

A Summertime Storm
by S.A. Payne
Sequel to Springtime Duel

Tarin's life has never been what anyone could consider predictable, but the events of the last few months have shaken him to his core. As he picks up his life and tries to take things day by day he finds himself caught between a hazy acceptance of his situation and the bitter guilt of surviving. When he does a favor for a new found friend he finds himself lost in a new world and maybe lost in a new love as well!

A Summertime Storm

Chapter One

It was the smell of the lower city that bothered Shelee the most. It was a damp scent of the sea, the harbor far below but the smell wafting up to the banks of the river despite the distance. She swore years before to never set foot in the lower city, never, no matter what, but some things were worth breaking promises for.

The day was sunny, spring was approaching, the damp chill of winter fading slowly day by day. It was the sort of day to plant flowers in gardens or hang laundry out in the sunshine and the people of the lower city were taking advantage of it. She watched the lives the coach rolled past, how people called back and forth over wash lines or at running fountains, watched children run in hand me down clothes and bare feet. The sights and sounds called up a twisted sense of homesick dread and she was eager to run her errand and escape back across the river.

The coach rolled from tightly clustered slums to a better district of single family homes and then slowly into larger and grander buildings. They sat in their lawns with an antique elegance, breathing their former glory and age to the newer and plainer buildings in the blocks around.

It didn't surprise her when the coach stopped in front of one of the grand old homes. She felt she knew this place even if she'd never seen it. A walkway of stones wove around bright green grass and old large trees, she even could make out the frail elderly lady sitting at her first floor window. Shelee had little doubt that the old lady wasn't the only person watching from behind their windows.

There wasn't any truly graceful way for a woman of her bulk to exist a coach but the coach man hopped down from his perch and graciously offered her a hand. It was a service he seldom rendered but was willing to grant to her. Shelee didn't know if it was her own reputation or her nephew's and frankly she didn't care. She accepted the help and made it to the ground without making a fool of herself.

"His place is around back, mistress." The driver said and quickly pocketed the coin she handed him. "What you care for me to wait?"

That surprised her and made her smile. "If you'd be so kind, I shouldn't be too long."

The man tipped his hat slightly and went back to his seat. Shelee smoothed her dress before turning to cross the lawn in carefully measured strides. Around the corner of the house and past a crumbling waist high stone wall she found the well repaired steps that climbed up the back of

the building and ended on the wide porch. The sun caught the glass of the tall windows and glinted it back.

She climbed the steps and didn't need to knock, the door swung open easily under her hand. The sight that greeted her inside made her sigh and she folded her arms under her chest.

"Just what do you think you've been doing?" She used a sharp tone to hide her worry.

"Leave me alone." A bundle of blankets muttered from the bed.

The room was long and open but had a stale smell to the air. The single table was cluttered with scraps of food not eaten, the fire was out in the hearth, dirty clothes were piled around and forgotten. Most disturbing was the casual way a blade in its scabbard had been dropped on the floor. She looked about to the scattered bits of mess and found several half consumed mugs of tea and a pitcher of very old cider but no wine or ale. That had been her primary worry and it offered her some small measure of hope.

"You've been sulking in here for too long, get up." She moved to the bed and tugged at the blankets.

Tarin peered bleakly up at her from under several layers, a length of brown fabric clutched tight in one hand. "Go away."

"No and you're in no shape to try to make me either. For Jesus sake Tarin, you're a bloody mess. When was the last time you took a bath?" She'd never seen him looking scruffy, he was obsessive about his personal grooming and often complained about a stubble of a beard long before it grew unsightly.

He ran a hand thru his short hair and it stuck out at all angles. "You don't understand."

"Horseshit I don't. You're not the only person who's ever lost someone they loved." That just made him turn his face away and half burrow back under the covers. "What would Ana think, if she saw you like this?"

Tarin made no move to answer or defend himself. Shelee raised an eyebrow and lowered herself to sit on the edge of the bed. "Tarin, it's been over a month. No one's seen hide nor hair of you for half that time. People are talking, I had one person ask me if maybe you died in here and no one noticed." The thought had chilled her and it was the worry that maybe he had done something rash that rushed her down to see him. "If you stay in here, everyone will know the gossips true."

Word had spread quickly and soon the whole city whispered rumors of the real reason behind the night of murders in the upper city. There was no way to prove any of it and the stories stayed merely stories but each whisper added to Tarin's fame. Young girls were sighing over the romance of Ana's tragic death and wished their young lovers would seek such bloody revenge.

"Everyone knows already, it doesn't matter."

This wasn't getting them anywhere. "I got a letter today, from Mr. Dunn." She paused and waited but he showed no interest in that either. "He says he got Jolie settled in, right and proper and was headed home. He should be here within the week. Do you want him seeing you like this? You told him he could stay with you until he found work, do you want to repay his help with this?"

"Shelee, I..."

He didn't have the words to explain but fortunately he didn't need to. The open grief wasn't difficult to read and she softened her look. "I do understand, really I do but enough is enough."

You've got to get up, today, and go on."

Tarin shook his head and propped himself up a little on an elbow. "I can't."

There was only so much a soul could take, Shelee knew this. She'd reached her own breaking point long before and she knew what a dark and horrid place it could be. The seemingly bottomless strength in the young swordsmen had amazed her. He'd endured enough in his life to drive most people mad and yet remained a functioning capable man. Ana Grenk's murder was a catalyst. From that moment on he stopped fighting, stopped striving and allowed his past and grief to carry him down. It couldn't be allowed to continue.

Shelee pulled back her hand and did the one thing she'd never done to him, she slapped him, hard. Her hand made a loud smacking sound and she struck with such force that a red hand print appeared instantly on his fair skin. She waited for his anger, for his return of the violence but he just sat there. Shock, surprise and a bitter look of betrayal crept across his face but he didn't move.

"Don't you dare ever say that to me." The slap hurt her twice as much as it hurt him but it needed to be done. She'd made a fortune by reading people, knowing what they needed before they fully knew. "Yes you can, you just won't. You've needed time alone to grieve, fine, I've respected that but it's time to live again. You aren't going to give up that easily, I won't allow you to, do you understand?"

He nodded meekly and kept his wary eyes on her.

"Good. Now get up, take a bath. Jolie is going to need a father, Dunn needs a friend and I need my nephew. Stop laying there feeling sorry for yourself and take back your responsibilities."

"Okay, just, don't hit me again." His tone was mocking and sarcastic but there was a disturbing undertone of seriousness below it.

"Don't give me cause to, you've never before and I don't see you being this stupid too often in the future. Made me come all the way down here to knock some sense into you. You know how much I hate this part of the city." She stood and fussed her way toward the door, carefully watching to see if he was actually getting up. It pleased her when he carefully dragged himself from bed. "When was the last time you had a real meal? Don't answer, if the scrapes about are any clue it's been weeks. I'm going to be sending one of my girls down here every day. They'll get this rat's nest cleaned up and see to it you've fresh meals made."

Tarin made a cynical grunting noise. "And make sure I'm living as you say."

"That too! Don't sass them, they're good girls. They've been worried sick about you and you've been horrible, not even sending us word. Making me come all the way down here," She muttered again and used the words to hide her concern.

When she turned to glance back Tarin was on his feet, his clothes as rumpled as his hair and his posture defeated but at least he was moving. "I can't say enough how sorry I am about Ana, but Tarin, I can't bare to loose you. If you won't go on for her or yourself, how about for me?"

He shuffled over to the table and scooped up a discarded mug. The half drunk contents sloshed inside and he sniffed it for freshness before sipping it. "Thank you for coming down here." It was all he could say. Her visit had touched him. She was almost phobic about returning to the lower half of the city, afraid she'd not escape a second time.

"I've a coach waiting. Take care of yourself, Tarin, and come up for dinner soon."

"Okay."

"Promise?"

"Yeah, I promise."

Venturing beyond his door wasn't an easy task. His legs felt weak and his head disconnected from the swirling patterns of life in the neighborhood but out he went. The women of the Pink Pearl had been making daily visits just as Shelee had promised and their quiet company had worked as surely as the delivered slap. They were vital, alive and so full of energy and hope that it was impossible to remain hidden and unaffected.

What Tarin didn't know was that Shelee was hand selecting each woman. They were all as clever as they were beautiful. Each one was given strict instructions on how to act, what to do and most importantly what not to do. One by one they showed up at his door, they cooked him a meal and shared it with him. They brought gossip and conversation, straightened his room and cleaned. Not once did they suggest their services, offer him sympathy, push for him to speak when he remained silent and never, under any circumstance, did they mention Ana.

It worked. The sound of other people and the ever changing pattern of lovely women pulled him from his despair. While the dark moments, the times when it hurt so deeply in his soul each breath felt like too much of an effort, continued, every moment wasn't so dark and so difficult. Like the spring slowly arriving back to their city, bit by bit the will to continue returned to Tarin. Even if he found no joy in living, no good in it, he no longer was willing to surrender and give in.

People stared, as much from his reputation as from his long withdraw from the public eye, but people always stared. No one spoke more than a few brief words to him on his first ventures from his rooms. For as causal as the words were, he found the effort to maintain an appearance exhausting.

It was nearly a week after Shelee's visit before he felt ready to go to the Fleecy Sheep. He arrived in the late afternoon and the faces of the other swordsmen turned and openly watched him. There was a moment of uncertain silence, as if he were a specter and unreal, before they turned away. It wasn't done out of rudeness but from respect. Everyone knew how deeply Tarin valued his privacy and in that silence a thousand greetings and questions died, unasked.

He sat at a table with his back to the wall. The distance between himself and the others felt unbreachable, he felt more alone, more out of place, than he had the first day he'd ever walked into the Sheep. Only this time, taking a few hires and developing a reputation would do nothing to ease that feeling and Tarin had no idea of what else to try.

"Good to see you, Tarin." Jen said with a warm smile as she set a mug of tea in front of him. It took an effort to hide her shock at how thin the swordsman appeared, how sunken his eyes.

"Thank you, Jen. Any messages for me?"

"Aye, a few, Owen will want to bring them out for you."

Word must have spread ahead of him because before Jen could get even a few steps away Owen appeared from the kitchen. He moved directly to Tarin and before the younger man could say a word he dropped a capture game board onto the table between them, the pouches of light and dark colored, carved stones followed.

"I hear you're a real hot shot at this. Figured it was about time we see about it." He lowered his height into the chair opposite Tarin without waiting for an invitation.

Capture was played by the wealthy and educated and rarely was seen in the lower city. The rules were complex and the scoring varied on which carved stone captured which and on what move. It wasn't a game to be played when drinking or in a noisy tavern. Tarin had seen Owen playing it before, with Jen and occasionally on a slow afternoon with a few retired swords but he'd never been asked to join them and he'd never felt right inviting himself to play.

"Owen?"

The large man ignored the uncertain question and continued setting the stones up on the board. "Have you eaten? We've a roast tonight, potatoes with that rich gravy made from those mushrooms you like so much. A fresh batch of honey bread too. Hope you haven't eaten, I'm starving and hate eating alone."

The tavern owner's easy acceptance, his total embracing without explanation was so touching that Tarin had to swallow hard to clear his throat and blink quickly to clear his eyes. "Just because you got some more of those mushrooms doesn't mean I'm going to spare you in the game." He managed to make his accent high and almost arrogant but it wasn't total, nor was it easy.

Owen heard the real emotion behind the tone and saw it in the other's lavender eyes. It made him smile wide to finally be reading the distant man so well, to finally be understanding his fragile, almost fearful, pride. "We'll see about that lad, we'll see."

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Chapter Two

Dunn's ship was set to arrive any day and Tarin had been making a habit of walking down to the docks to check to see who'd arrived that morning and if there was any word. Going close to the sea helped to clear his thoughts and the travelers and sailors that moved around weren't as likely to know him. It gave him a small measure of obscurity that he found he wanted. There was still a thrill that went thru him when he saw a ship, even the smaller river runners, raise their sails and dance with the wind and tides.

It was late in the day as he wandered around the docks, just enjoying the look and style of the smaller boats moored there. Most were busy with ship board life, loading and unloading cargo and the day to day work to maintain any ship. His thoughts drifted to his own time on the sea. How he almost longed to return to that life. The day to day work was back breaking and endless but he never had to think about what to do next. He even found himself missing the companionship of the crew. He regretted not knowing how to fit better with the men he'd served with, they'd tried to befriend him but he'd always kept them at a distance. After four years they'd come to respect his solitary ways and in that acceptance Tarin had found a sense of belonging. He missed that now, and his thoughts wandered to the possibilities of his life had he continued in

the Navy.

"Morris? Tarin Morris?" A voice called out as he walked past.

Tarin turned to the voice carefully, his hand moving to the hilt of his blade. The man that hailed him was standing at the gang plank of a river runner, his hair was grey now and thinning but Tarin remembered his face.

"It's me, Zas Bumpion, remember?" The man hurried down the plank with long practiced ease.

"Of course," Tarin smiled warmly. "It's a fool that forgets his first hire."

Zas chuckled and offered his hand. "Didn't expect you to remember, it's been a long time. How are you?"

"I'm well, how's life treating you?" Tarin accepted the hand and shook it firmly. He couldn't recall just what the river runner's dispute was over but he remembered it gave him a good start as a hired sword. Zas' father had been in a collar as a young man and he'd raised his children to hold no prejudice against freed slaves.

"Come on board, we'll share a drink. Unless this is a bad time for you? I know you're all famous and such now. No one down here believes me when I say I hired you first." He smiled good naturedly and nodded back to the boat. "What was your cost back then?"

"Two bishops." Chance encounters and friendly receptions generally made Tarin nervous. The boat could contain an ambush, he wasn't without enemies. The boat would be a good place for it there were plenty of spots to hide armed men. Ambush was the paranoid explanation, but a trusting swordsman was a short lived one. The most likely explanation was that the man was wondering about his rates today and needed a swordsman's service again.

"How much is your going rate now?" The sailor asked in good natured curiosity.

"About forty crowns."

Zas laughed cheerfully. "I got a grand bargain! Come on lad, come have a drink with an old man."

His good humor was infectious, Tarin grinned and nodded. "A drink sounds good."

It never once occurred to Tarin that the man was lonely and merely wanted to talk. The boat was in good repair and Zas was friendly and welcoming. They drank ale and shared stories of storms, fighting and the sea. The conversation was free and easy, the older man not at all shy over Tarin's past or awed by his current reputation. Finally, the long time sailor nodded knowingly.

"You're a Spotter, aren't you?"

Tarin just shook his head. "Spotters are a myth."

Zas snorted and took a long swallow from his drink. "Says you, but I've spent my life on the water. I've seen true Spotters, they're rare but real. I'm surprised the Navy let you out, a Spotter's worth his weight in gold. A ship with a Spotter on has never been lost, not so long as the Captain listens to what he says anyways."

"I don't believe in Spotters, and all ships can be lost."

"Not if the Captain listens to his Spotter it won't be. Not surprised a man like you wouldn't believe."

Tarin bristled and sat straighter at the implied offense. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Believing requires a suspension of logic, accepting that there are things beyond what you can see. You're far too logical of a man to do that easily, far too reasonable. If you'd been blessed, you'd have been born to a seafaring family, your pa would have seen you were a Spotter from the time you were little and raised you to trust that skill as surely as you trust that blade you wear. One day, one day you'll learn to see what you aren't able to see with your eyes. My nephew was a Spotter, he was a lot like you but his father let me take him out on the water. If I'd been around more I would have seen sooner what he was, but by the time I did he believed in logic." The sailor's tone grew bitter and cold.

"Where's he now?" Sailors had been calling him a Spotter from almost the moment he'd set off to sea. Tarin hadn't really believed it then and he still didn't. He didn't hold special skills or knowledge, he simply processed information differently from the men around him. Being a slave had taught him to always be alert, always watching and studying and that alone explained why he knew the weather, he simply must pay more attention than the average man. That didn't mean if given the opportunity he wouldn't like to meet someone else called a Spotter, maybe than he could better learn what the difference was and prove finally it wasn't anything supernatural.

Zas sighed. "Dead, a few years ago. The wind pulled off a shingle and it smashed his head in. Damndest thing too, boy almost seemed to expect it to happen. I sort of lost my taste from running the river after the lad died. I was going to let him take over in a few years but, well, that won't happen now."

It hadn't missed Tarin's notice that the ship seemed hollow and unused. The line and rope were coiled too neatly, the ship a touch too tidy for one in between trips. "What will you do now?"

"I don't know, the boat, she's a lady, you know? You don't blindly turn away from a lady you love. My brother's offered to let me buy a part of the building his shop's in, I'd be close to family but I've this lady here. She counts on me to look after her, I couldn't just sell her." He smiled weakly and knew instantly that the too handsome swordsman truly did understand, after all he was a Spotter.

The idea came quickly. "You would sell her, if you found the right buyer?"

"Aye, but she'd have to be loved by her new man. I just don't have the energy or the heart for it anymore." Zas narrowed his eyes. "You thinking about shoving off out to sea? She's not made for the open water."

"I know but she's a beauty of a river runner. I want you to sell her to me."

"What for? You don't have an interest in the river."

"No, but my Uncle does. Look, he was in the Navy, he knows ships and is a hard worker." Tarin found himself quickly explaining. "He's proud, he'd never accept a ship I bought. So I want you to hire him on as a hand, a partner, show him the river. After a few runs, when you are convinced he can handle the sand bars and currents and equally convinced he'll love your lady as you do, sell him the boat. Let him make payments to you, don't worry, I'll pay you outright. When he makes payments to you, deposit them into a holding account minus a percentage for your efforts. For all my uncle will know, you're financing his buying you out. How's that sound to you?"

Zas thought about it for a moment. "If I don't think he'll take care of her?"

"Than you pay him his share of the run and drop him on shore, no hard feelings."

"You've a deal, Mr. Morris, you've a deal."

Dunn hiked his pack higher on his shoulders and entered the yard to Tarin's building. There had been a message waiting for him from Tarin that when his ship had finished docking he should send word. Tarin would then send a carriage down to fetch him, but Dunn hadn't. The weather was delightful in its spring softness and warm sunshine and being back at sea had made him feel born anew. He'd walked the streets to Tarin's building on light feet and wasn't prepared for the sight that greeted him in the yard.

There were no less than six young men hauling boxes and crates from a cart out front. They called cheerfully to each other and laughed. One man sat on part of the old garden wall and played on his violin, the music rolling and joyful, setting a pace for the work of the others. Each were dressed in the simple, poor style of students, the few pieces of furniture Dunn saw were second or third hand, shabby and plain. It was the care given to the easels, boxes with paint splatters, instrument cases, and canvases that gave them away as struggling artists.

That didn't surprise Dunn, fourth year art students and recent graduates often moved down to the better neighborhoods of the lower city. It lent them an air of danger, a sense of rebellion and wildness plus, the rent was cheaper. What did surprise him was seeing them hauling their supplies and belongings up the Grenk's stairway. Mrs. Farntell sat at her window watching and listening to the life and music with obvious glee.

She called out to Dunn and waved, obviously wishing him to join her near her window. He smiled and called out a greeting but kept moving. He'd traveled too long to not find Tarin right off. He'd make a point of visiting the elderly lady soon. The noise and life from the side of the building carried to the back and Dunn climbed the steps with a shake of his head and a grin that was infectious from the group of young men.

Tarin's porch windows were cracked open, a spring breeze blowing inside. Dunn peered in and saw the young man, he was running forms, the weighted practice blade in his hands. Dunn was struck again at the swordsman's skill, his grace and more, at how thin he looked, how hollow.

"Hello." He called out and Tarin instantly stopped his practice.

"Lieutenant!" Tarin answered with a grin. "Come in, why didn't you send word? It's a long walk from the harbor."

Dunn pulled the door open and entered the darkened room. "It was a pleasant walk and don't call me that."

"Yes sir. Have you eaten? There's plenty left from lunch, Eve makes enough for four." He pushed his short hair back, still not comfortable with the length, and racked the practice blade.

"Eve from the Pearl?" He dropped his pack and stretched out his shoulders.

"The one, Shelee's been sending one of her girls down every day to see to it I eat." Without being asked he put water on for tea and uncovered dishes of food and set them on the table.

"Thank you." Dunn answered and didn't make the comment that sprang to mind that maybe Shelee should be sending two women to cook, because the swordsmen looked like he was fading away. He amended that after a second look, Tarin had the appearance of a man recovering from a long illness. "What's going on out there? It looks like a circus is moving in."

Tarin snorted. "Might as well be. Mrs. Grenk moved out a few weeks ago, went north to open a shop or something. Somehow Mrs. Farntell got into her head the place was too quiet so she

rented the rooms to a group of artists and musicians. I think she likes the idea of eccentric tenets."

Dunn chuckled at the sour look that came to Tarin's face. "She can't well rent to another swordsmen, everyone knows your kind are territorial."

That made Tarin grin. "Bloodshed in the garden might be a touch too eccentric for her taste. They've already started calling her grandma, it's amusing her to no end. They're making a horrible racket."

"I thought you liked music?"

"I do, just not in the flat next to mine. Tell me, how was your journey and how's Jolie?" He poured the tea and eagerly sat down across from Dunn.

"We had beautiful weather the whole way down, only had rain one day and she took to travel well. Loved the sea, had to tie her down to keep her out of the rigging. She's a good child."

"And this school?"

"The Bor'slinich Academy for Young Girls? You'd approve of it. They only have seventy one students, there are five students per teacher, they offer a wide range of classes and have high standards without high pressure. The girls were all tight knit and happy, Jolie's sharing a room with three others and had already made friends before I left. I set up the money you sent with a third party agent in the form of a trust for Jolie, her tuition and board will be paid automatically for as long as you wish her to stay, additionally she will receive an allowance for expenses. I don't think she understood yet how generous you were with that, but she will." The tea was the same expensive brew Tarin preferred and the food was well made and good. Dunn ate hungrily.

"But she's happy?"

"She's happy."

A weight seemed to lift from the swordsman. "Good, very good. Thank you, I can't ever repay you for what you've done for me."

Dunn waved the debt off. "You're working a job?"

"Small one, just body guarding for a few nights. Don't worry, you'll have the bed, I'll be up till dawn."

"Dangerous?"

"Not really, just another fine example of the rich and paranoid. A wealthy merchant is convinced his partner is going to have him killed in his sleep. He's paid a fortune to have me watch him for the week. Should have charged him more for having to listen to them snore."

"Doesn't sound like you think there'll be an assassin."

Tarin shrugged and toyed with his tea. "He's made it clear he hired me, there are plenty in the city who'd still risk coming against me but I'm not sure his partner can afford to pay the higher fee. Two more nights and he heads out to the country for a few months, whatever upset his partner should blow over by the time he's back. Don't worry over it."

"I won't, you're good at your job."

"Speaking of work, I know you asked me not to meddle."

"Tarin," Dunn's voice grew reproachful.

"I didn't do anything. I ran into my first hire last week. He's got a river runner and he's getting old. His father was in a collar so he doesn't care about a body's past. He mentioned he was looking for a second hand. Thought you might want to look him up. That's all." It was only from spending most of his life as a slave that gave him the skill and control to not show his delight in the plan he'd set up. Shelee had helped him when he was newly free, now Tarin was finally being given a chance to return that favor to someone.

Dunn sat and ate in silence for a moment. He owed the younger man for so much already, much more than he was truly comfortable with. There were limits and lines that pride wouldn't allow him to cross. The truth of it was he'd do almost anything to be back on the water again, Tarin's meddling could easily be overlooked. Dunn had little illusion that Tarin had more than just spoken to this river runner, he had no doubt that a job stood waiting for him.

"What's this man's name? Maybe I'll look him up tomorrow."

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Chapter Three

The knocking was soft and uncertain at first but by the time Dunn was awake and on his feet had grown more demanding. Tarin's room's were still empty, the swordsman still out on his job and the light seeping in around the cracks of the curtains showed dawn was close but not yet fully at hand. The knocking came harder and Dunn unlocked the door carefully. A dozen different situations came to mind but the sight at the door wasn't what he expected.

On the other side stood a young man, not yet twenty and dressed in a plain shabby style that pegged him as one of the students that had moved in next door. His nut brown hair was pulled into a neat braid at the base of his skull and hung down his back below his shoulder blades, his features were boyishly charming but not overly handsome. He stood wide eyed and uncertain, with almost a frightened look to his face. Dunn understood the look as soon as he noticed the young man leaned heavily on a cane, his left leg strapped tightly in a wood brace.

"Can I help you?"

"Mis...mis...mister Dunn?" The boy stuttered out, eyes wide and frightened.

"Yes?"

"I, I was, it's just, I was up and well, it's... well you see..." The boy stumbled over his thoughts, his eyes watching the older man uneasily.

"We're going to be here until the sun sets if you don't calm down." Dunn warmed his voice and smiled gently. "Now, take a deep breath and just tell me what's on your mind."

The boy nodded and drew a deep breath. When he spoke again it was slower, softly and with his eyes down. "I moved in next door, I get up early, the light you see, it's different."

"Out with it lad."

"Yes sir, a man came to our door by mistake. He thought I was you in the dim light and told me the message meant for you. I came right over here."

They stood in the door way with the damp early light of dawn surrounding them, watching each other for a moment.

"What was the message?" Dunn prompted gently, afraid too harsh of a word would send the boy scurrying for cover.

"Oh!" He blushed suddenly, understanding how stupid he'd been acting but quickly recovered. "There was a message from a Mr. Vic Loyds, he's asked you to come to his home. Your nephew's been hurt."

"Jeses sake! How badly hurt?"

The boy flinched from the suddenly harsh tone but held his ground. "I don't know, sir, the man didn't say and didn't wait to be questioned. I'm sorry."

"Never mind, it's okay, it's not your fault. Thank you for telling me so quickly."

The tone was one of obvious dismissal and the boy nodded and backed away. He leaned a great deal of weight on the cane, his bad leg unable to fully support him even with the well crafted brace. Without another word he made his slow and careful way back down the steps, leaving Dunn to hurry inside to pull on his boots.

By the time Dunn reached Vic Loyd's home on the other side of the river the sun was fully up and people were bustling about the city. Only, near Mr. Loyd's house, people didn't hurry about their day, they stopped and stared at the ruined front lawn.

Dunn pushed himself past the whispering gossips and had to pause a moment himself. The home was several blocks away from the river but not far enough away to be a high class neighborhood. It was respectable, a small private home with a nicely maintained yard around it. Only, this house's front yard and flowers lay in withered ruins. The grass had curled and blackened from a small fire which now had been fully extinguished. Shards of glass winked back the sun from where they lay scattered about the paving stones of the walk way and the clumps of ruined grass. The glass had come from an upstairs window, now broken out and looking blankly out to the street below.

It wasn't the black remains of fire or the broken glass window that made Dunn stop in his tracks. Laying half on the paved stone walkway, a handful of paces from the wide steps that led to the front door, was a blanket draped body. The thin sheet showed the twisted outline well and blood stained darkly in several spots. City guards stood watch at the entrance to the yard and hovered near the body and door, they spoke softly to each other and glanced from the body to the window with shakes of their heads. In that moment Dunn wondered if he'd been called here to claim the body and he feared stepping forward.

If it was Tarin, they'd send for Shelee soon if he didn't arrive. That was a pain he'd spare the woman if he could, she shouldn't have to do such an unpleasant task. Dunn had buried many men, far too many of them friends, he'd see to Tarin if it was him.

He stepped toward the walk way and was instantly stopped by the guardsman.

"No one's allowed entrance."

Dunn drew his years of command about him, and raised a single eyebrow. "I was sent for. Mr. Elorin Dunn, Tarin Morris' uncle."

The guard glanced quickly to the blanket covered body and back to the handsome middle aged man standing at the gate. "We've been waiting on you, come in."

Dunn didn't look too closely at the body as he was lead off the path and fully around it. That would come soon enough, there was no need to rush it now. The doors were opened ahead of him and more guards waited inside, they led him down a hallway and to a parlor.

The small room faced east and with the lamps and morning sun was bright and airy. It was packed with guardsmen, most appeared to be officers. They clumped around a small settee where an overweight man sat holding a sobbing woman. Both were still wrapped in robes, hair in disarray, and Dunn assumed they were Mr. and Mrs. Loyd.

A guard moved from his line of sight and Dunn caught a clear glimpse inside the secondary clump of guards. It made his heart leap and he shook his head. Tarin sat on a stool, bloodied and stripped to the waist but very much alive. His left arm hung forward at an awkward and obviously dislocated angle. A surgeon hovered near his right arm, carefully stitching closed a long gash. The man must have been working for quite a while because several other cuts on the same arm had already been washed and stitched shut. Tarin's chest was wrapped in bandages and he cradled his nonfunctioning arm close to his body.

"You can't be in here." A guard officer said as Dunn approached.

"It's okay, he's my uncle, I sent for him." Tarin spoke up.

"What happened? I thought it was you out there." The officer stepped aside and let Dunn pass.

Tarin shook his head. "It was a few hours ago, I got up, he didn't." He flinched away from the surgeon's efforts but that made his shoulder move and he flinched again.

"What happened, are you okay?"

"I will be if I can ever get my arm to work again."

The surgeon, a middle aged man with a sour look and warm, welcoming eyes, looked up from his work and frowned. "You won't be so eager when I get to it."

"What happened?" Dunn asked for the third time and found himself losing patients.

"Tarin was just being dramatic again, he's trying to become a living myth." The surgeon muttered.

"Jot here patches me up too often, he's cynical and annoying but his skills keep me from killing him."

That made the surgeon chuckle warmly. "I'll answer your question because my pin cushion won't. It seems Mr. Loyd's concerns over an assassin were well founded. The man on the lawn broke in

and was going to set the Loyd's on fire in their bed."

"I jumped him, didn't know he had a hood lamp and a jug of oil. When I smelled the oil and figured out what he was going to do I pushed him out the window. Ow, bloody hell, Jot, gently!"

"Pushed him out the window," the surgeon went on and ignored the protest, "and followed him as well."

"Out the window?"

Tarin nodded. "With the oil spilling everywhere too. Which is how the front lawn got redecorated."

"Are you okay?"

"A few cuts from the window, a burn on my side and I landed on my bad shoulder, popped it out again. Hey!" He called out as a guardsman walked by, "I want my knife back from the body."

"Yes sir, as soon as we're done with the investigation."

"No, now, that cost me good coin and I won't have it becoming a souvenir. Get your commander on it, I want it back before I leave." His tone and eyes made the guardsman back down. With a muttered agreement he continued on his way. "When I was sure I hadn't died I had them send for you."

"It almost didn't get to me, the message got delivered to one of your new neighbors. Can I help with anything?"

"Brandy, or something strong, before this butcher puts my shoulder back in."

It took only a quick glance around the room to spot the glass decanters and fine glass tumblers set around it. Dunn opened one of the bottles, sniffed it and replaced the stopper. The second bottle he tested smelled strong enough to burn his nose with one whiff. This was the one that he splashed a double dose out into a glass.

Tarin took it when it was offered and held it loosely in his right hand. The bottom of the glass resting on his knee because the surgeons work had him feeling light headed and his grip felt weak. He held still and waited for Job to finish his careful stitching, a skilled surgeon that could be trusted was worth his weight in gold to a swordsman. Tarin may not show it but he deeply respected the other man's skills.

That didn't mean the moment Job let go of his arm to line up the bandages Tarin didn't down the mouthfuls of strong drink. It instantly burned, spreading fire down his throat and making him cough. "What was that?"

Dunn shrugged casually. "You said something strong. You want more?"

Tarin sputtered and nodded gratefully. He was exhausted, both from pain and injury and from not sleeping. Once he'd calmed down and really understood that he'd not snapped his neck in the fall, that the killer was dead and the Guards had arrived, everything had instantly started to hurt. Jot had tried to get him to have some brandy, knowing how much pain the swordsman was in but he'd been turned down. Tarin refused to risk getting even slightly drunk without someone he trusted near by.

That didn't mean he was foolish enough to refuse it now. He held still while Jot began the careful job of wrapping the fresh wounds in clean bandages. The second offering of rough drink was sipped slower, as he was able to move his arm from the surgeons grasp. It was spreading a

numbness and the pain was slowly receding.

"Mr. Morris, I've been told you were badly hurt."

Tarin looked and his eyes didn't want to focus properly. "Mr. Loyd, are you and your wife unharmed?"

"Yes, because of your fast action. We never dreamed he'd go so far, the guard has the letter of hire on the killer. They're bringing charges up against my partner. None of this would have been possible if not for you. Are you badly hurt?" Loyd was a good man, a merchant that practiced fairly and was well respected in the community.

"Nothing that won't heal. Thank you for your concern. I would recommend you and Mrs. Loyd leave for the country this afternoon, just to be safe." Dunn plucked the glass from Tarin's numb fingers.

"We shall, don't worry about that. I'll see to it my agent sends the other half of your payment down to you, there'll be a bonus with it. Ah! No protesting, I know you like to stick to your contract but your contract didn't include going out the window to save us. You've earned it. If I can do anything for you?" He looked from Tarin to Jot to Dunn and back again.

Tarin shook his head. "You've already been kind enough to send for my uncle and Surgeon Jot."

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Chapter Four

"Mr. Loyd, I'm going to have to ask you to step back. I need to get his shoulder back in place." Jot had twisted up a length of blanket and used his professional voice that everyone obeyed.

Loyd nodded and bowed away, back to the circle of guard's officers and his still crying wife. Jot looped the fabric around Tarin's rib cage and handed the loose ends to Dunn. "Navy man huh? You've done this before?"

They switched sides and Dunn wrapped the fabric around his hands. "Aye, I helped get Tarin's shoulder in the first time he popped it out."

"I didn't know that."

"Of course you didn't, you were out cold, half cracked your head open." He repositioned the twisted blanket to get the best leverage.

"This is going to really hurt, isn't it?" Tarin looked from one man to the other, his eyes uneasy.

"Aye, lad, it is." Jot's voice was gentle, his fingers checking the joint as carefully. Tarin glanced down at that and Jot caught Dunn's eye over the swordsman's head. "Hold tight. On three."

Dunn caught the look and understood. He repositioned his grip and held firm. Tarin drew a breath and grimaced as Jot got a solid grip on his arm.

"Ready lad?"

"Yes. On three."

"One..."

Two never came. After one, Jot twisted and pulled the loose arm. It made a nauseating crunch pop sound but went back into its natural position. Tarin called out and blanched pure white, he cursed in language Dunn hadn't heard since he'd left the navy. The swordsman grew light headed and his skin went clammy. The surgeon moved right away to steady him, certain he would vomit or pass out but Tarin did neither and he was again amazed at the boy's pain tolerance.

"On three, three, that was not three! What a rotten trick." He gasped and a small groan escaped him. He wanted to slap Jot away as the man worked to get a sling on his weak and aching shoulder.

"Aye it is lad, sorry about that. If I waited to three you'd have tensed up and it never would have gone in. Feels better right?" He was carefully probing the shoulder again.

"Yes, it still hurts but it doesn't feel like it's ready to fall off."

"Good. Now, keep that salve on the burn, you know all that already. I'd say to see me to cut the stitches out, but I know you'll do it on your own, just keep it clean and bandaged with the salve for that. It'll help keep it from scarring some. Keep the shoulder in a sling for at least a month, see me in a week or so, I want to make sure it's okay."

"I hate wearing a sling."

"Than you'd better find new work. At least it's not your sword arm."

"Small favors. Thank you, Jot. I'm sorry to get you up so early."

The surgeon waved off the thanks. "Just go home and sleep, you've stretched yourself too far today."

Dunn helped Tarin out a back door and across a few side streets to avoid the gawking onlookers out front. Tarin was limping but not complaining. As soon as they reached a busier intersection, Dunn flagged down a coach and hired it. They rode in silence, Tarin half dozing in the stuffy warmth until the coach pulled up in front of his building.

He refused help getting down but once around back he accepted Dunn's support getting up the stairs.

"Did you hurt your leg?"

Tarin shook his head. "Just wrenched my back again and bruised myself from head to toe. Getting stiff from the coach ride is all, nothing some sleep won't fix. I'm getting too old to be

doing this I think.” He chuckled softly when they got near the top of the stairs. “At least when you’re here you can’t say you’re bored.”

“I think you could use some boredom. You aren’t too old, you just need to give yourself time to heal. Come on now, almost there.”

The truth was, he was getting old for a swordsman. Even without knowing his age, he figured he was around sixteen or seventeen when he’d been sold to the guard. That made him twenty or so when he got out, and he’d been on his own for almost five years since. Twenty five was a good age for a swordsman, most retired well before thirty, married and had kids and told stories about their days with a blade. He’d need to seriously give some thought about the future, about what would happen if he did retire. It was just assumed that one day someone would kill him and that would make the choices easier.

Once they hobbled into his rooms he needed Dunn’s help getting his boots off, but he changed clothes on his own by going very slowly. He was drunk with exhaustion now and the pain was faded enough from the brandy that he was pretty sure he’d sleep. As he lay down and pulled a blanket over his throbbing shoulder he made a note to speak to Shelee. She would know how to go about making small, quiet investments. She was good with money and would know what to do.

It was a disturbing thought, planning for a future he didn’t want to live to see. As he was trying to work out the sudden need to make long term goals, sleep claimed him. He dreamed of fire and falling and not being able to breath but he slept and that was a blessing.

Dunn sat at the table and twirled the quill pen between his fingers. The afternoon sunlight was warm and his thoughts were scattered. He’d waited until Tarin had been soundly asleep before heading out. For all the adventure of the morning, Dunn was eager to speak to Zas Bumpion, the river runner that Tarin had mentioned. The idea alone was exciting and he wasn’t sure he could stand to sit and wait to investigate.

It had only taken a few careful questions to have Zas pointed out, but Dunn hadn’t expected the ship to be so beautiful. Her lines were sleek and the space efficient, she was skillfully and lovingly maintained and just made him ache to take her out on the water. There’d been no need to hail Bumpion, he’d seen Dunn staring in rapture and invited him aboard.

Zas had been charmed by Dunn’s energy and Dunn had been delighted to be able to speak of boats and water again. Tarin wasn’t unwilling to speak of it, but the conversation made him uncomfortable. It was good to be around another person with boats in the soul. They’d spent hours talking and looking over the ship and at the end the conversation came around to making a run. A short one, just a few towns up the river, they could be up there and back in a few weeks. Dunn eagerly accepted the offer and didn’t even haggle over his cut.

It wasn’t until he was halfway back to Tarin’s rooms that he heard the gossip. Word was spreading quickly that Tarin had been killed or mortally wounded last night. There was just enough truth in the stories that it sounded real and Dunn chuckled over it. He laughed as much at their conviction that the swordsman had finally fallen as he did over his own instant worry at seeing the sheet covered body that morning. It was only then that he remembered Shelee and how the gossip would soon reach her. She’d not be laughing.

With Tarin hurt it fell to Dunn to write the woman and let her know he was fine. So he hurried home and was back in Tarin’s rooms before he remembered that Tarin could barely read basic words and had never learned to write. Naturally there’d be no pen, ink or paper in his rooms.

By the time he returned with writing supplies it was afternoon and his mind was firmly stuck on

the coming voyage. He knew what basically had to be said in the letter but no words came to his hand and he sat, trying to focus and failing. He managed to force out a few lines when the door carefully cracked open.

Dunn rose to his feet and drew the short blade Tarin normally wore, the one he'd been so stubborn about retrieving from the dead man that morning. If word was spreading that Tarin was dead, it would only be a matter of time until someone tried to pick over his things. It was sooner than he'd expected but within the realm of reason and Dunn braced himself to shoo away whoever poked in the door.

"Mr. Dunn!" A beautiful blonde woman gasped out. "We didn't know you were back."

"Eve." The name came to his mind instantly, he'd have to be dead to have forgotten her. Eve was beautiful enough to distract most men, but it was her strength and intelligence that had captivated him. "Quiet, he's asleep."

He stepped out of the doorway at her nod and laid the blade back down. She slipped inside and crossed the room on quiet feet. He watched her pass, dressed plainly and still stunning, her hair braided back and her skin glowing. It took only a glance to see Tarin was still breathing, sleeping gently and very much alive.

She returned to Dunn's side and sighed. "I'm glad you're back, we heard an awful rumor, Shelee sent me straight down to see."

"I know, I heard it too. I was just trying to write Miss Morris when you arrived." He waved to the letter and the few lines he'd finished.

"What happened and how's Jolie?"

"Would you," He had one mad moment when he lost himself in her eyes and he had to blink quickly and look away. "Would you care to walk with me a little? I'll tell you what happened and we won't worry about waking him."

Eve paused and it hadn't missed her notice his sincere interest. "I need to get word to Shelee."

He waved to the letter. "You could finish it and I'll have it sent off. Or I could finish it, either way she'll know." He could kick himself for falling over himself around her. It wasn't like him to be swayed at all by beauty.

"I'll finish it, and a walk would be lovely." She smiled, and it wasn't one she used for clients but a real smile, warm and true.

The letter was quickly written in her easy flowing hand and, with one last look for Tarin, she followed Dunn outside. They sent the letter on its way and he offered her his arm, which she casually accepted. They walked side by side, Dunn sharing his adventures south, his time with Jolie and the night with Tarin. She listened and commented freely, the world focused down to the two of them.

"I'm sorry, I haven't eaten. Would you care for some tea?" Dunn asked as they passed a tea shop, one that served small tidbits and had quiet, private tables. Their conversation had slowed to gaps of easy silence.

Her smile was charming. "I would love some, you should have said something. Here I am draining you of all information and you're starving to death."

"It was a sacrifice well worth making."

His sincerity made them both blush and he quickly covered it by moving them inside the tea room and into a small table in a corner. Tea was quickly brought with a plate of small pieces of fruit, cheese and flat bread. They busied themselves with the casual comments of the tea and the china it was served in, and it wasn't until they'd sipped at the hot brew for a few moments before either one was willing to speak further.

"It was good of you to help Tarin, with Jolie."

"I did it as much for Jolie as for Tarin. I'll never tell him this, but the poor child had nightmares for the first few weeks."

"I can understand why, poor thing. You surprised us with how good you were with her. You, a confirmed bachelor."

He smiled. "By necessity, not choice. It's not a good life to be married to a sailor, it's a rare woman willing to share her husband with the sea, even rarer still to find one also willing to look past the collar."

"May I ask?"

Her tone was so careful that he had little doubt to what she referred. "How I came to be a slave?"

"Yes, it's okay if it's something you don't wish to speak of. I understand."

"I don't normally, simply because it's history, but I'm not ashamed. I was born in a collar. I've no idea who my father was, mother always said he was a good man but I'm not sure it's so or even if she knew. Our owner had several ships, I was sent to work on them when I was six."

"And you went from there to the navy?"

"No, he died and his estate was in debt so we all were sold off. I was fifteen and ended up in the harems." That was something he rarely spoke of. "Not like Tarin, I was bought for an ageing lady. She was kind to me."

"And your mother?"

"She died of a fever when I was ten, I was out at sea and didn't get word of it until months after."

"I'm so sorry."

"Thank you, but by that time I barely knew her."

"So, how'd you end up a naval officer? Tarin's always spoken very highly of you, even when you were his commanding officer." She smiled a little and made her tone light, breaking his serious expression. There were few men that could remain glum when Eve cheered up.

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Chapter Five

"My owner had a taste for young, intelligent men. She demanded I be educated and able to amuse her outside the bedroom too, in return she indulged my love of the ocean. She even went so far as to hire tutors to continue my apprenticeship since I couldn't be at sea. When she grew bored with me she took me aside and told me I'd served her well, that she was pleased, but I was getting too old for her. Then she gave me a choice, she said she would sign me over to the navy, she had connections, and I'd have a chance to earn my freedom or she could sell me." He busied himself with pouring more tea into both their cups. "I wasn't a fool, I knew I was marked as a harem slave now. I also knew I had been very lucky to have been purchased by a woman, even a very old one. I wouldn't have made it under other circumstances, so I took my chance in the Navy." He grinned a little at the obvious choice and he left the rest of the years unspoken. "So, I've told you my past, may I ask how you came to be... I mean..."

"You mean how I came to be a whore?"

He blushed a little at that, he hadn't wanted it phrased to directly. "Yes, but not like that. A woman as brave and intelligent as you could have your pick of men, why haven't you married well?"

The bitter look to her eyes melted and she laughed merrily. "Oh, Mr. Dunn, you are the first man to not mention my looks and actually mean to not mention them I think."

"You are beautiful but beauty isn't that rare. Your mind and spirit are much more worthy of being treasured."

His tone was so serious that she stopped laughing and really looked at him. She'd heard every form, every manner and style, of flattery but this time she actually believed it. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He answered with the same level of seriousness. "Please, call me Elorin."

"I will. To answer the question, Shelee saved me years and years ago. I was thirteen and being dragged down the street by my father, he was taking me to be married to a man forty years my senior. Shelee came up and yelled at my father for hurting a child,. He'd beaten me so badly that I was a bruise from head to toe. I don't remember the details too well, she ended up paying him a full crown for me, twice what my husband was willing to pay.

"I learned pretty quickly what she did to earn money. She was tucking every coin aside to get out of the lower city and she never once asked me to do a thing to help. I cleaned and cooked for her but that was it. She hired tutors for us both. I even ran messages to Tarin when we could. She was desperate for money, so I picked a few pockets and the like. I even lured drunk men down dark alleyways and robbed them." She laughed now, lightly over the memories.

"I'll avoid alleys on our walk home."

That made her laugh harder. "You're safe with me, I swear it. I started selling my time with men when I was sixteen, they all wanted my favor but I cared little for them. Figured if they wanted my attention so badly they could give me the coins I wanted. Shelee says I have icewater for blood."

Dunn shook his head. "No, you don't. Why should you care for a man that merely wants to say he had a beautiful woman?"

"True. Well, I gave her every penny I made. In a way she owned me, though I never wore a collar and she never once treated me like a slave. I owed her so much and she asked for nothing in return. She accepted every coin I gave her, saw I wanted for nothing and when she started looking at houses I was brought along. She bought the house we're in now on my say.

"That's the reason I've never married. Shelee raised me to run that house. I even scout for new girls on my own, she still has final say but I've free reign. I can entertain when and if I feel like and I love the day to day running of the Pearl. Shelee is my mother, I'll inherit the Pearl after she's gone. I'll never give that up and any of those rich or titled men that want my hand would make me do so. You believe no woman would share you with the sea, especially with your history, what man would share me with my work and the knowledge of my past?"

The words that came to his mind were censored instantly. They were too bold to speak, they asked too much but he was never a man to back away from a challenge. He judged the tea in her cup to be cool enough not to burn him should she be so offended that it required the tossing of a drink in his face. Dunn drew a deep breath and turned off his caution. "Maybe a man that also has to be shared. Eve, may I see you again?"

Her eyes went cold and a mask went over her face, the openness fled. "Of course, just say when you're free and I'll make sure I have the whole evening for you."

"No, not like that, not professionally. I'd like to take you out to dinner, maybe? I'd like to see you as a man wishing to court a woman, just as friends is fine. I don't expect more."

His handsome face was weathered by wind and sun but his eyes were warm and open. There was such an air of competence, of skill and confidence to him that Eve found him highly attractive but never did she dream he'd ask to court her. No one had ever courted her, not truly, whose simply weren't given that chance. There was such hope in him, such honesty that the ice water inside of her melted.

"I would love that."

The change in Dunn was obvious and Tarin found it the one spot of cheer in his world. He moved with the same confidence and pride that he'd had when Tarin had first met him. In the mornings Dunn would rise and leave early to go to the harbor, Zas was including him in every aspect of preparing a river runner. It was only a matter of time until Zas invited Dunn down to live on the boat. Tarin was surprised he hadn't already. The truth was Zas had and Dunn had refused. Tarin's wounds and injuries were awkward and painful and, for now, he needed an extra hand.

Tarin stuck close to his rooms the first few days after his injuries. He was in no mood or temperament to deal with people and in too much pain to feel like going out. It went without saying how vulnerable he was and, he wasn't willing to take unnecessary risks. His pride didn't like the idea of being killed when he was too hurt to fight back.

It was late afternoon of the fifth day of his injuries that a knock came on his door. Dunn had just arrived home but Tarin waved off his offer to answer it. When he pulled the door open he found three young men staring nervously back at him.

"Yes?" Tarin asked when none of them spoke. He was fairly sure they were some of his new neighbors but he hadn't yet figured out just how many of them were living next door and which of the small parade of men coming and going were going to stay.

They shared an uncertain look before one of them spoke up. "Mr. Morris?" His accent was upper city and while his clothes were old they were well tailored.

"Guilty as charged."

"We live next door."

"Thank you for coming over and telling me."

The young man raised an eyebrow at the tone and quickly rethought his original notions of the swordsmen. "True, we have been rude, not coming over to say hello. Let us make it up to you tonight? We're having some friends in, strictly informal. You know how musicians and artists get when they gather together."

"Drunk?" Tarin offered but softened his tone.

It made the young man laugh. "True, that too, I was thinking loud. Instead of disturbing you I thought it better to invite you."

Tarin didn't miss the look that passed between the other two boys but neither one spoke or protested. They hadn't been stopping by to offer an invitation. "Thank you but I couldn't."

"Nonsense, of course he can." Dunn called out as he came up behind them. "I'll be out tonight or I'd join you as well."

"Sir?" Tarin warned.

"Don't worry boys, he'll be there. I promise." Dunn smiled widely and laid a hand on Tarin's good shoulder, his sword arm.

The one who'd spoken smiled warmly. "Good, we'll look forward to it."

Dunn waved goodbye as he shut the door and was smiling with smug humor at the dumb founded look on Tarin's face.

"Why'd you go and do a stupid thing like that? There's no way I'm going to that party. And what's this about you going back out? You need to tell Zas he isn't giving you a big enough cut to run you ragged at all hours." He rubbed absently at the burn under his shirt, it was healing well and hadn't been overly serious to start with but it was starting to itch.

"I'm not going back to Zas tonight. I'm having dinner with Eve."

That stopped Tarin in his tracks. "Our Eve? Shelee's Eve?"

"The very one."

"Dinner you said?"

Dunn would have laughed at the continued look of confusion but held himself in check. "Just dinner."

"I'm speechless."

"And stunned enough to not kill me for making you go to this party?"

"That too. You and Eve, huh?"

"We're friends."

"What do you mean make me go to this party?"

Dunn did laugh now, in good spirits. "When was the last time you went to a party?"

A muscle twitched in the swordsman's jaw and the perplexed look fled his eyes. "I'm not the party sort." He answered coldly.

Dunn could have kicked himself. In that moment he'd forgotten that Tarin had attended many parties when he wore a collar, not as a guest but as part of the entertainment. "It won't be like that. You owe a word of thanks to one of them anyway. Just go over, have something to eat and come home. They'll get to say they had someone famous and dangerous at their party and you get to act the part of a good neighbor."

"It's just, well, what would I say? I kill people for a living, it's not what I'd call socially acceptable conversation." His voice grew strained and the distance between himself and the world around him reflected in it.

"Just go and be yourself. Say what you will, if they get too nosy leave. I'm betting boredom will drive you home first."

"You're sure about this?"

Tarin had been isolated and distant when he'd served on the Dream. Dunn had almost gone so far as to order the young man to shore a few times but some of the crew had saved him from doing so. They'd occasionally talk the former slave into joining them on their leave. When they returned, they spoke of his quiet reserve and careful manner, that even getting him drunk didn't open him up any. For the most part Dunn had watched how the too pretty sailor avoided all social contact and had understood instantly it was fear and lack of experience.

The years had done little to change that. The fear was still there, lurking in his eyes and there was little Dunn could do about that. He could do something about experience and the group of young artists was a great place to start. Dunn had promised Captain Chisholm to look after Tarin and he felt as bound by that word today as before. Tarin needed social contact, especially with the emotional wounds he'd taken lately, but Dunn knew the man would never willingly jump into anything. He would have to be pushed.

"Go, and try to enjoy yourself. Go for my sake, Eve will worry about you all night, picture you sitting at home alone. If I can tell her you're out as well she won't be thinking about you. Help me out here." His voice was sympathetic and asking for help and both men knew it was a ploy.

Ploy or no, Tarin knew he would just sit and think himself into depression. What neither were willing to mention, to even actively think about, was that today was an anniversary of Ana's death. It had been three months ago to the night. The truth was, he didn't want to sit alone tonight and he didn't want to remember.

"If this goes badly I'm blaming you."

"So noted."

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Chapter Six

Dunn bathed quickly and left in clean new clothes looking strong and commanding. He hid his nerves well, he'd spent a lifetime doing such, but Tarin always knew. It didn't matter that this time Dunn was nervous about making a good impression and not over a bad storm or a coming battle, Tarin saw past his exterior as few could.

"Say hello to Eve for me." Was all Tarin said as Dunn tossed his cloak about his shoulders.

"I will. Try to have a good time tonight?"

Tarin nodded. "I will."

Once Dunn had gone, Tarin bathed and shaved for the second time that day. He carefully treated, checked and tended to his wounds, hissing in pain. The bruises across his body were a fading purple red, but hadn't yet gotten to the sick yellowish shade. The spots of the worst bruising were still horribly tender painful and would be for days more. As soon as he was convinced none of the wounds had gotten any worse he bandaged them back up and dressed as quickly as he could. The last thing he did before he left was to buckle on his sword. He was pretty defenseless at the moment, even with it, but he'd become almost paranoid about being caught without it.

At the bottom of the steps he could hear voices and music. He hadn't climbed them since he saw Ana's mother that day. They had spoken briefly afterwards, before Mrs. Grenk had moved her family out, but she had sought him out, not the other way around. It took a moment to make up his mind but with a held breath he climbed the side stairs to the light and life above.

He knocked and didn't have to wait long in the lamp light. The door swung open and the young man he'd spoken to a few hours earlier stood in the door way. "Mr. Morris! Come in, come in!" He swung a hand out to beckon the handsome swordsman inside.

Tarin saw the motion and saw something slender and long in the man's hand. He skittered backward and his good hand reached quickly for the hilt of his blade.

"Easy." It took a moment for the boy to notice that Tarin wasn't focused on him but his hand. He slowly moved it into the light. "It's just my flute. Sorry about that, didn't mean to startle you."

"Occupational hazard." He eased his hand away from his hilt and relaxed his guard. "I'm not too late am I?"

"Not at all, but if you hadn't shown I'd have lost a bet." He grinned widely and stuck out his hand. "Calin Freese, I don't think I introduced myself earlier"

Tarin accepted the hand and shook it firmly. The boy had all the manner and sound of one raised to wealth and the name gave him away. "Jois Freese's son?"

"Former son, you know my father?"

"We've had occasion to meet in the past." The boy had some of his father in his looks, the same

square jaw and dark brown eyes but none of the father's raw strength.

"Which in your line of work means either you were hired to kill him or hired by him to kill someone. Please come in, come in, we're lurking from everyone else."

Tarin allowed himself to be drawn inside. The entrance opened into the main room and it was filled with people, all young and most male. A pair played music in the corner and most were at least half listening, they clumped together in chatter and common interests and Tarin suddenly felt the odd man out.

"Everyone!" Calin called out and the room fell silent when eyes turned to see who'd arrived. "Everyone, I'd like to introduce you to our neighbor, Mr. Tarin Morris. Mr. Morris, there are five of us living here, myself and Eant, Gengore, Henris, and Ishvan hiding over there by the fire." He pointed to each one in turn. "The rest are just here to eat our food."

There was called out greetings and a few waves but the music started up again and the conversation soon followed. He allowed Calin to lead him around for a bit, allowed himself to be introduced to their friends. Finally when he had Calin momentarily alone he managed to ask what he'd been trying to ask all night.

"Which one of you passed on my message the other day to my uncle?"

"That would have been Ishvan. He's always up at dawn, he's from the Shoker Commune, makes his ways a bit strange but he's a good sort." Calin had maneuvered the swordsman over to where the quiet boy sat watching everything.

"I'm told you're the one that carried word I'd been hurt to my uncle?" Tarin spoke carefully, the boy had a timid air. A cane leaned by his one leg and his other was strapped to a well made brace and Tarin figured that had a lot to do with his shyness.

"Aye sir, it was me." He met Tarin's eyes and the odd color made him quickly look away.

It was a reaction Tarin was well used to. "Thank you for that. You did me a service."

"It was nothing, I was glad to help."

The boy was so shy it made Tarin uncomfortable and as soon as he'd said his thanks he let Calin lead him off again. Eventually the bulk of the crowd faded off and away and the music faded into low, almost mournful notes. Tarin accepted the hunk of bread and cheese offered him and nibbled on it as he sipped the cheap, watery wine they had poured. He let them talk around him as they spoke of people he didn't know but Tarin didn't mind. It was enough to sit and watch their interactions.

"So what's it really like to be a swordsman?" Calin asked in his upper city accent.

Tarin wasn't sure how to answer the question and he covered his uncertainty by sipping at his wine. Before he could answer another boy spoke up and answered for him. "I bet it's brutal!"

"Brutal is Sulliviks creation class!" Eant tossed back. "I swear I'll never please that man, every ballad or jig I write he hates."

The first boy shook his head. "Stop writing that love song drivel. Sullivik hates love songs, he calls them weakness and a cheat. He told my class we'd have the rest of our lives to write such jabber."

"So what does he want? What more is there than love?"

"Death, tragedy, he's a sucker for a tragic song. The only lovers he wants to hear about in his class are star crossed ones. Use an old legend or make one up, better yet use a bit of current gossip. These rooms should inspire you, write a song about Analeia Grenk. Mr. Morris, you were there that night, the only one still alive that knows what really happened to her. Help Eant pass his composition class and tell us what happened?" The boy asked lightly but all eyes turned to the silent swordsmen. They all knew the official story and the whispered undercurrent of gossip that contradicted it.

Tarin's blood went cold but he caught the boys look and made him look away. He answered carefully. "There's nothing I can say that you don't already know."

"Aw come on, you have to know what really happened." Calin asked, smelling a really good story to build a song on.

For a moment he saw again her blood on his hands. "There's nothing I can add. It wouldn't make a good song."

There was some more bantering about what made a good tragic ballad. Tarin gladly let them go back to the technical side of the conversation rather than the personal. Soon however they remembered him sitting, listening among them and were asking him for other stories. They were like any other group of young men, eager for the blood thirsty details of a swordsmen's life.

They didn't want the truth. None of them wanted to know about the fear or the work that went into staying sharp so you didn't have to be as afraid. He wasn't sure he could explain to them how in a fight he wasn't taking notes but letting the violence and skill use him, flow thru him. Songs and their singers couldn't ever translate how much blood a human had and how it got onto and into everything nor could it properly describe the smells, sounds or feel of the kill. Frankly, Tarin didn't like thinking about it too closely, it was an unpleasant subject. He knew enough to not try to explain what his life was really like, not to them anyway.

So he was careful with how he answered their questions. He spoke quietly and soon they'd wandered the conversation away from him again. Tarin rose from the group to try to find the bathing room and its necessary facilities and none of the small group that remained bothered to stop him.

On his way back to the group Tarin's eyes fell on one of the doors. He walked over too it and instinctually traced the letters carved into the wood. He'd never been inside Ana's room, now it wasn't her's any longer. He touched the carved ANA'S and could tell from the height that she must have done it when she was still a girl. It was very much like her to stand on tip toes and dull a blade to claim something as her own.

"You can go in if you'd like." The shy Ishvan said from behind Tarin. "It's okay, it's my room now." He limped past Tarin and opened the door, his weight balanced heavily on his cane.

Tarin followed almost without any conscious thought. He was drawn into her room with a morbid fascination and a childish hope to somehow feel closer to her. Ishvan moved carefully on his clumsy leg and lit the lamps that sat waiting for use while trying to stay out of the swordsmen's way.

The room was small, a narrow hard bed was pressed to one wall, another held a small wardrobe. They may have been her's but there was no saying. The window was small but large enough that she had regularly gone in and out of it as surely as if it were a door. The room had changed, it wasn't her's any longer. Sketch books lay around, boxes of pens and pencils were carefully placed on a small table. Brushes sat in small jars, pigments were treasured in their little pots and an easel stood under a stained fabric cover, the shape of a canvas showing underneath. The room didn't smell like Ana but rather had the sharp smell of oil paints and the dusty smell of charcoal. She was really gone and he was a fool to think he might find her here.

Ishvan watched the handsome swordsman's face for any reaction, any hint but none came. "You were close to her?"

That drew out a reaction, Tarin's eyes hardened and some of the killer showed for a moment. "Not close enough. Thank you." He bowed his head and left.

In the main room he made his apologies. "Thank you for inviting me."

Calin hopped to his feet. "You aren't leaving are you? We've just scared off the riff raff, it's just friends now. You won't stay?"

Tarin shook his head and waved slightly at his arm in it's sling. "I need to go." He moved quickly to the door and didn't stop until his own was shut behind him. Once back in the quiet of his own rooms the weight of her death suddenly felt raw and new. He leaned against his door and allowed himself to grieve.

The days melted together into weeks. Dunn saw a great deal of Eve until the day finally came when he said good bye to both her and Tarin and set off up the river with Zas Bumpion. It was difficult to hide his joy in being back on the water, it was greater than his sadness at leaving his friends.

It was about that time that Shelee stopped sending her girls down to tend to him. So with Dunn gone and no company, he was alone again for the first time in months. The solitude was comforting and he felt like he could breathe again. When his arm came out of the sling he felt more confident about venturing about. It would be a while before he felt ready to take another hire but he didn't need to hover so close to home.

So he went out and listened to gossip or played Capture with Owen at the Sheep. He had dinner with Shelee and discussed some of his worries about the future and then had to sit and listen to her lengthy advice. He spent his time strengthening his damaged shoulder and sharpening his skills and simply let life worry about itself.

The weather was sunny with a damp feel of spring, Tarin was coming home from visiting Shelee and listening to a rather stunning idea she'd proposed. One of her plans for his future included having him buy a failing brothel. Shelee would put up some of the money and move one of her skilled girls like Eve in to run it. He'd make money without having to do anything. It would allow Shelee to expand and it was almost a sure bet, it was something he'd have to give more than just a passing thought.

He stopped in his tracks and his thoughts scattered. There was one sound he was painfully attuned to and far too used to hearing when he walked by and that was the sound of mocking. Tarin listened for a moment and decided it didn't have the right flavor to have been about him but it was near by. It was curiosity that caused him to scan the early evening streets but it was a face he knew that caused him to stare.

A few dozen paces away was a cross street, little used but well maintained. Off to one side near a fountain that was dusty dry and unworking was a small group of four boys, all about the same age and not yet able to claim to be men. They'd blocked the passage of a fifth boy and it was this one that Tarin knew on sight. The young artist Ishvan, one of his new neighbors stood with his shoulders slumped forward.

As Tarin watched they pushed him and he stumbled back on his bad leg and cane. The young man didn't fight back and kept his eyes down, he tried to walk around the small group but they reformed and boxed him in. Words were exchanged and there was more mocking laughter but

the wind had shifted and carried the sound away from Tarin.

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Chapter Seven

It meant nothing to Tarin, he owed the boy nothing. It didn't matter, it had nothing to do with him. They weren't mocking him, he should just keep on walking. It was all very logical and proper but it made him feel sick to see one of the boys pull at the pack Ishvan wore, the strap tore and the contents of sketchbooks and supplies came tumbling out into the dirt.

It didn't matter to him that the group kicked at the books and when Ishvan awkwardly dove to the dirt to shelter the paper they kicked at him as well. People were bullied and killed every day in the lower city, it didn't matter to Tarin. It wasn't his place to save them. It wasn't his responsibility. He should just be happy it wasn't him being shoved around again. He wasn't a hero, or a fool, he needed to just go home and not worry about it.

Tarin wrapped his hand around Ishvan's cane and stopped the boy that had stolen it from bringing it down onto the young artist's back. The bully and his friends stopped laughing and turned to greet who ever had been crazy enough to bother them. The fight went out of their eyes when they saw who it was on the other end of the cane.

"Don't." Was all Tarin said but it was enough, the angry displeasure in his eyes said the rest. "Go on now." He didn't even have to raise his voice to scurry the group away. The boldest of them glanced to the sword Tarin wore and weighed his chances but in the end he left with his friends.

When they'd disappeared from sight and Tarin was fairly sure they weren't just going to circle back around he knelt down beside Ishvan. "Let me help." He picked up one of the folders that had spilled out.

Ishvan frowned and pulled the folder out of the swordsman's hands. "I've got it." He was dusting off books and papers before roughly shoving them back inside his carry all sack.

Tarin understood the source of the anger. "You should stand up to them. Bullies are cowards."

The boy's long fingers tied the sack tightly shut and he pulled his cane from Tarin's hand. "I'll take it under consideration." His voice was tight and he grimaced as he pushed his way back to his feet.

"They won't stop until they know you'll stop them."

"Look at me? Do you think this is the first time I've been pushed around?" His face was flushed with shame and suppressed, helpless anger but he snapped freely at the swordsmen. As soon as

he had his balance back he started walking home again at a steady pace.

Tarin stood for a moment in the dusty cross street a little stunned at how Ishvan spoke so to him. The boy was making good progress down the street when Tarin shook his head and laughed at himself. He'd run off again to do a good deed and the good deed hadn't been happy with him. It was very appropriate.

He hurried and caught up to his neighbor. "It's not easy being different but you don't have to put up with that."

"Why are you following me? I can make it home on my own." Ishvan tried to go faster but there was no way he could outpace the swordsmen's long legs. Tarin just followed, silent as a shade at his side. "It's easy for you, I stand up for myself and I'm picking dirt out of my teeth. I doubt the great swordsman Tarin Morris has to worry about the snot being kicked out of him when he stands up for himself for being different. Hell, you don't even have to raise your voice and they almost burst into tears! I don't need you telling me what to do."

"Why weren't you with your friends?"

"Why do you care?"

"Why weren't you with your friends?" He softened his voice but kept his accent strong.

"I wouldn't go so far as to call them friends." He sighed and glanced to the man following him. "They take different classes from me, we work at different times. They aren't bad people. Are you following me home?"

"I'm headed that way, you have a problem with my walking with you?"

Ishvan shook his head. "It's a public sidewalk but I'm not that sort."

"Not that sort of what?"

"I'm not a fluffer, I know I'm in the art school but it's not my thing."

Tarin carefully kept his voice steady. "You think that's why I helped you?"

"No offense intended, I mean I'm sure anyone would be flattered but well, you aren't my type."

"I've killed men for making such assumptions about me."

Ishvan shrugged. "So kill me for it. I saw you that night, I know the stories about you and Analeia Grenk are true."

"Jeses, you're a nervy one for an artist."

"I'm not the coward you or those boys think I am, my folks just raised me to pick my battles. Besides, I don't think you'd kill and unarmed cripple boy, it would ruin your reputation."

They walked on in silence. It wasn't until they were on their block that Tarin broke it. "Well, you aren't what I expected." He offered his hand to the boy and it earned him an uncertain look. "Ishvan?" He fished for a last name.

"Ishvan Ovelent."

"Ishvan Ovelent, it was nice running into you." He kept his tone dry and sarcastic and wandered off before the boy could react. It would take only a few words to the right ears to promise the boy

was left alone. It didn't settle well on Tarin that the boy should be harassed simply for his handicap.

The summer was shaping up to be a hot one already, it was still early in the season but the air was hot and dry. It had dried the blood sprayed onto Tarin's clothes almost before the fight was over. There was little hope of getting the stains out and saving the outfit so he hadn't been in a hurried rush to get home.

The fight was typical of the early summer. As the wealthiest members of the upper city started to get hot but before it was socially acceptable to escape to the cooler countryside, their collective tempers and intelligence grew short. There was little Tarin could complain about, Miss Very Abppelson was a lovely young woman and the only child of the widowed Lord Abppelson. She was set to inherit a staggering sum of money once her ill father passed on and as of yet hadn't found any of the young men drooling for her hand acceptable.

The young men were all of good breeding and of differing fortunes so it was natural that her indifference to their charms was insulting. They'd collectively gathered and made it known they would prove their worth. A day was set and an open call was made to the groups of young men. Duels would be fought, strictly to the level of honor or first blood, and whichever swordsman won would prove the man who hired him was worthy of such a distinguished young lady.

As soon as word had spread to the lower city of the ridiculous fight Tarin tripled his fees and still he'd spent the better part of the last month declining offers. He let his scorn for the public fight be known, and openly made it clear that in his thoughts none of the young men were worth fighting for. It caused a minor scandal and a flurry of showy hires, none of the fine gentlemen wished to be seen as weak for having been mocked by a mere swordsman.

The truth of it was that Tarin had been hired within hours of the silly arrangement and at double his tripled price. There were only three requirements to the breath taking fee, the first was that the name of the man who hired him, indeed the very fact that he had been hired, must be kept hidden until after the fight. The second was that he must insult and scorn the suitors that sought to hire him, he was ordered to do everything in his power to annoy their pride. The final command was simple and the most difficult to promise, when the fight came, he must win.

The afternoon had arrived and Tarin had delivered on all three of his promises. Blood had been spilled but none of the swordsmen hired had lost life or limb though one or two would be out of commission for several more weeks. The crowds had gone wild at Tarin's arrival, demanding to know who he fought for and delighting that he withheld the information.

It was the perfect entertainment for an early summer day. It was over a plain but wealthy enough to be called beautiful young woman's fickle affections, no one had to die, and the scandal it caused would keep them all, upper and lower city, gossiping for weeks. It had been a grand exhibition and Tarin had truly enjoyed it, even with the cheering and gasping crowd. He'd enjoyed it even more when he'd won and been allowed to announce that he'd been hired by Miss Very Abppelson herself. Proving to all that she and she alone was worthy to find a husband for herself.

The day, in fact the past few weeks, had gone so well that when the fighting was over Tarin had allowed himself to join some of the other swords at the Sheep for a few drinks. Spring had definitely brought better times and summer was following in its footsteps.

Dunn had finished his first and second river run and now on the third he was acting Captain. Bumpion had spoken to him about buying him out and Dunn had been glowing with pride ever since. He'd thanked Tarin for arranging the job the last time he was in port but Dunn hadn't once suspected that the coin to allow him to buy the sleek and delightful river runner had come from

Tarin. Tarin had protested weakly that he'd done nothing but mention his name to Bumpion and than merely accepted the thanks, knowing to deny it too hard or to accept the truth of it too easily would make his former commanding officer suspicious.

The renewed confidence and strength in Dunn had gone a long way to his courting Eve. While she wasn't the most celebrated whore in the city, it was merely because she didn't desire to be. Her name was spoken of highly and often and few could compare with her sheer beauty yet she saw less and less of her clients and was reported to be seen out quite often with a handsome former naval officer. The pair were discreet and careful to down play their growing affection but word did spread.

It pleased Tarin, even if their uncertain and quiet happiness made his own grief sharp in response. The pain of his loss was fading. It was a dull ache now instead of the stabbing crippling pain of before. He found it was an ache he desired, one he held dear and sheltered it close. It changed him, mellowed him and he even found as summer bloomed that he didn't even mind the rowdy and often noisy young men living next door.

They'd invited him to other parties and gatherings and for the most part Tarin had declined. It was a world he didn't belong in and he understood that even if they didn't but he grew fond of the music that seemed as common on the air as birds. They took to practicing out in the yard now that the winter and early spring rains had dried up and Tarin could sit on his balcony and warm himself in the sun and just listen.

One afternoon he'd come home to find Eant struggling with a song about Analeia Grenk. The boy had paled visibly and tried to look invisible when he saw the dark look that had crossed the swordsman's face. Tarin's first instinct was to stop the boy, threaten him and see to it the song was never created, but he was never a man to react strictly on emotion.

He'd gone over to the boy and the poor fellow had nearly fainted in fear. "May I join you?" Tarin had been careful to keep his tone gentle and the boy responded to that.

"Of course." He spoke with the working class upper city accent but Tarin knew little about his past.

"You've talent at that. I've been paying attention."

Eant was uncertain over the praise but a smile flashed across his face and turned his plain, almost delicate features pretty. "Thank you."

"I was going to tell you it would be a bad idea to make a ballad about that event."

The boy studied the swordsman carefully and saw no threat. "But?"

"But it wouldn't do any good, other people are doing it anyway and I can't kill everyone." He deliberately made his tone light but his eyes were too serious.

Eant laughed nervously.

"You're a clever young man and more mature than you let on. So I'm going to trust you, this is not to be taken lightly, do you understand?"

"I believe so, sir."

Tarin had sighed and glanced around once more but they were still alone. "Ana would have loved to have been in a song. May I hear what you have so far?"

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Chapter Eight

The boy flushed but nodded. He began to pick out the basic melody on the small finely crafted guitar he held. There was a place or two where he faltered, the words still clumsy and the tune raw and uncertain, but the foundation was well crafted. In places the music and the boy's clear tenor voice were haunting and he'd guessed enough of the truth that the open reflection of events was a knife in Tarin's heart.

The song faded away, the gentle air held the final notes as if unwilling to allow the music to die. Eant looked up, feeling shy and awkward with the handsome swordsman sitting so silently. "It's still really rough." He apologized.

Tarin nodded. "Abrasive in parts." He raised an eyebrow and his accent was sharp. It made the boy blush and look away. "But it has promise, some of the melody is lovely. It just needs work." He drew a breath and thought carefully.

"Thank you. No one's heard it yet, no one knows I'm working on it. If you'd like, I'll see to it that it stays that way." He'd intended it to be presented for his fourth year final exam. If he could get the song in his head to come out properly it would be an epic, he could feel it, but that was before he saw the carefully hidden pain in the swordsman's eyes.

"Don't be absurd, it could be grand. She'd have loved it. You've some of the story wrong." Tarin began carefully and he kept a sharp eye around them. No one was close enough to overhear his softly spoken story, but the musician and his eyes were wide with the sudden trust being placed into his care.

Tarin spoke about Ana and how she'd pursued him, he told of their friendship and the love that had grown unbidden between them. Out came how deeply he loved her, how beautiful she was even if everyone said she was plain, and without any choice he told the musician of that night. The only exception was that the child kidnapped and used as the bait of blackmail was the daughter of a friend, not his own, but the rest he told truly. For the first time he spoke of that night, of the horror at seeing her murdered, of his rage at those that had set the course into motion. He tried to explain that those that had planned the blackmail would have been dealt with but the manner he used was from his pain and grief. It hurt to speak of that night but at the same time it made him feel oddly comforted to know someone else knew and understood.

"Do you understand why I'm telling you this?" He hardened his voice.

The boy nodded slowly, his eyes wet with unshed tears. He had guessed correctly over much of that night but he'd never have guessed the depths of the cold swordsman's emotion. "Yes, I do. Would you like final approval?" He did understand, there were things that needed to be said and some that needed to be implied and plenty that needed to be left out as too personal to include,

but it all needed to be known to create the ballad he heard in his head.

Tarin shook his head. "No, as far as I'm concerned we never spoke. If you say we did, I'll deny it. If you assume too much or dishonor my trust, well, I won't be amused." There was no need to overly threaten the boy, he understood.

"Mr. Morris, I'll do right by her, I swear it. Thank you."

He'd left the boy alone under the tree in the backyard. Eant looked a touch bewildered at the faith placed in him, but his eyes were already glowing with the fevered look of an artist. Tarin would have been happy if nothing had ever been spoken of it again but a few days later Calin stopped him outside their building.

"Mr. Morris, Mr. Morris, a word sir?" The boy's tone had become more respectful around the swordsman, a tone used with another upper city equal.

Tarin paused and waited for the musician to join him. "Yes?"

"I just wished to say thank you. For what you did for Eant."

"I haven't done anything."

Calin waved it off. "So he says but I'm not a fool, I know him better than anyone in the world." He smiled and chuckled warmly. "He's the reason my father disowned me and he's worth it. I can play, learn the technical side of music and learn to express with it, but Eant is music. He's a genius, he breathes melody and lyric. I've seen it in him, our teachers have, but he never has. That is, until you trusted him. He's confident for the first time. Thank you is too shallow a phrase for what you've done but it's all I can offer."

The young man's serious tone and solid eyes caused the flippant response to die unspoken. Tarin merely nodded. "You're welcome."

"I think you'll be pleased. It's shaping up to be unforgettable."

He'd heard the final song a few weeks later and it was sad and haunting. It had captured a tragic sense of their love and in this version Tarin wasn't merely a cold killer but worthy of Ana's affections. While it made him ache to hear it, the song was so beautiful that he didn't mind the pain. By summer, the Swordsman's Lover was being sung on every street corner, in every parlor and tavern and had gained the young composer a fair measure of fame. It went without saying that it added to Tarin's own vast reputation.

So it was that he arrived home after winning Miss Very Abppelson's fights and from a few drinks at the Sheep feeling contented. The warmth of the day was soothing and the late afternoon sun made the dappled cool shade a pleasant contrast. The grass was growing up green and thick and the spring dampness was leaving the ground.

"Mr. Morris."

He turned and spotted the source of the voice sitting under their yard's tree. He'd known the speaker, the crippled artist Ishvan, without having to spot him. The boy had been friendly but not intrusive, sharing a word or two with Tarin as they came and went but staying out of the way. That seemed to be the artist's general approach to everyone and Tarin found himself the most comfortable around Ishvan of any of the young men.

"Hello, Ishvan, what can I do for you?" Tarin had spoken carefully about the young crippled artist living in his building and word had spread. Since then no one had risked the swordsman's anger by threatening the boy, and whether Ishvan knew of it Tarin couldn't say.

Ishvan pulled himself off the ground and limped quickly over to meet Tarin. He offered a roll of papers tied securely shut. "I was at the fight this afternoon. I've never seen you work before, you were amazing. Here, for you."

Tarin accepted the roll of paper and untied the cord. What unrolled was a well done series of sketches of the afternoon's events. Ishvan had skill, the scenes were carefully selected and captured the fights well. The faces in the crowd had expression and form; the primary figures were detailed and well crafted. Tarin glanced over the papers and saw himself in the various fights he'd performed and saw the slight look of embarrassment he'd worn when Miss Abppelson had placed a kiss on his cheek for winning in her name.

He shook his head in amusement. "These are good."

"Thank you. I was approached by a man from the Gloucester Word, they wanted to turn them into wood cuts and print it in their paper. Offered me a half crown for them, but I told them I couldn't."

"Did they offer to publish it with your name?"

Ishvan shook his head. "Oh no, they never do that."

"You were right to refuse than."

"No, I refused because it was just a form study and, well, if anyone should have them it should be you. It's not my best work, just quick sketches."

"You're an idiot." He kept his tone light and carefully handed back the sketches.

"Sir?"

"Take these directly to the Word. Tell them you want published full credit and you want a full crown for the series."

Ishvan floundered, the idea was crazy. "I can't, I'm nobody, they didn't even give Jimes Ortune published credit."

"Then he's a fool too. Trust me, they've made a fortune publishing the gossip of challenges and duels, this is what sells their paper. They need things just like this. Better yet, do you write?"

"Some yes, why?"

"Offer to write a companion piece to match the stories, not a gossip events story but as an eye witness to the fights. If your memory's as good as your eye you won't have any trouble. Sell the sketches and the story as a package and ask for two crowns. If they fuss, remind them that the vast amount of their sales go to the working classes on the hill and they'd love to hear one of their own as an eye witness account. They'll fuss at the price you want but don't go lower than a crown and a half. They can afford it."

"Mr. Morris, I can't, I'm nobody, I,"

"And you'll always be nobody if you think like that. Remember, I'm famous, I get offers from writers and artists all the time wanting to interview me or some such. They're willing to pay way more than two crowns, so my name must be worth something. Go on now." He shoosed at the boy.

"You're sure?"

"Yes, now move."

"Okay." He nodded but his tone wasn't convinced.

Tarin stood and watched as the young man turned to go. A final thought occurred to him as the boy gathered up his things from the yard. "Ishvan?"

"Yes sir?"

"I'm having dinner with my Aunt. The Pearl's only a few blocks from the Word's offices. Come by when you're done, have dinner with us? I want to hear what they say."

Ishvan felt himself blushing but he nodded. No one turned down a chance to have dinner with Tarin Morris or a chance to be invited to the Pink Pearl. He'd be crazy to refuse but he'd never been inside a brothel before. "I will sir, thank you."

Tarin took the steps to his room two at a time and once inside he gathered up clean clothes swiftly. He bathed and shaved, scrubbing the afternoons sweat, blood and dirt from his skin. This time he hadn't been hurt, but his body was grateful for the hot water and he soaked the aches from his shoulder and back. Before he left he tossed his soiled clothes into the tub and ran cold water on them. A little light scrubbing showed they may not have been as ruined as he first thought. His laundry lady was amazing and if there was any hope at all she'd save them, but it couldn't hurt to soak them a bit now. He dressed quickly and combed out his damp hair before pulling on his boots and strapping on his sword and knife. When he left his rooms he was in good spirits.

Juidth greeted him warmly as always. Her scarred face twisted instantly into a lovely smile and she wiped her hands on her apron before coming over to pat his arm. She asked after the day's work and he answered her kindly, the gentle give and take of Judith was always welcome. When her questions were satisfied she shooed him back to the parlor.

Shelee didn't stand up and greet him when he joined her in the parlor but poured a second cup of tea for him. "Hello." He smiled and accepted the hot brew before sitting next to her. "How's the day going?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Well, you didn't tell me you were fighting in that stupid tournament."

He shrugged. "It wasn't important. It wasn't a serious fight."

"I know, I was watching."

"I didn't see you."

"We were invited to watch from one of the buildings."

"We? So you were working as well." He thought for a moment and then smiled. "It wouldn't have to do with the Durkin Gentleman's Capture Club, now would it?" The building over looked the square that had been selected for the fight and the membership was exclusive.

"Correct as always. They paid a tidy fee to have a dozen of my girls twitter and gasp beside their members. You about stopped my heart the way you stumbled against Bork." She smoothed the silk of her dress and hid the look of delight in her eyes. It had been a pleasure to see him fight without having to worry about him being killed.

"Bork's no threat. I was paid well to make a show of it. By the way, before I forget, I've invited someone to have dinner with us, is that okay?"

"Of course." She answered carefully and controlled her hope. "May I ask who to expect?" It was unlikely he was involved with someone else so soon, but not impossible.

"It's not like that." He scolded, seeing right through her. "It's just one of the artists that moved in next to me. He's a good sort and was going to be in the area anyway."

"And?" There was always more than just friendliness to Tarin, Shelee knew that well.

"And, he's a really good artist. You've been complaining about the time it'll take to commission a portrait of you and some of your girls. He's affordable and I've seen his work."

"Does he know?"

"Of course not, I'm not even sure he'll show. He's from the Shoker Commune."

That made her laugh. "The poor dear will die of embarrassment."

Tarin didn't laugh. "Maybe, but there's more to him than he's showing."

"Oh?"

"Nothing dangerous, it's just, around most people he's typical Shoker--shy, reserved, soft spoken, controlled--but around me he speaks his mind. He was even short with me one day, angry."

"Well, you do have that effect on people."

That made him grin. "It's more than my charming personality. I think he hides behind his manners."

Shelee shrugged. "If you say he's no threat then I'll not worry about him. I've news for you."

"Oh?"

"I believe I've found a house to buy. It's several blocks away, far enough that it won't cut into our traffic but close enough to allow easy movement between the two. The lady who owns it now is revolting, she drinks her profits. The house itself is in disrepair but it's in a good location and has the potential to have a private back garden." A private garden was something she'd always wanted, not only for the idea of a place for a formal afternoon tea but so many of her clients wished to entertain in an outdoor setting when the weather permitted.

"And the staff?"

"Is not up to my standards." This was a touchy area and Shelee approached it carefully. "She uses slaves." It was acceptable but most men preferred a free woman, one working of her own will. "I've spoken to her about the sale of the house and she was receptive, but I can't do a thing with her women. Their treatment has been unkind and it's taken the joy from their work." That was putting it delicately, the women were battered, broken shells in comparison to the lively happy women Shelee hired.

"What are their ages?" Tarin understood what Shelee wasn't saying as much as what she was.

This was the question she'd hoped he wouldn't ask. "The oldest is a crone in the kitchens, she's shriveled and white haired and didn't know her age. She's got two children working for her, both girls, one's six and the other's nine. Both are children to the workers, apparently she's been selling off their offspring when they have them but these two she kept because their mothers

were once pretty." She saw the cold look in his eyes and how the good mood he'd worn had faded.

