

NIGHTINGALE



L.E. BRYCE

Nightingale
by L. E. Bryce

Phaze

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This is an explicit and erotic novel

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Nightingale

A short novel of homoerotica by

L.E. BRYCE

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Note: *Nightingale* is set four hundred years before the events in *House of the Swallows*, five hundred years before the events in *The Golden Lotus*, and seven hundred and fifty years before the events in *The Water Lovers of Sirilon*.

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Chapter One

"Winter has its blessings," said the queen. "Our enemies might invoke the name of the water goddess, but they have not yet managed to cross the seas and attack us during this time of year. Let us drink to these precious months of peace."

Applause greeted Amunnikal's words, and cups were raised. Aranion sipped at his mulled wine; it would not do to get drunk before the first course was served. Around him, his brothers and sisters and their consorts mingled with members of the royal court, as the flutists and lute players spun their musical web from the shadows. As always, the gathering did not include the queen's many husbands. *Ani* never came to court, and played no part in the governing of the realm beyond sharing their seed.

"This must be a welcome respite for you, Aranion," said Elenin. Charming and brilliant, he had contacts in half a dozen ports throughout the Middle Sea, and counted more merchants than nobleman as his friends. Thanks to the stormy weather and dangerously erratic seas, winter did not agree with him at all.

Aranion watched the servers bring in trays of steaming butternut squash soup. Having fasted all day in preparation for this feast, his belly rumbled impatiently during the numerous religious invocations and the queen's speech. "The true respite will come when the Shivarrians realize they need to stop trying to expand. They already have the Seaward Islands, and our ancestral lands in the north."

Elenin laughed sharply. "Spoken like a politician!"

"My service with the fleet leaves me no time for politics."

"Not even time to get married?" Elenin waited long enough for Aranion to roll his eyes before chuckling again. "When are you going to do your part to provide generations of future husbands for our future queens?"

Aranion bristled as his brother looked set to delve into one of his favorite sedentary pastimes: needling his sibling about his apparent disinterest in women. "You're doing more than your share already," he observed tartly, nodding toward Elenin's wife, who even late in her fifth pregnancy glowed with enough enthusiasm to show off a new silver headdress.

"Orinne tells me this is the last one. If I want more, she says, I'll have to divorce her."

Any discussion of marriage or religion was guaranteed to upset Aranion's digestion, and the meal would accomplish that by the third course. Somehow Elenin had obtained the menu and assured him that the royal cooks had prepared enough food to feed most of the city.

Aranion finished his soup, then picked at the stuffed hen garnished with ginger and stewed apples in cinnamon. As far as he was concerned, winter solstice would have been more profitably spent visiting the dry dock, where the city shipwrights labored to get the fleet into fighting condition by spring. Instead, custom obliged him to watch the priests sacrifice some poor temple slave to bring back the sun, and endure an endless round of banquets and meaningless small talk.

Elenin laughed at his brother's misanthropy. "Aranion, has it ever occurred to you that the shipwrights and your men might *need* a holiday? Just because you find all this tiresome doesn't mean others do. Ah, but never despair." He gave Aranion's arm a friendly pat. "The gifts are coming, and not a day too soon, I might add. The children have been pestering me all week wanting to know what their grandmother has chosen for them."

Dessert and gifts. Aranion could not decide which was worse: the nauseating array of sweets or his mother's inexplicable taste. No one dared point it out, of course, but Queen Amunnikal gave the most useless presents a man ever saw. She might know her twelve children about as well as the men who had fathered them, but surely her ministers could advise her better. Aranion wore last year's gift—an absurdly heavy pair of silver and turquoise earrings—only as a courtesy; he would have sooner pulled them off and given them to his sister-in-law.

Next, Mother will give me a monstrous nose ring, he thought ruefully, and then I'll have no choice but to get my nostrils pierced. My men will never stop laughing at me.

Yet more entertainment arrived with trays of apple and lemon tarts, pumpkin bread, almond and poppy cakes, and honey custard. Earlier, fire dancers from the Isheri Mountains spun through the hall with their twirling brands and trilling pipes, but the ministers in charge of the solstice banquet always reserved some special performance for after the meal. Last year, bull-leapers from Thrindor had amazed the court,

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while the year before, Aranion fought to stay awake for the insipid poetry recital praising the sun goddess.

A youth dressed in white took his place on the floor before the queen's dais. Aranion noted his fair hair and shy, sweet smile, but nothing else. Music did not appeal to him.

Elenin leaned in close. "I do believe that boy is a *petah*."

Just the thing to give a man an ulcer: a shrill castrato. Aranion grimaced into his napkin, while waving away the servant bearing a selection of tarts. The last *petah* who sang for the court made his stomach turn and his ears ring for three days afterward.

But when an expectant silence fell over the hall and the young man began to sing, the voice that carried to the barrel-vaulted ceiling was a soft, tremulous tenor. So the boy was not a castrato.

It must have been a love song, as they were all the rage this year. Aranion could only stand so much vapid nonsense, and ignored the words in order to watch the singer. Tears glistened in his eyes, as though each note cost him untold anguish; he seemed for all the world like a boy in love for the very first time.

A cunning trick, observed Aranion. *Petaha* were nightingales who never spoke except to sing. But for their music, they were mute. No wonder the young man poured such emotion into his performance: as a slave forbidden to speak, singing was the only freedom he knew.

"Ah, that's lovely," sighed Elenin.

Aranion rolled his eyes.

At the conclusion of the recital, the *petah* and his handler received their applause with polite bows, then withdrew so the gift giving could commence. "Here we go," muttered Aranion.

Amiri, the eldest child and royal heir, received a bow and arrows. Plump from eight pregnancies in ten years, it was a wonder the Crown Princess could even move—what in the world would she do with such a weapon? Amiri kept an impassive face, spoke the ritual formula of thanks, and waddled back to her chair. What a waste of a handsome bow, electroplated ash wood with matching arrows in a black leather quiver. Aranion would not have minded receiving it himself.

"Mother will probably give me some dull philosophy book," whispered Elenin. "She ought to know by now that I never read anything but my ledgers."

Elenin rose when his name was called, received the dreaded book, and returned. "You're next, little brother."

Gritting his teeth against certain disappointment, Aranion approached the royal dais. His mother, immense, remote, and regal, inspired no particular affection. Aranion spent his childhood with his siblings in the children's palace, where his only guardians had been servants and tutors. Like all the royal children, he never knew his father or even his father's name, and rarely saw his mother the queen. Even now at twenty-nine, even as Admiral of the Queen's Navy, he scarcely ever had an audience with her.

This war with Shivar might go differently if she ever bothered to listen to me, he thought bitterly.

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Amunnikal, draped in silver and pearls and a great peacock headdress, reclined amid turquoise moiré and tapestry cushions like some exotic bird. Aranion dropped his gaze and, wishing himself elsewhere, bowed.

"To our beloved son, Prince Aranion," she said, "a gift of music."

Amunnikal waved a plump hand thick with silver and turquoise ornaments. From the corner of his eye, Aranion glimpsed wheaten hair and a flash of white.

Oh, gods, he thought.

It was the mute singer, the *petah*.

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Chapter Two

"Of course a military man like you isn't interested in music," said Sheban. "However, Melan has other talents which ought to please you."

Only a waterfront brothel could produce the kind of leer the heavysset, florid man gave Aranion; the temptation to answer with a good, hard smack across the face almost proved too great. Sheban might be the *petah's* former owner, who under normal circumstances had no business lingering once the transaction was complete, but he was also Melan's voice trainer and agent. Unless Aranion could make alternate arrangements, the man's presence was a necessary evil.

Aranion let his disgust show. "I hope the boy knows more than love songs."

Sheban flashed him an oily smile. "Oh, yes, my lord, Melan has a vast repertoire, and can easily learn any song fit for a tenor. His routine is rigorous. Exercise in the morning, then an hour of scales, then he practices, rests, and exercises again."

"So he'll be filling my house with his trilling and yowling from morning till night?"

"Oh, no, my lord! I have it on good authority that you spend your days down in the shipyards or with your officers, and that's when Melan practices. He shouldn't disturb you at all."

Aranion glanced over at the youth, who sat in a corner with his hands demurely folded in his lap. Either through

natural evasiveness or a genuine paucity of information, Sheban could tell him only that Melan was around eighteen, and had been purchased as a menial some ten years earlier. "A waif with a sweet voice," said Sheban, "when I could persuade him to sing."

Aranion preferred not to dwell on what passed for persuasion in the man's house. "His inability to speak limits his usefulness to me."

"Ah, but the boy *can* speak!" exclaimed Sheban. "*Petaha* communicate through gestures, and are quite adept at making themselves understood. And of course, there is nothing wrong with his lips or his tongue, should you find some other, more intimate use for them."

This presumption went too far. "I was under the impression you were the boy's voice trainer, not his pimp."

Sheban blenched, and all at once a hundred apologies began dripping from his tongue. "I meant no offense, my lord, none at all! Surely you knew that *petaha* are as renowned for their love affairs as their singing? In fact, they are quite highly desired—"

"Their *messy, disastrous* love affairs, you mean," Aranion said sharply. "I want no scenes and no drama from the boy."

"But surely—?"

Another moment and Aranion knew he *would* slap the man. "What do you want from me? I am a prince and Admiral of the Queen's Navy, not some sensualist eastern potentate with multiple wives and a harem full of sex slaves. My pleasure is none of your affair. My servants know their place,

and in my household I expect peace, quiet, and good behavior—from him and you both."

Sheban inclined his head, but not before Aranion detected a moment's hesitation.

Mahawn, the steward, came in to show the young man to his quarters. Even here, Sheban seemed reluctant to give up control; Aranion overheard him in the corridor arguing about Melan's schedule and accommodations until the steward firmly put him in his place. When Mahawn returned with his report, Aranion momentarily set his paperwork aside. "See about replacing that trainer. If the scrip is clear, I own the boy now."

"I know very little about singers and voice trainers, sir," replied Mahawn, "but I will look into it. Fortunately, the young man himself seems pliant enough. I do not think he will cause any trouble."

"The trainer told me he can communicate through gestures. Learn whatever you can so someone in the household can talk to him."

Acquiring the slave's sign language did not appeal to Aranion any more than having him perform. Almost at once, as an irritated Aranion returned to his seat in the banqueting hall, Elenin had asked whether or not he would hold a recital for the boy. Aranion snorted over the honey custard his sister-in-law pressed on him; he could not eat another bite. "You're mistaking me for someone who has time for the arts." Elenin stroked his beard. "You'll have to do something with the boy. He isn't a book you can file on your shelf and forget."

Perhaps not, but Aranion proceeded to do just that. Whatever Melan did about the house, his new master neither saw nor thought about it for several days after the initial interview. No matter how dreary, the post-solstice season offered no rest. Once the shipwrights got over their collective hangover, work recommenced in the dry docks. The same held true for crews and soldiers. Daily drills would alleviate their natural tendencies to gamble and get drunk. Aranion wanted no sluggishness once the campaign season started in spring.

Logistics officers sent lists of available material, and intelligence reports arrived twice a day through Aranion's chief officer, Shiranar Dorwe. Even in the depths of winter, the Shivarian fleet made limited patrols. However remote, it was always possible that Demar would come under attack when its defenses were most vulnerable.

Days were short and overcast, the sea in the harbor an unrelenting iron-gray, and the marine fog lingered into the afternoon, dulling winter's weak daylight. Aranion drove back the gloom with work, until he made certain he went to bed exhausted each night.

One morning three weeks after the solstice, he woke to rain hammering down on the gutters and rooftops. Water sluiced down the opaque window glass; he could not peer through to the courtyard below. Today would be wet and cold, with the wind driving the rain sideways, but neither the troops nor the shipwrights could be allowed any excuse to lag behind.

As he sat down to breakfast, Mahawn entered wearing a grim look. "So much rain fell during the night that the streets are already under five inches of water. And it's still rising. Shiranar Dorwe just managed to send word that the Royal Corps of Engineers are sandbagging the waterfront. By the queen's command, all businesses are closed, and all soldiers are to stay in their barracks. Captain Dorwe sends his regrets, sir, but that means you, too."

Aranion brooded over his oatmeal. Only a royal order could keep him indoors—but it could not keep him from chafing at his confinement. Rather than take his exercise at the barracks with his men, he stretched and curled in a room above the flooded courtyard, then bathed, and retreated to his study with yesterday's report. Under these circumstances, which might persist for several more days, Aranion's only consolation was that the high seas precluded any attacks. Any enemy foolhardy enough to attempt a landing would be hurled onto the rocks around Demar's natural harbor.

In the afternoon, following a brief episode of thunder and lightning, the rhythmic downpour and crackle of a warm fire worked their hypnotic magic. Aranion sprawled out on his couch with a thick woolen blanket pulled up to his chin and the reports scattered across the carpet beside him, beginning to drift off.

As his eyelids grew heavy, a voice climbing the scales jolted him out of his lassitude. Well-bred servants moved quietly and spoke in whispers. This interruption was as intolerable as it was inexplicable. Mahawn's name hung on his

lips, but, suddenly remembering the useless singer his mother had given him, he never called the steward.

Once his initial irritation passed, Aranion found a pleasing rhythm in the singer's exercises; the downpour muffled the sound, so the youth seemed to be singing from a great distance. Again, sleep beckoned, and this time Aranion drifted into a cozy slumber. He stirred as twilight darkened the study and Mahawn entered with a lamp to stir the embers in the fireplace.

"What time is it?" he mumbled. His mouth tasted dry and sour, and his belly grumbled with faint hunger.

"Sunset, my lord," said Mahawn, "though you would hardly know it from looking out the window. The storm shows no sign of abating."

Aranion stretched stiff limbs and, pushing the blanket aside, sat up. "Have there been any messages?"

Sparks showered the fireplace as Mahawn poked the log. "Nothing can get through this flooding, sir. When would you like to eat?"

"Give it a half-hour." Aranion felt parchment crinkle under his left foot, and realized he had left yesterday's messages lying on the floor. Gathering them up, he instructed, "I'll take my supper in the library." Surely he could find something to read that would hold his interest until bedtime.

Still yawning, he slid his feet into his house slippers and shambled down the corridor with the lamp. When he opened the library door, he was stunned to find the room already lit. Two alabaster lamps threw shadows and sallow light onto polished wood and glass. Light did not, however, mean heat:

the fireplace remained dark, and pale smoke plumed the air as Aranion exhaled.

On the thick-woven carpet before his desk, sitting cross-legged with an open book on his lap was the fair-haired *petah*.

"What are you doing here?"

As Aranion entered, setting the lamp down on a side table, Melan sprang up in terror and backed away, into a corner where Aranion easily cut off his escape. "Well, answer my question, boy."

Then he realized how utterly thoughtless his command was. "Never mind," he mumbled. Aranion bent to pick up the fallen book, open to an illuminated page depicting the famous bull-dancers of Thrindor. "I had no idea you could read," he said. "Or is it just the pictures you like?"

Still wary, still shielding his head against an expected blow, Melan just stared at him.

Is the boy slow-witted, or just shy? Aranion prayed it was the latter. "Have you read anything else out of my library? A simple nod will do."

Melan anxiously chewed his lip, then nodded.

"Which ones?" Aranion set the book on his desk. How long had the boy been in here, with no fire or extra clothing to keep him warm?

Gaping as though he did not understand the question, Melan followed Aranion's hand as he gestured to the cabinets, but took his time about answering. Perhaps he truly *was* slow, his songs nothing more than clever mimicry. But then, seeming to realize he was not going to be beaten, Melan

indicated several gilt-lettered spines and smiled. Rather shyly and charmingly. Aranion brought the little brass lamp closer in order to read the titles: *Romances of the Lion Court*, *The Knights of Rhodeen*, and *The Hero-King Arkanti*. Books such as a youth would read. "I thought all you did was practice your scales and exercise."

Nodding, Melan made a long face, indicating boredom. His fingers stroked the spine of *Romances of the Lion Court*, and he shook his head.

"You're not given any books to read, or anything else to do? Did Mahawn tell you that you could come in here?"

Aranion recognized the look on the young man's face: Melan did not want to get the steward into trouble. "You can certainly tell me. Now if you were going through my personal papers, that would be different." Since he kept those documents securely locked in a cabinet, it was not an issue. "I sometimes allow my servants to borrow books—provided they ask first."

Melan gestured to the map spread above the mantel. Taking a step forward, he pointed to the blue star representing Demar, then indicated the Middle Sea and the lands to the east and north, and shook his head sadly. It did not take someone versed in the youth's sign language to understand what he meant. "You've never been outside the city?"

Melan sidled over to the desk and touched the book, lovingly stroking the leather binding. A boy who had never been anywhere or allowed to do anything but sing—Aranion could scarcely imagine such a bleak reality, even for a slave.

By eighteen, he had traveled the length and breadth of Yshan, and had already spent a year in the navy. "Can you really not speak?"

Parting his lips, Melan let out a trilling note of such perfection that it made Aranion shiver. Even as it hung in the air, vibrating softly against the glass, the young man pointed to his throat, then his head. A gesture Aranion could not read—though he thought he grasped fragments of meaning.

Frustrated, frowning now, Melan opened the book, tapped the text, touched his lips and temple, then shook his head. Pointed again to the words, to his forehead—until Aranion understood. "You don't *think* in words?" How exactly did that work, if he could read? "But you *can* follow what people say. You *can* sing."

Melan mimed speaking, then brusquely swatted his hand.

"You were trained not to speak? But if you *wanted* to—?"

Again, he made the swatting motion.

"I see. It's been scolded out of you."

A knock at the door brought Mahawn, followed by a servant with supper. "It's cold in here, sir. I thought I told Toban to light the fire." The steward nodded at Melan, and seemed untroubled by his presence. "Never mind, I'll do it myself."

"Did you know I had a visitor?"

Mahawn glanced over at Melan. "I know he sometimes likes to read books from the library. He is always careful with them, and until today always left before you returned home. If you don't approve...."

Aranion dismissed his query with a nonchalant wave. "As you say, he's always careful." As the manservant set the tray on his desk and began lifting the covers, he spied tomato soup and buttermilk biscuits. Just the sort of meal to brighten a cold, rainy night. "Bring an extra bowl and place setting. Melan, bring that chair from the corner. You can stay and eat with me tonight."

Melan dragged the chair over, but hesitated even when Aranion told him to sit. "Look at all this food, young man. Somehow the cook expects me to finish it all."

Fire bloomed on the hearth. Mahawn, brushing off his trousers, stood up and replaced the fire tools, shoving the tinderbox into his pocket. "No ale or other spirits, sir," he said. "The boy is only to have spring water."

As they ate, Melan hunched over his meal as though he would rather be elsewhere. This would not do at all. Aranion got up, found *Romances of the Lion Court* on the shelf, and brought it over. It was a Tajhaani novel of the sort popular among eunuchs and harem ladies—a vapid tale of separated lovers, narrow escapes, and magic. "So you like love stories? After all, if you're going to raid my library, it's only fair that I know what you're reading."

Abashed, the young man motioned to the book and held his thumb and forefinger a small distance apart. "A little—you like them a little? You mean all the books?" Tonight Aranion found deciphering his signs a delightful novelty, where another time, on a day when he had too much to do or think about, he might have grown impatient. "Ah, I see. You

haven't read very many books at all. But you *do* like to read, yes?"

Melan nodded shyly.

Stop averting your eyes. "All right," said Aranion. "If you promise to take care of my books, you can read them." So saying, he set the romance down with a bemused chuckle. "Strange, I didn't even know I had this book."

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"So what are you reading today?" Aranion gently took the red-bound volume from the boy's hand. "*The Tale of Two Jaguars*—ah, yes, now that's a story I know. Two warrior princes of Ambaza set out to avenge their murdered father. Now why are you blushing like a pomegranate? I won't spoil the ending for you."

Shaking his head, Melan glanced toward the mantel. Somehow he always managed to look like a child caught filching a sweet cake. "You didn't ruin a book, did you?" When Melan, still flushed and biting his lip, indicated this was not the case, Aranion persisted. "Then you'd better show me what's wrong."

The young man went to the shelf and pulled down a volume that looked perfectly innocuous until one opened the cover. And then....

Aranion immediately saw the problem. Pornographic illuminations spilled across every page, accompanied by flowery script—instructions on how to achieve ecstasy in each position. Seeing this, and confronted by a youth's flustered embarrassment, he could not help but laugh. "Shiranar gave

this to me. I really ought to examine my bookshelves more. So it gave you a shock, did it?"

Melan shrugged and did his best to look nonchalant, while failing miserably. Aranion recalled what Sheban said about the boy, and doubted he was a virgin. "Oh, but surely you know how to do this?" Unable to resist a little teasing, he turned the page to an image of a man lying between a woman's spread legs.

Glancing quickly aside, Melan gave no answer. Aranion chuckled and browsed through the book until he found an illumination of a man taking a youth from behind. "Well, what about this?"

Melan peered at the image just enough to give a horrified start. Aranion set the volume on the table beside *The Tale of Two Jaguars*. "I assumed you knew all about this. I want no games or false modesty. You brought me—" Then he realized that Melan was no longer blushing but deathly pale, his chagrin now genuine hurt. "So you've done this before."

