



KEI'S GIFT

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BOOK TWO – UTUK CHAPTER 1

Arman was fighting a war within himself, and losing. A man used to certainty in his decisions, and of constancy in his beliefs, now he found himself questioning himself and his actions, his desires in conflict in almost every way. His urgent need to shake the dust of Darshian from his boots was matched by his equally powerful urge not to return to his house which was not a home and never would be. His wish that every one of the Darshianese hostages would die painful deaths, clashed with the equally vehement one not to have to return to Darshian to fetch more hostages, and his sense of duty to his sovereign.

His body was in rebellion too – he was tired when he wanted to be awake, and yet he seemed never to be able to sleep when he lay down with that intention. Food had no pleasure for him, and more often than not, he left what was offered untouched, nauseated at the idea of eating. Yet there was a hunger in him for something, anything, to ease the ache in his heart. He had as yet to turn to wine for solace, but only because he knew it would work too well – he would not sully Loke's name by becoming a drunkard in his memory. Yet, without this to numb his senses, his thoughts ran around and around in his head like a pet hisk in a cage. They led him to dark and unhappy places, and he had no power to prevent them doing so.

Perhaps most disturbing to him, as they began the march into Urshek and once again the landscape was marked by fine temples and ample evidence of devotion to the gods, was accepting that his lifelong piety, which had never wavered, and certainly never been questioned, had utterly ceased to offer him comfort. The rituals, the weekly thanksgivings which had once been a pillar of his life, now seemed meaningless and grating. It was a trial to listen to the familiar words, to sit through the sacrifices, to make it seem that, like his men, he still believed Lord Niko heard every word offered in prayer, and responded to them. He did not feel himself beloved of the gods any more.

Worse than that, he found himself questioning how Loke's death could be the gods' will. Why would Lord Niko want to let a good, pious boy die and yet spare the heathen, immoral Darshianese? Why had none of them fallen into the deep ravines as they had crossed the mountains? He had believed Niko to be a merciful, wise father to his children. The senseless, cruel murder of the most innocent of his creations seemed to mock the very concept of wisdom or mercy.

He kept all such thoughts to himself, of course, knowing his blasphemy would shock and disgust both peers and his subordinates. Likewise, he spoke to no one of the confusing shifts in his moods from sad to furious to dull tiredness, which wearied him beyond belief. It was a further sign, if any were needed, that he was not himself these days – so very far from himself that he no longer recognised the man he had become. He moved through each day in a cold, isolated fog, a perfect military machine, assessing facts and figures and events purely from the tactical point of view, and caring not about any personal impact on himself or anyone else. At night, he continued the long walks which were only slightly effective in wearing him out.

At least the dreams had stopped on the mountains. Exhaustion was all too easy to achieve, even with the guide ropes and bridges that had been built by the soldiers in the three months since the fort had been established. He had to admit their engineers had done a magnificent job – Her Serenity should be pleased. She should be delighted in fact. Every thing had gone to plan, precisely as she had wanted it. Whether she *would* be delighted, they would find out soon enough.

The soldiers and the hostages had camped on the northern edge of Urshek for a few hours, waiting for night fall when they could be moved through the city with the minimum observation. No one was entirely sure how the southern Darshianese, who could be troublesome when they put their mind to it, would react to a group of their fellows being taken under guard through the streets, so Ritus, meeting them two miles from the city limits, had advised them to wait before they joined the ship. Arman didn't care one way or the other. The slight delay allowed him to make his reports to Ritus and learn his instructions. Other than that, he was indifferent.

He had his tent set up and refreshments served from the supplies that Ritus had brought with him. "I bet you missed Prijian wine," Ritus said, stretching in his camp chair expansively.

"One manages," Arman said in a frigid tone which made Ritus do a double-take and look at him oddly.

"A difficult mission? I thought things had gone well."

"I'm glad it's over, that is all. Now, please tell me Her Serenity's wishes."

"Well...hang on, where's that boy of yours? I could have sworn you had him with you when you left. Didn't leave him behind, did you?" Ritus said jovially.

Arman stiffened. "In a manner of speaking. He was murdered at Darbin, in the bomb attack. It was in my reports."

"Oh...hells, Arman, I missed that. Damn inconvenient for you, losing a good servant like that."

Ritus probably didn't appreciate the danger he was in at that point. Arman fought his anger down. "The loss of a Prijian citizen is always more than inconvenient, General. Now, if you don't mind, I want to know my orders."

Ritus was obviously surprised at his rudeness, but the damn fool finally took the hint. "Very well, as you wish. She wants a triumph, so make sure your armour is nice and polished up when you hit port. You'll march down the Avenue of the Gods to the civic square where she'll address you and the population. Shouldn't take too long and then you can get back to your wife."

"And the hostages?"

"Senator Mekus has been appointed to deal with them. They're off your hands once the triumph is over."

"Thank the gods," Arman muttered. "Has the port blockade begun?"

Ritus nodded. "Yes, over a month ago. No movement from the Rulers, but we won't expect anything for a while. Her Serenity is content with progress. So, tell me about it. What was it like?"

Arman gritted his teeth and put a bit more flesh on the bare bones of his reports for Ritus' entertainment, but then begged to be allowed to rest before the sea journey. He had no desire to rehash the mission in the least, and there would be many times when he would be forced to over the coming days. He wished Her Serenity could have curbed her love of ceremony and public display, but there was always going to be little chance of her missing the opportunity to celebrate the successful annexation of a large chunk of Darshian, if not the capital itself. He just hoped attention would be more on her than on him tomorrow.

There were still six hours before nightfall. He decided to try and sleep. He had a feeling tomorrow was going to be a trial.



He had become complacent, Kei realised. While he had never forgotten they were captives, or that his eventual fate was to be taken to the Prijian

capital, these were facts that he set aside in his mind most of the time. He'd had to, to preserve his sanity. In the meantime, he'd kept busy, and distracted himself with talking to Jena and caring for the rest of the hostages. Their captors too were relaxed and allowed them much more freedom than he had expected, which they were careful not to abuse. Their daily routine, while it was no substitute for liberty, was far from intolerable.

All that changed when the 'golden general', as one of the young men from Ai-Tuek had dubbed him, arrived. Almost immediately, there was a shift in attitude from their guards – there was far less informality, less freedom and even a return of the hostility and suspicion which Kei had marked among them when he had first encountered the Prij, but which had slowly disappeared over the past two months. Some of it undoubtedly came with the returning soldiers, who had, according to the hostages from Ai-Kislik, treated them in a much less friendly fashion than had those who had accompanied the other Darshianese south. But most of it, Kei was certain, emanated from the general himself. 'Sei Arman' he was called. 'Sei' was apparently a title, not a first name as Kei had first thought, referring to his family's senatorial rank, so the 'golden general' was not only a high-ranking officer, but a nobleman at that, with family ties to the royal family itself. His nickname was well-deserved then.

The fort's routine got noticeably more strict, but they had only a couple of days to observe it. The hostages of Ai-Kislik were only granted that little time to recuperate, and then all seventy of the Darshianese were instructed to pack and make themselves ready for the mountain crossing. Extra blankets were issued, and they were shown how they would need to tether themselves to guide ropes, brusquely taught knots that would hold them safe, and warned that if they did anything to endanger either hostages or soldiers, they would be punished severely, as would their colleagues. After a month and more of peaceful co-operation, Kei found it galling to be treated with such suspicion, as if they were common criminals. This attitude had to come from this Sei Arman, he was sure of it.

The month spent in inactivity had been poor preparation for the crossing, although Kei doubted anything could really have prepared them fully for it, given that even the seasoned soldiers struggled with the steep narrow paths, drenched intermittently with heavy rain that made everything slippery and even more dangerous. His fellow hostages were terrified, as was he – they had never been on terrain like this in their lives, nor so high up. The thinner air made breathing difficult, and his heart pounded to the point of nausea – and

the panic of his comrades as they tried not to look at the vertigo-inducing views only made things worse for him. After the first few hours, when they stopped for a meal, he was forced to find Jena and beg her to stay with him, actually in physical contact, to act as a buffer. He disliked using her this way, but she told him that the effort to muffle what he was feeling from the others was far less than what he was expending in trying to shield himself, and that she could easily support him for a few days, if she had to. Kei had little pride left after the first day's climbing, and was glad for any relief he could get.

The highest passes were icy in parts, forcing them to all move at a snail's pace. Even with this caution, to Kei's horror he could only watch helplessly as a soldier in front of him slipped and fell to his death. A halt was called briefly, and words were spoken in honour of the man, but then they were moved on. Staying would only endanger them further, he knew, but it still seemed a little callous. The mood of the men was sombre after that – and the Darshianese fears only grew worse. Kei truly believed they would never leave this grim and dangerous place alive.

But after the second day, they began to descend, and while it was still difficult and far from safe, just the knowledge that this part of the journey was coming to an end lifted their spirits somewhat. It also helped that it was easier to breathe, and the temperature seemed to be rising every hour as they came down the mountains. When they could finally see the lush greenness which was the south Darshianese coastal plains, Kei could have cried with relief. He could have cried with weariness too, but that was a given.

They were given no time to rest until they were marched a good fifteen miles from the end of the trail, and then, for no reason that he could see, they were told to halt. This order came after the arrival of a welcome party of soldiers, led by an officer wearing a similar uniform to that which the 'golden general' habitually wore. Kei heard one of the soldiers say something about 'old Ritus', so he guessed the newcomer was the general in charge of south Darshian he'd heard mentioned, not always in flattering terms, by soldiers at the fort. Camp was not set up, although cooking fires were soon got going. Kei and the others welcomed food and a chance to ease exhausted bodies, and wondered what was going to happen to them now.

The mood of his fellow hostages was grim despite the end of the dangerous mountain journey, for it meant now they were truly isolated from their families and friends. Jena sat beside him to eat, looking sad and weary. Kei touched her arm. *Can you hear any mind-speakers from the south here?*

She shook her head. *Their thoughts will be guarded and until I can make contact in person, or they find out about me, they will not 'hear' me. It is necessary for ones like us to know those we are mind-speaking to, when over a distance. Only the truly Gifted can speak without an introduction.*

Not even the truly Gifted could speak across the mountains, or the deep seas, not at the distance Utuk was from Darshek. *So, it's up to us now,* Kei 'said', trying to seem cheerful.

We can only do our best, and hope for a rescue sooner rather than later. Let's also hope the rains are not extended this year.

Even with the messages from Darshek they'd had up until they left, which promised an early solution, and even with knowing that his family and friends were working hard to push the Rulers into action, Kei couldn't help but feel depressed at now being cut off from communicating with them. He had missed Myka and Reji before, but now it felt almost like they had died, their absence now so total, and possibly permanent. It was hard to appear optimistic even though he knew he had to – his moods affected the others who looked to him for leadership. He was not allowed the luxury of sulking.

He was surprised that at dusk, orders were given that they were to be on the move again. Paths illuminated by torches, the soldiers and their captives walked in silence through what seemed the back streets of Urshek. Kei wondered if the Prij were ashamed of their actions, or just fearful of causing ill feeling among the southerners. There was a stench in the air that he recognised from his time in Darshek – they were coming to the docks. Sure enough, they were marched down near the water, where an enormous ship waited in moorings. "Gods," Peit whispered. "How does it stay afloat? Surely we're not all going on that?"

But they were, and even Kei, who had once travelled on a boat, albeit a much smaller one, and only on a day's excursion to one of the islands near Darshek, couldn't help being afraid of travelling in this monster. It swallowed the seventy hostages easily, as well as the hundred or so soldiers with them, and yet had room for numerous sailors and even three urs beasts. Kei expected the thing to sink like a stone – but it only swayed as its passengers came on board and didn't seem to go lower in the water at all.

They were taken to a hold and locked in, with buckets for relieving themselves and canteens of water that they were warned had to last them until the following morning. There was no movement, no relief of a breeze through the small portholes for what seemed like hours. Despite their fears,

sheer physical exhaustion meant most of them were soon drowsing in the stuffy darkness.

Kei was unable to sleep so easily – his own emotions and worries were too turbulent to let him – and so he was one of the only hostages to be awake when the great ship began to move, the shouts of the sailors and the roars of the urs beasts warning him that things were changing. At least the air was a little cooler, a wind coming in through the portholes that smelled of salt and seaweed, an alien but not unwelcome scent.

He tried to get comfortable again on the bare floor. Urki's head was in his lap, Peit was slumped against his shoulders. Kei used their warm, familiar presence to try to calm his fears and to make himself sleep. They had a long night ahead of them and tomorrow would bring the gods knew what to burden them.



The return crossing had been choppy than their outward journey, but it didn't affect their speed much. Arman had got a couple of hours sleep, but his dreams and the heat of the cabin drove him out on deck, where he sat wrapped in his cloak, watching the phosphorescence of the waves and hearing the sails flapping and the spars creaking, but not really paying attention to any of it.

Without willing it in the least, he could not stop thinking of the last sea journey he had made and with whom, and all that had happened afterwards. He knew his reactions were too extravagant for good sense. He had not grieved this hard even when his mother had died, although it was possible, he supposed, that a child of eight might not feel things so deeply as an adult would. But Loke had made so many things tolerable which now seemed an impossible burden – his marriage, his career which was not of his choosing nor of his inclination, the expectations of his civic role....

Arman did not make friends easily, and never had. He had always been a solitary child, his brother being the only company he had ever wanted, and had found the army a rude awakening after years immersed in his books. He had adapted only because he'd had no choice, and because he had become skilled at hiding his feelings, living in a household where he was an unfavoured second child. Tijus had always been his supporter, as had Karus, but Tijus had married young and left their home to set up a country estate with a wife who preferred her own friends to keeping her husband's sullen younger

brother company. Karus could not be his teacher forever, and had likewise left, retiring to enjoy the fruits of many years tutoring the nobility.

For months after Karus retired, Arman had felt lost. Too young to join the army, a destiny which held no joy at all for him, and without a friendly face to turn to, he had retreated even more into his books. And then Loke and his mother had come to his home, and his life had changed forever.

He wiped his eyes even as he smiled in remembrance. How frightened and sad Loke had been then, his green eyes so huge in a miserable pale face that had forgotten how to smile. His father, a minor nobleman and one-time business partner of Arman's father, had died of a wasting disease, leaving crippling debts which meant his wife and son had been forced to sell their home and nearly all their possessions. Loke's mother, Mari, had been a close companion of Arman's mother, a school friend who'd known her all her life. In one of the only acts of spontaneous kindness Arman had ever witnessed his father carry out, Mari had been offered a place in Arman's home as their housekeeper, with accommodation for her and her son for as long as they wanted it. Loke, then only nine, was put to serve as Arman's page – more, Arman suspected, as a way to keep both of them out of mischief than anything else.

Arman had felt something in Loke's grief-filled eyes call to him, and so he had taken the child under his wing, doing what he could to ease his fears and make him laugh. It had taken a little while, because Loke had loved his father dearly and the change in their circumstances had been a great shock to him, but then the boy had responded, revealing a generous, bright spirit which had, for eight wonderful years, made Arman's life mean something, if only because Loke depended on Arman as much as Arman loved and needed him.

How ironic, he thought, that having eased Loke's grief at the start of their friendship, Loke himself should be the cause of such pain at the end of it. Unfortunately, there was no lonely older boy with time on his hands and a need to assuage his own sadness to help Arman as Arman had helped Loke. Now he was more alone than ever. His marriage acted as another barrier to interactions, even with those few people who were close to him, since it was difficult to socialise with married friends without explaining why his wife did not come with him. No wonder he had spent so much time with the widowed Karus. But even Karus did not know, at least, not from Arman's own lips, the truth of his relationship with Mayl. Karus assumed, as did everyone else, that Arman and the senator's daughter had the perfect marriage, except for the

lack of children. Arman laughed bitterly, remembering. Of course, even that flaw was now rectified.

With a shock, he saw the faintest pink glow on the horizon and realised it was dawn. He had spent the entire night in this fashion, and now he was both disgusted at his self-indulgence and stiff as a board in punishment. He could see the dark outline that was Kuprij's largest island but the ship was still clearly some two or three hours from port. He supposed he had better try to get some more rest. Or at least polish his damn armour.



The noise was incredible. It wasn't just the cheering, or the drums, or the trumpets, or the braying of the odd looking animals that some of the soldiers were now riding. It was all those things together in a deafening roar that went on and on, numbing Kei's mind as he and the others stumbled along the marble paved street, with soldiers massed to all sides of the hostages, their path led by drum beating musicians and dancing women. Far ahead, he could see the 'golden general' on top of one of the mounts, dressed in his finest armour. Other than that, Kei could only see his fellow Darshianese, the backs of the soldiers, the tops of the huge stone buildings, and here and there, glimpses between their guard of the watching crowd, who yelled praise for the general and the soldiers, and jeered mightily as the Darshianese passed. Some even threw missiles, although the soldiers accompanying them quickly put a stop to that.

That didn't mean Kei couldn't feel the emotions of the crowds. The fruit throwing was done without particular malice towards them, he sensed – more for the fun of it, and because such things were almost expected. There was much curiosity, some apprehension, a lot of excitement which may have been just because there seemed to be a general day of festivities going on around them. He and his comrades were just an excuse for a mighty good holiday, he thought sourly.

Ironically, although they had finally reached the end of their long, long journey, he was now close to breaking point. He'd had no sleep at all, and once the ship was out on the open sea, many of the other hostages had woken up with severe seasickness. The provided buckets were soon close to overflowing, but it had taken a lot of determined banging and yelling to get the sailors' attention, have the buckets removed and empty ones provided in their place. There was no remedy offered for the sickness, which perhaps was fortunate since Kei doubted it would be remotely effective, but it meant misery

for afflicted and non-afflicted alike. And then, after hours and hours of this torture, they were removed from the ship under the guard of what seemed to be every soldier on Kuplik, and roped together like condemned criminals, to be exposed to the curious and disdainful gaze of thousands of idle Prij.

Kei would have been furious if he'd had the energy, but he, like the others, was too exhausted to work up anything other than a fervent need to just *stop*. To find out their fate, even if it meant death – to stop moving, stop walking and above all, stop being pushed around and stared at. Even Peit was downcast. Peit was the rock of the group, never seemingly bothered by any hardship, placid and strong. He looked close to tears now. They all felt that way.

Gods, would this journey never end? This street they were marching down seemed miles long, and there was an endless supply of people – how could they fit them all in this city? They were the first Prijian civilians Kei had had a chance to look at in any detail. Like the soldiers, they were much fairer than the Darshianese. Here and there were heads of hair darker than the prevailing blonds and reds, but nothing like the black colour of Kei's people, no one with dark brown eyes, and every one of them seemed milk pale, unlike the brown tanned skins of the northerners. They should be close to burning to death in the heat, he thought. At least some of them seemed to agree because they carried parasols. Many wore hats against the punishing sun, although it was cooler than it had been in Urshek. He remembered one of his instructors in Darshek telling him once that the Prij came originally from a much colder land, but had settled Kuprij centuries ago, having lost all connection with their ancestors. Perhaps their paleness was a holdover from that time. The Darshianese were the colour of earth by comparison.

He shook his head – he had let himself wander off in his mind again, and had missed the fact their route had altered. They were now entering a large square, nearly as large as the main assembly forum in Darshek, which was filled with cheering people, and surrounded by tall, metal and stone buildings which glittered in the sunlight. At the far end of this enormous place was an imposing structure, all columns and statuary. Kei and the others were led to the front of it, and made to stop. Everyone seemed to be waiting for something. The 'golden general' took off his helm, and made his mount stand still.

A blare of horns, and then a figure – a woman – appeared on the huge balcony, and stepped up onto a dais where a chair was in position for her. This would be the feared sovereign, Kei thought. The woman addressed as

'Her Serenity', Kita impossible name impossible name or other. Such a tiny person to have caused so much havoc, he thought.

There must have been a signal, because the general called out in a firm voice. "Your gracious Serenity, the land of Darshian now belongs to the Prijian Empire. I present to you your newest subjects."

Slight exaggeration there, you urs fart, Kei thought angrily. They didn't have *all* of Darshian yet, and hopefully, one day, not even what they laid claim to now. But he said none of this, of course. The general made a low bow from the back of his mount, and the sovereign raised a hand in acknowledgement. A courtier stepped forward and unrolled a scroll – these people really liked the flamboyant details, Kei noted – and made the response for the ruler.

"Our dear and loyal general, Sei Arman, we thank you and our other generals, Jozo and Ritus, for the glory you have brought to Prij and to ourselves. The subjects you have brought to our attention this day will receive all the kindness and learn the benefits of life in the Prijian empire. We extend our hospitality to them during their stay."

Kei stared at the speaker, and the woman whose words he was reading, in disbelief. *Hospitality*? Were these bastards *remotely* serious? Because if they were, he and his fellow Darshianese were in a lot more trouble than he thought, because their captors weren't just aggressive war-mongers. They were completely insane.



Arman walked through the palace corridors, wishing this day were over. He had a monstrous headache, and the nonsense he had just been witness to was insulting even to the wretched Darshianese. Kita was playing to the crowd again, making herself seem the gracious, generous ruler. But she really was stretching credulity if she thought anyone would imagine the pitiful captives standing in front of her in bonds would consider that they had been shown either kindness or hospitality – or that they would be treated with anything more than contempt by the Prij. They were defeated, and hostages. Pretending otherwise was offensive.

He kept his thoughts to himself, naturally. Dying at the hands of an enemy was one thing – being hanged as a traitor was entirely another. He waited in the antechamber before his presence was requested, and he walked in, his helmet under his arm. "Our dear Arman, how good it is that you have returned safely."

He knelt and took the offered hand. Small and dainty, apparently delicate like its owner – only a fool would mistake the appearance for reality. Her Serenity was five short feet of pure steel, tempered in acid – and in twenty-two years of life, was as seasoned a politician as her father had been at twice her age. “Thank you, your highness.”

He waited to be asked to stand, and when he did, stood stiffly at attention, hoping his travel odour would inspire her to cut the interview short. Blikus, the Lord Commander, stood in the background, sharp eyes watching him carefully. “We have received your reports. A most successful campaign. Commendably little loss of our troops too. You and Jozo make a good team.”

“Thank you, your highness. It is an honour to serve with him.”

Blikus grunted at the fine words, which were sincerely meant for all their politeness. “The lack of resistance surprised him, I note. Do you think they are playing some kind of game?”

“No, my Lord Commander. I believe they are simply degenerate. We were dealing with farmers and stupid ones at that. The day that the North is populated with good Prijian citizens instead of Darshianese will be a proud one.”

Ah, he had let his feelings get away from him. Blikus narrowed his eyes in disapproval, but Her Serenity seemed pleased. “Very true, Arman. Now, we’re sure you want to be on your way to your home.” She smiled slyly. “We believe you may have some good news awaiting you.”

Of course – he wasn’t supposed to know. “And what is that, your highness, may I be so bold as to ask?”

She tapped him on the cheek, an inappropriately coy look on her face. “No, no, we shan’t spoil the surprise. But let us just say that we believe you will be *most* pleased. We have already rejoiced at your good fortune.”

“I look forward to this news which has brought you joy, your highness,” he said, trying not to let his disgust colour his voice. “Is there anything in my reports which you need more detail on?”

“None, Arman. They were most thorough, as usual. We see you lost your personal servant. Always a risk, is that not the case, Blikus? When civilians travel with the troops?”

“Yes, your highness. I’m sure the general is aware of that.” Arman bowed his head and gritted his teeth. “Arman, we should talk about the fine details but not today. As Her Serenity says, you must want to see your wife.”

“Yes, my Lord. May I therefore be excused, your highness?”

"With our thanks, naturally," Kita said, holding her hand out again for another formal kiss.

"I'll walk you out, with your highness' permission?" Kita nodded and Blikus strode out as Arman bowed and followed in his wake.

Their booted footsteps echoed in the marble halls, a sound Arman had become unused to in four months away. "Do you really believe we are dealing with degenerates?" Blikus asked. "Leaving aside, of course, your obvious hatred of the race."

Like Jozo, Blikus disliked emotions being brought into decisions. "I only know what I saw, my Lord. There was almost no resistance, and the captives had been no trouble at all. Were we dealing with Prijian farmers, I would have expected much more of a fight."

"No resistance other than that incident at Darbin, you mean."

"An isolated incident, my Lord, easily dealt with. There was no repeat of anything resembling it."

Blikus grunted. "As you say, it does not speak well of their fighting ability but I would caution you not to underestimate them, Arman. I have had much to do with the Darshianese, and they are neither stupid nor passive. You know that as well as I do."

"Yes, my Lord. But the northerners seem to be of a different stock. Whatever the truth, we have taken the north with ease."

"We have taken a collection of farms and villages, Arman. Darshek is a different proposition."

"Yes, my Lord. Is there anything else you wish clarification over?"

Blikus gave him a long look. "You seem...dissatisfied, Arman. Not like a general who has just had a significant success. You and Jozo are on your way to senatorial status in your own right if you keep this up."

As if he wanted *that*, Arman thought. "I'm tired, Lord Blikus, that is all. It's been a long campaign, however easy our success."

"Hmmm. Very well. You'll be on your way to your home?"

"Eventually. But there's something I must do first."



The public humiliation for all its disturbing nature, didn't last long, for which Kei was wearily thankful. They were all taken inside the palace to a large, richly decorated but sparsely furnished hall, their bonds removed, and for the first time that morning, given food and drink and even a chance to wash arms

and faces. Kei wondered if someone thought they stank. *And whose damn fault is it, if we do?*

No one came near them for some time. There were soldiers on the door who ignored them, but other than that, they were left alone. There was nothing for it but to sit on the ground and wait. "What do you suppose they're going to do with us?" Urki asked, voice trembling. She'd had a dreadful night.

Kei hugged her close. "Don't know, Urchichi. Don't waste energy worrying."

"Maybe they're going to ask us to dinner," Peit rumbled. "How's your dancing, Kei?"

"Better than yours, you great urs beast. With those huge feet, you'd step on that Serenity woman and squash her flat."

That raised a rare smile from people. Jena seemed unable even to manage that. Kei knew what was wrong. She was missing the contact of other mind-speakers, something, she said, she usually took for granted like Kei took his soul-touching. He passed Urki to Peit and went to Jena's side, giving her an embrace too, not surprised to find a few tears wetting his dirty shirt. She'd been so strong, they all had. Everyone had their limits, and it looked like she had reached hers some hours ago.

At last the soldiers at the door stiffened to attention, and shortly afterwards, a man in either an elaborately decorated dress or a very baggy shirt and trousers – Kei couldn't quite decide which – came in with a guard of ten men. "I am Senator Mekus," he said in accented but clear Darshianese. "Her Serenity has placed you in my charge. I want the children of the clan heads to come forward and name your people."

Kei and the others leaders did as they were bid by the rather short-tempered man whose disgust with them was almost visible. He walked around them, tut-tutting at their filthy state. "Right, listen carefully. You'll be placed with our finest families in their service until this Darshian affair is finished – you had better appreciate the honour. During this time, you will be taught our language, our law and our religion. You will follow the orders of your hosts, and of the Prijian authority without question or there will be severe penalties. Do you understand this?" There was a murmur of assent which, curiously, only seemed to increase his disgust. "Very well." He turned and gave one of his soldiers an order, and the man left the room at a run. "Straighten up, you damn heathens. You are about to receive a visit from Her Serenity."

There wasn't really a lot to be done, except stand a little taller, and make sure trousers and shirts were properly laced. Mekus paced impatiently, but

then there was a short blast on a horn outside the room. The soldiers within, as Mekus himself, stood rigidly to attention, and, as the advance guard entered the room, Mekus hissed, "Kneel, you disrespectful fools."

They obeyed, but not fast enough, because two of the guards who had just come in, pushed those who were too slow to their knees, moments before the tiny woman Kei had seen earlier, swept into the room. "Your highness," Mekus said, bowing low. She held out a languid hand to him, but her eyes were on the Darshianese. She said something Kei didn't catch and then walked closer to them.

He felt like an urs beast at market, the way those cold green eyes looked at him and the others. He sensed...curiosity, and a good deal of disdain. None of the loathing he was coming to associate with high ranking Prijians. No fear, naturally. This woman was used to creating fear in others, not experiencing it.

She took her time, walking through the kneeling ranks of hostages without speaking to, or touching them, Mekus following obsequiously behind her. She came back to the front of the group and stood in front of Kei. "Stand up," Mekus snapped.

"What is your name, boy?" she asked in Prijian.

'Boy' – that was rich coming from a woman who seemed barely out of childhood herself. "Kei, your highness."

She seemed surprised that he responded without waiting for Mekus to translate. "You speak our language? Already?"

"Only a little," he said, which was true. "Some words."

She made a rapid comment to Mekus, which he certainly didn't understand. She seemed to dismiss him from her attention, and one of the soldiers pushed him back to his knees. *How polite*, Kei thought sardonically.

She had nothing more to say to them – inspecting her livestock, Kei thought, not her new subjects – and left, Mekus bowing low until she left. Then he stood straight and glared at them. "All right, you will be taken to a compound until we find places for you. Follow the sergeant and bear in mind my warning. Get on your feet!"

The hostages scrambled up, confused as Kei was, by this endless up and down for no point, and began to trail after the sergeant that Mekus had indicated. "You, what is it, Kei? Not you. You've already been placed."

"My lord?"

Mekus ignored him and turned to one of the soldiers. "Bring him. I need to write a note to his new master."

And who in hells is that? Kei wondered, already not liking the sound of this. He was no man's servant – and he wasn't anyone's slave either, Gonji's 'emissaries' be damned.



Arman took the time to take off his ceremonial armour, and to wash his face and hands before he rode his borrowed jesig to his father's house. It had been months – no, more like nearly a year since he had made this journey. He and his father had no reason to attend each other's houses. They nodded at each other at the monthly celebration of the Goddess Punus, and their servants carried messages between them. It was not necessary to actually speak to his father, which was how they both liked it. Today, he was not coming to visit his parent either, but he expected that he would see him.

He asked the footman if his esteemed father could spare his humble son a few moments, hoping this would not be the case, but word came for Arman to attend his parent in the library. His father would have been watching from the senatorial gallery, Arman knew, so it was hardly needed to tell him that he had returned.

His father was at his desk, and didn't stand. "Ah, Arman. Returning covered in glory, once more."

"A joint effort, father. I trust the senators were pleased with our reports."

"They were acceptable to all, as I'm sure Her Serenity has already told you. Are you just here to receive my personal gratitude?"

"No, father. I came to see Tir Mari."

"Mari? Whatever for?" His father wasn't stupid, whatever his faults. "Oh blessed gods. Surely not Loke." Loke was one of the few things that Arman and his father had had a mutual concern for. *One more tie broken.*

"Yes, I regret that it is so."

"She will take this hard. How did it happen?"

"An enemy attack to the rear. We lost six people, him included."

His father glared at him. "You should never have taken the boy on the campaign, Arman. It was a thoughtless act, an unnecessary risk."

"It was at his own insistence, father," Arman said, his throat tight with grief and anger. "I'm aware of my fault. None, I assure you, is more conscious of it, or has a greater regret."

"None save Tir Mari," his father said with heavy sarcasm. "She's in the garden. Bring her in when...when you've done. She'll need comforting."

“Of course.” It was a source of constant amazement that Arman’s father, always so cold and judgemental towards him, had an endless source of patience and affection for Mari and her son. It had made Arman briefly suspect there was more than friendship involved, but it seemed that his father simply honoured Mari and Loke for who they were, and their family’s past relationship with him. Would that the man would be so concerned for those actually related to him, Arman had often wished. “If she needs anything....”

“Then I will provide it, Arman. Do you think I am so doddering or so poor that the father needs the son to pay his way? Go do your duty, and then say a prayer for the poor child’s spirit. He was the saving of you, you owe him a great deal.”

Arman was surprised that his father had ever even noticed. “I don’t need my father to tell me that.”

“You grow impertinent, Arman.” His father was standing now, a little red in the face. “You are only a soldier, and not my heir. You will show me respect due my rank or I shall have it taught to you.”

Arman bowed low. “Apologies. I misspoke. May I have your permission to withdraw?”

“I already told you to leave, you arrogant brat. Go and find the woman whose child you murdered.”

Arman took a step forward, and drew a breath. “Loke,” he said through gritted teeth, “was *murdered* by the Darshianese. Do not put that lie about, father, or we shall be even more at odds, and I don’t think you want that. You are a senator, but I am Her Serenity’s general and in good favour with her. She will not appreciate your slandering me, or her army.”

His father glared. “You are in good favour *now*, Arman, but the favours of women are fickle things.”

“As are those of fathers, it seems,” he snapped, turning smartly on his heel walking out. He would hear about this again, he knew. Perhaps from Kita, who was fond of pretending a maternal role with her senior people, and liked to beard them over personal matters. His father was not above using his own favoured position to have Her Serenity made a dig at his aggravating son if it suited him.

Outside the library, Arman forced himself to calm down. He had not come here to fight with the old bastard. He drew the wallet out of his breast pocket – he had kept it close by him for weeks now, but it was time it found its proper home. But he was not looking forward to performing this last duty for his friend.



Kei was rapidly getting to the point that if another person poked him in the back to make him move faster, or shouted at him in Prijian as if speaking loudly somehow made them easier to understand, or wrinkled their nose in disgust at his clothes, he was going to punch them. He wasn't prone to violence and the last time he'd hit someone in anger was when he'd been ten and had then been pounded into the dirt by Urki, but by the gods he was going to give it a go. "Touch me again and I'll bite you," he muttered in response to yet another incomprehensible order accompanied by a shove in the back, but because the escort didn't speak Darshianese, they ignored him. Again. He could have been a statue being shipped to a new owner for all the attention they were giving to him, and the pace at which he was being marched along made no concessions at all to his ability to keep up, which was declining by the minute.

Utuk was a city of stone and gardens, pretty waterfalls, and apparently wealthy, happy citizens. But here and there, Kei sensed an undercurrent of violence and greed, which said to him that the image of a placid, contented populace that the city so obviously strove to achieve, may not be more than just that – an image.

It was, for the moment, none of his concern. All he could do was go where he was prodded, and try to work out from emotions and expressions what the hells they wanted him to do, and try not to panic about where he was being taken.

Eventually this was revealed when they came to a grand house in what seemed to be the better part of the city. One of the soldiers knocked for admittance and handed over the note Kei had seen Mekus give him, the one with instructions for Kei's disposal, he assumed. After a few minutes, the footman who'd answered the door returned and Kei was taken inside.

Despite his weariness and his anxiety, his natural curiosity was aroused. The buildings here were very different from those in Darshek, with sparser furnishings which were more severe in style. These contrasted with the rich, ornate decoration of doorways and floors, with mosaics and carvings depicting mainly scenes from the sea. The quality was high, and he guessed, expensive. He wasn't being given in charge to a pauper, that was for sure.

He was brought out to a cloistered area, and made to stand in a courtyard. Shortly afterwards, an elaborately coiffed, breathtakingly beautiful woman, obviously in the middle stages of pregnancy, and dressed in a fine yellow

gown and delicate sandals, came out to meet them. A man of somewhat less attractiveness, carrying a long ornate black cane like a symbol of office, accompanied her. Her husband? His servant? Kei couldn't tell at first, but the way the soldiers deferred to the lady, and that the man bowed to her, made the situation clear. Was he going to be a lady's maid?

She came over to look at him, giving him much the same kind of impersonal scrutiny that the sovereign had, and with similar disdain. There was also...malice?... and not a little amusement at something in what Kei could sense from her. "What is your name?"

The question had been asked of him in Prijian so often, he could answer it easily, but when he failed to understand her next remark, she rolled her eyes in disgust, and spoke to her servant. "My mistress wants to know if you know why you are here."

"No, my lord."

He turned and translated for her. She smiled, not a particularly pleasant sight, and then waved her hands at the soldiers in clear dismissal. They saluted and the footman led them away, leaving Kei subject to the uncomfortable scrutiny of his new mistress. She walked around him for a few moments, clearly assessing him, and then snapped something at her servant, who bowed as she left, and then turned to Kei. "Come with me."

Kei followed the man into the house, along more richly decorated halls, and then into what was some kind of laundry or washroom. "You will clean yourself and change your clothing. You can wash your present clothing here too and hang them on that line."

"My lord, may I ask your name?"

"My name is Mykis, but you will call me 'sir', boy." He tapped his cane against the floor for emphasis.

"Yes, sir. What will I be doing here? Will I be serving your mistress?"

Mykis gave him an evil looking smile, pleased malice rolling off him, his small eyes squinting at some private joke. "No, you'll be serving the master. Now be quick about cleaning yourself. My mistress hates dirt and smell, and I run a clean household. I won't let you filthy Darshianese change that."

Yes, because of course we all live in mud wallows and eat shit, Kei felt like saying, but of course refrained.

The man watched him clean himself, indicating that he could use the harsh clothes soap on his own body. Kei didn't care about the quality of the soap – he was just glad to be clean again. His new clothes still seemed to offend Mykis, but when the dirty ones were hung out to the man's satisfaction, Kei

was ordered to follow him again, this time taken to a kitchen which was nearly the size of Kei's whole house. Several servants preparing a meal stared at him in frank curiosity. He smiled back, wanting to seem friendly, but no one responded. Mykis shouted something at them in Prijian. "You, listen here. Every servant in this household is your senior, and you will obey everyone of them as if my mistress or I had made the order ourselves. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my...sir. What are my duties?"

To his shock, Mykis came up to him and slapped his face. "Lesson one, boy. Do not speak until spoken to, and do not ask questions until I give you leave. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, sir." Kei stared straight ahead, unable to believe the man had struck him for such a trivial mistake. He'd clearly waited until he had an audience, too, so he was a show-off as well as a bully, by the look of it.

