couldn't help but wonder what made the difference when they were collected together.

Although it seemed like they had been walking for years, it was only four and a half weeks after they left Ai-Albon that they stumbled, cold, wet and exhausted, into the fort at the foothills of the Treyk Mountains. It was coming up for nightfall, so the fort was lit only by the moon and the flames of the sentinels' torches. It looked terrifying and enormous. Kei had the sickening feeling he was entering hell and would never leave again. From the emotions of his comrades, they felt the same. It didn't exactly encourage him.

Ignorant or unmoved by their apprehension, their escort moved them inside the high wooden walls. Kei could only catch an impression of the actual size of the structure, and of the numbers of soldiers within it. They were taken to see what he now knew to be a sergeant. Their names were recorded, and then their condition was assessed by the army medic, who was mainly interested in whether any of them were sick with communicable diseases.

Kei's box of supplies was handed over, explained and then sealed in his presence. The medic told him, in perfectly wretched Darshianese, that if Kei needed the things, he had only to ask, but the medic would have to supervise any dangerous procedure, to which condition Kei agreed in words, but with no intention of obeying in spirit. He'd determined Prijian medicine was as hidebound and riddled with myth as their religion, and he was damned if he would let a Prijian doctor interfere with proper treatment of his people.

The sergeant told them they would be able to wash themselves and their belongings tomorrow. For now they were taken to a large barracks where the other hostages were being held, and left there, the door being locked behind them.

The room was dim, lit by a few oil lamps, and in the corner, the faint red glow of a stove. They seemed to have been expected, since all the waiting

hostages were standing as they came in. A man stepped forward. "Welcome, Ai-Albon. I'm Gonji of Ai-Rutej."

Kei let his hand be shaken warmly. "I'm Kei." He quickly introduced the others from his village. "Gonji, we're hungry and sore. Can we rest? We can give you what news we have."

"Of course, there's only the pallets but it's better than the ground. We've got food waiting for you."

The pallets, which turned out to be stuffed with straw, were the softest things Kei had sat on in a month, and his clansmen groaned in relief as weary bodies were eased down. The other hostages took their oilskins away to dry, helped them stow packs, told them where they could relieve themselves (in latrines in an adjoining building), and brought them bowls of hot, tasty stew in wooden bowls, apparently carved from the same trees which had been cut down to make the fort.

As they ate, their hunger making them greedy, Gonji introduced the other Darshianese. The last person he brought forward was Jena, the Ai-Rutej mind-speaker, also their healer. Through her, the hostages in the fort had been kept fully apprised of the events in the north. She confirmed that Ai-Kislik had fallen, as they had expected, and that an enormous fortification was under construction just to the north of the village.

"However, I have better news," she said with a smile, and behind her, Gonji also smiled. They had clearly been looking forward to imparting this. "Every single person sent away to Darshek has arrived safely. Everyone from Ai-Albon is safe. They arrived three weeks ago. They're well and being cared for."

Kei's grip on his empty bowl tightened as he clutched at his chest with his free hand. He was suddenly overwhelmed with such a barrage of happiness and relief that he couldn't think at all. It wasn't all his own, he knew, but in his weariness, and with so many people suddenly so close after weeks on the march, he had nothing left to use to protect himself.

He struggled to stay upright, and might have managed to force the dizziness down if Urki had not, right at that moment, flung her arms around him. "Oh gods, Kei! Pito is safe!"

"No, Urki, don't...." he protested but it was too late. Her physical touch was the last straw, and his vision faded, the waves of emotions dimming suddenly, and then...nothing.



His head pounded, dark red flowers blooming behind his eyelids in time with his heartbeat. He felt sick, nauseated to his core. He curled up and wished the pain in his head would stop.

Something cool was placed on his face, and a very gentle touch on his face failed to bring a renewal of the emotional input. *Kei*. The voice was in his head, rather than in his ears. It was very soft, calming. *It's all right, Kei. It's Jena*. The soothing hand stroked his face again, and it seemed to lessen the pain, a little. *I'm sorry, I didn't realise you were a soul-toucher, or I'd have been more careful how I told you that news.*

He fumbled a hand up to touch hers. "S'all right," he mumbled, and winced as the sound of his own voice rang unpleasantly in his ears.