Without looking, Melan gestured to the book and, squeezing his eyes shut, grimaced. His reaction was clear, but Aranion needed several more minutes to puzzle out his meaning. "Are you worried that I will try to do this with you? I thought I made it clear the first day that I wasn't interested in your body—or your singing either, for that matter."

Melan pouted, then made another gesture, so abstract Aranion had difficulty deciphering it. Finally, he had to guess at the meaning. "You don't like being teased?"

A vigorous shake said no.

"I suppose you haven't spent much time with other boys your age, and as a slave I doubt you have any brothers. If you had, you'd know I was only playing with you. I have seven brothers who tease me all the time, and here I am almost thirty. I'll put the book away and we won't talk about it again. Now put a smile on your face and go find something else to read. It'll be supertime soon."

Aranion's dining room with its thick-woven carpet and imposing mahogany table saw little use; he ate either in his study or at the barracks, and almost never entertained. Empty chairs made him brood, since Mahawn refused to violate protocol by eating with him, and his visitors rarely stayed long enough to make opening the room worthwhile. Even Elenin took his wine and delicacies in the study whenever he visited, and usually complained about the lack of atmosphere. "This place needs a woman, Aranion."

"I prefer bachelorhood, thanks."

Boredom and bad weather made Aranion restless. That first evening after his curious little singer retired, he had reacquainted himself with a volume of Tajhaani military history, and ordered the dining room opened just for a change of scenery.

Flowing scarlet drapes obscured the spatter of raindrops against opaque glass, and skeletal outlines of stripped trees thrashing in the damp, windy twilight beyond. A fire burned on the grate. Mahawn and another servant followed the cook in with the evening meal.

Aranion stared at the dishes. "You don't expect me to eat all this by myself, do you?"

"You've never objected before, sir." Mahawn looked unsympathetic. "The leftovers will be good for several nights."

Just because he had had the formal dining room opened did not mean he wanted a four-course meal laid out before him. Aranion put his head in his hands. "You don't intend to eat with me, do you?"

"Sir, you know I wouldn't dream of it!"

"This is absurd." What to do now? "Oh, if you're not going to cooperate, then go find that mute slave—yes, the singer—and have him join me. Set an additional place."

When Melan hesitated on the threshold, Aranion had to reassure him. "As you can see, this isn't my bedchamber. Unfortunately, my steward and cook conspired to serve more than I can eat, and they refuse to join me. Since the weather won't allow me to invite my brothers or my lieutenant, you'll have to do."

Obviously that was not the right thing to say. Melan looked more reluctant than ever. Why did this boy have to be so sensitive over a practical matter? "Sit down, Melan. Just because Mahawn won't be reasonable doesn't mean I have to eat alone tonight."

Aranion tried to adopt a more sociable tone over the first course, chicken broth with slivered celery and onions. "You're used to eating with the other servants, aren't you?"

Melan pointed to his throat and mimed singing. "You eat with Sheban? In *my* house? I thought I gave orders that he wasn't supposed to stay after giving you your lessons. I certainly don't want him freeloading from my table."

Melan made no response, except to withdraw further into himself.

"You don't like him, do you?"

That the youth vigorously shook his head came as no surprise. But the way he contracted into his own body, as though trying to disappear, was not normal. *I can't be that bad a host.* "Melan, you'll have to forgive me for being short. I hate being confined like this. A man like me has to be out doing things, not sitting idle. Do you understand?"

Although Melan nodded, he did not look up. "You're not going to brood, are you? You're shaking your head, but you still look sore. Was it what I said before, about your voice instructor?"

Melan had set down his spoon, and now sat tightly hugging his arms.

"Is he a stern teacher?" asked Aranion. For a timid youth, a disciplinarian could become a nightmare figure. Even he, who feared little, still shuddered at the memory of his naval training. The drillmaster who oversaw the young recruits gave no quarter to royal princes. "I've had my share, believe me."

His admission should have brought a shrug, a conspiratorial smile, however shy. Melan showed no reaction at all, but instead sat frozen in a silence that went beyond his inability to speak.

Why Aranion should recall the book at that particular moment, he did not know, except for a nagging suspicion that the young man had shown it to him for a reason. Not under a pretense of modesty or a fumbling attempt at seduction, but as a roundabout way of confiding what he could not say

outright, even had he possessed a voice. "Has *Sheban* done things with you that you don't like? Things like you showed me in that book?"

After several moments, enough time to begin to doubt his hunch, Aranion received his answer: the briefest of nods. "Have you told Mahawn?"

Of course not, as the steward would have reported the information to him. "How long has this been going on?"

Aranion did not really need Melan to tell him, and he felt a guilty twinge at having raised the issue. *Sheban* would have been using the youth at least since puberty. *No more*. "No, don't tell me. It's all right. You belong to me now, and he won't do it to you again."

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Chapter Three

"You know how I love giving recitals," said Hyleas. "Are you sure you won't sell the boy? I would pay generously, of course."

Although two years Aranion's junior, Hyleas possessed twice the girth and three times the wealth. Whenever trade ships arrived with art treasures from Ambaza, Tajhaan, or even as faraway as northern Khalgar, Hyleas or one of his agents always showed up at the auction house ready to buy. Aranion had known he would broach the subject of the *petah* sooner or later; the inclement weather simply delayed the meeting.

"Normally I would oblige you," replied Aranion, "but under the circumstances it's out of the question. Mother would be most displeased to learn I'd sold one of her gifts only a month after receiving it."

Hyleas rolled his eyes. "Ah, she gives Elenin dull books, you a musical boy, and me a bit of useless, marshy farmland east of Cardann. Where is the justice in that?"

Aranion reached across the desk to refill his cup. "There are no hard feelings. I'm perfectly willing to loan the boy to you for a recital. Just name the time and place and I can arrange something."

A month ago, he reflected, he would have jumped at the chance to sell the *petah*, his mother's opinion notwithstanding. Familiarity, however, forced him to reconsider. A month ago, he felt no attachment to the boy.

Selling him now, no matter what price Hyleas offered, was not something he would consider.

Finding a new voice trainer before winter's end proved impossible. Sheban was an inconvenience to be borne, even with restrictions. As expected, he had bypassed Mahawn and brought his complaints directly to the prince responsible for imposing the rules. "My lord, how am I to train the boy if I can only see him two hours a day?"

"Two hours is sufficient," Aranion answered sharply. "Your duty is to guide him through his scales and singing. You're not here to eat from my table or fuck my servants."

All color leeches from Sheban's sanguine features, and his jowls sagged. "My lord, it's understood that a trainer is allowed, ah, certain liberties with his students."

Aranion was ready to stab him through the eye with his stylus. "However you want to grope and molest your own property is your business. But the scrip is clear: Melan belongs to me now. Should I find that you've been bending him over a chair and fucking him, I'm going to throw you out altogether and get a eunuch in here to train him instead."

Sheban's jaw worked, yet for several moments no sound emerged. Finally he stammered, "My lord, this is highly—"

"Keep your prick in your loincloth where it belongs."

"But, my lord, a trainer has certain privileges, and a *petah* owes certain obligations."

Like a dart, the stylus thudded into the wooden molding beside Sheban's head. "Let's be clear: I have no objections to you making a fortune off this boy's musical talent. It doesn't interest me. But since I own his chit, I own his body, which

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means I don't want your hands or your prick abusing my property. Obey the rules or you're out! Is that understood?"

Still shaken, Sheban grumbled something under his breath, but nodded.

* * * *

Aranion was not the first person to use the bath that day, he could tell. Unlike Elenin and Hyleas, both of whom owned residences with private facilities for themselves and their families, Aranion had to share his porcelain tub with the higher-ranking servants; the two scrub maids, porter, and assistant cook used the communal bath two floors down. Barracks life inured him to the situation, and he honestly did not mind letting Mahawn, the valet, and the cook enjoy a hot soak as long as they bathed while he was out and left him a clean tub.

Early in the day, the scrub maids carried steaming buckets of water from the kitchen hearth up to the bathroom and emptied them into the tub. Had Aranion insisted, he probably could have gotten apartments in the newer wing of the palace, where hot and cold water ran through clay pipes, an innovation brought from Thrindor fifty years ago. But moving would have been a chore, especially in winter, and the old wing was quieter with better neighbors. Too many court dandies and nosy, social-climbing bureaucrats occupied the new facilities, paying double the rent for only half the space.

Aranion sank into the hot water, hissing as it tingled and reddened his skin. Forgoing the comforts his brothers and their wives enjoyed in their palatial pools, he reached for the

pumice and began scrubbing between his toes. A man did not need a dozen bath slaves hovering over him to wash his hair and scour his ass when he was perfectly capable of doing those things himself. And no matter what Elenin said, Aranion doubted very much that washing was the only activity going on in a rich man's bath.

Movement from his periphery drew his attention to the doorway, where expressive gray eyes set in an oval face widened at being noticed. Aranion laughed, and as Melan started to flinch back he called the boy over. "Are you looking for me, young man?"

Blushing, his eyes averted from the tub and its nude occupant, Melan shook his head.

"Did you think Mahawn was in here? He never attends me during my bath unless he has something truly interesting to report." Noting the youth's damp ringlets and pink skin, Aranion could not resist a little teasing. "Have you just come from the communal bath? That's no place for a pretty boy like you. Next time use my tub. Don't worry—I won't be in it! Mahawn will tell you how it works."

Melan's gaze darted toward the door, seeking escape from embarrassment, not terror. Had he been afraid, Aranion would have let him go at once. "Sit on the stool over there where you won't have such a full view. Just shift my things over." When Melan was seated, the robe and loose cotton trousers spread over his lap like a shield, Aranion nodded, laughing. "You're safely out of arm's reach now. Certainly not about to be molested by some dirty old man in his bath!"

When the youth blanched, Aranion silently chided himself for his tactless remark and changed the subject. "Have you learned anything new? I don't believe I've heard you sing since you were given to me."

An inquiring look yielded another nod. "Sing something for me," said Aranion. "Whatever song you like."

A subtle shift in posture, a studied deep breath, and a low tenor filled the steam-laden air. The song Melan sang was one Aranion had never heard before. From the lyrics, which filled the darkness behind his closed eyes, Aranion was transported to the Seaward Islands centuries before the Shivarians came in their ships to drive the natives south. Turquoise waters lapped limestone cliffs, and reflected the towering *ninoni* that had seen generations of Danasi come and go, that watched the invaders approach, and that fell crashing into the sea when Shivar toppled the ancient monuments.

Aranion imagined male lovers, servants of the sea goddess, driven apart as their world fell, then finding each other again in a rush of passion.

As the song ended, quivering on a final, soft note, Aranion opened his eyes. "That was lovely," Aranion admitted grudgingly. Melan modestly averted his eyes at the compliment, as though unaccustomed to praise. "But now I have to get up." Steam curled and wafted from his arms as he gripped the sides of the tub and stood. "Hand me the towel, would you?"

Gaze still fixed on the tiles, Melan passed the crisp linen across, and did not look up until Aranion stepped out and, dripping wet, wrapped the towel securely around his waist.

"You needn't be afraid. I won't touch you, and Sheban isn't to do anything with you except give you your lessons and leave. I've made that clear to him, and Mahawn will make certain he obeys."

With a second towel, Aranion dried his torso. "Would you consider performing for one of my brothers?"

Melan's reaction mingled apprehension with revulsion. Apparently a *petah* was expected to do more for his clients than simply give a public recital. For him, *performing* held multiple meanings. "It isn't what you think. Hyleas enjoys music. He has no taste for boys. You would accompany me as my guest, sit at the high table beside me, and sing at the end of the evening, nothing more. Sheban certainly isn't invited."

Frowning, Melan tapped his chest with both hands and shook his head. Aranion could only guess at his meaning. "You can't go? No, you mean you can't go without Sheban? Then we'll find you another voice trainer and agent. Or I can act as your agent, since I'm also your owner. You needn't put up with anymore than what's necessary."

A broad smile curved Melan's mouth, and sudden joy brightened his eyes. As Aranion reached for his trousers, the young man seized his hand and kissed it.

Now it was his turn to be stunned. Such spontaneity brought a burning flush to his cheeks; he was grateful for the steam and hot water that disguised his reddened skin.

"Melan..." he began, the name sticking in his throat. "You needn't do that."

And yet, those lips exerted a subtle pressure upon his knuckles that stirred impulses he had thought quiescent. No

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matter how innocent the gesture, his desire wanted more—he suddenly wanted to feel that mouth moving over his, and that youthful body pressed against his own. It would not have been the first time he took a lovely boy or girl to bed after the languor of a hot soak. As Melan's owner, he had that right.

But he could not do it—could not crush the youth to his chest and ravage him with kisses, or bend him over the stool and take him. Melan's trust was as fragile as an icicle, too easily shattered, and once broken, forever beyond repair.

No, he could not do it.

"You needn't kiss my hand," he repeated. "Here, hand me my robe and you can show me what new books you've discovered."

* * * *

Seeing the sign for water, Melan radiated delight. Aranion tried a second sign, the one for book, before picking up a volume and opening it. "These are all the various types of ships that sail on the Middle Sea," he said. "Here, this one is called a galley—you can see the oars and square sail. But this larger galley is a warship, with the battering ram affixed to the prow and the shields mounted on the port and starboard sides to protect the oarsmen and archers. I sail in a ship like this. One day, when the weather is fair again and the fleet is out of dry dock, I might take you down to the waterfront and show you."

Melan mimed rocking back and forth as though on a ship's deck, and shook his head. He drew a long face as he

motioned to the wall map. "I figured you've never been on a boat before, or outside the city."

Mahawn taught him the few signs he had learned, and it was Aranion's enduring misfortune that he lacked his steward's talent with languages. To carry on a conversation, he continued to rely on his intuition and Melan's ability to get his meaning across. Asking the youth to write proved impossible, for while Melan could read he seemed unable or unwilling to touch pen and paper. Perhaps that impulse, like speaking, had been rigorously scolded out of him.

For Melan to point out the map and then gesture to him with a querying look did not take a linguistic genius to decipher; he wanted to know all the places Aranion had been. It was the intangible, the youth's own thoughts and feelings that remained a mystery, and what Aranion most wanted to know. "I've been as far north as Ikun, which is one of the Seaward Islands, practically within spitting distance of Shivar. I've been as far south as Ostolan, and as far east as Jhaell."

Aranion spent their time together either gently teasing Melan or satisfying his boundless curiosity; there was much the young man, being a slave, did not know or had never seen. Therefore, it came as no surprise when Melan gestured to the mounted brass telescope. "I'd show you how those work, but you need a clear night to look through the telescope." Aranion found explaining his nautical equipment to the young slave an intriguing novelty. "Remind me when this storm ends and we'll look through it. Just don't touch either one when I'm not here. The telescope is very

expensive, and the glass lenses are specially made. The same with the spyglass in this case. I use it on my ship."

Melan mimed putting the glass to one eye, then frowned in bewilderment. Aranion understood the question—or thought he did. "Well, I need to be able to spot enemy ships on the horizon. Once they're upon us, it's too late to turn about and use the battering ram."

Sighing heavily, Melan let his shoulders slump. With a long face, he mimed using the spyglass, swordplay, and horseback riding before pointing to Aranion. Then, pressing his lips together in disgust, he tapped his chest and pantomimed singing.

Aranion stifled a short laugh of recognition. "That's your job, Melan. Your purpose is to entertain, and you do sing beautifully."

Melan sadly shook his head.

"If I let you, you could learn how to do those other things," suggested Aranion. "I'll be gone from late spring onward, but I have a groom who can teach you to ride. That's not to say I will. It probably isn't a good idea. For now, if you want to go out to bazaar, you can accompany Mahawn on his shopping trips. He won't buy you anything, but at least you'll be able to leave the house and be useful when you aren't practicing."

Those promises had the desired effect—and more. Leaning forward, too quick for Aranion to stop him, Melan cupped his face in both hands and kissed him.

Aranion jolted upright. Then, recovering his equilibrium, he seized Melan's wrist and pulled back. "I know you can please

a man—your trainer offered you to me that very first day. But I told you before that—"

His protests went unheeded. Melan ignored the restraining hand on his wrist and leaned in to deepen the kiss. And Aranion, knowing better, let him. Opening his mouth, he slipped his tongue between the young man's lips, and when Melan responded Aranion drew him into his embrace. Still kissing the youth, he stood, pulling Melan to his feet with him.

His hands moved down Melan's back to cup firm, rounded buttocks. What a tight little ass the boy had—just how Aranion liked it. His cock rose hard at the prospect; he fought the urge to take Melan's hand and shove it against his groin. For a casual lover, that was fine. For a new partner, and one as shy as the young singer, it would never do.

No, it was wrong, all wrong. His erection straining his laces, Aranion breathlessly broke off the kiss. "There's no need for you to do this. Your duties don't include—"

A single finger touched his lips, silencing him. Melan's gaze softened and became pleading as he indicated himself, then tapped Aranion's chest and smiled. "You want to do it with me? That had better be the truth. I don't like taking lovers who are unwilling."

Melan answered with another kiss.

Aranion vaguely remembered leading him by the hand to his bedchamber and undressing him by the fire. Under his loose clothing, the young man was surprisingly well muscled, the light playing off his firm contours; Aranion recalled that Melan exercised an hour each day.

Once naked, Melan reciprocated, undoing buttons to bare Aranion's chest, and unlacing his trousers so his stiff cock bobbed free. But when he took Aranion in hand and bent to service him with his mouth, Aranion stopped him. "Not yet," he said. Not before he enjoyed the feel of the young man's body moving against his, and not before he made sure Melan enjoyed it as much as he.

"Come with me." Taking the youth's hand once more, Aranion laid him down on the feather mattress. At the beginning of winter, Mahawn had the servants pile the bed with furs and silk-lined woolen coverlets. As the lovers lay down together, the plush bedding yielded under their twined bodies.

Unlike other young men his age, Melan had no body hair; his former owner had kept him depilated, and Melan simply continued what had become an ingrained habit. Aranion shoved the distasteful image of the trainer's methods from his mind, even as he delighted in the smooth skin sliding under his fingers and tongue.

Melan's nipples were pale pink nubs, sensitive to the touch; it took little to make him writhe and pull Aranion's head closer, but he made no sound. Even here, he remained mute. Aranion, who enjoyed noisy sex, did his best to break the youth's silence. With his tongue he licked and flicked those tender nipples, while he let his hand slither between sleek thighs to cup the young man's balls, squeezing them gently before reaching even farther back to rub his swollen perineum. A groan moved through Melan's body; he tensed, but the only sound that escaped him was a ragged sigh.

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As Melan arched his back, his erect cock bobbing gently against his stomach, Aranion moved up to ravish his mouth. "I would like to hear you cry out," he said huskily. Exhaling his words against Melan's lips, he slipped his tongue between them.

Melan twined an arm around his neck; his other hand slid between their bodies to find Aranion's cock. Oh, yes, the boy knew what he was doing, and Aranion could only wonder how long he had been doing it.

No, don't think about that. Closing his eyes, he enjoyed the warm hand rubbing him from root to head, until his hips began rocking involuntarily. He knew the signs—he was within a hair's breadth of coming. "Not yet," he groaned. "Turn around, with your back to me."

Grazing his partner's temple and cheek with eager lips, he spit on his hand, rubbed it on his cock, and maneuvered it between the youth's thighs, so when he thrust he nudged Melan's balls from behind. Melan lay passively, his eyes closed; this form of lovemaking did nothing for him. *Well, I can change that.* Aranion reached under his arm and around to pinch his nipple, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger until he elicited a sharp gasp—the first such sound to escape Melan's lips. "You're supposed to enjoy this, young man."

Melan pushed back against his groin in response. Oil would have heightened the sensation of his engorged cock moving back and forth over the boy's perineum, and Aranion regretted not having grabbed a vial off the sideboard before climbing into bed. "You like this," he murmured, licking

Melan's earlobe as he said it. "But now you're going to come all over my hand."

Releasing the swollen nipple, he brushed his lover's cock and closed his fingers around it. With his thumb pressed against the slit, and his tongue lapping Melan's ear, he began to stroke up and down. Melan's buttocks clenched like a vise, milking Aranion's cock, splayed hands urging him to thrust harder and faster. Aranion tried to synchronize the movements of his hips and hand, but with each exquisite sensation, with each second that brought him closer to orgasm, his control wavered. At last, unable to maintain the stimulation, he let the young man's cock slip from his grasp, and gripped his pelvis to brace himself.

His climax shuddered through him, and as he cried out his seed spurted into the warm crevice between Melan's thighs.

Breathless, gasping his pleasure as moist, hot breath against the youth's shoulder, he finished what he had begun. Now that he could concentrate, he lavished attention on the young man's neglected cock, jerking it at the root before squeezing his way to the head. Again and again he did it, until he had Melan squirming in his embrace.

"Yes, that's it," he urged. "Come for me. Let me hear you cry out."

Melan took his pleasure silently, trembling and convulsing, filling Aranion's hand with cum. As the crisis passed, he went limp. Aranion kissed his sweat-damp neck and temple, then released him.

From the night table, Aranion seized his discarded loincloth and used it to clean their bodies. Melan, his hair rumpled, his

skin damp and flushed from exertion, shifted onto his other side, and Aranion gathered him close. Outside, the rain continued to fall, but within the bedchamber, softened and warmed by the fire, the lovers snuggled in the comfort of Aranion's feather mattress, under silky woolen covers and furs.

