

*Dreamspinner Press*  
Fairy Tales



# SWEET SON

Heidi Cullinan

For Jason

No man has ever risen to the real stature of spiritual manhood until he has found that it is finer to serve somebody else than it is to serve himself.

—Woodrow T. Wilson

## CHAPTER I

### THE WITCH IN THE WOODS

Once upon a time in a land far, far away, there was a merchant's son named Eryn who was unhappy because he could not find his true love.

First he tried to find his true love in the young ladies of his village, but his love was not there. He tried then in the older ladies of the village, but his love was not there either. When his father's moneylender caught him unawares in the counting office and pressed him close and kissed him, making his heart flutter and his sex swell, Eryn began to understand why he had no luck in finding his love with ladies of any age. Even so, the moneylender still was not his love, and in the country in which Eryn lived, a man could not love a man publicly and keep his social standing. Frequently men who admitted to loving other men lost not just their money and their position but their lives.

Eryn had always lived a privileged life, and he was not interested in losing his comfortable situation as his father's heir, not even for true love. And so for a time, Eryn tried to take his pleasures in the darkness, and he made his family's business his love instead. But affairs in the dark wore on Eryn's heart, and no matter how his coffers filled or his stature rose, his soul remained empty. He also began to have erotic, vivid dreams, and sometimes he thought he even saw his true love inside of them.

The man in Eryn's dreams was slim and slight and pale in a manner which even in Eryn's northern country was unusual but which Eryn found to be very beautiful. The man in his dreams had hair like night and skin so fair it glowed like new fallen snow. And there was a great deal of skin to glow, for in Eryn's dreams, his lover was always naked. He rode down a flower-strewn path in a golden carriage laden with silks and cushions, sitting naked in the back window as he laughed and beckoned Eryn closer. In his dreams, Eryn always rode a white horse as he chased after his love. Whenever he caught the carriage, it turned into a great glass bed, and Eryn made love to the beautiful man as white flowers as fair as his lover's skin rained down around him. But as they kissed, the glass bed would turn to ice, and the man would slide through it and become trapped inside. Eryn always ended the dream with his face pressed to the glass, calling in vain as the beauty below him fell into a deep, deep sleep.

The dream became so vivid and engaging that even though the end was tragic, soon Eryn found himself doing whatever he could to lure himself to sleep so that he could see his lover again. But the ache to know his true love in the flesh persisted inside Eryn still, growing with every passing day. And so one spring, as the flowers bloomed and the merchant ships sailed once more out to sea, Eryn arranged for the sale of his business, kept the receipts from the profits with his mother, and prepared to leave the home he had always known.

The road, Eryn knew, could be dangerous for a man traveling alone, and he knew that to be safe he should hire

## SWEET SON

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men to travel with him and protect him, or he should take less money and wear more common clothing so that he would not be a target for bandits. But Eryn could not bear to think of hunting down his true love with anyone along to discover his secret, so he did not hire a guard. And though Eryn was a good, kind man, he was also proud and vain, and he disliked the idea of leaving his fine clothes behind. After all, how would he woo his love looking like a pauper? As a compromise, he traveled alone but in clothes which, while flattering, were not quite so fine as he would like, and he sewed his stash of coins inside.

With hope in his heart, he set off down the road, seeking both his true love and a land where he could love him freely. Eryn walked for many, many miles and many, many weeks, passing first through one country and then the next, until at last he came to a fork in the road at the foot of a mountain, and there he sat on a stump and measured carefully his next decision.

Eryn's country was north and east of the mountains, and most of its commerce was carried out by sea because the mountains were difficult to pass. A single traveler, however, or a small caravan could edge between the steppe and the foothills to the warm and wealthy countries of the south, but bandits roamed the plains, and this road could be dangerous. Heading north would lead Eryn to a great forest, but many magical creatures were rumored to live there, some of them malevolent. Eryn wished there were a road cutting through the mountain itself, for the land he most wished to see was to the west, where legend said a godlike prince ruled from a castle in the clouds, benevolently

shepherding his people with a sense of equality and fair-minded justice.

Eryn thought this mythical land would be the one most likely to allow him to fall in love with a man and live in peace. He had spent the many nights of travel imagining what his yet-unmet husband might be like. A merchant like him, perhaps? A courtier to the prince? A lawyer or a scholar would do nicely too. Would he be better off, Eryn wondered, with a younger man, who would be pretty like the man inside his dreams, or would it be better to fall for an older man who would go gray first? There were so many different ways for his quest to end well, and Eryn often made himself dizzy with possibility.

But for now his quest had ended, for he could not decide which direction would be the quickest, safest route to his true love. The thought of choosing the wrong path paralyzed him, so he sat there for some time pondering, which was why he did not see the old woman until she practically stood before him.

“What is a fine young man like you doing so far from home?” she asked Eryn, waving at him with the end of her walking stick. “One such as you should be with his wife, not wasting away his life sitting on a stump, waiting for a bandit to come along and steal the coins he thinks no one will know he’s sewn into his tunic.”

The old woman, Eryn now knew, must be a witch, for only such could discern so much simply by looking at him. He thought carefully before giving his reply.

## SWEET SON

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“I do not have a wife,” he said at last, “and I am sitting here because I am seeking my true love, but I have come to a crossroads and do not know now which way to go.”

He had thought himself clever to phrase his reply just so, not revealing that he knew his true love to be a man without denying his yet-unmet true love as well, but Eryn quickly learned that however clever he might be, he was not half as much so as the witch.

“What way you take depends upon what lies within your heart.” The old woman poked Eryn in his leg with her cane. “Come. I can see you have seen your true love’s shadow, but you keep it too close to your heart. I know the secrets of these lands, and if you confide your longings to me, I will help you realize them.”

Now Eryn was very afraid. The country where these crossroads lay had a cruel custom that men who confessed to enjoying sex with other men could be named deviant, and as such they could be stripped of title and wealth and sold for profit at the slave market. Eryn had never met a witch before, and he feared this one might be dangerous. And so once more he tried to find his way out with cleverness.

“My longings, old woman, I will keep to myself, but if you will tell me which road will lead me quickest to a soft bed and hot supper, I will give you one of the gold coins you have so cleverly surmised I carry.”

The witch tapped his leg again, sharply now. “Only once more I will ask you: what secret do you hide about your true love? Share it with me, and you shall be rewarded.”



But Eryn's fear was too deep, and he could not confess what he knew, and so he rose and made as if to leave. "I have no secret, old woman. Move aside, please, and I will be on my way."

This time she did not poke him with her cane but aimed it instead directly at his heart.

"Foolish man!" she cried, still waving her cane. "Foolish, selfish man! You say you seek your true love, a love so bright and strong it carries you halfway across the world, and yet you are so ashamed of this love that you will not claim it, not even as a shadow to a stranger. You do not deserve the love which has called you. He who waits cannot be saved by such a coward."

Eryn's heart ached to hear the witch's words. Her damning him as a coward was difficult enough, but to hear that she had known his true love was a man all along—and to hear that his love had need of saving—caught at the edges of Eryn's heart. Too late, he realized the witch had been meant to be his helper, not his enemy, and he fell to his knees before her in his despair.

"Then strike me down, good sister," he said to her, "for after such failures I surely do not deserve to live."

But the witch only regarded him with impatience. "And what good will that do? You are more foolish than I thought. No, I will not destroy you, for then he will have no hope at all. But for your lack of trust, instead of helping you, I shall impede you. The way to your true love was practically upon you, but now it is a long, lonely road full of danger and confusion. You denied your love to me three times because you loved your safety more than his discovery; now you must

## SWEET SON

---

declare your love of men three times before you will find him, and each declaration will be more dangerous than the one before. The cleverness with which you attempted to distract me will be no help to you anymore—it might help others, but your wit and charm will never directly aid you again. You must shed your pride and your fear before you find your true love. And you will not so much as catch a glimpse of him until you lose every last one of the gold coins with which you tried to bribe me away.”

“But how am I to find him,” Eryn asked, filled with despair, “if I have no money, no cleverness, and no safety?”

“You will find him as you have always done,” she replied. “With your heart. All else is distraction.”

Eryn’s fear was a leaden weight upon his chest. He could not see even a shard of the way to his true love before him now, and he did not know how he would ever find the strength to take another step. He mustered up enough courage, however, to ask the witch one question more.

“Will you give me no counsel at all, good sister?” he pleaded. “Will you not give me even one ray of light by which to see my love?”

At last it seemed he had said the right thing, for the witch smiled at him, looking suddenly much, much younger than Eryn had assumed her to be. “You seek the Sweet Son,” she said.

And as her words echoed in Eryn’s ears, she faded away before Eryn’s eyes, leaving him standing in the middle of the path, alone.

Heart-sick, Eryn wandered to the south, because he was cold and it felt good to walk toward the warmth of the sun. He was starving and very weary, having only napped beside the stump while he tried to decide which way to go. Full of hunger and mired in misery, he wandered aimlessly, hoping to find an inn with a bed for his weary body and food for his empty belly.

But he did not find an inn. Instead, he found a band of roving bandits who in the space of a morning fulfilled much of the witch's prophecy.

After cutting the ties to the purse at his belt, they called for him to strip out of his tunic, and after discovering the coins he had sewn into the hem, they ordered him to strip naked there in the middle of the road to see if he had any other coin hidden upon his person. Eryn did: he had four silver pieces in his breeches and two bronze, one in each shoe. When the bandits were done with him, he had nothing at all, and he stood there, naked and shivering in the morning dew, watching helplessly as the bandits tore apart his clothes to see what other treasures he held inside. But they were not yet finished with him. Once the bandits had shredded the last of his attire, the leader turned to Eryn with a wicked glint in his eye.

"Poor man," he said, with no sympathy at all. "You seem to have lost all your clothes. As it happens, I have a garment or two I might sell to you."

"But you have stolen all my coin," Eryn said, trying not to let either his anger or his humiliation show. Then the bandit grinned in a manner Eryn knew well, and he realized

he had only touched the barest edge of the shame this man would teach him.

“There are other methods of payment,” the bandit said, reaching down to cup himself roughly through the fabric of his trousers.

It had been some time now since Eryn had taken a man to his bed, and though he was cruel, the bandit was handsome in a roguish way that called to Eryn’s blood; it rushed now to his cock, making it twitch for all to see. It faded when the bandits burst into cries of disgust and peals of laughter, but it had been enough to damn him, and the head bandit came forward, leering.

“Well, well. I only meant to put a rich fool in his place, but it appears this is a payment you’re quite eager to offer.” He nodded at Eryn’s now-withering cock. “Or did I misread you? Are you a deviant, a man who loves men, or are you one of those odd buggers who gets hard when he’s afraid?”

Eryn wanted to lie. Eryn would have surrendered twice as much gold and silver and bronze and seven embroidered tunics to escape what he knew would come if he told the truth to this man. But he remembered what the witch had told him, of how she had accused him of putting his safety ahead of his desire for his true love. He thought, perhaps, that this would be the secret, that if he swallowed his pride and answered honestly this would appease her, and he would be rewarded with more help in finding his true love. So he swallowed his fear and said to the bandit, “It is true. I am a man who loves men.”

The bandits erupted into shouts and cries again, and the head bandit, too, curled his lip in contempt. But he also undid the ties to his breeches and planted his feet wide apart on the gravel as he freed his cock from its confines. "Then get on your knees, my slut, and show me how much you love my cock."

It hurt Eryn's pride far more than it pained his knees to kneel in the gravel and take the bandit's musky penis into his mouth. Eryn was accustomed to gentle, perfumed lovers, but the bandit was coarse and dirty, and Eryn had to work to keep from gagging as he drew his face up to his captor's sex. The bandit was also not aroused, and so Eryn had to suckle him with an exuberance he did not feel to make him hard. He tried to think of his yet-unseen true love, to hold that light in his heart as he made love to a cruel man's cock while other men jeered, but it was hard to keep his imagined lover in his mind. It was even more difficult when, after the first bandit erupted inside him, another appeared to take his place, and Eryn had to coax another stinking, flaccid cock into erection so he could drink him down as well. Soon he was not hungry at all, because his belly was full of the cream of six bandits.

"No clothes for you, my fine slut," the head bandit said, slapping Eryn's bare ass as he drew him to his feet. "Now we know your measure. Truss him over the back of the donkey, boys. When we camp tonight, we'll give this one all the man-loving his back door can handle."

And they all laughed, all but Eryn, who knew cold fear in the center of his belly as he thought of the horrors that lay in store for him now. They hauled him up over the backside

of the donkey, tying his hands and feet together with rope suspended beneath the animal's belly, making sure his legs were spread wide enough to expose him for his humiliation and their enjoyment. When the pressure on his belly made him vomit up their semen, they only laughed and promised they'd refill him at both ends when they stopped for lunch. As they made their caravan down the highway, they took turns mocking him, promising to ride him hard when they stopped to rest the other animals.

When one thought to stick a finger in Eryn's backside, and they discovered how it made him moan, they made a game of that too. Eryn tried to resist, but as the bandits kept after his inner fire with some skill, Eryn found he could not. They fucked him with their fingers until he begged them incoherently to continue—at which point they would stop, come around to the other side of the donkey and make him suck their fingers clean. Eventually one of them succeeded in making him come against the animal's side, after which point Eryn hung his head in shame and tried not to react to anything they did to him. He was sorry now that he had told the truth, and he felt a fool for thinking it would save him. Hanging limp as the noonday sun baked him, he waited miserably for the next round of humiliation from the bandits.

But the next round did not come, because at noon the bandits encountered a caravan bigger than their own, a procession of a wealthy pasha passing from the steppes down to the sea, where he would board his ship for home. The bandits saw the armed guards and knew fear, and they merely waited, hoping the pasha would pass them by.

Eryn, however, saw only the beautiful white horse tethered behind the opulent golden carriage. It was white and pure and beautiful, so perfect that even in his humiliation and fear he felt his heart lift up at the sight of it. It bore no saddle and no rider, and it was tethered to the carriage by the thinnest golden ribbon. The beast did not pull away, only pranced impatiently back and forth, obeying the length of its bonds. It was, Eryn realized with a pounding heart, the horse from his dreams. When the pasha did in fact call a halt to his party and came over to interview the bandits, he found he was glad, for he could look upon the enchanting beast a little longer.

But when the pasha came up to Eryn's donkey, Eryn saw the dark gleam in his eye, and he feared he would soon be wishing the pasha had not lingered at all.

## CHAPTER II

### THE PASHA'S TEST

The pasha was tall and handsome, his skin darkened not by the sun but by the natural pigment of those who lived south of the sea. His head was wrapped in a crimson turban, but his robe was dark indigo and crisp, clean white. On his feet he wore jeweled slippers, and his fingers were covered with gem-encrusted rings. He was broad-shouldered, but he was also slight, and as he came closer, Eryn could see the pasha was older, nearing the middle ages of his life. The bodyguards who flanked him, however, were not slight, nor were they old. They wore all black, and they regarded the bandits with a look which made it clear they only hoped the thieves tried to make trouble so they had an excuse to beat them.

The pasha ignored his bodyguards and the bandits both, saving all his attention for Eryn.

“What is this man tied over a donkey?” he asked, sounding both amused and intrigued. “Has he cheated you? Or is his tortured position your idea of sport?”

“He is unclean, sahib,” the head bandit offered. “He sucked all our cocks without complaint because he is a dirty man who loves men. We tied him like this so he would know his shame, and tonight we plan to fuck him. At the next town we will sell him. He will not complain, because this is



what he wants. All deviants ache to be used. We are merely making a profit from his dirty nature.”

The pasha tilted his head to the side and regarded Eryn thoughtfully. Eryn tried to turn his head away, but there was a command about the pasha he could not deny, and so he stared back, cheeks burning, head dizzy from lack of food and water, his whole soul full of shame at how he was displayed.

“He does not appear happy to me.” The pasha looked up and arched an eyebrow at the head bandit. “I believe you may have kidnapped this man against his will. I believe you may have robbed him and shamed him into deviancy for your own amusement and profit.” When the bandits began to protest in alarm, the pasha held up a hand. “You have given me your version of the story, and now he will give me his.”

Hope stirred in Eryn’s chest. The bandits cried out in even greater alarm. “He will lie!” they said. And they were correct. Eryn planned to lie heartily. He had borne enough punishment from truth. He glanced at the white horse guiltily as he thought this, but he hardened his heart. He would not confess the truth, not in any way, not ever again.

But the pasha did not ask Eryn a single question. In fact, he did not look at him again, speaking only to the bandits. “Here is the bargain: I will find out if the man you say loves to be your whore does indeed love to have sex with men. If this proves to be true, I will purchase him from you at fair market value, saving you the trip into town. If my suspicion is right, if you have kidnapped him, you will return the money you have stolen from him, doubled for the cost of his pain and suffering. If you do not have such coin, you will

be his slaves until you are able to pay him back, which is also in accordance with this country's law."

"We do not agree to this!" the head bandit cried, but then the bodyguards stepped forward, and the bandits fell silent again.

The pasha waved a hand, and servants appeared from beside the carriage. They cut Eryn free of his bonds, pulled him down gently from the horse, and helped bear him up as his abused muscles tried to find the strength to stand. Eryn swallowed several times, ready to find his voice to deny the bandits' claims and set himself free. But the servants did not lead him to the pasha. Instead, they bore him away towards the tent.

"Clean him and feed him," the pasha ordered, "and once he is himself again, bring him out and we will have our truth."

And clean him the servants did. They were tall, dark men like the bodyguards, but they were slender like the pasha. They led Eryn to the steps of the golden carriage, and here Eryn knew his first surprise: though the outside of the vehicle was modest in size, appearing wide enough to house perhaps two small rooms, each the length of a horse and the width of a moneylender's desk, the interior somehow held much more space. The retainers led Eryn into a room which boasted several silken stools, a low table, and a shallow pool of water.

It was impossible for such things to exist in the carriage Eryn had seen. He sobered, for he knew now that this was not just a pasha sitting in judgment over him but a

magician. He knew he must be careful and very, very clever. The witch had warned him against this, but obeying the witch was what had led him to his humiliation. He would heed her advice no more.

