



## KEI'S GIFT

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**BOOK FOUR – DARSHEK** CHAPTER 1

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Arman hoped that Kei's shocked face was not to be his last memory of his friend, but it was obvious that at this very moment, he would have no say in who he would see or when. The transition from passenger to prisoner had been abrupt, and while he hadn't exactly expected to be welcomed like a long-lost heir, the coldly efficient manner in which he was transferred and taken charge of, reminded him more of the Prij than of the Darshianese he'd encountered thus far.

Apart from the brief exchange at the handover, this Lord Meki, who had not even had the courtesy to introduce himself properly, had not said a single word to him. That was partly because of the smart pace they set along the paved road, passing fields and small prosperous looking hamlets, tidy farmhouses and barns. This part of Darshian was rather like the south, he noted, only lacking all of the influence the Prij had brought to bear, no temples, no sign anywhere of war or violence, and the style of the houses was quite different from those in the south, or even those of the dry regions. It

was noticeably warmer here too, and more humid – the heavy cloak felt uncomfortable and for the first time in weeks, he cast it aside to ride in shirt sleeves under the sun.

After three hours, they stopped to change animals at what was clearly an army post – he was offered food and drink and the briefest stop to relieve himself. Lord Meki remained at a distance from him, and Arman was kept under the strictest guard the entire time, which he could have found flattering, and certainly thought amusing. Although he had graduated the day before to the walking stick that Kei had made for him, he could still only limp slowly on his weakened leg. A three year old child could outrun him with ease. However, the Darshianese were taking no chances.

Not long after they resumed their journey, the fields gradually gave way to more and more houses, workshops and even markets, the population density slowly increasing, and their speed now considerably slowed by the other traffic – carts, wagon, people, beasts – on the road. Even with the soldiers shouting for everyone to get out of their way, loaded wagons and beasts took time to move. Arman wished he had kept the shawl he had been previously using for warmth, to cover his distinctive hair and features, but he refused now to hide, exposing himself to the astonished stares of the people on the streets and in the carts. Some of it was curiosity perhaps at seeing a Ruler – Arman had no idea how much contact the ordinary citizen had with the elite – but most of it was clearly directed at him.

Lord Meki now seemed anxious to move everyone along, and the officer in charge of the soldiers shouted constant orders for his men to keep tight formation with Arman's cart and to keep moving forward. Perhaps they were worried someone would assassinate him, Arman thought. He couldn't detect any obvious hostility in the curious onlookers, but it only took one person with a grudge and a bomb, as he knew only too well – and so apparently, did Lord Meki.

Eventually they reached what appeared to be the centre of Darshek. It was a spacious city, with gardens and trees everywhere, looking far less formal than Utuk. While Utuk was all tall marble columns and granite buildings, Darshek seemed to be made of sandstone, wood and bricks, the buildings lower set and wider at their base than their Prijian counterparts. There didn't seem to be the urgent crowding into the desirable areas that was such a feature of Utuk, and what seemed to be the houses of the wealthy had gardens without fences in front of them – something no prosperous Prijian

would dream of omitting – letting any passer-by look, or indeed, stroll straight into them.

The most prominent building was a very large, long residence, slightly taller than any he'd seen, set well back from what appeared to be the equivalent of Utuk's civic square, with gracious, well-planned gardens at its front side. It was at this building where he was taken up a wide drive, so he guessed this was probably the Rulers' House which he had heard Kei and Tiko mention, the administrative centre of Darshek as well as home to its eight elected Rulers. Compared to the sovereign's palace, it was a very modest affair, but by Darshianese standards, it was imposing.

Arman was taken to the rear of the building where there were stables and more soldiers apparently permanently stationed. He was unloaded from the cart, and taken, with the guard of soldiers still tightly positioned around him, inside the building, down a long corridor to a bright, cheerfully ornamented room that appeared to be an office for someone of high rank. That seemed to be Lord Meki himself, who beckoned Arman to sit and dismissed his soldiers, asking one of them to bring them some refreshment before seating himself behind the large desk. Books covered one wall from floor to ceiling and on another were a series of beautifully drawn maps. Arman itched to look more closely at them.

Lord Meki steepled his hands and looked appraisingly at Arman. "My apologies, General, for the unseemly haste of our journey. I was anxious to get you here before rumours started to fly around too much."

"I understand, my lord. You told Kei that where I would be kept would depend on certain factors. Do I need to guess what those might be?"

Lord Meki laughed a little. "No, I suspect your guess would be accurate. From the reports I've had of you, general, you're a straight-talking man. I've been told of your conditions, which I believe are the return of your men to Kuplik, and that any rescue must involve as little loss of civilian life as possible. Have I been informed correctly?"

"Yes, my lord, you have." Arman couldn't help envying their mysterious and apparently very efficient communications system. "Were you also told that I can hold out very little hope of success, however much cooperation I give you?"

"Yes, that was made clear to me also. However, we can only try to form a plan which achieves all our aims, and if you're prepared to give us all the information we need, I believe we may be able to do this."

“Are you not concerned that I might lead you into a trap, my lord? Were I in your position, I’d be very suspicious of a traitor.”

Lord Meki only smiled. “What makes you think I’m not suspicious, general? However, I’ve noted something from the reports we’ve had, and even now – you’ve made not a single request on your own behalf in exchange for cooperation. Now, one might suppose that could be because you fear us and our retribution, but from what I can see, you’re not exactly quaking in your boots. Do you see yourself as a traitor, general?”

However much he tried to get used to the word being applied to himself, Arman always experienced an unpleasant queasiness when it happened – all his life he’d been taught that blasphemy and treachery were the vilest, most heinous crimes imaginable. The former charge held no fears for him any more, but he’d never expected to be guilty of the latter. “If you mean, would I be seen as one in Kuprij, yes, I am. But I don’t mean to betray my country to the enemy, and if you expect me to hand it over to you, you can consider any offer of cooperation void. I merely want to right the wrong committed by my people against yours. By my own hand against your people as well.”

Lord Meki nodded. “Yes, I had reports of what happened at Ai-Darbin. That caused a great deal of consternation and speculation here, I can tell you. But this is why I’m prepared to consider your advice as honest, general. I’m inclined to believe that if you intended to deceive us, you would have taken a different route. However, don’t imagine we have no way of verifying what you say, or that we will *not* exact retribution if you attempt to mislead us.”

“I understand, my lord.”

There was a knock at the door, and when Lord Meki told them to enter, a servant entered with a tray of food and drink, setting it on the desk and withdrawing. “Please, general, do eat – it’s been a long day.”

Arman permitted himself some of the cold fruit juice because he was thirsty, but left the small pastries untouched. “So how do we proceed, my lord?”

“Hmmm. It seems to me we have a slight stand off. In order for you to make plans which have a hope of succeeding, you will need to be given details of our military capacity which puts you in a very privileged position. General – once you have that information, you cannot return to Kuprij, not, at least, while we are in a state of hostility with your people, even if the hostages are returned. You do understand that?”

Arman bowed his head. “Yes, I’ve accepted that since Darbin. It’s too late now, if my men go home.”

Lord Meki gave him a piercing look. "And if they don't? Because we could possibly allow you and the other soldiers to return if the hostages could somehow be rescued without your involvement being known."

"My lord, those fourteen men have families and lives to return to. Keeping them here to protect me would be both futile and wrong."

"And yet this is the man who took our people hostage and away from their homes, let some of them be killed, without a shred of conscience. You surprise me, general. Is anyone truly that honourable?"

Arman thought of Kei, and thought that Kei was even more honourable than even this lordling could imagine. "All I can say is that I've been helped to understand a good many things, my lord. But if you don't trust me, you don't trust me. I've answered your question honestly – yes, I know I won't be able to return to Kuprij while we are at war, or possibly at all. It doesn't change my intention to assist you, if I can."

"Hmmm. Well, then there's the second difficulty. Once we show you our capabilities, you may decide that we pose too great a threat to your people. How can we convince you that we don't?"

Arman shrugged. He was tired and wanted this to be over. "I don't know, my lord. It seems to me that I am the one with the most to lose if you reveal your secrets. All you have to do to keep your people safe is to kill me if you deem me too great a risk."

Lord Meki seemed genuinely horrified. "Kill a prisoner, general? We don't even execute murderers."

"No – but a murderer only kills one or two people. If I betrayed your city, thousands could die. Would die, make no mistake about that. If the Prij come into this city by force, instead of at your surrender, they will slaughter any who resist and many more besides. If I were to make that happen, you would regret your fine scruples in an instant, I assure you."

"You make it sound like you prefer death to returning home, general."

Arman sighed. "My lord, I'm very tired and my leg aches, so forgive me if I sound less enthusiastic than I might do. I've been travelling for weeks, with my fate uncertain this entire time. I've made an offer, a sincere one. I've made the difficulties plain to you, and you know what my limitations are. Could you not consult with your fellows over this? I don't make policy for Darshian any more than I do for Her Serenity. If you don't want to kill me, I accept that you may have to incarcerate me – I accept whatever is deemed necessary because, in your position, I would do what I had to do as well. I want to bring

your people home because it's right to do so. But only you can make that possible."

Lord Meki looked at him for the longest time. Arman sipped more of the juice and longed to just be able to put an end to this day. He longed to speak to Kei and say a proper farewell. Perhaps he should ask that as a condition of his cooperation – but Kei would be angered by that trivial approach.

Finally Lord Meki spoke. "Very well, general. I have been somewhat discourteous in not allowing you to rest, and it will take a little time to arrange matters. I have one question, an urgent one – how much time do we have?"

"Very little, my lord. The senate wanted the siege to be lifted even before I left – I'm surprised to see it still in place. Her Serenity could weary of the business at any moment, and at that moment, your people's lives would be forfeit."

Lord Meki nodded. "But if we assume she will continue for the immediate future, have you a date in mind which would be ideal for a rescue attempt?"

"What...? I have no idea what date it is. How long to the equinox?"

Lord Meki seemed surprised, but then he went to his library and consulted what Arman assumed was a Darshianese almanac. "Two weeks and a day."

"Then you have an opportunity around that time. I won't give details until I have my assurances."

"Very well." He went to the wall and tugged on a long embroidered strip of material – Arman assumed it rang a bell somewhere, a similar system operated in the palace. "I appreciate your forthrightness, general. Please accept the hospitality of the Rulers this evening and refresh yourself. I'll have a healer attend you shortly to check on your leg – I want to make sure this village lad who travelled with you did a proper job."

"I doubt," Arman said stiffly, annoyed at the slight to Kei's reputation, "your finest physicians would have done a better job, my lord. He saved my life and many of my men."

Lord Meki smiled. "Then I am glad for Darshian's sake that he did. And your own, of course. Ah, Mijli," he said to the young woman who had appeared at the door. "General Arman will be retiring to the rooms we've arranged – General, Mijli is one of the housekeepers here and will ensure you have whatever you need."

Arman got to his feet and bowed. "Thank you, madam." He picked up his walking stick. "My belongings?"

“Should be in your rooms, general. We had to search them of course. If there’s anything we had to remove, it will be returned on your departure. We’ll meet in the morning. Good day.”

Outside the door, there was a small escort of soldiers who walked ahead of and behind Arman and Mijli as he made his slow way along the corridor. She and one of the soldiers helped him climb the long wide stairs to the first floor, and then he was taken to a small suite of rooms at the end of the corridor. Mijli dismissed the soldiers and showed Arman where the facilities were, the bath and washroom, the earth closet, and the bedroom. The main room was a light airy office with a library of books, which were no use to him, unfortunately. “General, there is a bell here should you need anything. I’ll have a meal sent up when you’re ready. Clothes are being prepared for you, but until then, I’ll have your present ones cleaned – I’m not sure they’ll stand much cleaning though,” she said, wrinkling her nose at the old trousers Arman was wearing. “While you’re in your own rooms, we’ve provided some loose shirts and over-robos. Not very dignified, but you’ll be comfortable. We weren’t expecting someone so...enormous,” she added with a smile.

“No, my height and size has been a problem all the way along. Thank you once again, madam.”

“Please call me Mijli, general. No one really cares to be called madam or sir in our society.”

Something no one had pointed out to him before. He wondered what offence he’d given. “Then please call me Arman, for I’m no longer a general, it seems, and certainly not in your army.”

“All right...Arman.” She went to a closet and pulled out his pack from the journey. “Your things are here – we took nothing away except the clothes to wash. If you leave your present ones in the washroom, I’ll have those cleaned too. When would you like your supper?”

He looked through the window and realised with shock that it was sunset – and that he was very hungry. “Soon, if you don’t mind.”

“Very well. Lord Meki has given orders that you’re not to be disturbed except at your request, and if you wish to speak to him at any time, he’s to be told immediately.”

“Thank you. Do the other Rulers live here too?”

Her open friendly expression suddenly closed off. “I’m sorry – I’ve been told not to answer any questions about anything not directly concerning your wellbeing, Arman.”

“I understand – I meant no harm, I was just curious.”

She smiled and the awkward moment was over. "I'll have the food sent up then. Anything else?"

He shook his head and then she left him in peace. He hobbled over to a chair that sat in front of the window, looking out to the sea. He'd hoped by now that he would know what was to happen to him, but of course they had to consult and plan and prepare, and he wasn't, he had to admit, in the best frame of mind to understand what they may be planning to present to him. But now that a lot of the anticipation and anxiety that had been sustaining him was gone, he just felt exhausted. A little depressed too, because he really couldn't see how he could bring Kei's friends home. He wanted to – making Kei happy wasn't his only, or even main reason for doing this, but he hoped it would help a little. Already he greatly missed his gentle friend. He hoped Kei had been able to find Reji this night – and he wondered how long Kei would linger in Darshek once he did so. He had to consult people at the academy, he'd said. Arman had no idea how long this would take.

Gods. Arman just remembered – Kei's book was still in his pack. Ah, but then that would allow Arman to have it returned with a note, if it was permitted. He could at least say farewell in that way.

He laid the walking stick that Kei had made for him across his knees. It was a fine bit of seasoned wood – Kei had spent some time selecting it from the carpenter's workshop in Kislik, sanding it and cutting it to the right height himself in the workshop, and then spent the evenings by the fire as they camped for the night, polishing it. The night he'd declared Arman could try walking a little distance, he'd handed it to Arman with an apology for it not being as good as it could be, but Arman had been delighted to have something that was tangible evidence of Kei's friendship and concern. Even now, as he rubbed his fingers along the silky grain, it was almost like rubbing his fingers down the long smooth length of Kei's braid. He wished it was the real thing – he knew he had touched Kei's hair for the last time and regretted that this was so, even though the day had to come sooner or later. He'd just not expected to be quite this soon or abrupt.

The light was going, but in the dying sunlight, he saw that there was something carved under the curve of the handle. He couldn't make it out, so he lit a lamp and brought the stick closer to look at what the carving was – it seemed to be Darshianese lettering and the carefully incised characters were unfamiliar to him. He was still trying to puzzle it out when there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," he called.



A grey haired man with a serious expression came in and bowed. "I'm Loti, general – a healer. Lord Meki sent me to check your leg and your general health."

Loti asked him to undress while he lit several lamps around the room. "Ah, a bad injury then," he said when he saw Arman's scar. "What happened?" Arman briefly described his injuries as he understood them to be. Loti tsked at his being off crutches. "That's negligent – your leg may not be healed yet, general."

"The young physician who was in attendance for the journey was very cautious, I assure you. He's a mind-mover, and checked my recovery at every stage. If he says my leg is healed, sir, then it's healed."

Loti blinked at his emphatic declaration. "A mind-mover who's a healer? I didn't know we had one of those. What's his name?"

"Kei of Ai-Albon. He struck me as being a very capable and learned young man."

Loti stared. "Not Keiji and Erte's boy?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Good gods. I was at the academy with Erte – such a clever woman, and such a kind-hearted one. We exchanged many letters – I was deeply sorry to hear of her death. But she never mentioned Kei was a mind-mover. Now...wait, yes, I think she said he was a soul-toucher. That's right. I think you're mistaken, general," he said as he gentled probed Arman's ribs.

"No, I certainly am not," Arman said irritably. "He's got both gifts, he said. He's no liar – he demonstrated the mind-moving to me, and I had the other independently verified."

"Truly? Two gifts? That's almost unheard of. If that's the case, general, to have had Erte's son and such a gifted and clever healer as your personal attendant for your journey was indeed fortunate – this is a very serious wound you have taken."

"I'm aware of that, and it was no fortune – Kei was one of the hostages. Through circumstance for which I can take no credit, he was placed in my charge as a servant. If any credit or fortune there be, it comes from his head, not mine."

"Hmmm." Loti looked at him seriously. "Whatever the reason, you truly are a lucky man. You've healed extraordinarily well, and quickly. You still need to be cautious about the leg – I presume he told you?"

Arman almost grinned, remembering. "I was made to swear many oaths on the subject before he would consent to let me leave off the crutches, I assure you. Kei is almost ridiculously careful with his patients."

Loti shook his head with a smile. "General, there's no such thing as an over-careful healer, just over-impatient patients. But he's given you excellent care and I'll report as much to the Rulers. Do you feel well? Your digestion? Your sleep?"

"Other than being rather tired at the moment, I'm in perfect health, sir. I'm sadly out of shape from the inactivity, but that's hardly anyone's fault."

"Never thought it was, general – Kei has you doing exercises, I presume?"

"Yes, and he was massaging the leg which seemed to have helped."

Loti nodded. "Yes, it would. We have a young woman training to be a healer who's very good at such matters – I'll arrange for her to attend you tomorrow. Do you have a robe or something to put on? I imagine you'll want to bathe."

Arman told him where the clothes were, and Loti helped him into it. "Don't attempt to get into the bath on your own just yet, general. Mijli will arrange someone to assist you. You will need to be very careful for the next couple of weeks at least that you don't slip and fall on that leg again."

Arman agreed to the advice and Loti prepared to leave. "One moment, sir – I wonder if you can translate something for me?"

He pointed out the carving on the walking stick. Loti was having trouble seeing it too but finally he nodded. "It says, I think, 'For the golden one, from he who is a friend.' Or lover possibly, but in this context one assumes friend. It can just mean 'he or she who loves or is beloved' rather than lover, but it's a rather archaic character to use. I think the confusion is deliberate."

Arman flushed. "Golden one?"

"It's a pun – golden can refer to the colour, so I assume it refers to your hair, but it can also mean favoured, beloved or bringer of joy." Loti gave him a slightly mischievous smile. "Did you make a conquest of a carpenter, general?"

"No. I don't know why this was carved – the thing came from Kislik, I think it might have been there already," he lied. What on earth had Kei been thinking?

"Second hand? It doesn't look that old to me, but if you're correct, then it's probably an inscription from a husband to a wife, to say it was a labour of love. It's discreetly done – by placing it where the fingers must always touch

it, it's very symbolic in our culture too. I wonder that whoever owned it could bear to give it away."

Arman pretended a lack of interest in the subject. "Perhaps they died and it was no longer needed."

"Perhaps," Loti said. "Well, goodnight, general. I reside in the House, so if you need anything, send for me. Please do be careful on that leg and keep up the exercises."

"Yes, I will."

As Loti left, Arman stared at the polished wood of the walking stick lying on the desk. His fingers traced the complicated characters carved with such delicate skill, with such care and thought. *Kei, my dear friend, you truly are beloved. Please be well and happy, wherever you are now.*



It had taken them a good four hours to get to the port once Arman had been handed over, and Kei was glad that Tiko had decided to let his men travel separately, taking their time with the pack beasts while he and Kei rode on at a fast trot. It meant he didn't have to talk to Tiko or anyone else, so the turmoil and the sadness he was feeling remained his own secret. He was glad nonetheless that Tiko was with him – he knew the way, roughly, to the inn, a popular resting place for sailors and travellers down by the harbour, outside the city proper, but close to stores, docks and merchants – but he was finding it hard to think or concentrate. Tiko took the lead, and all Kei had to do was follow.

They took a break to let the animals rest and to get some water for themselves. Kei could feel Tiko's concern, but he didn't want to discuss it. Even sensing Tiko's emotions was grating on him, and he realised with dismay that his control was breaking down again. All Kei could do was grit his teeth and try to do a few of the exercises that Jena had taught him, and hope that nothing would happen for the next few hours which would disturb him too greatly.

So absorbed was he that it was something of a shock when Tiko pulled up in the late afternoon outside a large building with a implausibly cheerful-looking rodent painted on a prominent sign. "There she is," he said. "I'll need to go in with you and authorise your bill."

Kei nodded. They tied up their beasts and Kei unloaded his animal, since Tiko would take it on to the main army stables. He had no need of the beast any more, and if he did, he knew where he could claim it.

They had to walk through a busy eating area to get to the reception, and Kei winced as he was buffeted by a dozen or more strangers' emotions. "Are you all right, lad? You've been looking poorly since we set out."

"My gift's playing up," Kei muttered. "I just need to be on my own for a while."

"Fair enough." Tiko rang the bell, and shortly a large, motherly looking woman turned up and greeted them politely. "This lad's a guest of Lord Meki – his lordship says to bill whatever Kei needs to him."

"How long are you...?"

She was interrupted by a deep, familiar voice. "Kei?"

Kei turned – Reji. His lover took four long steps and then he was wrapped in Reji's arms, an exquisite agony as Reji's joy washed over him. "Let go," he murmured reluctantly, wanting to be close to Reji, but knowing his control would shatter very soon if he didn't move away.

Reji did so, and stepped back so he could look at Kei properly. "Gods, you look horrible, little brother."

Kei had to grin at the honesty. "But you're a feast for a starving man, Reji." To Reji's unspoken concern, he mouthed, 'later'.

Reji nodded and turned to the innkeeper. "Mil, this man's staying with me."

"Right you are, Reji," she said peaceably, seeming not at all surprised. Kei assumed she knew Reji very well from his frequent visits to the city.

Kei moved away from Reji and pointed to Tiko. "Reji, this is Captain Tiko. He's brought me all the way from the southern range."

Tiko stepped up and shook Reji's hand. "Glad to meet you, Reji. I can hand him off finally."

Kei growled. "Go sit in a thurl's nest, you patronising sod."

Reji laughed. "Well, I see your temper's been improved by your experiences. Tiko, is your business done with him? He looks ready to collapse."

"For now." Tiko asked for a bit of paper on which he hurriedly scribbled something. "Kei, that's my home address, and who to ask for at the barracks. Come there tomorrow morning and ask for me or this chap, and we'll sort out funds for you." He handed Kei the note and peered at him. "Will you be all right now, lad?" he asked quietly.

"I'll have to be," Kei said bitterly, which made Reji look hard at him too. "Thank you, Tiko. I'll see you again before I go, I promise."

“You do that, lad. I won’t invite you to supper tonight since I think we’ve both got our reunions, but I expect you to come in the next day or so or I’ll be looking for you, you hear?”

“Yes, Tiko. Haven’t you got something better to do now?” Kei said in mock irritation at Tiko’s perpetual need to father him – or mother him.

“Not right this minute,” he said with a grin. He made a sloppy salute at them. “See you later, both of you.”

Another parting, Kei thought, the effort of maintaining a semi-cheerful face suddenly too much. “Reji, can we just go to your room now?” He’d have like a room of his own, but knew that would insult and upset Reji far more than the benefit Kei would derive – and he had truly missed his lover.

“Of course, Kei,” Reji said kindly, hoisting one of his packs up onto his shoulders. “I’d like supper sent up later, Mil, I’ll let you know.”

“As you like, Reji. Go on and take the lad upstairs before he falls down.”

Kei hadn’t realised he looked that woeful that stray innkeepers would feel protective of him, but perhaps they just did that to all their young visitors. He followed Reji up the narrow stairs and into the small room with the wide bed and not a lot of other furniture. Reji put Kei’s pack on the floor, and then pulled him gently into his arms. “I missed you, Kei. I’ve been worried sick,” he said, planting a kiss on Kei’s forehead.

Even Reji’s controlled concern was too much and Kei squirmed away from his embrace. “Me too,” he whispered.

Reji came and sat next to him, but carefully didn’t touch him again – the benefit of a gifted lover was that they took boundaries seriously and Reji knew when Kei didn’t want to be touched, he really didn’t want to be touched. “Was it truly appalling? Or are you just tired?”

“Both...no, not all appalling...just...Rei-ki, I need some time alone, but I want you near too. Can you stand to just be with me and not touch me for a couple of hours?”

“Whatever you need, little brother. Why don’t you take your boots off and lie down? I’ll lie beside you. I’ll listen too, if you want to talk.”

It was what Kei needed right now, although he felt bad to use Reji this way. The bed was a little lumpy but far more comfortable than a bed roll, and as he lay on it, he realised how tired he was – Tiko had really been setting quite the pace and even though Kei was now fitter than he’d ever been, his body still demanded rest. Reji settled alongside him, looking into Kei’s eyes with love and worry. Kei reached over and took hold of the end of Reji’s braid,

trying not to think of how another person used to hold his own hair thus. "Tell me," Reji said quietly. "Tell me everything you can bear to tell me."

Reji was the one person Kei had never had to lie to, or hide anything from, to protect himself or the other person. Even though what he had to tell was so much worse than anything he'd ever shared with his lover before, and he wasn't sure how Reji would react, the habit of total honesty was too ingrained to break. So he told him. Everything. Right from when Reji had ridden out of the village to that morning when he had seen the most important person in his life ride out of it forever. By the time he was done, the room was completely dark. Reji hadn't said a word, just taken hold of Kei's hair as Kei was holding Reji's braid, and listened patiently, without judging or being revolted.

"Oh, little brother, you've been through a trial, haven't you?" Reji murmured, brushing his hand across Kei's cheek in a whisper-light touch. When Kei didn't flinch, he dared to cup it more firmly, and lean closer to place a soft kiss on his forehead, before he moved back again. "And you think someone in the academy will have an answer?"

Kei wiped his nose on his arm. "I hope so. It's the only hope I have now. I knew Arman would have to go, I just...wanted it too much to push him away while he was still with me. Now the damage may be permanent for all I know."

"I doubt that, Keichichi. You've survived this far, there has to be a solution. Does it truly hurt to have me with you?"

"No," Kei admitted. "Not now – I was just a bit unbalanced when you turned up. The worst thing is...gods, Reji, I let myself be happy for a little while after Ai-Darbin and now it's worse than it was, I think."

"And you don't know why Arman can help, but no one else can? Are you sure I can't?" he asked, tracing his finger gently across Kei's forehead.

"You don't understand, Reji. Your hand feels nice, and I can feel...your love, your worry...and it's comforting. But if Arman did that...you know what it's like when you put chuo sap on a bruise and all of a sudden you can't feel it any more? It's just like that. You know the bruise is there, but you don't care. Until the ointment stops working."

"Then it hurts worse than before," Reji said. "Then we take you to the academy tomorrow – but tonight, you rest and get whatever peace you can from being with me. I'm sorry I can't be the chuo sap on your soul, little brother."

Kei clutched at Reji's shirt. "I *love* you, Reji. I just...don't know how to fix this."

Reji closed his hand over Kei's. "Don't fret, Keichichi. We'll find an answer together so you can come home again. I won't leave you again."

Kei sniffed and wiped his nose again. "You have to go back to Ai-Albon," he muttered.

"If I have to send the goods back with a trader going further south, I will. Whatever it takes, little brother. You've been on your own too long in this." His thumb stroked over the back of Kei's hand. "Will you really not see this general again? Do you not want to?"

"No...yes...Reji, if he can't help them, he might have to be sent to Andon, or even back to the Prij, although they'll hang him if he returns.... You didn't see Lord Meki – he's just a tool to them. He means nothing to them and once they get what they want from him, they'll...I don't know, pay him a pension and stick him in a house somewhere, or find him a make-work job, or whatever. I'll be home long before that, I hope."

"So do I," his lover said. "Look, let me go down and find our supper. There's no bath on this floor but there's a washroom. Why don't you clean up while I get the food? You don't need to do anything or go anywhere tonight. I've got you, Kei. Just let go."

All he could do was nod. Reji used a sprite to light the lamp so he could find some clean clothes and when Reji left, Kei went in search of the washroom. It was small and clean – cold water only, but in the warm humidity of the coastal plain, that wasn't intolerable. He was glad they'd arrived in winter – Darshek in midsummer could be unbearably hot. All the houses here were designed for the heat, rather than for the cold as were those of the dry interior, but still there were days when all one could do was sit on a verandah and pant, waiting for the sun to go down and relief to come.

By the time he had washed, he felt calmer. Talking to Reji had helped a good deal – more than anything had since he'd left Jena, other than Arman's company, which wasn't actually a help but a palliative. His twin aches remained though, and he couldn't help but fret over Arman and what was happening to him. Tiko said he trusted Lord Meki, but Kei didn't – Arman was used to dealing with politicians at a high level but he was just a prisoner here. Surely they wouldn't just discard him, or force him back to Kuprij? But perhaps Arman's value to them was very limited – the Darshianese refused to make war with other peoples, and war was what Arman knew.

Kei would go to the academy tomorrow. And then he would get Tiko to find out what was happening with Arman. Reji said he wasn't going to leave

Darshek until Kei was well again. Kei wasn't going to leave until he knew Arman was safe and that was all there was to it.



After a sleepless night filled with worries and futile desires, Arman hardly felt refreshed, but he was eager to finish this task he'd set himself. He therefore welcomed the note that came with the generous breakfast, saying he would be required to attend the rulers in two hours, an escort coming to collect him at that time. He truly hoped a solution would be found – he'd spent not a small amount of his unwelcome insomnia turning possible answers over in his mind, but could find none at all. He had too little information, and while the close-mouthedness of the Darshianese had been entirely understandable, it had effectively stymied all his attempts to come up with a feasible plan. He hoped this discretion was shortly to end.

He'd thought he'd eaten well in the villages on the latter part of his journey, but it was nothing compared to what was laid before him now. Fresh fruit, both as pieces and as juice, milk, butter on exquisitely made bread, and slices of a firm, flavoursome cheese. The only thing lacking was a pot of pijo, which was unknown to the Darshianese, apparently, and Kei's presence, also unobtainable. Since he had not been able to sleep and restore his energy that way, he ate and hoped it would help in achieving that aim. He had a long day ahead of him – one, if he was completely honest, might end in him being taken to a prison camp. He guiltily realised that he had not enquired after the soldiers being held captive, but since he himself and his fourteen men had been treated with such consideration, it honestly hadn't occurred to him that the other thousand or so would be maltreated in any way. However, he would ask if he could see them – the request would likely be refused but he could make the gesture and see where it got him.

While he was eating, his laundered (and mended, he noted) clothes were brought back to him, and shortly after, a young woman called Siv turned up to put him through his exercises and to massage his leg. She didn't use Kei's tinsel leaf ointment, but he felt the benefit of the massage anyway – Kei hadn't really needed to warn him not to overdo it, his leg muscles were complaining after the slightest exertion.

He dressed but still had nearly an hour to spare, so he pulled out Kei's book and his own notes in them. Karus had the dictionary papers still in Utuk, so Arman had only the two sets of notes to use as a crude dictionary. He really should have had a copy made of the work Karus and Kei had



completed, Arman thought regretfully. He doubted anyone here would want to work on such a thing, with him the only person likely to need it.

He became absorbed in his task, and was thus a little surprised at the knock on the door which announced his escort. He was taken outside to the rear of the House where more gardens spread over a large area, numerous shady trees providing shelter from the already punishing sun. After weeks of freezing his arse off in north Darshian, the contrast was pleasant.

There was a kind of pavilion, the kind of thing that might pass unremarked in Her Serenity's palace, where she could sit and drink a glass of wine while watching musicians. In this building, also set advantageously to catch the evening sea breeze and the scents from the garden, were a number of people of high rank, sitting on chairs with tables set next to them – curiously, not all the chairs were occupied. Arman was asked to sit in front of the nobles, at a little distance from them, and was then introduced to the other seven Rulers of Darshek – one of whom, he noted with some astonishment, was a mother feeding a very young infant from a bottle. But then if women were allowed to rule, one had to expect such things, he supposed. He was surprised she wasn't using a wet-nurse.

It was another woman, Lady Jilki, who stood to address him. "General, Lord Meki has explained to us your goals and your reservations. We have invited you today to show you evidence of our good faith and our military capabilities. Now, I believe you understand the consequence of doing this. Can you confirm that in front of us, please?"

"Yes. I confirm that once I have seen these secrets or received this information, I will not be allowed to return to Kuprij until all hostilities with my country cease. Is that clear enough?"

"Yes, thank you. But there is one more thing, I'm afraid. While it is Lord Meki's belief that you are sincere, we need more than his assessment. We have ways of determining what is in your heart – no harm will come to you, and this will be done only with your consent – but unless you allow it, we can go no further."

Arman nodded. "You intend to use a soul-toucher or a mind-speaker?"

That question caused consternation among the Rulers. "May I ask how you know of such things, general?" Lady Jilki asked, shooting a poisonous glance at Lord Meki, who looked rather queasy at Arman's revelation.

"Two of the hostages had these gifts, my lady. They were revealed to me because it became crucial to the continued survival of one of them that I knew of this. I was sworn to secrecy and have not revealed the existence of gifts to

any other Prij. If I had, I assure you that the young healer who returned with me would not have been allowed to do so, as he is the soul-toucher in question.”

“I see. Well, the damage is done,” Lady Jilki said, still sounding a little put out. “To answer your question then, yes this is what we intend. Do you consent?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“You understand how it works?”

“No, my lady,” he said with a smile, “but if you mean have I experienced it, yes I have. I’m not afraid – Kei has reassured me about the ethics of those of you with gifts, and I believe him.”

There was a whispered consultation between the Rulers, in which Kei’s name appeared several times. “Very well.” She raised her hand, and two men came walking towards the pavilion across the grass. “General, in the presence of our gifted assistants, please confirm you consent to their probing you to verify your sincerity.”

“I confirm it readily. I have nothing to hide.”

That got him a smirk from one of the men, and a faint smile from the other one. Both laid hands on him as Lady Jilki asked him a series of penetrating questions about why he was agreeing to assist the Darshianese, and what he hoped to gain from doing so. Arman answered everything as calmly as he could, and hoped his honesty really could be detected. Finally, the two men let go and went to the Rulers, speaking in a low voice with them while Arman waited impatiently for their pronouncement.

The two interrogators sat down to one side and Lady Jilki stood. “General, your motives have been found entirely pure and your statements sincere, therefore, in the assurance that you understand exactly what this means, we shall begin. Lord Meki?”

Lord Meki stood and raised his hand in an apparent signal and shortly after two men and a woman ambled over to the pavilion. Arman watched in some astonishment as the newcomers greeted the Rulers familiarly and sat down without waiting to be invited – these were either very rude, or very indulged servants, he thought. He thought he detected an air of fond irritation from Lady Jilki, but Lord Meki was entirely undisturbed by his underlings’ lack of manners. “General – you’ve heard of gifts, but what you don’t realise is that the minor talents you’ve been made aware of are both common and insignificant compared to those possessed by the truly Gifted. Three of our more powerful Gifted have agreed to come here today to demonstrate their

abilities to you. Reis? Would you...? Oh, and don't break anything," he added severely. "Or anyone."

The man called Reis only grinned. "That was an accident last time – damn silly fool took fright. If he'd sat still, he'd have been fine. General, can you see that statue over there? The big fishy thing?"

"It's a blyke whale, you ignoramus," the other male newcomer muttered, while the woman smiled behind her hand.

"Whale, fish, whatever. You see it? At the edge of the garden?"

"Yes," Arman agreed, wondering if he was dealing with a lunatic, "I can see it."

"Want a closer look?"

Arman just stared at this idiot – was this some kind of elaborate test? "Not really."

"Oh. Well, Neris likes it so I'll bring it over for him." Reis gestured lazily, almost in a bored way.

The statue began to rise slowly and drifted across the garden like a piece of seed fluff. If Arman had not previously seen Kei's trick with the gren nut, he probably would have thought he'd lost his mind, but he still stared in open-mouthed amazement as the bronze and marble statue was brought to the grassed area. "Not on the lawn," Lady Jilki said severely. "The gardeners have only just repaired it after the last time."

"All right," Reis said amiably, leaving the statue – which had to weigh several tons – floating a few inches above the grass. "Your turn, Neris. Pity it's not night time."

Neris scowled, and then without any warning or gesture from him, several huge bright pillars of flame appeared elegantly arranged around the hovering statue – like it, considerately keeping off the grass. Arman lost the power of speech as the pillars grew several dozen yards into the air and then disappeared with an almighty 'whoof' which made birds in the trees flap away squawking in disgust.

"Show off," the woman said affectionately. "Do you think the lawn needs a drink, Jil?"

'Jil' glared a little at the name, but nodded. "Not seawater, Meda, please."

"Yes, I know, the gardeners will have a fit," Meda said with a sigh. She waved her hand, and for several moments nothing happened. Just as Arman was wondering what exactly her power was, a huge waterspout glided silently over the roof of the Rulers' House and did a slow circuit over their heads, the trapped water swirling furiously, and then, like a ball of wool unwinding, it

began to slowly and gracefully unravel, sprinkling water – and a few unfortunate fish – over the lawn and the flower beds.

Lady Jilki looked at the dying fish and then back at Meda who shrugged. “Oops?”

“I suppose the fish will feed the flowers eventually,” the Ruler said with a sigh. “General, to forestall your next objection – we don’t need your knowledge to wage war on Kuprij. We have many more weapons in our arsenal than the harbour cannons, and a strong alliance with the Andonese whose army and navy outnumber both your country’s and ours together. With these alone we could destroy Kuplik tomorrow, even without the assistance of our Gifted.”

“Then why this display, fascinating though it undoubtedly was,” Arman asked, his eyes still drawn to the floating statue, which Reis had made rotate slowly, perhaps to let Arman see it to its best advantage, or perhaps just because it amused Reis to do so.

“Because you wanted us to minimise casualties – as do we. We don’t want war, General. We didn’t want this conflict and we would never have launched any attack on the Prij. Apart from anything else, our people have got better things to do with their lives. Now you have seen a sample – a very small sample – of what we have at our disposal, do you think you can form a plan to rescue our people without undue loss of life?”

Arman turned to Reis. “How much can you lift or move?”

Reis grinned. “You know Kurlik Pass? That wasn’t blocked by explosives, you know.”

Arman shook his head in astonishment. “Then the answer is yes. I think I can.”

Meda held up her hand. “Wait a minute – we don’t kill and we won’t attack people. Got that, general? We’re not damn weapons.”

“I understand, my lady.” He turned back to the Rulers. “I need to know all of it – what else you have, what ships you have and how many men you can supply.”

“You said you had a specific date in mind,” Lord Meki said.

“Yes. At the equinox, Her Serenity will oversee a major celebration and sacrifice to Lord Quek at the harbour. I have no idea if the hostages will be present – but every dignitary worth their salt will be, along with a good percentage of the navy and the army. I didn’t know what you had available – all I had was a vague idea that it would be a point of vulnerability for the Prij – but now I think it might be our opportunity.”

"Then we have six days to plan and prepare, and eight to sail to Kuplik. Reis, Meda, Neris, I'm going to send the general with you to the academy...."

"Hang on," Neris said irritably. He seemed to be just generally rather ill-tempered, Arman thought. "How do we know this fellow won't just see us as freaks and treat us like some of the Rulers in the past did?"

Lord Meki started to speak, but to Arman's surprise, it was one of the two interrogators who interrupted him. "If I may, my lord. I saw that the general has become very close to one of the lesser gifted, and sees nothing 'freakish' at all in the concept of gifts. I would risk my reputation to state that he will treat our truly Gifted with respect."

"I will," Arman said earnestly. "Right now, I feel...rather overwhelmed by it all, to be frank, but if you don't trust me, then I'll make the plans and let someone else take charge of the execution. Is that fair?"

"More than fair," Lord Meki said, glaring at Neris. "Right, time is wasting. General, please go with the others. You'll be escorted there and back for your own safety, but as of this moment, you can consider yourself to have the same freedom as any other Darshianese citizen. It's only proper to warn you that this freedom probably only extends to being able to wander around the House for the moment, but this will change."

Arman thought of Kei, and then realised that, regardless of his personal wishes, he had something more important and urgent to attend to. "Thank you, my lord. I'll do what I can to earn this trust."

"Good. Reis, please put the statue back now, it's confusing the gulls."



Kei looked at Reji yawning over breakfast and felt guilty all over again. He'd not slept well – but Reji had hardly slept at all, he confessed. Kei had kept him awake most of the night with his bad dreams and crying out. "Now you know why Tiko made me share the tent with Arman," he said in a low voice, pouring out more tea for his lover. "Sorry."

"It's not your fault, Keichichi, and once we go to the academy, they might have an answer."

Reji was so difficult to depress, Kei thought fondly. "Don't you have things to do today?"

"Well, yes, but I have to go into the city anyway, so why don't we go together after you visit your army friend, and then we can do my business. We can retrieve your beast from Tiko. Should have hung onto that, little brother – I can always use another beast."

“I’m sorry – it’s not really mine, although the original animal was actually Prijian, and I’m not going back to return it.” Reji just grinned. “Gods, Rei-ki, I missed your smile.”

“I miss yours,” Reji said quietly. “But we’ll find it again. Eat up, Kei. Sira must have thrown a fit when she saw you.”

Kei was relieved to find his control was back to what it had been at least before Ai-Darbin, and while the numbers of strangers milling about by the harbour was difficult to bear for just the sheer volume of emotions he had to sift through, he wasn’t at the same risk of falling apart he had been the evening before. Reji’s calm demeanour helped, as did his sheer familiarity – while it was nothing like as soothing as Arman’s presence, in a way Kei welcomed it more as being something he knew he could hang onto. If they could work out what Arman was doing, then maybe Reji could do it too.

They were out of luck in finding Tiko, although the sergeant he spoke to swore he would pass on a message, and he also provided Kei with a supply of coins which Reji judged generous without being excessive. Kei had very little experience of handling money at all – it wasn’t used in the village, and anything he ordered for his profession was paid for by Fedor and the clan. When he’d lived in Darshek before, he’d stayed in the dormitories like the other trainees. His parents had given him a very small amount of money to spend on luxuries, but Kei had been so overwhelmed by all the knowledge suddenly there at his fingertips, that he had hardly gone out at all and had brought most of the coins back with him. He had no idea what anything cost, or even where one bought most things, since whenever he wanted food, on those rare occasions when he and Myka didn’t cook for themselves, he just went to Sira or Meis to ask. And it wasn’t like he’d been allowed to stroll around in the markets of Utuk....

After a bit of confusion at the stables, Kei retrieved his beast – or one closely resembling the one he’d ridden in on – and soon they were riding the mile and a half along the road to Darshek proper. As they rode, keeping their beasts at walking pace, Reji told him how the war had affected the city – surprisingly little considering, he said. “The worst hit were the inns and the sailors because of the harbour being closed. The inns at least had the Andonese soldiers for a good while, but most of them are now quartered up near Kislik or further out on the plain. The sailors are still drawing their pay, but they’re bored and that brings trouble. I hope your friend can make it possible for the siege to end – everyone’s sick of it, and the supplies from

Andon are much more expensive. The treasury can cope, but it's just irritating for all concerned."

"And the soldiers?"

Reji pointed southwest. "In a big camp over there. I reckon we should send a bill to that damn queen of theirs, since her men have been eating their heads off at our expense for so long."

Kei shook his head at the idea. "She doesn't have much of a sense of humour from what Arman says, so I think that joke wouldn't go down well."

"Who says I'm joking? Anyway, it was roughest when we had everyone here in the camps and no one knew what was happening. When people were sent home, it made a big difference to morale everywhere. I still think they made a huge mistake in letting the hostages be taken, Kei."

Kei lowered his eyes. "Yes, but we might have had no homes to return to if the Rulers had advised another strategy. We had no chance to fight them on our own, Reji, and I'd rather be a hostage for ten years than have you or Myka or anyone else killed."

"I still think it was too high a price for stability – at least, I bet the people in Ai-Vinri think so."

At the mention of the bereaved clan, Kei grew silent. It was true, what Reji said – the security and future of the clans had been bought at the cost of ten deaths, and possibly sixty-nine more if Arman's plan failed. But at the same times, there were several thousand people who had been able to pick up their lives more or less where they'd left off. It was too high a price – but it had still needed to be paid.

The clerk at the academy reception seemed flustered, and didn't want to be bothered with Kei's request at all. "A problem with your gift? You'll need to speak to Master Bikel or Master Diza and they're not here. They might not be here for a week or more."

"A week? Are you sure?"

The man glared at him. "Are you calling me an idiot, boy? Of course I'm sure – all the gift masters and the Gifted are away on an important, urgent project for the Rulers. If you can't control your minor gift, then you'll have to wait or do without."

*Arman*, Kei thought. *It has to be to do with Arman*. "Can I leave a note to say I need assistance?"

"If you like. It won't make them more available, I warn you now."

Kei scribbled out the request and details of how he could be located – he thought about mentioning that he was a friend of Arman's but thought it

sounded like pleading and besides, it was unlikely to make any difference. Nor should it. If the masters of the academy were working on getting the hostages home, then he had no business taking them away from that.

Dejected, he returned to Reji and gave him the bad news. “Kei, you should write directly to your general – he knows you wouldn’t ask for anything trivial and he knows the problem. It might only take a half hour for one of these people to give you the advice you need.”

“I don’t want to disturb them....”

“Little brother – this country damn well *owes* you twice over. You went as a hostage, and you brought back that general alive and well. It can damn well spare you the time of one of its academy masters. Now you write and ask him for help, or I will.”

Kei glared at being bullied, but at the same time, he supposed Reji might have a point. They rode towards the Rulers House and then Kei walked up the path to the front hall. “I’d like to leave a message for Lord Meki – it’s for General Arman,” he asked the woman who was guarding the entrance behind a huge desk.

“I can’t discuss the General,” she said, folding her arms.

“I don’t want to discuss him, I just want to leave a note about him,” Kei said in some exasperation. He’d forgotten how irritating the Darshek bureaucrats could be. Reluctantly, she pushed over some paper for him to write his message. “Will he get this today?”

“I have no idea, boy. The Rulers don’t answer to me or to you.”

*Actually, they do,* Kei thought angrily. The Rulers themselves were generally thought to be honest and hard working – but some of their staff had a rather inflated sense of their own importance and of their masters’. “It’s urgent,” he said, handing her the folded note.

“Everyone says that, boy. Now, if you’re done, please leave the hall as we have a lot of important visitors expected today.”

Her rudeness really made him angry and he vented it all over Reji as they sat under a wide shade tree in the central park and ate some pasties that Reji had bought from a street vendor. “Who in hells do people like that think they are? I nearly damn well *died* for this damn country, and I’ve worked for my people all my adult life and half my childhood! The Rulers’ House is open to everyone and always has been! Why does she get to decide who’s important and who’s not!”

Reji just grinned. “You’re damn cute when you’re mad, Keichichi.”



“Shut up, I’m not cute,” he muttered, ripping into the hot pie with a savage bite. “Someone ought to tell that bitch where to stick her pen and how far up.”

“Yes, they should, but all I care about is that she passes your note on and she can’t do that if she’s doing *this*.” He bent over and pantomimed someone desperately trying to remove something from their anus.

Despite his anger, Kei laughed. “No, I suppose she can’t,” he said as Reji sat down. “I don’t even know Arman’s being kept there.”

“Oh, he will be – it’s either there or the camp and if he’s helping them, it’ll be the House for sure.” Reji put his hand on Kei’s shoulder. “Cheer up, little brother, you’ve done what you can for now. If you’ve finished, I have to go see some merchants.”

Reji’s business took most of the afternoon, and it was much more pleasant travelling back to the inn when the worst heat of the day was over. Kei couldn’t help fretting about whether he’d done the right thing in sending the note – whether Arman would even get the message and whether he could or would do anything about it – and what would happen if he couldn’t. There was the faint possibility that one of the masters Kei needed to see would return to the academy sooner than the clerk had said and agree to meet him, but if not, then Kei would just need to hold on until they did.

There was a small crowd of people near the inn, blocking their path and Kei could feel their anger and excited tempers. “Reji?”

“Looks like a bar fight,” he said grimly. “Too many sailors with too much time doing too much drinking. The army will be here to sort it out soon.”

Because of the press of people, Kei couldn’t see what was going on, but suddenly there was a scream and the crowd broke apart as two brawling men sprawled out, almost under the feet of Kei’s beast, making it snort and bellow and rear up. He struggled to get control of it, but the fighting men didn’t even seem to notice him desperately trying to stop his beast stepping on one of their stupid heads. It didn’t help that the drunken rage of the two was like a hammer hitting the anvil of his gift and making him nauseous. “Kei!” Reji yelled, but his beast had become blocked by the crowd who were as drunk as the brawlers, egging them on. Kei couldn’t get to Reji, nor Reji to him.

Kei couldn’t seem to get away from the men without his beast injuring them or the onlookers. With the shouts of the crowd deafening them and the smell of spilled blood, his animal was getting almost to the rolling eyed level of terror and it was becoming impossible to hold his seat.

“Knife! He’s got a knife!” a woman screamed. Kei looked down and in horror saw the long flash of steel...*plunging up into Myri’s heart...and they all died....*

“Kei!” he heard someone yelling but he was already falling off his animal and plunging down, down, down....



Arman limped slowly up the stairs, feeling utterly exhausted, but also more elated and hopeful than he had been in a very long time. He’d been given the fastest of educations into the strange world of the Gifted, what they could do, what they *would* do and what it would take to get them to cooperate with each other, let alone him. There were two dozen of these astonishing people in Darshek, but in the end, only eight had consented to help in the plan. He’d spent the afternoon with colonels, naval captains, teachers, Rulers...it had been dizzying, but he began to feel they could really achieve a rescue at a cost of no civilian life and even very few, if any, military deaths. That would please Kei, he thought, smiling.

He rang for his food and once the servant had come to receive his order, he washed himself, too tired to be bothered with the full bath which had been very enjoyable indeed the previous night, but which was a lot of trouble since he had to have assistance in and out. All he wanted to do was to eat and then get some sleep, because it would be an early start the following day. At least this time, all the meetings were to be held here in the House now the Gifted had consented to cooperate. There was so much to do before the ships set sail to Kuplik.

He dressed again in one of the soft nightshirts provided for him and one of the over-robos, which afforded him a measure of dignity and sat down at the desk to rub his aching leg – he might have to ask Siv to come up and massage it tonight, he thought, and then his gaze caught on something on the desk. Gods – Kei’s book. He needed to return it at the very least, if not see if he could have permission for the healer to visit him.

He’d been told the food would be a little while, and this errand wouldn’t take long. He rang the bell again, gathered up the book and pulled on a pair of the soft, embroidered slippers that he’d been encouraged to wear as often as possible in the House to protect the wooden floors. A maidservant appeared. “Yes, general?”

“Would you be kind enough to ask if Lord Meki can see me, and would you also arrange for Siv to attend me in two hours, if she’s free?”

“Yes, general. Lord Meki has left orders that you can see him any time, so I can take you there now and then find Siv.”

He hoped Lord Meki wouldn't mind his trivial request, but he felt it was important enough at least to himself to bear the annoyance if it came.

Lord Meki's personal chambers were on the floor above Arman's – he'd learned that only Lord Meki lived in the building all the time, although all the Rulers kept their offices there. There were apartments reserved for them which were used a good deal, the other Rulers usually spending two or three days in every week there conducting business, and returning to their private homes with their families the rest of the time. Lord Meki had been widowed some time ago and had given up his country estate to his son and his wife, no longer wanting the trouble of it. He now lived permanently in the House, and would do until he retired or died. Arman could think of many worse arrangements for a man dedicated to serving his country as Lord Meki undoubtedly was.

The maidservant knocked on the door and held it open for Arman. Lord Meki looked up. “General, what can I do for you?”

“It's a rather small request, my lord, but I need to send a note and a book to someone and I don't write Darshianese. Is there anyone who can help me?”

Lord Meki was dressed as Arman was, more or less, and Arman had caught him at the tail end of what seemed a very simple supper. “Certainly – I'll have my secretary come to you this evening. Who are you writing to?”

“My healer, Kei. You met him, remember?”

“Ah, yes. You seem to have become good friends with him – one of the hostages, I understand? Now that's a story I'd like to hear one day.”

Arman smiled. “It would give me pleasure to tell it, my lord. But what I really need to do is return this book of his.”

“Book?” Arman held it out. Lord Meki took it and looked rather puzzled. “What's this?”

“Something you might be interested in, my lord. Kei is writing a field medical guide for soldiers and people like farmers who might be unable to have a healer come to them quickly. It's intended to be simple and straightforward, but dealing with everything from small injuries to really quite serious conditions.”

“Really?” Lord Meki opened the book at random, and read the contents of one page, and then another. “Good gods, this is well written, general. Did you help him with it?”

“Rather the opposite, my lord. I’ve been translating it into Prijian and learning a great deal in the process.”

Lord Meki handed the book back to Arman. “You said he was gifted?”

“Yes, he’s unusual in that he’s got two gifts – soul-touching and mind-moving.”

Lord Meki stared. “Are you sure? That’s extremely rare, you know.”

“No, it’s true, I swear.”

“Then let’s have your young healer up to work with us, general – we need all the gifted with additional talents that we can get for advice, and since this lad is special and clever and a friend of yours, I think he qualifies. Leave the book in the House – I’d like to look at it – but I’ll send my man up to you to draft your note this evening and it will be delivered in the morning.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Arman said, delighted that he hadn’t even had to ask to be allowed to see Kei again. “I’ve just had an idea as to how we can avoid the signal beacon problem, by the way.”

“Oh? Tell me more.”

Twenty minutes later, Arman was hobbling back to his room with a sense of a job well done. He’d brought Kei to his Ruler’s attention and the medical text also which might ensure it actually got distributed, and Arman was going to be able to tell him the good news and much besides in person. Better than that, Kei was to work with them on the project. The thought lifted Arman’s mood despite his intense weariness. He would sleep well tonight, he felt.



Kei tried to move and immediately had to turn his head to throw up, his nausea overwhelming him even more than the horrendous throbbing in his head. Someone touched his face and he cried out at the added agony. The touch and everything else disappeared then....

He kept waking and being sick and in pain, people close by him making him cringe away from their touch and their emotions. He begged them to leave him alone, to keep away, but he couldn’t tell if they heard him and he couldn’t seem to stay awake long enough to find out. It went on and on until he was exhausted, unable to fight either pain or distress. At last, he was given something to drink that was icy on his tongue, and the pain, at least, disappeared and the world faded out again.

There was bright sun in the room when he woke, still feeling nauseated, and he couldn’t remember where he was. He could feel someone close by – he turned his head. Reji, lying asleep, looking drawn and worried. He raised a

shaking hand to the pain in his head, and found a lump with a cut or graze on it, above his temple. How had he been injured? Why did he feel so sick and...disconnected?

Carefully, so not to wake Reji or fall over, he got up. He had to hang on to the bed to stand. What was wrong with him?

His shirt was vomit flecked and covered in blood, so he pulled it off, grimacing at the state of it. The only clean one to hand was one of Reji's but he didn't think he could manage trying to find another so he took it. He wanted to use the washroom to clean up, but where were his boots? He looked around and spotted them by the door. As he bent to pick them up, trying not to pass out again, he saw a note had been put under the door. He sat on the only chair to shove his feet into the boots and then unfolded the note. His vision wasn't behaving – he had to squint past the blurriness and the throbbing in his head to read it, but eventually he realised it was a message from Arman. 'I need your help,' it said.

Gods! Arman was in trouble. Reji was still asleep – should Kei wake him? No, he looked tired. Money? Did he need it? He couldn't ride a beast, he knew that but maybe he could pay someone to take him to the city...did he have enough for that? He had no idea.

He couldn't think. Best to just get moving and hope for the best. He put the purse of coins in his pocket, kept a firm grip on Arman's note and opened the door quietly. The stairs were a challenge, but he hung onto the rail grimly. The innkeeper said something to him but he didn't want to talk to anyone, so he just waved and got out of the inn as fast as he could.

The sun was too bright, and he feared he would throw up again, even though he felt completely hollow. For a moment, he couldn't even remember which way he had to go. "Are you all right, lad?"

He squinted at the elderly man who was looking at him in concern. "Rulers' House," he mumbled. He brought up the note. "Here."

"Oh, you want to go east, that way, lad," the man said, pointing the direction. "But you don't look in any state to walk that far."

Kei peered at him in dismay. "Cart?"

"A cart? A wagon might give you a lift, if that's what you mean."

"I have money," he said, going for his purse.

"No, lad, they'll give you a ride for free. Let me find someone for you."

Kei could only nod mutely in thanks, and hang onto the post at the side of the building where he was standing. There were people everywhere and he could feel them like shards of glass cutting into his skin. He tried to hide in the

shadows, avoiding being brushed against. Only his hand tightly clutching Arman's note gave him strength to keep upright.

He was close to passing out when his new friend returned. "Come on, lad, I've found a wagon driver heading into town who'll take you to the Rulers House, or close enough."

The old man laid hands on him, and Kei had to grit his teeth not to cry out from the pain of it. He would not throw up, he would not throw up, he told himself. He let himself be tugged along a short distance around a corner. "Is this the lad?" someone asked.

"Yes – he's a bit unsteady, looks ill to me."

"Maybe he's drunk."

"Oh, use your brains, man – does he smell of drink? And see? Look at that knot on his head. No, he's sick – his friend will help him if you get the boy to where he's to meet him."

His friend. Arman. Arman would help...no, Kei had to help Arman. "I'm all right," he muttered, and with the help of a strong arm, climbed slowly into the back of the empty wagon which smelled of cured jombeker hides and would have made a healthy man want to be sick.

He buried his nose in his shirt and breathed shallowly, but the jolting, smelly ride was pure misery for him. All he could do was rest his head and hope it wouldn't take too long.

"Wake up, lad – come on, boy, you're here. Are you all right?"

He looked up blearily – the wagon driver had climbed into the back of the wagon to find out what was wrong with him. He accepted his assistance to stand, and managed not to fall down again immediately despite his sudden dizziness. "Rulers' House?"

"Right here. I can't take you up the drive – can you walk?"

He nodded, and let the man almost carry him out the back of the wagon. At least the fresher air was a relief, although the sun was bad. "Do I pay you?"

"For taking you where I was going anyway? Don't be daft – look, lad, are you sure you are supposed to be here?"

Kei thrust the note, still clenched in his fist, under the man's nose. "Arman needs me."

"Er...all right. You head up the path there and find your friend. Don't pass out," the man added darkly.

Kei just nodded and stumbled his way up the path he seemed to recall from somewhere...when? It was easiest if he just watched his feet, he found – if he looked up, the world seemed to waver back and forth. There were stairs,

which were a challenge, but the rail helped. He shoved the big doors open with his shoulder and almost fell inside the cool, darker hall inside. The desk – he knew he had to go to the desk first. “Can I help you?” a woman asked him.

He pushed the note at her. “Arman needs me.”

She recoiled from his outstretched hand. “I beg your pardon, boy? You look drunk – you have no business here.”

“Not drunk,” he said, almost growling. This bitch...he remembered this bitch, remembered she’d been rude. “Should stick your pen where it hurts,” he muttered to himself.

Not enough to himself, apparently. “*What* did you say? Guards! Take this man out of the building!”

That made him panic. “No! Arman needs me! Look!” He shoved the note into her face again. “Look, he’s written! Lord...Lord Meki... he knows...please...I have a note...no, let me go,” he cried as his arms were seized, and his mind was scraped raw by the emotions of the men holding him. “Please, don’t touch me...just get Arman...just....” His legs collapsed but he was held up. “Please...help me....” His vision was going all funny again, and there seemed to be a lot of voices all at once, angry, worried, voices. He wanted to hide from them but they wouldn’t let him go.

“You should get him out....”

“...Lord Meki....”

“...injured, not drunk....”

“Get a healer...gods, he’s passing out! Catch him!”

*No, can’t pass out, got to help Arman....*



Arman saw a clerk enter the room with a worried look on her face and go to Lord Meki’s side to whisper something in his ear. The Ruler stood. “Everyone, sorry to interrupt, but there’s some kind of disturbance I need to attend to. General, I think you’d better come.”

Arman frowned – they were right in the middle of some crucial planning, and from the looks of the others in the meeting room, he wasn’t the only one annoyed at the interruption. However, he knew Lord Meki well enough to know he wasn’t prone to wasting his own time, let alone anyone else’s, so he nodded and stood. “Please continue – we can’t afford any delay.”

Lady Jilki stood to take over the meeting as he and Lord Meki left the room. “What’s going on?” Arman asked, struggling with his bad leg to keep pace with the impatient Ruler.

“Someone’s come to the reception demanding to see you. It could just be someone with a grudge who’s heard you’re here, but I want to be sure.”

They could hear the shouting as they approached the entrance hall, and Arman arrived just in time to see Kei being lowered to the floor, apparently unconscious, surrounded by soldiers. “Kei! Please, my lord, get those men away from him!”

Lord Meki snapped out an order for everyone to get clear of Kei while Arman hobbled as fast as he could to Kei’s side. He lowered himself with difficulty to the floor and pulled Kei’s head into his lap – there was fresh blood on his face, trickling from a short, deep gash on a nasty looking lump on his forehead. “What happened? How did he get here?”

Lord Meki turned to the woman who was standing to the side of the soldiers, looking angry and afraid. “I don’t know, my lord,” she said in answer to his questioning look. “He just turned up, seemed to be drunk, demanding to see the general – he was here yesterday, being rude and demanding to see *you*, my lord,” she said defensively. “We can’t just let people walk in from the road to waste the Rulers’ time.”

“Kei’s not rude and he doesn’t waste time,” Arman said through gritted teeth. “Will someone for the love of the gods get a damn healer here? My lord, please, could you send for the lad’s friend, Reji – he was staying at the Inn of the White Hisk – he’ll know what’s happening. Or Captain Tiko.”

“Elsi, get healer Loti here,” Lord Meki snapped. “Sergeant, find this man Reji...of Ai-Albon, is it, General?” Arman nodded. “Reji of Ai-Albon and have him brought here – have him bring his belongings and this lad’s too. He can stay in the House if he needs to, but he’s to be at the General’s disposal until otherwise ordered. Elsi, why are you still standing there – go get that damn healer!”

The woman scurried off as Lord Meki knelt down beside Arman. “He looks dreadful,” he said.

Arman nodded, stroking Kei’s face. He noticed Kei had something clutched tight in his hand, something he hadn’t let go even in his faint. He prised Kei’s fingers away from it with surprising difficulty, and found it was his own note. He looked at Lord Meki in confusion. “He came in response to this – perhaps he was attacked on the way?”

“It’s possible. I’m sorry, general – we’ll make sure he’s looked after.”

“My lord?”

Arman turned and with relief saw it was Loti come at his Ruler’s command. “Loti, this is Kei – he’s been hurt.”



Loti dropped to his knees. "Oh, good gods." He pulled Kei's eyelids back, checked his pulse and breathing, and examined the badly bruised lump. "This is a few hours old – perhaps as many as twelve – and has had a healer's attention. He shouldn't be walking around in his state – he's got a bad concussion."

"Will he be all right?" Arman asked in frantic worry – Kei looked so pale.

"I think so, although he needs to be watched for a few hours. Was he on his own? No healer would leave someone like this unattended."

"I think he might have had a friend with him," Arman said distractedly. But why had the friend let Kei wander off on his own? "My lord, can we take him to my rooms? I know he'll be easier if I'm close by."

"Of course." Lord Meki signalled to the soldiers, who lifted Kei carefully. "Loti, you stay with the boy until either I or the general order otherwise. General, we can spare you a few minutes, but this is a very bad time for an interruption as you know."

"Yes, I know – if I can just be with him when he wakes, to reassure him. He'll need rest more than anything, yes?" he asked Loti who was following Kei being taken up the long staircase.

"Yes, that's really all he needs, and fluids when he's awake. Please, general, we need to get him onto a bed."

Arman followed, praying that the soldiers would realise how precious their cargo was and not drop him. With relief, he saw them reach the first floor and Kei was borne with great gentleness along the long corridor to the residential wing.

Once in his rooms, Kei was laid on the bed and the soldiers were dismissed. Arman watched anxiously as Loti made a further examination.

"I need to get back to the meeting, general."

Arman turned, slightly startled to hear the words – he'd been concentrating so hard, he hadn't even realised that Lord Meki had followed them in. "Of course, my lord. I'm sorry for the delay – but this man is not only very dear to me, but he's much too valuable to Darshian to lose."

"All our citizens are valuable, General," Lord Meki said gravely.

"Some are more valuable than others, I assure you." At that point, Loti finished his examination. He nodded and motioned for Arman to approach. "I'll come down as soon as I can," Arman said to the Ruler. "Will you have someone tell me the moment that Reji is found and brought here?"

"Of course. I'll make sure the reception staff don't place any more obstacles in the path of your friends visiting. Or of anyone else," Lord Meki

added darkly. Someone was going to get a proper bawling out, Arman predicted. "I'll find out what happened yesterday – he was trying to find you, perhaps he needed something."

"Yes, he must have done – he's not a frivolous person, my lord."

Lord Meki smiled a little. "No, I very much doubt he is. Do what you need to, general and then come down. I can have everyone take an early lunch but we really have to get on."

Arman nodded and the Ruler left. "How is he?" he asked Loti.

"Asleep, I think – nothing worse. He's going to be in a lot of pain when he wakes up, no doubt – sleep is the best thing for him. I'll wait in the other room if you'll stay here with him. Call me if there's any change or he wakes."

Loti bowed and went back out to the office. Arman took off his boots and climbed onto the bed, resting Kei's head into his lap again, and taking one of Kei's cold hands into his. If he found that Kei had been attacked, he would find who it was and rip them apart. No one touched Kei like that again. He'd sworn it after Mykis' abuse.

He was conscious that every minute away from the planning table counted hard, but he didn't begrudge Kei any of it – Kei had paid for the right to demand Arman's time many times over and Arman would fight anyone who thought otherwise. However, it was only a half hour or so when he felt Kei stir. "Kei? It's Arman. Open your eyes."

There was a muttered curse, and then Kei's eyes opened into slits. "Arman?" he said in a slurred, faint voice. "I came, Arman. You need me?"

"Yes, I do and yes, you did come," Arman said gently, stroking Kei's face. "What happened, Kei? How did you hurt your head?"

Kei closed his eyes again. "Don't know," he mumbled. "Are you hurt? You needed me?" his hand clutched Arman's tightly. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, my poor befuddled friend. I just wanted to see you again and you can help us with the rescue project, if you wish. I didn't mean you to run over here with a head injury."

Kei nodded and winced. "Hurts...people hurting me.... s' nice, doesn't hurt with you."

Arman stared down at him in dismay – it sounded as if Kei was suffering a reoccurrence of what he'd experienced back in Utuk, after the hostages had been killed. "Has this been going on since I left you?"

Kei rolled over a little. "No...can't remember, Arman...tired...."

"Then you should sleep, my friend. Kei – listen to me."

"Wha'?" Kei opened one eye and stared blearily up at him.

"I need you to remember this – I'm going downstairs, no further, for a meeting. If you need me, I'll come immediately, but I won't be far away. There's a healer here called Loti, who knew your mother. A very nice man who'll watch over you. I want you not to panic when you wake up. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Ye...es. Head hurts, Arman."

"Yes, I know," Arman said soothingly. "I want you to go to sleep now."

"Help you," Kei said stubbornly.

"That will help me, you hear? I need you to go to sleep so you can help me later. Understand?"

"Y...yes."

"Good." Arman slid carefully off the bed and put Kei's head back on the pillow. The lad already seemed to be asleep. Arman bent and placed a light kiss on his forehead. "You'll be safe now."

He slipped out into the office and spoke to Loti. "He's been awake but is asleep again. I've explained where he is and where I'll be and I think he understood but he doesn't remember how he was hurt. He's a little confused still."

Loti nodded. "Not uncommon with concussion. I'll watch over him. You need to get back to your meeting, general."

"Yes, but there's something you need to know. When Kei was in Utuk, he suffered a great shock to his soul-touching gift, and for weeks, couldn't bear the touch or even the presence of other people. For some reason I'm an exception to that. I think he's suffering a recurrence of that problem so please, try not to touch him, and don't be distressed if he seems to be in pain because of that."

Loti's mouthed pursed in sympathy. "Oh, the poor lad. Was nothing done to help him?"

"I believe he was seeking help at the academy. I don't know if he did that."

Loti looked surprised. "General, you've got all the gift masters here – if he went to the academy, there would have been no one there to help."

"Oh, gods, what a damn fool I am," Arman cursed himself angrily. "All right, I'll see to that – just keep a close eye on him. This man is the most precious person in the world to me and I would be very angry if anything were to happen to him."

Loti was unmoved by Arman's threatening stance. "General, I treat every patient as being precious to someone – he'll get the very best care because he deserves it, not because you've bullied me into it."

Arman slumped. "I'm sorry. I'm just worried."

"Yes, I know," Loti said, putting a kindly hand on his shoulder. "No offence taken, I promise. Go, I'll let you know the second he wants you or if there's a problem."

Arman nodded and left to return to his meeting, still angry that the harm to Kei might have been avoided if he'd bothered to think about who the people he'd been meeting with actually were. He walked back into the meeting room and Lady Jilki quickly briefed him – they'd got on with things while he'd been gone and so no harm had been done.

He forced himself to concentrate because this rescue was important to everyone, not just him and not just Kei, but he was still on alert, expecting to see Loti come through the door at any time, or to get the message about Reji's arrival. None came, and lunch was called at the usual time. Lord Meki forestalled him going to the members of the academy by taking his arm. "Your healer apparently wanted me to ask you to assist him in contacting Bikel and Diza – I'm sorry, the note only got to my desk this morning."

"I've discovered my mistake over that independently, my lord – so please allow me to rectify it."

Lord Meki went with him as he approached the two men who had verified his bona fides for the rulers. "Gentlemen, the general needs your assistance concerning a friend, a young healer who was one of the hostages."

They gave their Ruler their attention, and Arman explained quickly what had happened in Utuk and how Kei had turned up in distress earlier. "I don't know what happened to him other than the injury, or how sensitive he has become. I do know that he needs help."

Bikel turned to Diza. "Let me speak to him and then we can both see him later. General, if you would?"

Arman took the mind-speaker up to his rooms, but Loti shook his head when he asked if Kei was fit enough to be seen. "I'm sorry, general – he's been asleep since you left, and I'm reluctant to wake him since he will only be in pain. Best if he rests until this evening."

Bikel shrugged. "I can't help someone who's this sick, general, so let me suggest that my colleague and I speak to Kei alone tomorrow. We're not needed that desperately that we can't be spared. I can report to you afterwards."

"Can you help him, do you think?"

Bikel looked at Arman with cool, frighteningly intelligent eyes. "I can't tell until I speak to him, general. Tell me – if I need to read you again to help him, will you allow that?"

"Anything," Arman said eagerly. "Anything at all that he needs."

"Then I may do that, as may Diza. I'll return to the academy this evening when we're finished and consult our records too. It's an unusual and very grave situation. The solution may be difficult to achieve."

The honest words were depressing, but Arman wouldn't press for assurances which would be meaningless. As he was clearly not needed, he went downstairs and continued discussions with his rescue committee over lunch. But where in hells was Reji?

It wasn't for another two hours until they had finished their meal and recommenced their work that a clerk came in with a message for Arman that a gentleman was here to see him. He looked at Lord Meki, who stood up. "Everyone, the general has to see someone urgently, so I would suggest we end this for today. Nera, I know you want to get back to your daughter."

The Ruler, who had a two-month-old child presently asleep in her rooms, smiled. "Yes, I would, thank you." She turned to Arman. "And I hope your friend recovers, General."

"Thank you. My lord Meki, our next order of business has to be the removal of the Prijian ships from the harbour."

"Agreed – we'll take care of that, and I assure you we'll attempt to do so without a single death or injury."

"Although the poor sailors will get the shock of their lives," Reis said with an evil grin. Arman wasn't sure he wanted to know – but he'd probably find out later.

Arman went to Lord Meki to speak to him privately. "Is there somewhere I can talk to this man where we won't be disturbed?"

"You can use my office – or better, perhaps, the back gardens. I find those soothing," he said sardonically. "If the man needs accommodation near your healer, then we have rooms here or at the academy dormitory – the inns on the harbour are miles away from here, very inconvenient if you have to go back and forth."

Arman hadn't known that – and was chagrined to learn he had not only made Kei believe that his attendance was urgently needed even though he was injured, that he'd also had to come a long way just to fulfil that request.

He didn't need to ask which of the Darshianese men in the reception hall was Reji – it had to be the tall, handsome man who was glaring in obvious

anger and worry at everyone who entered the hall. He pounced on Arman as soon as he appeared. "Where's Kei? What have you done to him?" Reji grabbed his shirt and even though Arman must have outweighed him by at least thirty pounds, Reji lifted him up easily to his toe-tips. The soldiers on guard came rushing over to rescue him, but Arman told them to back off.

"Kei's safe, asleep and upstairs under the care of a healer. Would you let me down, please?"

Reji did so with a growl. "What did you do to him, you bastard?"

"I was going to ask the same thing, actually. Keep your voice down and come with me. We can see Kei later but I need to talk to you first."

Reji was impatient at his slower pace, and stalked through the hall ahead of him as if he were the one leading the way. Arman couldn't help admiring what a fine figure of a man he made in his possessive anger – no wonder Kei was smitten with him. Reji was forced to halt by the guards at the rear of the building and turned towards Arman, demanding with flashing dark eyes that he shift his worthless carcass so Reji could give him the telling off he deserved. It was rather amusing, Arman thought, to have someone so unafraid of him and those who had charge of him. He pointed at a seat under a tree with his walking stick, a place far enough from the building to let Reji shout in some privacy. As he took his seat, he said quickly, "Before we begin, let me assure you I've done nothing to Kei and that he's in no danger. We're just rather puzzled why he turned up here in the state he was in. Why did you let him leave the inn if he was injured?"

"Let...?" Reji choked. "You bastard, I was up all night with him, watching him puke, holding his head, and listening to him moan. The healer finally had to give him some pijn to let him sleep – so I lay down beside him to get a little rest myself and when I woke up he was missing and the innkeeper said he'd left an hour before. I've been searching everywhere for him ever since."

"Ah. Then I think what happened is that he woke, found a note from me that I'd sent saying that Lord Meki would like to meet him, and that he might be of some assistance to us – he seems to have taken this as an urgent request for his help, which I put down to the drug and his injury – I have no idea how he got from the inn to the House since he could hardly walk when he arrived, so I was told."

"Stupid brat – probably talked someone into giving him a lift." Reji smiled ruefully. "Sorry – I've been out of my mind with worry."

Arman made himself smile back, and tried to appear as unthreatening as possible – he didn't want to make an enemy out of Kei's lover. "I know the feeling. What happened? I take it the injury happened last night?"

"Yes – I don't really know what happened myself. We'd come back from the city, encountered a brawl near the inn which spooked Kei's beast – I don't know if he fell or fainted or what, but he just toppled off his beast and cracked his head. Scared the living daylights out of me."

Arman could imagine. "He can't remember what happened at all – he was still rather confused when I spoke to him. He's got a bad concussion but you would know that."

"I only meant to sleep an hour or so...but I was so tired since I hadn't slept at all the night before. Kei has nightmares...but you would know *that*."

"Unfortunately, I do," Arman said. "Did you get the message that you can stay in the House if you want, or Lord Meki will find you rooms elsewhere if you prefer – I assumed you would want to be near him."

"I do – but he can't stand my touch. Every time I laid a hand on him last night he cried in pain."

Gods. "There might be a solution for that – the academy masters will see him tomorrow and I hope they can help, as he thought they could. I'm sorry that I inadvertently delayed that meeting – things are moving very fast and I didn't think."

Reji's interest was piqued immediately. "The rescue? It's happening?"

"Yes, we depart in five days."

"And what of Kei, general?"

Arman stared at him, perplexed. "He stays with you, of course. I have nothing to offer him here, and it's possible I may even be returning to Utuk."

"So whether he's well or not, you'll abandon him to his fate."

"I'm not *abandoning* him, you damn fool. But I can't help him either – that's for the experts to do."

"So you say," Reji said with heavy irony in his tone. "Let me see him."

Kei was still deeply asleep. Reji looked at him for a long time, before going back outside the bedroom, summoning Arman to talk with him. "I can do nothing for him today, and all our packs and clothes are still back at the inn. Let me go back there tonight – I have necessary business to conduct for our clan but I can be free by tomorrow, and return with everything he needs. Will Lord Meki let him stay at the academy once you've gone?"

"I will ensure that I get an undertaking that Kei gets what he needs. Not only do I owe him a great deal, but so does his country. Lord Meki understands that."

"I'm glad someone does," Reji growled. "He's been treated shabbily by people who aren't fit to lick his boots."

The look Reji was giving Arman made it clear that Arman was possibly included in that number. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean him to run all the way over here. When I said I needed his help, I didn't mean immediately."

Reji shook his head ruefully. "General, never say 'need' or 'help' to Kei unless you mean it – he always takes it very seriously. Too damn seriously, if you ask me."

Arman nodded, agreeing completely with that, but finding it hard to regret that fact. "He's just a good, kind person, Reji. You're a lucky man."

That got him the oddest look. "So are you, general. Can his lordship arrange to whisk me back to the inn as fast as I was brought here?"

"I'm sure he will. Let me ask."

