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Almost Human

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Almost Human

By

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It started in Deadrider and, at the time, neither of them could have predicted how it would end. Now—in a shabby, nondescript room above an inn, at the center of a sad little town with nothing to it but empty gray skies and wheat fields—the two of them sheltered from a storm entirely of their own making.

“That’s what I’m talking about.” Kalyan stood at the window, his broad back turned to the room. Though his tone suggested mild amusement, his body gave nothing away and it was to that expressionless bulk that Lazarus felt his attention drawn. “Sometimes I think you could be almost human.”

Lazarus frowned in annoyance, partially at that snide comment and also at this stupid reaction he couldn’t seem to control. They had so much else to concern them—the money, the Agisci closing in behind them, and that Last Moon would be in three days—yet he still found himself prepared to put it all aside...for a few hours, at least. They’d been on the road a long time and he ached down to his very bones, so tired he hadn’t even noticed whether this town had a name, or what it might be if it did. All Lazarus had cared about as they limped in, dust-draggled and exhausted, was finding the closest inn and handing over money enough to buy them rest and food. They hadn’t much left of their own, and it didn’t seem sensible to use the stolen gold to buy lodging—or horses, though he would dearly have loved to do that. He couldn’t remember ever being so footsore.

Yet, despite the fact Lazarus had believed nothing could ever matter again beyond a warm bed and a hot meal, here he was: not yet half-rested and already totally distracted by the way his lover looked from behind. It definitely irritated him. And then to be accused of humanity! Kalyan would have to pay for that one.

Lazarus unlaced his other boot and pulled it off. “Am I?” he said, making a show of inspecting the sole and not really still staring at his lover.

“Yes.” Kalyan didn’t even turn around. “You are. Always focusing on the little things. You need to stop worrying about it. Live for the moment.”

“Ha.” Lazarus swung his legs up onto the bed, thighs slightly parted so as to give Kalyan a good view of his opinion on that last comment when he finally deigned to turn around. He’d show Kalyan living for the moment. Not that Lazarus had trusted the inn’s standards of cleanliness enough to undress. He’d seen the state of the blankets. No, his rough cloth shirt and woolen hose provided scant protection against the things he suspected crawled in the bed’s innards, but he’d have to risk it sooner or later. Kalyan, of course, was naked as a babe. He’d paid the innkeeper for hot water and a bath, taking voluptuous pleasure in scrubbing away the grime and muck of their journey. Now, he stared down into the little cobbled yard through bottle-glass windows that opened out onto a darkening world. Lazarus’ gaze traced every inch of Kalyan, from the back of his head—that shock of still-damp hair, wetted to the color of a blood bay horse—to the powerful arches of his feet, dawdling by way of neck, shoulders, arms and back. They formed an intricate collage of angles, each muscle at once softened and sharpened by the shadows that pooled on his body. Lazarus supposed it would be possible, if he sat and watched long enough, to see those shadows fall and change around Kalyan like a sundial, the single fixed point in the world.

His spine seemed the first straight furrow in a virgin field, and the valley of its curve led down to secret pastures. Each buttock, a powerhouse of weight and control, held a sculpted niche in its side, the fingerprint of his agility and strength. His thighs, too, knew hard work, honed from his years of running and riding. Lazarus could think of other uses to put them to right now, and he reached absently down to rearrange himself through the strained fabric of his hose.

"See?" Kalyan gave a dry snort of laughter. He didn't turn from the window; he had no need to, with senses of hearing and scent like his. "That's exactly the kind of thing I mean. Just like a human: over-emotional, and not an ounce of self-control."

"Very funny. You? Talking to *me* about self-control?"

Kalyan pivoted on one foot and regarded his lover critically from beneath drawn brows. For a moment, Lazarus almost regretted his riposte, but then Kalyan's lips drew back into an avaricious smile, revealing the creamy teeth he still insisted on filing into points after the traditions of his mother tribe.

"You'd call me a beast?" he asked.

It wasn't as direct a challenge as it could have sounded, so Lazarus didn't answer immediately, his attention consumed by the banquet of visual delights that ranged from Kalyan's neck to his knees. His chest, broad like a warrior's shield, curved up and out, held high with all his natural pride and arrogance. His most devastating weapon he carried lower, and Lazarus watched it bounce, lolling with each hypnotic step when Kalyan crossed the room, exaggerating his gait and swaying his hips.

"You know very well what I'd call you," Lazarus muttered, before Kalyan pounced.

They rolled on the saggy pallet, each fighting the other for purchase. Lazarus dug his fingers into the dense flesh of Kalyan's body, plundering kisses from his mouth, tongue scraping against the devilish razors of those teeth. Limbs grappled and butted each other, breath rasping between them and the husks of words left empty.

Lazarus gave only token resistance when Kalyan tugged away his clothes, though they both took care not to damage the garments; neither traveled with enough spare luggage to waste what they had. Even in lust, Kalyan remembered that. Lazarus suspected that all but the worst of his passions held an element of playacting and it pleased him to see how far he could push before Kalyan fought back. Tonight would be no exception. They'd paid for the room, for the anonymity...maybe even security. Lazarus pressed his knee between Kalyan's thighs, reveling in the feel of his muscles clenching, then releasing, his legs parting to let Lazarus work against his hardness. Heat, friction and the questing movements of each body for the other—familiar now, yet no less urgent—warmed away any lingering doubt.

"*Kita epan*," Kalyan muttered, his face too close for his features to be discernable and his hair prickling in Lazarus' eyes. His long, thin nose, that most striking part of his haughty profile, nuzzled Lazarus' cheek.

Lazarus said nothing, though he couldn't deny being tempted. The utterance was part of an old rite, older than either of their clans, and one steeped in ancient human traditions. It had to with the bondage of souls, of eternal and all-consuming love. Many dreams had been built on that, once. Still, it was hard to believe that Kalyan could be such an old-fashioned romantic. Lazarus kissed him again and he tasted of honey, cloves, vanilla and warm silk.

"And I'm almost human?" Lazarus murmured.

Kalyan growled against his mouth, those vicious teeth threatening Lazarus' lower lip, though the way he pressed close spoke of need over any pretence of anger. Lazarus wasn't about to argue; he was ready. He rolled his head back as Kalyan sank onto him, hungry and urgent. The rickety bed wobbled and creaked beneath them, obviously unused to this kind of treatment. Perhaps it would scare the bugs away. Lazarus smiled, in part at the idea, and part at the sensation of fully possessing Kalyan. He was still on top, driving their rhythm and setting their pace, but Lazarus knew it wouldn't be long until all that superior composure cracked. There had been a time—back in Deadriver, where they first met—when he'd thought Kalyan must be a whole other species. So coldly calculating, hewn of ice, and so stunning. The only word for it, because he did: stun, dazzle and disarm. His hands came to cup Lazarus' jaw and rub his shoulders... hands that had killed.

Not then, not in Deadriver. It hadn't seemed like it at the time, but that place had been a paradise. Dry, dusty and barren—except for the few gardens, cultivated at great expense, that marked out wealth and status. They'd had such freedom there. It was a small town, far to the north, and it called people for one reason. Escape.

Lazarus, keen to flee the shackles of his upbringing, had gone there with four of his clan brothers. They were all young, all eager to taste life in its ruddy, authentic glory. Back home people considered such a trip almost a rite of passage. His tribe, like many of the Changed People, were country dwellers, though not from choice. Humans in the north seemed less accepting of their kind—of all the potential and power so few Changed really had—and tended to shoot, or at least maul, on sight. Lazarus' abilities had manifested late in his teenage years, scorching his conscience with unexplained fires and the odd spontaneous combustion of things like curtains and homework. He'd known what was happening to him, but never voiced it. Not even in the note he left his parents the night he stole away to the hills.

He got hopelessly lost, ending up dehydrated and drenched to the bone, wandering amid the open country. Temmik, the old man with the limp and the ability to read the weather so well that humans thought he could control it, found him on the third day. He brought Lazarus to the tribe's camp and nursed him through the ensuing fever. Temmik and his wife Leta became the new parents to Lazarus' new being. There were trials and tests to undergo before that, naturally, not to mention the choosing of his new name. One risen again...it seemed to suit him. He pledged himself to his tribe, to his clan, and to his future, whatever tatters of it remained.

All would have been well, but for his own clumsiness. A burnt hand, helping Leta with her cooking, a knee cut on the treacherous rocks that smattered the slopes beyond camp. Lazarus slowly realized the full extent of that awful knowledge: Change—with all its manifestations inside and out, its uneven abilities and warped genes—had brought with it something longer, stronger and far more difficult.

He could heal.

Even among the Changed it remained uncommon. He was what those who knew no better called an immortal. As far as words went to explain anything, it did the job. Not that it really conveyed everything the word implied. Sure, he had a resistance to aging, an imperviousness to the normal finite life of a body; dead or damaged tissue replaced itself with new, fresh cells almost immediately. Muscles rebuilt and maintained themselves with little effort and time could no longer ravage immortal

flesh. But...eternal life? Perhaps, if the bearer avoided accidents to the brain stem, or blood loss so catastrophic the body couldn't cope, but not necessarily. Certainly not eternal youth, as such.

It brought other, weirder things, which damaged the balance of relations between the Changed who had it, and those who didn't. Immortals required less sustenance, but craved more than their needs. Their appetites in most things were swollen by the fear of losing the ability to feel, numbed by a world that could no longer touch them with its spidery fingers of time. Lacking vulnerability to harm doesn't breed restraint in any field, and many Changed had cause to despise immortals as wastrels, gluttons and impetuous madmen. They ate without hunger, drank without thirst and, perhaps most unpardonably, quaffed without getting drunk. Many could also be given to fighting, thieving...living without morals or forethought. At first, he'd thought of Kalyan that way. His personal demon, his weakness. But that wasn't true; even without what they'd done, Kalyan meant so much more.

