

HEART SENSE



KL RICHARDSSON

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the author or the publisher.

Heart Sense

PRIZM

An imprint of Torquere Press, Inc.

PO Box 2545

Round Rock, TX 78680

Copyright 2007 © by KL Richardsson

Cover illustration by Pluto

Published with permission

ISBN: 978-1-60370-478-6, 1-60370-478-7

www.prizmbooks.com

www.torquerepress.com

All rights reserved, which includes the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever except as provided by the U.S. Copyright Law. For information address Torquere Press, Inc., PO Box 2545, Round Rock, TX 78680.

First Prizm eBook Printing: September 2008

Printed in the USA

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware the this book is stolen property. It was reported as “unsold and destroyed” to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this “stripped book”.

HEART SENSE
KL RICHARDSSON

ILLUSTRATIONS
BY PLUTO



For Glenna, who knows the world almost better than I do.

For Alia, who whipped the characters, especially Mikael, into shape.

And for Tim, who didn't laugh. Too much.

GLBT YA Books from Prizm

Banshee by Hayden Thorne
Changing Jamie by Dakota Chase
City/Country by Nicky Gray
Heart Sense by KL Richardsson
I Kiss Girls by Gina Harris
Icarus in Flight by Hayden Thorne
Masks by Hayden Thorne
Staged Life by Lija O'Brien
The Water Seekers by Michelle Rode

Chapter One

Katjin hummed to himself, letting the city noises distract him from his chores. Even in their small camp, Apa still piled chores on him. It was probably fair, since it was just the two of them on the road. He still wished that Apa would lay off a little sometimes. It almost seemed like his father deliberately made up chores to keep Katjin in camp. He couldn't get into *that* much trouble strolling through the city streets, and it wasn't as if they were in one of the really dangerous cities anyway. This town was barely more than a collection of houses and shops that clustered around the mouth of the harbor. Most of the inhabitants were fishermen and crafters. He still wasn't entirely sure why they would need the selection of nets Apa brought to show them, since they could probably make their own just as easily. But Apa swore they were the best nets, and his father should know. He was the trader, after all.

If some of their cargo hadn't seemed so random, so oddly chosen, Katjin wouldn't have made so much of it. They carried pearl rings and other trinkets to the coast, trading them for some of those fancy headscarves the farmers' wives of the Lowlands liked to wear when they worked in the fields. They brought tapestries and robes down from the plains for curious Lowlanders who wanted to own a piece of the 'barbarian' past. Apa had been speaking for moons about a deal involving Highlands wool, something even the most daring trader didn't usually try for. No one went into the Highlands. Not if they could help it.

At least they had a couple more days here. If he tried, he could probably sneak out later and meet some of the local fellas, even though Apa didn't encourage too much of that. Katjin still wasn't sure if it was because he always chased after the fellas, or because there was some ancient Lowland prejudice against it. There had been a couple Lowlanders, here and there, ones who had actually seemed interested in him as a person, and not just an

exotic Clansman. Those kinds of fellas seemed to be few and far between. It was too bad that the girls all drove him crazy.

“C’mon, Kat. Time to pack up.”

Apa came striding into the yer just as Katjin was folding his clean clothes. He’d taken advantage of the sunny weather to try and wash some of their dirtier breeks and shirts while Apa handled negotiations with the merchants here in town.

“We’re leaving already?” Usually Apa gave him a day or two notice. Not that they had a schedule to follow; they were freelance traders, after all, reporting to no one but themselves. “Your robe is still damp.”

Apa shucked out of the robe he was currently wearing, balling it up and tossing it on his pallet in the corner of the yer. “It’ll dry as we ride. Come. Time to move.”

He eyed Apa skeptically, but did as he was told. His father was in a habit of not telling him everything. It was possibly because of the ‘paths that patrolled the city streets, hunting down every thought or emotion that might bring harm to the empire. Or it could even be that it was just time for them to leave. They were Clanfolk after all, not always welcomed in the more ‘civilized’ cities of the Lowlands. While there hadn’t been war between the plains and the Lowlands for generations, the Lowlanders were still slow to forget. Katjin couldn’t blame them; hordes of barbarians on horseback, all wielding vicious bows and knives, would be rather fixed in his memory. And while the Empire tried to promote unity and brotherhood amongst its people, that still didn’t mean it happened. Especially with the how rarely the two people interacted. Clanfolk stayed to the plains, and Lowlanders remained in their towns. It was simple as that.

“Any reason why?” Katjin couldn’t help asking, quickly tossing the rest of their clothes in a few saddlebags. The yer itself wouldn’t even take half a hand-span to take down, even once they folded up the woven horsehair panels and rolled up the lattice of flexible willow branches. As it was now, the sun hung about three hand-span from the horizon, meaning they could be back on the road by dark.

“No reason,” came Apa’s curt answer. He was already rolling up the pallets, putting them aside to be loaded on the packhorse.

Over the years, Katjin had learned to estimate when they’d overstayed their time in town. Apa’s goods were always welcomed, and his half-blood son was always welcomed with them, showing that he really did have a legitimate tie to the Lowlands. But, inevitably, someone always started drinking, and always made a remark that either fired Apa up or

made him deadly quiet in his anger. His father tended to be mild-mannered in most things, genial as any trader should, but when something frustrated or infuriated Apa, he held the thing in his jaw until he shook it to death.

Katjin sighed. He hadn't been that fond of Alanisport anyway. It was a smaller town, even for their out-of-the-way treks. And there had been a few too many 'paths around to make either of them comfortable. 'Paths meant Katjin spent most of the time muttering or humming under his breath, giving him an air of craziness. He wondered what his reputation was now, in the Lowlands, since Nolan Redwind and his half-blood son were rather well-known in their own trading circles.

At least it wasn't something they'd have to worry about anymore. This was their last stop before heading to the plains, and he was right sick of the Lowlands rain and constant winter gloom. He could almost feel the spring sunshine warming his face, the damp earth under his feet, the smell of Meke's fry bread.

"Be ready soon, Apa," he called as Apa left the yer. Just a bit more, and then they'd be free on the road again.

Springtime on the plains. Nothing could possibly be better, especially after a moon span in a dirty, crowded town. He'd never understand how anyone could live like that: on top of their friends and family in small, stone houses; the ghosts of thousands of fires blackening the ceiling and the smells of a thousand years clogging your nose. You couldn't feel the wind in those houses, even with the shutters opened. You couldn't smell the outside, the surroundings--not that the pisspot of the city, with its dirt and moldering rubbish were worth smelling. So many people cramped into one space, surrounded by those high walls. No wonder Apa always insisted on staying outside of town. No wonder Apa had never forced the life of the Lowlands on him.

Springtime on the plains meant the heady warmth of the sun beating down on him, the muscles of his horse's back bunching as he rode after Apa across the grasslands. It was the scent of sun-bleached and rain-damp fodder, just coming out of the months and months of winter rains. Even the wet-animal smell that their yer sometimes got after moons of rain was preferred to the smells of the city, especially if he was trapped inside the yer for a moon at a time on the edge of some city, as often happened when the rains came

to the Lowlands. Springtime on the plains meant going home, back to Meke and Febe and the rest of their family for a much-needed rest. Even if it was only half a moon's span of rest. He wouldn't even mind an entire span, one full moon to the next, if he could stand his family for that long.

It was high time for it, too; winter rains would soon enough give way to the humid heat of summer. At that point, Katjin would gladly trade the robe off his back for the cool, high pastures of spring camp, a welcomed relief.

Katjin hummed softly to himself as they rode along, trying to keep the rhythm of the bells that were tied to the saddle and bridle of both their horses. He could tell it was annoying Apa, from the hunched shoulders and the tightness around his father's mouth. Even Apa's dark hair seemed to be pulled unusually tight, tied back from his dark-tanned face. Usually, his father didn't seem to mind Katjin's off-key humming. Half of the time, they even sang together. They were traders, after all, so it wasn't like they had to rely on stealth as they rode between the cities of the Lowlands and the grasslands of the Horse Clans. Apa even said that his and Katjin's singing probably drove the bandits away.

Not that Apa was a traditional trader, really. Not like the ones that moved between the cities of the Lowlands. They didn't haul wagonloads of goods with them on their seasonal treks across the Empire. Sometimes, Apa might have a packhorse or two to carry their wares between the places they visited, but it was never more than just the two of them and their horses. Apa seemed to deliberately choose goods that were small and portable, like the infamous rugs that the villagers wove on the Lowlands/Clan borders. Katjin would've thought that carrying the occasional large item would look less obvious, since he'd had his suspicions for a while now about what Apa *actually* traded. The romantic in him sometimes wondered if Apa were some kind of spy for the Empire. Or against it, since Apa seemed to associate with those the Empire might deem 'dangerous' sorts. They seemed to stay a lot longer than most traders would, even traders who were wooing reluctant merchants. He and Apa could be in one town for up to two moons spans, which was longer than they even stayed on the plains.

When Katjin was younger, he hadn't really thought about their unbelievably good luck on the road. Now, he wondered sometimes if Apa had made some kind of a pact with a witch on one of his rare visits to the Highlands, since they'd never encountered bandits or anything like that. Or were questioned by the Empire. Not that there were many bandits, what with the Empire's 'path-led army hunting down anyone who ever had an evil

thought or feeling in their lives, ancestors bless the Empire and their foresight for this. Empire citizens, from the smallest villages on the shore to the vast Horse Clan grasslands, never had to fear for their lives. Their thoughts, maybe, but never their own mortality. Not unless they had anything to hide.

It was when you had something to hide that it really mattered, which is why he wondered about Apa sometimes. Their trade routes always varied to the point that Katjin was never quite sure where they were going next; they never visited the same city over the course of a year. There had been plenty of times they had left in the middle of the night, but Apa always swore it was so that they could get a headstart on the day's ride.

Katjin wondered who Apa was trying to protect sometimes: himself, or Katjin. There were 'paths, aye, moreso here than on the plains, but it wasn't as if they ventured anywhere near the capital. After Apa's one and only all-out fit at Katjin's suggestion to head to the capital, Katjin had realized that his father probably had a reason or two to want to stay away from there. On good days, Katjin convinced himself that it was just because of all the 'paths the Emperor tended to keep around him, and the sheer numbers of military personnel that constantly patrolled the area. On bad days, well, Katjin just hoped that Apa wouldn't get them both hung for treason.

He wasn't an idiot. He did realize that Apa was probably up to something nefarious and that it would eventually catch up with them. You didn't dance with the Empire and not expect them to notice. It was easier, sometimes, just to pretend that everything was okay and normal, especially if you ran across a patrol of 'paths. Katjin liked his life, as secretive as Apa could be sometimes.

Not that Katjin liked to think about it. Thinking about things like that, especially anywhere near the trade cities, usually ended with an overnight stay at one of the local military encampments, a thought-sense rummaging around in your head, or a heart-sense examining every feeling you'd ever experienced. Apa said it wasn't a pleasant experience, though Katjin was really curious about how Apa actually knew that. True, it wasn't an experience he exactly wanted first-hand knowledge of, but it would help if Apa actually gave him information occasionally. Maybe when he was a grown up, since fifteen apparently wasn't old enough to know. Stupid fathers who thought they knew what was best, especially if they didn't bother telling their kids what exactly it *was* that was best.

"How long are we staying with Meke and Febe?" Katjin asked, trying another tactic to get his Apa's usual good humor back. His mouth watered at the thought of all the white

food he'd missed over the past two months. Cheese and yogurt just didn't taste the same in the cities. Not like it did on the plains.

Apa looked uncomfortable, his usual expression when it came to their family. He knew it had something to do with his ama, and the fact that Meke and Febe had never quite agreed with Apa marrying someone outside of the Horse Clans. It probably also had to do with the fact that Apa had never settled down, not like a proper son of the plains. Luckily, most of the disagreements between his grandparents and his father seemed to focus on Apa's own failings, and not Katjin's. But his failings as a son of the Clanfolk were completely different from Apa's, and one more thing he tried not to dwell on for too long.

Sometimes, on nights when Apa'd had too much wine or fermented milk, his father would question their way of doing things. He would wonder if he'd raised Kat right by never providing a home for him, or if he'd ruined his only son, cursing him with the same restlessness he felt. Because Katjin knew he felt that same restlessness. Knew that once he'd spent a moon or more in one place, it was time to move on. Because who wanted to know other people that well? Who wanted to depend on other people that much? Who wanted to get involved in a life as complicated as one of Meke's fantastic tapestries?

He loved his solitary life.

Those few moon spans a year on the plains were just enough for Katjin to get his fill of Clan food and life before moving on again. Apa's family was large and far too loud for Katjin's taste. They were always incredibly kind to him and spoiled him rotten, which he never minded, but there was something to be said for the peace of the road. Something to be said for silence, where he could hear his own thoughts. Especially since, in such a close-knit camp as Meke and Febe's, your business was everyone else's business. And everyone tried to help you, no matter if you wanted it or not.

"About that, Kat..." Apa trailed off, still avoiding Katjin's eyes. He seemed more focused on his horse's neck and the bright bells that dangled from his mare's bridle. "Remember how I always promised you a summer in one place? Without traveling?"

Katjin eyed Apa suspiciously. "Maybe." He could remember that promise--Apa made it four years ago, when Katjin was eleven and tired of moving from place to place every five minutes. He'd whined about it for a whole summer then, and had pretty much given up hope of it ever happening, not with the way Meke and Apa argued over everything.

Apa coughed, playing with his reins. If Katjin hadn't known better, he would've sworn

that Apa was stalling, or nervous. His apa never got nervous, not even the rare times they'd actually been stopped by the cavalry. Katjin had almost wet his breeks the last time, when all the captain had done was stare at both him and Apa. "How'd you like that chance? Having Meke and Febe all to yourself? Getting to know your cousins better?" His father's dark eyes still avoided his.

Spending more time with his cousins had never exactly been high on Katjin's list of things he wanted to do in his life. They were nice enough, most of them clustered somewhere around his own age. And they all seemed to look the same: dark Clan eyes; the thick, stiff dark hair that Kat had; the same slant to their broad-cheeked faces under the same gold-brown tan. The only difference between them seemed to be the brightly colored robes they wore and the length of the two hair-tails. Then there were breasts on girls. Kat still didn't quite understand anything with breasts.

The girls still confused him, but the fellas were all right. A little too concerned with the horses that were the pride and joy of every Clanfolk, but still, nice enough. Well, maybe not Soren. But Soren was the leader of the pack, as far as anyone was concerned, and he'd had a vendetta out for Katjin from the moment he was born. Kat still wasn't sure why, since he was patient enough with the other fellas, even with the girls. Luckily, there were so damned many of them--seven boys, all within five years of him, all loud and racing around on their ponies, constantly challenging each other to some stupid dare or another. Katjin knew it was all preparation for going into the cavalry someday, since the Horse Clans provided the backbone of the Empire's horse soldiers, the lightly-armored cavalry that served as the Empire's mobile security forces, but it was still overwhelming. Especially for someone who spent most of his time on the road, with only one other person for company.

"If I said no?" Katjin said carefully, trying to make it more of a question than an answer. "I thought we were going to the Highlands this summer. I'm old enough now, almost an adult."

Apa would never take him before now--something about how superstitious the Highlandfolk and how much they didn't like outsiders. He snorted to himself. People thought that his family was clannish. That's the way it had always been, though--Clan with Clan, Lowlanders with Lowlanders, Highlandfolk with Highlandfolk. Until the Empire decided to make one country out of all three. All three peoples still debated the 'rightness' of that particular decision, even if they all admitted begrudgingly to the benefits.

“Plans changed, Kat. I’m sorry, but it would be easier if I went to the Highlands myself this summer.” Apa at least looked apologetic about it, now that he was willing to look Katjin in the eye.

“Because there’s so much in the Highlands to be afraid of.” If you could be afraid of a bunch of shepherds and their flocks; nothing grew in the hills except sheep and madmen. There were also those stories about the occasional witch, if the rumors were to be believed. But that was kid stuff, or so he kept telling himself. Then there were other stories, worse stories, about the Hill witches actually bedding the Shahi demons that lived on the other side of the mountains. Three-headed, pointed-eared, flame-winged, red-haired demons. If the Empire’s ‘paths were scary, the Shahi were far worse. No one knew exactly what the Shahi could do, except that it probably involved skinning babies and all kinds of rape and murder.

Maybe he didn’t want to go to the Highlands after all.

But, that was the beauty of wandering the roads and never being tied down. You could visit all these places and decide for yourself if the Shahi were really demons, which they probably were, and if the Highlandfolk really did unspeakable acts to their sheep like everyone said, which they probably did. Maybe it was Apa’s fault that Katjin couldn’t settle anyplace for too long. Ever since his ama died, ten years back now, he’d been riding at Apa’s side on pretty much every trading run that Apa went on. Maybe it did encourage Katjin to get bored of people pretty quickly, especially once he got to know them inside and out, this included the seven cousins he tried so hard to avoid. But all that movement, that constant motion, made life exciting.

“There will be a time,” Apa often said, “when you’ll have to get used to staying in one place. When you’ll have to face people and learn to deal with them. To not run away from them.” And then they would ride off for another town several days’ ride away. Apa wasn’t one for commitment, for staying in one place. So it was no surprise that Katjin had little patience for it either.

Life in the Clans, as much as he loved his family and their traditions, was boring. It was peaceful, and it was free from ‘paths, but it was isolated. The Horse Clans had once been the scourge of the Empire, riding down on the Lowlanders who dared to encroach upon their grasslands. That era was long since gone, and now all the Clanfolk concerned themselves with were their horses and the sons they gave to the cavalry. The same could be said for the Highlands, concerned with only their sheep. Not that anyone knew for sure,

since few went there--certainly none of Katjin's cousins. Apa had promised for ages to take him there. It wasn't dangerous--too dangerous, at least--and the demon forests beyond the Highlands were far worse, by anyone's reckoning.

Which was why, as traders, he and Apa traveled the breadth of the Empire to learn the news and pass on what they knew. But they still wore, with great pride, the embroidered robes and peaked caps of the Clanfolk, the felted boots with the turned-up toes, the bright blues and greens that so clearly identified them as Clan, because Apa wasn't afraid of where he came from. He was just scared that that was all he would be capable of: horses, sons, cheese and fry bread. It was a life of simplicity and drudgery, and it was the last thing Katjin wanted. He'd learned that from Apa himself.

There had to be a reason why Apa was willing to subject him to that, though, especially when Apa couldn't take it himself for more than a moon. Katjin tugged on his reins, pulling his horse to a stop. "Unless you're not going to the Highlands," he said suddenly, looking at the back of Apa's graying head. "You're going to the Shahi." This time, there was no question about it. Not with the way Apa's long fingers still fidgeted with the reins. Not with how he avoided Katjin's eyes.

Especially since Apa refused to answer.

No answer came for a long time. As hard as Katjin tried, all he could hear was the plodding of their horses' hooves and the soft sounds of the wind among the grasses of the plains. Not that he wanted to hear anything on the wind. Any voices might mark him as a 'path--a thought-sense or worse--and that would put him straight into service of the Empire. Not that the Empire was bad, he carefully amended in his thoughts. Just to be on the safe side.

"Remember what I told you about thinking before you spoke?" was Apa's first response to Katjin's question, as if he was considering how much to give away. Apa always said that if you didn't know, the Empire couldn't torture it out of you. And those words themselves were dangerous enough, if the Empire sent one of its 'paths after Apa.

"Some thoughts you shouldn't speak," Katjin repeated dutifully, staring down at the reins he held in his hands. They were long-fingered hands, because he was thin and weedy like Apa. He was still hoping for that long-promised growth spurt. "And some thoughts you shouldn't even think." Unless you were deep in the heart of the plains, where no 'path was within a four-day's ride to hear you. "But Apa--"

There was still some question about how much the 'paths could actually read into you.

Could wearing a hat or some kind of scarf shield you, which would explain the numbers of scarves they tended to trade in the smaller Lowlands villages? Could you hide your thoughts by thinking of something else, like supper or the next camp? Would thinking nonsense thoughts protect you in the long run? But because all ‘paths served the Empire, and were trained from birth to die for the Empire, no one ever wanted to get close enough to ask. There were whispers, on the plains, of renegade ‘paths that fled over the Highlands, but you wouldn’t hear about them in the Lowland cities. No one in the south questioned the ‘paths, for fear of their minds and their lives.

“You’re staying with your grandparents, Kat,” Apa said quietly. “No sneaking after me this time. It’s not...” He trailed off; there was that damned secrecy again.

Katjin rolled his eyes. He’d been seven--seven years old!--the last time he tried to sneak after Apa. So he might’ve had a habit of running after his father whenever Apa tried to leave him in camp. After Ama died, there had been a huge family row about what to do with him, and even then, he’d thought it wasn’t fair for them to decide. So he’d taken matters into his own hands, caught his pony from the family herd, and followed after Apa’s tracks the two or three times Apa had attempted to leave him. Not that Meke and Febe or Apa had particularly liked that stunt. Particularly after the first panic he’d caused, right in the middle of a Gathering, too. One of the family outriders had hunted him down and dragged him back to camp, howling and screeching like a Shahi demon. After the third time, Apa didn’t even bother trying to leave him at camp anymore.

This was different, somehow. This was a different adventure entirely, one that almost warranted sneaking after Apa later. The tracks couldn’t be too hard to follow, not if Apa was on horseback. Katjin might not be the best tracker, but not even a Clan horse could move without a trace. Apa did seem more likely to let him go along when he just showed up, because both he and Apa knew exactly what they both meant to each other. What would Katjin’s life be without Apa, alone in the same camp year after year? It had to be a really good reason, if Apa was willing to put up with the threat of Katjin following behind, even with his limited navigation skills.

“You are going to the Shahi!” Katjin said, everything suddenly clicking. “I knew it! I--”

“Kat.” One word was all it took for Apa to show how serious he was. If Apa really was going into witch country and beyond, to bargain or trade with the demons that lived in the forests there... “I’m sorry, Kat,” he said quietly, reining in his own horse. “I can’t take you with me this time. It’s too risky.”

“Too risky, or you’re just chicken?” Katjin asked. “Dump me off with Meke and Febe where it’s safe?” He snorted, kicking his horse into a lope. He knew he was behaving like a child, but he just didn’t care at this point. If Apa was going to treat him like a child, then he was going to act like one. “Glad to see you have that much faith in me.”

“Katjin!” his Apa called out as Katjin rode past. “Ancestors damn it all, Kat--”

“Not good enough this time!” Katjin yelled back as he rode off.

Except that he forgot, as he was apt to do, how little he knew about navigation, even on the seas of grass that made up the plains. True Clanfolk, whose blood wasn’t tainted by the Lowlands, could merely look at the curve of a river or the rise of a hill and tell exactly what family’s migration area they were in, and how far it was to their own family’s grazing grounds. The best Kat could do was trace the Redwind family’s path by following their constellation in the sky. And anyone, child or idiot, could find the jagged line of five red stars that looked like a lightning bolt. Most Clan kids could also follow the invisible currents in the grass that would guide them home to their camp. At least he didn’t have any trees to worry about. He shuddered at the thought of the forest. Wind rustling in the tall grasses was peaceful. Wind howling through the scraggly branches of trees sounded as if Shahi demons were after him.

The sun hung high over his shoulder, coming down in the west, so he knew he was at least headed in the right direction. He’d occasionally see a single stunted tree clinging to the fold of a hillside, but none of them looked familiar. Especially since they all seemed to twist in on themselves in the same way, drawing their scrawny green branches in close. He also knew enough not to founder his horse. Shanti could run like the wind and had an endurance that still amazed him, even lugging him, his light leather saddle, and all the camp gear Apa piled on her back. She was his lifeblood out here on the plains. She was the one who could best find water and who would find the most stable ground to sleep on. Ancestors’ hells, she could probably find her way to Meke and Febe if she wanted, even though he thought they were still a couple days’ ride away.

He heard a horse’s nicker coming from behind him--it didn’t sound like Apa’s mare, but it could have been that new packhorse they picked up in the east. Except it wasn’t the sound of one horse calling hello to its packmate. It was the sound of a challenge, a

stallion's piercing cry.

Katjin whirled Shanti around. Unless Apa had been joined by two others, the party of riders approaching him couldn't be who he thought it was. Especially since two of the horses were Lowland-bred: blockheaded, ugly brutes that were probably descended from draft horses. There was no doubting the robes though; two of the four riders wore the elaborate robes of Clanfolk. The other two were swaddled in some kind of cloak, only their faces visible. And as the riders drew closer, Katjin noticed how strange the two cloaked ones looked. Their faces were blank, expressionless. They seemed almost far away, as if their minds weren't quite inhabiting their bodies just now. Which could only mean one thing.

'Paths. And two cavalry riders with them.

He swallowed, suddenly feeling hot and sticky in his robe. He tried to loosen the snug collar of his shirt underneath his robe, but nothing seemed to help. Shanti sensed his nervousness and started dancing about underneath him. It was all Katjin could do to keep his seat and his calm. So he started to hum under his breath, one of the nonsense songs Meke liked to sing. By the time the riders were within earshot, he was almost singing at the top of his lungs.

"Ancestors bless," one of the cavalymen said, riding close. He held out his arm to Katjin from a horselength away.

Katjin reached out his own arm, careful that his branded right wrist, the one marking him as a non-'path, was visible. "Ancestors bless," he replied, trying to keep his voice level. "What, um, what--"

The soldier on the right, the one who'd spoken, nodded his head toward Katjin and snorted in the direction of the second soldier. The second soldier snickered back.

"Guess you haven't seen a 'path, eh, lad?" the second one asked, black eyebrows raised above dubious dark eyes. Katjin wished he could look that competent or that threatening.

"No?" was the best response he could give. "My apa--I'm waiting for my apa."

The first soldier seemed to have some pity. He nudged his horse closer, patting Katjin on the shoulder. "Easy, lad. They won't bite."

Except even the soldiers seemed to keep their distance. Their horses revolved a clear five or six horselengths away from the 'paths at all times, and both soldiers were careful not to even touch the 'paths' horses.

"What family are you, lad?" the first soldier continued. "You seem a long way from

Spring Camp.”

“Redwind.” They always said you should answer the truth around ‘paths. “Redwind family.”

The second soldier stroked his bare chin, since no proper Clanfolk would even think about wearing a beard. The soldier looked thoughtful, then his eyes narrowed in something resembling suspicion. “Doesn’t Redwind family have their Spring Camp back eastward?”

Katjin closed his eyes, not knowing what else to do. He could either admit that he had no idea where he was going, looking like a complete idiot, or he could lie in front of ‘paths, which would mean possible arrest, or worse. He could feel the sweat collecting in his armpits, puddling at the small of his back. Grown-ups made choices all the time, but this time, he wanted Apa to do it for him.

“He’s lost,” one of the ‘paths spoke in a quiet voice. “Leave him be.”

The second soldier coughed, almost as if he was trying not to laugh. “C’mon, Reik, let the poor boy go. He’s got to have some pride left at the end of the day.”

The first soldier glared at Katjin. “See it doesn’t happen again.”

Katjin nodded. “I’ll just wait here for my apa,” he said, wanting to sink down into the ground and never show his face again. Maybe hiding on the plains for a summer wouldn’t be so bad.

Without another word, the party rode off eastward, away from Katjin. He just sat on Shanti, watching them go, trying not to think of what ‘paths this far in the plains might mean.

And he waited until the sun had dropped two handspans in the sky, sitting right where he was. Apa would find him eventually. Which is why it didn’t surprise him when he heard the jingle of bells and soft clodding footsteps approaching from behind him. In fact, Katjin sighed in relief at the sound before he remembered how angry he was at Apa, and how much everything was Apa’s fault.

“You’re going the wrong way,” Apa said in a mild voice as he rode by Katjin. “You should have turned west at the last tree.”

Katjin followed right behind Apa’s horse, silent. Because no words were needed. Not right now. Not til they got to Meke and Febe’s.

Two days of riding, two days of no conversation, two days of humming to himself, just to drive Apa mad. It was almost a relief when Katjin recognized the stream they usually camped by in spring. It was more of a relief that he did recognize it, even after a year's absence.