Arman watched Kei's lover leave, rather confused by the man's reactions, and the things he'd said. He'd expected the protectiveness and the anger – anything less and he'd have discreetly arranged to keep Reji well away from Kei until the healer was recovered, and possibly even after that. But what perplexed him was Reji's presumption that Arman bore some on-going responsibility for the man – on-going blame he admitted readily, but when he'd been taken away from Kei two days ago, he'd honestly never thought to see Kei again, and he knew Kei would have felt the same. So why did Reji assume differently – and why was he apparently happy enough to leave Kei with him and go off and tend to his business affairs? It wasn't callousness – any fool could see Reji loved Kei and thought the world of him. It was more that Reji had judged Arman a fit custodian and trusted him with his most precious possession. Considering who Arman was and how he'd come to meet Kei, not to mention the reaction of just about every other Darshianese Arman had met to this point, he was a strange person to give such trust to.

Arman was utterly baffled, but standing here in his confusion wouldn't advance anything, and there was still much to do. He went back to the bedroom and summoned Loti to step outside. "How long will he sleep?"

"Oh, hours, I would have thought," Loti said confidently. "And he won't be up to much when he does wake – I can give him some pijn for the headache and that will make him drowsy."

"I think he might fight you on that."



Loti grinned. "Of course he will – he's a healer, we make dreadful patients."

Arman had to smile at that. "I'm sure. I have things to do – please watch over him and find Lord Meki or me if you need me. I'll be back at supper and then I can let you go if you judge it safe."

"Very well. Don't worry, general, he'll be fine."

*Kei was born to worry me*, Arman nearly said but it was hardly fair. It was as much his own intense feelings as anything Kei had done that troubled him.

He went to Lord Meki's office and wanted to know what was happening about the siege ships. "Ah, well, since you're free, you can see for yourself. We need to go down to the harbour – I was going down there in a few minutes to supervise anyway, so you can join me."

"Won't I cause a stir?"

"General, with what's about to happen, no one will be looking at you."

Lord Meki was enjoying himself, Arman thought, but after a tiresome siege of over six months duration, he supposed it was time the Darshianese got a little of their own back. Still somewhat concerned at being seen by a vengeful populace, he hid in the corner of the small covered carriage that Lord Meki had ordered for their transport down to the water's edge where, at a raised viewpoint which overlooked the docks a half mile or so away, a small number of soldiers were waiting, as were Lady Jilki and Neka, a Gifted mind-speaker. "The others decided to go to the docks, Meki," Lady Jilki said.

Lord Meki snorted. "They won't see a thing down there. Neka, tell Reis to commence when he's ready."

"What are you planning exactly?" Arman asked. He'd left this business to Lord Meki and Lady Jilki, since he was more concerned about what happened when they arrived in Utuk.

"Wait, general, and watch your ships."

Puzzled, Arman stared out to sea. He was prepared for almost anything after what he'd been shown the previous day – there was no doubt at all that the siege could be broken at will, the only question was how the rather eccentric and mischievous Gifted would go about it. Since it involved water, he'd expected Meda to be in charge, but it seemed the lively Reis had won the battle to deliver the final blow. He could just see at the docks, a large number of soldiers massing. "How will you stop the sailors offering resistance?"

Lady Jilki answered. "Reis can immobilise them and remove them one by one from the ships. However, if you prefer, Neka here can let you speak to them directly. That might help to calm them."

Arman nodded, still finding it hard to conceive of the power of the mind-speakers in this country. Even the so-called minor gifted were the basis of the country wide communication network, while people like the reticent Neka, who seemed nothing but a shy country girl, could speak to other mind-speakers as far away as Fort Trejk without breaking into a sweat, and to the ungifted a hundred miles away with ease. Their only limitation was mind-speaking across the highest mountains or the deep seas – why, Neka had no idea. The truly Gifted seemed rather uninterested in why their powers worked – only that they did and they could play with them. They were valuable and useful members of Darshian society...but also touchy and unpredictable. Arman was expending a lot of every meeting with them using his rusty charm skills to keep them amused and content with his direction. Should they cease to be thus content, the entire plan might fail before it started.

"Look," Lord Meki said. "Here they come."

Arman squinted against the sun. Yes – he could just see that six of the Prij's finest warships were moving slowly...no, not slowly at all, he realised...quite rapidly in fact across the thirty or so miles of water from their position out of cannon range to the Darshek docks. The boats moved as if they were under full sail in a hurricane – but in fact, their sheets weren't set at all, and their motion was too straight for them to be moving under the power of the wind. Arman could imagine the consternation of the sailors, finding their ships taken out of their control as if the gods themselves had them in hand. "Should I speak to them?" he murmured, still mesmerised by the strange sight.

"Wait until they get closer," Lord Meki advised. "Reis is going to be clever, I think. One can't argue with the man," he said with a sigh.

The ships were now about two miles from the shore, and Arman could now see the sailors running about in panic on the deck and up the rigging. As he watched, now rather worried about the men, the ships stopped moving – horizontally. Instead, they rose slowly, the great hulls of the huge ships clearing the water like a child's boat in a pond, picked up by its owner to be taken home. The ships floated in the air as unmoving and apparently weightless as clouds. Neka turned to Arman. "Reis says you can speak to them. Just talk to me as if you're addressing them directly and they will hear it thus."

Arman found it rather odd to be doing this, but he turned towards the ships, and tried to imagine he was standing on a quarterdeck facing the crew. "Sailors of Kuprij, this is Sei General Arman of Her Serenity's Army. Please don't panic – you are perfectly safe. You are being taken under the control of the Darshianese, but no one will be harmed if you do not resist. You will not be harmed. Stand down and wait to be boarded. I repeat...." He said the message several times and then looked at Neka. "Are they paying any attention?"

"Some are. Keep speaking while Reis brings them in – I'll send them an image of you here so they know it's you."

Arman did as she bid, while Reis, unseen at the docks below them, brought the first ship towards him, still floating, her sails and cannons immobilised. "Which ship is it?" Arman demanded, and Neka told him, which allowed him to be specific in his orders to its crew.

The ship was brought to rest at the dock, and immediately boarding ladders and ropes were thrown against it. Arman kept repeating his urgent orders – he had no way of knowing if there was fighting, he couldn't see that level of detail. He could see there was an enormous amount of activity going on, and then finally the main gangplank was put out and secured. With a great sense of relief, he saw sailors being marched off in orderly fashion from the ship – he kept up the reassurances until Neka confirmed the ship was under control and all the sailors removed unharmed. Then Reis floated the ship away to be moored safely in the harbour out of the way.

The securing of the entire fleet took two hours, and was completed with the death of only one sailor, a man who slipped while trying to get off his boat in a panic as it was coming into the docks. Lord Meki apologised for that and assured Arman the man would be decently buried. "Poor Reis," Lady Jilki said.

"It's not his fault," Neka said quietly.

"No, but he'll blame himself anyway. Thank you, Neka – why don't you go to the others and make sure he doesn't get too morose. Take my carriage, dear."

"Thanks, Jil. 'Bye, Meki, Arman."

The Gifted didn't believe in titles any more than most of their countrymen, Arman noted. The Rulers and their staff were rather odd in that they did. And then he shook his head over worrying about the use or otherwise of titles when he'd just seen several thousands of tons of Prijian shipping carried about like bean sacks, and emptied nearly as easily. He wished Kei had seen

it, or Karus – it would be something Arman would remember even when he was old, blind and senile.

It was coming up to sunset. Nothing more would be achieved today – the captured ships would need to be prepared for the eight day journey to Kuprij, maps drawn up by Arman and the senior captains were being carefully copied and distributed, and the defence of Darshek was being secured, since it would be temporarily exposing itself to attack, at least theoretically. The Andonese had no love of war either, Lord Meki and the other rulers had assured him, despite their superior military power – and like the Darshianese, could have dominated or destroyed their neighbours with ease at any point, if they'd been inclined. They weren't. Arman was about to open the eyes of the Prij to some very unwelcome truths and he hoped it would be enough for them to see sense. If not, he feared his people would spend many years fighting futile wars and at the end, be poorer and more primitive as a result.

He had asked Lord Meki yesterday why the Darshianese had let the south go so quickly. "Surprise," Lord Meki had said with a shrug. "And to retrieve it would have cost too many lives on both sides. My predecessors made a calculated decision that less suffering was to be caused by letting your people remain than to fight bitterly to remove you. We decided to close our border and protect what we had, and hope that the Prij would not harass our people too much. Were we right?"

Arman had had to confess there had been some harassing, and a good deal of imposition. But the deaths were still fewer than if there had been an all out war, so he admitted the Rulers' decision, while rather ruthless, had probably been the wisest. "And now? Now that you will reveal your capability to the Prij?"

"Now," Lady Jilki said, "now, we will ask for *all* our people to be set free. We won't let our people die to achieve that – or yours, necessarily. But we might give them a damn good fright," she'd added with a most unwomanly grin. Lady Jilki could give Kita nightmares, Arman had decided.

Lord Meki and Lady Jilki were already returning to the carriage. Arman thought it was no bad thing to make such a powerful impression on over a thousand Prij sailors, who would return home with an astonishing – and cautionary – tale to tell their friends and family. If the Darshianese reputation spread by word of mouth, not a single shot might need to be fired in anger to recover the south. Yes, the Prij were in for a very big shock indeed in a few days' time.

Kei was getting really tired of waking up with this headache. For a minute or two he was so distracted by the pain and the persistent nausea that he failed to notice that he wasn't alone – and that he was lying in someone's lap. There was a lamp set low, a faint golden glow beside him. He turned towards it, and groaned at the pain. "Shhh, don't move, Kei."

"Arman?" Why was he lying in Arman's lap – or anyone's lap? "What's wrong? Why are you here?"

Arman's hand came gently to rest against his forehead. "You fell and knocked yourself out, apparently, and then you came to the Rulers' House because of a mix-up. That's where you are now."

"The Rulers' House?" He tried to sit up but Arman pressed him down. "I shouldn't be here."

"It's all right," Arman said. "Not only are you wanted here, you have permission to stay as long as you need to."

"But...why am I in your bed?"

"You were in distress when you turned up – I thought you were having a problem with your gift so I thought it was best if I were near. Don't you remember any of it?"

Thinking was very hard.... "My head hurts too much, Arman." He felt tired and drained. How long had he been here?

“The healer left you some pijn – he knew you’d be in pain. Do you want it?”

Kei thought about it. “He said it was all right?”

“He recommended it very strongly in fact, so you would sleep.”

“All right, then,” he said reluctantly. Arman brought the cup to his lips, and he sipped it, knowing he would not be able to hold a coherent conversation until the pain stopped. The liquid made him gag, but he got it down. He lay back, exhausted, and waited for the relief to come. “Reji – does Reji know where I am?”

“Yes, he does. He’s got business to complete but then he’s going to come back here and stay until you’re well.”

Kei groped for Arman’s hand. Despite the pain, he hadn’t felt this centred and balanced in days. “Tell me what you know.”

“I don’t know much. Reji says you fell from your beast, or fainted, near the inn....”

“There was a brawl....”

“Yes – you remember?”

Bits and pieces of details were coming back...he remembered the screaming, and the roaring beast.... “There was a knife,” he whispered. “Stabbing.... I think I got confused....”

“You remembered...the hostages?” Arman tightened his grip on Kei’s hand.

Kei nodded. “Yes.... I think I must have fainted...can’t remember...then I was sick...was there a note? I...got a note...you needed me,” he said urgently. He looked up into Arman’s face, even it was masked by deep shadows. “What happened? Why did you need me?”

Arman stroked his cheek again. “It’s all been a mix up, like I said, Kei. I still had your book and I wanted to return it. When I asked Lord Meki for help in drafting a message, I told him about it, and you, and he said he’d like to meet you, that you might even be able to help plan the rescue. I’m afraid I was so overjoyed at being able to see you and say goodbye properly, I didn’t frame the note as cautiously as I might have done. You seem to have misinterpreted it as an urgent cry for help, when all it was, was a friend wanting to see another friend.”

“Oh.” Kei now felt rather stupid – and rather sleepy as the pijn’s effect began to creep over him. “Goodbye? So you’re leaving? It’s happening?”

“In five days. You can stay here and see the masters – in fact, they’re going to come and see you tomorrow.”

"I didn't want to be a nuisance," he protested. He seemed to remember causing a scene earlier, and his face began to burn in embarrassment. "Gods, I've made a complete fool of myself...I'm sorry, Arman."

"You've done nothing of the sort, you idiot. You were injured and confused because of the injury – and your gift, perhaps? The guards said you couldn't bear to be touched."

Kei tried to recall, but it was hard when he was lying in Arman's embrace like this, to remember being in pain before. "It's been...ever since you left, it's been shaky...."

"Reji? Has he helped?"

"Yes...a little. He wants to."

"Yes, I know he does," Arman said quietly. "They've brought a cot in here – shall I sleep there or with you? Which would be more comfortable?"

"Please...don't go," he whispered. He'd thought never to have Arman with him again, and he knew he shouldn't ask for this, but it always felt so good with him. "But this is the last time."

"Yes, I know. Just tonight, while you're unwell. Tomorrow you can stay with Reji."

Kei nodded, but for some reason, the thought gave him no joy at all. Nor, he could tell, did it for Arman. He was so damn tired of losing the people he needed. He struggled to keep his eyes open. "Arman, are they treating you well? Are you well?"

"Yes they are and yes I am. Kei, you're the patient tonight, not the healer. Go to sleep, my friend."

"Please don't go anywhere?"

He heard a slight chuckle. "There's no chance in any hell of me doing that, Kei. Now rest, and I hope your head is clearer in the morning."

Kei hoped so too, but at the same time, he was dreading the arrival of the dawn.



Dawn had to come, of course but having slept so soundly that he wasn't conscious at all of time passing, he could only be grateful to be so rested. And there were, Kei thought, worse sights to have on waking than a pair of intensely blue eyes looking at him with concern and affection. "Finally, you're awake," Arman teased. "I thought you would sleep so long you would want lunch, not breakfast."

Kei grunted, speech not being one of his faculties that was working properly just yet, although his vision had stopped being doubled which was a relief. His head still hurt like all hells, but he wasn't nauseous – just hollow. He moved a little and found that Arman had one arm around him possessively. *It still feels nice*, Kei thought sadly. "I should get up."

"I should, at least. I must go to inspect the army preparations today, but I also wanted to be sure you were all right. How do you feel?"

"I'm all right. I'll have a headache for a while, but I'm not insane any more."

Arman smiled and brushed Kei's cheek with the back of his hand. "You weren't insane – just distressed. Everyone understands, Kei."

"That clerk in the reception hall doesn't," he muttered, struggling out of Arman's grasp so he could sit up. Gods, his head ached.

"Lord Meki's not very happy with her, apparently. It's refreshing to know the Prij don't have a monopoly on mean-spirited servants." Arman sat up and grinned at Kei. "Did you really threaten the woman?"

Kei blinked, trying to remember what he'd done. "Um...I possibly threatened to shove her pen up her arse," he mumbled, terribly embarrassed at the scattered memories of turning up at the Rulers' House. The clerk's outraged face was one of the clearer recollections.

"That doesn't sound like you."

"No, it sounds like Myka. Gods, she's a bad influence on me."

"I'm sure you'll survive. Now let me order breakfast, and then I can see about getting you moved to the rooms you and Reji will be staying in."

Kei nodded, depressed that the time to leave Arman had come so soon. He looked down and realised he was dressed in a nightshirt. "Where are my clothes?"

"I sent them to be cleaned," Arman called from the other room. "Mijli has arranged a clean set for you – they may be a bit short in the leg, she said, but they'll do until Reji arrives with your pack."

*Everything's arranged*, he thought unhappily. *Nice and tidy, so Arman can slip out of my life again*. He got up, and found the clean clothes placed neatly on the chair. He guessed the location of the wash-room and made hasty ablutions, conscious that he smelled unpleasantly of sickness and sweat. What in hells had been wrong with him to have made such an almighty fuss? Common sense should have told him that if anything had been seriously wrong with Arman, someone would have come for him in person – there wouldn't have been a note shoved under a door which might not be read for hours. He groaned in shame at what the Rulers must have made of it all.



They would be thinking that the villagers of Ai-Albon must all be touched if this was how their healer behaved when in the capital.

He dressed and tried to appear calm as he went into the outer chamber, which was set up as an office. It looked like a Ruler's room, perhaps one that had been out of use for a little while – it was as comfortable looking as a family home, somewhat shabby, and with the eclectic collection of ornaments and decorations that might come from a series of people inflicting their personal taste on it. It wasn't as grand even as Arman's house, but he liked it all the more for it. He was glad the Rulers were treating Arman well – from the way he was speaking, it seemed they were making every accommodation for him, and had given him a good deal of trust. *As they damn well should*, he thought fiercely.

Arman was seated at the desk, where a tray of food had been set. "Come and eat – there should be something to tempt you." He was being such a good, cheerful host, Kei thought irritably. Probably couldn't wait to get his troublesome friend out of his way so he could attend to more important matters.

The Rulers ate well, it seemed, and even with his headache, Kei's appetite was whetted by the sight of the fresh food – he hadn't eaten in well over a day and what he'd eaten before that, he recalled losing in several painful and humiliating bouts of nausea. *Poor Reji*, he thought. *I've made so much trouble for him too*. Arman watched him as he ate, sipping thoughtfully from a cup of tea, and nibbling on a bit of buttered bread. Kei could only detect concern from him. "Tell me what's happened since I saw you – and the plan, how am I supposed to help with the plan?"

"Please don't worry about that, Kei. While your wisdom and clear vision would be welcome, we have others who can advise us. Lord Meki was just being kind to me, I think."

"Oh." Kei felt even more of a fool now, getting ideas above himself. "But they're taking you seriously?"

Arman smiled. "Oh yes. Now I know what I know, I know why I couldn't know it before. You missed a wonderful show yesterday."

"Huh?"

"Reis – the mind-mover, do you know him?" Kei nodded. "He picked up six Prijian ships and floated them into the harbour – when I say 'float', I mean in mid-air. I still can't believe I saw it." Arman's voice was so full of wonder, Kei had to smile despite his depressed mood.

"Now you see why lifting gren nuts doesn't impress anyone."

"I don't know – I always find the things you do impress me, Kei."

Kei flushed at the compliment. "It's not like being able to do that," he muttered. "So – the rescue, the Gifted have agreed to help?"

"Some – more than enough, and we won't take everyone who's offered. Lady Jilki isn't just talking about rescue anymore – she's talking about a total peace settlement between the Prij and Darshian."

Kei stared. "But...does that mean you could go home? If we're not at war, then you can't be a traitor, can you? Does it mean that?"

Arman nodded, but he didn't seem overjoyed. "Possibly. There would be those who would see me as a traitor whatever happened, but legally...we'll have to see, Kei. All I want is your people home. What happens to me is irrelevant."

"It's damn well *not* irrelevant," Kei shouted, and then winced at the sharp pain this sent through his head. "It's not – you have a right to be happy. You have a right to go home too."

"So you think I should go back to Utuk?"

"It's where you live, Arman. Karus too. People won't stare at you there, or be rude."

Arman was still staring at him oddly. "True," he said finally. "Have you had enough to eat? I really must get moving."

"Gods, sorry. Yes, of course. Don't wait for me, Arman – just tell me where I have to go."

"I can wait long enough to see my friend settled, Kei," Arman said mildly as he rose and rang the bell-pull. "I'll be back this evening for certain, and should you need me urgently before then, have someone find me. We'll speak several times before I go with the expedition. It's not goodbye."

"Not yet," Kei muttered. "I'm really sorry about the embarrassment I caused you, Arman."

"Please don't ever, ever apologise to me again, Kei. I mean it, do you hear?" Arman's stern gaze and the anger Kei could feel made it clear he was entirely serious.

"Yes, all right. I just..." Arman held up his hand in warning. "All right." He couldn't do anything right this morning, it seemed. "When is Reji coming?"

"I'm not sure. He's trying to clear everything so he can be free to look after you. I like him, Kei. I'm glad to find that all the praise I've heard heaped upon him has been justified. It relieves me to know he'll be with you."

Kei nearly snapped out an irritated comment about not needing a nursemaid, but after yesterday, perhaps he did need one. "He's one of the

best people I know.” He fidgeted with a piece of bread, wondering how long it would be before someone came to tell him where to go. It wasn’t helping that Arman was watching him intently, neither his expression nor his emotions giving anything away of his thoughts.

With some relief, he heard the knock on the door, which heralded a maidservant. “Ev, this is Kei,” Arman said, standing to greet her. “I believe Mijli has arranged rooms for him?”

“Yes, Arman – if you would come with me, Kei?”

“Wait – Arman, what about the...you know, masters?”

Arman nodded. “I’ll have them come to you this morning. I believe the healer will be down too. Go on, Kei. I’ll speak to you later.”

Arman was obviously busy, Kei thought – even as he stood to follow Ev, Arman was shuffling notes and getting them in order. He didn’t need Kei hanging around like a whiny child. “Goodbye, Arman.”

Arman looked up with a polite smile. “I hope they can help you, Kei. If you need me, please send a message, understand?”

Kei nodded, and thought he would cut his arm off before he disturbed Arman with any stupid request of his. He was taken to the floor above Arman’s and he asked where they were going. “We have a few rooms that we maintain for visitors from the villages or Andon when they come to see the Rulers.”

“Wait – I don’t need anything like that,” he protested.

Ev gave him a dimpled smile. “Well, Kei, it’s either that or one of the Ruler’s rooms. Would you prefer one of those? I think we have one free.”

“No! I meant, I don’t need anything fancy.”

“Lord Meki was very specific, Kei. You and your friend are to have the best we have to offer – and the guest rooms are nicer than the Rulers’.”

“Oh.” Kei’s face burned in embarrassment, but he was also intrigued by her comment. The truth of it was soon proved when she opened a door onto a large, bright, very clean apartment with fine furniture and well-maintained drapery. It was a much more elegant suite than Arman was using. “I can’t stay here,” he protested. “It’s too much.”

“Hmm, I thought you villagers were supposed to have such nice manners. Would you behave like this if you were offered hospitality there?”

Kei mumbled an apology, feeling every inch the country bumpkin. Ev wasn’t really annoyed though – she probably didn’t expect any better from him, he thought. She showed him where everything was, and told him to call if he wanted anything. “You can go anywhere in the House or the gardens, Lord

Meki told me to tell you. Your clothes will be brought to you, and if you need to speak to the general, ring for someone to take a message. *He* was very specific on that point.”

He thanked her and she left him to it, to his intense relief. He hardly dared to sit down – he’d only seen furniture of similar quality once before, in Arman’s house, although this was far more to his taste. Myka would adore it, he thought numbly.

Finally he sat gingerly in a chair by the window and looked across the pretty gardens to the sea. He really shouldn’t be here, he thought. He was putting Arman to trouble, making the Rulers have to accommodate his needs when they were so busy with rescuing the hostages, and it seemed he wasn’t even needed for that. If he hadn’t been expecting the gift masters, he would have walked out and returned to the inn.

He sat in a funk for a while, his head throbbing painfully, and feeling utterly miserable. When a knock came, he expected it to be the teachers from the academy, but instead it was a short, grey-haired man he’d never met before. “Good morning, Kei. I’m Loti – the healer.”

Ah, Arman had said the healer was going to visit. “Thank you for coming. It wasn’t necessary to trouble yourself.”

Loti smiled and came over to him, taking Kei’s chin in his hand without ceremony and beginning to check his eyes and pulse. “No trouble at all, Kei. I’m sorry I was late, but Lady Nera was worried about her daughter – she’s a little colicky and since the child is being fed from the bottle, she imagines everything is to do with that. I told her that all babies are colicky sometimes. Hmm, you look fine. Head hurt?”

“Like you can’t imagine.”

“Can’t do much about that unless you want more pijn.” Kei shook his head. “Thought not – then it’s rest and cool cloths and time. You know the procedure.”

He did indeed. “Lady Nera hasn’t been able to feed the child?”

“No, sadly. Her milk dried within the month, but her daughter is tolerating the jombeker milk well. She had a difficult birth and this on top of it – it’s made her a little cautious about the child’s health, but in truth, the baby is thriving.”

“Good,” Kei said. He didn’t know the Lady, but it was always a source of relief when a child was successfully born and raised in Darshian – fertility was too low to be complacent.

Loti was checking Kei’s head injury, which hurt. “Sorry,” Loti said in response to Kei’s wince. “You’ll have a tidy little scar there, I think. You’re

lucky it wasn't worse. It would have been a tragedy to have lost Erte's son so pointlessly after losing her."

"You knew my mother?" Of course he did, Kei chided himself. *Everyone* knew his mother.

Loti nodded. "We studied together, and she mentioned you in her letters. She never said you had two gifts though."

*How did...?* "I honestly didn't know it was important, or unusual. There's only the one other gifted in our village – I've not met that many before."

"Hmm – perhaps not important, but certainly unusual. Well, you seem fit, lad, although you need feeding...."

Another knock at the door interrupted him and this time it *was* the gift masters. Kei stood hastily and bowed to the two men by whom he'd briefly been instructed at the academy, and Loti started to make his excuses to leave. "No," Bikel said. "We'll have need of you, please stay, if you would."

"Of course." Loti sat down again.

"This would be best done where you can lie down, Kei."

Kei pointed to the bedroom and was ordered to undress and get on the bed. "What are you going to do?" he asked politely.

"We need to look inside your mind," Bikel said impatiently, as Diza silently drew two chairs over to the bed. "It's probably going to hurt a good deal and I'm going to ask Loti to dose you with pijn."

"Is that really necessary, Master Bikel?" Kei asked, pausing as he removed his trousers.

Bikel gave him a severe look. "Would I suggest it if it were not, Kei? You'll thank me later, I promise you."

Diza had slipped out of the room to speak to Loti, and returned with the healer in tow. Loti looked dubious. "How numb do you need him to be?"

"Conscious, but only just. But he will want to sleep afterwards, I'll warrant, so prepare a second dose, if you will."

Kei's anxiety about what was going to happen was ratcheting up by the moment – and he thought it was most peculiar that neither man had even asked what was wrong with him yet. *Arman*, he thought. He had to have given them all the details, he supposed.

Loti gave him the pijn to drink, and then, dressed only in his loincloth, Kei lay down on the fine soft bedspread. The pain in his head began to recede almost immediately, but that could have just been the fact of lying down which achieved that. Bikel sat at a chair near his head and watched him intently, one hand on his wrist, and the other on Diza's arm. *I want you to tell me when*

*your sensitivity to pain is gone, Kei. When your head stops hurting completely.*

Kei nodded, already feeling drowsy. In a couple of minutes, he told Bikel he thought he was ready. *All right – now, Diza is going to touch you. I'm warning you, it will still hurt, but it's necessary. I'll do what I can to ease it, but you just need to be brave.*

Kei nodded again, and then had only a split-second's warning as Diza's hand touched him before his mind exploded in agony and he screamed as he struggled futilely against the grip on him. He dimly heard people shouting but it was just a faint backdrop to the torture of his mind....

He came to only slowly, and groaned. Immediately a cool cloth was laid on his head. "Don't try to move," someone said, someone he thought he recognised as Loti.

He couldn't have moved even if he wanted to. He opened his eyes, and saw the light was very different from when he'd last been aware of things. "How long?"

"It's after lunch – you've been asleep for five hours."

*Five...?* "Where...." His mouth was dry. He swallowed. "Where's Master Bikel? Everyone?"

Loti moved where Kei could see him, and changed the cloth again. "Bikel is with Diza, who's lying down in another room. He's nearly as badly off as you are. Reji arrived earlier and was asked to go away until we send for him."

"What...happened?"

Loti's mouth turned down in a grim line. "Diza passed out, that's what happened."

"What?"

Kei struggled against the pain and the lethargy to try and sit, but only succeeded in making his headache worse. Loti held him down easily. "Don't move, I said."

"Tell me."

"Only if you stay still and calm." Once Kei agreed, Loti told him. Apparently when Diza linked to him and Bikel had called up the memory of the executions, Kei's pain overwhelmed them both, and though both he and Bikel had struggled to control what was happening, Diza couldn't bear it and had eventually fainted dead away. Loti had given Kei more pijn and Bikel had taken Diza away to rest. "The screams from both of you brought a lot of people running, including Reji. Getting him to calm down was fun," Loti said

grimly. “Fortunately, General Arman is out of the building so I didn’t have to deal with *two* over-protective men.”

“I’m sorry,” Kei said quietly. “I didn’t want anyone hurt.”

“Stupid boy, do you think anyone blames you?” Loti took the cloth and wrung it out in a basin of water on the table beside the bed, before placing it back on Kei’s forehead again. “Bikel will be here later. If you sleep now, you should feel a little better – I daren’t give you any more pijn, so the cold cloth is all I can offer.”

“It helps,” Kei mumbled, then he realised something else was wrong. “I can’t sense you – why?”

“Partly the drug, I think, but Bikel did something, he said. It was the only way to stop what was happening to Diza. He said your control was shattered.”

Kei closed his eyes, exhausted and hurting and feeling utterly mortified. Not only had the experience been excruciating for all concerned, it looked like it hadn’t helped either. If he could do that to a gift master, those of their kind who had the best control of all of them – so good they could train others how to build their own control – there was no hope for him at all.

He dozed fitfully for a couple of hours, and woke with the late afternoon sun blazing into the room. His head seemed less painful, and he could move without the pain crippling him. Loti was also dozing a little in the chair by the bed, but in response to Kei’s quiet call, came instantly alert. “How do you feel?” he said, taking the cloth away and replacing it, even though the water in the bowl was now tepid, bringing less relief than before.

“Better. I could get up, I think.”

“And then I could be set upon by your anxious supporters and torn to bits,” Loti said tartly. “You sit still, my boy. Get out of bed and I’ll feed you tinsel leaf until you explode.”

Kei nodded. It seemed healers all over the country had learned that threat was highly effective. He disobeyed Loti only so far as getting himself into a sitting position, pillows behind his back. He felt empty and depressed, wondering what now could be done for him. This had been what he’d feared – that there wouldn’t be any answer to his problem, that the damage was too grave.

A few minutes later, Loti returned with Bikel behind him – Loti was then abruptly dismissed and Bikel closed the door behind him before coming to sit at Kei’s bedside. “How is Master Diza? I’m sorry he’s been hurt, Master Bikel.”

“Don’t be a fool, Kei, it wasn’t anyone’s fault, save mine.” Bikel looked drawn and tired. “But he’s fine – resting. He’s not coming near you again today, though.”

“I understand. So it’s hopeless? You can’t help me?”

Bikel shook his head regretfully. “I can’t, no. Neither can he.” He wiped his face with a weary hand. “I’m going to explain this carefully. It will take a little while because it’s complex, and I confess I’ve never encountered anything quite like this before, so some of it’s guess work.” Kei nodded. “The problem has many layers. The first relates to your degree of sensitivity. When I was trying to break the connection between you and Diza, I found it very difficult, nearly impossible to block your gift. Normally I can do so easily even with someone as well-trained as he is. It appears that your gift is far stronger than many soul-touchers, verging on the truly Gifted – and yet it was not thus when you were here two years ago.”

Kei answered his enquiring look. “I think.... Jena – that’s the healer from Ai-Rutej who was taken hostage, a mind-speaker – thought gifts like ours got stronger with age and with certain experiences. Could a series of shocks, griefs, cause that?”

Bikel looked thoughtful. “It might,” he said doubtfully. “Never seen anything quite like this – the only two factors which might explain it are that you have two gifts of very different types, and this experience with the executions. Either might be the reason. Whatever the cause, you are just much more sensitive than you should be, at least now. You will need to learn much greater control, and keep a constant guard on it until that control is second nature to you. This will take time and effort, and you’ll always be at risk of being overwhelmed if you’re not careful or don’t maintain your mental exercises.”

Kei nodded unhappily – it looked like the control he had once taken for granted was never to be so easy again. “Then there is the experience you had in Utuk which would distress anyone – the nightmares, the random memories, these will be afflicting your fellow hostages as much as you. For this, there is no answer but time, and the understanding of those who love you. In a way, it’s good you’ve alerted us to this, because when we have the hostages home, we can warn their families and friends to be supportive. I suspect it will always be something that sets them apart from their clan.”

Kei agreed. “It feels like wearing a brand sometimes, like a scar only I can see. My family...they were kind, but it’s not like having been there.”



“No,” Bikel said sympathetically. “There are no easy solutions there either, Kei, but you’re fortunate in having many people who love you and want to help.”

“Yes, I am. And the rest of it?”

“The rest of it is peculiar to you as a soul-toucher. Has anyone explained how your gift works, exactly?”

He nodded. “We form a link to the other person and feed a little on their emotions, like a parasite.”

Bikel tsked. “What a disgusting way of describing it. Whatever you take, I assure you, you return tenfold, Kei – it’s more other people are parasites on *you*. Why do you think so many soul-touchers become healers? Or are otherwise centrally important to their clan and family? People love to be near you, to feel you – you’re like a balm on their souls, and the relationships with soul-touchers are often the deepest and longest lasting of all for that reason.”

“Oh.” Kei felt rather embarrassed at the idea that he was walking around donating emotions to his clan. “Does that harm us?”

“Not normally, because while you give more, you have more to give. But there is a circumstance where this is definitely harmful – when the soul-toucher is strongly linked to someone who dies, especially if they are already emotionally close to them, and especially if that death is violent or occurs without warning.” He held out his arm and pushed back his sleeve. “We have veins and arteries, yes? And the veins pump much more slowly going back to us than the arteries do going out, correct?”

“Yes, of course.” Kei was getting confused. How did this relate to his gift?

“The heart feeds the hand and the hand returns a little, if you like. What would happen if I took a knife and cut thus?” He pantomimed slicing across the main artery in the elbow.

“You would bleed badly – die eventually, if you weren’t treated.”

“Exactly. Now, if I cut ten arteries, all at the same time?” Kei stared at him in mute horror. “Yes, we both know perfectly well I would die and very quickly. A soul-toucher who has their link severed in that way is exactly like someone having an artery cut. The experience you had was indescribably cruel to someone with your gift, unbelievably harmful. Even just the memory of it was too much for Diza. To be blunt, Kei, you should have ‘bled’ to death within a very short time that day – it’s probably only because you’re so young that your heart didn’t stop from the sheer pain and shock on the spot.”

“I....” Kei rubbed his chest a little in remembered agony. “Why didn’t I?”

“You know the answer to that.”

“Arman?” he said, frowning. “But how?”

“I’ll come to that in a moment,” Bikel said, holding a hand up to forestall any questions. “So here we have a soul-toucher with a mortal wound who somehow does not die when he should have. Last night I spent several hours with Diza looking back through the academy journals. There have been thirteen recorded cases of soul-touchers suffering such injury, though none nearly so grave – but in almost every single case, they’ve died, either from just pining away without apparent cause over a series of months, or, more commonly, suicide within weeks. A few lingered for longer than others, but in over a hundred years there are only two cases on record of a soul-toucher surviving such an event for more than six months. In both cases, the death they felt was not of a lover or close relative or friend, and in both cases, they formed a relationship with another person in a short period of time after the injury. In both cases, that relationship was of life-long duration.” He gave Kei a penetrating look. “In other words, they seem to have found a lover who could heal them.”

Kei blinked in surprise. “But Arman’s not my lover. Reji’s my lover but he doesn’t make any difference at all.”

Bikel’s cool stare was positively unnerving. “Then there must be an additional element in the relationships that enabled the others – and you – to survive.”

“I don’t understand.”

Bikel sighed. “Neither do I, not completely. Fifty years ago, one of my predecessors wrote about this very phenomenon, and the best he could come up with was that some individuals are fated to be together – not just in this life, but across several lives, possibly forever. He thought it might be that soul-touchers are always unconsciously looking for these life-mates – the one who can fully sate their hunger for emotional energy – that this is somehow the source of their gift. In those rare cases where they find one, it completes them in a way that no one other person can. If that were the case, and the soul-toucher is injured in their gift, their life-mate might compensate in some way for the injury.”

Kei could only stare. “Do you believe that?”

“It barely matters what I believe, Kei. Whatever the explanation, since it didn’t kill you, your wound is now slowly scabbing over, so to speak. I confess this is where I am extrapolating a little from the situation where a soul-toucher loses control of their gift in the ordinary way. You know yourself when you’ve lost control, that you are very raw at that time, you feel things very keenly and

painfully, yes? If I'm correct in my theory, every new, severe shock, every strong emotion, jars the wound, removes the scab on this terrible injury and so you lose more or less ground, depending on the shock. Arman is able to stop such things aggravating this injury while you're with him, especially, I suspect, if you're in physical contact since that always increases the link between you and others. I suspect he's acting as a buffer against the emotional damage caused by other people, and even yourself because your own emotions also draw on the injury."

Which was why things like the trial in Ai-Darbin and going home hadn't been as difficult to manage as they should have been. It made a kind of sense, he supposed, but it wasn't much comfort. "He has only to touch me and all pain ceases, as if he's a kind of pijn for my gift. But when he leaves, it's as bad or worse than before, so he's just acting as a palliative supporting the symptoms. I'm not actually getting better, I know. It's becoming an addiction, I fear, since I can't seem to keep away from him."

Bikel shook his head in disgust. "No, you've got the analogy wrong, lad – would you call a bandage on a wound addictive? He's not helping the symptoms, he's actually helping you heal, the way tirsels ointment does a sprain. He's not chuo sap or pijn on your heart, merely numbing the pain – he's helping the cause of the pain itself. If you're finding excuses to be with him, it's only the natural reaction of an injured body seeking a remedy."

"But it hurts worse when he goes than it did before, and that's the proof of it being palliative not curative."

"Well, yes, of course it hurts, because his leaving causes you emotional pain, and that itself is re-injuring you, like someone ripping a bandage off a burn."

Kei shook his head stubbornly. "I still have to find a way to get through this without his help."

"Are you mad, Kei?" Bikel said, glaring at him. "He's the only thing that kept you from dying, and he's the only thing from what I've seen that will help you recover in the future. You *can't* do this without help, any more than a man with a broken leg can walk without crutches."

Kei looked at him pleadingly. "You don't understand, Master Bikel. The general is returning to his own country in a few days. I won't have the option of his help, need it or not. Is there no other solution?"

The master sighed heavily. "Truthfully? The only other option would be to isolate yourself for however long it took to heal. It could take years, but it would be incredibly painful, Kei. Soul-touchers need people as much as

people need them. You would feel like you were starving to death. I truly don't recommend it as a merciful option."

Gods – such a fate sounded worse than death, but then it seemed death was the only other alternative. "But...why him? Is there any possibility that Reji could do what Arman can?"

"Lad, if he could, he would, I'm sure. As to why Arman – I don't know, any more than why we fall in love with one person and not another, why nitre weed brings some people out in a rash and not others. I tell you this though – repeatedly separating from him is doing you active harm."

"Because of his special effect on me? Because it's taken away?"

"No, because of the pain it causes you."

Kei frowned at the man. "This is circular reasoning."

"No it's not, actually," Bikel said with some impatience. "This is the failing of all soul-touchers if you ask me – you all spend so much time immersed in other people's feelings, you fail to stop and think about your own. However, if you and the general truly must part, then isolation is the only other sure cure."

"The exercises? What about this...block, whatever you've done to me...can you do it again?"

"I could – but that's truly just symptomatic relief and becomes ineffective within a couple of repetitions. I did that out of desperation to protect Diza – it's no answer, Kei, any more than drugging you with pijn would be."

Kei slumped in dejected misery. Either he lived in exile, trailing around after Arman like a puppy begging for scraps or he became a hermit. "If I do nothing...perhaps just limited contact with people, strengthened my control, kept doing the exercises...would I die?"

There was only pity in Bikel's expression. "Probably not, although you would never heal properly. You might live a normal span, especially if you could find something that absorbed you, like intellectual work – but it would not be a happy life, nor one I would wish for you. I suspect you would not be able to begin or sustain any close emotional relationship, nor a sexual one – it would rip your soul to shreds."

This had only been what he'd been expecting more or less, but it still hurt to hear it confirmed. "I can live with that, I think. I can still be of use to my clan."

Bikel stood and went over to the window, staring out of it for long moments. Finally he turned, his expression no longer harsh. "Kei, until now, I have been speaking as a master, purely addressing the problem of your gift. Now, let me speak to you as a teacher, a lover of a soul-toucher, and

someone who would not want anyone to suffer. I think you should speak to your general and simply ask for his help.”

“No,” Kei said fiercely. “He has his own path to follow. I’ll find another way, or live with it.”

Bikel shook his head sadly. “Then your bravery is greater than your common sense. The block I’ve put on your gift will last a few hours longer, but then you will need to be alone. I’ll tell Loti – at the very least, you must try to avoid aggravating this injury, especially now. You’ve given it two severe blows in as many days and unfortunately I’ve given it another – you can’t sustain that. I can do no more for you, nor can anyone else in the academy. You should get out of Darshek as soon as you can, avoiding physical contact with people at least until you regain some control and keep away from strangers or those with turbulent or passionate emotions as much as possible for as long as possible. No prolonged farewell to your general either. That’s all I can suggest. I wish I could offer more, but not even the truly Gifted could solve this for you.”

*Myka*, Kei thought, and wondered how he was supposed to avoid her. “Thank you for what you have done anyway. Would you please tell Master Diza how sorry I am and that I hope he doesn’t suffer too long?”

“I will, but you should turn that concern on yourself, healer. Farewell – and please consider my advice.” Kei nodded and Bikel left, closing the door after him.

He felt like weeping with frustration and grief. This was so *unfair*. He was being punished for something he had done to save his clan, punished for a gift he’d always wished he hadn’t possessed – and now which was going to dominate his life whatever he did. If Kei went with Arman back to Utuk, he would suffer homesickness for the rest of his life, and he wasn’t sure the pain of his gift, the pain of the emptiness and sadness was worse than that. Even now, his soul was tugging at him, trying to get him to go to Arman – it must have been his subconscious wish that made him so easily confused the day before, he thought grimly.

He got up and found a robe in the closet, before going to the outer chamber. Loti got up from his chair and came towards him with a worried look on his face. “Kei, you should be in....”

Kei held his hand up. He had very little time, if Bikel was right. “Loti, please send for Reji urgently, and then would you ask Ev or someone to find me a quiet place to sleep tonight, away from everyone? Reji can have these rooms, and then we’ll probably be leaving tomorrow.”

“Kei....”

“Please don’t argue,” he said tiredly. “I’m not a child, I can make my own decisions. I’m going to have a bath – just ask Reji to come in and you can leave me alone.”

Loti still looked worried. “And General Arman?”

“I’ll send him a note, but I don’t want you to breach my privacy. I’ll explain what Master Bikel said. Go on – I’ve no need of a healer any more and you know it.”

“Then I hope you don’t pass out in the bath, young man,” Loti snapped.

He picked up his medical bag and made to leave. “Wait – I apologise, Loti. I’ve just...just had some very bad news and I need time to adjust to it.”

Loti’s expression softened. “I understand, lad. We all wish you well, you know.”

“I know. Unfortunately, such wishes can’t do a thing to help me. Please, I need to see Reji while Master Bikel’s block is still in place, or I won’t be able to bear his company.”

Loti nodded and left quickly. Kei went back to the bedroom and into the small washroom. He set the charcoal under the bathwater alight – it would take a good while to reach an adequate temperature, but he could bathe in tepid water. He stripped, and undid his braid, using the comb that, along with soap and hand cream, had been thoughtfully provided for him, to ease out the tangles and small knots. He doused himself with cold water from the pump and then slowly and carefully soaped every inch of his skin, the entire length of his hair. He wanted to give his friend, his brother, his lover, this gift, if it had to be that he must stay apart from those closest to him to survive.

He rinsed himself and then climbed into the bath, letting the warming water take away some of his headache. It was improving a little, although how much was because of real healing, and how much was masked by the lingering pijn and what Bikel had done, he didn’t know. He laughed a little, bitterly – it seemed to be his entire existence now, not to know what was real peace and what was merely hiding the pain.

He didn’t spend long in the bath, just long enough to gain a measure of calmness. He got out, dried himself and redressed in the soft robe before returning to the bedroom to sit by the window, combing his hair dry in the breeze and the late afternoon sun. He heard the outer door open and close, and then the bedroom door open. He just kept looking out the window.

A hand took the comb from his, and continued the careful grooming. Kei closed his eyes, giving himself to the gentle sensation. Reji didn’t speak for

long minutes, for which Kei was glad. It was odd not to sense him, but it was also a relief.

Only when Reji had stopped combing and had remade his braid, did he turn. His lover just looked sad and worried, a little tired too. "What happened? What did they say?"

Kei bit his lip and shook his head. "Later. Take me to bed, Rei-ki. I need you to love me."

Reji put his arms around him and pulled him close to plant a gentle kiss on his lips. "I will always love you, whatever happens, wherever you are. Don't be afraid of losing me, little brother."

And at that, Kei could not hold back the tears.



Later, as the sky in the window began to show the brilliant red and golds of the dying sun, Reji began to stroke his arm gently, as Kei told him what Bikel had said. Reji listened in silence, then said "So you want to leave tomorrow?"

"Can we? Have you finished everything?"

"Yes – I've already arranged for the village goods to be sent with the traders from Ai-Tuek. We won't have to match the pace of the wagons. Kei...look at me." Kei rolled over and looked into Reji's kind eyes. "Little brother, you know I love you."

"And I love you, Reji. This doesn't change that – it just means...we can't...."

"Yes, I know, but that's not my point. Why won't you talk to Arman? The man adores you – you must know that."

Kei's heart ached to think of Arman. "Yes, I do, but Reji, he has a life and friends he can return to, and he's a foreigner here where he's always going to be feared and even hated. I can't ask him to stay and I can't bear to go – how can I leave you and everyone else, just to cure this...this wound...."

Reji leaned over and kissed his forehead. "And that's all it would be, Kei? Just an end to pain?"

"I wouldn't even achieve that – I would simply exchange one misery for another. I doubt I would ever find happiness if I did that. My place is with my people, serving them, being useful and doing my job, if I can."

Reji clasped Kei's hand and held it between them. "No one in the clan wants your help at such a price."

"Myka needs me. You need me. They need their healer, Reji."

Reji shook his head. "Myka needs to know you're happy. I need the same thing. As for a healer, they have two. Kei – what are you afraid of? If you won't even talk to Arman...."

"And say what, Reji?" Kei said angrily. "Oh, I know you adore and want me, but I only want to be with you because you stop my heart aching? He deserves more."

"So do you, Kei."

Kei pulled away from him and sat up. "All I wanted in life was to be in the clan and with you and my family, and I *will* have it even...."

"Even if you have to be miserable every day of your life." Reji sat up and put his arms around Kei. "Little brother, there is nothing – nothing – in the world that would make me happier than for you to return to our village, and be my lover, and to see you happy and fulfilled and with those who love you." He made Kei turn and face him. "And there is nothing," he said gently, "that will cause me greater pain than to watch you live a lonely, joyless life, always at arms length from us, wedded to duty, never to know happiness or love. I would rather lose a hand, my sight than to see that." He kissed Kei's forehead. "I would rather let my enemy and my rival take you away from me than see that, Kei."

"I love you, Reji," Kei said desperately. "You know that."

"Yes, I do, but we know that it's the love between two old, very dear friends. What I saw in Arman's face, his way of treating you, his concern – that was different. Do you not feel anything for him? Because I think you do, but you won't allow yourself to admit it."

Kei looked away from that intense gaze. "I feel...relief. Glad to be free of pain, glad...that I have helped him and brought him here safely. I'm grateful for what he's done for me. That's all." That surely was all it could be. Relief and gratitude didn't equal love. Nor did desperate wanting.

Reji shook his head as he laughed, but his eyes were sad. "Look, I have no liking for the man or what he's done, or who he represents. I wish that he was anyone at all other than who he is, but we can't predict or choose who we love. It's only because I *do* love you, that I say to you – go and talk to him."

"I can't."

"Why? Are you such a coward?"

Stung at the insult, Kei pulled away, and climbed off the bed. He searched for his clothes and pulled them on, angry at being pushed and pulled around. "I'm no coward. I've paid more of a price than anyone save those at Ai-Vinri, but at least *their* pain is now over."



Reji reached out a hand to him, looking shocked at his words. “Kei, I didn’t mean....”

“We’re leaving tomorrow, and that’s it. I’ll send someone to you when I’m ready. Now I need to be alone – I can feel the block’s weakening and since I’m so cowardly, I want to avoid that pain. Goodnight.”

Angry tears in his eyes, his head throbbing agonisingly once more, Kei stormed out of the room and out of the apartment. He just wanted to go home – he’d done what he’d promised to do and got Arman here, he’d consulted the masters and they’d offered no relief. If he’d known that agreeing to be a hostage all those months ago would mean he would be a slave all his life, clan or no clan, he’d have refused. No one should have to pay this price for peace, personal or otherwise.



Arman tried to concentrate on the notes he was making, but his heart wasn’t in it. He had the briefest encounter with Bikel in the reception hall upon his return to the Rulers’ House, but the academy master wasn’t in the mood for a long discussion – he was clearly in a foul temper, and worried about his lover. Curtly, he’d informed Arman that yes, Kei’s injury was severe, and yes, there was an answer. “But,” he’d snapped, “the young fool won’t listen to me, and so he’s condemned himself to a weary, painful life. I wish him joy of it.” And then the man had stalked off, collected an obviously ailing Diza from a nearby chair and walked out of the building.

Arman had asked where Kei was, and had been informed he was resting in one of the guest rooms under the supervision of the healer. That had been two hours ago, and he’d heard nothing since. He didn’t want to send for Kei, or interfere, but he couldn’t help being anxious, and wondering what Bikel had meant. Tomorrow he would try to get a better answer from him, once the man had had a chance to calm down. For now, he could only get on with his work – he really had to try and make some clear instructions for the troops once they landed in Utuk.

His heart leapt when there was a knock at the door, and he called his visitor in, expecting it to be Kei at long last – but it wasn’t. Instead, it was an angry, rather worried looking Reji. “What’s happened?” Arman asked, getting to his feet and limping quickly to the man. “Is Kei hurt?”

Reji held up his hand. “Not more than he was. You and I need to talk, general. Sit down, and don’t pull any arrogant, ‘I’m a Prij and you’re all scum’ shit with me or I’ll knock you down.”

"I wouldn't dream of it," Arman said stiffly, returning to his desk. "Do, please have a seat and explain why I deserve such a charming greeting."

The man looked ruffled as if he'd dressed in a hurry, and was flustered more than angry, Arman now realised. "I've just been talking to Kei."

"Is he all right?"

"No, he damn well isn't. General, our little healer is hell's bent on destroying his happiness, and I can't let him do that. I may have to lose my lover, but I'm damned if I'll lose my friend!"

Arman folded his arms and tried to keep calm. One of them needed to keep a cool head and it clearly wasn't going to be Reji. "Explain."

"The masters have told him that there's three options for his injury – and of course, being the stubborn little idiot that he is, he's chosen the one which will cause maximum distress for those of us who care about him, because he *thinks* it's the one that will serve our clan best. I need you to convince him that his clan is best served by him not destroying himself. I've tried and he's not listening," Reji said irritably.

"And why would he listen to me and not you, Reji?"

"Because you're in love with him and I'm damn sure he's in love with you, even though he won't admit it! General, he's convinced that because you make him happy and content, you're a bad thing. How in hell's do you argue with logic like that?"

There were so many surprising statements in that sentence, Arman could only stare at the man for long moments. "I care for him very deeply, but I know I can't make him happy," he said finally.

"Then you're a damn fool. Look, general – I don't like you at all, let's be clear about that. You've hurt my people, and you've stolen the contentment and heart of the man I love without giving him the means to find happiness. You're fixing one crime somewhat, but if you don't fix the other one, then you will have committed a far greater sin."

Arman was losing patience with the man's dramatic statements and belligerence, however concerned he was. "Reji, I think you're misreading the situation...."

"Am I? Truly? General, you've been sharing a bed with Kei for how long and never laid a finger on him? Either," he said sardonically, "you've had your balls removed, or you're denying yourself to avoid hurting him. Don't even pretend to me that you don't desire him – no one who loves another can mistake that look."

"He's been hurt," Arman protested, "injured.... I wouldn't...."

Reji stood up and glared at him. "Will you please stop dancing around the truth? General, the three options they gave him were to stay with you, live alone for years without any human contact, or live crippled and out of reach in the village, chained to his research and never to be touched by or touch another person. Tell me honestly that you think the last two would make either of you content."

"No, of course they wouldn't!" Arman said in shock. "If he came to me, I would gladly take him with me, I would give anything up for him...." Reji's eyebrow was raised now in a knowing look. "I would never impose my feelings on him, Reji. I have only loved one other in my life with such intensity, and I would never have laid a hand on him. Kei could sleep in my bed for an eternity and his fidelity to you would remain unchanged."

"And no doubt the little idiot knows that – no wonder he doesn't want to talk to you. You're both *mad*," Reji said angrily. "I give up. But I tell you this, General. I won't let him leave Darshek until you two talk and if you leave without doing so, I'll find a way to drag you back. Stop being so damn noble and tell him the truth. It's not like he doesn't know how you feel, but he'll play your idiot games as long as you do and it's killing him. I mean that literally."

Reji got up to leave. "Where is he now?" Arman asked.

"Gone out. He's sulking. Maybe crying. Thinking, I hope, although I doubt it. You've got four days to fix this, general."

"Wait." Arman got up too, although he had no chance of catching up to Reji if the man decided not to obey. "I still don't understand. He's your lover. Why are you doing this?"

Reji laughed bitterly. "Because I love him enough to send him away. Don't make me hate you more than I do by making my grief pointless."

He walked out of the door, slamming it in his wake. "What in hells?" Arman said, bewildered. How could this situation possibly have got more complex than it already was? He had to find Kei. This discussion was long overdue.



Kei sat in the dark garden, staring up at the first floor window where a dim lamp glow could be seen. His anger at Reji had died almost as he'd left the room, and already he was framing his apology for being such an overdramatic fool. His anger at the world remained, though, and was growing. He felt trapped, as much a prisoner as he'd been in Utuk. If he'd been a free man, without this gift and without this damage, he'd have offered himself to Arman months ago. But he wasn't a free man – he had obligations, he had a lover

whom he did truly love, no matter how one categorised it, he had a profession. He couldn't, wouldn't throw that away for selfish pleasure.

But....

He kept looking at the light, and thinking of the man sitting there reading by the lamp. Arman wanted him and loved him. And Kei.... Kei didn't know if he could live without Arman any more, and not just because of what Arman could do for him.

'In another time and place', they'd both said. And this was both.

He wasn't a coward. And he'd already paid the price. Perhaps it was time to learn what he'd won.

## CHAPTER 3

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Arman fretted. He'd sent people out to search for Kei nearly an hour ago. How hard was it to find one simple villager? He was beginning to worry Kei might have done something really idiotic and since the idiocies could encompass anything from running away on an urs beast to flinging himself into the harbour, this wasn't giving him any comfort. His door opened and he prepared to yell at these people for being so damn slow. "Oh, gods, could you...?" His complaint died on his lips as he saw who it was. "Kei...are you all right?"

Kei shut the door and leaned on the wall next to it, his expression sullen. "No, I'm damn well not. I've been told by two separate people to come and

talk to you, although one then told me not to and the other called me a coward for following that advice. I'm getting heartily sick of people trying to bully me."

He looked utterly miserable. Arman got up and rang the bell-pull and then limped over to Kei. "I don't want to bully you," he said gently, coming to stand in front of Kei. "But we need to talk, and soon." He tilted Kei's head up. "How's the headache?"

"Healthy and getting worse by the minute," Kei said irritably, jerking his chin away from Arman's grip.

"Then go and sit down...." There was a knock and Arman opened the door – it was the housekeeper. "Ah, Mijli, would you call off the search? He's here."

She glanced at Kei and smiled. "Very good, Arman."

Arman closed the door and found his visitor glaring at him. "Searching for me?"

"Reji was here earlier. He more or less threatened me with an unpleasant fate if I didn't talk to you."

"I didn't send him...." Kei hugged himself. "I'm making such a damn mess of this, Arman."

"No, I refuse to let you take *all* the credit, Kei." Kei looked up suspiciously at his tone. "Please, come and sit. My leg won't tolerate standing for long."

Arman had rather shamelessly appealed to Kei's healer instinct for a reason, as it was always the best way to distract him from his mood, and it worked – with a guilty look, Kei immediately headed for a chair while Arman sat down in its neighbour. "Reji told me what Bikel said. He also said a number of other things which I would rather hear from you, if at all. Kei – he said you know how I feel about you. I suppose it's inevitable that you do – but I would never, regardless of temptation, impose that on you. You do know that, don't you?" Kei nodded miserably. "I'm sorry that I can't...control myself...."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous, Arman, how are you supposed to control who you love?"

Arman would rather Kei had not used such a scornful tone when discussing his affections, but there was no reason for him not to, he supposed. "Reji also claimed that you...had feelings for me." Kei started at that, then looked rather wary. "Do you remember a discussion we had on the boat about choice and consent?"

"Yes, but...."

"I see this situation as really no different from when you were a hostage, Kei," Arman said firmly, wanting this to be perfectly clear. "I would want no

one to come to me under compulsion, be it from me, or themselves because of a...an injury.... If you need me with you to help you heal, then you don't need to think I would require a return of my feelings...."

Kei snorted. "Don't you get sick of being noble, Arman?"

Arman stiffened at the rudeness. "At least I'm not the one proposing to commit slow suicide because he won't even ask for help."

"No, of course that makes you and everyone else on earth better than me."

Kei just sounded tired and sad – Arman couldn't stay annoyed with him, knowing his irritability was caused by his own misery. "Kei – answer me this question and try to be as truthful as you can, as fully as you can. I promise not to hold it against you whatever you say." Kei looked up at him with puzzled eyes. "What – and who – would make you happy...given your present difficulty? What – who – do you truly want?"

Kei sat back, and his mouth drew down in a grim line. He just stared at Arman for long moments, unnerving Arman a little, since this penetrating gaze was nothing like what Arman usually received from the gentle healer. But at last he sighed. "All I truly want is to go home...and to be with you. Because Reji's right, the damn interfering bastard – I do love you. But *you're* wrong – I don't love you because I need you. I need you because I love you."

Kei was trying to sound irritated, but underneath the tone was a note of...fear? Did he truly think Arman would reject him – when he'd just given Arman the gift he wanted most in the world? Cautious hope began to grow within Arman. "Then if you want to go home, and you want to be with me, the answer is that I go home with you, is it not?"

"But...you can't...."

"Why not?"

"Because...Arman, you're going home. Back to Utuk."

Arman stood and went to Kei. He would have knelt but his leg would never have stood that strain. "Kei, I told you. I've had no home since Loke died – none save with you. I'll live anywhere in any way that lets me be with you."

Kei let Arman pull him to his feet. "But Karus...your career.... These are important to you, don't deny it."

"Yes, they are, but not as important as you. Karus told me...to find some joy in my life. You bring me joy, Kei. You're my home, my peace, and I will live in a hut in the wilderness if your people won't allow me to be with you, but...if your only reason for not letting me be with you is this, then...please, don't throw your life away on a principle."

Kei stared into his eyes without saying a word, and Arman couldn't begin to work out what was going on in that moral, battered head of his. At last he stepped back, and Arman's heart sank, fearing that he hadn't convinced Kei, or that there was some objection he hadn't covered. But then Kei picked up the end of his braid and tugged at the leather thong that held the tail in place, pulling the tie off completely. He shook his head and then his hair fell loose around him, like a rippling black silk sail.

Arman's mouth went dry at the sight, and he hardly dared breathe for the desire that filled him, the raw need the simple gesture had woken in him after so many weeks of holding his passion in check. If Kei turned away now, he thought he might go mad.

"I think," Kei said quietly, "my answer is best given in another way." He came to Arman, bringing his hands up to cup his face before gently touching his lips to Arman's.

Arman buried his trembling hands in the long, fine mass of Kei's hair. "I love you," he whispered. Kei kissed him again, this time more forcibly, and Arman learned what it was like to kiss where there was desire and love, where there was no duty, only need. He discovered what it was like to hold a lithe, hard body against him, to feel Kei hardening and know that it was for him and because of him, and that he did not have to hide his own passion any longer. Kei's mouth burned and ravaged him and he, a willing student and devotee, could only go where Kei's skilful hands and lips led him.

Kei pressed him back a little, and the stumble that caused brought Arman back to their situation. "I foresee two difficulties."

Kei leaned back a little, his eyes crossed a little with lust. "Which are?"

Arman smiled at his impatient tone. "My leg won't stand much more of this – and I have absolutely no idea what I'm doing. There's also your headache to consider."

Kei closed in on him again and rested against him provocatively. "What headache?" he breathed, his words sending ripples of excitement to Arman's cock. But then Kei stepped back again and bent to pick up the walking stick that Arman hadn't even noticed he'd dropped. He gave him the stick, collected the lamp from the desk and held out his hand. "Come with me."

Arman seized his hand and let himself be led into the bedroom, feeling more apprehensive than the first time he took command of the army, and every bit as inexperienced. He was glad of Kei's confident desire, and only hoped he wouldn't disappoint him too badly.

But Kei, once he set the lamp down, put his arms around him and laid his head on Arman's shoulder. "You really don't have any idea, do you?"

Arman shook his head, at the same time, indulging a long-held fantasy of being able to run his fingers through Kei's unbound hair. "I'm sorry...I know you expect...."

Kei put a finger to his lips. "I expect nothing. I just want you to hold me as a lover, not as a friend."

"Can't I be both?"

Kei lifted his head to smile at him. "Friend or no friend, I at least want you to be naked."

Arman had never slept naked in his life, and just the idea of being allowed to have Kei's bare skin on his own made him tremble. He nodded, and stood still as Kei solemnly undressed him, even unwinding his loincloth and folding everything neatly on a chair. Even though Kei had seen him nude before, this was different – he was no longer a patient, or a master. He was that new and wonderful thing, Kei's lover, and beloved of Kei. "It's only fair," he said, his voice hoarse with desire, "that you undress too."

Kei laughed. "Don't be so impatient. Sit, Arman."

He pushed Arman carefully back onto the bed, before stepping back into the pool of lamplight. He slowly unlaced his shirt, deft fingers playing with the leather, his throat exposed as if to invite a kiss or even something less gentle. As he drew his shirt off, his stomach muscles rippled, and Arman realised how very strong and fit Kei had become over their long journey with all the riding. Trousers were slid down over powerful, lean thighs, then Kei's long cock sprang free, erect and unashamed. Arman flushed – he'd seen Kei naked too, but never in a state of arousal. Because he was so natural about his nudity, and so lacking in aggression, sometimes it was easy to forget he was entirely male, hair or no hair, gentle manner or not. The oddness of the situation was suddenly brought home to Arman. "I've never been with a man," he blurted out. "I've never even slept with anyone but Mayl."

Kei finished undressing unhurriedly as if he hadn't spoken at all, then came over and kissed him again, on the lips, and on the forehead, as if to reassure him. His body felt so warm, the muscles hard under deceptively soft skin, so smooth and fine. "Then you've never made love at all."

Arman nodded. He doubted Kei really knew just how very inexperienced he was, but he wasn't going to tell him, and Kei was hardly pressing him. "I want to make love to you, Kei."



“Yes.” Kei’s hands ran gently down his sides, making him shiver. “So hairy, but so beautiful. Like a god.”

“Not a god. The gods are cruel.”

“And you’re always kind to me, Arman,” he said, leaning in for a kiss. He looked up at Arman. “Are you worried?”

“Terrified. I have no idea what you want to do with me.”

Kei gave him a slightly impish smile. “Nothing bad, I promise.”

“You couldn’t. To have you touch me....” He caressed Kei’s cheek. “Or to touch.... I’ve been starving all my life for this.” Kei nodded against his hand, leaning into it. “Will you have regrets? You love Reji, and he certainly loves you.”

“This won’t change my feelings for Reji, Arman. It just means I won’t have sex with him any more, because I’m going to be with you now.” As he spoke, his hands moved gently down Arman’s stomach, brushing his cock and making it leap a little. “Have you never even thought about what you might do with me if I ever was with you?”

Arman shook his head. His imagination had so little to work with, and none of it concerned two men together. “Just...to hold you and to touch you....”

Kei took Arman’s hand and wrapped some of his hair around it. “You want to touch this, I know.”

“Yes....” *Oh yes.*

“Tell me how you want to touch it, Arman. What would you like me to do to you while you hold my hair? Should I kiss you?” Arman nodded, winding his fingers even more tightly into the smooth length of Kei’s hair. Kei leaned forward and nibbled at his lips. “Your beard feels strange,” he whispered, rubbing the bristle.

“I’ll shave it off.”

“No...I thought I’d want you to, but now I want you to keep it.” Kei kissed him again, and then knelt so he could lay his face on Arman’s stomach, kissing the soft skin of his belly, teasing the fine hairs there with his tongue and making Arman shiver. He licked a little lower, and bit gently at the skin below his navel, a strange and powerfully arousing sensation – Arman had never felt so stimulated sexually, his cock never this hard or needy before.

He didn’t know what to ask for or where to touch Kei, but he needed more of something, that was for sure. And he wanted it soon or he might possibly lose his mind if Kei bit him like that again.

As if sensing that, Kei dipped his head lower, his hands parting Arman’s thighs, his fingers stroking along the soft inner skin near his balls. Arman held

his breath – what was Kei going to do now? Warm lips brushed lightly against the top of his cock and he jerked in surprise – he hadn't thought...would Kei really...?

But Kei moved away again, and began to trace patterns with his tongue on Arman's thigh. Arman relaxed – it seemed Kei was just going to lick him from head to foot...one of Kei's hands cupped his balls and rolled them carefully, the strange but enjoyable sensation distracting Arman from Kei's mouth – but then warm heat engulfed his cock, the sudden intense pleasure shocking, so much more than anything he could have imagined. He instinctively tried to move, whether into or away from it, he wasn't even sure himself, but Kei's grip was insistent, his mouth relentless.

Helpless against the rising tide of his arousal, Arman plunged his hands again into Kei's hair, holding him tight, wanting him closer, harder...if there was even one fantasy that he had, this was it and he wondered how Kei could possibly have known...and that it was Kei doing this, and not some faceless stranger....

His hands were shaking, his whole body trembling with desire, overwhelmed by the sensations of what Kei was doing to him, but also acutely aware of how Kei's hair slipped through his fingers, of Kei's warm body between his legs, and always, that he had been given his heart's desire. Finally, happiness was not just within his reach, but in his hands.

As he came with a startled cry, he found he was still holding Kei's hair and head in a cruel grip. Mortified by his selfishness, he let him go with a murmured apology. But Kei stayed where he was, his tongue still licking and sucking Arman's cock. Arman made him pull away, and found his lover...oh, wonderful word...smiling up at him, looking rather smug. "I didn't mean to...did I hurt you?"

"No, you didn't. No one's ever done that to you before, have they?" Arman shook his head mutely, ashamed of his lack of experience, but curiously glad that Kei was the first to give such a wonderful gift to him. "And was that frightening?"

Kei stood so Arman could look directly into his teasing dark eyes, his perfect mouth, the lips that were so soft but so very clever, curved into a sweet smile, "It was wonderfully frightening. Do...?" Arman was about to ask if Kei wanted him to do the same to him, but his courage failed him. He simply wouldn't know how to begin, and he was afraid he might gag, or hurt Kei. "How can I make you feel good too?"

In answer, Kei kissed him, the same agile tongue that had just been curled around his cock now plundering his mouth, his kisses as different from Mayl's perfunctory efforts as sand was from water. Arman could have kissed Kei all night, could have spent a year just holding him and revelling in being so close to him, having so much of his beautiful body against him, and so he complained a little when Kei pulled away. "Where are you going?"

Kei stuck his tongue out a little as an impudent reply, as he went looking for something on the table near the bed, found what he wanted and triumphantly held up the pot of ointment that Siv had been using for Arman's leg massages. Something occurred to him – he took a cautious sniff of the contents before he smiled again, apparently reassured by what he'd detected. Arman's mouth went dry again, this time from nervousness. Kei had said he and Reji used this stuff for sex...did Kei want...how could he...?

"You suddenly felt petrified just then, Arman – what's wrong?" Kei said, climbing on the bed and putting an arm around him.

"The cream...do you want me to...or...Kei, I really don't...."

Kei put his fingers on Arman's lips and shook his head with a smile. "No, not that, not now – it's all new to you and for all I know you wouldn't even like it."

Arman was relieved, ashamed to be so, but relieved nonetheless. "But what do you need the massage ointment for?"

"Let me show you. Sit up against the backboard. Mind your ribs." Kei got him comfortably settled, and then sat between Arman's legs, his back to Arman's chest, his enormous length of hair carefully tucked out of the way. "Put your hand on me."

"On your...?" Kei just took his hand and put it firmly around Kei's cock. It definitely felt odd to touch another man this way but to have the freedom to do this to Kei made his heart soar with pride. He gave the long cock a light upstroke and Kei wriggled appreciatively. "Like that?"

"Mmmm, but that's why you need the ointment." He took Arman's hand and put some of the stuff on his fingers – it was smooth and slick, with no particular odour. "I had to check they weren't using the tinsel leaf – that would have brought this night to a very early close," he said with a chuckle.

"You sound as if you know this from experience."

"Not me – Reji. If you don't clean it off your fingers properly and then have a piss, it's beyond painful. He had me cleaning his cock for an hour to try and get it off – it's amazingly persistent."

"Ouch," Arman said in sympathy. "This is safe, I hope."

“Yes. Now....” Kei brought Arman’s hand down to his cock again. “Try it again.”

This time, the stroking was much smoother and easier, and Kei sighed in pleasure. “Oh, gods, that’s it...just do what you’d do for yourself, Arman....” He suddenly twisted to look into Arman’s eyes with a worried expression. “You’re not such a saint that you don’t masturbate, are you?”

Arman grinned. “I’m no saint, just deprived. How do you think I keep sane?”

Kei smiled. “Oh, good – for a moment there, I was afraid you were just too innocent to be real. Oh...now try this....”

Gently Kei guided him, suggesting he try this, or move that way, all the time his breathy sighs telling Arman how much he was enjoying this. Arman was astonished how much *he* was enjoying this, the feel of Kei’s cock in his hand, the smooth soft skin sliding easily under his fingers, the act both familiar and strange – the shape of Kei’s manhood was subtly different, longer but narrower than his own, a little more sensitive in some ways, and less in others. Kei caught his other hand and brought it up to one of his nipples – Arman hadn’t realised that a man could enjoy being touched in that manner, but from the way Kei moaned and wriggled, he truly did like having his nipples tweaked carefully and rolled.

This was so much more beautiful, so much more satisfying than the mockery of lovemaking he’d endured that night months ago with his wife, whose cries of pleasure had been both feigned and forced. Not like Kei who shifted in his lap like a wild thing, lost in his delight and truly wanting Arman’s hands on him, not an ounce of guile or pretence in anything he did, just pure reaction and emotion. Arman was instantly and permanently addicted to the power of making Kei lose himself in his desire and need. Who needed to command an army when the feel of his fingers and lips enslaved his whole world?

He tried to prolong it for Kei as long as he could, knowing that was what he liked best himself and guessing Kei was not so very different. He took some pride in the fact that he seemed to be driving Kei quite pleasantly mad for some time, but finally Kei came with a guttural calling of his name, and a wonderful whole body shiver. Arman kept his hand loosely on him, and let Kei lie limply against him, obviously sated, obviously satisfied. He hoped it didn’t compare too badly with how Reji might have done it.

Kei lifted Arman’s sticky hand and kissed it, and then, rather to Arman’s shock, licked his own come from it – he wasn’t sure why it shocked him when

Kei had swallowed Arman's seed a few minutes before – it was partly that it would never have occurred to him that any one would ever do such a thing. But there were so many things he had no idea about....

Kei got him to rub the rest of the ointment into the skin of Kei's stomach, and then he just lay back against Arman, his contentment plain. "Are you happy?" Arman murmured against his ear.

"Yes, I am," Kei said just as quietly. "I've been such a damn fool, Arman."

"Why?"

"Because I thought it was wrong that you made me feel so at peace, and yet the pain that leaving you caused me should have proved my mistake. Pain has a purpose, and in this case, its purpose was to tell me I was being an idiot."

Arman chuckled and began to play idly with the strands of hair that had escaped and were hanging down Kei's chest. "And will this heal you? You meant it, I hope, when you said that you aren't just doing this from necessity." He winced as Kei elbowed him – fortunately not on his injured side. "Sorry."

"You should be. If I didn't come to you out of necessity before, I wouldn't come now. Yes, Bikel thinks you can heal me, but there are other parts to this problem that only time and I can deal with. My gift has altered, he doesn't know why, and that's something that I'll always need to watch." He sighed. "How long are you going to be away?"

"Well, it's eight days to Utuk and the same back – but it could be a month or more while actually in Kuprij depending on what happens."

"Then I'll be going with you, of course."

Arman's hand tightened in Kei's hair, his contentment replaced in an instant by raw fear. "No, you aren't."

Kei turned around. "I wasn't aware I'd been asking permission, Arman."

"Kei, there might be a battle – very likely there will be – I can't allow you to be in such danger...not after what happened to Loke...please don't ask this."

Kei twisted and knelt facing him, looking at Arman gravely. "And yet *you* can go into danger, possibly be killed. Can't you imagine what your death will do to me? Or even just waiting here, wondering if you'll ever come back? It would be better to slit my throat before you leave than to do that."

Arman's heart stuttered in his chest at the very idea. "Kei...if anything happened to you...."

Kei put a gentle hand on Arman's cheek. "You would have to tell yourself that it was still kinder than the alternative. Do you have to go? They can't just carry out your plans?"

"No, they need me – I can only prepare them so much, but there's always the unanticipated problem, not to mention the negotiations with Her Serenity. We're going to try and minimize the fighting, but we can't be sure there won't be serious resistance. Kei, I can't protect you if you go on this."

"But...are the Rulers going?"

"Lords Meki and Peika are coming. I don't think they'd look too kindly on my bringing my lover along."

Kei made a face. "You forget that's not all I am. Do you have a healer on this expedition? A soul-toucher? Who's going to make sure your soldiers are fit and that the hostages are cared for? Some damn army medic?"

Arman wished this didn't sound so reasonable. "No, you're right – this is an omission, and if you're really going to insist on coming, then I could also do with your help with the Gifted. Reis is presently being rather moody because a sailor died while he was bringing the ships in, and is talking about not going at all. We desperately need him – the other mind-mover can't do this on his own. Do you think you could talk to him?"

"I'll try. You forget how important this is to me too."

Arman tugged on a lock of hair. "No, I've never forgotten that. It's not my principal reason but I's been my principal consolation, since I never thought...that you and I...."

Kei smiled a little cheekily. "That you and I...would have sex?"

"You need a spanking," Arman said, tugging on his hair again.

Kei pulled the lock out of his fingers. "Now don't you start that, I've had enough hair pulling from Myka. Lesson one in the care and feeding of your Darshianese lover is – the hair always has to be rebraided before you and he go to bed, no matter how sleepy or tired you are."

"Why?"

"Because your Darshianese lover doesn't want to wake up half strangled, hair up his backside and the whole thing in an unholy tangle, Arman. You may like the look of it, but it takes as much attention as a sickly urs beast. You don't know what you're taking on."

Arman grinned and pulled him closer for a kiss. "I know exactly what and who I'm taking on. I'll braid your hair every night and every morning if I have to, because it, and you, make me happy."

Kei nuzzled his smooth cheek against Arman's bristly one. "Oh, if I'd known you were prepared to be my personal hairdresser, Sei Arman, I'd have been in your bed weeks ago. What a wasted opportunity," he said with a dramatic sigh.

Arman just held him closer. "Not wasted," he whispered.



Kei now had had the opportunity to see Arman's sleeping face many times, but he had never seen it so happy or at peace before – he couldn't help but be amazed how his handsome lover became even more beautiful when at peace. Only when he was like this, did it become obvious how much of the time Arman was under stress and unhappy, however well he tried to conceal it. The lines around his mouth and his eyes were the only clue. When they were gone, as now, it revealed what he looked like when he truly felt relaxed.

The sense of warmth and the relief from sadness that lying next to Arman brought were also familiar but the lack of guilt at feeling this way was completely new. He had been released from being a hostage weeks ago, but he hadn't felt truly free until this moment. He just couldn't stop smiling like an idiot as he looked at Arman. What a night it had been. Not the sex itself – after all, he had had his release with Reji earlier, and there was no doubt that Reji was far more skilled than Arman, if all he wanted was simple sexual pleasure. What had made it something Kei would treasure forever, was Arman himself and his sweet, serious innocence – so inexperienced, so willing to please, and so astonished at discovering the pleasure even simple acts could bring. It was a crime against nature, nothing less, that Arman had been denied the enjoyment of lovemaking before now. The kaleidoscope of Arman's emotions – his joy, nervousness transmuting into raw delight, even pride at making Kei come, the wonder of discovery – had been like a drug to Kei, and for the first time in months he had stopped cursing his gift. He even felt a little sorry for normals that they would never know what it was like to share what Arman was feeling. For once his 'gift' really had been just that.

Kei thought of Reji, and how two years ago, his lover had initiated him into lovemaking with another man, how he'd been so patient and careful with him. But Kei hadn't been a virgin for all intents and purposes, and it hadn't been the culmination of months of frustration...and Kei had not been deeply in love with Reji....

Reji.... Kei would have to talk to him and soon. But for now, he just wanted to enjoy watching Arman sleep, and this languid peace. He wished his headache could have been magically cured by happiness – he had been so absorbed in Arman's reactions that it had receded until they had settled down to sleep – but a concussion was a concussion. He would have a headache for

a couple of days or more, and that was that. Considering the gash on his head, he was lucky it wasn't worse.

He dozed again, and woke to find Arman was no longer watched, but the watcher. "Good morning," Arman said quietly, his eyes crinkling up in a smile.

"Hmmm, yes, it is," Kei said, his own smile coming out in response. "You're so handsome when you're asleep, you know."