Now, he began his descent to the lip of the chasm, his body rocking harder against Lazarus', flesh slamming on flesh, the echoes of breath tearing at the air between them. Lazarus, locked tight in Kalyan's clasp, braced his hand on the wall above the bed and drove his hips up ever harder until Kalyan's moans became deepening cries, his release drawing an uncharacteristic openness from him. His final gasp tailed into a kiss. He pulled Lazarus as close to him as a treasured heirloom, just as tenderly cupped. Having delayed his own pleasure for Kalyan's sake, Lazarus found the nearness stifling and his peak, when it came, was an agonizing burst of intensity.

"Mm." Kalyan sighed happily. "Makes sense of everything, yes?"

Lazarus, foggy and unfocused, squinted at him as he moved away. He wanted to say 'what?', demand to know how Kalyan thought that sex fixed their problems, especially here and now, but the words wouldn't come. Maybe he didn't need the explanations, just the knowledge that everything they'd done, right or wrong, led only one way.

"We should sleep," Kalyan said over his shoulder. He got up, hauled the pisspot out from under the pallet and urinated loudly into it.

Lazarus averted his gaze, looking beyond his lover's form, to where their packs lay in the corner.

Back in Deadriver, taking the money had seemed like such a good idea.

Wordlessly, Lazarus exchanged places with Kalyan and relieved his own bladder. He'd known when they first met that the strength of their attraction was something unusual: like nothing else existed, let alone mattered. Even then it stank of fate. Perhaps from the very first, this path had unfurled before him, every stone, every blade of grass on its surface whispering Kalyan's name.

He climbed gingerly back onto the bed where Kalyan, in a fit of sleepy, post-coital affection, wrapped arms strong as oakum rope around him.

Lazarus frowned into the uneasy dark.

They had three days.

* * * *

Last Moon marked the beginning of the end; the final harvest of the year, and a last statement of defiance in the face of the oncoming winter. As such, there were always celebrations, no matter the size of the town or village. Whole communities in outlying regions would uproot and travel to the nearest fair to take part in the delights of hog roasts, candied apples, and a general refusal to bow before the snow. Thanks would be given for the year, and the three harvests of grape, grain and meat. Usually some traveling order would tout a relic of mystery and supposed power before the faithful. At the point between the light and dark, where the world's veil grew thin and minds turned to the questions of survival over the cold months, a small window existed where the Changed found themselves, if not welcomed, then tolerated among humans. It was possible to walk through the streets without attracting so much as a second glance, or near enough.

When he was a boy, Kalyan loved the annual masquerades of the city. Two weeks of Carnival, with rules suspended, morés broken, and the pretences of civilization put away. People roamed as Nature had made them: proud, free beasts, ripe with passion and fuelled by hunger. The one time of year his clan left the shadows, the abandoned factories and the slums to walk openly in the whiskey-drenched sunlight. His first time, just fourteen, his powers almost fully emerged, and older boys of the mother clan had treated him like a mascot, a puppy or new-found toy. They encouraged him to jump off things, brand himself with hot irons, slice his skin with knives and razors, just to watch him heal. He'd done it all, endured each agony like a badge for their amusement, their acceptance. His clan master—the man who, in a less austere tribe, he might have called 'Father'—put a stop to it after the older boys hit Kalyan with bricks and sticks, then pushed him out into the middle of the Carnival parade, streaming with blood and screaming, to heal before the horrified crowd. He remembered the flash of sequins, blinding torchlight and contorted faces all around him, the tremulous gasps and squeals of women and the revulsion of men.

Healing hurt, every single time.

The incident caused something of a scene. "It is not", his clan master said between each stroke of the beating he administered, "Something to ever be repeated. Not on any account."

Kalyan's flesh couldn't scar, but each blow of the master's staff had seared itself into the tissue of his memory. He found it hard to remember that Lazarus never had such a harsh induction to their way of life. He was Changed, yes, but he'd come to his tribe late, coddled with all the gentleness of the human world; all those assumptions, those pompous, ignorant declarations of rights, the demands and expectations of security and comfort. Pipe dreams and arrogance, all of it. A stupid idealism founded on an unworkable vision of a distant, improbable Utopia...and yet they still believed in it. Lazarus still believed.

Kalyan struggled with that, aware his unease didn't change facts. That night, back in Deadriver, he foolishly hoped he could change things. He realized now how wrong he'd been. The Agisci Order had come to town under a cloak of suspicion, loaded with riches and supercilious smiles, and not at all what the inhabitants were used to seeing. Deadriver was a town where the Changed were almost as good as normal; traveling monks, even those with sumptuous robes and cedar wood chests, would be unlikely to be met with open arms. Yet the Agisci waltzed straight in like they owned

the place, spewing forth their poison. Kalyan recognized it for that almost at once. Words, bitter as gall, honeyed with hope and promise. Parables of trust, of innocence and unity, yet all the while tainted with circumspection. The brothers claimed to be preparing for Last Moon—some sacred rite for the benediction of the gods during the harsh winter ahead—and said they planned to wait out the hardest months among the townsfolk. Not a fortnight after they arrived, attitudes to the Changed began to alter. Tolerance made way for distrust, and blind eyes turned to snooping.

It worried Kalyan. He thought of leaving then, stealing away in the night before it all turned sour, as he'd seen it do once before. Somewhere else. Only Lazarus had stopped him. They were bonded for life and beyond it, Kalyan felt sure, but he recognized that something needed to be done. The Agisci presented a test that he must see Lazarus face. It came to him in a dream, the garbled way that such visions often did, and he woke in a cold sweat.

He'd known Lazarus wouldn't understand, and why should he? What had he ever seen of humanity's darker side? Lazarus looked no further into the fire than the depth of the flames. It might, Kalyan supposed, be one of his most attractive qualities. He looked over at where his lover lay, slumbering beneath the tattered blankets, his clothes and inhibitions long since discarded.

Deadriver had changed him, maybe. Knocked out some of the hesitancy and insecurity he'd had when they first met. Kalyan remembered telling him during the first week they were together—amid the heat and want, in the depths of that burnished crucible—how he must never again be diffident, ashamed, be anything less than proud.

We are more than all of them, for we are eternal.

Yet Lazarus had shaken his head, his touch cooling Kalyan's fevered skin.

Not more. Just different.

Kalyan had laughed, though now he saw Lazarus' point. Immortality was one thing—and a great, burning brand of a thing, at that—but without the finality of death, the intricacies of loss, defeat and waning, did existence not blur at its edges, let some vital meaning ebb from it? Fear, that gnawing thing which had haunted the breaches of Kalyan's years, urged him to cling still tighter to life, just as he clung to Lazarus...fiercely, and blindly.

Yes. More. Brighter, and greater, and filled to the brim with it.

Lazarus had reproached Kalyan when he mocked the Agisci, telling him he should learn tolerance if he expected it in others. He'd never believed they were truly dangerous. Perhaps that—more than love—was why he'd crept, close to Kalyan's side, into the shadowed chamber in which the monks slept, above Deadriver's only inn. Eight brothers piled into one room, not at all unlike the one he and Lazarus shared now. And a chest, full of riches. *That* was different.

It had been about proving a point, demonstrating that Lazarus would follow him anywhere. A dare, a challenge... a dream. How well Lazarus had fulfilled it! They would teach the Agisci a lesson, remind them not to meddle with those who had no need of their bile and fear, and in so doing, cement the bond between them. Lazarus had probably never stolen so much as a glance before, yet he'd grasped the concept quickly, following in Kalyan's footsteps and loving every minute of it.

Kalyan had to admit it had been exhilarating. He even felt a rush he'd not experienced in far too long—both from the wanton misbehavior, and the equally wanton effect it had on Lazarus once they were alone. Perhaps they might have overstepped the mark. Stealing from monks was one thing...but the stone talisman they found at the bottom of the cedar wood chest did not fit among the tithe monies and fancy jewels. Now, Kalyan crossed to where their packs stood and nudged the bundles with a wary foot. Whatever it was, the Agisci Order wanted it back. That much was clear. No sooner had they run, giggling like children, back to the safety of Kalyan's room behind the adjacent saddler, than he had the first inkling of a mistake.

Certainly, the monks woke quicker and rose in greater anger than he'd expected. Taking breakfast in the tavern the next morning, he and Lazarus had heard one of the Agisci storm past the doorway in a fury the like of which no holy man should surely be capable. Another of the brothers, rushing from the tavern, struck the novice that accompanied him so hard he raised welts on the lad's face. At the earliest indication that the Order intended to send for the Watch, Kalyan decided it would be time to go.

They had no real plan. It was enough for Kalyan that Lazarus showed no desire to return to his tribe, forsaking what links he held to them in favor of this shapeless, shifting existence. Maybe he didn't regard it as permanent; instead considering all this, Kalyan included, the last gasp of some adolescent rebellion. Kalyan supposed that only time could say, and they had plenty of that at their disposal. Unless the Agisci caught up with them, of course. Their guilt must have been obvious from the moment they left town. A palpable anger had trailed them ever since, not to mention the monks themselves. The regrettable incident that had followed, barely four miles outside of Deadriver, had compounded any crime they might have committed. Kalyan wished it could have ended differently, but he'd not expected the man to be armed. And then, there were the dreams....

"What are you thinking?"

Kalyan started at the feel of a hand on his back. He hadn't heard Lazarus rise, and being taken by surprise irked him. He let out a small huff, breath misting in the morning air, the noise animal and ragged.

"Nothing."

"Liar."

Lazarus' fingers slid up the nape of Kalyan's neck, strong and soothing. Yet, somehow, Kalyan didn't want his touch. Not now, where there seemed to be something...watching? Embarrassed at his own fear, Kalyan jerked away, went for his clothes and began to pull them on.

"We need to leave. Get moving again."

