



AMARANTH AND ASH
BY JESSICA FREELY

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Dedication

For Nica.

A Note About Pronouns

Some of the characters in this book are intersex. The question of how to handle pronouns for people who possess both male and female characteristics was a difficult one to answer. On the one hand, my purpose in inventing the vasai in the first place was to break away from our dichotomous gender system and play in the middle ground between what is considered male and what is considered female. On the other hand, *Amaranth & Ash* is above all else a love story, and I did not want to distract the reader with a whole new lexicon of unfamiliar terms.

My editors and I considered several options. At one point I even entertained a caste-based pronoun system that would have applied to all the characters in the story and would have reflected their social standing, not their gender. While an interesting experiment, it proved unwieldy for a full-length novel.

In the end, I went with most vasai identifying with one gender or another and adopting the appropriate pronoun--with the exception of one character. For reasons elaborated upon in the novel, Grail uses the gender-neutral pronouns *sie* (pronounced *see*) and *hir* (pronounced *here*). These pronouns are also employed by some characters when they first meet a vasai and do not know what *hir* gender preference is or how *sie* wants to be addressed.

Incidentally, *sie* and *hir* are among the most common English-language gender-neutral pronouns in use in our own world today.

Chapter One

Once

Ash's empty belly growled. He wrapped his fingers in the chain-link fence and peered through it at the homes and factories of Pelon. It was early evening, and the aromas of pel dinners wafted across the barrier, enticing him. Dusk made the lights in the windows stand out like warm beacons of comfort. Ash looked over this shoulder. Across the field, the tiny clapboard dwellings of Chelon stood crammed together like rows of rotten teeth. Already they began to disappear in the fading light, only a few scattered flickers of fire visible. There was nothing for him there. He didn't even have an elat for a bowl of oats, and he wouldn't steal from people who had so little.

At the age of twenty-three, Ash had done this before. It was no big deal. A dozen times or more, he'd trespassed across the barrier, relying on his short, wiry frame to slip unnoticed through the shadows. He knew exactly where to feel for the broken links and how to unhook them and make a space to crawl through. Still his heart pounded, just as it always did. He only needed to get caught once.

Ash waited until full dark, and then he slipped through the fence and ran, canvas shoes making the barest of whispers across the empty field. He reached the buildings on the other side. They were all made of the same gray stone, buildings and shops and factories alike. Large, blocky buildings laid out in orderly square grids, one after another after another. Streetlights cast pools of pale illumination to light the way for the night-shift workers. Ash kept close to the wall, crouching below the line of the windows and skirting the light.

Two blocks in he spotted a grocery. It was one of Pelon's little miracles: stores dedicated to selling food of all kinds. This one had its doors wide open to welcome evening shoppers, and stands on the sidewalk that seemed to overflow with breads, fruits, and vegetables.

Ash swallowed the saliva pooling in his mouth. He had to be careful. There were people about. He sneaked down an alley that ran behind the shop, and then up an even narrower one between the grocery and the building next door--a cement works that was just changing shifts, which accounted for the grocery's brisk business. Ash settled himself behind a crate of gravel and waited.

A whistle blew, and the night shift began. He peeked out from his hiding place and saw the street, for the moment, deserted. Through the window of the shop, he saw the grocer counting his till, his head bent over his money. Ash darted out of the alley and grabbed the first things he could reach: a great glorious loaf of bread studded with sesame seeds and a salami the length of his forearm. Grinning at his score, Ash scuttled back toward his alley. He'd almost reached the safety of darkness when a sharp jerk at his collar brought him up short.

Reflex made Ash clutch the food to his chest as the grocer lifted him up by the back of his shirt. He dangled in the man's grip. "Chel thief!" the man spat in his face. "Sort, Carve," he called out over his shoulder. Two other pel appeared in the mouth of the alley, the grocer's assistants, most likely. They wore white aprons like the grocer did. Both of them were males, both big and every bit as angry as their boss. "We've got vermin," said the grocer. The two assistants grinned.

Uh-oh.

Ash was relieved of the food in an eyeblink. And then the grocer shoved him up against the wall of the alley hard enough that his head struck the stone with a jolt of pain. Stars danced before his eyes.

That was just the beginning. A fist slammed into Ash's gut, and his breath left him all at once. He would have doubled over, but the grocer held him pinned to the wall with both hands. Must have been one of the others hitting him, then. Ash tried to look, but he couldn't seem to get control of his body to turn his head in the right direction. Another blow to his gut made Ash's knees draw up, and he retched, but his stomach was empty. He had nothing to throw up, which was just as well.

Past the pain he was dimly aware of epithets battering his ears as the men's fists battered his body--"Chel." "Marsh rat." "Vermin." They washed over him with little effect. He heard words like that every day of his life.

One pel punched Ash in the mouth, and he tasted blood. Then someone smashed his nose. Pain bloomed through his face. Ash screamed, the cry trailing off into choked sobbing. Already beyond pride, he whispered, "Please," through bleeding lips.

"Please," mocked the grocer. "You hear that, fellas? The marsh rat has manners."

"Aw, isn't that nice? It's begging for mercy."

The grocer pulled him away from the wall, and for one wild instant, Ash thought they were letting him go. Then the pel threw him to the ground. Laughter rang in

Ash's ears as he struck the unforgiving pavement. He didn't waste any time scrambling away, first on his hands and knees and then struggling to his feet. He couldn't quite stand upright, but he started running anyway. More laughter and easy-paced footfalls followed his progress. Even then, he knew they were just playing with him. At the end of the alley, one of the assistants quickened his pace until he was just ahead of Ash. Ash didn't see the foot coming out to catch his faltering stride. The next thing he knew, he was facedown on the pavement again. The impact on his injured nose burned. He couldn't help it. He cried.

Three sets of hands grabbed him and stripped off his clothes.

"No!"

"Aw, that's right, little marsh rat," said the grocer. "Yell all you want. But you're in Pelon now. You got plenty of fun left in you, and we're not about to waste it."

Ash tried to break free, but they were stronger.

* * *

"Why don't you try to get more clients, Amaranth?" asked Grail.

It was two in the morning, and the Grassland Saloon was noisy, packed with vasai intent on drinking all the silsinthe they could hold after a long day of treating the aches, pains and insecurities of their clients. The subdued decor in the bar contrasted with the hubbub: rich leather booths and bar stools, polished wood, and stands of siltgrass in terra-cotta pots.

Amaranth pretended not to have heard his friend's words. Grail was very traditional. So much so that instead of choosing a male or female pronoun, as was the current fashion among vasai, sie used the older, gender-neutral form. Hoping to avoid a lecture from Grail on how to conduct his business, Amaranth stared across the bar at the rows of green and gold bottles lined up on the counter before the mirror. They gleamed in the mellow light from the recessed spots in the ceiling above.

"Amaranth." Never a particularly subtle person, Grail was less so with a couple of glasses in hir. Sie leaned over and put a hand on Amaranth's shoulder, giving him a little shake. "Did you hear me?"

Amaranth sighed. Grail meant well. "I have enough clients," he said, trying to keep the impatience out of his voice. He lifted his glass of amber silsinthe and sipped it, the bitter liqueur making him wince. Why had he let Grail talk him into coming here tonight?

"Kristeth came in today while you weren't there. Evanscar took care of him."

Amaranth shrugged. Kristeth was not one of his favorite clients. The man didn't really need healing. He just drank too much silsinthe, and he liked to fuck someone who couldn't refuse him. Amaranth was sick of using his vasai healing ability to soothe his hangovers and get him off.

"Amaranth! Don't you even care?"

"Not really."

Grail stared at him, silver eyes wide with incomprehension. "What's wrong?"

Amaranth closed his eyes and forced a deep swallow of silsinthe down his throat. "I'd just like to help someone who really needs it."

"But the Elai do need us. They have so much responsibility. The stress they're under--"

"Maybe. But what about people who are actually sick?"

"People. You mean pel." Grail's voice was flat. Sie didn't like this kind of talk.

Pel, yes. Or the underclass, for that matter, though mentioning chel in polite company would get him more recrimination than he was ready to handle. Amaranth glanced at the pel serving drinks behind the bar. Like most members of his caste, he had a round face and a solid build well suited to physical labor. Pel were shorter than vasai and Elai but taller than chel. They were the most numerous of the castes and did most of the actual work, though it was the Elai and their pampered pets, the vasai, who lived in luxury.

The pel bartender wiped off a glass, replaced it on the shelf above the counter, and then hurried to the other end of the bar where Evanscar and his friends clamored for another round. "You know the doctors can't do what we can," said Amaranth.

"The doctors are Elai. Their souls may not be able to reach out and touch other beings, but they are wiser than we are. And pel are valuable. The Elai love their pel. Don't you think they give them the best care possible?"

"If that were so, and doctors could heal better than vasai, then what use would the Elai have for us?"

Grail sighed and shook his head. His long, sleek black hair swayed from side to side, giving Amaranth an occasional glimpse of the birthmark below his ear. "I

thought you'd abandoned these ideas when we were still students in the Temple. It makes me sad to hear you still so hostile to tradition."

"And talking to you about this makes me tired beyond endurance. You'd support anything so long as it was 'tradition.'"

Grail's straight, dark brows drew together. Sie opened his mouth to say something, but at that moment, a commotion at the end of the bar distracted them both.

"This glass is dirty, you pel beast! You insult me!" Evanscar said, throwing his drink in the bartender's face.

The pel stood blinking as the liquor ran down his face. "I beg your forgiveness, vai. I will bring you another right away."

At six feet, Evanscar was on the short side for a vasai, but he still towered over the bartender as he stood up and seized the hapless pel by the collar. "You'll do better than that. You must atone for this insult. How will you do that?"

The pel bent his head. "How do you wish me to atone, vai?"

Evanscar smiled. Seeing his expression, Amaranth and Grail exchanged glances. They had their differences, but one thing they agreed upon was that Evanscar was a sadistic, power-hungry travesty of a vasai.

"If you value your employment," said Evanscar, "then it would behoove you to entertain your patrons and make them forget your clumsy insults. A song and a dance are in order, I think. Up here, where all of us can see you." He patted the top of the bar.

Amaranth set his glass down and began to stand, but Grail grabbed him by the arm. Sie leaned in and whispered in Amaranth's ear, "You'll only make it worse for him. Let Evanscar and his friends have their sport, and they will be satisfied. Intervene, make a cause of this, and Evanscar will report the pel to his employer. What do you think the owner of the bar will do when forced to choose between an influential vasai and a pel who can be replaced in a matter of hours?"

Bile rose in Amaranth's throat, meeting the bitter taste of the silsinthe. Grail was right. And a pel without a job was worse off even than a chel. The world had no use for unemployed pel. Amaranth took a deep breath and nodded. "Very well," he said, prying Grail's hand from his sleeve, "but I don't have to stay and watch."

By the time Amaranth was halfway across the room, the pel had hopped up onto the bar and launched into an off-key rendition of "As the River Runs." His trem-

bling voice battered Amaranth's soul. At the doorway, he turned and saw Evan-scar and his friends staring up at the pel and clapping, their faces lit with amusement. Even outside, in the quiet of the street, their laughter echoed in Amaranth's mind, circling around and around like a flock of carrion birds.

He couldn't face going home now. If he did, he knew he would lie in bed the rest of the night, staring up at the ceiling in his small, empty apartment, sleepless and full of rage. He needed a walk.

* * *

"I think he's still alive." The voice came from far away, across the vast black ocean of agony where Ash floated.

"He won't be by morning. Dump him in the culvert for his fellow marsh rats to collect with the rest of the trash."

* * *

Amaranth walked along the riverside. The Newhope River cut through the whole of Harken's Landing without regard to caste. Here, in Elaion, where the elite and their vasai lived, parks lined the swiftly flowing water. Amaranth breathed in the fresh air, willing it to dispel the lingering fumes of silsinthe that wrapped around his thoughts like unwanted obligations. He hated that stuff. Why had he drunk it? Why had he let Grail talk him into going out in the first place?

Because he'd felt bad. Grail was his oldest--really his only--friend, but lately they'd grown more distant. Amaranth sometimes felt as if he were on a boat, adrift on the Newhope, watching all the people and the places that he knew recede from him as he floated out into the ocean.

When he was younger, he thought he'd get over this feeling of not belonging. He thought that once he got out of the Temple and started his real work as a vasai, then things would start making sense to him. But if anything, time had only made matters worse. Most of the Elai he treated did not suffer any serious health issues--nothing a bit of restraint wouldn't cure. They came for treatment because they liked to be serviced by beautiful intersex vasai.

According to the Temple prelates who had taught Amaranth, souls were like houses. Gods could enter them and guide a person. The soul of an Elai had many rooms. They could be guided by more than one god at a time. This was the reason they were superior to all the other castes. Pel souls had only one room, and of course, chel had no souls at all.

But the soul of a vasai was unique in its own way: it was elastic. A vasai could extend his soul out from his body and touch the soul of another. That was the source of the vasai healing power. And because of that special property, the vasai soul could accommodate no other deity but the Lovers, who could be in two places at once. This was also believed to be the cause of their intersex nature. And it was the reason why vasai must heal through sexual contact.

But Amaranth didn't believe in the gods. He suspected that the Elai simply wanted sex with vasai along with healing. And what the Elai wanted was law.

Lost in his thoughts, Amaranth passed out of Elaion and into Pelon without even noticing it at first. It wasn't until the trees gave way to neatly mown grass and the fine gravel of the footpath became a tidy concrete sidewalk that he realized where he was. He looked up and out, across the square rooftops of Pelon--all those pel, sleeping and working. Serving the Elai, making things for the Elai...and for him.

Amaranth had never really accepted the idea that vasai should only treat Elai. It seemed obvious to him that he should be treating those who needed treatment, no matter what their caste. And surely, in the vast expanse of Pelon, there must be some who needed him--truly needed him. Not for entertainment or relaxation, but for their health, their lives.

Knowing what Grail would say if she were here, Amaranth hesitated. But when had Grail ever said anything she'd not been taught to say by the Temple teachers? What Amaranth contemplated felt dangerous, and yet, as he stood there on the edge of the field with the wind from the river streaming through his hair and his mind finally clear of the dregs of silsinthe, he realized he hadn't felt this alive since he didn't know when. Amaranth took a deep breath and loosed his soul.

* * *

Ash came to, curled on a sloping concrete ramp. At first he didn't move. He lay there, feigning unconsciousness, listening for any sound of his attackers. He heard nothing but the lapping of water against the bottom of the ramp. From that sound and the sloping floor and the smell, he knew he was in a waste culvert. The good people of Pelon brought their trash here, and every morning just before dawn, chel came in their boats to collect it and sort through the garbage for anything useful or edible.

He hurt in every way imaginable and several he hadn't known were possible. Dark memories skittered at the edges of his awareness, but he pushed them back and forced himself to focus on breathing and staying quiet. It was possible they were still somewhere around, waiting, playing with him again. He lay still for a long time, not even sure he could move. Their words came back to him. "He'll be dead

by morning.” As the minutes ticked by, he realized he was alone. They’d left him here, nothing but a used-up bit of trash.

He tried raising his head. It felt like a fifty-pound sack of nails. The movement made red agony race down his spine and forced a startled gasp from his blood-encrusted lips. He blinked in the darkness, trying to focus, trying to figure out just how to survive this. He shivered on the cold, damp concrete. He was naked.

His clothes--they’d taken his clothes, ripped them from him, all but his shoes. He still had his shoes. Something about that seemed hysterically funny to him, and then he wasn’t laughing anymore but just shaking and choking out some weird kind of gasping sound. He had to stop that. Someone might hear.

With brutal determination, he forced himself to be silent, forced himself up onto his hands and knees, and crawled up the slope of the culvert to where the bulk of the trash lay. Every movement made his battered muscles scream in protest, but if he could get up there, there might be shelter for him in the refuse--something to help him keep warm.

What he found was a wooden pallet leaning against the wall, forming a lean-to that blocked some of the chill breeze coming in from the river. Biting his lips against the pain of moving, he managed to drag a flattened cardboard box into the shelter to keep himself off the damp concrete. He knew he needed more--food and a blanket or some kind of clothes to keep warm with--but he didn’t have any of those things, and he didn’t have the strength to seek them out. Instead, he curled up in a ball on top of the cardboard and welcomed the black tide of unconsciousness that rose up to consume him.

* * *

At first, Amaranth’s soul was inundated by the collective weariness and boredom of thousands upon thousands of pel souls. He felt like he was suffocating as they crowded in upon him, and he couldn’t even tell one from another. But then someone’s extreme distress flared through the teeming confusion like a pillar of fire. Daily contact with the petty ailments and self-inflicted miseries of the Elai had not prepared Amaranth for anything like this.

The individual was in great pain. It washed over Amaranth like a red wave. This was someone in real trouble. He staggered with the force of it, and reflex made him pull his soul back in to protect himself. But what had he come here for, if not to help? And whomever this was needed help. Amaranth loosed his soul again, sending it out to find the source of this incandescent pain.

Amaranth followed the beacon of distress to a waste culvert deep in Pelon, nearly to the border of Chelon. By necessity, he drew his soul in tighter the closer he got, so that he was not overwhelmed. Now he stood beside the river at the base of a concrete ramp. It sloped upward between stone walls cut into the high riverbank.

Amaranth had heard about these culverts, but he'd never actually seen one. The ramp ascended until flush with the surface of the riverbank. The pel threw their refuse down the ramp so the chel could collect it without the decent, hard-working pel having to lay eyes on them. He supposed it wasn't so different in Elaion. There, pel workers took the trash down to the footpaths along the river and deposited it in grottoes for the chel to gather.

But not everything in this culvert was refuse. Huddled behind a wooden pallet halfway up the ramp was the battered consciousness that had called out to him across half of Harken's Landing. Amaranth stepped forward, his foot scraping on the damp concrete.

* * *

The sound of a footstep awakened Ash instantly. Adrenaline pumped through his system, sharpening his senses. No. He couldn't let himself be taken again. It would kill him--if he wasn't dying already. Panicky, he searched about for a weapon of some kind, anything. His gaze fell on a discarded pair of scissors. He didn't even know if he'd have the strength to wield them, but he was going to try. What the fuck did he have to lose? Maybe, if he was lucky, he'd die fighting.

* * *

Amaranth felt the soul of the person huddling behind the pallet flare to wakefulness. He--and it was definitely a he--was ablaze with pain and rage now. Instinct made Amaranth draw his own soul in to protect him from the agony. But it didn't do any good. There was just too much of it.

Bracing himself against the emotional onslaught, Amaranth sidled into the culvert along the opposite wall, giving the individual lots of room. In the light of the setting moon, eyes--and something else--glittered from between the slats of the pallet. Panic spiked out at Amaranth. What little information he could glean through the general cloud of pain, hunger, and distress made him flinch inwardly. Whoever this was, whatever had been done to him, he was well past the point of being able to distinguish friend from foe. This was going to be tricky.

Amaranth crouched down, his hands extended outward, palms up. In his most soothing voice, he said, "It's okay. I won't hurt you."

The pallet went flying and a scrawny young man launched himself at Amaranth, wielding a pair of rusty scissors.

The thrust was well aimed and would have cost him a scar or even an eye if the body propelling it had been capable of more speed. Amaranth ducked under the scissors. He tucked his face in the young man's armpit for protection and grabbed his assailant firmly around the waist. The young man let out a scream that raised hair on Amaranth's body he hadn't even known he had. Something sharp sliced into his shoulder.

Shit! The scissors!

Amaranth let go of the struggling body with one hand and reached behind him, groping for the scissors. The boy wrenched free and stood. He turned to run. Even with his soul locked down tight, Amaranth had a good idea just how low the brief struggle had left the young man's limited store of energy. He staggered. Amaranth barely managed to catch him as he fell.

The body was light in his arms, underweight but lithe and sinewy. He was strong for his size, but now all the wire and snap were out of him, and he lay limp and motionless. He was in his twenties, if Amaranth could judge. Rough-textured dark red hair gleamed softly in the dim light. The face was angular--high cheekbones and a pointed chin covered in rough red stubble. Freckles stood out in sharp contrast to the boy's pallor.

The physical differences between the castes were obvious: Vasai were tall, slender, with hair ranging from silver to ebony and every shade between, and they possessed both male and female characteristics; Elai were tall as well, though thicker of build and dark haired; pel were of medium height, stocky, and dark haired; and chel were short and thin, with sharp faces and red or auburn hair. With a shock, Amaranth realized that the being in his arms was a chel.

A chel with a soul. Amaranth had felt it. There was no mistaking it. That meant either this was a very special chel, or that much of their world was founded on a lie. He decided to leave thinking on that for another time.

Whoever, whatever this young man was, he needed help. But for a forlorn pair of stained canvas shoes, he was naked, shivering even in unconsciousness. Kneeling on the damp concrete, balancing the limp form in one arm, Amaranth swept off his cloak and wrapped the too-thin body in it. He got one arm under the knees and the other behind the shoulders and lifted him up, cradling the chel against his chest for extra warmth as he strode out of the culvert and up the path along the riverbank, back toward Elaion. What, precisely, Amaranth thought he was doing bringing a chel into his home, he didn't give himself time to wonder about.

Chapter Two

Little Accomplishments

Amaranth got to his apartment building and up the stairs to his floor without attracting notice. Opening the door while still holding the unconscious chel in his arms was a bit of a juggling act, but he managed it. Once inside, he headed straight for the bedroom.

He laid the chel out on the bed. "Let's see what we've got here," he murmured. A quick visual scan and a slower one with his soul confirmed his worst fears. The sharp face, narrow chest, and wiry limbs sported numerous bruises, cuts, and contusions. Kidneys and intestines were bruised from the beating he'd sustained. His throat and anus were abraded from forced entry, and his left hip was dislocated. He was in shock.

Amaranth trembled as full comprehension of the ordeal the young man had been through washed over him. "And you managed to crawl away, after all of that, and find a hole to curl up in and a weapon to defend yourself with," he muttered under his breath. Respect for the resilient spirit that had somehow found the strength to fight him filled Amaranth. Part of him quailed at the task before him, but had he not always insisted that a vasai's abilities should be used to help those who really needed it? He couldn't think of anyone needing the touch of a vasai soul more.

There was no question of treating him the traditional way, not after what he'd been through. Instead Amaranth sat down on the bed beside him and simply held his hand. He loosed his soul and reached out with it, seeking the worst of the trauma. He poured his own strength into the body's natural healing responses, supporting and amplifying them. When he was certain the young man's life was no longer in danger, he turned his attention to the body's pain blockers and fortified those. Then he lifted his client's thigh, turning it just so and sliding the joint back into place. He made sure that the scoring in the anus was free from infection and coaxed the tissues to heal. Finally, Amaranth poured his own feelings of compassion into the chel's soul to bolster his shattered spirit.

Vasai healing was different from what a medical doctor did. Often the most challenging cases for a vasai were not the most physically dire ones, but the ills that carried with them an intense or long-standing emotional component. For example, a deep cut would take many stitches and several weeks to heal if treated by a doctor, but so long as the injury was sustained under neutral circumstances, such as an accident, a vasai could coax the severed flesh to knit back together in a matter of

minutes. On the other hand, something as minor as bruising could take several days for a vasai to clear if it was the result of brutality.

When at last Amaranth had done all he could for one day, hours had passed, and he was weary to the bone. He pulled the covers over his client to be sure he stayed warm, collapsed onto the couch on the opposite side of the room, and dropped into an exhausted sleep.

* * *

The first thing Ash became aware of was that he wasn't cold anymore. Then he noticed that the cardboard he lay on had somehow gotten much softer. He rubbed his face against it and realized it wasn't cardboard at all. It was much too smooth and soft. While his sleeping brain puzzled over that, it dawned on him that he was able to notice these things because the pain that had overwhelmed all other awareness was now a distant, dull throb. He tried to crawl his way up out of the languorous stupor that wrapped him in warmth and comfort. He didn't really want to wake up. He hadn't forgotten what had happened to him, and he knew he should be feeling far worse than he did. Perhaps this was all a dream that would fade the moment he opened his eyes, and he'd be in his little lean-to in the culvert again, cold and naked and hungry.

Except the more he lay here, the more certain he became that what he felt beneath his cheek was a pillow. That meant he wasn't in the culvert. He was somewhere else. He couldn't have gotten anywhere else under his own power, which meant someone had brought him here, wherever here was. His eyes flew open and he forced himself up with his hands.

He blinked in the bright morning sunlight. It reflected off whitewashed walls. The room he found himself in was simple. He lay in the only bed. It stood in one corner and had an iron frame. The headboard had bars that ran vertically up and down it. Good for tying people to, he tried not to think. He sat amid a sprawl of white sheets and two--two!--blankets, one blue, the other green. They were practically the only color in here.

In the wall above the worrisome headboard was a window, deep set, with little panels of glass set in a metal frame. The window stood open, letting in the morning light and a fresh breeze scented with some sort of heady flower. On the same wall stood a simple wooden table with a chair drawn up to it. There was a pen stand and a writing tablet there too. Against the wall opposite the table was a wooden chest. Above it, several garments hung from pegs.

The fourth wall had two doors, one on the end near the chest and the other almost directly across from the bed where he lay. Like the floor, they were made of wood,

dark brown and beautifully polished. Between the two doors stood an overstuffed couch upholstered in a rich, dark brown velvet, and on the couch, asleep with his...her...head resting on the arm was the most beautiful person Ash had ever seen.

The individual was dressed in white--loose pants of some sort of slightly shimmering material, and a tunic of knitted fabric that looked nubby and at the same time indescribably soft. The hair was blond and long, cascading down the arm of the couch. Stray wisps clung to the long neck and the perfect oval face. A long, delicate nose, lips as pink as rosebuds, chin and brow and cheekbones all balanced on the knife-edge of androgyny.

Ash barely dared breathe. This was a vasai! The beauty of the creature made his cock stir. Desperately, he tried to quell his response. He was in equal parts mortified at his reaction and astonished that his misused body was capable of it.

As he stared at the vasai, the almond-shaped eyes opened, revealing glittering golden irises. The vasai blinked once, twice. A smile transformed the face from pristine perfection to a much more irresistible living warmth.

"Ah, you're awake." The voice was as beautiful as every other aspect of the individual and equally unhelpful in terms of determining gender. The vasai sat up, stretched, pulled a few wayward strands of golden hair from his face, and leaned forward, fixing Ash with a piercing look from her scintillating golden eyes. "How do you feel?"

Ash gathered the covers more tightly around his body and asked, "What do you want?"

The vasai gave a little shake of her head and smiled, then stood and approached the bed. Ash backed up to the wall. The languor of sleep faded, reminding Ash just how badly he'd been hurt. Even that small movement made his muscles scream in protest. He stood no chance at all of fighting him...her...off. Helplessness brought tears of frustration to his eyes, and that only intensified his humiliation.

"I'm Amaranth," said the vasai, stopping the moment he observed Ash's reaction. Now she stood halfway between the chair and the bed, arms loose at her sides. "I found you last night and brought you back here. This is my apartment. Nobody is going to hurt you here."

Sweet words, but Ash wasn't dumb enough to believe them. This was a vasai. He was a chel. Why would a vasai help a chel other than to get some use out of the chel? "Just tell me what you want."

Amaranth tilted his head to one side and pursed his lips. "I want to help you, if you'll let me."

"And then what?"

The vasai appeared to be at a loss. He shrugged. "I'll confess, I hadn't thought that far ahead. You've been badly hurt. I think you would have died out there last night. You need a safe place to rest and recover from what those people did to you."

At those words, fragmented memories of the attack flashed through Ash's mind like shards of a broken mirror, cutting him. "What do you know about that?" He'd been going for an outraged shout, but his voice shook. Gods abandon him.

Amaranth sat on the floor, fractionally closer to Ash than before, but not pressing too much on his space. Her face, now just above the level of the bed, was open, sincere, if appearances could be trusted. "From your injuries, I know you were beaten and raped, probably by more than one person. And I know that you need time to recover from the physical and emotional trauma you've sustained."

Ash shook. He wanted nothing more than to launch himself at that perfect face, wrap his hands around Amaranth's neck, and choke the life out of him...her...it. But his traitor of a body couldn't do anything but lie there and tremble. He couldn't stand the compassion in those golden eyes. He turned onto his side, facing the wall. "You should have left me out there to die!"

"No."

Tears stung his eyes, and he rubbed his face against the pillow. "Why not?" he choked out. "What are you going to do to me?"

"I'm trying to help you. Here." Ash heard the vasai get up and walk across the floor. He heard the door open and then the distant sound of water running. Wincing at the pain that rocketed up and down his limbs at every movement, Ash rolled over to see Amaranth coming back through the door. Ash caught a glimpse of the kitchen beyond--polished stone counters and floor, a stainless steel sink, and a stove. The vasai carried a glass of water and a carafe with more. "You need water."

As if Amaranth's words had the power to awaken his body, Ash suddenly realized how horribly thirsty he was. He propped himself up on one trembling arm. He was so weak. He had no hope of fighting the vasai off if...if he needed to. He was at Amaranth's mercy.

The realization made him blush, and that made him scowl. He grabbed at the glass of water and would have dropped it if Amaranth had not held the base and guided it to his mouth. Ash drank it dry.

“More?”

He nodded, lacking the good grace to give thanks or even say please. Without comment, Amaranth poured him another glass and held it for him as he drank it down. The cool, clean water was the best thing he’d ever tasted. “Thank you,” he managed at last before slumping back down into the blankets.

Amaranth smiled at him. It was like the sun coming up over the ocean. So beautiful. The vasai refilled the glass once more and set it down on the table by the bed. “Try to get some rest,” he said and left him, shutting the door on the way out.

Ash stared at the door until it stopped wavering and his eyes dried. He wasn’t sure how much time passed; he seemed to go into some sort of blank state that wasn’t quite sleep, wasn’t quite anything. He was grateful for the solitude.

* * *

Amaranth turned the soup down to a simmer and went in to check on his new client. The chel lay in the bed, a small lump amid the blankets. A shock of red hair and a pale forehead were all that were visible above the covers, which gently rose and fell with his breath. Good. He was sleeping soundly now, at least. He probably needed that more than anything else, though Amaranth was concerned about getting some nourishment into him soon.

Amaranth sat down on the couch and loosed his soul, letting it merge with the chel’s so he could check his condition. He was already starting to heal, but his muscles were still traumatized from the beating. Movement of any kind was still going to be very difficult for a number of days. He was going to need physical assistance with things like eating, bathing, and going to the bathroom.

Amaranth bit his lip. Already his client had shown himself to be mistrustful--sensibly so, of course, even if it weren’t for his recent experience at the hands of his attackers. Amaranth stared, rapt by that sharp face tucked among the covers. He’d never seen a chel in real life before. He didn’t find him ugly at all. And he certainly didn’t smell any worse than anyone who’d been sleeping rough would. But he was unmistakably a chel, and as such he must wonder why on earth a vasai would take interest in him. He must expect mistreatment from any caste above his own.

Getting his client to accept Amaranth’s help would be a challenge. He hoped he could communicate his intentions in a way the chel would understand.

* * *

Ash must have slept without realizing it, because he opened his eyes to discover the light had changed. The room, previously flooded with sunlight, was now shadowy, and the sky outside the window had the golden cast of afternoon. Amaranth had returned at some point. He sat on the couch, reading a book, which he now closed. "I don't know your name," she said, crossing to Ash's bed and kneeling beside it.

"Ash," he said, because really, what difference did it make if she...he...knew his name? And so long as they were exchanging personal information... "What are you, anyway? I mean I know you're a vasai. But are you a boy or a girl?"

Amaranth smiled broadly, the skin at the corners of his eyes crinkling in amusement. "Yes."

Ash shook his head, bewildered and grateful for the distraction. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Like all vasai, I have both female and male characteristics."

He knew that, but... "What do I call you? He or she?"

"Traditionally, we are referred to with the gender-neutral pronouns, hir and sie, but the current fashion is to choose a gender of preference. I'm most comfortable with the male pronoun."

Ash took that in and decided just to let it sit there for a while. He could examine it later--sometime when his bladder wasn't about to explode. He shifted, trying to ease the pressure, and winced as his muscles protested.

"Ash, do you need to go to the bathroom?"

Ash colored. Moving even that little bit hurt. He didn't think he could stand. He'd have to crawl... He pushed himself up by his arms, biting his lips.

"Wait," said Amaranth. "Don't try to get up."

Not needing much convincing, Ash collapsed on his side and lay staring as Amaranth turned back to the couch. Ash noticed a tear in the back of Amaranth's tunic and an angry red cut beneath it. "What's that on your back?" he asked.

Amaranth turned in surprise, then reached around to feel the cut. "Oh. Yes. When I found you, you thought I was there to harm you. You tried to defend yourself."

Ash didn't remember that at all. He didn't remember anything from the time he had woken up in the culvert and crawled to shelter, and when he found himself here. "I did that to you." The cut looked bad enough to be painful, though it was clean, as were the frayed edges of Amaranth's tunic. But Amaranth was a vasai. Why hadn't he healed himself?

Amaranth nodded. There was no anger in his eyes, no promise of retribution in the frank set of his mouth, the calm stance. "Yes. But it's not important. You thought you were fighting for your life. The cut will heal, and my tunic can be mended."

"And still you brought me back here. What if I had woken up while you slept last night and attacked you, killed you?" What if I still do?

Amaranth raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "At the moment, I don't think you can." He paused. "Later, I hope you won't want to."

"I cut you pretty bad," said Ash, finding both shame and pride in the statement.

"I miscalculated when you threw yourself at me. You went for my face at first, and in my urgency to protect it and prevent you from harming yourself, I neglected to take the weapon away from you. That's what I should have done to start with, of course. I'm not much of a fighter."

"But you're a vasai. Why haven't you healed it?"

Amaranth smiled again, but there was sorrow in it. "A vasai cannot heal himself."

"Oh." Suddenly the mix of feelings inside Ash shifted to shame. "I'm sorry I did that."

"No. Don't be. The fact that as hurt as you were, you still tried to fight, bodes very well for your recovery."

And what was Ash supposed to say to that? He didn't have a chance to think of anything. Amaranth picked up a vase that sat on the floor beside the couch. It was crystal, a beautiful thing. It caught the light from the window and cast a rainbow about the room. Ash was reminded of the glass figurines in Darien's mother's cabinet. What on earth did Amaranth intend with it?

That was answered soon enough. "You can use this," Amaranth said, thrusting the vase toward him. "Just push the covers down and lean forward."

"What? You want me to go in that?" He was pretty sure he could be executed for pissing in a crystal vase.

Amaranth looked at it critically. "Yes, I think it's a good shape. The trick is to get you close enough to the edge of the bed. It will be easier if you let me help you. And I can steady you so you can concentrate on relieving yourself."

Ash stared at him. "But it's a crystal vase."

"Yes. A client gave it to me once. I suppose it's pretty, but I never really use it. I don't care for cut flowers. They just die, you know?"

Ash tried to decide if he was up to this conversation. The answer was no, and his bladder, now promised relief, became insistent. Why worry about the vase? Just his being here was enough to get him killed. He nodded and started to sidle painfully toward the edge of the bed.

"I can lift you by the shoulders and position you closer to the edge if you'll allow it," Amaranth said.

The way he asked made it not so terrible to accept. "Okay."

Amaranth's arms came around him, warm and strong, and for a moment, Ash was enveloped in the smell of lilacs. One golden strand of hair fell down and brushed against his neck. Its silken touch so distracted Ash he barely noticed when Amaranth drew the covers down, exposing him.

"Here," said Amaranth. He steadied Ash with one hand on his shoulder while Ash guided his penis to the vase. The position pushed Ash's face into Amaranth's shoulder, and he rested against him as his bladder emptied. Ash looked down, expecting to see blood in his urine. But there was none. Odd. He distinctly remembered taking some sharp kicks to his kidneys.

Feeling accomplished for producing a quantity of blood-free urine, Ash let Amaranth wipe him off and position him back in the center of the bed with the covers up around his neck.

He must have drifted again, because the next thing he knew, a tantalizing smell filled the room. Amaranth walked through the door carrying a large steaming bowl. "You must be hungry," he said. "I made you some broth. You're better off staying away from solid foods until your body heals. I'm sorry."

The smell of the broth made Ash's stomach tighten with need. But he hadn't even been able to hold a glass of water by himself. How was he going to manage a bowl of hot soup?

* * *

Amaranth saw the hesitation in Ash's eyes. His soul told him how hungry Ash was, but he also knew that just sitting up to eat would be difficult and painful for him. "Your body needs nourishment," Amaranth said. "The easiest thing would be if you would allow me to feed you."

Ash frowned. "I'm not a stripling. I can feed myself." He forced himself up into a sitting position against the metal bars of the bed frame. That had to be rough on his bruised back, but his mouth was set in a line of grim determination. Amaranth hesitated, but Ash had so little control over anything at the moment. The last thing he wanted to do was make the young man feel even more helpless.

* * *

Ash's head swam at the effort of sitting up. Little blotches of gray danced about his field of vision, and the bars of the headboard dug into his back. Looking doubtful, Amaranth settled the bowl in his lap and handed him the spoon. Ash managed to wrap his fingers around it. He leaned over the fragrant broth, nearly fell in face-first, and then righted himself. He dipped the spoon in the soup with a splash and drew it out again. One would have thought this simple process the equivalent of swimming up the Newhope River, the way his heart pounded and his hand shook. The soup splashed all over the blankets. None of it made it as far as his mouth. He tried to put the spoon back in the bowl, missed, and it slid off the blankets and clattered to the floor.

"I don't want any," he said.

Amaranth shook his head. "Do you really believe I mean you harm?"

Ash considered this, realizing that if he wanted to harm him, Amaranth could have done so by now. And Amaranth had sustained a wound because of him and seemed to bear him no ill will for it.

Ash knew how he felt now, which was terrible, but nothing like how he'd felt last night, and that was also Amaranth's doing, he was sure. Amaranth had somehow slipped him some painkillers or something. That should trouble him, but truthfully he was grateful. The vasai wanted something from him--that was a certainty--but he didn't think Amaranth meant him any immediate harm, and that alone was more than he could expect from most people. "No," he said grudgingly. "You've helped me."

"If you will permit me contact, I can help you eat."

Ash looked Amaranth over carefully. He was so beautiful. Under other circumstances, he would like nothing more than to "permit him contact." But this was dif-

ferent. He was helpless. This was humiliating. His stomach growled, as if to tell him exactly what he could do with his pride. He gave a short nod.

Amaranth smiled. He moved slowly, as if Ash were an injured wild animal, prone to startle and attack at the slightest cause, which had been the case so far.

"I'm going to lift you and place you in a more comfortable position where I can support you." He bent over, sliding one arm under Ash's knees and the other behind his back. He pulled him away from the torturous bars of the headboard, then held him securely while he slid onto the bed behind Ash. Amaranth rested his back against the wall--much more comfortable, surely; why hadn't Ash thought of that?--and settled Ash in his lap. Ash suddenly became aware of how much shorter he was than Amaranth. His head rested against Amaranth's clavicle. Small, soft breasts pillowed his shoulder blades. This detail so distracted him that he didn't freak out about having someone so close behind him until Amaranth leaned forward to lift the soup from the bedside table. That was when a sudden memory of the grocer leaning over his back, panting, made him flinch and, to his horror, whimper.

"I'm sorry," said Amaranth. "This position must be difficult for you. It seemed the most stable, but I can move, give you more space..."