*Speak this way, Kei, it won't hurt you so much. We have some pijn....*

*No, keep it for something serious. We don't have any way of replacing it.*

*Very wise. You must be Erte's son. I was sorry to hear of her death.*

He risked opening an eye to squint at her, but she was just a dark blurry haze backlit by an oil lamp, so he closed his eye again. It wasn't worth the pain it caused. *You knew her?*

*I knew of her. Your mother was well-respected among healers, as was your father for his discoveries. A great loss.* There was nothing he could say to such an obvious statement, so he didn't respond. Her hand seemed to be leeching the pain away, although he suspected it was something she was actually doing with her mind. *Were you not taught better control than this at the academy?*

*It's only a minor gift, Jena.*

*Not so minor, that I can see.* Her 'voice' held a note of dry reproach. *It's also one strengthened and affected by many things, such as the profession of the person with the gift, and their emotional state and those around you. You've been careless, Kei. You, a healer, are at most risk if you do not protect yourself, and that is even without the grief you have suffered with your parents' deaths and this most recent event. You must have been taught some protective exercises – all soul-touchers and mind-speakers are.*

Kei *had* been taught them but as he had once had a good degree of natural control, his gift had rarely troubled him and so he was rather lax about carrying them out. He hadn't been able to stay for the full course of training in Darshek as news had come of first his father's death, and then a month later, the suicide of his mother, which meant he had to come home and take up the role of healer before he was quite ready or fully trained in his gift.



He'd known his emotions had been badly battered after his return from Darshek after his mother died, but he had accepted this as normal. He hadn't realised how he had let things slip, how he had exposed himself repeatedly to greater and greater insults.

The parting from Myka and the others had just been the last blow. Jena was right, he'd been careless. *I'm sorry. Can anything be done? Everything hurts now, Jena. I've been hurting for weeks.*

*Yes, I can see, she said kindly. Of course I can help you. For tonight, sleep where you are, away from the others. I'll warn them to leave you alone. Rest, get some proper food, regain your physical well-being. Then we'll begin your exercises again. We need you well, Kei. We two are the only healers our people will have while in the hands of the Prij, and I dread to think what will happen if a Prij physician has to treat any of them for something serious. Their idea of a good dressing for a burn is roasted snake fat.*

Kei shuddered in disgust. *Yes, I know. Jena, why doesn't your voice hurt my head?*

*Because I am making it so, and buffering your gift. I can only do it when I'm touching you.*

*Are you a mind-mover too?*

He felt her surprise. *No, of course not. Are you saying that you are?*

*Um, yes.*

*Kei, don't you know how rare it is for someone to have two gifts? Do the people at the academy know?*

*Um. No. Ma knew but she never said it was special, so I didn't think anything of it. The instructors were only interested in training soul-touchers and mind-speakers. If you don't have a true Gift, they don't really much care what else you can do. I don't talk about it much because no one understands it, and I can't do anything really spectacular with it. I just...you know, move small things in the body. Broken bones, bleeding, that kind of thing, I can deal with a little easier than most. It helps but it's not all there is to my healer craft.*

She took the cloth from his forehead, and he heard her wetting it out. She presumably wrung it again and then put it back on his face, which also helped the throbbing in his head a good deal. *Well, you're full of surprises, aren't you?* she said fondly. *Rest now, Kei. Everyone's safe for now. Since none of us are oracles, we don't know what the future holds, but we can only do what we can do.*

Kei agreed wordlessly. He was just so damn tired. There was one more thing before he could rest, though. *Jena, have you sent word of our arrival to Darshek?*

*I will as soon as you're asleep.*

*Could you...just this once, send a message to my sister, Myka? Just say I am safe and well and missing them all.* He hesitated to ask since he was sure all the hostages would want personal messages sent in this manner, but the network of mind-speakers was thinly stretched. To cover such great distances, each of them had to work very hard to send and receive the thoughts of the others.