Lazarus sighed. "Already?"

"Yes. Any problems?"

"No."

"Good." Kalyan didn't look up, not prepared to challenge the weary note in Lazarus' voice. Instead, he laced his boots and reached for his pack.

His hand shrank from it the second his skin grazed the leather; what was that? A sudden burst of pain, sharp yet fleeting, shot behind his eyes like a tainted star. The dark, twisted world of his dreams closed around him with the damp oppressiveness

of fog. Through all of it, something watched him, the heat of its breath scraping the back of his neck.

"Kalyan?"

Lazarus' touch roused Kalyan's anger though he knew it to be nothing but unsure enquiry and genuine concern. He pulled away, lips curled around a snarl and shoulders aggressively tensed. Lazarus moved back, hands held up in indignant defense.

"All right!"

"Sorry. It's just..." Kalyan trailed off, aware that Lazarus followed his gaze to the pack. Did he feel it too? He must do, surely. The...thing, whatever it might be. Kalyan shook his head. "We need to go. There isn't long."

Lazarus frowned. "You had a dream, didn't you? Last night."

"No."

A great shape outlined in flames against the sky...a thousand hands stretched up, beseeching, lost in the madness of bloodlust...and through it all, the screams of fury, of terror and unending pain...

Kalyan hefted his pack onto his shoulder.

"Three days," he said, more to himself than to Lazarus. "If we stick to the lower road, make good time, we can be in Greenridge before Last Moon and—"

"Claim sanctuary at the Hall." Lazarus nodded. "I know the plan. We get there by midday, make our appeal to the Warden and, under the rule of the festival, he's compelled to pardon any wrongdoer who asks. So long as we can quote the right verse." He shrugged. "Trial by holy book. I suppose even you'll have to admit the law's good for something."

Kalyan grimaced. Behind his eyes, a burning idol rose high into the stars, and its cry was a bay for blood.

They left the inn without a second glance and attracted little attention by their departure. Outside, the sky hung heavy with steel blue clouds, stark against a backdrop of washed-out gray. A chill breeze skipped along the dirt road, blowing grit and detritus before it; yet, in denial of the turning season, sunlight as strong and thick as honey suffused the whole scene. The main street—a collation of miserable shacks and low dwellings—seemed to glow, even the mangy dogs by the roadside painted with a softer light.

Kalyan glanced at Lazarus, taking in the way he looked, his profile sharp against the odd atmosphere, dusty blond hair ruffled by that unsettling wind. He stood, gazing towards the horizon, his lower lip pinched between his teeth, pale blue eyes narrowed in apparent thought. He'd never seemed so...human? No. Vulnerable, Kalyan corrected himself. Like a crocus: perfect and so easily trampled, its glory all the greater for its fleeting nature. That last part was open to question in their case. How *would* they age? No one seemed able to answer. Theirs was too early a generation to judge. The bombs had stopped falling only a century or so ago, and scientific thought—inasmuch as that survived these days—indicated it had taken time for the species to adjust; for people to stop dying from the radiation and start adapting to it.

Maybe they were the first new things to crawl out of the world's twisted rubble. Not human, but almost. Evolution's clenched fist, defiance against destruction.

Kalyan smiled. Lazarus had noticed him staring.

“What?”

Kalyan looked at him a moment longer. Briefly, he considered apologizing for the mess he’d made, wiping away any chance of security they might have had. The impulse passed quickly.

“We should get a move on,” he said. “Storm coming. You won’t slow me down, will you?”

Lazarus scowled. “No more than the broken leg I’ll give you for the next crack like that.”

Kalyan grinned as he began to walk. “You and whose army?” he called back over his shoulder.

Lazarus gave no answer but, after a few paces, Kalyan saw a tiny snake of flame fizzle in the dust by his feet. He stamped it out and laughed, waiting for Lazarus to catch him up. They walked on in companionable silence, falling into the rhythm of the road. Kalyan sneaked the occasional glance at Lazarus, keen to do so while the sun was still bright. There were birds in the trees and, if he concentrated hard on believing it, he could pretend that all was right with the world. Damned monk should never have got in the way. What gewgaw could truly be worth his life?

He’d come upon them at a lonely bend in the road, his horse raising dust and pebbles, and his thick dark cloak flying out behind him. He could have been a rich lord, but for the badge of the silver owl at his shoulder—the Agisci’s sign—and the carved red hilt of the knife he drew, marking him out as brethren. He dropped from his mount, face full of false mercy and wheedling encouragement.

Give me the stone.

Kalyan remembered pushing Lazarus out of the way before the monk lunged with his knife, and then...then that familiar blankness descended. The monk had made the first move, hadn’t he? In any case, he’d needed to be dealt with, and Kalyan had done just that. He didn’t remember the details—he rarely did—only the feeling of surfacing again once it was all over. Some things came back clearly enough: the blood on his hands and face, sticky and thick, and the scent of copper at the back of his throat, both choking and sustaining him. The warmth of the corpse at his feet, cooling rapidly in the damp air, body crumpled and limbs broken, its robes disarranged and eyes staring—wild but unseeing—perhaps into the face of god. The horse was long gone, galloping away in the full flight of terror, blood-stench choking its nose.

Lazarus had thrown up behind a tree while Kalyan hid the body and cleaned up as best he could. Not the best use of their rationed drinking water, but necessary. He’d thought Lazarus would run, but he hadn’t.

Strange, that.

It had never been Kalyan’s intention to expose himself so utterly. He had shown Lazarus the very worst part of his soul—the full horror of what his Changing had done to him, what it left him able to do—without warning or mitigation. All Lazarus had done, aside from lose his meager breakfast, was keep right on walking beside him. Kalyan had wanted to question him about it, but the opportunity hadn’t arisen. He could have run, or let the bandits take Kalyan—whatever’s order they’d been working under—but he hadn’t.

Now, he grinned at Kalyan, questioning and mildly teasing.

“What?”

Kalyan shrugged. "Nothing. Just wondering whether we'll find another place to stay before Greenridge."

"There must be somewhere. It's, what, another two days' travel?"

"About that," Kalyan said cagily. He didn't want to admit to Lazarus that his knowledge of the towns any further from his clan's home turf than Deadriver veered into the extremely sketchy. He'd seen maps, and he knew of Greenridge as the biggest city in the province, but that was different to actually having gone there. He scuffed his foot at a loose pebble in the dirt.

"There'll be something, perhaps. This is mainly mining country, so there's outposts. Grubby little towns springing up everywhere you turn. But, look, even if there's nothing, we've still got food and water. And the tent."

Lazarus groaned. 'Tent' was a euphemism for Kalyan's leather cloak, strung over the nearest and heftiest branch or brushwood they could find, then weighted down with stones. As they'd discovered within days of leaving Deadriver, it leaked and kept out neither wind, mud, nor inquisitive livestock. Kalyan smiled, still mellow with the night's rest, despite his evil dreams. From the bottom of his pack the stone talisman, safely wrapped in a strip of linen, seemed to pull at him. He tried not to think of it and instead stared ahead to where the great gray expanse of sky started to open up into tiny chinks of blue. Lazarus, almost cheerful, began to hum under his breath.

The road remained devoid of travelers for hours. Kalyan congratulated himself on having had forethought enough to take this lower way east instead of the broader, straighter road, which could bear carts and therefore would be heaving with Last Moon pilgrims.

Still, they needed to stay vigilant. The Agisci could well have anticipated the choice. Travel by road—though the only way they could reach Greenridge in time—did not offer the safety they'd have working across the backcountry. Kalyan supposed, with the mountains and their rich mining seams to the west, the lands spread out to the east must be pretty much either barren or the desolate, dusty kind of farms that comprised the region around Deadriver. Perhaps, when the current predicament blew over, he could find a map or some knowledgeable old tavern soak and learn a little more. He hated to feel this adrift, lost and unable to find a foothold on his surroundings. He shook himself. No. Greenridge lay east, and that was enough for now.

Kalyan grew aware of Lazarus mumbling, and it took a moment for him to recognize the blurred litany. Of course, Lazarus had been raised human, and the last dregs of that culture clung on in his earliest memories. As a boy he would have been reminded to say his prayers, read from those holy books. The archaic ritual that marked Greenridge's Last Moon festivities harked back to those times. The idea was that anyone who could quote a pious passage must have enough goodness in him to be judged morally innocent by law, despite the lingering stain of any technical guilt. Kalyan knew he ought to be grateful for it, but he couldn't help his natural skepticism.

"Like the ocean is the god-self, which remains forever undefined. Like the sun, it dwells not alone. For much man is, but...no. There is much that is man, and much that is not yet, but that will...oh, damn! That's not right either. Become? Is that it?" Lazarus narrowed his eyes in concentration, then glanced at Kalyan, a smile breaking

through his seriousness. "Well? If it saves our skins. I don't see you practicing your recitations."

Kalyan snorted. "No. Fair enough, I'll just owe you my life instead."

Lazarus' momentary cheerfulness slipped back towards melancholy as the reality of that statement sunk home.

"I didn't mean—" Kalyan broke off, tensing at a subtle vibration of the air, like far-off thunder. "Shh!"

"What is it?" Lazarus glanced behind them, back towards the nameless little town, now tucked well beneath the horizon.

The dark bellies of storm clouds roiled up in the distance, and Kalyan struggled to separate the feel of them—their silver-copper taste and sharp smell—from what he'd sensed. He closed his eyes and listened to his body, to all the nerves and hidden places he usually tried to ignore, and they quivered into action, taut and eager to feel the light. There was the storm, and the way the land braced itself ahead of it, the flight of animals and the furling of flowers. Then the industry: almost close enough to the mountains now for him to make out the clank of machinery, right at their metal heart. The buzzing of little lives in between. Farmsteads, villages...they flowed like the lifeblood of the land. All this and more Kalyan felt. His senses extended out beyond him, beyond simply being excellent or uncanny, until they moved as one with the world, rode on the air and rippled through the earth. With it came the sense of such enormity he struggled to maintain control, almost slipping out of himself and falling into the abyss; the place where Kalyan ceased to exist and simply ciphered the experience of everything, the raw universal breath of life. If that happened, he might never return. Nothing but blankness, sheer animal reaction and existence. Not safe, especially with Lazarus here. *What if I—no.*

"Kalyan?"