Ash got a hold of himself and shook his head. "It's okay," he muttered. Truth was, he wasn't at all sure he could sit up on his own for long, he was ravenously hungry, and until memory had blindsided him, he'd rather enjoyed the feeling of Amaranth's body surrounding his. That last he chose not to dwell on. Maybe it was just the hunger.

As Amaranth dipped the spoon into the bowl and lifted it to Ash's mouth, he began to hum. The sound was soothing. Despite Ash's uncomfortable mix of feelings--humiliation at his own helplessness, curiosity about Amaranth's body, hunger, fear, pain--he felt himself relaxing. The soup was warm and delicious. His greedy stomach clamored for more. He thrust aside the part of himself that died in mortification every time he opened his mouth and permitted himself to be fed, and in no time he had finished the whole bowl.

His stomach full for the first time in he couldn't remember how long, Ash found himself sleepy and sated. Amaranth's humming came to a stop. For a moment, neither of them moved. Ash found himself reluctant to be freed from Amaranth's lap, but he did not want the vasai to know that. What passed through Amaranth's mind in that pause he could not begin to guess at. A sigh escaped the vasai's lips, ruffling Ash's hair. Ash closed his eyes, imagining it was Amaranth's lips instead, pressing a kiss there. Gods abandon him. He was worse off than he'd thought.

"Feel better?"

"That was some soup," said Ash. A warm glow suffused his entire being. He'd never felt like this before. Amaranth must have put some kind of drug in the soup. Ash didn't care. Whatever it was made him feel good, and if he woke up tomorrow in a cage or without his kidneys, then that was tomorrow's problem. For now, all pain was forgotten. He closed his eyes, and his mind settled into a cool, open space where there was nothing to bother him. He stretched on forever across the ocean, the curve of the horizon rolling out before him like a graceful hand, beckoning.

* * *

Ash felt so good in his arms. The chel rested against Amaranth's chest, compact, warm, and solid. Holding Ash in his lap and feeding him made it a simple matter for Amaranth to simply loose his soul and let it infuse his client's. He could feel Ash's hunger, his pain, and his intense embarrassment at his own helplessness. Amaranth hummed to help his client relax as he focused his soul on helping Ash's sore muscles and bruised tissues to heal. Amaranth hoped that Ash would put the feelings of warmth and ease that came with treatment down to the soup and the gentle contact.

He wondered about the ethics of treating Ash without his knowledge now that Ash's life was no longer in danger, but asking his permission would require a discussion of Ash's soul, and at the moment Amaranth judged Ash had enough to deal with. The important thing was that he ate and got as much rest as possible. Through his soul Amaranth could feel Ash's whole body and being responding to the food and to his treatment. Ash was strong, but he'd been through so much. Amaranth could feel sleep overtaking the young man, and no sooner had Ash finished the meal than he sagged against him, unconscious.

Amaranth continued to hold him longer than was probably proper, but he couldn't resist prolonging this moment of trust, exhaustion-driven though it might be. At last he gently laid Ash back on the bed and pulled the covers up over him. He hovered, staring at his client's face. Dark bruises ringed his eyes, but the swelling around his nose and mouth was already starting to go down. And the suspicion was gone for the moment. Amaranth drank in the sight of Ash's smooth brow, the dusting of freckles across his cheeks, and his open expression. A little smile still lingered on his lips. Amaranth smiled too. He knew chel were supposed to be ugly, but he didn't think so. He thought Ash was beautiful.

Amaranth wasn't used to treating someone who really needed it. A wave of fatigue swept through him. He forced himself from Ash's bedside, took a shower, changed his clothes, and then lay down on the couch to rest.

Chapter Three

Soul to Soul

Ash awoke from a deep, untroubled sleep to discover it was morning once more. He'd slept almost a whole day and hadn't had a single dream. What a blessing.

Amaranth helped him use the crystal vase again, helped him drink water again, and fed him, again. This time, Ash didn't fuss about any of it. He still wondered what would be expected of him when the bill for all this care and consideration came due, but there didn't seem to be much point in not savoring the idyll while it lasted.

Once again, the soup left him with a pleasant feeling of lassitude, like floating on warm, gentle waves. He should ask Amaranth what he was using. If the drug were readily available, it might be lucrative to sell. But somehow, he didn't want to ask. He didn't want Amaranth to know he knew he was being drugged. Not yet. He wanted to keep enjoying this illusion a little longer.

Ash listened to the clink of dishes and the hiss of running water as Amaranth cleaned up the breakfast things. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, Amaranth stood over the bed, smiling down on him. It was like looking up at the sun, too bright and beautiful to gaze on for long. Ash looked away.

"Would you like to sleep some more now, or would you rather get cleaned up a bit first?"

Cleaned up? Ash suddenly focused on his grimy forearm resting against the clean folds of Amaranth's sheets. He was filthy. Covered with dirt from sleeping rough, from...never mind. Amaranth had been handling him, touching him all this time without complaint. Gods abandon him. Suddenly bathing seemed an absolute necessity, but he could barely even sit up. He'd just had to be fed, for the love of mud. Face aflame, he said, "I...don't think I can..."

Gentle fingers ghosted across his forearm and then withdrew. "I can help you if you'll permit me."

There it was again, that asking for permission. As if Ash, not Amaranth, were the one in control here. He quailed at the thought of what was to come. Intimacies he'd scarcely shared with anyone...

But who was he trying to fool? Amaranth had seen him naked. He was naked now. Why did clean and naked seem more naked than filthy and naked? Or was it the wet part? In any event, others had helped themselves to his body with no recourse to permission or consideration or anything else, and he would feel so much better if he could get their stink off him. He took a rather shaky breath and nodded.

He would have sworn he could feel Amaranth's smile, a warm glow in the vicinity of his heart, but that was just fancy. There was an awkward little pause during which Ash had the distinct impression Amaranth was refraining from hugging him, of all things. Then Amaranth turned toward the second door in the room. "Rest while I prepare the bath."

Ash lay there, drowsy and feeling far better than he had a right to. It was a novel sensation, this lack of a need to find something, to fight someone, to run from something. He could just lie here and...be.

At length Amaranth returned from the bathroom, steam making his gauzy tunic stick to his breasts. Ash swallowed and lowered his eyes.

"I'm going to lift you again, the same way as before. All right?"

Ash nodded, trying to convince himself he wasn't looking forward to being in Amaranth's arms again. This was just for now, until he got better. It was necessity, not...anything else.

Amaranth lifted him up and cradled him against his chest. Ash managed to set aside his pride and savor this new feeling that crept over him every time Amaranth lifted him or held him or touched him.

He wondered about that. It wasn't the soup drug. It was something else. He couldn't put his finger on exactly what, but he found he liked it a great deal. It should distress him, because that liking, if it ever became craving, would give Amaranth a hold over him. But the absurdity of worrying about such things when someone was carrying his helpless, filthy, used-up body into the bathroom to be washed was too much to bear. Besides, he could feel Amaranth's breasts--one pressed against the side of his chest, the other resting lightly on his thigh. Ash gave up on thinking and enjoyed the ride.

The bathroom was as simply furnished as the bedroom. White tile covered the walls and the floor. The washbasin, tub, and toilet were all of gleaming dark brown ceramic. Like the rest of what he'd seen of Amaranth's home, this was clearly an Elai place. Everything was so clean, and the austerity was chosen, neither pel utilitarian nor chel impoverished. There was even some fragrance in the air, like the flowers outside the window, only with more spice. Ash remembered Darien, at

six already a head taller than he, holding out a silver jar from his father's dresser. "Amber," he'd said and tossed a pinch onto his father's brazier that they were not supposed to light.

"We'll get you cleaned up, and then you can have a good soak," Amaranth said. "It'll be good for your sore muscles." He eased Ash into the steaming hot water.

Oh. Oh now, that was something. The heat penetrated Ash's tortured muscles and seemed to seep into his very bones. He sighed.

Amaranth smiled. "Feels good?"

As he looked into Amaranth's bright, hopeful eyes, some new, unruly emotion tried to crawl up Ash's throat. He tried to close himself off from it, but his vision wavered with unshed tears all the same. He looked away and nodded, not trusting his voice to speak. The way Amaranth treated him, with such care and consideration, he didn't know what to make of it. He'd never known anyone like this. Was this how all vasai treated one another? How pleasant their lives must be.

Amaranth started with Ash's hair, pouring water over it with cupped hands before shampooing it with firm, gentle fingers. He rinsed his hair, then soaped up a soft cloth and washed Ash's arms, his back, his legs, and his chest. He offered Ash the cloth then. "Perhaps you'd be more comfortable washing the rest yourself. I'll help you to stand."

Tactful, that. Ash managed not to drop the cloth as Amaranth helped him into a standing position. He swayed as he ran the cloth as quickly as possible over his penis and balls. He didn't want to touch his ass. He didn't really want to acknowledge that it existed. "Your abrasions are already healing," said Amaranth when he hesitated. "The soap is mild; it won't sting."

Ash felt that unnamed emotion pressing up against his palate. Reluctantly, he reached behind and ran the cloth between his butt cheeks. Amaranth hadn't lied. The cloth came away streaked with dried blood, but the soap didn't sting. Amaranth seemed to see how Ash looked at the washcloth and took it from him, tossing it into the sink. He helped Ash rinse off, changed the water in the tub, and then eased him back down for a nice soak.

"This is very kind of you." Ash managed at last to attempt some sort of grace. "I don't understand why a vasai would go to such effort for a chel, but thank you all the same. And I'm sorry I stabbed you."

Amaranth's smile made his whole face light up. His obvious pleasure both embarrassed and pleased Ash. "Don't worry about that anymore, please," said Ama-

ranth. "I'm fine. And...it's nice to take care of someone who really needs it for a change."

Ash wasn't sure what that meant, but he hoped there was something for Amaranth in all this.

Warm and clean, with a full belly and a strangely affected heart, Ash dozed, not worrying for once about what the future might bring. He roused to find the water had cooled. "I'm going to lift you and put you back in bed now," Amaranth said. Ash noticed Amaranth always told him exactly how and when he was going to touch him. He helped Ash stand up, wrapped him in a large towel, dried him, and then carried him back to the bed.

"Ah...um." Amaranth paused.

Ash opened his eyes to slits and saw that the sheets, undoubtedly once pristine and white, were stained here and there with bits of grime and blood.

"Here." Amaranth set him down on the couch, whisked the sheets from the bed, took a fresh set from the chest, and remade the bed. "There you go now. All nice and clean," he said, laying Ash out on the bed and pulling the sheet and the blankets up over him. He sat on the floor beside the bed again, peering at Ash intently. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Better than I should," Ash admitted. "Are you giving me something for the pain?"

"In a manner of speaking, I am."

Ash didn't like the sound of that. "What do you mean? What are you giving me? Is it addictive? Am I going to--"

"No!" The shock in Amaranth's voice mirrored the expression on his face. "Nothing like that. I'm not giving you anything, in the sense of a substance." He smiled. "I'm a vasai, you know? I'm treating you. With my soul."

All other thoughts abandoned Ash like the gods themselves. "With your soul?"

"Yes." There was a new fire in Amaranth's eyes.

Ash stared at him, trying to work out if he was getting this right. Surely not. "What--Wait." He shook his head. "I'm not following. What did you say again?"

"I've treated you three times now, and you've responded well. My soul's not even out, and I can tell from here. You have a lot more healing to do before you're really recovered, but your life is no longer in danger, and I can feel how strong you are. Given time and proper care, you're going to be fine."

Ash stared at him. Amaranth's words seemed to hang in the air between them, just out of his reach. What was he saying? You're going to be fine, he heard, and treatment, but that didn't make any sense. "But I'm a chel."

There was that fire in Amaranth's eyes again, and his mouth formed a firm line. "Yes."

"You can't treat a chel."

"That's what everyone says."

Ash felt as if he were on a cliff and every word he spoke took him another step closer to the edge. But he couldn't stop. "Vasai heal through soul-to-soul contact. Everyone knows that."

"We do. It's true. Soul to soul."

They stared at one another. The silence felt thick.

At last Amaranth broke it. He took Ash's hand and said, "For a long time I've known that the Elai lie when it suits them. But until two nights ago, when I felt your soul's distress and followed it to that culvert, I didn't know the full extent of their falsehoods."

Ash trembled. He didn't want to know this. He didn't want it. A soul--what good was it? "I've never felt a god enter me and guide me. If what you say is true, then chel souls must be too lowly for the gods dwell in. So what difference does it make?"

"It's a funny thing about the gods," said Amaranth. "My friend Grail knows that the Lovers reside in hir and guide hir every action. Myself, I've never felt the touch of divinity within. I think gods are a product of our imagination. Grail believes in them, so sie feels them; I don't, so I live my life alone."

He's lonely, Ash thought, but what he said was, "You don't believe in gods, but you do believe in souls."

Amaranth squeezed his hand. "For me, a soul is not a thing to be taken on faith; it is as tangible as your hand in mine. I know souls exist, I feel them, and I touch them, and I know yours is no less sumptuous than that of any Elai."

Ash tore his hand from Amaranth's as if stung. He turned to face the wall, his face hot. As vividly as if he'd been transported in time, he saw Darien's mother standing over him on his last day at Dartwood and saying, "Your pretense to feelings for my son is obscene. You have no soul. You are not capable of real love or friendship, only cunning."

"I'm sorry," said Amaranth, his voice bringing Ash back to the present. "This must be very difficult for you to take in. I understand. It's no small thing."

A laugh escaped Ash's lips at the understatement. He turned to face Amaranth again. "You're asking me to believe that everything my life is founded on is a lie. And you're asking me to believe it based on the existence of something I can't see or touch or feel. You say you don't believe in gods. Why should I believe in souls?"

* * *

It was a fair question. Amaranth's soul ached for Ash, for what this realization must be doing to him. It was all very well and good for Amaranth, who had known most of his life that the prelates of the Temple lie and that Elai lie.

But Ash was a chel. He'd probably never seen an Elai, let alone a prelate, and what was more--Amaranth took in the thin face, the bony wrists--the conditions of Ash's life had all been predicated on the lie that chel had no souls. He'd suffered for that lie. It would not be easy for him to abandon it. Amaranth wondered if he should have kept the truth to himself and let Ash believe he was slipping him painkillers and antibiotics in his food.

But it was too late now. The very least he could do was make things less confusing for Ash where he could. "Would you like to feel your soul?"

Ash looked at him. Those piercing green eyes gleamed with unshed tears. "You can do that?"

"Yes."

He watched Ash consider it. If he refused, he could cling to the lie and pretend that Amaranth was misguided or insane. But once he consented, once he felt his own soul, there'd be no more denying it. "You don't have to decide now," Amaranth told him. "Any time you wish, I can show you."

Ash heaved a great sigh. "There was no blood in my urine," he said under his breath.

"What?"

Ash pinned him with his gaze. "The morning after you found me, when you helped me piss in your vase. There was no blood. I know I got kicked in the kidneys too hard for there to be no blood the next day unless something...unless you did something..." He looked away, shaking his head. He took another deep breath and then nodded. "Fine then. Show me. Show me my soul."

* * *

Amaranth reached out and took Ash's hand again, and Ash, spellbound, let him. He couldn't take his eyes away from that long, slender hand, those graceful fingers. Amaranth's hand was so beautiful he suddenly felt as if his heart were breaking. He stared at his own bony fingers against Amaranth's perfection, and the image wavered. He had to close his eyes.

In the center of his body, somewhere just below his heart, a feeling of warmth blossomed. It spread outward, bringing with it a feeling of euphoria and ease. Despite the circumstances, Ash relaxed. At length, he opened his eyes again and asked Amaranth, "When are you going to show me?"

Amaranth smiled, a bit smug. "I already am. How do you feel?"

"Good. Like from the soup--"Oh. "O-oh."

Amaranth nodded. "That's your soul, Ash. My soul touching your soul makes you feel that way."

"No wonder the Elai want you all to themselves. Does it feel this way for you too?"

Amaranth stared at him. For a moment Ash thought he wouldn't answer. Then he smiled, though it seemed a bit forced. "It does now," he said, which wasn't quite an answer to what Ash had asked him.

So this was what it felt like to have a soul. It was nice. Ash particularly liked the idea of Amaranth's soul touching his, as he rather liked the idea of Amaranth touching him in general. But still, was it really worth all the fuss people made? "What else can I do with it?" he asked.

"What else?"

"Yeah. Is it good for anything other than being able to be healed by vasai?"

Amaranth gave a breathy little laugh. "Um. I don't know. It...it makes you a whole person, as valuable as any Elai..."

"Uh-huh. I don't think it's going to get me into the Elai Dining Society. Do you?"

"I guess not." Amaranth's cheeks colored.

"I'm sorry. You've been more than kind to me. I'm not ungrateful. I just--"

"Have to ask a lot of uncomfortable questions."

Ash grinned. "Yeah. It's kind of my thing. So how do I know that anyone besides vasai have souls at all?"

"What?"

"If I can only feel mine when you're touching it, how do I know it's really there and not just your soul making me feel like this? Making anyone feel like this?"

"Ash, I can feel it. Here."

Ash felt something nudge that spot behind his solar plexus. It wasn't exactly a physical movement, but he felt it.

"I'm bumping your soul now. Do you believe me?"

It tickled. Ash laughed. Amaranth did it again, and Ash's laugh escalated to a giggle. "Okay, okay," he said. "I believe you."

"Good." He squeezed Ash's hand.

Ash felt Amaranth's soul withdrawing. He wanted to ask him not to, but... "Does it tire you to use your soul like that?"

"Like this? Not so much. But I wasn't really treating you. Healing work can be very tiring." He gave Ash a little smile. It looked sad at the corners. "Well, you could use some more rest. Do you think you can sleep?"

Only for about a hundred years. Ash nodded.

"Okay, then." Amaranth smiled. It made the skin under his eyes crinkle up. Ash liked it. "Get some rest."

Amaranth pulled the covers over him, and Ash let his eyes drift closed. He felt like he could still feel his soul now, like the touch of Amaranth's soul had never really left him. It was like floating on a soft, warm cloud.

* * *

"Does it feel this way for you too?"

No one had ever asked Amaranth a question like that. Certainly no one he'd been treating as a vasai. But that was not the only astounding question Ash put to him. Now that he was recovered a little bit, his personality was emerging. Ash was intelligent, curious, cynical, and kind. He'd felt bad about the wound on Amaranth's shoulder, and...and he'd asked Amaranth if what he was doing provided mutual pleasure. Watching Ash sleep now, Amaranth felt his heart still pounding from that one question over all the others.

* * *

Ash must have been more tired than he realized, because when he awoke it was the dead of night. Amaranth slept on the couch again, his beautiful face limned in moonlight. He gave a little murmur and lifted his head. Ash watched, beguiled by Amaranth's grace as he stood and crossed to the bed. He helped Ash up to a sitting position and gave him more water. "Do you need the vase?"

Ash was embarrassed to admit that he did, but somehow Amaranth made all of it seem so ordinary. He managed a short nod. When he was finished, Amaranth pulled the blankets over him again and returned to the couch.

"Go sleep in your own bed," said Ash. "I'll be okay. You need rest too, don't you?"

Amaranth smiled. "I'm fine right here."

"No, please."

Amaranth sighed. "I only have the one bed, and your need is greater."

This brought Ash to full wakefulness. "Wait, this is your bed?"

"Of course."

He absorbed that. He'd assumed this was a spare bedroom. Just how much room did a vasai's apartment have, anyway? Somehow, he'd imagined a palace on the other side of that door. He wanted to offer to share the bed. He wasn't sure he

could do that. While he was working all this out, Amaranth laid his head down, closed his eyes, and apparently went straight to sleep.

* * *

As Ash's body mended, the wounds to his soul became more evident. Now Ash's fear and loneliness made it difficult for Amaranth to sleep. He considered drawing his soul all the way in, closing himself off, but what if Ash needed something in the night? Eventually, exhaustion won out, and Amaranth slipped into a fitful doze, threaded through with Ash's pain.

He dreamed of an alley, the heady smell of fresh bread, and the sudden terror of a hand on his collar. Three pel surrounded him, grinning. The first blow robbed him of his breath; the second, his self-control; and the third, his dignity. Piece by piece they took everything else from him too. When they stripped him of his clothes and forced him to his hands and knees, Amaranth awoke. And Ash screamed.

Amaranth gasped, grappling for consciousness. He sat up and wrapped his arms around his midsection. It wasn't his dream; it was Ash's.

The raw impact of the attack struck Amaranth in the soul. Those abominations--what they had done--Amaranth wanted to find those pel and...and hurt them.

He'd never felt this way before. Even when Evanscar misused his privilege, Amaranth had only thought of protecting the powerless. Now he wanted revenge. Shocked at his own response, he forced himself to his feet. He shook his head, hoping to dislodge the brutal images and free his soul of the heavy burden of hatred.

Ash was awake. He sat up in the bed, staring about with wild eyes. His panic lashed out at Amaranth, a more immediate demand than Amaranth's anger. Amaranth had experienced part of the attack in a dream. But Ash had lived through all of it. If there was a time for revenge, this was not it. Ash needed him, not his outrage. Amaranth went to take him in his arms.

But halfway to the bed, he hesitated. Maybe the last thing Ash needed now was anyone touching him without permission. Amaranth dropped his hands to his sides.

* * *

Ash stared at the unfamiliar surroundings for a moment and then remembered where he was. This was Amaranth's bedroom, all ghostly and pale blue in the moonlight. The air seemed to echo with the sound of a scream. His, he realized. Then he noticed Amaranth, standing halfway between the bed and the couch,

looking at him. Ash couldn't make out his expression. His golden eyes lost their color in this light. They gleamed silver.

"You're safe, Ash," said Amaranth. "It was a dream."

Ash knew that, yet he couldn't rid his mind of those images, feelings, memories. They seemed to flood in on him from every direction. He was in two places at once, here safe at least for the moment, and back out there again, where anything could happen.

"You're shaking," said Amaranth, stepping closer.

Ash shook his head. "No I'm not." But he was.

"May I?"

Ash looked up to see Amaranth standing beside the bed, his arms held open. "What?"

"Comfort you."

Ash looked abruptly at the floor. He couldn't think of anything he wanted more, but to show such weakness... This was somehow much worse than needing to be fed and bathed.

Moving slowly, Amaranth sat down on the bed beside him. He smelled like lilacs. Ash felt the warm length of his thigh alongside his own. The promise of contact was just too tempting. He threw his arms around Amaranth and buried his face in his shoulder.

* * *

When Ash finally fell, he fell all the way. Suddenly, Amaranth's arms were filled with sweaty, crying boy. Amaranth gathered him in and nestled him against his breasts. The moans and sobs of misery tore at his soul and brought tears to his own eyes. Strong fists beat at his back, and he let them, let Ash push his trembling, heated face into his shoulder, and gave him a safe, dark place to fall apart in.

Ash clung to him, and Amaranth held him back just as hard, running his hands up and down the trembling back, whispering words of comfort. Without thought, Amaranth turned his face and kissed the top of Ash's head.

* * *

Ash had never, ever allowed himself to break down in front of another person like this. Not since he was a little boy. Maybe the attack had broken him, after all. Maybe it was that one last thing too much, and now...

"Don't be ashamed," said Amaranth, as if he knew exactly what Ash was thinking. "You're just as strong as ever. Strong enough to let this move through you. Let it. Let it go."

Something opened up inside Ash at those words, and what came pouring out was more than he'd ever known a body could hold. It was more than his pain and outrage at the attack. It was more than a lifetime scrabbling for every scrap of food, shelter, and clothing. It felt like the whole world's agony pouring forth from him, stretching his mouth wide open in a scream too large for sound.

He was certain he'd be ripped apart by the force of the...whatever it was, "feeling" seemed too small a word. But then in the midst of the turmoil, he felt soft lips gently press against the top of his head. A kiss. Amaranth kissed him.

It was like a buttercup standing alone in an abandoned lot: small and fragile, but real. A moment so utterly itself it did not matter if it lasted but a fraction of a second. It was every bit as big as the torrent of sorrow now moving through him. It was life, and he clung to it.

Chapter Four

What a Vasai Wants

"So, really, why are you doing all this?" asked Ash, sitting up in the bed now and feeding himself like a big boy. He sat with his back against the wall, cushioned with pillows. The blankets pooled around his waist and he wore one of Amaranth's tunics, the sleeves pushed up to his elbows. Amaranth sat on his couch, his own plate in his lap. It was the afternoon of the second day since he broke down. With Amaranth's aid, Ash's body was healing quickly. Pretty soon he'd be able to leave.

Amaranth gave him one of those smiles of his. They were sunny and kind. Ash had timed it out. He could look at Amaranth smiling like that for exactly two and a half seconds before he had to look away or get all funny. "Does one person need a reason to help another person?"

Ash smiled back. "Usually, yes."

Amaranth blinked, mouth open as he searched for an answer to that. "Well, it's no bother, really."

"I've put you out of your bed, for one thing. And what about your patrons? Surely there are people who pay you to heal them."

"My client list is light these days." There was something troubled in his eyes when he said that--dark clouds in the distance. "And I'm perfectly comfortable on the couch."

"Maybe so, but none of that answers my question." Ash was rapidly coming up to the time when he would have no further excuse to linger, which was when, inevitably, the price for all this luxury and kindness would need to be paid. He wanted some kind of forewarning about what would be expected of him. "What do you need from me?"

Fire flashed in Amaranth's golden eyes, and he drew his shapely lips back. Suddenly the kind, gentle beauty was gone, and in his place stood a being of power and fury. Ash flinched, and as quickly as Amaranth's temper had been lost, he regained it. He turned and stared out the window, getting control, Ash judged. "We're not all heartless, you know!"

Ash thought he'd been putting it respectfully, but Amaranth reacted as if he'd been struck in the face. "I didn't say you were."

Amaranth gave him a wounded look and paced the room. "So why is it so impossible for you to believe that I just want to help you?"

It was Ash's turn to search for words. "Why? Why is it impossible? Because, Amaranth. Look at me."

He turned, his great golden eyes anguished.

"It's nothing against you. You've been... I can't even say what you... Anyway, it's not you. You're a good person. But good people, bad ones, we're not all that different. I've known good people and bad people before. And if you have no reason at all why you're helping me, then you'd be the very first person like that I've ever met."

* * *

Ash was so smart. Amaranth felt naked under the glare of that worldly green gaze. There was no fooling someone like Ash, who'd seen everything. He might be able to fool himself about what he was doing, with Ash here in his home, in his bed, but he couldn't fool Ash. Amaranth's mouth tasted bitter from shattered illusions. Ash was right. Pretty soon, he'd be better. Then what? When he didn't need Amaranth to take care of him any more, then what would Amaranth do?

He'd told the truth about his client list being shy. His reputation was spreading, and this current situation, if the other vasai found out about it, would only make matters worse. All of which meant that he had no money to give Ash. No material way of assisting him apart from--oh dear, he was in trouble--apart from offering him a roof over his head. And a bed. Don't forget about the bed and what you keep pretending you don't want to have happen in the bed, you big perv. "You don't have to worry, Ash. I'm not going to ask you for anything." He had to get out of here. "I have some errands to run now."

He fetched Ash a fresh glass of water and fled.

* * *

While Amaranth was out, Ash had plenty of time to mull over their conversation. What the fuck was that all about? Amaranth had been really angry when Ash pointed out that he must have an ulterior motive for helping him. But he was just trying to be realistic. Amaranth had taken it as an accusation.

And had reacted defensively to that accusation. First, Amaranth had been angry; then he'd tried to talk his way around the issue; and finally, when that hadn't worked either, he'd fled. It was a pattern Ash was familiar with. It was how someone behaved when they were guilty of whatever they were being accused of.

Only Ash hadn't been accusing. Had he? He hadn't meant to be...had he? Maybe there was a part of him that wanted the impossible. That wanted Amaranth's help free of charge. Even if that were true, there was no profit in indulging such fantasies. He just hoped that whatever Amaranth wanted wouldn't hurt too much. Maybe Amaranth needed a thief for some reason. Or a package delivered or something like that. A housekeeper? Now there was an enticing thought--the idea that he'd be able to continue living here, earning his keep by doing chores. He pushed the fantasy to the back of his mind where it could keep favors-for-no-reason company.

What if Amaranth wanted sex? Ash tensed at the thought. Amaranth was beautiful. Ash was attracted to him. But he didn't want to be fucked again. Not ever. Still...if that was what Amaranth wanted, he'd have to go along. He couldn't imagine Amaranth being brutal about it. Maybe, if he'd healed by then, it wouldn't be so bad.

And what makes you think he wants your bony ass anyway, marsh rat? Good point. Anyone who looked like Amaranth would have no trouble finding sexual partners.

And yet over the past four days, Amaranth had scarcely left the apartment. No one had called or visited. There'd been no mention of appointments or lunches or dates. The guilty way Amaranth had started when Ash asked him what he wanted came back to his mind. There was something there. What was it?

These thoughts kept him entertained, if one could call it that, until Amaranth returned a couple of hours later. The vasai smiled at him as he entered the room. In his hand he held a small package wrapped in brown shop paper and tied with cord. He sat on the edge of the bed and proffered it. "I found this when I was out, and it made me think of you."

Ash hesitated. He should refuse this...gift? Was it a gift? He should definitely refuse it. It could be something else for Amaranth to hold over him later. But the truth was, his curiosity simply wouldn't be denied. He nodded politely and accepted the package. "Thank you."

Amaranth's smile broadened, and he sat back, clearly excited to see how Ash would respond to the--whatever it was. He slid his fingers across the smooth paper and plucked at the knot in the cord. Not string, cord. This was from an expensive

shop. He could tell. Suddenly his mouth was dry and his hand trembled. This was a mistake. He shouldn't do this. He pulled the cord anyway and unfolded the paper.

A book. Freedom of Soul by Eli Harken. Ash gasped and dropped it. It landed with a muffled thump in his lap. A book? He stared at Amaranth, his mouth agape. "A book."

Amaranth held his hands out. "I know you can't read, but I thought if you were willing, I could read it to you. Maybe I could even teach you to read, if you wanted. It must be tedious for you just lying here all day."

Ash struggled to process this. Amaranth was concerned about him being bored? That was a problem so far down the list of potential hazards it hadn't even occurred to Ash that it existed. Of course, now that he considered it, he realized he had been bored and secretly anticipating Amaranth's return so he might be distracted from his own thoughts. Nevertheless, surely boredom was outside the range of concerns that Amaranth, as Ash's self-appointed healer, needed to take into account.

Except he had. And he'd spent money and was prepared to spend time in order to do something about it. Ash took in the tentative smile and the hopeful look in Amaranth's eyes. What the fuck?

Amaranth's smile wavered and became a frown. "Oh." Dismay filled those great golden eyes. "Oh gods." He slapped one hand to his forehead. "Bright, Amaranth." He dropped his hand and bowed his head. "I've offended you."

The idea of a chel being offended by a vasai for any reason made Ash grin. "You didn't offend me. I'm just surprised, and actually, I can read. That's not what--"

"How could I be so stupid? I--What? You can read?"

Ash shrugged. "Yeah. Uh..." The story of why Ash had the rudiments of an education was not something he wanted to go into at the moment, or maybe ever. "Yeah. I can."

"Oh. Okay, then. Well..." He gestured at the book. "It's an early edition, unrevised. They're rare these days. I thought you might appreciate our founder's original thoughts on the matter of soul."

Ash picked it up again. A book. He hadn't had one since... "This is very thoughtful. Thank you."

That afternoon, they enjoyed a companionable silence as each of them read and the sunlight tracked across the room from the western window. It was the most perfect span of time Ash had ever experienced. For the longest time he couldn't put a name to the feeling he had sitting there, absorbed in Harken's account of leaving his home with his fellow Elai and casting their fortunes among the stars. Harken's description of the dehumanizing treatment the Elai had received in Nortam, and his conviction that respect and compassion were the birthright of all who drew breath did not move Ash as much as did the sight of Amaranth on the couch, bathed in light from the window. An occasional rustle of a turning page punctuated the stillness and made it even more sacred.

Awe. That's what Ash felt. Awe that life could hold such wonders as Amaranth, as Harken, as these hours of tranquility. He wanted them never to end. But eventually the light grew dim, and Amaranth stood and lit a lamp. He said something about supper and left the room.

Ash closed his book and sat looking at it. His mind went back to the expression on Amaranth's face when he'd held the gift out to him. Hope. He'd looked hopeful. What was he hoping for?

* * *

Amaranth poured stock into the soup pot and switched on the range. He took two carrots, an onion, garlic, and mushrooms from the keeper and began to chop them, his movements slow and measured. The deep sense of ease the afternoon had instilled in him lingered still. Ash had seemed pleased with his gift. Amaranth wondered at his ability to read, but he sensed Ash didn't want to share the reasons behind it, and he determined to leave it alone. It was none of his business.

Of course, it hadn't been his business to offer to teach Ash to read, either. He was lucky Ash wasn't offended. The truth was his life as a vasai and Ash's as a chel left little common ground between them. No matter what his feelings, his motivations, could he really hope to bridge that gap? It seemed inevitable that one or both of them would get hurt if Amaranth continued on his present course.

And yet, when the soup had been prepared and he carried it into the bedroom on a tray only to find Ash asleep in the bed, his heart skipped a beat at the sight of that spare, sharp face, now relaxed and open.

Ash was suspicious of Amaranth's motivations for helping him, and he had every right to be. Certainly the life he'd led up until now could not have engendered trust in his fellow beings. Not to mention the fact that Ash was absolutely right. Amaranth did want something from him. That until now Amaranth had hidden that truth from himself did nothing to change it. What was he going to do?

Ash's long russet eyelashes fluttered, and he opened his eyes. He saw Amaranth standing there, staring at him, tray in hand, and he smiled. Amaranth's heart pounded. Just a day or two ago, Ash's reaction would have been guarded. There was trust in that simple expression of pleasure. That had to be a good thing, didn't it?

* * *

The next morning when Amaranth awoke, he found a folded sheet of paper on the floor near the front door. He opened it to find Grail's elegant handwriting, anxiety etched in every curve.

Are you all right? Have you been ill? Why have you been away from the Refuge for so long? Everybody's asking, and I don't know what to tell them. And Evanscar is speculating about you quitting all your clients. Parnal was in yesterday looking for you. You'd better get in to the Refuge today, or Evanscar will steal him from you.

Amaranth sighed. There was nothing for it. He couldn't put off going back to work any longer. And really, Ash was past the point where he needed his constant presence. He was walking to the bathroom on his own now and spending more and more time sitting up, awake. Amaranth went into the bedroom to find him up and dressed, walking back and forth across the room with slow, deliberate steps. He smiled when he saw Amaranth. "Good morning."

Amaranth returned the smile. "Good morning. How are you feeling?"

"Much better. Figured I'd better start getting some exercise before my body forgets how to walk."

Amaranth nodded. "That's good. Just don't overdo. I can show you some stretches to help with the stiffness."

Ash blinked. There was that look again. Wary, speculative. Amaranth didn't need his soul to tell him that Ash was wondering what was behind the helpful offer. But his client didn't say anything, just nodded and completed his circuit of the room.

Amaranth was tempted not to go in to the Refuge today, to put it off in favor of helping Ash with the stretches and exercises that would help him recover the muscle tone he'd lost while bedridden.

But he'd put it off too long already. With a sigh, he said, "I have to go out again today. For several hours, I'm afraid. Business."

Ash nodded as he sat down on the edge of the bed. "Of course. I've been wondering about that. I hope your sticking around here hasn't caused any problems for you."

"Oh no, of course not," Amaranth told him and smiled.

* * *

The lounge area of the Refuge was elegantly furnished in muted earth tones. A thick carpet of rich brown absorbed most of the incidental noise. Amaranth took a slender flute of mango juice from the buffet of drinks and light snacks and made his way to one of the low couches near the back of the large, softly lit room. Soothing music played quietly in the background.

Vasai and clients sat in pairs on the benches scattered across the room, quietly discussing terms before drifting to the back and through the archway to where the private rooms were located.

At this time of day, the crowd was sparse. Amaranth took a seat on a low bench to await Parnal's arrival.

But the next time the doors opened, it was Evanscar who entered, his emerald robes fluttering about him like gossamer wings. The color set off his auburn hair and green eyes. His full lips, high cheekbones, and aquiline nose were as handsome as they were haughty.

Evanscar spotted him and hurried over. Wonderful.

"Amaranth, my dear, how are you?" The vasai swooped down upon him, enveloping him in muscular arms and the scent of anise. "Are you quite well?"

"I'm fine, Evanscar."

He pulled back and eyed Amaranth closely. "Are you sure?" Emerald eyes watched him sharply. For an instant, Amaranth was reminded of Ash. "We've scarcely see you in days. We were getting worried."

"Thank you for your concern, but I'm fine."

"Really? Because Salme, Mical, and myself have been so distressed. None of us can think of anything that would keep you from your sacred calling for so long except for grave illness." Evanscar paused a moment, his sharp gaze growing speculative. "Or personal tragedy."

Amaranth drew a deep breath, inwardly cursing his naïveté in thinking he would not need a cover story for staying so long away from the Refuge.

But it was too late now. Anything he assembled on the spur of the moment would appear...assembled. He drained his glass and stood. "It is sweet of you to worry, but there's no need." He held up his empty glass. "Will you excuse me?"

Evanscar inclined his head. Even with his soul packed up tight as a fist, Amaranth could feel the vasai's eyes boring through his back as he made his way to the refreshments. As he handed his empty glass to Build, the pel attendant, Parnal appeared. Amaranth went to him immediately, took his hands, and bowed over them. "Ei, can you forgive me?"

Parnal was a middle-aged man of solid proportions, a hair shorter than Amaranth but wider and thicker. He was balding, and the hair that remained was dark with flecks of gray and trimmed short. His eyes were pale blue, his face rectangular and stolid. "I wondered if perhaps I had done something to put you off."

"Of course not! You are my best client. I was fatigued is all." Amaranth stepped back and held his arms out at his sides, letting the long sleeves of his tunic unfurl. "But now, as you can see, I am recovered." He took Parnal's arm and steered him toward the private rooms.

Parnal hesitated. Amaranth followed his gaze and saw Evanscar staring back, a faint smile on his lips. In that moment, Amaranth knew that Evanscar had tended to Parnal in his absence. Well, and what right did he have to complain if he was not available for the man?

Parnal looked back at Amaranth, seeming to make up his mind. "Yes, of course. Let us waste no more time."

* * *

After Amaranth left, Ash felt how quiet the apartment was with no one else in it. That got him thinking again about what Amaranth wanted.

He got out of bed and walked around the room. He was already stronger than he'd been this morning when just one circuit had left him wobbly in the knees and dizzy in the head. This time, he had strength to spare when he made it to the door. He opened it.

On the other side was the kitchen he'd often glimpsed before. Tiles of polished brown flagstone lined the floor and walls. Directly to his right, along the wall shared with the bedroom, stood a food keeper and a stove. On the wall to the right

was a sink with a window above it, and directly in front of him, a counter separated the kitchen area from the rest of the apartment.

Curiosity drove Ash past the kitchen. A vestibule led to the door of the apartment, and opposite it stood the living room. There the walls were white as in the bedroom, and the floor was covered with the same dark brown planks of hardwood. Glass doors led out to a balcony overlooking a wooded rise behind the building. They appeared to be on the second or third floor.