Aranion combed his fingers through Melan's hair as he contemplated the rafters. Sleep should have found him almost as soon as he wiped his body clean. Sex always tired him, and he rarely lingered with his lovers, but instinct told him the night was not yet over. Although he did not feel quite ready to do it again, he knew he wanted to.

"Tell me why you kissed me," he said. "I'm not a terribly handsome man." Indeed, the face that met his gaze in the looking glass was stern even without the beard. Elenin told him repeatedly that he looked better when he smiled—if only he could remember to do so.

Melan kissed the cleft between his pectorals, then grinned up at him. What might he have said, had he been able? Aranion wondered whether he sometimes misunderstood the young man's gestures, and read into them simply what he wanted. "Your loving gaze tells me I'm the best lover you've ever had, but I highly doubt—And you're nodding at me, you impertinent boy. Are you telling me that that really *was* the best sex you've ever enjoyed?"

Even as he nodded, Melan managed to look wounded. "No, I'm not mocking you, but I want to know why in the world you'd rate me the best. I can't possibly be the only one who's ever made you come."

The feather mattress rustled as Melan shifted out of his embrace and sat up. Before Aranion could ask what was wrong, his lover's mouth found his, and it was all he could do to recover his breath under the assault. There could be no mistaking such enthusiasm—the young singer wanted this moment, just as he wanted someone who held him close, who cared about his pleasure, and did not push him away after sex.

As Aranion's arousal stirred once more, Melan would get exactly that, until dawn found them lying sated and exhausted in each other's arms.

* * * *

Aranion put his questions to the steward over lunch. "Exactly how well can you communicate with the *petah*?"

"I still don't understand everything he says, sir," answered Mahawn, "and his trainer hasn't exactly been forthcoming. Has the young man said something to you—through his gestures, I mean? If you deem it urgent, I can see about hiring a translator."

Aranion pushed chunks of braised beef around with his fork. Bouts of enforced confinement blunted his appetite; he found he did not need the three meals a day his cook insisted on preparing. Why did this winter have to be so unseasonably wet and foul? "What information *have* you been able to obtain?"

By now, the entire household must know that Melan had spent the night with him. Servants would have their gossip, he decided, whether he allowed it or not. "I want to know any

intimate details the boy may have confided," he added. "I'd ask him myself, but it's a rather ... delicate matter."

Mahawn, whatever he thought, kept a neutral tone. "Melan dreads his lessons. It's obvious he doesn't like his trainer, but he doesn't seem to care for music very much either. Or rather, he's bored with it. Whenever he has a moment, he tries to help the servants with their work. I know he'd like to go out. I told him I wouldn't make any promises without consulting you first."

"We're all itching to get out these days." Aranion blew on a morsel of stew before tasting it. While the rain persisted as a heavy drizzle, the violent downpour had begun to wane. Perhaps tomorrow he would be able to venture out, though Mahawn warned him that the saturated gutters meant many parts of the city were still flooded. Demar's reservoirs were full to overflowing, and the city's engineers never had enough funds or workers to improve the drainage system. Aranion supposed it was fortunate the sewers were not backing up.

The priests had sacrificed an unfortunate temple slave to the goddess of the sea and her consort, the divine wind, the moment the storm began. Chosen at birth for their perfection, their lives dedicated to fulfilling the one function for which they were bred, those slaves struck Aranion as uncomfortably mindless creatures. He did not want them or their priest-handlers on his ships, and when the men grumbled about honoring the gods before setting out, he substituted a strong, splendid bull for the ritual bloodletting.

Aranion burned incense on the household altar, but the *ninoni*, the faceless stone sentinels who observed his every

devotion and transgression, remained inscrutable. Certainly they never answered his prayers to help him build a more powerful navy, or at least send a knowledgeable Shivarian prisoner his way.

Idly chewing on the morsel of spiced beef, he wondered what gods his sweet young singer worshipped. "Has he ever said anything about...?" *Get it over with.* "Has he ever mentioned other men he's been with? I know that trainer used him. Were there any others? If he's been harshly treated, I want to know."

At this, the normally placid steward demurred. "I didn't go prying that far, sir."

"Well, you now have my leave." Aranion wiped his mouth with a linen napkin. "I want to know the boy's history."

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Chapter Four

By midwinter, the floodwaters receded enough to let a man walk through the streets of the lower city. Aranion seized the opportunity to visit the dry docks, the naval warehouses, and the barracks where his subordinate had been overseeing the men in his absence. Shiranar Dorwe reported no trouble other than the occasional fistfight or fit of drunkenness.

"Soldiers can only spend so much time indoors."

"They'll be drilling outdoors tomorrow." Aranion gave the first dormitory a cursory glance. Shiranar lived in military housing near the waterfront, and during the worst of the storms stayed in the barracks to make sure the men woke at the proper hour, exercised, and kept their dormitories clean.

Shiranar could not resist a lighthearted quip. "If it rains this hard here, just think how bad the Shivarians have it in their soggy country with all those overflowing rivers."

Aranion did not laugh. "It won't keep them away come summer."

That evening, he sent Hyleas a message agreeing to a recital after the spring equinox. Melan would need time to rehearse the songs Hyleas wanted performed, and time to recover from his slight cold. Aranion omitted this last detail, but his brother somehow discovered the *petah's* illness and sent a constant stream of nourishing soups and teas.

Whenever he had a moment, Aranion looked in on the young singer, and brought books and extra blankets which were not really necessary, since Mahawn made certain all the

servants had adequate food, clothing, and bedding. Melan smiled through his sniffles and showed off the woolen socks the steward made him wear. Despite his illness, his spirits remained high. Sheban's absence probably had much to do with that.

"Since you enjoyed *The Tale of Two Jaguars*," said Aranion, "I thought you might like *The Sun King's Saga*. It's an adventure story set in Rhodeen. A prince builds a mighty monument to the sun and moon, and marries a princess created from stardust."

Too late, Melan's exasperated frown warned Aranion not to spoil the ending. "It's very long," Aranion assured him. "By the time you get to those parts, you'll have forgotten I said anything. And once you feel better and the weather clears, you're going to learn how to ride a horse. I like to travel when I can, and I don't like to be burdened down by baggage carts. All my attendants and guards ride."

Prompted by the young man's smile, Aranion continued, "I've written to Hyleas accepting his invitation. You'll sing two songs, but you'll sit beside me as my guest. Once you're well enough, my tailor will take your measurements for new clothes. You won't have to wear that white robe you're used to performing in. And no, Sheban won't be there."

In fact, it would not be long before Sheban disappeared entirely. Mahawn had found a new voice trainer, a skilled eunuch more than willing to take on a prince's personal singer. "Meshabi knows better than to put his hands where they don't belong," said the steward.

Aranion snorted. "Since he can't, it's a non-issue."

At this, Mahawn raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Actually, sir, some eunuchs *can* achieve erections and perform the sex act, but Meshabi has already signed a contract stating he is being engaged solely for the purpose of training and maintaining the *petah's* talent. He understands that he has no say about who the young man sleeps with, even though, he says, it's highly irregular."

"I don't care if he can get an erection," Aranion said tightly. "He can stick it somewhere else."

"Of course, sir, and he agrees, but I did take the opportunity to question him more closely about *petaha* and their agents. Meshabi told me several interesting things, and directed me to a registry where I was able to look through certain documents pertaining to your young singer."

"And what did you discover?"

Mahawn drew out a slip of parchment filled with his spidery handwriting. "I found the bill of sale giving Melan to Sheban. His family sold him at age seven to pay off their debts. From my limited conversations with him, I discovered that he does remember but would rather not discuss it. The registry also includes every performance and official transaction for which Sheban was paid. There are, ah, quite a number of entries."

The reluctance with which the steward responded almost made Aranion reconsider asking in the first place. Then again, this was information he wanted. "Go on."

Mahawn anxiously cleared his throat. "The young man's body has been traded almost as much as his singing talent. Trainers do it all the time with their charges; they initiate the boys at puberty and hire them out. *Petaha* are expected to

carry on dramatic love affairs in addition to performing; it's considered a way of introducing them to potentially lucrative patrons. Apparently it also adds a certain authentic empathy to their music. Now I counted—"

Aranion held up his hand. A number would only taint his interactions with the youth. "I don't want to know."

"Fortunately for you, Melan has no interest in being a famous *petah* or having wealthy patrons. He's willing to sing for a livelihood if he has to, but as for the rest he finds it distasteful. Of course, he understands that it's his profession, and never complains. I had great difficulty getting him to tell me as much as he did."

"And yet with me he behaves differently." Had Melan lied to him in order to gain his protection? With effort, Aranion smothered the first stirrings of anger. There had to be more to the tale.

"Because with you, it *is* different." Mahawn, so taciturn by nature, wore a faint smile. "Melan does it with you because he wants to."

* * * *

Sea breezes softened the evening, cooling the lingering warmth of the day. Fog rolled in across the harbor, obscuring the waterfront in a gray haze. Even an hour after sunset, the moisture penetrated the linen curtains of the litter, which was borne on the backs of six sturdy porters from Ambaza.

"Pull the blanket up, Melan," said Aranion. "It won't do for you to catch a chill."

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Normally he would have ridden the three miles between the palace and Hyleas's residence overlooking the harbor. Melan, however, was not yet comfortable enough in the saddle to make that a feasible option, and once Aranion noted the incoming fog he decided for the singer's sake to endure the tedium of a journey by litter.

Melan obediently drew the fur-trimmed blanket up to his chin. Underneath, he wore deep blue linen and wool, with a silver squash blossom pendant and small matching earrings. The excursion alone brought light to his eyes. Being given new clothes that were not a *petah's* traditional white robes drew forth grateful kisses.

Aranion laughed aloud. No matter how small the gift, the singer responded with unbridled enthusiasm. As soon as he recovered from his cold, Aranion bedded him again. Melan freely offered every pleasure, even turning on his hands and knees to display his willing ass. Seeing that dusky pucker, situated between two pale, perfect globes, was enough to inflame any man's lust, but Aranion bit back the urge to sink his cock into the young man's body and ride him. Instead he adhered to his own personal code, coming only between Melan's thighs or on his own belly, and he always made certain Melan enjoyed their lovemaking as much as he did.

As the litter turned into the cypress-shaded lane leading up to Hyleas's residence, Aranion glimpsed torches, fuzzy and indistinct, through the draperies. "We're almost here," he said.

A tall Ambazi porter with almond eyes set down a block and assisted them out of the litter. "Prince Hyleas waits to greet you within."

Standing in the foyer with his elegant wife, Hyleas was dressed in emerald brocade imported at great cost with three ropes of pearls looped around his neck; Aranion thought he looked like a Tajhaani potentate. Guests, mostly relatives and important clients, spilled over into two great salons where servants offered wine and trays of pickled shellfish and deviled eggs. Aranion spied Elenin and his wife, who sported yet another new turquoise-and-silver headdress to celebrate the recent childbirth, and his brother Shassil, who greeted him with a rigid military salute.

"How are you faring in the navy, little brother?" Shassil's meaty head came down hard between his shoulder blades. Aranion knew better than to be holding a cup of wine with his brother around. "Gotten tired of heaving your guts over the side of a ship yet?"

Shassil always asked the same question, even when the answer never varied. "*I never* get seasick."

"When you've had your fill of those old salts down by the waterfront, come see me. The army could use a man like you."

Aranion rolled his eyes. "What would be the point of that, when it's *your* soldiers on *my* ships? Any man wanting a decent military career knows the action is at sea."

"But who's going to man those fortresses you want established in the islands?" Shassil took a fresh cup of wine from a passing tray and moistened his throat. In the interval,

he noticed Melan, who was studying his surroundings with polite curiosity. "Hyleas said you would be providing tonight's musical entertainment. At first, I was horrified by the possibility that *you* might sing, but now I remember Mother's little gift to you."

"Since you ask so sweetly, perhaps I *will* belt out a few ballads." Aranion waited until his brother took a second sip, then slapped him hard across the back. Red-faced, Shassil sputtered and choked. From the corner of his eye, Aranion saw Melan looking on in mixed horror and fascination; he winked reassuringly at the boy. "My brother is always like this—ridiculous, but completely harmless."

Before Shassil fully regained his breath, Hyleas descended upon them with open arms. "Brothers, you're not going to bore us all to tears arguing about military matters again, are you?" His booming laughter echoed through the salon and out into the foyer. "Aranion, I thought the young *petah* would be wearing his usual white."

"Melan is my guest," answered Aranion, "and you know I don't stand on ceremony."

Hyleas anxiously cleared his throat. "Yes, I got your message. There will be a place for him at the high table, though I wonder if he might not be uncomfortable sitting among so many nobles."

Aranion felt tempted to point out that Melan regularly ate at his table; sensing the young man's discomfort, he glossed over his brother's comment. Setting a hand on Melan's shoulder, he gave it a comforting squeeze. "*Petaha* are welcomed guests wherever they go."

"Of course." Grinning broadly, Hyleas patted the youth's hand. "I'm delighted to have him, and relieved he's feeling better after his illness. I meant only that he might have difficulty conversing with the other guests without his agent to translate."

As latecomers arrived, Hyleas returned to the foyer to welcome and usher them in. Shassil lingered, accompanying Aranion and Melan into the second, more intimate salon. "I never took you for a musical man," he commented thoughtfully, "yet here you are with a pretty singer on your arm."

"Are you jealous?" Aranion flagged down a passing servant girl and ordered a cup of watered wine for Melan.

Shassil winked at the young man, who lifted his eyebrows in chagrin. "Not to worry. You've a lovely face, but I prefer women."

At this, Melan cautiously nodded, and even smiled a little at the rough compliment before turning to Aranion with a gesture and questioning look.

"Do you understand what he says?" asked Shassil.

Laughing, Aranion slapped his brother's shoulder. "He wants to know if all my brothers are as colorful as you and Hyleas."

When Shassil left them, Aranion directed Melan over to a velvet couch by a roaring fire. "Sip your wine slowly and relax. You're doing fine." But it was only when he took a seat beside Melan that the youth's tension demonstrably eased. "Hyleas is more than happy to have you sit at the high table. He just isn't used to a prominent guest who can't speak."

Supper was served in a long gallery beyond the grand salon. Six tables faced arched windows overlooking the manor's lush botanical gardens. Torchlight glimmered through the glass, and the many-branched candelabras set throughout the gallery cast a golden glow over the diners. Whether it was a late spring supper or a summer luncheon in multi-hued pavilions by the beach, Hyleas knew how to set a feast.

With each sumptuous course, Aranion admonished Melan to eat sparingly. "There'll be seven or eight courses by the time dessert is served," he murmured in the young man's ear. "Take a bite of each dish, otherwise you'll be too bloated and drowsy to perform later."

Melan indicated the generous helping of pheasant and green beans tossed with fried onions. Aranion nodded. "It won't go to waste. The servants will eat what we don't finish, and Hyleas will have leftovers to last the week."

On Melan's other side, Elenin's plump, matronly wife did her best to ply the young man with food. From the moment they sat down to the first course of mushroom soup and biscuits, Orinne showered Melan with maternal attention; she somehow seemed to have no trouble understanding him. Aranion observed as she rested a jeweled hand atop Melan's and assured him in a sincere voice that everything would be all right. "You will sing beautifully, dear."

Mulled wine and ginger wafers were served in the grand salon, with its coffered ceiling and red brocade draperies. Aranion took a seat on a red velvet couch, with Melan standing behind him, and waited for his brother to announce the evening's entertainment. Amid the conversation, the

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musicians who had played throughout the pre-supper mingling and the meal exited the gallery. A *petah* sang without accompaniment.

When the moment came, Hyleas tapped a spoon against his glass and boomed for attention. "We're privileged to have a lovely young nightingale sing for us tonight. He belongs to my brother, and Aranion commands the fleet, so.... "Good-natured laughter followed his remarks. Hyleas never stood on formalities with his guests.

Orinne led Melan by the hand to the fireplace. "Hush now, all of you!" she said, smiling as she waved the last few talkers silent.

Even in the golden firelight, Aranion discerned Melan's spreading blush. But Orinne need not have admonished the audience, for once Melan opened his mouth and the first note emerged, the partygoers were spellbound.

As a tenor, Melan was not exceptional; he would be in his twenties before his lungs developed their full power and capacity. Aranion knew that not even the novelty of a mute singer or the passion with which he sung could have disguised a middling voice.

Softly the young man began to sing. Hyleas had selected both songs, and he lacked a broad imagination; his guests would have heard these lyrics many times before.

And yet, it was magic.

Somehow the song matched the one Melan had sung that night in the bath, weaving a tale of first love between two young men, mortal consorts of the sea goddess. Glowing like alabaster, with hair like flowing cream, they gazed upon each

other, and each thought the other was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

Why in the world had Hyleas chosen that song? Hyleas neither liked other men nor was he particularly religious. Then again, some *petaha* simply performed certain pieces better than others.

Aranion gradually became aware that Melan gazed upon him and no one else. When the sea-lovers were smitten, the young man poured out their declarations of love for his master alone. Heat rose to Aranion's face, his breath caught in his throat, and he was certain everyone in the salon knew it.

At the recital's conclusion, Hyleas rose amid the applause and complimented Melan directly. "That was wonderful, young man, simply wonderful. I do hope my brother will let you sing for us again."

Orinne kissed Melan's cheek, never mind that he was a slave and not a member of the royal family. An uncertain Melan smiled shyly at the attention.

On the way home, he snuggled happily under the furs, and his master grinned to see him thus. Aranion, his senses still fuzzy from the love song, knew he wanted the young man in his bed that night. Lust played its part, but the ache in his loins was curiously blunted by the desire to hold this warm, loving body in his arms.

"So you liked the party?" he asked as they climbed the stairs to his apartments. Aside from Mahawn and the porter, who opened the door for them, the rest of the household was

asleep. "My brother means it when he says he wants you to come back."

Mahawn politely interrupted. "Shall I wake Toban, sir?"

"Go to bed," said Aranion.

"Sir, you realize your good clothes will end up on the floor?"

"Where they'll keep until morning. Go to bed, Mahawn. I don't have the time or patience to deal with a sleepy valet."

Melan tugged on his sleeve and mimed undoing buttons. "You want to help me?" This was not how Aranion intended to seduce him, preferring to ask more directly, but it would suffice. "All right, I'll show you what to do."

A fire burned on the grate, casting the bedchamber in a drowsy orange glow. Aranion closed the door after Melan and went to stand by the iron firedogs. "You'll see my nightshirt laid out on the bed. When I take off my clothes, you just lay them neatly atop the chest there."

Aranion slipped off his own cloak and shoes, dumping them on a chair beside the fire. Then he gestured for Melan to approach, smiling as the young man hesitated. "You don't have to, you know. I'm used to doing this myself."

Melan nodded toward Aranion's tight-fitting doublet, with its laces and double rows of buttons. "Ah, yes, I can see where this might be a problem. Do you know how to use a buttonhook?"

As Melan went to work on his cuffs, deftly undoing the tiny pearl buttons in the flickering light, Aranion kept up the conversation. With his free hand, he touched the silver

squash blossoms dangling from Melan's ears. "These belonged to me as a boy. You can keep them."

Clearly Melan did not own anything so fine, or else he was not accustomed to being given such intimate presents, as he seemed more abashed than grateful. Clutching the earrings, he tapped Aranion's chest and frowned.

"I have more jewelry than I know what to do with, Melan, and I never wear those earrings. Keep it, and the necklace, too."

Perhaps he acted too hastily. Melan's fingers now trembled as he worked the buttonhook, and twice it slipped from his grasp. To help him, Aranion unhooked the doublet's front closures, then turned so Melan could undo the gray velvet sleeves and slide the garment from his shoulders. Now he stood with his linen shirt open to the waist, the light playing off his chest, and he perceived how the young man's gaze traveled downward. "You may unlace me," he said softly.

Melan touched a hand to his navel and paused, lingering over the top lace. Aranion reached out to brush the curve of his jaw with his knuckles, and let his fingers trail downward until they reached Melan's collar. Working the silver buttons loose, he opened the doublet, caressing the youth's chest through his fine linen shirt as he went.

When the garment was open, when his hand found the laces closing Melan's trousers, he spoke. "Do this for me, and I will do it for you."

Laces swished through grommets. Aranion felt the pressure on his groin ease as the soft gray wool parted. His cock stiffened again as the woven laces and his lover's fingers

rasped over his loincloth. His bulge strained the linen into a tent; he restrained the urge to rub it. Instead he kept his promise, unlacing Melan's trousers until he and the young man faced each other.

A quick graze of his fingertips over Melan's burgeoning hardness made the youth shudder. So he wanted this, too. Aranion shrugged off his shirt and stepped out of his trousers. Heat spread across his back and thighs, licking at his buttocks where the thin loincloth did not cover them; he knew now what he wanted to do. "Bring the pillows and furs from the bed and lay them on the carpet here. And yes, you can remove the rest of your clothes. Put them next to my nightshirt."

As Melan turned to comply, Aranion could not resist ogling the rounded swell of his ass. Thinking on the pleasures to be had between those delicious cheeks, he ran his palm over his bulge, stopping only when Melan wobbled back under an unwieldy armload. Aranion helped Melan arrange their makeshift bed before stepping onto it.

"It's a cold night outside. We can warm ourselves here for a while." Taking Melan's hand, he placed it over his erection. "Here's one last garment for you to remove."

