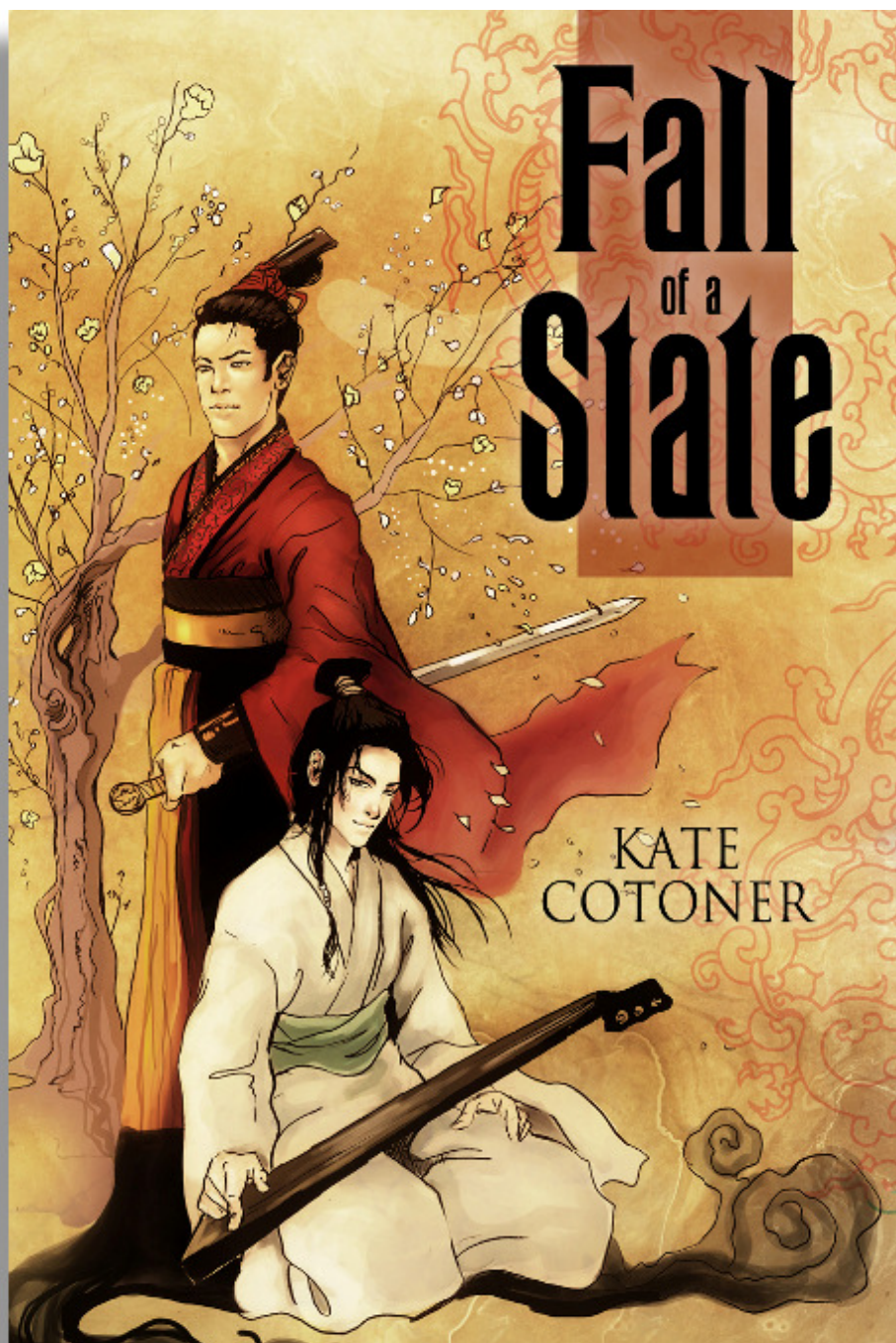


Fall of a State

KATE
COTONER



Chapter One

“GET out of my sight!”

Liu Che, the Emperor of the Middle Kingdom, hurled a goblet of wine at the huddle of court musicians. They whimpered in dismay, scuffling backward on hands and knees, dragging their instruments with them. None of them dared look up; all wore expressions of consternation and terror. They folded themselves over their instruments and shook, the rustling of their silks like a soft breeze flowing around the audience chamber.

The sound amused and aggravated Liu Che in equal parts. He sighed, turning his head so sharply the red and gold beads suspended from his headdress clattered and tangled together. The beads danced and slowed, then fell into graceful silence. A smile of self-mockery curled his mouth as he became aware of the extent of his jaded cynicism. Things must be bad when he found the beads on his headdress more interesting than his court entertainers.

With a gesture, he summoned his chief eunuch. When the elderly, soft-bellied creature bowed low before him, Liu Che leaned back in his gilded throne and flicked his fingers toward the musicians. “Get rid of them.”

The chief eunuch bowed even lower. “Permanently, Your Majesty?”

Liu Che scowled. “I am not that much of a monster. Send them away until they can play in tune. Send them to Minyue.”

A wail more musical than the tunes they’d been playing erupted from the cowering musicians. Liu Che let his smile return briefly. Minyue was at the far south of the empire, a kingdom so distant very few travelers ever returned from its damp heat. Those who did were racked with strange malaises and told tales of monstrous beasts stalking through dank, hot jungles. It sounded like hell on earth.

He waited until the musicians were separated from their instruments and removed from the room, protesting and pleading. His expression hardened. Liu Che despised those who begged for his clemency when they had done nothing to deserve it. He believed a man should use the gifts he’d been given and never apologize for them, but neither should he squander those gifts in meaningless repetition.

The court musicians had been told once already to play something new. An emperor should not need to repeat his commands.

The double doors of the receiving hall closed, cutting off the musicians’ cries. Liu Che curled his hands around the armrests of his throne and stared at the dark wood of the doors, admiring for a moment the intricate bronze decoration of two dragons entwined amongst clouds. His decision to use two dragons rather than a dragon and a phoenix had provided endless fodder for gossip. Everyone knew of his preference for male flesh, but it was something that went unacknowledged. The denials had irritated him so much that

he'd had the doors made as a permanent, daily reminder to his courtiers of his nature.

Now the doors seemed to taunt him. Two dragons sporting together, their long, sleek shapes undulating in bliss, their lashing tails entangled to bring their bodies ever closer... and yet for all the valiant generals he took to his bed, Liu Che had never found that moment of sweet, perfect unity his dragons symbolized.

The reminder made his mood turn sour. He stood abruptly, the beads in his headdress clashing again. Looking out over the assembled courtiers, he pinned them collectively with his gaze, watching them wilt beneath the weight of his anger.

"I am sick of hearing the same songs, the same music," he began. He lifted his arms, the heavy folded silk of his sleeves sliding over his wrists in a sensual rub. "You give me tiresome variations on tunes popular when my great-great-grandfather was emperor. I have extended the boundaries of the empire further than any ruler before me, so why must I listen to the lackluster twiddlings of inadequate musicians? I want new music, new influences. I want to hear the songs of the south and the far west. I want to hear tunes from the north. I want something new! Is there anyone here capable of that?"

In the wake of his speech, silence rang around the room. It stretched out, becoming first uncomfortable and then unbearable. Everyone, it seemed, kept their eyes trained on the floor.

Except for one. As Liu Che scanned the room, his gaze met that of a young man half hidden behind more senior

members of the Guild of Music. When Liu Che stared at him, the young man answered his challenge. "I can give you something new. I am capable of entertaining Your Majesty."

The young man's voice was soft and husky, scarcely more than a murmur, and yet his words carried around the room.

"You." Liu Che beckoned him. "What is your name?"

The musicians around him parted as the young man prostrated himself. "Your Majesty, this humble person is Li Yan Nian."

"Let me see you."

Yan Nian rose obediently from the serried ranks of musicians and ministers, stepped out in front of the throne, and knelt with his hands on his knees. Graceful as well as clever, was Liu Che's first thought. He admired the way the young man had arranged the silks of his pale blue robe so they trailed around him in a delicate, artful pattern. The silk was of good quality, though the style was dated. The young man must be of good family, or else he had a lover at court that gave him last year's castoffs.

Liu Che frowned at the direction of his thoughts. He didn't want to imagine this young man with a lover. He stepped down from the dais at the same time as Yan Nian looked up, shy and bold, inquisitive and challenging, and Liu Che felt his heart seize before it beat again, strong and rapid. Yan Nian was beautiful.

Liu Che had never demanded beauty in his lovers, contenting himself on the battlefields and in camp with mutual satisfaction and stray lusts. Pleasure was the only currency he traded in with his intimate companions;

pleasure and the easy understanding of men. In the palace it was different. Beauties were pushed upon him at every turn, eunuchs from different factions desperate to know his tastes so they could bring him the most peerless of women, the most radiant of youths, the handsomest of guardsmen. None of them had yet learned that their master's delight lay less in outward appearance and more from a resonance of the soul.

He'd thought himself immune to beauty. He'd believed himself jaded, spoiled forever by a glut of the most beautiful men and women in the kingdom. He'd grown complacent, thinking he'd seen everything his country had to offer—and now it offered him this musician, this Li Yan Nian.

Liu Che stared, concealing his true feelings behind a mask of indifference. Yan Nian had pale skin and wide dark eyes, a full upper lip that made his smile seem upside-down, and the deceptive roundness of face and body that marked him as a northerner. He wore his long hair pinned in a simple topknot save for one tendril that hung over his chest. Braided through it were tiny silver bells. They tinkled and chimed with the slightest movement. They betrayed his nerves now, the delicate sound glittering with each anxious breath Yan Nian took.

"How long have you served me?"

Yan Nian lowered his head. The silver bells tinkled and were silenced as the tendril of hair curled on the floor. "Two years, Highness. I entered the palace with my sister, Lady Li. She is one of Your Majesty's dancers."

Liu Che didn't want to hear about the sister. If she resembled her brother, doubtless she'd be lovely, but her

existence meant nothing to him. “Two years. And yet you have never performed for me before.”

“Your Highness has many musicians.”

“I have many disappointing musicians.” Liu Che looked at the discarded instruments of the recent exiles. “Are you not afraid you will disappoint me, too?”

Yan Nian rose up and met Liu Che’s gaze without flinching. “No, Highness.”

Amused by the young man’s bravery, Liu Che chuckled. He returned to his throne and sat back, relaxing into the comfort of padded velvet. “Play for me, Li Yan Nian.”

“As you command, Highness.” Yan Nian tilted his head, a questioning smile on his lips. “With your permission, I will use one of the qin left behind.”

Liu Che nodded. He watched Yan Nian cross the room and crouch over a jumble of abandoned instruments. “Not one of those. You shall use the best in the palace.” He signaled to his chief eunuch. “Let the best qin be brought at once.”

Yan Nian’s fingers stilled on the neck of the qin he’d selected. To Liu Che’s eyes, it seemed like any other instrument, ordinary and dull. But Yan Nian caressed it with tender care, hesitant fingers stroking the length of the seven silken strings. He plucked a note from it, modulating it, merging it into a second note and then a chord. He smiled, closing his eyes at the sound. When he looked up again, he said, “Oh, Your Majesty, you are generosity itself. But it’s not necessary to have the best. This instrument suits my purposes.”

Intrigued, Liu Che held up his hand to stay his chief eunuch. He watched as Yan Nian made the qin sing again, an inanimate construction brought to life beneath elegant, clever fingers. Even though Yan Nian played nothing more than a handful of tuning notes, the sound rippled through the air. Liu Che felt his body tighten in response to the aching cry of the instrument.

Yan Nian moved the qin to sit in front of him, and then he began to play. At first came the melody, followed by a variation, before finally Yan Nian started to sing:

In the north lives a beauty beyond compare;

One look will cause the fall of a city,

Another, the fall of a state.

Who knows how far the charms of the beauty may reach?

Yan Nian's singing voice was pure and clear, the huskiness almost a tangible caress. Liu Che shivered. The tune was simple, catchy enough that he could hum along, but the flourishes around it were complex, delighting the ear.

When it ended and Yan Nian's fingers rested, Liu Che felt a shock akin to pain. The song had been haunting, captivating. He shook himself free of its spell and sat forward. "I like it."

He saw Yan Nian's exhalation of relief, heard the murmured comment and scattered applause around the room. Liu Che paid no attention. "Play it again," he commanded. "Again, Yan Nian."

Bowing his head in acknowledgement, Yan Nian bent once more over the qin and coaxed out the opening chords of his song. Liu Che listened closely, his fingers tapping in unconscious rhythm as the melody wove its magic. This time he could distinguish different elements in the music. It seemed simple, yet just when he thought he understood it, the melody changed and began again.

He hid his smile of delight. Yan Nian was a rare find, both a beauty and a talent. Liu Che rose from his throne, taking with him the stiff leather crop he usually carried tucked into his waist sash. He used it on his warhorses and his lovers in equal measure, to urge them on and to punish them, though he preferred using the crop to bring pleasure. Over the years he'd learned how to wield it with exquisite mastery. He knew how to inflict ecstasy with its kiss, but also knew how hard to strike to lay open a man's flesh to the bone. The crop was desired and feared almost as an entity in itself, rather than as an extension of his will, but Liu Che liked it that way.

He stepped from the dais and approached Yan Nian, holding the crop down. The loop pulled tight across his knuckles, and he allowed the leather-wrapped shaft to be alternately hidden and revealed by the movement of his robes as he walked. Liu Che wondered how Yan Nian would react to it. He drew nearer the beautiful musician and flicked the crop a little, as if in time to the beat of the song.

Yan Nian glanced up and fixed his gaze on the crop. His eyes widened, but neither his voice nor his hands faltered in their task. Liu Che smiled inwardly. He walked a slow circle around his prey, edging closer each time until the trailing silks of his outer robes caught on Yan Nian's clothes.

Still Yan Nian didn't flinch. His voice remained clear, his fingers sure as they plucked a shimmering cadence of notes from the qin.

Liu Che purred a little at the back of his throat. It had been too long since he'd enjoyed teasing a man like this. His generals were cultured men who could discuss the classics with as much ease as they could pen a charming poem, but they lacked a certain delicacy. His generals were straightforward and bluff, and now Liu Che realized he longed for shyness and sincerity.

He wanted to touch a lover and see raw emotion on his face. Not just lust—he wanted to see the wonder of lovemaking reflected in his partner's expression; wanted to hear sweet, husky moans of pleasure rather than the savage grunts of rutting.

The images in his mind tormented him. His body responded, a kick of desire heavy in his belly and his cock stirring. Liu Che gave a sharp tug on his trailing skirts, swishing them behind him. He continued to walk, stepping now upon the pale blue silk of Yan Nian's spread robe.

At last, he saw Yan Nian's fingers tremble on the strings of the qin. The musician reacted on instinct, blurring the sound and building the tremulousness into the tune. Liu Che almost laughed in admiration. He paused behind Yan Nian, watching the adept movements of his hands. Liu Che was close enough to breathe in the spice-sweet scent of the musician's hair and skin and to hear the delicate chime of the silver bells as counterpoint to the melody... and then he realized Yan Nian was afraid, his whole body quivering finely.

A small flash of triumph went through Liu Che, followed by a stronger sense of admiration as Yan Nian sang his verse again, his voice pure and unwavering. Yan Nian was afraid, yes, but he didn't allow his emotion to interfere with the song. He'd put his emperor's pleasure before his own feelings.

Liu Che made a contented sound and moved around to stand in front of his musician. He raised the crop and touched its tip to Yan Nian's face in the lightest, briefest caress. With a flick, Liu Che set ringing the silver bells twined through Yan Nian's hair. He saw the heat rise to Yan Nian's face and traced the blush with the crop.

Yan Nian's lips parted. He seemed to struggle to breathe. Liu Che stroked the tip of the crop over the soft pout. He saw rather than heard the startled gasp, saw Yan Nian jerk backward slightly, but the song continued, smooth and steady.

Liu Che smiled. He trailed the crop down Yan Nian's throat and hooked it into the neck of his robes. The pretty, pale blue silk lay over an under-robe of purest white. Against it, Yan Nian's skin seemed to take on the color of warm honey. The black leather crop made an intriguing contrast. Liu Che imagined stripping Yan Nian naked and decorating his fair skin with sharp strokes of the crop, or leaving the dark imprint of his hand on Yan Nian's smooth, rounded buttocks.

His breath hissed between his teeth at the sudden surge of excitement that beat through him. He willed Yan Nian to lift his head and see the reaction his music, his very

presence, had wrought, but the musician resisted and played on, hesitant and shy.

Determined to make him react, Liu Che leaned forward and arrowed the crop down over Yan Nian's chest and into his lap. Yan Nian kept his gaze lowered, but neither his voice nor his body could lie. His song grew huskier, richer, as he responded. His movements as he played became more languorous, the notes holding longer, hanging in the air and quivering.

When he finished singing, he threw back his head, the silver bells in his hair chiming. His mouth looked ripe, inviting kisses, and though his eyes were veiled by his lashes, Liu Che saw the gleam of arousal hidden there. When he glanced lower, he saw the extent of Yan Nian's response. Liu Che narrowed his eyes, gauging the size of the musician's cock from the bulge in Yan Nian's lap. His calculations pleased him, and Liu Che made a soft sound of anticipatory pleasure.

He withdrew the crop and tucked it into his waist sash before he crouched beside Yan Nian. The musician flashed him a confused look, then dropped his gaze, but he didn't stop playing. The tune went into a series of variations, each more complicated than the last, until a different piece of music was born from it.

Liu Che watched his fingers fly over the qin's twisted silk strings. "Your song is exquisite and your fingers so very elegant," he murmured so only Yan Nian could hear. "Tell me, do you play every instrument with as much talent?"

A deep blush crept over Yan Nian's cheeks. Without stilling his fingers or breaking the music, he replied, "Please,

Highness. You asked me to play my song for you. Your word is an imperial edict. I cannot allow myself to be distracted, not even by you, or I will risk your punishment.”

Liu Che remained beside him, savoring the moment of amused shock. Without another word, he stood and returned to his throne. He sat, rearranging his silks around him, and made a signal to his chief eunuch. The old man shuffled across the floor to Yan Nian, who glanced at him and then at the throne before finally ceasing his playing.

He bowed and lifted the qin into his arms. The chief eunuch’s high-pitched order stopped him. “Leave the qin. You may go now.”

Yan Nian shot another glance at Liu Che before he got to his feet and backed away, keeping his head low. At the chief eunuch’s sign, the rest of the musicians and courtiers rose and filed out of the audience room. Yan Nian was lost amongst them, and soon the room was empty.

Liu Che felt the glow of anticipation fan itself into a flame of desire. Easy conquests bored him. His concubines and even his generals allowed him every privilege and denied him nothing; and yet Li Yan Nian, a lowly musician, had the temerity to turn his own words against him in chastisement.

How refreshing! Liu Che leaned back in his throne and smiled. He would seduce Yan Nian and punish him with pleasure. His beautiful musician would learn his lesson well—and he would begin that very night.

Chapter Two

YAN NIAN slid shut the door to his room and leaned against the wall. He gasped, legs buckling as he sank to the floor. Beneath his fine silks, his body was bathed in sweat. Arousal burned through him, sharp and aching. He fumbled with his skirts, lifting them to his waist and grasping at his erection through the thin linen of his under-trousers.

He moaned, fitting his palm to his cock and squeezing himself, prolonging the pleasurable agony a moment longer. His hips jerked, his body instinctively craving release. The silver bells in his hair tinkled and clashed as he rolled onto his side. Beneath him, the wooden floor felt hard and unyielding. His bed was only a short distance away, but Yan Nian wanted to finish this now, quick and brutal.

He dipped his hand inside his under-trousers and gripped his cock. It pulsed in his hand, its head wet and trailing slick ribbons over his skin. Yan Nian stifled a cry as he fisted his erection and began to work it back and forth. He thrust hard into his hand, his fingers tightening... the same fingers that had just played his newest composition for His Majesty Liu Che.

A rush of desire curled in his belly at the thought of the emperor. Liu Che was his darkest, most forbidden dream made flesh. Tall and proud, his fine skin tanned from his

time on the battlefield, his expression distant and his gaze watchful, Liu Che was a man born to rule. Even without the intricately patterned brocades and beaded headdresses, without his powerful black warhorses and his gleaming bronze armor, he would still look like an emperor.

Yan Nian sobbed for breath as thoughts of Liu Che overwhelmed him. He twisted on the floor, his body on fire for a lover's touch. He only had his hand to help him, coupled with the memories of the emperor speaking to him, watching him, toying with him. He jerked at his cock, desperate for the relief of orgasm. Turning onto his belly, he raised his arse, hips thrusting back against an imaginary weight on top of him. His anus clenched, shudders running through him as he pictured Liu Che behind him, forcing his hard cock inside Yan Nian's tender body.

His thoughts snapped onto the emperor's crop. He stuffed his free hand into his mouth to stifle his moans and bit his knuckles as he imagined the sharp lash of the leather crop against his naked flesh. Would Liu Che go easy on him, or would he whip him with the same blank control he used when chastising a headstrong stallion?

Yan Nian groaned and turned his head. His saliva smeared from his knuckles over his face. He shut his eyes tight, hearing the chime of the bells in his hair as he focused on reaching climax. His hand moved faster on his cock. Sweat trickled down his sides. He could smell himself, lust and musk and need. His teeth sank into his lower lip sharp enough to hurt, and he grunted, the breath forced out of him in a staccato rhythm.

He held onto the fantasy of Liu Che. He wanted the emperor to use him, to teach him the pleasures of bed-sport. He wanted to give himself entirely to Liu Che, to allow his king anything. He wanted one night, just one night. He wasn't greedy. Just one night with the man he loved, one night in which to experience everything he'd been denying himself....

Yan Nian gasped, his orgasm almost upon him. His back arched as his hips plunged faster. His hand was wet and slick, his cock so hot and hard, the floor beneath him spattered with pre-come. He summoned the thought of Liu Che in the audience chamber, his handsome face free of expression but amusement shining behind his eyes. Oh, that look—Yan Nian wanted it, wanted him, *needed* him—

His orgasm broke, sudden and violent. Yan Nian swallowed a cry as his seed spurted from within the cage of his fingers and shot over the floor. His body shook and he shuddered, open-mouthed and wide-eyed, pleasure wasting him. His knees slid out from beneath him, and he lay flat, fingers still wrapped around his cock.