A couch and a chair stood near a coffee table graced with a bowl of river stones. Along one wall stood a shelf with more books. Ash noticed that there were no photographs. In fact, apart from the books, nothing in the whole apartment seemed personal. There was nothing to indicate that one person rather than another lived here. No mementos of friends. Just spare, beautiful furnishings and books.

Ash scanned the titles, hoping for some clue to Amaranth's inner life. He had a full set of *The Ruminations* and a nice edition of *The Settlement of Harken's Landing*, as well as a biography of their founder, Eli Harken. On a whim, Ash took down the first volume of *The Ruminations* and checked for an inscription. Nothing. He checked several of the other books. No.

Ash sighed and returned to the kitchen. He opened the fridge. A bottle of mango juice, a block of tofu, some boiled noodles, and a head of lettuce. Ample, nutritious food, but no clues. Ash took an orange from the fruit bowl and began to peel it. A small leather-bound notebook sat on the counter near the bowl. He opened it.

It was a desk calendar, the kind with a page for each day and an address book in the back. Ash closed it again. What was he doing? Snooping, that's what. Amaranth had been nothing but kind to him, and this was how he repaid him? By going through his things the moment he was gone?

But that look on Amaranth's face when he gave Ash the book came back to him. That hope. And the way he'd looked when Ash asked him why he was doing all this. Guilt. Hope and guilt. Over what?

He opened the calendar again and turned it to the page marked with a ribbon. Two days ago.

"Parnal" was written on the page for the day Amaranth had found him. The day he'd--

Ash turned the page and found the same name written two more times. If Amaranth had an appointment with him, he'd broken it. There were a few more names

on a few more pages. Clients would be Ash's guess. He flipped through the rest of the calendar. No birthdays, no lunches or dinners or outings.

In the address book in the back, Ash found just three entries. Somebody named Grail, a Kristeth, and Parnal again.

As the quiet of the empty apartment closed in on Ash, the truth finally dawned on him in that way that truth often will, as a coalescence of many small details which by themselves had been meaningless.

Amaranth was lonely. Of course as a vasai he had no family, but he had few personal friends either. He lived by himself in this pristine apartment. That explained why Amaranth seemed so pleased simply to have Ash around the place. As if his very presence here were some sort of gift. And it was, because it kept him from being alone.

But why him? Surely a beautiful and talented vasai like Amaranth had men and women clamoring for his attention. Or would those be clients? It would appear that he had precious few of those, as well.

Ash considered the spare furnishings and the contents of the keeper. Perhaps this austere beauty was more than a sense of style. Perhaps it was a necessity. Was Amaranth struggling in some way with his profession? Was he alienated, not only from other vasai but from the wealthy patrons he served? Was there something about the company of a marsh rat that offered Amaranth a comfort he couldn't find elsewhere?

* * *

The private rooms of the Refuge were covered with siltgrass mats to block out the feelings of others, which might distract the healer from the client. The room was furnished in a similar manner to the rest of the place, except that the floor was covered in sand. The organic material helped a vasai to channel the negative energies drawn from the client into the ground. A low, padded bench and a chair completed the amenities. Or rather, Amaranth completed them.

Parnal wore the traditional executive uniform--a gray wool suit, expensive and exquisitely tailored. Now he removed his jacket and draped it across the chair. Amaranth, needing at this point to demonstrate his eagerness to treat Parnal, set his reluctance aside and forced himself to smile. He took hold of his client's waistband and unfastened the latch. He drew Parnal's trousers down his legs, let him step out of them, and then folded them carefully and laid them down on the chair along with the jacket.

By now, Parnal was unbuttoning the cuffs of his crisp white shirt. Amaranth stood close, letting his chest brush against Parnal as he released his soul and merged it with Parnal's. His client's emotional and physical state wrapped itself around Amaranth and permeated his own state of being. Parnal's frustration and boredom, his impatience with his situation as a midlevel manager, washed through Amaranth like a swell of bilgewater beneath the docks.

Amaranth had been trained since birth to release the energies he drew off a client, and he did so now, directing the flow down through the soles of his feet, through the floor, and into the ground below. But in recent times, he'd begun to wonder if all of the client's energies really left him. It seemed to him that a residue of malaise was gradually building up, tinting his whole view of the world.

Nevertheless, he pushed Parnal's shirt off his shoulders and down his arms, using his palms to draw negative energies from his client. Worse than Parnal's general dissatisfaction with his life was his true view of Amaranth. Not that Parnal was a monster or anything like it. In truth, he was a decent client. Polite, undemanding, and yet, in these moments, there was no escape from the understanding that to him, Amaranth was a tool--a beautiful tool most enjoyable to use, but an object nonetheless.

Amaranth trailed a row of kisses down Parnal's neck and shoulder to his chest, bestowing each one with a little burst of healing energy. He slid Parnal's shorts down his hips and sank to his knees.

* * *

Amaranth had collected his fee from Parnal and was on his way out when he nearly ran into Grail.

"Amaranth! What a relief! I was really beginning to think you had come to harm somehow."

Amaranth embraced hir. "I'm well. I took some time for myself."

"I'm glad to hear it. And it's no more than you deserve. But are you leaving again so soon? I have gossip for you."

All Amaranth really wanted to do was get home and see how Ash was doing. But Grail was his oldest and, for all practical purposes, only friend.

And sie saw Amaranth's hesitation. Hir affable smile did not quite hide the worry in hir eyes. "No matter," sie said. "My appointments don't start for another three quarters of an hour. I'll walk with you."

They walked down the broad thoroughfare of Harken Avenue, lined with expensive shops, fine restaurants, and stylish cafés. There was a vasai clinic every two or three blocks in this district.

"So, what is the gossip you have for me?" asked Amaranth.

"Actually, I wanted to warn you." Grail scowled, showing his true state of mind for the first time.

Amaranth put his arm through Grail's and leaned in. "Warn me of what? That my best friend is a worrywart?"

"Don't trivialize this before you even hear what it is." Grail gave a frustrated sigh and disentangled himself from him. "Listen, Evanscar treated Parnal the other night."

"Oh that. I know that." Amaranth waved one hand, affecting rather more unconcern than he actually felt.

Grail stopped walking and stared at him. "You know? You know this, and you are leaving the Refuge at this time of day? Business will be heavy in another hour. You can pick up two or three drop-ins tonight, easy."

"Drop-ins. Ugh."

"You don't understand. You are this close to losing Parnal to Evanscar, and he's the last regular you have! Kristeth is seeing Evanscar regularly now, since you've been out so much."

Well, there it was, the bald truth Amaranth had been skirting for months now. Skirting and always finding other things to think about, to focus on. "I don't really like those clients."

Grail's eyes were wide. "Have you completely lost your senses? It is not for such as we to like. We may, if we earn it, prefer, but like? That's ludicrous. You're a vasai. You treat people. If you don't, how will you live? How are you managing now, on just what Parnal gives you? I'm afraid to find out."

"I have some savings. Enough to get me through this. I'm in a rough patch is all. It gets to you after a while. You should know."

"Your problem is you don't drink enough."

"I've found something better than drink." He looked up and down the street, then leaned in closer. "Someone actually, and he's really helping me. I'll be back on my feet in no time."

"Another vasai? Who is it?" Grail eyed him with deep suspicion.

Amaranth licked his lips, nervous about sharing this, even with Grail. "It's not a vasai."

Grail's dark eyebrows arched in toward the bridge of his nose. "A client? Who?"

"No, not an Elai. His name is Ash. He's--"

"A chel!" Grail gasped.

Amaranth nodded. "Yes. A chel. And he actually needs my help."

The way Grail looked at him now made Amaranth feel as if he were a specimen under a microscope. "But you can't treat him, and he can't give you anything."

Amaranth decided not to bring up the subject of Ash's soul. "Just helping him, any way I can, helps me."

"Aren't you afraid he'll follow you home and rob you blind?"

Amaranth laughed. "No. Not in the slightest. Not every chel is a criminal, Grail. In fact, Ash has been nothing but respectful, considerate, and honest. It's very refreshing to be around someone who sees me as a person, not a tool."

Grail pursed his lips. "What exactly are you doing for him?"

"I give him food," said Amaranth, "and a safe place to sleep. Clean water and sympathy."

"Has anyone seen you with him? Where do you go to meet with him?" At Amaranth's hesitation, Grail's jaw dropped. "No! You're not--" She glanced up and down the street, stepped closer, and dropped his voice. "You don't have him in your home."

Amaranth sniffed. He understood that Grail was worried about him, but this was becoming tiresome, and he really wanted to get back to Ash. He stepped back, attempting to withdraw, but Grail grabbed him by the arm, his fingers like an iron shackle around his wrist.

"If anyone finds out about this, you'll be ruined."

Amaranth took a deep breath and stifled his impatience. Poor Grail couldn't help it. Sie was so very conventional, and sie worried so. Sie really did care for Amaranth. He knew that. He smiled at his old friend and gave hir a peck on the cheek before gently removing hir hand from around his wrist. "It's all right," he said. "Nobody knows but you."

The expression on Grail's face was bewildered and lost, as if sie didn't even recognize Amaranth anymore. Sie said nothing as Amaranth turned and headed home, but Amaranth felt hir gaze following him for a very long time.

* * *

After days of bed rest, all that snooping wore Ash out. By the time he made it back to the bedroom, his neglected muscles were shaking. He crawled back into bed with a sense of relief. He was not quite yet fit to go back out into the world and fend for himself. He legitimately had another day or so of recovery here before he was truly malingering.

He dozed and awoke again at the sound of the latch on the front door turning. He heard Amaranth come in, heard the water running in the sink in the kitchen and then the soft tick tick of the stove turning on. More soup, no doubt. Ash sat up and was just about to venture out into the kitchen when the door opened and Amaranth stuck his head in. He smiled, though Ash saw shadows under his eyes. "Hi."

"Hi," said Ash, swinging his feet out of the bed. "How did your business go?"

Amaranth nodded and came to sit on the couch. "Like it does," he said, running a hand through his hair. "Fine. It was fine."

Ash noted the slight tremor in the hand, the set quality of the smile, and the haunted eyes. Amaranth was dead on his feet. Ash didn't say anything. He stood, walked over to where Amaranth sat, and put a hand on his shoulder.

Amaranth looked up at him, mouth open in surprise.

"It must take a lot out of you," Ash said. "Healing people."

The look that got him was fierce and oddly reminiscent, though he couldn't place it. The nearest thing he could come to was a frightened animal cornered in its lair. "Expending all that energy for others," Ash went on, as if he hadn't noticed that he'd struck a nerve. "I've been up and about today. I'm feeling much better." He

smiled in what he hoped was reassurance. "Why don't you let me finish getting supper ready?"

"You shouldn't overdo."

Look who's talking. "No, really," said Ash. "Just relax. I'll get you a drink."

Amaranth blinked as if Ash had just announced he'd be riding a unicorn to Old Jupiter. "I don't drink."

"Well, tea, then." He pressed Amaranth back into the couch. "Sit. I'll be right back."

Ash successfully navigated tea and soup preparation. This time they ate in the kitchen, sitting on stools at the counter. Somehow, even though they hardly spoke, the silence was comforting, not empty.

After they ate, Ash was tired again, and Amaranth's eyes were drooping. They both returned to the bedroom. He got into bed and lay regarding Amaranth as the vasai prepared to spend another night on the couch. Ash realized now where he'd gone wrong the time before, when he'd brought up the reciprocal nature of all arrangements between people. "Amaranth," he said.

A blanket trailing from one hand, Amaranth turned to look at him.

"You've done so much for me," Ash went on, hoping he had it right this time. "It would mean a great deal to me if I could do something for you." And with that, he scooted back in the bed and lifted the covers in invitation.

Amaranth swallowed, and the blanket slipped from his fingers. For a moment, he seemed locked in some internal struggle. He literally swayed, and then, all at once, he gave in and climbed into bed with Ash.

At first pleased with his success, Ash now experienced some trepidation, uncertain as to what, exactly, he had just offered Amaranth. Whatever Amaranth wanted, he supposed, and in truth, that seemed only fair.

As it turned out, what Amaranth wanted was simply to be held. They wrapped their arms around each other, bodies pressed together, warm through the thin layers of their pajamas. Neither said a word, but they both clung tight.

Chapter Five

Through the Gates

Amaranth awoke suffused with a feeling of peace he'd never known before. At first, he wondered why, and then, as his waking brain registered the warm body pressed against his, he remembered and smiled.

What Ash had done last night--Amaranth was still astonished. It was the last thing he'd expected. How had Ash known that simple contact, without demands or expectations, was the very thing he longed for above all else? How had he known?

And perhaps even more to the point, what had motivated Ash to make Amaranth's wants his business? He shook his head at the thought. Now he sounded like Ash had, that day he'd questioned Amaranth's motives for helping him. But he didn't mean it that way. It was just such a surprise.

All the more so given what Ash had been through. The flicker of trepidation that had crossed Ash's face the moment after offering space in the bed had not escaped Amaranth's notice, nor for that matter, the determination that swiftly followed it. Ash's offer had been vague in the extreme, and he'd been committed to following through on whatever interpretation of it Amaranth chose to make. The courage and openheartedness of that took his breath away.

Now Ash formed a pleasantly solid bundle pressed against his side. His head rested on Amaranth's shoulder. Amaranth's arm wrapped around Ash, and in his sleep, Ash had flung one leg over Amaranth's hip and one arm across his chest. Amaranth stared up at the ceiling, relishing the contact.

It was a full two breaths before he realized that Ash's thigh was directly on top of his characteristic morning erection. And then another two breaths before the source of a certain firm nudging against his hip resolved itself in his sleep-muzzled consciousness.

Amaranth smiled, though he supposed he shouldn't. Of course, Ash's erection was a sure sign that his body was recovering, and that was reason enough to be pleased. But how would Ash feel about it if he woke while they were like this? Amaranth wondered what he should do. If he got up, he likely would awaken Ash. If he remained--

A sudden intake of breath on Ash's part made the whole question moot. The young redhead shifted and then pushed himself up into a sitting position, blinking at Amaranth owlishly. "Morning," he said, his voice thick with sleep.

"Good morning," said Amaranth, casually lifting his left knee to shield his erection from Ash's view. Had he noticed? Were the covers pooled in Ash's lap serving the same camouflaging purpose? "Did you sleep well?"

Ash smiled. "Yeah." His cheeks went a little pink. "You?"

"Yes. Very well, thank you."

For a moment they both stared at one another wordlessly, as if sharing the same thought. Better than I ever have before. Was it true? Had the night spent in his arms been as deeply restful and soul healing for Ash as it was for Amaranth? He was tempted to loose his soul and find out for sure, but that would be an invasion of Ash's privacy and a poor way to repay him for his gift.

Meanwhile, they were still staring at one another, the silence stretching out, past awkward, into some new, undefined territory. Amaranth licked his lips at the very same moment Ash did, and they laughed and the spell was broken.

Amaranth swung his legs out of bed and stood, keeping his back to Ash until his cock finally calmed down. "How about eggs for breakfast?" he asked, throwing his robe on over his pajamas. He turned to see Ash still sitting in the middle of the bed, suddenly looking quite small and lost. All Amaranth wanted to do was crawl back in with him and kiss him senseless. Uh-oh.

"Sounds good, thanks," said Ash.

For a moment Amaranth lost track of whether Ash was responding to the question about breakfast or to his unspoken thought. Get ahold of yourself. Before he did something truly disastrous, Amaranth left the room.

* * *

Ash sat staring at the door Amaranth had just closed behind him. That had been... He didn't know how to describe it. First of all, to say he'd slept well was a flagrant understatement. More like better than he ever had. Wrapped in Amaranth's arms, he'd felt completely safe for the first time he could remember. And there was more. He'd felt whole. Gods, he was losing it.

Then, that stare. Ash had come this close to kissing Amaranth. Only his awareness of his scrawniness and Amaranth's beauty had stopped him. If Amaranth wanted

that kind of thing from him, he'd have done something about it by now. Ash wasn't silly enough to think that the rather prodigious boner pressing against him this morning was anything other than the typical morning state of any cock, regardless of circumstances. That Amaranth had taken care to hide it from him only served to prove he had no designs upon Ash's person. Amaranth wanted companionship. That was all.

So for how long could Ash give him that? For all intents and purposes, he was recovered from the attack. So the stated reason for his presence here no longer applied. He could leave at any time. Should he? He had no place to go, nothing to do but go back to stealing, skulking, hiding. But that was not a reason to live off Amaranth's kindness. What reason was there?

This question occupied Ash throughout breakfast. Finally, his stomach full to bursting, he set his plate aside and looked at Amaranth. "I'm well now," he said.

Amaranth smiled, but there was that haunted look in his eyes again. "That's good. I'm glad you're feeling better."

"I can leave now," he went on, the words issuing from him as if attached to a string he had swallowed the night he came here. "I don't need to be looked after anymore."

At once, Amaranth looked bleak. It was as if he'd aged fifteen years in an instant, and suddenly, Ash wondered how old he really was. Amaranth gave a little nod and looked down at his own empty plate. "Is that what you want?"

Ash sighed. "I can't just keep living off you."

"Not living off me." His voice grew small. "Helping me."

Ash's heart gave a thud, as if starting up again after a long pause. "Helping you?" That's right. Please. Give me a reason to stay.

Amaranth nodded, his head still bowed. "You were right that time you asked me what I wanted. I've been doing this for me, not for you. I... It helps me to have you here."

Ash reached out and took Amaranth's hand. "I want to help you. Any way I can."

"You already do." Amaranth looked up at last, his gaze piercing. "More than you can know. Before I found you I was--"

"Lonely," Ash finished for him.

Amaranth's eyes widened. "Yes. Lonely and fed up with everything that's expected of me. But you don't expect anything. When you look at me, you actually see me. Not just a beautiful vasai who is here to treat you."

Ash digested this. Something about the way Amaranth said "treat" made Ash think "put out for." "Is it true that treating the Elai involves sexual contact?" The question sprang from his lips before he could stop it. Gods abandon him, what a thing to ask.

Amaranth stared at him, mouth open.

"I'm sorry. That was tactless. I just--You don't seem to like treating Elai very much, and I wondered if that was why." Was there no end to his prying? What had come over him? He usually minded his own business.

"That's okay. Yes, it is true. We are taught that because the vasai soul is shaped to accommodate no other god but the Lovers, healing is an inherently sexual act."

Ash couldn't stop himself. "But you healed me, and we haven't--"

"It's another of their lies," said Amaranth, looking as fierce as he had when first confronted about his motivations in helping Ash.

"You hate it," said Ash, understanding why Amaranth's appointment book was so barren.

"I hate lies. I hate being required to perform for people who don't even really need healing. I hate knowing that I could be helping people like you but I can't because it's not allowed. And--" He stared at his plate again.

"And?"

When Amaranth looked up, the fire of anger had faded from his eyes. His voice grew wistful. "Other people get to have sex for themselves. Elai, pel, and chel all do it because they like it. They choose--well, most of the time--they choose it. It's selfish of me, I know, but I want that too. I want it to be for me sometimes, not in service to someone else."

"I'm so sorry." Now Ash knew he had a soul. It hurt for Amaranth.

"You're sorry?" Amaranth laughed, but it was a bitter sound. "No. Don't be. Don't think that... I know what I do with my Elai clients is nothing like what you've been through. They're not brutal or anything. The Elai value us and they're considerate. Sometimes I enjoy it. It's just--"

Ash fought to master his own anger. He was proud of how even his voice was when he said, "Maybe they don't beat you, but they still rob you of your choice. It's not really all that different. We have a lot in common."

Amaranth got a funny look on his face. He flared his nostrils and made a crooked little smile. His eyes were too bright. He looked away and sniffed. When his shoulder trembled Ash jumped to his feet. He wrapped his arms around Amaranth, pressing the vasai's wet face to the crook of his neck. "There," he said. "There. Okay."

* * *

Amaranth wept, despite the mortification he felt. Ash's words peeled away all his defenses and left him bare. How was it possible that someone whose soul never left his body could know so much? There was no hiding anything from Ash; that much was clear. He let the man hold him and rock him, and at last his tears subsided. But before he broke away, before he looked, while he was still within the magic circle of Ash's arms, protected from all the evils of the world, he asked the question he knew he had to ask. "Will you stay, please?"

Ash squeezed and then released him. Amaranth searched his face for the answer. Ash smiled. "Yes, but I need something to do here. I can't just sit around all day reading."

Amaranth sucked in a deep breath, as if he'd just surfaced from a dive. He nodded. "Of course. Yes. Of course. I'll--" He broke off, searching his mind for a job that Ash would believe was a real job. What? "There's a ton of stuff to do around here," he lied. "Let me think about what would be the best fit."

Ash gave him a look as if he knew Amaranth was stalling, which of course he did because he saw everything. But he didn't say anything.

* * *

Ash carried his own dishes to the sink and dried while Amaranth washed, because Amaranth insisted on washing. He'd met his match for stubbornness, he realized. Though the lithe, willowy vasai gave every appearance of gentleness and compliance, he was, in fact, a mule in lamb's clothing.

When the last utensil was returned to its place, Amaranth asked, "How are you with numbers?"

Ash raised his eyebrows. "Not bad, actually."

"I think I know what your job can be. At least for now." He turned and went into the living room, where he took a box from a cabinet in the lower shelf of the bookcase. It was green fiberboard--a file box.

"I'm terrible at accounts," he explained, presenting Ash with the box. "I gave up trying to balance it all about a year ago. Now I just put it all in here and only pay the red ones. If you've got a head for numbers, maybe...you can be my accountant?"

Ash's eyebrows rose even higher as he accepted the box. A year's worth of paperwork, unsorted... It could be either busy work or a major pain in the ass. "Okay," he said.

"Thanks." Amaranth smiled and Ash's heart sped up. For a moment they stared at one another, and it was just like when they had awoken this morning. Something hovered in the air between them like a raincloud waiting to burst.

"I have to go to work now," said Amaranth.

Ash's soul stabbed him. Work. Now he knew for sure what that meant. No wonder Amaranth hated it. Ash almost told him not to go, but what was the alternative? His recent lesson in the consequences of stepping outside one's place silenced his protest.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Amaranth's smile grew, and his eyes radiated warmth. The way Amaranth looked at him gave Ash the strangest feeling, like gravity was slowly losing its hold on him. "Don't be. It's not so bad, especially with a friend to come home to."

A friend. Is that what they were? Friends?

* * *

After Amaranth went to work, Ash settled on the couch in the living room and started sorting through Amaranth's papers. He really did keep everything in here.

As Ash separated out Amaranth's bank account statements and bills, an alarming picture rapidly emerged. Amaranth had next to no money coming in, and while at one point he must have been doing all right because he had a sizeable savings, that too was now steadily being winnowed down by his bills, despite the fact that he only paid the ones that were overdue. At the rate he was going, Amaranth would be flat broke within three months.

There was more to do, but not without Amaranth's input. Ash tidied the piles and stacked them back inside the box, closed the lid, and set it under the coffee table. He went into the kitchen and made himself a cup of tea. Staring at the steam rising from the kettle, he thought about all that Amaranth had told him this morning. About his role as a vasai and how he said it helped him for Ash to be here. He'd missed a lot of work because of Ash, but he'd been losing clients long before that. Did Amaranth know the depth of the disaster he flirted with? Ash, through happenstance, had experienced both wealth and poverty. He knew firsthand that money only became important when one no longer had it.

So what was Ash going to tell Amaranth when he got home? How could he urge him to take more clients when he knew the true nature of what Amaranth did for them? No, he couldn't tell Amaranth what to do. That wasn't his place. But Amaranth said he hated lies. As much as Ash's soul rebelled against the idea of Amaranth servicing anyone, not telling him the truth about the state of his accounts would be an even worse betrayal.

* * *

Ash spent the rest of the afternoon reading *Freedom of Soul*. He was amazed to discover how liberal their founder's ideas were. Harken even entertained the notion that animals might have souls. Of course, he'd only lived for thirty years after the settlement was founded. He hadn't seen the devastation of the mutant plague or the subsequent development of the vasai and the lesser castes. Ash flipped to the frontispiece and noted the date of publication and the publisher: 3557, from New Dawn Press.

The name and date stirred memories from his time with Darien. Darien's tutor was a dour old man, an Elai of middling rank who had nearly quit over Ash's presence. However, he knew his history.

Ash could still picture his stern face as he said, "In the mid-thirty-sixth century, a variety of social justice and activist trends that had been building since the fish famine of 3503 coalesced into a concerted effort to abolish the use of silsinthe. The movement was spearheaded by a group who called themselves the New Dawn. But their project to replace silsinthe with alternate spirits failed, largely over fears that the very chel they sought to aid would riot if denied their livelihood." This last was directed at Ash with a sneer and a reproof. "Sit up straight, you marsh rat." Darien, of course, objected to the slur, and an argument ensued, which the old man blamed Ash for as well. Still, it had been an interesting lesson, all in all.

Ash heard a key turn in the lock on the front door. He closed his book and set it down on the coffee table. Night had fallen. The glass doors that opened onto the

balcony at the back of the apartment were dark now and showed his reflection and that of the front door. He turned to see Amaranth entering.

Weariness shadowed Amaranth's eyes, but he smiled to see Ash, and said, "How are you?"

Ash stood and went to him. "Well. And you?" It was a stupid question. Ash didn't need a vasai's soul to tell that Amaranth was worn out. "How many people did you treat today?" he added, dreading the answer.

"Five," said Amaranth. "Walk-ins."

In other words, new clients. Strangers who Amaranth was expected to touch with his body and his soul. Ash nodded, not sure what to say or do. For a moment they just stood there staring at one another. Ash edged closer, and the next thing he knew, Amaranth was in his arms, his slender body stooped to allow for Ash's reach. Ash held him tight, drinking in the smell of Amaranth and the silken feel of his hair on Ash's cheek. Ash ran his hands over the long, curved back, then lowered them to Amaranth's waist. He guided the vasai to the couch. "Sit down," he said. "I'll make you some tea."

* * *

It was good to sit in the warm glow of the lamp and listen to the clink and clatter of Ash making tea in the kitchen. How strong Ash was. It had only been a few days since Amaranth found him so badly beaten he could barely walk. Now he was taking care of Amaranth. The book Amaranth had given him sat on the coffee table. "So you've been reading Freedom of Soul."

"Yeah," said Ash, returning with a steaming teapot in one hand and mugs in the other. "I never realized Harken was such a radical."

"Well, of course he was," said Amaranth, "He was the leader of a rebellion back on Earth. He led his people out of subjugation to freedom here on Harken's Landing." Amaranth watched Ash closely for his reaction.

"I know that," said Ash, pouring the tea. "I just never thought of it that way before."

I know that. Ash had an education somehow. Amaranth's curiosity got the better of him. "Ash, who taught you to read?"

Ash set the teapot down with a click. He stared at the cups of tea that steamed on the coffee table, but he didn't pick either up. "Darien's tutor," he said.

Amaranth leaned over and picked up one of the cups. He sipped at the hot, fragrant liquid. "And Darien is..."

Ash's fingers curled into fists. Amaranth regretted prying, but it was too late. "Darien was a very spoiled little boy."

"An Elai," Amaranth said, though he wasn't sure why.

Ash's eyes widened. He nodded once, stood up, and went back to the kitchen. "I don't want to talk about it." He opened up the keeper and took out a head of lettuce. He started to tear lettuce for salads. "I went through your box of bills today, Amaranth."

The sudden switch of topic combined with Ash's domestic activity gave Amaranth the strangest feeling, as if they had suddenly shot forward in time and become an old cantankerous couple. He shook his head in disorientation.

"You're running out of money," said Ash, his voice gone gentle. "If you keep living off your savings, you'll be broke in a few months."

"I knew that, I guess. I just didn't want to think about it. But now..." He looked at Ash, who was slicing a tomato. "I'll be able to work more. I worked all day today."

A shadow crossed over Ash's face. "I wish you didn't have to."

The sincerity of those words burned away the residue clinging to Amaranth's soul from the day's clients. Nothing had changed, but knowing someone understood, and cared, made everything different somehow. "It's okay. I'm just out of practice," he continued with a smile. "I'll build up my stamina, and I'll work every day. It'll be easier now."

Ash set down the knife and stared at him. Amaranth couldn't quite make out the expression on his face, but his soul could feel the turmoil seething under Ash's calm surface. Of course. Ash saw parallels between what those pel had done to him and Amaranth's duties. Amaranth himself wasn't so sure about that, but it didn't change how Ash felt. Amaranth's new resolution to be a good vasai and work hard might be as difficult for Ash as it was for him.

* * *

Ash wondered if he could bring some money in too. There were no jobs for him in Elaion, of course, but... He allowed himself a rueful smile. And here he'd thought he'd never consider stealing again.

They sat down and ate a quiet dinner together and afterward, did the dishes, Amaranth washing, Ash drying, just as before.

When they got to the bedroom, Amaranth stood between the bed and the couch as if marooned there. He looked at Ash, his face carefully neutral. Gods abandon him. Amaranth was waiting for permission. As if the bed were not his by rights. As if Ash shouldn't have been relegated to the couch, or better, the floor some days ago.

Ash walked past him, drew down the covers, and held out his hand, gesturing for Amaranth to get in.

Immediately, a tension Ash had not been aware of eased from Amaranth's shoulders. He pulled his tunic off over his head, revealing his small breasts, got into bed, and held open the covers in a reversal of Ash's invitation of the night before.

Ash, stripped down to the cropped pants Amaranth had lent him, slid under the covers and into Amaranth's arms.

Amaranth's breasts pressed against his chest and made him hard. He tried to quell his arousal, kept his lower body away from the warmth mere inches away, but then, when Amaranth raised a hand to smooth back the hair from the side of Ash's face, the pressure inside him reached its breaking point. He lifted his head and pressed his lips to Amaranth's velvet mouth. It felt like the most natural thing in the world. Amaranth gave a deep sigh, drew him closer, and kissed him back.

Ash felt awash in a sea of feelings and sensations. The taste of Amaranth's mouth, like apricots, the warmth of his body and the silken texture of his skin beneath Ash's hands. Ash stroked his back, dared to reach down farther and cup his ass. Amaranth shifted, and suddenly their groins were snugged tight together, erections bumping against one another. Ash's heart pounded. He could barely credit what was happening. "You," he gasped when they broke the kiss. "I didn't think..."

"How could I tell you?" asked Amaranth, his beautiful eyes clouded with desire. "After what you've been through."

Of course. Ash buried his face in the crook of Amaranth's neck and licked and kissed his satin skin. Gods, he tasted so good. And he was warm everywhere Ash touched him.

Amaranth writhed in appreciation, his hips slowly undulating back and forth, dragging his cock up and down alongside Ash's.

Ash hissed at the intense sensation. Already, he felt like he was going to come. But he wanted to pack as much into this moment as possible. He slid down a little, removing his cock from direct contact with Amaranth's.

Amaranth gave an adorable little whimper of disappointment until Ash bent his head to Amaranth's breasts. He cupped one, stroking the smooth skin, fondling the soft fullness of it. Amaranth arched his back, and Ash took the nipple of the other breast into his mouth and sucked it gently. "Ah!" said Amaranth.

Ash ran his tongue in circles around the pebbled nub of flesh, eliciting increasingly urgent cries. Amaranth's cock pressed against Ash's belly, hot and hard. His own cock pulsing with need, Ash moved to kiss and suck Amaranth's other breast while he reached down and took the vasai's cock in his hand.

It was huge. Ash ran his hand up and down the heated length, rubbing his thumb in the precum that beaded at the tip.

"Oh gods, Ash. You... I..." Amaranth bent his face to the back of Ash's neck and kissed him there. Then he reached down and brushed one hand over Ash's thigh.

Ash understood at once. Amaranth wanted to touch his cock but was asking permission first. "Yes!" he said, too impatient to want Amaranth's gentleness now. He shifted his hips, jutting his penis into Amaranth's palm like a pup looking for scraps. It was a hungry puppy.

He felt Amaranth's smile at the back of his neck and knew he'd gotten his message across when the next thing he felt was a gentle nip, followed by a warm, wet tongue. He shivered at the hand on his cock, the mouth on his neck, and all of Amaranth that he had in his hands and in his mouth.

Ash had not had a lot of sex with other people. Just enough for it to be known he was perfectly capable of it and that he was always on top. Well, that was the theory, anyway.

Generally he found the whole thing messy and inconvenient compared to the quick, simple ease he could give himself. But this was completely different. For one thing, Amaranth and he both touched each other at the same time. On their sides, face-to-face. Just to see Amaranth's expression, he lifted his head from the breast he was sucking. The nipple rested, wet, at the corner of his eye.

In Amaranth's golden eyes Ash saw the reflection of a paradise he'd glimpsed once long ago, as a child on the cusp of adulthood. He'd all but forgotten it until now. He raised up to kiss Amaranth, and Amaranth's lips parted like gates into that forgotten land.

Ash shed everything in order to pass through.

* * *

Amaranth felt the moment Ash let go. He'd carefully kept his soul tucked in, though he was not accustomed to being this intimate without it. In the first few moments he'd felt blind, but Ash had proven a most excellent guide. Now, as he moved in Amaranth's arms, his pleasure, his utter abandonment, rolled over Amaranth, overwhelming his barriers and igniting his soul in a way he had never dreamed possible.

Amaranth felt he was on the edge of a precipice. Ash's hand on his cock, Ash's cock in his hand, Ash's tongue in his mouth, and his moan in Amaranth's ears all pushed him. He fell, plummeting into ecstasy.

All his life Amaranth had been taught that his talents and his body were to be used in service to others. Of course he'd slept with other vasai before. Especially in school, they'd comforted one another. He and Grail, in fact, had been frequent partners at one time, but it was nothing like this.

Ash clutched and stroked, bucked and kissed and bit. His eyes closed, his face rapt, he moaned and flexed his hips as Amaranth stroked him. Sweat beaded at his temple, and Amaranth licked it off.

"Mmmmmuh," Ash whimpered. "I...I want..."

Amaranth rolled onto his back, drawing Ash on top of him. He raised his knees, took Ash's hand from his aching cock, and guided it down, past his shaft to the other place where he ached.

Ash stilled when his fingers brushed the folds of Amaranth's labia. He opened his eyes, and Amaranth was surprised all over again at how green they were.

Apparently, he wasn't the only one who was surprised. Ash stared into his face in wonder. Amaranth gave him a single nod. "Feel that?" he said, dipping Ash's fingers into his wetness. "I want you."

Ash exhaled a shaky breath and scooted down. Amaranth let his legs fall open. Ash stretched out and lowered his face between Amaranth's thighs. He ran his hand down Amaranth's cock, which sprouted from the crown of his yoni like the overgrown clit that it was. Ash traced the base with one finger and then ran the exploring digit down, parting the lips of Amaranth's vulva. A hot tongue soon followed, stroking his inner folds. Amaranth was used to giving such attentions, not receiving them. He sighed as a feeling of luxurious ease swept through his body.

Ash ran his tongue from the opening of Amaranth's vagina up to the base of his cock and back again. Pleasure, at first diffuse, sharpened with every stroke. His cock pulsed, which made his pussy throb, and that just made him harder, which made him wetter. He had to have Ash inside him. "Ash, please. Fuck me."

"O-okay." Trembling, Ash got onto his hands and knees over Amaranth. Amaranth reached down and guided Ash's cock into his pussy. The firm, tight glide made Amaranth gasp. Ash was perfect. The perfect fit, touching Amaranth in all the best places. His cock stroked Amaranth's G-spot and bumped up against his cervix. A glorious sense of fullness swept from Amaranth's core outward.

They rocked together, gazes locked. Did he look like that, as if every moment brought a new wonder scarcely dreamed of? He must, because it was true. Amaranth threw his head back and cried out as Ash thrust into him harder now, faster. The pounding turned him to jelly and filled his limbs with heavy pleasure. They were both breathing hard, skin slick with sweat sliding one against the other.

Yes. Yes, this was it. What he'd been looking for all this time. This match, this fit. Ash balanced his weight on one arm, his hand pinning Amaranth's shoulder to the bed. He reached down and took Amaranth's cock in his palm. His callous fingers closed around it. Amaranth shouted at the intense friction. He bucked up furiously to meet Ash's cock. He couldn't get enough of it or of the rough hand on his penis or the frenzied soul battering against his own. "Ash!"

"Yeah," Ash panted. "Yeah, go!" He worked Amaranth's cock in an iron grip. "Go!"

He fucked Amaranth harder, faster, his eyes losing focus as his hips slipped from their rhythm, and he pounded in, relentless. Amaranth was caught in the tide of Ash's need. He clung to Ash like a castaway clutching a life ring. But Ash wasn't content to just let Amaranth go along for the ride. He captured Amaranth's mouth and drove his tongue inside. It was as hot and insistent as his cock, and it demanded an answer. Amaranth kissed him back, running his hands up Ash's shoulders and raking his fingers through his hair.

Ash flicked his thumb over the cleft at the head of Amaranth's cock. The touch sent ripples of sweet-sharp delight coursing through Amaranth, all the way to his hands and feet. Amaranth curled his toes and fisted his hands in the sheets. His soul was so full of love and lust and pleasure that it felt like it would explode. His cock too. Ash squeezed him once more, and it all boiled over. Amaranth came, his shout muffled by Ash's mouth.

Grunting deep in his throat, Ash plunged into him one more time, shuddering. Amaranth felt the head of Ash's cock swell as he spilled himself inside.

Afterward, Ash clung to him until he fell asleep. Amaranth got up to wash the cum from his belly and turn off the light. After, he paused by the bed, staring at Ash curled among the sheets, hair matted to his forehead with sweat, his fine features even more beautiful in the abandonment of sleep.

* * *

Ash awoke the next morning to find himself in much the same position as the day before--one leg draped over Amaranth's hips, shoulder nestled in Amaranth's armpit, his head resting on Amaranth's shoulder--only this time, there was no embarrassed hedging around the fact that they both sported morning erections. Ash simply smiled and nestled deeper into the crook of Amaranth's arm, relishing the warm, solid length of Amaranth's cock beneath his thigh. His own erection bumped up against Amaranth's hip, the damp tip sticking to his friend's golden skin and causing a delightful pulling sensation.

"Mmmm," said Amaranth, turning and drawing Ash tighter against him. Ash's cock came unstuck from Amaranth's hip with a little sting, like when an adhesive bandage is pulled off quickly. It made Ash shiver with pleasure.

"Good morning." Amaranth's breath was hot on Ash's neck.

Ash chuckled and brushed the back of his hand over Amaranth's breasts. "Morning."

Their cocks bumped one another. Ash felt Amaranth's grin against his neck. The vasai ran his hands down Ash's back and cupped his ass. He pulled Ash in closer, bringing their two rock-hard erections up alongside each other.

Ash pumped against him. He loved the steamy stick and slide of their taut flesh. He felt himself blush all over, and he felt the warm tingle of Amaranth's soul touching his. Was he aware that he did it? Ash leaned back a little to peer up at Amaranth. The sight of him, eyes lidded and mouth open, the sex blush rising in his cheeks, took Ash's breath away. He leaned up and captured Amaranth's lips with his.

Their kiss was long and slow, just like the undulating of their hips. They took turns with each other's mouths, licking and probing, stroking and sipping. Even their breaths moved in unison.