The loincloth ended up flung over the chair, but just as Aranion started to pull Melan into his arms for a kiss, the young man sank to his knees and began licking his balls. No warning, just got down, moved his cock out of the way, and started tonguing him. When Melan gently sucked first one sac then the other into his mouth Aranion abruptly forgot whatever protest he meant to make; it had been so long

since anyone pleased him quite this way. Surrendering to the moment, gripping his cock in one hand and stroking the boy's head with the other, he let his lover play.

Melan slid up his balls and painted them with a swipe of his tongue, then reached for the prick jutting before him. Aranion relinquished it so he could watch its rigid length disappear before the boy's eager lips. In that moment, with the fire burning at his back, he heard only the crackling flames, his own hoarse breathing, and the slurping sounds Melan made as he bobbed up and down on the shaft.

Had it been no more than this, Aranion would have withdrawn before his climax and lain down beside the young man to draw out their lovemaking. But when Melan, his mouth stuffed full of cock, gazed lovingly up at him, every last shred of self-control deserted him. A shudder passed through his groin, and his pelvis began thrusting, gaining momentum as his peak neared. Instinct urged him to shut his eyes and let his climax come. Instead he held Melan's gaze, and watched his shaft, glistening with saliva, glide in and out between his lover's lips.

"I'm coming." It was all the warning he could give. As the spasms hit, he gripped the base of his cock to milk it. Jerking hard, he saw his cum dribble from the corners of Melan's mouth when the boy could not swallow fast enough.

Once he withdrew, teasing out a few last drops so they landed on Melan's upturned chin, he knelt and kissed the boy savagely. Like a man starved for water, he sucked greedily at his lover's mouth and tongue, lapping up his own juices. Despite his orgasm, he still craved sex. He wanted to make

love to his singer until his erection returned. He wanted to rub his prick between the boy's ass cheeks until he shot another load all over that sweet pucker, and he wanted to straddle those sleek thighs and fist his cock until he spurted yet again on the boy's golden belly.

Melan leaned into the kiss, and opened his mouth to take Aranion's seed on his tongue once more. After a moment, he lay back among the pillows; the look in his eyes was an open invitation. Aranion bent over him to taste the pulse in his throat, and the delicate hollow where his collarbones met. Melan dusted his cheek, his temple, his hair with kisses; his hand rested on Aranion's shoulder even when Aranion pulled back to study the way the firelight gilded his nipples.

Soon he had the young man writhing under him. Urgent fingers tangled in his hair, alternately drawing him closer and pushing him away. Aranion did not stop the torture. Using teeth and tongue, he nipped and sucked until those hard little buds were raw, until any other boy would have screamed for mercy.

Then he ventured lower, nibbling at the sensitive join of his thigh and pelvis. Squirming, Melan started as he realized what his master was doing, but by then Aranion already had the tip of his cock between his lips and was milking it with exquisite suction. On their first night together, Aranion had noticed how generous the young man's manhood was, with a deeply blushing crown and a slit that yielded dewdrops of juice.

Aranion ignored the hand trying to push him away. With both arms, he pinned Melan down and, opening his mouth,

swallowed the shaft nearly to the root. How long had it been since he did this for a partner? Long enough that the prospect of sucking an orgasm from the boy excited him. His prick stirred with arousal; it brushed against naked skin and soft fur, and begged for attention. Not yet, not until he made the boy come.

As he reached up to offer his index finger, Melan took it in his mouth; only when it was completely coated in his saliva was Aranion satisfied enough to remove it. Then, wriggling his hand under the boy's heavy balls, he pushed the finger into his tight hole and twisted it until he found the gland he sought. Melan might not take his cock this night, but he would be fucked.

And the boy thoroughly enjoyed his fucking. With increasing vigor, his hips began to rock; he rode the mouth sucking him, and the digit pumping in and out of him. Aranion quickened the tempo, alternating his oral attentions with hard finger-fucking until he established a rhythm. It was a rhythm that swiftly brought results. The young man's cock began jerking spasmodically. Cum spurted into Aranion's mouth. He swallowed it greedily, drinking in Melan's breathless gasps along with his salty seed.

Covered in sweat, Melan was still panting when Aranion sat up, turned him over on his stomach, and started rubbing his prick between his ass cheeks, teasing the hole but never penetrating. Just the thought of his cream dripping from those perfect globes made him anticipate his climax.

To his amazement, Melan twisted around and, spitting into his hand, offered it. Aranion immediately understood, and his

defenses crumbled. Guiding Melan's hand, he let the boy lubricate his prick until he judged it wet enough, then spread that delectable ass open and inserted himself.

Once he pushed past the outer ring of muscle, the boy's tight vise enfolded him with its heat. He entered carefully, waiting until he was fully sheathed and Melan completely relaxed to start moving. Bracing his arms on either side, he arched his back and thrust forward. As he began to fuck the young man's hole, he groaned into Melan's hair, the nape of his neck, and that tight ass wrung seed from him even faster than the boy's mouth.

Breathlessly, his cock still buried in its sheath, he slumped forward; he did not move until he realized he was crushing the body under him. His limbs dragged like weights as he withdrew and rolled off, onto his side in the furs. Exhaustion overtook him; his eyelids fluttered, and he could not suppress a yawn. Lying on the floor would soon lose its novelty and become uncomfortable. The fire would start to burn low. But at that moment Aranion could not care less. His arms went around his singer. "We'll go back to bed soon," he mumbled, "and make love again."

Melan reached back to stroke his thigh, a gesture that said, yes, he wanted to very much.

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Chapter Five

"Wherever you got your information, it doesn't seem to be any good," Shiranar Dorwe commented.

Aranion gazed at the horizon, narrowing his eyes as the wind blew in his face. The nearest island was still four days to the north. Intelligence placed a Shivarian fleet of indeterminate size near Shubra, which, if true, put the enemy within nine days of the capital. "They won't venture far unless they're sure they can make landfall in Yshan. Our ships stand between them and Demar." As did an army of forty thousand men, stationed at various strategic points along the coast. "We'll circumnavigate Shubra, then turn south again."

Shiranar grunted. "As long as we don't neglect the channel too long."

Aranion had no need to be reminded, and sent Shiranar back to his ship with new orders. His jovial subordinate might mean his criticism lightly, but Aranion could not afford to have the crew or his soldiers overhear discussion of what was, after all, just a rumor.

Of more immediate concern was the weather. Although the late spring day was cloudless and warm, if the wind did not shift by dusk half the crew would have to stay at the oars until they could raise the sails. The Shivarians could sail into the wind. Aranion questioned the islanders, who could not tell him precisely how the enemy tacked their sails, then made several unsuccessful attempts to puzzle it out on his own.

On deck, his soldiers polished their weapons, mended leather straps, and hammered grommets. As long as they did not get underfoot, he let them exercise, spar together, and enjoy the sunshine. On days when the crew had more work than they could handle, or when the weather turned foul, he put the men to work alongside the rowing crew. Tonight they would probably do a stint at the oars. Aranion braced himself for the inevitable grumbling. All the more reason to pray for the wind to turn.

Some captains took the precaution of bringing along priests and temple slaves. Aranion disdained the former and preferred not to have to drown or hang the latter as a sacrifice, and those men superstitious enough to question their admiral's judgment were quickly reprimanded.

Shivar rarely sacrificed men to its gods, and then only to execute criminals and blasphemers. And yet, the sea goddess appeared to favor them. Two hundred years after seizing the north and overrunning the Seaward Islands, they could boast that the Lady chose her beautiful, white-haired consorts from among them. Where their ancestors had migrated south from cold northern lands covered in forests, they now built tall ships and mastered the waves.

Shivar held the northern Islands under its firm dominion. Now it wanted control over the southern Islands, which struggled to maintain their cultural and political separateness. From there, Shivar had but to step across the channel to seize a foothold in Yshan.

"Why in the world would they want to conquer us?" Hyleas had asked the question over the splendid supper Elenin

arranged to mark the beginning of the spring and summer campaign. "Don't they have enough land?"

"Yes, but what do they produce that they can sell in the eastern markets? Their linen is good quality, that I'll admit, but their wines are atrocious," explained Elenin. "They have certain woods—oak, ash, and yew—which aren't plentiful in the east, but Tajhaan and Juva can get cedar and mahogany at a better price from neighboring Thales. They have pearls, but you can get better quality gems from the waters around Thrindor and southern Juva. So what do they want with Yshan? Well, Hyleas, what do we have that's valuable? We have silver and turquoise mines. We have vast cotton plantations. And let's not forget that we have links with lucrative markets dealing in spices, rare oils, and gems."

Shassil, his mouth stuffed full of braised beef, gestured to Elenin with his fork. "Shivar is a joke in the eastern bazaars, a rustic backwater whose people are less than ten generations away from wearing animal hides and living in crude huts."

"Please swallow before speaking," said Orinne. "You're setting such a bad example for your nieces and nephews."

Shassil ignored her scolding tone. "Good! We need more men in the army."

"What we need is a victory at sea," said Aranion.

Upon further reflection, he realized that what Yshan needed was a more modern fleet, with larger, stronger ships and newer tactics. Establishing bases in the Seaward Islands would be a profitable first step, but even now Aranion could

not seem to convince his mother, her advisors, or the powerful priesthood that it was a necessary investment.

Melan had not been at the farewell feast, but that did not prevent Orinne and Hyleas from asking about him.

In his pocket, tightly rolled in waterproof skin, Aranion carried a slip of parchment Melan had given him. After the young man's illness, Aranion instructed him to practice writing, and even enlisted Mahawn and the eunuch Meshabi to assist him; a *petah* should not have to rely upon others to communicate.

The first lesson did not produce the three sentences Aranion had ordered, but three simple words in a childish scrawl: *I love you*.

Aranion read and reread the message, which made him burn with fierce pride and desire, and a strangely juxtaposed sense of dismay. While he accepted and even returned Melan's shy affection, he did not know how he felt about being the object of a youth's first serious infatuation.

Had it not been so dangerous, Aranion would have brought him along, just so he could see the Islands firsthand and experience sailing on the open ocean.

A war galley was no place for a green youth, or anyone who could not endure long stretches of boredom. This voyage to Shubra and back might result in battle, or it could just as easily prove uneventful. Aranion might bring home some fresh scars, or just a sunburn. Off to port, the afternoon sun slowly crossed the southern sky. An hour after Shiranar left, the wind still showed no sign of turning. Aranion would have to select the oarsmen and helpers for the two night shifts.

"Enemy ships off the bow!" Above him, atop the forecastle roof, the lookout emphatically gestured north.

Spyglass in hand, Aranion ran to the prow, one of a dozen others clamoring for a view. Nudging both sailors and soldiers aside, gruffly ordering them when they did not move, he peered through the instrument and calmly looked until he had his fill.

"What do you see, sir?" Not one query, but a dozen, and as he swiveled for a glimpse of the other ships in the fleet, he saw the alert going up everywhere.

"Get to your posts," was his only response.

Soldiers gathered up weapons and armor, and held their shields at the ready to deflect missiles. Crewmen stood poised at the ropes. Others went to the rudder, or waited to carry fresh orders down to the rowing deck. Aranion let his squire outfit him in a tight leather corselet and helmet. While Yshando vessels were lighter and more maneuverable than Shivarian galleons, they were at the mercy of the elements. "Pull back!" he shouted. "Turn about and raise the sail!"

Through his spyglass, he counted six ships to his fifteen. Sighing, he closed the glass and put it away. The queen gave him specific orders: when near Shubra, reconnoiter, not engage. An unusually sensible decision, given there were probably more enemy vessels nearby. "Hoist the flag to withdraw."

A yellow flag shimmied up a pole, signaling to the rest of the fleet. Mates tugged ropes, unfurling the large square sail. A tactical retreat carried its share of risks. Aranion counted on the enemy not wanting to stray too far from port. Shivarian

galleons, with no oars, fared well enough when the wind blew, whichever way it blew, but they were useless on a becalmed sea.

Squinting, he judged that roughly two nautical miles separated the fleets. At that distance, he could now make out the galleons in greater detail. With their high-storied decks and masses of rigging, they were unsightly behemoths that, even without battering rams, could do considerable damage to an enemy galley just by colliding with it at full speed.

Coming about took longer than he anticipated, and as the galleons closed the gap Aranion realized to his horror that he had misjudged. The Shivarians were moving faster than he thought they could, and he was in the worst possible position: his starboard side exposed and vulnerable, the oars still in the water. A direct hit could capsize him or split his hull in two.

A single galleon, noticing his vulnerability, veered directly toward his exposed side. Speeding via a steady tailwind, it reached him too quickly. Like a monolith it filled his vision, looming so close now that he could make out its figurehead: a bare-breasted woman with the body of a fish. Gritting his teeth, bracing for the impact, Aranion shouted. His archers fired off a single volley before taking cover. Oars slid back in their tholes, retracting just seconds before collision.

The hull lurched. Aranion lost his footing and stumbled back.

Missiles rained down on the deck. Aranion crouched under his shield; he felt multiple arrowheads bounce against the iron boss. More arrows thudded into the deck around him, catching exposed limbs. Men cried out as they were hit.

Aranion turned his head just enough to see a nearby galley listing to port and men spilling into the sea. Flailing bodies churned the water, easy targets for the Shivarian archers who picked them off from the railing of the galleon above.

Wind bellied into the sail with a crisp snap, and Aranion felt the deck pitch a second time. Now that they had fully come about, making it impossible for the enemy to tip them over, they stood a chance. As the barrage ceased, Aranion gave the command to row—row and put distance between them and their pursuers.

But the galleon remained on top of him. Even with the wind's advantage, even with the oars to balance out the lack of multiple sails, he could not lose his pursuer. Arrows continued to rain down on his stern, depriving his archers of their ability to fire back. Aranion ordered them under protective awnings, and everyone else off the main deck.

An aide dove under cover alongside him. Missiles punched into the sturdy wood canopy. "There's no damage, sir."

Aranion did not need to see the waves skimming past to judge his ship had reached its top speed. And still the galleon kept pace. Outrunning the enemy was no longer an option. "I counted six enemy vessels."

The aide nodded. "They're not many, sir, but they've spread us out."

Fourteen galleys to six galleons made the odds more than two-to-one provided he still had fourteen ships in maneuverable condition. "Raise the black flag to engage. And turn us about again." Perhaps the best way to escape the enemy was to meet him head-on. Without their tailwind, a

Shivarian galleon could not match a Yshando galley for speed. "A hundred-eighty degrees around the enemy. We'll take him from the stern."

Aranion moved to the prow where, far beyond enemy range, he could emerge and watch the maneuver. As he predicted, the galleon tried to protect its rear by following him into the turn. With its greater mass it cut a wider circle through the water, yet as it came upwind its speed began decreasing. Aranion signaled to a second aide. Turn about again. They would take the enemy on its port side.

He imagined the rowers heaving and straining on their benches below. Sympathize he might, but they would have to do a lot more rowing before this skirmish ended.

Oh, yes, the Shivarians knew exactly what he was doing. Like ants he saw deckhands climbing into the rigging to adjust the sails. So they intended to tack into the wind, did they? Aranion wished he had time to observe them more closely. Had his mother not cut short his investigations, he might have discovered the trick by now.

A third signal told the archers to ready their arrows. Braziers set pitch-tipped arrowheads alight; the stiff ocean breeze hungrily licked the flames.

Out came the spyglass. Across the water, skirmishing vessels continued to engage; he saw a Yshando galley listing to one side, and men struggling in the water. Another galley tried to employ its battering ram. Aranion bit his lip. Without a stiff wind, the ship could not gain the necessary momentum. The most effective tactics against the Shivarians

involved hurling flaming pitch and jars of poisonous reptiles onto their decks.

A distant flash of flame brought a smile. At least one crew, it seemed, managed to get in a blow. Not so the others. Unless they broke away from the main skirmish, they did not have room to come about, and could not outrace the enemy. Aranion saw one caught as he had been: on the starboard side while trying to maneuver around.

As the vessel under him gained speed, Aranion braced himself for ramming. Shivarian hulls were the heaviest and sturdiest he had ever seen; the ram might not breach through. Along the awnings, archers took position. Once they hit, they would not have much time before a return volley drove them under cover again.

Timbers crunched as the iron ram punched through. Aranion grunted under the jarring force of the impact; it nearly tore him from the doorway where he braced his body. Below decks, the rowers would have it much worse. Oars locked to avoid lethal recoil, the ship had to glide the last few feet. Gods hope the boatswain timed it right, or they would be in no position to withdraw.

Two dozen flaming arrows hissed as they sailed up into the enemy rigging. Aranion saw several catch, but there was no time to stop and watch. Now to disengage, provided he could. It would be a bad piece of luck if the ram stuck fast and dragged him down with the enemy.

A gesture cleared the deck, but reversing seemed to take forever. So slowly Aranion got a good look at the breach; it looked large enough to flood the galleon's lower decks in a

quick minute. Already listing at fifteen degrees, it was not going to pursue him further

"Sir, we have damage." A senior aide approached. "It's not much, just some water dribbling in."

"Where's the leak?"

A forward leak after ramming would hardly surprise him. Nowadays, with better construction, a Yshando galley could stay afloat after hitting a Shivarian galleon and limp to safe port.

"Where we took the earlier hit, sir. On the starboard side."

Aranion went below to check the damage. Poor light and continued action above deck kept him from examining the cracks too closely. It did not look too bad, but he would not know for certain until he got the ship into dry dock. "Plug it up the best you can. Let me know if it gets worse."

Up the stairs again, with the strained grunts of the oarsmen at his back. Even with their stamina, they were near collapse. Time to retreat, regroup, and find safe harbor.

A sweeping scan through the spyglass revealed complete disarray on both sides. Two galleons were tacking upwind to withdraw. Another was still engaged. Aranion counted eight intact galleys, three still fighting. Others tried to retrieve men struggling in the water or had their yellow flags flying to retreat.

Aranion gave the order to hoist the yellow flag. "Get these arrows off the deck, and see to the injured." Offhand, he tallied five casualties. Unless he made landfall within the next twelve hours, the dead would have to be interred at sea.

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In his cabin, he opened the shutters to flood the narrow space with light, then spread out his charts. Fortunately he had taken sextant readings an hour before the skirmish, so he knew roughly where his position ought to be. Now to determine his route. The regroup point was an island half a day's sail from here.

Aides brought reports. "The fleet is still scattered, sir. Two ships are on fire, two others sunk, and the lookout counted four in retreat."

That left six unaccounted for. Possibly eleven ships lost. His mother would not take the news well. She would call him incompetent, never mind he managed the best with what resources he had. Let *her* try commanding from the front lines to see how easy it was! "Tell him to look for the others. What about the enemy?"

"We sunk one, two more are sinking, and three are in retreat, sir."

Four ships could still effectively reconnoiter the area. Not a wise decision, given the likelihood that more enemy vessels lurked nearby. And as insignificant as it seemed, the leak concerned Aranion. One good impact could sink him, and here he had taken two. Those cracks might not withstand the twelve hours it might take to reach land.

In the late afternoon, he removed his metal-studded corselet and helmet, and set an additional lookout up on the forecastle. Making landfall during the night could be done, since he knew the nearest island and its currents very well.

A young deckhand affixed the lantern to the prow. Aranion donned a light cloak while marking how the tailwind turned. *Six hours too late*, he reflected bitterly.

"Sir, we're taking on more water than we should." An aide stood at his elbow.

Within six hours, the space between the keel and the rowing deck had quietly, insidiously flooded. Seawater now seeped up between the planks; the rowers labored ankle-deep, and the chalk marks the second mate made on the stairs swiftly disappeared. In the smoky lantern light, Aranion saw the man making mental calculations. By the way the mate shook his head, the news was not good.

"The impact stressed us under the waterline," he said. "Whatever it was, the leak was small enough to get us this far. I can't be sure without being able to see, but I'll wager the water pressure's forced the joints apart and widened the breach. Either we'll sink intact, or break apart."

Aranion did not need to count the men left aboard to know how many he was about to lose. Each galley carried one rowboat, generally used to ferry passengers and cargo between ships. One rowboat could carry twenty men. With supplies of food and water, less than that. Signaling to the rowing master, he gave instructions. "Keep the rowers down here until the water's up to the benches, no more. Then get them up to the deck."

Four oarsmen for the rowboat, two crew, and eleven soldiers—he would have to choose carefully, and soon. By custom, he would wait until the ship went down, then swim to the boat and go aboard as the eighteenth man.

Aranion tried very hard not to picture the inevitable chaos.

On deck, he scanned the horizon for lights and saw none. How could the skirmish have dispersed them that widely? Had other galleys been in the vicinity, he could have signaled, and they could have sent out additional boats.

Shivarian galleons carried boats for all their men. Aranion's critical gaze swept the deck; there was no room aboard the galley for additional boats, and where they would have hung from davits alongside, the oars made that impossible.

Crew members hastened to the boat with provisions. Others hooked it onto the swiveling davit and began to winch it up. All eyes watched their movements—seventy men in the darkness, each measuring the others, wondering who would be chosen to live, and who to stay and drown.

An aide came running out with Aranion's charts, sextant, and compass. "It's time, sir," he said. "The rowers are being evacuated."

Aranion glanced up at the forecastle, where the two lookouts maintained their vigil. "Is there any sight of land?"

There was no mistaking the distress in the young man's voice. "None, sir!"