"And the workers?"

She sighed. "Five of them, the oldest is thirty four, then twenty eight, twenty six, nineteen and thirteen."

"Jeses sake."

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Chapter Nine

"The youngest two grew up in her house, she's since sold off their mothers."

Tarin was silent for a long moment. "What will she do with them if we buy the house?"

"I don't know, if I were her I'd sell off the oldest and keep the kitchen girls and the two youngest workers. Maybe start over with them." It was the cold truth and she wasn't in the habit of lying to him. "I know what you're thinking but we can't afford to buy them all. Besides, she'll just buy new slaves, she's a leech."

"How much would it take?"

"Tarin it won't matter."

"Don't worry about her, if we totally buy her out she'll quietly retire all together. How much?"

She knew that tone and knew he was too stubborn to fight with. Her only hope would be that he'd not threaten the woman directly, leeches still had teeth. "She wants four thousand crowns for the house and everything in it, another thousand for her slaves."

"That's absurd. The ages and such you described aren't worth a collective hundred crowns."

"That's pointless. Most of my money is tied up in investments. It's going to take hundreds of crowns to get the house back into any sort of order. I can come up with maybe two thousand crowns, maybe."

"Don't worry about that, I can have four thousand crowns to you by tomorrow if you need it."

Shelee choked on her swallow of tea. "You're joking right?"

"No."

"Bloody hell Tarin, where'd you get four thousand crowns from and why do you have it just laying around?" Her lower city accent crept into her voice.

"Shelee, you've seen how I live. I don't spend much. I've made at least a hundred crowns every month for the past four years, some times a great deal more than that a month but never less." He hadn't really thought about how wealthy he actually was, not in real terms.

"I had no idea, I knew you were paid well but not like that."

He shrugged. "I've six hundred crowns in trust for Jolie, the trust will make money on it's own and she'll be wealthy when she comes of age. I also just spent fifteen hundred crowns buying out Zas Bumpion."

"Dunn doesn't know?"

"And won't know, I'd like to keep it that way. I've got over a thousand crowns in other small loans and such, I make a profit on most of those but that wasn't ever the reason I loaned out the money. In fact, I'd like to buy Eve a share in this new house. We can set up terms and she can pay it back but if you've no objections, I'd like her to have a stake in it. You were thinking of having her run it, weren't you?"

"I was, yes, if you held no objections but why buy her into it?"

"Because she should have a stake in it and, well, she was always kind to me. When you'd send her with a word for me and that time you smuggled me sugar cookies, she was always kind. She didn't have to be but she was and that meant a great deal. Just make sure she accepts the offer, she's earned it." He fused with his tea to hide how uncomfortable the subject made him.

"She'll accept it, she's not stupid."

"No, she's not. Have you debated the price with this woman yet?"

"I told her I'd speak with her tomorrow, that I wished to speak to my investor first."

Tarin nodded. "Good, we'll go over and see her after dinner and fix on a price. Does she know your investor is me?"

"No, I wasn't sure how public you wanted it to be that you're part owner."

He waved it off. "I'm not worried about that, everyone knows you're my aunt."

A tap came on the door and Judith peeked it open. "There's an Ishvan Ovelent here to see Tarin."

"Send him in Judith and set a place for him at the table."

"I will, dinner will be out in a moment."

"Thank you."

Shelee rose to her feet and Tarin followed on instinct and they both stood to greet the young artist. The length of his braid hung over his shoulder and his face was flushed with excitement and embarrassment. He leaned heavily on his cane and moved into the room quickly. His eyes fell on Shelee and the shy uncertainty came over him.

"Ishvan, my aunt, Shelee Morris, Shelee this is the artist I told you about, Ishvan Ovelent."

"Ma'am, it's a pleasure to meet you." Ishvan said softly and tried not to blush at being introduced to one of the best known whores in the city.

"Just call me Shelee and you'll stay for dinner, I hope."

"I, I couldn't, I just stopped in for a moment."

"Of course you can stay. How'd it go at the Word?" Tarin asked and left the young man no choice in the matter.

"Oh, splendidly, I got the published credit and the story and a crown and a half. A crown and a half, I'm rich! It's more money than I've ever seen, I've been nervous walking around with it. It never would have happened if it weren't for you, I can't thank you enough."

The boy's open joy at such sudden wealth made Tarin smile at the huge amounts they'd casually discussed a moment before. "Come, let's go eat, I'm starving."

Shelee had the table set in their private dinning room, normally a room set up with fresh tea and a buffet style dinner. Tonight she'd made it clear that Tarin would be joining them and they'd be sitting down to a real meal and any free to join them was welcome. There was a fine cloth on the table and the best china was out but no matter the trappings of wealth, there was no instilling formal manners. The girls were too full of laughter and life to force any of them to sit for a proper meal.

The room quickly filled up with a half dozen of the women. They were dressed in light and airy fabrics that made them look more sensual than if they'd been nude. Each one had to have a moment or word with Tarin and in so doing be introduced to his blushing young friend. Ishvan soon learned that while the majority of them were as lovely as reputation said, and some were stunningly beautiful, a good number were ordinary in appearance, a few down right plain. It wasn't their looks that drew men to them and he quickly understood it was less definable, it was their warmth, their intelligence, the way they could draw a man in with a smile. These were the ones that really made him blush.

Shelee got them as settled as they ever got and most everyone found a seat but instead of being served, the bowls of fragrant and well made food were passed around from hand to hand. Talk was light and the ladies retold their own adventures of the afternoon, some of it bawdy and most of it mocking and light hearted. It was the first time Ishvan had seen the handsome swordsman relax and smile freely, he even laughed at their stories and how they made Ishvan blush.

By the time dinner was finished Ishvan was feeling comfortable enough to open his carry all sack and pull out some of his paper and pencils. This drew the attention of some of the woman and in short order most of the eyes fell on him.

"May I?" He asked and stopped the pencils scratching on the paper when he saw the bulk of the eyes were watching him.

Shelee bowed her head. "Of course you may, if we're allowed to see when you're finished."

"Thank you." In truth he wanted to give something back to them for the wonderful meal and company and it was the only real coin he had to trade in.

So as tea was poured and a small well made cake was sliced to accompany it Ishvan sketched and no longer felt so horribly out of place. The mood stayed light and almost celebratory and

when the conversation came around to Tarin the swordsman groaned.

"No, it's not fair telling that story. I was drunk, I swear to god I was and you can't hold what a man does when drunk against him!" He rubbed at his eyes but was chuckling under his protests, knowing no amount of begging would stop the women from trotting out the story at hand.

"I think Ishvan would love to hear it." Shelee began. "You see, Tarin is a compulsive cheat at almost every type of gambling but when he's drunk you can tell he's cheating."

Tarin groaned again and laughed. "I don't cheat!"

"Horse shit you don't, I taught you how. Anyway, this particular evening he got caught and denied it all."

"Oh Jeses and you wonder why I never bring anyone to dinner." His protests were diluted by his laughter and Tarin resigned himself to the story being told. In the end even Ishvan was laughing.

As dinner passed the women slipped back out to the front rooms and most didn't have the time to return. Finally Eve joined them and clapped her hands. "Come along ladies, come along if you're done gossiping." Her tone was warm and there was some minor grumbling but the smiles didn't fade as the women went to work.

"Eve," Tarin called out and waited until he had the woman's attention. "We're going over to see the new house tonight, did you want to ride along?"

She shook her head. "I saw it this morning, one look was enough."

"That good huh?"

"Let's just say it's going to be a challenge but the location is excellent."

"I'll say hello for you."

Her eyes narrowed at his tone. "Don't you be causing any trouble."

"When do I cause trouble?"

She snorted in mock disgust and wagged a finger at Ishvan. "Go with him and keep him from killing anyone."

"I, I, well, I..." Ishvan stuttered.

Eve grinned. "It's okay, I know he's not one to listen to reason. Thank you so much again for the lovely drawings." She knew just who would be getting the carefully made sketch he'd drawn of her.

"You're welcome." He managed to mumble back, overwhelmed by the day's odd events.

"So how about it, Ishvan, care to ride along?" Shelee asked, she liked the boy and had been impressed with his skill but her invitation went deeper than that. Tarin needed friends and the quiet young man had a good chance of at least being a casual companion.

Ishvan looked to Tarin and at his shrug nodded his acceptance. "I'd be more comfortable not traveling alone with this kind of money on me and I'd be honored to go with you both."

"Than it's settled, let's get this over with."

In spite of the relative closeness of the prospective house, they hired a coach. Shelee didn't walk that far anymore if she could help it and so a coach was the best way to go. Inside she sighed and settled her bulk across from the two young men and knew from even a passing glance that Tarin wasn't likely to be much for conversation.

"So, Ishvan, I hear you're from the Shoker Commune. We hear very little about your people, I've never heard of any of you coming into the city for schooling."

"It doesn't happen, you're right. I wasn't born in the commune, my parents died of a fever when I was a child, the people of the commune took me in. My adoptive father, when he saw my skill, felt I should receive more training than the people could give and since I was already of the outside world, they felt it could do little harm."

She noticed what Tarin had said, how shy and uncertain the boy could be at moments and how certain at others and it made her wonder which was the real boy. "Will you return when you've finished your schooling?"

"Oh yes, my people value beauty, my skills'll be useful."

"You sound homesick."

He smiled softly. "I am but this is what I must do."

"Well, it's our gain. I've been looking for a skilled artist, are you as well trained in oil as you are in pencil?"

"Yes, Lady."

"Good, than I wish to commission you for a series of portraits. I'll, of course, purchase any supplies you require and shall we say, a quarter crown per portrait for your time?" She glanced to Tarin and he offered no protest to the price. The last artist she'd interviewed wanted no less than a crown per portrait and his skill had been less than Ishvan's.

"Lady I, I don't know what to say." The stunned awe was clear in his voice.

"Say, yes, of course." She teased.

He laughed lightly, nervous over such good fortune. "Yes, I accept, with honor."

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Chapter Ten

Tarin watched out the window and didn't bother focusing on the rest of the conversation. The ride was spent talking over poses and outfits, shapes and styles and the various supplies the young man would require. It wasn't of much interest to Tarin, so he blocked the conversation out and missed hearing his Aunt say that she wanted a portrait of her and her nephew. If he'd been listening he'd have been able to protest, but as it was he was blindly agreed to the statement for want of a negative word.

The house when the coach stopped in front of it, was as perfect as both women had implied. It sat back from the road on a large lot and was entirely encased in a wall twice as tall as a man. It would make it impossible for anyone to see inside, for even the nearest building was too far away to have a clear view. The lane that led to the gate set in the wall was poorly maintained and rough and the gate hung on broken hinges and the lamps lining the way were only partially working. The few that did work had broken shades and cast fragmented light.

The coach drove inside the gate unchallenged and Tarin was pleased to see the house was set behind a large graceful turn around loop, horses and coaches would have little trouble coming and going. Off to one side stood a large stable, falling in on its self now but the former splendor of the carved wood was still easy to see. It wasn't in a serviceable condition and hadn't been used for a long time but it still stood on a strong foundation.

The front yard was overgrown in places and muddy in others and the few horses that stood tethered to the post were untended and ignored. The wide steps that led inside were in need of repair but the elegant grace of their antique style was charming. The house itself was squat and long with second story above and balconies hanging from windows. He wouldn't trust them now but once fixed they'd be wonderful. It was easy to see what Shelee and Eve saw in the place, it was grand old style and had been too long mistreated.

"Well, it looks better at night." Shelee announced after paying the driver and asking him to wait for them.

"That's not promising, the water is still running?" He waved at the shambles of a broken fountain.

"It's running but needs repair."

"Well now, at least something's partly working." He didn't wait to see if he was followed but stretched his long legs and made his way inside.

Inside was worse than outside, the rugs appeared as old as the house and were dirty and threadworn. The walls were peeling paint or paper, faded and ugly. There were spots where the plaster itself was crumbling and spots where holes had been broken into the wall. The smell made Tarin's nose twitch, it was a sickening blend of unwashed bodies and old food.

To the house's credit, it wasn't overtly dirty but neither was it well cleaned either. No one greeted them but their was only one door open and Tarin went into that room. Inside were cheap tables and a few dirty men sat about them, drinking cheap watery ale with a set of women that made Tarin feel ill. He knew the look in their eyes, knew the source. He felt Shelee and Ishvan come up behind him and Shelee's careful touch on his left arm.

"Tarin?"

He shook his head and didn't turn. "Gentleman, the house is closed for the evening."

There was carefully whispered questions and a few men stood, the tension was thick in the air. "This is our house, you got no right coming in here with your fancy clothes and high city accent telling us what to do." One man said, his eyes glazed from the cheap drink.

Tarin kept his eyes on the man who'd spoken but he fished out a few bishops from his purse by

feel. With a casual flick of his wrist he scattered them on the nearest table. "Take it for your inconvenience and go."

A few of the men looked hungrily at the coin and one or two carefully moved toward it but the first waved his friends off. "Typical rich snot thinking you can buy anything you want. Well you can't buy me and I stay." He turned to stare at the other men. "We all do!" There were half hearted statements of agreement from some of them.

"I don't want any trouble." Tarin said softly, a tone most people had learned was more threatening from him than out right anger.

"Course you don't, might mess up your pretty little face. We ain't afraid of trouble and around these parts we don't call the guard for help. We settle things on our own." The drunk stepped forward, his thick belly close enough for Tarin to reach out and touch.

Tarin glanced over the man and a small smile tugged at his lips. That was the only warning before he lunged forward, using momentum and surprise rather than sheer strength to man handle the larger man back against a wall. He pressed his forearm tight to the man's neck, forcing his chin up. The pressure caused the man to gasp for air as his windpipe was carefully crushed and Tarin found his breath offensive, the sweaty smell of the man intrusive.

"I'm not the sort to call the guard either, I'm glad we understand one another." Tarin hissed and pressed harder on the man's throat until he settled down and held still. With the drunk controlled Tarin spared a side glance to the men in the room. He was far too out numbered to fight without his blade and he didn't want to kill anyone tonight. The group stood still, uncertain and counting the odds against their fear. The one nearest Tarin glanced to his friends and swallowed hard. He twitched in movement but before he could step forward or speak Ishvan moved.

The boy brought his cane around in a high arc and with a heavy hand cracked it loudly on the table top. The smack crack noise made the room flinch in surprise and one of the women cried out in fear. The group looked to Ishvan, the table hiding the fact that his leg was in a brace.

The boy balanced on his good leg and met their eyes. "I wouldn't." He said strongly and slid the cane from the table top.

No one moved, the men stared at each other, Tarin forced another gasp from the drunk he held when the man tested the grip on him again. It was a stand off and no one was willing to move to break it. Shelee saw that it was only a matter of time before they rushed them and that wouldn't go well so she drew herself up and stepped forward.

"Enough of this foolishness. You child," She nodded to one of the kitchen girls peering around a corner. "Go fetch your mistress, tell her Miss Shelee Morris and her nephew Mr. Tarin Morris are here to see her. Go now child!"

Tarin's name was whispered around and eyes swung to the swordsmen. The room reevaluated the pretty, rich looking man, weighed the sword at his side and soon fell into hushed fears. Finally the man who'd almost moved to his friend's defense took a careful step forward, his eyes meeting Ishvan's first to show he meant no threat. He swept the crumpled hat from his head and held it in front of him.

"Mr. Morris, sir, we's didn't know it was you. Don't pay Darrin no mind, he's a hot head, always has been. If you'd have told us straight off who you were we'd have gone with no fuss." He waved to the other men. "We'll be going now sir, just don't hurt him any for being a fool." The men swept hats from heads and carefully shuffled out of the room.

Tarin adjusted his grip on the drunk. When he pulled his arm from his throat he spun the man with a hard shove toward his friends. "Get out of here and don't come back."

The man bobbed his head and got an arm around his choking friend. "Yes, sir, don't worry about us sir, you won't have any trouble." He continued to bow and scrape until both were out of the door.

It left Tarin, Ishvan and Shelee alone in the run down dirty room. He sighed and began gathering up the bishops he'd scattered earlier, no one had dared take one. He nodded to Ishvan. "Thank you."

The boy was pale but he nodded and when Shelee gently pressed him to sit down he did without protest. His palms felt sweaty and his knees weak. "Is your life always like this?"

"Pretty much so."

"Miss Morris, Mr. Morris, I had no idea you'd be coming by tonight. If you'd have sent word I would have seen to it the place was all for you, Mr. Morris and your friend. You have to forgive the other men, we draw a rougher crowd in here." The tirade came from a skinny, older woman as she bustled around the corner. She was only half dressed and pulled a thin robe around her waist as she moved, her eyes were red and her hair hung in tangled knots.

Tarin glanced to one of the women that sat frightened and still near by, a healing bruise on her face. "So I can see."

The house mistress tugged at the arm of one of the women, the youngest girl. She was skinny and plain but had made an effort to be clean. She wore clothes of an adult woman which hung on her girlish frame and only made her look younger. She kept her eyes lowered as she was prodded forward, the cheap metal collar clearly visible around her neck. "This is Gerta, she's still learning and shy. Look at the fine man, child." She hissed and Gerta glanced up, her eyes older than her age.

The mistress watched Tarin for a reaction and saw none. "Or," she began again. "You can have your pick of the older two or Ama, come here child!" She barked and the youngest of the adult women stood. "Ama is well experience but still pleasingly young. Isn't she a pretty thing?"

Ama wasn't ugly but she wasn't pretty. She stood with her owner's firm grip on her arm and the bones of her elbows poking out of her skin. She was so underfed as to be frightening in appearance, her eyes sunken in and her hair thin.

"Darla," Shelee began carefully, almost tasting the rising anger in her nephew. "I think you may have,"

But Shelee didn't get to finish. Mistress Darla had her eyes only on Tarin and when the skinny Ama didn't attract his notice and his eyes didn't linger over long on the older two she felt near panic at the idea of loosing such a rich sale. She clapped her hands over top of Shelee's careful warning and the toothless old kitchen woman pushed the two kitchen girls out into the room.

The nine year old was the one Shelee had sent running to wake her drunken Mistress and a new bruise was reddening on the child's face from the hard slap she'd earned. They'd had their clothes brushed off of loose dirt and flour and their dirty hair had been freed from the tails normally worn. The older was old enough to understand why they were being shoved out into the main room and her eyes were frightened but resolved, she stood slightly in front of the younger, trying to protect the child from open inspection. The youngest only knew that the room was angry and tense and her chin quivered in the uncertain air but no tears fell.

Darla saw how Tarin's eyes surveyed the children, how carefully he studied them. His interest made her bold and she hurried over and laid a hand on Tarin's arm, pressing herself close to him. "I've had them working in the kitchens, neither one's been touched by a man. I've been

saving them for a special client, I'd be honored if you selected either one."

The smell of ale was strong on the woman and it made Tarin want to retch. Before she could move away he caught the hand that touched him so casually and bent the fingers back at a painful and awkward angle. Darla screeched in pain and tried to twist free but Tarin held tightly to her. She wasn't stupid, she stopped screaming and held still. "If you ever touch me again, I'll snap those fingers off and make you watch while I feed them to dogs. Do we understand one another?" His voice was cold, hard and distant, his eyes were like ice.

Darla nodded and whimpered. "Yes, my lord, yes, I'm sorry, please, don't hurt an old woman!"

Tarin twisted them once more and made her screech before releasing her and letting her fall away. She backed away, cradling her hand close to her body. Shelee stepped forward and whispered to Tarin, asking if he was okay softly so no one else could hear. When he nodded slightly, his eyes still on the women around him, she spoke. "As I was saying, Darla, Tarin isn't here for entertainment or to test your services. I wasn't clear enough perhaps when last we spoke, my nephew is my investor. I told him of our conversation and he wished to see for himself."

Tarin picked up a lit candle off the table. "Of course you don't mind if I look around?"

Darla nodded her acceptance and Tarin paced away into the darkened rooms. His anger needed to do something and he needed desperately to get away from the empty eyes of the women and drunken greed of their owner. He found the upstairs in such disrepair as to be dangerous and the downstairs given over to rats and dirt but for the few rooms they used. The women shared a long parlor style room that had been broken into small sections by blankets hung on cord. The bedding was dirty and old and upon closer inspection showed to be infested as well. The women would have lice if their bedding did, it wasn't surprising when he saw the conditions they lived in. He found the kitchen poorly stocked and holding barrels of watery, cheap ale but fairly well maintained and cleaner than he'd expected. A rough cot was shoved in the corner for the old woman to sleep on and there were nests of blankets around it for the kitchen girls. Tarin couldn't find a room for Darla and upon a second study of the living areas came to the conclusion that she slept by the door to the women's common room. She accepted payment without having to ever rise from her own make shift bed. When he returned to the main room he was less angry and more ill.

All eyes turned to him when he rejoined them. He shook his head at Shelee but addressed Darla. "You had the nerve to ask four thousand for his dump?"

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Home

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Chapter Eleven

"It's my family's home." She whined. "We've owned it for six generations."

"Aye and there's six generations of filth and disrepair to contend with. I'm amazed the rats haven't eaten you all." He hardened his tone. "If this were an empty lot it'd be worth maybe a thousand crowns, but with the house on it in this state it's worth considerably less. How dare you try to extort money from my aunt for this worthless house."

"The house is sound, it merely needs repaired. I've not the funds for such, I'm a woman of poor means."

"You'd have the means if you'd stay sober for more than an hour at a time."

"Sir, I--"

"I think we should keep looking, Shelee. Nothing here is worth four thousand crowns."

Shelee nodded and rose to her feet, brushing off the silk of her gown. "As I said, the choice is yours."

"Wait!" Darla reached out to clutch at Tarin's arm, remembered his threat at the last moment and merely hovered her fingers above his sleeve. "Wait, you're right, the price is too harsh when there's so much work to be done. Three thousand."

"You're mad from that cheap ale. Come on Shelee." He took two steps away.

Darla shouted after him. "Two thousand!" When the swordsman stopped she continued on. "Two thousand's a fair price, it's an honest price. I've got debts sir, I owe taxes, if I don't pay the debts soon I'll have some bad enemies. Have pity on me? Two thousand? It's a solid house, well made. Not many of this kind are left."

He raised an eyebrow at Shelee while his back was still turned and the mistress couldn't see it. Her expression didn't change, she knew who Darla owed money too and they would make a bad enemy.

Tarin turned slowly and let his distaste show. "I won't pay you a copper more than fifteen hundred crowns." She began to wail in protest and Tarin held a hand up to make her stop. "But, I'll give you an extra five hundred crowns if you concede three conditions."

Darla's eyes narrowed. "What are they?"

"The first is that you never own a slave again and you never run another house. I want you to retire, quietly disappear. Even after paying your debts you'll have enough to live on for the rest of your life. Do you agree?"

She thought about it quickly and nodded. "I'll agree to that." Owning slaves was more of a bother than it was worth. They had to be fed and tended to and frankly she was too tired to worry over it any more. She'd make a small extra sum from selling off their worthless hides.

"Second, that you leave here tonight."

Her eyes grew wide. "Where will I go? I've no coin and no one to take me in!"

"Easily settled, I'll pay you a hundred crowns tonight as a deposit. You'll receive the rest when the deed is transferred over and our transactions are complete. We should be able to arrange all that in the next day or so. Until then a hundred crowns should be plenty for you to live on." He didn't soften his tone or pity her. Within a year she would be dead from drink, he was willing to lay a bet on it.

"A hundred crowns, in cash, tonight? Just for my leaving?"

"Yes."

"Agreed."

"Finally, I want all the papers for every slave you own transferred to my aunt. Temporary bills of sale can be drawn up tonight and the official paperwork can be filed at the same time we transfer the deed to the house."

Darla shrieked and came to her feet, forgetting in her outrage the fear she had of the swordsman. "No, I won't, that's not a fair condition! My girls are prime and experienced, they'll sell for a pretty sum at any open auction! You're just looking for a bargain and you won't find it from me. I'll offer some considerations, take less than this grand old house is worth simply because I must, but I will not be cheated!"

"Cheated!" Tarin roared back. "You dare accuse me of such? As if I don't know the costs of harem slaves!" He was shouting now and his anger pushed the older woman back a step. "A toothless old crone, two scrawny, plain, dirty children, a thirteen year old who's had more men than most women in their thirties, two women well past their prime and a young woman so skinny her bones poke from her skin sharp enough to cut a man! These are your prizes? All off them sick and infested with lice, do you really think you'll get more than forty or fifty crowns for the lot of them? Don't you dare speak to me about being cheated!"

Darla sat heavily back down, her face contorted up in helpless anger and deep fear. Tarin stepped forward and loomed over her in the poorly lit room. "Now," he spoke sharply, "will you take the hundred crowns, sign over their ownership and leave tonight--or must I look elsewhere?"

She sobbed and protested and complained but in short order paper, pen and ink were produced and she signed over her slaves to Shelee. She gathered her personal things into a large sack and sobbed farewell to her former slaves, making a great show of it and begging Shelee to take care of her darlings. Tarin counted out fifty fat double crowns as Ishvan and Darla's eyes popped at the wealth and handed it over to the woman. She suddenly didn't seem so upset at leaving.

"One more thing," Tarin said and stopped Darla in her tracks. She turned to face him and her eyes widened in fear at seeing his hand gripping the hilt of his sword. "You will honor the conditions of this sale and you will keep this transaction private. If I hear so much as a whisper about this from anyone who shouldn't know what happened, I'll assume it came from you. I will find you and I won't be amused like I am now. I take my privacy seriously."

She paled and nodded quickly. "Yes, sir, I understand." She scurried out into the night as fast as she could and she never once looked back.

"Well, I guess we're expanding."

"Shelee there's no making you happy, you've wanted a second house for the last year. If both you and Eve liked this location, why wait any longer?" He pushed his anger aside, there was no use for it now.

"True. You never do anything half way, do you?"

He shrugged and remembered Ishvan sitting, silently watching everything. "What do you think?"

Ishvan's eyes scanned the fear filled faces of the slaves around him. "I think you did a good thing."

"It's good you agree but what am I supposed to do with them?"

Tarin thought a moment, he was as unwilling to leave them here as Shelee was. "Ishvan, how's the leg?"

The boy narrowed his eyes but heard no malice in the question. "It's okay."

"Good, here, go out, hire a wagon, something big enough to transport everyone and come back here with it. Can you do that?" Tarin pressed a bishop into the boy's hand.

Ishvan nodded. "I can."

"Thanks, Shelee, take the coach back to the Pearl. Warn Eve and get things ready, I don't want them carrying vermin into your home. We'll be by shortly."

She pushed her bulk up. "Okay, I'll get things going, but I meant what am I supposed to do with them from now on?"

"For right now, let's just get them cleaned up and fed. I'll figure something out."

"Okay, but I'm going to hold you to that."

When both had left, Tarin turned to the uneasy group. "It's going to be okay. I need you to gather your things and put out the lamps and fires. When you're done, come back here. Okay?"

There were nods but no real spoken words, they shuffled off together and followed his orders. Tarin felt sick, his legs went weak and he had to sit down hard to keep from falling down. He couldn't save everyone, he reminded himself. He couldn't stop people from using slaves how they saw fit. He wasn't responsible. He'd paid back what he owed. Hadn't he?

As soon as he learned of his daughter he'd bartered her way out of a collar, he'd acted properly for her future and benefit. As best he could he'd paid back which ever woman had been her mother the harm he had caused her. He'd repaid Chisholm's kindness by helping Dunn, and some of the debt he owed Shelee for her care had to have been canceled by setting Dunn up in a trade. How much more would he have to give or do to stop feeling guilty every time he saw someone in a collar and down right ill when he saw other harem slaves?

There was no easy or quick answer to his question, but while he sat alone in the parlor of the run down whore house, he prayed he might one day find the key to absolution for being free.

"Mr. Morris?"

Tarin looked up at his name and smiled. Ama was still frighteningly thin, but the weeks of rest, food and care from a surgeon was going a long way to restoring her health. She set the bucket of cool water down and offered the dipper to him. He accepted it gratefully. "Thank you."

His graciousness made her look away shyly. None of the slaves had any illusions about just who it was that had secured their safety and eventual freedom, and they all were disturbingly grateful. Shelee has set them all up as indentured, they weren't required to wear collars but they weren't yet free. Every month the Pearl would subtract a fair wage for the cost of their purchase, a figure appraised fairly by an auction house. When they'd paid the sum in full, they'd be truly free. The old cook Neely had wept at the news.

Until that time they were working however they could, and for now the bulk of the work was centered around making the old house grand again. Tarin was spending every free moment he

had helping, every hour he put in was one less they had to hire someone else to do, but the truth was he enjoyed the work. The act of making things right again, of helping the skilled carpenters and stone masons they hired, was refreshing.

Eve was always around. She'd fussed and refused his offer and after a few weeks of being nagged had finally given in and accepted. Now she worked with renewed pride, for the place being made was truly hers. She put as much effort and love into fixing the stables as she did in welcoming the former slaves as house staff and the same energy that she put into recruiting just the right sort of woman to work in the new house.

Not that they were anywhere near ready for that. Today was a fun day, they were white washing the tall wall that encased the property. It had been freshly repaired and now with a new coat of white it would look uniformly pleasant and new. Half the women from the Pink Pearl were over, dressed in casual work clothes, long hair pulled back. They laughed and giggled and got as much of the white on themselves as on the wall, but they were making progress.

Tarin took rich swallows of the water and surveyed how much was still yet to do. The afternoon sun was rising up in the sky and the air was growing hot. There were shade trees in the yard, but not nearly enough to prevent having to work in the heat. The ladies had all brought with them wide hats to shade out the sun but Shelee would skin him if they all got sun burnt.

"Hello! Hello there!"

Tarin knew the voice and looked to the gated entrance in time to see Calin leading the way into the court yard. He replaced the dipper and, with another smile of thanks to Ama, headed to meet his neighbor.

Only it wasn't Calin alone. It was all his neighbors and some musicians he knew by sight only, the only one missing was Ishvan. They carried instruments carefully and moved with uncertain tension into the enclosed grounds.

"Mr. Morris! Hello there!" Calin called and waved.

Tarin met with Eve as she hurried over, paint splattered across her, and prevented her from shooing away the rag tag group.

"Calin, I didn't expect to see you here. Come to help us white wash?"

"Gracious no! When have you ever seen a musician do an honest day's work?" He laughed.

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Chapter Twelve

Eant waved him off. "Of course we have, we'd like to lend a hand as best we can."

"That and maybe provide some music to make the afternoon and the work go faster." Calin grinned and accepted the hand Tarin offered.

"Eve, my neighbors. Gentleman, this is the Lady who'll be running this fine establishment."

Calin accepted her hand and bowed formally over it, turning on all his charm. "It's my deepest pleasure to meet you Lady. I wish you the greatest of success."

"Thank you." She answered coldly. "It's kind of you to offer to help us so freely, especially since this would be a delightful way to casually audition."

A few of the men shuffled their feet but Calin made a look of mock hurt. "Lady Eve you hurt me, truly! Just because we are all soon to be holding masters certification from the university in the arts and because some of us like Eant here are already well known. And the fact that a house of this size and grandeur will offer dancing, meals, gambling as well as the obvious pleasures and in so doing will require a steady, stable musical staff doesn't mean I would ever impose on our friendship with our kind neighbor Mr. Morris and try to gain your good graces." He smiled so smoothly, so innocently that it made Eve laugh.

"I make no promises until after I've heard you play and after we discuss your terms. Come along, grab a paint brush and we'll talk." She tossed an arm around two of the young men's shoulders and lead them toward the wall.

Tarin stopped Eant on his way past. "Why didn't Ishvan join you?"

Eant looked to Calin's back before answering the swordsman, nervous about saying too much. "He wasn't feeling well."

"Nothing serious I hope?"

"No, not really. He received word from home, his mother's ill and he doesn't have the means of returning to see her. He was rather upset, he gets angry over his limitations."

"I don't understand why that would stop him?"

Eant sighed and resolved himself to telling more than he thought the young artist would have liked. "His father is very protective, he won't let Ishvan travel without an escort. It's not so much the coach ride but the nearest stop is a week's hike to their village. At least a week at Ishvan's pace, it wouldn't be safe for him to travel alone. His father sent coin for him to hire an escort but it was stolen, without it he can't afford to make the trip."

Tarin hadn't considered the situation. He took for granted his solid health and strong body as well as the fact that all of his friends and family were right here. "She's that ill?"

Eant shrugged. "Ill enough that he's worried. He hasn't been home once since he arrived. He's close to his kin even if he doesn't speak of it much, I know, we were roommates in our first year. Look, just don't tell him I told you. He doesn't like people to think of him as crippled or weak."

"I won't tell him." Tarin let the musician join the others but his thoughts weren't on the white washing. There was no way he could relate, he barely recalled his own mother, but Ishvan's plight ate at him. How would he feel if he knew Shelee was ill, maybe dieing, and he couldn't speak with her one final time? It wasn't a pleasant thought.

By late afternoon, the sun sunk low in the sky and the breeze cooling, the wall was fully painted.

Neely had thrown together an amazing dinner and the whole party sat on the lawn and enjoyed good food and company. Except for Tarin, his thoughts were busy and he only nibbled at the dinner. As soon as it was possible he excused himself from the group, belted on his sword and left.

When he got to his house he itched for a bath but instead of climbing his stairs, he found himself in front of what once was the Grenk's door. He had a moment where he was frightened of knocking, frightened that somehow Mrs. Grenk would answer as she had before only this time she'd see and know his guilt. It was a foolish thought and he scolded himself for it as he brought his knuckles against the aged wood.

It took a moment but the door cracked open and Ishvan peered out, when he saw who stood outside his door he opened it wider. "Yes?" The boy's voice was quiet and serious, his face somber and none of the life he normally carried sparkled in his eyes.

"Look, I'm not much for this sort of thing so I'll say it plainly. I heard about your mother, I'm sorry she's ill."

Ishvan made a sour face. "Damn it, Eant had no right saying anything."

"If I were you and it were Shelee that was ill I'd find a way to get to her. Family isn't to be taken lightly, you need to go."

"Don't you think I know that? Unfortunately, I'm not you. My options are little more limited."

"I know people, how much coin do you have that you can afford to spend? I might be able to find you an escort." He ignored the boy's anger.

A look of awed uncertainty flashed across the artist's face. Finding an escort was no small task, most of the kind of men capable of protecting a crippled artist weren't the sort willing to take the job. "All I can afford is a half a crown."

"Do you have it on you?"

Ishvan dug about his person and produced the needed mix of coins, he handed it over to the swordsman without a moment's hesitation.

"Good, you've just hired your escort. When do you want to leave?"

It took a moment for the words to sink in but when they did Ishvan blinked owlily. "Are you mad? I've heard what kind of rates you charge. I can't afford that, my whole family can't afford that."

"I need a holiday. I'm working my fingers off on the house, still taking hires and my surgeon says my shoulder's not going to strengthen fully unless I lay off everything for a few weeks. I can't just sit around here idle, I'll really be mad if I do that. By the time we get back, I'll be back to full health. It makes perfect sense, that is if I'm good enough an escort?" It wasn't as sudden of a choice as it sounded. The logic was just as he'd said, he'd spent the afternoon thinking it over.

Ishvan shook his head. "I can't imagine a situation you couldn't handle. I don't know why you're really doing this but thank you, thank you very much."

Two days later the coach rolled out from the station. There were whispers of course, it didn't take long for gossip to suggest the pair were lovers. Why else would an unknown artist be granted such access to the swordsman and such respect from the Gloucester Word? Why else would

the swordsman agree to escort the young man home?

Their friends knew better and spoke against such whispers. Ishvan's friends from the university spoke of how everyone knew he had no interest in men and how deeply he loved his family. The people close to Tarin were quick to point out that the summer, with so many of the cities wealthy leaving the city, was his slow season. Vask often summered with one noble or another, mixing holiday with work and providing exhibition fights for summer parties. Why shouldn't Tarin take a holiday and help a friend, so what if he'd never taken a holiday before. The truth was even those closest to the pair secretly wondered.

All but Shelee, she above all others understood the deep ache Tarin felt at not having a family. That translated easily to his helping Ishvan, it was perfectly in line with the swordsman's temperament and nature. She had nodded and asked him to be careful, raids from the ferals and attacks from bandits were always a threat. He'd carefully agreed and easily accepted her well wishes for a relaxing trip.

As the coach rolled them out of the city in the early morning light, the other passengers minding their own concerns, Tarin felt his shoulders unknot. The odds were good that this would be a simple, easy trip. More so, outside the city he should be relatively unknown. He'd draw attention for his appearance, he didn't doubt that but there would be none of the accompanying whispers. As the city pulled away behind them, Tarin felt lighter than he'd ever felt before.

By the time they stopped at noon to rest the horses and have lunch, Tarin was fairly sure their fellow travelers knew who he was. They ate in quiet whispers and careful glances and some of Tarin's good mood disappeared.

Ishvan glanced toward the cluster of the other travelers. "Don't mind them."

He forced himself to shrug. "I'm used to it."

For as much as the swordsman acted indifferent, Ishvan saw past it. It made him feel oddly protective of the older man but before he worked up the nerve to bring up the subject, it was time to move on. They rode on during the day and stopped at a well traveled inn for the night. The travelers quarters were much like a barracks, a single long room with a line of narrow beds. One for men and one for women, but the bedding was clean and the water in the bath was hot, both were tired enough to sleep.

Ishvan woke, rested, just before dawn as he always did. The grey light of the night's ending glowed in the window, the shutters outside the glass had been left open. There were still snores in the room and the restless sounds of other travelers but as he sat up and glanced toward the bed Tarin had chosen in the corner he saw no length of legs under to covers.

That startled him the rest of the way awake. He sat up and was startled again to see Tarin hadn't left the room or the bed. The swordsman sat at the head of his bed, his back pressed against the headboard and his knees tucked up against his chest. He was bathed, shaved and dressed for the day excepting the boots at the edge of the bed and the sword belt with in easy reach. The pale oval of Tarin's face watched the artist wake, his eyes unwavering and his body so startling still that for a moment Ishvan thought the other man a mere shadow of imagination.

"If you're awake, you should go bathe now before the coachman comes and wakes the others up." Tarin whispered and casually unfolded his legs. The coaches left at staggered times, theirs was set to leave the earliest. "It'll give you time to eat before the coach leaves."

Ishvan rubbed his eyes and shook his head before sliding from the warm blankets. He wandered off to the bath house feeling oddly uneasy at finding Tarin so awake and ready so early. It wasn't natural to sit awake and watch people sleep. Then it occurred to Ishvan that maybe the swordsman was taking his duties as guard seriously and had watched for threat while he slept. It

wasn't any more comforting of an idea.

In the end he couldn't argue with the results. As he found his way to the dinning room Tarin was finishing his tea and picking at a final peice of warm brown bread. Ishvan was served hot tea, his own small round loaf of yeasty brown bread dripping with honey butter, a bowl of oats that were hot and sharp with spices and to top it off were sauages and stewed dried apples. The food was plentiful and delicious and he stuffed himself on it.

"Oh that was good." Ishvan sighed as the first of the bleary eyed passengers joined them. They were offered small plates of food and mugs of tea but there was no time to give them the same feast they'd just enjoyed. "I feel sorry for them."

Tarin grinned. "Traded sleep for a full stomach. Cold ham, biscuits and hard cooked eggs are nothing in comparison to what we got." He finished his tea and stood, gathering up both packs before Ishvan could protest. Tarin had already insisted on taking the heaviest of their supplies into his own pack, it made little difference now but the walk to Ishvan's family's holdings was a different story.

It didn't miss Ishvan's notice that Tarin took their packs and carried them to the coach. He doubted he could order the man to not do things like that, it just was in his nature so he saved his protests. Neither did it miss his attention that some of their passengers had noticed that the early risers from other coaches were being offered a great deal better of a breakfast. He belched softly in satisfied contentment as he joined the swordsmen in the cool morning air.

"I never thought it was true until now." Ishvan spoke lightly once the swordsman had securied their packs to the coach and rejoined him by the gate to the inn.

"What was?"

"The rumors that you never sleep."

Tarin laughed and shook his head. "I sleep."

"Ah but I've no proof of that, you were awake when I went to sleep and still awake when I woke up."

"I slept some, I don't rest well with strangers around. A swordsman's life makes you paranoid."

His tone was light but there was a shadow in the lavender eyes that Ishvan saw and understood. He nodded, comforted to know that the other man didn't feel he had to stay awake and protect him. "Lucky for you there'll be plenty of time to sleep in the coach. I almost wish we could walk, I hate traveling."

"At least it's just as miserable for them. Traveling is horrible for anyone, even the rich." Tarin nodded to the side yard where a collared slave was preparing a private coach for the days travels. Those wealthy enough to own their own coaches and drivers didn't have to sleep in the common rooms and didn't get shaken awake at dawn to pile in with a half dozen strangers but that didn't mean they avoided any of the potholes or rocks in the road.

"True, come on, we should get in before we get stuck between that fat preacher and his smelly daughter. I swear if she touches me once more I'll scream."

"Want me to kill her for you?"

The swordsman's tone was so serious, so earnest and eager that Ishvan had to turn and look back to see the smile and amusement in the man's eyes. "Please, don't tempt me."

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Chapter Thirteen

By the afternoon of the third day their traveling companions had dwindled to two others, a tailor and his pinched looked wife. Both had fallen asleep and leaned against the sides of the coach, snoring blissfully. Ishvan sat at one window and propped his elbow against the wall. He'd produced a book and had been spending the days reading intently. Tarin sat and napped when he could and watched the heads of the tailor and his wife bob and thump with the roughness of the road when he couldn't.

Tarin sighed and readjusted his weight; the padding in the coach wasn't up to sitting hours at a time. Again he adjusted the sword at his side, the hilt cut into his thigh and had left a bruise from the tight quarters. There simply was no comfortable way to wear a blade in a coach for any length of time. Equally, there was no way he could be comfortable without the blade firmly attached to his side, so he tolerated it.

"You should have brought a book." Ishvan said softly so as to not wake their coachmates. He wasn't sure he could stand to hear yet another story about some rich lord's inseam measurement.

"Wouldn't have done me much good, I can't read all that well."

Ishvan blinked, surprised at the casual confession. He knew logically that only a small number of people could read, but he'd grown up in a culture of education. He knew that the people at university were the minority but he hadn't really thought about it. "I'm sorry, I just assumed with how well you speak, your accent." He had to look away from the odd eyes that studied him before he blushed.

"The people that owned me didn't place literacy terribly high on the list of skills they felt were important for me to learn." He regretted the mocking tone as soon as he finished. The boy flushed scarlet and kept his eyes down, embarrassed to have pried and not understood. "I've thought about hiring a tutor, but the idea seems vaguely absurd at my age." In truth he was a little surprised Ishvan could read so well, he'd heard that the Shoker Commune didn't believe in books and stuck to the old style of oral history. The thought bothered Tarin for a moment, made him feel a touch edgy, but he dismissed it. There was any number of logical explanations, the Shoker traded their craftsmanship with the outside world, reading no matter how frowned upon was a vital skill for trade. Also, Ishvan wasn't born to his people, it made sense that he'd have been granted other exceptions. The logic of the reasons comforted Tarin and he set his sudden worries aside.

"It's not absurd, anyone can learn. Here, you said you couldn't read well. Come here, point out which words you can make out?"

Tarin felt a little silly but he slid closer and studied the book. He pointed to and announced the words he knew, the few he owned as he liked to think of them. After a little while, Ishvan pulled one of his pencils and some paper from his carry sack and began to show the swordsman the letters that made up each word, how they were said and how to form them. Ishvan proved to be a skilled and kind teacher, but as soon as the coach began to slow for the evening and their neighbors roused awake, Tarin slid away. He was ashamed of his ignorance and embarrassed to be caught trying to learn.

This inn served dinner on tables set out in the yard under wide, cool shade trees. Half way through the meal Ishvan put his fork down and stared at Tarin while he was eating.

"What?" The swordsman demanded, pausing in mid bite.

"Which hand do you fight with?"

"My right of course, why?" It was a stupid question, anyone with eyes could see which side he wore his blade on. Besides, all swordsmen were right handed.

"Why do you use your left for everything else?"

Tarin looked down to where he'd set his fork down on the left side of his plate and had reached for his drink with his left hand. "I don't, I use them both. Don't you?"

Ishvan shook his head. "No, I don't, no one really does. People are either right or left handed, it's very rare to use both equally. In the coach when you were writing, you kept passing the pencil from one hand to the other, I thought maybe it was because you were left handed but you did equally well with both. But you eat almost entirely with your left hand."

Tarin shrugged. "Of course, keeps the right free in case I need it. Anyone can do it if they want."

Instead of answering, Ishvan took out a scrap of paper and his pencil. He handed them to the swordsman. "Draw an 'A' with your right hand then with your left."

"Ishvan,"

"Just do it for me."

Tarin obeyed because he saw no harm in it. The letter looked foreign and strange but he'd made it, it pleased him even if it looked immature and shaky.

Ishvan took the paper and did the same, placing his right handed 'A' under Tarin's and the same with his left. He presented the paper back to the swordsman, the left handed 'A' was barely recognizable on Ishvan's line, but on Tarin's it both 'A's were equally well formed. "See?"

Tarin nodded but wasn't impressed. "So what? It doesn't mean anything."

"Tarin, it's extremely rare that someone's able to do that." Ishvan saw he wasn't getting anywhere. Tarin sat staring back at him unimpressed and not the least bit excited to learn he was any more different than he already was. "Never mind, look, who taught you to read? They did a decent job of it."

"There was a fellow in guard training with me, another slave, he could read. He taught me a little when we had time."

"Hopefully he's working as a teacher now because he did a good job."

"I doubt it. He was sent to the guard and was killed a few weeks later in a fight with the ferals. The ironic thing is he taught me to know his name so I'd be able to find it on the casualty lists."

"I'm sorry."

He picked up his fork, this time careful to use his right hand. "He was never very good with a sword."

The tailor and his wife fell asleep in quick order the next morning and Tarin was unwilling to ask to be taught further. He didn't have to, as soon as Ishvan was sure the couple were soundly napping he brought out his paper, pencils and book. He didn't make an offer to teach, he didn't ask, he simply continued where they had stopped the day before. It made the final day of travel go faster for them both.

By nightfall they stopped at the final inn. This was as far as the public coaches traveled and the neat string of taverns and inns grew less reliable from that point on. They spent one more night in well tended beds and with baths that had hot water before setting off on foot down the road at first light.

They stopped early for lunch at Tarin's order, even though Ishvan protested he was fine. As soon as he sat down he was rubbing his leg, trying to stretch the aches and cramps out of it. Tarin tried as hard as he could to not notice, to give the man privacy, so he focused on fixing them a lunch.

"May I ask?" Tarin said as he handed over their simple meal.

"The leg?"

Tarin nodded.

"I was born with it this way. It's twisted and weak, luckily the other one's fine."

"If I walk too fast, you let me know."

"I will, but I'll keep up. It's two days up this road to the cross road, and then another days walk to the river. From there we follow it onward, can't miss it." He twirled his cane in his hand. "My father made this for me with his own hands. I can't wait to see him again. And mother."

"Just a few more days."

Tarin found Ishvan an easy traveling companion. The boy spoke little and when there was a need for conversation he combined it with his earlier lessons. He'd scratch a letter into the loose dust on the road and Tarin would announce what it was as he passed by it. By the time they turned off the main road onto a smaller one Ishvan was scratching out short words and Tarin was proud of his progress.

They had left the open pasture lands behind for more wooded areas. The trees made the air feel clean and the day was noticeably cooler than before. They went all day without passing another person for the first time and it let Tarin imagine there wasn't another soul for a thousand miles but the two of them. It lulled him into a sense of peace and safety, a sense he wasn't overly used to feeling and relished now.

If Tarin was growing more at ease, Ishvan was growing into a ball of raw nerves. He was openly

jittery, worried and distant. The ache in his leg was a painful reminder of his weakness and his normal shy, easygoing manner blew away in the face of his worry. Tarin didn't try to offer any meaningless words of comfort or try to tell the boy they'd reach his home in time. He knew they either would or wouldn't and no words could ease the other's gnawing unease.

"We should stop." Tarin said as the sun was getting low in the sky.

"No, please, just a little further. I wanted to make it to the river today. It's not much more and there's a wayside camp there. We'll make it there in less than an hour." Ishvan turned worried eyes to Tarin.

The swordsman shrugged. "If you can manage it and want to. There's a storm blowing in. I wouldn't mind making it to your family before it gets here."

Ishvan stumbled and caught his balance with his cane. "Don't be silly, there's not a cloud in the sky."

Tarin nodded. "Not now, but in a few days there'll be a bad thunderstorm. We should make it to your family's holdings by then, right? Say in another two or three days?"

"To theirs or one of the neighbors."

Tarin looked at the young man sideways. Ishvan hadn't questioned how Tarin knew, which was odd because everyone questioned it. It worried him that the boy was so distracted by his anxiety that he was paying so little real attention to their surroundings and what was said and done. He'd have to be on extra guard until they finished their journey, they were more vulnerable with Ishvan sleep walking this way.

Ishvan had been right and they made it to the river before full dark. There was a small permanent camp made in a clearing where the road bowed close to the river and split from the main way and the river way they were to take from here on. The fire pit was scraped clean of its old ashes by the wind, there hadn't been anyone by this way in a while and that in itself worried Tarin. The Shoker holdings were known to trade with the outside world in the spring and fall, it wasn't so far into summer that the road should be so empty.

But when he mentioned his worry to Ishvan, the boy shrugged and muttered about the farming keeping everyone busy. Tarin didn't know a single thing about farming and nodded in acceptance. They busied themselves with making camp and then, after a warm fire was burning and a quick meal was made, they set water on the coals to heat and took advantage of the river to bathe.

It was dark and the water was cold so neither man was inclined to linger. The moon shone overhead bright enough to see by and Tarin glanced around from soaping his hair and caught sight of Ishvan drying off on the shore. His leg was as bent and misshapen as he'd said, but he moved on it as easily without the brace as he seemed to move with it. The light was dim, but he was fairly sure he saw a scar on the boy's slender side that looked for all the world like a battle injury. A wound made from a sword thrust or an arrow, long since healed but having left its mark behind. It made no sense with what he knew of the boy from the peaceful Commune.

He winced as a bit of soap dripped into his eyes, it forced him to finishing rinsing his head and when he looked again he was certain what he'd seen was just a play of light and shadow. Ishvan had dressed and called out. "The water's freezing!"

Tarin laughed and swam easily back to the bank. "It's not so bad." He towed off quickly, and pulled his clothes on over damp skin. "I don't know about you, but I'm tired. Not used to all this

fresh air and quiet night sky.” He scooped up his boots with one hand and his swordbelt with the other and walked barefoot down the narrow trail to the camp. Once there he warmed his toes by the fire and listened to the night’s insects singing as Ishvan worked the knots out of his waist length hair.

“I’m not sorry mine’s short now. There are some advantages.”

The boy looked up and grinned. “Yeah, but the women like it better long.” He raked through the length and skillfully braided it back again.

The smile was shy and uncertain, but it was the first easy smile Tarin had seen on the boy the whole day. He tugged on his socks and boots, placed his sword near his blankets within easy reach and shifted into a comfortable position to watch the stars above. They hadn’t been standing watches, there seemed little need for it. Ishvan rubbed his sore leg one last time and eased under his own blankets. They fell asleep to the singing of the insects and the happy cracking sound of the fire.

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Chapter Fourteen

Tarin woke suddenly. He’d been soundly asleep and resting well, but something had startled him out of it. His hand moved before his eyes were open to the hilt of his sword, comforted to find it still within his grasp, and he strained to hear what had startled him awake.

Only it wasn’t a sound he was hearing but silence and it took a moment for him to understand that the constant drone of the insects and the song of frogs had stopped. He looked carefully to the sky above and judged from the stars that it was a few hours shy of dawn, the moon had set or was so low on the horizon to give no light. He moved carefully, sliding from his warm shell of blankets and saw instantly that Ishvan’s blankets were empty.

It could be innocent, the boy might have wandered off to empty his bladder, but Tarin had explained to him how lightly he slept and had asked him to wake him before leaving camp. It could be as simple as the boy forgot, half asleep and tired in the middle of the night, but Tarin hadn’t stayed alive as long as he had by assuming the best.

He moved to the edge of the camp and listened, the silence made his ears roar in tension and it took a force of will to slow his breathing. A branch snapped, small and sharp in the night air and Tarin tracked it, then moved to a better position and made ready.

It felt like a small forever but he clearly could hear someone moving now, closer to their camp. It was coming from along the river, not from the road or the water itself. He told himself to be ready, that it was most likely the boy and he was overreacting. Tarin shifted his grip on his sword

and made out the rough outline of a form approaching camp. He heard another footfall, and another and the form cleared the darkened camp circle and paused.

Tarin moved from his own shadows, sword held at ready and called in a clear strong voice. "Hold!"

The figure gasped and threw out its arms, branches tumbled loudly to the ground, smacking into each other and causing a clatter of snapping small twigs. "Wait!" Ishvan called out. "It's me!"

"Jeses sake, Ishvan, are you trying to have me kill you?" He cursed and lowered his sword. "What the hell were you doing? I told you not to leave camp without waking me."

The boy moved easily across the clearing, bending to gather up the smaller branches and feed them into the fire. "The fire was dieing and there wasn't enough wood. I was just gone a moment." Soon the embers were blazing happily again and throwing their light around them. Ishvan looked up to where the swordsman stood, still angry and holding a bare blade. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to worry you."

The boy's eyes were so full of apology that he couldn't stay angry with him. He rubbed a hand across his face and sheathed his blade. "I could have killed you, you know that right?"

He nodded. "I know, I'm sorry. I didn't think you were that light of a sleeper, you were so out when I woke up. I just, well, I know how little you do sleep and I didn't want to wake you. I'm sorry, I won't do it again."

Tarin dropped his blade and moved to help gather up the wood. "I appreciate the idea but next time," He stopped in mid-sentence, the hair along the back of his neck tingled and he felt silent eyes watching him. He cocked his head to the side and listened but heard nothing.

"What is it?" Ishvan asked, looking around to the woods about them.

"Shh."

"Tarin?"

Tarin waved at the boy to be silent and started to move toward his blade. Before he made it to his feet the worst happened. A half dozen faces melted from the darkness, they were unlike anything Tarin had seen before and they moved with a deadly silence. Each was lithe and graceful, dressed in tight, dark brown leather pants and soft boots. Their tunics were of the same leather and were sleeveless, lacing tightly to their bodies on either side of their ribs. Their faces and bare arms were streaked in kohl and blackened and their hair was long and tied back in dark dyed fabric.

Tarin didn't need to see their hair, their eyes gave them away. They came to an odd point and the skin that peeked from under the darkening kohl was golden. He paused in that moment of understanding, knowing that even if he could reach his blade there was no way he could fight off a full party of Ferals. He scanned them for weapons, saw two with bows, arrows notched and ready but not drawn. The remaining four carried long blades, too short to be swords, too long to be a standard knife. They gleamed sharply in the fire light.

The moment of shock snapped clean and he moved on instinct. Tarin brought his hand up to the back of Ishvan's neck and pushed him hard to the ground. "Stay down!" He hissed as he saw their attackers step forward carefully into the circle. Tarin dove for his blade and rolled as he landed. His hands found the hilt by luck or skill as he carried the motion through and bounded back to his feet. His arm whipped out and the sheath and belt flung off the naked blade.

He tried to watch them all at once and couldn't. His blade snapped between himself and the

nearest Feral, the man raised his own weapon up protectively but before either could attack Tarin spotted another moving along toward his side and was forced to change his guard. They were trying to flank him and they had the force of numbers on their side.

No one had made a move to attack yet and he stood waiting for it, wary of what was to come. One of the Ferals stepped forward, a little older than the rest, and he headed toward Ishvan. The artist was struggling his way from the dirt, rising to his knees.

"Ishvan, stay down, don't move!" He barked, keeping his eyes on the fighters around him.

Ishvan was on his knees now. "Tarin?" He questioned, his eyes wide with uncertainty.

Tarin looked his way and saw the Feral had moved behind Ishvan, his blade raw in his hand. There was a horrible moment of double image for Tarin where he saw again Ana forced to her knees and the blade coming to her throat. His heart stopped as the Feral took the boy roughly by the hair, Tarin lunged toward them. His blade was blocked hard by the nearest fighter, the steel on steel rang sharply in the silent night. The man who blocked his way defended himself fluidly but made no move to attack and neither did his fellows.

There wasn't time, there simply wasn't time. Tarin didn't understand why they simply didn't attack, they had the greater numbers, they'd had surprise, he should already be a dead man. Instead they just stood there, watching, waiting and it chilled Tarin to think that Ishvan may have been their target. It was possible the Ferals had some grudge against the boy or his family, it was rumored that the Shoker's, like most of the holdings near the no man's land buffer zone, interacted with the Ferals.

Tarin threw everything he had into his attack and the Feral was good, he held Tarin at bay by the narrowest of margins and it was only a matter of time before Tarin could slip in a killing stroke. Time wasn't one thing Tarin had but the cold, strong voice of the Feral holding Ishvan stopped him.

"Stop or I'll kill him."

Tarin paused and retreated a step or two. The Feral held Ishvan by his hair, the sharp knife at his throat. The boy was holding very still, his eyes wide. Tarin looked around. He was encircled now. There was no way out with both their lives, if he ran he was sacrificing Ishvan's life. He couldn't live with that guilt. He lowered his guard fractionally to see what they'd do.

"Drop the sword." The man tightened his grip in the boy's hair and pressed the blade tighter.

"Okay, just let him go, he's a non-combatant, an artist, just don't hurt him." Tarin spoke slowly and moved just as carefully to lower the blade to the ground.

"Get down, on your knees." The Feral ordered.

Tarin nodded. "Okay, it's okay now, don't hurt him." He lowered himself carefully down into the dirt and held his hands out from his sides.

One of the Ferals moved close enough to kick his blade out of reach and only then did the one holding Ishvan let go. The boy swayed forward and rubbed at his throat. Tarin watched wide eyed and confused as Ishvan pulled himself onto his feet and got his cane under him.

Tarin was starting to understand and starting to get angry. He surged to his feet and felt the bowstrings being drawn. Ishvan called out and held out a hand but the words were those of the Ferals. His voice pleaded but the fighters didn't relax. He turned to Tarin and tried there.

"Tarin, I know this looks bad now but you've got to trust me. Just hold still, you're not to be

harmd so long as you don't give them reason to. Do you trust me?" Ishvan knew full well how most of the Ferals considered all Outlanders nothing better than wild animals and the clear rage in the swordsman's eyes gave them good cause for concern. "Tarin do you understand?"

Tarin lunged at the nearest Feral and stumbled toward Ishvan, uncertain of what he was going to do but needing to do something in his rage. "I understand you're a traitorous son of a--" He never made it further than a few paces. The closest Feral brought the pommel of his hilt across the back of Tarin's head. In spite of Shelee's insistence that Tarin was thick headed, he crumbled into an untidy heap beside the fire.

Tarin's head felt ready to split open or explode, the ache was sharp and painful and made him long for the blackness he'd been swimming in. The pain brought with it memory and that gave him more than enough reason to pry this eyes open.

The sun was warm and it was, from the angle and feel, close to noon or later. They were on the water, he knew that instantly, and the strong stroke propelling them up the lazy river was uniform and well practiced. The boat was narrow, he could feel the tight arch of the walls close to his body. When he tried to move his head felt ready to fall off but the careful examination of his limbs proved that short of the knot on his head nothing was broken or wrong. Except, his hands were bound loosely but very securely behind his back. Oddly, they'd tightened the rope over his sleeves which would pad the damage that could be done but increase the chance he might be able to wiggle free.

He groaned and fell still, playing weaker than he was. His head simply was too sore, too swollen to allow for much action now but if he had any chance of gaining his freedom he'd have to save his strength and use surprise to his advantage. There was nothing to be done at the moment, so he dozed back to sleep in the warm sunlight and hoped his captors had no idea how awake he had been.

When he awoke again the shadows from the trees were cast across the boat, the sun was close to late afternoon or early evening. This time, while his head hurt horribly, his stomach didn't feel queasy and his limbs didn't feel weak. He shifted his weight slightly to allow blood flow to return to the side he'd slept on and tried his hardest to make it look like nothing more than unconscious tossing. His leg went all pins and needles as the blood flow returned and it made him want to twitch from the sensation. He held still, he had long practice silently enduring unpleasantness.

A half an hour after he awoke, he felt ready to do something. He offered no warning, he went from lying seemingly helpless on his side to surging forward. He glimpsed the boat, filled with the Feral warriors and Ishvan, all paddling their way in easy unison up river and he saw the startled surprise on the nearest one's face as he moved toward him. Only Tarin's lunge wasn't aimed at the Feral, he plunged over the side and into the depths of the cold river before any of them could react.

He silently thanked Dunn and his demanding training. Tarin went under the water and kicked hard, using his free legs to move him away from the boat. He bobbed to the surface in awkward buoyancy. He drew a breath and gauged the distance he'd covered from the boat. Their shocked surprise oddly amused him.

Before he could think about or even really feel how badly his head hurt he sucked in another lungful of air and forced himself below water again. There he balled up, pulling his legs up as close to his chest as he could. Once he made himself as tight and small a bundle as possible he forced his bound hands down over his hips, sliding it barely across his thighs and then he was free to pull his legs out straight. His hands were now in front of him, which would make swimming difficult but not impossible. It was a drill Dunn and Chrisholm had made them all master, swimming with bound hands. It was something that had terrified Tarin at first but it was a

task he had been pushed to do time and again until he mastered it. Dunn had always said it might save his life one day.

It took a moment once his head popped back into the air for the water to clear from his ears but when it did he heard the hurried, angry voices behind him. They weren't shouting or panicked and that wasn't good for Tarin, the more chaos he could instill the better his chances would be. He didn't waste time looking around but set off swimming hard for the shore line. The cold water chilled him and soaked his boots and clothes, dragging him down. His vision was spotty and his head felt too light, he told himself firmly he was not going to pass out while still in the water.

Below his boots scraped the river bottom and he kicked hard into the shallows. The water pulled him down and he lost his balance, splashing on his side and losing time as he struggled to regain his footing. Finally he stumbled onto the shore and spared a glance back over his shoulder, the long boat of Ferals was closing quickly. They'd finished whatever debate they'd quarreled over and now pursued him with a single mind. They'd make it to the shore faster than he had and his head start was quickly fading.

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Chapter Fifteen

He hit the woods at a dead run. There was no chance of hiding, so stealth was a waste of time. He blundered across fallen leaves and logs and new green grasses, trying hard to not turn his ankle but with only one thing in mind. His only chance was to put distance between himself and his captors and maybe, if he was really lucky, come across a home or settlement. If he was really, really lucky, they'd grow bored and consider him far too much risk or effort to chase down. Tarin didn't trust either circumstance.

His foot hit open air, the ground had curled away into a small hill. He hadn't been watching close enough to see it in time. It threw off his balance and he tumbled down the incline, rolling to control the slide and get his hips and legs to take the brunt of the force. When he reached the bottom, the woods had given way to an open valley of grassland. It may have been a field or pasture land to someone at some time, but now it was empty and grew wild. The grass was waist high, filled with tall stems and bright summer wildflowers.

Tarin ran straight into it at an angle, running hard because he could hear the Ferals behind him now. His blood was pumping in his ears and it was making him dizzy, he was running out of strength as well as time. The little depression he stumbled on was a blessing and the best cover he was likely to find, so he slid his body into it, startling a bird in his haste.

He lay there, breathing so hard he was sure they'd be able to hear him. There was nothing to do but lay still and wait--and he hated that, hated being unarmed and helpless. He looked around for a tree branch or stick or something to use as a weapon and saw little of much functional use. The

only thing he could come up with was a smaller rock with a sharp edge and, as he lay waiting for the Ferals to come over the hillside, he sawed frantically at the ropes around his wrist.

He glanced up the way he'd come and saw them. They moved carefully, silently and swiftly. He'd had no chance to hide his trail and they followed his path down to the sea of grass. Once on the edge they stopped. They looked right to where he was hidden, their eyes scanning around and past him. Tarin let out the breath he'd been holding and continued to saw at the ropes. The wet cord was parting but far too slowly. When he glanced up again, the small party was studying the nearby grass and Ishvan was making his slow way down the hill using his cane, but his leg no longer wearing the brace. Tarin muttered purely internal curses at the boy and watched as the Feral's pointed in his general direction.

They fanned out and moved carefully toward him. There was a slow, deliberate need to their search and it chilled Tarin. This was more than just a casual kidnapping. Even figuring in that he was somewhat well known and his death would bring notice to their cause, they were too carefully searching. There was little doubt they were looking for him and considered him of value to expend such energy in his capture, and now recapture. Tarin couldn't imagine what they wanted of him, unless they were mercenaries, hired by some noble who wanted him back in a collar. There were plenty of men who'd been unhappy that his last owner had so blindly turned him over to the guard and had enough money to hire whomever they wished. The Ferals were well known for their stealth and skills, just because he'd never heard of free roaming bands for hire didn't mean he couldn't rule the possibility out.

There was no way he was being taken back to a collar. Even if the possibility was remote and driven by his own phobias, he'd force them to kill him first. If they proved unwilling, he'd find a way to kill himself before they got their hands on him again.

He could hear them moving through the grass now and he stopped sawing at the ropes. It was small, but the loose rock was the only weapon he had. He clutched it in his cupped hands and breathed as slowly and carefully as he could. The line moved a few paces closer and Tarin could see the shadow of the man closest to him. He bunched his feet up under him and when the whispery sounds of the grass told him another step had been taken, he lunged.

The first Feral startled backwards at the sudden movement but brought an arm up and half deflected the blow that Tarin aimed at his head. The rock compensated and the man stumbled under the impact. Tarin bodily slammed the man down and twisted the blade loose from his hand. The hilt felt strange but he gripped it tight between his bound hands, feeling a little better now that he was armed. He shifted his grip to deliver the killing blow but the man struggled and threw him off balance.

Tarin looked around and saw the others coming at a run. There was no time now so still clutching the blade he jumped to his feet and took off running again. He tried to hook back around and reach the woods, knowing there was little real chance of escape but being driven by fear now as well as anger. The shouts of his pursuers were controlled and well trained and only spurred Tarin to move faster.

An arrow sprouted among the flowers in front of him, several feet away and in his line of escape. Tarin turned direction and another arrow appeared there as well. He turned and spotted the archers across the field. He stopped running, knowing they'd hit their target and that if they'd wanted to put the arrow in his back they would have.

"Tarin! They won't hurt you, you have to trust me," Ishvan called out. He was crossing the field as quickly as he could. "Put down the blade and hold still!"

"It's a little difficult to trust you right now, Ishvan!" He kept his eyes on the approaching Ferals and shuffled a step backward. An arrow instantly appeared a foot away from him, it came so close that he felt the air split in its wake.

It was a choice of how he was to be taken and he'd be damned before he made it easy on them. He shifted his weight and the nearest to him shouted out a warning, seeing his plan to run a moment before he actually took off. Tarin's back itched as he waited for an arrow to hit him, but none came. A few more appeared nearby, but when it was obvious the threat was no longer going to work they stopped.

The Feral behind him was running hard and gaining ground. He wasn't in soaking wet clothes, with his hands tied and with his head bashed in. Tarin knew he couldn't make it away, and still he ran. His lead was still strong, if crumbling, when from nowhere a cord with weights on either end hit his ankle.

Tarin was in midstep so it only partially entangled his other foot but it was enough to send him sprawling into the grass with a curse. The weights carried around his ankle to crack painfully against his leg. The cord was strong and hopelessly entangled about his ankles and he scrambled frantically, tugging at the weights.

Ishvan had been close enough to see the look of terrified panic and resigned anger on the swordsman's face, and when he saw one of the scouts release the golo cord he had a chilled moment of understanding. "Disarm him, now!" He shouted in the words of the Ferals, calling out to the man that had held a blade to his throat the night before.

Shandro offered the young man a confused look but nodded and gave the order. Lenno, the closest, responded to the order without thought and leapt on the swordsman. As he lunged he understood, the outlander had turned the blade around and was a breath away from using it. They tumbled together in the grass and the blade spun away out of reach.

Tarin snarled in anger at having his suicide stolen from him and bit the arm of the Feral trying to restrain him. The man yelped and hissed in surprise and pain as blood welled from the bite. Within a moment there were two and then three others on Tarin. They skillfully cut his bonds free and twisted his limbs in painful angles to force him to submit. Three of them bodily were holding the swordsman down, he was forcing them to release him or break an arm and their choices were running out. Lenno swore again and cracked the swordsman near the bloody knot on the back of his head. The man below their weight groaned and went limp for the second time in a day as he was dropped into unconsciousness.

Shandro sighed as he shook his head in disapproval.

"There wasn't a choice." Lenno protested. "He fights like a mad man or a wild animal. By the trees, he bit me!" He offered up the bloody arm as proof.

Ishvan caught up and looked from one man to another. "At this rate he won't be able to put two words together by the time we deliver him."

"He's lucky we didn't twist his arm off." Lenno waved the other ferals aside to handle the swordsman personally, it was quick work to untangle his feet but he paused before rebinding the swordsman's wrists. "Sir?"

Shandro glanced and understood. Their orders were simple, the swordsman had to be delivered undamaged and whole. They'd tried to bind him as gently as possible and now they would have to tie him tighter, but Lenno was right to pause. The skin around the swordsman's wrists was already scarred, showing past evidence of the cut of a rope. "He's a criminal?" He questioned of Ishvan.

"No, not at all. They aren't like us, he was a slave. He doesn't understand."

Shandro's face softened a little and he nodded. "So be it. Tie his hands as they were before but

put a band around his elbows. That'll keep his hands safely in place. Tether his feet too."

"Sir," Ishvan protested the rough treatment but stopped when Shandro put a hand on his shoulder.

"We'll make camp and when he wakes up you'll speak with him. It's going to be a long trip if this nonsense keeps up."

Tarin awoke a second time and felt sick at the idea that he still lived. There was little doubt he was still alive, his head hurt too much for him to be dead. Voices drifted softly in the cool night air and he couldn't stop the groan that escaped him as he came fully awake. The voices stopped at his stirrings and Tarin found that amusing. He was no threat now.

He checked himself for damage and found little more than strains and sore bruises. His hands were rebound at both his wrists and his elbows, but again were curiously tied above his clothes. When he shifted his legs he found them bound as well and he wasn't at all surprised. What did surprise him was the blanket tossed carefully about him. His clothes were still damp and made his skin feel chilled, but the blanket was keeping him warm. His boots had been removed and when he cracked his eyes open he saw them drying near the fire.

He refused to show just how much pain he was in, how weak he felt, so he lifted his head and forced his eyes open. The Ferals and Ishvan stared back at him, watching him carefully. There was wary uncertainty in their faces and Tarin found it both amusing and annoying.

"He's got the eyes of a demon," one of the scouts whispered and glanced to Shandro and then Ishvan.

"He's no more a demon than you are." The boy answered back and poured water into a waiting mug. He fixed the tea quickly and moved without fear over to where Tarin was propped along a tree. "How're you feeling?" He asked so Tarin would understand.

"What do you care?"

"I care because I'm your friend. Here, it'll help with the headache." He offered the tea but Tarin turned his face away.

"If this is how you treat your friends, I'd hate to be your enemy." His words were bitter, his tone mocking.

"Don't be stupid, drink the tea."

Tarin stared in open mistrust.

Ishvan sighed and drank several deep swallows of the herbal brew. "There, now drink the tea."

It was his thirst more than the pain in his head that made him comply. His throat felt raw and his mouth was dry. Ishvan held the mug for him skillfully and he drank deeply from it. "Is there anything you need? Are you hungry?" Tarin gave Ishvan such a look of open hate that the boy looked away. "I guess not, maybe later."

"Tell him." Shandro spoke in the Outlander's words.

Ishvan nodded. "I did lie to you, Tarin. I'm sorry for that, but I lied to everyone. Some of what I told you was the truth, my parents did die when I was young, but it wasn't the Shoker's that took me in, it was the Ferals. Shandro," He waved to the Feral that seemed to be in command. The

man who'd held a blade to his throat to capture Tarin without bloodshed. "He's my father."

That surprised Tarin. He looked at the Feral with new eyes. He was a fair looking man with strong hazel eyes that watched everything. His tawny hair was pulled back into dozens of small braids and bound into a tail at the base of his neck. He was tall, almost a head taller than Tarin and not as old as Tarin had first guessed. He placed the man as several years older than himself but also younger than Dunn. He watched everything with a serious expression that didn't suit the smile and laugh lines etched into his face.

"Well, at least I returned you to your family," Tarin mocked.

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Chapter Sixteen

Shandro frowned but stayed silent and left the conversation to his son. "Yes, you did. It was as I told you, when I showed skill with art Shandro petitioned to have me taught by our people. It wasn't an idea they were comfortable with, we value art as a holy skill and when it came down to it I am still an Outlander to many. Rather than give up, my parents asked that I be allowed to attend your universities and permission was granted."

"And your leg, was that a lie too?" Tarin nodded to the boy's leg, still without its ever present brace.

Ishvan smiled thinly. "No, I wish it were. I wore a brace as a child, it was safer to appear more lame than I really am and no one ever looks beyond the brace and cane, it made it a little safer for me."

"So how much were you paid? And will I at least know who I'm being sold to?"

The swordsman's tone was harsh but his eyes were pure savage hatred and Ishvan understood. His family and friends near by exchanged confused looks and Ishvan was glad they didn't gather the implied mercenary meaning of the outlander's words.

"It's not like that Tarin, not at all. I know it looks like that but it's not and I'd never do that, we'd never do that." The swordsman obviously didn't believe him and made little show to pretend otherwise. "Last winter, you and Analeia Grenk freed one of our people from your city."

The smallest amount of surprise passed across the swordsman's eyes before he steeled his expression again.

"I know it was you. The woman you helped, her name is Hentra, she's my mother."

There was no hiding the shocked surprise Tarin felt that time. The confession hit almost as hard as the blow to his head had.

"I got a letter from home, telling me that the Shoker Commune here had been slaughtered. Our people traded freely with the Shoker's, the Govners troops made an example of the ones out this way. My mother was one of three Feral women captured that day, my father wrote and told me this. It took some searching but I found their numbers, one had died of her injuries, one had been sold up north and one had stayed in Glouchester. I tracked that one down and, by sheer chance, it was my mother." He sighed and offered the captive swordsman another drink from the mug.

Tarin was too off balance to refuse and after a few sips Ishvan continued. "It took a bit of working but I got her out from her master's house. Before we could leave the city the alarm was raised and she ordered me to go back to the university. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done but I obeyed, she didn't want us both being hung. I waited for days for word of her capture but nothing came, and than a few weeks later I got a letter.

"It not only told me she was alive but that someone in the city had saved her and enlisted the help of another and asked for nothing in return. She gave a description of a pale skinned, lavender eyed, dark haired man who wore a sword. She had no idea how rare your coloring is.

"Anyway, when she made it home and told of what you had done it was decided that the person who'd risked so much for one of their enemies needed to be spoken to. It's the first time we've any positive proof of kindness from any of your people, it's fascinated our leader. It was so ordered that you were to meet them and since they couldn't come to you, you had to be brought out of the city. I was ordered to locate you and lead you here."

Tarin was only made more angry. "So this whole time was a ruse? A way to gain my trust?"

"No!" Ishvan was quick to answer and than paused. "Well, in the start, yes." He looked to his father and felt, not for the first time, torn between the two cultures. "I came down to the lower city to try to learn how to gain your friendship and I ran into Mrs. Farntell. She told me of the opening of in her building, your building and I got a group of my friends to rent it with me. It was my idea, they are totally blameless. I figured out pretty quickly from Mrs. Farntell's gossip that the woman my mother described was Analeia so I focused on meeting you."

"I'm flattered."

"It's not like that. Well, it was at first. You can't see how you appear to other people. Tarin you're this legendary swordsman that's so cold, so distant, there's little doubt that all the stories about what an emotionless killer you are, are true. I couldn't believe you'd been the one that risked everything to save my mother, it couldn't be this cold empty swordsman. So, I thought everyone has a soft spot and maybe yours was helplessness."

"Which is why you were so shy." It made sick sense now and Tarin had fallen for it.

Ishvan nodded and wasn't proud of himself. "It wasn't all a ruse, I am withdrawn by nature. But at the party, when I let you into Ana's old room," he shook his head and glanced to the fellows around them and wondered if they'd think he'd gone soft in the head as well. "There was little doubt that you were no more the cold killer than I was the shy helpless cripple. I made my mind up that I wouldn't pretend to be something I wasn't and figured I'd report failure to my people. I'm sorry father."

Tarin sighed. "And yet here I am, trussed up like a festival turkey."

"I'm sorry, it wasn't supposed to be like this. We wanted to disarm you so we could explain, but you've been difficult."

Tarin raised an eyebrow. "I beg your deepest pardon. So, now what?"

"It's another two days by the river and there's a meeting place set up, you won't have to go any further than that into our lands. You'll meet with the representative sent to speak with you and we'll return you to your home." Shando answered smoothly. "How you travel is your choice."

"When you put it that way, I would like to walk around a bit and stretch my legs. You say I'm not to be harmed?"

"You won't be harmed." Ishvan promised.

"And I've no choice but going through with this?"

"None." Shando answered.

"Well than, can these ropes be loosened? I'd really like to be able to feel my hands and feet again." He softened his face but couldn't quite bring himself to even half smile.

There was quick and uncertain debate but in the end two of the group came forward to loosen his bonds. The moment Tarin felt them give, he lunged. He knew he couldn't get free but he'd not go easily. By the time they'd wrestled him down again he'd blackened one eye, split a lip and knocked the wind from a third. So when he was being retied he found himself laughing mirthlessly at the whole absurdity of it.

"I swear, I'll never do a good deed again. I swear it." He chuckled on and the Ferals watched him, wondering if he might be a touch mad.

"Is this necessary, Father?" Ishvan didn't like it. They'd reach the meeting place tomorrow before noon, their progress had been stopped by a fast moving but very violent thunderstorm. It had dumped buckets of rain on them and turned the world to mud and lightening. Tarin was the only one unsurprised by the intensity of the weather and he'd sat it out in resigned misery. Once the sun had again returned, the entire company was soaked and mud splattered. Tarin had begged for a chance to clean himself up. The last time they'd granted such a request he'd escaped again, this time they'd agreed only if the swordsman was tethered. They'd tied a rope in a loose loop about the man's neck, bound it down to a loop about his waist and connected it to a central line that Shando held. They'd kept his hands bound in front of the swordsman for the last two days and even that was a risk.

Shando looked at his son in surprise. "He's beaten most of us senseless over the last few days, tried to strangle you and taken a bite out of your cousin. I'm surprised you'd ask that."

Tarin tossed them a hard look from where he stood in waist high water washing, resenting that they spoke words he couldn't understand. He squared his shoulders and openly watched them, he wasn't afraid any longer, just furious.

"You don't understand him. He values freedom more than life, I can't fault him for anything he's done. He's every right to hate me."

"You really did befriend him, didn't you?" He didn't know his son to befriend anyone lightly and it made him rethink his opinion of what he'd at first seen as a brutal savage.

"Yes, I did. He's a good man."

"I'm sorry Ishvan, that we have to keep him in such conditions and that you've lost a friend."

"I know, it's okay, it had to be done."

They stood in mute silence for a moment, keeping a casual eye on their captive and uncertain what to say. Shando wasn't one to speak without long thought and some of his manner had rubbed off on the young outlander he'd adopted.

"Father?"

"Hmm?"

"Is it possible for an outlander to be a holy one?"

The question was asked casually but Shando gave it his full attention. He mulled the answer carefully before he spoke and was proud of how Ishvan stood and waited for an answer.

"I don't know, your mother would be a better one to speak to about it. I know you won't speak to a holy one. May I ask why you'd want to know?" Anyone else, a holy one included, would have simply answered that no it wasn't possible but Shando didn't know, he couldn't confirm a negative answer and so was unwilling to give one.

Ishvan looked down and answered carefully. "You'll think what I have to say is strange."

The scout shrugged. "I often think what you have to say is strange but that doesn't mean I don't want to hear it."

That made Ishvan laugh and drew him a hard look from Tarin. "True. I shouldn't laugh around the swordsman, he's touchy about being mocked."

"Than by the Trees don't laugh! We don't want him set off again. I've seldom seen a temper like his. Tell me your thoughts?" He smiled freely.

"There are signs of a holy one, one with the true vocation?"

"So we're told but it seems like most these days show little true vocation." It was a confession he'd make only to his son or wife but one commonly held.

"The day we reached the river, he warned of the storm's coming. I'd forgotten until the storm arrived last night." He spoke carefully, knowing what shaky ground he was treading on but needing to speak up.

"A lucky guess?"

Ishvan shrugged. "Maybe but did any of you sense a coming storm?" Some weather sense was common for scouts but no where near the intense knowledge of a holy one.

Shando shook his head. "None that spoke of it. Lenno knew a short time before the sky opened but not in advance of days as you say he did."

"It's more than that, he heals rapidly, he knew you were about to attack but none of you made a noise. He's shown several times that he's been aware of the mood or actions of others when he shouldn't have been. He's even equally skilled with both hands." His voice became pleading, worried he was making too much of things.

"A sign of one touched, only the greatest have such skill." He stood in silent thought and for a brief, terrible moment he considered setting the outlander free, suddenly frightened of what the strange eyed man might mean to his people. "What else have you seen?"

Ishvan shook his head. "Nothing I can pin point, you've seen him fight. He dodges blows he shouldn't even know are coming, counters attacks as they begin and this is rough and unarmed. With a sword he's amazing. I've never seen anything like it. It might mean nothing, but..."

"But the storm came." He tightened his grip on the ropes in his hand as Tarin moved into the shallows. "It's not for us to worry over, so don't fret about it."

Tarin finished drying off as best he could and turned to the pair watching over him. "I guess you won't let me shave."

The two men exchanged a glance but it was Shandro that answered. "I don't believe I'll trust you with a blade."

"Can't blame me for asking." He had started dressing as much as his bonds would allow.

"If you want, I can shave you." Ishvan volunteered, ignoring the hard look his father gave him.

"Thanks but between the choice of you holding a blade to my throat or growing a beard I'll take the latter. Stubble never killed anyone." He offered out his hands to be unbound so he could dress, his eyes ever watchful for a moment of distraction or weakness. He'd been getting perverse pleasure in popping them whenever he could even if it meant being roughed up in kind.

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Chapter Seventeen

That night, Ishvan took his turn watching Tarin. They'd had to tie the swordsman to a tree to keep him from slipping away in the dark. The first night he'd managed to twist his hands free and had picked at the knots all night until he'd gotten his legs free. If Lenno hadn't decided to check on him, he'd have been off and running before they could have stopped him. As it was it became only a tussle and now, at night, they tied the man to a tree with a rope around his neck and waist.

They were well past the middle of the border lands and close to the land occupied by the Ferals, there was no threat from an outside source but the scouts still rotated someone on roaming guard as well as someone awake in camp. Ishvan couldn't do the roaming with his leg but he could keep an eye on Tarin.

It would have been more comfortable if the swordsman slept soundly. He'd drift off and then startle awake a few moments later short of breath and frightened. The longest any of them had seen him sleep was a few hours at a time before dark dreams shocked him awake. It had Ishvan assuring them that outsiders did sleep, just this one didn't sleep well. Ishvan had a pretty good idea why the swordsman slept so poorly, the bindings on his body and the weight around his neck were sure to bring back unpleasant memories.

"I wish you'd not look at me like that." Ishvan said softly, looking up over his sketch book to where Tarin studied him.

"Like how?"

"Like you want to break my legs."

Tarin shrugged. "I do want to break you legs."

"I'm sorry."

They sat in silence as the fire cracked cheerfully. Finally, Tarin broke the silence, needing to speak.

"They slit Ana's throat."

Ishvan looked up. "I didn't know that."

"I watched them kill her, I couldn't stop them."