Spring Camp had always been his favorite. Certain times of the year were better than others at some camps, especially when the fierce, cold winds came off the mountains to the northwest. Spring Camp was up in the high pastures, the rolling hillocks that weren't quite true Highlands--at least, not to those who cared. It was quieter than Winter Camp, down on the plains closest to the Lowland cities, but it was still far from dull. In Winter Camp, or when they rode through the Empire where the 'paths had a bit freer reign, Apa always warned Katjin to keep his thoughts to himself. But at Spring Camp, Katjin felt a little bit easier about what opinions he entertained. Maybe his thoughts did border on rebellious, especially when it came to trying to figure out what Apa was up to. He tried not to be too curious about anything while they were in the Lowlands: the fellas, their destination, Apa's ulterior motives. At Spring Camp, and further into summer, it was a different choice entirely.

Not that Katjin ever really had an idea of where they were going. He was mostly just along for the ride, and for Apa's credibility, Apa had joked once. That had never made a difference before. He'd always accepted that he was along to make Apa look more credible. Clanfolk, especially those not with the cavalry, weren't usually seen outside the plains. But a Clanfolk peddler and his half-Clan son, even one with as good a reputation as Apa had? Especially one with a son who obviously showed some Lowlands blood? That was different. Katjin knew his green eyes opened up all kinds of doors to Apa, since there was still distrust between the Clanfolk and the Lowlanders. He knew his worth to Apa, which made getting left behind all the more painful this time.

"It's not like I'm some kid," Katjin said finally, scowling at his horse's ears as she grazed. Shanti only flicked an ear back at him in disinterest.

You are never really a kid, out on the plains, not like the soft-bodied cityfolk. Yeah, maybe Apa questioned Katjin's skill with the Clan short sword and bow sometimes, but it wasn't as if Katjin was a complete lackwit with weapons. He was decent enough with his knife, since Apa had put it into his hand almost before he could walk. And no one could pull him from Shanti's back--if they could even catch her. For all the Clan horses, Shanti was one of the fleetest mares his family had ever bred. Plains horses were bred for speed

and endurance, and Apa had made sure that both he and Katjin had a couple of the best. Good traders always had the fastest horses, just because you never knew when you would need to run, or when your luck would run out.

He stroked Shanti's silky neck. He could never forget that the horse was the lifeblood of the Clan. Not when she'd carried him so far. Not when she would continue to be his partner in life. He might not have the almost 'pathic bond that some of his cousins had with their horses, but he did appreciate his little mare and how much he owed her, especially as lack-witted as he seemed to be.

"It's not your abilities I'm worried about," Apa tried finally as they rode into Meke and Febe's camp. "This isn't something you should be involved in, Katjin. Not at your age."

Because fifteen wasn't old enough for anything. Somehow, Katjin knew that if Apa found out about his run-in with the two cavalymen, all chances of going on the journey were off. Nor would he, if Katjin had his choice.

Every child of the Horse Clans learned from an early age how to defend themselves. Not because they had to, but in the off chance that they might go into the Empire cavalry someday. No 'paths freely roamed Horse Clan lands, not the way they did in the Lowlands. For the price of their privacy, the Horse Clans had promised the Empire full support in first pick of soldiers and horses whenever they had need. There hadn't been a border war in the Empire in just about seventy-five years, but the Empire itself was always prepared. And with borders that strung out from the Highlands of the north-west, an old volcanic range that few dared to cross, to the coastal cities half a moon span's ride away, the Empire had a need for a mobile and fast armed force. Since no 'paths had figured out how to instantly move from place to place. Yet.

That didn't mean that all Clanfolk were loyal to the Empire. Just like it didn't mean that all Clan boys dreamed of riding with the prestigious cavalry. Apa had never been like the others in the family. Apa had always had ideas of his own. Kat only hoped they were thoughts of dissatisfaction, and not the actual takedown of the Empire that he occasionally thought Apa was harboring. Discontent was one thing, but actually wanting to get rid of the 'paths, no matter how much you didn't let yourself question their usefulness? That was treason. The mere thought of treason made his stomach coil up in knots; that would mean the end of everything. Apa wasn't that stupid. Of course, for all he knew, Apa could just be avoiding the annual taxes that every merchant had to pay to

the Empire for the upkeep of the roads they traveled on and the cavalry that protected them. Tax fraud was so much more acceptable. Of course, a scarf conspiracy, to provide every paranoid Lowlander with some sort of ‘path-blocking scarf was preferable.

“Is it treason now? And if it is, would you at least let me help, since it affects me too?” Katjin asked sharply, dismounting his horse and doing his best to put on a happy face for Meke, and not to fall over his own two feet. He heard Apa suck in a breath at that, undoubtedly getting ready to either rail into him in denial, or own up to it. Not that Apa would do that in front of Meke and Febe, which meant that was the end of that conversation, for now.

As Katjin looked around, he tried not to be disappointed with what he saw. It was almost as if he’d never left. Meke and Febe’s camp looked exactly the same as last year: four large, round tents forming a square, their flaps all facing east, and the camp itself surrounded by dozens and dozens of horses. Katjin could see some of his cousins on herd duty, playing in and on the horses that made up Febe’s favorite herd.

“It’s about time you got here!” Meke said, sweeping Katjin up into a hug almost before his feet touched the ground. She looked the same as she had the last time he saw her: short and round, with a bright smile and brighter dark eyes. Her hair was silver now, her brown skin faded and wrinkled by the sun, but she was still beautiful in his eyes. Maybe it was because of how much she loved him, or just because she was his grandmother, and the only mother he could remember.

She said, “I was almost beginning to worry, or to think that Kat had ridden off or something.” When Katjin and Apa failed to laugh at that, she gave them both a thoughtful look. “Though I’m guessing that’s not far from the truth.”

“Didn’t mention to Kat that he was staying here for the summer, eh, Nolan?” Febe asked, taking Katjin’s reins out of his hands. “Give the boy more credit than that, son.”

“If you think he’ll listen to you more than he’ll listen to me...” Apa said with a wave of his hand.

“He’ll figure it out eventually, Nolan,” Meke added reproachfully. “Katjin’s a smart lad--nearly sixteen now, which isn’t that much younger than you when you ran off on your fool’s quest.”

Apa sighed. “Can we not discuss this in the middle of camp?” Katjin noticed heads beginning to pop out of the other three tent-flaps, which meant that it was only a matter of time before the entire family came out to greet them. “I’d like to get settled before

supper.”

Meke hmmped a little before taking Apa by the arm. “Let’s get you cleaned at least, and you both look like you could use a bite. Supper’s still hours off yet.”

Katjin’s stomach rumbled in response. He glared down at his gut, even as Meke laughed.

“Don’t think I don’t know how to raise boys,” she said, hooking her free arm through his and leading both him and Apa to the tent. “Always hungry. I’m surprised we can keep food for more than a day, thanks to your cousins. A summer here won’t be so bad, Kat love.”

Katjin looked over his shoulder at the people falling out of the other three tents, only biding their time before they could pounce all over him. “I wouldn’t take any bets on that, Meke,” he muttered as she dragged him inside.

Truth be told, a bit of a wash and some fry bread in his stomach did make him feel a bit better. Meke had even produced a new robe for him to wear, taking his old, patched one outside for what she called ‘cleaning’, but probably meant turning over to one of his aunties to be made into rags. Apa tried his best to keep Katjin in decent robes, but they had ridden so far this past season that it had almost made it difficult to stop. And Katjin shot up at least two hands’ height in the past year. Breeks and shirts were one thing--he could usually just use Apa’s cast-offs, especially since Clan breeks tended to be long and full and tucked into the tops of your boots. But robes, since they had to be so much more hard-wearing, were something entirely different.

He felt almost like a new person, dressed in fresh clothes and with his face and hands washed. A full bath could wait til later, once he had a chance to head down to the stream. Chances were that his boy cousins would all follow him down, which didn’t bother him too much. There’d be the usual posturing, the usual comparing since they’d all probably grown since last year. But that also meant his sneaky looks wouldn’t have to be so sneaky. These were his cousins, the fellas he’d grown up with, but that still didn’t mean that he couldn’t look once in a while. Especially not if they were willing to display themselves like peacocks for him.

“There’s the Katjin grin that I’ve missed so much,” Meke said, kissing him on the cheek as she passed by and pushed more fry bread into his hands.

“Meke!” Katjin said, trying to hand the soft, doughy sweet back.

“Eat. You’re too skinny.” Meke’s own rather stout figure was proof of how much she

loved to cook, and how underfed she inevitably thought everyone was.

“Let’s look at you,” she said, pushing him back and turning him around in a small circle. “Ancestors, but we have to fatten you up, boy. You’ll never catch a good mate looking like a scarecrow. You as well,” Meke added in the direction of Apa. “Probably feeding him all sorts of rubbish on the road, ancestors know you never learned to cook properly...”

She moved around the yer, putting away what Katjin recognized as his tattered old clothes. “Ancestors bless, Nolan. I expect better of you than this. What kind of trader’s son looks like some Lowlands tinker?”

“He’s a boy,” Apa said gently, chewing on some frybread of his own. “Remember what boys do to their clothes? And how fast they grow? What’s the use of fancy trim if the clothes are as good as rags the next season?”

“You still have to take care of them,” Meke scolded gently, as she made her way toward the tent flap. “And you still have your pride as Clanfolk. Remember that, at least.”

Even though the thought of adventure was a lot more appealing than a summer with his grandparents, Katjin didn’t mind it so much right now. It wouldn’t be too bad; he had the cousins to run with, the horses to watch, maybe even a real horse of his own to break-not that he didn’t love Shanti. And there was something about being surrounded by his family’s tent, with its familiar smells and sounds wrapping around him like a blanket. This was the closest thing to home he’d ever known, and while he was grateful that he got to see everything he did, there was still something about home.

“So you’re off to the Highlands then?” Febe asked at supper, as they all sat around the main hearth eating that night’s stew. In the flickering light of the hearth, Katjin could see the sharp resemblance between Febe and Apa, even down to the same way their brown hair parted to the right and tended to fall out of its tails and into one eye. He could only hope he’d be as tall as either of them someday. At this point, he’d even settle for some of their measure in chest and shoulder. He was tired of looking like a weedy little boy.

“A trader from Johansport is interested in some wool,” Apa said, sounding as casual as Katjin had ever heard him. He could almost believe that Apa was on some innocent

errand for one of the big city merchants.

“Wool, eh?” Febe sounded skeptical as he sipped at a mug of beer. “You’re going to the right place for it.” Everyone, Lowlander and Clan alike, knew that the Hill sheep produced the best wool, and that the finest weavers were the ones living deep in the heart of the Highlands. Few merchants could be bothered to sell their wares though, because only certain traders would even go anywhere near the Highlands. They had a reputation for a reason, and not just because the Highlandfolk tended to be closed-mouthed toward any outsider.

“That’s why I wanted to leave Kat here this season. He doesn’t need to be dragged all over the Highlands after a deal that might not pan out,” Apa said, shaking Katjin out of his thoughts.

“Might not pan out,” Febe echoed. “Keep yourself safe as well, boy. If it’s not safe for the son, it might be equally dangerous to the father.”

Katjin hid a smile as his Apa rolled his eyes. At least parents never changed.

“It would be good for your boy there to spend a season with us again,” Febe continued. “Would do the young ones here a turn as well--too full of themselves for their own good. They need a spark like our Kat here to take them down a notch or two.”

Meke smiled, a calculating smile. “We can even bring him to the Gathering, introduce him to a few boys his own age--nice boys he’s not related to.”

Katjin almost choked at that. He could just see that happening too; Meke would drag him to every yer within a day’s ride if it meant she could introduce him to some nice boy he could settle down with. And probably would this summer, if he knew his Meke. He groaned. The fellas might be nice to look at, but there was still a bit of awkwardness to it. *My meke thinks you’d make a great partner for me. Can you make fry bread?* It was hard enough to make conversation with the boys in town, much less the boys of the Horse Clans. At least she’d given up on him settling down with some girl, especially after she found him and one of her best friend’s grandsons skinnydipping at the summer camp three years ago..

Apa ruffled Katjin’s brown hair, escaping from both the tail on the top of his head, and the more scraggly tail at the base of his neck; clan tails, one for the mane and one for the tail of the horses they raised. “He is a good lad, isn’t he?” There was quiet pride in Apa’s voice, something that made Katjin both uncomfortable to hear, and incredibly warm inside. A good lad, maybe, but he’d rather be considered a good man.

“A man, almost,” Meke said, setting a round of sweetbread in front of each of them. “Fifteen this year, aren’t you, Katjin?”

Katjin nodded around a mouthful of more fry bread, this time sweetened with honey. His birthday had passed just three moon spans ago, something he was hoping Apa hadn’t forgotten. Fifteen was a lot older than fourteen, and fifteen year olds were definitely old enough to go into the Highlands, if only Apa would agree to that.

“Fifteen?” Febe seemed surprised. “Almost time for you to think about settling down somewhere, Katjin. Or decide if you’re going to follow your father’s folly.” Febe never had approved of Apa raising Katjin on the road as he had, but Febe hadn’t exactly forgiven him for marrying an outlander either, especially one of the scorned cityfolk.

“Marriage,” Meke mused. “Or not,” she added hastily, noticing Apa’s look. Katjin couldn’t help blushing at that. He’d thought Apa hadn’t noticed where his attention strayed, since Apa seemed more concerned with keeping him away from the local fellas instead of the girls, especially when they were down in the Lowlands. The Empire presented a united set of beliefs that weren’t always recognized in the smaller villages. While the Clanfolk had no issues with the way he looked at boys, some of the Lowlanders might prefer it otherwise. Girls were nice and all. Boys were just nicer still. And didn’t have all those funny curvy bits that seemed to get in the way when you didn’t want them to.

“Fifteen is still young for thinking of partnership, especially permanent partnership.” Febe sent a glare in Apa’s direction, since Apa hadn’t been more than seventeen when he brought Katjin’s ama home. “But still, to think of what life you might want to live, lad.”

“Just because I give you this summer doesn’t mean you can have your sway over him,” Apa reminded Meke and Febe, something Katjin was grateful for. Not that he didn’t love his time on the plains, but to be stuck in this one spot, this one life for the rest of his years—that thought was agony.

“Just because you’ve had him these last ten years doesn’t mean he’s given up his right to a permanent home, Nolan,” Meke replied, her voice tight with some emotion.

“Ama--”

This was one more example of why they never spent more than a half moon or so at a time with Apa’s family. If Apa and Meke and Febe ever saw eye to eye on anything, especially on the first time discussing it, Katjin would probably die of shock. He didn’t need to see whatever ‘discussion’ was coming up this time.

“I’m off to bed then,” Katjin said quickly, swallowing the last of his bread and getting

to his feet. It was the last thing he wanted to admit to, especially if he was going to try to sneak out after Apa, but the long ride always seemed to take something out of him, and there was something about being back in the home tent--the closest thing to home he'd ever really known.

"Your corner's waiting for you," Meke said, rising as well. She kissed Katjin's cheek, pointing him toward the usual place where his pallet lay.

"Thanks, Meke," he said quietly, wanting to let her know that he did appreciate it, even if Apa sometimes didn't seem to.

She smiled then, a tired smile, but a smile nonetheless. "Anything for you, love."

"And you couldn't have waited another moon?" Meke's voice broke into Katjin's sleep. "You know who's on their way here, at this very minute."

"How was I supposed to know they'd come early this year?" Now it was Apa's voice, full of anger. "I'm not taking him with me, Ama. Not with where I'm going."

"So you'll leave him here instead," Febe said, joining in the conversation. "Known half-blood son of a suspected rebel, loose in a camp and a whole division of cavalry on their way..."

Katjin kept his eyes clenched shut, trying to relax his breathing. His corner was screened off by a light curtain, but the adults could still see shadows through it from the light of the fire. If he was quiet enough, they might not notice he was awake. But then, maybe if Febe and Meke didn't want him here, he could go with Apa after all.

"Safer for him--and you--here, than for him to come with me. Safer still, since he has better defenses than you do. He has learned something, these past ten years with me. Much as you don't want to admit it." He'd never heard that sour a tone coming out of Apa's mouth before. "Much as you approve of what I'm doing anyway."

"Mixing with others like that..." Meke trailed off. "Ancestors know, you should have settled long ago, taken another wife, and provided Katjin with the mother and family he needed. Do you think he'll ever be satisfied with life here? Or any other life without you?"

But nothing more was said after that. Or if there was, Katjin didn't notice. He fell back asleep. And by the time he woke up, hours later, it was only Febe and Meke in the tent, starting breakfast.

Seeing Katjin's disappointed look, Meke automatically handed him a cup of salty butter tea and a bit of cheese on bread. "Here, love," she said. "Eat before you wear away to nothing."

"So he left?" Katjin asked, alternating between sips of tea and bites of cheese and bread. "Never thought he was coward enough to avoid his own son."

Meke hit him lightly on the hand. "No disrespect for your ancestors, Katjin, even if your apa is being a coward."

Katjin looked up at Meke over the rim of his cup as she stirred a pot of stew on the fire. "You don't approve of him, do you?"

Meke looked up in surprise. "Not always," she said, obviously choosing her words carefully. "I would be happier if he settled here with the rest of the family. If he would provide you with a more stable life. But whether I approve or not of his life as a trader..." She shrugged. "Why don't you go out and see your cousins? I'm sure they could use some help."

Katjin rolled his eyes, taking one last gulp of tea and bite of bread. "Aye, Meke." That was a sure sign, if any, that the conversation was over.

There wasn't much for him to do now that they were coming into the long days of summer, other than watch the animals. It was the boys' only job during the day, other than practice their cavalry exercises. Though it could be worse. Katjin could have been assigned to the cow herds, like some of his cousins were. That didn't just include watching them. It also meant milking, cooling the milk, and helping the women make the yogurts and cheeses to see the Clanfolk through to autumn. Katjin didn't really envy them that. Cows smelled funny--worse than horses--and seemed even less tractable when it came to controlling them. At least a horse would listen, most of the time.

Men had the night watch, and spent their days out hunting if they were in need of meat. The goats and cattle weren't killed until fall, if they were killed at all, since there was no sense in wasting a thin cow that could be so much fatter by the time summer was over. It was the women who were busy now: checking the food stores, drying and salting anything that needed to be prepared for winter, making sure the tents and camp were in order. While the women did seem to get stuck with the menial chores in camp: gathering to the men's hunting, mending clothing while men tended to the leatherworking and harness-mending, it was also the women who started to break this year's crop of foals in spring. It was the women's gentle touch that first taught the horses to trust and love the Clanfolk as

much the Clanfolk loved and needed them. Jobs were divied up by strength, so that everything and everyone had its place in camp-life. Katjin just hoped it didn't take the rest of summer for him to find his.

Sure, there were always horses to train and drills to run through, but Katjin had never been as good at the trick-riding as his cousins, even before he became all feet and thumbs and limbs that never seemed to go where he told them. And while horses seemed to like him well enough, he didn't have that same almost 'pathic bond with them that some of the other boys did. Katjin had known for years that he made a rather mediocre son of the Horse Clans. Which was why he preferred the open road and Apa to being stuck in camp like this, day in and day out.

And his cousins were quick to remind him of his place. Not only was he half-clan, almost a sin in most of their eyes, but he wasn't the most talented either. If he'd been good at tracking or woodcraft or hunting or leatherwork or just about anything, they probably would've been more eager to accept him. It was fine when he visited every once in a while, but Katjin could only imagine what a whole summer would do. None of his cousins wanted to hear his stories of what he'd seen, and none of them were impressed by his none-so-daring escapades that had made it back to Meke and Febe. It wasn't just listening to himself talk--Katjin also enjoyed hearing new stories. Not just about Clan life, about the Empire and what lay beyond, but most of his family didn't care for anything beyond the plains. And while Febe had mentioned taking Katjin along on his next negotiation with some of the other local camps, that wasn't anything that would fill each and every day.

So he spent that first day by himself, watching the others, boys and girls alike, race in and out of the herd, practicing the new tricks they'd learned, showing off their weapons skills. Some would go to the cavalry someday, especially those that seemed to have passed out of, or never started, that clumsy phase that still seemed to plague him. Some would stay here to guard the grasslands. But none of them would actually leave the grasslands. Not for good. Not of their own free will.

But Katjin had never been a good son of the Horse Clans. And probably never would be.

"So your apa dumped you, huh?" Soren, one of his older cousins, sidled up to where Katjin sat, playing idly with a strand of grass. "My apa said it's 'cos he can't stand to look at you, since you're not proper clan and all."

“Which is why he keeps me with him, day in and out,” Katjin replied, not bothering to look up at Soren, whose eyes and hair were properly dark brown like other Clanfolk. Katjin couldn’t help it if he had his mam’s light eyes and paler skin. In summers, he was bronzed as any of the clanfolk. In winter, he was pale as the cityfolk that his cousins liked to mock. At least from far away he looked properly full-Clan. If no one noticed his incredible lack of that legendary Clan skill on horseback.

At least that made Soren think a moment. “Think you’re better’n us,” he said in a low voice. “Fancypants city boy, prob’ly spying on us for the Empire’s ‘paths...”

Katjin rolled his eyes, turning away without a word.

Soren grabbed Katjin’s shoulder with one large hand. It hurt, hopefully because Soren didn’t know his own strength yet, and not because he wanted to hurt Katjin. “I’m talking to you, boy, don’t you--”

Katjin shrugged out from under Soren’s grip, rolling away from his cousin. Soren wasn’t just taller, he was also heavier than Katjin. And Katjin had learned years ago not to let Soren get the jump on him. Not if he wanted to escape unscathed.

“Meke needs me,” he said quickly, scuttling backward as quickly as he could.

“Runaway,” Soren sneered. “Hide behind Meke, just like you always do.”

“Smart runaway, at least,” Katjin muttered as he ran toward Meke’s tent, trying to ignore the catcalls from his cousins. Right now, Soren was the biggest and oldest of the ones still in the tents, who hadn’t gone off to start their own families and camps yet. It was expected that he would go to the cavalry at some point in the next couple years, just because he also happened to be the best at riding and fighting. If he wasn’t such a stuck up prick about some things, Katjin probably would’ve liked him a bit better. Kat might’ve even had sympathy for Soren, as the youngest son of Katjin’s oldest uncle. Meke always said that Soren fought his older brothers the same way Katjin fought Soren, but he had his doubts. Especially since he seemed to leave the rest of the younger cousins alone.

At least only some of his cousins were here. Apa’s three older brothers stayed in the other tents, and each had followed family tradition, populating the tents as full as they could with children. Meke had always paid especial attention to Katjin, since he was the only grandson without siblings for company. It wasn’t his fault that Ama had died bringing a little sister for him into the world. No one had expected her to have a hard time birthing her second child, especially since Katjin’s own birth had apparently been one of the easiest Meke had ever seen. Some still seemed to see that as Apa’s fault, if not Katjin’s,

because someone should have *known*. And it was even less his fault that Apa hadn't taken a second partner of any kind. Just because Meke thought Katjin was lonely didn't mean that he was.

Meke gave him an indulgent smile as he burst through the tent opening, looking up from the bread she was still kneading by the fire. Her precious iron cook pans, brought all the way back from Apa's last trip to the coastal city of Gert, sat next to her, ready for what would eventually be rounds of more sweetbread.

"I thought you might be back," she said, nodding to the empty space next to her. "There's more dough to work."

Katjin shrugged, picking up a lump of freshly-risen dough. They didn't get much like this on the road, except when Apa bothered to stop in a village somewhere for fresh baked goods. And while all Clanfolk could cook, few had the patience, or the hands, to make bread like Meke. Katjin usually pounded it too much, to the point that Meke had to let it rise again, but that didn't stop her from enlisting his help. She seemed to know when he needed time away from the cousins.

"Is it Soren this time?"

Katjin looked up, startled. "You sure you aren't a 'path, Meke?" he accused, only half-joking.

Meke smiled at him. "Call it 'parental instinct'," she said, flipping over her own lump of dough to knead the other side. The smell of freshly-risen dough made Katjin's stomach rumble. "Soren's needed to be taken down a peg or two. Best at everything, he thinks he is. He's probably jealous that you're my favorite."

"Meke!" Katjin's cheeks flushed. "You're not supposed to say that." Though he didn't mind that she did.

Her brown eyes almost twinkled. "It's not as if we didn't all know, Kat." She put the kneaded dough into a round wooden bowl, covering it with a bit of cloth and wiping her hands on her apron. "Of all my children and grandchildren, I know I should love them all the same, but you..." She seemed to study him, as Katjin shifted from foot to foot uncomfortably. "You remind me so much of your apa, in some ways. He tried so hard to fit in here, but I think we always knew life on the plains wasn't for him."

Katjin looked at the lump of dough in his hands, still sticky from its last rise. "It was good then, that he met my ama?"

Meke took the dough out of Katjin's hands, studying it with a careful eye. "Some

people are born knowing their place in the world,” she said softly. “Some need others to help them find that place. This summer might be that bit of help you need, love.”

Katjin gave her a dubious look. “If you say so.”

She smiled, patting his cheek with one doughy hand. “Trust the experience of an old woman, Kat-love. We are good for something, after all.”

Chapter Two

Errands. Every chore Meke could think up for him was too womanly for her liking, so she sent him off on errands. For the past week and a half, it had been errand after errand: gathering plants, finding stray animals, checking traps. Katjin was beginning to wonder if she was keeping him out of camp deliberately. Tensions had been high in camp over the past ten days, but no one would tell Katjin why. He couldn't decide if it was because he wasn't Clan enough, or they still thought of him as one of the kids. And then it was hard to decide which was the better option.

It didn't help that he hadn't been sleeping well either. Dreams had plagued him, of some small, dark place that he couldn't get out of, no matter how hard he screamed. He woke up in the mornings, surprised that he didn't find his fists battered and bloody. It felt like he'd pounded on those stone walls all night, night after night, until his throat burned and the skin on his knuckles split. He'd never been a restless sleeper, but even Febe was starting to notice.

They did need more green onion to add to the stew for supper that night, and Meke swore she saw some growing down by the river. She would have gone herself, or sent one of the girls down, but one of his aunts decided to go into labor early. If it hadn't been this new aunt's first baby, Meke probably wouldn't have fretted so much. But Layla was young and small, and it was far too soon for the baby to come, so all the women were a bit agitated. And anything that got him out of camp for a few hours was a welcome distraction. Especially since it meant avoiding Soren and his other age-mates.

Life on the plains had a certain rhythm to it that Katjin could never get the hang of. He was always off-key somehow. All of his family, right down to his smallest cousins, seemed to know their place in it. Maybe Meke was right--Apa should've left Katjin in her and Febe's care after Ama died. But even then, there was no guarantee that Katjin would've

been any better with horses or any more adept at the other necessities of life on the plains. He had no aim to speak of and his ability to use his knife was self-defense at best. He had no head for tactics like Febe, so the cavalry would have no use for him. And he was about as skilled at weaving stories as he was wool, all tangled warp and weft.

Apa always said that Katjin's heart was in the right place, it just hadn't found that right direction yet.

It might've been better if there'd at least been someone his age he could share something with--anything, really. He'd never really seen eye-to-eye with most of his cousins, his age or otherwise. The girls were too strange and undecipherable, and the boys just didn't speak the same language. And since even the horses seemed to snub him...

"Onions," he muttered, kicking up tufts of dirt and grass as he scrabbled along the edge of the stream. "They don't grow in summertime. Every baby knows that..."

Katjin stared his right wrist, left hand tracing the brand that had been there for as long as he could remember. Each child born within the boundaries of the Empire was examined and branded by one of the Empire's representatives within a year of the child's birth. While the Clanfolk were the only ones who were left unsupervised by Empire 'paths for most of the year, not even their children were exempt from the Birth Rule. If any child was found unbranded, it was automatically confiscated by the Empire. Non 'paths--anyone who didn't show signs of the heart-sense or thought-sense gift--were automatically branded on their right wrist with some symbol that apparently meant 'heart-blind' in the old Empire tongue. Any child who was pronounced as being able to sense thoughts or emotions was automatically branded on the left wrist--telepath or empath, as the Empire folk said--and were taken away for training in the Capital. A few children were taken from the clans every now and then, but not many. Clanfolk seemed to have some natural resistance to thought-senses. Heart-senses less so, since it was hard to block emotions. But anyone gifted with thought-sense sent into the plains automatically left as soon as they could.