"Lower the boat."

A half-moon hung midway on the southern horizon. Silvery wisps of cloud splotched the darkness. It was not a good night to search for land. Nevertheless he gave each young lookout a reassuring slap on the back. "Keep looking."

A long, loud creak gave him a moment's warning before the forecastle lurched under him. With a cry, an archer tumbled off the roof. Tumult ensued below as the ship listed

further to starboard. Aranion braced his legs against the tilt even as the lookout clung to him for support. It was all he could do to stay upright; he could do nothing to stop the men jostling to swarm up the ladder, and the archers, unable to steady themselves long enough to shoot, were useless.

Aranion fought down his panic as soldiers, shivering rowers, and crewmen knocked him down. He covered his head with both arms and drew his knees up to his chest. Above the shouting and screaming, he heard the sea rushing in, closing over the main deck, and the distant splashes of men striking the water.

Forty-five degrees. His mind grasped that figure, clung to it even as his men all around him clung to the mast, the port rail—anything that offered a few more precious moments above water. Should the galley list more than forty-five degrees, it would be over. His body strained, tensing against the inevitable fifty, sixty, seventy degrees that would decide his fate.

And then the listing stopped, even seemed to correct itself. Aranion drew a sharp breath, but unlike the relieved young lookouts beside him he knew what was happening: the ship, its compartments now entirely flooded, was leveling off before the final plunge.

Uncoiling his body, he scrambled to his hands and knees and crawled across the deck. Within moments it would submerge—he could practically taste the salt sea on his tongue, and the panic thick around him. Men flailed in the water; they fought over the sparse flotsam. Aranion did not see the rowboat—no, wait, there it was, the heart of a

maelstrom in which desperate men in their dozens tried to clamber aboard.

As Aranion watched, the unthinkable occurred. Slowly the boat took on water. Oars swung, knocking men backward, but it was too late.

The rowboat capsized, spilling its human cargo into the sea, and with it went his last shred of hope.

Once again, his world listed, this time the prow churning up out of the water, the stern dipping, straining, tearing loose. A sharp crack brought the mast hurtling down, smashing into the waves atop struggling men. Aranion tumbled onto what had been the forecastle wall, and saw the prow rising above him. Cracking timbers offered a heartbeat's warning, time enough to leap clear before the keel reached its maximum stress, and sheared apart. Groaning, splintering, the broken prow smashed into the forecastle, into hapless men whose screams were swallowed by the noise.

Aranion gasped at the shock of hitting cold water. It could have been worse, much worse, water so cold it killed within minutes. There would not have been so many men still struggling had that been the case.

Just as he surfaced, the sea dragged him down again, into the vortex spun by the sinking ship. Whether he fought or not, it would take him. So he sucked in a lungful of air and surrendered, plunging into the depths until the suction yielded its pull enough for him to break loose and rise.

A floating block bobbed amid the flotsam nearby. Recognizing it as a buoy, he flailed toward it, grabbed on, and began treading water. Without lanterns to light the scene, he

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had to rely on the moonlight, too pallid to reveal anything beyond bodies splashing and sputtering around him. The chaos seemed to be lessening. And he knew why. Men who could not find wreckage to cling to were drowning.

He had to stay warm, to keep his heart pumping and his blood circulating, no matter what it took. Kicking off his boots, which would only weigh him down, he concentrated on paddling while still clinging to the buoy.

His teeth chattered hard, his body shivered uncontrollably, losing heat in the cold water. Once hypothermia took hold, his heart would give out, and he would lose his grip on the buoy and sink.

Around him, the sky began to lighten, darkness giving way to the twilight of false dawn. Lifting his head to take in his surroundings gave him no hope. Faint traces of wreckage bobbed on the surface. By now, ocean currents dispersed most of it. And still there was no sight of land. Once again he sank against the buoy and floated; he no longer had the strength to tread water.

His mind began to wander. Flashes of lucidity found him mumbling under his breath—about what, he did not know—and when voices seemed to answer him, he stopped wondering. Sunrise broke over the water, painting shadows in deep green and brown, and sunlit patches in golden rose. Aranion wanted to believe the sun would bring warmth and life. He wanted to believe his life would go on past his ragged breathing and the lapping waves.

Voices called out above him, so distant and indistinct he could neither identify them nor comprehend what they said.

His eyelids fluttered. Whether another ship had found him, the gods or vengeful spirits of the sea had come to claim him, he did not know.

Shadows closed in, devouring the emerging daylight. The buoy bumped then scraped against a large, solid object, the slight impact jarring his aching body. Aranion grunted and tried to raise his head.

Something seized him, prying him loose from the buoy. A cord slipped under his arms, tightened, and slowly, painfully, he began to rise out of the sea. Dazed, he watched the buoy drop and bounce off the surface of the water. Cold air buffeted his convulsing limbs; he gasped against the sudden agony, and groaned as arms hauled him over a side railing.

Nausea overwhelmed him as his world tilted; he choked back bile and concentrated on breathing. Somehow he found himself lying on his back staring up at the sky.

A face, hungry eyes above a dark, scraggly beard, appeared above him. This was no one he recognized, no soldier or naval crewman. It was a mere sailor, a fisherman who happened upon the scene. Just as comprehension pierced his numbness, Aranion felt a weight on his chest pinning him down. Pressure closed around his wrist, crushed his hand, and something hard pulled at his fingers.

When he glimpsed the flash of gold and recognized his own signet ring, awareness gave him strength. Surging up against the pain, he seized the man's hand to claw at his fingers. "*Nikal!*" His shout emerged as a waterlogged croak. *Nikal*, his title, a son of the queen—it was all he could manage. "*Nikal, nikal!*"

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Metal clinked over wooden planks and rolled away. Aranion did not see where the ring fell, did not see anything past the man's amazement and the shadows closing over him.

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Chapter Six

"You look terrible, sir."

In his salt-stained, threadbare regimentals, pale and coughing, Aranion knew how awful he looked. However, his weakened condition, and the circumstances that brought it about, left him in no mood to jest. "Where is your commanding officer?" he demanded.

The young sentry paled at the perceived reprimand. "He's inside, sir, but you needn't wait out here. I'll take you in."

As one of Shassil's lieutenants, Eremir made it his business to know what the fleet was doing; he required no introduction, no preemptory flash of the royal signet ring, and, it seemed, he already knew about the skirmish. "Two ships arrived five days ago needing repairs. They dropped off a few survivors they'd plucked out of the water, and made sure I sent word onto Demar. Captain Dorwe took charge after the fleet lost sight of you. Good gods, sir, don't stand there listening to my report. Sit down and let me get you some spirits."

"I'll be fine." Aranion coughed into his fist. "How many other survivors were there?"

Eremir stabbed his finger at a chair. "I *said* sit down. I won't have a courier go to Demar saying you turned up alive when we'd already given you up for dead, and *then* died because we didn't care for you properly."

Aranion obediently took a seat and the glass of brandy an army adjutant placed in his hands. "Answer my question."

"Five came here. More might have turned up elsewhere, I don't know."

The brandy burned a hot, welcome trail down his throat; it reminded him of his first moments aboard the fishing vessel. Once he identified himself, others pulled the would-be thief off him, stripped him down, and pressed a vial of brandy upon him. Below deck, he was put to bed under a mound of blankets, with the cabin boy pressed against him to share his body heat. Two other survivors turned up shortly thereafter. Aranion did not ask how many other live bodies had been pulled from the sea, robbed, strangled, and thrown back. "You sent a message saying I was dead?"

Eremir held up his hand. "One of your lieutenants wrote the message. I merely supplied the courier."

"How many days ago was this?" Aranion sipped again at the brandy, though what he really needed was a hot meal and a bed.

"Four days ago," said Eremir.

Which meant the news would just be arriving in the capital. By law, his assets would be frozen for thirty days: time in which to mourn and inventory his property. Mahawn would have already begun the process. "I must get a message to my family."

"I can take care of that for you, and if you'd like to dictate a personal note, I can send a scribe, but if you think you're making the trip in your condition—"

Aranion raised a hand in agreement. "Yes, yes, I should have stayed where I was."

Yet crammed onto a narrow cot in a drafty, two-room hut thick with wood smoke, kept awake by the incessant activity of his hosts, Aranion's only thought was getting to the nearest military outpost. No one in the fishing village could read, write, or carry a message, and they would not let him leave until his fever cooled and the chills stopped. Even then, the women did not want him to go, and certainly not alone. When he could travel, they insisted he ride their best mule, and take two men as guides. Eremir would see to it they were paid for their trouble, fed and rested, and sent on their way again. Aranion also meant to arrange transport for the two other survivors he had left behind.

"You can stay here," said Eremir, "in the infirmary. It's quiet, and the food's good, and your men are still there. When the physician says you can leave, I'll make sure you have a proper escort and a mount better than what you rode in on."

* * * *

"Dear gods, sir, you look awful."

Aranion had heard that phrase enough times in the past hour to be irritated. With his steward, however, he managed a weak smile. "I missed you, too, Mahawn."

Mahawn's broad hands slapped his back, yet when the steward withdrew from the embrace his demeanor seemed troubled. And his split lip and bruised cheek indicated something was very wrong. "Fortunately we've had time to unpack everything."

"Mahawn, have you been in a fight?"

"If you can call it that, sir," mumbled Mahawn. Taking a breath, he added, "Melan is gone."

Of all the things Aranion expected to hear, this was not one of them. "What do you mean, gone?"

"He's been taken away, sir."

Aranion's gaze took in the foyer, its furnishings newly rearranged, as though the young singer might emerge at any moment. "By whom?" he growled. Only one person could be audacious enough to interfere with legal procedure. "My assets were frozen—and that includes any slaves."

Mahawn nodded. "Of course, sir, but the boy's former master came eight days ago with a writ and five armed bodyguards to seize him. It was just me and a few servants packing up the household. I barely had time to read the paper the man shoved in my face before the guards pushed past me and dragged the boy out. Melan put up quite a fight. He punched Sheban in the face and blackened his eye. It was the wrong thing to do. Sheban backhanded him so hard it practically broke his nose; the blood was still dripping from his nose when that man put a rope around his neck and took him away. We tried to intervene, but the bodyguards beat us back."

Anger burned through Aranion's exhaustion, roiling in his gut until he felt compelled to hit someone. Melan had been in that man's hands more than a week. In his frustration, he turned on Mahawn and shouted, "You should have already known that I wasn't dead!"

Perhaps as a testament to years of similar outbursts, Mahawn did not flinch. "The news didn't reach us here until

two days later, and it isn't as though I sat idle, sir. I went straight to Prince Hyleas and explained the situation, but he refused to interfere. Something about violating the law. None of the magistrates would help either once they saw the paper—"

"What paper?"

From a cabinet Mahawn produced a thin leather cylinder containing a scroll. Aranion snatched it, unrolled, and nearly tore it in his haste to read what it said. *"The aforementioned slave is to be returned immediately upon receipt of the prince's death. The customary thirty day period does not apply."*

"I am not dead!" Seizing an expensive vase off a pedestal, he hurled it against the wall. Glazed shards littered the floor in a thousand pieces of cobalt and green.

Mahawn quavered, his reply coming out as an anxious croak, "The moment I knew I went straight to Sheban and told him, but he threw me out. Two bodyguards hauled me out and dumped me on the street, and while I was still trying to pick myself up Sheban followed and yelled at me that it was a lie. The magistrates were no help then either. They said you'd have to sort the matter out yourself."

Typical incompetent bureaucrats. Had Mahawn greased their palms with the right bribe, they would have acted immediately. "Then *I'll* go."

"Sir, you need to rest—"

Aranion shook off his hands. First he would knock some sense into Hyleas and the city magistrates, and then get a

warrant to collect men from the city garrison. Melan would be back safely in his household by nightfall.

* * * *

"Brother, you misunderstand my actions—"

"Your *inaction*, you mean!" Maintaining a tight grip on Hyleas's broad collar proved difficult with the man's multiple chins. "You knew he was my property, you knew the situation was wrong!"

"Of course I would have protested the impropriety, but the writ your steward showed me—"

Aranion would have liked to shove him into the wall, just for emphasis, but Hyleas's bulk made that impossible. "You got news two days later that I was alive, you fat cow! What did you do then? Nothing!"

Off to the side, his brother's wife threatened to make a scene. "Get out, you boor, and don't come back until you can apologize!"

"Shove your complaints up your cunt and stay out of this, woman!"

"That's no way to talk to my wife, Aranion. After thirty days I would have made an offer for the boy. But to do it now, when all your other assets are frozen—what would men have said about me?" Sweat poured down Hyleas's face, slicking the fatty folds around his neck and dampening his collar. "That I was so greedy for your singer that I couldn't wait the customary period, that I took him when you were barely cold? I couldn't bear that."

Aranion cuffed his ear. "You did nothing to help get my property back, even when Mahawn told you what that man was like. How do you think Melan is faring after eight days in his company?" Cursing, mumbling under his breath, he unhanded his brother. "Remind me not to ask you for any favors in the future."

With the magistrates he had better luck, negotiating his warrant at sword point. A prince in his mood and physical condition was too dangerous to try to elicit a bribe from, and while the initial seizure had been legal, Sheban keeping the boy under the present circumstances set an unwholesome precedent. Aranion got his warrant faster than he anticipated; he presented it to the commander of the city garrison, then went into the man's office to wait.

Normally he would have accepted a glass of brandy to calm his nerves, but Eremir's physician had warned him against it. "You need hot, nourishing fluids, sir. Spirits dry out the body and enflame it." Nevertheless he felt tired and weak: the effect of riding four days straight with a lingering illness. Had he known about Melan, he would have ridden harder.

At length, the commander ushered the men in himself. "These ten should be sufficient, any match for some shady slave dealer's hired bodyguards. Is there anything else I can do for you, sir?"

Sunset loomed on the horizon as Aranion emerged from the barracks, his soldiers forming two orderly lines behind him. All he told them was that a slave dealer in the city had stolen his property; they were to help him reclaim it, and he

would see them back in time for the evening mess. Hired brutes or not, Sheban would not give him any trouble, not with a warrant, an affidavit from Mahawn, and ten soldiers at his back. Retrieving Melan should not take long.

Sheban occupied a modest house near the cobblers' market. Aranion ignored the curious glances of passersby and banged on the door, first with his fist then with the pommel of his sword. Finally a harried-looking slave looked through the peephole. "Where is your master?"

"What do you want?"

"I am Prince Aranion Nikal, Admiral of the Queen's Navy, and I have a warrant to enter these premises."

The peephole snapped shut. Moments later, the old slave cautiously opened the door. His gaze remained trained on the soldiers, as though expecting to be arrested. "The master's in his office, sir, right down the hall to the left."

A colonnade edged a narrow courtyard. Five brutish men lounged around the empty fountain, playing dice and drinking. They glanced up as Aranion led the soldiers along the walkway, muttering under their collective breath but issuing no challenge.

Lamplight illuminated a single room, its door propped open, its furnishings stripped bare. Crates were stacked against one wall with rolled-up carpets. "Are you going somewhere, Sheban?"

Sheban started like a deer cornered by snarling hounds. Frightened eyes took in the soldiers crowded in the doorway, then the sword in Aranion's hand. "I have business in Cardann. A new client," he stammered.

"And leaving in such a hurry?"

"Well, I—"

"I didn't come to bandy pleasantries with you. You know why I'm here."

"Let me say how glad I am that you're alive—"

"Shut your fucking hole!" As Aranion advanced farther into the room, the flickering light revealed a mottled yellow shadow accenting Sheban's left eye. Melan truly had punched him in the face, just as Mahawn said. "You knew I was alive six days ago—yes, six days ago when your bodyguards dumped my steward out in the street. Now where is the boy?"

"I'm afraid he's not here."

Aranion came around the desk. Sheban tried to back away, to keep the desk between them, until a pair of soldiers anticipated him, blocking his escape and pushing him back so Aranion could seize and shove him up against the wall. "Then I suggest you find him. Quickly."

The knob in Sheban's throat bobbed anxiously as Aranion's sword pressed into the tender flesh above his carotid artery.

"Sir, I—"

"Do I need to gut you right here and tear this house apart myself?"

"I've sold him."

Without thinking, Aranion increased the pressure. Blood welled up through the thin cut. "You did *what*?"

Sheban gritted his teeth. Sweat formed a fine sheen across his forehead. "A naughty boy like that—I had to! Imagine, hitting his owner! How could I possibly have him in the house after that?"

"You'd better tell me where he is."

"If you kill me, you—"

Holding the blade steady, Aranion brought up his knee and jammed it into the man's groin, just hard enough to let him know he could inflict more pain—a *lot* more. "I can kill you quickly, or very, very slowly. Your hired men aren't going to help you. They're no use against trained soldiers in armor, and they know it. Now tell me where the boy is."

"I sold him in Cardann."

"All the way on the western coast, where the only slave dealers cater to the brothels and galleys—what profit could you possibly get there?" Aranion gradually eased the pressure and backed away. "You might as well stay where you are. It'll save the city magistrates the trouble of having to fetch you when I press charges—" Gleaming metal caught his eye. Silver squash blossom earrings winked from the man's ears.

With a wrench, he yanked them from Sheban's ears, and broke them in the process. Blood poured from the torn skin. Sheban shrieked, even as Aranion backhanded him. "You're a thief twice over! You!" He motioned to the nearest soldier.

"Can you read?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then have your men pry open these crates and start looking for this snake's ledgers. I'm sure they'll tell us whether or not we can trust his word. And don't worry about your dinner. I'll send out for something while you search."

Sheban, whimpering and clutching his bloody earlobes, waited until the soldier's sword started to pry up the lid of the

first crate before crying out. "No, don't! I sold the boy to the slave markets down in Inat!"

Aranion punched him hard in the gut. Watching Sheban double over and gasp for air gave him no satisfaction, though. "First you steal my property, and now you fucking *lie* to me? How long ago was this?"

"Seven days—"

"And you didn't tell my steward? You didn't *think* to send somebody to fetch the boy back? What did you think would happen when I returned—or were you hoping to be safely gone by then? Men, hurry up with those crates. We'll search this whole house if we have to, but I want those ledgers. For all I know the boy is on a slave ship to Thrindor and the eastern markets."

"No, no, I swear! The ledger is in that satchel on the floor, next to the carpet."

A soldier brought over the satchel, cut the ties, and dumped the contents onto the desk. Several ledgers tumbled out. Aranion shuffled through them with his sword; he did not have time to examine each in minute detail. "Which one?" he demanded.

Even then, Sheban hesitated. A slice across the cheek got him talking again.

Aranion opened the ledger to the last page and its final entry: '*Melan, singer, sold to Inat. Agent to decide price.*'"

"Stop what you're doing, men. We have what we need."

Sheban breathed a sigh, even when Aranion pocketed the ledger. But by now he knew better than to protest or do anything other than comply. Later he would complain to the

city magistrates, and wave his writ in their faces. How could he have known the prince was alive when he seized the boy, and how could he have possibly guessed the news about the prince's miraculous survival was not a rumor, or merely some ploy to cheat him out of his property? Of *course* he had cooperated, but to have armed soldiers burst into his house and start ransacking his goods—absolutely intolerable!

Sheban might put on an obsequious demeanor, even when the blood was pouring down his face and neck, but Aranion knew exactly what he would do the moment he left the house. How many magistrates had the man bribed simply to ensure no one contested his unorthodox seizure? Aranion had neither the time nor the patience to determine which officials had been bought, and he certainly had no intention of bribing them himself.

Sheathing his sword, he decided to give Sheban exactly what he deserved.

A second sigh died in the man's throat—choked off as Aranion grabbed a javelin from the nearest soldier, spun and thrust it into the trainer's belly. Aranion put all his weight behind the movement, so the momentum carried the impaled man into the wall and pinned him there.

Such a wound could take hours to kill. Aranion never intended to be merciful.

For a moment, Sheban did not realize what had occurred. Then the initial shock subsided. He whimpered and gripped the javelin, moaning at the pain his effort cost him, and the realization that he was stuck fast.

"Now," said Aranion, "I am done with you."

On the way out, he addressed the stunned door slave.
"When your master stops twitching, then you can take him down."

* * * *

"What am I to do with you, boy?"

Amunnikal did not like being interrupted during supper—or at any other time. She made no exceptions for her many progeny. Aranion, however, was not about to waste precious time putting in a formal application and then waiting days to see her. After returning the soldiers to the barracks, he went straight to the royal apartments and demanded an audience, shouting until the queen sent her chief lady-in-waiting to bring him inside.

"Give me my warrant and thirty soldiers and I'll be on my way," he said.

The queen washed down a morsel of chicken with red wine; she did not offer him any. "I hear you're in no condition to travel. And I don't care for the report I've just had from your brother. Threatening him over a single slave—"

"A slave *you* gave me, Mother."

"Mind your manners, boy! I will not have you interrupting me, or trying to strangle your own flesh and blood. Hyleas did nothing wrong. I also will not have you racing about the city spearing unfortunate men to the walls of their own houses."

Aranion did not bother to ask how she had acquired that information so quickly; it had not even been two hours since he left Sheban's house. His mother had spies everywhere.
"The man seized Melan illegally."

"On the contrary, I am told the transaction was quite legal."