"Good. You will be taking the place of my master's manservant who he recently lost. You will bring his meals, do his laundry, prepare his baths and his rooms. When you are not doing that, you will do as you are directed by me or anyone else here."

"Yes, sir." Kei bit his tongue – he'd been about to ask where he could put his pack and where he would sleep, but that would get him hit again.

"Now wait here, until my master returns. Don't touch anything."

"No, sir."

He was forced to sit like a naughty child while the cook and her assistants giggled and stared and made not entirely incomprehensible comments about him, his morals, his body and his likely habits. He gritted his teeth and pretended he didn't follow any of it. What kind of people were these, to treat others with such lack of respect? Or was it just hostages made into slaves they treated this way?

He waited for an hour or more on the hard stool, trying hard to stay awake. What was happening to the others? Would he see them again? And who was this man, and this family?

Mykis returned and snapped out an order to the cook's assistants, who began to bustle about. It soon became clear that they were preparing a tray of food, and when Mykis ordered Kei to pick it up, he guessed he was about to meet his new master.

He took a breath, and got ready for this new challenge.



Arman had a headache that was close to making him stop and bang his head on the ground just for relief. He'd expected the meeting with Mari to go badly. He'd expected her tears. He hadn't expected her to thank him for his kindness to Loke, or her proud, silent grief which was somehow more of a reproach than if she had blamed him, as his father had done, for Loke's death. Of course, his esteemed father more than made up for the lack once Arman had returned indoors, throwing Mayl's pregnancy into the mix and being as thoroughly disagreeable and unpleasant as Arman remembered him. Arman sometimes wondered if *he* was a bastard too, since his father seemed to have so little interest in him. But no, the dynastic meddlings were proof that his father was trying to preserve the bloodline, even if he couldn't give a damn through whose veins the blood flowed.

Gods. Mari had broken his heart, but he had no solace at all to offer her, just a lock of hair and the note. He wished she had railed or wept wildly, anything, but her dignity only emphasised the depth of her pain. There was nothing at all Arman could do for her, not when he could do nothing for himself.

His escort kept well back from him, sensing his foul temper, he supposed, but one of his men took his reins smartly enough when they reached his house, and the other two took up position as usual by the door. "Welcome home, Sei Arman," his footman said as he strode in.

Arman ignored the pleasantries. "Have someone bring me something to eat and some wine," he snapped as he walked down the hall, just wanting to get away from people for the next...well, year, would be his preference, but hours would probably be all he would get. "And I want a bath in an hour."

"Yes, Sei," the man said to his back.

Arman ignored him, continuing to his rooms. He didn't bother with the farce of going to be welcomed by Mayl, or being 'surprised' at her news, which his father had broken with all the grace that Arman had come to expect from the old bastard. Now he was in his own house, he wasn't going to play meaningless games. Tomorrow, he would visit Karus and hope to be put in a better temper. For now, he wasn't fit company for himself or anyone else.

He threw his satchel of papers onto his desk and examined the notes and invitations which had been left there in his absence. There was nothing that demanded his attention, and even if there had been, he couldn't have summoned the energy to care. He'd begun to strip when he heard a knock and curtly told the servant to leave the tray on the table.

"Sei Arman...."

He turned. "What...?" Then he stared at the newcomers. "What in six hells is *that* doing in my room?"

His steward bowed. "By my mistress' order, Sei Arman, this is your new manservant."

"I think *not*. Get him out of here, and tell me where I can find my wife."

He stalked angrily through the house in search of her, wondering what idiotic game Mayl was playing now, and how she even *knew* Loke was dead. How dare she, how damn well dare she?

She was in her bedroom, being primped by one of her maids. He noted the bump and how she was dressed to emphasise it – was he supposed to be impressed? "What do you mean by sending that Darshianese filth to me? Have you lost what is left of your senses?"

"Welcome home, husband," she said coolly, dismissing her maid with a wave of her hand. "I rejoice in your safe return."

"Never mind the platitudes, what game are you playing? Who is that man and why do you have a Darshianese hostage in our house?"

She regarded him calmly. "That man is your new manservant...."

"No, he damn well...."

"...by the order of Her Serenity herself."

"What?" He stared at her, perplexed. "Why would Kita...? Do you have a hand in this, Mayl, because by the gods you go too far this time...."

"Of course I don't," she snapped at him. "I found out Loke was dead when the soldiers turned up at our door. Here is the note from Senator Mekus if you don't believe me."

He certainly didn't but after reading the note, he was forced to accept that Her Serenity, meddling again for who knew what reason, had seen fit to foist one of the enemy onto him. "Very well, do with him as you like. I don't want him as a manservant."

Her expression became brightly spiteful. "Oh, but I can't do that, Sei Arman. Her Serenity's orders are very specific. He's to be *your* page. Do you want to tell her that you've spurned her gift, or will that duty fall to me?"

He could still turn the man away, but he also knew that Mayl would contrive to have that fact conveyed, however indirectly, to Kita's ears. "I suppose you imagine he will sleep in my room too?"

"Of course. Unless you want people to speculate that Loke shared your room for a reason other than the fact he was your page."

He gripped her shoulders. "That won't be a rumour that will start from you, will it, my *dear* wife? Because once that hisk runs, others might chase after it for company."

She shook him off. "There's no need to be violent, Arman. I merely point out the truth. Anyway, what difference does it make who serves you? The man is fair, sound of limb, he speaks a little Prijian – it's not like you need more than that. Her Serenity obviously wants us to civilise him."

"Fine," he spat. "You do it. He can bring my food and my bath and other than that, I don't want to see him, or discuss him. He's yours to look after."

"As you wish, Sei Arman."

He indicated her stomach with a wave of his hand. "I see you wasted no time in spreading the word about your little bastard. My father actually took me to task that he heard it from you before he heard it from me."

She gave him a wide-eyed look of false surprise. "Oh, that *was* impolite of me, wasn't it. But I knew he would be so pleased to hear the news, I couldn't deprive him of the joy."

He shook his head in disgust. "Leave me out of your games, Mayl. You've got what you wanted, don't push me."

"As if I would," she said sweetly. "By the way, his name is Kei, of Albon."

"Who?" For a moment, he thought she was naming her lover.

"Your new servant, of course. He has a name. They're only mostly savage, you know."

"The day, Sei Mayl, I need lessons on the Darshianese from you, I will take my sword and run it through my stomach. Until then, kindly stick to the things you actually know about – infidelity and plotting."

She sneered at him again as he turned to leave. Gods, could this day get any more appalling?



Kei didn't know who was more horrified, the 'golden general' or himself, but he thought Sei Arman probably had a slight edge in the 'who was most angry' stakes. What in hells was that damn woman doing? Was she unaware of how this man felt about Kei's people? Was this how a successful general was usually rewarded?

He was dragged back to the kitchen, but oddly, Mykis didn't seem either surprised or put out by the rudeness of his master. Kei was simply told where he could draw bath water, and that he should attend his new master in an hour, told by the water clock in the kitchen, to provide him with enough hot

water to fill a hip bath. What a hip bath was, he had no idea. The sniggering of the servants increased when Mykis told them what had happened – Kei didn't need to know Prijian to work that out. It seemed that Sei Arman was not well liked by his servants. Perhaps he had to have slaves sent to him because he was so hated, Kei thought, which didn't bode well for his own term of imprisonment.

Gods, he was tired. Every limb ached and his hands shook slightly from fatigue, but he wasn't allowed to sit idly this time. The cook indicated by gesture that he should take the slops out to the midden, and then he was set to scrubbing pans in water so hot it was close to scalding. No one offered him any of the food which was being prepared, or indicated how he should even obtain a meal. He didn't want to ask – he'd had enough abuse for one day, and going to bed hungry was something he could endure. If he had a bed at all, that was.

Mykis returned, and struck him across the shoulders with his cane. "Don't you see the time? Your master has been waiting half an hour for his bath!" He struck Kei again, who was tempted to take the cane and snap in half or possibly shove it up the horrible man's nose. "Hurry up, you useless boy!"

"Yes, sir," Kei muttered, hastily rolling down his sleeves and heading to the tap room. He was obviously expected to go on his own this time – perhaps Mykis didn't want to risk the wrath of his master again.

He struggled with the fully filled bucket of hot water down the halls, desperately trying not to spill anything on the mosaics, and found the door. He knocked and heard a curt "Enter". He did so, and bowed. "Your bath water, my lord."

The general turned, and gave him a glare. "Don't just stand there, put it into the bath."

"Um...where is it, my lord?"

The general's lips tightened as he got up from his desk and indicated a covered box, the lid of which unfolded to reveal a metal container, slightly raised. "Fill it and get out of my sight. You've forgotten drying cloths and soap, bring that on your return."

"Yes, my lord," Kei said hastily, anxious to get away from this man's roiling hatred which, as before, made him sick to his stomach.

It took two more trips to fill the bath to the general's satisfaction, and then he was rudely told to leave and not return for two hours. In that time, he was set again to cleaning dishes and scrubbing huge, food encrusted pots. It seemed there were over a dozen servants in this house, and every one of

them came in to have a good look at the new arrival. Their opinion of him was universally unflattering, and keeping his temper in the face of their verbal insults and gestures was very difficult. It was with some relief that he noticed two hours had passed and he could escape, although whether the general was actually better company, he couldn't really say.

He found the man dressed in a kind of long robe, which he assumed was for relaxing in one's bedroom since it seemed too heavy to sleep in. He stood waiting for instructions, unsure of what exactly he was supposed to be doing. It was nearly midnight, by his reckoning, and he'd had no real rest for nearly two days. He wasn't sure how much longer he could continue.

"Empty the bath, then you sleep in that corner," the man said, revulsion pouring off him. "Keep out of my way."

"Yes, my lord."

He began to scoop the water out, but was then curtly informed that he should use the taps at the bottom of the bath for that. He set the things to flowing, standing uncomfortably under the intense blue gaze of his master. As he bent to turn the tap off, he heard the general say in a low voice. "I hate you Darshianese, just be clear on that point."

He straightened and turned. "Yes, my lord. Can I ask why?"

He was sure he was about to be hit, such was the anger he felt coming off the man. "You killed my friend. Wantonly murdered a non-combatant."

"Where, my lord?"

"At Darbin. A cowardly attack on my supply train."

Ah, that incident. "Your...friend? Your servant?"

"My *page*. Loke." The general stared with such powerful loathing in his eyes, Kei almost expected his clothes to be set on fire. "Died in agony from a hole in his gut put there by a bomb thrown by your filthy kinsmen."

Kei nodded sympathetically. "Stomach wounds are very difficult to treat...."

He found himself slammed against the wall, the general's breath hot in his face. "Are you *mocking* me?"

"N...no, no, my lord. Of course not."

"No one can treat gut wounds. It's impossible, my medics told me that."

He was being half-strangled by the tight grip the man had on his shirt. "It's not impossible," he said, trying to stay calm. "Just difficult."

"Liar!" A little spittle hit Kei's face as the general shouted. "Liars and murderers, everyone of you!"

"I am a healer, my lord, not a murderer. I don't believe in killing."

Close up, Sei Arman's eyes were even more astonishingly blue and intimidating. "You make me sick. You've been forced on me, but you are not wanted, do you hear? You killed that which I loved, and if I could, I would have you all slaughtered without thought. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, my lord." Kei swallowed, trying not to throw up. "But I didn't kill your friend."

"I don't care. Your kind stinks, you offend me. I have to have you serve me, but nothing will make me like it, or accept you. Is that clear?"

"Yes, my lord." *How many times is this man going to say the same thing? And what in hells does he want me to say?* "Shall I empty your bath, my lord?"

With a growl he was set free and the general stalked back to his desk. "Hurry up. Don't trip and break your foolish neck or I will have to replace you with another of your degenerate kind."

"No, my lord."

Kei left with the bucket of cold water, his heart sinking. He had been right – this man's hatred was likely to crush him, crush them all. How could he hope to survive months with someone like this? "Hurry up, you pampered bastards," he muttered to the absent Rulers of Darshek. "Or there'll be no one here to rescue."



He slept like the dead, and for once, dreamlessly. When he woke, he found the general already at his desk. The slight noise Kei made moving about drew his attention to him. "Go and get my breakfast," he was ordered. The general didn't even glance at Kei as he spoke.

Good morning to you too, Sei General Arman, Kei thought as he moved on stiff legs to the kitchens. He had to ask for the man's food in broken Prijian, which the cook pretended for quite a long time that she couldn't understand even though there were precious few reasons why he would be standing there asking for anything, and then took the tray back to the general's room. It was accepted without a word of thanks, the food on it eaten quickly, and then Kei was ordered to take it away.

"My lord, what shall I do today?"

"Whatever you're told. I won't return until after supper. Don't cause trouble for my wife's staff or you shall suffer for it."

"No, my lord."

Wonderful, a whole day at the mercy of Mykis. He took the tray back, wondering how he should ask for his own food. No one seemed willing to help

him, even though they were perfectly able to tell him how to clean the dishes and oh, yes, do the others while you're there, boy.

He worked under the direction of the cook for at least two hours. By then he was very hungry indeed, so he dared to ask her, "Food, for me?"

She grinned and indicated he had to wait until lunch – another four hours. He couldn't argue with her – didn't have the words, and even if he did, he knew she wouldn't listen anyway.

He was set to scrubbing floors, and hauling buckets of water in and out of the tap room, taking out scraps, cleaning pots and the enormous spit oven. All the while, he had to try and ignore the hunger pangs until he was finally given some bread and cheese and barely enough time to eat. He had only just gulped the last bite down when Mykis came and looked at him in disgust. "Gods, you're filthy. I told you, we run a clean house here."

"My lord...."

He yelped as Mykis' cane struck his arm. "Do *not* speak until you are spoken to!" Kei shook his head and rubbed his arm. Mykis pulled him up by his collar. "Go and wash immediately. I will not allow slovenliness in this household."

His other clothes were almost certainly still wet, but he could only nod and say, "Yes, sir." Anything else would just earn him a beating, and a rebellion might end up with him being killed. He couldn't let himself that happen if only because it would mean death for the others from Ai-Albon. He could only grit his teeth, and do what he had to do to get through this.



Arman sent a polite message of thanks to Kita and damned her to the pits of all six hells in his heart for her interference. His mood was not improved when he called on Blikus and found that his next employment was to take charge of the troops on Kuprij – more meddling from Her Serenity. "She thinks you should spend more time with your wife at this time," Blikus told him dryly, his expression telling Arman what he thought of such sentimentality. Arman could hardly tell him how little joy the prospect gave him either.

He should have expected it though. With Ritus in southern Darshian and Jozo in the north, there was a gap in the command structure. Arman was the natural person to fill it, but he intensely disliked the *reasoning* for the decision. He never wanted his personal life discussed, he didn't want his career directed by broody women. He also resented that Kita thought it was appropriate to interfere so directly in his domestic arrangements. He

desperately needed a friendly ear to bend on the topic and so he went in search of the only one now left to him. Of course, he couldn't even walk there on his own any more – the dignity of his new position required a permanent escort of soldiers, where once he only had them at his home. He wouldn't even be allowed to walk off his bad tempers in privacy any more.

Karus was the first person who was genuinely relieved to see him back safely. "Arman, come in, come in, welcome home. Such a successful campaign you've had. This will do you a lot of good in the long run."

Arman held his arm and made Karus stop. "Pei...Loke died."

Karus peered into his eyes, and nodded slowly as if he had confirmed something. "My dear boy. I'm so sorry." He patted Arman's hand, his expression solemn. "Though it may not comfort you yet, the gods have him in their care, I'm sure."

Arman had ceased to be sure of any such thing, but he bowed his head respectfully. "And how are you, Karus-pei?"

"Well, very well. Come and talk to me in the garden, Arman. I'll have cool drinks brought to us."

Arman noted that Karus was moving more slowly than he had before Arman left on the campaign, and he was seized with a sudden fear that he would lose the only friend left to him. If Karus died, he would truly be alone. The idea made him feel physically ill, but he clenched his fists and said nothing of his fears, which would only upset Karus if he gave expression to them. Instead he admired the last of the autumn flowers and the tree colours in the shade of a tido palm as Karus asked him about the campaign and how Loke had died. It was perhaps unfortunate that it was just as Arman was describing the attack in Darbin that their refreshments were brought. He glared at the woman who brought the drinks. "I wasn't aware," he said with bare politeness, "that you were to have a hostage billeted with you."

"Oh, yes, when they asked who was willing, I offered immediately. The state is paying for all the costs, and I wanted to practice my Darshianese. Arman, this is Jena."

The woman, who he vaguely remembered seeing on the journey south, bowed to him. "My lord," she said politely.

"Pardon me, Karus," Arman said in Prijian, "but I am not exactly enamoured of the race right now."

"Because of Loke? I suppose you might hold a grudge there." Karus tapped the tray and told the girl in Darshianese to leave it and go. When they were alone again, he leaned forward. "Arman, what you described doesn't sound

like any more than a youth carried away with patriotism. I doubt it means the race is evil to a man.”

“You didn’t see it, Pei,” Arman said coldly. “They have no honour, and no sense of familial love or loyalty at all.”

“You surprise me with this observation, Arman. But since it upsets you, let us speak of other things.”

Karus turned the talk to the latest reports from Andon, and let Arman recover his temper. Lunch and the afternoon passed more peacefully, and fortunately, the Darshianese woman wasn’t seen again. Karus was a balm on his soul, and over dinner, he could speak a little more openly of Loke’s loss, and his feelings concerning it. “Was it wrong, Pei? He wanted to go, but I could have forbidden it. I *should* have forbidden it.”

He stared at his wine glass, seeing Loke’s pain-glazed eyes in the dark liquid. Karus, when he spoke, was kind. “If you were to ask Loke, even knowing what happened, I know he still would have gone, Arman. You were that boy’s world. His sorrow would be that you are alone now, but never that he died in your arms. A sweeter death, even with the pain, he would not have wished for.”

“It is irrational for me to grieve thus, I know....”

Karus tapped his hand gently. “No. Never say that, Arman. Your grief is deep because your loss is great. Loke was a gift from the gods, who have taken him back to their bosom. Come, I haven’t paid my respects. Come with me, my friend, while I do so.”

Standing in front of the garden shrine, with Karus at his side, praying piously, the tears he’d held in check ever since Loke’s body had been cremated, coursed freely down Arman’s cheeks. The darkness hid them so he doubted that Karus knew that he wept. The gods knew, he supposed, but he wondered if they cared at all. He wished he knew that Loke was truly safe with them, and longed for the childhood surety of his faith. To question it was to lose the foundation of his entire life. He was adrift in his sorrow, and only time would tell if he would drown or swim.



Kei was beginning to lose track of the days. He wasn’t sure if he’d been in the house of Sei Arman for two weeks, or longer. Counting time by meals was pointless – he never knew if he would eat or not, most often not. He washed more often than he ate in fact, changing his clothes sometimes three times a day in a futile attempt to stay as clean as Mykis insisted. He had been given

two sets of Prijian clothing, which was odd with all the ties instead of laces but comfortable enough to wear, but the effort of keeping them washed and himself clean, while at the same time carrying out the many tasks that seemed to require his attention and his alone, was a losing battle. Every night he went to sleep with fresh welts on his back or his arms from new beatings, and the disgusted complaints of Mykis in his ears.

He began to wish that the general would spend more time at his home, because, although the man was unfailingly rude and curt with him, he never struck him or touched him at all. Kei was sick of being manhandled, hit, shoved and plain abused, and he longed to be in a position to use Mykis' cane to carry out an internal examination on the bastard. Unfortunately, the general seemed to be avoiding his home, and Kei usually only saw him in the late evening and at breakfast for the briefest period of time. For the rest of the day, Kei was left to the tender mercies of the other servants.

Nothing he did pleased them, no matter how hard he tried. He was beginning to realise that they didn't *want* him to please them, because that would rob them of their fun. So would him learning the language, which no one bothered to try and teach him. He was picking up a few words here and there, but he had undoubtedly learned more Prijian from the soldiers on the march than he ever would in Sei Arman's kitchens.

He had no knowledge of where the other Darshianese were being kept and under what conditions, and he feared they were being treated at least as badly as he was, or worse. He was deathly afraid that someone like Urki would actually lash out, or that Peit would, and then they would be punished for rebelling. He hoped wherever they were, they were doing as he was, and trying to keep their heads down. As he never left the house, he had no chance of finding out, and Mykis would turn into a tuktuk bird and fly away before he told Kei any news of anything, let alone the other hostages.

The other problem was the lady of the household who, Kei suspected, encouraged quite a lot of the abuse but for what reason, he had no idea. She came to the kitchens only rarely, but Kei was set to work in the gardens too, spending long days digging in the hot sun, allowed no or little rest, and water only grudgingly provided after he'd fainted one day. She would watch him from the verandah, fanning herself elegantly, sitting on a kind of long backed chair, chatting to her maids but her eyes on him, speculating, assessing. The gardener liked to express his disapproval with blows from his shovel handle, and more than once, Kei was knocked to the ground not far from where this

woman sipped from a glass. She never showed any reaction to the violence. Kei wondered how anyone could be so callous – or so cold.

He never saw the woman speak to her husband, nor did any of the staff seem to interact with the man more than brief exchanges with the footman. It was if he barely lived there, and Kei himself, provided he did what was asked of him to an adequate standard which he tried to reach, seemed to be invisible to the man, for all that Kei returned to his room each night to sleep.

The only time the general took the slightest interest in him was when Kei's medical equipment was finally sent to the house, and left for Sei Arman to attend to upon his return. Kei found the general looking at the box the next morning when he woke. "This is yours?"

Kei scrambled to his feet, then held onto the wall so that he didn't fall down. He felt so light-headed these days. "Yes, my lord. They're my medical supplies."

"Medical? Show me," the general ordered.

Kei took the surgical instruments out and displayed them, making sure that he mentioned how sharp they were so he would not be accused of storing weapons. The general seemed struck by the quality of the metal. "Where are they made? In your village?"

"No, my lord. In Darshek. It's a special method, the steel is very strong and can be made very sharp."

The general examined one of the knives closely and tested the edge on his thumb. "Interesting. You can't keep them."

"No, my lord."

"And this?"

"Nitro distillation. It's an antiseptic." At the man's puzzled look, he explained further, "It prevents infection."

"Is that so. What is it, some magical potion or other?"

"No, my lord. It's distilled nitro weed. Highly toxic if drunk, but safe if not."

The general's face wrinkled in disgust. "You said you were a healer. Do your patients survive?"

"Many do, my lord. The credit most times goes to them, not to me."

"I'm sure. Well, you can't be allowed to have these, but the tools are too valuable to dispose of. I'll lock them up in the library." He closed the lid of the box. "You're adept at making poisons?"

"No, my lord. I make medicines. I told you, I don't kill."

The general's eyes narrowed. "You're impertinent, Kei. Go get my breakfast and don't ever forget who you're addressing."

As if he could ever do that, Kei thought with a silent sigh. “Yes, my lord.”



Her Serenity was not happy, and it meant extra work for everyone. The Darshek siege was showing no sign of succeeding as yet, and Arman was summoned almost daily for discussions with the Lord Commander and the admirals about ideas on how to hasten things along. Personally, Arman thought Kita was being foolishly impatient. It had only been three months since they had sealed the trade route tighter than a drum. The blockade was holding, so it was only a matter of when, not if, Darshek would fall, and the riches of the north would be able to come to Kuplik by sea. The lack of a wagon trail meant Tirko Pass was useless as a supply route, but advances in making it easier to traverse were being achieved every day. Kita was insane to think of expanding to the north before she had conquered Darshian. Taking on the Andonese was a proposal that even Blikus refused to consider seriously before Darshek fell.

Arman let Blikus deal with Kita and concentrated on the Kuprij defences and the security of the supply routes. It had been Jozo's job before he left for Darshian, and Arman hadn't quite appreciated just how complex a task it was. He supposed it showed how trusted he had become, but it was still a large responsibility.

He welcomed being busy, though, and welcomed also that he was able to spend most days away from the house. He even thought of suggesting that he should shift base to the north of Utuk, to the coastal city of Garok. It would make a good deal of logistical sense, and be nearer Tijus, but he didn't want to have yet another conversation with Kita where he was lectured about his duty to his pregnant wife. Two of those in a month had been quite enough.

So for now, he avoided his home, and barely ever caught a glimpse of his supposedly devoted wife, which was, as ever, how he liked it. He spent most evenings with Karus, who never questioned why a man with an expectant spouse would want to spend so little time with her. Arman was beginning to suspect Karus knew somewhat more about the situation between Mayl and him than he had been officially told, but they never discussed it. The Darshianese woman often waited on them at dinner, but Arman was becoming inured to her presence. The sharp pang in his heart when he saw a Darshianese was becoming a dull ache, which was at least more comfortable to live with. Karus could even mention Loke's name now without Arman's eyes wanting to betray him with girlish tears. In fact, it was something of a

comfort to be able to share happy memories of his friend, with a friend. Loke had loved Karus as someone close to Arman, and Karus had felt the same for Loke. Arman needed to be able to talk to someone who knew what it felt like to lose Loke. Karus did. If Arman had not had him, he wondered how he would have got through the first few weeks back in Utuk.

It was thus an unwelcome reminder of Karus' mortality when a message came to Arman at the palace to say that Karus had contracted a cold, that he would be unable to see Arman that evening, and possibly for several more. Arman sent a gift of special quality pijo beans with a note saying he expected to be sharing a brew of pijo with Karus over a game of kezi very soon, and tried not to imagine how easily such a thing could turn to pneumonia in a man of Karus' age.

It meant he had to dine at home, which wasn't as inconvenient as it might be as he had several reports to go over, and he might as well do that in his own rooms as at the palace. The man, Kei, was nowhere to be seen when Arman got back, but the footman was sent to tell Arman's manservant to bring a tray to his rooms.

His rooms were getting chilly in the evenings – he would have to make sure Mykis adjusted the underfloor heating to this wing. He was damned if he was going to shiver in his own bed, he had enough of that when he had to sleep in the field. The rooms themselves were neatly ordered as he liked them – at least the Darshianese servant was handling that task properly, and keeping out of Arman's way as he'd been ordered to, although he could be damnably slow on those rare occasions when Arman actually required his presence. Like tonight. Arman thought a meal of soup and roasted vegetables shouldn't have taken half an hour to bring, especially as he had arrived close to supper time. He pointed this out in no uncertain terms to Kei when he brought the meal, and received the usual meaningless apology. It probably wasn't his fault, Arman thought absently, but then was soon absorbed in his reports.

He finished his meal and ordered Kei to clear the tray and fetch water for a bath. It really was time he modernised these rooms, he thought. One of the new water heaters would mean he would not need servants every time he wanted to bathe. On the other hand, it would mean a lot of noise and mess while it was installed, and an investment in a house he hated and spent little time in, when Kita wasn't interfering, that was. Perhaps he would endure buckets from the tap room for a little longer.

He heard a crash of crockery and he turned sharply in annoyance. His servant had knocked a glass over, and was staring at it as if he'd never seen

such an object before. "Try not to make so much damn noise, and hurry up with the water, will you?"

"Y...yes, my lord."

Arman grunted and turned back to his papers. The plans for an improved wagon for the desert looked promising, and could cut the journey time between Rutej and Kislik by over a week over that by conventional wagons – or so the engineer claimed. He finished reading the details, not completely convinced by the arguments in the technical details, and was irritated to find that he still didn't have his bath water. *Where in hells is that creature now?* He was tempted to seek his servant out, but the idea of bellowing for the blasted man through the hallways was unattractive, so he let it go. Finally, both man and water arrived, Kei panting as if he'd been running. He looked a sweaty, untidy mess – Arman would have to speak to him about this later, it set a bad example to the other servants. "Took your time, didn't you? Hurry up, do you think I have all evening?" he muttered as he picked a report on lem supplies in the southern region of Tykir.

"I'm sorry, my lord."

Arman ignored the soft words, but moments later, when there was an almighty clatter behind him, he threw down his pen and stood up. The useless man had spilled half the water from the bucket all over the floor. "For the gods' sake! Clean that up, you stupid boy." It was worse than having a three-year-old as a servant. What was wrong with Kei tonight? He wasn't usually quite as hopeless as this.

He flung a drying cloth at the man, who was crouched on the floor, cringing, looking at him with wide, frightened eyes. "Just wipe it up."

Kei caught the cloth clumsily and bent, wiping at the puddle with all the speed and agility of an arthritic eighty year old. Arman really had no time for this. He gripped Kei's shoulder. "Here, give me...." He froze as he heard the man whimper, and felt him pull away as if Arman's touch was hurting him. "What's wrong...are you injured?"

Kei stared up at him as if Arman's Darshianese was somehow unclear, which he knew damn well it wasn't. "It's nothing," he whispered. "Please...."

"What's nothing? If you have a hurt, I need to know about it. I'm responsible for your welfare, for what it's worth. Take your shirt off."

He watched Kei untie his shirt with shaking fingers. Impatient, Arman crouched, gripped the hem of the shirt and raised it, determined to find out what was going on. He sat back, frozen in utter shock as he saw the state of his servant's back. It was covered with so many bruises and welts, it *was* a

bruise, a single, multi-coloured vicious injury covering every inch of Kei's back. Across his shoulders were at least ten or more fresh, cruel whip marks. "What in hells...? Who did this?"

Kei tugged his shirt down, a movement which clearly caused him a great deal of pain. "Mykis, my lord."

"Mykis? Why?"

Kei swallowed. "I...I broke a glass. My lord."

"You broke...." Arman stared in astonishment at the man. Whippings were administered in the army and corporal punishment was handed out routinely to civilian criminals – but only for the serious offences, like theft or assault or severe dereliction of duty. *Not* for mere clumsiness. "Did you do it deliberately, perhaps?"

"No...no...my lord. It was an accident. I...got dizzy."

For the first time since the man had been set to work for him, Arman gave him a good look over, and was horrified to note he was in obviously poor condition, looking thin and ill and utterly worn down. He was pretty sure the man had not been like this four weeks ago. "Have you eaten tonight? Today, at all?"

"Yes...breakfast, my lord."

"Which was?"

"Some bread, my lord."

"And that's it? That's all you've eaten today?" Kei nodded. "And what have you been doing? Are you working in the kitchens?" Arman wasn't sure what his wife had set his page to do in his absence. He hadn't cared at all.

"N...no, my lord. The gardens. Digging a new drain." Kei began to close his shirt's ties. "I...I'll clean this. I'm sorry for the mess."

"You'll do no such thing," Arman growled. "Stay here. Just get out of the water, for the gods' sake." He threw the cloth he found he was still holding, into the puddle on the floor, and, seeing how slowly his servant was moving, he carefully held his arm and helped him move back out of the mess. Now he was alerted to it, he could feel how thin Kei seemed to be and how he trembled uncontrollably under his touch.

He stalked out into the hallway, angry with his staff and furious with himself. A general should never have so little regard for his troops, and Darshianese or not, no one under his command was going to be treated like a common criminal – not unless they *were* criminals, which was what he wanted to find out.

He found his steward smoking a pipe in the kitchen, sitting with the cook, stretched out before the fire. They scrambled to their feet as he came in, possibly more moved by the anger in his expression than natural obedience. "Mykis, I want you to explain why my manservant's back looks like someone has been knocking the dust out of him with a rugbeater. What has he done to deserve such treatment?"

"Master...the boy is useless. Utterly clumsy. He breaks things, can't do the simplest task...."

"Oh? Such is not my observation," Arman bit out, even though he had thought very similar things earlier that evening. That was before he knew under what disability Kei was attempting to work. "And who gave you leave to chastise him in that manner?"

"My mistress, Sei Arman. She told me to keep him under control with whatever it took."

Arman could easily imagine such words leaving Mayl's perfect lips, but looking at this small-eyed, small-minded bully, he could also imagine with what relish Mykis had carried out the order. "Kei is *my* servant, personally placed under my charge by Her Serenity. Do you want to explain to Her Serenity how her gift was so badly damaged that he can't carry out simple tasks because *you* have beaten him into a pulp? And what's this I hear about him not being fed? The man is skin and bones. Cook? Is there some famine that I am unaware of that does not allow my man servant to eat three meals a day as I'm sure you do? That all the servants do?"

The woman opened her mouth and shut it. Mykis answered. "It was a punishment for his clumsiness, Sei. He spills things all the time."

And so would you, if you were hungry and injured and terrified, you loathsome brute. "All right, hear me now. As of this moment, Kei has one duty, and one only – to serve me. He will be fed the same food that I am, at the same times, and in the same manner, and if I am not here, he will be fed as if I *am*. No one will lay a finger on him without my direct order. Is that understood?" His servants were no less susceptible to his parade voice than were his soldiers, and far more easily more cowed. They nodded their agreement eagerly, wringing their hands. "Now, I want bath water, some cloths to clean a spill, and a meal prepared. I will speak to my wife about this, but *regardless* of what she may have to say on this subject, if my orders are contravened, you will both leave this house and I will ensure you get no other position. *Ever*. Is that also clear?"

"Yes, Sei Arman," Mykis said faintly.

“Is there some reason you’re still standing there and not carrying out my command?”

“No, Sei,” Mykis squeaked, scurrying away. The cook blanched, and hurriedly began setting plates on a tray.

Arman stalked off in search of his wife and found her on the terrace, listening to her maid reading. “Leave us,” Arman ordered curtly and waited only for the woman to scamper off. “You’ve a damn nerve, Mayl.”

Mayl placed her hand over her belly – perhaps forgetting that reminding Arman of her pregnancy was not likely to win her any sympathy from him. “Is there some reason you are brutalising my maid, Arman?”

“Brutalising? You don’t know the meaning of the word. You leave my servant alone, Mayl. Hurting him won’t do anything to me, but if it comes to the ears of Her Serenity, you’ll be sorry.”

Her lips curled into a sneer. “Changed your tune, haven’t you? Have you finally decided to let him warm your sheets the way dear little Loke did?”

He raised his hand, and she cringed. “Oh yes, you’re afraid of me, and with good reason, you unspeakable bitch. With a mind like yours, it’s a wonder you’re not running the city brothel. Do not touch what is mine, or in my care, or you will find yourself out on the street, child or no child.”

“You told *me* I was to take control of the boy,” she spat.

“You abused the responsibility. Faithless wife, and now a worthless mistress – what a prize you are, Sei Mayl. I’ve told your people if there’s a repeat of these matters, they will be turned out.” He gripped her chin. “That applies to you too.”

He set her free with a disgusted sound and walked out. He would have to pay for this later, he knew. But he wasn’t going to let a servant take his whippings for him.

The water had been delivered, as had the food, and the floor was dry. At first Arman couldn’t see Kei, but then he found him kneeling in the corner, clearly trying to keep out of the way of any further abuse. He remembered Kei now – barely – from the journey across the mountains. The man had always appeared composed – Arman recalled now that he seemed to have been considered one of the leaders among the hostages. He certainly had never shown any fear that Arman had ever seen – but now he looked terrified of his own shadow.

A part of Arman was ashamed to see it, very conscious that he was in no small part responsible for things coming to this state. He had wanted the Darshianese dead – but he couldn’t stomach pointless cruelty or torture, and

certainly had never wanted *this* to happen. Punishment should fit the crime. This man had done nothing but cross the path of an evil bitch and her petty-minded servants.

He crouched in front of Kei. The only way to deal with this was to forget what he was, and treat him as Arman would treat anyone else in his charge who had been mishandled thus. "There's food, will you eat?" He held out his hand, but Kei backed away from it. "I won't hurt you. I promise."

"You hate me. You hate us all," Kei whispered, his eyes downcast. "You let them do this."

That jabbed directly at Arman's pride, but he knew why Kei would think this. "No, I did not and I do not. I have expressly forbidden anyone to lay a finger on you. I have...no love for your race, it is true." He drew a breath. He had always believed in fairness and justice, and this was neither fair nor just. "But this is not how we treat our servants. At least, it is not how *I* treat my servants."

Kei lifted his head, and there was a faint anger in his expression, a small spark even now of pride. "Prijian *hospitality*."

"No. Prijian cruelty, for which I apologise." Kei's eyes widened in surprise. "Please, you should eat." Arman put his hand out again, and Kei accepted it with a shaking one of his own, biting off a small cry as his injured back was tugged. "I'm sorry, just move slowly." Kei just nodded as Arman helped him to the table. "Now eat. You'll eat the same food as I do in future, and I want to know if you do not."

"But...I have to work...with them?"

"No. From now on, you work for me and no one else. Understand?" Kei nodded. "Good lad. I'll see if I can put my hands on some liniment...what?"

"My box...I have ointment which is good for bruises."

"Box? Oh, that thing. All right, I'll fetch it. Eat, I'll return soon. No one will disturb you."

Kei nodded again, and Arman left to get this box of his from the library case. He knew the liniment would be best, but the man looked too fragile to argue with, and perhaps a home-made remedy would ease his mind. It would take more than that to ease Arman's mind, though.



Kei didn't know where to start with the rich food. His hunger was almost greater than the pain in his back and his astonishment at the abrupt change in attitude of the general. He broke off a bit of bread and dipped it into the soup,

half wondering if this was one of his food dreams, where the dishes would be whisked away just as he got the stuff to his lips. His hand shook as he brought the food to his mouth, and when he actually tasted it, it actually entered his mouth and he could swallow it, tears run down his cheeks in relief. He was so hungry....