Ash wasn't sure which of them reached down first. It seemed that one moment, their cocks bucked and bobbed against one another, and the next, their fingers twined around both of their straining erections. Together they pumped them, slow at first and then faster as the pleasure sharpened and their chests rose and fell with

ever more force. Ash felt like he was swimming upstream, the current crashing around him, the friction of it against his skin driving him to greater exertions. His balls tightened like the vortex of a whirlpool.

“Yes,” said Amaranth. “Gods within, Ash. I can feel both of us.”

The thought of Amaranth experiencing their lovemaking from both of their perspectives at once, feeling everything Ash felt, pierced his heart. A torrent of feelings burst forth and carried Ash along in its wake. The wave didn’t expend itself until both Ash and Amaranth gasped aloud and pumped together one last time, coating each other’s chests and bellies with cum.

Chapter Six

Uninvited Guests

Amaranth walked to the Refuge that afternoon with a spring in his step. He felt warm all through, wrapped in memories of making love with Ash. The afterglow felt like armor, protecting him from all life's ills. Even Evanscar's arched eyebrow and superior smile caused him no chagrin as he entered the Refuge and took a glass of juice from the refreshment table. Amaranth idled over to a pillar and leaned against it, sipping.

"I'm so glad to see you here today." Grail all but pounced on him. Sie wore a midnight blue tunic shot through with silver stars. The colors complemented his dark hair and silver eyes. Sie leaned closer, his voice dropping. "Are you all right? Is your uh...little visitor still with you?"

The covert expression on Grail's face and his euphemistic words made Amaranth laugh. "Yes, thank you, Grail. I'm quite well, and Ash is--"

"Shhh! Don't talk about that here!" Grail glanced about. "Someone will hear." Indeed, at the far end of the room, Evanscar, Mical, and Salme all looked in their direction.

"You're the one who brought it up."

"I'm just worried about you is all."

"I told you, I'm fine." Grail's panic was beginning to eat away at Amaranth's post-coital buzz. He didn't want to lose it entirely before he treated his first client.

Just at that moment the door opened and a female Elai walked in. Tall, robust, and raven-haired, she looked about the Refuge with a frankly appreciative gaze that boded well for whoever treated her. "Excuse me," said Amaranth and started toward her.

Grail reached out for his arm. "Are you avoiding me?"

Amaranth freed himself. "You're the one who said I should take more walk-ins," he said, rather more sharply than he had intended. Grail drew back and nodded, hurt in his eyes.

* * *

After Amaranth left, Ash poured himself a fresh cup of tea and returned to the box of bills. Since Amaranth seemed to have decided to start working more again, Ash could help him by prioritizing his payments and working out a monthly schedule. He was just getting to the schedule when he heard the door open. He looked up, a smile on his face. "That was quick. You--" But it wasn't Amaranth.

A tall, dark-haired vasai with straight, dark brows arrowing in toward the bridge of his nose stood in the doorway, regarding him. "You must be Ash," she said, her voice a shade deeper than Amaranth's.

"And you are?" asked Ash, putting Amaranth's papers back in the box and shutting the lid. He picked up his cup of tea and sipped it, trying to appear casual.

The vasai stared at him a moment more, then crossed from the foyer to stand at the foot of the couch, hands on her hips. "By gods, you make yourself at home."

Ash blinked at her, projecting innocence. "Actually, I'm a guest. I don't know you."

"A guest. Indeed. For your information, I am Amaranth's oldest friend."

This one was almost too easy to wind up. Ash was having fun now. He pursed his lips. "He hasn't mentioned you, I don't think. What did you say your name was?"

The vasai reddened. "I didn't come here to answer your questions. I came here to tell you that if you care for Amaranth even the tiniest fraction as much as he thinks you do, you will leave here now and never let yourself be seen by him again."

Unease gripped Ash. "Why do you say that?"

"You mustn't mind old Grail," said a new voice from the doorway. A shorter vasai with auburn hair and eyes almost the same color as Ash's stood just inside. Behind her were two others.

"Evanscar!" cried Grail. "What are you doing here?"

The green-eyed vasai laughed. It sounded like tinkling bells. "We followed you, you dolt. You and Amaranth have been whispering to each other a lot lately. When you left the Refuge long before your customary hour, I decided to follow you. I thought I smelled a secret." His gaze shifted to Ash, who suddenly felt like a rat paralyzed in the gaze of a cobra. "But I had no idea it would be as good as this."

* * *

Amaranth stroked his client's breasts, loosing his soul. He had not treated her before, but she told him she suffered from chronic headaches. He bent his head, kissing his way down her belly as he drew the tension from her neck that she held there due to a flawed relationship with her spouse. Amaranth could tell that she really needed to talk to her husband about the issue, whatever it was. The physical symptoms she had mentioned at the start of the session were all stress related, and the fact that the tension was centered in her neck indicated that it came from holding back truth. But he supposed divulging what ever it was came with risk, and it was probably easier for her to get treatment instead. Not that it was his place to determine such things for Elai in the first place.

With a groan of anticipation, she grasped the sides of his head and pushed him lower. Amaranth nudged the lips of her vulva with his nose, then parted them with his tongue, her salty taste washing over him as he lapped at the little bud at the top of her yoni. She gasped and squeezed her thighs together, trapping his head in a viselike grip.

Amaranth embraced her with his soul, sopping up her anxiety like a sponge. Though their point of contact was her vulva and his mouth, he could direct his soul wherever it was needed. He focused on her stomach now, where an incipient energy form had the potential to develop into an ulcer. It was just as well she sought treatment, after all.

Her arousal awoke his, but he ignored his erection. It wasn't difficult. By necessity, he put his soul into his work, and where the client's soul took him, his body followed, but that was not the same thing as desire.

When she climaxed, the wave of released tension seem to stab him in the stomach. He concentrated on channeling the negative energy through his knees, into the sand, but when she had dressed and handed him a twenty-elat tip, he still felt a dull throb. Maybe something was wrong with his ability and he couldn't discharge drawn energy effectively any more. But he hadn't had that problem with Ash.

"Thank you," she said. "You did a nice job. Is this your regular establishment?"

"Yes, Ei."

She nodded. "Then perhaps I will look for you here again."

He bowed his head in what he hoped was construed as gratitude. In truth, she'd not been bad, as clients went.

He went back into the lounge after she left. It was a slow time of day. No clients at the moment. He looked about for Grail. He wanted to apologize to hir for the way

he'd been acting. Grail could be tiresome, but sie was a good friend. Amaranth didn't want to let bad feelings linger between them.

But Grail was not to be found. Neither, he noticed with a twinge to his already irritated stomach, were Evanscar, Salme, and Mical.

He drifted up to Build, the pel who kept the refreshment bar stocked. "Have you seen Grail? Is sie with a client?"

"No, vai. Sie left." Build hesitated, then added, "Evanscar followed hir out."

Amaranth's bad feeling intensified. He gave Build a ten-elat tip and left the Refuge. Suddenly, he felt the need to reassure himself that Ash was all right.

* * *

It was beginning to dawn on Ash why Amaranth was less than enchanted with the life of a vasai.

First of all, there were the other vasai.

For instance, this Evanscar. The auburn-haired, pointy-chinned vasai sat beside him on the couch, leaning into his personal space with the air of a naturalist examining a new species of insect. "So this is a chel," sie said.

Sie sat back of a sudden and turned to the two who had come in with hir: a strawberry blonde with eyes so pale they seemed to have no color at all, and a blunt-chinned brunette with a body that looked chiseled out of stone. "Look how small he is."

"I think he's cute," said the strawberry blonde.

Evanscar turned back to Ash. "Stand up for us, honey."

Ash tightened his grip on his mug of tea, regretting that it had cooled to room temperature. If it were hot, he could throw it in the wretch's face and ruin hir whole career. Instead, he remained immobile and let it all come out in his eyes.

Evanscar leaned back a little. "Does he bite, do you think?"

Oh. Yes.

"Evanscar, don't," warned Grail. The interruption, combined with the recollection of Amaranth's situation, was just enough to restrain Ash. Just.

"Oh, I suppose you're right, Grail." Evanscar sighed, getting up to pace the floor. "We shouldn't bait him."

"What we should do," said Grail, "is withdraw. We don't belong here." Sie glared at Ash. "None of us."

Ash lifted his chin, his gaze locked with Grail's. He wasn't about to be pushed around by any of these people, but at the same time, what would this discovery do to Amaranth's reputation, and how much worse would it be if he stayed? To insist on his status as a guest now would be to act the cad, valuing his comfort over Amaranth's well-being. But to leave at the vasai's insistence was to play the abject chel, something Ash had never been much good at. It was an impossible situation. As he and Grail stared at one another, the vasai seemed to realize this.

Evanscar, however, was enjoying himself and seemed to have no intention of leaving. Sie stopped behind Ash and rested her hands on his shoulders. The touch brought back bad memories, and when Evanscar leaned over and sniffed at him, Ash could not suppress a tremor. "He doesn't smell much," said Evanscar. "Oh, but he's frightened!"

"Evanscar--" Grail began but fell silent at the click of a footstep on the threshold. They all turned to see Amaranth standing in the doorway.

* * *

In the downstairs landing, Amaranth heard voices from the second floor, where his apartment was. Was that Grail? He hurried up the steps. Grail had a key.

Half a flight up he saw his apartment door standing open. Harken's soul! Grail had gone too far, sneaking over here behind Amaranth's back. Had sie even rung, or did sie just let herself in? He was certain now Grail had some notion of making Ash leave, perhaps by persuading him that it would be for Amaranth's good. The gall.

But as he reached the top of the stairs, he realized it was much worse than that. He clearly heard a third voice. Evanscar.

The scene that greeted him as he stepped through the doorway would be forever burned into his memory. Ash sat on the couch, stiff and still, strung tight as a wire while Evanscar stood behind him, resting his hands on Ash's shoulders. Good gods! Evanscar's friends, Salme and Mical, were in one corner, smirking, and beside the bookshelves stood Grail, looking very much as if sie would like to evaporate on the spot.

"What is going on here?" He glared at Grail. Grail had a key. If Ash did not let them in--and Amaranth was fairly certain he would not--then the vasai were present because Grail had let them in. Grail, his oldest friend.

Grail opened his mouth, but no words came. Sie looked like a beached fish.

"We didn't know you had a house guest," said Evanscar, his honeyed voice dripping with venom. He'd waste no time in spreading the word about Ash all over town. Everyone would know, and no one would want to be treated by a vasai who involved himself with a chel. "Shame on you for hiding the little creature from us, Amaranth. He's adorable."

Amaranth pushed aside thoughts of his own ruin. Evanscar's hands were still on Ash's shoulders, and the look in Ash's eyes was a mix of rage and shame Amaranth had hoped never to see there again. Something inside Amaranth broke.

He charged across the room and struck Evanscar in the chest with his outstretched hands, shoving him several paces back. "Get the fuck off him." He kept walking toward Evanscar, who backed up against the kitchen counter, his smug smile slipping. "Get out!" Amaranth pushed Evanscar toward the door. He swung around and pointed at the others. "All of you. You're trespassing on private property. Get out!"

Mical and Salme fled after Evanscar, who had recovered and was now laughing in the hallway outside. Grail turned in the doorway. "I just--"

"I don't want to hear it," said Amaranth, "We have nothing more to say to each other." He shut the door on Grail's face, trying not to notice the pain in those dark eyes.

Amaranth bowed his head a moment and then turned. Ash still sat on the couch in the same position. Slowly, Amaranth approached him. "I'm so sorry," he said. "Are you okay?"

Ash nodded, but it was a lie. His mouth was white around the lips, and a vein stood out on his forehead. "So, those were some of your colleagues."

Amaranth nodded. "How long were they here?"

Ash pursed his lips. "Not long."

"It just seemed like forever," Amaranth said.

This got a smile. A little forced around the edges but genuine in the eyes, where it counted. "Yeah."

"Did they hurt you?"

"No. Just...no."

He could imagine the way Evanscar had behaved. "Whatever they said, they're full of shit. You know that, right?"

"Believe me, I've met enough people like Evanscar--we have self-important mean-spirited wastes of space in Chelon too--not to pay attention to anything he says."

Amaranth put a tentative hand on Ash's. Ash didn't pull away. "He was behind you with his hands on your shoulders."

Ash swallowed. "Forget about that. I'm okay."

Amaranth eased closer to Ash and held out an arm to him. With a sigh, Ash sank against his side and let Amaranth put his arm around him. Though he was exhausted from treating that walk-in today and from the adrenaline crash after his expulsion of the interlopers, he loosed his soul and wrapped it around Ash, draining off his residual nervous energy and helping him to calm.

Ash pressed against Amaranth a little more as his muscles relaxed. "You're doing this, aren't you? It's your soul I feel, touching my soul and making me feel better."

"Yes."

"Thanks."

"What did Grail want?" As if he didn't know.

Ash sat up and turned to him. "Your friend really cares about you. Sie pointed out the damage my presence here is doing to your reputation. Something I hadn't considered before."

"Nor should you."

"No? What kind of friend am I if I put my comfort before your well-being?"

Amaranth closed his eyes to contain his frustration. "I'm an adult. I make my own decisions, and I'll accept the consequences." He opened them again to find Ash

giving him a skeptical look. "Besides, I don't care what those people think. What do they know?"

Ash didn't answer him. He turned back and leaned against Amaranth again, and for a while, neither of them said anything. Finally, as the sun was beginning to drop behind the ridge, Ash grunted and stood. "Are you as hungry as I am? Let's make dinner."

* * *

It wasn't like Ash to avoid a confrontation, but here he was, eating dinner with Amaranth and chatting about Freedom of Soul, as if he weren't planning to take off that night.

After dinner and after they did the dishes, they sat together on the couch in the living room and read, Amaranth with his head resting against the arm of the couch, stretched out, his feet on Ash's lap. Ash kept stealing glances at him. His face was rapt, beautiful in its unselfconsciousness, the warm light of the lamp creating a cloud of gold all around him. Ash took care to note every detail so he could recall the image later, when none of this would seem real anymore.

Amaranth sighed and closed his book, set it aside, and sat up. "I'm sleepy."

Ash nodded. The tensions of the day had left him exhausted, and the night would be much worse. "Let's go to bed, then," he said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. As if they were an old married couple. That thought sent a pain sharp as a knife slicing through Ash's heart and caused him to halt in his course around the couch. He managed not to gasp aloud. Ahead of him, already making his way to the bedroom, Amaranth turned and looked at him, brow creased in concern. "You okay?"

Ash nodded and managed a smile for him. He followed Amaranth into the bedroom.

* * *

This time their lovemaking was measured, patient. Amaranth hovered over Ash on his hands and knees, kissing him on the lips, neck, shoulders, chest. Amaranth rubbed his cheek over the short, rough, curly red hairs on Ash's chest, delighting in the texture. He darted his tongue out and licked at one rose-gold nipple. He loved how the flesh pebbled under his touch. Amaranth tilted his head and sucked the nipple into his mouth and was rewarded with a soft moan from Ash.

Amaranth stroked Ash's nipples, running his tongue in circles around the hair surrounding the aureole before zeroing in on the other sweet nub. Ash let out a soft hiss and ran his fingers through Amaranth's hair.

Amaranth worked his way down Ash's body, brushing Ash's flat, quivering belly with his breasts. There was nothing rough about Ash's skin, as Amaranth had been led to believe. It was soft and warm, and the feel of it brought Amaranth's nipples to sharp peaks of desire. He dipped his head and followed the trail of hair that led from Ash's navel to his groin with his tongue. With every sigh and moan Ash made, Amaranth felt his own pleasure mounting.

His cock filled and lengthened, and as he reached the dense patch of red curls, he saw that Ash too had grown hard. His thick, stalwart cock jutted up out of its nest of hair proudly. The swollen glans, already glistening with a thin layer of precum, peeped through Ash's foreskin. Amaranth licked at it and Ash groaned. Amaranth nuzzled Ash's cock and then ran his tongue up it from base to tip. He reared up and ran his breasts back and forth over it, enjoying the heated taut length against his tender skin.

Amaranth lifted his head to find Ash watching him, his green eyes hooded, glittering with unspoken emotions. He stared as if he could engrave Amaranth's image in his mind. "It's okay," said Amaranth. "I'm not going anywhere. You can look at me every day for as long as you like."

Ash sat up, grabbed Amaranth, and kissed him hard. The next thing he knew, Amaranth was on his back, shoulders pinned. Ash hungrily devoured his mouth. Amaranth's heart pounded. There was something desperate, almost feral about the way Ash made love to him now. He liked it.

Ash sucked at his breast and pinched his other nipple. The contrast between Ash's soft, warm mouth on one side and the sharp delight of his fingers on the other made Amaranth writhe. Ash ground against him, cock to cock, and then Amaranth lifted his knees and opened himself to Ash. "Take me."

Ash paused, staring at Amaranth again with that intense, lost look. "I--" he faltered.

Amaranth smiled and loosed his soul, wrapping both of them in warmth. Ash's urgency overwhelmed him now, his passion and something else the feel of which Amaranth had only encountered a handful of times, mostly with Grail. Love. "Yes," he said again, returning the emotion with all his soul. "Yes."

The head of Ash's cock brushed Amaranth's folds and then pressed against his opening. After a moment's resistance, he slid inside, filling Amaranth with plea-

sure. Ash's cock inside him made Amaranth feel protected somehow--safe and whole and cherished. Amaranth sighed with contentment and pushed up to meet Ash as he began to thrust. They moved together as if this were their twentieth time making love, not their second.

As if Ash's own soul enveloped him, layer after layer of warmth, love, and delight wrapped Amaranth, spreading from his center all the way to his fingers and toes in shivery little ripples. Amaranth floated on an ocean of pleasure, gently rocked by the waves. He opened his eyes to see Ash looking at him, his green eyes glazed with passion, his mouth open. Little grunts and gasps escaped his throat. "Ash," Amaranth whispered. "Ash."

Ash reached down and grasped Amaranth's cock. He stroked the rock-hard shaft in time with his thrusts. Amaranth could no longer distinguish where his body ended and Ash's began. He felt as if it were his own hand wrapped around his cock, his own cock plundering his tight, hot body. The sensations of taking and giving, stroking and pounding and rocking built one on another until Amaranth was lost in a whirlpool of desire and fulfillment.

Precum dripped from the slit of Amaranth's cock and dribbled over Ash's hand as the vortex centered in the pit of Amaranth's stomach spun faster, drawing them ever tighter together. Close. They were both so close. Close to completion, close to each other.

Ash's eyelids fluttered closed, and his mouth formed the word Amaranth, though it was barely more than a whisper on his breath. And then that breath caught, and Ash opened his eyes wide. He plunged forward into Amaranth and pumped furiously, desperately, as if this were his one and only chance to unite with him. The pulse of Ash's orgasm triggered Amaranth's release and he clung to Ash, bucking up against him, pushing into his hand as his hot, sticky gift poured out between them.

* * *

Ash awoke in the small hours of the morning, feeling as if not only he, but the whole world were brand new. He'd never experienced anything like what he and Amaranth shared, not even with Darien.

He lifted his head from Amaranth's shoulder and propped himself up on one elbow. In sleep, Amaranth was even more beautiful than usual. Silvery light from the stars outside painted the long, graceful lines of his face, and relaxed, lost to sleep, he looked so young. How old was Amaranth?

That vasai lived longer than all but the most privileged of the Elai was widely known. Did that mean that they stayed looking young longer too? Ash was twenty-three. For all he knew Amaranth could be his own age or much, much older. The thought that he'd have to ask him brought Ash's bemused speculations to a screeching halt. He'd do nothing of the kind. He was leaving.

Right now. Just as soon as he grew a pair and got out of the bed.

But did he really have to go? What if the damage to Amaranth's reputation was already done? That Evanscar creature wouldn't waste any time spreading the story; that much was certain.

Perhaps, but that did not change the fact that Amaranth's chances at living down the rumors and innuendo would be nil if Ash was still here.

With a sigh, Ash set aside all the wonderful thoughts and feelings Amaranth inspired in him, and prepared himself to return to reality. He got out of the bed. He stood in the middle of the room, turning slowly. Clothes. He needed clothes.

He hated to steal from Amaranth, but this was a necessity. The pel who caught him stealing had destroyed his clothes. Ash would send Amaranth money when he got work. If.

He picked up the tunic and cut-off drawstring pants Amaranth had given him to wear. The fine cotton weave was smooth as silk, beautiful, but it would never keep him warm.

He went to the chest against the wall. Carefully, he lifted the lid. Shame heated his face. Sneak thief, pawing through Amaranth's things. What else could he do?

He found a set of long underwear, which, beneath the woven tunic and pants, would be adequate. A cropped wool jacket hung from a peg beside the robe Amaranth always wore when he went out. Ash had never seen Amaranth wear the jacket. He touched the warm, soft fabric, hesitating. Hurry up, he told himself. You don't have time for this shit. Take it like the thief that you are.

His shoes, at least, had survived and sat, forlorn, beside the door to the rest of the apartment. He swiped a pair of socks, a luxury he'd seldom had, and slid the worn canvas shoes onto his feet.

He turned the doorknob. Well-oiled, the door opened without a sound. He didn't look back to the bed before letting himself out.

Chapter Seven

Separate Ways

Amaranth woke with a smile on his face. He sighed and rolled over, reaching for Ash. He found nothing but an empty expanse of cold bed. Frowning, he forced his eyes open. "Ash?"

He wasn't there. He must have gotten up. Maybe he was making breakfast. Amaranth stretched. He felt so good. Relaxed, replete. Happy. He wouldn't go to the Refuge today, he decided. This feeling was too extraordinary to squander. After breakfast, he'd coax Ash back into bed. He already had a few ideas for other things he wanted to try.

He listened for sounds from the kitchen. There weren't any. A little chill threaded through his foggy euphoria. He got up and padded into the kitchen. Ash wasn't there. The chill congealed in his stomach. Ash wasn't in the living room either. Amaranth went back into the bedroom, holding panic at bay by sheer force of will.

The jacket he'd been planning to offer Ash when he was ready to go out was missing. Ash's shoes were gone too. Well, there then. He'd gone out for a walk. That was all.

* * *

Ash shivered from more than the chill night air. While he'd been safely ensconced in Amaranth's apartment, the events of the attack had receded somewhat, but now his every footfall seemed to echo with shouts and jeers. His skin prickled in anticipation of a hard hand reaching out from the darkness to seize him.

He had to get hold of himself. Ash forced himself to breathe and look around him. He stood in the shadow of an archway that led to a park. The glittering streets of Elaion spread out around him, their pristine condition emphasizing that he did not belong here. But they were empty at this hour. That was the important thing. He'd be fine. He just had to make sure he got to Chelon before the sun came up.

The park felt more secluded than the streets with their streetlights, so he went that way. This park ran along the Newhope River, the life stream of Harken's Landing. The river plunged down through the hills of Elaion and wound its way through the other caste districts until it reached the harbor. And below the high banks, muddy footpaths on either side of the rushing water were stippled with the footprints of chel. Every morning before dawn they drew their small makeshift boats

upstream to collect the garbage left in the grottoes carved into the banks. If he stayed near the river, he'd be okay.

Ash wandered through terraces, formal gardens, and stands of weeping willows and live oaks, all empty and silent. He paused before a sculpture of Eli Harken, founder of Harken's Landing, set amid spearlike cypresses. He stared up at the shadowy granite face. Starlight illuminated the hawklike nose and the sightless, deep-set eyes.

They said that as a young man, Harken had led his people out of poverty and oppression on their home planet. The first generations in Harken's Landing endured many hardships to build this city. It was said that those hardships, those sacrifices, were what made the Elai what they were. But of course as a member of one of the lesser castes, Ash knew nothing of that. Pel and chel came later, an unfortunate by-product of the plague that had nearly destroyed Harken's Landing. What would Harken think, Ash wondered, if he could see his city now? Would he deplore the conditions under which chel lived, or would he applaud the Elai's mercy in finding use for such creatures? Would he see chel as human? Would he believe in chel souls?

Ash still wasn't used to thinking of himself as having a soul. He kept expecting to feel different, more important, or something. But except for when Amaranth touched Ash's soul with his own and created all those lovely sensations, he felt exactly the same.

Footsteps startled him out of his reverie, and he turned to see a pel groundskeeper wheeling a waste bin down the path. She spotted him at the same moment. It was too dark for his hair color to give him away, but his height, as always, betrayed him. "Here now! What are you doing here?"

His heart in his mouth, Ash ran down the path in the other direction.

"Stop, you! You shouldn't be up here!" she shouted, but her voice grew fainter, and he realized she wasn't serious about giving chase. She'd be able to say she'd tried apprehending him, if anyone asked later.

Ash made haste now. From the sparkling heights of Elaion--Ash wondered at Amaranth carrying him all the way up here that night--he descended into Pelon, a vast grid of homes and factories and shops that filled the lowland from the foothills to the tidal flats. He pulled his coat about him tighter and kept to the shadows.

There were parks along the river here too, though fewer of them, interspersed with docking facilities for riverboats, hydroelectric plants, and waste culverts.

Ash knew he'd be safer on the towpath beneath the high bank, where it would be no great surprise to find a chel at this hour. But that meant he'd have to walk right past each culvert on this side of the bank. He wasn't sure which side of the river the culvert he'd been left to die in was on, but it mattered little. Just the memory of waking up naked on that sloping concrete ramp was making him shake.

Ash hastened along the tidy concrete sidewalk, doing his best to be invisible. By the time he neared the border of Chelon, the sky was turning that particular shade of predawn blue, and he heard the familiar sound of water lapping gently against the hulls of small boats. It was perhaps the very first sound he had memory of, and combined with the rich, rotten smell coming from a nearby culvert, it sent him straight back to his earliest years, when he had napped in the stern while his mother pulled the craft upstream, her feet beating out a counterpoint to the waves as she trudged up the footpath, hauling the craft by a rope attached to the stern.

A low wall had been erected along the edge of the bank to discourage dogs and toddler pel from going over the side. Ash crouched behind it. From there, he could see a group of chel on the opposite bank.

Four or five boats coasted up to a culvert about a quarter of a mile downstream, and the mad scramble began. Anything of remote use was seized upon and loaded into the boats or sometimes eaten on the spot. He watched two children fighting over a pork-chop bone, and he wondered whatever had become of his brother.

A year younger than Ash, Shale had been a constant annoyance in his early life, always underfoot or tagging along, always trying to steal Ash's food.

Ash had hated him and spent many an hour thinking up ways to kill him. And then there was that day when they followed the Newhope all the way up into Elaion and they'd come to the gate of Dartwood and met Darien. Only Shale had run, and Ash hadn't. And later, when Ash was banished back to where he belonged, he never found his mother or Shale again.

Ash watched the people gathering the trash and shoveling whatever was of no use into the water. He looked at the fine clothes he had stolen from Amaranth. Soon, they would be soiled and torn, but at the moment the jacket, extraneous at this season, would fetch him a place of good standing in the little group below. He could offer it in trade, and they would accept him and let him scavenge with them. He would be safer with a group, and he would share in whatever they gathered. It would be a place and a group and a task. More than he had now.

It wasn't just that he did not want to enter a waste culvert again. (Was that a pallet leaning against the far wall?) Something inside him, something very silly, did not want to give up the jacket, either.

He thought pride was finally behind him, but his foolishness persisted. It was this same arrogance that had made him reject traditional work after they kicked him out of Dartwood. Stubbornly he'd chosen to steal rather than work, and if he didn't mend his ways, the same thing that had landed him in Amaranth's care would happen again. There, on the river below, was his ticket to safety. At the mere cost of a jacket he did not need. Why didn't he take it?

Ash waited until the group of chel wound their way farther upstream and then hurried on. He knew he was at the border of Chelon when the concrete wall lining the riverbank came to an end and the bank itself sloped down and became a marsh, thick with stands of siltgrass.

The river, by now brown and dotted with bits of refuse, widened out as the elevation of the land sank. Packed dirt footpaths, some of them augmented with scraps of wood, cardboard, or plastic, led off through the siltgrass fields in all directions. From somewhere nearby Ash smelled smoke. Immediately a thousand memories came back to him. His clothes felt wrong on him, and his time with Amaranth and with Darien alike seemed nothing but two different versions of the same fleeting dream.

He headed in the direction of the siltgrass fire.

* * *

Amaranth sat on his apartment's balcony, a small tiled space with a wrought-iron railing overlooking a ravine. He stared at the trees as the sun slowly sank below the ridge. Somewhere beyond the big bubble of nothing filling his mind, the air grew cold. He shivered but couldn't think of a reason why it mattered. The only thought that penetrated the unfeeling blankness inside him was that Ash was gone.

"Amaranth."

The voice came from behind him. Amaranth stood. Why was he so stiff? He'd only been sitting here a moment. But no. It was full dark now. He turned and saw a familiar tall figure standing in the doorway. Grail was backlit from the living room beyond, his face lost in shadow, but Amaranth knew him all the same. "Grail. You let yourself in. Again."

"Come inside. Please. It's cold out here. You're shivering."

It would be cold now wherever Ash was too. Amaranth was glad he'd taken the jacket.

Grail stepped onto the balcony and took Amaranth by the arm. "Please. Come inside."

Amaranth resisted. "Why do you think you can simply enter as you please? This is my place."

This close, Amaranth could see the concern in Grail's face. "I was worried about you. You never came to the Refuge today."

"I'm waiting for Ash. He's gone. He..." He knew by now Ash was not returning, but to say that aloud was to kill that last little flicker of hope that seemed to be the only reason to keep breathing.

"He's gone, Amaranth, and it's just as well."

The numb darkness inside Amaranth evaporated in a burst of understanding. "You have something to do with this."

The balcony was dark, but Grail had turned and light from within the apartment illuminated half of his face. His eyes widened, and in that instant, Amaranth knew. Anger rapidly filled the void inside him. "What did you say to him when you were here yesterday?"

"I..." Grail sighed. "I only told him the truth."

"Your version of the truth." Amaranth gripped Grail by the shoulders and shook him. "What? What did you say?"

Grail looked at him in surprise. He stepped back, removing himself from Amaranth's grip. He brushed at the crumpled folds of his robe. "I don't understand why you're getting so upset over a chel. He told me he was your friend, and I merely pointed out that a friend would not let another friend's reputation suffer for the sake of his own comfort."

Amaranth swung his hand, and his palm connected with Grail's smooth cheek. Crack!

"Get out!" Amaranth shoved Grail through the empty doorway. Grail stumbled and fell backward onto the living-room floor. He stared up at Amaranth with undisguised horror. "Get up! Get out of my home!"

Grail got to his feet and backed away. He shook his head. "I don't understand. What's happened to you? You used to be so serene and gentle. Now I hardly recognize you. You're like a wild animal."

Like a chel, Grail didn't say, probably because sie valued hir life, but the implication was there, hanging in midair between them.

Amaranth didn't want to think about it. He wanted to take the pain inside himself and put it outside, onto Grail. He grabbed hir by the arm and shoved hir toward the door. "How dare you? You take from me the only reason I had to keep going, and then you ask me what's wrong?"

Grail pulled away from him and hastened toward the door, but once sie reached it, sie turned. "I'm just trying to look out for you. You haven't been yourself lately, and I'm worried. Amaranth, I'm your oldest friend."

Amaranth stared at hir. A trickle of blood ran from the corner of hir mouth, and the heartbreak and bewilderment in hir eyes threatened to pierce Amaranth's rage. His palm stung. Amaranth crossed his arms, pinning his hands in his armpits so he wouldn't hit Grail again. He wanted to--oh how he wanted to. Rage was so much easier than knowing Grail meant every word sie said.

Both vasai stood in silence, staring at one another. The sound of the blow seemed to echo still, not just in the apartment, but all across Harken's Landing.

Part of Amaranth was mortified at what he'd done. Vasai did not resort to violence. But more of him still raged at Grail's meddling, and he was raw from what it had cost him. "Go," was all he could say.

Grail stared at him a moment more, dark eyes searching Amaranth's face as if looking for familiar landmarks in a landscape suddenly turned foreign. Finding none, sie straightened hir spine and left.

Amaranth's rage at Grail had broken him out of his stupor. Oddly enough, Amaranth felt better now that he knew Ash had left out of the misconception--planted in his mind by Grail--that his presence was a detriment to Amaranth. It meant Ash didn't reject him. It meant Ash cared about him.

Amaranth paced his living room once, twice, and then strode into the bedroom. He took his largest satchel from the closet and brought it into the kitchen. Finding Ash might take a while. It would be a good idea to take some provisions along. He filled two bottles with water, grabbed a package of nut wafers, three oranges, a piece of cheese, a bag of carrots, and a box of wheat crackers. Then he took the flour jar down from the shelf, reached in, and pulled out the roll of bills he had stashed in there for an emergency. If he was to find Ash, he'd have to talk to people, get information. If he couldn't barter with food, he could always pay cash.

Finally, Amaranth put on his sturdiest shoes and his long coat and went out.

* * *

Grail knew sie had miscalculated when sie found Amaranth on his balcony, staring into space with that awful lifeless expression on his face. It had almost been a relief when Amaranth blew up at hir, attacked hir. Almost.

Grail had never seen him like that before, though when he kicked Evanscar out the day before, sie should have realized that gentle Amaranth was capable of ferocity under the right circumstances. Still, to experience that rage directly, to see hatred in the eyes of hir oldest, most beloved friend... It left a hole inside of Grail sie knew no amount of silsinthe would ever fill. Though that wouldn't stop hir from trying.

Sie just couldn't understand it. All hir life, sie'd been nothing but loyal to Amaranth. And being Amaranth's friend was not always easy. Even before this latest scandal, Amaranth had always had difficulty conforming to what was expected of him.

Even when he was in school, he was always asking the teachers the wrong questions. Things like, why do the vasai only treat Elai? And, do the parents of vasai object to having their babies taken from them?

Amaranth never knew when to leave well enough alone, and now Grail worried that this insane obsession with a chel would be his final undoing. Evanscar would not let it go lightly.

As Grail walked back to the Refuge, sie wondered how sie might buy Evanscar's forbearance. There was very little that sie, a midlist vasai, could offer a rising star like Evanscar.

This thought preoccupied hir as sie entered the Refuge. Dutifully sie worked the room, making the acquaintance of every unattached patron present and soon accompanying a gray-haired history professor into one of the private rooms. As sie closed the door behind them and began to disrobe, sie comforted herself with the knowledge that least now, with Ash gone, Amaranth would get back to work. Surely that would help.

* * *

Amaranth had ventured into Pelon more than once before, and so the collective souls of a vast number of overworked but adequately fed people did not overwhelm him as they might have had he been unprepared.

In his trek through the regular, uniform grid of the streets, he came upon a cement works just as the shift was changing. The pel stared at him as they filed past in their uniform gray coveralls. The ones on their way home for the night spent rather more time rubbernecking than those who were on their way in to work. Amaranth smiled and tried to make eye contact with one or two of them, but when they saw that he was looking, suddenly all gazes turned to the ground. Amaranth remained on the corner, and they all filed past him. Their souls told him of weariness, and most of all, boredom. And then a woman passed him whose soul filled his belly with hot agony.

Amaranth gasped. "Pe!" He reached out to her.

People around them picked up their pace, eager to be away. The woman stared at him with fear and confusion and quickened her steps as well.

"Please, pe!" said Amaranth, reaching out to her again as she passed. "I can help you. I'm vasai; I can cure you!"

She stopped. For a moment she just stood with her back to Amaranth.

"Pull, come on," said one of the others, and another said, "Whatever it's doing here, you don't want any part of it."

"You're in pain," said Amaranth. "I can help."

She turned around and took three quick steps toward him. She looked him up and down. "You are vasai. What are you doing here?"

Amaranth took a deep breath. "Does it matter? I can help you. I can take the pain away."

She furrowed her brow. She stood about to Amaranth's shoulder. She had dark brown eyes and glossy, straight hair of the same color, trimmed neatly just above chin level. The skin of her round face was sallow and etched with pain, and she was thinner than pel tended to be.

"Vasai don't treat pel," she said. She glanced up and down the street. Most of the workers had gone, but one remained, watching from a distance.

"I'm not like most vasai," said Amaranth.

She swallowed. "But...how...where... Do I have to take my clothes off?"

Amaranth smiled and shook his head. "All I have to do is touch you. Anywhere on your body will suffice. Your hand, perhaps."

She took a deep breath. "But the doctor says there's nothing he can do."

Amaranth nodded. What she said confirmed his worst fears, which he had harbored ever since school, when they taught him that pel did not need vasai because some Elai trained to be doctors for pel. He'd gotten in trouble because he raised his hand and asked if the doctors could cure all ills as effectively as vasai could. And he never had gotten an answer. He held his hand out to her now. "I can help you if you let me."

Pull's companion had drifted closer. She turned to look at her now. The woman, who looked like a younger version of Pull, shrugged.

Pull nodded her head once and took his hand. Amaranth grasped it in both of his and got to his knees. This posture would help him release her illness into the ground. He closed his eyes and loosed his soul.

Red-hot agony stabbed his stomach. Gods within, how did she bear it? Amaranth embraced the pain, drew it from her, and released it into the concrete pavement at his knees. He found that the unyielding surface absorbed the energy better than he'd thought it would. And that was good because his patient was sick with the kind of disease that could kill a vasai if not fully released. The Temple instructors educated vasai in all aspects of the body's function and all the ways in which things could go wrong. Just because most of his clients came to him with headaches and indigestion didn't mean he couldn't recognize cancer when he felt it.

Pull sighed. "Oh! Oh that's so much better."

Amaranth nodded but did not release her hand. With the pain drawn off, he could get a better feel for the position and composition of the tumor itself. Immediately, he understood why her doctor would not help her. The tumor was not in her stomach at all. It put pressure on that organ, but it was in fact on the inside of her spinal column. Surgery would likely kill her. At the very least, she'd be crippled. An Elai doctor would not be able to conceive of a pel who could not work. From a traditional point of view, it would be kinder to let Pull die than to risk that. Pull was on pain medication, but to be strong enough to really be effective, it would render her as useless as the surgery would.

Amaranth tightened his focus on the tumor, seeking the older cells and probing them. Often sense memories became encapsulated in cells, like little time capsules,

cues to whatever was happening in the person's life when the illness took root. This was often a valuable key in determining how to clear the disease.

The cells in the core of the tumor emanated heartbreak, with a strong dose of guilt to go with. As Amaranth absorbed the sadness and analyzed it, he realized it was for somebody--somebody very close, not just relationally, but physically as well. He looked up at the other pel, who looked like his client. The word "daughter" came into his mind. Amaranth withdrew his soul from Pull and released her hand.

"Something happened between the two of you..." He considered the size of the tumor. "About eight years ago."

The younger woman reddened and looked at the ground with a stare so embarrassed it bordered on anger. Tears sprang to Pull's eyes. "I had no choice!"

"I know," the younger woman ground out. "I know that now." She looked up and gave her mother a look searing in its love and regret. "I'm pel. I never had any business with such a thing in the first place."

The mother sighed. "Oh Push, dear, I wish it were different."

"I know you do. But you were right. Going on with it only would have made me unhappy."

Even more unhappy, thought Amaranth. Now that he understood, the young woman vibrated with thwarted talent. He wondered what her body would do with that unexpressed drive, over time. And who would be there to help her with it?

A question burned inside Pull. Amaranth felt it like a live coal, right in the center of the tumor.

"Ask her," Amaranth told his client. "You must ask her."