The servants led Eryn into the water and washed him, soaping him with sponges and anointing him with scented oils. Their hands frequently strayed over his sex, and he gasped out loud when one of them inserted an oiled cloth inside him, but beyond this, Eryn held himself still. He steeled himself against any sort of arousal, even though the scents were beautiful and the men were so handsome they made his teeth ache. His efforts were rewarded, for soon they had finished bathing him. Wrapped in a borrowed robe, Eryn sat on a cushion near a door of the carriage and congratulated himself on his success so far as he ate the bread, cheese, and fruit the servants brought for him. He was still eating when the curtain that made up the door parted, and to his surprise, the white horse's head appeared as the animal nudged its way around the edge of the fabric.

Eryn felt a strange joy bubble up inside him at the sight of the animal, and as he smiled at his unexpected visitor, he reached for a scrap of bread. "Hello, friend. Have you come for dinner?"

The horse nickered and nuzzled Eryn's leg. Laughing, Eryn brought forth the bread and offered it to the beast in his palm. He stroked the animal's long, beautiful nose as the horse ate.

"I have dreamed of you, friend," he said softly. "In my dreams, you bore me after the carriage which held my true love."

## SWEET SON

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The horse huffed and nuzzled Eryn again. Eryn brought out a piece of apple this time.

“I wish it weren’t a dream,” he said to the horse. “But I can’t trust them, not after what happened with the witch. I must be careful.” He stroked the horse again. “You are a beautiful animal. When I get my money back from the thieves, I will offer to buy you from the pasha. I only hope I have enough.”

This time the horse whinnied sharply and drew back. It seemed angry, which of course couldn’t be possible, but Eryn was enjoying himself, and he grinned and answered back as if they truly were having a conversation.

“Oh? You don’t wish to be bought?” He drew forth another piece of apple. “Not even if I promised you sweet feed and fresh water every day?” He slid the apple over the beast’s nose in a tease. “I would be good to you, beautiful horse. I would treat you like the prince you are.”

The horse snorted and stuck out its tongue from the side, stealing the apple before Eryn could pull it away again. Smiling, Eryn brought out more apple, feeding it outright to him this time. “Very well. If you don’t wish to be bought, I won’t offer for you. But I would treat you well. I would pamper and love you, sweet horse. You would have no worries ever again, were you mine.”

It surely was his fancy, but the horse seemed to settle a little, and the next nuzzle was almost affectionate.

Eryn rubbed the beast’s gleaming head. “Ah, I have your measure now, sir. You’re a pretty, elegant stallion wanting pampering and pleasure.” Feeling silly, his belly full, his

body healed, and his spirit full of play, Eryn leaned forward and whispered in the horse's pricked ear. "Keep a secret, friend; despite what I will tell your master, it's only stallions of any species I wish to pamper and pleasure."

There was no question that it was his imagination, but it made him smile that at this confession, the horse nuzzled him back.

After, when the servants came and led him out of the carriage again, Eryn worried that he had fallen into the magician's trap after all, that the horse had been enchanted to get him to confess. It had, he admitted, been a foolish thing to do, whispering the truth to the horse. But neither the servants nor the pasha made mention of it, and Eryn congratulated himself on his escape. He smiled at the pasha, ready to weave a tale of abuse and cruelty enough to win him not just his freedom but his coins back too.

But the pasha did not smile back at him. Turning to the bandits, he said, "You have the man before you now whom you claim is a deviant. Quite obviously, he will say whatever must be said to escape slavery; therefore, we must find another vehicle to the truth." He snapped his fingers, and servants appeared beside Eryn, who gasped as the men pulled the ties of his robe and drew it away, leaving him naked once again. The pasha gestured, without passion, at Eryn's naked, flaccid cock. "If he is a deviant as you say and desperate for sex with you, there should be no trouble arousing his body. You may not touch him, but for the next five minutes, you may persuade him to arousal by any other means you like." He pulled a small, strange metal device like

## SWEET SON

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a very fat coin from his robe and glanced at it. “Begin... now.”

Eryn’s eyes darted around him in panic. *Think of your grandmother*, he urged himself, though his balls were drawing in with very little encouragement at all. He feared slavery too much to find the coarse jeers the bandits through at him arousing. It was a little trickier as they pulled down their breeches and flashed him their cocks, reminding him of how pretty he looked while he’d sucked them—oh, perhaps he was deviant after all, because part of Eryn stirred at their jeers.

*Hold to the fear*, he urged himself, and he found that this worked and worked well, for no matter how graphic their talk, no matter how close they came with their cocks, no matter how many nipples and gaping arseholes they flashed him—nothing moved him, because he was not a deviant ruled by sex, he was just a man who loved men, and this was not love. As the pasha called out “thirty seconds,” Eryn let out a small, relieved breath and moved his eyes back briefly towards the carriage.

His dream lover stood at the door, half-swathed in the purple curtains, gripping the golden rail of the frame for support, as beautiful and naked as ever. His dark head turned toward Eryn, and when their eyes met, the pale, perfect face lit in the most beautiful smile Eryn had ever seen. Then his lover’s hand dipped down, and he took himself in hand.

Like a ship riding a wave, Eryn’s cock stiffened and rose up in response. The bandits cheered, and Eryn snapped his head away, realizing what he had done.

“No!” he cried, his erection withering again. “No, it’s not you, it’s—” But when he turned back to the carriage, the man was gone. Because, Eryn admitted to himself with sick dread, his dream lover had never been there at all.

The pasha lowered the device in his hand and nodded curtly. “I stand corrected, gentlemen,” he said to the bandits. “This man is indeed a deviant, as you claim.” He motioned to his bodyguards. “Arrange him for inspection, then fetch my purse so we may negotiate the payment.”

The bandits cheered, and the pasha disappeared back into his carriage without so much as a glance at Eryn.

*No!* Eryn tried to cry, but his throat closed in terror as the bodyguards gripped his shoulders and led him away.

The white horse, tied with its golden ribbon behind the vehicle once again, pranced and whinnied in excitement.

Between the time Eryn had been led into the carriage and then brought out again, a great yellow-and-white tent had been set up off to the side, and it was there the pasha’s bodyguards led Eryn now. Eryn did not protest or put up a fight in any way; he had gone numb, and he could not seem to draw himself out of the cold, small space his terror had taken him. He thought, as if from very far away, he might have flailed if they had been rough with him, but the men who bore him, though they held him firmly, were almost polite about it. They held back the flaps of the tent and urged him to mind his head as he ducked inside. When they asked him to please kneel on the oblong cushion

in the center of the tent, it seemed almost rude to refuse, and he went obediently. The bodyguards praised his submissiveness and left the tent as other servants hurried forward to take over.

They poked and prodded him everywhere, measuring, inspecting, and judging. They bid him to tip back his head, and when he complied, they pulled open his jaw, and another of the servants spoke rhythmically in a foreign language in a manner which made Eryn think the man was counting. They shone lanterns into his ears and eyes, and they made an inspection of his hair. They ran hands over his arms, his shoulders, his legs, and his back, testing his muscles with squeezes and pokes. They lifted one hand at a time to inspect his fingernails as someone else made an inspection of his feet. At some point the pasha joined them, because Eryn could hear his voice calling out quiet orders in the same strange language. Through it all, Eryn held still, too shocked to do anything else.

He stiffened when two hands pulled the cheeks of his backside apart, but when a sharp word and a sharper slap was his reward, he relaxed without meaning to, and it was then that a cold, slick finger pushed into him. He grunted at the invasion, and he colored as the hands that held him open pulled him wider and the finger pushed deeper inside him. When it began to push and withdraw, fucking him gently, Eryn gritted his teeth as he tried to deny the sensation. But it was a clever finger, crooking and stroking all the right places inside him, and soon he was hard and panting despite himself.



Before he reached his climax, the finger withdrew, and his cheeks were closed. This was when a marble phallus was brought to his mouth. When he opened for it, the cold length was pushed inside his mouth carefully, but deeply. Eryn relaxed his throat and took a breath before it pushed against his airway, holding back the urge to gag, and this, it seemed, was what he had been meant to do, because the foreign words came quickly now, and with a happy sound.

The servants removed the phallus and greased it before inserting it where the finger had been, and the servant who wielded it slapped Eryn's arsecheeks and urged him with a heavy accent, "Come, slave. Come. Come for your master."

The pasha was seated in front of Eryn now, watching impassively as Eryn was fucked before him. Eryn felt embarrassed and aroused at once. Where fear had gone, he couldn't say; he had the vague sense that he would come to terms with that later, once he was left alone.

*If he was left alone.*

A shudder rippled through him, and the servant fucking him praised him, urging him to spill his seed upon the cushion like a good slave.

In the end, it was the pasha who made Eryn come. It was the pasha and the quiet command he held that aroused him as he watched Eryn without flinching, without judgment or compassion. He was not aroused and not repulsed. He simply was. And as Eryn knelt before him, numb and dazed and grunting as a stone cock ground inside him—as Eryn knelt helpless, the pasha's gaze held him up. And when he could fight it no more, Eryn fell into that gaze, coming with three grunts and a guttural moan. He closed his eyes only as

the power of his orgasm forced him to; once he could, he opened them and stared back at the man who watched him, waiting to see what happened now.

What happened was that the pasha smiled, rose, and patted Eryn's head. "Good slave," he said and left the tent.

Once the pasha departed, the servants went back to work. They drew Eryn up to his knees, cooing to him as they sponged him clean, and they decorated him with jewelry. They put a heavy golden collar around his neck and matching cuffs on his ankles and wrists. They pierced his ears—it hurt, but they were swift and careful and rubbed soothing oil on the wounded skin after—and they roped him into a harness made of golden chain. They attached clamps to his nipples and a ring to his cock. They put a brand on the inside of his thigh: two rippled lines with a straight line through them both, which even in Eryn's land was the mark of a deviant.

Something slim and cool was slipped inside of his still-swollen anus and strapped into place with a golden belt. His toes and fingernails were painted, as were his eyes and lips, and then his arms and torso too. They showed him a mirror when they were finished, and Eryn barely recognized himself. His lips gleamed golden, as did his eyes, nails, and skin where the paint had been laid. His nipples throbbed, but only slightly, as did his backside, though it burned a little when the servants led him out of the tent. The bandits were disappearing into the distance, and the pasha was nowhere in sight. Neither, Eryn noticed, was the white horse.

When the servants led him to a room at the back of the carriage, once again too big to follow logically from the space

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allowed it on the outside, Eryn did not fight them. They gave him a honeyed drink which he knew without being told contained a drug. He was too weary, too stunned, too overwhelmed to do anything but sleep. His eyes were closed before the servants laid his head back upon the pillow, and he was asleep before he even managed to fully exhale his breath.

He dreamed he rode the white horse and chased after the golden carriage, but this time he never caught it. He collapsed wearily at the bottom of a hill, and as his horse ran off without him, he looked up and saw his love sitting on top of his glass bed, grinning indolently.

When he woke, the carriage was moving, and the pasha lay beside him on the cushions. His robe was open, and one leg was drawn back, opening his groin to show off the dark nest of hair and his great, heavy cock.

“Ah. My slave is awake,” the pasha said, and Eryn was helpless but to watch as his captor took himself in hand and stroked gently.

The pasha seemed even larger here in the carriage than he had outside of it, and he was every inch the lord as he lounged on the silken cushions. As Eryn watched, the pasha’s cock began to grow. Eryn’s own sex, half-buried in the pillows, stirred in response.

“Would you like to taste it?” the pasha asked, still stroking himself.

Eryn did not answer. Surely this would be another trap. But he was beginning to lose the threads of safety, and he

could not decide which way would be a trap, to comply or to resist. Eryn said nothing.

Amazingly, this seemed to have been the right answer after all, for the pasha smiled. “A shy slave. I approve. But in the future, I expect you to answer all questions I put to you. And I warn you that if you lie, you will be punished.” The pasha’s cock was now almost completely erect, and when he lifted his hand to rest it on his raised knee, the organ bobbed on its own. “For now I will simply give you instructions. Come here, slave. I want to feel my cock buried in your throat.”

Eryn hesitated a moment longer, still uncertain, but the dark gleam had come back to the pasha’s eyes, and instinct told Eryn he would pay dearly for refusing this command. And so, his chains and belts and other signs of bondage clinking, Eryn shifted his body on the cushions so that he could service his master. As he took the organ in his mouth, he blushed in shame, not because the act was distasteful but because he did wish to taste the pasha, very, very much.

## CHAPTER III

### THE PASHA'S SLAVE

**T**he pasha's cock was sweet. It tasted of male and skin as all cocks did, and perhaps Eryn's palate was simply relieved not to be swallowing the rancid flesh of the bandits, but Eryn thought there was something distinctly different about this organ. It was very fat, filling Eryn's mouth and stretching his spit-slick lips, but the taste kept drawing him back, encouraging him to bury his nose in the pasha's wiry hair, daring him to caress the swelling shaft with his tongue as he slid up to the tip and down again. The pasha did indeed fill Eryn's throat, so much so that he had to be sure to take a breath before taking his cock all the way in, because when the pasha filled him, he could not breathe. But despite his fears of being a slave and his humiliation at being found out as a man who loved men, Eryn found he loved being filled by the pasha, and when his captor began to thrust into his mouth, driving even deeper into his throat, Eryn moaned his pleasure and shut his eyes.

"Oh, but you are a fine slut," the pasha rasped, taking a great fistful of Eryn's hair. "*My* slut now. This is my throat I fuck. I have bought you, slave, and you are mine." His fingers tightened until they threatened to pull the hair from Eryn's scalp. "Moan around my cock again, slave, for I find it pleasurable when you do so."

Eryn did as he was told. He half-knelt, half-crouched on the cushions in an awkward position, but he did not complain and only shifted as his body required him to keep from falling over. In a way, now that the worst had happened, he found his situation to be a relief. Perhaps it would not be so bad to be a slave, if he spent his days like this. After a lifetime of knowing nothing but stolen pleasure, the thought of permission to submit to his desires was a relief. Perhaps it would be enough to trade this freedom of want for freedom of body.

Eryn set to work to make his new life the best it could be. He drew breath at the cock tip, then hummed all the way to the root. Frequently the pasha held him there, nose buried, throat blocked, but Eryn only hummed on, waiting until the pasha let him go so he could slide back up again. Sometimes he even remained a little longer there before lifting for air. For Eryn was enjoying this very much. The pasha did not mock him. He called him his slut and his slave, and he had trussed and painted Eryn, but there was something about the pasha that made Eryn easy, even inside of his fear.

When the pasha pulled him off and told him to lie back on the cushions, drawing up his knees, Eryn did not hesitate, though he did quiver when the pasha unbuckled his chain and removed the phallus from his anus and slicked his own cock with oil.

“Hold yourself open wide for me, slave,” the pasha said. He was stroking himself again, and his cock flushed a deep red as it strained to escape his sleeve of skin. “Show me your rose, and let me see how eager it is for me to claim it.”

Eryn should have felt shame at such a lewd act, but he did not. He only drew his knees back as far as they would go, making himself gape as he flexed his opening for the pasha's pleasure, shivering when his captor's eyes went even darker and more hooded at the sight. And then those eyes lifted to Eryn's, and the pasha spoke.

"Whose rose is this?" The pasha pressed a finger to Eryn's opening. "Whose hole is this, flexing and eager to take my finger inside?"

"Yours," Eryn said, flushing, but his voice was steady.

The finger pushed a small way inside of Eryn. "Do you give yourself to me because you wish to stay out of trouble, or because it gives you pleasure to surrender yourself to me?" Eryn faltered at this, unsure of how to answer, and he said nothing.

The finger withdrew. Eryn startled when he felt a sharp slap against this thigh.

"Answer," the pasha ordered.

"I do not know," Eryn said, and this was an honest answer.

"Then consider the question, for I will ask you again when I have spent myself inside you." The pasha pinched Eryn's backside. "And when you address me, slave, you will always acknowledge me as your master."

Then the pasha pushed his cock against Eryn's hole and pushed himself inside.

The pasha was very large, and Eryn huffed and groaned at his invasion. He had taken only a few lovers in this way,

but never one as large as the pasha, and never one who took so little interest in Eryn's own pleasure. It was not that he was unprepared; both the oil and the phallus had stretched and loosened him, and even though he felt the pressure and tightness of the pasha's invasion, it did not hurt him, not beyond the edges of pleasure-pain. But what Eryn did not know quite to do with was the dispassion with which the pasha fucked him. This he had not expected, and this, he found, he did not quite enjoy.

As Eryn held his knees back and kept himself open, the pasha braced against his thighs and rutted as if Eryn was simply a hole in which to slake his pleasure. As the pasha used him, the chains which held the clamps to his nipples bounced and danced against his chest, as did the belt around his waist. Eryn looked up at the glint of gold at his wrists and ankles and felt the weight of the collar at his neck, marks of his enslavement. All the while the pasha fucked him impassively, huffing occasionally as he continued to pound away inside Eryn.

But even though he did not like the separation of the act, even as the pasha used him, Eryn's body responded. He grunted and gasped and gritted his teeth, holding himself open wider and wider. As he felt the pasha's strong hands gripping the backs of his thighs, Eryn took a distant and dark sort of pleasure in being used, and his cock swelled with his lust. When the pasha withdrew, then pumped himself and sprayed his seed across Eryn's belly and chest, Eryn held still and let him, not even flinching when some of it hit him on his mouth and cheek. He only held still, cock



hard and chest heaving as the pasha finished and looked down at him, still impassive.

“When I give you the gift of my fluids,” the pasha said, “you will thank me.”

“Thank you,” Eryn said obediently, but the pasha only slapped him on his backside. When Eryn said nothing, the pasha slapped him again. When Eryn still said nothing more, the pasha slapped him a third time, now hitting him on his still-swollen arsehole.

“Ahh!” Eryn cried out, but his cock swelled when the pasha slapped him there again.

“How do you address me?” the pasha prompted.

For a moment Eryn honestly didn’t know, which earned his anus another slap. He cried out, then murmured quickly, “Master.”

Another slap, this one very sharp. “I cannot hear you, slave.”

“Master!” Eryn cried. “Thank you, Master!”