There was such torment and pain in Tarin's lavender eyes that he didn't need to speak further. Ishvan had picked that threat to disarm Tarin because he didn't believe the swordsman would sacrifice an innocent's life to save his own. Now, he'd give anything to choose another method, he'd had no idea how closely it paralleled a past pain.

"When we set you free, you should break my legs." He meant it too.

Tarin's eyes stayed cold and angry but he sighed and shook his head. "I'm not going to break your legs. No matter how much you deserve it."

Ishvan released the breath he hadn't know he was holding. "I really do consider you a friend. I didn't want this to happen."

"Well, we don't always get what we want. They're going to kill me, you know that right?" He had little doubt of it now, it was a gnawing sense that he couldn't shake.

"No, once the envoy from the Elect speaks with you, you're to be escorted to the border and released."

Tarin shook his head. "That may be the plan but it won't happen, did this Elect of yours order I was to be released or has it just been assumed?"

Ishvan thought about what he'd been told. "Well, the orders were just to bring you in unharmed. To tell you that you wouldn't be harmed."

Tarin set his head back against the tree. "So be it. Look, I figure you owe me something for this. Tell Shelee to give my share of the Golden Pearl to Jolie, she'll understand. Tell her," he tried to think of all that needed said and all he couldn't say. "Tell her thank you. She'll understand that too."

Ishvan understood that the swordsman was saying his goodbyes and it unsettled him. The man had a knack of knowing what he shouldn't. "Tarin, no one, I repeat that, no one, not even the Elect, will harm you while I'm alive to do something about it. I promise you that!" He hissed the oath out and felt the weight of his words, knowing if it came to such a choice he'd be giving up everything he had ever known.

"Don't, I'm not worth it." Tarin's words were so empty and broken, so hollow that Ishvan had to struggle to hear them. Neither spoke for the rest of Ishvan's watch and when he was finally relieved to sleep, Tarin had fallen into fitful and restless slumber of his own.

Shortly after noon the next day they spotted the rising smoke from cook fires and as they rounded the bend of the river a small village or very large camp came into view. If Tarin had the option to go over board he would have but they'd taken to tying his feet as well. The camp was well laid out and dotted with over a dozen round semi permanent tent like structures. Horses were picketed off to one side and a series of long narrow boats like the one they were in were at rest on the banks, pulled up out of the water.

Tarin watched and saw the dozens of people moving on the shore line and among the tents. All were armed and dressed as the Ferals with him were, their golden skin glowing where their strong arms showed against the dark leather tunics. The boat was quickly spotted and voices called out greetings. Soon the bank was swarming with the camps inhabitants, all waving and calling out as their fellows returned from a dangerous mission. Tarin felt very foreign and very vulnerable.

The long boat skidded across the water to the shallows near the camp and people rushed out to help pull it close to the shore. Some of the warriors within the boat leaped out to help secure it to the shore and Tarin sat steady, waiting for the ropes on his feet to be freed. He watched the crowd and saw that about half the numbers here were women, dressed as the men with their hair as long and braided back as the men. The tight leather tunics looked more than a little immodest on the women and Tarin felt himself startled by the embarrassment that swept over him.

While he was waiting to be freed, he became overly aware of how he was being watched. People openly pointed and whispered out in fascinated tones, amazed that there really was someone with such odd coloring, shocked that such a bizarre eye color could be found even among the outlanders. It was starting to annoy him, starting to make him feel angry and a little sick when the crowd parted down the middle.

The people drew back to allow a pair to easily make their way to the shoreline. The one Tarin saw first was a man so tall as to appear a giant, most of the people on the shore, male or female had a willowy look to them, slender and graceful but this one stood taller than anyone present. He was wider to, stronger across the shoulder, his hands were wide and strong, thick fingered in comparison to the long elegance of those around him. He breathed strength and power and look more than able of snapping anyone in two with his bare hands. He was armed with one of their odd length blades and a more proper sword and was obviously someone of respect for how people looked to him for a reaction.

The woman that followed at the man's side was one Tarin knew. It was the Feral he'd helped that winter, dressed now in the clothes of her people, her short hair braided into a dozen slender braids which stuck out at all angles from her head. Only now, there was no fear in her eyes, only a great joy and she smiled widely when she spotted her son and husband returned safely.

Shando left Lenno to free the swordsman's feet and hoped from the boat. He inclined his head to the tall warrior and spoke simply as was only proper. "Marcus, we're honored that you were sent." In all technical terms, Marcus was of no higher rank than Shando or any other full scout or warrior but unlike most of them, he was friends with the Elect and a trusted companion.

"Shando, I'm pleased you've returned safely but what's this? You were ordered to bring him here unharmed." He waved to the outlander in the boat, Tarin had gotten more than a few scrapes and bruises over the last few days, he was bound tightly and unshaven and not at all arriving like the honored guest he was supposed to be.

"It was the only way to bring him here in one piece. He's done harm to us all on the journey and is to be handled carefully." It was all the warning he was willing to offer, it should have been plenty if Marcus would really look at the warriors and scouts in the boat.

"Bring him here, I want to look at this marvel."

Ishvan had hopped free of the boat and smiled warmly at his mother but he stayed by his father's side. "Warrior Marcus, if I may, do not let him too close to you and we've found he's easier to handle if we speak only in his words."

Marcus frowned a little at being addressed directly by Ishvan, adopted or no, he was still just an outlander. "If he can't understand a civilized tongue I can't help that. Bring him here."

Shando sighed and laid a hand on his son's shoulder, drawing him out of the way. The men from the boat exchanged a common look of understanding and as soon as Tarin was helped out of the boat and brought before Marcus they backed out of the way.

Tarin's legs felt weak from being held still so long and it was almost a delight to be able to get out of the boat and move around. He was prodded gently to the shore and led to stand in front of the giant, bear like man. Everyone spoke quickly in their own words, a language he half felt he knew, catching words that sounded vaguely like his own, but he understood none of it. It annoyed him, to be spoken around in this way. It was how a slave was spoken to and it pushed a button deep inside of him. His captors had learned to speak so he could understand at all times and had grown to respect his temper and desire to fight. Now, they'd come to handle him as they would any valuable but highly dangerous animal, giving into his whims when they could and being mannerly with him when he was denied.

Marcus didn't yet know this and he ignored the warnings offered him. He stepped close to the outlander and studied him. Even with the odd coloring right in front of him he wanted to deny it. It didn't seem human to look as the man did, with skin the color of a corpse and eyes so frighteningly shaded, the shock of black hair seemed merely designed to point out the differences of the other colors. The outlander stood like a warrior but he was bound and controlled. Marcus reached out and touched the pale skin, half expecting it to rub off and show a more normal skin color underneath, even a more normal color for an outlander.

"Don't." Tarin warned.

Marcus laughed and turned to the people around him. "He threatens me!" He answered in his own language. Everyone laughed at the jest, because no one willingly fought against Marcus, everyone laughed but those that had been in the boat. As Marcus turned back to the outlander he caught the movement.

Tarin lifted his heavily booted foot up and smashed the hard soled heel down onto the top of the softly booted foot of the man across from him. Marcus drew in a breath from the pain but didn't cry out, he swung a hand out to grab a hold of the outlander but Tarin danced out of the way just in time. When he stepped a half step forward again, he crouched his hands up and into Marcus' solar plexus, the force knocked the wind from the bigger man and as he doubled over Tarin wrapped his bound hands around the other's neck. Marcus tried to stand, but Tarin saw the movement and kicked hard at the other's knee. As others moved forward to pull him off, Tarin had a strong hold on the man's neck.

"It's not nice to laugh at people!" He snarled and choked harder for a second and then, a moment before being either whacked across the head again or tackled to the ground, he released his hold on the man. He was out numbered and had no hope of winning but he'd made his point and that was all that really mattered.

Tarin drifted, napping and sleeping as best he could in the position he'd been bound in. They'd been quick to hand him back over to his initial captors, men deemed to have some sort of magical understanding on how to keep the crazed outlander calm. He'd been half dragged, half carried to one of the round tents in the center of the camp, Tarin had watched the lay out and plotted an escape route even while he pretended to weakness and disinterest. Once inside he'd allowed himself to be rebound without a fight, his hands tied behind his back again around the center tent pole, his ankles again tied together. Once he was secured they'd left him alone and as soon as he resigned himself that he couldn't wiggle free he'd settled in as best he could and took advantage of the first real privacy he'd had to sleep.

When the tent flap shifted he came alert but kept his head lowered. He watched as the opening grew and a form slipped inside, the sky outside the dim light of the tent was dark and Tarin was surprised he'd managed to sleep so long. As soon as the tent was closed behind the form Tarin could make out who it was and he wasn't surprised at his visitor.

"The reversal of our positions must be amusing." Tarin didn't need to fake a defeated weakness, he was weary of being bound, of being captive and was eager for an end to come.

The Feral woman paused and continued across the tent, a mug in one hand and a bowl in the other. "I thought you might be hungry. Shandro says you've hardly eaten."

"The conditions haven't been such to promote hunger."

She set the bowl and mug down and knelt beside him. "My name is Hentra, I'm told you are Tarin Morris." She spoke his name as if the first needed the second to make sense or as if the two names were one.

"Go away."

Hentra watched him for a moment and then offered him a small bite of food, holding it delicately in her finger tips. She'd been warned not to do such, that the outlander had bitten the last person who'd tried to feed him.

Tarin closed his eyes and turned his face away. The rich aroma of the food taunted him and his stomach growled in empty need.

"Please, eat. You do honor to your self control but you don't do yourself any service by refusing, eat, I promise to tell them you refused every bite and I was forced to throw the food away."

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That made Tarin grin and he turned his face back to her and studied the good humor in her eyes. Without a word of acceptance he parted his lips and let himself be fed with delicate care.

"I'd thought I'd exaggerated the color of your eyes."

"What is it you want?"

She nodded. "Very well, in truth, to help you. I understand how difficult this is for you and I owe you a great debt."

"And?"

Hentra wasn't going to speak of the other, but there was one. The fact that this outlander knew her motives so well frightened her a little. "And to ask you to not hate my son. He only did what he had to do, he thinks very highly of you and is deeply upset at betraying you."

Tarin waited until he'd been fed a few more bites, enjoying the feel of something in his stomach. "What does it matter now? When must I speak with this envoy?"

"Will you see Ishvan, if he comes to visit you, will you speak to him?"

"The envoy?"

She sighed. "Tomorrow, he was not happy at your besting him this afternoon. He wished time to allow his temper to cool."

"Thank you." He nodded at the honest and open answer and found himself liking the woman across from him in spite of himself. She had a lot of Ishvan's quiet good humor and openness about her. "Tell Ishvan, I'm not going anywhere at the present time. I can't promise what sort of company I'll make."

Hentra smiled and saw what her son liked so in the swordsman. She bowed her head and rose to her feet. She left the tent without another word spoken.

But Ishvan didn't come to visit that night and the only people Tarin saw were the guards set to tend and watch him. He found himself disappointed and, oddly, felt lonely and abandoned.

They had roused him at dawn and allowed him to carefully wash in a small bowl of water. They carried large, heavy sticks now, sticks thick enough to break bones and knock a man senseless but if wielded carefully ones that wouldn't kill. Tarin understood the threat and behaved, grateful for a chance to move after so long bound to a limited number of positions. His body ached in protest at being retied to the tent pole but there was little he could do.

Ishvan arrived hours later, he came into the tent carefully and with his cane to lean on. He lowered himself to the floor with a sigh and his face was frowned in displeasure. "How are you?" He asked with real concern.

"You know, the worst thing about being tied up? I've had this spot on my nose that's itched for days, it goes away and comes back."

"I'm sorry."

"When can I meet this envoy?" Tarin didn't let the sympathy effect him and he reminded himself of all the lies the boy had told.

"About that, you won't be. A runner arrived from the Elect, they'll be here before night fall and want to speak with you personally. It's a high honor."

"I feel honored." He mocked with his accent and voice.

It worked, Ishvan looked down in shame and studied his hands for a moment. "Do you hate me?"

Tarin really wanted to answer that yes he did but he couldn't. His face softened and he shook his head. "I should, I really should hate you but I can't. I believe you didn't intend it to be like this."

"Can you forgive me?"

"That's not something I'm sure I can do. Let's see how this all ends and than we'll see."

There was more than a little threat in the swordsman's voice and Ishvan accepted it. He stayed for a while, sitting in silent company but with no words to say. Finally, the force of Tarin's stare was too much to take and Ishvan retreated out into the fresh, open air of the camp.

Tarin made an effort to behave during the afternoon. Hentra reappeared to feed him lunch and when his guards took him for a brief walk he was the model of defeated, idle behavior. He focused everything now on studying the manners, layout and ways of the camp, knowing the better he acted the longer outside the tent he'd have to watch. His secondary plan was to appear as defeated, as subjected, as he could. It was a manner he could affect well, one that had kept him alive when in a collar. By mid afternoon he had most of the Ferals around him convinced his solitude in the tent so tightly bound had broken his fight at least temporarily. Only Shandro continued to watch him with the same wary way, not convinced for a moment that Tarin had been so easily humbled.

Tarin was again attached to his tent pole when late in the day he heard the joyful cries of the people out side the tent that announced a new arrival. There were sounds of horses and cries back and forth in their fast, almost understandable language. Tarin listened for all he was worth and heard people moving quickly around outside and soon music filled the air in odd rhythms and melodies.

The sounds of a happy celebration continued during what he assumed was a meal. The smells of cooking meat and grains drifted to him in his tent and made his mouth water but no one arrived to offer to share any of it with him. After a time the music died and a single or pair of voices spoke loud enough that Tarin could hear. From an outsiders perspective it sounded like a story and he thought he recognized Shandro's voice occasionally and at other times other men from his trip up river. At points, the crowd of voices laughed or gasped in gleeful shock and Tarin figured they were retelling the adventures of dragging him to their camp. Oddly, it amused him to think of them telling of how a single, unarmed, bound outlander had caused them such trouble.

Finally the music began again, but quieter this time, more subdued and withdrawn. Tarin felt the change in the music and in the sounds of the people around him. He tensed and waited, trying to arrange himself into the most pathetic of forms he could manage, which given his rough treatment and days of confinement wasn't difficult.

At long last the tent opened and the large man he'd fought the other day came into the tent. His bulk filled the space and he looked down from his height on the heap of the outlander. When he was sure there was no threat from the man he spoke, carefully and slowly in the man's language, uncertain if the outlander would be bright enough to really understand.

"The Elect wishes to speak with you. You will show respect. Do you understand?"

Tarin looked up and schooled his expression to one of weakness. He nodded meekly and lowered his eyes to the floor. He watched the boots of the tall man shuffle aside and a word was spoken before a second person joined them inside.

The feet were smaller than the tall Marcus but covered in the same soft leather boots everyone seemed to wear. Tarin glanced up and the sight that greeted him glued his eyes for a moment. Their great leader, the Elect everyone spoke of with such respect and awe, was a young man. He wasn't small compared to the almost giant Marcus, but he wasn't large either and Tarin judged the man to be similar to his own height and he was almost half as wide as Marcus in the shoulders. His hair was a tawny coppery auburn color that hung down his back in a loose shower held in place by only a few small slender braids. His eyes had the same almond slant of all the Ferals and his skin was golden. There was a still, graceful quality to the man that struck Tarin. He had the look of a wild deer moving about some forest glen, primal, elegant, and powerful. It was a look so naturally in balance with everything around him that the balance itself became a form of beauty.

He lowered his eyes, afraid if he stared he'd show too much interest for one supposedly broken in spirit but he wanted to watch this man, study him closer. He was dressed as the people in the camp, the same tight leather pants and tightly laced leather tunic, but over it he wore an open robe. It was a soft fabric and light of weight, the sleeves were short but full and the fabric hung from his shoulders in an open v down to where it was belted tight to his waist. The fabric then tumbled in an inverted open v down to his ankles. It framed his form and showed off the strength in his arms and the lean fitness of his body.

He surveyed the inside of the tent and the bound outlander before him. "I left orders he was not to be harmed." He spoke in a casual tone, but there was the power of command to his voice.

"He's not been harmed, just restrained." Marcus explained, knowing the soft spot the Elect had for things wronged.

"He was to be our guest."

"And he is."

He gave the tall warrior a doubting, exasperated look and was glad he'd only allowed Marcus to join him in the tent. "Leave us."

"Your Grace, I don't think--"

He raised an eyebrow. "Leave us."

Marcus squared his shoulders and nodded. "I'll be outside if you need assistance."

There was a silent moment where Tarin remained as he'd been, trying to look crumpled and defeated and the Elect stood watching, studying the strange outlander before he crossed the space between them and gracefully knelt beside his captive. He waited but Tarin neither glanced up nor spoke. Tarin was willing to sit there all day and wait if he had to, the silence didn't bother him any.

"My people call me the Elect, do you know what that means?" He waited, his hands folded in front of him but the outlander gave no response. "It's similar in position to your Govnor but with a few more spiritual over tones. I am not a leader to my people in the sense yours is to you, but they obey my commands as they would a leader." He wished the outlander words fit his position better but they simply didn't. The concept of his title didn't translate well into their thinking. "Do you understand?"

Tarin glanced up again and nodded. "If you speak the word I will be killed." He spoke above a whisper, affected by the power of the man's presence deeper than he'd expected, but he met his eyes with no fear.

He paused, lost and slightly frightened in the lavender eyes that watched him with such badly hidden anger and bitterness. It took a moment to settle his thoughts to speak calmly again. "I'm told you're called Tarin Morris." Again he spoke his name as Hentra had, as if the concept of two names was awkward and unnecessary. "My name is Ilan. You've made quite an impression on my people. Marcus speaks of you like a demon from legend." It took all his skill not to grin, he'd have done anything to have been able to see this outlander fight his friend. "Hentra is guardedly careful when she speaks of you, Shandro practically sings your praises. This is unusual because generally it's Hentra that speaks so freely and Shandro who rarely says a word. All the men you traveled with speak well of you, even if it appears you gave them a difficult time."

He expected to see some sense of pride over the struggle Tarin had put up, maybe a resigned expression of determination, but the outlander remained expressionless, his control remained untouched. It made him want to push and get a reaction from the man. Every word spoken about him was over his cleverness and his temper. Yet he sat as still and unthreatening as the tent pole he was tied to and he wondered if it was a ruse or if they'd pushed him a bit too far.

"I've seen a great deal of your people. I've seen them in every situation imaginable. Most times, I've been horrified by your behavior, some of the things your people have done are beyond description. Occasionally, I've been witness to your people doing honorable things for their own, their kin, their neighbors. Never, not once, have I seen or heard of one of your kind risking everything they had to save one of my people without asking for anything in return. What you did for Hentra is unprecedented and I don't understand it. I know my means of speaking with you have been harsh but I'm not able to come to you, you had to be brought to me. I can understand why you'd not feel like talking, given how you've been treated. I'm willing to untie you if you'll promise not to harm my people and not to try to run off until after we've spoken. I'd imagine a proper chance to clean up, fresh clothes and real food would be welcome. Do I have your word?"

It was too good to believe, the offer was astounding. He couldn't seriously mean it, it was too much to offer. Tarin ran the words across his mind a few times looking for a trap. If there was one, he couldn't spot it and if the trap sprung, at least he'd be in a better position to survive it. He studied the serious, composed face of the man across from him before he spoke. "You have my word."

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Chapter Nineteen

He nodded and Tarin expected him to call in Marcus or another warrior, someone armed, to untie him. Instead he moved with careful motions to the knots behind his back and he worked them

free with nimble fingers. Tarin sat still, able to rub his aching wrists for the first time in far too long and watched amazed as the feral knelt to work the knots from the rope that bound his ankles. Hazel eyes focused on their task, his neck was exposed to Tarin as he purposefully exposed himself to harm.

The outlander didn't take advantage of the offered advantage and that alone surprised him. He sat back on his heels and watched as Tarin rubbed aimlessly at his wrists and stretched his legs.

"Thank you, Ilan."

His voice was warm and had a tone of intimacy that he wasn't used to encountering. The number of people who dared use his name were small and the sound of it spoken with the outlanders accent was oddly pleasant. He wondered if Ishvan was wrong, this man couldn't merely be a mercenary. The strength of his personality, his grace in such a demanding situation, better belonged to a high ranking nobleman. Maybe he was more to his people than he pretended to, the idea tickled the back of his mind and he filed it away for further questioning later.

"You're welcome, Tarin Morris." He rose carefully to his feet and pulled open the tent. Marcus stepped instantly to the entrance and his eyes grew wide when he saw the outlander was unbound. Ilan stopped his protest with a warning look. "Marcus, send for Lenno and his cousin. Tell them to bring fresh clothes for the outlander, to see he is bathed and well fed. Tend to his needs and grant him the time to refresh himself, when he's ready, send for me and I'll speak with him. He's to be treated as my guest and he's given his word to behave as a guest."

Tarin watched openly and so he didn't miss seeing how the large man ground his teeth in repressed frustration. To his credit he didn't protest his orders but half bobbed his head and muttered an agreement. Ilan turned once before leaving, framed in the doorway his eyes were openly curious about the strange man brought before him.

Marcus stood and stared down at the outlander with contempt. "Stay here, if you so much as poke a finger outside of these walls I'll have it chopped off." He slipped out into the night and the tent was closed behind him.

Tarin took the time to carefully stretch out long bunched up muscles. His legs twitched in painful cramps and his shoulders, especially the one he'd recently dislocated, throbbed in pain. He ran a hand over the days of beard on his face and figured he was looking rather piratical. His neck ached and his hair felt dirty and unkempt, his clothes were torn and stained.

"Shelee thought I was a mess before." He muttered to himself and checked himself over for any serious or lasting harm.

It was a surprisingly short time before the tent opened again and Lenno and Ishvan slipped inside. Tarin hadn't expected to see Ishvan and he covered his shock with a sarcastic comment.

"Don't any of you savages know how to knock?"

Lenno bristled but Ishvan placed a careful hand on the man's elbow. "This is an outrunner camp, asking permission for entrance isn't a custom here." Ishvan explained quickly. The rules were different in a true village but here it was considered rude to deny any fellow scouts or warriors access to private space. "We've been ordered to show you the respect of a guest, that you've given your word to act as a guest."

"You're cousins?"

Lenno stood taller at the mocking tone of the outlander and it was Ishvan that again restrained the sharp retort in his throat. He was highly protective of his cousin and far too often jumped to defend him.

"We are, yes. If you want, I can leave and have someone else replace me but Lenno has to stay, there has to be at least a warrior or scout with you for now."

"Because I always put an armed guard on my guests."

"Would you so readily disgrace your self and others?" Lenno asked, sharp and confused at how blind any adult could be.

Tarin looked from one man to the other. It was Ishvan that held out a hand to his cousin and spoke a quick short phrase in their language before answering Tarin's open uncertainty. "This is an outrunner camp. Any one not a warrior or scout is escorted for their own safety by a member of the camp. In case of attack or wild animal or in your case a misunderstanding should someone not know you have been granted guest status. If you went unescorted and something should happen, it would shame you for not being willing to accept custom and it would shame the camp for not seeing to your care."

"I can well take care of myself." He answered Ishvan but he kept his eyes on Lenno as he hauled himself stiffly to his feet.

Oddly, Lenno grinned at the truth of the outlander's words rather than take offense.

"It's a small thing Tarin, it's not meant to be rude or disrespectful."

His legs trembled weakly under him but he tried to hide the effects of being so long confined. One of his hands waved airily. "What choice is there. Now, I believe I was promised a bath?"

There was more than a few stares as Tarin made his way across the camp, with Ishvan at one side and his cousin Lenno on the other. He was taken to a point a long stones throw from the camp where the river bent into the bank and formed a small pool. A towel and a fresh change of clothes from his own travel pack sat, folded, waiting for him. Torches burned cheerfully against the night's darkness.

"How's the arm?" He asked casually of the stolid faced Feral. Tarin didn't like being watched as he undressed and the careful reminder of the bite made the other man glance away.

"It's healing." He rubbed at the bandaged spot on his arm. "You fight well, for an outlander."

"I'll be certain to tell my clients you think so." Tarin mocked easily as he stripped off the old clothes and happily dropped them on the river bank. The cold water raised goose bumps across his skin but it made him feel refreshed and alive. It shocked some of the complacency from him. "Don't worry boys, I'm not going anywhere but I am going to swim a little bit." He warned them, knowing they were edgy too, before he ducked his head under the water and stroked out to deeper water.

Lenno waited until he was certain the outlander wasn't going to swim off, dressed or undressed, before he turned to his cousin. "They marked your mother the same way." He nodded to where Tarin swam, as comfortable in the water as an otter, and to the string of letters and numbers burned into his shoulder.

Ishvan nodded. "I know."

"I'm confused, he fought so hard to be free of us all this time, now he swims like it's a holy day picnic."

"That's his way. He's not stupid, he knows he can't get away now but if he sees a chance he'll still take it. Cousin, will he be allowed to leave?"

Lenno shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not, it'll depend on what the Elect decides. I don't think even he knows yet. Don't look so glum, he's just an outlander."

Ishvan grunted in noncommittal agreement and didn't point out to his cousin that he too was just an outlander. It tore him in two sometimes, when he walked among the outlanders he saw their casual dismissal of the Ferals. They said they were savage, uncivilized sub human wild animals. It was proper to haul captives back and enslave them because it brought order to them and taught them the proper ways of the world. When Ishvan was among the people, he listened to them scoff at the almost childish ways of the outlanders. They would mock their stubborn insistence upon farming in the border lands, their disgusting habits of keeping slaves and desire to own everything. It was well known their army was conscripted and without honor and they fought for money. It was okay to freely kill them because they were ignorant and grew on the land like a blight. When Ishvan walked with the outlanders he felt very much like a feral, when he was among the people he never so deeply felt like an outlander. There was no explaining to either group how wrong they both were.

Lenno sensed the unease in his friend and cousin and partially understood. He wanted to explain that Ishvan wasn't the same sort of Outlander as the swordsman but he didn't. It would mean little to the young artist, he took everything so deeply to heart and expressed so little of what he felt to others.

"You'd have made a good scout." Lenno finally said at last, the outlander was washing in earnest now and wouldn't long be in the water.

That brought Ishvan's head around to his cousin. "Thank you but I disagree."

"Only a scout can know a scout." He grinned at the ritual of the words. "My uncle did well in choosing you." He often felt his cousin should have been born to the people but he seldom spoke his thoughts to anyone. Tonight, all his instincts screamed that it needed to be said and even as he spoke he felt uncertain and unsure.

The effect was just what Lenno had wished. Ishvan released the nervous breath he'd been holding and his shoulders relaxed, as if too heavy of a burden had been removed. "Thank you."

Tarin stepped from the river and shook the water from his hair. He couldn't understand the words that passed between the two men but they had a distinct friendly tone. It made him feel suddenly homesick and lonely for a place and time he couldn't really pin down.

"Well, I feel better." Tarin said, breaking into their quiet conversation. "If I'm still considered a guest, I'd like something to eat and my razor." He noticed the uncertain look in the feral's eye. "Don't worry warrior, I just want to shave."

"We'll see it's brought to you. And I'm not a warrior."

"It's all the same."

"No, it's not." The man's voice chilled.

Ishvan was the one forced to explain and ease the tense mood. "Tarin, there is a difference among us. Lenno is a scout. Saying it's the same as a warrior is like saying a man in the Navy is the same as one in the Guard."

Tarin balanced on one foot and pulled on his boots. "So, what's the difference? I thought you used the terms interchangeably."

"A scout is between a warrior and a holy one."

"A priest?"

"Not really." Ishvan sighed and wished Tarin spoke their language. "Warriors and scouts are both skilled fighters but scouts have a way of sensing the world around them that warriors can't. It's difficult to explain, I'll try to one day if you want."

"One day, yes." He held back the first remark he wanted to make, that it mattered little if it was a warrior or scout, both could easily be an executioner. It was important that they believe he expected to be released, that he was behaving because he no longer thought death was certain.

He was led back to his tent among more cautious, uncertain stares. His escort left him alone inside his tent and when they shut the flap behind him, Tarin sank weakly to the floor. For a moment his resolve shattered and he sat, feeling helpless and overwhelmed, holding his face in his hands. Then he thought of Shelee and how if he died she'd never know what happened, she'd always sit and wonder if he would come back because he had little doubt Ishvan would never be allowed to return to the city. He thought about Dunn and Jolie, Eve and the new house she'd run that he'd put so much work into making right. He thought about Owen and the Sheep and the gentle, quiet kindness that had been offered to him there. Finally, he thought of Ana and how even at the end she'd not really given up. If he died, something of her that still lived would die too.

When the tent was opened again to allow Lenno and Ishvan to carry in a bowl of water and his shaving kit from his pack, Tarin was composed and still. He'd trembled on the verge of a breakdown but steadied himself and left no sign of how close he'd come to surrender.

He thanked them and then ignored them. Not caring if they stayed to watch or not. In the end, Lenno bowed out to gather dinner for their captive and left Ishvan alone, at his request, with the dangerously armed outlander. It was the fastest efforts he'd ever done to gather a meal and he returned as quickly as he could, fearing to see his cousin bleeding or dead and the outlander gone.

Instead, Ishvan sat in still silence and Tarin was finishing his shave, scrapping the last of the beard from his face. The outlander was making a careful effort to ignore them both as he made a final inspection of his face in the small mirror. When he was convinced he was presentable, he washed the remains of the soap from his face, cleaned the razor and folded it back into its case. With practiced motions he reassembled his shaving kit and handed it intact back to the Feral.

"Thank you." Lenno answered the outlander's silence, feeling as if the man were humoring him by disarming. In fact, given how well he fought, he may very well be. The thought unsettled him.

Tarin looked at the food offered him and sighed. "Would you please inform the Elect that I am ready to speak with him." Tarin sat as composed as he could manage and waited, the game was just beginning.

The Elect arrived and the tent was opened for him. "Leave us." He spoke to Ishvan without actually looking at him.

Ishvan bowed slightly and pulled his cane under him as he got to his feet to leave. He paused and almost spoke, almost directly addressed the Elect to ask for Tarin's life but he knew his place and it was not to speak to him.

Ilan felt the question that went unasked and wondered what it was. Shandro and Hentra's foundling was a curious one and his time among his own people had only enhanced that sense, not lessened it. There was little room in Ilan's thoughts for Ishvan's unspoken words when he

glanced to where the Outlander sat. He had to cross to where the other man sat and kneel to gain the time to hide his surprise. Cleaned up he looked even more amazingly unreal, bordering on pretty his color was so extreme but with such a strong sense of male about him that Ilan was well aware of him on a primal level.

"Thank you for honoring my trust in you." He spoke carefully and carefully watched the lavender eyes across from him.

Tarin saw one difference, the Feral looked tired now. He must have been rushed to reach them in time and had been with his people for dinner before he'd met with him the first time. His graciousness had delayed their speaking and he'd drawn out that time as much as he could and it earned him that glimpse of weariness.

He bowed his head slightly as he'd seen Ishvan do. "Thank you for honoring me with your trust." It must have been the proper thing to say because it pulled a small smile to his too serious face.

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Chapter Twenty

"Would your people truly have harmed you had they caught you aiding Hentra?"

Tarin paused and glanced uneasily to the tent flap. "I was told that you have a policy that anyone may walk into any space uninvited, is this so with you as well?"

His head bent slightly to the side as he took in the odd answer. "Yes, but few would without permission. They will ask before walking in."

Tarin glanced down and to the graceful man opposite him, schooling his face in just the right expression of embarrassed uncertainty. "That won't make this easier. I respect your curiosity about my motives but they lie in personal areas of my past. I'm sure you've been told I too was a slave at one time. I will answer your questions as fully and honestly as I can because you have been kind to me but the answers may anger some of your people or be highly personal to me. Can you ensure our privacy while we speak? That none will listen? The tent walls are thin."

It was a proper request with proper reasons. Ilan was not one to accept things at their surface but again he could understand some of the Outlander's uncertainty. He was unquestioningly proud and he'd heard enough of the gossip about the swordsman's past from Ishvan to know how speaking of any of it would be difficult for such a proud man.

After a moment of thought and of carefully weighing the options he nodded and stood. He pushed the tent flap back and Marcus was at the entrance at once. "Has he been disarmed?" Ilan

spoke in their words.

Marcus nodded. "Yes, his clothes were searched before he bathed and nothing hidden was found. He shaved but the razor was turned back over to our people."

"Good, than he's little threat. Pull everyone back, I wish privacy to speak with him. No protesting this! Stay within earshot if I yell but I want everyone pulled back and I want not to be disturbed."

"Ilan..."

"What's he going to do? Where's he going to go? If he grabs me everyone here will know, if he tries to leave the entrance is being watched. I don't believe he'd harm me and what he has to say is far too valuable. You of all people know what a knife's blade I've been walking lately." He pleaded, not needing permission but wanting understanding.

He nodded. "So be it but if it goes badly I'm going to say I told you so."

That made him smile warmly. "Granted and rightfully so."

He pulled the tent entrance shut behind him and turned back to the outlander. "It's done, in a moment everyone will be a fair distance off but within range if I call to them."

"Thank you." He drew a breath and steadied his thoughts. "Yes, if I'd been caught in helping any run away, Feral or no, they'd have inflicted the same punishment on me as on the run away. If it had been one of my people, it would most likely be a public whipping but for a Feral the punishment is death."

"They would have killed you?"

"Yes." Tarin sprang forward so quickly the feral man had no time to even gasp let alone call out. One moment he sat still, calm and almost distant and the next, as his answer was spoken, he leapt into motion. He crossed the small space between them and clapped a hand over his mouth to stifle any protest and then moved behind him and pressed his razor to the golden throat. Ilan struggled a little but the feel of the cold metal against his skin stilled him.

"Be still or I'll be forced to hurt you." Tarin hissed into his ear. Ilan nodded slightly and he lowered the razor to his ankle and unwound the length of fabric he'd tied there. The length had been torn carefully from the hem of his discarded shirt when he'd been bathing. He pulled his hand away from the Feral's mouth carefully.

"Where do you think you can go?" He asked, in a soft, unworried voice.

He quickly gagged him, tying the fabric almost brutally tight at the back of his head. "Anywhere I please, Your Grace." He mocked. With quick movements he tied up his unresisting captive, using the rope Ilan had untied from him to bind his hands behind his back. Now, gagged and bound he sat with almost an amused look as Tarin quickly dumped the food he hadn't eaten earlier onto the blanket he'd been given, securing it all in a bundle with the remaining rope.

Tarin shook his head at his unconcerned willingness and moved to the edge of the round tent. He carefully made a small slit and peered out, watching the darkness around their structure. One by one he checked three more places before finally choosing the best angle of escape. The razor cut thru the thick fabric with a snarl, making a slit large enough between the supports for a man to slip out.

"Come on." He said as he turned and gathered the bundle up and his captive. The first uncertain look of worry crossed Ilan's eyes but he didn't call out and didn't pull against Tarin's hand. Tarin couldn't tell if the other man's confidence and lack of protest was from a belief that they couldn't

escape the camp or if he was just that unconcerned for his own safety.

Tarin half pulled him out of the slit and quickly behind the next tent, deeper into night time shadows. He followed with graceful ease and scanned the shadows for any sign of Scout or Warrior. They'd followed his orders a touch too well and pulled away, afraid to be seen lurking too close to the captives tent and thought to be listening in. Tarin pulled them along from shadow to shadow to the edge of the camp and finally into the edges of the woods.

He pulled them in the opposite direction away from the river, knowing they'd look their first. He left a heavy foot print in the drying mud and when they were far enough from the camp that the fires were dim he stopped. "Hold still."

Ilan obeyed, no longer frightened and watching the outlander to see how he was going to kidnap him. Tarin knelt along the hem of his robe and tugged until a handful of threads and a small scrap of fabric came loose. These he looped on a low growing and very thorny plant. Once done, he took him by the arm and roughly pulled him away but now not going deeper into the woods.

He dragged Ilan back around, sticking to dry or rocky ground and moving slow enough to ensure he left little telling trail. There was no rush to the man, no hurried fear and he carried them surely in a wide arch around the camp. It was then that Ilan knew his idea and marveled he had the courage to pull it off. An escape across land was insanity, no matter how fast they ran they'd be found by morning.

But the river ran a clear, swift flowing path right back to his own people and all he had to do was buy enough time and steal a boat. He'd done all he could to buy time and as they rounded the edge of the camp he moved to steal a boat. No one was on guard, because who would steal a boat? Tarin had little doubt that there were scouts or warriors or whatever on watch in the camp and in the woods for a fair distance around it but the river was open water and none of Tarin's people came this far up such a small under populated water way.

He moved them to the boat on the far side of the camp and pushed Ilan into it. The bundle of food followed and he moved to where they were tethered. One by one he pulled at the ropes on the boats and set them adrift. It would make counting them difficult and delay, hopefully, the realization that one was missing. He looked up to see his captive easing his way out of the boat, one foot already in the water silently. Tarin moved quickly to remind him of the blade he carried in his hand and Ilan settled back inside. The boat bobbed out into the current and soon was drifting away, the camp fading behind them. Tarin kept their heads down until they rounded the lazy bend in the river and then he allowed them to sit up. He took up a paddle and pushed hard into the water, feeling better for the first time since his capture.

Near dawn, Tarin set the paddle down. His shoulders burned and his hands ached from gripping the oar so long. He'd listened hard but the only sounds around them were the waking song of birds and the river. It was a good sign. He stretched out his shoulders and leaned forward to shake the feral man's shoulder.

Ilan had only been half dozing and awoke instantly at the touch. His eyes searched Tarin's and when the outlander pulled closer he was uncertain but not afraid. Only, the outlander didn't harm him and instead, he pulled off the gag. Ilan watched him and Tarin watched him back and with a slight shake of his head he dragged one of his hands into the water and scooped up a handful of the fresh, cool river. When he held it to his lips he drank thirstily.

"Thank you." He said after several handfuls. "What are you going to do with me now?" He watched as he slaked his own thirst from the river and unwrapped the bundle of stolen food.

He picked over the flat bread and cooked meat and pulled up slices of dried apple. He tore off a bite and chewed on it for a moment in thought. When he ripped a piece of the apple off and held it to Ilan's lips, he accepted it.

"I'm not going to harm you, which is more than you can say about me."

"How far do you think you'll get, by now you're being chased."

He nodded. "I know but I don't need to get far, just far enough. Tomorrow either noon or dawn, I'll put you on the shore. Your people should find you there." They'd be close to him by then and the distraction of picking him up should gain Tarin some time to get ahead again. With the current and steady paddling, he hoped to be far enough away to be fully safe in another two days.

Almost as if he'd read his thoughts Ilan shook his head. "You can't paddle that long without rest and I swear to you they'll take turns and not stop until you're over taken."

"You'd be surprised what I can do when I put my mind to it." Constant paddling would be impossible but he'd do his best, sleep lightly in the current once he'd dropped his captive on the shore and mostly trust in luck. Tarin watched as Ilan shifted his shoulders and tugged at his bound hands. "Not nice being tied up is it?" He asked with no tone of mocking.

"It's just that you can't scratch your own nose." He half teased and grinned.

Tarin wondered how he knew he'd said much the same. Were there spies or was it merely a common observation? He leaned forward and extended one finger and gently rubbed the bridge and tip of his nose.

"Ah, right there, thank you."

"Jeses you're something else, aren't you the least bit concerned? I could do all manner of horrible things to you, not the least of which is keep you right here until we come upon a patrol of guards. There's a rather handsome reward for your death."

"I don't fear death, nor the horrors you could inflict if you willed. You won't, however, I know you won't. It's not in your temperament."

"And you're so certain of that?"

He nodded solemnly. "Yes. Any man, outlander or of the people, anyone who'd risk death for their enemy won't cause harm for harm's sake. I'll behave, not give you trouble and before tomorrow my people will have caught you again. If you speak with me now, I'll let you continue floating down this river, if you wish to treat me as your helpless captive I'll allow them to kill you for kidnapping me. Though your death will bring me no joy, it'd be like destroying a work of art."

"Yeah, I know, don't hurt the face." He muttered around another bite of apple. Impressed by the strength of the Feral's will and his stubborn command, even if he was tied up.

"No, I don't mean your appearance, even though your coloring is extraordinary. I meant your skill, how you fight. That escape was wonderful and I'd have loved to have been there to watch you confound Shando and his men. The stories they tell are almost unbelievable. Did you really go into the river with your hands bound behind you?"

He nodded and saw no need to deny it. Off came a bite of the apple and he put it to Ilan's lips. "Yes. It's not that impressive, it's something I had to learn years ago." He hadn't expected him to be impressed with his fighting, he didn't even go armed but there was a gleam in Ilan's eyes that wasn't there before.

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A Summertime Storm

Chapter Twenty One

"We won't get more private than this, will you tell me why you helped free Hentra?"

He tore apart and split another apple slice between them. Chewing over the question as he chewed over the leathery fruit. There wasn't any harm in answering. Tarin was stubborn but not to the point of being stupid. If he'd been asked to go speak to their mighty leader he never would have agreed but he was here now.

"Because it needed doing, maybe because it was the right thing to do. I don't know, not entirely. I liked the idea that someone would be free because of me, that someone would be better off because of me. It just felt right to do it, if that makes sense at all. She'd run into me, into my arms and was alone in a strange place." He sighed and took up his paddle again, gently guiding the boat faster down the current. "I respected her need to be free, it was strong enough that she risked death for it. I understood that feeling too well to turn my back on her. I might have done things differently if I'd known it was going to lead to this mess."

Ilan sat in silence and the river bank passed by them. Almost as if they held still and the trees were running in some plant foot race. "I don't understand why your people think they can own other people."

"If you ever figure that one out, let me know the answer too."

A good hour passed as the sun rose up above the trees and Ilan sat thinking. He watched the strange man paddling in a steady, unhurried rhythm, letting the river guide them toward his escape. All the questions he'd wanted to ask had fled, in his mind he'd pictured the outlander as wise and meek. He'd pictured someone who did good deeds because the good deed alone was worth doing, or, maybe, someone who had helped Hentra as a protest to an unfair system. The swordsman's own confusion over his motives was more human than he'd expected, his own lack of answers reflected Ilan's own doubts.

"Hentra's son's told me you're well known among your people."

"His name is Ishvan."

"I know what his name is."

"Do you? You don't speak it."

"He's an outlander."

Tarin snorted in disgust. "He was born among my people but he's as much a feral as you are."

He sat up straighter in the boat. "I don't need you lecturing me. Who do you think it was that allowed Shandro to save the boy in the first place when his outlander father used him to shield

his own life? Who do you think it was that granted them permission to formally adopt him? Or who it was that arranged it so the boy could go to your universities to study?"

"He told me his parents died of a fever."

He shook her head. "They had set up a homestead within a few miles of our lands, deep in the border lands. When we rode up and asked them to leave they attacked us, my people defended themselves and struck down anyone who raised a hand against us. The mother killed her own children rather than leave their farm and then she attacked us. The father, when he saw his wife and children dead and himself outnumbered, pulled his only remaining child to him as a shield. Shandro had already let his arrow fly before the man had scooped up the child. When the arrow pierced the boy instead of the man, he was consumed with guilt. The child was alive and rather than finish what the arrow started he begged to be allowed to try to heal him. The father's cruelty was such that no one could disagree. Thanks to Shandro and Hentra's care, Ishvan," he stressed the boy's name. "Lived and since his entire family was dead, they gave him a new one."

"I didn't know, he never mentioned it."

"He rarely does. They treated him worse than we'd treat a dog, all simply because his leg was lame. Do you wonder now why we see your people as animals?" His words were bitter and harsh.

"What do you want from me? Do you want me to say I'm sorry for all the rotten things my people have done to your people as well as mine? I'm not responsible for them! I can't speak magic words and make it all go away!" He snapped at him, his temper fraying. He wasn't the one to defend his people's ways or to explain their behavior.

He paddled on in anger and silence, Ilan sitting and watching him with calm, steady eyes. "I can't believe your people don't have a bad element too. That you lack people that beat their wives and children or worse. I know there have been horrible things done by your people to mine in battle." He'd heard the gossip and listened to the reports being read from the city wide announcements. "Your people are no more innocent of wrong doing than mine."

"True, we have but I've been working very hard to stop such behavior. I can't be everywhere along the border and my people feel outnumbered and overwhelmed. People do awful things when they're scared." He lowered his eyes and looked inward, debating something that he wasn't willing to speak of. When he looked up again and continued, the steady look of controlled calm had returned. "As to the other, yes, we have people that don't act humanely. Our punishments for such are harsh and they rarely act out that way again."

"Your people aren't any better, you're just quicker to punish them."

"But how can your people own another? Hentra was held down while they burned a number into her shoulder, how can your people turn a blind eye to that?"

Tarin grew cold and distant. "It's not personal, it's just economics."

An hour or so later, Tarin edged the boat toward the shore line. He needed the break and he was sure the feral would as well. They didn't linger and before he climbed back into the boat, he splashed some of the cold river water on his face, trying to shock some of the exhaustion from his system. When he looked up, Ilan was watching him closely.

"So how'd you get to be this Elect anyway? You seem awfully young for someone with so much power." His anger from before was gone and the beauty of the day was affecting him. The sun was warm and comfortable and there was a light breeze blowing, carrying the scent of summer on it.

"I was born to it."

"You inherited it?"

"No. Our lineage isn't passed from one generation to the next in a family line. It's been three generations since the last Elect was called, generally there's a Guardian, a mediator on the council." He smiled at the sharp interested look in eyes set into a carefully bored face.

"If it doesn't pass from one generation to the next, how'd it come to you?"

"I was born to it." He explained again as if that made perfect sense.

"You've said that already."

"All of our children are presented to the communion of elder trees when they are two years old. They select who and if there will be an Elect, they entrust the people into that child's care because that is what they were born to be."

Only about half of that made any sense to Tarin and he shrugged. "So you've been ruling your people since you were two?" The idea was absurd.

"No, I've been in training to lead my people since I was two. I didn't take up full responsibilities until I was fourteen."

"Your parents must be very proud."

"I wouldn't know, they were killed by one of your guard patrols when I was very young."

"I'm sorry."

He shrugged within the limits of his bindings. "I never knew them and I was very well taken care of. I wouldn't have been allowed to know them if they'd lived. The Elect belongs to everyone, not one family."

"Sounds like a slave to me." He answered casually but watched intently.

The barb struck its mark, his steady, calm expression faded and he looked disturbed and upset. "It's not like that, I'm honored to serve."

"But what choice were you given? A slave is given no choice, they're told what to be and do."

"It's not like that." His voice was soft.

Tarin left it at that, his words had carried more force than he'd intended. When he was in a collar he hadn't ever been allowed to forget his place but if he could have, if for one small moment he could pretend he was where he wished to be, he wouldn't have taken kindly to someone pointing out his lack of options. He paddled on and left Ilan alone to his own thoughts.

Close to noon he paused again, needing to rest and eat something. He roused the feral from his brooding to offer him water and to feed him small bites of flat bread. Neither spoke but ate in silence, uncertain of just what to say. Ilan looked up at the strange man as he took up his paddle, still trying to escape with single minded stubbornness.

"My people are dieing." He waited but the outlander didn't comment, just raked his lavender eyes over him and then went back to studying the river around them. "We were never that many in numbers, our entire population is probably the same as just one of your cities. We can't win, we

can't even hold our own for much longer. Within a generation we'll be gone, enslaved or just slaughtered and with us the trees and land too and there's nothing we can do about it."

His voice was so mournful, so defeated that Tarin was drawn into the sadness that clung to him. "Why tell me this?"

"Because I can, because you aren't of the people. A few of the better scouts suspect, people like Shandro and Hentra, their nephew Lenno, some of the warriors but for the most part my people don't believe it, not yet. We've fought so hard to maintain our borders and yet every season we fall back a little more, lose more lives we can't afford to lose. We don't have the strength or the numbers to keep your kind at bay, I know this as surely as I know the sky above.

"You see," He smiled ironically, "it's my duty, my job... my enslavement, to stop this from happening. I can't stop it, we're too weakened already, all I can do is buy some time. Your people are relentless demons that consume everything and leave ugliness in its wake."

"What a warm and pretty picture you paint." He mocked but he was listening.

"But you're not that way, not all of you. I can no more afford to assume you all are disgusting as the man that fathered Ishvan as I can say all my people are as lazy and bad as most of our holy ones." He could see his comparison made little sense to the Outlander but it didn't matter, he just needed to speak. "When Hentra told me what had happened, I thought the answers might lie in you. You were an example that all your people weren't monsters and maybe by speaking with you, I'd learn some new way to keep my people alive and together." He sighed and the food sat heavy in his stomach, making him feel weighed down and a little sick. "But you don't have any answers and I was a fool."

Tarin let the river pass them by, let the current carry them onward and worked only on a minimal of course changes and corrections. "Maybe," He said at last, speaking carefully and with none of his normal sarcasm. "you aren't asking the right questions."

He sat and thought about that for a long while, turning over every word the outlander had said since he'd met him and everything he'd been told about him from other people. There was far more to the outlander than a pretty face and a mercenary spirit, he was certain of that now.

"You said it wasn't personal that it was only economics?"

"Did I?"

"How much does it cost to buy a slave?"

He shrugged. "It would depend on the slave. Anywhere from three or four crowns up to fifteen or twenty is pretty normal."

"That's a lot of money?"

"Yes." He laughed with a slightly self mocking tone. "For most people it is, yes. The average worker makes about one crown, maybe three, for a year's wages." Tarin couldn't deny he was intelligent, the Feral's mind had grasped his casual statement and he was working out something in his thoughts that had nothing to do with trying to escape from him. Either he trusted Tarin's word that he wouldn't harm him or he trusted his people would catch up to them before he could be harmed, he didn't know, either case he'd hesitate calling it bravery.

By mid afternoon he was growing exhausted and in need of rest, there was no logical way he could think to manage it so they wouldn't be over taken by the people most certainly giving chase or where Ilan wouldn't escape. He dozed lightly in the afternoon sunlight, snatching at a few moments sleep and than snapping awake only to drift off again. The river was gentle and

winding, the current carried them on and after almost an hour of snapping in and out of sleep he shook his head and shifted his weight. He trailed a hand in the water to wake himself up and ran all the reasons he had to get free across his mind again, that was just enough to shake off slumber. His cat naps had rested him enough that he no longer felt so heavy with exhaustion and he went back to paddling with the current.

Ilan had watched him practically sleep with his eyes open and knew any movement from him would wake him up. Oddly, he wanted him to rest, he was extraordinary in his stubborn single mindedness and he wanted to see what he would do next. His interest was clinical and almost scientific, many of the scouts had similar skills but they generally roved in small bands or alone and he'd never gotten to watch one from the perspective of captive.

His people were getting closer, he could sense that, but how close he didn't know. The best guess he could come up with was sometime tomorrow, assuming the outlander didn't stop to sleep, sooner if he did. It wasn't a lie to say they would never stop until they either fell over dead from exhaustion or found him, he knew his people. The question became whether or not the outlander had the same will. So far, he'd been forced to admit he did.

Being a captive was oddly liberating and he found that other than not being able to move freely or stretch out his arms, he took well to his temporary new role. With the outlander he didn't need to guard every word he said, he didn't need to think of what to do next for anyone, he didn't even have to think if he didn't want to. It was a comfort Ilan had never had before, he didn't even need to try to act the role of the Elect, something that was growing more and more difficult as time went by. It'd never occurred to him how smothered by his own responsibilities he was until they'd suddenly been removed. It made him in no rush to be rescued.

The outlander snapped awake and shook the sleep off of him, shifting and repositioning his weight in the boat and caught Ilan watching him. The arrogance he carried around him wasn't muted by his presence, he was used to dealing with people who possessed self importance but most people toned that down around him, awed by his title. He was almost mockingly contemptuous of him, the way a man of great power would be to one far below him but there was no malice in his tone and manner. Truth be told, the longer he watched him the more he was certain he turned the same near loathing contempt onto himself as well as the world around him.

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Chapter Twenty Two

"Rest well?" He asked in serious tones but with a smile to his eyes.

"Like a babe."

They floated on before Ilan spoke again. The silences between them were comfortable and he was unwilling to break them unless the questions in his mind were pressing. It was rare that he

was allowed to just be around another person, people always wanted to speak to him and hear him speak to them. It was exhausting.

"You were a slave, how is it you don't feel a need to prevent other people from being a slave as well?"

Tarin's reaction at first wasn't verbal, his eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched. He drew a breath and held it and Ilan was convinced he'd respond in anger, that this was some unknown taboo among his people that he'd walked into.

"Why should I?" He answered lightly but the look of anger was still in his eyes. "No one gave a second thought for me when I was in a collar, why should I for them?"

His coldness shocked him, no one of the people would have answered so callously. "Because you know what they're going through, because it has to start with someone. Someone has to be the first to stand up and say when something is unjust and wrong."

He laughed and shook his head. "Jeses, are all Ferals so naive?"

"It's not naive, nothing will change if nothing is done."

"Why would I want it to change? What good do I get from it?"

"Selfish thinking."

"I've given enough already in my life that I think I've earned a little selfishness. It's not my problem, I'm not responsible for the actions of rich nobles. They're the only ones who can make any changes and they won't because the way things are work pretty damn fine for them. Do I like the idea of slavery? Do I approve of warring constantly on your people? No I don't, but I'm one man, not even an important one. There's nothing I can do but take care of myself. One man can't do anything." He found himself snapping at him and not even understanding why he was so angry.

"The only time things have ever changed are when one man makes up their mind to change it." Ilan spoke softly, wondering if he was as naive as Tarin accused. It was impossible for him to wrap his mind around his coldness, his seeming unconcern, compared to his risking his life to save Hentra.

"Horseshit. All that does is shorten one man's life considerably." His head whipped around and he stared up river. "Shit, stubborn cusses aren't they."

Ilan listened and heard a horn, high and distant, from upriver. They'd sound it every few hours to announce their pursuit. At the pace they were setting they'd be on them by sundown, still several hours away. It was odd that the outlander had turned before the horn had sounded.

Tarin took to paddling hard again, needing every foot and yard he could gain. "How far into the border lands are we?"

He studied the river around them and made a guess but held his tongue.

"How far!" Tarin demanded.

Some of the anger his captors had spoken of was there and he saw for the first time the danger coiled deep inside this man. "Not even halfway."

"Bloody hell." He muttered and shifted all of his focus on moving them faster down the river.

By the time afternoon faded to early evening, sunset still a few short hours away, Tarin was trembling with exhaustion. His arms felt like rubber when he could feel them at all, his back screamed in protest at every stroke but he continued to push forward. The horn had sounded again, much closer this time and coming ever closer and had reminded Tarin of what he was struggling so hard against.

Finally, he knew he couldn't go much further. He fell forward, struggling for breath, grimacing from the pain of cramped muscles and the throbbing in his head. It took a force of will to sit back up and guide the boat along, searching for a good place to beach the boat to let the Feral out. It took far too long to find a safe place to reach the shore line and as he pulled the boat out of the current and toward the shore he wondered if this was a huge mistake.

"Come on, out of the boat." He said as he tugged at his captive's arm, too weak to put any real strength into it.

Ilan let himself be removed from the boat, he stumbled under the clumsy awkwardness of having his hands tied and Tarin instinctually caught him. The outlander's touch was like fire along his nerves, even with the fabric of his wrap between his fingers and the bare skin of his arm. As soon as he was firmly on solid ground he released him, the sudden shock of his touch disappearing distracted Ilan so he didn't see the loose river stone he'd put her foot on. With his hands free it wouldn't have mattered but now the rock twisted and he fell hard on his side. The cold dampness of the stones sprang up and whacked the side of his head, scraping the skin at his temple and dazing him for a moment.

Tarin cursed and knelt instantly. His hands came to Ilan's neck and head, checking for wounds before brushing the small grains of dirt and moss from the scrape at his temple. "Are you okay?"

He nodded and opened his eyes and looked directly into Tarin's own. His breath caught in his throat and he suddenly felt light headed and drunk. "Yes, I'm fine." But his words didn't stop the Outlander's concern, he supported him and helped him straighten to a sitting position. His hands carefully dusted off Ilan's clothes, searching for further injury and finding none.

There was no thought behind it and later looking back he couldn't say what made him do it. As Tarin hovered near him, exhausted, frightened, in a complete rush and yet taking the time to make sure he was okay and safe, at risk to his own safety, the choice was no longer his. Ilan straightened himself up and leaned forward quickly and before the outlander could pull away, he pressed his lips to Tarin's in a kiss.

Tarin's breath hissed inward in surprise and he tried to pull away. Ilan was quicker and followed and it was only the fact that the Outlander was kneeling that kept the kiss going. All the thoughts of disapproval from the council of Ilan's people fled at the feel of the strong warmth in the man's lips. There was something delicious and far too tempting about the startled feel and when Ilan broke the embrace to prove he wasn't trying to delay his captor Tarin surged to his feet and stumbled backwards.

"Don't!" Tarin snapped but the command sounded more frightened than demanding. He paced a step back and shook his head. "Why would you...?"

Ilan shrugged. "I've never had a conversation with an Outlander, never been alone with one, certainly never been captive of one and I just figured I'd never have the chance to kiss one."

The fear faded from his eyes and anger took its place. Ilan's bold confidence was in such sharp contrast the weary, too sad man that had spoken of his people's defeat only a short while before. It was a fascinating contradiction and Tarin shook his head. The kiss had started to trigger all his old fears but Ilan's casually selfish explanation of why only made him angry. Even anger was

difficult to sustain when he was so bone weary exhausted.

He quickly untied Ilan's hands and tossed the rope into the boat. "That wasn't a kiss." He mocked as he turned to go, leaving him sitting on the bank of the river. "You're as naïve about kissing as everything else."

The mocking surprised Ilan. Not even Marcuss, who had the most causal of relationships with him, ever mocked him. Certainly not like with the sharp scorn Tarin casually tossed his way. What was worse was that it struck a nerve because Ilan was painfully aware of his own lack of experience. He knew he was provincial and sheltered but it still hurt to have the proud Outlander tease him.

Ilan narrowed his eyes and refused to rub at his sore wrists. "Run away, Outlander, before I change my mind and request your head on a stick."

The challenging threat in Ilan's eyes made Tarin grin. Oddly, it made his lips tingle a little too much from the inexperienced kiss he'd mocked. He wanted to run his fingertips over them just to make sure the feeling was real but Tarin was unwilling to give away even that tiny reaction. Instead he just smirked and hurried back to his stolen boat.

He pushed out into the current with all his force and glanced back for a final look of Ilan rising to his feet on the riverbank, looking solemn and self-confident. Not at all the look of someone unwillingly kidnapped and held hostage and he wondered if he'd merely played along with him, after all, hadn't he gotten his wish to speak with him?

It was a silly idea and he shook his head as he focused on gaining some ground. Movement on the river bank caught his eye and at first he thought the feral man had followed the river bank and was pacing him but when he glanced over the movement was going upriver not down. The brush and branches obscured his view for a moment but the shape soon came into the clear and Tarin's blood went suddenly cold.

The man was dressed in dirty and old clothes, casts off from the army by the looks of it. His hair was too long and his beard untidy, his sword at his hip was common and cheap standard issue, his armor was a bit of chain mail and nothing more. He glanced at Tarin and quickly hurried deeper into the brush. It was then that Tarin heard the bird call, a high whistle twittering sound that he'd heard before beaching to drop off Ilan but now that he really listened hadn't heard for days.

There was only one answer and he cursed himself for being a fool. The border lands weren't patrolled by any true branch of the army but there were groups of retired fighters that banded together and roamed the open land looking for opportunity. Capturing and turning in a Feral caught in the border lands was easy money and it looked like he'd dropped Ilan down in the middle of a group.

He could keep going, his people were only a short way up the river. They'd be on the group in time to stop them from carrying him off. It was unlikely they'd outright kill him, there would be plenty of time for his people to save him. But that meant there would be plenty of time for the group to harm him as well. Many awful things could be done in a very short time and the groups of men in the borderlands weren't known for their scruples. His people were so close, but they weren't close enough.

In the end he blamed it on the kiss. Ilan tried to appear confident and secure but that kiss had been vulnerable and uncertain. He'd put the other man into a bad situation and now he'd have to take responsibility for it. It all was some vast cosmic joke. It was absurd, he knew it but he couldn't continue on his way, no matter how well he tried to justify it. With new found urgency he pulled the boat back out of the current and toward the nearest bank, not caring to find a safe landing and not worrying about securing the boat. He tossed the lead line around a fallen log, not

convinced it would hold the boat in place and leapt to the bank.

He ran headlong back up river, the razor carefully palmed in his hand, hidden from view. When he broke into the clearing he'd left Ilan in he expected the worst but he was greeted by the sight of two of the ragged band on the ground and a third splashing his way free of the river. He'd stripped off his robe and was using it as a defensive weapon against the blades of the group and he was holding his own nicely.

Ilan looked up in surprise when he blundered into the fight and flinched as Tarin hurtled himself toward him. Only he wasn't aiming at him but at one of the men he'd already knocked down who'd gotten to his feet behind him. A few quickly delivered blows had the man properly unconscious and gave Tarin a moment to look up at the Feral man.

"Swim!" He shouted at him and tossed a hand at the river.

"What about you?"

"I'll be right behind you just go!"

He looked torn but nodded and headed for the water. At it's edge the man he'd tossed into the river was waiting and as Tarin spared a look toward him, he saw Ilan some how manage to kick the man in the face and land on his feet. It was impressive to watch and effective, the man fell back into the water. Stunned or unconscious, it didn't matter, the man was out of the way which was all that counted. He dove into the water and started to swim hard upstream and the waiting boats of his people.

Tarin turned to the angry group around him before making his own dive into the water, only he planned to go down stream and hopefully back to his boat. As he quickly checked the group he saw one had a crossbow as old as he was but still in working order. The bolt was armed and he was aiming not at Tarin but at Ilan swimming and vulnerable.

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One of the guards came at Tarin and swung his sword high, arching it as if it were an axe not a weapon of skill and Tarin easily ducked under it before throwing himself at the man with the crossbow. The bolt flew but wildly and it struck the water well to the side of where Ilan swam. It caused him to stop and look back at the fight on the shore and almost made him turn around to help but there was little he could do. The attacking groups numbers were growing as it's fellows caught up to the main party and neither he nor Tarin were properly armed. There was little he could do but swim.

Tarin tackled the man with a cross bow and brought the razor across his throat working on sheer

reaction rather than thought. As soon as the man's blood sprayed up and out he regretted it, knowing now his fellows would be rightfully vengeful. A body slammed into Tarin, knocking him down flat and rolling him over rough stones and damp ground. He struggled with this man, fighting for control, the razor knocked out of his reach. Tarin's hand scrambled for it while trying to keep the man on him at bay, the only thing he could wrap his hands around was a river smoothed rock. He brought it to use against the man's head, knocking him senseless and off of him.

He rolled to his feet and dodged to the side without actually seeing the attack aimed his way. The blade swung out and low, catching Tarin along the side of his outer thigh. The blade cut deep enough that blood quickly drenched his leg and caused him to cry out in surprising pain. It was deep enough that his leg was practically useless and now without a weapon he was highly vulnerable.

Only they didn't continue to attack, sensing he was vulnerable now, almost helpless, they held back and encircled him, driving him away from the water. One of their ranks stepped a bit forward; Tarin assumed he was the leader from how the others looked toward him. He drew a breath and spoke in a slurred countryside accent.

"By order of the Govnor, any caught aiding a wanted Feral shall be sentenced to death by hanging, sentence to be carried out right off."

The group cheered happily at the man's formally spoken words and Tarin looked around.

"You're joking right? You've no authority."

The leader grinned. "Out here, lad, we're the authority. Get him ready boys and rough him up a bit for Damo's sake."

Tarin held them off for a few moments but their numbers were too great and his space was too limited, more, his body was simply too exhausted. One of them swung a staff and it caught Tarin across his spine with enough force to knock him flat. Without his feet under him, there wasn't much he could do but try to protect his head, their anger at the death of their comrade was swift and severe.

"Here lads, here." Tarin heard a voice say and the blows slowed and then ended. He lolled on the edges of unconsciousness, not too eager to be aware of the throbbing pain of his body but a couple of the men dragged him to the water's edge and dunked his head in the cold water. They held him under until the near drowning forced him conscious and flailing weakly. They gripped his shoulders and hauled him across the ground in land slightly and dumped him what felt like a mile later.

Tarin cracked his eyes open, one of them was swelling badly and he knew the side of his face had taken a kick pretty badly, he wondered if they'd broken anything until he saw a rope sail up and over a low hanging limb. It wouldn't matter if they'd broken anything, he'd not live long enough for it to heal. They tied his hands behind him and he couldn't get anything to work well enough to try to protest or escape.

The rope was coarse as they slipped the noose about his neck and they tugged until the knot was tight at the base of his neck. Tarin had seen people hung, every sailor had as it was the standard punishment for any captured pirates, he knew the knot at the back of his head would cause him to strangle slowly, dying from having his air cut off rather than placing the knot to the side where the weight of his body would snap his neck and kill him quickly. As he lay there and worked to roll himself to his knees trying to get to his feet, he had a blissfully peaceful moment. The knowledge made him feel light, this is where it would end, this was how. There was no more longing or wondering which form Death would arrive in. There would be no more anything soon and the idea was welcome, cool and comforting.

Than the men pulled on the other end of the rope and it tugged the knot tight and forced Tarin to his feet. The terror was instant and primal and there was nothing he could do to stop it. Another tug and he was raised to his toes, choking now to suck in air and he knew he shouldn't struggle but he did. The rope hissed over its tree branch and this time Tarin's feet left the ground. He kicked, seeking aimlessly for something for his feet to grip, seeking relief from the burning pain of his neck. One more pull took him to the point where his feet swayed at about the level of where his knees should have been, not all that far from the ground but it may as well have been a mile. They tied the rope to the trunk of the tree and left him swaying there.

They watched in solemn silence and Tarin hated that he struggled so, kicking against his own will to seek a purchase that wasn't there. The blood pounded horribly in his ears, his lungs burned in agony and as he swayed in a lazy circle he saw the hateful eyes of the dirty, rag tag band that had managed to do what the best swordsmen in an age hadn't been able to do. He closed his eyes to hide his fear from them. He wasn't going to give them that, no matter what. His limbs were growing weak now, his legs no longer kicked so hard in their seeking need as if they too had finally understood there was no hope to it. Even with his eyes closed now he saw spots against his vision. It would be soon, he knew it would be. He desperately wanted to swallow and couldn't.

The ground suddenly rushed up and smacked into him. The world felt tilted and off balance and Tarin was grateful the earth had so dramatically risen up to take some of the horrible pressure from his neck but he still couldn't breath. Fingers scraped at his neck and the rope pulled loose, he gasped for air, choked on it and coughed violently. He lay weakly curled into a ball on the ground, gasping and gagging with strong hands supporting him.

Tarin managed to open his eyes and he looked around trying to make sense of it. The group of fighters were surrounded by Ferals, Ilan still dripping water from his swim among them. Some of the fighters had been wounded, one or two lay still enough to be dead. Among the faces Tarin saw both Shandro and Hentra and the large giant Marcus who was cleaning his blade on the clothing of the man that lay at his feet. He managed to turn on his side enough to see that Lenno stood over him, sawing at the rope that still hung over the tree branch. Once he'd severed Tarin from it, he gently slid the noose over the outlander's head, holding onto the hanging section as if it were a great talisman before turning his attention to freeing the swordsman's hands.

Words were spoken around him but Tarin couldn't understand them , his ears were still ringing so badly that he couldn't even say if the language was his own or theirs. As grateful as he was for being cut down, he was still aware enough to know he wasn't free and wasn't safe. The very people he was running from now held him captive again, he struggled to move, to try to get away and all his efforts only managed to create a painful half crawl for only a few paces.

Lenno moved quickly to support the outlander and soon was half carrying, half dragging the wounded man toward the river. Tarin was still coughing, gagging, struggling to breath and was disoriented enough to offer little resistance to the hands that moved him so surely. The movement turned his stomach over and as they neared the water's edge, he pulled away.

It was a new agony, vomiting past his battered throat and there was little in his stomach but bile but he fell to his knees and couldn't stop his stomach from emptying. The violence with which he vomited, the pain of it, set his whole body to trembling in shock. Lenno supported him and as soon as he was certain the outlander was finished, started moving him again toward the water and the waiting boats.

Tarin saw the boats and the Ferals moving around him to the water's edge and remembered vividly why it was a bad idea to be blindly hauled away. He tried to speak to protest being taken again but his voice didn't want to make any noise that sounded like words. His arms flailed out and he tried to struggle from Lenno's grasp. All he was doing was slowing their progress not breaking free, Lenno was being extremely careful in how he handled and directed the outlander

in his care but he wasn't going to let go of him.

Hentra stopped as she passed them on her way to the boat and instantly understood. "Set him down a moment." She spoke to Lenno and then knelt in front of the outlander. She took his head in her hands, careful of the swelling under his eye that continued up to his temple. "Tarin Morris," he tried to pull away from her hands but she held on. "Tarin Morris, look at me." She held on and waited until his lavender eyes opened, the whites around them growing red with blood from being strangled. "You saved my life, now I'm asking you to trust that I will save yours. You will not be harmed by my people, do you understand? I'll lay my life down before I allow any one to hurt you. I know you believe you're being taken back as our captive but it's not so, you're very hurt right now and need help. Please, let me help you, please." She struggled to make her sincere wish to help known in the words she wasn't used to using. He needed help, they'd been ordered to help him and with him struggling so he'd easily capsize the narrow boat. She watched for any sign he understood but the only reaction she was given was that he shut his eyes, the tears that he'd suppressed slipped out from under his dark lashes to slide unnoticed down his face and he stopped struggling.

"His lips are blue." Lenno said softly to his aunt.

She nodded. "Another moment and we'd have been too late." Hentra glanced over and saw the discarded robe the Ect had been wearing, with quick fingers she tore a length of it off and tightly tied it above the still bleeding slash on the outlander's thigh. "Get him loaded in, we need to get moving." But Hentra didn't follow, she tore another length of the soft fabric and dipped it into the water, this one she draped across the swordsman's bruised and torn neck, trying to offer some measure of comfort.

Tarin opened his eyes at the gentle touch and still couldn't stop his body from trembling. He knew it was shock and knew there was little he could do about it but wait it out. Around him a group of Ferals piled into his boat, leaving the second one pushed up at the shore alone and waiting. Tarin saw mostly faces he knew, Marcus, Ilan, Hentra, Lenno and Shandro, a warrior and a scout he remembered from his capture but whose name he'd never learned and another scout. Words were quickly exchanged as Ilan settled in to his place in the center of the boat, close to where Tarin had been dumped. They struck out into the water and paddled hard upstream. Tarin gratefully slipped into the dark comfort of unconsciousness.

Lenno watched the unconscious outlander carefully and while the coloring returned to the man's lips his breathing was still scratchy and unsteady. He waited as long as he could before speaking, the night had closed around them and they'd put a fair distance between them and the party that had attacked them.

"Your Grace?" He spoke carefully, shy about addressing the Elect personally but he'd ordered him to tend to the outlander. When Ilan turned he swallowed hard and continued. "We should stop, he needs tending."

He glanced at Tarin and nodded. "We should be far enough, Marcus?"

The large man nodded and gave the orders. They paddled on for a while longer but soon came to rest on the opposite side of the river. The group split quickly into tasks and soon a camp was made. Lenno carried the drowsing outlander onto land and carefully set him by the fire that was growing in size, tossing off light and warmth.

Ilan knelt by the outlander and looked to Lenno. "Tend him, I don't want him to die." He knew they had carried with them supplies, among them a full healing kit out of fear of any harm done to him.

"Maybe it'd be best not to tend him." Marcus said carefully as he rejoined the circle of camp and firelight.

Ilan gave him a hard look but spoke to Lenno. "Tend him." He stood and turned on Marcus. "He's to be my guest and retreated with respect, do you understand? He saved my life."

"By endangering it in the first place."

He snorted in tired disgust. "I was never in any danger. How'd he get that razor?"

Lenno flushed red. "That's my fault, Your Grace, I watched him shave and I'd swear he put the blade back in his kit but I didn't personally check the kit afterwards."

He rested a hand on the young scout's shoulder. "It's okay, the results were acceptable. Well, except for the end but that was unforeseeable. If you can't treat him with honor, Marcus, I'll find you a new assignment."

The large man bristled under the implied insult. "I know my duty."

"Good, than see to it."

They walked off in different directions and left Lenno alone with only the outlander and his uncle. Shandro nodded toward him. "Want some help?"

The young scout sighed. "Please, I've never, I mean, I've never patched an outlander back together before. Are they different?"

Shandro shook his head. "No, some are more fragile but they live softer lives. I'll fetch some water."

Together they cleaned and stitched the long wound on the outlander's thigh shut, cleaned the bloody rope burns on his wrists and finally the long rope burn on his neck. There was little they could do for the beating the man had taken, they checked him for broken bones and found none but Shandro shook his head worriedly at the boot impressions on the man's back.

"How is he?" Ilan asked. He'd gone and bathed and now felt better clean and dressed in fresh clothing.

Shandro shrugged. "The neck should heal well, the rope went high, see? Under his chin almost so there should be little lasting damage. He might keep some of it as a scar but I can't say, his skin's so light. There shouldn't be any lasting harm to his leg, it was a messy slash but not deep enough to cripple him. He was beaten pretty badly, even with his lighter skin but nothing seems broken. Whether there's bleeding inside or had his head kicked in, I can't say. We washed him and put him in some clean clothes but the rest will depend on how he heals."

"Do your best but we can't stay here. If he's able we need to get moving."

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Chapter Twenty Four

Tarin drifted, feeling miserable and mostly unaware. The few moments he had of clarity melted like wax and mixed with a series of horrible and bizarre dreams and visions. For a while he felt he was on the water and for some reason that scared him, the water was something he was trying to get away from but then he remembered he was in the navy. He was trying to earn his freedom and he was sick with worry and fear of failing. The people around him dissolved into his shipmates, the men that had kept a quiet distance from his past and appearance but never mocked him openly. The fear was so strong that it left him feeling feverish and queasy and he didn't understand why they didn't help him.

Then he did understand, he was a slave. Hauled around like luggage and given about as much consideration. The aches, the deep pains in his body were oddly comforting because they were a means of focusing on something other than the next beating, the next horrible use he'd be required to endure. Thinking too long on the hopeless future was enough to drive him mad and he wept in his despair, crying out wanting to know what sin he'd done to deserve to be fated with such treatment. He cursed a god he no longer could stomach believing in for allowing him to be born at all. Hated Him and trembled in his rage, knowing that he was forsaken simply because he'd existed.

He couldn't be a slave, Shelee was beside him. Her voice came from a great distance and he couldn't understand what she was saying. He tried to ask if he'd been hurt, because everything hurt. The words tried to form but wouldn't, he must have been in a battle on the sea. He remembered how desperate the fighting was, surrounded by water with no choices but succeed or drown. Tarin didn't want to drown, to have the air stolen from his body. Had he drowned? Was that why it hurt to breath? Shelee watched him with her dark, concerned eyes but didn't answer him, that was assuming she even understood his questions. She pressed him to drink and the dry fire in his throat forced him to accept her offer but the liquid wasn't sweet, cool water but a thick and bitter tea. He gagged on it, coughing and turned away from her betrayal.

When he looked to her for understanding, it wasn't Shelee but Ana that hovered over him. Her neck a torn ruin, blood frothing up at the gaping wound to form tiny bubbles of blood that swelled round and fat before bursting, spraying, out on him. She held out her hands, dripping with her own blood and her eyes turned to hatred and anger. Without words she accused him of her murder, of being cursed and drawing all who got close to him into his curse. She lunged and wrapped her hands around his neck, the blood slick and warm as her fingers closed tighter, strangling him. He tried to plead, tried to apologize and pour out his guilt at her feet. He asked her for forgiveness, and still she strangled him. Her wet fingers closing around his flesh were relentless. He struggled to pry them off but was too weak, he knew he was guilty and unworthy of forgiveness and when he dropped into darkness, certain it was the darkness of death, he was grateful she'd killed him. It was no less than he deserved.

"Tarin?" The voice called, it was one he knew and he didn't understand why it just didn't go away. "Tarin, you need to wake up."

He struggled to understand who it was that was bothering him. Didn't they understand how exhausted he was, how sick he felt. He turned away from the voice.

"Tarin, wake up!"

The voice was growing upset at him, was he supposed to listen to it? Was it an officer, was he supposed to be on watch? They'd black mark him for sure if he'd been stupid enough to fall asleep. He started to struggle to wake up now, worried and the voice called to him again, shaking at him roughly. A thought chilled him, maybe it was a master, a new owner, or maybe someone he'd been loaned out to. The voice didn't sound amused, if he'd fallen asleep on an owner it wouldn't be pleasant, the last time he'd done something similar he'd been beaten so badly he couldn't move for a week. He was frightened now and fought harder to wake up. If he came awake and served well, maybe they would forget he'd disobeyed; maybe they wouldn't hurt him more than they had to.

His eyes opened but didn't focus. They felt fuzzy and weak in his eye sockets, vaguely gummy and tired. Tarin blinked a few times and tried to look alert and ready as he focused on the face that hovered near his own. It swam and blurred but soon focused, it wasn't the face of an officer, nor were they dressed in fine enough clothes to have been an owner but he knew the face. It took a moment of struggling for memory to understand.

"Ishvan?"

The boy sighed and nodded. "Yes, how are you feeling?"

Tarin lowered his eyes and tried to understand where he was. "Lousy, tired, weak." His hand came up to his neck and touched soft bandages not cold metal, he shuddered. "No collar." The words escaped before he could stop them.

"No, no collar, not for years now. You're safe, you were hurt do you remember?"

He struggled with the memories, replaying what he did recall and letting it lead him. It took a moment but he gasped and shuddered, his hand going to the bandages at his neck this time knowing why they were there. "I should be dead."

Ishvan smiled. "A few times over, they hung you. The people got to you in time but you were pretty badly hurt. The slash on your leg, it got infected, that's why I needed to wake you up, you need to drink this." He lifted the swordsman's head a little, supporting its weight and pressed the mug to the man's lips.

Tarin sipped and coughed on the bitter tea. The taste was horrible and yet oddly one he knew, he grimaced and forced more of it down. It sloshed in his very empty stomach and made him feel sick. "How long?"

"Five days."

"Bloody hell." He sighed and rubbed at his eyes. "Tell me." Talking was making his voice hurt and burn, a side effect of the rope he guessed. He wasn't stupid, he knew he was lucky to still be able to speak, lucky to still be breathing.

"Lenno said you were feverish before dawn the next day, you scared everyone with how sick you got so quickly." The swordsman had arrived back at the outrunner camp flushed with fever, his skin throwing off a frightening amount of heat but it felt tight and dry to the touch. "The wound on your leg was hardly infected but you ran a terrible fever." If they hadn't kept river cool wet cloth on the swordsman while they traveled back up the river, Ishvan was certain the man would have died in those first days. Three days ago the frighteningly high fever had dropped and the outlander had sweated, throwing off any blankets they tried to keep on him only to break into teeth chattering shivers. Back and forth he went, muttering and calling out in his fever, it had been terrible to see.

Lenno had been set to the outlanders care but he quickly was overwhelmed and enlisted Hentra, Shandro and Ishvan's help. Together they were able to rouse the outlander to walk about weakly

and tend to needs, or walk to the water and cool the fever from his exhausted flesh. Every chance they had they were pouring the bitter herbal tea down his throat but as often as not he merely vomited it back up. They got far too little fluid into the man and no food. Yesterday, Shandro was convinced the outlander would die, the fever was still raging but Tarin had grown too weak to even shiver any more. By dinner, as suddenly as it had started, the fever had broken. The pale skin was still flushed and hot to the touch but not deadly hot. Bit by bit during the night the swordsman showed slow signs of recovery. Bit by bit, Tarin came back from the edge of death.

"You're better now, and you're going to get better. You're legs healing fine."

Tarin sighed and felt too weak to keep his eyes open. "I don't feel better. I thought, I dreamed," he paused unsure what to say or how to say it. "It doesn't matter, I must have been really sick to have had some of those dreams."

Ishvan nodded solemnly. "You were. Are you hungry?" The swordsman's ranting and restless words had been unnerving and Ishvan had been forced to explain to his family just what the outlander had been when he'd worn a collar. Hentra had been silent and unhappy after learning about their charge and from that moment on she'd mothered the outlander as she'd taken in and mothered Ishvan.

"No, not at all."

"Well, sorry, you've got to eat something. I've some cooked oats, you need to try to get some of it down."

Tarin groaned in misery but couldn't prevent the boy from helping him lean forward so thick folds of blankets could be placed under his head and back. "I don't think I can." He murmured as Ishvan tried to get him to eat.

"Try. If you don't my mother will skin me." He stubbornly got his friend to take one mouthful from the spoon and watched as the man exhausted himself trying to chew and swallow.

The food sat heavy and almost painfully in his stomach. He opened his eyes and looked around the inside of the tent. "Back in camp?"

Ishvan nodded and got another bite into the swordsman. "Yes. Tarin, don't panic, you're not a captive, it's not the same camp. The Elect needed to move more into our land and he's been unwilling to leave you out of his care. We've been traveling with him."

"Why?"

"He says because you saved his life."

"You don't sound convinced."

"Oh, I believe you came back when you saw he was in danger, I'm just not sure that's his only motive for wanting you near by. He's rather a skilled fighter, more than capable of taking care of himself." Ishvan set the bowl down and frowned. The effort to eat even the small amount offered had exhausted his friend. "I think you should try to rest some more. It's okay, Tarin, you're safe." He felt embarrassed saying that but so much of the man's fears could be settled if he believed he was protected and sheltered that he had to say it.

Tarin nodded weakly. "Thank you." His words were slurred and the accent made him sound far too young and vulnerable. He drifted back down into sleep, only this time it was restful and not fevered.

When he awoke again he still felt weak but not deathly so. He'd been injured enough times to know how badly he had been hurt and to not do anything suddenly. Slow and steady would be the order of everything so he took a long time to work up the nerve to open his eyes.

"I was wondering if you were going to lay there pretending to be asleep all day." Hentra asked from beside the outlander. "Come, wake, eat, bathe and rejoin us in the land of the living."

"How long was I out that time?" He managed to mumble out and closed his eyes again.

"All of the day, we've been moving you about like a sack of potatoes. Don't worry, we've traveled as far in land as the Elect needed to go, so now you can rest here and grow strong." She rocked onto her heels and leaned over him, with a swift movement she brushed a lock of hair off his forehead. "Come, up on your feet. We'll wash your body and your wounds and fill your stomach and you'll feel almost human."

Tarin pushed himself up on an elbow and groaned, his body weak and painful, it felt like a broken puppet or doll rather than his own bone and skin. "I'm not optimistic on the chances of that happening."

Whether he meant the chances of bathing and eating or of feeling human, Hentra didn't know. She merely smiled warmly and helped the young man to rise, knowing Shandro or Lenno would be on hand and could help as well. She'd done her part to keep him alive but still felt she owed him a deep debt, he'd have to live for her to find a way to repay it.

Lenno and Shandro were waiting near by for them and Tarin could see instantly they weren't at the camp he remembered. There were many more trees, obviously in a forest and the camp itself was larger. It was nearly a village of dozens of round tents tucked about the trunks of the trees like mushrooms that had sprung up from a hard rain. Oddly, none of it had any sense of a lasting population. It took him a little while to figure out where this impression came from but as he watched the people that moved around them in the late evening light he saw only adults. There weren't any children of any age and no signs of them anywhere. The majority of the adults he passed were warriors and scouts but he spotted a clump of people with their hair brushed loose and hanging long to their waists dressed in robes and loose clothes. They watched Tarin as if he were a disgusting animal soiling their bedroom. It was a testament to how worn out he felt that he didn't give it more than a moment's thought.

He was taken to a small pool that was fed by a small running stream, stones lined the walkway and it had a natural feel but Tarin was certain it had been created. Bathing exhausted him and he was shocked by his own weakness. The wound on his leg was red and ugly but healing and he could see they'd been forced to reopen the wound when the infection had set in. When he strode out of the water, Lenno tossed a blanket around him and offered a steadying arm. Tarin had little choice but to accept it and he gratefully let himself be lead to an over turned log to sit.