'Paths had their uses, every now and again. He'd seen more than one fractious babe in the womb be calmed by the 'path there to witness the birth. It happened moreso in the cities, where 'paths were stationed more regularly, but it still happened. Sometimes they could go into broken minds and help them heal, or give poor spirits the will to live again. But they could also, some said, take away that thought before you had it and before you'd even know it was gone. It was one thing to know who had murderous and other criminal

thoughts. It was another to be afraid to think at all.

Which was probably why Apa was going over mountain even now. No 'paths existed beyond Horse Clan territory. If the Horse Clans were stubborn, the Highlandfolk were far worse.

Cityfolk condemned the Horse Clanfolk for being all kinds of backward--no gold coins, no way of writing everything down, no homes and land to call your own. But the cityfolk had no idea the richness and complexity of the stories the clanfolk told. The stories were woven by the ancestors themselves, past down from febe to apa to chibe and back down again, and each generation added something to them. It was a cheat to write them down. Real civilized folk remembered without having to read something, honoring the feats of their ancestors by devoting the time and effort to memorize them. Real civilized folk, especially the singers of each clan, could remember and recite poems and songs going back generations. And the music they could make... That was one more gift Katjin lacked. He loved to sing, but even musically, he seemed to lack the harmony to blend in. More than one singer had stared him into silence at the nightly fires, with or without his family to stand up for him.

So, whenever he was by himself, Katjin opened his mouth and sang as lustfully as he could. If he scared off a few animals, no harm done. It wasn't like he wanted an audience in the first place.

He started off with his favorite hero songs as he scanned the stream-banks for wild onions. If there was anything he loved best, it was the hero songs. It didn't matter if they were songs from the Clans, from the cities, even from the Highlands; there was something about the triumph of one small hero over impossible odds that always stirred his heart. Many of the heroes didn't recognize their place until Destiny threw it at them. Not all of them were blessed by the ancestors with impossible gifts. Some were misfits like Katjin who didn't really belong one place or another, but they always triumphed. Even in their deaths, they triumphed, because of what they accomplished by their very efforts. That was what Katjin wanted most of all--not necessarily to be remembered in legend and story, but to finally find that place where he did make a difference.

Apa said that Katjin tended to be impulsive sometimes. At least, impulsive when it meant getting his way. The problem with running off once when you were a kid is that people always remembered that, and always carried that picture of you. So he might have decided to try and swap his pony for a sweet in one of the sea ports when he was eight

years old. Kat still thought it had been a good deal, even if Apa had had to do his own wheedling and dealing to get the pony back.

When he was angry, Apa called him spoiled. Kat really didn't care, one way or another. He knew Apa loved him and would always forgive him. And if it meant he had an adventure or two on the way... He didn't mean for that herd of goats to follow him home that one time, and if the shepherd really thought Katjin was trying to steal them, well, it wasn't his fault.

But there were only so many hero songs that Katjin could sing before he realized his voice wouldn't do them justice. Most of them tended to be somber, and he preferred to sing things loud and lustily. And while he knew drinking songs a-plenty, it just didn't seem right. Not when the whole world seemed to be listening. Maybe Layla's baby was going to be someone special, and that's why everything seemed to be perfectly still for once.

So, out of impulse, Katjin began to sing one of the oldest of the Horse Clan song traditions, the aiding song. Clan life was based on the fact that you always took care of those in need, be they blood family or not. Each clan was related to the other, and each person made up the great webwork that was the Horse Clan family. If everyone helped whoever they could, it meant that they took care of their own, without having to rely on outside help from people from the cities, or from the Empire itself.

He couldn't help feeling a bit of pride at that. That was one reason why Apa had never forced Katjin to adopt Lowland dress--pride in your kin and your Clan. They might not be their own rulers, but at least they'd never have to ask for help. It had been that way in the beginning, when the Horse Clans were first fighting to keep their land free of Lowlanders and Highlandfolk. And it was still true today. As long as they kept the Empire out, they'd be free. Not as free as they once were, but free enough.

The aiding song was simple enough. It was a short tune, weaving up and down the musical scale, repeating over and over again to ask if anyone needed help. Families sang it each time they visited a new camp. It opened and closed every midsummer gathering. Sometimes Meke and the other women would sing it in the morning at chores, or Febe as he and the other men brought in animals from the hunt. It was sung partly in jest, almost a plea for help in itself. But it was still understood that, if they heard that song at any time, they were to come running to see if there was anything they could do to help.

People of the golden plains
Pleas heard in every breath

Heed our elders, heed our young
Help the family in its need

Katjin hummed it softly to himself as he plucked some of the long green stalks of wild onion. A few were still in flower, but most seem to have died off as the hot weather of summer arrived. Even these few would help Meke, who always preferred fresh herbs to dried ones. And if it helped in any way with Layla and the baby...

Each to each and hand to hand
Easing pain and stopping grief
Whose this day can I abate?
Which wish can I help relieve?

He sung the chorus through once more to himself, wondering if a double handful of stalks was enough. Each was about half a length in height, and even once you trimmed off the flowers and the roots, there was still a good bit of stalk left--

Me, is mine, I seek relief
My pain is nigh, my heart's hurt
A favor paid, a deed done
Deliver, ease, help this day

Katjin stopped. That was the answer to the aiding song, not the usual one that he heard at every gathering, but the older response. Some called it the only true response, used when someone needed help as a matter of life or death.

Hesitantly, Katjin sang the chorus again, trying to pinpoint the location of the singer. The grass was nearly waist-high here, and the banks surrounding the stream were steep, easily hiding someone in the hollows and dips of the banks. He moved toward where he thought the voice was coming from; a clear, low voice, not cracking and jumpy like his, from the sound of it, much better at singing than Katjin. The accent was funny, neither City nor Clanfolk. It couldn't be a 'path though, because supposedly no one outside the Clans knew this version. Because no one outside the clans would ever ask for this sort of serious help.

"Who--" he started to say, before dropping his own voice to slightly above a whisper. Not knowing what to do, he sang the old response to the equally-ancient question.

I will, aye, I will, aye
Just point me the way

He almost stumbled upon the singer, secreted in a small hollow near the edge of the

stream. It was a boy, not much older than he was, skinny and dirty as any beggar that Katjin had seen in the cities. His blond hair was snarled and there were shadows underneath his eyes that were darker than Katjin had ever seen. Someone had chased this boy, chased him far, since he was obviously not Clan, for all he knew the right song to sing.

“What can I do?” Katjin asked breathlessly, automatically holding his right hand out to clasp that of the other boy. But the other boy just pulled his away, looking up at Katjin with frightened eyes.

“Take me away. Or hide me. Even kill me,” the boy said in the Lowland tongue, panting with each breath. He looked exhausted. “Just... don’t let them get me.”

And before Katjin could do anything, the boy promptly fainted.

Katjin wasn’t sure how he managed to haul the boy home. As skinny as the boy was, he was heavier than he looked. And he kept twitching every time Katjin’s hands touched his skin, as if he was trying to push Katjin away. Which was pretty good, considering he was out cold the entire time.

“Meke! Meke!” Katjin called out as he dragged the boy into camp. “Febe? Anyone?” He managed to get the boy all the way to Meke and Febe’s camp before he collapsed himself.

“Katjin, for love of--” Febe burst out of one of the other tents. “You know better than to come into camp screaming like that. If you aren’t bleeding to death, boy...” He stopped when he saw the boy next to Katjin. “What happened, Kat?”

Febe gathered the boy up in his arms as if he was light as a feather. The boy twitched just as bad, if not worse, as when Katjin had held him.

“I found him out by the stream, Febe,” Katjin panted, struggling to his feet. “He sang the aiding song.”

Febe’s eyebrows went up. “The aiding song?”

Katjin nodded. “In Clantongue. But I think he only speaks Lowlands.”

“A boy who can sing the aiding song in the old language, but who speaks from the Lowlands.” Febe sounded thoughtful as he carried the boy into the tent. “I don’t know how you do it, boy, but somehow strange luck seems to follow you.” The last bit he said

with a grin on his face, so Katjin knew he wasn't mad anymore.

"I wasn't stealing the apple, and I didn't know it was meant for the Lord Mayor's supper," Katjin said hotly, knowing the exact incident Febe was referring to.

"Easy, son," Febe said with a laugh, laying the boy down on Katjin's own pallet. "You did a good thing, bringing him here. A very good thing." The first thing Febe did was take the boy's flailing wrists in one hand, studying them carefully. "Unmarked. Odd." Looking over Febe's shoulder, Katjin could see that Febe was right. Neither of the boy's wrists was branded, which meant only one thing.

"Is he witch-blood?" Katjin asked in a quiet voice. The Shahi were all supposed to have red hair, though this boy's hair was dirty blond, from what Katjin could tell. But that didn't mean anything. He could be a half-breed of some kind.

Febe chuckled. "No such thing as witch-blood, Kat. Just a poor boy who was running from something." He looked at the pale wrists again. "So skinny. This one's been running for a while."

"He asked me to kill him."

Febe looked up sharply. "Maybe you better start from the beginning, Katjin."

As Katjin retold his story, Febe busied about, fetching herbs and things from Meke's chest in the corner. With water from the bucket, he mixed some kind of a poultice and put it on the boy's head. He made Katjin brew some tea, getting a little bit of that down the boy's throat. That seemed to calm the boy a little bit.

"He's feverish for one," Febe said a while later. "Half-starved and weak for two. Flinches to the touch and he's unmarked..." He looked thoughtful. "He might be a 'path."

Katjin looked around wildly, wondering if the Empire itself was on their heels. There had been those soldiers, on the ride here, and that had been almost a month ago now. He wondered if he should tell Febe about them. "We need to take him back then," he said, trying to wrap the boy in his blanket. "We could probably put him on a horse and take him--" There were stories about what happened if you were caught harboring a 'path. And this boy was unmarked on top of maybe being a 'path. It wouldn't mean punishment for Katjin alone. It could mean the death of the entire camp. It had happened before.

"Katjin." Febe's tone was final. "We're not taking the boy anywhere. He stays here, for now." He pried Katjin's fingers off of the blanket, smoothing it back down. "The boy needs us," Febe said gently. "And since no one ever comes looking on the plains for

anything..."

"But his wrists," Katjin said. "What about his wrists?"

"What about them?" Febe grabbed some torn linen rags from Meke's healer's kit, wrapping them tightly around both the boy's wrists. "As far as anyone knows, he's branded just the same as we are."

Katjin shrugged, not knowing what else to do.

"Now, if you could get some water, maybe we can clean the poor lad off." Febe smoothed back the boy's tangled hair, crooning softly. "Ancestors only know who saw you hauling him in here, especially with the way you were bellowing. Best to make him as presentable as we can, as soon as possible."

All Katjin could do was stare at his usual stern Febe, being more gentle than he'd ever seen the man before. "But--"

"Go!" Febe almost snapped. Katjin ran out of the tent.

It wasn't far to the rainwater stores. Each time they made new camp, it was the kids' job to set up the rain collectors. The huge sheets of oiled cloth hung on sticks, gathering the water into a huge bucket. These were only set up through spring, since it was rare to see rain at anytime in the summer. Katjin quickly filled up a leather bladder full of water, running back with it toward the tent. One of his cousins noticed, calling out to him, but he didn't bother stopping. The voice was followed by that of one of his uncle's, but he figured he had other things to worry about.

He burst back into the tent. Febe nodded his head toward the pallet as he headed back out the tent flap. "I'll get your Meke," he said. "Be gentle with the poor boy, Kat. Try to imagine being in his place."

Katjin scowled at his Febe's back as the old man left the tent. Then he turned toward the boy on the pallet, still scowling. "If I have to be nice," he muttered, kneeling next to his pallet and wetting a cloth with water.

He was careful not to touch the boy's skin, since that seemed to irritate their patient. Dipping the cloth in the water, he wiped the boy's face clean, not surprised by the amount of dirt that seemed to come off. He even lightly sponged at the boy's hairline, trying to get rid of some of the sweat and grime caked there. The boy seemed to relax a little bit, as if being cleaner made whatever pain a little easier to bear.

And once he got rid of the dirt, Katjin could see how young the boy really was--not much older than himself. Not a kid, but not an adult either. The boy was pale as a

Lowlander under all that dirt, and his hair about the same color as the bleached grass of the plains. Katjin couldn't help wondering what color his eyes were. People thought he was strange enough because of his green eyes. For all he knew, this boy's could be brown or blue or even green as his own.

The fella was decent to look at, once you got rid of the filth. He had a nice mouth, when it wasn't grimacing in pain. He could even be noble, with that nose of his. This definitely wasn't any farmer's son. Katjin wondered where he came from, and how he got all the way out here. If they'd been in Winter Camp, closer to the Lowland cities, it wouldn't have been as surprising. But here, almost up in the Highlands... It was one thing to travel by Clan horse. From the looks of this boy's breeks and bare, blistered feet, he'd walked.

"Strip him down," Meke's voice came from the tent flap. "We'll burn those rags." She bustled in, looking over their guest with a critical eye. When Katjin hesitated, she just gave him a look. "What are you waiting for, Kat? He won't bite. Or even notice." She gave him a slight smile. "Unless you want me to do it..."

"No, Meke," Katjin said quickly, turning back to the boy. The shirt came off easily enough, being too big for him in the first place. The breeks were a little harder, since they seemed to have almost grown attached to the boy's skin. The fabric ripped under his fingertips when he touched it, but that made it a little easier to slide them off without touching the boy's pale skin.

"Sickly thing, isn't he?" Meke said, kneeling next to Katjin. She wiped his chest, as hairless as Katjin's, with the damp cloth. "If he was awake, I'd have you haul him down to the stream for a bath." She examined the cloth, a look of distaste on her face. "Poor child. He obviously ran from something."

"The Empire is my guess," Febe said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other uneasily. "His wrists aren't branded."

"What?" Meke's voice got suddenly higher. "Every child born in the Empire..."

"Aye," Febe repeated. "Every child born in the Empire."

Meke looked at the boy again. "You don't think he's Shahi, do you? Might almost be preferable..." She brushed the blond hair back from his ears, looking at them in surprise. Katjin didn't see anything wrong with them. They were just as round as anyone else's.

"Not Shahi. Not Highlandfolk either," Febe said, sounding certain. "I'd say cityfolk, if anything. Looks too pretty for anything but a noble."

"Noble-born, maybe bastard born?" Meke wondered out loud. "Hidden away, for

certain, especially as pale as he is. Look at his feet. They're positively torn to shreds. I'm surprised he made it this far."

Katjin put his bare hand on the boy's forehead, surprised when the boy didn't thrash as he had before. There were shadows under those eyes, and when Katjin looked closer, he noticed the bright pink of the boy's skin. It wasn't from washing, that was sure. Sunburn, from the look of it. If he'd been hidden away somewhere, in a secret room or something, that would explain why he was so skinny and pale. Katjin could count the boy's ribs, and his hip bones jutted out from beneath his breechclout.

"But why would they hide him?" Katjin asked, hesitantly touching the boy's face. His skin felt clammy now. The boy seemed to turn into the touch. At least he seemed cooler now, and not as feverish as he had before.

"Path is the most logical guess," Febe said quietly. "Someone managed to hide a child away, and he escaped somehow."

Meke made a noise that Katjin couldn't quite read. She didn't say anything, though. Meke had always had a strange view of 'paths, automatically changing the subject whenever anyone brought them up. It was just one more of the mysteries of his family that Katjin couldn't quite figure out.

"But why'd he come here?" Katjin's hand moved down the boy's face to rest at the boy's throat. He could feel the boy's pulse there, faint but steady. The minute his palm touched the boy's sweat-slicked skin, though, the boy made a hoarse, groaning noise, shying away from Katjin's touch as if it burned. Meke made that hmmphing noise again and went on her work.

"Unless someone told him where to look for help..." Febe shrugged. "You said he knew the aiding song, eh?"

Katjin flushed. "I was singing it," he muttered. "And he knew the response. Asked for help. Used the Clan response too."

Which meant the Empire was probably looking for him, if someone was desperate enough to send this helpless boy out by himself, armed only with the fragile hope of a response to an old aiding song. Katjin wondered more and more if someone had released the boy, or if he'd escaped himself, and exactly what he was escaping from.

The boy began to struggle again, thrashing about on the pallet. Katjin wrinkled his forehead, suddenly worried. Could the 'paths be out at this very moment, searching for him? Though you could see for lengths and lengths from the tents in all directions, it still

wouldn't be that hard to sneak up.

As Katjin continued to fret, the boy's thrashing grew worse and worse.

"Heart-sense," Febe said suddenly, pushing Katjin's hand away and replacing it with his own. "Shhh, shhh," he said softly, stroking the boy's forehead. "Easy, lad. We're here. You're safe."

But even as his shudders stopped, the boy started to whimper.

"Empath," Meke added softly. "He's picking up on Kat's emotions. I wonder if that's what caused all this. Too much emotion..."

"Can you fix it?" Katjin asked anxiously, lightly covering the boy's hand with his. The boy seemed to still at his touch—maybe he was just too worn out now. Funny, that--when he kept calm, when he tried to push away those fretful thoughts, the boy seemed to calm as well. And if the boy picked up on his emotions that easily, Kat could only imagine what kind of havoc it might wreck with the boy's mind. Which meant that he probably shouldn't think about what the boy might look like with a little weight on him, filling out the long lines of his bones. And other thoughts that he shouldn't have in front of his grandparents, much less a 'path.

Febe and Meke exchanged a long look. "That might take some doing, Kat-love," Meke said finally.

Chapter Three

They took turns watching him during the night. Katjin wasn't sure what Meke and Febe told the other relatives, just that no one seemed to bother them. One of his aunties brought over a pot of stew, but there were no stolen glances toward Katjin's occupied pallet. She'd even managed some kind of clear broth for the boy.

It was Katjin's job to try and spoon it down the boy's throat. He seemed calmest when Katjin was nearby. Why he'd decided Katjin was his new best mate was still a mystery to any of them though, especially Katjin. And Meke and Febe kept throwing around the words "heart-sense", which at least wasn't as bad as a thought-sense.

The Empire usually used heart-senses to gauge the general feelings of the public, usually in the big cities to the south. Occasionally, you might find one in the smaller villages, especially if there'd been problems with dissent in the past. Usually, though, only telepaths were assigned that far out, just because they could communicate over a greater distance.

The boy's eyelids fluttered a few times during the night, which Meke said meant he was dreaming. His fever didn't come back, though, and there wasn't much more of the thrashing about. It was still a long night. As much as Meke and Febe insisted that he sleep, Katjin still couldn't take his eyes off the boy on his pallet. Especially not with the tension he could almost feel heating up the air in the tent. Meke and Febe weren't telling him something, and something was obviously on both their minds.

He'd gone out to relieve himself once, toward dawn, and wasn't surprised to see a few faces peer out at him from the other tents. That meant that he wasn't the only one having a sleepless night, or that he was the only one afraid of what was to come.

"We're going to have to do something, aren't we, Meke?" Katjin asked sometime after what would've been breakfast.

Meke looked at him tiredly. He could see the shadows underneath her eyes. Even

without this strange fella, Meke would've had a sleepless night. Layla's baby came, but both the baby and Layla were sickly, and with Meke being the only healer in camp, she was especially occupied right now.

"Aye, we do," she said, coming to sit beside him. She handed him the heel-end of yesterday's bread. "Especially if he is what we think he is."

"Heart-sense," Katjin repeated. The boy still twitched every time any of them mentioned it, and he fretted whenever anyone got near enough to touch him. Katjin was beginning to think they were right about the whole thing. "What's wrong with him, Meke?"

"I think he's just lost right now," Meke said, her face thoughtful. "Sometimes things sneak up on you that you don't anticipate. Maybe the emotions got to him, and he didn't expect it." She gave him a slight smile. "We all know how moody younglings are, how their emotions can fly away with them."

Katjin made a face, but Meke did have a point. The girls especially seemed a bit crazed now, not like they had been in all the years past when he and Apa visited. They were always prancing around, especially in front of him and the fellas, like they wanted to be noticed or something. And the fellas were almost worse--posturing, comparing how good they were, challenging each other. Soren seemed to be the worst of them all, just because he thought he was the leader of the herd.

"Head stallion," Katjin muttered, trying not to think of his handsome cousin and how many partners swarmed toward him every Clan Gathering, boy and girl alike.

"I don't want to lie to you, Kat," Meke said slowly. "Your febe will have to discuss this with every member of the camp."

Katjin dropped his eyes, staring at his lap. Meke's new robe covered him. He'd never noticed how much embroidery was on this one, not only on the neck, but going all the way down the edges to the very hem itself. She'd spent time on this one, time that maybe he didn't deserve to have spent on him. Clanfolk prided themselves on their embroidery, and even everyday robes were felted and embroidered within a hand's length. But this--Katjin had never had one this nice. And after all the trouble he'd potentially caused, bringing a 'path into the camp.

"I should've left him there, shouldn't I?" He couldn't help asking, especially since a small part of him had been wondering that since he first saw the boy out by the stream. "Because the Empire will come for him."

“Maybe not for him, but the Empire will come,” Meke pointed out. “As they’ve come every year for the past five hundred years, because of the agreement made between the Clans and the Empire.”

Katjin looked up sharply. “The cavalry--”

Meke bit her lip. She seemed to hesitate before she spoke. “They come every spring to check this year’s crop of foals. They get first pick, as they always have. So, at any moment, we should have the Empire’s cavalry on our hands. With luck, they won’t have a ‘path with them. With luck.” Meke looked away. “You did pick what was possibly the worst time, Kat-love. You and your fella there.”

“He’s not my--” Katjin started, but then knew there was no point. This fella, this boy, whoever he was, had become Katjin’s responsibility the moment Katjin opened his mouth to sing the song. The aiding song was something no one took lightly, and no one joked about. If Katjin wanted an adult responsibility, he’d finally found it.

Meke nodded when Katjin looked back up at her, seeming pleased with him for some reason. “He is your responsibility, and I’m glad you recognize that.” Now her voice was gentle, the voice of the Meke that loved him so much. “You’ve spent the past fourteen years playing around, darling of everyone you meet.” Katjin snorted in disagreement, but Meke only shushed him. “Maybe everyone but Soren...”

“I’ll take him away,” Katjin said, suddenly feeling more scared than he ever had in his life. If they could drug the fella, maybe it would be okay. Maybe if they just turned him over to the Empire... That very thought soured Katjin’s stomach. They couldn’t. Not when Katjin had promised to protect him.

“I know what you’re thinking, so don’t even try to hide it.” Meke’s voice was stern. Katjin looked at her in surprise. “Even if it is a thought that your febe and I have both had, this night,” she admitted. “While I can’t fault you for what you did, because the boy did need help...”

Meke’s voice faded into a soft, indistinctive murmur. There was too much to think about without her harping on Katjin about something. If Clanfolk were anything, they were bossy and insisted that they knew what was best, right or wrong. It was too bad that the boy wasn’t Clan.

Maybe that was the answer. Make the boy part of the Clan. Then, by right, the Empire couldn’t take him away. Not if they wanted to provoke a war of their own. Not that the Clans would go to war over some boy that Katjin found at the stream.

“What if we make him part of the Clan?” Katjin said in a rush. “If he’s part of the family, they can’t take him away, right? Because he belongs to us?”

Meke stared at Katjin for a moment, her dark eyes blank. Then she shook her head, as if she was trying to think through it all. “Kat, do you know what you’re asking?” she said slowly, quietly.

“Meke...” Katjin shifted from foot to foot, not entirely sure. There were people adopted into the Clans from time to time. It didn’t happen often, and usually they just married in, but it wasn’t completely unheard of. But if something happened to this boy, who’d asked them--asked Katjin--for help... “He sang the aiding song, Meke.”

“I know, Katjin. I know.” Meke looked troubled. “But it isn’t as simple as you think. Short of someone marrying him, we can’t just adopt him into the clan. Not without hearing from the camp. And not without the family council’s approval.”

“But--”

Meke cupped Katjin’s cheeks in her hands, her eyes looking old--older than Katjin had ever seen them look. “You’re almost an adult now, Kat. Maybe you are an adult, because of this. But you have to understand that nothing is ever as simple as it seems. And you have to be willing to listen to those of us who know what we’re doing.” Katjin could tell, even without being any kind of ‘path, that Meke was uncomfortable about all this.

“But he’s just a fella--just a kid like me,” Katjin said softly, looking down at his invalid. His, something inside him kept insisting. Because Katjin was responsible for this stranger, no matter what anyone said.

“Aye, love,” Meke said. “And that’s what makes it hurt all the more.”

They wouldn’t let Katjin be part of the camp gathering. Meke said it was because someone had to stay with the boy. Which Katjin didn’t exactly understand, since he was supposed to be responsible and an adult, and if the boy was his, then shouldn’t he have some say in deciding what to do? All he did know was that his stomach was a mess of nerves, especially if that ‘path should arrive before they could think of something to do with the boy.

So Katjin stayed with the boy while Meke and Febe discussed it with the other adults. What they’d done with Katjin’s cousins, he didn’t know. Nor, at this point, did he really

care. This was something bigger than Soren and his other cousins' stupidity. Maybe even bigger than their own lives.

That's what you get for messing around with the aiding song, that little voice inside him reminded him. You always get what you ask for, Apa was wont to say. And just because Katjin had never wanted for anything in his life...

Maybe he was a little spoiled. Apa usually caved in whenever Katjin asked for anything, and Meke and Febe couldn't seem to resist either. It was a comfortable life of keeping Apa company, sleeping in their own small tent whenever they traveled. Food had never been an issue, and Apa always seemed to pull off a successful trade. It was almost completely troubleless, and unless Katjin counted his mam dying when he was five, there hadn't been much taken away from him either. He always had a place to come home to with Meke and Febe, a place where they obviously loved him. And now this boy...

"Where--" a voice croaked in the Lowlands tongue. Katjin opened his eyes, surprised to find the boy's blue eyes staring at him. "Clan?" The boy struggled, trying to sit up. "Too close, gotta keep moving."

Katjin gently pushed the boy back against the pallet, eyes widening at how the boy seemed to freeze the minute Katjin's hands touched him. Then the boy attempted to get away, but failed, probably not having the energy for it. He almost reminded Katjin of a fractious horse, the way the whites of his eyes were showing and how much he flinched at a human hand on his skin. "Aye. Clan. But you're not going anywhere. You're safe here." He automatically switched over to the same language. The plains of the Horse Clans were the one place where the language of the Empire had never really taken hold. Most Clanfolk--those who dealt with the Empire--spoke both, but it was rarely heard this far north of the Lowlands

The boy, to his surprise, actually snorted at Katjin. Snorted, as if in complete disbelief. "Even Clan's not safe," the boy muttered, as if Katjin was an idiot-child. It might've sounded more impressive if the sheer effort hadn't caused the boy's blue eyes to roll back in his head in something resembling a silly lady's swoon.

There'd be no gratitude out of this one, even if Katjin did save his sorry, skinny hide. No matter how pretty he was. "You're as safe as you're going to get." He shook his head, remembering the manners Apa and Meke had drilled into him. "I'm Katjin."

"Mikael," the boy said, his reply now exhausted, eyes fluttering shut again at the effort. "Safe?" he repeated, "you're sure?"

Katjin touched Mikael's cheek lightly in reassurance, not really knowing what to say. There was another flinch, but not so bad this time. He had to feel a little sympathy for Mikael, especially since it obviously wasn't a springtime festival that he'd run from. Heart-senses couldn't hear lies, could they? Like thought-senses could? "Yeah," he said. "Safe." And technically, Mikael was. For now.

The tension seemed to go out of Mikael's body as he relaxed into what looked like a real sleep.

"Kat?" Meke's voice brought him out of whatever dreamworld he'd been in. He nodded. "It's time."

Katjin stared up at Meke. "They've decided what to do with Mikael?"

Meke blinked. "He woke, did he?" She was careful to keep her voice even and controlled, but Katjin could tell this news distressed her. Made him wonder if they, the camp gathering, even wanted Mikael to survive.

"Aye, Meke. He woke. He didn't say much, but..." Katjin touched Mikael's cheek lightly, not surprised to see Mikael squirm away, even in sleep. "He'll get better, Meke. And then we can make him Clan and everything will be fine." Except even Katjin realized that his plan was missing a few important pieces. Like whatever the gathering had decided.

"Kat--" Meke's face softened, her mouth smiling a little. "Oh, Kat, if only..." She shook her head. "They're not adopting him, Kat."