The first few bites disappeared in no time, but his eager greediness made him choke, forcing him to stop and drink some of the wine. He wiped his mouth with trembling fingers, still not sure if this was real or not. He picked up the spoon and began to sip the excellent meat broth, making himself eat slowly despite his starvation, not wanting to be sick and stretch Arman's sudden generosity too far. His master's odd behaviour was most likely down to shock, and perhaps anger at his servants, more than any feeling for Kei's well-being, but Kei was willing to accept whatever mercy he could in the circumstances.

Gods, his back was on fire – he was glad he couldn't see it, but he knew the bruising to be severe. Mykis had hit him so hard and with so much bad temper, Kei was honestly afraid he would be killed. Then he hoped he *would* be killed, just so the beating would stop. He still didn't know how he had carried that bucket from the tap room.

Feeling less frayed and dizzy with every mouthful, he finished the soup, and then tried the cheese, which wasn't anything special, but which tasted like the finest batch Myka had ever made in her whole life. He was still finishing his food when the door opened – he couldn't hold back his flinch, but he relaxed slightly when he saw it was only his master with his box of equipment and medications in his hands.

"It's in here?"

"Yes, my lord. There's a pot of ointment, sealed with wax...but I can't...." He bit his lip. It was certain the general's kindness would not extend to dressing his wounds. "I forgot," he said in a low voice. "I'm sorry to have troubled you."

Arman put the box on the desk. "What are you talking about, Kei? You need me to put it on you, that's obvious. Have you finished eating?"

"Yes." He hadn't quite, but he wouldn't try the general's temper.

"Then take off your shirt and lie on your pallet."

"Yes, my lord." He needed help again to get his shirt off – he would be useless the following day, possibly longer. He wondered if Arman realised that.

With a quiet groan, he lowered himself to his pallet and lay face down. "My lord, the ointment will stain if you get it on your clothes."

"My damn clothes aren't of any concern to me, Kei. Lie still." Kei felt his braid gently moved out of the way, and then he jerked at the cold touch of the ointment. "Does that hurt?"

"No, my lord. It's just a little cold."

Arman's fingers were surprisingly skilled and gentle as they spread the salve, causing Kei only a little unavoidable pain, well worth it for the relief the numbing ointment brought. "This stuff actually seems to stop sensation," he heard the general say wonderingly. "What's in it?"

"Reduced sap of the chuo plant, mixed with boiled tido palm oil," he explained simply.

"It really works. How was this discovered?"

Kei twisted his head. Arman was looking at his fingers, no doubt puzzled by the tingling that the cream would be causing. "My father was experimenting with various plant saps for their antiseptic and other properties, and found the chuo sap had numbing powers."

Arman looked at him in evident surprise. "Experimenting? You mean, not witchcraft?"

Kei laughed a little despite his weariness and pain. "No, my lord. We have no witches in the north. My father discovered a great many new drugs and treatments but there was no magic involved."

"Hmmm. Kei, this bruising goes below your belt – does it extend much below?"

"Yes, I'm afraid it does."

"Then loosen your trousers – no, take them off." With help, Kei obeyed and Arman hissed in a breath. "Why did you say nothing? This is a serious injury – you could have been crippled."

Kei twisted to look at him again. "To whom should I have complained, my lord?"

"To me, you damn fool!"

"To the man who thinks we're all murdering scum, and who has treated me like an ignorant slave for weeks?"

The room was suddenly very quiet, and Kei realised he had let his weakness and his resentment get the better of him. He had gone too far. But to his surprise, Arman simply began to apply the ointment to his lower back and buttocks, with the same gentle touch as before. "I would not treat a dog thus. Loke...would be distressed to see this." He heard the lid of the ointment jar being replaced. "Your people killed Loke. You killed my friend." Now Kei could feel the faint echoes of Arman's anger, overlain by fresh, intense grief.

Kei could not move easily so he could only turn a little to look at Arman, who seemed lost in his sorrow. "My lord," he said gently. "I can't bring your friend back to life though I wish I had that power to ease your pain. His death was a crime, the man who killed him committed a wrong, no matter what the provocation. But we're not all criminals, any more than all Prij are cruel."

Arman stared down at his ointment-covered fingers for a moment, then lifted his eyes to Kei's. "You don't know how it hurts."

"No, my lord. I only know what my own sorrows feel like, and imagine your own based on that." He reached out a tentative hand to Arman's and when it was not rebuffed, he gently squeezed his fingers. "But I know that his worth was great, to have been loved so deeply. I'm sorry that any of my people were responsible for that loss, I'm sorry for your grief. Deeply sorry, my lord."

Arman let him hold his fingers for a moment or two, then gently pushed them away. "You need to rest," he said, his voice devoid of the emotions Kei could feel surging inside him. "You have no duties until you are healed, and then I'll find some better occupation for you than digging drains."

"Thank you, my lord."

"Go to sleep."

Kei couldn't reach his blankets, but decided the pain of having them on the welts on his back would be far worse than feeling a little chilled so he didn't even try to get to them. But then, to his surprise, he felt something soft laid over him. "The sheet will be easier," Arman said gruffly, before settling the blankets over his back.

Kei could only murmur his thanks again. Arman had taken the sheet from his own bed and laid it over his enemy. Kei could not have been more astonished, but he had no energy to be astonished for long. The relief from pain the ointment gave him, and having a full belly for the first time in weeks, all made sleep irresistible. He stopped resisting, and was tugged under in a matter of moments.

Chapter 2

Arman lay with his arm over his eyes, cursing the situation, his wife, his own blindness, and everything that had brought things to this pass. He had fervently wished never to have anything to do with the Darshianese ever again, but he'd had Kei forced on him. He had hoped to endure the few months until the man was sent back home again simply by ignoring and avoiding him, but Arman had forgotten in whose care he had left him, and chosen to overlook the fact he was dealing with a human being, not a slab of rock. There were details that a general should never forget, no leader should ever ignore, and he had let himself fail his own standards. In failing himself, he had allowed Mayl to dishonour him, and in allowing that, Arman had dishonoured Loke's memory by allowing his

successor to be abused. Regardless of his feelings for the Darshianese, these were unforgivable sins.

That damn Mykis. He should give the man his marching orders now – Arman wanted no thug as his steward – but it would cause gossip, and unless he had a provable charge to use as an excuse to turn him out without a reference, the man would find other employment and spread lies about Arman's household. Still, if he broke Arman's orders over this even in the smallest manner, Arman would have him charged, and dismissed without notice. He wondered in disgust how Mayl found such prizes, and how even she could stomach them.

Thank the gods none of them had ever touched Loke, although that was probably more to do with Arman's father's favour than Arman's own. It was almost certain that Kei's replacement would also be tormented, unless Arman put a stop to this business now. Perhaps it was time for him to take more interest in the running of the household, but it would mean repeated clashes with Mayl, and Arman had little stomach for it, not when he cared nothing for the house. If she left his personal affairs alone, then Arman would tolerate the rest. If she did not....

He clenched his fist, and noticed his fingers still felt strange. He sniffed at them but the ointment had no odour that he could detect. Another shock, to find that what he had dismissed as witchcraft and nonsense, was actually effective, and that it was the product of rational investigation, not chance. What other secrets did the Darshianese have? Was it possible that the Prij might gain more than territory from them? It seemed almost treacherous to think so, but of late, Arman's thoughts seemed to be of a treacherous bent. He'd ceased to be horrified at where his own mind persisted in going.

He would fix this wrong, for the sake of Loke's memory if nothing else. He cared nothing for the hostages but he would not let Loke's death be the excuse for injustice and revenge.

With that vow made in Loke's name, he grunted and rolled over. The tingling of his fingers still bothered him. The ointment numbed the pain of a beating and of bruises, but it seemed nothing could dull the agony of a bruised and battered heart.

The languid peace that Kei felt when he woke disappeared the second he tried to move, and then he remembered why he was lying on his front so awkwardly. He tried to push himself up, but couldn't help a small groan as his body failed him. He had to get up, he had to...Arman.... It was late, why...?

"Take it slowly, Kei. You don't have to get up yet." The general crouched where Kei could see him without moving his head.

"My lord, I...need to...."

“Piss? I’m sure you do.” There was the slightest tint of amusement in Arman’s voice, which baffled Kei utterly, as did the man’s lack of irritation at his helplessness. This time he groaned more loudly as Arman helped him turn on his side, and then sit up, which hurt his bruised tailbone as much the rest of his back ached.

“My lord....” Kei couldn’t seem to wake up. He knew he had to. “Your breakfast....”

“Was about five hours ago, man, not that you would have been fetching it in this state. I told you that you had no duties until you recover,” he added with a hint of irritation in his voice, but Kei couldn’t sense any actual annoyance behind the words.

“Five...gods, I slept so long?”

“Indeed. Which is why you need to piss, no doubt. Can you stand?”

“I doubt it,” Kei muttered, but he let Arman lift him to his feet with surprising ease – the man was very well-built, and it wasn’t just for show. There was an awkward moment as his eyes slid away from Kei’s body and Kei realised he was still nude. The Prij were funny about such things, he thought ruefully, casting about for something to cover himself with. Arman told him to wait, before he fetched his own blue robe, helping Kei ease his arms into it. “Thank you, my lord. I’m sorry for the trouble.”

“It’s not your damn fault,” Arman said curtly. “Do...what you need to do, and I’ll see about a meal for you. Use the earth closet.”

“Yes, my lord.” At least Kei wouldn’t have to struggle to the latrines, or face the other servants. He wondered what they were making of his sudden absence from the kitchen, and of Arman fetching and ordering food for him. He hoped Arman had been serious about Kei not working with the others any more, because he would catch an enormous amount of grief from them if he did have to return to the routine he had become used to.

There was no point in dwelling on it. He could only use this interlude to recover a little, and enjoy the general’s strange tolerance for however long it lasted. Not long, Kei was sure.

He was still feeling light-headed and used the walls for support to get to the little earth closet. Relieving his bladder took care of one discomfort at least. He stole some water from the basin to wash his hands and splash his face to see if it would dispel the dregs of sleep, but it didn’t really help that much. He just couldn’t seem to wake up, and his body seemed filled with rocks. As a healer, he knew what he was dealing with – almost total physical exhaustion on top of malnutrition. If things had continued the way they had, he might easily have been dead in a couple of weeks. But knowing and feeling it were two different things. He had been tired before, hungry before, but never like this. He was so weak, he could hardly stand, and he kept trembling no matter how much he locked his legs or clenched his fists.

The only place he felt he could sit which would not appear impertinent was the pallet, and he honestly didn't think he could get down to the ground again on his own, so he just stood, leaning on a chair and tried not to look as if he was taking liberties or that he was about to pass out. Arman returned several minutes later, carrying a tray and grimaced at him. "Why don't you sit on that, instead of using it to prop yourself up, you fool?"

"I'm sorry, my lord."

Arman sat the tray on the little table he usually used for his meals, and helped Kei to sit. "Perhaps I should put some more of that ointment on you."

Kei shook his head. "No, my lord, it's too valuable to waste. It helped last night. I don't need it today."

Arman stared at him in perplexity. "How is it wasted when you're injured?"

"Someone might suffer a worse injury and need it. I can't replace it down here, the chuo plant grows only in the dry regions."

"You're a stubborn idiot, Kei, but have it your way. I'd ask a physician to come and look at you, but you wouldn't consider that good enough, I suppose."

Arman now seemed truly annoyed. Kei just wanted to eat the food in front of him, because he was very hungry and it smelled delicious, but he couldn't afford to anger his master while he was so weak. "If you wish it, my lord, I would be grateful for the kindness."

"Huh. Darshianese for 'let's humour the Prijian fool'". Kei looked up in amazement at the slight mocking tone. Arman wasn't exactly smiling, but he wasn't frowning any more. "Do you think you need a physician?"

"Most likely not, my lord. The bruises will heal, and I can't feel any infection. If I move around, I won't stiffen up. Uh...but I don't think I will be able to lift anything heavy for a day or two."

"A day or two? Try a week, you idiot. You'll stay with me until you heal properly, and if you try to lift anything heavier than a spoon, I will give you some other pain to distract you. Now eat, I haven't got all day to attend to you."

"No, my lord." Kei turned his attention to the food, and tried to eat as politely and quietly as he could, given he was so ravenous. There was a hot sweet drink he had seen served from the kitchens but never tasted, which warmed him all the way through and did much to help him wake up properly. He savoured it, wondering if he would ever taste it again, and just enjoyed the rare pleasure of not being hungry or forced to work while he was starving and sore. He'd almost forgotten what it was like to have nothing to do. The

general sat at his desk and ignored him, reading through papers. Kei wondered why he had not gone out as usual, but didn't risk irritating the man by asking.

He could get used to having a full belly again too, he thought with a sigh. He couldn't finish everything that had been provided, to his regret, and Arman gave him a sharp look as if to ask why he had not eaten it all. "I just can't finish it, my lord. If you leave it a while, I could try...."

"Don't be ridiculous, Kei. I'll have fresh brought later, if you want it. Do you want to get dressed? You can keep the robe on if you want."

The robe was wonderfully comfortable, but it was the only one Arman owned. The man lived very simply, Kei had noted, for someone who owned such a lavish house. "My clothes...the ones I had yesterday?" He couldn't see them anywhere.

"I sent them to be washed. Where are the others? You have more, don't you?"

"Yes, my lord – but they're probably still wet."

Arman's brow creased into puzzlement. "All of them? How can all your clothes be wet?"

"Um...Mykis wanted me to be clean...so I had to keep washing them."

Arman threw the pencil he was holding down on the desk. "So, in addition to beating you, and starving you, he expected you to appear spotlessly clean. How...thorough of him." Kei could feel Arman's disgust as he considered his steward. "Never mind, keep the robe. It's not like you'll be going anywhere today."

"No, my lord. Is there something I can do to assist you at all?"

"I doubt...wait, you read and write?"

"Yes, of course, my lord."

"Do you read Prijian?"

"No, I don't know the letters."

Arman said something quickly in his language, to which Kei could only give a puzzled look in answer. "And you don't speak it well enough yet either. But you speak some, I believe."

"Yes, a few phrases." Mostly insults, Kei thought, wondering if Arman was going to ask for a demonstration.

Arman sighed. “So much for Her Serenity’s plan of you all learning our tongue. I need to see to that. There is a task I’d like carried out, but I don’t know if you’re up to sitting for a couple of hours.”

His backside hurt, but all his aches were tolerable so long as he wasn’t straining himself. “I’m fine, my lord. I’ve been enduring worse for some time.” Which earned him another piercing look, as if the general thought he was being mocked. “I’d like to help you,” Kei added as meekly as he could.

“All right.” Arman took the tray and put it outside the room – on the floor or into a footman’s hands, Kei didn’t know – and then moved Kei’s chair closer to his desk, even giving Kei a cushion to sit on, which helped a good deal. All this kindness made Kei wary, as if he was being set up for even greater chastisement, but all he could detect from Arman was a faint distaste for the situation, and not a little genuine concern for Kei’s well-being. Of the former intense loathing that had clung to him like a cloud, Kei could only feel echoes. He supposed the man was putting the fact of his race aside, and trying to treat him like any other servant. Kei wanted to fit into that role, and not remind Arman of his hate. It was much easier on both of them this way.

But it couldn’t be ignored for long. Arman described the task he had in mind. “There isn’t a decent Prijian-Darshianese dictionary which uses the Darshianese characters, not our phonetic representation. I’ve a feeling we’ll need such a thing soon, and if you’d like to make a start on one, it would help.”

Kei went still, his heart sinking. He couldn’t.... “My lord, can I ask why you might need such a thing?”

Arman’s eyes narrowed as he looked at Kei. “To read Darshianese documents and books, of course.”

“I can’t, my lord. You’re asking me to be a traitor.”

Kei braced himself for verbal abuse, or worse, and from the look in Arman’s eyes and the emotions Kei could sense from him, there was a real risk he would be struck. But then Arman’s hands unclenched. “Yes, I can see how you would see it that way. In fact, it would make no difference to our campaign – only after. It would help in dealings when Darshek falls, but it won’t hasten that event.”

Kei looked down at his hands, gripped tightly in his lap. “Do I have your word that it has no military implications?”

He heard a snort of anger and thought he had shattered the fragile truce then. Long moments passed without a word from either of them, but then he heard a sigh, and risked lifting his eyes to the general’s. “I won’t swear by Lord Niko because I doubt that would carry any weight with you, but you have my word on my name and my mother’s

memory. I surely don't need to explain to you that it's hardly regular for a prisoner to insist on oaths from his captor."

"I thought I was a hostage, my lord."

"Don't push me, Kei." The chill in Arman's voice made Kei's hands sweaty with fear. The general glared at him for several painful moments. "I would never ask another man to betray his loyalties. I wouldn't ever be able to trust them again if they did."

"And do you trust me, my lord? I could badly mislead you on this project, if I so chose."

"I doubt it," Arman said dryly. "You're not the only Darshianese I could ask, but you wanted to help. I hadn't expected to be treated like a cur over it."

"My lord, I meant no offence, but our people are at war. You can't blame me for putting Darshian first."

Arman rubbed his temples, and it wasn't for show, Kei sensed – he was in some pain. "No, I can't, and it was perhaps ill-advised to ask you. However, I promise that this work is intended for the peace that follows the siege, not the siege itself. We haven't needed such a thing before to defeat your people, have we?"

"No, my lord," Kei said, his hands clenching a little in anger, although Arman was simply pointing out the truth. "Then I'll do as you ask, in the hope that it will bring true peace and an end to war, which I truly wish."

"Moral little bastard, aren't you?" But there was no real heat in the words, and Kei sensed there was even a slight admiration there. "I've not done such a thing before, but I thought if I gave you a list of words in Prijian, you could give me the characters in Darshianese. I believe the manner of writing the two languages are similar enough that it will be easy to pick it up."

"We can try, my lord."

It was easily the most interesting two hours Kei had spent since he had been taken from his home, with the possible exception of the time spent with Jena talking about medical matters. He'd had so little to do with Arman before – he had only seen the cold, hostile general, and formed no impression of his intelligence that wasn't unfavourable to him. That impression, he now saw, was very misleading. The man was an intellectual and exceptionally well-read by Prijian standards, which meant he was strong on history and politics, but knew almost nothing of natural history, medicine or other sciences except for a strong interest in engineering. However, he made up for this lack with a boundless curiosity and retentive memory that made Kei feel like a dullard. He thought deeply but also incisively, and he had the kind of quickness of wit that reminded Kei achingly of Reji, although Arman would never be called light-hearted, and had probably never played a joke in his life.

Arman had the same instinct to teach that Kei's father had had, and it was impossible for Kei not to respond to that, because he loved to learn and discover things, a love that both his parents had encouraged all his life. It was rare among the Prij, though, and there were areas of ignorance and prejudice even in Arman's education which Kei had to step lightly around. It would not do to seem condescending or patronising of his master, especially in his present condition.

Despite his caution, their conversation ranged widely, as clarifications over words and usage led to cultural explanations and examples, and then a few anecdotes from each of their pasts which gave Kei a surprising insight into the general. He didn't know if Arman felt the same way about Kei, but he sensed a genuine enjoyment of the task, for once without any shadow of Arman's apparently ever-present grief.

It was Arman, at last, who called a halt. "Very good work, Kei. An excellent beginning."

Kei blushed with delight at the praise, and then was annoyed at himself for being so easily pleased. "Thank you, my lord."

"You look pale, though. I think it's enough for today. I have to go to the palace and I suggest you try to rest. I'll have some food sent in."

Kei was suddenly fearful about being left alone in this house without a protector, but was too ashamed to say anything. "Thank you, my lord, but I'm not hungry. Sleep would help."

"As you wish. I should be back for supper. No one will molest you, you have my word."

"Yes, my lord. Thank you." Now that they had stopped, he really was feeling exhausted again. He tried to rise from the chair but was forced to give up. His cheeks burned with humiliation. "Uh...."

Arman's strong hands were already under his arms. "I think you might be better lying on the bed until I return."

"Your bed?"

"Why not? You'll be able to get up from it without help while I'm out, if you need to."

Speechless with surprise, Kei let himself be led over to the bed, helped to lie on the covers, and a pillow put under his head. "My lord... this kindness, I won't forget it."

Arman's lips tightened, and Kei sensed he had aroused anger, although not apparently directed at him. "There would be no need for it if I'd been doing my duty. Don't mention it again, Kei."

“No, my lord.”

“I’ll leave instructions that you’re not to be disturbed unless there’s a fire. If you don’t smell smoke, don’t open the door.”

“No, my lord.” Kei was coming to the astonishing realisation that the ‘golden general’, the cold and apparently heartless murderer of Ai-Darbin, had a dry and cutting sense of humour which expressed itself at the most unexpected times. It made Kei yearn to be able to respond to it the way he would with Reji, but he forced himself to be respectful. Arman was odd, and volatile. It didn’t do to poke him too often.

Arman pulled a blanket over him carefully. “Take care you don’t fall in my absence.”

“No, my lord. You said you don’t want to have to replace me.”

Arman only shook his head at Kei’s impudence. “No, I don’t. I’ll be back for supper.”

And then he was left in peace and in comfort, but more confused and unsettled than ever by the strange man who held him prisoner. He would never understand the Prij, he thought.

Arman leaned his forehead briefly on the neck of his jesig, pretending to check the reins while he got his scattered thoughts together. What in the gods’ name was he doing? Asking an enemy for help? Enjoying his enemy’s company? He was betraying his country and Loke with every word and action today.

But even as the words formed in his head, he could imagine Loke’s laughter if he had ever said such a thing to his friend. All afternoon, Arman had kept thinking how much Loke would have liked Kei, and Kei, Loke, and how cruel it was to be so reminded of his lost friend by someone of the very race that had killed him. But over that thought too, Loke would have taken him gently to task. Kei had not killed Loke, had been nowhere near Darbin, and disapproved of the act. Gods – he had even apologised without the slightest trace of mockery, and with every semblance of true sympathy.

What was going on? He had only wanted to right a clear injustice, but instead, he had gone beyond mere care for an injured man to actual...friendliness. Kindness, Kei had called it, which made Arman ashamed and angry that someone who had been abused by one of his people would see it that way, rather than simply as his due. Why?

Why had he spent so long talking to the man? Why had he let himself enjoy it, and make an effort to let Kei relax enough to enjoy it too? He had deliberately let the boundaries between them blur for those few hours, but he couldn’t even hold any resentment over Kei taking liberties with that relaxation, because he hadn’t. Kei was behaving like a model servant, a model prisoner – and still managed to be true to himself, retaining his

dignity and sense of pride. It would be easier if he was a spiteful little shit like Mykis. But he wasn't.

Arman mounted quickly and gave orders to his escort to head towards the palace. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. At all. He had vowed to hate the Darshianese for the rest of his life, to curse each and every one of them no matter where he found them, and yet he had spent one of the most pleasant afternoons in months with Kei, even forgetting, for a little while at least, that they were enemies.

He rode on without seeing, letting his mount pick her path, led by the jesigs of his escort around him. He couldn't allow it to continue, and yet a part of him had needed that respite, had yearned for the companionship of someone of similar intellect, a similar way of looking at things, similar desires. He yearned, in fact, for someone to fill the hole in his life that Loke had left, and which Karus, dear and beloved though he was to Arman, could never truly fill.

Arman's hands tightened on his reins. Here was the full evidence of his madness indeed. Even if Kei were not an enemy, he was not a permanent fixture either. When Darshek fell, hopefully in the very near future, he would go home to his pitiful village, take that fine mind and waste it putting bandages on the scuffed knees of yokels, and Arman would never see him again. Even if he did, it would be as a member of a defeated race. They could never be equals, let alone friends.

By the time he had got to the palace, he knew the answer to the dilemma, sending a note to Karus which he was sure would solve the problem entirely to the satisfaction of all. By the time he had delivered his reports and collected fresh papers from Blikus, he was calm once more, and able to examine his behaviour rationally, acknowledging also that he had at last made some progression in his grief in being able to do so. Kei was likeable and unthreatening, and his wounded, terrified condition – no fault of his own – had simply triggered Arman's protectiveness the way Loke had all those years ago. It wasn't surprising Arman had responded, having had no outlet for such tendencies since Loke's death.

Nor was it really a surprise that he could hate the Darshianese as a group, but come to tolerate someone with whom he had to live day to day, who carried no personal blame, and who was trying, so far as Arman could see, to fit in with an admittedly difficult situation as best he could. Loke would not have held Arman to account for this and would have approved completely of Arman's treatment of Kei. Knowing that eased his guilt and his grief in no small way.

He received the reply that was waiting for him on his return with a sense of relief. This would solve things honourably, and with benefit to several parties, without needing him to spend further time or thought on Kei's situation. It was thus with a calmer and lighter heart that he approached his rooms, after having taken some delight in Mykis' obvious chagrin at being ordered to personally deliver food and baths for two in an hour.

Any conscience Arman might have even begun to have over his treatment of his steward had disappeared that morning when he had seen Kei naked, the extent of the truly horrific abuse perfectly evident, the bruises livid even against Kei's brown skin. It hadn't been a single incident, or even one or two losses of temper or control, which had wrought such damage. It had been caused by systematic torture by a mean-spirited coward, and if he had been Kei and treated that way, Mykis would be dead by now. Except Kei knew, as did Arman and so doubtless did Mayl and Mykis, that Kei dared not strike back. Each bruise had been borne for the sake of others as well as himself. Arman longed to see if Mykis would be so stoic. He doubt that piece of urs shit would be, somehow.

He took care to enter and close the door quietly so not to startle Kei, who clearly still expected Arman to begin abusing him as Mykis had done. But his manservant was still asleep, deep marks of tiredness and pain marring his mouth, his braid a tousled mess down his back. All the Darshianese wore their hair long, but Kei had one of the longest braids Arman had ever seen, extending to the backs of his thighs, which meant it had to be nearly past his knees when loose.

A damn nuisance to maintain no doubt, Arman thought, even worse than his own unruly mess which he wore long because it was fashion for the nobility, but which he wished he could crop to bristle length as did his men. He bowed to that expectation of his caste, but refused to shave – beards were out of fashion as a rule, but were much more practical in the field, even though Loke had often said he wished he would remove it, since he thought Arman looked better clean shaven. Arman had never seen any Darshianese with a beard, and they seemed to have little or no body hair except about their genitals. Perhaps, he thought, their ancestors had considered shaving a waste of time too and bred it out of the race.

He let Kei sleep a little longer, but the meal and baths would arrive soon, and he didn't want the man startled by their delivery. He took care not to touch the damaged back, instead shaking Kei by the arm and calling his name. It was shaming to see how the man flinched, at first in fear and then in pain as he moved, but Kei composed himself quickly enough. "My lord...is it very late?"

"Not so late, but supper will be here soon."

Kei seemed dazed but much improved even with a few hours' rest. Arman sincerely hoped his recovery would be swift because then he could restore their interactions to that of a normal master and servant, which would be far less disturbing for both of them, he was sure.

He helped the man to sit back in the chair, and offered a comb for him to straighten his appearance when it became evident that his belongings were still in the washroom, along with his still damp clothes. They would need to be retrieved. "My lord, I can't manage this...Do you mind if I don't?" Kei looked mortified at having to admit being unable to even groom himself.

Arman wasn't prepared to assist him in such a personal matter either – there were limits to his kindness. "Of course not. Wait until your back heals more."

"Thank you, my lord." Kei still wouldn't look at him. "You finished your business?"

"Naturally. I have some good news...."

A knock interrupted him, and Mykis opened the door at his response. "Your supper, Sei Arman."

"Set it on the table." Arman kept a deliberately cool and intimidating gaze on the man as he set the tray down. As Mykis glanced at Kei who seemed paralysed with fright, his thin lips curled in a sneer. It was the only opening Arman needed. "Something not to your liking, Mykis?" He was careful to speak in Darshianese. This was for Kei's benefit, after all.

"No, Sei."

"Are you sure? You look troubled. Perhaps you disapprove of my kindness to one of your victims."

Eyes widened at the use of the word. "No, Sei," he said in an indignant tone.

"As well you should not, naturally. It's very bothersome for me as your master to have to clean up your mistakes, Mykis." Arman had learned this silkily vicious tone of voice from Mayl – he'd never had to use it before, but he was discovering that it was amazingly effective. "It does not please me at all to be put to this trouble."

Mykis gulped. "I'm sorry, Sei Arman."

"I'm glad to hear that you are. I would not like to be in the position of having to treat another servant for injuries unlawfully given, nor of being inconvenienced by preparing an affidavit to be used in a prosecution. Assault is such an unattractive thing to have on one's record, don't you think?"

"Yes, Sei," Mykis mumbled, looking at the floor. "Uh, will that be all?"

"Did I say it would be all, Mykis? Did I ask you to speak out of turn?" Kei flinched a little at his words – so Arman had guessed correctly at one of the excuses for chastisement.

"No, Sei."

"No, I didn't think I had. Kei's belongings are missing, find them and bring them to this room. I also want two clean, dry sets of clothing delivered for him, his other clothes laundered correctly and with care, and also brought here. Find one of my wife's maids

who knows how to braid hair and send her along with the bath water. Oh, and Mykis? You're untidy. Your hair needs cutting, there's a splash of fat on your coat, you've missed a spot on your neck when you shaved, and your left thumbnail looks like you've been cleaning a stove with it. I won't tolerate such low standards. See that you don't appear before me again like this."

"No, Sei."

"Now go away, I've got better things to do than to dally all day talking to you."

The man bowed, his face now red with anger which Arman ignored, and left them alone.

Arman poured himself a glass of wine and looked at Kei thoughtfully as he sipped it. "You know, I rather enjoyed doing that."

Kei's eyes were on stalks. "My lord...if I can ask...how does such a man come to work for you?"

Arman set the glass down, and wished Kei would lose this tendency to ask the most pointed questions. "He doesn't, he's my wife's creature. I wouldn't have someone like that in my command or my home, if I had a choice."

"But...this is your home, isn't it? Why don't you just ask your wife to remove him?"

Arman sighed and folded his arms, regarding Kei with his still terrified expression. "Because, Kei, life and war are about choosing your battles. I choose not to fight a battle over the staff unless it becomes unavoidable, as it has in your case. I can keep Mykis under control without dismissing him, and without an argument with my wife. So I choose one battle, and ignore the other one. Any more impertinent questions before we eat?"

"No, my lord," Kei murmured, before he picked up his fork and speared a luglo root. "But I'll treasure the look on his face until the day I die."

Arman had to grin at that, the first real smile he'd had on his face in months. "It was rather wonderful, wasn't it. Stupid damn man, he'd be eaten alive in the army."

Kei nodded and began to eat, a faint smile on his lips, the fearful look now gone. Arman noted his appetite was heartier than his capacity to finish the meal once more, and wondered exactly how little food his servant had been surviving on over the last month. The man wasn't a giant to begin with, very tall and quite lean by nature anyway, but he now looked gaunt, although even with a single day's better treatment, he seemed altogether less ill and worn.

When only half of the food was gone, Kei stopped, looking at his plate regretfully. "I can't eat any more, even though I know I want it."

“Never mind, Kei, don’t force yourself.”

Kei laid down his fork. “My lord, you mentioned good news?”

“Oh, yes. I’m afraid I’ll be too busy for some time to come to work further on the dictionary as we did today, but I’ve asked a friend of mine if you and he might continue the task. He’s my former tutor, a trusted friend. Speaks Darshianese like a native – he’s the one who taught me. You can start tomorrow if you feel strong enough.” He expected Kei to be pleased, but his servant was looking down at the table and appeared apprehensive. “Now what’s wrong, Kei?”

“My lord...he’s not...he won’t...?” Kei bit his lip and went quiet.

Arman tsked in irritation. “Do you think I would send you to someone else to abuse you, when I’ve just gone to all this trouble to put a stop to it here? I must have misjudged your intelligence, Kei.”

Kei lowered his gaze respectfully. “I’m sorry, my lord. I’ll work with this man, as you wish. What’s his name?”

“Karus-pei. Karus. He’s elderly now, and not in good health, so I expect you to be considerate and not tire him out. He doesn’t see a lot of people now. He’d welcome the company, I know.”

“Yes, my lord. ‘Pei’ is...teacher?”

“‘Honoured teacher’. When the honorific is in front of the name, it’s a title or position, after the name it’s more a term of respect, an earned term of affection or status.”

“Oh, I hadn’t realised. So ‘Sei’ isn’t ‘lord’, it’s ...?”

“Senator’s child. ‘Ard’, sea captain, and so on. The Darshianese don’t use such things?”

Kei shook his head. “No, my lord. We’re a very disrespectful people.”

“So I see,” Arman said dryly. Yes, it really was just as well to pass Kei to Karus, who was well used to dealing with young people with more spirit than common sense. Kei would be well treated, and maybe he would even look back on this time as one in which he learned some things of benefit to him. The Prij owed him a little compensation for his pain, after all, and if the empire got a decent dictionary out of it, then everyone benefited. It had been a while since Arman had felt so satisfied with one of his labours, which served justice and practicality at the same time, while removing someone from his day to day life who disturbed him greatly, albeit in the most innocent way.

Loke had done that too, right from the moment Arman met him. But Arman wasn't ready for another Loke in his life – and likely never would be. Let Karus look after Kei, and let Arman be alone. It was best for all concerned.

Despite the quite surprising degree of patience Arman had shown Kei over his fearfulness, and the trouble to which he'd gone to reassure Kei that this Karus wasn't another bullying Prij, Kei really couldn't stop feeling apprehensive about the meeting that was about to take place. He was feeling a lot better today – still very sore but nowhere near as weak and shaky as he had yesterday, and had readily assured Arman that he could manage an easy day's scholarship with a retired gentleman. To be honest, he could have easily spent another day resting, but if Arman was not going to be there, he didn't want to risk encountering Mykis on his own, however delicious it had been to see the brute reduced to quivering, helpless, red-faced anger by Arman's razor-edged tongue. Mykis would be plotting his revenge, and Kei wasn't at all sure Mykis' fear of retribution from Arman was greater than his need to exact retribution from Kei.

He still couldn't get over how civil and pleasant Arman was being. The change was greater than if he had been switched with another person using his body. Kei could still feel a lot of the emotions that he had come to associate with Arman, the intense sadness, the hostility, frustration, and some anger, but they seemed to have transmuted, their target changed, and Arman himself seemed to have at last reined in his more dangerous feelings. Perhaps the passage of time was working its inevitable magic on the man's heart, Kei thought, hoping this was so both for Arman's sake and his own. Grief was a deadly emotion if left unchecked – he knew this personally. He didn't want to see anyone suffer the way his mother had, or the way he knew Arman had been when Kei had first encountered him. He was still puzzled as to when the change had occurred, and why – had the business with Mykis lanced the wound? If so, why?

Arman had offered to take Kei to the tutor's house in a light jesig-drawn vehicle, the type which Kei could see passing along the avenues even now, but the idea of being jolted in that manner, or on the back of a jesig, made him plead to be allowed to walk, however slowly. It wasn't that far, so Arman had agreed, pitching his stride to Kei's slow pace, the soldiers who were escorting them (as they always escorted Arman, the general hastened to reassure him) walking at the same rate. Kei was sweating with the effort by the time they arrived at a much more modest house than Arman's, but his aching muscles had loosened up and he knew the exercise would help disburse the pooled blood of his bruises. So long as Arman didn't expect him to haul buckets of water for a while, he'd be fine.

A footman opened the door to Arman's knock and they entered. As Kei's eyes were adjusting to the darker interior, he heard a "Kei? Gods, Kei!" before he was rushed at and embraced by an excited and delighted Jena. "It's you, oh, gods!"

Kei winced. He was as overwhelmed with relief and pleased surprise as she was – only she was hurting his back. Let go, Jena, I'm injured.

"Oh." She let him go and looked at him critically. "What's happened to you, Kei? You look like shit."

"Is that your professional opinion, Jena?" Kei said with a grin. He heard a throat being cleared and he turned. "I'm sorry, my lord, I just...we're just...."

"Happy to see each other, yes, I can see. Jena, please tell Karus-pei that I'm here."

She bowed. "Yes, my lord." She gave Kei a quick smile and left.

"My lord, you didn't mention Karus had any of us with him."

Arman looked at him steadily. "It slipped my mind, Kei. I hope this will reassure you somewhat that he doesn't mistreat people of your race."

"Yes, my lord, it does." He still couldn't believe it – after weeks with no news at all, to find Jena of all people was living so close by, and that he would probably be seeing her every day for a while.... He couldn't stop smiling.

"If I had known it would make you this cheerful, I'd have made it my business to remember. Shall we go on? Karus will be in the garden, enjoying the sun."

Arman seemed a little frosty – did he not approve of Jena in some way? He'd spoken to her with familiarity, so must have seen her a few times before. Had she upset him on one of those visits? Kei fervently hoped not, he didn't want Arman to retreat into his cold shell again. It was painful for both of them.

He followed the general out into a small but lovely garden, in which grew many plants that Kei easily recognised from Darshian, the kind that grew where there was more water available. In a long, low wheeled chair, sat an elderly, rather frail looking man with intense, brightly intelligent eyes, who smiled warmly as they approached. "Welcome, welcome, both of you. So, Arman, this is the young man of which you spoke?"

"Yes, this is Kei of Albon. How are you feeling, Pei?" he said, standing and going to Karus' table, to lay the notes he had made about Darshianese characters the day before, and to touch Karus' hand with gentle affection.

Karus waved them over to the chairs near him, metal ones that matched the table he was using for books, and indicated they should sit. "Much better, Arman. Jena made me some tea with uyris flowers – did you know they were good for congestion? Wonderful things, I suggest you try it when you next have a cold."