Kalyan pulled back, grappling away from the edges of himself and returning to his present, to his anchor. Hooves on compacted dirt. Four, no, five...from the north-west. Lazarus looked anxiously at him, and Kalyan wanted nothing more than to kiss that full-bruised mouth and wipe the look of fear from his face. He shook his head.

"They're coming. Fast."

"What do we do? Get off the road?"

Kalyan looked around them. Empty wasteland on all sides, save for a narrow strip of brush standing between them and a copse of dry, sun-blasted trees, brittle from the long summer.

"There, maybe. We'll try it. Come on."

Lazarus had already started to move, breaking for cover. Kalyan hesitated, his instincts rebelling against climbing into a space in which he might find himself trapped. Lazarus dragged him through the coarse undergrowth and down behind the trunk of a rough, lichen-plated oak. He didn't let go of Kalyan's arm, instead drawing close to him, chin resting on his shoulder. Despite their uncomfortable position, the intimacy calmed Kalyan, and he began to take deeper breaths. Lazarus' presence filled his lungs; the scents of cornfields and sea salt, of licorice and cotton. Also the stench of fear and determination.

Whatever else, no one could accuse him of cowardice.

Kalyan folded his hand around Lazarus' and squeezed until he felt the answering clench of a desperate grasp.

"Not until we have to," he murmured. "*If* we do. Yes?"

"Yes." Lazarus' breath tickled against his ear. "Kalyan?"

"Shh."

Kalyan hunkered lower, trying to spread his weight and avoid cracking any twigs, dislodging leaves or otherwise revealing their presence. The sound of hoofbeats grew louder and five horses swelled above the horizon, bearing figures in familiar dark cloaks. The silver owl glittered on each man's shoulder. They drew up about two hundred yards back from the copse, and Kalyan could just make out the sweat on the horses' flanks, and the anger in the Agisci's faces. Their voices, faint but audible, rippled with the same ire.

Lazarus tugged on his arm. "What are they saying?"

"Shh!"

Kalyan strained his ears and tried to ignore the whiff of metal he caught on the air. *Metal...and something else. Blood?*

"They were definitely sighted heading in this direction, Brother." A slippery, cajoling voice. Obviously, Kalyan decided, this monk was among the lesser of the group, but not without ambition. He tensed as the figure shifted in its saddle, looking for a moment up towards the copse. "Master Aldo was right; they continued along the lower road, thinking to avoid detection."

"Then they must be here somewhere," a second voice chimed in, sounding younger than the first. A novice, perhaps, like the boy they'd seen take a beating back in Deadriver.

The first Agisci scoffed cruelly. "Quite, Brother. Now, if you'd be so good as to tell us *where*...."

"Enough."

The third voice, terse and abrupt, belonged to a monk sat astride the largest horse. He jerked roughly at its mouth as he brought the animal around to circle the two bickering brethren and, though Kalyan couldn't see his face, he projected an air of uneasy authority, as if he'd rather slit throats than negotiate. The horse whinnied and popped a little bounce on its hind legs, not quite enough to fully rear but sufficient to earn it more harsh treatment from its rider. He twisted in the saddle, surveying the landscape.

"I feel it. The stone is near. It whispers."

Kalyan hardly dared breathe, determinedly not thinking of the talisman hidden at the bottom of his pack. What was this thing, that it exerted such power? He tried to block its image from his mind, but perhaps the Agisci had already caught its scent. Their horses shifted uncomfortably, clearly wanting to keep ahead of the storm. Kalyan glanced up at the sky. Those greasy clouds moved faster now, rolling in like giant waves the color of beetles' backs.

"Kalyan? What are you doing?" Lazarus clawed at his arm. "*Get down!*"

Kalyan paid him no heed. A smell like burnt hair and hot granite filled his nostrils, overlapping and overwhelming the sap of the trees, the lichen, and even Lazarus' proximity. Beneath him, the ground flexed, its form changing. Dry grass became rough stonework, warm to the touch, and the air clung to him, stale and stifling. Kalyan heard the throb of drumbeats—two dozen players, maybe more—pound in frenetic rhythms, layers of sound dancing around each other and spiraling up into the smoke that seemed to cloud his vision. Blue-gray wreaths of it, so thick they felt

sticky, and Kalyan knew he had to push his way through, to get out before he choked.

He made his first faltering steps, the rocks treacherous beneath him, and the sound of drumming grew ever louder. The smoke roiled up, tearing at his face, his arms, and it hissed in his ears, trying to stop him. He pushed forward and a great cry went up, the drums stilled, and he stood before the idol. It towered higher than he'd imagined, broader and bigger, hewn from some dark, ancient stone like the dolmens he'd once seen as a child. Lumpen things, half worn away, sticking up from the scrubby fields outside the city walls. Yet to call this object 'stone' seemed to deny something of its nature, for it glistened and pulsed with life. Its shape was that of an owl, though stylized, with two great brows jutting sharply above hollow eyes, rounded by segmented rims. Somewhere at their centers, dull flames smoldered and gave the effect of a dim, glowering stare. The head, intricately carved to mimic the look of feathers, had set into its heart a huge sharp beak, forever half-open in a silent roar. The flicker of other, darker flames issued from that stone maw, the light dancing red across the owl's chest.

Kalyan stared, totally absorbed by the beat of the fire. It drew him towards it inexorably, his feet dragging on the stones. He knew somehow that this wasn't right, some hidden part of his brain screaming for air, yet still he moved towards the idol. He could already feel the roughness of the stone in his outstretched arms, the heat of its breath and the beat of its lifeblood...for life it had, a strange and vicious kind, drawn still throbbing from the bodies that pressed all around him. Monks, though they had discarded their robes, naked flesh on every side, winding and flailing as anguished moans ripped through the air.

"Kalyan!"

He came back to himself just as the brushwood cracked around him, twigs and low branches giving way. Lazarus still clung to him, trying to drag him back though he knew he'd failed. He let out a low groan, his grip tightening on Kalyan's arm.

"Ohh...what have you *done*?"

The Agisci wheeled around, horses screaming and startled; there could be no escape from confrontation now. Their white faces grew sharper as they closed the gap in the road, robes flying and the beasts' hooves pounding. Barely seconds seemed to pass before the monks were on them, incoherent cries of triumph splitting the air. Kalyan's chest tightened, the breath thumping in his ears and his vision blurring. Beside him, Lazarus tensed, then let loose his first burst of fire. It split from his palms, seared in wide arcs to the dirt path and flared—close enough to the horses to scare them into rearing and unseating two riders—in a wall of yellow and red. He cried out, and the smell of burnt flesh hit Kalyan like a punch to the stomach. The ability to channel fire did not protect the human body from burns, and he'd seen too often the ugly welts and blistered places on Lazarus' flesh. That he healed so fast was barely a consolation. It still hurt, and the greater the flame, the worse the agony.

Now, the Agisci who'd fallen were up and circling about them, knives drawn. The carvings on their blood-red hilts seemed to shift as Kalyan looked at them, squirming like serpents beneath the brothers' hands. Their leader held his prancing horse in the center of the road, the beast still shying with nostrils flared and neck arched at the sigh of the dying flames and the stench of scorched earth. His two adjutants, having

even greater trouble with their mounts, flanked him, their horses jostling up against his, yet when he called out to Kalyan, his voice held no tremor of concern.

"Give yourselves up, my friends. You have been outnumbered, and you carry with you something which belongs to us."

The talisman, at the bottom of Kalyan's pack, seemed to pulse with the renewed desire to break out. He felt it, and it made his head swim, the scent of blood mingling for a moment with the smell of Lazarus' fire, and the ghost-touch of stone beneath his fingers. Kalyan blinked, pulling himself back to focus on this place, this moment, determined to ignore every instinct now clawing at his insides. He glared at the monk, the very picture of grandeur in his thick-woven robes, his face broad and hard of feature, the wind tousling his dark blond hair.

"What do you claim from us?" he demanded, sounding less shaken than he felt.

The monk's eyes narrowed. "You know what, thief. You are thieves and murderers both, and that stolen gold you carry is drenched with blood."

Kalyan scoffed. "Gold? You seek a darker property, I think."

An unpleasant smile crawled across the monk's face and he brought his horse a few paces closer. The beast moved only under protest, its nostrils flaring and steam rising from its high-arched neck as it eyed Kalyan with a wildly uneasy stare.

"Whatever could you mean?" The monk's incredulity sounded hollow. "We simply come seeking justice. It is *your* crimes that have found you out. The whole province has heard what happened to poor Brother Jozac, after he merely came to beg for the return of our goods."

Kalyan glanced at the two figures still wielding blades, and felt Lazarus' shift of weight. He smelled his lover's nervous anger; Lazarus would rather burn the lot of them than let him come to harm, yet he wanted so badly to run. He reeked of it, but not through cowardice. No, rather fear of his own power, fear—even now, after everything—of what he was. Kalyan hated that he felt that way. None of them should, not any more. They might have made mistakes, but...he blinked rapidly, trying to keep a hold on his mind. He could feel it start to shatter away from him, disparate memories and sensations overtaking rational thought. The thick cloak of the night as they snuck into the tavern room in Deadriver—had the talisman been calling to him even then? The thrill, the game. Lazarus, ripened by his own corruption and so perfectly free, giddy from laughter and exhilaration. Deep draughts of kisses exchanged as they looked over their stolen gold, coins flickering in the candlelight. They could have bought a farm. Bought a new life. Security? Maybe...of a kind. All those thoughts and so many more, loose-linked together by threads of cobalt fire, had leaked through Kalyan's mind as they coupled roughly on the floor of his lodgings. He hadn't known it would be his last night in the place he'd come to call home. But that didn't matter now. At this moment—with the storm rolling in over these dreary, faceless plains—there was only the taste of iron at the back of his throat, and Lazarus at his shoulder.