He groaned softly, feeling the wet patches of semen soak through the delicate layers of silk. His clothes would be stained, but he didn't care. Trembling, Yan Nian curled onto his side. The room spun around him. Though the air smelled of sex, he could still remember the scent from the emperor's clothes. Instead of his own harsh gasps for breath, he could hear Liu Che's jade-pure, masculine voice.

His heart thumped, his pulse slowing to normal. Yan Nian remained still, drowsing in the aftermath of climax. With the return of his senses came the return of sensible

thought. He sat up and examined his clothing, giving a rueful grimace at the damp patches. He needed to change.

Yan Nian used the hem of his under-robe to wipe the floor clean of his seed before he stood and undressed. He balled his stained garments and tossed them into a basket. Naked, he walked over to the wooden chest at the foot of his bed. Court musicians were given small, basic quarters in one wing of the palace along with the rest of the entertainers. A narrow room with a shuttered window, it contained all his worldly possessions.

He had given up so much to obey his father's wishes. Their comfortable house in the countryside and its estate had gone, sold to raise money for his sister's outfits and to pay their travel expenses to the capital. Careful spending had ensured that Lady Li never went without a new garment for any state occasion, even if it meant Yan Nian had to wear less fashionable clothing. He didn't mind. His father's plan revolved around Lady Li, and Yan Nian was determined to see his sister established as Liu Che's favorite concubine. His resolve faltered only slightly when he thought of his beautiful sister in the arms of the man he loved.

Yan Nian lifted the lid of the chest, one of the few things he'd brought into the palace from his old life, and began to look through his meager collection of folded garments. He'd caught the gleam of speculative interest in Liu Che's eyes and knew it wouldn't be long before the emperor summoned him again. The whole court knew of His Majesty's fondness for male lovers, although it seemed Liu Che preferred his generals to any other companions. Yan Nian had never expected to catch imperial notice, but now he had it, he had

to ensure that Liu Che's attention passed over him in favor of his sister.

He pulled on a clean pair of under-trousers and selected an old cream tunic. It had worn thin with repeated washing, the silk almost transparent. The garment was too tight across his chest and arms, but Yan Nian put it on anyway. No one would see it but him. For his outer robe, he chose dark brown brocade sewn at the cuffs and hem with golden thread. Although expensive, the fabric looked drab on him. Yan Nian didn't want to call any more attention to his person; he needed to reflect it elsewhere.

Presentable again, he knelt and examined the remaining contents of the chest. He lifted his qin from its silken wrapping and set it on his bed. He'd developed a habit of storing the instrument in the chest whenever he left the room. The palace servants who swept out the musicians' quarters could on occasion be careless, leading to erhu with snapped necks and qin with dented sounding boxes.

Yan Nian's qin had been in his family for centuries and had been given to him by his grandfather. Though its sound remained true, the qin was so old that the silken strings snapped free of their tuning pegs whenever he played too passionately. The craftsmen at the Guild of Music shook their heads whenever he took it for repair and told him he should retire it.

But he couldn't afford a new qin, and so he used it to compose his melodies, plucking with careful delicacy at the strings until he had the tune memorized. Only then did he ask the Guild's masters if he could borrow one of their qin,

and on that he would work his basic melody into a completed tune.

Yan Nian sighed as he looked at the instrument on his bed. He considered himself fortunate to have the support of the Guild. The masters told him he was talented, and during his time in the palace, they'd nurtured his gift for composition and his skill at playing. They also lectured him on his shyness and encouraged him to push himself forward. Other, less talented musicians had excelled at court and gained His Majesty's attention, garnering praise and rewards while Yan Nian stayed in the background and wrote ensemble pieces. But now he was ready.

Beneath the next layer of clothes, he found his mirror. Yan Nian lifted the circle of polished bronze and examined his reflection. He saw the slight frown between his brows and tried to smooth it away with his fingers. The motion set the silver bells in his hair ringing. He smiled, remembering they were his sister's idea.

Three years younger than him, Lady Li had a forceful personality and a casual disregard for the wishes of their father. She'd gone through the motions of the dancing lessons with a sullen pout, but not even her bad temper could disguise her beauty. Almost every man in the district had clamored to catch a glimpse of her.

And then there were the men who called at their house not to pay court to Lady Li, but to befriend him. Yan Nian had always imagined they sought his friendship only as a means of contriving access to his sister. He'd thought nothing of his own looks until Lady Li held her mirror in front of him and told him he was beautiful.

“Not as beautiful as you,” he’d said, embarrassed.

“No,” she’d responded. “You’re more beautiful. If you were a woman, I’d scratch out your eyes in a fit of jealousy.”

His smile faded, and he tucked the mirror back into his clothes. His looks had brought him only grief when he’d first arrived in the palace. As a lowly musician, he’d been the target of other men’s lusts and the focus of several noblewomen and princesses. The women he could handle, deflecting their amorous intentions with gentle persuasion. The men were less easily put off. His schooling in basic swordsmanship—a discipline that oddly complemented his skills as a musician—and the strength in his deceptively soft body had ensured he was left alone after the first few attempts to overcome him.

His decision to hold himself apart had won him no friends, though it brought him respect. Yan Nian had fallen into the trap of having many acquaintances and no close companions. He spent most of his time with his qin, studying advanced musical theory with the masters of the Guild or teaching the youngsters of the imperial household.

As he folded his one good cloak around the mirror, his hand brushed against a cool, smooth object poking out of his oldest, simplest clothes. Yan Nian drew it out, aware of an anxious yearning within him as he held the object cradled in his hands.

A phallus, made of polished red jasper, life-size—or so the shopkeeper had told him with a knowing wink. Yan Nian turned it in his hands, embarrassed at the fingerprints he left on its glossy surface. He studied it, feeling the chill weight of the stone across his palm. The phallus flared

slightly at the bottom and had a long, notched line running up the underside to where the stone curved out to represent the head. The tip was gently rounded and even had an eye marked in it.

“It’s crude, but it does the job,” the shopkeeper had said with a leer.

Yan Nian didn’t know if the claim was true. He hadn’t yet had the courage to use it on himself, intimidated by its size and weight. The idea of taking his pleasure from a piece of carved stone disturbed him, but it seemed to be his only option. He’d had a few offers of sex before, one from an acrobat, another from a guardsman, and another from one of the under-secretaries of the Entertainment Ward, but none of the men had stirred his senses the way Liu Che did.

Besides, he shouldn’t allow himself to be turned from his purpose within the palace. His focus needed to be absolute: he should think only of his sister and the honor she would bring to their family if Liu Che chose her as his concubine.

With a sigh, he replaced the stone phallus in the chest and covered it over.

Chapter Three

YAN NIAN spent a few hours playing melodies on his qin, trying to put into music what he felt for Liu Che. When a servant passed by with a gong, declaring the hour of the Rooster, Yan Nian wrapped the instrument in its embroidered silk cover and set it gently inside the chest. He smoothed his hair and straightened the fall of his robes, then opened the door of his room and ventured out into the corridor.

He walked swiftly, greeting acquaintances as he made his way from the musicians' quarters out across the courtyard and through the gate into the living space reserved for acrobats and jugglers. Yan Nian paused to watch a group of young men and women arranged into a star shape attempting to balance on a golden ball. The man who had his feet on the ball had to stay in constant motion. One of the girls forming the topmost point of the star wobbled, and the arrangement collapsed amidst much laughter and the sound of scolding from their master.

Yan Nian waved to the acrobats before continuing through another set of gates and along a covered walkway before he reached the dancers' quarters. He passed the kitchen, alive with bustle as the cooks prepared the simple evening meals provided for all members of His Majesty's imperial entertainers. Breathing in the sharp-sweet scent of

garlic and roasted peppers, Yan Nian felt his mouth flood with hunger.

Dinner was still an hour away. This was the best time to go visiting around the palace—people were glad of a diversion after a long afternoon of reading, letter writing, lovemaking, or whatever else they did for fun. Yan Nian strolled through the courtyard belonging to the male dancers, exchanged a few friendly words with the guards stationed at the moon gate, and slipped through into the courtyard used by the female dancers.

Though not guarded or chaperoned as rigidly as the emperor's concubines and other imperial ladies, the women who served in the palace were protected from any unwelcome attention by a rotating unit of soldiers and a flock of low-ranking eunuchs. Yan Nian always introduced himself as Lady Li's brother whenever he saw a fresh face at the gate.

He waited, casting a glance at the small garden the dancers kept more for showy blossoms than from any love of horticulture. His sister had told him several times that flowers had more than one use and that she could make perfume and salves from the blooms she wore in her hair or tucked into her robes. Yan Nian bent to examine a pale pink rose, only to straighten when a door opened in the dancers' quarters and Lady Li ran lightly down the steps toward him.

As ever, the sight of his sister filled him with a rush of affection, making him smile with happy pride. She'd been their parents' favorite child, and yet he'd never felt a flicker of jealousy at that. He admired her gown, an elegant confection of damask and chiffon, and recognized the wrap she wore around her white shoulders as one he'd given her

two months ago. She'd sewn beads into it to weight the fabric, and it draped over her in an alluring fashion.

"Sister!" He caught her up in his arms and swung her around until she squealed.

"Nian, you beast!" Lady Li skipped out of his embrace as soon as he set her down, laughing up at him while she set her costume to rights. Then her expression turned serious, and she took his hands. "I'm so pleased you're safe. I was worried! We've heard rumors that the emperor exiled a group of musicians to the furthest reaches of the eastern seaboard...."

Yan Nian grinned, pleased to have an accurate piece of gossip to impart. "No, he sent them to Minyue—but as you see, I am not amongst their number. His Majesty liked my song. He asked me to play it for him again and again."

"That's excellent news, brother! You must be delighted." Lady Li linked her arm through his and indicated that they should stroll around the garden.

He fell into step beside her, protecting her clothes from a thorny shrub as they navigated the narrow path through the flowerbeds. "It's a new composition," he said. "I wrote it with you in mind. The song is a sort of puzzle for His Majesty, telling of a beauty from the north that possesses such charm that one look from her will bring a city to its knees. A second look will cause her lover to abandon his kingdom from desire for her."

Yan Nian paused, feeling heat color his face as he described the song. He often got embarrassed when speaking about his music, but never before had he blushed so in front of his sister. He hurried to continue. "His Majesty will be

intrigued by the subject. He will wonder about this mysterious beauty and be tantalized by her identity.”

Lady Li gave a peal of gentle laughter. “And the beauty is me?”

“Yes, of course.” Yan Nian smiled at her. “If His Majesty calls for me to play again, I shall ask him if I may bring a dancer to illustrate my song. He will agree, and I shall summon you—and then he will realize the identity of the beauty.”

She turned her face up to his and gave him a glowing look. “You are so very clever, brother! I am full of admiration. But you had better sing this song to me, so I can memorize its rhythm and teach my friends to play it. I will need to practice my steps if we’re to give a command performance together.”

“Certainly, sister. I’ve written down the basic tablature for you.” He took a scroll of bamboo slips from inside his robe and held it out. “It’s a simple tune, yet when you begin to play it on the qin, it takes on a life of its own. I’m sure you’ll know which flourishes and variations to use.”

“I never studied as diligently as you, Nian, but I will do my humble best.” Lady Li hugged his arm, then let go to tuck the tablature into her wide sleeves.

They approached a stone bench set beneath a cherry tree. She waited while he dusted off the seat with his sleeve and then she sat, arranging her glorious blue, white, and orange robes around her. Gold and turquoise butterflies hung suspended on fine gold wire from her headdress, and her hair was caught up with golden combs studded with a

cluster of tiny pearls. Yan Nian couldn't recall seeing the butterflies or combs before.

"Your hair ornaments are lovely... and expensive. Are they a gift?"

Lady Li flashed him a half-troubled, half-defiant look. "Yes. From a—a friend."

Yan Nian hesitated before he sat beside her. His sister had a sweet disposition and, unlike him, possessed the ability to make friends easily. The dowager empress was particularly fond of her. Perhaps he need not worry about the provenance of the jewelry, but still he asked, "Sister, who gave you such a gift? Was it Her Majesty Dowager Empress Wang?"

Now Lady Li merely looked defiant. "No. They are from Zhou Jun." She met his gaze without flinching. "He is the commander of the guards for the East Palace."

Yan Nian swallowed. His anxiety bundled itself in his belly. Carefully, he took his sister's hand and threaded their fingers together. "Why would Commander Zhou give you such a costly gift?"

She pulled away from him and stood, her spine rigid. "Because I slept with him, that's why! And he was pleased with me. He's a good man, a brave man—a loyal soldier to His Majesty...."

A groan broke from his lips before Yan Nian could stop it. He covered his face with his hands, dragging them down over his mouth. "You slept with him."

Her color high, Lady Li turned back to him, though she would not meet his gaze. "Yes! And everyone here knows it.

Everyone in the palace probably knows it! Oh, my poor brother, you are such an innocent.” She sighed and sank down next to him, taking his hands. “Listen to me,” she said, her tone suggesting that she were the elder about to explain the ways of the world to a younger, naive sibling. “Father told us to advance in our life at the palace....”

“He wanted you to become concubine to His Majesty!” Yan Nian protested.

Lady Li lifted one hand to pat her hair, her fingertips brushing over the golden combs. “Well, and it may still happen. But Nian, don’t you understand? I’m young, I’m beautiful. Don’t expect me to pine for a man who’s never even looked at me.”

Yan Nian stared at her, feeling her words as if they’d been a slap to the face. “I—I never thought... never realized....” Guilt and bewilderment spun through him. His shoulders slumped, and now he was the one to pull free of his sister’s hands.

She reached out for him, grasping his sleeve, a look of sympathy on her lovely face. “Don’t take it so hard, brother. Besides, everyone knows His Majesty prefers experienced women in his bed. He doesn’t like virgins.”

“Oh.” Yan Nian struggled to adjust his emotions. The idea that he’d caused his sister grief was horrible, but so was the thought that he’d failed in his promise to their father. Now all he felt was the crush of disappointment at this latest revelation. He thought not of his sister’s wanton behavior but his own lack of experience. His Majesty would surely mock him for remaining untouched by the age of twenty-two. Not that he should be thinking of the emperor at all in that

way. Ensuring his sister's place at court was still his priority, no matter what.

Lady Li gave him a quizzical look. "Nian, is everything well with you? You seem... distracted."

Yan Nian took a deep breath and exhaled some of his tension. "Of course. I'm sorry if I overreacted. Things are different here in the palace. If we were outside, I'd be forcing Commander Zhou to make reparations for your honor. Instead, I should be thanking him."

"Thanking him?" His sister gazed at him doubtfully.

"Yes!" Yan Nian managed a cheerful smile. "Commander Zhou has shown you the ways of the bedchamber. You will be able to use your knowledge to please His Majesty. That's—that's excellent. Don't you see? We're close to fulfilling the charge Father placed upon us."

Lady Li took her fan from her sash and flipped it open. Moving it back and forth in a languid rhythm, she said, "Ha! I don't care what Father wanted for us. As far as I'm concerned, his ambitions died with him last winter. I don't want to be the emperor's concubine. I'd rather have my own life, with a husband of my own choosing... as long as I have your blessing, of course, elder brother."

Yan Nian opened and closed his mouth in stunned horror. When he could speak, his voice emerged as a whisper. "You don't want His Majesty?"

"Oh, he's handsome enough," Lady Li replied, a smile teasing the corners of her mouth. "In fact, he's easily the handsomest man I've seen. But handsome men are everywhere at court. There's so many of them I don't know where to look next."

“He loves music,” Yan Nian blurted, anxious to make her change her mind. “He appreciates it, understands it....”

“He’s capricious.” She closed her fan with a snap.

“Hush, sister!” He glanced around in case they were overheard. “I’ve served him for two years, and during that time, I’ve watched him closely. It’s true he has a temper, but he’s been a king since he was three years old and an emperor since he was fifteen. With such pressure, is it any surprise that he’s sometimes bad-tempered?”

“You don’t need to make excuses for him.”

Yan Nian ignored her, expanding his theme. “He doesn’t stand for toadying officials and rewards those who speak plainly and give good counsel. He supports the scholars and administrators. He’s a mighty warrior and a clever administrator. He has extended the empire, and even now, he commands the best generals to put the Xiongnu to rout. He reveres the gods and respects his ancestors. He....”

“Peace, brother,” Lady Li said with a laugh. “You make him sound perfect.”

“He is not perfect.” Yan Nian broke off, his thoughts turning inwards. He gazed at the spray of pink roses and spoke quietly. “He’s unhappy. Only love and harmony within the imperial heart can bring him joy and make him perfect.” He turned to look at her. “Sister, this is what we’ve been working toward our whole lives. This is our chance to make our emperor happy.”

Lady Li gave him a strange, contemplative look and rose from the bench. “I must go. The Dowager Empress commands the dancers tonight.”

Yan Nian escorted her back through the garden and stood at the steps to her quarters. “I will call on you again when I have more news. Prepare yourself, sister. I’m sure it’ll be soon. Our fortunes will change.”

She touched his cheek and smiled. “I know they will. But sometimes we can’t alter fate, no matter how clever our plans.”

Chapter Four

LIU CHE paused at the threshold to Li Yan Nian's room before he entered. The guards who'd accompanied him tried to crowd in behind, but he waved them back. There were no dangers lurking here, and besides, he was armed with his crop and the two hunting knives he habitually carried in his boots.

"Wait outside," he ordered, and the guardsmen stepped back smartly, snapping their heels together as they turned to face outwards. Liu Che drew shut the door and breathed out a sigh, enjoying the moment's peace.

It was rare he had time to himself. Even when he tried to remain aloof from palace politics, his mother interfered on his behalf and her relatives clamored for his attention. He had better things to think about, such as the latest news from his armies in the West, where the Xiongnu had gathered in an effort to oppose him. Over the past few years, he'd been slowly eradicating their presence in the empire, but still they defied him.

Previous rulers, his father included, had been more concerned with preserving the borders of the empire than with extending its reach, and had adopted defensive measures instead of a strategy of offence. The treacherous Xiongnu tribes had taken advantage of this weakness and

snatched valuable land, stealing women, crops, and cattle and slaughtering the men. Liu Che would not rest until he'd driven the Xiongnu and their supporters out of China for good.

At home, he was concerned with the burdens of taxation, the distribution of rice, the overhaul of the education system, and the administration of the imperial examinations. And those were the subjects of only a handful of the petitions presented to him today. Little wonder he craved a brief moment of solitude.

Liu Che moved into the room, tapping his crop idly against his thigh. He reminded himself he hadn't come here in search of quiet. He'd come for the company of Li Yan Nian. Annoyance tinged his mood as he looked around. The masters in the Guild of Music had assured him that Yan Nian would be closeted in his room composing and practicing, yet the beautiful musician was nowhere to be seen.

Still, it was an interesting experience. Liu Che had never had to wait for a potential lover before—they always came to him, anxious to do his bidding. Similarly, he'd never had cause to enter this part of the palace before. Musicians and servants had stared at him in astonishment before dropping to their knees and kowtowing. By the time they'd straightened up, words of flattery and pleas for his notice on their lips, he'd already moved on, following the eunuch who'd led him here.

He walked around the room. It was a tiny space, barely twice the size of the imperial bed. A small window covered in oiled linen allowed in a meager light from outside. Using his

crop, he poked at the contents of the room: a narrow bed with a battered chest at its foot; a low writing desk heaped with bamboo-slip scrolls and set with a tray containing an ink stone, a variety of colored inks, and several brushes; and in the corner, a small ancestral shrine.

Liu Che tossed the crop onto the quilt and sat on the bed. He winced as the hard, lumpy mattress jarred his spine. If Yan Nian was going to be his lover, he needed quarters befitting his new status. A bigger room; a softer, larger bed. Pleased with the thought, Liu Che tapped his fingers on his knees, smoothed out his brocades, then got up, bored.

He wandered over to the ancestral shrine and read the deeds of the Li family, understanding from the most recent tablet that Yan Nian and his sister were alone in the world. Then he investigated the contents of the chest.

He found the qin first, removing it from its silken wrap and touching it with care. He recognized its age and fragile condition and wondered at Yan Nian's ability to play such a venerable instrument. It would be his pleasure to give the musician a new qin, perhaps one made especially for him. Surely this would be a gift to bring delight. Liu Che imagined several enjoyable ways in which Yan Nian would show his gratitude.

Placing the qin to one side, he examined Yan Nian's clothing with a frown. Such a beauty should not dress in dull shades of moss green or sandy beige. The pale blue silks he'd worn that morning had been perfect. Glancing around the room again, Liu Che spotted the corner of a laundry basket peeping from beneath the bed. He pulled it out and found the pale blue robe. Further investigation revealed a

number of stiff, whitish stains that flaked off when he scratched at them with a fingernail.

He licked a finger and tasted the residue, drawing in his breath at the flavor that rolled across his tongue. So, Yan Nian had pleased himself—and had been in such a hurry to reach climax that he hadn't had time to protect his clothing. Liu Che smiled as he stuffed the robe back where he'd found it and nudged the basket beneath the bed.

Returning to the contents of the chest, he discovered a mirror and then, tucked away like a shameful secret, a phallus of cold red jasper.

Liu Che chuckled as he studied the toy. He wondered if Yan Nian had used it while masturbating. He drew it under his nose, alert for the slightest scent of sex, but smelled nothing. Surely even if Yan Nian had cleaned it, the stone would retain a lingering odor of its use. Liu Che traced his tongue over the shaft. It tasted fresh, unused... or perhaps that was just wishful thinking.

His cock hardened as he imagined Yan Nian kneeling on the bed, his hands slick and glistening as he rubbed oil over the phallus. He'd be careful to warm the chilly stone before using it, forcing heat into the toy with the same long, smooth strokes he used on his own growing erection. Then he'd lean back and position himself over the head of the phallus, trembling slightly as he impaled himself on it. Liu Che felt his belly clench with wicked lust. He imagined Yan Nian's panting gasps of pleasure as he worked the phallus deeper into his body, his arsehole claspings and flexing around the unyielding stone.