"Mother, are you even *aware* of the circumstances under which the boy was given to me?" But no, the queen never would have seen to such mundane arrangements herself. A vizier had probably selected Melan, and drawn up the agreement with Sheban. Aranion judged it wiser not to belabor the point. "I've read the writ. It clearly states *in the event of my death*. So Sheban goes to collect my slave once he hears about my apparent demise. Two days pass. He sends the boy south on the slave caravan to Inat. But once he finds out I am alive, once he realizes there is a problem, he does nothing to correct the matter. He makes no attempt to fetch the boy back. On the contrary, he throws my steward out onto the street when Mahawn gives him the news. And when I confront him myself, he lies point-blank to my face about the boy's whereabouts. In fact, he was packing up his house to flee to Cardann, and hoped to be gone before I ever got home."

Amunnikal dabbed her lips with a generously splotched napkin. "So what do you intend to do with a warrant? Meaning: what will you do down in Inat? Suppose you don't find this boy, or suppose he's already been sold? Do you plan to massacre every slave dealer you find who denies seeing the boy? Do you intend to kill the poor, unsuspecting man who buys the boy and feels he's being cheated out of his merchandise?"

His mother was not in a giving mood. Losing seven ships and close to eight hundred men to the Shivarians did not

endear him in her eyes. "Give me a royal warrant and the local authorities will cooperate."

"Perhaps they will, perhaps they won't," she said. "I suppose you expect me to pay for this excursion?"

"Need I remind you that Melan was a gift?"

"I can easily give you another."

"I don't *want* another boy. As for your question, I will pay for the thirty soldiers out of my own pocket, just grant me the warrant and release my assets."

Amunnikal grumbled into her cup. "Foolish boy, you're just like your father." She waved to one of her omnipresent eunuchs. "Zama, go fetch my personal scribe and tell him to bring his writing materials. And have the servants set out an extra place setting. The prince can dine with me while the ink dries."

"Mother, your generosity—"

"Spare me the platitudes, boy. Why do you think I employ so many viziers and eunuchs? Military men are no good at groveling. Making you sit at my table will at least ensure you have a proper meal in your belly, and don't go running off to the barracks the moment I put the warrant into your hand. You need to rest."

A servant brought utensils, a glazed cup, and a bowl of steaming onion and mushroom soup. Aranion would have preferred a meaty broth instead. "What I need is—"

"To listen to your mother and do as you're told," Amunnikal finished sharply. "You're just like your father: quarrelsome and impatient. He was a prince from Thrindor, an explorer and hired sword. He stayed long enough for you

to quicken in my womb, but there was no keeping him, and quite frankly I had no interest in doing so. I gave him rich presents, and we parted on good terms. Since then, I haven't had any word from or about him. I suspect he either settled down or got himself killed in some skirmish long ago. Probably the latter."

This was more information than anyone had ever given him. Somehow the truth came as no surprise. "I only pick fights with those who wrong me."

"I expect you to apologize to Hyleas," said Amunnikal. "Oh, and to his wife. I understand you said something very unpleasant to her."

Aranion gritted his teeth, more at the amount of pepper in the soup than the prospect of making peace with his brother. His sister-in-law was another matter. "I'm sure Arra misunderstood. I can be very ... passionate when I'm angry."

Amunnikal grunted. "You must care for this boy very much to insult your family like this. I am surprised."

"What did you expect me to do with Melan?" Aranion gulped down half a cup of red wine to get the peppery tang out of his mouth. "I'm a naval officer. I care nothing for music."

"Is that the boy's name?" Amunnikal shook her head; her massive silver and turquoise earrings swayed like leaden weights. "Such a shame. You obviously think your mother gives you useless presents to torment you. Ha! I have a lot more to say about what gifts I give than you think, boy. Yes, I saw how you looked at the bow and arrows I gave Amiri. But she needs them and the exercise far more than you. She

can hardly walk now as it is. Any more pregnancies and she'll kill herself before she's forty.

"Even a military man ought to appreciate art and poetry. Of course I might have given you a book of poems or a musical instrument, but you don't know how to play, and I know full well that any poems or lyres I gave you would end up gathering dust on a shelf."

Aranion found the crusty, golden bread served with the soup more palatable. "Then you might want to rethink what you give Elenin."

"Unlike you, Elenin is married. I can't very well give him a singing boy, now can I?" Amunnikal waved a plump hand thick with silver rings. "I'll see to your brother, make no mistake, but it's you I'm concerned with right now. Zama is having the warrant drawn up. You'll have your thirty men in the morning—ah, don't interrupt me to thank me, boy. You haven't heard my terms."

Terms. The queen's frosty tone made the bread turn to sawdust in Aranion's mouth; he took a draught of wine just so he could swallow. "What terms?" he asked nervously.

"The priests have been complaining to me for years about your failure to carry out the proper rituals aboard your ships. And not a few officers have also complained about your stinginess," said Amunnikal. "Your recent losses are being attributed to your lack of piety."

"That's bullshit." A stern finger wagging in his face made him reconsider his profanity. "That's absurd, Mother. The truth is the enemy has larger, stronger ships and the ability to sail no matter which way the wind blows."

"Many feel the wind would have turned in our favor had you hung an offering from your mast. Of course, your insistence on sacrificing bulls comes from your father. That's how they do things in Thrindor. Like the sea, it's in your blood. I understand that, but this isn't the Bull Court, boy. My ministers and the high priests are quite adamant on this point, Aranion, and in light of your most recent conduct, defending you to them is out of the question. I am replacing you as admiral. Drumal Alíkas will assume—"

"Drumal is a horse's ass who will run the fleet into the ground!" Aranion gnashed his teeth at the insult. "You might as well invite the Shivarians to take over."

Amunnikal's scowl said she would brook no argument. "Contest my will and I can take away more than just your command. I have yet to sign the warrant."

Half-formed protests died on Aranion's tongue. When provoked, his mother always did exactly what she threatened to do. Without exception. "What do you expect me to do?"

"I have not decided yet."

Melan or his command. She wanted him to choose one over the other. It was so needlessly harsh it made him sick. *You've already taken my command. What more can you take?* Drumal Alíkas was an aging, superstitious bootlicker who knew nothing about the need to innovate, to go on the offensive rather than simply just defend the coast. Such conservatism bred a perception of weakness, and this time Shivar would be right.

I can argue all I want. Mother won't see reason until she's desperate. His appetite gone, he mulled over his options,

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rapidly dwindling. Others *could* lead the fleet. No one could replace Melan, not in his heart or his bed, and he was not going to give the boy up quietly.

"Give me the warrant," he said.

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Chapter Seven

Ten days from the coast, Inat might as well have been another world. As one traveled along the broad north-south highway bisecting the kingdom, the fertile lowlands gave way to a high, dusty plateau. Shrubs and gnarled oaks dotted the chaparral, and when the wind rose, tumbleweeds bounded across the dirt track.

South and east, the solid bulwark of the Isheri Mountains remained capped with snow, even at the start of summer. Its people were rugged and secretive, herding goats and guarding the passes leading through to the mines that supplied Yshan's silver and turquoise, and the road that took travelers and merchants into Ostolan. Aranion tried very hard not to think about what would happen if Melan disappeared into the mountains or south across the border. There would be no recovering him then.

Exhaustion and illness wore him down, eroding his vigor. Since the infirmary of the military outpost, he had not rested. First because the constant noise and activity made it impossible, then because need drove him to go on. A reliable equine post system would have allowed him to ride south at a full gallop, and arrive in Inat within six days. Necessity forced him to pace his mounts, slow his progress, and it made him grit his teeth in frustration.

On the seventh day, his cough returned. Windborne dust penetrated his face cloth to make him wheeze, and in the mornings he hacked up yellowish phlegm.

Inat thrived on the slave trade. Caravans arrived weekly from Ostolan in the south, Jhaell in the east, and points throughout Yshan. Silver and turquoise also passed through the town, as well as cotton and spices. One might think such a prosperous location would attract good taste and a sense of permanence. One thinking that would be wrong. Ramshackle tenements and noisy, dusty marketplaces dominated the town: it looked filthy and smelled just as bad. Aranion gagged at the stench of meat cooking in strange spices, and the rancid odor of unwashed slaves being herded to and from the auction block.

In a place where human beings were sold like cheap beer on every street corner, where would he even begin to look for Melan?

His subordinate, a junior officer named Chuma, offered a useful suggestion. "I come from this region, sir. If this slave is as valuable as you say, he won't be sold like cattle in the common market. Ask around as though you want to buy a singer for your tent. It will give you a place to start."

Aranion honestly did not know whether that would work. Sheban could just as easily have sold Melan to a brothel as a whore. "Where do I go first?"

"The smaller markets, sir," replied Chuma. "The larger ones specialize in laborers for the mines or the fields. Good slaves are a rare commodity. Let me ask around."

Chuma went to work in the nearest bazaar, coming back a short time later with directions to a modest-looking storefront. Aranion went in with him, leaving twenty-nine plainly clothed soldiers in the street outside.

The whitewashed foyer was clean and unimposing, offering no hint as to the type of business within. A door slave took their names and announced them to the foreman, who seemed to speak only in grunts. Somehow Chuma managed to communicate with him, and even looked hopeful when the man retired behind a striped curtain. "He's going to see what wares were brought here in the last week."

"Suppose he lies to us?"

Chuma nodded grimly. "That's always a possibility, sir. We may have to bribe him, or the owner."

"I can't afford to bribe every slave dealer in this stinking midden."

Moments later, the foreman returned with bad news. "Two shipments have come in within the last ten days. We have some girls, a middling doctor, a pair of young pages, and a skilled cook, but no pretty boys or singers, and nothing from the capital. Could we interest you in some of our wares?"

"Perhaps you might be able to direct us elsewhere?" suggested Chuma.

A slight nudge in the ribs was Aranion's cue to produce the incentive. Palming the coins, the foreman suddenly became very helpful. "Don't tell anyone I told you this, but you might try Ghazzan's across town. He's a leathery old stick who sells them as fast as he gets them, never mind the quality, but he sometimes gets that sort of merchandise. Pretty boys, fighters for the arena, bath slaves, even a few actors. He'll cheat you, though, mark my words."

Aggressive vendors and the overall squalor of the various markets soured Aranion's mood. He had no inclination to eat

anything cooked at the outdoor stalls, and preferred to sleep out in the open. Should this Ghazzan prove intractable, even with a royal warrant shoved in his face, Aranion doubted he would have the patience to remain diplomatic.

Once again, Chuma came to his aid, and the clerk was cooperative. "A singer recently came to us from the capital," said the man. "I would have to check the invoices to see if he's still available, though."

"There's no need." Aranion pushed his way forward, royal document in hand. The seal with its turquoise cords caught the clerk's eye at once. "We have a warrant."

Squinting at the wax, obviously distressed, the man excused himself. "I'll be right back, sirs."

Aranion heard frantic whispers behind the curtain, then the sound of a chair being pushed back. Double footfalls brought two men out into the foyer; the clerk had returned with the owner, a thin, dark-skinned man past sixty. A blue skullcap covered his wispy white hair, and when he took the warrant and began to read it, soundlessly mouthing the words, Aranion saw he still possessed most of his teeth.

Halfway through the warrant, Ghazzan shook his head and handed it back. "I know the slave you want. He came in nine days ago with a cut lip and bruised face. A *petah*—what you people up north call a male singer—yes, that was him. I preferred to keep him here for a while, so his bruises could heal and I could see if he was really what his former owner's agent claimed, but alas—"

"I am his owner."

Ghazzan's eyes widened in alarm, but he managed to keep his composure. "Yes, yes, I see that, sir." His gaze darted frequently to the door. Obviously the clerk had told him there were armed men in the street. "Unfortunately, a neighbor heard I had a *petah* in stock and sent his agent to make an offer. I tried to refuse—believe me, I did!—but Odaru always gets what he wants, when he wants it."

Ghazzan could have been negotiated with. He had enough respect for Aranion's royal authority—or, more likely, the soldiers in his entourage—to have handed Melan over. This Odaru sounded like trouble. "And where do I find this man?"

"Odaru lives in the upper town, up in the foothills away from all the stink and bustle of the markets. His house...." Here Ghazzan paused, clearing his throat loudly before continuing, "I wouldn't tell this to anyone else, you see, but as a friend—"

"I haven't got all day." Ghazzan's flustered reaction told Aranion the interruption was unnecessary, and unwise. "Go on. Tell me about the house."

"I say this only as a friend, sir," repeated Ghazzan, "so you will not be surprised should circumstances, ah, not go as you wish. Odaru's house overlooks a deep gorge, and he makes ample use of it. It's a terrible place, sir. Believe me when I say I hate doing business with that man. Sooner or later any slave I sell him ends up at the bottom of that gorge."

An image of Melan being hurled to his death reproached Aranion for not foreseeing this danger; he swiftly suppressed it. *It's only been nine days.* Right now, he could only hope the thirty men he brought would be enough. "Take me there."

Ghazzan visibly hesitated. For all his talk, he was a coward. "Sir, he could ruin—"

"I will ruin you if you *don't*. Permanently." Aranion set his hand on the hilt of his sword where the slave dealer could see it. "Return this man's money and file a grievance with the dealer who sold you the stolen goods." At this point, he certainly was not about to mention that Sheban was dead. But when Ghazzan did not move, Aranion drew out several coins. "I can be generous, provided you cooperate, but I'll go on alone if I have to."

In the end, Ghazzan had no choice. His clerk brought him a little purse and his walking stick, and he led Aranion back out into the street. "There," he said, motioning to the purplish hills flanking Inat's southern end. "Stable your horses with Pebbar at the edge of town; the track isn't wide enough for all of them."

The wealthier residents of Inat lived in the hills, yet it seemed they could not afford to lay down a paved street or install other amenities of civilized living. Aranion stepped around a pile of slop and human waste someone had dumped from a window; he heard cursing and guffaws behind him when one of his men encountered the mess. Scraggly trees separated the houses: whitewashed, two-story affairs with tile roofs. Graffiti defaced one, while the plaster was peeling off the façade of another.

Ghazzan brought them to the last house on the street and clanged the bronze bell. "Perhaps I should not stay—"

Aranion clamped a hand firmly on his shoulder, just as the peephole slid open. "You stay right where you are."

The doorkeeper, a dour, flat-faced man, looked duly unimpressed by Aranion's warrant or royal titles. "I'll announce you," he said glumly, "but your men will have to stay outside."

Absolutely not. "I am bringing nine with me, as befits my station."

An exasperated grunt, and the peephole started to snap shut. Anticipating this, Aranion jammed his sword into the opening. "You can open the door and respectfully announce me, or my men will break it down and you'll have to explain to your master about the damage."

The threat worked. Aranion briefly considered pressing his advantage by bringing all thirty inside, but decided against it. "Leave the door open," he told the man. "My men have orders to keep me in their sight at all times."

Like many dwellings in the region, Odaru's house faced inward, its windows and entryways opening onto a central courtyard. Two female servants slapped and wrung wet clothes against the fountain curb; they scattered at a rough word from the doorkeeper. "Wait here," he grunted.

Moments later, a man emerged from the house. Tough as the weathered oaks that dotted the plateau, hawk-nosed, and snapping a leather fly-whisk against his palm, Odaru left no doubt as to who was master of the house. Gold flashed in his teeth when he smiled, but there was no warmth in him. "What is this, Ghazzan?" he demanded, ignoring Aranion and his escort. "You know I don't like to be disturbed unless it's something worth my while."

Ghazzan flinched at his tone. "My dear friend," he squeaked, "a problem has arisen with some merchandise, and I thought I should tell you personally. The little singer I sold you last week—"

"Pah!" Odaru spat a wad of phlegm directly at Ghazzan's feet. "I should sue you for overcharging me—or better yet, passing off inferior goods. The boy has yet to sing a note."

"I assure you, friend, the boy is the genuine article. But—"

Odaru smacked the whisk hard against his thigh. "Then we'll persuade him yet."

Ghazzan jumped as though struck. "I regret to have to tell you that he is stolen property. These men are from Demar with a warrant demanding the boy's return."

Now Odaru acknowledged Aranion. "And who are you?"

Aranion met the man's gaze directly. No amount of spit and snap and show was going to intimidate him. "I am Prince Aranion Nikal. The boy Melan belongs to me—"

"*Belonged*," corrected Odaru. "He is my property now."

Aranion held up the warrant with its dangling seals. "You're the recipient of stolen property. Ghazzan regrets the inconvenience and is prepared to return your money, plus a little extra, but—" Odaru's cold, unrelenting stare made him reconsider in mid-sentence. Here was not a man to be flattered or cajoled. Aranion switched tactics. "You realize I could simply arrest you and seize my property?"

Odaru laughed harshly. "Oh, I don't think so. You see, the locals don't take too kindly to outside interference. Threaten me, and next you might want to meddle in their affairs. No,

your men aren't going to do anything, and the boy will stay right where he belongs: in my house."

"Be reasonable, my friend!" cried Ghazzan. "I have your money right here, and more than a little extra for the trouble. I can't imagine you've had much satisfaction with him, with those bruises and the fact that he doesn't sing as advertised."

Odaru winked at him. "Who says I use him for singing?"

Aranion could have run him through right there. "I'm beginning to think you don't have him at all."

"So you want to watch me give him a little discipline, do you? It wouldn't be the first time I've whipped him in front of guests. Three nights ago my neighbors, having heard Ghazzan's outrageous claims, wanted to hear the boy sing. Too bad he refused. Pretty boys who don't do as they're told get my rod—on their ass and in it. Ghazzan, you know better than to apologize for a few bruises. Slaves without marks forget what good discipline is."

With a sharp summons and a slap, Odaru sent a serving girl to fetch Melan. Aranion held his breath. When he saw the boy, when he counted the purpling bruises, what would he do? Mere heartbeats separated him from his heart's desire, and the urge to kill the man in front of him. Exhaling slowly, he said, "I understand you have a most unusual way of dispatching unwanted slaves."

Slyly, Odaru glanced over at Ghazzan. "My friend here really shouldn't talk, but yes, I don't waste time with bad goods. Other men might sell their slaves. Mine wouldn't fetch much by the time I've finished with them. Let me show you."

Aranion never meant his query to proceed this far; he sought only to make conversation, to dispel the tense silence. But he had chosen the wrong topic. Odaru led him through a tiled arch, along an open walkway, and onto a narrow terrace. Not trusting the man, certain he would not pass up the opportunity to kill him, Aranion kept two soldiers between him and Odaru.

He smelled the gorge long before he leaned over to gauge the depth. Human remains and garbage littered the crags all the way down. Scraps of tattered clothing and disarticulated limbs competed with household waste. Vultures circled the air above. "Your neighbors don't mind?"

"Hah!" laughed Odaru. "They would all do the same if they could."

Back in the courtyard, a sturdy-looking slave awaited them. In his hand he held the chain of a younger man dressed in a coarse brown tunic, his head bowed under the weight of an iron collar. Even with his telltale fair hair, it took Aranion a moment to realize the chained youth was his singer.

In the half-dozen steps it took him to cross the courtyard, he did not breathe. With one hand, he gently lifted the young man's chin. Bruises marred his cheek, closed his left eye, and under the irons his skin was chafed raw. But it was his eyes, vacant and hopeless, that haunted Aranion. *It hasn't even been two weeks!* "Melan," he said, hoping to elicit a response.

"Is that his name?" Odaru sauntered over, lazily slapping the crop against his leg. "This man wants to hear you sing, boy!"

Where another slave would have jumped at the command, Melan did not react, gave no hint that he had even heard. Clucking under his tongue, Odaru shook his head. "I see I will have to beat you harder."

As he lifted his hand, Aranion seized his wrist, clamping down so hard that Odaru dropped the whip with a sharp cry. Then, twisting the man's arm around, pinning it behind his back, Aranion let his impulses guide him. Odaru cursed and struggled, and called for help. Chuma shouted over him, and as Aranion shoved his prisoner toward the archway he heard the tramp of booted feet rushing into the courtyard.

Odaru knew what was coming. Snorting, he thrashed about, tried to brace himself on the walkway and shake off his captor, but Aranion never gave him the chance. His pace quickened, until he was running, propelling Odaru through sheer momentum. And when they reached the terrace, Aranion did not stop. With a final burst, he slammed the man into the low stone wall. Odaru gasped and sagged, too breathless to resist the hand that seized his scalp and began pounding his head into the sandstone.

Blood spotted the stones, but Aranion was not finished. Odaru was not going to die here, his brains bashed out on the terrace. Heaving the groaning man to his feet, throwing him onto the ledge, Aranion ignored the fingers feebly clawing at his arm, the pitiful cries for mercy, and shoved Odaru over.

A scream reverberated off the walls of the gorge, which swallowed the cry and cut it short with an audible crack of bone. Aranion leaned forward just enough to watch the man's

body break upon the rocks, and it seemed to him that the vultures, scenting blood, circled more thickly overhead.

Several heartbeats later, he found himself standing alone on the terrace, staring at the dark smears of blood against the paler stone, wondering what he had just done. Not that he regretted it, not at all. Trembling with adrenaline and anger, he remembered Melan standing forlorn in the courtyard. Odaru was dead. Now he had to get Melan safely away.

In the confusion, no one, not even Chuma, had given any thought to the young man they had come to retrieve. He still stood motionless, staring at the ground, the iron collar around his neck. Aranion strode over to him, jerking the chain from the servant standing guard and roaring at the man. "Get this thing off him! Now!"