They would not take him.

"The...the monk." Kalyan's words started half-choked in a growl, and the horses pranced back in alarm. The wind whipped harder through the brush, presaging the first fat spots of rain to hit the ground. "This Jozac of yours. He wouldn't have—no. He drew a knife. Like those." He nodded to the two blade-wielding brothers, who

seemed less keen to use their weapons now. “Red hilt. Carved. We did what we had to. And now...you don’t seek justice, but vengeance.”

“You know nothing of us,” the monk warned.

“I know enough! I’ve seen your rites; I know what power your little stone trinket has!”

“Blasphemer!” cried one of the brothers, but the lead monk raised his hand.

“Peace, Brother.”

“But, Father—”

Kalyan spat on the ground. “Father, they call you?”

The monk pulled himself up in the saddle, his full height and breadth not unimpressive.

“I am Father Siru, of Elmllyn Abbey, and I will ask only once more for the...the thing that you carry.”

Kalyan curled his lip. “Call it by name, monk. It calls for *you*.”

“I am fast losing patience! Give us the stone.”

“Take it.”

Kalyan glanced around in surprise, not expecting the steely defiance in Lazarus’ voice. Yet he glared at their challengers coldly, and Kalyan smelt the anger in him.

“Take it,” he repeated. “If you think you can. You don’t plan to let us go, so why expect us to roll over for you? What do you think we are?”

Siru jerked his horse’s mouth and forced the animal forward, its hooves cutting the air as it rose up on its hind legs. His robes rippled in the rising wind and he scowled down at them, his head tipped back.

“I know what you are, Changed One. I see your dangers, and I hear your lies. You are filthy, polluted. Corrupt. Your kind would kill us all! Vicious, unnatural...and you are no better than your—” He shot Kalyan a disparaging glare. “—your creature. Your beast.”

Kalyan growled, but it was Lazarus who pushed forward, a great arc of fire breaking from his hands. It was greater—worse—than anything Kalyan had seen him do before, white-hot and blazing. For one clouded moment, he thought it would split Lazarus down his center, crack him open like a pot left too long in the hearth. His hair crackled, the smell of blistering, burned skin sickly and intrusive. The horses reared, shrieking and flying backward. One fell, and its rider screamed as it rolled over him, the crack of bone audible beneath the flare of flames and the Agisci’s furious cries. Father Siru alone remained determined, reining his mount into the fire despite the horse’s desperate bellowing. The stench of burnt flesh scoured Kalyan’s nostrils and he barely needed to hear the Agisci behind him, leaping with drawn blade, before he was spinning around, his hands raised and his lips pulled back into a furious snarl. The last thing he was aware of was the feel of a man’s neck beneath his fingers, all meltingly soft flesh and the promise of bone, and the red-handled knife that broke so easily in two when he seized it. Unseen drums pounded in Kalyan’s head, and something he could put no name to urged him on until he could almost taste the blood, and feel ancient stone under his feet.

* * * *

Lazarus hadn't wanted any more killing. He'd not said as much, but Kalyan knew. It could be the only reason why he hadn't ripped the monk to pieces, or chased after any of the Agisci when they turned tail and fled, singed and terrified. The fallen horse, a deep bay gelding, with long ears and a Roman nose, had remained behind, stunned and panicky, for which Lazarus would remain eternally grateful. He'd helped them cover a far greater distance than they could have hoped to otherwise, cutting away from the flat scrubland of the plains and into lush, broader land that, very soon now, would bring them to Greenridge.

Fleeing had been the better action, he felt sure of that. No more blood and terror, no more additions to their wrongs. Even so, Lazarus couldn't stop seeing the face of Father Siru, contorted with hatred and rage, and he couldn't forget the anger that had burned in him, hotter than the fire that had left those bloody, weltering sores on his hands, so deep he thought they'd never heal.

He'd never channeled fire that strong before, nor been fueled by such blind fury...he didn't want to repeat it. Yet it must have worked. The monks, their element of surprise and their advantage lost, had run, taking their injured brethren with them. Though Lazarus doubted it would be the last they saw of the Agisci, it had given them time to get away with the gelding, across country. Now, if only he could blot the heat and the screams from his mind, Lazarus felt sure everything could get back on its way to normal...as far as it had ever been since he first met Kalyan.

They made camp at the edge of a small piece of woodland, which lay between two farms. The horse, tethered close by, browsed happily on the sparse greenery, and Kalyan cooked a chicken—which the larger of the two farms would be unlikely to miss—on the campfire. Fed and watered, they sat under the darkening trees. Kalyan had seemed ill at ease since the encounter on the road, and he'd left more space between them than Lazarus felt comfortable with, his mind still apparently somewhere else. Whatever he'd had behind his eyes when he dropped the bleeding monk from his grasp still locked there.

"Hey." Lazarus reached his foot out over the crisp drift of fallen leaves and nudged Kalyan's outstretched leg. "Tell me what you saw."

"Hm?"

"Tell me," Lazarus said again, determined to have his answer. Kalyan looked as if he'd rather brush it off and go back to staring at the flames. Any other night Lazarus might have let him. But not tonight. "It's the talisman, isn't it? It gives you...dreams?"

Kalyan glanced wearily at him over the firelight, the flickering glow painting deep, unwholesome shadows across his face. He sighed.

"No. Visions. You wouldn't underst—"

"Don't! Don't do that. Don't you patronize me," Lazarus finished, uncomfortable with the volume and vehemence of his voice.

He huddled his knees closer to his chest and frowned at the fire, pretending to ignore the look of amusement on Kalyan's face. He could stand most things—even the dark turns his life had taken in recent weeks—but Lazarus couldn't bear to have Kalyan laugh at him. *Bad enough to stand the guilt, but for it now to drive a wedge between us...* He saw it in Kalyan's face; the shadows the talisman cast were changing him. Whatever black hold it could exert, whatever malign power, Lazarus didn't feel it. Not truly. He sensed something stalking the night behind them, forever

in their footsteps and perhaps getting closer, but knew he barely scratched the surface of the thing. *I can't see the way Kalyan can, and I can't—*

“D’you really want to know?”

Lazarus stiffened. He’d not heard Kalyan move, but there he was all the same, so close that his warm breath raised the hairs on the side of Lazarus’ neck. He wanted to pull away, to get up, abandon the fire and Kalyan both and refuse him this satisfaction, but every bone in his body had apparently turned to jelly. Kalyan ran a hand up Lazarus’ arm, maybe meaning to comfort him. If that was his intent, it didn’t work. Lazarus shivered under his touch. Everything in him that still wanted—needed—Kalyan felt like a betrayal, and he hated how easily he gave in, turned his head and sought out that familiar mouth. The warm, seductive weight of Kalyan’s tongue slowly wore away his defenses, and Lazarus clung to him, as if he could blot out the rest of the world and pretend none of it existed.

“They’re not monks,” Kalyan murmured, his lips still crushed against Lazarus’.

“Not as you know them.”

“Then what are they?” Lazarus asked the question he knew he was supposed to, but he couldn’t resist adding a sarcastic twist. “Demons?”

Kalyan’s soft exhalation of laughter filled his mouth.

“Don’t be so melodramatic. No, they’re...they’re not men of god.”

Lazarus pulled back and looked seriously at his lover in the dimming firelight. It wasn’t a phrase he’d expected to hear Kalyan use.

“Which god?”

“Any of them. It doesn’t matter. They’re not holy. D’you see? It’s about power. What they do....”

“You’ve seen it? In the...visions?”

Lazarus shivered, suddenly cold without Kalyan’s arms around him. He thought he’d pushed too hard, that he’d hear nothing else about this tonight, but Kalyan just shook his head and frowned down at the dirt.

“I know. I’ve seen it before. Under a different name, but....” His frown deepened.

“It was meant to have ended.”

Lazarus reached for him, tracing his fingertips up the back of Kalyan’s neck, feeling the tension in his muscles, the latent anger and rage. There was still so much he didn’t know about this man. He leaned his forehead against Kalyan’s, unsure whether to say ‘tell me’ or ‘don’t tell me’. *Maybe I don’t want to know, or I’ll find out more than I want to.* Either way, words didn’t come easily. Instead, Lazarus held him tightly, molding his body to the angles of Kalyan’s form. He snaked his fingers beneath the inconveniences of clothes, needing to feel the skin, sweat and heat that proved they were still alive, still real. Kalyan responded in kind, those devilish teeth grazing Lazarus’ tongue, ever heavy with the threat of a killing bite...or at least, for them, a painful one. It seemed strange to Lazarus that he could be so gentle, but—just as always—he was. Kalyan touched him like he feared Lazarus might break, or fly away.

Funny that he could think that, when a million suns would have to die before I’d leave.

He unlaced Kalyan’s hose with trembling hands, not yet prepared to lay himself totally open and vulnerable out here in the wilds, but equally unable to break away from what he’d started. Kalyan rose to greet him, an elegant serpent glistening in the

firelight. He leaned back on his elbows as Lazarus sank greedily down, and a low sigh broke from his throat, rustling through the bushes like a summer breeze. Lazarus pushed as far as he could, buried his nose in the dark thatch of his lover's crotch and, thus impaled, hardly dared move. Utterly filled, soul and spirit, Lazarus felt the beat of Kalyan's lifeblood on his tongue. He drew back, up the shaft before engulfing him again, over and over until Kalyan's hips worked in involuntary spasms and his hoarse sighs became smaller, needier noises. The tiny part of Lazarus' brain not currently occupied wondered whether there was any other time he commanded this much influence, but he didn't pause to consider it. Instead, with the fat head of Kalyan's cock between his lips, and those powerful thighs twitching beneath his teasing hands, he slid home for the final peak of his lover's ecstasy, drinking in every tremor, cry, moan and spasm.

