

LOVEYOU DIVINE

# THE GOLDEN HORSE



M. KING

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**The Golden Horse  
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# **The Golden Horse**

**By**

**M. King**

Cinderella was the horse's name. A true beauty with fine, clean legs, a pretty little head, and the fastest paces a man could ever hope to win money on. Shem's da had bred her dam and sire both himself; rightly proud of a bloodline known as one of the best in the country. "There's only one thing as would mek it better," he'd say in the evenings, sitting afore the fire and gazing speculatively into the flames. "Only one thing."

"What's that, Da?" Shem would say obediently, a grin on his face ahead of the answer he already knew.

His father would suck his teeth and draw in a long, deep breath.

"Royal Sharna," he'd say, like a prayer, the words all gold-hued and sacred.

The stallion belonged to the squire at the big house on the top of the Downs. A thoroughbred with the fire of the legendary Canterbury Arabian in his veins and a string of Derby and Cup wins to his name.

"Wi' speed like that," Shem's da would murmur, "and a gait like my gal's...there'd be no horse as could catch the foal I'd breed, save the steed o' the Devil hissel'!"

He'd said it so often, dreamed the same dream so long, that no one believed a thing would come of it. The men laughed, the women teased, and Shem's ma rolled her eyes heavenward, muttering a pox on all horse dealers under her breath.

Shem didn't mind it. His life, as long as he remembered, had always been about his da and the horses. They calmed him, made him feel good about himself even on his darkest days, when the world was lonely and he felt outcast and unwanted.

The camp had been home all his life, too: The one place to which they always returned. Through the year he'd go with his da to all the fairs, up to Stow and Appleby and back home down to Horsemonden, buying and selling and soaking up all the old men's wise talk about horseflesh. As a nipper, Shem's da used to put him up on the great big stallions, sit him there with nothing but their long, shaggy manes to hold onto and have them trot up and down. They'd flash their paces while he leaned on a fencepost, pulled on his pipe, and said to prospective buyers, "Tha' see 'ere? 'Tis my own boy, that is, and he ain't gonna fall off. Tha's how gentle that horse be. A right keeper."

When the deals were done, hands clapped and spitting over, he'd set Shem down again, and ruffle his hair with fingers that smelled of baccy and straw.

"Good job," he'd say. "My little keeper."

As Shem grew older, he was allowed to take part in the harder work: washing the horses in the river, helping tack up before sulky and trotting races, and—in the months his da brought his mares to the boys—holding ropes and taking the strain for the loud, messy, dangerous procedure of covering. It was a good life. It gave Shem, like many boys his age, a rough,

ready introduction to sex. It helped make sense of things, too, as he hit that difficult stage at which, perhaps, in a different life, he'd have struggled.

He knew enough of nature – of rams slaughtered because they like their own kind better than ewes and aren't worth the keep, and of cows who pleasure each other to fend off boredom in long pasture hours – to understand what he was. It didn't make it easier, the knowing, but it didn't consume him the way it might, had he grown in a place where the structured rules of church and village life applied. The camp could be like a village, of course, with little privacy and everyone knowing everyone else's business, but it was family, and that made it different. Most importantly, Shem had the horses. Just a few minutes' walk away from the wagons and the dogs' pens to his da's fields, and the herd that felt like part of his soul.

They calmed him, and reminded him – whatever else he was, however alone and fated to live without the love he saw bloom for his brothers and cousins every time one of them paired off with some pretty girl – that he had something of his own. The horses, with their warm breath and their enveloping smell, gave him validity, an identity and, above all, a way to earn his da's respect.

Against that, what did it matter if the lads called him Shit-Shoveller Shem?

\* \* \* \*

One night, cool and clear with autumn's mellow grace deepened out into soft shadows, talk turned again to Cinderella and the champions she could bear. They all sat by the fire, the flickers of flamelight painting shadow shows on the sides of the wagons, their colours glimmering and the patterns dancing in the night. Dogs slumbered in the warmth, and an atmosphere of gentle conviviality hung over the camp, product of full bellies and contentment.

"Royal Sharna's seed," said Shem's da to a chorus of groans and catcalls, "and my mare's stock...no, you listen here, boys! It's all that stands between me and perfection. That's truth, that is."

Shem shook his head. All of them, his uncles and cousins, aunts and nieces, nephews...even his purodad, his da's father, all laughing, smiling faces in the amber glow. His da just nodded, let the mockery slide off him, a still figure of dignity and concrete belief in his old flannel jacket and smartly embroidered waistcoat, the gold thread of his pocket watch's chain trailing across it, and a yellow silk scarf at his throat. The streaks of silver in his hair marked his age, though his eyebrows were still thick, black and wiry, set low over glittering blue eyes, twin chips of dark ice in a tanned, lined face.

He smiled, and from that Shem knew he had a plan. Sitting on the dry, fire-warmed grass, his arms looped around his knees, he looked up at his father, wondering what was going on in that cunning old head.

Shem's da tilted his chin. "I shall ask the big man," he declared. "Ask for Royal Sharna to cover my girl."

They laughed all the harder at that. Shem's purodad – a small, sinewy chick of a man fair doubled over with his rheumatics, but still quick in mind and tongue – laughed loudest of all.

"He'll beat you across the Downs before he'd even think of hearing what you have to say! Damn fool that you are, son. Damn fool!"

Shem sat quiet, watching the back and forth between them all. His father just smiled, said nothing more but three quiet, determined words:

"I shall go."

Shem studied him, those clever hands resting tidily on his knees. All his life, he never remembered his father having one harsh or unjust word for anyone...nor much concentration for anything that didn't relate to his horses. This was typical of him, this softness, and below it lay a resolve that could bend iron.

Sure enough, the very next morning, Da woke him early, that sharp, whiskered chin pressing close to his ear.

"Shem?" He shook Shem's shoulder again, pulling him from the last vestiges of sleep. "Shem! Wake up, boy. We're off."

Shem rubbed at his eyes, the light harsh and the vardo's red walls far too bright.

"Wh – ?"

"Come, come. Fast. Don't wake your mother."

Shem grumbled but dragged himself out of bed and noiselessly gathered his clothes. Outside, his father had readied him a small bowl of water – cold in the misty morning air – for a scant wash and, shivering, with a cuss on his lips and a scowl on his brow, Shem readied himself quickly and quietly.

They didn't talk much as they walked. At a good pace, the three mile walk to the big house didn't take long. The worst of it came in crossing the stream downwind of the outlying paddocks, water still icy with the night's breath. Shem, long-legged like his mother, and well-built, forded it easily, though he didn't relish the chill.

The land was familiar here, a much-loved part of his world. Chalk downlands, lilting and pleasant, with the feel of the rock solid and comfortable far beneath his feet. Lush green grass, soft-shorn by generations of sheep, blanketed everywhere he looked, broken only by the babble of water and the creeping wild flowers and small-leaved plants edging through the blades. The house, Grange Park, rose on the horizon, a great brick of a building weighing down the hills around it like a stone in a sheet.

The nearer they came, the busier things were. The chalkland was fenced up into paddocks and pasture, fine and beautiful horses grazing the rich grass. Shem noted his da's appreciative murmur at the sight of two bay mares with fuzz-tailed, knock-kneed foals at foot – champions in the making, by anyone's judgement. As they passed the field gate, the rabbit trails they had been following gave way to tracks worn by hoof prints, wheelbarrows and, eventually, the intersection of a dirt track leading to the grand house's stable yard.

Shem's da paused before they got to the top of the yard, its great wooden-and-brick gateway rising high, the shape of one of his lordship's fine thoroughbreds set atop it in wrought iron. He straightened the diklo at his neck, ran his hand over his hair, and cleared his throat, a passing glance tossed to Shem.

"Will we do, lad?"

Shem grinned. "Aye, Da."

"All right, then."

The two men squared their shoulders and, together, walked on into the yard. They hadn't gone far before a voice called out and a groom, his breeches work-worn but his shirt smart and white, ran to intercept them.

"Hoi! Hoi, there! What do you want? We've no call for tinkers here. Go on, be off with you. Don't no-one want to buy anything 'ere."

Shem glanced at his father, waiting to see if he'd let the insult stand. His da just smiled, and Shem fancied it was he alone who saw the dangerous sparkle in those blue eyes.

"Good morning, sir." Da bowed, every inch the gentleman. "I can assure ye, we're here for the most best of purposes, sir. I wish to speak with his lordship, on a matter of utterly respectable business."

The man crossed his ruddy, sunburnt arms and scoffed. "Oh, aye?"

"Indeed. My name is Ezekiel Stone, and this is my boy, Shem. Our business concerns Royal Sharna. I imagine his lordship *is* here this morning?"

The groom's glance at the long, low, brick building that housed stores for feed and tack gave him away. In that single, fleeting moment of silence, filled with the sharpness of manure on the air and the whinnies of horses, the clomp of hooves on hard floors, Shem caught sight of a tall man in herringbone tweed lingering just behind the shadow of the door.

"Da," he murmured.

His father nodded. "Aye, Shem. I'm sure his lordship will be able to see us directly, bein' an honourable gennelman of fine character and most excellent sense o' business."

The groom sighed tersely and seemed about to search for some excuse to clear them out, but his master left the shelter of the tack room and came striding across the yard. Tall, and as broad in girth as he was at the shoulders, thick legs encased in baggy tweed trousers, his jacket flying open and a small driving crop in his hand, he bore down on them at speed.

"Graves?" A cut-glass accent of the kind Shem had only ever heard come out of a magistrate's mouth split the air in two, and a young groom, backing a dappled grey thoroughbred filly out of one of the stalls, had to catch at the animal's head to stop her rearing. "Graves, what the devil's going on, man?"

The groom turned to appease his master. "Sir, these...people.... They wish to speak with you relatin' to Sharna. I've told them —"

"Yes? Well, what is it?"