“Good.” The pasha took Eryn’s balls in his hand, holding them tightly, but he did not hurt him. Yet. “Do you give yourself to me because you wish to stay out of trouble, or because it gives you pleasure to surrender yourself to me?”

Eryn realized he had not considered this question at all, and his mind raced for the answer, because he feared what the pasha’s hand would do to him if he remained silent. In his fear, his cleverness deserted him, and he could speak the truth. “Both, Master.”

The hand on his sac massaged gently. “Whose balls are these I hold, slave?”

“Yours, Master,” Eryn replied.

“For whose pleasure is your body, slave?”

“Yours, Master,” Eryn said again.

“Whose mark is this upon your thigh?”

“Yours, Master.”

“Why do you fear trouble, slave?”

Eryn paused. He did not know this answer, not even enough to guess. But before he could say this, he felt the pasha’s hand tightening again, and he heard himself say, “Because I fear pain, Master.”

“Ah.” The hand at his balls shifted, and Eryn tensed, but the pasha only squeezed once more before releasing him and lifting a hand to Eryn’s cheek. “You are more honest than I suspected you would be. For this you shall be rewarded.”

The pasha’s hand slid higher into Eryn’s hair, and his thumb pressed against Eryn’s temple.

A vision took Eryn, swift and hard and powerful, and he closed his eyes.

He saw his true love, fair and dark at once, beautiful as ever, but this time he saw him in a castle, dressed in the finery of a prince. He saw his love playing in a garden, happy and light-hearted, and when a woman of similar features peered down at him through a window, the young man in the

garden waved up at her with a bright smile. All around the edges of the castle were thick, beautiful white clouds of mist.

But when the woman withdrew, a shadow came over the garden. Before it shut out the vision, Eryn watched a black-gloved hand close over the young man's wrist.

Eryn's eyes flew open, and he stared up at the pasha in alarm.

The pasha, expressionless, lifted his hand. "That is your true love, the man your heart has already called its own."

"But he is in danger!" Eryn said, then thought to add, "Master."

"Yes," the pasha said, his eyes hard. "Your true love is in danger, but you are but a slave who cannot help him. Even before I bought you, you were a slave: a slave to your fears. Only a free man may save the one you love."

Eryn's heart ached. "Then he is doomed for my foolishness. Again." He shut his eyes.

A strong hand gripped his thigh. "Foolish you are, yes, but foolish you need not stay. He whom you seek has been in danger for some time; this is not the present which I have shown you, but the past. You may rescue him still, but only if you can be freed from the chains which bind you, both the ones I have given you and the ones which bind your heart. You must be tempered, and you must be taught." The hand shifted down, stroking the curve of Eryn's backside, near his still-swollen anus. "Give yourself to me, slave. Give me your mind as well as your body, and I will teach you to be the man your true love needs to set him free."

Eryn's cock stirred at the pasha's touch, lust warring with his despair. "But how do I give you my mind, Master?"

The pasha's answering laugh did dangerous things to Eryn's insides. "By giving me your fears," he answered, his finger swirling around the gaping hole of Eryn's entrance. "By letting me tell you what is pleasure and what is pain."

When Eryn's belly danced at the word "pain," the pasha's hand lifted up to still it, and he looked Eryn in the eye, his dark eyes sincere.

"I will not lie to you, Eryn. I will hurt you, if you surrender to me. But I will promise you this: *only* I will hurt you, while you are my slave. I will teach you not to fear my pain, and in turn, you will learn not to fear your own. Your body I own until I decide I have no more wish for it. I may hurt it by law in any way that I wish. I may have you killed for my pleasure. But what I wish you to give me is your mind. I do not ask for your love, only your surrender. Let me own your fear of pain. Let me tell you what is pain and what is not. While you are my slave in mind as well as body, you need fear nothing else. Nothing but me. And on my honor, I shall teach you that even the pain I give you is not to be feared, that it might be pleasure if I tell you so, that even this part of you may be mastered." His hand slid up the center of Eryn's chest, teasing the chain between his nipples. "Will you give this to me, slave? Will you give me your mind as well as your body?"

Eryn could not speak. He had never felt so exposed by anyone, for no one before had seen so far inside his mind. He ached for the freedom the pasha promised him, even as he feared it could not happen. He knew he should be thinking

of his true love, but in this moment, all he could see was the pasha. His mind told him he was being a fool, but his heart ached for release. He nodded.

The pasha smiled a sweet, tender smile.

Then he took hold of the chain between Eryn's nipples and tugged.

Eryn gasped in pain and let go of his knees to push the hand away, but the pasha roared at him. "Hands on your knees! Spread yourself for me!" He tugged again, but though Erin gasped in pain, he did as he was told.

The pasha tugged again, but he also shifted himself around so that he knelt beside Eryn. While the one hand continued to tug sporadically at Eryn's nipples, the other reached down and took hold of his cock.

"This is your pleasure, slave," the pasha told him as he tugged again, and again, and again as his thumb wormed open the press of Eryn's slit at the tip of his sex. "This pain is your pleasure. I wish to tug at your tender nipples until they ache, because they are my nipples, and I wish to see them more distended. Thank me, slave, for the pain I give your nipples. Thank me and call me my by name, and when I give you extra pain, let me hear your exaltations of gratitude at the pleasure I have so graciously allowed you to have."

And though the torture of his nipples hurt like nothing Eryn had ever known, he gave the pasha what he asked for, crying out and sighing and even whimpering at each tug and twist on the chain. But when he was able to speak, he added, also, "Thank you, Master." His words were slurred

from pain, but they were still the words, and soon he did not even speak them consciously. They simply rose on the command of the tug of the chain from his mouth until he knew nothing in the world but the tug, the pain, the words, and the soft, insistent touch of the pasha's hand at his cock.

When it finally stopped, at first he didn't notice; in fact, it was not until he felt the brush of the pasha's hand against his cheek and the other at his belly that he realized the torture was over. "Another reward to my slave, for his obedience," the pasha whispered, and he bent down to press a kiss against Eryn's sweaty forehead.

Another vision came: this time Eryn saw the gloved hand close over his true love's arm, but then he saw, too, the armed men leap out of the shadows. They threatened Eryn's true love's captor until he let the young man go, and then they took his true love away. They leapt with him from the clouds, taking him down the mountain to the edge of a deep, dark wood, and they bade the young man to run away, run away fast and never come back. The young man went, weeping silently as he disappeared into the trees.

The next few days for Eryn were a blur, the particulars of their passing carried away on the undulating tides of pleasure and shame, of passion and degradation, of ecstasy and pain.

That first night the pasha continued his focus on Eryn's nipples. Once the vision of his love escaping into the forest had faded, the pasha picked up the chain again, but he did

not tug this time. He grabbed the mechanism of the clasp that held the flesh and forced it open.

Eryn was not prepared for the stab of pain that accompanied the rush of blood back to his tender nipple, and for a moment he could only moan and clutch at the pillows. But he could feel the pasha watching him, waiting, and when he was able to speak again, Eryn said, teeth still jangling from pain, "Thank you, Master."

The pasha smiled, and then he bent and took Eryn's nipple in his mouth.

The red nub pulsed and throbbed, but coils of pleasure wound around the pain as the pasha soothed it with his tongue. Eryn kept his eyes open, watching as the turbaned head bent over his body, as the pink tongue traced a circle around his tender flesh. He clutched at the pillows and moaned as the pasha began to suckle.

But when the pasha bit, Eryn's body jerked, and he cried out.

The pasha, however, did not slow down. He bit again, and again, and then he suckled and laved, and suckled, and laved. When he switched to a bite the next time, Eryn jerked, but not as hard. The pasha repeated his pattern again, and again, and again, until at last, when he nipped, Eryn cried out in pleasure, not in pain.

"Very, very good." The pasha reached between Eryn's legs to fondle him.

Fondling soon had Eryn writhing and begging, and to his surprise, the pasha shed his robe, oiled them both, then pressed his body over Eryn's as he slid their cocks against

one another and began to thrust. Eryn moaned, tipped his head back, and arched to meet the pasha's thrusts.

"Such a good slave," the pasha murmured as Eryn gasped. "Such an agreeable, obedient slave. Would you like to come, boy? Would you like to be given permission to have your release?"

"Yes," Eryn rasped. "Yes, Master—please!"

"Good." The pasha's voice was thick with his own lust, and he reached down to put his fingers on the remaining nipple clamp. "You may come when I release this."

Eryn faltered, and his eyes flashed open in alarm.

The pasha slowed his thrusts and smiled a wicked smile. "You think you can't, slave? You think you can't come while filled with so much pain? And you know what it feels like now, don't you? You know the pain that will come. You know to fear it. Is that what you're thinking, slave?"

"Yes, Master," Eryn confessed.

The pasha traced his finger around the imprisoned nipple. "You focus on the wrong part. Yes, the action will bring you pain, but it will also bring you incredible pleasure. If you learn to master yourself, you can use the pain instead of letting it rule you."

"I don't think I can, Master," Eryn whispered. And even as the pasha continued to thrust against him, his erection began to fade.

The pasha's eyes danced, and he leaned forward. "I will teach you."



And the pasha did. He took the freed nipple in his fingers and teased it, and pinched it, and he took Eryn's mouth with his own and teased and nipped him there. He alternated the pleasure and the pain—deep kisses and gentle teases of the nipple, then hard pinches upon his breast and hard bites upon his lip. Then he began to confuse them. He would bite at Eryn's lip but stroke the nubbin beneath his fingers. He would pinch painfully but kiss tenderly. Through it all Eryn gasped and cried and grunted and moaned until he was lost, unable to tell one sensation from the next. When the pasha began to thrust brutally with his tongue, when he had not just the nipple but the flesh around it gripped hard in his hand, when his master was rough and then rougher and then rougher still, Eryn simply moaned for him, over and over and over.

But he was not so lost that he failed to notice the pasha's fingers slide back over to the clasp of the clamp.

When the pain came, he cried out, because it hurt even more than the first. But then the rush of so many overwhelming sensations crested inside him, and Eryn shuddered, grabbed himself, and drew seed out of himself in two short tugs, shooting up and out, spraying the pasha, sliding down the sides of his own sex.

The pasha slapped his thigh. "Pull your legs back, slave, and open yourself, for I wish to fuck you again."

Weakly, Eryn did, and the pasha speared him. The fuck was dry and painful, but Eryn was so spent he did not protest, only breathed through the sharp edges until he could bear them, and then he simply watched as the pasha rutted inside him. It pleased him, oddly, to be so used, but it

made him feel empty too. When the pasha filled him with his cream, Eryn's reply of thanks burned inside his chest.

The play with his nipples continued as the pasha fed Eryn his supper; after each piece of fruit or bread, the pasha would pinch one side or the other until Eryn swallowed and said, "Thank you, Master." When the food was gone, the pasha took Eryn into the room with the pool inside of it and sat him on a cushion before a stool; as the pasha sat on the stool, Eryn knelt on the cushion, facing out, his hands on the back of his head. As the pasha's men came in and gave their nightly reports in foreign tongue, the pasha pinched and stroked Eryn's now very, very tender nubs as idly as another man might twine his own hair around his finger. As before, pain and pleasure soon merged, and Eryn's cock grew hard and thick again.

It was harder when the pasha took him back into the bedchamber again and applied strange, soft cups to the tortured nipples, cups which, when the pasha operated a bellows, began to suck and tug most painfully against Eryn's skin. He could feel his breasts swelling, and he feared very much that when the cups were removed, he would look like a woman. But even as the pain made him shut his eyes and set his teeth, he did not complain. And when the pasha leaned over him, looking expectant, he managed to whisper, "Thank you, Master."

"Are you in pain, slave?" the pasha asked.

"Yes, Master," Eryn agreed.

"Do you wish for the pain to end?" the pasha asked, and without thinking, Eryn cried out, "Oh yes!"

Then he cried out again as the pasha pushed the bellows harder. "But I am not ready, slave," he said, and the torture began again.

The pain became white-hot, and Eryn feared he would be damaged, and so when the pasha asked if he would like to stop again, Eryn begged his master, please, please, for mercy.

But the pasha said only, "I am not ready for your pain to end, slave," and the torture went on.

Eryn began to weep. This was too much. This was too cruel, and nothing in the world was worth this. He told the pasha so.

"You think yourself so weak," the pasha scolded him. "I have made a lifetime's study of discovering how much men can bear, and you are nowhere near your peak. Trust your master, slave, to know your limits better than you do your own."

And so Eryn's torture continued. The pain crawled up the sides of his face like fingers, clawing at his brain, and he forgot all the words of any language. It exploded inside him, turning colors inside his brain with each pulse of agony. He knew only the pain, the strange, terrible pain. It crawled around inside him, sliding into places he didn't know he had, and it took him over. But it taught him something too: indeed, he *was* able to bear this pain, for much as he disliked it, much as he ached for it to be over, it had not driven him mad, and he realized that even this miserable, he was far, far from such an end.

## SWEET SON

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When the pasha slackened the bellows enough to allow Eryn to answer his question for a third time, Eryn said, his words slurred, “I wish the pain to end when you believe the time right for it to end, Master,” and readied himself for another round.

But to his surprise, the bellows fell away, and the cups released—and this time the pain of blood rushing truly was an erotic relief.

Even better was the warm lotion the pasha applied to his skin, which was swollen, yes, but not half as much as Eryn had feared. The slick cream made Eryn’s skin hum, and he purred deep in his throat and arched his back as the pasha slid it all across his chest. When the pasha asked him to open his mouth, Eryn did without hesitation, and his reward was a sweet leaf which, in addition to taking away all the pain, drugged his mind, taking away all the hard edges his torture had created there. He tried to murmur his thanks to his master, but he might well have simply drifted like a feather into sleep, where, as his body lounged on scented pillows, his mind watched his true love approach a small cottage in the forest, where seven small and kind-looking men welcomed him readily inside.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ENCHANTED FOREST

For the next week, as the caravan made its slow and difficult path through the foothills of the mountains, the pasha introduced Eryn to many various sexual delights and tortures, conditioning Eryn both to respond to the pasha's erotic commands and to associate pain with pleasure. And Eryn did find, to his astonishment, how easily he fell into both. He credited this not so much with the pasha's skill with his hands but with his words.

"Submission is not a sign of weakness," the pasha said, "and my strength is not shown in my mastery of you. Your yielding to me is your gift, and I earn your trust by anticipating what you need. Law and coin made your body my slave, but you give or withhold your mind from me by your will. I choose to gain that will by showing you I wish to keep you safe. I also choose to teach you how to be stronger than you believe yourself currently to be. Within the protection of my power, within your surrender, you now have the space to develop your own strength. You have already learned to make your own definitions of what is pain and what is pleasure, ignoring what the world has told you must be and even what your body has told you must be. What more, slave, do you wish to learn?"

That question had stumped Eryn, and after a few days of contemplation, as he laid his head on the pasha's thigh

## SWEET SON

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and wiped semen from his chin, he asked, “Master, what more is there to learn?”

The pasha smiled a slow, mischievous smile and replied, “What is it you wish to discover?”

“I do not know, Master,” Eryn confessed, and the pasha nodded.

“And until you do, you will never be anything more than a slave, no matter what I do to you.” He slapped his hand lightly on Eryn’s backside. “Lie back, slave, for I have a desire to taste you.”

At first Eryn could think of nothing he truly wished to discover. He still wanted his true love, but he had begun to understand the full depth of how unprepared he was to keep him safe. Almost nightly he dreamed of his love, safely tucked in the cottage in the woods, but he saw the shadows, too, always lurking at the edges of the forest. If his dreams were true, his love was safe there, and happy enough, but Eryn could see the yearning on his face and his loneliness. Eryn wished he could go to his love, to rescue him, to love him and keep him safe. And as that loneliness and yearning weighed heavier and heavier on Eryn, at last he knew what he wished to learn from the pasha.

“I wish, Master,” he said, “to learn how to be strong.”

The pasha smiled and stroked Eryn’s cheek. “Then learn you shall, slave,” he said, and he kissed Eryn on the mouth.

And true to his word, the next morning Eryn was taken out of his slave chains, all but his collar and his cuffs, and was placed in the same leathers as the pasha’s guard. For the next week, Eryn barely saw the pasha at all; occasionally

he serviced his master, but mostly Eryn trained with the soldiers under the supervision of the captain. He was so weary at the end of the day that he fell into bed and passed out on his silken pillows. All day and well into the evening Eryn trained with the guards, learning how to fight and how to defend. He learned military strategy and also martial arts of a kind he'd never seen before, styles of fighting known only to foreign lands. He learned how to hide a knife and how to wield it. He learned when to strike and when to wait. He learned how to fight with a sword and without one. He earned the respect of the captain of the guard and most of the men.

But not all the men.

There was one man in the pasha's guard who sneered at Eryn and called him "slut" and "slave" both to his face and behind his back, and his name was Rahn. When no one was looking, Rahn spit on Eryn, and if he could sneak up behind him, he grabbed Eryn's golden slave collar and tugged it hard enough to cut into Eryn's throat. When Eryn and Rahn sparred, Rahn worked hard to draw blood even though the captain made it clear bleeding one's opponent should only happen by accident. Rahn hated Eryn, and Eryn hated Rahn in return. But it was not Rahn's behavior towards himself which upset Eryn the most; it was the way Rahn treated the pasha's page.

As did all men of his rank, the pasha kept a young page who copied the letters the pasha sent out to his men of business and to foreign dignitaries. The young man, Keir, was along both to aid a nobleman and to learn from him, and he reminded Eryn of how he himself had been at fifteen

when he was sent to be apprentice to his father's boyhood friend. Keir was a boy-man accustomed to pleasure and comfort, a young man who now found himself in unfamiliar and frequently unwelcoming situations.

Rahn was as unkind to Keir as he was to Eryn, but he was also no fool; he only went after the "weakling man" when no one watched—no one of consequence, anyway. And even then, his taunts were carefully measured to upset the boy without being harsh enough to draw censure from even an accidental observer. He would tell Keir to fetch something for him, even though Keir had no obligation to so much as lift a finger for Rahn, but Keir would do the task in hope that compliance would win him favor with Rahn and end his persecution. This of course only fueled Rahn's interest in him, usually earning Keir more murmured insults when no one but Eryn was around to hear. It didn't take long for Eryn to work out that Rahn made certain Eryn was around to hear, because Eryn had made the mistake of letting Rahn know that his treatment of Keir upset him.