Arman brushed the back of his hand against Kei's cheek. "Just thinking the same. How's the headache?"

"There, unfortunately."

"Maybe you should rest today."

"No, I want to be with you, and I need to make arrangements for medical care, and talk to Reis." Arman's expression darkened. "Arman, I don't want to fight with you over this."

"I know...and you're right, but you can't expect me to be happy about it."

Kei tangled his hand in Arman's hair and pulled him close for a slow kiss, which at least made his lover smile. "No, I don't expect that. I don't exactly want to go back to Utuk either, but until this war is over, then neither of us can do as we wish." He stared into Arman's eyes – how could anyone have eyes that colour, he wondered. It was scarcely natural. "Will you really be happy living in Ai-Albon?"

"Yes." No hesitation, no reservation.

"Fedor will have a fit. He won't be the only one."

Arman kissed his forehead. "If they're not prepared to put up with my presence for your sake, Kei, then they don't deserve you. I'll do my best to help them accept it."

"But what will you do? Arman, you're a noble, a general – we're just farmers and miners."

"Then I will learn to farm or to mine. Don't imagine I like being in the army – I never chose that for myself. As for being a noble...." He pulled a face. "My caste has no charms for me."

Kei wound one golden springy lock of hair around his finger – strange to have hair that resisted this way. "Won't you be bored?"

"Are you trying to talk me out of this? Twenty-four hours ago, you were prepared to live a life of raw misery because you didn't believe I would come back home with you, and now I've said I will, you're making every argument you can to stop me."



That intense blue gaze was serious, even though there was humour in his tone. "I just don't want you to throw your life away for me," Kei said, tugging a little on the curl in his grasp.

"Funny, because I was thinking my life was just truly beginning. I'm going with you, and you're stuck with me now. Get used to it." Arman hugged him briefly, but then sighed. He sat up and scratched his head. "I need to tell Lord Meki, and there's a lot to do. I have to get up – you can stay in bed if you like."

But Kei sat up too. "No, I need to speak to Reji and then find out what the situation is with medics and such."

He started to get out of bed, but Arman caught his shoulder. "Reji.... Are you going to be all right talking to him?"

"Arman, the man took it upon himself to interfere so thoroughly last night, he can hardly complain about anything now," Kei said firmly, although he wasn't quite as sure as he was trying to sound. "In fact, let me go talk to him now, I'll return so we can have our breakfast and you can take me to Lord Meki, if you think that's best." There was no point in delaying this, and he wanted to spare Reji even a moment's more concern. It was still early – Kei didn't want anyone accusing Arman of letting his lover interfere with his task.

Arman kissed him gently. "As you wish. Gods, that I'm allowed to kiss you now...."

Kei grinned. "Not only allowed, my lord, positively encouraged. I won't be long."

He dressed quickly, and realised he would have to retrieve his poor clothes which really had been on a tour in the last few days. He went upstairs and knocked on the door of the guest room, his heart in his throat – he hoped this wasn't going to be ugly. His control was somewhat better but it wouldn't stand a huge emotional outburst, especially not from someone he was as close to as he was to Reji.

The door opened to reveal a haggard, anxious looking Reji. "Kei! Damn it, I was worried sick!" He grabbed Kei and crushed him close. "Where did you go?"

"Reji, I'm all right, just let's get inside," Kei said, gritting his teeth against the pain of the contact, but not wanting to push his friend away. Reji was actually shaking, he had been so upset, and Kei felt angry with himself for not thinking of what this was doing to those who loved him.

Reji pulled him into the apartments, and then peered at him anxiously, before thrusting him back. "I'm sorry, I forgot...are you all right, little brother?"

Kei made himself put his arms around Reji's waist and hug him, ignoring the pain it caused him. "I'm fine – it's all right, Reji. Can we sit? I need to talk to you, and then I have to get back to Arman."

Reji pulled himself free. "Arman? So you spoke to him?"

"Yes, I did," Kei said, pantomiming a cuff to his head. "That's for interfering. And this," he said, kissing Reji's cheek, "is for caring."

Reji was looking at him in a guarded way. "So...you two have stopped playing games?"

"Yes, we have. It's all right. He's going to come back to the village with me, though the gods only know what Fedor will think."

"Fedor will have a fit."

"That's what I said."

Reji smiled, although Kei couldn't help but know it was forced a little. "But then this is perfect – we don't lose you, and you're happy. I'm glad, Keichichi."

"And I'm sorry, Reji. You know I'll always love you, don't you? I just...need to be with him, and he with me."

Reji took his hands and peered into his eyes. "No, I understand, Kei. I knew you did from the first time you spoke of him, that's why I couldn't understand why you were being so blind. Or so damn stupid."

"Neither can I now. I just couldn't see how it could work – but the solution was simple. I'm just not looking forward to the arguments when we get back."

Reji struck his own chest with his fist. "I'll fight anyone who tries to send him away, Kei. You're too important to lose," he said stoutly.

It was breaking Kei's heart to see Reji trying to put such a brave face on it, but his lover...his friend...obviously needed to do it this way. "Thank you...and I'll fight anyone who tries to tell me I can't love both of you at the same time." He came up to Reji and laid his head on Reji's shoulder. "Even him, do you understand me? The only thing that changes is sex."

"Maybe we should convince him to try three in a bed," Reji joked, but his eyes were still sad.

"Er...no, Rei-ki. He's unusually free-minded for a Prij, but he's still a Prij." He knew Reji wasn't serious, but he still felt bad about this. "Anyway, I wanted to tell you, and to apologise for being such a brat last night. I also need you to explain to Fedor that I'll be gone longer than planned because I'm going to Utuk with Arman...."

"You *what*?" Reji yelled. Kei had to move away from him hastily out of sheer self-defence. "You're pissing well not doing anything of the sort! Kei, you only just escaped from there!"

“Reji, I need to be with him, and if he died....”

“Then he dies, but he’s not taking you with him!”

Reji pushed past him to stalk towards the door. “Reji, no, where are you going?”

“To tell his pissing lordship that he’s not taking you away from us again.”

He was out the door and slamming it before Kei could move – by the time, Kei opened it and raced after him, Reji was at the stairs and running down them. “Reji, stop!” Kei hissed, not wanting to shout up and down the halls of the Rulers’ House but dismayed at the turns of events.

Reji ignored him and disappeared out of Kei’s sight. All Kei could do was run and hope Reji didn’t actually do any physical harm before he caught him.

He got to Arman’s rooms where he found the door open and Reji holding Arman’s shirt in his clenched fist, clearly about to bellow at him. Arman wasn’t offering any resistance and his expression was blank – but Kei could sense how angry he was. “Reji, let him go and get away from him.”

Reji ignored him. “You are not taking Kei back to Utuk, you bastard,” he said, shaking Arman. “Haven’t you done enough to him?”

Kei forced himself between Reji and Arman. “Get away from him, I said. Reji! He’s injured! Let him *go*!” Whether it was his yell, or his words or just Reji not wanting to hurt him, Kei didn’t know, but it worked – he let Arman loose and moved back. “Gods, what are you doing, you damn idiot! Arman’s not ‘taking’ me anywhere!”

Reji pointed at Arman, who as yet wasn’t saying anything to either of them, with a trembling hand. “Are you going to die for him now, Kei? It’s not enough we had to let you go with him as a hostage, and see you come back so damaged....” He took a shuddering breath and turned to Arman. “Isn’t it enough you take our brightest jewel without you taking it and throwing it into the midden? Who are you to deserve him, if you can’t even protect him?”

Kei drew breath to speak, but Arman laid his hand on his arm. “Let me,” he said quietly. He moved forward. “First of all, I’m no happier about this than you are, Reji. But Kei *is* a free man now. I’m not making him do anything, and I never will do so again. Secondly, he’s not a possession to be bandied about, taken, thrown away or owned. You may love him but you don’t own him. Neither do I. How he came to my notice, yes, I accept that was wrong, all of it was wrong. But no one’s keeping him by force.”

“And no one is making me go to Utuk, “ Kei repeated. “I need to go, Reji. Apart from anything else, I can be useful, and I want our people home. I will never rest until I know they’re safe.”

“And of course you’re the only one who can do this,” Reji said with heavy sarcasm, his angry sorrowful eyes burning into Kei. “How convenient for the Butcher of Ai-Darbin.”

The name sent a spike of sorrow through Arman, and drove Kei to instant fury. “Get out, Reji,” he said through gritted teeth. “Just go home and take your self-righteousness with you. I want no one near me who claims to be a friend but who’ll hurt someone I love.”

“No.” Kei turned, puzzled at Arman’s soft word. “Kei, don’t do this. Don’t destroy an old and valuable relationship for my sake. I *am* a murderer, you know that.”

“You’re *not*! They even judged it thus!”

“Don’t quibble on a point of law. Reji is right – you’re not coming to Utuk because you’re the only one who can do this, you’re coming because of me.” Arman put his palm on Kei’s chest. “Please, Kei. Don’t be angry, and please, think of what you’re doing to your clan.”

“My clan will have me when I’ve done this, Arman, and I’ve seen you come back safe along with the others. I owe them a duty. I don’t owe them my life, not any more. I paid any debt on that score when I agreed to be a hostage.” He clasped Arman’s fingers in his. “Though in the end, the price was too high, at least I haven’t lost everything.”

Arman looked at him, his expression sad and affectionate. “I’ll work all my life to make up for what you *have* lost, Kei,” he said quietly.

Kei had almost forgotten that they weren’t alone, but Reji’s voice called him back to reality. “So you’re intent on putting your life at risk for him?”

Kei turned. “Yes. Not for him – for us. Accept it or leave, Reji. And never again call him what you did, or you and I will be enemies.”

He could feel the shock of both men at that statement. Reji stared. “You go from denying you even care for him to this in a day, little brother...you make my head spin,” he said finally with a sad smile. “All right, if you go to Utuk, I go to Utuk.”

“No!”

“I can’t allow that,” Arman said promptly. “Kei has a useful role. You’d be dead weight.”

“I *what*?”

Kei put his hand up to stop another screaming match starting. “Arman, don’t. Reji, what possible reason would you have to come?”

“To protect you and keep an eye on you, Kei!”

“Right. Apart from that?” he said heavily. He wished all the men in his life who loved him weren’t such overprotective idiots. “Because lovely though the idea is that I might want or need a personal bodyguard, I can’t see Lord Meki being impressed. Especially, Reji, when you know about as much about fighting as you do about surgery.”

“I can use a sword if you give me one.”

Arman snorted at that. “Now you’re proving nothing but that you’re a brave fool. If I wanted someone to protect Kei with a sword, I’d set Captain Tiko over him – in fact, I probably will, since he’s coming.”

“Oh, *is* he?” Kei said dryly, putting that little fact aside for a private discussion with Arman later. “But there you go, Reji. I can have a fully trained soldier looking after me – why would I need you?”

“I...” Reji’s shoulders slumped. “I just can’t bear to see you go into danger and not lift a finger to help, Kei,” he said in a quiet, defeated voice. “You don’t know how I felt that day, riding off with the others. I felt like my heart was lying in the road, cut into a million pieces. If anything happened to you and I didn’t at least try to stop it this time....” Then he straightened. “But as you wish it...I see I have no right any more to argue this. I’ll be returning to the village today, Kei. Please....” He turned to Arman. “Please bring him home,” he whispered.

“Reji....” Kei just wanted to hold Reji again and kiss him... he couldn’t do that with Arman there – but his old lover looked heartbroken...or even just broken....

“You’re an expert with urs beasts, are you not?”

At Arman’s clipped words, Reji turned around – he’d been heading to the door. “Yes, I am. So what?”

Kei looked at his lover in puzzlement. “Arman?”

“We need someone to manage the beasts we’re taking. We’ll also need someone who can help us get the hostages home. Can you be spared from your village, even for months? I can make no promises as to when you will return – or even if.”

Reji’s expression brightened. “It will be a slight struggle for them, but they’ve managed before. I’m the best beast manager in north Darshian, and I know more about putting a caravan together than anyone in Darshek.”

Arman turned to Kei. “Is this true?”

“Yes, but are you serious?”

Arman took his hand. “We do need someone for this, and every soldier we don’t take is another who can stay to defend Darshek and the rest of Darshian. If you consent, and he wishes it, I will put it to Lord Meki.

However....” He turned to Reji, still holding Kei’s hand tightly. “Touch me again in anger, and you won’t just answer to me. Shout like that again at me, or anyone under my command, while we’re afloat, and I’ll have you put overboard. This is a military expedition, not a children’s playground, and displays of that order could cost lives. If you can control yourself, and your boasts are true, then come, and be welcome as any friend of Kei’s is to me. If you can’t, better you turn around and walk out rather than have you risk anyone for your tantrums.”

“Reji? I really don’t want you to come, but I won’t object if you wish to.” Kei tugged himself free from Arman, but gave him a quick kiss before he left his side to stand in front of Reji. “But please consider this carefully.”

“I don’t need to, Kei. Those are my people too, and you’re my...friend. I want to do it. And yes,” he said past Kei’s shoulder to Arman, “I understand all you say. But if you....”

Kei put his hand over Reji’s mouth. “Don’t. You’ve made your position clear. But I belong to no one and I’ll have no threats, do you hear? Don’t make me have to walk away from you, Reji. Force me to choose and there is no choice.” Reji nodded. “Thank you,” Kei said, and then pulled Reji into a hug which Reji returned with crushing strength, and overwhelming gratitude and relief. “You can be such an arse, Reji,” he whispered, but he was no longer in the least angry with him. He could feel Reji trembling and he guessed his friend had not had much sleep again. In fact, the whole period of Kei’s absence had to have been a torment for him. With one thing and another, Kei hadn’t had much chance to make it up to him. “Have you eaten? We were about to have breakfast.”

“No, I’ve been too worried.”

“Then stay and eat, then you can join us for whatever Arman is planning with meetings and such. Yes, Arman?” He asked permission with his eyes, and Arman nodded. His lover was a little wary, but Kei was determined to end this bad blood immediately, not just for his own and Arman’s sake, and Reji’s, but because Reji’s acceptance of Arman would make a difference to all their futures.

Reji pulled away from him “Just let me change my clothes, Kei, and bring yours down here. I’ll return shortly.”

“Then I’ll order more food,” Arman said calmly.

Kei could have sighed with relief. Finally everyone was behaving like adults. He – and his overstrained gift – were very grateful for it.



Arman went to the bell-pull to summon the housekeeper, and then turned to Kei. "This wasn't exactly how I imagined my first morning with you would go," he said, keeping his tone deliberately mild – it wasn't Kei's fault. Or even Reji's, really. "But I have to warn you in all fairness – if Lord Meki overrules me on this, not only will I not argue with him, but if you or Reji try, I'll have you taken into custody for your own protection. This isn't a game, Kei. I know you know that."

"Yes, I do," Kei said quietly, coming to him and taking his hand. "Thank you. That was a very good thing you did."

Arman kissed him, reminding himself of the wonderful softness of Kei's lips. "I know Reji's suffered because of what I've done – and he's suffering now. I'm not going to give you up to help him, I'm not that noble – but I'll do what else I can." He pulled Kei close. "Besides, he reminded me that this is a Darshianese mission, about Darshianese citizens. Really, I've no right to stop any of you if you want to participate. Who am I to say that their future is best placed in my hands, when it is I who ripped them from their homes in the first place?"

"Enough of that," Kei said sternly. "And I meant what I said to Reji – I won't allow people to keep flinging accusations at you. The deaths at Ai-Darbin have been examined and laid to rest and the spirits of the dead boys are not served by these recriminations. The hostages aren't served by an endless examination of history either, Arman."

"Perhaps not, Kei-gidu," he said, deliberately using the honorific, and meaning it too. "I remain worried and insist on the right to state that fact. However, if you two are coming, then it will free up soldiers. Are you up to coming with me to the barracks this morning?" Arman brushed the bump on Kei's head, making his lover wince. "You know, that looks perfectly hideous."

"It feels horrible too, don't touch it. No, I'm all right. Reji's tired though. Perhaps if we visit this morning, I could persuade him to come back and rest for a while. When are you meeting Reis and the other Gifted again?"

"This evening, when we'll meet to go over our final plans. I'll introduce you to the others. Reji doesn't need to come to that, but..." he said as he kissed the inviting angle of Kei's jaw, which seemed to be a particularly sensitive place, "as they'll see us interacting other than in a professional way, it seems right that they know who you are and what you bring to this."

“Yes, that’s fair,” Kei breathed, even as his hand stole under Arman’s shirt. “I want you,” he whispered.

*Gods....* He’d never had this delicious problem before, how to refuse a tormentingly beautiful lover because he had a damn mission to plan. “Kei...my control isn’t that perfect, you know, and we have things....”

“...to do, I know.” Kei stepped back. “You’re just so good to touch, Arman.”

“And you may do so, but....” There was a knock on the door. Arman took a deep breath and plastered a polite smile on his face before opening the door, informing the housekeeper there would be three for breakfast, and closing the door again.

Kei pounced and for several minutes, all Arman could do was let his clever lover plunder his mouth, as he held onto the wall for support. It wasn’t until there was a second knock that he found the control to push Kei firmly back, and even as he straightened his clothing, he couldn’t help but feel a little proud of the pout on Kei’s beard-reddened lips. “Now, behave. Remember my position.”

Kei raised an eyebrow. “I could teach you some new ones,” he said with a wicked grin.

Arman growled and turned his back resolutely. He opened the door to the servants bringing breakfast. Behind them was Reji, with two packs in his hand, and, once he saw Arman, a rather knowing look on his face which made Arman flush bright red. Gods, how was he supposed to handle having two men at his breakfast table who knew exactly how the other responded, and how they looked when they’d just been indulging in unseemly behaviour?

However, Reji said nothing, and seemed to have recovered both his equilibrium and his manners, handing Kei his clothes and waiting to be invited to sit. He seemed a little subdued – he was, as Kei said, obviously tired, probably having spent a sleepless night worrying about Kei, as Arman would have done himself if Kei had not finally decided to stop torturing them both. That Reji was miserable at giving Kei up to someone he disliked – or to anyone – was also perfectly obvious. Arman refused to play a possessive lover. If Kei wanted to comfort Reji in any way he chose, that was for his conscience. Kei had come to him of his own free will and would stay of his own free will – if Arman tried to be possessive, he would drive him away. He was sure Kei would do his utmost never to hurt Reji or him.

For his own part, Arman decided to treat Reji with all the honour he deserved because of his kindness to and love for Kei, and with the politeness which he hoped might begin to convince the man that not all Prijs regarded the



Darshianese as scum. Now he'd stopped shouting, and had a few minutes to calm down, Reji was showing the side of him which had clearly won Kei's affection, and that of Myka. Arman explained as they ate what the plans to this point were, and he was pleased that Reji seemed to grasp the issues quickly. Not a stupid man then, which was a relief. "If they let the hostages go, how have they decided to take them home?" Reji asked. "Will they be up to a long journey by foot?"

"Assume not," Kei answered. "Even if they've not been mistreated, they won't have been allowed to get out or stay fit at all."

"I had a report that at least one woman was pregnant before I left," Arman said. Kei looked at him in shock. "I'm sorry, I didn't think you'd want to know that, given...you know...."

"So others may also be. Poor girls," Reji said.

"Will her clan accept her?" Arman asked. Both Darshianese men looked at him in puzzlement. "I only ask because a raped woman in our smaller villages would probably be driven out. The child would be exposed to the mercy of the gods at the very least."

"That's *awful*!" Kei said, his eyes wide with shock. "What fault is it of the woman or the child?"

"She'll be taken back and treated kindly, at least she would be in Ai-Albon and in Ai-Darbin," Reji said firmly. "And if she can't bear the idea of the child, a relative would gladly take it in. Which village is she from?"

"I don't recall, I'm sorry. But coming back to my point, someone in that condition would never cross Tirko Pass, and we don't know when or if Kurlik Pass will be reopened. Reji, you and Kei should put your heads together on this and decide the most humane way of getting people home quickly. I want you both to come with me this morning and I'll have a chance to reunite Kei with his dear friend again."

Kei poked his foot under the table. "You're enjoying the prospect too much, Arman. I suspect you of base motives."

"Now how can I have chosen the captain to annoy you when I didn't know you were coming with us until last night, Kei? Be reasonable. Besides, he was asking after you most devotedly." He couldn't help a smile at Kei's dark scowl. "He'll be on our ship, of course. I want to make sure you're well looked after."

The poke became a decided kick, and even Reji grinned. "You do take some looking after, Keichichi," he said. Arman hadn't heard this nickname before – was it just used between them as lovers? He stamped down the little jealous feelings that arose at the idea.

“I can look after *myself*, “ Kei said, glaring at them both. “Anyone who thinks differently better watch what ends up in their loincloth on this journey.”

Reji looked at Arman. “I think I should warn you, our healer has a vicious streak.”

“Oh? He always seems so meek and well-mannered. I put down all those stories Myka was telling me to sibling rivalry.”

“You were talking to Myka?”

“A little, yes. A charming girl. I hadn’t realised what a burden she was suffering under though, having Kei as her brother.”

Kei stood up. “Are you two done yet?” he said crossly. “I wasn’t aware that I’d been invited to eat with you so you could pick on me.”

Reji tugged on his shirt. “Oh, calm down, little brother. It’s just harmless fun. I’m sure the general has ways of dealing with you that I wouldn’t dare employ.” He succeeded in making Kei sit again, but only so Kei could tug his hair – and not gently. “You’re definitely getting to be like Myka, Kei. Stop that, you brat.”

“Enough, you two,” Arman said peaceably. “I want to introduce you to Lord Meki. Are you presentable?” There was a quick wiping of hands and surreptitious straightening of shirts and braids, before Kei nodded. Arman collected his stick, and got up, Kei coming to his side and looking worried at the way he limped. “I’m all right, it’s just stiff in the morning, and I didn’t have the massage last night.”

“I’ll give you one as soon as we return, “ Kei said quietly. “You have to make time for that, Arman.”

“Forgive me – I was distracted,” Arman said with a wry twist to his mouth, and Kei smiled a little. “Let’s go – Reji, remember what I said, and if he vetoes the idea, then that’s it.”

Reji only nodded, to Arman’s relief. He honestly didn’t know what Lord Meki would say. It really was most irregular, and Arman couldn’t really summon much enthusiasm, regardless of the practical benefits. Every time he thought of Kei lying dead like Loke, his heart literally stuttered in his chest with fear. They hoped this would all go smoothly but as Reis had discovered, there were no guarantees in any of this.

His lordship was at his breakfast, but greeted Arman and the others politely. “Good morning, general. And you’re Kei, I seem to recall?”

“Yes, my lord. Please let me apologise for my behaviour earlier.” Kei really looked ashamed – Arman resisted putting a comforting hand on his arm. That would just make it worse.

“Nonsense, lad, you were clearly ill, and that bump on your head would cause anyone to be addled. And you are?” Lord Meki said, looking at Reji.

“Reji of Ai-Albon, my lord. Trader and friend of Kei.”

“Ah, yes, the one we were looking for when he turned up. General, have you brought these young people to meet me for a reason?”

“Yes, my lord. Kei has offered to be our medical adviser and to take charge of the hostage’s welfare, while Reji is experienced in the management of urs beasts. I’d also like them to plan how we will get the hostages back home in the shortest time, given the distances and that some of them may not be completely well or fit.”

Lord Meki stood, frowning. “Two civilians, general? We’ve got other healers we could call on.”

“Yes, my lord. Kei’s offer seemed excellent, I saw no harm in putting it to you.” He was hoping Lord Meki would refuse, but he was also worried what that would do to Kei. All Arman could do was be scrupulously fair and let the matter be taken out of his hands, since he was not unbiased.

Lord Meki came over to look at Kei. “Young man, are you going to be fit? This isn’t going to be a stroll on the beach, you know.”

“Yes, I know, my lord. I will be fit – the concussion will linger for a few days, but I’ll be completely recovered by the time we are within reach of Utuk.”

“Hmmm. And the other problem? The one for which you sought help from our academy masters?”

“I’ve received their advice and after some thought, have been able to act on it,” Kei said in a neutral tone – and then ruined it by giving Arman an unmistakeably intimate smile. From his expression, Lord Meki hadn’t missed its meaning. “This is one of the reasons I wish to be part of the expedition, my lord.”

“Is that so? We’re not in the business of assisting romances, Kei. Aren’t you being rather frivolous?”

Lord Meki’s sharp eyes looked penetratingly at Arman’s lover, but Kei gave no ground. “I don’t believe so, my lord. I’ve travelled many weeks with the general to bring him here to help, and I believe I had some small part in helping him understand how wrong the hostage taking was. More than that – I have close relatives and friends among the hostages, and so I’ve a much more personal stake than anyone in this room in seeing them home. I’m also very good at what I do. If I thought I would be inadequate, my lord, I would not

have put myself forward for this task, though I'd have begged to be allowed to travel with the general as a passenger."

Lord Meki glanced at Arman. "Speaks well for himself, doesn't he?"

"Yes, my lord, but with good cause. I too wouldn't have put his name forward if I thought his skills were inadequate, though I do so with a heavy heart because of the danger. However, Kei is aware of that, and has made his choice."

"And you, Reji – your motives?"

Reji straightened up and spoke clearly. "Like Kei, I wish our people to come back and wish to help. I also have a personal interest in keeping both the general and Kei safe."

Lord Meki shook his head. "Most irregular, general. I fear you will be distracted at a crucial moment."

This was Arman's own fear, and after what had happened to Loke, he knew he could not take Kei's safety for granted. "My lord, we'll have many people on this expedition, including yourself, whose deaths would be a grievous loss. Kei is not the only person whose welfare I'll be concerned about."

Lord Meki heard his words in silence, and continued to stare at Kei as if trying to see his soul. Finally he sighed. "Kei, Reji, I know you're sincere. But we will have nearly a thousand sailors and soldiers with us, as well as the hostages when they're released. I hesitate to mention such a thing to you, Kei, because I know you've already suffered a great deal for your clan and our people. But that suffering, our efforts and the lives of all these people could be all for naught if either of you behave in an indulgent manner – or if you place your personal desires above the needs of the mission. Now – I want your solemn oaths that you will do nothing whatsoever to distract any member of the team – regardless of the situation. If you can't so swear, then I can't let you go. If you do go and you fail to keep your oaths, you will spend the rest of the journey in the brig."

Kei had turned pale, but he still shook his head. "I swear, my lord, on my honour and my clan's name."

Reji affirmed without hesitation, "And I also swear on my honour and the name of my clan, my lord."

"Very well. I still reserve the right to order you to stay behind if the plans demand it, but for now, I'll accept the general's assessment of your usefulness. If you two would excuse me, I would like a word with him."

Arman smiled reassuringly at his lover. "Kei, if you and Reji wait in our room, I'll come to you there and we can go to the barracks."

Reji took Kei's arm. "Come on, Kei, we've wasted enough of his lordship's time."

Lord Meki gave them a polite, thin-lipped smile. "No waste of my time, young man, but there's much to do. I will doubtless speak to you again. Good day."

He waited until the door closed behind them before he turned to Arman. "Explain, general. I can tell you're no more comfortable with this than I am."

Arman asked if he could sit – his leg really ached this morning. "Kei's problem – and the solution – requires my physical presence. The alternative is complete isolation from other people. I also happen to love him, and happily, he's realised he loves me. However, he simply will not countenance the idea of being apart if that means I might be killed in his absence. I didn't have another solution, and he is actually as good as he claims to be."

"And if you're killed? What will happen to him?"

Arman tried to reply calmly even though this was his biggest concern – what would happen to Kei if he were lost. "I don't know, my lord. I've been trying to help Kei recover for months, but the moment we're forced apart, he begins to deteriorate. He's simply not far enough along the path of healing to tolerate it. If he were forced to remain behind, he probably would have to go into isolation until I returned. If I died during that time...he would have to remain thus isolated."

"A cruel fate indeed for such a young, and apparently able man." Lord Meki sat down, and suddenly looked rather haggard. "Forgive me, general, for I find it hard to be objective on this subject myself. I lost my wife a year ago, almost exactly to the day – she had a wasting disease which no healer could cure, and died after a long period of severe pain. I felt I died myself that day. Since then, my life has been my work."

Arman nodded sympathetically as he continued. "Sometimes, when I see young people in love, walking hand in hand, I want to say to them, beware, look at the pain that comes when you love them and they die. That's when I'm feeling very low, you understand," he said, baring his teeth without much humour in the smile. "Other times, I think, I had thirty-two wonderful years with a woman I adored, and I wouldn't want to have missed that even to have spared myself this pain now. I suppose I'm saying...I understand how you want to be together and I know why he would fear losing you, even without this other thing which I don't really understand. But part of me wants to tell

you that you're setting yourself up for grief. That's an old, tired man talking, though."

"I'm sorry," Arman said, and meant it. "I don't want to miss any time with Kei because of a fear of losing him, and if he wants to be with me enough that he is prepared to accept any risk, even that of losing me, then how can I say no?"

"You can't," Lord Meki said sadly. "You're a lucky man, general. He's clever and he's passionate and he's brave. We could do with more like him in our country. We could use someone like that here in Darshek, but I suppose he only wants to go home."

"For now, yes, he does. I know I'm lucky, and I don't deserve such fortune."

"We rarely do, general." He seemed to close in again, hiding the brief glimpse of his personal feelings. "Fine, it's done and I think you all know what's at risk. Our sailors have begun taking over the Prijian ships and they've started to load them with supplies. Tonight, you'll be meeting the mind-speakers who are coming with us. Let me have the plan Reji and Kei are making for the hostage return by then, so I'll know if we need to bring extra equipment." He drummed his fingers on the desk. "So much depends on whether we can use Kurlik Pass or not. We can get people across it whether or not it's open but I don't want to fight our way to it to use it."

"And can you close it again if you need to?"

"Certainly we can – and Tirko Pass or any other your people choose to come through. We won't be caught a third time. If this fails, general, Kuprij will find itself locked down tight. The Andonese won't tolerate further aggression, and I have to say, neither will the Darshianese." He gave Arman a hard look. "And at that point, you'll need to decide which side of the border you want to be on, for good."

"I've already decided, my lord. My place is with Kei and Kei wishes to go home."

"You'd actually bury yourself in a tiny place like Ai-Albon? Nonsense."

"Why not? What's the alternative, my lord?"

"Whatever you want, general. You have the freedoms of any Darshianese citizen. Make of it what you want. The Rulers and the country can provide a small income, but a young, able man...."

"With the wrong coloured hair and skin, being known as the butcher of Ai-Darbin...? I think not, my lord. If Kei's people will tolerate me, that's more than

enough,” Arman said, not wanting to discuss this further. It was, after all, his personal business.

“If you say so, general, but we’ll speak of this again, mark my words.” Arman bowed his head in agreement. “Very well. I’ll meet with you this evening, and don’t forget that report.”

“No, my lord. Good day to you.”



“What’s wrong, Keichichi?”

Kei sat down in a chair and looked up at Reji. “Oh...just realising how real this is, how dangerous it is. Reji, I’d be happier if you stayed behind. There’s no point the village losing both of us.”

Reji came over to him and crouched down. “You don’t really expect me to agree to that, do you?”

“No,” Kei said, grinning sadly at Reji’s wry expression. “You didn’t expect me not to say it either.”

“No.” He stood and pulled a chair over. “He really cares for you, I’ll give you that. Bastard,” he added without heat.

“Don’t start, Reji. If Kurlik Pass isn’t going to be opened, then I think we’ll have to take everyone back via Darshek. The sick, injured or pregnant, if they can travel at all, we should take first and let them rest at each village. There’s a cart design....”

He spent the next few minutes absorbed in the plans with Reji and hardly noticed when the door opened. It was only when Arman touched his cheek that he looked up and smiled – he hadn’t thought Arman would be demonstrative in public, so it was lovely to be claimed. “We’re working,” he said gravely.

“Yes, I can see. Colonel Jiv is expecting me, though. Shall we go?”

Arman took them out to the front hall. Kei wanted to hide from the fearsome reception clerk – he really shouldn’t have said what he had, head wound or no – but Arman took him by the hand and led him up to the front desk. “Elsi, order the carriage for us, would you?” he asked in a drawling, arrogant tone Kei hadn’t heard in months.

“Yes, general.”

“And I believe you’ve met Kei. Kei’s going to be staying in my rooms with me and will be working closely with us on this project. I trust that meets with your approval.”

“Yes, general, of course.”

“Thank you. The carriage is urgent, Elsi.”

“Yes, general,” she said, scurrying off to send the message.

Arman limped over to a chair and made Kei sit down too. He motioned Reji to join them. “What in hells was that about?” Reji whispered to Kei.

Kei leaned over. “Arman doesn’t like rude servants – or uppity ones,” he said with a grin.

“Or uppity lovers,” Arman said severely, but he still held Kei’s hand tenderly. Kei noticed he was holding his walking stick rather oddly – so that his fingers could caress the underside of the knot that formed the handle. Arman saw him looking and gave him a curious smile. Kei suddenly realised that Arman had discovered the meaning of the carvings he’d made on the handle – carvings he’d made almost in desperation, never expecting to have to explain them to Arman, or why he’d carved them, for at the time, he hardly knew himself. From the way Arman was touching them, he not only had had them translated, but was pleased with the meaning – or one of them. If Arman didn’t want to be dragged into a side room and kissed breathless, he really should stop looking at Kei like that.

Kei made himself look away instead, and sat up straight, trying not to seem like a man surrounded by lovers, one of whom was radiating desire and love like a beacon, and who had just made a very public declaration that he, Kei, was his and was sleeping with him. Kei would never have expected a Prij general to go so far. But then he would never have expected to love a Prij general more than life itself.

Arman kept hold of Kei’s hand all the way into the carriage, and still held it as he asked them for their plans, saying Lord Meki wanted them by that evening. “Why the rush, general?”

“Call him Arman,” Kei chided Reji.

Arman shook his head as if to tell Kei such things didn’t bother him as he explained to Reji that they wanted to know if they would need to take any equipment with them. It bothered Kei though. They didn’t use titles in the villages, and Arman was to live as one of them. It was important that Reji treated him as he would anyone else.

The ride to the docks took a quarter of an hour. “How’s your control?” Arman asked quietly as the carriage jolted along.

“All right if you’re touching me – all right if no one shouts or gets upset. It’s improving but not what it was before...you know....”

“The brawl?” Reji asked.



Kei nodded. "Then stay by me as much as you can," Arman said firmly. "Reji, would you keep anyone remotely...disturbing away from him if you're with him? That applies on the journey as well."

"Of course," Reji said, and Kei could sense the pleasure at being asked to do something meaningful to help him. Kei patted his leg and gave him a smile in thanks. He wished this wasn't so hard for him.

At the barracks, they were met by the colonel, who saluted Arman, something Kei was rather surprised at – there was currently no rank of general in the Darshianese army, although there once had been, a long time past. Kei wondered exactly what position Arman had been asked to hold during this period of planning.

"Colonel Jiv, this is Kei, a healer from Ai-Albon. He's going to be supervising the medical aspects and general welfare for the mission – would he be able to speak to the medics who are coming with us?"

"Of course. And this gentleman?"

"Reji, also of Ai-Albon. He's going to take charge of the beasts, so you can leave your sergeant here."

Colonel Jiv's eyes narrowed. "Is that so? Rather unusual, isn't it?"

"We have need of his assistance when the hostages come back – it's just an economy of manpower," Arman said calmly.

That placated the colonel immediately. "Very well. Reji, the stables are over there." He called out for one of his men. "Seva, take this gentleman to the stable master. He's to take charge of the beasts. Then get the medics we've assigned to the mission and tell them to come to my room."

Seva saluted, and with a slightly worried glance back, Reji followed him out. Kei and Arman were taken to the colonel's office where Arman spoke quietly to the colonel about preparations for the journey – Kei knew the discussion of armour and weapons was necessary but it was making him feel sick to his stomach.

After a few minutes of this, Arman glanced at Kei and stood up, urging Kei to do the same. "Excuse me, colonel – I just need a quick word with Kei before the others get here," he said casually, taking Kei's arm and leading him outside into the fresh air. "What's wrong?"

Kei gulped down the nausea. "Just...talking about soldiers...war...."

Arman kept his hand on Kei's arm, which helped. "Kei, if it's having this effect on you now, how will you feel when we get to Utuk?"

Kei looked despairingly at Arman. "I don't know."

“Neither do I and it worries me.” Arman pulled him close, which amazed Kei since any of the soldiers in the courtyard could see them if they chose. “It’s not too late to pull out until we set sail, Kei,” he said in a gentle voice, right by Kei’s ear. “If you are going to suffer like this all the way and back, you would do better to stay because you’ll worry me sick, and distract me as Lord Meki fears.”

Kei could only rest his cheek against Arman’s neck. “If...I let this defeat me....”

“This is not something you need to defeat or get over, because it’s not part of your normal life,” Arman said in a low voice. “Can you speak to the medics or do you want to go back?”

Kei made himself stand up straight. “Speak to them – I can handle my job.”

Arman reached up and touched his face but Kei moved away from him. “People will talk,” he said.

“I don’t care. Walk in with me, or walk back to the carriage. I won’t think less of you whichever you choose.”

Arman’s eyes were full of concern, and nothing else. “I’m coming in.”

Arman nodded and just took his arm again. By the time they walked back into the colonel’s office, the six medics were there. Kei concentrated on the immediate task and not on why his skills might be needed, and that helped him get through. The medics were only a little suspicious of his presence, but he quickly reassured them that he was competent, and with a little gentle prompting from Arman, took control of the meeting. After a little while, and with a concerned look from Arman to check that Kei was handling things, he and the colonel left the office to them to continue their discussions. Kei was so absorbed, he didn’t miss Arman’s buffering presence.

He was impressed by the preparations the medics had made, but they had also missed some things, which he was able to advise on. The care and accommodation of the hostages was also something they spent time discussing – he was able to give them a better understanding of the likely condition of their people, and how the medics could prepare. One thing he was adamant on – no one with a sword, and preferably not in any kind of a uniform, should spend much time with the hostages.

After a good hour or more of planning, there was a knock on the door. Kei called the visitor to come in – he immediately regretted it when a broadly smiling Tiko came in. “They said you were here. Are you done?”

Kei looked at his colleagues and was disappointed to find they were in fact finished. He reluctantly called the meeting to a halt. "You can contact me via the general or the Rulers' House," he said, and ignored Tiko's smirk.

The medics nodded and left. Tiko came over and offered his hand. "How are you, lad? We've been hearing all kinds of stories about you, and then one of my men said he saw you and the general kissing in the courtyard. I told him that couldn't be, of course."

"We weren't *kissing*," Kei said hotly, and then flushed bright red at Tiko's pleased look at having caught him out. "Oh, leave me alone, you bastard. Why are you here?"

"Polite as ever, Kei. I saw your general and asked after you, and he said you were here. Asked me to come find you and see if you were done, so I did. So if you want to lose your temper, lose it at him. Why *are* you here, lad?"

Kei looked at him warily. He didn't want to listen to another rant about him going to Utuk. "I'm helping with preparations for the mission – medical matters, and advising about the care of the hostages."

Tiko clapped him on the shoulder. "Good, I'm glad to hear that. I tell you, Kei, our medics need better training."

"Then why in hells don't you make sure they get it?" Kei said impatiently. "Have them at the academy, pay them officer rates, treat them as professionals. It's not one step up from being a beast manager, you know, and they're not even given that status."

"Suggest it to the colonels then, Kei – or Lord Meki, since I suppose now you and the general are so well in with each other, you must have his ear as well."

Kei growled and went for the door. He didn't want to be teased on this subject – Tiko had entirely too much ammunition. "Have you seen Reji?"

"Reji? No, why?"

"He's going to be the beast manager – he should be in the stables."

"Beast manager? I thought you and he would be going back to Ai-Albon – ah, but then you'll be wanting to wait for the general, I suppose," Tiko said, nodding to himself at realising this.

"Where is Arman, anyway?" Kei asked as they walked out into the corridor.

"Stores – come on, I'm supposed to be showing you the way."

The barracks were huge, and there were men everywhere – Tiko had previously told him there was accommodation there for seven hundred men (at a pinch), although there were never that many soldiers actually in Darshek itself most of the time – the core permanent force was rather small, but there

were many more reservists to be called on at any time, as they would be for this expedition, and many of them appeared to be here today. However, the barracks served as training and equipment provision and home for the core force, those at least, who didn't have families of their own. Tiko lived outside in his own small house with his wife. Kei wondered how she felt about Tiko being back for just a week before being sent off on another long mission – perhaps she was just used to it.

Tiko spotted Arman and Colonel Jiv before Kei did and hailed them. "Found him, general, and rescued him again."

Arman smiled in welcome, and since it might give Arman cause for concern, Kei forced himself not to scowl at Tiko's joke. "Are all the arrangements to your liking?" Arman asked.

"Pretty much – I want the hostages given as much space as possible, with as few reminders of military confinement as we can manage. A lot of them suffered badly from seasickness on the crossing from Urshek and if any are already ill, these will need special care." He noted Arman's guilty feelings over the matter – there wasn't anything Kei could do to change that. Arman and his fellows were responsible for a lot of suffering and it was something that only Arman could deal with.

"The lad's going to be bored waiting for you, general," Tiko said jovially. "Maybe we can have him here to train up our men."

"Ah. Actually...."

Kei held up his hand. "General, while you explain matters to the captain, I'll find Reji – are we leaving?" Arman nodded. "Then I'll meet you at the carriage. Which way are the stables?"

Colonel Jiv indicated the direction, and with a nod to Arman and no guilt whatsoever in dropping him right in the mess, Kei walked away quickly. He heard Tiko's outraged bellow and hastily dove around a corner – Arman could handle Tiko. He couldn't really face another lecture this morning.

He could smell the stables before he saw them. There were animals in the yard, some being exercised, others saddled, one or two being curried. Reji was there, sitting on his haunches, looking thoughtfully at the feet of a beast and talking to a soldier. He smiled at Kei when he spotted him. "You've got a furtive look on your face that reminds me of when you were trying to keep a baby krak-krak bird secret from your mother, Kei."

"Not so very different – I'm hiding from Tiko. How does it look?"

“Good, good. We’re only taking twelve urs beasts, and also a few jombekers for the milk – if any of the hostages are sickly, they’d welcome that, I think.”

“Yes, they will – however they travel, they’ll need better food than the army provides. Are you done?”

“Almost. You?”

“Finished, but we can wait for you.”

Reji stood up. “This one looks fine to me – we can take him,” he said to the soldier. The man nodded and led the beast back inside. “Are you all right? You look a little pale.”

“Just the headache, and...well, I’m not fond of the military environment for all kinds of reasons.”

“No,” Reji said, giving him a searching look. Kei waited for his friend to give him the now expected lecture about him not needing to do this, but Reji just put his hand on his shoulder. “Let’s go then.” Kei nearly sighed in relief. It was bad enough that he himself was questioning whether he should go without everyone else doing it for him.

He hid shamelessly behind Reji as they approached the courtyard. “If Tiko’s there, I’m making a run for it.”

“You know, he struck me as a very nice man,” Reji said calmly.

“Yes, that’s because you don’t remind him of his son,” Kei snapped. “Tiko doesn’t know if he’s a bodyguard, surrogate father or matchmaker. I don’t need any of them.”

Reji laughed. “The coast is clear, you can come out. Arman’s looking at us as if he thinks I’m doing something to you.”

Kei could indeed see that his lover’s face was set in a stern expression, which immediately brightened when he spotted Kei. But that, Kei had to admit, had been a feature of their relationship for so long, he’d ceased to remark it – in fact, they had been so friendly and intimate with each other that the only real change for them, as with Reji, was the sex. He was just grateful Arman wasn’t behaving in the least bit jealous – that, he really couldn’t have handled at all. Not now.

Colonel Jiv seemed to have found other things that needed his attention – Arman was on his own, and claimed Kei’s hand as he approached. “Now that was unfair,” he said dryly. “It was your idea to go to Utuk, so why do I get burdened with defending the decision to your friends?”

Kei laid his head briefly on Arman’s shoulder in apology. “Because he has to listen to you and not to me?”

“Hmmm. If I didn’t know you so well, I’d suspect you of manipulation.”

“No, just fatigue. Thank you for talking to him.”

“I should do as I threatened and set him as your personal watch.”

Reji grinned at Kei’s look of horror. “I told you he had ways of dealing with you that I wouldn’t, Kei.”

“Fortunately for him,” Arman said with an amused smile, “he’s only to turn those eyes of his on me and I relent.” *I do?* Kei thought. That was something to remember. “Shall we go?”



Arman looked down at Kei’s sleeping face with a mixture of concern and love. Concern because Kei’s headache was clearly troubling him more as the day wore on, although he’d repeatedly assured Arman this was quite normal, and because the damage to his gift had been quite severe – even with Arman’s buffering presence, it would take time to recover from the twin blows dealt to it in the last few days. Love because...it was Kei.

Arman hadn’t thought his feelings for this young man, asleep so trustingly in his lap, could grow stronger than they were, but they had. Finding that Kei returned his love.... Arman still couldn’t believe his good fortune. It terrified him more than a little because it tempted fate too thoroughly. The gods had snatched Loke away from him, he feared they would notice that he had won a prize of equal worth and steal Kei from him too. It had been so very hard to let Kei exercise free choice and allow him to come on the rescue – but Arman had sworn to himself that Kei would always be free to do as he wished. He could not stumble at this first test, however great.

The bruise on Kei’s temple felt like a rebuke to him. If he’d made it possible for Kei to have seen Bikel on the first attempt, Kei would not have been at the inn that day to be injured. He laid a protective hand on Kei’s forehead, glad he had insisted on a break after a morning and lunch spent in intensive planning, although it had been as much to allow Reji to rest as for Kei. And, Arman had to confess, he just wanted to be alone with Kei for a while. It was good for both of them. Kei needed time to recover physically and psychically, and he’d admitted the most beneficial contact with Arman was when they were both alone and touching, just as they were now. For Arman, the benefit was learning how to accept being happy. He’d spent so long settling for what dry crumbs were left to him after duty was satisfied, that to experience the pure, raw pleasure that being with Kei in this way gave him, was a dizzying and, at times, almost alarming experience.

Kei wasn't the only thing on his mind, of course – not even sitting so peacefully with him. There were still so many things that could go wrong in this rescue. He felt they were as prepared as they could be, but so much depended on handling Kita. This was why he'd suggested only male Rulers should go, although Lady Jilki was more than a match for the Prij sovereign in intellectual strength and in ruthlessness – Kita simply would not respect a female the way she would a male, and she might also make the mistake of thinking the Rulers would be susceptible to her charms. Lord Meki might be considered too old, but Lord Peika was barely thirty, a handsome and charming man (and happily married, though Kita would not know this). Arman had spent considerable time briefing the two men about his sovereign and how to handle her – and would spend more time doing so.

The threat of the Gifted and Darshianese armoury was only half the battle – the Darshianese wanted to win not only the war but the peace too, and this, Arman knew, would not be easily achieved or maintained. There was a good deal of disquiet among all eight rulers that the Prij would subvert the stable and rational society that their predecessors had painstakingly built over two hundred years. This was not an area Arman could advise them on – it was a Darshianese problem and he had neither expertise nor any rights.

He rubbed his eyes – he'd been making notes and rereading them for hours and he needed a break. His gaze fell upon the walking stick, lying on the table near the bed, and he reached for it, the already familiar weight and smooth grain of it something he found soothing to hold. He smiled as his finger traced the symbols under the handle – how much comfort he had taken in them, thinking that was all he would have left of Kei's presence in his life, and yet how they paled in comparison to the reality of the man who'd carved them.

"You're not planning to go for a walk on the bed, are you?" a sleepy voice asked.

"No, just admiring some rather fine craftsmanship – and a rather fine craftsman, of course." Kei flushed – he was endearingly unused to being complimented on his handsome features, which were yet the least of his charms to Arman. "I believe these have a number of interpretations. What was in your heart when you put them there?"

Kei looked up at him and took his hand, curling it over the handle of the stick. "I don't know myself," he said quietly. "I was so sad because I knew you were going, and I didn't want you to go but couldn't ask you to stay. I just...wanted you to have something of me."

“And so this...‘beloved’ or ‘lover’?”

“Not ‘lover’ – friend. But also...he who loves. Kei loves Arman who brings him joy.”

Arman shifted and slid down the bed so he could lie next to Kei instead of looking down at him, and so he could kiss him, no longer content to merely touch his face. “Arman also loves Kei who brings him joy. Can I say that by turning it upside down?”

Kei laughed. “No, that makes it say, ‘I like to have sex with urs beasts’.”

Arman moved back to look at him suspiciously. “It does not.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Kei admitted, still chuckling. “But you thought it did for a moment.”

“You’re going to be a handful, I can see that.” Kei gave him a kiss as an apology and made him come closer. “Loti had trouble with this character – he said it was archaic. How do you know it when he’s unfamiliar with it?”

Kei took the stick from him and his eyes grew soft as he touched the symbol. “My father taught it to me – he came across it in his researches when he studied in Darshek in his youth. If he ever made something for us, especially something special, say for a birthday, he would inscribe or carve this somewhere on it. Every year he made my mother a figurine in plum wood – animals, or plants, she loved them both and he carved like a master – and always set this in the base. See, if you turn it, and add a single upstroke, it becomes unambiguously ‘friend’. Turn it again, and cross this line here, and it is ‘lover’. But as it is...it means ‘friend’, ‘beloved’, ‘lover’ or ‘loving’ – you can usually tell by context which it is really.”

“And this?” Arman pointed to the ‘golden one’ character. “Not just my hair?”

Kei looked embarrassed. “I carved that before I remembered it had the other meaning. I wasn’t really thinking about your hair then. You’re the one with that obsession.”

Arman ran his hand down his particular obsession, remembering braiding it the night before and what had passed before that, and smiled. “Your fault for putting so much of it in my path.” He leaned in and kissed Kei’s forehead. “Your words gave me comfort, to know that you cared even as a friend.”

“Always that, Arman,” Kei said in a low voice. He yawned. “It must be late. When do we have to attend this meal?”

“Not for two or three hours at least. I’ll need Reji and your report, but I think we wrapped that up earlier. Let the man get some rest.”



"Mmmm. Poor Reji, he's getting old. Oh...he's only a little older than you, isn't he?" Kei said innocently. "No offence, my lord," he said with demurely cast down eyes. The effect was ruined by the smile tugging at his perfect lips.

"Yes, I'm sure," Arman said sardonically, being nothing of the kind. "Wait until my leg and ribs heal properly, I'll show you old."

"Your leg!" Kei sat up and looked at him with a guilty expression. "I was going to massage it!"

"Calm down, Kei, there'll be time enough for that."

"There's time *now*, Arman." He got off the bed and disappeared into the bathroom.

Arman shook his head and wondered what the man was up to, but just as he was getting off the bed, Kei returned, dressed only in his loincloth, and wagged a finger at him. "Uh uh, stay. I've just stoked the fire under the bath, and by the time I've rubbed your leg and any other parts of you that take my fancy, it should be properly hot."

The bath wasn't the only thing heating up. Such casualness over sexual matters was something Arman knew he would never get used to. "Er... fine. Shall I undress?"

"Of course. I'd always prefer to have you naked."

Kei clearly enjoyed Arman's discomfiture. He was grinning as he helped Arman take his trousers off and unlaced his shirt. "You do this deliberately," Arman said with a sigh. "Just when I think you're this serious, learned healer, you then behave like the silliest brat I've ever encountered. Which are you, really?"

Kei put an arm around him. "Both. I'm just Kei, Arman. Sometimes the healer, and sometimes a silly arse. Sometimes, I'll want sex and sometimes I'll be tired."

"And now you have a headache."

"And now I have a headache which is improved, and I want to give you a massage before we get distracted...more," he said with a grin, looking down at the bulge in his own loincloth and then at the evidence of Arman's growing arousal. He leaned forward, his eyes heavy lidded in what Arman was beginning to recognise as pure desire. All sense fled when his mouth touched Arman's, his tongue probing and teasing, Kei's hand in the small of Arman's back pressing him close.

Arman tried to pull him down to the bed, wanting nothing more than to kiss and hold this wonderful creature, this fortune, to him, to dig his fingers into the fine, dense hair and to loose the amazing braid. For a moment, Kei melted

against him, unresisting, but then he dragged himself back. “Gods, you’re bad for my resolve. I’m going to do your damn leg.”

“Forget it, it’s fine.”

“No, I need to be good,” Kei said, standing up, an unconvincing picture of virtue with his kiss-enflamed lips and his erection trapped in his loincloth. “I’m going to think of rotting urs beast entrails until I’m done.”

“How romantic,” Arman said dryly, knowing that an hour kissing Kei would make his leg ache a good deal less than any massage. At least, it would while he was kissing him.

Kei got the ointment and knelt on the bed. “Roll over...oh, gods, what beautiful legs you have,” he groaned, sounding most aggrieved. Arman decided that he deserved a little pain for insisting on playing the healer when Arman was eager to learn more of the arts of love. “And your arse...I wish I could sculpt, I would spend my life trying to portray your body.”

“Are you just going to drool over me, or are you going to massage my leg? Because if you’re not, I’ve got something I’d really rather do with you.” He looked over his shoulder back at Kei who seemed to be really pondering the decision. “Well?”

“Massage,” Kei said firmly, and immediately Arman felt the coolness of the ointment on his leg, and Kei’s strong fingers working on him.

His leg *had* been aching, he had to admit, and he’d even begun to be concerned Kei had been premature in letting him walk, despite all his caution. “Is it healing straight? Can you see?”

There was a few moments’ silence. “Yes,” Kei finally said. “But your leg muscles are strained, you’ve been overdoing it. No wonder you’re in pain.” His fingers continued to dig and ease the tight muscles far more skilfully even than the clever hands of Siv. “We need you fit, Arman. My country needs you, and so do I.”

Arman turned his head to look at Kei – where there had been a wry grin before, now there was just a grave and loving look in his eyes. “Same to you.” Kei nodded slowly, continuing to work his magic in silence.

Kei’s words stirred up many emotions in Arman. Thoughts of those who loved him, thoughts of those who had trusted him and who he had now betrayed as they would see it. Thinking of the people waiting for a rescue they probably believed now would never come – if they still survived. The idea that the Darshianese would arrive in Utuk and find Kita or the senate had ordered the destruction of the hostages in a fit of petulance, haunted Arman. If they were dead, each death was on Arman’s head, as the ten of Vinri already

were. If Kita had ordered their deaths, he might just have to dedicate his life to the destruction of the Prijian ruling class so this could never happen again to this race he had once hated so greatly, and now loved and wished to protect with all his heart. They may continue to hate him and he couldn't blame them – but like Kei, he now wished to serve Darshian.

He didn't know when he had become so sure that this, not just the rescue, was his goal. Perhaps it had been when Kei had come back to him, and he realised he truly had a second chance, a new life, and he was determined that this one was not to be filled with bitterness and devotion to ideals he only believed in because there seemed nothing else for him. Perhaps it had been because he had truly died when Loke had, and this was his rebirth. All he knew was that every time Kei touched him, he knew more joy than he ever thought possible, and he wanted to give the country that had given life to his lover, all that he could in return.

He felt Kei finish his massage, and then stretch along behind him, slick fingers trailing lightly up his still damaged side. "I've been good," Kei whispered. "Now reward me."

Arman turned and tangled a hand in the hair at the base of Kei's braid, using that hold to draw him close. "Hmmm, a reward for a massage of that quality...could be expensive."

"Very," Kei whispered, his lips almost touching Arman's, his breath a warm caress on Arman's skin. "And very lengthy too. Could take hours and hours."

"What about our meeting?"

"They can watch if they like." Arman laughed in shock at the idea, and Kei grinned. "Well, perhaps not all of them."

"You're a sybarite. I thought you were such a good person, but you're just devoted to pleasure."

Kei closed the gap between them, and his mouth proved Arman's point exquisitely, such a warm, inviting place for Arman to explore. "I'm not devoted to pleasure, Arman. I'm devoted to you. But they're one and the same thing."

Arman grunted at the hyperbole as his fingers explored the soft fine skin over Kei's ribs. Not a hair to be felt, while his own chest was scattered with wiry blond ones. Kei's skin was not like Mayl's – not perfumed and not so soft that one imagined he never left his rooms – and had a subtly difference texture from Loke's arms that spoke of his adult state, a life working in the sun and in the desert. Where Arman was built solidly, broad-chested and with powerful legs, Kei was less broad, as wide in the shoulders but narrowing to a slim waist and hips – too slim, Arman was well aware. Kei needed to put a

little fat on his bones, to mask the wiry muscles he'd built up over the long trials of his captivity and the journey back.

He heard a little chuckle and looked up. "What's amusing you?"

Kei's eyes were bright with laughter. "You. So intent, so serious – like you're proposing to pay for me by the ounce and are worried that you're being cheated."

"I could never afford to buy you, and no money would be enough to persuade me to give you up. We were talking of compensation. What do you want of me?"

"Hmmm...I think I want...a bath."

Arman felt his mouth pursing into a pout and stopped himself. Generals didn't pout – it was unbecoming. "If you want," he agreed, trying not to show his disappointment.

Kei got up immediately and held out his hand. "Then come on – if your fantasy is to play with my hair, mine has been to have a decent Darshianese bath with you, and I'm determined to have my way."



Kei sighed in absolute contentment. What more could he want than to be in a proper bath – only his second in over a month, and the first to be at the right temperature – and to have the man he loved in his arms. "Now do you understand?" he said, resting his head on Arman's shoulder. "There *are* some things better than sex, strange as it seems."

Arman tilted his head for a kiss. "I think it's unfair that I have to make a judgment based on such limited experience, but I'll allow this is very nice. I thought so before when I was alone, but with you...yes, acceptable, I grant that."

"Acceptable, you Prijian barbarian? If your people had such things, they would never go to war."

"That may be true. I'll be sure to suggest it to the senators when I next meet them."

Kei looked at Arman's solemn expression. "Will you convince them?" he asked quietly, and he didn't mean the bath.

"I don't know what alternative they'll have, but my fear is that they won't agree and the Darshianese will find themselves forced to police Kuprij for generations. The answer has to be that the Prij see the solution as beneficial and honourable. We don't take defeat well, as you can imagine."

“No.” Kei fell quiet. Always this war between them, even here. He hated it and he wished never to see another soldier again as long as he lived – at least, not one that wasn’t just carrying out the normal defence and policing that he and his fellow Darshianese had come to see as the army’s main role.

“Kei – this morning...when did it start to trouble you, our conversation, I mean?”

Arman’s hand took his as he asked the question. Now, after hours of peace and rest, Kei could answer calmly. It was being taken by surprise that always hurt him. “When you were talking about the fighting and the weapons – this is getting worse for me in some ways, being ambushed by my memories.”

“Your fellow hostages, will they be the same? Or is it just you, do you think?”

“I think all – it’s not my gift that is affected. It’s just... the violence we experienced and the horror – and months of terror and anxiety. It wears a body down, Arman.”

Arman’s fingers tightened around his. “I won’t keep saying I’m sorry, but I am. Does talking about it help or make it worse?”

“Both, I think. This is new to me, Arman. I lived a very quiet life before, we all did. We knew nothing of war or violent death.”

“Hmmm,” Arman murmured in sympathy, pulled him a little closer. “In the Prij army,” he said quietly, “we had a few cases of men who’d seen bomb attacks on their comrades losing all their nerve and being unable to face the enemy again. Even punishing them for cowardice made no difference, and they were discharged in disgrace. That was cruel, I now see.” Kei could only nod, and feel pity for those poor shattered men and their broken lives, whatever the cause. “Will you do something for me? Will you speak to Master Bikel again and take his advice? It may be that the academy will have answers, and it will give them some time to prepare.”

“All right,” Kei said, but he was dubious that Bikel could help. The man was a powerful mind-speaker and a learned master, but his experience of violence was surely as limited as Kei’s own. He put his hand between Arman’s thighs, over his softened cock. “But I don’t want to talk about Master Bikel now,” he said in a deliberately inviting tone.

The cock under his hand immediately showed a little life, even despite the hot water which made it difficult to get, let alone sustain an erection. “Ah...then you wish to have sex here?” Arman asked somewhat hesitantly.

Kei could almost hear the gears in his mind turning as he tried to work out the logistics.

“Actually, having sex in a communal bath is considered extremely rude,” Kei assured him solemnly, and smiled at the mixture of relief and disappointment he sensed from his lover. “But,” he said, moving around to face Arman, “touching is encouraged.”

“Touching?”

“Mmmm. Like this.” He ran his hand up Arman’s good side, and gently pinched the nipple there between his fingers. “Are you sensitive there?”

Arman’s eyes were wide in surprise. “Yes...I’ve never touched myself there at all.”

“Never? Gods, Arman, you mean you just put your hand on yourself and go for it? How much fun is that?”

“Not very much. I have rather low expectations,” he said glumly.

Kei leaned forward to give him a long kiss, continuing to carefully roll the pink nipple and enjoying the little gasps of pleasure Arman gave out as he did. “Yes. Well, we’ll have to change that.” He turned his head to nibble at the base of Arman’s long neck – everything about this man was long and well built. He was a wonder to behold, truly. And a delicious one too, the way he shivered at the lightest stimulation – so deprived and so eager, everything Kei did to him was new and wanted. It was a heady rush to share it with him.

He gasped himself as Arman’s fingers did a little exploring of their own. “Yes, good,” he breathed as Arman tweaked his nipples gently – the man was a very fast learner, that was for sure. He moved the hand he still had over Arman’s cock down lower and cupped his balls, playing with them carefully, something that he’d already found Arman enjoyed. Not every man did so, Reji had told him. Kei did, but he could understand how it might be too intense, or how a clumsy lover would cause pain. Arman wasn’t clumsy in the least – just inexperienced. But, oh, how eager he was to learn.

This gentle fumbling and touching, the languid kissing, tasting Arman, feeling the new strange texture of his curly hair and pale skin, went on for some time, neither of them under any pressure to move things further along. It was only when Kei dared to brushed a finger below Arman’s balls, across his entrance, that Arman went stiff underneath him, anxiety flowing off him – fear of the unknown, Kei guessed. “I won’t hurt you,” he said quietly.

“I...I know nothing about this, Kei. Do...does Reji...or do you...?”

Even talking about it made Arman tense and unhappy. Kei knew he hated to be incompetent. “Yes – both do and done. Fucking, if that’s what you’re referring to.”

Arman looked at him in confusion. “I have no...concept of how...does it hurt?”

“Not if you do it right, no. It’s not something Reji and I do exclusively, Arman,” he said to reassure the man that he wasn’t going to be an inadequate lover if he didn’t want to do this.

“I...” Arman looked down at the water, where Kei still had his hand around his genitals, but not moving them. “Would you...fuck me? Gods, I hate that word,” he spat suddenly.

“Why?” Kei shifted to put his arms around Arman’s neck.

“Mayl...it’s her idea of bedroom talk,” he said, disgust clear in his voice and in his emotions.

Kei kissed him. “Then I won’t use it. I don’t care for it either, because I think of it as making love – but it’s all making love, even this. Shall we call it ‘poking’ then?” That made Arman smile. “Or...’tuktukking’? Yes, let’s call it that.”

“Now you’re just being silly.” But now he was grinning.

“We established that some time ago. To answer your question, I could...tuktuk you, if you want.”

“I can’t say that, it’s ridiculous,” Arman protested. “‘Poking’ is no better. ‘Have’?”

“That’s fine. Is it something you want to try? We really don’t have to, and since you’ve got healing ribs, maybe we should wait until we get back from Utuk.”

Arman looked at him gravely. “Kei, I’ve waited for you for a long time. I’m tired of waiting, and I’m tired of having low expectations. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Kei said. “You want to try it now?”

“Yes. We’ve still an hour or more before the meeting, but who knows how much time we will have to ourselves after tonight. Let’s not waste any more time.”

“No,” Kei agreed, but yet he spent a few moments more kissing Arman because he loved to do that, and it was never a waste of time.

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Once again, Kei was leading him into the unknown, Arman thought, but he'd been less afraid of going to Darshek than this, and he'd not been so ashamed of his fear either. He wished he could retract his agreement to try this, but whatever his experience, he'd never thought of himself as a coward. It terrified him to think of this, but he would never back out.

Kei had him sit on the bed, but then knelt on it next to him. "Arman, if this is upsetting you so much, it's truly not important."

"It is," Arman snapped. "How can I call myself your lover if I can't even do a tenth of what Reji can for you?"

Kei sat back. "Are you afraid I would leave you for him? Over *this*?" Arman nodded reluctantly. "I didn't abandon Reji because he doesn't have a cunt, yet I like sex with women too. Arman – just holding you and tasting you and making you climax, having your hands on me...just being with you even if we never had sex again...." He picked up Arman's hand and placed it on his chest over his heart. "This is all the guarantee you need. I love many people, but while my heart beats, it belongs to you and you alone."

With such love shining in Kei's beautiful eyes, how could Arman argue with that? "No more than I belong to you, Kei. But...could we try? Slowly? I wish I was braver about this...ow!" Kei had just flicked his nose. "What was that for?"

"This isn't a battleground, you nitwit. Your asshole isn't somewhere to plant your standard."

Arman bit his lip, trying not to laugh, but it was impossible with Kei's cheeky grin. "You're the most irreverent person I've ever known, you brat."

"Didn't you know healers are well-known for having no concept of the proprieties? Look – if you want to try this, we can. Even if you don't, we can try again later when things are less...stressed.... But equally, I could just use my mouth on you or you on me. Or we could just...."

Arman held his hand up, not sure that the idea of using his mouth was less terrifying than the original proposal. "I understand. You're the teacher, Kei. I'll follow your lead."

"All right. First lesson, kiss the teacher before, after and during the lesson, and at all other times, please."

Arman smiled and pulled Kei to him to do just that. "Too easy."



"Mmmm, but too nice. Lesson two – take a deep breath. Good. Now another," he said quietly. "And again...good, I feel you relaxing. Don't undo what the bath did...." Kei's hand was rubbing his back soothingly, and with that, and his soft voice, Arman was indeed losing the tension in his body. A sure sign of that was that his ribs hurt less – every time he tensed up, they ached. Kei kissed him again on the forehead. "Feel better?"

"Yes. I don't mean to be so dramatic, Kei."

"You're not, this is all just new, I know. Lie down." Kei pushed him back and lay against him, just holding him, and kissing him in a gentle, undemanding way. Arman relaxed even more. Holding Kei was such a source of peace for him.

"I love you," Arman said, because it bore repeating.

"I know," Kei said with a grin. "That's one of the few benefits of my gift – no one can ever lie to me." Kei kissed him again, then moved down to kiss his neck, and then a nipple. Arman shivered at the delicious touch – how could he have not known this could give such pleasure before? "Like that, don't you?"

"Yes. Do it again," he asked daringly. Kei only smiled and did so, his perfect white teeth tugging gently at the nub. The sensation seemed to have a direct connection with Arman's cock, rather to his surprise.

Kei did this a little longer, then sat up and reached for the tub of ointment on the table. "No, don't tense up again, I'm only going to rub a little cream in," he said, still in the same quiet, soothing tone, one hand continuing to play with Arman's nipple, the other scooping a little of the cream out and rubbing it between his fingers. "Bend your left knee." He arranged it a little better, then slipped his fingers behind Arman's balls, rubbing the skin there. "Like that?"

"Yes...." It surprised him...he'd never thought of that part of him as having anything to do with pleasure at all. Kei's touch was gentle and assured, and the faint smile on his face told Arman he was enjoying himself. Arman made himself relax again. Kei knew what he was doing.

Kei's finger moved a little lower, to where he'd touched Arman in the bath, just circling carefully, his fingers slipping easily with the cream. "How does that feel?"

"Odd," Arman confessed.

"Yes, it will do." Kei got some more of the ointment on his fingers and put them back. "Now, this won't hurt unless you fight it. Breathe slow for me." He set up a slow circular motion on Arman's stomach. "That's it, the way I showed you when you were injured, remember?" His hand kept moving,

distracting Arman from his *other* hand, so that when he remembered it, he was surprised to find Kei had inserted a finger without the slightest discomfort. It was...surprising...but not painful. Kei bent and kissed his stomach, at the same time moving his finger carefully, in, out and stretching him.

Now, this really did feel strange, and Arman wasn't sure at all he liked it. But at the same time, it didn't *hurt*, and he loved Kei touching him everywhere else, so he was prepared to just wait and see where it went.

So to speak.

"You know, I never knew what that looked like," Kei said thoughtfully.

"What what looked like?"

"The 'I can't believe I'm lying here with someone's else's finger up my arse' look."

Arman leaned up and aimed a swat at Kei's head for his cheekiness, but of course Kei easily ducked. "Thank you for taking all the romance out of...oh...."

"You were saying?" Kei said, his hand on Arman's cock, stroking it firmly with slick fingers while his other hand continued its...odd... investigation.

"Stop making me laugh, you little bastard," Arman muttered, even as he moaned as Kei did something with his cock that felt like pure bliss.

"Why? Reji and I laugh all the time when we're making love. If someone farts while you're tuktukking him, I defy you to keep a straight face."

Arman groaned. "You're definitely taking all the romance out of this."

Kei leaned down and kissed his stomach. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "But sex is silly and it's funny, and it doesn't always work – you need to get that idea out of your head or you'll just get depressed if it's not all magical. Are you enjoying what I'm doing?"

"Yes...."

"Then stop worrying about romance, general. Now...."

Kei did something, and Arman's vision whited out as his whole body jerked. "Gods!" He gripped the bedding in his fingers. "What in hells was that?"

"*That* is why tuktukking can be so much fun."

He did whatever it was again, and the sensation was just as powerful – Arman could only pant as the tingling in his body subsided. "Blessed gods," he breathed.

"Mmmm. Feel relaxed?"

"I'm dead."

"That's a shame. I'll have to stop then, I suppose."

Arman reached up and caught Kei's wrist. "You're going to stop *now*?"

Kei's eyes were wide with what Arman now realised was completely fake innocence. "Well, if you're feeling unwell...."

"Healer, you'll need your own skills if you abandon me in this state."

"Tut tut, general, threats will get you nowhere with me." He became serious. "I think you're ready, but I won't be sure until we do it. You want to?"

Arman tugged him by the wrist he was still holding, and even though it made his ribs creak, bent up to meet him and kiss him. "Yes," he said with absolute certainty. "Please have me, Kei."

Kei's eyes were soft with affection. "I won't hurt you, I swear."

"I know. How should I lie, or move?"

Kei stood back to consider. "Slide forward, and put your good leg over my shoulder...does that hurt your ribs?"

"I'm fine. It's comfortable."

"Then that's good." Kei reached for more cream and unselfconsciously began to slick his own long cock, still playing with Arman's arse. He was getting used to the sensation – but Kei's cock, elegant and slender though it was, was bigger than a finger. "You're getting tense again, Arman," he chided. "Breathe again for me."

Kei's gaze pinned him, and he forgot to worry about what was to come, how exposed he was, and even how silly he probably looked right now. All that mattered was the love that blazed in those dark, beautiful eyes – love only for him, and forever. "Kiss me," he demanded. Kei had to adjust things to obey but he did, and Arman could forget everything else in the sweetness of Kei's mouth. He cupped the sides of Kei's head and made him look right at him. "Thank you," he said.

"But...."

"Thank you for this much...and for what you're going to do."

Kei gave him a wide smile. "You're always welcome, Arman." He stroked the back of his hand down Arman's face. "Ready?"

Arman nodded, and Kei moved back and got him into position again. "Don't forget to breathe," he ordered, and then something...blunt...nudged into Arman. Oh...gods, it felt so *enormous* inside him.... He gripped the bedding again and tried to remember...oh yes, breathing...he kept up long, slow breaths. Kei was patient, taking his time. It didn't hurt...it was just...odd....

Kei slid his hand up and down Arman's cock and he welcomed that distraction for its familiarity. Kei was looking at him intently, no doubt looking for any sign that this was hurting him. "I'm fine," Arman whispered. "Go on."

Kei drew back and thrust, more quickly this time, and the sensation was stronger, the feeling of almost being overfilled on the verge of being unpleasant, but never getting to that point, and so long as Arman remembered Kei would never hurt him, he could stay calm. Still the intent look, and once again Arman reassured him. Kei began to move more smoothly, in and out, setting up a slow, considerate rhythm, matched by the stroking motion on Arman's cock.

The sensation was intense, but not so overwhelming that Arman couldn't focus on what was happening, or who he was with. Kei's handsome face was a mask of rapt concentration, and Arman wondered what it felt like to him – fucking (for the word was appropriate there) Mayl had felt good and Kei seemed to like what he was doing. Would he ever have enough skill to pleasure Kei this way? His cock was thicker.... How big was Reji, Arman couldn't help but wonder.

And then he stopped thinking as Kei bumped that spot inside him that he'd touched with his fingers earlier, and he cried out in incoherent pleasure, calling Kei's name, begging for more. Kei gave it to him, thrusting faster into him but with a control that surprised Arman, as his clever hand played Arman's body, wringing delight and shivering, rippling sensation from him over and over until he was almost babbling in his need. He cried out again as with a flick and a quick stroke, and thrusting fast, Kei made him come harder than he ever had before, so powerfully that he had to close his eyes against the sparkling of his vision, and grip the bed again to stop himself flying apart, dimly aware of Kei's own grunt of completion.

He forced himself to breathe again and to open his eyes. Kei was hanging over him, hands on either side of his body, smiling, and looking rather out of breath himself. "You're noisy," he said. "I like that."

Arman flushed. "Sorry...."

Kei shook his head. "I just said I liked it. Nothing better than knowing your lover really is enjoying themselves." He eased his cock out of Arman's body. "Now we're both sticky," he said with a grin. "The lesson ends with the observation that sex is very messy."

Which Arman had already worked out on his own, even from his own limited knowledge, and could have done so just from the sight of his come splattered on his stomach. Kei had tasted this the night before without a trace of hesitation. He touched one of the spatters with his finger, and brought it to his lips. Not completely disgusting – but not exactly a delight either.

“Well?” Kei said. He’d been watching Arman’s actions with that same half-amused smile on his face.

“I’ve eaten worse,” Arman said simply, and Kei laughed. “But I shan’t finish it, if you don’t mind.”

“Reji never does either. Let me get a cloth.”

Arman could do very little in his limp, sated state but lie there and wait for Kei to return.

Reji’s name had been mentioned several times, and yet he had not felt any jealousy. Perhaps that was because Kei had never even hinted he was comparing the two. He was just stating simple fact, offered mostly in reassurance to Arman, and no way indicating that he thought he was getting the worse deal for having surrendered one lover for another.

Reji was simply part of Kei’s experience, a beloved part, and he was offering that experience to Arman to give him enjoyment. Far from Reji being a threat, Arman realised, in fact, he had a great deal to thank the older man for. Although, he thought wryly, Reji would probably not appreciate the gratitude.

Kei cleaned him quickly and put the cloth aside before cuddling close to him which, Arman was discovering, was really the part of sex he loved the most. They lay like that, Arman slowly stroking Kei’s braid and kissing him, until the last red streaks had gone from the sky.

“Time to go,” he said then, and so they rose, refreshed and relaxed, ready to join the real world once more with all its concerns.



The only reference point Arman had for official dinners were the stultifyingly boring ones that Kita regularly held at the palace, and he had been expecting, without any great enthusiasm, to have to endure something of the sort tonight. It was therefore a surprise to find that the atmosphere was decidedly informal – no elaborate linen or settings, no pre-established seating plan, and food piled on tables at the top and side of the room for the forty or so people to help themselves from. There were other tables arranged haphazardly around, and he realised the intention was for the guests to move about, discussing matters with whoever they needed to. By the time he and Kei arrived, the room was already lively – all the rulers were there, the senior army and naval officers (including Tiko who scowled briefly as he spotted Arman, but then turned back to an earnest conversation with one of the sea captains), several of the Gifted, and others who had been at various daytime meetings.

Kei was a little taken aback. "I didn't realise there would be so many people," he whispered.

"Nor I. Can you handle this?"

"Yes, if I can come back to your side if things get too much. Oh – there's Reji."

That surprised Arman. However important Reji was to Kei personally, a beast manager was very low down the rank of people involved in this rescue. Perhaps Lord Meki just thought he could come since he was around. Arman was puzzled by the whole thing – the idea of socialising based on a military expedition seemed odd. Lady Jilki said it had been Lady Nera's idea, to help them all get to know each other and strengthen their cooperation. Arman had heard stranger ideas, he supposed.

Lady Jilki snagged his attention as he and Kei were going to fetch something to eat. He introduced her to Kei and she paid the barest attention due to politeness, before questioning Arman closely about the defences in Urshek. Kei stood listening for a few moments, looking ill at ease, but when Arman managed to shrug and indicate he could be a while, he smiled uncertainly and wandered off to find himself some food. Arman expected he would find Reji if he needed someone familiar to talk to, or come back to Arman's side. Kei was not among enemies here, and so Arman refused to be too anxious about him. He did, however, make sure he knew where his lover was at all times.

Lady Jilki was gracious enough to let him fill a plate and sit down, but he could hardly get a bite into his mouth as she quizzed him. It was with definite relief he saw someone else catch her eye, and she excused herself. Arman hastily ate some of the smoked jombeker meat with a hunk of the excellent bread – he doubted he would have much chance to eat in peace again and he was in fact quite hungry.

Sure enough, Lord Meki noticed he was free and strode over. "Have you got that report for me, General?"

Arman dusted off his hands and pulled the papers out from where he'd stored them in his shirt pocket. Lord Meki scanned them quickly. "Excellent – thorough work, general."

"I can claim no credit, my lord. It was Kei and Reji together – I've been too occupied to do more than answer some questions they had."

Lord Meki nodded. "And the lad, where is he?"