The squire drew to a halt before them, his face shiny and pink, like a side of ham in a butcher's window. He didn't even glance at Shem, but looked

down his nose at his da, ruffling a great bushy moustache, the same reddish-brown as the rumpled hair on his head.

"Spit it out, man. Who are you, and what d'you want?"

Shem licked his lips, deeply uncomfortable yet strangely fascinated. He slipped a sidelong look at his da, curious to see how he'd take to this madman.

His father bowed, gracious and easy. "Good morning, y'honour. My name is Ezekiel Stone. This is my son, Shem. We come to make you a business proposition."

"Really?" Cruel amusement played over the squire's face. "And whatever might that be, Mr. Stone?"

Shem's da drew himself up to his full height. "I would like for Royal Sharna to cover my mare, sir. If you would be so good as to tell me what is the fee that you require, then —"

The squire laughed, a gut-deep rumble of mirth and mockery that sent a shudder down Shem's spine. He shot a glance at his father, but Da stayed upright and expressionless, even as the squire's puffy red cheeks shook with laughter.

"You'd wh...? Oh, my word! My very word! By God! My good man — you realise Sharna is a thoroughbred of the highest value? No mere tup for a tinker's pony. The very idea that...ah! Had you not brought me so much mirth, I'd have a mind to whip you for the insolence." He hefted the driving crop in his hand, and his eyes lost a little of their laughter. "Go on, now. Off my land. And don't let me catch you skulking these parts again! My gamekeeper knows your kind."

They laughed still, every man-jack of them. Shem's gut twisted as he looked at his father, still unbowed and motionless, but for a small smile creeping across his lips.

*No good comes of a face set like that.*

Shem's da bowed again. "Of course. Well, then. I'm sure poor tinkers like us see the error of our ways, dun't we, boy? Say aye, Shem."

"Aye," Shem echoed, confused.

"We'll be on our way, and say no more of it, my lord. Right sorry if we troubled such a fine gennelman as yoursel', an' no mistake. Aye, Shem?"

"Aye. Right sorry."

He played along, followed his da's lead as they turned and left the yard, and certain words lingered in his ears long after they had passed by. Tinker, pedlar, tramp...they cut at the pride like rusted blades, and pride was one thing he and his da both had in plenty. No tinker, the man in stride beside him, but a gentleman — just as much as any toffee-nosed bastard on the Downs. A proper Romani rai, and no mistake.

Yet he didn't seem angered by the squire like Shem. He whistled as they walked, hands in pockets and a swing to his gait. Shem cleared his throat.

"Um. Da...?"

"Well, I asked him. Didn't I, lad?"

"Aye, Da."

"And I offered to pay him. Didn't I offer to pay him? You heard me, boy. All fair and square."

The first glimmers of understanding prickled behind Shem's eyes. "Aye, Da. I heard it. An' all them other people there did, too."

"Well, then."

They walked on, and Shem stuck his hands in his pockets, same as his da, a grin on his face.

\* \* \* \*

A little less than three weeks later, under the cover of a dank, misty night, when even the sliver of a waning moon refused to show her face from behind a veil of cloud, Shem followed his da down to the field and brought Cinderella in with a loop of rope about her neck.

She whickered gently, pleased to see them, and as Shem led her down the track, she butted her head at him for petting and the chopped apples she knew he carried. He laughed softly, rubbed his palm over her velvet nose, and fed her a treat.

Three miles was no journey at all with a friend like her beside him.

Naturally, what with the squire's horses being valuable, and there being gamekeepers on the prowl around the grounds, they had to stay quiet. His breeches still wet from leading Cinderella across the brook, and his teeth aching to chatter in the crook of the night's cold, Shem walked the mare around the far boundary of the paddocks, to the near field in which Royal Sharna grazed.

Everything looked different in the dark, but he'd spent enough long years at this game to know how it went. He motioned to his da to get the gate and — Cinderella grown frisky beside him, uneasy with what she must now realise they had planned for her — Shem leaned his weight into her shoulder, his arm across her withers and his face against her neck.

"Whoa, now. Don't you fret yoursel', my darlin'. Go on, now."

Slow and steady, he edged her into the field. She backed off once, hind foot stamping the ground in urgent worry, and Shem's da leaned over the fence to slap her rump, sending her in a cat-jump forwards and Shem almost toppling to the ground. He pulled away from the mare and loosed the rope from her neck. She sprang away, snorting and pawing at the night.

Royal Sharna, over by the far hedge, knew immediately what Cinderella was. He caught her scent and proximity at once, raised his head, and let out a long neigh.

Shem bit his lip. Someone would be bound to hear if he made too much noise, and then they'd be for it. His da seemed to read his mind, cocking one leg over the fence post to sit more comfortably, and pulling his pipe from his pocket. He let out a low chuckle as he packed the bowl with that thick, acrid baccy.

"Dun't 'ee give it thought, boy. He'll mek his move. Soon as he gets all his prancing an' showin' off done, he'll do it."

Shem leaned back against the fence, arms wrapped around his middle.

"Aye? And what if he don't?"

His da shrugged. "If it happen, it happen. An' it don't happen, t'ain't meant to. That's nature, in't it?"

"I'd feel better if we'd tied her. I don't like this."

Shem's shoulders hunched at the cuff his Da landed across the back of his head. "Ouch!"

"We couldn't tie her, could we? We don't know 'im well enough for that. 'Sides, it'd tek too long. Don't want to get caught, do we?"

Shem, still smarting from the blow, curled his lip. "You said it weren't thieving, Da. You said it were nature."

"Aye, an' it is. If it happen, it happen. All right?"

Shem chuckled dryly. "Aye, Da."

"Good lad. Keep watch a minute, will you? I want to light my pipe; don't want no-one seeing the match."

"Aye, Da."

Shem didn't look round as he hopped down from the gate and ducked behind the hedge. He heard the match strike, smelled the brief tang of sulphur, and strained his eyes to follow the shape of the stallion pacing the far side of the field, hooves thrumming the ground.

Cinderella didn't seem impressed by all this macho bravado. She snorted, angled round, haunches tightened with kicking in mind. Shem held his breath and glanced down towards the yard. The suggestions of lights flickered there – no doubt at least a couple of the younger grooms slept in, an eye always on his lordship's most valuable animals, though the house was close enough to be ample deterrent. Shem smelled the familiar waft of tobacco, and his da re-emerged, sucking on the pipe's stem.

Well, deterrent to most people, probably.

"Anything?"

Shem shook his head. "He's still showin' off."

"Bugger."

They waited, the night growing thinner, dawn but a few hours away and with every second the threat of discovery worsening. Shem clenched and wriggled his fingers, trying to keep the damp and the cold at bay, certain they'd be up before the beak in the morning. His da just stood and smoked, eyes keenly fixed on the horses, barely blinking.

At last, Royal Sharna made his move. Shem winced at the squeal Cinderella gave when he sank his teeth into her withers and she kicked out, for one terrifying minute making it look as if she'd send him flying. The stallion struggled but regained purchase and, his calls and hers cutting through the night, the deed was done. Horses in the other pastures – edgy since the arrival of this interloper and now thoroughly uneasy – cantered beside their own boundaries, the mind of the herd roused by what was happening. Cinderella seemed to have taken it all personally and set herself to trying to give Sharna the kicking she thought he deserved, though he was too

busy running off his excitement, great bellowing neighs loud enough to wake the dead, much less the squire and his people.

Shem's da cursed. Lights were definitely on in the yard, and calls drifted on the air, the sounds of people rising reluctantly from their beds to see what the racket was all about.

"Right, lad. Time to go. Go get her."

"Me?" Shem had no time to argue. He took the head collar he'd brought with him from his shoulder, the rope loop from the fence, and ran, light-footed, across the damp grass. Royal Sharna didn't take kindly to his interference, and Shem ducked his way past swinging hindquarters and grumpy barging to catch Cinderella.

He saw the lanterns in the hands of men – most likely armed, to some degree – coming up the path, and he called out to his da to run, go on ahead and he'd catch up. Shem caught one glimpse of his pale, worried face in the gloom, and he should have been concentrating, but he just wanted to be sure that Da got away. Sharna's hind foot swept past his knee, and Shem moved just in time, saving himself a shattered kneecap, but failing to miss the full weight of the stallion's body as he swung around again, furious and territorial.

Shem sprawled to the churned mud, winded and sight blurring. He was vaguely aware of the shouts and running footsteps approaching the paddock, but his immediate world had filled up with hooves and hard, flying legs.

Something hit his head, his eyes rolled, and everything turned black.

\* \* \* \*

The room in which he awoke looked like nothing Shem had ever seen. Everything was clean and bright, bounded by huge windows full of blue sky and sheathed with lacy curtains. He must have been out for a while, as morning had clearly come, though he couldn't see how high the sun had risen. A large pine washstand stood to one side of the room, a blue-and-white china jug and bowl upon it, and an oil painting of a fine chestnut thoroughbred hung on the wall.

Tentatively, Shem raised his head, feeling for the edges of the bed with his fingers. It seemed to go on forever, like drowning in a cloud. A heavy, satin-topped coverlet lay over him, and the walls sported a similarly pearlescent damask paper, patterned with an ornate, complex design. Shem blinked, awareness of his body flooding back and bringing with it intense washes of overlapping, gut-twisting soreness. He hiccupped, swallowing down a retch, and shut his eyes against the unfamiliar, alien room and the splitting agony in his head.

"Ooh! Bless me," exclaimed a voice, signifying a presence he hadn't noticed. Young, female, and verging on the painfully shrill. "He's awake! Mr. Boon, sir! The lad's awake!"

Shem groaned and ventured to peep out of one eye. The voice belonged to a girl in a maid's uniform, her drab brown hair pulled back beneath a daft

white cap. She stared straight at him, her pointed little face widening until she was nothing but eyes and mouth and, with a squeal, she ran from the room, leaving a panelled oak door wide open in her wake.