Liu Che stifled a groan at the flood of images in his mind. He hadn't wanted a man this badly in years. Still holding the phallus, he shoved the rest of the items back into the chest and closed the lid, then sat once again on the edge of the bed. He set the stone toy in his lap, feeling the weight of it drag down his richly decorated brocades to rest between his thighs. It nestled there, and he felt amused at its temerity.

Outside, he heard his guards stir, and then came the sweet, husky voice that had consumed his thoughts all day. He resisted the urge to stand and instead remained where he sat.

"What is it? Why are you here?" he heard Yan Nian demand of the guards. They made no reply, and after a few more puzzled questions, the musician opened the door and entered the room.

Liu Che turned his head. It took every ounce of self-control not to laugh at the look of complete shock on Yan Nian's face.

"Your Majesty!" Ingrained respect dropped Yan Nian onto his knees. He bowed, his face to the floor, the silver bells in his hair chiming and clattering in a discord of confusion.

Satisfied with his surprise, Liu Che studied him. Yan Nian wore an ugly robe of brown brocade the exact color of river mud. Though it was sewn with gold thread, it did nothing to improve the garment. Liu Che wrinkled his nose. He could not have his lover dressed like a drab little sparrow.

"I have been speaking with the masters in the Guild of Music," he said, keeping his tone disinterested. "They speak highly of you."

"They are very kind." Yan Nian kept his head low and addressed the floorboards.

"I am told you can play every instrument with great skill and feeling, even those that are new to you."

Yan Nian squirmed, a blush firing his soft cheeks. He lifted his head slightly and appeared to fix his gaze on the hem of Liu Che's deep crimson robes. "I need to practice, like everyone else, but I do have some small ability...."

His voice tailed off when Liu Che reached into his lap and held up the phallus. Assuming a puzzled expression, Liu Che said, "Tell me, Li Yan Nian: what is this?"

A moment of silence passed, so deep and still that Liu Che fancied he could hear his guards breathing outside in the corridor.

Yan Nian stared at him, his eyes wide and his face aflame. "Your Highness, it's... it's a... an instrument of pleasure."

"An instrument?" Liu Che frowned at the toy, pretending further ignorance. "An instrument like the qin or erhu?"

Yan Nian made a strangled sound and pressed himself flat against the floor once more. His voice lowered to a whisper. "Yes, Your Highness, for it can draw forth music from the human body if it's played correctly."

Liu Che hid a smile, pleased with his game. "Show me."

"Forgive me, Highness, I cannot. I don't know how to play this instrument." Yan Nian sat back on his knees and

gave him a look of such daring innocence Liu Che wanted to drag the musician onto the bed and ravish him there and then.

“Finally, an instrument you cannot play.” Liu Che stroked the smooth stone, letting his fingers linger over the length of the shaft then caressing the rounded head. “I happen to know the correct technique. Perhaps I can teach you.”

He thought he’d gone too far, too fast when Yan Nian went as pale as cream and swayed slightly, but then the musician’s face lit with an expression of incredible joy. When he spoke, his voice sounded huskier, rich and sensual. “Your Majesty, I would be grateful for any instruction you wish to give me.”

Liu Che circled his fingers around the phallus and used his other hand to rub it back and forth. The cold stone pulled at his flesh, and he imagined how it would feel inside him. He sat straighter, aware of Yan Nian’s devouring gaze fixed on his every movement. “I don’t want your gratitude.”

Yan Nian looked confused. “Then what do you want, Highness?”

“I want a partner willing to play with me,” Liu Che said. “A man who’ll allow me to dictate the terms, but who will offer me a challenge. A man who can take responsibility for his own performance, yet can merge with my wishes in the creation of something new. A man dedicated to the sweetness of pleasure. A man who can accept me as I am, who can understand what I need, to take what I give or to surrender to my demands. That is what I want, Li Yan Nian. Are you the man I seek?”

“Yes.” The answer came without hesitation. His expression soft and drowsy with desire, the look Yan Nian gave him was tender, almost loving. His lips parted, adoration shining from his face, and then suddenly it was gone, the delight replaced by a cautious, sensible expression.

Liu Che regretted the change. He’d seen plenty of people staring at him as if the sun shone out of his arse, but few had ever looked at him with as much passion as Yan Nian. His generals showed him respect, sometimes even affection, but nothing like that fleeting glimpse of love he’d seen on his musician’s face. His heart ached as he thought of the two entwined bronze dragons on the door of his audience chamber, and so caught up was he in his thoughts that he almost missed Yan Nian’s quiet admission.

“Your Majesty, I—I regret—that is to say... I am inexperienced.”

Liu Che’s melancholy vanished, trampled by the swift fire of lust. From the moment he’d seen Yan Nian, Liu Che had hoped that he was untouched. He’d thought it a foolish whim, but the gods had seen fit to grant him his wish. He hoped his voice was steady when he said, “Good.”

“Good?” Yan Nian stared at him. “Highness, my sister said you disliked virgins.”

Liu Che raised his eyebrows. “You discussed me with your sister? I’m flattered,” he teased, observing Yan Nian’s blushing wince. “Lady Li is partially correct. I dislike female virgins. Men, however....”

He stood, setting the phallus on the quilt beside his leather crop. Yan Nian didn’t move, merely sat back and looked up at him as he came closer. Liu Che cupped a hand

around Yan Nian's face, feeling the warmth and softness of his skin.

"Have you any idea how rare it is to find a male virgin in the palace?" Liu Che asked. "Especially one of your beauty and temperament. How old are you?"

He felt Yan Nian swallow. "Twenty-two, Highness."

Liu Che gave a cynical snort. "Most of the youths the eunuchs bring me are thoroughly debauched by the age of fourteen." He let go and walked around him slowly, studying the musician from the shine of his tight topknot to the shape and size of his feet hidden beneath the ugly brown robe. "Their skill in bed is the only thing to recommend them. They cannot do anything else but hope to please me." Liu Che curled his lip and glanced away. "It's a waste. I don't want them. I want men who know their own minds, who have more than one talent. I crave conversation as well as sex."

Yan Nian remained silent. Doubt showed in his expression before he laughed. It was not an uncertain sound but one of genuine amusement. "Conversation, Highness?"

"At times, yes. Conversation and silence." Liu Che gave a self-mocking smile. "At other times, I have as much self-control as the river in full flood and I want only sex, hard and fast. And when I'm faced with someone like you..."

The words trailed off, silence thickening between them. He watched Yan Nian moisten his lower lip—an unconscious gesture, without any artful accompaniment, and yet to Liu Che it seemed unbearably erotic.

Yan Nian lifted his chin, that bold look back in his eyes again. "How do you feel, Your Majesty?"

“Hungry. Desperate. You make me want to....” Liu Che stared at him, feeling the answering spark of lust at the implied challenge in his musician’s gaze. “Enough talk. It’s time for your lessons to begin, Li Yan Nian.” Liu Che watched a shiver run through him, and smiled. “Stand.”

The musician rose to his feet with a jingle of sound from the bells in his hair, and Liu Che moved closer, invading the space close to his body. Another man would step back, but Yan Nian tilted his head and held his gaze. A drowsy look came into his eyes and his lips parted; his breath whisper-soft and rapid.

Liu Che stood so close they almost touched. Yan Nian’s brown silk shirred as it brushed against the crimson imperial garments. The silver bells chimed gently with each breath. His sweet, spicy scent lingered between them. Liu Che wanted to taste him, touch him.

Yan Nian’s gaze fixed on his mouth. He seemed unaware of his beauty and appeal, his regard honest rather than coquettish when he said, “Highness, is it very forward of me to wish to kiss you?”

“Very bold,” Liu Che agreed. His pulse quickened, anticipation notching higher. “But still, you may kiss me.”

He’d expected something demure, but to his surprise, Yan Nian leaned into him and brushed his lips against Liu Che’s mouth. It was a tease rather than a kiss, the drag of his lower lip slow and enticing. Then it came again, Yan Nian’s lips parting this time to let Liu Che feel moist warmth stroke against him.

Yan Nian made a soft sound and moved his head a little to one side, using the angle to lick the tip of his tongue over

Liu Che's lips. Unused to such a delicate assault, Liu Che slid an arm around the musician's narrow waist and drew him close. This time, Yan Nian moaned.

Liu Che caught at the musician's full upper lip and nipped it gently. Yan Nian jerked against him with a hoarse gasp. Liu Che took advantage of the movement to drop his hand lower to fit over the curve of Yan Nian's arse. He stroked him through the silk, sweeping up to his spine and then down again, each time exerting a subtle pressure that brought them even closer together.

His cock stirred, rising beneath the heavy crimson fabric to nudge at Yan Nian's hip. The musician jumped again. He drew back and gazed at Liu Che, then kissed him with renewed fervor. Liu Che met his demand, biting at him to force his mouth apart. Yan Nian put his hands flat against Liu Che's chest, his fingers digging in through the layers of silk as their embrace deepened.

Liu Che cupped the back of Yan Nian's head, holding him into the kiss. He heard Yan Nian's whimper of surrender and tightened his grip. Saliva slicked across their lips as the kiss became savage. Liu Che thrust his tongue into the musician's mouth and stifled a groan when Yan Nian sucked on it eagerly.

Yan Nian's arms went around his neck. The silver bells chimed once and were silenced as their bodies crushed tighter together. He tasted of honey-sweetened wine, his lips soft and wet.

Liu Che wanted more. He stepped back, unbalancing Yan Nian enough that the musician fell against him. "Bed," Liu Che said, his voice rough in his throat. He pulled Yan

Nian down on top of him, remembering the lumpy mattress a moment too late. Then he forgot the discomfort as the musician settled over him, the silver bells jingling. Yan Nian closed his eyes and shuddered, open-mouthed, rocking his hips enough to grind his erection against Liu Che's silk-covered cock. Each wanton thrust made the bells ring sharper, louder.

Liu Che chuckled and curled the tendril of loose hair in one hand, closing his fist around it tightly enough for some of the bells to bite into his palm. "These bells...."

Yan Nian looked at him with a hazy expression. "My sister's idea."

"Your sister is a young lady of decided opinions."

"Oh, Highness, she is an amazing woman...."

Liu Che clicked his tongue. "Hush. I don't want to hear anything more about her."

Was it his imagination, or did Yan Nian look slightly crestfallen? Liu Che narrowed his eyes. A moment later and Yan Nian kissed him again, with just as much enthusiasm as before. Liu Che forgot his temporary annoyance and responded with growing hunger.

Yan Nian slipped a hand beneath the folds of crimson silk. "Oh, Your Majesty," he whispered against Liu Che's mouth. "Let me touch you."

"Brazen creature!" Liu Che rolled him over and pinned Yan Nian to the bed. He held his face between both hands and kissed him, long and hard, then eased his body to the side, keeping the musician in place with one muscled thigh pressed across Yan Nian's legs. Raising himself up onto his

left elbow, Liu Che unfastened the sash around the musician's waist. He tugged the fabric free before dropping it onto the floor.

Yan Nian wriggled, shifting enough to kick off his soft slippers. The brown silk crumpled into disgrace with each movement. Liu Che grinned, about to comment on the ugly shade and the unflattering style, but as he pulled open the sides of the robe, the words died in his throat. He stared down at Yan Nian's body revealed beneath a tight, thin tunic of cream silk. His dusky nipples pressed erect against the cloth, and Liu Che could follow the musculature of his chest and abdomen, could see the dip of his navel and the fine trail of hair beneath it.

"Highness!" Yan Nian blushed, shame in his eyes. "I'm sorry for such a poor garment. It's very old—it doesn't fit me anymore, but I haven't replaced it yet. It's embarrassing—forgive me...."

Liu Che dragged his gaze from the delightful body displayed so blatantly beneath him. "On the contrary, I find I like it. A tunic that covers everything yet conceals nothing! Yes, I find it very erotic."

Yan Nian's blush deepened and he made a belated attempt to cover himself.

"No." Liu Che pushed his hands away. "I want to see you."

He wanted to do more than look. Ignoring Yan Nian's half-hearted protests, Liu Che nuzzled at the heat of his body through the thin silk. He tracked Yan Nian's scent across the cloth and snuffled into the heat of his armpit. Liu Che licked at the patch of sweat-dampened fabric, feeling the

wet tickle of hair against his tongue. He sucked at the cloth, murmuring his pleasure at the heady taste, then mouthed across Yan Nian's chest. He wet the cloth, making it stick to the curve of the musician's pectoral muscle.

Gasping a little, he raised his head and kissed Yan Nian again, a hungry, wet kiss. Yan Nian moaned, moving across the bed and pressing into Liu Che's arms. The brown robe slid from one shoulder and he shook it off with an impatient gesture.

Liu Che leaned down and fastened his lips around Yan Nian's right nipple, suckling at it until the cream silk covering it was sodden. He teased it through the fabric, first with his tongue and then grazing it with his teeth.

Yan Nian bucked beneath him. The bells in his hair rang, punctuating his gasp. He lifted his hips, trying to rub his erection against Liu Che's thigh.

Liu Che pulled back and considered the tunic again. "It's old, you say? You have no sentimental reasons for keeping it?"

His eyes shut tight, Yan Nian turned his head. "Not sentimental reasons, just necessity. I have so few clothes, I must make—oh!" He stopped, jerking on the bed in shock as Liu Che seized the neck of the tunic and ripped it open. For a moment Yan Nian stared up at him. A pulse beat wildly at his throat, and he blushed, his confusion as evident as his arousal. "Your Majesty!"

Liu Che touched him, a long, deliberate caress from throat to chest, rubbing a thumb over the tender nipple before he swept down around Yan Nian's navel and

insinuated his hand beneath the waistband of the musician's under-trousers.

"I will send you the finest linens and most beautiful silks," Liu Che promised, hearing the catch in his own voice as he brushed over springy pubic hair and closed his fingers around the swollen, sticky head of Yan Nian's cock, "and my seamstresses will make you a whole new wardrobe."

Yan Nian's breath came faster. "Your Majesty is too generous."

"Not at all. I have a fancy to see you dressed in soft green and pale lilac, dark red and the indigo of a thunderstorm...." Liu Che smiled as he measured the length and girth of Yan Nian's erection with his fingers. He let his gaze linger lasciviously on the musician's naked chest. "Of course, seeing you undressed is just as charming—but I doubt my ministers would agree. So you will need new clothes. Garments to enhance your looks, outfits that will make you the most beautiful man at court."

"Highness—I don't care about the clothes...." Yan Nian panted, thrusting into Liu Che's palm. "Oh—let me...."

"You are too eager, Li Yan Nian." Liu Che withdrew his hand from the musician's trousers. He held it out, palm first, so Yan Nian could see the pre-come glistening on his skin, and then Liu Che licked it. The taste of it fresh on his tongue made him purr. When he'd finished, he pushed apart the torn edges of the tunic and turned his attention to Yan Nian's body.

He nuzzled against him, enjoying the smooth texture of his skin, the softness of flesh stretched taut over muscle. He played with Yan Nian's nipples, pinching them hard between

finger and thumb until the musician cried out in almost-pain before soothing them with slow strokes of his tongue. Later, he sucked up the droplets of sweat trickling down Yan Nian's sides, chasing them up into the hair in his armpits until he squirmed. Only when Yan Nian's breathing became fractured did Liu Che bend his head over his navel, dipping his tongue into the musician's belly button before tugging with his lips at the trail of rough hair leading downwards.

Yan Nian cursed, his hands fluttering around Liu Che's shoulders. He retained enough presence of mind not to force his emperor's head down, but threaded his fingers in Liu Che's upswept hair, pulling it free of the pins holding it in place. Liu Che kissed Yan Nian's cock through the fabric of his trousers, licking at the damp stains of pre-come.

"Wait, Your Majesty," Yan Nian gasped. He hooked both hands into the waistband of the trousers and pulled them off, curling his legs up and giving Liu Che a tantalizing glimpse of his pale buttocks before he lay back, naked but for the torn tunic and the brown silk robe still caught around one arm.

"Impatient, aren't you?" Liu Che teased. He wanted to be naked himself, to feel Yan Nian's body against his own, but he preferred the heady power of being fully dressed and controlling the game.

Yan Nian laughed. "Yes. I want you, Highness, and I'm not ashamed to admit it. I want you to show me everything."

"That will require more than one lesson." Liu Che gave him an indulgent smile and slipped lower down the narrow bed. His questing hand found the familiar shape of the crop, then closed around the hard, cold form of the phallus.

Holding it by the base, he stroked it over Yan Nian's bare foot and up his leg. "We will start with this... what did you call it? Ah yes—this instrument of pleasure."

Yan Nian trembled, the chill of the stone drawing goosebumps from his flesh. Liu Che nudged the phallus against the length of Yan Nian's cock, rolling it over his erection, and his trembling turned to shudders. Turning the toy, Liu Che dragged the shaft across the tip of Yan Nian's cock, gathering a sticky caress of pre-come. Raising the phallus to his mouth, Liu Che played his tongue along the shaft, enjoying Yan Nian's startled exhalation of response.

Liu Che licked over the smooth stone head, wetting it with kisses before he lifted it to Yan Nian's lips. The musician hesitated only a moment. He held Liu Che's gaze and bent his head forward, taking the rounded tip of the phallus between his lips.

A groan of pure need broke from Liu Che's throat. His cock leapt at the thought of Yan Nian serving him the way he now sucked on the toy. His body heated, lust firing his blood. Liu Che gripped the base of the phallus and forced it deeper into Yan Nian's mouth. His eyes wide, Yan Nian made a smothered complaint, his lips stretched obscenely around the cold red stone. Liu Che controlled how much he took, careful not to frighten him. He watched Yan Nian swallow, his head tipping back and his throat working as he adjusted to the size of the toy.

Liu Che slid it in and out, his breath coming short as he fucked Yan Nian's mouth. The wet sucking sounds made Liu Che's cock throb, and he groaned, reaching down with his free hand to squeeze his erection through the layers of silk.

The stone phallus glistened when he withdrew it, saliva smearing around Yan Nian's lips and down his chin. The musician gasped, the noise loud in the sudden silence. He lifted himself toward the phallus, his lips parting for more.

Arousal slammed through Liu Che so sharply he laughed to dispel the tension of it. He striped the wet toy over Yan Nian's body and set it between his thighs, nudging beneath his balls and probing at his buttocks.

Yan Nian arched off the bed, his moans loud and sweet as he spread his thighs and wriggled himself against the phallus. "Highness," he cried. "Oh, Highness."

"Beautiful," Liu Che whispered, captivated by Yan Nian's obvious pleasure. "So beautiful." He dropped a kiss on Yan Nian's open mouth, plunging his tongue deep and then pulling back. Putting command into his voice, he said, "On your hands and knees. Let me see every part of you."

His cock engorged and dripping, Yan Nian rolled onto his front and pushed himself up onto his knees. He shrugged off the clinging silks and dropped forward into the requested position. His neat topknot collapsed to spill his hair over his shoulders and across his back, tendrils sticking to the sheen of sweat on his skin. The silver bells rang softly as they tumbled forward.

Yan Nian rocked back and forth, making himself comfortable. He arched down, thrusting his arse up. Liu Che knelt behind him and stroked the insides of his thighs. "Ah, yes, just like that," he murmured as Yan Nian wriggled his weight through his knees and spread himself further open. "Such a pretty arsehole you have, Yan Nian."

He saw the musician shiver at the praise and smiled. He sucked his middle finger, wetting it to the knuckle, and then pressed the tip to Yan Nian's opening. Liu Che felt him flinch, his boldness deserting him momentarily, and then his curiosity brought Yan Nian back.

Slowly, Liu Che slid his finger past the tight ring of muscle. Yan Nian allowed the intrusion, his body quivering with each press forward. Liu Che twisted his finger and watched the musician jerk in response. With a chuckle, he withdrew and stretched out flat beside Yan Nian.

"Suck it. Taste yourself." He offered his hand. Yan Nian looked at him in helpless confusion, his expression dazed. Liu Che demonstrated, taking his finger into his mouth with a slow, seductive gesture. "Watch," he urged. "Mm. You taste good."

"Your Majesty...." Yan Nian begged, a wild light in his eyes.

Liu Che smiled and resumed his position behind Yan Nian. He stroked his flanks, dragging the soft silk of his sleeve over warm naked skin. Yan Nian wriggled, pushing back. Liu Che ran his hand below his body, grasping the musician's cock for a moment before cupping his balls, squeezing gently. Yan Nian uttered a hoarse cry and canted his hips sharply backward. Pleased with his eagerness, Liu Che brushed his wet finger over the pucker of Yan Nian's anus before slipping it inside.

He pushed deeper this time. Yan Nian tightened his muscles around him, gripping tight. Liu Che stroked back and forth with shallow thrusts, then slid his finger free and lay beside Yan Nian again.

“Now try a taste,” he said, pressing his finger to the musician’s lips. Yan Nian tossed his head to shake the hair from his eyes and took Liu Che’s finger into his mouth.

Liu Che groaned at the sight. “Suck harder. Yes.” He nudged his index finger at Yan Nian’s lips. “Both of them. Make my fingers wet so I can fuck you with them.”

Yan Nian sighed around his fingers. A moment longer in the wet warmth of his mouth and Liu Che withdrew them, shining with saliva. This time Yan Nian accepted both fingers into his arse, impaling himself with steady thrusts back against Liu Che’s hand. His breath steepened and he hung his head, dropping from his hands onto his elbows and pushing his arse higher in the air.

Liu Che groped for the stone phallus and retrieved it from the bunched quilt. Taking his fingers from the heat of Yan Nian’s body, he spat on them and smeared his saliva over the head of the phallus. He knelt, circling the toy around the musician’s anus, letting him grow accustomed to its hard shape. Only when Yan Nian mewled and nudged toward it did Liu Che press it to his opening.

Yan Nian half moaned, half gasped as the smooth head pushed past the resistance of the ring of muscle. Panting, he shoved back and took more. Liu Che caught his breath as he watched the stone shaft penetrate his musician’s body.