As had become his habit, Eryn confessed his increasing frustration with Rahn to the pasha's horse.

Eryn had been assigned to care for the beautiful white beast by his master, and it was one of his most cherished daily tasks. Every evening Eryn brushed every inch of the white coat until it gleamed. Every evening he filled the horse's wooden bucket with fresh, clean water, and every evening he heaped his trough with fragrant hay. The horse had no name, because it was not the tradition in the pasha's country to name animals, and in fact it was odd for one to be as cherished and pampered as this one was. Eryn could not



bear leaving the beast unnamed, however, and so he had given him one himself. He called the stallion Snow, because the horse gleamed as white as snow newly fallen in midwinter. And every evening Eryn spoke to Snow, telling him what had delighted or upset him during the day. He had begun to speak frequently of the problem of Keir.

“I understand that he needs to learn how to fight his own battles,” Eryn told the horse, “that he will never be a man if he is always rescued, but I wish there were a way to explain to him he’s going about it in the worst way possible.” He sighed. “I had a Rahn of my own when I was his age. His name was Neil, and he was the son of my father’s business rival. He hounded me, and he made me miserable. Like Keir, I thought if I appeased him, he would leave me alone. But all he did was teach me to fear.”

The brush paused over the horse’s flank, and Eryn grew thoughtful.

“He did, Snow. He *did* teach me to fear. It wasn’t just him, of course, and it wasn’t his fault or anyone else’s—it was just the way I reacted.” He let the brush fall away, and he reached up with his other hand to smooth his palm over the gleaming coat. “Maybe that’s why Keir upsets me so much.” He stared at the place just above Snow’s head, but he saw only the murkiness of his own mental reflection. “Or perhaps it’s because when I look at Keir, I see not my weakness past, but my weakness present. I have trained my body and made it strong, but the man inside me is still a slave.”

## SWEET SON

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Snow turned his head and snorted. When Eryn did not respond, the beast swung around and nuzzled his cheek. Eryn broke out of his reverie with a wry smile.

“Sorry, friend. Am I being too morose for your liking?” When the horse only snorted again and stamped his foot, Eryn laughed and rubbed his muzzle. “Very well, very well. I’ll stop. Should I go to see if I can find you a carrot or apple as a reward for putting up with my laments?”

Snow lifted his nose higher so he could lick at Eryn’s ear.

Grinning, Eryn bussed a kiss across the horse’s velvet nose. “Very good. Wait here for me, good friend, and take care not to muss your coat. Let everyone see how beautiful you are, sweet Snow, and be proud, for there is no horse more beautiful in all this land, I promise you.”

Snow whinnied as Eryn ducked beneath the horse’s golden tether and wove his way through the camp, and Eryn’s smile lingered long after the horse was well behind him. He always felt good after he had cared for the pasha’s horse. It didn’t even bother him anymore that the horse would never be his own. It was pleasure enough to simply tend him. The only problem was that after each session he longed to linger more and more with his beautiful Snow, and he had taken to giving the beast so many treats that he knew he was spoiling him terribly.

But on this night Eryn did not go far before he heard shouts of alarm rise up through the pasha’s camp, and soon he heard horns bleating as well. And the next thing he knew

the pasha himself stood before him, his expression hard and edged.

“We are about to be attacked,” he said. “The bandits from whom I bought you have decided they couldn’t resist the riches of a pasha. They have rounded up all the bandits in the area, and now they will try to enslave us all. They should not have been able to find us, because I have cast spells to see that this very thing did not happen, but they have overcome my guards. I fear an even greater magician is assisting them.”

Eryn’s heart beat faster in fear, but he squared his shoulders and lifted his chin as he said to the pasha, “I will fight with the men, Master, if you let me.”

The pasha shook his head. “I have a greater task for you. There are persons and things in my caravan too precious to be allowed stolen. The fact that my spells were compromised means I have traitors in my midst, and I must find them first before I do anything else. But until I know my enemy’s face, I must send my precious things away. I will send my jewels, my page, and my horse, and a sheaf of documents, and I will send them with you into the caves of the hillside. Will you do this for me, Eryn? Will you protect what is most precious to me?”

Not slave: Eryn. His own name ringing like a bell inside his ears, Eryn nodded. “I will do this, Master. I swear I will not fail you.”

The pasha reached out and stroked Eryn’s cheek, but his expression was unreadable. “Understand that if you do this, I will not be able to protect you as I do now. As my slave, I have used you and commanded you, but I have

protected you with my name as well, both from my men and from others we have met as we traveled. Even as you trained with the men of my guard, you were protected by me. None of them laid a hand on you outside of the ring, for they knew if they did, they would feel my wrath. If you do this, Eryn, you will become vulnerable. If you go, even by my command, you will not be my slave any longer, not in truth. Should you succeed, I will reward you with freedom and riches. Should you fail, you will be rewarded with death, by me or by another. Will you still do this, Eryn? Will you protect my precious things for me?"

Eryn's heart pounded in his ears, but the quickening was not from fear now. *Snow. Keir.* He would be allowed to protect them both? Emotion swelled within him, and he could only nod to the pasha. Oh, yes, he would protect them. He would protect them with his very life.

And so he did. The pasha gave him a packet of documents and a bag of jewels, and he hurried Eryn and Keir toward the back of his carriage where Snow was tethered. The beast stamped his feet and neighed in fright, for men were darting all around and shouting, and the horse was afraid. The pasha whispered words in a foreign language to the animal as he untied the golden ribbon. Then he nodded at Eryn.

"Quickly. Climb aboard him, and once Keir is safely up as well, ride away. Ride up into the hills of the mountain, ride deep into the trees where you will not be seen, and find a cave in which to hide. I will give you this"—he produced a strange device made of metal which had a tiny metal needle swinging back and forth between a rainbow of colors and

many scribbles in a foreign tongue—"to help you find one. When the needle dips into green, you are close to a cave. It must slide well into blue before you will find one large enough to hide the horse. Wait there until I come for you."

He helped Keir and Eryn onto the horse, handed them each a sword, and slapped Snow smartly on the rump. And as the bandits came raging down the road, Eryn and his party slipped behind the boulders and up the stony path of the foothills, into the mountains, and into the forest.

Eryn had learned a great deal about the mountain's forest from the captain of the guard as they had traveled along it. The forest was indeed, as he had heard, full of magical creatures, and it was even more treacherous than he had first surmised. Sometimes the pasha's men would forage inside of it for fresh water or food, but they always went in teams and always during the day. The forest, the captain had explained, was enchanted.

"A terrible witch lives there," he had told Eryn. "The pasha could challenge her, because he is a powerful magician, but he says he respects her authority and will only trouble her for what we need to survive. But you must only travel in the forest during the daylight hours, and you must always leave her an offering of coin or trinket hanging from a low-hanging tree branch before you leave. If you fail to do this, she will punish the next from our party who enter the forest. And if you linger in the forest past the last blush of dusk, there will be no one to save you, for you will belong to the dark creatures that lurk inside the night."

These words rang in Eryn's head now, but he did not know what to do with them. The pasha had given Eryn no trinket to give as offering; all he had was that which the pasha had declared as precious. Worse, he was not simply skirting into the edges of the forest; he was heading deep within with no intention of leaving before dark fell within the hour. It occurred to him that he should have asked the pasha how to handle the witch, but it was too late to do so now. And so Eryn pressed on, urging Snow deeper and deeper into the forest.

The pasha's packet of documents pressed against his back, and the bag of jewels slapped against his waist. The boy Keir was sheltered before him, clinging to Eryn's thighs as Eryn himself held tight to Snow's mane and urged him with clicks and coos deeper into the trees. He had worried the horse would not obey him with no bridle and no saddle, but Snow heeded him willingly.

Soon Eryn saw the first stretches of the hillside rising up as a rocky height before them, and as he urged Snow onward, he pulled out the pasha's device and began to hunt for a cave. The sun was very low in the sky before he saw any green readings at all, and there was barely any light filtering through the trees before the needle dipped all the way into the blue. Even so, Eryn had to dismount and fumble through nettles and brambles for yet another hour before he found the entrance to the cave, but once discovered it was worth all the scratches and itches, because the cave was indeed large and even warm despite the damp. Eryn removed his cloak and arranged Keir in a nook against the wall, stroked Snow's velvet nose, then set out to see if he

could find some berries and water to keep them through the night.

What he found instead, less than four steps outside the mouth of the cave, was the witch.

Somehow it did not surprise Eryn at all to discover that the mountain forest witch was the same who had appeared to him at the fork in the road before the bandits had overtaken him, who had cursed him and called him coward. He was surprised, however, to discover that he did not fear her this time.

“Good evening, witch,” Eryn called to her, making a low bow. “I seek shelter for my master’s precious ones for the evening. I would be grateful if you could tell me where I might find water and food for them, so that they might spend this night in some comfort.”

The witch lifted a hoary eyebrow. “You do not try to hide from me, slave? You come outright and tell me your business, and how precious is what you hide in my caves?”

“You try to tell me,” Eryn replied, “that you do not already know those answers?”

The witch smiled at this. “So you have learned a little something after all, though I see you could still use a bit of manners. For you offer me nothing in exchange for spending the night in my caves.”

“Alas, lady witch,” Eryn said, “I have nothing to offer. All which I protect does not belong to me. I would offer myself,

but then I have nothing with which to protect that which I have promised to guard.”

“Surely your master will not miss one of the jewels? Or a hair from the boy’s head? Or a ride on the back of his beautiful horse?” the witch suggested.

“They are not mine to offer,” Eryn replied.

“Noble slave. Your master would be proud. It must be something else you give me—and yes, you do have something which I wish to have.” The witch’s terrible smile curved across her lips in the glow of her lantern. “I will allow you to stay in my forest and will allow your master’s precious ones to stay in my caves. I will provide silks and blankets and food and water for the boy and the sweetest of sweet hay for your horse. But for that, you will pay a price. You will give me a jar of blood spilled from your own vein.”

Fear gripped Eryn in an icy vise. He knew little of magic, but he knew that a skillful witch or wizard could do terrible things with but a drop of blood freely given; what could this one do with a full jar? And how big would this jar be? If she took too much blood, he would be too weak to defend Keir and Snow and the pasha’s documents and jewels.

The witch laughed, the sound a terrible cackle. “Your thoughts are written on your face, slave. Yes, you will be very weak through the night, so weak you will be worth nothing to your charges. But remember that I have promised they would be safe. You, however, will be unprotected. You will lie on my stone slab and bleed until midnight, and then you will wander the forest until morning. You will be sick and weak, yes, but if you are lucky, you will survive. If you do, you may



drink of the water in the stream, and it will replenish you of even the worst misfortunes the night might bring you."

Eryn did not like this arrangement at all, and he worried very much that he could not trust the witch. But he could see no other way to protect his charges, and so he agreed.

"Take me to your table, witch," he said, "and bleed me. But I will have your word that no harm will come to those in the cave and the treasures hidden within."

"My word you have," the witch replied, and with this she turned and hobbled deeper into the forest. Eryn followed.

She led him to a clearing ringed in small black stones the size and shape of very large eggs, and they surrounded a long, sleek slab of stone even darker than the stones which surrounded it. It looked cold, and when Eryn touched it, he found it was colder even than the iciest day in winter.

"Take off your clothes," the witch told him, and Eryn did, and then he lay down upon the slab and held out his arm, shivering. But the witch did not cut his wrist. Holding up a gleaming black knife, she pushed Eryn's legs up and back, and she made a long, wicked cut along the inside of his thigh, across the place where the pasha's brand had been laid.

Eryn cried out, for the knife burned. The pasha had taught him to take tiny cuts against his skin as he climbed his way to pleasure, but this was no small slice, and it was not a normal knife. The blade was magical, and it made Eryn ache long after she had finished cutting. She had cut very, very deep, and as the blood seeped out of him and onto the

stone, each drop burned hotter than the last. Even with the training the pasha had given him, the pain was more than Eryn could bear, and he cried out in agony with every breath.

The witch loomed over him, impassive, but she said, “Perhaps you wish to give me the golden ring from the boy’s hand instead? Or a lock of hair from the horse’s mane?”

“No,” Eryn rasped, then shuddered as another drop of blood fell from his wound.

Shrugging, the witch pulled a jar six inches tall and three inches across from the folds of her skirts. “Then you will lie here until this jar is full.” She placed the jar at the foot of the stone just in time to catch the first drop as it slid off the edge of the cold black stone. “When the moon passes overhead, the jar will be full, and it will vanish, as will the stone and the circle. You will be unmolested until I finish collecting my price, but after that you will be on your own. Remember what I said about the water of the stream. And I would be careful what you promise to the demon.”

“Demon?” Eryn rasped, but he screamed as the witch squeezed his thigh, making the trickle of blood turn into a river. She smiled in satisfaction, and then as if she had never been there at all, she was gone.

The hours until midnight were the longest of Eryn’s life. He lay on the cold stone, shaking and crying out and bleeding a painful river of blood, all alone, and he was full of fear. He had terrible visions too: he saw his true love in the cottage in the woods, and he knew it was these woods in which the cottage lay. He saw shadows approach the cottage,

growing closer every day. The beautiful young man who lived inside was so close to danger but did not know the peril he faced. Eryn wanted to leap up and warn him, but he could not, not without forfeiting his promise to the witch and therefore failing to protect that which he had promised to protect for the pasha.

It was hard to lie there as he saw a shadow approach the door of the cottage. His true love was in danger, but he could not rise to stop it. He cried out now in misery, uncaring even of the pain, for it was nothing compared to that inside his heart. He must stop this—he must stop this! But when the shadow passed over the door, obscuring his view, he knew he could not last. He tried to squeeze his thigh, to bleed faster, but it was not, as the witch had promised, until the moon rose just above him in the sky that the jar was full. When it was, the table and stones and jar disappeared. Weeping now with relief, Eryn gathered his clothes and stumbled off into the woods, determined to find his true love before it was too late.

He had but one leg into his trousers before the demon appeared before him.

## CHAPTER V

### THE DEMON'S BARGAIN

The demon was so tall and dark that at first Eryn mistook him for a tree. It wasn't until the creature bent down and looked at him, red eyes glowing and sharp teeth glinting in the moonlight, that Eryn truly saw it, and even then it took him a moment to actually register that the demon was real, for it was too frightening to be believed.

But it was real: it was as tall as the trees and twice as wide, body burned black by the fires of hell. It was nothing but scars and scales, and its hands were claws with great sharp talons curling out from the edges. Its head boasted great horns which stood up like spikes from a nest of black, singed hair. It was naked, and Eryn saw it had a huge dark cock nestled between balls coated with wiry black hair. As Eryn watched, the demon shrank in size, but even when it was done, it was several feet above his head. When it laughed, its red eyes flared like coals.

"Well, well!" the demon cried, grinning wider. Its voice boomed from its chest, making Eryn's teeth rattle and his bowels shiver. "I see tonight my dinner has come to me. Would you like to be roasted, my little man snack, or eaten raw?"

Eryn felt so weak and dizzy, and the visions of his true love in peril still swarmed around him, but even so impaired,

he had not forgotten his purpose. "I do not wish to be eaten at all. I have charges to protect."

"Then why are you not protecting them? Why are you here, naked in the forest?" The demon tilted its head and narrowed its eyes at Eryn's thigh. "Ah. I see you have been making payment to the witch. I wondered why I could not see you until now." The demon reached out and ran a finger along the still-seeping line of Eryn's wound; Eryn winced but did not cry out. For several minutes the demon regarded Eryn, looking intrigued. Nervous as Eryn was, he took this as a good sign; if Eryn was interesting, perhaps he would not be eaten.

"What is it worth to you, human, to keep yourself alive until morning light?" the demon asked at last.

Eryn was ready to say "anything," but then he remembered the witch's promise to be careful what he promised the demon. He considered his answer carefully.

"If I were to wake at the edge of the stream, my soul and mind still intact, my body able to be restored by the witch's promise of a drink of the water, I would grant you whatever you asked," he said at last.

The demon laughed again, eyes blazing. "You are very foolish to promise so much so freely."

"Likely so," Eryn agreed, "but attempting to be clever has led me to great trouble in the past. And what I have said is the truth. So long as in the morning I am able to return to my charges, I care not what you take."

"You must think yourself very strong to endure such potential torture under me," the demon observed. "For

torture you I would, body and soul. And while I will not take your mind, I will cast shadows upon it such as you have not even dreamed to fear. Are your charges worth this, foolish human?”

Eryn felt sick from more than just the loss of blood now. No, he did not think himself that strong. And much as he loved Snow and empathized with Keir, much as he wanted to impress the pasha and live to find his true love—no, he did not know that any of that was worth the terror the demon promised.

“Would you take less?” Eryn asked, but he already knew the answer before the demon laughed.

“I might have, before,” the demon said. It took a few moments more to study Eryn, and Eryn thought the demon took particular joy in seeing Eryn’s misery. Then the devil leaned in close, saliva hanging in great strings from its jagged teeth. “Give me one pearl from your master’s hoard, and I will set you free. One pearl, and I will take the golden circlet from your neck and turn it into coin. One hair of the horse’s head, and I will give you a treasure like you have never dreamed and send you to a town far, far away from where the pasha will ever go. I will not so much as touch you, or them, if you but give me one tiny trinket from your care.”

Eryn wanted to. In the face of the demon, he was ready to give anything and everything away, no matter how much he loved Snow. But even now, even in his longing to escape torment, he could not. He did not answer, only shut his eyes and bowed his head. He waited for the demon to claim him.

The demon laughed, and its hot breath scalded Eryn's skin. "Oh, but you are a fine, fine prize," it said, and a talon reached out to stroke Eryn's cheek. "You will weep much before the dawn, little human. I will make certain of it. You fear what I might do to your body, of how I might hurt you, and yes, I do enjoy pain. But what I love more is despair. I love hopelessness. I love to watch you ache and bleed, not from your body, but from your soul. You will live upon the morning, but I will break you, human. I will find what you hide within your heart, and I will take it from you." The demon leaned in very close. "One hair. One hair from the boy. He will not even know it is gone, and neither will the pasha. That is all it will take for your freedom. Would you endure a battered, broken soul to preserve a single hair?"