Shem shut the eye again and opted for another groan.

"Gosh, I say!"

A second female voice. Where the devil did all the damn women keep coming from? He rubbed his knees together beneath the covers, trying to ascertain how naked he was. Whoever had undressed him had at least allowed him to keep his unmentionables on, for which Shem was heartily grateful.

The whisper of skirts and the slim waft of a scent – lavender, he suspected – dragged Shem's eyelids back up again, and he found himself looking at a young woman dressed all in light blue. Rosy cheeked and bright eyed, she had the same expression on her face his da got when appraising a new mare, and Shem didn't like it one bit.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, stepping far nearer the bed than propriety allowed. "You've been unconscious since they brought you in. We all thought the worst, but the doctor said the blow wasn't too bad. Papa said everyone was to leave you alone and he'd come straight to see you, soon as you were able to answer questions. He was *terribly* cross. I heard Milly shrieking about you being awake, so I couldn't resist popping in to take a little peek. I'm Elizabeth, by the way."

Somewhere in the constant stream of her babble, Shem realised this must be one of the squire's daughters, and panic gripped his throat, reawakening the urge to retch. He took deep breaths, calmed himself, his mind veering to other urgent questions. His da, and the horses...were the horses all right?

"Miss Elizabeth!" A third strange voice reached Shem's ears, and an old man entered the room, dressed like a corpse in Sunday clothes. "Miss, this is entirely inappropriate. You must –"

"Oh, Boon, don't fuss! I simply wanted to see our guest for myself. Your arrival did cause something of a ruckus last night," she added with a smirk at Shem. "What is your name, anyway?"

"Sh'm," he mumbled, gaze darting from her to the butler. "Shem Stone, ma'am. I dun't want t'cause no trouble. Sir. Miss. I dun't..."

He floundered, gaze flitting around desperately for potential escape. The walls were too close, despite the room's size, and everything was too strange. He wanted to go home, back to the comforts of a warm fire and people he knew, and as far away from all of this as any man could ever get.

Elizabeth smiled again, and Shem's heart sank. She put a finger to her lips and winked before Boon ushered her out, clucking worse than a broody hen. He gave Shem a dry, withering look and told him to wait where he was for the time being, until the doctor had been called again. Shem widened his eyes.

"All the same to you, sir, I'll rise. I'm quite well, I'm sure."

Shem had no trust of doctors. Dead-men-makers, his purodad called 'em. The butler turned down his mouth disapprovingly, reminding Shem for a minute of his mother.

"Suit yourself, then, boy." He nodded to the washstand. "There's water there. Make yourself decent, and I'll fetch you to his lordship directly. Don't think, lad, that jes' because you took a knock on the head there'll be no repercussions."

Shem frowned. He wasn't used to washing inside the house.

Still, he had no opportunity to argue. Boon had already gone. Carefully, Shem eased back the heavy, slippery coverlet and manoeuvred himself out of the bed. The room lurched a little, his legs weaker than water beneath him. One glance down at his body showed the telltale blossoming of fat bruises on his legs and sides. He'd be in for even more pain when that little lot came out, right enough.

His mind on his da and Cinderella, Shem tottered over to the washstand, slowly readying himself for this strange, unusual day. Someone had folded his clothes on a chair beneath the window, and he tugged them on with distaste, fancying he could feel foreign, unclean hands upon him.

Boon came back to take him to the squire, marching him through endless corridors of gleaming wood smelling of beeswax and big, old paintings. Fresh flowers stood on tables that had no apparent use. In the study he was brought to, the very air seemed to creak like the opening of a leather-bound book. The squire sat waiting for him behind a large, leather-topped desk. The man Shem had seen before—Graves, the head groom—stood in attendance, and the whole thing recalled to Shem the time his brother Ernest had been up before the magistrate for poaching.

Of course, Ernie had got off, while he doubted he'd be so lucky.

"So," said the squire, that voice cutting through Shem's throbbing head with the ease of a hot blade. "This is the thieving little blighter, is it?"

Shem wasn't sure what to say. He cleared his throat. "If'n please you, sir, I'm very grateful for your hospitality, but I—"

"The doctor said there'd be no lasting damage, so don't think you can pull the wool over my eyes, boy. Your father might have had it away faster than we could catch him, but we have his horse, and naturally you were an accomplice to the crime."

Shem looked down at his feet. All these books, pressing in around him, intimidating and heavy with the smell of dust and ages. Da had got away, then. That was something. And Cinderella was all right. And yet...

He glanced up. The squire leaned back in his chair, laying his palms flat to the desk as he studied Shem consideringly.

"Naturally, I should call the constable at once. I could have you subjected to the fullest extent of the law."

Shem dropped his gaze, fixing it on the dusty toes of his boots. That was it, then. He'd be for the gaol, and that would be that. He'd die there, for he couldn't live in a cage.

The squire's terse sigh disrupted Shem's visions of his grim, early death. "However, there is an alternative. Should you care to hear it?"

Shem twisted his fingers into the hem of his jacket and bit his lip. "Y's, sir."

"You will work off your debt in my yard. I shall keep you, and the mare, until the foal is born – if she indeed produces one. Then, I shall keep the foal. It would legally be my property, after all. You will then have license to return to your people, and you can tell them precisely what happens to thieves upon my land. I do not think that is unmerciful. Do you?"

Shem had only heard the barest shapes of what the man said, his head woolly and sounds swooping around him, unclear and yet so dreadful. Almost a year, to be caught and held here, away from his family, his home? Dizziness shook his knees, but he knew it was mercy, however much like cruelty it seemed. He opened his mouth, but he couldn't form a reply, his thoughts on his da, his mother...what would they do? How would they know where he was?

"I will, naturally, allow you to contact your family. You may write to them," the squire said, steepling his fat fingers and regarding Shem coolly. "Or, perhaps, dictate a letter. I'm sure they'll be able to find someone to read it to them."

Anger boiled in Shem, but he knew better than to speak out of turn. He bit his teeth together and said nothing.

Graves, ever his master's faithful bulldog, cleared his throat. "Well? Say thank you, ungrateful boy!"

Shem looked between the two men, the air stifling with the smell of old, dusty pages. "'nk you, y'honour," he mumbled.

\* \* \* \*

And so it was that Shem found himself bound to a new job, his days filled with the comforting scents of straw and manure, his billet a prickly sackcloth bed in one of the spare looseboxes. He got to know the stable staff – Graves, of course, and Mason, the trainer who saw to Royal Sharna and his jockeys, and Oldham, whose concern was the brood mares with which the squire hoped to perpetuate Sharna's legacy.

He had little to do with the people from the big house, though in those first few, hard weeks, he caught sight of several of the maids coming down on the pretext of bringing beer or bread to the men, giggling behind their hands as they lingered to take a peep at the raggle-taggle gypsy working off his penance.

He hated it, half-tempted to feign putting a curse on the lot of 'em if it would just make them go away. The other lads were little better. To Shem, they lacked the basics of good manners and cleanliness, yet they called *him* a dirty pikey, and they bore him no respect.

He ate, worked, and slept alone, and was content enough by it.

Once or twice, Elizabeth, the squire's daughter, came by to see him. She took to timing her morning rides around the estate to match his work, so he'd be there to tack up her horse – a pretty grey mare called Jemima – and take her in again when the mistress returned.

Shem liked the girl well enough for what she was, though he wished she'd stop trying to set her cap at him. Never having been in such a position before, he didn't know how to tell her he didn't care for women. He doubted she'd have listened, in any case. She seemed one of those types of girls to think she could change a man just by winking. A cousin of his had introduced him to a girl like that once before, and Shem shuddered at the memory. He much preferred to spend his days with the horses.

The weeks turned to months, and Shem grew used to the rhythms of the estate, the coming and goings of race people and the so-called higher class of horse dealer with whom the squire did business. He didn't care for them. To Shem's eyes, they were a shifty, greasy-suited bunch: flashy men with a mind to profit and only a weak judgement of horseflesh. Not like his da.

Great excitement surrounded one such man, a mealy-mouthed rat of a creature to whom – so Shem heard – the squire had paid an enormous sum of money to purchase the most rare and valuable of horses to grace his stable.

"'Tis a beautiful beast," Graves told him, as they shared a pack of smokes in the cool afternoon, the last flares of the dying sun going down over the near paddock, touching the silhouettes of the grazing mares with shadowed gold. "Bought in from the East."

Once he'd seen Shem work with the horses, the man's opinion of him had improved and, for his part, Shem had to admit a grudging respect for the head groom, despite his initial distrust.

"Aye? An Arab?"

"No." Graves blew out a stream of thin, grey-blue smoke and licked his lower lip. "Akhal-Teke. From Turkmenistan, wherever the bloody hell that is. Russian Empire, I believe. Coat like spun gold, runs like the bloody wind, boy. His lordship wants 'un for breedin', though I can't say I fancy the job of overseeing that malarkey."

Shem pulled on the cigarette, missing the taste of the baccy his purodad mixed, and the smell of his da's pipe. He leaned back against the fencepost, his body aching from a day's long work. Midges had begun to fly in the dusk.

"Fiery, am they?"

Graves chuckled. "Aye, could say, lad. I was there when he went to see it at the dealer's yard. Damn thing nearly kicked a hole clean through the wall. He's arriving day after tomorrow."

He stubbed out his cigarette and bade Shem goodnight, a few fateful words tossed carelessly over one shoulder: "Still, you'n be there to give us a hand, won't you?"

"Aye." Shem nodded dubiously. He really had no choice.