Arman pointed to where Kei was in an earnest conversation with Reis, hopefully convincing the eccentric mind-mover that however guilty he felt over

the death of one man, he could prevent many more by coming on the mission. He had every faith in Kei's persuasive ability, he thought with a small smile of pride. "Then I think I'll have a chat with him about this," Lord Meki said. "I believe our sea captains will want you to inspect the ships tomorrow – they want to be sure everything looks authentic."

"Yes, of course. I'll arrange that first thing."

"Are you sure this healer of yours will be fit to travel in three days, general?"

"Yes, my lord. If he's not, he's not coming. I've told him that."

Lord Meki grunted in approval. "Very well. I'll speak to you once you've inspected the ships. Good evening."

He knew the Ruler was not, underneath it all, a harsh man, but Arman still had a little anxiety as he watch his short, slim back make his way through the talking groups and past the tables towards Kei. "Something troubling you, general?"

He looked up at Bikel, who stared back with cool, slightly mocking eyes. It was a habitual expression, it meant nothing other than the man liked to hide his thoughts. "No, not really."

"Oh? Not a certain stubborn village healer?"

"No, Kei's fine, in fact – over there." He pointed, and had the pleasure of obviously catching Bikel by surprise. "He took your advice after all."

"Did he now? Good gods, I thought he was a lost cause. And what will happen when you go to Utuk?"

Arman looked at him seriously. "He's coming with me."

Bikel went very still. "And should something happen to you, general?"

"You know the answer to that, Master Bikel. But he insists that it will make no difference to that wherever he learns the news, and if he goes he will have that bit longer with me. I've tried arguing with him. As you know, it's an unrewarding task."

Bikel frowned. "This is very bad, general. That boy would be a great loss for us. He's got a fine mind, if a stubborn one, and a great gift and talent."

Arman shrugged helplessly. "I'm open to suggestions. I particularly would love some answer to the question of how to keep him alive if something happens to me. Is there no one with your gift who can help? It would be worth trying almost anything to save him, but I don't want him to survive just by locking himself away. I would truly rather he died than suffered that, and I think, in his heart, so would he."

Bikel nodded. "I agree," he said. "I've been discussing this very thing with Diza today – what happened to Kei is naturally something that upset him

greatly, given our situation. He said if he and I were unfortunately linked at my death, which I truly hope we're not, but it could easily happen, he would just take an overdose of pijn. I can't find it in my heart to argue against that. We're not meant to endure such pain for years, general."

"I'm sorry," Arman said quietly. "I hadn't thought how this would resonate for you."

Bikel just gave him a sad look. "It's one of the few disadvantages of loving a soul-toucher. The other main one is never being able to deceive the bastards," he said, his thin mouth quirking into a brief, wry smile, before he became serious again. "There is one other option, one that Diza being in his late middle age would never contemplate, nor I suggest it. But since Kei is so young, it's possible he might consent, if the only other options were suicide or a lifetime of agony. It's a last resort, you understand."

Arman could tell from the man's voice that he found what he was talking about repugnant, but if it offered any hope at all for Kei in the event of his own death, he wanted to know. "Tell me more," he said quietly.



"This is what I've been trying to tell you," Meda said. "Honestly, Reis, you're no murderer," she added affectionately, putting her arm through her lover's.

Kei could feel Reis struggling against his own sadness to understand Kei's argument. Kei had not intended to speak to the man this evening, since Arman hadn't even thought he would be here. But Neka, the mind-speaker, had spotted him and recognised him, as she'd shyly told him, as the person was occupying so much of Arman's thoughts. She had brought him over to meet Meda, who'd then insisted he talk to Reis. And so there he found himself telling them about how he'd come to know Arman, about their relationship (because if you were someone the Gifted wanted to talk to, then they wanted to know all about you with nothing held back). That had led on, somehow, to Reis saying he couldn't convince himself that he should go on the rescue and that he was no better than the Prij himself. At this point, Meda had looked at Kei with pleading eyes, and Kei knew, whether Reis came on the mission or not, he couldn't let this young man carry this burden of misery.

The problem was that the mind-mover had only ever thought of his gift as something to amuse himself, rather than as anything dangerous. That didn't mean he hadn't been careful when he'd brought the ships into the harbour. It just meant he'd never really believed that he could in fact cause a death, or many deaths, even by accident. Not being a stupid person, he'd understood



that fact intellectually, but it was quite another thing to actually have caused someone's life to end – and it didn't help that many of the Gifted had point blank refused to be involved in the mission. Reis and the others who had so agreed were already facing disapproval for involving themselves with a military operation. Kei didn't think he could live with the guilt of causing a death himself, so he had every sympathy with Reis' reluctance to put himself in the way of doing it again.

But at the same time, Reis was so crucial to the plans that the entire mission might have to be scrapped if he didn't come with them, and Kei was desperate to stop the Prij killing his friends. He refused to lay even more guilt on Reis, by claiming he would be responsible for more deaths if he refused – it sounded like enough people had already tried that with Reis and it had just made him even more upset and unhappy. It was as if no one cared at all how Reis himself was feeling.

"When I was in Fort Trejk, after the Prij force was overrun," he said hesitantly, and the two Gifted turned to him. "We had dozens of people coming in – blood everywhere, arrows sticking out of bodies, even spears, broken bones breaking the skin...." Meda shuddered. "The first time I'd seen anything like that was when I was ten. Our village mines pujum ore, and there was a kiln explosion. Ma was our healer and I went with her – everyone did, as you can imagine. We just ran to where the smoke was."

He had their full attention. "When we got there, it was a bit like the fort. All I could see was blood, broken bodies, fire.... I was scared to death. Ma made me stand outside while she worked. We had...oh, there were six or seven people, injured, and as many more I think, lying on the ground. I thought they were all dead, there was so much blood and damage, but Ma knew they were alive. I watched her as she decided who she had to treat and in what order and then she started making order of the chaos. She made a decision to work on the most desperate ones first, as is our training. While she was operating on the second victim, two of those waiting died. There was nothing she could do – she was the only one who could do the surgery, and there were too many. She told me later that she might have saved the men, if there had been time and someone else to help, but that was the decision she made. That was the day I really decided I wanted to be a healer like her."

Meda was looking like she was about to cry – he put a hand on her arm to soothe her. "It was a long time ago," he said gently. "Such things happen when you refine pujum, or where you carry out any such dangerous work." She nodded. "But my point is that it was a stark lesson to me in many ways.

You need to always be prepared for disasters, and you do what you can when they happen. But you can't save everyone, and if you try, you might lose all your patients."

"Fort Trejk?" Reis said harshly, clinging to his lover's arm, his eyes burning into Kei's.

"Yes. Well, as I said, it was chaos – I was the only trained healer on hand, although we had medics as well. We just had to sift and assess and make those who were safe, even if they were in pain, wait until we knew who needed treatment first. Several died as we were assessing them – they were too badly hurt. Finally, it came down to two men who were the most seriously injured. One had a spear through his lung, the other had been crushed by an urs beast. The first was going to die in minutes if I didn't work on him, get the spear removed, stop him bleeding – it took a long time to make him stable. I knew the other man was waiting, but there was only one of me, and if I stopped on the first to attend to the second, both would have died. By the time I'd judged the first safe to leave, the second was probably only minutes from death, perhaps no more than five to ten until it would have been too late to save him whatever I did. If I hadn't had my gift to help me, it's certain the second would have died – it would have taken too long." Kei pointed at where Arman was sitting with Bikel, talking seriously about something or other. "The second man was Arman."

Meda gasped a little. "Your point is?" Reis said angrily, seeming pale and looking almost about to collapse. Kei tugged him over to a chair and made him sit, Meda hovering behind him. Kei pulled a chair up and sat down also.

"My point...my point is that if Arman had died, I wouldn't have forgiven myself, even though it would have been unavoidable. His death would have been the direct result of my decision, but it was a decision I made to save another person. That the one who would have died was the man who was to become my lover, and who even then I was probably already in love with, had to be set aside. But afterwards, I would have tortured myself, I know, even though my presence there was pure chance – if I'd not been there, both men would have died, and others besides. But should I have let the other man die to save him?"

"Was the other one a good man?" Meda asked quietly.

"I didn't know him at all. Does it matter?" Kei said, just as quietly. She shook her head. "No. We who have skills and gifts can do so much good, save people's lives. But we can't save everyone, and sometimes our decision to save someone means someone else dies. Reis, you saved hundreds and

hundreds of people that day, Prijian and Darshianese alike. You should be proud of that. It was a humane and skilful thing to do.”

But the mind-mover was still looking upset. “I was trying to be amusing, a show off.”

“Maybe. But you still saved them. If there had been a fight at the docks, it would have been carnage.” Kei took the man’s hand, and bore the pain because it was important. “I know you’re sad, and I know you’re afraid. I know what that feels like too. I was terrified every moment I was in Utuk, even with Arman being so kind. I thought we’d been forgotten. The ones still there won’t have any idea help is on the way, so they probably think they’re forgotten too.” Reis looked at him with tears in his eyes, and Kei squeezed his hand to comfort him. “Our people just want to come home, Reis. Please – you and Jera can bring them back safely and you can do that in a way which means no one needs to die. The hostages have paid such a price for peace – won’t you help them come back home?”

Reis closed his eyes and rocked back and forth a little. He really was suffering, it wasn’t him being indulgent, Kei knew. This was an awful dilemma for him. “No one else can do it, can they? Jera can’t do it on his own.” he whispered.

“Arman says not – not and be so sure to avoid bloodshed. I’m not saying there isn’t another way at all, but the other thing is that you and Jera working together can be fast, Reis. We don’t have time – it may already be too late, and every day we wait makes the chance of the hostages being killed that much greater. It’s not at all your fault that this is the case. I just know that however sad you feel, it doesn’t mean you can’t still do so much good here.” Kei just held his hand, doing what he had not done since before the executions, extending his gift and absorbing Reis’ pain, accepting it as his own, so that the burden was more bearable for the man. He wanted to cry from the sadness he felt from him, but at the same time, he found he could do this, and was glad he still had that power.

“Reis,” Meda said gently, stroking his hair as she spoke. “Don’t let this failure make you mean and selfish, because I know you’re not. That would hurt you as much as this man’s death, if it meant you had to close off that part of yourself.”

Reis looked up at her with tear-filled eyes, and then turned his head against her stomach. “All right,” he said in a muffled voice. “I’ll do it. For them.”

“Thank you,” Kei said, his own eyes becoming damp as relief filled him. “Thank you, Reis.” He put his hand on Reis’ head. “You have a good heart.”

Meda nodded and mouthed 'thank you' at him as he got up, feeling a little dizzy. He turned to walk away, needing to find a little peace and quiet – but found he almost ran straight into Lord Meki. "I beg your pardon, my lord," he said, flushing from embarrassment.

"Come with me, young man," Lord Meki said in a tone which brooked no argument. Kei realised that Lord Meki must have overheard or at least seen some of the conversation with Reis.

He looked around to see where Arman was – he was still talking to Bikel. Kei couldn't interrupt him just to hold his hand while he was talking to Lord Meki. Still feeling the effects of Reis' misery, he followed the Ruler out of the room, and down the corridor, which was lit only by a few sconces here and there. The Ruler collected a candle from one of the lower sconces, and opened a door. He used the candle to light the wall lamps, then indicated a chair in front of the desk. "Please, sit, Kei," he said, taking a seat himself.

The Ruler was emitting hardly any emotion at all – all Kei could detect was some irritation. He didn't seem to have noticed that Kei was suffering, which was good because he didn't want to appear weak and unreliable in front of this man. He took some deep, albeit discreet, breaths, and thought of Arman, letting the memory of their lovemaking earlier balance the distress he'd absorbed from Reis. After a few moments, he said, "How can I be of assistance, my lord?"

Lord Meki drew out a sheaf of papers from his shirt breast. "Your report on the hostages. It's very thorough."

"Thank you, my lord." Kei thought such a busy man would hardly have interrupted his meeting with the others just to compliment him, and wondered what in hells was going on.

Lord Meki stood up and tucked his hands behind him as he faced the darkened window. "General Arman says you two are returning to your village when this is over."

"Yes, my lord."

"You realise what a dreadful waste that is, don't you?"

"My lord?" This was about the last thing Kei expected to hear. "A waste?"

"A waste, a dreadful waste of talent," Lord Meki said impatiently, turning back to Kei. "Are you seriously proposing to let the general bury himself in your backward little home when Darshian needs him?"

Kei was so startled he could hardly speak. "I...he offered...."

"Yes, of course he did, because the alternative was harm to you, as I understand it. I looked up your academy records, young man. Looked up your

parents, and then the reports from that captain, Tiko. You're not a stupid person, and apparently you're dedicated to service. But you would deprive Darshian of potentially one of the most useful servants ever to become available to it, for the sake of your own indulgence. Why? Why would you hurt your own people this way?"

Kei rubbed his chest to try and help himself breathe, so sharp was the pain the man's words caused him. "M...my lord...I...." He gripped the edge of the desk. "I didn't mean to cause harm...I don't want anyone to suffer...." He felt as if he might faint as he struggled with the sudden rush of emotions in his own heart.

Lord Meki uttered a sharp oath, and went to a cupboard in the corner, doing something out of Kei's sight but returning with a glass of water. "Drink this," he said with rather more gentleness in his tone than before. Kei clutched the glass and gulped a little water, trying not to be sick. "I'm sorry, I didn't realise what was wrong with you.... I didn't mean to...."

Kei held out his hand to stop him apologising. "Don't.... Can you just...be calm...? Let me calm down."

"Of course. Do you want me to leave?" Kei shook his head. "Then I'll just read your notes."

Long minutes passed. Kei closed his eyes and just tried to breathe evenly and relax. He wished Arman were here to help, but at the same time, the way this conversation had started, Kei was really quite glad he wasn't.

It took him even longer than when he'd first come into the room, but finally he felt he could speak normally. "I'm all right now," he said in a low voice.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, my lord," he muttered, looking at his hands. He wished he could just escape. He still felt sick, and Lord Meki's words were ringing in his ears.

"I apologise most sincerely, Kei. I've made the kind of error which most irritates me in others – I've failed to properly do my research." Kei looked up to find Lord Meki staring at him intently. "Would it pain you to explain exactly what your problem is, and how General Arman fits into this?"

"No." It was easier to talk about this when he wasn't looking at those sharp eyes, and he tried to tell the sorry tale as quickly and as neutrally as possible. "I'm sorry I'll be the cause of hurting Darshian...I didn't mean to...I just wanted to be able to go home, my lord. This seemed the only answer."

"Yes. Again I apologise, and especially for being so aggressive. Damn," he said, laying the papers down with a sigh. "I thought...." Kei looked up and the man smiled ruefully. "To be honest, Kei, I thought I would just need to

exercise a little moral and intellectual pressure on a simple villager to get my way. I had no idea.... Of course you have no choice, not at the moment, not if you want to go home which of course you have every right to do. But let me ask you this – is that what you really want?”

“My lord?”

“Do you want to go back to your village and that be an end to it? Because your academy reports were extremely complimentary, you know. And with your background and your abilities...well, losing the general isn't the only waste.”

Kei couldn't think about any of this now, and he wished the Ruler would leave him alone – hadn't he already done enough for Darshian? “I just want to go home, my lord,” he repeated quietly. “You don't know what it was like to be unable to do so, to be afraid all the time I would never see them again.” He looked down at the desk again, remembering that time of despair, especially those weeks after the others died. He clenched his fist and tried not to let his emotions unbalance him again.

“Yes, of course,” Lord Meki said kindly. “But will you always feel this way? Once you've recovered, and you've spent time with your family, will you be content, do you think? We could offer you so many more opportunities here, and you could serve Darshian and your clan at the same time.”

“I don't know, my lord. At the moment, I'm just concentrating on getting our people home. I can't even think of anything else...well, other than Arman,” he said, making the effort to smile.

“No, I imagine not. I think it's best for now to forget this ill-timed conversation, and do what you need to recover, let the general help you as I know he wants desperately to do. But...if I should ask again in a few months' time...or we need to call on either of you...I beg you, please consider my words. This report, that text you're writing...you have a good mind, Kei. An unusual one. The general is similar in many respects. Such things are almost as rare as true Gifts, and you know how we value those.”

He stood up and walked to the window. “I don't say this to flatter you. I say this because the time ahead for Darshian, with the Prij as enemies or at peace, will need all the talent we have, if our nation is not to fall prey to new and greater threats. I don't want this country to be dependent on our Gifted for its defence. It's too risky, too prone to chance, to human vagaries as you've seen with Reis. I want our defence, our education, our medical knowledge, our science, our engineering, to be the best we can possibly have. I want the academy to find the kind of answers your parents spent so much of their lives

looking for, and more. And I want you and your general there, and in the government.”

Kei could only look at the Ruler in open-mouthed astonishment. “I’m just...I’m too young, my lord.”

Lord Meki snorted. “You were old enough for us to send into the mouth of danger, my boy. You’re old enough to take on the responsibility of your village’s health, and to bring General Arman to us. I know men three times your age with a tenth of your brains. As I said, forget this conversation, and don’t trouble the general with it, unless you feel you must. But I’ll send out a call to you one day, Kei. I hope you will consider answering it.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Now, go on back to him. By the way, that was nicely done with Reis. No one else seemed to be able to get through to him.”

“Because everyone else was trying to bully him,” Kei said, a touch acerbically. “He has a right to his grief – a man’s life isn’t a trivial burden. He’s upset that he’s being regarded as a weapon or a tool and so he should be. Please try to remember the people behind the Gifts, my lord.”

Lord Meki actually seemed a little chastened. “Yes, I’ll try to. I didn’t want to agree to the general’s request concerning you, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” Kei said, looking directly at the Ruler. “Why did you?”

“Because the man’s no fool, so I was taking a chance that he knew what he was doing. Now I believe that he did.” Kei had no reply to this, so he just nodded. “We have three days left to us – I want you to spend as much of that time recovering, resting and doing whatever you can to strengthen yourself. Consider that a direct order from your Ruler, Kei.”

“Yes, my lord – I believe the general has this in hand.”

Lord Meki smiled suddenly, a tight thin-lipped smile, but a smile nonetheless. “Yes, I imagine he does. Goodnight to you.”

Kei bowed and left the room, feeling rather as if he’d been pummelled with bean sacks. He didn’t know whether to tell Arman about the discussion or not. On the whole, he thought not. He had been telling the bare truth to the Ruler. He just wanted to get the hostages home. Talk of being at the academy or elsewhere was ridiculously premature when none of them knew what would happen to them in eleven days’ time. If they survived that, then perhaps he would tell Arman. Until then, well, he was under orders to recover. And that meant being with the man he loved, so that was where he was going right now.



Arman was concentrating on Captain Mejka's words, but a small part of him was keeping an eye on the doorway through which he'd seen Lord Meki lead Kei a few minutes ago. He didn't know why the Ruler would need private words with his lover, and he couldn't help worrying. It was thus with no small amount of relief that he saw Kei reappear. He looked a little pale but composed, and when Reji peeled away from the conversation he was having with Neris to come to his friend's side, Kei only smiled and let Reji take his arm. Arman was even more relieved to see that Reji was urging Kei to come over to Arman. He rose to greet them. "Are you all right?" he asked. Now he was closer, he could see Kei really was pale. "Sit, please."

His lover needed no prompting. Reji stood behind him, looking worried. "I'm all right. I was talking to Reis – he was upset," he murmured.

Ah, that explained it. Arman relaxed. "Of course. Reji – I wonder if there are any pastries left, perhaps some juice?" He wished there was some wine, but it wasn't often served here, apparently. Neither beer nor distilled spirits seemed to have been deemed suitable for this meal. Reji took the hint, and, squeezing Kei's shoulder, left to find them some refreshment.

Kei turned to Mejka in apology. "Please don't let me interrupt you."

"It's all right, lad, we're nearly done," the sea captain said. "Talking to Reis, were you? How did he seem?"

Kei looked at Arman as he answered the captain's question. "He's agreed to come. But I want people to stop trying to push him around. It's very unfair – he's not in the army, you know."

There was a slight rebuke in Kei's eyes and his voice, and Arman accepted it. "Yes, I'm sorry. People are just very anxious, and not as careful as they should be of someone sensitive. Thank you for speaking to him."

"It wasn't planned," he said quietly. "Please, continue. I'll just wait here if you don't mind."

So Arman did as he asked, with Kei leaning against him slightly, close enough that it was obvious they were lovers, but not in a manner which anyone here would object to. Certainly the captain didn't seem to mind at all, and continued as if they'd hardly been interrupted. Kei seemed content to just listen, and when Reji returned, accepted a share of the food and drink passed around with quiet thanks. Reji's return meant the talk turned to the animal transport and other matters, and after a little while Kei joined in, his colour now better and his spirit, though somewhat subdued, was not alarmingly low.



When another naval officer joined Mejka, and it was obvious that the discussion would continue a good while longer, Arman excused himself for a moment to take Kei and Reji aside. "This is going to take a while and it's nothing you need to be involved in. Perhaps you would like to return to our room, have an early evening." Kei nodded. "Reji, if you aren't needed, you could keep him company – I'm sure it's dull for you on your own." That earned him a smile from his lover, and a surprised look from his lover's friend. "Go on," he said to Kei. "I could be hours and you've already done good work."

Kei touched his arm. "Are you sure I'm not needed?"

"Yes – you've given your report and Lord Meki is happy with it, and you've spoken to Reis for which we all thank you. If there are any matters arising which need your attention, I'll make notes and we can look at them tomorrow. You and Reji don't need to be bored by all this, and you've hardly had any time to talk, I know. Just go." He squeezed Kei's hand then looked at Reji. "I won't mind if you want to wait up with him," he said, hoping the older man would take his meaning clearly.

"Thank you, gen...Arman," Reji said, and that made Kei smile. "Come on, Keichichi, these things are no fun if you can't dance."

"I'll be sure to pass that on to Lady Nera," Arman said gravely, which only made Reji grin. "I'll see you later, both of you."

Reji took Kei's arm and led him away. Arman hoped it was just the after effect of the talk with Reis, and perhaps the lingering symptoms of the concussion that was making Kei so quiet. He looked across the room where Lord Meki and Lady Jilki were in close conversation. He hoped Lord Meki had been gentle with his lover. Kei didn't need any more people to be afraid of.



Kei closed the door behind them with a sigh of relief. "You know, it would be a lot easier not to worry about you if you didn't keep disappearing off with people and coming back looking like reheated shit," Reji said, taking his arm and making him sit at the desk. "And your general must really be worried if he's throwing me at you. I'm just surprised he didn't get up to tear the hide off his lordship."

Kei shook his head. "He doesn't realise it was Meki – I let him think it was talking to Reis, which didn't help, it was true." His head was pounding – but he was rather proud of the fact he had managed to keep his composure pretty well even after Lord Meki's sneak attack, and that he hadn't fallen apart afterwards. Of course, being able to touch and be with Arman helped. It gave

him a little hope that one day he would really recover from this. He laid his head on the desk – he was so tired, even with the nap. He was worse than a pregnant woman, he thought irritably.

Reji's hand on his arm was soothing. Fortunately, his friend's emotions were under control and placing no burden on him. "What did the little hisk-faced bastard do to you?"

"Just ambushed me when I was already a little unsteady after talking to Reis. Poor Reis – the problem with military men is that they forget other people don't take killing for granted. Arman, for all his understanding, has forgotten what it was like never to have taken a life, I think."

"True, but I was asking about Meki. Ambushed you? Over what – I thought he was happy with our report."

"He is," Kei said gloomily. "And now he wants me to work for him – actually, he really wants Arman to work for him but he figures we're inseparable. Don't know where he got that idea from," he said, and Reji grinned. "Accused me of being selfish by wanting to take Arman back home with me."

"He what? I'll wring his scrawny neck! Selfish? Damn it, Kei, if Arman hears about this...."

Kei held his hand up. "Which he won't, not yet. I'm telling you because...well, I can tell you anything and I know you'll listen. Usually," he amended, thinking of that morning. He smiled at his friend. "Gods, Reji, you know, it's so good you're here still. I didn't want you to go on this rescue, but having you here is a little like being home again."

Reji put an arm around him and gave him a carefully chaste hug, probably, Kei thought, trying to not seem to be imposing. *Piss on that*, Kei thought, as he squeezed Reji tight and buried his face in his neck, smelling the warm, familiar scent of his old friend. "Why won't these people leave me alone? It's not like I forced Arman to offer to come with me. No one was more surprised than I was."

"I wasn't," Reji said quietly, stroking his hair. "That man thinks the suns shines out of your arse, Kei. He'd do anything for you. Even walk away from you, if he thought it was the best thing. As I would."

"You don't need to walk away, Reji. I want you to stay, I need you." This was nice, he thought. He could feel Reji's love, not exerting any pressure on him at all. Somehow he knew Arman wouldn't object. If he did, he wouldn't be the man Kei knew him to be. "But is Lord Meki right? Am I forcing Arman to accept a future that's wrong for him? Do I have a right to keep him in the

village when he's probably going to be hated there, and when he really belongs working with the rulers?"

"I take it just talking to him is out of the question," Reji said dryly.

Kei lifted his head and gave his friend a narrow-eyed look of irritation. "I *will* talk to him later. I'm talking to *you* now, you idiot. I want your opinion. Just because I'm not sleeping with you doesn't mean I don't still value your ideas, Reji. Have you forgotten why you started calling me 'little brother'?"

Reji laughed, and tugged his braid a little. "No, I haven't forgotten. Never knew a child with so many questions. All right – if you want *my* opinion, I think you don't owe Meki a damn thing. Or Darshek. They did nothing to rescue you, you got out of Utuk on your own. So basically, the Rulers can all go and sit in a thurl's nest. As for Arman – I think he can only be happy if you are. That's not to say going home is going to be easy. Fedor isn't going to like it, and you know it. People like Meis and Rin...well, if they get a chance to talk to the man, they might change their minds. If he can convince Misek he's no demon, then he must be pretty persuasive." Kei grinned at that. "If you want my opinion on the rest of it, I think coming back to Darshek at some distant point might be good for both of you, if only for a short while. But it has to be something you both *want* and not something you do because pissing Lord Meki tried to bully you into it. The damn nerve of the man!"

"He's not so bad," Kei felt compelled to say, now he was calmer and Reji had been able to expose things to the light of common sense. "He's just thinking of the whole picture, and I'm just too...worn out...to care about it. Just the idea of thinking about it makes me tired."

"Yes, and he should have had more sense," Reji said firmly. "Arman will kill him, truly, if I don't kick his bony arse first."

"You won't say a damn thing to him, Reji!"

"Calm down, Keichichi, I'm just expressing a preference. His lordship's behind is safe – for now at least." Reji touched the lump on his head. "How's this?"

"Better, but my headache's worse again. Did I make an awful mess in the room at the inn?"

"Yes," Reji said with a grin. "Puke everywhere. Mil was having hysterics at the blood and mess."

"Sorry."

"I'm sure you arranged to fall off the beast deliberately, Kei, so I'll be sure to hold a grudge over this until the day I die. You can be a real idiot sometimes,"

he said, shaking his head in disgust. "You should lie down – give it a chance to heal."

This was true, Kei thought. "Do you have to go?"

"If you're going to bed...."

"I'm just going to lie down. I won't sleep until Arman comes back. Can you just sit with me? On the bed or on a chair, I don't mind."

Reji looked dubious. "Won't the general throw a fit?"

"Because you're sitting with me? He's not like that," Kei said in exasperation. "And damn it, I can decide who does or does not talk to me whether I'm upright or on my back without my keeper's permission."

Reji held up his hands in surrender, his eyebrows raised in surprise. "Look, it's between you, but you've not been lovers more than a day and I'd rather not have a fist fight with him over this."

"Another one, you mean."

Reji gave him a hurt look. "I just shook him a little. I never hit him."

"And you'd better not – and he'd better not ever hit you," Kei said, scowling. "I've had a gutful of violence."

"I can imagine. If you want me to stay, I'd like to. Go and get comfortable, I want to have a piss and then I'll come sit with you. A cold cloth? Would that help?"

"Yes, it would," Kei said gratefully. "I'm so damn sick of this headache."

"Then remember that next time you take a dive from the back of an urs beast."

Kei shook his head ruefully. There was no point looking for gratuitous sympathy from Reji. It was one of the many reasons Kei liked him so well.



Arman opened the door quietly, expecting, as it was past midnight, that Kei would have long since gone to bed. He was surprised to see the faint glow of a turned down lamp coming from the bedroom, and even more surprised to find Reji dozing upright in a chair, one hand protectively on Kei's shoulder. Kei himself was fast asleep, still in his clothes and lying on top of the bedclothes.

Arman shook Reji gently, and then put his finger to his lips as the sleeping man came awake with a jerk. He signalled for Reji to come into the office, and closed the bedroom door behind him carefully. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean you to have to sit up with him this late."

Reji yawned and cricked his back. "S'all right, we were just talking and he fell asleep. I thought I'd stay in case he had any nightmares."

"That was kind, thank you."

Reji shrugged. "I'd do it anyway, ge...Arman. Got to look after my little brother."

Arman cocked his head. "You called him that before – why?"

"Because he is. I never had one, and when I moved to Ai-Albon, this big-eyed ten-year-old boy started following me around like I was his own personal oracle. I was missing my own family so I just adopted him, and his parents more or less adopted me. I guess I'm as much as part of his family as Myka is, in some ways. Of course, I was glad I wasn't really his brother when we...uh...." He looked down. "Well, you know."

Arman was amused. "Reji, it's not exactly a secret that you and he were lovers, is it? Not when he spent a good deal of the afternoon using you as an example to show me the finer points of lovemaking."

Reji's eyebrows rose to his hairline. "He what?" Arman shushed him. "Are you joking?"

"No."

"Gods, I'll wring his neck. I never...I'm not...gods, Arman, he's a brat, honestly."

Arman thought the way Reji was blushing was rather endearing. "No, it wasn't like that. Have a chair." He took a seat himself – his leg was aching again – and set the lamp on the desk. "This must be difficult for you – one minute he's yours, then he's mine."

"He was never mine, Arman. I think you've misunderstood what we had. It was a companionable thing, an extension of our friendship. Not what you have."

"Yes, I know he sees it that way," Arman said slowly. "But somehow...I think perhaps it was more for you...or perhaps it's become more while he was gone?"

Reji stared. "Yes," he said finally. "When I had to leave him behind...I think that's when I realised.... But it makes no difference. The heart chooses, and there's no arguing with it," he said in a low voice Arman had to struggle to hear. "I'll never even attempt to put an obstacle in your path – not that I could, I know that."

"No, you couldn't. But yet you could make him very unhappy, just by being unhappy yourself. I can't, never could give him up to you, Reji, not while there's breath in my body. But you won't find me playing the jealous fool, and feel free to remind me should I forget that. It's important to him that I don't, especially now. This is a dangerous time for him – for all of us. There are too

many things that can hurt him on this mission, and I can't protect him on my own."

"You don't have to do it on your own."

"I know. Just – never feel you have to apologise or retreat concerning him. Kei is worried about losing his family because of me. His family includes you. Please prove him wrong."

Reji smiled. "Gladly." He stood and yawned again. "I still haven't caught up with my sleep."

"You should be able to take it easy tomorrow, and I'll encourage Kei to stay here – he's still finding other people a strain, and it's essential he's in good shape if he's to travel with us. A quiet day with a close friend would be good for him." He stood up and leaned on his stick. "Good for both of you, I think."

"Yes, I agree. Somehow, I didn't expect you to be a reasonable man, Arman."

Arman smiled at the slight note of complaint in the other man's voice. "There was no reason for you to do so. Kei has mellowed me considerably."

Reji gave him a long look. "Perhaps. Anyway, goodnight. Tell him to send for me when he's ready."

Arman bowed his head in acknowledgement and Reji left, closing the door quietly behind him. Arman blew out the lamp in the office and let the dim glow from the light in the bedroom lead him into the other room. He should really get Kei under the covers – but he was much too heavy to move while he was asleep. He unlaced Kei's shirt and pants, then shook his shoulder. "Wake up, lazy. You need to undress and get into bed."

Kei's arm came up and hooked him around the neck, pulling him close. "Mmmm, come to bed," he said, giving Arman a sleepy kiss.

"I will if you get under the covers."

Grumbling, clumsy with sleep, and with a little help from Arman, Kei got his clothes off and then crawled under the bedclothes where Arman joined him. "You woke me up. Mean," he complained, as he snuggled close to Arman.

"Sorry, I thought a few minutes' pain was worth a good night's rest."

"Don't be logical at me in the middle of the night, you bastard."

Arman smiled in the dark. "Apologies. Go back to sleep."

"Hmpfh," Kei said, managing to make the noise sound aggrieved, but in a very short time, his breathing evened out again. Arman held him, knowing he too would be asleep in a very short time. His mind turned to the discussion he'd had with Bikel. At least now there was a sliver of hope that Arman's own death would not mean the end of Kei's life. Whether Kei would feel grateful to

have that chance, Arman didn't know. He just hoped neither of them would ever need to find out.

## CHAPTER 5

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Arman had many opportunities to be glad of Reji's continued presence over the next three days. If he had tried to ensure Kei's continued stability without help, he would certainly have failed, since there was just so much to do, so much he didn't dare involve Kei in because it was to do with military drills and planning. However, Kei was hardly idle either – his presence was requested constantly by the Gifted, when he wasn't needed for medical planning, or discussions with Bikel over the treatment of the hostages once they returned. Arman was torn between anxiety over Kei overdoing things and exposing himself to harm, and being pleased that his request for Kei to take part in the mission had been vindicated. In the end all he could do was ask Reji and Bikel to make sure one of them was with him at all times, and take Neka aside for a long talk before he would consent to have Kei spend much time with Reis or any of the others. The way Kei had reacted to Reis at the dinner indicated that he was still very vulnerable to the emotional turmoil of others, and Arman suspected the Gifted could be more troubling than any other group. Only after Neka had solemnly assured him that she would monitor Kei at all times and send for Arman if he was needed, could Arman give his blessing to Kei's interactions with the Gifted.

However, once given, that blessing repaid itself because it was noticeable how much more cooperative the Gifted became once Kei became part of the negotiations. Arman may have wanted to keep Kei locked in their room until he was over his concussion, and further along the path of recovery from his recent setbacks, but there was no doubt that if the mission succeeded, it would owe much to a man who was only still in Darshek by purest chance.

The success of the mission was in no way assured, unfortunately. Everyone knew that. Everyone knew they might be sailing to Utuk to do nothing more than to view sixty-nine fresh graves. For that reason, Lady Jilki's messages to the community leaders and clan heads were cautiously muted in tone, merely stating that a rescue was in progress, that a Prijian general was assisting them to the best of his ability, and that until they reached Utuk, nothing more could be known. Even with this caution, Arman wondered how much unrest there would be if the rescue failed. The long delay in starting a rescue had caused a good deal of ill-feeling, he'd been told, even though, in the absence of any intelligence on the location of the hostages, he could understand why the Rulers had had so little choice. The hopes of an entire nation rode on a very slim possibility of success.

There was also the question of what would happen to the more than two thousand soldiers and sailors presently imprisoned some ten miles outside Darshek city. If the hostages were returned, there wasn't a difficulty. If they were dead – or the rescue failed, things were more problematic. Kei believed they should be returned home out of simple humanity. Arman and the Rulers were more interested in the practical effect of depriving Kuprij of a substantial chunk of its military forces, and disinclined to restore that loss without considerable thought. For the moment, the prisoners were being kept ignorant of Arman's presence in Darshek and of the rescue, and those of his men either recently arrived or who were still travelling north would remain segregated at least until the outcome of the mission was known. Lieutenant Vikis had only recently become fit enough to travel and was still at Fort Trejk. Thus any Prij who knew of Arman's betrayal or even his capture, had not yet had an opportunity to tell the wider group of prisoners. Arman doubted it would be possible to keep this a secret for very long, but Lord Meki insisted on this quarantine, to give the Rulers – and Arman – as many options for the future as possible.

He discussed this very little with Kei, allowing the healer to concentrate purely on humanitarian issues, and on maintaining the good spirits of the Gifted. Reji reported that Kei was becoming something of a favourite with



them. Reji was surprised, he said – the minor gifted were usually considered of no interest to the truly Gifted at all, since the gulf between their abilities and experiences was so great. It seemed Kei had worked his magic on these strange people as he had done on an embittered Prijian general, and Arman again wondered what on earth Kei saw in him. It certainly wasn't for lack of alternatives.

Arman tried to make sure they were both well-rested on the two nights following the dinner, since by the third, they would be on board one of the captured Prijian ships, waiting for the tide and ready for sail. He insisted Kei was fully examined by Loti before they departed for the docks that afternoon – Kei's headache lingered, and he'd been very tired by the end of each day. Loti took his time, much to Kei's evident disgust and Loti's palpable amusement, before declaring him fit to travel. "You're recovering nicely," he said.

"I told you I was," Kei snapped, putting his shirt back on.

"Yes, yes," Loti said peaceably, winking at Arman who was trying not to laugh – Kei in a temper was a sight to behold. "Still try to rest, although I don't suppose you'll have much else to do – it's a good thing you're not prone to seasickness, lad, I'd be reluctant to clear you."

"Well, I'm not and I'm going. Arman?"

"Loti, thank you for your help – we'll see you on our return."

Loti bowed. "My hopes and good wishes go with you both."

Arman waited until Loti had left the apartment before pulling his grumpy lover into his arms and kissing his forehead. "Now, I know your answer, but for the sake of form, I'll say it. It's still not too late to stay behind. Logistically, we don't need you."

Kei sighed in exasperation. "Yes, you do. I promised Reis I'd be with them all. Quite aside from the fact I already told you I was going for my own reasons." He stood back and put his hand on his hips. "Enough? No more of this?"

"No more, I promise. But you also remember *your* promise not to distract me, and that means you obey me as any other soldier or sailor will. Misbehave, and Meki will stick you in the brig and I'll fix the irons myself, never think I won't."

Kei looked at him seriously, all temper gone. "No, I promise."

"And you don't set foot on Utuk unless it's completely safe and without me at your side. Whatever happens, do you hear me? A civilian running amok is the very last thing we need."

"I understand." Kei put his hand over Arman's heart. "You're scared, I can feel it."

"Always. Before every battle. Every soldier is, Kei. You coming along makes it worse, I won't lie to you."

Kei put his arms around Arman and laid his cheek against his face. "You know why."

"Yes, I do," he said gently. "Now, come on, everyone is waiting downstairs. We need to get on board while we still have the light."

Despite the caution of the Rulers, it was clear the population of Darshek was pinning a lot on the rescue succeeding, and were determined to see their soldiers and sailors off in style. Lord Meki had given in to the inevitable and so a small caravan of carriages complete with military escort had been arranged to take all the Rulers, the Gifted and other participants such as Arman, Kei and Reji from the Rulers' House along the streets of Darshek and down to the docks. It was almost like a reverse triumph, Arman thought sardonically. He would rather not have had the attention, and it was clear that Kei and Reji, crouched in their respective corners of the open carriage, disliked the entire business. The cheers of the crowds were quite deafening and the progress of the carriages irritatingly slow, although they had left plenty of time just for this reason. Arman held Kei's hand as they travelled along, and Reji had a hand on Kei's arm too, but it was obvious Kei was still suffering from the massed emotions he was feeling. "Not much longer," Arman soothed, now wishing he'd sent his lover and Reji down to the ship earlier in the day. He wondered if it was bringing back unpleasant memories of the day the hostages had arrived in Utuk, but decided it was better not to ask.

In fact, despite the press of the crowd, they were at the docks in half an hour. Two of the three ships were already loaded and sitting at anchor out in the harbour. It only remained for the vessel carrying the two Rulers and Arman to take her passengers on board. Lord Peika had suggested a speech could be made to the crowd, but Lord Meki had vetoed that idea, not wanting the delay or to raise expectations higher than they were.

"Better to return in triumph and make our damn speeches then, than to make promises we can't keep," he'd muttered to Arman when this idea had been raised earlier in the day. So all that happened in the end was that the Rulers going to Utuk and the other passengers went on board without ceremony, while the other Rulers spoke only briefly to the crowd, making thanks to those going on the mission on behalf of the populace.

Gangplanks were withdrawn, and Reis and Jera, the other mind-mover, shifted the boat away from the docks, out into the harbour. Reji excused himself as soon as they were moored to go see his hairy charges below deck. "Let's find our berth," Arman said to Kei. They would be waiting a couple of hours – they could have used the Gifted to get moving, but there was no real need with the weather being as fair as it was, and it had to be said the sailors were happier with the idea of trusting tide and wind to move their vessels than a mysterious force they had no experience of.

They had been given one of the officers' cabins – still very small for two men, but more spacious than the last one they'd shared on a boat. Their packs had already been stowed, so all Kei had to do was pull out his medical notes and set them on the desk.

"Well, this is familiar," Arman said dryly. Kei nodded and came into his arms. Arman kissed him in a perfectly chaste fashion, sensing Kei wasn't in the mood for play and only wanting to give him a little comfort. "Come and sit? We can go up on deck when we get moving, catch the breeze while we eat."

It had been a stressful day, so many last minute preparations to attend to. He'd only caught up with Kei in the last half hour before they'd left the Rulers' House, which might have contributed to Kei's bad temper, although that was probably more to do with healers making rotten patients, as he'd been repeatedly told. So it was good to have Kei in his arms now. They would have a little more time to themselves over the coming days, although Arman had promised to teach the two Rulers some rudimentary Prijian, and once contact with the mind-speakers in South Darshian had been established, there would be an intense period of intelligence gathering through Neka's Gift. That wouldn't be for at least four, possibly more days – they also hoped to confirm through Jena that the hostages were alive. If they couldn't contact her, the worst would have to be assumed.

"You're going to have to be damn careful walking about on deck, Arman," Kei said as he joined Arman on the narrow bunk – they were really going to have to sleep very close together at night. "Any rough weather and as medical officer, I'm ordering you confined to your room. You'd only have to fall awkwardly and hit those ribs or your leg and you'd have to start from scratch with the healing."

"Yes, Kei," Arman said patiently. It was only the fifth or sixth time in the last three days Kei had said this. "I don't want to break my leg again either, you know. It damn well hurt doing it the first time."

"Hmmm."

Kei settled against him, and once again his extraordinary braid was coiled in his lap. Arman picked up the tail. "So now I know what really passes for foreplay among the Darshianese," he teased, flicking Kei's chin with it, making his lover chuckle a little. "Were you flirting with me that night?"

"No...it wasn't sexual at all...I didn't feel desire for you that way until after we left Ai-Albon, and then only dimly...but you just made me feel so safe and warm, I could forget for a little while I was a prisoner, and the war...." Kei twisted to look at him. "But it wasn't fair of me because I knew you wanted me, so I was always trying to pull away.... I'm so glad we stopped doing that," he said with a wry smile.

"And I," Arman agreed with feeling. "Kei, when this is over, I know I said I would go back with you...."

Kei stiffened. "Yes?" he said warily. "You've changed your mind. I thought you might."

"No, I haven't changed my mind," Arman said, hearing the disappointment in Kei's voice. "But I've a previous obligation to Ai-Darbin."

"Oh. I'd forgotten about that.... Six months," he said slowly.

"I don't have to do it now, and I dare say they don't expect me to do it at all, but...." He brushed his hand down Kei's braid. "I want to start my new life right, Kei. Follow your customs, your laws. Make amends for my past – and Seya was right, that judgement was meant to heal. How will it look if I say I wish to be part of your village life, but I ignore a judgement so fairly and wisely arrived at?"

"Not good, I know." Kei shifted so he could look at Arman. "You want me to live in Ai-Darbin for six months?" he asked quietly.

"Could you bear it? Not now, of course, but later? Perhaps you and their healer could exchange places – I believe such things happen." He didn't want to push Kei over this – it had to be his choice entirely. "Or if we wait until you've recovered, I could go on my own – it's not like the two villages are so very far apart."

"No," Kei said, sounding thoughtful. "If it's important to you, of course I'll do it, if I can arrange things. Just give me some time to...adjust."

Arman kissed him. "All the time you need, Kei. I just thought I'd mention it so you did have a chance to think about it. But there's a long way to go before that happens."

"Yes. Arman?"

"Yes?"

"You did make sure Tiko was on another boat, didn't you?"

Arman laughed. “Yes, I did. I thought it was worth more than my life to inflict him on you – or me. Reji’s a lot more civilised in his protectiveness.”

Kei smiled and leaned against him again. “Reji’s been such a good friend,” he said contentedly. “Thank you for letting him stay.”

“He’s your past and your future, Kei – he’s going to be part of my future too. I know he and I won’t be friends, but he’s an important figure in the village. I want to get along with him.”

“You might be wrong about the friend thing, Arman. Give it time – and of course, continue to treat me nicely,” he added with a cheeky grin. “He’s very impressed when you do that.”

“Now that could be a hardship,” Arman said placidly. “But I suppose nothing’s too great a sacrifice to make if I want to befriend one of your clan. I feel badly that you’re merely being used as a device, but I suppose needs must.”

“I’ll force myself to endure it,” Kei said, leaning back so he could nibble on Arman’s ear gently. “They have to be alive, Arman. After all this time, it would be too cruel of fate if they weren’t.”

Arman could have reminded him of how personally they both knew how cruel fate could be. But he didn’t. Kei knew this as well as he did, but he was grasping for comfort. So close, still too far away from winning the prize. “Luck has guided us so far, Kei. All we can do, is do our best. If fate can bring me to you out of the worst circumstances, then truly anything is possible.”

Kei nodded and held him close. For now, that was all they could do for each other.



Even though Arman was forced to spend most of each day locked away with the Rulers, Kei found his days were surprisingly full. He took to spending an hour or so each morning with Reji, helping him muck out – there were soldiers on hand to do the task, but Kei had always enjoyed working with Reji and the beasts, and the soldiers were only too glad to pass the job to someone else. There was no doubt that Reji appreciated it, especially when the weather grew rough as it did a day out of Darshek, and both beasts and passengers began to suffer badly from seasickness. Ironically, it was the two mind-movers who could possibly have helped with the motion of the ships, who were laid as low as could be, and Kei had to spend a good deal of time at their side, although there was little that could be done. There were only two treatments for seasickness, neither very appealing – one was to dose the

victims with pijn so they slept away their misery – the other was to give them ipo tea made half with fresh water and half salt, and honey added to it. It tasted pretty foul, and the only virtue was that it did seem to stop the victims being sick so thoroughly and left them far less weak when the weather improved. Getting his patients to drink it was a considerable battle though, and after two days of this, Kei decided he would have to do something about the taste if he were to continue to prescribe it to them.

Since the urs beasts could also be drenched with the stuff, after breakfast, Kei used that as his excuse to rope Reji into coming up to the galley to help him with his experiments. He wanted to try different ingredients to see what would make the ipo tea more palatable, manfully ignoring Reji's suggestion that alcohol would be the obvious addition. "Yes, and then I'll have to deal with them puking because of the hangover," he said, giving his friend a severe look. "Not to mention what a drunk urs beast would be like to manage."

"But they wouldn't be suffering," Reji said with a grin.

"Not at that point, no. Be sensible, Reji. Fruit juice?" Reji shuddered. "We should try it at least."

After an hour, they were floating in tea and both feeling faintly sick from all the variations they'd tried. The best they could come up with was to make the tea stronger, add more honey and a few aromatic suik seeds. It still wasn't delicious, but it wasn't actively nauseating. "With our luck, it will be fair until Darshek," Reji said, grimacing as he pushed the latest batch away, "and this will have been a waste of time."

"It's never a waste of time to find drugs that work," Kei said. "Let me take this to Reis and Jera. They should be just about desperate enough to try anything."

"I think I'll keep the beasts on what we're using, but add some more honey – they're not so fussy. The main thing is to keep them drinking," Reji said. "I'll find you for lunch – is Arman going to join you?"

"He's not allowed on deck in this weather," Kei said firmly. "I'll nail his feet to the floor if he tries to climb those wet stairs."

Reji flicked his braid as he passed him. "You might have the hair for it, but he's the one on the leash, I see."

"As it should be," Kei said with a grin. "Come find me later."

Reji waved and left. Kei set the pot to boiling again, and made up a batch of the new formula for the tea. "Oh, hello, Kei."

He looked up and smiled at Neka. "Good morning – how are the patients?"

“Awful,” she said, wrinkling her nose. “Poor Reis. Neris and Meda don’t know what to do with him.”

“There’s not a lot they can do, but I believe the weather is going to improve, the captain said. You can take this to Jera, if you like. I hope this won’t make him as sick as the last batch.”

She took the teapot and sniffed at it suspiciously. “Doesn’t smell too bad. Is it nasty?”

“Not as much. He needs to drink it even if it is, he’ll feel better later. If he’s hungry and wants to eat, Cook is going to make up some meat broth. He can have that.” He collected his own pot and a mug. “Come on.”

The motion of the ship made it hard to keep their feet, and he had to grip Neka’s arm to keep her from falling. Finally they got to the deck where the Gifted had their berths. “I’ll call in and see Jera in a few minutes. Just try to get him to sip this – anything he gets down will help.”

Meda opened the door at his knock. “Oh, gods, Kei, I was just coming to find you – I think he’s dying!”

“I think that’s unlikely,” Kei said calmly. The cabin smelled pretty ripe – it wouldn’t be helping Reis even if he weren’t seasick. He set the pot and mug down and came over to where Neris was wiping Reis’ face, looking as worried as his other lover was about their companion. “Didn’t get much sleep?”

Reis looked up at him with miserable eyes. “I want to die.”

“That’s a little different from actually being close to death, so I’ll take that as a good sign.” Reis really looked very poor though. “The weather’s improving, and I’ve adjusted the taste of the tea. Want to try it?”

Reis looked nauseated at the very thought, but Neris propped him up and Meda brought a cup over for him. Kei helped him sip it. “Well?”

“Yuck. But not so much,” he said with a wan look, leaning back against Neris again.

“Good. Drink that. You know, this room stinks. Meda, please open the porthole – fresh air is more important than a little rain.” While Reis drank the tea with much pulling of faces, Kei took his pulse and assessed his condition – his pulse was fast and his skin was too cool. “I think we need to try the pijn again, Reis. You need to get some sleep.”

Kei had already had this argument, so the response was expected, even tired as Reis clearly was. “It’s nasty and I don’t like being drugged.”

“No, but your body doesn’t like you being exhausted – and look at Meda and Neris. They need a rest too.”

Reis gripped his wrist. "Maybe if you stay with me, Kei. I think I can sleep if you stay."

Over his head, Neris raised an eyebrow at Kei. "I've no objection, if you don't mind."

"All right. Let me go and see if Jera is all right. I'll make no promise until I see him, and you need to drink another mug of tea while I'm gone," he said sternly. Reis nodded, the relief he was feeling at the prospect of Kei's return unmistakable.

Kei had considerable doubts that he would make a difference, but if his patient wanted something so simple, he wouldn't deny it. Jera was sleeping, having had an entire mug of tea, Neka proudly reported. He could safely be left in her hands, Kei thought.

The only thing he had to do was find Arman and let him know where to find him. He made his way to the other end of the ship where the Rulers' cabin was, and knocked on the door. Lord Meki answered. "Good morning, Kei. Is there a problem?"

"No, my lord. I just need a brief word with General Arman."

Arman was already on his feet and limping over. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Kei said, nearly sighing at his lover's protectiveness. "Reis has asked me to stay with him this morning to help him get some rest, that's all. I just wanted you to know where I was."

Arman frowned and ushered him back into the corridor, shutting the cabin door behind him. "Is that necessary, Kei? I don't want them imposing on you. Why can't Meda or Neris stay with him?"

"Because they're as exhausted as he is and the minute I get back I'm going to chase them away to find some sleep. Reis is very ill, Arman. He needs the rest."

"Then give him some pijn."

Kei folded his arms. "Are you presuming to tell me how to treat my patients, general? Shall I plan your next battle for you?"

Arman held up a hand in apology. "I'm sorry, you're quite right. Just remember your limits – I know what you're like when you think you're needed. Other people need you too, don't forget."

"I know. How goes it?"

He pulled a face. "I never realised how clever you were that you picked up our tongue so easily."



"I had two months living with soldiers and my survival depended on it. If my incentive had only been flattering that poisonous bitch you call sovereign, and I only had a week to do it, I don't think I'd have been so good at it."

"Perhaps not. Perhaps it's your youth too. Never mind," he said wearily. "I'd love some fresh air," he added, giving Kei his most pathetic look.

"Too bad," Kei said heartlessly. "If it stops raining and the ship stops rolling, you can come up later and not before."

"You're getting your own back for Utuk, aren't you?"

Kei leaned over and kissed him. "Not at all. I hold no grudge against *you* for that." He let himself enjoy holding Arman for a moment or two, then set him free. "I'll find you later. *Below* deck, general, or I'll want an explanation."

"You're a hard man, Kei. Some might accuse you of inflexibility."

"So long as the same thing can't be said of your leg, then yes, I am."

Arman shook his head at the poor joke and then laid his hand on Kei's arm. "Just don't overdo it," he said and then went back into the cabin.

Kei sighed and went back to Reis' cabin. "All right, Meda, Neris, go find an empty room and get some sleep. I'm ordering you away until Reis wakes up."

Although they each kissed Reis affectionately before they left and assured them they wouldn't be far away, Kei sensed their relief – Meda looked as pale as Reis did, and Neris was frowning from an obvious headache. At least the air was fresher, and Reis, although he looked perfectly wretched, wasn't actually vomiting. Kei was just going to sit in a chair by the bunk, but Reis waved weakly at him, indicating Kei should sit on the bed itself so Reis could put his head on his lap. Rather glad Arman wasn't here to lecture him about it, Kei readily obeyed.

Reis, he'd discovered, was a very tactile person, and took full advantage of having two lovers to satisfy his need to be touched. It didn't surprise Kei at all that Reis needed to be in contact with him, and provided the mind-mover wasn't being too depressed or angry, and Kei had a little time to prepare, he could easily bear it. Reis, who was only just a couple of months younger than Kei, had a rather simple, openhearted personality, rather child-like in his curious and affectionate, occasionally mischievous nature. Of course, that made him feel emotional blows more deeply, but it meant when he loved or formed a friendship, it was equally strongly felt. Kei was becoming very fond of him, and all the Gifted. There was so little malice in them. It restored his faith in people.

Right now, all Kei could detect was intense weariness, nausea and a little fear – probably because Reis was so sick he couldn't imagine ever feeling

well again. "The weather's improving," he said quietly, stroking Reis' forehead. "As soon as we stop rolling, you'll feel well again. It'll be like magic." Reis just stared back, and Kei could tell he was just too miserable to care or to think. "I want you to sleep," he said gently, using the tone of voice he used with Arman to help him relax during sex – something he thought he wouldn't tell either man.

Reis clutched at his hand. "Never felt this sick," he whined a little. "Why me?"

"Bad luck, I'm afraid. We don't know what causes it, but if you drink that tea, you'll suffer no permanent effect. In fact, you'll feel perfectly well within a short time once the weather improves, I promise."

"Talk to me, Kei. I like your voice."

"What about?"

"Home? Or...Arman, maybe?"

"Same thing," he said, joking – and then realised it was perfectly true. "If I tell you about my village, you have to try and sleep, all right?"

Reis nodded, and Kei did as he said he would, talking about his parents and his sister. It didn't surprise him that Reis seemed to ease as he spoke – now Bikel had explained better how his gift worked, Kei was able to use it consciously to help his patients, letting them feed from his calmer emotions which caused him no harm provided he didn't overdo it. No chance of doing that with Arman and Reji around, he thought, smiling.

He kept his voice quiet, certain that with the improving ship motion, Reis' exhaustion and the tea, his patient would drop off quickly. So it proved to be, Reis still holding his hand as he fell asleep. Kei could leave now, he supposed, but he didn't want to disturb the man, and besides, it was a chance to make sure he and his lovers really did get some rest. He did lift his mental 'voice' and speak to Neka, checking that Jera was also still asleep, and asking her to let Meda and Neris know that Reis was fine.

He wasn't tired, but the cabin was warm and the motion of the ship had a hypnotic effect on him, so he dozed lightly for what he felt was probably three hours at least. When he woke properly, the light through the porthole was noticeably brighter and the ship was rolling far less. Reis was still fast asleep, still very pale. *Kei?*

*What, Neka?*

*Meda wants to know if they can come back in.*

*If they like. He's asleep.*

He felt Neka 'nod'. Not long after, the cabin door opened and Neris walked in. Kei put his finger to his lips to signal silence and pantomimed that they should change places. With great care, Neris slid under Reis and let Kei up. "Thank you," he said quietly. "Meda's on deck."

"I'll find her."

As he left, Neris was smiling at Reis – the fire-shaper rarely smiled, as if Reis had stolen all his amiability, but in fact, he was as gentle a soul as either of his lovers. For some reason, he only felt able to express that side of himself to them. Kei responded to what he sensed and not what he saw. He liked Neris for his kind, if prickly nature, and the tenderness he showed his lovers.

He was right – the weather was much improved and the sun was shining brightly, looking set to quickly dry the puddles of rainwater left all over the deck. On the boats ahead and behind, Kei could see sailors on deck mopping the water up, as they were beginning to do on his own ship. Arman would have his walk later, he thought. Meda was leaning on the rail. "Did you get any sleep?"

"Some. I'll have some more later. How is he?"

"Asleep – tired, of course. He won't be much use the rest of the day, I think. You should all get more sleep, if you can."

"I might – I just wanted to be out in the air now. I don't like being confined." As Kei looked out at the sea, he saw a series of waterspouts rising, being made to dance like a fountain, and then he saw that there were jijel dolphins playing in among them, leaping through the spouts. "Aren't they pretty?" she sighed. "I love dolphins and whales."

"Yes, they're pretty, and so is your art."

"Reis like my waterspouts. He likes *you*, Kei. He's going to miss you when you go home."

"I'll miss him. I'll miss you all, Meda. I'll think of you often, I know."

"There's no ocean in Ai-Albon," she said sadly. "I wouldn't like to visit where there wasn't water to play with. Big water, I mean. Not puddles."

Kei smiled at the idea of one of her creations being lifted above the big waterhole in the village, and how the children would love it. "Perhaps I could come and visit you again one day."

"Would you?" she asked, turning to him with a hopeful expression. "Oh, that would be wonderful. And Reis wouldn't be so sad – but do you mean years and years away?"

"I hope not," he said, not sure when he would ever come back to the city. "But I've just been gone for over half a year. My sister is sad too."

"She would be. If I had you as a brother," she said, putting her arm through Kei's, "I would never let you out of my sight."

"She didn't have a lot of choice in the matter, Meda."

She looked at him, big eyes assessing him critically. "No. But then you wouldn't have met Arman. I like him too. Not as much as you, because he's a bit gruff sometimes. You're always sweet."

"I'm not," he said with a grin. "Talk to Reji."

"Reji's sweet too. You must *all* be lovely in your village. No wonder you miss it. Maybe Meki could invite everyone to visit Darshek and we could see them," she said, a little playfully.

"That wouldn't be very practical now, would it?" Kei pointed out. "And many of them have also just been away for months, so I think they wouldn't be eager to leave again."

She sighed, acknowledging the point. "But it's so dull in Darshek sometimes, Kei. People are scared of us, and they treat us like freaks, or they just want to know how to use us. We're really just like everyone else."

Watching the amazing waterspouts amusing the dolphins, Kei hardly thought they were 'just like' anyone at all. "You have a wonderful Gift. I've always wanted to be able to do something like that, or even like Reji's fire-shaping. Something beautiful."

"You have something beautiful," she said, touching her palm to her chest. "Wyma said you glow. So does Arman."

"Wyma?" But the soul-toucher hadn't even come near him, which hadn't surprised Kei after what had happened to Diza.

She nodded. "He said you and he were like this big ball of light when you came together. Pretty, he said. I wish I could see it. You can't see emotions like that, can you?"

"No – I didn't know he could. It must get confusing."

She shrugged. "He's used to it and he hardly ever goes out anyway. He said most people are too ugly to look at. But you and Arman are beautiful, he said. You know, Arman's handsome in a funny way. Does that beard prickle when you kiss him?"

"A bit," Kei said, amused by her curiosity. "Not as much as you think and it feels good when he rubs it on your ...."

"Kei!"

"Stomach, Meda. You started it."

She poked him in the side as a reprimand. "Well, anyway, he's pretty too. I like you better, though."

“Thank you,” he said with a little bow. “I’d like the lovely women to prefer me to him.”

She poked him again. “You’re not supposed to prefer women at all now.”

“And who’s the one telling me how beautiful I am? I can look, I’m just not going to do anything about it.”

“Then so am I,” she said. “Looking, I mean.” She sighed. “I should go and find Neris. Reis will be all right, won’t he?”

“Completely, I promise. Have him drink some more tea when he wakes and let him eat whatever he fancies – perhaps keep it to something light, like soup – but he should be fine. If there’s any more rough weather, then we’ll just have to get through it.”

“I hope it’s not rough before we get to Utuk,” she said seriously. “If he and Jera are sick, we might not be able to do what Arman wants.”

Kei had worried about this too. “Let me speak to Arman about it. Don’t worry, Meda. He’s a very clever man – he’s probably got a plan all worked out.”

“What’s he going to do in Ai-Albon, Kei? You don’t need a general there, do you?”

He looked at her suspiciously. “Meki didn’t put you up to this, did he?”

She was utterly bewildered. “I don’t know what you mean. I just wondered what he’s going to do – will you teach him to be a healer? I can’t see him doing that.”

“He was talking about farming, actually.”

“Oh. Well, as long as it’s not war, I’m happy. I don’t want us to be at war,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s not like there isn’t plenty for everyone, and lots of room in Darshian. I’m sure once Meki and Peika point that out to this woman in Utuk, she’ll understand.”

Kei was rather less sanguine about the reasonableness of the Prij sovereign. “Possibly. Are you going to see Neris?”

With a guilty squeak, she rushed off and abandoned him, leaving him with much to consider as he looked out at the dolphins, now deprived of their toy, but still leaping joyfully in the wake of the ship sailing ahead of Kei’s boat. So he and Arman were beautiful together? That didn’t surprise him as much as discovering the Gifted soul-touchers could see emotions, and not just feel them. Perhaps when his own gift had recovered, he might have a chance to talk to Wyma about what it was like. He was truly glad he himself didn’t have that Gift. It would make every day existence very uncomfortable, and he already had enough difficulty with that.

He sighed. Time to find Reji for lunch and then he would tell Arman he could take a cautious walk on deck. Then Kei could claim his reward for his generosity – Arman might possibly even like that as much as the walk, he thought.



There was no more rough weather for the next two days, and Reis and the other victims of seasickness had a chance to restore both strength and spirits. However, it wasn't the fine sailing that was putting a spring in everyone's step. Five days after they left Darshek, in the late morning, Neka made her first contact with mind-speakers in south Darshian. Arman immediately abandoned his language lessons, and was then locked away with the Gifted woman for the rest of the day as she used his more recent knowledge of the south to contact key figures of the population, alerting them to events and the Rulers' plans. Kei could only fret, wearing out his anxiety working with the animals, or letting Reis and Meda amuse him with their games on the ocean. There was only one thought in his mind, only one thing he wanted to know, and he knew he wasn't alone in that desire.

It wasn't until late that evening, as he and Neris and Reji, who had become friendly with the Gifted fire-shaper, were on deck, leaning on the rail, watching the phosphorescence of the wake and using one of Reji's fire sprites to give them a little light, that more news came. *Everyone, I've spoken to Jena in Utuk. She says as far as she knows, all the hostages are still alive.*

Kei looked at Reji, and was already throwing his arms around him in joy as Reji came towards him to pull him close. He couldn't speak as tears flowed down his face, tears of relief and happiness. Reji snagged Neris into the hug too, and the three men held each other, crying and laughing, so much worry and tension gone. Around the ship, cheers could be heard rising, and on the ships ahead of and behind them, happy sailors and soldiers were waving lamps on deck. "Gods, they're alive. I didn't want to hope," Kei said, burying his face in Reji's shoulder.

"We still have to get them out," Neris said, pulling away from their embrace.

Kei wiped his eyes, but let Reji keep his arm around him. "I know – but at least they're still alive to get out."

*Kei? Jena wants to talk to you. Come to our cabin. Arman's waiting for you.*

“Neka wants me,” he told them, but still had to give Reji a last celebratory hug. “I just know everything will be all right now.”

Reji tugged his braid gently. “Still a long way to go, little brother. Don’t get your hopes too high.”

His worried eyes did a little to dampen Kei’s mood, but only a little. “I won’t – but forgive me being joyful just for now.”

“We’re all joyful, and you deserve your happiness. Go on,” Reji said.

Everyone Kei met on his way to the lower decks wanted to shake his hand or hug him, and by the time he got to Jera and Neka’s cabin, Kei was feeling dizzy not only with his own happiness but the combined joy of the entire crew and passengers. Arman’s greeting him at the door and pulling him into a crushing embrace was welcome not only so Kei could share his feelings, but also balance them too. “Gods, Arman, it’s true, they’re alive, Jena’s alive.”

Arman kissed him. “Not only alive but impatient to speak to you. Come and sit.”

Jera was sitting with his arm around his lover. Neka looked a little tired – she’d been working hard all day and even though her Gift didn’t cause her the strain that the minor gifted suffered, just concentrating so intensely for so long would have to have been hard. Kei kissed her cheek, and then took a seat. She reached for his hand, and then he heard Jena’s voice in his head. *Kei?*

*Yes, Jena, it’s me. You’re made a lot of Darshianese very happy.*

*Well, I’m sitting here crying and trying not to make any noise. Are you well, truly well?*

*Yes, I am now that I know you’re still alive. Arman’s with me.*

*Neka said. You realise I’m going to grill you for a week when I see you.*

Kei grinned, and he saw Arman was smiling too – so his lover was listening as well. *You can do whatever you want with me, if I can get you out of there. Aldik is well, or was when I saw him a few weeks ago. Everyone is safe.*

*Thank you, Kei. Neka’s told me what you’re planning – if you put yourself in danger and get yourself killed, young man, I’ll dig up your corpse and piss on it, I swear.*

Even used to her colourful way of expressing herself, Kei still blinked, and Neka laughed. *Then I’ll avoid that. Are you well? Has anything happened since I left?*

*Not a thing – people are starting to get anxious because Arman and his troops haven’t returned, but that only just in the last couple of weeks. So far, it*



*hasn't affected us. Of course, Karus lives a very quiet life and doesn't hear the gossip.*

*Kei felt Arman take his free hand. Jena, Arman asked, Is Karus all right?*

*A slight hesitation, and Kei felt Arman's hand tighten a little. He's frail, Arman. But desperately hoping to see you again.*

*If...you think it safe, tell him...I'm coming back, but not to stay...and that I found my joy. Please tell him that, if you can.*

*I will. I can trust him, I know. He just wants us to go home – he thinks it's terrible that we've been kept here for so long, and after... the Ai-Vinri deaths...he doesn't believe the war is just anymore.*

*Nor I, Arman said grimly. Then tell him and send him my love. I would consider it a great favour, Jena.*

*I'd do it for him regardless. He just wants you to be happy, Arman. And Kei, you too.*

*Then you can tell him I am, Kei said. Give him my love. Tell him I'll always remember my time with you both with affection.*

*I will. How long, Arman?*

*Three days – we should be there for the equinoctial ceremony. If you and the other hostages are summoned to attend, then get everyone to stay together. Neka will be contacting as many as she can between now and then. The main thing is not to worry when the soldiers come. We won't let them hurt you.*

*No, I know that. Arman, are you not coming back to Utuk?*

*Arman looked at Kei, and squeezed his fingers. No – I'm going home. That isn't in Utuk.*

*I understand. I still don't like you, you know.*

*Kei grinned. Yes, you sound very convincing, Jena. Listen, Neka's tired, and she's going to be busy for the next two days, so we better let her go. I will see you in three days.*

*As will I, Arman told her. Neka will be able to hear you if you call, she says. If you find yourself at the ceremony, let us know, we could use someone on the ground.*

*I understand. Sleep well, Kei. And I'll give your message to Karus now, Arman. He's gone to bed, but I think he's awake. He won't want to wait.*

*You know his situation, and I know you'll care for his health. Thank you for looking after him, Arman said, and Kei saw there was a suspicious gleam in his eyes that was probably unshed tears. Tell him...he won't have to watch me being bitter. He'll know what I mean.*



*Yes, I will.*

Neka raised her hand. "I've told her to get off and do what she needs to. Did that make you happy?" she asked with an earnest frown.

Kei kissed her forehead. "More than you can possibly imagine. Thank you. She's alive – I can't believe it."

"Believe it," Arman said. "And now we will bring her and the others out, I promise it on my love for Karus and for you. There is no stronger oath I can swear."

Kei pulled him close. "And so I know you will keep it," he said quietly, kissing him. "Three days."

"Two and a half. We still have much to do, Kei."

"Yes, I know. Do you need to speak to the Rulers?"

"I'd better – I'll see you in the cabin soon."

Kei nodded and Arman got up and left. He knew Arman wouldn't be long – he could sense the longing for comfort, and the sadness of knowing that even if he saw Karus, it would be for the last time. He hoped the kind, elderly man would get some pleasure from Arman's message – hoped he would understand Kei taking his friend away from him. He would spare Karus that pain, if he could, but there was no answer for it. Somehow, he thought Karus in his wisdom and his love for Arman, would forgive Kei and be glad that Arman had escaped his deadening duty. Jena would help him accept it, he hoped. But then Karus was going to lose Jena too.

"What's wrong, Kei?" Jera asked. "You were so happy a moment ago."

"Yes, I was – I am, truly. It's just...a dear person is going to be sad, and I wish I could spare him that."

Neka took his hand again. "You're kind, Kei. I'm sure they'll understand you don't mean them to suffer."

"Yes, he will." He made himself smile. "Thank you – your Gift was a gift to me also."

"I like to make people happy," she said shyly.

Jera smiled at her. "Yes, you do, don't you, my love. I'll do my part, I hope, when we get to Utuk."

"Yes, I hope you will. Have you and Reis decided who's to be on the ground?"

"I will. He says he'll be happier if he doesn't have to threaten anyone. I don't have any conscience where these people are concerned, short of killing them. I'm more than happy to scare them quite thoroughly," he said with a wicked smile.

“Good,” Kei said. “I don’t want them dead but they could do with a good fright. If they shit themselves with fear, I won’t be crying into my pillow over it.”

Neka laughed. Kei squeezed her hand and stood up. “See you tomorrow. The weather still looks promising.”

Jera waved his hand dismissively. “They’ll let me or Reis know if it looks as if it’s going to blow up again. I’d rather miss sleep than go through all that again.”

“Same here,” Neka said. “You’re horrible when you’re sick, Jerichi.”

“Most people are,” Kei said. “I’m the worst patient I know. Worse than Arman, and that’s saying something. Goodnight.”

He left the cabin, feeling a mixture of joy and fear and some sadness. He needed to talk quietly to Arman to untangle all these emotions and make some sense of them, and help Arman with his own mess of feelings. Three days – three days and Jena would be safe and he could, truly and finally, go home. And this time, he wouldn’t have to take Arman away again.



They ran into more bad weather, but this time, between their mind-movers and Kira, their wind-shaper, and with enough warning this time, no one had to suffer any seasickness – Reis and Jera kept the ships steady, and Kira managed to blow the worst of the storm away. Arman welcomed not having the distraction of the unpleasant motion of the ship, or of Kei having to spend long periods away ministering to the sick. He knew it was selfish, but he found it less worrying when Kei was working quietly in their cabin on his text and not having people imposing on his still healing gift. Not that Arman ever expressed this to his lover, because he knew what his reaction would be – but it still gave him some peace of mind.

After the joy of discovering the hostages were still alive, tension began to mount again on the ships as their destination grew closer. Lords Meki and Peika had had all the language lessons they were going to get – now, they and Arman spent all their time with Neka, speaking to the clan leaders in south Darshian and making plans. They wanted no nasty surprises when they confronted Kita.

Kei was growing quieter as the time drew closer. He was worried, Arman well knew, for Arman’s safety. Arman thought the risk was lower than in many battles he’d engaged in, but he couldn’t lie and pretend it was non-existent. He was, after all, relying on people who’d never used their abilities for any non-peaceful purpose, and who were completely untried. He knew they would

do their best – but this was a new and enormously dangerous task he'd set for them. He knew the Rulers were worried too – not on their own behalf, but like any good leader, on the behalf of those they were leading into conflict. Ultimately, it all depended on Arman's planning and his knowledge of the ground and of Kita. He'd never had this level of responsibility resting on him before – never had so much to lose either. Kei's fate if he himself died, gnawed at his gut like a starving hisk.

Finally, his head pounding furiously with a severe headache, he called a halt. "My lords, we've done as much as we can," he said finally. "We should all make sure we rest tonight."

"Agreed," Lord Peika said. "You seem rather pale, general."

"A headache, nothing more, my lord. Kei will treat it."

Lord Peika smiled. "Ah, the joys of one's own personal healer. Meki, you and I should have insisted on one ourselves."

"Kei's done well enough for us," Lord Meki said gruffly. "Goodnight, general. You've done good work."

"Thank you," Arman said, bowing a little, and collecting a lamp to see his way out. "Don't forget, we need to be ready at dawn for the transfer."

He closed the door, and then stretched his back. His ribs hurt and so did his leg, just from being squeezed into a cramped and uncomfortable chair for days. He needed a walk – and then he needed to find Reji before returning to his cabin.

The storms of the morning had long since blown away, and the sky was moonless, the stars sparkling clearly in a completely cloudless sky of perfect darkness. All the brighter lights on the ship were dimmed in case any Prijian patrol boat were lurking – they were still a hundred miles at least from the tip of Kuplik, and a patrol this far from the main island was unlikely, but couldn't be ruled out. Even Arman's lamp was guarded so the light spilled downward, not out to the gaze of any ship lookouts. He took a moment or two to adjust his vision before walking carefully toward the rail, not wanting to deal with a broken leg or Kei's lecture on the subject. To his surprise, there was someone there, lit only by a small flame sitting above the rail. "Reji?"

"Oh...Arman...sorry, I was lost in thought." The other man turned to him. "I thought you'd still be with the Rulers."

"No, we've done enough and my head's about to explode. Actually, it's you I was coming to see."

"Oh? Something wrong? Nothing to do with Kei?"

“Yes, to do with him, but nothing wrong. Not yet.” He drew a sealed letter out of his breast pocket where he’d had it all day, waiting to speak to Reji. “You know as well as I do that I might not come back alive from this.”

He handed the letter to Reji, who frowned. “Is this your will?”

“Not...exactly. Reji, you’re the only person I can really talk to about this, because Kei means as much to you as he does to me, and I know you will understand my reasoning here. Has Kei explained what Bikel told him about the injury to his gift? How it happened, how I help him and so on?”

“Yes, as much as he knows, I think.”

“So you understand what my death might do to him if it occurs at this time.”

Reji grimaced. “Yes, I do. Which is why I wanted to come on this mission and keep your sorry Prijian arse in one piece.”

Arman smiled, even though it was hardly a joking matter. “Yes, I know. But there’s a limit to what you or I or anyone can do, whatever else we want for him. I just wanted you to be the one...Reji, he has to do whatever he needs to do to survive...but if he chooses not to survive...that’s a letter for him, saying that if he can’t bear the pain, I don’t want him to linger where he has no will to live.”

“You’re telling him to suicide?” Reji drew himself up to his full height and glared. “You don’t have that right, Arman.”

“I’m not telling him to do a damn thing, Reji. I’m telling him that if I’ve gone, he needs to do what he needs to do. And you need to let him, damn it! Please – I’m just asking you not to tether him to this world if he can’t stand it, and I’m asking you to help him if he wants to try.”

“You forget,” Reji said coldly, “that you don’t need to ask me to help Kei.”

Arman sighed. This was going so badly. “No, I know...I’ve just been trying to think how to make sure my death doesn’t destroy him.... I suppose you’ll hate me for this suggestion too, but I need to make it. Bikel told me that there is another option, and should the worst happen to me, and Kei breaks down as we fear, then you should drug him for the entire return journey and get him back to Bikel. If Jena has come back, ask her to assist you.”

“But Master Bikel said he couldn’t help,” Reji said, still holding the letter as if it was a thurl poised to strike.

“He can’t, no. But Neka can – if she consents and Kei truly wishes it. He said it’s possible for a Gifted mind-speaker to completely erase a mind – take a person back to infancy, in fact. Destroy every memory, every pain.... It would take away Kei’s injury as if it had never been, possibly even eradicate

his gift, although Bikel wasn't sure. It's never been done on a gifted person – and the last time it was done at all was nearly two hundred years ago, during the civil wars.”

Reji drew in a sharp breath. “Wipe away Kei's mind? Are you serious?”

“If it were a choice between that and him killing himself, which would you want for him?” Arman asked. “It's only something a young person might contemplate because it would take years for them to be remotely normal again...but do you see? It could give Kei that second chance.” He rubbed his forehead, wishing the pounding in his head would stop. “It would be a last resort, Reji. And if you were there, at least he would have someone who loved him to bring him back.”

Reji stared at him. “He would forget you...forget he loved you.”

“Yes. But as I would be dead, it wouldn't matter.” He gave Reji a half-smile. “And perhaps we could try again in the next life.”

“You've known about this since Utuk and you still brought him with you?”

“He would never consent, Reji....”

The man raised his hand. “No, not that...you've had this in your heart, this burden...Arman, no lover should have to contemplate letting the one they love forget them this way.” He clenched his fist and his face contorted in distress. “Our memories...it's what carries us from one life to the next...it comforts the spirits to know those behind them recall them with love. If Kei forgot you...your spirit would be lonely, lost...crying in pain....”