Arman glanced at Kei. "No, Pei, I didn't know this. Jena has medical knowledge?"

Kei interrupted hesitantly. “My lord, Jena is a healer like me, a very skilled one.”

Karus put one hand over his heart. “Blessed gods, another one. Are you all healers in Darshian?”

“No, my lord Karus. We’re the only ones in the hostage group, and there is usually only one in every village, two at the very most. Jena is far more experienced than I am.”

“Well, then I am fortunate indeed to have you both in my home, and I expect to live many more years with what I will learn from you. Now, Arman, stop scowling. Have you time for some pijo?”

“I regret not, Pei. I had to do other things yesterday, but the Lord Commander is expecting me this morning, and then I have to attend on Senator Mekus. I’ll return this evening to fetch Kei – are you sure you’re up to him being here all day?”

“Certainly I am, and if I fall asleep like the senile old fool that I am, he and Jena can talk until I wake up.” Kei smiled. He was beginning to feel very fond of this kindly old man. “Let us chatter together while you attend to the important affairs of state.”

Arman’s face creased with a genuinely affectionate smile. “I would rather stay than go, but I will go. Kei, please be careful of Karus, he’s a national treasure and I’d be sad if he was damaged.”

Kei understood the serious message behind the flippancy and bowed his head. “Yes, my lord. Thank you for introducing me.”

“Such lovely manners,” Karus said with a sigh, his eyes twinkling. “Not like someone I could recall very easily, if I put my aged mind to it.”

“I doubt it will take you very long, Pei. I’ll be back before supper. Kei, please don’t leave the house for any reason other than a summons direct from me, do you understand?”

“Yes, my lord.” Kei couldn’t sense anything other than slight concern for him, so he doubted Arman thought he would try to abscond. He must really think his staff are criminally minded, he thought.

“Fine – no, don’t stand, Kei. Good day, Karus.”

Kei found himself being scrutinised closely, and forced himself not to twitch. At last, Karus sighed and rang the little bell he had on the table. “How badly are you injured, young man?”

“My lord?”

“Call me Karus, dear boy, I’m no one’s lord or master or ‘Sei’. You’re hurt, are you not?”

“Yes...Karus. Bruising, nothing more.”

“Hmmm. How did you come by an injury so severe that Arman is happy for you to sit in his presence, and forbid you to stand at his departure as is only expected of a servant?”

“I...” Kei really didn’t know how to deal with this. If he lied, and Arman had already told him the truth, Karus would think him sly. If he told the truth, Arman would have every right to be angry that matters concerning his household were being spread about.

“Forgive me, Karus, it’s a private matter which Sei Arman will explain if he wishes to.”

Karus grunted, and then was forced to cough painfully. “Discreet, and polite. You must be an excellent physician, Kei.”

“I’m a beginner only, my lord...Karus, I mean.”

“And modest too,” Karus noted dryly. “A paragon, indeed. Do you have any faults?”

“I’m told I’m impertinent, Karus. Does that count?”

Karus laughed but then had to cough again. “Damn cold, makes me feel twice my age. Ah, Jena, are you pleased at my little surprise?”

“Yes, Karus, thank you.” She smiled with obvious affection at her master – she’s been lucky, Kei thought, with only a trace of jealousy. “Do you want a pot of pijo, or some tea?”

“The tea again, I think, but inside, in the library. Send Matez to wheel my chair in, and you take young Kei to the kitchen and find out what he wants to drink. I shan’t be in any hurry for the tea, if you two want to get caught up. And then Kei and I have our little task to do for Arman.”

“Thank you, Karus,” she said, and Kei echoed the sentiment. “Come on, I’ll make you something hot to drink.”

She held his wrist as they walked. Gods, Kei, you’re moving like a cripple – what’s happened?

Show you in the kitchen, but don’t say a thing to Karus, all right?

You’re worrying me, but I’m so glad to see you.

Same here, Jena.

I know, she said with a grin, tapping her forehead. I nearly fainted when Arman turned up here the day after I arrived. I had no idea you were with him. Has it been very bad?

I've not been as fortunate as you, Jena, let's just put it like that. They had arrived at the kitchens, which, like the rest of the house, were smaller than those of Arman's home. "How many staff has Karus got?" Unlike Arman's kitchens which were never empty of people, he and Jena were the only people there.

She drew boiling water from the supply on the stove into a tea pot and added a handful of uyris flowers from a container near the sink. "Apart from me, there's Cook, and Siza, her assistant – they're both out at the market – and Matez, who's the footman and the gardener and general help to Karus."

"Gods, Arman has four times as many, and a wife as well."

"I've heard about her," Jena said dryly. "Now show me what you've been hiding."

"Are you sure we won't be interrupted?"

"Kei, have you injured your penis or something?" she asked impatiently. "You're making me very worried."

"You'll need to help me with my shirt." He could feel her anxiety – it wasn't going to improve, he knew.

He was right, of course. She gasped as he turned around. "Oh...gods...."

"Is it very bad?"

"You should be in bed with chuo sap dressings on it, and you damn well know it. Who did this? The golden general? I'll kill him!"

Kei grabbed her wrist. Don't say that even in jest, Jena, you could end up getting yourself and the rest of your villagers killed. It wasn't Arman – it was his damn steward. Arman didn't know – he was furious when he found out. That's why I'm here – to keep me out of the little bastard's way.

Was it by his wife's orders? Karus doesn't come right out and say it, but I know he thinks she's a bitch – and Arman is here almost every night.

Kei hadn't known this was where Arman spent his time. He thinks she's behind some of it, at least. She definitely knows it's happening. I've hardly seen her, don't think much of what I do. They're not love's young dream, but she's expecting.

Only takes one lucky fuck for that to happen, as you know.

“Jena!” Kei was slightly shocked at the crude language. “Anyway, I don’t think it’s infected, but I can’t see it. Tell me honestly how bad it is, and then you better get that tea to Karus.”

She skimmed her hands gently over his back, which still made him flinch. “It must really hurt.”

“It was worse two days ago. Will I live?”

“Probably, unless the bastard who did this has another go. You’re not having to exert yourself while this heals? Tell me he’s not that callous.”

“No, he’s not. He’s not anything like as bad as we thought, Jena.”

She gave him a sceptical look. “We’re talking about the ‘golden general’? The one who killed the boy in Ai-Darbin?”

Kei tugged his shirt down and retied the side sashes. “Yes, that’s the one. The bomb the boy threw killed a civilian, a personal servant of Arman’s. More than a servant – his closest friend, I think. He was mad with grief at the time, he’s still in a lot of pain. It’s not an excuse...but I can understand the reaction. He’s not an evil man, Jena. He doesn’t like us, but he doesn’t want us mistreated either. Dead, yes, beaten, no.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Kei, now I’m even more worried about you.”

“What’s the point, Jena? It’s not like I have a choice where I’m placed. Have you seen any of the others?”

“Yes, a few are around this area. I’ve talked to Gonji and Myri once, at the market – they’re all right, or they were. You?”

Kei sat down – he was feeling a little shaky again. “This is the first time I’ve been out of Arman’s house since the last time I saw you.” He pulled her close and hugged her.

“Gods, Jena, I’ve been so worried and frightened. After what happened to me, I thought the same thing might be happening to everyone else.”

“I can’t swear that it isn’t, Kei, but I’ve no proof that it is. At least it’s stopped for you.” She pulled back. “It has, hasn’t it?”

“I think so. Arman’s pretty angry with his steward.”

“So he should be. A man like that belongs in a prison cell or...or....”

“I was thinking of a rectal application of tinsel leaf, and then having him hung upside down for a week.”

She chuckled. "Oh, now, that's mean, Kei. The tinsel leaf, yes, definitely. But the smell...." She picked up some dark green beans and put them into a grinder. "I'll make some pijo. If you don't want it, I'll drink it or Matez will. I've got some chuo ointment, if you need it."

"No, keep it. I've got some and used it, but we might need it for something more serious."

"Kei, you idiot, this is serious, and besides, who will need it but you or me?"

He shrugged and then winced at the pain. "It's the principle of the thing. You never know. Come on, he really needs the tea."

Karus didn't seem at all put out at the lengthy delay in fetching his refreshment, and he beamed paternally at them as they sat down at his invitation. "Jena, if Cook doesn't need you, I think you would be able to help us get on faster."

"Of course, Karus, what is it you're doing?"

"It's a Darshianese dictionary, Jena," Kei said.

She touched his hand. Are you insane, Kei? They're the enemy!

Yes, I know. It has no military application, Arman promised. Look, he could ask anyone in south Darshian for this, it's not a code. It'll help me learn Prijian and it gets me away from that bastard steward of his. You don't need to help, you can excuse yourself. He won't mind.

She shook off his hand. "Tell me what you want me to do, Karus," she said sweetly. Kei sighed. His life was so full of compromises.

Mekus was such a politician, Arman thought, giving the word the emphasis of a curse. He was one of the most high-ranking senators, but still a small-minded windbag for all that. He'd known Arman since he was in nappies, of course, and never seemed to be far from mentioning the fact either. His daughter was a close friend of Mayl's, which didn't recommend father or daughter to Arman, and Mekus' heir, his son, was an honourless, lazy whiny brat who expected the world to stop revolving if he stamped his foot, and everyone else to defer to him, even other senators' sons five years his senior. Arman thought he needed a good slap and possibly a ten year stint in the army. He was no admirer of the hereditary form of government which meant oldest sons of oldest sons got to become senators with no other qualification at all. The Prij had had a series of good, strong rulers presiding over weak and talentless senates, and Arman believed this was not going to do the country any good in the long term. He just hoped he was dead or retired

before Prijus took his father's place. He'd never submit to an order from the man, he'd cut his own throat first.

He left with a pounding headache and a letter from Mekus' daughter to Arman's wife, being considered little higher in status than an errand boy in that family's eyes. He was tempted to tear it up, but that would be petty – Arman liked revenge on a large scale, and this wasn't worth the price of the argument he would get into if Mayl discovered him shredding notes from dear Meke.

He managed to calm down on the walk from Mekus' house to Karus'. He hoped Karus wasn't going to be too worn out by having Kei with him – he trusted Kei not to do anything deliberately, but Karus' enthusiasm all too often exceeded his physical abilities. Arman had been slightly jealous at the warm welcome the Darshianese man had received, but Karus was always polite and kind, and had had fifty years' experience in greeting new pupils and putting them at their ease. Kei had responded just as Arman had, and dozens of other men beside him. Karus was very, very good at what he did.

He heard gentle laughter even before he knocked at the door, and as he walked through the halls to the library, he heard it again – this time he knew it to be Karus with a woman's voice mixed with it – Jena's, he supposed. A happy scene greeted him – Karus had his kezi board out and Kei was staring at it with an expression Arman knew all too well. It was the look of a man outwitted by a seventy year old with an innocent gaze and a mind like a steel trap, and no idea how it had happened. "Come in, Arman, I've been teaching our guests the gentle sport of kezi hunting."

Arman looked at the board. Yes, that was a classic set up indeed. "Not fair, Karus. I was playing for two years before you tried that one on me."

Kei looked up and grinned. "So it's not that I'm particularly stupid, after all?"

He'd forgotten his 'my lords' but Arman overlooked it. "We're mere neophytes, Kei, and always will be in comparison. Karus was playing kezi in his mother's womb, and was plotting kezin-ge while he was spitting milk all over her shoulder."

"A slight exaggeration, dear boy," Karus said, but with a smug look. "Have you come to stay for supper?"

Arman nearly said yes, but then looked at his servant and his friend, and realised both were close to exhaustion. "Not tonight, Pei, if you will forgive me. I've some reports to write and I need Kei's assistance." That got him a sharp look from the woman, to which he responded with a cool look of his own. Did she think he had injured Kei? "We should really be getting back, Kei."

"Yes, my lord," Kei said, standing by holding onto the desk. He bowed his head. "Thank you, Karus-pei, for your help and the game."

“It was a delight, Kei-gidu.” Arman was startled at the use of the honorific – Karus really must be impressed. “Will I see you tomorrow?”

Karus was looking at Arman as he spoke. “Yes, if you don’t mind. I take it the dictionary is going well, if you have time to play kezi?”

Karus waved impatiently. “Oh, don’t be a prig, Arman. Work and rest in the proper proportions are fundamental to health and productivity. I taught you that.”

Arman bowed. “Yes, Pei, you did. I meant no criticism.”

“Hmmm. The list goes very well, Jena is helping us too. It might make us all famous one day, what do you think?”

“I think, Pei, that you are already famous, and that I really must take my leave. I’ll bring Kei back tomorrow. Goodnight.”

Kei bowed. “Goodnight, Karus, Jena.” The woman was showing a little more propriety than she had this morning, Arman was glad to see, and only bowed in response.

Arman led Kei out and their escort joined them. “Are you up to the walk back?”

“Yes, my lord. I rested when Karus did. Uh...I didn’t tell him what happened. He asked but...I thought it was something you might not want bandied about.”

“Quite right, I don’t. Not to protect Mykis, but because gossip could hurt more than him. Karus doesn’t need to know, but I’ll explain if he does.”

“Thank you, my lord. May I ask, what does ‘gidu’ mean?”

“‘Learned’. It’s often used by physicians of one another as a courtesy, but when Karus uses it, he’s paying you a remarkable compliment.”

“Oh.” Kei was silent for a few moments, and Arman suspected he might be blushing, as well he might. Praise like that from Karus actually meant something. “He should really call Jena that. He’s in good hands with her – she’ll care for him very well.”

“Until she goes home, of course,” Arman said neutrally.

“My lord?”

“Have you forgotten, Kei? This isn’t going to go on forever – one day, one day very soon I hope in fact, the siege at Darshek will succeed and you and your friends will be free to return to your villages. It’s what you’re longing for, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Yes of course it is, my lord.” They walked in silence for several minutes, but then Kei spoke again. “It just feels odd – to have spent so much time here, to have learned of your ways and your language, and then I’ll never use it again, I suppose, nor ever return to Kuprij.”

Arman was really curious as to where Kei was going with this. “After your experiences, I would wonder that you would ever want to lay eyes on another Prij as long as you lived, Kei. Even I admit you’ve not been treated particularly gently, not at any point.”

“No, my lord, we haven’t. Yet a man like Karus is something special, someone to treasure having met.”

“But he’s the only one, surely.”

“No, my lord.”

That surprised Arman, he had to admit. “Is that so. Well, when Darshek falls, the empire will be united – there might be opportunities for you to come back to Kuprij if you’re so inclined. I doubt I would feel that way in your shoes, but then I’m not you.”

He could feel Kei’s surprise at his cold tone, but it was time for a little restoration of the proper balance in this relationship. Kei could satisfy his natural desire for friendship and intellectual stimulation with Karus, Arman didn’t need to be anyone’s friend. It hurt, a little, to push a congenial soul away, but they were enemies, he told himself sternly. A couple of days of necessary relaxation of the rules didn’t change this fact.

Kei didn’t speak again until they reached the house, the darkness hiding whatever his expression may have told Arman of his thoughts, but when Arman reached his rooms and lit the lamp, he could see that some of the silence had to be caused by pure tiredness. “You overdid it today, Kei. I warned you not to.”

“Yes, my lord. It was just sitting, I swear to you, and Jena found me a place to rest for a couple of hours.... It’s just been a while since I had to work so hard intellectually for so long.” But then he smiled. “It’s good for me.”

“Indeed,” Arman said, sorting through the letters on his desk, and not looking at Kei. His servant fell silent again, and when the meal arrived, he ate without talking at all. He managed more food this time, Arman noted – anything which helped the man recover more quickly was good, so he was pleased.

He left Kei to bathe on his own while he checked some records in the library, and when he returned, Kei was dressed again and sitting on his pallet. The waiting footman took the dirty water away, and Arman could then bathe quickly and have the water and the trays removed. “You should turn in.”

“Yes, my lord.” Kei shifted as if he was about to lie down. “My lord, have I offended you in some manner?”

“No, Kei, I would tell you if you had.”

“Oh. Only, you keep grimacing – does your head hurt?”

Arman blinked in surprise – that had been the last thing he expected. He’d thought to hear a petulant complaint about being ignored. “Yes,” he admitted. “It does.”

“I can do something about that, if you like.”

Kei was being scrupulously polite, and his eyes were downcast. It was hard to know what was going on in that curious mind. “Another ointment, perhaps made from caterpillar spit, or some such?”

Kei smiled a little. “No, my lord, just a neck massage.”

“You expect me to let a Darshianese get their hands anywhere near my neck? I think not, Kei.”

Kei looked up in shock. He seemed about to speak, but then he shook his head and turned, clearly giving up on the idea. Which, perversely, even though it was exactly what Arman wanted, annoyed him. “Can you really cure headaches this way?”

Kei turned back to him. “Not all of them, my lord. It depends on the cause. It’s good for those caused by overwork or strain. If there is an underlying illness, it’s not very effective.”

Despite himself, despite his resolution, Arman was curious, and his headache was indeed very bad – had got worse steadily since they had returned to the house, although he had not actually been doing any serious reading. “You may try. If you kill me, remember there won’t be anyone to keep Mykis away from you.”

It was only intended as a joke, since Arman honestly didn’t believe Kei would lift a finger to harm him, if he had not attacked Mykis with far more provocation. But as Kei rose, his expression was solemn. “I’ve told you, my lord. I don’t kill. I’ve never killed anyone, I never wish to. I serve my patients by easing illness and pain.”

“All right, Kei, don’t get upset.”

But the man persisted, still speaking quietly, his dark eyes intense with his emotions. “My lord, I apologise, but to me, it’s not a joking matter. You called me a murderer when you first spoke to me. I couldn’t – I could never.... To kill someone.... It’s sickening.” His voice was low, but the passion behind the words was clear enough.

It infuriated Arman to be held to account this way. “I’ve killed, Kei. I’ve killed your people. I would do so again, if ordered to, and gladly. Do you hate me for that, Kei? Do I make you sick? Do you want to put your hands around my neck now and avenge your kin, the way I avenged.... Soldiers kill, Kei. It’s my job. Do you think me evil, or cursed?” Why was he debating this with the man, when he should just order him to shut up? Why did his opinion matter in the least to Arman? His head throbbed even harder – that and his rising anger made his next words harsh. “You have no answer for me then? You seem to have an opinion on everything, Kei, but none on this?”

Kei wrapped his arms around himself, his face miserable. “Whatever I say will anger you, my lord.”

“That’s not stopped you opening your mouth and expressing whatever impertinent thought pops into your head before, so come on, I want to know – do I make you sick? Am I condemned in your eyes for my crimes?”

Kei shook his head and walked closer to Arman. “Let me treat your headache and then I’ll answer you, because your pain is making you irritable.”

Arman nearly threw a paperweight at him for his impudence, before realising that would exactly prove his point. “You go too far, Kei. You test my limited tolerance and you exceed your licence. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, my lord,” he answered, as meekly as Arman could have wished, but that enraged him too.

“If your hands slip, if I suspect for a second you are trying to do me harm, you will die, do you understand? I can kill without my sword, don’t imagine that I can’t.”

“I don’t, my lord.” Hesitantly, Kei walked behind him – Arman tensed up immediately even though Kei would be hard pressed to squash the life out of a hick in his present condition, but as he felt cool, slightly trembling hands on the back of his neck, he forced himself to calm down. Let this farce be over, he could set a punishment for the man, and then he could stop making a damn fool of himself, losing his temper and shouting at a servant over moral issues which were not his or any other Darshianese’s concern.

There was a firm pressure at the base of his neck, and despite himself, he sighed – some of the pain had dissipated already, incredible though it seemed. He let his head fall forward, and Kei’s fingers dug carefully but firmly into his scalp. Gods...he’d had massages before, but nothing like this, ever. It really felt marvellous, his headache, the pain, and his anger with it, seeping away and leaving nothing but pure relaxation and calmness in their wake.

He was shocked to find he was practically falling asleep, but when he lifted his head, Kei had already stepped away, looking at him apprehensively. “Does...does that feel better, my lord?”

“Yes, it does. Thank you.” Kei nodded, but clearly didn’t want to risk his wrath by speaking again. Now that his temper had calmed, Arman was deeply ashamed of himself. Kei had only wanted to help him and be kind, but as payment Arman had behaved no better than Mykis, for all he’d used only words, threats rather than actual violence. The effect on Kei had been exactly the same – the fearful looks, the way his hands were shaking. “Will you sit? For a moment? I’m not angry, I promise you.”

Kei stared for a moment, and then moved hesitantly to the chair Arman had indicated. He was still biting his lip, and his hands were clenched in his lap, as if to stop their trembling. “I apologise, Kei. I was behaving like a thug.” Kei’s head jerked up in surprise, but he didn’t speak. Perhaps he was wary of another attack. With perfect cause, Arman thought ruefully. “I understand your intentions not to kill. I don’t believe for a moment you would ever do such a thing, whatever I said before in anger. I...may not have been entirely rational then. Loke’s death.... Even now, when I think of it.... I would kill that boy again, if he were here. I hate him, I truly do. But my reactions.... They were disproportionate. Many tried to tell me. You, ironically, are the only one who has not, and yet you have more cause than most. Why is that?”

He’d kept his voice deliberately gentle although even just saying Loke’s name had made his chest tight with grief. He had shouted like a drunken lout before – it was a dishonourable way to behave to a prisoner, let alone a servant.

“My lord.... May I speak...?” Arman nodded. “I didn’t blame you because I knew how you felt, a little. My parents died two years ago, my father of bej fever – a great loss to our village, and to my sister and to me. But my mother.... I wasn’t there, I only know...Myka, my sister, said she couldn’t eat or sleep. She was driven by this huge guilt that she could not, with all her skill, her training, all her experience, save the man she loved. Adored. So she drank nitre distillation. Nitre weed...the death is very painful. Cruel, in fact. There are far kinder ways a healer can use to kill themselves. She must have chosen that route because she felt she deserved it.”

Arman drew in a breath in shock. “Kei.... That must have been hard for you as a healer too.”

Kei nodded jerkily. “Yes, it was. Because I had failed too. And for a while, I too thought about death, only for a short while, but then I remembered Myka and my duty. But even knowing the pain I would cause with my suicide, the pain in my heart from losing the two of them, so close together, one so pointlessly.... It seemed, even for just that short while, a way, the only way to end that agony. So, no, my lord, I don’t blame you for your reactions or what you did. I don’t accept that it’s right to kill in that way, but when the pain is so hard to bear...I know that sometimes, you just do what you need to, to make it stop.” He lowered his eyes again. “If I’ve caused any offence....”

“No, you haven’t. But you know I have killed without the excuse of grief. I’m a soldier, Kei. Does that not sicken you?”

“No, because who am I to judge? If I’m not willing to kill with my own hands, but yet it’s necessary, then can I blame those who will, in my defence or in the defence of others, even my enemy?”

“So you don’t believe that boy at Darbin was evil either.”

Kei looked at him with weary eyes. “You know the answer to that, Sei Arman. If we had attacked Kuplik, if your home, your family, your loved ones were under threat, don’t tell me you wouldn’t look for a bomb or whatever weapon came to hand to fight back. You wouldn’t have it in you to stand and watch. Not you.”

Despite himself, Arman felt his eyes filling, remembering that day yet again. “It was such a cruel death, such an unnecessary death. He died in my arms, in pain, no dignity – how can I forgive that, Kei? How can I stop hating a race who took my heart and crushed it?”

He found to his horror, that tears were coursing down his cheeks. What on earth was he doing, sitting here, weeping in front of his servant, his prisoner? He squeezed his eyes shut, and cursed himself for ever starting this stupid conversation. He heard Kei moving, and then a gentle touch on his hand. When he opened his eyes, Kei was kneeling before him, his hands pressed lightly over his own.

“Forgiveness does not mean forgetting, my lord,” he said in a quiet voice. “That boy took something away from you that he should not have. You took away something from him you should not have. Neither of you gained any comfort or benefit from killing. Blame...hate...fear, these bring nothing but harm to those carrying the emotions. I just...want you...to let your memories of your love be unclouded by your hate, and then your friend’s life will be a blessing once more instead of a burden. I want you to heal, Sei Arman, so that you will not be driven by your pain through your days like a beast. Your friend would wish this too.”

“I loved him, Kei. Truly, with all my heart and soul. I’m empty without him.”

“Yes,” Kei said gently, his grip a little firmer on Arman’s hands. “I know you are, my lord.”

Arman’s tears wouldn’t stop however much he willed it, but somehow he knew that Kei wouldn’t use this weakness against him. He could feel...only gentle concern...and no judgement.... “Will it ever stop, this pain? Can I ever feel joy in life again?”

“Yes, you can, you will, my lord. I believe you’ve begun to find your path already, but you’re afraid to let go of your hate for fear of losing your love. You won’t, I promise you. Loke isn’t lost to you, and never will be.” Kei put his hand over Arman’s heart. “You carry him here, safe, loved...always.” The hand moved back to cover his own again. “My lord, won’t you let yourself rest, as you’ve allowed me to? Your hatred denies you peace and it’s what you need, more than anything.”

“I have no peace, there’s no rest. My friend’s dead, Kei. Loke....”

“Is still beloved, my lord. Still here to let you rest, if you will let him give it. Let go your hate, and let your love heal you.” Kei stood and moved behind him again. Once again, those gentle, clever fingers were on his neck. “Rest, Sei Arman. Be at peace.”

Blind with tears, he closed his eyes again, and let the soothing words drift over his head, Kei’s hands leeching away the renewed ache in his head and in his heart. A minute or two later, Kei touched his face, and when Arman opened his eyes, Kei was looking at him kindly. “Go to bed, my lord.” His hand was taken and he let himself be led over to his bed, urged to lie down. “You need to sleep.”

He curled up on the bed and closed his eyes, feeling so very tired and needing an end to this pain. Something covered him and the glow of the lamps beyond his eyelids disappeared. He heard soft shuffling as if at a great distance, and then silence.

And then at last...at long last...blessed peace.

CHAPTER 3

Kei was getting used to an unpleasant feeling of disorientation, and to spiking pain upon waking, but he knew if he waited a moment or two, and moved slowly, he would be able to sit up. He waited, expecting to hear Arman call his name – but there was only silence. He sat up and looked around – to his surprise, the general was still on his bed, apparently asleep, the first time Kei had woken before him since he had come to his service.

Kei got up carefully, pleased that his legs were steadier and the pain somewhat less, but regretting the headache which he had inflicted on himself the night before. He went to the bed, and yes, indeed, Arman was fast asleep, looking young and peaceful, even if his mouth was drawn down in a sad line. Kei didn’t begrudge the man his rest, even though helping him to it, and fighting his way through the incredible waves of pain and grief that had boiled off him so suddenly and so powerfully, had stretched Kei’s control to the limits, for which he was now paying.

He relieved himself and wondered what he should do – he couldn’t face going to the kitchens to ask for his breakfast, and didn’t trust the staff not to refuse him if he did. He wouldn’t wake Arman even if he dared. He needed to sit, though. He pulled up the low stool Arman used when he was pulling his boots, and set it next to the end of the bed. Then he just sat leaning on the

bedpost, watching over the man who had disrupted his life so thoroughly and who now dominated it and his thoughts.

He'd been wrong to think Arman had lanced the boil of his pain – all he had done was bury it under politeness and duty, before it had erupted in that emotional explosion whose suddenness and ferocity had alarmed Kei, and even Arman too, he realised. It had taken all his understanding, all his control and skill to try to help this agonised soul. Had it worked? Kei fervently hoped so.

He was dozing against the bedpost when he heard a movement, and looked up to see Arman's drowsy eyes looking back at him. "Kei," Arman whispered.

"Are you well, my lord?"

Arman nodded, and then reached for his hand. Puzzled, Kei let him take it. "Thank you. I haven't slept so well in months. I owe you a debt."

"I'm glad, my lord. You needed that rest."

Arman still held his hand, still seemed rather sleepy and sad, but where his pain had been sharp and agonising to sense the night before, it was now a deeper, dulled ache, more like a healing bruise than the slash of a knife. "I hadn't realised how exhausted I'd become. You were right...I was no better than an animal, the way I was behaving."

"You were in pain. There was a reason."

Arman stiffened, and Kei felt his guilt spike a little. "I was in pain, but there was no reasoning. Today I feel like a man, with a man's griefs still, but with a man's strength and control. I...can see the events...that day...I can look at it honestly now, I think."

"You need to, my lord. Your friend deserves that honesty, and it will give you the peace you seek."

"Yes, it probably will. I'll try hard to be honest with myself, Kei, and remember your help. Thank you, Kei-gidu."

The honorific pleased Kei, but more than that, knowing that indeed, Arman really was calmer, was what really gratified him. "You're welcome, my lord."

Arman sat up, yawning, scratching his messy golden hair. At last he seemed to have woken up properly. "You know, you should really call me 'Sei' or 'Sei Arman'," he said in what was obviously an effort to change a painful subject. "Or even just 'Arman' as Loke did. 'My Lord' is the Lord Commander, who I decidedly am not. You can use my name, if you want."

"Yes...Sei...." The word seemed awkward. "I suppose it's because 'my lord' is the only title we use, and if I call you by your name.... I might do so when

it's inappropriate and then people will talk." As they already did, Kei thought darkly, thinking of the abusive terms flung at him, and the sniggering gossip of the kitchen maids. For such a prudish race, the Prij spent a lot of time talking about sex, he thought.

Arman sighed. "True, and if I'm honest, I don't like 'Sei' either. Being reminded of my caste doesn't bring me pleasure. Do as you wish, Kei, I don't want to make you feel awkward."

"Thank you...Arman," Kei said, which earned him a smile. "Should I ask for breakfast?"

"No, let's wait until a stiff breeze wouldn't knock you over before you have to face Mykis and his lovely crew. How do you feel? You look tired. I'm sorry for inflicting that outburst on you last night. Please forgive me."

He looked so young, so earnestly worried that it touched Kei. "Nothing to forgive, my lord...Arman. Seeing your pain made me sad, not angry or irritated...or disgusted," he added deliberately. "I was glad to help, and would do so again. As for me, I feel better. I am tired, but not in a bad way. I shouldn't try to learn a game like kezi from a master strategist while I'm not at my best."

Arman smiled a little. "Karus is the best kezi player in Kuprij – I know, because I've played against generals and admirals and they're nothing in ability compared to him. I can teach you more of the game if you like. It would please Karus to have someone other than me to play with, he knows all my tricks."

"I'd like that."

"Good." He swung his legs out of the bed. "Let me order our food, and then we can go over there after we eat."

Over breakfast, Arman told Kei how he'd first encountered Karus, and that led to a more general history of Arman's childhood. He'd lost his mother in childbirth at the age of eight – a common tragedy it seemed, for the Prij, who were more fertile than the Darshianese, but who lost more of their infants in childhood and more of their women in producing them.

Kei also learned, more from what was not said, than what was, that there was no love lost between Arman and his senator father, although Arman was fond of his older brother who lived on a family estate to the north of Utuk and who would one day inherit his father's senatorial status. Karus seemed to be very much a father substitute for Arman, and the pattern on which he had formed himself which, to Kei's thinking, was a very good thing, but meant that Arman was going to be faced sooner rather than later with the loss of another

person close to his heart. Karus was frail – one day soon, Jena would not be there to treat the next cold, or help him if he fell, and Prij medicine would offer no real treatment. It made Kei wish there was some way of letting Jena stay that didn't mean cutting her off from her village – but there was not. When she returned home, Karus would have to get along without her. As would Arman when Kei left. He hoped, by then, Arman would really be healed. He'd made a good start.

It was much easier today. Before, Arman's polite consideration had the brittleness of duty and pretense about it, and Kei had not been able to trust it. Today, he was much more at peace. His grief, his deep sadness was still there, but he had set aside a heavy and damaging burden of anger and hate upon his soul. It showed in every line of his body, everything he did or said. Kei could only feel glad for him.

Kei finished his breakfast, and sat sipping his pijo as Arman ate. He was coming to enjoy this strange, delicious drink, which was made from beans imported from islands far to the south of Kuprij. The drink was warm and smooth on the tongue, and lit a pleasant fire in his belly. Something else he might actually miss when he returned home, although it wasn't enough to keep him here when the war was over. Other things would, possibly, if he didn't have the many ties that he did – of course, he was assuming he would be welcome. That was unlikely, he told himself sternly. The Prij, even after twenty years, still ruled at a distance from the Darshianese, and never mixed with them. There were no others of their race in Utuk, Jena said, other than the hostages, and while intermarriages were not forbidden outright, there was such a strong social taboo on them, they never occurred. Kei thought it was sad. The two peoples could give a lot to each other, more than the crops, mineral wealth, labour and taxes that were all the Prij seemed to want from their subjects.

Arman called him back to himself. "Kei? You seem distracted. Is something wrong?"

"Sorry, my lord, just thinking about the Prij and Darshian."

"Solving all our problems in that clever brain no doubt, Gidu." Kei flushed a little at the compliment. "Forgive me, but there is something I need to ask. You told me of your parents' death – but I understood you to be the son of the clan head, who I spoke to in Albon."

Arman wasn't outright calling him a liar and Kei could sense no suspicion, but he hastened to explain anyway. "Fedor is my father by adoption, my uncle – my mother's brother. It's the custom of my clan for a senior family member

to adopt orphans of their relatives, where the children are unmarried or under the age of majority. As I was above that age, I could have refused, but I was happy to let it happen – I honour him as my father and my uncle, and he's been unfailingly kind to my sister and me. There is no distinction in our law between adopted and blood children, it's a very common thing."

"Hmmm. We allow adoption, but the children are never really considered of the same rank." Kei heard him mutter something in Prijian, but couldn't make it out what he was saying. "It sounds a close and supportive clan – but your father, your uncle, seemed so unmoved by being forced to lose you as a hostage. Are you all so stoic?"

Now Arman's emotions were stirred, although why, Kei didn't know. "We're not stoic, far from it. But do you reveal your weakness to your enemy so easily, Arman?"

"I revealed it easily to my enemy last night."

Arman was gazing at him intently, clearly waiting to see how he would respond to that. "I'm not your enemy, Arman," Kei said in a low voice, wondering if he was betraying Darshian and all his kin, but not caring much. "I would never hold such a thing against you, any more than I would hold Karus' cold, or a patient's broken arm. If you're afraid I'll become too familiar with you because of it, don't be."

Arman nodded. "I know you wouldn't, Kei. There is a grace about you...I hope your village appreciates you, and will honour you for what you are when you return, because you're a remarkable man. I'm grateful that chance, however unfortunate to you, gave me the opportunity to meet you."

Now Kei really flushed with embarrassment. "Thank you, my lord...Arman."

"It's only my honest opinion on the subject, and you deserve my honesty after last night." Arman held Kei's gaze with his powerful, blue-eyed stare for a moment longer, and then his expression relaxed. "Now, let's take you to Karus, and see if he can wear you out again. Oh, there's a bit of news that should make you happy – it's Her Serenity's birthday at the end of next week, and she's declared all the Darshianese can attend the festival in her honour. Senator Mekus is sending the notices out today. So, if seeing Jena made you so cheerful yesterday, you'll probably faint with delight next week to see the rest of your friends."

Kei grinned to himself, knowing that Arman was unknowingly speaking the literal truth, and reminded himself to work with Jena on his control before next week arrived. "I'll be looking forward to it. Thank you, Arman."

Another genuine smile. *Careful, Sei Arman*, Kei thought fondly. *Keep that up and it could become a habit that will be hard to break.*



“Are you sure you want to do this today?”

Kei tied off his braid – Arman was always surprised by the ease with which he managed that enormous rope of hair – and gave him a long-suffering look. “I’m fine, Arman. You’ve been more than kind but you know it will only cause more talk if I don’t get back to my regular duties soon.”

“I don’t care about the gossip of servants, I care about you being made ill again.”

“Fetching your breakfast won’t make me ill, and since gossip entertains Mykis’ staff so much, why not deny them their fun for a while longer?”

Arman shook his head, secretly pleased that Kei’s spirits were high enough for him to argue with him, but not wanting to show it. “As you wish.”

“Thank you, Arman.” The quick smile, and the use of his name, also pleased Arman in a way which he suspected was probably a little unwise.

“Just be careful,” he said gruffly.

“Yes, my lord,” Kei said with apparent respect, but his dark eyes were full of mischief as he left the room. When he looked that way, Arman’s heart felt a sharp pang of loss – it was so like the way Loke used to tease him. He never thought anyone would tease him again this way. He was still surprised that it was one of the enemy who was doing it. But Kei was not his enemy, not any more. He felt it to be so, knew it in his heart.

He should be getting dressed, but instead he sat waiting for Kei to return. It was ridiculous that he should be afraid what might happen to his servant while simply getting a meal for him – but after what had happened to Kei, Arman couldn’t be complacent. Kei had only just begun to lose the fear that came into his eyes every time he left Arman’s rooms, and he was only just healed enough to return to duty. The bruises were still lurid, and he was still somewhat stiff and awkward on rising. Every time Arman saw Kei wince, he wanted to rip Mykis’ lungs out and serve them up as a sacrifice to Lord Quek, only the sea god would probably refuse them as being as tainted as their owner.

With pure relief, he saw Kei come back soon enough, bearing a food tray and with no sign that he had been attacked in any way. “What happened?”

“Nothing, Arman – there was only the cook and she said nothing to me.” But the relief in Kei’s own voice told Arman he had not been anything like as

sanguine as he'd pretended, and Arman cursed himself again for having let things get so bad.