Again, Katjin found himself staring up at Meke. "But..." He wasn't sure what else to say. "But then they couldn't steal him away. Not without provoking some kind of act of war." Could they?

Meke knelt next to Katjin, taking his hands in hers. "Kat, remember the agreement we have with the Empire. The Empire can take whatever and whoever they want, 'path or not. That's the price of our freedom."

Katjin snorted. "Freedom."

"Freedom to say that, freedom to think that," Meke reminded him. "Freedom to answer this boy's song and be able to offer him the help he needs."

"So what's the decision?" Katjin asked, his mouth dry. His voice came out as a squeak.

"We can't keep him here." Before Katjin could protest, Meke held up her hand to quiet him. "We can't keep him here, but we can move him. There are places up in the hills..."

Katjin nodded begrudgingly. There were hollows and hidden places, like the dip in the stream bank where Katjin found Mikael, where people could disappear for moons.

Beyond the hillocks themselves, up into the mountains of the Highlands actual, there were valleys that some of the Clans knew about. How they'd remained a secret this long, Katjin didn't know. And even if the Empire did know about them, it didn't mean that their 'paths could find them.

"Hiding, huh?" he said slowly, looking down at Mikael. "Won't they catch us?"

Now, at least, Meke smiled. "No one can catch a Clan horse. Not if that horse doesn't want to be caught."

Katjin tried to consider all of this. "So we're going into the Highlands then?" Who 'we' was, he wasn't quite sure. It wasn't as if they'd send the two of them out alone. No one would be that cruel. And from the bit he'd seen of Mikael, he wasn't sure how much he liked the prospect of being alone with a spoiled pretty Lowlands boy.

Meke nodded. "The cavalry should be here any day. We're lucky enough now that they didn't come while your apa was here." Which made Katjin wonder, since they'd never had an issue with the cavalry before. But then, soldiers and 'paths had never ridden together on the plains together, not looking for someone. "And if we're luckier still, there won't be a 'path with them. But if there is..." If there was, it was possible that they could hide themselves before they could be found. The cavalry would have to move at the 'path's speed. And since not all 'paths got along with animals, that could hamper the speed of the cavalry. Some 'paths actually walked. Some traveled in great companies, surrounded by their own cavalry. And some made their way on their own. Who, after all, would dare to harm a 'path?

Looking down at Mikael, still sleeping fitfully, Katjin considered this. Mikael didn't weigh much, and Clan horses, small as they were, could carry a lot more than they looked like they could. They had been bred for speed for over a thousand years. And, if you believed what the ancestors said, they were descended from the Four Winds themselves. 'Drinkers of the Wind' was how their name translated into the old Clan tongue.

"We leave tonight?"

Meke shook her head. "You leave as soon as Soren's ready."

Katjin's jaw dropped. "Soren? Meke, you can't--"

"Not your choice, Kat-love," Meke cut in. "Soren's the best of the unpromised warriors, and you know that." As if Katjin would ever admit that to his cousin's face. "Getting him away from camp might do both of you some good."

"Or some pain," Katjin muttered, not looking at Meke. "He hates me." He didn't care

if he was whining. Even adults had the right to complain about something like that.

Meke smoothed back Katjin's flyaway hair. "He doesn't hate you. Who you are, maybe. But you as a person? Give him a chance to get to know you."

"So he can beat me up even more."

Meke sighed. "He's going with you, Kat, and that's that. No amount of arguing will win this one."

But Katjin wasn't too sure about that. Protesting had always paid off before. And it might still pay off this time.

Until he found himself racing after Soren on two of the fleetest horses the camp owned, clutching Mikael tight to his chest.

Okay, maybe whining hadn't paid off this once.

Chapter Four

Meke had at least done something to Mikael's curly hair, making it look the same black-brown as the rest of the Clanfolk. He wouldn't be easy to spot from a distance, at least. And there was nothing to be done for Mik's sunburn. With luck, it would fade into something resembling a healthy color in time. Not that any of them knew how much time they had.

"I've dosed him with a bit of valerian," Meke said, handing Katjin packet after packet to put into his packs.

"Meke! Isn't that dangerous?" Katjin looked at where Mikael lay, looking even more unconscious, if that was possible.

"If it keeps him quiet enough for you to get where you're going..." Meke handed him another packet. "You know the markings. Don't get them mixed up."

Katjin nodded. "Is there more of the dye stuff? For his hair?"

Meke pointed to a small black bladder. "Mix that with water and dump it on his head. It should last for a week at least. And if you have to, just cut his hair off. It'll last longer."

It wasn't common to see Clansmen with shorn hair like in the Lowlands, but Katjin would do whatever it took. "When should we come back?"

Meke wouldn't answer right away. "We'll find a way to get word to you," she said, looking away for a moment. "Don't worry, Kat-love. You'll be fine."

"But everyone else. They know about Mik--" Katjin protested as Febe all but threw him on his horse, then arranged Mikael's limp body in Katjin's arms.

"Let us worry about that," Febe said in a grim voice. "Your job now is to keep this boy safe. Aye?"

"Aye, Febe." Katjin looked over his shoulder at Soren, who held the lead-rein to one more horse, for Mikael once he woke up. Or in case one of them needed to get away in a

hurry...

"Off with you now." Febe slapped Katjin's horse on the rump, sending her flying. Katjin grabbed Mikael around the waist to make sure the sudden jump didn't send his passenger flying off the horse. "Speed of the ancestors, and may the ancestors watch over you!"

"And you, Febe," Katjin shouted as they raced out of camp. But no one was in earshot to hear.

At least Soren didn't insist on saying anything. Katjin's usually boastful cousin kept quiet, and for once, Katjin was entirely grateful. He'd noticed the annoyed looks Soren kept shooting him as they rode along. That first burst of gallop had only lasted so long, to Katjin's relief, and Soren had grudgingly admitted to wanting to conserve their speed. But, other than that, his cousin hadn't said much. Looked plenty, but hadn't actually said anything.

Neither had Mikael. The valerian that Meke dosed him with did its job, keeping Mikael in whatever coma-like state that Meke wanted him to stay in. Which was probably better for him, because being bounced around on the back of a horse couldn't be good for anyone in Mikael's shape. At least they'd dressed Mik comfortably: soft, fur-lined boots to protect his feet; enough light silk shirts to give the illusion of bulk under his robe; even a peaked cap for his head to keep him from getting even more burnt by the sun. Katjin only hoped that when, if, Mikael did wake up, he'd forgive Katjin for the uncomfortable ride across the plains. They wouldn't mention the part about actually having to tie Mikael to Katjin. He wasn't sure how Mikael would react to that, especially with Mikael's apparent aversion to touch, if his brief behavior was any example. Any Clanfolk would hate it, not just because of the extreme insult to both pride and riding ability.

It was coming toward summer now, so they had plenty of light. That also meant that, if a 'path was following them, the 'path would have plenty of light too. But that wasn't something that could be helped. At least, this high on the plains, they didn't have to worry about the heat of summer.

Soren kept them riding for hours, until it was almost too dark to see. Not that Kat was even paying attention to where they were going, since he spent most of his time trying to

keep Mikael balanced on Shanti's back. Riding double was uncomfortable enough when the person was conscious, which made Katjin question Meke's choice of drugs when it came to Mikael. Surely there had to be something that could've just made him a little sleepy, instead of taking him out completely. And that didn't even take into account the saddle sores Katjin could feel irritating his thighs, from trying to squeeze two people into what was undoubtedly a one-person saddle. He hoped he'd be able to walk when they got to camp.

He still had no idea where they were going, and even wondered if Meke and Febe knew. At least that was something familiar on this mad journey, the sense of just being along for the ride.

They didn't say anything as they made camp. Soren unsaddled the horses and let them graze while Katjin carefully laid out one bedroll, making sure Mikael was comfortable on it. They didn't bother lighting a fire--it wasn't cold enough to need one, at this low altitude. And smoke would only alert any watching patrols to their presence. When Mikael got restless, Katjin poured a bit more of the valerian down his throat, just like Meke said to. He hated doing it, but there wasn't much more that could be done. It was better to have Mikael comfortable, even if he was unconscious for most of the ride.

And so it went for another painful two days--up at dawn, riding for a few hours, stop at midday. After a rest, they'd push on until dark. Day was preferable to dark, since they went straight to sleep as soon as they reached their camp for the night. While Mikael slept the sleep of the unconscious, Katjin tossed and turned and dreamed of dark rooms and walls he couldn't break through. All the tossing and turning apparently kept Soren up, because Soren's glares only seemed to get darker as the morning of the second day progressed. As dawn of the second day approached, and Soren threw Mikael into the saddle in front of Katjin once more, Katjin really hoped Mikael would appreciate this someday.

All the while, Soren said nothing. Katjin wasn't used to silences like this. A few times, he found himself singing under his breath, but that only made Soren glare at him. And all he needed was to antagonize his cousin more. Soren had only tolerated him at best for most of his life. And now that Katjin was pretty much dependent on him to get them wherever they were going...

By the end of day two, Katjin learned that it was better just to keep quiet.

“Y’know it’s your fault,” Soren finally said. They’d reached a valley at this point, heading deeper and deeper into what almost seemed like the Highlands proper. Katjin had certainly never seen valley walls this steep. It was bad enough that the walls themselves almost seemed to be closing in on them. But they had cover at least, and a source of water. So it was probably only a matter of time until... until whatever happened.

But even after those three days of sulking and silence, Soren still wouldn’t look at Katjin. But he wouldn’t look at Mikael either, who was still asleep on the other side of Katjin.

“What was I supposed to do?” Katjin asked, suddenly feeling irrationally grumpy and very tired of all this. The accusing looks of his aunties and uncles over the past couple days had been enough. “He sang the aiding song. We’re supposed to help anyone who sings it.”

No one ever said that life on the plains was easy, especially not in years of drought so bad that you had to kill half your herd. Katjin only had a couple memories of that one drought year, when he was six years old, and he was glad that those memories were limited to only a few hazy ones. He didn’t need to see Febe cry that hard ever again, especially after putting down the stallion that had carried Febe so proudly from camp to camp for more than fifteen years.

The whole history of the Clans was based on the idea that no one ever went without. Only one people, together, could conquer the grasslands. No one could do it alone, and no one should have to do it alone. That’s what Katjin had always been taught. If you saw someone riding by your camp, you invited them in for something to eat. That way, you could figure out what they were doing here if they were non-Clan. And if they were Clan, it was a good excuse to catch up on the gossip. Likewise, if you ever rode near a Clan camp, you should expect the same invitation and hospitality.

Soren didn’t seem to have anything to say about that. “You coulda brought home a ‘path next week,” Soren said sourly. “Or last week.”

“I’m sorry Apa didn’t consult you about our schedule, since he doesn’t even consult his own son,” Katjin pointed out, feeling just as disagreeable as his cousin sounded. Soren was supposed to be the rational one. He was older. By Clan standards, he was an adult and should have started training with the cavalry already. And there hadn’t been any

doubt in anyone's mind that Soren would go to the cavalry. Not with his skills.

"The cavalry's coming for you, aren't they?" It would explain Soren's bad attitude from the past half a moon. And why the other fellas had been so anxious to show off.

Soren's only answer was a sullen nod.

"Febe didn't have to send you with me. I can take care of myself."

At that, Soren only snorted.

"Well, I could." Katjin stared at his hands, trying not to yell at Soren, which would only provoke his cousin into an even worse mood.

"Meke probably hoped your Mikael would die in the night," Soren finally said. "I heard her talking with my ama."

Katjin wrapped his arms around himself, shivering a little. "They wouldn't really have turned him out, would they?" He reached out with one hand to touch Mikael's blanket-wrapped body, barely a handspan from where Kat sat.

There was a thoughtful look on Soren's face, something Katjin hadn't ever really seen. "I don't know. The ancestors say they can't, but..."

"We could fight the Empire. Their cavalry's all Clan anyway. Right down to the horses."

Soren snorted again. "And after we steal their normal soldiers, they'll send out their 'paths to hunt us down to our last bolt-hole and then do what they want to us." At least now, the look he gave Katjin was a little friendlier. "The Empire's serious business, Kat. You can't just throw a rebellion in their face and not expect consequences. We'd be better off just getting caught with Mikael."

"Except we won't get caught. Not with you guiding us." He at least got a smile out of Soren at that. And not knowing what else to say, Katjin leaned around the fire and touched the back of his cousin's hand lightly. "I'm sorry, yeah? About the whole cavalry thing."

"Nothing that can be fixed now," Soren said with a shrug, his dark eyes focused on the fire, as if they'd rather not meet Katjin's eyes right now. "Besides, going to the cavalry probably wouldn't have been what I expected, and having to watch my thoughts all the time." He looked at Katjin, more serious than Katjin had ever seen him. "How does your apa stand it, month after month? Being surrounded by all those people and all those 'paths..." There was something to the tone of his voice, something that almost sounded like admiration. Begrudging admiration, but still admiration.

Katjin thought about that for a while. “You learn what not to think about when you’re in the cities,” he said finally. “Apa always says to watch my thoughts when I’m anywhere but here.” And it usually gave him a headache. “It’s why we sing so much when we travel. So we don’t have to think about things like that. Things that might get us in trouble.”

Except that Apa was probably somewhere in enemy territory right now. Katjin could only hope Apa was having all kinds of adventures that Kat would be envious of, someday. It made the fear a little less bitter, even if it only amplified his anger at being left behind.

Soren nodded to where Mikael slept. “Maybe the ancestors sent him your way to do something about all that. The Empire and ‘paths rummaging around in our thoughts like they have a right to it. If we have one of their ‘paths, one they can’t get to--” His voice was passionate now, as if years of resentment Katjin hadn’t even guessed existed finally coming to the surface.

“If he lives. If we can keep him alive.” Katjin scowled, remembering the hasty way they’d been thrown out of camp just hours before.

“Least we could do now is wake him up,” Soren said.

Katjin shook Mikael gently. The valerian should be wearing off by now. Mikael had kind of faded in and out over the past couple days, opening his eyes at Katjin long enough to take some water and pee in the general direction of away from Katjin, but there hadn’t been any more response than that. They hadn’t even dosed him today, since they did want him to wake up. Eventually. “Hey, Mik. Time to wake up.”

There was a flutter of eyelashes, and then a sleepy, “What?” The blue eyes widened, as if Mikael had become conscious of where he was. Or where he wasn’t. He thrashed around, knocking Katjin over. “Where? Who--”

“Damn it, stop!” It wasn’t too hard to pin Mikael down, considering how skinny he was. “Soren, help!”

Soren reached in, trying to pry Mikael off, but the minute his hand touched Mikael’s bare skin, Mikael howled so loud that Katjin thought his eardrums were going to pop. One of the first things you learned was that you never touched a ‘path. At least they knew why now; it apparently caused them physical pain, not just mental pain. Apparently when Katjin touched him, it was just annoyance. When it was Soren, though, Mikael’s howls made it sound like the touch burned.

“Back off, Soren! Now!” Katjin pulled Mikael back against him. “Easy, fella. Easy,” he

said, using the same tone he'd heard Febe use with a fractious horse. Mikael still struggled, still shuddered at the touch, but quieted some.

Soren moved back with a shrug. "Your call, Kat."

Mikael's blue eyes were still a little unfocused, but they fixed on Katjin well enough to glare at him. "Where am I?" he slurred, starting to thrash again, as if he realized how weak he was. "Drugged! You drugged--"

Katjin shook Mikael again, this time a little harder. "I didn't drug you. My gran did, and we had to! To save you, you idiot." The thrashing stopped, and Mikael peered up at Katjin again, eyes a little less crazed now. Katjin dropped his arms, letting Mikael go. The boy fell into a blanket-wound heap, but at least he was awake.

"Katjin," Mikael said slowly. "You're Katjin? Clan?"

He nodded in relief. "Katjin. Of the Horse Clan. You got yourself to the plains, somehow."

Mikael snorted. "Walked." He kicked at the blanket he was wrapped in until his feet were free, then struggled until he could see his feet. Katjin had to prop him up against a nearby rock, wincing at the sight of the bandaged feet. "Guess they blistered."

"Meke was surprised they weren't infected." Katjin tugged at the blanket, freeing Mikael to sit up on his own. He tried to ignore how Mikael seemed to wiggle away each time Mikael came within Katjin's reach. "You're with Clan. Me 'n Soren, my cousin. We're trying to save you."

"Who says I need to be saved?" Mikael attempted what looked like a pompous look, staring down the end of his nose at Katjin, but it failed miserably. It might've been the sheer exhaustion on Mikael's thin face. Or the fact that Katjin had been hauling this fella around like a limp sack of grain for the past three days.

"You screeching the aiding song at Kat, for one," Soren said, coming around the other side of the fire, a scowl on his face.

Mikael looked between Katjin and Soren; Katjin could almost feel the indecision. Soren definitely looked like more of a threat, but then, Katjin had also been an instrument in drugging Mik. He wasn't even sure which of the two options he'd choose, if he were in Mikael's position.

"That was--" Mikael started, struggling to stand up. His eyes bugged out with pain at the effort. "That was--" He slumped back to his knees, staring at the ground. Katjin had to feel sorry for him. He'd probably had his whole life ripped from him, and now he was

stuck with two strange Clanfolk out in the middle of the plains.

“The Empire’s after you,” Katjin said, trying his best to stay calm. All he wanted was for Mikael to seize up again, and they didn’t need to dose him with valerian again.

“I knew that,” was all Mikael would say, still staring at his feet.

“The Empire’s after you,” Katjin repeated, resisting the urge to either roll his eyes or beat Mikael over his pretty, curly head. “Soren and me are hiding you.”

Now Mikael looked up. Looked almost repentant through pale eyelashes, mouth still tight. “Thank you.”

Mikael awake was a different story than Mikael asleep. Asleep, he’d been glorified baggage, spending most of his time slumped against Katjin’s back as they rode across the plains. Now, he was a sarcastic, spoiled prince who didn’t quite get life on the plains. Not that Katjin could exactly blame him, since Kat didn’t exactly feel like he fit in himself most days.

“Where are we?” was Mikael’s first demand. When Soren wouldn’t tell him, that produced a sulk lasting almost half a day. Not that Katjin minded, entirely, since at least there was one more person to step between him and Soren now. This new distraction even complained more than both he and Soren combined: about how bright the sunlight was. Or how much the sun seemed to burn his skin, even if he kept covered up. Or what white food they’d brought with them from camp. He’d even scorned Meke’s fry bread, which was as good as a crime in Katjin’s eyes.

“You let him boss you around like that?” Mikael asked on the second day, when Soren more or less ordered Katjin to start a dung pile to ensure that they would have fuel over the next half a moon.

“You think you could survive out here without him?” He knew his own shortcomings when it came to survival. On the road, he was all right, especially if he had a direction he could follow. But out here, away from the comforts of the yer and the familiarity of camping with Apa, he knew they both had to rely on Soren. Not just Soren’s skills, but Soren’s patience as well. And if his cousin was willing to make a temporary peace, he was too, just to ensure his own survival.

Mikael actually looked thoughtful at that. “Maybe we’ll keep him a while longer then,”

was his concession to that fact.

Day three was when they figured out that any skin to skin contact with Mikael was pretty much forbidden. Not just because he didn't like to be touched. After all that whimpering and whining, it was almost anticlimactic when Mikael had fallen down, clutching his head and screaming in pain. All Katjin had tried to do was haul Mikael to his feet—an innocent touch, at the most. Not even bare palm to palm contact was an option.

It had taken all Katjin could to grab Mikael, forcing some of the valerian down his throat. Soren had diluted it with something, which meant that Mikael didn't pass out for days on end anymore. He would be groggy for a while, yeah, but that was better than unconscious.

"Touch," Mikael panted, beginning to sweat. "Touch is bad. Touching makes it bad--worse." He started to shake.

"Makes reading the emotions easier?" Katjin's arm tightened around Mikael's waist before he realized what he was doing. This time, Mikael didn't seem to shy away from it. Not completely, anyway.

Mikael nodded, but wouldn't say any more.

He made sure that only the sleeve of his robe touched Mikael, trying to stay away from the skin-on-skin contact. If touch made it worse, what kind of life was that? Could Mikael touch anyone? Aside from the prospect of sex and touching another person, how could you love anyone like that? Katjin tried to stay as calm as he could, as focused as he could. All Mikael needed now was to get bombarded with whatever he was feeling about something neither of them could control. It was bad enough now, when he couldn't tell if his moods were up or down or coming from somewhere sideways. But to have touch only make that worse? To have touch increase the tempermentalness of your emotions, just because your brain is a little too receptive to what people are feeling?

By day four, all three of them were wearing gloves, even in the rising heat. Tempers flared, especially when Katjin insisted that Mikael put on one of his spare robes.

"It's too damned hot for that!" Mikael complained, sweat pouring down his pale face. He'd at least taken their advice and worn the peaked cap that Meke had originally plunked on his head. His sunburn was fading a little, his normally pale complexion still tender.

Katjin sighed. "It's not too hot. Look. Me and Soren are wearing them." He pinched the sleeve of his lightweight linen robe. "It keeps you cooler, I swear. You don't feel the

sun beating down on you as much.”

They all felt the heat now, which only made tempers worse. Especially since they only had each other to talk to, or yell at.

Mikael pursed up his lips, took a deep breath, and then nodded. “Fine, I’ll try it.” He sighed again, shrugging into the robe that Katjin held out.

“It doesn’t hold in the sweat the way your shirt and breeks do,” Katjin said, helping Mikael with the unfamiliar toggles at the left shoulder that fastened the robe, then the other toggles that followed the left side seam down. He tried to ignore the heat of Mikael’s skin just as much as he tried not to touch any of the skin that was bared. “The linen wicks the moisture away. At least, that’s what Apa always says.”

“Your father some kind of cloth merchant?” Mikael asked, holding out his arms and inspecting the light grey robe.

“Trader. Some cloth, some trinkets, some foodstuffs,” Katjin replied, ignoring the knot in his stomach. Or trading his soul, if Apa really was committing treason and consorting with the Shahi. That was why Katjin never questioned any of Apa’s somewhat dubious activities when he was growing up. It just seemed safer, more comfortable, for them both that way.

“My father was a merchant.” Mikael looked away, as if searching the horizon of their small valley for something.

Katjin knew when to pry and when not to. There were times when a fella just didn’t want to talk, and he respected that. Especially with Mikael. Especially since they were here for who knew how long, trying to save themselves and an entire camp.

Katjin sighed, trying to ignore the bickering between Mikael and Soren. But as much as he stared at the torn robe in his hand, he couldn’t concentrate enough to mend the tear. His stitching wasn’t bad--well enough to mend, Meke always said, but the yelling made it worse. And to top it off, he couldn’t even tell what it was about, this time.

To his credit, Mikael was trying. His feet were still sore, so he couldn’t move far enough to gather food and fuel the way Soren wanted. And he didn’t know the first thing about washing clothes, though he seemed willing enough, after some cajoling, to learn. What he could do was tell stories, far better than Katjin could. And while the stories might not be

about whatever Mikael's life had been like before all this, they still made even Soren laugh sometimes. Mikael did have his own biting wit, when it wasn't directed at you. Which made Katjin happy, to know that Mikael was more than just a pretty face.

"For the last time, that's not what it's like. Think outside your plains, horsehead! We're not all the Emperor's sycophants in the Lowlands," he heard Mikael shout.

Mikael ran toward him, Soren at his heels. "Tell him, Kat," Mikael demanded. "Tell him what life is like in the cities. You've been there with your father."

Soren turned an interested eye to Katjin. Interested, yes, but also eager to prove Mikael wrong. "C'mon, little Kat," his cousin said in a mocking tone. "Tell me how wonderful these Lowland cities of yours are." While the first overtures of peace had been made, Soren still fell back to his old tricks from time to time, especially when Katjin seemed to side with Mikael against him. Soren took that as a personal insult, which only made matters worse.

Katjin stared at them both. He wondered who had nominated him to be the peace-maker, because he was getting tired of it. Tired of Soren's emotions fueling Mikael's already-hot temper, and the sparks flying between them.

"It's like the Gathering, Soren." He knew how much his cousin loved the Gathering, being able to show off to an entirely new audience of family and non-family alike. "It's as much food and goods and people as the Gathering, only every day of every year. With people and sounds and the smells of food from the market. And all the colors of cloth, and the girls and the fellas dressed in their best."

Mikael's eyes had that distant look in them again. "Laughing. And gossip. And always new people to talk to, new stories to hear."

Katjin smiled. "New songs."

Mikael nodded. "New songs."

Soren crossed his arms. "So it's like the Gathering. So you have people to talk to. You can do that at home. You just have to visit another camp to do it."

"Aye, and it's usually a long ride away," Katjin said.

"But there's less people. Less crowding. Less smell, from all their privies and night soil and nasties they throw in the street." Soren wrinkled his nose. "No walls."

"No walls," Katjin echoed with a shudder. Standing just beside him, Mikael shuddered too. "Closing you in, not letting you go free."

"Like the dark." Mikael's voice was soft. "Til you're alone in the dark, and there's no

one there with you.”

Katjin and Soren exchanged a long look. That would explain a lot about Mikael--his reticence to listen to them, his outright refusal to sleep in the yer or to go beyond the firelight at night. His stubbornness about some things. And the way that he seemed to alternate between clinging to Katjin’s shadow at times, as if he was afraid Katjin would disappear out from under his eyes, while physically pushing Katjin as far away as possible, as if he couldn’t stand the touch.

“Well, you’re stuck with us now,” Soren said slowly. “And unless you don’t pull your weight, we won’t be throwing you back to the dark anytime soon.”

He did have to admire Soren sometimes. His cousin knew how to lead, knew how to get attention when he needed to, and, occasionally, knew when to give a kind word to someone who needed it. That skill might not always apply to his younger cousin, but it was still one Katjin had seen him use occasionally. And it was good to see it here, in this fragile bit of truce.

“I asked Meke and Febe to make you Clan,” Katjin said in the second week, as he and Mikael groomed the horses. Mikael had a surprisingly light hand with the animals, being able to calm them as Katjin couldn’t. There was something to that heart-sense thing.

Mikael actually looked startled. “Why?” he asked in a frank tone. “Why bother with me?”

“Because you sang the aiding song,” Katjin responded in the same simple tone. “Because we’re supposed to help each other when we need it. It’s what Clanfolk do.”

Mikael fidgeted with Shanti’s mane, plaiting the coarse copper strands between his fingers. “But I’m not Clan. There’s Clan blood back there, somewhere, but I’m not your family.”

“But we can fix that.” Soren’s voice came out of nowhere, making them both jump. “I was thinking, little Kat. We can fix this.”

Katjin made a face at the nickname, something Soren was using more and more. “Fix it how?” he asked.

“By adopting Mikael into our camp. By doing the ritual ourselves.” Soren grinned, his whole face lighting up. “Want to be Clan, Mikael? Might not stop the Empire, but it

means that not even the Clanfolk could force you off the plains.”

Mikael looked thoughtful, and not really bothered by the whole thing. Maybe because Soren was in a good mood, which automatically improved Mikael’s. Or maybe because it was one solution, even if it would only cause more problems.

“But--“ Katjin knew it couldn’t be that simple.

“No, listen. It’s easy.” Soren shuffled over til he was standing next to Katjin. “By Clan law, all you need is the consensus of the camp. It doesn’t say that it has to be the full Clan camp that your family belongs to. It just says that it has to be the camp you’re currently living in now.” Soren waved his hand at their small campsite, the horses and the yer that faced south, just as it would have at Spring Camp. “I have a feeling we’ll be out here for a while by ourselves.”

Mikael cut in. “And since it’s just the two of you, in a recognized camp, no one can question the legitimacy of it. You’re your own authority here.”

Soren’s grin widened. “Aye, what he said. See, Katjin? Then no one can argue whether or not he belongs ever again. Look, we could take it one step further and do the old blood-binding rite.” At Katjin’s confused look, he rolled his eyes. “Didn’t you ever pay attention when Meke was drilling us about Clan history? Honestly, Kat.”

The blood-binding rite turned out to be simple enough. All they needed to do was have Mikael exchange blood with Katjin, and Soren, as default leader of their small camp, would declare them blood-kin, inseparable by even Empire law. It wasn’t quite marriage, but to Katjin, it sounded awful close to it.