“Better that than Kei crying in pain,” Arman snapped, unnerved by Reji's reaction. “You know him, you love him – do what you can to help him if I can't. You said you loved him enough to send him away – I love him enough to send him home. Take him home, Reji, if I can't be there.”

Reji put the letter in his breast pocket. “I'll do what it takes,” he said solemnly. “But the best solution is for you to come back alive so, much as I dislike you, I'd prefer you to do that. Don't ever mention any of this to him if you do. It'd upset him.”

“Yes, I know, which is why I'm talking to you, not him,” Arman said, his headache and the subject making him irritable. “But the same goes for you – your death would bring him almost as much pain as my own, so keep your damn head, and his, down and out of sight tomorrow until it's safe. I don't want him to have to cut your braid.”

“Nor I his.” Reji gave him a humourless smile. “Guess you'll have to live a while longer if we're to have one of yours to cut.”

“I was planning on doing so. I’m going to him now and I’ll see you at dawn – the beasts need to be ready by then.”

“Wonderful, I’ll need to be up an hour before. But as you command, general,” Reji said with a mocking bow. “And get some sleep, you look like urs shit.”

“One would imagine you were concerned for my well-being,” Arman said sardonically, “but I fancy you’re only thinking about the hostages.”

“Yes, of course. And Kei. Besides, funerals at sea are an unpleasant business.”

Arman gave the other man a knowing tilt of his head. “Goodnight, then.”

Reji only nodded as Arman walked away, but as he got to the stairs and looked back, Reji was staring out to sea again, the little flame still dancing on the rail. Arman knew he would keep his word – he just hoped Reji wouldn’t need to.

The ship seemed very quiet to him – no sailors calling out to each other, no passengers talking in the corridors, not even the roar of a bored or angry urs beast to break the stillness. It was if everyone and everything was on tenterhooks, waiting for the dawn. In less than twelve hours, he would be back in Utuk and then they would see if all the planning, all the fears, all the effort, was going to bear fruit.

Kei was working at the desk and turned as he came in. “I could feel your headache from outside the door – come here and let me mend it for you.”

Arman went to him gratefully – the headache was getting to the point where his vision was starting to be affected, and once it got that bad, in the past, all he’d been able to do was lie on his bed with a cloth over his eyes and wait for the pain to stop. Now all he had to do was sit on the bed, bow his head and let Kei’s gentle, clever fingers work on his neck and forehead. As it always did, it took mere seconds for the pain to start to ease, and in a minute or two, all that was left was a kind of dull, slight ache where the pain had been. “Gods, Kei, thank you. I was close to screaming with it.”

“And why did you let it get so bad before coming to see me?” Kei asked, kissing his forehead. “I could have let you work in peace if you’d come to me when it started.”

“Sorry – we were in the middle of an intense discussion and I could hardly excuse myself on such trivial grounds.”

“Your health isn’t trivial,” Kei muttered. “Are you back for good now, or do you have to run away again?”

“No, all yours. Have you eaten?”

Kei nodded. "A hour ago at least. You?"

"We had something brought to us. I can't say I was hungry."

Kei leaned over, blew out Arman's lamp and turned the desk light down low. "Are you tired? You still seem to be in pain – what's hurting you?"

"Everything – I'll be fine, Kei. I've missed you," he said, kissing Kei under his ear. "How goes the text?"

"To be honest," he said, sighing heavily, "I've been staring at the same words for the last four hours and wondering when you would come back." He let his lips touch Arman's gently, but didn't deepen the kiss. "I don't know that I'll sleep too well tonight."

"You must – we both must," he said, sliding his hand up into Kei's hair. "Will you do me a favour?"

"Anything. What do you need?"

"You – let me love you tonight?"

Kei laid his cheek against Arman's, and cupped the back of his head. "Do what you wish," he said in a low voice.

"You don't really feel like sex, do you," Arman said, looking into his eyes.

Kei stared, then shook his head. "No. I'm sorry."

Arman just held him close, burying his nose in Kei's hair. "Don't apologise. Why don't we go to bed? We really do need to get some sleep."

"I don't think I can, Arman. My gut's in a knot and I keep thinking...." He took a deep breath and tried to smile. "You know what I keep thinking."

"I know. Just come to bed. I want you in my arms, I need that."

Kei nodded and pulled away so he could stand and strip, folding his clothes with care. Arman waited until he was nude before pulling him back into his arms. "You're not undressed," Kei said with a little pout.

"Because I'm waiting for you to do it for me."

Kei raised an eyebrow, even as he started to unlace Arman's shirt. "This is the man who prides himself on doing everything for himself?"

"Can I help it if I love the feel of your hands on me?"

Kei smiled. "Ah, an ulterior motive. I knew there had to be one." He drew Arman's shirt over his head. "Does your leg hurt very badly?"

"It aches, but it always aches. It's strong enough for tomorrow."

Kei's expression shuttered as he helped Arman get out of his trousers, and then removed his loincloth. Arman could guess what thoughts were plaguing him, but there wasn't much comfort he could offer. Arman lay back on the bunk – they'd had to arrange things very carefully so Kei didn't keep knocking his bad side, but they had managed it eventually – and Kei lay down beside

him, resting in Arman's loose embrace, and pulling the blankets over them. It was a warm night, and the covers weren't that necessary, but Arman sensed Kei was making a more symbolic gesture, keeping the world out and at bay. He kissed Kei's temple. "You taste salty."

"I had a wash earlier – can't waste too much fresh water rinsing everything off. Just the important bits."

"Hmmm." Arman licked a little more of the saltiness away from Kei's face, as his hand stole over his chest, trailing up and down gently. Kei's smooth skin was a wonder to him, a perpetual delight, and Kei loved to be touched, Arman knew. Now Kei was back in a semi-normal environment, Arman had noted how often Kei patted or hugged or kissed his friends, and how they did the same to him. He thrived on it, and Arman had to wonder what it would have been like for Kei if they had not found a good reason for Arman to touch and hold him during his imprisonment. He suspected his lover would have suffered very badly from the deprivation.

Kei was still rather tense and Arman knew that if they were both to sleep, he would have to do what Kei often did for him, and help him relax. He settled him a little more comfortably in his arms, and brought his hand up to one of Kei's nipples, rolling it a little, less firmly than if they had been making love, but more than just a caress. Immediately Kei tensed but then relaxed, a little sigh of pleasure puffing from his lips. Arman kept up the movement as he kissed Kei's jaw, licking under it in the little hollow there, and feeling Kei shiver a little. He responded readily to certain stimuli, Arman knew, and Arman was making a careful study of all his sensitive areas, working as carefully as he would plan any battle, memorising the lay of the land, where the vulnerabilities were, and where a sneak attack would be most successful. But that tactic was for when he wanted to arouse rather than to soothe, and he wanted to gentle Kei now, ease his fears for a little while, so he concentrated on small, slow pleasure, rather than large jolts of sensation, moving his hand lightly over Kei's chest and stomach, stroking and playing a little.

After a little of this, he felt Kei beginning to calm down, tension lessening in that long, lean body, his breathing slowing and deepening. Would he sleep now, or should Arman continue the exploration he had begun? If he asked, he might break the spell, and Kei might wake up too much to ever have a chance of sleeping this night, when they both had so many worries to grind on them. He let his hand drift lower, just casually, without apparent destination, but as he reached the crisp hair at the base of Kei's stomach, he found his lover was



erect – so not quite as sleepy and relaxed as Arman thought he was. He could ignore it, he supposed, let Kei's body take the path of least resistance, continuing the stroking and touching. But at the same time, they were new lovers, and the ability to make Kei respond to his touch was an almost irresistible temptation. "May I?" he whispered, wrapping his hand around Kei's cock. "Or do you want to sleep?"

Kei tilted his head so he could kiss Arman. "Please," he breathed.

They'd never done it in this position, or without the cream to help. But this was as familiar to Arman as walking, since his teenage years and his married life had offered but this one means of release, the only guiltless pleasure he could take. Certainly it was odd to have his hand on another man's cock, and to be at a different angle, but he found himself finding an easy rhythm soon enough, taking it gentle and slow, always waiting for a sign that he was hurting Kei or that his lover was weary of the touch. Kei seemed only too happy to let him continue, one arm slung over Arman's body, his face buried in Arman's neck, his breath coming in short, hot, gasps against Arman's skin as his arousal grew.

It was all over rather quickly, Kei stiffening and then coming in complete silence, his semen hot against Arman's hand. Arman threw the blankets back and collected the mess, wondering what to do with it – but Kei drew his hand up to his mouth and lapped at it. "I should do that," Arman murmured, leaning over to help, licking his hand, and Kei's mouth, and his chin and his slightly salty face. It didn't taste so bad this time – maybe because he was getting used to it, or maybe because kissing Kei made everything more pleasurable.

Kei settled again, and reached down for him. Arman brushed his hand aside. "I'm fine, I just want to sleep."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm just tired and I need to hold you." He stroked a few stray hairs back from Kei's face, regretting that he hadn't been able to play with Kei's unloosed braid as he loved to, and hoping he would get the chance to do so again. "Sleep, Kei. Give me all your worries for this night."

It was all he could do. To speak of the coming day would be to awaken all their fears and anxieties. To talk of the past...? No, nor of the future. To get through this night, they could only think of the now, being with each other, safe for the moment. The world could wait a few hours, Arman thought, drawing the blankets back over them both, and keeping it at bay.



It was still dark when there came a quiet knock on the cabin door. Arman was already awake, and from the way Kei immediately tensed up, Arman knew he'd not been asleep either. He called to the sailor to come in, and the man did, bringing a tray and a lamp, and telling them it was half an hour to dawn. Arman thanked him and he left.

He kissed Kei and then urged him to sit, since there was no way of escaping the bunk without his cooperation. Kei got up, not looking at him, and not speaking, and the hunched way he was moving as he found his clothes told Arman how upset he was. He came over and took Kei into his arms. "I'm sorry, I wish there was another way."

Kei turned to him with reddened eyes, but a calm expression. "You have to do this. Just do your job, I'll do mine, then come home to me."

Arman stroked his hand down Kei's braid. "Neka will help moderate things for you. Let her and Reji help you, Kei."

"I will, because I want you concentrating on one thing – doing this successfully. That means getting out alive too. Don't let them ask for you in exchange for anything."

"Not even Jena and the others?"

Kei went very still, and closed his eyes. "Gods, Arman," he whispered. "Please...don't let it come to that. Please."

"I'll do my best, but ultimately, if one is to be sacrificed to save sixty-nine, and one is me.... I can't refuse." Kei clutched at his shirt, but said nothing. Arman kissed him and held him, but then set him free. "I have to go."

"Yes, I know. Do you want me to rub your leg before you go? Loosen it up?"

Arman stretched it. "If you can do it while I eat, yes, it would help. I don't want it failing at a crucial moment."

"Jera told me he'd make sure you were all right." Now Kei was firmly in his professional role, dressing quickly and fetching the pot of massage ointment, pretending that Arman's weak limb was his only concern. Arman ate the hard bread and drank the fresh jombeker milk that had been sent down as his breakfast, while Kei briskly massaged and rubbed his right leg. Arman's body was still stiff all over – the bunk didn't offer much room – but there wasn't a lot to be done about it. At least he'd slept all the way through the night. He wasn't sure Kei had.

Kei was done in a few minutes, and then Arman finished dressing. He took particular care over his appearance this morning, and Kei groomed his hair carefully for him, even combing his beard, which really needed trimming but

there was no time for that now. "I suppose it's a shame we didn't bring your armour from the fort," Kei said in an all too obvious attempt to appear good-humoured.

"It might send the wrong signal – that we're afraid of them."

"You should be afraid of them – I am," Kei said, clenching the comb in his hand.

"So am I. But damned if I'm going to let those bastards know that. Kei, I have to get moving."

"Yes. Let's go."

But he didn't move to follow Arman, and when Arman turned to find out why, he saw Kei standing still, trembling, his hands clenching and unclenching. As Arman approached him, he backed away. "It's funny...last time... I...I was scared like this was...when you came...took me...took me hostage...." He wrapped his arms around himself and looked at Arman, his eyes dark with desperation.

"Gods, Kei," Arman whispered, his heart breaking to see his lover in such agony. He pulled him close, and laid his cheek against Kei's. "I wish there was an answer, some surety...I can't give it to you.... It'll be over in a few hours."

Kei clutched at him, but only a few moments, he pushed Arman back. "I'm sorry. I'm being stupid."

"You're being a perfectly decent human being, Kei. Now come."

"Wait – let me say goodbye here. If I do it on deck, I'll fall apart." He kissed Arman, trembling hands combing gently through his hair. "Whatever happens this day, Arman...know that I'm yours, in this life and the next."

He took Kei's hand and kissed it. "I'll be back before night."

Kei nodded. "Yes, you'd better be."

Arman held his hand as he limped out into the corridor and up the stairs to the deck. Lord Meki was there, looking impatient. "I was just coming to get you, general." In fact, dawn was only just breaking, the sky gorgeously coloured in pink and gold, so Arman wasn't really late at all – Lord Meki was just anxious, his sharp face tight with worry. Arman knew it wasn't on his own behalf.

The crew were all assembled, waiting for the departure of their leaders. Arman led Kei to Neka, who would stay with this ship for her own protection – the mind-speaker was far too valuable for them to risk, not that any of the Gifted would be anything less than a terrible loss. The hostages would be returned to this vessel too and kept away from any battle on shore. She slid

her arms around Kei's waist. "Don't be sad, Kei," she said gently. "I'll watch over him, Arman."

"Thank you." He turned to Reji, standing with the waiting beasts. The trader nodded – there was no need to say more to him. Reji knew what was needed. *Neka, if anything appears to be going wrong, make sure you don't let Kei link to you, and keep him numb until you get help for him.*

*Of course,* she said calmly. *I know what needs to be done, Arman.*

Kei just looked at him, his heart in his eyes, but making every effort to be composed. Arman nodded to him also, and then resolutely turned towards the Rulers. The Gifted were there too – all but Neka were transferring over to one of the two troop vessels which would now take the lead position as they sailed towards Utuk. She would keep everyone linked all day, and any of them would be able to mind-speak to anyone else as a result – Arman still couldn't get over how easily this was done, and what an enormous advantage it gave the Darshianese in any battle.

Once they gathered into a group, Reis and Jera transferred Arman, the Rulers and the Gifted. Even having experienced the phenomenon several times as he and the Gifted rehearsed their plans for this day, Arman could never get used to the sensation of flying – the effortlessness of it was astonishing, and Jera and Reis never seemed to have to even think about what they were doing.

He and the others landed on the deck softly as a kiss. "There you go, Arman – I promised Kei I'd mind your leg," Jera said with a wink.

"So you did. Right, Kira, you're our power, go to it."

They were still some forty miles from Utuk, and they couldn't afford to be becalmed or lose any speed – Kira brought up the wind to keep them advancing at a steady pace which should see them there in three hours. But Reis and Jera would be needed before that. Between their current position and Utuk lay two small islands, both forming part of the network of signal beacons which would alert Kuplik of any attack. These had to be disabled without causing any suspicion on the main island itself.

The two Rulers joined Arman at the rail, watching the beacon islands appearing on the horizon. Even the cheerful Lord Peika was subdued. To pass the time, Arman had them talk to him in Prijian, making them pretend he was Kita. It wouldn't do for them to use the wrong title or word – better to let him translate than unintentionally designate her by a lowly honorific. Fortunately, that was one aspect of the language the two Rulers had picked up very well.

They sailed on uninterrupted for nearly an hour and then there was a shout from the crow's nest. "Patrol, starboard!" the lookout called, then gave the signal whistle which would be heard on the other ships – but their lookouts were already waving that they had seen the Prijian boat.

The crew came to attention. "Your lordships, please go below," Arman ordered. "Everyone, behave normally, you'll look like a Prijian vessel until they get closer. Jera?"

The mind-mover came closer. "How long before I do it?"

"Let them get a mile or so closer, so you can see better what you're doing."

Reis came up silently next to them, as if to ask if he could help, but Arman had asked Jera to do this for a reason – Reis was still hesitant about risking sailors, even though what they were planning should, if there were no unexpected problems, only cause the approaching boat a lot of inconvenience and not much else.

The sailors on the Darshianese boats continued to work as usual, their borrowed uniforms and caps hiding the distinctive long dark hair of the men. Arman watched the smaller patrol vessel getting closer. "Right, now, if you please."

Nothing happened for a moment or two, but then Arman saw the mainsail of the patrol ship start to tumble from the rigging, falling to the deck in a graceful heap of canvas. Across the water came the distant shouts of astonished sailors who were suddenly trying to deal with this and the descent of all their other sails as well. He could see them scrabbling about, preparing to get the sails back in position, but he knew it would be futile – because Jera was about to, and now did, snap the top off the main mast and cast it into the ocean a mile from them. "Cannons," Arman reminded him.

"Oh yes." From out the side of the ships shot six large guns, bursting through the gun ports, and flying into the ocean to the consternation of the crew. The sailors rushed to the other side of their boat as the action was repeated. "That's the lot?"

"Yes. Just disable the launches and then we're safe." The two launches were lifted off their booms, dropped to the surface of the ocean, and left to float away. The crew was now completely marooned. *Neka, let me speak to them.*

*Go ahead.*

"This is Sei General Arman of Her Serenity's Army. Your ship has been disabled by the Darshianese. Do not panic. You will be rescued later today by

another vessel.” He repeated the message twice more, then let it go. The sailors would be utterly bewildered, but as long as they did nothing stupid, they would come to no harm – the important thing was that they wouldn’t raise any warning. This would be the only patrol ship in this sector, Arman knew – for he was the one who had drawn up the defence plans.

Their first engagement had gone easily and would be good for raising everyone’s confidence, as evidence from the smiles and cheers of the crews on the three Darshianese boats. It was a relief to Arman certainly. But they had a long way to go yet.



As soon as Arman had gone to the other ship, Neka turned and placed her hands on either side of Kei’s head. “Now, let me block your gift as we discussed.”

Kei nodded, knowing it was the only way to ensure he got through this without breaking down. She didn’t seem to do anything, and he felt nothing at all – until he realised he could no longer sense the other people on the ship. It felt strange, as if part of him was dead or missing, but it was better than experiencing that terrible loss of control that had afflicted him when Arman had been taken from him in Darshek just a few days earlier. Bikel had warned him not to let himself experience another such blow, and Arman’s leaving as he had, and going into danger, was exactly what Kei did not need to feel in his present unhealed state.

It didn’t take away his weariness, or the grinding anxiety, but these were normal, easily handled by comparison. It wasn’t like feeling his soul was being sliced into slivers. “Thank you,” he said, bending and placing a kiss on her forehead. “Now we’d better go below.” Arman had left strict orders for all civilians left on their boat – all three of them – to stay off the deck. It wouldn’t protect them against a cannon shot, but it would lessen the risk of being hit by shrapnel or a stray arrow. Kei had no desire to die so stupidly either, so he ushered Neka down the stairs, Reji on their heels.

She kissed him again as she headed towards her cabin. “I need to concentrate, but if you want me, just ‘call’.”

“I will. Don’t give yourself a headache.”

She gave him a shy smile. “It’s no effort, and I’m glad to help. Arman is trying so hard for us.”

“Yes, he is,” Kei said, feeling proud even as his heart tightened at the mention of his lover’s name.

He turned and Reji was there, looking at him. "Let's go milk the jombekers," Kei said. He needed to do something manual.

Reji kept a hand on his shoulder as they moved to the lower deck. "Did you sleep?" he asked Kei.

"Not much. I'm tired, but I won't sleep a wink until he...until they come back."

Reji pulled him into a hug, and Kei couldn't help but be comforted by his familiar warmth. "He'll come back," Reji said. "He's made it this far and so have you."

"Too many things can go wrong, Reji."

"Yes, but a lot of them will probably never happen. Don't torture yourself, Kei." He led them into the animal hold. "Come and look at this female and tell me if her teats look all right to you."

Kei crouched by the jombeker and look at her udder. "Hmmm, I think this one could do with being rested – you've got that ointment, haven't you?"

"Yes, but I could do with some more, if you're making it."

Kei nodded and took the pot from Reji. It was an antiseptic, with an unpalatable herb added to deter the kid from suckling on that teat until the inflammation went down. "Milk her by the other teat today, I can bottle feed her kid," he said as he smeared the green ointment gently on the reddened teat.

Reji fetched the milking pot, and while he milked the animal, Kei sat on a stool out of his way, the baby jombeker in his arms, crying a little for its mother, but not being too hysterical. Kei kept it where it could see and smell her, and lick her face if it wanted to. The kid was only days old, born on the journey. It was so small and fragile, and yet it would grow into a great, hairy smelly animal like its mother and all its kin. It reminded Kei of Fedor's story about Kei's mother. "You know Fedor thinks Arman is my pet jombeker?"

"Eh?" Reji sat up in surprise. "He said that?" Kei smiled a little and explained. Reji threw his head back and laughed. "Gods, and what did the general say about that?"

"Not much. He was trying not to annoy Fedor, and not upset me. I don't suppose he was pleased. It's not what I'm doing with him, you know."

"No, it's not. If I can say that, then Fedor needs to accept it too. Besides, I'd like to see someone try to take Arman's balls off to make him behave."

Kei had to chuckle at that. Reji fetched the hand-feeding bottle and washed the supple leather teat, before filling the bottle with some of the fresh

milk. He gave it to Kei and then poured the rest of the milk into a mug. "Here, breakfast."

"Thanks." He'd been too upset to have anything earlier, but now he was hungry, and the warm milk was delicious – a treat for travellers, and good for those who'd been ill or needed strengthening up after injury. Arman had drunk gallons of the stuff once they'd changed the travel plans after Ai-Darbin, and the hostages would probably appreciate it too. The Prij had jombekers, but the milk was little seen in its natural state, being made into either cheese or butter. Most of the animals were kept for their meat, apparently. The Prij had other domesticated animals, used for meat and wool but they were not kept for their milk either.

As Kei fed the kid, Reji milked the rest of the flock, reserved a little for his own breakfast, and then took the two buckets out to the galley where it would be distributed to the sailors, or used in food preparation. He returned with some hard bread, which he broke and shared with Kei. It was peaceful, this, almost like being back in the village. Kei's family hadn't kept jombekers, but there were several who did and who supplied the village with milk and meat. He'd spent many hours helping friends look after them, and he'd done his share of physicking sick animals too.

The kid in his lap was suckling noisily but steadily, its mother watching the goings on with concern, but not being too upset. Female jombekers were placid, the domesticated ones bred over many generations to be more so, although the mature males, as Fedor had discovered, could be damn nuisances. The one Kei was holding was a male. Its future was not going to be a long one, sadly, but it would be a happy one, he hoped.

It finished its meal and Kei set it on the ground where it instantly joined its mother. It sniffed at her teats and was put off by the smell, just as intended, and then settled down as she began to lick it, reanointing it with her own scent.

Kei got up and stretched. "We...." He stopped as he heard a sharp whistle and then the lookout shouted. "What's happening?"

Reji moved to the porthole. "Can't see...oh, there's a ship!" Kei crowded close to him at the little window and saw a strange boat sailing towards them – and then watched as the sails tumbled to the ground and the mast was destroyed. The sailors were running around the deck in a panic, but it was clear their ship was immobilised completely. "Got them!" Reji crowed. "Look at that, perfectly done!"



“Good,” Kei said quietly. Their view was lost as their ship changed direction slightly, and he came away from the porthole. “So it begins.”

“It began when we left Darshek,” Reji said, putting his hand on Kei’s shoulder and making him look at him. “Really, it began when the Prij invaded.”

“Do you think we will really get peace from this?” Kei asked. “The Prij seem to have no imagination about other peoples, no respect – I fear a peace won by force.”

“If that’s the only peace we can get, at least in the beginning, that’s all we can have,” Reji said, sighing. “Kei, you think too hard about these things. Let’s just get through this day, and our people back. Let the Rulers worry about the larger issues. Come on, I want to muck out the beasts – it’s hard to ponder diplomacy with a shovel full of shit.”

“Funny – it’s the time when I think it’s most appropriate,” Kei said, forcing a grin on his face. But Reji was right – the urgent issue was getting the hostages out. The rest of it was for later.



The signal beacons were destroyed with elegant efficiency – Reis and Jera broke the mechanisms of the signalling arms, forcing them into the ‘Situation normal’ position, and sunk the boats the watch-keeping crews might have used to row to the next island and raise concerns. By the time the mess was sorted out, Arman and the little fleet would be in Utuk. Their borrowed colours and ships would keep them safe until they were in the harbour, but the very fact of the reappearance of three of the siege ships would cause surprise and suspicion. He knew exactly what the response would be, and they would have to deal with it and still get to the waterside amphitheatre, set at the back of the harbour close to the docks. He glanced back at the third ship – he hoped Kei wasn’t spending his time moping. Reji would keep him busy, Arman thought.

Twenty minutes later and the narrow mouth of the long harbour at Utuk came into view. They had chosen the longer southern approach to the island to avoid the main fleet stationed at Garok – there were gun boats in the south but they were concentrated closer to the harbour itself, and in fact, one was already sailing towards them. It was dealt with swiftly by the two mind-movers, who were gaining confidence with every success – Reis was even beginning to smile again, although Jera still took the lead in their plans.

“All right, everyone! They know we’re here,” Arman shouted. “Heads up, and keep your caps on at all times!”

They sailed past the disabled boat, hearing the angry shouts of the sailors as they did so, seeing clenched fists being shaken at them too. They'd be even angrier when they realised what the Darshianese were up to, Arman thought – and who was helping them. Even though he had long got used to the idea of how his actions would be interpreted, it still made him a little ill to know that after this day, he would be irrevocably and justly labelled a traitor – peace maker or not.

The wind was dropping now as they came closer to the island and the harbour, but their progress slowed not at all, thanks to Kira. The cannons at the harbour mouth were toppled gracefully into the sea as the three Darshianese ships approached, and Meda sent a waterspout to drench the armouries and thoroughly soak all the explosives and powder. Archers lined up on the cliff tops, but Kira blew up dust clouds which forced the soldiers to drop their weapons to protect their eyes, then she calmly blew their bows off the cliff. Neris incinerated them in mid-air, along with the spears hurled with angry shouts of frustration. The soldiers stood at the edge of the cliff, shaking their fists and screaming abuse at their assailants. Some of them even threw rocks, which fell harmlessly a long way short of the ship. Arman would have chastised them for a needless waste of their weapons and energy if he'd been commanding them, he thought, though he commended their devotion to their task.

Troops were running along the cliff edge in large numbers, and a few arrows and spears came down sporadically but they were of little concern now the Darshianese vessels were safely in the harbour. The third ship – Kei's ship – was left behind a little as the two vessels carrying Arman and the soldiers advanced. They came under sustained fire almost immediately, and the Gifted had to coordinate things carefully to ensure not a single cannon ball hit the ships, nor an arrow. The air was now full of deafening gunfire, laden with the bitter smell of gunpowder, and becoming thick with smoke, spray, and the light falls of ash following dazzling flashes of flame as Neris set weapons on fire. Men were busy in the rigging, the Darshianese soldiers standing ready to repel any attempt to board the ships. Small boats were being launched from bays set low in the cliffs, but the craft were easily tipped over by Kira's winds. The strident sounds of Prijian cursing were loud even against the cannon.

Colonel Jiv bellowed commands as did Arman, trying to anticipate where the attacks were coming from, as their own soldiers stood at the ready on deck. Meda sent water spouts to knock troops away from their positions, and

weapons were tugged from moorings, dropped into the sea or burned. Arman was happy to have the more showy Gifts on the display – he wanted it made clear from the start that the Prij had no hope of beating the Darshianese. The sooner they accepted it, the better for all concerned.

Reis moved the two troop ships at a frightening pace towards the place where the ceremony was being held, and the Rulers came on deck, ready to go. *The sovereign is leaving*, Neka warned.

“Jera, stop them and get us over there. Neris, provide the cover. Meda, Kira, Reis, keep up the defence as we discussed. Colonel Jiv? Bring your troops in at your discretion.” The colonel signalled he had it in hand. “Any questions?”

There were none, and the five of them who were to confront the sovereign stood together. Jera floated them up in the air, and then Neris wrapped them in a huge ball of heatless flame. For a few moments, Arman was blinded to all but the dazzling brightness, and he could well imagine the terror this apparition was causing on the ground. He wished he was more sanguine that the Prijian defence at the harbour was completely quelled, but they needed to tackle Kita and the Senate while they were out in the open. Once they were at the palace, it would be nightmarish trying to get through the defences there without loss of life.

He could hear the panicked screams of the people in the amphitheatre as they were brought to the ground in their fiery chariot, where Neris opened a door through the ball of flame. Arman led the other four through it and found they were on the amphitheatre stage, a little distance from the royal viewing platform. The ritual pyre had been abandoned, and the priests had fled. The sacrificial black jesig was still tethered to one side, its eyes rolling in terror, straining at the rope holding it in place. Everywhere terrified people were shrieking and trying to escape the arena. “Jera, calm this,” Arman ordered quickly.

Jera did so simply by freezing everyone where they stood, sat or were trying to run out of the structure. “People of Utuk!” Arman shouted. “Be calm – no one is going to be hurt. Your highness! We just want to speak to you!”

Kita stood and came to the edge of the platform. “What have you done, Arman! Let them go this instant!”

“I can’t do that, your highness.” *Neka, let me speak to them all.* “People of Utuk, the Darshianese have come to negotiate the end of the war. No one will be harmed. Your presence is requested as a witness to the negotiations. No one will be harmed. Please be calm.”

Jera lifted them high above the ball of flame and floated them close to the official dais. Only Kita had the freedom to move – her guard and the senators were all frozen. “Your highness, you can address your people through me,” Arman said. He had to give Kita credit – she was clearly alarmed, but she retreated not an inch from these strangers floating in the air in front of her. “Please – ask people to calm down or there will be a tragedy.”

“I’ll see you *hanged*,” she spat.

“Possibly, but right now, you’re in no position to do that. Please – order your subjects to calm down. We only want them to watch and listen. Not to be hurt in any way.”

She glared, but drew herself up to her full five feet. “And how is this charade to work?”

“Address the people as if they were all as close as I am. Never mind how.”

She came closer, still looking revolted by Arman’s mere presence, but did as he said. “People of the Prij, we are your sovereign, Kita Ruj Kemi. You are ordered to remain in your seats and to stay calm. The perpetrators of this outrage will be punished in short order. There is no danger. Your sovereign is safe. Lord Niko will protect you all. Remain in your seats.”

Arman nodded, and Jera relaxed the hold on all but the Palace guards. There was still a bit of unrest, but the panicking had stopped. “Jera, just keep an eye on things there,” he ordered quietly before turning back to his sovereign. “Thank you, your highness. May our party speak to you and the senators?”

“We do not speak to traitors, Arman, nor to invaders.”

She turned but found her path blocked by a wall of flame. She backed away from it hastily. “Your highness, I think you’ll find that you have very little choice in this matter,” Arman said politely.

She turned back to him furiously. “You threaten us? Your sovereign?”

“No, your highness. I merely advise you that you would do well to allow my companions to speak to you. The harbour is under Darshianese control – you will not be receiving relief from the army, and no one can leave or enter this place without our permission. Please – the Rulers just want to speak to you.”

“Very well. But once we are done, you will be arrested for treason and your companions put to death!”

Like the other Darshianese, Jera could rely on Neka to ‘translate’ the words via Arman mentally, and he smirked. “She’ll have to catch us first,” he said as an aside to Arman. She glared at him but only on general principles – she spoke no Darshianese, a lack Arman was now grateful for.

“As you say, your highness. Please allow me to introduce Lord Meki and Lord Peika, two of the Rulers of Darshek.”

The two Rulers came forward and bowed with scrupulous politeness, which she ignored. “You bring me clerks to speak to me? Elected officials before an absolute sovereign? Unless they are here to surrender, I have no business with them.”

“Your highness, they are not here to surrender but to bring their people home, and to negotiate an end to the war.”

“Tell her we want the hostages brought here,” Lord Meki said with a baring of teeth.

Arman repeated the request in the politest terms. “I shall have to insist on this, your highness, as our minimum demand.”

“You make demands on us, Arman? Have you forgotten your position?”

Arman gestured to the guards, still frozen in position, their faces contorted with anger. “Have you forgotten yours?” He was only prepared to listen to so much bombast before he showed her the bared steel. “Your highness, the Rulers want to retrieve their people with as little loss of life as possible, as do I. Don’t imagine that is the only way they can do it.”

“You *are* threatening us.”

Arman shook his head a little at her obtuseness. “Yes, now I am. Call Senator Mekus forward and send him to collect the Darshianese hostages. We can stand here all day – or my friend Jera can simply destroy every single structure in Utuk, and send every non-civilian into the sea. We won’t have problems cremating them, your highness,” he said, waving his hand at the ball of flame, still burning brightly on the amphitheatre stage, making a threat he knew perfectly well Neris would never carry out. “I should tell you that every word we speak now, can be heard by every person in this arena.”

He thought she was going to explode with rage. “You traitor, you filthy, deceitful *traitor!*”

“The hostages, your highness?” He kept looking at her calmly, letting her know she could expostulate all she wanted but in the end, he, Arman, was going to have his way and that was an end to it.

Finally she narrowed her eyes. “Very well, set the senator free.”

Mekus was released immediately on Arman’s order, and he stormed towards them, spitting oaths and obscenities. Jera immediately paralysed him again. *Tut tut, Arman, he’s a bad-tempered little creature, isn’t he? Can I annoy him a little?*

*Not yet, but we can frighten him in a bit. He's too stupid to get it the first time.* Arman turned to the immobilised man. "Senator, Her Serenity has orders for you."

"Mekus, round up those worthless Darshianese and have them brought here," she said with ill grace, "and hurry up about it."

Jera let Mekus go again and the senator began immediately to protest. "Your highness, you're not serious! To give into these...these *animals!*"

"We share your disgust, Senator. Now do as I order."

Mekus spat at Arman. "Showing your true colours at last, Arman? Your father will be so pleased."

Arman had been wondering where his distinguished parent was – he wasn't among the senators, but to miss this ceremony was considered a major social faux pas, although he wasn't the only one missing. Blikus wasn't there for a start. "You make free with my family again at your peril, Senator," he said with a polite smile. "Now run and do your mistress' bidding. Take the guards with you." Jera released the soldiers, who stood warily, waiting for Kita's command. Mekus straightened up and turned to walk away. "Oh, one more thing."

Mekus turned back to look at him. Arman nodded to Jera and then drew his dagger. He tossed it, caught it by the blade tip and then threw it with deadly intent at Mekus – where it came to rest in the air a mere half inch from his right eyeball. All the colour drained out of Mekus' face as he stared in horror at the knife. "Your thoughts and actions are being monitored. If I suspect for a moment that you plan something, oh like, having the hostages killed and bringing their corpses here to mock the Rulers, which I'm sure would be just the kind of stupid, bloodthirsty thing you would do, you will find yourself very, very dead. We don't need you, Senator, just your list, and none of us would be sorry to see you die. I know you can have the hostages here in under two hours. You have that long." He gave Kita a significant look. "You don't need me to be dramatic about the consequences, do you?"

Mekus clutched at his chest in fear, but at an impatient wave of his sovereign's hand, he scurried off, followed by the guards. *Neka, you need to watch that little shit.*

*I will. Right now, all he's thinking about is finding a way to kill you painfully.*

*Obviously the man needs a hobby.* Jera sent Arman's dagger back to him and he sheathed it as if it was perfectly normal to threaten a senator in that way. "Your highness, while the senator does his errand, would you be

gracious enough to listen to these gentlemen? They've come a long way to meet you."

Arman made a surreptitious signal. "Your highness, I am Lord Meki," the Ruler said in carefully learned Prijian. "I wish to negotiate a peace with you."

"I do not deal with those employing traitors."

That was pretty much the limit of what Lord Meki could handle without warning, so Arman took over. "Jera, please free the senators. Senator Kizus, would you kindly act as translator for Her Serenity?"

The senior senator came forward with a sneer on his lips. "You imagine you can do this with impunity," he said in Darshianese. "But the Prij will exact revenge for this outrage."

Lord Peika gave him a charming smile. "I hope you will see it less as an outrage and more of an opportunity. Senator, would you be kind enough to ask Her Serenity if we may sit?"

Kita granted the request, evicting two of the younger senators from their chairs. Arman was pointedly not offered a seat and he hoped his leg could take the strain. It was going to be a long day.

He took a position behind the rulers, and Kizus stood at Kita's side. He knew Kizus was completely fluent in Darshianese, and would be fair in his translation, but Arman was there as a countercheck anyway. The Rulers were of course getting a direct translation from Neka as well. Arman passed on their words, trying to imitate their patterns of speech and present the words of the Rulers as if they were speaking directly. "Your highness," Lord Peika said, "the siege at Darshek is broken. We have captured your ships and all the sailors. In addition, we have over a thousand soldiers imprisoned as well. I regret that your General Jozo was killed at Kislik."

"Better dead than dishonoured," Kizus said, and though the words were Kita's, the added venom was his alone.

"He died with honour, indeed and was buried as a brave soldier, but now we wish to return your people to you."

"And the price for this?"

"All Prij military presence out of south Darshek, and all the territories returned to Darshianese control," Lord Meki said curtly.

"Impossible!" The exclamation came from one of the senators behind Kita, and his fellows were also muttering. "Give up south Darshian? Let the soldiers rot, I say, rather than that."

"Senator Vilkus," Arman said mildly, "bear in mind you can be heard by everyone in this arena – some of them have relatives in the northern camps."

Secretly he was pleased – the populace had to be won over to this plan if it were to truly succeed, and knowing that the Darshianese were more concerned for the welfare of sons, brothers and husbands than their senators were, would only be to the Rulers' benefit.

"Be quiet, Vilkus, you damn fool." Kita snapped. "We shall discuss this matter and no one else."

"Your soldiers will not rot, your highness," Lord Peika said. "We have treated them with great care. We regret those who have died in battle, but not a single soldier has been lost through illness or neglect. I'm rather proud of that."

Kita looked less than impressed, but kept her view on that to herself. "We will not give up those territories."

"Your highness, once again, you have very little choice in the matter. We could remove every soldier and Prij citizen from there in a matter of days. However, we do not wish to be at war with your people. We wish, instead, to offer a number of tangible reasons why such a withdrawal would be of considerable benefit to both sides."

"Go on," she said.

"We want the soldiers removed, but we have no wish to deprive your honest citizens of the homes they have held for twenty years. Nor do we wish to unfairly tax or oppress them. We propose that in exchange for south Darshian being returned to our control, we will take on the cost of defending and administering that territory, and we will re-open Kurlik Pass and the other trade routes. Furthermore...."

"Re-open Kurlik Pass? You're insane," Kizus snapped.

Arman sighed and turned to Jera. "There's a statue up on the hill behind us – big, white marble thing. Bring it down so we can see it, will you?"

There was a great screeching of rocks being scraped against each other, and soil and pebbles began to rain down the hill as a dark shadow fell across the viewing platform. The statue of Lord Niko was approximately fifteen times the size of the one Reis had used to demonstrate his powers to Arman, and yet Arman knew it was well within Jera's ability to move. People began to scream helplessly, still held in their seats, as the huge object began to descend towards the stage, its base nearly as big as the entire semi-circle. Jera left it hovering above the stage as he turned nonchalantly to Arman. "How big are the rocks in Kurlik Pass again?"



Arman passed his question on to Kizus, who was staring bug-eyed at the statue. His question went unanswered, so he turned back to Jera. "I think we can assume they're not as big as this," he assured him solemnly.

"Oh well then, there's no problem. Shall I put it away?"

"If you would." Arman turned to the senator as the statue rose in the air again, and was floated back to its original position high above them. "Do you still think it insane?"

"I..." Kizus turned to Kita. "Your highness," he muttered. "We have no answer to this."

Kita too was utterly taken aback by Jera's action, but she collected herself. "What do we care if Kurlik Pass is opened or not?"

"Your people are traders and farmers too, are they not? Sea routes are all very well but in the storm seasons, you need a reliable land route too, not just to us, but to trade with the Andonese. I know you've been lacking just such a route since the pass was closed. I know also that you need a northern harbour port, and I also know that the Andonese have recently closed off all access to their docks and trade routes. The Andonese and the Darshianese are allies, your highness. I am authorised to tell you that such access and their routes will be reopened if you agree to our conditions. You would of course be able to trade freely with north Darshian as well."

She stared at Lord Peika as Arman translated his words. "We have other options," she said dismissively. "We have no need of your trade routes. We control other markets."

"Indeed," Lord Meki said coldly. "But if your ships are sunk, your harbours and docks destroyed and you are isolated by a trade embargo enforced not just by us but by the Andonese, how long will your overburdened island survive without the lifeblood of imports? Your choice, your highness, is to live in cooperation with your neighbours who only seek peace – or to starve to death. We will no longer allow a rogue nation to dominate our peoples as you have done, like thugs and bullies, for the last twenty years."

Lord Peika gave the stunned sovereign a wide smile. "Your highness, if you can end this war in this way, you will be seen as the peace maker of your people, the one who brought prosperity and opportunity to your land. And you can do it without a single death, without any destruction of property – and at very little financial cost, for what you lose in taxes from Darshian, you will gain in trade receipts and in the savings of maintaining a large and expensive military force."

Kita folded her hands. "I wish to speak to my senators in private. Remove yourselves, please."

The 'please' was significant, Arman thought, even if the Rulers didn't realise it. "Certainly, your highness. Jera, take us up so I can see what's happening in the harbour."

Jera obliged, and now Arman could see that the battle was dying off. *Colonel Jiv, if you want to bring your troops up to the amphitheatre, I think you'll shortly be receiving hostages to take under control. Neka, what's that little rodent doing?*

*He's given orders, no messing about either. They're rounding people up in some kind of vehicle – a 'calash'?*

*Yes, that's right. Good. Reis, be on standby to transfer everyone when they get here. Are you and the others all right?*

*We're fine, Arman. Meda's just hosing off a few people, and Kira and I have blown their boats away out of the harbour. There's no fighting at all.*

Arman could have sighed with relief. So far, so good. "Do you think she'll go for it?" Lord Meki said. "I really don't want to have to put a cordon around this damn island."

"I can't tell yet, my lord. We're getting the hostages back. Any more than that is a bonus, as you know. The Prij have never suffered a serious defeat – at least, not in over a hundred years – but then they've hardly attempted to take over a nation so committed to peace before."

"She's going to ask for you, isn't she?" Lord Peika said. "But she's going to be disappointed," he added with a grin. "Now the hostages are being returned, she hasn't a single thing to hold over our heads."

"No. But let's not be complacent, my lord. Mekus is a stupid man but a sadistic one, and he really has no limits on his behaviour. When your people are on the boat and safe, then we can be smug."

Lord Peika nodded. "How long do you think we'll have to hang in the air like this? It's damn undignified."

"Want to go on a tour instead?" Jera asked, raising his hand.

"Er, no, Jera, please. We've alarmed the masses enough for one day," Arman said. "Look – Reis is bringing the soldiers over." Below them, soldiers and urs beasts were being floated from the ships and landed at the docks. Arman couldn't see any signs of resistance from the Prijian military – Utuk was overstretched because of the siege, but he hadn't expected such an easy victory. *Jiv, watch your back. It's suspiciously quiet.*

*I think it's all right, Arman. There are soldiers here but we've removed their weapons. Right now, they're just standing here with their mouths hanging open. But we won't be careless.*

The Darshianese troops were now marching along the esplanade up the hill to the amphitheatre. Neris pointed to the road that ran north from the shore. "Someone's coming – is it our people?"

At this height, it was hard to see. It could just be an ordinary calash, but with most of Utuk's finest citizens sitting pinned to their seats, it was unlikely. Nor would most calashes have soldiers riding beside and behind them. And it was definitely heading for the amphitheatre. The Darshianese troops were nearly there too. *Jiv, who's that in the vehicle being drawn up now?*

There was silence while the vehicle was stopped and Darshianese soldiers conversed with the driver. *It's some of our people*, Jiv reported and there was no missing the jubilation in his voice. *Four, from Ai-Vinri.*

The four Darshianese with Arman grinned at him. "Jera, send them to the ship – coordinate with Reis," Lord Meki ordered. "Four brought home," he said with grim satisfaction.

"And here come more," Neris said. Sure enough, there were more calashes arriving. The one just emptied left, hopefully to pick up more hostages.

It was amazing what the human mind could get used to, Arman thought. Here he was, hundreds of feet in the air, casually directing events below him, while out to sea, people were being flown back and forth like birds from the ships, and he wasn't the least bit shocked by it. He felt rather sorry for the Utuk citizens who were watching all this. Some of them would probably have nightmares as a result.

Lord Peika was keeping count – the hostages were coming back at an agonisingly slow rate, but they were up to twenty-three already. Below them, Kita and the senators were still locked in negotiations. *Jiv, have you seen any soldiers with red plumes yet?*

*The palace guard? No, we're watching for them.*

"Jera, can you get Neris closer to our soldiers?"

Jera nodded and floated Neris lower and outside the amphitheatre to hover over the Darshianese troops. Arman didn't want him on the ground – but he would be a powerful deterrent if Mekus decided to use the palace guards against the Darshianese.

Anxiously they waited as the hostage count grew in increments of three and four at a time. He judged they had waited like this for an hour or more, and whatever Neka said, he didn't trust Mekus not to pull some idiotic trick.

"Sixty-seven, eight – nine! That's everyone. Get them out, Jera," Lord Peika ordered. "Then get the troops back on their ships too – we don't need them for this bit."

The transfers took another ten minutes or so, then Lord Meki looked at Arman. "I don't know about you, but I'm sick of hanging up here. Shall we see if that blasted woman has seen sense?"

"As you wish, my lord."

Jera took them back down to the platform, where Kita glared at them. "We do not yet require your presence," she said frostily.

"Unfortunately, your highness, we don't have endless time," Arman said, just as coldly.

Lord Peika laid his hand on Arman's arm. "Let's not be impatient, general. I'm sure Her Serenity is using her famed wisdom to make a sound judgement in the matter."

Arman refrained from rolling his eyes at the flattery, while Kizus carefully translated everything Lord Peika said. Kita seemed a little mollified by the compliment. "These are grave matters. Not to be decided under duress," she said and Arman thought he detected a slight note of appeal in her voice. This was a good sign, he thought. Even if she would never admit it, she could see who was really in charge.

"Of course, your highness. We don't wish to be rude, or to imply that you should give them less than due consideration. Perhaps we could retire to a more...private venue, for further discussions."

There was a hasty, whispered conference. "Very well, Her Serenity invites you to the palace for talks," Kizus reported.

"But the traitor does not come," Kita added, glaring at Arman. "We demand he is handed over immediately to be tried for his treason."

"I can't allow that," Lord Peika said politely. "For one thing, Arman is our translator. For another, we have granted him Darshianese citizenship, and I'm afraid I can't hand over a fellow citizen to you. If he's committed a crime, he'll be tried in our courts."

*When did I become a Darshianese citizen?* Arman asked him in surprise, keeping a carefully blank expression on his face.

*About half a minute ago,* Lord Peika said, still smiling amiably. "You have your own people to assure you that he's not deceiving you, or placing anyone

in danger. It would be a...wise...and most appreciated gesture, if you were to forgive his assistance to our cause.”

She continued to glare at Arman. “Our own cousin. How could you betray us, Arman?”

“Forgive me, your highness, but I have tried to act in the best interests of the Prij.”

“*Our* interests?” Kizus said sarcastically. “You bring an enemy force to subdue ours and you call that acting in our interests?”

“Yes, Senator, I do. You’ve seen what power the Darshianese have, and the Andonese are their allies. Already the siege has cost us hundreds of lives, and more funds than we can easily spare. When I reached Darshek, I realised that the war was not only unjust, it was one we could never win. We’ve gained nothing for this – I wanted to see the Prij get some benefit, rather than suffer an ignominious failure which would have brought shame on our nation and on your person. It is my belief that this day will be seen not as a surrender, but the start of a glorious period for the Prij.”

“You think you are wiser than we are, Arman?” Kita snapped. “To make such decisions?”

“Your highness, I was in a position where I had to decide for myself. I wanted all the people of both sides of this conflict to return safely to their homes,” he added, playing shamelessly to the waiting crowd. Always a good idea to remind them that they were now the ones who had hostages taken from their homes.

More hasty, whispered discussions. “Very well. We are a merciful sovereign, and since you have served us well before this, and it seems you have acted in good faith, although with a total disregard for our authority, you shall be spared our wrath. But it would be wise for you to remove yourself to your adopted home along with your fellows. Naturally, you lose your position, and you will no longer be a Prijian subject, Arman, though it pains me to say it.”

Arman bowed low. “It pains me to hear it, but I thank you for your mercy.” Which was less mercy than recognising she had no choice, but Kita was always good at portraying herself in the best possible light to the masses.

Kita stood and Arman bowed again, feeling almost giddy with relief. Was this all going to work?

“Your highness, would you care to try our Darshianese transport?” Lord Peika said, offering his arm as Arman translated.

She hesitated – and then took his arm. “Senator Kizus, attend us.” She named five others to come with her, and then told the rest to go to the palace by more normal means. “Are you going to set our people free now?”

“Yes, your highness. Of course. Jera?”

At once, the audience began to move about freely, and it was clear most of them wanted nothing but to get out of the amphitheatre as quickly as possible. “We wish to address them,” Kita ordered. “Perform that trick again, so I may do so.”

“Speak when you’re ready, your highness,” Arman said.

She turned to the crowd. “People of Utuk, we will be continuing our conversation with the representatives from Darshian at the palace.” The audience stopped moving, and looked up at the platform. “Your sovereign and your senate remain unharmed and continue to rule this nation. We order you to return to your homes and carry on as normal. Any civil unrest or disobedience will be dealt with as usual. This goes for the Darshianese as well – we will not tolerate lawlessness,” she added, turning to the Rulers.

“Of course not, your highness,” Lord Peika said, as if she had the slightest hope of enforcing her bold words. Now they had the main part of their demand, he could afford to be gracious. “Shall we go?”

She lifted her head. “Yes, you may do so,” she said imperiously.

The palace was about a mile away and should have taken only a couple of minutes to reach, but Lord Peika instructed Jera to take his time, as Arman showed Kita what her city looked like from above. Two of the senators looked about ready to puke, Kizus was impassive – but Kita seemed delighted as Arman had rarely seen her, and demanded to be allowed to see the palace and gardens from a series of angles.

Arman thought her curiosity was quite poorly timed – but that was often the case with Kita. It was her worst failing, other than her viciously cruel streak, of course.

At last they were landed at the back of the palace in the gardens, just near the large doors which led into the private offices. Jera bowed low. “I hope you enjoyed that, your highness.”

She looked rather flushed and excited. “We did, and would like to do it again once we have finished today.”

“Yes, your highness,” Jera said, giving Arman a sly wink. *Jilki would have her for lunch.*

*Yes, I know. Play along, she likes to be amused.*

Less amusing were the twenty or so guards who came rushing at them just then – Jera immobilised them on the spot. “Your highness? Would you advise them that we’re here by your consent?”

She waved at the guards impatiently. “It’s all right. We’re in no danger.”

Jera released the guard, and they moved instinctively forward before coming to a halt and snapping to attention. “What are your orders concerning the Darshianese, your highness?”

“Treat them as guests, of course,” she said. “And have someone send for the Lord Commander from Garok. Gentlemen, please do come inside so we can continue our discussions.”

Kita was being gracious. This was not necessarily a good sign, Arman thought, as he followed his former sovereign into the palace.

## CHAPTER 6

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Lord Peika finally asked for a halt in proceedings in the late afternoon, pleading a headache, but really to allow the Gifted, especially Neka, to rest. It was a good time to stop. Kita needed to consult with Blikus and the Senate in privacy, and the Lord Commander would not return from Garok until the following evening. Some agreements had been reached, tentatively, but they

needed the approval of the full senate, and the fine details needed to be worked out and documents drawn up once that was done.

Kita invited the Rulers to dinner at the palace the next night, which was readily agreed to, although an invitation to stay at the palace was politely refused. Arman had warned them that Prijisn hospitality, at least as interpreted by Kita, was not subject to the same unbreakable law as that of the Darshianese – it was certainly possible that she would order the Rulers slaughtered in their sleep, and Jera and Neris could not guard them all the time.

However, after Jera had given her another little flying excursion, and Neris had put on a show for all the attending senators, Kita declared that the Darshianese, including Arman, could visit the city freely the following day, provided they did not engage in violent disorder. She even offered to arrange transport from the docks for any of them that needed it. Arman had to come back to settle his affairs – he would find out, he supposed, just what Kita's word was worth then. He would take an escort with him, just in case.

Kita bid them farewell with all appearance of politeness, but Arman knew her well enough not to trust that any more than her hospitality. He was more heartened by the progress they'd made with men like Kizus, who seemed to have accepted the inevitable, and had, indeed, reined in Kita's tendency to get carried away with her own majesty. When she had begun to make a series of really quite outrageous demands, it was Kizus who had reminded her that in fact, the Darshianese didn't have to do a thing they didn't want to, and that the Prij were in the position of requiring concessions, not making conditions.

That had not pleased Her Serenity, but Lord Peika's charm did much to smooth her ruffled feathers. Lord Peika was deft at making every loss of ground appear like the greatest advance for the Prij, and while Kizus was probably not fooled, anything that gave Kita ammunition to present a defeat as a triumph only helped their cause.

Arman could tell all his companions were just glad to escape the palace, as was he. Lord Peika may not have a headache, but Arman did. "Good work, general," Lord Meki said as they approached the ships.

"Thank you – but I'm not a general any more, my lord," Arman reminded him.

"No, indeed, you are not," he said dryly. "Congratulations on acquiring Darshianese citizenship. I must get documents drawn up on that when we get



back. Never done it before – Peika, we'll have to make something up that sounds convincing." Lord Peika just grinned at that.

Arman was pleased in a distant sort of way, but all his thoughts now were on returning to Kei. He didn't give a damn whether Kei's lover was Prijian or Darshianese, so long as it was *him*.

They were landed on the ship deck with the same care as he'd come to expect from Jera all day, and greeted by the massed crew and hostages, who were celebrating their triumphant return in fine style. The roar of the shouting, whistling, feet-stamping and clapping was almost shocking loud to his ears, for all that he'd been half-deafened in the battle earlier in the day.

Sailors were hanging off the rigging, waving their borrowed hats, and ships' bells were being rung in an extravagant manner, but for all the exuberance and real joy of his companions, Arman found it hard to join in the jubilation – it felt somehow unreal to him – but perhaps it was simply because he was tired, and sick of political machinations.

He searched the sea of faces, and found Kei – but, to his surprise Kei looked rather solemn. Then Arman saw who Kei had his arm around, and one look at Jena's face told him what had happened. *Karus*.

Lord Meki began to address the assembly, but ignoring all protocol, Jena broke free, tears streaming down her face, running to Arman and flinging her arms around him. Arman caught her as his own vision blurred. "When?" he finally managed to ask.

She pulled back a little. "Yesterday morning," she whispered. "Gods, Arman, I'm so sorry." He saw Kei approach but then decide to let Arman and Jena have their privacy.

He embraced her, but refused to weep here with everyone watching. Arman looked over at Kei who came closer as Arman held out his hand to his lover, pulling him to his side. "Can we go somewhere?"

Kei nodded and tugged Jena. "Come back to our cabin, Jena." Then he kissed Arman gently. "At least you're safe."

Arman's heart felt like it was about to burst through his chest. The pain of his sudden grief rose in his throat, choking him, making it impossible to answer his lover's concern. It was too much. So close, too late. He'd tried not to hope too hard that he would see Karus, but he'd begun to think he just might do so – to have missed the chance to say goodbye by just a day seemed more cruel than he imagined fate could be. Was this the real price he had to pay for his treachery?

He followed Kei and Jena down to the cabin, ignored by the other passengers and crew who were still listening to Lord Meki. Kei closed the door behind them, and drew Arman to him. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

Arman let Kei hold him, and shed a silent tear or two on his shoulder, before straightening and turning to Jena. "Please tell me what happened," he said, taking her to sit on the bunk.

She sniffled hard, and wiped her face on her sleeve. "I gave him your message. He was so happy to get it, Arman. We talked about you for an hour or more that night, and he seemed so at peace the next day – so well, full of energy, wanting to talk about all sorts of things. We...we worked on your dictionary...he said you'd need it for your new life."

Her voice caught on a little sob. "We were going to work on it again yesterday, so we went into the garden, but he wanted to talk a little more about you, and Loke. And Kei," she said with a damp smile, looking at her friend. "He missed you, Kei."

"I missed him," Kei said quietly. "And?"

"And...I just got up to get him some tea, came back and thought he'd fallen asleep. But he wasn't...it was that quick, Arman. No pain, no warning. His last words were about you and how he loved you." She began to cry again. "I miss him so much now. I loved him."

"We all did," Arman did, succeeding in keeping his composure only until Kei stood and wrapped his arms around him, and then he lost all control, burying his face against Kei's stomach and weeping out his grief. Was he always to lose those he loved before he was ready to say goodbye?

He felt Jena hugging him from the back, and wondered when she would remember that she was supposed to hate him.

Kei knelt so he could look at Arman directly, brushing back his hair off his face. "I know you're not thinking about it now, but everyone is deliriously happy at being back. Thank you."

"I made a promise. Perhaps I should have promised to return to Karus and he would still be alive," he said, his voice harsh with grief, fresh tears falling down his face as he spoke.

Kei shook his head and kissed Arman's cheek. "Don't say that. Karus' time had come, that's all. He was with you in spirit, you know that."

"He was," Jena said, making Arman turn. "He loved you as a son and he was so proud of you, of what a good man you had grown up to be. When I told him you were going to rescue all of us, he was so pleased. He thought it took so much courage to go against your breeding like that. And when I told

him about you and Kei, it was like it was his birthday and I'd given him a treasured gift."

Arman clutched her hand, too overcome to speak. Coming so soon after Loke's death...and even now that he had Kei.... "I feel so alone," he whispered.

"I know," Kei said, and Arman appreciated him not trying to argue him out of his sadness. Kei knew what it was like to lose those he loved.

Jena stood up. "Maybe I should let you two be on your own."

But Arman put out his hand to stop her. "Please don't. Please...just tell me more about what happened while I was gone...and just...." *Mourn with me*, he wanted to say, but didn't feel he had the right. "The funeral?"

"Last night. His sister organised it."

Arman nodded. It was the Prijian custom not to let the sun set on a death if it was at all possible. "Did you...did anyone speak for him?"

"We didn't go – we servants, I mean. It was very quiet, his sister told me, but I don't know who came or what was said. Cook and Matez and Siza and I cried in the kitchen for him and...." She twisted her hands. "I suppose we had our own little funeral there." She wiped her nose again. "Anyway, his sister said I could stay for a few days before she let Mekus know to have me moved, and as I knew you were coming...." She smiled, even as more tears fell. "I couldn't tell her, of course. But I don't think she'll be angry. She's very nice."

"Yes, she is," Arman agreed, having met the woman a number of times. He wished he could have spoken at Karus' funeral. It seemed wrong that such an important person, who had educated so many of the elite, should have had such a small and uninspiring farewell. But perhaps it didn't matter. Those who knew Karus and loved him didn't need to prove that fact to others.

"She also said he left everything to you in his will. All he wanted was his servants to be looked after."

"But his sister...."

But she was elderly, and not in need of funds. Karus had wanted someone to care for his faithful assistants – but Arman was leaving too. He would have to settle that before he left as well.

Arman got Kei to sit with them on the bunk, so he was squashed between his lover and his lover's friend. Jena seemed to have forgotten her animosity for the moment. *No, I haven't, Arman. I think I've just forgotten how to hate you.*

Arman smiled despite his pain and Kei kissed him. "And the rest? Will they agree to peace?"

"It's looking hopeful. They don't have a lot of choice, but I wouldn't rule out Kita waking up tomorrow and deciding agreeing to the terms is too humiliating. She likes Peika, as I hoped she would. Meki thinks she's a waste of time."

"Hardly surprising," Kei murmured.

"And the hostages? How are they holding up?"

Jena sat up straight and glared at them both. "I want to kill someone, I really do. We have three women pregnant – three! Raped as prisoners, when they were supposed to receiving 'hospitality'! And others, even some of the men have been molested, some beaten. I tell you, Arman, the Prij are all bastards."

Kei smiled a little, as Arman did, no doubt remembering another young woman stating this emphatically. "Then it's as well that from this day, I am no longer a Prij. Two separate sets of rulers have declared it. I am apparently a Darshianese citizen, so you have to be nice to me now, Jena."

"What?"

They both looked at him in surprise. "It's true, ask the Rulers. And Kita's stripped me of my Prijian status in front of most of the senators. So if you cast me out, I really have no home to go to. " *And I would have no home at all, if it weren't for Kei*, he thought sadly.

"No need to fear that, Arman. Congratulations," Kei said, kissing him. "Are you sad about that?"

"A little. It hardly matters in the scheme of things. Jena, I'm most sorry for the hostages, and sorry we couldn't get here sooner. Has Kei told you all that's happened since we left?"

"Yes. *Everything*," she said with a significant glance at Kei. "I know you moved as fast as you were able. The fault is theirs who carried out the abuse."

Arman leaned against Kei, glad that Neka's help meant his lover could bear this contact when Arman was so distressed. "Are you sure you shouldn't be with them, helping them?" he asked.

Kei stroked his hair. "In a bit. There are medics with them now, Tiko too – the soldiers are out of uniform."

"And me? Should I absent myself?"

Kei shook his head, as he caressed Arman's cheek. "Most of them have no strong feelings about you, surprisingly, and now you've brought them back,

and your role in that is known, there's no hostility personally. However, we all need to avoid shouting, speaking Prijian, any military discussions. Treat them as you treat me, pretty much. Except for the sex," he added with a slight smile.

Arman turned and found Jena grinning at him. "You Darshianese....," he said, shaking his head.

"No, *you* Darshianese," she said, poking him. "Better learn our ways properly and that includes losing all that stupid prudishness."

"I intend to," he said solemnly. "Kei, I could do with something to drink and some fresh air. I've been locked in with politicians all day and my nose is full of the smell of shit."

"I take it you haven't said this to Lord Meki," Kei said dryly, before standing and pulling him upright. "Come on, let's find Reji."



Kei had been desperate for, and dreading, Arman's return. He'd known perfectly well what a blow Jena's news would be, and there was nothing he could do to soften it, or make Arman's pain any less. Arman seemed to age ten years as he realised what had happened. Kei felt almost as sad as Arman in a way. He certainly understood why Jena grieved as if for her father. Karus was the kind of person one might meet only once in a lifetime, and only if one was very fortunate. He hoped Karus' loving, gentle spirit would find a suitable home in his next life, and be blessed by happiness as he deserved, but this hope would only be of cold comfort to Arman as he mourned his beloved teacher.

Reji was still up on deck as were many of the hostages, no doubt enjoying the freedom to walk where they pleased, among their own people. Arman's appearance brought a few glances, a few smiles, which pleased Kei – he'd hoped his fellow hostages would understand the enormity of Arman's sacrifice, and it seemed they did for the most part.

It wasn't, naturally, the most important thing on their minds. Many had suffered abuse, perhaps not as severely as Kei had at Mykus' hands, but enough to cause emotional damage, and the women who were pregnant were in despair over their condition. All of them would need a lot of love and understanding. Once the euphoria of being rescued died away, the reality of their situation would need to be dealt with. It would not be a quick process, Kei knew that from his own experience.

He was stopped several times as they walked across to where Reji stood near the quarterdeck, but while he was happy to answer questions for a little while, Arman needed him now. He tugged Arman along, Jena on his other side, until they reached Reji, who was talking to Peit. Peit seemed a little uneasy at Arman's presence, but stayed nonetheless.

Reji put his hand out to Arman. "I'm very sorry for your loss, Arman," he said solemnly. "I hope your friend's spirit finds a happy home in the next life."

Arman shook his hand with obvious surprise that Reji cared at all. "Thank you. So do I."

"What's the news on Kurlik Pass?"

"I think the chances are good. It will take the best part of a week though, to clear. We can't just have Jera and Reis throwing rocks around like pebbles. Army engineers will have to work with them." Arman turned to Kei. "Have people decided what they want to do about getting home?"

"I've only just started to talk to them, but those at Ai-Rutej and Ai-Vinri are happy to wait for the pass to be cleared. I think those at Ai-Darbin and Ai-Tuek might go the overland route too, as a lot of their people suffer from seasickness. Our pregnant women are not so far gone that it makes much difference either way – two are from Ai-Tuek, and one is from Ai-Rutej." Kei took Arman's hand. "I want to go with those travelling by land, Arman. They need a healer, and someone who understands...and I'd like to see Jena home safely," he added, hugging her a little.

"Of course," Arman said calmly. "I told you, I'm with you wherever you wish to be. So long as your clan is happy, then so am I."

Kei squeezed his hand gratefully. "Reji, will you lead the caravan if the pass is cleared?" he asked. "I know you must want to get back...."

"Of course, Kei. Arman brought me along to manage the animals and take people home. The village can manage for a few weeks," Rei said cheerfully. "Stop looking so worried, little brother."

"I'll try," Kei said with a smile, and considerable relief. He wanted the longer return to Ai-Albon for selfish reasons, needing more time to heal, and to be with Arman in their new relationship before facing the clan again. Reji's support made him feel less like he was letting his village down. Myka was still going to be furious, he knew that.

"If some of us want to go the long way back, you won't mind?" Peit asked.

"No – but why would you?"

Peit looked at his feet. "I...we might...."

*Kei, you're not the only one in no hurry to face your clan, Jena said. People need time to adjust, and Peit knows you. Others will ask the same thing.*

Oh. Even with the thought he'd put into it, this hadn't occurred to him. He'd just assumed everyone would want to be home as soon as possible. "It's all right, Peit. We could use a hunter anyway, right, Reji?" The big man's expression immediately looked less strained, and he even smiled a little. Kei cursed himself – he'd got too used to relying on his gift, when Peit's unhappiness was obvious to anyone who just *looked*.

"Gods, yes. Peit, we'll be keeping you busy," Rei said, clapping his friend on the back. "Anyone who wants to come, can come."

Arman listened to all this politely, but he was looking rather weary, and obviously sad. Even this friendly interaction was clearly more than he could bear just now. Kei needed to get him somewhere private. *Jena, can you stay with Reji? Maybe you and he could find our supper and bring it up on deck in a little while.*

She nodded, and then gave him a push. "Go and say hello to each other properly. Honestly, Kei, you have no idea how to treat your lovers."

"I wouldn't say that," Reji said, wagging his eyebrows suggestively at her. She blushed beautifully, to Reji's obvious amusement.

That was Kei's cue to pull Arman away and lead him over to a quieter part of the deck. He grabbed a bucket and overturned it. "Sit," he ordered. Arman was limping worse than ever. "Did that bitch have you standing up all day?"

"Most of it." Arman ignored the bucket and just sat on the deck, tugging Kei down beside him and then burying his face in Kei's shoulder.

Kei just held him, wishing there was more he could do, knowing there wasn't, stroking Arman's hair and trying to show his love by his touch. The sun was getting low in the sky, but it was still warm – winter was over for Kuprij, and the early spring was nothing like what it was in north Darshian. It felt almost balmy here on deck.

"How do you feel?" he finally asked Arman.

"Funny, usually you don't need to ask," he said, his voice hitching.

"No, I know. But I'd have never got through today without that block on my gift, even without Jena's news. People were pretty overwhelmed when they got back on the boat. It was a very emotional couple of hours."

"I can imagine." Arman heaved a heavy sigh. "Mostly, I'm just tired. We've worked so hard for this, and now it's nearly over. I think we've succeeded, but all I feel is sad."

"Because of Karus? Or because you're leaving Kuprij?"

"Both. I don't regret leaving," he said gently, raising his head to kiss Kei. "It's just..."

"Another loss, yes, I know. A big leap of faith too. Were they very rude to you?"

"Very. Kita is very disappointed in me. I'm heartbroken over that as you can imagine," he said dryly and Kei smiled. "At least my father wasn't there. And we got Mekus to shit himself more or less, that was fun."

"Oh, I wish I'd seen that. Reis was all for dunking him upside down in the harbour a few times. I said we could do that as we leave."

"No argument from me. I have to return to Utuk tomorrow, Kei. I'll need to see to Karus' affairs."

At this announcement, Kei looked at him anxiously. "Is that safe?"

"Probably. Lord Meki will let me take Reis or Jera and some soldiers. It's unavoidable and I owe it to Karus to make sure his servants are looked after."

"And...Mayl?"

Arman grimaced. "I owe her one too, but not in the same way."

"I'm coming with you."

"No, you damn well are not, Kei! Not to my house, never again..."

Kei shushed him. "No, not there, but at least to Karus' house. Jena will want to go too, I know that. It's no more risky for us than for you, and I want to be with you to support you."

Arman shook his head with a rueful grin. "You're going to be a stubborn brat all our days, aren't you?"

"Yes, completely impossible. Want to hand me back to Reji?"

"Not in this lifetime," Arman said, holding him close. "Or the next." His voice caught on the words. "Do you believe Karus and Loke are together now?"

"I believe we are tied together in our lives by those we loved in the previous ones, so yes, I do. It's odd – Loke might be older than him when they're reborn. Maybe they might even be brothers or playmates. That's a nice idea, don't you think?"

"I miss them," Arman said, burying his face again. "I thought Loke...Loke would be there when Karus died...but Loke died first... Why do I have to lose everyone, Kei? Is it because of my sins? Would they be alive if I hadn't killed so many, if I hadn't gone into the army? "

"No, my love," Kei said, his soul cut to the quick, hearing Arman's broken voice. "Karus died because he reached his span of years, no more."



Loke...well, yes, he might not have died as he did if you'd not been in the army, but he could have died anyway. Look at my father, living a peaceful life in the village and yet he was struck down by bej fever. We don't even know what causes it, or why. Anything could have killed Loke. Who's to say that he might not have died sooner, if you had not had him with you? Don't torture yourself."

But his lover would not be comforted, and all Kei could do was let him grieve silently and hold him as he did. Arman had to go through the same sorrow as he had for Loke, as Kei had done for his parents, and it would hurt, the worse because of it coming hard on the heels of another great loss.

But at least Arman wasn't alone, the way he was when Loke died. *Karus, I'll look after him for you, as you did. I will make him happy again, I swear.*



He'd expected a troubled night, but held in Kei's arms, he'd slept dreamlessly, waking with a sense of heaviness and grief in his chest, and itchy eyes from all the tears. Seeing Kei there, and having him wake and kiss him tenderly, his dark eyes full of loving concern, helped a little, reminding him that while he had lost so much, he had gained a treasure too, and for this great mercy, he had to be grateful.

They breakfasted in their cabin, but when they came on deck they found it busy again, people wanting to experience the fresh air of freedom. Now he wasn't so absorbed in his own pain, he could see the signs of the strain the long imprisonment and abuse had caused the hostages. All looked tired, and thinner, and smiles seemed to be fleeting. Kei had put a lot of thought into providing comfortable, welcoming accommodation for the sixty-nine hostages, and had hand-picked soldiers to act as companions, people from the same villages and clans, men with kind faces and hearts to listen and talk. Arman felt a deep pang of guilt every time he saw a worn face, or caught sight of the women, wondering which had been raped, and how they would cope with their unwanted children. Even in the depths of his hate for this race, Arman would never have consented to hand people over to rape and assault. He would have this matter raised with Kita, even if he had to do it himself.

The Rulers were on deck too, and Arman approached them. "My lords, Kei and Jena wish to go with me to Utuk, with your permission. Do you mind?"

"You're best able to judge the wisdom of that, Arman," Lord Meki said. "I heard of your sorrow. Please accept my condolences."

Arman bowed, wondering who'd informed him, and surprised that Lord Meki had mentioned it. "Thank you. I believe they'll be safe, if you can lend me Jera. He's willing to come, he said."

"Yes, of course. Reis did a splendid job for us yesterday, but if they didn't attack last night, then I don't expect it today." Lord Meki sighed. "I wish I was dealing with a stronger mind, Arman. Your...excuse me, their...sovereign is too damn full of herself."

"I won't argue her case, my lord. The Prij have done surprisingly well with rulers who have had stronger opinions than intellects, but that's because they prefer others to make decisions for them. There are a few good heads in the senate, but not enough. I think we managed to get through to them, if that's any consolation."

"Yes, I believe we did, but it's depressing that we've let the south be dominated by such a woeful bunch for so long. Please return to the ship before the dinner, we should arrive together. I trust your business won't take long?"

"I have no idea, but I'll return nonetheless. I have no desire to prolong my stay."

Lord Meki eyed him sympathetically. "No, I imagine you don't, after what they said yesterday. Whatever the Prij think of you, Arman, our people will honour you, never fear."

"Thank you, but all I want is just to get these people home and to live with Kei in peace," he said, taking Kei's hand.

Lord Meki gave Kei an odd look, and Arman's lover wasn't giving anything away in his expression. "A full and happy life is all anyone wants," Lord Meki said. "And to serve those with whom we live."

"Yes. Service at any level is worthy," Kei replied, staring back unsmilingly at his Ruler.

Arman frowned. What was going on between these two? Lord Meki gave Kei another unreadable look, then turned to Arman. "I won't detain you then. I've been informed you've decided to return to Ai-Albon overland?"

"Yes, my lord. It allows me to make my excuses at Ai-Darbin, and to discuss when it will be convenient to carry out the sentence set upon."

"Ah yes, that. I'd forgotten about that. I'm sure they'll be flexible about that."

"Yes, my lord." Arman didn't want to discuss this, not in front of Kei. He didn't want to be seen to pressuring him in any way. "Kei? Shall we find the others?"

Jena and Jera were in the passenger hold, talking to Reji, Neka and some of the others. "Are you leaving now?" Jera asked, getting to his feet.

"If you don't mind," Arman said. "Neka, would you be kind enough to tell Captain Tiko we're ready?"

"Tiko?" Kei asked. "You never mentioned him," he said with a reproachful look.

Arman shrugged. "You didn't ask. He'll behave. I'm in no mood for lectures today, but in any event, the worst of it is over." To be frank, if Kei and Jena were coming, there was no one Arman would trust more than Tiko to keep them safe.

Reji clapped his hand on Arman's shoulder. "I'd like to come along too, if you don't mind."

"Why?" Arman asked, looking at the trader in surprise.

"Oh, I just fancy seeing Utuk, to find out if it really is as grand as it sounds. Someone needs to keep an eye on these two as well," he said, winking at Jena, who nudged him hard in the ribs in response. He grinned at her as he rubbed his side. "Maybe we should just let Jena guard everyone instead."

"I'm not running a sight-seeing tour," Arman snapped, but Kei turned to him.

"There's no harm," he said quietly. "I think we all just want to make sure you're all right, Arman."

"I don't need keepers," he said, embarrassed at the attention.

"No, you don't. You need friends," Jena said, taking his hand. "You're one of us now, Arman. And we Darshianese like to stick together, or haven't you noticed?"

Arman almost thought he might break down again, but instead he placed a stern expression on his face. "All right, you can come. But no messing around. Don't forget, you're in hostile territory and very obviously alien – not to mention the fact that you're consorting with a traitor to the Prij."

"No one will lay a hand on you," Jera promised. "And if anyone tries when I'm not there, you yell, and Neka will get someone to you faster than they can blink, won't you, love?"

"You bet," she said, looking determined. "I'll monitor you all day, I promise."

"There's no...."

"Arman? Shut up," Reji said, grinning broadly. "You're not a general any more, you're just a humble Darshianese, out for a stroll with friends. If Neka wants to monitor you, she will. You don't give any of us orders now."

Out-numbered and out-argued, Arman gave up. Kei took his arm. "It'll be fine," he said as he led Arman out ahead of the others.

"We'll look like a travelling show," he grumbled.

"So what? You told Tiko you were used to the attention." Kei kissed him. "Now, smile and be nice. This is going to be a rotten enough day without you scowling yourself into a headache before we start." Which made Arman scowl anyway, but Kei just kissed his frown until he stopped.

Jera moved six urs beasts over to Tiko's ship, landing them with exquisite care so not to frighten the animals. Soldiers immediately took them in charge and calmed them. Then it was the turn of the others, and as soon as they touched the deck, Tiko came up and shook Kei's hand. "Ah, now, there you are. I thought he was hiding you from me for a reason."

"Yes, Tiko, Arman was surely going to butcher me in my sleep and hide the parts just to annoy you," Kei said, rolling his eyes, which made Arman smile. "Now, no more insults – Arman is now officially Darshianese. He's just the same as you and me, only with blond hair."

"Really?" The captain gave Arman a long look. "Well, wonders never cease. Congratulations, gen...Arman," he said, shaking Arman's hand enthusiastically.

"Thank you. Could we get moving, please? I don't have a lot of time."

"As you wish." Tiko whistled up the five other soldiers who would go with Arman's group. "Jera, down to the docks. That damn Serenity woman better have those funny cart things ready."

"Calashes," Arman murmured.

The urs beasts were flown, this time with their riders, across the water and down to the docks. Arman and the rest followed, where they were met by one of Arman's former captains, who saluted with correctness but a noticeable lack of warmth. "Your calash is ready, Sei General."

"Thank you, Captain Pevus. However, I'm no longer a general, and since we don't use titles in Darshian, please call me Arman in future."

"As you wish. Do you require a driver?"

Arman could have driven it himself, but there was a matter of appearances to maintain. "If you please. But no attendant – I have my own escort."

"Yes, Sei...Arman. However, Her Serenity ordered at least two of us to attend you at all times. I'll be coming with you."

