



The
Highwayman

Ali Katz

THE HIGHWAYMAN

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The captain of the guard lay on his back, naked, one foot on the floor. The thin, white sheet of rough linen covering him to the waist served only to highlight the sweep of lean hips and the bulge of his flaccid cock where it dipped into the valley between powerful thighs.

Janos couldn't take his eyes off him. Lust, like liquid fire, washed over him, raising gooseflesh and creating a stir in his breeches as his own cock reacted to the sight. A harsh, silent breath escaped him.

The Archangel Michael lay before him bathed in moonlight.

He crossed himself with his sword arm to ward off the blasphemy without bothering to pray for strength to resist the invitation the long, hard body conjured. That temptation was beyond resisting and assured him an eternity burning with a different fire in hell.

From the foot of the bed, he let the steady rise and fall of the man's breathing hypnotize him while he waited for the tremors in his limbs to settle down. Once his hand steadied, he slid the tip of the saber beneath a fold in the sheet and lifted away the cover for a better view. The soft snores never faltered.

His gaze traveled the length of the man, taking in the thick blond hair spread across the pillow, the full, perfectly kissable lips, slightly parted. And down, following the line of light fur past the wide expanse of chest and cleft of torso to where the no-longer flaccid cock swelled and lifted from its coarse nest as though responding to his visual caress.

Ah hah, the sleeper awakes...

ALSO BY ALI KATZ

Gato Negro

Glory

Only One Regret

THE HIGHWAYMAN

BY

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*To Judy, my faithful reader.
And a special thanks to Google Earth for
the journey into the past.*

CHAPTER 1

No fire burned in the tiny hearth. The only light in the room poured from the slit that passed for a window high in the wall onto the narrow bed and the figure sprawled there.

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Ah hah, the sleeper awakes. His lips curled. He swiped the flat of the blade over one turgid nipple.

The captain thrust an arm toward the floor, groping.

"Is this what you're looking for?" Janos raised the saber in salute. His voice was entirely too husky to pull this off.

In a blur, his prey leaped from the mattress. "How did you get in here?"

Janos circled the bed, keeping the saber pointed at the captain's chest. The tall, blond bear of a man retreated before

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the smaller until his back met unyielding stone. Janos pressed the advantage. Lifting the point to the man's jaw, he closed the distance between them to a hand's breadth.

"Take off that mask," the captain demanded.

"And bare my identity? I think not. Kneel."

A stubborn crease appeared in the smooth brow. The flesh surrounding the saber's tip puckered and paled as Janos forced a sinister air and increased the pressure—just a hair. He had no desire to draw blood.

The man snarled a curse and lowered himself to the floor. "You'll be caught. My men are asleep down the hall."

"I'll come quietly, then." Janos chuckled and unbuttoned his pants with his free hand. His engorged cock, freed from the confines of his breeches, fell heavily into his palm. A few casual strokes drew the man's gaze. The heat in those crystal blue eyes produced a thrill of triumph. He'd guessed correctly. Stefan appreciated the game.

"You realize," his lover said, licking his lips, "if that blade slips, you'll likely lose your manhood to my death throes."

"*Ta gueule*, Novák! Stop blabbering and suck." Janos grinned in anticipation. "And, if I feel teeth, rest assured your theory will be tested."

Stefan's tongue reached out and licked the grin right off his face.

A jerk of his hips thrust Janos's cock against the other man's mouth. The lips parted, and with a low moan, he sank into silken warmth. His sword arm shook.

The captain reached up and swiped the blade away from

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his jaw. Its tip dropped to the floor.

The grunt that escaped Janos's control was too loud.

He pressed his free hand to the wall, seeking support for his watery legs as Stefan sucked him to the back of his throat. Each stroke of tongue along the underside of his cock set his limbs quivering. Coming quietly was going to be a challenge.

His pants fell to his knees. Nails dug into his ass. A hand reached between his thighs and Janos parted his legs in invitation. A warm palm cupped his balls, toying with the slippery nuggets as the sack tightened and burning pleasure flared through him. When Stefan pressed a solid knuckle to the hidden flesh behind his scrotum, a second grunt broke free, louder still.

Then the captain swallowed. The saber fell with a clang, and Janos grabbed what was close at hand. His fingers tangled in sleep-tousled hair. His hips plunged, sending his cock deeper, and his beautiful man took every inch of him. Janos swooned, then a surge of heat blossomed from his balls outward, washing over him in all directions. So much for controlling the situation. All thought of self-preservation aside, he pumped against Stefan's face, lost in furious lust. When the orgasm overtook him, he clamped his mouth tight to avoid crying out.

For a moment, he stood helpless, blind and shivering under the effect of Stefan's tongue finishing him off.

As Janos came to his senses, Stefan rose to his feet with a low growl, grabbed him by the throat and, using his whole body, shoved him, legs still tangled in his breeches, across the

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floor.

Janos's knees met the bed. He clutched Stefan's arms for purchase as he tumbled, bringing the much bigger man down with him.

Stefan's weight pinned him to the insufficient mattress. Janos didn't protest. Instead, he wiggled against the stiff, unsatisfied cock that lay like a log between their tight pressed bodies. He reached for it, but Stefan seized his wrist and restrained him.

"You're going to get us both hanged coming here like this." The harsh whisper bathed Janos's face in hot breath. "Or worse." Stefan's free hand stretched toward the head of the bed.

"What's worse than hanging?" Janos asked, drowsily. He followed the hand with his eyes and watched Stefan dip his fingers into the lamp oil. His ass clenched in anticipation.

"Do you know what they've thought up for the likes of us? And wearing that mask—what if someone saw you?" Stefan slipped his oily hand between them to grasp Janos's limpid prick.

The slippery pressure on the still-sensitive organ drew painful spasms and had him writhing for mercy. With none forthcoming, he gritted his teeth and endured. Pleasure returned soon enough when Stefan slid his palm along his length and over his balls.

"No one saw me," he groaned. "Haven't you heard? I'm a phantom. I appear from nowhere and disappear into the night."

Stefan's oily thumb found his back entrance, pressed,

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breached.

“Don’t start believing your own boasts,” he said and added a second finger, massaging the tight muscle.

The burn spread like wildfire through Janos’s balls. His cock twitched with new life. He forgot how to speak.

“Nothing else to say for yourself?” Stefan delved deeper.

Janos’s hips pressed back, seeking the fire his whole body craved.

“Say it.”

An animal sound came from his throat. He didn’t even care. “Please.”

“Please? What do you want? Say it.”

“Give,” Janos gasped.

“Give what? Spit it out!”

“Fuck me, damn you. Give me your cock.”

The fingers withdrew. Janos didn’t have time to mourn the loss before Stefan flipped him onto his stomach and shoved his thick cock home without even pausing at the door.

“Yes!” With long hard strokes, Stefan made it clear who was in charge in this relationship.

Janos stretched his neck, hoping to catch a glimpse of his lover’s face, to experience the moment that fierce countenance melted into mindless passion, but Stefan’s gaze reached upward, hiding his expression. So, he buried his head in the mattress, dissolving into the sensation of Stefan holding him captive and pounding him until the heavy bed frame scraped across the rough, wooden floor.

Stefan stiffened; the low grunt he let loose was music to

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Janos's ear. He thrust, and again, then collapsed, and wrapped Janos in his arms while the orgasm rocked them both.

When it was over, Stefan rolled onto his side, pulling Janos with him. They lay front to back, still joined, Stefan's face buried in his hair while their breathing returned to normal.

Janos wallowed in the moment. Sex was their bond, but this closeness, this tenderness kept him sane.

Anxious for a taste of Stefan's satisfaction, Janos turned his head. Stefan obliged with a rabid kiss as his prick shrank and slipped away, leaving Janos feeling cauterized.

They drifted apart. Stefan fell onto his back with a satisfied moan, and Janos shifted to lie beside him with his head resting on his chest. They both breathed for a while, basking in contentment. Stefan brought his fingers to play in Janos's hair.

"You've got to stop taking these chances, Janos." His hoarse whisper rumbled through Janos's head. "If they catch you here, I'll be court-martialed and probably hanged. Do you know what they'll do to you, a deserter and a thief?"

Janos shrugged. "Hook me like a side of beef." Why have this conversation? Of course he understood the stakes. "You worry too much." He was not going to be caught. Raising himself onto his arms to gaze at his lover's face, he changed the subject. "I've got a riddle for you." He chuckled. "Who's fast as lightning, elusive as the wind, and impossible to resist?"

"Janos—"

"Right! Me and Beelzebub." He threw himself back onto

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the bed and dissolved into silent laughter.

Stefan growled, shoved him aside in a fit of temper and got to his feet. Grabbing his shirt from its hook on the door, he began to dress.

“You’re leaving?” What had happened to their moment?

“I have rounds. You need to get out of here before daylight. And take that damn mask off.”

Janos said nothing. Neither did he remove the mask. He slid his breeches up over his hips and stood to tuck in his shirt and button up.

Stefan had rounds at dawn—more than an hour away. Janos was being dismissed, rather rudely as it were. The best he could do was leave quickly before the sting of rejection brought tears to his eyes. He circled the bed to pick up the coat he’d tossed aside when he came through the window. He slipped it on without care, then reached for the sill to pull himself up but couldn’t resist one last glance to see if Stefan had reconsidered.

He sat in the room’s only chair struggling with a boot. He did not look up. “Szabo asked for two guards to accompany him to Brazov. They leave the day after tomorrow.”

So soon? The abrupt dispersal of information they’d waited six months to hear confused Janos. When did Szabo make these plans? If he hadn’t shown up tonight, would Stefan simply have let the opportunity pass? Stefan’s stiff jaw warned him not to try discussing the matter.

He nodded his thanks. He didn’t trust his voice to speak it.

The nod went unnoticed. Stefan grabbed his scabbard from

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where it rested beside the chair and, stood up. With his back to Janos, he donned the belt and slid the saber in place at his hips.

“Henric and Grigore volunteered for the detail,” he said. His voice had a hard edge to it. “Listen to me, Vesh. You won’t hurt them.”

Janos flinched at the use of his surname, an even surer sign of Stefan’s anger than the dismissal. Thankfully, his reaction was hidden behind the mask—not that Stefan would have noticed. He jumped onto the sill.

“Be careful,” Stefan whispered.

Crouched in the window, Janos paused a moment, tempted to offer reassurance, but his anger wouldn’t let him. He leaped to the ground and ran, weaving through narrow alleys to the postern gate where he waited in the shadows for both sentries to pass in their watch.

* * *

Interlude

The naked boy paced. Two steps right to the reeking bucket he used for a chamber pot. Two steps left to the flea-infested mat he used for a bed. Six steps if he followed the arc the chain binding his ankle allowed.

This was his world now. They’d brought him here to pay for his father’s crimes.

A door squealed. Heavy footfalls approached. Janos set his back to the cold stone and waited.

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Light from the hall spilled into his cell, blinding him. Faceless hands grabbed at him and spun him, face to the wall. Wordlessly, the guard bound his hands behind his back.

“Leave.” Fuzi. The voice from the doorway raised a torrent of rage and terror. Murderer.

Still blinded, he turned toward the sound. A shadow crossed his face. He blinked. The landlord’s malicious grin came into view.

Janos spat. A heavy hand smashed his jaw and threw his head hard against the unyielding stone. He turned just in time to save his face from being crushed into the rock as Fuzi’s weight pressed against him. The stench was unbearable. His gag earned him another blow.

Fetid breath bathed his ear. “Time to pay.”

CHAPTER 2

Janos shuddered. Dark thoughts tonight—anger had a way of bringing them out.

He needed sleep. These journeys into the past affected him more than he cared to admit. On a good day, he turned them away, but sometimes...

Movement in the corner of his eye grabbed his attention. He'd almost missed the sentries passing. He counted to one hundred, then ran, squeezed through the gate, not bothering to close it behind him and, hugging the wall, moved along the western parapet.

The grasses were high for April. Dew dampened his boots and back as he maneuvered the steep embankment in the

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predawn air. He had two minutes to ease his way down the bank and make it to the tree line without causing a rockslide.

Don't hurt them. He never hurt any of the men he robbed. Never.

Perhaps Stefan was having second thoughts.

No. Janos refused to consider it. Stefan was loyal. He would have gotten the information to him somehow. Stefan came through, with no little risk to himself.

Money alone didn't motivate him. *He trusts me.*

Then why the dismissal? And no mention of their next meeting.

And why the fit of temper over an unexpected social call? This wasn't the first time Janos had snuck into his room.

A little anxiety seeped away when no cry went out before the trees rendered him invisible to the sentries. The ground leveled. He slowed his pace, not wanting to startle his mount as he approached.

Had Stefan grown content with the little time they had together? Except for an hour stolen here and there like this, they had only the one night a month Stefan could get away to meet.

One night a month did not go far toward satisfying Janos's current restlessness.

Imbécile! Let it go. Once piqued, his mind gave him no rest.

Dark memories, dark thoughts, dark dreams—without Stefan's calming influence, Janos might easily fall into those old traps. But Stefan didn't know that, did he?