Jena didn't seem at all disturbed at his request. *I'll do that, Kei. I'll collect all the messages from your people and send them at the same time. We all know how hard this is for everyone. We mind-speakers have to do our best for you all.*

Kei squeezed her hand in gratitude. It eased his mind greatly to know Myka would have direct word of his welfare. And Reji and Banji too. Even though they would not hear from Ai-Albon itself, it would help them a little, he hoped.

Jena covered him with a blanket and changed the cloth again. *I'm going to send you to sleep, Kei, for your own good. Please, just stop fighting your need to rest.*

He opened his mouth to argue, and shut it. She was right.

He let her touch send tendrils of relaxation through his painful head, and as the pain disappeared, he felt able to let go, slipping gently into oblivion.



His head was much clearer when he woke to dim sunlight coming in through the high windows, and he felt calmer. He still had a bit of a headache, but nothing he couldn't handle easily, and the need to piss outweighed the desire to lie still for a little longer. Throwing the blanket back, and turning over, he found he was on a pallet in a far corner of the room, away from where his fellows apparently had spent the night. There were only two other people in the barracks – one of them was Urki. She saw him standing up and she came over to him with a worried, apologetic look on her face. "Kei? Are you better now?"

He noticed she was keeping her distance – Jena must have really impressed them with the need to give him space. "I'm much better, Urki. I'm sorry to have worried you all."

She bit her lip. “No, I’m sorry. I was just so happy that my sister was safe, I didn’t think....”

“It’s normally fine, Urchichi, I’ve just...it’s my own fault, really. Where is everyone?”

“Bathing, washing clothes. They said it gets too stuffy in here to stay all day. When the sun’s actually shining, everyone tries to get out in it, apparently. Myri and I stayed in to make sure you were better.”

He didn’t recognise the other woman stirring the stew pot at all, but he smiled reassuringly at her. “Well, I’m fine, Urki, so let me use the latrines, point me at the food and tell me where I can find you all. A wash sounds like a good idea.”

She sniffed. “It seems to be the only thing the Prij are good at, plumbing.”

Kei grinned at her disdainful tone. “They have to be good at something other than invasion, I suppose.”

She told him there was bread being kept warm in the bottom shelf of the oven, and he could eat as much of that and the stew as he liked. Food, at least, didn’t seem to be a problem for this fort – the foothills were lush compared with what he had seen of the rest of northern Darshian, so the Prij weren’t *just* eating stolen Darshian grain.

He wondered again how the countryside and the villages would sustain all the extra people thrust upon them, and suddenly felt rather guilty to be able to eat his fill when his friends and family might yet go hungry this year. He sternly told himself that he had a duty to stay healthy regardless of what was happening back home, because he had to look after the people held captive. It never got easier, this being held so far from those he loved. The damn Rulers had better get off their own well-fed behinds and sort this problem out – it was, after all, why anyone ever paid them any attention at all, the supposed ability to keep Darshian safe. They’d lost the south, Kei hoped they had some idea how to regain the north.

He relieved himself, washed his face and hands and then helped himself to the bread and stew. Myri and Urki had gone outside, and Kei was now the most alone he had been...gods, it felt like in forever. At least since they had begun the march south. Not being able to feel other people’s emotions unless he put some effort into it, was very restful. He felt rather stupid to have had to have another gifted person point out how careless he’d been. His mother would have scolded him soundly, even though she would have then done what she could to help him. The problem was that people without gifts didn’t

really know what it was like at all for those with them. It was one of the reasons that being with Reji was so easy and undemanding.

Reji. A sharp pang of loss and sadness filled him at the thought of his absent lover. Kei was so proud of him, having got everyone to Darshek safely, when it had to have been a difficult, dangerous trip, but it wasn't as a caravan leader that Kei valued him. He missed the smell of Reji's skin, the way his big hands would cup Kei's buttocks as he kissed him. He missed his laugh, and his silly sense of humour. He hoped Reji was not feeling low, living on Darshekian grace for who knew how long. Reji didn't like to be confined, that was a certainty.