“More,” Yan Nian whispered. He turned his head, his long silken hair tumbling across his face and into his mouth. “Fuck me, Your Majesty. Do it. Fuck me.”

A groan broke from Liu Che as he slid his hand down to grip the base of the phallus. With his free hand, he brought Yan Nian close to him, holding his hip. He knelt, pressing

the length of his erection against the back of Yan Nian's thigh and grinding into him, shuddering with pleasure. As he thrust, he mimicked the movement with the phallus, working it deep into Yan Nian's arse, then pulling back.

Yan Nian yelped and jerked, hips plunging and his body undulating. Sweat pearled in the small of his back and shone from his skin. The deep scent of musk rose between them, mingling with his sharp-sweet fragrance. He threw back his head and groaned long and loud. The silver bells clattered and chimed as they swung with each stroke, and tendrils of his hair stuck to his damp flesh.

Liu Che wished he could turn Yan Nian over to see the ecstasy chase across his beautiful face, but knew this position was the easiest for the musician's inexperienced body to take right now. He reserved himself the pleasure of watching his expression for another time, for the moment when he decided to drive himself deep inside Yan Nian rather than use the toy.

Yan Nian bucked faster, his skin so slick that Liu Che tightened his grip. Heat radiated from him. Liu Che felt sweat trickle down his sides beneath the thick layers of crimson silk. He fixed his gaze on the phallus as he pushed it inside, fascinated and aroused by the sight of the red stone sinking into the yielding flesh, Yan Nian's arsehole stretched around the shaft. Suddenly he didn't want to use the toy anymore. He wanted his cock in there, wanted to feel the flex of muscle against his hard length.

"Ah, Highness.... Please...." Yan Nian's glorious voice sounded husky, desperate. He groaned and slumped

forward, taking his weight through one shoulder as he reached for his cock.

Liu Che relaxed his grip on Yan Nian's hip and covered the musician's hand as it curled around his cock. Their fingers knit together, and Liu Che grunted at the sharp, rapid rhythm Yan Nian set. Liquid smeared over their joined hands. He could feel the throbbing pulse of Yan Nian's erection and groaned aloud at the sensation of sweat-streaked pubic hair brushing against his hand on every down-stroke.

He curved over the musician's back, leaving the phallus buried to the hilt inside him. He slammed his hips against Yan Nian's buttocks as their hands moved together. Yan Nian sobbed beneath him, the bed creaking as he bucked and jerked in wild, erratic time. More liquid spooled over Liu Che's fingers. He squeezed, hearing Yan Nian gasp and hold his breath.

Two more strokes and it was done. Yan Nian muffled a scream in the pillow roll, his body breaking in a series of long, drawn-out shudders. Liu Che felt the orgasm rip through Yan Nian, felt the flex of muscle beneath him. Yan Nian's cock jerked in their grasp, and Liu Che cupped his hand around the head, catching the hot spurted seed and letting it pool and drip from his palm.

"Majesty," Yan Nian gasped. His hand continued to move, slower now, his semen still spilling. "Highness. Oh."

Liu Che pressed his sticky wet hand to Yan Nian's belly, stroking his seed into his skin. As soon as he felt the power of the climax fade, he pulled the phallus from Yan Nian's

anus. The musician moaned and then chuckled, sounding exhausted and content.

“Turn over,” Liu Che told him. “Lie down.”

Despite the warm patches of seed soaking into the quilt, Yan Nian obeyed and lay back. With his face flushed, his hair tangled, and his eyes shining, he was far removed from the poised, elegant young man who’d dared to challenge his emperor earlier in the day. Now he looked like a beloved, wanton and thoroughly possessed, a smile of satisfied delight curving his lips.

Liu Che stared down at Yan Nian as he reached beneath his robes to grasp his cock. He lifted the long skirts out of his way and freed his erection from his under-trousers. Yan Nian lifted his head, biting his lip as his gaze fixed beneath Liu Che’s robes.

“You want to see my cock?” Liu Che said with a laugh.

Yan Nian gave him one of those bold looks. “Yes, Highness.”

Liu Che grabbed an impatient handful of his skirts and wrenched them to one side, exposing himself. His cock throbbed, seemingly growing harder at Yan Nian’s hungry moan of admiration.

“Let me suck it,” Yan Nian begged.

“Nian—” Liu Che could barely hold back. The thought of his beautiful musician sucking on his cock made his head buzz. Shudders cut down his spine, and his hips jerked. His hand moved faster, blurring in tight, hot speed as he chased down his orgasm. He was too close to climax to enjoy Yan Nian’s lips around him this time; he would shoot in the

musician's face before that pretty mouth even opened for him.

Liu Che groaned. "Next time," he gasped. "Yes. Next time." He stared at Yan Nian's face, at the wet streaks of semen across his belly, at the tendril of hair with the silver bells curled over his chest. He tried to slow his strokes, to make his pleasure last, but he'd kept himself on the edge for too long. With a groan he arched over Yan Nian just as his orgasm hit. Liu Che grunted, his hips jerking. His seed jetted onto Yan Nian's body, splashing across his belly and chest, spurting over his still half-hard cock and trailing pearlescent semen into the curls of pubic hair.

With a gasp, he pressed both hands into the quilt on either side of Yan Nian's hips. Liu Che hung his head, feeling his topknot finally unravel and collapse, his hair falling warm and scented around his shoulders. He laughed, breathless, and hung over his new lover until his heartbeat slowed and his muscles began to ache at his position.

He let out a long, shuddering breath and then inhaled deeply as he sat back on his heels. Liu Che looked at the mess of seed decorating Yan Nian's body and purred, satisfaction and pride making him grin.

Yan Nian flashed him a wicked, daring look. "How did I do with my lesson, Your Highness?"

Liu Che laughed as he picked up the torn tunic from the edge of the bed. He used it to wipe Yan Nian clean. "The masters in the Guild of Music were correct in their assessment of your capabilities. Given the right motivation, you're quick to learn. I am very pleased with your performance, Li Yan Nian."

Happiness glowed in Yan Nian's expression. "Then perhaps you will allow me to play for you again."

Liu Che smiled. "And perhaps you will allow me to play *with* you again." He got up from the bed and adjusted his dress, tucking his spent cock into the under-trousers and rearranging his layers of crimson silk. Yan Nian moved from the wet patch and furled the quilt around his body, watching Liu Che as he tidied himself.

When he was ready to leave, Liu Che glanced over at his new lover. Yan Nian looked soft and beautiful wrapped in the quilt. Unable to stop himself, Liu Che went over and kissed him one final time.

He pulled away with reluctance. Collecting his crop, he tucked it into his waist sash and walked to the door. Just before he slid it open, he turned back and smiled. "The music of your stifled moans is exquisite, Yan Nian, but the next time I possess you, I want to hear you sing out loud."

Yan Nian couldn't hide the flash of pleasure that crossed his face. His hands gripped the quilt, and he smiled. "Yes, Your Majesty. Next time, I promise I shall sing at full volume the sweetest of songs for you."

Chapter Five

TIME seemed to drag. Yan Nian attended rehearsals, gave his lessons, and sat through a number of daily lectures. Ordinarily he'd have enjoyed all of these things, but instead he felt restless. During a lecture on advanced composition for the erhu, he stared through the carved screens of the windows and tracked the sunlight in the courtyard outside. He gazed at the weathered volcanic rocks that had been carefully placed to aid contemplation and blushed when the only thoughts that came to mind were far from contemplative.

He thought of Liu Che and what they'd done together a day and a half ago. His body still ached, tender from the way the emperor had used him, but it was a pleasurable ache. Whenever he stretched or bent down, he felt a flicker of arousal alongside the brief protest from sore muscles. At times, he thought he could still feel the stone phallus deep inside him.

Yan Nian lowered his head and pretended to take notes while the music master droned on. He moved his sleeve from the collection of bamboo slips so as not to smear the ink and found himself doodling obscene shapes. Heat washed through him as he remembered sucking Liu Che's fingers, then feeling the same fingers inside him. His body tensed, desire stirring.

He'd slept with the phallus beside his pillow roll, the stone toy warm in his hand. He'd wanted to use it again but hadn't had the courage to penetrate himself. Though he thought he should practice in case the emperor summoned him to his bed again, somehow it seemed less exciting to do it alone.

Instead, he'd practiced sucking the phallus, taking the smooth stone head between his lips and enjoying it the way he wanted to worship Liu Che's cock. Yan Nian remembered the emperor's groans of longing and the look in his eyes. In the privacy of his own room, Yan Nian had pleased himself so many times he'd lost count, coming until he felt drained and his seed was thin. He'd thought he could exhaust the memories of Liu Che's touch so they no longer affected him quite so much, but all it had done was focus his thoughts and make him want His Majesty all the more.

A blob of ink spilled from his brush and spread across the flat, narrow surface of the wooden slip. Yan Nian stared at it miserably. He'd thought one night with Liu Che would cure him of this helpless longing, but it had made matters worse. How could he give up such happiness? How could he bear to put aside his own feelings and convince the emperor to bed his sister?

His vision blurred. Yan Nian closed his eyes, his heart heavy. His mood swung between despair and delight with each change of thought. If this was love, then it was an unbearable torment; and yet he didn't want to live without it.

At least his sudden dip into melancholy had quashed his arousal. Yan Nian snapped off the ruined bamboo slip from the loose-knit scroll and pushed it to one side of his low

desk. He gave up trying to follow the lecture and admired the sheen of the purple damask of his new robes.

As promised, Liu Che had sent tailors and seamstresses to his room, laden down with bolts of silk and the finest linen as well as a selection of robes and undergarments already made up. Overwhelmed, Yan Nian had allowed them to measure and fuss over him, chattering amongst themselves as they held fabric up to his face to find the most flattering shades.

Today he wore silk of the darkest indigo, with white undergarments and a waist sash of deep yellow ochre. Lavish gold embroidery decorated the sleeves. It was a beautiful garment that had drawn the attention of his colleagues and masters when he'd entered the Guild of Music. No one had said anything, but they'd stared and whispered behind their hands.

Yan Nian refused to feel ashamed, but he did feel self-conscious. The lecture had allowed him to become anonymous again, just one musician amongst many. He glanced out of the window once more, letting his thoughts drift. Only when the man seated beside him tugged on his sleeve did he pay attention to what was happening around him.

Turning, he followed the direction of his neighbor's jerked chin and saw a blue-robed eunuch standing at the front of the hall. The eunuch raised his eyebrows and made an annoyed gesture.

"Li Yan Nian. His Majesty the Emperor demands your presence immediately."

Yan Nian lurched to his feet, knocking the desk and sending his wet brush skittering across the floor. Aware of the attention focused upon him, he mumbled an apology and collected his things together.

“Quickly!” snapped the eunuch. “Leave those. You can come back for them. His Majesty wants you *now*.”

Despite his flustered confusion, Yan Nian had the presence of mind to bow to the music master before he hurried from the hall. The eunuch set a smart pace, and Yan Nian followed him, the bells in his hair ringing with each step.

They passed the audience chamber and went deeper into the complex of rooms that formed the emperor’s private quarters. Yan Nian had never been in this part of the palace before, and he glanced around with interest at the ornate carved screens and colorful draperies, the jade sculptures and painted panels. Guards stood at the junction of each corridor, and eunuchs scuttled back and forth carrying scrolls of paper, linen, and bamboo slips.

Finally they reached an open doorway guarded by two soldiers. A long screen just inside the room blocked Yan Nian’s view, but he could hear the murmur of voices from within. His heart leapt as he recognized the emperor’s clear tones. The eunuch ushered him into the room and left him there alone.

Yan Nian paused behind the screen, taking a moment to compose himself. He straightened his sleeves and smoothed down his hair. The action made the silver bells chime. Inside the room, Liu Che broke off from his conversation and called, “Li Yan Nian, is that you I hear?”

Taking a deep breath, Yan Nian stepped out from the cover of the screen. “Yes, Your Majesty. I am here to serve you.” He sank to his knees and made his obeisance. When he raised his head and sat back on his knees, he realized three other men were regarding him with various degrees of fascination.

Liu Che, reclining upon a gilded couch set on a dais, smiled at him with pleasure. “This is Li Yan Nian, a talented musician who recently came to my attention,” he said to the three men. They were all high-ranking ministers, richly dressed and carrying petitions rolled tight in their hands. Two of them looked kindly upon Yan Nian, but the other curled his lip and averted his gaze.

Yan Nian didn’t think he could form a single coherent sentence, but it seemed he hadn’t been summoned here to entertain the ministers. Liu Che waved the three men away. “Thank you, gentlemen. I will think some more on what you said and will give you my decision when you attend me tomorrow. And Guang Jin, give my regards to your brother on his achievements. I will see him rewarded on his return. Now leave me—I have things to discuss with Li Yan Nian.”

They waited in silence until the three ministers left the room, and then Liu Che leant his chin on one hand and gave him a sparking look. “Well, my treasure.”

Yan Nian blinked, startled by the endearment. “Your Highness?”

“You are wearing the new clothes I sent. Good. This color becomes you, as I knew it would.” Liu Che’s smile broadened.

“Your Majesty has superb taste.... Oh.” Aware of the implications of what he’d said, Yan Nian fell silent, blushing. Never had it seemed so difficult to express gratitude.

The emperor chuckled. “You may compliment yourself as directly or indirectly as you wish. I don’t mind. You are too humble, Yan Nian.”

“My role in your life is humble, Highness.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” Liu Che gave him an intense look, quickly gone. “I summoned you here to give you some good news—news you may take to your colleagues in the Guild of Music.”

It was easier to focus on the prospect of work than on attempting to understand the emperor’s mysterious comments and meaningful looks. Yan Nian settled himself more comfortably on his knees and waited.

“There will be a banquet in three days’ time,” Liu Che announced. “A small private feast for fifty of my ministers and other guests to mark our continued victories over the Xiongnu in the West.” His smile vanished, and he became serious, changing position on the couch to lean forward, his hands linked in front of him. “In the palace and the capital, you will only hear reports of our success, Nian, but in truth the war requires cunning and a great number of resources. The Xiongnu are on familiar territory and our men are at a disadvantage. It’s a war of attrition rather than of pitched battles....”

With a sigh, Liu Che let his words tail off. Realizing this was an important conversation, Yan Nian tried to follow the emperor’s train of thought. He felt ashamed that his mind clung to the thrill of hearing Liu Che use his personal name

instead. He remembered the burst of excitement he'd felt when the emperor had said his personal name before, when the exclamation had been torn from Liu Che as he'd masturbated over Yan Nian's naked body.

The memory made his cock stir. Yan Nian dug his fingernails into the palms of his hands and willed his body to calm down.

"We must keep up the morale of the people," Liu Che was saying, and with a guilty start, Yan Nian jerked his attention back to his emperor's words.

Liu Che shot him a shadowed look, as if he knew Yan Nian hadn't been listening. "There are spies everywhere," he said, his expression severe. "It's my intention for the Xiongnu to hear about our celebrations. Perhaps they will lose heart, just as our men will rejoice that we honor their bravery."

Yan Nian bowed his head. "Your Majesty speaks freely in front of me."

The emperor rose to his feet, his dark gray and pale blue robes falling in elegant lines. He stepped down from the dais and walked over to a map of the empire, painted on a wide strip of silk and pinned to a wooden panel. His back to Yan Nian, Liu Che said, "I speak freely because I trust you."

Yan Nian directed a startled glance at the strong sweep of the emperor's back. "Why?"

Liu Che half turned toward him and gave a wry chuckle. "You will call me a fool and a sentimentalist, but I truly believe I would hear any disloyalty or betrayal in your music. You are your music, Yan Nian. Any hint of rot would reveal

itself. Instead, when I listen to you, all I hear is truth and purity.”

Yan Nian’s breath caught. Delight spread through him, a slow warmth that fed into the desire he’d tried to tamp down. His pulse raced as he bowed low, almost to the floor. “Thank you for your confidence, Highness.”

“I know it is not misplaced.” Liu Che smiled, his gaze lingering for a heartbeat before he crossed the floor and resumed his seat on the dais. “But to return to the banquet.... I require music and dance, acrobats and beauties—entertainments to please my guests. I want you to arrange it, Yan Nian. It will be your choice entirely.”

Dozens of ideas flooded his mind, from the simplest to the most extravagant. Yan Nian sighed at the thought of having complete control over such an important performance. Naturally, his sister would be involved. It was the perfect chance for him to introduce Lady Li to the emperor. Then his confidence faltered as the enormity of the task hit him, and he balked.

Bowing to the ground, he said, “Your Majesty asks a lot of this humble person. Surely there are masters within the Entertainment Wards better qualified than me to make such decisions....”

“I want it to be you.” Liu Che’s tone, so warm and reassuring, made Yan Nian raise his head in longing. “I believe you know my tastes as well as anyone else,” the emperor continued. “Perhaps you know me better.”

A frisson of pure desire went through Yan Nian. “I would not be so bold as to assume anything.”

"I know." Liu Che gave a lazy smile as he stretched himself out on the couch. "Choose whomever you want for the banquet. I want the best, and at the culmination of the feast, I want you to perform for me."

Yan Nian swallowed. His heart raced. "Perform, Highness?"

Liu Che laughed. "Your songs, my treasure. I want you to sing and play your Northern Beauty song."

This was the opportunity he'd been waiting for. Before he could think better of it, Yan Nian plunged ahead. "Highness, may I bring a dancer to accompany my song?"

"The song has no need of illustration."

Greatly daring, Yan Nian raised his gaze and looked directly at the emperor. "I disagree. I believe the meaning of the song can be improved by the addition of a dancer."

Liu Che stared at him with an odd, slightly amused expression. "Sometimes you're so like my generals. If they have an idea in their heads and they feel it's right, they won't back down. I know I'm right, but the fact that you challenged me makes me...."

He broke off and sat in thoughtful silence for a moment before giving a snort. "Very well. You may bring a dancer. But make sure the first performance of the song is yours alone. The second time you sing it, the dancer may perform—and then I will be the judge of what is best."

"Thank you, Highness." Yan Nian bowed, and when he straightened up again, he realized he was trembling. He'd done it. He'd been granted permission to present his sister to

Liu Che. They were one step closer to fulfilling their father's dream. So why did he feel so miserable?

Liu Che seemed to sense his mood. "You need not dilute your abilities. You shine even when you play the simplest tune. Your gift, Li Yan Nian, is that you make your music accessible to all who hear it. The masters of the Guild of Music assure me your compositions are dazzlingly inventive and incredibly complex, yet my Chief Eunuch tells me that even the kitchen slaves can sing your lyrics and memorize your melodies. The whole palace is dancing to your tune. Even I, who have little use for music beyond relaxing entertainment, find myself humming your Northern Beauty song at the strangest times. What do you say to that?"

Yan Nian felt a glow of warmth at the praise. "I—I am flattered, Highness. I wish only to please you."

"Oh, you do. You couldn't fail in pleasing me—with your music..." Liu Che paused before he continued, "and with your body."

"Your Majesty." Yan Nian flattened himself against the floor again. His head spun as he tried to untangle his muddled emotions. If only he had his qin, he could compose a melody that expressed and made sense of his feelings.

As if aware of how overwhelmed Yan Nian felt, Liu Che came down from the dais and crouched in front of him. With gentle hands, he urged Yan Nian to rise, tilting his head so they looked into one another's eyes.

The emperor studied him curiously. "Do I frighten you, Yan Nian?"

"No, Your Highness." Yan Nian spoke with honesty.

Liu Che laughed, apparently disbelieving. “Others are afraid of me, and yet you say you’re not. Why is that?”

Yan Nian paused, considering his reply. “I think it is because I saw gentleness in you the very first time I saw you.”

“Gentleness?” The emperor looked astonished. “I am renowned for my temper, and yet you call me gentle!”

“It is said that gentleness will win more victories than boldness.”

Liu Che smiled. “Then tell me of my gentleness, for I don’t remember a single instance of it.”

Yan Nian couldn’t help himself. “Not even with a lover, Highness?”

That earned him a long, scorching look. “Now you are being bold, Nian.”

“Forgive me.” He dropped his gaze. “I will surrender any victory to you.”

He heard the emperor chuckle. When he glanced up, Liu Che’s expression was one of amusement. “You have an answer to everything, my treasure.” Liu Che gestured for him to continue. “Tell me what you saw in me.”

Pursing his lips, Yan Nian cast back through his memories. He remembered the songs he’d been writing and allowed the music of those days to build on his recollections. “It was two years ago, when I first came to the palace,” he began. “The summer was mild. I spent a lot of time outdoors with my qin, trying to capture the beauty of the palace gardens.”

He hesitated. "I admit I trespassed on a few occasions. Your Majesty's private gardens inspired me. I wrote my best melodies there."

"So you saw me in the gardens." Far from looking angry, Liu Che seemed intrigued. "You courted danger even then, Nian. If you'd been seen, you would have lost your head."

"I know. I was willing to take the risk." Yan Nian smiled at his imperial lover, knowing the same was true of their relationship. Even if he had to watch Liu Che fall under Lady Li's spell, he would not regret this moment.

Yan Nian pushed the thought from his mind. "There was a place I liked to go, hidden amongst the bamboo and azaleas. I would lie there and look at the sky through the leaves and feel the warmth of the earth against my back. The smell of the plants and the soil surrounded me, made me feel at one with your garden...." He half closed his eyes, remembering the sensation of nestling on the ground, safe and content. Even now he could recall with perfect clarity the argument that had broken into his idyll.

"On one occasion, I heard a noise. Not the tranquil sound of water running through the streams and into the ponds, but voices raised in anger. I was so used to having the gardens to myself at that time of day, I felt annoyed by the interruption. I sat up and peered through the azalea shrub and saw Your Majesty. You were discussing something with one of your generals. I don't know his name. He was about Your Majesty's age, handsome and haughty; his sword had a white jade hilt and he wore a peach-colored robe over a yellow under-robe...."

“I remember.” Liu Che seemed surprised by the memory, or perhaps it was Yan Nian’s recollection that made him smile. “Yes, we argued. We always argued. Both of us were too bold. We fought in bed as violently as we clashed in court, and though the sex was a pleasure, it was a battle to reach orgasm. He never wanted to surrender, and I got tired of forcing victory.”