She drew her brows together and stared at him a moment, then turned to Push. "Do you hate me?"

Tears shone in the daughter's eyes. "No," she said, her voice hoarse. "I don't hate you! I never hated you. I'm sorry I blamed you when it wasn't your fault. It's maybe not what either of us would choose, but you were right all along. We are pel. It is not for us to choose. You were right to destroy it." She paused. "I'm glad you did. That night I'd already decided to give it up, but I was afraid I wouldn't be able to. You made it easy for me."

"I wish things were different," Pull said again.

Push hugged her mother. "I know. I just wish I'd never found the damn thing in the first place."

They separated and glanced about the empty street. "Look at us, airing our socks in the street," said Push. She turned to Amaranth. "Thank you for helping my mother."

"She's not healed yet. This was just the beginning." He held his hand out to Pull. "You'll need more treatments to clear the cancer, but please let me check your progress and see what else I can do now."

He felt the difference immediately. The cells no longer locked themselves tightly against her pain and fear. Now he could manipulate them. With gentle prodding he began to coax the cancer cells to revert to normal ones. Many of them died and began the process of filtering out of her system. Others became antibodies to cancer and went in search of other sites of abnormal growth.

She was not clear of the cancer yet, but he could feel it starting to leave her, and he directed it down into the ground, where all energies returned to their most basic elements and were renewed. He was accustomed to the minor aches and petty frustrations of the pampered elite. He had never treated an issue of such magnitude. Even Ash's trauma, severe as it had been, had not been as demanding as this. He could do no more now. He needed to treat her again. Several times, ideally.

He let go of her hand and slumped to the ground.

"Gods within!" cried Push.

Amaranth felt hands on him, lifting him up. He was in a stupor, his energies so low he could barely even see. Each woman took an arm and put it around her shoulders. They wrapped their arms around his waist and supported him. "Hurry!" said Push.

They trotted him down the street and around a corner. Amaranth lost track, but it couldn't have been more than a block or two before they passed through a doorway and into a dim interior.

"What in the name Harken is this?" asked a new voice. Amaranth lifted his head to see the vague form of a male pel.

"We'll explain later, Stack," said Push. "Let's get her into bed. She can use mine."

"Her? You mean him?" asked Pull.

"It's a vasai," said the third pel, Stack. "It's not male or female, or maybe it's both. I forget. At any rate, you have to get it out of here."

"What? For shame, Stack, this...this person just healed me of my pain."

"It's true," said Push. "I saw it happen."

"They are healers," said Stack. "But what is it doing in Pelon?"

"It... She just came up to us on the street," said Push.

"He felt my pain. And he helped me."

"Well, if we get caught with a vasai in our house, we'll all be in big trouble."

"Let him rest here tonight. We can at least do that."

"Nobody's going to know unless you tell them," said Pull, to Stack, presumably. "Now make yourself useful."

Amaranth was trundled into a room. His blurred vision and the dim light didn't provide many details. Push and Pull levered him into a bed and pulled the covers up around him with brisk efficiency.

Amaranth tried to rouse himself. He had to go find Ash, and he needed to make some sort of arrangement with Pull for follow-up treatments. But all he could do was stir and moan.

"Rest," said Pull. Cool hands soothed his brow. "And thank you."

Chapter Eight

The Secret Life of Dreams

Ash carried an armload of siltgrass to the fire pit and tossed it in, blinking as the acrid smoke stung his eyes. The heat of the fire made him sweat under Amaranth's wool coat, now streaked with soot and sap. He went back to the pile of siltgrass Sand was cutting and grabbed another armful. The fumes from the fire made his sinuses burn, and already, after just a few days, he could feel the oily resins coating the inside of his mouth and throat.

Cinder, the chel tending the fire, coughed. Ash looked at her, noting the sallowness to her skin and the deep lines in her face. She probably wasn't much older than him, though she looked to be at least fifty. He wondered how long it would be before he got the marsh cough.

As the sun set they stopped cutting siltgrass and let the fire die down. When it had burned itself out, Sand, the boss of the crew, spread a tarp out on the ground and handed out shovels. They shoveled the pale green ash in the pit onto the tarp. Then Sand folded it up, and they all followed him through the marsh to the weighing station by the river. There a pel weighed the bundle. His face seemed cast in a permanent scowl. Ash wondered what transgression he'd committed to be sent here to deal with chel. Was he even permitted to go home at night, or was his banishment complete?

"Cheer up," Ash told him. "At least they didn't send you to the mines."

The pel stood, a hand raised. Ash backed up, bumping into Sand, who shoved him aside. "Shut your mouth." Sand turned to the pel. "Sorry, pe. I'll deal with him."

With a surly glare, the pel counted out forty elat and handed the coins to Sand, who shook his head. "No, pe. It's fifty, and we both know it."

Ash, Cinder, and Stalk watched, breathless as the two men stared at each other. The pel did his best to intimidate Sand, but Sand calmly stood his ground, never wavering, and it was obvious he'd stand there all day unless he was paid his fair share. Finally, the pel handed him one more ten-elat coin.

Sand gave Cinder and Stalk each ten elat. He cuffed Ash on the ear. "You lip off to Grind one more time, and I'll let him pound you into jelly. Here," he gave Ash his pay. "Go buy some sense, and don't come back tomorrow unless you can shut the fuck up."

Ash's cheeks burned, but he kept his head down and nodded. Sand was a hard chel, but he had to be to keep the pel dealer from cheating him or chel bandits from stealing the siltgrass ash. He didn't try to cheat his crew, and Ash could tell by now that Stalk and Cinder had worked for him for some time.

Ash had never worked a regular job before. His mother, brother, and he had been gleaners. When he came back from Elaion the first time, he'd refused to shovel anyone's shit or shorten his life burning siltgrass. Instead he'd led a shadowy life on the fringes of Chelon, crossing over into Pelon at night to steal. And look what that had gotten him. He wouldn't make that mistake again. It was no great honor to be a chel, but a chel he was, and pretending otherwise only brought more misery.

Ash and the others started down one of the pathways winding through the siltgrass marsh. As they walked, Cinder slowed her steps until she walked beside him. "I'm going to Kettle's Rest and spend this on barley and beer," she said, holding up her ten-elat coin. She tilted her head. "Come with me?"

Ash returned her gaze. The way she held his eyes, steady and sure, he knew it wasn't just a drinking partner she wanted. He should take her up on it, he knew. It might help put Amaranth from his mind, and if they hit it off, a partner was a very helpful thing to have. But he shook his head. "I have to save my coin," he told her, and that was the truth, even though he wasn't really being honest with her.

She lifted one shoulder. "So. You have to eat, don't you? Kettle's as cheap as the next place."

He shook his head, and suddenly she stood in front of him, blocking the path. Over her shoulder, Ash saw Stalk and Sand disappear beyond a curve in the path. Cinder crossed her arms, not smiling now. "What? You think you're too good for a silt burner? I've got news for you, Mr. Fancy Coat--you're one now too."

Fear climbed up Ash's throat. Male and female chel weren't differentiated in size the way the Elai were. Cinder was at least as tall as him and looked to outweigh him by a few pounds. Plus, she'd been burning a long time. She'd be strong from the hard work. Maybe he should just go along with what she wanted.

But that stubborn piece of him that wouldn't part with Amaranth's coat also refused to accept her offer. "It's not that," he said. "I appreciate you asking, me being new to burning and all. It's just that...I only like guys."

It was a total lie. Like most chel, Ash was bisexual, but he didn't want anyone who wasn't Amaranth now, and it was the only thing he could think of to put her off

without offending her. The moment he said it, he regretted it, seeing the gleam of curiosity in her eye.

"Oh..." she said. "You're a drake. I don't think I've met one before."

He didn't say anything. He just kept walking down the path. His hand was sweaty around the coin in his hand. He'd worked out the math. The cost of the clothing he'd stolen from Amaranth was about 300 elat. He could spend five a day on food and pay Amaranth back in sixty days. That wasn't bad, but it left no money for lodgings. He'd been sleeping under a set of steps by the dam. If he went with her, she might have a better place. Why hadn't he just said yes?

"You like it up the ass then?" she asked.

Gods! "No!"

Her laugh scalded him. "You're a funny kind of drake then. Too bad. I know some girls who'll pay good money to see boys fuck each other. You could top, I suppose, but it'd limit your trade."

Ash quickened his stride. He hoped she didn't notice him shaking. "I'm not interested."

"Suit yourself, then," she said, her voice growing fainter in the distance. She didn't try to keep pace with him. Thank the gods.

Ash emerged from the siltgrass marsh along a canal that intersected with the north end of Glean Street. He turned down the avenue, paved intermittently with scraps of wood, cardboard, and plastic to keep the oozing muck of the marsh at least partly at bay. The little clapboard shacks crowded in upon one another on either side of the street, leaking smells of burning dung and chum stew into the air like incense burners. The aromas brought back a thousand memories, both good and bad.

At the far end of the block was a cook stand. The smell of fried fish suddenly brought to Ash's awareness that he was famished. He bought a fish sandwich for two elat and ate it as he wandered about Glean Street, taking in the sights. A soul seller plied her wares not far from the fish fryer, and farther down a boat maker--offering watertight skiffs ready made or to be constructed of salvage provided by the buyer--added the tinge of pitch to the many smells of Glean Street.

A tall, muscular chel, flanked by four others of a similar build, walked up the street. He carried a sturdy metal box, and his confederates held cudgels, and everyone got out of their way. They stopped at every stand, and the merchants made

their deposits in the box. Ash paused and took a good look at the man. So this was Glean Street's new banker.

Ash prided himself that in all the time he'd been a thief, he'd never stolen from other chel, but the same could not be said for others. Crime was rampant in Chelon, and those who had businesses here had need of someone who could keep their earnings safe. Of course, the banker charged a fee for keeping one's money safe. All the same, most merchants considered themselves ahead of the game, and the banker was usually able to change the minds of those who thought otherwise.

A mob of children--orphans, most likely--had surrounded the fish fryer and were begging, refusing to leave unless paid off and keeping paying customers at bay. But when they spotted the banker approaching, they scattered.

Ash finished his sandwich and headed toward his sleeping place. For years Ash had slept rough, and he'd become adept at ferreting out little in-between places that went unnoticed by most other folk. On his first night he'd been fortunate enough to discover a set of steps up to the retaining wall of the dam on Fish Street that had cracked with age. They were concrete but hollow, as he'd discovered when he investigated a hole in the side of them. It was possible to loosen a chunk large enough to form a hole to crawl through and then pull it back in place once he was inside, as he did now.

It was a good sleeping place, damp, but the strong smell of the river made him feel at home. Finally not feeling foolish for having kept the coat, he wrapped himself up in it and lay down. Overhead he could hear the voices of the fishers out on their barges, and the slapping of the water against the embankment.

When he closed his eyes, he saw Amaranth as clearly as if he were sharing this little space with him. It was like this every night. When he went to sleep, Amaranth was there, waiting for him. Perhaps he was there. Ash had no idea how far a va-sai's soul could roam. Was the feeling of warmth and pleasure that crept over him now the touch of Amaranth's soul or just his imagination?

Ash wormed his hand into his pants and pretended that his cold fingers grasping his swelling cock were Amaranth's warm ones instead. He conjured up the smell of lilacs and imagined Amaranth's lips against his. Their kiss was gentle at first, but soon Amaranth was opening for him, and Ash dipped his tongue into the va-sai's hot, wet mouth. The indescribable taste of Amaranth washed over him, bringing Ash's erection to full bloom.

Amaranth sighed and stroked him. Ash broke their kiss and worked his way down Amaranth's neck and shoulders with kisses, licks, and nips. When he got to Amaranth's breasts, he sucked in a mouthful of soft flesh and ran his tongue around the

aureole. Amaranth's gasp of pleasure made his cock throb. Ash cupped the other small, perfect breast, palming it and giving the nipple a gentle tweak. Amaranth hissed, and Ash grinned and switched sides, suckling at the tight, pebbled peak.

They moved together, hips undulating. Amaranth's cock grazed Ash's thigh and he reached down and grasped it, pumping Amaranth with a strong grip. Amaranth's fingers stroked Ash's cock and he felt his balls tightening.

But it was too soon. He wanted to give Amaranth every pleasure. They'd only had those two nights. There was so much left untried. Ash slid down, his cock slipping from Amaranth's grasp. Amaranth sighed with disappointment but contented himself with stroking Ash's shoulders.

Now Ash lowered his face to Amaranth's cock, breathing in the heady fragrance of spice and salt. He licked up the length of it, starting at the base and running his tongue around the crown at the top. "Oh," said Amaranth, as if the answer to a puzzle that had long plagued him had just been revealed. "Oh."

Ash closed his lips around the head of Amaranth's cock and sucked him down. Fingers tightened in Ash's curls and then relaxed again. Of course Amaranth would be concerned about bringing back memories of Ash's violation. But Ash wasn't thinking about that now. He couldn't get enough of Amaranth's cock or the wonderful sounds Amaranth made as Ash sucked him, moving his head up and down now, stroking the shaft with lips and tongue. "Ash, oh Ash, I love you."

They'd never used words like that with one another. They'd only just started to discover what was between them, but Ash knew he loved Amaranth, even if now, alone under a set of crumbling steps with his cock in his hand, was the first he'd admitted it.

Ash went back to his fantasy. He released Amaranth's cock long enough to lick his fingers, then went back to sucking him as he teased apart the folds of Amaranth's pussy and slid one finger into his vagina. Tight, wet heat enveloped him. Amaranth contracted around him. Ash introduced a second finger and scissored them, then started fucking Amaranth in earnest.

The vasai's gasps came in a rhythm now, and he thrust up onto Ash's fingers, into Ash's mouth. Ash echoed that rhythm with his own hips, thrusting his cock against Amaranth's calf and smearing the blond hairs and golden skin with pre-cum. The beat had hold of both of them now. Ash moaned around the cock in his mouth. He was so close.

Amaranth ran his long fingers through Ash's hair, and then Ash felt the touch of Amaranth's soul coming loose and flowing over both of them. The feelings of

warmth and security nearly drove him over the edge. He wanted Amaranth to come in his mouth. He wanted to drink him down. He swallowed his lover to the root and extended his pinky to press and pet at Amaranth's asshole.

Amaranth bucked and shouted. "Ash!" His cock pulsed. Ash drank down his sweet, salty cum as his own orgasm overtook him. He spurted ribbons of cum over Amaranth's leg until it all emptied out of him. Their climax left him spent, exhausted, and tingling.

Ash kept his eyes closed and drew his coat tighter about him, pretending it was Amaranth's arms instead, rocking him to sleep.

* * *

When Amaranth first awoke he thought he was back in his apartment and Ash had just given him the most extraordinary blowjob. He smiled and reached out to draw his lover closer, and found nothing but empty bed surrounding him. That's right--Ash had left him, and he had left Elaion. He forced his eyes open and glanced about, trying to get his bearings.

The small, utilitarian bedroom brought full memory back to him in a flood. He sank back against the pillow. That woman, Pull. He should treat her again before he went on his way, and make some kind of arrangement to come back, perhaps on his way home again with Ash. Even after that, he'd need to see her every few days until she was well again.

He sat up and took in his surroundings. Really the room was not all that different from his own, though his room was simple because that was his taste, and this one was simple because a pel's wages did not allow for extras. The wood floor was solid, the blanket thick and warm, the mattress a bit on the thin side but adequate.

The unpainted stone walls were decorated with photographs and children's drawings.

Morning light came in through a window, and Amaranth gazed at all those round pel faces and colorful, rudimentary pictures of flowers and dogs and houses. So much life.

He spotted his satchel in a corner of the simple, stone-walled room--he was famished and no wonder. That was quite a bit of healing he'd done last night. Amaranth pushed himself to the edge of the bed. His arms trembled. He tried to stand and fetch the satchel, but the room spun around him, and he abruptly sat down again.

He'd never felt so exhausted in his life. Even just sitting here upright made his heart race. How on earth was he going to get to Chelon to look for Ash?

A stifled giggle from the direction of the door broke through his anxiety. He glanced that way and just caught a small, brown-haired head popping back out of sight behind the jamb. "Shh," said a childish voice. "He'll hear you."

Amaranth smiled. It would seem these drawings were from resident artists and that he was an object of some curiosity to them. No wonder. They'd probably never seen a vasai. He recalled the male pel's objections. The man was right. His presence here put the whole family in jeopardy.

But if he didn't do follow-up treatments on Pull, she would not survive.

"Get away from there!" It was Pull.

The two kids ran past the door and on down the hallway, and she entered. Amaranth loosed his soul to gather information on the state of her illness. Even that minor effort sent dark spots dancing before his eyes, but the glimpse he got before he drew his soul back in told him that she was remarkably improved. The tumor was shrinking, and her body was stronger and beginning to fight back.

He swayed.

His client's eyes widened, and she crossed the room in two strides. "There now, what are you doing?" She took him by the shoulders and lowered him to the bed. "Were you working your stuff on me again? After it knocked you flat last night? I've never seen anyone look as pale as you did. I was afraid you wouldn't wake up and we'd have a dead vasai on our hands, and then where would we be? My name's Pull, by the way. Pull Furrow."

"Amaranth," he whispered. Vasai didn't have last names. No families.

"I'm grateful for what you've done for me. I think that pain was going to kill me soon, and the doctor said there was nothing she could do."

"We're not done yet," he said. "I need to treat you again. A few more times. But I have to go. I'll come back. I have to find Ash." He was so hungry. He reached toward his satchel in the corner. "I have food in there. Could you..." Maybe if he ate something, he'd feel better and he could treat her again before he left.

She stared at him, her mouth open. She seemed to recollect herself and snapped it shut. "We'll feed you. That is the absolute least we can do. Here, let me help you get comfortable."

As Pull tugged and prodded him into a sitting position against the wall, his back bolstered by two meager pillows, Amaranth was reminded of the first few days of caring for Ash. The recollection brought a smile to his lips and then a sharp pain to his heart. Where was Ash now? What had befallen him since he left Amaranth?

Pull brought Amaranth breakfast. While he ate--eggs, bacon, and bread, greasy and heavy but certainly sustaining--the two children came back to spy on him. Amaranth swallowed a piece of toast and smiled at them. "Hello."

One of them startled and hid behind the doorjamb again, but the other, the older of the two, stared at him with solemn eyes and said "hello" back.

"My name is Amaranth. What's your name?"

The child furrowed his brow. "Task."

Amaranth nodded, accepting this information with all the seriousness it was due. "It's nice to meet you, Task. Would you like to come in?"

Task bit his lip. Behind him the other child peeked out at Amaranth again.

"Your sister too. It's okay. I won't hurt you."

Task turned to his sister and reached for her hand.

"No. We're not supposed to," she said.

Task tightened his grip and shook his head. "Are you always going to do everything they say? It's a vasai. Come on."

Task's sister clamped her lips together and looked up and down the hallway, then gave one sharp nod and let her brother drag her into the room.

They approached him, ogling. He smiled again, hoping to reassure them. He still didn't have the strength to soothe them with his soul.

"Are you a boy or a girl?" asked the girl.

"Toil! That's rude."

She shrugged, all shyness forgotten. "Well, I can't tell."

"Vasai are part girl and part boy, but most of us identify with one or the other. I have always felt more comfortable thinking of myself as a boy. So you may think of me as a boy too."

"Does it hurt?" asked Task.

Amaranth tilted his head to one side. "Being both male and female?"

He nodded.

Only sometimes, he thought, but he said, "No," so he didn't confuse them.

Toil crept to the edge of the bed and peered at him. "You're sad," she said.

"Today I am," he admitted.

"Why?"

"I'm looking for my friend. It's important that I find him, and now I don't know how long I'll have to wait before I can start looking for him again."

They both took this in. They exchanged a glance, and then Task said, "Mama says you made Nana better."

"Nana was hurt," said Toil.

"Yes," said Amaranth. "She was, and I helped her." But he needed to keep on helping her if she was to truly recover.

"You made her pain go away?"

He nodded.

"Mama says that's why you're sick."

"I'm not sick," said Amaranth. "Just tired. I need to get my strength back so I can--" He hesitated, feeling that whatever he said to these children he must adhere to. "So I can finish helping your nana and then go looking for my friend again." Really he'd known all along it would have to be that way. He only hoped that Ash, wherever he was, was managing.

"Task! Toil!"

The children sprang back from Amaranth and scurried out of the room, past the figure looming in the doorway. "I told you kids to stay away from it." Amaranth recognized the third pel from last night. Pull's husband?

Whoever he was, he didn't seem pleased to see Amaranth. He stood with his arms folded across his chest and stared as if he could make Amaranth vanish through willpower alone. "Pull and Push tell me that we owe you a debt of gratitude. That don't mean we got to let you near our kids."

"Okay," said Amaranth. "I meant no harm."

The pel scrunched his face up and took another step into the room. "Pull says what you did to her made you ill. How long before you can walk?"

"I don't know."

"Pull and Push think you're some kind of miracle worker, and that we oughta turn our lives upside down to pay you back. You ask me, it'll be a miracle we don't all lose our jobs over this."

"I understand the precariousness of your position."

"I'm glad Pull's not in pain anymore, but--"

"You'll be glad to see me go. I don't want to stay either. I have urgent matters to attend to. However, Pull needs further treatment or she'll get sick again."

The man tilted his head to one side. "She says the pain is gone."

"For now. But--she's your wife, is she not?"

He gave a sharp nod.

"Your wife has cancer. It'll come back if I don't clear it completely."

"And how long will that take?"

"I can't say for certain. Probably a few days." He looked down at the blanket on his lap. He wanted to go.

"A few days? And how do we keep you a secret until then? The children already know about you. Push's ordered them to keep quiet, but you know how kids are." He looked Amaranth up and down. "Well, maybe you don't."

"Believe me when I tell you I won't stay a moment longer than necessary."

They stared at one another. The silence between them congealed. Amaranth began to wonder if his pel host might simply pick him up, carry him out of the house, and deposit him on the street corner. Perhaps he wondered the same thing. Finally, he turned and walked away.

Amaranth slept the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon. By the time Pull and Push had awoken and were getting ready for their shift, Amaranth had enough strength to treat Pull again. The session left him barely conscious once more, but he cleared the site of the tumor. Next he could start on clearing the other sites in her body where the disease had taken root.

Pull and Push helped him up from the floor and back into bed. "You shouldn't do so much at one time," said Pull. "If you kill yourself, then where will we be?"

"Ash," he whispered and sank into unconsciousness.

* * *

Amaranth dreamed of Ash again. This time, they were in a cool, dark place that smelled strongly of the river. They lay side by side, stroking and kissing one another. "I'm working every day," Ash murmured, his lips against the crook of Amaranth's neck, his warm breath raising gooseflesh on Amaranth's arms. "Soon I'll have enough to pay you back."

Amaranth wasn't sure what Ash was talking about. Ash's hands on his breasts and his cock stirred feelings in him that made it difficult to focus. Amaranth turned his head and nudged Ash's chin with one hand, lifting his face to kiss him. Amaranth drank Ash in, his tongue delving into Ash's hot, wet mouth, meeting his tongue, pressing against it and pulling back and accepting Ash's tongue in his own mouth, a long, delicious dance of give-and-take.

Amaranth ran his hands down Ash's tight little body. Accustomed to being with Elai or the occasional vasai, Amaranth loved how he could reach all of Ash so easily. He was...manageable. At least, in terms of size. But Ash's will was indomitable, and he rolled Amaranth onto his back now and climbed on top of him, holding him down by the shoulders as their kiss became more urgent.

Amaranth loved this. His cock swelled to fullness as Ash devoured his mouth. The small space they were in echoed with their moans and whimpers.

As he'd done the day before, Ash worked his way down Amaranth's body, kissing and licking and nibbling as he went. But this time, when he reached Amaranth's

hungry, bobbing cock, he moved past it. He gave Amaranth's pussy a lick and then focused his attention on the patch of skin below it. Amaranth gasped and forced himself to be still at the exquisite sensation, like a rose blooming somewhere deep inside him, in a place he'd never associated with pleasure before. He wanted to buck his hips up. His cock desperately wanted contact, but Amaranth didn't want to do anything to distract Ash from whatever it was he was about.

Ash sucked and caressed the tender patch of skin until it felt supple as buttered calfskin, and then he dipped his tongue down even farther and ran it over Amaranth's asshole.

At first, the touch of that hot, wet tongue tickled. Then, as Ash licked in earnest, his strokes infused Amaranth's hole with heavy pleasure. Amaranth's tight opening fluttered and relaxed. A mewl escaped his lips, and he thrust upward, pushing his hole against Ash's probing tongue. Ash gave a little chuckle, held Amaranth's hips still, and circled Amaranth's quivering entrance with the tip of his tongue. Hunger awoke deep inside Amaranth's ass, begging to be filled.

"Ash! Ash, I--" Amaranth had never experienced anything like this. He'd done this for a few clients, but he'd no idea it felt so good. No wonder...

And then, Ash pushed his tongue through Amaranth's tight muscles, breaching him and filling him with his hot, mobile tongue. Amaranth's skin tingled all over his body. He let out a high-pitched keening sound so raw with need it shocked him. But Ash paid no mind. He fucked Amaranth's ass with his tongue as precum dripped down Amaranth's cock. Amaranth felt like he could come with just a single touch to his needy cock, yet that hunger deep inside his body still clamored to be filled. "Ash, please... I need..."

"Mmmmmm," Ash hummed, sending warm vibrations through Amaranth's body and unraveling all his nerve endings. Amaranth lost the will to argue. He lay back and let Ash do as he would.

After playing with Amaranth's asshole with his tongue for what seemed like an eternity, Ash finally withdrew. The damp air felt cool against Amaranth's wet, wanting opening. Ash grinned at him. He squeezed the tip of Amaranth's cock, sending a jolt of pleasure down the shaft, straight to the spot in his ass that just wanted more, more, more. Ash coated his fingers with the slippery precum oozing from Amaranth's slit. The light touch sent more little ripples following the path of the first shockwave. Amaranth fought to control his breath as Ash inserted a finger inside his ass. The lubed digit slipped in effortlessly and promptly went exploring.

It brushed against that secret spot inside that had been announcing its existence in an ever more demanding way since Ash first started playing with his ass. Every

nerve in Amaranth's body exploded with delight. He lost all control. His body took over, rocking, driving down onto that questing finger with every thrust. He could come from that alone. He would, any second now.

Ash seemed to know it. He reached up with his free hand and circled the base of Amaranth's cock, locking it in a viselike grip that held the encroaching orgasm in check. Ash slipped a second finger inside Amaranth and worked him harder, thrusting and scissoring, loosening Amaranth's muscles.

By now Amaranth was certain he knew what was coming next, and he looked forward to it with a combination of desperate longing and dread. He'd done this before with clients, and he'd found it uncomfortable at best. But he trusted Ash. Ash wouldn't do anything to hurt him.

Every stroke of Ash's fingers drove Amaranth closer to climax, but Ash's grip on the base of his cock prevented him from coming. Amaranth's arousal just mounted higher and higher, with no end in sight. Tears of frustration and need leaked from his eyes even as precum flowed down his cock and over Ash's fingers. If he didn't get to come soon, he was going to lose his mind. "Do it," he begged Ash. "Take me. Do it. Please."

Ash stopped fucking Amaranth with his fingers and stared at him. "Are you sure?"

Amaranth nodded and took a ragged breath. "Please."

Ash's eyes widened, and he nodded once. He withdrew his fingers and positioned his cock at Amaranth's entrance. He released his stranglehold on Amaranth's cock and braced his hands on Amaranth's upraised knees. Biting his lip, he slowly pressed inward.

All the breath left Amaranth's body as Ash's cock entered him. He felt huge. Amaranth felt like he'd split in half. A familiar burning sensation quickly gave way to sharp ecstasy as Ash's cock pressed against that spot inside him. Amaranth breathed deep, his mouth open with the wonder of it all.

Ash's eyes fluttered closed, and a bead of sweat dripped down the side of his face. He rocked in until he was fully seated, and Amaranth felt himself filled to the brim with Ash's hot, hard cock.

As slowly as he'd entered him, Ash withdrew. When only the tip of his cock remained within the outer ring of muscles, he reversed his direction, gliding back in at a stately pace.

Amaranth's cock throbbed with need. He felt like he was going to explode. He thought Ash fucking him would bring relief, but it was only more delicious torture.

Finally Ash's iron control slipped, and he started to fuck Amaranth harder, faster. Low grunts escaped his lips, and he reached down, finally giving Amaranth's desperate cock the contact it needed.

He stroked Amaranth in time with his thrusts. All the wonderful feelings that had been building up inside Amaranth the entire time Ash made love to him now sharpened to an almost painful peak. Amaranth teetered there, balanced between joy and oblivion. The callous pad of Ash's thumb on the underside of his slit pushed him, and Amaranth tumbled over the edge of climax, shouting and spasming as his cock pumped out ribbons of hot cream.

The reverberations of his orgasm rippled around Ash's cock, making it feel even bigger than before. Ash shouted, pumped into him desperately three times, and then froze, his cockhead pulsing his release within. It sent delicious little after-shocks coursing through Amaranth's body, but what was even more gratifying was the look of utter abandonment on Ash's face. His eyes were closed, his mouth open. His breath gusted out over Amaranth's shoulder, warm and damp like the wind before a summer rain.

Amaranth raised up to kiss him, and blinked. It was morning, and he was propped up on his elbows in Push's bed, arching up toward empty space, his belly sticky with cum.

* * *

Ash stood on top of the dam in the blue predawn light and stripped. He'd woken up again this morning with dried cum all over his belly and the memory of a scorchingly erotic dream filling him with a familiar warm tingle. Was it really Amaranth's soul reaching him from across all of Harken's Landing, or just a sense memory? He tied his clothing into a bundle and balanced it on his head as he descended the stairs into the river to bathe. The water was cold, but the cool current refreshed him.

With his clothes still sticking to his damp skin, Ash made his way up Glean Street toward the siltgrass marsh. He drew the salt-tinged air of Chelon's main thoroughfare about him like the familiar folds of an old coat.

On the corner, two people argued for possession of the body of a dead dog. He crossed the street to avoid them. This brought him into the vicinity of the soul sell-

er. She looked up at him with sharp eyes and waved a hand over the display table. "Choose."

Tiny boxes of all shapes and colors crowded the table. They were brightly decorated with paint and bits of paper and ribbon--whatever the seller could glean or barter for. Each one was unique and had a string for wearing around the neck.

The belief that chel were without souls was the essence of their degradation. No soul meant no place for a god to dwell and guide the individual. But however looked down upon they might be, chel had no lack of ambition, or imagination. Inside each brightly decorated box was a small figure or object, representing a god. The idea was for the customer to choose the vessel that appealed to her most. Whichever god rested within was the one whose guidance she most urgently needed.

Soul sellers were popular fixtures in Chelon, and considering the difficulty most chel faced simply getting enough to eat, Ash found it incredible that he'd never encountered a soul seller who did not do a brisk business.

"Choose," said the soul seller again. Ash looked at the chel closely. This was not just some grass burner looking for a way out or a gleaner trying to get ahead. He noted the smooth cheeks, the strong jaw, the rounded shoulders, and prominent voice box. She wore a dress but was androgynous all the same. He inhaled sharply. "You're vasai," he murmured.

The soul seller grinned. "Almost was. But no. Mother was fond and wished to keep me."

Ash took an involuntary step back, as if what the soul seller's mother had done to her were somehow contagious. That embarrassed him and he corrected himself, winding up closer to the soul seller than before. He studied her. Tall (though not as tall as she might have been with better food), long of limb, and beneath the grime and a soul seller's motley costume, quite beautiful.

Ash's breath caught. Of course, he'd heard stories of mothers who, despite the generous payment program, still did not wish to give their vasai offspring up to the Temple. Ordinarily, others around them intervened and the infant was duly delivered to its rightful place. But once in a while--so seldom that until now Ash had dismissed it as myth--a parent's desperation to keep her child was so intense that it drove her to maim it, removing the one undeniable indication that the infant was vasai and not simply female.

Ash became aware that he was staring. He lowered his gaze. "I'm sorry."

"Why? You didn't do it." The being looked back at him matter-of-factly. "If you're really that broken up about my ignominious fate, you can buy one of my souls. I assure you they are the best in Chelon."

"I don't believe in gods," said Ash.

"No? Are you sure?"

He shrugged. "Another vasai told me once--"

"Another vasai. I don't know whether to thank you or call you a liar."

Ash shook his head. "You're still vasai, no matter what else has been taken from you. Can't you go to the Temple and explain--"

"What Elai will have a defective vasai treat her? And what of the other vasai? Would they welcome me, do you think?"

Ash thought of Evanscar and Grail. He said nothing.

"Here, at least, I have a trade. I am an oddity, but one afforded a certain degree of respect. Do you really think my fortunes would be better in Elaion?"

"No," Ash admitted, feeling awkward and wishing he'd minded his own business. "Well. I have to go now."

Chapter Nine

The Soul Seller of Glean Street

By the evening of the second day since hir fallout with Amaranth, Grail was deeply alarmed. Amaranth never had shown up at the Refuge. Something was wrong. Grail left early and went to Amaranth's residence to see what was the matter.

The door was locked, and no one answered when sie rang. Grail stood in the hallway wondering if sie dared try Amaranth's patience again by using the key.

But did sie dare not to? Grail recalled the state sie'd found hir friend in two days before. What if he had done himself some harm? What if he was...

Grail unlocked the door. "Amaranth?" sie called out.

No answer came. The apartment was dark. Panic wound through hir veins and made hir steps rapid as sie searched the small apartment. It was empty.

He was gone. And then the truth of what must have happened flooded in upon Grail all at once and sie staggered. That fool. He'd gone after the chel.

* * *

"And what do we find there but a chel of all things. Yes! Quite a savage little beast too."

As Grail walked into the Grassland Saloon, hir worst fears were confirmed. Evanscar sat on a stool, surrounded by avid listeners, regaling them with Amaranth's story.

"Did it assault you?" asked Cruce, whose clients numbered among the highest echelons of the Elai.

"Only with its odor," said Evanscar.

The others twittered with amusement at this gem of wit.

"But truly," Evanscar went on, "Salme, Mical, and I were grateful to escape with our lives. Were we not?" He looked to his cohorts.

Salme and Mical nodded, soaking in the reflected glamour Evanscar's story cast upon them. "You should have seen the look it gave Evvie," said Mical. "I thought the marsh rat was going to kill him on the spot."

"Please, Mical, there's no need to be rude. Let us simply describe it as a chel. Surely that is ugly enough."

Mical gave Evanscar a wounded look, and Evanscar, seeming to regret drawing participants into the conversation, ignored her. "At any rate, it was not Amaranth's guest we needed to worry about. It was the host himself."

"He was there?" asked Cruce.

"He arrived after we got there, and when he saw us, he--"

"Evanscar," said Grail, stepping up and placing a hand on the other vasai's shoulder. Hir thoughts raced. How in the name of all holiness was sie going to redirect this conversation or salvage even one shred of Amaranth's reputation? "You are forgetting that you were not the only one there, and I fear your enthusiasm for a good story has the better of you."

Evanscar smiled, but the look in his eyes promised retribution.

Silence hung about them now as the onlookers waited to see what would happen next. Everyone knew that Grail and Amaranth were friends. They expected Grail to come to Amaranth's defense and so were unlikely to believe anything sie said in that line. What was sie to do? Perhaps the only thing that would divert them was an even greater scandal--and to be believable, it must be one that benefited Grail not at all.

"I'm afraid there's been a terrible misunderstanding," sie went on, hir voice shaking, which only gave greater credence to what sie was about to say. "It is true what you say, Evanscar. Amaranth did indeed have a chel in his lodgings, but I'm afraid you've misunderstood the reason. Amaranth admitted Ash and let him remain there as a personal favor to me."

"Oh Grail, you funny old thing. You can't expect us to believe that you, the soul of propriety itself, are consorting with a chel."

Grail shook hir head. Hir stomach felt tight as a tin drum. "No, not consorting. Of course not. Merely giving aid. You see, that chel is my brother."

A collective gasp went out among the onlookers, and those nearest hir took a step away. The irony of that was bitter balm to Grail's mortification. Any one of these

vasai could easily be of chel origin. Vasai were mutants and could be born of chel or pel alike. Only Elai did not produce vasai. The Temple paid top dollar for vasai babies, and the only reason that the lower castes did not throw themselves into producing as many vasai offspring as possible was that no one had ever been able to discover what causes the mutation.

Just because a woman bore one child who was vasai was absolutely no indication that she would give birth to another, and the same was true of the sire. As far as anyone had been able to determine, in all the generations since the first vasai was born, it was completely random. Even environmental factors seemed to play no role.

Needless to say, vasai of chel origins would be looked down upon and vasai of pel origins preferred, if anyone knew which was which. But there was no way to determine a vasai's origins by looking at hir, and parentage was a strictly guarded secret. The vasai themselves were never told who their biological parents were. They were all children of the Temple. Those who received the babies and paid the lucky parents passed the children on to the Temple in a matter of days and never saw them again. Every effort was made to sever the vasai from their base origins, and Grail's admission to knowledge of a family connection was perhaps a greater scandal than hir admission of chel origins.

"You're making it up," said Evanscar. "That is not how Amaranth behaved, and besides, you can't know who your brother is."

Both good points. "Amaranth was trying to make it look like I was not involved. But I cannot allow him to suffer for my sake. As to the family connection, you are quite right. I can't know that chel is my brother, but the chel can."

"How?"

Good question. "It seems our mother did not follow the rules. Before she handed me over to the collector, she marked me." Grail lifted hir hair to show them the small birthmark on hir neck, just below hir ear. "A tattoo, but made to look like a birthmark. Sie put the same mark on my brother." Mother, brother--how strange those words felt in hir mouth. Sie prayed Evanscar had not examined Ash closely enough to know for a certainty he had no such mark. "Then she sneaked into the Temple grounds--you know how chel are--every month or so, and later, when I was older, yearly, so she could keep track of my appearance. It seems she passed on recently, and on her deathbed she told him to seek me out."

Grail took in the expressions on the faces surrounding him. It was working. Even Evanscar was rapt. Many of them looked on hir with disgust, but there were those

in whose eyes envy gleamed, as well. Chel or not, Grail had family. Or would, if the whole thing were not a complete fabrication.

"The rest is quite simple," sie went on. "My brother approached me, demanding money or he would expose the truth. I confided in Amaranth, and my friend, more brother to me than that loathsome chel, offered his apartment as a meeting place. I paid him off, you see, though I regretted it almost immediately. It became obvious he would demand more."

Sie turned to Evanscar. "I have to thank you. Until I came in just now and heard your understandable, if false, version of events, I was tempted to keep paying the marsh rat off. But I can't sacrifice Amaranth's reputation for my own. I must say, I find myself much relieved. It was an unsavory thing, acquiescing to the demands of such a creature. Now, whatever comes next, I may at least respect myself."

Evanscar held Grail's gaze a few seconds before glancing at the onlookers. To a one, they stared at Grail. If nothing else, hir version of the story had won with the crowd. It would do Evanscar no good to insist on his own now and would make him appear chellish to do so. Whatever Evanscar privately thought, he had little choice but to incline his head and say, "Well, Grail, you have astonished us all."