“Since you like him anyway.” Soren smirked at Katjin’s surprised look. Katjin looked around quickly before noticing that Mikael was out of earshot. “What, you think we didn’t notice? He is kinda pretty, but I’ll leave him to you.”

“So, when do we do this?” Katjin figured it was easiest to ignore Soren’s teasing. This teasing seemed different, though. Almost like it was out of affection, and not general derision.

“Now. Might as well.”

“But will it work?” He didn’t want to sound skeptical, but it still seemed too simple. Not that he minded the thought of being bound to Mikael. It’s not like they were asking him to bond with the fella for life, not a monogamous partnership or anything. It still meant that he was tied to this Lowlander, this ‘path, and it was an unbreakable bond. They would both be responsible for each other’s actions for the rest of their lives. And he

wondered if Mikael realized that.

Sure enough, as Mikael came back into whatever his 'range' was, he picked right up on the emotion. The same way he picked up on any of the strongest emotions they felt, especially at this close of range. "Katjin's not sure it'll work." Mikael's voice was flat. "Why're you so sure, Soren?" His voice was angry, frustrated. They were all frustrated at this point.

"Might not work, but we don't have much of a choice," Soren pointed out. "I don't want you and you don't want us, but we're obligated to help you."

Katjin wondered where this 'we' had come from all of a sudden.

It was a long, tense moment before Mikael finally nodded. "Okay." The word sounded like it cost Mikael a lot, especially when it came to pride.

Katjin held out a gloved hand to Mikael as a peace offering. "C'mon, brother."

Some humor flickered in Mikael's blue eyes, and he laughed, even if he didn't take the hand that Katjin offered. "Brother, huh? I never had one. Three sisters, but no brothers."

Katjin snorted. "Don't get me started on the family."

They made their way back to the campfire. Soren poked at it a few times with a stick, stirring the banked fire into life again. He pulled out his boot-knife, sticking it into the fire.

"Red Wind Clan," Soren said, taking his knife out of the fire and testing the heat of it on his arm. He winced at the sizzle of hot steel against flesh. "Of the..." he looked at Katjin helplessly.

"Of the Stream Camp," Katjin suggested.

Soren rolled his eyes, but nodded. "Red Wind Clan of the Stream Camp," he repeated, taking on the part of camp leader. "We are here today to welcome a new member into our family. Are there any objections from the tent heads?"

Katjin supposed that meant him, since he was the only other one there. Even though they'd only brought one yer for the three of them.

Soren turned to Mikael, holding out his hand. "Your name," he asked, part of the ceremony.

Mikael stared at Soren, hesitating, before putting his hand in Soren's. They both winced at the touch. "Mikael of Stoneridge," Mik said clearly. Stoneridge was just on the border of the Clan lands, so Mikael hadn't come as far as they thought--still a long way, but not quite Lowlands proper.

Soren nodded. "Hold out your arm. Katjin, you too."

Katjin shifted him and Mik so that they both knelt in front of Soren, then held out his own arm.

“We speak these words to join you as brothers,” Soren said. “Blood binds to blood, life to life.” And with a swift movement, he cut both Katjin’s and Mikael’s hands. He dropped the knife and pressed their bleeding palms together, binding them tight with a cloth. Mikael fought it for a moment, but then his hand tightened around Katjin’s. “This blood that now flows in your veins binds you both to Clan and Camp. You are now family, Mikael of Red Wind, of Stream Camp.”

Soren droned on, but the words made no sense to Katjin. All he could feel was a welter of emotions: fear, sadness, and some strange joy that he couldn’t put a name to. The world seemed to swim and then, suddenly, it all went black.

Chapter Five

“Kat?” Someone’s voice--didn’t sound like Meke or Febe--pierced the hazy darkness that surrounded him.

He woke, sticky with sweat and clinging tightly to someone as if it meant life or death. His arms seemed to tighten automatically around the person, without his consent. The person in his arms thrashed for a moment, and Katjin began to panic. His grip on the other body squeezed more and more until the other person *heaved* and wound up on top of him. It wasn’t until dark hair blocked his vision, Mikael’s eyes staring, frightened, into his, that he realized.

They were in the yer. Not the familiar white felt roof of Apa’s yer, but the same type of small round yer smelling of horse and grasslands and years of use. The yer that he and Soren had set up--was it a week ago?--when they decided to camp here, in this valley. The yer that he knew he hadn’t fallen asleep in last night.

“Kat?” He could feel the unease rolling off Mikael in waves: anxiety at Katjin’s closeness, anger at the desire to push Katjin *away*, the worry that something had gone wrong. He felt. And he knew the strange emotions weren’t coming from him, because they didn’t feel natural. They didn’t feel like they were his.

Mikael’s.

Heart-sense.

He sat up in a rush, pushing Mikael away. Or, he tried to, until his head started pounding. He grabbed at Mikael again, who looked just as sick as Katjin felt. He rubbed at his eyes, noticing the heavy bandages on his right wrist. “What—“ he croaked, blinking his eyes awake. “We...”

One of Mikael’s hands, wrist also bandaged, half-heartedly pushed Katjin back to what seemed like a more acceptable distance. The poor still fella tended to freak if someone got

too close, much less touched. Mik peered at him anxiously, uncertainly. Almost as if he hoped Katjin knew what was going on.

“Your cousin did something,” Mikael said. “Or it’s some demon witchery. What was that ritual? Something you learned from the Shahi?”

Waves of anger and fear hit him, but at least he could figure out why he felt that way. Well, fear, aye, since he wasn’t sure why his head started pounding whenever Mikael wasn’t glued to his skin. That was uncomfortable for other reasons. Katjin shifted position, hoping his usual ailment of morning hardness wasn’t too evident. He’d also need to leak shortly, which he could imagine would be all kinds of fun with Mikael attached to his back like some kind of parasite. Maybe he could escape to piss before Mikael noticed. Oh, ancestors, if that was an emotion that ‘paths could read.

He would’ve expected Mikael to smirk. Instead, the other boy looked away, as if he knew exactly what Katjin was thinking. Then, inexplicably, Mikael blushed, and Katjin’s own feelings of discomfort intensified. Now, it was irritation, with a bit of panic for seasoning.

“Slow down,” Katjin said, touching Mikael’s shoulder. Mikael shifted away, as usual, but it seemed half-hearted this time. Maybe Mik was finally getting used to be around people again. He rubbed Mik’s shoulder this time, trying to ease some of the tension. Because even a blind non-’path could feel the tension. You could probably cut it with a knife. “What are you talking about?” There had to be a way they could get through this. Make Mikael turn off his ‘pathing. Because it had to be Mikael. Because ‘paths could do that, couldn’t they? It was almost enough to distract him from the fact that he had to pee.

“Your cousin,” Mikael said slowly. “He... did something.” He pushed Katjin away again, this time to a full arm’s length. “You feel that?” Mikael’s voice was strained.

The headache was definitely back, in full force, and brought a sucker punch to the gut along with it. He almost thought he was going to wet his breeks, it was so bad. The yer seemed to spin, taking his stomach along with it. And there was the taste of whatever he’d last eaten-- “Maybe,” Katjin said, grabbing Mikael’s hand again. The hand attempted to skitter away, but Mikael seemed to think better of it. The sense of relief that came with the touch almost knocked him on his back again. It wasn’t just physical relief. It was mental relief too; peace and ease and something that said that everything would be all right in the world. Maybe this wasn’t too bad.

“Do ‘paths just read emotions?” This could just be a side-effect of Mikael being a

heart-sense. Maybe giving off emotions was just part of the package.

“Because I’m the expert on ‘paths?’” Now it was annoyance. So maybe Mikael wasn’t-- what was the word? Projecting?--emotions at him. Which could only mean...

Mikael stared at him. Looked at him, eyes wide with all the fear that Katjin felt. Except it wasn’t all his. It didn’t all feel like his. Because if he was a ‘path now too, then they were in twice as much trouble.

Ancestors bless.

He breathed. In and out. And started humming, just the way he always did when he was in the Lowlands. Started mouthing the words to the first song that came into his mind. Which happened to be the aiding song.

That seemed to calm Mikael down, at least. And maybe him too, a little. “Do you feel okay?” he asked, squeezing Mikael’s hand. This time, there was a slight squeeze back, as if Mikael wasn’t sure what his response should be. It wasn’t like this was easy for either of them.

There was a pause, and then Mikael nodded slowly. “I feel clear,” he said. “Like I can see again. No headache. No nausea. No nothing.” He shook his head. “It hasn’t been like that for a long time.”

Katjin lay back, taking Mikael with him. Mikael lay next to him, twitching until they were an arm’s length apart. Even then, Mikael still kept only the lightest contact with Katjin’s skin, shaking from the effort of it all. “What was it like, before?” Katjin asked. “Before you, um, ran.”

He could feel the shudder that went down Mikael’s body, and the fear that came with that shudder. His vision darkened until everything went black, and it felt like the yer itself was trying to swallow him up. There was an emptiness inside that grew and grew until his body began to shudder with the engulfing fear. Katjin tried to stop it, but his own body wouldn’t listen. It was listening to Mik’s emotions instead.

Oh, ancestors.

“Apart,” Mik said, distracting Katjin. “Crowded. Like there were too many feelings in my head. Like I couldn’t find myself in there.” He shivered. “Until they put me away. And then there was just... nothing.”

Which explained some of Mikael’s hostility then. He wasn’t sure how he’d react, if he suddenly woke up a heart-sense. Except, he was now. Kind of. If that’s what had happened, when Soren did that blood ritual thing. Maybe he could give Mik a little more

slack, for all that. It wasn't comfortable, this feeling other peoples' emotions thing. It was almost like there was some alien spirit inside, making him feel worse than usual, and for no good reason.

"But you aren't branded." It was more of a question than an answer as Katjin picked up one of Mikael's wrists, comparing it to the old brand burnt into his. It was a thin wrist, far too skinny, really. And pale. Kat didn't think he'd ever seen anyone that pale.

He could feel the shrug--both physically and mentally, which startled Katjin. Almost more than his own echo of the shrug, shoulders hitching slightly up, then down. "There was a 'path at my birth," Mikael said slowly. "My parents swore to it. But for some reason, the 'path never branded me. I don't know if my family made a deal with the 'path, or..."

Katjin nodded. "So you didn't know."

"Not until about a year ago." Mikael shuddered. "I started feeling all the emotions around me, and it was okay at first, but then I started fainting and screaming. My parents got scared, so they made up some story about sending me away to the country."

"And hid you." The shudders started again in both of them, but they seemed to decrease when Katjin tightened his grip on Mikael, tugging him against his side. It took a breath or two, but then Mikael's tense body seemed to relax, even if it was just a little bit. "In the dark. With no one else. Just you..." All alone, not knowing what was going on outside, not knowing when food would come next, or light, or if anyone was even still there. Panic built up in his chest until Katjin was gasping for breath, trying to find the light, the warmth, any sign of someone who was out there--

"Easy," Mikael's voice said softly. Thin fingers ran hesitantly through Katjin's hair, tugging a bit too hard as if they'd forgotten how hard or soft to comb. "Easy."

Katjin buried his face against his arm, trying as hard as he could not to cling harder to Mikael. Mikael seemed to feel the need, and put a bony arm around Katjin, drawing him closer. "I'm sorry," he said, tears catching in his throat. He didn't know if the pain was his or Mikael's. "I'm sorry."

Mikael pushed Katjin away, a strange, almost disbelieving look on his face. "You really felt that."

Nitwit. As if he'd been faking it the first time. Or the second. Or now. "I felt it. Like I've felt everything else this morning. Afternoon. Now."

And the sense of not being alone anymore. Of the realization of not being alone. A

sudden relaxation of tension Katjin hadn't even noticed tightening up his body. The only problem with that was the reminder that he desperately had to piss. And from Mikael's own not-so-subtle shifting, Mik probably had to too. This was going to be interesting.

"Um," Katjin began, not knowing what to say.

Again, that fierce blush on Mikael's pale face. "No, we can't. I can't. I'll never piss again." He screwed up his face in horror. "Gods. If we, um, use our opposite hands or something, we could, y'know."

Katjin nodded in relief. "That's good. That's, that should work." He hauled Mikael to his feet, pulling him out of the tent. Mikael hurried along after Katjin, his arm stretched as far as humanly possible. After the initial dancing around and some sighing and noises of disgust on Mikael's part, it didn't seem as difficult as Katjin thought, not that they wanted to make a habit of it. Standing back to back freed their hands enough to take care of business without too much discomfort. And the double relief that he felt afterward almost made up for it.

They went back into the yer and leaned against the taut lattice that made up the yer wall, hand in hand, but still that arm's length apart.

"So you feel what I feel," Mikael said slowly. "Which means you'll feel what Soren feels."

Katjin tried not to think about that. His cousin was a reeling whirlwind of emotions, and when they filtered through Mikael, the reflected moodiness was bad enough. But add him too to the mix?

"I feel what you feel," he repeated. "And we're sure this isn't just you?"

"Look, I might not know a lot about being a 'path, but I can guarantee that the whole touching thing isn't part of it." Mikael raised their intertwined hands, shaking them a bit with a sigh. "That's going to cause more problems than you picking up on my feelings."

"What makes you so sure?" Katjin asked sourly. So much for the idea that it was just Mikael, and not something he and Soren did. Which could be bad, in the long run, but he wasn't going to think about that now. "It wasn't supposed to be like this." Because everyone wanted to go through their life constantly plagued by headache and feeling like they were going to vomit everywhere.

Before they could say anything else, someone coughed. Katjin looked up, not surprised to see Soren there, wearing a look of hesitation.

"Soren?" Katjin asked. He could feel Mikael almost vibrating with anxiety. Katjin

squeezed Mikael's hand. So the run-ins between him and Soren hadn't been the best in the past week or so. Katjin could understand a little nervousness on Mik's part. Especially with the new... developments between them.

"You're awake." His cousin sounded--and looked--relieved. So relieved that Katjin could feel it, calming the tension out of his own body. Except that only started to bother him more, when he thought about it. Shouldn't his body be listening to his thoughts, not someone else's?

"Course we are," Katjin said, trying to fake a cheerful tone. "Why wouldn't we be?"

Soren sighed, dropping down on the ground next to them. "You were out for three days. I thought..." He swallowed. Fear twisted and roiled around in Katjin's stomach, probably coming from Soren through Mikael. Kat never thought that Soren would actually care that much, not enough to actually be scared for Katjin. "You're okay now, right?"

Katjin's eyes followed Soren's to his and Mikael's joined hands. "About that."

Soren's eyebrows arched. "About the hand-holding, or is it something else?" It was obvious that Soren was assuming the worst--if a sudden desire to ravage Mikael senseless was the worst.

"We might've done something when you bound me and Mikael." Katjin winced at the weight of worry that suddenly thrust itself at him. He breathed, hummed a bit, and tried to stay as calm as he could. For Mikael's sake. And for his own.

"Something that makes you want to hold his hand all the time?" Soren was trying for an amused tone, but failed miserably.

"Replace 'want to' with 'have to'," Mikael said, sounding a little calmer, a little less bitter. Curious. Most times, any contact with Soren in a mood like this wound Mikael tighter than an unbroken colt.

Soren's jaw dropped. Katjin had the curious experience of seeing his usually stoic cousin absolutely speechless. "Um."

"It wasn't supposed to do that," Katjin suggested as a possible response. "I didn't mean to do that. Or, how about, what do you mean you have to touch him?" Except something sounded profoundly, and delightfully, dirty about that last one. He didn't even want to think about the problems constant physical contact was going to have. But the fact that he had to touch Mikael might have some benefits, even if Mikael himself didn't seem too pleased about it

“But you don’t touch ‘paths. I thought that was one of the rules of the Empire,” Soren said, still looking completely confused. “Every time we touched Mikael before, he freaked out.”

Once again, Mikael raised their hands in an obvious ‘well, look at this’ gesture. “Something changed. The blood sharing did something to us. So Katjin feels my emotions. And if we don’t touch--”

“Ancestors damn it!” Katjin howled as Soren suddenly yanked them apart. As fast as he could, he scrabbled back to Mikael, trying to stop the pain. Mikael reached for him at the same time, huddling close together until they were in each other’s arms, faces pressed cheek to cheek. And that relief came back, that feeling of shared strength, of peace settling over and calming them both.

“Watch it, idiot!” Mikael growled, pushing Katjin to arm’s length again. Katjin patted his arm, humming again. Between the worry from Soren and the anger boiling off Mikael, it was all Katjin could do to keep himself--and Mikael--together.

Soren backed away, looking, well, lost. “I need to think--” he started, before heading out of the yer.

“As if we don’t.” Mikael sighed. He moved a little closer, bumping Katjin’s shoulder with his own. “You okay?”

Katjin laughed a little. “Isn’t that my response?” He eyed Mikael. “I guess we do have one benefit from all this.”

Now Mikael arched one pale eyebrow. “Which is?” he asked expectantly.

“We can figure it out together.”

“Shouldn’t you be more worried about this?” Soren still wouldn’t look either him or Mikael in the eye. The whole guilt thing was bad enough, but combined with the vague sense of unease, it was almost too much. And it was doing things to Katjin’s stomach. He hadn’t waited months on end to enjoy Clan food, only to have some of Soren’s sour emotions ruin it for him. “You keep grabbing him, he keeps pushing you away, and if you aren’t together, you’re writhing around on the ground like someone kicked you in the gut. It’s not *normal*. Not even for you.” Soren paced up and down. “Uncle’s going to kill me. And then Meke and Febe will have the ancestors resurrect me so they can kill me after.”

“How worried do you want me to be?” Katjin snapped. Two days in, and Soren had taken to sleeping outside the yer. Said, in an especially snide tone of voice, that the noises the two of them made at night, when Katjin was sure he and Mikael were both asleep, were bothering him. As if Mikael’s screeching panic hadn’t been bad enough, pushing Katjin away as if he was some kind of unclean monster. If they’d even been consciously making the noises, Katjin wouldn’t have minded so much. Trust that the one chance he finally had at a physical relationship, of some kind, would be something that seemed to happen in his sleep and just leave him with damp stains on his breeks and an anxious Mikael trying his best to get away. Mikael seemed to be getting a little better about it. They’d both realized there was some kind of calming influence when they touched; that seemed to even soothe the savage beast that lurked within Mikael’s scrawny body.

“Well, you just seem kind of,” Soren flapped a hand indecisively, “calm about the whole thing.” His cousin sounded frustrated. “And you shouldn’t be. Because I’m not, and I’m the adult, which makes me responsible, and I never said this could happen. I--”

“Calm?” Katjin breathed, trying to keep his voice down from a shriek. To his surprise, Mikael started humming at him reassuringly. “Think about it, Soren. Mikael feels what you feel. I feel what he feels. He feels what I feel, and then we’re back where we started. If I don’t keep calm--” He inhaled deeply. “If I don’t keep calm, if I try not to think about it, then I get through it. One more day.” One more day of alien emotions invading his body. One more day of wondering when he’d get the control back.

Soren didn’t need to know about how many times Katjin had woken up in the past two nights, cold sweat, all but pushing Mikael away. At least it was a change of pace from Mikael being the instigator of their separation. Even Mik had clung in sleep a couple times, as if he didn’t realize he was doing it. They’d taken to tying their hands together at night, just to prevent anything from happening. Neither needed to deal with that pain again. Neither needed to take any chances. And if it meant he didn’t touch Mikael by the in the middle of the night like he had that first night, causing Soren to hastily move out of the yer on a permanent basis, then fine by it.

“But how--” Soren stopped, looking puzzled. That, for some reason, made Soren look really young for a moment, his face scrunched up almost as if he was going to cry or something. “I have to fix this. I have to do something.” He took a deep breath. “And I don’t know what.”

Katjin hadn’t thought about it from Soren’s perspective. His cousin was sent out here

to protect and watch over him, make sure he didn't make too much of an idiot of himself. Soren was, for lack of a better word, playing Apa's role. Apa always knew how to fix everything because fathers always seemed to have some kind of control over the way the world worked. And here was something that Soren had no control over, couldn't fix, and quite possibly caused. Not only that, but his cousin was alone with them--completely alone, with no Meke or Febe or Apa or Ama to guide him. At least Katjin had Mikael, even if Mikael couldn't decide between pulling Katjin close and shoving him away again.

Maybe it was time to be a little nicer to his cousin. But only if Soren stopped asking annoying questions.

"We'll stay here until we get the all-clear from Meke and Febe," Katjin said slowly, looking at Mikael, who was trying to mend a torn robe with one hand and doing an all right job of it. "We should hear from them soon. And then--"

"Your apa's in the Highlands, right?" Soren broke in, face lighting up with excitement. Maybe he'd found a solution to their problem. "Highlandfolk have connections to the Shahi demons. Maybe we can get them to fix you."

"No Shahi," Mikael said flatly, looking up from his mending. "Highlandfolk are bad enough, but there will be no Shahi."

Katjin tried to figure out if the fear coming off Mikael was anything in particular, or just the normal fear they all felt. As long as he and Mik kept at arm's length, and he let Mikael take the initiative on drawing closer, the Lowland boy seemed all right. At least Mikael was okay with sleeping in the yer, now. Maybe Katjin's closeness gave Mikael something new to worry about rather than a fear of small, dark places. At least they both had that in common.

Katjin carded his fingers through Mikael's hair, which was coming in blond at the roots. Meke's dye was wearing off. Mikael usually wouldn't let him do this, but he seemed distracted by the mending. His fingers got stuck in the frizzy tangles. It felt almost like a winter horse's winter coat. Mikael stopped what he was doing, and, almost as if he didn't realize it, leaned into the touch. He almost purred as Katjin stroked his hair. There was something euphoric about that, and decidedly exciting about it. His stomach began to quiver slightly, an almost nervous feeling.

"We need to comb your hair," Katjin muttered, zoning Soren out. Mikael leaned into the caress as Katjin massaged his scalp. "We should at least pull it back into two tails. It'll keep it out of your eyes better."

“Katjin? Kat!” He could hear Soren’s voice, but that didn’t seem important somehow. The tangles in Mikael’s hair were all that mattered, and getting them straightened out.

“I think we have a comb.” He dragged Mikael along behind him as he hurried toward the yer, and began digging in the saddlebags that were thrown in the corner. It wasn’t long before he pulled out a bone comb, the teeth wide enough to handle Mikael’s curls with ease. “Here, sit.” He pushed Mikael down in front of him as he perched on a folding camp stool that Soren had brought.

Mikael gave in, settling against Katjin’s knees and lighting resting a hand on Katjin’s bare foot. They were still figuring out the ways and ways of touching without having to hold hands all the time. There were some things you needed two hands for. And some things they still had to work on.

Katjin untied the leather twist that held Mikael’s hair back, loosening it over Mikael’s narrow shoulders. “You look like you haven’t combed your hair in a moon or two,” he muttered, going to work on one of the worst tangles.

“It’s not like we’ve had time,” Mikael said, leaning into the long strokes of the comb. Looking down, Katjin could see Mikael’s eyes drifting shut. “And it’s kinda hard to comb your hair when you’re unconscious.”

He nudged Mikael’s butt with his foot. “It wasn’t my idea.” This time, there was no bitterness in either remark. It almost seemed like a joke. Or something that happened a long time ago.

Not that any of this was easy. But it was so easy to forget all the hurt and headache when he could do something as simple and calming as comb Mik’s hair. The gnarls in everything seemed to just fall away.

He gathered to top half of Mikael’s thick curls into one tail, twisting and tying it off with a bit of leather. The top tail wasn’t quite long enough to tuck into the bottom one, but both make Mikael’s hair look a lot neater. And it showed off the lines of Mikael’s stubborn jaw. His face seemed finer-boned than Clan, but still nice to look at nonetheless. And those blue eyes that, unguarded, looked at Katjin as if he was all that mattered in the world--

A sudden rush of smoldering emotions: anger, jealousy, loneliness. Katjin’s head started to hurt. Soren coughed. “Are you done?”

Katjin and Mikael both glared at him.

Things might be a little easier, but there was still a way to go.

Chapter Six

“Ancestors damn it!”

Katjin jerked awake. Arms and legs flailed around him as he struggled to sit up. And there was that familiar headache, which meant he’d strayed too far from Mikael’s side. It was kind of hard to tell by feel in the dark, especially when there was one more body in with them than normal.

He hadn’t been about to leave Soren out in the rain, especially not in the torrential downpour that appeared not long after supper. Soren had grudgingly dragged his bedroll into the yer while Mikael glowered at him from over Katjin’s shoulder, but everything had seemed all right.

At least, until they fell asleep.

Soren started out on the opposite side of the yer, with almost a horse length between Katjin’s pallet and Soren’s. But somehow that distance had changed in the middle of the night. And somehow, Soren had gotten tangled up in his and Mikael’s usual nighttime huddle.

And apparently someone had grabbed the wrong body part.

Katjin closed his eyes, opened them again, and breathed in deep. Mikael started humming something on his other side, something that sounded better than the usual tuneless noise he made. Funny how Mik had picked up that habit. At least it worked on both of them.

He could just make out a blurred shape shuffling across the yer, dragging its bedroll behind it. The muttering was clearer, and Katjin could almost make out individual words; at least the rain seemed to have stopped, since he couldn’t hear it thudding softly against the yer anymore.

“Soren,” he started, trying not to sound cross. He rubbed his eyes with his free hand,

wondering if it'd been him or Mikael that had grabbed Soren. Mikael started out each night sleeping against the yer wall, but that didn't mean he'd end up there in the end. For all that they were tied together at the hand, his bed-mate was a restless sleeper and often ended up in some contorted positions. When Mikael wasn't trying to shove Katjin out of the bed in the first place as soon as he realized he was actually sharing a pallet with someone.

It was more than a need to touch now. It was almost like an addiction sometimes--it felt so wonderful and warm and good to touch Mikael that he wondered if he'd ever be able to stop. Except there were times when Mikael made him stop, pushing him away as Mikael's breath came in faster and faster gasps.

"It's fine, Kat," was Soren's gruff response. "Leave it. Rain's stopped, I'll sleep out there."

"Damn it," Katjin muttered, trying to untangle himself from the blankets before Soren could walk out. Except the blankets were wound around his and Mikael's hands, through the rope that bound their wrists. At least, that's what it felt like in the dark.

"Here, what if--ow!--we just--" Mikael got to his hands and knees, crawling and half-dragging Katjin in Soren's direction. "Soren, stop!"

But the yer flap rustled open and shut.

Katjin's eyes found the darker shadow of Mikael's face in the darkness. He reached out hesitantly, not sure if Mikael would let him. To his surprise, Mikael leaned in, letting Katjin feel Mik's smooth skin, the frowning mouth, the worried ridges between Mik's eyebrows. "He'll be all right," Katjin said, sounding doubtful even to himself.

"He's lonely," Mikael said quietly. "He's lonely, and he's aching all the time, and he has no control over it. And he hates not having control, especially since he's supposed to be the one with all the answers."

Mikael's hand came up to cover Katjin's. Katjin turned his hand palm-against Mik's cheek, squeezing Mikael's hand before letting it go again. "Lonely? Soren?" It seemed doubtful, somehow, even if it rang true in his bones. Because that sullen want that burned in the pit of his stomach wasn't his own feeling. He knew enough now to be able to say that, at least.

"Think about it," Mikael continued. "You said he's basically the head stallion at home, yeah? Here, he's got only us to lord over, but he's also responsible for us. We can't take care of ourselves, and we're in this mess. And we're, kinda, wrapped up in each other." He

waved their joined hands. "That doesn't involve him. He can't control it. So, yeah, why wouldn't he feel a little left out?"

Katjin mulled over this for a while. "Didn't think you were such a fan of Soren's," he muttered, suddenly hating his cousin. Mikael shouldn't admire him that much, not when this was Soren's fault in the first place.

"Not a fan," Mikael corrected. "Sympathetic, maybe." He snorted. "Empathic toward his predicament."

Katjin chuckled a little at that. "So, what do we do?"

He could hear Mikael chewing on his lip. "Maybe we try some more stuff," Mikael said after a little while. "Test reaction time. Distances. Maybe if you stand in front of me, you'll get the emotions first or whatever. Things like that."

He thought about that for a moment. "Could work. Soren does like to think, to plan things. He was always the best at raiding other camps at the Gathering each summer. Got all the cousins to follow him one year. Meke almost had all our hides when she found out we took off with one of her friend's best rugs."