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No. Stefan had no idea how fine an edge Janos walked.

He shouldn't let this devil him. If Stefan was truly unhappy to see him, the outcome didn't support the fact. His balls still throbbed in the aftermath. He'd be more careful in the future. As much as Stefan loved sucking cock, Janos didn't want to lose the privilege of offering him the pleasure.

Hera was just as he'd left her, nodding on her feet, tethered to a poplar. He dug in his coat pocket and pulled out the last of the withered crab apples he always carried for her. She perked right up at the scent and nibbled the hard fruit from his palm.

He grabbed his tricorn from the saddle, settling it low on his brow as he loosed the tether and swung onto Hera's back. Shoving the mask up under the hat, he looked back the way he'd come.

The white rock of the crumbling citadel stood out against the blackened landscape. The fortress sat atop a rise on a spit of land where two rivers merged, guarding the canyons that provided the only access to the country's interior through the rugged, southern mountains. No enemy had tried these passes since the Turks, fifty years ago. There were much easier routes farther west, through land more capable of providing for an army. Hungary's Austrian queen insisted the fortress remain manned, yet provided no money for maintenance. All the taxes collected in the area went directly to her coffers.

And why should they?

Szabo should yield at least a thousand gulden—taxes collected this past winter. Even divided five ways, that was enough to keep each of them for a long, long time.

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Stefan had little reason to worry. Janos and his men had lain idle waiting for this chance. They hadn't plied their trade in months, and never in the hill country. They'd prepared for half a year; this action would be quick, unexpected, well planned.

With a tug to the reins, he cut through the forest toward the north road which followed the lesser river to its source in the high country and beyond into Ottoman lands. The moon was setting and the chill before dawn closing in. They wove through the trees at a sleepy pace, depending on memory to find their way. In a few minutes, they made the road and began the uphill climb toward home.

From behind him, a horse nickered.

A gentle hand to Hera's cheek stilled her, and the heavy clop, clop of a single horse and rider walking grew from the silence. With a nudge from Janos, Hera moved silently to the side of the road into the shadows.

The graying sky offered enough light to reveal the silhouette of a horse, its rider nodding in the saddle, plodding steadily up the road.

He could see little of the man, huddled as he was in his greatcoat, broad-brimmed hat pulled low over his eyes. His mount, however, with its light frame suitable only for riding, announced its owner's status—landholder, without a doubt. Which one made no difference to Janos.

The bitter taste of hatred burned his tongue—not surprising so soon after revisiting memories of his childhood. He bridled the emotion. Thoughts of vengeance were futile.

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Fuzi was dead—killed in a fall that may or may not have been an accident. The only vengeance Janos would get was weighed against the coin in the pockets of his victims.

Just a bit of fun, that's all he sought here, a distraction.

The horse nickered once more. The fool must be drunk to ignore his mount's warning. Drunk made this interesting. You never knew what a drunk might do.

Careful of any sudden move that might attract attention, Janos slowly reached for the mask Hera wore tucked around her ears and tugged it over her eyes and nose to cover her markings. He did the same with his own mask, then drew two pistols from the holsters draped over his saddle. One he eased into the waist of his pants. The second he held in a steady grip while listening for the sounds of other travelers. It was not a market day. Few would be out on the road this early.

Man and horse approached. Janos clucked quietly, and Hera moved out of the shadows to stand in the traveler's path.

The second horse snorted and shied, bringing his rider to attention at last. He looked up and met the barrel of Janos's pistol aimed between his eyes.

"Stand and deliver." Some of the anger he refused to acknowledge seeped into Janos's voice. He brushed it aside.

The man reached for his own weapon. He paused, however, at the click of the hammer on Janos's gun and raised both hands away from his body.

To emphasize his advantage, Janos drew his coat aside to reveal the second gun. He urged Hera closer, removed the weapon from the landlord's waistcoat and stuffed it beside his

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spare. Then he fell back. "I have no patience this morning, friend. Your money or your life."

The threat, convincing enough, bought the wretch's cooperation. He straightened, teetering precariously in the saddle, and met Janos's gaze with a rabbit's stare.

"The money is in my breast pocket," he slurred.

"Very slowly, one hand. Remember, your reflexes are hampered, sir."

Apparently, the man agreed. His hand emerged wrapped around a leather purse.

The drunken landlord lobbed the sack in Janos's direction and he snatched it from the air with his free hand. The jingle went a long way toward easing his temper.

Hera's muscles quivered in anticipation.

Janos touched the pistol to his hat.

"You are too generous, noble sir. Have a pleasant day." With a rush of triumph, he squeezed his thighs to Hera's ribs, and they were off in a heartbeat. A bend swallowed them before the man had time to react.

Better than sex. Janos laughed aloud and gave Hera her head. They flew along the road at a gallop until the trees receded and the river came into view.

When it was obvious no one followed, he slowed Hera to a canter and removed the masks. The wind in his face, the intoxicating scent of pine fresh air, Hera's power between his thighs, he might, himself, have been drunk.

Their path took them along the river canyon, moving ever upward through dwindling forest—the land here long ago

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cleared to make way for orchards and farmsteads. Fuzi land. Janos's life was tied to these mountains. He knew every village and most of the families. These forests lived in his blood. Yet, the place felt nothing like home.

At first light, when the residents began to emerge, he slipped into the woods, following the contours of the land deeper into the hills.

The sun had risen above the peaks by the time he smelled smoke rising from the cot. The steady thunks of an ax helped to guide horse and rider through a thickly forested cleft between two hills. He dismounted and walked Hera into a clearing.

Tomas was splitting wood in the yard.

Janos's partner was especially invested in maintaining their cover. He provided for a wife and three children in one of the villages below and made it his business to convince the locals actual woodcutters used the woodcutter's cottage where they met.

Janos gave Tomas's shirtless physique an appreciative once over. His sun-kissed torso belied his forty years; swinging an axe day in and day out gave him the body of a much younger man.

Tomas paused, leaning on the ax. "Where have you been?"

"Mass."

The obvious lie won him a look of disdain. Tomas harrumphed and went back to his work without another word.

Janos walked Hera to the lean-to they used to shelter the horses. He removed her tack and gave her a quick rubdown,

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then measured out a portion of oats for her breakfast before making his way back to the cottage where he planned to fall into bed for a few hours.

“Did you bring us something?” Tomas asked as Janos strode past.

He tossed him the purse. “For the village. We need to talk. Don’t let me sleep too long.”

CHAPTER 3

Janos walked the familiar route through Rasnov's narrow streets and alleys like this were any routine monthly visit. He no longer worried whether Stefan would show up for their meeting tonight. After last week's disastrous encounter with Szabo, there was no question he'd be there, and Janos dreaded facing him. Still, he would not be defensive. Henric had fired. His men had responded. Blood was spilled on both sides.

Three hours before Stefan expected him, he made his usual detour past the chemist's shop to the red door marking his uncle's home. He knocked and waited.

The tread of a man's boots approached. Remembering at the last minute, Janos swept the hat from his head as the door

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opened. His uncle's bulk blocked his view of the inside.

"Janos."

Not even, "Hello, Janos." The coldness of the greeting didn't surprise him. A long time had passed since his father's brother had showed him any warmth.

Nonetheless, he tried to be civil. "How are you, Uncle? How is your wife?" He passed a few coins into the man's hand.

His uncle took the money without looking at it.

"Thank you. Now, I want you to go."

Janos glanced at his uncle's fist wrapped around the coins and swallowed his temper. The monthly visits were increasingly uncomfortable, but he'd never been turned away. "I came to talk with Nici."

If the man ever suspected where the money came from, Janos would never see his little sister again.

"No. Leave her alone, Janos. Nicoleta doesn't need your influence, nor to be seen in your company. I won't have her associated with your shameless ways." He grabbed the door, preparing to close it in Janos's face, but hesitated, shrank a little seeming to relent, then shook himself free of whatever second thoughts he'd entertained. "Why do you come here dressed like a strutting peacock? For an educated man, you know nothing of discretion."

The pain in his chest stole Janos's voice. He stepped back from the door, feeling like a child who didn't understand why he was being chastised, and looked down at himself to see what his uncle saw. His dark frock was modestly closed and

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buttoned, covering all but stockings and the hems of his breeches. He'd never felt less like a peacock.

"Jani!" Nici called from within the house. She pushed her way through. "Uncle, you can't keep me from my brother."

He grabbed her about the waist to stop her. "Yes, I can, girl. Go back inside."

The sight of the man's beefy hands on his delicate sister turned Janos's pain to rage. The force of the emotion threatened to overcome his measured calm, but this time reason won. For Nici's sake, he beat back the heated impulse to strike out.

"You should do what he says, Nici." His uncle was not at fault here. He'd taken the eight-year-old Nicoleta in when his brother was murdered, and he treated her well. He was gentle with her. Janos would always be grateful.

"No, Janos, don't go. I need to talk to you. Uncle, please."

"I won't have this sodomite in my home." The snarl his uncle cast his way stunned Janos. Did the man hate him so much? Thank God, Nici hadn't seen, though perhaps she knew.

Nici gently removed the man's hands from her waist. "We'll go around back. No one will see. Please."

Uncle's eyes softened. The affection and concern he turned toward her gave Janos reason to forgive any slight he'd suffered.

"Take him through the breezeway to the garden."

She reached up with a kiss for the old man before taking Janos's hand and leading him along the side of the house.

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He followed her silhouette and the rustle of fabric into the garden. Soft light filtering from the kitchen cast a glow over the tiny yard, illuminating the satin finish of her gown—a new one, and very grown up.

“You look beautiful.” Not mentioning it would be unforgivable.

“Thank you, Jani.” Nici beamed and his heart warmed.

The air smelled of rosemary and lavender. The latter from his sister, he discovered, when she wrapped her arms around him in greeting.

He sighed and returned the hug. “How are you, sweet?”

“Well. I’m well. Please forgive him. He’s been upset since your last visit.”

“He’s happy enough to take my money.”

“If it’s a hardship—”

He waved the words away before she finished.

“I don’t understand him,” she said. “He knows what they did to you. How can he blame you so cruelly?”

“Nici, Farkas didn’t make me what I am.” He wished he could point a finger of blame at Farkas, the man who saved him, the man who taught him the meaning of love and betrayal. But Janos long ago came to terms with that truth. “He recognized my nature and took advantage, that’s all.”

“If only you didn’t flaunt—”

“Are those your concerns or his? Look at me.” He raised her chin, insisting. “Do you thinking hiding behind filth and homespun will change what others see?” He could swagger. He could roughen his voice and bury the smooth contours of

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his face under a hat or behind the mask. Those tricks were an effective disguise when he needed one for a few moments, but failed under close inspection. Whatever mysterious quality drew Fuzi, Farkas, and yes, Stefan and a dozen others, was there for all to see.

“Jani, just a little—”

“Enough.” He let her go and pointed to a nearby bench, indicating he wanted her to sit. “Is this what you wanted to talk to me about?”

“No.” She took the seat and sat primly, hands in her lap. “I apologize. I love you, Jani.”

“I know. So, tell me your news?”

She swallowed and cleared her throat. Even in the dim light, he saw the color rise in her face. “Uncle received an offer for me.”

“An offer?” What was she trying to tell him? “What kind of offer?”

“Domm Barbu wants me for his wife.”

Once again, Janos was struck dumb.

“It’s not a bad match, Jani.”

“You’re not old enough to marry,” he blurted. Closer examination confirmed his opinion. His little sister had grown, yes, but not even the new gown concealed her fragile, girlish frame. Marriage meant children. Remembering their mother, laid in a grave, their stillborn brother in her arms, the very idea sent waves of terror through him.

“I’m sixteen.”

Never, not once, had he considered Nici as someone’s

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wife. Oh, he'd romanticized her falling in love and finding some of the same happiness their parents shared—sometime. Not yet.

"The baker? Is that the best he can do for you?"

"I could do worse. Domm Barbu is young. He hasn't been married before. He's a decent man, Jani, and makes a good living."

Mater Dei, what was he to do? He sat beside her on the bench and took her hands in his. "Is this what you want?"

She kept her eyes averted. "Everyone says he's kind."

"But—"

"He's willing to take me without a dowry, Jani."

He sobered. If he'd given any thought to his little sister's growing up this might have been avoided. "I can provide a dowry. Don't settle for less than you want because of money."

"Where will you get three hundred gulden for a dowry, brother?"

"The same place I get the money for your keep."

"From Farkas?" She jerked her hands from his. "What will he ask in return for the silver he gives you?"

"Nothing I'm not willing to give." He let Nici and their uncle believe Farkas continued to provide for them as he had while Janos belonged to him. "Nici, I'm sorry. If I'd paid attention..."

"This had to happen eventually."

"I know. I won't let you go without a dowry, even if Barbu is willing. But, you don't have to settle for the baker. Shall we talk to the matchmaker? Perhaps she'll find someone more

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suitable. Someone who isn't likely to keep you chained to a hot oven." And perhaps she'll take three or four years to find him.