Melan cringed as pitifully as though the reprimand was for him. Too late, Aranion remembered to curb his outburst. With the entire courtyard—his thirty soldiers, Ghazzan, and the dead man's frightened servants—watching, hardly caring what they thought, he gathered the young man in a close embrace and stroked his hair until the minder returned with the key. And the moment the collar was unlocked he stripped off his cloak and wrapped it around his singer. "We need lodgings for the night."

Expecting Chuma to answer, he was surprised when Ghazzan, pale and rigid with apprehension, offered a solution. "You might stay here, sir."

"In this house?"

"There are no inns in the town with rooms for you and all your men," explained the slave dealer. "This house is secure, and Odaru has no family living here."

You see, the locals don't take too kindly to outside interference. Threaten me and next you might want to meddle in their affairs. Odaru's warning might have held as much truth as bluff. "And the neighbors?"

Ghazzan shrugged, then offered more advice. "Have your men go into town for food and drink, and hire a wagon for the boy; he won't be able to sit on a horse, I think. Tell your soldiers to spread the word that Odaru was stealing property, and that the warrant was for his death—and only his. You'll be on your way first thing tomorrow, with no more trouble."

Chuma put in, "Sir, that foreman we encountered earlier saw the warrant."

"Did he read all of it?" As the soldier shook his head, Aranion noticed the way Melan was trembling in his arms. Give it too long and the boy might faint. "Then do what Ghazzan says. And you—" Over Melan's shoulder, he glared at the minder, who now wore a suitably contrite look. "Who is the steward of this house?"

"Irsu, sir," replied the man.

"Then tell this Irsu to come out."

By now, most of the household had gathered in the cramped little court. Wherever the steward, a slight, myopic little man, had been hiding, it did not take him long to appear. "Yes, sir?" he asked shakily. Perhaps he thought he would be the next one hurled into the gorge.

"Since that filth of an owner is now dead," said Aranion, "until tomorrow, I'm your master, and I want accommodations for the night. Here on the ground floor—two beds, one for me and one for the boy, and benches and bedding for fifteen men. Starting now, there will be a guard on the house. No one leaves."

Irsu squinted at him, at the soldiers, then spread his hands in a hapless gesture. "Sir, we haven't the provisions—"

"My men will buy food and drink in town." Letting the servants prepare a meal, Irsu's protests notwithstanding, would be an invitation to poison him. "I assume you have a well on the premises? Then draw water and heat it. I want a bath within the hour." Melan would have one, too, and fresh clothes. And whatever he could do for the young man's bruises and other injuries without a physician, he would.

As he started to lead Melan from the courtyard into the shade of the atrium, he felt Ghazzan anxiously pluck his sleeve. "What is it now?"

"Perhaps you should have a man or two watch your horses," the slave dealer suggested. "With so many fine mounts, maybe you won't notice if a few are missing. It's always best to be safe, sir."

Yes, it was. "Chuma, see to it. And you, my friend, will be my guest tonight."

Ghazzan, eyes widening, started to demur. "Sir, I couldn't possibly—"

Not for a second did Aranion trust him to go home and keep his mouth shut. "I *insist*."

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Distressed, wanting to send a message to his clerk, the dealer hung all over him until Aranion sharply ordered two soldiers to lead the man away. Wrung out, he needed to rest, and he wanted a moment alone with Melan, who looked visibly uncomfortable sitting on the atrium bench. Clearly the boy was in pain, and it was not difficult to guess why. Odaru's discarded crop and the welts other slaves bore told the tale as poignantly as any explanation.

Aranion sat down beside him and took his hands between his own. Melan's skin felt cold, clammy. "I wish I'd come sooner."

Melan turned his head. Stared at him, through him. Shock, it must be shock. Once he got over it ... Aranion dared not finish the thought, because inevitably it would lead to another: what if the boy did *not* get over it? "I should have come sooner," he murmured, this time to no one in particular.

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Chapter Eight

"What is this I hear about my household being moved?"

After ten more days on the road, Aranion wanted nothing more than to bathe, lie down, and sleep. Ten days coming from Inat, the ten days before that going, and the four days before *that* coming from Eremir's outpost. More than three weeks in the saddle. Exhausted, the last thing he needed or wanted was a messenger riding out to meet him with an order to report to his brother's house.

Elenin nodded. "Mother decided you were better off out of the city. It's all right, it's a lovely villa four days from here on the shores of Lake Suthal, and you're to have a generous allowance. I've made sure your steward has whatever help he needs packing and moving your things."

"Elenin, I can't take another four days traveling."

"You'll stay with me until your lodgings are ready. I know you haven't been well."

Aranion glanced over at the wagon, a small conveyance driven by two harnessed mules. Melan, wrapped in a thin blanket, sat in the rear. For the entire journey, the young man, dazed and uncomfortable, scarcely acknowledged him. Chuma and twenty-eight soldiers had returned to the barracks, leaving one to drive the mules. "I have a guest."

As Elenin's gaze darted to the wagon, he smiled broadly. "I know that, too. We were expecting you. Orinne has already prepared rooms for you both."

Orinne did far more than that. As a consummate matron and chatelaine, she would not hear of sick guests being tended by servants. Since the children were away visiting their maternal grandparents, she turned her attention on Melan, almost ignoring her brother-in-law in the process. She descended upon the boy the moment Aranion helped him across the threshold, and ordered a hot bath, clean clothes to replace the threadbare tunic and reed sandals he wore, and nourishing foods. For once, seeing Melan was in tender, loving hands, Aranion did not mind shifting for himself.

That did not preclude him from teasing Orinne. Following a bath and meal, he leaned in the doorway of Melan's guest room and watched his plump sister-in-law apply ointment to the raw welts and bruises on his back and thighs. "You know, since you're playing nursemaid, I could use some hot tea," he said.

She waved him away. "Have the serving girl bring you some."

Aranion let her tend the young man's back, but when her ministrations ventured lower, he cleared his throat. "Orinne, some of his injuries aren't for a lady to see." While no one in Odaru's house volunteered any information, it did not take long for Aranion to grasp that Odaru had done far more to Melan than simply cane him. In the wagon, Melan seemed unable to find a comfortable position, and had trouble performing his natural functions. Aranion did his best to make sure the wagon bed was thickly padded and that clean, cool water was available for washing. But what his young singer needed were hot baths, ointment, and time to heal.

Wiping her hands on a towel, Orinne rose from her bedside chair and led Aranion out into the corridor. "I've already seen the redness between his thighs," she said softly, "and I know perfectly well how men use other men. Elenin sometimes indulges with the serving boys."

"I doubt very much Elenin does to them what that man in Inat did to Melan."

"I know it was rough and—"

"Orinne, this is not a woman we're talking about. Men aren't really meant to take it that way. They have to be prepared, they have to relax, otherwise it hurts, and it tears them inside."

Orinne gave him a shrewd look. "Might I ask how you know all this, Aranion?"

"A soldier once told me. One night he got so drunk it made him sick and despondent. I never thought it to look at him—he was so tough. Ha! That was *why* he was tough, he said, so no one would ever do it to him again."

At this, she relented a little. "I will consult a eunuch physician and let him treat those injuries, but as for the rest I think the boy might *prefer* a woman."

A mother, she meant, whose love Melan probably had never known. From his room, right next door, Aranion overheard her speaking softly to the youth, and when night came she sang lullabies and charms, which he recognized as spells his nurses used to sing to dispel evil spirits from the royal nursery.

What good they did a young man of eighteen, Aranion did not know. Orinne insisted on their efficacy, but whenever he

visited, Aranion perceived a lingering blankness in Melan's demeanor. As always, the youth was deferential, acknowledging his master's arrival with a nod, yet the more Aranion tried to reach out to him, the more he talked, the wider the gulf that seemed to separate them.

"I should have made arrangements for your safety in case anything happened to me. I never thought this would happen," said Aranion. "The men responsible for this won't bother you again. They're both dead."

Melan's face betrayed no reaction. The air between them grew awkward, a sure sign to change the subject, or stop talking altogether, but Aranion, feeling ashamed at his inability to prevent the abuse, seemed unable to do either. "I know you punched Sheban in the face. I saw the bruise. I'm very proud of you."

That elicited a response, albeit a faint one. A cringe, a slight furrowing between the brows, signs of regret. Slaves simply did not strike their masters, or any free man for that matter.

Aranion rose, took the poker from the fire stand, and mimed being run through with a javelin. "This is how Sheban looked the last time I saw him. I pinned him to the wall."

Melan, horrified and disbelieving, shook his head. Once again embarrassed, Aranion replaced the poker and returned to the window seat. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything. Isn't it strange? I find somebody I finally care about and I can't talk to him—and he can't talk to me. It's all a mess. If you were anybody else I'd know what to say."

"Have I told you that I've been banished from court? I lost seven ships, and the priests are angry. As soon as you can travel, you and I are going to a little villa by Lake Suthal. You can continue your writing and speaking lessons, we can go swimming and riding, and I can teach you how to shoot an arrow and spar with a sword.

"Yes, it's quite all right. I know slaves aren't supposed to use or even carry weapons, but you aren't going to be a slave for much longer. As soon as I can send for the magistrate, I'm manumitting you. You'll be a free man, so if anything ever happens to me again you won't have to worry."

In fact, the idea had just occurred to him, an impulsive offering thrown out in hope of eliciting a smile, a favorable reaction. Later, he sought out Elenin to ask him to send for the appropriate magistrate.

Elenin, however, voiced doubts. "Are you certain this is wise?"

"What could be more sensible than to give him his freedom? Should anything befall me—whether illness or accident or my being killed at sea—he needs to be protected. What happened before can never be allowed to happen again."

"Manumission is a privilege typically granted after years of dedicated service," Elenin pointed out. "Melan hasn't been with you more than six months. If your only concern is protecting him from being unduly seized and sold should you die, you can append a codicil to your will overruling the traditional thirty days and appointing a guardian for him. Orinne and I would be happy to take him on."

An eminently sensible solution, one for which Aranion could find no fault, and yet it felt insufficient. *I have already given my word.* "I want to do this for him, Elenin."

Steepling his fingers upon his torso, Elenin leaned back in his chair. "You're in love, aren't you? I can understand why: he's young and charming, and I have no doubt those adoring gazes he gave you at Hyleas's party were genuine. But when your love doesn't speak, when all he can do is gesture and convey his thoughts through his eyes, his songs, it's easy to put words into his mouth."

Aranion shifted uncomfortably where he sat. "He gave me a little scrap of paper." A scrap lost when his ship sank and he went into the water. "I ordered him to practice his writing—*petaha* can read but apparently aren't allowed to write. I told him I wanted three sentences. He gave me three words. You can imagine—"

"*I love you.*" Elenin smiled and nodded. "So you're manumitting Melan because you love him in return. I can see that. But what do you intend to do with him once he's free?"

"What was I supposed to do with him while he was my property?"

"Teaching him to ride and spar and box is one thing, Aranion, but you and I both know he isn't going to become a soldier. What about his music lessons?"

Aranion shrugged. "What about them? First, he's going to learn to write and speak properly, then we'll see about his musical career, or finding him another profession if he doesn't care to continue. Should he want to sing, at least he'll be able to manage his own affairs."

What Aranion did not mention, though he had no doubt that Elenin already knew, was the very possibility he might lose Melan again, this time through his own impulsiveness. Somehow the queen had heard the full report of his conduct in Inat. Upon his return, he told her that Odaru refused to honor the warrant and had tried to kill the boy on the spot. He need not have bothered. Amunnikal must have questioned Chuma and learned that her son told only a partial truth. Her caustic missive threatened to remove the young man entirely.

Not this time, Mother. What did Amunnikal, whose twelve children all had different fathers, know about love? *Not if I set him free first.*

Melan gave no sign he understood his situation. "His wits aren't wandering," Orinne assured Aranion, "but there are certain things he prefers not to think about. And you don't help, you know, coming in and talking about what you did to his voice trainer and that horrible man down in Inat. You're doing the best you can, I understand that, but he doesn't need to be reminded."

"I don't know what else to say to him." Had he been able, had he known what would cheer his young singer, Aranion would have showered him with gifts. Had he thought Melan could bear his physical presence, he would have held the youth in his arms and kissed him.

"Why don't you simply ask him?" suggested Orinne.

Of all the absurd things she might have said! "And how would I do that? He can't tell me what he needs. If he could—"

Orinne remained unflustered. "You really are quite a silly man, Aranion. It might surprise you to know that Melan *can* talk."

Aranion could scarcely conceal his surprise. "But he's never spoken to me."

"He can say *yes* and *no*. In fact, just before he left, Mahawn told my husband that when the voice trainer came to take the boy away, Melan struck him and shouted *no*."

And yet, Mahawn had omitted that fact, a minor piece of information overlooked in the chaos between Aranion's supposed death and his return. "Melan hasn't said even that much to me."

"You have to coax him, Aranion. When I ask him a question, I don't let him get by with nodding or shaking his head. But give it time and patience, and by all means find something else to talk about than how sorry you are for his condition or how you rescued him. I read stories to him—"

"You're not reading him nursery fables, are you?"

She swatted him in mock exasperation. "I am reading him *The Bull's Labyrinth*. He quite enjoys adventure tales and heroic legends, much like my eldest boy, though I daresay he hasn't heard half the stories Laeras has. As for the nursery part, one of my women felt sorry for him and bought a stuffed animal in the market so he can hold it close at night, and I leave the lamp burning by his bedside."

Just like a child. Aranion pictured the eighteen-year old hugging a velveteen dog and sucking his thumb: images guaranteed to kill any amorous impulses. "Does he have dreams?"

"Sometimes," she admitted. "Most slaves are sold very few times in their lives. I'm told it can be very difficult for them, especially when..." Fortunately she did not finish the thought.

Aranion was well enough the following afternoon to ride into the marketplace and browse through the cozy shops on the Street of the Bookmakers. Registering a slave for manumission and paying the magistrate cost relatively little; those expenses left him more than enough to find Melan a suitable gift.

Like the leather stalls, the booksellers had their own unique smell: comprised mostly of cuttlefish ink, vellum, and the oil of cedar the scribes used to preserve eastern papyri. Among the stacks, Aranion found three slender volumes bound in blue leather: two books of heroic adventures and one compilation of tales from Tajhaan featuring Gaval, the perennial trickster and jackal god. He negotiated a reasonable price, waited while the seller wrapped his purchases in muslin, and returned to Elenin's house.

A letter from Mahawn awaited him: "The villa is pleasantly situated and has its own furnishings and staff, and I have had to do very little beyond buying provisions and unpacking your belongings. By the time you receive this, all the arrangements should be finished."

Which meant he and Melan could depart at any time. Four days on horseback was out of the question for the young man; he would have to ride once more in a wagon. Tomorrow Aranion would ask Orinne, who preferred convenience over ostentation when traveling, where to hire a modest yet comfortable conveyance.

Aranion bathed and rested, and at sunset came downstairs to greet the magistrate, a white-haired, grandfatherly man who was genuinely distressed to learn the circumstances behind Melan's manumission. "It's a rather odd request, given his youth," he said, "but there have been stranger cases."

Orinne had arranged a formal affair, with honeyed wine and cakes, and the entire household dressed in their best. Whenever a slave was manumitted, the other servants were customarily allowed to participate in the celebration. Although Melan technically did not belong to the master or mistress, many of the servants who tended him regarded him fondly, like a stray puppy or injured bird to be healed, and several laid out small gifts of food or wove floral garlands.

Orinne's chief lady-in-waiting escorted Melan into the foyer. From there, Aranion did his duty as master and led his singer through the door into the garlanded, candlelit reception room where the household gods had their shrine. On this occasion, Melan wore borrowed finery: a dark green velvet robe with full-flowing sleeves. Having been made for Elenin, who stood taller and broader in the shoulders, it did not quite fit the youth, and he traipsed in looking thoroughly bewildered and abashed. But he understood what was going on. Orinne took pains to assure Aranion of that.

A tense moment in the ritual came when the magistrate asked the slave's name, for traditionally the slave was supposed to answer. Aranion, cursing himself for not mentioning that the slave in question was a *petah*, held his breath. Should he disrupt the proceedings by speaking out of turn? Would the magistrate, sensing the situation, ask him?

Then he heard a low voice, gravelly from disuse, utter the name. Stunned, Aranion placed a hand on Melan's arm, as much to steady himself as express his approval. Orinne must have coached the young man on what to say.

"And who brings Melan to be manumitted?" asked the magistrate.

Here was the master's cue to speak. "Aranion Nikal, prince of Yshan."

"And what witnesses does Prince Aranion Nikal supply for this sacred act of manumission?"

Elenin and Orinne stepped forward and gave their names.

"And has Melan shown himself to be an industrious, modest, and forthright slave who will uphold these traits in his liberated life?"

"He has," answered Aranion.

Nodding, the magistrate smiled at Melan. "Then let Melan turn his back on the condition of servitude and take his first steps as a free man."

Aranion interposed himself between Melan and the magistrate, placed both hands on the young man's shoulders, and, stooping to kiss him on both cheeks, turned him around. "Go through the doorway and return a free man."

Polite applause greeted Melan as he shuffled to the threshold in his overlong robe and came back. Servants liked nothing better than a holiday or manumission. Caught up in their infectious enthusiasm, overjoyed at being able to give his young singer this gift, Aranion could not resist kissing him on the mouth. And to his delight, Melan did not pull away.

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Through his blush and puzzlement, his smile was sincere. It curved his lips and radiated from his eyes.

"You are free now," said Aranion, and kissed him again.

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Chapter Nine

Cooled by the region's coastal breezes and a broad, kidney-shaped lake, Suthal offered respite to city dwellers who could not afford a seaside villa. Modest estates dotted the lakefront, and on any given day small boats and swimmers took to the water.

Aranion had not come to play, no matter the season or what his physician had recommended. Mindful that his exile could end at any time, given his replacement's incompetence, he spent his mornings rereading every nautical text in his library and sending to the booksellers in the capital for any he did not have. Evenings he spent at the drafting table sketching new designs or puzzling over existing problems, admitting that even if he did manage to find a solution to the enemy's superior sea power he might never be in a position to implement it.

Beyond a sharp reprimand, his mother neither wrote to him nor attempted to take Melan away. Perhaps she thought better of the latter when she learned the singer was now a free man.

Mahawn reported generous revenues from the villa and its surrounding farms, which Aranion occasionally visited. But Aranion did not find the life of a rich, idle landowner appealing. Inactivity and his demotion wore at him. He needed a challenge; he needed to be at sea, and thought his mother a fool for sending him inland.

His brothers sent housewarming gifts. Even Hyleas was generous: his crates of oysters, sea salt, and pear wine came with an apologetic note. Shassil also sent a letter, in which he lamented the deplorable state of the fleet and assured Aranion that he would be recalled soon: "Drumal Alíkas hangs so many sacrificial offerings from his masts that even the priests are starting to complain of the stench. His discipline is as overly harsh as he believes yours was overly lax, and no one wants to serve under him. Let him lose a dozen ships and the surviving officers will threaten mutiny."

Shassil did not mention and Aranion did not point out that when it came to the military their mother merely regurgitated whatever facts or opinions her advisors fed her. Aranion thanked his brother for the two fine horses and cautioned him to fortify the coastal areas. Losing a dozen ships in addition to the seven already lost would mean disaster.

Aranion took Shassil's note into the library and showed it to Melan, who sat hunched over his lessons wearing a frustrated look. Parchment scraps littered the desk, and he worried the end of his pencil between his teeth like an errant schoolboy. His tutor, a eunuch recommended by Elenin and Orinne, had him practice his letters for an hour each morning, then he spent another two hours doing sums and writing sentences.

"Eighteen is an awkward age to start," said the eunuch, shaking his head. "It's a wonder he can read at all."

Melan made a face, to which he added a deepening blush when Aranion clucked his tongue over the report. "Now how

are you ever to manage the vast fortune you're going to make if you don't know how to write or do figures?"

Pursing his lips, Melan scribbled a single word on a blank piece of parchment: *Mahawn*.

"Oh, but Mahawn's *my* steward!" Aranion laughed. "You'll have to hire your own, and then how will you know he isn't swindling you unless you can go through the account books yourself?"

Melan grunted, shrugged, but where once Aranion would have interpreted that to mean *I don't know*, he now took Orinne's advice and insisted Melan vocalize his answers. "I have no idea what you're trying to tell me. Well-bred young free men don't mumble."

Like a youth ten years younger, Melan sometimes sulked. Aranion refused to tolerate this behavior just as he refused to let the young man get away with falling back on his old gestures. "I have something to show you, but I won't unless you behave."

Another face, followed by two words that took all Melan's concentration: "Don't know." A rasping reply, as though he choked on the words. Right away, the eunuch offered a bewildering mix of praise and criticism. "He must learn to relax, sir, so speaking becomes as normal to him as breathing. Why it takes so long, though, I don't understand. He can sing, and tries sometimes to sing his responses to me, so it isn't as if he's a mute."

"He'll get it." Aranion gazed fondly at his flustered singer. "One day the words will fall out of his mouth and he won't even realize he's done it until afterward. Now as for your

reward, young man..." He handed over the note. "This is from my brother Prince Shassil. You can ignore the salutations and military business; they don't concern you. Just skim down to the bottom, the part about the horses."

Melan parsed the text, held up two fingers. Then, realizing this would not suffice, he croaked out an answer: "Two."