"Thank you." The light was fading quickly and Tarin's strength was going with it. He passively allowed the pair of scouts to tend his wounds and when Shandro offered to shave him he accepted that as well.

"I guess this way you know I won't keep the razor." Tarin said softly while Shandro cleaned the blade.

The scout smiled a little. "You're the Elect's guest, you're allowed to be armed. All you have to do is ask, but if I were in your place I'd wait a bit. Some of the folk here are a little unnerved to have you around."

"How did you manage that? With the razor?" Lenno asked from where he knelt, re-bandaging the

still sore wounds on the outlander's wrists.

Tarin would have shrugged if he hadn't had a blade to his throat. "I cheat at dice too."

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Chapter Twenty Five

Tarin awoke the next morning, at least he hoped it was still morning, what little light that seeped into the tent was shadowed by trees and it made judging the time of day sketchy. He sighed at the aches across his body and brought a hand up to the healing bruise on his cheekbone and temple. It wasn't swollen but it was still very tender to the touch and he winced away from even his own careful probing.

He'd eaten before lying back down to rest but now his stomach felt painfully empty. It was that more than anything that dragged his eyes open fully and shook off the last of the sleepy grogginess. Ishvan sat watching him, looking over the book he read in the light of a small lamp.

"Morning."

"Is it?"

"Morning?" He waited until the swordsman nodded. "Yes, it's still morning."

"Been there long?" He struggled to sit up and for the first time noticed that the clothes he had been given to wear were similar in cut and style to what Ishvan was now wearing. Simple, loose, almost flowing basic shirts and pants with soft socks and soft leather boots, Tarin hadn't had much use for the boots yet, he'd been padding around barefoot.

The boy shrugged. "A little while, it was decided it was best not to have you wake up alone."

"How kind of you." Tarin mocked with thick sarcasm, he ran a hand across his hair trying to brush it into place as best he could but couldn't muster too much energy to worry about how he looked.

"How're you feeling?"

He was forced to nod at the question, unwilling to deny the basics of the truth. "Better, clearer, I know I've asked this before but I was really sick, right?"

Ishvan smiled a little, Tarin had been asking that every semi-conscious moment for days. "Yeah, you were really sick. There was a bet among the scouts and warriors about whether you'd live or not you were that sick."

"That's me, always trying to be entertaining."

"It wasn't done to be mean, half of them think all outlanders are odd animals, myself included. Are you hungry? You should eat and some sunshine and fresh air would do you good."

"I'll eat if you tell me how much you won."

Ishvan only shook his head and grinned. He had won a fair sum, betting that Tarin would live.

With Ishvan's help Tarin got to his feet and wandered out into the tree dabbled sunshine. The air smelled so sweet, the breeze was cool and the sun was hot. He stared around not at the myriad of alien faces but the tall trees that spanned so far above them, the leaves spreading to a wide distance. Birds skittered from branch to branch and sang back and forth to one another, seemingly ignoring the camp below or unworried by it.

The camp itself was clustered around the trunks of the trees in smaller groups, circles or semi circles of round tents with a central fire in the middle. People moved about on tasks, he saw a few groups of fighters sparing against each other with wooden swords and as Ishvan waved for him to sit on a log by the fire Tarin spotted another group of the robed, loosed hair people who offered him hard looks.

"Friendly bunch." He nodded to the group in robes, watching them with close eyes but keeping their distance.

Ishvan pressed a mug of tea into the swordsman's hands and a wooden bowl of stewed fruit and oats. "Oh, don't mind them, I've only been living with the people for thirteen years and they still look at me like I'm going to torch the elder trees."

The tea was the same bitter brew they'd been giving him and he made a face at it. "But who are they?"

"Holy Ones, priests if you will though the people aren't religious as you'd know it, it's more of a philosophy." At the blank look on Tarin's face Ishvan frowned. "We're different here, the place of class and rank is strong but it's different than with your people."

"Our people, you're skin's as light as mine." He reminded the boy.

This made Ishvan frown deeper. "True, I'm sorry. Look, you were a slave, no matter what you do to your," he paused and frowned again, "our, people you will always be a slave. If someone is born in the slums they will always be lower than someone born among the rich, right?"

Tarin nodded suspiciously.

"Okay, here," he gestured at the camp around them, "people are sorted out by skills. Or in theory they are anyway. Every child of the people are introduced to the elder trees at a young age and the parents in turn are told what skills the child may develop if nurtured. Do you remember Marcuss? Big fellow who hovers around the Elect?"

"I remember."

"Well, his parents, all his family, are farmers but his parents were told he could be an average farmer or an extraordinary warrior. They chose to have him apprenticed to become a warrior and look at him, he's the Speaker for the Warriors to the Elect himself, a position about as noble and high as it gets for the people. Hentra, my mother, she was supposed to be a holy one but when she came of age at thirteen rejected the training and was accepted as a scout. A child of two scouts or warriors might be happier and better suited to being a blacksmith and the parents are

told of this and society is sorted out by skill." He bent and uncovered a basket and fished out a round of flat bread. While he spoke, Ishvan picked at it and kept an eye on the watching holy ones.

"Some society, being told what you'll be from birth?" Tarin shook his head.

"It's not like that, or not entirely. It's just a suggestion and even if the parents take it for their child, the child has a right to pick their own fate when they are old enough to understand, like my mother did. The elder trees are normally dead on though with what would fit a person's skills and temperament. The message is sometimes misunderstood because it's only as clear as the skill of the holy one in communion with the elder trees."

"That makes no sense."

Ishvan laughed a little. "Yeah, I know, it's not something I've ever seen first hand and since I'm not of the people, no one thought to introduce me to the trees and see what skill I'd have." There was just the smallest sense of bitterness in the boy's voice.

"So, Ilan is the head of the people?"

"Yes and no, he's the Elect, no one would dream of disobeying him but no one's required to obey him. He's followed because he's special, he's amazing, but no one is required to follow because of laws. The people are over seen by a council, men and women from different trades and groups. Each region has it's local council, the regional council chooses two people to come to a grand council. They hear the thoughts and worries of the regional council and bring the issues before the grand. The grand council sets policy, settles wide disputes, keeps order for the most part. Each grand council member serves for five years and can never serve again after their five years. The grand council is balanced by the holy ones, they send no representatives to the local councils and have their own internal hierarchy. The holy ones advise and offer suggestions to the councils but have no authority to veto or approve anything but they are respected greatly."

Tarin's head was feeling a little buzzy from all the new information and concepts he'd never heard of. "And Ilan fits in how?"

"The top of the chain of command, the over seer of the whole system is either an Elect or a Guardian. The Guardian is someone chosen by the elder trees in times between an Elect, they have no true power and their entire job is to see nothing serious changes. They make sure the council keeps out of people's way, that they remember they're job is to do as little as possible. When there is an Elect, things are different. The Elect brings change with them. If the Elect told the people they now could fly and they should climb the highest trees and jump, everyone would climb the highest trees and jump. After the Elect's lifetime, the Guardian see to it the changes the Elect put in place stay in place as often the changes aren't popular with the councils. Make sense?"

"No, but I think if I think about it some it might. And the elder trees are what and why would one group speak for them, why don't they speak for themselves? And can I have some real tea or water or something, this stuff's awful."

Ishvan grinned easily. "Sure, but you should drink it anyway, it saved your life." He busied himself with pouring out some of the clean, cool water. "The elder trees are real trees, Tarin."

The swordsman looked skeptical and he pointed to a near by tree. "A tree?"

"Yes, a tree but not like those. I can't explain it, I've been around them and you can feel them, they feel different. Mother tried to explain it one time, it's not the tree, the tree's a gateway or a network of gateways to somewhere else. She was a tad tight lipped about it, most people are. I know, I know you don't believe. Truth is, I'm not sure I believe." He poured water for himself as

well and drank deeply from it.

"That's because Uncle never had you introduced." Lenno said from behind them and caused the outlander to jump in startled fright. "Sorry about that, I was out on patrol and still in that mindset. Have another mug for me?"

Ishvan poured out more water as his long legged cousin eased down to join them. "Shandro knew what he was doing when he didn't introduce me, I'm not of the people."

Lenno shrugged. "Perhaps. Thank you." He accepted the mug and studied the outlander. "You still look pale, are you well?"

"I'm always pale and I'm better. So those holy ones," he nodded toward the group watching them, "they say what these trees tell them? And they're the only ones that can pass along such messages?"

"Correct."

"So what's to stop them from saying what they want to say rather than what they should?" Frankly, he was pretty sure that's how the whole system worked. An elite group that pretended to speak for a higher and very distant power and with no means of having their work checked up on. It was a perfect scam.

"There's nothing to stop them."

Tarin bit his tongue at the easy and open chance to mock their ways.

"Outlander, you've never met the elder trees. Even those with no sense for such things feel the connection for the rest of their lives. You may not believe but that doesn't make it false."

"I didn't say a word."

Lenno snorted a little but his eyes were amused and he found himself liking the outlander. "Those demon eyes of yours give away your thoughts, outlander."

Tarin shrugged. "Can't help that. Where's Ilan? If I'm his guest here, I assume I can't leave until I see him?"

"The Elect," Lenno stressed the title but the outlander seemed to ignore him, "is in meditations today. You're stuck with us. If you're feeling up to it, you should try going for short walks, it'll help get your strength back."

Tarin nodded and lowered his eyes to hide the instant feeling of being trapped. Guest or not, he felt like a captive again but this time he'd have to wait until he was stronger. "Thank you, I'm afraid I am not a very good sick person."

"Well, just take it slowly, it's going to take a few days to get your strength back."

Tarin spent the next few days sharing the tent with Ishvan and Lenno and being openly included in the family. He slept when they slept and woke near dawn with the other young men, outside in the early morning air he shared breakfast with the family and a few other scouts, all of whom kept a respectful distance from Tarin but weren't rude. He spent his days swimming or walking, growing stronger with every effort and when he was tired he'd rest or nap. When he'd slept as much as he could and was tired of walking the same marked pathway around the camp, Ishvan would sit with him and quietly begin his reading lessons as if the past few weeks had simply

never occurred.

It angered Tarin at first and he wanted to scorn the artist's efforts but his desire to learn was greater than his pride. He feigned indifference but soon was animatedly asking questions and trying very hard to understand what he was being shown. Lenno sometimes sat with them in the afternoons and watched, trying to make sense of the outlander's written language but he often simply gave up.

After lunch several days later, the easy pace of life was starting to wear very thin on Tarin's nerves. He missed the noise of the city and the sense of purpose his life had, he felt kept and while the majority of the camp simply ignored him as they did Ishvan, he was starting to feel like a caged animal.

"Lenno?"

The scout looked up from where he was gathering dirty dishes at his quietly spoken name.
"Yes?"

"I want my sword."

Lenno set the dishes down and wished Shandro was around. There was no reason to deny the outlander's request, he was supposed to have been their guest but the thought of the man armed frightened him. Shandro would know a logical reason to deny the return of the weapons. "I thought you were still weak? Your leg's not fully healed." Semi healed was still amazing, Ishvan had been right when he said the outlander healed much more quickly than normal.

Tarin's eyes were cool and steady, his voice calm. "You said I could have it anytime I asked but to wait a few days for people to get used to the sight of me. I'd like it back."

"Why?"

"How comfortable would you feel, being unarmed for so long?"

Lenno met the odd eyes that watched him so intently but he saw no anger, no violence in their depth. Finally, he nodded and rose to his feet, without a word he left their section of the camp and soon had disappeared from their sight.

"You're not going to cause trouble are you?" Ishvan asked.

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Chapter Twenty Six

Tarin's smile was thin and cold. "No, and I won't leave without speaking to Ilan one more time. Don't worry, my legs too sore for me to get very far." But the boy still looked uneasy and frightened.

It took Lenno a while but he returned, Tarin's worn leather sword belt clutched in his hand. He stood over the outlander and studied him, wondering if the man would draw the blade and strike him down as soon as the weapon was returned but after only a small second thought he handed the weapon over.

Just holding the weight of the old leather and steel was comforting. Tarin stood up and quickly buckled it around his waist, feeling suddenly a thousand times more optimistic than he had that morning. "Thank you."

The weight and gravity of the outlander's words humbled Lenno, he nodded his head and moved a few paces away. It allowed him to watch as the swordsman, for Lenno no longer doubted the man was worthy of the title, carefully examined the condition of the knife that hung on one side of his hip and then drew and inspected the blade from the other side. The feel of the hilt in his hand again nearly made Tarin sing with joy, it was such a liberating feeling, such a sense of right to it that he swore he'd never again take for granted his weapon. He stepped a few paces away from the fire and lightly bounced the blade in his hand, letting it sweep over itself and spun the hilt easily in his grip. He could have left this blade behind but he was very glad not to have been forced to. It was as much a part of him as the numbers on his shoulder.

Without really thinking about it he let the weight in his hand pull his body into the first forms of his practice, something he was normally self-conscious about doing where others could watch. The myriad of bruises on his body ached and limited his range, the slash on his thigh burned but both were comforting in their own right and not enough to distract him. He slid from one form to another, moving gently, testing his body carefully and found it better than he'd feared.

After a moment he paused and looked up, Ishvan sat watching him but Lenno had a slight look of confusion on his face, his head tilted slightly to one side and his eyes intent. "What?" Tarin asked, feeling suddenly far too aware of how stupid he must have looked.

The scout shook his head. "Would you trust me not to harm you?"

Tarin smiled easily at that. "Sure."

But the scout didn't smile, he stood with the same distracted look to his face. "Come." He motioned with his hand.

Tarin glanced at Ishvan but the artist only shrugged and got to his feet. Obviously what ever was on his cousin's mind he wanted to see as well. They followed Lenno around the camp to an open clearing that had no cook fire and only one tent off to the side, a few people milled about, talking and they earned more than their share of odd looks. Lenno ducked inside the tent and emerged quickly, carrying two of the well-formed wooden practice blades Tarin had seen several people working with.

"You'll have to take off the real blade." Lenno was already removing his long knife and he handed it to Ishvan.

Tarin wasn't certain he liked this idea but he unbuckled his belt and handed it over to Ishvan. Lenno handed one of the wooden blades to the strange outlander across from him and then backed away to shake out his arms and watch from a little more of a distance.

The weight of the blade was strange in his hands but the form and style were very similar to his own sword. He took a few practice swings to study the way the wood moved with him and then

turned to the scout. "So? A practice fight?"

Lenno nodded. "Do your people do such things?"

"Some do, I don't normally. It's been a long time."

"We'll go slow, if you tire, let me know and we'll stop." Lenno fell into a guard position and watched the outlander carefully.

Tarin shrugged. "Okay, slowly." He took his own guard and waited, Lenno didn't make him wait long.

The young scout attacked in a straightforward and basic manner, Tarin countered with almost a lazy effort. Lenno tried again, moving with more skill and when the swordsman barely had to twitch to turn him aside he backed off. When he met Tarin's eye he was grinning now and this time he attacked at a more normal speed.

The ground was mostly flat and had been cleared of any large rocks so there was little to trip over but Tarin moved carefully. He was used to ballroom floors and well tended city streets, not fighting in a forest and he didn't want to make a fool of himself by tripping over his own feet. Because it was supposed to stay friendly, Tarin didn't strain himself any and it really was friendly. He ignored the aches in his body as tired and tight feeling muscles slowly warmed up and stretched out. They feinted and played back and forth, testing one another, giving and taking but neither had a doubt which of them was the better swordsman. As Tarin moved in with a higher level of control and skill they both knew he would win, it was just a matter of how soon.

Before it came to that, Tarin slipped sideways and called out for the scout to stop. "Hold, hold, the leg." It was a lie and they both knew it, Tarin was moving on his torn leg just fine and even as he rubbed at it gently Lenno grinned with understanding. It was an easy excuse that saved Lenno from loosing to an outlander among his own people.

"Don't tear it back open, Hentra will kill me." Lenno was breathing lightly but far from being winded. "You're not bad, outlander."

A small crowd had gathered around and watched, they whispered back and forth in quiet tones. Tarin ignored them. "Thanks."

"Yes, not bad for an outlander against a young scout. How about a warrior?"

Tarin looked around and wasn't surprised to see the tall Marcuss crossing into the open. He glanced to Lenno and Ishvan but they were whispering worriedly back and forth among themselves.

Lenno hurried forward. "He's still recovering."

"Or he's afraid to go against a real fighter. How about it outlander, which is it?"

Tarin straightened up and shrugged. "I'm willing." He swung the blade, it danced comfortably in his hand.

"Not with a scout's sword, with a warrior's."

"That's not fair!" Ishvan protested. "He's never even held a warrior's blade."

Tarin shook his head. "It's okay, I'm willing to try."

Lenno sighed and fetched out the wood blades from the tent, returning the pair they'd been

using. Tarin looked uncertainly at the carved wooden blade he was offered, it was twice as wide as the blades he was used to using, longer and required a two handed grip. It was a slashing weapon and he was used to point work and his arm already felt tired.

They fell into a guard position with no promise to move slowly or to keep it friendly. Tarin felt small and awkward behind such a large blade but he forced himself to draw a few slow breaths and calmed himself down. Something about the large man just rubbed him the wrong way and he had a feeling the effect was mutual.

Marcuss' first attack was forceful and Tarin caught and deflected it with loud cracking sounds from the wood. The impact shook his arms and made his hands tingle from the force. The feral had far too much of an advantage in height and reach and Tarin felt slight and small next to him. There was no way he could match the man for strength and what was worse was how fast the feral moved. He moved impossibly fast for a man his size. With his own blade, Tarin wouldn't have worried about it but with this monster of a wood sword he moved too slowly.

It was a matter of learning the new weapon and he just didn't have the time for it. He watched the feral's attacks, all long reaching slashing motions, swung in graceful, powerful arcs and as Tarin caught them and turned them aside by sheer stubborn will and simple dumb luck he was looking for a way to end the fight quickly. He couldn't match the speed of the other's swings nor the strength in his attacks. Unlike with Lenno, neither man was smiling and enjoying themselves, the fight was serious and intent.

Marcus swung again and this time Tarin didn't try to fend the attack off. He let the man come at him with the full of his strength, thinking he'd turn it aside, only as the wide blade rushed toward him, Tarin dodged. He pulled his own blade close to his body, the width of the blade standing straight like the trunks of the trees around him directly in front of his face. Rather than retreat, he spun tight into Marcus, inside the arc of the attacking blade and as the wood crashed into the dirt and grass of the ground Tarin stood with his back to Marcus' chest and let the direction of his spin carry him. As he spun toward the feral's left hand side he arced his own blade down in a low swinging attack, the blade smacked hard across the back of the big man's knees. Tarin let the speed of his spin carry him away and he turned ready for another attack.

Only, none came and he turned in time to see Marcus collapse. His knees had caved under the stinging blow and he fell forward, catching himself on his hands and saving himself from sprawling face first into the dirt. The crowd around them had grown considerably and they clapped cheerfully at the end of the spectacle. Tarin held his guard for a moment, breathing harder now but when Lenno stepped to his side he stood down and let the practice blade be taken from his hands.

A few warriors had come forward and were helping Marcus to his feet and as Tarin watched, Ilan broke from the crowd. He too was clapping merrily and Tarin felt oddly embarrassed to know he'd been watching. "Well done!" He called out. "What do you say Marcus?"

The large man walked with a stiff and painful limp to where Tarin stood. One paw like hand swung out and Tarin half flinched before he understood he was being offered the hand in friendship. He accepted it and hoped most people missed his jumpy nerves.

"I say he should be dressed as a Warrior, he fights like one."

Lenno clapped him on the shoulder and Ilan watched Tarin with amused eyes.

"How about it Shandro, want to try him out?" Ilan called over his shoulder to where the Scout lurked unnoticed.

Tarin felt himself starting to blush when he watched the couple he'd slowly been growing to respect emerge from the far side of the tent. He couldn't name just why it disturbed him to be

caught in even casual fights with the couple watching but he felt vaguely like he was showing off. It felt like he'd been caught in a lie.

"He's still recovering. It wouldn't be right." Shandro appraised the outlander, he was starting to favor his injured leg and he was breathing harder now.

"How about it Tarin Morris? Do you feel up to one more fight?"

There was no doubt about it, there was a playful challenge to Ilan's voice. He stood straight and sketched him a full and formal bow. "As the lord requests."

Lenno just shook his head. "Must you mock everyone?"

"Pretty much."

"How's your leg?" Shandro asked as he accepted from his nephew not one but a pair of the odd length blades carved again from solid, heavy wood.

Tarin took his own pair and shook his head at the odd weapons. "It hurts and I'd be grateful if you don't smack anything into it. I think it's already bleeding again."

"Than we shouldn't do this."

"What more harm can come from it?"

"So be it. Ready?"

Tarin paced a little bit but felt more like his old self than he had since crossing paths with the feral scout. He tested the weight and feel of the blades in his hands and liked it. "Yes."

There was no falling to a guard position, there was no pause or wait, Shandro spun into an attack with both blades. The man's speed was blinding, the wood long knives spun and turned like a whirlwind. For a moment Tarin reacted with stunned shock and barely blocked the attack, moving his two blades in an effort to simulate one normal sword like he was used to. It was working but not well and the effort was straining, he'd block once and then again and by the time he'd processed where the second blade was the first was attacking again.

Something in his mind clicked off and he stopped thinking, stopped trying to analyze the fast paced, fluid movements of the other man. He stopped trying to defend as he normally would and found himself in one of those rare moments where all sense stopped. He simply was, the world was down to the clacking of wood on wood, the smooth rapid darting in and away of the other's attacks and he just merged with it all. He started defending one blade against the other, blocking the attacks independently and the pace sped up. He defended faster and half felt he could close his eyes and still meet the other man's assault from sheer feel and then he had his first moment open for attack and he slipped his practice blade inside, forcing the scout to defend for the first time.

The ground under Tarin slipped away, the soft leather of the boot scrambled for purchase and found none. With the too fast onslaught the slip was enough so Tarin let himself fall. Shandro's attack missed him but Tarin landed hard, twisting his knee with a curse. The scout backed away, breathing hard and looked to see the outlander tumbled on the ground where he'd slipped on his own blood. The wound on his leg had torn open and bled freely, making the soles of his boots slick and the grass slippery.

Shandro instantly dropped the wood practice blades and moved to the pale outlander. "Steady, steady, are you okay?" The young swordsman's knee was turned at an odd angle and he moved to check it but was waved off.

"I'm fine." Tarin muttered and with a popping sound his knee straightened out. "I'm double jointed, I twist easily and don't break. Jesus I didn't know I was bleeding this badly." His breath was moving too fast for how little effort he'd put forth and he felt suddenly weak and drained. He'd done too much too soon.

No one around them was clapping now, the crowd stood in awed, almost frightened unease. That was the reaction Tarin was most used to. Ilan knelt beside them and watched as Shandro, breathing hard, carefully tied off the bleeding wound on the outlander's leg. "Is he well?"

"I'm fine." Tarin answered for himself. "Just tired now. Sorry, Ilan, I didn't win for you."

He laughed lightly at Tarin's arrogant assumption and casual manner. "You weren't fighting for me. What say you Shandro?"

"He's better than most of the recruits we get, by far. I've no problem with him going as a fighter."

"I don't understand."

"Don't worry," he rested a hand on his shoulder for a moment. "I'm sure they'll explain it to you when they patch that leg back together." He looked up to where Hentra, Lenno and Ishvan hovered and wondered again at how the family had so easily taken in the outlander. He met Hentra's eye as he stood up. "Let me know if he gets ill again."

"We will, Your Grace."

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Chapter Twenty Seven

Tarin let them steady him to his feet and he kept an eye on the crowd as they broke away with whispers and open looks. Ilan didn't linger, he gathered Marcus up and left as soon as he'd seen Tarin was well. Once he stopped moving, all the bruises and aches returned and his leg stiffened up so badly he could barely stand on it. It was only with the small families help that he made it back to their small circle of tents and the entire family followed Tarin inside the one he'd been sharing.

"Now, what's going on?" Hentra untied the makeshift bandage and started to work on untying his pants. Tarin batted her hands away, his eyes going wide with uncertain fear and very certain embarrassment. "Stop that."

"You're bleeding."

He knew he was going to blush, he could feel it creeping along his neck. "Not that badly."

She poked at the growing blood stain on his pants leg and he flinched away from the contact. "Badly enough."

"Stop that!" He caught her hands again and pulled them away.

She looked up to Shandro, where he stood still catching his breath and he just shrugged. "You won't survive another fever."

"But you see... you're... it's just... privacy." He knew he sounded pathetic and he'd seen them bathing in mixed groups without a second thought but he just couldn't do that. It was bad enough that the women went around dressed as they did.

"They have taboos about mixed company." Ishvan explained.

Hentra sighed and tossed her hands up. "Men!" She cuffed Ishvan lightly on the side of his head as if all the problems with his gender were suddenly embodied in him but she left the tent without further comment.

Tarin undressed willingly than, using a blanket for a cover and tried not to wince away at how thoroughly Shandro washed and tended the wound. The salve he rubbed into it was sharp smelling and stung badly. "So, what's going on?"

Ishvan sighed. "To go openly armed among the people, at least with a sword, you must be a warrior or a scout. Since you can't be either and since you do have the right to go armed something needed to be done."

Shandro looked to Lenno. "When word of your little fight spread, I spoke with the Elect and suggested that if you proved skilled with a blade, proved you were as trained as our own fighters and could win the respect of the warriors and scouts, then you should be allowed to dress as a fighter and go armed."

"Offered equal respect." Ishvan finished.

"So it was a test?"

"In a way, yes, but nothing so formal."

"You fight very well." Shandro complimented as he started to re-bandage the wound on the outlander's leg, again uneasy by the near corpse pale skin.

"Does this mean I still need to be escorted everywhere?"

"This means you can escort me around." Ishvan grinned.

He rubbed a hand over his face and felt himself being drawn ever deeper into their world and wasn't sure he liked it. Shandro put a hand on his shoulder, sensing some of his unease and a lot of his exhaustion.

"You should try to rest."

Tarin couldn't think of anything clever to say so he just nodded and let his weariness pull him down into restful sleep.

He slept all the rest of the afternoon and woke only long enough to eat and bathe before lying

down and dropping deeply asleep again. It wasn't like him to sleep so much but his body craved it and every moment of sleep seemed to move him closer to being well.

When he awoke in the morning he was surprised to find an outfit like Lenno's laid out for him as well. For all he knew it was one of the scout's set of clothes. He pulled the soft leather on and felt incredibly exposed, the shirt was tight to his chest and tied close to his sides, his arms stuck out bare and pale in comparison to the golden skin of the Ferals around him. The pants were the worst part. It didn't hurt his wound too much but the leather clung to his legs and hips. He had to adjust the fit several times before he was satisfied that he wasn't going to totally embarrass himself.

Even as it was, when he joined the family unit at the fire, his sword belt buckled over the leather of his pants, he blushed bright red at Hentra's admiring whistle. "Please, don't, I feel stupid enough as it is. You're sure I have to wear this?"

"You don't look stupid." Hentra reassured him. "You look like a fighter, a pale one but a fighter." A lot of the women were talking about the outlander, his looks were extraordinary enough to turn even their heads.

"No one will accept you wearing arms if you aren't dressed that way." Shandro added and the appraising look his wife gave the outlander didn't miss his notice. "What do you plan to do today?"

Tarin sat and accepted breakfast, eating it carefully. "If I'm free to move around on my own now, I want to go for a real walk. If that's okay? By myself, spend some time alone, think over some things."

Shandro half smiled and he nodded. "I think no one will complain over that. Remember though, the woods are patrolled so don't go too far."

Tarin understood the careful warning. "I won't."

Tarin started near the camp just to see if anyone would try to stop him from moving about on his own. When no one did more than look at him he moved into the woods. He stuck to the trail he'd found but a sudden swelling of emotion made him cut away from it. He needed to be alone, badly. It was a desperate need to run as far as he could get away from Ishvan and his strange Feral family. He couldn't run, his leg hurt enough just walking on it, and Shandro had casually warned about the area being patrolled. They'd stop him before he got far and that would ruin what small amount of trust he'd wrung from them. He needed them to trust him so that when he was able to slip away he could, when the time came he needed to have as much on his side as he could manage.

As he moved away from the encampment and deeper into the forest he found the advantages of such a form fitted outfit right away. There wasn't anything to snag on brambles or catch on branches, he could move about the woods as gracefully and easily as any of its four legged inhabitants. Soon the camp was out of sight and hearing range and he continued to wander, it was only then that it occurred to him that this was the first time in his life he'd been this alone. There were no neighbors a wall away, no people on the street, no sailors on deck or slaves sleeping beside him. It was just him and the sky and the cool earth below him, it was such a shocking feeling that it almost made up for the hassle of how he'd gotten there. That is if the being tied up, kidnapped, beaten and hanged parts were removed.

After a little while he found a large rock outcropping, the pale stones were smooth and had pushed up out of the earth in rounded knuckles. Tarin climbed them, knocking off a little moss along the way and found a spot near one of the highest points. He settled in the sun warming the

stone and it felt very solid and real. His own paranoia had him listening, waiting for one of the Ferals to appear and tell him he'd gone too far or that he needed to return but he heard nothing. The forest around him was as it should be with the songs of birds and insects and his worry eased.

He almost would have preferred to stay paranoid and worried. Once he was sure he was alone and safe something in him crumbled. Too much had happened and he hadn't had a single private moment to process any of it. He wasn't like Ishvan and Lenno and the rest of the Ferals. He couldn't let his guard down around others and count on them to understand. They wouldn't, they never could understand and any weakness Tarin showed was one more thing they'd have to use against him.

That wasn't to say he didn't want to. He envied them their close relationships and how they so obviously supported one another. He wanted to know what that felt like and to be part of that desperately. Shelee and her girls tried but Tarin never had learned how to accept that care and kindness. It was like he'd been bricked up inside of a room and left for dead, still able to hear life and voices on the other side with no way of reaching them. The trouble was out in the wilds with people that didn't know him, with people that barely knew his culture, it seemed seductively easy to give in to them. That was something he couldn't do if he ever hoped to get home again.

His hands balled up into fists and still they shook. All the fear and emotions of the past weeks bubbled up and he wanted to scream or throw something but his body was frozen. He couldn't move and the closest sound to a scream he made was a grunted, hushed moan. If he'd had the tears he would have wept but he didn't weep anymore. The nightmares from his fever had made old wounds feel far too fresh and his most recent brush with death left him feeling broken. His hands uncurled and instead wrapped around the still healing rope burn on his neck as he gasped for air and tried to re-contain the emotions he never let out.

It felt like little more than a few moments until Tarin got himself back under control but when he looked up the sun had moved several hours distance across the sky. He stretched his legs and they went all pins and needles tingles from being folded in front of him for so long. He rubbed them and waited for feeling to return but when he could move he left his perch with reluctance. While he was glad to have his emotions back under control, he hated having to go back to pretending again. His softly booted feet crunched back onto the forest floor. He'd stayed out for longer than he'd planned and didn't want anyone getting worried so he started to turn back toward the camp. He only made it a few feet before he stopped.

It wasn't a sound, not really. It wasn't a whisper or a whistle or a call of any bird or animal he'd guess at, he wasn't even sure he was hearing anything. He stood still and listened, the tone echoed again and it pulled at him, called him toward it. There was still several hours to the afternoon, it suddenly felt less important to get back. What harm could it do to follow the tone and maybe learn it's source? With his head cocked to the side, listening to the will o' wisp sound, he began to follow it.

The better part of an hour passed and he was pretty sure he was going in a wide circle but the sound was growing louder. It still wasn't something he could name and sometimes he stopped, wondering if he was hearing anything at all but the siren song returned and he felt compelled to understand where it was coming from. Off he'd go again, following it around like a fool but the more he chased it, the more he felt a deep rooted need to find it.

Lenno followed Tarin at the far range of his tracking skills, working very hard to keep an eye on the outlander and to stay out of his way. Shandro had sent him to find and follow the swordsman not out of worry he'd run away but out of fear that the city dweller would get hurt or injured in the forest itself.

During the course of the morning Lenno climbed a tree and waited in the crook of its limbs as Tarin sat on a pile of stones. He was surprised at the way the man sat in one place because Tarin didn't seem the sort for passivity but he didn't disturb him as the afternoon faded away. Eventually the man stirred and carefully climbed down from the rocks, only instead of moving back toward camp he turned in the other direction.

For a moment, Lenno thought the man was simply lost but he was clearly moving toward something. His pace was slow and unsure but not hurried or frightened and Lenno held back and let Tarin find his own path. So when Tarin broke into the clearing Lenno was quite a bit behind him and when the swordsman stopped moving, Lenno ventured forward cautiously.

He peeked into the clearing and cursed, vividly and colorfully, wondering if Shandro would have him scrubbing pots for the rest of his natural life. There was no point in stealth now, he hopped across a rock and ran into the clearing that was sheltered by the massive tree. The tree spread its limbs out in a wide circle, its leaves offering broken dappled spots of shade. Crumbled at the base, his hands pressed to the tree's trunk was Tarin.

Ishvan had quietly spoken to Lenno about his uncertain wonderings about whether an outlander could have the vocation of a holy one. Lenno had laughed at the time but now he'd gotten to know the swordsman, for Lenno had little doubt his cousin wondered about any other man and not some random Outlander. It was Ishvan's concerns that stopped him in his tracks. It could be simply that Tarin had collapsed, he was still weak no matter what he said, but if it wasn't, if it was more, moving him could kill him.

Lenno whistled out into the woods, there was always a scout near the trees and in a few moments a whistled call came back to him and before long another scout joined him in the clearing. The woman cursed under her breath when she saw the outlander crumbled at the base of the tree.

"Go, get Shandro and Hentra and a holy one."

The woman, named Belize, nodded. "You'll watch him?"

"Yes." With that single word he swore to kill Tarin before allowing him to harm the tree he knelt under.

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Chapter Twenty Eight

Without further debate she took off into the forest at a run, Lenno watched her go with a sigh and shook his head. He'd been attracted to her since was old enough to notice girls but she'd never

given him a second glance. Such was the way of women and he'd never spoken to her beyond work. Thinking about her was a lot more comfortable than thinking about the outlander collapsed in front of the tree.

Shandro and Hentra arrived first. They ran smoothly into the clearing and stopped cold. "Tell me, what happened?" Shandro demanded instantly and let his wife move closer to the outlander.

Lenno didn't pause but let the events of the afternoon spill forth and before he was finished Belize returned with a holy one named Ventros, Lenno held his groan of distaste in check. Of all the holy ones hovering around the border lands and the Elect, the nearest one had to be Ventros. It wasn't so much that he was a bad person but Lenno suspected that he preferred the wilds of the fringes of the trees because he was so disliked by even other holy ones. The few times Lenno had been forced to cross paths with the man, he'd found he agreed with their general opinion of him.

Ventros sighed, winded from the hurried walk he'd been forced to by the scout's anxiousness. "Scout," He addressed Hentra sharply from where she knelt near Tarin. "Remove that filth from my tree."

Hentra glanced up. "I would be more comfortable doing so if you'd check first and make sure it's safe to do so."

"Safe? This outlander scum is the only threat here. Remove him at once, treat whatever ails him elsewhere."

"It's just if he's..." she tried again.

"He's an outlander! How dare you even think such blasphemy! Now, follow your orders."

Hentra turned from the holy one to Shandro and he understood. There were few things in life worse than the wraith of a wife but not many. "Holy one, please, the Elect himself placed this man's care into my families keeping. It's proper we'd have our doubts."

"You may have your doubts but I have none." He moved quickly across the clearing as Hentra stood to move out of the way but instead of going to the tree he reached to pull Tarin back. Only his hand stopped a small distance from the outlander's shoulder, a strong hand grasped the holy one's wrist. Ventros looked up the arm to see Lenno standing firmly beside him. "How dare you lay a hand on me."

When the holy one jerked his arm back, Lenno let him go. Only Ventros in spite of, or because of, his softness was still quick to anger, his hand flew back and his knuckles impacted sharply on the side of Lenno's face. He'd seen the blow coming but it was the holy one's right to punish anyone for touching him and he accepted the backhanded slap with as much dignity as he could.

Shandro however was a different story. He moved forward and physically stood between Tarin and Ventros. "Sir, this outlander's care was entrusted to us. So long as we have our doubts he stays where he kneels. Now, Belize, run quick and fetch the Elect. We'll let him settle this." The girl nodded and took off like a deer. "Until he arrives, holy one, so there is no mistaking any of our motives, would you kindly step across the clearing with me?"

Ilan made the clearing sooner than Shandro had expected and the tension that greeted him was thick. Ventros sulked on his side of the clearing, Shandro basically standing guard over him and Hentra and Lenno hovered near the still and silent outlander.

He broke into the clearing with Belize and Marcus at his side, the warrior was gripping the hilt of his blade firmly and his eyes were unhappy. "What's going on here?" He demanded, shaking off the pair that followed him and moving to study the people before him out across the clearing.

Shandro quickly explained what had happened as he understood it and motioned to where Tarin still knelt, unmoving. "We didn't want to move him until we had your say."

"This is absurd, all this fuss over an outlander filth!" Ventros hissed out.

Ilan moved to where Tarin knelt and studied him carefully and then gently he placed the palm of one hand flat against the tree trunk. "Be grateful these scouts have more sense than you do Ventros. I left orders this man was not to be harmed, if you'd moved him, it easily could have killed him."

"There's no way this man is in communion with the trees!"

"Enough!" He roared back and rose to his full height, his shoulders squared and his hands balled into fists. "You're a parasite and if you've ever truly communed a day in your life you'd have felt the truth the moment you stepped into this clearing. Leave, now, and be gone from the camp before I return. So help me if I have to lay eyes upon you again any time soon I will have you stripped of your rank, do you understand me?"

Ventros flushed red and squared his jaw but he bowed slightly. "Yes, Your Grace." He muttered out and hurriedly left the clearing moving with amazing speed.

"What do we do now?" Shandro asked carefully, not wanting his anger turned on him.

Ilan sighed and shook his head. "I don't know, this isn't supposed to be possible. The trees have him now."

"Your Grace?" Hentra moved forward. "If I may, the trees, they may not know he's so defenseless. He doesn't have any training for this, they could draw him in too deeply and he could be lost."

Ilan looked to the pale man at the base of the tree and nodded. "Very true, don't worry, I'll take care of it. Lenno, Belize, go back to camp, Lenno find Ishvan and keep him close to camp in case you're needed. Shandro, Hentra, I'm putting the outlander into your care. See he's taken care of when he comes out of this. Marcus, choice is yours, you can go or wait until I'm done."

"I'll wait." The large man nodded. It unnerved him when Ilan worked with the trees. It didn't seem proper for a fighter to be so much of a holy one. He followed him over to the other side of the tree trunk and watched with uneasy eyes as he settled in at the base. "Be careful."

He smiled warmly. "I will."

It was always very easy for him to drop into communion with the trees, too easy his teachers had warned. It was so much a part of his being, so like breathing, to him that it took no effort and with a small thought and less effort he shut his eyes and felt himself falling backwards into the comforting warmth of the trees. For as much as he understood it was only his mind drifting away, that his body sat in rest, every time felt like it was a physical drop and thrilled him with excited fear.

But the drop as always leveled and he floated in soft comforting darkness. The connection to his body was a pulsing thread of sensation, a subtle heartbeat of spirit and when he reached outward he felt the outlander's own tie to his body. It was comforting to feel its strength, to feel how securely he was anchored in spite of his ignorance. If he wanted to, he could reach out and feel the connections of any holy one in communion at that moment and once when he was younger he'd done just that, but such small efforts no longer amused him and this time he had a job to do.

He followed the feel of the swordsman and wasn't surprised when he stepped from darkness into

a landscape he knew well. It did surprise him that of the dozens of landscapes possible he'd followed Tarin here. The grass below his feet in the glade was almost painfully green and softer than silk, the blades parted and shifted in gentle waves under each step. In the center of the clearing stood a massive tree, it rose so tall the top was circled in clouds and to see it Ilan had to twist his neck or lay on his back in the soft grass. The branches of the tree stretched out in a wide and welcoming circle, the open arms of a loved one greeting and drawing family home. The sky was crisp and bright blue and the air that blew gently around was soft, warm and fragrant. He'd never seen a sun in this glade but light defused down from the sky above from all directions and cast no shadows.

Before Ilan could cross even a few feet of the glade toward the tree, a woman stepped out from behind the thick, massive trunk. Her skin was like polished walnut, the grain and pattern of the wood swirling. Her lips were pink flower petals, her eyes flowing water, sometimes green, sometimes blue, occasionally brown. The hair that fell from her head to her waist was soft slender weeping willow branches, the green leaves small and abundant. The dress she wore was cut simply and floated about her body, the fabric made of a thousand spun spider webs. Strapped to her back was a sword, taller than she stood on her bare feet, the tip almost dragged on the ground, the hilt rose about her head. It would have taken four strong men to wield it, the blade alone was half as wide as her body but she carried the burden with grace and ease. Never had Ilan seen her draw the sword, nor had he ever seen the woman without it.

There were no words, the Lady never directly spoke, Ilan felt her warmth and love like sunshine flowing out and into him. Love, welcome, joy at seeing him again and it brought a smile to Ilan's face. "I'm glad to be here as well but I have urgent concerns."

The woman looked worried and the warmth dimmed, being replaced by concern, eagerness to know.

"There is one among the trees."

That brought an amused light feeling, to the Lady, there were dozens directly among the tree, if not hundreds at any time. Ilan often wondered if she counted all the people as among the trees, whether they were in communion or not. The Lady queried for more information to help narrow the numbers down.

"He doesn't belong, he isn't of the people."

Since Tarin was the only outlander in contact with the trees, it should have instantly made whom he was speaking about clear. The Lady just smiled softly and shook her head, offering a slight shrug. The emotions that flooded Ilan were deeper amusement and almost as clearly as if it had been spoken, the knowledge that no one was not of the people. The feeling was so intense that Ilan filed it away to be questioned and examined later, he'd never gotten such a reaction from anyone in the trees.

"He's an outlander, one of pale skin."

This helped, she nodded and held out her hand. Within it was a carving of a man, the skin pale marble, the hair black coal and the eyes were lavender quartz. There came with the image such warmth and acceptance that Ilan knew instantly that the Lady didn't view Tarin as a stranger.

"He doesn't know the ways, he's never learned or experienced... he's vulnerable."

This brought out a great sense of mourning, an almost audible keening sound and the image of Tarin developed cracks. A tear slid from one of the Lady's eyes and such a wave of pain, grief and sadness washed out that Ilan was confused. He had to slow the flood down to process it, understand that it wasn't the Lady's pain, but her reaction to the depth of Tarin's. The moment Ilan understood the Lady nodded and closed her hands around the image of him, sheltering him

in her grasp and projecting such fierce protectiveness that Ilan was half afraid the trees would never release Tarin.

"I had no idea of the depths of his pain but he can't heal if he gets lost in you. If he goes in too deep, he won't know how to return. Please, release him, we'll try to help him."

The Lady merely shook her head and held the image closer.

"Please, he doesn't understand, he doesn't know what is happening, what to do. We didn't even know he was able to commune with you. He will lose himself and cease to be if you don't release him." He pleaded, begged.

The Lady paused, unable to express herself in mere emotion. When she moved it was quickly and the tip of her finger touched Ilan's forehead, the first time in all the years the woman had made move to make deeper contact, and Ilan gasped, shocked and almost knocked senseless at the sudden depth of his understanding. Tarin needed this time and the Lady wouldn't release him until she had to. She was going to allow him as much time in the depth of the trees as he could physically stand before spitting him out. She was aware of his lack of training, lack of knowledge and she would see to his safety.

Ilan's breath came in ragged gasps and he nodded. "I understand. He's dear to me too, I don't want to see him hurt."

That brought the warm, sunshine feeling love back into the Lady and she smiled knowingly, as if the two shared some forbidden secret. The Lady held open her hand but this time the stone image of Tarin was encased in a nearly clear glass bubble. She placed it in Ilan's hand and so pledged to protect and return the outlander.

The image danced for a moment in his palm before fading away. "Thank you, I know you would never hurt him but I didn't know if you were aware of how vulnerable he is. How sheltered he's been from the ways."

With a final smile, the Lady turned and strode back to the trunk of the massive tree, disappearing behind it in obvious dismissal. Ilan pulled himself back, stepping across the soft grass into the warm darkness. He opened his physical eyes to the afternoon sunshine. The first breath upon his return was deep and escaped in a sigh but it helped to clear the last of the foggiest of the merge.

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Chapter Twenty Nine

"What happened?" Marcus demanded but gently and he helped Ilan to find his feet. He hated that his friend went to places he couldn't follow, places he couldn't shelter him from.

Ilan looked to the scouts that stood near by and to the outlander still crumpled where he'd fallen. "I've never seen her react to anyone this way. She won't release him, I think she called him."

"That's not possible for anyone but a trained holy one, isn't it?" Hentra glanced down at Tarin.

Ilan shrugged. "I didn't think so either. How would he even have known what the call was?"

"Who says he knew? Lenno said he wandered around, changed direction, doubled back as if he were looking for something or following something, not like he knew where he was going." Shandro's voice was casual but his face remained worried.

"Well, in any case, she'll release him before he's harmed, she's promised but both of you stand ready. I'm not sure just where he is or what mood he'll be in when he's freed." He started to let Marcus guide him away back to camp but stopped on the edge of the clearing. "Let me know what happens." With their nods of agreement he left, his mind now buzzing with new questions.

When Tarin finally moved, he drew a gasping breath and pulled away from the tree so suddenly that Hentra startled backward herself. The outlander scrambled backwards, his hands tearing up small clumps of the loose soil and dead leaves, obviously frightened. Shandro moved quickly and got his hands on Tarin's shoulders, trying to settle him and tell him it was okay.

Only Tarin didn't react well to hands grabbing a hold of him. He let out a trapped animal moaning sound and violently shook Shandro off. He surged to his feet, his eyes wide and frightened but unseeing, his weight was balanced on the balls of his feet. Hentra scrambled to stand and instantly flanked the swordsman.

"He's going to bolt!" She hissed to Shandro in their own language.

"He won't get far." He nodded and slowly rose to his feet, keeping his hands away from his body. "Tarin," He spoke as gently as he could. "Tarin, it's Shandro and Hentra, we're Ishvan's parents. He's your friend, we're your friend too, it's okay, no one's going to hurt you. Do you understand?" He spoke slowly but the madness in the lavender eyes didn't fade.

A twig snapped under Shandro's feet and internally he cursed, Tarin flinched from the sound as if it were a physical threat. With no further warning he started to run, trying to weave between the two scouts but Shandro had been watching. Tarin made it only a step or two before Shandro's weight brought him down. The scout didn't know how he'd be able to restrain Tarin without help and he was unwilling to risk Hentra to how violently the outlander could fight.

Only Tarin didn't fight, as soon as Shandro's weight settled on him he cried out in pain and fear and curled up into a small ball. Hentra cursed, responding to the cry as only a mother and a woman would, it was the sound of a young and terrorized child. She thumped Shandro lightly and knelt down to pry him off of the outlander.

"What did you do?" She accused, frightened and angry.

Shandro pulled away and started to check Tarin for injuries. "Nothing!" But as he tried to check the outlander for injury he only pulled away more, pleading softly in a broken, terrified voice.

Hentra instantly understood and she quickly gathered up her husband's hands. "The trees, it's a lot like dreaming, he's stuck in his past." Slowly, carefully, she started to stroke the man's hair, making soft universal soothing sounds.

Shandro sat back on his heels and rubbed a hand across his face, he did understand. Her first weeks home Hentra had woken up from dark dreams and nightmares, uncertain if freedom had been a dream. She'd cried out confused and frightened and he'd held her, sometimes for hours,

stroking her hair, talking softly to her, trying his best to comfort her while she wept in panic, fear and memory. "But Ishvan says he's been free for years." He whispered back.

"Aye, and held in a collar since he was a babe too... and the things they did."

The rage and hate boiled inside of him. He had been sick with grief when he'd thought he'd lost Hentra in battle but when he learned that she'd been carried away he was consumed in inexpressible rage. He would have ridden off to death or slavery to join her if the Elect hadn't quietly soothed him and asked him to wait, if Ilan hadn't spoken of how desperately he needed his council but while Shandro agreed, he'd hated him in those moments. He hadn't thought he could be any more angry than he was in those weeks but when she'd returned and he'd learned of her treatment he was wrong. He'd wanted to kill them all when he'd learned she'd been beaten into submission, he wanted to weep at seeing her forever marred by the brand on her shoulder. The night she'd finally broken down and told him about how the slavers she'd been sold to had taken turns using her during those first days, he would have traded his soul to take the pain and the memories from her.

When Tarin had raved in fever, he'd said some things that were fairly difficult to believe. Hentra had been silent and had looked to Ishvan to explain and he had. He'd gathered his family around and in a quite monotone told them of all the gossip surrounding the famed swordsman's time in a collar. Lenno had refused to believe it and Shandro too found himself shaking his head. No one could so casually hurt a child that way, it was beyond thinking. It had to be an exaggeration. Only Hentra nodded silently and told of how when she'd been placed up for sale, there had been several young children being sold as bed partners. It was too horrible to think about and Shandro hadn't dwelt on it. Now, seeing the open terror in the man's frightened but unseeing eyes, the hate returned and he would have gladly given his life to kill everyone of the soulless bastards that thought they could own another.

He sat back and waited, struggling with his own hate and anger while he watched Hentra trying to sooth some of the fear from the outlander. By the time awareness slowly returned to Tarin's eyes, Shandro felt less like screaming in rage and more in control of himself. Tarin sat up and pulled away, watching them both with wary eyes but there was no threat he'd run this time, he tucked his knees up under his chin and hugged his legs.

"What happened?" He asked in a small voice.

"What do you remember?" Hentra asked carefully.

Tarin's odd eyes turned inward and he shook his head. "I was trying to find a sound, like a whistle but not. I came into the clearing and then," he shook his head searching for words. "It was dark and warm... safe." He shuddered. "I was safe. I wanted to stay but she wouldn't let me, oh gods." The words were spoken in a shamed whisper, a confession of a hidden need. He fought against it but a sob escaped him and he struggled to stay calm, turning his face away from the quiet pair.

Shandro moved without any real thought, he'd spent too many years comforting the grief and pain of others to sit silent in his own anger for long. He wrapped his arms around the swordsman and tried to pull him close. Tarin tensed and tried to pull away, fighting weakly against the offered solace.

"Shhhh, it's okay now, no one's going to hurt you, it's okay."

Tarin thrashed aimlessly, unwilling to hurt the man trying to help him but not able to accept comfort. "It's not, it's not okay... you don't know... you don't understand." His voice broke in a painful whisper.

Shandro held on. "You're right, I don't understand but I know it's not your fault, you aren't bad, you deserve to feel safe."

The words broke something open deep inside and Tarin moaned in purely emotional agony and the last of his control shattered. With no more strength to fight, he gave in and wept.

It was close to sunset when he finally pulled away and scrubbed roughly at his face. "I'm sorry." He muttered out and felt unbelievably stupid. Hentra had pulled him against her and he'd clung there, crying like a child with Shandro near, occasionally rubbing his back or soothing his hair. Neither had spoken much or asked him to speak, they simply sat with him as he wept in soul wrenching grief.

"Don't be, you needed that badly I think." Hentra smiled softly and took up one of the outlander's hands in her own. She rubbed at the tension in it, trying to ease some of the internal tension as well.

"I ah, I don't normally... I mean."

"It's okay."

"No, it's not... I..." he stopped trying to apologize when he saw no embarrassment, no questioning looks from either. He suddenly felt exhausted and it occurred to him that this was the first time he'd not worried what people thought about him, ever. He sat silent for a moment as the impact of that thought crashed over him and the pair sat as still and waited.

Finally he nodded slightly. "It's not okay because I'm not a good person it's a guilt I have to carry but this, this was okay. It was more than I deserve."

Hentra shook her head. "No, no Tarin, I don't believe that. The trees simply don't call bad people to them."

"Think of the worst sin you can imagine, I've done it. My own mother didn't want me."

"Neither did Ishvan's father but Ishvan is one of the finest men I've had the honor of knowing. People, parents, make horrible mistakes, that doesn't make the mistakes true." Shandro said softly, wishing he could remove some of the grief, guilt and pain that was emotionally crippling the outlander.

"His only crime was being born different."

"Tarin," Hentra took his hand between both of her own and waited until he stared at her with those haunting eyes. "That's your only crime too."

He had to look away quickly, needing to deny her words but he had to clench his jaw to keep from weeping again at the truth in the logic.

"If you'd looked more ordinary, even if you'd been sold, you'd have worked in a kitchen or stables. It was as much an accident of birth as the one that crippled Ishvan and you are no more to blame for it than he is." She released his hand to stroke his hair and was pleased when he didn't flinch from the contact this time.

"What if you're wrong?"

"I'm not. I wore a collar, remember? I know."

He couldn't fight her logic and he was too exhausted to try. They didn't know, they were kind in trying to help him but they'd hate him if they ever really knew. He simply couldn't do more, he had no strength left to protest with. Finally he nodded and straightened up, uncurling and forcing his body to relax.

"I don't understand why your trees would call me in just to make me feel safe?"

Hentra smiled and glanced to the old, large tree across the clearing. "Because the trees are the life of our people, they give us what we need to survive. They gave you a gift you needed as well. Come, communing with them is exhausting, we should get you back to camp before the sun goes down."

Tarin let them lead him back, they walked on either side of him but didn't hover or try to help him. He stayed silent, trying not to think or worry, trying only to focus on the sun shining above and the birds singing around them. The woods were lovely and he'd never thought he'd be so at peace with the countryside.

When the camp was near he paused and the pair beside him paused as well. "Ishvan's very lucky." It was as close as he could get to saying how deeply he envied his friend their support to fall back on. It was odd thinking of Ishvan as a friend at all again let alone including his family in that circle but Tarin did like them a great deal, no matter how he'd met them or what color their skin was.

Shandro slid a hand on the swordsman's shoulder, a silent measure of support before he ranged out ahead. Hentra smiled thinly at the outlander. "Ishvan has good taste in friends." Her words forced Tarin to look away but she stayed by his side as they crossed the last yards to camp.

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Chapter Thirty

Word of what had happened had spread. The Ferals they passed openly stared at Tarin, watching him with the same fascinated look his own people watched him with. He was an oddity even here and it wasn't just because of his odd eyes and pale skin. Tarin kept his head down, trying to hide what must be obvious evidence of his weeping from casual eyes and as soon as they made their own circle he felt a little better.

"Will you eat?" Shandro asked, he'd shooed off the few others that shared their circle. It was well understood, no one doubted what a shock it was to communion with the trees the first time. The Elect had gone into isolation for two weeks after his first time, simply because the experience was too much to process while moving about daily life.

Tarin shook his head. "No, I'm not hungry, thank you." He ducked away and slid into the low tent he'd been sharing with the other single men and found Ishvan sitting quietly inside.

He looked up over his book. "Are you okay?"

Tarin nodded. "Right as rain, where's Lenno?"

That made Ishvan smile. "He's on a date, if he's lucky he won't be back until tomorrow."

"Good for him." He plopped himself gracelessly down onto the floor and rubbed at his face.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine." But his voice was cold even to his own ears.

"Want to work on a lesson?"

"I can't, I don't have the focus."

Ishvan nodded and turned back to his book. They stayed that way for a while, one lost in thought and one lost in his story and neither minded the silence. Both could have stayed that way all night if Lenno hadn't stumbled into the tent and stopped, surprised at finding both of them inside.

"Why aren't you with Belize?"

Lenno frowned at Ishvan. "The night ended early."

"What happened? You said she was hinting pretty strongly when she asked you over."

"Nothing happened."

Tarin watched the exchange but wisely kept his mouth shut. Ishvan shook his head and snapped his book shut so quickly his ribbon place marker fluttered away and settled unnoticed on the floor.

"What did she say?"

"Nothing."

"You're a lousy liar in our language Lenno and even worse in the outlander's. What did she say."

The scout sighed and shook his head. "It doesn't matter."

"Yes it does. What did she say?"

"She said she was only interested in me if I denounced you. That she didn't want to soil her name with outlander filth." He'd been furious and shocked but it wasn't the first time he'd gotten such a reaction from others.

"That bitch!" Ishvan snarled and climbed stiffly to his feet. Tarin had never seen the boy really angry and was impressed.

"Ishvan, let it go. It's okay."

"No, it's not okay. If she's got a problem with me she can say it to my face." Before either man could stop him he was off limping heavily out of the tent.

Tarin sat and watched Ishvan storm out and then looked to Lenno. The scout had stayed where he stood. "Don't you want to go after him?"

Lenno shook his head and sat heavily down. "You are crazy aren't you? There's no telling him

anything when he's in this mood, best to just let him stomp over and tell her off. Last time I tried to stop him he took a swing at me."

Tarin motioned to the bruise on the scout's cheekbone. "That's not from Ishvan?"

Lenno reached up and rubbed at the mark. "No, he always bloodies my nose." Lenno sighed. "She's attractive, smart. She's a great scout but by the trees Ishvan's right, she's a shallow bitch. I've tried to be alone with her for years and the first time she notices I'm alive and now I don't want her. Maybe I'm the crazy one."

"If it means anything, I think you made the better choice."

"Thanks. How are you? You look tired."

He nodded. "I feel tired."

Lenno held up his hand. "Let me grab us something to eat, I was supposed to eat with Belize and now I'm starving."

The scout was outside before Tarin could protest that he wasn't hungry. When he returned with a cold supper and hot tea, Tarin's stomach growled. He thanked the other man and sipped at the hot brew, feeling it ease the sick tight feeling he'd had in his stomach for hours and hadn't really been aware of.

"So, was it rough? I heard that it's unsettling the first time the trees call you."

"No, it was okay, just after... I" he stopped himself and shook his head.

"What?"

"Nothing, I'm just not used to talking like this."

Lenno grinned good-naturedly. "We do talk like this all the time here, it's why they camp unmarried men with other men and the same for women. What happened, if the communion didn't leave you looking like you've seen a specter?"

"I just, sort of fell apart afterwards."

"I've heard the trees can do that to you, draw out things you'd not otherwise express. Shandro and Hentra stayed with you right?"

"They did, yes." He felt vaguely ashamed of the confession.

"Good. When my father was killed, I was a mess. Even though it was Shandro's brother he was so good with me. They both raised me, apprenticed me but we've all been close. I was close to my father."

"I'm sorry."

Lenno shrugged. "Death comes for us all, I just watched him die and wasn't able to help him. It still upsets me. I've Shandro and Hentra and Ishvan, I can't complain." He forced a smile but his eyes were distant. "I wanted to ask you, who's Evan?"

Tarin shook his head. "I don't know anyone by that name."

"Huh, you kept calling for him when you were ill. Only with me, not to the others, thought maybe he was your cousin."

"No, not my cousin, he was my brother." The words slid out as he was reaching for some flat bread and he froze, his hand hovering above the basket. "Odd, I didn't remember his name until now. What, exactly, did I say?"

"You would clutch at me and say, 'Evan, Evan why didn't you send for me? Why did you go away, why didn't you ever find me?' Things like that. Where is he?"

"He's dead, he died when we were still children. There were three of us, us and a younger sibling I can't hardly remember. I couldn't ever remember his name. I can't remember my own name. Strange."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause pain."

Tarin shook it off and tore off a bite of the bread. "I used to think he was alive. He died so suddenly, we went to sleep and when I woke up he was gone. I was too young to understand that sometimes people die that quickly so I used to pretend he was alive and he'd find me. I even had a house in my head, on a farm, that we lived in. I haven't thought of that in years." He smiled but it had a bitterness to it. When he was very little and new in a collar he had every aspect of the house laid out. When he was hurt, that was where he went inside his head to hide.

"I shouldn't have brought it up."

"No, no I'm glad you did. I guess when I was so sick I remembered what I don't when well." It made him wonder what else he'd muttered out, how much more he'd said. "Say, right before I was," oddly he couldn't say the word hung. The word stuck in his throat and simple refused to be verbalized. "When Ilan turned to swim toward your boats, he did this kick thing and somehow kicked a guy in the head. How'd he do that? I've never seen anything like it."

"Most of our fighters are taught to fight like that, some are better than others at it. I've seen how you move, it wouldn't take too much to show you some of it. If you want to learn?"

"If it would be allowed, I'd like to."

Lenno grinned. "The trees called you, who will say no to you now?"

The scouts easy acceptance was a little disturbing. "When will Ishvan be back?"

"Oh, not until morning I'd guess."

"Isn't that a long time to fight?"

"Fight? Hardly, I know him, he'll shout and scream at her and she'll call him names and they'll wind up in bed together." His laugh was ironic. "She won't sleep with me because I'm his cousin but she'll sleep with him. Our women respect strength, his standing up to her will fascinate her."

"I thought, never mind." Tarin decided he wouldn't understand anyway and wasn't going to pry.

"I don't love her. I'm not really looking for an affair, when the right woman comes along I'll know it. Shandro says when he met Hentra, it felt like someone had punched him in the stomach. That's what I'm looking for. Ishvan though... I don't think he'll ever settle down. He's split between my people and yours, he's too much of the people to be happy bound to an outlander and he's too much of an outlander to ever be happy here." He shrugged. "He's young yet, not old men like us."

It hadn't really occurred to Tarin that Lenno was close to his own age. He'd never been close to many people and he'd never really gotten along with people his own age before. The experience

was odd but not unpleasant. He wondered what it would have been like to have been raised in a society where such close friendships were taken for granted.

"Tell me about your cities? I can't imagine how any of you survive without the woods."

They spent the night talking. Tarin told Lenno about the cities he'd been raised in and the ones he'd visited while in the Navy. He spoke of what it was like to be out at sea, no land in sight and the feral shook his head in disbelief. Lenno spoke of their own communities, so intertwined with the woods and trees around them that everything they did was a part of the whole. He told Tarin of the rolling, wide valleys between the forest covered mountains and how their farms dotted the fertile grounds. They shared stories of battles, of fighting and slowly Tarin spoke of working as a hired sword.

"I half think I was so willing to help Ishvan get home to have time away from the memories of her." Tarin had spoken of Ana carefully. Lenno had risen hours earlier and returned with a fat clay pitcher. The drink he'd poured out had a sweet taste but the burn of brandy, they'd shared several mugs since then and it had made them both a little more willing to speak of more painful times.

Lenno shook his head. "I would give anything to be loved like that. Love like that doesn't come to men like me."

"That's nonsense. You just haven't met the right woman yet."

"Maybe, but I'm not holding my breath while I wait. She sounds like she was an extraordinary woman."

Tarin swallowed more of the cool, sweet punch and nodded. "She was. I wasted so much time with her."

"And you haven't been with a woman since?"

"No."

Lenno shook his head. "You should have gone and yelled at Belize, you need to find a woman, got to remind yourself that just because the one you love isn't here doesn't mean you need to be alone."

Tarin felt himself blushing and shook his head. "No, I'm fine."

"Fine? How long has it been? Seven months? Longer? It's not good to grieve so long."

"It's not grief, not totally."

A moment of confusion crossed Lenno's face and then understanding dawned. "Oh, I'm sorry."

"I don't mean that. I'm capable." Tarin almost snapped back. "I've..." he stopped and finished off the last swallows in his mug.

"You what?"

"I've never been with anyone, not willingly. Jesus, why am I telling you this?" He looked across at the other man, his steady face and oddly shaped eyes were frozen in shocked surprise. "I'm an idiot, I'm sorry, forget I said anything."

"No, wait, not even with your Ana?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes it does, not even with your Ana?"

"No, we tried but," he closed his eyes and sighed. "We thought we had more time."

"And you needed to go slowly." Lenno nodded knowingly.

Tarin nodded and felt smothered in shame.

"If I were you I think I would have killed them."

"I have, some of them, I've taken a lower fee when it was someone I remembered but if I killed them all I'd be bathed in blood. That won't give me my past back."

"You're a better man than I am. Don't you get angry? The people that tortured you are going unpunished, worse they're still hurting others."

"There's nothing I can do about it. I try not to think about it. What's done is done."

Lenno shook his head. "Do you know what our punishment for rape is?"

Tarin shook his head.

"Death, quickly but with no mercy. If someone is caught raping a child we kill them very, very slowly."

"What if the person is falsely accused? It's one person's word against another."

"There's no hiding from the trees. Besides, so many of our people have touches of the trees in them, like scouts have and holy ones and you too, that it's impossible to lie about such a thing. To our people, rape is worse than murder."

"Than you should kill me."

"What do you mean?"

Tarin leaned forward and ducked his head, rubbing absently at the back of his neck and wondering how drunk he was. "Nothing. It doesn't matter."

"No it does, tell me what you meant?" He struggled hard to keep his voice low and steady and was grateful not for the first time that night that Ishvan had seen to it all his family spoke the outlander's words so well. "Tarin, tell me?"

"I was born to be a whore, just look at me? I didn't even remember my brother's name but I remember the meal my first owner fed me. I disgust myself."

"You were just a child, a small one weren't you?"

Tarin nodded. "And I learned very quickly." The contempt and hatred dripped on his words. "They called me highly trainable, when I was auctioned in my first private sale they boasted about how I was docile when they wished and how I fought when they wanted me to, all without having to be told. They said I knew what my master wanted before he had to ask and I did, I always knew. I did whatever they wanted not because I was afraid of another beating or even because I was afraid they'd kill me but there are so many things they can do that are so much worse and I just couldn't... I couldn't face that again. When I was older, what they wanted included forcing myself on others when they told me to. I did the same thing to other people, sometimes women,

sometimes children, that I hated having done to me. I was horrible, brutal, when they desired me to be. They called me the best. I more than merit death.”

Lenno had refilled the outlander’s mug and now he pressed it into his hands. “That wasn’t you. You had no say over it. You were as much a victim as the ones you were used to hurt. You were just another tool of their sadism, only as a living tool they were able to torture two of you at once. It’s not your fault.”

Tarin laughed bitterly and drank deeply from the punch, now wishing it were stronger than it was. “It’s easy to say that but you don’t have to hear their begging, their screaming, in your dreams. I do.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Can we talk about something else? I’m too tired and way too drunk to think about this.”

Lenno agreed and they did talk about other things. He let the conversation guide them and wasn’t surprised that as the pitcher was emptied and the night descended Tarin spoke briefly about some of the other horrors he’d survived. Lenno listened without judgment and with little comment, knowing the great effort the other man was making even to speak of the past on the most surface of levels. Eventually, the Outlanders exhaustion and the strong drink wore him down and he laid down.

“I’m way too drunk.” Tarin muttered but his eyes drifted shut and he was asleep before he could worry over it. He’d been too upset to notice that the majority of the pitcher had been emptied into his mug.

Lenno waited until Tarin’s breathing evened out. He’d seen first hand how lightly the swordsman slept and right now he needed to sleep. When it was safe he carefully slipped from the tent, outside his aunt and uncle sat waiting near the fire.

“Well?” Hentra demanded at once.

“You were right, he talked.”

“You look pale.” In truth her nephew looked ashen, a look she hadn’t seen on his steady face since his father was killed.

Lenno sat heavily beside them and leaned against his aunt, she tucked him protectively under one arm as she’d done when he was a child. “The things they did to him, the things he survived... death is too light a punishment.” His voice shook with emotion. “The trees did right in calling him and you were right that he needed to talk. I don’t know how he stayed sane.”

Hentra rubbed a hand in circles across his back. “You did good being there for him, you did good.” It had been her guess that Tarin would never speak to them or even to Ishvan but Lenno who was virtually a stranger and so close to his own age might be safe to speak to. She’d known that if the pale outlander didn’t speak to someone now, when the trees had cracked open his defenses, he’d never speak to anyone and that was a pathway to madness. “You did good.”

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Chapter Thirty One

Tarin's head ached when he woke up but it was no where near the hangover he deserved. The night before, in truth most of the afternoon, evening as well as the night, had a hazy unreal feel to it. It felt more as it had happened to someone else, distant and faint but when he remembered being in the safe darkness, wrapped in the comfort of the trees, he had no doubt it had happened to him. The longing to return was so intense that it stole his breath.

He found himself alone in the tent, Lenno was on morning patrols and apparently Ishvan hadn't returned yet as his cousin had predicted. The quiet of the world outside told him it was not yet noon but well past dawn. Back in the city this would be early for him to wake, he'd have stayed up all night and slept until afternoon but something about the fresh air and the clean greenness of the forest made sleeping so long seem wrong.

It was then that it occurred to him that he was no longer considering himself a prisoner. Somehow when he wasn't looking he'd gone from focusing on escape and returning home to allowing himself to enjoy the beauty of the woods and the quiet dignity of the people around him. It was both a comfort and oddly disturbing at the same time.

Rather than dwell on it, he rose and staggered outside. The bright sunlight made him wince a bit until his eyes adjusted and it did nothing for the dull pounding in the back of his skull. No one was around the firepit which wasn't uncommon so he wandered away to the bathing pool and found one of the people he'd been half heartedly looking for.

Ishvan sat on a log and was quietly shaving, his hair was still wet and his shirt lay across the log beside him. Across his bare back were long red scratches, more welts than bloody lines but telling none the less. As Tarin drew nearer he saw a series of small, half moon cuts on the boy's shoulders and he laughed knowing their source.

"Morning."

Ishvan turned and smiled. "Good morning to you too."

"Grinning like a guilty cat!"

Both men turned to spy Lenno hurrying down the path toward them. "Morning." Ishvan said simply but Lenno went to his cousin and poked at the welts. "Hey, stop that."

Lenno was laughing and looked to Tarin. "It's good to have a cousin so willing to place himself in harms way for you, isn't it?"

Tarin raised an eyebrow and started to undress. "Indeed."

"Oh, Ishvan, oh!" Lenno raised his voice in mock impersonation of a woman's and sighed but fell to laughter when his cousin, instead of being offended merely laughed with him.

"She said I was as pale as the under belly of a dead fish."

Tarin dove into the pool, not waiting as Lenno worked his hair out of the myriad of braids. "She seems to have minded it horribly too."

"This morning, she said she was disgusted with herself."

That made Lenno laugh harder. "And you said?"

"I told her not to say such sweet things, it'll give me the wrong idea."

That made Tarin laugh now too. "Didn't think you had it in you."

Lenno waved to shush the swordsman's laughter. "What did she say to that?"

"She asked if I was free tonight."

Lenno laughed so hard his sides hurt but he shook his head. "I could hate you, I really could."

"It's bad luck to hate a cripple."

"I'd risk it if I thought it'd do any good. By the trees, I don't know how you do it. Will you see her tonight?"

Ishvan shook his head. "No, she truly hates outlanders, bitterly so. I don't want to stretch her prejudice too far." He had a moment when he truly did look guilty. "I didn't mean for this to happen. Are you angry with me?"

Lenno waved it off. "I know you didn't and no I'm not." He shook out the last of his hair and quickly joined Tarin in the water.

"How was patrol this morning?" Ishvan asked when Lenno's ears cleared the water in them.

"Boring but I like the early morning runs. Tarin, if you want I can show you some of that fighting this afternoon?"

Tarin nodded, grateful that little was said about the night before. "I'd like that. My time's running out here, I'll need to be going soon."

"How soon?" Ishvan instantly stopped shaving and lowered the small round mirror.

Tarin shrugged. "Another day or so, not much longer than that. I don't belong here."

"Why, because of the color of your skin? Tarin, the trees called you. I don't know what that means, I don't think anyone does, but you should stay until it's figured out." Lenno protested, as unwilling as his cousin to see the swordsman leave.

"I have no interest in your trees or your politics. Frankly, I don't care to know what it all means." He finished bathing quickly and rushed to dry off and dress.

"Does he mean that?" Lenno asked in their words.

Ishvan shrugged. "I don't know. It's difficult to tell what he really means sometimes."

"Would you two please stop that. Either teach me to speak your words or don't talk about me in yours." Tarin snapped peevishly as he started to shave.

"That's an excellent idea. We'll start today."

"I was kidding."

"Well, I'm not, I'll start teaching you today."

An hour later Tarin was wondering what he had gotten himself into. The cousins had dragged him away to a far corner of what he had assumed was their practice field, the same area he'd been tested in. Lenno picked a spot and started showing Tarin the most basic of their unarmed fighting and Ishvan lowered himself with his sketchbooks and pencils under a tree and began connecting the words Tarin knew with the ones he didn't know. His head still dully ached, his wounds were sore, his leg throbbed and he wanted to go back to bed.

Lenno cracked Ishvan's cane against Tarin's back leg. "No, you're holding your weight too close together, it's fine for fighting with a blade but when you pivot that," he accented his words by cracking the cane against the other leg, "side you'll be unstable."

"Girl." Ishvan called out.

Tarin held his temper and tried to find the proper response while he repositioned his legs. "Gertra."

"Good but you're accenting the wrong syllable."

He solely wanted to tell them both to bugger off but he really did want to learn. In the end he gritted his teeth and tried as hard as he could. It seemed like a poor effort and he felt clumsy and dim witted.

"Just when did you learn this?" He asked between repeated practices.

Lenno grinned widely. "When I was seven."

Tarin groaned.

"No, no don't lose heart, you're plenty flexible, you've got the strength and the balance you just need to put it together in a new way. You're getting it."

"The most basic only though."

"Everyone starts there. Now, try again."

The next days melted together and Tarin found himself not only growing more comfortable around the feral scouts but surprisingly happy. They fell into an easy pattern, he woke when he was rested and bathed alone or with Ishvan or Lenno. If the cousins were busy with other duties, Tarin found something useful to do. He helped around the camp, washed laundry, tidied the campsite, scrubbed dishes and tackled any task he could find to stay busy. Once he tried to find Ilan and was quickly told that the Elect would find him so firmly that he was certain he'd stepped upon some unspoken taboo.

Once Ishvan and Lenno both were free, they retreated to their corner of the practice field and began their lessons. By the second day, other scouts occasionally wandered over and with an uncertain reserve would smile and offer to help. Tarin wasn't sure if they were being helpful out of respect for Ishvan and Lenno's family or from simply curiosity about what he was up to. As often as not they would watch him and carefully question him in shy interest about his cities and his life there. Their command of his own language was sketchy and they often looked to the

cousins to make themselves understood but they all were respectful.

While Lenno and his occasional helpers worked Tarin through the paces of their style of fighting, Ishvan worked with him on their words. The end result was that by the end of the afternoon he was as exhausted in mind as well as body. They'd walk together back to their camp circle and it was after dinner than Shandro, Hentra and the seemingly fluid fellow members of their group would grin and question the trio on the day's efforts. The questions often led to a quizzing of Tarin's learning or a demonstration of his slowly growing new skills.

None of it was unpleasant. The cousins didn't mind his clumsiness with social situations and neither took offense when his arrogant pride roared it's head. Lenno found the swordsman's upper class peevishness amusing and took the manner as a method of humor, it wasn't until Ishvan explained that it was meant to be annoying and meant to drive people away that he really understood. He still grinned when he pushed the outlander far enough to draw a sharp comment but now it came with the tinge of sadness.

Tarin sat under what he'd come to think of as their tree, the growing warmth of the summer afternoon had driven them into the shade to join Ishvan. It was the seventh, no he corrected himself, the eighth day of lessons and they'd brought with them a fat glass bottle of cool water. They sprawled against the tree and drank long swallows in turns, resting from an afternoon's efforts. Lenno was retelling a story of a somewhat embarrassing adventure he had with a female scout and all three men were laughing freely at his expense.

"Come on, who was she?" Ishvan asked around his own amusement.

"I'm not saying, I swore an oath to keep it to the grave."

"Well, if you hadn't been trying to do that in a tree..." Tarin laughed and shook his head.

"I was lucky not to have become a permanent addition to the branches. We need to teach you to climb trees like a scout." He lightly thumped Tarin on the shoulder to accent his statement.

"I don't tree climb."

"Nonsense, surely you climbed trees as a child, even little baby city trees."

The laughter died in Tarin. "No, never, it was deemed too risky."

His meaning was quickly absorbed by the pair, Lenno nodded. "Than, you must learn now. Tomorrow, first thing, unless you're afraid of heights."

"I used to climb the riggings on ship and they go higher than these trees."

"These yes, not the great trees, you can climb to the heavens in those."

Ishvan grinned. "Or wind up in hell if you slip and fall. I'm not sorry I can't climb far. You might not be afraid of heights, Tarin, but I'm a coward."

"Afternoon gentleman."

Lenno and Ishvan instantly sprang to their feet and Tarin looked up from his lazy sprawl to spot Ilan a stone's throw away, Marcus, as always, hovering and looking un-amused. Tarin sat up and stretched with a practiced, uninterested yawn.

"Afternoon, Ilan, you're a difficult man to see." He spoke casually and delighted in the look of murder in Marcus' eyes and shock in Lenno's.

"I'm a busy man. I've heard you've been making quite a show of things."

He looked up at him and smiled warmly, surprised again at how young he seemed, how untouched by the world, to carry such authority. "I try to be amusing."

That made him laugh and in spite of his normal sternness he smiled widely. "I bet you do. Are you two finished with him for the day?" He asked of the cousins.

Ishvan glanced to Lenno and lowered his eyes, leaving a response to his cousin. "We are, Your Grace."

"Good, may I borrow you for a while Mr. Morris?"

He noted that he now addressed him as any of his people would. He'd either been asking questions or had made it a point to learn more of him from some source. Tarin nodded and rose to his feet, dusting off the grass and dirt from his body. "The Elect," he managed to say the title with just the right amount of mockery to be offensive but not enough to get hit by Marcus. "May borrow me for as long as it would amuse him." Tarin hadn't meant to but the words took on a vaguely flirtatious tone.

It made Marcus bristle and Ilan's smile disappeared. "Walk with me." He waved to the surrounding woods.

"Of course." He joined the Feral at his side.

Ilan took a step toward a path that would lead them away from the camp. "I'd like to be alone, Marcus."

The warrior froze in place. "Your Grace, it may not be wise. He already threatened you once."

"And I said I'd like to be alone. I'm in no danger. See me later tonight for tomorrow's orders." It was a cold and clear dismissal and he set toward the path without seeming to notice the frustrated anger his words brought to the warrior.

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Chapter Thirty Two

Tarin held his thoughts until they were several dozen paces down the path and he was convinced they were alone. "He's your bodyguard?"

He looked sideways at him and considered the question, uncertain of his meaning at first. "One

assigned to protect another?"

He nodded.

"In a way yes, he's very protective of me."

"I've noticed."

"He's one of a small number of people not afraid to speak their true thoughts to me. I value that, highly. So many people just say what they think I want to hear. That's why Shandro and Hentra are so high in my thoughts and why they've become the unofficial leaders of the scouts." He watched him from the corner of his eye. Each time Ilan spied on Tarin the Outlander looked and felt more and more one of their people and the oddity of it intrigued him.

"I didn't know that."

"They don't speak of it. Shandro has no conceit or desire to lie in him. I could ask him what color the sky was and he'd carefully consider the question and then just as carefully answer. If he hadn't seen the sky yet that day he'd tell me plainly he didn't know, because if he hasn't witnessed it he won't speak of it. Hentra is all emotion and fluid thought, they often come to the same conclusions but the paths they take to get there are vastly different. I learn from both. Lenno is showing as much good sense as his uncle without the obsessive nature of his logic and all the warmth of his aunt without her unpredictability."

"But?"

"But he is afraid to speak freely around me. He's young still, maybe he'll grow out of that. How are you? I've heard you're healing well."

"Almost healed, the legs still touchy and the rope burns will be red for a while."

"I was pleased to see Lenno and Ishvan teaching you. You've definitely caused a fuss, the holy ones have been ranting at me for days about your time in the trees and the scouts have practically threatened a revolt if you're mistreated in any way. They've grown rather loyal to you." His words were careful as he moved them with long practiced ease down the winding and crisscrossing pathways.

"I haven't meant to cause any trouble. I'll be leaving soon, you won't have to worry about me." He mistook Ilan's casual concern for worry about his position and power.

"I'd asked Shandro and Hentra to tell me about your reaction to your time in the trees. Do you know what they said?"

Tarin felt suddenly angry and hurt that what he viewed as a highly private time had been casually reported. "No, I don't."

"They told me it was none of my concern. That even if I ordered it, they wouldn't speak of what they witnessed. Hentra even offered to be exiled first, she was very protective of you." It took an effort of will to keep the amusement off of his face and try to look upset.

"As I said, I didn't mean to cause any trouble. With your leave I'll return to my people tomorrow."

His stiff pride made Ilan smile. "You don't have my leave. I'm pleased you're causing trouble. You're making people think. Making them question what they've assumed to be true. I've been trying to do that for years. I'm delighted."

Tarin stopped as understanding dawned. "That's why you allowed them to formally adopt

Ishvan."

He raised an eyebrow but didn't comment.

"It's why you had me brought along so deeply into your land, and why you've left me alone to interact with your people." He felt vaguely used but not enough so to be offended.

"Clever man."

He just shook his head and followed silently beside him. They wound down the pathway further away from the camp and finally Tarin asked. "Why?"

"Because change is a necessary thing and I'm up against centuries of tradition. Just because it's the way things have always been done doesn't mean it's good."

"Unbelievable."

"Thank you."

"I didn't mean it as a compliment. You use people, play with their emotions, hell you had me kidnapped just so you'd have someone to talk to and look what that's gotten me?" He tossed up his hands in frustration.

"Do you really believe I'm naive?"

"What?"

"When we kissed, you said I was as naïve about that as everything else. Do you really believe I am so naive?"

"You mean when you kissed me, there was no 'we' in that action if I remember right. If I was making a list of people to kiss you would be fairly close to the bottom, Your Grace."

The mocking made Ilan frown. "Was I so unskilled at it? Did I do such a poor job? Admittedly my experience is limited but past lovers haven't complained."

Tarin could have left it alone but some sadistic part of him just couldn't. "You said yourself very few people tell you the truth. How would someone as high and mighty as you are even know if they were truly willing to come to your bed?"

"You know nothing of my life." Ilan's voice grew sharp.

"I know your type. You're not so different from the rich, bloated nobles of my people. You want to talk to me and Ishvan stalks me and betrays me all to please your whim. You arrive to a camp and they throw a party to celebrate, something they wouldn't do if they weren't trying to win your favor. You walk up to Ishvan and Lenno and they hop to their feet. If you said jump, do you think they'd ask how high or just start jumping?"

Ilan stopped walking. "You know nothing!" He heard himself hiss back. "I spend every waking moment of everyday devoted to my people. I ask for nothing in return, not even their friendship. Your Outlander eyes may see their respect as forced or required but I would trade every title, every honor, for one hour spent being treated like a normal person!" He paced away from the Outlander surprised with his own anger. "You know nothing of our ways and even less of me. It's so easy for you. You just stand there and judge and mock but you're too much of a coward to even admit that the reason you helped Hentra escape is because it makes you bleed inside to see people enslaved while you stand by doing nothing!"

"As if you could even comprehend my actions, or my thoughts or my world!" Tarin shouted back. "You live in a bubble, covered with people falling down to make your life easier. You flit about your damned precious trees and your green clearings and your blue skies where everyone has family and friends and just think you understand me! You wouldn't survive one hour in my life, not one second! You don't even have to ask and anything you want is given to you. Not even my life belonged to me and I fought and clawed and bled just for the chance to keep breathing so you shut up and stop pretending you have any concept about why I might or might not have done something!" He was shouting now and it felt amazingly good. Ilan just stood there with a startled and oddly fascinated look on his face like no one had ever yelled at him before. It would have been a stupid thought if Tarin wasn't pretty sure it was true. That only made him more angry but it wasn't his normal temper. Normally, when Tarin finally felt angry it was cold and hollow like everything he felt. This was different, this time he was burning with it and wanted to hit the smug man that didn't even seem to notice that he was furious.

Everything in Tarin wanted to lash out with more than words at the other man. It wasn't a need to draw his sword and kill, his temper was too hot for that. He wanted to hurt the other man, to hit him and kick until Tarin's temper or Ilan's body broke, which ever came first. It wasn't a good desire to struggle with given Ilan's rank. He doubted even the other man's protests would save him if people found out Tarin had beaten him up. So instead he swallowed his anger and pushed down his urge to lash out and quickly turned to walk back toward the camp. Distance was what he needed between them if he wasn't going to do something stupid.