*Take his bargain!* a voice within Eryn cried, and how he wanted to heed it. But he could not. There was no way a demon would take a simple hair when he could have such torture; the deal could not be as simple as it appeared, and therefore it was not safe. It occurred to Eryn to offer a hair of his own, but he feared that too; the demon did not say he would keep Eryn's hair, or even his blood. No, it was best to continue as he was.

He shook his head, and he waited.

The demon chuckled low. "Then you are mine, body and soul, until the dawn."

Great leathery wings flew out from either side of the demon's body, and claws reached out and grabbed Eryn's shoulders, dragging him forward to burn against the demon's searing skin as it bore them both up into the sky.

The demon took Eryn into hell.

First it flew up high, high into the sky, and then it sent them down like a bullet straight into the earth, into a steaming vent between two rocks. Eryn's skin scraped against the boulders as they dipped down, and he cried out, but the demon held him fast; it did not let Eryn fall, but it made sure he caught as many gashes as possible on his way down. By the time they landed, Eryn's arms and legs were caked with his own blood. He worried how much more he could lose and not die.

Soon he found he had much, much more to worry about than loss of blood.

At the hands of the demon, Eryn knew exquisite torture, and though there were only six hours between midnight and the dawn, they felt like an eternity. First the demon stripped away the last of Eryn's breeches which he had not managed to fully put on, which the rocks had rent nearly to pieces. Then it had Eryn stand in the center of a great stone dais. They were in some sort of great cave with many ledges of rock but also many hollows in the walls. Fire was everywhere, in rivers and in vents. It was difficult to breathe.

Many pairs of red eyes blinked out of the darkness, and sometimes, when the roar of the fires died down on the hot wind that whipped through the cave, Eryn could hear their dark laughter. And as Eryn stood waiting, slowly the creatures which belonged to the eyes began to creep forward.



“I will feast first on your shame,” the demon told Eryn. “Put your hands upon your head and parade your nakedness for us. “

It slapped Eryn on his ass and sent him stumbling forward, all the way to the edge of the stone upon which he stood. But then abruptly the scene changed, and Eryn was not in hell, singed by fire and ogled by demons; he was in his hometown, walking down the main street before his father’s shop. The streets were full of people.

And Eryn was still naked.

The people laughed at him and pointed, and Eryn tried to cover himself, but he could not move his hands; they were stuck fast to his hair. He could only stumble this way and that through the crowd, through people he knew and who respected him, who saw his naked body and gasped and pointed and whispered.

“It is Eryn,” they said to one another. “It is Eryn, but look at him! He wears the collar and shackles of a slave! He is naked! Look at the brand along his thigh! It says he is a deviant, a lover of men! Our Eryn!”

“Please,” Eryn begged them. “Please, this isn’t real!”

But the people could not hear him, because his voice was trapped in a magical wall around his face. “Deviant,” they cried, and they began to throw eggs and stones at him. “Deviant, who has brought shame upon his father!”

And then his father himself was there, standing in the middle of the street. He looked at Eryn with shock and disappointment.

## SWEET SON

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“This is true, my son?” his father asked. “Is it true that you have soiled yourself? Have you let men inside you? Do you welcome this, or have you been used?”

Eryn tried to lie, because he would never let his father believe such dark things of him, but again, his words would not come.

“I will test him, sir,” a great man said, coming up behind Eryn. He pushed Eryn into the dirt face-first, his hands still stuck to his head, his knees bloody as they hit the gravel. Eryn flinched as he felt a hand at his backside. “If he moans in pleasure as I use him, you will know he is a whore.”

Eryn vowed, *vowed* he would make no sound—how could he, with no voice? But to his horror and to his terrible, terrible shame, when the man behind him touched him, fondling his cock and balls, when he parted Eryn’s cheeks and thrust his tongue inside, Eryn could not stop his moan—and this, *this* carried like a bell across the courtyard. He heard his father cry out, and then his hands were free so that he could lift his head and watch the despair fall across his father’s face. Lust and shame rose up at once inside Eryn, and he wept, broken, as the man behind him began to fuck him with his fingers, but he cried out in animal lust, too, begging the man to fuck him harder, to fuck him faster. His carnal pleas carried across the street, and his father fell to his knees, weeping.

And then the vision ended, and it was the demon pushing a finger inside of Eryn, the demon making him moan.

The demon leaned forward and licked Eryn's ear.

"Your father will dream that dream," it whispered. "It will be as vivid for him as it was for you, and he will wake in deep despair. Were you to go home and marry a woman and take her before his very eyes, he would always look at you and doubt. When you think of your father forever more, little human, know that he knows your shame."

Eryn tried to cry out, but the demon's fingers were like a fire inside him, and not at all in a painful way. He groaned instead.

The demon licked him again. "You like this. You like to feel me inside you. Would you like more, Eryn? Would you like to feel more of me? Would you like to give more of your friends and family dreams of what you like to do with men? Would you like to feel me come inside you and have them watch? Would you give up their regard for you to feel me deep inside you?"

Eryn tried to say no. He did. He truly did. But the demon's thrall over him was great. He had not withheld his will from the demon, and the demon controlled that now. "Yes," he rasped and opened himself wider for the demon's claiming. "Yes. Yes, take me, demon," he pleaded. "I do not care what they see of me. Only take me. Take me until I cannot stand."

The demon purred. "With pleasure."

## CHAPTER VI

### THE COFFIN OF GLASS

Eryn woke to find the bright morning sun streaming on his face.

He could see the sun just barely; only one eye would open, but this wasn't an advisable activity, as it would immediately fill with the blood running down his forehead. He had a frightening suspicion that the other eye was no longer even there.

It was not that Eryn could not remember what the demon had done to him; it was that he had lost the ability to judge what the demon had *actually* done to him and what it had only made him think had happened. That had become its favorite game: it would give Eryn the illusion that it had ripped both his arms off, then it would show him that this wasn't true—and then it would reveal that it had, truly, taken a finger from one hand. It had stuck its hand into the center of Eryn's chest and pulled out his heart, and then all his other organs, sending them in a disgusting, horrifying cascade to the floor. Then that illusion fell away: only the heart had been removed, but not severed. It beat on, lying in the demon's hand before it drew the organ up to brush it, bloody, against Eryn's screaming mouth. That had happened. That had actually happened.

He was almost certain of it.

When the pain and terror had started to drive Eryn mad, the demon had gone back to humiliation. The demon appeared to Eryn as his father, weeping and wailing and bemoaning what he had done to the family name—and then, still in the guise of his father, the demon had raped Eryn. That had almost been too much, and so that had been the worst. Everything after that was simply more salt in a very open wound. Every boyhood friend, every family member, every acquaintance. They all came, and they all saw, and they all watched Eryn rut with a demon. It was an illusion, yes, but it felt so real. At one point Eryn laughed, maniacally, bitterly, because this had been what the pasha had tried to teach him: that his prison was in his own mind. That the threat of this exposure, this shame, was worse than the reality. To experience it even as an illusion was the same, and almost worse, as if it had actually happened. In the demon's arms, all that Eryn had feared about his life came true.

As morning had come closer, Eryn had become weaker; he had wept for hours, but now he was simply numb and so weak he was disappointing even the demon. And so the demon had cut him and stuck needles in him and dismembered him for real, but had thrown in more illusion, just to make it interesting. Then, as promised, it had left Eryn near the stream, abused, bloodied, and sorely beaten, but not dead, and not mad. Close to both. So close he was a hair's breadth away from each. But Eryn lay there with a chance, a slim, unlikely, but still possible chance of survival.

Yet the demon had taken something very important, something Eryn had not even thought to ask to keep safe.

## SWEET SON

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The demon had worked hard to take away Eryn's desire to crawl forward the few feet required to dip his hand into the stream and rejuvenate himself, and he had succeeded. It had not been his shame to his father, either, nor the promise of acute pain that had undone him. The demon had shown Eryn the fate of his true love. It had *taken* him to his true love. And now that Eryn had seen him, he wanted to live no more. For his true love was already dead, dead and buried in a mountain of flowers, sealed forever inside a coffin of glass.

It was just beyond the cave where Keir and Snow were hidden—his love lay in a glass coffin on top of a flat hill. The sun shone upon it all day long, illuminating the beauty of the man within. The flowers grew up around him like a gleaming halo, as if he inside were their sun, not that which beamed down from the sky. The glass was thick and cold, glass forged by the guardians who had failed to protect the beautiful young man inside, because they could not bear to bury him in the ground and never see him again.

"He was heir to a powerful kingdom," the demon explained, grinning as Eryn clutched at the glass. "He was the prince of the palace in the clouds. You dreamed of traveling to that mythical land where you might live in peace, but that kingdom has never existed. Its potential lay with this one here, but he could only achieve that reality with you, and you were too late."

"How?" Eryn had asked, mystified. "How could his success ever lie with me?"

"Because you are, as you have dreamed, his true love, and his road is too lonely to travel alone. The kingdom he is meant to rule has long been ruled by a satrap, because the

succession has been unclear for almost a thousand years. It was prophesied that the next true prince would be known by his coloring, a pale skin unknown to the land in which he would be born. He would have dark hair like that of his clan, but he would have fair skin lighter than that even of the far north.” The demon laughed. “No great ruler, no warrior was he; he was as fragile as the glass which now houses him. The queen, however, loved him with all her heart, and she called magical men and women from all over the world to help protect her ‘sweet son’. He was kept hidden both in body and in spirit until he was sixteen, and then the satrap found him in the courtyard. He was whisked away to this forest, where the witch did her best to protect him, but the satrap had magicians of his own. Now he is dead. The sweet son is no more.” The demon dug its claws into Eryn’s shoulder. “You are too late.”

Eryn wanted to believe that this was an illusion, that the demon had lied, but that dream had felt too real. He did not want to dip his hand in the water so that he could go and check. He could not bear to think that by his weakness he had been too late.

The demon had an answer for this too.

“What—did you think *you* could have saved him from this fate? You? Cowardly, simple you? You with no magic, no wit, no skill at all? You who have been raped and enslaved and sent off like a nanny to watch the horse and the page while the real men stand and fight? It was kinder that he never met you. Even if he were still alive, what would you do with him? How would you woo him? You think you could

take on a satrap? You think you could take on anything? Anyone?"

No, Eryn did not think so. In fact, he knew well he could not. And after this realization, it hardly mattered what the demon did to him. Now, as he lay beside the bank in the morning light, he knew there was nothing to live for now. He was as worthless as he had feared. He was weaker than even he had suspected. He had disgraced his father, failed the pasha, and he had been too weak to save his true love. He should be left to die. There was no point in saving himself.

He felt a hard nudge against his back, and he winced, ready to hear the caustic rebuke of the witch. Well, he would give her more blood, if she wanted it. He would give her whatever she wanted now.

But no one spoke, and after a few minutes, the nudge came again, hard enough this time to roll him over. "Sir!" a gentle voice cried. It sounded like Keir. Eryn tried to open his good eye and see, but it filled with blood, so he closed it again.

"*Sir!*" This time there was no doubting the speaker was Keir, and there was no mistaking the sorrow in his tone. Eryn tried to speak, to soothe the boy, but there was something wrong with his tongue. Or his lips. Or both.

A wet cloth wiped across his eyes, first one, and then the other; his good eye opened wide, bleary at first, but able to see the quietly weeping boy, shining and healthy and whole as he bent before Eryn. The other eye burned in its socket; it was gone, but with the merest brush of the water, it was growing back.



Keir had removed one of his white sleeves, and it was this he dipped into the stream once more before using it to bathe Eryn's face. He was still weeping. "Sir, oh, sir! Why did you not stay with us? It was warm and safe in the cave, and a beautiful woman came and fed us marvelous things and made us soft beds to lie in! Why did you go out into the forest? Why did you not stay with us, where it was safe? Oh, sir, please do not die! You have been so kind to me, and you are so strong! Please, please do not die, please!"

And as the boy wept and begged, he continued to clean Eryn with his sleeve, wiping first his face and then his matted, bloodied hair, and then his ears, one of which was gone—and as the boy bathed Eryn in the healing waters, he was by inches restored. Eryn's tongue was still ruined, however, and so he could not speak. All he could do was lie there and stare up at Snow, who was looking at him gravely, his silver-white mane blowing gently in the morning breeze.

"You must be thirsty," Keir whispered before squeezing water from the stream into Eryn's mouth. Eryn felt it burn, healing his lips, his cheeks, his tongue, soothing his throat which the demon had used so cruelly, watering, too, he fancied, his soul. For as the water restored him, Eryn realized the most important lie the demon had told him, the lies he had told himself.

As the cool, restoring water spread through his body, he realized all of it was lies, everything he had ever been told and everything he had ever believed. He was not strong. He was not weak. He was not a shame to his father, and he was not a source of pride. Or, rather, he was all these things. He was the pasha's slave, yes, but only because he agreed to be.

He was Keir and Snow's protector because he told himself he was.

He was, in short, whatever he wished to be. And that was the secret, the truth the water whispered to him. Strength was not something he achieved or was granted. It was something he claimed. Eryn still did not know what to do with his fear that he had come too late for his true love. But with the water inside him, he reached for a new, private strength, and within it he saw not a future full of despair but a window into a world where death was not the end and impossible things might, if approached correctly, still happen.

It might be nothing more than another illusion, but Eryn chose to cling to it nonetheless.

"More," he rasped to Keir, his regenerating tongue now restored enough for speech. "More!"

But before Keir could dip his sleeve into the water again, another voice rose up from the forest, this one also familiar, but unwelcome.

Rahn was here.

"Well, well, well. What have we here?" Keir gasped and moved aside, moving closer to Snow's now agitated legs, and Eryn saw the man standing there, leering. "The pasha's most precious creatures, all lined up in a row, and no one here to protect them."

"Please," Keir begged. "Please—he is hurt already. I'll do what you ask, but please, don't kill him!"

Rahn laughed. “I’ll do what I like to all three of you, for there is no one here to stop me. I will tell the pasha that his traitorous slave was killed, as was his horse, and the poor page”—his face screwed up in mock sorrow—“oh, the poor thing was raped to death.”

Keir cried out and tried to run, but Rahn caught him fast around the waist and hauled him off towards a crop of rock. Snow whinnied and arched up on his hind legs, his eyes wild with fear.

Eryn turned back to his belly and used his good arm to try and drag himself toward the stream. But he was too weak; he could not make it, not in time. He managed to get his fingers into the water, and he could feel it working along his skin, but by the time it did its work at this pace, it would be too late for Keir. He could hear the boy’s screams and pleas and the rending of his clothing—there was no time.

He felt a nudge at his back, and he thought, *yes!* Aloud he rasped, “Hurry, Snow! Push me in, friend. Push me in the water, so that I may save him.”

He hadn’t known if it would work, but push him in Snow did, nudging first at Eryn’s back and then shoving hard with his hoof until Eryn slid down the bank and into the water. He felt it close over him, cold and pure and sweet, and it lit him like wet fire. He sucked it in like air, letting it fill him, feeling the roar of it as it restored him, letting its illusion permeate all the way to his bone. He sucked in another drink and he rose, still shouting, and like a vengeful god he climbed back onto the bank and tore across the clearing to where Rahn had pinned the boy, naked and

screaming, where he was unbuckling himself and preparing to enter him.

Eryn hit him in a flying run, tackling the soldier and sending him hard against the rock. Now Rahn cried out, first in surprise, then in a plea for mercy. Eryn longed to kill him. He wanted to beat Rahn's head against the stones until he saw the man's brains. He wanted to crush him. He wanted to destroy him. But as the soldier's pleas merged with Keir's terrified cries, Eryn remembered the way the demon had used him in the darkness, the pain he had endured, and suddenly he could abuse Rahn no more.

Thrusting the man back to the ground, Eryn tore at Rahn's tunic until he made several long strips of cloth from it; two he used to bind the soldier's hands and feet, but the last few he took to the stream and soaked in the healing water. He wrapped Rahn's head where it had smashed against the rock, then drizzled water into his mouth. But when the man began to spew his venom again, Eryn stuffed a wet rag into his mouth and used another to hold the gag in place.

"I will not kill you," he told the man, "but neither will I subject us all to your bile."

With that, he left Rahn bucking and fuming on the ground and hurried to the boy.

Keir had put himself back together, but he was still crying quietly. Whispering soothing words of comfort, Eryn led Keir to the creek and bade him drink of the water, cupping it in his hand when the boy was unable to do so

himself. "It is magical water," he said when Keir tried to resist. "Look how it healed me. It will heal you too."

"H-he had not—hurt—" Keir tried to explain, then burst into tears again.

"Some hurts are on the inside." Eryn pressed the water to the boy's lips. And as it had helped him, so it helped Keir to calm and re-center himself. But Eryn thought it seemed a shallower healing within the boy, not the deep-down healing he himself had known. He considered giving the boy more or dunking him, but his suspicion was that the illusion could only go so far and that he had reached the limit.

*Is it less illusion in me, then, and more revelation?* he wondered, but he dared not take the time to explore these musings now.

"The horse made me come," Keir confessed when they were settled beneath a great tree and Snow stood nearby munching on sweet grass. "It was upset and prancing, and when I didn't understand, it ran out of the cave. I thought the pasha would be upset if the horse ran off, so I tried to follow. It led me to you." He looked Eryn up and down in wonder. "You were so brave, sir."

"You did well to follow the horse," Eryn said, ignoring the part where Keir had called him brave. "The pasha would indeed be pleased. I will be certain to tell him when we meet him." Privately he worried that the pasha would never come, that the battle had gone badly, but he decided there was no point in such thoughts yet. He reached up to rub Snow's white chest. "Thank you too, sweet Snow."

Snow whinnied and ducked his head to nuzzle it against Eryn's own.

"Sometimes I think that horse can understand you," Keir said.

"Sometimes I think so too," Eryn agreed, and after that they sat in companionable silence, the three of them, boy and horse and man, doing their best to ignore the outraged, muffled shouts from Rahn on the other side of the trees.