Yan Nian lowered his gaze as heat flooded his face. He wanted to experience what the handsome general had enjoyed. He wanted Liu Che to do battle with him amidst silken sheets, wanted his emperor to push him into an ecstatic climax that left them both triumphant.

“I didn’t listen to what you and he were saying, Highness. I listened instead to the shape of your voice, the tone and elegance....” Yan Nian stopped himself from revealing that Liu Che’s voice was one of his greatest inspirations, a sound he wished he could replicate on the qin.

“You argued, and the general left the garden. I thought you would go back indoors, but instead you wandered along the paths, looking at the pond and the rocks. Your expression was angry; I could see the tension in your body, the way you gripped your hands and the violence with which you swung your sleeves out of the way as you passed a line of shrubs. You came closer to my hiding place, and I was afraid you’d find me, but then you stopped.

“I saw you frown. You reached out. I lay flat on my belly, staring up through the leaves, terrified of being discovered but unable to look away. The leaves shifted and I saw what

had caught your attention—a butterfly with yellow and black marbled wings. It was trapped in a spider web.”

“A butterfly....” Liu Che stood rapt, his gaze fixed unwavering on Yan Nian.

The intensity of his stare made a pulse beat rapidly in Yan Nian’s throat. “You freed it. You broke the web holding it and you freed the butterfly. It fluttered in your hands and you let it fly again.” His voice sounded husky to his ears, and he licked his suddenly dry lips. “Your expression was transformed, Highness. Your anger vanished, and you smiled. You took the time to free an insignificant insect, and you smiled.”

Silence rolled around the room. Anxiety tightened in Yan Nian’s belly, and he fidgeted. The movement set the silver bells in his hair jingling in soft harmony.

The sound seemed to rouse Liu Che from his thoughts. “I remember that day. And you were there in the garden.... How strange! I pride myself on sensing when I’m not alone, and yet that day I stood scant inches from your hiding place and I never knew....”

“Your Majesty was busy. You had no reason to notice me.”

Liu Che chuckled and moved away, taking a few steps around the room, the skirts of his robes sweeping across the floor. “Another man would have pushed himself forward. He’d have taken advantage of what he’d just seen and he’d present himself to me as a replacement lover.”

“Highness, I was trespassing!”

“Another man would have turned that to his advantage, too. After all, it’s well known that I like bold men.” Liu Che’s eyes flashed. “But I also respect those who are aware of the rules that govern us... even if those rules are sometimes ignored or twisted to suit the individual’s purpose.”

Yan Nian lifted his chin, not certain whether the emperor was praising him or scolding him. “You wanted to be alone. I could tell from your expression. Besides, I am not the sort of person to thrust myself into the center of attention. My sister....”

“Ah, your sister.” Liu Che gave him an odd look, a half smile on his face. “You must be the most devoted brother in my palace. Every time we meet, you mention your sister. Enough of it, Yan Nian, before I start to believe your intention in seducing me is to introduce me to your damned sister.”

Yan Nian went cold. He felt himself become smaller, drawing himself in as fear churned in his belly. If Liu Che thought he was being manipulated, he would be angry and disappointed. Yan Nian didn’t think he could bear it if that happened. Breathless, he whispered, “Seducing you?”

It was the right thing to say. Liu Che laughed, the tension going from him. He stepped up onto the dais and lounged back on the couch. “Yes. You seduced me with your boldness at first, then with your music... and then with your body. Now you will seduce me with your innocence.”

“Highness?” Yan Nian had no idea what the emperor meant, but his body responded anyway, his arousal swift and hungry as it followed his fear.

“The way you look at me... it’s intoxicating. It’s as if you....” Liu Che stopped and seemed to change his thoughts. “As if you truly want me.”

“I do.” The words came out as a whisper. Yan Nian knelt once more and crept forward on his hands and knees, the fine indigo silk rustling beneath him. He stopped short of the dais and looked up at Liu Che. “I promised I’d sing for you, Highness. And you said—you said next time I could....” He paused, licked his lips, then continued, “You said I could suck your cock.”

Liu Che stared at him. “Tell me, Nian—how many men have you brought to orgasm with your sweet mouth?”

A blush burned Yan Nian’s cheeks. “None, Your Majesty. But I’ve practiced.”

“You practiced?” The emperor sounded scandalized. “How did you practice?”

“On the... instrument of pleasure, Highness.”

Liu Che glanced away, covering his mouth with a hand. He made a muffled sound that may or may not have been laughter. When he looked at Yan Nian again, no trace of amusement remained on his face. Instead, his expression was cool and controlled. He gestured idly. “Get up.”

Eager to obey, Yan Nian stood and adjusted the fall of his silks. He flattened his hands over the yellow waist sash, straightening it.

The emperor moved from the couch, rising to his feet and prowling down from the dais to stand in front of him. He brushed aside Yan Nian’s hands, fitting his palms to the

slender curve of his waist. Liu Che held him for a moment, his fingers seeming to burn through the layers of silk.

Yan Nian lifted his gaze, the silver bells in his hair chiming just once. He searched Liu Che's expression for a sign, some indication of what his emperor wanted of him. Yan Nian remembered the passion of their kisses, the stab and dart of his lover's tongue, the slick of saliva across his face, and the bruising hardness of teeth. He wanted that again and moved toward Liu Che, offering himself for a kiss.

Liu Che drew in a breath and let him go. Stepping back, the emperor folded his arms across his chest and uttered one word. "Strip."

An excited shiver went through him. Yan Nian retreated a few steps, his breath shallow and rapid. He darted glances around the room, reassuring himself that they were alone, and then he began to unfasten his waist sash. He gathered the length of fabric into his hand, looping it around his fingers. His robes loosened, hanging straight from his shoulders rather than emphasizing the shape of his body.

He dropped the sash onto the floor. Flicking back the braided tendril of hair, he shrugged out of the topmost robe of indigo silk. The bells jingled in time with his movements. Yan Nian ran a finger around the collar of the second robe, opening it across his chest before he peeled off the garment. Clad in his under-things, he blushed as he remembered the old, worn tunic that Liu Che had torn from his body. Now he wore a new tunic of finest glossed silk.

The emperor stared at him. "Take it off, Nian."

Yan Nian lifted the tunic over his head. Never before had he felt so aware of his physical self. There was a moment,

when his arms were raised high and the tunic was caught over his head, he felt utterly helpless. Instinctively he drew in his belly, his body tensing as if expecting an attack. Then he was free of the garment, the tunic flung to the floor, and he lifted his chin to meet Liu Che's hard gaze.

The cool air kissed his naked skin, raising goosebumps along his arms and making his nipples stiffen. Yan Nian shivered.

"Are you cold, my treasure?" Liu Che pushed back the wide sleeves of his dark gray imperial robes and slid the leather crop free from his sash.

"No, Highness." Yan Nian forgot what he was doing, his focus shrinking to the sight of the crop. The smooth black leather seemed to taunt him, the thin shape of the shaft and the thicker, rounded handle promising to bring both pain and pleasure. He'd felt it teasing him before, the stroke of it through his robes and across his skin, but never like this. Now he would learn why Liu Che's lovers whispered that he was a stallion-breaker. Yan Nian yearned toward the crop, jittery with nerves and excitement.

Liu Che traced the tip over his chest, circling his nipples and caressing the hollow of his throat. The stitching in the leather felt slightly scratchy against his skin. Yan Nian turned his head as the crop stroked up to his face and brushed over his mouth. The smell of leather, horse, sweat, and male musk rose from the crop. He knew Liu Che had fucked his men with this crop—fucked them and punished them with it. Now it was his turn.

Yan Nian gasped, his arousal immediate. He felt the stretch of silk as his erection pulsed upward, and with a

guilty start he realized he hadn't finished undressing. His hands dropped to the waistband of his under-trousers and he pushed them down a little. Then he stopped, confused. While he didn't want to disobey his emperor's orders, he didn't want to expose himself.

Liu Che made a soft sound. "You're trembling."

"Because I want you." The words blurted out before he could stop them. Yan Nian blushed and added, "Your Majesty."

The emperor smiled, moving the crop from one hand to the other. He ran it lightly up Yan Nian's left arm and stepped closer, his right hand cupping Yan Nian's cock and balls through the thin covering of silk. "I love your honesty," he murmured, squeezing Yan Nian's erection gently before letting go. "Not even my most beloved generals were this truthful with me. They enjoyed my company and the pleasure we found together, but they were always aware of their position in the palace."

"I'm aware of it too," Yan Nian protested, squirming away from the crop as it tickled over his ribs. His cock ached from the brief caress, and he wanted to touch himself, to stroke his hard length through the silk the way Liu Che had just done.

"That's not what I meant." With a small smile, the emperor urged him toward the map pinned to the wooden board. He stood behind Yan Nian, the crop resting at his waist. "What do you see?"

Yan Nian looked at the map, the provincial capitals marked amidst a network of roads, rivers, and canals. He focused on the imperial capital Chang'an and felt a moment

of awe for the vastness of the country and for the man who ruled it all. “Your Majesty, I see the Han Empire.”

Liu Che tapped the crop against the painted silk. “And here in the West?”

“Barbarians. The Xiongnu.” Yan Nian caught his breath as Liu Che moved in closer against him and splayed his free hand over Yan Nian’s naked belly. Yan Nian stifled a groan as his emperor’s fingers traced around his navel. Liu Che’s hand dropped lower, tugging at the drawstring ties on Yan Nian’s under-trousers before rubbing through the smattering of rough hair leading to his groin. His cock leapt at the touch, moisture leaking from its tip to wet the white silk.

He kept his gaze on the map. The territory of the Xiongnu stretched from beyond the Great Wall in the distant north into the unknown lands of the West. The map became less detailed there, just a series of lines that charted the Silk Road and divisions of provinces and countries that belonged to the barbarians. Yan Nian tried to focus, but he was aware only of the man behind him, of Liu Che’s hand stroking the sensitive skin of his belly, of the crop cool and smooth against his side.

“The world is so vast, Highness.”

“And I want it all.” Liu Che’s response was a whisper.

Yan Nian glanced at him over his shoulder. “The whole world?”

“I will be content with driving the Xiongnu from our borders.” Liu Che removed his hand from Yan Nian’s body and stepped back. “But I want to experience everything the world can give me.”

It seemed like a riddle. Yan Nian considered it, then shook his head, making the silver bells chime prettily. “I think I’d be afraid if I had the responsibilities of an empire. I would be content to know love in my life.”

“Ah, Nian. Love is the greatest mystery this world has to offer us.” Liu Che’s voice changed, sadness in his tone for a moment before he straightened and tapped Yan Nian’s arm with the crop. “But let us not speak of such things. You wanted to sing for me, I believe. Let’s see if I can coax a tune from you.”

“Highness.” Yan Nian took a step back, nestling against the emperor’s body. He gave a wanton wriggle, making his own offer blatant.

“Bold, my treasure. You like to tease me.” Liu Che sounded amused. “Lean forward. Put your hands on the map.” With subtle taps of the crop, he guided Yan Nian into position. “There—like that. Good. Keep them there. Don’t move.”

Excitement and apprehension warred inside Yan Nian as he followed the emperor’s orders. He leaned his weight through his hands and spread his feet apart, his erection bobbing against his silk trousers. He made a soft sound of protest and canted his hips, wanting something harder than the sheer fabric against his cock. “Highness, what are you doing?”

“Punishing you.”

Yan Nian jerked up his head, twisting a little to stare at Liu Che. “What have I done to displease you?”

“You admitted to trespassing in my private gardens.”

“Oh.” Yan Nian gaze fixed on the crop, the supple black leather seeming to taunt him. He wanted it, wanted to feel Liu Che strike him with it. It would hurt, he knew; but his cock leapt at the thought. Desire tightened inside him, and he stretched, his breath coming short as he pushed back, tilting his arse.

Liu Che smacked the crop against the palm of his hand. “You seem to be flirting with me, Nian.”

Yan Nian jumped at the sound of the crop on skin. He gazed at Liu Che, at first nervous and then challenging.

The emperor gave a hungry laugh. “You have fire in your eyes. Are you a fox spirit, come to tempt me? I would see your tail, Master Li...” He hooked the tip of the crop into the back of Yan Nian’s trousers and pulled. The drawstring ties at his waist unraveled and the garment fell around his ankles in a soft heap. Yan Nian squeaked as he finally stood naked and exposed.

The crop tickled up the back of his leg, over his calf, inwards up his thigh, until it probed delicately between his buttocks. “No tail?” Liu Che mused. “Ah, but I forgot—a fox can hide his true shape. Perhaps I can make you forget yourself, Yan Nian. Perhaps I can make you beg and plead, and make you offer yourself to me here on the floor.”

The words made him moan. Yan Nian closed his eyes, his mind full of images of himself at Liu Che’s feet, worshipping his body, sucking greedily at his cock. He was ready to start pleading now, but he knew it would spoil the game Liu Che was playing.

His moan became a yelp as the first blow fell. It struck the round curve of his arse, a stripe of fire that shocked

rather than hurt him. His skin tingled, the slight pain fading—and then Liu Che struck him again. The blow was harder this time, bisecting the first stripe. Yan Nian's breath came sharp, and he tried to stifle a cry.

“Louder. You said you'd sing for me. I want your moans and cries.” Behind him, Liu Che paced back and forth. Yan Nian could hear the whistle in the air as he swung the crop, teasing him with the promise of the next blow.

Yan Nian gasped, his body burning with mingled arousal and shame. His arms trembled as he held himself in place. “Your Majesty, the guards can hear us!”

“Would you like them to watch instead?”

The thought made his legs go weak. Yan Nian whimpered. The idea of the stone-faced guards brought in to witness his punishment made his erection throb and his arsehole clench. He watched a bead of pre-come ooze from the tip of his cock and drip onto the floor. The sight made him blush even more, and he hid his face against one arm. The scent of his lust made him pant.

A third blow landed, harder and sharper than the last. Yan Nian shook with the force of it, feeling the power of the strike resonate through him. A fourth stripe followed, and he cried out, his voice sliding from a desperate moan to a shout of need.

“Yes. That's what I want.” Liu Che brought the crop down again and again, always moving, changing the force of his stroke and the area of attack. “Let me hear your glorious voice. I want you to moan. I want to hear you come apart for me.”

Yan Nian mewled. He could smell himself, his heat and need so sweet and musky from his skin; the sweat gathering in his armpits and trickling down his sides a more pungent scent. He dropped his head between his outstretched arms, the tendril of hair with its silver bells swaying, music shimmering the air around him. "Highness," he gasped, "oh, Your Majesty...."

Liu Che came close and flicked at his nipples with the crop until Yan Nian squirmed. "Don't move." Liu Che's voice held a warning note. "Wriggle one more time and I will force you to obey your emperor."

Yan Nian held still, his entire body shaking inwardly with effort. Instinctively he knew Liu Che wanted him to disobey. He moaned, tipping back his head. He flinched at the repeated rub of the crop over his nipples, and then shuddered as he heard the crop clatter to the floor.

Opening his eyes, Yan Nian met his emperor's gaze: hard, implacable, commanding. He drew in a shaking breath, only to expel it again in a sharp gasp as Liu Che slid a hand across his chest. His tormented nipples ached. He wanted the heat soothed, but instead Liu Che pinched one between thumb and forefinger, rolling and tugging on it.

Fiery pleasure-pain streaked through him. His cock jerked hard against his belly, pre-come smearing across his skin. His muscles flexed. Yan Nian arched into the pain, whimpering helplessly as Liu Che twisted his nipple. It burned, the heat as sharp as the blows across his arse, but when the emperor released the pressure, Yan Nian protested and cried for more.

His balls drew up, tight and hot with seed. Yan Nian wanted to spurt all over the floor, wanted to come at Liu Che's hands. If the emperor touched his cock, Yan Nian knew he'd climax. He shook his head, the bells glittering, punctuating his harsh gasps. "Please, Highness. Help me."

Liu Che chuckled and crouched to retrieve his crop. "You've spilled pre-come on my crop," he said mildly, holding it out to show him. "Such disrespect, my treasure. It needs to be licked clean before I can use it on you again."

Yan Nian stared at the shiny gleam on the black crop. His throat constricted. When Liu Che held the crop close to his mouth, he tentatively put out his tongue and licked at it. He lapped over the smooth leather, his groan low and hungry as he tasted himself and the harsher flavors of horse and sweat ingrained into the hide.

"Oh, so obedient," Liu Che whispered.

The crop moved, drawing slowly between his lips. Yan Nian turned his head to follow it and inadvertently moved one hand from the map. He froze, his eyes widening as he realized what he'd done.

"You moved." Liu Che looked delighted. He stepped back, wielding the wet crop. "Ten strokes, Nian. Count them for me."

The first blow made him squeak. The wet leather made his arse sting, and the sweat running down his back bit at the welts already raised by the crop. Yan Nian counted aloud, trying to keep himself still to accept his punishment.

"This is what I wanted to do to you from the very first moment I saw you," Liu Che said, his breath coming short as he swung the fourth stroke. "I knew your arse would be as

sweet and smooth as a ripe peach, your skin as pale as cream. The thought of decorating your perfect buttocks with red stripes made me hard that day.”

Yan Nian sobbed, the silver bells jingling as he writhed, seeking to escape the pain and yet trying to embrace it at the same time. “I know, Highness. When you walked around me, I knew it. You touched me with the crop and I wanted it. Wanted you.”

Liu Che threw the crop aside and slid his hands over Yan Nian’s arse. The gentle touch made him cry out, his skin so tender and sensitive that even the lightest caress seemed to burn. His body spasmed, his orgasm close now.

“Keep counting,” Liu Che ordered harshly. He brought his hand down on Yan Nian’s arse, the sound a sharp crack as his palm met yielding flesh.

Yan Nian yelled “Five!” as he jerked forward, but Liu Che caught him with his free hand and held him steady around the waist as he delivered another hard strike. “No,” Yan Nian moaned, twisting to break free, conscious of Liu Che’s silken sleeve brushing against his cock. “Your Majesty, I’ll come—I...”

“I want you to come.”

Liu Che spanked him again; three stinging slaps one after the other. Each one made Yan Nian buck in response, his cock thrusting into the softness of the emperor’s sleeve. He gasped, his hips juddering as he chased his climax. It slid away from him, teasing him, and Yan Nian pleaded for it. Even after the tenth slap, he begged for more.

“Harder,” he moaned. “Highness, hold me. Touch me.”

Liu Che delivered a final hard slap across his buttocks. At the same time, he grasped Yan Nian's cock through the fabric of his sleeve and stroked him, once, twice.

Yan Nian wailed, his orgasm pumping out of him in a swift, violent rush. His seed spurted, soaking the emperor's sleeve. He gabbled a breathless apology, but it seemed Liu Che didn't mind. Instead, he continued to stroke Yan Nian's cock through the stained silk, drawing out the last tremors of climax and every last drop of semen.

His legs buckled, and at last Yan Nian slid to the floor, his body quivering with aftershocks. He mewled in complaint as his new position stretched his sore buttocks, but he didn't move. Pleasure buzzed through him and he felt lightheaded, his mind spinning away. His breath rubbed in his throat and his chest heaved, sweat glistening on his skin.

At last he raised his head, the silver bells in his hair tinkling slightly. He looked up at Liu Che, who stood over him, face flushed and his eyes glittering. From where he lay sprawled at the emperor's feet, Yan Nian could see the hard thrust of Liu Che's cock outlined beneath his imperial robes.

He pushed himself onto his knees and crawled closer. His head still swam, but now his focus was on his emperor. Clutching at Liu Che's silks, he looked up. "You've forced me to take my pleasure, Highness, but what about your own?"

Liu Che looked startled. "Nian—"

"Please, Your Majesty. I beg you—let me suck your cock. I want to taste you. I want to know...." He reached up and curled his fingers around the shape of Liu Che's erection, moaning as he felt its heat fill his palm. Yan Nian licked his lips. "It's so hard. Give it to me. Let me please you."

The emperor seemed to struggle with his decision. Finally he gestured toward the crop on the floor. “Bring it to me.” He turned his back and crossed the room, then seated himself legs apart on the couch, waiting.

Yan Nian’s pulse raced. Should he stand and fetch the crop? No—he’d do it on his hands and knees, a mark of loving subservience to his emperor. He kicked off the under-trousers still wrapped around his ankles and crawled naked to where the leather crop lay. He felt Liu Che’s gaze hot over his body and shivered, arousal starting a slow burn inside him once more. Collecting the crop, he brought it to the emperor and sat back on his knees to offer it in both hands.

Liu Che took the crop but said nothing. He flicked aside the topmost fold of his robes so Yan Nian could see the hard length of his cock pushing toward him beneath the layers of cloth. Uncertain what he should do, Yan Nian sat forward and fumbled with the under-robes, smoothing his fingertips over the emperor’s thighs and murmuring in admiration as he revealed Liu Che’s engorged cock.

Yan Nian touched it with reverence, his lips parting as he measured its length and girth. His breath came faster as he imagined taking it in his mouth... taking it in his arse. He swallowed, a beat of feverish anticipation pulsing life into his own cock. Liu Che was so big, so thick, so much more than the stone phallus. Yan Nian knew he’d be stretched wide, and he whimpered at the thought, unbearably excited.

He leaned forward, letting his breath whisper over Liu Che’s erection. Catching his scent—pure, dark, masculine lust—Yan Nian wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. He made a greedy sound and moved to take Liu Che in his mouth.

“Not yet.”

Liu Che’s voice, heavy with desire, made him stop. Puzzled, Yan Nian looked up. “Your Majesty?”

“You have to earn the privilege of sucking my cock.” The emperor’s eyes gleamed as he held out the crop, its wide handle toward Yan Nian’s lips. “Demonstrate for me the way you practiced on the phallus. Show me how you’d suck me.”

The impact of the command slammed through him. Yan Nian bowed his head, relinquishing his pride and enjoying the sensation of submitting his will to his emperor. He wanted Liu Che’s cock in his mouth, but the desire to please him was stronger. He dropped a kiss to Liu Che’s bare thigh, then tilted his head, opening his mouth to accept the handle of the crop.