He didn't manage to escape far. Tarin had barely turned to go when a hand caught his arm with a grip firm enough to stop him from walking away. He glanced down to the hand clamped over his arm even if he didn't need to see it was attached to Ilan to know it was his. That was going too far. Tarin smacked the hand off and just barely kept himself from turning and hitting the other man.

The hand reappeared on his arm and this time Tarin let it spin him back around. He still smacked the hand away but this time he caught the slender fingers before they could escape. He twisted, trying to bend Ilan's hand and arm into a good joint lock but somehow the other man managed to twist and turn. Before he knew it, Tarin had lost his grip on the hand and it again appeared on his arm.

"Let go or I'll break your fingers off!" He snarled but Ilan only grinned back at him.

He'd warned him, he had and there was no way Tarin could stop himself. When he caught the long fingers again he moved to break them. He wasn't going to break them all, just one or two, just enough to teach the smug fellow to keep his hands off of other people. He was fast, when Tarin made his mind up to actually hurt someone it normally happened almost instantly. Only this time as he moved to crack those delicate bones he found the slender fingers again had somehow slithered out of his grip.

"Stop it, I'm not playing a game!" Tarin spat the words out and the weight of his sword at his belt was tempting.

Ilan reached his apparently slippery fingers out again only this time he didn't grip Tarin's arm again. This time the fingers reached across and brushed a stray lock of black hair back from Tarin's face. He would have bitten them if he could have, instead he jerked his head back.

"For an Outlander, you're exquisite when you're angry." Ilan tilted his head to the side. "It bothers you that I think you're attractive."

That was too much and Tarin finally stopped caring if he was killed for attacking their precious Elect. He threw a punch and knew it was going to be too slow the moment he started the motion. Ilan moved like a dancer, or a fighter or, maybe, like a mirror of Tarin himself. He wasn't used to people being as quick as he was and he was a little startled when Ilan knocked the punch aside

and tangled Tarin's arm around his own. It pulled them far too close together and Tarin yanked but his arm stayed entrapped. He tried to bring his other arm up into Ilan's throat but the Feral caught that one as well and twisted it painfully back down and slightly behind Tarin.

He twisted but was really caught and it turned a spark of his anger into panic. Tarin bucked and pulled and all he managed to do was tug Ilan off balance. They didn't fall but Tarin found himself stumbling backward, tumbling a little off the narrow cleared path. His back hit a tree trunk with enough force to half knock the air from his lungs at the sudden contact. Ilan must have aimed them for the tree because he didn't look the least bit surprised.

The position bled away his anger and left only fear in its place. Tarin was pressed to the rough bark, his arms trapped and helpless. Somehow the impact with the tree or Ilan's own planning had forced his feet to slip apart and his footing was bad, his legs parted wide and the other man stood firm and confident between them. He felt off balance, trapped in place, lost in a strange place and out of control. There was a decidedly masculine body pressed tightly to his own and it made Tarin want to scream and run away to find some place to hide. He struggled but his feet only slipped further, his legs parting wider and his arm twisted more painfully behind him.

Normally, he would have been able to think of a good dozen ways to break the hold or to break partially or all the way free. His mind was a blank space of boiling fear and old memories. He may as well have been a child again, pinned there by someone older and stronger, someone that was going to hurt him. He knew he was supposed to beg to not be hurt, knew he should be pleading for his freedom but the words wouldn't form. He was trapped and couldn't think past the fear that rolled inside of him.

Ilan was studying him but Tarin was far too good at hiding fear when he wasn't required to show it. It was never a good idea to let someone see how frightened he was. He must have hidden it well because Ilan leaned forward and before Tarin could stop him, pressed his lips against his own. The kiss was one sided again as Ilan's lips nibbled and teased his own. Part of his mind screamed to give in, not out of desire but out of fear that if he didn't please the person kissing him he'd be hurt for it. It made him feel dirty and small again like he hadn't in years and he almost parted his lips and surrendered to his captor.

It wasn't even a thought or an emotion. The need to fight back, the desire not to give in and take the easy way out had become so much a part of his life he couldn't stop it from welling up. He would rather die than to be victim again to his own fears. One of the hardest lessons he'd ever had to learn was that no one was going to give him anything. If he wanted Ilan to release him, he'd have to make it happen. There was no logical thinking, no complicated move to free his arms. He just pulled his head back and smashed it forward into Ilan's.

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Chapter Thirty Three

The trick to a good head butt was one Tarin had learned the hard way when he was just in the Navy. Hard, bony parts of his face had to hit softer, more breakable parts of his enemy's or else they both would go down from the damage. His first head butt had been done out of desperation, caught by one of the pirates they'd boarded, a blade swinging toward his stomach from the man standing behind him, Tarin had thrown his head back. Only the back of his head hit the pirate's forehead and sent them both reeling. He'd learned from that mistake except this time he reacted from fear. His forehead cracked forward into Ilan's face, catching the corner of the man's eye. Not the hardest part of his skull but not the softest either.

It achieved its purpose. Ilan instantly released Tarin and staggered backwards. The blow wasn't hard enough to do much damage but it still raised a red mark at the corner of one hazel eye. Eyes that flashed pride and anger but something more that Tarin didn't like to see, interest. He skittered away from the tree and back onto the narrow path that cut through the woods.

"I won't be trifled with!" He snarled out, trying desperately to hide his own panic and fear and failing. The tone was less angry and more the frightened warning of some cornered animal. "And I sure as hell won't jump when you order it." That came out with more defiance but Tarin figured he should cut his losses and hurry away. He wasn't sure he could fight back again if Ilan tried to push the issue. Worse, his hands were shaking and he needed to get back around people and away from the isolation and solitude of the forest.

Ilan flopped onto the pathway and watched Tarin stomp away. His odd, heavy, Outlander boots were too thick and clumsy for the wooded path and did little to help the otherwise graceful man move about the forest and he wondered how Tarin would move like in some of their footwear. It was a distracting thought from the sore spot on the side of his face and the burning fire still on his lips.

His attraction to the Outlander wasn't physical. The pale skin and odd coloring were pretty, in an odd flower like way, but not something he found sexually appealing. It wasn't his body Ilan wanted but his mind. He was drawn to the Outlander like a moth to fire by the other's temper, arrogance and bold courage to be truthful to the point of rudeness. It made Ilan itch to be closer to him and that was all he needed for him to find sexually appealing. There was just something about the pale man's temper that turned him on.

Maybe he shouldn't have forced the issue, it wasn't like he'd intended to kiss Tarin, he just wasn't going to let the Outlander dismiss him and walk away. It was that sharp temper that made him goad the other man on, that made him tussle them together. Once they were together and he had the man pressed against a tree to help hold him still, he couldn't help but kiss him. The anger had just dissolved from the odd lavender eyes and for a single moment Tarin had almost looked submissive. It had struck a nerve Ilan hadn't known he had. It had made him want to lick the pale neck and do things far more intimate. It had made him feel really powerful for the first time in a very long time.

Until a very hard head smashed into his own. He should have been pissed himself but Ilan rubbed at the sore spot and shook his head. There was no anger and instead he felt only an odd twisted amusement.

"Should have known..." He chuckled and winced but stayed sitting in the dirt. Tarin hadn't been easy for one single moment and he'd been a fool to think just kissing the man would gentle him, especially if he wasn't very good at kissing.

Ilan sighed and pushed himself to his feet. If Tarin showed back up at the camp without him there Marcus was likely to send everyone out looking for him. It wouldn't be easy to explain that he was lingering in the woods to nurse his bruised ego. He judged Tarin had enough of a head start to not think he was being followed, brushed the dirt from his clothes and shook out his hair. There was no getting around going back but it made his shoulders tense up with every step that carried him back.

As his feet broke from the woods into the mostly open space the camp took up Ilan pulled his 'I'm busy leave me alone' posture around him. It was a handy trick to have learned, if he looked like he was busy or that he had a destination, most people left him alone. Most of the time it was just an act to gain himself some moments alone to think and it felt a little like cheating but he wasn't above that.

He caught Marcus hovering to the side of one of the tents. The giant of a man was frowning which meant he'd noticed Tarin's return to the camp. From the way he was fondling the hilt of his sword it was pretty clear he'd only been a moment from rounding up a search party. The man's frown made him smile softly and it broke his too busy to be bothered expression. Ilan carefully tilted his head in the general direction of his own tent and that was all he had to do to get Marcus moving and following him.

Even his tent was set back away from the others. No one else joined him around the fire placed outside unless there were there wanting something from him. Some nights, Ilan sat alone and listened to the people around him, gathered in their own small groups talking and laughing and almost felt like he was sitting with them. Other nights listening just made him feel more alone and he was quick to withdraw inside to try to block it out. He was grateful for the privacy because he wasn't sure he could stand to be watched every moment of everyday but it did make the nights awfully lonely.

The tent's entrance shifted and Marcus slipped inside making the tent suddenly not empty anymore. It still amazed him how tall and broad the other man was, almost like Marcus was maybe a different species of human. Just having him in the tent made the space feel occupied.

"What happened?" Marcus asked as soon as he closed the tent behind him.

"Nothing."

Strong hands caught Ilan's face and tilted it toward the dimmed sunlight. "You've a bruise."

"One which I earned." Marcus frowned and Ilan pulled his head free of the fussing hands. "Don't."

"What?"

"Faking innocence doesn't suit you. The Outlander didn't do anything improper. If anything I did."

"I don't like him. We should kill him, he's been here too long."

"I don't want him harmed." Ilan flopped down on the floor and had to wave to invite Marcus to such informality. When he did Ilan rolled over and buried roughly gripped the back of Marcus' neck. It didn't take much of a tug to get the larger man to lean over and from there Ilan devoured his mouth. He wanted to kiss away the feel of Tarin but mostly he wanted to clear his own worries from his mind.

"Mmm..." Marcus sighed as the hand let go of the back of his head. "What brought that on?"

Ilan shrugged and tried to pretend it was just a kiss. "Just wanted to see..."

"See what? See if I'll forget the fact that after the last time our paths crossed and parted I couldn't sit a-horse for a month without thinking about you?" Marcus wanted to frown but seeing Ilan laying down beside him, his tawny hair spilling out across the floor was too distracting.

"I'm sorry for that. I didn't mean to be so rough."

"I wasn't complaining. That happens when we only have a few moments alone and I'm going off

to fight." He let his fingers spin the loose hair around his fingers. "We have more than a few moments this time and yet you haven't called me to you once."

"Marcus, do you only...are you only my lover because I call you to me?"

The tall man leaned over and gently kissed Ilan's frowning lips. "No. Now, please, let me kill him before he puts anymore doubts into your mind."

"What?"

"I've advised you for the Warriors for how many years? I know what you hide." Very carefully he brushed his thumb across the bruise near one beautiful eye. He didn't touch gently for fear of causing the bruise to hurt him physically but because he was overly aware of how easy it could be to hurt the other man emotionally. "You, more than anyone I know, is drawn to a challenge. He was cruel to you."

"He wasn't."

"He's an Outlander, all they know is cruelty."

"He speaks the truth others fear to tell me. Am I such a poor lover?"

"You can be a bit impatient, more than a bit demanding but I've always enjoyed our time together."

"You don't love me."

Marcus leaned up and glared down at his friend. "I adore you, you own me, body mind and soul. I would face a thousand pains to keep you safe. If you were lost my world would hold no meaning."

"But you don't love me, not the way you one day will another."

He'd never knowingly or willfully lied to Ilan and he wasn't about to now but neither would he be hurtful. Instead of answering Marcus just glanced away.

"It's alright, I understand my place. I'm grateful we can have a few moments like this." Ilan almost managed to keep the loneliness out of his voice.

"I know you're lonely but hunting an Outlander? There are safer ways to piss off the Holy Ones."

Ilan sat up and shook his hair out behind him. "I'm not doing this to be a brat. There's something about that man. He calls to me Marcus like a moth caught by a fire. I just...I just want to..." He wasn't sure he had the words. It was more than seeing the strange man pinned in place and looking receptive. There was something vastly more to him and it made Ilan feel like he couldn't breathe.

"Than take him and let me get rid of him before he causes more trouble. The Scouts are growing fond of him. If you wait too much longer there could be trouble."

"They're loyal." There was a long standing rivalry between Warriors and Scouts but Ilan trusted both groups totally.

Marcus just scoffed a little but even he couldn't deny that they were loyal.

"I don't want him." Marcus raised his eyebrows and Ilan sighed. "It just sort of happens when I'm around him. I don't intend to. I'm drawn to him, Marcus, I don't know why."

"You like to cause trouble?"

Ilan smirked in reply. "The trees called him. The trees don't make mistakes. Or you, my friend, would have been a blacksmith like your parents and brothers instead of the finest Warrior I've met."

Marcus stood up and offered his hand to his friend. Ilan paused before he accepted it and let the strength of the other man haul him to his feet. "I suggest you learn why as quickly as you can and learn as much as you can about this Outlander as well. I will help."

"I'm sure that will earn me massive progress. Thank you." Marcus was many things but it was his blunt, frank honesty that Ilan valued so much. That same bluntness didn't make the man the most diplomatic and the Outlander seemed like the sort of man to require diplomacy.

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Chapter Thirty Four

Tarin almost ran down the narrow pathway back toward the camp. When he didn't hear Ilan following he was able to slow down a little but he couldn't get his breathing to stop. He had to get away and breaking into the camp and being around the relative safety of other people did nothing to stop the urge. His eyes refused to really focus on the people around him as he hurried toward his own small camp.

Ishvan and his family weren't around and Tarin felt both better and worse for that. He stormed into the tent he'd been sleeping in. His pack slouched in the corner and he pulled it out while trying to ignore how badly his hands were shaking. They'd returned everything of his to him but he'd barely thought about the travel pack in days. Now he rummaged inside of it with a desperation that drove him to find his clothes and pulled them out.

The tight leather of the strange clothing had become a comfortable feel on his skin until today when it felt confining. He pulled at it, tugging at laces and ties and struggling to yank the odd garment away from his skin. The need to run and keep running was burning brightly in him and he couldn't stop it. All he had to do was get his things and go. They'd said he wasn't a prisoner, he'd be able to just leave and Tarin needed that. The city might not be perfect but it was where he belonged and it had rules he understood. He knew his place there and knew what he could and couldn't expect.

"Leaving us?"

Tarin spun like a cat with a stepped on tail at hearing the voice and had his sword half bared

before seeing it was only Hentra and letting it slide back into its place. "I'm not a prisoner!"

She shook her head. "No, you aren't, I can't make you stay."

"Good!" He yanked and pulled and got the too tight shirt off of his body. With a quick motion he flung it across the space just to be able to act out against something.

"What's happened?" She asked carefully and took a small step forward.

"Nothing." Tarin dropped to his knees to try to sort through the messy pile of clothes to find his own shirt. The fabric seemed set against him and tied in knots.

"Something had to have happened to frighten you so much."

"I'm not. Damned fabric is all twisted!" He wanted to pull it apart, to rip the cloth to shreds.

"Tarin..." She moved gently over and knelt beside him. His struggling hands were the source of the clothing rebellion. The only way to still him was to lay her own hands over top of his. "I would hope that you know you don't need to hide or pretend, not with me. I wear a number too." Mentioning their common bond made him flinch but his hands stilled under hers. "What's happened?"

"I need..." Tarin was shocked to hear how quickly he was breathing. "I need to go back to my people."

"You will, soon, but there's no rush, is there? Stay and enjoy the peace and quiet." She wanted to invite the Outlander to stay and maybe have a chance to heal. There was little doubt that Tarin had faced more of his own past pain and healed more in the few weeks he'd been with the people than he had in his lifetime. Hentra just didn't think pointing that fact out would be overly helpful.

"Peace and quiet? I won't be owned again by any rich man I won't! I don't care how important he is to your people or that it'll get me killed if he touches me again...if he....if..." Too fast breathing had broken into gasps and Tarin knew he was going to pass out soon if he didn't regain some measure of control but that was far easier said than done.

Hentra let the words tumble across her mind but when meaning sunk in she felt angry. It was a mother's anger and it surprised her that after such a short time her heart had adopted the broken Outlander. "Tarin...stay. Give me an hour before you plan to leave. Please? I won't allow you to be owned again, or to feel owned again. Do you believe that?"

He wanted to but Ilan was their leader. How would she be able to stop him? The trouble was, he didn't think he could find his way home. His supplies weren't set up for a cross woods hike and really he knew nothing about the countryside. He'd been born and raised in a city, he'd served in the Navy. If he could find water and a boat maybe he could make it on his own but it was all maybes. He was trapped and hated that feeling. The last thing Tarin wanted to do was run off blindly and have to be found like a wandering child.

Reluctantly he nodded agreement. It was one of the best nods Hentra had seen in her life and she held in her smiles. With a squeeze to Tarin's hands she slipped back from in. "Stay here, you won't be disturbed, I'll return as quickly as I can. I promise." She had been frightened, alone in a strange world, lost on its rain slicked streets and knew the look of panic in Tarin's lavender eyes far too well.

She slipped out of the tent and stopped trying to control her emotions. Her face must have been fearsome because Lenno stopped fussing at the fire and his eyes went wide.

"What's happened?" He asked, glancing between his aunt and the tent she'd emerged from. "Ishvan?" The last time he'd seen her so angry was when Ishvan had been bullied.

"Is fine as far as I know. See to it he is not disturbed. I will return." She flung a hand toward the tent and hurried from the camp.

"Who?" He questioned but his mind knew. "Tarin...okay...I will." He said but the words were too soft for his thundering aunt to hear as she stomped toward the main encampment.

Hentra didn't need to ask where the Elect was. Whenever the man retreated into his own tent, one placed slightly off to the side of everyone else's, for any length of time people started to hover a respectful distance away. There was a small cluster of Holy Ones and a few Warriors too which meant that there were good odds Marcus was in the tent with Ilan. Protocol said she should wait but she was too angry to obey. She didn't stop the proper distance away and wait, instead she charged right up to the tent and entered it without asking for permission.

Two men stared at her in surprise but only Marcus looked a little guilty. Like maybe she'd almost, but not quite caught them doing something private or maybe her arrival would now prevent them from something private. They were standing a touch too close to each other but she wasn't shocked. Hentra had long suspected the two men were more than companions in the casual sense and had been silently grateful the young Elect hadn't been totally without companionship. It did, however, fuel her anger as it confirmed Tarin's mumbled half confession.

"Hentra? What's the matter?" Something big had to have happened for Hentra to walk so boldly into his private space.

"I seek a word with the Elect." She locked eyes with Marcus. "A private word."

The two men stood stunned by the venom in her voice but it wasn't until Ilan nodded that Marcus bowed a little and left. Normally Hentra would have found how the large man circled around her to get to the exit amusing but her mood was too sour to find amusement in anything.

"What's occurred, Hentra, that you'd come here uninvited?" Ilan wavered between angry at having his one private place invaded and worried because Hentra had always been respectful.

She shook her head. "I have always respect both your place and your person, have I not?"

"Your service has always been above what is required. I have valued you and your family's support for years."

"May I speak freely?"

"Of course."

She drew a deep breath and prepared to do what should have been unthinkable. "If you were my son you'd be very close to a beating! I've always been proud of you but right now? How could you do that to him? What were you thinking? Have you gone mad?"

Ilan actually blinked and had to process the fact that she was rebuking him and he wasn't sure what for. "Excuse me?"

"Tarin." She spat the name out as if it explained everything.

"What about him?" Ilan narrowed his eyes.

"I don't know what game you're playing with him but it stops, now."

"What did he tell you?"

"Enough, he told me enough. Is this why you keep yourself distant from others? Is it because you like to use force? Huh? Do you like to see fear in your victim's eyes?"

"What?"

"Is that what it is? You like making someone bend to your will? Is that what does it for you? Is not simply knowing any one of the people would gladly come to your bed if you even so much as smiled at them not enough? If you think being the Elect will excuse you for rape you are sadly mistaken!"

"Rape? What are you talking about?"

"Tarin! Do you think it's acceptable because his skin is lighter than ours? Do you think he feels less?"

Ilan's mouth fell open but his protests died before he could speak them. Marcus' suggestion to just take Tarin and get it out of his system did imply that some part of him had been thinking that because the man was an Outlander that it was more okay. He'd never have even considered such a thought if it had been directed at one of the people. Not that he would have ever done it but the thought alone would have been too much if Tarin hadn't been an Outlander.

"I haven't raped him. I've barely touched him. I would never...how could you think such a thing about me?"

"You did something to him. He came back home pale and frightened, talking about not ever being owned again or touched again against his will! Explain that to me!" She wanted to hit him because Tarin hadn't. Than again, she saw the bruise on the side of Ilan's eye and figured her boy hadn't been as helpless as she'd feared.

"We just kissed...I..." He replayed the afternoon in his mind and added in Hentra's anger. It colored everything different and he felt sick. "By the trees...I didn't mean..." Ilan sighed and sat down. "I thought..."

"You thought what?" Ilan's suddenly defeated look surprised her but was comforting too. It proved he wasn't the monster she'd feared. "Explain it to me... please." She pleaded and knelt down to sit across from him.

He wanted to but he was caught between desperately needing someone to talk to and being the in control, aloof, the Elect he was required to be. "I am naïve. It wasn't my intention to hurt him. I just...you'll laugh at me."

"No, I won't."

"I don't have very much experience with people, on a personal level. I didn't see...I thought he was just being...well, stubborn like he is about everything. He didn't tell me differently...things got rough but that's how it is..."

"Fine pair you both are..." It was pathetic in a sad way and she wasn't sure if she still shouldn't smack Ilan. "Spring rites and who? Marcus?"

Ilan blushed and glanced down.

"I'll take that as a yes. I thank the trees everyday I was born female. If I take a woman to bed she is gentle with me, if I take a man he is gentle with me. What is it with men laying with men and having it be a show of strength? I wouldn't expect you to know better if your only experience is

the rites and Marcus.”

“Marcus has been kind to me.”

“Oh I don’t doubt it, he adores you but I doubt he’s exactly been the best teacher when it comes to intimacy. Look me in the eye and tell me you didn’t intend to harm Tarin?”

Ilan hadn’t been so embarrassed, blushed so much, since he’d been a child. He very carefully met Hentra’s eyes. There was no room for lies or hesitation with her. She’d had a choice between Scout or Holy One and he’d never once doubted her connection to the Trees. She would know instantly if he tried to lie to her.

“I never intended to harm him. My intentions have always been, and remain, as I’ve said, that he is to be returned to his people unharmed. I didn’t understand I was hurting him because, it seems, I lack the training.”

Hentra studied the younger man deeply but saw only truth. “Life isn’t about training, Ilan.” She dared to use his real name because she was speaking to the man not the title. “It’s about making mistakes and making it right afterwards and learning so you don’t do it again. You’ve never had that, everything has been laid out before you in lessons and classes. It isn’t my place to say but it’s very sad that the Holy Ones have so sheltered you from living. You should have had a father, a mother and siblings to help guide you as you grew to manhood, not training and lessons and the Trees alone.”

“I’m sorry. I had no intentions of hurting him.”

“I believe you, and you couldn’t have known, you can’t know. The slavers that captured me? They raped me to try to break me but once I reached the city I scrubbed floors and boiled laundry. Tarin was sold as a child, a young child but he wasn’t sold to clean a house. He was sold into the harems and used and tortured for years. His arrogance, his distance, is as false as your own and worn for similar reasons.”

The blood drained from Ilan’s face. “I knew he’d been a slave as a child but not...” His hands balled up into fists at his side and he wasn’t sure if he wanted to hit someone else or himself. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not the one you need to say that too. If you were my son I’d drag you across the camp by your ear but you’re not.”

“I’m too old to be your son.”

“You’re Ishvan’s age.”

“And he is just barely a decade younger than you.”

“Fine, if I was your older sister. I’m not so you will have to move of your own will. I won’t make you, I won’t even speak of this again. Or I won’t if you don’t repeat something this stupid.” She watched as embarrassment turned into shame and a purely personal disappointment and almost as quickly altered into determination.

“Fine, let’s go.” Ilan nodded and stood. If he was going to humble himself and admit his mistake he was going to get it over with.

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Chapter Thirty Five

Ilan's mood darkened further when he followed Hentra outside. Marcus hovered far enough away to make it clear he wasn't eavesdropping but the normal gathering of Holy Ones and Warriors stood waiting as well. It made his shoulders instantly grow tighter and he felt his jaw aching from how badly he was clenching it. Even Marcus' worried look didn't sooth him and he gave the man a brief shake of his head to tell him wait and leave him be. The last thing he wanted to do right now was try to explain the conversation with Hentra to his on again, off again lover.

It took a force of will to keep his face steady and even, his posture straight, as he followed beside Hentra. If his shoulders slumped, if he frowned, people would wonder and whisper. He'd made that mistake once, after a small battle where they'd lost too many warriors and scouts, several of which were people Ilan had known and was as close to as he could ever be. He'd let his own grief and pain show and the defeat had carried an extra level of pain for everyone. If he looked upset, unsteady, broken, hope was far thinner than it actually was. It was a small thing he could do to try to hold on to hope but it killed him to always have to hide what he felt.

Lenno leapt to his feet as they broke into the small Scout camp. His eyes darted to Ilan but they rested on his aunt even as he bowed his head a little in respect. In another lifetime they would have been friends. Even if Ilan had become a Holy One instead of a Scout, he was sure they would have found friendship. At least he hoped, he admired the other man a great deal and he was fairly sure that was a good foundation for friendship.

"Has he left?"

"No."

She saw the questions in Lenno's eyes but he held them and that made her proud. "Good." Hentra nodded. That was all she needed to hear and she turned her attention to Ilan. "Well?"

He stood for a moment confused until he understood that she wasn't going to go with him and she wasn't going to help him. "Very well." He tried to sound confident but he wasn't sure it was convincing.

Hentra almost but not quite smirked. "We'll see you aren't disturbed." She nodded a little to Lenno and the two moved and took up careful positions around the tent as smoothly as Scouts did anything.

That left him with no excuse and no reason to delay. Ilan slipped into the tent and quickly shut the flap behind him. The light dimmed but there was no mistaking the naked blade of a knife in the Outlander's hand. That surprised Ilan but didn't worry him. He'd seen how the man could fight and if he'd wanted to harm him he had no doubt Tarin would have already done it. Instead what he saw was the loose dark hair and the loose Outlander shirt that hung over the leather pants of the people. It made him want to run his hands up under the loose fabric and that was a thought

that wasn't going to be helpful.

"Am I your prisoner?"

Ilan shook his head. "No, you're my guest."

"You going to stop me from leaving?"

"No. How will you find your way back to your city? Do you know the way?" It was a poor apology so far and he was glad Hentra was too far away to hear him.

Tarin's eyes half closed before he nodded with his chin to the side. "That way."

The answer shocked Ilan not just because the Outlander was right when he should have had no way of knowing which direction was his home. He could have figured that out from the stars if he'd had any training. What surprised him was how like a Scout or Holy One the Outlander had felt as he figured out the direction. It was the same tingling surge of connection that should only have been found in the people.

"You're correct but can you reach it?"

"I'll damned well will. Go away, I have to pack."

Ilan saw the pale hand grip the blade tighter. Tarin was an able fighter, skilled and graceful but he gripped the hilt not in threat but in fear. Ilan wasn't used to that reaction and now that he knew the reason behind it he felt even worse. He was there for a reason and he was stalling.

He held up his hand and moved to open the tent's entrance. Ilan ducked his head out and sure as their word both Hentra and Lenno were still positioned a respectable distance away. "Lenno, a moment?" He called out and again the young man glanced to his aunt before loping over to join him.

"Sir?"

He motioned for the Scout to join them inside the tent but Lenno hovered near the entrance obviously uneasy about being drawn into whatever was wrong between the two men. "Are you loyal, Lenno?"

Lenno looked as if he'd been slapped. "To the grave, sir."

Ilan kept his eyes on Tarin. "Swear to me and swear to him that should our Outlander guest wish to return to his people, you will guide him home. Taking with you whatever resources you require to do so safely and without requiring my permission."

Lenno looked between the two men but it wasn't something he wanted to debate since he had been planning to smuggle Tarin back to his people with or without permission. "I swear it."

"Thank you." Ilan nodded and it was a clear dismissal and Lenno didn't seem to mind hurrying from the tent. "There, now will you put your weapon away?"

Tarin shifted his weight but made no move to disarm.

"I wish to speak to you." Ilan sat down but Tarin didn't move. He drew a slow breath and focused on getting his shoulders to relax. "Please....please, Mr. Morris."

The Outlander hesitated but he sat down. The blade was still bare and threatening but he laid it across his lap instead of holding it in his hand. "I've nothing to say to you."

"No, you misunderstand. It's I that have things to say to you." Dark eyebrows rose up elegantly and Ilan had no doubt that the Outlander would never ask. "I'm sorry. Deeply, truly sorry for what occurred in the woods. It was not my intention to harm you or force myself upon you. The very thought that I did makes me ill. Please, forgive me." Ilan spoke with as much honesty and sincerity as he could before bowing forward. He folded himself over his knees and let his hair part and tumble down beside him. It was a humbling posture and it completely exposed the back of his neck to the Outlander's blade. It would be easy to kill him, he was offering his life to the other man in apology and for a moment he was certain Tarin was going to claim it.

"Just...don't do it again." Tarin forced out in means of acceptance.

The words allowed Ilan to sit back up. "Thank you. I am sorry. I..." Ilan sighed and glanced around the empty tent. "With you, may I, just for a moment, stop being the Elect?"

"You're not my Elect, I don't care." Tarin answered with a haughty tone.

"Hentra says you and I use arrogance for the same reasons, that we hide behind masks. She's not often wrong about people. We both hide because neither of us know how to deal with people, not really. She told me what kind of slave you were. I'm sorry I didn't know. I wouldn't have...you're right. I am naïve. I am inexperienced in many ways. You're right, I had no choice in the life I was given or who I was expected to be. Everyone looks to me for answers, to be something that I'm not sure I am and I spend half of every day feeling like a fraud. I have no answers. I don't know how to save my people and I hide from them because I'm scared that someone will see the truth about me."

"I'm not a priest you need to confess to."

"I know, I'm sorry, Mr. Morris, this isn't your problem. I only wish you to understand my assault of you wasn't from malice but from my own stupidity. I've had few lovers. The spring rites which are simply about fertility and pleasure and...and a friend, a man."

"Your brute of a bodyguard."

Ilan couldn't help but have his jaw drop a little and he knew he gave away the truth with his surprise. "Apparently our discreet relationship was obvious to everyone. Yes, Marcus is the closest I have to a friend. He and I? When we come together it's rough, it's about pleasure. I've assumed it was to be that way, I'm used to how he and I...tussle. I mistook your reaction because you're right. I know nothing. I'm sorry."

Tarin shifted his weight where he sat and placed the blade from across his knees to on the floor beside him. "You don't need to explain to me."

"No, I do. I want you to know I'm sincere in my apology. I would sooner cut off my own hand than to touch anyone against their will. It's just, Mr. Morris? I am drawn to you. Even with how you look, I want to be closer to you, nearer to you, to know you..."

"What's wrong with how I look?" Tarin almost sounded offended.

"Well, nothing, I'm sure, for an Outlander but you aren't of the people. You're too pale, your hair is as dark as night, there is no gold and glow to you. It's not your fault you were born to the wrong people." Tarin's eyebrows raised again and Ilan could see the stubbornness starting to rise. "What I'm trying to say is that to me? It doesn't matter what you look like. I want you, physically but more. I find myself thinking about you and not just what you might mean to the people but to me personally. That isn't something I had wished to confess. I'm sorry." He felt himself blushing and oddly becoming aroused at the same time. "I must seem a fool to you?"

Tarin sat still and unmoving. When he finally moved he swallowed hard and dropped his eyes. "No...not a fool. I will never be owned again, I will never be any man's property."

"All I wish is a chance to know you. I don't believe in chance, Mr. Morris. I believe the Trees have brought you here."

"No, your thugs brought me here."

"But why did Hentra's path cross your own? I don't believe it was accident. There is something here with you, between us, that I should learn and if it is merely humility than I shall try to learn it. I ask of you, please, don't leave us just yet. Give me time to learn more, from you. I can't make you stay, but I am asking."

"There's nothing I can teach you."

"You're wrong. When you were in the Trees...there was a Lady, I know you saw her or felt her. She responded to you as I've never seen her to anyone. I would like your help to learn why. I know I've already violated your trust but I am being as honest as I can with you. More candid than I am ever with anyone."

"All you want is to take me to bed. That's all you want."

Ilan blushed brighter but he wasn't going to lie. "Do I desire you? Yes, as I've already said but it's more than that and I will never lay a hand upon you without your permission again. Nor will I allow any of my people to do so. I also don't expect you to be as honest with me as I have been with you. All I ask is that you stay and give me one more chance. Please?"

Tarin licked his dry lips and lightly clasped his hands onto his knees. "You have something specific in mind."

Ilan smiled lightly, pleased that Tarin was at least thinking about staying, about what would happen if he did. "I do. I'd like to go back into the Trees. Only this time I want to go together and see what happens."

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Tarin physically leaned backward, repelled by the idea alone. "No."

"No?"

"No, I don't know what happened before but it isn't something I plan to repeat."

"It won't be the same."

"No."

He wanted to snap that it was important and couldn't Tarin see how important it was but snapping and ordering wouldn't move the other man any. Instead he drew a careful breath and stopped trying to keep a distance. "Communion with the trees is never a simple thing. When I was a boy? I was frustrated because the Holy Ones refused to allow me a full communion. I could feel the call, I knew I should reach back to them but they said I was too young. I thought they were being selfish and overly protective. I thought I knew what to expect and I was old enough to handle it. Truth is? No one is old enough for their first time. The trees bring to you what you need and it can turn your world upside down. That first time is highly personal. I never knew my family, I..." Ilan sighed. "I have days when I see the families around me and it hurts. It makes me feel even more alone. It hurts, I'll admit it, and the trees gave me a time where, for the first time in my life, I felt a part of a family. I felt loved and cared for, connected. That must sound minor and simple to you but it was profound to me. It shook me, deeply, to be shown all I had sacrificed to become the Elect for my people. I spent days, too many days, afterwards by myself just to settle my own emotions."

"Why tell me this?" It unnerved him to have Ilan being so open and honest. It made Tarin feel like the other man was trying use honesty to manipulate him.

"Because maybe if you understand you'll help me. I've never been able to tell anyone how deeply that first connection shook me. But, I promise you, the next time wasn't like that. If you agree to this, it won't be anything like that first time. I'll be with you, we'll be able to guide it. You'll be safe. I'll make sure you are."

"It's stupid to think a tree can have any answers."

"They aren't just trees, they're portals, gateways. They might not show us anything but maybe there will be some answers." He could see some curiosity in the odd eyes but also a lot of suspicion. "Don't you want to know why the trees called you? You heard it, I know you did. The buzzing hum, like an insect but not that drew you to that tree. You're not here by chance, they called you, placed Hentra in your path to meet you and draw you here. I promise, no harm will come to you."

The truth was he heard it even now, if he listened for it. A buzzy sound that made him edgy and a little lightheaded. He wanted to follow it and find it but he was scared silly of losing himself in that warm, safe darkness again. It wasn't because it had been unpleasant or even unwelcome but because it had felt so good, so wonderfully good that he wanted to surrender and give himself over fully to that feeling. That made him uneasy because it wasn't real and illusions were no comfort.

Ilan had promised him it would be different. Oddly, Tarin believed him. The man had been aggressive but with the rawly vulnerable confession he believed it wasn't from malice but more like a puppy like inexperience. It was his own fault as well, because of his own history and damage. He hadn't even been able to allow Ana close and she hadn't been as physically aggressive as Ilan had. If he'd been normal he might have simply tripped the arrogant young man and shown him what real kisses should be like. As he studied the handsome, honest face with it's warm almond shaped eyes, Tarin found himself surprised to admit if he wasn't so damaged he would have quite enjoyed the younger man's clumsy efforts at seduction.

That didn't mean he trusted or even liked the other man. The whole situation made him feel like he'd been sold to a new master. The rules were all changed and different, the surroundings were all too strange. He was left alone with nothing to guide him, unsure what word or action could

cause trouble. There was no easy way to tell which way was the right way for him to go and it made his stomach feel sick.

"Okay." Tarin finally agreed but the word was spoken barely above a whisper. He agreed mostly because he wanted to see what it would feel like to try it again. There were too many questions in his head about the odd experience and not enough information to even start to guess at answers. If he left without at least trying to learn more he'd wonder about it for the rest of his life. "Just, don't kiss me anymore."

Ilan smiled softly and brushed his hair back off his shoulder. "Never again without your permission. I swear it."

The addition of an acceptable situation instead of a simple agreement made Tarin shake his head. "Unbelievable."

"Can you deny there is something between us? Do you really not feel this too?"

Tarin was suddenly caught in the hazel eyes and the intensity there. He saw no malice, no violence, nothing to trigger his own fears but he did see longing. He saw intelligence and loneliness and it pulled at him like few things could. With that one look he wanted to agree and maybe, just maybe, risk trying to see what it would feel like to willingly kiss someone. The thought startled him enough that he broke the eye contact.

"Didn't you hear? I kill people for money. I don't feel anything."

Ilan saw the reason behind the arrogance this time and made him ache. Carefully he reached across the small space between them and lightly rested his hand on top of one of Tarin's balled up fists. He didn't even close his own hand around the pale outlander's, he just placed it there and let it rest. That was awkward enough without pushing the contact further. Even that simple touch was normally denied him with his own people.

It felt right with Tarin, it felt good to connect them slightly. "You feel more than you're comfortable with."

He wanted to snatch his hand back from under Ilan's but he didn't. It didn't feel sexual or aggressive, the touch just felt warm. It felt like comfort, like friendship maybe and it certainly implied a level of intimacy that he didn't think existed between them. It made sense, however, given that Ilan had about as many close friends as Tarin did, maybe less so. He remembered how grateful he was when he'd finally stopped trying to pretend he was okay and started to really be himself around Shelee. It had felt like he could breathe for the first time in his life. Ilan may not have been through the same but he'd been just as isolated and it made his asking permission to not be the Elect seem all the more horrible. Tarin kept his hand still under Ilan's because Shelee hadn't flinched from him and he'd return that kindness by not flinching from Ilan.

That was a comfortable excuse. The truth was he liked the feel of the hand over his own. It was strong, rougher than he'd expected. It felt like a hand that could swing a sword and fight. It was warm without being dry or damp, and rested over his own without too much pressure but enough to make it clear he was there. It felt companionable, comforting and Tarin didn't have the instant flash that they were a heartbeat away from the other man trying to hump him like a dog in heat.

"I'm sorry." Ilan muttered and withdrew his hand. "I presume too much."

Tarin watched a blush creep across the man's cheekbones under the amber golden tone of his skin. It made the normally self-righteous man look young and almost made Tarin forget what a pain in the ass he'd been. "It's okay." He comforted. "It's not your fault. I'm broken, they broke something in me..." The words surprised Tarin but he didn't stop them. "Even if there is something between us, I'm not even sure I'm human anymore."

Ilan shook his head. "No, I will never believe that. If it comforts you to think so, I won't fight with you over it but you're the most human Outlander I've ever met. I'm sorry."

"For what?" Tarin's voice was a bit too harsh but he didn't like the gentleness in Ilan's own tone. He could deal with angry, demands and selfishness but kindness, concern, care? Those were emotions he never knew quite how to deal with.

"For what happened to you. For the childhood stolen from you. For all that you've survived that would make you think you have any less claim to humanity than the rest of us. It makes me ache for you. I'm sorry."

Tarin snorted and used changing the position he was sitting in as an excuse to pull away from Ilan a little. "Why should you be sorry? You had nothing to do with it."

That made Ilan gape a little and blink in surprise. Not from the unexpected question but because the answer would have been obvious to anyone of the people. "What evil is done by one, all are to blame for. What pain is caused to one, all feel."

"So says the man leading one side of a war."

"That isn't by our choice or will. We're fighting for our lives, our right to live, not from enjoyment or greed like your own kind." Ilan heard the bitterness and anger in his voice and instantly saw something ugly in his own thoughts. It was the same thought that made it okay to even consider the idea of simply using Tarin and not worrying about if the Outlander agreed. It was the hatred of too many years fighting an enemy and the trap of seeing them as less than his own people.

Ilan drew a deep breath. "I'm sorry. This will be one of the things I will have to address with my people. When you were lost in the trees? I followed to make sure those that dwell there knew you weren't aware of our ways. I said, I was here for the one not of the people and the Lady was unable to know I was speaking of you. To her thoughts, everyone is of the people but to ours, to mine, there is a clear line. You as an Outlander being able to commune with the trees changes that thinking, maybe we are all one people..."

"Or, maybe talking to a tree is a bit crazy." Tarin mocked.

"You'll understand better after this time. Before, it was simply emotion and darkness, no form, this time, you'll see more clearly. It'll be more difficult to deny this time. Besides, it won't matter what our ways and beliefs are. In a few generations we'll be gone."

"You can't know that." Oddly, he wanted to comfort the sudden weariness that weighed Ilan down.

"If I fail? I'll see it in my own lifetime. My people broken, scattered as slaved or killed, the elder trees burned and gone."

"So, don't fail."

Ilan smiled thinly. "Just because an Elect is born doesn't mean they'll succeed. We are still human, after all. Trust me, I was raised on the stories of the Elects before me who succeeded and those who failed, especially the ones who failed."

Tarin saw it. The truth behind the young man, the horrendous pressure placed on him from childhood on up. It was cruel and his people may have considered it necessary but it seemed heartless to Tarin. "If things failed it's everyone's fault. One man can't make a difference. It wouldn't be your fault either." He didn't know quite why he was willing to try to comfort Ilan, maybe there was something between them and it was messing with his normally very

comfortable sense of sarcasm and self preservation.

"That's the difference in our people, Tarin. Your kind say, why should I bother, one man can't make a difference, it's up to everyone. My people? We say everyone is but one man." He ran his hands through his hair and was oddly very pleased that Tarin had tried to comfort him. "Since I have been forgiven and you have agreed to stay, I will take my leave of you. People will talk if I stay hidden away alone with you for very much longer. Will tomorrow be okay for you? I'm afraid I'm required to be in some meetings tonight."

"Of course." Tarin stood as Ilan unfolded and gracefully got to his own feet. He was struck by how similar their heights were, how close their builds were. If he just stepped forward it would almost be like embracing himself and for one mad moment Tarin almost moved.

"Thank you, Mr. Morris. I promise to be a better host from now on."

Ilan's words broke the odd desire and Tarin nodded dumbly as the feral turned and quickly slipped from the tent. It left him alone, exhausted, and more than a little confused.

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Chapter Thirty Seven

Tarin refused to re-dress in a Feral style that evening. He kept his own shirt and boots on and their pants but part of him needed the comfort of some small thing that was part of his life before coming to the woods. Ishvan and Lenno both tried to talk to him and while he wasn't rude, he wasn't talkative either. His thoughts hummed around inside his head like sparks rising from the fire.

He only picked at his dinner. The food was good, hearty and flavorful like always, but he just wasn't able to stomach it. It became clear fairly quickly to the other scouts that shared their fire that Tarin wanted to be left alone. They didn't exclude him but, rather, they let him sit by the fire around them, silent and lost in his thoughts but not alone. It was comforting and made him homesick for a place and time he'd never had.

A hand rested on Tarin's shoulder and it made his muscles knot up. He glanced up the arm to where Shandro stood, freshly returned from a patrol and looking worried. He didn't say a word, just rested that careful hand on his shoulder for a short moment, but Tarin didn't need him to speak. He could see it in his eyes, the concern for his well being, the offer of help if he needed it.

"Thank you." Tarin whispered softly before turning to watch the fire again. The hand patted his shoulder lightly before slipping away and moving on.

It was what a family should feel like, he decided. Concerned about each other, talking and laughing together over food. Few of them were actually blood related, he'd learned, but from

watching them he couldn't have guessed. Even without knowing their words very well he could see the teasing was gentle, the concern was real and the love was there. It made his heart ache to see and feel bruised at being as included as he had been. It made him feel welcomed and more a stranger than he'd ever been at the same time but he sat there, drinking it in because to be alone hurt more.

After a while he gave up the pretense of trying to eat and quietly excused himself from the fire. He felt eyes following him but no one stopped him or offered up a warning and he was allowed to set away from the fire without fuss. He didn't have anywhere he wanted to go but he was too restless to stay still. Walking helped him think and he often went out at night in the city to just walk around and while he wasn't even in the mood to think, moving made him feel better.

There were a couple of dozen more campfires, all circled with low, rounded tents that looked like they'd sprouted up from the forest floor like mushroom rings. Around each fire was more of the same as what had been at his own. Scouts, Warriors all grouped together, eating, talking, laughing like small clusters of family. At some he could hear the drifting sound of singing and music and at others the sharp words of a debate but life was all around the tidy camp.

It was only one that really caught his eye. Tarin moved toward the single campfire set off a little from everyone else's and he knew just from that position who's it would be. There was no laughter here, no teasing jests and good natured conversation. Ilan sat quietly, as still and composed as he normally appeared where roving eyes could see him. Not even his hair looked out of place and it was a far cry from the vulnerable and weary man that had sat across from Tarin earlier and asked for forgiveness. He was eating, the bowl carefully held in one hand as he moved with deliberate care to take each bite, but he was the only one at that fire doing so. Around him sat a half dozen Holy Ones, their hair loose and flowing, their clothes elaborate and far from functional for hiking through the woods. They were talking at Ilan, forcefully too from their hand motions and the way they kept glancing among themselves. It wasn't the jovial family like atmosphere of the other fires and Tarin could see, even from his distance, the force it took Ilan to keep his face neutral while he listened.

If Tarin could have made the loneliness he felt sitting around his own fire into a reality, he figured it would look a lot like what he saw at Ilan's fire. No one ate with him, or talked with him. Tarin even doubted Ilan tasted the food he was eating, each bite was so mechanical, so methodical, it reminded him of when he'd been required to eat with an owner or guest and how he'd very carefully consumed every bite required but struggled not to vomit it back up. What was worse was that no one else seemed to notice that Ilan's situation was odd. That maybe he'd like to share gossip and jokes like they did. The other people walking around paid more attention to Tarin than they did to their precious Elect eating in isolation while obviously dealing with people complaining.

As if he could feel Tarin's eyes on him, Ilan glanced up from where he'd been studying his food and instantly spotted Tarin standing in the darkness. His expression didn't change one bit from the cold, distant emptiness he wore to hide his thoughts behind but Tarin's heart skipped a beat. He swore he saw something cold melt and become warm in the almond shaped eyes all because the other man had noticed him. It wasn't sexual, at least he didn't think the look was meant that way, but something else, something he couldn't quite understand.

He ducked his head and walked on. Ilan's isolation wasn't his concern. The man's reaction to seeing him didn't mean anything to Tarin either. There was no way he was going to feel sorry for him, not given the fact that it was plainly clear that he was spoiled rotten. Yes, Ilan had been raised in a cage but it had been a comfortable, gilded one unlike Tarin's own. He wasn't going to let his heart beat faster each time he saw those distant icy eyes warm up to something more human when they fell on him.

It wasn't until he had walked enough to allow the cool night air to sooth him and he was back at his own camp that he understood. He had been laying on his own blankets, Ishvan snoring softly

across the space from him, that Tarin knew where he'd seen the look Ilan had in his eyes before. That odd not-sexual but still sexual warmth when their eyes met had been a look he'd been used to seeing once. Only it wasn't in a master's eyes, another slaves or even someone in the navy. He'd seen it every time Ana had look at him when she thought he wasn't paying attention and wouldn't notice. That look in her eyes had always made his heart beat faster too and the whole thing made it impossible for him to sleep until well into the night.

He was surprised when he woke up that Ilan wasn't waiting outside his tent for him. He half expected the younger man to be eager to hold Tarin to his promise and unwilling to give him a chance to change his mind. Instead he found nothing out of the ordinary. He ate, bathed, shaved and dressed like normal and still no Ilan. While Tarin was glad the other man hadn't rushed right over, it left him sitting waiting, nervous and thinking about changing his mind.

When Ilan finally did appear Tarin struggled to look like he hadn't been waiting. "You surprise me. I expected you to be here waiting for me to finish shaving so we can get this over with."

"Not sure I trust you and razors any longer." Ilan grinned and it was only seeing the smile that made Tarin notice how tense and unhappy the other man had looked when he had finally arrived. "And I doubt you would have wanted my help scrubbing your back, either."

Tarin raised an eyebrow but wasn't going to dignify the comment with a response.

"Haven't changed your mind?"

"No."

"Good, because I spent the entire morning threatening death and chaos to anyone that disturbs me on our little walk into the woods. The Holy Ones, you know, are going to have spasms when they find out I took you back to the trees."

"Not a problem I have to worry about."

"True. Shall we be off?"

Tarin stood at the invitation and walked beside Ilan toward the nearest forest trail. They moved in single file, Tarin following Ilan, until they were a fair distance from the camp and the trail disappeared into more of a suggestion of a pathway than anything so formal.

"Thank you for coming to see me last night." Ilan finally spoke.

"I didn't."

"But you were there, you waited until I felt you."

"I was just walking."

"Still, thank you. It would have been an unbearable evening if not for you. I've asked that replanting efforts be halted in some of our borderlands. Too many of our people are being killed trying to reclaim fields back to the forests they were supposed to be. The Holy Ones forget that lives are more important than seedlings, sometimes."

Tarin wasn't sure at the softly spoken words. Normally he'd have kept his mouth shut and refused to get involved but that didn't seem like an option. "They don't seem to have a great deal of respect for you."

Ilan snorted. "Some days I think the same." He sighed and glanced over to where Tarin was trying to pretend that he didn't care and was failing at it. "Holy One is a calling, like Scout or Warrior. It takes a very specific set of skills, naturally born skills, things you can't learn. Scouts and Holy Ones are similar, only Scouts have the temperament for combat, patrolling, exploration. With the war more and more of those with a deep skill and calling to the Trees make the choice to become Scout, not Holy One."

"Like Hentra."

"Yes. Not every scout could go the other route but most of them could and would be quite happy. Our bravest, our best, feel it is their duty to walk a Scout's path in these troubled times so those that are left over become Holy Ones. They are not what they once were and some I doubt can even hear the call of the Trees. Oh, not all, mind you, but enough and out here away from our cities, it seems the weaker ones gather. Since I must spend most of my times out here closer to the borderlands, I am always drowning in people that think they know best and assume I will listen to them without a thought of my own. It can be...trying."

"Can't you just tell them to go away?"

"I have the authority to banish them, yes, but to use that too often wouldn't be proper. It's their right to have my ear but most haven't noticed I'm no longer a child. An Elect is to bring change, a Holy One maintains tradition, the two roles will eventually grate on one another. It's in their best interest to keep me..." Ilan hadn't ever thought about it before but understanding was quick to dawn.

"Isolated? Alone? Controlled?"

He nodded. "It makes them sound vicious and cruel. I don't believe that's their intent."

"As you said, you don't have the best of the bunch out here, right?"

"Yes." Ilan nodded but the truth had been seen and it unsettled him. "Here now, back to the Tree as promised."

Tarin glanced from Ilan to across a clearing at a tree he barely remembered seeing before. "One tree looks like any other." He lied and tried to block out the buzzing call that had gotten far to loud once his feet had broken into the clearing.

"I know you can hear it. Here."

Tarin looked over and down to see Ilan offering his hand to him. "What?"

"For this to stay controlled we have to hold hands. I promise I won't bite."

"It's necessary?"

"I'm afraid so." Ilan held his hand a little closer to Tarin and watched the suspicion creep across his face.

With a sigh Tarin gave in and took the offered hand and almost instantly wished he hadn't.

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A Summertime Storm

Chapter Thirty Eight

With a sigh Tarin gave in and took the offered hand and almost instantly wished he hadn't. Tarin wasn't used to casual contact. Generally, when he was being touched now it was a surgeon stitching some new wound closed and before, when he'd still worn a collar, there was no such thing as casual touch. Ilan's hand was warm and strong against his own, folding around his fingers as if they'd always done that. It made Tarin shiver and his feet stumbled on the uneven ground.

"You okay?" Ilan stopped and would have moved to help steady the Outlander but he wasn't sure his touch would be welcome.

Tarin dropped his eyes and was surprised at how good it looked to see their hands entwined. "Yes, I..."

Ilan squeezed the hand he was holding. "I promise you, I won't let you get lost in the Trees again. It'll be okay."

The simple misunderstanding was a wonderful gift and Tarin nodded. "It's just so loud."

"I half think they do that so the person they're calling can't ignore them. It'll get quieter if you get away from one of the Elder trees but the closer you get the louder it sounds until you give in. It's been a source of one than one of my headaches." He tugged on the Outlander's pale hand and got them moving again toward the tree.

"Elder tree, huh? That one doesn't look that big."

That made Ilan smile. "No, it's not. The title isn't about age, though being older does seem to increase the odds of a tree being one. It's more like certain trees are portals at random. When you're in them, you can feel where they all are...it's like this amazing web. Don't worry you won't see it, I mean it won't be overwhelming. It'll be okay."

"I'm not a coward."

"I didn't imply that you were and I've never once thought such. Any Outlander that can move among the people with his head held high and without timidity is not a coward, foolish maybe but not a coward."

He chose to ignore the carefully hedged compliment. "So, now what do we do? Last thing I remember from the other day was touching the tree. It's made me a little bit jumpy about touching any trees."

"It's easier, yes. I've got you, it's safe, just sit down with your back against the tree and relax but don't let go of my hand." The pull to the trees was almost painfully strong. Originally he'd suggested holding hands just because he wanted to see if the Outlander would trust him but now he was glad he'd suggested it. If it wasn't for that contact he had no doubt that Tarin would have

already been pulled into the Trees again.

"Okay." It took a little effort to get easily seated with his back against the tree without letting go of Ilan's hand but Tarin managed it. Without even being really aware of it he clutched a little too firmly at Ilan's hand but the other man didn't protest.

"Try to relax." Ilan said when Tarin had repositioned himself for the third time.

"It's hard to relax against a tree, it's not the most comfortable of places to be lounging, especially since the tree is going to eat my soul."

"It's not. Close your eyes, relax, if you don't relax I can't guide you in. The only other option is to let go of your hand and let the trees pull you down and hope I can find you."

"Let's not do that. I don't fancy the idea of tumbling around inside of some stupid tree again."

"So, make things easier and relax."

"Curse me for a fool for even doing this." Tarin sighed and closed his eyes. He tried to relax but that wasn't a state he was very good at achieving. Overhead the birds kept singing and a knob of bark was digging into his back. It wasn't working and he was just about to open his eyes to tell Ilan that it wasn't going to work when darkness sucked him down.

This time the darkness didn't strip him of awareness and he was able to maintain a sense of himself and what was going on around him. It was like diving, one moment he was sitting in the warm sunshine and the next he was swallowed by darkness and fluidity. Only unlike water there was no coldness, no pressure, no burning need for breath in his lungs, the blackness had no real form but it pressed against him with the same pressure and weight as water. It was comfortable and a little like floating, drifting and he was fairly sure he was going to be lost in the darkness.

It was the thought of being lost again that set off his panic. He was alone He couldn't feel Ilan's hand, he couldn't see anything, there was no sound. The sense of safe security was gone and in its place was the deep rooted terror a being lost beyond where it was possible to be found. He started to flail in his panic but there was nothing flail against, no means or ways of movement or grip. He wanted to scream but had no voice.

And the next instant his foot stepped forward and landed on solid ground. The motion carried him and he stepped past the emptiness and into bright, warm sunshine. Only the light didn't make his eyes water or even stun them, it was gentle and welcomingly soft. The grass below his feet looked like a painter's vague dream of grass, it was multi hued pastels and deep rich shades glossed onto blades so feathery soft it appeared more like thistle down instead of the flat edged leaves of normal grass. He couldn't help himself, he knelt down and swiped his fingers into the grass. It was as soft as it appeared and it made him smile in sudden amusement without knowing why.

When he looked up, Ilan stood beside him, only he was different. Half of his hair was loose and flowing, half remained tied in it's tiny braids. The loose strands floated in a curled dance on a breeze he couldn't feel. His skin was stunningly smooth and flawless, the golden tone almost a reflective amber tone. His eyes, a plain hazel normally, now seemed to swirl in colors and patterns. His entire face seemed somehow subtly enhanced, strong and intelligent and wildly beautiful and it wasn't just his face, his whole body was slightly different. Ilan looked like every line, every feature had been refined and purified.

"What?" Ilan asked and looked around a little.

Tarin shook his head. "You look...I don't know..."

"Nonsense, I look just the same, you look just...well...you look...stunning."

Tarin frowned.

"No...I don't mean it to be that way. It's like you've been refined." All the oddness of the Outlander's coloring was suddenly focused into something that could have been art. It left him stunned and his mind almost wanted to use the word pretty but even with Tarin looking so beautiful there was no doubt about his masculinity. "You're dressed as I am too and your hair is longer and like mine."

"I feel the same." He stood up and ran a hand over his hair. Ilan was right, his hair was back to the length it had been before Ana had been killed and now was loose and braided too. When he brought his hand down he noticed another difference. "No scars." The thin criss crossing of fine scars he'd picked up across his life were gone. Before Ilan could speak again he twisted and ran a hand up under his own shoulder and shook his head. "What's going on?" He hated that his voice was a little shrill but it made him feel sick to his stomach to run his fingertips over smooth skin and not the ridges and bumps of the burned in numbers.

"I don't know."

"Is this normal?"

Ilan smiled gently and shook his head. "No, it's not. However, I've never guided anyone here like I have you. Maybe my image of myself has imprinted onto how you're appearing?"

"Is that possible?"

"Maybe. I don't know. Let's try to find out."

Ilan stepped away and that was the first moment Tarin truly had to look around. The wide, green clearing with its feathery grass framed a tree that rose up and pierced an impossibly blue sky. Its trunk was as big and round as a fair sized house and its branches stretched out in a massive circle to cast cool shade from sunlight that wasn't hot enough to need it.

"Oh," He stared in open jawed wonder. "This isn't real, I mean, we're still sitting under that tree, right?"

Ilan nodded and crossed the clearing, knowing Tarin would follow on instinct if nothing else. "We are but we're here too, this is just as real."

"I don't understand, I don't know how that's possible?"

He paused and reached behind him to slide his hand back into the Outlanders. "It just is." With a small tug Tarin followed where he led.

At the hint of movement from the far side of the tree Tarin stepped forward and in front of Ilan, shielding him with his body. It was an instinctual reaction, the response of too many years spent being hired to put himself between others and harm. It also made it easier for him to defend himself from whatever was approaching. He reached for his sword and found it missing but before he could curse its absence he saw just who was stepping out from behind the tree.

If the landscape fascinated him, the Lady of the Trees left him speechless. She moved in graceful steps, the length of her willow branch hair rustling. Today her eyes were bright blue with small eddies and a touch of white caps and she smiled warmly at seeing them both. She clasped her hands together in front of her and projected warmth and welcome and not a bit of surprise at seeing Tarin.

Ilan waited, not wishing to influence the Outlander or disturb this first meeting. Tarin was so good at hiding his thoughts, so good at staying closed from casual inspection that it was almost impossible to know if he was able to feel the emotions the lady gave off. Ilan didn't want his own experiences to color whatever Tarin might find or feel so he stayed silent and watched.

It took a moment to remember how to speak and when he did the first question on Tarin's mind was the one that came out. "Who are you?"

The lady laughed soundlessly and delighted mirth rolled from her in waves but it wasn't malicious. She looked to Ilan and nodded with her head toward the outlander, an obvious invitation to speak for her.

"She's one of the Ladies of the Trees. One I see most often."

"She doesn't speak." It wasn't a question.

"No, she doesn't."

"Why?"

Ilan shrugged casually.

"Why should she speak?" A rich baritone voice called out, at once everywhere and nowhere. "She makes her meaning very clear to you both."

The lady spread her hands wide in welcome, the palms upward toward the uncertain direction of the sun. The light gathered and formed into a single bubble, glowing for a moment before bursting and spraying outward. The glow didn't dissolve but sparked and grew and soon shaped into form of a man. He stood with golden skin, not the warm tan shade of the Ferals but one of true gold that caught the light and glinted it back with a metallic shine. His head was bald, his nose straight and long between high, sharp cheekbones and expressive full lips. The eyes that stared out at them were silver gray as glossy metal colored as his skin. The man was tall, standing taller than Tarin himself and he was strong, his body bare and without a stitch of clothing. Tarin felt himself blush at the strange man's boldness and lack of shame of being so very nude in front of them. Never mind that he seemed to be the only one to notice or care that the new arrival was naked it still seemed impolite.

The golden skinned man rested a hand on the tree lady's shoulder and she patted it in friendly greeting before he moved forward. He stretched out his arms. "I'm so glad I was available when you two came in." His smile was as radiant as his skin. He rested his hands on Ilan's shoulders as he leaned in close. His kiss started as the merest brush of lips to lips but quickly became something much less chaste but still more friendly than sexual. "It's so good to see you again, my Ilan."

"Pelin you're a worse flirt than I remember. And you're right, it has been too long."

He waved off Ilan's accusation of flirtation. "If you'd stop running around like a mad man I'd see you more. Well now," Pelin smiled, turning his full attention to Tarin. "This is the one my sister told me so much about."

Tarin had one moment of horror as the golden man stepped his way that he too should be kissed but Pelin read the subtle changes in the Outlanders stance and offered his hand instead. Tarin accepted it on reflex and found that the man's touch was as warm and soft as any person made of flesh and had not even a hint of a feel of metal.

"Tarin Morris, yes?"

"Yes."

"Good to meet you formally, I am called Pelin. I'm one of the beings that dwell here." Pelin pulled back and drew in a quick breath before looking to the lady. "You were right, he's amazing." He said softly before turning back to the pair of mortals before him. "Never in my deepest slumbering dreams did I imagine to see you both standing together."

Ilan frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

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Chapter Thirty Nine

Pelin smiled gently and stepped back closer to them. He slid an almost shimmering hand onto Ilan's shoulder. "Now, that is a very good question. One which I can't explain and you both must see for yourself. You're holding back from one another." His eyes narrowed. "I would have thought you two would have been all over one another." The hand slipped from Ilan's shoulder and reached over to Tarin. He drew the tips of his fingers across Tarin's face in a quick, gentle touch. "But you are as wary as a kicked dog and you, Ilan, still have no sense of self worth."

The idea that Ilan had trouble with his own self worth made Tarin snort.

That sound drew those flat metallic eyes firmly onto Tarin. "You doubt it?"

"I've rarely met anyone more arrogant and self absorbed." He answered back, meeting and holding the odd eyes.

"Pelin, please, don't." Ilan whispered.

The soft protest pulled Tarin's eyes from the odd naked man to Ilan and he was surprised to see his lowered eyes. It wasn't just body language but something more, something about the place they were at, that let Tarin feel vividly the painful awkwardness Ilan hid so well.

"Both so damaged in such fun ways...maybe you just need a nudge." He smiled brightly and the hand that had so gently stroked Tarin's face roughly shoved Ilan over into Tarin.

The Feral stumbled hard against Tarin. If he'd had a moment to think instead of just reacting he would have shoved the man away from him or stepped aside to let him stumble or fall on his own. He didn't and all his instincts and training had him reaching out to wrap his arms around the off balance man to try to stabilize him. There was a moment when Tarin was sure they'd both be okay but Pelin had shoved Ilan with more force than he'd first assumed and they both lost their feet and fell in a tumble of arms and legs to the ground below.

Tarin felt himself falling and braced for the rough jolt of hitting dirt with the weight of someone else landing on him but instead he flopped down onto something soft. The light changed around them too, he could see it even without looking. The bright blue sky sunshine was replaced by a dimmer, warmer glow of lanterns. He tried to shove Ilan off of him but his struggling only mixed with Ilan's struggling to tangle them further.

His hand caught a bare shoulder and pushed Ilan back off. It moved the other man far enough back that Tarin could see around them. That is if he was looking around which he wasn't because his hand was touching bare skin. Ilan was nude but for a nearly see through, very thin pair of loose pants.

"What the hell?" He almost screeched as it sunk in that he was dressed similarly.

"Stop pushing, you're making everything worse!" Ilan barked back.

"We're naked!"

"Not..." Ilan froze and glanced down at Tarin and more milk pale skin over lean muscles than he'd ever imagined. Tarin's hair was loose and spilled everywhere around him on what could only be a velvet pillow. It gave him pause and he didn't feel the way their legs were tangled together with so little very thin fabric between them. "Not naked just mostly..."

Tarin frowned as Ilan's hair fell across his face and he sputtered to spit out a mouthful. He flailed about with one hand to pull the surprisingly soft hair away from his face. The threads tangled around his fingers and he was reluctant to let them slide away. "Are we in a tent?"

Ilan looked around at the incense, lamps, heavy draping velvets in rich, beautiful colors. They were laying on a bed of thick soft pillows with sheer draping fabric framing what was obviously supposed to be a love nest. "Looks like we are."

"You're still..." Tarin squirmed a little but was trying very hard not to rub against Ilan too much.

"Sorry." Ilan glanced down again and felt his heart forget to beat. "Hit me."

"What? Just get off of me."

"If you don't hit me I'm going to kiss you."

Tarin glanced up and hazel eyes were swimming in front of his face. A hand stroked across his neck and it should have made him want to hit Ilan. He should be feeling sick, trapped, from where he was pinned he should be dancing on the edge of panic. Only he wasn't and all he felt was warmth. "This isn't real..." He whispered but his hand fisted into Ilan's hair and half pulled him closer.

"We're in the trees...it can be dreamlike." His hand slipped down from Tarin's neck to stroll across his collarbones. "You're breathing hard."

Tarin nodded and closed his eyes trying to find some stable footing in a world that had changed too much. "It's just a dream." He whispered.

Ilan leaned down and brushed his lips across Tarin's own. "I'm sorry." He whispered before he settled tighter against Tarin's body and kissed Tarin's trembling lips. When he nibbled a little at them they parted and he moaned as he was able to really kiss Tarin for the first time. It wasn't the devouring kiss he shared with Marcus but something softer. He wanted more but didn't feel the crushing need to rush towards more. The softness of the tent invited gentleness and Ilan was surprised to find he liked going slowly, very, very much.

The kiss paused and Tarin arched a little under Ilan's gentle weight. He kept his eyes closed. "If it's a dream it's okay..."

"It's still real, Tarin. Pelin sent us here. I don't to hurt you, I don't want you to do anything you don't want." He didn't either but he was starting to ache with the need to touch so much pale skin. If anything Tarin was even more milk pale under his clothes. Tarin was fragile, he could feel it and understood why now and the last thing he wanted to do was hurt the Outlander further for his own selfish needs.

"Ilan..." Tarin opened his eyes and wasn't surprised that Ilan was fit and toned but he was surprised at how softly he was being touched. "This is some magic isn't it?"

"The Trees are gateways, yes."

"I'm okay. I should be upset but I'm not." He hadn't intended to make the confession but he felt a little drunk and the words slipped out.

"Being touched normally is a bad reminder?" Ilan asked as he kissed the side of Tarin's face as gently as he could.

"I've never...I've wanted but I've never been able..." His free hand reached up and clutched at Ilan's shoulder. "This incense is making my head spin."

"I didn't think it was the incense I thought it was the taste of your skin." Ilan whispered as he nuzzled against Tarin's neck. "I don't know why I want you so much."

"I still think you're an selfish, self absorbed..." His rant was cut off by a kiss that made Tarin's spine tingle. "Oh...Jeses I want this..." He couldn't stop the words from spilling out and he hoped it was all a dream because if it was real he was going to be mortified later.

"We can have this, here if no one else, we can...unless you tell me to stop."

Something in his stomach fluttered and Tarin recognized it as a touch of the old panic and fear that always consumed him when he tried to get physically close to anyone. It felt wrapped in wool and distant but it was there and it made his spine feel like jelly. "I can't."

"You can't what? You can't tell me to stop or can't have this?"

"I...I'm confused. I feel drunk..." He brushed a hand across Ilan's chest, lower to a flat, firm stomach and finally to curl around a narrow waist. It felt amazing to be able to touch someone and not feel sick but it felt even better to be touched and not feel like filth.

"I won't hurt you. Touching you feels so right, even if you're annoying."

"I'm annoying? You're so much worse than I am..." His protest was cut off by another kiss and this time he closed his eyes again and gently kissed back. "That...that feels good." A hand was teasing across his stomach, touching him but not pushing into the more obvious erotic zones of skin and reaction. He didn't know if Ilan was being deliberately gentle or if he just was that inexperienced and he didn't care.

"What do you want, Tarin?" He kissed down a tense neck and nipped at the junction of shoulder. That felt pretty good to him and it was something he'd never had the luxury to explore. It must have felt good to Tarin too because he gasped and arched, rubbing the side of his hip tighter against Ilan's groin and the growing hardness he had been trying to hide there.

"I...I thought we were here to...oh that feels..." he groaned as Ilan's fingers grew rougher and

started to touch him with more demand and less fluttery uncertainty. He drew a deep breath, the air rushing into his lungs and making his chest heave below the teasing fingers. "I thought we were here to find answers?"

"Maybe this is the answer?" Ilan whispered. His body wanted to rub against Tarin's, his fingers itched to pull the flimsy fabric from their hips and legs. If they were bare together he'd need more than just kiss and touch.

Tarin tilted his head to the side and some of his previous sarcasm broke through the haze of the incense smoke. "I think you're asking a different question now."

"Oh?" Ilan half answered, half moaned as Tarin's hand tightened in his hair while the other one scratched lightly down his back. "What question is that?"

"I think you're asking if you can fuck me...and we were supposed to...oh...oh...supposed to be asking about why...why..." but he couldn't think clear enough to finish the sentence. Sex had never disarmed him so much and he blamed it on the dream of the odd space.

Ilan paused and pulled away enough to look squarely into hazy and unfocused lavender eyes. "I'm not asking to take you, you can have me if you want but I would never ask for your body. If you should offer it, I'll happily accept."

"You'd let me..."

"Right now if you want me." He saw the disbelief on Tarin's face. "We don't have to either way. I'm enjoying just this much. Pelin was right...he...we..." A thought tickled at Ilan's thoughts and tried to force its way to the surface. "Pelin..." He pulled away a little more and tried not to focus on flush of desire that colored a blush across Tarin's pale skin or the way his half panting breaths made his body rise and fall like the wind in the trees. "Pelin...this isn't..." Tarin's hand snaked up over his shoulder and both hands and ran through his hair. "He...we were supposed..." Thoughts began to crystallize in his mind. "He tricked us."

Ilan's sharper words seemed to mean something but Tarin's mind was fogged and he couldn't think clear enough to care. His body felt like desire, languid and hard in all the right places. Every touch felt like being reborn and all he wanted was to get lost in those sensations forever. He pulled on the hands full of hair he had and dragged Ilan downward and this time kissed him with all the skill and training he had.

Ilan made muffled sounds of protest which quickly dissolved into moans. He struggled to push away from a kiss that was better than anything he had even imagined, a kiss that made his eyes feel like they would roll up into his head and threatened to make him lose all control. "Mmm...Tarin...stop..." He pushed at Tarin again and managed to get some space between their lips and bodies. "This isn't right, this isn't you. I want you but by your own will." It hurt to say that but he forced the words out. "Stop, Tarin..." He reached into his hair and caught the wandering hands. "You were right. Pelin is trying to distract us..." Tarin writhed and rubbed against him.

"I don't care." He sighed and pressed his lips against Ilan's neck. "I want...I want to feel...normal...just this once..."

"By the Trees." Ilan swore and felt his resolve fleeing.

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Chapter Forty

Tarin's kiss was like fire against his skin. He had never been with a lover that really bothered to show a great deal of attention to any area of his body that wasn't obviously erotic. Tarin seemed to just know how to make every inch of his body feel like something that needed to be worshiped. He wanted to press tighter to the hungry body below his own. He wanted to tangle his hands into the black hair and press Tarin's mouth to his neck so he would never stop kissing him. He was panting for breath and trembling just from a few kisses, he couldn't imagine what it would be like when Tarin turned his attention elsewhere.

"Tarin..." He whispered and knew he should pull away from the Outlander. "Tarin...we shouldn't..." But his protests were weak because his hands were stroking over milky skin.

Tarin moaned as hands glided across his body. It wasn't like he was drunk, it was worse or better, it was like he had been stripped away into what he should have been if he'd been raised more normally. The smell of Ilan's hair was like sunshine, his skin tasted of summer. His body felt fevered as Ilan's breath tickled across the side of his face. His body was aching and he arched up but kissing wasn't enough, kissing wasn't pushing them further fast enough. He tried to nibble but while Ilan's breath caught in his throat his hands stayed almost timid in their touch against his skin.

"Tarin what...oh...ohh..." Ilan moaned as a wet tongue licked at his neck and traced up across his pulse to lap at his ear. It made his spine quiver and it almost made him forget that this wasn't right. "I...I...won't...please...please..." He wasn't sure if he was moaning for Tarin to stop or begging for more. He knew what he should do but it wasn't what he wanted to do.

Ilan wrapped his arms around Tarin as tightly as he could. It helped that as soon as he lowered down toward the Outlander the other man was arching up toward him. He clenched his arms tight around the strong back and buried his face along the side of Tarin's. Stopping was a physical pain and he knew he was going to regret doing the right thing for a long, long time. Regret was something he could live with, seeing betrayal in the bizarre lavender eyes was something he couldn't. No matter how badly it hurt he had to stop them and the only way to do that was to pull them out of the trees entirely.

"Please..." Tarin whispered. "Please let me..." His voice trembled but his arms wrapped around Ilan's back almost as tightly as he was being held.

Ilan's chest felt so tight he wasn't sure he could breathe. "I'm sorry." And he was, he really, really was and not just for Tarin.

He'd pulled himself out of the Trees plenty of times before. It was one of the first real lessons Ilan had learned because sometimes when he was in the Trees the people that lived there didn't always want him to leave. It was a small measure of control that he could have and he'd worked hard to master it. Now he was grateful for that practice because if he hadn't he wasn't sure he could have dug up the will to fight off a near desperate Tarin and Pelin's seductive nudge.

The drop from being in the Trees to being back in the real world was always rough but this time was worse. Ilan gasped for air, choked on it as his body arched from the tree he'd been leaning against. Tarin's hand was damp and sweaty in his own but it was yanked from his grasp and he was too caught up in his own body to worry about Tarin's. His clothing was a torment against skin that was already on fire. It would have been a sensation that he could have happily indulged in if he didn't hear the muffled moaning whimpers from beside him.

"Tarin? You okay?" He tried to ask but the words came out muffled and a little garbled as he tried to put them into the Outlander's language.

When he didn't get an answer Ilan pushed himself up from where he was slouched forward over his own legs as he tried to regain some control over his body. Pelin's nudge was powerful and it lingered on like a morning fog, chasing them back into reality and their actual flesh. Ilan's body ached but Tarin was his responsibility, he could worry about how he was going to deal with it all later once he knew Tarin was okay.

If bouncing out of the Trees was rough for him and he was used to it, it would be worse for Tarin. Ilan managed to half crawl his way over to where Tarin had fallen and what little control he'd managed to regain over his rebellious body was quickly lost. Tarin was splayed out at the base of the tree, his skin was flushed and Ilan could have sat and watched him for hours. It wasn't the bright splatter of ruddy color that detracted from beauty but looked more as if someone had drawn roses across his skin and the flowers had left their color behind. For the first time Ilan could see why Tarin's people could consider his odd coloring beautiful and desirable.

Tarin panted and arched, one of his hands trailed across his own chest and the tight leather of the shirt he wore. "What...what was that?" Tarin forced out.

When the lavender eyes opened, Ilan felt his body stop cold and his stomach fluttered. "Pelin has a way of bringing out what's hidden." His hands itched to touch Tarin's real flesh.

"That..." he swallowed hard. "That wasn't me." Tarin tried to sit up against the tree but his body was trembling. His skin was burning so much the slightest breeze felt like a thousand hands touching him.

Ilan shook his head. "It is part of you. The Trees can show you nothing that you don't already have." Very carefully he reached a hand out and brushed sweat damp hair back off of Tarin's face.

Tarin moaned at the touch but the sound wasn't dragged from his throat with the normal dread he felt when things turned sexual. Ilan's hand was warm and strong and very tender when he could see the other man was well beyond being gentle with his own desire. Most shocking of all was how good it felt, the tentative touch and how it made his body tremble for more. His head was still a little muddled, lost in the clinging light headed drunkenness and hungry desperation for more but that only made it easier to turn his face toward the tender touch. Without thought he nuzzled against Ilan's hand, kissing the slightly calloused fingertips, rubbing his cheek against the strong palm.

"Ohhh...Tarin....don't push me." Ilan warned so softly he wasn't sure he spoke loud enough to be heard. "I ache for you." He told himself not to but his thumb traced across the parted, panting lips.

Tarin sucked the digit into his mouth. His tongue swirled across the sensitive fingertip in open seduction. It was habit, training and skills he normally felt sick to possess. Only when Ilan's jaw went slack and his hips twitched at the completely not subtle innuendo Tarin didn't feel sick, he didn't even feel a little bit panicky. Instead it felt right and he closed his eyes and tried to show Ilan all the wonderfully wicked things he had been taught to do with his mouth.

The hand pulled from his grip and Ilan's fingers disappeared from his mouth. The hand didn't stray far but snapped out and buried itself hard into Tarin's hair. The grip was mildly painful but that only seemed to make him want to moan again. When the hand forced his head to tilt back and up a little he gave in. Lips covered his own and Ilan's tongue replaced his fingers inside of Tarin's mouth.

This was a real kiss, not one shared inside the dream like world of the odd Trees. Tarin's neck ached a little at the odd angle and Ilan rushed forward so fast that their teeth nearly slammed together. It was hot and wet but Ilan's kiss was again clumsy with the awkwardness of reality. At the edges of his mind Tarin could feel whatever spell Pelin had put on them fading. He could feel the return of his fears and past like hoof beats through the earth. It would return and he would be trampled by them and lose how good it felt to feel skin against his own, lips against his own.

Ilan broke the kiss because he wanted more than a kiss. He wanted to loosen their clothing, he wanted hands and lips across his skin, across Tarin's skin. He'd promised and he wasn't going to break that promise simply because he'd never seen anything as sexy as Tarin writhing weakly with a too noticeable bulge in the tight leather pants.

"I'm sorry." Ilan's voice half broke on the words. "I won't...you're not yourself right now..."

Tarin opened his eyes and for all of Ilan's protests there was no doubt that the other man was hanging onto his control by the thinnest of threads. "I know I'm not...please..." He wanted to explain how some nights he ached in loneliness for the simplest of human touch that he simply couldn't stand. He wanted to be able to tell Ilan that he needed to feel what it should be like, just once, and maybe use that in the future as a way out of his past. Words weren't his friend with his blood boiling and even a heated look from Ilan making him feel pleasure that was pure and not tainted by pain and fear. He licked his lips. "You can have me." He offered and had to drop his eyes. "I can take it."

Ilan nearly came right there. Never in the deepest of his dreams had he even considered someone saying something like that. He wanted to agree. He could almost feel himself slipping into Tarin, filling his body, finding pleasure with the odd Outlander. It would be so easy but it still felt like he was taking advantage.

He shook his head. "No...no..."

"You don't want me?" Tarin asked, as he arched, his hands moved to the ties of his pants and tugged at them.

"Oh...oh no I want you...by the Trees I want you but not like this..." Ilan put his hand over Tarin's and stopped the other man from fully untying the laces. Unfortunately that also put his hand right next to Tarin's groin and his obviously aroused cock. He could feel the heat pouring off of the hidden flesh. He could open Tarin's pants and his own, it would be just as easy to reverse their suggested positions. He could straddle the pale hips, lower himself down, fill himself and that would feel as good. That would be as much of a betrayal and he tried to keep telling himself he couldn't.

"I...I..." Tarin wanted to ask again but he couldn't. Ilan's hand was right there, steady but there, so close but not touching him. His hips twitched, trying to pull Ilan's hand over to rub the ache away. The leather of the pants was too tight for his comfort on a good day but now it was painful and all he wanted was to take them off.

"We shouldn't..." Ilan sighed. "We shouldn't...we can later when you're...you're..." He tried to logic his way to safer ground. It would have worked too if his hand hadn't wandered over, across the back of Tarin's hand to the smooth leather of his pants. Before he could stop himself his palm was pressing down on the trapped length, letting it's heat burn his touch and draw out almost blissful moans from the Outlander.

Tarin had never wanted someone to touch him more than he did Ilan. It drove him a little mad to feel he teasing hand just pressing down on him doing nothing more than providing a tormenting weight. He couldn't stand it and felt a little queasy as he felt his normal reactions growing stronger. Time was running out and he was going to lose the rare chance he'd been given.

Ilan knew he should remove his hand and put a good distance between them. He almost found the will to do it until Tarin arched up, grabbed a handful of his hair. There was real force behind the Outlander's grip as he was yanked down so Tarin could claim another kiss. It was searing, demanding and his fingers tried to curl around the throbbing, leather covered length he'd been touching. The kiss made what Tarin wanted very, very clear and Ilan broke away. "We shouldn't..." he panted and Tarin's hand reached between his legs and had no trouble gripping him. He groaned in almost pain and felt his will snap. "Oh...Hentra's going to kill me."

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Chapter Forty One

"Why're you thinking about her?" Tarin moaned out as his hands tried to pick at the ties on Ilan's pants. If he was going to be stopped from opening his own he'd try to peel the leather from Ilan.

He felt the ties of his pants tug and loosen and he groaned. "Does..doesn't matter..." He pushed the hands off his body and almost slammed Tarin back down against the ground. It was too rough but Tarin moaned anyway, his eyes fluttered a little but he stopped trying to pull open Ilan's clothing. It surprised him that the little bit of roughness made Tarin's arms go limp and he laid still, accepting and waiting.

There was a touch of vulnerability that he had never expected to see in the proud, arrogant lavender eyes. It was a measure of trust that Ilan was awed to be given, even with the lingering effects of Pelin's nudge he was overly aware of how much it was costing Tarin to want him. Any last flash of guilt was gone as he worked at the ties along the sides of Tarin's shirt.

The leather loosened and slipped away easily and Ilan's breath caught in his throat. He was almost used to how pale Ishvan was but Tarin was sickly pale and if he hadn't known better he would have worried. As much as he knew Tarin was supposed to look that way it still surprised him but it wasn't repulsive. On the contrary Tarin looked like a warrior, his body was toned and strong under the odd pale skin. Unlike inside the Trees, the reality of Tarin's body was different. He was scared and damaged in thin lines long healed and some that looked freshly healed.

It cooled some of his desire, but not fully. It gave him a shiver of awe for the odd Outlander. He wanted to devour him but he took a moment to trace each scar with a gentle fingertip. The ridges and lines spoke of a life of pain more than the man ever would and he watched as his hands

touched each healed wound with reverence.

Tarin forced his eyes open and was worried he'd see pity on Ilan's face. Instead he saw awe and it made his heart race. "What're you doing?"

Hazel eyes blinked and drifted up to meet Tarin's. "Honoring your past, touching your pain..."

The answer made Tarin frown. "Don't."

"Too late." He leaned down and very gently kissed the frowning mouth. He didn't linger but let his mouth move across the expanse of pale skin. It was warm and shivered and twitched under his lips as he pressed gentle kisses across Tarin's neck, down to his collarbones. As he kissed lower he found his mouth next to and soon over one hard, pink nipple. His breath fluttered across the sensitive flesh and he was surprised when Tarin writhed a little even without any direct contact.

It was Tarin writhing, grasping again to the tree behind him and the ground below for some grip on reality that set Ilan's blood on fire again. His mouth closed around the quivering nipple and he sucked lightly on it. Tarin moaned below him and it only encouraged Ilan to drag his tongue across the hard pebbled flesh while his fingers teased the other one. It was such a simple thing but Tarin started to claw at him, trying to pull off clothing and tugging on random handfuls of his hair. He knew the area felt good from his own limited experience so had only been assuming that touching and kissing with more care and gentleness than Ilan was used to would feel even better. He felt smugly proud that he'd guessed right.