Kei shook his head at his maunderings. He was supposed to be trying to avoid emotional turmoil, not add to it. He ate and scrubbed the bowl out with sand before rinsing it and hanging it out to dry with the other bowls. He noted a small collection of knives and other potential weapons – the Prij were clearly not worried about an attack from within. As well they need not be – none of the hostages would risk doing anything to bring punishment on their own or their comrades' heads, nor upon their villages. It was, Kei reflected, an amazingly simple way of keeping control over an unwelcoming population.

He collected a clean set of clothes, and his little-used drying cloth from his pack. The door was unlocked so he wandered out, and was directed in friendly enough tones by the soldiers standing guard as to where he could find the other captives. They were actually outside the fort, by a stream that ran behind it. Some were bathing, some were washing their clothes. Others, like Peit, were sitting on rocks and idly watching proceedings. There were twenty or so soldiers keeping guard over the fifty hostages, but they weren't paying a lot of attention. Kei noticed a screen of canvas had been erected upstream, and from the sounds of the voices, it was where the women were bathing. He'd learned the Prij had some odd notions about modesty and apparently thought it shocking that nudity was no cause for scandal or concern in Darshianese communities. The soldiers who brought them south had been surprised that men and women would sleep so close to each other, but since the barracks weren't segregated, their captors seem to have accepted this oddity of their prisoners. Such a stupid thing to consider sinful, Kei had thought.

He was aware he smelled appalling, and his clothes were disgusting. Since others of his fellow hostages were sitting nude on the bank, he couldn't see any reason not to strip, wash himself and then his clothes. He begged some soap from Gonji, undressed and left his clothes in a heap on the bank, and

strode into the water. Which was incredibly cold. He yelped as his balls tried to crawl up inside him to get away from the water and then he turned to look at Peit accusingly. "You could have warned me, you urs fart."

"It's not like the water would get any warmer for being warned," Peit said placidly. "You'd best get clean and scrub your clothes. I'll hang them with the others – they've got a place inside for them. With the rains, they'll never dry otherwise."

A wise bit of planning – Kei wondered whose it was. Peit's advice was good – standing in the chilly water wouldn't do him any good. He scrubbed away a month's worth of grime and mud, then unbraided his hair and washed it carefully, finger combing out the tangles. He tied it into a knot as he scrubbed at his filthy clothes – they would need patching, both shirt and trousers. At least his overshirt was sound. Still nude, he walked back over to Peit who accepted the sopping bundle from him, and held out a bone comb. "You might need this."

As indeed he did, having forgotten to bring his own with him. He sat on the rock Peit had just abandoned, and let the sun warm his chilly flesh as he carefully combed his hair dry. "Would you like me to braid it for you?"

He turned and saw Jena, freshly washed and in clean clothes. "That would be kind, thank you." It was almost luxurious sitting in the sun, having someone attending to his hair.

"You look much better."

"I feel very much better, thank you. Also ashamed."

She tugged his hair a little. "No need to be, Kei. Soul-touching is a very difficult gift, and more two edged than most. You've had a lot to bear even without it. I've been talking to your people. They consider themselves very lucky to have you as their healer and their companion. It's a wonder your ears weren't on fire."

His cheeks certainly were, to know they'd been discussing him – but after he'd passed out cold last night, no doubt a good deal of conversation was had. "They're good people. It's no trial to serve them at all."

She finished the braid and looped it over his shoulder, before sitting next to him on the rock – probably scandalising the soldiers, but Kei couldn't have cared less about that. "They are clearly well-served. I've been itching to pick your brains about an idea I had for a new burns ointment."

"Oh, you've decided to try the roast snake fat after all?"

She flicked the end of his braid. "Remember I am your senior, young man."

"So sorry, lady Jena. So what's this idea?"

“Well, you know the nitre weed is rather irritating on burns....”

For the first time in a month, he forgot he was a captive. For the first time in nearly two years, he was able to talk to another healer with the same interests and aims as himself. He was shocked when he looked up at someone's hair and saw the soldiers – he had utterly forgotten their presence, or where they were. They must have been talking for an hour or more, because his hair was completely dry and his skin felt warm too. “We should go in,” he murmured, rising to his feet and picking up his dry clothes to put on. It hurt to be brought back to reality so abruptly.