Liu Che fed it between his lips, his gaze fixed on Yan Nian’s mouth. The emperor’s breath came in sharp, staccato gasps as Yan Nian sucked on the handle. The taste of leather and sweat exploded across his tongue. He drew back his head, scraping his teeth gently against the crop before allowing it to slip from his mouth with a wet kiss. Humming, he licked at the handle, his head bobbing up and down as he worked his way around it from the base to where Liu Che’s hand grasped it tight. Yan Nian licked at his lover’s fingers, teasing with the point of his tongue before he returned his attention to the crop and took it as deep as possible.

He heard the hitch in Liu Che’s breathing and dared a glance up at him. Yan Nian hoped he made a pleasing sight, naked and kneeling at his lord’s feet with his lips parted around the handle of the crop. The knowledge of his submission made him tremble with the force of his desire,

made him desperate for Liu Che to fill him with his cock, to thrust deep inside him until they both came.

“Stop.”

Yan Nian gasped as he felt Liu Che seize a handful of his hair, twisting it free of his topknot. A few strands fell, sticking to his warm, damp skin. The crop was pulled from his mouth, and then his head was pushed down.

“Suck me.” Liu Che’s voice was a growl. Both hands gripped Yan Nian’s hair, the emperor’s fingers moving convulsively. Yan Nian obeyed, inhaling the scent of his lover as he took Liu Che’s cock in his mouth. He did it slowly, relaxing his throat to take him all the way, moaning in ecstatic delight as the thick shaft filled him.

With his mouth full, Yan Nian looked up again. Liu Che stared down at him, his expression strained and his breathing heavy. His gaze was intense, his focus absolute. “Make me come.”

Yan Nian shuddered, loving the command. He flicked his tongue along the underside of the shaft and angled his head to swallow more. He slid his hands up the inside of Liu Che’s thighs and cupped his balls, using his thumbs to roll them in their tight sac. Yan Nian wanted to taste them, wanted to tease at his emperor’s pubic hair and explore deeper between his thighs with his tongue, but Liu Che’s hard gaze controlled him, made him suck his master’s cock in a faster rhythm.

“Yes. Yes, Nian.” Liu Che increased his hold on Yan Nian’s hair. His head tipped back and he gasped for breath, his hips thrusting and his cock driving into Yan Nian’s welcoming mouth. Yan Nian swallowed him hungrily, his

saliva mixing with the emperor's pre-come, the taste sharp on his tongue and the creamy liquid smearing around his mouth and down his chin. He moaned, tension building inside him as he felt Liu Che struggle for release.

Yan Nian gripped the base of his emperor's cock and pumped it hard, timing it to the rhythm of his lips and tongue. He made tiny soft sounds of encouragement, desperate for the taste of his emperor's semen. Liu Che gave a strangled cry and forced his cock deeper, his hips jerking. His hands clenched in Yan Nian's hair as he came, his seed hot as it spilled down Yan Nian's throat.

Yan Nian smothered a hungry groan and drank him down, taking it all. The thick, salty taste overwhelmed his senses and he pressed closer, not wanting to pull away until he'd sucked his imperial master dry.

Liu Che relaxed his grip and stroked Yan Nian's hair from his face. "Thank you."

With reluctance, Yan Nian let his lover's cock slide from his lips. He licked at the glistening head, teasing the final drops of come from the tiny slit, and then he sighed, laying his head against Liu Che's thigh. He closed his eyes. "I love you."

The admission slipped from him before he could stop himself. Yan Nian hid his face in his lover's lap, hoping Liu Che hadn't heard him. Embarrassment as hot as lust swept through him, prickling his skin. Yan Nian bit his lip, forcing back his emotions. He was happy; he was the emperor's beloved. He couldn't ask for more.

But his heart cried out for it.

Chapter Six

“BROTHER!”

Though he ached with every step, Yan Nian smiled as he approached the dancers’ courtyard. Lady Li stood between the two guardsmen at the gate, an elegant figure in lilac and blue silks. A gauzy white wrap fluttered around her shoulders, and as she shared a few final comments with the soldiers, she concealed the lower half of her face behind her fan.

“Am I late?” Yan Nian called.

“Not at all! I wanted to meet you for a change, rather than making you wait.” She gave him a dazzling smile and held out her hand, her eyes gleaming over the top of the fan. “New clothes, brother? We have much to discuss, it seems.”

Self-conscious, Yan Nian ran a hand over his indigo robes and blushed as he recalled how Liu Che had helped him dress after their lovemaking. Catching Lady Li’s speculative look, he hurried to make conversation. “Indeed we do, sister. I bring wonderful news!”

The soldiers grinned, their gazes raking Yan Nian in a curious, familiar way. Yan Nian tensed, suddenly aware of what they might know. He gave them both a quelling glance and hurried through the moon gate into the garden.

Lady Li folded her fan and took his arm. “Don’t rush, Nian. Walk slowly. We are being observed, you see. No, don’t look!” She sighed as he did exactly that, gazing around at the long buildings on three sides of the courtyard to see dozens of curious faces peering out at him.

“What is this?” he asked, though he thought he knew. “Have I grown two heads?”

“Dearest brother, you must know what everyone is saying about you.” She turned her most serious face upon him as they walked past the well and moved amongst the flowerbeds. “Tell me—is it true?”

Yan Nian gave a breathless laugh and tried to prevaricate. “Is what true?”

Lady Li stopped in front of him. Folding her arms, she fixed him with a hard stare. “They’re saying you’re His Majesty’s new lover. Is it so?”

Heat flushed his cheeks. “Yes. It’s true.”

“Oh, Nian.” She flung herself at him and clung tight, her slender body shaking.

“Sister....” Awkward and uncertain, Yan Nian patted her shoulder, ruffling the graceful drape of her wrap. He didn’t know what to say. He’d been so caught up in the onslaught of desire Liu Che roused in him and become so greedy for pleasure that he’d forgotten his father’s plan. Oh, he’d remembered part of it—but not the most important part. His heart sank as he realized he’d done the unforgivable: he’d not only fallen in love with the man intended for his sister, he’d slept with him, too. No wonder she wept so bitterly in his arms. He was absolutely the worst of brothers.

He pulled away from her, guilt clamoring at him. "Sister, I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" Lady Li lifted her head, dabbing with delicate precision at her eyes with her fingertips to avoid smudging her make-up. She didn't look upset. Her expression was radiant, her lips curved in a huge smile and the tears—those were tears of laughter. She grinned, no doubt amused by his puzzled expression. "You have no need to be sorry, Nian. I've just won a sizeable sum of money thanks to you."

"What?" Yan Nian stared at her, not certain he'd heard her correctly. Now it was his turn to fold his arms across his chest. "You made a bet? On me?"

His sister continued to grin, unrepentant. "I made the bet fifteen months ago. I said you would become His Majesty's lover within two years, and I was right. You've won me a small fortune, brother!"

"Wait." Torn between anger and amusement, he followed her around the garden as she skipped away from him. "How did you know it would happen?"

"Because you love him." Lady Li glanced over her shoulder, no longer laughing, but somber. "And because you're beautiful and talented; and because you care for his happiness." She smiled. "But mainly because you love him. You've loved him since we came here. I knew he would see it in you and admire it. How could he not?"

Yan Nian came to a halt. "You knew?" He thought back, wondering if his feelings had been visible to everyone who looked at him. Did the emperor know? He felt a slither of cold run down his spine before he straightened and lifted his

chin. He didn't care who knew it. He loved Liu Che. There was no crime in falling in love.

Lady Li sat on the bench and patted the place beside her. "Of course I knew. You and I are so alike, Nian. Father made us train together in music and dance, just as he made us study the classics together. Until we entered the palace, we were in each other's company all day long."

He sat rather gingerly, feeling the heat from the stripes across his arse. As he lowered himself, his sister nudged him with her elbow. "All those men who came courting, and you never showed them the slightest scrap of attention! Yet when we arrived here, it took just one look at His Majesty for you to fall in love."

Yan Nian met her gaze. "You're right, I love him. But I also love you, sister. We have our duty to Father to consider and your future to think about. That's why I came to see you—to tell you that His Majesty is planning a banquet in three days' time, and he wants me to play my songs for him."

To his surprise, she interrupted. "I know of the banquet, brother. I must tell you—"

He held up a hand. "Please, let me finish. As we planned, I asked His Majesty if I could bring a dancer to illustrate my song, and he agreed." Yan Nian smiled. "I hope you have been practicing, sister. We will make Father proud of us."

Lady Li turned her head and gazed at the stone flags of the footpath. A tendril of hair spilled over her shoulder. "I can't do it."

Yan Nian gave her a startled glance. "Why not?"

“Because I don’t want His Majesty’s attention.” She fidgeted, worrying at the overlay of her gown, and then looked at him directly. “I love another man. A man who has asked me to be his wife.”

Yan Nian was conscious of two conflicting emotions. One was delight that his sister had found love with an honorable man, and the other was indignation. Never good at resolving discord unless it pertained to music, he let indignation win through. “What?” he blustered, summoning up wounded indignation. “He should’ve approached me first!”

Lady Li faced him, her hands fluttering. “Nian, don’t be angry. Zhou Jun was ready to talk to you, but I wanted to speak with you first. Oh, I knew you’d be like this! I hoped you’d be more sympathetic now you’ve admitted your own love, but instead you’ll just lecture me on duty.”

“I’m surprised, that’s all,” Yan Nian managed lamely, although “surprise” was nowhere near an accurate description for what he felt. Now he’d had time to absorb the shock, he felt the slow unraveling of their father’s dream. He winced as it fell away, tearing strips from him. For years he’d done his parent’s bidding and put family honor first. Now, with one decision, his sister had cut the ties and freed them both.

Lady Li put a hand on his arm. “You’re angry.”

“No. I don’t know how I feel.”

“I hope you can be happy for Zhou Jun and I.” She offered him a small smile. “You will like him, brother. He’s the best of men. He’s from a good family, like ours. He’s

worked hard for his rank, and the emperor has praised his judgments on several occasions. He....”

“You make him sound like a paragon.”

“I love him,” she said simply.

Yan Nian sighed and shook his head. “After all Father did for us, we owe it to him to go ahead with his plan.”

“Who can gain from it now? If we continue with this, we both stand to lose.” Lady Li hesitated and leaned against his shoulder. “Father told me I was beautiful enough to catch an emperor. You always told me I was beautiful enough to win the heart of the man I loved.”

“By that I meant you’d love His Majesty.”

“I don’t. But you do.” She turned her face up to his, her expression both worried and serious. She lowered her voice. “And that is why you must listen to me now. It’s about the banquet. Zhou Jun has heard that supporters of the Xiongnu will be present. He believes they may make an attempt on the emperor’s life.”

Fear for Liu Che held Yan Nian motionless. Suddenly aware of the few people that continued to watch from the dancers’ quarters ahead of them, he slipped his arm around his sister’s shoulders and drew her close. Turning as if to press a kiss to her forehead, he murmured, “He should tell his superiors, not you.”

Lady Li snorted but didn’t pull away. “Don’t be stuffy, brother! Zhou Jun has done everything properly, but no one knows which of the guests at the banquet is a Xiongnu sympathizer. There have been whispers for months about certain ministers, but nothing has ever been proved.”

“Has His Majesty been told?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so. His favorite generals, the men who’d speak plainly to him, are all away at war. General Ren, who commands the safety of the palace, is an old man who holds the position only because he served the emperor’s father in the same capacity. He doesn’t want to risk speaking of treason when there’s no evidence to support it.”

Yan Nian knew Liu Che well enough to acknowledge that his imperial lover disliked any show of uncertainty. In matters of state, he cut straight to the root of an issue. His ministers offered suggestions, but it was Liu Che who made the decisions— bold, resolute, and dynamic. If he knew of this plot, doubtless His Majesty would take action—but he would want to know everything before he acted.

Releasing his sister from their embrace, he asked, “Can you find out anything more?”

“Zhou Jun is making further enquiries.” Lady Li patted her hair, her fingers closing briefly over the golden comb. “I have certain connections within the palace through my acquaintance with the Dowager Empress. It’s risky, but with a few words dropped in the right ears... it may bring more information.”

“Be careful.” Yan Nian stood and offered his hand to help his sister to her feet. They walked around the cherry tree in slow circuits, and with each pass, an idea grew in his mind.

“I need you to dance for me at the banquet,” he began, lifting a hand when Lady Li started to protest. “Not for Father, but for us—and for His Majesty. If Zhou Jun thinks

the traitors will reveal themselves at the banquet, but no one will take responsibility for warning the emperor in case they're wrong, then we must do it instead."

His sister gazed at him. "What?"

"If the sympathizers are cunning enough to have gone undetected within the palace for so long, surely they will attempt to control the outcome of their attack. They'll probably try to bribe the eunuchs on duty that day." Yan Nian spoke rapidly, no longer seeing the garden around him but the elaborate space of the banqueting hall. He pictured the various entrances used by guests and servants, mapping out a plan.

"His Majesty is always armed. There will be guards outside the room and stationed inside the main doors. Possibly some senior military officers will be attending the banquet. Ask Zhou Jun if he can be there, or if he can make sure a number of trusted soldiers are placed within the room. No one will be carrying any visible weapons, of course, so Zhou Jun's men must be discreet."

"I'll tell him," Lady Li said as they left the shelter of the cherry tree and began to walk toward the dancers' hall. "You can rely on him absolutely."

"Now to our roles." Yan Nian paused beside the roses as if admiring them. "I will write a new song in the western style, warning His Majesty about the traitors, and you will dance, dressed in a costume that suggests the clothing of the Xiongnu—furs and gathered trousers, high boots and braids. He will understand the message and be ready."

"And if our information is wrong and the traitors don't act?"

Yan Nian grimaced. "Then I will simply tell His Majesty that I took his request for western-style music seriously on the day he sent the court musicians into exile."

Lady Li gave him an uneasy look. "You think this will work?"

"Yes." He forced a smile. "Yes, it will work. If not...."

They both stood silent, staring at the roses. After a moment, Lady Li shook herself from their shared mood. "I need to go in and prepare for the evening meal."

"I should take my leave too." Yan Nian pressed her fingers, then let her slip away. He watched her begin to ascend the stairs, and made another decision. "Sister...."

She turned back. "Yes?"

"Tell Zhou Jun to call on me. He and I have other things to discuss."

Lady Li uttered a cry of laughing joy. Throwing him a dazzling smile, she ran lightly up the steps and vanished indoors.

Chapter Seven

YAN NIAN woke early on the day of the banquet. He lay in bed, unable to rest, until he heard the eunuchs walking the palace corridors, clashing their gongs and announcing the hour of the Rabbit. He rose and dressed, then hurried over to the Guild of Music and roused the masters from their slumber. He wanted everything to be perfect today. Professional pride required him to ensure the very best performances at the banquet, and anxiety for his imperial lover made him wish for the feast to pass without incident.

In recent days, Liu Che had been busy with matters of state. According to gossip, he had not summoned anyone to his bed. Yan Nian ached with longing for even a glimpse of his lord, but knew better than to make demands. As if he, a lowly musician, could ask anything of an emperor! He resigned himself to patience and filled his hours with preparations for the banquet.

He'd decided jugglers and acrobats would start the entertainments, followed by a line of male dancers interacting with the acrobats. Then the female dancers, who would be disguised as quiet and unobtrusive servants, would throw off their simple outfits to reveal brightly colored gowns. The dancers would perform together, weaving amongst the guests with ribbons and banners.

Finally, he and Lady Li would present his new song, warning Liu Che of the possible treachery at his own table, and then—if all went well to that point—they would perform the Northern Beauty song.

Yan Nian spent a few hours with the music masters, going over the program he'd chosen to complement the dancers. He gathered his colleagues and ran through the compositions twice before he was satisfied they were ready, then he thanked them and hurried to the courtyard of the acrobats. There he spent longer than he'd anticipated in a discussion of costumes. He was sharing a quick meal of fruit and lotus paste buns with the acrobats when a message came that a soldier was waiting for him in his room.

Stuffing the remainder of the bun into his mouth, Yan Nian raced across the Entertainment Ward. He slowed as he approached his quarters, tidying his appearance. The door was half open, and he could see the shadow of an armed soldier standing inside his room. The shadow turned at the sound of his footsteps and came to the threshold to meet him.

Yan Nian didn't recognize him, though he knew the cloak and insignia of the East Palace well enough. Tall and good-looking, with tanned skin and the silver tracery of an old scar across the back of one hand, the soldier apprised him with equal attention before murmuring, "Master Li." He bowed, according Yan Nian a respect he wouldn't usually have merited from such a high-ranking guardsman. This, together with his uniform, convinced Yan Nian of his guest's identity.

"Commander Zhou Jun, I presume?"

The soldier straightened and gave him a nervous smile. "I am he. Forgive me for not seeking you out sooner."

"You have your duties and I have mine." Yan Nian gestured toward the corner where he kept his writing desk. "Please sit. We have much to talk about."

Zhou Jun followed his example and knelt on the floor on one side of the low table. He glanced about the room, apparently still uncertain. "We do indeed. Your sister..."

Sympathy for the young soldier's discomfort made Yan Nian lean across his desk and grip Zhou Jun's wrist in a friendly gesture. "Be at ease, brother—may I call you brother? My sister speaks of you so often and with such affection that I feel I know you already." He gave an encouraging smile. "Though our father dreamed of a very high-placed union for my sister, I believe she is a woman who can only be happy when her heart is engaged. I know you will make her happy. Commander Zhou, I am delighted with the match and give my consent wholeheartedly."

Zhou Jun managed a more natural smile at this. "Thank you, Master Li... brother. But I didn't come here to discuss the marriage. I bring news of your sister."

"News?" Something in the tone of the young commander's voice made a sudden frisson of fear shiver down his back. Yan Nian tightened his grasp on Zhou Jun's arm. "What news? I was going to the dancers' courtyard this afternoon to check on rehearsals. What has happened?"

"Early this morning, she was practicing on the veranda outside the main hall of the dancers' quarters when she was pushed. You know your sister—her balance is remarkable. She recovered herself, only to be shoved again. This time she

fell.” Zhou Jun held his gaze. “I’m sorry, brother, but her ankle is injured.”

Yan Nian stared at him, his breath painful in his throat. He knew how high the veranda was—maybe two feet from the ground—but the garden beneath the wooden platform was formed of rough gravel. It would be easy enough for a woman to turn her ankle on such uneven ground.

His voice shook. “How bad is it?”

Zhou Jun made a negative gesture. “Bad enough that she cannot dance tonight. The Dowager Empress sent the best physicians in her court to attend Lady Li, and in their opinion she should stay off her feet for at least a week.”

His plans for the evening’s performance were crumbling around him, but Yan Nian pushed aside his panic and focused on his sister’s welfare. “The bone didn’t break? She isn’t seriously hurt? Is she in much pain?”

“No, no.” Now it was Zhou Jun’s turn to be reassuring, though it did little to cheer Yan Nian’s mood. “It’s a sprain only—a serious enough injury for a dancer, but nothing permanent.”

Unable to sit still, Yan Nian got to his feet and paced the short length of the room. “How could this have happened? Who pushed her?”

Zhou Jun turned to face him, expression full of determination. “That’s what I want to know. Her friends say the veranda is often used as practice space when the hall is full, and there were many girls both inside and out of doors readying themselves for the banquet tonight. Lady Li doesn’t recall who was next to her at the time. It could have been anyone.”

Yan Nian thought rapidly. “There’s no suspect at all?”

“The general consensus amongst her friends is that she was pushed by a jealous rival to stop her from securing His Majesty’s attention tonight.” Zhou Jun grimaced, apparently unconvinced by the suggestion. “Lady Li is beautiful and much favored by the Dowager Empress. Everyone knows you chose your sister to dance the role of the Northern Beauty in a special performance for His Majesty. It’s inevitable that some girls will resent her opportunity and seek to rob her of it.”

Yan Nian sat on the edge of his bed. “But you don’t believe it.”

Zhou Jun glanced toward the door as if checking they were still alone. “There’s more. When I visited Lady Li immediately after the incident, the room was filled with her friends, along with maids, physicians, and the Dowager Empress’ chief ladies-in-waiting. You can imagine the noise—as if a fox had been let loose in a henhouse. I managed to get close to your sister. Her face was white and her hands trembled. Not with pain, brother, but with fear.”

Yan Nian swallowed. His throat was dry. “What had frightened her?”

“She said....” Zhou Jun’s face darkened as he recalled Lady Li’s words. “She said as she’d been helped to bed, surrounded by friends and strangers alike, someone had whispered in her ear. A woman had told her to stay out of their business, or else next time her leg would be broken.”

The threat made Yan Nian spring from the bed. “I must go to her.”

Zhou Jun intercepted him before he reached the door. Taking hold of Yan Nian's arm, he led him back to the desk and urged him to sit. "Not yet. You must continue as if nothing's wrong."

"Yes. I understand." Yan Nian recognized an order when he heard one. He took a deep breath and tried to arrange his thoughts. "She didn't recognize the woman who spoke to her?"

Zhou Jun shook his head. "The room was overflowing with women when I arrived, and apparently it had been even more crowded when she was first put to bed. Her quarters are as large as this," and he gestured around the cramped space of Yan Nian's room. He smiled. "Lady Li has more clothes, though."

"You think the messenger was the same person who pushed my sister?"

"It's possible."

Yan Nian tugged at the loose tendril of hair braided with silver bells as he considered what he'd been told. "It could still be female rivalry."

"It could. But brother, I fear it could be connected with something else."

Meeting Zhou Jun's serious look, Yan Nian gave a tight nod in acknowledgement. It was what he feared, too.

"It's no secret that I love your sister and wish to marry her," Zhou Jun continued, lowering his voice. "Anyone wanting to warn me away from a course of action would have a hard time getting into my quarters inside the barracks, but

the Entertainment Ward has minimal security. Your sister was an easy target.”

“She must be moved to safety.” Yan Nian flicked back his hair, setting the bells ringing. “We must do it now.”

Zhou Jun bowed. “I agree. With your permission, I will take her to my mother’s house. She will be well protected there, and her injury cared for. I promise no further harm will come to her.”