Finally, the quiet broken only by Kalyan's ragged, deep breaths, Lazarus sat up and wiped his chin. The fire needed stoking, its guttering flames down to dull red stumps of their former glory. Kalyan still sprawled, unlaced and debauched, like some sluttish woodland sprite. He looked up at Lazarus through heavy-lidded eyes and reached briefly for him, the gesture lost in his fatigue. His face tugged at the deepest parts of Lazarus' chest, touching the already swollen hub of something that ran so deep within him it felt as if it could burst and wipe out his whole existence with its flood. In that moment, he wanted to weep, to fling himself down besides Kalyan and confess his love more times than anyone could possibly bear to hear, and yet it would all still be inadequate. He didn't understand it, and the shadows of it hung too close around him.

Lazarus wished his mind could be more open, the way Kalyan's was, though he knew he'd never have those gifts. He dreamed, nonetheless, of thoughts that moved between them with the deftness of kisses, a perpetual connection that could never be severed. Maybe he'd even find out the truth once in a while. Learn something of that closely guarded past. He reached up and scrubbed at his mouth again with the back of his hand, convinced by the look on Kalyan's face that he'd missed something. His taste, as bold and overpowering as he could be, coated Lazarus' tongue.

"I'll, uh...I need to get more wood." Lazarus cleared his throat. "Um. For the fire."

He turned and headed into the trees, glad of these shadows at least, to mask his sudden, clumsy embarrassment. After everything, and yet he felt so inferior—and he shouldn't, he knew that. Today, hadn't he saved them both? The memory of the flames came back to him, the pain and the stink of burnt hair and singed flesh. The screams of the horses. No. He should feel any number of things, with shame and guilt near the top of the list, but he didn't. All that overwhelmed Lazarus was the spectacular, coruscating fire of loving Kalyan and—what scared him the most—the knowledge that nothing else truly mattered. However sensibly he tried to think of it, it just didn't. Not even the death of the monk, not any more. What had been his name? Brother...Jozac, the others called him.

Behind Lazarus, a twig snapped. The breath lurched in his throat in the few seconds before he heard Kalyan's voice.

"We'll be in Greenridge soon, you know."

Lazarus stooped to pick up a dry branch, pausing to brush off a spider that still scrambled for purchase. "I know."

"You could still go from there. Away. Free and clear, once you've had the Warden's pardon."

Kalyan's voice burrowed its way down Lazarus' spine, hitting every nerve it passed along the way.

He shook his head. "Don't mock me."

"I mean it. You know you're too good for me, don't you?"

Lazarus turned, the branch still in his hand, and stared. "*What?*"

"You are." Kalyan stepped closer, the musk of his scent strong against the dusty, ancient smell of the trees. He kissed Lazarus softly, his arms blocking out the night's chill. "You really are."

Lazarus closed his eyes, content to take what he gave without question, and wanting very much just to return to the fire's warmth and make use of the blankets they'd spread out on the ground.

"The talisman," he murmured, "and what you said about the monks. How you'd seen it before, under a different name.... Tell me?"

Kalyan took the branch from his hand and frowned at it. When he spoke, his voice was uncharacteristically small and distant.

"When I was a boy, there was a church in the city, not far from where we lived. All boarded up and overgrown. Our Master took some of us there a few times, to see the stained glass. It was very beautiful, but dark...caged up, you see? Iron bars on the windows, so they couldn't be broken, but that meant the light couldn't shine through. The colors were just...dank. Just smudges. I remember that the master said we should learn from that. To cage something up is not to hide its true nature, but only dampen it. And that *is* a crime."

Kalyan shrugged and swung the branch aimlessly at the undergrowth.

"The monks came soon after. They opened up the church, let the light shine through the windows. They fed the down-and-outs who slept in the park. Everyone thought they were doing good. But when they preached—they started that, too—it wasn't about charity or compassion. It was blame, and isolation. And people listened. The way we were treated began to change, and then there were the comments in the street, the spitting...attacks. They began to seek us out, in the places we hid. Wherever we went. It had never been easy to live among humans, but *they* made it impossible. The church burned down in the end. Stupid. Senseless. It was a group of boys—human boys, though the Changed were blamed. The children responsible were found. Beaten to death."

Lazarus winced. "The monks did it?"

"No, worse. The down-and-outs from the park. D'you see, love? It poisons what it touches, that power. Binds hearts and controls minds, yet those bastards always claimed their hands were clean."

Slowly, they had been walking back to the fire, its orange glow breathing fresh life into both their faces. Lazarus frowned. "You think that's what the Agisci are? Liars?"

Kalyan shrugged, squatting to feed the dry branch to the flames. It crackled and caught light, thin reels of smoke stinging Lazarus' eyes. He blinked.

"Thieves," Kalyan said. "Not so much liars as thieves. They have something those other monks never had. Something much worse than words."

He stood abruptly and—though it might just have been the smoke—Lazarus thought he looked uneasy, almost afraid. He saw Kalyan glance towards their packs and bite his lip.

“The talisman? That’s it? But what—”

Kalyan turned to him, and it was no feat of imagination. The fear was painted in hollow shapes across his face.

“Look, what if...the way we are, right? Changed? What if other things could be affected too? Things more than flesh. What if we *are* evolution in action, but it’s not just humans that are Changing...what if it’s the whole planet?”

Lazarus frowned. “You’re not making any sense.”

“Think about it. This...this thing.” Kalyan dived for his pack, scrambling to pull out the talisman, still swaddled in its linen wrap, and he pushed it into Lazarus’ hands as if it had burned him, or he feared to touch it. “It calls to people. It called to them, didn’t it? You heard Siru say it whispered to him. And it...well, I know it has certain effects.”

Kalyan looked down at his feet, as near as he ever got to humility or admission. Lazarus turned the little totem in his fingers and studied it; the first time he’d really seen it close enough to appreciate the details of its carving. At first, the owl’s shape seemed crude but—when he examined it; really looked at it instead of just judging it—he saw the image’s reality wasn’t what counted. Despite its size, the talisman conveyed everything about the essence it represented...the relentlessness, the viciousness and the intelligence of the sacred bird, and it seemed to Lazarus that the fire’s glow gave it the illusion of life. He shivered.

“You think this stone...what? It can feel? Think?”

“No.” Kalyan snatched it back, pressing the thing back into the strip of linen and twisting it round, hiding that sharp little face from view. “I don’t know. You asked me to tell you, so I’m telling you. That’s all. It’s obviously some kind of powerful symbol to them. And it’s old stone. I’d bet this is carved after a bigger idol, and that’ll be the crux of it. I.... Well, I’d think so.”

Lazarus pressed his lips together, annoyed by this endless secrecy. “You mean that’s what you saw? In your vision?”

Kalyan said nothing, but the twitch of his mouth was confirmation enough.

“Fine.” Lazarus turned from him and went back to sit by the fire, jabbing angrily at the flames. “Don’t tell me.”

* * * *

Notwithstanding the frosty remains of argument between them, the rest of their journey lacked incident. Kalyan wondered it was due to luck or some decision on the Agisci’s part. Lazarus might have sent Father Siru’s little pack running with their tails clamped down, but that didn’t mean some greater peril didn’t await them. Nonetheless, they reached Greenridge at dawn on the day of Last Moon.

Their first glimpse of the city was the walls, rising up against a pale-washed sky with steely teeth of flint and stone. Farmland stretched out beyond them, and gates lay to the east and west quarters, their approaches thronged with carts, horses, and people on foot. Relief seeped through Kalyan; no matter if there were Agisci here or

not, it would be easy enough to disappear among this crowd. He pulled up the cowl of his cloak and winked at Lazarus.

"Nearly there, my love."

Lazarus smiled tightly and said nothing, adjusting his grip on the gelding's reins. He looked in need of a good meal, Kalyan thought, and resolved to make that the second stop on their list: an inn with hot water, hot food and a warm bed. After they'd eaten, washed, made love...well, he'd think about that when the time came. A whole new future awaited them.

One of the first things they had to do was sell the horse. The dung-sweet scent of an ostler and dealer's yard sprawled out close to the east gate, and Kalyan left Lazarus holding the animal while he went to strike a deal with the fat, red-faced man who ran the place. He seemed surprisingly gullible for one in his line of work, happy enough to accept Kalyan's word on the horse's history, or perhaps just happy to get such a good price on it. Either way, Kalyan nudged Lazarus in the ribs as they walked away from the yard.

"Oh, come on. You know we couldn't hang onto a stolen nag. Don't look so sad. You weren't going to name him, were you?"

Lazarus pulled a face and, emboldened and liberated by the feeling of being hidden among the crowds, Kalyan draped an arm around his neck and kissed his cheek, delighted by the blush he elicited.

"Let's find an inn. We should make the most of the time we have here, don't you think?"

Lazarus made a half-hearted attempt to wriggle out of his grasp and muttered a reproach, but Kalyan felt the heat of his desire nonetheless. He grinned. Yes, city life felt good, and Greenridge looked to be a nice town. Busy, but nice. Buildings crowded close together in discordant lines, jostling up to the streets, every window opening onto some glimpse of activity, some bustle or excitement. The scents of a dozen different food stalls hung the air—boiled onions, fried dough, spiced meat, all vying for supremacy—while traders, hawkers and vendors cried their wares and last-minute, once-in-a-lifetime offers.