“You look troubled once more, Kei,” Jena said as she also climbed to her feet. “Did I say something wrong?”

He made himself smile. “Not at all. It was the most stimulating conversation I've had in a very long time. It was like...talking to Ma. Or Pa. Or both of them. Thank you.”

She blushed a little. “You're welcome. I get a bit carried away some times, but you have no idea what it's like not having anyone to share ideas with.”

“Oh, I think I do. Myka is going to be an excellent healer one day, but she has no interest in experiments or theories at all.”

“That's unfortunate, but perhaps, being your father's daughter, she will grow into it. You're very like him, you know.”

Kei paused in lacing up his shirt. “I thought you didn't know them.”

She smiled, making her plain face almost pretty. “Duka sent me images and memories. I wanted to put faces and voices to the names. So I can't say I 'know' them, just...I know what they were like, a little. They must have been very much in love.”

Kei finished lacing his shirt, and wished she could read his wish not to talk about this. “They were. I wasn't there when Pa died, but I knew...when I heard about Ma, why she'd...but if she had only waited a little until I got home...I still....”

“You're angry she left you?”

Kei lifted his head. “She left both of us. I know how much pain she had to be in to do what she did, and I know how much she loved Pa, but she didn't let me even *try*.... I'm a healer and I couldn't even save my own mother,” he added bitterly.

“She must have felt the same when Keiji died,” Jena said gently. “Grief does awful things to people, and perhaps...perhaps she knew you were strong enough to cope on your own.”

“Yes, obviously I am doing just *fine*. My village is without a healer, my sister is doing the gods knows what with those fine bastards in Darshek and I pass out if one of my friends hugs me. Yes, it was perfectly acceptable for my mother to drink nitre distillation, because her damn *son* is making such an urs-shitten great *job* of trying to take her place.”

He stalked off away from the stream’s edge. Most of the other captives had gone inside – he hadn’t realised how close it had become, and how the clouds had almost completely blocked the sun. Another few minutes and they would be caught in the rain. “Kei, wait!”

He stopped as requested, aware he was making a scene and a complete fool of himself. He found it hard to be calm about losing his parents, for all that it was something that was so ordinary. Even Banji was coping better with his dual loss than Kei ever had. Jena caught up with him and laid a hand on his wrist. *I’m sorry, Kei. That came out badly.*

“It’s all right. I overreacted.”

*No, it’s not, and I do apologise because you don’t need to be upset now. Walk with me to the drying room – if you go back in with the others now, it will hit you hard.*

He obeyed and let her lead him to the shed inside the fort which was little more than a shelter facing away from the prevailing wind, looking onto the courtyard, a low wall the only separation from the courtyard. Long rough poles stood in long rows, and on them hung many sets of wet clothes, including his own. It was just a glorified verandah – the comparison must have occurred to some of the soldiers, because there were some stools against the wall. Jena motioned for him to sit. The rain had started, and a cool breeze filled the shelter with fresh air, a pleasant change from the oppressive humidity of before. “I don’t know if it’s been explained to you how your gift affects you, Kei. You don’t just feel the emotions of others. You take them into yourself a little, so they enhance and heighten your own. You would almost call soul-touchers parasites, except they don’t derive any benefit from feeding on other people’s feelings. You need to get better control over your own emotions if you are to cope with other people’s.”

“So I just become some kind of cold, hard bastard, feeling nothing and caring about nothing? That’s not likely to happen, Jena.”

She smiled and touched his wrist. *I would hope not, Kei. You have a kind heart, which is your strength and your weakness. But you are going to drive yourself mad if you don’t learn some restraint. Your gift is probably at its strongest now, so you are more sensitive in every way. But your emotions are*



*surging and retreating wildly, and it's not healthy. I think now would be a good time to revisit some of the simpler exercises you would have been taught. Agreed?*

He drew a deep breath. *Agreed.*

He worked with her for several hours until she called a halt. By then, his headache had returned in full strength and he had to retreat to his corner of the barracks and lie with the blanket over his head, which was mortifying, to say the least, knowing Jena had to explain what was going on. He had always been used to being fit and well, and a strong reliable person. Now he was like some sickly child, having his whims indulged. It seemed ridiculous to be spending time on this when the situation was so serious.