"How'd she find out?" Mikael asked, coming to lean his chin on Katjin's shoulder. Katjin tried not to act too surprised at that, since Mikael had never done that before.

Katjin could feel his face burning, but knew it was useless to try and hide anything from Mikael. It's not like his feelings were his own anymore. But at least Soren couldn't feel them. Thank the ancestors for that.

"Um, I might've told her," he muttered quickly. "But I--"

Mikael's laughter rang out in the small yer. "You ratted out your own cousins? Gods, Kat, no wonder Soren hated you!"

He glared at the general direction of Mikael's head. "I was nine, and it wasn't like I realized what I was doing." Which seemed to be the story of his life sometimes.

There was a rattle and a whoosh of breeze as the yer flap opened again. "Glad to see you're having a laugh at my expense," Soren said, coming into the yer with one of their lanterns. He grabbed at a second blanket. "I'll leave you in peace."

"Ancestors--Soren, wait!" Katjin said, getting to his feet and dragging Mikael with him. "Mik's not laughing at you. He's laughing at me."

"For what?" Soren asked, arms crossed over his chest, a sullen look on his downturned face.

"For that stupid rug we took, and how I told Meke afterward," Katjin said. "It's not

because of you. It's 'cause of me."

Soren looked from Mikael to Katjin and back again. Mikael had tears streaming down his face. Katjin could feel wetness pricking at his own eyes, but couldn't tell whose emotion it was, not this time.

And then, Soren smiled a small smile. "That was pretty funny," his cousin admitted, uncrossing his arms. "Until Febe tanned all our arses for it."

"I couldn't sit down for two days," Katjin said, smiling back a little. "That was the last adventure you dragged me on."

"'Cause you were a snot-nosed kid who got too excited," Soren said, his smile widening. "Just a baby who'd tell everyone who'd listen what we were up to."

"Probably not the best plan of attack," was Mikael's snickered comment.

Soren sighed, resigned, only some of it faked. "If only you knew."

Katjin coughed. "Umm, I am here, you know." The other two ignored him.

"What was it like, growing up with him?" Mikael asked, falling back down to the pallet. Katjin all but fell down after him, jerked to his butt by their bound hands.

Soren looked at Katjin and then at the yer flap, as if he was thinking. "Remember, I only saw him part of the year," Soren said, finally deciding to settle on the floor again. "And Meke was so infatuated with him as her favorite that we couldn't say no to him..."

Katjin sighed, realizing he was in for a long night. He was glad that Mikael and Soren had some way to connect, even if it was at his expense.

Gradually, Soren accepted his role in everything. Katjin's cousin tried not to whine or yell too much about their inability to do anything but chores that could be done while holding hands, but it still happened. You could probably get tired of gathering all the dung for the fire, or waiting spans and spans for the privy pits to be dug or the horses to be groomed by yourself after a while. They were all irritated, and Katjin's stomach seemed to be in a constant state of turmoil. Someone could turn their head and sing as loudly as possible, but it still didn't mean that that person wasn't next to you while you tried to do your business in the morning, gripping the back of your neck as if his life depended on it.

"A sobbing pity fest," Soren had called it at one point, after a particularly bitter fight over nothing and everything.

Mikael, to his credit, was trying. He tried, but it wasn't as if he could ride a horse or aim a bow without hauling Katjin along behind him. His aim with a throwing knife didn't seem too bad, for all that Katjin was attached to his other hand.

"You could always beat someone over the head one-handed with a stick," was Soren's only smarmy remark.

Katjin tried not to touch Mikael as much, even as Mikael's discomfort with it seemed to decrease. He let Mikael initiate the closer contact, since they still seemed to spend a lot of their time as far apart as they could be. It wasn't exactly the best way to begin a relationship, if you could even call it that.

"Stop it!" Mikael actually shouted at him, when Katjin had tried one time too many to cuddle a little closer at night. "Stupid Clansman, always invading my space!"

"What's your problem?" Katjin asked, moving back toward his side of the pallet. The emotion stung more than the remark. "Why do you keep fighting this? You know it's better if we're closer together. Even you can feel the difference."

"I just—I don't like it, okay?" Mikael started to roll over on his side, then seemed to think better of it. "It's different, in the dark. There wasn't—" The pain sang through their bond, loud and clear. The oppressive darkness seemed to haunt Mikael to the point that Katjin saw it even in his own dreams, waking him up at night shaking with chills and tears. It was the same nightmare that had woken him up this time, trying to crawl inside Mikael's welcome warmth to drive away the darkness.

"I'm sorry," Katjin said finally, not knowing what else to say.

"I know we need this." Mikael's grip on Katjin's hand tightened briefly. "I just—" He hesitated. "I'm trying, I just need time."

Katjin swallowed, breathed, hummed to himself. He hoped his voice wouldn't crack. "When Apa comes, he'll fix it. He'll fix you. I promise."

There was a sniffle from Mikael's side of the pallet as Mikael shifted oh-so-slightly closer. "I hope so," came the quiet answer. "I'm tired of pushing away."

Mikael occasionally mentioned things he missed: riding, swordplay, music. They didn't even bother attempting any swordplay. Even Katjin knew that it was suicide to attempt any kind of fencing while attached to someone, but from the very reverence that Mik had when he even touched a weapon, Katjin got the idea that Mikael's abilities far outshone his own. And his cooking was heaps better than Katjin's. Better even than Soren's, though Soren wouldn't admit it.

“I wish you would just stop it,” Katjin said time and time again, especially when Soren found one more reason to harp on Mikael. It wasn’t Mik’s fault that he couldn’t set a trap properly, or tickle a fish out of the stream. Mik hadn’t lived and breathed horse breath since he was small, so it was understood that he couldn’t pick hooves or dose stomach colic or anything like that. And while his muscles were coming back, they were still really too atrophied for anything more strenuous than gathering the dried dung into bags for the fire, which they could easily do with one hand. Digging only worked for so long, since they each only had one free hand. Mikael could mend with one hand while Katjin held the cloth with his spare hand, but even that was tedious. And a shovel wasn’t exactly practical for someone with one hand and no leverage to speak of. At least, with Soren taking a bulk of the work, his cousin was virtually exhausted at the end of each day.

“He mended your robe,” Katjin pointed out. Mikael’s fingers were far more deft with a needle than either Katjin’s or Soren’s, even one-handed. And they were definitely wearing their robes hard.

What especially didn’t help was Mikael’s aversion to touch, something he probably hadn’t felt in a long time, if what Katjin thought was true. If Mikael wanted any kind of peace, Katjin had to be in physical contact with Mikael at all times. If they got any more than an arm’s length or so away, they both got that intense headache, and usually blacked out for a little while. And while they agreed to Soren’s trials, Soren wanted to experiment with that to see what kind of a range they got, it still made Katjin’s cousin even testier whenever the blacking out happened, then the yelling happened again.

“You’re so spoiled, you know that?” Soren shouted. “If you weren’t Meke’s favorite, her darling grandson, no one would like you.”

Katjin stared at Soren. “Meke’s favorite? Hardly! She’d at least pick someone who could ride a horse better, or shoot an arrow or at least protect himself,” he retorted. “I can’t even keep myself out of trouble.”

But that only seemed to make Soren boil over more. “Why d’you think Meke and Febe sent me along with you, idiot? You’re my responsibility! And now I screwed that up.” Katjin could feel Soren’s mental and physical pain. His cousin hurt, gut-twisting outside and guilt-ridden outside. “Meke’s gonna kill me.”

Katjin chewed on his lip, taking a deep breath. He counted, and he breathed again until he felt calm. His cousin was the most capable out of all three of them, and the only one who could do things with both hands. It had to be tough for him, even if Soren was being

a snot-nosed baby about it. Then he punched Soren in the arm. “Not completely your fault,” he said, trying to make a joke out of it. “It’s not like you forced me. Or either of us knew what we were doing.”

Soren snorted. “Meke’ll have both our hides.”

“And then she’ll make a rug to replace that one we stole all those years back,” Katjin added. That got Soren to grin at least, even if it might not have completely gotten rid of the guilt. Except that, with the guilt, came curiosity. Soren wanted to know everything about whatever it was between Katjin and Mikael, just because, if Soren knew the details, maybe he could fix it.

“But is it a big pain or a little pain?” Soren kept asking, even as Katjin sipped cup after cup of herbs to try and soothe the pain. He never asked Mikael, ignoring the fact that Mik’s head rested against Katjin’s knee in utter exhaustion, one of Mik’s arms wrapped around Katjin’s calf.

“It’s an annoying pain,” Katjin finally snapped. “Just like this question. It’s a pain that bothers you until you wanna hurt what’s causing the pain. So, back off!”

Soren actually looked hurt by that. “I was just trying to help. If you two want to go through life hanging on to each other like some freaky kind of twins, that’s your problem, not mine.”

Not that Katjin minded the touching. Sometimes, he almost felt like he couldn’t get enough of it. That was hard, because Mikael would only give so much. True, he was starting to allow more touches. A touch to the hand, the face, even the hair: it didn’t matter. It was almost like drinking that really expensive Lowlands wine Apa brought to Summer gathering two summers back—intoxicating and exciting.

It became something they just didn’t talk about. Hands never purposely strayed below the belt, and they tried to keep their distance as much as possible, as long as their hands were touching. But it got hot at night, and it was hard to breathe even with Mikael’s slight weight sprawled across his chest. And there were times when he just wanted time for himself. He wasn’t used to sharing his life this closely with another person. He couldn’t even scratch without Mikael noticing, usually because he’d accidentally forgotten and used the hand holding Mik’s. It had taken him long enough to get over that when he peed, much less anything else.

Soren tried to hug Katjin once. It was a clumsy thing, since neither of them were used to it. The moment Soren slung one arm around Katjin’s shoulders, drawing him close,

Mikael immediately growled and glared. Both Mikael and Soren looked startled by it. Katjin couldn't help wondering if he'd act the same way. He knew he was starting to think of Mikael as his, and even Soren had made a similar remark a few times. The bond seemed to becoming more than just a physical one. When it came down to it, he would fight for Mikael and vice versa, because they were bound together. Maybe they even belonged together, a little bit.

Soren continued to sleep outside the yer each night, rain or not. He said it was because he didn't want to watch them cuddled up like a pair of newly-bounds or something. Katjin knew that was true, but it was also to give Mikael a little peace. While Mikael seemed to be a whole lot better about the whole channeling emotion thing, he still needed Katjin to step in on occasion. It hadn't taken Katjin long to figure out that, if he literally stood in front of Mikael, trying his hardest to stay as calm as he could, the emotion's effect seemed to lessen, almost as if he was shielding Mik.

The emotions had to go somewhere, and even Katjin couldn't keep calm and happy all the time. And he did get tired of the sour stomach, the aching head and watering eyes, and the snotty nose that occasionally came along with Mikael's emotions. He wanted his body back, under his own, if limited, control again. Which meant he yelled at Soren or told Mikael to get lost. And while Soren could leave, Mikael couldn't.

"We're stuck together," Mikael pointed out the fourth or maybe the twelfth time Katjin had yelled at him. He sounded rather calm about the whole thing. Or, just resigned to it.

"I think I figured that out," Katjin hissed, wishing he could shake off Mikael's insistent hand without falling down with a raging headache.

"We won't be strolling down the streets of the Capital anytime soon," Mikael continued in the same mild tone, which only infuriated Katjin all the more. "You won't be riding trade routes with your apa anymore. Not unless there's a Clan horse that can carry the two of us across the Empire and back."

Which was probably the worst thing. The fact that life as all three of them had known it was over. And none of them knew what was coming.

"Why aren't you fighting this anymore?" Katjin asked, almost in despair about the whole thing. "I just want to be alone. For one moment." Peace. Control. Being alone inside his head and heart again, not having to worry about everyone and everything. Being able to touch without having to ask permission first, or wait for someone else to decide if it was all right. Not being overwhelmed by everything, since he couldn't tell what emotion

was his, and what was Mikael's sometimes. And his own mood shifts were bad enough, thank you very much.

Mikael just looked at him. "I can recommend a dark room, if you'd like one." The pain hurt almost as much as it did when they weren't touching. And the burning eyes and the ache that settled somewhere near his heart, almost as if he'd eaten some off food. "Y'know I don't even know how old I am now? Or how much time passed?"

Katjin hadn't lost years of his life. His life would be more difficult and interesting now, especially with any 'path able to sniff them out the moment they ran into a patrol, but no one had deliberately taken anything away from him. Especially not because he'd been born with a gift he couldn't control.

Every heart-sense born into the Clans had been taken away almost immediately after birth. No one had ever heard of a latent talent developing as late as Mikael's. Which is why Katjin thought that was probably why Mik couldn't handle it. All those emotions hit him at once. Which was Katjin's job now--to make sure Mikael could cope.

Small price to pay, for his own freedom.

His sanity, though, was another matter.

Except Soren seemed to agree with him and Mikael that, if Katjin and Mik were going to function together, they needed to be able to be separated. They couldn't go through life glued at the hip. Someone was going to notice eventually. Because, while Katjin could probably learn to survive and support Mikael off the land at some point, they would have to go back to the Clan eventually. Apa would come back from his trip to the Highlands, and the cavalry wouldn't take whatever excuse Meke and Febe gave them about Soren forever.

"I told you, I don't know if that's true," Mikael said over and over, whenever Soren or Katjin asked. Because it was on both their minds. The Empire might not come into Clan lands without reason, but it was still best to be careful. "When the 'path was there for my birth, it's not like it registered with me. And once my mother and father figured out what I was..."

Night after night of waking up next to Mikael, hard as anything and not able to do anything about it, was taking its toll on Katjin. Katjin knew he was one step from

resenting Mik, someone who really didn't deserve it. Not Mikael, who had somehow made it all the way into Clan lands, half-mad with the weight of the world's emotions. It wasn't like he'd asked to be born a heart-sense, as Katjin hadn't asked to be born Clan without any real sense of belonging to the plains.

"Why us?" Katjin asked, out of curiosity, as they washed their clothes one morning. If they stood side-by-side, shoulder to bare shoulder and thigh to bare thigh, neither of them felt any discomfort. Katjin tried not to wiggle in excitement; this had actually been Mikael's suggestion. And it gave Katjin a nice view of Mikael's lean body, turning a good golden-tan color. He'd never be as dark as Clan, but no one would mistake him for that pasty-faced city boy that Katjin found by the stream that day.

"My mother's grandmother was Clan. Not your family, but one that camps closer to the Lowlands," Mikael said, scrubbing his robe with sand. "She passed down the Aiding Song through Grandmother and Mam, just in case we needed it."

"And you just left one day?" If 'left' was the right word. Katjin pounded his shirt and breeks against a low rock, enjoying the warmth of the sun and Mikael's wet skin against his. Mikael was still a little skinny to be considered too good-looking, but he was nowhere near the skeleton he'd been.

Mikael was quiet. Katjin couldn't feel any fear coming off Mik, but there was the echo of an old pain. "Everyone was gone," he said finally. "They usually brought me food, and no one did, so I tried the door. And it was open. And I just... ran."

Katjin tried as hard as he could to imagine being locked up in a cellar somewhere for so long that you couldn't tell how many days anymore. It was a wonder that Mik wasn't mad or something.

He caught Mikael's hand, squeezing it tight. "And the ancestors led you straight to us," he said, trying to keep his emotions under control. Mikael didn't need to be reminded of everything he felt. Not when he'd already lived through it once.

Mikael smiled at Katjin, a brilliant smile that warmed Kat right down to his wet toes.

"Yeah," he said softly.

It was worth it, Katjin kept telling himself. It was worth it to save Mikael, no matter what the cost.

The moons passed until Katjin didn't even bother counting anymore. Their horses were growing fat, having all of the grazing land in the valley to themselves. Every so often, Soren would mutter something about moving camp, to throw off anyone who might be tracking them. He'd also talk about setting up some kind of watch at the valley mouth, since they apparently weren't camping in the most strategic position. For the first time in his life, Katjin could really appreciate his cousin's talent. Which only made him regret, all the more, that Soren lost his chance with the cavalry.

But Soren only shrugged whenever Katjin apologized, which amounted to about once a day. "There's still a chance," he'd say, not looking Kat in the eye. "Besides, someone needs to keep an eye on you two babies. I can only imagine what would happen to you without me." At least these words seemed relatively free of bitterness now. Now.

Which wasn't--exactly--fair to him and Mikael. Mikael still felt some bewilderment--and disdain--toward camp life. He still refused outright to help with digging privies, which meant that he usually watched Katjin do it--by hand, with a small trowel Soren had fashioned out of some boiled leather and a stick. But Mikael tried. And his muscles slowly seemed to remember what they'd done before he'd been locked in that small cellar however long ago.

It came out, over the days and nights, about Mikael's family. He wasn't nobility, which relieved Soren to no end. His father was a prosperous trader, which meant Apa had probably had some contact with him at some point. Mikael's mother wasn't much of anything, other than reigning queen of whatever society existed in Stoneridge. As the youngest child and only son, Mikael had been pampered and spoiled within an inch of his life, especially by his four older sisters. Everything had been for him, the golden child, the heir. He bore it with surprising good humor, especially considering his current situation.

"My father was always surprised by how good I was at reading people," Mikael remarked once with a touch of irony. "Merchants got used to seeing me whenever they had business with Father. And they always laughed when I saw through their games. They thought I'd be a great trader when the time came. Except..." Except Mikael's family had hidden him away without a thought, to the point that Mik still wasn't sure what had happened to them. They were just gone one day. So he left too. Because there was nothing else he could do.

When they had nothing to do, they tested the bond. Soren would have them stand, facing each other, moving backward a hand's length at a time until the pain got too great.

It hurt, but it worked. It got to the point that, if they stood close enough, they could go for a time without touching. Which meant that Katjin could finally piss without worrying about someone looking over his shoulder, or feeling his shoulder. Relieving himself of other needs didn't happen any more than it had before, but there were things he learned to live with.

Not that he thought about those things--touching Mik, kissing Mik, holding Mik so tight that they could hardly tell where one left off and the other began. He could already feel that much--those moments where he and Mik fairly breathed in tune with each other, one heartbeat between them. That's the moment he lived for.

Though tasting Mikael, the salt and sweat of his skin, the heat of his mouth--that might be nice too.

'Cause there hadn't been kisses. Everyone at camp was a relation of some kind, and none of the fellas in the Lowlands or on the plains had ever appealed to Kat this much. But none of them had ever really been his other half, either. Not the way Mikael was. Mik was his responsibility, but also his friend, and that mattered more somehow than any of the quick kisses he might've had from any of the girls or boys he and Apa met on their travels.

"What'll your apa say, when he comes back?" That question seemed to worry Mikael, since he asked it often enough. He never asked it in Soren's company though; they both knew by now how sensitive Soren was to anything related toward his 'responsibility' as the requisite grown-up in the camp.

And all Katjin could do was shrug. "He knows the laws of the ancestors. He knows the lore. And he'll probably welcome the company on the road anyway. I know he gets sick of me sometimes." They hadn't tried riding on separate horses yet, and not even a Clan horse could carry two half-grown boys for a long period of time. Especially over the distances he and Apa traveled.

They never mentioned the fact that they wouldn't have the freedom to travel with Apa anymore. Or if the cavalry arrived back at camp yet. Or what, if anything, had happened to their families.

Because that was something that happened outside their valley. And none of them were ready to face that just yet.

Chapter Seven

“Equinox.”

Katjin looked at his cousin in shock. “Already?”

Soren nodded. “Can’t you feel the chill in the air? The days are getting shorter again” There was a feeling of melancholy in Soren’s words, something Katjin didn’t mind sharing for a moment. Time must have passed, since Mikael was turning brown as leather now. Where had midsummer gone? And the rest of summer, if fall was almost here?

“The gathering.” Katjin bit his lip. “We missed the gathering.” The gathering was probably the biggest festival for the Clanfolk. Every camp from miles around met in the center of the plains to swap gossip and arrange marriages and other bindings between the families. Katjin had only been a few times in his life, but he knew Soren had gone every year, without fail.

But before Katjin could apologize one more time, Soren gave him a quick grin. “Y’know Ama would just try and find a mate for me anyway. And there’s no way I want to settle yet.” The brevity was a little forced, but not too much. Sometimes Soren forgot how well Katjin could read him these days--all too well.

Gatherings were the only time that you could meet Clanfolk you weren’t close kin to. Katjin had never really liked it because of the sheer number of people there. But Soren, popular as he was, never failed to make new friends--male and female--whenever he went.

“You’re still probably sick of our company by now,” Katjin said, nodding toward where Mikael sat, just a hand’s length away, trying to mend his robe.

“Naw, not quite yet.” And Katjin actually believed Soren was telling the truth this time.

Katjin probably should’ve resented that remark, but there really wasn’t a point. Especially since they all knew how much Soren risked for the two of them. And how much they couldn’t survive without him.

“What you could do for me, though,” Soren said slowly, “is take that fella of yours to the stream and see if you can find any fish for supper.”

Katjin nodded, automatically reaching for the hand that Mikael held out. “We can handle that. Maybe even without falling in the stream this time.”

Soren grinned. “You’re just lucky it isn’t the dead of winter. You would’ve been icicles if I hadn’t fished you out when I did.”

“I was seven years old, and--“ Katjin started, remembering the incident all too well. But before he could get any further, Mikael pulled him toward the stream.

“C’m on, before he decides we need another privy,” Mik muttered to him, hauling him along.

“Race you!” Katjin said, pulling away from Mik with a grin. He knew Mikael would be right on his heels as they ran toward the stream.

The stream was over a little rise from their camp, sheltered by the short, stunted trees that grew within the valley. It provided a really nice cover on a hot day like today. Especially if you wanted to swim without getting too hot.

“Betcha I catch more fish,” Mikael panted as they ran. “Betcha you don’t catch any.”

“You’re too loud!” Katjin called back with a laugh. “And last time, you fell in.”

“You scare ‘em off with your singing,” Mikael countered, grinning back. “And your smell.”

Without warning, Katjin turned on his heels, throwing himself at Mikael. They tumbled to the ground, rolling a few times before they stopped. “If I smell, you smell,” he said, wrestling until he was on top of Mikael. “You bathe as much as I do.”

“Lowlanders smell better than Clan,” Mik retorted, struggling under Katjin’s greater weight. “Clan smell like horse.”

“Better horse ‘n city, shit and all.”

They fought for a minute, rolling back and forth as they both struggled for dominance. While Kat had the advantage of weight, Mikael had almost a hand’s length on him now. Good food and living outside had changed Mik into an almost completely different person, even getting rid of those shadows that had been under his eyes.

But just as Mik was about to get the upper hand, he froze. That was when Katjin heard it: the absolute silence of it all.

Their valley wasn’t quiet by any means. Not with the horses constantly stomping and neighing and socializing with each other. Not with Soren grunting about everything and

the birds constantly trilling in the few trees in the valley.

Now, even the rush of the stream seemed quiet.

“Mik?”

And then Katjin saw him. The soldier. Dressed in a mottled golden brown robe that blended in so well that Kat’s eyes had almost passed over him.

“Sor--”

Pain lanced through him. It shot through his head, pounding behind his eyes and almost blinding him with it. It hit his belly like fire. And then the sudden break in the tie, the sudden lack of Mikael’s presence inside; that probably hurt most of all. The soldier feined left, then grabbed Mikael before Katjin could do a thing.

“Mik!”

He struggled, but arms grabbed him. He flailed his arms and legs, but he couldn’t break free. The malice, the sheer desire to hurt coiled around his stomach and made him want to puke, it felt so oily and dirty, more pain at the base of his skull then darkness.

“Kat. Kat!” Soren was shaking him.

“Go ‘way.” He tried to push Soren away, but his head felt fuzzy. And his hands seemed really far away. And nothing was connecting right.

“Dammit, Kat! Mikael’s gone.”

Gone? There had been that sharp pain in his head, and the kick to the gut. Emptiness inside; no Mikael.

“Took him... A soldier”! He tried to kick at Soren, but Soren kept moving, shaking, like he was under water. Blurry. “Thought we were alone here.”

Soren’s face swam into view. “If you knew anything about tracking...” his cousin muttered. “It’s not that simple, Kat. I can’t erase more than two moons of us being here.”

“Path,” Katjin muttered, trying to sit up. “Soldier an’ a ‘path.” He groaned, he stomach recoiling at the thought. Mik, gone.

“Here.” Soren shoved a cup in his hands, forcing the brim of the cup to his lips. He automatically drank the bitter herbs, coughing as it threatened to come up again.

But it helped. Katjin blinked, trying to clear his vision a little. Soren still seemed a little blurry at the edges, but he could at least see, but not read, the worried look on his cousin’s

face now.

Soren snorted. “Had to be a ‘path. I would’ve noticed otherwise.” Except even his cousin looked doubtful about that. “Ancestors damn it!” Soren slammed his fist against the ground. “If you two weren’t so busy making eyes at each other--“

“We weren’t--“ Katjin started to protest, then stopped. “He’s my...” Mine, that small voice in his head said. “I have to protect him. It’s my duty.”

“And it’s mine to watch out for you two idiots,” Soren said in a sour voice. “Damn it, Meke and Febe will have my hide.” He started pacing, kicking up tufts of grass and dirt every so often in frustration.

“We have to find him.” Katjin didn’t want to think about what the Empire was doing, what the Empire could be doing to Mikael. It was bad enough that there was that great emptiness where Mikael had once been. Worse, when he thought of Mikael being held by the Empire as a renegade ‘path. “We can track him. I can--”

There was that ‘Katjin’s an idiot’ look again. “You’re talking about the cavalry,” Soren said patiently. “Not--”

“The cavalry. Who has Mik,” Katjin said slowly. “Who is a ‘path.” He stood, trying to ignore the ground reeling beneath his feet. “You’re the tracker here. If you can’t follow a pack of soldiers and a few ‘paths...”

They didn’t even stop to saddle the horses. Or pack the yer.

“Need to follow the trail while it’s fresh,” Soren muttered as he swung up onto his horse.

Katjin clung to Shanti’s back, hoping that Mikael could hold on for a little while.

We’re coming, he thought, even though he knew there was no way Mikael could hear.

He fell off again. Soren threatened to tie him to Shanti’s back if he fell off again, or, worse, make him ride pillion behind. Only babies rode double on a horse, or unconscious people.

But he couldn’t hold on--could hold on even less than normal, not with the darkness that kept creeping in, and the blinding pain that came with it. Shanti’s gait seemed unnaturally rough, as if he was sailing across the plains instead of riding across on a horse. After the fourth time he’d fallen off Shanti’s back in as many lengths, Soren finally

just gave up, or so it seemed to him, but it was kind of hard to tell. Mik's voice kept crying in his head, angry and hurt and frustrated. But at least the emotions were back. At least he could feel that Mikael was alive and outraged. He didn't know if Mikael could hear him back, but he kept sending soothing thoughts to wherever Mikael was: we're coming, we're coming, you'll be safe soon, stay strong.

He saw red. His left wrist burned. And there was blood. And it hurt. It raged. And he tried to lash out, but they tied him and his wrist and it hurt. He tried to hum, tried to sing to make the pain go away, but it wouldn't. It just wouldn't.

And Soren's voice: "I'll get help, Kat. I swear. Just. Hang on."

His head pulsed in time with the hoofbeats and then it was back to darkness again, back to the crying.

Tears spilled over his cheeks until his eyes burned with them, his body wracked by choking sobs that hurt his chest. It wasn't hysterical sobbing. It wasn't despair. It was anger. Years of anger at being in the dark. Years of anger of a life stolen away, of a family stolen away. Of being hidden away from a world, trapped by walls he couldn't beat down because he couldn't find his fists in the dark. And he struggled, and the bees buzzed until their noise drowned out all other sound. And it hurt.

But he was glad of the hurt. He clung to the hurt, knowing it was his only connection to Mikael. He braved the red waves and the black waves, the despair and rage all swirling about each other until it nearly made him sick. Took his body's control away again. But he was glad, glad for the lack of control, glad to have something to fight, to hold on to, because hurting meant Mikael was still alive.

It hurt. And it felt so good to hurt again over the aching emptiness.

Days, hours, sun's turnings later, a hand gripped his chin. He flinched away from the touch, trying to push, push, push. Burning in his throat, and a bitter taste. When his vision cleared there was Soren, tear tracks mingling amongst the dirt on his face and a handful of people behind him.