\* \* \* \*

The day came for the Akhal-Teke's arrival, and it turned the whole yard into a frenzy of activity and chaos. The squire came down with his wife, his daughters, and half the damn household in tow. Shem, waiting where Graves had asked him, ready to help get the new stallion in, tried to avoid Miss

Elizabeth's eye, though he felt her staring at him, all coy smiles and knowing looks.

Finally, the horse arrived, battered in the dealer's wagon. They heard him stamping, kicking, and neighing right from the end of the track, and it set off half the horses in the yard. There was a great deal of shoving, shouting, and carry-on to unbolt the cart and back him out. Shem leaned on the gatepost and watched them try to coax the animal out without him kicking anyone into next week.

He was a beauty, sure enough. A real stunner.

Shem would never have believed a horse's coat could truly be called gold, but this one seemed it. It shone metallic dark cream in the sunlight, thick mane and tail flashing pale flares of silver. Such power in his body, too; far more than the light build should suggest. The stallion entranced Shem, and he hated to see the grooms make such a ham's fist of dealing with him.

Not waiting for Graves to call him over, he slipped through the rails of the fence and dived into the press of men. Shem called to the horse, low and easy, let him see a friend rather than one who wished to be his master. He took a hold of the head collar, reached up to run his palm along the smooth, glossy neck.

"Come out of it, you damn fool!" Graves spat, careful not to raise his voice.

Shem shook his head. "No, sir. You leave off him, all of you. I have him."

They drew back, all those strapping lads so keen to prove their muscle and mettle, and Shem felt the hatred radiating off them as he led the stallion down to the yard and through the gate. He heard the murmured accusations of gypsy witchcraft, the vituperative bile and the jealousy but, with his hand on the golden horse's neck, Shem didn't care a fig what any of them said. He didn't give a damn that Graves was so clearly furious with him, or that the squire kept remarking loudly to anyone who would listen that he was responsible for giving this vagabond lad a roof, a bed, and honest work.

Nothing else seemed to matter anymore.

Shem led the horse to the stall that had been prepared for him, backed him in with relative ease, and slipped off the head collar, running his hand down the stallion's high, hard nose, his reward a soft puff of warm breath.

"Eh, 's a pretty grai, my beauty," Shem murmured, reverting to words that meant something better than this place, words that put the taste of home back in his mouth.

The golden horse whickered quietly and rested his head on Shem's shoulder.

Graves let out a low whistle. "Well, blow me down. Looks like you've got yourself a full-time charge, lad."

Shem glanced up, almost forgetting the yard was full of people. A blush rose to his cheeks, and he mumbled a reply, embarrassed at being the centre of so many attentions... not least among them Elizabeth, ogling him like a piece of prize beef.

\* \* \* \*

After that day, Shem was put to the task of caring for the Akhal-Teke, settling the beast to his new home and maintaining his peak condition. He didn't mind the work, and enjoyed the time it allowed him to spend apart from everyone, alone with his charge. He fed, groomed, washed, and mucked out the stallion, and he talked to it all the while. Shem had always talked to horses, in one way or another—it seemed natural. Yet, with this one, he found himself speaking as he would to another man, albeit one he trusted more than any other here. Shem told it his secrets, his hopes, his torn and painful memories of home. He confided in the stallion all his fears, his worries, and the darkest of his desires and, with every word, the horse bowed its head and snorted softly, as if he really understood.

Winter was setting in, the nights growing cold and the days dim. Cinderella, who had proved indeed in foal, grew heavier every day, her belly swelling with a champion-to-be, and Shem's thoughts turned often to how his da must worry. He had written, of course. The squire might have them all pegged as illiterate and stupid, but Shem knew his letters and his Bible. Da had read to them from it every night, and his ma had taught them all the book learning they needed—certainly enough to pen a few lines on rough paper and send it to the local pub by way of one of the other stable lads. Those boys Shem worked with didn't understand why he stayed, why he didn't run in the night and skip the county with his father's fleet-footed horse. The reply he had back from his da explained it all.

*I write because you told me not to come there, and my heart is heavy for it. I would, more than anything, have had things different, but you do well by yourself and us in your honour, lad. God watch over you, and bring you back safe.*

*Your loving father*

He kept the letter, ragged at the edges and the ink smudged with reading, tucked beneath his sackcloth bed. It helped, of a night-time, to take it out and feel the words, even if he had no need to keep reading them over. Shem would just sit, listening to the golden horse shifting in his stall, murmurs against the sounds of hooves and low whickers that patterned the yard.

Time passed, and with the hard coming of winter the Frost Moon rose, clear and full over the silvered darkness. The horses were all excitable; ice under their hooves and snow on the air spoke to something in their blood. That night, the moon bright as any noon-shadow, in the stillness of the stalls, his da's letter in his hand, Shem sat and listened to their movements, keeping his ear sharp for the Akhal-Teke.

Something didn't sound right. The stallion scraped at his bedding, snorting and shaking his head. Shem stuffed the letter back under his

mattress and scrambled up, tugging his braces back up over his shirt from where they had dangled free at his hips, grabbing his jacket and throwing it around his shoulders. He swung out of the loosebox, pulse skittish for fear of what he'd find.

*Be just my luck, fine animal like that here less'n a month and comes down wi' a twisted gut. Squire'll have my own guts for garters if'n I let that happen...*

He glanced towards the tack room, where Graves and the other grooms usually played cards of an evening before the lads bedded down. They rarely invited Shem, not that he minded it. A lantern burned low, but there was no other sign of life. He had no desire to run across and wake anyone, so he slipped deftly into the golden horse's stall, teeth catching his lower lip as he tried to unbolt the stable door silently. The ironwork well-oiled, the bolt slid through with neither creak nor scratch, and Shem eased himself into the stall.

The golden horse stood, head bowed, snorting to himself. Sweat flecked his shoulders, yet he showed no other signs of a sick animal's distress. Shem clicked his tongue, moved slowly towards the creature, his palms out to show he meant no harm.

"Where's my 'andsome lad, then, eh? What's the matter wi' you?"

The horse shook his head, the flaxen mane ruffling, and flared his nostrils. Shem thought again of fetching Graves but, no sooner had he turned his back than he heard an odd sound behind him. A noise... something like the wind, and something like a whole different, shifting sense of space and time. The world seemed to have split itself around a new truth, the air thick and heavy with it. Shem held his breath, truly frightened to turn around. Every sense in him screamed that this was an older magic than he knew, and his fingers stilled upon the iron bolt.

"Shem?"

He shut his eyes. The voice that tugged at him sounded full and rich, like the oat coffee his purodad brewed. He dared not look, terrified of what he might find, and yet something deeper compelled him to open his eyes, to turn and face whoever called his name, even if it be the Devil himself.

"Please, turn around. The full moon is risen, and I have only until it sets again to be free from my enchantment. Please, Shem. See me."

He turned, the breath leaving him in one long, dry sigh, a dusty wind across desert sand. Where the horse had stood, Shem now looked upon a young man, tall and lithe as the stallion had been, his skin coppered with that same hue of fair golden cream. Startlingly blond hair—near white—close-cropped in coarse waves, contrasted with the dark brown of his eyes, and his face must have been moulded by some artistically obsessed Creator, for Shem couldn't believe such fine detail, such perfection of form, came from humans alone. His gaze slid inexorably lower, drawn where modesty should not permit it, to the swelling muscles of chest, loins, and thighs, and the sweeter prizes that graced them. Shem swallowed heavily and forced himself to look away, a murmured prayer on his lips.

"Don't be afraid," the young man said, moving closer, his hand outstretched just the way Shem had tried to ease the distress of the golden... well, of what had *seemed* a horse.

His movements were a little unsteady at first, and Shem supposed he must be unused to the form he'd taken. The thought prickled at his mind — this was the stuff of fireside tales, of stories! Close up, though, the man looked real enough. Human. Shem's gaze traced every inch of that face, seeking hints of devilry, but lighting instead on full, firm lips and hard cheekbones.

"What spell is this?" he asked, finding his voice at last.

Dark eyes met his, a sad smile on the man's face. "Old magic. I have been under an enchantment these past four years, only to take my true form by the full moon's light."

"Does the squire know?" Shem frowned, surprised at his own nonchalance. This was insane...madness, surely. Yet he believed it, easy as anything.

"No. My — The one who laid this thing upon me sold me to a corrupt dealer in horses. Ever since, I have passed among unknowing hands, raced and run for lords and rich men, far from my own land. They have never known, those who bought me, for no-one has ever taken as great care of me as you."

He took Shem's hand in those long fingers, and his touch pressed a thousand questions into the flesh, as much as his dark eyes begged for trust and belief. Shem wet his lips with an unwilling, awkward tongue.

"What's your name?"

"Batim."

"Right." He broke away, nervous of that hypnotic contact and, pulling off his jacket, held it out, his gaze determinedly fixed on Batim's face. "'Ere y'are."

It felt ridiculously formal, and Shem expected his laughter yet, when it came, it was as golden and full as sunrise. Batim's smile enveloped him.

"Thank you, but I really have little need for it. I do not feel the cold easily, and this form will be lost again in a few hours. There is really little point."

Shem dragged his treacherous gaze from the well-muscled torso, the narrow hips, and tantalising trail of darkening blond hair that led down to —

"It would make *me* feel better," he blurted.

Batim laughed again and took the jacket. He slid it on, buttoned it, the worn and slightly threadbare hem just skimming his thighs. It did little to protect his modesty, but at least Shem could look at him without staring, goggle-eyed, at his crown jewels. Not that he didn't want to look — by God, that and so much more — but... He cleared his throat, marshalling a control over himself that felt tenuous at best, and met Batim's eye.

"And how came you by this enchantment?"

The young man nodded. "I shall tell you my tale, but we must be brief."

Batim pulled over a couple of bales, and they sat while he recounted to Shem the story of his tragedy.