That was hir cue to leave. Sie turned from them and swept from the bar. Sie rather badly wanted a large glass of silsinthe, or perhaps several, but that would have to wait. First, sie had to find Amaranth and tell him that his reputation was salvaged and he could return to Elaion and resume his life. What Grail did after that, sie reflected, was not of the slightest significance to anyone.

* * *

Grail spent the night walking through Pelon, keeping to shadows to avoid encountering anyone. Of course, there was no avoiding the collective boredom and weariness of all those pel souls. The feeling made hir shiver, as did the utilitarian gray stone buildings on either hand. Sie had not been out of Elaion since sie was delivered to the Temple as a swaddling babe. Gods within. How did these people find the will to keep on going?

Still, hir sojourn in Pelon, bleak as it had been, did nothing to prepare Grail for the misery and chaos that was Chelon. As dawn turned the sky in the east pink, Grail stood on one side of a tall chain-link fence. Behind hir lay all of Pelon and Elaion.

The land on the other side of the fence did not look any different than it did on this side, but it was. Despite keeping hir soul locked in as tight as possible, sie could still feel it; the collective need was like a great wave, poised just offshore, waiting to engulf hir.

But how was it that sie felt anything at all? Chel did not have souls. It must be that so many of them, packed together in poverty and abandonment, manifested something enough like a soul that sie sensed it anyway.

In any case, the thought of Amaranth, who wore his soul more loosely than anyone Grail had ever known, out in the midst of...of all that--it made Grail's heart go cold.

A little ways down along the fence was a spot where someone had cut the links. Grail took a deep breath and bent low to climb through the opening.

Sie kept hir soul locked down tight, packing it in as densely as sie could for protection. But that couldn't lessen the impact when sie got to the far side of the field where the little ramshackle houses crouched together.

Sie stepped between two of the shacks and made hir way down a narrow dirt street, pitted and muddy. Sie had to navigate carefully to avoid stepping in refuse. The smell was unbelievable. Excrement, decay, and fish combined in a toxic alliance that seemed to singe the inside of Grail's nostrils. Sie breathed through hir mouth and still fought to avoid being sick. Adding the reek of stomach acid to the mix would kill hir, sie was certain. From a doorway up ahead, three narrow faces peered at hir and then suddenly disappeared. The door shut with a squeak.

After that, sie was aware of eyes on hir, following hir from behind stacks of crates or through chinks in the weathered wooden slats of the houses. It was impossible not to feel the presence of so much desperation, struggle, and longing. Sie marveled at the intensity of it and thanked the gods within that chel had no souls. If they did, their misery would surely kill a vasai.

Sie stepped into an intersection and surprised one, a female washing turnips in a bucket. The chel stared at Grail, openmouthed, then picked up her bucket and backed away, disappearing through a space between two shacks so narrow sie hadn't even realized it was there.

And so it went, block after block, street after street. Grail was observed, but from a safe distance. Sie needed to talk to some of them if sie was to find Amaranth. But none of the ones sie spotted stayed put long enough for hir to even open hir mouth.

The only good news was that if hir presence caused such a reaction, then Amaranth would certainly have been noticed.

At length sie passed from the residential district into one more commercially oriented. Here the streets were lined with the same pitiful shacks, only these had

brightly painted signs on them. Many had tables out front, piled with goods for sale--clothing, pots and utensils, crude sandals made of siltgrass fiber. There were cookshops too. At one, a chel ladled some sort of stew into wooden bowls and sold them for two elat apiece.

Grail stood in the tall shadow of a canoe propped against a wall, but the moment sie approached the cook stand, sie was noticed. Silence fell over the whole street. Everyone stared at hir. Hostility, curiosity, and fear battered at the tattered edges of hir soul. Somewhere in the distance the squeaking of a water pump could be heard.

As sie approached the cook stand, everyone got out of the way. All but the chel behind it, whose only alternative to facing Grail was abandoning her business. She seemed to be considering it.

"I'm looking for another vasai," Grail said. "Someone like me. Only blond." And with a face to steal one's soul, but sie didn't mention that part.

The chel, whose pupils were enormous, slowly shook her head.

That could mean anything. Grail leaned closer. "Have you seen another vasai lately? Has anyone you know seen one? I won't leave until you tell me the truth."

"No. There are no vasai here. No one has ever seen one, until now." Her expression told Grail she still wished she'd never seen a vasai.

And she wasn't lying. These people's reaction to Grail's presence was one of utter shock. If another vasai had been among them recently, other feelings would be in the forefront. Sie moved on, and everyone made way for hir.

* * *

"So you knew a vasai once, truly?"

It was the soul seller. Ash, on his way back to his sleeping place after a long day burning siltgrass, was tempted to walk on, but that same stubborn something that would not permit him to part with Amaranth's coat wouldn't deny Amaranth's existence, either. He paused at the stand, his gaze straying over the many tiny colored boxes. "Yes. I was injured and he...he helped me."

"He?" The soul seller raised an eyebrow.

"That was his preference."

"Ah, his preference." Her mouth tightened. "You are a strange little man. A chel who knows a vasai. Who wears a fine coat but smells of siltgrass."

"I am," he admitted. "To myself most of all, I think."

"You really don't believe in the gods?"

"I don't know. The vasai I knew, he didn't. He should know, right?"

The soul seller stared at him. Her eyes were a pale color somewhere between green and gold. "And what about souls? Do you believe in those?"

Ash drew a cautious breath. "I didn't used to. But now I do."

"Because of your vasai."

If this person's vasai soul had survived her mother's intervention, then she would surely know what Amaranth and Ash now knew. "Yes."

The soul seller gestured to the table once more, and Ash wondered if their talk had simply been to bring him to this point, where the lure of self-knowledge was at its peak. "Choose."

And what of it? What was one more day burning siltgrass? "Pick for me," he said.

She cocked her head and gave him a wry smile of acknowledgment. A moment later, the smile was gone as the soul seller looked at him as only a vasai is capable of looking.

Her hand shot out and snatched up a small hexagonal box decorated with red and yellow circles. "This one."

Ash handed her his coin.

While he waited for his change, he opened the box. Inside were two tiny figures made from twisted bits of colored paper. They were entwined with one another. "The Lovers," he said aloud.

"Go back to your vasai," the soul seller told him, handing him his change. "Love is too rare to bow to honor."

Ash stared at her. The soul seller stared back. "You of all people should understand why that's impossible," he said.

The soul seller laughed. "Now who's missing a part?"

Sudden anger made Ash turn away.

By this time, Glean Street was packed with chel coming in from the fields. Bodies pressed against him as he made his way down the choked street. He took off his coat and carried it to protect it from getting dirty. The familiar smells of a stew gallery greeted his nose, and his stomach rumbled. He made his way toward it.

From out of nowhere a pack of children darted in front of him, and he stumbled. One of them caught him by the arm and steadied him. "Careful, uncle," the girl said. Ash caught the gleam of her smile, and she was gone. So was his coat.

"Hey!" he shouted and shoved past the knot of chel in front of the stew gallery. He caught sight of someone dashing down an alley, and he went after her.

The alley was dark and narrow. Fetid pools of mud pocked the ground and soon soaked his canvas shoes. On either side, chel worse off than most huddled in doorways, clinging to bottles of silsinthe or holding their hands out to him as he passed.

Up ahead, he just made out a few small figures running. He put on speed. It was a fool's errand and one that would likely get his throat cut. He knew that. Chelon was filled with gangs of children, orphans who banded together for protection.

He rounded the corner and found himself in an open space between two tenements and a laundry. High up in the far wall, steam vents issued a steady stream of vapor, turning the evening chill warm and moist.

At first, he thought he'd made a wrong turn and was alone. But then, he realized what he'd taken to be the glitter of condensation on the stacks of oil drums on the far side were in fact several sets of eyes.

A soft scrape behind him made him turn, only to find two muscular chel youths with fish spears blocking the exit.

He turned again and found the girl who had steadied him standing in the middle of the courtyard. Behind her and all around him, countless other children emerged from the shadows. They stood around him, staring with hostile faces.

"You shouldn't have followed," said the girl. "You lost a coat; now you'll lose your skin." She and the two boys with the spears all bore a family resemblance.

"That coat does not belong to me," said Ash. "I have to return it to its owner."

She stared at him and laughed. "So you stole it yourself, but you'll risk your life to keep it? You must be crazy."

Too true. Ash lifted the soul that hung around his neck. "Here, I'll trade you this for it, and then I'll leave you alone."

Laughter greeted him on all sides. The girl shook her head. "You are crazy if you think any of us give a damn about some stupid painted box with a bit of trash inside it. I don't know why you old folks waste your money on that crap. Even if it were real, what use is a soul, anyway? We're better off without them if you ask me."

"I used to think that too," said Ash.

That seemed to surprise her. She tilted her head to one side a moment, hesitating, and then seemed to make up her mind. She shook her head. At her side, she held two fingers together and made a cutting motion with them.

Ash felt a slight movement of air on the back of his neck. He turned and lifted his arm, blocking the strike the boy aimed at his back. Ash used the boy's surprise to wrap his arm around the shaft of the spear and wrench it from his grip.

The other boy charged him, and Ash turned, holding the spear out in defense. The point caught the boy in the belly. His eyes went wide and he backed up. The spear clattered to the ground as he clutched the wound.

The other boy, the one who attacked first, grabbed Ash by the arms and held him tight as the girl picked up the spear and drew back to thrust it into his heart. "Wait!" yelled Ash. "He's your brother, isn't he?"

"What of it?" she asked.

"If you kill me, he'll die."

"He'll die anyway."

"I can get him help. I know someone who can heal him. If you let me live. If you kill me, he'll die a slow and agonizing death. The wound is in his gut. You should know what--"

"I know. We should make you suffer the same." She lowered the point of the spear to his belly.

"He can be healed. I know someone who can do it."

She looked at him sharply. "A doctor?"

Ash thought fast. If he told her the truth, she would not believe him. Chel did not know vasai, and even if he did, vasai could not heal chel, who had no souls. At least, that's what everyone believed. "Yes, a doctor."

Her gaze searched his face. "I don't know. It could be a trick."

"Ember," groaned the boy. "Please. I don't want to die."

For the briefest moment, her feelings for her brother ravaged her face. Her nostrils flared, and her eye shone with tears. Then she got control of herself again, her face harder than ever. "Fine," she snarled. "But if you're lying, we'll make sure you feel everything Soot does."

Ash swallowed, wishing he could pray to someone that the soul seller could still heal.

* * *

It took Amaranth three days to heal Pull. Between sessions, he was too exhausted to do anything but sleep. But finally, on the evening of the third day since he'd arrived in Pelon, he took Pull's hand and let his soul sweep through her, and he found not a single trace of the cancer remaining.

He smiled, released her hand, and sank back on the bed. In his depleted condition, even that small effort left him dizzy and panting. He'd pushed himself hard to heal her this quickly, but now, as soon as he recovered, he could go and find Ash.

"You're well," he told Pull, closing his eyes. "It's all gone now."

"Thank you," she said. He felt the brush of her lips on his forehead. "I don't know how to thank you enough."

Amaranth closed his eyes and fell into darkness.

Chapter Ten

The Night of Found Souls

They bound Ash's wrists behind his back and draped his coat over his shoulders to hide the fact. Ember held on to the end of the rope that trailed from his bindings, standing close behind him so it wouldn't be seen. The others surrounded him, and they all trooped off down the alley.

They made a strange sight. People stopped and stared as they went by. A grown chel surrounded by a group of obvious orphans. When they came up to the soul seller's booth, she stood. "You can't have your money back. I don't have it. Every hour my banker collects my earnings and keeps them safe for me, and he just left now. Setting these urchins on me won't do you any good, you hear?"

"I haven't come for my money back," said Ash. "I... We need your help."

The soul seller stared. "You think highly of yourself. We don't know each other."

"A boy has been injured," said Ash. "He'll die if you don't heal him."

"A boy? An orphan, you mean. And what's one of them to anyone with sense? Besides, why come to me? I'm no doctor."

"You're vasai," said Ash.

The street around them went silent. Ash was conscious of hundreds of pairs of eyes on them, though all he could see were the soul seller's, glaring.

"You'd better watch out the way you talk to me," she said. Her face was pale, her lips pulled tight.

"It's true. You can heal that boy."

"I'm not vasai!"

"Who is this, Vine?" asked a chel who stepped through the crowd.

"Some customer, making trouble."

It was the banker, flanked by his lieutenants. He looked at Ash and the children. "Time for you to go," he said. He was big for a chel, and so were the four others with him.

Ash shook his head. "We can't."

The chel stepped closer. "I don't think you understand. I'm Brand, Vine's banker, and these are my colleagues."

"We're not trying to steal from her or vandalize her stand. This girl's brother is wounded, badly. He'll die without help. We just want Vine to treat him."

The banker took in the way Ash stood, with his hands behind his back, the coat over his shoulders, and Ember standing close behind him. His eyes glittered with amusement. "Well, I can see you're in a spot of trouble, brother, but it's no concern of ours. Besides, even if Vine were vasai--"

"I'm not. I'm chel."

"--she couldn't heal a chel."

"I'll give the boy the soul I bought from you," Ash told Vine. "Then you can heal him."

Vine shook her head. "That soul is for you and you alone."

Ash looked from the soul seller to her protector and back again. "Think of the money you could earn if you prove that you can heal chel."

Vine's face grew even more pinched. She saw the thoughtful look on Brand's face, and her shoulders slumped.

"I know you," Brand said to Ember.

Ember shook her head and looked down at the ground. "No, sir. I'm just a kid. My brother, he needs help." She started to cry.

The banker laughed. "Oh, you're good. But then, you'd have to be to run that pestilent mob of yours. You're a real thorn in my side; you know that?"

She went very still, and Ash saw her trade glances with the boy with the spear.

A new hush fell over the crowd.

Ash saw it--the slight twitch of Ember's fingers. The index and the middle one together, making an abbreviated horizontal swipe.

The next thing he knew, the group of children around him erupted.

Ember's brother thrust his spear at Brand, but the banker dodged to one side and struck the boy on the back of the head with his cudgel. The boy stumbled and fell to his knees in the mud, but by then, Brand was at the bottom of a pile of screaming, hitting, biting children.

Passersby scattered as Ember's mob and the banker's lieutenants fought one another tooth and nail. The lieutenants were bigger and stronger, but the orphans outnumbered them. Ash, forgotten for the moment, sidled around the soul seller's table, seeking shelter from the fray.

Vine was already there, crouched beneath the table. "What is wrong with you?" she snarled as he got awkwardly to his knees and crawled in beside her. The table's covering shielded them from view. "Why have you brought this down on me?"

"They were going to kill me. That girl stole my coat, and in the scuffle, I stabbed one of her brothers."

"So what?"

"So the others surrounded me. I told them I knew someone who could heal the boy."

"But you don't," said Vine.

Ash didn't answer because a body landed on top of the table with a thud. The weathered wood sagged. His hands still bound behind his back, Ash shoved Vine to one side with his shoulder and rolled after her. Seconds later the table cracked in half, and souls of all shapes and colors rained down around them.

They wound up in a little lean-to created by one half of the table, its top now forming an A-frame with the legs.

"What have you done? My table, my livelihood. Gods abandon you!" She grabbed Ash around the neck and squeezed. His arms tied behind his back, there was little he could do to free himself. He thrashed from side to side, making the half table scrape and jump across the ground.

He couldn't breathe. Pressure built in his lungs. He struggled harder, trying to kick her, trying anything. Black dots danced before his eyes.

Suddenly the half table flew aside, and Brand yanked Vine off Ash. Brand looked rather the worse for wear, with the beginnings of a black eye and his hair plastered to one side of his head with blood. Behind him, Ash could see several children running away, and a few bodies, large and small, lying still on the ground. Ember, however, did not flee. She stood apart, a spear in her hand, glowering at everyone.

"Enough, Vine," said Brand. "Explain to me why your stand attracts this kind of attention."

Eyes wide, the soul seller shook her head.

"It's not her fault," said Ash, getting to his feet. "I brought these children here."

Brand released the soul seller and turned to glare at him. "And who the fuck are you?"

"My name is Ash." Ash straightened his shoulders.

"That's supposed to mean something to me? Every other fucking chel in fucking Chelon is named Ash. Now." He paused and stepped closer. He dropped a heavy hand on Ash's shoulder. "Tell me why I shouldn't gut you where you stand."

Ash became aware of something pointed prodding at his belly.

"If you don't kill him, I will," said Ember. "He said he was taking us to a doctor, not some stupid soul seller."

"She's right. I promised her I'd take her to someone who can heal her brother," Ash told him.

Brand's eyes narrowed. "But you brought them here. Vine's no doctor."

Ash locked eyes with Vine. Her look pleaded with him not to explain. He could understand why. If she did have a vasai's abilities, she would be much more valuable in Brand's eyes. More valued, more used. Her life was her own now. If she became Brand's chel vasai...

He looked to where Ember now stood. She gave him a dark glare that promised retribution. Counting her brother, Vine, and Amaranth, that was three lives he'd ruined.

But Amaranth and Vine would be alive and might change their fate, whereas Ember's brother, if he died, would stay dead. "Because she's a vasai."

Brand raised one eyebrow.

"Come on," said Ash. "How blind can you be? Does she look like a chel?"

Brand regarded Vine. She dressed like a chel, carried herself like a chel, and wore her hair like a chel, but her face was not a chel's face. Because every other aspect of her appearance screamed chel, it was easy enough for people to see what they expected to see. But now that Ash had called attention to it, there was no denying the high cheekbones, the long nose, the sculpted chin.

Brand pursed his lips and nodded. Vine gave Ash a dark look. "This boy," said the banker. "He is chel?"

Ash nodded.

Brand laughed. "Then even if Vine is vasai, she can't heal him. You've caused a lot of trouble for nothing."

Ash nodded to the soul he wore around his neck. "If he had one of these."

"Oh come now. Those are a comfort to our people, but no one believes they truly take the place of a real soul." He shook his head. "You must be crazy."

"Maybe I am, but I know the vasai can heal the boy."

"For the last time," shouted Vine. "I am not vasai!"

"But I am," said a new voice.

They all turned to behold a tall figure standing over the shattered remains of Vine's display table. At the sight of another vasai, Ash's heart tried to crawl up his throat and leap from his mouth, and in the next instant, it sank down again as he took in the dark hair and the severe profile. "Grail."

A group of chel had gathered, observing the brawl and its aftermath from a safe distance. Now they all gasped. Whispers flew about. "A vasai!" "A real vasai in Chelon!"

Brand's eyes grew wide. Ember stared openly.

"Go get your brother," Ash told her.

She shook her head. "He's chel."

"Get him anyway. Vasai all have medical training."

Ember took off down the street, feet flying.

Grail picked his way around the debris, kicking souls out of his path as he went, and walked up to Ash. Brand, a shuttered, watchful expression on his face, gave him room.

Grail looked down at Ash. "You have a knack for getting yourself, and others, into trouble."

Ash couldn't help it. There was something about Grail that never failed to get his back up. Even when he was right. He ignored the observation. "How's Amaranth?"

Grail's smile was anything but pleasant. "Do you think that's funny? You tell me."

"What?" Ash felt the whole foundation of his return to Chelon shake beneath him. "What?"

"He's gone," said Grail. "I assumed he came after you."

All Ash could do was shake his head and gape like a beached fish.

Grail's eyes narrowed, and he grabbed Ash by the upper arms. "You mean you haven't seen him?"

"No. No, I... He left?"

* * *

Grail was surprised to find Ash's hands bound behind his back, but it was the look in his face that filled him with dread. The chel stared up at Grail with wide eyes. His mouth hung open. He looked entirely different like this. Fear and confusion stripped him of all his bravado. There were no hard, angry edges now, no sly chel cunning. His longing and his love for Amaranth were naked in his face. Grail felt... Gods within!

He released Ash as if burned and stepped back, but there was no retreating from the knowledge of what he'd felt, what he still felt: Ash's soul. There was no mistaking it. It was bright and fierce and needy, and it was a soul.

This was not just feelings making themselves felt. Grail could deny it no longer. The texture, the shape, the way Ash's soul moved, brushing against hir own--it was unmistakable.

So this was what Amaranth knew. No wonder he'd seemed crazy.

Now that Grail understood, sie became aware of all the other countless souls around hir, lighting up hir awareness like stars burning in the night sky. Sie swayed, overwhelmed by them all--thousands of souls, all denied, all striving just the same.

Sie found himself on hir knees, weeping. The evil of the lie so undid hir sie might simply have lain down on the ground and let the weight of the wicked world bury hir. But though the Temple might be false and the Elai greedy, the gods were good. A vasai in the dress of a female chel stepped around Ash and smiled upon Grail. "Come now, brother. Stand up. It's not dignified for one of your station to kneel in the street."

From blocks away Grail had felt the soul of this vasai. Sie'd thought it was Amaranth's and had followed it here. "Their souls," said Grail. "You must feel them too."

"Ah. I see. Yes. Now you know." She lifted Grail up and embraced hir. She surrounded hir with her soul, giving Grail the moments sie needed to take in this revelation. Grail took comfort in her touch, within and without.

Her soul was very different from the light and warmth of Amaranth's. It was light and dark intertwined together--rich, complex, and compelling. Grail found hir own soul answering this beacon of wisdom and thwarted desire in a way sie had never experienced before. Privately, Grail had always thought sie loved Amaranth. But sie'd never felt this before. Not for Amaranth, not for anybody. Until now.

The mud, stink, and squalor of Chelon disappeared. Even those thousands of denied chel souls faded into the background. With a tearing sensation as painful as it was joyful, the Lovers within Grail turned from each other and reached out to their counterparts dwelling in the soul of this strange new vasai. Grail didn't even know her name.

* * *

Ash stared openmouthed as Grail knelt in the street and wept. Vine went to hir and addressed hir like a chel. Brother. But Grail did not object. Sie looked up at Vine, hir lovely face pale and streaked with tears. When Grail embraced Vine, it seemed an action predestined from the moment they'd laid eyes on one another.

Ash could see the connection between the two of them; anyone could, no matter what kind of soul they possessed. Well. Hooray for them.

The entire crowd, all the way up and down Glean Street for as far as the eye could see, had come to a dead stop. Ash couldn't remember when he'd ever heard Chelon so quiet. It was as if the whole world held its breath.

And into that watching, waiting silence came a cry. Ember's brother, who lay on a makeshift litter, carried by Ember and another of the orphans.

Grail's head snapped up, and his gaze locked on to the boy, and suddenly Ash realized why she was crying. She felt their souls. Grail, the most traditional of all vasai, now knew the truth.

* * *

Grail knew what people thought of him. Some, Amaranth for instance, thought him inflexible and needlessly hidebound. Others saw virtue in his devout adherence to the vasai customs and teachings. She was a loyal friend, a conscientious healer, and yes, an ardent supporter of the Temple.

But she was not a hypocrite, or a coward. They had lied. Whoever first declared that chel were without souls had lied. And she had lived his whole life in service to that lie. That was one thing, a waste, yes, and oh, did she owe Amaranth an apology if ever she found him, but Grail had not known it was a lie. Now she did, and to deny the truth for one moment longer was simply untenable.

So when the boy cried out, she knew what had to be done.

It would change everything, perhaps not for the better. She looked at the chel vasai. "What is your name?"

"Vine."

"Mine is Grail. You...you've lived here all your life?"

She nodded.

Grail had heard rumors of parents who insisted on keeping their vasai infants. He'd never believed them before. But the proof stood before him now, one more revelation. "Can you heal that boy?" A shadow act performed by a shadow person might not burn them all up in the blazing light of revelation.

"I don't know. I've never done it."

In a sense, neither had sie. Sie had always treated Elai, and the mode had always been sexual. This was a child. Must sie...?

"Amaranth healed you," Grail said to Ash, understanding fully now for the first time what had passed between hir best friend and the chel.

Ash came forward to stand at Grail's side. "Yes."

Grail took a deep breath. "Did he make love to you in order to...?"

"He held my hand and took the pain away."

"Held your hand." So, another lie. A personal rage ignited deep within Grail. Sie dared not allow it to grow. Not now.

Grail knelt beside the boy as up and down the street scores of chel looked on. The child clutched his belly and moaned. His pain stabbed at Grail's soul, but all the same Grail took his hand and loosed hir soul.

"What's wrong with him?" sie asked the girl crouching at his side.

"Stabbed in the gut," she said.

Grail's soul verified what she said. A sharp object had pierced the boy's lower intestine, spilling bacteria into the rest of his system. The pain the boy felt now was the pain of trauma but soon, without treatment, infection would set in. He would die slowly, in agony.

Grail took a deep breath and merged hir soul with the boy's. Sie weathered the onslaught of fear and pain, of chronic hunger and anger and hopelessness. When hir soul and the boy's acclimated to each other, Grail concentrated on the wound, using hir attunement with the boy to coax his body into mending. Working from the inside out, sie stimulated torn tissue to knit together again, first the intestine, and then the muscle and skin above it. The boy's bleeding stopped; the wound disappeared. But Grail was not done yet. Next, sie rallied the boy's immune system to attack the incipient infection. With the support of two merged souls, the boy's antibodies soon cleansed him of the deadly impurities.

The boy blinked up at him and smiled. For a moment they just stared at each other. What sie'd told Evanscar might have been a lie, but all the same, only a roll of the genetic dice made Grail vasai. Sie could just as easily have been chel, like this boy.

Tears in Grail's eyes made the boy's face waver. Grail squeezed his hand once before letting go and withdrawing hir soul.

The boy jumped up, wiping the blood away from his belly to reveal only a faint scar. "I'm healed! The vasai healed me! I felt it! I felt my soul!"

The gathered crowd erupted with shouts and cheers. The girl hugged her brother, and soon all three of them were surrounded by well-wishers. Two people lifted the boy up and hoisted him onto their shoulders. Others reached for Grail, who pulled back, unnerved by the bodies pressing all around him. They were joyous now, but what would happen when they got to thinking about how they'd been lied to all this time?

Grail tried to turn to Vine, but a couple blocked his way. They stroked each other's chests, over their hearts, as if they could feel their newfound souls. When they saw him they reached out. One of them hugged him. "You proved that Harken's lost teachings are true. We do have souls. Thank you," she said.

Grail patted her on the back and extricated himself as soon as possible. Grail's breath came rapidly now, and his head swam. That was quite a bit of healing she'd just done, and now... Someone jostled him from behind, and she bumped into another chel, who grinned at him with rotten teeth and tried to kiss him. She held the chel at arm's length, nodding, trying to be polite, but all she wanted to do was get out of here and back to safe, clean Elaion. Where was the chel vasai? Or Ash? Anyone?

"Here's the real hero!" someone shouted.

"Will you give me a soul too?" asked another.

The next thing Grail knew, two chel had hold of him by the arms and were trying to lift him up onto their shoulders. "No, please. Let me go." She tugged his arms, but their grip was strong.

"You deserve a victory parade of your own," one of the chel said.

"We'll take you all over Chelon," said the other, "and you can give all of us souls!"

"Let me go!" Grail's voice shook with panic. "You've got it wrong. I didn't give him a soul. I--"

"Sisters! This vasai is our guest." Suddenly Vine was there, disentangling Grail's sleeve from the chel's grasp. "She's tired from healing the boy. You must let him rest."

The chel drew back, abashed. "Oh. Sorry," said one, who turned to Grail. "Please forgive us." She gave her cohort a cuff on the ear. "Let hir go. Can't you see sie's tired?"

"This way," said Vine, guiding Grail to a small yellow shack. In front of it stood the shattered remains of a table. Bright trinkets lay scattered on the ground all around it, trampled in the mud.

"That was your stand?" asked Grail.

"Yes. I'm a soul seller. Was, anyway. I made fake souls for people who didn't have real ones. Or so they thought." Vine opened the door of the little house. She showed Grail to a chair and lit a lamp. "As you can see, I did well for myself, but that's all over now."

Grail looked about the tiny dwelling, searching for evidence of Vine's prosperity. A worn plank floor was covered by a rug frayed around the edges. In one corner sat a bedstead with a thin mattress and a blanket folded up at the foot of it, the walls were hung with more blankets, presumably to block drafts from the cracks in the wooden slats of the walls. A brazier stood on a stand against the wall. The cupboard above it held a few mismatched bowls, plates, and cups. A table, two chairs, and an oil lamp hanging from the peak of the roof completed the furnishings.

While Vine lit the little brazier and set a pot of water on to boil, Grail stared at the table spattered with paint and strewn with the materials of her trade. "I can't believe it," said Grail. "Chel have souls. Have had them all along. Gods within. What have we done?"

"What do you mean? Done in denying chel souls or revealing them?"

"I'm not sure." Grail sat up and looked about the tiny hovel again. "Where's Ash?"

"Who knows? Out celebrating?"

"No. Not him. You saw the look on his face when I told him Amaranth had left Elaion. He's gone looking for him. I hope he finds him. He's been missing for three days now." What if Amaranth were out there now, amid all those agitated chel? If something happened to him it would be Grail's fault, on so many levels.

Vine perched on her bed, looking thoughtful. "So, this Amaranth... He's Ash's va-sai."

Grail raised an eyebrow. "I suppose that's one way of putting it. There's something between them. I--" Sie almost said sie didn't want to know if or how they were involved, but realized how hypocritical that was.

Vine leaned forward. "Not you?"

Grail shook hir head. "Not me?"

Vine spoke slowly, as if explaining something to a child. "You're not Ash's vasai?"

"Oh gods, no!"

"Mm." That point settled, Vine returned to the brazier, where the water was boiling. "I'll fix you some tea."

Chapter Eleven

Grail in Love

All night long, Chelon rejoiced. The streets were choked with celebrants as chel of all ages laughed, danced, sang, and cried at the revelation of their souls.

"So much for my business," Vine said, looking out at the street through a knothole in the front wall.

"I'm sorry about that." Grail turned to Vine. The urge to touch her seemed ever present. "You... How are you here and not in Elaion where you belong?"

Vine turned from the knothole and regarded hir, one eyebrow raised. "Where I belong? Has this night taught you nothing?"

"Well, you know what I mean. Why weren't you taken to the Temple?"

Vine looked uncomfortable. "My mother did not want to give me up."

"But the money..."

She shrugged. "She always told me I was worth more than money."

Grail knitted hir brow. "You mean she hid you?"

"In a manner of speaking."

Sie had a feeling sie was missing something. Grail didn't want to make the same mistakes sie'd made with Amaranth. "I don't understand."

Vine shot Grail a sharp look, then smiled and put one hand on hir shoulder. Their souls bumped. "I'll explain it to you later." She went to the door and opened it, peering out. Grail stood behind her, looking over her shoulder. The street was full of revelers.

"I don't understand," said Grail. "A soul won't feed you. It won't clothe you or put a roof over your head. Most of these people live in desperate circumstances. This changes nothing."

"Oh to the contrary," said Vine. "It changes everything. We're real now. We matter."

"We?"

She nodded. "Whatever body I was born in, I've lived my life a chel."

Vine looked at Grail over her shoulder. There was a challenge in her eyes. She waited to see how Grail would react. But Grail didn't know how to react. What was sie doing here? All sie'd wanted was to find Amaranth and tell him he could come home, and now... Grail decided to sidestep Vine's challenge for the moment. Sie shook hir head. "Will you matter to the Elai? Or even the pel? Nothing's changed."

"You're wrong," said Vine. "We matter to ourselves now."

"Oh come, you can't tell me that any creature is indifferent to its state, soul or no."

"Of course not," said Vine. "But, you see, now we know that we don't deserve to be the lowest of the low."

Grail let that sink in. "There's going to be a lot of trouble, isn't there?" Trouble sie'd caused.

Vine went to her worktable, fingering the little boxes and the jars of paint. "Yes, I imagine."

"Is that why you never revealed what you knew?"

A jar hit the table with a click. Vine stared at hir.

"You must have known they had souls all this time."

"I knew. But..." She gestured around her, apparently at a loss.

"You were passing as chel, so you couldn't say anything."

Vine hurled the paint jar. It hit one of the blankets on the wall with a muffled thud and fell to the floor, leaking blue onto the planks. "I am chel!"

"But you're not just chel." Grail found the courage of truth. "You have a vasai's soul. You can't deny that. Not to me." Even as sie spoke, Grail's soul yearned to merge with Vine's. The Lovers wanted their mates. Did Vine feel it too?

Vine's cheeks colored. Grail saw her larynx bob as she swallowed. Grail reached out but did not quite dare put hir hand on Vine's shoulder. "You're so beautiful," sie said.

Vine looked sour. "There's no need to mock me, vasai."

"I don't understand." Grail was lost.

"Truly? Then you must be a fool."

"I am. But the moment I felt your soul, the Lovers within me turned from each other to face their mates in you."

Vine stared at Grail, openmouthed. Did she understand what that meant?

"At the Temple, this was not spoken of except among the students. The older ones said..." Grail hesitated, unsure if she dared continue. Vine leaned closer, mouth open as if thirsting for his words. Would she find them to her taste? "They said that is how a vasai knows she is in love."

The light glimmering in Vine's eyes gave Grail hope. But Vine said, "I thought a vasai's love was for the Elai, first and always."

Grail straightened. Determination made his voice stronger. "It would seem the world is full of lies."

A smile played at the corners of Vine's mouth. She lifted her chin in challenge. "So you're saying you love me?"

"Yes." She must be mad. This was all so sudden. And yet...

Vine's mouth went flat. "You don't know what you're saying. What you think you love is not a real vasai." She folded her arms across her chest. "Not a real anything."

Grail shook his head, confused. "There is nothing false about your soul."

"Gods abandon my soul! You don't know... How can you not know? How can anybody be so dense? You can't love me, Grail."

"It's too late." She approached Vine, arms outstretched. "I already do."

She pushed his back. There was little room. Grail's back struck the wall. The tiny house shook.

"How do you think Mother kept me out of the Temple?"

"I..." Sie was an idiot. Grail knew that even though sie did not know the answer to Vine's question.

"By removing that which would distinguish me from a female. You think you love me? Look!" She lifted the hem of her skirt up over her waist.

No cock shielded the folds of her labia, only thick, reddish brown pubic hair and, at the crown, a bump. Gods within.

Before Grail could school the shock from hir face, Vine saw it. She raised one eyebrow. "See? What did I tell you?"

Grail forced hir gaze back to Vine's face. "I'm so sorry."

"Yes, me too, yet I live. I've managed to make a place for myself. A soul seller is expected to be eccentric. But now... Nobody's going to be buying souls anymore, are they?" She went back to the knothole and peered through it. "What am I going to do?"

Grail didn't have an answer for that. Sie didn't know what sie would do either. What would any of them do, now that everything they'd known or believed in had been ripped away? But sie knew one thing. "You're going to let someone who loves you help you." Sie stepped up behind Vine and risked putting hir hands on her shoulders. The contact sent little ripples of desire through hir body--a warm glow.

Vine tensed at first, then relaxed and sank back against Grail. Their souls overlapped. Grail showed her what she would not believe in words.

Still she fought. Am I this stubborn? Grail wondered.

Vine shook her head and tilted it to peer up at Grail. "But--"

"I don't care." Grail bent hir head and kissed her. The touch of her lips brought a sweet ache to life in hir stomach. Hir cock thickened and hir soul tingled. "What can a thing like that matter when our souls are shaped for each other? I can feel the way they fit together." Sie kissed her again. "Can you feel it?" Please, gods within, let it not just be me this time.

Vine sagged against Grail, breathing rapidly. "I can. I do. I feel it, but you have to know my alteration is not just a matter of identity or appearance. I--" She kept her head bowed as she spoke. Her voice shook. "I've never known anything else, but I have gathered that my functioning is different from those who are intact. My capacity for feeling things is diminished."

"Your soul's capacity is not altered in any way, Vine."

"Perhaps, but my body..."

Grail turned her to face hir. "Nothing in life is ever perfect." Sie cupped her cheek and kissed her again, letting hir love flow over Vine through the conduit of their souls. "We will let your body feel all that it is capable of feeling." Grail ran hir hand down her back and stroked the round curve of her bottom. Sie bent hir head and brushed hir lips over the points of Vine's nipples, poking from beneath her shift. Vine gasped, arching her spine.

Grail moved hir hand from Vine's ass, around to her front. Sie stroked her folds. Vine pressed her forehead against Grail's shoulder, panting. As Grail palmed the nub at the crown of Vine's yoni, sie dissolved hir soul's boundaries and let it intermingle with Vine's. "And we'll let our souls do the rest," sie said.

Vine's pleasure--blunted perhaps but certainly present--ignited hir own, and their bodies melded together.

They stumbled toward the bed in the corner, shedding clothing as they went. Grail was on fire for Vine, as sie'd never been for any client or even for Amaranth when they'd been in school together. Hir cock was rock hard, precum dripping from the tip even as hir pussy was so slick with lubricant it dripped down hir thighs.

Vine, all protests abandoned, threw off her shift with defiance. She lay down on the pallet and looked up at Grail.

Sie wanted to fuck Vine so badly. Grail's soul dragged hir to her. Sie got to hir hands and knees, kissed Vine's warm, generous mouth again, and then her neck, licking and nibbling. The satin texture of her skin was a delight to Grail's senses.

Sie worked hir way down, worshipping her body with hir mouth. Grail pressed hir erection into Vine's thigh so her body as well as her soul could feel how much sie desired her.

Sie laved Vine's breasts with hir tongue, smiling to see each bright pink nipple stand up at attention. Vine ran her hands through Grail's hair and played with hir ears.

Oh gods, how sie loved having hir ears played with. It sent electric shocks up and down hir spine. Sie writhed, gasping. Grail had never experienced sex this way before. This was as much for hir as it was for Vine. Sie reveled in it.

Through their soul connection Grail felt Vine's trepidation rise as sie left the safe zone of her upper body and began to trail kisses down her belly toward the thick patch of curls between her legs. When sie came to the thick bump poking out from the crown of her yoni, Grail kissed it. Vine grabbed hir by the hair. "It's not just a big clit, you know. You can't just lick it and expect me to go crazy. It's..."

"I know," sie said, tears in hir eyes because sie did know. Through their soul bond Grail got a sense of the magnitude of what had been taken from Vine. "But let me love all of you, anyway."

Grail felt something in Vine's soul--something long and tightly held--release. She let out a long sigh and nodded, stroking the side of Grail's face.

Sie explored the parameters of Vine's flesh, tonguing her vagina, licking her folds, and kissing and licking the scarred nub at the top. Sie felt Vine relax. Sie knew through their soul bond that what sie was doing felt good. Sie clamped hir lips over Vine's nub and sucked her in earnest. Vine relaxed even more, her hips slowly undulating.

Grail's cock throbbed with need. Vine reached out with her soul and teased hir. "Fuck me," she whispered.

Grail's soul felt as full as hir cock. Sie had performed in this manner for clients many times, but this was different. This meant more than pleasure or duty. It was the physical manifestation of the truth Grail had known from the first moment Vine had touched hir. They belonged together.

Grail raised up, and Vine lifted her knees. The first brush of her soft folds sent a rush of warmth through Grail's body. They came together in one long, smooth glide. Vine's silken channel hugged hir perfectly. The sweet ache that had been building in Grail's belly since their first kiss now bloomed, filling Grail as Grail filled Vine. Hir skin tingled all over.

Grail thrust into Vine, hir desire, so long denied, rising quickly to its crescendo. "Overlap your soul with mine," sie said raggedly. "Let yourself feel what I feel."