"I brought help, little Kat." There was fear and sorrow and hurt in Soren's voice, as much as there was in Mik's crying in his head. And the darkness that he was really starting to appreciate, because now, it brought him peace.

Katjin opened his eyes, not surprised to find a man staring at him. Highlandfolk, mostly likely, wearing what looked similar to Clan clothes: full-sleeved white shirt, full-legged breeks and a wide embroidered sash. He wore his hair tied back like the Clans did, too, except one tail instead of two, had the same high cheekbones in the wide, almost flat face. In fact, if you would've put a robe on him, he would've looked proper Clan.

"You're Red Wind, eh?" The man said. "I see the resemblance. Your father mentioned a half-blood son." Katjin could feel the man's eyes on him, studying him. The man looked away, to someone behind Katjin. "But this one's sick. Did you know that? Heart-sick, I'd say, if I was readin' him right."

He heard Soren's voice. "You a 'path?" Ancestors, didn't Soren question these people before he brought them? Wasn't like they had Mikael here to sniff out their emotions. And he was all but useless on the whole 'path front. He hoped his cousin had gotten at least some information out of them before he brought them into their camp--into their rescue effort. Usually Katjin was the one who trusted all too quickly, not Soren. Soren should've known better.

The man actually laughed. "Not what you folk call 'paths, no. Might have a bit more seeing than you're used to, but I'm no toy of the Empire."

"Like I said, Kat's Mikael's a 'path. Someone captured him this morning. We're tracking him," Soren said. Or, at least, that's what Katjin thought his cousin said. He was having a hard time following the conversation. He kept hearing Apa's name, followed by Mik's name. And when he concentrated, Mikael seemed no closer or farther than he was before. Katjin just felt... tired and itchy, and as if someone had stuffed his head full of Meke's wool.

Arms lifted him up. Katjin thought about fighting it, but just didn't feel like it anymore. He was tired and hungry and scared and lost, and wanted someone to fix it. Particularly Soren, or maybe Apa. If could just find Mikael, he'd be fine.

"C'mon, little Kat," someone said. Katjin tried to push the strange arms away, because this new touch made him itch even more. But that didn't work. Not like he expected it to work.

He was carried out of the yer, the way Apa used to carry him when he was small. If he closed his eyes, which he did, and leaned his head against the stranger's shoulder, he could almost pretend it was Apa, carrying him off to their yer to sleep.

Someone set him down on the ground and wrapped him in a blanket, shoving a warm

flask of something into his hands. He automatically drank, almost inhaling the bitter herb drink. Tasted just as foul as what Soren had been giving him, and it burned his belly besides. He coughed, trying to shove the cup away, but someone kept pushing the cup to his mouth, forcing him to gag the drink down. When its warmth washed its way down his throat to his belly, things begin to clear a little bit. Katjin opened his eyes.

He sat in front of another tent--not the familiar round yer that the Clans used, but a longer oval shape. This tent was still the traditional white--probably limed horse or goat hair like Clan yer--but it was trimmed in what looked like black felt. It probably wouldn't hold as many people as Meke and Febe's yer, but it looked sturdy enough.

And there were people coming in and out of the yer--mostly out, to stare at him. They were dressed the same as the Hill man--more Highlandfolk, from what Katjin figured. Most of them looked like Clanfolk, but there were a couple with bright red hair. Demon hair. A few Lowlanders had red hair, but not many; definitely no Clanfolk were born with it.

Soren sat next to Katjin, a relieved look on his face. "So you're back with us, then?"

Katjin reached over, punching Soren in the arm. "Maybe." His head did feel clearer. There was still that buzzing, but he could at least think again, the pain in his stomach was dulled somewhat. He still missed Mikael though. Really missed him. "Mikael. We have to--"

Soren put a hand on Katjin's arm. "I know, Kat. I know. The Highlandfolk will help us find him."

"And you trust them?" Katjin looked around at the six people who came and went from the yer to the fire they sat in front of. They didn't look like they'd hurt him or Soren. They didn't look like the kind of people who'd lie either. Katjin had gotten pretty good at spotting liars, after all those years on the trail with Apa; Apa would even joke that it was the one reason he kept Katjin around, since it wasn't like he was that good at hunting or whatever. These Highlandfolk seemed honest enough, even if they were crazy to live just over the mountains from the demon-folk.

Soren looked at him, really looked at him, as if he was an adult. "They were the first people I found, and they didn't attack. They sang the aiding song at me, and I sang the response back." He shrugged. "They're folk just like anyone back at camp, Kat. We have to trust them. They're willing to help us."

Katjin looked over at the Highlandfolk, who didn't even bother pretending that they

weren't listening. "Why?"

One man, that Katjin vaguely recognized as the one who stopped them earlier, squatted next to Katjin. "Because the Empire stole what was yours, and unless you get him back, neither of you will be whole."

Katjin stared at him. "Are you 'paths?" There were rumors about the witches that lived in the Highlands. He still couldn't decide whether to trust these people, as nice as they looked. Witches always looked nice in stories. Nicer than Shahi demons.

The man laughed. "As we told your cousin; no, boy, we're not 'paths. Not the way you think of them. We just, well, look at things a little closer than most folk do."

One of the red-haired women handed Katjin another cup, this time of what smelled like chai. "Sometimes we'll help 'paths like your Mikael. You're not the first ones to come into the Highlands."

"That's why Uncle Nolan's here, yeah?" Soren asked, also holding a cup of chai.

Katjin shot Soren a look. "How'd you know about that?" And how'd he know more than Katjin did? Just because Soren was older didn't mean he was entitled to more information.

Soren smirked at Katjin, looking like the stuck-up cousin that Kat remembered. "If you actually listened to people sometimes, you might figure out what they're up to."

He really wanted to stick his tongue out at Soren. But he didn't. Because if Soren could act like a grown-up, so could he.

"Nolan has occasionally helped the people of the Highlands," the Hill man said slowly. "But how did the Horse Clans get entangled with one of the Empire's 'paths? Usually they find their way here by themselves."

Katjin thought about this for a moment. Actually thought about it, since whatever brew the Highlandfolk had given him, it was better than Meke's concoctions. If Apa helped the Highlandfolk, and the Highlandfolk helped 'paths, then that meant-- "Apa finds the 'paths for you, doesn't he?" he asked. "So that you can hide them here in the Highlands."

The man smiled at Katjin. "Not quite, boy. Your apa does help us, but he doesn't send the 'paths to us. The 'paths know their own way." He looked closer at Kat. "If I didn't know better, I'd almost say you were a 'path yourself. How did your mind become so clouded, boy? Did the Empire get to you?"

Katjin looked at Soren, who shrugged. "We dunno, exactly." he said slowly. "Mik

didn't know he was a 'path til a little while ago, and then he came to us, and Febe and Meke threw us out of camp."

Soren sighed, sounding annoyed. "Maybe you can figure it out. You know the blood rite, to make someone Clan?"

The man nodded. "We use much the same rite here in the Highlands."

"I bound Mikael to Katjin, since Meke and Febe wouldn't do it. It had a some odd effects."

No one said anything. Katjin watched the Highlandfolk exchange looks, wondering if some of them were more 'pathic than they were willing to admit to. He hated when adults did that, talking with their eyes and not letting you in on the conversation. At least with Mikael, he could've known what they were feeling. And Mik--

He bit his lip, staring down at the fire. His eyes were burning, probably from all the smoke. The Highlandfolk actually burnt wood in their fires, instead of dried dung like the Clanfolk. Dried dung didn't smoke this much, making your eyes water. The wood was probably green too, since it made his nose get all snotty and stuffed up.

When the man spoke again, he spoke carefully, as if he was trying to make sure they all understood, including himself. "So you bound them, blood to blood. Some say that binding with blood can sometimes have more of an effect than we realize."

"But making me feel what Mikael feels?" Katjin spoke up. "Mikael can't do whatever heart-senses do. He can't..." He searched for the right word. "He can't process the emotions. They get all tangled up inside him. So I have to do it for him."

The Highlandfolk all did that silent conversation with their eyes thing again.

"So you... untangle the feelings for him?" the red-haired woman asked.

Katjin shook his head. "I kinda sift through them, like Meke does with the flour when she makes bread. Make sure all the bad ones go through the holes, and keep the good ones so that they don't get too much for him."

"So that they don't overwhelm him." The man nodded. "You shield him, don't you?"

"Yeah, that's it." Katjin said. "If he would've been born a 'path, he probably could've done it by himself, but since he wasn't..."

"Late onset empathy," the man said, almost to himself. "I wish the Shahi knew anything about the mind gifts, instead of just their own magics."

Shahi. Even Soren looked nervous at that.

"You... consort with the demons?" His cousin tried to look calm about it. Katjin

couldn't help feeling a little satisfied when Soren failed miserably.

"No more demon than you or I," the man said, but he was nice about it. "They're not 'paths as the Empire understands them, but they still try and heal and fix things with the same types of power."

Soren met Katjin's eyes. If they ran fast enough to the horses, they could probably get out of camp before the Highlandfolk could catch them. And since it was dark, it'd be even harder to track them. Unless Highlandfolk could see in the dark with their witch powers.

Except that the Highlandfolk would probably be a better help in finding Mikael than just him and Soren alone. And Mik could be halfway back to the Empire now, if he was caught by the cavalry. Katjin's stomach felt all tied up in knots. And his head was starting to hurt again. It was all his fault, if he hadn't distracted Mikael, if he'd actually kept a watch like a proper Clanfolk, wanting to kick himself for not paying attention.

"It wasn't your fault," Soren said quietly, nudging Katjin with his shoulder. "If anyone should've been keeping watch, it was me. I was responsible for the two of you." His cousin's voice was grim, and there were worry lines creasing Soren's forehead. It seemed to hit Soren just as hard as it was hitting Katjin. "If I hadn't done the stupid blood rite—"

"You're not the one who's 'sposed to protect him though," Katjin said, feeling miserable about it. His one responsibility in life, and he screws that up the same way he screws everything up.

Soren reached out and hugged Katjin around the shoulders, just like Apa might've. "We'll get him back," Soren muttered. "He's Clan. We'll get him back."

Chapter Eight

Katjin lay in the yer that Mandric, the Highlandfolk, had set up for him and Soren. It reminded him of home, of Apa, and of the camp that he might not ever see again. If anyone was left of the camp. But that went into the pile of things he wasn't going to think about, just like he was trying not to imagine what they were doing to Mik. Kind of hard, that, since he'd get flashes every now and then behind his closed eyelids. At least, with his eyes open, he only got the audio and not the visual as well.

Mandric had sent some of the others off on some sort of involved plan that only Soren had been able to follow. Katjin had been sent to bed like a child, which probably was what hurt most of all.

The others didn't understand that this was his job, not Soren's. Not Mandric's. Mik was Katjin's responsibility, and probably vice versa. They still weren't sure what Soren had done that night, but it had bound Katjin to Mikael and nothing could change that. Without Katjin, Mik was unshielded. He was vulnerable to any attack, physical or emotional, that the 'paths might throw at him. Mikael could come away damaged, in more ways than one.

It made his blood boil, his fingers twitch with the desire to pluck the eyes out of every person who dared touch Mikael. If they even thought about it. Fucking thieves. Ancestors damn the ones who dared to take Mikael away from him. He'd make them pay, some way or another, for every hair they harmed on Mik's stubborn head.

Which decided it. He'd just go after Mikael himself.

But when he got to his feet, his head started swimming. Mandric's potion was wearing off. The buzzing was back, this time sounding like echoes of pained screams. Mikael's screams. He needed help, and Katjin had to get there as fast--

He looked at Soren, fast asleep. Wow, he'd been out of it for longer than he thought.

Especially for his cousin to come in and actually fall asleep. Sleeping the sleep of the innocent. Soren would only slow him down, this time.

Pushed past the yer flap into the night, but he could barely make out shapes in the dampened firelight. Everything blurred and twisted until he couldn't tell what it was. Katjin closed his eyes, breathed, tried to stop the rolling motion under his feet. Concentrated on those cries he kept hearing, knowing they'd point him the way to Mikael.

He opened his eyes and looked up at the stars. Off to the right, he could see the jagged red bolt that was his family's star pattern. Meke and Febe grant him calm. Apa guide his steps. Ancestors bless.

And he moved out into the night.

He stuffed a waterskin and some journeybread into his sash, following Shanti's delicate whickers to where she grazed. He leaned against her warm side for a moment, catching his breath, calming his pounding heart. He wondered if the others in camp could hear it, the same as the faint screams and cries. He heard it. But he needed it, to help him find Mikael.

Katjin almost panicked then, fumbling with the ties of Shanti's halter. He had to bite his lip so that he wouldn't cry out, waking the others up. But then he found the buckle and quickly fastened the leather throatlatch. And somehow he hauled himself onto her back and kicked her into the night.

But before he could get too far, a voice stopped him. Not a voice inside his head, a voice outside it. Soren.

"I was wondering when you'd get here."

Katjin whirled around, surprised to see his cousin, already mounted on his own horse. Katjin gave him a wobbly smile. "Good to see you," he muttered in Soren's direction. Ancestors damn his cousin for being able to get ready and actually saddle his horse in the time it took Katjin to ride off, all without even alerting anyone.

"Someone had to help," was Soren's whispered reply.

They were a fair distance from camp when Katjin finally decided to stop. He was tired, almost drooping over Shanti's neck.

"Here," Soren said, thrusting something in the direction of Katjin's hand. Katjin batted it away. He was tired of whatever concoction they'd brewed up this time for him. "Take it, dummy. It's not herbs. It's aisrag."

Katjin blinked at the brown flagon, grabbed it and took a huge swallow. The clear liquid burned as it slid down his throat, bringing a surprising bit of clarity even as it

numbed the world a bit.

“So, what’s the plan? We find Mik, I stun the ‘path, you grab Mik, and we ride?” Soren asked as they walked along again.

Katjin thought a minute. “How many do you think there are?”

“From the tracks I saw, it looked like about twenty-five.” Soren sounded bleak. “And this is twenty-five on Clan horses. I could tell from the shoe prints. Lowlander horses are shod differently than we do it.”

“Two companies of soldiers, and five ‘paths?” There had been those two ‘paths with the soldiers, on the way to camp ages ago. “One of the ‘paths could be Mikael.”

Soren hesitated a bit. “You know he’s still alive?”

The screaming in his head hadn’t stopped. “Aye,” Katjin said shortly. “He’s alive.” He looked at Soren. “You can track the cavalry?”

Soren nodded. “As long as you can point us in the right direction with that head of yours.”

Katjin closed his eyes, riding forward slightly, first west, than east. On his southern circuit, the pain in his head lessened. “That way,” he said. “We go that way.”

And they rode.

They were going down. That’s what it felt like to his addled brain. The muscles in his thighs were burning from trying to keep his weight off Shanti’s withers. Down and east by the stars, which he could at least recognize. He could always become nocturnal--might have to, now, if they involved the cavalry in all this. He tried to imagine a life of always running, always wandering off in the dark, and shuddered. Mik wouldn’t stand for that. Not with his unhealthy fear of the dark.

The buzzing got better. Mikael seemed silent right now, not crying as he had been. Katjin hoped he was sleeping. Except, every now and then, he’d get a sense or a flash of something: panic, burning pain in his left wrist, a twinge of fear.

Soren dismounted every now and then to check something on the ground. A couple times, he picked up a clump of horse dung and rubbed it between his fingers. Kat knew that dried dung was older than the fresh, still-steaming stuff, but that was about the limit of his knowledge.

“Did they say anything?” Katjin asked Soren at one such stop. “The Highlandfolk?”

Soren shrugged. “Just that the only ‘intruders’ they’d noticed in the past moon or so were us. Some of their ‘paths had picked up on Mik--I guess he’s unshielded or something?”

Katjin chewed on his cheek, trying to help him focus. “Mandric said something about that. That the ‘paths of the Empire would’ve trained him. I have to be his shield because he can’t.”

“They’d never heard of a case like yours; every other ‘path that came through the Highlands was alone and able to shield themselves.” Soren chuckled. “Trust you to be the odd one, Kat. You and Mik.”

Katjin made a face at Soren in the darkness. Even though his cousin couldn’t see it, it still made Katjin feel better.

“Maybe the Empire’s not that bad,” Kat muttered. “They have kept us safe all these years. And stopped the fighting between Clan and Lowlander.”

Soren sighed. “I don’t know what to tell you. There is something to be said for the security of the Empire. But when they steal away what’s not theirs, that crosses the line.” He shook his head. “Let the philosophers figure that one out. Time to ride.”

Katjin shook himself awake. He’d dozed off, he guessed, but there had been that burning pain in his left wrist again, and people--things--trying to get into his head. Searching. Probing. And not in a good way either. It felt dirty, people prying and poking and touching what they shouldn’t. He shivered. He hoped Mikael was all right--was still whole after all this. You never saw the victims after ‘paths were done with them. Katjin wasn’t sure he really wanted to.

Shadows of dawn were lighting the horizon ahead. His head felt clear now, but that only made the urgency all the stronger. He knew--knew--it was only a matter of time with Mikael. Kat didn’t want him broken. He wanted his Mik whole and just as stubborn as before.

Fear stabbed at him, made his muscles seize until he almost fell off Shanti again. His legs locked and he waved his arms, trying to fend off the guard. The guard’s breath reeked, and he leered with that dirty grin. One hand on his belt, and the choking realization of

what was going to happen. Bile burned in the back of his throat. He tried to scream, tried to say anything, but his throat locked up, and his lungs burned as he tried to breathe.

“Damn it.” He shook himself, kicked Shanti into a gallop. The burning was back, the fear so strong that his chest almost burned with it, as if he was running for his life with the entire cavalry on his heels. He panted. “C’mon, Shanti. Faster!”

She flew as she’d never flown before. Katjin almost couldn’t see the ground under her hooves. When they got back to camp, she was going to get all the apples and grain and whatever else he could stuff down into her to make her happy. She could even share the tent, for all he cared. If she brought him to Mikael.

“Hsst!” Soren’s quick hiss broke the silence. Katjin saw Soren’s hand flash for him to halt. As they approached the rise of a hill, he could see a line of tents in the distance. They weren’t Clan tents, that was for sure. From their rectangular shapes and peaked roofs, they looked like cavalry tents.

The Empire.

He sucked in a breath, cold creeping down his spine into his belly. Soren was right. From the number of horses picketed off to the side of the camp, it had to be at least twenty soldiers.

“Shit.” One or two cavalry-members, they probably could have avoided. But this many? Even Soren wasn’t that good, that talented. Especially not with those horses. Katjin actually recognized some of the lines of the stock, their distinct arched necks and high-held tails. Yeah, they were in serious trouble here. Especially if there was a whole camp full of ‘paths waiting for them.

“What d’we do?” Katjin asked quietly as Soren reined in his horse next to Shanti.

“Pray to the ancestors.” Soren took a deep breath. “Keep to it, little Kat. And do exactly what I tell you.”

There was another sharp pain, this one of panic and fear and burning lungs as if he was trying to run as fast as he could. Emotions boiled over until he almost screamed with it, fire racing through his veins. But before Katjin could ride any closer to the camp, he spotted a single figure running toward them. A figure in long Clan robes and a peaked cap on his head.

Mikael. Followed by what looked like sentries, stumbling about as if they’d were in some kind of intense pain. So the camp did hear their approach after all.

Without thought, Katjin kicked Shanti into a gallop. He rode toward Mikael as fast as

he could, not caring about the consequences. As he came up on Mikael, he grabbed Mik's arm, swinging Mik toward Shanti's back. Mikael grabbed onto him, scrambling up behind Katjin as fast as he could.

"Ride!" Mikael panted. "Just ride!"

The wind whipped in Katjin's face so hard that tears streaked down his face. He could almost taste the fear in the back of his throat, coated in familiar bitter bile. Shanti's sides heaved with each earth-tearing length. And Mikael squeezed his middle so tight that Katjin thought he'd break in half.

The rush of it, all those dirty emotions, ate at him. Disgust followed the fear, tasting even worse. He pressed his lips together, trying not to vomit into Shanti's mane. But Mikael was back, and that was all that mattered. Even with the entire cavalry after them.

"Why didn't you bring another horse?" Mikael wheezed into Katjin's ear. "Silly to risk Shanti like that..."

"Why didn't you wait for me to rescue you?" Katjin yelled back into the wind, giving Shanti her head as he tightened his grip on Mikael's arms. Not that there was any guarantee that he'd come, or that Mikael heard him when he'd said he would.

"Can't leave you to have all the fun," was Mikael's response.

Fun? If this was fun, he'd be satisfied with a dull life hereafter. He breathed out an almost hysterical breath. Mikael was back, had somehow gotten free. Whole, too, from the 'feel' of it. They could worry about the rest later. If they escaped with their lives.

Wind burning in his eyes, howling in his ears. He felt parched and dry, as if the wind itself was sapping the moisture out of his skin. They rode, they stopped, they rode again. Soren seemed to know exactly when to stop the horses, to keep them from keeling over completely.

"We can split up," Mikael argued as they watered the horses. "If Soren distracts them, we can get away."

He could feel Mik's anxiety, only adding to what he felt. "They had four 'paths, Kat. Two heart-senses. Two thought-senses. And you saw how many soldiers came with them."

"How many of them are Clan?" Kat couldn't help asking. He knew--they all knew--

that it would be stupid to pit Clan against Empire, even if a good part of the cavalry owed allegiance to the plains.

“Most, from the look of it.” Mikael made a face.

“Didja talk to any of ‘em?” He knew they didn’t have time for this, to discuss every part of Mikael’s captivity, but he had to know. If there was any chance that they might find an advantage, or some kind of sympathy, then they had to take it.

“They didn’t talk to me. Not the guards. And neither did the ‘paths. Not in words, anyway.” Mikael shuddered. “I could feel ‘em, rummaging around for something. Trying to find it.” He trailed off, looking out across the small stream, then shook himself back into the present. “But it was more than that. They were able to shield me somehow, like you do. So I couldn’t pick up anything from the soldiers.”

Katjin thought about this. “Probably since it’s what they do for themselves. They probably didn’t want some stupid kid ‘path bleeding emotions all over them.” He took Mikael’s hands in his, examining the skinny wrists. No flinching, this time. Dirty bandages were wrapped around the left one, which only meant one thing.

“They branded you.” Someone had hurt Mik--physically hurt him. That was the pain Katjin’d felt, the ‘paths branding him.

Mikael nodded, looking away.

“Hey...” Katjin touched Mik’s cheek, turning Mikael’s face toward him. “Look at me, yeah?”

Mikael rested his forehead against Katjin’s, his eyes closed. Katjin’s heart almost stopped at the touch. “They saw the binding scar on my arm,” Mikael muttered. “Thought I tried to kill myself. Then the captain of the guard decided they’d best brand me, in case I tried to escape again.” He started to shake. “They didn’t have a brand with ‘em, so one of the guards got out his knife and--”

Katjin didn’t need to hear any more. He tightened his grip on Mikael, drawing the other boy closer until they stood body to body, only their robes separating the two of them.

“Ssh,” he said, kissing Mikael’s face, wherever he could reach it. Meke would do that, sometimes, when she was trying to comfort someone. “I’m here. I’ll protect you. I swear.” He kissed Mik’s jaw, still clenched with anger and fear. He kissed Mik’s tightly closed eyes. “Hey, look at me.” And when Mik wouldn’t, Katjin pried Mikael’s eye open with one hand. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Mikael muttered in response, swatting away Katjin’s hand. “You promise?” His voice was rough, angry.

“Course I promise.” Katjin bumped his mouth against Mikael’s. Again, no protest. If Katjin didn’t know better, he almost thought Mikael leaned into it. “Not like I’m gonna let you go again.”

“Better not,” Mikael said, his voice still kinda husky. “Cause I can make you feel miserable for the rest of your life.”

Katjin smiled, a slow smile. “How ‘bout making me feel good instead?” He pressed his face against Mikael’s again, just slightly. This time, Mikael took the initiative and kissed him back. And then there were lips opening under his, and tongue and taste and--

“Um, we should probably go,” Soren’s voice called down quietly. “What with the Empire after us and all.”

Mikael made a whining noise in his throat. “Why didn’t you leave him somewhere?”

“Tried,” Katjin said, pulling away reluctantly. “He followed me anyway.”

Mikael touched Katjin’s face, his fingers feather-light on Kat’s cheeks. “Later. Later we can ditch him.”

Katjin blushed, feeling an arousal that wasn’t his own. “Not here, though.” He thought of Meke, of Febe, of Apa. Of anything that would keep his lead on the army that was behind them, and the Highlands that were ahead.

“About time you joined us again,” was Soren’s only remark when they got back. “How’s Shanti? Can she still carry the two of you?”

“Shanti’s fine. She’s carried more weight than the two of us before.” He had to be glad that neither of them were full-grown yet. Katjin was still small and scrawny as anything and Mik wasn’t much better. Soren was already carrying most of his adult bulk, so that’d be another story entirely. “If we can get into the Highlands...”

Soren looked thoughtful. “Maybe not even that. If we could distract them somehow.” He looked back at the trail they’d left. “If either of you could track, it wouldn’t be so hard.”

Katjin looked at the stream. “What if we take that?” he asked, pointing upstream. “It goes back into the Highlands. If we cut across higher up and meet you further in, we could lose them.

Soren nodded. “The ground will be harder up in the Highlands. They won’t be able to track as easily. And if I keep to softer ground, they might not realize we’d split.” He

grinned. “Good thinking, little Kat.”

He scowled at the nickname.

“One of the soldiers said the ‘paths can track me if they get too close,” Mikael said. “If Soren can keep them on their toes, they probably won’t realize they’re not tracking me. And now that I know what I’m looking for, I can keep a watch out for them too. “He shuddered. “Make me feel all itchy, like bees in my head.”

“Then we split up.” Katjin looked at Soren. “Watch yourself.”

“Watch his back, and have him watch yours.” Soren’s voice was rough. “Ancestors bless, cousin.”

Katjin grabbed Soren’s hand, dragging him into a quick, hard hug. “You too. Cousin.”

And then he rode off.

“You and me now,” Katjin said. “Let’s make tracks.”

“Or hide them,” Mikael said, grinning.

Maybe this wouldn’t be as hard as Katjin thought.

Chapter Nine

They climbed steeper up into the hills. In the beginning, Shanti easily found her footing in the sandy shallows of the stream. Katjin and Mikael followed behind, not quite as surefooted as Shanti, but close behind her at least. It looked like the ridgeline they were following headed directly west, which should lead them to camp. If what Soren's hastily muttered directions were true.

"Maybe Soren should've drawn us a map or something," Katjin muttered as they wound their way further and further back.

Mikael kept checking behind them, tensing up every time he heard a noise. It was all Katjin could do not to tug him close everytime that happened. He settled for squeezing Mikael's hand, hoping to reassure Mikael somehow.

But as the passage got narrower and narrower, and the banks of the stream were harder to navigate, Katjin realized the foolishness of the plan. Maybe the cavalry wouldn't find them, but eventually, someone from the Highlands would. And he could only hope that the Highlandfolk would be friendlier than the cavalry.

The cold water of the stream kept them both awake and alert, but he knew their energy would run out eventually. Mikael had practically inhaled what was left of the journey bread. And while they had plenty of water and a bit of aisag that Soren had shoved in Katjin's hands, those weren't exactly provisions for a journey.

It was almost like this was some kind of purgatory for them, that place you went when you didn't honor the ancestors as well as you could have. Maybe him defying the Empire meant he wouldn't go to the Great Plains after his life was done here. Maybe he'd doomed them all, just because of one stupid attempt to help someone.

Forever. They would walk into forever, always struggling against the same icy current. This was what the life after this one would probably be, plowing ahead through endless

cold water to wherever it took him. Cold that danced up and down his spine until he was shivering even in the heat of the sun, clutching his bunched up robe around him. But he needed to focus, needed to stay awake. Letting his mind wander had cost him Mikael once. It wouldn't catch him again.

"Kat? Kat?" Mikael's hand shook him. "C'mon, Kat, let's get you out of this stream and warm."

"But--" Katjin muttered, pushing away Mikael's insistent hands. "'M fine. Let's go." At least the buzzing in his head had stopped. He could see and hear things clearly again, and the world definitely wasn't fuzzy anymore. Well, it was a little fuzzy, but that could be because of the cold. He wasn't sure when the last time he felt his feet was. Might've been last week, or at the camp.