“That seems the best plan.” Yan Nian disliked having to rely on outsiders to protect his sister, but told himself that Zhou Jun was an honorable man and would soon be part of the family. As commander of the East Palace guards, he was also better placed to offer protection to Lady Li. Yan Nian felt a little superfluous. “Did you learn anything else about the events tonight?”

Zhou Jun shook his head. “Unfortunately not. I tried to be discreet with my questions, but obviously my interest was reported to someone. Lady Li’s injury was the result. She is afraid for us, yet she also fears for His Majesty’s safety. The fact that she was harmed proves that someone intends to act against the throne.”

The two men stared at one another in silence.

Yan Nian dropped his gaze first. Keeping his voice at little more than a whisper, he said, “So you don’t yet know the identity of those... people.”

“Not even a hint.” Zhou Jun scowled. “I’ve reported all my findings. My superiors are well aware of the problem.”

“And yet the banquet will go ahead.”

“It’s for the best. There’s no point in raising the alarm. If we let everything continue as planned, we have a chance to catch the traitors.” Leaning forward, Zhou Jun closed his hand around Yan Nian’s forearm. “Lady Li told me of your security ideas. They match with what I’d intended to do. I’ll be present tonight, along with my best men. If anything happens, we’ll be ready.”

“Does His Majesty know?” Yan Nian asked quietly, already knowing the answer.

“No. General Ren wants to keep it quiet.” Zhou Jun’s expression told Yan Nian exactly what his future brother-in-law thought of the general’s policy. “His Majesty is more than capable of defending himself, but like you, I would feel better if he were forewarned. That’s why I’m asking you to go ahead with your plan to warn the emperor in a song. It’s the only way we can warn him without making it obvious.”

Yan Nian nodded. “The song is written. I just need....” He broke off, realization suddenly slamming into him. His sister was injured. She couldn’t dance tonight. The panic he’d suppressed earlier came back in a rush. Curling his hands into fists, Yan Nian banged them on the table. “I need a dancer! Lady Li was my choice for the new song and the Northern Beauty song. Now she’s injured, I need a replacement.”

“Surely that’s not difficult?” Zhou Jun looked surprised at his vehemence. “There are plenty of girls capable of dancing. Your sister’s friends, for example....”

“No. They won’t do. They’re not as good as her, nor as beautiful. The choreography for the Northern Beauty dance

is complicated—only my sister could do it justice. Oh, this is a disaster!”

“Find a new dancer. You still have five hours to train a replacement.” Zhou Jun patted his arm. With another reassuring smile, he got to his feet. “Lady Li is always saying how clever you are, brother. I believe her. I’m sure you’ll work something out.”

Chapter Eight

THE banquet hall glimmered in a haze of candlelight. Music flowed, conversation rose and fell. The scent of incense, fresh-cut roses, and the assorted perfumes of more than a hundred guests, servants, and entertainers hung heavily upon the room. While the doors stood closed, the carved shutters on the windows had been flung open to allow the evening air to circulate. Despite this, Liu Che felt too warm beneath his layered silks and padded robes. He signaled to a eunuch nearby to fan him and breathed a sigh of relief at the gentle breeze.

He slumped in his throne, supporting his chin on his curled fist as he gazed around the room. The meal was on its sixteenth course, water frogs served with beans, and though his guests were eating with every sign of enjoyment, Liu Che's appetite had deserted him. With desultory interest he watched the antics of a pair of tightrope walkers who danced nimble-footed across a series of wires fastened around the columns of the hall. Every now and then, the acrobats would drop down, clinging to the ropes with their toes as they swooped over the tables and snatched up morsels of food.

Liu Che tapped his fingers against the belly of his jade cup. He noticed a few ministers exchange worried glances. Probably they thought he was bored with the banquet and

entertainment and were anxious in case his temper should slip its leash.

“Your Majesty, more wine?” His chief eunuch approached, carrying a sealed jar. At Liu Che’s nod, the eunuch broke the seal and took a sip to taste it before pouring a good amount into the jade cup.

“How many courses does this meal have?” Liu Che asked.

The chief eunuch pursed his lips. “Twenty-five, Highness.”

Liu Che groaned and waved him away. He took a gulp of wine, savoring its delicious coolness. Another nine courses, and then he’d be free of this charade.

Under cover of sipping his drink, he looked around the room, taking note of where his guests sat and with whom they were conversing. His attention fixed on Zhou Jun, commander of the East Palace guards, who was trying to appear unobtrusive dressed in the plain blue robes of a eunuch. Liu Che recognized several other soldiers in disguise, some of them dressed as eunuchs and others wearing their finest silks as if they’d been invited to the feast.

He wondered at their presence. A number of senior military officials sat in the hall, including General Ren, overseer of security for the entire imperial palace. Liu Che had watched Ren throughout the previous fifteen courses and had come to the conclusion that the elderly general was unaware of Zhou Jun and his men.

The situation presented a number of intriguing possibilities. Liu Che had heard rumors, unsubstantiated

but nonetheless virulent and from several different sources, that a plot had been laid against him. A number of people were rumored to be implicated, and it seemed likely they would make their move against him at this banquet.

His ministers had not warned him. General Ren appeared to be oblivious to the danger. Other senior military personnel seemed more interested in stuffing their bellies full of rich food than in protecting their emperor.

He narrowed his eyes. Apparently Zhou Jun was aware of the threat—or was he involved in the plot? Liu Che considered the likelihood for a moment. He believed the young commander was a loyal and trustworthy subject, but one could never tell. Treason took many forms.

Not that it mattered. Liu Che was confident he could deflect any attack made on his person. The crop tucked into his waist sash was not just a toy to bring pleasure; he knew how to wield it to cut flesh open to the bone. Concealed in his stiffened, felted boots was a pair of throwing knives with which he was equally adept.

He also had a number of skilled bodyguards, male and female, hidden discreetly amongst his guests in addition to the soldiers posted outside every door and patrolling past the windows. Yes, he was safe enough—and as a further precaution, one he took at every imperial banquet, the wine he was drinking had been watered down.

He drained his cup and held it out. “Bring me more wine!”

His chief eunuch hurried forward again, his expression carefully blank as he filled the jade cup to the brim. Liu Che made certain to slop some of the wine over the edge,

exaggerating his movements as if he were becoming inebriated. He swigged his drink and chuckled loudly at the antics of the acrobats, who were tweaking at the gauzy costumes of the male and female dancers now weaving amongst the guests.

Applauding, he made sure he knocked over his wine. The chief eunuch retrieved the cup and filled it again, a prim look on his round face. Liu Che guffawed and slapped the eunuch on the back, sending him wobbling toward a group of ministers. As he drank deep, he overheard one of the men, Guang Jin, remark to his neighbor: "His Majesty indulges too freely in common pleasures. The wine and the dancers have excited him."

It was said with such contempt that Liu Che almost hurled the cup at him. Cold anger burned in his gut, and it was an effort for him to swallow his next draught of watered wine. Guang Jin was a minister of second rank, a man whose opinion Liu Che respected. To hear him speak in such a sneering tone set Liu Che on edge and roused his suspicions.

Lolling back in the throne and grinning at the dancers, he darted a quick glance at Guang Jin. The minister seemed to be watching one of the soldiers disguised as a eunuch. Liu Che drew his sleeve across his mouth, thoughts whirling as he tried to anticipate how the plot against him might unfold.

The dancers finished their performance with a flourish and received scattered applause as they left the room. The musicians followed, exiting through a side door. Liu Che found his gaze drawn toward it, a strange, fluttery sensation

in his belly as he waited for Li Yan Nian to make his appearance.

He hadn't seen Yan Nian since that morning in his private quarters when he'd used the crop and his hands to raise red prints across the musician's pretty white arse. Palace business had occupied almost every hour of the days since, with endless memorials submitted for his attention and reports of an outbreak of plague in Henan that required his immediate action. Pleasure had seemed a distant memory, but even as he'd read through petitions and affixed his seal to those he approved, his thoughts had lingered on Yan Nian.

His beautiful musician had surprised him that day. Accustomed to his lovers always wanting something more from him than simple pleasure, Liu Che had been stunned by Yan Nian's uncomplicated desire and delighted that it was purely for him alone. Ever since he'd ascended the throne and started to take lovers, his concubines had been overawed by him and his generals too afraid of losing face by surrendering to him.

Yan Nian was different. He offered respect and humility, believed in compassion and honesty, took pride and confidence in his work, and felt no shame in submitting to his emperor. Liu Che recalled the musician's excited cries, the way he'd sought punishment, and the way his ripe, wanton body had responded to both gentle caresses and the sharp strokes of the crop. He remembered Yan Nian's bold looks and the way they'd teased one another, turning a straightforward sexual game into something much more satisfying. He'd never felt such a sense of equality with any other lover.

Liu Che wanted Yan Nian with the same hunger that drove him to expand the Han empire. It wasn't conquest that excited him but curiosity and challenge. Yan Nian surrendered joyfully to him, but innocence still glowed in his eyes. Liu Che thought he could take Yan Nian a hundred different ways without ever tarnishing such purity. His mind turned to the words of love Yan Nian had breathed during their last meeting. The recollection still had the power to make his heart beat faster. But Yan Nian had whispered, and Liu Che couldn't be sure if he'd heard correctly.

He shifted in his seat, aroused by the direction of his thoughts. His throat felt dry, and he took a gulp of wine. He forced himself to look away from the door, only to find his gaze pulled back as a gong sounded and the door opened.

The buzz of conversation died down as the guests turned to stare. Yan Nian entered the room, dressed in the same pale blue robe he'd worn when he'd first presented his Northern Beauty song. He held his qin cradled in his arms, and the silver bells in his hair chimed softly as he walked toward the throne.

"Ah!" Liu Che hauled himself up and leaned forward, still clasping his jade goblet. "Now for the finale." He pasted an infatuated look on his face and leered as Yan Nian knelt on the floor and ran his hands over the qin, creating a ripple of sound.

"Your Majesty." Yan Nian bowed low. When he straightened, he smiled at Liu Che, his gaze direct and his face radiant.

Liu Che glanced around, keeping his smile foolish and happy as if he were completely drunk. Catching the gaze of

Guang Jin and his neighbors, he gestured to Yan Nian and said loudly, “A pretty boy who can sing as sweetly as he fucks! A rare find, gentlemen.”

Yan Nian’s blissful expression froze and shattered. He dipped his head, the silvery bells now discordant and his body stiff with wounded pride.

Liu Che felt a stab of guilt. Yan Nian didn’t know this boorish behavior was only a pretense. He had no idea of the possible danger around him. Suddenly Liu Che wanted his lover out of there. He wanted Yan Nian kept safe, away from the threats and plots against the throne.

Before Liu Che could act on his confused thoughts, Yan Nian slanted him a challenging look. “Highness, you asked this humble person to perform for you here tonight. I am ready to please you, but first I must apologize. I had hoped to present a dancer to illustrate my songs, but unfortunately the dancer—my sister Lady Li—has suffered an injury and cannot entertain Your Majesty. I offer myself in her place, and beg Your Majesty’s forgiveness for this disappointment.”

Liu Che gazed at him, admiring Yan Nian’s poise and tone of voice, the cool look in his eyes and his haunting beauty, rendered even more perfect by the chilly formality with which he spoke. “There’s nothing to forgive, Master Li. I would be delighted to watch you dance.”

Yan Nian inclined his head in acknowledgement. His fingers moved over the qin, calling forth a sequence of notes that sounded like a waterfall tumbling into a deep pool. “Thank you, Highness. But first...” He paused to modulate the chords, the music drifting into a slower rhythm that

called to mind the plod of hooves and the heat of the sun's rays. "I wish to play a new composition."

"I only want to hear my favorite song."

Yan Nian didn't flinch. The music of the qin now suggested the wail of the wind across the grasslands. Holding his gaze, Yan Nian said, "I will play the Northern Beauty song directly, Your Majesty. But first, I beg you, listen to this."

Amused by his temerity, Liu Che motioned for him to continue. Chuckling, he leaned back in the throne and let the music drift around him. He noticed Guang Jin sit forward, almost rising from his place, and then saw the minister's neighbor pulling at his sleeve to hold him back. Liu Che frowned, his body tensing. What could Guang Jin possibly object to? Yan Nian's presence—or his song?

Liu Che put down his cup and paid attention. The music was lovely, a sweeping melody in the western style that emphasized the purity of Yan Nian's voice. But the lyrics.... He listened closer, and realized the lyrics didn't fit the music. There was a jarring, discordant tone to the verse, and when he looked at Yan Nian, he saw his lover's face was pale and anxious, his fingers trembling on the strings.

The words of the song sank slowly into his mind. Yan Nian's lyrics told the story of a noble hero alone in the grasslands, searching for the woman he loves. He fears she's been carried off by barbarians. The hero discovers a message from his beloved, but it leads him into an ambush. A barbarian horde rushes at him, weapons drawn....

Realization struck. Yan Nian wasn't trying to entertain him. He was delivering a warning—the warning his military

advisors should have given him days ago. Furious, Liu Che rose to his feet, slashing a hand down to silence the song. “Stop,” he snapped when Yan Nian played on. “Stop!”

Yan Nian’s fingers stilled on the qin. In the sudden silence, it seemed that the whole room held its breath.

A tremor in the air warned him before Guang Jin attacked, but Liu Che didn’t move until Yan Nian cried, “Highness, watch out!”

He whirled, sliding the crop free of his sash and whipping it across Guang Jin’s face. He aimed for the eyes, but the minister turned his head and took the brunt of the lash across his cheek. The skin split. Howling, Guang Jin staggered, then recovered himself, stabbing out with the dagger he’d pulled from inside his robes.

Liu Che stepped back and sideways as Guang Jin lurched forward. He struck the minister again, this time catching his left eye. Guang Jin shouted and charged at him, bellowing, “To me! Xiongnu! Xiongnu!”

Elsewhere in the hall, men leapt up, revealing hidden weapons. Shouts and screams broke from the guests as Zhou Jun’s soldiers and the imperial bodyguards rushed to throw off their disguises. Eunuchs wailed; the servants cowered against the walls; ministers attempted to flatten themselves beneath the low tables. Dishes overturned, spattering food and spilling wine. Outside, soldiers hammered on the doors, trying to break in. A few arrows whistled through the open windows.

In the midst of the turmoil, Yan Nian knelt clutching his qin against his chest, a mix of terror and indignation on his face.

Liu Che wanted to reassure him, but Guang Jin was proving more tenacious than he'd anticipated. He kicked the throne into the minister's path, and as Guang Jin tripped over it, Liu Che reversed the crop and slammed the blunt end of the handle into the softest part of Guang Jin's skull.

A shriek behind him made Liu Che turn, already lashing out with the crop as one of the guests, a colonel of the southern armies, dashed toward him with a sharp, curved blade. Liu Che spun from the first thrust, crouching low and using a scything kick to bring down his opponent. But unlike Guang Jin, the colonel was a seasoned fighter and blocked the strike.

Springing to his feet, Liu Che grabbed a fallen dish and flung it at the colonel. The action bought him enough time to free the knives from his boots. With a blade held in each hand, he advanced on the colonel, assessing his weaknesses.

At first glance, the colonel was in a stronger position. His sword gave him a longer reach, but now that the adrenaline of the initial attack had worn off, his face betrayed fear as well as determination.

Liu Che intended to capitalize on that fear. He swung himself at the colonel, short knives stabbing and slashing, keeping in continual motion as if following the intricate steps of a court dance. "You think you can kill me?" he roared. "I am your Emperor! I command everything between Heaven and earth, from Lindun to the Yumen Pass, from Wuyuan to Jiuzhen. Who are you to attack me? What gives you the right to disobey the Son of Heaven?"

The colonel gave ground, sweating and white-faced, his feints erratic now as he tried to back away.

"I gave you command of my southern armies, and yet you're nothing more than a pathetic worm." Liu Che's fury seethed, and heedless of his own safety, he darted in close against the colonel and sliced his knives across the soldier's belly.

The colonel uttered a thin, high scream and toppled to the ground, blood gushing from his wounds and staining his fine robes. Liu Che stamped on the colonel's throat and heard the snap of his neck breaking. Numb with rage, he bent to pick up the colonel's sword before he stepped over the corpse and moved on.

His gaze swept the banqueting hall. Zhou Jun had killed two men and was fighting with a third. Elsewhere, the imperial bodyguards had forced opened the doors and terrified guests were running or crawling toward them in an attempt to escape.

"No one leaves!" Liu Che shouted. "No one! Bring them back!"

A glance outside showed him that the palace soldiers had brought down the archers who'd fired through the windows. Torches flamed and anxious cries sounded from the veranda and courtyard. A few guests tried to climb out of the windows but were shoved back by the soldiers.

The melee had taken on a life of its own. General Ren sat with his mouth open, his confusion evident as around him, military commanders struggled against imperial ministers and eunuchs flailed at servants and entertainers. Liu Che waded into the fight, swinging his sword and snarling invectives at anyone who crossed his path.

He was so focused on cutting down the soldier who threatened an elderly finance minister that he forgot his back was open. Liu Che heard a warning cry and turned to see Guang Jin, one eye sealed shut with blood, rushing at him with a sword. The madness on his face told Liu Che that Guang Jin would not die easily.

He parried the first blow, but as he launched an attack in response, the soldier he'd just struck down suddenly grasped at his robes, unbalancing him. Liu Che cursed and tried to right himself, but the moment of distraction allowed Guang Jin to strike at him again.

Liu Che's breath stilled in his throat. His heart seemed to stop. He knew this thrust would hit him.

A crack of wood sounded, and Guang Jin's sword flew from his grasp. A second later he was knocked flat to the ground, his eyes bulging with astonishment. Behind him stood Yan Nian, holding the broken, splintered pieces of his precious qin. "Highness!" he blurted, and stared down at the man he'd just felled.

Without a word, Liu Che cut Guang Jin's throat. He slid the knife and sword into his waist sash, then went to Yan Nian and took his arm, leading him away. They stood beside the throne together, Yan Nian trembling with each breath. Liu Che put an arm around him and held him tight. Only then did he look around the hall.

Zhou Jun, bloodied and out of breath, hurried over and knelt before him. "Your Majesty, we have defeated the traitors. Several are dead, but three survive."

Liu Che nodded. He waited until a hush spread throughout the room, broken only by the moans of the

wounded and the sobbing of frightened guests. He tightened his grip on Yan Nian, pulling him closer until he felt the warmth of the musician's hair brush against his cheek.

"Commander Zhou, you have my gratitude for your actions this evening. Have your men question the survivors. There may still be traitors within the palace. Find them. I will not tolerate any Xiongnu sympathizers within my walls."

"Yes, Highness." Zhou Jun bowed, then turned to repeat the orders. Two men and a woman were dragged out of the hall by his soldiers and the imperial bodyguards.

Before Zhou Jun could move away, Liu Che raised a hand to stop him. "Now the excitement's over, Commander, perhaps you will explain precisely what happened here... and why I wasn't informed." He turned to Yan Nian and gave him a little shake. "And you, my treasure, will tell me what your role was in all this."

Yan Nian pulled from his embrace, dropping the last few pieces of the damaged qin to the floor. The instrument shattered, and he gave a sob of distress. He sank to his knees and tried to gather the pieces. "It's broken. My family's qin—more than eight generations old—it's nothing but tinder now." He lifted his face to Liu Che, tears shining in his eyes. "I don't care. It's only a qin. But you.... Your Majesty, I would sacrifice ten thousand qin to keep you from harm."

"Ten thousand qin?" Liu Che smiled. "This is how much you value me?"

"More than that, Highness." Yan Nian bowed his head. "So much more."

Crouching beside him, Liu Che caressed Yan Nian's hair, his fingers numbering the silver bells braided through

it. "You saved my life, Nian," he said gently. "For that, you will be rewarded."

Yan Nian shook his head, his gaze darting to Zhou Jun. "I don't deserve it. The reward should go to Commander Zhou. He dared to go against orders when his superiors didn't believe there was a plot against you. He killed three traitors, Highness. He is a loyal man, a good man, he...."

Liu Che recognized the onset of shock in the musician's panicked expression and rambling dialogue. He encouraged him to his feet and stroked his face until Yan Nian blinked and turned away with a soft murmur. Frowning, Liu Che looked from his musician to Zhou Jun. An unpleasant thought came to mind. "Nian, is Zhou Jun important to you?"

Yan Nian gazed at him blankly. "Yes, Highness."

Liu Che let his hand fall. "I see." His heart sank, the victory over the traitors turning to ashes as he stood and regarded the young commander. "Yes. Of course."

Zhou Jun looked bemused, then understanding lit his features. "No, Your Majesty! It's not like that! I am marrying Lady Li—Yan Nian and I will be brothers!"

"Brothers?" Liu Che glanced back at Yan Nian. Hope made him clumsy, and he ignored Zhou Jun's continued explanation as he seized Yan Nian in his arms. "Is this true? He will marry your sister?"

Yan Nian nodded. "She fell in love with him. He is a good man."

"Then I will promote him to the rank of colonel, and he will command palace security with General Ren. The two of

them may learn from one another, and perhaps your sister will be pleased.”

Zhou Jun began to babble his thanks, but Liu Che paid no attention, seeing only Yan Nian’s smile—a shy, small smile meant for him alone.

“She will be delighted, Highness.” Then Yan Nian’s smile faded and his face darkened. “My sister was to be my dancer tonight for the Northern Beauty song, but she was injured by the traitors. They wished to silence Zhou Jun, so they harmed Lady Li in an attempt to warn him off. But she begged us to forget her suffering and focus on protecting Your Majesty.”

“So the plot reached amongst the side palaces, too.” Liu Che exhaled and shook his head. “We will find who hurt your sister and see them punished. Lady Li is a most determined young woman. Where is she now?”

Zhou Jun spoke up. “She is with my mother.”

“Bring her into the palace, Colonel Zhou, and summon your family. If Lady Li feels recovered, you may celebrate your wedding tomorrow.”

A look of sheer delight spread across the young soldier’s face. Zhou Jun dropped onto his knees and kowtowed. “Thank you, Your Majesty!”