Her hands tightened to fists in her lap. "Uncle may not want to wait."

Janos cringed. "He's so anxious to have you gone? Why? Because of me?" She didn't answer. His gut twisted. "I'll get you out of here, Nici. Don't let him pressure you to accept. I'll find a place for you."

"How..."

The kitchen door opened. Uncle's wife stood silhouetted against the light, arms crossed, unmoving, obviously intent on ending their time together.

Janos rose to his feet and took his little sister in his arms. She reminded him so much of their mother. She didn't remember, but he did—a sweet, delicate woman, who smelled of roses. What he remembered most clearly, however, was the way his father had looked at her. He wanted the same for her daughter.

"Trust me," he whispered next to her ear. "I'll take care of you." It was about time he lived up to the promise his father had asked of him.

"Nicoleta, now," the woman in the doorway said.

Nici placed one more kiss on Janos's cheek before pulling away. Framed in the doorway, she turned for a last look. "I'll wait with my answer for a while."

Relief flooded him. He made his way through the breezeway, pausing for a moment to get himself in check

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before stepping into the street.

Nici married? No.

But they had little choice while Uncle held the cards. His efforts on Nici's behalf were sincere enough, but Janos could not believe in her best interest. Nici wouldn't say so, but he knew she was frightened. Hell, he was frightened.

She'd asked for his help and the only help he could imagine was to sweep her away to safety—but where?

The offer of a dowry, and perhaps more in the way of support, might give their uncle reason to put this off for a while, though he was just as likely to refuse so large a sum believing Farkas to be the source. And until Janos told him otherwise, he'd continue to disapprove of Janos's choice to keep Farkas in his life.

As though life with Farkas had ever been a choice.

* * *

Interlude

Fuzi's punishment for any infraction was to leave his hands bound. It had been three days. His shoulders ached, his arms too weak to lift for relief. Janos still did not understand what he'd done this time. He'd stopped fighting the beast long ago. Perhaps a grimace or a groan escaped his control while his mind wandered. The darkness took over most of the time these days. Returning grew difficult. Even the smell of food didn't bring him back reliably. Maybe he was being punished for growing too thin.

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The outer door squealed. The darkness fell.

* * *

Cold water struck his face. He came to, gasping and dripping, hands still bound. Someone had doused him and now scrubbed his skin until it burned. The cold sent the ache in his shoulders over the edge into pain. He endured.

Despite all, it was wondrous to be clean.

Sometime later, scoured, powdered, breath sweetened with mint, Janos, his gait unsteady after so long bearing the weight of the chain, followed the guard from his dungeon through darkened corridors to a great door where Fuzi waited. Janos ignored him, so when the leather collar cinched his neck, he gasped in surprise. His body stiffened to receive the blow that never came. Instead, a less than gentle tug informed him Fuzi held the other end of a lead attached to the collar.

What new torture was this?

Someone threw a blanket over his shoulders. For the first time since his arrival here, his nakedness was covered and he felt almost human. Then the door opened and Fuzi stepped out into a world of brilliant whiteness, pulling Janos behind.

The air bit. His naked feet sank into brittle cold. Winter! His father had died in the spring. A sob broke from him. Half a year had passed him by while buried in the dungeon. His birthday—he was fourteen.

He couldn't take any more. He reached for oblivion.

* * *

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The cold again brought him round as they exited the carriage and Janos's naked feet sloshed through a filthy mire of snow and muck stirred by the passing of many carriages and horses. The sensation moved to the back of his mind when he took in his surroundings.

They stood before the broad, sweeping stairs of a palace like those in the fairy tales his mother had once told him. If he still possessed the ability to fear, he might be terrified. He stumbled. A man in powdered wig and livery held out a gloved hand to steady him. The man caught the blanket before it fell in the mud and adjusted it on Janos's shoulders, politely ignoring the fact he was naked beneath.

Fuzi did not leave him time to wonder. With a firm jerk on the lead, he pulled him up the stairs and through a pair of carved wooden doors built for a giant.

Janos didn't have names for most of what he saw. He tried to take it all in while a servant dried his feet then led them into a wide expanse of room that rivaled the cathedral in Rasnov.

A stranger approached and started a conversation with Fuzi. Janos let his eyes wander. A handful of white-wigged, foreign-dressed men lounged about the room, each accompanied by a naked, or nearly naked, boy kneeling or standing at his side.

While the stranger held Fuzi's attention, Janos's gaze fell on one couple in particular.

Next to the hearth, an old man cornered a youth a few years older than Janos and similarly leashed, though his hands were free. The old man traced patterns on the boy's

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torso with a riding crop. The boy stood silent and trembling, his cock rigid and at attention. The two focused so intently on each other, they seemed unaware of anyone else in the room.

Mesmerized, Janos followed the crop's path over smooth muscle. The crop drew back and flicked the boy's turgid member. Janos winced. The boy cried out, jerked, but rather than try to get away, reached with his hand to pull the old man into a heated kiss.

From nowhere, a blow struck the side of his head, nearly knocking him to the floor. A violent tug on the leash pulled his attention from the couple.

"Look at me when I talk to you," Fuzi growled.

Janos looked, but when Fuzi had nothing more to say, glanced toward the stranger whose dark eyes glared with barely contained anger. Janos put on a contrite expression. It didn't last. His gaze wandered back to the corner where the old man now stroked the younger's cock. Goosebumps tickled Janos's skin. His groin felt leaden.

He'd expected Fuzi's diligence would free him of these feelings.

Not even the stranger's fingers against his cheek distracted him. As if in a dream, he felt the man's touch slide from face to neck, toy with a lock of his hair before continuing to explore his chest. Finally, a rough pinch to one nipple got his attention. Janos turned to the stranger.

"Let me have him for the evening." The words were not directed at him, but everything else about the man was. The force of his presence descended like a weight of stone.

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Fuzi laughed good-naturedly. "Out of the question."

The arrogance the man turned on Fuzi added stones to the weight.

"That wasn't a request, churl; it was a courtesy." He didn't wait for Fuzi's sputtered response, but waved a servant over and whispered instructions close to his ear. The servant took the lead from Fuzi's hand and lead Janos from the room.

Once the door closed behind them, the servant dropped back and guided Janos with a gentle hand against the small of his back, up a broad staircase and down a hall to a room brightened by late afternoon sunlight. A huge, satin covered bed, a small table with two chairs set to catch the sun, a writing desk, a heavy, oak wardrobe—the furnishing did not begin to fill the space.

Afraid to sit uninvited, Janos stood at the window, looking out over the white expanse of snow-covered grounds. Awe overtook reason and kept the fear of what was to come at bay.

He didn't know how much time passed before the door opened again. His body stiffened, but the expected blow never came. The touch was gentle, the voice, soothing.

"These bindings are too tight. Shall I loosen or remove them?" The stranger didn't wait for an answer but drew a pocketknife and sliced the cord away.

Janos's arms fell useless to his side. Painfully, he cradled each hand beneath an arm and shivered as they crawled with the prickling of a thousand insects.

"The view in the spring is ten times more impressive," the man said, stepping up to the window beside him. "The lawn

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reaches to the shore of the lake. See it there? A frozen white expanse now, but blue as the sky in summer. Wildflowers grow everywhere. In April, the fog lifts and the snow-covered peaks are crisp against the sky."

Janos would have liked to be able to respond to the man's kindness. But, apparently, he'd forgotten how to speak and the pain of returning circulation in his limbs robbed his senses.

"Show me your hands." The man gently lifted his right hand away from his body and examined the bloody wounds left by the bonds. "How long have you worn those? Here, sit down." He pulled Janos over to the bed, sat him on its satin duvet and briskly rubbed both hands to bring back the circulation. "Why were you bound? This is not part of the game, is it?"

Game? What manner of game is creating pain? But Janos recalled some of the couples in the parlor. They teased each other with subtle tortures and seemed to enjoy both the getting and the giving. Is that what he'd inadvertently fallen into? Did Fuzi think this was a game? If he ever found the chance, the ghouel would soon enough discover it was no game.

As color began to return to his hands, the pain in his limbs became the center of everything.

"Do you speak?"

He managed a nod and a gasp.

"What is your name?" The man sought to distract him.

"Janos Vesh," he croaked.

"Janos. Beautiful boy, how did you manage to catch the eye of that termagant, hmmm?" He left no space for an

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answer, but continued musing, speaking in a soothing voice more to himself than to his listener as the pain grew worse before subsiding. "The fool has no idea what he's found and wouldn't know enough to cherish you if he did understand. Look at what he's done to you."

The droning voice went on, whispering admonitions and endearments. Janos let the sound wash over him. This one was young. His unpowdered black hair framed sharp, aristocratic features. He looked on him with kind gray eyes, which did nothing to fool Janos. The man wanted no less than the monstrous Fuzi.

"I saw you watching the boys, Janos."

Heat rose in Janos's face.

"Don't be ashamed. Someone told you these feelings are sinful. Who? The priests? The priests speak from guilt." The man turned his hands for closer examination. "Damn philistine." When he looked up, something in his eyes burned. "My name is Agostan Farkas. This is my home."

* * *

Farkas's kindness never wavered, which, in the end, made his betrayal unbearable.

Church bells ringing the hour roused Janos. He discovered himself in front of the tavern with no memory of how or when he'd arrived. The confusion faded quickly into panic when he counted the time. Ten? Eleven? He'd lost hours.

His racing heart stole his breath. He braced himself, gulped air deep into his lungs and forced himself to let it out slowly.

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Again. A third deep breath and his heart settled in his chest. He glanced about, searching the street for anyone who might have noticed the lapse. His luck, there was no one. The fact did little to ease his mind. Where had he been since leaving Nici? No amount of effort could bring forth a single memory of the missing time.

Je deviens fou.

Eleven o'clock, he was late. If his luck held, Stefan was not waiting behind the door growing angrier by the moment. He'd never been that lucky. Janos couldn't miss their meeting tonight without looking like a coward.

Setting aside the question of his sanity for now, he tapped his pocket. The bundle was still there. He breathed once more to clear his mind and prepared to be chastened.

As the door closed behind him, a single glance toward the back of the room found Stefan glowering in his direction. Janos's already sour mood curdled.

CHAPTER 4

Stefan grimaced as he watched Janos swagger into the tavern, wearing a scowl and breeches so tight his cock was clearly defined resting against his thigh. The boy intended to get himself killed, one way or another.

Even in his anger, Stefan reacted. His heart swelled painfully in his chest. His cock in particular didn't care he was angry with his lover, reacting with a mind of its own to the young man's lust-provoking presence. Raven hair flowing, dark eyes blazing, Janos's delicate frame carried his allure well.

The western style he wore already set him apart from everyone else in the room. Yet, he chose to flaunt his

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differences. With frock and waistcoat swept back in defiance to reveal those form hugging breeches and the nearly translucent white shirt untied to expose an expanse of naked chest, he clearly meant to provoke.

And the heated comments from all sides warned Stefan others took note as well and with even less amusement.

Janos didn't acknowledge the glare Stefan cast his way. He dropped into the seat opposite him and, with a jangle of coins, plopped a heavy, leather purse in front of Stefan and growled, "There's more."

Stefan picked up the purse, testing the weight before slipping it into his shirt. "This was a mistake. I see you've heard."

"Heard what?" Janos waved at the barmaid and raised two fingers over his head.

Striving for patience, Stefan grabbed his hand out of the air. "Stop calling attention to yourself."

And received a snarl in return.

Janos snatched his hand away and sprawled across the bench with his back to the wall, looking far too inviting for the seething expression he wore. "Then you order my drink."

Stefan waited to catch the barmaid's eye and gave her their order, then returned his attention to the man across from him. "I thought you wouldn't come."

"I was detained."

Stefan raised a brow. His nerves fluttered. Detained how? Janos was not normally sullen. What was he hiding with his reticence? He understood the man had secrets and a history he

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refused to discuss. A little mystery added charm, but Stefan feared his lover was sinking beneath a past that refused to release him. He'd witnessed what that past produced. Memories of the young corporal charging into battle, filled with blood-lust and indifferent to the carnage surrounding him would haunt him forever. Stefan feared for him even before he knew him.

"Janos, you should leave." He hadn't meant to be so abrupt with his suggestion.

"I just got here."

"No, make yourself scarce for a while." He desperately needed him to pay attention, to understand the validity of his concern. "Go to Buda. Spend some of this money you're hoarding."

He wasn't even listening. Stefan followed his gaze, which seemed locked on an animated young man seated at a table across the room. "Did you hear anything I said?"

"Oh, yes. I heard. You want to be rid of me." Was that a quiver in his voice?

Jesu Christi, there was no reasoning with him. Stefan slammed a fist to the table. "I'm trying to save your life. How far do you trust those partners of yours?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The bounty on your head is trebled after this last escapade, Vesh. Don't you imagine your men are calculating the risk of highway robbery against the simple task of turning you in?"

"Oh, that. *Ça ne fait rien*." He waved the idea away, but

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when his hand came to rest again on the table, it shook.