"More..." Tarin groaned. His body was shivering on the brink of panic and desire, pain and pleasure. It made him feel lost, confused and achingly desperate. There was a tickling fear in the back of his mind that said he should run and a burning need to beg for it to never end. Ilan's lips slipped over, sliding sideways to kiss his breastbone and down the center of his torso. It was brilliant and beautiful. His skin tingled and his body demanded more. Tarin wanted Ilan naked over him, he wanted to close his eyes and just feel while it still felt good. Until hands tugged at the ties of his pants, with his eyes shut his mind spun sideways and he fell hard into memories he struggled to never recall. He was going to be stripped and used. Someone was going to hurt him and he wasn't sure he could stand to have that kind of hurt again.

"No!" He cried out, not quite shouting and his eyes flew open. The hands at his pants froze and his eyes darted around. Only Tarin wasn't in some rich man's bedroom or parlor. The man over him, wasn't fat, lazy and useless. He wasn't wearing a collar and he wasn't being forced because the moment he'd said no, Ilan had literally frozen and not moved.

"I'm sorry." Ilan blushed and started to pull his hands away.

"No, it's...it's okay." Tarin caught Ilan's hands and put them back on his hips. His heart was racing even faster now with the odd mix of fear and desire but he had enough control left over from Pelin's spell to hold panic at bay.

"We should stop." Hentra would neuter him if he pushed Tarin, no matter how willing the other man seemed, further than he should. Just because he was able to force the words out, however, didn't mean there was a cell in his body that wanted to stop.

Tarin shook his head. "No...no..." He licked his lips and forced his body to lay down and try to relax. "I'm okay, just had...had a moment...it's okay...it is..." He arched his hips and tried to rub them into Ilan's but the Feral moved away just enough to stop him.

"I don't want to but we should..." He protested again but Tarin arched up and this time Ilan let the man below him cover his lips in a kiss that felt desperate. The trouble was Ilan wasn't sure he could stop with those burning lips on his own.

Tarin shook his head. "I still want this..."

"I'm not as skilled as you." Ilan confessed.

The words made Tarin laugh in a dark and impatient way. "I know."

"I want..."

Tarin reached up and gripped a handful of the hair that seemed to be everywhere. "Since you're not going to fuck me, do what ever you like...just...do something!"

"I'll try not to disappoint." Ilan moved to the ties of Tarin's pants again only this time his hands paused over the leather. "May I?"

"Shit!" Tarin cursed and quickly yanked the leather ties open and let his pants part open. He wanted to wait for Ilan to do something but the sudden release of pressure on his aching cock was too much. The air felt good against his aching length and he pushed his hand inside to start to stroke himself.

Ilan closed a hand over Tarin's wrist and pulled his hand out from his pants. No matter how sexy, how hot it would be to watch Tarin stroke himself until he came he wanted more. His body ached to be pressed tighter to Tarin's, to rub and sweat and move with his flesh. It was almost a comforting thought to know he might have a chance to actually lay naked next to Tarin, to give and take pleasure with him but it was an almost comforting thought. He had to take what he could now because there was no promise he'd have another chance.

Very carefully Ilan moved to drag his hands back down Tarin's torso. He was overly aware now of how skittish the man could be with too sudden of a touch. Now he moved with deliberate touch, the way he would with a frightened animal and he followed his touch with kisses. Tarin's feet kicked against the ground and the motion kicked his legs apart. It made room for Ilan to kneel between Tarin's spread thighs. The feel of Tarin's legs rubbing against his body as the pale Outlander writhed drove him half crazy with need.

His lips moved down lower over Tarin's belly. The pale skin trembled and was scented with leather and sunshine and made his own skin feel kissed. His lips moved lower as Tarin's hips twitched up toward him. It was a beautiful site seeing the strong man lay back down, his eyes closed, lips parted as he panted for breath. Tarin's pants were open now and the leather was parted enough to see his desire reddened length peeking out, throbbing it's own begging beat.

Ilan licked his lips and kissed the tip of Tarin's half hidden cock. Tarin's hips popped upward and Ilan found more of the length than he'd expected slipping into his mouth. It made him moan and he gripped Tarin's hips to hold him still. Tarin's whimpers filled his ears as his moans melted into gasping tiny cries. Somehow he'd expected an Outlander's cock to feel or taste differently than one of the people but it didn't. Tarin was hot and when he drew his tongue across the sensitive flesh he shivered in pleasure the way anyone of the people would have.

Tarin's spine arched off the ground and his hands snapped out to grab at Ilan's head. "Wa...wait..." It took a second before Ilan let go from where he was sucking hard and backed away. "It's...it's too much...I can't..." Tarin put an arm over his eyes. "I'm sorry."

Ilan licked his lips and slipped up Tarin's body. "It's okay." He caught Tarin's arm and pulled it from off his eyes but he had them closed. He could see the tension rising in Tarin's body and it wasn't the good kind of tension. Ilan kissed the side of the tense face and nuzzled a little at the side of Tarin's neck. "It's okay....it's okay..." He whispered again as he gently slid his hand into the parted leather.

The touch along his cock was wonderful and yet at the same time not as overwhelming as Ilan

sucking on him. It was too much for him to stay calm and keep panic at bay. He was trembling between pleasure and release and fighting desperation. He arched and wiggled under Ilan, sighing and shivering as his hand stroked him. Tarin's hands flexed against Ilan's back, scraping, clawing to pull Ilan closer while he fought with the need to push him away.

His spine arched tightly as his head fell to the side and Ilan nuzzled and kissed the corded muscles. "Too much...I..."

"shhh." Ilan soothed but he nearly jumped out of his own skin when a hand forced it's way into his pants. The ties were loosened just enough to allow Tarin's hand to creep inside. It turned his comforting shushing into moans of his own. His hand on Tarin's cock, Tarin's hand on his own and it felt like they were one. When he stroked, Tarin stroked, when he squeezed, Tarin did as well. It was a beautiful mirrored reflection.

It wasn't surprising that neither of them lasted very long. Tarin arched first, his jaw clenching shut and the whimpering, gasping cries went silent as his body trembled, shivered and came. It spilled hot sticky release over Ilan's hand and it was feeling Tarin rippling below him, feeling him coming against him, that pushed him over his own edge. He nipped at Tarin's neck, moaning as pleasure consumed him. It wasn't as good as sex, not by far, but it was good and as Ilan licked Tarin's neck and sighed against the damp skin he worried it could easily become additive.

Tarin's jaw was clenched so tight he was worried that he could break his teeth or snap a bone. The fear was there, stalking him, but it was being held back now by sheer raw pleasure. He made as little noise as he could because he'd always been required to make plenty of noise before. Not having to now made the pleasure sweeter, and as he drifted down, his hand sticky, the feel of Ilan's breath against his damp skin his body shivered in reaction. He wanted to pull Ilan closer, he wanted to push him away but his body was too exhausted and all he could do was lay there, under Ilan's weight, trying to catch his breath. A hand petted his hair and the touch was just clumsy enough to not send him spiraling into panic.

"Tarin?" Ilan whispered and was surprised his voice was so hoarse. "Tarin? Tell me you're okay." If Tarin wasn't he was pretty sure he'd have to change his name and disappear to avoid Hentra's wraith.

"Yeah." Tarin forced out. He elbowed Ilan in the ribs. "Get off of me."

Ilan nodded and rolled to the side. Hands slipped from inside leather pants but he stayed where he had fallen. Sweaty, pants open, hand sticky and feeling better than he had in years. The air felt too clean, the sky peeking between the leaves and branches was too blue and Ilan wanted to roll back over, climb on top of Tarin and see about going further. "That was... that..."

Tarin sat up. "Close your pants, someone could see."

"I don't care." Ilan sighed. "That was...that was..."

"Thank you."

"It was Pelin's doing but I'm glad for it." He grinned and glanced over but Tarin wasn't smiling. He wasn't frowning either. The look on his face was more empty shock and it worried Ilan enough to sit up and close his own pants. "You're welcome. I was glad to help."

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Chapter Forty Two

Tarin glanced over to catch the sated grin on Ilan's face but didn't see anything malicious or mocking there. He wiped his hand on the grass and tried not to grimace at the feel. His skin was cooling down in the light breeze and it made him feel more naked than he really was. It wasn't a feeling he liked and he moved quickly to get his shirt and pants closed back up.

"Here." Ilan shoved the handful of leaves at Tarin. "Crush them in your hands, they'll clean things up. Scouts use them on patrol."

He frowned at the green leaves and up at Ilan before accepting them. He was skeptical but when he rubbed the leaves between his hands they shredded. The shreds became small pebbles of green that were damp but not wet and did a decent job of making his hands clean. By the time he let the crushed leaves fall away his hands not only looked clean but felt so as well. "Thanks."

Ilan crouched back down and restrained the need to brush some of the odd black hair back off Tarin's face. "You okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Have dinner with me tonight?"

"What?" Tarin angrily pushed his hair back from his eyes and hated that it hadn't grown out enough yet to tie back again. There was a reason, and it wasn't fashion, that he liked his hair longer. He hated having his hair in his face.

"Have dinner with me." Ilan asked again and tried to read the look in the bizarre eyes. "Please?"

"I thought you had people talking to you all evening?"

He shrugged. "They can live without me for one evening. Is that a yes?"

"Why would you want to have dinner with me?"

The suspicion was almost amusing. "Because I'd like to talk with you with food and wine as a buffer between us instead of awkward emptiness."

"I don't think we have anything to say to one another."

Ilan leaned forward and very gently touched the back of Tarin's hand. "I don't think that's true. Why say no? You have to eat don't you? And we should discuss what we're going to do when we try this again tomorrow."

He pulled his hand back but it wasn't because the touch was offensive or bothersome. He pulled

his hand back because the gentle touch felt good. It was almost comforting and that was almost more disturbing. "I'm not going back in there."

"Pelín won't pull that trick again. I promise you that, he's..." Ilán sighed and glanced up to the branches above them. "He means well but he's a creature of lust and cleverness but he's not malicious. We have to go and try again. I don't think the answers we found today were the ones we were looking for. Though I have to admit, I did enjoy the answers we did find."

"That wasn't me." Tarín protested again. He pulled back and pushed himself to his feet. There was a look in Ilán's eyes, something soft and warm, that made him nervous.

"It was part of you." He glanced up legs that looked far too long to a strong ass and arms. "If it wasn't Pelín couldn't have drawn it out." He pried his eyes off of the strength in Tarín's arms to catch the worry on his face. "That's not the issue right now. The issue is that we still don't know why the Trees called you. We need to try again. I'll be more alert next time."

"Damn it." He cursed and shook his head. "Can you promise this won't happen again?"

Ilán stood up and stood as close to Tarín as he thought he could get away with. "I promise."

Tarín nodded. "I still want answers."

"Good, me too. So, dinner tonight?"

"I..." He sighed and glanced around but there was nothing in the clearing to distract the other man with. "Yes, that's fine."

"Good. I'll see you tonight." He smiled warmly. "Would you like me to walk you back to camp?"

That would feel like being escorted and he wasn't sure he could do that without punching Ilán. "I think I can manage." He could hear the mocking in his tone of voice but doubted Ilán understood his accent.

"Good. I'll see you tonight?"

Tarín nodded and started to turn to go but a hand caught his shoulder and half spun him. He reached to the hilt of his sword but as his fingers curled around the comfortable metal Ilán pushed against him. A thigh slipped between Tarín's own and with the tight leather there was little between their bare flesh. A hand pressed against his chest and another settled against his neck. His reaction to the touch was as it always was, to push it away and make sure the person touching him never touched him again. Before he could shove Ilán back a mouth settled over his own.

The kiss was warm and gentle. It caught Tarín completely off guard as Ilán's lips moved against his own in a soft and careful way. The hand at his neck didn't clench tighter. The mouth against his own didn't try to pry his lips apart to make him vulnerable. Even the thigh between his legs was still and steady, neither withdrawing nor rubbing forward in mocking tease. It was just a kiss, light and warm, almost shy and it pushed for nothing more than what it was.

Ilán broke the kiss with a sigh but he moved back out of Tarín's personal space quickly. "The path is a few hundred feet that way, once you find it follow it back. Until tonight..." He smiled at the surprise in Tarín's eyes and didn't point out that his lips were parted, almost asking for more of a kiss. He was pretty sure he'd get punched if he tried to kiss him again. Instead of staying and risking temptation again, he stepped back and let the forest swallow him.

If Tarín hadn't seen it he wouldn't have believed it. Ilán stepped back and in to the tree line. He had his eyes on the other man, he knew he hadn't taken his eyes off him but he just, dissolved.

One moment he could see where Ilan was walking and the next it was as if he hadn't even been there. It was more than a little unnerving and it left him standing in the clearing alone and trying not to think too much about how he had done that. Instead of thinking about it too hard he moved quickly to find the path and return to the camp.

Ilan made it out of sight and paused. He wasn't worried about Tarin getting lost, he knew the Outlander could find his way back to camp even if the man had little experience in the woods. That wasn't what he was concerned with so he made sure he was far enough away and he stopped.

"I know you're there. You may as well come out." Ilan said softly.

It took a second but the branches around him rustled. A form moved in one of the branches before Lenno swung down and dropped to the ground. "I'm sorry, Elect, but I wasn't spying."

"I know."

"Shandro asked me to follow Tarin when he's away from camp. I think he's worried a bear might try to eat him if he's left alone for too long. I didn't intend to see..." But he couldn't stop himself from blushing.

"I know." He answered gently. "You care about him. This isn't merely an assignment for you."

It wasn't a question but Lenno nodded. "He's a good man, for an Outlander."

"What is you wanted to say that you aren't?"

He liked his lips and dropped his eyes. "Don't hurt him, Elect, please. He's more fragile than he seems."

"What did they do to him? Do you know?"

"I..." He was torn between being loyal to Ilan and his people and the trust Tarin had placed in him on the night they'd gotten a little drunk together. "It would be best if you ask him for yourself. What words I could use wouldn't do his pain justice."

"I like him, Lenno. The more I learn of him, the more I do."

"Elect?"

"Yes?"

"I don't think he was ready for...for what you two did." Lenno had no objections to men lying together. Even though he wasn't so inclined generally that didn't mean he hadn't experimented like most men of his people. He just didn't like having to think about Ilan having sex, it was like thinking about his father.

Ilan wanted to deny it but he couldn't. "I know. I know he's not and it wasn't my choice. Something happened in the Trees..."

"It's okay, Elect, you don't have to explain to me."

"I would like to. He cares about you and your family. It wasn't my intent to take advantage of him in that state."

"Forgive me, Elect, but if you hadn't I would have questioned your motives. I'm not sure I could have refused him in that state."

That made Ilan smile softly and it was only with that smile that he understood he'd put back on the mask of the Elect he always wore. "Thank you. I promise to be more proper with him tonight."

"Elect? With all due respect, if you want him you'll need to push the issue with him. He won't, he isn't able to approach you but..." the last thing Lenno wanted to do was give relationship advice for the Elect and an Outlander. "But if he wasn't attracted to you he wouldn't have allowed what's already happened. No matter what happened in the Trees. He would have stopped you."

"You think so?" He ran his hands through his hair and tried to pick out a few stray leaves that had gotten tangled into it.

"I do." It was such a fine line but he'd seen something from the Outlander while he was held in Ilan's arms that he hadn't expect to ever see. The man had looked like he was lost in pleasure and more, he'd looked like he felt safe. It wasn't a look Lenno had seen in the stubborn man in the weeks he'd known him. That was the only reason he was even considering speaking a little of what Tarin had entrusted him with. "Tarin's been broken for too long. It's the only way he knows but he's still human with human wants. He would have stopped you. I promise you he would have."

That was the tiniest bit of encouragement and Ilan snatched at it. "Will you make sure he finds me for dinner, tonight?"

"I will, Elect."

"With your permission, I'd like to take him someplace private for dinner."

"You don't need my permission, sir."

"I know, but I will respect your input."

"I think getting Tarin away to someplace private would be a good idea. He has a difficult time being himself around others."

Ilan's thoughts were spinning and he only had a few hours before dinner to make everything ready. "Will you continue to make sure he's okay until he reaches camp?"

"Of course."

"Thank you. I'll need you near by tomorrow afternoon as well. We're going to go into the Trees again. I would feel better knowing you are here watching over us." It was the truth. Ilan was comfortable inside the Trees. Even if someone pulled his body from where it was in physical contact with the Elder Tree he would be okay because of his skill level and training. Tarin wouldn't be so lucky and he'd feel better knowing someone would be near by making sure Tarin was being taken care of. He didn't quite trust that a Holy One wouldn't happen by and pry Tarin away. It would make it easier to focus on what he had to do.

"I would be honored, sir."

"Good, until tomorrow. Please, go, make sure he gets back to camp safely." Lenno nodded his head. "Thank you, sir." It was a high honor and he wasn't taking it lightly. That

didn't mean he wasn't eager to get away from the Elect and almost as much as he was to get home to find his aunt.

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Chapter Forty Three

Tarin wasn't sure how he found the path because he wasn't thinking at all let alone thinking clearly. In the city that kind of distraction would have gotten him killed. There was always up and coming swordsmen looking to make a name by taking out someone higher on the food chain. He didn't mind going down that way, death wasn't something he feared or courted. Most days he was tired and the idea of someone besting him was welcome but he didn't want it to be because he was lazy or sloppy. He was sure being so distracted could get him killed in the woods as well he just didn't know where the dangers would come from which almost made it worse.

When he found the trail his mind shut off even more as his feet followed the path. There just didn't seem to be any thoughts in his head, for good or bad. It wasn't that he was numb because his body still was tingling but maybe it was a stillness. He felt no pain, no distant worry that made him flinch from shadows. There was no grief or pain and even the exhausted depression that tended to take over his thoughts when he was tired was gone. What was left was a blank stillness, a sense of some slate wiped clean and he moved through the trees feeling unsure what to do next.

The camp was busy with life. People moved around, talking and working. The life around him made him feel out of step and uncomfortable. It was too much on nerves that felt exposed and he found himself moving to his camp to gather a towel and a change of clothes. The truth was he was a creature of the city and the life and noise should have been comforting. The trouble was the life and noise around him wasn't the right kind to be helpful and he needed some privacy and silence.

He'd suspected the small pool where Ishvan's family bathed wasn't as public as he'd been told. Maybe it was their position as the defacto leaders of the Scouts or the fact that they were hosting him but when he turned the corner and found the spot empty he didn't care, he was simply grateful. It felt good to strip away his clothes and slip into the almost too cold water. He'd never have guessed how much he would enjoy swimming but he did and it soothed both his body and his mind to let the water surround him.

When his arms were tired and the mostly healed wound on his leg burned he moved back to the shallow water. He methodically bathed and shaved just because he was there. A small back corner of his mind was grateful that he'd been able to clean up after his encounter with Ilan. It wasn't so much that he'd been feeling dirty like he was used to after sexual contact but he hadn't felt clean either. Being forced to remain sticky and dirty was often required of him to the point

that it had almost felt normal. As the soap was carried away by the gentle current of the river he felt some of his queasiness float away with it.

"May I join you?"

Tarin glanced to the head of the path and wasn't surprised to see Shandro standing there holding his own small stack of toweling and fresh clothes. "It's more your river than mine." He waved to the water and let himself fall back onto the ground. The towel was barely wrapped around his hips but he wasn't in a rush to dress. The sun was warm and felt good against his drying skin.

"Thank you." He put the stack down and started working on unbraiding his hair. "I'm always shocked to see how pale you are. My first thought is that you must be ill."

That made Tarin smile thinly. "If I stay in the sun too long I'll turn red." He wasn't adverse to conversation but he was grateful when Shandro stopped trying to talk to him and waded out into the water to bathe. It gave him more time to lay in the sunshine and soak in the silence.

"You took the stitches out."

Tarin lifted his head to see which wound Shandro meant and saw the man nod to his leg. "It was healed enough."

"Should have waited a little more. How many times did that tear open?"

"Too many. It's fine. I just hope the rope burn on my neck is gone before I go home. It'll be difficult to explain." He rubbed his eyes. "I need to go home."

Shandro rubbed water from his hair and sat on one of the rocks near the water's edge. "There's no rush is there? You've seemed happy."

"I don't belong here. I...I'm not myself here. This place makes me something I'm not. I feel like I'm losing who I am."

"Maybe you're not, maybe you're finding yourself for the first time."

That made Tarin frown. "At home? I know the rules, I know what and who I am, I'm okay with that. Here? Everything is backwards and sideways and I don't know...I'm just lost." His voice faded away at the confession.

"I don't think you're lost but I do think things are changing for you. Not saying that's a bad thing. If you'd stayed in your cities you wouldn't have seen so many new things."

Tarin sat up and ran his hands through his hair. Shandro was not watching him, the other man was busy brushing out his hair and working on braiding it. It made him want to talk to the other man. He had a crazy moment to wonder if he was Ishvan or Lenno if he would turn to Shandro for advice that only a father figure could offer. The thought alone was almost beyond his consideration because he'd never even had the option before.

"Something on your mind?"

"What?"

"You've been staring at me like you want to say something but aren't sure if you should. You're welcome to, I'll listen."

The offer was right there. It was a chance Tarin never had been given and one he had never expected, certainly not for personal matters. The choice made Tarin's stomach cramp up and he

wavered between desire and fear.

"You and Ishvan okay?"

"Huh? Oh, yes."

"Lenno?"

Tarin shook his head.

Shandro grinned. "Did my wife stick her nose in where she shouldn't have?"

"No, you've both been kind to me. I'm fine."

"If you say so."

Even how Shandro refused to pry further made Tarin want open up and he wasn't even sure what he'd say if he did. "I'm having dinner with Ilan tonight."

"Alone with the Elect?"

"Yes."

"That's quite an honor."

"He annoys me."

That made Shandro laugh. "I can see how he might."

Those were easier confessions than the one he really wanted to make. "He...we...sort of...kissed." The confession made Shandro's eyebrows go up but the man didn't look too shocked. "And it wasn't bad."

"A kiss shouldn't be bad." Shandro answered softly and made sure he wasn't watching Tarin too closely. He hoped if he gave the Outlander some privacy he'd continue talking.

"I should go back to my people."

"Because of a kiss?"

"Because of what it means. I wouldn't have allowed it where I belong."

"Allowed it or enjoyed it?"

"Both?"

"Than it's a good thing you're here. You should enjoy it, Tarin and with the right person you should allow it."

"You're not upset that it's your precious elect?"

"Not in the least, he's been too isolated and I believe he can be trusted with you. He can be a bit single minded but he's a kind man." Shandro glanced over and saw the conflicting emotions on the pale face. "You want him."

It wasn't a question but the bald honest statement made Tarin feel more naked than his exposed skin. "It frightens me." The words fell out before he could stop them.

He twisted the last section of his hair into its braid before he spoke again. "Given your past, I would be concerned if you weren't. When Hentra returned to me, all I wanted to do was hold her. I had been mourning her as lost and suddenly she was here but when I went to kiss her she pulled away from me."

"You shouldn't tell me these things." Tarin shook his head and dropped his eyes.

"Of course I should. She told me I should if it felt proper to. She and I had a relationship of years, built on love and trust and she was attacked for a very short time. Most of her time with your people was degrading but not abusive but it was enough to make her pull from my touch. She was frightened but, together, we worked through her pain. How can you expect not to be frightened? My only concern is that the Elect...that Ilan as the young man that he is, may not understand the way he should but I have no doubt that he would never deliberately hurt you." Shandro wanted to move closer and sit by the young man's side but he had to keep reminding himself that Tarin wasn't one of his sons. "You should talk to him, if you can, so he understands."

"I should go back to my people." The words carried less weight with the comforting warmth of the sun and the safety to rest in that warmth without worry of being attacked.

"Would you like me to braid your hair?" It was something he'd do for his children when they were upset. Tarin gave him a look that said he thought the other man was a touch mad and Shandro laughed. "I will accept that as a no. Your people are a strange lot."

"My people?" Tarin snorted but something tight felt loosened in his shoulders. It seemed to loosen up his need to hide from the bustle of people around him and got him moving to get dressed.

Tarin moved away from the river and back into the camp. The movement around him didn't feel as harsh as it had but he still very much felt like an outsider. He wasn't up for conversation, even the most casual of conversations so he found a quieter area and a tree he could sit against. Before he could settle down he looked a little sideways at the tree and figured he'd just have to risk it now that he'd never really look at a tree the same way again.

He settled down and found himself comfortable almost right away. Being away from the city was feeling more and more normal and that worried him. Worse, as he sat alone and apart from the Ferals around him he watched them but he didn't really watch them. He should have been studying their movements and actions. He should have been looking to see if there was a way to gain an advantage from their patterns. Normally he'd be planning escape routes and emergency plans but instead he simply sat and watched. He didn't think he was losing his edge it just didn't seem as important to try to get away anymore. He stayed there, alone and oddly content, until it was close to dinner and he finally stood up.

A small part of him wanted to go back and join Ishvan and his family for dinner like he did every night. He wanted to do it out of spite and leave Ilan waiting in vain for him. It would be petty but would make him feel better in a childish way and give him an excuse to not spend time alone with the other man. Somehow that felt a little dangerous now and Tarin wasn't feeling all that brave anymore.

His feet didn't take him back to his own camp. They carried him toward where Ilan's own tent settled off by itself alone. Only the fire outside was lit but small and nothing had been cooked over it and no food sat near it. He frowned but there was no Ilan nearby and he stood, unsure if he should go inside the tent or wait outside. He was just about to give up and leave when Ilan hurried toward him. That was a sight that he hadn't expected to see, Ilan in a rush.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to keep you waiting." He said as soon as he was close enough to talk freely.

Tarin shrugged. "Wasn't waiting long. I thought we were going to have dinner."

"We are." Ilan grinned. "Just not here."

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Chapter Forty Four

"What?"

"Not here. If we sit and share food here do you really believe we'd be alone? There would be eyes watching every thing we do. I for one would like to have some actual time alone to relax. Don't look so worried, you're merely my excuse to be selfish." Ilan tried not to sigh. "Still willing to share a meal with me?"

It felt too late to back out so Tarin nodded. "Of course."

"Good, up for a walk?"

"I think I can manage." He let the sarcasm grow thick but if it bothered Ilan the other man didn't let it show.

He followed beside and slightly behind Ilan as they walked through the camp. It wasn't a conscious choice but from years of being hired to guard people. Ilan projected the same sense of power and command that the people that hired him did and he fell into the same role he tended to fill with men like that. It wasn't necessarily a bad thing. He wasn't sure how the Ferals around them would like to see Tarin acting as if he thought he was an equal. He didn't care if they watched, he was used to being stared at, so long as people left them alone.

Once they were away from the camp proper and on a trail Ilan slowed down which forced Tarin to walk side by side. He fell into step easily and having Ilan beside him didn't feel uncomfortable or unusual. They didn't talk and the only sound was the simple noises of the forest. Tarin was surprised to find he'd really come to love the sound of the wind blowing in the trees around him. He wasn't sure if Ilan understood that, shared that feeling or was simply preoccupied by other thoughts, he was just grateful the other man kept his mouth shut.

"Where are we going?" Tarin finally broke down and asked as the sun was starting to get low against the hills around them and the shadows being cast by the trees were getting longer.

"We're nearly there. I wanted a place where I knew we could be alone." He turned and tried smiling at Tarin to put him at ease but the Outlander wasn't being soothed so easily. All it did was earn him more suspicion but he didn't worry about that, they were nearly there.

"Water?"

Tarin asked several yards before they could actually hear the stream. "Yes, it feeds into the river, too small to swim in but it's nice. I come here to meditate and be alone."

He followed Ilan around an outcropping of rocks. The stones pushed up out of the dirt and formed a semi half circle around a clearing that opened against the small stream. It made the spot feel a thousand miles away from anyone else, private and safe. A smile fire glowed in front of a smaller tent. The camp site was placed to take full advantage of the privacy.

"That fire isn't big enough to cook dinner with and it's late."

"Dinner is already made."

"Oh?" Tarin moved into the camp and it wasn't just a place to have dinner. "This is a full camp."

"I know, it took me all afternoon to set up." He grinned. "And to cook."

"You cooked?"

Ilan nodded and knelt by the fire. "Don't look so shocked."

"Not shocked but I am wondering what we're going to have for dinner. I'm hungry."

"Funny." He'd cleared the space around the fire he'd built and brought some fallen logs near it to sit on. They were low and almost the same as sitting on the ground but it would keep the damp out. The food was placed near the fire to stay warm and he easily served it onto the waiting plates.

Ilan held a plate out toward him. "You sure it's safe?" He asked as he accepted what looked like roasted rabbit stewed with vegetables with flat bread on the side.

"I'm sure." He deliberately didn't watch the Outlander the way he'd ignore a nervous dog and just let him settle in on his own. It was a plan that seemed to work and he busied himself with pouring wine into wood cups. "Here."

Tarin accepted the squat wood cup and sniffed it. "I don't generally drink."

"I think after today we both should start."

It might be a bad idea but Tarin couldn't debate it. "I'm starting to like this." He sipped at the sweeter liquid before placing the cup onto the cleared ground. "Food's not bad either."

"Thanks. The Holy Ones didn't feel it was important that I learn things like cooking and tending my own camp but I made sure I learned."

"Of course they wouldn't want you to learn. The less you can do for yourself the more you have to rely on them." The food wasn't just decent, it was bordering on delicious.

"They aren't malicious."

"I didn't imply that, just, it's easier to sway someone that has to count on your support. If you can't function alone without someone, they own you."

"I am owned by my people. Ownership isn't always a bad thing."

Tarin snorted.

"Is it easy? No, it's never been easy but I am honored to serve. I hope one day to be owned by another too. One that I can love and be loved by in returned. Don't you wish to be owned in a manner like that one day?"

Tarin's first thought was of Ana and it made his heart hurt but not bleed like it would have a few months before. He'd loved her deeply, more than he'd ever expected to feel about anyone and her loss was shattering. Those were wounds he couldn't verbalize to Ilan. "I've been owned, Your Grace, it's not a word I would toss around lightly."

The acidic tone surprised Ilan but he saw behind it. "You have loved someone that deeply. Did they leave you? Did you leave them?"

"I don't see how this conversation is important for us to have a course of action on going back into the Trees?"

"Tell me what happened with him first."

Tarin raised an eyebrow but the contents of the wood cup slipped down his throat. "Her."

"A woman." The surprise was obvious in his voice. "I had just assumed with this afternoon...you seemed to enjoy being with me."

"Her name was Ana." The last thing he wanted to do was explain to Ilan that his preference was no one.

"Ana, I bet she was beautiful."

That made Tarin smile a soft, painful smile as he poured more of the sweet wine into the small wood cup. "No, she wasn't. She was quite plain. She never once tried to own me."

"She was the woman that you brought to help Hentra?"

"Yes." It was an aching wound.

"I'm sorry for your loss. If I'd known she was no long in this world I wouldn't have pushed you to speak of her." He softened his voice and swirled a bit of bread in the last of his dinner. The sun was gone now, set below the hills and the small fire glowed warmly against the darkness.

"Ishvan tell you that?"

"No but if she was still living he would have attempted to bring her along. Since he hasn't, it could only mean one thing. I'm sorry. I can't imagine how much it must have hurt you."

"Wasn't the first time and won't be the last."

Ilan shook his head but he didn't want to pry any further. It was enough that he knew that the person Tarin had loved was not going to stand between him and the odd Outlander. All he did was make sure Tarin's cup stayed full.

The night went silent but for the sound of the fire crackling and the insects and frogs singing around them. It was the silence that Tarin needed but the thoughts in his head were no where near as silent. Shandro's advice rang around his head about trying to make Ilan understand but the words were sticky.

"About this afternoon." He finally forced out when yet another cup of the wine disappeared in a

few quick swallows. "I wanted...Ilan..."

"You don't need to speak of it. I'll understand if it was a one time thing that won't occur again."

"No. That wasn't what I was trying to say." He leaned over and snagged a small log to feed into the fire. "I've never...Jeses this is hard to speak of."

"Tarin."

"This afternoon was the first time I've been able to enjoy physical contact with anyone when it was shared willingly." He kept his eyes on the fire and pretended the words didn't matter. "I don't know how that creature Pelin did it, I'm not even sure if it was actually real and not some twisted dream but I'm...I'm glad for it."

"As was I." Ilan moved a little closer to where Tarin sat but he moved slowly and subtly.

"Where I'm from, people tend to think that I have no emotions, that I feel nothing. It's not true. I get lonely. Some days I think that's all there's left of me, just pain and loneliness. I would do almost anything to just be able to stand someone putting an arm around me but I can't." He was whispering now, confessing to the fire and it wasn't the words he'd intended to tell Ilan. When Shandro's advice had sunk in he'd planned to tell the Feral all about his sordid and horrible past. The desire had stemmed less from trying to make him understand and more from trying to disgust him enough that he'd want nothing further to do with him. The trouble was that once he started talking it wasn't the physical side of his history that poured out.

"I can understand that feeling. In that regard, you and I are quite alike."

"You'd think death would be the worst thing that can happen to you, it's not, you know. It would have been easier to die. I could have done it. Even as a child I knew I could anger a master enough that he'd forget how much he'd paid for me and kill me. All I wanted was to live until they wished something of me..." The memories were bitter but hazy. They were shaded by a veil that kept them from being too real, too close to him and he needed that.

"What did they ask of you?" Ilan asked as gently as he could.

"No, you don't get to ask me that." He wouldn't have told Shelee and he wasn't going to tell Ilan.

"I'm sorry."

"There's worse things than death and once you know what that is..." He shook his head. "After that I would do anything to avoid facing that pain again. They took my soul, Ilan. I knew there was no escape, no way to refuse. They make you enjoy it and hate yourself for it. I can't be touched without feeling..."

"That isn't who you are any longer." The whispered pain in Tarin's voice made his own heart ache but he would have taken a thousand pains if it helped the Outlander ease some of his own.

"But it is." Tarin glanced over and was surprised to find Ilan sitting so close. The other man was close enough that he could feel his body heat. "I wanted..." His hands balled up into fists. "With Ana, I wanted her...I want her love but I couldn't feel it. I wanted...want to feel your hands on me again but I don't think I can. I want to..." He shook his head. "I want you, I want to feel you again." That was a difficult confession but he wasn't blind to the fact that he was being given a chance to maybe, just maybe have a chance to know what it would feel like to be normal.

A hand settled very lightly on Tarin's back, right between his shoulder blades. The touch was subtle but it may as well have been a red hot poker placed against his skin. It burned and made him want to scream all from such a simple touch. Logically he knew he should sit there and take

it but he couldn't keep from flinching away and found himself standing on his feet, glaring at Ilan's startled face.

"I'm sorry."

"No, you don't get to say that and you don't get to pity me." Tarin snapped back. "I don't want pity."

"Okay." He nodded and folded his hands together against his own legs. "What do you want, Tarin. If I can give it to you, if I can make it happen for you, I will."

He knew what he wanted and he wondered if Ilan maybe suspected as well. The quiet, private little camp off in the woods seemed to suggest it but that could just be Ilan wanting privacy for himself. His mind shied away from the words and it would have been much easier to change them to something safer. Tarin had never considered himself a coward and he didn't want to start being one now.

"Make me." He finally forced out. The fire cracked loudly and sparks flew up into the sky.

"Excuse me?"

"Don't let me say no."

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Chapter Forty Five

Ilan sat and blinked up at Tarin as he ran the conversation and words through his mind again. He was skilled with the Outlander's language but he was certain he was misunderstanding what had been said. After checking each word again and again for the third time without finding a secondary meaning that had to be there he swallowed hard. "I'm sorry, I think I had to have misunderstood. What?"

Tarin paced a little around the small camp. "I...I can't...I'm not a coward."

Ilan stood up and stood near where Tarin was walking, five paces one way and then five steps back again. He made sure he didn't stand in the way of the nervous movement but only that he was close enough to be noticed. "I've thought many less than flattering things about you but doubting your courage has never been one of them."

"I wanted to love her but there's something...wrong with me. I wanted her but when we touched I wanted to scream. I couldn't...I couldn't love her..."

"Love isn't the physical. I think she knew you cared for her, if you were as obvious with her as you are right now."

"I'm not...I'm not...there's always been rumors because of my past but I'm not...with men..."

"Well you fooled me this afternoon."

"It's not that...it's anyone. I'm not...interested in anyone. I am but I'm not, it's just I can't..."

"You can't stand it."

Tarin nodded. "Except this afternoon."

Ilan drew a slow breath. "So it's not about me. It's not that you desire me, is it?"

"I..." He glanced over to Ilan and the longing disappointment in the hazel eyes. "Do you care?" The honest truth was Tarin was attracted to the Feral. Even his arrogant manner was a challenge that Tarin wanted but he couldn't stand to admit it.

He shook his head. "No, I guess I don't." But it was a lie and he knew Tarin could see it was a lie.

"You set this up for a reason didn't you? A camp out from everyone else, where we could be alone, a tent...you did this hoping for more."

"Partially, yes but that wasn't the only reason. I wanted a chance to speak with you alone."

"Here's your chance." Tarin stopped pacing. "Do whatever you'd like."

"Tarin..."

"I'll fight but I don't mean to. You're strong enough to stop me, to make me."

"I'm not so desperate for bed partners to hold someone down against their will." The words were sharp and a little angry but Ilan couldn't stop the thoughts that slipped into his mind. With open permission to do whatever he liked to the Outlander his thoughts could easily get base and primal very quickly.

"It wouldn't be against my will. I'm giving you permission. I don't mean to fight but I do, I can't help it."

"I'm sorry but holding someone down to have them in your bed is pretty much a definition of against their will. Besides, Hentra would kill me if she ever found out."

"What's she have to do with this?"

"She's very protective of you. She's threatened to hurt me if I hurt you."

Tarin frowned. "She's not my mother and has no right to do that."

"She really cares about you. And, honestly, I'd rather not face her wrath."

His hands balled up into fists. Part of him was really touched by her protection but the larger part wanted to go and find her and tell her the protection wasn't necessary. "She doesn't speak for me, she can't understand."

"The truth is her threat isn't holding me back, I won't hurt you. No matter how much I may desire

you, I won't hurt you." He squared his shoulders. "And, honestly, I have very few opportunities to be with anyone. When I do have the chance I prefer them to desire me as well. I won't be a lover of convenience. You'll have to find someone else." He watched the look of surprise settle on Tarin's face. Ilan figured the Outlander had never expected his offer to be refused. "We're finished with dinner. We should return to the camp."

"I...no...you're irritating, you know that?"

"I've been told, yes."

"You want me." It was a statement. Tarin had survived long enough to earn his freedom by knowing when someone desired him.

"Yes." He saw no reason to lie.

"Then take me."

Ilan shook his head.

"What? What do you want? Do you want me to say it? Is that what it'll take? Fine, I do want you and I...I enjoyed this afternoon. I'm not used to feeling...." He shook his head. "I'm not used to being attracted to another person. I've never had the choice before. I won't beg you. If that's what you're waiting for you can stop, it's not going to happen."

"I wouldn't dream of asking you to humble yourself." The pride in the lavender eyes made him smile. Ilan reached a hand out and Tarin only flinched a little when he slipped his fingertips over the strange black hair.

"Should we go back to camp? Now that I've made a fool of myself."

"You haven't." Leaving the privacy of their little campsite was the smart thing to do. "We should stay here."

That was all Tarin needed to hear. He paced over to where the jug of wine sat forgotten. This time he didn't bother with a cup and instead took many long swallows right from the container. "Okay. I'm ready. You can tie me down if it'll make it easier."

"How will I know if you truly wish me to stop?"

"Don't stop, I might say to or say no but don't stop..." He was scared silly. "Just, try not to hurt me, please." Part of him knew he had no right to ask that. He was giving himself to Ilan with no conditions and had to simply hope the other man wouldn't do any lasting harm. His hands were shaking slightly as he got his sword belt unbuckled and very carefully laid it on one of the wood logs.

"You're sure you want to do this?"

"I am." But he could hear the fear in his voice and he started focusing on keeping his breathing under control. "If we do this, maybe it'll be easier next time I'm with someone. I want...I want to feel...I want..."

"I understand." The sight of the stubbornly proud outlander stood, shoulder's tense and hands clenched, made his heart pound. Tarin just stood there, waiting and Ilan itched to peel away his clothing and take all that was being offered.

It seemed too good to be true. Ilan was honest enough with himself to admit that he'd set up the small campsite hoping to have some form of continuation from the afternoon but he'd never

expected to be offered so much. He stepped to where Tarin stood, waiting and gently rested a hand on a tense shoulder.

Tarin flinched at the touch but didn't shrug it off. It emboldened him and Ilan let his hand trail down the strong toned arm to the side of Tarin's shirt. Everywhere his fingers touched Tarin's body flinched away but it was small shivering twitches and Tarin held his ground. Even when Ilan tugged at the ties of his shirt, Tarin stood still, eyes down, waiting. He pulled at the ties with a little more force and Tarin still stood there accepting it.

"Will you help me get these clothes off you?" He asked softly.

The thought of standing in the fire light naked made him queasy but he nodded.

Ilan had been assuming Tarin's request was just one of the things people said and not one they really meant. He half asked Tarin to take off his clothing to call his bluff and see just how fair the Outlander was going to take things. The last thing Ilan expected was Tarin's trembling hands to move to the ties on his shirt and pants and for him to be quickly stripping leather and fabric away. Before he had time to comprehend that Tarin was obeying the Outlander was naked and not trying cover himself from sight.

"By the Trees..." It was almost impossible to think clearly about anything with all of his blood pooled into his groin. There was a naked man that was standing waiting for him to do whatever he wanted to him.

"I was better looking when I was younger." Tarin muttered.

"What?"

"The scars."

"Oh, I don't mind them." He let a hand trace a scar on Tarin's side and this time he could actually see the pale skin shiver trying to pull away from his touch. His hands wanted to wander over all the exposed skin but there was no sign that Tarin was enjoying anything. It made him uncomfortable to think that he could just use the other man without him enjoying it in the least. Instead of letting his hands go where they wanted to he slipped down and took Tarin's hand. "Come into the tent with me."

Tarin nodded but it was hard to get his feet to move. He was almost glade he was naked now because the lack of boots was keeping him from running full speed into the woods and not looking back. His heart was pounding in his chest but Ilan seemed much more calm than he'd expected. Standing naked in front of other men generally had more of an impact on the people who were going to take him. He wasn't sure if it was Ilan or the scars and damage his body had picked up over the years but he was grateful he hadn't simply been thrown to the ground and used.

Walking to the tent was the longest few feet he'd walked since he'd worn a collar. It took a small tug from Ilan's hand in his own to get him to duck his head to slip inside. The tent's flap fell closed behind him but enough light seeped through the fabric of the tent walls that he could see well enough. The space inside was much smaller than the tents he'd been sharing with Lenno and Ishvan. It may have been smaller but it seemed the same amount of blankets and bedding where inside. All the fabric made the interior of the tent soft and comfortable.

"Sit." Ilan tugged on Tarin's hand and half pulled the pale Outlander down onto the blankets. As soon as Tarin moved to obey he let go of the tense hand to start stripping away his own clothing. "You sure you want to do this?" He checked again, just to be sure.

Tarin nodded quickly. "Yes." He forced the word out but his eyes were caught on Ilan. The light

was dim but his eyes were caught on the suddenly exposed golden skin. He'd be a liar if he said he didn't find Ilan attractive but there seemed to be a disconnect in his mind or body that failed to connect attractiveness with sexual desire. He had found Ana attractive even though he hadn't been overcome with sexual need for her. It was only when she'd pressed their relationship to become more sexual that he'd wanted her in that way. It certainly didn't help his level of desire that he was frightened to face what he'd agreed to.

"You're ready?" Ilan asked as he lowered himself down beside where Tarin sat with a spine so straight he could have had a rod strapped to it.

He drew a breath, wished he was more drunk than he was. "Yes." He agreed and closed his eyes.

Ilan watched the way Tarin's lips tensed up and how his hands clenched into the blankets. The man looked like he was prepared for a beating not for pleasure and from all Ilan had learned the Outlander may very well expect both. He let a hand pet across Tarin's shoulder before he leaned into the other man's personal space. Just that small movement made Tarin tense up and half flinch.

"I'm not going to hurt you. It's okay...it's okay..." He hated himself but Ilan made a choice when he saw the horrible fear that Tarin was struggling to hide. "It's going to be okay." He petted across Tarin's shoulder again and tugged at it to get Tarin to lay down. He just hoped he was making the right choice and that he wouldn't regret it later.

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Chapter Forty Six

Mentally Ilan ran through his mind all the supplies he'd brought with him when he set up the camp and knew what he needed. The slender cords were strong but not abrasive and used to secure the fabric that made up the tent. They were more than strong enough to secure one single man. As much as he hated to admit it, he wasn't sure he could secure Tarin any other way without harm coming to either of them in the process.

The rope coiled easily around one of Tarin's wrists but he paused as he saw the scars already there from other times ropes had touched the fair skin. He just couldn't do it, as much as he knew he should, he just couldn't tighten the rope enough to be of any use. It didn't matter that he knew this rope wouldn't cut into the Outlander's wrists.

"Do it."

Ilan glanced up from where his eyes had been stuck on the scars and into the wide lavender eyes. "I can't."

Tarin shook his head. "If you don't I'll hurt you." It wasn't an empty threat. Tarin knew he'd fight with every ounce of strength in his body. Ilan still might overwhelm him but it wouldn't happen without pain for both of them.

"I can't when you've had this done to you..." He touched the scars.

"If you don't...I...I..." It wasn't something he could explain easily but he closed his eyes and tried to calm his racing heartbeat. "If I can't fight I should be able to..."

Oddly, it made sense to Ilan. "If you can't fight you might be able to give in and accept it."

He nodded and the breath Tarin hadn't really been aware that he'd been holding came rushing out. As much as he thought the ropes were a good idea, it made him want to vomit when Ilan began to bind his first wrist. Ilan's hand reached for and closed around his free arm but Tarin couldn't quite give in and let his free hand be bound. It wasn't a conscious choice to resist but he couldn't help it. As a slave he would have only attempted to refuse if that was what was wanted, otherwise he would have already been bound and helpless. His life since he was out of a collar almost made fighting such submission a requirement. The only thing that kept him from having to be wrestled down and tied up was his own internal reminder that he wanted this.

"I'm sorry." Ilan whispered as he tightened the rope around wrists that suddenly looked fragile. Tarin's head was tilted back and to the side, his eyes tightly clenched shut but he didn't need to see the Outlander's face to feel the tension in his body.

"Shut up." Tarin hissed out but he kept his eyes shut. As soon as the ropes tightened he was pulling against them with varying degrees of effort. Once he knew the knots were good enough to hold him he started to feel panic creeping in.

Ilan caught Tarin's bound arms as they flicked out toward him. Even with them tied together Tarin still could lash out and hit him. He couldn't have that and quickly looped another length of the soft rope around Tarin's bare waist and before Tarin could pull away he lashed his wrists to his waist.

Tarin tried to pull his arms away from his body and found the new knots as strong as the first. It made a cold sweat break out across his skin but he wasn't going to be a coward now. There was no place in his past for shame or pride and he could feel that broken acceptance creeping back in. He drew his feet up and spread his legs wide, opening and exposing himself.

The movement surprised Ilan because he'd really been thinking that Tarin was going to lay flat and rigid as stone waiting for whatever evil Ilan wished to rain down on him. He was even more surprised when Tarin's legs slipped up and he made himself ready to be used. The sight would have been sexy if the pale Outlander wasn't trembling in fear, his cock soft and almost an afterthought to the pose. It wasn't sexy, it was the position of someone wanting to expedite something unpleasant. He'd been worried that having Tarin alone as they were would be more than his control could handle.

"At another time..." Ilan said softly. "This would be very appealing." He let his hands wander over the places where rope met flesh. The dark fibers stood out in sharp contrast to the milk pale skin. He let his touch drift across Tarin's exposed hip, down the outer edge to the crease of where leg and hip joined and further to touch across the strong legs in soft petting contact. It wasn't soothing as he'd intended and only seemed to make Tarin more tense and nervous.

Very carefully Ilan lifted each leg and placed it back flat onto the cushions covering the tent floor. He'd seen the man practicing with Lenno and the Scouts, he knew Tarin was supple and flexible but the joints he moved were stiff and wooden. The slender feet moved restlessly against the blankets but he didn't pull his legs back up. It took an effort Ilan could visibly see and he tried again to touch and sooth the tense limbs.

"What're you doing?" Tarin's voice was hoarse and rough but his eyes were tightly closed again.

"Touching you, isn't that part of 'do whatever I want'?"

"Why...just..."

"You said I could do whatever I wished and I wish to touch you." He let his hands wander, fascinated by the pale skin exposed for his pleasure. It should have been enough to arouse him but the tension never left Tarin's body. There wasn't any way he could even pretend that the Outlander was finding any pleasure at the gentle contact.

The only small comfort was that while it was very clear Tarin wasn't enjoying himself, he wasn't actively fighting either but it wasn't the evening Ilan had fantasies about. When he let his fingers wander lightly over the flaccid length Tarin's entire body bucked. He pulled at the ropes around his wrists and the tether to his waist but they held tight. His breath stuttered but even from his limited experience Ilan knew it wasn't a good reaction. The sound had more tones of pain and fear than pleasure the flesh below his hand shivered but didn't harden. His first reaction was to instantly remove his hands, untie Tarin and send him back to camp but he fought that. He left his hand resting lightly over Tarin's groin and leaned in over the writhing body. Very carefully he brushed his lips to the tense pair below his and the barely there kiss made the lavender eyes pop open.

Ilan watched as Tarin's eyes darted about a little in an effort to see anything but Ilan's face and when he found nothing else within his field of vision he closed his eyes again. The lips moved, gasping for breath and trying to form words but no sound came out. The panic made him worried about being bitten so he moved onto kissing the side of Tarin's face, his eyes, his forehead, his nose. Light brushing kisses that were gone before Tarin was even able to be aware that they were there.

The gentleness only seemed to making things worse for Tarin. When he'd moved onto kissing the racing pulse in the pale neck sound began to dribble from the panting lips. It was just a soft moaning gasp sound but it wasn't a comforting sound. He'd heard the sounds Tarin made when turned on and these weren't those sounds. When the strong shoulders pushed off the blankets he held them down and still.

One of his arms slipped over Tarin's shoulders and chest using the weight of his own body to hold the trembling man still. It was easy from there to drop down and lay against him, naked skin to naked skin, and hold Tarin close. Ilan stopped touching, stopped kissing softly and just pulled the near panicked Outlander close against him. It was like trying to cuddle a log but he did his best to conform around the tension and fear. For a moment he actually thought Tarin would let him and they'd be able to lay quietly together, just touching skin to skin. Tarin pulled away from his body but he gripped his shoulder hard enough to keep him in place.

"No." The word finally escaped his control and tumbled out.

"It's okay." Ilan whispered.

"No...no..."

"Shhh..." He held the body closer and petted as much of the skin as he could while not letting Tarin escape. When Tarin's arms jerked around more violently this time he reached down and caught the bound wrists. They jerked out of his grip and Ilan struggled but he got a hold of them before Tarin could flail around too much.

"No...let me go...let me go!" Tarin jerked and pulled but no matter how he twisted Ilan was there, pulling him closer, holding him with soft touches and gentle whispers.

"I'm not..." Ilan was struggling now as Tarin's twisting and pulling grew worse. "It's okay."

"No...No!"

"Shhh." He had a good hold on the struggling body now and knew he could keep Tarin from getting away. The more he restrained Tarin the worse his breathing became. It was short and ragged and getting worse. He could feel the man's pulse pounding under his skin to the point where he was almost worried that Tarin was going to make himself ill. It didn't matter, he wasn't going to let go and the more it became clear that Tarin wasn't going to be able to break free the less he struggled but the worse his breathing became.

"It's okay." Ilan whispered and repositioned his grip on the now sweaty body. It let him tuck his face against the side of Tarin's neck.

"P...please...please...st..stop....I...can...can't breath..I can't..."

"You're fine..." Ilan wasn't sure Tarin was but he held on anyway. Tarin still writhed a little, trying to pull away but it was weakly now. He gave in and let Tarin pull away enough to roll over onto his side, half curling up but he followed molding his own body tightly. It would have been a wonderful position, chest to back, arms tightly wrapped around the strong body, his groin pressed close into Tarin's ass, their legs tangled together.

He held on and listened as Tarin's breath grew shorter and the exhales took on a whimpery moaning sound. "Shhh...it's okay." He was going to hold on for as long as it took, even as his own muscles trembled almost as much as Tarin's. It was only a matter of time until he either rode out the fear and panic or passed out and Ilan was going to hold on no matter what it took.

"I've got you..." Ilan whispered and he slipped a hand over Tarin's tightly balled fists. "I'm not afraid." There wasn't a muscle in the Outlander's body that wasn't tense to the point of snapping but the flinching had stopped. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm not...no one is going to hurt you." He kissed the back of a fear sweat damp neck.

The small kiss was one thing too many. Tarin's shuddering whimpered moaning spiked into the sound of something wounded and hurt. There wasn't a gradual release of tension in the bound body but with the release of that horrible to hear sound Tarin suddenly went limp in his arms. He wasn't sure if Tarin had surrendered or passed out and he didn't care. All that mattered was that he'd hung on longer than Tarin had been able to fight and now the Outlander lay in his arms exhausted, weakened and truly vulnerable. It wasn't a place he'd expected Tarin to reach but he was grateful for it as it allowed him to pick at and loosen the knots of the ropes. The bindings fell away and Tarin's arms fell limply. It made him sure that Tarin had simply passed out and he took advantage of the other man's weakness to roll him gently onto his back to hold him in a better position. The body moved without any offered help or resistance and Ilan started thinking about getting some water on hand to offer Tarin when he came to, only as soon as the body settled into its new place he was shocked to find the lavender eyes half open but empty and glazed.

"Shit." Ilan whispered and worried that he'd pushed Tarin too far and broken the damaged Outlander in a very, very bad way.

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Chapter Forty Seven

"Shit." Ilan whispered and worried that he'd pushed Tarin too far and broken the damaged Outlander in a very, very bad way. "Tarin?" Ilan tapped lightly at the still face but the eyes barely blinked and the focus never changed.

He glanced around the small tent but there was nothing his eyes fell upon that offered any suggestions of what he was supposed to do. There was water outside and the small stream. He could dump some over the dazed Outlander or even drag him into the running water. With any luck the shock should snap Tarin out of whatever he was stuck in but if he'd guessed wrong he could do more damage than he'd already done.

There was a good chance Lenno was nearby. Certainly he was out of ear shot and at a distance to give them the privacy that Ilan had worked hard to create but Ilan had no doubts he could call the man in. The two of them should be able to bring Tarin around, maybe, and if not they could get him dressed and back to camp. It was the smart thing to do even if he dreaded trying to explain just how Tarin had gotten into such a state. His pride didn't matter nearly as much as making sure the Outlander was okay.

He had found and was almost pulling on his own pants when another thought occurred to him. It was technically forbidden because it was rare that someone could do it but Ilan knew he could. Even if he hadn't guided Tarin into the trees just a few hours earlier he was willing to bet he still could. It was a horrible invasion of privacy but he could, in theory, slip into Tarin's mind the way he dove into the Trees. Just like the Trees, entering Tarin's mind would force it to form some structure. In theory it would create a world they could share like inside the Trees and he should be able to communicate. It was a huge invasion of privacy because the world would be created from inside of Tarin's mind and he'd have little control over it.

"Well, if ever there was a time." He petted the black hair back from the empty, expressionless face. "Let's get us wrapped up into some blankets first." He pulled blankets up and layered them over their nude bodies. The night air wasn't cold but doing what he was considering doing often left him feeling chilled and the blankets were a welcome weight.

He settled them down, curled up together with Tarin in his arms. It was a position of surprising vulnerability that he had never expected the proud, stubborn man would ever allow. Even more, the weight of his limp body against his own was comforting and felt right on a level that Ilan was shocked by. It was a sensation that he would have enjoyed if there had been any life in the Outlander.

"Okay, here we go."

Ilan took a deep breath and reached out. His eyes drifted shut and he felt it, the web of connections between the Elder trees. It was something he'd always assumed everyone could see or feel, or at the least, every Holy One. It wasn't until he had been older that it sunk in that they couldn't and his level of awareness was unusual. That connecting web made it easy to find an Elder Tree but it hadn't taken much for Ilan to figure out what else that web could be used for.

Once he found the connection it was easy to let his mind glide along it. It glittered and filled him and soon he could spread out along the network but not just the network that connected the Elder Trees but one that seemed, if he looked hard enough, to touch everyone. It was easy from there

to look to the man in his arms and feel how he was connected and then to find the same connection he'd used to take them both into the Trees.

It wasn't the smooth falling into darkness and warmth that the Trees always gave him. In all honesty, Ilan wasn't even certain it would work but he tumbled into empty darkness that didn't feel welcoming so he guessed he was on the right track. It felt like he was fumbling around but he didn't feel fearful or worried and the more he pushed the more it felt right.

When his vision cleared it was the same as when it did in the Trees. There was a moment of light that almost was painful and that quickly dissolved. As his vision cleared he was able to make out the space around him and the more he saw the better in focus it became. It wasn't the beautiful, sun filled glade with the towering tree he was used to waking into.

He was fairly sure almost right away that he was in a room but it wasn't like anything he knew. The floors were glossy marble with intricate colorful rugs covering and warming the floors. The walls were richly styled and while heavy brocade curtains hung where windows should have been, there was only wall behind them. He turned around and found a wide fireplace but no doors. There was a few fancy, ornate carved wood chairs with velvet upholstery.

It was a world far different than his own which made it very clear that he was inside of Tarin's mind. The light came from the fire in the fire place and the candles placed in shiny metal candle sticks but it still kept the room in dimness. He stepped forward and boots clicked on the marble floors. Boots like Tarin wore, Outlander boots that didn't feel right on his feet. Before he could notice what else he was wearing he noticed the only other piece of furniture in the room.

It was a bed, but one unlike any he'd ever seen before. It was huge and made from dark, carved wood with four posters and heavy curtains tied back at each corner. It was easily big enough to sleep an entire family with a mattress thicker than anything Ilan had even dreamed of. It made him want to crawl up across the beautiful blankets and sink into the softness and he may have done just that if he didn't spot Tarin laying face down in the center of the massive bed.

The pale skin stood out like a beacon on the dark bedclothes and there wasn't a thread of cloth covering the Outlander. Only it wasn't the body he was physically holding. The back and shoulders weren't as broad as he was used to and the strength wasn't in the muscles. The black hair was long, curling down below shoulder blades that were too sharp under the pale skin. When he stepped closer it wasn't just the shoulder blades that were too sharp under the skin but the slender elbows and ankles too. It wasn't until he was almost close enough to sit on the edge of the bed that he saw why.

The pale, nude body was, without a doubt, Tarin's but the face was young. The features weren't the developed ones of the man he knew but softened into youth. He wasn't a child but not yet a man either. Ilan guessed the Tarin laying on the bed was a mix of the man he knew and the boy he had been. The boy he'd been as a slave. Ilan could see the ornate gold collar locked on the slender neck.

"Tarin?" He whispered and sat on the edge of the bed. The name drew no response. Very carefully he reached over and let his fingers brush across and tangle in the black hair. The length was appealing and he could have happily toyed with it, the black silken length tangled around his fingers.

The touch did what his name didn't. Lavender eyes opened and the slender boy pushed up from the plush bed. The body moved with graceful ease but he stayed on his stomach, prone and vulnerable. A tongue slipped out and carefully ran over pink lips.

"Master said to be pleasing to you."

It was Tarin's voice but it wasn't. There was no dripping sarcasm and the cynical temper that

always lurked below every word was gone. Instead the words were measured to carry eroticism and Ilan felt a cold shiver slip down his spine to settle in his stomach. He closed his eyes to block away the temptation and reminded himself that he couldn't take advantage of the situation.

"Don't you know who I am?"

A slender hand rose and pale fingers slipped through black silken hair only to release it to fall in a heavy curtain over a bare shoulder. "Do you not find me pleasing? Tell me what you desire, how to amuse you."

"By the Trees..." It would be so easy to take advantage of the man, he doubted he'd ever have a chance like this again. "You have no master any longer Tarin. You don't remember that?"

Tarin slipped across the bed sheets. Long slender legs folded in front of him and Ilan did his best to keep his eyes on the man's face. That was made more difficult when Tarin's hands petted across his own skin. "Do you want to watch?"

"Tarin, please, I need you to think, you're not a slave, not any longer. This is all just in your head."

Lavender eyes blinked and a look of confusion was chased away by sadness. "No..."

The room around Ilan wavered and dissolved. The fancy furniture disappeared but the style of the room stayed the same. There were no rugs on the cool marble floors and Ilan had a sense of people standing outside the circle of light he was in. Tarin was there too but it took Ilan a heartbeat to have the new situation sink in and when it did he thought he might become ill.

There was no fancy bed but the pale Outlander was still nude, or mostly so. The gold collar was still locked around his neck. His hair was tightly braided back. He was down on his knees, his hands encased in gloves that looked like hooves and kept them useless. On his head were pink ears which would have been adorable if they weren't there as a form of humiliation. Protruding from the pale ass was a perfectly carved pink corkscrewed pig tail which was attached to the plug shoved into his body. The worst part was the slender gold ring pierced through the center of Tarin's nose. There was a slender chain attached to the ring and it led to a post that held Tarin in the center of the room. The ring was new and each time Tarin tugged even a little at the ring tears welled up in the lavender eyes and a small trickle of blood slipped from his nose.

Ilan shook his head. "It's not real." He reminded himself but even that reminder couldn't stop him from glancing around to the forms of people just beyond the candlelight. He heard them laughing, heard parts of jokes and mocking and it removed any doubt that this was simply something Tarin's mind had created. At some point, at some time, it had been real.

The difference was, Ilan hadn't been there when it was real. He moved in anger and rage. It took will and strength but he forced the shadowy memory of tormentors away. With a touch to the slender gold chain it too vanished and the gold ring from Tarin's nose but the blood still trickled sluggishly. Ilan wrapped his arms around the slender shoulders and pulled the wide eyed Tarin against him.

"You're not a slave anymore...you've no master now....Do you remember? Do you remember, Tarin? You're free now..." He whispered against the shivering body. "Remember." He willed understanding into the other man and hated that his efforts to reach him had pushed Tarin back into his past. "I'm here, I'm here and I won't let them hurt you...but you have to remember...you have to remember who you are...because I'm not leaving you until you remember...I'm not leaving you alone..."

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Chapter Forty Eight

Hands no longer encased in gloves made to resemble hooves cautiously wrapped around Ilan's body. It was such a small thing but a huge step and it made him smile. Ilan let his hands pet over the tightly braided hair and was surprised when it unraveled and fell loose at his touch. "It's okay...it's okay..." He whispered because there wasn't anything else to say. The scars were gone from the smooth skin but the seared in numbers still marred the otherwise perfect shoulder. Ilan risked running a hand over them, just a brief touch, but even that small contact made the pale body shiver.

"Please..." Tarin said in a small voice. "Please don't..."

"I'm not going to hurt you...do you remember? Tarin do you remember? You're free now and strong. It's okay..."

"Free?" The word was tiny but carried disbelief.

"Yes." His hands stroked over the fragile body in what he hoped was a soothing way. "You're free now and safe and it's okay. You're okay...do you remember?"

"I..." Tarin turned in his arms and wide lavender eyes stared up at him. "I remember."

The world around Ilan dissolved and changed again. This time he wasn't in some fancy room with mocking people and overly ornate furnishing. This time the dim candle light was replaced with glaringly bright sunshine. The floor below Ilan's feet became wood planks that rocked and swayed in a way that would have made him sick had it been real. Wind blew in his hair and Ilan glanced around to find himself on a boat, a huge boat with massive white sails billowed out above him. He spun in a small circle and saw only wide expanses of water in every direction and himself very much alone.

Or almost alone. Tarin stood near the bow of the boat, his hand on the rail and as the deck below him moved he followed it with ease. The black hair was short now, cut to less than an inch that stuck out at odd angles from his head. Thankfully, clothing covered the pale body. It was simple clothes of basic cotton pants that hung to mid calf and a very simple shirt with sleeves that went to his elbows. The gold collar around the pale neck was gone and the pale skin was tanned darker with sun reddened patches on his nose and face.

The too slender body was gone and the Tarin standing before him now was still lean but putting on some of the muscle that Ilan knew the man had. Ilan stepped toward him slowly as to not spook him. "Tarin?"

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

Ilan stepped up and stood beside the Outlander. He drew a breath of salty air deep into his lungs and nodded. "Yes. I've never been on the ocean before. Your people control the coastline."

"It's like flying." A tanned hand with the same graceful fingers drifted over the wood railing. "As Captain, Chisholm was allowed to hand pick his crew. He came to see the rope and line exercises they put everyone through, even us slaves. I was the only one in basic that had come from the harems, it made me different, our sergeant would single me out. Before my turn he hit my leg with the rod so I'd fail but I didn't and Chisholm saw. He saw what I was and knew like everyone did that I was going to end up owned by the army as some officer's whore. He knew my only chance was if he took me, if he gave me that chance." Tarin closed his eyes and tilted his face into the rushing wind.

"He sounds like a kind man." Ilan said softly.

"He was. My training sergeant was pissed. He didn't believe filth like me should be allowed to forget its place. When he heard that Chisholm had selected me he tried to have me. I said no." A small smile flitted across Tarin's face. "I told him no and he beat me senseless and had me anyway. All I could think was that Chisholm wouldn't want me now. His ship would be leaving port and I would still be too injured to be useful. I had lost my only chance at maybe earning my freedom because I'd forgotten my place and dared to say no."

"He waited for you?"

"No. He couldn't but he came to me in the infirmary and said I had two days to be well enough to walk. If I could walk, he'd take me and let me finish healing on board. I could barely stand but I managed to walk. For a time, this ship was almost like having a home." He reached up a hand and rubbed at his eyes and coughed a little to clear his throat. "What are you doing inside my head, Ilan?"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't be..."

"But here you are."

"Do you remember why?"

Tarin's eyes squinted out over the water. "You were supposed to fuck me."

"I wanted to share pleasure with you but you weren't able to enjoy it so I held you instead." He let one of his hands slip over on the rail to cover one of Tarin's.

His first reaction was to pull his hand out from under Ilan's but the warmth and weight was oddly comforting. Instead of pulling away he turned his hand over, letting go of the railing and curling his fingers around Ilan's. "I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry for. I'm sorry I hurt you, I didn't want to."

"How are you...?"

It was a question Ilan didn't need finished. "There's a residual connection from our time in the Trees."

"I didn't...how long have you been in my head?"

"You don't remember?"

"Everything is... hazy."

"Long enough, I've been here long enough. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

"My past isn't a secret. I'm told in the right circles they're still talking about what I've done and been."

"I think I'm developing feelings for you." Ilan heard himself say and felt a shiver of horror creep down his spine at the stupid confession. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say...I mean..."

"Don't, please don't take it back." Tarin whispered and the wind nearly took the words away.

"I...shouldn't...it's foolish to feel anything. We could never..." Ilan shook his head.

That brought a smile to Tarin's face, a quick flash of emotion that darted away as quickly as it appeared. "Not because I'm damaged beyond repair and not because of the filth of my past but because we're from two different people."

"May I kiss you, Tarin?"

That brought lavender eyes around to lock onto Ilan's face. "Why would you want to?"

"Because you're stubborn and impossible and...and unlike anyone I've ever met." It was an honest answer and he didn't expect it to sway Tarin any but almost before he could get the words out the Outlander was in his arms. It was comforting to feel the strength in the body instead of the lean willow like body of the boy he'd found in the bedroom. The kiss wasn't an all consuming, mind blowing one of passion but something softer. It had a tenderness and a vulnerability that Ilan hadn't expected to receive from Tarin. It felt like what he'd always imagined a first kiss should feel like.

His hands trailed down Tarin's back, his fingertips barely brushing the other man's body. He wanted to hold him tight but he let the distance Tarin kept between their bodies remain. The shorter hair was unusual and it made Ilan grin against the kissing lips when his fingertips traced back upward to brush across the graceful neck and short haired head. He could have stayed on the deck of the large boat, rocking with the waves and sprinkled with sea spray forever if Tarin stayed in his arms but the world around him faded into darkness.

There was no shocking light when his vision cleared again this time. The light was dim and his stomach felt queasy. That was the first clue he had that he'd slipped from Tarin's mind back into his own. The numbness in his arm where Tarin was laying on his shoulder cinched it. He could smell smoke from their fire and Tarin's breath against his skin.

"Tarin? You back too?"

A sigh brushed across his chest. "Yes."

Tarin wiggled and pulled away from him until Ilan let him go. The Outlander didn't go far, just far enough away to lean up and kiss Ilan's lips. It was almost as tender, almost as shy as the kiss they'd shared inside of Tarin's mind. He fought off the need to pull Tarin tight to his body, to roll him under him and take whatever he wanted. It was a force of will to control himself and let Tarin guide them.

"Mmm...wait..." Ilan managed to force out. "We don't have to..."

"I know." Tarin whispered.

Hands on Ilan's shoulder's pushed him down and Tarin half straddled Ilan's waist. "Wait...oh..." The soft kisses made it difficult to think clearly. "We shouldn't..." but he wanted to, even with

Tarin's weight only lightly against him he wanted more.

Tarin shook his head. "I'm not afraid..."

The words made Ilan shiver but he still shook his head in denial.

Tarin's hands settled on either side of Ilan's face, petting it as he continued to press soft kisses everywhere. "I do desire you...I do...please..."

Ilan couldn't help it. Those simple words broke all of his logic that was holding his control in place. His hands cupped Tarin's shoulders and drifted down his back.

"Ohhhh..." Tarin arched against the touch. "That feels...ohhh, please."

Half straddling him became a mere concept as Tarin pressed fully against him, his hips rocking into Ilan's belly. There was no doubt now that the Outlander was enjoying the touch this time, his hard arousal was rubbing against Ilan in a way that was driving him crazy. He let his hands trail downward to cup across the strong ass and helped Tarin to grind tighter into his body.

"Wait..." Ilan forced out. "You don't have to...I mean...ohhh st..stop..." He moaned as Tarin nibbled at one of his ears. He had to catch Tarin and pull him away to get him to stop. "You can have me if you want...if it would be easier for you...I like it, even rough..."

That stopped Tarin cold and he blinked down at Ilan. "You would let me?"

"I wouldn't let you." He reached up and brushed Tarin's hair through his fingers. "I would welcome you." It took a little wiggling but Ilan got his legs to slide apart. "The basket there...little jar inside..." he reached his arm over his head and pointed. "You can do whatever you want to me." Ilan tossed Tarin's words back at him.

It almost was amusing to watch the confusion and desire war on Tarin's face but the Outlander didn't need to be told twice. He slipped off of Ilan long enough to reach the small basket and fumble inside for the tinier jar. Ilan watched as he juggled it in his hands and the look of uncertainty remained. "We don't have to do either, it's okay." Ilan spoke gently and leaned up on an elbow.

"No...I want to feel this..." Tarin studied the small jar. "I just...you're so...to have you...but to have you in me...to even just have your hands on me feels so...so..."

Ilan still had no idea what Tarin would settle on wanting until he watched the Outlander dip his fingers into the small pot. That was his first clue Tarin had made up his mind. He wasn't sure what that choice was until he watched the fingers slip behind Tarin. The lavender eyes fluttered shut as fingers disappeared into his body. Tarin was slicking his own body up and that meant Ilan was going to get to have the shivering body. The thought alone made his hips twitch and his cock weep with need.

"You're certain you want this?" Ilan had to ask as Tarin returned and put a leg on either side of Ilan's hips. It made Ilan's hands twitch to guide the pale hips back.

Tarin nodded. "While I can have it...before I can't again...I want this...want to feel....want...you...please..."

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Chapter Forty Nine

There were very few moments when Ilan wished he was someone else but having Tarin sitting across his body, naked, aroused, almost begging to have sex with him was one of those moments. If he was anyone else he'd already have Tarin below him, twisting in pleasure as he drove them both over the edge. If he was anyone else he wouldn't be struggling to think of why he wasn't all over the Outlander but he wasn't someone else. He had to weigh more than just desire and want before he could give in and he hated being that way as he tried to mentally line up if he should give in or try to convince Tarin to take him instead.

The choice slipped from his hands. Tarin wasn't going to wait to get what he wanted. A warm, slick hand gripped Ilan's length, stroking him and shutting down any attempts to think clearly. His hands slipped up Tarin's thighs, stroking and touching all the exposed skin and shivering at how wonderful it felt to touch someone and be touched in return. He licked his lips and was trying to find the words to agree to anything Tarin wanted so long as they went slowly and the other man just kept touching him. Before he could say anything Tarin arched backwards and Ilan's world dissolved into one of heat, pressure and unspeakable pleasure.

His eyes fluttered shut and Ilan moaned. His hips pushed upward without thought trying to bury himself deeper in the pleasure that was shooting like sparks through his body. He knew this feeling but it was from stolen moments and the rough taking he'd shared with Marcus. As good as it felt, he hadn't intended to take Tarin so quickly but the Outlander had made the choice for him.

Ilan opened his eyes hoping to see the same gasping pleasure he was feeling on Tarin's face but instead the lavender eyes were squinted shut. The look on the handsome face was far from pleasure. From the grimace on the sensual lips it was clear that Tarin wasn't lost in the blistering pleasure Ilan was but instead felt only pain.

"Tarin..." Ilan gripped the hips across his own and held the pale body steady as he sat up. It shifted Tarin's body back a little and the small movement made the man whimper softly. The sound made Ilan wrap his arms around the strong shoulders and he held the back of Tarin's head. "You...you should have...waited..."

"Di..didn't want to..." Tarin panted and tucked his head against Ilan's shoulder and dug his fingers into his back.

"Stubborn...stubborn man..." He breathed against the black hair. "Shhh...it'll pass...I can...can wait...I think..." Ilan's skin had broken out in a sweat and the force of will it was taking to not move was verging on impossible. "But...next time..."

"Shut up." Tarin hissed.

The almost angry words made Ilan grin and comforted him that Tarin was okay. The man wouldn't have snapped at him if he wasn't okay. All he had to do was hold on and let Tarin adjust

to the too sudden joining. He was going to do his best to make sure the Outlander enjoyed himself and if he had to stay still now and not hurt him he would do it

"I'm okay." Tarin sighed.

Ilan would have asked if the other man if he was sure but as he sighed he could feel the tension disappear from his back. He petted his hands across the exposed skin and felt the muscles soften and grow pliable where ever his fingers traveled. There wasn't anything his mind could conjure that could be sexier than Tarin writhing in his arms. Very carefully Ilan rocked the now supple body against his own.

"Ohhh..." Tarin moaned, his back arched as he dug his knees in beside Ilan and turned the small rock into a full on thrust.

It was the last permission Ilan needed. He moved freely now, gliding Tarin against him and letting his hands touch as much of the willing body as he could. Black silk hair tangled around his fingers when he moved Tarin's head closer so he could claim the lips he hungered for. They parted against his own and Ilan moaned. It was one of the best kisses of his life, hungry but gentle and Ilan knew he was addicted.

It wasn't fair that an Outlander could make his blood burn so strongly. He could have courted anyone of his people and had decent odds of winning their affection if not their love. It would be acceptable and safe to care for one of them in ways that Tarin could never be. The trouble was he'd never felt anything near as strongly for anyone before and it just happened that the one person to make him feel alive was an Outlander. Worse, he was an Outlander that was stubborn and proud and possibly the most difficult and sexiest man he'd ever met. It just wasn't fair that seeing Tarin writhing, feeling their bodies join together in hot pleasure made him want to hold the strange Outlander close and never let him go.

"Wait...this..." Tarin protested.

The body he was holding pulled away and Ilan instantly let go of the tight grip he had on the Outlander. "Wh..what's...you okay?" It was the most complicated thought he could express when he was so close to coming.

"This just...I'm...having...difficulties."

"What?" Ilan asked but he looked beyond his own desire and down the lithe body before him. Tarin was aroused but not as much as he should have been and with the close scrutiny the proud length wilted a little more. "Oh."

Tarin folded his arms across his chest and looked down his nose at Ilan. The expression was his normal one of perturbed annoyance and from the neck up no one would know what was happening from the waist down. "This doesn't happen to me."

Gently Ilan tugged at the crossed arms and when he couldn't get Tarin to let them go he moved to brush stray hair back from the upset face. "It happens to everyone. Maybe you're not ready for this, we should go slower." It about killed him to suggest that given how his body was screaming at him for release.

"No." The dark head shook off the gentle touch. "Just finish it."

It was tempting and with Marcus he wouldn't have even hesitated but Tarin wasn't his friend. He was both stronger and more fragile, sweeter and more bitter and he wasn't going to risk his own selfishness doing any damage. He shook his own head in disagreement and felt his body ache in protest.

"Here..." he tugged at Tarin's now tense body and tried to pry him off of his lap but it was a struggle. "Trust me." He asked with his eyes locked onto Tarin's.

With a slight nod Tarin gave in and let Ilan pull and guide him. It took some effort of elbows and knees getting in the way but Ilan got Tarin off of him and back onto the pile of blankets. As soon as he was lain down, Tarin's arms crossed over his chest again but he made no efforts to hide his fading desire.

"It's not that I don't want to."

"I know." Ilan soothed and gently stroked the moonlight pale skin of his lover's side. The blush creeping up and coloring Tarin's face made him smile gently. "Trust me."

That earned Ilan rolled eyes and a doubtful look. He ignored it. Under other circumstances talking about things would work them out but his body was fevered with need and there was no time for talk or room in his head for words. Action was what was needed if he wanted to enjoy the wonderful opportunity being given to him and that meant he had to put aside his own fears of being a horrible lover because of his inexperience and be a man of action.

Without offering any warning, Ilan dipped down and drew his tongue across the embarrassment softened length. The contact wasn't much and it made Ilan blush but the tiny contact made Tarin hiss in surprise and arch a little off the blankets. It didn't sound like a bad hiss so he lapped at the hot flesh again. Marcus had swallowed him whole once and it had nearly blinded him with pleasure but he'd never had a chance to try it himself. The fear of not doing it right had held him back but if he could make it half as pleasurable as what Marcus had done to him he'd have Tarin hard again in short order.

On a good day with only his own touch for company, Ilan could recall almost every breath, lick, nip and kiss Marcus performed on him. It was one of his favorite fantasies but his mind wasn't clear and the reality before him was so much better than any memory or fantasy. With each swipe of his tongue the flesh below him twitched and slowly hardened as Tarin's arms uncrossed and his hands gripped the blankets below him. He may not have very much first hand experience but from the reactions he was getting he was doing a good job of it.

"Ila...Ilan...ohhh that's...that feels..."

The stuttering panting words made Ilan smile. Tarin had wanted to feel, he'd wanted the chance to feel pleasure and what it would have been like had he been given the chance to have a normal childhood. Most importantly, Ilan had wanted to give that to him and it made his worries at being bad at intimacy seem petty and silly. It emboldened him enough to kiss the crown of the recovering length and the responsive flesh made Ilan's lips tingle.

"Tha...that's...oh...don't stop..."

One of Tarin's hands gripped into Ilan's hair, knotting the long length around strong fingers. The touch tugged suggestively, encouraging Ilan to let the growing length past his lips. He moved with care, unsure of his own reactions to such an intimate kiss but he found nothing disagreeable. The firm flesh felt good in his mouth but what was best of all was how every swirl of his tongue, every time he swallowed or breathed drew moans and writhing twitches from his lover. That was the best thing he'd every felt, knowing he could make someone else feel so amazingly good with such a small effort on his part.

"Oh...oh...Ilan...feels...fe..feels..." The words became moaning and Tarin's head lolled on the blankets.

He glanced up the lean body he was giving pleasure to and the sight of Tarin writhing, eyes shut, body tense but in the best way made Ilan's own cock weep with need and want. Only it wasn't

just his flesh that ached but his heart as well. He felt both pride and delight and love all at the same time and it was an intoxicating mix of emotions. As he toyed with the flesh in his mouth, teasing it all to see just what kind of reactions he could wring from Tarin he was shocked at how quickly the Outlander had gone from softened and fading to so hard he was sure the man was about to come.

Carefully, Ilan let the length slip from between his lips. "Want to finish this way?"

"Wha...what?" Tarin asked, his eyes opening but lust and desire had fogged the beautiful color.

The lusty confusion made Ilan feel amazing, it was better than any contact he'd had with anyone, ever. "You can finish this way, I'm okay with it or..." He let a finger slip between Tarin's legs, back across his tightened balls and back to the slick opening that trembled at the gentle touch. The quiver under his fingertips echoed in his own flesh and he half wished he was with Marcus because he could be buried deep in the heat of the other man's body by now.

"I..." Tarin's hips arched and rubbed that soft touch against his body. "I want...I want you in me...I want to finish with you taking me."

"You're certain?" He hated asking but he wanted to be certain beyond doubt.

"I need to feel this." The bold truth made his already flushed face blush brighter. "If you still want me."

"Now that's the most stupid thing I've ever heard you say."

"Shut up and fuck me."

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Chapter Fifty

There was the sharp tone again, demanding when anyone else would have asked and it made Ilan shiver. He caught the long legs and they folded easily up toward Tarin's chest. His rush to rejoin their flesh was a heady emotion and he would have worried about how quickly he leaned his weight over the other man. Only he'd seen Tarin practicing with Lenno, watching every moment he could from a distance. He'd seen first hand how flexible the Outlander was and now the flexibility was under his hands.

It was too much for his control. Tarin willing and writhing, asking for him in ways his mind had never imagined on its own, it drove Ilan crazy with need. Thoughts of gentleness and care were gone and all that was left was the need to be surrounded by the fiery pleasure of Tarin's body.

There was no hesitation and the lithe body pinned below him offered no resistance, Ilan slipped inside of him with ease.

"By the Trees...Ta...Tarin..." He moaned, his lips kissed any inch of flesh he could get below them. His teeth nipped Tarin's neck as his hair fell over his shoulder to cover them both. He opened his eyes as he nuzzled across Tarin's neck, across his face, and found lavender eyes watching him. They were squinted but he could see into them and he saw no fear, not even a hint of worry and the only thing clouding the color of spring flowers was pleasure.

It was all he needed to see to soothe him to let go and take Tarin as deeply, as fully as he'd wanted. Their bodies moved together, Tarin's fingers clawed into his back and each scratch made Ilan drive harder. He knew he was moaning, he could hear himself, but what few gasping sounds escaped from his lover seemed almost shy in comparison and drowned under his own sounds until a shuddering, gasping whimper flooded into Ilan's ears.

The sound instantly sent a worried, sick feeling down his spine but as it went from instant reaction to fully processed the fear disappeared. It was a good sound, one of someone lost in pleasure and no longer trying to control themselves. It made him drunk on the pleasure from the proud stranger and pushed him too close to the edge.

"I...I can't...Ta...Tarin I'm going to..." He tried to warn and there was just enough logic thought left in his fevered brain to remember he was being selfish. Ilan struggled to get a hand free and between their sweat dampened bodies. It wasn't difficult to find the other man's neglected and trembling length but he barely touched the flesh when Tarin's body arched and writhed below him, breaking their rapid rhythm.

That only encouraged him to wrap his hand around the hard flesh and stroke more moans and writhes from the pale man below him. It made Tarin move in random ways that made the strong hips buck and turn below him making Ilan feel almost like he was riding some wild horse that was only half tamed. He saw and felt his lover fighting with his control and he wished he knew what he could do to help make it easier.

"Oh!" Tarin cried out. "OH...ye..yes...pl...please..." Tarin cried out with a shiver to his voice that echoed through his taunt body.

"That's it..." Ilan encouraged, his hand tightened on hip and length making Tarin moan louder. Tarin's head tossed back to the side, his face half hidden under the dark hair and he bit his lip as his body let go and fell into trembling, gasping pleasure.