And it was thus that the pasha found them. He came with the captain of the guard and three other soldiers. Rahn, who had, to no surprise, been one of the traitors, was immediately put to death; the pasha had Keir watch as his attacker's head was severed there upon the rock where he had tried to rape the boy. But while that happened, the pasha came up to Eryn, took a golden key from his pocket, and removed the collar around his neck and the bands at his wrists and ankles too.

"Thank you for remarkable service and devotion, Eryn," the pasha said, his voice full of affection. "You are a slave no more."

Was it strange, Eryn wondered, that he was almost sad? But before he could think of something to say, the pasha only smiled and looked as if he had read Eryn's mind.

"You will do better than you think on your own." The pasha reached out and stroked Eryn's cheek. "Much as I would love to keep you and pamper you as my pet, you are a true man now, and the world needs more men with noble hearts and minds like yours." His hand fell away. "Let me give you a gift to send you on your way. Whatever thing of

mine, of all the wonders and treasures you have seen in my caravan—name that which you would like for your gift, and it shall be yours.”

Eryn’s hesitation was but that of a moment, and it was only to measure how far he thought the pasha’s gratitude might extend. “Would you give him to me,” he said at last, “I would ask for your white horse, the one you had me guard. But I would not blame you if you could not part with him, for were he mine, I could never give up such a beautiful beast as Snow, not for anything.”

To his surprise, the pasha only smiled. “Snow, is he? Well, well. I will release him to you gladly, but only if he wishes to go; I can no more give that horse to you than I could give Keir, for both are charges, not possessions. But let us go and ask your ‘Snow’ if he would like to be yours.” He had crossed to the horse as he spoke, and now he reached up to stroke the horse’s forehead. “What do you think, hmm?” he asked, then began to murmur gently in a foreign tongue.

The pasha had barely begun to speak, however, before the horse turned out of his hand and strode with graceful purpose toward Eryn, where he huffed, pawed the ground, then poked Eryn hard in the shoulder.

The pasha laughed. “It seems he has no argument with your request. Though I will give you a bit of advice: you may find that rather than he belonging to you, he may see the arrangement as the other way around.”

Eryn smiled and stroked the side of Snow’s sweet face. “We will belong to each other, then.”

**T**he pasha insisted upon giving Eryn quite a bit of money, not as much as he had set off with initially, but he gave him enough for him to travel comfortably, and he gave him better clothing too; clothing, to Eryn's surprise, which was that of his native land, not that of the pasha's country. But he gave him no saddle or bridle for Snow. Even the gold ribbon stayed behind.

"He will go where you ask him to go—so long as he agrees with your plan," the pasha told him. "Always ask him for permission to ride. Walk when you can. Feed him well, and keep him watered." He handed over the silver brush Eryn had used to brush Snow. "Pamper him. Indulge his arrogance. I pray that in time you will understand why I have asked this of you."

Eryn frowned, but he only nodded and pocketed the brush. Then he bowed before the pasha. "I will miss you, Master," he said.

The pasha scoffed. "Call me Rahjesh, for you are my equal now."

But Eryn shook his head. "You will always be my master, sir: he who taught me how to master myself. But I will call you Master Rahjesh, if it pleases you."

The pasha laughed and drew Eryn into his embrace. "I look forward to the day we meet again," he said, and he kissed Eryn on each of his cheeks.



Keir came forward, flushed but collected again, and he bowed to Eryn. And then they were gone, leaving Eryn and Snow alone.

Eryn turned to his horse, his heart swelling at the thought that Snow was truly his now. “We cannot linger here until dark,” he told the horse, “but there is one place I must go before we depart.”

Snow snorted and nudged Eryn hard against the shoulder. But before Eryn could even try to surmise where they were and where the hill with the glass coffin might be, the horse had set off with great purpose through the trees.

“Snow! Wait!” Eryn cried, but instead of waiting, the horse only began to move faster. He led Eryn through the woods and up the hill, and Eryn thought the fickle beast was taking great delight in keeping himself just out of Eryn’s reach. Eryn also thought his pleas and angry shouts were only amusing the animal.

“Please!” he cried, panting for breath as they came up over another hill. “Snow—please, we don’t have much time, and I must try to find the cave where you stayed, so I can see if—”

But then Eryn stopped, because as he crested the hill, he realized that Snow had somehow read his mind. Because though he had not seen the cave, they had indeed gone to the place Eryn most wished to go. Except now that he was here, he was full of sorrow, not joy. For there was indeed a glass coffin on this hill, a great clear casket covered with flowers. And the man Eryn had dreamed of, had visions of, the man for whom Eryn had endured torture and rape and despair lay inside, appearing even more beautiful than Eryn

had remembered. But lovely though he was, he was also pale and unmoving.

Eryn walked up to the coffin in a daze, and he touched the glass. It was cold and smooth beneath his hand, and thick. He tried to lift it, but the glass held fast. It was too heavy to move, the sides too deeply buried in the ground.

So beautiful. So perfect was he who lay inside. His dark head rested on a silken pillow as white and pure as his creamy skin; his slender hands were folded over his chest, laced together over the perfect white of his tunic. His feet were bare as well and pressed against a smaller pillow, and his legs were cased in black silk as dark as his shining hair. His lips were red and lush, begging to be kissed.

But none would kiss those lips again, for the chest beneath the hands did not move, and the eyes beneath the long, handsome lashes did not open. The young man inside the casket was dead.

*My true love is dead.*

Falling to his knees, Eryn pressed his forehead against the coffin and began to weep. Dusk was beginning to fall, and soon the witch would return, or the demon, or worse, but Eryn could not rise, for his grief was too great.

But before so much as seven tears had fallen upon the glass, a sharp neigh from Snow made Eryn lift his head again. Blinking away his tears, he looked at his horse, then drew back in alarm as he saw the horse charging up the hill through the flowers toward the coffin. Eryn cried out, "Stop, Snow, stop!" but the horse paid him no heed, and at the last second he had no choice but to draw back and watch in

alarm and confusion as the beast reared up and struck the glass hard with his front hooves.

The glass cracked.

The horse whinnied angrily, reared back, and struck again.

This time the glass shattered and gave way—and it was then Eryn realized that it was not glass at all.

“Ice,” he whispered, holding up a shard of it in his hand. It melted at his touch. There was glass, too, but it was only a crust, a thin gloss of it over the thick, brutal ice. But the ice was melting now, disintegrating as Snow beat ruthlessly at it, until all at once it was gone except for little bits of ice on the walls. But even this was disappearing fast, running in little rivers down the sides of the hill.

And there his true love lay, still and quiet yet, unmoving—but now, as Eryn looked at him, he saw that the young man’s chest was rising and falling, very, very slowly, very, very shallowly—but rising it was.

*He was alive.*

Eryn blinked back new tears, tears now of joy—but before he could touch the pale, beautiful skin, Snow whinnied again and jerked his head towards the setting sun. Eryn looked at it too.

“We must go,” he said to the horse, then looked at his beloved in concern. “But I cannot bear to leave him!”

Snow huffed out a snort, bent his head, and lowered his whole body beside the coffin. He turned his head toward Eryn.

“You want me to drape him on your back? But he will fall—”

Snow huffed again, angrily this time. He butted Eryn hard with his muzzle and jerked his head toward his back.

“Both?” Eryn said. “You want us both to ride you? But—”

Snow gave a neigh that sounded for all the world like an exasperated scream before nodding again at the now rapidly setting sun.

Eryn reached down and carefully gathered the young man from his coffin bed. He was damp and cold, but this was not, as he had feared, a dead body he held within his arms. His true love still lived, somehow. Holding him close, he lifted them both onto Snow’s back and held on tight to the horse’s mane as the beast carried them down the hill and raced like a bullet to the edge of the forest.

Snow took them not to the road by which the pasha had come, however, but across to the other side of the valley; the trees were thinning here, and they were entering a meadow wide and thick with grasses and flowers. Ahead of them, the mountains parted. But Snow did not stop; he raced on and on across the meadow, all the way to another forest on the other side. This one was gentler, but still dark. But Snow, Eryn noticed, was beginning to tire.

“Slow,” he urged the horse. “Slow, friend, and rest. You will hurt yourself if you carry us further. Take us to what shelter you can, if you know of some; if the witch or the demon return, I will find a way to protect you and the prince. I promise you I will not let either of you be harmed.”

But Snow, sweating and heaving, only whinnied at him again and took off deeper into the woods.

He took them to a cottage, a small and cozy house against the side of a hill sheltered by the trees, and Eryn realized it was the cottage he had seen in his visions of the young man he now carried in his arms. He worried that it was not safe, but then he saw the foam at Snow's mouth, and he slid off the horse's back and hurried forward, jostling his other charge in his arms so he could reach up to wipe the spittle from Snow's lips.

"You have worked too hard," he whispered fearfully. Hurrying inside, he found the cottage was quite deserted; he laid the young man before the cold hearth and rushed back outside to see to the horse.

He led Snow to the water pump and helped him drink from a bucket there, then hurried off to find the sweetest grass he could, but there was little on the ground. He wished he could go back to the meadow, wished Snow had paused long enough to eat; to his dismay, when he came back, the horse was listing dangerously. Eryn didn't think twice; he took a great handful of the horse's mane and all but dragged him toward the door. "In," he commanded, and to his relief the horse came.

As the sun set, Eryn cared for the horse, lighting a fire to warm him, raiding the pantry until he found dried fruit, which he shoved into Snow's mouth and held there until the horse swallowed it down. He brought in more water, and once the horse had drank his fill, Eryn used it to bathe and cool him, then spent some time brushing his coat until it

## SWEET SON

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shone, all the while cooing to him, trying to calm the beast once more.

“Hush now,” he whispered. “Hush. We’re safe. You’re safe with me, sweet Snow. You bore us well, but rest now. Rest, and I shall care for you.”

And as night came over the cottage, Snow did gentle, settling down upon the ground like a young foal. It wasn’t until he bent forward and nuzzled the young man they had rescued from the coffin that Eryn even thought of him.

Eryn bent to the prince now and touched his face tenderly.

“I don’t know what to do,” he confided in a whisper to the beast. “I have dreamed of him so long, and I ached when I thought he was dead, but now—” He turned back to the sleeping man, distraught. “Now what? He needs a doctor. Or a wizard. And the demon was right—how can I think of standing up to the satrap?” He laughed bitterly. “Unless there is no satrap at all. Oh, Snow, I am so tired of trying to sort out truth from lies. I am so weary of trying to be strong and clever. All I have ever wanted was to find my true love and care for him and love him.” He paused. “Well—no. For a time I wanted to find him only in a careful way that did not disturb my life. But my life is nothing but disturbed now. Now I only wish to know him, to hold him. To love him. I do not care what I must give up for him. I do not care what I must bear. I would be his servant, his lord—whatever he wanted. I would give him all I had, beginning with my heart.”

He stroked the pale, cool cheek, and tears formed in his eyes. Then he turned and stroked the side of Snow's head as well.

"Thank you for bearing me today. I only hope one day I may bear you in return."

He bent and brushed a kiss across the horse's nose. Then, in afterthought, he kissed the enchanted man as well, but the red lips were cold and uninviting.

The weariness of the day and the night before, which had given him no sleep, hit Eryn at once. He lay down before the fire, beside the young man. "I'm going to rest a moment," he murmured to Snow, and he slid into sleep even before his head hit the floor.

He woke to feel a hard nudge against the center of his chest. When he opened his eyes, he saw Snow looming over him, his front hoof planted squarely on Eryn's breast.

"What—?" Eryn blinked, then turned his head to where the young man lay. Except the young man was not there. Alarmed, Eryn tried to sit up, but Snow whinnied sharply and held him in place.

Eryn glared up at the horse. "Snow, where—"

And then he stopped, robbed of all speech as he watched his horse, his beloved, beautiful Snow, shimmer and melt away—

—and where horse had stood a man did now, the young man he had pulled from an icy coffin, the young man he had dreamed of, the young man who now knelt astride him, naked, his strong, slender hand pressed hard against the center of Eryn's chest.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE SWEET SON

For a moment Eryn and the young man could only stare at one another. Eryn's mind ran in ten directions at once, trying to understand what had happened to his horse, trying to understand if this image before him was real, trying to decide if he was dreaming. But the young man blinked, his dark eyes wide and beautiful, and Eryn felt the heat and pressure of the hand against his chest.

*My true love. My true love is kneeling here before me.*

Eryn reached for him, caught up in wonder. But the young man stiffened and drew back, and it was then Eryn realized his lover was full of fear. The young man tried to speak, but he only choked and sputtered. He breathed heavily now, and his pale face had gone even paler. When Eryn tried again to touch him, the man blew air out through his lips angrily and drew back, lifting his hand in a half-closed fist, his arm bent—for a moment Eryn could see the horse in him still, a hoof raised to strike—and then he crumbled and fell away, a sob-snort escaping him as he tried to get away on unfamiliar limbs.

Heart aching, Eryn turned and caught him before he could hit the ground. More sobs erupted from his throat, but Eryn drew the young man to his chest and caught them in his mouth.



*Snow*, Eryn thought dizzily as he gentled the frightened young man with kisses. *He was my Snow all along*. He didn't understand how it had happened, but as he held his beloved in his arms, he didn't care. He *felt* like Snow—not the horse, but the familiarity of his friend who had merely happened to be a beast. Now his friend was not a beast but a man. Enchanted somehow. But how? How had Snow been with him while his love was in this cottage? How had he been within Snow and buried in an icy-glass coffin all at once?

A sob turned breathless brought him back to the here and now. *However it happened, he is in my arms now*, Eryn reminded himself, and he wondered no more.

The fire had died down to embers, but it was light enough to see, and by its glow Eryn made tender love to Snow-turned-man. He rolled them over so that Snow was pressed beneath him on the rug, and he trapped him gently between his legs and arms, but he kissed him with all the tenderness in his heart, with all the love he had carried for the man who haunted his dreams, with all the affection he held for his companion who had borne him through his adventures. When his love shuddered with the shock of his transformation, Eryn stroked his hair and whispered soothingly in his ear, promising he would be all right soon. When he tried to speak but stumbled as he tried to learn to use the larynx of a man, not a beast, Eryn kissed the sides of his throat and urged him to take his time. And under Eryn's love and care, Snow gentled and relaxed, and after several throaty tries, he managed, at last, to speak a word.

## SWEET SON

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“Wyn,” he rasped. His fingers dug into Eryn’s shoulders, and he swallowed and drew a shuddering breath as he tried again. “My—name is—Wyn.”

*You will ever be Snow to me*, Eryn thought, but before he could tease him, he saw Wyn looking at him in silent, nervous inquiry.

“Eryn,” he said carefully. “My name is Eryn.”

Wyn swallowed hard and stared into Eryn’s eyes. “I remember you. It is as if through water, but I remember you. I remember that you brushed my hair. I remember that you nuzzled my face and whispered to me, but I could not understand your words—and yet I did, somehow. But I don’t remember how. It’s like a strange, foggy dream.” Wyn’s fingers tangled hesitantly in Eryn’s hair. “I have other dreams of you too. Dreams of you chasing me on a white horse. Except—” He frowned, and his hand trembled. “Except sometimes *I* was the horse.”

“You were enchanted, I think,” Eryn said.

Wyn’s fingers tightened. “The coffin—did I dream—?”

Eryn wished he could lie. “The coffin was real. But it is gone now. You’re safe, Wyn.” *Sweet Snow. I will never let anything happen to you ever again.*

But the promise felt hollow, even inside of his own heart. Wyn seemed to think the same thing.

“Where is my godfather? My godmother? I must speak to them.” He glanced around the room. “This is my cottage. But where are my guardians? Where are my godfather’s servants?”

“There was no one here when we arrived,” Eryn said. “As for your godparents, I do not know. It is just the two of us now.”

Wyn’s head whipped around, and he looked at Eryn in alarm. “Are you—did the satrap—?” He broke off, paling. It was alarming, with his already fair complexion. “You are. You’re his agent. He’s done it again, hasn’t he? Godfather warned me, told me I was too trusting, and here I am—” Eryn tried to interrupt, to reassure him, but Wyn just set his teeth and pushed at him, eyes blurring with angry, hurt tears. “He hides me as his horse, buries my body in ice, and even then I am such a fool that I fall for any man who looks at me with gentle eyes!”

*His horse.* The pasha was Wyn’s godfather. And Eryn suspected he had met the godmother too. At last, things began to make sense. “Wyn,” he said, trying again to gentle him, but Wyn was having none of it.

“You made me *dream* of you!” He shoved hard at Eryn’s chest, but the gesture sent the tears brimming in his eyes rolling down his cheeks. “You made me *love you*!” He choked on a sob and turned his head away in disgust. “Godfather told me over and over again that I must not give my heart away so easily, but I can’t—I tried, I did! I tried to be who they wanted me to be, but I couldn’t. I’m not strong enough.” He let out a ragged sigh. “Even as a horse,” he whispered. “Even as a *horse* I could not hide my heart. *Sweet son*, she called me. Stupid son, more like.” He stopped speaking and shut his eyes tight, but the emotions battling inside him made his shoulders shudder and shake.

## SWEET SON

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Eryn's head was spinning. Something deep inside him was rising, something great and shocking, something had not known he had inside him. In his own way, he felt as fragile as Wyn in that moment, for he did not understand any of this, not Wyn, and not himself. *He needs someone wiser than me*, he thought, panicked. *My sweet Snow, my Wyn, my beloved needs a stronger, wiser hand than mine.*

As he stared down at the proud, frightened prince trapped beneath his body, as he looked down at the beautiful face which had haunted his dreams, Eryn realized that for all his journeys, for all the lessons the pasha had taught him, for all that he had endured and survived, he was the same man who had set off from home, naively believing that if he walked far enough, hid deeply enough, lied cleverly enough, he could escape his fears. He was the same man who, when given the opportunity to surrender those fears, had handed them over without hesitation and given his body in exchange for peace. He was the man who had performed so prettily for a demon, who had failed to so much as bargain with the witch. The pasha had told him he had become a man, and for a moment he had believed his master, but Eryn saw, as he looked helplessly down into Wyn's pale, beautiful face, that the pasha's words had simply been another illusion. Everything, he realized bitterly, had been an illusion: his hopes, his fears, his beliefs—his whole *life*.