Liu Che smiled at him, feeling benevolent. He gestured around the banqueting hall, at the trampled food and splashes of wine amongst the dead bodies and whimpering ministers. “It’ll be my pleasure. We need a good party after this mess.” Turning to Yan Nian, he said, “My treasure, would you grant us the gift of your music tomorrow for your sister’s wedding?”

Yan Nian gave him a smile that took Liu Che's breath away. "Of course, Highness. I would do whatever you commanded."

Liu Che gazed at him, suddenly feeling unsure. The irony of it caused a certain wry amusement—he knew he could defeat the Xiongnu and bring peace and prosperity to his lands, but he wasn't sure he could read the heart of his lover. "Anything?"

"Anything."

"You once told me you loved me." Liu Che glanced away and then looked at him steadily. "The circumstances of that admission perhaps encouraged it...."

Yan Nian gazed at him. "I meant it, Your Majesty."

"Then tell me again now, in front of all these witnesses."

There was no hesitation. "I love you," Yan Nian said. He pressed close, his arms winding around Liu Che's body in a most unseemly manner. "I love you, Highness."

Liu Che kissed him, lifting his lips from the sweetness of Yan Nian's mouth only to whisper, "Your love is my greatest triumph."

Yan Nian smiled, and a bold look came into his eyes. "Then, Your Majesty, perhaps we should celebrate together."

Chapter Nine

AROUSAL thrummed through Yan Nian, excitement making him breathless as he followed Liu Che to the door. The emperor held him by the wrist in a tight grip, not letting go even when soldiers, servants, and eunuchs pressed in around them, shouting questions and seeking reassurances.

“Get out of our way,” Liu Che snapped, sweeping his free hand in front of him and sending the crowd scattering.

Pleasure warmed Yan Nian when he realized what Liu Che had said. “Our”, not “my”. He flashed a look at his imperial lover and felt his heart squeeze. Perhaps he was unaware of it, or perhaps he denied it, but in Yan Nian’s eyes, Liu Che was a man who cared about his lovers in the same way he cared for his country. Both needed a firm hand to master and guide them, but equally they needed to be nurtured and trusted.

In that moment, Yan Nian felt his life align with Liu Che’s. The force of what he’d witnessed this evening, what he’d been involved with, suddenly hit him. He’d saved the emperor’s life. No longer was he simply a musician; he’d become as important to the empire as a front-line soldier fighting in the West.

The realization caused him to stumble. He tried to right himself, but before he could do so, Liu Che had caught him

up and swung him around the corner of the portico. Yan Nian gasped in shocked delight as he thumped against the wall. He reached out, dragging the emperor close as Liu Che crushed in against him and kissed him with hard, lustful hunger.

“It’s time,” he said, voice rough with need. “Are you ready, Nian?”

Yan Nian kissed him in reply. He squirmed closer, desperate to feel the full length of his lover’s body. Even through the barrier of silk, linen, and brocade, it was enough to make him weak. He wanted everything tonight—he craved whatever Liu Che wanted to do to him.

Liu Che broke the kiss, cupping Yan Nian’s face for a moment and staring at him with hot, intense eyes. Then he took his hand and pulled him down from the portico and across the courtyard. “This way.”

Braziers and lanterns lit their path, which passed through gardens, between buildings, and across bridges. Yan Nian lost track of where they were until they came to a small gate, unguarded, set into a high red-painted wall. He glanced up, frowning slightly at the leaping shapes of the terracotta dragons that formed the ridges of the black tiles along the top of the wall. He recognized this, though it seemed unfamiliar in the dark.

“Highness, what is this place?”

Liu Che unlatched the gate and pushed it wide. “My private garden,” he said with a smile. “The most secret heart of my private garden—a place not even you, sweet trespasser, would have found.”

Yan Nian went inside, disoriented by the darkness. The faintest hint of moonlight reflected from a pool. He felt his way forward, then caught his breath when Liu Che slid an arm around his waist and guided him over a small arched bridge toward a pavilion.

Something moved in the darkness, and Yan Nian's heart clutched. He tried to move in front of the emperor, fearful of another attack, but Liu Che chuckled.

"Don't worry. No harm will come to us here. That's just my chief eunuch—I asked him to prepare the pavilion for us tonight."

"Prepare?" Yan Nian blinked at the sudden blaze of light from the building as the door opened. The elderly, round-faced eunuch bowed as they entered, then, after a few murmured words to the emperor, he left them alone.

Yan Nian moved into the center of the pavilion, taking in the furnishings with a sense of heightened anticipation. The room was set for a seduction. A bed large enough to accommodate six men stood against the wall, its gauzy curtains drawn back and the quilt turned down in invitation. Candles burned low with a subtle light, and blue-tinted incense smoke spiraled up from a brazier. Wine and small dishes of food sat on low tables, and in each window hung delicate silver chimes that matched the bells he wore in his hair. The slight draft they'd brought with them through the door set the chimes ringing, the sound as pure as raindrops falling into a pool.

The noise shimmered over his body, raising goose bumps. He rubbed his arms through the thin blue silk of his robe and shivered, the movement sensual and ticklish.

“Nian.”

Liu Che’s voice was deep and commanding. His heart thudding, Yan Nian turned and gazed up at his emperor. “Your Majesty.”

Liu Che touched the tendril of hair that hung down over Yan Nian’s chest, setting each tiny bell ringing. He curled the hair around his hand, gathering it up and drawing Yan Nian nearer until they touched. Fingers splayed, sliding through the glossy upsweep of hair at the back of his head. With his free hand, the emperor untied Yan Nian’s topknot.

His hair spilled down over his shoulders, covering Liu Che’s hands. The emperor groaned in appreciation and took a tight grip, pulling Yan Nian’s head back. His gaze feral, his eyes glittering, Liu Che said, “Kiss me. Surrender to me.”

A desperate whimper escaped Yan Nian’s lips. He flattened his palms against Liu Che’s chest, feeling the soft slide of fabric over hard muscle. His fingers dug in, gripping, stabilizing, as he lifted his head and kissed his emperor open-mouthed.

Liu Che angled his head so the kiss teased, lips soft and his tongue-tip tracing the shape of Yan Nian’s mouth. Impatient, Yan Nian grabbed at the emperor’s nape and pulled him down. He felt Liu Che smile, heard the growl of pleasure start in his throat as their kiss deepened. Yan Nian flickered his tongue against Liu Che’s, moaning into the embrace when the emperor explored his mouth with slow, devouring strokes.

His head spun, his senses full. The scent of their arousal mingled with the incense. When Yan Nian breathed in, his chest felt tight. The room seemed to tilt, and he

moved with it, leaning against Liu Che, offering his soul in his kisses.

Yan Nian eased his fingers around the collar of the emperor's topmost robe until he loosened the cloth and touched warm skin. He felt Liu Che tremble, and the knowledge made him brave. He pulled at Liu Che's waist sash, clumsy with haste. "Please," he whispered against his lover's mouth. "I want you."

Liu Che purred. "I know."

The sash unraveled in his hands. Yan Nian let it drop to the floor and stroked a hand around his emperor's hip and down to grasp at his erection. He closed his eyes when he touched it, a ragged sigh breaking from him as he flexed his fingers and felt its thick length. Saliva flooded his mouth as he imagined worshipping his lover's cock, remembered the taste of him on his tongue. Tonight he'd feel Liu Che inside him in every way.

"My lord," he whispered. "What would please you?"

"You do." Liu Che slid his hands all over him, rough and then gentle, the heat of his palms burning though the thin silks. "My treasure. My beloved Nian."

Yan Nian tilted back his head and watched the emperor's expression as he stroked Liu Che's cock, gathering the draping silk and rubbing it over and around the head. The cloth grew damp under his fingers. Smiling, feeling slightly wicked, Yan Nian increased his tempo. He gasped at the wetness coating his fingertips and pulled free enough to raise his hand to his lips. "You taste good, Highness."

Liu Che's eyes gleamed. "Bold, Nian. Very bold."

“Oh, no, Majesty. *This* is bold.” Yan Nian dropped to his knees and tore at the brocades, parting the topmost layer and burying his face against Liu Che’s thighs. He inhaled the dark, musky scent of sex and moaned in pleasure, mouthing across the under-robos until he took the cloth-sheathed head of the emperor’s cock into his mouth.

The silk was damp, stained through with pre-come. Yan Nian soaked it with his saliva, working his lips around the thrust of the cock-head and slowly down the shaft. Wetness smeared across his face. The three layers of cloth molded together, shaping tight to Liu Che’s erection. As Yan Nian sucked, he tasted another ooze of pre-come through the filter of the silk. He lifted a hand and grasped at the base of Liu Che’s cock before dipping his head and sucking at the heavy weight of his balls.

“Nian. Stop.” Liu Che tugged at his hair, pulling him away.

Yan Nian sat back on his knees, looking up with wide eyes. As innocently as he dared, he licked his lips.

Liu Che managed to chuckle. His face flushed and his skin damp with sweat, he stroked Yan Nian’s cheek and ran a delicate touch over his mouth. “On your feet, my treasure. I want you on the bed.”

Reluctant to leave the game just yet, Yan Nian stood and grasped Liu Che’s cock once more through the wet silk. Together they moved to the bed, Yan Nian backing up against it, Liu Che’s cock throbbing and thrusting in his hand. He let go only when he tumbled back onto the mattress, hair falling into his face.

Liu Che climbed on top of him and kissed his mouth, his neck, his throat. He tore at Yan Nian's waist sash and robes, stripping him naked in a few short moments; then Liu Che lowered his head and licked at Yan Nian's nipples.

Yan Nian squirmed, arching from the bed. "Harder, Your Majesty. Bite me."

With a flick of his wrist, Liu Che spread the width of his sleeve over Yan Nian's chest. Flashing him a hot, hungry look, he bent his head again and wet the silk with his mouth. Only when the fabric clung to Yan Nian's nipples did Liu Che take one tight peak between his teeth. Holding it carefully, with the minimum of pressure, he tugged at the wet silk, drawing it across the nipple.

The friction between flesh, teeth, and silk jerked Yan Nian hard against the mattress. Heat twisted inside him; his body tightened and his hips thrust up. The slow slide of wet silk and the nibble of sharp teeth undid him completely. His anus flexed, a dart of anticipatory pleasure shuddering through him. He wanted possession; he wanted to be filled.

Liu Che moved back, letting his sleeve fall. Yan Nian tried to pull him close again, but with a smile, Liu Che caught his hand and kissed it. He scraped his teeth playfully across the knuckles, then turned Yan Nian's hand and dragged the point of his tongue over the sensitive skin inside his wrist.

Yan Nian moaned, a shock as bright as lightning jolting his spine. He felt pre-come dribble down his erection and tried to free his hand, desperate to touch himself.

"No," Liu Che murmured. "Not on your own. We'll do it together."

The words made Yan Nian tremble. He stopped and lay still, his chest heaving with each harsh breath. He knew he'd obey any command his emperor gave him. He would do anything for his lover, as long as Liu Che touched him soon, took his willing body and fucked him.

"Turn over." Liu Che settled Yan Nian on his belly and stroked the length of his body from shoulders to thighs. He trailed a path of kisses down Yan Nian's spine, tongue darting, lips teasing. Yan Nian bucked upwards, spreading his legs to offer his arse. Liu Che cupped his buttocks in both hands and licked stripes across the taut flesh. Only when his arse was wet and his cock pulsing with hot, violent want did Liu Che dip his tongue between Yan Nian's buttocks.

Yan Nian cried out, rubbing his cock against the quilt. The embroidery on the silken coverlet felt rough against his swollen flesh. He thrust wildly, frantic for release.

Liu Che slapped his flank. The sharp stinging pain melted into delicious ecstasy as the emperor's tongue probed lower and licked across Yan Nian's arsehole. Every muscle in his body turned liquid. Yan Nian slumped, his breath panting and steep. He could barely move, helpless with pleasure, tremors shaking him from head to toe.

Silk shirred and whispered. Yan Nian felt it sweep over his legs as it fell from the bed, and then Liu Che lifted him, turned him onto his back. Yan Nian gave him a dazed look before he realized his lover was naked. A soft sound emerged from his lips, and he reached out. He'd wanted to feel Liu Che's naked body against him for so long. The reality of it

overwhelmed him, made him cry out as the emperor settled against him.

Their cocks brushed together, sticky heat and desperately hard flesh. Yan Nian grasped their erections together, gasping for breath as he rubbed up and down. Orgasm flitted at the edges of his consciousness. He thrust slowly, trying to make it last. Pre-come smeared across their bellies and glistened amongst their pubic hair. Yan Nian watched each tortuous stroke, his body quivering with tension.

“I need to be inside you.” Liu Che’s whisper flayed at his control. Yan Nian almost came at the depth of need in his lover’s voice.

“Yes.” He clasped at Liu Che’s shoulders as his lover rearranged his position. Yan Nian lifted himself high, legs spread and his hole open. Speaking suddenly seemed difficult. He could barely think straight. “Take me. Fuck me. I’ve wanted you....”

“Forever.” Liu Che entered Yan Nian, a long, deep thrust that brought them together. He withdrew almost all the way and circled his hips, holding back and teasing before sliding deep in again.

Yan Nian gasped, his body jack-knifing. The width and length of the hard, wet cock filling and stretching him was so much more than the stone phallus; so much more than he’d imagined. He turned his head on the mattress, his hair streaked hot with sweat, the silver bells chiming with each strong thrust. His hands fluttered from Liu Che’s shoulders to grasp at the quilt, bunching it tight as he fought for climax.

He wanted to close his eyes and sink into the ecstasy, but at the same time, he wanted to keep his eyes open and watch the expressions chase across his lover's face. The sight of Liu Che drew him. Yan Nian gazed at the muscles of his chest, the tightness of his shoulders, and the gleam of sweat on his skin.

Liu Che's topknot undid itself, his hair tumbling free with each stroke. Yan Nian gave an excited cry as it spilled loose and brushed across his skin. The gentle caress seared him, sent him into jerking spasms. His orgasm was close, so close....

His muscles tensed and rippled, his arsehole clenching around Liu Che's cock. Yan Nian's thighs ached. Heat rolled from his skin. The air seemed to fracture, the night filled with tiny flames that licked his skin and dazzled his vision. A sense of unreality covered him, and only Liu Che was real. Only the delicious weight of his lover's body curved over his, only the hard thrust of his cock inside him.

Yan Nian surrendered his will. His orgasm shattered him, his body rocked with deep shudders. Pleasure drove him onwards; he was blind to everything but pure sensation. He heard Liu Che's voice husky and passionate in his ear; felt the hot spurt of seed deep inside him. Yan Nian arched into his climax, his arms wrapping around Liu Che to hold him with bruising tightness as the emperor rode out his own orgasm.

Liu Che kissed him, a desperate cry of a kiss. Yan Nian responded, offering all the love inside him. The emperor crushed him closer, still thrusting, still touching him. He slowed, then stilled, but continued to kiss him. The embrace

changed, violent desire passing into something tender and sweet.

Yan Nian drew away first. His lips felt bruised and swollen. He touched Liu Che's face, stroking the damp hair from his forehead. They kissed again, and Liu Che moved to lie beside him. For long moments they remained that way, content to be silent.

Yan Nian said, "I love you."

Liu Che was quiet for a heartbeat, then hesitantly, his voice full of wonder, he said, "And I love you."

Epilogue

YAN NIAN knelt over the qin, allowing the last few notes of the Northern Beauty song to die away before he placed a hand over the strings to silence them. When he raised his head from his instrument, he grinned at his sister and her new husband Zhou Jun. Lady Li laughed, her face alight with joy. Her red and gold wedding robes emphasized her beauty, and she drew the attention of every man present—except one.

Shyly, Yan Nian slid his gaze toward Liu Che. His imperial lover sat in the dragon throne, watching him with a half smile. Yan Nian bowed to him, moving his hands over the body of the qin in acknowledgement and thanks for the gift he'd been given that morning.

Liu Che's smile broadened. He stood, gesturing that Yan Nian should set the instrument aside and join him. Together they strolled across the floor of the receiving hall away from the cluster of wedding guests until they stood before the ornate double doors. Yan Nian glanced at the pair of bronze dragons entwined amongst the clouds and put out a hand to stroke the long, sinuous belly of the nearest beast.

"Do you know why I had these doors made?" Liu Che asked softly.

Puzzled, for he'd never thought about it before, Yan Nian took his hand from the dragon's thigh. "Because you're the emperor."

"Two dragons, my treasure." Liu Che tilted his head, dark eyes gleaming. "I never wanted a phoenix here—not on my door, not in my bed, not in my heart. I wanted another dragon. These doors were to remind me to keep searching for him."

Yan Nian swallowed. "Did you find him, Highness?"

"Yes." Liu Che reached out, and Yan Nian went into his arms. "I found him. The greatest treasure of my empire; my northern beauty. Even though I have yet to see you dance, Nian, I'm certain you dance as beautifully as you do everything else."

"Your Majesty is too kind to this humble person." Yan Nian dipped his head, a blush firing his cheeks and a smile tugging at his lips.

"Not humble. My equal in many things." Liu Che put a finger beneath his chin and made Yan Nian raise his head. "And nowhere are we more equal than in pleasure."

His blush burned hotter as Yan Nian remembered everything they'd done last night. He'd never believed such ecstasy could exist, such happiness. "My pleasure is yours, Highness."

"Yes." Liu Che gazed at him, eyes intense and loving. "Well, Nian. Your song was right. At first look you caused the fall of a city; at the second, the fall of a state. Now you have caused the fall of an emperor. Be proud, my treasure, and be happy."

Yan Nian leaned against him. "I am, my lord... my love."

A shriek of laughter from Lady Li made them both turn in time to see Zhou Jun pick her up and swing her around. The guests applauded and laughed.

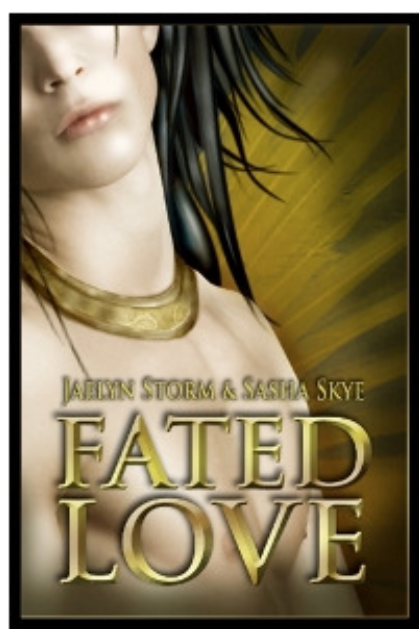
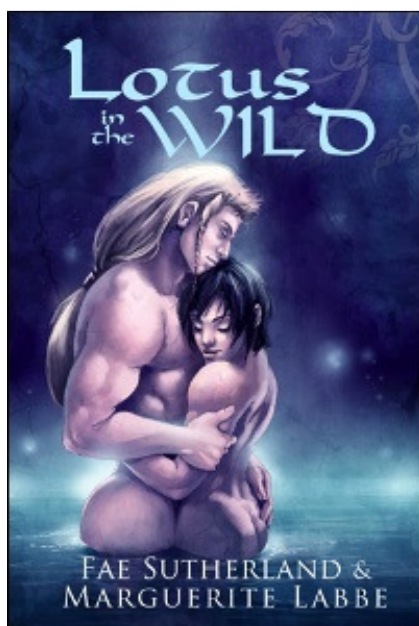
Liu Che looked at the wedding party with a satisfied smile. "It's worked out so well for all of us," he remarked lightly, then slanted an inquisitive, challenging look at Yan Nian. "In fact, it's worked out so perfectly, I could almost believe you'd planned it."

Yan Nian gave him a startled glance. About to confess, he found he didn't have the words to explain. Instead he laughed and only stopped when Liu Che kissed him.

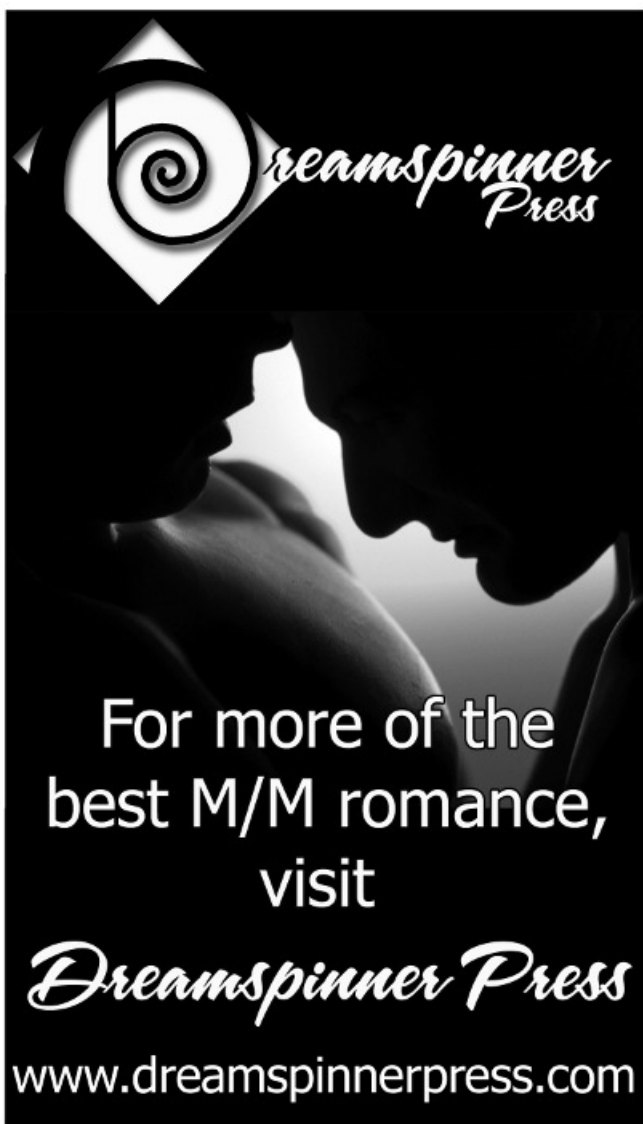
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