"Then ride with the driver, but don't interfere with our business. Reji, if you could help Jena and the others in?"

Tiko helped Arman into the calash, which was rather crowded with five of them, but bearable, then he and his men mounted their beasts. It really was going to attract a lot of attention, Arman thought with regret – urs beasts were hardly ever seen in Utuk itself other than at the docks, and never ridden through the streets like this. “Tarkus, the banker,” he ordered the driver, then sat back.

Reji was curious both about the jesigs and the vehicle. “I really want to get some of these animals up to Darshek,” he said. “Are they fast?”

“Very. Not tremendously strong, but they have a lot of stamina. I think you’ll find any number of Prijian breeders interested in trading them, and they’re much more convenient for the city streets than the beasts.”

“People only ride them?” Jena asked. “You don’t milk them or eat them?”

“No, although there’s no real reason not to. The wild ones are hunted up in the mountains, although there’s probably not many of them left. They live in abundance on the smaller islands, and they’ve been taken to Ursinzo and Sel successfully.”

Reji had a gleam in his eye which Arman suspected meant he saw a future as a jesig breeder for himself. He suspected the man could do it, even in the desert – he had a real gift with animals, and understood their minds. Jesigs were smarter than urs beasts – they would appreciate a clever hand, he thought.

They were indeed attracting a good deal of attention, and not all of it friendly – there was a certain amount of booing and shouting, and someone threw a rock which Jera simply shot up into the air. It could have been much worse, Arman thought, but he wished again Kei and the others had stayed behind.

It took twenty minutes to reach the street where the bankers and lawyers had their offices. Arman caused quite a stir, walking in with two Darshianese soldiers and a Prijian army captain, but he ignored the stares of the clerks, asking to see Tarkus himself. The elderly banker handled the matter with aplomb – he had been Arman’s banker since he’d reached his majority, and handled all his family’s financial affairs for forty years. He’d probably seen far worse scandals than a defecting Prijian general, Arman suspected. He gave instructions and waited while letters were drawn up – after today, he would be officially penniless, save for a very small amount he was keeping aside for contingencies. Curiously, the thought gave him not a jot of concern. It was rather freeing, in fact, to lose the tether of position and property.

Then it was on to Karus' house. As they drew up to the familiar gate, Arman felt tears come into his eyes again, and Kei squeezed his hand. Across from them, Reji was doing the same for Jena. He ordered all the soldiers to stay outside, and when the captain protested, he turned on him sharply. "This is a house in mourning, you damn fool. Do you truly expect me to be attacked by three servants and a seventy-two-year-old woman?"

Tiko took up a position in front of the man, and although he spoke no Prijian and the captain only indifferent Darshianese, his meaning was clear. No one was going into the house without Arman's permission. Captain Pevus backed down without further argument, much to Arman's relief.

At the door, Matez bowed formally, but it was obvious he'd been weeping not long before – Jena hugged him warmly, as did Kei. Cook and Siza were almost overcome with joy at seeing her again, and with relief that Arman had returned. Their joy dimmed somewhat as he explained he wasn't going to be staying, but that he would make arrangements that would secure their future in his absence. Karus' sister wasn't there, but was to return later. Arman would see her then.

He went into the library, and as he stood before the desk where he had had so many happy and fascinating conversations, the teeth of his grief ate at him from the inside out, and left him weak-legged with the agony. He had to clutch the desk for support. *Karus, old friend, just a couple more days. Could you not have waited for me?*

Kei came up behind him. "I feel him," he said quietly. "As if his spirit watches us. Perhaps he's waiting to say goodbye to you before he leaves."

Arman turned to Kei, tears filling his eyes. "Do you really think so?"

"If not here, where else would he wait for you?" Kei said. Then he bowed low. "Karus-pei, I thank you for your love and kindness, and all you did for Jena and me. Have a safe journey to your next life and be well."

Arman looked at his lover. Did Kei really believe Karus could hear this? Did *he*? "I don't know what to say," he whispered.

"Say what is in your heart, Arman."

Arman turned back to the desk. It really did feel as if Karus was still sitting there, smiling benignly at him, waiting for the latest news and gossip. "I...I miss you, Karus. I'm sorry to have not...been here. I hope...you are watching, safe, with Loke. I hope...I hope...." He couldn't continue, and covered his mouth with his hand, trying to hold in his grief for fear it would overwhelm him.

Kei put his arm around his waist. "Do you hope he'll be happy?"

“Yes,” he forced out from a throat tight with pain. “And that he knows I love him, and will always honour him.”

“I’m sure he does. He knew that when he lived, how could he not know it now?” Kei made him turn, and kissed him. “In his next life, he will find your spirit too. I believe that. Love and kindness this strong can’t just be for one lifetime.”

Arman could only nod, and try to get some composure back. He couldn’t stand around weeping like a woman – he had people’s lives to secure. “Kei, I have to see my father and Loke’s mother. Then I have to go to my house. I can’t let you go with me.”

“I understand. Will you take Jera?”

“Yes, and the Prij soldiers. Remember that Neka is listening and if there’s any trouble, get out of here. I think there won’t be, but....”

“I’ll be careful. You do what you need to.” Kei took his hand and looked deep into his eyes. “Will you be all right? Seeing them?”

“I have to be. Just don’t expect me to return all glad smiles.”

“I won’t. Well, come on. The sooner you go, the sooner you’ll come back,” he said with a smile.

Arman let Kei led him out, but at the door, he turned and looked back at the desk. “Farewell, Karus-pei,” he whispered. “Be at peace, my old friend.”



Arman could hardly have liked any task less than what was next on his agenda, but it was inevitable, he knew that. At least this would be the last time, he thought as the calash drew up to his father’s house. “Stay here,” he told Captain Pevus. “My father, the senator, won’t appreciate soldiers traipsing through his garden. Jera?”

Arman walked in silence up the long drive. “Don’t like your father much?” Jera asked.

“No. This is going to be very unpleasant, I’m sorry.”

Jera clasped his shoulder. “Never mind, Arman. At least I don’t speak Prijian. I’ve been rather glad of that over the last day.”

Arman rather wished he didn’t speak it either. He was kept waiting like a common tradesmen for an unnecessarily long time before being summoned to the drawing room. “Ah, I wondered when you’d dare show your face,” his father said without any pretence of welcome. “And who in hells is this?”

"This, father, is Jera, my protection, and the principle reason I dare show my face anywhere. I've come to see Tir Mari, and to inform you of how I intend to dispose of my affairs here in Utuk."

"So it's true – you're really going to run off and live with the savages. Gods, Arman, when I heard that, I thought Vilkus had gone mad. What's possessed you to throw away everything of importance to yourself?"

"Discovering that they weren't important at all, actually. And discovering that the 'savages' offer a damn sight more than I could ever have in Kuprij. You have no reason to regret it, surely. I'm just the second son," he said with some venom, his sorrow over losing Karus transmuting into bitter anger that even at this last moment, his own father couldn't summon up a shred of politeness at the departure of his child.

"A second son and ever a disappointment," his father spat back. "The very image of your mother with none of her sweet nature. Gods, how she must be watching you with sorrow, seeing how you grew into such a sullen, sour child, and now a cursed traitor. Why you couldn't have been more like Tijus, I'll never know."

"No, I don't suppose you ever will, Father, if you can't understand how a child of eight might want more than to be shoved aside as an unwanted distraction. Please have Tir Mari sent for, and do me the courtesy of listening to what I have to say, so I don't waste our time more than we need to."

His father glared, but rang a bell for a servant to find Loke's mother. "And what will you do in Darshek? Plot more treason?"

"I'm not going to Darshek. I'm going to live in a tiny little village in the middle of nowhere to work a farm with my handsome male lover, and not regret leaving this island, or you, for an instant."

His father laughed mockingly. "Oh, marvellous. When you make a fool of yourself, you do it in style, don't you. You surely don't really believe the Darshianese can hold us at bay. If Kita agrees to this nonsense, it will only be until we plan the destruction of that city properly."

"Oh, yes?" He turned to Jera. "My honoured parent would like a closer view of the ceiling."

Jera grinned. "Right you are."

Arman watched his father rise from the floor and listened to his outraged expostulations, completely unmoved. "Careful, Father. Jera could just as easily send you through the ceiling as float you near it – or simply bring the entire house down around your ears." He looked at the mind-mover. "Put him down. Be gentle if you can be bothered."



“As you wish.”

Jera dumped Arman’s father into a chair and smiled politely. “I hope you enjoyed the ride,” he said with a cheeky smile.

Arman’s father spoke Darshianese quite well, and the remark infuriated him even more. “You damned, insolent...I should have you flogged!”

“I don’t advise you to try it, Father,” Arman warned.

The door opened, and Mari came in. Arman and his father hastily stopped glaring at each other, and he made the effort to smile at her. “Arman! How wonderful to see you – but I heard...I thought you were leaving.”

Arman took her hand and led her to a chair. “Yes, Tir Mari, I am. I’ve come to deliver a message, and to ask a great favour of you. You know Karus died?”

“Yes, I was so sorry to hear about that,” she said quietly.

“I went to his funeral,” his father said. “Where you should have been. You should have spoken for him. The gods know what you owed that man.”

Arman gritted his teeth. “Since I was technically a prisoner of war at that point, and since even you could hardly pretend I arranged Her Serenity to send me to Darshian merely to avoid Karus-pei’s funeral, I don’t think your point carries any validity, Father. Kindly allow me to continue.”

Mari was looking rather shocked at the display of ill-feeling, something Arman and his father had always managed to keep from her. He was sorry she had to see it now. “Tir Mari, Karus left me all his possessions, including the house, and asked me to look after his servants, but I can’t do that living in Darshek. I’ve arranged the house to be put in your name, and I’ve withdrawn my personal funds, also placing them in your name.” He drew the documents out of his pocket. “If you want to live in the house, or sell it, that’s up to you, but I would ask you to ensure that the three people listed here never want for anything. I’d also like some books sent up from his library to the Rulers’ collection in Darshek, if you can manage it. If you run out of money, or need help, you can contact me via the Rulers in Darshek. I’m sure my father will assist you in finding me.”

His father glared. “Are you, now. Why are you depriving me of the only company left to me, Arman? Is it not bad enough that my son is deserting Utuk, but you must take Mari away too?”

Arman blinked at the genuine anguish in his father voice. “Father, there’s no reason why Tir Mari can’t remain with you, if she chooses. This just gives her some property of her own again.”

“And why would she stay as a servant when she owns a house, hmmm?” His father got up and walked to the window. “But of course, you must go, Mari. It’s always been wrong that someone of your rank had to work in a household like a maid.”

She got up from her chair and came to his side. “Sei Armis, I’ve always considered it an honour to be allowed to serve you, just as my son did. You’ve both given us so much joy over the years. I would never leave your house while you wanted me to stay – but if you want me to leave, I shall.”

He turned to her, and Arman was utterly shocked to see his father – he who never showed a weakness or a gentle emotion to anyone – seemed on the verge of tears. “Mari...we took your son from you...I should have given you a house of your own years ago, the gods know you deserved it...but forgive me, I wanted your presence too much. You remind me of Elda...and it meant I could think of her when I spoke to you. I’ve been selfish, I’m so sorry.”

She took his hand. “You didn’t take Loke from me, it was the war, and that boy with a bomb. It wasn’t you or Arman. I’ve never blamed either of you, and nor would he. May I stay, please, Sei Armis?”

His father’s face contorted with sadness. “I would be deeply honoured if you would,” he said in a gruff, quiet tone. “You’ve a home here as long as you wish it, I swear that on Elda’s memory.”

“Thank you.” She turned to Arman, still holding his father’s hand. “I won’t live in the house then, but I’ll make sure Karus’ people are well looked after, Arman. Loke was very fond of him, and his servants. He always had such happy stories to tell me about him.”

“Yes, I know.” Arman had to grip his walking stick hard to keep from losing control. “Then the other thing I need to tell you concerns Loke himself.”

His father led Mari back to her chair and sat down himself, although he stared towards the window, pretending a lack of interest in Arman’s words. His eyes still seemed rather red.

Arman continued. “After I was taken prisoner, I was brought north through the villages, one of which was Ai-Darbin, where...well, where Loke died. I won’t distress you with the details, but the matter was discussed at some length by the village while I was there. It was recognised by the clan leaders that Loke’s death was a grave wrong, and they’re going to put a little memorial up to him there. I thought you would be pleased to know that.”

She made a little sound and covered her mouth, her eyes glistening with tears. “Really?”

“Yes. They said...that on the day when they honour their own dead, he would be honoured too. I could see no offence in such a gesture. They also offered to compensate you in some way for his loss, but I knew my father was caring for you with great generosity, so I took the liberty of refusing that.” His father glanced at him for that remark, but Arman couldn’t interpret his expression. “Are you happy with this? They would do more, if you wished it. Their regret was very deep, as was mine for my actions that day.”

She shook her head, as tears trickled down her face. “No,” she whispered. “Thank you. And thank them...Loke would be touched, I know. I don’t blame them, Arman. It was a war we brought to them.”

“Yes. I bear all blame for Loke’s death, Mari. For the rest of my days, I will carry that guilt, and I can only say again how sorry I am.”

“I forgive you,” she said. “Not that it’s really your fault, but I forgive you anyway. Loke loved you, and so do I. You’re so like Elda, I know she would be proud of you.” There was a noise from Arman’s father. He didn’t dare look at him. “And will you be happy now, Arman? What of your family, your wife and son?”

“I plan to be happy, Tir Mari, but as for them, I need to speak to my father in private about them. Could you excuse me now while I do that? My time is short, I’m sorry to say.”

“Of course,” she said, standing and holding out her hand to him. “I may never see you again, I suppose. Will you write?”

“Yes, of course. I should like to hear from you too, and about Karus’ servants.”

“Then I shall say goodbye now. Thank you, Arman,” she said, squeezing his hand and looking up at him with the same lovely green eyes as Loke had, and with the same openhearted kindness. “You and your family have been so kind to me and Loke. Even now, though I grieve for him, I rejoice that you will be happy, and I’m glad also to remain with your father. You know, Elda always said she had the kindest husband and the two most wonderful sons in Kuprij. She loved you all so very much. I feel close to her when I’m with you.”

“And I to her, through you,” Arman said, bowing over her hand, and kissing it. “Farewell, Tir Mari. Thank you.”

She smiled, bowed to him and to his father, and then left the room. There was an uncomfortable silence, which no one seemed inclined to break. Finally, Jera coughed. “Why don’t I...have a look at the garden. Through those doors?”

“Yes,” Arman said, rising and letting him out. “I’ll call you when we’re done.”

He closed the doors behind Jera. “He won’t disturb us,” he said to his father, sitting once more.

His father cleared his throat. “You wanted to tell me about Mayl and your son? Have you even seen the child yet?”

“No, I’m going there after this. Father, I’m sending Mayl back to her home. I’ve placed her dowry back in her name, and you can take the house back. I want nothing more to do with her or it again.”

His father stared at him in perplexity. “Why? What of your son?”

“He’s not mine. She’s been sleeping with one of your colleagues – I found out before I left for north Darshian the first time.”

“Blessed gods. Are you sure? That’s a dreadful accusation.”

“Yes, I’m sure and yes, it is. But I don’t want a scandal. If I send her away, she can marry again. It’s not like I care what she does.”

His father got up, and went over to the window again. “And here I was, so happy that at last I had a grandson. You’re depriving me of son and grandson in a single day, Arman. I suppose you think this is a perfect revenge for your childish grievances.”

Arman shook his head. “It’s not intended as revenge of any kind, Father. My future simply doesn’t lie in Utuk. I thought you would hardly care where I was.”

“What difference does my caring or not make to you? You made it clear years ago that I meant nothing to you. I suppose you blamed me for your mother’s death, it would only be natural.”

“I didn’t, Father,” Arman said, rising from his seat and going to stand near his parent. “You set me aside. I thought you blamed me in some way, felt that I wasn’t sufficient comfort for losing Mother.”

“You look like her,” his father said in a low, harsh voice. “Gods, Arman, you have her eyes exactly, and her hair. After she died, you kept looking at me with those eyes...and all I could see was her.... I couldn’t bear it, couldn’t bear to see them when I missed her...still miss her, every day.... Every morning for years, when I woke, I was sorry I hadn’t died in my sleep, because I wanted to be with her....”

“I didn’t know,” Arman whispered. He’d had no idea...he’d thought his parents had an arranged marriage, as most of their class had. He hadn’t realised it was a love match, or that his father had been suffering a grief as deep as any Arman had ever felt. “I didn’t understand at all. I’m sorry.”

“Now you’re sorry,” his father said gruffly, “but for years you were buried in your books, ignoring us, offering nothing to us, to me. All you had to give me were her eyes, when I wanted her, I wanted her joy and her laughter, and her love. All I got in return was a disagreeable little boy who would rather read than talk to any one.”

“But....” Had all these years of animosity been caused by two different ways of dealing with pain? “Father, I’m truly sorry. For my offence, I apologise. I didn’t know you wanted more of me. I thought no one wanted anything of me at all.”

“Of course I did, you stupid fool. Any parent wants their son to love them. When I realised I couldn’t have that, I at least wanted you to make me proud of you. And now you’ve turned traitor.”

“I just wanted the war to end, Father. It was sapping Kuprij, and would have destroyed her. Surely you can see we would never have won it? If you’d been there yesterday, you’d have seen it, had it all explained. Why were you not?”

His father looked at him. “I’ve had enough of it, Arman. I was about to announce my retirement, hand my seat over to Tijus. I was just waiting until you were returned safe...or we got news. We’ve been waiting for weeks for news of whether you were dead or alive, heard nothing at all. I didn’t realise....” He coughed. “I’ve had enough of Kita, and the war, and the whole damn stupid business. Tired of dealing with fools like Vilkus and Mekus. I was looking forward to my grandchildren. Now I suppose I’ll never have those either.”

“But Temir...she and Tijus will have children, surely.”

His father snorted. “The woman’s barren – they’ve been married eight years, and she’s never even been pregnant. Oh, he loves her, of course, and won’t set her aside, but there won’t be a child there. I thought Mayl was barren too, but she caught – only it turns out it was from the wrong stud. What will you do with the boy? Send him away too?”

“I don’t know. It seems wrong that he should suffer for her sins, but I can’t find it in me to want him for myself. Father, I’m sorry for your disappointment in me. Had the war not happened, I wouldn’t be leaving. I....” Arman didn’t know what to say. He wouldn’t stay for his father, and he couldn’t offer him children where none existed. “At least you have Mari. I honestly never intended her to leave your home. I’ve been too overwhelmed by the news about Karus, I suppose I didn’t think it through carefully....”

His father dismissed the words with an impatient wave of his hand, but his eyes were looking rather red again. "Never mind, never mind. You'd best be leaving and take the trickster with you. I daresay you and I will not see each other again. I'm not going to this damn banquet, I can plead the cold that got me out of the ceremony."

"Perhaps you should come and meet the Darshianese, Father. They're entirely different from how they're portrayed."

"I'm too old, Arman. Too old and tired, and I have lost my taste for politics. Go and find your new life. My dreams are dust, yours don't have to be."

Arman couldn't just leave it at that. "Father, you've a good twenty years or more left of life. Karus told me to find some joy in mine before I died. I pass that advice on to you, for what it's worth."

His father seemed not to hear him, and there was nothing more Arman could think of to say to him. "Farewell then, Father." He went to the garden door, intending to find Jera and leave.

"Arman." He turned and looked at his father. "What I said before...about your mother. That was wrong of me. Elda would never think you a disappointment. She loved you dearly."

"And I loved her. I loved you too, until I believed you no longer wanted me. I regret my temper, Father. I regret the wasted years. At least I can wish you a long life and a peaceful one."

His father wiped his face wearily. "Don't waste your talents on a damn farm, Arman. Use your mind, it's a gift you have from your mother. At least be productive up there – you have the ability."

Arman bowed. "Thank you. Find some joy again, Father. I did, in the last place I would ever have imagined."

His father grimaced a little. "Then you're a fortunate man. Farewell, Arman."

Arman wanted to say more, something to ease the pain he could see in his father's eyes, but it was years too late for both of them. He had a different path to follow now. He bowed again, and used the door to the garden to make his exit.

He knew he would never see his father again, but rather than the relief he'd been anticipating, it caused him more sorrow than he could have ever expected. He even wondered if he should delay his departure, but he couldn't do that to Kei. No, both he and his father would have to live with their mistakes and their misunderstanding, and find peace in their own separate

ways. He just hoped Mari would offer his father the comfort that her son had brought him. If she did, then perhaps his father would find that joy after all.



At his next destination, Arman brought the soldiers inside with him, and he got a childish sense of delight at the consternation this caused. “Peri, call all the servants to the kitchen. I’m going to speak to your mistress, and then to you all.”

“Y-yes, Sei,” the boy stuttered at them. Arman swept past him, glad this was the last time he would need to interact with these people. He took Jera and the soldiers to the library and instructed him to wait for him. “This won’t take long.”

“Are you sure you don’t want moral support?” Jera asked, his kind face showing his concern.

“Morals and my wife are complete strangers. It would be a waste of time.”

He found Mayl out on the southern verandah – she wasn’t alone. “Come to admire my father’s grandchild, Mekus?” he said. “Or are you visiting your son?”

“I have no idea what you mean, Arman,” Senator Mekus blustered, backing away from the chair where he’d been sitting in a rather intimate position with Arman’s wife. Mayl straightened her gown hastily and glared at him.

“Really? Then you’re even more stupid than I thought you were. However, you can stay to hear this. Mayl, I am sending you back to your father. We have the requisite witness, I see,” he added, nodding at the woman sitting in terrified silence off to one side, suckling a small infant. “Sei Mayl, I repudiate you, I return your dowry and I return you to your family, unwanted. Leave this house within the hour.” He drew out the banker’s note and laid it on the long chair. “Take it and get out.”

“You can’t send me away, I’m divorcing *you*,” she said with smug malice. “And I want more than my dowry, Sei Arman. Much more. Treason is a very good ground on which to get rid of you and strip you of your fortune.”

“My fortune is gone, you stupid bitch. I signed it away this morning, all but this. But if you want to go to court over it, please, by all means. Let’s expose your tawdry affair with a man old enough to be your father – or is it

grandfather, I can never keep track of such matters,” he said, looking Mekus up and down with disgust.

“You have no *proof*! No servant here will ever speak against me. It’s your word against mine. The word of a traitor against a member of the aristocracy, a virtuous woman with a new-born child.”

Arman snorted at the idea of Mayl calling herself virtuous, with her dress still disordered from Mekus’ hand having been up her skirt. “A child I see you can’t be bothered even to feed yourself – what’s the matter, doesn’t Mekus like the taste of milk?”

The senator made a disgusted noise. “She’s right. You’ve not a shred of evidence, and once she’s done with you, I’ll prosecute you for libel.”

“And get what, Mekus? My money’s gone, the house isn’t mine – and besides, how will it look when people learn you’ve used your own daughter to pimp for you?”

Mayl gasped, then looked at her lover in dismay. “How...you have no proof, you’re guessing.”

Arman shook his head. “Not a bit of it – as for proof, did you think it amusing to send my wife disgustingly detailed propositions through your daughter, with me to deliver it? When I found that letter in my files I could hardly believe that even you could sink that low. Unfortunate for you that I became distracted that evening and forgot about it – I bet it caused you some anxious moments when you realised it hadn’t arrived.”

“A forgery,” Mekus said, even as he backed away from Mayl. “Still no proof.”

“Really? You know, Meke doesn’t strike me as a particularly strong-minded or intelligent person. How long do you think she will last under examination? Especially when I remind her of the penalty for perjury – she’s nothing much to look at now, but losing her nose, ears and tongue might ruin her marriage prospects, don’t you think?”

“You wouldn’t,” Mayl shouted at him. “You’d never go through with it, the scandal...”

“A traitor avoiding scandal? Just try me, Mayl. I’m in a mood to wipe the floor with both your pathetic hides. Now, get out. Take your money and leave. Your servants are about to be turned away, their notices paid and the house locked up. If you don’t leave, I’m sure the senator can tell you about the gentleman who played so prettily with him yesterday. He’s in the library right now, waiting for me.”

Mayl went white, and Mekus gulped. “Come, my dear. I can protect you.”



"Oh, leave me alone, you fool," she snapped, picking up the banker's letter. "Kesa, bring the child."

"No."

"What?" Mayl said, turning to Arman. "You surely don't want him."

"I don't want you to have him either, and certainly not to be raised by a pair of wanton thugs like you two. The child is mine officially and I claim him by right. Even if you divorce me, Mayl, there's nothing you can do. Take yourself off, and don't plead the sorrowful mother with me. You've not even looked in the boy's direction since I came in, so little does he concern you – and no one decent would cavort with their lover in front of a child this way. Just get out. Your belongings will be sent to you, and if you linger, I'll have you thrown into the harbour along with this worthless creature. I've got some very angry Darshianese with me, Mekus – any one of whom would love to see you die very painfully."

The senator was almost purple with anger. "Her Serenity will hear of this, Arman. Your father too."

"My father knows, and, please, do tell Kita. It'll save me the effort. Get out of my house now. Both of you, before I lose what little control I have!"

His roar frightened them into action and they scurried out, much to Arman's relief. He turned to the wet nurse, who, he now realised, was only a slip of a girl, no more than seventeen or eighteen. "My apologies, madam," he said in a gentler tone. "Wait – I know you, do I not?"

He came over to her and crouched down. He had to admire the way she was protecting the baby and continuing to feed it, even though she was obviously nearly out of her wits with fear. "I won't hurt you or the child. You're not to blame for this business. Your face is familiar though – I do know you, yes?"

"Yes, Sei," she whispered. "I'm Lieutenant Vikis' wife. We were at your captain's wedding last year."

"So you were. But what are you doing here? Why are you working for Mayl?"

The child finished feeding at that point, and he waited for her to wipe his mouth and arrange her dress again. "My little girl died three weeks ago," she said in a quiet voice, "and at the funeral, an agent looking for a wet nurse came and asked if I would work for your wife. I needed the money, Sei Arman. My husband.... Sei, is he lost? I've been waiting for news for so long...and he doesn't know about our baby."

Her face was a mask of misery, and under the terror, he could see the distinct marks of very recent grief. What a disgusting practice wet-nursing was, he thought, preying on the bereaved, and mostly it was just so aristocratic wives could regain their figures sooner. “No, he’s not lost. He was injured in the same battle where I hurt my leg, but the last report I had of him two weeks ago said he was fit and well and waiting to return home.”

She gave a little cry of astonishment. “He’s alive? Really?”

“Yes, he is.” The position was killing his leg and he had to stand. “It’s Kesa, yes?” She nodded. “Kesa, I need to get the boy away from here and he needs a nurse. Would you be willing to look after him until I can find another? It will mean some travelling, but I’ll make sure you and Vikis are reunited. I’ll pay you well for your trouble. Do you have dependents here?”

“No, Sei. My father died some time ago, and left my mother a widow. But late last year she fell ill with a lung disease, and she died a week after you left. It’s just my brother and me now. There were so many bills to pay because of my mother’s illness, and they’re only giving me half of Vikis’ salary. That’s why I needed the work.”

“Then I will make sure you are well compensated for your trouble, Kesa, and when Vikis returns, his pay will be reimbursed. Your brother? Can he spare you?”

“Can I see him before I go?” she asked shyly.

“Of course you can. Come with me. Where are the child’s things?”

She led him to the nursery, and he asked Jera if he would help her pack up the baby clothing and other items. He had no idea what he was going to do with an infant of this age, but he knew one thing – he wasn’t going to let another child be raised in unhappiness. Karus had told him to raise his child to have an open, honest heart, and by the gods, he would do that in Karus’ memory, even if the child was not his at all.

He left Kesa in Jera’s protection, and summoned the soldiers to the kitchen where the staff were assembled. It seemed Mayl hadn’t even bothered to tell them what was happening before she and her decrepit lover slithered off. But Arman didn’t mind – it gave him a lot of pleasure to tell Mykis in person he was being sent away and that he shouldn’t expect a reference. “None of you should,” Arman said heavily. “Colluding in your mistress’ infidelity in that manner, you’re lucky to receive any notice at all. You can apply to Tarkus, the banker, once the Darshianese ships have left port. Now get out – take your own belongings and nothing else, or you’ll be prosecuted for theft. Captain Pevus, mind that they do as instructed.”

It only remained for him to write some letters of instruction and pack a few precious books and letters, his private seal and a few mementos. The rest of it could go to his father, hopefully to be put to a better use than it had been to now. He had a few personal items to remove from his bedroom, but considering he'd lived there for four years, it was surprising how little mark he had made, how little he'd accumulated. Mayl had bought things but the house was not much changed from when they'd taken it over. She'd obviously thought his father had given it to him outright – Arman wondered how many charms she would have for Mekus now she was a fortuneless ex-wife, the dubious coin of her virginity long since wasted. It was customary in such cases for the husband to compensate the wife for the years of access to her bedroom – but since Arman had had so little use of the facilities, he thought he would let the one who'd availed himself of her expensive cunt do the compensating.

Kita was going to be furious if she found out, he thought, and wondered if Mekus would actually dare to complain of his behaviour. Arman really didn't care in the least.

He left the bundles of books and papers in the library and went to find Jera and Kesa. They too were ready, Kesa holding the child carefully and protectively. What a damn shame the child was not her own, he thought – she was so obviously a far more fit mother than Mayl. "Shall we go? We'll call at your home later."

"Yes, Sei."

"You understand you are not obliged to come, don't you, Kesa? I will pay what you've been promised for your wages regardless, I promise that."

"Yes, Sei. I want to come. I want to see him safe, and then see Vikis again. It's been very lonely since he left."

With suffering two deaths so close together, and her husband gone, it was a wonder she had managed at all, he thought. Poor child. "Then come with me. The Darshianese are a very kind people and they'll care for you until you see your husband again."

"Darshianese?" she said, her hand going to her mouth in a nervous gesture. "Will I be safe?"

"Quite safe," he said, with a smile in Jera's direction. "He's not so terrifying, is he?"

"No, Sei. He seems nice."

"And so he is. Come on, there are people I need you to meet."



Arman had been gone hours and although it was wonderful to see Karus' people again, and to spend some time where Kei had a few happy memories, he was quite worried about his lover. Arman had looked so very sad that morning, so bowed down by sorrow, and visiting his father and his wretched wife would only place a further strain on him. So Kei fretted, finally giving up all pretence of following Jena and Reji's conversations with the others, and wandered out to the front of the house, dismissing Tiko's warnings about keeping a low profile. As if Kei wasn't perfectly well aware of the danger they were in. It was he who'd been the damn hostage, not Tiko, he thought crossly.

He knew Neka would alert him if there was a problem, and if he desperately wanted to, he could contact Arman in an instant, but he'd sworn not to violate his privacy. Arman would be fine, he told himself, but he still waited, looking along the road for any sign of the calash.

Finally, well after noon, the vehicle arrived. To Kei's shock, after Jera got out, he helped a young woman carrying a baby down the calash's steps. Arman followed – he was limping badly once more, Kei noted in concern as he ran to meet them. “Arman...who's this?”

Arman allowed Kei to take his arm. “Kei, this is Kesa,” he said in Prijian, speaking slowly so Kei could understand it. “Kesa, this is my good friend, Kei of Ai-Albon.”

She nodded, but looked very uncertain. “And the child?” Kei asked.

“Mayl's son.”

Kei made him stop. “But...Arman, why...?”

Arman looked at him with weary, almost desperate eyes. “I couldn't leave a baby with her,” he said. “No one deserves that...gods, I've made a mess, I wasn't thinking...I just wanted to get away from her, take the child and get away from her stink. Now I don't know what to do with him.”

Kei pulled him close and kissed him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kesa's eyes widen but he really didn't care what she thought when Arman was this distressed. “We'll sort something out,” he said firmly. “Just come in and get off your damn leg – what have you been doing, pulling the calash yourself?”

“No. Just kicking a noble arse or two,” he said with a painful-looking smile.

Jena came flying out of the house then, and Kei repeated Arman's explanation. “Jena, this is Kesa,” Arman told her quickly. “She's only recently

lost her own child, and her mother too. Can you take her in and look after her for a little while?"

"Of course," she said, and introduced herself politely in Prijian. Hearing her own language from a Darshianese clearly startled Kesa, but she responded with a timid smile. Jena led her into the house, Jera close behind them. Kei and Arman followed more slowly, and Arman insisted on resting at the front verandah before going inside.

"I just need a moment..."

"Of course," Kei said. Arman looked dreadful, even more grief-stricken than when he'd departed for his father's house that morning. "Was it very bad?"

Arman nodded. "Yes, but not...exactly...as I thought. It seems my father and I have been estranged for nearly twenty years over...." He stopped and grimaced. "Kei, is it possible to suffocate under the burden of one's regrets?"

"I doubt it. What happened? Was he cruel?"

"At first. But then it was worse than that. He...I've done him a terrible wrong, Kei. And I've given him more pain today, when I never meant to.... Gods, what a bastard I am," he said bitterly.

"You're not, you're a good, decent man. What happened?"

Arman explained, his face contorting with remembered sorrow. Kei listened, holding his hand, and aching for Arman's grief. "All these years, all I wanted was his love, Kei. All these years I had it, and I didn't know. The sheer waste of it, the pain of it all...and now I'm abandoning him, not even leaving him with the illusion of the grandson he wanted so badly. I thought he just wanted an heir. All he really wanted was my love, and I denied it to him."

Kei stroked Arman's hair back from his face. "You were a child, Arman, and in need of understanding and love too, as he was, but each of you were too hurt to offer it to the other. He shares responsibility here, more than you, for he was an adult. It's not too late, you know. Even if you have to leave Utuk, you can write, you can try to show him your love that way. You could even visit, perhaps, once the peace has had a chance to grow strong."

"But it doesn't undo the damage."

"No, it doesn't. But at least you want to try to mend things for the future. And Mayl?"

"Gone and good riddance to her." Arman looked at him. "I suppose it was cruel of me to take her child, but she had no interest in it at all. I couldn't...I promised Karus...and the child is an innocent, no matter whose it is."

“Yes, it is, and I think you did the right thing,” Kei said firmly. “But what’s to become of it?”

“You said you wanted a child – could you raise Mekus’ bastard?”

Kei drew in a sharp breath. To raise a baby...to be a father, even by adoption.... He’d never thought to have that chance. But then he looked at Arman’s face again. “You can’t, can you? You could never forget who his father was.”

“No. I know it’s wrong of me – but I know myself too well, Kei. And to make a child suffer for something not its fault...it would be better to let Mayl bring it up than to do that.”

“Then better to acknowledge that now, than to make the mistake of dismissing it. We’ll find a home for him. What of this young woman? Who is she?”

Arman grimaced again. “Another sad history, poor girl. Still grieving for her own baby and hired to do what Mayl wouldn’t lower herself to. You don’t use wet nurses in Darshian, do you?”

Kei shook his head. “No – I mean, in theory, yes, but in reality, the chances of there being a nursing mother available when a child needs a breast are so small, we had to find other solutions. Most do well on jombeker milk, if you can get them past the first week or so. How old is he?”

“I have no idea. At least three weeks, that’s all I know.” Arman wiped his eyes. “I can’t think any more, Kei. I’m so tired. I still have to sort out Kesa’s affairs – but you can use jombeker milk? So we don’t need her, in fact?”

“Not strictly, no, but human milk is better, and it would take a little while to wean him onto it if you want to avoid colic and so forth. She’s willing to travel to Darshian?”

“She’s Vikis’ wife, would you believe? So yes, at least to Fort Trejk. After that, we need another answer.”

Kei stood up and helped Arman to stand too. “We’ll find one, then.”

Arman looked into his eyes. “Are you sure you don’t want to raise him, Kei? I know you want to be a parent.”

“Yes, I do, but I want to be with you more, and if this will distress you, it’s not an option at all,” he said firmly, and felt Arman’s relief, which only confirmed that he was right in his decision. “Come inside, Cook’s got our lunch, I think.”

Kei led Arman inside to the kitchen, which was full of people. Jena and Kesa were in the corner, Reji holding the child as the women talked. Cook

and Siza were listening to their conversation intently. Matez and Jera were just watching everything going on. "Where's Tiko and the others?" Kei asked.

"Garden," Jera said. "Cook chased them out a minute or so ago with their food. Our lunch is ready too."

It was a simple meal of fresh-baked bread, butter and cheese, and cups of pijo which made Arman go very quiet as he drank. Much as Kei loved this house, it was doing Arman no good at all to be constantly reminded of his loss, and he urged his lover to finish up and tell him what needed doing. "Nothing," Arman replied. "Other than the notes Karus was working on, everything else can stay as it is. Mari can send me some books from the library, or not, as she chooses, but there's nothing else I want disturbed." He explained to the three servants what was to happen to them, to the obvious relief of all. "Has his sister not returned?"

"Not yet, Sei Arman," Siza said. "But we can pass on the message, if you have to leave."

"I think I do – we have to return to the ship. Kei, let me go to the library. I won't be long."

"Do you need...?" But Arman shook his head. "All right."

He watched Arman leave in some concern, hoping he wasn't about to do something which would cause him more pain. Jera reached across him for more bread. "So, what's to happen to the boy?"

Kei looked at Jena who was now holding the baby with complete confidence. "Jena, how do you feel about adoption?"

"What?" she said, startled.

"What?" Reji echoed. "Are you serious, Kei? It's Arman's child."

"He's not, actually. Arman only wants him to be raised happily, but he can't do it himself. Jena?"

She stared at him, and then looked at the baby. "I never thought... Kei, the child is Prijian."

"So's Arman, but that's not stopping him joining our people. Would you reject him simply because of his race?"

"No! Gods, Kei, give me a moment to think here...."

Kesa said something in a low voice that Kei didn't catch, but Jena did, and she replied, smiling. "She just wants to know if there's a problem. I told her we're just sorting it out. Kei, I don't know what my clan will say. Or Aldik...."

"Do you want to raise a child or not, Jena? The rest are things that can be discussed later."

She looked down at the child again. "He's a beautiful boy. And the poor little thing is alone. Better me than that bitch, don't you think?"

Reji smiled at her and so did Kei. "Absolutely better you than Mayl. If you can't manage it, then we'll find him a family somewhere else. Kesa is prepared to travel as far as Fort Trejk where her husband is, so you've got her for that long."

"Will Arman agree? I've been damn rude to him," she said dubiously.

Kei grinned. "I think he would consider that a perfect qualification for the job."

The decision made, there were practical problems to be solved, and everyone had an opinion on how best to get a small infant safely from Utuk to Ai-Rutej. "We can take some of the jombekers with us," Reji declared. "If you ride up front on the wagons, it's not so bumpy either. You can ride with me, I'll make sure you and the little one are safe."

"What's his name?" Jera asked.

Kei blinked. He had no idea. When Kesa was asked, she had no idea either. "How old is this baby?" Reji asked.

He turned out to be six weeks old, which scandalised the Darshianese. In Kei's culture, parents prepared names before the birth, so that the child could be named as soon as it came into the world. "It's like he was never wanted at all," Jena said sadly, cuddling the boy close to her in comfort.

"I think there might be a practice of waiting among the nobility," Kei guessed. "Arman said something about a naming ceremony."

"Why do you need a ceremony to name a child?" Jera asked. "The Prij are very strange, don't you think?"

"Why are we strange?" Arman asked as he came back into the kitchen, carrying a wallet of documents and what Kei recognised as Karus' kezi board. He took a seat at the table. "What's going on?"

Jena stood up. "Arman, will you allow me to raise this boy for you?"

Arman sat back and stared in surprise. "Are you sure, Jena? I'll be what help I can, but I warn you, I'm now penniless or I will be once I settle Kesa's bills for her."

"I don't need your damn money, I just need your permission. Well?"

"Yes, I can't think of anyone more suitable, in fact. But what of your family, your village? Ai-Rutej was very unfriendly when we passed through it."

Kei had to admit this was true. "Jena, are you really sure?"

She gave him a dirty look. "Yes, of course I am, or I wouldn't have offered. He needs a home, and I would make a perfectly adequate mother. Unless you



know someone else who wants to do it?" She glared at everyone in the room. "No, I thought not. So I'll do it. But Arman has to name him, it's only right, son or no son."

Arman shook his head. "No, Jena, if you're to raise him, you name him." But all the Darshianese just looked at him – they all knew he was the one who had to do this. "Gods, I have no idea what to call him. I would name him after my father normally, but that seems inappropriate."

Siza spoke up in a hesitant voice. "Sei, what about Karus?"

As soon as she spoke, Kei knew this was the perfect answer. "Karik," he said. "Call him Karik."

Arman nodded. "Yes. Karus is the reason I saved him, let him be called after him."

Jena held the child up to them all. "Then welcome, Karik," she said with a smile, bestowing a little kiss on the baby's forehead. Kei thought she already seemed to be falling for the boy's charms, and somehow doubted that they would have to find him another home when the time came.

She gave the boy to Kesa to hold and explained what they had just done. Kesa smiled and nodded. "I like that," she said shyly.

"Fine," Arman said, getting to his feet. "Now that's settled, I need to see my bankers again and then take Kesa to visit her brother. Jera, get everyone else back to the ship, if you wouldn't mind, and my books."

Kei went to Arman's side, sensing that despite his gruffly efficient tone, he was actually deeply upset and exhausted. "Let me come with you," he said, taking his hand.

He could see Arman was about to refuse, but then he just nodded. "As you wish," he said tiredly. "The sooner this is over, the better."

In the flurry of farewells, and arranging who was going where when, Kei drew Arman aside and kissed him. "It gets better," he said quietly.

"I hope so, Kei," Arman said, stark desperation in his voice. "I don't know that I have much more in me."

"You have enough, I know you do, but you can lean on me for a bit too."

"What would I do without you?" Arman said, resting his head briefly on Kei's shoulder. "I feel as if I'm drowning."

"No, you're doing fine, honestly. Just a little longer and then we can be alone for a while. This will all be done soon, and then we can go home."

Arman raised his head and stared at him. "I'm home already."

Kei hugged him tightly. "Then be welcome and rest a while." *And try to find a little peace, Arman.*

Arman hadn't wanted Kei to come with him as he finished his personal affairs, but he was very quickly grateful that he had. Without Kei to see to Kesa, and to take the strain of reassuring her and explaining things, even if Arman had had to translate some of the time, Arman feared he would have just lost all control over himself, so raw and weary and utterly sick of things had he become. But Kei was doing more than that. Somehow, just through his touch, he was keeping it bearable, so that Arman could find the energy to smile occasionally at the young woman, so timid and in need of assurance. It left him free to deal with all the necessary business which meant her family's bills were settled (and thus draining the very last of Arman's funds) so that she would have a future to return to.

He visited his lawyer, left a deposition about Mayl and submitted a formal ban of separation and divorcement, which Kesa was able to support as a witness to his formal declaration. If Mayl contested it vigorously, it probably would not stand, but Arman had kept his powder dry and was fully prepared to carry out his threat to reveal her perfidy. As even a cursory examination of his affairs would prove he'd been telling her the truth about his finances, he rather doubted she would have the brass neck to try what she'd threatened – and Mekus was far too cowardly to expose himself to scandal.

Kesa's brother was rather uncertain about the whole thing, not sure he should let his only surviving relative go off with a bunch of heathens and a discredited former general. Kei helped there too, as did Jera. The man was a potter, and it seemed Jera had an interest in the craft. Kei knew something of glazes, and with Arman's assistance, a short but spirited conversation about tableware seemed to ease the brother's mind more than any reassurance Arman had been able to give. Kei had a gift with people Arman truly envied, and loved.

He sent a note to Mari asking her that if Kesa or her brother approached her in future, to give them what assistance she thought fit, and in a note to his father he asked if he would make sure Mari wasn't taken advantage of. He also confirmed the arrangements for the house and Karus' library, and, following Kei's gentle urging, added warm thanks for his help over this. Perhaps it would be possible to re-establish relations with his father even if only by letter. Arman wanted to try. He was sick of losing the people he loved – or those he wanted to love. He wasn't sure which category his father fell into just yet – but pity and remorse might easily become true affection, he knew. Only time would tell.

His head began to pound after only a very little of all this, but before he had a chance to really become aware of it, Kei had slipped his hands behind his neck and eased it. "I'll rub your leg when we get back to the ship," Kei said quietly.

Jera grinned at that. "Now, if I tried to give someone a massage using my gift, I'd probably just take their leg right off." Arman had to smile at that, but was rather glad Kesa hadn't understood.

Finally they were done and Arman, having given both bankers and lawyer his future address as care of Lord Meki in Darshek, felt he had made as full an arrangement of his affairs as he could do, with minimum pain to those who didn't deserve it (and maximum inconvenience to those who did). With relief, he took his leave of Captain Pevus at the docks, and asked Jera to carry them across to the ship. By now, Kesa clearly trusted Kei enough that when he told her to just hold onto him, she did. Jera gave her a little demonstration first of what he was planning, but when he took them for real across the harbour, her eyes grew wide with delight. "Look at the view!" she cried. "Oh, I wish Vikis was here!"

"You can tell him about it," Kei said kindly, and Arman translated.

"There won't be many people who will have had this experience," Arman told her. "It will be something to tell your grandchildren."

“Yes,” she said, with only a hint of sadness. Brave girl, he thought. He hoped she would have more children to help ease her grief.

Jera took a slightly longer route around the harbour, just to please her, but they were back on the ship in good time. Jena and Reji came to meet them at once, and took Kesa in hand, which was a relief to Arman. He was given a message that the Rulers wanted to see Jera, Kei and himself as soon as they arrived. He hoped there hadn’t been a problem while he was gone. He really didn’t think he could deal with that right now.

Kei held his hand tight even as they were admitted into Lord Meki’s cabin, where Lord Peika was talking to him. “Sit, Arman – gods, were you limping that badly this morning?” Lord Peika exclaimed.

“He’ll need a rest and a massage, my lord, before you ask him to go anywhere else,” Kei said.

“Yes, of course,” Lord Meki said. “Arman, the child you’ve brought on board – that won’t be the cause of a diplomatic incident, will it? I don’t want rumours of dastardly Darshianese kidnapping children to get about.”

Arman took the chair that Lord Peika had vacated for him. “No, my lord. The child is, as far as anyone knows, my own son, and by Prijian law, his disposal is entirely up to me. Even if my wife contests our divorce, she has no rights in this matter.”

“How uncivilised,” Jera murmured.

“Yes,” Arman said. “But in this case, beneficial. Was that all that was concerning you, my lord?”

“No, I wanted to tell you about this evening. After talking to the hostages, and to Reis and Neris, we’ve decided to make a show of it. Travel into the palace in style, show them we mean business and that we’re not a bunch of savages. What do you say to that?”

“I say that’s a wise thing to do. They need to take Darshian seriously as an equal nation, and pomp always impresses Kita.”

“Good, I was hoping you would say that. Kei, as the representative of your clan, would you be prepared to join the others in a similar position at this meal? You’ll be protected, I promise.”

“Yes, my lord. I’m always happy to be with Arman. But I insist he’s not asked to walk.”

“None of us will be walking,” Lord Peika said with a wink. “We just need to arrange things with you, Jera, if you don’t mind and you’re not tired.”

“I haven’t exerted myself at all today,” Jera said. “Anything you want, of course.”

"My lords, there is one matter I want to raise with you," Arman said. "Compensation for the hostages who were killed, and the injuries and rape those who have been returned have suffered. I tried to get something for Ai-Vinri before, but they dismissed it as unnecessary. I think it's important they don't get away with that – it wasn't war, it was a crime, and Kita knows it, as does that rodent, Mekus."

Lord Meki frowned. "Do you think that wise, Arman? I don't want to antagonise them unduly, and all the money in the world won't bring those poor souls back to life."

"No, my lord. But it's only justice. I promised myself they would have that. Forgive me, but if you won't raise it, I will. If the clan representatives are going, then it's even more important this is raised."

"Hmmm. And what do you see as just compensation?"

"I don't know, my lord. That's for the people who've suffered to determine. But those women should have some support for their offspring at the very least."

"Very well, Peika and I will discuss that and put something to the clans people. You've not given us much warning of this, Arman. We've got to be there in three hours."

"I'm sorry, I've been rather preoccupied," he said, somewhat less politely than he should have done. Damn, his leg ached.

Lord Peika touched his shoulder. "Yes, of course you have, with your friend's death and everything else. Go and get some rest and this massage. Leave it to us, Arman. You've done a great deal already, and neither of us mean to sound ungrateful, do we, Meki?"

"Of course not," Meki said impatiently. "Yes, please do take some time to rest, you don't look at your best at all. Kei, I trust you will have him in good shape for this evening?"

"Of course, my lord. I wonder that you feel the need to ask."

Again there was this slight edge between Kei and Meki. Arman was too tired and in too much pain to think about it. He got up. "I'll be there when you call, my lords. Come on, Kei."

Kei led him out, still holding his hand. "What's going on between you and Meki?" Arman asked in a low voice as they walked along the corridor.

"Nothing, he just seems to be a bit pushy sometimes. Come on, if you don't get off that leg right now, I'm going to get Reis to carry you everywhere for a week."

Arman arched an eyebrow at him. "I bet you would too."

“Just try me, Arman.” But Kei still kissed him tenderly as they reached their cabin, and helped him undress. “You should really be in better clothes for tonight, as should I.” He made Arman sit on the bunk and wouldn’t let him lift a finger.

“The only other clothes that might fit me are at my house, and I refuse to wear Prijian style again. In fact, I need a favour – is my hair long enough to braid?”

Kei looked at him in surprise. “Barely, I suppose. Are you serious?”

“Completely. I also want to get rid of this beard.”

“But...” Kei shrugged. “All right. I was just getting used to it,” he said affectionately, rubbing his hand over it. “It feels nice sometimes.”

“I know. But you don’t have one, and nor does anyone else in your nation.”

“Want me to dye your hair with gike bark too?” Kei asked, grinning. “The stain doesn’t come out.”

“If you like.”

“I’m not serious, Arman. You’d look like a jombeker. If you’re planning to grow that mop as long as mine, we’ll have to hire Reji to wrangle it for you.”

Arman caught him around the waist and pulled him to the bunk. “You’re the only one I want playing with my hair.”

Kei looked at him with dark, serious eyes. “Arman, you don’t have to become physically like us to be accepted. No one will hold your colour against you.”

“They will, but that’s not the point. My allegiances have changed, so I want to symbolise that. You think it’s foolish?”

“No. I understand. I just don’t want you to feel you have to fight for something already granted to you.” He pulled Arman to him and kissed his forehead. “Now, I’m going to do your leg, and you’re going to sleep for a couple of hours. You look utterly worn out.”

“I feel it. I’m almost numb, I think, I’ve had so many blows. I feel I should be feeling things more deeply, but I’m just so tired.”

“That’s part of the grief,” Kei said, making him lie down, and moving so he could take Arman’s leg in his lap. He didn’t seem to be bothering with the cream.

“Are you just going to use your gift?”

“Yes, this time I am, because you’ve really done some damage. You will not walk around tonight, do you hear me? I won’t allow you to be crippled to be part of Meki’s damn display.”

“He’s really annoyed you, hasn’t he?”

Kei leaned forward and poked him on the nose. "You've annoyed me – at least your leg has. Now, close your eyes and breathe the way I showed you. This may hurt a little, but it will feel better in the end. You need to untense, Arman. Your whole body is as tight as a bow."

"Perhaps I've had good cause to be tense," he snapped, but regretted his ill-temper immediately. "I'm sorry...."

Kei held his hand up. "I never said you hadn't good cause," he said quietly. "My concern is the effect on you. These are not small sorrows. They're the most painful things a person can experience, losing friends, family, position – even property, though I know you don't care. And then there's Karik...."

"The child means nothing to me, Kei, beyond my concern that he is cared for properly and raised with the love neither I nor Mayl could have given him." But even as he spoke, Arman felt his chest getting tight and his eyes were itching again. He had no idea why.

"He's another loss, Arman. He represents...a family, your own real son. Things I can't give you," Kei said quietly.

Arman tried to sit up but was sternly ordered to lie back again. "You're my family, Kei. I don't want a son, or a child. I just want you."

"Yes, I know that. But perhaps your heart doesn't, not yet. I think part of you wishes you could have a child of your own. It wouldn't be natural if you didn't, and the two griefs...so close together, so new.... There's nothing wrong with feeling sad that Karik isn't your child, after all."

Arman grimaced as Kei did something that hurt his leg, but then it was followed by a pleasant sense of warmth. He tried to obey Kei's wish that he relax, but it was difficult when Kei was talking about something so painful, something Arman didn't want to acknowledge to himself at all. He put his arm over his eyes and Kei continued to massage his leg in silence. But again, there was something more.... "Kei, are you doing something to me?"

"I'm rubbing your leg, can't you feel it?"

"No, something...like you're taking away some of my mental pain...." He uncovered his eyes and found Kei looking a little guilty. "You *are*! You damn idiot, stop it! You don't need my feelings on top of your own! Kei!"

"I'm sorry, Arman, but I'm not going to stop. It's not hurting me half as much as feeling your distress. Calm down, will you?"

"No, damn it, I will not calm down! Who gave you leave to harm yourself on my account!" He struggled up and pulled his leg away from Kei's grip. "You fool, you're injured yourself and look at the fuss you make at me walking on a damaged leg, when you're doing something which could send you insane."

Kei folded his arms, and his expression closed off. "I know what I'm doing."

"I forbid it, I won't be the cause of you damaging your gift even more. Gods, Kei, you're the only person left to me, how can you allow yourself to be hurt again...?" Kei grabbed his shoulders to stop him getting off the bunk and Arman pushed back – only he misjudged the force and Kei stumbled, falling off the bed and landing on his backside. Arman stared at him in shock. "Gods," he whispered. "Oh, gods...." He covered his mouth, horrified at displaying violence to Kei in this way. "I'm sorry...."

Kei scrambled up and came back to the bunk. "Don't be stupid, I know you didn't mean that. Arman, stop it.... Arman? Please, don't do this." He wrapped his arms around him. "I'm not hurt."

But it was like a dam being broken. Arman couldn't stop shaking, or get his voice back under control. If he couldn't even protect the one he loved more than life....

Kei was shaking him gently "Arman! Stop it, you did nothing, it was simply an accident."

Arman clutched at his shirt. "I'd rather send you away than hurt you. I deserve all of this and more...."

Kei shook him again, and this time it wasn't gentle. "Stop this now! Arman, look at me! Now, damn you!" Startled by the fury in his words, Arman obeyed. "Listen to me now. No one deserves this. No one will send me away. You've not hurt me and I know you never will. You're just overwrought, not seeing things in a reasoning way. This is why I was trying to take some of your pain," he added more quietly. "I wanted to help you. It's what I do, you know. I'm a healer. I know my limits better than you think. Maybe you need to learn to trust me as much as I trust you."

"I do," Arman said, muttering against Kei's shirt.

"Then trust me now. You really do need to relax for an hour or two."

"Stay with me...everyone else has left me...."

"Of course I'll stay, but I won't sleep so we're not late. I'm not tired, but you are. Lie down again, Arman. Put your head on my lap, if you like."

Arman slid down, feeling like a complete fool, but also still feeling a little wild and unable to settle down, as if all his grief, all the pain in his heart was falling in on him and he was helpless to stop it.

Kei began to stroke his hair. He didn't speak, but Arman could feel himself easing with every moment. Kei was doing it again. "Stop it," he whispered.

"No. I won't have you suffer when I can help."

"I can bear it."



"You don't have to, and I don't want you to. Close your eyes, Arman. I need you to do that for me."

Arman could only obey the gentle but firm command. "I'm sorry...."

"Please don't, Arman. You've had a very sad day, but I'm proud of being able to help, proud to be loved by you and to love you."

At those words, Arman turned his face towards Kei's leg and he had to fight the tears that were pressing at his eyelids. He couldn't handle another thing now. It all hurt so much...it was just too much to bear...and he was too tired to think....



As Kei felt Arman drifting into true sleep, he sighed with relief, rubbing his forehead to drive his incipient headache away. Arman's emotional tempests were fortunately rare, but they were always overwhelming for both of them – the price Arman paid for his powerful control and determination to behave with honour, Kei thought. If it hadn't been Arman who was experiencing it, Kei could never have dealt with being so close to his pain at all, just as Kesa's sad little soul would have driven him almost insane if Arman had not been in the calash with him.

He kept up the gentle stroking of Arman's hair, hoping to drive away any bad dreams. There wasn't time for a proper rest, but the man was so overburdened Kei was seriously considering begging the Rulers to excuse Arman from this dinner. Only the fact that Arman really was necessary, and more than that, deserved to see the culmination of his efforts, made Kei refrain from using Neka to contact Lord Peika. All Kei could do was let Arman sleep for as long as he could now, and take what pain he could from him.

Poor Arman, Kei thought. To have lost both surrogate and real father, and even the illusion of a son, was an impossibly cruel blow to deal with in the space of a day, and to have it on top of everything else.... He wasn't thinking clearly, that was for sure, and his emotions were all in a tangle, fighting to control him rather than the other way around. Look at this stupid business of Kei tripping. He'd seen the shame in Arman's eyes, as if he had suddenly become this disgusting thug – as if Kei would stay for a minute with someone who would hurt him deliberately. Arman had never even struck Mayl, so far as Kei knew, and the gods knew the woman invited a thrashing, however wrong it would be to deliver it. For such a powerful man, Arman was actually very gentle. Kei cursed his own clumsiness and the narrowness of the bunk which made every movement awkward and had caused him to fall, made it

impossible to lie completely comfortably next to Arman now and hold him close.

He laid his head against the bulkhead and resigned himself to two hours or more of inactivity, not that he minded. If he'd thought about it, and had got Arman to lie the other way, he could have kept up the massage on his leg, but Arman needed the emotional comfort more. If Kei concentrated, he could do a little good from where he was sitting, concentrating on overworked, inflamed muscles, and aching bone. If Arman wasn't careful, he'd have to go back to using the crutches again. Hard, though, for someone used to physical fitness, to bear a disability. Kei felt that with his gift, always wanting to do more, be more carefree than he could be – they both had to accept their limits.

He could reach the comb sitting on the desk, so he fetched it and began to smooth Arman's unruly hair, trying to imagine it in a long braid and failing. It would look like a wild vine, he thought, shaking his head at the idea. He could just about manage to braid it in the position he was in, so he did so, taking the tie from his own hair to tie the short tail into position. It was only three inches long, less than any respectable prepubescent Darshianese could boast. But it would grow. Kei would regret the beard, but he couldn't help be curious to see what Arman's face would look like without it. How he would shave it, Kei had no idea. Razors for personal use were completely unknown in Darshian – not much call for them one way or another. Some men who had stray hairs on their chins plucked them out for tidiness, and he had tweezers in his medical kit, but the thought of pulling out a beard like Arman's, one hair at a time, made his eyes water.

It made him glad, Arman's decision to do this, even as Kei ached for his sadness. Every move, everything Arman had done today had been intended to cement his new life, to break ties with his old one, no matter what the pain. It was humbling that Arman would do so much, give up so much to be with him, and it shamed Kei that he had thought coming to Utuk to be with him would be too great a sacrifice. If Arman had wished it now, Kei would stay and find a way to be happy. But Arman really wanted to leave, so perhaps it was as well things were this way after all. It just worried Kei that Arman's willingness to sacrifice so much meant his love was more powerful than Kei deserved. Kei wanted to give everything to Arman. He was just scared of losing everything in the process.

He could reach his medical text off the desk, and spent two hours reading before realising that it must be coming up to when they needed to leave.

Arman was still soundly unconscious, and Kei really hated to wake him. *Neka, how long before Lord Meki needs us?*

*A little over half an hour, Kei. You really should be getting ready.*

*Damn. Thanks. Just waking Arman now.*

He shook Arman gently. Arman came awake with a jolt, looking up at Kei with startled eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, we just need to get you ready for the dinner."

Arman groaned and tried to push himself up. "Gods, I ache all over."

Kei helped him sit. "Because you've been holding yourself so tight, I told you." He kissed Arman into a little more wakefulness, and sensed he was calmer, if still very sad, and still guilty over the idiotic fall before. "It's not your fault there's not enough room here," he said, slipping his arm around him. "If you're going to torment yourself every time I fall on my arse, I'll have to borrow your walking stick to make sure I don't ever slip over." He kissed his forehead again. "Do you really mean to shave? We only have half an hour, and I don't have a razor."

"I do," he said quietly, getting to his feet, and wincing as his bad leg touched down.

"Sit. Tell me where it is."

Arman sat back on the bunk. "In my pack there, the one from the house. No, that one."

Kei rummaged through it, finding a hair-brush and other grooming items. "This?"

"Yes and the whetstone. I'll need soap...maybe there isn't time," he muttered distractedly.

"No, you said you would be shaven, and so you shall. I'll fetch the soap."

"Pass me the comb and the scissors, and that little mirror."

Kei did so and then fetched the bar of soap, a cloth and the wash-basin of water. He watched in fascination as Arman carefully clipped the beard close, and then lathered up his skin. "Never seen this done before?" Arman said as he sharpened the razor, leaving the lather to soften the bristles.

"Not on a human. I've seen jombeker hides shaved before being cured."

"Same principle."

"Yes, but the jombeker hide won't bleed."

"Neither will I if you don't distract me. Now you know why I don't bother with it in the field."

Kei winced as Arman began to scrape the bristles off his chin. "Does it hurt?"

“Not if you do it right. Shush.”

Kei shushed, but he was glad when Arman finished. Having that razor near his lover’s throat made him uneasy. When Arman was done, the basin was full of bristly suds and hair, and his cheeks were as smooth as kidskin. Kei touched them in amazement. “You look about fifteen.”

Arman smiled a little as he patted his face dry. “Which was the other reason I grew a beard. It’s hard being a twenty-two-year-old general when your lieutenants are nearly twice your age.”

“You’re so handsome,” Kei said, surprised at the fine features the beard had been covering. “I mean, you were before, but...”

Arman shook his head. “Loke said I looked better without it too. My father...my father says I look like my mother. She was a great beauty apparently, although I don’t remember her clearly. I remember her hands, how soft they were on my face, and her voice. And her eyes. But I don’t remember her appearance much at all.”

“If you resemble her, then she must have been a beauty indeed.” Kei said, sighing in appreciation, and then remembered they were in a hurry. “You’d better get dressed, and I’d better change, I suppose.”

“Will you be all right? There’ll be Prijian soldiers there, in full uniform too. Kei, if this is going to distress you....”

“No, now I’ve been warned, I’ll be fine. I just don’t like being surprised. I’m going to stay by your side the entire time, protocol be damned.” He passed Arman his clothes, and decided the braid was too untidy to pass muster, so he quickly remade it, then he had to find a tie for his own hair and change. He was just lacing his shirt when Neka asked them where they were. *Coming, give us a few moments.*

Arman was sitting on the bunk again, his eyes weary and lost-looking. “Just a few more hours,” Kei said, stroking his hand down Arman’s cheek. Arman leaned into the touch and looked at him. “And then no more, I insist on it.”

“You can’t insist, Kei. If the negotiations continue, they continue.”

“They can find another translator.”

“No, they can’t, not someone they can trust, and no one who understands the Prij the way I do. I just have to finish this. Darshian’s not going to suffer because I’ve made the most appalling mess of my private life.”

Kei sat next to him. “It seems to me,” he said quietly, “that the mess wasn’t of your making, most of it. What can I do to help?”

Arman turned to him, and stared at him. “Just be with me. I need you.”

“Then you have me. Now, try not to put too much weight on that leg – use me as support, and once we’re on deck, you let Jera or Reis do the work.”

Even with the rest and the massage, Arman was having trouble and Kei had to really support him on the weak side. Once they got back, Kei swore he was going to make Arman do the exercises as they’d planned and keep off the leg otherwise – he’d had entirely too much of the wrong kind of movement in the last two days, and a broken leg took months to be completely strong again. It hadn’t even been two since he’d broken it, and the inactivity had badly weakened the muscles too. Once these damn diplomatic manoeuvres were over, Kei was going to insist that Arman gave himself the proper time to recover.



There was quite an assembly of people on deck, and the hostage leaders who were attending the banquet were dressed in the best of the clothes that Kei had arranged to be brought down from Darshek for them. Lords Meki and Peika were in their ceremonial robes, and Colonel Jiv and the captains were wearing their armour. But everyone was standing at the rail, looking towards the land. “What’s going on?” Kei asked, helping Arman limp over to the others.

Jera pointed. “Meda and the others are putting on a show for the locals.”

Kei looked past the two other Darshianese ships, and now he could see that there was an amazing display being put on close to the shore, with water spouts and balls of bright flame, and small rowing boats being moved along on waves that danced in the air, illuminated by Neris’ fires as the sunlight was deserting the scene. “Why?”

“So we have an audience when we head to the palace, that’s why,” Lord Peika said. “Right, everyone,” Lord Peika said, clapping his hands. “We’re going to go right up this Avenue of the Gods, and we’re going to be as obvious as we can about it, so that means Jera and Neris are really going to be showing off.” The two Gifted men smiled. “Everyone, remember you represent Darshian, and don’t rise to any provocation – however, don’t let insult pass either. Either I or Lord Meki want to know – we’re not going to let the Prij use us as their play things any more.”

He turned to Arman. “Are you fit?”

“Fit enough.”

“Then let’s go. Neris? Jera?”

Gonji moved closer to Kei. "You done this before?" he asked out the side of his mouth.

"No. But I understand there's nothing to it. Just hold your head high and let's show these bastards who's really in control here."

Arman looked at Kei then, and grimaced. "Let me speak to Lord Meki, Kei." He tugged his arm free from Kei's and limped heavily over to the Ruler so he could speak to him in privacy.

"What's wrong with the golden general?" Gonji asked.

"Don't call him that, Gonji," Kei said irritably. "He's had rather a lot of bad news in the last day or so, and he's worried about this all going well. You don't realise how hard he's worked, or what he's giving up. Whatever you think you sacrificed to be a hostage, he's lost and more to get you all home again."

"Settle down, Kei, we do appreciate it. It's just still rather strange to have a Prijian general walking around as one of us – gods, you've even got him wearing a braid," Gonji said with a chuckle. "He surely doesn't mean to grow that mass out, does he?"

"So he says. It'll weigh as much as he does, if it gets as long as mine. Gonji, don't tease him, please? He's really suffering."

"Yes, I can see," Gonji said kindly. "We won't hurt him. The people from Ai-Vinri are a bit wary of him, but I don't think anyone else is."

"Good. Heads up, here we go."

Lord Peika got everyone to stand in a tidy group and then Neris waved his hand. At once, the darkening sky was lit by a long row of dazzlingly bright balls of light. From across the water, faint cries of astonishment drifted across to the ships. "Our path is lit, and we seem to have everyone's attention, so we should go," Lord Peika said. "Arman? Lord Meki? If you don't mind."

Arman came back to Kei's side and Lord Meki stood next to his fellow ruler. "Jera, if you please? Reis, Meda, Kira, the ships are now entirely under your protection."

"We've got everything under control, Peika, run along and have fun," Reis said, giving Kei a little wave. *Is Arman all right? He looks so sad.*

*He is sad, thank you for the concern. Once this is all over, he'll feel better.*

*Tell him we're all behind him, Kei.*

*I will,* Kei said, smiling at Reis. *He tells me you and the others aren't missing anything, but I'll try and bring you back some sweet cakes.*

*Prijian food? No thanks.* Reis pulled a comically disgusted face.

Arman was looking at Kei curiously. "Tell you later," Kei murmured.

Lord Peika gave a signal, and then all of them began to rise in the air. Kei had had a little experience of this, but had never been taken this high before – he squeezed Arman’s hand and hoped he wouldn’t puke in fright.

Behind them, the massed soldiers were also being lifted. Neris’ bright trail of lights made it almost seem like noon – to the watching crowds, it must have been like their gods coming to earth. Kei noticed Meda hadn’t been able to resist a final flourish – their path was being picked out on the water by a series of pretty fountains which caught the light from the fire balls, so it seemed as if the Darshianese were flying along a road of glittering gems.

Arman’s hand was cold around Kei’s, but Kei knew his lover wasn’t afraid. “It’s beautiful,” he said, putting his arm around Arman’s waist.

“Yes, it is. Probably a waste of effort, but it’ll give people something to chatter about.”

He sounded so bitter and sad. Kei just hugged him and tried to let Arman feel his love through his touch.

They were landed at the docks, and met by a large number of Prijian soldiers, including those wearing red plumes who, Arman had told Kei, were the elite palace guard. “Sei General,” one of the officers said, coming up and saluting. “We have carriages for the guests.”

“They’re not needed, captain. Have your men fall in behind our party, behind the Darshianese troops.”

“But, Sei General...”

“Do as you’re told, damn it,” Arman snapped. Kei looked at him in surprise – it was unlike Arman to lose his temper dealing with minions.

“Yes, Sei,” the man said, shouting orders and marshalling the Prijian soldiers behind them.

Arman motioned to the Rulers. “This way, my lords.”

Once again, Neris threw a trail of lights above them, making the street shockingly bright. There were dozens of people watching, just here at the docks and as Jera lifted up all the Darshianese, all seven hundred or so people, a foot above the ground to float along the street along which Kei have been force-marched all those months before, gasps and cries began to fill the air. The Rulers ignored it, looking somewhat bored as if this was their normal way of moving about, while Neris played a little, sending balls of flame to dance ahead of them, and over the crowds which grew in number and more awestruck as they went along.

There was a little angry shouting, and several times, people threw missiles, which were harmlessly deflected by Jera – the Prijian guard rushed

to deal with the assailants, but the Darshianese affected disdain. Mostly people just seemed amazed, but the children thought the fire-balls were pretty. Arman's face was completely blank as he stared straight ahead of him, but Kei could sense his emotions were nowhere near as calm as he was trying to appear. He could feel the anxiety and curiosity of the other former hostages, but everyone was taking it all in their stride rather well. He himself couldn't help feeling a little grim satisfaction at being able to return with the upper hand so decisively theirs, when he and his fellows had previously been dragged along in bonds for the entertainment of these same assembled masses. He doubted people would be saying how primitive and unimportant the Darshianese were after this evening.

They took their time, floating gracefully up the long street, letting the onlookers get a good eyeful of the power of the Darshianese. By the time they arrived in the large square where Kei had first encountered the Prijian sovereign, there were thousands of people, and Prijian soldiers everywhere trying to control them. At the gates of the palace, a flustered-looking senator met them. "Arman, what in hells do you think you're doing, bringing all these soldiers here, and in this manner?"

"You have a problem with the correct ceremonial protocol for Darshianese Rulers attending official functions in foreign countries, Senator Vilkus?" Arman drawled. "You didn't perhaps expect them to be tied up and dragged along like criminals, did you? Not again. I don't think the Darshianese would consent to be treated that way twice."

The man quailed a little as Neris chose that moment to put an especially bright ball of flame over their heads. "Come with me. But the soldiers stay outside."

"No, they come into the palace grounds, Vilkus. The Rulers require a proper escort and retinue as much as Her Serenity does. You wouldn't want to cause any offence, would you?"

The man scowled, but then signalled for the Darshianese caravan to come inside the palace grounds. After all, he could hardly have stopped people who could be floated over the gates as easily as dried leaves. "You're enjoying this," Kei muttered to his lover.

"Maybe a little," Arman said, a slight smile on his lips. Kei was glad to see it.

The Darshianese soldiers were taken to a courtyard where, Arman was assured, they would receive a good supper. "You trust the Prij not to poison them?" Lord Meki asked quietly as they were escorted through the palace.



“No. But I trust Jiv and Tiko to ask the food to be tasted before they touch it. I’ve warned them. I warn you too – Jera, that’s especially in your case. You’ll be a main target.”

“Got it,” the mind-mover said. “Permission to dump poisoned food on people’s heads, Meki?”

Lord Meki seemed rather amused at the idea. “With pleasure.” Now Kei was hoping something would be found, which was very wrong of him, he knew. He didn’t realise he had this capacity for vindictiveness. He hoped he grew out of it, or that it only applied to the Prij.

But he still wanted to see Senator Mekus wearing a bowl of soup.

They were lead to a large room, and for a moment, Kei had a sudden painful memory of that day when they had all been rounded up. Arman squeezed his hand. “It’s not that room,” he said quietly. “They don’t use that for banquets.”

Kei gulped down the sudden nausea, grateful for Arman’s words. Footmen came to meet them, and to escort them to their seats, the Rulers near where the sovereign would sit and the other Darshianese down a long table near there. All of them but Arman. “What’s going on?” Kei asked as footmen tried to usher him to a chair. “Why haven’t you got a seat?”

“Ah. It seems as translator, I’m a servant, and servants may not sit in front of Her Serenity at a meal.”

“What?” But Kei’s outrage was interrupted by a blare of horns and a drum being beaten, and then the sovereign and her senators swept into the room. Everyone bowed, the Darshianese a beat behind, as the woman took her seat. Arman went to take up position behind Lord Meki. Kei just looked at him. “You need to sit,” he hissed.

“Protocol,” Arman said. “Go and be seated.”

“No.”

Lord Meki turned around. “Kei, take a seat please.”

“No. Arman isn’t sitting, I’m not sitting.” *He’s not a servant. None of us are. Kei?* Kei turned to Gonji. *What’s wrong?*

*Arman isn’t being given a seat because they think he’s a servant.*

*Right.* Gonji got to his feet. A few moments later, the other clan representatives did, as did Jera.

Lord Meki looked at Kei, then at Arman, and then finally at Lord Peika. Then he got to his feet too, and was joined by his fellow Ruler.

Their actions caused a ripple of comment from the Prij, and the sovereign leaned towards her translator to speak to him. "Her Serenity wants to know why you are all standing?"

Lord Meki turned and bowed. "We didn't realise servants can't sit in front of Her Serenity. Since I and Lord Peika are servants of our people, we shouldn't sit either." The translator spoke quickly.

"And I serve my clan," Kei said.

*Kei! You're making a fool of yourself and of me!* Arman was giving Kei one of his fiercest glares. Kei just grinned.

"I likewise serve my clan."

"And I."

"And I."

Her Serenity was going redder and redder as each Darshianese made a similar declaration. "Are you trying to turn this meal into a farce?"

"No, your highness. We would just like a chair for our good friend and colleague, Arman. If it pleases your highness."

She glared, and then snapped her fingers, and a sharp command. A footman went scurrying off. "Could you not have just asked?"

"We thought you already knew that Arman wasn't a servant," Lord Meki said politely.

She frowned. "He has a chair now. Sit down, please."

Lord Meki bowed. Arman's face was like thunder as he watched the table being hastily rearranged. "Was any of that strictly necessary?" he growled at Kei and Lord Meki, sitting down at last and glowering at them.

"No. It was just fun," Kei said.

"You would jeopardise the peace to get me a damn chair?"

"No. I'd just poke these pompous fools for that."

Now Kei could sit next to Arman, which they both needed, and since he felt he had provoked his lover enough, he sat with perfect politeness as the first dishes were served. It was a quite acceptable vegetable soup, and he was about to tuck in, when Arman shook his head. *Wait until the senators taste it.*

*You're serious.*

*Completely.*

Kei looked at his plate, and felt queasy. Suddenly this wasn't fun any more. Not that it really was at all, but he'd been trying to lighten the mood.

None of the senators dropped dead, perhaps unfortunately, and so the Darshianese could eat. Arman was still slightly cross, but mostly he was just

tired and rather anxious. Kei recognised some of the senators, including the odious Mekus. The Lord Commander who was sitting next to Her Serenity, kept glaring at Arman. Kei wanted to poke his tongue out at him, but instead squeezed Arman's leg under the table, which raised a little smile from him. "Behave," Arman whispered. Kei just gave him an innocent look.

They were barely halfway into the soup when the sovereign began to ask Lord Meki questions, and Arman had to translate. It seemed that the Prij had actually agreed the substantive part of the Darshianese demands and were quibbling over minor details of tax, import duty and legal administration in south Darshian. Kei had expected more resistance. Jera and Neris really must have made an impression. But they had better watch what they ate over the next few hours.

It was all stiflingly dull, and for the Rulers and Arman, not even a respectable meal, as they were constantly talking to both sovereign and senators. The Lord Commander kept up his steady glare at Arman, but never spoke to him, and hardly at all to anyone else. The rest of the Darshianese were ignored, which suited Kei fine, and Arman could eat food he probably preferred when they got back to the ship. Kei was just glad he was now off his leg.

The courses were interminable, and far too rich and extravagant. Kei, who had always been taught not to waste food, struggled to finish everything on every plate put in front of him, but finally had to admit defeat. *I'll be sick if I eat another thing*, he thought at Arman, using some of the water to wash the greasy taste away. The wine was too heavy too, although it wasn't unpleasant – he just distrusted the fact it was so much stronger than beer. Being drunk here would be a very bad idea.

*You're only supposed to pick at each plate, no one eats everything.*

Kei stared in disbelief. *What a dreadful waste of food!*

*Yes. Another reason I hate these things with a passion.* Arman just smiled politely as his mostly full plate was taken away.

Kei was about to remonstrate with Arman when Lord Meki cleared his throat. "Your highness, there's just one more matter before we finalise things."

"Oh? We thought you were done."

"There's the question of compensation, your highness."

"Compensation? For what, pray?"

Lord Meki drew some papers out of his inner pocket. "For the murdered hostages from Ai-Vinri, for three women raped while in your custody, seven men who were seriously assaulted, and for the theft of three hundred sacks of

grain and other stores from the villages. We've made a list of our requirements in this regard."

"You can't possibly be serious." This from the Lord Commander.

"I regret that I am, sir."

"Why was none of this mentioned before?" Senator Mekus snapped.

"My omission, I'm afraid. But I'm afraid we do have to insist on it."