"In my own country, which lies across many distant miles of mountains and sea—a beautiful place, thick with forests of pine—I was the son and heir of a wealthy nobleman. My father had a sizeable fortune, vast tracts of land with many tenants, and a castle beneath the Black Mountain. My mother had died when I was a baby but a few days old. A local rumour had it that she had been bewitched, and they buried her with fresh eggs beneath her armpits, as was the custom in those parts, to stop witches drinking her milk.

"My father did not believe in the local superstitions. He thought only of the future, of the way forward, and he cared little for the old ways, disparaging the beliefs of the villages and the old magic. When a woman came to his court seeking audience—long black hair and scarlet lips, with nails like crimson talons—I tried to warn him. I saw what she was, but he didn't listen."

Batim hung his head, brows drawn low over clouded eyes.

"He wed her, and he died within a moon. She brought with her a witch-daughter, Lyudmila, to whom she wished me to be married. I—well, I have never had a great deal of interest in women, like you, Shem, but..."

The words snared Shem's ear, and he wanted to blush for all the things he'd confided in the golden horse. He held his breath, scarce able to believe the things he was hearing, and not daring to interrupt the tale-teller.

"Even had I been able to feel desire for her—and she was, I suppose, beautiful—I could not have wed one such as she. I fled, under the cover of darkness. The land was black, slivers of moonlight skimming the stony ground. I heard a shriek rend the night behind me and turned to see *her*, my stepmother, standing upon the castle's tallest tower. Furious, she cast this curse upon me, and I could not outrun it. It bore down on me, tearing my flesh into a new form, ripping my mind asunder. She has such powers, you see. Her kiss may make a man forget his whole past, and her anger can destroy him forever.

"I wandered for a long time, learning who I was, what I had become, and trying to find a way to turn myself back. Slowly, I regained some semblance of the man I once was, and I have been able to make some small study of the enchantment, but it has been four long years, and I am far from free."

He fell silent after that, brows drawn low and eyes sullen. Shem had listened with rapt attention, and the sudden absence of Batim's voice came as a sharp blow. He had so many questions, so much he wanted to say, but the night was beginning to break. Batim looked up at the greying light filtering through the top half of the stable door.

"It is done. I shall change again very soon. You may not wish to watch. It can be...unpleasant."

He stood and divested himself of Shem's jacket—still warm to the touch and rich with the scent of his skin. Shem held it tight, clutched in his hands as he readied to go, to give the man some privacy. And yet he didn't want to leave, didn't want to abandon Batim to his fate.

He stepped outside on feet of lead, listened for some telltale sound. He closed his eyes, waited, and tried to pretend he hadn't stumbled over the first

step to falling in love with his very own enchanted prince. No, it was madness. Insanity, every last ounce of it. And yet...

Noises began to filter through the wooden wall. Groans, and movement. Shem wondered if the transition from man to horse hurt more than the other way around. He hadn't heard this pain in Batim before, whereas now —

A cry rang out, and Shem's first instinct was to run back in there, to offer whatever aid he could, but he didn't dare. Instead, he murmured a prayer under his breath and clutched the jacket Batim had worn tighter, holding it to his face and breathing in their mingled scents until he heard the shifting of hooves and the soft whicker that announced the Akhal-Teke's presence.

Shem slipped back into the stall, and the stallion stood there as if nothing had ever changed. Batim dipped his head and pawed the ground once, and sharp, unexpected tears stung Shem's eyes. He went to Batim, ran his hands over the proud, arched neck, buried his fingers in that thick, coarse mane, and pressed his face to the horse's broad cheek.

"I'm so sorry.... I will wait for you, for the moon to come again. And I shall be here, I swear it. I shall not leave."

For all answer, the horse snorted, and his soft breath touched Shem's shoulder like a kiss.

\* \* \* \*

Keeping the golden horse's secret proved a trial. The squire, excited by the prospect of Batim's rare paces, began to put him to work under the charge of Mason, the trainer. With every early morning gallop, every hard-whipped lunge and harsh word from the man's mouth, Shem wanted to knock him flat, though he had to resist. He took to hanging around the ménage, while Mason worked, wincing at the succession of jockeys overusing their heels and their whips. Each strike against Batim's flesh made him flinch. One morning, a little after five, Graves came to stand beside him, the pair of them leaning on the fence and watching the golden stallion glide effortlessly through the course Mason had set him.

"You've done a fine job wi' that animal, lad. He's fair soft to handle since we've had you to care for him."

"'nk you, sir," Shem mumbled, unaccustomed to compliments, his gaze still fixed on Batim's hooves weaving complicated patterns across the sand.

"If you'd think on it, I should like to ask his lordship to consider keeping you in his employ. Full-time, like, and paid."

"Sir?" Shem blinked, the head groom's voice seeming to echo back to him from some distant cave.

"Ah, well. Think about it." Graves packed his pipe with one broad, yellow-stained thumb. "I know, of course, you've your family to think of, probably a whole other life away from here you're keen to return to, but you've been an asset to us, Shem. I'd gladly see you stay."

Shem murmured his thanks, unsure how to respond. Did he want to stay? Thoughts of his home, his da, and the people he missed, the horses he'd not

seen in so long, flooded his mind. And yet there were things to keep him here, too... the golden horse, and the secret he carried. Shem bit his lip, wondering if perhaps he had made more promises than he could keep.

*I shall not leave.*

Graves patted his shoulder. "Think on it, boy. Think on."

He shambled away into the dewy morning chill, and Shem hunched over the fencepost, troubled and confused.

Sure enough, he could see a future for himself here. A future of a kind, at any rate... and there were those who would be happy if he stayed, certainly. Shem tried not to think of Miss Elizabeth, who had still not given up her chase. So far, she had persisted with every wile her sex and her class put at her disposal – catching him to handle her mare after morning rides, lingering to talk to him about horsemanship while he brushed Jemima down, and asking him for tales of his home. He always obliged her as far as was polite, unable to be firm with her the way he might with any other girl. Yet Shem couldn't shake the feeling that she was like a grey cloud presaging a storm; not by herself a bad omen, but a measure of things to come.

His da, if they were out on the way to a place, would always say certain things boded too badly to continue. Meeting a hearse, or a nun, or seeing a rat cross the road... he'd spit on the ground and, no matter what business they lost by going on no further, home they would turn.

Shem wished he had that luxury now.

As it was, he could do nothing but wait. It seemed to take forever for the moon to swell to full again. All the while he waited, Shem began to doubt his sanity, to wonder if any of it had been real.

The house was getting ready for Christmas, a vast and expansive time celebrated with such extravagance as Shem had never known.

Several of the other lads had gone out wassailing, and Graves was up at the squire's table, taking benefit of the season and leaving Shem quite alone in the yard, the sounds of the horses and the encroaching dark his only company. He sat in the empty loosebox and waited for the moon to rise.

A sound outside caught his attention. Thinking at once of Batim, he leapt to his feet, eager and far too ready to see him.

"Shem?"

His heart squeezed itself against his ribs, for that was no changeling prince, but the squire's daughter. Shem darted out into the soft shadows of the yard and found her standing there, dressed in a dark green coat and gloves and holding a basket covered with a blue cloth, from which the top of a stone bottle protruded.

"Miss Elizabeth! You shouldn't –"

"Oh, pssh!" She waved away his concern. "I thought of you, all alone out here, missing the fine treats we have on our table. So I brought you something, in the spirit of the season. Won't you have a drink with me?"

Shem glanced up at the sky, the shadow of the moon not yet risen. She couldn't be here. Not tonight. Not any night, come to that. What if someone saw them?

"I..."

She wouldn't be put off. Brushing past him, she swept into the loosebox he called home, looking about her at his makeshift bed and the few things of his own he had set there.

"This is where they make you sleep?"

Shem swallowed, trying to overcome the sense of violation. He didn't want her here, in amongst his things, his private space. No girl of any proper sort would think to act so. Among his people, it would have been considered the worst sort of manners.

"'Tis where I sleep," he said. "Miss, you mustn't be here. What if somebody sees?"

Elizabeth smiled at him. "But they won't, will they?"

"But..." Shem sighed. He'd dealt with stubborn, moody mares before, and she was worse than any of them. "Your father might miss you. Someone could – ah, what is the use? All right. One drink, and then you must go. Promise me that?"

She pulled the stone bottle from her basket and uncorked it. The enticing, clove-rich smell of mulled wine drifted out to tickle Shem's nose, and he watched her take a confident swig. No girl-child this, nor a weak, watery woman. He bit down a sneaking, affectionate admiration for her and smiled when she handed him the bottle.

"Of course," Elizabeth said, more than the wine flushing roses into her cheeks. "You might cast some gypsy spell on me, and then I should never be free to leave again."

"Ha!" Shem almost snorted the wine from his nose. "You don't 'alf rokker tosh, maid!"

She laughed, and he didn't understand why. Yet, true to her word, she left him after one drink and pressed a kiss to his cheek as she went. Shem stood in the yard for a while after she had begun to head back up to the house, his flesh tingling as the first silver of the moon touched the sky.

It was time.

From the Akhal-Teke's stall, the sound of scraping hooves and low groans began, and Shem stared at the sky, willing the moon to quicken. He leaned his head back against the wood and waited, every second a leaden hour.

"Shem?"

Batim sounded strained, weak. Shem dived inside, eager for the sight of him, and abundantly rewarded. He stood, naked in the lantern's light, as fine a man as ever drew breath. Shem smiled, breathless.

"I feared you'd not...you know. That it wasn't real."

"It's real." Batim smiled. He held out his arms. "Come. Feel."

Shem closed the space between them, fell into a clumsy, warm embrace. Batim's breath grazed his neck, his hands searing Shem's back through the fabric of his shirt. Without thought, Shem sought his mouth, their lips

brushing close together before, embarrassed at his forwardness, he pulled away, flustered and confused.