They had decided today was a good day for Kei to resume his duties, a sufficient time to heal coinciding neatly with Punus-feast, when most of the staff would be taking their day of leisure, going down to the civic square to see the celebrations and enjoying food stalls and free entertainment after the sacrifices. Arman thought in other circumstances, Kei would enjoy seeing it too, but he was reluctant to let the man be exposed to large numbers of strangers until his confidence completely returned. Arman would not be able to protect him all the time – he had his own duties to perform today, and there was always the delightful prospect of Kei possibly being forced to endure meeting Arman's father. Arman did not want a fragile soul exposed to that acid tongue.

"You should stay here until I get back, Kei. I'll only be a couple of hours."

"Yes, I will. I'll have a wash though, while everyone's out."

Arman frowned at that, even though this was also necessary, even more so, to prevent the kind of filthy accusation that Mayl had threatened to put out about Loke, and which Arman had no doubt her servants already believed. No one who knew Arman would seriously have credited he had been sodomising his childhood friend and servant. But Kei was a full-grown man, a remarkably handsome one at that, and without the excuse of injury, his bathing in Arman's rooms would be seen as meaning only one thing. Arman didn't want to offer any supporting evidence for Mayl's spite. It would do too much harm in too many quarters, and not all of it to him. "Can't you wait until this evening?"

"Won't they be back by then?"

Arman sighed. "Oh, do as you wish, Kei. You know, you're a lot of trouble for a servant."

"I'm sorry, my lord." Kei's eyes were downcast as he spoke.

"It's not your fault, you idiot. I know it's not easy for you either."

Kei looked at him. "No, it's not. But it's far easier than it could be. I have you and Karus-pei to thank for that."

"Yes, well..." Arman was surprised, and warmed, by the unexpected, probably unearned gratitude. Such a generous spirit, when he had been so badly harmed. "Come on, eat up, I'm tired of Karus' cook giving me those mournful looks because she thinks I'm still not feeding you."

"I'll be heavier than you in a month if I keep eating her sweet cakes," Kei said with a grin. "She feeds me non-stop while I'm there."

“That’s because Karus has the appetite of a bird these days. It’s frustrating to the poor woman. Indulge her, it won’t be for long.”

Kei looked down. “No, my lord. I hope it won’t.”

And there it was again. Every conversation had this as the shadow over it. Kei’s hostage status, the siege, the fact there was only one realistic outcome to the war.... Perhaps they would meet again in their next lives, if the Darshian beliefs were true, and then they could be friends without reservation. It was a nice idea, anyway.

Arman ate and then dressed in his armour – the less dazzling version, for, as he explained to Kei, there was no point in inuring people to his majesty. Kei gave him a grin at that comment. “My lord, I doubt that could *ever* happen.” Which, if Arman were prone to blushing, would have made him blush. He wasn’t, but he was still oddly pleased at the compliment. He liked to think he wasn’t a vain man, but living with Mayl and the disdain of his father made him forget very often that he wasn’t exactly repulsive by conventional standards. Not that it did him any good, but that he didn’t revolt Kei, who had to be used to very different standards of attractiveness, was something that pleased and surprised him, being a sign of a lack of resentment on Kei’s part for which Arman was very grateful.

He pulled on his best cloak. “I’ll be back soon. Stay out of trouble,” he said, strapping on his sword.

“Yes, Arman,” Kei said, and this time, there was no humour in his eyes.

Arman suppressed a sigh as he left. His life had come to this, that there was more danger to a Darshianese hostage inside his own home than there was on the battlefield. If the Darshianese were right, he must have been a very great sinner in his past life.



The kitchen was empty. Kei put the dishes in the sink for washing – Arman had told him not to worry in future about cleaning them, or doing his or Arman’s laundry, there were people employed to deal with that and they damn well would do, he’d said – then he crept as quickly and quietly as he could to the washroom. He took a hasty bath, not wasting time waiting to draw hot water since he could bear cold, dressed in clean, fresh clothes and hoping he would be able to escape back to Arman’s rooms without being seen at all. He now wished he’d listened to Arman’s advice and waited – his stomach had been churning since he’d left Arman’s chambers.

Unfortunately he was out of luck. He heard Mykis' voice as he came out of the washroom, and unless he wanted to hide in there indefinitely (and perhaps be discovered skulking, which would be humiliating to say the least), there was no choice but to walk out and hope Arman's warnings would protect him.

It did, a little. Mykis only scowled at him, but didn't speak as Kei emerged. Mykis wasn't alone, however. Peri, the hisk-faced boy who acted as messenger and general hand about the gardens (and who had gladly passed many of his duties to Kei before Arman put a stop to it), was there too – as was Arman's wife. Kei couldn't rush past her with impunity, so he stopped and bowed respectfully, hoping she would think him beneath her notice.

It seemed in that he was also out of luck. She handed something to Peri, said something to him about 'Mekus' and dismissed him, before walking over to Kei. She said nothing, merely giving him that same cold appraisal as she had the day he'd arrived. She said something to Mykis, whose scowl deepened. "Sei Mayl wishes to know if you are now fully recovered."

"Please tell her that yes, I am." Kei stared straight ahead, trying not to catch either of their gazes.

Mykis repeated the information, or Kei assumed he did. She tapped her fan against her lips and walked around him slowly, like he was a vase in the market she was considering buying. She said something else. "She wants to check that you're healed. Take off your shirt, boy."

Kei started and looked down at her in horror. "My lady...."

"Are you deaf, boy?" Mykis snapped. "Take off your shirt. It's not like it will hurt you," he added with a sneer.

Kei fumbled at the ties of his shirt, his face burning with embarrassment. She watched him calmly, betraying no emotion in her expression, but Kei sensed her malice, and something...less wholesome. He swallowed as he took his shirt off, holding it in front of him, and wished he was anywhere on earth than here. This was worse than being beaten.

Again, the slow appraising look. She said something to Mykis, who smiled unpleasantly and made an unmistakeably sexual gesture towards Kei's body, which made her laugh. Kei couldn't believe a married woman, a pregnant one at that, would engage a servant in this...this lascivious assessment, nor make what were clearly prurient comments on the half-naked body of another man in this way.

At last she seemed satisfied, and Mykis curtly told him to put his shirt back on. "My mistress wants to know if you enjoy serving her husband." The way

Mykis said 'serving' left little doubt what he really meant – Kei couldn't tell if that was how *she* meant it, but somehow he suspected she did.

"Sei Arman is a good and kind master," Kei said. Let them make of that what they wanted.

She gave him a knowing look as his remark was repeated back at her. "My mistress says to take care, my master has a habit of risking his servants' lives."

Kei looked at Mykis then. "Is this a remark you want me to pass back to Sei Arman as from your lips, Mykis? Tell your mistress that I have no concerns or fears working for her husband. He treats me with kindness and respect, as an honourable person should."

Sei Mayl's lips tightened as Mykis reported Kei's comments, and she snapped something back at him. "She wants you to remove yourself from her presence. As do I."

"Gladly," Kei said calmly, walking without haste from the kitchen, but still half expecting Mykis' feared cane to land on his back at any moment.

He kept his composure until he got back to Arman's rooms, and then he sank onto a chair, his hands shaking and sweaty. Gods, how could there be people like this and Arman in the same city, let alone the same house? He pitied Arman deeply over this home of his – at least one day, Kei would escape. Arman would never be free, at least not, Kei suspected without paying a high price in scandal and loss of face. There were definitely benefits to not being of any nobility of any kind. If this was what it meant to be a lord in this society, the Prij were welcome to it.

He couldn't help but wonder over the constant innuendo he'd heard about Arman and Loke. It didn't seem to be unusual for a manservant to sleep in his master's rooms, so Kei could only assume that the closeness between the two of them had led people to speculate that there was something improper going on, even if that very speculation made Arman's wife look something of a fool. Arman had never mentioned anything of the kind regarding Loke, even though he freely admitted, at least to Kei, to loving Loke much more deeply than he could ever have done his spouse. But had Arman really been sleeping with the boy or not?

Arman didn't seem the type, somehow. Despite his non-relationship with his wife, he seemed to suffer none of the sexual frustration that was beginning to build in Kei now that he had stopped being beaten, starved and worked to a frazzle. Kei's urges, fuelled by his memories of lovemaking with Reji, were a constant but easily bearable irritant, a background to his life that he took for

granted as part of being a man. But Arman appeared to be without interest in such things – never making any comment that was remotely ribald or indicating that he noticed the attractiveness of anyone, and certainly never referring to Loke with anything other than reverence.

He wasn't an expert on the man, and he had only had a short time to observe him, but it still puzzled Kei because Arman was a handsome, desirable man, in good health, and, apart from his period of wild grief over his friend's death, a remarkably stable person. There seemed no reason why he would suppress his natural instincts this way.

Perhaps being married to that bitch would put a rope around anyone's balls, Kei thought, allowing himself a bluntness that he would never express to Arman, and he hoped sincerely that the happiness Arman was not deriving from his marriage, he might yet gain in fatherhood. But this also was not something he had ever heard Arman say a word about. The upcoming birth, just three or so months away, was something Arman never referred to, not to Karus or to Kei. It was if he forgot most of the time that he had a wife or child on the way at all.

As promised Arman was back in less than two hours, for which Kei was grateful – being alone in his house inevitably left him feeling anxious, uncomfortably conscious of his vulnerability, and how much his present safety depended on the goodwill of a single man. If Arman tired of him, or was told to send him away, Kei could easily end up under the control of another Mykis, and this time, without a powerful patron to protect him.

"What's happened, Kei?" Arman said quietly as he came in and shut the door. "You've got that spooked jesig look in your eyes again. Has someone done something to you?"

Kei took Arman's ceremonial breastplate from his hands, and hung it on the stand. "No, not really. I just encountered Mykis earlier...and your wife. No one hurt me."

"Good. And how was the honoured Sei Mayl? As pleasant as ever?"

"She's apparently concerned for my wellbeing."

Arman raised an eyebrow. "That I find most unlikely. Ignore her, Kei. She likes to torment. If she knew it would not have offended my father, she'd have done it to Loke too." He rubbed his forehead. "Gods, why do I go to that every month? Would it trouble you to work your magic on my head again?"

"Of course not. Lean forward." Kei put his thumbs gently against the pulse points and began to massage, while he used his mind-mover's gift to constrict

the blood vessels that were making Arman's head throb. It only took a minute before he felt Arman relax. "Better?"

"Much," he said with a sigh. "I wish I knew how you did that."

"Trade secret, my lord." Arman gave him a weary grin. "Why do you go to that if it annoys you so much?"

"Because it's expected twice over of me. I'm a general and of the senatorial class. Piety is obligatory in us."

Kei had learned more of the Prijian religion from Karus, who genuinely believed in his gods and took comfort from them, although he wasn't a superstitious man or a gullible one. He sensed Arman's faith was less solidly founded, but it wasn't an area he was going to tread in. Their religion was a touchy subject with the Prij. It was the bedrock of their state and their belief in their right to rule other nations. Asking about it opened up a thurl's nest of questions, which could lead to bad feeling. Kei wasn't going to risk that.

He turned the conversation to the celebrations he was to attend in three days' time, and Arman's role in them. Mykis and Arman's distasteful wife were left aside as something neither of them wanted to talk about, and lunch with Karus, finally over his cold and back on his feet, improved Arman's mood again. The day with its unpromising beginning, turned out in the end to be a good one for all of them.

Kei left Arman talking quietly with Karus indoors, while he and Jena enjoyed the last of the daylight out in the garden which made them both homesick, but yet was a source of comfort too, with the familiar scents and colours. "I can't wait to see the others, Kei," she said, sitting on the grass under the big tido palm. "Does it sometimes feel to you like we could be here forever?"

"All the time. Yet Darshek could fall any day now. It's ironic that it would mean we go home but the others would be captives, maybe. I don't know what to wish for any more."

"Yes, I know what you mean." She looked around to see if they were being overheard. "You don't think a rescue will come now, do you?"

"No. I think the siege is working too well. So much for their damn plans and promises – we should have all fled to Darshek instead of a few of us."

"But then we'd all be captured when Darshek fell." She sighed. "Why us, Kei? Why can't the damn Prij just stick to their own damn islands and leave us in peace?"

He took her hand as he sat down. "It's just their nature. Like some men are more argumentative, and some women more lusty."

She gave him an odd look, and grinned at their joined hands. "Is that a comment on anyone in particular?"

He stuck his tongue at her. "Not you, you prim little healer. You want to hope Aldik hasn't moved onto someone else by the time you get home. Ow!" She'd poked him hard in the stomach. "Well, it's true."

"He just wants a quiet life. He doesn't have a roving eye or I wouldn't put up with him." Her lover was a widower who didn't care she was infertile. His children were grown, and she had him all to herself. It was an arrangement a lot of gifted people had, and it seemed to work as well as turning to one of their own kind, which wasn't often an option in the villages. The only other option was to engage in casual romps with normals, who then discarded them for proper spouses when they were ready to build a home and a family.

Still, when Kei saw what Arman had to put up with for the sake of a so-called normal life, he was happy to be the way he was. "I wish all married people were like that," he said heavily.

"Oh? What's happening?"

"Just Arman's wife," he said in a low voice, worried about being overheard. *Tell me, if you had a choice between skinny, bruised old me and Arman, who would you choose?*

She grinned. *Him, of course. He's like one of their gods. He's taller than you even, and I didn't think that was possible. And that amazing hair...for a Prij, he's beautiful.*

Exactly. So why was she giving me the once over in the kitchen, do you think?

"What?" He shushed her. *Are you joking? She's pregnant!*

Yes, I know.

Ick.

Exactly.

She looked at him in concern. *Be careful, Kei. The last thing you need is to be accused of raping one of their women.*

"Tell me something I don't know, Jena." *I don't encourage her. She's not my type for a start.*

Oh, right. So who is your type? The golden general?

"Jena," he said, shaking his head in exasperation. *Don't even think that as a jest.*

"It's all it is, Kei. He's a handsome man, but he's not one of us. They don't want to pollute the pure Prijian blood with that of nasty primitive Darshianese. We're safe."

“I hope. Come on, Cook must be ready to serve dinner by now.”



Arman was glad on Kei's account for the day-long celebrations of Her Serenity's birthday, but for his own, he only wished it to be over. The ceremonial part of his job wasn't one he enjoyed in the least – although to be fair, the same was true of his fellow generals and the Lord Commander himself. This year, because he was the only one of the three generals actually on Kuplik, he would have an even more prominent role, having to prance about in his best armour for at least an hour, and spend at least another two listening to dull speeches of congratulations from the senators. Usually he contrived to be off Kuplik if he could on this day – no escaping it this year.

He sent Kei to Karus' house early, so he and Jena could go with Karus' people to the festival. Karus thought he would not go to the square this year, having been so recently ill, and had told everyone in advance that he was saving himself for the Solstice night bonfires, which he loved to watch. Arman wished him good health for that, and had promised to join him then. Privately, he prayed that Jena and Kei would still be there then, to make sure Karus was well for it. It was only three weeks away – surely it wasn't wrong of him to want to delay their departure for just that short time, and for Karus' sake, not his own. Yet the siege had to end soon. He wanted it to end. Kei needed to go home, Arman knew it very well, and would not place any obstacle in his path. But if he could just stay those three weeks....

He rode down the docks where five hundred of his troops were assembled, all specially chosen for the honour of participating in the birthday celebrations. It would not hold any surprises for him, Arman knew. There was to be the usual military parade with drums, musicians, dancers and children strewing flowers, starting from the north end of the Avenue of the Gods. The Lord Commander was to ride beside him. All Arman had to do was sit on the back of his well-trained jesig and look imposing, which he could do with his eyes shut – literally, since his ceremonial helmet hid them so well – but would not do so in case he actually fell asleep, as was rumoured to have happened once to one of his predecessors in the reign of Her Serenity's father. Landing in an undignified heap on the ground for his jesig to step on would not enhance his standing with Her Serenity, he was fairly sure.

The weather was a little damp, which made things cooler in his armour, thank the gods, but the crowds didn't seem to mind in the least, the numbers even larger than Arman remembered from two years ago, which was the last

time he'd been in Utuk for the event. He greeted Blikus and then inspected his troops, receiving their salute before he led them towards the parade route. After that he knew he wouldn't need to engage his brain again for some time. Blikus seemed equally bored as they made their slow way along the avenue, past the cheering crowds. "One of these years, they'll come up with a new idea that doesn't involve us," he said out the side of his rigidly smiling mouth as they rode along.

"Never – the army's the best show they've got, unless you want to flood the avenue and ask Ard Peku to sail a ship of the line down it."

Blikus snorted in amusement. "I dare you to put it to Kita, I really do, Arman."

"Not on your life, my Lord. She'd take me up on it, and I'd have to arrange the troops to clean fish heads off the street for a year."

"Almost certainly. I see the hostages are here as planned."

Arman had already noticed dark-haired heads here and there. "Yes, they've been looking forward to it. I hope it's good for their morale."

"Their morale be damned, I just wish Darshek would hurry up and come to its senses. The people must be eating their boots by now."

"One can only hope, my Lord." Arman scanned the crowd for Kei. With his height he should be easy to spot, but Arman would understand it if the man had no wish to see the Prijian military on display. Other than their being able to meet, there really wasn't any reason for the hostages to want to watch this parade. Arman wouldn't, in their place. But in their place, he doubted he would behave as amiably as Kei had, or Jena. He would, he thought ruefully, make a damn poor hostage.

They'd nearly reached the end of the route, and Arman was sure Kei had decided to miss the parade, until he spotted a tall figure waving discreetly at him. He couldn't help a grin as he nodded at the small group, which he saw included three other Darshianese. Kei had found his friends. Good. Arman wanted him to enjoy this day. He'd had such a damn bad time of it to now, and Kei deserved better. Far better.

They were turning, and Arman lost sight of his friend. He now had to concentrate a little more guiding his animal and his troops into the narrow corridor leading to the ceremonial arches at the end of the square. One hour down, two to go, and then he could be free to call on Karus and enjoy a rare free day.

His troops stood at rest in the square. Arman saluted Her Serenity and then rode out again behind Blikus. They had privileged places reserved for them

up on the balconies along with the senators where they could listen to the long boring speeches in a little comfort. Out of the public gaze, he and Blikus dismounted, handing their reins over to waiting soldiers. “My Lord Commander? Sei General Arman?”

Arman took off his helmet – he couldn’t see the speaker clearly in the shadows. “What is it, Lieutenant?”

“An urgent message, Sei General. You need to come.”

Arman raised an eyebrow at Blikus, who just said, “Lead the way, Lieutenant.”

They were taken to Blikus’ offices, where he was handed a note. He waved Arman down to sit as he read. Arman watched his commander’s face grow grimmer, until at last he put the paper down on his desk with a sigh. “Bad news, my Lord?”

“Yes. One of our troops in north Darshian has been killed. One of the ones stationed at the villages – at Vinri.”

Arman stared in surprise. “What? After all this time? Do we know what happened?”

“Senator Mekus just quotes the report – look, here.” He passed the paper to Arman who read it but gained little more from it than what Blikus had said. “You know what this means, Arman.”

The hostages. “Surely not, my Lord. Not until we know the full story.”

But Blikus was shaking his head. “Her Serenity’s already given the order. Mekus has already started rounding them up using the palace guard – he doesn’t want to wait since they’re all here today.”

“But there’s no hurry, is there? My Lord, this will do no good and cause unrest, you know that.”

“Be that as it may, Arman, the terms of surrender were clear and the people of Vinri have chosen to ignore it. The hostages are only here to ensure the good behaviour of their villages – they have no other use to us.”

Arman struggled to find something, anything, that would delay this decision, which seemed unnecessarily rushed, and entirely unwise. “But my Lord...on Her Serenity’s birthday?”

Blikus only shrugged. “They mean nothing to her, I imagine. Mekus is dealing with it. We don’t need to be directly involved – I suggest you ask Captain Peyo to work to Mekus’ orders.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Arman said through gritted teeth. “Where are they being taken?”

“To the blue reception hall. Damn stupid people, these north Darshianese – why risk ten of your own for a single one of ours?”

“Indeed, that’s what I’d like to know. I would still counsel a delay, my Lord, until we do.”

“It’s out of my hands, Arman. Please see to her orders and get it over with.”



Kei was having a hard time maintaining any semblance of calmness. Not only was he being battered by the fears and anxieties of his fellow hostages as they huddled together in the hall under guard, he was also desperately trying to work out what was going on. One minute he was watching Arman in the parade with Jena, Peit, Myri and Urki, and then next they were surrounded by guards who hustled them through the gawking crowds at sword point. No one would tell them what was going on – he didn’t even know if any of the soldiers forcing them along spoke any Darshianese, and his attempts to ask them in Prijian were ignored.

They had been taken in the hall he remembered from his first day in Utuk, where twenty or so of the other hostages were waiting, obviously terrified and no more aware of what was happening than Kei was. Over the next hour or so, the other hostages were also brought in. Their guards kept a close watch on them, but didn’t try to stop them interacting, so Kei spoke to as many as he could, not only to see if anyone knew what was going on, but also because he had an uneasy feeling that this might be their last chance to do so. Most of them looked well enough, some looked depressed and rather tired, but didn’t want to talk about what had been going on. From what he gathered, most of them were being used as domestic servants, but he couldn’t see signs of serious abuse. That was one small mercy at least.

He made his way back to the group of people he’d come in with. Urki and Myri clung to Peit, their terror obvious. Jena was silent, grim-faced. Kei returned to her side, unable to offer any comfort or information. Had the siege ended? That seemed to be the only thing that might require them all being together like this.

Quite suddenly, without any fanfare or announcement, there was an inrush of heavily armoured soldiers who took up positions in front of them and facing them, forming an impenetrable barrier between the hostages and the rest of the room. Shortly after that, Senator Mekus came in and snapped out an order for the hostages to form in village groups, the clan head’s children at the head of the lines. As soon as that was done, still more troops came in and

stood among the hostages – by then there had to be two hundred soldiers in the room. *What in hells do they imagine we can do to them?* Kei wondered.

“The hostages from Vinri, step forward,” Mekus ordered. The ten men and women were dragged out past the barrier of soldiers, to stand in behind of Mekus. Immediately, two soldiers apiece came to stand next to each of them, holding their arms in a tight grip. Myri was one of them, searching out Kei with terrified eyes as she stood dwarfed by the soldiers. “People of Vinri, your clansmen have murdered a Prijian soldier. Under the terms of surrender signed by your clan head, your lives are therefore forfeit.”

No. They couldn't.... “No!” Kei yelled, as the other hostages began to scream and cry. “No, you can’t, they haven’t done anything!”

“Silence!” Mekus yelled, but despite his commands, and the efforts of the troops to stop them surging forward, the Darshianese would not be silenced. Kei was sick with horror and the emotions being forced on him. He could feel the terrors of the Vinri hostages most of all, like a choking knot in his gut that made it hard to even breathe for the pain of it, like he needed to vomit to expel it.

The soldiers guarding them were finally forced to gag many of them, including Kei, by holding their hands over their mouths, forcing them to their knees. Even then, Kei and the others continued to scream their anger from behind the gagging hands and to struggle futilely, but the relative order brought by the use of such force was all that Mekus was apparently waiting for. Without any further announcement, he made a signal and a soldier came up behind each of the Vinri hostages. He nodded – and with a short stabbing motion, as one man, the soldiers thrust their swords into the hearts of their prisoners.

Kei screamed in pain – he’d felt that moment of hopelessness, the last terror, and then...the spark of life snuffed out, as if his own heart had stopped. He struggled as tears poured down his face, trying to get to the dead, trying to escape the agony. Wave after wave of sorrow and terror and anger and pain hit him from dozens of agonised Darshianese. “No...gods, please, no,” he whispered, voice still muffled by the hand clamped over his face. He fought to get to his feet, just wanting to get away from people and what they were forcing on him, surprising his captors by his hysterical strength so much that he briefly broke their hold on him, but before he could get an inch forward, he was clubbed down, and between the blow and the pain of so many emotions crushing him, he lost his senses, seeing the floor rising, but never reaching it.



From the gallery above the hall, unseen by the people below, Arman had watched the entire disturbance and the execution with a rising sense of disgust and dismay. What possible good would this do? The villagers at Vinri had not been deterred by one set of hostages being taken from doing what they had, why should these deaths and another group being taken, offer any more guarantee? All this would do would be to cause unrest and rebellion where there had been peaceful co-operation. Mekus was a cruel idiot – Arman was sure he could have prevented this, but hadn't lifted a finger to stop it.

There was still an unholy mess in the hall with the struggling, weeping hostages, soldiers forcing them back from the corpses left where they'd fallen. He saw Mekus speak briefly to Peyo and then sweep out of the room, clearly no longer interested in the matter. "Ask Captain Peyo to attend me here," he told his lieutenant. "Make sure none of the hostages leave before I give the order."

"Yes, Sei General."

Arman tried to find Kei in the melee, but there were so many struggling men and women, so many soldiers, that he couldn't catch sight of him at all. The man was going to be distraught – Arman wondered how he would ever make this right for him. The truth was, he probably couldn't. It was both a political mistake and a personal tragedy. If Arman had foreseen this day, he would not have taken such a savage delight in reading the terms of surrender out to the villagers as he had done, all those months ago in Darshian. He'd just never expected the clause to be invoked – he'd never imagined it would really be needed.

But the thing was done, and it looked like Mekus was leaving the army to clean up the mess he'd made, literally and metaphorically. His captain came up onto the gallery and saluted. "Did the senator order anything regarding the hostages, or the bodies?"

"No, Sei General. Only that we should ensure that the celebrations are not marred."

Then why in hells be in such a rush to murder the poor sods? "Very well. Keep the hostages here for a couple of hours until they calm down, and then have them taken back to their houses in small groups – no mass departure, and tell their masters to keep them under curfew for the next two days, unless by my order or that of Her Serenity."

“Yes, Sei General. And the corpses?”

Arman had only the haziest knowledge of Darshianese funeral rites, but they could hardly be taken back to the villages, and to have them buried in the south might cause trouble. “Have them taken out of the hall and kept somewhere. Treat them respectfully, Captain – I’ll make enquiries about the proper disposition.” He looked down again at the hostages. “That big fellow, from Rutej, I think, he seems less overwrought. Send him to my office. And Peyo, have the men treat the hostages with a little consideration – we don’t want a revolt on our hands. There’s no need to provoke them more than they have been.”

Peyo seemed a little surprised but made no comment on the order. “No, Sei General.”

“Have that hostage sent to my office. There are two others – my servant, Kei of Albon, and Jena of Rutej, I’ll see to their return myself.”

“Yes, Sei General,” Peyo said, snapping a salute and leaving.

Things seemed to be quietening a little, but the sound of weeping was louder than ever. He thought he could see Jena at last, and it looked as if she was cradling Kei. Gods...Karus would be hurt by this too. Arman couldn’t see a single benefit from this act today, and cursed Senator Mekus and all his kind. This was no way to win a war.



Gonji, as the man was called, from Rutej, had been a good choice. He was calm, although grim, and answered Arman’s questions respectfully. It seemed that Darshianese burial rites were simple, and needed no priest to officiate. Nor was it particularly important that the hostages be buried on Darshianese soil. “Their spirits have already been freed, my lord,” he explained with weary patience.

“You understand I can’t allow a mass funeral. It would cause a disturbance.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Would it be sufficient for you and perhaps one other to attend the burial?”

“Whatever you direct, my lord.”

Arman sighed in exasperation. “I’m asking you this honestly, man. I won’t punish you for your answer.”

“No, my lord. I answered honestly. Your offer is sufficient. Thank you.” The man hesitated. “My lord – more will be taken from Vinri?”

“Yes, of course. You know the terms of surrender.”

"Yes, my lord. Is that all?"

"Yes – wait...Gonji, you must make your fellows understand that any rebellion will end in the same way. If anyone attacks a Prijian citizen, or absconds, all of his village will pay." He held the man's gaze, willing him to take that message into his heart.

"We all know that, my lord. None of us want to bring the wrath of the Prij down on anyone else. I really don't know why Ai-Vinri did this. It's incomprehensible."

"As it is to me, but the reports are unambiguous." *But suspiciously lacking in detail*, Arman thought. "You're dismissed."

The man bowed, and left. Arman rubbed his forehead. Such dignity made him feel ashamed to be Prijian today – and then he realised just how ironic such an idea was. *Loke, my friend, are you laughing at me now? You should be*. But he was glad Loke had not had to see the executions. Arman wished he had not either.

He called his lieutenant in and told him to bring Kei and Jena to him, and then wrote a note to Mekus informing him of the arrangements for the burials he planned and the curfew he had imposed, trying to keep the annoyance and disgust he was feeling out of his written words. That was the problem with mixed civilian and army control over a situation – too many loose ends, and a clumsy approach which served no one well. As Mekus was in control of the matter, *he* should have been the one to deal with the corpses and any potential problems caused by the executions. But as was typical of the man, he only wanted to be the one shouting orders and pushing people around. Arman almost wished his father had been in charge of the hostages – for all his many faults, Senator Armis was meticulous and would be disgusted by the sloppy handling of this. But then, being Arman's father.... No, perhaps better it was Mekus, after all.

A knock on the door and he called for them to enter. Kei and Jena were brought in under close guard. Jena was distressed and tearful, but Arman hardly registered that fact because Kei was barely conscious, and unable to stand without the support of the guards. "Put him in a chair," he snapped, "and send for a medic."

"My lord, he needs no medic..." Jena started to say, but Arman snarled at her to shut up, so she did.

Kei was helped to a chair where he lolled helplessly. Arman grasped his chin to see if there was any injury to explain his state – he seemed to have a bruise on his forehead. "Was he struck?"

“Yes, my lord,” she said quietly, “but not dangerously. He’s just overwhelmed.”

“‘Just’ seems to be understating it,” he said angrily. He sent the guards out of the room, and then crouched down. “Kei? Wake up, Kei.” Kei winced, and seemed to curl in on himself, but didn’t answer. “Has this happened before?”

“Yes, my lord. He’s...sensitive...to the strong emotions of others.” Her look was stony. “It’s hardly surprising he felt distress today.”

Arman wasn’t going to waste time debating the issue with her. “In that cabinet there, are glasses and a carafe. Bring him some water.”

As she moved to the cabinet, an army medic was admitted to the office. Arman directed him to examine Kei, and then stood, arms folded as he waited for the diagnosis, trying not to look as worried as he felt.

The medic peered into Kei’s face, checked his eyes and his pulse and then straightened. “A faint, Sei General. Dazed a little from the blow, but other than that, all he needs is rest and quiet. I could have him taken to the infirmary if you wish.”

“No, I’ll attend to the matter. Dismissed.”

Jena brought the water over and handed it to Arman. “I could have told you that was what he needed, but of course, we Darshianese are just animals to you, aren’t we? To be ignored and derided, and then slaughtered without conscience....”

“Still your tongue, woman, and remember your position!” Arman slammed the water down on his desk.

She squared off to him, hands on her hips, her eyes flashing with rage. “Could I ever forget it, Lord General? After what your people did to him, what happened today? Do you *ever* think we forget we’re prisoners, my *lord*? Denied all mercy and all justice by the magnificent Prij?”

He gripped her arms. “You go too far, Jena. How dare you? What happened today was the consequence of your own people killing one of ours – they were warned....”

“Yes, they were, but I’ve only got your damn word for it that any death even occurred!”

“Shut up.” The soft words were slurred. “Just...gods...shut up, both of you.”

Arman ignored the rudeness of the command as he crouched by Kei’s chair. “How do you feel, Kei?”

The second the words left his lips, he knew they were foolish in the extreme. Kei’s mouth tightened as if in pain. “I...I felt them die...all of them.... Why, Arman? Why did you kill them?”

"I had no choice, Kei."

Kei pushed himself out of his chair on shaky arms, and stood, wavering back and forth, to glare at him. "Always have a choice. Those...were innocent.... You're just a murderer."

"Kei, please...."

Arman put his hand on Kei's arm, which made him flinch. "Don't...you make me sick...." Kei passed a shaking hand over his face. "I...can still feel it." Arman only had a split second's warning, Kei's eyes rolling back in his head as he crumpled, to catch the man and stop him collapsing onto the floor. Jena rushed forward and helped Arman lay him down.

"You did this," she said furiously. "You made us watch out of pure spite."

"It wasn't...."

"Your decision? Just some other Prijian thug? He's right – you make me sick too." Arman gripped her arm again in anger, but she looked at his hand in scorn. "What will you do, Sei Arman? Execute me too? Kill all my villagers for the crime of honesty? Or can't you face the consequences of your own actions?"

He shook her. "Shut up," he said in a low, threatening tone. "Stay here and care for him, and shut up or you will surely bring death on your head. I don't care what you say to me, but your tongue will bring grief on your people. You're all in danger now, so for the sake of whatever gods you hold dear, be *quiet*." He stood up. "I'll tell Karus where you are. You stay with Kei until I return. If anyone comes in, treat them with a damn sight more politeness than you've just shown me, or I will not be able to protect you."

He grabbed the note he had written and stalked out of the room, his hands shaking with anger and worry. He thrust the note at one of the guards and told him to deliver it to Senator Mekus, telling the others to make sure no one went in or out of the office without his say so. He needed to find Blikus and report to him, but his thoughts were back in his room, on a friend who was no longer a friend, and an enemy who was not that either. Mekus had *no* idea what a damn shitty mess he had just made, Arman thought, clenching his fists as he strode angrily through the palace corridors. Maybe one day the man would be forced to face the consequences of his acts, for a change.



Kei cried out as the pain in his head spiked. He couldn't even see...but then cool, gentle hands on his forehead stole a little of the ache in his head, and it

was the pain in his heart...that awful, ripping pain of loss and...then a void....
Lie still, Kei.

Jena, the...deaths...make it stop...I keep feeling it...

I'm sorry, Kei...I can't do anything...lie still and wait for the headache to ease.

Her hands kept stroking his face, but all he wanted to do was curl up and wish the world to disappear. He'd never felt *anything* like that before and he just couldn't get the sensation to go away...he could still feel all the terror. *Why?*

Because the Prij are cowardly, evil thugs who have no sense of justice. I wish we'd never encountered them or learned of their existence.

Kei agreed, although he was too heartsick to summon the anger Jena clearly felt, and which was washing through him. *Jena...stop...I can't bear to feel your hate....*

She was silent for a moment, her hands stilling, and then the emotions he could feel from her dropped away almost to nothing. She began the stroking of his face again. *I'm sorry, I was so angry, I forgot to control it...but gods, Kei...Myri, Syra...all of them, all dead.*

I know. How could they do that? We were nothing to that Mekus fellow. It was like putting down a sick urs beast, but without the mercy.

I want him to die.

Kei forced his eyes open, gulped down the nausea this caused, and gripped her hands. "No! That makes us the same as them."

Her eyes were full of angry tears. "They think we're murderers anyway, or have you forgotten what Arman thinks of us?"

Arman.... "Where is he?"

"Who cares, Kei? He's a vicious killer, and we were fools to think otherwise. Are they still going to force you to serve him?"

Probably, the sovereign ordered it. Jena, will you...go back to Karus? He's not like...not Arman.

Her expression softened slightly. *No, he's not.* "Kei, I can't bear you being forced to work for that bastard."

Kei didn't know how he would stand it either, but not for the reasons Jena had. He was just so...even her company made him ache inside. He wanted to be alone, but he was never alone any more, always supervised, under guard, being watched. He never wanted to feel the touch of another human soul as long as he lived. "Can you help me sleep? I need to not feel anything for a while?"

“Of course.” She moved his head into her lap, and covered his eyes with her hand. “The pain might go in time, Kei.”

No, this time, he really didn’t think it would.



Blikus was sympathetic to Arman’s carefully neutral complaints about the way the hostage executions had been handled and said he would speak to Her Serenity about them, but he had no interest in the personal impact on the Darshianese – any more than Arman would have done a few short months ago. Had he changed, Arman wondered, or had he just realised more of what was going on? When had the welfare of the hostages – not just those two he knew best – become of any concern to him?

Concern or not, the matter was over as far as Blikus was concerned, telling Arman to get his servant home and not to worry about returning for the celebrations. He would not be missed, and if he were, Blikus would make his excuses, he said. Arman thanked him. He still had to check whether the removal of the bodies and the survivors from the hall was going smoothly. It was – the corpses were gone, and the floor strewn with sawdust to soak up the blood. There were still thirty or so hostages sitting subdued and frightened in the hall – he told Peyo to speed up getting them home. He wondered what the masters of the households to which they belonged would make of their servants’ tale, or if they would even care. Most likely the ones who had lost servants would complain about the inconvenience, and that would be it. Arman had few illusions about the other members of his class and their attitudes to those of lower rank than them.

He gave orders that he wasn’t to be disturbed and entered his office quietly. Jena was sitting on the floor with Kei’s head in her lap – she gave him a fierce glare as he approached. “How is he?”

“Much afflicted, thanks to you.”

“Jena...you’ve made your point. Kindly cease to speak to me in this manner in this office, or you’ll force me to have to take notice of it. I don’t want to do that.”

She glared again, but when she stopped doing that, she just looked more tired than anything. “I don’t want to wake him, but he can’t stay here.”

“Agreed, and you need to get back because Karus will worry.” He shook Kei’s shoulder gently. “Kei, wake up.”

She touched his face. “Wake up, Kei.”

Kei opened his eyes, and grimaced, shrinking from the touches of both of them. "Please...let me alone."

"No one's going to hurt you, Kei. I just want to get you home."

"Home? We can go home?"

The sudden hope in Kei's voice sent guilt through Arman. "No, I'm sorry – I meant my house. Can you stand?"

Kei nodded, but there were fresh tears in his eyes as he let Arman help him up. "I thought...I just want to go home.... Let me go, Arman, please...."