The sovereign signalled to Mekus to sit down. "We were at war with your people. Acts of war require no compensation."

*Who says?* Kei thought angrily.

Arman didn't wait for Lord Meki to answer, getting to his feet and speaking in Darshianese, forcing the sovereign's own translators to work hard. "No, your highness, the hostages at Ai-Vinri were murdered, the victims of a Prijian crime and an injustice. No Prijian subject, as the hostages were at that point, should be attacked while under your protection. Besides, they were in receipt of your hospitality, as were all the hostages -- you proclaimed this yourself. No Prij should allow a guest to be raped. As they have been, you should make reparation."

"A gue..." She stopped as Kizus whispered something in her ear. The Lord Commander also said something to her. "You're twisting our words."

"No, your highness, those are *exactly* your words. You said they would receive Prijian hospitality. And yet they were beaten, raped and killed while receiving it."

"You were the one who brought them to us!"

Arman bowed. "Yes. A crime for which I am making atonement. But I never expected them to be raped, your highness. At the very least, you have a duty towards the children, for they will be half Prijian."

The woman was furious, but Arman was radiating cold anger, and not a little shame and guilt. Kei put a surreptitious hand at the small of Arman's back. "We shall not," the sovereign declared coldly.

Lord Meki got up. "Then I regret the negotiations are finished. Your island will be blockaded and you will not be able to trade with any other nation, nor with your territories." He signalled everyone to stand, and he began to walk out. The guards blocked the doors -- Jera just picked them up and sent them up to the ceiling. "Goodnight, your highness," Lord Meki said. *Neka, put everyone on alert. We're returning and not on friendly terms.*

They all moved to the doorway, Lord Meki looking grim and Arman still radiating anger. *Jiv, get your people ready*, Kei heard Arman tell the soldiers. *There could be a real fight in a minute or two.*

“Wait!”

The shout had come from Senator Kizus, who then said something rapidly in Prijian to the sovereign. There followed a quick fire exchange between the Prij which Arman wasn't translating, at least out loud, but from the intent expression on the Rulers' faces, Kei guessed there was a mental dialogue being carried out. The rest of them stood, waiting for a sign as to what to do.

Finally one of the other senators approached them. “Please, be seated, we will discuss this.”

“No,” Lord Meki said coldly. “We will not discuss anything. We have injured and murdered people and we will not allow this to pass.” *Huh*, Kei thought to himself. He hadn't even wanted to bring it up earlier that afternoon.

“But we wish to discuss the terms.”

“We will dictate the terms. Your soldiers marched into our villages and did the same. How does it feel, Senator, to be on the receiving end?”

The man turned to the sovereign to explain and she barked back a command. “She bids you sit.”

“Tell her to jump off a cliff,” Jera murmured.

“We don't take orders from the Prij any more,” Kei said loudly, and there was a quiet chorus of assent from the others. At the same time, he did wonder if Meki and Arman were pushing something that was far less important than the peace itself. He wondered why Arman had suddenly stopped being conciliatory.

More exchanges among the Prij. Kei was beginning to be a little afraid, despite Arman's determined look and the Rulers' hard expressions. The Rulers had never dealt with the Prij before and Arman wasn't a diplomat. What if they were making a mistake?

The sovereign dismissed the senators with a wave of her hand. “Please... gentlemen...would you be kind enough to sit?”

It sounded like she was stabbing a knife into her hand with every word, but it was – technically – polite. “For what purpose, your highness?” Lord Peika said, his voice as cold as Lord Meki's had been.

“To...accept...your request...and finish our meal, of course.”

Lord Meki bowed. “With pleasure, your highness.”

The red-faced guards were brought down from the ceiling to be placed back in position like dolls and the Darshianese all trooped back to the tables as if they'd merely got up to relieve themselves. “All Prij are bastards,” Kei muttered, and Arman turned to look at him. There was the faintest smile on his lips. “And you're the biggest one,” he added.

Arman squeezed his fingers under the table. *It was an important point. It's also important to reinforce her subordination to us. It's like training a jesig.*

*If she was a jesig, I'd have her knocked on the head.*

*Yes, well, I won't argue with that.* Then Arman had to return to translating.

The Prij seemed in more of a hurry to finish the meal after that, and a formal signing of treaties was arranged for the following day. The clearing of Kurlik Pass would begin as soon as Jera and Reis were taken to the mainland, and troops would start to leave Darshian as soon as the Darshianese arrived. Lord Peika and some of the Darshianese troops would remain in Utuk to form a diplomatic mission until a permanent ambassador could be appointed, and Lord Meki would establish temporary command in the south until the local leaders could form their own Council of Rulers – negotiations on that point had already begun, Arman had told Kei. The northern troops would take control until the southerners had rebuilt their own army, and the Prijian infrastructure was handed over to the Darshianese. The north and south ends of Darshian had always had their own governments, with a close affiliation between them. This would be restored. The most important thing was to reopen the communication between the two ends of the country, but they would also need to reunite to keep the Prij under control. No one expected them to accept peace this easily. Arman had told Kei there were Gifted in the south, apparently, but they had long been in hiding, and as yet, their cooperation had not been secured. The northern Gifted would be important in gaining that, and it was possible some would remain in the south for a month or two for that purpose.

It was all over. Kei could hardly believe it. The Prijian senators weren't looking thrilled by the whole thing, but there was less hostility than Kei had expected. Some bright spots of hate – Mekus was a notable source of that, and the Lord Commander was simmering with anger, directed most pointedly at Arman. At the end of the meal, the sovereign bade the Darshianese a polite, if not especially warm, farewell. "Blikus, you will escort our guests back to the docks." The man looked visibly revolted at the idea, but his sovereign ignored his response entirely. Beside him, Kei felt Arman become very tense. "Goodnight, gentlemen. The signing will take place in the square tomorrow at noon. You shall attend us then."

The Rulers bowed, and everyone stood as the sovereign swept out, much to Kei's relief. The Lord Commander walked over to them, his expression showing his distaste. "This way," he said curtly, and then grimaced as Jera

got the Darshianese off their feet, and floated them along. Kei sent Jera a grateful smile for that kindness to Arman.

Out in the courtyard, the troops were assembled – thankfully, none of them looked poisoned. “I’m going to ride my jesig,” Blikus said. “Do you intend to bring everyone along in that outlandish fashion, Arman?”

Arman looked back at him coolly. “Yes, I rather think I do. Do you have a problem with that, my lord?”

“I have a problem with you, you filthy traitor. You’re an absolute disgrace, and the deaths of our men are on your hands!”

“My lord, those deaths occurred before I ever encountered the Darshianese again.”

“And now you’re helping those who killed them.”

“Yes. I am.”

The two men glared at each other, and Kei felt sick at the powerful loathing coming from Blikus, who suddenly turned to him. “This is *your* doing – you’ve put a spell on him, stolen his mind! He would never have done this of his own free will.”

Kei put his arm around Arman’s waist. “It is I who is enspelled, my lord,” he said calmly. “I’m as much a slave as I ever was, only this time, of love, not the Prij.”

Lord Meki cleared his throat loudly. “Lord Blikus, we would like to return to the ship. If you object to my colleague’s presence, perhaps you could ride at the back, so the sight of him doesn’t offend you.”

“I’ll ride at the front, as is my duty and my position. I haven’t forgotten all that I am, just to fuck some pretty arsed boy.”

“I’m sure. Although, I would suggest you try it before dismissing it,” Lord Meki said politely. Lord Peika hid a grin behind his hand. “But Arman’s personal habits are hardly important. What is important is that you are displaying a great deal of rudeness to the representatives of a sovereign nation and causing embarrassment to Her Serenity. Shall we end this unseemly discussion, or would you like me to take it up with her?”

Blikus’ lips thinned in anger and then shouted to his own men to mount up and get into position. “Don’t try that kind of feeble threat on me, Lord Meki. I’m not one of the senators to quake in my boots if you make a display of temper. I don’t give a damn if you’re offended, and neither does she. We just want you off our island. You’re a completely dishonourable race – you had the means to defeat us and yet you still stoop to subverting one of our finest officers.”



“I was trying to save Prijian lives, you damn fool!” Arman snapped. “Yes, they could have defeated you – and killed nearly everyone in Utuk, tearing the place apart looking for their people!”

“You’re assisting the enemy, Arman! What is wrong with you that you can’t see how wrong that is? How can you betray your honour, your family, the trust we all placed in you? It beggars belief that you – of all people, *you*, Arman – could do this. Your father, your brother, must be dying of shame. How do you expect them to show their faces in the senate after this?”

Kei felt Arman go tense under his arm. “The honour of my father and brother, and of any other person, derives from their own actions, not mine. If the Prij had acted with honour, I would not have needed to take this step. If the hostages had been treated fairly, I would not have begun to question the justness of the war. And if the Darshianese had not been so determined to stop civilians on both sides from dying, you would not be Lord Commander, Blikus – you would just be dead. Gods, man, do you not realise what these people can do? The very palace we’re standing in could be hurled into the harbour in the blink of an eye! They could incinerate every living creature on Kuprij as easily as breathing. They didn’t need me to win this war, they needed me to win the peace. People are alive because of their mercy and for no other reason.”

“Better to be dead than dishonoured,” Blikus sneered.

“So you say. But it’s not a decision you have a right to make for everyone else in the Prij nation. Dead is dead, Blikus. There’s no honour in a grave. Better to live decently, and serve one’s fellows, than to die uselessly and let others die uselessly too.”

“You’ve lost your mind, Arman.”

“Maybe, but I’ve found my soul. Now, enough. You despise me and you despise the nation I serve. You’ve made that clear. In twenty years, when the Prij prosper from peace instead of war, maybe you’ll sing a new song. Until then, I’ve made my choice. I’m proud to be part of this peace, Blikus.”

“We’re proud to have you with us too, “ Lord Meki said. “We’re leaving, Lord Blikus. We don’t need an escort. If you come with us, keep your mouth shut. I’ve had enough of Prijian pomposity this night.”

Kei blinked. That was about the rudest thing he’d ever heard Lord Meki say.

Jera moved the Darshianese forward, and Blikus had no choice but mount his jesig and follow. By the time they’d reached the palace gates, a passable appearance of an escort had been formed. There weren’t any crowds this



time – it had to be close to midnight, and most people would have long since gone to bed. Neris lit their way again and Jera carried everyone along, although at a notably faster pace than before. They were at the docks in twenty minutes or so. Blikus stood and pointedly waited for them to depart the shore before turning his troops around and marching them back up to the palace.

Arman was rigid with stress as Jera flew them over the harbour. “His opinion doesn’t matter,” Kei said, kissing his cheek in comfort.

“He’s not a bad man or a stupid one, Kei. His opinion does matter. And it hurts,” he added quietly.

“He’s wrong. Left to men like him, we would do nothing but fight wars.”

“He’s been my commander for nearly ten years. A role model in some ways. His approval mattered. His hatred matters now.”

Kei had no answer to this. He suspected Arman’s reaction was bound up in what had happened with his father earlier, and Karus’ death. Some things Arman just needed time to work through himself.

As they landed on the ships, Neris set a huge ball of flame over the harbour, lighting it as bright as day. “That’ll let us see the bastards coming,” he said with satisfaction. He came to Arman. “That man was wrong, Arman.”

Jera joined him. “Yes, he was. You’re not like him at all, and you’re not a traitor. You’re our friend,” he said simply.

Kei could have kissed Jera for the words, and he sensed Arman’s sad heart lift ever so slightly. “You haven’t lost everything, or everyone. See?” he murmured.

“Yes, I do. Kei, I’d just like some fresh air before we turn in.”

“Want me to go below and wait?”

Arman looked at him, hesitated. “No,” he said finally. “But do you mind if I don’t talk for a while?”

“Whatever you want.”

Arman limped heavily over to a distant part of the rail. The Rulers seemed about to approach him as the clansmen and women went down to the passenger deck, but Kei held his hand up. “No. He needs time to think.”

Lord Peika nodded. “We just wanted to offer him our gratitude, and our regret at the treatment he received.”

“I’ll pass it on. My lord...you will make sure people know what he’s done, won’t you? He’s not a traitor to his people, he’s just tried to behave with honour.”

“We know that, lad,” Lord Meki said. “He also knew how people would react, although facing the reality has probably been more unpleasant than anyone could have imagined. Don’t insult him by assuming he didn’t go into this with his eyes wide open. He knew the risk, he knew the cost. He did it anyway. That’s what makes his actions brave. Of course we’ll make sure people know this.”

“Thank you. I’d still appreciate you leaving him be. Do you need him tomorrow?”

Lord Meki looked at his fellow Ruler. “I think we still do. I’m sorry. The ceremony shouldn’t be a long one, and once it’s over, we’ll get him out of here. I won’t let him be subjected to any more nonsense like this evening. I’ll have Jera or Reis toss that Blikus chap into the ocean before he gets away with that again.”

“That chair business was a bit of spite too – I wonder who was behind it?” Lord Peika said.

“One of the senators, I wager,” Lord Meki said. “The sovereign seemed to know nothing about it.”

Kei could imagine a couple of likely suspects. “True. May I bid you goodnight, my lords? Arman and I are very tired.”

“Of course. Get him to rest that damn leg of his.”

Kei bowed and waited for them to leave before going to where Arman was sitting on a hatch, looking back at Utuk. The light over the harbour was eerie – below it, daylight, above it, a golden reflection on the dense cloud cover which made it look even more surreal. He wondered how many citizens were looking out their windows at the amazing sight. Even knowing what caused it, it was still wondrous to Kei.

“Mind if I sit?”

Arman shook his head. Kei sat next to him, not sure if Arman wanted physical contact or not, but his question was answered as Arman reached for his hand and held it in his lap. He didn’t look at Kei, or speak, so Kei just let him hold his hand as he stared out over the harbour.

“I always thought the war was a bad idea,” Arman said softly, after long minutes spent in silence. “I told Karus the Prij would regret it. But I had to do my duty. I wonder if all this could have been avoided if I’d been more outspoken at the start.”

“Would they have listened?”

“Probably not. But I should have tried. Like I should have tried to work out why my father was so cold to me. Like I should have stopped Mekus that day,

or at least made sure you didn't have to see it." He freed Kei's hand and put his head in his own. "So tired," he murmured.

Kei put his hand on Arman's neck and gave it a little massage – the muscles there were like rocks. "Lie back. Just on the hatch. Lie back – I've got you."

Looking a little puzzled, Arman obeyed, and Kei made a pillow for his head with his arm. The air was warm and still, sticky almost – perhaps there would be rain later that night, but for now the cloudy skies held back. Kei untucked Arman's shirt so he could put his hand over Arman's heart – it was beating very fast. Too fast. He rolled a little and put a kiss on Arman's new-shaven jaw. "Kei, people can see," Arman murmured.

"So? They've seen you kissing me before. I notice Blikus thinks I have a pretty arse. Means he must have been looking, don't you think?"

That made Arman smile just a little. "I disgust him."

"So do I but he still thinks I've got a pretty arse. Your arse is pretty too. Bet he's looked at that as well."

"Thank you for that image, Kei. I managed eight years under his command and never once considered the man was interested in any of my body parts."

"Glad to hear it," he said, letting his hand drift over one of Arman's nipples, and feeling his lover twitch a little.

Arman pushed his hand away. "Don't."

Kei stopped because he didn't want Arman to be upset. He put his hand on the outside of the shirt. "Do you mind that people know you have a male lover?"

"No."

"Then why do you care if people see me touching you?"

"Because I'm damn sick of people presuming to know my affairs and what's in my mind. Gods, Kei, do you know what that's like?"

"Yes, I do," Kei said calmly. "But I'll leave you alone if you want."

He moved to get up, but found his hand caught by Arman who was looking at him with wide eyes. "Don't...I didn't mean...don't leave me because I've angered you. Please."

"I'm not," he said, leaning down for a kiss. "I'm trying to give you what you want. I don't want to hurt or embarrass you. I need to touch the people I care about, that's all. I like to make them feel good."

"I can't...I'm not ashamed of you. To have you by my side, and claiming me...I feel like a god, Kei."

"You just don't want to have sex out in the open."

Arman looked at him. "Not really."

"All right. There's more room here than on the bunk, even if it's harder." And that's just the hatch, Kei thought ironically. Lying next to Arman was doing all sorts of things to him and giving him ideas which Arman clearly wasn't ready for. "I'll be good."

"I doubt that," Arman said with a trace of a smile. Kei leaned down and kissed him again – it felt strange without the beard, but it made Arman's mouth even more luxurious to explore. Despite his reservations, Kei could feel Arman's desire springing into life, masking his sadness.

It wasn't just his desire springing up either. "I could touch you very, very quietly," Kei said softly, right under Arman's ear, running his hand gently down Arman's body, to come to rest over his groin. "I can be discreet when I want to be. I can even be...elegant..." He nibbled Arman's earlobe and Arman exhaled sharply. "I could just sit here driving you quietly, discreetly and elegantly mad and all the sailors would think would be that we're just sitting here talking. Would you like that?" He took advantage of the beard's removal to lick along Arman's long, square jaw.

"You talk too damn much," Arman said, dragging him close for an almost savage kiss. "You already drive me mad. I want to mope and instead you're making me wild with need."

Kei grinned. "We damn Darshianese, we just don't follow the rules, I suppose. But if you don't want me to talk, I've got a better use for my mouth."

He began to tug at the lacings of Arman's trousers. Arman grabbed his wrist. "You would really do that here?"

"Why not? No one's looking, Arman. It's not causing offence or inconvenience."

But Arman still gripped his wrist and was looking at him strangely. "No one thinks this is wrong?"

"I wouldn't do it in the middle of Darshek square, no. But here? Look," he said, pointing at the sailors who were all watching the ocean. One or two had noticed what they were doing and were amused, he sensed. But no one was offended. "No one gives a damn. It's a different attitude, Arman. Sex isn't a sin or a crime. You need to get used to that."

"I saw...years ago, in Urshek. A woman doing...what you were going to...with her lover. In a street. I was so shocked."

"But you still looked? Was it beautiful?"

"Yes," Arman breathed. "Her hair...and the love in their eyes.... I wondered what it would be like to be wanted like that, to love...to give pleasure in that

way and to receive it. And to feel no shame at all.” He looked up at Kei. “I want not to be ashamed.” He sat up and pinned Kei to the hatch. “I’m not ashamed of you.” He placed his hand over Kei’s crotch and massaged it a little. “Let me?”

“Whatever you want, always.” Kei held his breath as Arman began to undo the lacings on his trousers – what was he going to do? He released the breath as his cock was freed of his clothes. Arman seemed to be going to kneel – Kei grabbed his shoulders. “No, you don’t. Not on your knees. What do you want to do?”

Arman seemed a little confused and somewhat irritated. “I wanted...to...well, use my mouth,” he mumbled.

“All right,” Kei said, trying to hide his sudden arousal, not to mention his surprise. “You sit, I’ll stand.”

“Kei....”

Kei held up his hand. “Bad leg – listen to me, or no sex. Got it?”

“Yes. Bully.”

“Stubborn idiot. Behave.” He got off the hatch and stood in front of Arman, who put his hand on Kei’s hips, keeping his shirt rucked above them and exposing Kei’s arse to the world. “You don’t have to....” Arman looked up in real annoyance. “All right, I’ll shut up.”

As he felt Arman’s breath on his cock, he had to clutch at Arman’s shoulders as his knees went a little weak with excitement. He’d never expected Arman to do this, not here and certainly not now. Arman had only had a couple of experiences of this act himself – did he have any idea what to do? He buried his hand in Arman’s hair, and gasped as Arman’s warm tongue licked across the top of his cock, as his hand cupped Kei’s balls carefully. “Gods....” He looked down. Arman seemed uncertain. “Do that again.”

Arman did, and then licked a little down the length of Kei’s erection. Kei shuddered with raw need. He had to be patient, he couldn’t push...but gods, he wanted Arman’s mouth on him *now*.

Arman was being maddening, using one hand to play with Kei’s balls, to trace slow circles over his thigh, while his mouth moved from his cock to the hollow of his hip, licking, sucking...even, daringly, nibbling which drove Kei *crazy* with lust – he adored being bitten carefully by his lovers. His hand tightened in Arman’s hair and he bit his tongue to stop himself begging. This was Arman’s first time, Arman needed this, and needed to feel confident. Kei had to...be patient, damn it! He jerked as Arman’s teeth grazed the head of his cock with exquisite gentleness. “Gods, oh gods....” Warm, agile tongue

curling around him, soft, firm lips pressing against his erection, a strong hand rolling and playing with his balls and then...around his cock, pumping carefully as Arman began to suck, hesitantly, a little clumsily...but it felt so damn good despite that....

Arman shifted, and then he was trying to take all of Kei into his mouth. Kei pulled back, and made Arman look up at him. "That needs practice," he said gently. "Just keep doing what you're doing, it's driving me mad and I love it."

Arman smiled and obeyed. Kei sighed as once again that wet, delicious heat enveloped him and he could lose himself in the sensation, feeling Arman's love, his mouth, his hands and just pure joy that he had a lover so brave and so generous.

It was more Arman's hand than his mouth that made Kei come, and it was so sudden he couldn't warn Arman, who coughed but swallowed manfully. Then had to cough again. "Sorry, I should have pulled away."

Arman looked up and wiped his mouth. "It's not like I didn't know that would happen," he said calmly.

Kei crouched to kiss him. "Thank you," he said. "I really enjoyed that," and he felt Arman's emotions colour with pride and pleasure at his words. He sat down on the hatch, still bare-arsed, and laid his cheek against Arman's, reaching for Arman's lacings. "My turn."

"You don't...."

Kei looked at him sternly. "I *want*."

"Ah. Carry on," he said with a faint smile. Kei made him lie down so he could undress him better, shoving his shirt up to expose the broad chest. He spent some time licking and teasing Arman's pink and pretty nipples before moving down to the impressive erection set in the golden curls. Arman's cock was always a bit of a challenge, being thicker than Reji's, but Kei rose to it, loving the taste and the feel of it on his tongue and the way Arman could lose his sadness through his desire, the way he became so wantonly needy, beautiful and responsive to every touch and movement. Sex with Arman felt like he had all the power in the world, like having a Gift that gave him complete control over this wonderful man, this kind and generous soul. It was completely addictive, and Kei had no intention of fighting that addiction.

Arman came with a cry, clutching at Kei's head as he drank him down, licking his cock as it softened. Only when Arman moved and Kei guessed he was a little too sensitive, did he slide up Arman's body to kiss his stomach, and then his chin, and finally his mouth. "Like?"

"Mmmm."

Kei grinned. He seemed to have robbed Arman of the power of speech. He sat up, intending to pull his trousers up again – and then heard a chorus of applause and whistles. He looked up – the previously uninterested sailors were all watching from the masts and crow's nest and showing their appreciation of the unplanned entertainment. He blushed, but stood and bowed, bare arse and all, to his audience. "Thank you, thank you. You're too kind," he said with a flourish of his hand.

Beside him, Arman was frozen in place, embarrassment rolling off him. "You said they weren't looking!"

"I never said they'd keep not looking." Kei pulled his trousers up and then sat down, ignoring the sailors who were returning to their watch now they had thoroughly humiliated the two lovers. "They still don't care, beyond it being a great joke." He touched his forehead to Arman's. "It doesn't matter. And I'm still proud as anything of you and to be seen with you."

Arman closed his eyes. "I...don't feel ashamed," he whispered. "I'm not ashamed," he repeated in a louder voice. "I love you." He stood up and called to the sailors. "I love Kei of Ai-Albon!"

The sailors clapped again and called out a few "good for you's", grinning down at them. Arman pulled up his pants – Kei was so pleased he hadn't done that first – and sat down again, looking rather flushed and still a little embarrassed. "Gods, maybe you have cast a spell on me. I'd have never done that before."

"No. But it's not bad for you, I promise."

"I have no dignity left."

"We don't have dignity in Darshian," Kei said. "We just have pride. And you have plenty of that, never fear. The Rulers are proud of you, they were going to come over to tell you in person, but I thought you wanted some privacy. And Blikus better behave tomorrow or he's going for a swim." At the sound of his former commander's name, Arman's spirit dimmed a little. Kei cupped his cheek and kissed him again. "We're all proud of you. I hope you saw that tonight."

"Yes. I did." He sighed. "Now I'm *really* exhausted."

"Come to bed. We don't have to rise early. We could sleep up here, you know. It'll be pretty hot in the cabin."

"That's a good idea. Let's...."

Kei wagged a finger at him. "I'll get the bedding. Relax."

Kei couldn't help smiling as he walked back to the cabin. Arman had come such a long way, not just in miles but in spirit. He was a beautiful, extraordinary man – and all Kei's.



Rumbles of thunder woke them in the early hours of the morning, and they got below with only a minute to spare before the rain came down hard. Arman was so tired that he fell asleep again not long after they had rearranged the bunk, not bothering with the blankets in the stifling heat. When he woke again, bright light was streaming through the port holes. Kei was still asleep but as Arman moved, he opened his eyes. "Is it morning yet?" he muttered, putting a hand over his eyes to cut out the light.

"It could even be noon," Arman said. "Move, I need a piss."

Kei let him up, and he used the chamber pot. By the time he was done, Kei was sitting up and yawning and scratching his face – which reminded Arman he would now have to find time each day to shave again, something he hadn't had to do in years. A small price to pay for accepting a new identity, he thought. Kei looked at him. "How did you sleep?"

"Well enough. I'd like a real bed at some point, but I think it will be Ai-Albon before we get one."

Kei smiled. "I think I'll pull in a favour and get one before then. But once we get moving...that will be soon, yes? There's no reason not to take people across the pass before it's cleared."

"None. All we need is to organise the wagons and what extra beasts we need. It's all in hand. Once we get to Urshek, it should be straightforward." Arman came over to Kei and rested his hands on his lover's shoulders. "Ready to go home?"

Kei nuzzled against his hand. "Not yet. By the time we're there, I will be. And you?" he asked quietly.

"I need time to think, to adjust. A few weeks on the trail will give me that." He bent and kissed Kei. "Thank you for last night. Not just for...."

"Embarrassing you to death?"

Arman smiled a little. "No, although it had its amusing side. For...everything, for support, for the love...."

"Always. Even into the next life," Kei said, kissing his hand.

"You believe that?"

"With all my heart." Kei's dark eyes were solemn, as they rarely were, but then his expression became less sombre. "How's the leg?"



Arman stretched and winced. "Still not good. How long before it stops?"

"Depends on how good you are at following my instructions," Kei said severely, getting up and holding him around the waist. "You've been very disobedient until now."

"Apologies. I've had other things on my mind."

"Yes, and now they're done so you can put yourself in my charge again. Don't forget, I can always call on Jena to make you behave."

Arman pretended to quail. "Oh no, master, please don't."

Kei wagged a finger at him. "I will, don't think I won't."

"Then it's a good thing Tiko's coming with us on the journey," he said, and Kei's eyes widened in horror.

"No!"

"No," Arman agreed. "But I could always ask him."

"No! Arman, he was bad enough last time."

"Be fair, Kei. Last time was very different. Now we're lovers he can stop driving us apart and then trying to match-make again. We must have been very confusing to him."

Kei looked sceptical. "I think he just needs to go home to his real family and leave me alone to sort out my own affairs. After all, now I've got a big bad Prijian general all of my own to hand rear, I should be safe enough."

"I'd rather be a Darshianese farmer if you don't mind."

Kei looked away at that, and then freed himself to find his clothes. "Why don't you go on deck and get some air? I'll bring our breakfast up. It's stopped raining, hasn't it?"

"Ages ago," Arman said, wondering why Kei had suddenly withdrawn from him. "Kei...did I say something wrong?"

Kei turned and gave him a bright smile. "No, of course not. I'm just glad it's all over."

"Still have to sign the treaty, don't forget."

"We know that's a formality. We won, Arman. It's over. You're a damn hero, Arman. And I'm a damn hero's damn lover."

"You're pretty heroic too," Arman murmured. Kei was deflecting again.

Kei helped him to the stairs and up them. "Don't move around. Let me come to you."

"Yes, Kei, run away," Arman said with a sigh. He'd had a suspicion he was going to have to pay a price for Kei not enforcing the exercise regime over the last few days, and he was right. Oh well, it was, as Kei said, all over. More or less.

It wasn't as late as he'd thought it was, and there were people eating on deck. Jena was there, holding the baby and talking to Reji and Kesa. She waved when she saw him, but as he came closer, she fanned her face. "My, it was hot last night, wasn't it?"

"It stormed, did you not hear it?"

"Yes. But it was *really* hot before that. Really, really hot."

Arman wondered why she was making such a big thing of the weather. "Yes, it was," he agreed.

"Steamy even."

"Yes."

"So...did taking your clothes off help?"

He stared at her, and then flushed to the roots of his hair as he realised why she was grinning. "How...you weren't there!"

She tapped her skull. "I was, in a way. Neka was awake because Jera just got back and...well, I was up with Karik and Kesa because he needed a feed...and Neka decided to let me...look."

*Neka!*

*Sorry, Arman. It was too beautiful not to share.*

*You shouldn't have been inside our heads!*

Her mental 'voice' turned defensive. *I wasn't. I wouldn't do that. I was in one of the sailors. I asked him and he said it was all right.*

Reji was grinning at him too. "Oh, it's funny, is it?" Arman snapped. "Wait until it's your privacy invaded."

Reji held his hands up. "Look, it wasn't me making love on the deck. I should have warned you about Kei. He's not exactly inhibited."

Arman's face was burning, and he was very glad the puzzled Kesa couldn't follow their conversation in the least. "I'm never going to have sex again," he muttered.

Jena handed Karik to Kesa and stood up. She came to him and kissed Arman's cheek, to his great surprise. "It was really beautiful," she whispered. "Don't be ashamed, Arman. Your love was something wonderful to see."

He caught her hand. "I'm not ashamed...I just wasn't expecting anyone else to watch."

"Didn't see much. What I did see was impressive," she said with an impish grin and a quick glance downwards which made Arman want to sink into the deck. "It was...stimulating."

For some reason, Reji looked at Jena rather oddly just then. Arman considered the two of them, and wondered if Jena had worked off a little

frustration with a certain handsome trader in a quiet corner last night – or if perhaps the trader had wanted to. That was an interesting development, he thought, and felt rather better about being embarrassed in this manner. “I’ll be sure to let you know when the next performance is,” he said, trying to keep a straight face, even though part of him was quietly horrified at talking openly about something so intimate. He had to keep reminding himself he was Darshianese now. “If we time it right, you could make sure you had company.”

There was definitely a blush on Reji’s cheeks. Jena was shameless of course, and only kissed him quickly again. “That’d be fun,” she said, taking the baby back and sitting down. “Where’s Kei?”

“Fetching food.” They made room for him on the hatch. “How are you, Kesa?”

“I’m well, Sei Arman,” she said in a quiet voice. “Everyone’s been very nice to me, and Jena’s teaching me her language.”

“Call me Arman, my dear. Have you all that you need? Are you comfortable?”

“Oh yes. Everyone wants to help, and Jena’s so kind. It’s almost like having my mother around again.”

The poor girl, he thought – denied a mother’s comfort after such a terrible loss. He doubted Mayl had even bothered to enquire after Kesa’s circumstances, and she would hardly have offered her a friendly ear. Jena would give Kesa some kindness for a short time at least. In a day or two, Kesa would be back with her husband. Vikis was a good man, a good ten years older than Kesa, but not a harsh person. He would help her grieve, he hoped. It was important not to be alone at such a time. He’d discovered that rather painfully.

Jena seemed to be taking well to motherhood – or guardianship, he wasn’t sure how she saw it in her mind. He still felt a sharp, undefined pain when he saw the child and thought of what he represented, but Karik was undoubtedly a well-formed child. Probably would take after Mayl with those looks, he thought. Time would tell if the boy would grow up as fair in soul as he was in features. Arman wasn’t optimistic, but Jena would at least give him the chance to become a decent human being. It wasn’t anything to do with him, Arman told himself. He shouldn’t be affected in any way. But he still found it hard to look at the child.

Kesa wanted to know what was happening about the war, so he told her it was all over and that everyone should be moving soon. One ship would take the hostages and half the soldiers to Urshek, and then on up the coast to

Darshek with the hostages who were returning by that route. That ship would come back to Utuk with some of the Prijian soldiers once Darshian was firmly back in Darshianese hands. The Prij had had to resign themselves to losing six warships for good. It was a real blow, and Arman hoped it would slow the response of the militaristic types like Blikus, who would want to try and retaliate as soon as the Darshianese left Utuk.

"There you are," Kei said cheerfully, bearing mugs and a large piece of flat bread. "Hello, Jena, Reji. Kesa, how are you?" he asked in careful Prijian.

She smiled at him. "Very well, Kei."

He sat down next to her. "You'll see Vikis again in a couple of days. Are you happy about that?"

"Oh yes!" She was much prettier when she was happy, Arman thought. "Only I'll miss you all. Everyone's been so kind...so different to what we've been told about you and...I...."

Kei looked at Arman, clearly not picking up all her rapid Prijian. Arman explained. "She'll miss the company, the kindness. She's got no one except the brother, and I doubt he really understands what it's like to lose a child."

"Her husband?"

Arman shrugged. "A man isn't as good as a woman at this kind of thing, it's just a fact of life. And Prijian men aren't known for their sensitivity," he added wryly. Jena gave him a grin at that.

"I don't know, you're pretty sensitive, especially that little place...."

"Kei!"

Kei gave him his patent innocent look. "I was just proving the flaw in your argument."

Kesa was watching the back and forth between them with complete confusion. "Kei says the Darshianese will miss you too," Arman lied, but knowing that it wasn't really a lie. Already she seemed to have been taken up as a bit of a pet by the former hostages, which was probably good for all of them. Pity it was to be of such short duration.

Kei understood what he'd said. "We Darshianese could do with getting to know the Prij," he said quietly. "If we're to have true peace, I mean – we have to make friends with each other."

"It will take more than a few individuals, Kei. I fear it will take change at the very top of Prij society, and that's not likely to happen for a good many years."

"We can only do what we can do," Reji said. "Kei's right. We need to build bridges."

"I won't deter anyone from trying, Reji. I just warn you that it will take a lot more than being friendly to a kind young girl like this." Arman smiled reassuringly at Kesa, who smiled uncertainly back.

At this point, the baby decided to wake up and express his displeasure over something. "I think he needs changing," Jena said, getting to her feet. "I'll take him down below. Kesa, would you like to come with me?"

Kesa would, and so would Reji. Soon, Kei and Arman were left on their own. "Reji seems to be getting rather attached to Jena," Arman said, accepting a bit of the bread Kei tore off for him.

"Really? I hadn't noticed," Kei said, looking in the direction his friends had taken. "Ah, well, it won't be for long," he said with a sigh. "Jena will be home in four or five days."

He leaned against Arman, who put his chin on Kei's shoulder. "You'll miss her," he said.

"Yes, very much but I can't see any reason why I would ever see her again. I'm not the only one of us who's made friends we will regret losing." He heaved another sad sigh. "I wish our country wasn't so large. Not like yours when you can across from one side to another in a day or so."

"Well, that's on Kuplik. We have hundreds of islands, not counting the territories. To cover them all would take much more than a day."

"Yes, but most of them have no people on them. Maybe we can build one of those wagons you were talking about and then we can race up and down the length of Darshian in a week."

Arman kissed his cheek. "I doubt that'll ever be possible but if we had a network of people like Reis, we could fly everyone between the two ends. That seems a rather large waste of resources though. But you said people travel between the clans. Why would Jena never visit?"

"She's their healer, Arman. Like I'm Ai-Albon's. We can't just wander off the way Reji can. People need us." He became solemn again, and buried his face in his mug of milk. There was something definitely going on in Kei's head. For such an open person, he could be downright secretive, Arman was discovering. Poking him didn't seem to work. Arman would have to be patient.

Arman wondered if he should tell Kei about Jena, and decided Jena would probably waste no time doing that herself, and get a lot of pleasure out of it, so who was he to deny it.

It was nice, sitting like this, now the weight of the negotiations was off his shoulders. Now he could hand responsibility over to other people, like Reji, who was going to be in charge of the caravan getting people home, or Lord

Meki who was going to make the decisions concerning south Darshian. Arman wasn't needed any more. He could have stayed on Utuk to work with Lord Peika, who'd asked him to continue to act as a translator and advisor, but he couldn't do that to Kei – or himself really. Even though he had real regrets at leaving Kuprij, he had none about being with Kei, and however apprehensive he was about how he would fit into Ai-Albon, it had to be better than enduring the endless scorn of his fellow nobles, and the constant reminders of his betrayal, which would never disappear no matter how much the Prij prospered as a result of this settlement. It would also make life easier for his brother and father, not having their traitor relative always on display. He wished there had been time to see Tijus. He hoped his father was wrong about Temir but feared he was not. It seem his father's line was to die out after all. Once that would have caused him no regret at all. Now....

Kei nudged him. "Why are you so sad?"

"Thinking about my brother."

"We could find a way for you to visit him, maybe."

Arman shook his head. "It's best if I don't, for his sake. Besides, I have no idea how he will respond to all this, and I fear I'm not strong enough to be flayed again by someone I care about."

Kei put his mug down and put his arm around Arman's waist. "History will honour you," he said in a low voice. "And the pain will ease."

"History means nothing to me. I know the pain will ease, I just... don't think I can endure any more just now. I'm a coward, I know."

"Some coward," Kei said with soft sarcasm. "Give me your leg, I'm going to massage it and then you can start your exercises again. If you and I are to ride to Fort Trejk, you need to be fitter than you are."

"You want to do that here?"

Kei raised one fine eyebrow at him. "After last night, you're worried about people seeing you do some leg raises?"

"You set me up. This was all part of your evil plan. Now if I object to anything, you'll bring last night up and say nothing could be as embarrassing as that."

Kei grinned. "Discovered, all of it. But it's too late – now you're just a willing pawn in my hands."

"Your own helpless hostage. However will I cope?"

"With aplomb, Arman. It's the only way to go."

Rearranging himself and putting his leg into Kei's lap, Arman thought that was probably right.



The ceremonies were over finally – not swiftly enough for Kei, seeing how even the brief exposure to the censure of his former friends and colleagues sent Arman into a depression again. The Rulers opted for a short but flashy entrance, having Jera and Neris float everyone over the top of the palace on a raft of fire, while Meda took the rain drops from the showers which had come over Utuk by noon and turned them into spinning balls over the heads of the crowds. It made quite a large impression, at least on the ordinary folk.

This time, the troops were left behind – it was now obvious even to the most stubborn Prij that the Rulers didn't need their protection. Instead, they and the former hostages stayed on the ships, getting ready for departure. By the time Kei and the rest of the group returned, everything was in hand. All they needed to do was to wait for the tide and the smaller boat which would bear the Lord Commander and two senators along with the troop ship to Urshek, where the removal of Prij soldiers would begin.

Arman asked for some time alone, and Kei let him have it, knowing Arman was genuine in his wish for solitude but that he would welcome Kei later when he'd had a chance to think. In the meantime Kei had things to talk to Reji about, and to Jena. After Arman's comment earlier, he'd paid more attention to those two and, yes, perhaps Arman was right. Reji definitely admired Jena, and they were getting on very well. More than that might come if they were to have more time together, but they would part in less than a week.

Kesa had agreed to travel to Ai-Rutej and stay there until Karik was moved successfully onto the jombeker milk. Jena could have done it sooner, but she said she felt with the inadequate bottles (for the only ones available at least on the ship were those used for hand-rearing jombeker kids) and the stress of the travel, it would be troublesome to do that before they had stopped moving. Kesa didn't mind at all. Kei and Arman were to travel to the fort and pass on Lord Meki's command for the troops stationed there to move south as soon as Kurlik Pass was clear, and to ride back to an agreed meeting point on the road to Ai-Rutej with Vikis. He would then go with his wife to the village and there have transport for both of them arranged back to Urshek and then to Utuk.

In theory at least. Kei couldn't help but worry that Ai-Rutej would refuse to help at all, since Gyek and the others had been so unfriendly and two months longer without their people wouldn't have sweetened their attitude. There was also the question of Ai-Vinri. Arman had been personally banned, as had all

Prij, and that ban extended to babies as well as full-grown men. The former hostages on the ship weren't hostile, but Kei couldn't see any reason why they would argue Arman's case strongly. That might mean splitting up the returning group.

Kei found Reji with the beasts, and Jena was there with the baby. "Aren't you worried about the smell bothering him?" Reji was just finishing putting out feed, and had mucked out again, but it wasn't exactly fragrant in the hold.

"He needs to get used to it," she said. "Urs beasts are a fact of life. At least they don't stink of hypocrisy."

"No, they don't. Where's Kesa?"

"Having a rest. She had a broken night because of Karik. Poor girl, I'll hate to see her go. You know, her mother probably died purely from the treatment she got from those so-called physicians, and her little girl could have been saved if you or I had been there. It's just awful."

Kei took a seat on a bucket, and asked to have the baby to hold. "You haven't said that to her, I hope."

"Of course not! But it infuriates me that she and her brother were begging themselves to pay those leeches who killed their patient, and she's grieving so much for her daughter. I'm worried about her, Kei. Even giving Karik up will distress her, not that she imagines he's hers, but just what her body will be doing once she stops feeding him will remind her of her own baby. I tell you, it makes me glad I can't go through that."

"True," Kei said seriously. "He's really fair, isn't he? Blue eyes too."

"They may change, Kesa said. They may go green or even hazel. But he's pretty enough."

"For a Prij."

She glared at him. "He's not a Prij any more. I spoke to Lord Meki about it and he's granted him citizenship too. He said if we keep recruiting Prij at this rate, he'll have to set up an office to handle such things."

Reji chuckled at that as he washed his hands in a bucket of water. "You never know – once they see how well we live, we might have to barricade ourselves against applicants."

Kei looked at him. "You know that no Prij can settle in the north now, except by special order of a Ruler? It's part of the treaty – they're only allowed in Darshek and only with permission. The Rulers don't want the dry lands ruined by overpopulation and the bastards breed like hisks."



"Die like hisks, too," Jena said scornfully. "I'm glad they're being kept out. We can only sustain the population we have, everyone knows that. They should go to their undeveloped islands and leave ours alone."

"Well, they might do after this, and maybe the Darshianese can help there. Jena, it does mean that Karik is likely to be the only Prij your people will ever see, and it doesn't matter if he's raised as one of us, he'll always look different."

"You forget Mina's baby. And what about Arman?"

"Mina's child will be half Darshianese and won't look so different from us. Arman's an adult and can fight his own battles. Will you be able to protect Karik from prejudice?"

She took the baby back from him and then looked at Kei and Reji fiercely. "I'll leave to protect him. I won't let an innocent child suffer for what its parents might have done. Arman's committed crimes, he knows that and is prepared to pay for them. Karik's done nothing and if my clan won't accept that, then I will take him where he will be accepted, even to Darshek."

"Well said," Reji answered, and she blushed. "Arman might help, in a funny way. He seems to win people over without even trying to. If he's accepted, then Karik might be too."

"Arman doesn't play games, that's why. He's honest with people, accepts the consequences of his actions, and accepts the responses to them. Not many people, Prij or Darshianese do that so thoroughly."

"True," Jena admitted. "And he's changed, or perhaps he's shed the skin hiding his worth. He loved you long before he admitted it, Kei. It's hard to hate someone that devoted to you."

"Yes," Reji said solemnly, but when Kei looked him, he only smiled. "It just means he has impeccable taste, that's all."

"Yes," Jena agreed.

"Stop, you two, you're making me blush."

Jena leaned over and kissed his cheek. "And very winsome you look too. You weren't doing much blushing last night that I saw."

Kei stared at her. "How...Neka? That's rather rude of you, Jena."

"Perks of my gift," she said, poking her tongue out. "I never thought Arman had it in him. So to speak."

"Has he? Had it in him?"

"Reji! I'm not going to tell you about our sex life!"

"Why in hells not? You're apparently happy to tell him about ours!"

Kei's face began to burn, and Jena looked utterly fascinated. "That's different," he mumbled.

"How, exactly?"

"Shut up, both of you, and keep your mind out of my love-making, you perverted woman. I don't know if you should be allowed to have a child to look after, if you're going to invade a person's privacy that badly."

She hooted with laughter. "Look here, Kei, it wasn't me parading around on deck with his arse hanging out of his shirt tails and Arman's cock half way down his...."

"Jena!"

"Leave the boy be, Jena," Reji said, grinning hugely. "He's got himself a brand new toy and he can't help playing with it."

Kei pointed an accusing finger at Reji. "You shut up. You were just the same with Peza, that time Myka and I walked in and found you two on the floor together. Ma said we should start carrying around buckets of water if we were going to visit you in future. In fact, if Jena wants to know...."

"Oh, Jena *does*," she crooned. "Very much."

Reji got up and grabbed Kei by the arm, hauling him up. "Enough, you damn brat, go and find the golden man and teach him that trick you do with your tongue and his ear."

"Later...wait, Reji, I want to talk about the wagons!"

"Another time!"

Kei found himself dragged up the stairs and up to the deck. "You behave, Kei," Reji said, slapping his arse. "You're got your general, you leave me be."

"Ah – so you do want to impress a certain lady healer after all?"

Reji folded his arms. "Is it your business if I do? I'm not your lover any more, remember?"

Kei frowned, then came over and hugged him. But Reji didn't unfold his arms, or welcome the embrace at all. "No. But you're still my dearest friend, Reji. Jena's going home and she's already got someone waiting for her. I don't want you hurt."

"Don't worry, nothing can hurt me after...." He took a deep breath and tried to push Kei away, but Kei wouldn't be shed so easily. "Let me be, Kei."

"No...Reji, I'm so sorry," he murmured, laying his head on Reji's shoulder. "I really do still love you, and I miss you as a lover. I didn't just say, oh, Arman's with me, I'll forget about you. Did you really think that I would?" he asked earnestly, looking into Reji's eyes.

"You need to be with him and I need to move on," Reji said gruffly. "That's the way things are."

"Maybe. But not onto a woman, who I also love dearly, who you can't build a future with. I don't want either of you hurt, and a casual fling.... Reji, your heart isn't ready for that, I can feel it. What can I do?" he asked.

Reji hugged him tight. "Nothing, little brother. Just be my friend and be happy. I'll get over it in time, I'm not one to mope, you know that."

Kei kissed him and not on the cheek, but on the mouth, tenderly. Reji hesitated and then responded a little to Kei's lips. "I know," Kei said quietly, laying his face against Reji's cheek. "Jena's not the only woman out there."

"I know that too. She's just...she reminds me of you, but she's also bright and funny in her own way. How could I not be attracted?"

"You can't. But don't lose your heart, Rei-ki. That won't do either of you any good. Not that I don't wish there was a way. I love Jena like I love Myka. It'll hurt to lose her."

Reji hugged him again. "Life isn't particularly fair, is it? At least I don't have to bear not seeing you again, even if you are the most annoying brat in the world."

"But you love that about me," Kei said, kissing him again. "Never will stop loving you, Reji. Don't be sad."

"I'll try," he said gently, pushing Kei off, and this time, Kei allowed it. "It's just getting used to the change, and this... well, different regret. She makes the kind of impact you did."

"But you didn't want to sleep with me when you met me! At least I damn well hope not," Kei said, looking at him with a little alarm.

"Of course not, you nitwit. But...you dove into my heart like you belonged there, like you had a right to be there. She's the same."

"Maybe she is...she did that to me." He regarded Reji sadly. "I'm sorry for this too, Reji. Gods, I never meant to be the cause of such pain for those I love."

Reji took Kei's hands in his. "You're not," he said with perfect gentleness. "None of this is your fault, and it's not necessarily a bad thing. Arman's feelings for you helped him understand what he needed to do. Your love for him makes you glow, Kei. You're happier than you've been since your parents died, even with all the sorrow you've had recently. And I...well, like you said, there are other people...I've met at least one already, so who knows...?"

"I refuse to believe that someone like you can't be happy with someone else, Reji. If you've decided you want to settle down, you'll find them, I know that. And you'll always have me to talk to, to be at your back."

"No, little brother, you really have to be at Arman's back. But that's all right. I don't intend to let you walk out of my life," Reji said. He kissed Kei's forehead. "Now go away. Even if Jena is leaving, I'd still like to get to know her. We can talk wagons later."

"As you wish." Reji nodded and turned to go, but Kei caught his arm and tugged over for one last kiss on the lips. "I wish there had been another way," he whispered.

"There isn't. Kei, you're coming home with me, with us, and you're happy while you're doing it. Don't underestimate the joy that gives me. The rest...it's bearable. It eases every day, truly. Once things settle back to normal, we'll all be fine." He smiled reassuringly. "Now, go."

Kei watched him leave, his own deep regret threatening to overwhelm him. Just when he thought there might be an end to pain, there was more ahead. However much he might think they suited each other, he really hoped Reji wouldn't give his heart to Jena. She would leave a great hole in it when she had to go, as Kei knew only too well.

He needed to find Arman. Right now, he just wanted to hold someone close and be held for a while. That was all that would help.

## CHAPTER 8

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A day and a half later, Arman was standing with Kei, Reji, Jera and Neka on the Urshek side of the blocked Kurlik Pass. With them were three urs beasts ready to be levitated over the huge pile of rubble and boulders which had blocked the only trade route through the high Trejk range for two decades. "Ready?" Jera asked.

"Make sure you stop these bastards panicking," Reji said, hanging onto the reins of the beasts.

Jera nodded and held his lover around her waist. "Here we go."

This was higher than Arman had yet flown before, higher than he'd ever even climbed before. Kei hung onto him tightly, and it was clear he was terrified, though he never said a word. The sight was astonishing – surely no man before them had ever seen the Trejk range from this viewpoint before, and looking down on the razor-like peaks and sharp shadowed valleys, Arman found it amazing that he and his soldiers had managed to cross them at all. The black granite and basalt mountains looked utterly unforgiving.

It briefly became hard to breathe, and very cold, but they were descending almost before it became too noticeable or unpleasant. Jera brought them carefully to rest on the Darshek side of the pass, but the movement of the beasts was restrained for a little longer. The change in humidity and temperature was immediately apparent. Even Jera looked a little out of breath – it must have taken more effort than he'd expected. But still he smiled. "Right, you're all set."

Kei freed himself from Arman's embrace and came to Neka, kissing her on the cheek. "I hope to see you again," he said.

"Don't hope, promise, Kei – please?"

"I can't promise, Neka. But I'll try."

"All right," she said, her eyes already red from unshed tears.

Kei turned to Jera and while he was saying farewell, Neka stood in front of Arman, her bottom lip trembling just slightly. "You're not mad at me still, are you?"

Arman kissed her cheek too. "No, of course not. It's been a pleasure to know you, and like Kei, I'll try to come back to Darshek to see you."

"Please, Arman. We all like you. Be well," she said, returning his kiss. "You have a wonderful mind."

From her, that was a true compliment. "Jera's a lucky man," Arman said.

Jera smiled at that remark and held out his hand. "Farewell. It's been an honour, Arman."

“Same here. You and Reis, all of you, you served your country and your people in an extraordinary matter. Be proud of that, Jera.”

“We are – but none of it would have mattered if you hadn’t helped. Safe trip. We’ll be ‘watching’ of course,” he said, smiling at Neka.

“Not all the time,” Kei said, poking her on the nose. “Privacy, please.”

“Yes, Kei,” she said with a dimpled smile.

Reji led the beasts over. “Right, you know where to meet us tomorrow. If you don’t appear within half a day of the expected time, I’m coming to find you.”

“Yes.” Arman shook his hand. “Safe trip until then.”

Kei was less restrained and hugged his old lover. “See you tomorrow, Reiki.”

Arman let Kei help him up into the saddle, and Reji checked his reins and girth for him. “We’ll be waiting to hear you’ve set off.”

“All in hand, Arman. I’ve been running caravans for years, I know what to do.”

“I know.” Not that this was an ordinary caravan, with the wagons, beasts, people and stores all to be flown over the pass as Arman and Kei had just been, and with Neka to announce their departure as she was about to tell every mind-speaker in north Darshian, and Darshek too, of the rescue and the plans for the return of the former hostages. Reji would handle it. He exuded calm confidence, an essential quality in a beast manager and a caravan leader too.

Arman saluted and Kei waved to the other three as he set an easy trotting pace towards Fort Trejk. It would only take just over half a day to get there, and then they would leave the following morning and meet the main party at their planning staging post that evening. The returning troops would have to wait for the pass to be cleared which would take the best part of a week. The former hostages didn’t need to wait that long.

It had been raining, so the air was cool, but the sun was bright, if not particularly warm – early spring in the north was usually cold, Kei had said. The beasts were well-fed and lazy from ten days on the boat, so not inclined to work that hard, but for all that, they were setting a respectable, sustainable pace. Already the so-called desert was showing the first greening, the trees on the cusp of coming into leaf, and everywhere, there was fresh grass and early flowers. Not as lush as the south, but still full of life and beauty.

Kei rode on in silence. He’d been quiet ever since they’d left Utuk harbour, really, although he hadn’t wanted to talk about what was bothering him.

Arman knew he was depressed at the goodbyes he'd said, not just to the Gifted, but to the hostages from Ay-Beyto and Ai-Kislik. Since these villages lay on the road to Darshek, Kei had a very good chance of seeing everyone again, but all the hostages had been emotional at the parting, which had affected him for a good while. Only the fact that they needed to get on, and Reji wanted them to get moving anyway so he could concentrate on the preparations for the journey, had broken him out of his depression a little.

At least they were out of Utuk. There had been a tense delay at the port while Blikus went ahead and informed General Ritus of Her Serenity's new treaty, and for an hour or two, Arman had feared Ritus might actually refuse to obey. But eventually the Darshianese were able to dock without conflict, and Lord Meki had quickly taken control of things with the help of the community leaders who were waiting to meet him. All Arman had had to do was go where they had told him to go. Reji had handled everything else.

Kei had got his real bed in the house of one of the leaders, and both of them had had a decent rest and a bout of healing love-making. Leaving Utuk, getting away from the Prij, had lifted some weight from Arman's heart, and while he still had many sorrows and several regrets, he was excited because his new life was finally beginning. Now, as they rode to Fort Trejk, he really felt he was becoming truly Darshianese, that his life as a noble and a general was behind him. Now he was just a humble emissary for the Rulers, and the lover of the beautiful man riding a little ahead of him, lost in his thoughts.

They rode for a good three hours before Arman begged for a halt by a small creek to ease his bladder and his tortured legs and backside. "You forget I've been sitting in a chair for two months, more or less," he grumbled as Kei helped him dismount, ever careful of his bad leg.

Kei, of course, was perfectly fit, having developed legs like iron over the same period. "I've got some tinsel cream," he said. "Want a massage now? We've plenty of time."

They were in the middle of nowhere, not a soul to be seen, but somehow the idea of lying bare-arsed to the sky while Kei smeared ointment on his backside seemed rather unappealing. "No, I'll be fine if we can have a break and some tea."

Kei was already hobbling the beasts so they could graze while the riders rested. "You do what you need to, leave the rest to me."

Arman was glad to, annoyed at being so physically decrepit, but he'd had no real exercise in two months, and serious injuries to heal. The ride back to

Ai-Albon should toughen him up – he didn't want to appear a weakling in front of Kei's village. Which was probably his own now, come to think of it.

Kei had a little fire going by the time Arman had relieved himself. "When do I become part of the clan, or does that never happen?"

"Oh, that happens the minute you're allowed to stay. Clan, village, are somewhat interchangeable terms, since we're all related to some degree but we also move around so much. The village is really the physical representation of the clan spirit, if you like."

"But what if they don't accept me?"

Kei growled. "They will or they lose me." But then he brightened. "Don't worry about it, Arman. You charmed Myka, and Peit and Urki like you too. So long as you aren't seen as an agent of war, most of them won't be too long in welcoming you. Besides, you kept your promise to Fedor. That means a lot to someone like him, and he'll appreciate what you've given up too. He's a very good man – not unreasoning or vindictive."

"Yes, I sensed that." Kei got up and helped Arman lower himself to the ground. Damn, his leg annoyed him, not even letting him crouch easily, or kneel for any time at all. "You'll miss everyone, Jera, Reis...."

"Yes. Isn't it funny how two weeks ago, I only vaguely knew of them, and now they're dear friends. Pure chance, just like the hostages." He looked up and smiled. "I've met the most wonderful people in this whole business. Of course, I've also met some of the lowest scum one could ever wish not to see."

"So...when you're in your dotage, looking back over your life... how will you see this? As a time of regret?"

"No...a time of...trial...growth...I'm not who I was six months ago. I still don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing."

Arman reached out a hand to touch his knee. "You're not so very different, I think. Not to me. I know you better now, but you were always a fine person, a brave one. That's not changed."

"Reji says I seem happier. Isn't that odd, with all that's happened?"

Arman considered that statement. "Perhaps...but you are happier in some ways, nonetheless. Sadder in others. It's part of getting older, I suppose."

"Are you happier now than when you were my age?"

"Not in everything. I understand things better, though." Kei nodded, caressing his hand in understanding of his words. "But while there are things I would dearly love to change about this time, and I regret so many others, I



won't look back at this with unalloyed sadness." He raised his hand to stroke Kei's cheek. "Not in the least."

"Nor I." The little pot of water began to boil and Kei threw in the ipo leaves. He left it to brew while he went to their packs, drawing out some dried fruit. "Here, we need this. It's too long until we get to the fort and as you pointed out, you're hardly travel-hardened."

"No. I'm just a tottering old man."

Kei rubbed his face. "Certainly a whiskery one. Damn it, Arman, your beard was a lot kinder than your bristles – it's like being rubbed over with shark skin."

"Sorry, I keep forgetting to shave. It's not a habit I expected to get into again."

"You really don't need to, you know."

"I know. I'm doing it for me, not you."

"Huh. Then you better do it properly, if at all, or no more kisses for you," Kei said sternly, wagging a finger.

"What a horrible threat. You want me to shave now?"

"No, but please, for mercy's sake, do it before we go to bed."

He poured out the tea. The hot liquid and the energy from the fruit were both welcome – it really wasn't that warm a day and as Arman cooled down after his exertions, he almost wished for a heavier coat. He hadn't brought the winter cloak with him to Utuk. Perhaps an omission, but too late for worrying about it.

Kei seemed a little more cheerful, and after they mounted up again, he was chattier than he had been earlier. There was still a rather notable lack of excitement about returning home, and something lay heavily on his soul. Possibly even several somethings. Arman's attempts to get him to open up had met with a total lack of success, which frustrated him. He was far less skilled at handling people than Kei, and Kei was still something of a mystery to him. He was afraid to push and hurt his lover. He just made it clear that he was ready if Kei wanted to talk and left it at that.

They reached the fort an hour or so past noon, and Arman was very grateful indeed to stop. He knew none of the soldiers, but Kei did, greeting several of them familiarly, and re-introducing Arman. Neka had forewarned the fort, but it was up to Kei and Arman to explain things. But before he did that, Arman asked to see his lieutenant, and he was sent for immediately as Kei and Arman spoke to the two captains who had been left in charge of the fort.

Arman handed over Lord Meki's letters and the captains were reading them when there was a knock at the door. "Jevik, you wanted...? Sei General!" Vikis saluted smartly, but his puzzlement was obvious. "What are you doing here?"

"I've come to bring you home, Vikis. I'm not Sei General anymore. Have a seat."

The confused man did so. "Didn't you go to Darshek after all, Sei?"

"Just Arman, and yes. There, back to Utuk, the war is over, Vikis. And Kesa is waiting for you – we're going to take you to her tomorrow."

"Kesa? What...but her baby...."

Kei spoke quietly. "I'm sorry, Vikis, but the child died a month ago."

"No...gods, Kesa.... Why is she here?"

Arman quickly explained and had to break the bad news that Vikis' mother-in-law had died also. By the time he'd finished narrating the sad tale, Vikis looked overcome. "My Kesa...is she all right, Sei...Arman?"

"She's well, yes, and being cared for very kindly by some of the Darshianese hostages. She couldn't be in better hands, I swear to you. Tomorrow you and she will be reunited and then you both can return home in a week. I'm sorry to bear the news of your daughter, but because of that, and after all this time away, I thought you and Kesa would want to be together sooner rather than later."

"Yes.... I'm glad she's found people to help her. It's been hard, worrying about her all this time."

"And are you well, Vikis?" Kei asked. "You look fit."

Vikis smiled briefly. "Very well, Kei. I owe my life to you and all the medics. I don't think I'd have survived under our own physicians."

Kei coughed. "Er, no. You're still thin. Are you eating properly? No pain? No problems breathing?"

"Not any more. The ribs still ache, of course. It was hard for a few weeks after you left, but Nev and Perik have been very good to me." He turned back to Arman. "Sei...Arman...what about your injuries? Are you really not a general any more?"

"I'm no longer even a Prij. I'm healed, apart from this tiresome leg. I should warn you that because I helped the Darshianese end this war and retrieve their people, I'm considered a traitor by Her Serenity and the Lord Commander, to name but two."

“Oh.” Vikis looked away for a moment, and Arman’s heart sank. He had thought not to encounter this attitude again. “Then I’m a traitor too, because I’m glad the war’s over, and I’m glad the Darshianese are coming home.”

“Really?” Kei asked.

“Yes. I’ve....” He looked over at the captains. “I’ve been treated with honour and kindness. I know we wouldn’t have done the same for a wounded prisoner, let alone all you saved, Kei.”

*No, we would have killed them or tortured them for information,* Arman thought, ashamed all over again for his role in the oppression of Kei’s people. His lover answered Vikis. “Your fellows were happy to condemn Arman as a traitor, Vikis, for all that they were treated just as kindly.”

“Then they’re blind fools,” he said firmly. “But then I’ve had longer to think, I suppose. Being the only prisoner here...well, not much of a prisoner, am I?”

Captain Jevik smiled. “Not really. We could have had you chained up all the time, if you’d preferred.”

“No, I think I like it the way it is,” Vikis said with a grin. “So when do we leave?”

“First light. You can say your farewells tonight.”

“Yes.” Vikis seemed genuinely regretful – it seemed here was another convert to the Darshianese who had made real friends among a supposed enemy. He stood. “Then I’d better pack and get ready. I’ll find you later?”

“Yes, certainly.”

He went out, and Arman looked at Captain Jevik. “Though I’m no longer a general, or a Prij, I thank you for your kindness. He’s a good man, a decent one. His wife needs him home.”

“He’s behaved with perfect decorum, Arman. We’ve tried to respect his loyalties, and he’s respected ours. More than a few men’ll miss him, I think. What will become of him, if the war is over? You won’t need so many soldiers, will you?”

“The *Prij*,” Arman said with heavy emphasis, “will probably turn off a good many soldiers, I expect. I don’t know, is the answer.”

“Unfortunate,” the captain said, grimacing. “Still, it’s not Darshian’s problem. So Lord Meki wants to deploy all of us southwards, eh?”

They spent a little time talking military matters, while Kei excused himself and went to find their lunch. The two captains and Arman joined him in the canteen, along with what seemed like every other soldier in the fort. Kei was greeted by many of them, while Arman received more curious glances, which

turned to smiles once Kei explained why he was back there. Everyone was delighted the war was over, and that they would eventually be going home.

Although the atmosphere was so cheerful, after not very long at all, Kei excused himself once again. “Too much,” he whispered. “I’m going down to the creek behind the fort. Come for me when you’re done.”

Arman gave his hand a quick squeeze and Kei walked off. Arman found Jevik and Rem, the other captain, looking at him curiously. “Ah, you and Kei...?”

“Er...yes. But only recently,” he added hastily, in case they thought Kei had been molested while still a hostage.

“Then congratulations,” Rem said calmly. “He’s a good lad, that one.”

“The best, in fact.” Arman tried to imagine having a male lover so calmly accepted in Prijian barracks, and failed. At the very least, he’d be subjected to endless gossip and harassment, however muted, until he’d left the army altogether. These two officers hadn’t even blinked.

There wasn’t much more to be said, and anything else Arman could add was simply details of what had happened in Utuk, not of what Lord Meki wanted. Arman had simply not been involved in those arrangements and hadn’t wanted to be. Kei’s reaction to the discussions had confirmed he’d been right to reject any future military role. His lover still found it hard to tolerate such matters, and Arman wasn’t needed that badly – or at all.

He hadn’t spent much time at the fort exploring it and had to ask for instructions to find Kei, but did so readily. Behind the fort was really quite lovely, looking up at the range, but with forests cladding the lower hills, and a pretty wood closer at hand. There was a swift-flowing stream running along the back of the fort, the source of its water supply and no doubt being fed now by snow melting off the mountains – when they’d been lifted over it, Arman had seen that the very highest peaks were still white, for all it had become so much warmer in Kuprij. That journey across them with Kei...he still had nightmares about it.

Kei was talking to Vikis, sitting on the bank. Arman limped over, cursing the pain in his backside and legs. He’d stiffened up even over lunch and now wished he’d let Kei massage him while they’d been on the trail. He could hardly ask for it now.

Kei exclaimed at the sight of him and rushed over to lend him a hand. “I’m all right, stop mothering me. I just need to regain my riding muscles again.”

Kei lowered him to a comfortable tussock. “I’ve just been telling Vikis a bit more about Kesa and the arrangements for getting you home.”

Vikis nodded. "And I was telling him that I'm grateful for all you're doing, all you've done for her."

"How did you meet her?" Arman asked. "She's not from Utuk."

"No, but neither am I. She's from my village, and when her parents came to Utuk two years ago, I was someone they asked to help them settle in. I got to know Kesa then. I thought she was the prettiest girl I'd ever seen. I left our village when she was only a child. She's grown a bit," he said with a smile. "But we wanted this baby so much...."

"Let her mourn your daughter. There'll be time for another child, when you're both ready," Kei said kindly. "So you came to Utuk to be a soldier?"

"No, I came to work with my uncle, who was a wainwright, as is my father. I worked for him for three years, but then Uncle died and the business was in debt so it was closed. I had no choice but to go into the army."

Arman's interest was immediately pricked. "So you're a wainwright by trade?"

"Yes, Sei...Arman. I'm sorry, it seems wrong not to call you that," he said with a little shrug of apology.

"You'll get used to it, not that it'll matter once you get back. I dare say people won't be keen to discuss me."

"Maybe when we've had peace for some years...." Arman just raised an eyebrow and Vikis shook his head. "No, perhaps not. But it was still a good thing to do."

"Arman thought none of his soldiers would ever understand," Kei said.

"You don't give us credit, gen...Arman. Not all of us wanted this war, or any war, but who ever asks our opinion? We just do what we're told, but I'd have been happier being with my Kesa and mending wagons. That's all I wanted to do when I came into the army, but for some reason, my sergeant thought I had some talent and pushed me on, and then I got my commission five years ago. But I'd still rather be working with my hands than fighting."

Arman was ashamed that he'd known so little about one of his officers, even one as low-ranking as Vikis. "You don't have to stay in the army. When you return to Utuk, you can apply to my father, and a lady who's a family friend. They might be able to offer you a position."

"No offence, S...Arman, but I'd rather be in the army than a manservant."

"As you wish. The offer stands. Perhaps for Kesa, if not yourself. The lady I've in mind is unfailingly kind and would treat her well."

"Then I'll bear that in mind for her, because a kind mistress might be what she needs. She was very close to her mother. We didn't expect her to die. The physicians seemed so hopeful."

Kei shot Arman a glance at that, and Arman knew why. Still, there was no point in hindsight. "Well, at least see what my father can offer you. Wainwrights are much needed, it seems a shame to waste your skills."

"Not so much on Kuprij, and if Darshian is to be closed to us...." Vikis shrugged. "But I can't complain. By rights, I should be dead, yes, Kei?"

"You did the hard work yourself, Vikis. A healer can only work if the patient will too and you fought that infection hard."

"Not going to argue with you, I know the truth of the matter, and who really saved me." He got to his feet. "I won't be in any hurry to take Kesa away from her new friends. If this baby needs her and she wishes to be with them, I can wait. The army's done without me for months, it can live without me a little longer."

"Indeed," Arman agreed. Vikis saluted casually and walked off. Arman wondered how he would fit back in with the rigid Prij army environment after all this time with the informal Darshianese. Arman knew perfectly well that he himself would have found it nigh impossible.

Kei plucked a long grass stalk and began to twiddle it between his fingers. "We need more friends like him. More Prij who aren't bastards," he clarified with a smile.

"That may be so, but before he leaves, I plan to warn him to conceal his friendliness for us, for his own sake. The Prij were never that well-disposed to the Darshianese, especially on Utuk, and if he remains in the army, such a conciliatory attitude will only bring him grief. It could even get him killed."

Kei's eyes widened in horror. "Surely not."

"Afraid so. Men get attacked in the night, in alleys – who's to say if it was a criminal or one of his own? He'll need to be very careful, Kei."

"It's obscene."

"Oh, yes? What about the attitude of some of your own people? Are you saying no Darshianese would ever be angry at their own kind being friendly with the Prij? I thought you had personal experience of that."

"Yes, but to kill...." Kei's expression became sad again. Arman laid a hand on his shoulder. "We'll never have peace. It'll always be armed hostility. I've been a fool to think otherwise."

"Give it a few years, like he said. You and I, we've done all we can. Now it's up to everyone else. I'm tired, Kei. I want to not think of matters of war and government for a long while."

"Really?" For some reason, that cheered Kei up considerably. "So going back to Ai-Albon isn't second best?"

Arman leaned over and kissed his cheek, carefully keeping his nasty whiskers away from Kei's smooth skin. "Not in the least."

"Good. I hoped it wasn't." He threw the grass stalk away and touched Arman's hand. "I'm glad to see Vikis so well. It's the real reward of any healer, to have a patient be so ill and yet make such a full recovery. He came so close to dying, but we were all determined he wasn't going to."

"And you've surely saved two lives, for the gods only know how Kesa would have dealt with his death."

"No kindness is ever wasted, Arman. Just as yours to me was not."

"No, indeed it wasn't, though at the time it was less kindness to you than anger at my vicious wife and her thuggish servants."

Kei turned to him. "It was more than that. Anger would have done for some of it. Not all. That you found that within you, with all your pain.... You asked about my memories of this time. That will be one I'll cherish."

Arman regarded Kei in blank astonishment. "That was an appalling time for you! No one should have to endure that – even now, I wish I'd done something more to Mykis than just turn him off. He deserved to suffer worse."

"And so he will, in the spirit world. He will have to serve his time in one of the hells for his crimes, unless he learns remorse in this life."

"How can you be so calm about that, Kei? I saw you, you were terrified out of your wits, had been for weeks.... And now you just want to leave it to your gods to punish him?"

Kei shook his head with a smile. "Don't get me wrong, Arman. If I was cooking for him, something really unpleasant would end up in his food, trust me. But nothing I can do, or you, could punish him for the darkness in his soul. His cruelty is just a reflection of that. Mykis will get his – I wouldn't be surprised if he returns as an oroj cricket in the next life. Or a flea on the arse of an urs beast," he said with such satisfaction that Arman could only chuckle. At least Kei wasn't too saintly to take relish in a little vindictive speculation. "And look at it this way – had he not behaved thus, you would still hate us, I would still be a hostage, the war would go on, more people would be dead. So the little pimple's worst punishment is that he brought happiness where he only sought to cause pain. That's the best revenge, don't you think?"

Kei's bright smile was welcome. "Yes, it is. Healer, would you be able to work a little magic on my arse, do you think?"

"What, here? My, you've lost *all* your inhibitions, haven't you?"

"Brat, I meant the tinsel leaf cream."

"You're no fun, Arman." But he stood up anyway. "Come on, we can use the infirmary and then you can do some exercises with me – it'll help loosen things up." He grinned. "And then we can have sex," he added brightly.

"You would, you really would. Reji really should have warned me about you before I ever took up with you."

"Too late, lover. You're stuck with me now."

"Sadly, this is true." *What a delightful fate*, Arman thought, as Kei pulled him to his feet.



They set off at dawn, Arman trying not to groan as underused muscles complained about being back in the saddle. Several hours later, they got a message from Neka to say that Reji's caravan had crossed Kurlik Pass and were on their way. Arman, Kei and Vikis had to ride cross-country to meet up with them, and it wasn't the easiest ride. Arman was thankful the Darshianese had such excellent maps as they navigated the route. It would have been too easy to have got lost in the alien, deceptively changeable landscape, apparently so flat and featureless, but offering frequent traps for the unwary.

They pushed their beasts as hard as they dared, wanting to get to the meeting place before nightfall. If they were late, it would delay the caravan, and if Reji was forced to come looking for them, it would delay things even more. Vikis was clearly anxious to get back to his wife, and Kei to see the other former hostages again. He had few enough days left with the friends from Ai-Rutej and wanted to spend as much time with them as he could. Arman had Kei and was thus content to be moving or still, wherever he was. His life was so amazingly uncomplicated now.

Sunset was just coming to an end as Arman spotted the cooking fires of the camp. Soon they heard shouts of welcome, and then, charmingly, Reji sent a few little fireballs along their path to light it. Kei jumped off his beast and walked in front of it, leading Arman and Vikis along the darkening trail, letting Reji's fire sprites lead them into the camp. "Ho, you made it," Reji called out cheerfully.

"Vikis! Vikis!" A small figure blazed out of the camp and towards the beasts. Vikis dismounted quickly and swept his wife into his arms, where she



clung to him sobbing and laughing, his face buried in her hair. Arman and Kei withdrew discreetly to let them have some privacy.

Reji took the reins of their beasts and led them over to where the others in the wagon caravan were hitched. "We've set aside a tent for them so they can be alone," he told them quietly, nodding at Vikis and Kesa. "But it makes your heart glad to see that, doesn't it?"

"Oh yes," Kei said, a little sadly. Then he brightened. "So where's my supper, Rei-ki? I'm starving!"

"Hey, I'm supposed to say that, you jombeker," Reji joked back, clapping his shoulder. "Arman, you're walking like a tuktuk, what in hells is wrong with you?"

"Shut up," Arman muttered as he hobbled along. This was so humiliating. He hadn't felt like this since he'd learned to ride at the age of seven.

"He just needs to get travel hardened," Kei said.

"Oh, I thought it was just you'd been having overenthusiastic sex. My mistake," Reji said, and then ducked Kei's outraged curse and cuffing hand.

"Yes, do slap him for me," Arman said irritably. People were calling to them from around the fires, and Jena grinned at them. She was holding the baby, and feeding it from a bottle, Arman noted. Kei had said they were going to introduce a little of the jombeker milk to Karik's diet after all, to see if he could tolerate it. They must have picked up the bottle in Urshek.

Arman's nascent exhibitionism certainly wasn't up to making love surrounded by fifty other people, and since he and Kei were only sheltered by the underside of the wagon, it was too cold for them to want to do much that night but hold each other tight, wrapped in layers of blankets. It wasn't the most restful night, nor was the next, but Gonji had promised they would be billeted in his village or he would insist on knowing why.



Kei grew quiet that final day as they rode towards Ai-Rutej. Some of it was sadness about Jena, Arman guessed. But Ai-Rutej had upset Kei badly the first time he'd travelled through it, and even though circumstances were now different, Arman suspected he was still fearful of the same hostility. Some hate was inevitable, Arman knew that. On that account, the hostages from Ai-Vinri were going to ride straight on from Ai-Rutej, since it was thought politic not to test the patience of the bereaved village. Reji thought their supply situation would hold up well without its help. It would still leave thirty former hostages to travel without break from Ai-Rutej to Ai-Darbin, a journey of ten or

so days. Arman had his own reasons for apprehension about returning to Ai-Darbin, of course, but he would never shy away from it.

They reached Ai-Rutej in the late afternoon, and the pure joy at the return of their people meant any awkwardness over the presence of four Prij was glossed over. They were mostly ignored in the flurry of welcomes, and the Darshianese hostages were all swept away to be fed and billeted. Arman and Kei kept out of the way of the reuniting clan, helping Reji and Vikis settle the beasts and stow the wagons, while Kesa watched, minding Karik for Jena who had gone to find her lover. No one paid them a bit of attention for over an hour, but then Gonji came to find them and tell them to shift themselves, because a house was being provided for them all to share that night. "I'll have to be with Pa and Ma this evening, but I'll be here to help you stock tomorrow," he said. "Don't go sneaking off," he added.

"Wouldn't dream of it," Reji said.

It seemed that the village was dealing with their foreign guests by not dealing with them. The house was laid out for them, with food in the larder, beds prepared and a cradle for Karik in which Kesa laid him down to sleep, but no one came to talk or to issue invitations to come eat with them. It didn't surprise Arman, while Kei just seemed rather relieved. Kesa and Vikis were still wrapped up in each other, but Arman had to wonder if they would be transported back to Urshek as Lord Meki had requested in letters given to Gonji for his father, or whether they would have to be collected by the soldiers. He found he was a little worried for the safety of his former officer, and sternly told himself that the Darshianese would not harm these two. They had already had hospitality extended to them. That meant, whatever the clan's opinion, Vikis and Kesa would be protected.

Kei courteously offered Kesa and Vikis the first use of the bathing facilities. Reji found a little barrel of beer that had been left for them and broached it with glee, pouring mugs for Kei and Arman and then one for himself, taking a mighty pull on it. "Ah, that's good," he said with a deep sigh of satisfaction.

"Not as good as Myka's," Kei added loyally.

"Well, no, but we can't...."

The front door slammed open and the three men jumped. "Jena?" Kei said, standing, and then catching her as she ran to his arms, sobbing. "What's the matter?"

She couldn't seem to speak. Reji came over and put his hand on her shoulder, and Kei transferred her to him, clearly finding her distress too painful to easily bear. Arman limped to Kei's side. "What?" he whispered.

"No idea. Jena, sit down, would you? Reji, take this one."

Reji pulled Jena down onto the long seat. "Tell us," he said gently, taking her hand.