"I..." He blinked, his gaze trailing the straw-littered floor. Suddenly, he remembered the bounty Elizabeth had brought, and he held up a hand.

"Wait. I have something."

Shem fetched the basket and held it out proudly to Batim. "Here. For you. Us. If you're hungry, I mean. It is nearly Christmas."

Batim smiled, and the joy at seeing it thrilled through Shem like the warmth of a dozen fires.

They sat on hay bales and devoured the bread, meats and pickles with which the squire's daughter had thought to seduce him. Shem had never seen anyone eat with such speed or relish, and he commented upon it. Batim smiled sheepishly.

"My apologies. It is a long time since I lived as a man and enjoyed the pleasures of this form."

He sat close to Shem, their knees almost touching, and those words hung heavy in the air. However determinedly Shem tried to ignore it, the rising desire for this man ached in every part of him, harsh and raw. The beat of it thrummed in his blood, made his prick ache and his throat tight, and he could barely think of anything besides Batim's beauty, so very obvious in his unclothed state. Shem wet his lips, wishing he had more experience, some notion of how such a dance should play out yet, he supposed, this was so very far from anything with which normal people might be familiar.

"Um." Shem stared down at his knees. "When you say that, do —"

"Would you think ill of me if I kissed you?"

He looked up sharply, the utter clarity of desire in Batim's face driving the apprehension from him, and taking with it any lingering power of speech.

"Nn-nn."

Shem closed his eyes, sinking into the warmth of new sensations. Batim leaned across to him, and he tasted of burnt toffee and cloves, his mouth strong and hard, yet so gentle, so careful.

Large, broad hands traversed Shem's shoulders, toyed with the dark curls at his nape, traced the line of his jaw with smooth, feather-light touches, encouraging him to respond, to do the same. Emboldened, Shem reached out, the feel of warm skin and fluid muscle stoking his desire. Batim's kisses built in intensity, whispers of assent peppering the damp air between them, and an unfamiliar, dark hunger took a hold of Shem.

They tumbled to the floor, the needles of straw scratching and pricking his skin, though Shem had no mind for them, not when Batim stripped him of his clothes with such deft ease, tearing away his nerves, fears, and inhibitions.

He knelt before Shem, mouth searing a path up his thigh, dark eyes glistening with want. Shem couldn't have cared, at that moment, if he was devoured whole, as long as the pleasure didn't cease. He stretched up to Batim's lips, aching, scorching, pleading...he cried out when that wet heat engulfed him, sudden and overwhelming.

Batim watched him all the while, steady eye contact as he lavished upon him the kind of attentions Shem had never even thought it possible to receive. He couldn't have imagined such bliss, such intensity, nor such enjoyment for the giver, yet Batim seemed to revel in it. As Shem teetered ever nearer the brink, Batim growled out his delight, and it rippled through Shem's flesh, claiming him, marking him and setting aflame a whole new chain of agonies. He spent as never before, strangled cries choked off, hand to his mouth to keep the whole yard from hearing. Afterwards, Batim pulled him close in the tangled mess of straw, wrapped him in those broad arms, and kissed his neck.

The scent of their mingled sweat tempted Shem afresh and he wriggled, tasting himself on Batim's mouth, his lover's hardness rubbing against his thigh.

"Let me?"

"Gladly, if you wish it."

Wish, Shem decided, did not come into it. He crawled into his new position, elbows scraped on the rough floor, flushed with anticipation and a desperate eagerness he did not quite understand; not just a need to give pleasure, but to fulfil something deeper within his own self.

He took his first attempt too quickly, nudging Batim with his teeth and eliciting a shallow gasp of pain. Dismayed, Shem made to pull away, but his prince laid a hand to the side of his head.

"It is forgotten. But go slowly now. Use your hand."

Shem did as he was directed, wrapped his fingers around the stiff flesh, firm and yet so soft, and concentrated his attentions on the first inch or so. Batim sighed, a string of words in some unknown, musical tongue passing his lips. His enjoyment buoyed Shem... the fact he could bring this delight to another man enthralled him and, as he built his rhythm, a sense of strange peace filled him, as if nothing existed beyond this embrace, this still, moonlit piece of the night.

Growing braver, he slid down the shaft, Batim filling his mouth, filling every part of his being. His weight on Shem's tongue, his head, the taste of him, the beat of his pulse... all these things wrapped around each other and seeped into every pore of Shem's skin until, outside and in, he existed only for this. It didn't matter to him if he choked, so long as it never ended.

Of course, it did end, and Shem did choke, gagging and coughing but undaunted. They laughed, Batim – in a weary, sated, way – at his enthusiasm, and Shem, a little embarrassed, smiled at his own desires and his ineptitude.

"It will not be long before the moon sets," Batim observed.

Shem, laying in the crook of his arm, winced. "You will change?"

"Yes."

"I will wait for you. For the next full moon," Shem blurted, Batim's answering squeeze of his shoulders both a comfort and a reminder of his inexperience, as if he was a child in need of reassurance.

"I shall await it, too. Most eagerly," Batim added, those last words pressed, along with a kiss, just below Shem's ear. "You don't regret it?"

Shem stared up at the wooden rafters, and a smile crept over his face.

"Never."

\* \* \* \*

The waiting was the worst part, the pain that Shem doubted he could endure. Every time, it made him doubt his own mind, doubt the very reality of everything. Months passed, the winter's icy grip still strong, and the moon's turning face the only change for which he cared. The endless days stretched out into bare and comfortless weeks, broken only by those brief, single nights of joy, so perfect but so fleeting, and then Batim was four-footed once more, still beautiful, but no longer his.

Shem wrote to his da, told him of Graves' offer of work and how he was giving it thought, but was sore tempted to come back home at the first moment the squire allowed it. He longed with an ache deep in his bones for the comforts of home, and he knew he wouldn't rest without it. Yet, when that time came, it would surely mean leaving Batim, and that thought hurt worse than any.

When the next full moon came, Shem resolved to speak with Batim about it. He needed to know what to do. There was so much he couldn't put into letters, risking any wandering eye reading his words, and so much he knew would not be believed even if he told it in person. He wished his purodad could be with him, full as he was of old stories and strange wisps of knowledge caught from times gone past. He knew a bushel of charms against thieves and rustlers, for good luck and good health, though Shem doubted he'd ever encountered anything like this.

He sat on the cold ground outside Batim's stall, and it felt like the moon would never rise. Snatches of old songs tripped under his breath, and the ice on the air seemed to carry a melody all of its own, silvery and sharp. The other lads were out for the night again — blessed good fortune — and Graves was attending on the squire and Mason, both away at a meet with Royal Sharna, whose glory seemed unending. So far, the squire had not entered his prized Akhal-Teke into any races, and Shem hoped the day would yet be far off. Watching the training was bad enough; he had no desire to think of Batim spurred to injure himself on a racecourse.

The telltale sounds of the change echoed through the wooden wall, and Shem caught his breath. He hated to hear Batim in pain, almost as much as he wished his prince would let him stay to see it. It would be horrible, he was sure, but perhaps he could go some way towards halving that burden. The moonlight glinted off the ice-clothed trees, and Shem slipped into the stall.

At the first sight of him, all thoughts of the serious words and solemn talk he'd wanted filtered away to nothingness. Shem fell on him, kisses pressed to his face, his neck, his chest. Batim held him so tight he thought he'd burst, murmuring words of love in that secret, musical tongue of his. At some point, Shem wanted to ask him about his homeland. Ruefully, he wished they had time to spend that way, hours lost in speech and learning rather than the hurried desperation of their meetings.

Batim stripped him, bore him to the nest of straw, hungry and unstoppable. In turn, Shem met him at every push, every peak, exploring the still-unfamiliar lands of his flesh with growing need and hunger. He put his mouth to Batim's skin over and over, tasting him, testing him. For his part, his prince coaxed and teased, anointing every part of Shem's body with tongue and hands, raising him time and again towards an ineffable peak. They rolled together, flesh on flesh, ever seeking new delights.

"There isn't much time," Batim murmured, his hands slipping beneath Shem, cupping his buttocks and squeezing.

"Oh, lord.... Never enough time," he agreed.

"Aye. Not for spending with you."

Batim flipped him over, painted his spine with kisses, laving a trail to the seat of his pleasure and, there, laying open greater delight that Shem had ever believed possible from that part of his body. He groaned, wanting both to prolong the agony and bring it to its natural conclusion, but Batim seemed set on driving him entirely out of his mind.

"Please," he whispered, ragged and aching.

"Patience," Batim chided. "I do not wish to hurt you."

True to his word, he took more time than Shem was sure existed in the world. He lay there, caught upon a knife-edge of feeling, convinced that every clock, every hourglass in the world must have ground to a halt, because nothing was real except the union of their bodies.

"Please," he murmured again, a sigh of satisfaction leaving him in fractured gasps as Batim claimed him, slow and careful.

His hands brushed over Shem's arms and shoulders, smoothing the way for each longer stroke. It lasted an age, bodies bathed in the moonlight, in the lantern's glow, and in the sweat and scent of each other. Shem lost himself in it, his cries muffled by the wadded jacket he bit down on, his whole being consumed by the bliss that built in him. He didn't hear the creak of the door opening, aware of it only by the pooling moonlight on the floor, and the shriek that echoed around the stall.

Elizabeth, backlit against the shadowed night, stared at them. The stone bottle she carried fell from her fingers, hitting the ground with a dull thud. She paled, her face a twisted mask of anger, disgust, shame...and a dozen things besides. If she'd meant to speak, nothing came of it but a few strangled husks of words, riven with spite and anger. She turned, fleeing into the darkness.

Shem untangled himself and sat up in a panic, pieces of straw sticking in his hair. He made to move, almost forgetting his nakedness, but Batim grabbed his arm and held him firm.

"Wait! No."