The soft plea came close to breaking Arman's heart, but he could only shake his head. "I'm sorry, Kei, not yet. Soon, I promise." Kei nodded, but tears spilled down his cheeks. Jena wiped them away for him.

Arman got him to sit, and Jena to fetch some more water. After a few moments, Kei seemed a little better. "Jena, I'll arrange a calash for the three of us. Keep him awake, please."

She nodded sullenly, and Arman left only long enough to send orders to the stables to have a jesig-drawn calash brought for him.

With Arman's support, Kei was able to walk to where the carriage was waiting. He no longer seemed to be about to faint, but was withdrawn and silent, responding in the briefest way to any questions. Arman felt strongly that Kei wasn't trying to be rude or slight him – it was as if he just couldn't bear to interact with anyone, even with Jena. The woman glared angrily at him all the way to Karus' house – Arman supposed he couldn't blame her, but he wished she would realise the danger she was putting them all in. If word of her behaviour and her familiarity with Arman got back to Mekus, Arman wouldn't put it past the senator to have her removed, possibly killed, as being a bad influence. Mekus seemed to have the same attitude to the Darshianese that he did to jesig breeding, which was that you culled the ballsy ones so the rest of the population was more tractable. Jena would be culled in a second if Mekus saw her now.

It only took a few minutes to get her to Karus' house, but before she left the carriage, Arman took her arm. "Please, I beg you, be gentle with him and don't let him worry about Kei. I'll tell him more but don't take revenge on him for my sins."

She shook him off. "Don't worry," she said coldly. "Vengeance is a Prijian habit, not mine. Take care you don't add to *his* pain, my lord, for he suffers more than you can possibly imagine." She leaned over and touched Kei's face. Kei moved and opened his eyes, but said nothing to her, and almost

didn't seem to notice that she was leaving. She left the vehicle without another word.

Gods. How could Arman explain this to Karus? It was one thing to be quelling rebellions in south Darshian, decimating troublesome villages and towns to keep them under control. It was quite another to do so right under Karus' nose, and to hurt those he called friend. His old tutor was no innocent, but nor was he a military man. Arman hoped Jena would be kinder to Karus than she was prepared to be to him.

To the curious looks of his footman, and a passing maid, Arman managed to get Kei back to his room, and made him lie on his pallet. "Kei, is there anything that would help?"

Kei shook his head. "No, my lord." He looked at Arman with miserable eyes. "I miss...I just wish I could go home."

Arman touched his shoulder. "I know, my friend, and I wish I could send you back."

"You killed them," Kei said, cringing away from his touch. "Like animals. You're no friend."

Hurt despite himself at the bitter words, Arman sat back on his heels. "As you wish it, then. Rest, stay here. I'll see to what needs doing."

Kei ignored him. Arman took off his armour and went to the library to keep out the man's way. So it had come to this, at last. He wasn't surprised – it was always likely that their different positions would kill their friendship, if such it had been. But he regretted it more than he would have thought he would. For a brief time, the pain in his own heart had been eased a little, but now he was alone again. Even worse, another he respected and liked was suffering because of him. He wished he had not begun to care at all but it was too late for that.

CHAPTER 4

Kei crept through the next few days, trying to avoid anyone and everything, a hole in his heart the size of his fist, or so it felt. Every whisper of emotion he felt from others, every voice he heard, was like glass being ground into his mind. He felt exhausted by just trying to get through each day, but his dreams made his sleep unrestful so that he woke tired and in pain, mental and physical. He was beginning to fear he was going mad, but there was no remedy, no ease, except avoidance.

Arman, to give him his due, did as much as he could to let him pursue that path of least resistance. He left him alone, and for the first two days,

continued to have food and baths ordered as he had done while Kei was injured. But then he came to Kei one morning and said his wife had complained about her servants waiting on another, who she knew was in perfect health – she had seen proof of that with her own eyes. She'd implied she would spread the word that Kei was being kept as a pet more than a servant – and that was something Arman dared not risk in the current climate. He told Kei that there was some bad feeling about the hostages coming to light, that their very existence and drain on the state was being questioned. Arman did not want to fuel that line of attack, he said.

So Kei returned to his duties, slipping like a ghost along the corridors of the big, soulless house, and avoiding all eye contact and conversation. Despite Arman's repeated, stern injunctions to Mykis and the other servants, he couldn't stop the comments, muttered and some not so muttered, nor the gestures, or the slowness of responding to Kei's careful Prijian which forced him to repeat himself over and over to get what he needed so he could leave the kitchens. There was nothing anyone could do to stop the loathing and the jealousy which emanated from the other servants, which felt as harsh and cruel as Mykis' cane on his back, but which no chuo sap could numb.

Arman didn't press him to return to Karus, for which he was thankful, because Kei couldn't even face Jena just now. Arman was being very thoughtful and kind, Kei had to admit, and felt the tug to respond to such concern, but every time he looked at Arman, he saw Myri and the others as they died, and his heart filled with hate and grief for that act. He couldn't bring himself to hate Arman himself – he could sense no malice in him which would indicate what he'd done had been mere wanton cruelty – but he feared the way Arman's sense of duty had overcome his decency so easily, and so Kei feared him too.

More than ever he wanted to just leave Utuk and Kuprij, and return home, away from these harsh, cruel people and their unforgiving 'justice'. The only hope he had was that familiar faces, and the kindness of his lover and sister, would fill the emptiness within him. For nothing else seemed to, and nothing else brought any ease. He would even welcome the fall of Darshek, if it brought him home a minute sooner, for he didn't think he could live like this much longer.

He tried not to think of his medical kit – and the release from pain it held. He had sworn to himself long ago never to take that path because of what it would do to Myka and his friends. But with each day, and each renewed torment, that resolution became harder and harder to remember.



“How is he today, Arman?” Karus asked as Arman joined him in the library. He found it easier to take his suppers with Karus once more, and could only order Kei to make sure he ate in his absence – he suspected that more often than not, he wasn’t doing so.

It had been nearly three weeks since the executions and there was no improvement in any of it. Not in the political climate, which was still worryingly antipathetical to the hostages, not in Jena’s hostility, and worst of all, not in Kei’s mental state. “The same, Karus-pei. I regret to say, possibly worse. I really don’t know what to do, Pei. I would do anything that would help, but I’ve tried everything I know of.” Arman touched the little statue of Lord Niko that Karus had on his desk, wondering if the gods would help him if he asked. He doubted it. “I truly think he’ll go mad.”

Karus nodded. “It’s a risk, Arman, certainly.” He looked seriously at Arman. “You know you should talk to Jena – she knows him best.”

Karus had urged this before, but Arman had pointed out the obvious problem, and he did so again. “She won’t talk to me. She hates me and with good cause.”

“Yes, she does,” Karus said simply, yet again without any judgment in his voice, the same tone as he used to offer every comment since Arman had admitted to him what had happened and what the effect had been. Karus had simply accepted Arman’s belief that he’d had no choice, without any criticism at all. He had also accepted Jena’s hatred and avoidance of the general with equal tolerance. “But she loves Kei and will do anything to help him, even talk to you. So I suggest once more you try that.” Karus touched Arman’s hand. “If only for my sake, because I miss the boy myself, and don’t want to know he’s in pain.”

“Do you think I do, Pei? Do you think I did this just to make him suffer.”

“No, Arman, I don’t. But Jena does in some way. It is up to you to convince her otherwise. She’s in the kitchen. Take her out on to the verandah and talk to her.”

There was no arguing with that gentle, authoritative tone – there never had been. Arman bowed. “Yes, Pei,” he said, just as he had when he had been Karus’ student.

With no small apprehension, but a sense that this needed to be done, he headed for the kitchen, and found the entire staff involved in preparing the

evening meal. Cook was making dough, Siza was basting the fowl on the spit, Matez was washing dishes, and Jena was beating eggs in a bowl, her face flushed with the heat of the room. Everyone but her merely nodded politely to Arman, long used to him and knowing there was no need for formality. But Jena put the bowl down and made an elaborate curtsy. "My lord Sei General Arman," she said in perfect Prijian.

Arman ignored the obvious sarcasm of her greeting. "Jena, I need to speak to you, alone."

"I'm busy, my lord." She picked up the bowl again and began to beat the eggs, dismissing him from her attention.

"I know you are, but it concerns Kei."

Oh, that caught her notice. "Something's happened?" Her eyes went wide in fright. "Is he hurt?"

"Calm yourself, woman, he's much the same as he was – but I need your help with him."

She put the bowl down and dusted her hands on her apron. "Very well."

He led her out onto the verandah and got to the point. "I believe Kei is close to going completely mad and I need to know what I can do to help him."

"You mean, other than send him home, or not to have killed ten of his friends in front of him?"

"Yes, other than that," Arman said, ignoring her insolent tone. "I need to know *why* he's like this. You all were there, but he's the only one who is suffering this way. It's not an act, I know. No one acts this well."

"No, it's not an act," she said in a low voice. "But equally, there's nothing you can do to help. You've probably made it inevitable that he'll go insane, and most likely he will die of it."

Arman gripped her shoulders. "You're a healer, you must be able to help him!"

"I *can't*, my *lord*. What he's suffering from is beyond medical help."

"But what is he suffering *from*? Gods, woman, stop being so damn cryptic and tell me the truth for once!"

She pulled away from him. "If I tell you the truth, you'll use it against him, against us all. Kei would not want that, however ill he is now. I will not, my lord."

"You would rather he died?"

"I would rather you did, you murdering bastard."

Arman pushed her against the wall and put his hand over her mouth. "Jena, they could have you gutted and your corpse put on display in the civic square

for such a remark. Curb your tongue, if not your anger, I beg you.” Her eyes told him that she thought such a death would be worth his own, but he set her free anyway. “I will swear any oath you want that whatever you tell me, I won’t use to harm you or Kei or any Darshianese. I just want to help him.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s my...friend...and I don’t want to lose another in this war. Please. I promise to use the knowledge only to help him.”

She glared again. “Will you promise also not to treat me as if what I’m about to tell you is superstition and myth?”

“If that’s your wish, yes. Let’s sit.” He urged her over to one of the long stone benches which lined the wall of the verandah. “Now tell me.”

“Swear on your god and your honour, my lord.”

“I so swear it, Jena. I swear it also by my love for Karus, which means much more to me.”

That seemed to surprise her, but also convince her. “All right. Kei is a soul-toucher. He can feel people’s emotions.”

Despite his oath, Arman couldn’t hold back his disbelief. “That’s ridiculous.”

“You promised, and yet already you’re an oath-breaker,” she said, sighing wearily. She gripped his wrist. *And is this ridiculous, my lord murderer?*

He yelped and jerked away. “What in hells? What kind of trick is that?”

She grabbed his hand again. *No trick, no myth. I am a mind-speaker, of limited powers. Kei is a soul-toucher, perhaps more powerful, but also of limited scope. When you feel an emotion, and you are near him, especially if you’re touching him, he feels it as his own.*

Arman stared at her in amazement. “But....” Then he realised in horror that if she was telling the truth.... “He felt...all of it...everyone in that room?”

“Yes, and not just that...he told you, my lord. He said ‘I felt them die’. And so it was. He was joined to them, their emotions, and at the moment of their death, he felt as if he died too. They are dead, and he’s alive, but dead also. That’s why I can’t help him. Part of him is crippled – there’s an empty place in his soul which medicine can’t help.”

“As I felt when Loke died,” Arman said softly.

“Only much worse, my lord.” She dusted some flour from her gown thoughtfully. “How did you start to recover from the death of your friend?”

“Kei...he helped me.”

“How? Why him, why no one else?”

“He...gave me trust, and I trusted him. He saw my pain, and accepted it as his own.... Gods. What he must have felt....” He took her hand in a painful grip. “But then I can help him, surely.”

“No, my lord, because he can’t trust you any more. He can’t accept you, or what you did, and dares not let you in because you’re everything he abhors. He was close to friendship, before, I think...but no more. You make things worse for him, not better.”

Arman groaned. “I had no choice, Jena. It wasn’t my decision to kill those people, or to have you watch. I only provided the tools.”

“How hard did you fight the decision, my lord? Did you take it to Her Serenity?”

“The order *came* from her, you damn woman. My sovereign commands, her generals obey or they die and are replaced. It’s not a battle I could ever have won, and Kei would be just as damaged, only in the household of someone like Mekus. Is that a better fate, do you think?”

She tugged at his grip but he wouldn’t free her. “Better him than the betrayal of a friend, my lord. He’s lost his family, his lover and his role in life, and the person he had begun to open his heart to, has stabbed him through it. Kei probably wishes he could die. He’s a healer, he’ll find a way.”

“No! Please, just tell me how to fix it....” Arman felt tears pricking his eyes. “I won’t let him die – I’ll take him into custody, prevent any weapons coming into his hands....”

“And that’s better than death, my lord Arman? For Kei, truly?”

Her angry brown eyes bored into his. “No. But I can’t bear him to die.”

“Perhaps you need to think what he wants, and stop telling me what you can or cannot bear, my noble lord. You can’t help him because he can’t trust you. You can’t force that any more than you can force love, and you can’t win his love or friendship by guile or tricks. He can feel your emotions, he knows the truth of your feelings.” *As do I, Arman.*

He forced her to look him in the eyes. “Then tell me my feelings, madam, read my heart, and read the truth. Please.”

She stared at him intently. He wondered if she could really see as deeply as she claimed. “Actually, more deeply than even you’re aware of, my lord...Arman,” she said quietly in response to his unspoken thought. Something seemed to have been settled in her because he sensed that her hostility diminished a little after that. “I have no more doubts on your score, but that still doesn’t help him. He can’t just see your need to help him and accept it. I don’t know the answer – you need to find that. But you need to

know this – every contact with a person, every touch to the skin right now, is agony for him. A prison cell would be kinder in some ways. Don't force him to interact with you for pity's sake. If you can't make him better, please don't make him worse."

"I won't. Is there nothing you can do even temporarily? Give him some rest? No drug, no...." He waved his hand at her head. "Anything?"

"There are drugs which would numb his pain, certainly. But he would need more and more of them, for less and less effect, until they stopped working and he would be left both with a craving and the pain. So I won't even suggest such an option, and nor would he. As for...my gift...I can make him sleep when he cannot, take some physical pain away – nothing else. It's his *soul*, Arman. My powers don't extend that far. No one's do."

"So even if he trusted me, accepted me as a friend, I still couldn't help?" Arman felt his heart sinking again, having briefly begun to hope there might be a way out for Kei.

"I didn't say that, my lord. I just don't know if it's enough." She searched his eyes again. "Kei has an enormous heart, Arman. His injury is proportionate."

"I understand, Jena. I thank you too, and I won't betray this confidence. Would sending him here make it easier for him, do you think? I could lie and say I needed him to work with Karus.... I think Her Serenity would believe it."

"Right now, he just needs to be left alone. If you could send him home, where those who love him are, it might help."

Arman shook his head with genuine regret. "I can't, I honestly can't, although I wish I could. I may not be a soul-toucher, Jena, but I feel that need in him as strongly as if it was my own. There's no way I can do that without risking every one of you, and I know, you know, Kei would never accept that as the price."

"No, he wouldn't." She looked at her hands. "It was an evil act, Arman."

"I regret it, I do, but such things happen in a war, and even worse."

She lifted her head and glared. "A war begun by the Prij, for the Prij. You are still my enemy, Sei Arman. You hurt and killed my people, you seek to crush my home. Don't imagine that I don't hate you."

"I don't. But / don't hate you or your people any more." He smiled, although it was painful. "Kei is indeed 'gidu', learned healer, if he could cure that sickness in me."

"Kei's mother was one of the most skilled of our profession, my lord, but I think he matches her already even though he's only twenty. If you really want

to make reparations for your crimes, then make sure he goes home and is allowed to be a healer once more. He was born to it, it's his true love."

"I promise, I swear I will. Thank you." He stood. "I better let you go back to your cooking."

"Yes, so I can spit in your omelette."

He only raised an eyebrow at her insolence. "If you so wish, lady Jena. I've eaten worse, I assure you."

That won a reluctant grin from his sworn enemy. *Now, if only making Kei smile were so easy....*



Making Kei smile was in fact utterly beyond Arman's abilities, so he went against his instincts, listened to Jena's advice, and continued to leave the man alone as much as he dared. He had to be there for some meals, or Kei wouldn't eat – careful and frankly sneaky enquiries had confirmed what he'd suspected, that Kei just didn't leave Arman's room if Arman were out, and the other servants could hardly be ordered to wait on him. It was a juggling act between giving him the solitude which seemed to be the only salve for his soul they had, and making sure he didn't begin to starve again. He was losing weight already but there didn't seem to be anything Arman could do about it.

He had no answer to the dilemma, however much he searched his heart. He knew he'd had no choice that day, even if Kei wouldn't ever believe him. He had begun investigations into what exactly had happened at Vinri, but any response would take many weeks to arrive, and it wouldn't bring the dead back to life. It wouldn't change the fact that the executions had been at best pointless and at worst, purely vindictive and cruel, carried out in the most vicious way. He couldn't fix that either, but it meant that the images in Kei's mind, his memories, were as painful as could have been designed. Arman even wondered if killing Mekus the same way would help at all – that he would seriously consider murdering a senator showed how desperate he was, he knew – but he knew it wouldn't. The answer was not more death and cruelty, any more than another death had eased Arman's heart when Loke had died.

Loke...now, he would have known how to fix this. He would know instinctively how to gain Kei's trust again, and how to heal that damaged heart. But Arman was not Loke, and just didn't have a solution.

The military situation refused to change at all. If anything, the siege seemed to be draining Kuprij more than Darshek, and there had been discreetly angry exchanges in the senate over the policy. No direct criticism of Kita, of course, but the senators were beginning to lose faith in the project. What they would decide to do if they dropped the siege, Arman didn't know – he wasn't privy to that level of discussion, at least, not yet. No, they would tell him when they wanted some more innocent Darshianese murdered and not before, he thought sardonically.

The Solstice came and went. Karus stayed in good health, but Arman felt guilty for wishing that Kei and Jena would still be here for the festival, because his wish had been granted in a way he'd never wanted. The gods perhaps punishing him for his loss of faith, he thought, which was nearly as effective as punishing a woman for losing her virginity outside marriage. Once lost, never recovered, no matter what the retribution. The gods had no more claim on Arman's heart, they had broken their covenant with him too many times.

He had insisted to Senator Mekus that he wanted an opportunity to question the replacement hostages from Vinri when they arrived, which they did two days after the Solstice. He had them taken to the blue reception hall and then extracted their unofficial leader for a private audience in his office. The man was sullen, with none of the air of pleasant cooperation that Arman had come to associate with the first group of hostages, but Arman wasn't going to hold that against him. He had good cause, he felt. "I want you to tell me how the soldier died last month, why he was killed by your people."

"He wasn't *killed*, my lord," the man said, making no attempt to hide his anger. "He was surprised by the husband of the woman he was raping, and he was injured in the fight that followed. He killed the husband first, slashed the woman with his sword, and died from his injuries which he inflicted himself – he slipped in the blood and cracked his skull. Our man wasn't even armed."

"Have you got any proof of this?"

"Ask anyone, my lord. He attacked the woman in her own home, any number of us saw the end of the fight. If you believe our kind, that is," he said with a sneer.

This would explain the lack of detail, if true, Arman thought grimly. He questioned the man further, and then carefully interrogated each of the other nine hostages separately and without allowing them a chance to confer. The story was the same in each case, with only the slight differences that came from different vantage points. This fact, the impression of honest anger and

his previous suspicions, were enough to make him believe this new version of events.

He felt utterly sick with fury and shame at the deception, and the unjustness and pointlessness of the hostage deaths. If the men responsible had been in Utuk, he'd have taken great pleasure in venting his rage and punishing them for their betrayal of their duty. Frustrated by the distance and slow communication, he had few options but he exercised them all. He asked for a meeting with Her Serenity that very day to bring the matter to her attention – she granted the audience, with Mekus in attendance. That suited Arman perfectly. He laid out the information he received and carefully detailed why he believed the story to be true, but he was surprised at the lack of reaction on both the part of his sovereign and the senator at the gruesome story. “We really don’t know what you want us to do, Arman,” Kita said, sounding less than enthralled. “The people are dead, we can’t bring them back to life.”

“Your highness, you can send the new arrivals home, or offer to compensate them. It’s a simple matter of justice. Even an apology....”

Mekus snorted. “General, don’t be ridiculous. We’re waging a war against these people, we don’t offer apologies or compensation to the enemy.”

“Senator, with respect, the hostages and the villages are not the enemy, they’re now Her Serenity’s subjects, to which the law of the Prij applies.”

“Then they shouldn’t have killed one of our soldiers, should they?”

“They....”

Kita held up her hand. “Enough. We don’t wish to engage in this unseemly discussion any further. Arman, the senator is correct – we’re at war, and in wars, people die. When the peace is restored, then perhaps.... We shall do something as a gesture, perhaps erect a statue to improve their town square. The sovereign of the Prij does not explain her actions to anyone, or apologise.” She rose, and they stood too. “That is all. Good day, senator, general.”

Arman bowed, seething with anger. There was warfare and there was simple murder. He knew which had occurred a month earlier. “Was there something else, general?”

“Yes, Senator, there was another matter. I’ve been hearing reports of attacks against hostages, and mistreatment in the houses in which they’re being kept. I believe one woman may even be pregnant.”

“I don’t believe I’m responsible for that, General.”

"I don't mean to imply you are, Senator. But it concerns me that such mistreatment may bear bitter fruit in the future when Darshian is entirely under our control."

Mekus gave him a scornful look. "You sound as if a handful of disgruntled farmers are your only concern these days, Arman. Are you not occupied with enough affairs?"

"Yes, senator, I am. But I have a care to the military implications."

Mekus snorted, flicking his hand dismissively. "There are none, don't be a fool. As for mistreatment, I heard that your own servant might have a complaint in that direction, so I suggest you don't put your hand in that thurl's nest, for your own peace of mind. Now, if there's nothing else?"

Arman bowed. "No, Senator. That's quite enough."

Mekus looked if he was going to say something about the ambiguous meaning of his response, but then he gathered his robes about him and swept out. Arman clenched his fist and punched the wall, right in the middle of a mosaic depicting a victory of Lord Quek over the demon Squiluk. This was wrong. This was such rank injustice it made his blood boil. But at the same time, there was nothing more he could do – the sovereign and Mekus were right, in that as the ruling nation, they had no obligation to do a damn thing. There had to be an answer....



Kei was dozing restlessly on his pallet, the same way he spent most of the days now in Arman's absence. Arman didn't seem to expect him to do anything or go anywhere, which meant Kei at least got a little relief from the effect of other people. He was wasting his life in dreams and in his thoughts, but in his present condition, he had no future to plan for anyway.

A knock on the door startled him, and for a moment, he thought about ignoring it and hiding until whoever they were, had gone, but then word might get back to Arman's wife that he was being rude if he did that and the idea of an interview with her to explain himself make him shiver. So, hesitantly, he opened the door, and found Peri there with a soldier. Instinctively, he took a step back – had they come to arrest him? The soldier didn't seem to notice his fear. "Sei General Arman requests you to come to the palace," he said, as Peri watched bug-eyed in the background. "I'm to take you by calash." He took a piece of paper from his sleeve. "He's given me a note for you."

Kei took the paper and unfolded it. In carefully lettered Darshianese, it read, "Don't be afraid, it's safe. Arman." It bore Arman's personal stamp.

He folded it and placed it in the breast of his shirt. "All right." He collected his cloak, because it was cold even in the house, and wondered what Arman could want after weeks of virtually ignoring him. Despite the note, he shook a little in fear, his mind replaying the events of four weeks ago, and imagining that, at any moment, he was going to be dragged away to see more of his fellows killed. Or killed himself, although he no longer feared that. Death would be a release he would welcome now.

The soldier with him wasn't sending out any particularly hostile emotions, but his mild disdain for Kei was salt in a raw wound, as was the curiosity and contempt of the people who walked past them as he was led through the palace. He just wanted to get away from them, but all he could do was wrap his cloak more tightly about him and hope this would all be over soon.

He was taken to Arman's office, where the general was waiting for him. "Kei, thank you for coming. Please have a seat." Arman was being perfectly civil, even gracious, even though there was a soldier watching the exchange. Why? Arman didn't explain, but he snapped an order at the soldier, who saluted him and left. "Is there something you would like, Kei? Drink? Food?"

"No, my lord. Why am I here?"

"To act as a witness, Kei. It won't bring you pain, I promise." Arman's voice was gentle, as if he was trying to soothe him. Kei didn't know why he was bothering. Did he think Kei would forget what he'd done, for the sake of a few sweet words?

The soldier returned with a Darshianese man Kei had never met before. "Leave us," Arman said to the soldier. "Gyu, please take a seat. This is Kei, of Ai-Albon. Gyu is from Ai-Vinri."

The new hostages. Was Arman rubbing Kei's nose in this mess, to make him learn manners? The stranger looked at him curiously and with suspicion. Kei could feel even some contempt from him, and he shrank further into his cloak.

"Gyu, I wanted Kei to witness what I'm about to say, so the fact of it will not be denied later." Arman turned to him. "Kei, I've investigated the death of the soldier at Ai-Vinri, and I've discovered that there has been a terrible mistake and injustice. The soldier who died, died as a result of his own crimes, and took the life of a villager before he did and attacked another. The sergeant in charge of the unit there has been concealing the facts from us and covering up his own complicity."

“They died...for nothing?” Kei asked uncertainly, afraid of angering Arman, but unable to believe this horror could be made even worse.

Arman nodded, frowning. “Yes, I’m afraid so. I had my suspicions...I tried to urge a delay, but the order had been given before I could influence the decision. Gyu, please accept my personal regret for that.” Gyu just shrugged, unimpressed – Kei wondered if he had any idea of the magnitude of Arman’s gesture. Probably not. “Now...given the situation between our peoples, it’s not possible, Gyu, to return you to your homes at this time, although you can have my solemn word that I believe you should be.”

“No, my lord. We’re your prisoners, after all.”

No softening up this man easily, Kei thought, feeling his chest getting tight with worry. Where was Arman going with this? Despite himself, he found he was leaning forward in anticipation and anxiety. “That’s not really the point. I’ve...made representations about the need to have you compensated in some way, and while it’s not possible now, I also swear to you that when the war is over, if I have to pay for it myself, I will see to it some reparations are made. I know it won’t bring your people back, but it might help their families.”

Gyu just stared, clearly puzzled. “Yes, my lord.”

“However, there is something I *can* do now which is entirely in my remit, and that is to discipline the soldiers responsible for concealing this matter. I’ve already given orders that they are to be removed, stripped of their rank and uniforms and brought back to Utuk in irons.” Kei jerked in shock – the Prij were going to humiliate their own people on behalf of the Darshianese? “I’ve also given orders that reports of deaths among quartered soldiers need to be countersigned by an officer at a different station, of two ranks above the senior person at the place where the death occurred. This should prevent such falsifying in the future. I appreciate that treating this as a disciplinary matter may seem to trivialise it in your eyes, but I assure you, it won’t be seen that way. I can at least stop other hostages being killed for a lie. I can’t offer my country’s apologies, Gyu, but you can have mine for the failure in discipline and honour of my troops.”

Kei was frozen in his chair. He’d seen the arrogance of the Prijian elite. Apologies didn’t trip lightly from their tongues, and though Arman wasn’t typical, to hear him say such things in public.... Even Gyu seemed dumbstruck. “Yes, my lord. Thank you.”

“I hope you and your people, and the rest of the hostages will be returning home soon. I wish you had not been brought here in this manner, but I also

hope you will endure with the same grace as your fellows from Darshian have done. When the war is over, you'll be sent back with all speed, I promise."

"Thank you, my lord."

"Right." Arman went to the door and called for one of his people. "You'll have to go and be dealt with by Senator Mekus now. Thank you for coming."

Gyu got to his feet. He looked rather dazed by all he'd heard. "Yes, my lord. I mean, you're welcome."

Arman shut the door behind the man, and then returned to sit at his desk. Kei was without words, he was so shocked by what he'd heard. But why...why had he been brought here? "Because I needed you to see it," Arman said gently.

Kei hadn't even realised he'd spoken aloud. "My...my lord.... Why did you do that?"

"Because a wrong needed righting, Kei, and this was the only thing I could do, given the political climate. It was nothing but a crime against your people. Against *you*. Jena told me about your...soul-touching...and what it's meant in this situation. I can only say how sorry I am, how much I want to help you, and how much I miss your friendship and your trust. I wanted to prove myself worthy of it. I also needed to satisfy my own sense of honour. Those people should not have died, and most certainly not in that way, although you should realise that saying so, in public at least, would get me hanged. Her Serenity has already told me that no apologies will be forthcoming. I tried, Kei. I wanted to get them sent home, but she refused. This is all I can do – for now."

"My...my lord...." Kei clutched at himself, confused and unable to make sense of all he had heard and was feeling. That Arman would go to all this trouble – humiliate himself, put himself at risk for the sake of justice.... Kei had been so afraid of him, but had he been right in the first place...to trust? Could he trust him? His heart pounded, overloading with sudden hope, his grief, confusion, whirling inside him.

"Kei?"

"I...."

He couldn't deal with this any more, with his emotions boiling up so fast and confusingly. He got to his feet, thinking only that he needed to escape, no plan in his mind other than finding a place to be alone. Arman got up so fast, he knocked his chair over, and then Kei was being held, stopping him from falling – or leaving. He cried out as Arman's emotions flooded him, but then he felt...warm.... He wasn't being hurt by this touch. He just felt...warm...and

more...perhaps.... He began to weep, tears of relief because the pain had stopped. "Don't cry, Kei," Arman murmured.

But Kei was helpless to obey, wrapped in this strong, comforting embrace, feeling so safe...it felt so good.... "Arman...."

"It's all right, Kei, sit down." He was led back to his chair, and Arman made to move away, but Kei clutched at him, needing that comfort for just a little longer. Arman knelt and kept his arms around him, a loose, unthreatening embrace. Kei rested his head on Arman's shoulder, and wondered at this miracle, this end to apparently endless agony.

"It doesn't hurt," he murmured. "Why doesn't it hurt when you touch me?"

"I don't know, but I'm glad it doesn't." Arman moved a little, so Kei had to look at him. "I just wanted to help you. Watching you...die slowly...I would do anything to stop that, you understand? I would give all I had to keep you safe and alive, Kei."

"They died...they're still dead...."

"Yes...I can't change that. Will that always be between us? I told you, I'm a soldier – soldiers kill."

Kei wouldn't meet his eyes. "I can't...forget...I still feel it.... But...would you do it again?"

Always the sticking point. "If ordered to – but I would argue to the limits of my ability if I felt it was wrong. I should have done that this time, and I did try, if not hard enough. I won't make that mistake again. I'm sorry, Kei. I want your trust, I would not betray it or you. If you can't forgive me, there's nothing more I can do."

Kei nodded. If only he could stop feeling that emptiness...but Arman...he was not an evil man, he knew that already. "I forgive you...but I can't forget what happened."

Arman stroked his cheek. "I wouldn't expect you to. I just don't want you to hate me, I want to be allowed to help you."

"You do...I don't know why.... I don't hate you, Arman. I couldn't make myself, I wanted to...."

"I'm sure you did," Arman said gently. "I won't betray you. I can't promise I won't be asked to kill again, but I'll do all I can to argue against it. Let me help you, Kei. Watching you in pain...it's like feeling it myself."

You have no idea what's that's really like, Kei thought sadly. "At least...it doesn't hurt when you touch me...it makes it stop."

Arman found his hand and clasped it between them. "Then use that, Kei. Let me help you find time to think, to heal."

“Yes,” Kei whispered, fresh stupid tears falling again. “I just wanted to know I could trust you. But I couldn’t.”

“And can you? Now? “

It might be a mistake, but Kei felt that he could let this man into his heart. Arman would not hurt him – not deliberately. “Yes.”

Arman carefully pulled him close. “You won’t ever have a reason to doubt my word, I swear.”

And Kei knew this would be true. He had found a little peace, a little rest, for a while at least. He hoped it would be enough to let him find a way to live again.



When Arman cautiously moved a second time to detach himself, worried they would be discovered, Kei let him go without complaint. Arman remained crouched beside him for a moment. “Do you want to go back to my house, or stay here with me this afternoon? I can’t leave yet.”

Kei pulled his cloak around him. “Stay...please,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry to be any trouble, Arman.”

Gods – that Kei would apologise to *him*. “Kei...please don’t. I’ve got Karus’ papers on the translations – if you have those in front of you, you can say you’re working on them. You don’t need to actually do so.”

He retrieved the papers from his files, and laid them on the desk next to Kei, who looked up at him. “Karus...is he all right?”

“He’s very well, Kei. Worried about you, as is Jena.”

Kei reached out as if to touch Arman, but then he pulled his hand back under his cloak. “I can’t see them,” he whispered.

“They understand.” He touched Kei’s shoulder and felt how Kei relaxed a little with the contact. He cupped Kei’s chin and looked into his sad, weary eyes. “Will you heal? Given time?”

“I don’t know.” Kei reached up and closed his fingers around Arman’s wrist. “But now’s there a chance. I just....”

There was a knock at the door. Arman gently removed Kei’s hand. “We’ll talk later. Just be calm.”

He called for his visitor to come in, and dealt with his captain’s request and report in short order before dismissing him. Kei kept his eyes lowered to the desk, apparently absorbed in the dictionary, but the fingers holding the pencil shook and Arman doubted he was really reading Karus’ notes.

That was the pattern for the afternoon, a stream of people, even one senator who looked at Kei in disdainful curiosity, needing Arman's advice and attention. Through it all, Kei was silent, standing respectfully for the senator but not looking at him, and otherwise, just staring down at the notes while Arman conducted his business. After a while, he began to do some real work on the thing although it wasn't what Arman expected of him, but Kei's able mind needed occupation. Arman wondered if in following Jena's advice to the letter, he had forgotten this important fact. A little useful work might distract Kei from his distress.

It was nightfall before he could get free, and send for a calash to take them to his house. He'd already had a note sent to Karus to explain he would not be there for supper that evening, and to ask him to tell Jena that Kei was a little better. More than that, Arman didn't want to say, because he had no idea if Kei would improve at all.

Kei was quiet, huddled into the corner of the carriage for the short ride back, and seemed somewhat at a loss when Arman took him back to his rooms. But he wouldn't allow Arman to get their meal in his stead. He didn't want the talk to start again, he said.

Arman let Kei have his way – at least when Kei went home, he wouldn't have to be the victim of that any more. That Arman would be left with the wife and the household that he had, was only justice for what he'd done to this man, to this man's people.

What would happen to Kei then? He had a lover, Jena said. Arman wondered what she was like and if she would be able to help Kei at all. If he loved her, at least she must be a good person. Arman felt jealousy rise as he wondered what this person was like who had caught Kei's affections, but then he pushed those feelings back down hard. If Kei felt that in him, he would be distressed, and it was pointless. The simple fact was, that Arman would not always be there. Kei needed a lover of his own race, someone to build a future and a family with. At least he didn't have the dynastic pressures on him that Arman had – what a blessing it would be, to be able to follow one's heart without restraint.... To be able to offer love, without shame.... To hold, and to love, with true desire, not duty....

Kei was taking a long time. Arman was about to go find him when he returned, looking pale and tense. Arman took the tray from him and made him sit. "Gods, what happened? Did they hurt you?"

Kei shook his head. "Just...such dirty minds...."

Arman uncovered the food and urged Kei to eat. "Not a gift so much as a burden, this soul-touching, if you ask me."

"It doesn't usually bother me, but...." He clenched his hand around his spoon. "Now...there's nothing between my feelings and other people's, like a curtain ripped away, or a wall...and a void in here.... Death would be a blessing."

Arman gripped his shoulders in alarm. "No! Kei, please...."

Kei winced at his passion so Arman let him go. "I was just stating the truth," he said, rubbing his shoulder where Arman had held him.

"No more talk of death, I forbid it."

His eyes shuttered. "Yes, my lord," he said in a dull voice.

"Kei, don't...gods, in another time and place, we would be equals and you would have no need to fear me or my kind, but can't you just...forget that, while we're alone? Please?"

Kei still wouldn't look at him. "I have nothing to offer you, offer anyone...I'm a shell...."

"You're not," he protested. "When you go home, won't your lover be able to help?"

"Reji has no special powers over the heart to heal it." He grimaced as he looked at his food. "I'm really not hungry."

"Leave it then. You might want it later."

Kei covered the plates and put them on the tray near the door, and then walked over to his pallet, lying down on it and facing the wall as if Arman no longer existed. Perplexed, Arman sat down to eat, wanting to let Kei do whatever he needed to do, but at a loss to know what to try next.

His meal finished, he returned to his desk. If Kei wanted to be left alone, he might as well use the evening to work on his reports – he would need to go to Garok soon, he thought, and see the new recruits. He could visit Tijus, perhaps, on the way.

He managed to lose himself in his work for several hours, and so was shocked when he felt a hand on his shoulder. "Kei?"

"I just needed to touch you," he said, sounding embarrassed. "I'm sorry."

Arman stood and took him into his arms. "No, please, do what you need," he said, pulling Kei's head onto his shoulder, feeling him shivering a little. What could he *do* to help this man...the enemy only of his peace. "Whatever you need from me is yours." Kei was silent for a moment, but then he said something Arman couldn't make out. "What did you say?"

"In another time or place...."

“Yes, if the gods allowed it.” Kei’s braid under his fingers was as smooth, as soft as he thought it might be. He was such a handsome man.... “It’s very late, Kei.”