Hot wetness flushed over Ilan's hand but he was too distracted to really feel or notice. All of Tarin's body was writhing and trembling, clenching and releasing around him and under him. Mixed with the gasping moans and his own pleasure it was almost more than his mind and body could process and stand. His breath caught in his lungs as he tried to hold on to Tarin and his own control long enough to enjoy every heartbeat of his lover's pleasure. It was a futile battle and as Tarin was still gasping with his own moans Ilan's pleasure swept him away.

He was the first person to admit that he wasn't experienced and each time he'd been able to steal time with someone the pleasure had always surprised him but nothing, not one single moment before with someone or alone had been able to prepare him from what washed over him. It was a pleasure beyond what should have been allowed to a human, one that broke his heart and shattered his nerves. It melted him and turned him into a moaning, gasping, desperate thing that clung to the body and soul below him that had made it possible.

His lungs were still straining and burning when sense started to return. His muscles twitched below his skin as if he'd run through the forest until exhausted. A hand was stroking almost tenderly through his sweat damp hair and he clung to that soft, wonderfulness as his body drifted on a cloud of pleasure. He was slumped onto Tarin, half curled along the panting man's side and

dared to wrap an arm around his chest.

"That...that was..." Ilan panted and the hand in his hair stilled.

"Ilan..." Tarin's voice was soft, gentle.

He raised himself up enough to glance down to the handsome man he was still tangled with. The beautiful eyes were closed, the sensual lips parted. "I'm here." He stroked the back of his hand across a face so handsome it didn't look real.

Lavender eyes opened and they had a blank, glazed look to them but behind that was awareness. It was a look that he'd never seen from the Outlander and it surprised him to see what was unmistakably peace in his normally restless eyes. "Thank you."

That brought a gentle smile to his face and he leaned down to kiss the nearest shoulder. "You're welcome."

"I'm human." He sighed and the eyes went shut. The rush of comfort and gratitude washed over Tarin's normally impassive face. "I can be..."

The relief made Ilan stop smiling and some of the lingering glow of pleasure that they'd shared faded into heart ache. "We shouldn't have done this."

"I know." Tarin admitted.

"Why do you have to be an Outlander?" Ilan dropped back down and pulled the pale body close to his own but Tarin tensed a little. It was a small but very sure sign that the languid ease of pleasure and trust was starting to fade. He knew in that moment how futile it all was. "You're going to leave us."

Tarin blinked in dim light. "I don't belong here." His body was sparking in pleasure he hadn't imagined he'd ever be able to feel. It felt clean and good and for just one instant pinned below a man that could have easily taken whatever he'd wanted, he'd felt safe.

"I have feelings for you. I can't help it." Ilan forced an ironic smile. "It just goes to figure that I find the one thing I can't have. The gods must enjoy my misery."

"Stop whining." Tarin scolded and gingerly rolled over onto his side. He was going to be sore for days and regretted being less prudent with his desires. "I didn't think I'd ever be with a man again." The words floated out before he could stop them and almost sounded wistful.

"Was it so bad?" Ilan followed Tarin's movement and loosely curled up along his back.

"It's not that...my people are not like yours." That was an understatement.

Gently, Ilan brushed dark hair into more orderly lines so he could kiss the back of the pale neck. "Obviously."

"Your people think nothing of two people of the same gender..."

"No, we don't. It isn't a primary relationship for most but it's quite common."

"The men of my people don't lay with other men, unless one of them is wearing a collar or being paid."

"They'd think you were a whore?"

"With my past, yes." If Ilan wasn't a Feral and Tarin had found this budding, growing connection with one of his own people who happened to be male, it would cause all manner of problems. He'd have to kill a whole lot of people to keep his respect in the community and he wasn't sure he had the stomach for mass slaughter any more.

"Your people are stupid."

"I could say the same for yours." Tarin shrugged off the continuing gentle touches. "We shouldn't have done this." It felt like there were chinks in his armor that he couldn't patch together with sheer will alone. Chinks that hadn't been there before Ilan and that the man's simple, careful touch seemed to find like arrows.

"I would regret it more if we hadn't." Ilan whispered.

The fingers on his neck wandered over his shoulder and while Tarin wanted to agree that he would have regretted it more if they'd not taken the chance, he couldn't say it.

"They did this when you were a child? Do you remember it well?" Ilan's touch ghosted over the branded scar seared into the pale flesh.

"I don't..." he started with his normal lie. "Yes." The tension had to be forced from his body but he struggled to enjoy the moment. "They put a rope around your wrist to hold your arm out and straight. A band goes around your neck and chest so your torso can't move. They line your number up in a holder and put it in the fire until it's glowing and burn it in all at once. The smell..."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked." Ilan let his hand wander away from the scar. "I want to understand your people but my motives are selfish because now I want to understand you."

"I have an aunt. She's not really my aunt. Once when I was little my master took me shopping. It had been a bad day for me and he was locking the chain to my collar and to a bar outside the shops. I heard a woman crying and found her in an alley, alone, looking like how I felt. It didn't seem right being upset when something bad had happened to her so I talked to her, tried to tell her it would be okay. She was kind to me and I didn't think anything of it until the next time I was taken out and she was there and a few times she smuggled food or candy to me. On days when I thought I couldn't stand another moment without going mad she seemed to be there. She's the closest thing I've ever had to a mother."

"I wish I could meet her."

The thought of Ilan with his leather clothing and odd hair sitting in Shelee's parlor staring over a cup of tea with his odd almond shaped eyes made him smile. "That would be amusing. She tried to buy me once. The first time I came up for public sale but my price went too high. I asked her not to but she tried anyway. It was more difficult being sold with her there, being so close to freedom and just out of reach. Did you see that inside of my head?"

"No. I didn't go snooping about. I didn't mean to see anything but I've never done that before. I'm grateful to have seen the ocean, even if it was through your eyes and not my own."

"I'm not happy that you invaded my privacy like that."

"I'm sorry." And he was, in a way but he also very much wasn't because Tarin was laying almost in his arms and he would have done far worse to get the man into such a position.

Tarin opened his mouth to snap out something acidic and sarcastic but those words faded. "Part of me is grateful someone else knows." He sighed and was starting to feel dirty. "Don't take that as an invitation to poke about in my thoughts anytime you want."

"I would never dream of it." He wasn't sure he could handle more of what he'd seen inside Tarin's memories.

He plucked the hand off his skin. "We're filthy. Did your plans for seduction include bringing soap for us to clean up in the creek?"

"Of course. Towels, soap and all the cold water you want." He hated seeing Tarin retreating but each time he was able to get Tarin to open up a little easier. After what they'd done, Ilan was fairly sure he had the skills to crack the Outlander open again in the best way possible.

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A Summertime Storm

Chapter Fifty One

There was an itchy spot between Ilan's shoulder blades. He rolled his shoulders but the itchy spot didn't disappear. What was worse was that the more that he tried to ignore it, the worse it got until he was laying there, half asleep being driven crazy by the need to scratch that one spot. With a sigh he gave in and twisted an arm around to rub at the itchy spot.

"Oh..." He sighed happily. From the light seeping into the tent it was well past dawn and he was surprised he'd been allowed to sleep so late.

It was with that thought that he remembered why he'd been able to sleep so long. He'd cooked dinner for Tarin and then things had gotten a lot more interesting. It made him smile in contented happiness. Until he lifted his head and found the small tent empty. The blankets had a very distinct Tarin shape to them but the Outlander was no where to be seen.

They'd bathed in the creek and Tarin had been silent. Even the cold water hadn't been enough to elicit a comment and Ilan had left the man to his thoughts. Part of him had really hoped for more conversation when they'd returned, wet and shivering, to the tent since he doubted they'd be doing anything more than talking. Tarin had a different plan and the silence had continued. Expect for making sure the other man was comfortable sleeping with him in the tent, they didn't speak at all. It would have been disappointing and would have hurt Ilan a little if Tarin hadn't chosen the dead middle of the blankets inside the tent to lay down on. There was no way the two of them could sleep without touching with where the Outlander had placed himself. It was a subtle way of asking for them to sleep touching but Ilan didn't take advantage of the quiet offer. They'd fallen asleep with barely their feet touching against each other but when he'd woken slightly in the middle of the night he'd found himself curled around Tarin's back.

It was a small victory but one none the less and it had left Ilan hoping for more in the morning. The trouble was that he'd woken up with an itchy spot and a Tarin shaped empty spot. Now all that he had to do was wake up and find out where the other man had gotten to. That was easier to say than do since most of his clothes had been kicked about during the night so he settled on just finding his pants and pulling them on.

The sun was even brighter than he had expected which meant that it was even later than he'd first thought. People would be missing him and he wondered how much longer he could stay out in their private little camp before someone came looking for him. The last thing he wanted was to have to try to have the post night of amazing sex conversation with a gaggle of Holy Ones standing by, frowning at him.

Fortunately he found no one in the morning sunshine that shouldn't be there and one person who should have been. Tarin sat by the fire, dressed and holding a mug of tea and watching the fire crackle and burn.

"Good morning." Ilan said as soon as he spotted the other man. He was fairly sure Tarin was aware of him, he hadn't been trying to be quiet but if he'd been deep in thought he didn't wish to startle the Outlander.

"I made tea, I would have cooked but I'm afraid it wouldn't be edible."

"Tea's more than I'd expected. I was afraid you'd be gone by now. I over slept."

"I think the world will survive if you sleep past dawn for one day."

He carefully poured himself some tea and sat down near but not too near Tarin. "Apparently so but I'm shocked no one has shown up."

"It's a good thing your babysitter Marcus didn't show up, I might have had to kill him."

"That would have made for a busy morning, what with hiding the body." He caught the smallest of smiles tweak across Tarin's face. "Did you sleep well?"

"Well enough." That was a gentle way of saying he'd slept like the dead. Tarin didn't remember a time when he'd slept so soundly, so dreamlessly. He'd been warm and even naked and unarmed he'd felt secure sleeping next to and near the other man.

"Good. Should we...do we need to talk about last night?"

"Do we?" He swirled his tea around in his mug.

"I don't know. Isn't that generally what you're supposed to do?"

"How should I know?" He glanced over to where Ilan was trying very hard to not to look at him. "I've never..." The reminder of his past made him shake his head and take another swallow of his tea. "What are we going to do now?"

"Was last night just a night for you?" It was like poking at a bruise because he knew Tarin didn't feel nearly what he felt but for him to let the other man walk away he needed to hear the words.

"Yes it was." Tarin spoke quickly and caught himself. "No, no it wasn't just a night. It'd be easier if it had been, wouldn't it?"

"Without a doubt, it does seem like an impossible situation."

"You need to get dressed."

Ilan raised his eyebrows. "Shouldn't you be trying to get me out of my pants?"

"What happened last night can't happen again. There's no point to it, no point for either of us to get too comfortable with something that can't last. Get dressed so we can go to your trees and figure out what this is between us once and for all."

It wouldn't just give them answers, it would allow Tarin to return to his people. It was unspoken but the truth hung between them and Ilan nodded. "We can go this afternoon."

"No, we're going now. I want answers."

"Of course." It was expected, if a little bit disappointing, and he wasn't going to fight with Tarin over it. "I'll dress and be back out right away. We'll go right there." He had no right to keep Tarin with him and he wasn't so desperate as to force someone to stay with him.

He dressed quickly and wasn't surprised to find that Tarin had put the fire out and was ready and waiting for him. All of his resolve disappeared when he caught sight of the Outlander standing in the dappled sunlight, his dark hair glowing and his body lean and fit as any member of the people. It stopped him in his tracks and he struggled not to simply demand that the Outlander was a captive and refuse him the right to leave. No one would stop him, or even think twice about his choice and the temptation to never let Tarin from his sight again was strong.

"Are you coming or just going to stand there like the village idiot?" Tarin snapped out and gave Ilan a look people in the city knew well. It was a look that said he wasn't going to be messed with, only it seemed to amuse Ilan.

"I'm ready."

"Did you want help, with the camp?"

The offer surprised him both because he hadn't expected Tarin to offer to help break the camp and because it was just assumed they'd not return to the private little corner. "No, thank you, no, I'll take care of it."

They walked through the woods in silence with only Tarin's heavier footsteps breaking the quiet. Some of Ilan's favorite times and memories were walking through the trees of their woods alone with stillness of nature around him. It was a place he'd always enjoyed but walking with Tarin only put a sense of sorrow and dread in his chest. The beauty of the clear, warm summer's morning was lost to his eyes as his thoughts tried to imagine not having the other man's fragile pride at his side. It was going to cut him deeply to let him leave and he knew he had to accept the wound.

It didn't take them long to reach the same elder Tree that they'd gone to the day before. He had wanted to stall and walk them in circles until he could convince Tarin to take a break with him. Maybe if they could just have more time together Ilan could convince Tarin to stay, even if just for a few more weeks. He could put his own duties and work on hold that much longer, or try to. If he could just have a week with the strange Outlander, a single week of pleasure and companionship he could let go. If he could have just one week it would be okay to be alone again.

"That's the tree. It looks so innocent." Tarin closed his eyes and felt the tree buzzing along his nerves. "I don't know if I would ever get used to this feeling."

"You're not supposed to get used to it. If the Trees are calling you shouldn't be able to tune them out. Tarin..."

He heard the tone change in Ilan's voice and he shook his head. "Don't."

"What?"

"Just...don't."

"Why?"

"Because there's nothing you can say to make any difference. We're two different people from two totally different worlds. I could no more live in yours than you could in mine. It was a mistake, pure and simple so don't look at me like that." He scolded but the warning was as much for himself as it was for Ilan.

"I'm sorry but I can't help it. I know all the logical reasons. I know but I can't help how I look at you." He crossed the clearing back to where Tarin stood, frozen in spot a safe distance from the tree. "You can't ask me to change how I feel."

"Ilan." The name made his lips tingle to speak. The Feral crossed the clearing back to where he'd paused with a steady step that made no sound against the fallen branches and dried grasses. The last think Tarin was going to do was step back from the other man, even with what they'd done the night before. He wasn't going to back down to anyone, not even Ilan. "We can't."

"I know." Ilan stopped right in front of Tarin and the proud set of the other man's jaw made him smile softly. "Tell me you don't feel this too?" He whispered and stepped another half step closer into Tarin's personal space.

"I..." He wanted to lie but it was almost impossible with the throbbing buzz from the trees along his nerves and the heat from Ilan warming his skin. He closed his eyes and tried to keep his breathing steady but knew he was failing. "It doesn't matter." It was just physical, that was all there was to it. Desire and lust were emotions that could thrill a body but they weren't the best guides for making choices.

"Of course it matters." Ilan dared to reach out across the space between them to the night black hair that so fascinated him. It tangled around his fingers as he ran his fingers along Tarin's head. "It matters."

"Ilan...it's just..."

"No, it's not, it's more."

"You don't know what I was going to say." Tarin's voice took on it's normal sharp tone but his eyelids felt heavy and it was difficult to keep them open as Ilan stepped closer to him, as one of Ilan's hands slipped around his waist to rest at the small of his back.

"You were going to say it's just physical but it's not. Not for me and I don't think it's for you, either. Deny me, if you can without making yourself a liar."

The challenge galled him. "I'm not a liar."

"Than deny me and I'll know it's the truth. Tell me you don't feel my heartbeat the way I can feel yours...tell me..."

Ilan's words were spoken so softly but they filled Tarin's mind. The breath from his speaking puffed in small touches across his lips and made him shiver. They were too close, too near to one another and it made it impossible to think clearly because he could feel Ilan's heartbeat under his skin as an echo to his own. He closed his eyes. "It doesn't matter what I feel."

"It matters to me." Ilan whispered and the hint of space between his lips became less than a hint as he guided the unhappy lips to press against his own.

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Chapter Fifty Two

Tarin tensed in his arm but Ilan hung on, pushing himself closer until his leg slipped between strong thighs that parted and let him draw nearer. He knew he shouldn't have forced a kiss but he couldn't help it. The denial, the obvious struggle in the lavender eyes, made him want to fold Tarin into his arms and take him back to their private tent and hold him forever. The very fact that the swordsman had to struggle with something so basic as simple feeling and human connection made him feel even more drawn to the man.

It pushed him to draw more from the uneasy kiss than maybe he should have. Tarin's head tilted under his hand and it forced Ilan's hand up to cradle the back of the other man's skull. He could feel the struggle in the kiss and how each heartbeat was one where the Outlander wasn't sure if it was okay to let go or if he should keep fighting. Ilan pushed, folding himself over his lover, kissing him deeper. He was going to force Tarin to feel it if he had to, force the man to admit that it wasn't just about physical by kissing him until he admitted it.

The moment Tarin gave in, he knew it. The lips softened, parted and almost became welcoming. He wasn't quite kissing back but he stopped fighting and let Ilan plunder his mouth as much as he wanted. The neck under his hand melted but the back Ilan was holding was just as tense if not more so. He drew his hand forward, gliding over ribs and down over a hip that was so tense the muscles were nearly trembling. Ilan was ashamed to admit it but the mix of fight and surrender was intoxicating. It made him hard in a way that felt dirty but so very good when Tarin's arms finally lifted and his hands barely pressed against Ilan's back. For a moment he was certain Tarin really did feel it too.

The moment didn't last. Even if he was sure Tarin felt it, if only for a moment, he would have been more surprised if the Outlander had allowed it. Like a fire sparking brightly on a dark night, Tarin remembered himself and that brought all the fight right back. The mouth that was sweeter than any wine to Ilan drew away and he followed. The body he was pressing to his own pushed against him trying to find the strength and purchase for escape. The neck below his fingers arched away from his touch leaving only strands of black hair tangled around his fingers. Ilan knew he should let go but he couldn't. Every nerve in his body was screaming for him to hold on for as long as he could.

He would have never let go if a fist hadn't suddenly hit him in the side. It surprised him more than hurt him but the results were the same. Ilan pulled back, breaking the kiss as his eyes flew open. For a single second his arms loosened and that was the only second Tarin needed to slip

away and stumble backwards. Ilan's body felt suddenly cold without the comforting warmth.

"Don't do that!" Tarin snapped out, his fingertips pressed to his lips briefly before he caught himself and lowered his hand.

"Why?"

"Because I said not to."

Ilan's eyes drifted down to the obvious bulge in the leather pants. "You feel it to."

"It...it doesn't..." Tarin sighed and dropped his eyes, his face felt flushed and he knew he was blushing. "Yes. Are you happy now? Yes, I feel it. I would have gutted you by now if I didn't."

"You would have tried." Ilan smiled. He might be unarmed most of the time but he was far from helpless.

"Is that what you wanted from me? To admit it? Well, I have now leave it alone."

"I don't want to."

"That's too bad because there's nothing either of us can do about it. So we have..." Tarin shook his hand at the space between them. "Something. It doesn't mean anything because I have my world and you have yours and we can't...we can't..." He rubbed his eyes.

Lead settled in Ilan's stomach because he knew Tarin was right. He knew it and didn't want to admit it. "I know but is it so wrong that I wish it wasn't. Is it so wrong that when I can stand here with you, alone with just you, I don't feel lonely for the first time in my life? I can't explain it... I don't understand it. You're funny looking and arrogant and a pain in my ass..."

"Hey!"

"But I can't deny it, I can't deny you. The more time I spend with you the stronger it grows." He tried to smooth his hair back into place and make all the external things look normal when inside he felt turned inside out.

Tarin shook his head and did the easiest thing left to him. He ignored Ilan, ignored his own emotions and wants and walked straight around the source of such much turmoil toward the tree buzzing along his nerves. It took a force of will but he wasn't a coward and he pressed his hands to the bark of the tree and braced himself for whatever happened.

It was almost amusing to see the startled look on Tarin's face when he touched the tree and stayed conscious. The Outlander flipped his hands over and tried touching another spot but after a few futile attempts he gave up and turned to frown at Ilan.

"Why won't it work?"

"Because you've been called before. The Trees assume you know the way in now and since their need isn't urgent they won't simply snatch you again."

Tarin sighed and folded his arms in front of his chest. "This is absurd."

"Take my hand." He held one of them out to the other man but Tarin didn't move. "Trust me."

"This doesn't mean I trust you." Tarin carefully extended his hand. "I want answers."

"Very well." Ilan wasn't going to fight over it or agree, he just took the offered hand and waved to

the tree. "Settle in, just like yesterday."

It had only been a day, one day to change so much for Tarin. He settled in against the tree and tried to breath normally. That was easier to think about than to do with the strong hand in his own and knowing what could happen if and when the Trees drew them in. Before he could worry about it in anything but a superficial way, blackness claimed him.

There was some small comfort when the sense of falling through warm darkness ended and Tarin found the same beautiful clearing below his feet. The grass was as soft and green as before, the sky as blue and the tree in the center of it all was as large and imposingly tall as the day before. Only this time there was no woman of leaves and stones with her silent emotions waiting for them. The only one waiting for them under the wide branches was Pelin.

"My, you two look so much better. Have a good night?" He smiled.

"That was a dirty trick and below your manners, Pelin. I don't appreciate it."

That made the golden man laugh. "I think you do. I think you both do."

Pelin took a step toward them but Ilan held up a hand. "I think you should just stay where you are. We need answers and can't afford any more distractions. You know what's going on, just tell me."

The mischievous smiled faded into one a little softer, a little more sad. "If I could tell you, I would but you'd never believe me. I should go, there is much that must be done. Before I fade away, I'll tell you what I was waiting here to say. Walk up to the tree and touch it, you should find some answers there."

"Pelin..."

He shook a finger at them. "Fuss at me later, I promise I'll listen." Before Ilan could protest further he glowed and popped in back into the floating bubble and than gradually faded away into the surrounding light.

"I hate when he does that." Ilan sighed.

"What did he mean by that?."

Ilan shook his head and gestured to the tree before them. "I don't know but I suggest we find out."

Tarin followed but he didn't like it, the beauty of the clearing was perfect and he tended to distrust perfection. When Ilan grew near to the trunk of the tree he stopped. "Have you done this before?"

"No, I've never been invited to."

"How do you know it's safe?"

"I don't but I know Pelin left and the Lady isn't here, neither of them would allow harm to come to me. Will you still trust me?"

"Damn it all."

"That's a yes?"

He nodded. "That's a yes."

Ilan slipped his hand into Tarin's. It was an action that was growing and common place .

"The bark looks like glass." Tarin whispered and reached a hand out to touch the strange looking surface. He remembered to pause at the last minute and curled his fingers up into a ball.

Ilan raised his free hand. "We'll do it together."

They touched the surprising bark at the same time. This time there was no darkness and no sense of really being anywhere else. The images were like watching paintings, there was no doubt they stood outside of all they saw. Neither could they see each other but Tarin felt Ilan near by, as if he stood just behind him.

At first he saw the pair of them, standing in an open clearing. Their backs were toward each other, Ilan staring east and Tarin looking toward the west. Twined about their legs and feet was a stunted ivy vine. Its leaves were yellow green and its vine was thin and weak. As they watched the distance between them grew as the two images of their own selves grew further apart, the vines about their feet browned and died. A blackness formed in the space where they had once stood and it expanded. It swelled up as well as outward and quickly engulfed their vision.

They didn't remain in darkness. It shifted to a spinning pattern of rapid movement. The world swirled past them and shifted to Tarin's home and city. Fires burned across the lower and upper cities, people screamed in the smoke and flames. Great mobs of lower city people and slaves still in their collars were pulling the wealthy and the nobles from their homes out into the streets. The violence inflicted there was sickening. The city guard tried to regain order but were quickly overwhelmed. Eventually the main guard moved in and merely slaughtered any thing that moved, man, woman or child, free or not. Tarin saw the Pink Pearl burning, Shelee lay dead in the garden out back. A black swarm of flies buzzed happily around her untended plump form.

His vision blurred and instead of the burning city it was an open field. The soil was soaked red with blood and hundreds of bodies lay about like some child's discarded toys. The vast majority were golden skinned, the sight blurred and a dozen images of such vast defeats appeared and faded with the speed of a heartbeat. He saw great scores of amber skinned people being dragged from their forests in chains, watched as children were held down and branded. Fires burned here too but it was the open fire of a wild fire, consuming trees, homes, and living things with an equal hunger. The worst was the trees, he watched helplessly as torrents of pale skinned invaders took ax and fire to the grand ancient trees. The tall forest screamed in agony, wept with such soul twisting grief that it made Tarin ache to hear. He wanted to scream at them to stop for mercies sake but the settlers and farmers were as equally unable to hear the death of the forest as they were to hear his protests.

The pain of so much senseless killing on both sides, such unspeakable violence, made Tarin ill and just as he was sure he couldn't bare to see more the blackness returned. It welled up and consumed him, fading out the emotions and the hideous sights that had been shown to him. Only, when the black melted away, he wasn't standing in the glade with the soft feathery grass but back staring at the meadow and the dual images of them both.

This time, they faced each other, their arms extended to hold the other's wrists in a grip that was secure and strong. The ivy grew in abundance at their feet, twining up from between their grasped hands, one plant growing around them both. It's leaves were vibrant green and healthy. Its stem was strong and curled around their bodies to form a crown of heart shaped leaves. There was no blackness; they pulled away from the meadow, rising up into the clouds and just as rapidly descended.

This time they looked upon the lush woodlands, the trees grew tall and proud. Seedlings planted in the border lands were growing into small trees and the fields that had once held corpses now grew rich with ripening grain. The farms of the Ferals were bright harvest squares in the valleys

of their mountains, farmed by pale outlanders clumped in small villages as well as amber skinned Ferals. The only traffic leaving the woods was the steady stream of trade that flowed between their peoples. Children played and laughed together with no mind for skin color and the land thrived. He could feel it, singing in his veins, pumping in his own system as surely as his blood did.

They soared upward and swished down on his city. Banners hung from windows and lamp posts, bright and cheerful, dancing on a playful breeze. There were no fires, no riots but Tarin saw more than a few buildings and houses boarded up, closed down and he could make no reason for which places thrived and which were abandoned. In a common green in the heart of the city they saw a massive pile of discarded metal collars. In another common, or maybe the same one at another time, a crowd had gathered to jeer at a cartload of prisoners. The crowd called out insults and threw refuse and filth which stained the once fine clothing of the carts occupants. The final destination was a raised gallows. Their vision slid away from the city limits and up the hill side, away from the crowd of buildings to the Govner's compound. A small town of it's own right that sat almost on top of the main one, a defensible building with a hundred rooms or more. Their vision slid easily in an open window, past more waving banners and the happy sounds of music. They wound down hallways at nauseating speed and into a large open room where a single man sat upon the Govner's throne, part in shadows, the gaiety of the celebrations outside not reflected in the cold and empty room. The man leaned forward in solemn worry, the Govner's gold crown, simple and unmistakable, held back his black hair. He raised lavender eyes up and looked almost to where the invisible pair watched from above and there was no doubt as to his identity.

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Chapter Fifty Three

It was too much of a shock. Tarin gasped and tried to pull away, fought to escape the images he'd been shown and he stumbled away from the glassy bark of the massive tree in the middle of the feathery glade. He tripped and fell on his tailbone, into the soft grass and found he couldn't breathe. Panic made his lungs burn and his head throb with his racing heartbeat. The strangely lovely lady of the trees knelt by him, uncertain about touching him, her hands hovering over him and her face concerned. Ilan pulled away from the tree with a startled gasp and instantly felt the lady's concern. He moved to try to comfort Tarin but the outlander scuttled backwards on his hands to get away from him, his breath was harsh and ragged.

"Tarin,"

"Stay away from me!" He gasped out and dragged himself back, trying to find an escape. He needed to get away from the strange woman and the strange clearing with it's strange tree and visions. He found a way out by stumbling into blackness and falling what felt like forever before

slamming back into his real body. His lungs wouldn't work and the air he held in them burned like fire, he stumbled on reflex to his feet and crashed into another person. They fell to the ground in a tumble of arms and legs and the impact shocked Tarin into breathing. He gasped great breaths of air and struggled to free himself from the person he'd fallen into.

Strong hands grabbed him and hauled him free. Tarin swirled and tried to fight the hands holding him but it didn't seem to matter which way he turned and twisted the hands kept holding on. Panic settled enough that Tarin was able to see the man pulling at him and it wasn't a great surprise.

"Lenno? What are you doing here?" Tarin glanced around, expecting the glade to be filled with scouts but it wasn't. Lenno stood alone among a half dozen solemn eyed holy ones, their robes and hair flowing, some watching with obvious distrust. The person Tarin had smacked into had been a woman, she was being helped carefully to her feet, her orderly hair and robes tussled and uneven, dried leaves stuck to her everywhere.

"I didn't feel right leaving you unguarded. Are you okay?"

"Dandy. Never...never better..."

As he watched, the small cluster of priests moved to help Ilan to his own feet. There were quiet words. He shook his head and tried to push past them. "Tarin?"

"Stay away from me! He reached reflexively toward the hilt of his sword but it was impossible to draw it while seated and he was too rattled to remember the knife he wore.

Ilan pushed the last of the fussing priests away and tried to cross to where Tarin sat, confused and frightened. It didn't really surprise him to see the panic in Tarin's eyes but he was taken off guard when Lenno stepped between him and the Outlander.

"I don't believe he's up to speaking with you right now, Your Grace." He said carefully, keeping a very respectful tone but in no way or manner showing any weakness or any sign of backing down.

He was both impressed and pleased with the young scout even if his loyalties may have become divided. It was an effort to not allow his pride to show as he put a hand on his waist and raised an eyebrow. Lenno didn't back down, even with his direct stare. "See to it he gets back to the camp safely, we'll discuss this later."

Lenno bowed his head low, knowing and feeling like a traitor to him but knowing the Outlander needed his interference more than Ilan needed his loyalty. "Yes, Your Grace."

"You," he turned on the group of holy ones, watching from the corner of his eyes alone to see Tarin made it away safely. "Just what are you doing here?"

They shared a look but finally the woman Tarin had knocked to the ground stepped forward and spoke. "We all felt it, Your Grace, and came to see what was happening."

"Felt what?"

They Holy Ones shared a look and some whispered to each other but the woman's head tilted to the side. "The Call, Your Grace. The Trees Called us to witness."

"To witness..." Ilan whispered and understanding crept into his thoughts slowly. If his hunch was right it would change everything they knew, everything he'd ever known. "Since you're here. I want three of you to commune individually. I want you to ask the trees to show you the Elect and than I want you to come without speaking a word to anyone, and I mean anyone, and report what

you saw.”

“Your Grace?”

“My orders are clear, pick three among you that can keep silent until after you’ve spoken with me. I’ll be in the camp.” Ilan’s hands were shaking as he moved to leave and he clenched them into fists to hide his own emotions from sight. As he walked back to camp he silently prayed his suspicions were wrong.

“What’s going on?” Ishvan demanded as he limped into the family’s camp, leaning heavily on his cane but moving quickly.

Tarin sat watching the small fire, his elbows on his legs and his hands folded along the back of his neck. His eyes were lowered and he didn’t even glance up when Ishvan joined them but he didn’t sit alone. Lenno hovered near by, crouched warily and uncertain, his eyes worried.

“I finally got Holy One Bertice to sit down and look at my sketches and in mid sentence she stood up and excused herself and headed off into the woods. Now, the camps buzzing with gossip and I’m hearing the craziest things.”

Lenno stood. “What’re are people saying?”

“You won’t believe it.”

“I won’t if you don’t tell me.”

Ishvan looked to Tarin and waved in his direction. “They’re saying the Elect took him back into the trees and something happened that pulled a dozen or more holy ones to witness it. Now the whole camp is saying the holy ones have their robes in a bunch over something about the Elect and what the trees are saying about him. When I was half way back here I saw a good dozen runner Scouts heading out with their tails on fire, supposedly being sent out by the Elect himself. What happened? Do you know?”

Lenno shrugged because what he had seen and what he did know he couldn’t admit to. “I don’t know and he’s not speaking. It’s true about the runners?”

Shandro joined them from a second path, his eyes watching Tarin as if the outlander were a strange and dangerous snake. “It’s true, Hentra was asked to be one of them.”

“Mother but not you?”

“No, all selected were special.”

“Holy ones.” Lenno nodded toward Tarin and felt chilled. “It’s because of him.”

“What the hell does that mean and would you please not speak about me as if I am deaf!” Tarin snapped in anger and looked to the men around him but they looked away and didn’t meet his eye.

“It means that each one of the scouts picked are skilled enough in the ways of the trees that they could have become holy ones if they’d wished it. It means that they are being sent to find holy ones because most scatter themselves among the woods for mediation and only another holy one or a special scout will find them quickly.” Lenno explained gently. “How many were sent?”

“Over two dozen.”

"So it's important."

Shandro merely nodded but before he could answer movement from the main camp caught his eye and they watched the party approaching them. Marcus led a group of four warriors, all male, strong and armed.

Marcus stopped in the clearing and looked about at the faces of the family. He respected Shandro even if he didn't always agree with the man but he never could figure out what he saw in the crippled outlander he'd adopted. Most days he shrugged it off, after all as a boy Marcus had raised mice, there wasn't much difference as he saw it but now with two pale Outlander faces staring at him he was less willing to dismiss the habit.

"Tarin Morris?" The outlander didn't answer but he stood slowly, his frightening eyes slid over the cluster of warriors with cold dislike s his hand easily curled around the hilt of his weapon. "There's to be a meeting, the Elect would like you to attend."

"An open meeting?" Shandro asked, hoping that Lenno would have the good sense to not start trouble as he equally hoped Ishvan would stay out of it if there was.

"Yes, word is going out now." Marcus answered quickly but he kept his eyes on the swordsman. "You come with us."

Tarin wanted a fight, it was a need curled up in the bottom of his stomach. He wanted the flash of steel and the quick violence of blood coating his hands. "And if I refuse?"

The warriors behind Marcus shifted their weight slightly but Marcus himself didn't so much as blink. "I'd recommend against it."

Shandro placed a casual hand on the outlander's shoulder. "He'll be there, your escort won't be necessary."

"I have my orders."

"Unless you were specifically ordered to escort him personally you have fulfilled your obligation. I'll see to it he attends." He had no doubt Tarin was a good fighter but the numbers were against him, if trouble started, blood would be shed. They might not be allowed to kill Tarin but somehow he doubted the Elect would be happy if anyone was injured over something so stupid.

Marcus didn't like it but he nodded. "So be it." He drew away and the men with him followed.

"Why'd you do that? I'm not going to any meeting." Tarin snapped out and his hand didn't release the hilt of his sword.

"I did it because you are going to this meeting and Marcus is seeking any reason to smash your face into the dirt."

"I am not going to any meeting."

"Tarin, it's just a meeting. Something unusual has happened, it's not going to cost you anything to attend. Don't be stubborn for stubbornness sake."

Such a wave of homesickness suddenly washed over Tarin that all the fight bled out of him and he sat heavily back down. The people, the constant interaction with them, was becoming too much. Their differences made it easier for him to forget just who and what he was but at the same time made it impossible to forget. It left him longing for the solitary emptiness of his apartment, the distant respect of the other people at the Sheep and all that had been his life

before.

"You've been kind to me Shandro, but I need to return to my own people."

"Soon lad, soon." But Shandro knew it was a lie, the Trees had called Tarin and from that moment on he could never truly leave them. Like Ishvan, the swordsman would never fully belong to either people again. He didn't like the half truth but he doubted Tarin would take such honesty well right now. "Sit. Have some tea until this meeting."

"I don't want any tea." Tarin complained but he sat back down. The worst part of it all was the low dull ache that reminded him of the night before. It didn't seem fair that he could swing from feeling almost normal, almost like someone human to such a horrible shock that made him long for his former isolation in such little time.

"Here." Ishvan handed Tarin a mug and gingerly sat beside him, rubbing at his sore leg reflexively.

With a sigh Tarin accepted the tea. "I don't see why I have to go to one of your people's meetings. It has nothing to do with me."

"If the Elect is asking you to attend, it does have something to do with you." Ishvan reminded.

"Or something to do with last night." Shandro grinned and sat on the other side of Tarin. "Just what happened that you didn't return after dinner?"

"Nothing happened." Tarin muttered around a swallow of tea but he felt his face blushing from the memory.

"Ah, of course not, how silly of me to think so." He smiled at the pink shade of Tarin's ears and shared a knowing look behind Tarin's back with Ishvan.

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Chapter Fifty Four

Tarin learned quickly that the meeting was held just outside of camp and not inside of it. He was led to a sunny, pasture like meadow where the trees didn't grow or had been removed and by the time they joined the common ground it was already littered with scouts, warriors and holy ones. It was more people than he'd thought was sharing the camp. It was a reminder that the tent he shared with just Shandro and Ishvan should have been shared with twice as many others or more. If he added it up that way it seemed like nearly everyone was in the open space. It didn't surprise Tarin to see there was very little interaction between the three groups, even if they stood

close together in the meadow.

Ilan stood in the rough center of the group and while all around him people whispered in hushed gossip, he waited in silence. He glanced up as Tarin joined the outskirts of the group, Marcus followed his stare from where he hovered near by. Soon the whole of the gathering had fallen into hushed silence and they parted to make it easier for him to move toward the center. Something Tarin would have been happy to avoid, he had been planning on staying as close to the back as he could manage.

"Thank you for all joining us here, this doesn't effect one man but us all." Ilan spoke in their language, Ishvan translated it quickly in a soft voice for Tarin. "As most of you've heard, recently our guest, the outlander Tarin Morris, was called by the Trees. This is unheard of and needless to say unexpected. A few hours ago I took Mr. Morris back to the trees seeking answers. What happened was again just as unexpected."

He looked to where Tarin stood, wary and watchful with a dark look to his eyes and kept his face schooled to one of careful emptiness. "I've asked several of the holy ones to confirm it before I brought it to you. It seems that the Elder Trees not only have called Mr. Morris, but they are showing him as an Elect." A great roar of whispers and uneasy words washed over the crowd. Ilan raised his hands and called for silence. "The Trees are showing two Elects, I don't know what this means. I'm not sure there is anyone of the people that will know, only that this must be taken very seriously. I ask all of you who are capable of it to confirm this fact with the trees for themselves. Additionally, given the grave nature of this information, I've called together an emergency council of Holy Ones. We're to meet in three weeks time at Rogue Paths. The runners have already been sent. Until we can make sense of this, I ask each of you to show Mr. Morris the same respect you would offer me. In the eyes of the Elder Trees, we are equal and to do anything less would bring shame upon our people. Because he is an Outsider to our ways, who will stand and guide him?"

Shandro didn't even pause, he stepped forward and bowed slightly even while Ishvan was translating the last of Ilan's sentences. "I and my family will, the scouts will be honored to serve."

"Wait one moment here." Tarin interrupted as Ishvan caught him up, the boy skillfully switched his languages and continued. "I want nothing to do with any of this."

One of the holy ones, an ageing man with white hair and bushy eyebrows stepped forward slightly when Ishvan finished. "With due respect, the call of the Trees is more important than personal wants."

Tarin listened to the translation and hated that the lessons in their language had him only understanding every dozen or so words. "With no respect," his accent was sharp and he met the older man's eyes dead on. "They aren't my trees, I'm not of your people, I feel no obligation or duty. You can turn your trees into toothpicks for all I care, I'm leaving in the morning. If you want me to stay you'll have to tie me up and drag me to this council." He didn't wait for an answer. He pushed past the crowd trying to get away. Or he wanted to, it would have been more satisfying to shove people out of the way but they easily parted to allow his retreat. The show of respect annoyed him even more.

He was on the outskirts of the camp when he noticed Lenno was following him. "What are you doing?"

"Following you."

"Why?"

"Because, you are Elect, and well, I want to make sure you don't bite anyone that looks at you sideways." He grinned good naturedly. "Do you really mean to leave?"

Tarin stopped and was surprised at the sudden seriousness in the other man. "Yes, I do."

"Why? Because of what's happened?"

"Because I don't belong here, and I want to go home. They won't actually tie me up and drag me will they?"

Lenno laughed, certain he was being teased now. "No, they won't, every holy one will want to but they won't dare, not now. I've barely been able to teach you our ways of fighting and you still climb a tree worse than a child."

It suddenly occurred to Tarin that he'd most likely never see Lenno again, or any of Ishvan's family and it actually made him ache a little. He forced a small smile but it was bitter. "Maybe the next time we meet."

That evening Tarin sat in their tent alone with Ishvan. Lenno and Shandro had bowed out after dinner as well as what appeared to be most of the scouts in the camp for some private meeting. Ishvan had said little and simply continued their nightly reading lesson as normal, unwilling to speak of Tarin leaving and equally unwilling to ask him to stay.

Tarin's eyes lifted from the book to the entrance to the tent before the cloth moved. Ilan stepped inside without asking for permission and Tarin glared at him. "May we be alone?" He asked of Ishvan who was already gathering himself to escape like a frightened mouse caught by the cat.

"What do you want?" Tarin asked coldly as soon as Ishvan had closed the tent up behind him. He pretended to return to reading the book in front of him but was too distracted by him to focus.

"I wanted to personally ask you to stay for a little longer, at least until we make some sense of this. I also wanted to say I was sorry for springing this on you in the way I did." He didn't mention that the reason he had to was because Tarin had refused to stay and talk to him and instead had run away from the Trees. Somehow he didn't think mentioning that would be helpful. "May I sit?"

"It's your forest."

He lowered himself to sit across from Tarin and had to restrain the need to rip the book from his hands. "Will you consider staying?"

"No."

"Why?" He snapped back to the coldness. "You saw it as surely as I did. Together our people will thrive, apart they both suffer. How can you ignore what we saw?"

"What I saw was just a dream. Can you tell me that those visions really will come about or if it's just a chance of it happening?" He snapped the book shut, too uneasy to even pretend any longer.

"The Trees don't offer visions often but when they do it's generally reflections of possibilities, not certainties." As much as he wanted to tell him it was all set in stone, he simply couldn't meet his haunting eyes and lie.

"See? For you it's simple, one path leads to death and one to life. For me, it's death at both sides."

"I didn't see that."

He surged to his feet, too upset now to stay seated, too angry not to do something. "Because you see nothing strange being a leader. The idea of me being Governor is absurd, it's wrong. I don't have your bloodlines. Do you know what my family was? My mother was a whore, she lifted her skirts for pennies. My father was some nameless drunk who used her. I'm worse than either of them, I can't... I won't be deluded into thinking I'm supposed to be some leader because a bloody tree said so!" He found himself almost shouting and stopped. He pressed his hands to his eyes for a moment and settled himself down. "At least I know if the riots happen, where I have to be to protect those I care for."

He was pacing now, three short strides one way and then three back again. It made it impossible to speak with him so Ilan stood and placed himself in his way. "But don't you see, together we can make such a difference. Whether you want to admit it or not you and I together could end your people's slavery. We can save my people, we can find a way together to have both our people live in peace."

"It's not my responsibility to start or end anything and it's not in my power to make things right between our people. You've got the wrong man."

"So you can just walk away and know countless people will suffer and die simply because you didn't want to take responsibility."

"It's not my fault! I don't owe anyone, anything."

"That's selfish and you're wrong. You know what it means to be enslaved; you don't have the veil of ignorance to hide behind! You can't pretend not to understand or to be blind. You know and yet you do nothing and now you know you have at least a chance to make a difference and you still refuse to do anything. It wasn't your fault before but if you walk away now, knowing what you know, it will be. I swear to you it will be your fault and you'll have to live with that!"

Ilan's eyes were flashing in anger that was obvious even in the softer light of the tents lamps. He wanted to rage at him, yell at him that he didn't understand, he wanted to confess and tell him that every day he felt the weight of responsibility Ilan assumed he so easily carried. No words came, they stood in mute emotion across from one another, trapped in their own pride and sense of self.

They moved as if in mutual agreement. Their bodies slid together with comfortable ease, their lips met and melted into their kiss. Ilan pulled him close and he delighted in the controlled strength he felt in the feral's body. His hand slid along his ribcage, under the fabric of the robe but over the teasing closeness of the leather. Ilan's hands moved with a will of their own, they snaked up his shoulders and slipped into the thick black of his hair to hold him in place as the kiss ravaged them both.

The feel of hands sliding easily through his hair and down to his neck felt good and the passion startled him away from the pull of their kiss but not away from Ilan. They stood in each other's arms and he studied his face. His lips were still parted, his face flushed and they both were breathing hard. His body burned with a need for him, the hallow of his throat begged to be kissed, his hands ached to touch the golden skin and there was surprisingly no panic curling in the pit of his stomach. That wasn't to say there was no fear, his desire alone frightened him, but there was no mad, out of control panic eating away at him.

"Tarin?" Ilan's voice was a whisper. Lavender eyes watched him with such steady need but with no movement.

Tarin leaned forward and brushed his lips to his but compared to the almost desperate need of a heartbeat before this kiss was shy and uncertain. For a moment he rested his forehead to Ilan's, his eyes tightly shut. There may not have been the sense that he was about to fall off a tall cliff into uncontrollable panic but he was still afraid.

"You should go." Unless he saw him off in the morning, he'd never see him again. The thought brought sudden pain and a slashing sense of mourning. He told himself it was for the best, that he couldn't stand another doomed affair and by their very skin colors it was truly doomed. His words didn't stop the sick feeling he got when he pulled out of his arms and left the tent without another word.

Tarin suddenly felt the need to follow, to chase out after him into the camp and he made it as far as his own circle fire before he stopped. Ilan hurried down the path, head bowed and neither slowed nor turned. The will to call him back evaporated and Tarin stood and let him go.

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Chapter Fifty Five

Ishvan sat watching from his place by the fire, he'd started dinner but Tarin was pretty sure he was seated close enough to the small tent to hear their raised voices. "It's a good thing mother isn't here."

Tarin waited until Ilan had rounded a corner and was no longer in sight to answer. "Why's that?"

"Because she'd go all teary eyed and fussy. She'd also tell you to go after him."

"What're you talking about?" He almost snapped but held himself in check.

Ishvan pointed with the stirring spoon at Tarin. "Your hair is all messed up and the look on his face... please I'm not naïve. You should go after him."

Tarin quickly ran his hands through his hair, trying to comb it back in place and hide the guilty evidence. There seemed no point in denying anything, not to Ishvan. "No, I shouldn't. It's better this way."

The boy snorted. "Come here and eat. You really mean to leave tomorrow?"

"I do."

"Well than, any objection to my going with you?" It was a careful way of asking not only to travel

with the swordsman but also if Tarin had any plans to turn him in as a traitor should he return.

"I thought you were staying here?"

Ishvan shrugged. "I've got to finish two more classes at university and I promised Eant I'd pay my share of the rent for at least a year. I can always come back to the people."

"I'd welcome the company." He accepted the bowl of food, the simple fare of the people was comforting and filling but he wasn't that hungry. "Just, next time, if you need a favor, tell me the truth."

Ishvan laughed. "I promise."

It didn't take much to pack up his things. Most of the clothes he brought with him had been destroyed. He'd have to go shopping when he returned to the city, there as no avoiding that. He didn't have enough of a wardrobe to absorb such heavy casualties. For now, he'd have to stay dressed as one of their fighters, at least until he got to the border lands.

Lenno was still at his meeting when Tarin finally laid down to sleep and when he awoke near dawn the scout was still missing. He moved to wake Ishvan but found him gone too, his pack no longer beside his blankets. Tarin stretched and found himself struggling with a surprising sense of regret. He hated to admit it but he was really going to miss Ishvan's family and even most of the others in their camp. He didn't even want to think about Ilan and what leaving the other man would cost him emotionally. It was only by reminding him self that to stay would mean being dragged deeper into their politics that got him moving.

He slipped from the tent in the gray morning light on his way to the pool to bathe and shave before leaving and found their small campfire surrounded by several dozen men and woman. He knew most of them on sight and had learned to tell the braided hairstyles of warrior from scout and he wasn't surprised when a quick survey showed them all to be scouts.

"What's going on?" Most of the gathering had been talking softly together, sipping from mugs of tea. He spotted Lenno, Shandro and Ishvan sitting close to his tent.

Shandro poured a fresh mug of tea and offered it to the swordsman. "We had a meeting last night and we're in agreement. You're not leaving alone. An escort will go with you until you reach your people's land."

"Do I get a say in this?"

"No, it would be dishonorable for us to not do this."

"Well than," he didn't know if he should be angry or not but the warm sense of belonging stopped him from snapping at their good intentions. "How many is in an escort?"

"Twenty five and Lenno is in charge."

"Of the escort." Lenno corrected, knowing the un-amused look on the outlander's face.

Tarin just shook his head. "Well, have your escort ready. I'm leaving with or without you."

"We'll be ready."

Tarin started to turn toward the path that led to the bathing pool but he stopped. "And, thank you."

The sun was fully up by the time Tarin was led to the edge of camp. Their packs were missing but Tarin had been told that everything had been gathered with the group waiting for them. Part of him was oddly suspicious but he allowed Shandro to lead him across the camp pathways without questioning.

"Hentra will be upset that she didn't get to say farewell to you."

"You'll explain to her?"

"I will, she'll understand. You know why I can't go with you? The Elect needs me, he counts on my voice to speak for the Scouts."

Tarin nodded. "I understand. Thank you, and thank Hentra for me."

"You'll keep an eye on Ishvan?"

"Of course."

"You won't stay?"

"I can't."

"Any message you'd like for me to pass on to the Elect?" Shandro asked carefully, keeping his eyes on the path in front of them and trying not to invade the other man's personal space.

Did he have a message for Ilan? What could he say that would make it all okay? He was certain there were words to say but he lacked the eloquence to form them. Words of emotion seemed wasted since there was no way or chance they could ever mean anything more than words. It hurt to think about the other man, it wasn't the crippling pain of Ana's death but it still hurt. He couldn't think of anything to say to make it better.

Tarin shook his head. "I've nothing to say."

"If you two had a fight, you shouldn't leave it that way."

"I know you mean well, Shandro, but there's nothing to be said and we didn't have a fight."

The older man sighed and shook his head. "Stubborn." He rested a hand on Tarin's shoulder. "You'll have a chance to say it to him yourself. I have no doubt we'll meet again as well."

"Perhaps."

"No, we will. I can feel it." They'd reached a corner and Shandro stopped. "Straight ahead."

"You aren't going further?"

He shook his head. "No, I've said good bye to Ishvan and it's not easy to say it so I won't do it again. It's easier this way." The Scout's eyes were unusually misty and he looked away before glancing to the swordsman again. "You will always have a home with us, always."

The seriousness and weight of the man's words hit Tarin like a fist. "Thank you." Was all he could manage to say and he hoped the other man knew he meant it.

"Go on with you, be safe." Shandro didn't wait, he turned and quickly went back the way they'd come.

Tarin had to wait until he'd calmed his nerves a bit before he started on the path. He had no doubt leaving was the right thing to do, none whatsoever, but it didn't make it easy. When he felt steady enough he followed the path out to a clearing. What he found there made him stop and shake his head. "Oh no, no way this is going to happen."

The clearing had the twenty five scouts, Ishvan and their belongings and twenty seven horses. Lenno waved him over and held the reins not only to his own beast but a second one.

"No." Tarin shook his head and crossed quickly over to the group.

"No?"

"I don't ride."

Lenno looked to the horse and to Ishvan who was pulling himself skillfully up into the saddle, mindful of his bad leg. "You can't walk to the border."

"Yes, I can." He frowned. "I don't know how to ride."

Lenno offered a set of the reins. "Don't worry, the one I picked for you is as gentle as a pony."

"I don't know how to ride ponies either."

"It's easy, put your foot in there, haul yourself up, hold on. You're not riding into battle, it's a cut trail. You'll be fine, now get up there."

With a heave and a sigh Tarin swung himself into the saddle and clutched madly at the reins. The people around him were too kind to laugh at his inexperience but he felt stupid and his nerves were making his horse, pony like or not, nervous too. Luckily for him, Ishvan moved along side before he could be thrown and helped to steady him. Without being asked he quietly showed Tarin how to hold the reins and offered some quick, very basic advice. In the moment before they were ready to leave, Tarin spared a look around, searching the tree lines but he saw nothing.

"He's not coming." Ishvan said softly.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know who. He's as proud as you are. Pair of stubborn fools, both of you."

"I wasn't looking for anyone."

Ishvan rolled his eyes and moved his horse away, leaving Tarin too busy with his own animal to worry about anything. What neither man knew was Ilan was near the clearing. He was perched in the limbs of a strong oak across the open field, tucked out of sight and self conscious about being noticed. He watched as the group slowly disappeared down the forest trail.

Close to a week later, when the group stopped for the night, Tarin was certain for the first time in days that his legs were not going to fall off. He had been learning the care and manner of horses from anyone willing to show him anything and now he was comfortable enough around the animal to actually enjoy the beast's company. He couldn't debate the speed and usefulness of the animals but he doubted he'd ever willingly trade walking for riding.

They'd stopped short of sunset to make camp. Now that they were well into the border lands Lenno had been taking no chances and he insisted that they stop early enough to send out scouts to secure the area around camp. Since Tarin was in no real hurry and had no experience with such things he didn't protest. Every moment sooner they stopped for the night was one less moment he spent in the saddle.

The group had fallen into easy companionship and the scouts that spoke Tarin's language had made an effort to be friendly and the ones that didn't would grin and nod to him and he found himself content to smile and nod back. After dinner was cooked and eaten they worked on teaching Tarin and he wondered if his efforts were so amusing or if it was merely a means of passing time. They continued his language lessons and continued to show him how to fight in their style but his legs were so sore from riding that he was rather limited. The pain was great enough that he flat out refused to try to learn to climb trees and his refusal made most of the group laugh in good natured companionship. It would be strange continuing on without them but in a few days Ishvan and Tarin would do just that.

That night as the fire burned cheerfully, and virtually without a curl of smoke, Tarin sat and watched the scouts talking. Something had them stirred up and they debated back and forth, occasionally Lenno or Ishvan would toss out a comment and that would send the group spinning in debate. Tarin listened carefully but his words were too limited and they spoke too quickly for him to understand much. Finally, one of the more vocal of the group tossed out what sounded like a demand and all eyes watched Ishvan and Lenno or darted at him before drifting away.

"What's happening?" Tarin didn't feel any threat or anger from anyone but he didn't like being kept out of things so much.

Lenno tried to gauge the swordsman's mood and couldn't. "They... we aren't comfortable with you returning to your city without one of us with you."

"That's a brilliant way to commit suicide but otherwise an absurd and utterly ridiculous idea."

"Perhaps but the trees have called you Elect, that means a great deal to my people. Each and every one of us would lay down our lives for you, that is how seriously we take it our duty to the Elect. A few of us, those that are have no spouse or children, have requested the right to follow you among your people. Even if only one of us is allowed, it would fulfill a commitment we feel toward you." Lenno looked to Ishvan but his cousin was staying out of it.

Tarin shook his head. "Impossible. There's no way any of you can pass as one of my people and the only Ferals in the city are slaves."

"We know that, it would be an acceptable disguise. It shouldn't be that difficult to acquire a collar."

Tarin sat in mute silence, shocked beyond speaking.

The scout who'd demanded earlier asked his question again and Lenno nodded before he spoke. "They want to know if you'd allow us to see the brand you wear. They think it would be wise to duplicate that as well and want to see how difficult it will be to copy."

"You're mad!" Tarin looked around trying to find another sane person and his eyes fell on Ishvan. "Tell them... it's madness."

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The boy shrugged. "I've told them it's risky but they know that."

"It won't work."

"Why?"

"Well, for one, each number is different and cataloged as such. Sure you could make one up but it wouldn't pass serious inspection."

Lenno translated quickly and heads nodded. There was a quick discussion with sharp and rapid words before Lenno spoke again. "If it would pass casual inspection it would be fine."

"Are you all insane? This isn't a love tap. It's a brand. It will never go away, never fade and it hurts like hell to have done. You won't be able to move your arm for a month afterwards, that's why it's put on the left side so a good new slave can still work. I won't allow any of you to do this!"

"Tarin, you may be Elect but you can't order any of us to do or not do anything. You can advise but frankly I don't think they'll listen when they feel there's a threat to you." Ishvan offered but he didn't agree with the Scouts desire, frankly, the idea made him ill.

"We're aware of the seriousness of such an act and it's deemed acceptable. We wouldn't truly be a slave and we know we'd be safe under your care."

Tarin's mind clutched onto an idea that should help them understand the idea was stupid. "I can't own a slave, it's not allowed."

Lenno quickly questioned Ishvan and the group was off and debating again. They turned and spoke in quick fire phrases to Ishvan and the boy shook his head, disagreeing. Only as he listened some more he sighed and shook his head in defeat.

"Ishvan can own slaves. He could hold legal control over which ever one of us goes with you." Lenno finally announced.

"This is madness, I'm not going to listen to anymore of this." Tarin snapped and rose from his place by the fire.

"Will you let them see your brand?" Lenno asked again.

Tarin threw up his hands. "No." He answered sharply before disappearing away from the fire light into the still darkness.

A hand closed over his mouth and Tarin woke up startled and reaching for his blade. As soon as his eyes were open he saw Lenno looking down at him, one finger raised to his lips asking for silence. When Tarin nodded the scout removed his hand and leaned in low. Off in the dimness of the early morning hour, Tarin heard a child crying in the near by woods.

"There's a woman, a slave, that's run away from the farm down in the valley below. They've chased her this way and she's cornered on a ridge a little ways from here. There's a group of armed men, come."

The gray early light of dawn was damp with rising mist and Tarin sat up wide awake. The camp was being quickly cleaned out and straightened and the horses were grouped into sets and tethered to a lead horse. The scouts could fade away into the woods better on foot but the animals were too valuable to simply abandon or turn loose in case of discovery. The best riders, the bravest of them, would split the animals into small groups to guide away and the ones on foot would find the groups of horses as they could. Tarin wasn't surprised to see Ishvan waiting with his own group of horses. It was a precaution in case things went badly, Tarin had been well informed about the lengths the scouts went to so they'd always be ready for the worst.

Tarin followed as he was beckoned, stepping almost in Lenno's footsteps as they crossed out of the camp and headed toward the mentioned ridge. As they grew closer the sounds of a child grew louder, the wailing was miserable and frightened. Tarin felt as much as he saw the scouts ringed out around the ridge, knowing they would watch and not interfere unless the armed men moved any closer to their campsite.

Lenno led them in creeping, careful movements to a gully that allowed them to overlook where the woman huddled. She'd run into a spot where the rock of the mountains rose from the ground and formed a tall, ragged wall. With time and without the child, she could climb it but now she crouched, exhausted, at its base. Her dress was plain and dirty, merely a sleeveless shift and her hair was loose from its single braid. Leaves and twigs stuck in it and her hands, feet, legs, arms and face all bore thin red scratches. She had balled her body around her child, a babe not more even yet a year old and she cried as hard as the baby did.

There was nowhere to go, the men had caught up to her on horseback and the dozen or so of them dismounted. They followed the oldest, a man with a thick waist and bushy graying hair. Tarin watched as the group of men passed almost close enough to reach out and touch from where he and Lenno were hidden. They moved in confident strides, and the gray haired man nodded to the men around him.

Two of them moved, not to harm the woman but to pry the child from her arms. She screamed in rage and protest and clutched so tightly that the child would have bruises from the grip of her hands.

"Come now, Dinah." The gray haired man cooed. "You've always been a good girl. You'll have others, I can promise you that. Give it up now and I'll not take your foot off for running."

The woman sobbed louder and clung to the child until one of the men hit her solidly in the face

with a closed fist. She reeled back from the blow and for just a second her grip loosened. The babe was snatched from her grip and she screamed as the man walked off with it. She tried to throw herself after him but the man that hit her grabbed her and threw her to the ground. Before she could rise he'd brought out the discipline strap from where it was tucked at his waist. The thin, flat strip cracked down and smacked with force against the woman's shoulder and bare arm. Instantly a red welt rose up but the man didn't stop with one blow, he struck her several times before she stopped trying to rise and lay crumpled at his feet.

Tarin shut his eyes and felt panic claw up his spine. It was the sound, he hadn't heard it for years but he'd never forget it. The strap made a very distinct sound and his body trembled in memory and he felt suddenly ill. Lenno carefully placed a hand on the swordsman's arm and when Tarin met his eye he motioned behind them. Asking if he wanted to leave but Tarin held his hand up and shook his head, trying to convince the scout if not himself that he was fine.

"What do you want us to do with it boss? Just leave it here?" The man carrying the child asked.

The gray haired man shook his head. "That'd be cruel. Kill it and bring her along."

The woman cried out in a wordless begging pleas, her hand stretching out to the child. The agony in her voice was cut off with another cracking blow from the strap. The man holding the baby placed it on the ground and the child cried in fear. He drew his blade and crouched down.

Before he could bring the blade down an arrow sprouted from his chest. He looked down at it startled before two more joined it. Lenno cried out, not surprised one of the other's was unwilling to watch even an outlander infant be slaughtered. He leapt to his feet and charged the clearing. Other arrows and scouts appeared. The fight was over quickly, the men were cut down coldly.

Tarin remained where he had been hidden. His body was unwilling to move as the child cried on. When his mind cleared enough to think he saw the woman had run forward and again thrown herself over her child. She wasn't crying now but she was shaking in fear, the Ferals were a new terror altogether. The scouts were mostly ignoring her, Lenno was trying to calm her but she was panic stricken at the sight of him and not listening. The others moved to sort over the bodies, retrieve arrows and settle the horses.

Lenno looked for Tarin to ask him to settle the woman but found the man missing. He moved back to where they had hidden and was disturbed by the haunted, distant look the man wore. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." He managed to stutter out. "It's just... that sound." He shuddered and let the scout help haul him to his feet.

"The marks on your back?" He'd seen them, the thin lines that crisscrossed the pale skin.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, I should have left you back at camp."

"I'm fine." This time his voice didn't shake.

Lenno didn't look like he believed him any but he nodded. "Can you speak to her? Settle her down?"

"I can try."

His legs weren't overly steady but he moved across the clearing and knelt by the trembling woman. "Ma'am, it's okay, they're friends, not one's going to hurt you or your child. It's okay, it's going to be okay." He tried to sound soothing but the words felt like lies.

The woman glanced up and froze. The morning light was strong enough that Tarin was easy to make out and she locked eyes with his lavender ones and stopped trembling and went deathly still. Understanding dawned in her eyes and she moaned. "I'm dead, oh, I'm dead!" She cried out over and over as she cradled and began to rock the red faced crying baby in her arms.

"You aren't dead, neither is your child. It's okay." He tried to reach out and sooth her but she pulled away.

"Not dead?"

"No, not dead." He tried to smile.

"Not dead... then you're a ghost?" Her words trembled and she looked around wide eyed and frightened. "You brought Ferals and you had them kill the Master? He always said you'd look out for us... please, please, if you helped me, help them, please... I'll do anything... you can take me with you to the other side... please." The woman begged.

Tarin looked to Lenno and the scout looked as confused as he was. "Ma'am, I'm not dead. I'm not a ghost." He reached out and took her hand before she could pull away.

She flinched but the hand that touched her was warm and real. She reached out and carefully touched Tarin's face, it was as solid as his hand. Her hand went instantly to cover her mouth in surprise and horror. "By Jeses, it can't be, this can't be real."

Lenno had sent runner back to the camp to let them know not to run. By now it would have been reestablished. "What's she talking about?" They needed to bury the bodies but he didn't think Tarin really wanted to witness that.

"Damned if I know."

"Can you get her to come back with us to camp? Maybe if we get some food into her she'll start making sense and we can figure out what to do with her."

Tarin nodded. "What did he say your name was? Dinia?"

"Dinah."

He smiled and tried to put her at ease but she stayed wary. "Dinah, these people are my friends, they won't hurt you. We've a camp near here. I want you to come with us. We'll get you some breakfast and you can tell us where you belong."

"No, no, you have to help them, please. I'll do anything, just save him, please."

"This is getting us no where." Lenno sighed.

Tarin held up a hand asking Lenno to wait. "Dinah, come with us and you can tell me who's in trouble and maybe we can help." He hated promising even that much because he knew it was a lie. There was no way they could interfere more than they had.

"You will?" She asked in a small, pitiful voice.

"We will." He offered her a hand and uneasily she accepted it.

She leaned heavily on his arm, her weight was slight but she was weak and exhausted. Lenno gave a few orders and the scouts that remained behind quickly fell to work, some spread out to make sure they were secure again and the rest got busy hiding any evidence of the ambush.

Dinah froze again on the edge of the camp, afraid again of so many Ferals but her eyes fell onto Ishvan with his limp and cane and he smiled warmly at her. "Hello." He said as he came over beside them, offering to help guide her in near the fire. "You have a lovely child."

The babe was attractive now that it had settled down and stopped wailing. She glanced to the baby and to the young man at her side and nodded. "Thank you. What's...what's going on?" She asked with wide, uncertain eyes.

They pressed her to sit and soon tea was being offered to her. That settled her more than any words could have but she still watched Tarin as if he might fade away at any moment.

"What should we do with her?" Lenno asked.

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Tarin shrugged. "You've killed her master and most likely his sons and overseer. They'll accuse her of that if you take her back to her farm and most likely hang her and the child." The mark on his neck suddenly burned, a vivid reminder. Hanging wasn't a simple or kind way to go, he'd happily take a quick sword through the gut any day. "This is why it's best to stay out of things."

"We can get that collar off of her."

"And than what? She'll be listed as a run away, the child too. Assuming she could find a place and find work if anyone suspects she's a run away they can easily check her number. That child will spend it's life in danger, it'll never be listed as anything but a run away. There's nowhere they can go. You'd have been better off letting them die back there." They'd been keeping their voices low but he glanced guiltily over at the woman anyway. She didn't seem to have heard him and Ishvan was trying to talk her into letting one of the female scouts check her wounds and tend to the baby.

"You don't mean that." Lenno shook his head. "You can't mean that."

"We've just made things worse. Even if she's never accused of their deaths, which is unlikely, no one will take her in. She's no papers showing she was freed. If and this is a huge if, she could find a place to go, what will she do? The only real option will be whoreing herself to feed that child and at the lowest level too. Most likely she'll be dead in a few years. If by some stroke of luck she finds better work if she's ever discovered or if that child is ever discovered anyone caught helping them will be punished as they will be. If she avoids being accused of murder that means anyone helping her will be stripped nude, staked down and whipped until their skin comes

off their back and than they'll spend the rest of their lives in a collar. If she's accused that means they'll swing beside her. Depending on how powerful that dead man's family is, or who catches her, that punishment could include the entire family of anyone that aids them." He felt sick at the thought but there was no point in lying.

Lenno cursed fluidly and graphically in his own language. "So what do you think we should do? Kill them both?" He hissed the words out.

Tarin was sorely tempted to say yes but he sighed. "No. We need to know more about where she's from, how many people are there, who will miss her that sort of thing. We'll figure something out."

"Good because if I ever want to sleep again, we can't kill them."

"Same here. Let's see if she's making better sense. Ishvan's better with people than I am maybe he's gotten her settled." They moved to where the woman and child sat. Someone had pressed a bowl of food into her hands and she was eating hungrily.

"Tarin, you need to hear this." Ishvan said softly as they sat near by. "Dinah, can you tell them what you told me?"

She watched Tarin with wide eyes and stopped eating. "He thinks you're dead, that's why I thought you were a ghost, or I was dead."

"Who does?" Ishvan prompted.

"Sam, my husband, he's a good man. You need to help him."

"Dinah, you need to tell him exactly what you told me."

She nodded. "My Sam, he's not from here, he was near but they just sold him over this way not more than five, six years ago. He was born free, in the city, his mother sold him off when he was little. He had a brother and a sister and he tried to keep track of them but she sold them off too and then his brother disappeared and he's always said he was most likely dead. Before he could find out for sure he was sold out to the farms and he's been out here since. But he was sure his brother was dead." She told the story to Lenno and Ishvan as much as to Tarin. The sight of the swordsman made her shiver and wonder if she truly was alive.

"What's this have to do with anything?" Tarin asked, it was unnerving the way she was looking at him but the story the woman told wasn't uncommon.

"Tell him." Ishvan prodded.

"Sam, he says it's bad luck to talk too much about that time... the before. I don't know I was born in a collar. He don't say much but he says he knows his brother is looking out for us because he found me and we had a family. He knows his brother would take care of our children because he was sold to such bad people, that he'd never let anyone hurt our little ones. That's why I thought what I did." She swallowed hard and looked around to the baby tucked tight against her body. "When he tucks them in at night, he always tells them their uncle will keep them safe, that they'll know him easily because he's got their black hair but he's got lavender eyes. I thought he was making it up cause I ain't never seen anyone with lavender eyes until today."

If Tarin hadn't already been sitting down he might have fallen over. "What did you say?"

"That's why you got to help him. Please, I'll do anything if you just help him."

Tarin felt dizzy. "What...what did you say?"

"Master, he sold him and our daughter off to a caravan just yesterday. Master doesn't marry, he has his children with slave women, he says it's so he knows his children will listen to him but I think it's because no free woman would have him. Bess, his last wife, she died a little while ago and he took an eye for me. Sam wouldn't hear of it, he pulled him off of me and master beat him near to death but Sam is proud and he's strong and master knew he'd kill him if he laid a hand on me again. So he set it up that the caravan would be by and he was going to sell all three of them off but the trader wouldn't take Vic because he's so little, not without taking me. So master sold off Sam and Violet and told me last night he was going to get rid of Vic and not to worry, I'd be having his children. But I won't, I won't! I'll do what his other women have done. I'll smother his monsters first! I couldn't just let him kill Vic so I ran off, but I got lost and then you showed up and it has to mean something. You'll help him...you have to help him. Our Violet, she's too pretty already and I don't know what they'll do to her, please, please help them!" The words tumbled out in an exhaustive, breathless plea.

Tarin stumbled away from the small group, he wasn't sure where he was headed and his head was spinning heavily. He clutched at a tree trunk at the edge of camp and felt like he might become ill. Lenno came up behind him, moving carefully.

"Tarin?"

"It can't be. My brother is dead. He died... this can't be, it's coincidence." His voice was hollow and empty.

"How many people have you met with black hair and lavender eyes?"

"I don't care, it's nothing to do with me. My brother is dead he is...he has to be." It had to be, it simply had to be so.

"Why does he have to be? It's likely your mother sold him off first and just told you he died. Did you ever see his body? His grave?"

"No, no, he died in the night and we couldn't afford a service. It can't be him."

"Why can't it?"

Lenno was almost sorry he asked because the look in the swordsman's eyes was the expression of someone who'd witnessed hell. "If he's alive... that means he never came for me." It sounded absurd even to his own ears but the words came out before he could stop them.

"Tarin," Lenno put a hand on the outlander's arm. "He was just a child too, he didn't have the option to come and save you but if he could have I bet he would have. Now, this woman's husband may not be your brother, you're right, it all may be chance, but what if he is? You can save him now." He spoke slowly and carefully. He had a pretty good idea the blow this would be either way. If the man turned out not to be Tarin's brother and if he did, both would have lasting and devastating impact. "What do you want us to do?"

He rubbed a hand across his face. "We do nothing. We'll take her back to the farm she ran away from. It sounds like there isn't much of the man's family left, she won't be listed as a run away if she returns. Eventually, the man you killed will be listed as dead, not missing, and his estate will be sold off and she'll go to a new home. We do nothing."

One of the scouts near by had over heard it all and he spoke just enough of Tarin's language to understand the gist of what was said. He moved to where Tarin stood. "No!" He demanded and off he went in his own words.

Soon the whole camp was in debate. Tarin ignored it and stood trying to calm his own fear down.

Dinah clutched at her son and sat silently, frightened but hopeful. What felt like the better part of the morning passed this way, the only one's not speaking were Tarin and Dinah.

Finally, the talk settled down and Lenno held up a hand. "Okay, Tarin, I'm sorry but they won't listen to you. We're going down to that farm, you, the woman and the child can wait there. We'll ride and over take that caravan and bring it back. They should have a means of making a brand. One of us will be branded and follow you from then on into your city. You won't be responsible, you can go about your life."

A breeze blew and the leaves above rustled, the tree under Tarin's hand felt alive. He could feel it down to its roots, feel how they intertwined with the roots of its neighbors. Off in the distance he could feel the dim echo of the elder trees and that echo seemed to bounce and reflect off of every living thing. The wind blew again and he knew a storm was coming, dark and fierce enough to make his bones ache. He knew all of this and didn't know how he understood. It should have been enough to make his head ache but instead it centered him, settled his fear and eased his worry and pain.

He turned and faced the odd group he'd called friends and they watched him with strong and proud eyes. Dinah had said her daughter had been told every night that her lavender-eyed uncle would protect her. The child Violet who had too be four or five to have been sent out on a caravan would be the same age he'd been when he was sold. Only the girl had never known what it was to be free, she'd never not worn a collar. She was expecting her uncle to protect her. If he wasn't her uncle, was it his responsibility simply because he happened to have similar coloring?

And the Ferals, so bound by family and the ties to each other. They would ride after that caravan whether it had branding tools or not simply on the off chance that this man might be his brother. The very idea unsettled him and warmed him deeply. That any of them would willingly put on a collar and suffer the horrid pain of a brand to watch out for him was unthinkable, he wasn't worth it. He wasn't worth any of this and he didn't understand their devotion.

The breeze blew again and he felt the roots growing below him and how everything touched something. Everything was connected, everything had a purpose and for the first time he understood that he'd been trying desperately to live his life with no purpose, without touching anything, affecting anyone. It was impossible.

That child believed someone would protect her, she believed someone would save her and return her to her mother. There were thousands just like her, just like he had been, all waiting, praying to be saved. His brother had been willing to do anything to protect him when they were children and all Tarin had learned from him was to do nothing to protect anyone. Even if this Sam wasn't his brother, he had a brother who had given him a fine example.

Ilan was right, he did understand what other slaves were going through, he understood far too well. Only now he couldn't pretend not to see, he could say it was the trees that opened his eyes but that wasn't really so. His eyes had always been open, only now he could feel what he saw. It was Ilan's fault he could feel. For the first time in his life he felt like he belonged, he felt like he was connected to life around him.

"No," he said softly. "I can't accept that." He felt his connection now, it had always been there, the roots and the breeze had always touched him too but he'd never been able to truly feel it. "We'll go together and bring back the caravan but no one's getting branded. We'll free these people and take them with us, if there's to be a meeting of your people, they should see things first hand. Ishvan, you told me once that it's an Elect's job to change things. Well, your trees have called me Elect, maybe it's time some changes were made."

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No one spoke, the air felt thick and charged with electricity but they nodded in agreement and everyone felt the rightness of his words. Tarin felt ill, worry ate at his courage. He wasn't sure what would be worse, learning this Sam was his brother or learning he wasn't but for good or ill a choice had to be made. The time had come and Tarin had made it, he didn't know if it was the right one but at least now he was making choices and not merely letting life suck him along, spending time trying to reach death and an end.

He looked up at the blue cloudless sky of morning but he knew a storm was coming. It would be wild, dreadful and it would wash the whole world clean. He could feel it pressing on his skin and nerves drawing closer, bearing down on them and it made him feel small. For all his worry and his unease, for the first time, Tarin felt no fear.

The caravan was slow moving. All slave caravans were limited to the pace of their livestock, with age, illness or youth, the pace was sometimes painfully slow. The smart slaver was unwilling to force a faster rate, a slave not in their prime could easily drop and die before reaching auction and then the money invested in them was a total loss. It made much better sense to move slowly and give everyone a chance to make it to sale alive, from that point on if they dropped over dead the caravan drivers couldn't care less. Tarin knew that even with the head start, it would be easy to catch them.

After they'd found the farm Dinah was from they dropped her and her child there with two scouts. The farm was being watched by three sirs, the informal title given to trustworthy slaves. They were granted certain liberties in exchange for helping to manage the field hand slaves. There title came because the lower slaves were required to address them as Sir. None of the three strong healthy men were overly fond of their master and offered little resistance to the Ferals when they took over.

It didn't hurt any when Dinah had fallen, sobbing, into the arms of the other women. Her baby clutched close to her body, she'd pointed to Tarin among the group and announced for everyone to hear. "See, it's Sam's brother, it's his baby brother! He's alive and he's going to help us, he saved me and Vic and he's going to save us all!"

It was an announcement that made Tarin distinctly uncomfortable but the effect was that none of the two dozen slaves were willing to offer any fight or protest. They believed Dinah and her

vouching for their strange guests settled their fears. At least, settled them enough that the scouts felt secure leaving only a pair to hold the farm.

They'd ridden hard, following to the side of the road. Even Ishvan stayed with them, it was quietly agreed upon among the scouts that the people in the caravan would be frightened and exhausted already. A group of feral scouts ridding down and liberating them would only scare them more. They were going to need his skills at translation and frankly Tarin wasn't going to be of much use if this Sam could be found.

They overtook the slow moving caravan not long after noon. The line of two flat bed wagons had stopped. They had a small cookfire going but that seemed merely to heat the water for tea for the slavers, the line of several dozen slaves, chained at the neck to one another, were being handed flat bread and offered a dipper full of water.

Lenno held their group up a distance away and they tethered the horses and moved forward with stealth and ease. The sight made Tarin ill and he couldn't help but scan the line of younger men looking for this Sam.

"Stay here with Ishvan." Lenno said softly, they'd retreated back to the horses and Tarin knew the scouts were skillfully flanking the caravan.

"I don't like the idea of you all risking your lives."

Lenno waved it off. "This isn't a risk, these men are cowards. It's gong to be a slaughter." He was well aware of the guilt Tarin already carried. "I don't want you to be part of that. Besides, if one of them slips past us, I want someone here to keep Ishvan safe. If you won't stay, I'll have to leave someone."

In the end, after a bit more debate, Tarin agreed. "When you've got it secure, look for a log book or records. Get it to Ishvan or myself, it'll list the records of sale for everyone here, we can trace who was sold at the last farm." He looked down and felt the tight knot of tension in his shoulders spreading. "I'd appreciate being kept out of sight of them until we can single out which one is this Sam and figure out who he is."

"We'll manage that. Stay here until we come for the horses."

The wait was horrible. Tarin paced around for a while but his nerves were making the horses edgy so he stopped. It was worse when the panic cries of the women and children rose to fill the summer air. The occasional male voice drifted over the higher pitched sounds, calling in fear or pain, shouting an order that the wind stole the meaning from. Tarin knew a caravan would have at least a half dozen hands, maybe a little more. He held on to the bridle of his horse and rested his head along the beast's neck. The horse whickered softly, sensing the unease on the air and in the human and almost knowing the strength Tarin was drawing from the contact.

The scouts were skilled at such quick raids, they were used to attacking much larger targets with far fewer members. The sounds that had risen into the afternoon sky quickly were silenced or quieted. Still they stood and waited, Ishvan was silent, lost in thought or simply respecting the nervous tension in Tarin. He watched closely and spotted the scout coming their way before the man fully reached them.

Tarin and Ishvan moved quickly for word but the scout sent was one that spoke virtually none of Tarin's language, he spoke quickly to Ishvan and handed a leather folder to Tarin. Tarin opened it quickly while Ishvan answered the scout back.

"They're securing the camp and they found the papers you wanted while pulling out more supplies to cook those people a real meal."

Tarin had the folder open and he stared at the papers but none of it made sense. His growing skill at reading should have allowed him to make sense of some, if not all, of the writing but his mind simply wouldn't function. "Would you? I can't seem to make sense of it." He pressed the papers at Ishvan.

The boy took them with an understanding nod and quickly thumbed through the bills of sales. "Here." He pulled out the smaller stack of paper work. "From Oliff Hold, the farm we just came from, the bill of sale for one man, approximately aged thirty years. Here's his number, black hair, brown eyes, purchased nearly six years ago from a caravan. That trader bought him from Flifflin Stead, they purchased him fifteen years earlier from another caravan." Ishvan's finger traced the carefully written script in several different hands. "They got him from Lord Early's estate, purchased from Wigjim's General Livestock Auction two years before. Wigjim's bought him from a private sale, owner was listed as his mother, the address is Wigjim's offices in lower Gloucester."

"I was originally sold to Wigjim's." Tarin's voice was low but his eyes were bright. "What was his function, what does it say?" The intensity in his voice disturbed the scout.

"Let me see. Early's estate has him as garden helper and his estate manger lists him as very able, quick to learn and with skill for growing things. Flifflin has him as a farm hand, with a sub-note that he's a moderate carpenter, skilled with livestock and general day to day runnings. Oliff lists him as a field hand only with a mark of being willfully stubborn." Ishvan scanned it again. "That's all it says."

It was enough. "What about the girl?"

Ishvan shuffled papers and pulled her papers out, they were much less detailed. "Born at Oliff's Hold five years ago, just had a birthday last month, black hair, brown eyes, her number's here and she's listed as general farm help. What's that mean?"

"It means she'd fetch water out to the field hands, pull weeds in the house vegetable garden, run errands, do whatever had to be done. It's a general job for most children out here in the country. The numbers can be matched to their brands." His stomach was tight and he wasn't sure he wanted to know the truth, either way it worked out. He was starting to think it might be better not to know.

Ishvan nodded and spoke quickly to the scout, pointing to the string of numbers and letters on the two papers. The scout nodded and took off running back to the road. "Come on, they'll be someone back for the horses in a moment."

Tarin moved but he was never sure how he got moving. They crossed the final yards to the road and to where the caravan was camped beside it. He saw the lines of men and woman and children, all chained to one another. The chains at night would be tethered to the wagons. Most slaves had a dread fear of being sold to a caravan. They'd not only leave the house or farm they knew, and all the people they knew, but they'd be forced to walk around sometimes for months and if at the end of the circuit they still hadn't been sold they'd wind up in some city auction. Caravan drivers were noted for the limited rations they offered, the miles they covered and their quickness to punish. Sometimes whole families would be marched around, split apart more and more at ever stop and during the day they'd be within eyesight of one another but not allowed to speak.

There was no sight of the slavers, Tarin was sure that was Lenno's doing. The scouts had gotten all the slaves into one central group, some were cooking over a much larger fire, boiling and pouring water for tea. A pair moved among the slaves checking the numbers on their shoulders, Tarin looked away, not wanting to see.

Lenno spotted them and jogged over to meet them. "Over here, by the wagon." He motioned

and led the pair to the secured spot.

"Any problems?"

"For us?" He asked and waited until Tarin had nodded. "None." He wanted to ask if the outlander was okay, he was looking as pale as always but his eyes were wide and startled. There was a nervous fear to the man and Lenno thought, given the circumstances it would be unbelievably stupid to ask if he was well. "Wait here, we'll bring the man over to this side and I'll speak to him. You'll be able to hear but he won't be able to see you. Okay?"

Tarin nodded dumbly and leaned against the wagon. Ishvan hovered nearby but held his thoughts and words. All too soon, the scouts had found the man named Sam and drawn him over toward Lenno on the far side of the wagon.

"You're the man called Sam, from Oliff's Hold?"

There was a bit of a scuffing sound and the metallic clink of the chain before the slave answered. "Aye." One word, spoken carefully and with deep suspicion.

"My people and I mean you and these people no harm. Do you believe me?"

There was a pause again. "If you wanted us dead, I think we'd be such." The accent had the hint of the lower city, the flat vowels but there was much of the lilt of the country side to his speech.

"You're right, you would be. I need to ask you some things, it's very important you answer honestly and fully. You were born in Glouchester?"

"Aye."

"Where in the city?"

"I don't know where, in the lower parts, we moved about a bit and I was young when put in a collar. I don't understand why this is something you need to know."

Lenno ignored the man's concerns and continued. "Your name, Sam, was it the one given to you at the Oliff Holding?"

"No, they let me keep my name."

"Who gave it to you?"

"My master before, I was Sam to him and Sam now."

"What was the name your mother gave you?"

"I don't see as it's anything you need to know." It was a personal and touchy issue and the man's pride and stubborn will showed. Most slaves were beaten badly if they so much as uttered an old name.

"What was the name you were born to?"

The man stood silent.

"We have your daughter." Lenno waved to where the child had been separated from the others. "We have your wife and your son. What I'm asking isn't so difficult. What was your name?"

The man wasn't proud enough to risk his family. "Evan. My mother called me Evan."

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Chapter Fifty Nine

Tarin's knees sagged against the wagon and his head spun. He barely heard Lenno call to them in their language and Ishvan call back. It was the young artist that laid a hand on Tarin's arm and looked him in the eye. "What do you want to do?" He asked carefully.

Tarin brushed off the arm and pushed himself fully to his feet. There wasn't any real thought, not now. He rounded the wagon and faced the scene on the other side. Lenno standing with his back to the wagon, another scout standing near the slave.