And then the something which had been rising folded Eryn in its arms and whispered, *Your control is an illusion, yes—but so is your fear.*

Now Eryn shuddered. *It cannot be that simple*, he argued back. *The world is more than just a series of illusions.*

But the voice inside him was louder now, and it was stronger than he. *And what is it then, pray? What has led you to leave your home behind? What has led you to such surrender, such despair, such pleasure, such pain? You have not changed, no—but have you learned? Will you continue to let others weave illusions for you, or will you give yourself your own?*

Eryn took a deep breath. He felt lightheaded and strange, torn between euphoria and despair.

*Will you let him slide back into his darkness? The voice pressed on. Or will you give him the illusion of a master, the guide and protector which was given to you, in this moment when he needs it more desperately than you ever did?*

And there, for one moment, Eryn did know despair, a terrible, horrible emptiness of a universe without laws, a world without order, an existence that would not, without effort, have any meaning at all. But then the moment passed, and he realized that the universe was not empty and lawless, that there was in fact order, and there was indeed a great deal of meaning.

He was there. He was law, and he was order. His meaning was his own.

And he could give that order and meaning to Wyn.

Eryn dipped his head, drew a deep, trembling breath, and he shut his eyes and smiled.

Then he schooled his features and lifted his head before taking firm hold of Wyn's slender chin and turning his face

toward his own. He watched the play of fear and misery and pride, of uncertainty and shame. But he saw the other emotions, too, the ones he realized now that despite his efforts, he had never managed to hide.

Hope. Eagerness. Desire.

Eryn pressed his fingers harder into Wyn's chin and did not let himself smile.

"I am not an agent of the satrap," he said, his voice full and sure and strong, full of the illusion of the pasha, of the man he had always wished would arrive to rescue him when he was young. "I am no agent at all, but a man all my own."

Wyn gentled for a moment, but the fear came raging quickly back. "You are trying to trick me. You want me to admit I desire you so that you may claim me. That is what *he* did. The first agent, the one the satrap sent. He wooed me in the garden, and when I yielded to him, he grabbed me and told me I would be his slave." The slender chin went up, but his dark eyes danced with fear. "I am no fool. I know the laws. Deviants are nothing but slaves to be mastered."

*And so the mythical country of equality and justice is just that, a myth.* But even with this revelation, it was getting harder for Eryn to hide his smile. "Have you ever thought," he asked, "that a man who enjoys mastering another man as his slave must, by his nature, be deviant himself?" When Wyn only looked at him in confusion, Eryn continued. "Or perhaps none of us are deviant at all. Perhaps that is the secret fear that all men carry: perhaps we are all lonely slaves, wishing for a master to make our burdens easier, frightened of the emptiness inside us. Perhaps all men, no

matter that they desire the touch of women or of men, are all deviants at heart.”

Wyn had stilled, but he still looked wary. “You are trying to confuse me with philosophy.”

“I am trying to *gentle* you with philosophy,” Eryn corrected. “But perhaps that is where I err. Perhaps you do not wish to be gentled at all. Is that your secret fear, beautiful Wyn? Do you *wish* to be mastered?” He ran a finger down Wyn’s cool cheek, delighting at his shudder, at the way his eyes went dark with desire. “Do you wish, sweet Snow, after years of hiding, after all your enchantments and protections, after all the warnings to be strong, to be wise, to be cautious, after all the myths piled upon you—do you wish for someone to take all that away and compel you to be the trusting, silly fool your heart longs to be?”

The tears were back again, but they were tears of release, because Wyn was easing, sinking into the rug, his body yielding even before his mind had agreed it wanted to. His hands, still pressed against Eryn’s shirt front, withdrew their pressure and tangled in his laces. “If you aren’t the satrap’s agent, one will be coming soon. My godmother rules this forest by day, but his minions rule it by night. I have heard that he has even summoned demons to hunt for me and any who would help me. The satrap does not wish to lose his power, and he will give his very soul to keep it.”

Eryn stifled the surge of fear that tried to rise at the thought of the demon catching him again. “Can his agents enter this place?”

To his relief, Wyn shook his head. “Not here. Not without great effort, and they do not yet know where we are,

I don't think. But tomorrow they will come. And if they suspect I am with someone who can save me, someone powerful enough to free me from my enchantment, even my godmother will not be able to stop them." His fingers tightened, massaging unconsciously into Eryn's chest. "The satrap fears my return. If I defy him before the Council, he will be forced to step down. But I don't know how to defy him, not when he will expose me as a deviant." He let out a tremulous sigh. "For I am. I *do* desire men. When my mother saw, she summoned my godparents and asked them to hide my desires. But Godfather said such a desire is not something that can be hidden. So they hid *me* instead, until I would be strong enough to face the satrap on my own." His lip curled into a self-deprecating sneer. "But how will I ever grow strong when I hide in forests and coffins and in the bodies of horses? I don't even know how many years have gone by. I have learned nothing. All I am is even more desperate for touch, for love." He pulled his fingers back from Eryn, as if just now realizing they were kneading into him. "I am weaker now than when the satrap's man first came for me."

*And am I strong enough now to help him?* Eryn wondered. *Have I learned enough to give Wyn the illusions he needs?* The answer, he suspected, was no. But he didn't let it bother him, only took a moment, first, to give himself the story he needed so that he could.

Eryn caught the fingers and drew them back against his body, capturing Wyn's gaze with his own, holding him there. He gave the man beneath him all the strength and control he had ever known, and then he reached down and gave him all



the strength he had *hoped* to know. And he watched, in amazement, as Wyn gave himself to it, stepping out of the shadows, out of his fear, and into the warm arms of Eryn's illusion of control.

And in that moment, even Eryn could believe it wasn't an illusion, but reality after all.

"I have never been with a man," Wyn whispered, his eyes fixed on Eryn's lips. "Nor a woman, either."

"You will be with a man now." Eryn took his beloved's face in his hands, bracing himself on his elbows, pinning his lover with his hips. He could feel Wyn's naked erection growing against his own cock trapped inside his breeches.

"I am afraid," Wyn whispered, but his eyes were full of longing and desire.

"Give your fear to me." Eryn reached down between them and took Wyn's naked cock in his hand. He felt a thrill rush through him at the young man's gasp, and he watched the beautiful dark eyes close. "Give your body and mind to me, sweet Wyn. I cannot promise you safety tomorrow, much as I wish I could, though I vow to you I will do all I can to keep you from harm. I cannot assure you I am strong or clever enough to keep the satrap at bay, but I mean to try."

He tightened his grip against Wyn's erection and slid his fist up and down the length, reveling in the way Wyn went even softer and more pliant, even as he arched his back and strained to get closer to Eryn.

Eryn bent and pressed a hot, wet kiss in the hollow of Wyn's neck. "What I *will* promise you is that I will give you pleasure. I promise that the love you say I lured from you in

your dreams will not be empty; it will be a gateway into a garden more delicious and exotic than any you have dreamed to know.” He took a moment to gather his own longings, and on instinct, turned them back to Wyn. “I promise to claim you, lover. I promise that while you are in my arms you can give over everything, that you will be so enthralled that you will be incapable of worry. I promise to master you, Wyn, to take away all that presses on you, so that you know only me and my body and the pleasure it gives to yours.” When Wyn cried out and thrust helplessly into Eryn’s hand, Eryn let go and grabbed his naked hip, thrusting his own cock against Wyn’s, and when he spoke, he growled into Wyn’s ear with a passion he had not known he possessed.

“You are mine,” he declared. “You think you are so helpless that you must be a slave? Then you will be *my* slave, and no other will have you. I claim you, Wyn. I claim your body and your mind and your heart. Do you give them to me? Do you surrender to me gladly? Do you give yourself to me so that no other may have you? Do you give yourself to me so that I might tell you what is pleasure? That I might tell you when to fear? That I might tell you when to feel rapture and when to feel pain?”

“Yes!” Wyn let go of the word on a sob, and he threw his arms around Eryn’s neck. “Yes—oh yes! Eryn—*yes!*”

And Eryn claimed his sweet beloved with a ruthless kiss, giving him the strength and power he craved, while in his heart he stroked him gently and vowed in a silent whisper to make this illusion the best the world had ever known.

Wyn's submission was beautiful.

Eryn made a leisurely exploration of his lover's body, but it was as if there were two of him, one Eryn to make love to Wyn, and another to watch his young lover's response. He noted the way Wyn trembled when Eryn brushed his lips over his nipple, but he saw, too, that when he licked the spot at the base of Wyn's neck where his pulse quickened against his skin, it sent a cascading sigh from Wyn's red lips. There were so many interesting things to learn from an exploration of the prince's body. A tongue against his skin made him shiver, but a soft nip made him gasp, and a hard bite made him moan. When his hands were left free, they flailed, and Wyn rode waves of tension that Eryn could see him visibly trying to shut down, but when Eryn trapped those hands in his own and pinned them above his lover's head, the waves crested and gave way, leaving nothing but Wyn's tantalizing whimpers as his body had no choice but to surrender to Eryn's invasion.

And it made sense, Eryn thought, as he undid the laces of his shirt and used them to bind his sweet lover in place before he bit his way down his arms to feast on the hollow of his neck and wrap himself in Wyn's shuddering cries. After years of trying to hide who he was, of years of knowing such intense, exquisite pressure not just from his family and country but from a legend—the illusion of illusions—it made sense that after bearing the weight of all this, of hiding and guarding and tensing at every threat, of pushing against a sweet and gentle nature to regard even the most casual of

affections as a potential attack, that it would be here, bound and claimed and stripped, that Wyn would find true release. In Eryn's arms, Wyn melted like the ice-glass of his coffin, freeing the fragile man who had so long hidden beneath. The fragile man who was actually full of pride and strength and will and had no desire to be fragile at all, the man who had been forced into weakness by shadows no man of any might could ever face.

*I will shelter you, Eryn promised, taking Wyn's mouth in a sharp, biting kiss. I will give you the space you crave. I will give you the passion you fear. I will give you the ruthlessness you long for, the dominance your heart tells you a legendary ruler should not desire. I will find your longings without your asking, and I will give them to you without permission. I will claim you. I will own you. I will give you the illusion of my strength and hope that within it you might find a strength of your own.*

He thrust his tongue hard inside of Wyn's tender mouth, and he let his heart spill over.

*I will love you.*

He kissed his way down Wyn's body, tracing the outline of his ribs with lips and teeth and tongue. He made his lover's belly dance. He made him gasp and cry by taking his nipples hard between his teeth. He made him beg and plead as he sucked his way down Wyn's sides, his hips, his thighs. He made him pull back his legs in wanton helplessness, pushing them up and out. He made him watch as Eryn watched him, his own lust rising as Wyn's cock bobbed eagerly and his rose bloomed and expanded before his gaze.

Eryn looked a long, long time, knowing it made Wyn fill with shame, knowing that beneath that shame lay his longing. He waited as long as he could so that Eryn knew nothing else, nothing but the emotions he feared and the sight of the man who had led him to them.

Then he lifted his eyes and made his lover still with his gaze alone.

“You are mine,” he said, quiet, sure, controlled. “You are not their legendary prince. You are not your mother’s sweet son. You are nothing but what I tell you, and right now, you are mine. Your body is mine. Your desire is mine. This”—he reached out and took hard, firm grip of Wyn’s weeping cock—“is mine. I made it. I released your desire, and I claim the evidence of it. I freed you from your enchantment, and I claim your body. Do not fight me, slave, for you are *mine*. All else is illusion. *I* am real to you. I alone.”

There was a flash of fear, but just a spark, and as Eryn watched, the thrill of power rising inside him, he saw his lover’s fear give way to surrender. “Yes,” Wyn whispered. “Yes.”

Eryn gripped hard on his cock. “Yes what?” he pressed.

And he thanked the pasha silently, thanked his own master quietly in his heart as he watched the same deep, total release he had known on silken pillows expand before him on his beloved’s face.

“Yes, Master,” Wyn whispered, and he let go.

Eryn took him carefully, but he took even greater care not to let Wyn see his discrimination. Wyn feared discovery that he was weak, and so his greatest longing was to simply

*be* weak. He had been told he must be the greatest ruler, the strongest man, the sort no real man could ever be, and so what his heart ached to know was an even stronger man who could take that yoke away. Eryn could not give him this in truth. But he could give his body that illusion, could teach him how to fool his mind. And it felt good, very good, so much better than Eryn had ever dreamed it would to be the man who could give such things to his lover.

Wyn also liked pain. The clues had come in how much he liked the biting, but it still surprised Eryn, because though he himself had been taught to enjoy it, Wyn relished the sensation in a way Eryn knew he himself never could. Wyn had much more mastery over pain than any man Eryn had known, because the more Eryn pinched or jerked or slapped, the more he tugged and nipped and pushed hard against his lover, the more the prince cried out and writhed and gasped in pleasure. It took, in fact, a great deal of focus to make sure he did not hurt his lover more than was safe. A bruise on his forearm was all right, but Eryn would not hurt him near his stomach, for too much too soft and dangerous to bruise lay beneath.

But oh, how he could grip and pull that luscious bottom. Oh, the shame and tightness he could give him by pulling those fat cheeks wide, making his opening widen. How he could spit on it and make it shudder. How he could call it *dirty hole* and make Wyn gasp and whine and beg him, “Please, master, *please!* Please touch me there, please—*please—*”

*Hurt me there.* Eryn could hear the words even though Wyn left them unspoken. *Oh, lover,* he thought as he wormed

a thumb inside, then licked around the edges to give just a little lubrication to his thrust. *Oh lover, you do not know your strength. You cannot see that so few men could bear what you do. You cannot know that what they ask of you is not possible to bear, that all men would be made weak by what they put before you. You do not know.*

*I will show you,* he vowed and slid his thumb and then his finger deep inside.

He gave Wyn roughness with his words as well as the sharp thrusts of his hand. “Your tunnel is hot,” he rasped at Wyn. “Hot and tight like a good slut. But you are mine, so this is my tunnel. I will fuck my tunnel, slave. I will not ask you. I will *take* you, slave. I will take you as hard as I like. Pull your legs back and open my tunnel for me, slave. Open yourself. Surrender yourself. *Wider*, slave. I want more of you. More. *More.*”

The sounds Wyn made now were little but gibberish, one so horselike it gave Eryn pause. But his hesitation made Wyn cry out in despair, and Eryn pushed himself aside, because this was not his moment. This was for Wyn. He gave his lover what he knew he needed to hear.

“They call you prince,” he sneered, hard and ruthless, even though part of himself was shocked at his own tone. “They call you legend, and they call you magic, but you are just a slut. My slut. My sweet slut. Slutty Snow. My horse. My ride. My animal. Your godfather coddled you, told me to be gentle with you. Told me to let you claim me. I won’t, slave. I claim *you*. You are mine and nothing else. My slut. Mine. *Mine*. They cannot take you, for you are *mine*.”

For a moment he worried he had gone too far. Wyn went still, his eyes shut, his body slack, and Eryn opened his mouth to retract it all. But then Wyn seized and cried out, and like a geyser, he came, the ejaculation of ejaculations, not just spunk and sex but self as well, and when the purr of pleasure died away, he simply wept, wept in relief, wept in the helpless release of one who had thought never, ever, to find such an elusive, impossible prize.

And Eryn set the illusion aside, just for a moment, because he was not, no matter how much Wyn needed it, *that* strong, and he wrapped his arms around his lover and pressed his lips to his hair, letting the dark, sleek locks hide his own tears of relief.

Eryn took Wyn upstairs and showed him the pleasure that was to be found with a lover and a mirror.

The glass was old and cracked and dirty, and the beds were crowded and short and no good for a pair of lovers, but Eryn arranged them enough to make do, and he put the mirror before them. Then he sat Wyn at the edge of the bed before it, drew his legs back, and taught him how to play.

He showed his lover what he looked like expanded, and what it looked like when first Eryn's fingers, then his cock, thrust inside. He made Wyn kneel before him and suck him off, but he turned the mirror so that it stood beside them, and he ordered Wyn to watch how pretty his mouth looked expanded around swollen cockflesh, how nice red lips looked when white cum dripped from their edges. He showed Wyn



what it looked like when Eryn took him from the front and the back and the side. He showed him how red his nipples became when Eryn pinched them. He showed him how his skin broke lightly beneath the surface when Eryn sucked hard on it. He showed him what teeth marks looked like on his thigh. He thought of his own mark, hidden beneath the scar the witch had made, and vowed he would, one day, give Wyn a brand of his own.

He bent Wyn over the bed, spread him wide, and spanked him like a naughty child, then showed him what a wide, red handprint looked like on his backside. He called him Snow and rode him like a horse. He found clothespins and stuck them all over Wyn's body, hoping to heaven he had chosen places that would hurt but not injure, vowing that if they made it out of this insanity alive, he would give himself an education on the body and learn these things for sure. He even, to his private disgust, used a few of the demon's tricks on his lover. But Wyn opened like a flower beneath them all. For every submissive act Eryn introduced him to, every edge of pain Eryn helped him explore, made his sweet Wyn a little more relaxed, and every act of surrender gave Wyn a little more strength.

He held back the words of love he longed to give his prince. He held back the tenderness he longed to share. He learned, in that illusion of control, some real control, not of the world, but of himself. He knew Wyn saw a man of mastery, and he was glad to give that man to his lover, but as he made love to Wyn, Eryn realized that to be a master, he must actually surrender more of himself than he had even known he could. But he found there was no end to how

## SWEET SON

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much of himself he was willing to give to Wyn, and Wyn in turn seemed just as willing to give endlessly back. And so they gave to one another, creating strength the likes of which Eryn had never dreamed could exist. When they wore out one another at last, they collapsed into each other's arms, and Eryn drifted to sleep sated and full of bliss.

At mid-morning Eryn woke. He looked down at the beautiful man in his arms, the man who, even as Eryn had first closed his eyes the night before, he had still feared would be a dream. What other dreams, he wondered, could be real? What other realities could be dreams?