Kalyan pressed through the seething mass of people, checking Lazarus stayed close, and headed for the main square. The Warden's Palace, seat of the civic council and genesis of all local law and statute—far more sophisticated than the drunken Watchmen who kept the peace back in Deadrive—occupied one whole side of the plaza. Its vast white columns and porticos, set sharp against clean red brick, for a moment stunned Kalyan into faltering steps and awed silence. Lazarus almost cannoned into the back of him, and followed his gaze up to the rows of dark-glassed windows, turned to sheets of gold by the sun's bright embers. The last of the light before the winter...and tonight, the Last Moon to rise on the fruits of the year.

"Is that where we go?" Lazarus asked, nodding to the gantry that had been erected in the square before the palace.

Liveried guards stood around the platform and, to Kalyan, it looked a little more like a gallows than it ought to have. He swallowed heavily.

"I think so."

He reached behind and grasped Lazarus' hand, seeking the answering pressure of his fingers. That initial lightheartedness crushed out of him, he could have sworn a dark, rusty voice whispered at the back of his mind, and unseen flames licked his

feet. Kalyan glanced around them, convinced he would see Agisci among the throng, half-expecting Father Siru and his thugs to return. His thoughts settled on the talisman, and how badly he wanted rid of the thing. They should have buried it along the road, but for the fact that wouldn't assure its destruction. Kalyan felt it pulling at him again, and he forced himself back to the present. Not long now. Once they had legal pardon, the Order couldn't touch them. They'd likely still try, but without the balance of law on the Agisci's side, at least there would be a chance they'd fail.

Waiting for the ceremony to begin was the worst part. Amid the day's festivities, time seemed to pass so slowly, yet they couldn't pause to enjoy any of it. Though his stomach growled with its customary impatience for food, Kalyan couldn't stand the thought of eating, and he kept seeing terrors in the crowds, imagined figures clad in dark robes with silver owls at their chests.

Lazarus was so much braver than Kalyan had given him credit for, showing far less sign of nerves. He settled them both at a table in the tavern closest to the square, near enough to the fire to appreciate its warmth, yet within easy view of the door, and he spent the last of his own money on beer.

"Drink up," he said, as Kalyan stared at the froth riming the top of his tankard.

Kalyan drank. What had been refreshing after the loneliness of the road now grew overwhelming. Too many people, too many smells and sounds muddled up in each other, scents criss-crossing and trampled into the dirt and the incessant *noise*.... Had it been so long? It reminded him of home, his first home, and the messy chaotic beauty of Carnival, which in turned dredged up more painful memories, until everything balled itself together into a web of conflict and Kalyan just wanted to turn and seek the road again. That, and the promise of Lazarus' body, safe and all-enveloping beneath the velvet sky. Or, at the very least, beneath the inconvenient and cramped cover of their makeshift tent which, for all its failings, had nurtured happy hours during the journey.

Most of all, Kalyan realized with surprise, he truly did crave forgiveness. The theft, the blood spilled...every wrong he'd committed deserved restitution and, even if his visions of the Agisci were true, there were better ways to tackle them. He could speak with someone here, surely. The Warden, or some representative of the Council who would be able to hear his concerns. They weren't known, after all. Nothing need mark him out as Changed, or criminal....

Kalyan stopped himself mid-pipe dream and listened to the train of his own thoughts. Madness! He'd become everything he'd first mocked in Lazarus; some silly, desperate ingénue. No. Poison was poison, and they would make their plea, then get out as fast as possible. Dump the talisman in the river, spend the gold on fresh horses, clothes and food, then get as far from here as they could. South, perhaps, towards the possibilities of cheap land, easy living and total anonymity. From there, who knew? They had eternity to consider their options.

He looked across the table at Lazarus, apparently engaged in some similar vein of deep thought. His face, at perfect repose, reminded Kalyan of the stone angels mounted on the outside of the church from his childhood. Maybe it had all started there, when he first learned what true power meant. He remembered watching from the shadows as the down-and-outs beat the boys who'd broken the windows. Children, no more than his own age. Tears stained his cheeks as he pleaded with his master to let him go to their defense. The man had just gripped his shoulders tighter,

made him stay, made him watch and learn but remain uninvolved. Those were the ways of humans, he said, the affairs of humans, and the rottenness that marked their very core.

Kalyan watched Lazarus sip his beer, and thought of the broken little bodies in the moonlight, and the hungry old men who killed because they were told to. He'd kill if Lazarus asked him, he knew. Easily. Hard to admit, at first, but true.

Does he know he could do that to me?

Whether he knew or not, Lazarus' power remained stronger than any trinket of stone. For now.

He looked up and smiled at Kalyan. "Ready? We should get down there. It'll be noon before long."

"All right."

They made their way down to the platform in front of the palace, just as the bell tower chimed. Crowds had gathered, raucous and jubilant, with some supplicants already trying to scale the wooden steps. The Warden—a man of about fifty, his gray hair close shorn and his face wrought with furrows—emerged to a chorus of cheers, and held up his hands to the people in greeting. His thick purple cloak shone through with threads of gold, catching the light as he turned, his boots military in style but far too well-polished to have seen much action between the platform and his bedchamber. His tunic, of startlingly white cloth, bore the symbol of three golden palle over a blue line, like a river, which Kalyan took to be the city's crest.

They watched, pressed in among the crowd, while the cheering died down and the call sounded for those ready to plead. Bodies pushed forwards, the first wave a group of rag-tag lads who looked the very stereotype of petty thieves and drunkards. They elbowed the eldest of their number, perhaps no more than nineteen, to the fore and he stared slack-jawed at the crowd, to a chorus of cheers and laughter.

"W-w-we come...we come before you, my lord," he began, his voice squeaking with nerves, "charged by Alcus Thorp, the vintner, that we did thief six barrels of wine from his cellar, and we plead benefit of the holy writ."

"Then speak, boys." The Warden smiled graciously. "We shall see if you are judged penitent."

He passed the lad a scroll of parchment, on which Kalyan supposed written the name and number of the verse he had to recite. Faltering, voice still quaking and lips dry, he began, announcing the names of his fellows and framing the first words of the recitation.

Lazarus tugged at Kalyan's sleeve and pulled him on through the crowd, making the most of their occupied attention to get closer to the platform. Kalyan followed blindly, not realizing how much he'd started to sweat until his foot was on the first rough-hewn stair. Lazarus looked at him, the corner of his mouth bent around a small, encouraging smile.

"Trust me," he mouthed.

Kalyan nodded and, as the gaggle of lads—jubilant with their success—left the gantry to mixed cheers and shouts, he and Lazarus passed the liveried guards, ready to make their own plea. Close up, the Warden seemed frailer, his tunic possibly padded at the shoulders and his boots fitted with unobtrusive little lifts. He smiled his succinct, professional smile at Lazarus and raised an arm to the crowd.

"Speak, friends! Your names, the charges, and let the day render you free!"

Kalyan's breath came short in his chest, the assembled faces stretched out below swimming before him, endless waves of flesh and open, hollering maws. He felt the call of the visions again—the talisman?—and the world seemed once more to try to slip from him, pierced by licks of flame and the worn smoothness of ancient stone. Lazarus' voice cut through it and Kalyan focused on that, standing as close to him as he dared, taking in his presence and his scent. His words rang out across the square, compelling silence from the crowd. When had he, the imperfect crocus, grown so very confident?

"I am Lazarus Ilix. My companion is Kalyan Say. We have traveled from the town of Deadrider, many miles to the west, and we come before you to plead by writ, in full conscience of our wrongs."

The Warden nodded, motioning for his attendant to draw the next scroll, each demand for verse and chapter selected at random from a chest that stood beside him. Kalyan sniffed, detecting a familiar scent. A chest of cedar wood, it seemed. He frowned as the Warden passed Lazarus the scroll and, still playing to the people, as his duty of the day demanded, asked them:

"You are well received, friends. Speak your charges, then we shall hear your plea."

Lazarus opened his mouth, but a voice cut across the square, echoing back from the stones.

"They are murderers, my lord! Thieves, killers, and defilers of our holy Order! To let them plead the writ is obscene."

Susurrations of suspicion, disbelief and shock snaked through the crowd, the noise of hooves on cobbles announcing the presence of a familiar band. Father Siru and his monks—one of their number with his leg bound and splinted—rode into the square, and he rose in the saddle to point at the gantry.

"They are Changed, and they are *damned*! They stole tithe money from our Order at Deadrider, and they killed Brother Jozac when he tried to retrieve it. They assaulted us, too, stealing Brother Mara's horse and leaving him for dead with his broken leg...they would have killed us all had we not fled."

Kalyan tensed, aware of the crowd's shifting mood. If they were not to be torn limb from limb where they stood, they needed to get away. He searched for an exit route, but the liveried guards at the edges of the platform suddenly seemed less decorative and decidedly better armed.

"We acted in self defense!" Lazarus shouted above the onslaught of angry jeers. "Yes, we did steal, and for that we will plead. Yes, we have spilled blood. But the law of this day makes no distinction, and—"

"The Last Moon law is *human* law!" Father Siru shrieked, reining his horse in towards the platform.

He evidently had the populace on his side, and the Warden stepped forward, his hands raised in an appeal for calm before a full-scale riot erupted.

"Please, peace! Peace! I have no wish to see this venerable tradition dragged down to a gutter fight. It is true, the plea of writ makes no distinction on the severity of the crime, though I have never before presided over a charge of murder. Lazarus Ilix, do you agree to take the plea, knowing if you fail you will be remanded to our court and summarily charged with these crimes? The penalty is death."

An absurd momentary stab of amusement pushed Kalyan to laugh, though he choked it down...the image of an executioner trying to hang them while they simply dangled there, feet swinging idly in the breeze. Useless, unless of course they used the axe.

Anxiously, he sought Lazarus' gaze, but his fragile crocus had turned to hardened oak and didn't even bother to look at him.

"I accept."