The slave was only a bit taller than Tarin, thicker across the shoulders from hard farm labor his whole life. His clothes were simple and plain. The man's face was handsome in a plain, rugged way, the features so much more refined on Tarin were cruder and rougher on this man. They shared the same cheekbones and straight nose, the same black hair as dark as a raven's wing. Only the slave's skin was dusky and tanned even further and his eyes were hazel brown, wide and warm, crinkled in smile lines around their corners.

The slave openly studied Tarin when he came around the wagon. Dressed as a feral but armed with one of their swords. His body strong and lean, his skin pale and even, paler now in surprise and shock. He took in the thick, black hair cut shorter now and the balanced, almost delicately pretty features but it was the stranger's eyes that froze him in place. For never had Sam seen anyone with eyes that color and the only person he'd ever known to have such couldn't be standing in front of him now. He pulled back a step from the stranger in feral clothes.

"Jeses sweet mercy. What trick is this?" He asked in a stunned and pain filled gasp.

"Do you remember him?" Lenno asked Tarin carefully. "Tarin?"

The swordsman swayed a little where he stood. "...ah...I think I should sit down." He didn't sit down, his knees buckled. Lenno jumped quickly to catch him, throwing an arm around his ribs and easing him to the ground by the wagon. Ishvan called out but it wasn't necessary, the scouts gathered around had already moved to get tea.

Lenno knelt next to Tarin. "Are you okay?"

"What's gong on here?" Sam demanded, his eyes almost as wide as Tarin's.

Tarin wasn't likely to give any answers, he sat where he'd collapsed, leaned forward, holding his head in his hands. Ishvan understood, as much as he was able to and moved to help in the only

way he could.

"I know this is confusing for you. Let me try to explain a little. We were traveling, just a few miles outside of the Oliff Holding. Some of our people came across your wife and son being chased as runaways." It didn't miss Ishvan's notice the instant terror that came to the man's eyes. "It's okay, they're both fine, we got to them in time. Your former master was going to kill your son, your wife ran away, we interfered. Anyway, as soon as she saw Tarin she grew upset. When we settled her down she told us of you and your brother and the stories of him you tell your children. Since Tarin was sold as a child, he remembers very little of his family and well, we're his friends so we thought it worth the risk to track you down."

Sam's eyes went from the carefully speaking man in front of him to the one sitting so brokenly on the ground. "My wife and son, they're safe?"

"Yes, and unharmed but worried about you and your daughter."

"And this man could really be my brother?"

Ishvan nodded carefully.

Sam drew in a deep unsteady breath. "I think I need to sit as well."

Neither man spoke, they just sat in the dirt opposite each other. Tarin kept his head bowed, trying to settle uneasy thoughts but Sam openly watched the other man, searching for some firm evidence that the man had been the boy he knew. The scouts near by, Ishvan and Lenno respected the silence.

Tea finally arrived and Lenno managed to press a mug of it into Tarin's hands. Sam took his gratefully. "Thank you. My daughter?"

"She's safe with the others."

Sam nodded but didn't look satisfied. "Look, I don't know if there's anything in the world that can make a man ready for a moment like this but I do know we can't just sit here staring at each other, afraid to speak."

Tarin glanced up over his tea and briefly at the other man but quickly looked down. "I've no words."

"I know how you feel. My brother had a scar, back of his head, just shy of the hair line on the left side. It curved a little. I figure the odds of two men with lilac eyes and that scar are impossible."

Tarin reached for the back of his head but it was impossible to tell on his own. With a single glance to Lenno the scout was parting the thick hair, sure enough there ran a white, curved scar. "It's there."

The words rested in the warm air like a death sentence and both men openly studied the other, again it had to be Sam to break the silence. "How is this possible? I've thought you dead, thought you had to be dead all these years. Were you sold to a caravan and liberated by the Ferals as we've just been?"

Tarin managed to shake his head. "No, I know it must look odd, my dressed this way."

Sam grinned suddenly. "Your accent." A hand came up to cover his mouth and the smile that had sprung to life there.

"Mother told me you were dead." None of Sam's amusement could touch Tarin, his emotions

were churned up but none of them felt celebratory or joyful.

Sam nodded. "I'd imagine so, she woke me up, told me to be quiet because you and the baby were sleeping. She walked me to the auction house and turned me over to them, the papers and everything were already done. I tried so hard to see you again, I tried so hard to keep track of you and our sister." He shook his head. "Lord Early, his estate's outside the city, there was no way I could slip away but I traded for information. I knew just when you'd been sold and I was near frantic about it." The words poured out of him, things he'd rarely expressed even to his wife. "I wanted to go to Lord Early, to beg him to buy you as well but Jauncy, the gardener in charge of me, refused to let me.

"Jauncy was a good man. He went to Lord Early and explained how obsessed I was with finding you. Lord Early made some inquiries but you'd already been sold. Jauncy tried to explain to me what harem meant but I was too young, he just told me it wasn't nice work like gardening. He told me the man that bought you was harsh and cruel, that he killed his harem slaves or broke them like toys." Sam's face was pale now, the remembered helplessness mixing with the current day's helplessness. "That just made me more desperate to get word to or of you. I tried so hard, I even ran off into the city once, it was the only time Lord Early ever had me beaten. Months went by without even a little bit of gossip and then a year and Jauncy told me one day that if I hadn't heard word by now you were dead. That a boy in the harems with your coloring would be shown off if you were still alive." Even now the memory of the grief of that moment struck Sam hard and his eyes turned glossy. "Anyway, it was a little after that when I got word that our sister had been sold and I'd just found out where she was when Lord Early got wind that I was obsessing over another sibling. I just couldn't stand the idea of failing her too, I planned to run away and steal her and I don't know, live on the streets or something. I was only nine or so, it seemed reasonable at the time. Before I could try, Lord Early had me sold out to the country, said I was too concerned for my past and not my work. It was impossible to look for her then and you, I never really believed you were dead but you just had to be. As I got older and I understood what harem meant, I prayed you'd died because it would have been more merciful. The idea that you lived, that you lingered like that, while I couldn't do anything about it... it was too much."

Sam shook his head. "I never dreamed, after so many years. You've been out of a collar a while?"

"A while, yes."

"How?"

"I was sent to the guard and then to the navy, I served my years."

Sam nodded vigorously. "Very good! I would have killed for that chance. My brother, free and by his own hand." His voice swelled with pride. "What've you been doing? Are you still in Gloucester? Was it true, what I was told? Were you sold into the harems?"

The questions were too many and too soon. Tarin held up a hand and set his tea aside half consumed. "I'm sorry but this isn't easy for me. I barely remember a time when I wasn't in a collar and what I do remember is hazy. I don't even know how I got that scar on the back of my head."

Sam smiled but it wasn't from the easy amusement, this time there was sadness in it. The lost, brokenness in the man across from him spoke more than any verbal answers to his questions. "It's okay, we've time now, right? Time neither of us ever thought we'd ever get." He nodded again and crushed his need to know. "The scar was from our mother, she broke a bottle over your head, you weren't more than two or three years old. It bled horribly."

"This is too much."

"Sir?" Sam asked carefully of Lenno. "Would it be possible to allow my daughter to join us? Or for us to join her? She's been frightened, terribly. I shouldn't have but, she's never known security, no child raised in a collar does. I never planned to have a family, the idea of loving someone so much and losing them again," Sam shook his head and glanced off toward the caravan. "But I loved Dinah whether I acted on it or not, loved her more than I was afraid. I raised Violet on stories of her uncle, I wanted her to know him, you." Sam corrected with a startled surprised look on his face. "Somehow the stories were like a charm for us, a potion to keep the evils of the world at bay. She believes more firmly in you than in God I think. I always told her that her uncle would watch over her, keep her safe, they were just stories, fairy tales, I never dreamed..." his words died off and he looked about the group in embarrassment. "I'm sorry, I never know when to shut up when I'm upset."

"I'd like to meet her but we should go to her so you can get something to eat as well. We'll need to be moving again soon." Getting the slaves moving again back to the farm was something practical and Tarin could wrap his mind around that. His legs felt uneasy but he forced himself to his feet, the small group around him followed. Only once he stood up he found his legs unwilling to carry him anywhere.

"Could we," the words came out without any real thought. "Could we have a moment alone? Please?"

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Chapter Sixty

The scouts and Lenno quickly agreed, offering to go ahead and see to it lunch was held for them but Ishvan lingered. "If you need us?"

"I'll yell." The warmth of the boy's friendship was a steadying hand and one he wasn't fully used to. "Thank you." He stood alone now, across from his brother, the idea was staggering. "Could you," Tarin motioned around to the far side of the wagon, away from watching eyes.

Sam instantly understood and nodded agreement. When they got to the far side Tarin leaned heavily against it both for support and because he needed something solid and real to steady against.

Sam smiled and his eyes crinkled. "I'm having trouble believing you're really here. This feels like a dream." He said when it seemed like Tarin would lean there in silence forever.

"I really thought you were dead, not because mother told me so but because I didn't think you'd break your promise." Tarin almost whispered out. "You had to be dead, you promised to take care of me." It sounded so infantile now but the emotions were deeply rooted.

Sam moved forward and acted without thought, he took Tarin's face between his hands and forced the swordsman to look him in the eye. "If I'd known you were still alive, if I'd known you were being hurt, I'd have come to you or died trying." He had no doubts now that Tarin had been sold to the harems and grown up there. It made him sick with grief and guilt. "You're my brother. I've always loved you, no matter what I will always love you." He felt Tarin's pulse quicken under his fingers, beating strongly in the vein in the slender neck and the emotions just as close to the surface. "Come here."

Tarin let himself be pulled into the hug with boneless acceptance. There was a moment where he felt deeply sheltered and in a flash he remembered how his brother used to sleep with his own body wrapped around Tarin's. They'd slept sharing what warmth they had and protecting each other from. It was only with his brother curled up beside him that he was ever able to sleep. The memory was so strong it made his whole body tremble and it was nearly too much on top of the last day's shocks.

Sam didn't push the embrace and with a few quick awkward pats on the back they broke apart. It comforted him to see his brother's eyes hadn't changed, Tarin's face may have hid everything but he still could read those odd eyes like a book and the emotions he saw there betrayed the control and coldness he was trying hard to show the world. Sam himself had to sniff hard and wipe at his eyes.

"I hope you can forgive me for not being able to protect you."

Tarin shook his head. "As an adult I do understand. You were only a child yourself, what, seven eight years old when you were sold?"

"Something like that, mother wasn't one on keeping track of birthdays."

"I'm sorry I'm not more..." he searched for a word and couldn't find one. "This is a lot for me, I don't deal well..." he sighed and tried again. "I'm going to have to go slowly, I'm sorry I can't be the brother you remember."

"Neither am I, how could we be! We've found each other, we'll discover each other as well. Right?" Sam asked carefully and drew a nod out of Tarin. "Come on, let me introduce you to your niece. She's a handful, all curiosity and so smart." He clapped Tarin on the shoulder and got them both moving, he was painfully eager to hold his daughter again.

Half way across the camp, Tarin following as silent as a shadow, a thought occurred to Sam. "I haven't even asked, are you married? Do you have a family? Friends? What do you do in the city? Why are you out here? I can't believe I didn't think to ask. I just can't get over that you're here. That we've found one another again."

The questions brought a sharp pain with it, a deeper sense of loss than he'd felt in months. Only it wasn't just Ana he thought of but of the long, coppery skinned man he'd left back in the forest. "No, I'm not married. I've a family of sorts, friends that have been kind to me." What he did for a living and what he was doing out in the countryside felt like a conversation for another day.

The memories of the bright eyed, clever and out going child Sam knew returned sharply to contrast with the cautious, careful and almost shy man across from him. The intellect was still there, even as a boy Sam had been stunned by his brother's intelligence but now there was a distance to him that seemed impassable. Sam had worn a collar long enough to know where that distance had come from. He had a pretty clear idea that if he was going to have any sort of relationship with his brother today, and he wanted one so desperately it made him ache, he was going to have to grow it slowly. "I'd like to hear about them sometime, when you feel like telling me. Speaking of families there's my pretty girl!" He called out and knelt down.

A child pulled away from where she stood waiting near Lenno, her black hair fell in tangled curls down her back but the color was as glossy black as her father's. She ran full speed on slender long legs tanned dark from the sun and threw herself into her father's arms with a squeal of delight. Sam scooped up her weight and swung her in a circle, prompting more joyful squeals.

He shifted her weight to a more comfortable pose and supported her against his side with one strong arm as she wrapped her legs around him in full confidence of his support. "Are you okay? Were you hurt?" He smoothed her hair back from her face and Tarin spied a child of delicate features and wide, large, doe eyes so dark them seemed bottomless.

She shook her head and for a moment her bow like lips frowned. "I'm fine, was just worried about you. Are you okay?" Her words and voice were far too grown up for a child her age.

"I'm just fine sweetie, just fine." He kissed her dirty forehead and slid her down to the ground. "Violet honey, I want you to meet someone."

She pulled away from her father and stood in front of Tarin. She smiled up at him with wide eyed innocence and in a very serious, very grown up way she offered her hand to him. "I'm Violet. I knew you'd come for us, I just knew you would, Uncle Kirik. Is Joey with you?"

Tarin accepted her hand and shook it gently. "Nice to meet you Violet." He managed to mumble out but his ears were ringing.

"None of that foolishness now girl." Sam warned.

"What did she say?"

"Pay her no mind, she's taken it into her head to have an imaginary friend."

"She's not imaginary!" The child protested.

"It's from the stories I've told her about you. She asked me one day last winter if maybe you had a daughter too and I said that if you'd lived you could have had one. She's too little to really understand that I didn't think you were alive. Anyway, she's made up all sorts of stories about her cousin Joey." He pulled the girl against him.

Tarin shook his head. "No, not that, what did she call me?"

"Uncle Kirik?"

The name made his stomach turn over. "Kirik?"

"Yes."

"That's my name?"

"Yes, Evan, Harn was the brother that died before you were born, you Kirik and our sister Gwyn. You didn't remember?" Sam asked carefully.

Tarin just shook his head, unable to speak.

Sam held tighter to Violet, the girl was clutching his leg. Grateful to be safely back beside her father but confused at the seriousness of the adults around her. "Kirik Muirmer, Muirmer was our mother's name since we've all had different fathers, assuming she ever knew who fathered any of us, she used that with us."

But Tarin couldn't answer, the name chased itself across his mind and back again. It was all too

much, it was simply too much too soon and he was unable to understand any of it. The name blocked off all thought, he saw Sam trying to speak to him but was unable to answer because the name had his mind shut down, unable to hear the words because of the blood roaring in his ears. His body felt both ill and numb, his hands and feet felt removed from his person. He tried to step away from Sam and all the emotions and memories the man so carelessly stirred in him but his body didn't move properly. His vision grew dizzy and distant and then darkened all together.

His vision cleared what felt like only a moment later but it must have been longer. Lenno knelt beside him and was calling his name, when Tarin glanced around, Sam and Violet had been drawn a good distance away and were ringed by four uneasy scouts who looked worriedly on. It took a bit to comprehend what Lenno was asking.

"Are you hurt? Tarin? Can you hear me?"

Tarin nodded. "Not hurt, no... I..." the name returned and his eyes grew feverish with the new knowledge. He clutched at Lenno, desperate to tell anyone and relieve some of the horrible pressure the name was creating. "I did exist... I was real!"

Lenno was even more convinced that the pale outlander had to have been poisoned because he made no sense at all when he finally came back around. Ishvan came up and knelt beside them as well and Tarin pulled on his arm, repeating over and over again the same nonsense about having been real.

"Drink that, calm down. It's okay."

Tarin accepted the mug that Ishvan had fetched and drank a long swallow, only it wasn't the expected tea but rough, cheap brandy that burned its way to his stomach. He coughed and sputtered a moment but the shock of the liquor broke some of the desperation from his mind. He sipped at it more carefully and felt the warmth spreading back into his numb body.

"I had a name." He whispered out. "I had a name, that means I was real to someone, not just a thing. I had my own name. I was a person. I was real... not just an object...."

The cousins understood and for Lenno the understanding sparked an anger deeper than he'd ever felt in his life. Not even the helpless rage he'd felt over his father had been this consuming. His father's death had been tragic, the man was strong and vital and wonderful but he'd spent his life doing and fighting for what he believed in. That couldn't compare to the anger he felt at knowing anyone, let alone the proud, strong man he'd grown to call friend, would have their lives so stolen from them, so twisted and distorted that they'd been convinced the whole solitary reason for their birth was to be a plaything to other's sadism. The idea that Tarin had spent his life questioning his own humanity, convinced the lies he'd been told were truth, certain that he truly had only been created to be used, cut Lenno deeply.

Ishvan knew the look in his cousin's eye and knew he'd not be able to speak clearly. He nodded to Tarin. "You always had a name, you just didn't remember it."

Tarin drank deeply from the mug. "I guess this sounds absurd to you." He hated how shaky his voice sounded. Now that he was settling down a bit he was feeling increasingly stupid for how strongly he was reacting.

The cousins shared a look again but it was Ishvan's past and not Lenno's place to speak of. "It's not absurd." Ishvan spoke carefully. "The family that I was born to, they never used my name. They weren't cruel but the indifference was..." he swallowed hard and shook his head. "It was quite a shock to go from that to the ways of the people. It's not absurd, not if you've had to go without an identity of your own."

Tarin suddenly felt guilty. He'd never asked or pried into his friend's history and he suddenly

realized he maybe should have. "I'm sorry, I never asked. I didn't think. I've been acting very selfishly."

"Bloody hell, Tarin!" Lenno finally snapped. "Selfish! How dare you feel overwhelmed by all you've had to cope with lately? How dare you need friendship and support? How dare you admit you've been horribly wounded and slowly bleeding to death? It may be different with your Outlander people but here, we know that not all wounds are visible but they're just as deadly. You are our friend, it's not selfish to draw support from your friends."

"I've never had friends." It was a plain statement and a confession at the same time.

"You have friends now, like it or not. Think you can ride? We should get this group moving soon."

"Yeah, I can ride. I can help you get the caravan moving too. Sam seems like he's got his head on his shoulders tightly, we can get him to help." He finished the brandy and felt the liquor hitting his blood, he hadn't had anything to eat today. "I'll go get him and Violet some food."

Lenno helped Tarin stand without being asked to. "Only if you get something yourself."

He nodded dumbly. "I will, I'll be drunk otherwise." It was an inviting thought.

Lenno and Ishvan stood together and watched Tarin move unsteadily to where Sam and Violet waited. He spoke quietly to them and drew them with him and the pair of Scouts off to find something for lunch.

Lenno shook his head. "He's going to break if he doesn't rest. It'd have been too much with the Trees calling him but now this? There's no strength left in him, no reserves."

"He won't break."

"You really believe that?"

Ishvan shrugged. "Believe it? I don't know, maybe. Maybe it's just I can't picture how he could feel anymore broken than he already does."

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Chapter Sixty One

The caravan with its still chained slaves moved slowly but they did move. It was odd for Tarin to ride when so many people just like him were walking in a shuffling line. What was worse was the

suspicious way the slaves watched the Ferals and how his brother kept glancing back over his shoulder to where Tarin rode. Sam and Violet were the only ones not still chained to the line.

"You still look too pale." Ishvan finally broke the silence when they'd ridden for hours without a word.

"He's my brother."

"Were you hoping he wouldn't be?"

Tarin shook his head. "I don't know."

"I had siblings. I remember them in a hazy kind of way. I'm not sure how I'd feel if one of them turned back up." He felt no loss for his birth family's death because he'd felt no love or connection to them. If he lost his adoptive family he'd be shattered.

"What am I supposed to say to him? Look at how he's been living? Yes he's been a slave but he's had a decent life, an honest life. I kill people for money."

It wasn't just being a swordsmen, Ishvan could see it in the worried face. He could see the past and the weight of it resting on Tarin's shoulders. His brother was a farmer and Tarin had been sold to the harems. It wasn't difficult to imagine how that could cause conversations to be a bit strained.

"You know I'll help you, however I can. You know that right?"

The offer surprised Tarin and he looked to the boy's face to try to spot any mocking but all he saw was sincerity. "Thank you."

"You do know the choice of what to do with these people is going to be yours. Lenno and the other scouts will follow whatever you say."

"I know. I've some thoughts but we'll need to see how well these people can travel."

Ishvan nodded. "We're not going back to the city, are we?"

"Not yet. Shandro was right, he said we'd see each other again."

That made Ishvan smile softly. "The Elect will be pleased to see you again, too."

Ilan, that was almost enough to make him turn around and ride as fast as he could back to the city. He ached to see the other man again and desperately didn't want any further contact. Ilan felt like a fire that if he got any closer to he'd be consumed by. It put a knot of fear into his stomach but he wasn't going back for himself.

"The thought of the Elect makes you look pained?" Ishvan teased. "Here you seemed to be enjoying his company."

"I can kill you, you know that right?"

The threat made the younger man laugh. "You won't. For what it's worth, I think he's good for you and you for him."

They rode on for far too long but Tarin wasn't sure what to say to that. "I loved Ana." He finally admitted. "I loved her but I couldn't....but with Ilan..."

"I think I can understand. I think she'd want you to be happy and if you can find some measure of

that you'd be a fool not to go for it."

"It was easier when I was leaving." He had to admit it. He was involved with a man. "I'm not..." Tarin frowned and his eyes locked on the back of his brother's head.

"I'm in art school. Half the students there are in bed together. It's not going to bother me that you're starting an affair with another man." He sighed and hated the anxious worry floating in the lavender's eyes.

"It bothers me. It'll bother him." He nodded to the man that looked similar to him but different.

He followed the glance and wasn't surprised to see the source of another worry. "Fuck him." Ishvan swore.

"Excuse me?"

"Fuck...him." He repeated. "If he's going to be judgmental bastard and think less of you for finding a small iota of pleasure and enjoyment in your life he's not worthy of being your brother."

They rode in silence further as Tarin tried to digest the other man's anger and finally nodded. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He answered just as solemnly. "I know you want a relationship with him, that's understandable, but just because you two shared a mother doesn't mean you'll have a brother-type relationship with him. That'd be okay because, you know, you're not alone anymore. You've Shelee and her girls and Dunn and me and Lenno and Shandro and Hentra...like it or not, we're ragtag but family, if you'll have us." He wanted to include Ilan in that list but he wasn't sure he should. He was fairly certain their relationship had grown physical but he was less certain it had grown emotional.

He hung his head and struggled with emotions that were foreign and strange to him. It wasn't until late that afternoon as the caravan rolled into the farm they'd left so many hours earlier that he looked up again. Tarin watched as Sam and Violet took off running from the main group to embrace and be embraced by Dinah and the baby she still clung to. They were laughing, joyous and wept freely. With a small twist of fate that could have been him, with a different eye color, a less balanced face, he would have been a valet or a cook. He could have found a love, a wife, raised children that delighted in his return and wept in joy at being reunited. Fate had taken a different turn for him and that was a kind of family that he'd never have and would always be confused by. Only when he looked over to Ishvan with his soft smile at witnessing the homecoming he knew that was a kind of family he could wrap his mind around.

"Ishvan?"

"Hmm?"

"Thank you."

That brightened the younger man's smile. "You're welcome. Does this mean you're not going to kill me?"

"It depends on how annoying you are. If you have me kidnapped again....well..."

"Yes, yes, you'll fillet me." The means may have been flawed but the ends were wonderful. There was no way Tarin would have let him in as much as he had back in the bustle and caution of the city and Ishvan knew now that Tarin had desperately needed people to care for him.

The teasing agreement brought a tiny smile to Tarin's face.

It took hours to settle everyone in at the farm and even longer to get a simple meal cooked. Fires were lit and patrols were started but no one was really at ease. The slaves were still locked in collars. They accepted their new ownership with the same bleak empty eyed broken stares as they'd accept being sold to a new farm but they huddled together fearful of the strange armed men and women that they didn't trust. The Ferals moved around the group with a mix of disgust and pity but without really knowing what to do with them.

Tarin was caught between them. He was more comfortable with the Ferals even with the cultural differences than with the frightened clumped group of people who looked like him. They watched him with a distance in their eyes but it wasn't too long after they'd stopped for the day that whispers started. Caravans had slaves from all over and just because most had been sold to the train from the outer farms didn't mean they'd all been so rural. The handful from the towns and cities all knew gossip and stories of a hired sword with black hair and lavender eyes.

It was the same distant wedge Tarin always felt around his own people. The gossip and stories of his past, of his work, made him a celebrity but it kept him a thousand miles apart from everyone. Instead of sitting around a fire with his own people, Tarin found himself sitting with the Ferals and picking at the simple dinner that had been pushed into his hands. It wasn't long until the hairs on the back of his neck prickled a little and the tone of the strange words around him took a different tone. He'd always known when people were talking about him. With a sigh he put his bowl down and left the circle of the light to walk out into the night.

He wanted to move beyond the house and simple shacks that housed the slaves, beyond the cleared fields and the neatly fenced pasture to disappear back into the forest. Oddly, he wanted to find a soothing tree and curl up around its roots and rest his head on the cool moss. That was a place where Ilan could find him and he knew he could rest safely with the other man watching his sleep.

Ilan wasn't in the dark line of trees on the top of the hill. He was miles away on his way to a meeting that Tarin wanted nothing to do with. The trees here would be young and just trees and the darkness wouldn't be safe to disappear into. There would be Scouts watching the safety of the group and Tarin's own selfish need to escape the gossip would divide their attention and put them all at risk. So instead of wandering too far away he stopped himself at a low stone wall that bordered a plentiful kitchen garden. He climbed up onto it and put his back to the glow of firelight from the other side of the house.

"Mind some company?" A country accented voice asked gently from behind him.

Tarin glanced over his shoulder to where Sam stood alone in the darkness. He wanted to send the man away, part of him wanted to deny he even existed. "I'm not much company." He hated how arrogant and cold his accent made his words and that he'd instantly added that extra tone of stuck up distance in the singular hope of driving the man away.

Sam shrugged good naturedly and easily hauled himself up onto the wall near where Tarin sat. "There's gossip about you."

"I'm sure."

"From the harems to a famous sword for hire? That's quite a leap. Do you really kill people for a living?"

Tarin heard the half hearted hope in the voice and felt the pressing need for denial. He'd never been ashamed of his work before and he wasn't going to be now. "Only two things I've ever been good at, pleasuring or killing. I'm sorry if you find that disappointing."

"We do what we have to do to survive. No one who's worn the collar can say they're fully innocent." He wiped his hands along his thighs. "They're saying you're famous and rich."

"I guess I am."

"Do you always answer everything with such caution?"

"Mostly."

The evasive answer made Sam smile. "Good answer. When we were little, you used to have half the neighborhood wrapped around your little finger. When mother forgot to buy food I'd take you to one of the neighbors and you'd look sad at them and they'd feed us. You were so...confident, so clever and quick. I've missed you, every day, I've missed you so much."

Tarin knew the human answer was to say he'd missed Sam as well. "I barely remember you." He said it knowing it would hurt but he hadn't expected it to cut him as well.

From the corner of his eye he saw the flash of pain on Sam's open and friendly face but steady accepting concern quickly took its place as the older man nodded. "I'm happy you remember me at all. I'd imagine thinking about a time before....before what was done to you, was difficult."

Tarin leaned back and glanced up to the shimmering stars glowing above their heads in the night sky and felt the pressure of the storm growing closer. He'd have to remember to warn Lenno they should wait a day or so before moving back into the forest. Some of the folks on the caravan could use a day or two of rest but they'd all suffer being caught in a thunderstorm.

"We don't have to do this." Tarin finally spoke, breaking into the silent darkness.

"I'm not following..."

"I'll see right by you and your family, I promise you that but we don't have to do this."

Sam nodded. "I'd be grateful to you for seeing mine to safety but you've lost me on the rest."

"The whole long lost brothers thing. Years and more have passed under the bridge and we're strangers to one another. I won't be offended or upset if we leave it at that." The pain made him want to curl up in a ball the way he had after Ana's loss. He felt shattered and empty and couldn't stand one more aching pain in his heart.

"Why..." Sam shook his head and puffed out a frustrated sigh. "You're a prickly sort, aren't you? You're my brother."

"I'm not the boy you remember!" Tarin snapped back.

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"The boy I remember is dead, the same way the boy I was is dead and gone too." Sam agreed. "I don't mean to make it seem like I'm asking for that time to come again."

"I don't understand what you want from me." He had expected friendly casual contact but not for the older man to seek him out.

"I don't want anything from you." Sam picked at the stones of the walls. "My brother was lost to me and yet here he sits. We're family."

"You should leave me as dead. You wouldn't want someone like me as family."

"Are you trying to convince me, or yourself?"

"Didn't you hear the gossip? I kill people for a living. If someone paid me enough money I'd kill you."

Sam shook his head. "I don't believe that. You want me to but I don't. There's nothing you can say to me to drive me away."

"You don't know the first thing about me."

"I'm sorry, Kirik."

"Don't call me that."

"I..." Sam started, paused and nodded. "I understand. Dinah knows my name from before but I don't allow her to use it. I'm sorry, Tarin." He smiled. "That name feels weird to say."

"Sorry for what?"

"For not saving you."

Tarin snorted. "You were a child yourself. Even if you could have found me there would have been nothing you could have done."

"Yes, logically we both know that but I'm going to keep saying I'm sorry until it sinks in emotionally."

"That's absurd." His accent was cutting but the sentiment was painful. "I survived. I don't want your pity."

"I don't pity you, I hurt for you."

"Why?"

Sam looked so dumbfounded at the question that for a moment he thought Tarin might be

teasing. When he really understood that his brother had no concept of what it meant to be brothers he thought his heart was going to shatter. "You're my brother, that's why. Beyond Dinah and the kids no one in this world means as much to me. I don't care what you do for a living, what you've done to survive, you're my brother. Nothing will change that and if you hurt, I hurt. If I could have traded places with you when we were children and gone to the harems in your place I would have, gladly."

"Don't say that." Tarin snapped back almost instantly. "Don't ever even think that."

"I mean it. I would have done anything to have kept you from that. That's what siblings do, they look out for each other. Not a lesson they taught in the harems, I guess."

"No, it wasn't high on the list of desirable attributes."

"Well, I guess I'll just be having to teach you that too." He smiled warmly.

"Maybe."

"Tarin...what's to become of us? Not just my family but all of us? These wild folk might not know what it means to take a caravan but you and I do. You're going to have to turn us in." It was a sensitive question but one everyone was whispering about.

The logical thing was to turn them in and walk away. "I don't know what we're going to do. This wasn't planned, I was on my way back home."

"You're going back to the city?"

Tarin's eyes drifted to the dark line of the forest. "I was, but not anymore..." He pushed himself off of the wall and left his brother sitting there alone.

Lenno and Ishvan and the Scouts not on patrol were still around the same fire Tarin had wandered away from. They were still talking and he still got the sense that they were talking about him but it no longer mattered as much. Eyes flicked to him and some of the faces smiled toward him but Tarin wasn't able to smile back.

"I know you're talking about me. If they're questions, ask."

There was only a quick, fleeting look of guilt before Lenno nodded. "Just gossip, nothing important. We're sorry."

"I'm right here, you don't need to gossip. Ask." He braced himself for the questions about his time in the harems or how many people he'd killed for money.

"Tarin...it's not what you think..." Ishvan warned while the small group quickly talked together.

"I can't sit with them because of the gossip." He pointed to where the slaves were grouped together. "And I can't sit here and pretend you're not talking about me either. So, ask because I need to have some place where I don't feel like a freak."

"Tarin..." Ishvan cautioned again.

Lenno nodded. "You and the Elect...they're...we were just talking about..." He couldn't hold Tarin's eye and looked to his cousin to answer.

"No way." Ishvan shook his head.

One of the other Scouts laughed and pointed to Tarin. "You...Elect..." But his words failed and

he glanced around with a wide grin. He caught his hand into the hair of the nearest Scout and pulled him over for a kiss that was far from teasing or friendly. When the kiss broke the one that had been pulled over laughed and wiped a little at his mouth and the original Scout pointed to Tarin again. "You...Elect...?"

It hadn't been the questions he had been expecting. Tarin felt himself blushing and soon there was good natured chuckling at the red flush that was creeping up his face.

"They just want to know if the two of you are...happy." Ishvan managed to ask.

The blush of embarrassment started to become anger. "You told them?"

The young artist held up his hands. "I didn't say a word. They're Scouts, they don't miss much."

"Ilan is one of the most annoying, difficult, troublesome men I've ever met."

Far from accepting what should have been a denial the group smiled and elbowed each other. His grumbling complaints were translated and seemed to confirm a relationship better than any positive words he might have offered.

"Was that all?" He cleared his throat.

"Pretty much." Ishvan tried not to laugh at Tarin's obvious discomfort with the rest of the group but it wasn't easy.

"Good." He sat a little straighter. "There's a storm coming and some of those people shouldn't be out in the soaking rain. If we can manage it, we should stay here until it passes but we can't stay too long."

There was shared words and looks before Lenno nodded. "We've felt it but not that it would be bad. We can stay here as long as you'd like but if someone happens by we'll have to deal with them."

"No one will be traveling in this storm. Will there be a problem to take them with us?"

"That depends on where you want to go."

"Can we take them to this meeting your people are holding?"

"You want to take a caravan of slaves to the Elect's meeting?"

"Yes."

"That means you'll be returning."

Tarin nodded. "Yes."

Lenno nodded. "If you're willing to go to this meeting you can take anything you want with you."

"Will we make it back in time?" They were still technically in the border lands but well on Tarin's people's side of things. It would take them as long to get back and more with such a slow moving group of people.

"Wagon will have to be left...There's some oxen and mules in the barn we can use for supplies. On foot it'll take longer but once we're back in the trees we can split up, leave the group to move slower on it's own but we can get you to the meeting before they resolve anything." Lenno was certain of that, even if they had to push the horses to the limit of endurance he would get both

Elects in the same place for the Holy Ones to see.

"Good." He nodded. "The collars stay on them for now." That made the group of Scouts uneasy. The slender metal loops could be easily removed but Tarin needed both the slaves to be reminded of their place for now and Ilan's people to see the reality of wearing a collar. "When we leave here we burn the barn and buildings." It would make it look like a Feral raid and keep people from questioning why an entire farm would suddenly be unpopulated. "Until then, keep everyone together, feed them, let them rest up but assure them no one will be harmed or turned back in." He sighed and glanced around. Things had gotten far more complicated than he'd ever wanted his life to be.

The storm rolled in and was as violent as Tarin had warned it would be. During the night the rains poured down and lightening struck far to close to the farm. Tarin would have hated being stuck out in the woods with the already frightened slaves and even huddled in the barn they flinched when the sky boomed and lightening flashed.

When the sun rose the next morning the grass seemed greener, the air cleaner even the sky seemed a bit more blue when Tarin walked across the open yard to help load supplies onto the mules. Breakfast had been cooked but he something in the crisp still damp air was satisfying enough. The Scouts had either already eaten or hadn't bothered in their rush to get everyone moving but even with the stress and worry they still talked good naturedly and warmly together.

"You look like you've slept well." Lenno smiled as Tarin walked up.

"I did. I always sleep well during rainstorms." He'd curled up in his blankets in some sweet hay and slept dreamlessly for most of the night. "Everyone ready?"

He nodded and stood up from where he was checking the ties on the packs of the beast. "I have some of them clearing out the kitchen garden. House is well supplied but there isn't enough blankets to go around."

"It's summer." None were too old or too frail to sleep on the ground without a blanket but some were dangerously close to it. As the slaves were fed, they were gathered together in a group in front of the house and Tarin shook his head. "Will there be enough supplies for so many?"

"No one will go hungry but it won't be a feast either. We'll be able to hunt when we're safely in the trees. It'll be okay, Tarin, you let me worry about these things."

"What can I do?"

"Calm them down, tell them it'll be okay? It'll make things a lot easier if we don't have to chase down strays." His smile widened. "I'd rather not be bitten by another crazy Outlander."

The very fact that Lenno found the memory of when Tarin had bitten him amusing tickled him. He smirked back. "I'll see what I can do."

Within a half an hour every slave on the farm had been gathered together. Tarin wasn't sure what he was going to say but when he walked toward them their eyes focused on him, looking to him for answers. It made him miss his empty loft and his privacy back in his life where no one was depending on him.

"I don't have a lot to say." Tarin knew his accent alone would resonate with authority he didn't feel. "We're stuck here with a couple of options. We can turn our backs and let you all disappear but none of us are stupid enough to pretend how that will play out. We can herd you to another caravan or leave you here until someone comes to collect you, sell you off to other places. Or

you can behave and come with us. I know the Ferals are frightening but they won't harm you. However, I won't allow any of you to harm them, either. If you cause trouble, step out of line, I'm not a master. I won't have you beaten, I'll simply have you turned out." That was a threat worse than a beating, to be turned away with no food, no supplies, no concept of where to go or what to do and he saw the fear in the eyes of those nearest him. It was a threat only someone who'd been a slave could understand. "We're leaving soon, get ready." He left them there, deliberately not looking to his brother or his family, and walked back toward the group of Ferals finishing up with the last little details.

"Think that'll be a threat they'll listen to?" Ishvan asked carefully as he came along beside Tarin.

"They'll listen. They're slaves. They all want to be free but being free and being alone are two different things." Tarin wasn't sure why the Scouts were putting the cooking fires out when they were lighting torches to set fire to the buildings but he wasn't going to debate their methods.

Soon enough and yet not soon enough, the group was moving up through the fields and toward the distant trees. They were moving slowly but moving and that was all he could ask of them. Tarin was one of the last in the line, on his horse while so many of the others walked. When he reached the top of the hill as their group disappeared into the tree line, he glanced behind him. A pair of Scouts rode hard up the valley toward them as the buildings caught fire. Smoke rose into the blue morning sky with curls of black as the buildings danced in flames. There was no way to deny it now, Tarin had made a choice and he wasn't siding with the status quo of his people any longer.

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Chapter Sixty Three

"I can do this on my own." Tarin muttered but held still.

Lenno frowned and dabbed the lotion on the nicely healing line of now barely pink skin on Tarin's neck. The rope burn had healed well once the bruising had faded but if he was going to have any say in it he was going to do his best to have it heal without leaving a single mark.

"Shut up and let me tend it. If Hentra hears you've been ignoring this she'll skin me."

He sighed and let the man finish what was becoming a daily task. He couldn't debate the results. Whatever herbs or potions were in the oil was causing the scar to fade, not just on his neck but on his wrists as well. They were well back in the woods now and the group was being allowed to light more than one fire. The slaves were gathered around their own and the Ferals were about another glowing circle a short distance away.

"How're they doing?"

"Their wounds are healing. Some of the weaker are responding well but they're still slowing us down."

"We should split up."

Lenno nodded and with a final tapping touch slid away to reseal the small bottle. "If you want to arrive at the meeting sooner instead of later, we're going to have to."

"How many will we have to leave to babysit them?"

"They haven't caused a moment of trouble, if you over look how unnerving it is for us to have them still wearing their collars that is."

"We've had this conversation, they have to stay on. If you take them off now they'll get confused. I know it bothers you but when you wear a collar it becomes a part of you. Take them off and the rules change, they're not ready for that, not yet, not until we have some idea what to do with them." Tarin leaned back and watched the group. They'd been traveling for days, the time blurring together, and he hadn't spoken to his brother since that night on the fence. He wasn't sure if the other man was giving him space to think or what but it left Tarin uncertain what to think or feel about him.

"Tarin?"

"Hmm?" He blinked and glanced over to the Feral.

"You're somewhere else. Didn't hear a word I was saying did you?"

"Sorry, no."

"A half dozen, we should leave at least six. We're not likely to run into trouble and we'll cross into our lands proper in another day at this pace. Six Scouts can keep watch on them and keep them moving without any difficulty."

"On foot?"

Lenno nodded. "I assumed you wanted to bring some of them with us. Your brother and his family?"

"Not for that reason. Violet is the youngest here in a collar. She'll have the most shock value for these Holy Ones of yours but it's not fair to take her along without her parents." He rolled a stone under his boot.

"Of course. So that's two horses taken, do you care which other four?"

He could have picked but Tarin had been trying to not get to know any of the slaves. "No, it's up to you. I want to push hard so they'll have to be able to keep pace."

"I think we can manage that. I'll ask your brother to pick the other four. If you don't mind?"

"I don't mind."

"He's emerged as someone the others look too. Seems leadership runs in the family."

Tarin snorted. "I'm not a leader."

That made Lenno smile thinly. "Of course you aren't." He shifted his weight on the log they were sitting on. "I'll make the arrangements and we'll split off in the morning."

Tarin nodded and let the conversation sputter out. If they rode hard it wouldn't be more than a week or so before they made the meeting. That would bring it's own complications and troubles since he didn't know what he was going to do or say to this gathering of Holy Ones. That would be easier than figuring out what he was going to say to Ilan.

"Bastard's going to be smug as hell..." Tarin muttered.

"What was that?" Lenno turned and asked.

"Oh, nothing, talking to myself." Tarin forced a smile and silently scolded himself for letting even the thought of the other man distract him.

Days of hard riding made Tarin grateful his body had time to adjust to being on a horse on the way from the Feral's lands. Doubly so when he saw the slaves wincing and stretching every night when they stopped and he was able to slide down to the gratefully unmoving ground with far more ease. The only one seemingly unaffected by the long days on horseback was Violet. She easily hopped down from riding in front of her father all day to run around the camp.

What surprised Tarin the most was how little fear the girl felt around the Ferals and more, how the Ferals, who were by their nature uneasy around Outlanders, had nearly adopted the child. It might have been her relation to Tarin or simply the fact that when she ran she was all bouncy black curls and laughter and made it almost impossible to be standoffish to her. She ran around the camp helping as she could and simply enjoying the fresh air of the forest and the attention of so many adults.

"I should be worried about her running around so many Ferals but they're so good to her. Even the ones that don't speak our language." Sam said as he came up beside where Tarin was brushing down his horse.

They'd barely spoken even with the larger group days behind them and Tarin glanced to his brother and still had the instant uneasy, almost queasy feeling in his stomach at seeing the man. "The people revere children. They'd never hurt her."

Sam nodded. "Your friend, Ishvan, told me that. He told me how they took him in when they didn't have to. He seems very loyal to you, they all do."

"Hm." Tarin grunted in reply and finished on caring for his horse.

"You're taking us to meet their leader?"

"Their Elect, yes. He's not a leader like...well...no one has to listen to him."

"I've worked hard my whole life but this horse riding is killing me." He rubbed at his back and smiled. "We'll be there tomorrow."

"Early afternoon from what they tell me." Tarin patted the side of the horses' neck and let one of the Scouts lead the animal to join the others.

"I've caught some whispers that there might be trouble between you and this leader."

Tarin shook his head and moved to help get the camp set up. "It's nothing you need to worry about."

"If he's going to be angry enough at you to order my family harmed it does." Sam followed.

"If there's trouble it won't be anything that effects your family. I promise you that."

"You're my family."

It made Tarin want to grind his teeth. "Well, I'm one member you don't need to worry about. If there's trouble I can take care of myself." He pushed past his brother, his stomach now so knotted up that he knew he wouldn't be able to eat and sleep would be impossible. He'd never been so nervous about seeing someone again in his life and the last thing he needed was his long lost brother making him more unstable.

As he'd feared, Tarin barely slept during the night. He'd drift off and almost as soon as he was soundly out he was jerking awake. It was how he was used to sleeping and it was nothing new but he'd gotten used to the secure comfort of sleeping with so many trustworthy men and women around him to guard him. It left him edgy and unhappy as the sun came up and they started their day.

"It'll be okay." Ishvan tried to comfort as he drew his horse closer to Tarin's.

"I'm fine."

"Sure. Didn't eat dinner, didn't have anything but tea for breakfast, kept everyone on edge by waking up about every hour...yeah you're fine." He teased. "Seriously, it'll be okay."

Tarin wanted the comfort. He wanted to spill out his nerves and confess his fears and let Ishvan reassure him that it really would be okay. Facing the Holy Ones didn't bother him. He neither wanted nor needed their approval and if they rejected his ideas and suggestions he'd figure something out. It was Ilan that had him sick with uncertainty and he could have really used even the false comfort of Ishvan's words.

He tightened his hands on the reins. "I'm fine."

They rode hard and by mid morning they were seeing more Ferals moving around the trees. The trail grew wider and more developed and there was no doubt that they were getting close. Four times as they traveled they were stopped and questioned and while the questioning was always brief it was testament to the increasing security. Tarin ignored them and ignored the looks every Scout and Warrior that stopped and watched them pass. They weren't his concern.

By noon they were in the camp. Camp was too humble of a term. It was more like small tent town or city. The tents were laid with the same precise way of the smaller camp Tarin had been in but this time it covered a whole valley. Instead of three or four tents around a single fire some had dozens. There were people everywhere, men and women, with their tawny, auburn hair and coppery skin and they all stopped to watch them as they passed. Lenno didn't stop them and he didn't even slow up to give anyone else the chance to stop them.

They didn't stop until they reached the far side of the valley. There, pressed against the tree line, was a naturally occurring bowl shaped hill which made a perfect small amphitheater. Along the top edge were dozens of Scouts and Warriors but Tarin only saw two that came running toward them. Hentra's face lit up and she pulled Tarin into a hug almost before he could get off his horse.

"Why didn't you send word ahead?" She scolded but quickly released him to move to hug Ishvan and Lenno.

"We were moving fast." Lenno explained.

Shandro stepped back from where he'd embraced Tarin, surprised that the man hadn't done anything more than flinch slightly at the contact. "I knew we'd see each other again."

"I didn't." Tarin confessed. "We ran into some complications." He nodded to his brother and the other slaves.

"I see that." Shandro stepped back but took the reins of Tarin's horse as he moved away. "He's down there."

Tarin took a deep breath and tried very hard to not show his unease. He stepped the last few feet to the rise of the hill and stood over looking the gathering below. Dozens of Holy Ones sat about on blankets alone or in small groups and the debate that was obviously quite heated stopped cold when they noticed Tarin standing on the ridge.

Ilan sat in the center of the small incline on a fallen log. His back to the forest that curved behind him and his head was bowed with obvious frustration and exhaustion. When the debate stopped for the first time in days his head snapped up but no amount of practice or training kept the look of shock at seeing Tarin from his face. He stood up and froze in place, worried that if he so much as breathed the Outlander would disappear or worse he'd run to him like some besotted fool.

"Tarin." He spoke and the Outlander still hadn't disappeared.

The surprise he saw on Ilan's face dissolved some of Tarin's own nerves. He saw the Feral say his name but he couldn't hear it over the sudden surge in whispering. That was all he needed to push himself literally and figuratively over the edge and step forward. He stepped carefully around the seated Holy Ones, some that got up and moved out of his way. He couldn't see anything else but Ilan standing there waiting for him. When he reached the center he stopped.

"Hi." Tarin finally said when Ilan just stood there, watching him.

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Chapter Sixty Four

Ilan's lips moved but no sound came out. One of his hands rose up ward, drifting with extended questing fingers toward Tarin as if to brush across his face or wander through his loose hair. The hand paused, the fingers balled into a fist and the almond shaped eyes darted from studying

Tarin to scan the hillside and the dozens of Holy Ones watching everything he did. Reality of where he was crashed over Ilan and the shocked surprised look on his face was quickly replaced by the cold, expressionless mask he always wore.

His hand unclenched but it didn't lower. Instead Ilan reached out and caught Tarin's wrist. His fingers gripped like steel and when he yanked, Tarin stumbled forward. Before the swordsman could regain his balance Ilan was tugging him forward for another step. Two steps became actual movement as Ilan pulled Tarin away from the collection of people toward the trees.

"Ilan?" Tarin tried to stop the man but the grip on his arm tightened and pulled at him harder. It left Tarin to stumble along behind Ilan into the trees. It took only a few feet before the trees gave way to a narrow path. "I get it, I'll follow so you can let go."

Ilan didn't let go. If anything, he pulled harder at Tarin's arm. They were almost running Ilan was dragging them so quickly down the narrow path. Tarin pulled his arm back a little, experimenting with how much force it would take to break free. All it did was earn him a tighter grip, one that had gone from bordering on painful to enough to make him wince.

After a being nearly dragged for hundreds of feet down the path they slowed down as they came up to a Warrior standing guard. Ilan slowed down just enough to bark out an order.

"I'm not to be disturbed, for any reason!"

The woman nodded and gave a crisp answer that sounded like agreement and Tarin thought was as yes, sir, but was too distracted to know for sure. He didn't miss the amused, pleased and sympathetic look she gave him as he was dragged by.

They stumbled down the path almost the distance they'd already covered. Tarin was a single heartbeat away from pulling his arm free and digging in his heels no matter how much fighting it would take just to get them to stop. Before he could find a good place to make a stand, they broke from the path and into a small cleared camp.

It was small compared to the camp behind them. A single tent sat near a small fire near a small stream. It was private, isolated and without a doubt where Ilan was staying. They hadn't just placed his camp off away from other people, they'd put him completely on his own. Tarin wasn't sure if the privacy was by Ilan's choice or if his people had been more comfortable isolating him. As they broke into the small clearing Ilan finally released his grip on Tarin's arm but they'd been moving so fast Tarin stumbled a few more steps forward.

"You could have just asked." He snapped and wrapped at his wrist. "A hello would have been enough."

Ilan turned, his eyes darting across Tarin as if he still wasn't sure what he was seeing was real. He reached for Tarin again and the swordsman flinched back a little, preparing to fight off another demanding grab to drag him somewhere else. When the touch gently brushed across his face instead of roughly snatching at him he held still and allowed it. Again, Ilan tried to say something but no sound came out.

The effort made Tarin smile a little, surprised to have caught Ilan so off guard that he was still speechless. He reached up and took the hand into his own. "It's really me."

The hand tangled around his own for a moment before breaking free. This time it returned to the back of Tarin's neck and pulled the him forward. Tarin stumbled again, caught off balance and fell against Ilan, fell into his arms. A hand slipped around his waist as the one on his neck glided up to flutter through his hair. Ilan's kiss spoke more for him than any words.

Tarin's first reaction was to push the man away, to fight off the contact as he would have with

anyone else but it wasn't anyone else. It was Ilan and his touch didn't send fear and disgust down his spine. His kiss didn't chill his soul but instead warmed it. His body went tense at the contact but quickly dissolved into languid softness that molded to his lover's form. He found his lips parting and more, he found himself kissing Ilan back with the same amount of desperate, hungry loneliness he hadn't really been aware that he was feeling. There was no doubt the feeling was mutual, Ilan kissed him as if the contact between their lips was the only thing keeping him alive.

When they finally parted because of a need for air alone Tarin found his hands gripping Ilan's shoulder blades, holding the Feral as tightly as Ilan's hand had gripped his wrist a short while earlier. He found his forehead pressed to Ilan's and he couldn't seem to keep his eyes open.

"You returned to me..." Ilan finally was able to voice.

"Yes." Tarin answered. Normally he would have clarified the statement with the fact that he hadn't really returned because of Ilan, that there had been other circumstances and situations that brought him back. The trouble was, in that moment, in Ilan's arms, with his knees still trembling from the passion of the kiss the man had claimed, it became the entirety of the truth. He had come back to Ilan.

"You heard my call, my loneliness, and returned to me..." Ilan sighed and nuzzled at Tarin's neck. "I've ached with the need to follow you."

"Ilan...we need to talk..." There were important things they had to discuss. Things had happened and things he'd learned about himself that he needed to share with Ilan. The difficulty was that while Ilan's lips were nibbling at his neck and ear he couldn't seem to recall all the very important things that had pushed him to return. "We...oh....I...I need..."

"So do I." Ilan whispered and pressed his hips firmly into Tarin's.

There was no hiding any arousal in the tightly laced leather pants. The feel made Tarin shiver but one of his hands dropped from the strong back down to grab the leather covered ass. Without thought he pulled Ilan's hips tighter to his own and found himself grinding his own growing length against Ilan's. The contact made Ilan growl a little against his neck and that simple soft sound made Tarin's hand drift forward to start pulling at the ties on Ilan's pants.

"Tarin...if you do that...I...." He nuzzled the side of Tarin's face. "Wait..."

Ilan pushed at Tarin's shoulders enough for their bodies to stop fully rubbing against each other. The sudden shock of emptiness made Tarin's head spin. He wasn't used to desire and lust and he certainly wasn't used to rejection.

"What?" He demanded but Ilan's eyes were scanning the forest around them.

Whatever he saw or didn't see there made Ilan smile and shake his head. "If you keep rubbing against me we're going to be naked right here and I can't promise I'll be able to help myself with so much pale skin under such bright sunlight..."

Tarin wanted to snap back with something witty and clever. He wanted to remind Ilan he wasn't some thing to be turned on and teased. The teasing smirk made Tarin want to push Ilan away and deny them both any further contact. What stopped him was a hand that boldly cupped his groin. The leather may as well have not been there. The touch burned him and made him moan.

Any thought of putting pride before desire dissolved. Tarin could no more refuse Ilan now that the man was boldly, directly rubbing him with a hand that seemed to know just how to touch him even through the leather of his pants than he could jump into the air and fly. It was impossible and he didn't want to try to fight against the shivering need that made his clothing feel uncomfortable against his skin.

"Ilan..." He felt himself lean back, the hand in his hair going down to support his neck and the other hand stroking him harder. "Jeses sake don't tease me..."

"But you're so beautiful like this..." Ilan sighed. "And I never thought to hold you again..."

His thoughts were splintered into a thousand parts but the reunion with the Feral wasn't what he'd expected. Tarin found himself pushing against one of Ilan's shoulders but even he wasn't sure if he was seriously trying to get away. "Stop..."

Ilan licked Tarin's jaw line. "Is that a real stop or do you just need to say it?"

The hand on his length stopped its steady rhythm and the nuzzling nips and kisses stilled against his neck. The question floated down over his scattered thoughts and the first answer that came into his mind came out of his mouth.

"I don't know."

Ilan chuckled but it had a tense undertone to it. "That's good enough. We've time now that you're back."

The hand not only stopped but disappeared from between his hips and the one on his neck trailed across his skin a little but it too disappeared. Ilan sighed but he stepped back away from him. The lingering feel of the other man's touches hadn't even faded before Tarin missed them.

Ilan nodded again and wondered if he could get away with adjusting his own pants to relive some of the pressure that was distracting him. "We've time..." He told himself as much as Tarin.

Tarin's hand snapped out and this time he was the one to catch Ilan's wrist. "Wait."

"Tarin?"

He couldn't ask Ilan to continue anymore than he could actually ask Ilan to stop. Instead of trying to speak he tugged on the arm he was holding onto. Ilan raised his eyebrows but he followed when Tarin tugged again. There was only one place Tarin could think of to go to make it okay and step by step he led Ilan toward the tent.

He could take Ilan to the tent but couldn't force the man inside. Ilan paused as Tarin ducked inside. "Tarin...is this an invitation?"

The wanting breathlessness of the question made Tarin nod in agreement as he glanced back up and out to where Ilan stood. He had no doubt the other man wanted to strip him naked and take him without thought to whether or not Tarin had given permission. The lust in the hazel eyes should have made him feel a little fear but all it did was thrill him with a returned echo of his own desire.

Even with the small nod, Ilan paused before ducking into his tent. Alone in the private space with Tarin and he knew he wouldn't be able to control himself. He knew Tarin was emotionally fragile but when he saw the Outlander standing among the sea of Holy Ones all he wanted to do was throw him down and take him, right there, with no concern over who saw. When Tarin kissed him back and rubbed his body against his own, it had nearly been more than he could stand but with that single spoken word of protest he had to pause and be certain he'd not harm the other man. The last thing he wanted was to see that blank emptiness of a broken doll in the beautiful lavender eyes again.

There was only hungry want in those eyes now. They stared up at Ilan and that broke his threads of control. He slipped inside the tent and closed it behind him. As the tent closed behind him,

Tarin leaned back, half reclining on the blankets that he'd slept alone on for so many nights. The sight made his head spin and before he knew what he was going to do, Ilan was stretched out over top the beautiful Outlander and tugging at the ties to his clothing.

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Chapter Sixty Five

The kisses came back and they made Tarin feel like he was floating in a dream. Even the hands tugging at his clothing were oddly gentle. His contact with Ilan had been a bit more demanding than the soft brushing of lips to lips and the fluttery touch of hands across his skin. It felt like a shuddering dream and Tarin closed his eyes and let Ilan part his clothing and peel it from his body.

"This isn't...isn't why I came back..." Tarin moaned as Ilan's lips found his collarbones. He buried his hand in the spill of so much hair.

"But isn't this nice?" Ilan sighed as he nipped at the exposed skin and finally got the ties on Tarin's pants loosened.

"Ohhh..." He sighed as Ilan finally got his pants loosened and the horrible pressure was eased. "That's nice..." A strong hand slipped under the leather and wrapped around his aching length and it brought a strangled moan to Tarin's throat.

"That's better." Ilan chuckled. "I've missed you....I missed the feel of you..."

The words were sincere, Tarin had no doubt about that, but they made catch the wrist of the hand that was stroking him so fully. He was suddenly suspicious of everything from the shivering pleasure filling his body to Ilan's almost loving words. His worries made him half sit up and he studied Ilan's face looking for mockery or deceit and not seeing any.

"What?" He questioned but he didn't see any fear or panic in the lavender eyes, all he saw was what he thought was anger. "What did I do?"

Tarin shook his head. "Don't say such things."

"What?"

"Just shut up and do it."

Ilan shook his head. "I'm not going to use you. I won't..."

"You always have to be so damn difficult!" Tarin cursed as he tried to push Ilan away.

There was no way Ilan was going to let himself be shoved away. He caught Tarin's arms and almost shook the other man. What he wanted to do was slam the pale Outlander down onto the blankets below them and climb on top of him again but he wasn't quite willing to be so rough with him. The tight grip and almost shaking made Tarin shiver and some of the tension dissolved from his shoulders. The sight stole Ilan's breath and without meaning to his hands tightened on the pale skin.

"You want to be hurt." Ilan whispered.

Tarin refused to look away when he saw the pain in the hazel eyes locked to his own. "It's easier."

"It upsets you to know that I might treasure you."

It wasn't a question but Tarin was unable to keep holding those steady eyes.

He pulled on the exposed arms he held in his hands and physically dragged Tarin closer to him. It might not have been so easy if Tarin's legs weren't still tangled in his pants with his boots still. He pulled hard and before his lover could slide away, Ilan wrapped his arms around the pale shoulders and pulled Tarin tight against him. Tarin tried to pull away but Ilan tucked his head against the Outlander's and just held on.

"Let me go."

"No. I can't help it...I have feelings for you...since you left? It's been like someone stabbed me it's hurt so much. I haven't wanted to wake in the morning... I'm sorry that upsets you but I can't help it. I want you but I won't hurt you to have you." He hugged Tarin tighter and felt the shortened breaths of the other man on his neck.

Slowly, hesitantly, Tarin's arms came up around Ilan's back. The contact made him waver between wanting to beat Ilan senseless for trying to hug him and burying his face in the tumbles of long hair and just hanging on. Before he was even aware of which he wanted his arms were wrapped around Ilan and he was clinging to the other man as tightly as he was being held.

"We shouldn't do this..." Tarin eventually whispered. "We'll have to part sooner or later."

Ilan petted the back of Tarin's head, thrilled again by the feel of the black silken threads under his fingers. "Than let that be pain be enough for you..." He whispered back. His hand drifted from the thick hair down the tense spine and the soft touch made Tarin's arms tighten around him. "Let me..." he sighed. "Please..." he kissed the side of the head pressed against him. "Please..."

A hand slipped across his ribs and Tarin found his breath hiccupping in a mix of surprised pleasure and angry grief. It would be easier to shove Ilan away and stop the craziness of whatever their relationship was becoming. It might even have been smarter to pry himself out of the strong arms draped around his body but the problem was he didn't want to. It felt good and more... it felt right.

Tarin pulled away from the warm embrace and was surprised when there was only a small hesitation before Ilan let him go. Ilan just watched him with serious eyes but for a change he kept his mouth shut. He wasn't going far. He leaned back just enough to tug at his boots and strip away his remaining clothing.

"I smell like a horse, I should wash up." He apologized.

Ilan let the back of his hand trail over the side of Tarin's face. "You smell like sunshine and leather, neither one is unpleasant and I don't want to wait that long."

The eyes on him made Tarin feel horribly naked but he scooted backwards and laid back down on the blankets. Ilan hovered, sitting where he'd been pushed and simply watched with his serious eyes. He watched for so long that Tarin was about to give up, get dressed and hurry away down the trail back to the gathering of people. Being studied was decidedly unsexy and Tarin frowned and raised his eyebrows.

"Sorry." Ilan blushed as he apologized. "It's just...this is like a dream." His hand easily stroked across one strong thigh so close within his reach. The petting hand retreated long enough for Ilan to gather his hair and settled it down his back before he began to tackle the ties to his own clothing. He couldn't pull them off fast enough to suit him and as soon as the last offending block between their skin was gone Ilan stretched out along the moon pale body again.

Only his time there was nothing between them and being free to touch skin to skin made Ilan sigh happily. "This alone would be enough...just to hold you." He whispered between kisses to the exposed shoulder closest to him.

"That would hold more sentiment if your hard on wasn't pressing into my side." Tarin mocked back.

"Now who just needs to shut up?" Ilan grinned but he rubbed the accused on hardness against the pale skin. "You seem to have lost some interest..."

"If you'd just stop talking and distracting me!"

"Of course..." He answered casually but let his hand tease and touch the semi-hard length Tarin was being so defensive of. "In the basket..." He nodded with his chin to the side of the tent closest to Tarin.

"I remember that basket." Tarin rolled a little on his side to stretch and tip the basket over.

The little pot of ointment rolled out but it wasn't the only thing that spilled free. With it came a section of beautifully carved wood, smooth and well oiled and in a very unmistakable shape. Tarin felt his eyes widen as he processed what the toy was and what Ilan would be doing with it. He scrambled trying to shove the dildo back into the basket.

Lips kissed his neck and Ilan chuckled. "Forgot that was there, sorry...I was lonely last night."

Tarin's hand clenched around the small jar. "What? Your pet bodyguard was busy?"

Ilan let his hands trace across the Outlander's flat stomach. "Didn't want him..." The hand went lower to resume teasingly touching Tarin's cock, only now it wasn't even a little soft and the burning hardness made him suckle a little at the beautiful neck. "You like the idea...the thought of me laying here alone, pleasuring myself?"

"You're an idiot." Tarin hissed back and meant to pull away from the groping hands but somehow ended up rubbing his ass back against Ilan instead.

"Sliding that into my body....pretending it's your flesh instead...." Tarin moaned against him and arched his length into his hand. "Do your people not have such things?" From what he'd seen in Tarin's head they did and more perverse and creative ways than his people did, he just wanted to hear Tarin say it.

"Don...don't be...oh...stupid..."

"Does that mean you do?" Ilan purred and tightened his strokes just enough to hear Tarin gasp.

"Ye...oh yes...." He half tossed the small jar back toward Ilan. "Get on with it!"

Ilan had to fumble to catch the jar before it rolled between their bodies. It was a temptation because it wouldn't take much effort to roll Tarin even further onto his side. He could have them slicked up and be gliding into that wonderful pleasure without barely having to move. Their bodies were so close already, so wanting of each other that it would be wonderfully easy. More, he could almost be holding Tarin close in his arms while he took him and that was a thought that made Ilan almost drool with want.

He fumbled with the jar and got the lid popped off. The slightly herbal smell drifted across the small tent as he dipped out a little of the ointment. Only instead of gliding it over his own length, he kept his body as tightly pressed to Tarin's as he could and gently stroked the lotion over the Outlander's.

Tarin gasped at the slick wetness that suddenly made Ilan's teasing hand into a new stroking torment. "Wha...what are you doing?"

Ilan nipped at the pale shoulder. "I want the real thing. If you're going to leave me again I want to know what it's really like..."

"Wha...oh...okay...I...Ilan...if you want." Tarin sighed.

"I do..." His hands petted down Tarin's sides and reluctantly he slipped back just far enough to roll Tarin onto his back.

"Ilan..."

"Shhh, just..." he couldn't say just relax and enjoy it because the thought alone made him feel like he was blushing but he wanted Tarin to do just that. Instead of trying to explain he slipped over and straddled Tarin's hips.

"Ilan..." Tarin sighed as the man straddled across his hips. The sight of so much golden skin over Ilan's surprisingly toned body made him feel light headed. His hands glided up the strong thighs and he liked the way Ilan arched a little from such a small touch. It was only seeing Ilan like this, aroused, seated across his lap, hair falling loose down his back and his face open and unguarded that Tarin saw for the first time the uncertainty and self doubt Pelin had hinted at. Ilan had to be sure of everything but Tarin saw below it and saw that he was certain of almost nothing.

The understanding hit him with such force that he was almost distracted from the hand stroking him. For a second he forgot what Ilan had been suggesting until the younger man slipped back a little. The hand stroking him paused, steadied him and suddenly Ilan was leaning back, sliding back until he was holding Tarin steady and moving to lower himself downward.

It wasn't as if he was a virgin or like he'd never taken another man before it had just been so long that Tarin was unprepared for the tight, hot pressure. As he watched Ilan lower himself down, his body seemed to dissolve into pleasure. His hands forgot to touch Ilan as the man slowly settled himself down but Tarin drank in the sight of how his breath moved in panting gasps through his chest.

Ilan tossed what hair had fallen forward back over his shoulders and licked his lips. "Oh...so good...oh Tarin..."

It made it all better than just how it felt for him to see such pleasure on Ilan's face. He wasn't even doing anything and Ilan was enjoying it. It felt like a challenge and Tarin made up his mind.

He rocked Ilan back a little and sat up to wrap his arms around the other man's waist. "Better than your toy?" He asked against one half hidden ear.

The whisper made Ilan shiver.

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Chapter Sixty Six

Tarin kissed the tense column of Ilan's neck. "It was just last night you were lonely?" He teased as he rocked the other man he was holding and liked Ilan being the one off balance and a little speechless for a change.

It worked. Ilan's eyes rolled shut. His words wandered into his own language, whispery tones that he couldn't understand but that made Tarin shiver with desire. "Say that in real words..." He whispered back and let his fingernails dig into Ilan's back.

"Arro...arrogant outlander..." Ilan moaned but he wasn't so offended that he didn't glide Tarin back deeply into his body. "I said...oh...please...please don't let this be a dre...dream..."

"Not a dream..." Tarin whispered back.

It would have been enough to just join with Ilan so easily, so simply. The younger man was obviously content with what they were sharing and he was barely doing anything. It would be easy to just leave it as it was and Ilan would never know any better. The other man had such little experience that he'd never know it could be more. Tarin should have been willing to leave it at that but he wasn't inexperienced. Instead of pulling to bring Ilan closer Tarin tried to get the man off his lap.

"No....no...." Ilan moaned and rocked harder, rode Tarin's cock with more force.

Tarin grew more demanding and physically pulled Ilan off his lap even though the sudden parting of their bodies made him want to plunge back into the very willing body and not stop until he'd found his own release. He tugged and fought with Ilan to get the other man to lay down and it wasn't until Ilan understood he wasn't being completely cast aside that he stopped fighting and started helping.

"Tarin....what..." Ilan tried to question but Tarin stretched out along his side and that made it a little better.

"Shhh..." Tarin brushed long hair off of Ilan's sweat dampened skin. He felt no panic or fear and the only thing tingling along his nerves was pleasure. Every brush of Ilan's fingers across his skin

simply felt good.

The sad truth was that what they'd done, how quickly they'd come together, would never have been acceptable before. It didn't matter about passion and desire, Tarin had been the best and for once he wanted to use those skills in a way that was worthwhile. It made him smile a little, softly and only when Ilan's eyes were closed because if he was half as skilled as he once was, Ilan wasn't going to know what was about to hit him.

All Ilan wanted to do was keep his eyes open to try to watch what the odd Outlander was trying to do, that or throw him down again and finish what they'd started. His skin burned, itched with the need to be touched the way his body ached with the need to have Tarin fill him again. All of the worry and stress of the endless days of grim news filled with no way to guide his people to security seemed suddenly worth it if he could have such comfort and pleasure every night.

And then it all shattered as it suddenly became better. Tarin's lips kissed his neck, kissed his jaw, kissed his face but danced around his mouth with teasing desire. All of Ilan's thoughts suddenly focused on kissing the tormenting mouth, gaining what he was being denied until the thought was all he wanted and still the teasing kisses fell to his skin. Until they stopped and covered his mouth, gently, softly, with far less of the hungry passion Ilan wanted and it made him writhe and moan. He tried to deepen the kiss but Tarin stayed just a breath away until his hands clung to the moonlight pale man begging him silently. It was only then that Tarin relented and parted his lips. The kiss made him dizzy and unable to tell if he was laying down or floating somewhere lost on a summer breeze.

His lips were still parted when Tarin's mouth retreated and left him gasping, weakened by desire when pain and stress couldn't make him falter. He groped after his thoughts and Tarin's body but both escaped him as Tarin's mouth returned to kiss his collarbones and chest, his hands ghosting over Ilan's ribs and making him arch from the blankets.

"Ta...Tarin...you don't...you don't have to...I'm...I'm content..." The seduction was wonderful and amazing but he didn't need it to be happy. He wasn't used to feasts of pleasure but stolen tidbits and that was enough to sustain him.

Tarin's teeth caught one dusky nipple and he nip it lightly before letting his tongue swirl and dance.

That was a sensation Ilan hadn't ever felt before and all protests against the delightful care Tarin was taken shattered. Most of his experience was concentrated below his waist and he'd never once imagined someone kissing what he'd considered such a useless part of his body. Now he was left wondering how he'd made it so many years without knowing how good it could feel and as Tarin's hand found and began tormenting the other one he didn't care so long as it never stopped. He wasn't sure his body could stand more burning pleasure and as Tarin's free hand found and curled around his weeping cock his fears proved true.

"OH...oh...by the trees...oh!" Ilan groaned before his words slipped into cursing surprise in his own language. That single touch carried him over the edge and his vision blurred away into hazy sparkles. His toes curled, his legs writhed on the blankets and he didn't even care that he came across Tarin's hand and his own chest.

Ilan lay on his blankets in the tent off from everyone else that had felt like such a prison and now felt like a palace. His breath came in panting gasps and he almost didn't notice or care that Tarin was still covering his chest and stomach in kisses and touches. He ruffled his hand through the strange black hair.

"Oh...mmm..." Ilan sighed. "Finish it?" He offered his body to his Outlander lover so long as he could lay there in the blissful, groggy happiness of sharing pleasure with someone that wanted him. It would be wonderful to have the luxury of just relaxing in the glow of delightful touch while

Tarin slowly took his body for his own pleasure.

"Finish?" Tarin whispered and slipped down Ilan's body. "We're not finished yet, either of us."

Ilan lifted his head, which now felt far too heavy and opened his eyes in time to see Tarin lap at the spill of his release on his stomach. Each long lapping lick was dirty and wrong and unbelievably sexy. It made him shiver with each long lick and while he knew he should stop Tarin he just couldn't bring himself to protest. He was doing a good job at keeping himself pulled together until lavender eyes flicked up and locked on his own.

It was like being struck by lightning on a late summer night. They were knowing and filled with boiling desire. They knew everything, things that Ilan had only even imagined in his midnight dreams. He knew the look could be calculated, trained from years as a slave to be pleasing but all Ilan saw was a partner enjoying being sexier than any dream he could have. It made him self-conscious but he hid nothing from his voice or face. Tarin was trying to be sexy, trying to please him and Ilan was going to let him know how much each long, wet lick felt.

"That's....oh...you shouldn't...." He moaned with a sigh, petting Tarin's hair. "You shouldn't..."

Tarin licked his lips and his eyes were hungry.

"Wha...what?"

He licked his lips again and kept his eyes locked to Ilan's. Very deliberately and with drawn out awareness, Tarin slipped lower down Ilan's body and with a single flicking glance of his eyes told him what he was planning.

"You wouldn't."

Tarin didn't answer with words. He lowered down with such gentle care that each heartbeat pounded in Ilan's ears. He couldn't look away as Tarin dropped down, holding eye contact until he was forced lower than he wanted. Ilan had some idea what it would feel like when those talented hot lips touched the crown of his softened cock. Marcus had only done such a thing to him once and Ilan liked to think he was a quick study but nothing Marcus had done compared to even the smallest touch of Tarin's mouth to his length.

All of the comfortable, sated happiness from his very recent release, vanished. With the slightest touch, Ilan thought he might pass out from the amount of blood that suddenly rushed back into his groin. His legs curled up, arching to get his cock buried deeper into Tarin's mouth. Fortunately, Tarin was expecting something like that and held Ilan's hips still and let his legs writhe as they willed. If he could have thought, Ilan would almost be embarrassed at the poor efforts he'd offered when he'd done such an act to Tarin. He'd thought he'd been somewhat skilled but Tarin's mouth did things he hadn't thought was physically possible.

Ilan found himself moaning, biting his own lips and pulling at his own hair trying to contain himself as his body vibrated with pleasure. Over and over Tarin took him to the brink of a second release and then somehow managed to back down, stop him from coming and wait just long enough before continuing. It was a sweet form of torture and Ilan was embarrassed at how quickly his moans started to sound like begging sobs. His face was flushed red and he knew, even through his cloudy fogged over thoughts, that he'd never imagined a body could feel so much and now that he knew, he'd never be the same.

"Ta...Tarin...st...stop...I can't...please...no...no more..." He moaned and begged. If he could have gotten any part of his body to work he would have tried to pull Tarin away from his body but nothing felt connected. His body flailed around but couldn't escape.

His begging wasn't enough to make Tarin stop. He continued past his desperate words as they

dissolved back into moaning, hiccupping gasps. When he thought one more second would shatter him, when he thought he was at his very limit, only at that moment did Tarin stop. He forced his eyes open but they only came open half way. It was enough to see Tarin lick his lips again and watch him with smug satisfaction. It was a look that said Tarin wasn't done with him yet.

Ilan was laying there, panting, trying to breathe, trying to come and end it and trying to hold on to make it last as long as he could when Tarin gathered one of his legs up. The motion made no sense to Ilan but he didn't care. Tarin could have slit his throat in that moment and he'd have happily allowed it. It wasn't until something hard and hot pressed at his entrance again that he figured out why his legs had been gathered up and even remembered how their encounter had started.

When Tarin slipped into his body, Ilan nearly screamed. He was far louder than he'd expected to be and had to hope that his order to not be disturbed was being followed. Even in his frantic state he could hear that his moans had taken on an edge of pain that he wasn't feeling. He'd never imagined pleasure could cross such a line but as Tarin filled him again he was certain he had died.

All he could do was lay there, limp and exhausted except for one very specific aching, hard part of his body that pounded with his heartbeat. His eyes were clenched shut as Tarin took him, their bodies rocking together in long deep strokes. Any thought to holding on to his control was gone. A half dozen strokes, deep, filling and overwhelming, and Ilan was shattered.

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A Summertime Storm

Chapter Sixty Seven

He collapsed into his own pleasure and the world disappeared. It faded to nothing but the trembling quivering of his own release and the steady rocking force of Tarin filling his body. If the world was only such things he'd never despair and he clung to the rare gift that he was being given. It was beyond any dream he could have invented and Ilan was fairly certain he floated away into unawareness as he partially passed out as his body came with violent need.

Awareness was slow to return and he was only vaguely aware of Tarin taking his exhausted body that felt like some child's doll, unstructured and floppy. He opened his eyes enough to watch and knew he should have been somewhat embarrassed at how his body was splayed out, exposed and with no modesty. He would normally have been self conscious and blushing had it been one of his own people taking him with such eagerness and it should have been doubly so with an Outlander. Only there was nothing of the kind in him with Tarin and he enjoyed seeing the oddly pale man holding his exhausted body steady as he rushed to find his own release.

It was a sight that he savored as he came down from the unbelievable orgasm. The contrast of sweat dotted skin against skin, sunlight gold against moonlight pale and it was beautiful. His eyes drifted up Tarin's legs, across the marks of old abuse and too close wounds from his profession that only seemed to enhance the odd man's beauty. Up his eyes wandered over the defined, hard, well taken care of torso, watching as his breath moved roughly in panting, needy gasps in and out of his chest. He drank in the sight of the strong arms holding his legs and hips in just the right place without seeming to strain at all.

He nearly blushed at the memory of the moans and cries he'd given voice to because Tarin was so quiet. His lips were parted, his breath came in short explosive bursts but little sound was slipping from the slender throat. Tarin's face was distorted with what looked to be the same mix of pleasure and pain Ilan had felt. Black hair was stuck to the unusual pale skin like slender branches of a tree against the full moon's silver.

Ilan hadn't really considered the Outlander handsome let alone beautiful when he'd first laid eyes on him. His coloring was too different, too extreme, too cold compared to the ambers, reds and warmth of the people. It was like finding some odd hybrid flower growing in a meadow of normal flowers and while he'd been able to study the difference he had found it too strange to be attractive. Somewhere along the days and weeks of watching the stranger his appreciation of the bizarre combination grew. Bit by bit he found himself admiring and, more, being attracted to the differences.

Now as he lay satisfied and sated below the Outlander's desperate need he could admit, without reservation, that he found Tarin beautiful. Not that he just found him handsome or attractive but actually beautiful like something rare and treasured, like some exquisite but fanciful artwork. He could never understand the Outlander need to own another man but he could understand the obsessive need Tarin could inspire in others. As Tarin's gasping breaths became short, tight moans Ilan knew he'd do anything to hold on to this odd man forever.

Tarin's face twisted up further and his hands gripped Ilan's body hard enough to leave bruises as he lost his own battle for control and with shuddering, stumbling thrusts spilled himself into Ilan's body. Generally, it wasn't a sensation he typically enjoyed. As much as Ilan liked being taken by a man, he generally found his own pleasure first and was chilled and weak when his lover finished. Not that he had much experience but he'd never found pleasure in the feel of his lover's release in his own body, at least, not until Tarin moaned and filled him. It was hot, sexy, and if his body wasn't so totally sated it would have been arousing as well. It wasn't because it felt any different, the warm rush of his lover's release into his own pleased body, it was that it was Tarin. It was knowing the difficult and troublesome Outlander had found pleasure in his body that pleased him. It was knowing something of the other man was part of his own flesh that made him feel connected and warmed. He struggled through his haze of pleasure and exhaustion to commit every sound from Tarin's parted lips, every feel of skin to skin, every heartbeat of the other man's release to his memory because it was a memory he was going to revisit for the rest of his life.

Tarin swayed as weariness swept him away. Ilan could see it as the tension of need rushed away from his face how utterly exhausted the other man was. His limbs were weak but he moved to pull at the pale man and slowly, with overly deliberate care, he guided them to end their joining. Tarin moaned unhappily as his softening cock slipped free of Ilan's body and it made him smile in a small, happy way but the moans held only regret at the end of pleasure not pain or fear. He pulled his lover close and kissed Tarin's forehead as he guided them to lay down on the now scattered blankets.

"Oh....oh...." Tarin sighed as his body trembled with exhaustion.

Ilan allowed his hands to pet across all the exposed pale flesh but it was with the soothing motion not an erotic one. He simply had a need to touch and since Tarin appeared to be in a place that allowed him to accept the gentle contact he was going to take advantage of it. Their bodies

tangled together in exhaustion the way they had in passion and he felt sleep clawing at him as Tarin's breath and heartbeat slowed against him.

"Are you okay?" Ilan finally asked when the sighing breathy moans took on a gasping sound as they slowed.

Tarin nodded against the other man. "I...I'm fine..." he was able to force out.

"I'm more than fine." He grinned around a yawn and found Tarin's head again to press another tender kiss. "I never dared to dream I'd be able to hold you again. I worried you didn't feel this... the way I do..." It had been a fear that had gnawed at him in the early hours of morning. He'd become nearly consumed with the Outlander and he had thought Tarin had felt it too. That unspoken, unknown connection that tied them together that felt to Ilan like finding a hidden half to his soul. It had been so powerful for him that he feared it was one sided.

Tarin sighed but his hands held to Ilan and his body stayed curled against him. "I...it's...Ilan...."

The stumbling uncertainty, the almost fearful vulnerability in the normally arrogant, proud voice made Ilan smiled brighter. "It's alright." He soothed and licked his dry lips. "You don't need to say it. I know you feel it, you made me know you feel it." He petted the damp hair. "You came back to me..."

Tarin sniffed with a bit of his normal tone slipping back in. "I didn't come back for you."

The reality wasn't shocking. "I know but you are here, in my arms..."

"I have a brother." Tarin confessed around a yawn.

"What?" He lifted his head enough to try to see Tarin's face and he could glimpse it just enough to see the gentle, open expression and the exhaustion softened eyes.

"We were almost to the point where I'd be going on alone and found some slaves. One of them was my brother and his wife and children..."

"You brought them here." He knew it as deeply as he knew anything.

"What was I supposed to do? Leave them in a collar? Leave his daughter to...to be sold into the harems as I was? I didn't know what to do."

The confession broke Ilan's heart because he was certain it was one of the most difficult things Tarin had ever forced himself to say. It didn't matter that fading pleasure and physical exhaustion stripped tone and emotion from his voice, Ilan could feel it. His lover survived by knowing what to do and holding to his control with a violent force of will. To admit that he was lost and needed help was a huge expression of vulnerability.

Tarin shook his head a little bit. "I...you were right...I do know and I can't walk away and....I couldn't leave them...should have but..."

"Shhh..." Ilan shushed. "No, you shouldn't have." Outlander slaves brought to the people would cause all manner of difficulties. Their people had been enemies for too many generations for even innocents to be accepted without some difficulty. None of it mattered to Ilan. Tarin had been lost, he'd needed help and was conflicted and instead of running away from others and trying to hold it all together himself, he'd returned to him and was asking to share his fears and worries with Ilan. "It'll be okay."

"I doubt it. I can't see too many ways that this could be okay."

"It will be." Ilan promised. "Your brother is my family. No harm shall come to them." He confessed around a yawn.

Tarin pulled away enough to lift his head and stare down at the groggy man. "I'm not...they're not your family. They're barely my family."

He opened his eyes and let a hand brush black hair away from the confused and far too vulnerable looking lavender eyes. "You are my family, even if you don't wish to have me as yours. I can't help it, Tarin, I can't...I ask nothing of you but these stolen moments but somehow you've become a part of me. If your brother and his family have been found, we'll find a way to shelter them together." He watched the way his words brought a flush of color to Tarin's face and how he dropped his eyes.

"It was just sex." Tarin mocked the open vulnerability of Ilan's confession. "I was well trained for this, remember? What we just did I could do drunk and half asleep."

The words were nearly spat out but Ilan wasn't fooled. "It wasn't and you don't need to admit it but I know it wasn't, not for me, not for you." Gently, he guided Tarin to lay back down against him and after a slight bit of resistance the Outlander settled against him once more. "You brought them back to me because you know there is something between us. They are my family because you have become my family, even if we can only speak of it here, alone, together...." It would be enough for him, he carried many things in the secrets of his heart and Tarin would fit there nicely.

Tarin drew a breath for denial or protest but instead it rushed out across Ilan's chest in a long sigh. He dared to pet the slowly relaxing body as sleep clawed at Ilan and he could feel it dragging at Tarin as well. With each long, gentle, comforting touch Ilan felt Tarin ease and sooth a fragment more. It would disappear, Ilan knew it would as soon as they woke. He'd open his eyes and Tarin would have drawn his masks and arrogance around himself again and all the exposed vulnerability of their stolen pleasure would be a memory. Only, it would be a memory he would be able to see behind the lavender eyes and that was fine with him. It was one of the things that Ilan treasured about the Outlander and he enjoyed the attitude and difficulties that came with loving the other man.

He let his fingers pet slowly across pale skin as sleep pulled them both down. "We'll..." he had to pause to yawn. "We'll figure it out....together..."

His tender words were met with a small snore. It made Ilan smile as he let sleep pull him down to join his lover. He would worry about the consequences later, when they were both awake and the world demanded entrance to their secluded corner once more. For now, however, it was enough to simply sleep and enjoy a single moment of perfection.

The end.

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