It was nightfall before he felt able to join the others again, and he gritted his teeth at the sympathetic looks he got when he came to join the rest of them for the evening meal. He found it very hard to be polite, and it was easier to take his food and retreat once more. Jena came to join him. "We have to stop this. It's crippling me, and this is no time for it," he hissed at her angrily.

"On the contrary, it's the perfect time for it, Kei. What do you think it will be like in the future, when we cross those mountains? We could face almost anything, for who knows how long. If things go badly, and you have to deal with it in your present state, you won't survive it. I speak to you as a healer to a patient now, Kei, for that's what you are. Now endure the therapy and trust that I want the best for you."

"I look like a fool," he said miserably, hunching over the bowl of food he no longer had any appetite for.

"Do you think your patients are fools, Kei? Do you think they need to be mocked for being ill?" She sighed and patted his arm. "They say we make the worst patients, after all. It seems to be true."

He reluctantly accepted what she said was true. He hadn't seen himself in need of healing, but clearly, he was. "All right. But I can't do any more today. My head is killing me."

"Yes, I'm sure. But on the other hand, I think your control is better." She put her hand on his face. *Yes, I think it is. What you are feeling from the others is much less intense. This is good, Kei. Do you want your food?*

*Not really.*

*Then lie down and I will ease the pain a little. You should sleep again. You have an injury and it needs to heal. Think of it like any other.*

*Yes, healer Jena. Are you any better when you're ill?*



She regarded him gravely, but a small smile twitched her lips. *I don't allow myself to get sick.*

He snorted at that, but then let her marvellous touch ease the ache in his head. He could only trust the therapy she prescribed would not be a long one.



If it were not for Jena, the month that followed their arrival at the fort would have been mind-numbingly boring for Kei. They had little to do, other than prepare food, clean themselves and their belongings, and make repairs. The rest of the time, the others spent idling by the stream, talking or bathing. When it rained, people gathered in the barracks and continued to build on the new friendships which had been struck up. The hostages from Ai-Beyto arrived two weeks later. Kei knew some of them as he had once travelled with his parents to that village and they were likewise glad to see a familiar face.

They were also delighted to know of the safe arrival of the refugees from their village and the others. By now, Kei had rebuilt his control enough that the reactions of the newcomers did not affect him, although he was aware of their emotions, just as he was of those of all the others. Jena's lessons were finally having the desired outcome, and he felt much calmer and steadier than he had done in a long time. Her presence was a blessing in another way too, because planning with her over the care of the hostage group, exchanging ideas, even doing a little plant collecting by the stream to see if there were any species they were unaware of which might hold medicinal properties, kept his lively mind occupied and stopped him gnawing on things he could do nothing about.

Her mind-speaking was a major factor in keeping morale up, although she had warned once they crossed the mountains, her link with the others, already stretched to its absolute limit, would be broken. Until then she could keep them informed of news from the villages with mind-speakers, and from Darshek. So far, the soldiers quartered on the villages had caused no trouble. Their main concern was collecting grain and sending surpluses to the outposts being set up, and making sure that the traders were travelling south and not north. They didn't interfere with everyday running of village affairs, or at least, they had not up to now. It was always possible things might change once Darshek had surrendered to the siege now in place, for which the city had had ample warning and time for preparation. The hostages were told not to be alarmed at the news of the siege, nor over any delay in rescuing them. The rainy season would mean things would not happen for a couple of

months at least, but preparations were being made. They were asked to be patient, Jena reported. Peit snorted. "Like we have any choice," he said derisively, and there were many nods of agreement.

"It is true we don't," Gonji said. "The Prij think of us as prisoners. We should instead think of ourselves as...emissaries."

"What?" Kei said, surprised and not a little amused at the idea. "You're touched, Gonji."

"No, listen to me. The Prij hold us in contempt because they're ignorant of us. They call us savages, and mock our beliefs. We're trying to learn what we can of their ways, but let them also see that we are not savages, not barbarians. By behaving with dignity and good humour, we may do as much as any direct attack to win good treatment for our clansmen."