“I won’t sleep, but you should.”

“Is there anything...?” He couldn’t ask the man to share his bed, as he would have done without hesitation if Loke were in this state. His control wasn’t *that* perfect, and if Arman’s body betrayed any desire, it would undoubtedly distress Kei in his present vulnerable condition. He would never do that to Kei, it would be dishonourable and wrong when Kei was in such a position of weakness...and Kei already had a lover. “Do you want to eat?”

Kei shook his head. “No.”

“Then try and rest. Do you think you will want to come to the palace tomorrow?”

“I don’t know. What would I do there? Won’t people talk?”

“What do you do at home when you’re not treating people? I think you said you were pursuing your father’s research – is there nothing here you could do in that line?”

Kei gave him a ghost of a smile. “Not wishing to offend you, but the facilities are too primitive here, Arman.”

“Then change that. Write down a medical guide. Perhaps even for treating injuries gained in battle...like gut wounds....”

His chest ached a little at the memory, and Kei reached out to touch his hand. “I can’t teach that in words, but I could make notes about some of the treatments that might help. It would be a start.”

“Would it bother you that the army would use it?”

“An injured man is an injured man, Arman. My patients are not enemies.”

Arman wondered whether any of the physicians down on the Street of Punus’ Gift would feel that way – they were proud and arrogant of their so-called skills, loudly proclaiming the support of the gods for their vocation, even though their only real talents lay in ushering the dying out of this world, and snatching their fees from the living left behind. The army medics were far more honest and less likely to sacrifice a basket of fowls as an answer to a marsh fever, but their successes were no greater, unfortunately. “Start writing it in Darshianese and then we can work on translating it as it’s in progress. It may be never be finished, but perhaps one day someone will take up the task.”

“As you wish. I doubt anyone will listen to a filthy Darshianese.”

The low bitter words were not like Kei at all, and Arman wondered who or what he'd heard. "Never mind, I will."

Kei nodded and then gave him a quick, almost embarrassed hug before turning to lie down on his pallet.

Arman retired to his own bed, and tried very hard not to think how good it felt to hold Kei. That line of thinking had to be closed as tight as Kurlik Pass, or he would go mad.



It was liking trying to climb naked out of a long, dark well, with slime-covered walls, having only a single rope to pull himself up with, a rope that only bore part of his weight so he had to use his fingertips, his toes, and raw willpower to climb. Every inch was won at the cost of bloody hands and feet, and every foot came at the price of falling back six inches. The only guide was the distant, dim light above him, promising freedom if he could only reach it, and that fragile, precious rope.

Arman was that light, his touch the rope, and Kei used it as much as he dared to help himself escape from the void that seemed to be eating him from within. Every day was a struggle, the nights a torment. Arman was almost always there, a kind presence when Kei needed it, offering a touch, an embrace, stolen when they were alone – small things that created the footing Kei built for himself. He still slipped, and the slipping was agonising – but at the end of a week, he was amazed how far he'd come.

The project Arman had thought up was a stroke of genius. A useful task, absorbing enough of his attention to distract him from the ache inside for long periods of a time, and occupying his intellect rather than his emotions, it was ideal for his present situation and he threw himself wholeheartedly into creating the guide. Such books already existed in Darshek, texts for training healers sent from the villages, and for the staff who worked in the infirmaries in the city. But a simple instructional text that even a common soldier or farmer could use, did not exist, and so Kei set to writing it.

He refused to care that some of his people might think he was giving aid and comfort to the enemy. He healed and he helped the sick. His father had never said his drugs were to be used only on the Darshianese. His mother had taught him the correct way to bandage all wounds, not just those on brown skin. Besides, his enemy was giving aid and comfort to *him*, so he was in no position to sit in judgment.

Arman, Kei knew, was taking an enormous personal risk for him. Not only had he left himself wide open before now to accusations of infidelity against his wife by treating Kei with such consideration, he left himself vulnerable to even worse attacks by keeping Kei in his office each day.

He and Arman were careful to be discreet in their friendship. Kei was always meticulously respectful to any visitors, leaving the room if directed without any question (and then having to find a corner in which to hide, to escape the curious looks of the soldiers and palace staff), but Arman was still exposed. He received high-ranking visitors on a daily basis, and it could not have been normal for him to have Loke with him as he did Kei.

Other people didn't think so either. One afternoon, when Kei was working intently on a description of the management of infected thurl bites, the door opened without any warning and in swept Senator Mekus.

Kei stumbled hurriedly to his feet and bowed, but Arman merely looked coolly at his visitor. "Senator, is there something I can help you with?"

"Yes, you can, General – I want to know why you have a Darshianese hostage right in the heart of the palace, allowing him to spy on us!"

Kei gripped the back of the chair he was standing behind, and tried not to be sick on the spot with fear and with feeling the anger and resentment of the man in front of him. He also wished his Prijian hadn't become so fluent – ignorance would be bliss in this situation.

Arman switched to Darshianese in his reply, which Kei was pretty sure he only did to annoy the senator. "Spy? If you mean my manservant, I don't understand the accusation." How did Arman do that? Manage to seem unconcerned, even slightly bored, when Kei could feel how strong his anxiety was.

"I mean *this*," Mekus said, snatching up the paper on which Kei had been writing. "I've been told he sits here, day in and day out, listening to private meetings, making notes! What possible purpose can it have, and what in hells do you think you are doing!"

"Senator, Kei is never present at any meeting with a security implication. What you're holding is a medical manual in Darshianese, which he is writing, and I'm having translated. If you would care to look...." Arman made a pretense of sorting through his files, even though Kei knew that Arman knew exactly where what he wanted lay. "There – my notes, translated from his. Shall I read the original, Senator? Or would you accuse me of lying to you?"

"Why *him*? He's a barbarian villager from the middle of nowhere!"

“He’s got some small medical knowledge – I thought to exploit that. However, if you don’t want the Prij to benefit...” Arman shrugged, as if it was no consequence at all to him. “I’m merely making use of a tool, Senator. I’d have thought you would have approved of the economy.”

Mekus sneered. “Then one hopes that his village will continue to behave itself. It would be a pity if your *tool* had to have his throat cut, along with the others of his clan, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, I suppose it would,” Arman said, sounding utterly uninterested, even though Kei could feel his roiling anger. “But unless that happens, I don’t see any problem.”

“It’s irregular in the extreme.”

“The notes don’t leave my office, Senator. You can have them all now, if you wish.”

Mekus looked at the pages, obviously frustrated by being unable to read the characters, and threw them down on the desk. “I’d heard you hated the Darshianese, general. On the whole, I’d prefer that you did.”

Arman made a slight bow. “Then I will endeavour to maintain whatever emotions serve the senate best, Senator.”

“You impudent brat. I never thought you were officer material, Arman – too damn soft and too damn bookish. Your father should have settled you on an estate and kept you out of mischief.”

“This is an opinion you’ve shared with Her Serenity, Senator? Because I understood the decision to promote me was a personal one, based on her assessment of my ability. I’m sure she’d like to have that assessment corrected by you.”

Mekus glared, and Kei felt faint at the loathing radiating from the man. “You’ll slip and fall one day, General. Your family’s prominence is based on a very slight foothold. I’ll be there when it disappears, mark my word.”

“I’ll be sure to share your good wishes with my honoured father, Senator. Now, was there something else?”

“Keep him out of the rest of the palace,” Mekus said, stabbing a finger in Kei’s direction. “If I catch him where he should not be, he’ll be killed on the spot.”

“As you wish, Senator.”

Mekus growled and then stalked out of the room, slamming the door which Arman quickly locked behind him.

Kei had to sit down – he really felt like he was going to be sick, until Arman put a hand on his shoulder and he could use the warm concern and the buffer

that his touch seemed to provide, an antidote to the poison of Mekus' emotions. "Are you all right?"

"He...he wants me dead...?"

"Not personally, I think," Arman said calmly, sitting on his desk but keeping the hand on Kei's shoulder.

"But why does he hate us? You had a reason...but what did I ever do to him?"

Arman sighed. "What did any of us do? He thinks the world owes him a lot more respect and honour than it gives him, and if he became the sovereign, it wouldn't be enough. He won't touch you, I promise."

Kei swallowed down the sickness he felt. "Arman, if he ordered you...to kill me, to kill the others of Ai-Albon, what would you do?"

"I don't know – delay and try and get you away, if I could. I've been giving it some thought, actually."

"Really?" Kei looked at him in amazement. "You'd really help us escape?" Even with everything he knew of Arman now, it was very hard to imagine him even *contemplating* that.

Arman smiled. "To save your life, I would try, certainly. But it won't come to that – I've put so many safeguards into the reporting procedure that unless your clan loses the patience they've held for so long, no one will pull a trick again like at Vinri."

"But if the siege goes badly...."

Arman's expression darkened. "Then I will still do all I can to get you away. The fact remains that I may be a general, but I'm still only one man. There's a limit to what I can do, you have to realise that. Be assured I will fight to the death to protect you, that's the least I promise you."

"Arman, I don't want your death for mine."

Arman squeezed his shoulder. "Then let's avoid that, shall we?"

He hopped off the desk, and Kei began to straighten the papers the senator had thrown into disorder. "Arman, I think I want to visit Karus tonight. At least, visit Jena."

"What? Kei, are you sure? You can barely stand my officers coming in and out the way they do." Arman peered at him, his blue eyes full of concern for him.

"But they're not friends, and I'm finding that I can more easily bear sensing the less hostile emotions. I don't...it's not everything so much any more."

Arman gave him a wide smile. "By the gods, Kei – that's good news. Of course we'll call on Karus. I get notes from him every day asking about you. I think he doesn't care about me at all anymore," he added with a mock frown.

"I doubt that, my lord," Kei said, and was able to find a smile too. Another inch gained today.

He had to visit Karus' house sooner or later. If he couldn't bring himself to tolerate Karus' gentle kindness or Jena's loyal affection, then he really would be better off dead, because there would be no one he would be able to turn to, not even Myka. Arman would not be with him forever. Kei didn't spend any time thinking about the future any more, or the day when he would leave Utuk, but he knew it would come, however much he ignored it. Arman had given him the place from which he could rescue himself, but it was up to him now.

Besides, he wanted Jena to restart the mental exercises with him, to see if he could tolerate them at all and if they would help, and also to see if working with Karus once more would be possible. Arman was trying to dismiss Mekus' threat, but he was worried, very worried, Kei could tell. Kei didn't want to die, if it meant the others did. Or that Arman did. He felt sick and cold at the very idea that he would cause Arman's death. He didn't want his spirit burdened with that crime, nor his heart with that sorrow. So, if he reduced his visibility, Mekus might leave Arman alone. He had to try it.

Arman sent a note to Karus to warn him of their intention to call on him, and then after another two hours which, fortunately, brought no more hostile visits, Arman took Kei by calash to Karus' house. The streets were empty – it was now deep winter and cold by the standards of Kuplik, although nowhere near as cold as it got in the north.

Kei welcomed the lower temperature as it meant fewer people were around, and it seemed to have a dampening effect on people's passions too – or perhaps he really was starting to build his defences again. Nothing could touch the shocking emptiness in him, the wound left by the loss of ten souls – nothing except Arman. Kei didn't know why that was, and it made him shudder at the idea of there being no other remedy for this pain. To live with it for the rest of his life, seemed a prospect worse than torture.

Arman held his hand in the dark in a way which was nothing short of tender. Kei could feel the carefully suppressed desire that lay underneath Arman's kindness, a desire that neither of them would ever dare give into – Arman because of his position, and Kei because...to have sex with someone would be to make himself open to them in a way he could not bear at all, and

perhaps never would be able to. Arman's feelings were buried deep, perhaps unacknowledged even by himself, and Kei would not utter a word to arouse them. His nights would have been easier if he could have spent them at Arman's side, but there was just no way that could occur without raising uncomfortable questions that Kei knew he couldn't deal with.

The Prij were a reserved race, so unlike the open and exuberant people Kei had grown up with. They rarely touched in public that Kei had seen, and Arman wasn't even physically affectionate with people like Karus. He didn't know how Arman rationalised the touches, the affection, the...caresses to himself if he would not admit his physical desires. Kei could only put it down to long practice at self-denial. Arman was chaste and faithful to a woman who loathed him, and with whom he never spent a night or a willing conversation. Either he spent a lot of time in secret masturbation, or he really did have a rope around his balls.

But Kei was grateful not to be pressured, even though he wished he could offer more of himself than he could. He was a hollow wreck now. Ai-Albon was going to get back a mere shadow of the healer it once had. He hoped that would be enough for his clan.

He steeled himself as they arrived at Karus' home. Apart from the transitory visits from Arman's officers, he'd had no prolonged contact with anyone other than Arman in over a month. The house was quiet, and Matez left them alone as soon as he let them in, which immediately made Kei suspicious.

The suspicion was confirmed when Karus made no move to take his hand, even though he was clearly delighted and relieved to see him. "Pei, Jena's told you, hasn't she?"

"About what, Gidu?" Karus' guileless blue eyes were wide in enquiry and nothing else.

Kei looked at Arman, who shrugged. "About my...gift," he said, using an ambiguous word he could explain away if he was wrong.

But he wasn't. "Yes, my boy, she did. I'm so very sorry this has happened to you and I won't burden you this evening with my company. Jena's waiting for you in the front room, with a good fire and a hot meal. Arman and I will keep each other occupied tonight. Go see her, she's missed you terribly."

Kei bowed. "Karus-pei, you're both kind and wise. I've missed you too."

"Well then, I hope you'll be able to spend more time with us soon. Run along, Kei, and remember you promised me to tell me more about that academy in Darshek one of these days."

"Yes, Pei, I haven't forgotten."

He went looking for Jena. *There, that hadn't hurt too much.*



Karus sighed, and asked Arman to help him to his feet. "Poor child, what a dreadful affliction."

"I'm sorry not to tell you, Pei, but I was sworn not to."

"Of course you were, Arman. If I weren't a harmless doddering old fool, Jena would doubtless have made me swear too, but who would believe my tales of people who can read your thoughts with a touch?"

"I'll allow the 'old', Pei, but only a fool would think you one. Where do you want to go?"

"To the kitchen. I gave Cook and Siza the night off and told them to find their sweethearts and enjoy themselves," he said with a chuckle, leaning on Arman's arm as they walked towards the kitchens.

"I never knew you were a matchmaker, Pei."

"Oh, a terrible meddler, given my choice, Arman. Such am I reduced to that I need to arrange the affairs of servants to amuse myself."

It was warm in the kitchen, and smelled deliciously of the meal waiting for them. Karus indicated he wanted to sit at the main preparation table and told Arman where Jena had left them their supper. He sighed happily. "This reminds me of my childhood, watching my mother prepare our meals with our cook. So many changes have happened since then, of course. Even what we eat – I'd never heard of medo fruit when I was a child, and then it was a luxury only the rich ate. Now, of course, they throw them at the festivals as if they're nothing. I don't suppose you can remember a time without cheap Darshian fruit at your meal table."

"No, Karus, I can't." Arman set the cold cooked fish and the spiced vegetable soup out in front of them, and handed Karus bowls and implements, before serving the food and cutting some bread. It reminded him of the quiet suppers with Kei in his own rooms – how much more enjoyable it was to be with a friend over a private meal, than a state feast. Most of the senatorial class adored big occasions like those often hosted at the palace – Arman had always loathed them with every fibre of his being.

"So many changes," Karus said again, spooning his soup into his mouth. "So many changes in you, Arman."

"Me? Well, of course I've changed, you've known me since I was in baby robes, Pei," he said with a smile.

"Yes, and you were such a sweet baby to grow up into such a disobedient child," Karus said wagging his finger. "That blessed tuktuk was never the same after what you and Tijus did to him."

"Sorry, Pei," Arman said but still able to grin over the incident. He lost his grin as he remembered telling Loke about it on his death bed. But it had been so funny when the tuktuk had sworn at Senator Dizus' wife....

"But that's not the kind of change that strikes me most about you, my boy. Even since you came back from Darshian...do you not feel it yourself?"

Arman cocked his head. Karus was giving him one of his critical looks, the one that seemed to know exactly what he was thinking or feeling at any point. That look had made him an effective disciplinarian in former years, and it was one Arman used on his officers from time to time with great effect. But he really didn't know what his friend was getting at. "What do you mean, Karus?"

"Arman, when you left, you were a disappointed man wrapped in duty. I ached to see you thus, and when you came back, you were so bitter and angry. But now...you remind me of when I first met Loke, that time you brought him with you to visit. The two of you were such good friends, I rejoiced to see it, and every time I saw you with him. Now you've made another friend, and it's changed you again. Even with this latest trouble... as with Loke, he feeds your soul and makes it grow. Am I speaking out of turn?"

"No, Pei, you aren't. But since I tore *his* soul in half with what I did, it's not like I deserve his friendship in the least."

Karus gave him a sharp look. "He forgives you, Arman. I can tell just by the way he looks at you, he bears you no ill will at all."

"Perhaps not, Pei, but we're still at war. He'll leave soon, I sincerely hope for his sake. All I can do is try and heal the hurt I've given him."

Karus nodded and ate more soup, as if that was all he had to say on the subject. But then just as Arman relaxed and began to eat his own meal, Karus spoke again. "And then, my dear Arman, what will you do? Retreat into bitterness again? Do your familial duty and let your soul die?"

"You speak as if I have any choice in the matter, Pei. I was born in this caste, I let my father make my marriage, I accepted my rank. I can't complain now if it doesn't bring me joy."

"No, my boy, you can't. But Loke brought you joy, I think Kei would if you let him. All I suggest is that you let yourself believe that even when they are both gone, the possibility of happiness exists in your future, and not to retreat into yourself again. I won't be here forever, Arman," he said gently, laying his hand

on Arman's wrist. "I don't want to be with Loke, watching from the heavens, as you turn into a sour, angry old man."

"You'll be here for a while yet," Arman said gruffly.

"My boy, don't insult my few remaining brains," Karus chided gently. "Bring your child up to have an open, honest heart and you will do us all honour, and find some joy in your life. Leave yourself ready to find friendship again."

"I'll try, Karus-pei, but I don't want to speak of the future." Arman changed the subject to what had happened that day in his office. "Kei was terrified, and I don't blame him."

Karus sighed. "Ah, Sei Mekus, what a horrible child he was, though I shouldn't say it. He's a bully, Arman, always was. You need to treat him the same way you treat other bullies."

"I very much doubt Her Serenity would appreciate me picking one of her senators up by the scruff of his neck and beating the dust out of his bones, Pei," Arman said dryly, and Karus chuckled.

"No, I fancy not. But I also fancy you've got better weapons than your fists these days. I pray daily for the end of the siege, Arman, much as I will feel more that I am losing a daughter than a servant in Jena. Is there any movement at all on that front?"

"None whatsoever. At this rate, you'll have Jena with you at the next Solstice."

"Which would bring her no happiness, so I won't wish it, however much we each want our friends to stay. I never expected to see this day, Arman. To be at war but to have found friendship through it. It's very strange, is it not?"

"Indeed, Pei. Very strange." *But also wonderful*, Arman thought. A brief but wonderful time to be cherished in the future which, whatever Karus said, had no prospect of joy at all.

They finished their meal, not talking of the war which Arman had had more than enough of lately, but of small things. Karus' garden and his plans to try and cultivate the difficult yusus tree, with its extravagant, delicate blooms, and edible blue berries. Matez' budding relationship with a servant in one of the neighbouring households, and what that might mean to Karus. The books on the history of Andon that Karus had ordered and that he was expecting to arrive soon. Little, undramatic things that Arman rarely had time to contemplate, but which were things he would *like* to have time to contemplate. He suspected he would be Karus' age before he had that luxury – and even then, he would have his wife and her bastard to ruin his peace. He had no

expectations that Mayl would die in childbirth – the gods wouldn't want to take her back to them sooner than they needed to.

Jena came in as they were finishing. "He's just resting," she said, forestalling both their queries. "You've done good work with him, my lord."

"Hurt to admit that?"

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Not at all, a healer takes her remedies even from the most poisonous bushes." Karus chuckled at that. "He's a long way to go, my lord. Don't imagine he's close to being healed, because he's not."

"No, I don't, Jena, but I urgently need to know if you think he can bear to be away from me for a few hours each day. The situation has become dangerous at the palace for him."

"Mekus? He told me," she said with a scowl. "That...bucket of urs piss!"

"Jena," Karus said in mild reproof. "Arman has to look the man in the face, you know."

"Yes, well, maybe he could poke him in the eye too while he's looking. All right, I know. The answer is, yes, if Karus will not mind him hiding away for the first few days."

It was just what Arman had hoped for. "Excellent. Pei, if he can come to you in the afternoons, that will reduce his time there."

"Yes, of course, Arman – he can spend all day here, you know that," Karus said with a puzzled frown.

"No, he can't, Karus," Jena said.

"I don't understand, my child."

Jena glanced at Arman. "It's complicated, Karus. I'll explain later, perhaps. But Kei should spend more time with Arman now than with you or me. For a little while longer, at least."

Karus blinked a little. "You're the healer, my dear. Whatever he needs, you know that, Arman. We need to send him home safe and in good health. It's only just."

"Yes, and I intend to," Arman said, looking at Jena who nodded. "I'll wait until he's ready and take him home. Thank you."

"Thank you – for his sake."

"Of course. For what other reason?" Karus was looking down at his plate, so Jena put her tongue out at Arman. Arman only grinned. Jena held no fears for him – he was married to a champion practitioner of nastiness. Jena was but a rank amateur in those stakes.



It was an intense relief to Arman to find Kei could, at last, spend some time at Karus' house, and even benefit from it. He'd explained what he and Jena had been doing – Arman really couldn't understand this strange power or what it felt like, let alone these mental exercises, but he accepted their necessity and the benefit Kei was deriving from them. He was a long, long way from normal, but at least he no longer returned from the kitchens pale-faced and sweaty every time he fetched a meal for them.

There was no joy in him though, no real spirit in his conversation. Jena said his recovery would take time and kindness from his friends. Arman could offer one, but who knew how much there would be of the other.

He could at least make him safer and exercised his little used political skills to make sure Mekus' spite didn't lead to fatal results for Kei. Arman let it be known what Kei was working on, casually mentioning the dictionary and the medical text to Blikus as 'being of some possible use, my Lord,' carefully underplaying it. Blikus' curiosity was piqued, just as Arman hoped it would be, and so Arman told him a little more about Darshianese remedies. His scepticism died somewhat when Arman had Kei's medical supplies brought to the palace and had Kei demonstrate the effect of the chuo sap ointment to the Lord Commander. "Amazing stuff, Arman," Blikus murmured, looking at his fingers. "You, Kei – you know the recipe for this?"

"Yes, my lord, my family invented it. But you can't get chuo sap in the south."

Arman was proud of how Kei held his nerve under Blikus' penetrating gaze. "Really. But still – put the recipe in that thing you're writing. You never know, we might get supplies of it. Are you describing the use of this nitre weed solution?"

"Yes, my lord. It needs to be used carefully, it can be an irritant as well as a poison."

"Hmmm, since the last time I had a bad back, the liniment the medic gave me brought me out in hives, I don't think we'll be too frightened by this. It's a good idea, this book, Arman. I'll mention it to Her Serenity. No point in prejudice getting in the way of keeping our troops healthy."

"No, my Lord, exactly my thoughts."

And now you can go sit on an angry thurl, Mekus, Arman thought with some satisfaction. He would look like a perfect idiot if he complained to Kita over this now, and Blikus hadn't raised the slightest objection either to Kei being in the palace in the mornings. Had even suggested that Kei speak to the medics, but Arman politely suggested that since the siege might end any

day, the notes would be a valuable resource, as would the dictionary, and would it not be best if he continued to work on them instead? Blikus had agreed, and Arman could relax again.

Kei understood what he'd done, and was grateful in a subdued kind of way. It seemed to Arman that his reactions were growing less severe as the days passed, and Kei admitted his control was improving. The last time anything remotely like this had happened, it had taken nearly a month for him to really be normal, he said. Arman got the impression that six months or more was likely to be the case here.

Kei was unlikely to still be in Utuk in six months' time. But neither might Arman. Three weeks after the new hostages had arrived from Vinri, he was summoned to a meeting of the security cabinet. Kita was present, as were six of the most senior and capable senators, Captain Peku, and the Lord Commander. He expected it to be about the siege at Darshek, and was resigned to listening to a lot of stupid complaints and ideas which they had gone over a dozen times before. But to his surprise, it was Blikus, not Peku, who got to his feet. "Your highness, Senators, we have lost all communications with north Darshian. There's been no goods or messages through Tirko Pass for three weeks. We've sent a number of messengers and scouts – not one has returned."

The effect was of consternation. "It's winter, Lord Commander, " Senator Kizus – one of the oldest and most acerbic members of the senate – pointed out. "Is it possible they've been lost in snowfalls or avalanches?"

"Yes, it is, although the snowfalls have not been severe, according to General Ritus. But if the passes were simply blocked, at least some of our men would be turning back and reporting the problem. At this point, we have to assume anything from a simple problem at Fort Trejk, to a total loss of our troops."

Kita was saying nothing, Arman noticed, but she looked thoughtful. "Your suggestion, Lord Commander?" another senator asked.

"The only solution is to find out what's going on – and that means sending a force north."

"*More* soldiers?" Kizus snapped. "Impossible – this war is stretching us thin. The senate won't approve it."

Her Serenity raised her hand for silence. "How many soldiers, Blikus?"

Blikus bowed a little to Kita. "I would suggest at least two hundred, your highness. But it would depend on what is found."

She folded her hands. "You seriously think we could have lost our entire force, including General Jozo? Is that even possible?"

"I would hope not, your highness. But a total lack of communications means just that – and until we know why, we have to assume the worst."

"Your highness, my Lord," Arman said, getting their attention. "A force of even a hundred men, carefully chosen, might be able to investigate this. We can spare those from Utuk without compromising security."

"And who would lead this? You?" Kizus snapped.

"I could, Senator. I know the terrain and the pass better than anyone on this side of the mountain range."

"Couldn't one of your captains lead it? It doesn't need a general's attention."

"No, it doesn't, not just getting through the pass. But if some catastrophe has befallen our army, it *will* need my attention. I would feel easier about the matter if I could assess it with my own eyes and make a judgement on the spot." Kizus grunted, accepting the point.

"A hundred soldiers, Arman. You would be sitting targets," Blikus said.

"If the worst has happened, yes, my Lord. But if the worst has happened, even a thousand men might not be enough."

"We're not sending another thousand troops," Kizus said. "It exposes Kuprij too much – we're already exposed too much by this siege. If there was an attack by the Andonese, we would have all our defences tied up in the north."

Kita held her hand up. "Arman, if we've lost Jozo, losing you would be a bitter blow."

"*If*, your highness. I don't have your belief in my indispensability, but in any event, it needs experience more than numbers for this task. It's probably something remarkably simple," he said with more confidence than he felt.

She tapped the arms of her chair with her fingers as she thought. "Very well. Arman, take a hundred troops and plan to only go as far as Vinri, unless you consider you really need to continue once you're on the ground. Send reports back at every station. We shall have four hundred men kept in reserve in Urshek, waiting for your command. If you determine more troops are needed, then more will be provided," she said with a sharp look at her senators. "We've devoted many resources to the fight for Darshek, senators, let us not quibble now when victory is so close."

Arman noted the scepticism of her cabinet, but she ignored it. "When can you leave, Arman?"

"In two days, your highness. My Lord, we will need cold weather equipment, and urs beasts for all men, for greater speed."

"Ritus will provide them. Peku, we want your fastest boat for Arman." The admiral nodded. "Anything else?"

"No, my Lord. It's always possible that news will come before we enter the pass – another reason for a smaller force."

"True." Blikus didn't look happy. "That's the end of my report, your highness."

"Very well, we trust you to provide what is needed. Good day, gentlemen. Arman, wait a moment, please."

He stood and waited politely for his colleagues to leave. Kita took his arm. "Walk with us, Arman." She led him out into the walled garden, where braziers were lit here and there to warm the more delicate plants. "You seem eager for this mission, Arman."

"Eager to know the fate of our men, your highness. General Jozo is too valuable to lose this way."

"As are you, Arman. Does it not concern you that your wife is soon to give birth?"

He nearly rolled his eyes – Kita always picked the most irritating moments to be womanly. "My wife is a soldier's wife and a senator's daughter. We all know our duty to Kuprij, your highness."

"Indeed, we're sure you do. We'll keep her safe for your return."

"Thank you. I don't expect it to be as dangerous as you fear. The chances that something catastrophic have occurred are slight."

"Of course. The Darshianese don't have a large army, we already know this. As you say, it's most likely a problem at the fort." She made him turn towards a display of bright red berry plants, a type he didn't recognise. "Will you take this manservant of yours? The one Blikus says knows so many remedies?"

Gods, he'd not thought about.... "If your highness would permit it, it would be helpful. Your kindness in that matter has been much appreciated." *Eventually*, he thought wryly.

"Thank you. Yes, you have my permission, but see that he continues with his work. We should like to see this text when it's completed. And, of course, if the Darshianese should kill this servant too, then it's only fitting"

Cold-blooded reptile of a woman, he thought with revulsion. "Of course. He is as much use as a hostage with this expedition as in Utuk, and I won't have to waste one of my soldier's time performing menial duties."

“Yes, true. Now, we better let you make your preparations. We would be most upset if you were to get yourself killed on this venture, Arman. We want you to know that.”

He bowed. “Your highness is too kind. I expect to be able to give you a report within a month, all being well.”

She smiled. “Ah, then, good, you shall have the naming ceremony in the palace. Your child will be a kinsman of ours, it will be joyfully welcomed.”

Arman would have loved to have told her the child wasn’t even *his* kin, let alone hers. “Thank you.”

She dismissed him and he backed away. Gods...what had he just agreed to do with Kei?



There were days when Kei almost felt normal, normal sad at least. Working with Arman in the morning was more stressful in some ways, but his presence gave Kei the strength to keep his control. The afternoons with Karus and Jena left him without that source of strength, but he didn’t need it so much – sometimes, not at all. Karus was so even in his temperament that he didn’t put a strain on Kei’s gift at all, and Jena could conceal her more changeable emotions enough that they didn’t burden him.

But he was also getting better overall – Karus’ other servants offered no special concessions, and yet Kei was now handling interactions with them easily. He could even now handle Arman’s less amiable staff, even though they still made him sick in every way with their unpleasant speculations and their hate. They were a good test for measuring his recovery, he knew – he began to believe that once he was back at Ai-Albon, with people who weren’t hostile, that he would really be able to live and work with them again. Jena believed it was so. The other matter...well, it was possible to live with a deep sorrow, a painful loss, however great. He was proving to himself that he could bury himself in his work, and there would be work aplenty in which to do so when he returned. It would help to numb the ache.

His heart always lifted a little in the evening when he heard Arman’s cultured voice asking Matez where they were, and he was always able to let a little tension go when Arman at last entered the library or the kitchen wherever he was working or talking. Arman always managed to give him some contact, a squeeze to the shoulder, or a hand briefly on his back, which was like water to a drought-dying plant. It revived him – not forever, but for a while – although he would begin to droop again if Arman were gone for long. It

angered him to be so dependent on another in this way, to be so weak and in need of comforting. But the situation wasn't of his making, nor under his control. All he could do was to work determinedly on his exercises, force himself to tolerate more and more exposure to the emotions of strangers to build up a callus on his heart, and to remind himself daily that he would not have Arman here for long, so he had better not use him more than he absolutely needed to.

Jena's reactions to Arman were always powerful and mixed, Kei found, slightly amused by the mixture of her determination to loathe the man for what he had done and who he was, her gratitude for the help Arman was giving Kei, and her reluctant liking for Arman himself despite her intentions. It wasn't as if Arman set out to charm Jena and she was always as rude to him as she could get away with, but Arman didn't ever seem to mind, which seemed to puzzle her. It certainly led her to mutter frequent imprecations about him to anyone who would listen, usually Kei – and Kei had to wonder if she was fooling even herself. It was one of the small entertainments of his day, watching them at it.

They were in the library, Arman having missed supper, and Karus having already retired for the evening – feeling over-weary he said, which always made Kei and Jena anxious when he complained of it. They both did as much as they could to make his days easier, but Karus was just very old. Some men lived longer, especially in Darshian, but he was one of the most elderly Prij that Kei had encountered. Kei's healing skills could not make a man more youthful, however much he wanted it.

Kei heard the front door of the house opening, Matez' deep rumble and Arman's tenor in response. A moment later, Arman was with them. As he came to Kei's side and put an arm over his shoulder to look at what he and Jena were working on, Kei could feel there was something serious on his mind. "Jena, would you mind if I spoke to Kei alone? I will then want to speak to you if you can wait."

"Yes, my lord." She was as puzzled as Kei was. "Has something happened? Not one of the villages...."

"No, nothing like that, but there's been a development. If you can curb your curiosity then I'll tell you about it later," Arman said with a trace of impatience in his tone.

"You should forgive my suspicion, lord General," she said huffily. "It's not like we haven't had nasty surprises from you before."

"Jena, stop it," Kei said. "Please, leave us alone."

She narrowed her eyes at him, and seemed about to retort before gathering her skirts up and leaving the library with annoyance showing in the stiff line of her back. Kei watched her go with a sigh. "Arman? What's happening?"

Arman sat down in Jena's vacated chair. "Communications with north Darshian have been lost. I'm to take a small force across Tirko Pass and investigate. I could be gone weeks, or longer."

Kei looked at him with consternation. "But...then what will I do? Will I have to...will I go to another household?"

Arman took his hand. "Her Serenity has given me permission to take you with me. I confess, I asked for that really before I had a chance to think it through. Kei, do you want to come with me?"

Arman's fingers were warm around his, but Kei could hardly feel a thing, so suddenly had hope and happiness filled him. "I can go home?" he whispered. "But...no...I would have to return, would I not?" He pulled his hand away from Arman's and stared down at his notes, his vision suddenly blurring. He had thought for a moment....

Arman put his arm around Kei and pulled him close. "Kei, I don't know what to offer. I can't just set you free or the others would suffer. But do you think someone in your village would take your place, if we went so far? My orders are to go to Vinri, but it will depend on what we find. We might turn back at Fort Trejk – I might be forced to go to Kislik, but it's unlikely. Albion is a long way from the pass and I can't make that journey just for you...but if we did?"

Kei blinked away the stupid tears of disappointment. "It would be unfair to ask."

"No, it wouldn't," Arman said firmly, his arms around Kei's shoulder tightening in comfort. "You've been with us for months. You've been injured twice, badly, and done as much as anyone could to keep the situation calm. I think you've served your village. It wouldn't be unfair to ask, but it would be up to you. Can you bear to go to Darshian and then return to Kuplik? I'm sorry, I should have thought this through."

"No...the situation is...difficult. I don't want to stay here at the hands of your wife or Senator Mekus. I'll go, knowing I will probably have to come back. I promise not to complain. But...Arman, we have to climb those mountains. I'm not in the best condition."

Arman sat back and looked him over. "No, you're really not. Do you ride? Urs beasts, I mean?"

“Oh yes, I used to race them with Reji and Banji. I need a big beast because of my height.” He looked at Arman, who was far heavier than he was and at least two inches taller. “But then so do you.”

“Yes, I do. Well, that’s one thing settled – we’ll all be riding, it won’t be like it was before, flogging through on foot. It won’t be easy, Kei – the pass is covered in snow and even with the new bridges, it will be difficult work.”

“Yes, I don’t mind,” Kei said quietly. It wasn’t like any of it had ever been easy. “When?”

“Day after tomorrow. I want you to be here all day tomorrow, I’ll be too busy to work with you and you’d be in the way. Cold weather clothing will be provided, of course and Her Serenity has instructed me personally that you’re to keep working on your textbook on the march. It seems setting that risk to run worked, at least.”

“Good,” Kei murmured. “Arman – what if something’s happened at the villages? The hostages...please, you have to try and keep them from being killed.”

Arman tapped his fingers on the desk as he gave the request his consideration. “I’ll have a word with Blikus about Jena – I think I can persuade him that her value as a healer outweighs that as a hostage. I’ll also be the one to make my reports about the situation, so I will do what I can to not trigger the terms of surrender. There’s not a lot more I can do, especially if I’m not here, Kei. There’s no way of letting them all escape from Kuplik, and the masters of the others are probably not as interested in protecting them as I am with you. Some may be. But I can’t promise it. I’m sorry. The best hope still remains that the siege will succeed, as it always has been.”

Kei nodded, but he was sick at heart. There seemed nothing he could do, and once again he hated the feeling of helplessness, of total dependence on others for his fate. He wanted to take control of his life again but the prospects for that seemed vanishingly small. “Let’s tell Jena, and I’ll explain to Karus tomorrow.”

It seemed he was going home but not in any manner he had ever imagined. He had thought this moment would bring him joy, but all it did was cause more worry and heartache. Karus believed the Prijian gods had a sense of humour. If they existed at all, Kei was beginning to think that sense of humour really had to be a very sick, cruel one indeed.



The wind was bitter – they were in for a rough passage, Arman could tell. No priest and no sacrifices this time – this boat was much smaller than the one which had carried the force to Darshian months ago. There were only the sailors and the hundred soldiers on the boat – the beasts and the reserve troops would be drawn from those in south Darshian, but Arman wanted to be able to hand pick the men coming with him on this, so had made his selection from those based on Kuplik. All had gone on the previous expedition or had travelled the pass before. All spoke Darshianese, and all rode a good seat on an urs beast. He didn't want to lose a single man to Tirko Pass this time.