"But she saw! She could —"

Batim's grip tightened, his eyes wide and fierce. "No! Understand this, my love. You must deny me. Do you understand? Whoever asks, whatever the questions, deny me. Say nothing. Deny me. Promise you will do that."

"I promise," Shem said, no thought of stopping to ask or argue.

*My love....*

Batim looked relieved.

"I love you, too."

The words slipped from Shem's lips with neither planning nor consent, but he couldn't regret them. The warmth in Batim's eyes was reward enough. Shem pressed a kiss to his lips and rose, snatching up his clothes and pulling them on as he dived out into the freezing air.

"Shem! Don't!"

Deep though his ache for Batim ran, Shem ignored him. He made out Elizabeth's figure, just past the gates, and he ran to catch her, reaching out to grab her arm. She spun around, tears spilling from her eyes and a terrible rage screwing up her face.

"Get away from me! You.... Who was that? Some other ravening gypsy mongrel like yourself? Some perverted varlet who — By God, if you were just a liar, Shem...! But you're not, are you? You're...oh, I can't even say what you are!"

She wrenched her wrist from his grasp and kicked his shin, sending pain shooting up his leg, but the slap she landed across his cheek stung less than her ugly words. His anger riled, Shem caught at her again, determined not to let her leave in this tantrum, to make her see she must be quiet.

"Let go! Let go, you disgusting —"

"Disgust you I might, my fine lady," Shem spat, the ire in him too raw to be reined in, "but dun't that leave you nowhere when all's said and done. I never wanted your favours, and neither did I call you the hussy you acted, so don't you tell me what's disgustin'."

"How *dare* you!" She kicked out again, as game a fighter as any he'd ever seen. "You have no idea who I am! My family own half the damn county, you ignorant little sodomite, and I'll be damned if I'm going to —"

"You'll do what you're tol', girl!" Shem shook her by the shoulders. "All right? You listen to me. Love don't hide in no palace, and it don't tek gold to buy it neither. Not love like I know, what's honest and real. That man... he's more than you will ever be, you unnerstan' that? Better, and purer, and I would walk to the world's end for him."

He knew in the instant he said it he'd done wrong. The night turned deathly quiet, no hoot of owl nor snort of horse, and though there had been no smell of it on the air, no heavy clouds in the sky, snow began to fall. It eddied about them like tears of ice, and Shem let go of Elizabeth, backing away from her, his head swimming.

*Deny me...promise me that.*

What had he done?

He ran, the cold air tearing at his lungs, the breath burning in him, but it was too late. The stable door stood open, and the stall was empty.

Batim had gone.

\* \* \* \*

They called him a thief, of course.

There was a scene at the big house, the squire's face scarlet with wrath. His daughter's tears spoke against any protestation of innocence Shem could have made, any word on his behalf Graves might have added. He curled his arms over his head, and the whip fell again and again, stunning his ears until the whole world was a mangled mess of sound, everything spinning and pitching about him. He stumbled out into the night, thrashed raw and bloody. Had his mind been full of anything but the burning, bleeding guilt of the promise he had broken, Shem might have had room for fear.

It was Graves who gave him his freedom, who opened the door of the butler's pantry into which Shem had been locked to await the coming of the constable.

He said little, his face pinched and white, but gave Shem money and let him out of the back door behind the scullery. Dawn was breaking over the horizon, staining the sky the bruised pink of half-healed burns, and the knotted fingers of trees stood black and bare against it. Shem didn't know what to say, until he saw a familiar figure by the hedge.

Cinderella, her gravid belly noticeable, yet still not more than a gentle swell to her sleek lines, tossed her head in the early morning mist. Graves gave him a gentle push between the shoulder blades.

"Go on, lad. Go."

Shem gave the head groom one last look, his gratitude too wide for words, and ran.

He made it back to the camp in quicker time than he'd even dared hope, but the homecoming was bitterly soured. They came to greet him – his mother and his da, his purodad and the aunts, uncles and cousins – all uncertain figures leaving off the cooking, washing, and sharpening of knives to rise and squint at his strange arrival. Shem slipped from the mare's back, her coat steaming in the frosty air, and tried to hold his head high. He passed Cinderella off to his father, the language of eyes their only communication as his da ran a soothing hand down her neck.

Shem cried in his mother's arms, the apologies pouring from him for all that he'd done, all that he'd not done, and all that he would bring upon them.

They would have to move on, naturally. This place would no longer be safe, nor their presence tolerated. Much of the day, the sun rising weak and pale, was consumed with the plans that had to be made. Shem talked until he was hoarse, explained everything as best he could, and met with no disbelief, no ridicule. His purodad sent him to rest while one of Shem's cousins took a horse to ride to the outlying reaches of Canterbury. Another, more distant branch of the clan lived there, and mayhap would have fields and safety to share.

Shem slumped on his narrow bed, and gradually allowed sleep to steal him. He expected the dark blankness of fatigue, not dreams, yet in that slumbering world, he stood in a cobbled square by a stone well... the centre of a village or some such, Shem supposed. It was not a place he knew, and it

seemed strange, the jagged lines of dark mountains rising between the houses and the sky, the scent of pine trees upon the air.

Yet these petty concerns soon left him for, standing by the well, he saw Batim. He looked more handsome than ever, clad in brown leather boots and grey breeches, a tunic of blue and a soft woollen cloak. He did not speak, but he watched Shem solemnly as he extended one hand and dropped something into the well. Then, a finger to his lips, he began to fade, and the dream dissipated.

Shem woke, sore and uneasy. He knew what he must do.

As his family packed up and began to make their way north, he set off alone, heading to Dover and the docks. Shem took little with him, just a small bundle of clothes, a tinderbox, a knife, and the black cloth pouch his purodad gave him. In there, he promised, lay anything Shem would ever need.

The journey was long, and if crossing the land was hard, the water was a thousand times worse. Shem, never having had much experience of the sea, had carried no notion that a body could undergo so much sickness.

At length, landing in a foreign realm of which he knew little, he found lodgings at an inn by the port, and asked after the Black Mountain. Few were willing to speak to him, and fewer still knew his language, but he persevered, his hand wandering to the pouch his purodad had given him. Without opening the tight-sewn little bag of cloth, Shem felt the shape of a horse brass within in, and the smoothness of the metal, and the memories it carried, gave him heart.

Eventually, he was able to glean knowledge enough that he should travel north-east, and so he began his journey. After the first few days of passing tiny villages and sprawling farmsteads, Shem made out the distant shape of a mountain range pricking the underside of the sky. He didn't know whether Batim's home lay there, but he was sure he would at least find some answer if he kept moving.

Mostly, Shem stuck to the roads, sleeping in copses and ditches, feeding himself on rabbit and hedgehog, and it wasn't a bad existence. The nights were cold and filled with regret, but in dreams he saw the golden horse, running through the bracken of a pine forest, his mane streaming out behind him. Sometimes, too, Batim came to Shem in his human form. He would stand beside the well in the cobbled square and, though he never spoke, his eyes seemed full of love. Beside that, the weariness of the endless trudge — those agonising miles that made Shem's blistered feet feel as if boots of iron encased them — mattered a little less.

At length, and after many days had bled into blurred, timeless weeks, he came to the mountains and the pass that lay through their foothills. A guard, his crimson tunic emblazoned with a black eagle, stopped Shem and demanded toll money. Unsure how to respond, his fingers closed on the pouch in his pocket, and a few grains of salt leaked out from its seam. Shem brought out his hand, and saw the salt had turned to coins. He offered them

to the guard. The man took the gold—lip curled in distaste, yet his hand darted out quick enough—and allowed Shem to pass.

The land that lay beyond the mountains was dominated by their shadows. One great peak rose to the south, and Shem looked on with mixed awe and trepidation, sure this must be the Black Mountain of which Batim had spoken.

Shem made his way down the sloping path fringed with trees, leaving the pass behind him and heading to a small town, groups of wood-framed houses with roofs carved like lace. On reaching the point where the pine forest gave way to dirt-packed streets and cobbled squares, Shem's heart leapt. He saw the well, just as he'd dreamed it, and that surely meant he was in the right place.

A liveried servant, all dressed in deep red, the crest of an eagle upon his chest, stood at the well, drawing pail after pail of water. Shem cleared his throat and stepped closer.

"Pardon, sir, but I wonder if I might beg a cup o' that? I've travelled a right long way, sir, and I'm dreadful parched."

The man stared at him, and Shem supposed he must present a terrible picture, caked with the dust of travel and a foreigner to boot. He reached again for his purodad's black cloth pouch and squeezed it, saying once more: "Sir? Please? Jes' a sip of water."

Perhaps human compassion and charity won out, or perhaps it was the pouch, for the servant nodded and gestured to Shem that he should drink.

Grateful, he came forward and dipped his hands into the bucket, scooping cool, clear water to his lips. Something glinted within it, and the weight of a small, hard object butted Shem's mouth. Quickly, he stowed it under his tongue. He nodded and smiled his thanks at the man, then waited until he had turned to leave before he spat the thing into his palm.

It was a ring, solid gold and, by the look of it, a good hundred years old, emblazoned with the same figure of the eagle that Shem had seen so often in these parts. He weighed it in his palm. Old gold, indeed, and a fine piece. Glancing around to be sure his find had gone unnoticed, he slipped it into his pocket. Following on at a safe distance, Shem tracked the liveried servant back to whence he'd come.

Shem trailed him through the town, past the two-storied shops, the market square, and the neat, clean houses, uphill to the gates of a small, grey stone castle. Everything seemed so tidy and in such good order that it gave him the shivers... particularly that one tower, rising higher than all the others.

*Furious, she cast this curse upon me from the top of the tallest tower, and I could not outrun it.*

Shem shook the words from his mind, blind to danger and deaf to prudence. He waited, watching as the serving man passed through a set of gates set back from the main entrance, and Shem heard him exchanging words with someone he took to be cook or scullion, their voices lilting with that same musical tongue as Batim had used to whisper him sweet things in the shadows.