"I...I...." She burst into fresh tears.

"Is it Aldik?" Kei asked. "About Karik?"

She shook her head. "Mara," she whispered. "He...and her...."

"Oh, Jena," Reji said, pulling her back into an embrace. Kei gave Arman a grim look. It wasn't surprising such things might happen, Arman thought. Jena had been gone from her home for more than six months, and men could be fickle things when it came to love. But to return to this....

"And...and before that...I told Gyek...about Karik...." Her voice was coming out in great sobs, barely intelligible.

"He objected?"

"Not...him...some others.... Aldik too. Said...we should send him back to Kuprij. I *won't*," she said fiercely. "No one wants him there."

"No, they don't," Kei murmured, stroking her hair. "Jena, have a drink and calm down. We'll sort this out." He handed her his own untouched beer and she sipped it, only to break down in tears again.

"Kei, um...why don't you and Arman go for a walk or something?" Reji said. "Or go upstairs?"

'You sure?' Kei mouthed, frowned across Jena's head at his friend.

Reji nodded, and then looked down at Jena, who had her face buried in his shirt, her shoulders heaving. "Give me a few minutes."

"Kei, come up and give me that massage you promised me," Arman ordered, tugging at his arm.

Kei still seemed unsure but followed Arman's lead anyway, helping him climb the narrow stairs. "Poor Jena. Aldik's a *bastard*," he spat as he closed the door behind them. "And that Mara, she must be behind this Karik thing – she really hates the Prij."

"She probably has good reason."

"She damn well doesn't – she's never even met one before. It's all by reputation, she's from Darshek. And to take out that spite on a helpless child.... It shames me to be in the same profession," Kei said angrily, beginning to pace.

Arman caught him and dragged him to sit on the bed. "Calm down. What's going on with Reji and Jena?"

"Oh. I don't know if that's a good thing or not. He's pretty taken with her, you know. But if she's just lost Aldik and he's given me up...." Kei looked at

Arman with worried eyes. "Can they have a chance with such a sad beginning?"

"We did," Arman said gently. "Reji has a kind heart. He won't toy with her."

"But he's leaving," he said distractedly. "And she has to stay here with that *man*. Oh, I could kick his arse! It was only a few months, could he not be faithful for that long?"

"Obviously not. It's done, Kei. Even if he abandoned Mara, Jena wouldn't have him back, I imagine. It's a common enough situation, as I know."

"I'm sorry, I was forgetting Mayl."

"Well, I never loved her, so it isn't the same. You surely don't think Reji will just take advantage of the situation? He's not the sort, I know he's not."

"No! I'm just worried they'll get hurt, that's all. Reji...." Kei drew in a breath. "I didn't realise Reji felt that way.... I broke his heart, Arman. I didn't mean to. In a way, I'm no better than Aldik."

Arman kissed his forehead, and regretted the sorrow in Kei's eyes. "The situations are quite different, Kei. Reji didn't know himself how strongly he felt until you left, and you didn't play him false, make promises only to break them, nor any vow. You still love him and you still show how much you care for him. There would have been pain whichever way you had chosen – for him or for me." He stroked his hand down Kei's face and cupped his cheek. "This is something you need to let them handle. They're both adults, both experienced."

"But what if he decides to leave our village for her?"

"Then he does." He put his arm around Kei, feeling him trembling slightly. "He has to find his joy, Kei. Same as I did. It might mean sacrifices, and not just for him. Be brave and let him go, if he has to."

Kei wiped his eyes. "I'm being rather selfish, being worried about losing him when I can't offer him anything, and Jena could be helped by him."

"You can't help your feelings, Kei. Just what you do with them. I would put my faith in Reji, personally. And in Jena."

"I'm probably getting ahead of myself," he muttered. "But I still want to kick Aldik's arse. How long has he been with Mara? Were they together when I came through here? If so, he's a hypocrite, I...."

"Kei," Arman said, covering his mouth. "Calm down. There's nothing to be done here but help Jena, and kicking her former lover in the arse won't do any good. I'm more worried about the situation with Karik. Maybe I should take him with me. After all, he's really my responsibility, blood relative or not. Jena doesn't need her life ruined because of him – he's not her son."

Kei wiped his eyes again. "She's become fond of him anyway. To offer an infertile woman the chance to be a mother is a wonderful thing, Arman, and she accepted the risks to take that. At least I could try and talk some sense into this wretched clan. Gonji will support me, I know that, and the others."

"Maybe." Arman thought that Jena was facing a battle that might be too much for her, and certainly not one which would give her happiness in the long term. "You were going to give me a massage," he murmured.

Kei looked at him. "I thought that was an excuse to get me out of there."

"It was. But my leg still hurts," he said, shamelessly appealing to Kei's nurturing instincts to distract him.

"Oh. Of course."

Arman watched Kei rummage in his medical kit for his tinsel liniment. This was a development he hadn't expected. He hadn't realised Kei had known the depth of Reji's feelings either, and wondered when he'd found out. Just when he'd thought his life was getting simpler, he thought, sighing.

Kei massaged his leg in silence, and then let Arman hold him, kissing him gently, for a while after that. He could wish his lover didn't have such a soft heart, but then he wouldn't be Kei, and that would be a great pity.

"Do you think we dare go down? Kesa and Vikis will be wondering where to put themselves," Kei said eventually.

"Yes. We can always run away again if they're not done."

Kei helped him down the stairs where they found the front room was quiet once more. Kesa was sitting with Vikis, and Jena was next to Reji, looking red-eyed but calm. Reji had a hand on her arm. "Kei, I have a question for you," Jena asked, looking a little hesitant.

"Ask away."

"Do you think your village can cope with three healers?"

Kei stared at her, then looked at Reji and Arman in astonishment. "You want to come...to Ai-Albon?"

"Reji suggested it. I don't want to tread on your toes...but with Arman there, and you...surely Karik would be safe?"

"Of course he would be, and nothing would make me happier...but Jena, are you sure? This is your home."

"As our farm had been before that, Kei. They have a healer and a mindspeaker, they don't need me. And I don't know if I can bear to stay...I think I would miss you more, actually."

Kei went to kneel in front of her. "You have no idea how much joy that would give me. Not just for me but because I know Myka will love you and we can both learn so much from you...." He turned to Reji. "But...?"

"She'll be under my protection, as will the boy," Reji said, his expression solemn. "Any more than that...we can take slowly." Jena gave him a smile for that, and he put a friendly arm around her shoulders.

Kei took Reji's hand and placed his own on Jena's knee. "If it's what you want, and you're sure, then please, come to my home. Reji's an honourable man. He's not like Aldik. For a start, he's got better taste."

For some reason, that made all three of them grin. Arman wondered what was so funny. Vikis was whispering into Kesa's ear, no doubt explaining things, and then he cleared his throat. "Sei...Arman, I mean...what will happen to us?"

"You'll go home as planned, Vikis. Jena, they didn't say anything about not doing that, did they?"

"No, they weren't mentioned. They'd probably be glad to get rid of you, even if they have to shove you both on urs beasts," she said bitterly. "If they try that, I'll curse them even more than I do now."

Kesa didn't know how to ride at all, let alone a beast, and Arman sincerely hoped they wouldn't be so unkind as to suggest it. But Vikis was still looking enquiringly at him. "Actually...Arman, Kesa and I have been talking.... I know it's a lot to ask, considering the war and everything... but could Darshian use another wainwright?"

Arman stared at his lieutenant in frank astonishment, as did everyone else. "You want to stay?"

"Yes, we do. Kesa says she likes you all very much and I...I don't know if I can go back to Utuk and pretend I hate the Darshianese. There's nothing but the army there for me, and I've lost my taste for it. I can't be a wainwright in Utuk, there's more than enough in the trade, and neither of us want to go back to our village.... I'd understand if you say no, but I wanted to ask."

Reji looked at Arman. "It would need Lord Meki's permission. But where would you live, Vikis?"

"In Darshek? Anywhere that would have us. We don't want much. We don't want to lose another child either." He pulled Kesa close. "Perhaps it's just a stupid dream...but I find it hard to imagine going back."

"Kesa, what of your brother if you stay?" Arman asked her in Prijian. "And you don't speak the language – won't you find that isolating? Think of what you're giving up, girl. I know better than most what it means."

“Sei...Arman...my brother is engaged, and will want to bring his wife to our home. He’s only delayed because of Mother, and then Vikis. But if he could have done so, he would have married before now. I’m learning some Darshianese, and I’d work hard. I know something of pottery, I could be useful,” she said earnestly. “Please, can we stay?”

“It’s not up to me, child, though for my part, you’d be welcome, of course.” He turned to Kei. “Perhaps if they travel up to Ai-Albon, and then on to Darshek. Once there, they can decide what they want to do. Lord Meki would help them if they want to stay. You do need wainwrights.”

“Vikis is a good one too,” Reji said firmly. “Even Ai-Albon could do with you – we don’t have a wainwright of our own, we have to use the one in Ai-Tuek, and a pain in the arse that is too.”

Kei shook his head. “It’s going to look like a home for lost Prij up north. Yes, come, Vikis, and be welcome. Fedor is going to have a fit,” he added wryly.

Vikis translated for his wife and Kesa smiled. “Thank you, Kei,” she said in Darshianese.

“You’re welcome,” Kei said, repeating it in Prijian. Then he pointed at Arman accusingly. “You, this is all your damn fault!”

“Well, perhaps to begin with. But you should stop being nice to stray Prij if you don’t want us following you home.”

Which made Kei smile, and Jena laugh. It *was* Arman’s fault, he knew perfectly well. Somehow, he found it hard to feel very guilty over the fact.



Jena waited until the Ai-Vinri people had left the village, before making her announcement. It had the same effect as dropping a dead hisk into a thurl’s nest, and the resulting shouting match gave Kei a worse headache than the concussion had. Vikis wisely got Kesa away and back into the house, but Reji and Arman stood their ground, waiting for Gyek and the elders to finish their accusations that Kei was poaching their healer, that they’d turned her against her clan, that he was trying to infiltrate Prij into their village by stealth. Angry at the shabby way Jena had been treated, Kei was happy to bellow back at them, especially Aldik, who wasn’t accepting responsibility for any of it.

Then Arman and Reji got into the act, and Jena, and Gonji and what seemed like half the village. The only thing to be said for it was that no one threw a punch, but after an hour of this, Kei had had a gutful. “Right, I’m not

listening to this urs shit any more,” he announced loudly. “Arman, I’m going for a walk.”

“Me too,” Jena said, glaring at her clan head and her former lover with equal disgust.

“Then I am too. See you, gentlemen,” Reji said cheerfully.

They left the square and ignored the angry looks of the clan as they walked down the street. Kei had to grip Arman’s arm to balance himself, and his skull was pounding furiously, to the point where the road in front of him danced up and down. The moment they were out of the line of sight of the square, Jena pulled him aside and placed her hands on Kei’s forehead. “Just relax,” she said quietly.

Kei felt the headache melt away. “Oh, thank you,” he said, kissing her cheek, feeling almost light-headed with relief. “Can we get out of here now, please?”

“Come on, there’s a nice walk if we head that way.”

Reji took her arm, Arman took Kei’s and they walked about half a mile from the village where there was a small sandstone outcrop, and bushes growing where the rain collected from runoff. “Blessed gods,” she said, sighing. “I’m so sorry, Kei. None of that was deserved. Anyone would think they damn well owned me.”

“Perhaps they’re just very fond of you?” Kei said, not entirely convinced himself.

Neither was Jena, who shot him a dirty look. “Oh yes, they’re very affectionate. People change villages all the time, I don’t know why they’re making such a big thing of it. It’s not like they haven’t got such a wonderful bargain in pretty little Mara, her big eyes and her fertile body.”

“Fertile?” Arman said. “Why do you...oh.” He touched her hand. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t care. If Aldik wants to be a father again at forty-five, good luck to him. His wife was such a nice woman too, and his children are lovely as well. I think he’s lost his mind, but it’s none of my affair.” But she gave a little sob, and Reji pulled her into his arms. “I’m sorry,” she said in a muffled voice. “I’m trying not to care, but it hurts.”

“Of course it does,” Reji said gently, rocking her a little.

“I take it you haven’t changed your mind about leaving,” Kei asked.

“I wish I could go *now*,” she said, pulling out her handkerchief and blowing her nose. “I feel like I never knew these people at all.”

“It’s the war,” Arman murmured. “It’s changed people, altered relationships forever. I’m truly sorry, Jena. This is my fault as much as anyone’s.”



"Yes, it is," she said. But then she gave him a watery smile. "But I forgive you."

He bowed his head. "Thank you. I'll try to make it up to you, I swear."

"Don't think I won't hold you to that, general. I need to pack, not that I'll take that much...we have room in the wagons, don't we? I know you weren't planning on me, but we've not packed things that tightly...."

Reji hugged her again. "You leave that to me, it's my job to worry about, not yours. You look after your son."

"Son...oh.... I was going to have adoption papers drawn up here, but damned if I want Gyek's permission for this," she said. "Kei, will Fedor...?"

"Of course he will." She nodded, and then more tears fell. "Darling Jena, don't cry," Kei said, taking her hand. "We'll make the finest home you could want for you and Karik, if we have to build it for scratch. If anyone gives you a moment's grief, I'll personally stitch their lips together."

That made her chuckle a little. "Not very ethical, Kei."

"I'll do it in the night, so they won't know which one of us to blame."

"That's my Kei, a sneaky little bastard," Jena said. She heaved a great sigh. "All this hate is very tiring, isn't it?"

"Very. You realise most of this is guilt," Arman said. "Guilt at losing you in the first place, over Aldik, over what they said last night...it will probably change over time. Gonji and the others will argue your case, if you did want to stay."

She glared at him. "No! You don't get to keep Kei all to yourself, you greedy bastard."

"What am I, a sweet cake?" Kei asked, stroking her face and wiping away a stray tear.

"Hmmm, very sweet. But with a hell of a bite," Reji said, which made her grin and Arman arch an eyebrow at him. "Shall we go back? I need to help you pack and there's the stores to get in. Kei, you'll help?"

"We all will," Arman said, but two pairs of healer's eyes looked at him in disapproval. "What? I'm walking fine."

"Yes, and I can just see you lifting a sack wrong and twisting that leg."

"I'm not made of pastry, Kei."

"You can see to Vikis and Kesa," Jena said. "And if you would mind Karik for me...or does that pain you?"

"I'll survive," Arman murmured dryly. "But we'd best be going. I wish we were leaving today."

“So do I,” Reji agreed, “But we’d gain nothing, and we’d already planned not to make this too arduous for the passengers. Wagon travel’s not very pleasant if you’re not used to it.”

“You don’t say.” Kei patted Arman’s leg in sympathy at that remark. “But we should get moving. If that lot erupts again, I don’t promise to retain my temper.”

“You mean that was you being restrained?” Reji asked in some amazement.

“Oh, yes,” Kei said fondly. “You don’t want to get him really mad. Then he gets mean.” Arman saluted him ironically for that. “But I say it with love, of course.”

“Of course. You’re such a brat,” he replied, getting to his feet. Kei was still rather concerned about him – the limp was better but still there.

“You tell me that a least a dozen times a day.”

“That’s because you are, Keichichi,” Reji said, pulling Jena to her feet.

“Yes, he is,” she agreed.

Kei pouted at her. “You mean I’m inviting you back to my home just so you and Reji and Arman can pick on me?”

“Yes, of course,” she said cheerfully, then made a run for it as he made to chase her. He let her go and Reji went after her instead. He watched him catch up with her, and take her hand. She rested her head briefly on Reji’s shoulder and then they began to walk back more sedately towards the village. “I’m going to have to go into hiding when I get home. Once Myka gets through scolding me for not coming back when I promised, in about a *year*, I’ll have all of you after me.”

“Poor Kei,” Arman said with a complete lack of sympathy, putting his arm around Kei’s waist. “Something I’ve been meaning to ask you – why does Reji call you ‘Keichichi’? No one else does.”

He showed nothing of it in his voice, but Kei could feel the slight jealousy. “It’s a childish name – Myka uses it, just as I call her Mychichi. Reji uses it because he’s my big brother, not because we were lovers, so stop frowning, Arman.”

“I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.” Kei kissed the proof of it. “I only let him and Myka and Banji and Mis call me that, so don’t you start.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. So,” Arman asked as they started to walk back to the village, “what would you have called me as a child?”

“Um. That’s hard to say. Your name’s not very Darshianese.”

“Should I change it?”

Kei made him stop. “No, Arman. You can go too far, you know. It’s not like it’s a hard name to say, not like the Andonese ones.” He kissed Arman’s cheek again – carefully smoothed that very morning as requested. “We won’t forget where you were born, you know. But you can make people not care. That’s all you need.”

“Hmmm.”

Kei sighed. Arman needed to get over this self-consciousness, but it was hard when one saw the kind of irrationality on display that morning. If Vikis did mean to stay in Ai-Albon – and Reji was becoming more and more enthusiastic about the idea – that would help, as would Jena’s presence.

He would be glad to get home, he thought and then realised with some surprise how much he’d been dreading it up until Jena had made her decision. Now it was something he was eager to do, he was eager to settle her in, and get Arman established in a useful role. And Reji would have someone of his own too, so Kei didn’t even have to feel too guilty over him, although he told himself that was certainly not the reason he wanted his two friends to form a relationship. It was as if, after his parents’ death had shattered his family, he was re-mending it, reweaving it with new, bright threads.

“Well, you look cheerful all of a sudden,” Arman said.

“I feel it. I really love you, you know that?”

“For any particular reason just now?”

“Not really.” He kissed Arman again. “I just want to go home.”

“So do I. Come on, we’re wasting the day.”



Jena didn’t have a lot of belongings, but it still took time for her to decide what to take and what to leave, and to have the more fragile and precious things stowed. Arman brought Vikis and Kesa over, as they’d insisted on helping, but he was relegated to a chair, much to his disgust, and made to hold Karik while the others worked.

That was until Jena began to get a series of visitors trying to change her mind, and after two yelling matches which left Kesa looking terrified and Karik screaming his tiny lungs out, Arman and Vikis suddenly became guards, sitting outside the front door. The irony wasn’t lost on anyone, least of all Jena. “You realise this will just make people angrier, two Prij guarding a former hostage, and both of them involved in the hostage taking?”

“At least you can count on them not losing their temper the way Reji and I would,” Kei said, hefting yet another set of books – the woman seemed to have as many as Kei’s father had had – “and if they do, they know which bones to break.”

“You have an unsuspected sadistic streak, Kei,” Reji said, cocking his head. “Did I have a lucky escape?”

“Maybe from the stove into the boiling water,” he said, looking at Jena as he grinned. “I keep trying to tell myself they’re not bad people, they’re not, but it’s hard.”

Jena rubbed some dust from her nose. “They’re not, really. But I don’t belong here any more.”

That worried Kei, that statement. Not for his own sake, but because he had to wonder how the other hostages in the other villages were going to find it. Over the camp fires on the trail, there’d been a lot of homesickness, but under that, a lot of apprehension too. Many had formed friendships, even romances, and there would be more than one family who would have a son or daughter announce they were moving to another village. Three families would have daughters bearing children of an enemy – and at least one of those had struck up a relationship with a man from the other end of Darshian, so they would be dealt a double blow if he claimed her. The north would be years healing from the scars of these changes, and that was before the changes in the hostages themselves were taken into account. Look at Jena, he thought. She was far more volatile, more easily upset, more in need of comfort than she had been when Kei first met her – and she’d been one of the luckiest ones in that her master had been the kindest person possible.

At least Ai-Albon looked like it would be keeping all its souls and gaining a few. Peit and Urki had shyly announced they were pledged just the night before they arrived in Ai-Rutej, so they wouldn’t be leaving. Most of the others had every intention of returning to pledge mates or lovers, although how many would discover the kind of thing that Jena had done, Kei didn’t know. He was beginning to realise that in some ways, he had got off extremely lightly from his experiences.

Once her things were placed in the wagons, Jena announced she would stay with Reji and the others that night. Reji immediately told her she could have his bed so she could look after Karik. “Don’t be stupid, Reji, I can sleep on a bedroll as easily as anyone else, I’ve done it enough.” But Reji wouldn’t hear of it, arguing she needed her rest if she was going to keep getting up with Karik. “Then we can share, I’ve done that before.”

Reji went bright red. Kei poked him in the side. "Taking it slow, huh?"

Reji slapped his hand away. "Shut up or I'll share the bed with you and Arman instead."

Kei just batted his eyelashes at his former lover. "For myself, I don't mind, but Arman has this injured side, and I don't know if he's up to a three-in-a-bed just yet."

Arman, listening to this exchange with a perfectly calm expression, told him to behave. "Stop teasing, you meddling boy. Jena, if Reji shares with you, you'll wake him all night with the child."

"True. All right, Reji, you escape for now."

Kei nearly laughed at Reji's mixture of relief and disappointment. He did think they should take it carefully, though. Jena was still very raw and that, with adjusting to motherhood, would make the situation difficult.

He said as much as he was helping Reji load the stores into the wagons later, when Gonji and Vikis had gone to fetch some more lem flour. "Do you not think I know that, Kei? I wasn't expecting any of this – I'm still reeling, half expecting her to change her mind."

"Did you tell her how you felt?"

Reji rested against the wagon for a moment – they were both pretty tired. "I told her that...I admired her, and would like to get to know her better. More than that, I felt wasn't fair, and possibly not even true. It's all happening a bit fast for a simple boy from the villages," he said wryly.

"That it is. How that bastard could give Jena up for another, I have no idea. If I were free, I'd pursue her myself."

"Yes, that's all you need, Kei, someone else in love with you," Reji said, cuffing his shoulder. "I suppose Aldik got lonely and Mara was there. With the baby on the way, his course is pretty much set now. I can understand loneliness, even if I can't understand him setting Jena aside."

"His loss, your gain. I hope, anyway. You would take on a child, though? You always said you wanted no ties."

Reji looked at him seriously, then hefted a sack up into the back of the wagon. "People change, Kei. Things change them, as they have you. Perhaps the lack of ties didn't seem so attractive once the choice was ripped away from me."

"You're not just reacting to me, I hope. Reji, that's not fair on her."

"Oh, hush, little brother, what do you take me for? If it weren't for you, I might have had her in my bed on the ship – it wouldn't have taken much, she was lonely too. I'd have asked, anyway. It's because I'm still...confused...that I

want to take it slow.” He put his hands on his hips and glared at Kei. “You’re a little young to be giving your elders and betters love advice, aren’t you?”

“I’ll grant you ‘elder’ at least,” Kei said, ducking the swat. “Anyway, some days I feel like I’m seventy, not twenty-one. I’ve seen and done more now than a lot in our village have.”

“Aye, that you have. But don’t fear that, Kei. It’s no bad thing to have different experiences from others.” He hefted another sack. “I know that you crave stability because of losing your parents. That doesn’t mean stability necessarily comes from lack of change.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t be threatened by new challenges, is all I mean. You don’t have to lose out, just because you meet them.”

“You’re being unusually cryptic, Rei-ki.”

“You’re being unusually dense. Never mind, little brother. Where in hells are Gonji and Vikis? We’ve still got a lot to do.”

Reji clearly didn’t want to pursue it, and despite his confusion, Kei let it drop. There was more than enough to worry about without it.

The departure the following morning was surprisingly low-key with only the former hostages turning up to bid tearful farewells to their fellows. Jena cried the whole time, and was quiet and sad for most of that day and the next, riding next to Reji with Karik in her arms, and leaning on Reji much of the time. Kei was glad she was getting some comfort that way.

He and Arman took turns driving the wagons, but they both preferred to ride unhitched beasts when they could. Those who liked to ride were given the chance to as much as possible – no one had to walk this time, and therefore the return was taking less time than when they had been forced away from the villages. At night, there was time and energy to talk, unlike before, and leisure too, to walk around, to escape one’s comrades and have some privacy. Most of them had had almost no privacy at all in the entire time since they’d left their villages. It was one reason Reji and Kei had insisted on tents, and more wagons than were strictly necessary, and rest stops in the villages they passed, to let people adjust back to some semblance of normal life.

One thing that had surprised Kei and Reji was how much the hostages wanted to talk to Arman, once they had got over their reticence. There had been anger, and that was expected. But most of them were just trying to make sense of the whole experience. Why had they been taken, why had the war happened, why did the Prij hate them? In that respect, they were very

fortunate to have Arman and not some other Prij to question, for these were things he and Kei had discussed at length over their long friendship. More than that, Arman was unusually open-minded, and had given these matters some thought even before the war. Vikis also became involved, and his pleasant, honest manner was much appreciated.

Not all the discussions were friendly, or civil. On a couple of nights, things had got very loud and angry, and people had stormed off, other left sitting in tears. Arman hadn't walked away, and he'd sat as long as anyone wanted to talk to him. But when he'd returned to Kei's arms, in the privacy of their tent, he'd wept a little on Kei's shoulder, for his own regrets, and sorrow for what he had been responsible for.

They'd planned to skirt right around Ai-Vinri to avoid any semblance of putting pressure on the village. Therefore it was something of a shock to find people from that village blocking their path, a good two or three miles out of Ai-Vinri. Kei and Arman were outriders that day, flanking Reji's wagon, which as always, was the lead vehicle. "Ho! Welcome, friends," Reji said cheerfully. "May we serve you?"

Two of the beast riders were former hostages, Kei realised. "Hello, Gyu. Did everyone get back safely?"

"Yes, they did, Kei, thank you. Reji, my clan head wanted me to invite the Darshianese among you to the village tonight." He looked at Arman. "The ban remains – but you can camp on the outskirts, and he will permit food and supplies to be brought to you."

"Why?" Arman asked. "Fejsik has no reason to bend his own decree. Not on my account."

"No, he doesn't. But he offers this as acknowledgment of your role in getting us back, and in thanks for ending the war."

Reji spoke up. "Gyu, as you can see we still have Jena and the child with us, and Vikis and Kesa as well. Will supplies be provided for them as well?"

"Why do you...oh, never mind. I'm sure they will. Do you accept the invitation?"

"Kei?" Reji asked, turning to him.

"I think it's a gracious gesture. Thank you, Gyu."

Gyu's grim expression lifted. "I'm sorry we can't have Arman in, but it's for our families as much as anything. People are still very raw, but Fejsik wants the healing to start too, for himself as well as the rest of us."

Arman bowed his head. "He's being more generous than anyone would expect of him. No need to apologise."

"I'll stay with Arman and the others," Kei said. "Reji, I presume you'll come back to the camp?"

"Of course. Gyu, show us where you want the camp and then I'll take the wagons in."

The chosen campsite was pleasant, providing plentiful feed and clean water, and staying there was no hardship to any of them as they'd been planning to camp that night anyway. Reji came back with two beasts, bearing food and tents for all of them. "That was unexpected, to say the least," he said as Kei helped him unload. "That Ai-Rutej should bear such a grudge, and yet this village with its grief...."

"Fejsik is a good, decent man. Myri was a lovely girl, a terrible loss to any father." Kei felt his chest getting tight, remembering her...remembering.... He forced himself to be calm. "But perhaps he doesn't want to offer hate in her spirit's name."

"Still, a generous gesture," Arman said. "I should have done more," he added quietly. "Damn it, I really wish I'd run Mekus through that day."

"And then you would be dead also, as would all of us be, probably," Kei said. "You share responsibility, Arman but it's not yours alone, or even mostly."

"Tell that to the bereaved families," he snapped, limping off.

Reji stared off after Arman. "I never realised.... Kei, are you all right? You look a little upset."

Kei shook his head. "I can't help...." His throat closed up. "Excuse me," he managed to say. "I need to speak to Jena."

He found her at the end of the camp, sitting in the shadows, and like him, she was close to tears. "Hold me, Kei." Which he did for a long time, their privacy respected by the others. This was something Reji couldn't understand. Not even Arman could, not completely. Only with Jena could Kei share his memories, of the others and of that day, and how it felt to be helpless as friends died, right there in front of them.

Arman joined them after an hour or so, bringing over food that neither of them wanted, but ate anyway because it had been a long day and it would be a long one to follow. He didn't say a word, but just took their hands in his, letting them feel his sorrow, and his sympathy. It was the best thing he could have done.

But it still hurt, and probably always would – a permanent scar, marking the hostages as different from their fellows for the rest of their lives. It was a distinction Kei would gladly have foregone.





It was another five days to Ai-Darbin. The return was always going to be emotionally charged for Arman, albeit less so this time, so Kei was quite worried how things would go. But when Seya and the other elders finished welcoming their people and they were handed off to their friends and family, she approached Kei and Arman, and greeted them warmly. "You left in sorrow, and return in joy. Are you well, Arman?"

Arman bowed politely. "Yes, thank you, Seya. I have letters from Lord Meki for you."

"Then come to my house."

His mother and uncle had claimed Reji, and Jena was leading Vikis and Kesa along behind him. Kei shouted to her. "Seya's house! Tell him!"

Jena waved, and then Kei came back to Arman's side. "All yours," he said, smiling at Seya.

They walked down the street, the happy sounds of rejoicing everywhere to be heard. "Quite a change," Kei said.

"Oh yes. Of course we knew you'd rescued them, but it's not the same as actually having everyone back, is it? Come in."

Arman seemed ill at ease, and let Kei make the explanations that Seya wanted. Only when she had read the letters and finished talking to Kei did he speak. "Seya, I'm sorry but I still have to delay returning to carry out the sentence. Kei needs my presence constantly for now. Until he's ready to leave Ai-Albon, I can't in conscience leave him to come here. I fully intend to do so, I just don't know when."

She frowned. "Explain?" Kei did so, as quickly and sparsely as he could, knowing Arman wanted to end this interview. "Ah, then, of course you must delay. No one really expected you to return, so if you do come back, it'll be a pleasant surprise. I see Lord Meki has arranged compensation for the village. That will help a good deal. The soldiers took so much."

Arman cleared his throat. "Speaking of compensation, I spoke to...my friend's mother. The one who died." Kei put his hand on Arman's. "I told her about the memorial. She was very grateful indeed. I thought you would like to know."

"Oh, I'm glad. It was little enough to do, but I felt for that poor woman's loss, I truly did. Would you like to see it?"

"I...uh...."

Kei turned to him. "I think you should," he said gently.

“Now?”

“Why not? Everyone else is tied up with their friends and with settling people down. No one will be watching.”

Arman stood suddenly. “Well, come on,” he said gruffly.

Kei took his hand, and held it tightly as they walked back out of the village to the graveyard, a pretty area with a stand of trees at one end which covered the land with the long shadows created by the late afternoon sun. Like those of most villages, the graveyard was a simple affair, small markers on each grave, the only structure being the stepped shrine in the middle where candles were laid on the night of the ancestors. “Because there was no grave, we decided to put it near the trees,” Seya explained. “You said he was a loving child. The children of our village play here, and it was nice to think of his spirit watching them.”

Arman stopped short. When Kei turned to him, he found tears were running down his lover’s stricken face and he was gulping down his sobs. Kei took him in his arms. “Don’t cry,” he murmured near Arman’s ear. “Be happy that he’s soon to be reborn.”

Seya was watching with deep sympathy in her eyes. “It’s here,” she said quietly. “We just put his name, and ‘beloved’.”

Arman crouched down and touched the marks on the stone. “Beloved,” he whispered. “Loke....” He hid his face in his hands and his shoulders shook in silent sorrow.

Kei kept his distance, to let his lover have his private grief. “You and him?” Seya whispered.

“Yes. I love him very much.”

“Good. He needs that. Kei,” she said in a more normal voice, “I believe Reji’s mother is going to arrange your accommodation. Her house is the one with the green and blue door that we passed, you might remember. I’ll leave you alone now but please call at my house tomorrow, I’d like to speak with you further.”

Kei nodded and she walked off. Arman didn’t seem to have noticed her departure. Kei knelt down beside him. “Does it please you?” he asked, tracing Loke’s name carved into the sandstone.

“Very much. I just miss him, and it never seems to get better, even after all this time.”

“It’s not so very long. You’ll always miss him, I think. And Karus, and everyone else you lose.” He pulled Arman’s head onto his shoulder, and

kissed his hair. "Because you love, Arman. The price is grief. But the reward is the love."

Arman nodded, but didn't speak. He sat like that for a long time, until it was nearly dark, and then Kei insisted they go in. But Arman still wanted to touch the marker stone one more time before they left. "I won't ever forget him."

"No, you won't. That's a very good thing, for when your spirit and his meet again, you will know it, somehow. I believe that in my heart."

Arman blinked at him, tears still bright on his lashes. "Might he be here already?"

"He might. Or he might wait until your next life, so that you can be reborn together. He might be watching you now, glad to know you loved him."

Arman just shook his head again, unable to speak. Kei helped him stand, and put his arm around his waist. "The pain eases, trust me. The sorrow remains, but the pain becomes tolerable."

"Yes," Arman whispered. "Let's go," he said in a louder voice, still rough with tears.

Kei kissed him, and hoped the pain would end sooner rather than later for his lover. Arman had had too much of it already.



Arman was glad when they left Ai-Darbin. Not that they'd encountered any hostility – the bereaved parents of Arman's victim had decided to leave the village altogether and move to a farm some fifteen miles outside it, to help Jik's ailing uncle work his property. The rest of the villagers were currently collectively working the farm Jik and Meri had abandoned, but were hoping to recruit people from elsewhere to live permanently in the village and manage the fields. Seya had even suggested to Kei that he and Arman might consider it, which Kei rejected politely. "My village needs me. But as soon as I've recovered, Arman will be free to return for the six months. That will help a little."

She'd agreed, looking a little disappointed but no more than that. She'd bid them a warm farewell, and said she looked forward to Arman's return. Arman knew she was sincere, and wished he could have been as warm in his response.

No, he'd had nothing to complain about in his treatment, but it was a reminder of pain, and Karus' loss so recently made the older memory of Loke's death even harder to bear. When he returned to carry out his

sentence, he hoped he would be less raw, but for now, he just wanted to get away from it all.

Now they were down to twenty returnees, and people seemed to be settling down a little. The conversations around the camp-fires at night were less fraught, and less of a trial for Arman, and though it was cowardly of him to be grateful to no longer have to explain over and over about the war, he was grateful none the less.

Everyone had finally got into a rhythm on the journey. Reji and Jena were getting along well, and Kesa's spirits seemed to improve every day. Vikis and Reji had struck up a firm friendship, although the trader was so amiable, it was hard to imagine him not being friends with almost everyone he met. Vikis began to talk hopefully of setting up a wainwright's workshop in Kei's village, and Arman thought this might be something in which he himself could usefully occupy himself. He needed a trade other than killing, since he doubted that was much in demand in Ai-Albon.

The stop at Ai-Tuek passed without incident other than Karik developing a short-lived fever, and Arman having the duty of explaining the terms of compensation to a clan head who was furious over the treatment of two of his clan's women. Not personally angry with Arman, it had to be said, but angry nonetheless. Arman sympathised with him, and offered his apologies for his involvement in the war. Rather to his surprise, the man seemed to appreciate that.

Arman never knew what to expect from these people any more. The reactions to him across Darshian had varied enormously, and despite the occasional, rare mean-spiritedness, he was constantly being taken aback by the generosity of the Darshianese over the whole business. How much of it was Kei's very obvious claiming of him as his lover, how much due to Arman's remorse, and how much because of the essentially peaceful, rational nature of the race, he had no idea, and nor did Kei. Kei was in fact as surprised as Arman at much of it, but then this was all new to him too.

Then there were only the ten people from Ai-Albon to return to their homes, and the Prij who sought acceptance with them. To say Kei was getting nervous was a complete understatement, and the normally polite and kind healer was becoming someone they all approached with caution, lest he bite their heads off. Arman was worried – Reji wasn't. "He was just the same when he was a boy, you know. He was always trying to smuggle animals and baby birds into the house. Erte or Keiji always found them and got rid of the damn things because of the smell and the nuisance – he'd mope for days

when they did that, but he was still always hoping they'd let him keep a krak-krak. The fact the bastards will take your finger off given half a chance didn't seem to put him off, nor did Erte's scolding."

"So I'm just another pet that Fedor will have to scold him over." Jena, listening as she bottle-fed Karik, just grinned at him when Arman said that.

"Well, there's more than one pet this time," Reji drawled. "It'll be fine, you'll see. They already had you there once when they had every reason to hate you, and you survived. Now you're coming back with their darling boy, and a wainwright and a fully trained healer. You'll slip in before they notice."

Arman wasn't sure that was how he wanted to be accepted by the village, but as Kei was over by the waterhole, scowling fiercely at it as if it had done him some personal harm, he didn't want to risk a fight with him to talk about it. What would happen if Fedor refused him asylum didn't bear thinking about, really.

Now they were down to two wagons and a cart for the four jombekers, they only took five and a half days to get from Ai-Tuek to Ai-Albon. Thanks to Jena, the village had plenty of warning of their arrival, and so there was a huge turnout of people at the edge of the village, cheering and waving as their group approached. The former hostages dismounted or climbed out of the wagons, and then people were running towards them, crying with happiness. It was a scene of joyful chaos, but curiously Kei kept apart from it all, hanging back on his beast, staying with Reji and Arman.

Of course he could only do that until Myka spotted him, and when Kei saw her running towards him, he climbed down quickly enough. "Kei! You bastard, running off again!"

He swung her around, and there was no mistaking his joy at seeing her again. Then she looked up and saw Arman. "Oh! Where's the beard?"

That wasn't the question he'd expected. "Long story," he said briefly, before getting off his beast. He wasn't sure how much Myka knew about Kei and him, and wasn't going to be the one to break the news. But then she called to Reji, who climbed down and swooped her into his arms. Kei gave Arman a slightly rueful look, but said nothing.

Unsure exactly how this was going to play out, Arman let Reji and Kei be his guide, and for now, they seemed in no hurry to dive into the mass of people milling around the returned hostages.

"Arman?"

Arman turned and saw Vikis looking out the front of the wagon. "Come down, I think it's safe. No one's thrown anything yet."

Vikis raised an eyebrow at that, but shortly after, he, Kesa and Jena walked around from the back of the vehicle. “Now what?” Vikis muttered.

Kei heard him, and pulled his sister away from Reji. “Myka, I’d like you to meet some friends of mine. This is Jena, formerly of Ai-Rutej, a healer, and her adopted son, Karik.”

Jena held out her hand, and Myka shook it hesitantly. “I’ve heard so much about you, Myka.” Myka smiled back politely, but then looked at her brother for an explanation which was, as yet, unforthcoming.

“And this is Vikis and Kesa from Utuk.”

Myka ignored Vikis’ hand. “Kei? What’s going on?”

“Kei! Welcome back...who in hells are all these people!”

Fedor and Sira had extracted themselves from the crowd and Fedor was now bearing down on them with a deep frown on his face. Kei seemed to quail a little. Arman would have taken his hand, but this had to be handled by Kei if it were to be handled at all. “Hello, father, I told you I’d come back.”

“Yes, but what...? Explain yourself, Kei. Why have you brought General Arman back to the village?”

“Didn’t you hear he helped free the hostages, father?”

Fedor wasn’t taken in by Kei’s innocent expression any more than Arman would have been. “Yes, of course we did – but that doesn’t explain why he’s here!”

“Um.... Can we do this somewhere private?”

Fedor snorted. “You mean you don’t want to be told off in public. Very well, come to the house. You too, Reji.”

Reji watched Fedor stride off. “Oh, we are in *so* much trouble,” he said cheerfully. “Mychichi, where’s that damn husband of yours?”

“Banji!” she promptly yelled. “Banji-ki!”

Banji struggled out of the knot of humanity, and his brother Misek came with him. “Gods, Myka, you’re a married woman now, learn some manners. Kei, it’s about damn time you came home again. The amount of complaining I’ve had to listen to from your sister....” Myka slapped his arm and he rubbed it with a grin. “Reji...who are all these people? Why is General Arman here?”

Kei sighed. “Why don’t you come to Fedor’s house so I don’t have to explain it twice. Mis, any chance you can see to the wagons and cart?”

“What, and miss out on the fun?”

“Mi-is,” Kei said in a weary tone. “I’ll tell you later, I promise.”

“All right, but you owe me one and if anyone gets a spanking, I want to watch, all right?”

“Misek!” Myka said, shocked at the suggestion.

Her husband pulled her by the arm. “Leave Mis alone. Come on, I’ve a feeling this is going to be one hell of a story.”

Kei was dragged along by Myka in turn, which left Arman to trail along behind with the others. “I could be wrong about this, but I think Kei looked worried,” Jena said dryly.

“He’s shitting himself, actually,” Reji said. “This’ll either be fun, or utterly appalling. Hope everyone’s feeling in a confident mood.”

Arman wasn’t sure how he felt, actually, but he doubted he could be more apprehensive than Kei was at that very point. They managed to skirt the main group of rejoicing villagers, and slip down the main street almost unnoticed. “Pretty village,” Jena said. “Bigger than Ai-Rutej, I think.”

“I think we have fifty or so more people than yours,” Reji said. “That’s before all you incomers, of course.”

Vikis was holding Kesa’s hand, and looking very worried. “Arman, they won’t attack us, will they?”

Reji turned. “Absolutely not, Vikis. Anyone wants to hurt you, they’ll have to come through me.”

“And me,” Arman said.

“And me,” Jena added. “And Kei too, and Peit and Urki and all the others.” She smiled at Kesa. “Don’t worry,” she said in Prijian, shifting Karik to her hip so she could take her hand. “They’re Kei’s family. They’ll be as nice as him.”

“Oh. Then I won’t be scared,” she said bravely, but she still looked rather anxious.

Kei’s parents were stiffly polite, asking everyone to sit, offering them tea and Arman took the opportunity to give Fedor the letters he was carrying. But once the bare courtesies were satisfied, Kei was pinned by Fedor’s sharp gaze. “Right, explain yourself. Don’t leave anything out. Start by telling me why General Arman is back here.”

“Well, father, he and I are now lovers and he’s going to live with me.”

Fedor choked and Sira put her hands up to her neck as she gasped. “I take it that isn’t a joke.”

“No, father.”

“Then I take you’ve just lost your mind.” Regrettably, Reji chose that moment to chuckle, which earned him a fierce glare.

“No, father. I love Arman, and he loves me. If he can’t stay here, I’m perfectly content to follow him wherever he will be welcome. I thought you’d

prefer I came back to the village, but if you'd rather he and I went back to Kuprij...."

Fedor made that choking noise again, and Arman began to realise that Kei wasn't quite as cowed as he looked. "Don't be ridiculous, Kei, this is your home. But him? Of all people, why him?"

"Why not? He's now as Darshianese as you or me – if you read Lord Meki's letters, he explains it. And he did save all the hostages."

"Yes, after taking them away in the first place! And who's this?" he asked, turning to look at Jena.

"Jena was one of the hostages, father, from Ai-Rutej. Because of...circumstances, she's asked if she can live in our village. She's a fully trained healer and a mind-speaker too – I thought she'd be very welcome."

"Hmmm, did you, now. That child isn't Darshianese."

"Yes, he is," Jena said. "Lord Meki says so."

"Lord Meki seems to be rather busy these days," Fedor said with heavy irony. "But whose is it?"

"Karik is...my wife's child," Arman said carefully. "I removed him for his own safety."

"Wife?" This was Sira. "You're married?"

"Not any more."

"You phrased that rather diplomatically," Fedor said. "The child is...not of your blood?"

"No, he's not. But I wanted him looked after with kindness, and raised to be an honest person. I felt he had a far better chance of that among the Darshianese than among the Prij, and Jena has offered to adopt him, for which I thank her."

Fedor shook his head. "And these two?"

Vikis nudged his wife, who stood and curtsied prettily. "I'm Kesa, your lordship. I'm pleased to meet you," she said in slow, careful Darshianese. Fedor's eyebrows rose at the 'your lordship'.

Vikis stood and bowed. "And I'm Vikis, her husband, sir."

"Kesa was being used as a wet-nurse by my wife, Fedor. She's recently bereaved of child and mother, and agreed to come to assist Jena. When Jena decided she wanted to leave Ai-Rutej, they asked if they might be able to find a home here in Darshian. Vikis is a wainwright."

"Is that so?"

Reji spoke up. "A damn good one too, Fedor. He's been of great help to us on the trip."



Fedor rubbed his temples. “So, if I have it straight, Kei – you want your Prijian lover, your Prijian lover’s wife’s bastard, your Prijian lover’s wife’s bastard’s adoptive mother, her wet nurse and the wet nurse’s husband to just move to our village without the slightest objection?” Kei, sitting very straight and looking a little pale, just nodded. “Is it too late for me to unadopt you?”

“Fedor,” Sira said reproachfully. “May I see the child, Jena? How old is he?”

Jena brought Karik over and she, Kesa and Myka sat near Sira as she held the child, Jena keeping hold of Kesa’s hand to reassure her. Fedor made a grumpy sound. “You lot, come outside.” ‘You lot’ apparently meant the men, so Arman followed Fedor out into the street. “Walk with me. I think I need to work off some stress.”

The four younger men followed Fedor out of the village. It was apparent he was heading for the big waterhole Arman could see a little distance from the house. Kei took Arman’s hand – Kei’s was rather cold. “It’ll be all right,” Arman murmured. “So long as you’re with me, I don’t care where we go.”

Kei gave him a slight smile at that, but then resumed gnawing his lip.

Fedor took a seat, and told the others to sit nearby. Kei rather defiantly sat next to Arman and put his arm around him, which earned him a frown from his father. “Kei...words fail me, they truly do. How do you expect people to react to all this?”

“Fedor, can I say something?” Fedor looked at Reji and nodded. “I understand how you feel, and trust me, I felt the same when I realised that Kei and Arman were in love. But at the same time, they *are* in love, and that’s not something you or I or anyone else can interfere with.”

“That’s all very well....”

Reji held up his hand. “No, wait. If it was just that, I wouldn’t argue that Arman should be allowed to stay, not if you objected. But I *am* going to argue that, Fedor. I’ve seen him in action, I’ve seen him with our people, with Kei and I’m saying to you that if you welcome this man into Ai-Albon, you will never have a moment’s regret over it, that he’ll strengthen our village, and increase its prosperity and happiness. I say that too about Vikis and Kesa. Both are decent, honest people, both prepared to work hard and fit in – and both are committed to the life and ideals of Darshian, just as Arman is. I would stake my reputation on them being fine additions to the community.”

“You, Vikis – is that true? Why do you want to live in my village?”

“Not necessarily in your village, sir, if it’s not permitted, but I’ve received a lot of kindness from your people, and we’ve both made friends with them. But if you wish it, we will leave, because neither of us want to cause trouble.”

“Hmmm. Your wife is very young.”

“Yes, she is.” Vikis gave Fedor a short explanation of their history, and what Kesa had suffered recently. “Even if you ask us to leave, I’ll always be grateful for what Jena and Kei and everyone else has done for her. I’d like to give you something in return, but have no wish to force it on you.”

“Yes, I understand.” Fedor looked thoughtful. “Banji? What do you think?”

Banji looked at Arman. “A lot of people here are still angry with the Prij. My mother’s one of them. Are you going to try and impose your values on us?”

“Not at all. I was hoping you would impose yours on me, because I find the way my country has behaved towards yours, disgraceful and dishonourable.”

“Arman’s been disowned by the Prij for what he’s done, Banji,” Kei explained quietly. “He stood up to the sovereign, the senate and the head of their army to tell them what they’d done was wrong, and they spat on him. He’s been publicly humiliated and insulted, called a traitor for standing up for the Darshianese, and he still did it. I’m very proud of him and I love him.” He squeezed Arman tightly at those words.

Arman could see Banji wanted to give in to his friend’s wishes, but he had more than Kei to consider. “Is it simply my race, or what I’ve done that you object to? Or what I might do in the future?”

Fedor sighed. “General...”

“Call him Arman, Father. He’s Darshianese and no general now,” Kei said somewhat sternly.

“So like Erte,” Fedor muttered, with a slight smile on his lips. “Arman...you know yourself this isn’t easy, and with four Prij to fit in.... Vikis, I feel for your wife, and she seems a lovely lass, but what of your children, growing up here, being different in looks – how will they cope?”

“They would be raised in the Darshianese manner, whatever their appearance. I’ve no wish to keep our family separate from you.”

Fedor nodded. “A wainwright, you say. You’d set up a workshop, then? But Arman, what do you intend to do with yourself? We have no place for idlers here.”

“I’ll do whatever I’m set to, Fedor. Work the fields, dig ditches, work in Vikis’ workshop – anything that you ask. I’m not lazy,” he added with a touch of asperity.

“Perhaps not, but that seems rather a come down for a man who was a lord and a general. Won’t you want to use your mind?”

“Since the work my mind has done in the past has done such harm,” Arman said bitterly, “I’m happy to retire it from my future concerns.” Kei looked at him then, and then kissed his cheek gently. “I owe your people my life, my happiness and sanity, and all I wish to do is serve, Fedor. Serve you, serve your country, in whatever manner you direct.”

Fedor nodded, and then seemed to go into a little reverie of thought. The others watched in silence, Vikis looking anxious, Reji unconcerned and Banji’s expression being unreadable. Kei just held him tighter, but said nothing.

Finally Fedor sighed. “I suppose the fairest thing is to let you all stay, for now at least. Acceptance by the clan isn’t a given, I warn you, and you will have to exercise patience and tolerance – you will face hostility, both of you, and some prejudice. I can’t stop that, and if I tried, it would make it worse. All I can do is promise to treat you fairly, as any other member of our clan, offer you the same protection – and the same justice if you cause trouble. Do you understand?”

“Yes, thank you,” Vikis said.

“You’re being more than generous,” Arman said.

“Thank you, Fedor,” Reji said. “You won’t regret it.”

“I sincerely hope not. Now, about Jena. Three healers, that’s a lot for us, Kei.”

“Yes, father, I know – but I thought Myka could do her training, and Jena and I are both interested in research. We don’t all have to be active at the same time, and Jena could teach us a lot. She’s very knowledgeable.”

“I’m surprised Ai-Rutej could bear to let her go.”

“They didn’t exactly make her welcome when she got back,” Kei said darkly. “There are personal issues there which she can explain, if she wishes to. But she’s someone I’m proud to call a friend – she reminds me of Ma.”

“High praise indeed.” Fedor got to his feet. “Well, I wasn’t expecting all of this, but I suppose the village was bound to change as a result of the war. Arman, I’m grateful you repaired your crime and brought the hostages back. That, at least, is something which counts strongly in your favour, and I intend to make that point to the elders when I give them the news. However, from this moment, you incomers are under my personal protection, and part of the clan. Don’t make me sorry for that.”

Kei stood. "Thank you, father," he said, taking Fedor's hand, and then being pulled into a warm hug. "I'm so glad to be home," Arman heard him say quietly.

"And I to have you back, my son. Although next time you decide to go off on a warship to a foreign country, let me know in advance so I can nail your feet to the ground."

"Yes, father, I will do," he said with a bright grin. "I think this must call for a beer, don't you?"

That was the sign for everyone else to stand. "Little brother, does any occasion not call for a beer?"

Kei appeared to be thinking. "No, I can't think of one. I just hope Myka lets me drink it and not wear it."

Reji clapped Fedor and Banji on the shoulder. "Right, let's welcome everyone home in style. I've been telling Vikis about the hospitality here, and once I mentioned the beer, I think that's when he decided our village was the place for him."

"I did not, Reji, don't tell tall tales," Vikis chided, walking along with the others.

Kei let them get ahead, so he could put his arms around Arman's neck and kiss him. "Happy?"

"That I'm going to be with you? What do you think?"

Kei leaned his forehead against Arman's. "I'm shaking, I'm so relieved."

"I think it went so much better than it could have done. Look at Jena's village. Fedor was the model of responsible decorum."

"He's a good man. I didn't want to hurt him or Sira, but I wasn't going to give you up just to suit them."

Arman hooked him around the waist. "Now you don't have to. But you do have to decide what to do with me. I'm not actually a pet, you know."

"Oh? And here I was, all ready with a leash and a bowl of jombeker milk for you. I'd be a very good owner, you know."

"You're a tremendous brat, that's for sure. Now, come on, I've been promised beer and beer I shall have." *We won*, he thought, slightly dazedly. *And now I'm really home*. The bubbling happiness inside him owed nothing to the expectation of drinking some of Myka's finest brewing.

Well, maybe it owed just a little bit.

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## BOOK FOUR – DARSHEK EPILOGUE



“Gods, I wish your father would have written in normal characters, Kei.”

Kei stretched his back and rubbed his eyes. “Me too. I know it saved space, but how he wrote that small, I’ll never know. Want some tea?”

“Yes, I do.” Jena stood and shook her arms. “I think I need to do some gardening, give my writing muscles a break....”

The front door opened without any warning. “Hello, you two, I’m back.” Several heavy packs hit the floor as an accompaniment to the words.

Jena exclaimed in surprised pleasure, and ran to the grinning arrival. “Reji! I wasn’t expecting you for a week!”

Reji swept her up and kissed her enthusiastically. “It’s that new spring arrangement Vikis put on. We can go nearly a third faster even with a full load, just as he thought we could. Hello, Kei.”

Kei abandoned the kettle and came over for a hug of his own. “Anything that gets you back quicker is a good thing. We were just having some tea – want some?”

“I’d prefer....”

“A beer, yes, I know,” Jena said, rolling her eyes. “But tea first.”

“If you insist,” Reji said with a sigh, pulling up a stool but keeping an arm around Jena. “How’s Karik? And what are you doing?”

“Karik’s fine, he had a little cold but he’s over that.”

“Jena’s helping me decipher Pa’s notes on possible cures for lung fever.”

Jena snorted. “Decipher – translate, you mean. Are Myka and Banji all settled?”

“Yes, quite well, and I introduced them to Reis and the others. Reis says, and I quote, that Myka is a sweetie.”

Kei chuckled at that. “Wait until he gets to know her better. Did you bring any letters back from them?”

“Of course,” Reji said. “Let me wet my throat first.”

Kei set the kettle on the stove and came over to the table, packing up the notes they’d been working on. It was late afternoon and they were losing the light – he and Jena had done enough for the day and after five weeks without her lover, Jena would want to be getting home with him. “Arman thinks they can make the wagons even faster – he’s been waiting for you to get back to talk to you.”

“I’m all for that. I tell you, the ride is so smooth, you don’t realise how fast you’re moving. And the beasts are in better shape too. I’ve brought him back the metal he asked for.”



“Good. How are Reis and Jera and everyone? I want to know what’s going on.”

As Kei made the tea and served Reji with some sweet cakes, Reji told him that their Gifted friends were all very well, missing Kei and Arman and sending their love. Lord Meki had returned recently to Darshek but Lord Peika’s wife had decided to join him in Utuk rather than have him return and let another Ruler take his place. The very last of the prisoners of war had finally been sent back – although nearly fifty Prij had asked for permission to stay in Darshek. Their applications were still being examined. “But,” Reji said, taking a pull from his tea, “I’ve got Vikis and Kesa’s papers with me – they’ve now been given official permission to stay in the village and their children will be Darshianese if they want it. I take it that the Prij sovereign’s a bit annoyed about the number of her people wanting to stay behind.”

“I’m surprised there aren’t more,” Kei said, not in the least concerned about the annoyance of the pissing Prij sovereign. “Master Bikel and Master Diza? Did you see them?”

“Yes, and they send regards. Bikel wanted to know how you were recovering, and I told him that as far as I know, you’re doing fine.”

“I am. I think a couple more months might do it. Not that it matters how long while Arman’s here.”

“Yes, Kei,” Jena said, “but controlling your gift yourself is important. I’d say a couple of months would do it.”

At that moment, Karik, lying in his crib, woke up and began to grizzle. Jena dusted her hands, picked up her son and brought him back to the table. That was enough to settle him – he just wanted company. “Look, Reji, his eyes are turning green.”

Reji peered at the baby’s face, and gave a waving chubby fist his finger to hold. “Well, well, so they are. I wonder if his hair will stay so fair. It doesn’t matter, I suppose.” He kissed Jena again. “Missed you – I’ll have to see if I can persuade you to come on some of the trips with me.”

“When Myka gets back, you will, and especially if you get the wagons to move faster. I’d like to go back to Darshek again. I want to visit the library for at least a month.”

“Me too,” Kei said. “And what they’re doing with isek leaves makes me think we’ve only scratched the surface of antiseptic plants.”

“Someone needs to do a proper survey of the dry regions,” Jena said. “Look how many medicines Keiji discovered just from around here.”

“He always said he wanted to set up a proper garden growing plants from here, trying different varieties and so forth and sending them to the academy to try. But it would take a lot of manpower,” Kei said, sighing. “And it’d need the academy to support it fully too.”

“Well, maybe one day it’ll happen,” Reji said peacefully. He got up and fetched one of his packs. “I must have twenty letters for you and Arman. If this keeps up, you’ll be running your own caravans just for your mail, Keichichi.”

“Don’t exaggerate,” Kei muttered, grabbing his post eagerly. There were letters from the Gifted, from the academy – and Lord Meki. “Uh oh,” he said, waving it at the others. “This won’t be good news.”

“Don’t be silly, Kei. You’re his darlings, you and Arman. Why else would Myka and Banji be staying at the Rulers’ House?”

“To keep an eye on them, I suspect.”

“Very true.” Reji put his arm around Jena’s shoulders. “You ready to leave?”

“I think so – here, take Karik so I can get the crib.”

Kei stood up and helped her pack up. “Tell Arman we’re done when you pass the workshop, would you?”

“Of course.” She kissed his cheek. “See you tomorrow – and don’t forget we’re having supper at Vikis and Kesa’s.”

“No, I won’t. See you in the morning.” He grinned at Reji. “Not too early of course.”

“Not everything revolves around sex, Keichichi,” Reji said, wagging his finger at him.

“No? So if Arman and I were to stroll over tonight and wanted to have a beer or three, you wouldn’t be otherwise engaged?”

“Are you joking?” Jena said, glaring at him. “I’m chaining Reji to the bed for the next week!”

“Poor Reji. You’ll wear him to a husk, you cruel woman.”

“But what a way to go,” Reji said cheerfully, clearly not worried about his impending imprisonment in the slightest. “See you tomorrow, Kei.”

Kei waved them out, then sat down at the table again, poured out some more tea and started to read his mail. The letters were short but warm and full of love and the personality of the writers, and he smiled as he thought of his friends up in Darshek. He missed them a good deal, even though being home again felt heavenly. He had regained the sense of being comfortable in his own skin again, which was why he was very reluctant to open Lord Meki’s

note. He had a feeling he knew what his lordship was going to ask and he wasn't ready to deal with it.

Still, he needed to know what he was saying. It was characteristically direct.

*Kei*

*Greetings. Your sister and her husband have already demonstrated the qualities that we've experienced from others of your village, and I hope her studies will benefit her. The work in the south continues, but we are also busy here in Darshek with the new trade that's already begun, and we realise that there is much work to do on our defences here. We could use Arman's assistance, and your own fine work on the medical guide has garnered a good deal of praise from several quarters – the academy wants you to come back to them, I know that for certain fact. I've not written to Arman, and I make no demand now, but as I promised, I'm asking. If you are in a position to say yes, your country will once again be grateful.*

*I hope you are well, and whatever your decision, I remain, I trust, your friend,*

*Meki*

Kei raised an eyebrow at the Ruler calling him a friend. Considering how rude he'd been to the man, that surprised him greatly.

He sighed. It was too soon. It might never be the right time, however guilty he felt from time to time seeing Arman working on a wagon wheel, when he could be arranging sea defences in Darshek.

But Lord Meki's letter reminded him of another he'd carried from Ai-Darbin. He went to the office and found the file where he'd put it. Seya had pressed it into his hands as they were leaving. "When Arman is ready to come back to us, when you're recovered, read this. Not before," she'd said, looking at him earnestly.

Arman hadn't mentioned going back to do his sentence, but Kei knew that his lover was trying not to press him – it must have been on his mind from time to time as Arman was not one to forget his obligations and especially not one of that nature. It might take a couple of months before Kei was completely in control of his gift, but in truth, it hadn't troubled him for a good month. They'd been back four. Maybe he should read this letter.

He unfolded it and found, like Meki's, it was also brief.

*Kei*

*Among the letters from Lord Meki was a request that I consider commuting Arman's sentence to work among us to six months' service in Darshek. I've*

*consulted with my fellow elders, and we have no objection. Should you be able to do this, and you and Arman wish it, then I would consider such work an ample satisfaction of his obligation. It all depends on your condition and how comfortable you personally feel, so Lord Meki insists that it is merely an alternative to be offered, not a mandatory change.*

*However, I would be sorry in a way not to have you both here, for his sake. I leave it in your wise hands to decide upon.*

*With my sincere good wishes,*

*Seya*

More pressure, another push back to Darshek. He sighed again and folded the two letters together, putting them away in the file for safe-keeping. He couldn't think of it now. But some day, he would have to do so.

Not long after, the front door opened again, and this time it was Arman. "Gods, what *have* you been doing?" Kei exclaimed.

His lover was filthy and smelled of metal and wood shavings. "Greasing axles," he said cheerfully. "Is that tea? I'm dying for some."

"Go wash...no, don't touch me, you disgusting creature...and I'll make some more." He ducked away from Arman's grimy grasp and went to the stove to top up the kettle and set it to boiling again.

A few minutes later, Arman emerged, dusted off and grease free. He sank onto a stool with a sigh. "Gods, my back aches. I've been crouched under a wagon for about three hours."

"You spoke to Reji? He's very happy with the new design."

"Yes, while he was unhitching. Said he had a bit of a problem with the braking, but we can fix that. Or Vikis can. I'm just muscle. I have to say, I could wish to be a foot shorter sometimes when we're working under the things." He took a sip of the tea and sighed happily, then crooked his finger. "Kiss. I've been good."

"Yes, you have." Kei kissed him slowly – there was something vaguely erotic about the smell of axle grease mixed with Arman's own natural scent, but he would never admit it or he'd never hear the end of it. "I was teasing Jena that we'd drop over tonight. Can you imagine?"

"She'd kill you," Arman said with a snort. "Literally slice you into ribbons. And Reji would hold you down."

Kei chuckled. "Yes, I know. Poor Reji, the thing he always hated about the travelling was the lack of sex. He's talking about taking her with him at some point for the company and so she can visit Darshek again."

"Can't see why he shouldn't. We can cut that round trip down to three weeks for loaded wagons, I'm sure of it."

"If you could, it would make a huge difference. We could actually start trading fruit from Darshek – even from the south. And send them our perishables, such as they are."

Arman nodded. "I was more thinking of people and post, actually. It'll make a difference, I know that. We might need to make the roads better though, and who's to do that, or pay for it, I have no idea."

"You just can't stop planning, can you?" Kei murmured, leaning his chin on Arman's shoulder. "Still a general in your mind."

"It's just ideas. You empire-build in your own, scholarly way."

"Don't get defensive, it's not a criticism." Kei picked up Arman's letters. "Reis wrote, and Neka, and Meda. The message is the same – come visit now!"

Arman chuckled. "Thought it might be. Maybe if Reji takes Jena up there, we could join him." He stretched a little and groaned. "Ouch."

"Let me stoke the bath."

"Ah, the most beautiful words in the Darshianese language."

Kei grinned. Of all the things Arman admired about Darshian, the baths were right at the top of the list. Sometimes he had the sneaking suspicion that Arman loved a hot bath even more than he loved Kei, but of course Arman would never admit it if he did.

Arman spent an hour or so looking at his post and eating a quick evening meal, but then admitted he really, really needed that bath. They cleared up and then Kei indulged his own great pleasure – stripping Arman and lovingly washing every inch of that pale skin, and combing out and soaping the unruly mane of hair, now full of sawdust and grit. "What have you been doing?" Kei murmured as he rinsed the soap out and lathered up again. "Sweeping the wagons out with your hair?"

"It just picks up the dust," Arman muttered. "I don't know what secret you have, you always look so sleek."

"I use my gift to keep the dust out," Kei said, grinning.

"Really?"

"No. I think I've just got good at ducking it."

Arman examined one wet lock ruefully. "That's a skill I'll never acquire, I suspect." Kei dumped another dipper of water over his head and he spluttered. "Ugh. Are you done?"

"Get in, I won't be long."

Kei washed himself quickly and rinsed through his braid without undoing it – it wasn't that dirty. Then he could join a naked and slippery Arman in a deliciously hot bath. "Feel better?"

"Mmmm," Arman murmured contentedly, sliding his arm around Kei's waist and pulling him into his lap. Kei lay his head on Arman's shoulder, and thought he couldn't be happier if he tried.

"Myka all settled?"

"Yes." Kei hesitated. "Arman, Lord Meki wrote to me."

"Oh?"

"He...wants you up there."

Arman went rigid under him. "Why is he writing to you about that?"

Kei looked at him guiltily. "Well, he sort of asked me to ask you. He mentioned it to me when we were there."

"Did he now," Arman said heavily, and Kei could sense his displeasure. "That was kind of him. Was this what was bothering you so much when we were travelling back?"

"Some."

"And why didn't you mention it to me, Kei?"

"Because...." Kei realised he was teetering on the edge of a cliff here. "I was afraid."

"You mean you didn't trust me to choose you over Meki?"

"No...."

Arman tilted Kei's head to make him look at him. "Are you sure?"

"I...knew how much you'd given up, and I didn't think...."

"...you were enough?" Kei nodded. "I can't say this delights me to hear."

"I'm sorry, Arman. It wasn't the easiest thing for me either. There were so many other things going on."

"Hmmm." Arman pulled him close and kissed him. "Do you trust me now?"

"Yes. I did before...it was me I didn't trust. I wasn't sure I could go with you if you decided your duty lay elsewhere."

"My duty is currently sitting in my lap, Kei, and giving me cramp. Move a little, will you?"

Kei grinned and obeyed, sensing he was forgiven. He decided it was best not to conceal any more from Arman. "There's something else. He's asked Seya if you could pass your sentence working for him, not Ai-Darbin. She's agreed, if you want to do it that way."

He could feel Arman getting really angry now, and regretted bringing it up. "I won't allow you to suffer for Meki's ambition and that's final. I'll write to both of them and explain that. Seya said she would wait, and so she can."

Kei nodded. "Only...Arman, what if you did go to Darshek for six months? It's not like I don't have good reasons to go there myself, and the village is well-provided for now with healers, or it will be on Myka's return."

Arman looked at him in surprise. "You want me to accept?"

"I'm saying that I don't object if you choose to work for Meki, not Seya. We both know you could do more good in Darshek than in Ai-Darbin, and their village doesn't need another labourer. They need more people to move there, but that's being encouraged from the south anyway."

"Hmmm. Let me think on it, and let's talk more. Don't let Meki or Seya push you around, Kei. I'm just one person, skilled at destruction. You've saved many lives. You're more useful to Darshian than I am, I feel."

"Lord Meki has another view on that."

"Lord Meki's not sitting in my lap."

Kei grinned. "And are we not all thankful for that. All right, I've told you about it, and you can think about it. I do want to go back to Darshek at some point – we have friends there, and I was talking to Jena about the library just today. If we can get Lord Meki good and grateful, I think I can exploit that."

Arman looked at him in surprise. "Well, aren't you the little general too? My little boy is all grown up."

Kei splashed him. "Little nothing, you great hairy bastard. A couple of inches difference and suddenly you think you're so much bigger and better than me."

"Hmmm, maybe bigger," Arman said, grinning.

Kei rolled his eyes. "I've created a monster. Five months ago, you wouldn't have given a damn about your penis size, and now you bring it up all the time."

"So to speak," Arman said, kissing him again. Kei took a little time over responding, enjoying Arman's freshly cleaned mouth, and even his slight bristle was now familiar, even enjoyable. "Kei, if you keep that up, bath or no bath, we'll end up having sex here."

"Myka's away."

"Yes, but it's the principle of the thing. Besides.... I like falling asleep with you afterwards. If I have to wake up, dry off, and then go to bed, I suspect it will spoil things."

Kei shook his head in disgust. "You're so incredibly logical, Arman. I thought I'd cured you of it when it came to making love."

"I'm sorry. Some things are too ingrained, and besides I've got cramp again. Move."

Sighing, Kei admitted defeat, and just got out of the bath. It wasn't the most practical place in the world and it was considered very rude, but just once.... "You don't even think about the fact I might not be in the mood once I dry off and go upstairs, do you?"

Arman just laughed at him. "Kei, you're always in the mood. Even Reji isn't as eager as you."

"Oh, yes, and what do you know about Reji's eagerness?"

"Jena's very forthcoming. Of course, she expects a similar level of openness from me."

Kei stared at him in horror. "You don't...you do...you don't, do you?"

Arman just grinned in what Kei considered to be a **very** annoying manner. "Hurry up, Kei. I want to go to bed all warm and relaxed."

Kei considered telling him to sleep in the bath, but then thought that the possibility of sex outweighed the need to punish his irritating lover. Sex with Arman would outweigh a good deal more irritation than Kei was feeling, which was very little in truth. He was more glad than anything to see Arman beginning to be a little playful, confident about sex and relaxed about it too. He was becoming more relaxed about a lot of things, and any lingering doubts Kei might have occasionally had about whether enticing Arman from his home was wrong, disappeared every time he saw Arman laughing with Jena and Reji, talking seriously to Fedor, or working intently on one of Vikis' new wagons, tongue stuck through his teeth in concentration as he wrestled a joint into position. Arman's heart was becoming less and less burdened every day, and those who loved him – and now there were more than Kei included in that number – rejoiced to see it.

Kei lit the bedroom lamps and climbed onto the bed. Arman, sitting cross-legged, insisted on unbraiding Kei's hair and combing it out before carefully remaking the plait, obviously enjoying the task. Kei, who was always happy to be pampered, felt his heart slow as he reacted to the gentle grooming. "I still don't know why yours is so much longer than anyone else's," Arman murmured. "Reji's seven years older and his is shorter. It makes no sense."

"It depends on luck, and Reji has to trim the ends off more than I do. The beasts tend to chew it," he said.

"Oh, that sounds unpleasant."



“Better the braid than your hand. If they try to chew on yours, they’ll break their teeth.”

Arman gave his hair a tug. “Are you saying I have coarse hair?”

“No – it’s just thick and curly. Jena thinks it’s pretty. I’ll have to keep an eye on that woman, I can see that. She spends too much time admiring your finer points.”

Arman finished the braid and pulled Kei back against him. “Kei, Jena is a wonderful woman who holds absolutely no attraction for me at all. I don’t even notice other people when I’m around you.”

Kei twisted and grinned in Arman’s face. “Gods, you don’t really think I’m jealous, do you?”

Arman raised his eyebrows. “You sounded it.”

“I can see I need to tease you a lot more so you get to know what the difference between it and reality is.”

Arman flicked Kei’s nose with the end of his own braid. “I don’t know if it’s possible for you to tease me more, you impossible boy. You spend every waking moment doing it now – you’d have to harass me in your sleep.”

“Boy?” Kei said, grabbing Arman’s hand and putting it around his cock. “Does that feel like a boy to you?”

Arman stroked Kei’s erection with a skilled movement which made him jerk with pleasure. “No – but that mouth of yours is as bratty as it comes.” He cupped Kei’s head with his free hand and pulled Kei close, so that he could kiss him. Kei closed his eyes and lost himself in the feel of Arman’s lips, the taste of his mouth. Arman was a very good kisser, and very dedicated to practicing his new skill. Kei liked that in a lover – dedication, that was. “Can I have you tonight?” Arman breathed.

“Thought you were tired and sore?”

“Mmmm, a bit, but I just want to be inside you.”

Kei had no problem with that at all. He reached for the pot of cream they kept in the bedroom for this and handed it to Arman, then lay out in front of him, anticipating the pleasure of preparation as much as the sex itself. He loved being touched and played with, and Arman was always very gentle and patient, not to mention admirably thorough. He didn’t seem to like the kind of boisterous sex that Reji did, but Kei found he didn’t mind – the concentration Arman brought to bear in lovemaking always made Kei feel like he was the centre of Arman’s universe, literally the most important thing in it, exhilarating to experience. He shivered as Arman’s hands spread him, and a cool, slick finger began to stroke lightly over his entrance, spreading the cream over him

as Arman bent and kissed the back of Kei's neck, pushing the braid aside and licking his skin just at the hairline. Kei sighed and bared his neck a little more – Arman seemed to know all his pleasure areas now and found them unfailingly. Of course Kei had Arman pretty well mapped too, but on nights like this, Arman liked to be in charge, taking his time stretching Kei and loving him slowly. He never liked to be rushed.

Arman's finger entered him, and massaged him a little. Kei smiled, knowing this was going to take a while and loving every moment of it. Arman had long, agile fingers and he had learned how to use them to pleasure Kei in exquisite detail. Kei cried out a little as the finger stroked over his prostate, very gently, but still sending ripples of bliss through his groin. It got even more intense as Arman began to bite his shoulder a little, the dull, deep sensation mingling deliciously with the more powerful ones radiating out from his lower parts. "Gods, Arman...."

Arman reached under him and wrapped a hand around Kei's trapped erection – it was almost unbearably pleasurable, being touched in three such different ways, at three different points, the raw desire racking up in him like a rising wave. "Oh, I'll come, don't!" he cried softly, twisting in helpless delight, trying to get more of the different sensations and not knowing which to beg for first.

Arman's hand on his cock eased off, and Kei could relax again, and the careful nibbles turned to licks, long delightful strokes of his skin. He turned his head – all he could really see was the top of Arman's golden head, the dark damp hair already drying and brightening into the astonishing colour that was uniquely Arman's. "Please," he whispered. "Now?"

Arman looked up. "Are you ready?"

"Mmmm. Wait – let me."

Arman removed his finger and Kei sat up. He got some cream on his fingers and curled them around Arman's erection, as he leaned in for another deep, languid kiss. He could feel Arman's lust and need radiating off him, but over all of it was the love, always there, always so strong, powerful as a drug. "Lie back."

"But...."

"Shhh. Lie back."

Arman's brief irritation disappeared once he obeyed Kei, and Kei then swung himself so he was sitting over Arman's body. "You've been working so hard, I thought I could do the work tonight."

Arman smiled. "I've no object...ion...oh...." The 'oh' was because Kei had eased Arman's cock inside him and then seated himself. Kei sighed too – Arman had such a *nice* cock to be fucked with. "You just like to be in control."

Kei grinned. "You've guessed it...oh...oh!" Arman had put a slippery hand around Kei's erection and done something quite evil as he stroked it which sent a bolt of pleasure through him. "You bastard," he panted.

"How romantic," Arman said dryly. "Are you just going to sit there cursing me, you lazy child?"

Kei rose a little. "You're obsessed with my age, you know that? Can I help it if you're..." He lowered himself and Arman's eyes crossed a little. "...just..." He began to ride Arman in earnest and Arman cried out in pleasure. "...so damn elderly?"

"You talk too much," Arman growled and got revenge by pumping Kei's cock with such skill and energy, that Kei lost concentration and rhythm, almost forgetting to keep moving on Arman's cock, until Arman tugged on his braid and brought him out of his bliss induced stupor.

It was almost a contest then who could drive the other more wild with desire, Arman cheating by toying with Kei's nipples in a frankly ungentlemanly manner, but Kei was too lost in the pleasure his teasing, tweaking fingers created to complain, too absorbed in the happiness he could feel radiating off Arman to care.

Arman came before he did, and then redoubled his sneak attacks on Kei's helpless body, sitting up with his cock still inside Kei so that he could take a firm hold of him and stroke his erection to climax while plundering his mouth.

Kei yelled as he came, and then had to cling helplessly to his lover's broad chest, panting with exhaustion and spent desire, as his body tingled with the last pleasurable shocks of his completion.

Arman kept kissing him, on the lips, on the cheek and forehead, as Kei came back to himself. Then Kei punched him feebly on the arm. "You bastard. I was supposed to be taking care of you."

Arman chuckled. "You're not the only one who likes to be in control." He kissed Kei's forehead again. "That was pretty good though."

"'Pretty good'? You're getting spoiled, I think. Oh, I can't move," he groaned.

"You relax. I think I've recovered enough to find the cloth."

He shifted Kei off him and made him lie down, then padded off to the basin for a damp cloth to clean them both with. Kei suffered the attentions because he was too sated and limp to do anything else, but when Arman finished and

came back to lie against him, he found the energy to pull him close. "Not bad for an old man...ow!" He rubbed his slapped bottom and pouted. "Well, it wasn't."

"I'll put you to work on that wagon we're building and see who cries for mercy first, you horrible boy." Arman closed his eyes in contentment. "This is why I like to make love in bed," he said sleepily. "Who wants to move afterwards?"

"Hmmm, good point." Kei snuggled closer as Arman put his arms around him in a warm, comfortable embrace. "You know, I don't think I care where I live any more, so long as it's with you."

"We don't need to talk about this now, Kei."

"I know. I'm just saying it." Arman began to stroke his braid, something that was almost a ritual for him, something that gave him a strange amount of pleasure. Kei loved feeling the contentment rolling off his lover as he did it. "I wish I hadn't been so afraid of living in Utuk with you. I could have been with you sooner. I'm such a coward."

Arman kissed him again and then looked into Kei's eyes. "You're the bravest man I know. Utuk wasn't about me. Utuk was about losing your family, your friends, all you had suffered. I was amazed you could allow yourself to set foot in it again."

"But it was also you, and Karus...."

"Not enough. I would never have asked it of you. Stop feeling guilty, it's unnecessary and foolish. And you still talk too much," he said with a wry smile. "Go to sleep and stop fretting. We've both given the world enough of ourselves, it can wait for our attention a little longer."

"Yes," Kei said with a peaceful sigh. The world would not wait forever, but it didn't need to intrude tonight. All the world he needed, was right here holding him tenderly, love for him shining in astonishingly blue eyes.

And for now, in this time and in this place, he was completely content.

**The End**