"You're being rather idealistic, Gonji. The prejudices are very deep, and these people aren't rational, just witness that ceremony this morning. How can you reason with people who think setting fire to branches sprinkled with salt will somehow bring good fortune?"

"Very true, Kei. But the alternative is to let them confirm the worst of their beliefs about us. If one is practical, we are likely to be treated better if they respect us, than if they despise us."

*This may be so, Kei thought, but it will be a long struggle for that respect.*

They would know soon enough what their fate was to be. Jena had been tracking the progress of the Ai-Kislik hostages and knew they were two weeks behind those of Ai-Beyto. Nerves were starting to become taut again, and there were some quickly ended quarrels among the group as the day of the last hostages' arrival drew near. Generally tempers were less frayed than they could have been, but the waiting was hard on them all.

Finally, on the thirteenth day, close to noon, Kei heard a blast of horns sounding from the sentinels, and soldiers began to assemble in the court yard. He, like the other Darshianese, came outside the barracks to see what was happening. It took some time before the great wooden gates of the fort were swung open, and in rode several men on urs beasts, followed by a hundred or so soldiers and the hostages on foot.

The sergeant in charge of the fort saluted the arriving officers and barked out commands, which Kei recognised as orders for soldiers to come and take charge of the urs beasts. With a shock, he realised that one of the men dismounting now was the general who had been so supercilious at Ai-Albon. The man was wearing an oilskin, and now took it off, revealing a much less impressive suit of armour than what he had displayed at Kei's village. This

time he wasn't wearing a helmet, and as his oilskin's hood was removed, a fall of bright golden hair was exposed, as well as a coldly handsome face, half obscured by a neat beard of a darker red-gold than his head hair. He was not, to Kei's surprise, much older than himself – possibly closer to Reji's age. Somehow, Kei had expected him to be in his middle years, but this was a young man in the prime of his life, very tall and muscular, every inch a warrior. But what caught Kei's attention most were the piercing blue eyes under fine blond eyebrows, which seemed to see everything, missing nothing, assessing and judging.

The man scanned the courtyard and his assembled soldiers as the sergeant continued to make his report. He didn't seem all that interested in what was being said, instead taking in the details of the building around him, as if trying to divine its weakness. At last his gaze rested on the hostages. Kei again felt the wave of virulent hatred mixed with sadness that he had noted the last time he had encountered this man. Again, it made him sick to his stomach, even with the training Kei had received from Jena. This man's emotions seemed to respect no boundaries at all.

He must have moved, or done something to catch the man's eye because suddenly he found himself the subject of that powerful, cold gaze. It was only a fancy, but it was as if the man was seeing Kei's very soul – only to dismiss it as utterly worthless and hateful. But the moment was brief, and then the man turned away from him and the rest of the Darshianese as if they were of no consequence at all. He walked in the other direction through the courtyard, to where the sergeant had his office, and then Kei lost sight of him altogether.

Ruti from Ai-Darbin hissed in a breath. "That's the bastard that murdered Timo. Cut him down like a dog."

"He hates us," Peit said. "The way he spoke to us, the way he looks at us.... Kei, this doesn't bode well."

"It will bode as well or ill as we let it," Kei said, letting impatience colour his voice, instead of the turbulent emotions which seeing this general again had raised in him. What had caused the man to have such a compelling disdain for them? And this grief, as strong as the loathing – what had happened?

It was unfortunate, to say the least, that it appeared they would be going south with this man in charge, since it was unlikely they would enter Kuprij without someone senior bringing them in. Still, if he wanted them dead or harmed, it would have happened by now, so worrying about it would get them nowhere. Kei went with his comrades to welcome the newcomers from Kislik and to help them get settled. There would be much to do over the next few

hours, but even as his mind occupied itself with listing those tasks, he couldn't help a little shiver of fear. The Prij officer who had looked at him had wished that Kei were dead – more than that, that Kei had never been born.

Hatred like that was almost like a natural force. Natural forces could be dangerous and uncontrollable things. If you did not learn to live with them...they would crush you.

But could one learn to live with hate that strong? For good or ill, they were about to find out.