He lay there a long, long time, feeling the peace of holding Wyn in his arms, feeling the morning sun fall across his face through the window. He thought of his father, of his own years in business. He thought of the witch on the road and the bandits, and he thought of the pasha, of his bargains and his cool and his control.

He thought of the demon and how easily he had turned Eryn's mind against itself. He thought of all the ways the world had taught him to fear, but also of how in the end, it had always been he who made the choice to let it succeed.

He thought of how the witch and the pasha had hidden Wyn, but how they had also led him to them as the sweet son's savior—he, Eryn, the one they enslaved and belittled and abused, he whom they had shown with such exquisite care how to master pain and fear.

He wondered what it was a satrap feared, what illusions he was terrified would fall. He decided it was time to find out.

Eryn shook Wyn gently, shuddering briefly at the marks and bruises across his lover's flesh before those dark eyes opened to see. When Wyn blinked up at him and smiled, Eryn smiled back, drew his fingers up, and kissed them.

"Come, sweet prince," he said. "It's time we claim your throne."

## CHAPTER VIII

### JAR OF BLOOD

Eager as Wyn had proven himself to surrender in bed, he was nearly intractable on his position on facing the satrap.

“You are *mad!*” he shouted at Eryn, tucking a blanket around his body as he paced back and forth across the bedroom floor. “Claim my throne! With what army do we march? What god do you plan to summon? My godfather is the most powerful magician in his land, but even he fears the satrap so much that he buried my body alive and pulled out my soul and stuck it in a horse rather than allow me to be glimpsed by his agent even for a moment!” He stopped and glared at Eryn. “I remember but shadows and shapes from living in the horse’s mind, but I know you were subjugate to my godfather. I know you met something in the night that hurt you when we were hidden in the forest.” He blushed only a little as he went on. “It is one thing to give my body to you in pleasure, to surrender to you in the dark, but what you ask of me now—after all these years, after so much hiding, after so much sliding into shadow to avoid being seen, you want me to *walk up* to the satrap and tell him it’s time he goes home?”

“Yes,” Eryn said with more composure than he felt. “For you cannot go on hiding. Wyn, you said it yourself: you were buried alive. Those who guard you aren’t just keeping you

from danger. They're keeping you from life. Better to face the satrap now and let him kill you than bleed your years away as you are."

"But I'm not strong—"

Eryn rose over him and aimed an angry finger into his face. "There is no strength. Not the kind you seek." His finger trembled for a moment, for this was that deep voice inside him speaking again, and it spoke to parts of Eryn himself as much as it spoke to the prince. "You cannot be the man they ask you to be. No one can. No man, no woman, not even a god could be their sweet son, their perfect, compassionate prince. They want the compassion of a man with a power of a deity. They want the sun to rise at dusk. They want the moon to shine enough for day. They want the world to lie before them like a carpet with all their favorite parts anticipated and prepared, and a drugging sleep thereafter so they don't realize how little they have lived."

Wyn shook his head, his countenance radiating his despair. "Then what is it you propose I do?"

"I propose," Eryn said, "that you go and pretend. Give them their illusion. Give the *satrap* his illusion. Anyone who works with such fervor to keep you at bay believes you hold even greater power than do the people who hope for your success. You do not have to be the strength and power they desire. You only need to be the mirror back for what they wish their ruler to be. And then like all gods, all rulers, all leaders of all kinds, you will do your best. You will hear what the people want, and you will see what they actually need. You will give it to them when you can, and when you can't, you will give them more illusions."

“And when they discover I am but another man?” Wyn asked, his voice sharp but also laced with his fear. “When the satrap discovers the kittens hounding his barns are more a threat than I?”

Eryn smiled a wicked smile. “Oh, they will not discover, because we will make sure you have a very, very good illusion. It will be all the magic you will need. The kittens won’t be fooled. But all the humans will. You will give them their illusion of safety and equality and control. Because that is, at best, all any of us ever receive.”

Wyn clutched at the blanket, drawing it tighter to his chest as his shoulders hunched forward and his dark eyes blinked, full of fear and uncertainty—and loneliness.

“And who will give an illusion back to me?” he whispered, only his pride keeping his voice from breaking.

Eryn came forward and, very carefully, took the trembling man inside his arms.

“Me,” he whispered. “I will keep you safe,” he vowed. “Not the prince. Not the legend. Wyn, Snow, the man inside, that’s who I’ll love, and cherish, and hold tight. You will order the lives of your subjects, but I will order yours. In my arms you will be mine and nothing else. In my arms I will give you the pleasure of a man, but I will also give you the pain and submission you can tell no one else you desire. In my arms the prince and even, sometimes, the man will die, and you will be nothing except what I tell you to be. I will give you your freedom, your release, your fire. In my arms you will empty, and I will refill you, enough so that you may go forth and fill a nation, even a world once again.”

Wyn had melted into Eryn's arms, and now he pressed his eyes, his nose, his whole face into Eryn's neck, pressing as if he meant to slide inside his lover's skin. "Eryn," he whispered. "Oh, Eryn. *Love*. I would lead a nation just to have such things with you. But even with all your beautiful words, I still do not understand how we can possibly succeed! How will we ever make such a complicated illusion?"

Even before Eryn could form his reply, he saw the dull glow start across the room, and he smiled, because it was good to know he had been right. "I suspect we will have all the help we need," he said, watching as the shape of the witch, Wyn's godmother, grew inside the light.

And this was how it was that Eryn, decked in fine and beautiful clothes, rode into the heart of the satrap's city on the naked back of a beautiful white horse, a horse which, of course, was his beloved Wyn. And as they rode through the golden gates of the satrap's city, the witch scurried through the crowds dressed as a peddler woman clutching a large wicker basket.

No one in the crowd that gathered to see the stranger knew Eryn, and they certainly didn't know his horse was, in fact, the kingdom's legendary prince. All they knew was that the man wore finery such as they had never before seen, finery greater than the simple golden robes of their satrap. He wore the clothes of kingdoms they had heard of but never seen, kingdoms rumored to be so rich that rubies grew on trees and fell like apples onto the ground. They saw Eryn's

fingers dripping with bejeweled rings and saw the gleaming buttons of his coat. They saw his clothes shimmer with fabric the likes of which they had only ever seen before on wealthy men from the south, and those who stood at the edges of the crowd could see that the stranger's garments were stitched with golden thread that glinted in the sun.

The horse on which Eryn rode was beautiful too. It had no saddle, but it gleamed as if it had descended from a cloud, not traveled for miles on dusty roads. And there were no retainers accompanying Eryn; there was only the man and the horse. Eryn could read the questions on their faces. How could they have traveled the dangerous roads with such finery and no escort? How could this be? The crowd whispered and wondered, and the residents of the satrap's city soon decided the man must be a wizard, and a great one at that. Perhaps, they whispered, he was even greater than the satrap. And as the whispers turned to a murmur, Eryn heard the words rise up from the crowd, and they made Eryn smile.

*Perhaps this was their prince, the queen's sweet son returned!*

When Eryn began to reach into his purse and toss an apparently never-ending supply of gold and silver coins onto their heads, they cried out and tried to press closer to touch the beautiful beast and handsome rider. They were hungry, so hungry, Eryn thought, not just for generosity and beauty but for kindness, and it moved him. But even so moved, Eryn knew this was not the moment to give in. He must keep up the illusion.



An old woman—in truth, it was Wyn’s godmother once again, but only he and Wyn knew this—came forward and touched the hem of his cloak; Eryn lifted his hand and spoke strange, sharp words. She who had touched him cried out and drew back, clutching her heavy basket as her hand shuddered from the touch. After that, the crowd stayed back, hovering close but keeping the road clear all the way from the gates of the city to the satrap’s palace, where, by the time the one-man parade arrived, the notorious leader stood at the balcony, waiting.

Eryn brought Snow to a halt, looked up at the infamous leader, and waited.

“Who are you, boy?” The satrap clutched the golden rail of his balcony as he leaned down and glared at Eryn and the enchanted Wyn below. “Who are you who makes his own parade, wounding peasants and taunting them with his wealth? Who are you, simpleton, to challenge me, a man who controls demons so powerful I can make night fall just by wishing for it?”

Beneath Eryn’s thighs, Snow whinnied and pranced nervously, but Eryn simply smiled, and this time his easiness was not feigned. *Ah, satrap, he thought. When was the last time, I wonder, that someone called you on your illusions?*

“Night just for wishing! Goodness, but that is something I must see. Can you truly call them now? Demons *now*? Right here? Amazing! Please, good fellow—show me!”

He took great pleasure at the flash of panic he saw in the satrap’s eyes before it gave way to his protective rage. “*Who are you?*” he roared.

## SWEET SON

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Eryn slid from Wyn's back and gave the satrap a casual, almost sassy bow. "I am the queen's sweet son, of course. I am the prince this land has waited for. And I have come to claim my throne."

Some in the crowd gasped. Some cried out. But the satrap and his guards around him just tipped their heads back and laughed.

Eryn smiled too. This was going so much better than he'd thought it would.

"You! *You*, the prince? You are as brown as a berry! You wear the clothes of a popinjay of the south!" The satrap gave Eryn a cruel smile. "You have brain sickness, I suspect. Guards: kill him."

This part made Eryn's pulse quicken. He watched the guards draw their bows, and he stepped forward, well away from his lover. But just to be sure, as he held out his arms he said softly, "Step back, Snow," and then he waited.

Twelve arrows whizzed through the air, and seven pierced Eryn's body: four in his chest, and three in his thigh. The satrap's men had good aim. Eryn swayed a moment as he swam in the pain, using everything he had been taught to turn the pain into, if not pleasure, at least something he needn't bother to fear. From the corner of his eye he saw the witch, still in her disguise, murmuring over her wicker basket at the edge of the crowd, and he let his will course to her, let her and the jar of blood inside her basket tell his body that, yes, while his heart and several other vital organs were mortally injured, this was not the moment he would be allowed to die.

When he was able, he looked up at the satrap and gave him a saucy wink. "Come now. You've had your fun. As I have said: I have come to claim my throne. Don't make this more difficult than it already is. If you step down now, satrap, I will not arrest you."

The satrap roared and climbed onto the rail of the balcony, his golden robes flapping in the wind. "Fool!" he shouted. "Parlor tricks will not work against a power such as me! Now you will not just die—you will writhe in agony for a lifetime! Lightning! I call you to come down from the sky and strike this impostor where he stands!"

Eryn felt the crackle of electricity before he saw it. The blue-white bolt came down, as the pasha had explained it would, not from the blue sky but from the copper tower of the palace, though to all those gathered in the courtyard it did indeed appear to have come from the cloudless blue above. Yes, it was magic, but it was not quite as magic as the satrap would have liked his people to believe.

But there was real magic in the witch's jar, and once again Eryn gave himself to the power of it, gave the blood of his that she held a little more of his will. When the smoke cleared from his body, he lifted his charred face up to the satrap and laughed a raw and scalded laugh.

"Very well. Very well. We have seen what you can do, satrap, but your time is over. Surrender, sir, for this is your last warning. If you give yourself to me now, I will only send you to jail. But if you try my patience one more time, I will give you death. Choose your course of action wisely."

Too outraged to even speak, this time the satrap leapt from the golden rail, and as he fell he called on all the

darkness he controlled, pulling it all to him. This time Eryn had to send his will to the jar early, for he did indeed recognize the demon forming before him, and there was only so much illusion his mind could make.

He did not watch as the demon rent him. He fled like the coward he was into the safety of the witch's jar, into the quiet darkness of his own blood—all but the tiniest bit of him, leaving just enough so that when the demon drew back and the people's screams died away, his ruined mouth on his severed head had strength enough to say their last words.

"It is over now, satrap. For you were right—I am not the prince, but his lover. But I am also the illusion he made to show the people how futile your power is, to show them how they have let a charlatan rule them all this time. Only the weakest of men must hold so tightly to maintain his rule. The true ruler, the rightful prince, knows he is but a servant to the land and lives not to pound his fist and fill his people with fear but opens his heart to restore his people with love. And it is with this love he will destroy you now and set the people free."

Eryn could feel the witch's irritation, because that had not been the speech she had given him. But it didn't matter. What mattered was that the people believed—and yes, he hoped it would help them accept a ruler with a male consort too. And as the people gasped in wonder, Eryn dared to hope that they did believe. Even before the white horse reared back and charged forward, even before Eryn leapt from the jar and sailed across the courtyard to his lover's heart, to the small, small pebble of his own blood the witch had hidden

inside of Wyn, he could tell the ruse had worked. Even before the witch released the enchantment over Wyn and used the power of Eryn's blood and sacrifice to make Wyn rise up, rise, rise, rise like a white and shining god towering over the satrap-turned-demon—even before that, Eryn knew the people believed. Eryn could feel the belief radiating off them, could see it on their faces, could see the hope the witch's parade had given them, what the illusions had given them. What visions magic could not weave, their minds crafted now.

But there was plenty of real magic yet to come. When they saw the beautiful, glorious young man reach down and swipe his snow white hand across the face of the screeching hell-beast, the magic that tricked their eyes did not let them see that this was, in fact, not at all what happened. The magic did not let them see that at best Wyn swelled to twice his size before the power of the blood Eryn gave him ran out. They did not see as Wyn shrank back, naked and frightened to death before the demon that had just shred his lover with his teeth. They did not see the witch leap out and catch the demon by its toe, did not see her whisper a word of a spell that freed it, which in turn inspired it to spin around and eat the satrap it before it vanished into the safety of the witch's basket. All they saw was the great god-like man step forward with his slender, elegant form and trample the shrinking demon beneath his foot.

They did not see a shaking, nearly weeping young man take the jar of blood from his godmother's hands before pouring it out over all the bits of Eryn scattered across the courtyard, did not see him beg tearfully for them to join back

## SWEET SON

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up to life; they only saw the god-man bend down and touch the ruined man with his snow-white hand, only saw him lift the severed, burned head and brush his rosy lips across the face. Then they saw the man who had ridden the horse—the horse who had turned out to be a god—rise up from his own ashes and go joyfully into the arms of his lover, the queen's sweet son, the legendary ruler of the land, the prince foretold by prophecy to come.

They didn't see the prince sob in relief. They did not see Eryn, resurrected, wipe his own eye before kissing Wyn's hair and urging him, along with the scores of the pasha's soldiers appearing from the crowd, into the open doors of the palace, where Wyn's mother stood, arms open, tears streaming down her face. They saw only the great white light and the rainbow arc out across the sky, taking the god-prince and his lover high, high away to the castle in the clouds at the top of a shining mountain.

They saw only what the pasha, who was hiding in the bell tower at the top of the satrap's palace, wanted them to see, for he truly was a great magician, a man especially skilled in the art of illusion.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE CASTLE IN THE CLOUDS

On a sunny summer afternoon, Eryn leaned back in his desk chair, reached over to the couch beside him, and caressed his true love's foot. "I think," he said, "that I would like to go to bed."

Wyn, who had been lost in the documents he had been reading, lifted his head and blinked in confusion. "Bed?" He looked outside to the sun beating fiercely across the balcony, beating back the mountain mist and revealing the golden leaves of the trees which surrounded it. "Are you mad? Four heads of state are waiting to see me, my mother has thrown another of her teas, and you want to go to *bed*?"

"Yes." Eryn turned in his chair and leaned on his elbows as he gave his lover a very hard and level stare. "That is exactly what I want to do."

Desire curled in his belly as he watched the prince before him give way to the submissive lover beneath, but it had been a very trying week for them all, and the office of the prince had its talons in deep into Wyn. "It's not possible. Perhaps later, but now—"

"Now," Eryn interrupted sharply, "you will put down your papers, walk down the hallway to our bedroom, and lie back on the bed with your pretty legs spread wide, because I

have use for your snug little hole. Your mouth may stay shut, at least until I decide I'd like to see my cock inside it."

As Eryn watched the flush spread across Wyn's fair cheeks, as he saw the longing war with duty, he cursed himself, because he had been right—he'd let Wyn go without surrender too long. It didn't matter that it was difficult to play secretary to a godlike prince and read the right moments to drag him into submissive release all at once; that was the lot he'd signed on for, and he'd let things slip. Well, he'd make it up to him. Wyn would just be a bit late to his mother's tea party, and he'd have to arrive in long sleeves. And a high collar.

And he'd need to have a cushion. Though it might be safer if he just planned to stand.

To make it all the better for his sweet love, Eryn did not give Wyn a chance to comply; he simply rose, swung his husband up over his shoulder, and carried the untouchable, mythical monarch down the hall. The servants and retainers, to their credit, pretended the prince and his consort were invisible, having seen this play too often to know better than to listen to Prince Wyn's pleas for assistance or carry out his instructions for violence against his secretary. These were the moments, they knew, it was best to simply get out of the way.

And Eryn knew once the door to the bedroom closed, once he thrust Wyn onto the bed and wrenched open his robe, once he tore the last of the prince away, that Wyn, sweet Snow, his dear lover would let go with a sigh, and this is exactly what he did. Eryn claimed him with a punishing kiss, and Wyn let go further, letting the weight of rule, the



burden of myth, and the care for thousands slide away with his clothes.

“Eryn,” Wyn whispered, gasping in pleasure as Eryn nipped at his flesh. “Love.”

“Give yourself to me,” Eryn whispered, pushing his own devotions for later. This time was for Wyn, now. “Give yourself to me. You are nothing else now. You are mine—mine alone.”

“Yes,” Wyn cried, rising up to meet his lover’s body, surrendering his will with a smile. “Yes.”

And as Eryn carried Wyn away once again on a tide of passion, he surrendered also, giving his heart to his true love there in their castle in the clouds, where for the rest of their lives the two of them lived happily ever after.

HEIDI CULLINAN has always loved a good love story, provided it has a happy ending. She enjoys writing across many genres but loves above all to write happy, romantic endings for LGBT characters because there just aren't enough of those stories out there. When Heidi isn't writing, she enjoys cooking, reading, knitting, listening to music, and watching television with her family. Heidi also volunteers frequently for her state's LGBT rights group, One Iowa, and is proud to be from the first Midwestern state to legalize same-sex marriage.

Visit Heidi's web site at <http://www.heidicullinan.com> and her blog at <http://amazoniowan.livejournal.com/>.

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