Stefan glanced up to find Janos staring at him, jaw set, his eyes daring him to mention what he'd seen. Stefan reached for him.

Janos pulled the hand away, offering an impudent grin in its place, and ran a lazy finger along the open seam of his shirt.

"What do you think of my disguise?" He actually had the gall to bat his eyes.

"A peasant boy is a disguise. What you have here is a death wish," Stefan said, surprised at the disgust in his voice. The conversation was not going as planned. He'd expected Janos to be more open after what happened; instead, he was unreachable. "Mentioning Szabo was a mistake. I'm done—no more information."

That got Janos's attention. He jerked to a seat. One hand shot across the table, twisted around Stefan's collar and pulled him in close. His eyes burned with anger. Hot breath blasted Stefan's face. "What? Are we not paying you enough?"

The barmaid stepped up with their drinks and hesitated.

He ignored her and went on, far too loudly. "What else are you done with, Novák? Me? Why don't you just come out and tell me to bugger off?"

Stefan opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He couldn't deny the thought had occurred to him. As much as he wanted Janos, feeling helpless was tearing him apart.

Janos got to his feet. "I'm sorry I can't oblige you by disappearing quite yet. I've matters to attend." He left.

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* * *

Janos's anger took him to the door and beyond, but once in the street, his stomach roiled. He stopped, waiting for the nausea to pass.

Fool. Damn fool. What madness made him press like that? When would he learn to keep his mouth shut? Now he had to face the others and tell them he'd lost their advantage. There would be hell to pay.

A heavy weight slammed into his chest. He staggered and caught himself with one arm against the wall. *Stefan, what have I done?*

Another wave of nausea struck. He moved swiftly into the alley beside the tavern and vomited into the dust. *I should have waited. I should have ridden it out. I can't be alone again.*

But he'd lost control. Forehead pressed to the cool stone of the tavern wall, he fought back the panic and tried to convince himself this could be fixed. He'd prepared for an argument, not dismissal. He'd acted badly. Stefan would forgive him. He always did. *I'll grovel if necessary.*

No. Stefan is right. I put him at risk.

Tossed aside again. He snorted, a sad attempt to stifle a laugh; nothing here was amusing except, perhaps, how history repeats itself. At least this time he knew why.

The insidious darkness was always too close to the surface. A seething self-loathing only Stefan's friendship had ever kept in check. At the first sign of rejection, he'd embraced the darkness. *Admit it, you've gone too far. Look at yourself.*

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Needy bastard.

His stomach cramped. He thought he was falling.

“Janos, dear boy, you are my heart and soul. But a man must find his own way in the world.”

Farkas, again. Augie.

No! He would not give him reign. The man owned enough of him.

Oh, yes, and you, fool, gratefully submitted everything. Let’s be honest. Yours was the better part of the deal. Farkas challenged himself to create a gentleman and might have succeeded. But in the end, a whore is a whore.

“What’s this?” A stranger’s voice called Janos back.

A second voice announced, “A catamite from the lowland pissing against the wall.” Laughter. “Did no one ever warn you about this part of town, *curva*?”

Thank God, a diversion. The thrill erased every trace of self-pity. Janos’s lips curled. He turned slowly, the better to savor this first look at his new acquaintances. Resting head and shoulders against the cool surface, he thrust his hips forward. With a hand on his thigh, he offered his most provocative pose.

“What can I do for you, gentlemen?” There were three of them. “If you want to buy a little love, I’m not for sale.”

He let his eyes travel over each as the speaker’s look of disdain turned to anger. He was an older man, about Janos’s height but built like an ox and wearing his fists at his side like hammers. Next to him was a much younger version of himself, undoubtedly his son. That one bore watching. The

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third man, also young, held back, but from his expression, not for lack of intent.

He saw no weapons to give him pause. "I might be convinced to provide a little consensual amusement, however." Peeling himself from the wall, he approached the bovine youth with a swishing gait, and hand to crotch, backed him against the opposite wall. "You seem to smell less like manure than your companions. Why don't we move into the shadows?"

He stood too close to take the full force of the blow that came at him, but it knocked him back so the one he returned offered the satisfying sound of bone cracking before he found himself surrounded.

CHAPTER 5

Stefan swallowed the last of his ale and held the cup up to attract the barmaid. After tonight's debacle, he intended to get falling down drunk. He'd already paid the proprietor for the room. Bartok would take his morning rounds. A night of drowning in his ale was in order.

He should have waited until he had Janos naked behind closed door. The man was suicidal. Talking went nowhere. Maybe he could have fucked the audacity out of him.

Don't delude yourself, idiot. You're better off without him.

He had yet to convince himself, even after the fiasco on the road the other day. Janos bore no tolerance for the landed. According to Henric, they wouldn't have fired if Janos's

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goaded of Szabo didn't appear ready to turn violent. Stefan believed his men used all restraint possible, but what choice had they when their charge was knocked to the ground? Thank God, Henric's only injury was a ball in the shoulder. The situation might have easily turned to disaster.

He still didn't know how badly Janos's man fared.

The barmaid approached to fill his cup. "I thought you'd like to know your friend found a brawl in the alley."

Damn the man. He surged from his seat and rushed the door before another breath passed. *Was there no end to his stupidity?*

He rounded the corner into the alley. Janos stood on his feet, but barely. The three were bouncing him back and forth between them like a children's tossing game. From the look of things, he'd landed a few solid blows of his own before they'd overpowered him.

Stefan plunged in, knocking the men aside like pawns. Apparently satisfied, they turned Janos loose and backed away, grinning. Stefan caught him before he crumpled to the ground. For one moment of terror, he thought his lover was dead. Then Janos groaned.

"When your friend wakes, remind him his kind isn't welcome here."

"What kind is that?" Stefan sneered. "The fragile molly?" They easily, it seemed, tolerated the kind big enough to fight back.

The speaker snickered. "Fools." The three slipped out of the alley and disappeared.

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Fool, indeed. Why wouldn't Janos simply abide by the rules?

Stefan lowered him carefully to the ground. In spite of the multiple blows to the head, he was conscious.

"Fragile?" A spray of blood accompanied the word and the following attempt at a laugh.

The dark alley hid the extent of his injuries, but black splattered his white shirt. The metallic scent of blood assailed Stefan's nose.

Janos turned his head and spat into the dirt. "Why'd you come, Novák? Miss me?"

"Stop spouting nonsense!" For once, Janos's flippancy didn't irritate. If he could bicker, he'd be fine. Stefan wanted to get him somewhere with enough light to assess the damage, but when he tried to slip his arms beneath him, the younger man shoved him away with more strength than Stefan thought possible.

"Leave me! I can walk." He rolled over and attempted to push himself onto all fours, but his limbs shook and collapsed under him. Still, he wouldn't let Stefan near.

"Do you want some help?" The proprietor stood at the alley entrance, arms folded over his chest.

"I need to get him to my room."

"Don't bring him through the tavern. Use the stairs at the rear of the building. The first room is yours."

"Can we get—"

"My wife will bring water and fresh linens. You can pay her for the supplies."

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He made no offer to help Stefan with his stubborn friend. Stefan dismissed the proprietor from his mind and reached for Janos, who had made it to all fours. He knelt on wobbly limbs in the dirt, head down and wheezing.

“Take my hand.”

“Leave me alone.”

Stefan resisted the urge to land a few blows of his own. “Let me help, fool, or I’ll knock you out and carry you. I’ll probably wind up carrying you anyway.”

“*Odi te.*” Cursing aside, Janos latched onto his proffered hand and pulled himself up—too fast. He cried out, staggered, and fainted against Stefan’s chest.

Stefan slid an arm behind his lover’s knees and cradled him close. Foremost was the itching need to get him out of the alley, but behind the worry and fear, anger lurked.

He found the stairway in the back. Carrying Janos’s limp body, the climb was slow. A glance in the dark revealed little of the sweet face he’d come to love, though he could already see the swelling of his mouth and at least one eye.

Three years he’d given this man. He’d hoped for fifty more, but watching him destroy himself had become too painful. Every few months this madness came on him. In the past, he brooded, but since returning to Rasnov, the brooding had grown into a deranged need to court disaster, to take frightening chances. The episodes were more frequent now and circumstances kept them apart too much for Stefan to find a pattern.

He shoved open the door at the top of the stairs. Soft light

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from an oil lamp lit the tiny room. A kettle heated over a small fire burning in the hearth.

After settling his burden on one of the narrow cots, he wet a towel from the kettle and did his best to clean the blood from Janos's face before trying to undress him. Bruises already darkened the flesh over his ribs. Stefan placed an ear against his chest, listening. The ribs might be broken, but the lungs were clear, likely undamaged. His abdomen, however, was mottled and tender, raising some alarm. If Janos was bleeding inside, they'd not be here long. Only time would tell and nothing to be done.

A light knock on the door announced the innkeeper's wife. He hurried to relieve her of the heavy bucket she carried.

"Here are fresh linens," she said. "You can use this one for bandages." She handed him the stack and walked over to examine Janos. "How bad is he?"

"He'll live, I think." Stefan reached into his shirt and fingered the purse Janos had delivered earlier, hoping to find a silver gulden to bribe the proprietor's conscience. He did his best to keep an even expression when he discovered the weight and warmth of gold ducats. *There must be thirty coins. A small fortune.* The fact did little to comfort him. If this was his share, there would be no safety in Buda. And Janos said to expect more. *What have we gotten ourselves into?*

The landlady stared at the coin with a suspicious gleam in her eyes, then at Stefan as she snatched it from his hand. The gold disappeared behind her bodice.

"I have to leave before dawn," he said. "I need your help

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looking out for him until I can return—a day or two.”

Her gaze swept over him, then Janos, assessing the situation. Much to his relief, she said, “I’ll help you bind those ribs.”

Janos did not wake through the procedure. He was still unconscious when Stefan returned from discussing arrangements with the proprietor and his wife. They’d provided a flagon of wine to offer if he woke and needed comfort from the pain. Stefan helped himself to a share and sat on the floor beside the cot watching for him to wake. He fell asleep where he sat, his head resting on the sheets next to his lover’s body.

CHAPTER 6

Stefan returned the following evening to find Janos seated on the edge of the cot, trying to pull on a boot with one swollen hand while mumbling Latin expletives under his breath.

“How many languages do you curse in?”

“Four. Would you like to learn ‘suck my cock’ in French?”

He did a quick assessment, noting the way he clutched at his ribs while struggling. Still, his posture was straight, not the humped over profile Stefan expected. Perhaps the ribs weren’t broken, after all. He allowed himself a moment’s relief, until Janos glanced his way. His face was a puffy, discolored mass with one eye swollen closed. “You’re a sight. Did they leave

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all your teeth?”

Janos made a sound that might have been a laugh or a sob. He doubled over, moaning. “*Salop*. Finally you learn to joke when I hurt all over.”

“Give me that boot. You can’t think you’re going anywhere.”

To his surprise, Janos handed it over. “I only stabled Hera for one night.” He lifted a foot, waiting.

Stefan slapped the foot aside and snatched the other boot from the floor, ignoring the grumbling. He set the pair by the hearth, out of reach. “I took care of Hera. She’s boarded for three days and you’re not leaving this room a minute sooner.”

“How do you plan to keep me here?” He seemed to have an easier time running his mouth.

“I took leave. Get used to my face. You’ll be seeing a lot of it.” Stefan dropped onto the bed beside him. “Janos, talk to me. Why are you doing this?”

Suddenly, Janos looked tired. With a glimmer of defiance in that single open eye, he stretched out on the mattress with a groan, setting his back to him.

Stefan fought the urge to say something cruel and leave. He was not a patient man. Was he supposed to get on his knees and beg to be heard? Not for a moment did he believe Janos’s arrogance to be anything less than self-preservation. Something hounded him, something terrible and impenetrable. He didn’t need to know those secrets, but he did need to know he could help. He was weary of feeling useless.

So, he focused on the many tender moments—too many to

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give up without a fight. He lifted a lock of silken strands, and pictured his lover's hair, black as night, flowing loose over his naked back.

"A dark cloud hangs over you, love. I'm helpless to know how to keep it away."

Janos shifted; his shoulders heaved. When he finally spoke, his voice was hollow, vacant.

"Nothing keeps it away anymore. It rides my back like a demon. Forgive me, Stefan. If you're seeking reassurance, I have none to offer. You needn't fear I'll plead your indulgence while I go mad."

He knows and promises nothing. Stefan saw none but a coward's way out. But not today. He was not willing to lie and promise what he couldn't do, but today Janos needed him. And tomorrow? Who knew what solutions tomorrow might bring? He lay down and drew his love into his arms, wrapping him in silent comfort. For now he offered what he had and admitted, at least to himself, the leaving would be the hardest thing he'd ever done.

* * *

Stop. Evaluate. Farkas taught him after the third time Janos awoke to his caresses screaming, fists flying. A year and a broken nose later, Janos had learned.