Distant drums beat in Kalyan's head. Something was wrong, so wrong about all of this...yet he couldn't quite make himself move, nor grasp the loose thread that held his thoughts together. He heard the rustle of the scroll unrolling, and Father Siru's indignant complaints hushed by the city guard.

An eerie quiet fell over the square, and Lazarus took a deep breath.

"Of Crimes and Punishment. Verse Six.

"When from the house of the soul a man wanders with eyes closed, his spirit forsaken, and commits a wrong, he must seek the gate of the blessed. Three times shall he knock and not gain entrance, three times sit without until he recall to his being the god-self.

"Like the ocean is that god-self, which remains forever undefiled. And it is like the sun, which dwells not alone, but in the shadow of the moon. For while there is much in man that is, there is much that is not yet, but is becoming.

"That which becomes, it shall grow only from love, and love shall grow only from trust. Then shall the man be free."

Lazarus finished and his hand shot out, grasping Kalyan's so tightly that he thought he'd have broken fingers. A moment's murmured conference passed between the Warden and his attendant, then the latter held up his book of law, the passage in it written just as Lazarus had spoken. A howl went up from the crowd, bellows of incandescent rage from the Agisci and, into the din, the Warden proclaimed his official pardon.

"...that, by holy writ, you be here washed clean of your crimes. Let no man seek to judge nor carry vengeance for that which is, from this moment, deemed undone."

Kalyan stared up at the sky where, pale against the blue, the ghostly daylight shadow of the Last Moon hung, mirrored beside the low-slung sun. They had done it...no. Lazarus had done it, and Kalyan owed him his life. Or, at least, he would do if they got off this platform without being torn apart by a hostile mob. The Warden's entreaties for calm ignored, he turned to them, a worried frown on his face. He looked, to Kalyan, ever more like someone's kindly old grandfather, lost and dwarfed by his position.

"This is not right, not right at all. You must come through the palace, leave by the back entrance. I cannot have this chaos tear apart everything that I..."

He ushered them to the steps, motioning for the guards to come to their defense as the first missiles hurled from the crowd. A beer bottle smashed on the wooden platform and, the Warden beside them, they hurried away from the throng. He looked up at Kalyan briefly, his expression one of unfocused confusion.

"Are you really...like that? Like the monks say?"

Kalyan stared, amazed that the Warden could wonder that at this particular moment, but he took no breath to answer. The guard hurried them—officials, attendants and plaintiffs, Changed and human all alike—up the stone stairway and

into the cool, gloomy grandeur of the palace. The Warden brushed part of a bread roll, sticky with some kind of red sauce, from his tunic, which was no longer sparkling white.

As the guards and twittering attendants were engaged locking the doors and plotting how to regain control of the situation, the Warden regarded Kalyan and Lazarus with that fuzzy, distracted stare.

"My apologies...gentlemen. And you were word-perfect, sir."

Lazarus bowed his head, shooting a sidelong look at Kalyan.

"Thank you, my lord. We regret everything that's happened, and if we can—"

"Oh, now...no. No. We shall have to have these, um, these monks in for an audience, of course." The Warden frowned. "See what they actually claim occurred. If you'd consent...um. Yes. Come...come into my privy chamber, won't you? We shall arrange a written record, and then I think fast horses for you. Hmm. Yes, that's for the best."

He moved off ahead of them, going to a door across the marble-floored hall. Lazarus glanced at Kalyan and raised his eyebrows.

"Well? Something to be said for the law, isn't there?"

"I suppose," Kalyan agreed doubtfully. "Even law as doddering as him."

"He reminds me of my clan father, old Temmik." Lazarus grinned and grazed his knuckles across the back of Kalyan's hand. "Come on. Tonight, when the moon's risen, we'll be well away from here. Just you and me."

Kalyan smiled at the depth of want burning in his lover's face.

"Can't come soon enough," he murmured, and they followed the Warden into his chamber.

The room was large, the dark blue ceiling vaulted and each boss painted with a golden star. Bookcases lined the walls, and an old teak table stood on the center of a rich green carpet. High, leaded windows leant light to the chamber while protecting it from prying eyes, and thick white candles burned in wrought iron sconces. The Warden closed the heavy oak door behind them and gestured to the plush-upholstered chairs that surrounded the table.

"Please, sit. Take your ease. I am...yes, I am very eager to learn more of you and your, uh, your kind."

Kalyan frowned. Something didn't smell right. The man's voice had changed, losing a little of that faint, inveigling tone. The Warden no longer sounded like an old, confused man. He turned and saw the flash of a blade, its hilt blood-red and covered with carvings that pulsed before his eyes, never staying still long enough to be examined. Beside him, Lazarus started back, already raising his hands, prepared to bring forth his flames. Kalyan reached for him.

"Don't! You'd be signing our death warrants."

The Warden smiled, unfastening his purple cloak with one hand and casting it aside, revealing the silver chain at his neck and—hanging from it like a spider from the silken thread of its web—the effigy of a tiny silver owl. He held out one blue-veined hand, his movements those of a man unhampered by his age.

"You will give me the stone. I believe you know its powers. It talks to you, does it not, Kalyan Say? You hear it whisper, although I don't think you understand yet quite how to *listen*."

Lazarus looked between them. "Kalyan? Wh-what do you mean?"

"It's the heart of their Order." Kalyan tore his gaze from Lazarus and glared at the Warden. "Isn't it? The stone the talisman is carved from. It's alive...it feels, it *knows*. It controls them, though they think they have it captive. And they need it. They can't bear to be parted from it."

"Enough!" The Warden's lip twitched impatiently. "Give it to me, thief. Quickly, or I shall put my knife to my own vein, then call the guard and accuse you. I might not have the strength to cut off your head, Changed One, but I'll wager eight or ten well-armed men could. What say you?"

"Do it," Lazarus murmured. "Just do it, Kalyan."

Kalyan glanced at him, and saw all he needed to know in his face. Worn by fatigue, worry, pain and the host of threats that had followed them ever since Deadriver, Lazarus looked tired, and Kalyan knew just how he felt. It was in his eyes, and the faint lines that traced his lips. The thought slipped between them like a kiss, every detail of the plan exact, and their every motion in concert. Kalyan reached slowly for his pack, withdrew the talisman and unwrapped it. The beat of drums, its living pulse, thrummed in his head and he struggled to ignore it, to keep his strength and hold out the little trinket to the Warden.

He seized upon it like a child to a teat, his face lighting up with thankful hunger, his knife drooping. Kalyan braced himself and looked away, hearing Lazarus' dreadful cry as he brought the flames to birth from the furthest depths of his ability. They welled up from his feet and through his whole body, burning and consuming bright as a phoenix, the stink of his smoldering flesh and his agonized yells filling the room. The Warden caught the full strength of the fire, and his screams tailed into a high-pitched death rattle like nothing Kalyan had ever heard, his own pain distracting him from the awful sight of that flailing, seared body. The old man died curled around the talisman and—in the moment before the stone cracked in his hand—it too seemed to scream. That shot through Kalyan's head like a knife, and hurt far worse than the burns.

The whole room ablaze and the fire spreading, they moved fast. The guards were already bursting in, and the flames swept over them and out into the marble hall. Lazarus still screamed, his skin healing over the burns and blisters as they ran, red-raw and virtually naked, clothes and hair long since singed away. They made for the back of the palace, the workings of the place where stables and fast horses could be found, their appearance enough to stun any opposition for the time it took to pass them. Kalyan dragged Lazarus behind him, each footfall still blinding agony as their flesh regenerated. He'd never know the meaning of cold again, he suspected; that awful heat, the heart of the fire, would stay with him always.

They took two geldings from the yard, terrifying the young groom who'd been brushing them down. Bareback and with only head collars, the horses panicked into full flight by the smell of burnt skin and blood that still cloaked these strange creatures, it was a ride no sane person would ever wish to repeat. Greenridge's west gate was not guarded as well as it might have been, with half the city flocking towards the billows of smoke and flame that now lit up the sky. It would take days to put out the fire and, like as not, it would wipe out a great deal with it.

Now, several miles away from the city, far from the road and just beyond the boundaries of a small farmstead that—as of quite recently—was missing laundry

from its washing line, apples from its barn and certain small items from its feed and tack store, a campfire burned low on the ground.

"Yuck," Lazarus announced, picking a piece of apple from between his teeth. "I think I've just eaten half a maggot."

Kalyan looked up from his seat on the cool, damp ground. "It's protein. Don't complain."

"Shut up." Lazarus threw the apple core at him. "Anyway, you look awful."

Kalyan raised a hand and ran his fingers over the fine stubble where once his thick chestnut hair had been. Lazarus sported a similar shaven look, though his eyebrows had already started to come back in. Both of them still felt tender to the touch, their stolen clothes rough against skin too new to bear much. He smiled.

"So do you. Absolutely appalling."

He held out his arm and Lazarus came to sit by him, as far from the campfire as he could get. Their bodies barely touched but his proximity was enough and, Kalyan suspected, the link between them could never really be severed anyway. He felt Lazarus as close to him as his own breath, or perhaps as the sound of distant, unseen drums. He'd not heard those since the talisman cracked, though he doubted they had been truly silenced. Like the Agisci, the heart of the stone remained out there somewhere, and it wouldn't rest until it found them.

But tonight, that didn't matter.

"Look." Kalyan touched Lazarus' arm gently and pointed up at the sky.

High above them, the great round disc of the Last Moon winked in a patchwork of deep blue shot through with stars. Though it signaled the coming of winter, they knew the flames would continue to burn.

M King

About the Author

M. King resides in West Cornwall, England, behind a keyboard and a vat of coffee.

She writes a wide range of fiction, often with a GLBT bias, and thinks the world would be a nicer place if people read more. Well, her world might be, anyway. She holds qualifications in art history, Classics, and medieval studies, and enjoys long muddy walks with her dogs.

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