Three hours after sunset, they were still waiting for the tide to turn, although he and his men had boarded while it was still daylight. At last the command was given. He watched the mainsail being set, and felt the great tug of the clipper as the wind caught the sheets. It was a moonless night – other than the distant glow of the huge lighthouse at the harbour in Urshek, the only other lights to be seen were the brilliant stars, and the guarded oil lamps of the sailors.

It felt good to be out of Utuk again – he'd not spent so long in the city at a stretch since he had got married, and Karus' presence aside, it had few charms for him any more. He honestly preferred the rough life of the army camps to being in his house, or in Utuk at all. Of course, what he'd found tucked away in a long overlooked file as he prepared himself for departure, soured him even more on his marriage and his household, however impossible he would have thought that a few days ago. He'd thought Mayl could no longer surprise him with the depths of her depraved morality – but he'd been wrong. He was glad not to breathe the same air as her right now.

The air he *was* breathing was pretty damn cold though. He pulled his furred cloak about him and shivered. There was no point in freezing out here. He needed to get some sleep – and he needed to see Kei.

He had been allocated a small cabin for his use – furnished only with a single bed, a small fixed desk and a chair. Kei was writing, bent over the desk, his winter cloak on the bed. He was used to much colder weather, he'd told Arman, and rarely bundled up the way the Prij did, at least indoors. Arman sat on the bed. "You don't need to work on that all the time, you know."

Kei turned to him. "No, I know, but I want to get it all down... in case...well, who knows if it will be finished if I stop working on it."

Arman felt he should remind Kei it was only a make-work task, but Kei was taking it so seriously – and it was, in truth, a valuable document. Arman's reservations about it were only as to whether the Prij physicians and medics

would ever understand its value. “Be that as it may, you need to rest. It’s going to be a rough crossing, and a long day tomorrow.”

“I don’t get seasick,” Kei murmured.

“Good, but you still need to rest. You slept badly last night again.”

Kei rubbed his forehead. “Sorry – I just kept dreaming.... It doesn’t matter. There’s only the one bed – I’ll take the floor.”

“You damn well won’t, you’ll be like a board tomorrow. There’s room, if you don’t mind....”

Kei gave him a quick, startled look. “I’m not that sleepy, Arman. I could just sit up and read, unless the lamp would disturb you.”

And then the silly idiot would stay awake all night. “Look, if you want to sit, sit here. You make me tired to look at you.”

With the briefest of smiles, Kei nodded, and came to sit on the bed. Arman pulled his cloak around them, and got Kei to rest against him, as Arman leaned on the wall. “Comfortable?”

“Mmmm, yes.”

Kei’s arm stole around his waist, and his head rested easily on Arman’s shoulders. He never seemed to mind being this close – but he always froze at the slightest hint of actually sleeping in the same bed as Arman. Perhaps he just didn’t trust Arman’s control either, Arman thought sadly. Kei’s braid was hanging over his shoulder, and the length of it was coiled in Arman’s lap like a rope. He picked up the long tail of it, tied off with a leather thong. “Why do you all wear your hair so long?” It puzzled him, the lack of variety, when Prij men and women of all classes seemed to crave looking differently from each other and disdained any kind of simple hair arrangement.

Kei’s voice was soft, and perhaps a little sleepy too. “It’s a sign of being a full member of the clan. From the age of puberty, no one has their hair cut. Loosing it other than for grooming is...an erotic act, a private one for one’s lover or spouse. Lovers will exchange bracelets made of it, which are seen as a sign of serious intent very often, although children do it as well with their childish sweethearts. When someone dies, their lover or kin will cut the braid off and keep it as a memento. It’s not uncommon for a wife to be buried holding the braid of her late husband, or vice versa.”

“Astonishing. So much symbolism,” Arman said wonderingly, rubbing the tip of the braid between his fingers.

“What you’re doing now is considered foreplay among our people, I should warn you.”

Arman flushed and dropped the braid in an instant. “Gods, I’m sorry....”

He heard a slight smile in Kei's voice. "My lord, were I prone to teasing you, you would be far too easy."

Arman would only be too delighted to be teased this way. He cupped Kei's chin and looked into his face. "It's not fair," he said reproachfully. "Making fun of my ignorance."

"Turn about is fair play," Kei said calmly. "So tell me why you all cut your hair into such amazing shapes, and not let such beautiful stuff grow long for your lovers to play with?"

"You think it beautiful? This mess? It's the bane of my life – although when Loke...when Loke was alive, he got a lot of pleasure in brushing it." Loke was much on his mind tonight, but Arman could speak of him now without it breaking him down. He had his friends to thank for that, he well knew.

Kei reached up to touch one of the wavy strands that hung about Arman's ears. "I'm not surprised," he murmured. "Such a wonderful colour – and it's so springy."

"It's rebellious," Arman said dismissively. "I really should cut it off – I only keep it this way because all the nobles do, but I don't really care what they think. Perhaps I'll clip it before we start the climb tomorrow."

"Please...don't. I like to look at it."

"As you wish, Kei-gidu," Arman agreed solemnly. Was Kei aware of how...erotic...his words sounded? The more so that they were said so sleepily and without any intention to be other than a simple request. Arman had never encountered someone with so much innate sexual attractiveness, who seemed so unaware of it. All his life, Arman had known women – and a few men – prepared to use their charms to seduce and manipulate, very often quite successfully, although never with him. But someone like Kei, so handsome and yet so without pretense – Arman had only known one other, and Loke had died before he had come into the full flower of his manhood. The Darshianese were a tall, straight-bodied race with looks that differed greatly from the Prij, but which had a beauty all their own. Perhaps Kei didn't believe he was anything that remarkable. Arman thought him close to perfect, but would cut his own throat before he ever said so out loud.

Kei's body was growing heavy, so Arman kept silent now. If it had been Loke lying against him in this way, he would suspect that it wouldn't take long for him to fall asleep, left to himself, and Arman rather thought Kei would be the same. The boat's rolling motion was hell to those prone to seasickness, but there was a certain soothing quality to it for those who weren't.

Kei should be tired. He'd slept very poorly the night before, even worse than usual, calling the names of his sister and his lover, and even Arman's own from time to time. Perhaps he should have just insisted Kei come to bed with him, Arman thought. The ease with which Kei was slipping into sleep now, despite the less comfortable conditions, was the proof of that.

Arman reached over and turned the lamp to low, but left it burning – if they had to get up quickly in the night, they would need some light. Using the hood of his own cloak as a kind of pillow, he got into a better position. Instinctively, his hand curved around the tail of Kei's braid. He was still fascinated by its dark, smooth sheen, and the softness of its weight. "Foreplay," he muttered with a grin. A rare joke, so to be treasured. One day, Arman hoped, Kei's jests wouldn't be such a remarkable thing.



Grey, dim light was coming through the portholes when Kei woke, stiff and somewhat cold and entirely alone. He remembered, he thought he did anyway, falling asleep on Arman the previous night before. Had they been talking about hair of all things? It was a bit muzzy, like him, but at least he seemed to have slept the night away. The ship's motion was less violent – had the weather moderated?

The lamp had burnt down, of course. On the desk was a folded note, and in it, in Arman's slightly ornate lettering, were instructions for him to 'Ask for kitchen, eat.' He didn't know the Darshianese letters for 'galley', it seemed. Kei splashed some of the chilly water in the neat fixed basin on his face and went to look for food and his master.

There were people about, and smells aplenty of something that had *once* been food, but no longer – the soldiers had had a rough night, it seemed. Kei hesitated to ask any of the busy passing sailors for help – but then he spotted about the only face in the company he did know, the medic, to whom he had been introduced the previous day. The man had been respectful in Arman's presence, but his disdain for what he clearly thought was a barbarian yokel rolled off him. So, not a friend then, but Kei called to him anyway. The medic told him where the galley was. "Don't suppose you Darshianese have any remedies for seasickness that work, do you?"

"No, sir. There's not a lot of seasickness in the desert."

That got him a funny look, and then the medic shook his head, scurrying off to deal with whatever he was working on. Kei headed off in the direction to which he'd been directed. The galley was tiny and cramped – he had his bowl

of bean and fish porridge thrust at him and his mug filled with water before being told to clear off. He could have returned to the cabin but he wanted to clear the stink of vomit from his nostrils, so he came up onto the largely deserted deck and found a place out of the wind against a raised shelter over the stairs. His cloak was warm, made of heavy, waterproof lemul wool, and the hood lined with hisk fur, more than enough protection if he stayed out of the wind itself.

The food was cold and very salty, but tasty for all that. He had a good appetite for once, perhaps because he'd got a rare solid night's sleep. He was embarrassed to have fallen asleep that way, but it was as if he lost all good sense when Arman put his hands on him like that. It was almost as if Arman had a kind of true Gift, of a kind Kei had never heard of, or even a type of magic. It was very difficult to resist it when he was so tired and had so many mixed feelings about the journey they were making. His dreams were filled with scenes of joyous welcome as he returned to Ai-Albon, free and healthy and with all his friends and family restored to him – but then they would turn dark. Reji would die in front of him as had the Ai-Vinri hostages. Myka would be dragged away screaming to be put into slavery. He saw Fedor dying of the bej fever, Banji crushed by an urs beast. The deaths of those he loved played over and over until he woke, shivering and sick. Only pure exhaustion – or Arman's embrace – let him sleep without such nightmares. Kei was heartily tired of it. Jena was right – healers had no patience with their own ills.

There seemed to be more people about, coming up to the deck to get fresh air as he was, perhaps checking the progress of the boat. They had to be close to Urshek, he guessed, although he had no idea how long they'd been sailing. Two soldiers passed him, not acknowledging his polite greeting, and went down the stairs. "The general's goin' ta have two mounts this time, ain't he? One for riding, and one for a ride," he heard one of them say.

The other one laughed, and Kei half-heard a remark about Arman's long-maned jesig. Jesigs didn't have long manes – but Kei did. His face burned with shame – the men's comment had been as clear in meaning as their contempt had been as they'd passed him. These damn Prij, did they think of nothing else? And had Loke been subjected to this, or was he a special case?

"There you are." Kei looked up, his face still hot with embarrassment, to see Arman looking at him with friendly enquiry. "Is the food to your liking?"

"It's fine, my lord," he said quietly, getting to his feet and moving to the rail.

"Is something wrong?" Arman joined him, standing at a respectable distance, but his tone still friendly.

“Your men think ...I shouldn’t sleep in your tent on the trail, I think.”

“You won’t have many options, Kei. We’ll all be sharing tents, especially in weather like this.”

“Then find me a tent other than yours, or let me sleep in the open,” he muttered, staring out at the surging waves.

“Kei, what’s happened?”

Arman moved closer – Kei retreated. “Your men seem to think you’ve got a pet, one with a nice long mane to grab while you’re fucking him,” he said through gritted teeth.

Arman was unconcerned. “So? They’re wrong. Soldiers talk, Kei. Servants talk, you’ve heard this kind of thing before at my house.”

“I’m *sick* of it, my lord. I thought I would escape this urs shit while we were on this march, but it’s following me because the Prij have minds like middens. If I wanted to be thought a whore, I’d set my fee out on a shingle like those in Pleasure Lane. I’ll sleep in the snow if it’d shut them up.”

His bitter words made Arman coldly angry. “Do as you wish, Kei, I’ll not beg anyone to sleep in my bed, or to help them. If you feel so under threat, by all means, go freeze to death on the trail, you idiot. I wasn’t aware you were a simpering virgin to need to protect your chaste reputation thus.”

He wrapped his cloak around him imperiously and walked off, leaving Kei feeling like the idiot he’d been called. It wasn’t Arman with his mind in the latrine.

He took his bowl and mug to be washed in the galley, and returned to the cabin. Arman ignored his entry. “I’m sorry,” Kei said quietly.

Arman turned to him – he was more sorrowful than angry now. “Kei, do you want me to list the reasons that I would never lay a disrespectful hand on you?” He ticked off the points on his fingers. “You’re a prisoner, a hostage, and recently ill. Even if you claimed to consent, it would be nothing more than rape, and I hope you don’t believe that is one of the crimes I’m capable of.”

“No, of course....”

“More than that, you have your own lover, I have a wife, and a reputation for whatever that’s worth in two separate spheres. Even if I burned with lust for you until I couldn’t sleep at night – which I don’t – I would still never touch you in that manner. Do you understand me?”

Arman’s voice was cold, but his eyes held only warm concern. “Yes, of course. I’m sorry. I just...get so tired of this innuendo, so tired of everyone assuming something that would make me sick to think about.”

"I don't know whether to be relieved or insulted, Kei, that I revolt you so much."

There was a slight smile on Arman's lips, but Kei was still embarrassed at the misunderstanding. "It's not that, Arman...."

"I know. I understand. Look – people will gossip, and the only answer is to behave with perfect correctness. If they have no real fuel, their words will make no real fire."

"No, I suppose not." Kei moved to sit on the bunk. "Did they talk like this about Loke?"

Arman shook his head, no longer smiling. "Not that I ever heard. But that was a different situation, Kei. When Loke became my page, he was a child of nine, and when I brought him with me when I first joined the army as an officer, he was treated almost as a camp mascot. He was popular and indulged by my men who never saw him as anything but the child he'd barely ceased to be when he died."

His mouth tightened briefly – Kei could sense the sadness that caused it. "You, on the other hand, are no child. You're exotic, you're good-looking, and some of them might just want to do what they imagine I do – the hair doesn't help," he added wryly. "You're not a whore, Kei. No one can make you less than you are, and the idle idiocy of my men won't change my good opinion of you. I'm not going to wade in and crack heads over the issue because they'll assume there's some reason for my anger. If a comment is made in my presence, I'll deal with it – but not unless. You should ignore it, and if you're asked about it, simply say you are a manservant. Repeat as often as necessary – isn't that what you healers say?"

"Yes, sometimes," Kei said, eased a little by Arman's honesty. "I'm sorry – both for the trouble and what I said earlier."

"You really will make me angry, Kei, if you continue to apologise to me. How many times do I have to say this isn't your fault?"

"Allow me the luxury of being able to make a mistake on my own account, my lord," Kei said tightly, but forcing a smile onto his lips as he spoke. "I'm no child, as you say, even if I *am* a prisoner." He tilted his head. "And if I consent, it's no rape. I know my mind."

Arman stood and came over to him, cupping his hand gently under Kei's chin. "In another time or place," he said softly. "But not now, whatever you were to say. I would no more touch you than I would have Loke – I never did, in case you have any thoughts on that score."

"Did you want to?"

Again, Arman's mouth tightened. "No. I loved him but not that way. He was a *child*, Kei."

"But if he had lived?"

Arman let him go. "We'll never know, will we. You seem to forget I have a wife."

"You do a fine job of doing so, so I don't need to," Kei said, a little surprised at his own boldness. "Will your child make a difference to your relationship?"

Arman snorted and sat down heavily in his chair again. "It might – if it were mine."

Kei stared in astonishment at the matter-of-fact tone as much as the actual revelation. "It's...and you know this?"

"Unfortunately."

"The father? You know who it is?"

"I do now. I don't want to talk about this, Kei. Suffice to say that my dear and honoured wife is both a protection of and a burden on my chastity, but she has a different interpretation of fidelity."

"I'm sorry – it must hurt."

Arman dismissed his sympathy with a wave of his hand. "It's old news, and it means nothing to me, truly. The joke is that Her Serenity is going to welcome the child as being of her kin with some kind of extravagant naming ceremony. Let's hope the damn infant doesn't have red hair, it doesn't run in either side."

Kei couldn't understand how Arman could be so sanguine, but he had reached his limit for such emotional topics. "Still, perhaps some of her bile will be diluted by the joys of motherhood. It often happens that women's personalities change after birth."

Arman snorted again, and picked up his pen. "I suspect it'll just make her even more smug and insufferable. What about your Reji? Will she give you children, do you think?"

For the first time this morning, Kei felt like smiling. "Well, there are two problems with that. We who have gifts are infertile, and Reji's balls might get in the way of the baby coming out."

Arman choked, dropped the pen and stared at him. "I beg your pardon – your lover is a man?"

"Yes, very much so."

"You never said."

"You never asked." Kei bit his lip. "Does that shock you? Such things aren't common among the Prij, I know."

"More than you know, actually, but even those who love their own sex are expected to produce children. Infidelity is grounds for divorce, no matter with who." Arman seemed still astonished by the revelation. "You're all infertile? Even Jena?"

"Yes. There's never been a recorded birth, at least."

"I'm sorry. I imagined you...with your lover and a family...I didn't realise."

Kei shrugged. "This is also old news, Arman. How long until we land?"

"Land? Oh – another hour or so. Eager to get started?"

"Eager for it to be over with, that's all." He stood. "It still might be wise not to spend too much time alone with you in the day."

"You'll have no choice on the trail, Kei. I won't let you ride to the rear like Loke did – I made a mistake that got him killed, sending him where I couldn't protect him."

There was nothing Kei could say to this that would not reawaken Arman's pain and guilt. "Well, until then, let me be seen to be detached from your side at least until we begin the journey. Maybe someone will get the hint."

"As you wish," Arman said patiently. "But I'm here if you need me."

Only for now, you are, my lord, Kei thought. *Only for now.*



Kei stuck to his resolution to keep as much distance he could between himself and Arman, for as long as he could. Arman regretted that it was necessary, but Kei was right – it might ease the rumours, which, for all he tried to seem sanguine about it, irritated him a good deal. After that frank conversation they'd had, with revelations on both side, he felt they both needed time to think.

There was also the small matter of a military expedition to consider to. They arrived mid-morning, and the day was occupied in sorting out equipment, vetting troops and arranging the urs beasts. They could have left that afternoon, but there was no point in starting a dangerous journey along snow-clad trails with just a couple of hours of daylight to make progress in, so Arman had already decided to let his men recover from the sea journey and to make a start before dawn the following day.

It was his first opportunity to discuss events with Ritus, and he discovered the older general was in a discouraging mood about the entire north Darshian push. "They should give it up as a bad job, Arman. We thought it would be a quick victory, and it hasn't been. Darshek isn't worth this price, port or no port."

"I agree. Her Serenity doesn't," Arman said gloomily. "If we'd spent that money and manpower on Kurlik Pass, we'd have Darshek in our grasp."

"Very likely. I wish there was something to offer us hope about Jozo's situation, but it looks bad, very bad. I was surprised they decided to send you, but glad they did. I think you should take more troops, Arman."

"The Lord Commander thought so too, but I thought a hundred might have advantages in speed and supply provision than two, since they weren't going to give me more. If we had been able to finish the signal beacons before winter set in, we wouldn't be in this situation."

Ritus shrugged. "We've only got so many engineers, and Blikus said the pass was the priority, so they built bridges and trails." He slapped Arman on the shoulder. "Well, at least I can treat you to a good meal before you freeze your balls off on those mountains. Can't say I envy you the trip, my boy."

"Thanks ever so, General," Arman said with a grin.

Ritus kept a small but comfortable villa as part of the privilege of his rank, and an excellent cook. Arman returned to camp with a full belly and perhaps a bit too much Prijian wine floating in his bloodstream. He'd almost forgotten that he would not be alone tonight in the smaller tent he'd chosen for this march and so was slightly surprised to find Kei was there, sitting cross-legged on the mat and working on his blessed text again. "Give it a rest," Arman said, stripping off his cloak. "You don't need to spend every second on it, Kei."

"I know, but it's something I want to do. It means my time here isn't totally wasted."

"Hmmm. Have you eaten?"

"No, but I'm not hungry."

Translation – he didn't want to face the soldiers on his own. "They won't eat you, however tasty they think you, Kei."

Kei flushed and slammed his pencil down. "I don't give a damn how tasty they think me!"

"Settle down, don't take everything so personally." Arman sat down on the camp chair and struggled with his boots. Damn, he'd had too much to drink. He gave them a tug and fell off the chair.

He looked owlishly up at Kei, who was looking at him with a raised eyebrow. "You need help with something, Sei General Arman?"

"You're laughing at me, you Darshianese bastard."

"Well, you do look pretty funny." Kei leaned down and tried to help Arman get up, but he'd misjudged the weight and the balance, and ended up sprawled across Arman, who grinned at his clumsiness. "This is all your fault,"

he said sourly, trying to push himself up, but only getting more entangled in Arman's long limbs.

"Just let me, damn it!" Arman grabbed Kei's shoulders, heaved with his superior weight and strength and got them both into an upright position. But doing that brought Kei's face very close to his own. Perfect, sculpted lips close to his, and gentle eyes. Kei seemed mesmerised by his own features, staring into Arman's eyes in a way that made Arman want to plunge his hands into Kei's fine dark hair and feel it slip like water through his fingers – and made his cock harden in his trousers.

No. Arman gripped Kei's shoulders again and set him back on his heels.

The sudden movement seemed to shake Kei out of his odd trance. "Oh, gods...", he muttered, sounding mortified. He struggled up to his feet, and didn't offer a hand to help Arman get to his. "I'm sorry...I didn't mean...."

"Nothing to be sorry for," Arman said as calmly as he could, willing his cock to behave.

"I don't know what happened there, I didn't...I mean, I don't...." Kei bit his lip again, and looked at the floor.

"Kei, you did nothing wrong, I promise you. It's this situation...this...intimacy...is unusual...and I'm sure it brings memories back...and perhaps even desires borne of those. It's nothing to be ashamed of." At least, *Kei* had nothing to be ashamed of, Arman thought. He had no such excuse.

Kei wouldn't look at him. "But I don't really want anyone – or you. There's no desire.... I really wish I could feel something that way," he muttered, "then maybe I could feel normal." He lifted his head. "I'm not normal."

"Yes, I know. It'll take time, Kei." Arman's head was too dazed with wine for a second conversation on this subject, and if it continued, he would lose control of the situation. That couldn't be allowed to happen, for either of their sakes. "This is a topic we should set aside. Just go to sleep, I'm too drunk to make sense anyway."

"Yes, my lord," Kei muttered, but Arman got the feeling he was more upset with himself than with Arman.

Arman didn't want the day to end with bad feelings. He took Kei's arm and pulled him close. "You don't offend me, Kei, or disgust me. Reji's a lucky man."

Kei looked into his eyes. "I doubt he'll think so, Arman, even if I ever manage to get home to him. Goodnight." He was clearly waiting to be set free, and once Arman did so, he lay down on his bedroll, facing away from Arman.

Arman managed to get his boots off this time without falling on his face. He sat on his own bedroll and looked ruefully at Kei's back. He didn't care how damaged Kei thought he was – that Reji *was* a lucky man. He damn well better deserve Kei, that was all there was to it.



Kei had thought the difficult part of this journey would be the wrench of returning to his homeland, then being forced to leave it once more. He'd also expected that being close to a hundred strangers for weeks on end was going to be a real test of his growing control. He and Jena had spent his last day in Utuk working intensively in preparation for just this, and it had repaid him well.

What he *hadn't* expected was the nasty little trick his mind was playing on him that kept making him forget that he and Arman weren't actually lovers. It had nothing to do with sex, or desire – but he found himself reacting to him with the same unforced affection that he would have given to Reji, and worse...Arman was responding. That he was doing this to both of them bewildered him, it confused him and it terrified him, because he didn't want to be a tease under normal circumstances, let alone these. Arman was being as patient and understanding as any human could possibly be expected to be – but he wasn't superhuman. They were blurring the lines dangerously between friendship and...something much deeper...and Arman was as in need of comfort as Kei in some ways. Kei had no business offering promises with his body that his heart could not honour.

He realised now that he should have stayed behind, even with the tormenting he would have got in Arman's household and the ache that would have filled him from dawn to night without having Arman close by. Rather that, than to feel an obligation to offer Arman more than he could bear. Arman said he wouldn't take it even if Kei offered – and Kei believed that he believed this. But two men, forced together, friends who each needed solace – Arman would not be able to resist forever if Kei didn't stop confusing the issue.

It was too late to turn back now. He just hoped the exertions and difficulties of the march would distract both of them.

There was much to distract him. He had to regain his seat on the big urs beast that Arman had found for him – he felt he was going to suffer for the first few days until his backside got used to the riding. It was a placid beast – they generally were as a species, but these were trained to be even more so – and responded easily to his commands, unlike some of the stubborn bastard animals that Reji had owned from time to time and got rid of. Arman

was on a beast bigger than even Kei's own, and cut an imposing figure in his battle armour, his standard being carried in front of him, and his men in formation behind him. Kei was also wearing armour – well, a breastplate at least. Arman had shown him how to put it on and how to stop it rubbing. "It'll stop an arrow or a sword thrust – you'll wear it every moment you're not actually sleeping, and even then once we're across the mountains," he said gruffly."

It already felt awkward. "Is that really necessary?"

Arman had given him a hard look, but with regret behind it. "Loke wasn't wearing armour. It might have saved him. Please keep it on, Kei."

Kei agreed without demur. This was the other thing on Arman's mind – this journey was full of painful resonance for him. His grief had become more rational over the last few months, but it still caught him unawares sometimes, Kei knew. This situation between them didn't help – Arman may not have lusted after Loke, but he loved him and was easy in his company. That he felt the same way about Kei only reminded him of what he had lost.

Still, the armour took some getting used to. At least he wasn't obliged to carry a weapon of any kind. He continued to get curious looks from the men who *were* thus obliged, and sensed more than curiosity from them. They weren't particularly hostile though – he could feel bemusement, some contempt, and yes, even a little lust, here and there, but so long as he wasn't forced into physical contact with them, he could stand it.

The march to the foothills took two hours. The weather was overcast, and it began to rain as they reached the range, which meant it would probably be snowing. The urs beasts could deal with snow – they ranged all over Darshian, living in the driest as well as the coldest regions, although the southern animals were generally smaller than the northern breed – but it would still be dangerous. Since Kei had last been taken through the pass, Arman told him that much had been done to make it safer. Two bridges had cut out some of the most difficult paths, and there were numerous guides and markers to lead their way.

The rain continued, making the going slow. It turned to sleet, which made them all muffle up in their cloaks against the sting and the urs beasts roar in complaint, although their footing never altered. After they'd been ascending for several hours, Kei once again began to experience the breathlessness he'd felt before. Arman felt it too, and called a rest for them all to recover a little, and to be able to stretch, relieve themselves and eat some fish jerky and hard bread. Arman didn't seem to expect Kei to wait on him, so Kei

dismounted and ate, keeping back from the soldiers as much as he could in the narrow path. He wondered why the air was thinner up here – was it the cold or the elevation? Something else to investigate in his later years.

They were only granted a half an hour or so to stop, and then the command was given to move. Kei was about half way along the trail from Arman, and for most of the day, could only see his straight back, riding with perfect ease on the big mount, every inch a man in control. Kei could easily see how Arman had reached nearly the top of the chain of command at the age of twenty-five. It was only when you took a second look that you remembered he was still so young – and he rarely gave anyone a chance for a second look. He was, even knowing all Kei did about his gentler side, a daunting and imposing commander. His men may speculate about his sex life, but they had no qualms about following him on this mission.

It began to snow and the progress slowed again. They were forced to dismount and lead the beasts single file for two hours, by which time Kei was exhausted and freezing, despite the quality of his clothing and the exertion, too tired even to be afraid of the vertiginous drops at the side of the path. It was also getting dark, and with relief, Kei heard the lieutenant shout the command to stop and make camp. He wasn't sure what he should do next, but the decision was taken out of his hands as the sergeant moved down the line of soldiers. "You, attend the general. Take your beast, you'll sleep at the head of the line tonight."

"Yes, sir."

He was ignored as he carefully led the animal along the ranks of men, who were already feeding their mounts and offering them melted snow. The urs beast could go many days without substantial food, but water was more important to them. A few men had already broken out the small charcoal stoves that they all carried and were heating water for the ubiquitous cheym bark tea which Kei had drunk for much of his journey south. It wasn't drunk in the houses of the gentility, but it was apparently a staple stimulant and refreshment of the common man. Kei didn't care for its smell, but it was hot and right now that was all that mattered.

Arman was feeding his animal. "Oh good, there you are – are you all right?"

"Apart from being exhausted, saddle-sore, frozen and hungry, I feel fine, my lord."

Arman grinned. "I think that's fairly normal for the circumstances. Hitch your mount next to mine – if you feed them, I'll get the water."

No one seemed to be the least curious that Arman was attending to himself and his animal this way. But then, he would hardly be run after by his servants even in a bigger expedition – Arman wasn't the type.

They watered the urs beasts, and Kei got the little stove going, a surreptitious use of his power speeding the flint sparks to make the tinder catch. Hot drinks were essential, he knew – even Arman, apparently so superbly fit and strong, looked weary and chilled to the bone, and the night would only get colder. “Where will we sleep?” There was no room on the path for tents – the urs beasts took up too much room.

“Where we sit, more or less, against these hairy bastards,” Arman said, crouching down and taking the drink. “I hope they'll keep us warm enough.”

“The men should move closer together,” Kei said softly. “It will be warmer for men and animals.”

“Yes, true.” Arman stood and moved to the group of men closest to them, speaking to them quietly. They nodded, and he returned. “I've told them to arrange the beasts and sleep between them. It's no different from sharing a tent after all. We don't just don't tend to think of things like that,” he added in explanation. “It doesn't get this cold in Kuprij.”

“We don't get snow in the north very often, it's usually too dry, but the nights are bitter. The waterholes often freeze over.”

“Really?” Arman seemed interested. “But it doesn't last?”

“Sometimes, if it's very cold in the night and the day is cloudy. Then we skip rocks along the ice and scare the birds. I mean, I used to do that when I was a child,” Kei amended virtuously.

“You would never be so frivolous now, of course.” Arman was grinning at him.

“No, of course not.” Kei couldn't help smiling back a little too.

The stove was turned off as soon as the water boiled – no sense in wasting fuel – and then the only warmth came from their own bodies and that of the urs beasts, too well-insulated in their winter coats to donate much to their owners, but who formed a good shelter against the wind. The heat they did provide felt good at their backs. No one dallied over their meals, and the rumble of conversation through the ranks soon died away as the men got settled, sitting up wrapped in blankets and cloaks and each other between their animals. Kei had little choice but to join Arman in a similar fashion. “I hope they don't make gossip about this,” he muttered as Arman drew a blanket over their heads, his other arm wrapped tightly around Kei's body.

“Kei, they’re all doing the same, and if they feel as tired as I do, all they will be thinking about is trying to rest. As should you be. Gods, I’m so cold – I’ve never been this cold before in my life. Have you?”

“Once or twice, and I’ve slept under the stars more than that. Move closer, and don’t let any air in.”

He could feel Arman shivering, and realised that the general was probably suffering more than he admitted. Under the blankets and the cloak, it was as private as a tent, so they could tangle their legs and arms together without fearing what it looked like – although Kei felt sure as the night got colder, Arman’s soldiers would do so themselves, instinctively, looking for anything that would keep out the penetrating chill. Kei’s urs beast let out a comfortable fart. “Oh, thank you, kind sir,” Arman grumbled. “That’s not the kind of warmth I need.”

“He’s only trying to help,” Kei said straight-faced, and was rewarded by feeling Arman’s chuckle deep in his chest. “We’re not going to get much sleep tonight, I fear.”

“No, I know, but still try to rest. Tonight and tomorrow are probably the worst of it, if you can bear it.”

“Do I have a choice?” Kei muttered.

“Not at the moment,” Arman murmured, his beard brushing crisply across the top of Kei’s head. “Are you well otherwise?” he whispered.

“Well enough, my lord.”

“Good.”

A little more easing of their positions, and then Arman fell silent. His hands were holding Kei’s close between them, but his gloved fingers couldn’t feel the contact. If it wasn’t so damn cold, this would be nice, he thought ruefully. But if it wasn’t so damn cold, this would be a very dangerous thing to do. He didn’t know whether to be grateful for that or not.



His soldiers were subdued, and Arman was concerned at the obvious weariness in them from a single night in the cold. He would need to ensure they had a day to recuperate at the fort when they got off these mountains. He wasn’t exactly chipper either – he’d slept poorly, waking every hour or so from the cold. He probably would have died without Kei and the warmth of the urs beasts – and this wasn’t even the worst of winters could throw at them this high. If they were going to keep using this route, and he sincerely hoped

another might be found soon, they would need to see if there were ways of keeping the men warmer and better rested than this.

Kei was suffering worse than all of them – hardly surprising given the battering his body had taken since he'd been taken from his home – but had made no serious complaint, nor lagged behind. He'd slept perhaps somewhat better than Arman, but had less flesh on him to bear the cold and the exertion. If he could get through this day, he would be fine, Arman thought.

Thankfully, there was no more snow, although it had frozen hard. This made things easier in some ways, but the day was one of careful clinging to guide ropes and beasts, only inching along in some places. He kept Kei with him all day – not for Kei's sake, but his own. Arman just felt easier knowing he was in reach should Kei get into trouble.

They'd begun their descent an hour before they stopped to camp for the night, and the sense of relief was palpable among the men. Still no room for tents, and he noted that the men huddled together even more closely than the night before. Kei wasn't in a mood to speak, but then neither was Arman. He was too exhausted to do much but gulp some tea, chew some jerky, and then huddle with Kei against the cold. The only blessing was that neither of them had any bad dreams, nor had they the night before – and a damn good thing too, because the edge of a cliff was a very bad place to start tossing and turning.

It snowed overnight, but only covered them with a couple of inches, so it presented no real difficulty. The going was easy although the decline was steep and there were several points in the day where Arman's own nerve nearly failed him, sitting on his beast. But when he looked back, Kei was stoic – the man did indeed know how to ride, although he hadn't appreciated feeling sore. That would diminish over the next few days – Arman wondered if there were any ointments in Kei's box of tricks which would work better on tight muscles than the liniment the medics routinely issued. The medic on this march wasn't making any attempt to talk to Kei, despite Arman's rather large hint – *stupid fool*, he thought. If Kei ever finished his book, Arman would insist every medic under his command read it and try at least some of the remedies for themselves. The Prijian medical profession were so damn hide-bound, that was the problem. If a simple man from the middle of nowhere knew more of natural sciences than a man such as himself who had the finest education his father's money could buy, there was something seriously wrong with Prijian learning. Arman yearned to discover more of what the Darshianese had

locked away in their libraries. But to do that – he would need to learn his letters better than he had. Another task for his idle hours, few as they were.

Kei rode up beside him – the going was definitely easier here. “My lord, will we reach the fort tonight?”

“Unlikely, but we’ll sleep under canvas, I hope.”

“I think it’s warmer the way it’s been. With the beasts, I mean.” Kei looked away, as if there was something amiss with him suggesting that Arman may also contributed to his warmth.

“If you prefer that, we can do it again,” Arman said mildly. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m fine. It’s been easier than the last time I did it.”

Arman was ashamed to say he had no idea how Kei had endured the previous journey, or how he’d felt during it. He hadn’t given a damn about the hostages’ feelings, only that they didn’t die and didn’t slow him down. He had been a callous bastard, no better than Senator Mekus or his own steward. When this war was over – would he be remembered as just a killer and a thug? Probably. It gave him no pleasure to know that, but the past was past. Kei had offered him forgiveness – perhaps that meant others would do so. Or perhaps they would consider him no more worth forgiving that he had that boy in Darbin. His hands tightened on the reins as he remembered.

“My lord? Are you all right?”

“Just counting my sins, Kei. Come on, let’s make the most of the light.”

They did sleep under canvas, but in the privacy of the little tent that was only half again as large as the two men tents his men used, he and Kei shared blankets and cloaks again for warmth. It was good to sleep lying down, without ice under their backsides, but it was still extremely cold.

And again he had no dreams.

They were only two hours from the fort. Arman let his men have a lazy start to recover somewhat from the climb and the nights of poor rest, but then they were on their way. Before long he could see the fort in the distance. So far, nothing explained the loss of communication with the north, so the problem had to lie at least at the fort, if not beyond. His lieutenant rode up beside him and saluted. “Shall I send scouts ahead, Sei General?”

“Yes, two only, lieutenant. Have them alert the fort of our arrival and report back here.”

His officer saluted again and left. Shortly after, Arman saw two soldiers peel off and gallop north. “Could there be a problem?” Kei asked in a low voice.

“No idea. If there’s the slightest indication of a fight, I want you to keep well clear, do you hear me?”

He turned and gave Kei a stern gaze to emphasise the point. Kei looked back steadily. “Yes, my lord.”

You’d better, Arman thought. He didn’t want to lose another person he cared about.

The fort looked utterly normal, but the scouts hadn’t returned. A half-mile from the structure, Arman called a halt, and signalled his lieutenant forward. “Lieutenant, something’s wrong. They’ve not changed the standard to my own at the gate, even though they know I’m coming.”

“Yes, General, I saw that. What...?”

“General! Lieutenant!”

Arman turned to the man who was calling – and saw what was coming. A huge force, mounted and afoot, closing in on them rapidly from the east – far more in number than they could ever hope to outrun or defeat. He quickly dropped back to Kei’s side. “Kei, run. Head west or north. Now.”

Kei’s eyes were wide with fear and worry. “Arman....”

But there was no time to argue – Arman took his riding crop, slashed Kei’s beast hard on its rump with it, and bellowed, “Now, gods damn it!”

The beast bolted north, and to his relief, he saw that Kei made no attempt to rein it in. “Be safe, Kei,” he whispered.

He drew his sword and held it high. “Lieutenant, forward advance, and attack!” *Better to die like a man, than live as a coward*, he thought, as he whipped his beast and galloped towards the enemy army, sword at the ready, the shouts of his men in his ears, his standard flying high and held proudly by his flag bearer at his side.

Loke, wait for me. I won’t be long now.