He held his breath until the warm wetness of Stefan's mouth nuzzling his shoulder and the iron cock gliding over his ass through their clothes became familiar. Stefan already panted with approaching orgasm. The gentle strokes along his

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crack, which had registered as a dream, grew more heated, less careful, urgent.

“Enjoying yourself?” The dream left his body yearning in spite of all its aches.

Warm lips curled against his shoulder. Stefan chuckled, and a huff of feathery breath tickled over Janos’s skin. The arms enclosing him tightened into an affectionate hug.

He groaned.

Stefan stiffened. His grip loosened. “Did I hurt you, beloved? I’m sorry.”

His heart melted. How long since Stefan’s endearments held such affection? “No. You didn’t hurt me,” he lied. “There are too many clothes between us.”

Stefan made quick work of his own buttons and slid his hands beneath Janos’s shirt, patiently caressing his back, chest, toying with his nipples through the wrapping.

Janos was having a little more trouble. With fingers stiffened by the blows he’d thrown, he was still working on the first button while Stefan’s cock poked insistently at his crack. He moaned in frustration.

“Do you need help?” Stefan had his cock freed and his breeches pushed down over his hips before Janos had the chance to thank him for the offer. His hand fastened around Janos’s cock, pumping a few times.

Janos shifted just so. With Stefan’s next thrust, his cock pressed right where they both wanted it.

“We have nothing to make this easy, love.”

Another heartfelt endearment and Janos’s pain eased a

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little more. "I don't care. I want you...need you inside me."

"Come for me." Stefan's hand on his cock became the center of the world; his steel hardness beat in counterpoint against his hole.

Everything became dreamlike and unreal. The pain in his body and his mind disappeared. He pressed back, hard enough for Stefan to pierce him. The head entered, stretching, burning. Stefan paused, waiting for him to grow accustomed to the invasion, before pressing farther, then rocked, nudging, nudging the sweet spot, gently pushing him toward the brink.

"Come."

Every stroke extracted a helpless little cry. Janos quaked. The orgasm struck all at once, taking control.

Stefan held on, riding the waves of pleasure with him, whispering, "God, oh God." His hand and cock disappeared, but returned quickly. Slick with cum, he sank his entire length into Janos's body.

Stefan's cries to heaven grew from whispers to growls. After a few strokes, the thrusts grew vicious, erratic. Janos felt Stefan's pulsing member swell, filling his passage. Pushing, hips jerking rhythmically, his lover pulled him in, ground his ass and sobbed wetly against his neck. "Oh, God, please."

* * *

Stefan woke to the sound of Janos groaning in his sleep. He rolled aside to relieve his lover's stiff and bruised body of his weight, and sat up in the bed. For a long time he simply watched him sleep, trying to see beyond the injuries to the

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man he'd loved for the past three years, the man who'd given him reason to risk everything to keep him. But the bruises were only a footnote in a long list of challenges. He ran a finger over the puckered scar left by the ball he'd removed from Janos's shoulder last fall. The injury that first revealed what he was doing.

If he were honest with himself, he'd admit Janos was no less a mystery now than when they'd first met. The rough white gash bisecting his hip was a constant reminder that Stefan knew from the beginning what he courted. Nothing, however, not rank, not reputation, not even the sight of his madness on the field, could have stopped him from approaching the bewitching young corporal. Berserker, they'd called him.

He'd overlooked the madness for wanting him so much. And for the first two years, convinced himself the man he held in his arms was the real Janos.

When Stefan discovered his lover's secret life, he begged him to stop, and a dozen times since. Instead, Janos had taken his adventures north, plying his new trade during the winter months on the open roads to the capital. How he wasn't captured was another mystery. Maybe the name Phantom was truer than he thought. Janos was fast becoming a phantom to him as well.

Janos stirred. His eyes opened, at least one did. The other tried. He made an effort to grin when he caught Stefan watching.

Stefan found a cloth nearby and wet it with warm water

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from the kettle. The eye was blackened, but less swollen. He wiped gently at the crusty lashes.

“I want you to stop.” The words left his mouth without any forethought.

Janos’s grin faded, but this time, he didn’t turn away.

Stefan waited to hear the flippant words meant to brush aside his concern.

Instead, Janos took the cloth from his hand and sat up. Resting his back against the wall, he wiped at the eye, hissing at the raw tenderness.

“Easily asked,” he said, blinking the eye open. The orb was bright red with blood. “Not so easily done. For now, this is something I need to do. I’ll stop soon enough.”

“When? We took three times what we expected from Szabo. You could live well on your share for years. When will it be enough, Vesh?”

Janos’s expression turned sullen. He growled a warning, which Stefan ignored.

“It’s not the money, is it? I believe you would have killed Szabo if Henric hadn’t fired. What drives you? It can only be vengeance. For what?”

“I’d never kill anyone,” Janos snarled. “But you’re right, a grudge. A few recompenses for past injuries, real or imagined, a little relief for those still under the yoke. You think I can use what I take to create a life for myself? That money belongs to those who slave for it. I’m not stopping, Novák. If you want rid of me, say so.” He rolled onto his side, turning his back again.

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Was it true? Did Janos not keep what he stole? It would make little difference to the hangman. "I'm not helping you anymore."

"You already said as much."

CHAPTER 7

The familiar scent of fresh hay tickled Janos's nose. He knew from experience a sneeze would knock him to his knees, but after three days of Stefan's brooding silence, he bit his tongue and held his breath rather than remark on his slowness. For safety's sake, he let Stefan check Hera's girth. He had no desire to slip from the saddle, adding insult to injury because pride wouldn't allow him to admit the weakness in his limbs. He only wished he'd hurry.

Stefan adjusted the belt a couple of notches, then leaning over Hera's neck, asked, "Are you sure you can ride?"

"And if I can't?" Janos gingerly pulled on the heavy greatcoat, took up Hera's reins and started for the door. Maybe

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a clear breath would relieve some of his ill-temper. He had no one to blame but himself. He'd waited so long for a chance to get Stefan alone for a few days and wasted the first opportunity. Why he'd chosen that moment to be fastidiously truthful escaped him. He could have let Stefan believe there was an end in sight. After his fit of temper, nothing in his arsenal, not contriteness, not tears, not making love, distracted Stefan from his anger.

No, what they did after those first tender moments when he hurt too badly to enjoy himself was not lovemaking. Stefan spent last night in the tavern getting drunk, came in this morning and fucked him raw, then fell asleep until an hour ago.

Nothing was resolved between them. He simply had no answer to Stefan's many whys. There were no answers, only the desperate need to hold back the darkness.

And his control was slipping.

"How far do you have to go?" Stefan asked. The creases in his forehead gave Janos a little satisfaction. Let his head hurt. "Maybe I should ride with you for a while?"

"No." Little good would come from losing his partners' trust by leading the local constabulary toward their refuge. "I'll be fine. Get back to the keep. You're expected."

"At least ride with me to the fork."

No harm in that unless, of course, he did have a problem riding. The last thing he wanted was to fall on his face and give Stefan reason to feel obligated to continue nursing him. He'd manage an hour.

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The merchants were closing up shop for the evening as they rode side by side through the town's narrow streets and out the eastern gate to follow the road into the foothills. By the time they started the climb, dusk had fallen. No words passed between them until they reached the turnoff to the keep. Already weary beyond endurance, Janos was anxious to be alone so he could collapse against Hera's neck.

Stefan stopped at the fork. Enough light remained to reveal his tortured expression.

"I'm leaving Rasnov," he said.

Hera danced a few steps in response to Janos's reaction. He calmed her with mindless pats to the neck while Stefan's words echoed through his head. Was this the end? Their final farewell? The new pain in his chest had nothing to do with his bruised rib.

"Leave?" He didn't see how Stefan could possibly leave. "You wouldn't desert."

"Why not?" The words held a bitter sting so unlike Stefan.

Because soldiering is in your blood. Stefan had never been anything but a soldier, the son of a soldier, the grandson of soldiers. Janos always thought his history of family obligations and expectations enviable.

"But you're right," Stefan said. "My commission expires in two months. I won't re-enlist. I want you to come with me. This money will keep us a long time. It's not safe for you here."

Janos shifted in the saddle, seeking relief from the sodden ache of his bruised torso. The idea had merit, and one glance

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at the expectation Stefan wore told him the offer was sincere. "Where would we go?"

"Away from here," Stefan said, gesturing to the mountains encircling them. "Last month a party of mercenaries from Cluj stopped for a night at the keep. They planned to take the Black Sea route to France. Rumor has it, the French are hungry for colonists in the Americas to stop the English from moving into their territories. The possibility has been haunting me since." His eyes burned with emotion. "What do you think, Janos? Land. A new world. A new start."

Janos tried to put a name to that heated emotion. Yearning? The thought surprised him. Stefan always seemed so content in his life. Janos never imagined he might have such a dream, but now the yearning in his eyes... A yearning that had little to do with him.

A vast land to get lost in. Perhaps a place where two men might make a life together without being subject to constant scrutiny. A place where they might find the freedom to be themselves, where those in power had no power over them. Stefan was right. Between them, they had enough gold to keep them for a lifetime.

"How much French do you know?" Stefan asked. "Can we do this?"

"Enough to get by, I would hope. I'll never pass for a Frenchman." But two months did not give him enough time to see Nici settled. Until he'd accomplished that, Janos wasn't free to seek a new life in a new world. "Stefan, I can't leave now. This is not a good time."

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He couldn't stand the transformation his lover went through. For a second, Janos watched the hope die, then turned his gaze away to avoid seeing what replaced it.

"What better time? When your name and face are recognized in every town and along every road through these mountains? When you can't move for fear of being caught? When, Janos?"

Stefan's voice did not hold the anger Janos expected. The pain he heard stabbed him to the heart.

"I'm sorry." He fought the panic rising in him at the thought of Stefan's leaving without him. "I have...obligations."

"Obligations?" There was the anger. "To whom? Your partners? When they discover the bounty on your head..."

"That won't happen, I promise you." Urgency overtook him. "I understand you're worried, but they're not the reason. This is something more...personal."

"Take care of your sister" were his father's last words. In Fuzi's dungeon, his failure had been part of his despair. It had been Farkas who'd found her, settled her with their uncle, saw she was cared for. That was the best Janos had to offer during the Farkas years. Then, the army took him away. After the army...he had no excuse.

Nici needed him now. She had to be his first priority, but revealing her existence to Stefan was out of the question—not for fear of what she might learn from him. She'd discover her brother's reality soon enough. What Nici could tell Stefan was a different story. The questions about his past her existence

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would raise must never come up. Stefan had only crumbs, and Janos meant to keep it that way. He needed someone in his life who didn't know.

"I can't help you if you won't be helped, Vesh."

"It's just a small matter. I can easily handle this myself." He lied out of desperation; he had no idea how he'd solve this problem. "I need just a little time." He sounded wretched even to himself, because, in truth, he wanted what Stefan offered.

"And what in the meantime? Am I to stand quietly as you continue down your path to self-destruction? If we leave now..."

"Stefan, I can't. A year. Give me a year to take care of this."

"You'll be dead in a year." Something in Stefan's eyes died at that moment. "That was my last hope. I can't anymore. Good-bye, Janos." He turned his mount toward the keep.

"Stefan, no." A war waged in Janos as Stefan's back receded from sight. *Catch up, tell him about Nici. Don't let him get away.*

Stefan would understand his responsibility to his sister. He might even accept they could never meet. A man would take that chance with someone he loved—if he trusted.

Janos did not trust. If he did once, he'd forgotten how. Still, he wanted and waited for Stefan to look back. A single glance was all he needed to chase him down and reveal all.

Just a glance, but Stefan never looked back.

CHAPTER 8

“You said you’d be gentle with us,” Janos complained. The cards were barely visible in the dim light from their small campfire.

“That was three months ago.” Murat laughed. “*Âs Nas* is not a game for whiners. Place your bet or fold.”

Janos searched Murat’s dark countenance, looking for any hint of bluff but found only his usual good-natured smile behind the thick mustache. Grumbling, he tossed coins to match the Turk’s extravagant bet into the pot and Murat dealt the final cards.

Janos was not happy.

The sound of something large moving through the trees

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gave him the excuse he needed to toss his two couples down before the last round of betting. The Turk clucked, showed three miserable huntsmen, a mediocre win at best, and swept the pot into his pocket as Tomas entered the small clearing.

"The coach crossed the pass. We have about thirty minutes." Tomas slid from his mount and shuffled over to the fire, his ungloved hands seeking out the little warmth it provided. "The hill is covered in frost."

His limp was noticeably worse tonight. He insisted the leg that stopped Henric's ball didn't bother him, but at this altitude, nights were cold even so late in the season. Tonight, a remnant of winter chilled the air, and Tomas spent the last hour atop the bluff overlooking the pass watching for the diligence to Brazov. Janos should have insisted he let someone else take the watch. That leg would slow him down.

The other three men abandoned their card game. Leaving Tomas to extinguish the fire, Janos, Murat and Pavol used the light of the half moon to center a wagon laden with firewood in the coach's path and harness Tomas's old draft mare to the shaft.