"That's right. Notice how my brother doesn't specifically say who the horses are for." *You will need companionship when you ride out to those dusty fields.* Aranion had no doubt as to what Shassil meant. "One is a mare, perfectly suited for you."

As any normal young man, Melan proved a better pupil when it came to physical activity. Afternoons were spent in the shade by the lake: boxing, sparring, and swimming. Because Melan could not swim very well, Aranion had to teach him. And that meant touching him, holding him buoyant while he practiced kicking and stroking, and watching the way the water glistened off his white skin. For modesty, the young man wore a loincloth, but that wet cotton clinging to firm buttocks only made things worse.

Had the water not been cold enough to shrivel his scrotum, Aranion could never have touched him at all. All thoughts of desire he tried to stifle by talking. "One day I should rent a place by the sea and take you to see the tide pools. There's good swimming in the ocean, but it isn't for beginners."

Gradually Melan began to notice his distraction. "Wrong?" he asked.

"What's wrong? Oh, nothing," Aranion lied. "I was just thinking maybe we shouldn't spend too much time in this cold

water. I wouldn't want to catch a chill again, and you'd hate it if I did. Then who would show you how to throw a knife or take you out to see the farms?"

While Melan enjoyed country life, he seemed chagrined by his newfound liberty. Because he never expected to be free, he did not know what to do and felt lost at so much change so quickly. And he confessed as much in the few sentences he managed to write. He kept his stuffed toy near his bed, and he treasured the little books Aranion had given him. "Mine," he wrote, "to keep."

Aranion smiled at the awkwardly scribbled words. "One day I'll expect you to read to me from them." After some internal debate, he invested a small sum of money on Melan's behalf. Elenin and Hyleas contributed matching amounts, and all sent gifts. Elenin provided handsome new leather shoes, Hyleas bolts of fine linen to be made into shirts and underclothes, and Orinne a sturdy woolen cloak lined with fur. From Mahawn came a shaving kit and instructions on how to use it. "He's nineteen now, you know," said the steward.

No, Aranion had not known. "When did this happen?"

"At the beginning of summer, sir. When I first looked through that voice trainer's ledgers, I saw the boy's birth date entered there, and when I asked Melan to confirm the information he said it was so."

"He made no mention of it to me." Small as it was, the omission stung.

"I don't think he's used to marking the occasion," replied Mahawn, "and it might embarrass him, after all the fuss made over his manumission."

Aranion let the matter slide, while marking the date—10 Summer—for future reference. Next year Melan would have a gift, whether he liked it or not.

Nineteen. In more practical terms, it meant the young man—for one really could not call him a boy anymore—needed a profession. Anywhere else, he would have worked the land, been apprenticed to a craft master, gone to sea, or enlisted in the military. But Melan showed no aptitude for working with his hands, the sea was not in his blood, and the military was too rough a life for a mostly mute singer. And one did not send a former domestic slave outdoors into the fields.

Many free men remained close to their benefactors, performing the same tasks except now for a wage. They rendered their obligations via services or cash payment. Until he acquired other, more profitable skills, Melan needed work, and Aranion needed a valet to replace Toban, who found another position upon hearing of his master's apparent demise.

When Aranion took Mahawn aside to discuss the possibility, the steward nodded. "But wait until his speech improves and he masters sums. He'll need those skills to deal with the local fullers."

"I want him to start by winter," said Aranion. "I don't want him to grow too accustomed to sitting idle."

For now, the summer days were filled with activity. At night, when he grew bored with his books and too frustrated to go straight to bed, Aranion took Melan for an evening stroll by the lake. Moonlit water lapped the shore, where the grass

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met the pebbled beach. Loons cried mournfully in the distance: unearthly, a sound to send shivers up one's arms. Melan hummed a little under his breath, but did not sing, did not violate the eerie twilight with his voice. Aranion never asked him to perform, even while wondering when—or if—Melan ever would again.

Those were nights for lingering outside, for retiring late upstairs or to the study with its cheery fire; nights in Suthal were cold. Intimacy beckoned, the temptation to make love ever present, but Aranion restrained himself. Melan's injuries had healed, his natural cheerfulness had returned to the point where he probably would have consented. But his status as a free man made it an awkward proposition. For if he was unwilling, if he refused, things would never again be the same between them.

* * * *

Sleep came hard, even after a day's vigorous activities. Aranion lay awake in his darkened chamber, feeling helpless, frustrated, like he was pushing the world away instead of dealing with the problem at hand. If not on the open sea, he should have been with the shipwrights discussing possible improvements to the fleet. Yes, he could draft designs and send them to Demar where he was forbidden to go, or invite the men to Suthal, but they could not afford to be away ten days or more, and written communication would not be the same.

When would his mother realize her navy was not up to the task? Would she ever have enough sense to send the priests away and start listening to the military men?

A man should rule in time of war. Blasphemous, a thought Aranion swiftly scotched. Only women sat on the throne. And there had been queens who led armies, who understood the importance of a strong navy, but neither Amunnikal nor her likely successor possessed such gifts. According to them, men did not count in the royal lineage, and had no value beyond their seed.

Royal princes should do more than that. Aranion had stayed in the nursery until age seven. No fanfare greeted his entry into the adult world. He had been given a modest household, tutors, and instructions to grow into something useful: a merchant, a priest, or a military officer. Beyond his small annual allowance, the royal coffers would not support him, and whatever distinction he held he had to achieve it on his own. *Which is far more than Mother has ever done.* Her only qualifications to rule were her status as the previous queen's eldest surviving daughter and her capacity to breed.

Princes who tried to seize power became temple sacrifices. Aranion sighed and rolled over, ruing the foreign blood that made him ponder such thoughts, and his own inability to do anything about them.

As his eyelids began to droop, the door opened and slowly, softly closed. Sometimes the servants brought fresh water or stirred the embers in the grate, but not at this hour. Aranion reached for the knife he kept under his pillow and sat up. "Who's there?"

No answer. A slender form stepped into a patch of moonlight, and, recognizing the intruder, Aranion saw why he received no reply. "What are you doing here, young man?" he asked, tucking the knife away.

To his complete surprise, Melan slipped under the covers with him. "Cold," he croaked.

Icy feet touched his. "So you are! And you think lying here next to me will warm you better than putting on a pair of socks?"

"Yes."

Aranion knew better than to believe him. The cold-feet story was as much a pretense for sex as a woman's headache was for avoiding it. But why would Melan come to him; why would he snuggle close and offer such inviting caresses after being treated so horribly? Aranion let the young man kiss him, but did not reciprocate as enthusiastically as he should have, because he did not know how far Melan wanted to go. Even a partner who burrowed under his clothing to touch his naked skin might not intend anything more than kissing and petting.

Against his better judgment, his body began to respond. Soon his arousal would rule his head, and his passion would burn out of control. Grunting into the next kiss, grasping Melan's wrists to hold him as he pulled back, Aranion asked, "Do you want to do it with me? Tell me the truth."

"Yes."

"You aren't afraid that I'll hurt you?"

"No." And then he heard his name—*Aranion*—hoarse yet strangely melodic, easily the most beautiful sound Melan had

ever made. With that, Aranion wrapped his arms around Melan's waist and drew him down onto the mattress beside him. He found the young man's mouth and nibbled at it, eating his soft, wet heat when those lips parted to accept him. A stiff cock brushed his thigh, but Aranion preferred to stroke and squeeze Melan's rounded ass cheeks under his shift instead.

How he wanted to do this in the lake! Lucky damp cotton, lucky rivulets of water sluicing down the youth's ass into the cleft between his cheeks! A man could bury his face between those firm globes and push his tongue into that dusky, puckered opening. Aranion knew what it felt like to be licked there, to be fucked with a probing tongue, and he wanted to do it to this boy.

Yes, he would do it tomorrow afternoon on the grass, in a little tent he would have the servants erect there.

Tonight he would tease and hold back, until he learned just how willing Melan was, until he satisfied the hunger brought on by abstinence.

Breaking away from their kiss, Aranion pulled his sleeping shift over his head and tossed it aside. "Are you feeling warmer now?"

Melan reached for Aranion's chest, ran a playful hand through the hairs tufting his pectorals. "My feet," he said huskily.

Oh, yes, Aranion knew precisely how to warm those. "Then let me rub them for you so you don't catch a chill."

Pushing back the covers, he crawled to the foot of the bed and knelt there. Then, taking a foot—no longer quite so cold—

he pressed the arch into his groin and started working the ankle, kneading it between his firm hands. Melan snorted with laughter and wriggled his foot so it rubbed tantalizingly against Aranion's cock and balls. Yes, the boy definitely knew what he was doing.

"Not so quickly," said Aranion. "Your toes and the bottom of your foot are still cold."

"Much warmer," insisted Melan.

I'll bet. As much as Aranion relished the idea of letting him continue to tease, and giving into the pleasure of having his balls massaged, he decided it was now his turn. "Listen to a seaman when he tells you how to get warm."

So saying, he lifted the foot away from his groin, supported the calf with his other hand, and sucked Melan's big toe into his mouth. Laughing, Melan flinched and involuntarily tried to pull back, then groaned when Aranion's tongue swiped the underside of his foot. So he could laugh and make the sounds of pleasure! Now Aranion longed to hear the full range of his ecstasy. Inhaling the smell of soap, tasting the salty sweetness of the youth's skin, he lavished each toe with attention before sliding both hands up his calf, pushing up the thin shift as he went.

Just as he reached Melan's thigh, a fraction of an inch before he exposed the erection bulging through the fabric, he said, "Why don't you show me your hard little prick?"

"*Not* little," Melan answered indignantly, but he obliged and drew the garment over his head. His shaft curved against his pelvis. "My foot?"

"Oh, I think your other foot is quite warm. Now since you decided to traipse about the house in only a thin shift and no underclothes your cock must be absolutely frozen."

Comprehension and a naughty twinkle livened Melan's eyes. "Cold water today."

"Yes, indeed, a frigid lake will certainly shrivel a man's balls." Aranion crept forward between Melan's parted legs so he could more easily grasp the young man's rod. "Ah, it seems quite warm to me—but not *quite* as warm as it ought to be."

Casually varying his rhythm, he worked the shaft up and down, chafing hot, rigid flesh while Melan shuddered. "And what about your tight little ass? Is that warm now, too?"

Melan stared wide-eyed at him. Alarmed. His gesture was unmistakable: he did not want to be touched there. Not yet. Tomorrow's intended game would have to wait. To reassure him, Aranion crawled up his body, kissing his torso as he went, latching onto a hard nipple. First one cool bud, then the other, until they were raw and glistening wet with his saliva. "You should really bundle up if you're going to go walking around at night. Orinne gave you a cloak, didn't she?"

Aranion did not have to invent this part: a young man so recently ill should not be wandering about barefoot and bare-assed in a scanty linen shift. Even he had to take precautions, lest his own illness return.

Perhaps now was not the time to mention the slight fuzz that furred his lover's chest. Melan was maturing, losing his boyish smoothness. For some youths, used to pleasing older men, it was a disaster. Aranion did not mind it at all.

"Change places with me. You can pull up the blanket if you like."

Melan covered him with his body instead, straddling his thighs so their cocks brushed together. He leaned in for a kiss, and as Aranion slipped a tongue into his mouth the young man's hips began to swivel, to grind back and forth. This was how he wanted to fuck; this was how he intended to come. After so long, Aranion did not care: the intimacy was all that mattered. Tightening the embrace, he waited, and then when the moment was right, moved so they created a rhythm.

Short as his breath became, he could not resist the earthy love-talk he so enjoyed. Melan panted above him, his muscles flexed and tightened, and Aranion knew he was going to come. "That's it," he growled. "Shoot your sweet juice all over my belly."

Melan did more than that. Rising up, he gripped his cock and began pumping it. His eyes squeezed shut, and his face screwed up with intense concentration, his ecstasy appeared to border on pain. Aranion knew the signs; it was going to be a big orgasm. A strangled cry escaped the young man's lips, just as pale strands of cum spurted from his slit. Not once, but twice, the second orgasm weaker than the first. His whole pelvis twitched with the effort.

Then he should have slumped forward, or slid to the side so Aranion could finish. Instead he moved down to lap up his own juices, to tease Aranion's swollen shaft and swallow it whole. This was not what Aranion expected. Not so soon, not with such vigor, but he was in no condition to protest. All that

existed right now was his throbbing cock and the wet mouth milking it so expertly. "Yes, yes," he hissed between his teeth. "Suck it all down. Make me come."

Aranion pictured his own face, looking just like Melan's seconds before his climax: that grimace, the moist tongue darting out to lick dry lips, and the clenched teeth. Men and women really did look ridiculous during sex—no doubt some colossal joke of the gods. Aranion could care less how he appeared when doing it, or how he sounded, as long as Melan kept sucking him.

Finally he let go; prolonging the moment had become truly painful. Gently pushing Melan away, he withdrew his spent member and lay catching his breath while his lover licked the last remnants of cum from his belly.

"Pull up the covers and come here." Sweat cooled his body. It felt pleasant now, but give it ten minutes and they would both be shivering.

Melan snuggled against him under the layers of wool and fine cotton. "I suppose you're nice and warm now?"

"Very warm."

"I'd like to do other things with you, if and when you like." Now was not the best time to engage in conversation, but when it came to sexual matters, bed was really the only place. "Naturally as a free man you're under no obligation to do anything with me."

"Yes."

So he wanted to. But how much was he willing to allow? "I don't have to come inside you, Melan. There are other things we can enjoy. I wouldn't want to hurt you."

Silence overtook the chamber. Melan might have fallen asleep but for the irregularity of his breathing. Moments passed, Aranion began to drift off, then he heard a rough murmur, "Being sold hurt, you dead hurt."

The unexpected answer momentarily staved off his exhaustion. "Melan, I saw your injuries. You had trouble just sitting up and defecating."

"Cane hurt," explained Melan. "Sex not so much."

Sheban had been using his body and selling it to others for years was what he meant. Odaru fucking him must have seemed natural, a fate he had come to expect. And yet, Aranion could not quite bring himself to believe it had not hurt, or that the cane had been a worse punishment. "Then you wouldn't mind?" he asked cautiously.

"Just not tonight."

Tonight he did not want to be penetrated. Tomorrow he might change his mind. So eating his delectable ass in the little tent was still a possibility. "Go to sleep now," Aranion murmured into his hair. "I can't have you going back to your room barefoot and hardly dressed. You're just going to have to stay with me."

* * * *

Melan moaned into the towel. Legs splayed apart, his ass arched into the air, he was right where Aranion wanted him.

Aranion's fingers dug into pale ass cheeks, drawing them apart to give better access to the rosy treasure within: a wet hole pulsing with desire, begging for a stimulating finger, a cock, or an exploring tongue.

Even in the midday heat, Aranion feared the cold lake would shrivel his desire. Not at all. Last night's lovemaking simply fueled his arousal. So did the sight of his young lover frolicking nearly naked in the water. His loincloth could scarcely contain his raging erection, and certainly did nothing to conceal it. The swimming lesson could wait. Either he would strip Melan here in the shallows and fuck him where any passing servant could see, or get him into the tent and do it. It hardly mattered, so long as he had the boy *now*.

Fortunately he had planned for this situation and ordered the tent erected. Of striped green and white canvas, it was floored with raffia mats and held folding chairs, a basket of towels, and a small table with food and drink. All Aranion cared about right now was that there was enough space on the floor for his pleasure; it would not do to fuck with their legs sticking out of the tent. Not that the nearest villa was close enough for any of the neighbors to see, and what he did with his boy was none of the servants' business, but Melan was a free man, entitled to privacy.

He waited long enough to hustle Melan into the tent and close the flap, creating a dim, close space, before pulling off his loincloth. His hardness rose, too unmistakable to ignore, and as Melan stripped down and reached for a towel, his gaze gravitated toward it. "You want?"

Aranion laughed harshly. "I want a lot of things. I want my command back, I want my mother to see reason, I want you on your knees sucking my cock, I want to see your—"

Before he could finish the thought, Melan knelt down and began servicing him. How expertly he did it, bobbing up and

down on the engorged rod, gorging himself on cock as though famished. And as he worked, Aranion noticed the erection quivering between his thighs. Young men his age were always hard.

Had he not planned this encounter, it might have gone very differently. It might have ended with a bit of mutual fondling and sucking. But no, Aranion had another oral pleasure in mind. Placing his hand on Melan's head, he gripped his cock and withdrew it from the boy's mouth. "Not yet," he said. "Lie face down on the towel. No, I'm not going to fuck you. There's something else I want to try."

And so the torment began.

Aranion started in the small of his back, kissing the damp skin there, lightly licking it while Melan pillowed his head on a rolled-up towel. By inches, he crept lower, nibbling at the top of the young man's cleft, painting wet circles around each perfectly rounded ass cheek, before spreading them to savor more intimate delights.

Melan tensed, as Aranion knew he would, and started to protest. A firm hand on his back kept him down. "You're perfectly clean, boy, and your ass is simply delicious. Relax and enjoy it. You'll soon be moaning and begging for more."

Clearly the boy had no idea how erotic ass-play could be. How the simple act of a tongue flicking around his puckered hole could make him squirm. Or how that same tongue, probing his sphincter like a stubby, wet cock, could undo him to the point where he had to bite down on the towel as he humped the mat.

Not so quickly. Aranion withdrew and got up on his knees. One last pleasure remained, one he rarely enjoyed. Taking hold of his cock, he rubbed it up against Melan's slick opening, and did not pause even when his partner stiffened. "I told you I wasn't going to fuck you. No, I'm going to come all over your ass. That's it, just close your eyes and picture it: my hard prick moving up and down your tight little hole. That's it, spread your cheeks for me, move your hips. You want my cream all over you, don't you?"

As much as the running monologue excited Melan it enflamed Aranion even more. With his cock, he traced a path from the swollen perineum up to his cleft, over each clenched cheek, then back to his hole. When the temptation to enter the boy's hot passage became too great, Aranion concentrated on coming. As he jerked and fisted, cum dribbled from his slit and onto the pucker. Gods, how succulent Melan now looked! And he could tell by the boy's muffled groans and whimpers that Melan knew it, too.

"This is what I've been waiting for." Lying down again between Melan's legs, he began licking off his juices. Broad swipes of his tongue took in the entire length of the cleft. He lingered over the hole, sucking out his cum, savoring the salty flavor of his own seed mingled with the boy's sweat and musky fragrance. "You taste so good now."

When he reached lower, letting his tongue slide past the perineum to tease his lover's balls, that did it. Melan's hips bucked, grinding into the raffia mat, and he came hard.

Aranion helped him clean the mat, then handed him his loincloth while he unfolded the blanket the servants had

provided. If they chose, they could doze in the shade until supper or rest and make love again. There was no hurry. "We can do this every afternoon this summer," he said. "And when the weather gets cold we can fuck each other silly in my study."

Melan smiled shyly, but a hint of skepticism remained. "What about your work?"

"There isn't nearly enough of it these days," Aranion admitted ruefully. "We're going to be here a while, perhaps a year or more. You'll have plenty of time to master your lessons, and think about what you want to do when—if—we go back to Demar."

When he lay down on the blanket, Melan joined him. "School," he said.

"You want to go to school, to a formal academy?"

"No, have a school."

Aranion puzzled over his meaning. Though Melan used increasingly more vocabulary—not surprising since he was already an avid reader—stringing words into complete sentences came slowly. "You want to own a school?"

Melan nodded. "For *petaha*."

"But aren't they individually trained?"

"Yes, but it's no good. *Petaha* need a school, eunuchs."

As Aranion began to comprehend the full depth of Melan's vision, he could not suppress a delighted grin. An academy for *petaha*, run and taught by eunuchs who would not—could not—prey sexually upon their charges. It was an outlandish concept, yet eminently feasible. And Melan had conceived it.

"You know, you have to have a lot of money to start such a venture, *and* know your sums—*and* be able to talk fully."

"I know." Despite his smile and deep blush, Melan's voice exuded confidence. Evidently he had spent much time thinking the matter through. "It will take a long time."

Aranion affectionately ruffled his hair. "Well, if you can do it, then I suppose a disgraced officer like me can get his command back."

Melan leaned over to kiss him. "Why not?"

"Because my mother doesn't see reason." Aranion sighed heavily. As always, practicality had to rear its ugly head. Melan needed to become more than a good-hearted dreamer to fulfill his ambition. "Or if she does, it's only after a lot of good men have died. Believe me, I'd rather be in your position, and even then I won't lie to you and say it'll be easy. People are used to things being done a certain way. They won't want to change."

"Even when it doesn't work?"

"Especially when it doesn't work." Aranion squeezed his lover's shoulder. "Don't listen to me, boy. I'm too cynical for my own good. And don't get discouraged when it doesn't happen right away."

"It only matters that it happens." Melan's face suddenly lit up. "You want to be in my position?"

Aranion caught his double meaning at once. "Naughty young man!" Wrapping both arms around Melan's middle, he rolled over so his partner was on the bottom. "Is that better?"

Melan lifted his head just enough to nip Aranion's chin. "It's a start."

Nightingale
by L. E. Bryce

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About the Author

L.E. Bryce was born in Los Angeles, California and has never lived anywhere else. She has a Masters in English Literature from California State University, Northridge. Her Jewish mother, dog Sarra and kitty-muse Molly help her keep her sanity.

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