He crept closer, taking advantage of their attention being turned to decanting the water into stone bottles, to dart through the gates.

*Why the devil does the place not have its own pump, or at least a well?*

Shem bit his lip, uneasy and afraid, but any discomfort shrank beside the promise of seeing his prince again. The men laughed and joked outside the wide maw of the kitchen doors, and he slipped inside, his leather-shod feet noiseless on the flagstones.

It stood to reason for Shem that all houses, regardless of size, must be organised in essentially the same way, and so he headed to where he supposed the back stairs must be. He found them, a great wide rise of dark wood leading to a dim corridor flanked with tapestries. Everything seemed to press in on a body here, whether it was the walls or the trees. He padded past room after room, shrinking at each sound that could be a footfall or opening door, and at last found the object of his search.

A stout door at the end of the hallway led into a room overlooking the castle's grounds. The furnishing were rich but sparse, a large bed swathed with fine linens, an oaken table and chairs, and a window of leaded glass let in streaming golden light. Standing beside it was Batim, just as Shem had seen him in his dream, clad in a dark wool cloak and fine tunic, looking every inch the great lord.

Shem didn't dare go to him, dared not do anything but stand and gawp, a painful swell of gratitude beating in his chest, tempered through with awe and disbelief. This could not be the same man with whom he'd lain in the straw of a stable floor, naked and unrepentant.

He turned, a frown on his beautiful face, and everything Shem wanted to say died in his throat, agony clenching his heart.

"Who are you?" Batim demanded.

No glimmer of recognition graced his eyes and, though he spoke in Shem's own tongue, the musical lilt of this foreign place hung dark and heavy on every word.

"It's me...Shem. Don't say you've forgot me? I've travelled all this way, just for you. To find you again. I—"

"I shall call the guard!"

He started towards the door, and Shem saw the jewelled dagger in his belt, not doubting for a moment that his prince would be man enough to use it. He took the golden ring he had drawn from the well out of his pocket and held it up, the bright daylight catching it, glinting golden between them.

"Remember me, my love. Remember."

*Her kiss may make a man forget his whole past.*

Batim faltered, blinked, a gauze seeming to lift from his eyes.

"I.... What is this devilry?"

He reached out and took the ring from Shem's fingers. Though the anger had left him, his face remained clouded with doubt. The inches of empty air between them yawned like a void. Shem ached to reach across it, to pull Batim to him and never let go, but he knew better.

"You remember?"

Batim's dark gaze swivelled to him, the ring still turning over and over in his hands.

"I...I know your face, traveller. I've seen you. In my dreams."

"Ah!" A fractured breath broke from Shem. "Yes. Yes, you been in mine too, right enough. Come. Remember."

Batim frowned again, struggling to break the spell. He rubbed his thumb across the ring and slipped it onto his finger, staring at the narrow golden band. Shem, hard-pressed to contain himself, stepped closer.

"You said, if she kissed you, you'd forget. You said she had the power to do that. Fight it, can't you?"

Batim blinked. "I know you. Ever since I... I came here, I have these dreams. You're there. There's a stable. We —"

He stumbled over the words, and Shem knew what he wanted to voice.

"Aye. We were. Like this."

Caution forgotten, he leaned forwards and pressed his lips to Batim's, a firm pressure filled with the memories of every moment they'd spent together, every delight, discovery, and yearning. He felt the recognition bloom in Batim's body, felt those long-missed hands come to clasp his arms, and the way his lover's mouth trembled against his. A damp, uncertain breath brushed Shem's cheek as they parted.

"Shem.... Oh, Shem, I am truly sorry. I never meant —"

"Shh. No apologies. The fault was mine. If I'd but listened to you, denied you liked you told me...."

"It's no matter," Batim murmured. "You've found me. How you must have struggled! You must tell me how you did it, tell me everything."

Shem held him tighter. Batim's arms folded around him, and that ineffable sense of peace that had been missing for so long began to return.

"It was you," he murmured into Batim's golden hair. "You showed me the way, love. All I did was follow... 'tis all I've ever wanted to do."

A small, dry chuckle broke from Batim, his hand smoothing the nape of Shem's neck.

"We must leave this place. Will you take me away?"

Shem pulled back, his brows drawn low. "What of your stepmother? Does she have the whole town beneath such an enchantment as she put on you?"

"Perhaps." Batim lowered his gaze. "Shem, I am no slayer of dragons. I have no desire to fight her. All I want is for you to take me home. With you."

Shem snorted, displeased. Yet, he had to admit, from what he had seen of the place, it looked pleasant enough. If the witch of whom Batim spoke ruled here by her craft, who was he to push her from her throne?

"Shem?" Batim squeezed his hand. "Do you think ill of me for that?"

Shem shrugged. "You don't want your lands back?"

"I want you. You broke my enchantment the night you refused to deny loving me."

"But I broke my word to you!" Shem's eyes widened, anger rising in him. "You made me promise to — I've been in such a state that I said all I did!"

"I'm sorry you suffered. Truly I am. But I would rather have lived with you, and remained enchanted, than have given you up. Do you understand that?"

Shem sighed, honeyed words of self-sacrifice and love not going far towards assuaging his irritation. He wrenched his hand from Batim's grasp, ignoring his further protestations of adoration, the velvet kisses of his touch. Stupid, humiliated tears prickled the bridge of his nose.

"You are a coward."

"I am your coward," Batim answered, and Shem couldn't argue with that.

He took his prince's hand once more. "Come. I know the way home. I've no castle to my name, mark you. No forests, no fine tapestries."

"I don't care."

"Well, you say that now...." Shem glanced down at Batim's hand and the ring upon it. He smiled, despite his lingering anger. "Come on."

They had made it almost all of the way out of the gates when a shriek sounded behind them, and Shem looked back to see a tall woman all in black, her raven hair flying out behind her. She pointed at Batim, the nail on her finger blood-red, and a wordless howl spilled from her carmine lips.

The walls of the world seemed to ripple against Shem's skin, and he felt Batim tense beside him, his prince's face blanching with fear.

"Shem! We must run. She will —"

"No." Shem gripped his lover's sleeve and held him fast. "We don't run. Didn't you wonder why there's no people here? Eh? All these houses, all these tidy little streets and clean, painted shops. Where's the people, my fine lady?" he added, turning to her and raising his voice. "What are you really queen of, madam?"

A wind sprung up all around them, chasing dead leaves ahead of it in skittering circles. From the castle, liveried men who bore the eagle's mark began to run towards them, and the witch-queen rose into the air, buoyed on the currents of her storm.

Shem put his hand into his pocket, fingers closing on his black pouch. He drew it out and, in one swift movement, flung it to the ground before her. A flame, bright blue and sudden, roared up and, with a terrible scream, Batim's stepmother shrank, wizening like an apple dried in the sun. No longer tall and beautiful, she cowered, an ancient, grey thing thin as a bone, consumed with anger and spite. Where her guards and liveried servants had been, there scurried beetles with shiny, iridescent backs. All around them the castle, the clean cobbled streets, and the many fine houses rippled into nothingness, the broken pieces of illusion fading to leave nothing but tree stumps and a hut of mud and straw. The smell of the forest grew stronger, pine sap and the dank, primeval darkness of the trees leaning in, eager to claim back the things the witch-creature had tried to steal from it.

Shem stole a look at Batim, his skin paper-white, his mouth slack, and his dark eyes pools of terror. He squeezed his prince's hand.

"All right. *Now* we run."

Batim didn't need telling twice.

They ran as far and as fast as they could, leaving the Black Mountain and the encroaching woods behind them, fleeing back through the now-unmanned pass and to the relative safety of the road.

When night came, they made camp by ditch. Shem caught a brace of coneys and sat by the fire to gut them. Batim was staring at the moon, rising high into the darkness, set against the pinpoints of a thousand stars. He sat with his knees drawn tightly in, his arms locked around them and his head raised, his eyes glittering in a face shadowed with fear.

"It can't touch you anymore," Shem said, wiping his knife on his breeches.

Batim glanced guiltily at him. "Hm?"

"The moon. That... thing. It's all gone."

"It was all a lie. My whole life."

Shem sniffed. "Not all of it. I'd wager you were the son of a great man, once. That you were his finest jewel." He stole a look at the ring on Batim's finger. "Perhaps a long time ago. Whatever that was, that creature, it took you. Built a web of fancies around you and snared you there, until the day you dared to defy it. See? 'Cause you did, didn't you? You dared. It never broke you that completely."

"Four years." Batim sighed. "I wandered, and I was —"

"Sent to find love. A love that wouldn't deny you, that would be true. As soon as that happened, she carted you right back again. Back to her web, to break you anew, once you'd opened yoursel' up that bare to another. No-one can be that bad hurt, as hasn't yielded that way. I'd warrant that was the plan."

Batim shook his head ruefully. "I don't know. Maybe I really am a horse."

The moon's silver light dappled the ground and gilded his handsome face. Shem set the rabbits to cook over the flickering orange of their fire and slipped Batim a sidelong smile. Even if that was true — even if a hundred enchantments had been made and broken this night — it didn't matter anymore. It wouldn't matter ever again, as long as they were together.

"I don't know 'bout that," he said, grinning. "But we could allus ask my da. You'n like him. He knows a thing or two about horseflesh."

Batim smiled, and Shem supposed the journey home might not be so bad after all.

## About the Author

M. King lives and works in a damp, verdant corner of South West England, where she may usually be found behind a keyboard and a vat of coffee. She has a deep and wide-ranging interest in folklore, and the Travellers' Tales series is inspired by her long-time affection for Romany stories.

You can find more of her work at [www.lavengra.co.uk](http://www.lavengra.co.uk) or <http://lavengra.wordpress.com>