"Remind me," Murat said, looking over the horse's back as they secured the traces. "Why are we doing this again so soon after our last, very successful by the way, action?"

Because I need something to pull me out of the past.

Janos offered a cock-eyed grin in response. He'd take his reasons to the grave. Besides, the excited gleam in Murat's eyes proved he didn't need an excuse.

Because I can't stop thinking of him. Because all I see

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when I close my eyes is him, leaning against that tree, watching me bathe away the filth of battle with naked lust in his eyes.

That first sight of Stefan played over and over in his mind until Janos believed himself already mad.

“*Do you want to wash my back?*” The captain had washed his back—and every inch of him, inside and out—and, when he was done, would not let Janos walk away.

“Janos!”

He shook himself free of the memory and went back to work.

They’d chosen a straight stretch through a narrow part of the canyon. The travelers would have no option but to stop on their downhill journey.

Tomas stayed with the wagon while the others positioned themselves among the trees on either side of the road. At the sound of horses approaching, he snapped the reins and began his slow descent.

The coach-and-four drew into the long stretch at a brisk pace. Enough light bled through the trees that the driver could not help but notice the cart with plenty of time to slow down. His loud cries of, “Make way,” began soon after he came into sight. Tomas feigned urgency, flicking the reins and cursing as though trying to get a stubborn animal to obey.

The driver was forced to pull up and slow to meet the wagon’s lumbering pace. As the coach passed Pavol’s position, he broke from the woods and leaped onto the boot, quickly scrambling up the back of the vehicle and over the

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roof. A blow to the head knocked the coachman out before he knew what was happening. He slumped in his perch. Pavol snatched the reins from his hand and drew up with a jerk.

Janos lifted the wide collar of his greatcoat to hide any remnant of the bruises he'd worn for the past few weeks. Weapons drawn, he nudged Hera onto the road and placed himself in the coach's path as it came to a stop. He approached the cab cautiously.

"Out!" Not surprising, no one appeared. From the opposite side came a loud crash and Murat's guttural voice, threatening. The door opened. Three exited with their hands in the air.

The first, Janos knew.

Rákóczi, a Hungarian noble whose family held vast tracts of land on the southern slope, a man of somewhat sordid tastes, had been a frequent guest at Farkas's soirees. Janos didn't fear he'd be recognized, not clothed, at any rate. The arrogant prick turned to offer his hand to a young woman, his daughter perhaps, or wife.

Last to exit was a black-bearded priest wearing a traveling cassock and holding an ornate wooden casket.

Murat followed through the cab. His gun aimed at Rákóczi's face, he reached into the aristocrat's waistcoat and removed an ivory-stocked fowling pistol. With a broad grin, he checked the load and tucked the beautiful piece into his pants, then slipped the knot from the man's purse string. He tossed the heavy leather sack into the air. It landed against his palm with a satisfying thump. When he reached for the woman, Rákóczi stepped between, his eyes sparking with

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menace.

“Don’t touch my wife!”

A wash of sympathy flooded Janos. The girl was little more than Nici’s sixteen years while the deviant who claimed her for a wife was easily forty.

He raised a hand and Murat backed away with a nod.

“If you’ll present the firearm from your muff, Lady,” Janos said. “We won’t trouble you.”

Her eyes widened. She looked to her husband for permission before pulling a small derringer from her sleeve and passing it by the barrel into Murat’s greedy hand.

“Search the carriage.”

Murat foraged the interior while Pavol went through the luggage tied to the top.

“Please, my son, reconsider.”

They’d paid little attention to the priest. None wanted to rob from the Church, nor even investigate the contents of his casket. Janos was sure whatever it carried was gold—and blessed.

“You seem a decent man,” the priest urged. “Surely you know nothing good will come of this.”

“I’m sorry, father, you misjudge me,” Janos answered. “I know nothing of the sort. Those coins will feed me and mine through the winter.” He turned away, having no desire to get caught in useless conversation, and addressed Rákóczi.

“Your rings, sir.”

In a fit of rage, the man tore the heavy gems set in gold from his fingers and threw them to the ground. “Have you no

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idea who I am? That fowling pistol has been in my family for a hundred years. Anyone who sees it will recognize its rightful owner. You're mad if you think to get away with this. "

"Do you mean I should return your weapon, sir?" Janos laughed. "Who is mad? As to who you are, I know every landholder in this part of the world and you, sir, are the worst of them. I have no love for your breed—"

"Watch your back!" Pavol's sharp warning from the roof took Janos by surprise. The sound of a struggle ensued. He glanced up to find his partner fighting with the driver.

Janos dodged. The sharp report of a gun echoed off the canyon walls.

Pavol wrested the gun from the driver's hand and clubbed him with the stock before jumping to the ground.

The two aristocrats scrambled for their seats as the coach lurched forward. The injured driver swung wide to avoid the wagon. The wheels sank into the muddy gutter at the side of the road. The cab tilted wildly. Luggage spilled everywhere. For a moment, the heavy diligence teetered, on the brink of falling, then righted itself and sped away at a reckless rate.

"Vesh!"

Furious at hearing his name spoken aloud, Janos turned toward the sound to find Tomas kneeling in the dirt at the priest's side. They'd abandoned him.

"He's been shot," Tomas said.

The man lay on his side, moaning softly. His hand clutched his shoulder. Blood seeped between the fingers.

Janos quickly pulled his shirt from his breeches and tore a

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long swatch from the hem. Folding it, he knelt beside the fallen man, unbuttoned his cassock, and slid the makeshift bandage in place. Within moments, the cloth was soaked through. "This is bad."

"We have to hurry," Tomas said. "If they keep up their pace, they'll reach Sacele in less than an hour. We should be long gone before then."

"We can't leave a priest to die in the middle of the road." Three wounded in two actions, and this, an innocent. Someone was trying to tell him something.

"What do you want to do? Take him with us? Be reasonable. Leave him the cart and the horse. He'll meet the detail they send after us and slow them down."

"There's too much blood. He won't make it." Janos would not have this on his conscience. "Clear the cart."

"*Jesu*," Tomas muttered under his breath but gave no more argument. He joined Murat and Pavol at tossing the firewood aside. When the cart was empty, the three spread their coats in the bed and helped Janos lift the priest into the wagon.

"What now?"

Janos threw his cloak over the semi-conscious man. "Take...my horse and go. The monastery is not far from the pass. I'll leave him there and ride the mare cross-country. We'll meet tomorrow where we planned."

The ride, uphill, on what was little better than a forest track, would be rough. He did what he could to make the priest comfortable. As he tucked the cloak around his charge,

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the injured man roused enough to moan.

“Keep this pressed to the wound,” Janos said. “We’re going for help. It won’t be long.”

“Thank you.” The priest groaned. “I was right about you. You’re a decent man, my son. Don’t try to convince yourself otherwise.”

Why did the kind words fill him with guilt? “If you only knew, Father.”

“Do you need absolution, son?”

Janos sat back on his heels to study the man from behind the safety of his mask. Confess? This man, his church, and very likely his God had long ago condemned him. For the briefest moment, he considered the confession he might make just to see the look on the priest’s face.

Instead, he got to his feet and spoke the clearer truth.

“There is no absolution for me.”

CHAPTER 9

He's not coming.

Janos stood in a shadowed doorway across from the tavern waiting for a glimpse of Stefan. They had no plans to meet. Stefan didn't want to see him. They hadn't spoken since the night on the highway, almost two months ago, but Janos thought if Stefan did come, perhaps he'd come with the same hope of catching a glimpse of his former lover before leaving forever.

Janos wanted the chance to say, "You were right." To tell Stefan he was done, done with the highway at least. The rest...

He wanted to say good-bye.

This was a foolish idea from the start. He'd feared setting

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foot in Rasnov, knowing the compulsion would take over, and it had. Twice he'd veered from the path to his uncle's door and started for their meeting place, only to argue himself out of the absurd impulse. He'd failed. Avoiding the town was not an option. His sister waited for him already.

A single glimpse would satisfy him—just a glimpse to free himself of this madness. A few weeks were not enough to convince his mind and his body to forget. The yearning grew stronger the harder he tried. One glimpse, he shouldn't hope for anything more.

But Stefan never arrived.

The hour grew late. His uncle would turn him away if he delayed much longer.

He'd almost certainly return after seeing Nici, even believing the effort a waste of time. Stefan had no reason to come. He'd said his good-bye. The finality of his loss struck. Hidden in the shadows, Janos curled around the pain in his gut and cried.

The sound of church bells tolling the hour brought him to his senses. Nici! He was so late.

He brushed his arm over his face and walked toward his uncle's house. The gold was in his pocket—enough to provide her a decent future. She'd marry some day, but not out of necessity.

If he could, he'd find a place for her, but what ties did he have but to poverty or debauchery? This world of his held no safety for a young woman alone. The gold would buy her choices, if their uncle allowed her to take it without

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explanation. Janos would lie if he had to, bribe the man if he must—everyone had a price. The money must get into Nici's hands. He wasn't sure he had the time to provide for his sister another way. The past beat at his back.

At his uncle's door, he pulled in a breath and knocked. The lamp glow from the windows assured him they waited. He strived to be dependable in spite of his uncle's poor opinion. His visits were like clockwork, the first Sunday of every month. It eased his mind to know if something happened to him, his family would notice his absence.

Before the breath left his lungs, the door flew open. Nici appeared, disheveled, wide-eyed. Behind her, their uncle dashed toward them, yelling.

"Nici! What—"

"Run, Janos. Run now!"

Stunned, Janos hesitated and was undone. Men rushed him from all sides. Strong arms grabbed him. He struggled. In his mind, they became Fuzi's arms. His body took over, twisting, kicking out, blows landing, mindless, violent, desperate. He had only a moment to recognize the uniform—king's men. Someone came between him and the light. Stars burst and he knew no more.

* * *

So, life comes full circle.

The irony in his situation didn't escape Janos. He was back where he'd started, chained again, a little better off, perhaps. For the moment, at least, his keepers left him alone.

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They'd questioned him—tried to get him to reveal the money's location. Janos found no reason to tell them. What was left would never satisfy them. The better part disappeared from his pocket in front of his uncle's house—probably why their questioning showed less enthusiasm than might be expected.

That would change when they moved him to the capitol. The king's inquisitors did not, as a rule, give up simply because the prisoner had nothing to tell them.

Voices reached him from the guard's room at the far end of the corridor. The afternoon warden and a stranger spoke at length. Their words didn't reach him. But for the meekness in the visitor's voice, Janos would swear he heard Stefan.

He groaned—the last person he wanted here.

Footsteps pounded down the hallway. Keys jangled. The heavy door swung open and a dark hooded priest entered, speaking softly to the guard before he closed him in. Janos only heard the guard's end of the exchange. "As ya like, Father. Yell when you're done."

Keys jangled once more, and the footsteps receded down the hall before the priest turned to him. A glint of crystal blue eyes gazed from beneath the hood.

He came.

Janos sprang to his feet, but Stefan's silent posture stopped him. Neither moved nor spoke. Janos dare not speak a name. His chains held him at a distance. The silence went on long enough he began to think he might be wrong, that this man, face hidden in shadow, was no more than a priest come ill

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advised. Then a voice, hoarsened by emotion, tore through his soul.

"I've come to hear your confession." Stefan brushed aside the hood as he crossed the earthen floor and buried him in his arms.

He came. Janos wanted to curse him for his stupidity, but couldn't bring himself to find fault. Stefan risked everything to come for one last good-bye. Instead, he let the joy fill him.

"Now, that's a disguise," he whispered against Stefan's neck, seeking the easy way they had with each other before these last terrible months. His lips curled around the words. "You look good in black."

A stifled sound broke in Stefan's throat. Janos looked up into red-rimmed eyes. His finger brushed one unshaven cheek.

Stefan said nothing. This was a different silence from that which he used to make a point—this silence held no recrimination. Paralyzing pain etched his face.

My fault. "You shouldn't have come."

Stefan jerked to attention. "Forgive me." He fell to his knees at Janos's feet, shaking with emotion and pressed a wet cheek to his breast. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

His tears burned Janos's flesh.

Overcome, he didn't notice his fingers wandered through Stefan's hair with comforting caresses. He was not adept at offering comfort. He was used to receiving. His limbs grew heavy. His chest threatened to burst. The glut of emotion carried too many to bear: love, sorrow, guilt, terror.

"Oh, love, why did you come? What if someone

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recognized you?” Stefan must not be recognized. Janos pulled the hood up over his head and knelt. With Stefan’s back to the door, all anyone would find was two men in prayer.

Stefan wasn’t helping. Janos, alone, prepared the illusion. He arranged the hooded cloak to hide them both from any watchful eye, pried Stefan’s arms from his waist and placed them on his shoulders. Satisfied he’d done all he could, he placed his hands and brow on Stefan’s chest and breathed.

He rested there, without thinking, taking in his lover’s warmth and his scent, feeling his heart beat beneath his palms. He wanted enough to carry him through what was to come. His hands wandered, slowly, aimlessly seeking to memorize every muscle, every tender spot and the response it elicited.