Vine locked her arms tight around hir neck and nodded. A second later, she gasped. Feeling their bodies now as one Grail could hold back no longer. Sie took everything sie had and threw it into each thrust, each kiss and caress. There was no beginning and no end. No Grail and no Vine. They...were. And then, just as sie thought sie'd be forever lost on a heaving ocean of sensation, delight sharpened to a pinprick, like a bright star in a dark sky, and then it burst, scattering their consciousness.

When awareness returned, sie cradled Vine against hir chest. Nothing was said or needed to be said. Vine reached down, pulled the blanket over them both, and they drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Amaranth awoke full of eagerness to at last resume his search for Ash. He rolled over, blinking in the darkness, and then stilled at the sound of voices arguing. There was a light on in the hallway outside, and he saw shadows on the wall. Five, maybe six people. In shadow, their actions were exaggerated, punctuating their words with jagged, sudden moves. He'd become accustomed to Stack's grouching, but this was different. Someone whose voice he didn't recognize said, "Stop lying. I know all about it." And then he heard Pull say, "No! Weave! Don't go in there, please!"

A figure appeared in the doorway, and then the light came on. A female pel about Pull's age barreled into the room. She looked at him with an expression of triumph on her face. "There," she said, folding her arms with evident satisfaction. "Now if that's a sick aunt, I'm an Elai."

Pull and Stack stood in the doorway looking stricken. Behind them Amaranth could just make out Push and two other figures.

Amaranth sat up. The room spun around him. It mattered not. He'd stayed too long already.

"It's not their fault," he told the woman. Who was she? "I insisted on staying. I've been unwell, and they were helping me, but now I'm going." He managed to get his feet on the floor. "Please don't tell anyone I've been here. They don't deserve to get in trouble for this."

She came around the bed and stood facing him. "Oh, they're not in trouble. I'm Weave, their supervisor, and I think you're a great asset to our community."

In the hallway Amaranth heard a scuffle, and a gasp from Push. Pull turned. "Don't hurt her!" She went to her daughter's aid, but Stack pulled her back. The struggle subsided, and two other pel, strangers, came into the room. One of them held a length of sturdy rope.

Amaranth struggled to his feet, but his head swam. He couldn't get his balance.

"Oh no," said Weave, putting a hand in the middle of his chest and pushing him back down onto the bed. "You're not going anywhere." She looked over her shoulder at the other two pel. "Tie it to the bed."

Pull tried to fight them, but one of the pel clouted her on the jaw hard enough to make her fall down, and after that, Push and Stack hustled her out of the room, and they didn't return. Amaranth was just as glad. He hadn't gone to all that trouble for her to be killed in a brawl.

Weave's two assistants bound him firmly to the bed, spread-eagle, and when they were done, Weave gave him a smile that curdled his stomach. She stretched and winced. "My back hurts," she said and climbed on top of him.

* * *

There wasn't a chel abed in all of Chelon that night. Word of Ember's brother's healing spread quickly, and everyone was out celebrating. Ash pushed his way through streets clogged with revelers, desperately searching for Amaranth. The tall, blond vasai would be easy to spot if he were out of doors, if something hadn't happened to him. If, if, if...

Ash stopped an older female chel who was embracing everyone she encountered. "Please, sister, have you seen a blond vasai?"

She clasped him to her bosom and then released him, patting him on the cheek. "A blond vasai? No, sweetheart. Our vasai is dark haired; everyone says so. Sie's resting now, tired after giving all of us souls. You mustn't be greedy now."

Ash opened his mouth to explain to her that Grail hadn't given them souls, but she was already turning to someone else, a male who returned her embrace with eager enthusiasm. Ash ran on.

Five hours later he had scoured Chelon from marsh to sea, from the border of Pelon to the bottom of Glean Street, and while he'd heard a dozen different versions of what had happened with Grail and the boy, he'd neither seen nor heard the first hint that Amaranth was in Chelon. Defeated, he started back toward Vine's house to see if he could find her and Grail and see what they thought about it.

* * *

"Gods within."

It was Vine's voice. Grail, asleep until that moment, forced his eyes open and tried to disentangle himself from the blanket. Sie got herself up into a sitting position and blinked in the bright morning light that came streaming in the door. The door that Vine held open and stared out of, mouth open.

Grail threw on his robe and hurried to her side. Gods within! Outside Vine's house and all up and down Glean Street, as far as the eye could see, sat chel, facing them, quietly waiting.

Now one stood and approached them. He had a child in his arms. "Please," he said, holding the child out to them. "My girl is sick. Won't you help her?"

Grail took another look at the people sitting patiently, peacefully, outside their door. Many of them had visible health issues. His soul confirmed that the others did as well. She looked at Vine, though she already knew his answer.

* * *

Half a mile from Vine's house, Ash encountered the first of the sitters. While the rest of Chelon partied, these people simply sat, all of them facing the general direction of Vine's residence and the site of what was now widely described as "the miracle."

Ash stopped, looking out over a sea of heads. He began to weave his way through them. A man reached up and took him by the hand, his grip strong though his face was gaunt. "Patience, brother. They'll get to all of us."

"They?"

"The soul giver and the soul healer. They're going to heal all of us." The man smiled, then coughed, a deep, rattling sound. Marsh cough.

Ash nodded and pried the man's fingers from around his wrist. "I'm not ill, brother. I have important news for them," he said, thinking fast. "I'm one of their first patients. They sent me on a quest, and I've returned."

The man's eyes lit up with reverence. "Of course, go on!" He turned to his neighbor. "It's their servant."

After that, no one tried to stop Ash as he made his way through the seated throng to Vine's front door. There, where the soul-selling stand had once stood, sheets of cardboard had been laid down with blankets on top of them. On this makeshift pallet lay a woman wasted by marsh cough. Vine and Grail knelt at her side, each of them holding one of her hands.

Ash stood back, watching them. He found he understood now why all these others were content to sit and wait. There was something so peaceful about the two of them, an all-encompassing kindness in whose presence even Ash felt his anxiety ease.

At length the vasai opened their eyes and released their patient's hands. "You'll breathe better now, sister, but you need to be treated again in a few days," said Vine.

The woman beamed. She stood and hugged each of them in turn. "I feel so much better! Thank you!"

Vine saw Ash first. "Did you find your vasai?"

"No." Ash turned to Grail. "I couldn't find Amaranth anywhere."

Ember came out of the house with a pail of water and a dipper. "Huh. You again," she said, spotting him. "Well, we can use the help. We've got our hands full here. Go fetch another pail of water, will you?" Without waiting to see if he did as she told him, she set out through the crowd, offering drinks to anyone who was thirsty.

Ash looked at Grail and Vine.

"She and the rest of her gang showed up a few hours ago," said Vine. "They've been a godsend. At first some of the sick objected to the presence of orphans, but once it got warm and they started circulating with the water, most of them came around." Vine stood and turned toward the house. "Come. You can help Ember later. Let's talk." She doubled back and caught the woman whom they'd just healed. "Sister, will you tell the others we'll be back in half an hour? We've been working all morning. We need to take a break."

The woman nodded.

Inside Vine's house, Ash paced the floor. "Are you certain Amaranth left Elaion?" he asked Grail.

Grail nodded. "And he went after you. About that I'm positive."

"So he left Elaion..."

"But he never arrived in Chelon," Grail finished.

Ash stopped in his circuit of the room. "How do you know that?"

Grail gestured at the door, on the other side of which the voices of the petitioners could be heard. "If he were here, this would have happened much sooner."

Of course. "You're right," said Ash. "So either he changed his mind and went back to Elaion..."

Grail raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, he didn't go back to Elaion, and he never made it to Chelon. Then he must be in Pelon, and something must be keeping him there. Do you think he's come to harm?"

Grail's fingers tightened on Vine's hand. "I don't know."

"But who would harm a vasai?" asked Vine.

"He left his place," said Grail. "Outside the bounds of order, anything can happen."

Ash knew the truth of that too well. Still. "I just can't imagine anyone harming so valuable a person as a vasai. Wait!"

"What?" asked Grail.

"I will bet you anything he encountered someone in Pelon who was sick." Ash shook his finger at Grail, willing himself to believe his own theory because the alternative was so... No. "He helped that person."

Grail nodded slowly. "And if that person was very sick..."

"It might take a long time. That's it!" Ash jumped, then forced himself to calm. "You know Amaranth."

"He wouldn't turn from someone who needed him."

"That's right," said Ash, reaching for his coat.

"Where are you going?" Vine asked, her voice sharp.

"To Pelon."

"You can't! If they catch you there--"

Ash's stomach hurt. "I know but I have to go." They stared at him. "I have to know he's all right. What if...what if we're wrong? What if something's wrong?"

"No pel would hurt a vasai, Ash," said Grail.

Fear and memory twisted Ash's stomach. "I don't know." Ash folded his arms around his ribs. "I believed you. You said I was hurting Amaranth by staying, and I believed you." Guilt and remorse thickened his voice. "I left him in the middle of the night. Like a thief."

"I'm sorry," said Grail.

"But it's too late now," Vine noted. "The important thing now is how are we going to take care of all those people out there?"

Ash shook his head. "But Amaranth--"

"Amaranth is with the pel," said Vine, the word an epithet on her lips. "He's fine. You need to stop worrying about him and finish what you started here."

"What I started? Look who's talking. You could have just come with me and healed that kid in a back alley where no one would have seen, and this whole soul thing never would have happened. But you had to make everything difficult," said Ash.

"I didn't know how to heal!"

"You do now."

"Grail taught me. And anyway, none of this would have happened if you'd just stayed with your vasai in the first place."

Ash pointed at Grail. "Sie told me to leave him!"

"I did," said Grail.

At that point Ember came in, her bucket empty. "What are we going to do? There's too many of them! You can't heal them all, just the two of you."

"See?" said Vine.

Ash shook his head. "I'm sorry. When I find Amaranth I'll bring him back here, and he can help you. But I've got to go."

"You'll get killed for nothing!" Grail shouted after him, but he was already halfway out the door.

Chapter Twelve

Into the Past

Most of Chelon was still celebrating. As Ash made his way to the border of Pelon, the streets were full of chel--singing, drinking, laughing, crying, and fucking.

Ash swerved to avoid a triad, a male getting fucked by another male as he went down on a female who perched on top of a fish barrel. The detour sent him smack-dab into the chest of a male chel larger than most. Ash backed up, tensed for trouble, but the man simply beamed down at him. "Steady there, brother. You all right?"

Ash nodded, then did a double take as recognition set in. It was Sand, his boss.

"Why, it's Ash!" Ash was suddenly enveloped in a bear hug. "You've heard the news then? A vasai healed a chel on Glean Street. We have souls now! Isn't it wonderful?"

Yeah, fucking fantastic. Ash didn't bother pointing out that if a vasai healed a chel, that meant chel had possessed souls all along. "Uh, look, Sand, I won't be at work today. I have something important I have to--"

"Work? Oh no, no one's working today, Ash. And nobody's burning siltgrass for a few elat a day anymore, I'll guarantee you. After all, we're just as good as pel. Why should we shorten our lives burning siltgrass? Why should we clean up their shit? Let them burn their own fucking grass. Let them haul their own garbage away."

Ash blinked. "And how will chel earn a living if we don't burn grass and haul trash?"

"Well, we'll see about that, won't we? Maybe we'll just go over there to Pelon and take what we want for ourselves."

Ash had the sickening feeling that today would be as bloody as last night had been joyous. He had to find Amaranth before everything erupted. "And the Elai, what of them?" he asked Sand, just to give him something to chew on.

Sand gave an eloquent shrug. "If it can be a lie that chel have no souls, it can be a lie that Elai souls are better. Maybe we all have the same kind of souls."

Hoo boy. Ash hurried on his way.

And then he was on the edge of the field between Chelon and Pelon, with the chain-link fence before him. Just the sight of it made him tremble.

How in the names of all the gods was he going to find Amaranth in Pelon? If he was even seen there, they'd--Ash stopped that line of thought. It would be worth the risk...if the task didn't seem so insurmountable.

"Hey, you've got the right idea, brother," said a chel coming up to stand beside him.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do. Don't be shy, Ash," said the other chel. "No reason for us to stay here now."

Ash looked and started. It was Brand, the banker. Behind him, a number of other chel gathered on the other side of the field. Ash spotted some of Brand's lieutenants walking among them, waving their arms and exhorting them. He turned back to Brand, taking in the other chel's avid expression. "You'll stay out of Pelon if you know what's good for you."

The banker snorted. "Sure, one at a time, they'll beat us or kill us, but if we all go over at the same time? What can they do?"

"You want all that bloodshed on your hands, keep talking."

"Pel blood," Brand said.

"If we have souls, so do they," said Ash.

"And all the good food and decent work."

On the other side of the field, the crowd of chel grew. They milled about. With Brand egging them on, there was no telling how long it would be before they got their courage up and crossed the fence. And if he didn't find Amaranth, first the vasai would be caught in the middle of a riot.

Ash couldn't afford to risk his life looking for him. He had to be smart about this. Without another word, Ash turned from the chel and headed back across the field. "They'll burn Chelon down if you even try it," he said over his shoulder, within earshot of a worried-looking chel hanging around the fringes of the gathering crowd. Then he headed for the river.

He ran down the towpath as fast as his feet could carry him. No boats on the river this morning. Not a good sign, but it made his trip easier.

There was only one thing he could think of now to save Amaranth, to save all of them. He wasn't even sure if or how it would work, but it had to be a better option than creeping around Pelon, searching for Amaranth house by house while a riot brewed.

There wasn't much time. He just hoped by all the gods, within and without, that he could remember the way after all these years.

* * *

Weave collected money from the people who came to Amaranth for healing. They lined up in the hallway outside the bedroom. Weave sat in the doorway with a cash box and took fifty elat for a half-hour session. That was bad enough. For the most part, those who came had legitimate health issues: slipped disks, asthma, arthritis. But at that price most of them could only afford to be treated once, and half an hour was not nearly enough time. And as soon as Amaranth treated one, another came. He had no time between sessions to recover enough to attempt escape or even argue with her about the fee.

By the end of the day, he was too exhausted to do more than offer the most superficial ease. He loosed his soul over the man straddling his waist, grateful to the gods that was all they did. They mimicked what Weave had done, too overawed by the presence of a vasai to demand "proper" sexual contact.

"If you keep working him like this, he'll die, and then you'll have a dead vasai on your hands. What will you do then?" Pull's voice came to Amaranth from the hallway.

Amaranth's client had a kidney stone.

"Are you still here, Pull?" asked Weave. "Do you want to buy siltgrass ash from dirty chel for the rest of your life? I've been lenient because your family are good workers, but I can arrange a transfer for all of you. The children too."

"Please," said the pel on top of Amaranth, a middle-aged pel of moderate build. "It hurts." All Amaranth had the strength for was to ease his pain for the moment.

In the hallway, Pull echoed his words. "Please. Just let me bring him some food and help him with his body's necessities. Please. An hour. That's all I ask."

"Hmm. Fine. But make it half an hour."

"But I've been standing here all day!" came a new voice. One of Amaranth's clients-in-waiting, no doubt.

"So another half an hour won't make any difference to you, will it?" said Weave. "And you in there, your time's up!"

"Go see your doctor," said Amaranth. "Your doctor can help you."

"I feel better. Thank you."

"It won't last. Go to your doctor."

The man left and Pull bustled in. She helped Amaranth relieve himself in a bucket and gave him water. "I'm so sorry," she said under her breath. "Weave's our supervisor. I never imagined anything like this happening. Here." She supported Amaranth's head as she fed him a tuna sandwich. He hadn't realized until now how hungry he was.

Pull gave him more water and then adjusted the pillow under his head. She pulled the blanket up over him and tucked it around his chin. "Push and Stack have gone for help," she whispered.

"Help?"

"The Temple. They'll help you, right?"

Would they? They might deem that he was getting just what he deserved for stepping outside of his place. But he forced a smile for Pull anyway.

"That's enough." Weave's voice came from the hallway. "Time for the afternoon shift."

A mangled finger, a headache, a heartache; it went on and on. They ceased being individual people to him. They became one long procession of never-ending ills to be healed.

"That's it. No more for now," Weave declared at last. "He needs to rest."

When they'd all gone, she straddled his hips again. "My back," she said.

Amaranth stared up at her. "Why are you doing this?"

Weave shrugged. "With the money you're making me, I'll be able to buy my own business. I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life in that fucking concrete

plant. Pull and her family have done me a big favor. And you. Now, touch me with your soul. I'm tired."

"What if I don't?"

"Transfer to Chelon is not the worst thing that can happen to Push and the kids. I could just fire them. They'd wind up in Chelon all the same, only with no job. And you know how much chel love pel. Why do you think you never hear anything about unemployed pel?"

Amaranth closed his eyes. All he'd wanted to do was help people, and all he ever did was hurt them. He loosed his soul over Weave, and her desperate boredom and ambition coated him like a fine film of tainted grease.

After, Amaranth lay in the bed, unmoving. Too exhausted to sleep, too weak to move, he stared up at the ceiling and despaired. He was never going to see Ash again. He knew that now.

He would have thought himself too weak for rage, but it burned inside him. A vasai's ability to heal was a gift, and all he'd ever wanted to do was bestow it upon those who needed it. But time and time again, it was taken from him. Demanded. Used.

Could a vasai's soul harm as well as heal? The next time Weave came to him, he could... No. It wouldn't be worth the cost. Would it?

* * *

It was afternoon by the time Ash reached Elaion. He followed the river up and up, scouring his memory for details of that day he and Shale had ventured so far up here.

Up above the place where Amaranth lived, the land became wilder. Little footpaths trailed up the bank to the back gates of large estates. Family crests graced those gates, but the dense foliage hid them from view. He didn't have time to check each and every one. He had to trust to memory.

And it did not fail him. It was his luck that the season now was the same as it had been the day he left Dartwood. The cherry tree that overhung the riverbank just at the spot where the footpath led up to the gate was taller now, but it dropped its white petals on the ground just the same.

Ash's pulse pounded as he made his way up the narrow path. His heart was so tight in his chest, it hurt. He felt as if something inside him tore itself loose with every familiar sight.

The details of the day he and his brother met Darien came back to him in every detail. The smell of the green plants all around and the earthy whiff of the recent rain, his brother's head bobbing up and down as he jogged ahead of Ash, the first glimpse of that little face on the other side of the gate.

And the day Ash left Darien was vivid too. Darien's voice, crying out for him, burning his ears with every step he took. He'd tried to count the petals of the cherry blossoms on the ground to keep that sound from breaking him, from making him turn and run back.

At his first sight of the back gate of Dartwood manor, new memories blindsided Ash. This time, they were memories of his days as Darien's friend. Or pet, as Darien's parents had described him. "Little Darien's pet chel. What's the harm?" they'd said, when visitors raised an eyebrow at the scion of the house playing rough and tumble with a chel child.

Darien, his parents' only issue, was spoiled and would not sit still for his lessons unless Ash was at his side. The tutor very nearly quit over the issue, but apparently enough money was applied to his wounded sensibility to repair it and allow him to carry on.

Ash stood before the wrought-iron gate, staring at the Dartwood crest. Three arrows on a faded field of blue. It was as if the years had evaporated. How could so much happen and this place look so unchanged? He hoped the same would be true for Darien if he were here, if Ash could find him.

Ash had forgotten, entirely, how happy he had been here before he was expelled. And just how long he'd stayed. He'd lived among the Dartwoods from the age of eight until he was thirteen, when a pel chambermaid had glimpsed Darien and Ash's first, exploratory foray into sex and had reported it to Alva Dartwood, Darien's mother.

Ash could still feel the light brush of Darien's lips on his, the tentative fingers stroking his cock. Most of all, it was the light in Darien's eyes, the wonder when Ash returned those caresses that had burned inside him, often buried but never extinguished, and finally ignited into full blaze when he'd made love with Amaranth.

If, as all signs indicated, Ash did in fact possess a soul, then it must be one shaped to accommodate one god and one god only--the Law Breaker.

Distant voices snapped him out of his reverie. How long had he been standing here, staring at the family crest on the gate? The voices, high-pitched ones, came closer. "Father says sometimes a wood spirit appears at the back gate, and if you're careful you can talk to it and it will teach you things no one else can. I come here every day to check," said a girl.

"That sounds like a tall tale," said another child. "You've never seen one, have you?"

"No, but I keep trying. Father says--" They rounded the corner, a boy and a girl, and stopped in their tracks, staring at him. "See?" the girl whispered. "I told you." She was the very image of Darien as a child. Ash's mouth went dry.

The boy with her laughed. "You dummy, Dara. That's not a wood spirit. It's a dirty old chel."

The girl scowled and pushed the boy down. "Be quiet, Samuel. You'll scare him away."

"I should scare it away." He glared at Ash. "It shouldn't be here this time of day. The garbage goes out in the morning."

Dara kicked him.

"Ow! Cut it out." Samuel got to his feet and started running back toward the house. "I'm telling!"

"Go ahead! This isn't your house."

Dara came closer, moving slowly. "Don't go, wood spirit. I know what you are. Samuel's just my cousin. They make me play with him when he visits. But he doesn't know anything. I know you're real."

Ash nodded. Samuel's footsteps faded in the distance. "I have a message for your father. Is he at home?"

She scrunched up her face. "He is, but he's working."

"Well, if you tell him that the wood spirit who befriended him when he was little is back and wishes to speak with him, I think he'll take a break. And then he'll come out here with you and see what a good girl you are."

She thought about that. "But if I leave, you might go away."

"I'll wait. I promise."

"Okay." With the trust of one who has never been betrayed, she turned and ran back to the house.

Of course, cousin or no, if Samuel alerted the servants first, he might never get the chance to speak with Darien.

In the event, it was a sizeable delegation that rounded the corner of the hedgerow. Dara, Samuel, two servants, and towering over them all, Darien. Ash recognized him instantly, though he looked a good deal different than he had when he'd seen him last. He was taller, for one, his face gone from rounded to square with maturity, but he had the same straight nose, blunt chin, and dark eyes.

As their eyes met, Darien paled. His mouth fell open. One pure, unguarded moment of loss and longing flooded his features, and his lips moved silently. Ash.

"Now here you! What are you hanging about for? Get out of here before we beat you senseless, you dirty--"

"Batch, it's okay," Darien said, forestalling the servant who trudged toward the gate brandishing a frying pan. "Everyone, go back to the house. I'll take care of this."

"See, Daddy, I told you," said Dara. "It's a wood spirit."

Ash smiled, all for Darien.

"That's right, honey. Now, let Batch and Sweep take you and your cousin back inside. It's time for your tea. And you can have an extra cookie for being such a good girl."

"Why does she get an extra cookie? It's just a chel," complained Samuel.

"Wood spirit!"

"Chel."

"Enough!" said Darien, and Ash saw that the once-timid boy had learned mastery after all. "I told you all to go inside. Batch, Sweep, take them in."

The delegation departed, and it was just Darien and Ash staring at one another through the gate, just like that first day so long ago.

Darien opened the gate and stepped through it. He stared at Ash as if he couldn't quite believe he was really there. "For the longest time, I waited for you to come back," he said, "and then, finally, I gave up."

Ash raised an eyebrow. "Not entirely. Wood spirit?"

Darien's cheeks colored. "A harmless tale for a child. I thought. Anyway, it served to alert me before Batch and Sweep had a chance to run you off. I'm sorry about all that. About everything, actually. I'm sorry."

"You married, I see," said Ash. "You're carrying on the family line."

Darien gazed back at the manse, the rooftops of which were just visible in the distance. "Yes. I made a lot of trouble for mom and dad when I was a teenager and in university, but eventually I settled down, and now I do my duty to the Dartwood name." The look on his face was one of resignation. He stirred himself and looked closely at Ash. "And what about you? Are you...?"

There was this impossibility between them. Even though Darien had left the yard, the gate might just as well separate them still. Darien kept leaning forward. Ash could see he wanted to touch him. Ash couldn't figure out if he wanted Darien to touch him or not. "I haven't come for myself," he explained.

"I don't care why you've come. Gods within, it's just so good to see you."

On closer observation Ash noticed that Darien looked tired. There were dark smudges under his large, luminous eyes, and the hollow beneath his high, prominent cheekbones was more gaunt than sculpted. He did not look like an Elai happy in his life. "Are you ill?"

Darien stared at him and smiled, and at last it seemed that the barrier between them dissolved. He took Ash's hand and Ash gripped it tight. Darien was so familiar to him. So known, even now.

"For you to ask me that..." Darien shook his head. "I'm fine. But what of you? I'm not enough of an ass to ask if you're all right. What can I do for you?"

"Listen. And believe what I'm about to tell you."

Darien nodded and leaned forward, waiting.

Ash told him everything that had happened since they parted--almost. He didn't go into detail about what the pel did to him--just the mention of the attack made

the skin around Darien's mouth go pale. But he did tell him of Amaranth and of Grail and the healing of the chel boy.

"Chelon is astir," he finished. "At the moment, they're celebrating, but already there's talk of mobbing Pelon. And Amaranth is out there somewhere. I know this is a lot to ask you to believe, simply from hearsay, but I have to find Amaranth. If the chel raid Pelon, there's going to be so much bloodshed. You were the only person I could think of who might believe me and might be able to find a way to stop it all."

Darien stared at the ground and was silent a long time. When he did speak, his voice was so quiet Ash had to lean forward to catch his words. "I never believed in gods and souls. Because of you I could not accept the idea that a chel lacked something others possessed, but I go through the motions in the Temple every week anyway. Now this. There isn't much time. The delight your people feel now at the discovery that they possess souls will quickly shift to anger against those who have denied them their sanctity. They will take it out on their immediate superiors first, the pel. And the pel will fight back, and the governor will have to intervene. It is hard to say what he will do--either arm the pel or send in the Temple guards. Either way, if we do nothing, chel will be slaughtered by the thousands, and hundreds of pel will die as well."

"Can you speak with the governor about it?"

Darien tilted his head to one side. "I can, but if I do he will likely arm the pel and instruct them to kill any chel who trespass."

Ash sighed.

"This thing is a wildfire. Now that it's started, it's going to spread, and one way or another, everything will change."

"And not for the better," said Ash.

Darien held out a forestalling hand. "You always look on the dark side. But this is an opportunity. At the moment, you and I are the only people outside of Chelon who know what's brewing. We can't prevent the chel from rising up, but we may be able to influence what happens when they do."

"What do you mean?"

"What if the pel greeted the chel not as trespassers but as guests with a common cause?"

Ash stared at him. "Pel hate chel, and vice versa."

Darien nodded. "And who does their mutual animosity serve?"

Ash sat back.

"What would happen if pel and chel united and turned to regard the Elai as their mutual antagonist?"

Ash was still trying to get his head around the idea of pel and chel cooperating with one another. "Even if they did unite somehow, I can't imagine them attacking the Elai."

"I hope not. But, mightn't they say, for instance, 'We won't do your work anymore unless you give us access to those resources you hoard for yourself'?"

"Negotiating power."

Darien nodded. "As garbage piles up in Elaion and no one can get a sandwich or buy a cup of coffee..."

"But why would the pel side with the chel?"

"Because the pel have been lied to also. We tell them the doctors are just as effective as vasai, that it is their duty to work every day, and that their wages are all we can afford."

"How would we do this?"

"I speak with the pel supervisor of labor and explain the situation to her. She will likely see the benefit of a chel alliance, in lieu of pel dying in a civil war."

"You'd be betraying your caste," said Ash.

Darien nodded. "Finally. Besides, if the pel and the chel fight, it's only a matter of time before the violence overflows into Elaion, and I have a child to think of. The world I want for her seems more feasible if inevitable change is embraced, not suppressed."

* * *

After Amaranth had serviced Weave, he was permitted a nap, and then Pull came in with a sandwich on a tray. "I'm not hungry," he told her.

"You have to keep your strength up."

"Why?"

She stepped closer and spoke in the barest whisper. "I told you, help is coming."

From the Temple. They'd likely lock him up. At the least he'd be taken back into the Temple for retraining. He didn't want to be retrained. He didn't want to find his proper place in the system. If he couldn't be with Ash--Wait.

Maybe he could be with Ash. Those dreams... Maybe they were more than dreams. Say the gods did exist. What effect would falling in love have on one guided by the Lovers themselves? Could his soul travel far enough to reach Ash wherever he was? Amaranth forced himself up into a sitting position and took the sandwich.

When he finished eating, Weave sent his next client in. Amaranth considered just sending his soul out to Ash right then, and who cared if he had to release it entirely in the process. His body would die, but he'd be with Ash. But this pel had a legitimate case of arthritis. He helped her. The next client had shingles, a very painful condition.

The third client was a big male pel who walked in the room like he owned it. His bearing and his self-satisfied smile put Amaranth on edge. He disliked this pel.

Unlike most of the others, who sat demurely on the side of the bed and let Amaranth take their hand, this pel climbed onto the bed and straddled Amaranth's hips the way Weave did. Amaranth couldn't pull his soul in far enough to escape the ugliness of this man's soul. It seeped into him like juice from a rotting tomato. "Well, vasai, I'm here for 'healing,'" he said. He leaned forward and pushed his pelvis down onto Amaranth so Amaranth could feel his erection.

"Don't," said Amaranth. He tugged at his restraints, but it was no good. He looked to the door. Weave was watching. She smiled at him.

"Aw, don't act offended. I'm no fool. I know what you vasai really are. Healers, ha! Fancy whores is what. For the Elai. But you're not in Elaion now."

You're not in Chelon now. His last statement had an echo--one Amaranth heard in his soul. Suddenly images and feelings flooded into Amaranth from the pel's soul. Power and hatred. A chel on the ground in an alley, his pain sharp delight. Another pel kicked the boy, and he rolled over. It was Ash, looking up at Amaranth through his rapist's memories.

Amaranth's whole body convulsed. "You!" he raged, bucking. "It was you!" Even as the man reached down to pin his shoulders to the mattress, Amaranth's soul was moving. He wrapped it all the way around the pel's deformed excuse for a soul. And he squeezed.

The pel's expression went from amusement to shock. He opened his mouth, gasping for air. Amaranth didn't let up. He squeezed the air out of the lungs. "I'll kill you for what you did to him," he said. Whether the pel heard or understood, Amaranth couldn't tell. He shook his head frantically, his mouth moving, probably pleading for mercy, but of course he had no breath with which to speak.

Amaranth squeezed him until only the barest spark of life still remained in his soul. The man slumped over on top of him, unconscious. Drool rolled from his mouth and down Amaranth's neck. It made him shudder. And somehow, that made him stop short of actually killing him. Amaranth wasn't sure why.

He was beyond exhausted now. With the last shreds of his consciousness, Amaranth loosed his soul completely, unhooked it from all its moorings, and sent it out in search of Ash.

* * *

Grail had never worked so hard in his life. The stream of chel in need seemed endless, and now, in addition to the cases of general malnutrition, marsh cough, and badly mended bones, they were starting to get people injured in the fighting in Pelon.

At least they had help. Ember and her gang were proving themselves indispensable. Even now, the orphans circulated through the waiting throng with buckets, dispensing water. The boss herself trudged up to the house wearily, her empty pails bumping against her knees.

"Thank you," Grail told her. "Your help is very much appreciated."

Ember straightened her shoulders. "You saved my brother's life. Of course we help you. What else do you need?"

"The water is essential," said Grail, "but we need food too."

Ember gave a short, sharp nod. "We'll steal some for you."

Alarmed, Grail held out his hands to stop her. "No. Don't steal. Here, I have money."

Ember stared openly as Grail fumbled in his robes for the bag of coins she'd brought with him. "Use this. Try to make it stretch, but get good food." She held out the bag to her.

Ember gaped at the bulging sack. She shook her head. "Don't give me all of that at once, vai. That's enough to buy Chelon. It'll either be stolen or I'll run away with it, I swear."

Oh. Grail felt his cheeks warm with embarrassment. She opened the bag and took out a handful of elat. "How about this?"

Ember's scrawny chest heaved with a deep breath. "Okay. Fine." She snatched the coins from his hand and took off at a run, the rest of her horde behind her.

They had barely disappeared when three tall people in chel dress approached the makeshift canopy where Grail and Vine treated their patients. Grail stood and nodded in greeting. "Hello."

Two of them hung back, but the third stepped up to Grail. "You know what we are?"

The androgyny of his features was camouflaged by grime and wariness, but there was no mistaking his soul or those of the other two. "Yes, and you're welcome here. More than welcome. We can use your help."

The chel vasai's lips parted, and she turned to the other two. They whispered among themselves for a moment, and then the one who had spoken before turned back to Grail. She pointed at Vine, who knelt beside a patient, her eyes closed in concentration. "We want to learn to heal like she did. Will you teach us?"

* * *

Ash let Darien escort him into Dartwood, where he sat on the edge of a chair in what had once been Darien's mother's office, but which now belonged to Darien himself.

"Yes. No." Darien said into the telephone receiver. "I don't care if she's in a meeting. Yes, that's what I said. An emergency." He rolled his eyes at Ash. A moment later, he had the supervisor of labor on the phone. Their conversation was brief, and within the hour, the three of them were in the Dartwood family hoverlift, sailing over the glittering streets of Elaion.

They passed over Pelon too. Ash looked at all the rooftops, all the same. Somewhere in all of that was Amaranth.

"Look!" said the supervisor of labor, pointing toward the border of Pelon and Chelon.

Smoke rose up from the pel buildings along the border like fingers reaching up into the sky. Ash felt them curl around his heart and squeeze. "We're too late," he said.

"Late. Yes," said Darien. "But maybe not too late." He urged their pilot to go faster.

They landed in an open square about five blocks north of the fires. People were running in all directions. "What do we do now?"

The pel supervisor of labor hoisted a bullhorn. "Find high ground," she said and headed toward the center of the square, where a statue of Eli Harken stood.

As Ash turned to follow her, he suddenly felt a warm tingling sensation all through his body. The touch of Amaranth's soul wrapped him in warmth.

Ash had speculated on the dreams he'd had of Amaranth. He'd wondered if perhaps it was the vasai's soul reaching out to touch him. Could a vasai reach that far? Did it make a difference if both people loved each other?

He had no answers to these questions, but he knew this touch. It was Amaranth. "Amaranth!" he shouted, turning in a circle, but the vasai was not to be seen. "Where are you?"

Something was wrong. Beyond the comfort of Amaranth's touch Ash felt his despair, and more--rage, pain. Suddenly Amaranth's soul wasn't just touching his anymore. It was surrounding it, and pulling. Dragged by his soul, Ash took the streets of Pelon at a dead run. Immediately pel spotted him and shouted, pointing. Some gave chase, but Ash ran as if his feet were on fire. The insistent tugging at his soul showed him the way. Maybe that's how it worked. Maybe people were guided from within by love, not gods.

Chapter Thirteen

The Prisoner of Pelon

The pel lived in big gray stone buildings. He was so lucky Amaranth was in a dwelling on the ground level. Of course, as it turned out, that was convenient for others besides him. When he got there, there was a line out the door.

The moment Ash saw that, there was no stopping him.

"You! Chel!"

Ash pushed the woman in the doorway down and her little table with it. But he saw the cash box. Gods within. She was charging them. How many had already paid, and what had they taken in return? How long had this been going on?

Amaranth lay in a bed, his wrists and ankles bound. On top of him lay a man who wasn't moving. Amaranth himself just stared at the ceiling. For all that his soul had reached out and dragged Ash here, Amaranth seemed out of touch with the physical world. No wonder. What other defense did he have?

"Amaranth!" The vasai still did not move.

But that didn't stop Ash either.

He flew to the bed, pushed the insensate pel off Amaranth, and untied his wrists. Hands trembling, he stroked Amaranth's cheeks. "Amaranth, it's me!"

Amaranth looked at him, golden eyes goggly. "Ash?"

"Yes. I'm here." Ash wrapped his arms around Amaranth. He found that he could keep from falling apart if he held Amaranth very tight. He peeked over his shoulder. People were starting to clog up the doorway. What was he going to do?

He kissed Amaranth on the shoulder and rubbed his back. He was relieved to find him not too thin.

Amaranth heaved a great sigh and seemed to come back to himself. Between them, their soul connection hummed. Amaranth clung to him, long delicate fingers gripping Ash's shoulders. Ash reached up and ran a hand through Amaranth's hair, his fingers tunneling through the silken blond strands.

"Ash? I dreamed of you."

Ash pressed his cheek to Amaranth's. "Yes. I know. I felt you." The woman with the cash box had rallied and was using the upturned table to block all access to the room. Greed benefited them momentarily, as it did so many. Ash drew back, and Amaranth found his mouth, and their lips met, like their souls had so many days ago. All the short time they'd known each other passed between them in the press and give of tongues. Ash ghosted his hand down the side of Amaranth's neck. "I love you."

Amaranth sighed as if the breath would never stop leaving him. "I love you too. I sent my soul out to find you. I didn't think it would come back, and I didn't care, so long as we were together, but you brought it back. You brought my soul back to me, Ash," Amaranth murmured against his mouth. He darted his tongue into Ash's mouth for a quick stroke and then added, "You saved both of us."

"I'm sorry it took me so long."

"No. You came just in time."

Ash swallowed. He collected himself and dived to untie Amaranth's feet. "Can you walk?"

"No. But don't worry."

The crowd at the door broke the table that barred their way. Wood splintered, and the woman who'd been charging admittance gave a cry of dismay. Ash's heart compressed to the point he thought it would kill him. He clutched Amaranth harder and rolled his body up to shield him as much as possible. All he could do was wait for the onslaught.

But it didn't come. Ash heard gasps. Someone cried out "Prelate!" and then another voice said, "What, by the gods within, are you pel about?"

Ash lifted his head to see two vasai standing in the room, one of whom he recognized. The auburn-haired one who'd come to Amaranth's house--Evanscar. He stood now with his arms crossed and an expression of barely suppressed glee on his face. The vasai standing next to him wore robes trimmed in gold, and he had on a tall hat, a sort of oval thing, also made of gold, with a point at the top that looked like it could draw blood. It was this person whom everyone stared at.

The woman with the table and the cash box cowered in the corner. "Y-your Honor," she stammered, bowing, still clutching her cash box. She edged along the wall to the doorway, still open, though no one was trying to get through now. "They

were hiding him here, I swear! It wasn't me!" She reached through the doorway and grabbed someone by the collar. There was a scuffle, and another middle-aged female pel stumbled into the room.

"It's true we here hiding him here, Your Honor," she said, also bowing. "But we didn't hold him against his will. He insisted on treating me. I shouldn't have let him. But I never foresaw Weave"--this with a finger aimed at her assailant--"coming in and tying him to the bed and forcing him to heal people for money." She knelt before the prelate. "We all deserve punishment, except for the children, but she...she should get the worst. She's no pel!"

Ash looked at Amaranth, thinking of how tired he'd been when he came home from the Refuge. This was so much worse.

For the first time, Ash really looked at the pel who'd been on top of Amaranth. As soon as he did, his response was instinctive. He kicked out at the man, striking him in the shoulder. He snapped his foot back and clutched at Amaranth tighter, watching as the grocer slid off the side of the bed.

He looked at Amaranth, who was staring down the guy in the weird hat. "Did he... Did he..."

Amaranth snaked one arm beneath Ash and held him tight. "No. I felt who he was, and I knocked him out before he had the chance." Suddenly he broke eye contact with the man in the doorway and looked at Ash, perfectly lucid. "I didn't kill him, but I could. Should I?"