Stefan’s warm breath whispered over his hair. “If you touch my cock, they won’t need a hangman.”

Janos froze, a smile forming. Stefan’s lips brushed his hair and Janos sighed. “I’d like to thank you for coming, but you have to promise you won’t say, ‘I told you so.’”

“Look at me.” Stefan didn’t wait for him to respond. He lifted Janos’s chin and forced him to meet his eyes. “I love you. I’ll never regret loving you.” He placed a kiss on his lips, then came back for another—kisses that would keep Janos as long as he needed.

Stefan straightened, perfecting the illusion with a hand on Janos’s shoulder and the other in his hair...a blessing.

“The priest gave them your name,” he said. “The man you helped.”

The fact didn’t surprise Janos in the least. “One of my men

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called out to warn me before the gun went off. It was a mistake, an accident.”

“He described you. So careless, Janos.”

“I couldn’t leave him in the road to die.”

“No, you couldn’t.” Stefan caressed his hair, his shoulder, his face. “Your compassion won’t help you, though.”

“It was always only a matter of time, Stefan.” He sighed. “We both knew that. The knowledge divided us for so long.”

“Yes. I’m sorry for that, too, love. My clumsy efforts sent things awry. I wasted the precious time we had.”

He reached for Stefan’s hand and held it to his cheek. “No reason to take the blame onto yourself, love. I don’t deny which of us is at fault. Forgive me. Our time’s almost up. Be careful, don’t come back here.”

Stefan rose. Janos rose with him.

“Stefan, I beg a favor.”

“Anything.”

“My little sister—”

“Sister? You said you had no family.”

“Yes.” Though Janos dreaded releasing this information to him, saying the words lifted a heavy burden from his chest.

A burden shifted.

“I’m so sorry.” The pain and confusion Stefan wore gave Janos little right to relief. “You’ll understand why I never wanted you to meet. Her name is Nici. She lives in the house where I was arrested.”

“Does she know about me?”

“No.”

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“So many secrets, Janos.”

“No more,” he sighed. “Find her. Help me. They took the money I had for her. What’s left is hidden under a stone in a cave above the woodcutter’s cottage. Someone from the village can guide you.” He gave him a name and directions for finding the right cave. “There’s enough to keep her for a long time. See her settled, please. I know it will delay your leaving, but I have nowhere else to turn.”

“I wish you’d told me. Of course I’ll take care of her.”

“When you meet, you’ll understand.” Janos pulled him into a hug. “Your friendship means everything to me. I’m sorry for all the pain I caused you.”

“More than friendship, Janos. This wouldn’t hurt half so badly if I didn’t love you so much.” The kiss was sweet, a sweet and final good-bye.

Janos released him and Stefan turned away.

“Guard.” When the door opened, this time Stefan looked back.

CHAPTER 10

The outer door squealed.

It's time. Janos's fists clenched his chains. His breath quickened. His heart galloped against his ribs.

Ridiculous. A laugh bubbled in his chest. Why panic when he expected them? Hysteria would not do. He would not shame himself by fighting a losing battle.

Two days to the capitol, four if they made him walk behind the wagon. A hellish trip, but nothing compared to the hell he faced when they arrived.

He closed his eyes and conjured Stefan's face. Blue eyes filled with love, not pity, gazed down on him. He knew how gossip spread among military men. Stefan would hear how, in

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the end, he had been in control.

He breathed. Stefan's last kisses warmed his lips and his fist unclenched. In spite of the cold sweats, the lack of sleep, the hours of bracing himself, the one thing he'd feared the most did not happen. The darkness remained at bay.

"We've come for the prisoner." A gruff voice intruded.

Next, the sound of heavy footfalls, the clank of metal, and the familiar rhythm of soldiers approaching.

The door slammed open. Two prison guards wrenched him to his feet. One unlocked his tether from the wall while Janos stared ahead through the open doorway into the indifferent eye of the future.

The guards dragged him from his cell and wordlessly passed him into the care of five faceless men in king's uniforms. Two grabbed his arms and turned him roughly into formation behind their commander. Their steel grip kept him upright in spite of the weight of the rattling chains scraping the stone floor.

He managed to keep his breath even, his legs under him for the length of the ascending corridor, until they turned abruptly into an unlit side passage. He stumbled. The hands gripping his upper arms tightened, momentarily offering balance, but the pace quickened and he stumbled again, the chains tripping him up. His guards swept him along, his naked feet barely touching the ground.

At the end of the dark passage, the group passed through a low door into blinding whiteness. Suddenly released, Janos's arms rose to cover his eyes. Urgent whispers meant nothing to

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his muffled mind as the others manhandled him, tugging at his limbs. The weight of the chain fell away. Someone tore his hands away from his face.

“Janos! Janos!”

He blinked and focused on Murat’s desperate visage.

“Wake up, man. We’re getting you out of here.”

A black bearded stranger threw a coat over his naked shoulders and crammed a hat on his head. It took him moments to realize the stranger was Stefan.

“Move. We don’t have much time. The real detail will discover you’re missing any minute now.” Stefan shoved him toward the horses.

Janos snapped to his senses.

They were in a small courtyard behind the stables. The others, Pavol, Tomas, and Tomas’s son, Roman, were already mounted. Tomas tossed Hera’s reins to Janos. He threw himself into the saddle and the six passed through a low gate in the northern wall. In seconds, they plunged into the forest along a narrow horse track.

Trees flew by on either side. When they crossed a small creek, Stefan pulled up beside him and gestured toward the trees on their right. The pair veered into a thickly wooded area as two others rode out to take their place on the road.

They circled the fortress at a gallop. Janos held onto his hat and leaned in tight against Hera’s neck, trusting her to find the way through the low hanging branches and slick forest mulch. Dodging brush and leaping deadfall, Stefan guided them into a crevasse between two hills, placing a rise solidly

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between them and the watchtower. Almost immediately, the way grew steeper as they pushed farther into the mountains. The pace slowed somewhat, but Stefan continued to press them to their limits.

The rapid incline was hard on the horses. Hera's chest heaved with her effort. After what felt like an hour, Stefan drew up in a depression beside a small creek.

"We'll let the horses catch their breaths and drink." He dismounted and led his mount to the water.

Janos sat on Hera's back waiting for his limbs to stop shaking. When he finally slid to the ground, he staggered and grabbed the edge of the saddle to keep from falling. Somewhere, far away, Stefan called his name. He turned just as Stefan swept him into a fiery kiss.

Mouth to mouth, cock to cock, each tried his best to devour the other in a frantic effort to merge. Janos had not a single coherent thought, only *Oh, my God. Oh, my God*, and he wasn't sure who the prayer addressed.

Stefan was the first to come to his senses. He broke away.

"We don't have time for this, love. Are you hungry?" He reached into his pack, pulled out a small parcel wrapped in cloth and passed it to him.

Janos's gaze remained locked on his lover as he gobbled the portion of bread and cheese. He was still too dazed to speak.

Stefan stripped down to his shirt and folded the blue jacket and breeches of the king's guard away in his pack. The clothes he pulled out to replace them were a more conservative

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homespun. Slipping the nondescript pants over boots and stockings, he glanced Janos's way and caught him staring. "Are you all right?"

Food in his stomach made all the difference. The fog was lifting. "Yes."

"Put this on." Stefan tossed him a dun colored tunic.

Janos swallowed the last of the bread and wrinkled his nose at the garment.

"Servant?" Not a convincing disguise considering Hera's obvious breeding, but he got the joke.

Stefan chuckled. "The plan is not to let anyone see us." He finished buttoning up and moved upstream a ways to drink from the creek.

Janos followed, pulling the rough woven shirt over his naked torso. "If we're going to the cot, we need to turn south soon." Stefan didn't know these woods like he did. If he could keep a clear head, this might actually work. "The descent to the east is too steep for the horses. There's a small valley over the next rise. The way is longer, but much easier on the animals. How much time do we have, do you think?"

"They'll be hard pressed finding a guide to follow us through these woods. None of my men will volunteer. And you have more friends in the villages along these rivers than you know, Janos. We'll be long gone before anyone shows up."

"What about Nici? Did you find her? Is she all right? How angry is she?"

"Nici is fine; she's safe. You have no idea how brave your

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little sister is. We didn't find the money, but we have a plan. Let's talk about this later." Stefan mounted his horse and waited for him to do the same. "You should probably lead from here."

The sun was at its zenith when the two dismounted in the clearing in front of the woodcutter's cottage. A boy rushed through the door into Janos's arms.

"Janos, oh, Janos, I was so frightened."

Nici! He stepped back for a better look. She wore a peasant's baggy pants and long tunic. Her thick dark hair tied back in a braid at the nape of her neck. A frisson of dread shook him. She looked very much like he did on the day their father was murdered.

"You!" She beat on his chest in frustration and anger. "They would have killed you! Oh, Jani, what would I do?"

"Why are you here, Nici?" He ended her pounding by bringing her close again, running soothing fingers over her hair.

"I couldn't stay there, not after what he did," she sobbed against his chest. "When the soldiers came, I begged him on my knees to tell them nothing, but he was so angry. He believed them from the start, without any proof, and he offered to help. *He offered.*"

The news sent a wave of sadness through him. "Uncle had little choice, Nici. They would have forced what they wanted from him. He did what was necessary to protect his family, including you." Over her head, he saw Stefan watching. "What is this? Why is she here, Stefan?"

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“She’s coming with us. She and I will travel as husband and wife,” he said, tossing a bundle which Janos caught from the air. “Here’s the rest of your disguise. Bathe. We leave in an hour.”

“Wait. Your wife? No, Nici’s too young to be a convincing wife.”

“I’m sixteen.”

He ignored her. “She’s my sister. I can watch over her.”

“And what role shall I play?” Stefan asked.

Janos threw the bundle at him. “Our servant.”

“No, Jani,” Nici cut in, strongly. “This will be safer. I don’t want to travel as a single woman, even with two protectors.”

Woman? He looked again. Not to his mind, but some might think so. And traveling as this vulnerable boy was out of the question.

“She’s right,” Stefan said. “A husband will prevent unwanted attention. The servant disguise is temporary, Janos. Once we’re far from here, take up whatever role you choose.”

Belatedly, Janos asked, “Where are we going?”

“East. Murat will meet us tomorrow night to guide us to Constan? a.”

The nearest Black Sea port—so a sea voyage was in their future. Janos nodded. This was a good plan. They could be in Ottoman territory in two days.

“Now, do you think you can find that money?”

CHAPTER 11

Merde! Another rock stabbed Janos's heel. What he wouldn't give for a pair of boots. The descent from the cave was difficult enough without worrying about dancing over jagged stones. The soft-soled shoes Stefan provided offered little protection.

But he had no complaints.

Well, the clothes might fit better. He laughed. Stefan's sense of humor was improving. He felt like a stick man wrapped in sackcloth—except the sash, Stefan's one concession to fashion. Stefan didn't say so, but Janos had no doubt he'd chosen the soft belt, embroidered in blues and greens, especially for him. The colors were perfect. The rest of

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these rags were fuel for the fire at the first opportunity. Stefan's gift, he'd wear around his neck—a collar of his own choosing.

The uneven ground shifted beneath his foot. He threw a hand out, taking purchase from a convenient boulder, and slid around the rock into Stefan on his way up the steep incline to meet him. Janos grabbed the strong, hard arms reaching for him.

"Oh!" A glance into his lover's eyes, dark with desire, and he melted. No recrimination, not a shred of doubt in those eyes. Stefan seemed to have forgotten the misery he'd put him through.

A welcoming smile blossomed on the rugged face and stole his breath.

I don't deserve him. He'd never be able to repay this man for what he'd done. Janos's fingertips skimmed over Stefan's cheek. "You shaved."

"Mmmm. And washed the soot from my hair." Stefan took him in his arms.

"This is better. The black beard made you look fierce."

"You used to like fierce." Stefan laid a lazy trail of kisses along his jaw from chin to ear. His wet tongue followed, lightly tracing the ear's contour. "But, I think you've had enough rough handling for a while," he whispered and sucked the lobe into his warm mouth.

Janos sighed. His eyes drifted closed.

"Stefan? What if..." *What if you wake one day to discover I'm not the man you think I am?* No, he would be anything

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Stefan needed him to be. He'd done it for fear; he'd do it for love and if the circle of his life couldn't be broken, he'd survive—or not survive. But...

Moist lips floated from ear to shoulder on a cushion of hot breath, distracting him.

“What if...” *I am going mad?* The idea frightened him more than the hangman ever had.

Gentle nibbles crept back up his neck. “I can't think...”

“Don't think.” Stefan's words, barely audible, brushed his cheek. “Kiss me.”

Janos shoved the dark thoughts to the back of his mind. He turned his head to capture those lips in a heated kiss and forgot they perched on the side of a cliff, a step away from possible broken limbs.

The earth moved. They slipped a few inches before Stefan caught his balance against the boulder.

“This is too steep,” he said, and glanced around, studying the area as though he'd just noticed their position.

“It's all right, Stefan. We shouldn't leave Nici alone anyway.”

“She's getting dressed.” Stefan's hands slid down his back to grip his ass and pull him in. “We have time.” His cock was already hard, a long, thick rod rubbing against Janos's belly.

Janos didn't need more encouragement. A grind of his hips showed Stefan just how he wanted to spend their time.

Stefan lifted and carried him, feet dangling, to a spot where the forest detritus formed a spongy bed among the rocks. He lowered them both into the soft nest and, leaning in,

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rained kisses on Janos's face and neck while fumbling with the knot of his pants.

The hard ground beneath Janos's back, the scent of moldering leaves and arousal, brought memories of hastily raised camps, bloody battles and frantic couplings under the trees at a time when any tender moment might be the last. Freeing the other's rapidly expanding member became a contest. He grappled with the buttons of Stefan's breeches at lightning speed.

A warm palm molded around his pulsing cock a second before Stefan's, heavy and hot, fell into his hand. The old rhythm, driven by breathy grunts and groans, came without effort.

Stefan's mouth closed over his and Janos opened to him with a soft moan. Time slowed. Stefan's tongue flicked over his lips, his teeth and, at last, plunged deep. Janos mewled and responded with his own tongue, teasing, sweet and playful like he had all the time in the world to relearn the fresh, liquid delight of his lover's mouth devouring his.

He bit down. Stefan grunted and pinched, smiling against his mouth and their kiss went deeper, hotter. Stefan squeezed.

Starbursts of pleasure broke over Janos. He wrapped his legs around Stefan's and tumbled him over onto his back. Breaking the kiss, he kicked the pants which had fallen around his ankles aside. Settling astride Stefan's hips, he stripped the shirt from his chest, baring the pale expanse of muscled flesh to the elements and to his roaming hands. He explored what he'd so long missed, tracing every contour, kneading every

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bulging muscle, all the while rocking gently. Stefan's swollen cock glided comfortably between the cheeks of his ass.

"I love you." The words were not so hard to say after all.

Stefan reached for him. Janos snatched his hands, kissed each before pinning it to the ground, then covered Stefan's mouth with his. This would be easier if Stefan didn't touch him.

Their tongues danced a slow waltz. He savored the kiss—warm and fruity. Stefan had taken time to eat. He tasted apple and his stomach reminded him how little he'd eaten in the last fortnight.

The protesting growl set them both laughing and their kisses lost momentum. Janos took his kisses south, stealing Stefan's usual role, paying special attention to the tight nubs of his nipples, loving the way they grew hard between his lips and reveling in Stefan's moans of pleasure.

He traveled lower. Laved Stefan's navel. Then lower. He nibbled.

When his lips encircled the head of his cock, Stefan gasped. "No, love, you don't have to." He tried to reach out, but Janos tightened the grip on his hands.

"Shhhh." He'd denied his man this pleasure far too long. Not denied, Stefan had never asked again after Janos reacted badly the first time. He'd pulled away, too shocked to hide his panic. Stefan was the one who'd apologized, over and over. And Janos let him, selfishly relieved to read the fear of losing him into Stefan's remorse. Even after so long together, Janos wasn't sure he would have said yes to a second request. This

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he did out of love. Not dreaming to repay Stefan nor hoping to bind him, but tossing inhibition aside and aching to share.

Circling the dark crown with his tongue, he took just the tip into his mouth and let his tongue dance—sweet broad strokes, tiny flicks, licking, sipping the salty metal taste of Stefan's essence as it trickled into his mouth, probing the weeping slit for more.

The breathy sounds Stefan made flowed through him. He swallowed more of the thick member and began a slow stroking movement, going farther with each downstroke. Stefan arched into it, his cries growing louder and more desperate. He tugged again to free his hands. Janos smiled and held tight.

He breathed and filled his head with the musky scent of man and arousal. Familiar, comforting, his lover's scent washed over him, strumming every nerve from his nose to his now painfully swollen cock.

Stefan shuddered and began a rhythmic pumping motion with his hips, his throbbing cock sliding farther down Janos's throat with each upward thrust.

But Janos wasn't done with him. On the next stroke, he let Stefan's cock pop out of his mouth and released his hands. Ignoring the moans of frustrations, he dug his fingers into that hard muscled ass and sucked down the length of his cock, sliding teeth and tongue over the fluttering vein to the root. He took first one, then the other of Stefan's balls into his mouth, massaging each with his tongue.

By now he was working as much for his own pleasure as

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Stefan's. His cock ached. He ached. He wanted to feel Stefan come apart under him. He reached for the soft skin behind Stefan's balls, tickling with the tip of his tongue. He reached farther, located the tiny puckered hole, and probed.

"No!" Stefan cried out. His ass clenched. Janos dug his fingers in deeper, spread him open and delved. Stefan bucked. His hands clutched Janos's hair and tugged. "Christ, what are you doing to me?"

No time to answer. Stefan's balls clutched so tight to his body, Janos wondered how they hadn't exploded already. Ignoring the pain to his scalp, one long stroke back the way he came and Janos once more had Stefan's cock pressing at the back of his throat. He opened and took him deeper.

"You're killing me."

Janos gathered some of the fluid leaking from his own painful erection onto one finger and shoved it, unceremoniously, into Stefan's ass.

"No! Stop!"

He smiled, or what passed for a smile with his mouth stuffed, and inserted a second finger.

Stefan growled, but didn't stop him. This would be a day of firsts.

Janos opened his throat again and sank over Stefan's cock until his lips settled in the nest of curls at its base. He swallowed and curled his finger, then swallowed again.

Nothing had ever been more satisfying than what followed. The breathless shouts, the violent spasms clenching his fingers, the throbbing, pulsing meat in his mouth as it fed him

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all of his lover's pleasure. The helpless whimpers when it was over.

Janos sucked his shrinking cock until Stefan collapsed into a shivering heap. Stefan, sated and weak as a kitten, gave a half-hearted tug with his fingers still wound in Janos's hair.

Janos slid up his body, slick flesh to flesh, peppering kisses along the way until their mouths met and Stefan took over, sucking Janos's tongue to the rhythm of his hand on his cock. It didn't take long.

* * *

"You've been holding out on me."

Janos only smiled. He lay, wrapped around his love in their spongy bed, content not to move or speak.

"I suppose I have Farkas to thank."

Even prepared, Janos flinched at the sound of the name on Stefan's lips.

"Nici told me."

His mind sought words to set Stefan on a different path, but he closed his mouth against whatever glib response might emerge—not this time. He sat up and reached for his pants with a trembling hand. "Nici doesn't know. She wasn't there."

"So, you tell me."

He didn't fear Stefan's judgment. What frightened him was the prospect of a lifetime spent dreading the pity written on his lover's face. But Stefan loved him. If Janos hoped ever to deserve that love, the first step was now.

"You can thank him for the orgasm as well as my

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reluctance,” he said, taking care not to seek Stefan’s reaction. “He didn’t let his friends have my ass, but they lined up for my mouth. He made sure I knew what I was doing.”

“I’m not surprised.”

Janos paused. He didn’t miss the double meaning in Stefan’s soft spoken words. He fought the urge to seek the correct interpretation in his face. He took his time drawing the pants up his legs, searching for the right thing to say. “Farkas was good to me, Stefan. He saved my life. He taught me everything I know. The man loved a challenge.”

“Then why did you leave? What happened?”

“I grew up,” he said with a dry laugh. “He bought my commission and sent me away...to make room for his new boy.” He looked up to see understanding dawn on Stefan’s face. “He was generous in the end.”

“Then he’s not the one who drives you to vengeance.”

“No, that one’s long dead.”

Stefan got to his feet and gazed down at him. Janos could no longer avoid his face. Looking pensive, one hand worked the buttons of his breeches while the other reached for him. “This Farkas, did you love him?”

Did he? Janos grabbed the proffered help and pulled himself up. He started to voice his denial, but Stefan’s truth-seeking expression stalled him. What did he feel for Farkas?

“I thought he loved me. I did anything he asked. Anything. Things you should know, Stefan. The list is long.”

“You’ll tell me what you need me to know.” Stefan took him in comforting arms and kissed him. “But no more today.

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We have a lifetime ahead of us.”

EPILOGUE

Stefan stood beside Nici at the stern of the ship watching home slip away. In spite of his excitement to be starting a new life, in a new place, saying good-bye to the old life and the old place filled him with sadness.

“I’ll miss the mountains.” Nici’s tiny voice, barely audible over the shouts of the crew working behind them, broke into his reverie. “I never knew how safe they made me feel until these last days under the wide open sky. Do you think the New World will be beautiful?”

“It’s a wild and untouched wilderness, Nici. How could it be less than beautiful?”

“There are savages.”

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"There are savages everywhere. Are you afraid?"

"No."

They gazed over the water for a while without speaking. The docks disappeared. The land of his birth became a flat line against the horizon.

"Will anyone miss you?"

Stefan shook his head. "I might have liked to say good-bye to my brother, if I knew where to find him. I doubt he'll notice I'm gone. He probably thinks me dead long ago."

"I doubt Uncle and his wife will miss me either. Maybe a little. He was kind, but I was just an annoying duty to her." The chill wind whipped her hair into her face. She struggled with it for a moment, trying to tuck it back under the braid until Stefan stepped to her windward side to act as a break. She looked up, smiling her thanks and paused to study his face. "You make a handsome husband."

Stefan chuckled to see her eyes grow wide and the rose bloom in her cheeks as she realized what she'd said.

"Oh." She sputtered. "I meant only Janos is lucky to have you." Then she grew serious. "Stefan, do you think he'll like having me around? We hardly know each other after so many years. Will I be a burden?"

"Nici, you're all the family we have. Janos is lucky to have *you*. And I'm thrilled he's willing to share his little sister with me. You're a joy, never a burden."

Her blush, this time, was pleased. "Where is Janos?"

No longer dressed as a servant, he was in the middle of the fracas on the deck holding fast a rope for the first mate to tie

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off.

They'd embarked as a family, husband, wife and brother-in-law, and Janos looked especially tasty, muscles straining beneath his form fitting breeches, bare feet gripping the deck, white shirt billowing. The mate tied off the rope then stepped in, too close, to speak in his ear. Janos smiled at whatever he said.

Sails hoisted, the activity on the deck soon quieted and Stefan crossed to where Janos stood at the bow talking to the mate—again, standing too close. As he approached, both men laughed at something one or the other said. Stefan was a little dismayed at the jealousy stirring within.

"Looking ahead, brother?" He interrupted the *tête-à-tête* before the feeling got out of hand. Both men turned at the sound of his voice. The mate cast a familiar smile Janos's way and excused himself.

Stefan stared after his back.

"If you're not careful, someone will think you're jealous." Janos leaned against the bulwark, wearing a wry grin.

"Do you plan to torture me all the way to the Americas?"

He burst into laughter. "Perhaps you'd like me to wear the cassock?"

The idea had merit. Though, looking Janos up and down, Stefan had to admit it likely he'd draw this kind of attention even in priestly black.

And Janos found this entirely too amusing. An irritating grin split his face as he leaned in and spoke quietly in Stefan's ear. "Like you said, this will be a long journey."

ALI KATZ

Ali Katz grew up the bug-loving, tree-climbing, fist-fighting tomboy in a house full of women. It wasn't long before she noticed boys were different and curiosity drove her to learn all she could of the strange and fascinating creatures. Loving them, in all their shapes and sizes, with all their quirks and quibbles, could only follow. Loving to write them came later. The process will forever be an irresistible exploration.

The oldest of four, Ali's the black sheep of the family, though not much of one, as black sheep go. These days, she lives in Tucson, keeps her family close and has a job, not a career, which helps support her real life. That takes place in the wee hours of the night, while everyone is asleep, when she sits at the computer, cornered into weaving the tales her characters demand telling.

* * *

**Don't miss *Only One Regret*, By Ali Katz,
available at AmberAllure.com!**

Rock musician, Daniel Sanborn, has given his lover, Ramón Alvarez, too many opportunities to practice forgiveness. Their relationship is barely healing from the crisis that was Daniel's

wake-up call when someone from his past walks in to audition for the band.

Melanie is the widow of Josh Taylor, Daniel's first and greatest love, and the woman who, a dozen years ago, unknowingly stole his lover. When Melanie's talent proves to be exactly what the band needs to take them in the direction they hope to go, Daniel votes to hire her. Meanwhile, he avoids Ramón's jealous streak by hiding the depth of his resurrecting emotions.

But since Daniel last saw Melanie at Josh's funeral, she has come unhinged. She never smiles, and she talks to her dead husband when she thinks no one is listening. Daniel shrugs it off to eccentricity and grief—

Until Josh's ghost makes an appearance!

Apparently, Daniel and Josh have unfinished business, and not the kind Daniel feels comfortable sharing with Ramón. As far as Daniel is concerned, that past is as dead as Josh himself. But Josh's ghost, however, has other ideas. Daniel's twelve-year-old secrets could be the last straw for Ramón, but keeping them buried might prove impossible...

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