Ash's mouth was dry. He shook his head. "I don't want you to. Not that I don't want him dead--just not by you."

Amaranth nodded as if they were discussing a shopping list. "Okay."

"Vasai Amaranth!"

* * *

Prelate Ki and Evanscar stood in the doorway, staring at Amaranth. Of course, the Temple. Amaranth wondered if it was Evanscar's meddling that brought Ki here, or Pull and Stack's misguided errand. It mattered not. It was almost worth all the fuss just to see the looks of horror on their faces. Laughter bubbled to Amaranth's lips, but beside him, Ash trembled.

"It's okay," Amaranth whispered to his lover, holding him tighter. "We're together. Everything's going to be all right."

Indeed, with Ash touching him, and Ash's soul united with his, Amaranth felt powerful. He had healed so many, had worked his soul so hard over the past several days that now, revived, it was stronger than ever.

"Vasai Amaranth!"

The prelate's stentorian tenor shot through Amaranth's spine just as it always had; only now, Amaranth did not flinch. "Prelate Vasai Ki."

Ash looked frantically between the two of them. "Prelate?"

"My old teacher. We never did agree on much."

The tall prelate lifted one long finger and pointed at the unconscious pel, now slumped on the floor beside the bed. "What have you done?"

Amaranth felt fire ignite within him, warming his soul. "That pel is a rapist and should be arrested. I would have killed him if the one he wronged hadn't told me not to. If you try to harm us, I can render you unconscious too."

"He's mad," said Evanscar.

"Us?" Ki turned to Evanscar in confusion. "What is he talking about, 'us'?"

"The chel, Your Honor. I knew that Grail lied. This chel is not Grail's brother. It's Amaranth's lover. He's in love with a chel."

They both stared at Ash and Amaranth as if they would very much like to look away but could not. "Gods within. Amaranth, let go of it this instant. You're under arrest."

"No," said Amaranth.

"What?" Anger flushed Ki's face rosy red. "What do you mean no? I'm a Temple prelate. Have you forgotten?"

"Oh no," said Amaranth, sending his soul out to surrounded Ki's, softly, so as not to alarm him. Yet. It had been one thing to do this to the pel rapist, but a vasai soul was different, more fluid. If Ash weren't here with him, he wouldn't be able to do it. There was something about the way their souls complemented each other. Ash's soul seemed to lend its energy and resilience to his own. "On the contrary, I've remembered much more than anyone is supposed to."

Ki shook his head. "Enough of this. Guards! Kill the chel and arrest Vasai Amaranth."

Four pel dressed in the gold and white livery of the Temple entered the room and advanced on Amaranth and Ash. Ash looked at him, his green eyes wide with terror.

"Don't let go of me," Amaranth told him.

"But--"

A pel guard grabbed Ash by the hair and pulled his head back.

"Stop," said Amaranth. "Prelate, tell them to stop right now."

The pel guard drew his knife, and Amaranth tightened his soul around Ki's, squeezing it. Ki's eyes bulged. He swayed. "Gods within! What are you--"

"Stop or Ki will die," said Amaranth.

"Prelate!" cried Evanscar, catching the man as he fell. He looked at Amaranth with fear and horror.

The pel guards looked between Amaranth and Ki. The one who gripped Ash by the hair still had the knife in his hand, but he made no further move. Ash, pale and sweating, stared at Amaranth.

"I can kill you, Ki," said Amaranth. "You know that now, right?"

Gasping, Ki nodded. "Yes," he wheezed. "You can. Guards, stand back. Release the chel."

The guards did as they were told, and Ash slumped against Amaranth, his chest heaving.

Amaranth maintained his hold on Ki's soul even as he wrapped his arms around Ash. That had been too close by far. "Thank you, Ki. Now do as I say, and you'll live."

"If he can do this," Evanscar said to Ki, "so can we. Fight him!"

Ki winced as Amaranth squeezed him harder. "I can't!"

Evanscar looked at Amaranth. Amaranth could see what he was thinking, could feel Evanscar marshaling his soul for an attack. Is this how it would be among vasai now? A constant duel of souls? Was this the price he paid for his life and Ash's?

Evanscar's soul flew at Amaranth's. Amaranth absorbed it, let Evanscar's soul flow right through his, and now he held both of them.

"Gods!" Evanscar cried out as his breath became constricted. "What are you doing? How can you--both of us? How is that possible?"

"I don't know," Amaranth said. "Maybe it's the gods giving me strength. The vasai soul is made for the Lovers, is it not? Ash and I love each other. Maybe they don't want us to be parted. Or maybe being tied to a bed and used by sixty-three pel had some unanticipated effects. In any case, what's important right now is that Ash and I are ready to leave this place, and you and Prelate Ki and all these worthy guards of the Temple are going to take us wherever we want to go."

"All right," said Ki. "The Temple liftcraft is right outside. We'll take you wherever you want to go." His tone said the rest. Where could they go? They were abominations in the eyes of their world. There was no place for them.

Ash squeezed Amaranth's hand. "I know where they can take us."

Prelate Ki and Evanscar walked ahead, and the guards surrounded all of them. Ash supported Amaranth, who kept his concentration on his soul. It enclosed Evanscar and Ki's souls like a sack. The hallway was empty now. All the pel had fled. Pull and Stack's front room looked forlorn, abandoned. Where had they gone? What would become of them now?

"The people who live here. No harm should come to them," Amaranth said, though he wasn't sure to whom he spoke or whom he thought could make certain of it. "They did nothing wrong. Nothing whatsoever, and they tried to help me."

Ash looked up at him, his mouth a grim, flat line. "Pelon is about to become a very dangerous place for pel. The chel... I never got to tell you. Grail came to Chelon. Sie healed a child. Everyone saw..."

"They all know."

Evanscar glanced over his shoulder at that. Amaranth ignored him.

Ash nodded. "And some of them think the pel should share what they have, whether they want to or not. They're already fighting, just blocks away. We have to hurry."

They crossed through the doorway into the street outside. Pel lined the street, keeping a distance of about a half a block from the front door and the lift that sat in the street outside it. Everyone was silent, but in the distance, Amaranth could hear shouting, screaming.

The sunlight made Amaranth blink. Evanscar turned, sensing his distraction. Amaranth tightened his grip on the other vasai's lungs, and Evanscar choked. "The lift," Amaranth said, and then he shouted out, "Pull! Stack! Task, Toil, Push!"

From the right came five figures. Pull and her family. "Ash, this is Pull and Stack Furrow, their daughter Push, and her children, Task and Toil. They've been good to me. This is Ash, my lover. Ash, please tell the Furrows what you just told me."

Ash stared dubiously at the pel. They stared back with barely concealed disgust. Oh, this was going to be so hard. "The night before last, a vasai healed a chel child in Chelon. The whole district knows about it." He looked at Ki. "Chel know they have souls now."

"What? Blasphemy!" cried Ki. Evanscar looked thoughtful.

"Chel have souls?" asked Pull.

"No!" said Ki.

"The point is," said Ash, "all we want is a better life. Some of us think we can do that in Chelon by helping each other, but others think the only way is to come here and take what's been denied us, by force, if necessary. Darien Dartwood and the supervisor of labor are trying to quell the rioting, but--"

"Liar! You're just a chel. You never spoke with Ei Dartwood." Ki turned to the others. "He's making it all up!"

"I do know him. It's a long story. My mother used to collect trash for him. Anyway, they're going to try to form an alliance between the pel and the chel. They think that together they can bargain with the Elai for better treatment. But we all know how likely it is that our people will cooperate with one another. You'd be safest coming with us."

The Furrows absorbed all that. They whispered among themselves for a few moments, and then Pull said, "Stack and I will stay here and join the supervisor and Ei Dartwood. Push and the kids will go with you."

"Just like that?" asked Evanscar. "You trust this chel? With your daughter and your grandchildren? We don't even know where we're going."

"I don't know about this chel," said Pull. "But I know Amaranth, and if he trusts him, then so do I."

Maybe there is hope for us all, thought Amaranth.

It was a tight squeeze in the hoverlift, and Ash had to take one of the pel children on his lap. He looked as if he were holding a poisonous spider, but he was going to have to change some of his thinking too. They all were. "Where to?" Amaranth asked him.

"Glean Street," Ash said. "Halfway between the sea and the marsh."

Chapter Fourteen

The Golden Land

"What's your name?" the chel girl asked Grail.

She looked much like they all did, Grail supposed. Hair ranging from chestnut to flame red, sharp narrow faces, tawny skin, and freckles. They weren't really ugly. It's just that this was how they looked, though Grail found that the longer sie was among the chel, the more differentiation sie found in them. This child had a heart-shaped face and eyes a strikingly clear shade of brown, like sunlight on polished wood. Grail could not heal what was wrong with her in a single session, if at all, which was why she'd been waiting all this time for treatment.

"My name is Grail," sie said.

She nodded. "My name is Silt. Thank you for coming to save us."

It was the forty-eighth time someone had said that to hir in so many words, and it stopped hir heart a little every time. Sie'd learned not to say anything back.

"When you give me my soul, will it fix my arm?" asked Silt.

Grail forced hir gaze from the child's and waited for hir tears to sink back down before looking at her withered limb. Nerve damage. Grail had been giving a lot of thought lately to what could and could not be repaired by vasai methods. In Silt's case, the nerves and muscle structures were still present, just atrophied. It might be possible to regenerate the dead nerves, and with them, muscle tone, but it would be a slow and likely painful process.

"I don't know," sie told her. "But you must understand, Silt. When I treat you, I'm not giving you anything you don't already have. You have a soul right now. You always did."

Silt grinned. She opened her mouth, but Grail never heard what she said, because suddenly a high-pitched whine had them all looking up at the sky. A hoverlift! In Chelon? Grail squeezed Silt's good hand. "I'm sorry. I have to--I'll be back as soon as I can."

Sie trotted to where Vine knelt beside a chel man wasted by marsh cough. Both of them stared at the hoverlift, which was now landing in the middle of Glean Street. Vine turned and saw hir. She stood. Grail hugged her close. "A hoverlift," she said.

"That's right." Sie buried his face in Vine's auburn hair, relishing the silky texture against his cheek even as their souls bonded and they shared each other's anxiety.

"Why would Elai come here?" she asked.

"I don't know." Grail couldn't think of a reason that bode anything good. "But we'd better go see."

Hand in hand they walked across their makeshift hospital, threading their way through clients lying on pallets and being tended to by orphans, under the direction of Ember.

The hoverlift settled and the hatch opened. Vine squeezed his hand. A vasai in a tall hat got out, followed by Evanscar.

"What do you think you're doing, bringing us here?" Evanscar demanded of someone still inside the hoverlift. The two vasai--that was Prelate Ki, Grail realized with a lurch of his stomach--stood in the muddy street looking about themselves with dismay. The expressions on their faces and the way Evanscar lifted the hem of his robe to keep it out of the mud were so comical that for a moment Grail forgot to be terrified.

And then Amaranth emerged, leaning heavily on Ash. Grail felt stretched between relief and dread. Amaranth was found at last, but he looked so pale, and he was so weak he needed Ash's support just to stand. Grail sent his soul forth in greeting and was perplexed by what she found. Amaranth's soul ballooned out from him and encompassed Ki and Evanscar in a way Grail had never encountered before. Amaranth's soul was engaged with both of theirs at the same time, and from a distance. But it was not a healing bond. It was... Gods within! Was he controlling them? Sort of. What was he doing? And how did he have the strength for it?

The answer to that last question was obvious, at least. It wasn't just Amaranth's soul exerting control over Ki and Evanscar. Ash had a part in this as well. Their souls were so intimately entwined, Grail couldn't really tell where one ended and the other began. That was how Amaranth had the power to forge a soul connection with two other vasai without physical contact.

Grail was becoming accustomed to the impossible, but the last thing his fleeting contact with Amaranth's soul revealed stole his breath away. She searched his friend's face. Did Amaranth even know?

Vine tugged at his hand. "Grail...who are they?" She eyed Ki and Evanscar. "What are they doing here and why? That's Ash's vasai, isn't it?"

Grail nodded, already moving toward them. "Amaranth."

Amaranth smiled to see hir just as Ash stretched up to whisper something in his ear. "Really?" Amaranth asked Ash. "Send it back?"

"If you do, then you can release Ki and Evanscar and there's nothing they can do. As long as the guards are here, you'll have to--" Ash broke off as he saw Grail approaching.

"You're right, of course," said Amaranth. With a nod to Grail, he turned to Ki. "Tell the pilot to fly back to the Temple."

Ki stared at him openmouthed. "You're going to strand us here?"

Amaranth got a look on his face Grail remembered from their confrontation the night of Amaranth's departure from Elaion. Sie'd hoped never to see it again, but at least this time it wasn't directed at hir. "It will be good for you," said Amaranth.

"No. I won't--" Ki gasped. The vasai was fighting for air. Grail sent hir soul out to discover what was the matter. Gods within. Amaranth's soul surrounded Ki's. He was choking him.

"All right," Ki managed to say.

Amaranth nodded and released the pressure. Ki sagged against Evanscar. "Pilot, return to the Temple."

"Tell him not to try to send anyone back here. We'll contact the Temple when need be," Amaranth said.

"Do as he says, Bend."

For a moment talk was impossible as the hoverlift ascended. Grail watched it get smaller and smaller until, like the world sie'd once known, it had disappeared entirely.

Grail felt Amaranth's soul snap back to his own body, releasing Ki and Evanscar. Ki took off running in the direction that the hoverlift had gone, but he didn't get more than a block or so before he stopped and bent over, his hands over his face. Evanscar, meanwhile, had not moved. He stared about him at the chel, who stared back. The vasai's eyes were wide, on his face a look of horror.

"Gods within," he whispered, his voice barely audible. "It's true."

"I told you. But you had to see for yourself," said Amaranth. He leaned heavily against Ash. "I'm sorry for doing that to you, choking you, forcing you, but...I had to..."

Ash shot Grail a look of panic. "Help me! He's--"

Amaranth's eyes closed, and he started to fall. Ash desperately tried to hold him up, but he just didn't have the leverage. Grail rushed forward, catching Amaranth by the shoulders. He was out cold.

"Take him inside," said Vine.

Ash and Grail carried Amaranth inside Vine's house and laid him on the bed. Now that Grail had Vine, the look on Ash's face was even harder to take. That's how sie'd be, if Vine suddenly collapsed. The chel stroked the side of Amaranth's face. "Amaranth? Amaranth!" He looked to Grail. "Is he--"

Grail couldn't help it. Sie reached out and squeezed Ash's shoulder. "He's just exhausted. He'll be okay, but he needs to rest."

Ash nodded, wiping the tears from his eyes with one arm.

Grail wondered if sie should say anything to Ash about Amaranth's condition. It wasn't hir place, was it? No, certainly not. Amaranth himself might not even be aware of it yet. "What he did to Ki and Evanscar is unprecedented. No wonder he's wrung out."

Ash swallowed. "It's more than that. Grail, they had him tied up. There was a line out the door, of pel waiting to be healed. I have no idea how long that was going on or what--" He broke off and stared at the wall.

Gods. What could sie tell Ash? "Well, it's over now." That seemed inadequate. "Why don't you get some rest too? You can't be much better off than he is. He's been using your soul like an auxiliary battery for his working on Ki and Evanscar."

"Is that how he did it?"

"Yes. It's a good thing no one thought to separate the two of you."

* * *

Ash sat watch over Amaranth. He could have done with a meal, a bath, a nap, or all three, but he couldn't bring himself to leave Amaranth's side. He had an irra-

tional fear that if he looked away from that perfect, sleeping face even for an instant, Amaranth might disappear.

"Mmm. Ash?" Amaranth murmured. He opened his eyes and blinked at Ash, smiling sleepily.

"Hi," said Ash.

"What happened? Where are we?"

"We're in Chelon, in Vine's house. You collapsed. You released Evanscar and Ki, and then you fainted. I was afraid--" Remembered panic made Ash's voice tremble. "I was afraid you--"

"Shh." Amaranth twined his arms around Ash's neck. "It's all right. Everything is going to be all right."

"Is it? I don't know, Amaranth. Everything's changing. The chel know they have souls now. All of them. Grail healed a boy in the street, and now everyone knows. All of Chelon rejoiced last night, and today they're rioting in Pelon. People are getting hurt, and no one knows what the Elai are going to do about any of it. I went to Darien. I told him about it. But I don't know if there is anything he can do. I--"

"Ash."

Amaranth stroked his back, and Ash felt the now-familiar warm tingle of Amaranth's soul touching his. It did relax him a bit, but not completely. "Should you be doing that? In your state?"

"My soul is strong, as long as we're together. Touching you like this isn't work, Ash. It's the opposite of work."

Ash remembered what Grail had said about his soul acting as a battery for Amaranth's, when he seized control of Ki and Evanscar. "Because we're in love," he said.

"Yes." Amaranth kissed Ash. The press of his soft lips made Ash's head spin. "Because we're in love."

Ash felt close to tears, but he wasn't sure if they were tears of joy at being with Amaranth again or of fear for what was to come. "I'm scared," he admitted. "I don't know what's going to happen, and it's all my fault."

"No. Not your fault, love. Nobody's fault, really." Amaranth ran gentle fingers down the side of Ash's face and gazed into his eyes.

Somewhere in Amaranth's golden eyes lay the gates to the place Ash had visited before when they made love. How simple that had been. "I never meant to do any of this," Ash said.

"What makes you say it was all you? What about those bastards who attacked you? Or me for finding you?"

"No, I mean even before that. Ever since I left Darien's house, I couldn't be content. If I hadn't been stealing, I never would have gotten--"

"Don't you dare take the blame for that. And let me remind you you're not the only one who couldn't accept his so-called place. We're a lot alike. Just ask Grail how much trouble I made for myself as a student. Don't you see, Ash? One way or another it was going to happen. Sooner or later, you or someone like you and me or someone like me would have met, and Grail or someone like him would have interfered.

"The world wanted this change, Ash. It couldn't go on like that indefinitely. It was bound to break. I know it's frightening, but we're together, aren't we?"

Ash sank against his side. "Yes."

"When was the last time you slept, Ash? Or ate something?"

Ash thought about that. "I slept the night before Grail healed the boy, and I ate...that morning, after I woke up, on my way to work."

"That was two days ago, and you've been running all over Harken's Landing ever since, right?"

"Yeah," Ash said. He was tired, he realized. Exhausted, really, though he hadn't noticed until now.

"Work?"

"Huh?"

"You said you ate something on your way to work. What was your job?"

"Oh, I was burning siltgrass."

"Ash!" Amaranth's eyes filled with horror, and at the same time, Ash felt the familiar warm tingle of Amaranth's soul touching his. "How could you endanger yourself that way? Don't you know how toxic those fumes are?"

"I know," Ash said, nettled a bit by Amaranth's attitude. "There aren't that many things a chel can do that pay. Hey, are you trying to treat me? You just fainted a few minutes ago. Give it a rest, Amaranth."

"Not until I know if you're okay or not."

"I'm fine. It was only for a couple of days."

There was a pause, and then Ash felt the touch of Amaranth's soul return to its light, warm tingle. "Well, it seems you haven't sustained any permanent lung damage, but why, Ash? I know, of course, you needed to survive, but...couldn't you have gleaned? Or something? Anything but that!"

Ash looked away from Amaranth's gaze. "I wanted to pay you back for the coat I stole. Burning grass is the quickest way to earn money."

Amaranth sighed. "Oh Ash... That coat... I was going to give it to you."

Ash laughed. "You were?"

"Yeah. I thought... I don't know where I thought you were going to wear it if you were still living with me in Elaion, but I thought you should have something warm to wear if you did have to go outside for some reason."

He must be tired. Ash couldn't stop laughing. "Ember stole it from me, and that's how I got into the fight, and that's how the boy got injured. I took them to Vine because I thought she could heal them, and then Grail showed up, and that's how all this happened. All because of that coat. And all this time, you meant to give it to me."

"Yes." Amaranth laughed too.

"But you didn't know I was leaving, did you?"

"No." There was pain in that one simple syllable.

"I'm sorry about that. I'm so sorry. Grail said--well, whatever Grail said, it was my fault. I never should have done that, sneaking out in the middle of the night like that. Leaving you..."

"No, you shouldn't have. That was very bad of you, Ash. Before Grail came over, I thought you'd left me because you didn't want to be with me. I--" His voice cracked and he fell silent.

Ash bent his head to rest it against Amaranth's forehead. "You thought I didn't want you? How could you think that?"

Amaranth didn't answer him, just held him tight and buried his face in Ash's neck. Ash ran his hands up and down the long back, soothing him. It reminded him of that day he'd come home from the Refuge so low in spirit. "I'm so sorry I put you through that," said Ash. "I thought it was for your own good, but I was stupid. I should have known better." Ash was so tired, and he hated himself for making Amaranth suffer. "If I'd stayed, you wouldn't have wound up tied to that bed."

Amaranth pulled back and looked at him. "True, but think of all the chel Grail has healed. If you'd stayed, they wouldn't have been helped either. For that matter, I was actually able to do a few of my pel clients some good in the time allotted them. I don't regret that. You shouldn't either."

Ash sighed. "Amaranth, you don't have to tell me, but I have to ask. Those pel who paid for you to treat them. Did you have to--was it--traditional?"

Amaranth smiled. It was weary but genuine. "No. I think they were afraid to presume so much."

The release of his worst fear seemed to take with it what little energy Ash had left. He knew he should be happy, but it seemed as if all he could remember how to feel was fear. The time they'd been apart was gone forever, wasted, and who knew how much time they had left now? "It's been impossible from the start, hasn't it? This thing between us?"

"No," said Amaranth. "Maybe it was, but now... Anything's possible now, Ash."

"Anything," he said. "That could be good or bad."

"Of course. Isn't that always the way? Aren't we always in the jaws of disaster, being shaken by life until our souls rattle in our bodies like seeds in a pod? I mean really. Think of your own life. Has it ever been certain? At least now you face whatever's to come with someone who loves you."

He was right. The realization burned away the terror gripping Ash. Something new and yet not entirely unfamiliar took its place--a fierce combination of love, hope and daring. "Okay," he said, taking a deep breath. "Okay."

Amaranth pulled him close and kissed him. Their lips moved against each other, speaking silent words of love. Ash's first taste of Amaranth's tongue sent a jolt of yearning through his whole body. His cock filled, pushing forward, like the rest of him. He couldn't get close enough to Amaranth.

Amaranth, it seemed, felt the same way. He squeezed Ash tight, kissing him harder, his soul wrapping around Ash's, leaving Ash dizzy with passion. Amaranth's cock pressed against Ash's belly. The hot, hard pressure made desire coil in the pit of Ash's stomach. He tugged at the opening of Amaranth's robe, burrowing his face through the soft folds of cloth until he found one of Amaranth's perfect breasts. Ash suckled at it and slowly thrust his hips, dragging his cock back and forth against Amaranth's erection.

Amaranth gasped. The sound was like warm waves bathing Ash's ears. Their soul connection seemed to create an infinite feedback loop, where Ash felt not only his pleasure but also what Amaranth felt, and then Amaranth felt Ash feeling all those combined sensations, and so on. He was lost in a sea of love and desire, and all they were doing was dry humping each other.

Ash, never content with the status quo, reached down and took Amaranth's cock in his hand. He began to stroke it, long, firm pulls up and down. Amaranth arched his back and whimpered. Ash lifted his head to see Amaranth's head tilted back, his mouth open, his eyes lidded with passion. The sight alone nearly undid him, not to mention that he could feel how his touch affected Amaranth: a sweet-sharp jolt fizzing in the pit of his stomach.

Then Amaranth reached down and ran those long, delicate fingers of his down the heated length of Ash's cock. Ash's toes curled at the delicious sensation of being touched there. He tried to focus on stroking Amaranth's cock, maintaining his rhythm.

Amaranth curled his fingers around Ash's cock and smeared his thumb through the bead of precum at the tip. Ash remembered the taste of Amaranth's precum. His mouth watered. He leaned up and kissed Amaranth on his open mouth, dipping his tongue into Amaranth's slippery heat.

Amaranth hooked one leg over Ash's and pumped him harder. Ash could feel his orgasm boiling up from the base of his cock. And he felt Amaranth's climax building as well. The double sensations inundated every nerve in his body with pleasure almost too intense to bear. It frightened him a little, but that only made him more desperate to give Amaranth all the love and pleasure he could.

"Ash," Amaranth whispered, his voice shaking. "Don't ever leave me again."

"I won't. I can't." And it was true. He and Amaranth were inextricably wound about each other now. "I love you." Oh, gods within. Amaranth was coming. Ash felt a flower open up inside his lover, a bloom that issued forth beams of sunlight to warm and illuminate the whole world. Shockwaves of delight bounced back and forth between them until the sweetness filling every inch of Ash's body sharpened unbearably and broke. Their cocks pulsed, spilling cum.

Ash had just enough presence of mind to pull the covers up before sleep claimed them both.

* * *

Amaranth awoke to the smell of food. A child set a pot of something steaming and fragrant on the table in the middle of the house. She turned and saw Amaranth looking. She was chel. "Good morning."

"Good morning," said Amaranth. Beside him, Ash still slept. Amaranth maneuvered carefully so he could sit up without waking him.

"Everybody's excited that we have another vasai," said the girl. "I guess that troublemaker Ash is good for something. Now, if we can just get those other two in the fancy robes to stop running around like ninnies and help Grail, Vine, and the others, we'll have plenty of healers."

Amaranth put a finger to his lips and pointed at Ash. How he loved the way Ash looked when he was sleeping.

The girl wrinkled her brow, then shrugged. "Well," she said in a whisper that was barely quieter than her previous voice, "I thought you'd both be hungry, so..."

Amaranth nodded and stood. He was a little light-headed after his days of confinement, but it was good to be up. He took a bowl and ladled some of the mixture in the pot into it. It appeared to be a fish stew of some sort, laden with vegetables. An eye popped up to the surface, glazed. Oh dear. Well, of course they'd use all of the fish. Protein had to be in high demand here.

He was starving. Amaranth lifted the eye out and dropped it back into the soup pot. He scooped up a spoonful of stew without looking at it this time and shoveled it into his mouth. It tasted delicious.

The girl stared at him in amusement. Amaranth gestured toward the door and, with a glance back over his shoulder at Ash, still lost to the world, followed her out onto the porch.

The sight that greeted his eyes was stunning. He'd been so focused on his control over Evanscar and Ki yesterday that he hadn't really taken much in. All up and down the street in front of the little yellow house were people, sitting or lying on pieces of plastic and cardboard. And directly in front of the house, an awning had been fashioned. Beneath it Grail and several other vasai in chel dress knelt beside clients who lay on slightly better versions of the plastic and cardboard pallets everyone else used.

The atmosphere was peaceful with a quiet murmur of conversation. Other chel children passed among the people gathered, with pails of water and more of the stew Amaranth had been given.

"Grail gave us the money for the food," said the girl. "We didn't steal it."

"It's delicious," Amaranth said around another mouthful. "What's your name?"

"I'm Ember, and it was my brother Grail healed to show us all we have souls. Since then, I've been working for Grail, and all my gang too. And now, since Grail gave me money to buy food for the people here, every orphan in Chelon is working for me."

Amaranth nodded, hoping he looked suitably impressed. Grail, what are you doing now?

A commotion off to their right seized their attention. There was Push, trying to restrain Task and Toil. "We want to play too!" they cried.

Amaranth approached them.

It was clear that Push had spent the night on the front porch of a neighboring home, whose occupants either didn't mind or were not present. "Amaranth!" she cried as he neared her. "What are we supposed to be doing here? I think this was a mistake. We should be in Pelon. This is--"

"They're fighting in Pelon, Push. I don't think you should take your children back there."

"But...what is there for us here? These are all chel, Amaranth! What can we do here? Why did you bring us?"

"Because it's safe here, and because I thought you might want to work."

"Work?"

Amaranth nodded, gesturing to the gathering with his half-empty bowl. "These people are all ill. They need healing. I healed your mother, even though she was not Elai. You can help them."

She stared at him, her mouth compressed into a tight, flat line. Toil shrieked and struggled against the grip Push still kept on her wrist. "Let your children play with the orphans," Amaranth told her.

Her nostrils flared. "This is how it will be now isn't it? Everyone mixing?"

"If we're lucky."

"Mom's alive because you were where you weren't supposed to be," she said. Then her eyes widened. "How are you, anyway? Forgive me. I must seem so ungrateful."

"I'm fine." Amaranth glanced at the children, who had quieted and were listening to the two adults. Amaranth raised an eyebrow.

Push let out a sigh. "Okay, go help the other kids," she said, "but don't you dare leave my sight!" The children scampered off and Ember corralled them, handed them each a pail, and set them to passing out water.

Not everyone would accept a drink from the pel children. Some turned their backs on them and wouldn't look at them. Others took the offered water with wide eyes and sniffed it carefully before drinking. And a few acted as if there were nothing unusual about being served water by a pel child.

"Amaranth!" It was Grail, ducking out from under the awning of the treatment area. "How do you feel?"

"I'm fine," said Amaranth. "What about you?"

There were dark circles under Grail's eyes and a slight tremor in his hand as she pushed the hair back from his face. Grail nodded in acknowledgment of what she clearly saw in Amaranth's expression. "Yes. I need a break. Vine slept later than I did. She can keep going a little longer. And they're patient, these people. They wait."

"I'll help you too," said Amaranth.

Grail hesitated, and Amaranth felt the brush of his soul. "You are amazingly recovered," she said. Glancing at the house, she put a hand to Amaranth's elbow. "There's something I need to tell you in privacy."

* * *

Ash dreamed he and Amaranth floated together in a warm, pink cloud, their arms, legs, and souls twined about one another. Amaranth's erection pressed into Ash's belly. Ash lifted his head and gazed into Amaranth's golden eyes. In them Ash found that land he'd caught glimpses of before, first with Darien and then with Amaranth. Only now, nothing stopped him from passing right through the gates and seeing everything.

He marveled at the fertile land, the river teeming with fish, and the children--beautiful children that he could not make out as chel, pel, vasai, or Elai. They played on the banks of the river in what had once been the siltgrass marsh. But the river had been allowed to run its natural course, and what had once been Chelon was now a prosperous district focused on fishing. Some of the residents were still identifiable as chel, though Ash had never seen such tall chel in his life. But there were pel there too, and vasai and Elai and others who, like the children, could not readily be identified.

Ash walked home from the river, a basket of fish on his back. He stopped on the way and bought turnips and long beans from a vegetable stand on what once had been Glean Street. People smiled at him in the street as he passed.

Where Vine's house had been stood a temple. Only it wasn't really a temple. In that way that things in dreams are sometimes just known, Ash knew that it was a place for people who were sick to come and be treated by doctors and vasai. Over the doors stood a statue of Grail. Darien, Grail, and Vine stood on the front steps arguing. Grail wanted the statue removed.

Ash waved to them and walked on to a house where lavender grew in window boxes, and the door opened and Amaranth stood there, looking much older. He smiled and embraced Ash, and they went inside. "Look who's home for Soul Night," said Amaranth, and there at the kitchen table sat someone Ash had never seen before. A tall person with auburn hair and a vasai's eyes, and freckles.

Ash awoke. His chest felt tight. He was certain it was his soul, so full of joy that it pressed against his rib cage. He wasn't sure why he should feel this happy just because of a dream, but he savored it anyway.

Until he realized Amaranth was not beside him. He sat up, rubbing his eyes, struggling to get his bearings. "Amaranth?"

The door opened and Amaranth came in, a big smile on his face. "You're awake."

"Yeah. Shouldn't you be resting?" he said.

"I'm fine. I'm wonderful!" Amaranth, all smiles and grace and golden curls, fairly sprang to the side of the bed. He sat down, taking Ash by the hand. "Ash, I'm pregnant."

Ash stared into Amaranth's eyes, and it was as if he were back in that dream again. "What?"

Amaranth nodded. "It's true. I didn't know either, but Grail can tell. Vine too."

Ash's heart pounded. "But I didn't think vasai could get pregnant."

Amaranth smiled. "Not by Elai or other vasai. But apparently the same is not true of chel."

There was a pause as the import of that sank in. Then Ash's gaze fell to Amaranth's belly. "You mean I'm--" He reached out, halfway, toward Amaranth's belly.

Amaranth took his hand and pressed it to his abdomen. "The father, yes."

Wonder filled Ash with a feeling not unlike the touch of Amaranth's soul. He caressed Amaranth with his callous palm. Suddenly he looked up. "Do you want... Can we... I want us to be a family together!" Would Amaranth want that?

Amaranth scooted forward, pulling Ash into his arms and kissing him. "Of course, goose."

Ash wrapped his arms around Amaranth and clutched him. This was like that time Amaranth had comforted him after his nightmare, only these feelings were all good. But there were so many of them. He didn't know what to do with them. He trembled and pressed his face to Amaranth's neck. Tears came, and he tried to muffle his sob.

Amaranth held him tight. "Ash?"

"No," he muttered. "I'm fine. It's not--it's just--I didn't even know I had a soul, and now it's so full!"

Epilogue

Four Years Later

Most of the estates in Elaion were dark on Soul Night, but Dartwood blazed with light. According to Batch, a total of 521 lanterns had been lit in honor of the festival commemorating the revelation of chel souls.

"A lot of fuss over some marsh rats if you ask me," she groused, then shrugged. "Course, I do like having two days off in a row, and better wages. I guess if we didn't have Soul Night, we wouldn't have Treaty Day, either."

Ash let the servant's remarks roll off him as she escorted them through the front hall. Amaranth took his arm and squeezed it. Shale tugged at his hand impatiently. "Presents, Daddy!"

"Yes, there will be presents," he told her, "but only if you're a good girl and you do as Uncle Darien says. No temper tantrums and no using your soul on your cousins unless they ask you. You understand?"

The child looked up at him and nodded solemnly. She had his sharp chin and Amaranth's eyes. She was female, but she had the soul of a vasai.

They stepped into the great hall of Dartwood to find Darien and his wife Elissa standing beside the fireplace. Dara and Samuel chased each other around the soul table. At the sight of them, Shale released Ash's hand and ran forward, shouting with glee.

"Thank you for watching her tonight," Amaranth said to their hosts.

"It's no problem at all. We love having her here," said Elissa.

Darien stepped to a sideboard where crystal decanters sat on a silver tray. "Can I offer you two a glass of apple wine?" asked Darien.

"No, thanks," said Ash. "I'm sure we'll be drinking plenty of it later."

"You, maybe." Amaranth made a face. "I can't say I'm all that fond of it, though it's not as bad as silsinthe."

"And it doesn't take up all the wetlands. Though some people aren't convinced. There's still going to be plenty of silsinthe production going on." Darien poured wine for himself and Elissa, and water for Amaranth and Ash. "Probably for another generation."

"At least the burners have masks now," said Ash.

They toasted Grail, the vasai of Soul Night, and then Amaranth and Ash departed, walking through the back garden to the gate.

"Are you sure you want to go this way?" asked Amaranth.

"Yes. I don't mind. The culverts don't bother me anymore. Everything's so different now. And I want to see the boats."

Even through the trees, Ash could see the lights of the boats. When they got to the riverbank, it was as if the dark water was a strip of the night sky, studded with stars. They took their own boat, a little skiff made of wood, and lit the lantern on the prow. They got in, spread a blanket on the bottom, and sat together in the stern.

As they always did, the gentle lap of water and the soft rocking of the boat recalled to Ash the best memories of his childhood. He looked at Amaranth. The scattered lights from the boats reflected in his golden hair. It still amazed Ash that they were together. A lot of things amazed him these days.

Amaranth leaned forward and closed the distance between them with a kiss. Ash closed his eyes, savoring the soft press of Amaranth's lips. Four years they'd been together now, raising their daughter, strengthening the chel-pel coalition, helping Vine and Grail with the hospital. It was such a good life. Sometimes he felt like he'd stumbled into someone else's destiny.

"Ash," whispered Amaranth. "Stop thinking so much, honey."

He was right. Ash devoted himself to kissing Amaranth back, dipping his tongue into the wet sweetness of his mouth, tasting him. It was like honey on his tongue. He reached up and ran one hand through Amaranth's silken hair, then cupped Amaranth's jaw and deepened their kiss. Amaranth responded with that little whimper deep in his throat that made Ash's toes tingle. He was hard already, and he leaned over, pressing his erection against Amaranth's thigh.

"Mmmmm," said Amaranth, sounding supremely satisfied. "I love it when you get excited." He reached down. As Amaranth's fingers burrowed beneath the waistband of Ash's trousers and gripped him, the warm blanket of Amaranth's soul en-

veloped him. They floated down the river, rocking gently, surrounded by lights, full of love.

Ash trailed kisses down Amaranth's neck to his breast, nuzzling aside the folds of Amaranth's robe to claim the perfect pink bud of his nipple. He rolled it about on his tongue, a delicacy. He slid one hand inside Amaranth's robe to find his cock, firm and hot. Ash stroked it. Amaranth's gasp bathed his ears. Ash sucked Amaranth's breast into his mouth as far as it would go and rubbed his face against the vasai's warm, soft skin. He thrust into Amaranth's hand. Now the little whimpers were coming from him.

"Have you ever done it in a boat?" whispered Amaranth. From the raggedness of his voice, he was as excited as Ash was.

"No. But inexperience hasn't stopped us yet."

Ash climbed on top of Amaranth, and Amaranth carefully lifted his legs. The boat rocked. It would just figure that they'd survive the revolution and drown making love in a skiff, but Ash couldn't stop himself. His cock was drawn to Amaranth's pussy as if pulled there by a string. He braced his knees against one of the ribs of the hull and placed one hand on the gunwale. With his other hand, he slowly guided himself into Amaranth.

Amaranth's slick, tight heat closed over him, and Ash was lost. He found Amaranth's mouth and kissed him as he thrust up, fucking him with long, slow strokes. Waves of warmth rolled from his cock out through the rest of his body. His skin tingled. Already he was so close.

"More," whispered Amaranth.

The word nearly undid him. Ash quickened his pace, pounding into Amaranth and sending the boat pitching from side to side. His balls drew up. He grasped Amaranth's hot hard cock and stroked it, running his fingers down the length and back up again, dipping his thumb in the precum beading at the tip and smearing it around the head in a swirl.

"Ash!" Amaranth cried out, and then the cock in Ash's hand pulsed. Amaranth's hot, sticky seed spilled all over Ash's hand. The contractions of his orgasm pulsed throughout his body, milking Ash's cock. With a choked cry, Ash thrust up hard, and again, driving up into Amaranth as far as possible. Sparks ignited in a sunburst emanating from his groin and out. The shockwaves made him clench his fingers and curl his toes. His soul overflowed. Full to bursting with love and pleasure, he emptied himself in Amaranth's womb.

They held each other in the bottom of the boat as they continued to drift downstream. "Maybe I'll get pregnant again," said Amaranth. "Would that be good?"

"We can have as many as you want. We can populate the whole of Harken's Landing with vasai-souled chel."

"Well, we'll see," said Amaranth, and they lay back together, staring up at the stars as their boat drifted downstream, toward the celebration in Chelon.

THE END

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Jessica Freely has been writing and publishing genre fiction under a variety of names for over fifteen years, but it wasn't until she stumbled upon a stash of Jay and Silent Bob fanfiction that she found her true calling: male/male romance. She hasn't looked back since.