The camp.

"The soldiers, did they, um, kill everyone? In the camp?" He almost didn't want to say it. His word echoed oddly in his ears.

Mikael gave him a startled look. "Who kill--" Those blue eyes blinked. "Your grandparents and Soren's folks?"

Katjin nodded. His eyes were burning again. Probably the cold water. Maybe he was cold in his head now too. But at least that was an improvement over the buzzing.

"I don't know," Mikael said. Katjin could tell he was hesitating. "They wouldn't say anything in front of me, and they shielded from me." He shrugged. "So I couldn't read anything. No grief. No anger. No remorse.

Mikael's arm looped around Katjin's waist. "We'll find 'em. You know we will."

Katjin nodded again, not sure of what else he could do. He stared at his feet, but they were starting to look blurry. Maybe all that blacking out had done something funny to his head, and his eyes, because they were burning worse.

Beside him, he could hear Mikael snuffling, as if he was trying to hold something back. His breath hitched in his chest, the way Katjin's did whenever he was trying not to cry. But if Mikael was trying not to cry, then maybe it was okay.

"They don't tell you stuff like this, do they?" Mik said softly, pulling Katjin into his arms. Kat just rested his head against Mik's shoulder, the way he used to do with Apa. "They never mention the choices you have to make, and that those choices mean consequences. It's not," he laughed a little, "it's not very fair of them."

Katjin cracked a smile, rubbing his face against Mikael's sunburnt neck. "Not fair at

all,” he sniffled.

Mikael pulled back, then gave Katjin one smacking kiss on the mouth. “How ‘bout this? For every hundred lengths we go, I give you one of those, yeah?” His wide mouth quirked into a grin. “Or you could kiss Shanti, if you want.”

The forced lightness, the forced happiness, was costing Mikael something. Katjin knew that much. But the fact that Mik could be that brave, could forget that much, just to keep Katjin happy--that warmed him more than anything.

Katjin looked at his horse, who was peering over her shoulders at them, as if trying to figure out what they were doing. “I think you kiss better than she does,” he whispered to Mikael, as if trying not to let Shanti hear. That seemed to be the right thing to do, since Mikael laughed and kissed him again.

“C’m on, idiot,” Mikael said, leading him further upstream. “It looks like the trees close in up ahead. If we turn west toward the sunset, then we should be all right from there.”

They climbed up and up through tussock grass and the same stunted toatoa trees that Katjin had noticed in their valley, the sharp blade-like leaves tearing into their robes. Mikael said the lack of any buzzing in either of their heads meant they probably weren’t being followed, unless the ‘paths had managed to mask their own ‘pathic vibes or something. They were out of the water, which had to be on the right track. Katjin still wasn’t sure if he could feel each of his toes, but at least his feet were warm and dry in his boots again. His breeks still dripped, and his robe from where it got wet in the water, but his feet were dry. It was chilly up here, much colder than it was at the lower elevations. From time to time, they had to scabble over scree and other loose rock, and hope that Shanti would find her own way up to them as they moved higher and higher into the Highlands.

At least the now rockier ground provided them some cover. It was difficult to try and find footing on, especially for poor Shanti, but Katjin thought that they probably weren’t leaving any tracks that the cavalry could find. The only thing he worried about was the fact that they were going deeper and deeper into the Highlands, more north than west. The valley itself that they were in seemed to get narrower and narrower as they went.

It wasn’t until they rounded a bend in the valley that Katjin knew they were on the right

track. Finally, some real trees that looked taller even than the forests of the Lowlands. He thought he recognized one as a larger toatoa, and others as silver-leaved beech. At least there wasn't a lot of undergrowth. They could make their way through the trees without too much trouble. Having so many trees towering length and lengths overhead made Kat feel very small, all of a sudden. It was almost the same closed-in feeling that he got whenever they stayed in a town. Something about walls, or being walled in. Apa said a lot of the Clanfolk had it, just because they weren't used to being surrounded by something they couldn't carry away.

"You okay?" Mikael's voice sounded hushed. "You feel jittery. Nervous." He waved a hand at the forest that closed in around them. "Is it the trees?"

Katjin nodded, pressing closer to Mikael's back as they trudged along. "They're so tall," he muttered, feeling like a little kid. "Never seen this many trees together."

Mikael turned back, giving Katjin a surprised look. "But the forests--they're all over the Lowlands. Didn't you and your apa ever ride through them?"

Katjin shook his head. "Too much trouble. Too closed in. What self-respecting Clanfolk would ride through a forest?" he asked in disgust. "You can't see anyone sneaking up on you. Or if there are any large animals lurking anywhere." He checked behind them, just to make sure. The only large animal back there was Shanti, now following behind them without even being on her lead.

Mik laughed, which only made Katjin hate him very, very much for a brief second. "What if you'd never seen trees before? What if someone dumped you somewhere that you'd never been, and you had to find your way home?" Katjin burst out.

But he didn't get the reaction he expected. Instead of the yelling that would've followed if it was Soren who'd make the remark, Mikael just looked down for a minute, and then kissed Katjin's forehead. "Someone did," he said quietly. Then, taking Katjin by the hand, he pushed his way forward through the trees. "We're supposed to go west, yeah? I can't feel the 'paths from here, so they're probably a long way off."

"Yeah, just follow the sunset." Katjin looked up at the doubtful sunlight that filtered through the trees. "If you can find the sun."

"Can't even find our shadows," Mikael muttered. "Isn't there something about moss growing on trees in a certain direction?"

"Moss grows on trees?" Katjin looked at the bare silver and reddish trunks that surrounded them. "Maybe in other forests?"

Mikael kicked at the moss and leaf litter at their feet. “Maybe it’s too dry on this side of the mountains,” he said, almost to himself. “Least there’s no undergrowth. Not too many vines either. All we need is to try and hack through that.”

Katjin wasn’t sure how to respond to that, especially since he’d never known anyone who had gone over the mountains. Not that he’d really known anyone who had gone into the mountains to begin with.

“Funny how you stare at the Highlands all your life, and never really think you’ll ever get there,” Mikael said suddenly, turning back to Katjin. “You could see the Highlands from the highest window in our house, and I always wondered...”

“Your apa was a trader. Why didn’t he ever go?” Katjin asked, squeezing Mikael’s hand as they walked. He noticed tiny flowers here and there: black and green on tall stems. There was even a bright purple or yellow mushroom that he’d sworn he’d seen in a couple of the nicer markets in towns. “Mine’s been a few times now, apparently.” He tried not to sound too bitter about that.

“My father’s a different kind of merchant than yours,” was all Mikael would say. “He never went much of anywhere, unless it was to one of the other cities. He went to the capital once, before I was born.”

Katjin had to be impressed at that. Not even Apa had been to the capital.

“Your apa probably wasn’t a spy though,” Katjin pointed out. “Secretly helping ‘paths across the border.” Maybe Apa would know what to do with him and Mikael after all. Hope began to bloom somewhere in Katjin’s chest. It was kind of romantic, when he thought about it. Nolan Redwind, secret spy, working one person at a time to undermine the Empire.

“Think we’ll ever be able to go home?” Mikael asked suddenly.

“Depends on where home is.” Katjin thought about it. “We might be able to go back to the plains, if we could convince the cavalry that we didn’t do anything wrong.” He didn’t say anything about if there was a camp to go back to. Because he knew it was in both their minds, even if neither of them said it.

“And we can’t go back to my family. Even if we could find them again.” There was a sigh. “If they’re even still alive. ‘Father, can I introduce you to Katjin Redwind? He’s my...’” Mikael trailed off. “What are we, anyway?”

Katjin shrugged. “Blood brothers, by Clan law. The whole shield business. I’m the filter for your emotions. Beyond that, don’t know.” He coughed as a thought occurred to him.

Just because he'd always looked at the boys didn't mean that Mikael had. And Apa had mentioned some of the strange customs Lowlanders had, like pre-arranging marriages and things like that. "You don't, um, have a wife, do you?"

Mikael actually stopped in his tracks, he was so surprised. And worried. And completely confused, if Katjin was reading him right. "A wife?" His voice cracked. "I'm sixteen, how can I have a wife?"

"Apa was seventeen when he brought home my ama," Katjin said. "You Lowlanders have strange customs, so I didn't know--"

"Didn't know what? If I was intended anywhere else?" Mikael took a step closer, til they were nose to nose. "Or didn't know if I liked girls better?"

Katjin squirmed. It wasn't like he could hide anything from Mikael. Not anymore. Not with the way the boundaries between their feelings blurred together. "Just 'cause we're stuck together," he said, shifting his weight a bit. "And if we don't get this figured out, you probably can't marry, and I didn't know if you'd want to anyway."

Clan didn't really care who you settled down with, as long as they weren't already promised somewhere and weren't wanted by the Empire. And since Mikael already fell into the second category, Katjin wanted to be sure of the first one before they went any further. Some Lowland families did have odd ideas about what was 'proper' when it came to settling down.

"I like girls," Mikael said matter-of-factly. "I like boys. But," and Mikael held up his free hand, poking Katjin in the chest with one finger, "I like you best of all. Not because of all this," he waved his hand, "but because you're, well, you." And at that, Mikael blushed. Just like Katjin was doing. "And someday, we can do stuff, and--"

Katjin cut off Mikael's words with a kiss. And maybe a bit of a rub, just so that Mik could catch both his meanings.

"Yeah, that," was Mikael's flustered reply. "So let's go find the others and figure out how to get rid of the Empire. And then..."

Katjin grinned. "And then."

Soren had probably counted on them finding the camp before nightfall. Unless it had moved somewhere while the two of them were rescuing Mikael. Neither of them had

packed blankets or food beyond whatever Katjin had grabbed on his way out of camp, and that was long gone. It was getting dark, and he could tell that Mikael was getting tired. Both of them were going on close to three days with no sleep now. Every step seemed to drag behind the other, and even Shanti was looking close to dropping. Katjin patted her neck as they stopped at a stream for a quick drink.

“Stop?” he asked Mikael, already guessing the answer.

“If the Empire finds us, they’ll at least feed us before they kill us,” Mikael muttered, falling to the ground in a heap. He tugged at Katjin’s hand until Kat followed him, then pulled at Katjin’s arms and legs until they were arranged to Mikael was satisfied. Katjin was just happy to have Mikael next to him again, legs intertwined, arms clasped tight together. He might not have missed the constant touching, but he did miss this: the calm, the quiet, the sense of peace that Mikael brought with him. Yeah, they were being chased by the Empire’s elite guard, but as long as Mik was with him?

They could face anything.

“How’d you escape?” Katjin asked as they treaded deeper into the forest the next morning. The trees seemed to grow closer together, looming higher and higher overhead. But the ground still remained clear of underbrush, which meant they weren’t stumbling through bushes and things. But the trees were still looming in more than he wanted to admit.

Mikael eyed him in the forest gloom. “You really want to know?” A hand squeezed Katjin’s. “You can’t hide it, Kat. I know how nervous this is making you. They’re just trees. It’s not like they’ll come to life and eat you.”

Katjin shuddered. “We’re in the Highlands. You don’t know that.”

Mik did have a point. He really didn’t have to try and make conversation just to hide his fear. Not like he could block it from Mikael. “But really. How did you escape?”

Mikael looked away. “They were, the soldiers were, um.” He stopped and took a breath. His whole body tensed, as if he was trying not to remember. “The ‘paths had gone to sleep, and there was a guard on me. Two soldiers. One of ‘em thought it would be fun to teach me a lesson. He held me down while the other--”

Katjin swallowed. Memories of what he’d felt on the ride to the camp, that sudden

burst of fury and bitterness of fear, came back to him. Mikael didn't need to go any further.

"They didn't," Mikael said quickly. "The one had his breeks down, and he came closer, and I could smell his breath. Drunk, like all of them. And something broke inside. I just--I panicked. And I gave them my fear."

Katjin stopped, tensed. "Projected it," he said slowly. "Maybe you were shoving it back at him." It would make sense. He thought that's how the calming thing worked; if he kept calm, then Mikael would pick up on it and radiate that same calm out to all of them. No wonder the Empire kept heart-senses in the big cities, if all 'paths could do that. It was instant crowd-control. It was a frightening idea, when Katjin thought about it. The potential for it, and the danger of what you could do with it, was almost limitless.

Mikael nodded. "And they fell to the ground, and they screamed. And then I ran. Just like I ran that day the door was open."

Katjin could feel the anger rolling and building under the surface. "Easy. We got past them now. If we get back to Mandric and Soren and the others, we'll figure out how to get rid of them for good." He rubbed at Mikael's shoulders, trying to ease the tension there.

Mikael looked up, as if he was trying to decipher something through the gloom of the forest. "We've been wandering for a while."

Katjin looked back at Shanti, still following docilely them. "We could ride again. Or you could. I think Shanti's rested enough."

Mikael shook his head. "Naw, it's probably easiest just to keep going." Katjin could hear his stomach rumble. "Though I wouldn't argue with some food, if you have it."

Katjin shook his head. "You already ate it. We could find some berries, or try to catch something."

Mikael groaned, his mood suddenly feeling loads lighter. "We're going to starve."

"I think we're..." Mikael pulled Katjin toward what was literally the light at the end of the tunnel of branches. "We've found it!"

Except 'it' turned out to be two arban of mounted soldiers, twenty mounted men waiting for them at the edge of the forest.

"It was our own stupidity that let you escape the first time," the noyon said, looking

down at them from his horse's back. To Katjin's dismay, every single one in the troop looked to be Clan, right down to the embroidered short robes they wore under their breastplates. Each wore armor made out of hardened leather scales, stitched together over bright silks and lacquered in their arban colors. In the middle, carefully guarded by the twenty soldiers, rode four Lowlanders, 'paths wearing the same hooded cloaks that Katjin had seen the others wearing, almost a lifetime ago.

An arban, though only made up of ten men, was thought of as being beyond clan, more than family. Your arban were your brothers, the ones you protected above all else. And the fact that the 'paths sat right smack in the middle of two arban was bad news for him and Mikael. There was no escaping this.

He looked at Mikael, who looked back at him. Mikael nodded, obviously agreeing to whatever plan Katjin had. Except he had no great plan this time. "Grab him and run" certainly wasn't going to work, not with Shanti near to foundering at this point.

"Don't even try it, boy," the noyon continued in the same sneering voice. "You were raised with the same good sense as we all were. You know better than to risk your horse."

To Katjin's surprise, the man spoke in Clantongue, not the speech of the Lowlands. The 'paths probably understood whatever he was saying, though, since all four of them looked somewhat pleased with themselves and the situation.

"There's a price for defying the empire," the noyon continued, a calculating smile on his face. "My men were denied that price earlier. But since there are two of you now, I think we may make amends. Issen, Marik, grab the two of them."

Two of the soldiers dismounted, each coming for Katjin and Mikael. Katjin stared at the two, both of them at least double the size of him or Mikael. His blood turned cold. And he felt Mikael's fear build up so that it froze every muscle in Katjin's body. It started in his knees and slowly slithered its way up his thighs, his legs shaking like a newborn foal's. It was too much; overwhelming. He needed an outlet, and fast, before his muscles locked up and he wet himself. So he did the only thing he could think of doing.

He grabbed a hold of Mikael's hand and screamed for all he was worth.

When he calmed Mikael, he took the emotions away, trying to stand between Mikael and whatever was hurting him. Now, he did it in reverse, all but physically forcing the emotions back at Mik. Every ounce of frustration and anger and fear that reeled off Mikael fueled his scream, funneling it into that one endless shout as he'd never before. And then, as if Mikael realized what he was doing, he heard Mikael's voice join his.

The soldiers and the 'paths, all twenty-four of them, fell off their horses. Literally slid off them, writhing in pain. They curled up, hitting their heads against the ground and clutching their hands to their ears as if to try and stop it. And blood trickled out of noses, eyes gummed shut with tears. The 'paths themselves turned pale as death, looking sicker than anything Katjin had ever seen. One even drew a knife from his belt, trying to stick the sharp blade into his ear as if to cut off the sound.

Before he could get too caught up in it, he grabbed Mikael by the waist and threw him up on Shanti's back. Inhaling again, he continued to scream at the top of his lungs as he scrabbled up behind Mik, kicking the mare into high gear. That seemed to do the trick, since she wanted to be away from this howling as badly as they wanted to escape from the soldiers.

They screamed until they were hoarse, almost coughing with exhaustion. But even then, Katjin kept focusing on that anger, that fear, and thrusting it at Mikael. And it seemed to work. In a quick backward glance, Katjin saw the soldiers and 'paths all writhe once or twice more and then fall still into unconsciousness. Katjin only hoped they didn't hurt the men too badly. That was all they needed.

It wasn't long enough, though. Hoofbeats hurried after them heartbeats later.. "C'mon, Shanti!" Katjin urged, his throat burning with the effort. "Faster!" Panic began to rise up, fueling the anger. "Damn it, we're so close!"

He looked back; a few of the soldiers were almost on Shanti's heels. They clung to the backs of their horses, looking woozy at best and barely conscious at worst.

"Can we do it again?" he asked Mikael, muttering in Mik's ear. "They're following us."

"I can hear them!" Mikael shouted back over the wind. "I don't know if I can do that again. It hurt." And Katjin could feel it, somewhat. That ache inside, almost an emptiness, a total absence of all emotion.

But Shanti was faltering, and Katjin could feel her sides heaving under their combined weight.

"Please, Shanti," he begged, tears burning in his eyes. They were so close.

And when he opened his eyes, the most beautiful sight stood in front of him: Soren, with what looked like an entire clan of Highlandfolk, all armed to the teeth.

"Thanks for bringing the cavalry," Soren called out, grinning from ear to ear. "It saves us a trip!"

Katjin didn't even bother to say anything. He just rode Shanti as fast as she could go until they were behind the strong line of Highlandfolk. He dragged Mikael off the horse with him, automatically grabbing Shanti's bridle to try and walk some of the heat out of her. "Easy, girl," he whispered to her as she tried to jerk her head out of his grasp. "Easy, we're safe now."

Mikael slumped to the ground, looking almost as dead as Katjin felt. But they'd made it. They were safe.

For now.

It hadn't been much of a contest. Not with the soldiers as weakened as they were. The Highlandfolk overcame them in a matter of minutes, fighting them back with bows before they could even get into sword range. He couldn't make much sense of the battle from where he slumped at Shanti's feet, the tired mare standing guard over them.

It looked like there were a few wounds, but nothing serious. And no one fell, which made Katjin all the more relieved. After some clashing about, the two arbans of the Empire rode off, their horses almost limping in fatigue.

With a slight smile, Katjin began to hum the aiding song. Soren gave him an odd look as he rode up, all but falling off his horse.

"Should've known you couldn't navigate your way out of a yer. If you ever--ever!--cause me that much worry again, I'll beat you so badly that your apa wouldn't even recognize you," his cousin warned, before catching Katjin up in a bone-crunching hug. "You have no idea what you put me through."

Katjin rubbed his face against the soft shoulder of Soren's robe. "But I got him back, didn't I?" he asked, his voice muffled. He could feel Mikael's hand on his ankle, squeezing lightly in comfort. "And we got back." Eventually.

"Not bad, for a baby," Soren replied, his own voice a little husky. "But you can tell me about it later. Let's get the two of you back to camp." And without a word, Soren hauled Mikael to his feet and into a big hug as well. "I swear, I can't let the two of you out of my sight."

"How'd you find us?" Katjin asked. "We got lost in the forest, so we thought we'd never find you."

Soren pointed to his head. “Mandric’s scouts caught sight of them wandering around where they shouldn’t. So we followed them for a while.” He nodded toward the retreating cavalry. “And there you both were.”

Katjin nodded toward the retreating army. “You sure you don’t wanna join them? Now’s your chance.”

Soren looked at Katjin for a long time before answering. “I think I’ve got my hands full enough with the two of you.” He smirked. “Besides, you’re still my responsibility.”

And that was all that needed to be said.

Chapter Ten

Food and drinks were shoved into their hands as soon as they arrived at camp. Shanti was led away to a heroine's welcome of her own, followed by a promise of a rubdown and oats, if Katjin heard correctly.

"You'll want baths then?" Mendric asked, tugging at Katjin's filthy robe. "We can probably save these, if you're wanting to get clean."

Katjin looked down at his robe, almost a disaster after three days of tramping through the Highlands, and all but sleeping in it for the past moons. Meke's beautiful felting was almost hidden under the layers of dirt. As much as he'd tried to wash it, he'd failed pretty much every time. And he didn't even want to think about what he smelled like.

"Clean," he said around a mouthful of cheese and bread, in complete agreement. "Then more food. Then sleep." Though it didn't necessarily have to be in that order. His whole body felt tired.

"We can take care of that," Soren said with a grin. Before Katjin could say anything, Soren grabbed both him and Mikael by the waist and hauled them off. Katjin automatically grabbed at Mikael's hand, but before he could get too good a grip, he was flying through the air. There was brief pain until he found Mikael's flailing hand. Then he was surrounded by cold and wet. Ancestors-blessedly cold and wet.

"Damn it, Soren!" Before his cousin could get too far, Katjin yanked Soren's arm, pulling him in after them. "See if I let you get away with that!"

To Katjin's surprise, Mikael jumped Soren from the other side, pinning Soren down while Katjin got his cousin in a headlock. They went down under the water, Soren trying to wriggle away from the two of them.

"I went through all that trouble," he coughed, "to rescue you!" Soren hollered before he went under again.

As Katjin struggled to flip Soren over onto his back with his free hand, he grinned across at Mikael, who grinned back. It felt good, for a moment, to laugh and not to worry. To just be with family. Maybe this was what it would've been like, if he'd grown up in camp and stayed in camp.

Even Soren started flailing a little less, his arms moving slower and slower until they all just kinda drifted there, in the shallow current of the stream, Soren on one side of Katjin and Mikael on the other. "You're thinking," his cousin said, tugging on Katjin's top tail of hair. "Stop it. It never did you any good."

Katjin sat down on the stream bottom, drawing his knees up to his chest. Mikael bobbed along next to him, one arm looped around Katjin's neck. "What's gonna happen now?"

Soren shrugged, bumping Katjin's shoulder with his own. "I dunno, Kat." He nodded toward where the Highlandfolk waited on the stream bank, watching them. "It's probably up to them what happens."

"Meke and Febe?" Katjin asked, almost afraid to know.

"The leader of the cavalry--" Mikael started.

His cousin stilled. Katjin wondered if Soren knew more than he was telling. "Noyon," Soren corrected, as if he was stalling. "The noyon of the arban. Ten soldiers to an arban, ten arban to a jaghun."

"The noyon," Mikael continued, "hadn't said anything about fatalities when he reported to the 'paths." He seemed to be studying his fingers, which were wrinkling up like dried berries in the sun. "They might still be alive."

"We all know the price of defying the Empire," Soren said, his voice flat. "It's a price we pay for living there."

"Not like we could've gone back, anyway," Katjin added. He tried to ignore the burning in the pit of his stomach, not knowing if the inescapable feeling of grief was coming from himself, Soren, or Mikael. "Guess we're Highlandfolk now then, huh?"

Mikael rubbed at his bandaged wrist. "Does that mean they'll make us go through another ceremony? I dunno if I'll survive it a second time."

Soren grabbed Mikael's wrist. Mikael flinched, but Katjin thought it was more from the memory of what happened than from Soren's touch itself. Another step forward, if it could be called progress. "The soldiers?"

Mikael nodded, yanking his wrist out of Soren's grip. "The 'paths said I should be

branded.” And that was all he would say.

Soren grunted. “Get one of the Highlandfolk to look at it. Make sure it’s not infected.” He stood up, hauling Katjin and Mikael to their feet with him. “C’mon, I think we’re water-logged enough.”

Mandric and the other Highlandfolk didn’t bother hiding their looks of amusement as they made their way back to the bank of the stream. They just silently handed Katjin and the others clean shirts and breeks, all bearing the same strangely unfamiliar Hill embroidery. Katjin couldn’t help turning the worn wool over and over in his hands. Maybe he could convince one of them to make him a proper robe. Or get Mik to do it, since Mikael seemed better with his hands than Katjin or Soren. He grinned to himself. How good with his hands, Katjin was definitely looking forward to learning.

He could feel his body heat up as he hurriedly shrugged into the shirt and breeks, careful not to let his eyes stray toward Mikael. They got enough teasing as it was, from the others and from Soren.

“C’mon, lads,” Mandric said, herding them toward a now-familiar Hill yer. “Beds for all of you.” Three pallets were set up against the far end of the yer. “Soren’s been worrying himself sick over the two of you younglings.”

Katjin gave his cousin a grin, who smiled crookedly back at him.

“Save the thanks for later,” Soren muttered, falling onto the pallet on the far right. “Next time you need me to save you, at least wait until I’ve gotten a few nights’ sleep.”

Katjin shoved the other two pallets up against each other, dragging Mikael down next to him. “We’ll keep that in mind next time.”

Mikael’s only response was a snore and a soft sigh. Katjin rolled into the warmth of Mik’s body, flung one arm across Mik’s chest, and joined him in much-needed sleep.

It was night when they woke again. At least, Katjin assumed it was night, since it was dark in the yer. His stomach rumbled, reminding him that he hadn’t eaten enough in the past few days. Or moons. However long it had been. His sense of time felt a little skewed. But then, the world itself had seemed a little warped ever since Febe ran them out of camp. Febe.

Katjin curled up on his side, wrapping his arms around his legs. He rested his forehead

on his knees, trying to breathe in and out as slowly as he could. They'd escaped from the soldiers relatively unscathed. No rumors had reached the Highlandfolk yet of a slaughter on the plains; Katjin bet that news would travel fast, if it happened. He'd feel so much better if he could find Apa, and somehow get a message to Meke and Febe, just to make sure they were all right.

"Stop it," Mikael muttered, nudging Katjin in the back. "If you don't stop fretting, I'll get Soren to pour some of that sleeping stuff down your throat."

"I think I've got some in my saddlebags," came Soren's voice from the other side of the yer. "Meke kept dosing you with it to keep you from hurting yourself."

Mikael snorted. "See how she'd like that foul brew poured down her throat."

Soren's laughter filled the tent. "Worked, though, di'nn'it?"

Katjin choked out a laugh. Mikael's arms wrapped around him, drawing him back against Mikael's chest. "We will find your apa," Mikael said softly. "He's here in the Highlands somewhere. Or the Highlandfolk can send a runner out to see your family. Shouldn't be that hard." Katjin felt a soft kiss on the back of his neck. "Think sometimes, idiot. Just like Soren's always telling you."

"Cityboy knows what he's talking about, Kat," Soren said. "Now sleep, before we dose you."

Katjin nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

"Sleep," Mikael's voice said softly, hands stroking Katjin's tangled hair. "Sleep..."

It was full day when he woke up again. Soren lay on his back next to Katjin, one arm flung up over his head, snoring as loud as he could. Even Mikael seemed to be asleep. Which would be fine, if Katjin didn't have to piss. Life was so much easier when taking a piss only required himself, and not his constant shadow. Not that he minded. Too much. He and Mik had at least worked out a system for when they needed to do their other business. He'd love to forget those first couple times, when his bowels had all but seized up at the thought of performing in front of another person.

"Mik," he hissed, nudging Mikael with his toe. "Get up."

"Wha?" Mik blinked sleepily at him. "Piss?"

Katjin nodded, hauling Mikael to his feet. "C'mon."

Mikael stumbled after him, still half asleep. Mandric gave them a grin and a wave as they made their way toward the privy trenches at the far edge of camp. Katjin groaned as he noticed how close to the trees they were. Not that there was anything big enough in the trees to eat him. Or any body parts he might expose in the process. But he felt so closed in. He shook himself before he started imagining soldiers haunting the treeline.

Mikael's body was warm against his back as Katjin took care of his business. Mikael had obviously slipped back into sleep, something Katjin envied. Mik seemed to be able to sleep just about anywhere. Maybe it was all those days that Mikael wouldn't talk about, as he made his way deeper and deeper into Clan lands. Or maybe he just had that sleeping sickness that Meke mentioned sometimes. People would just randomly fall asleep, no matter what they were doing.

When they got back toward the campfire at the center of the camp, Soren had joined Mandric as he cooked something over the fire.

"Your shadow still asleep?" Mandric asked, nodding toward Mikael.

"I'd send him back to bed, but..." Katjin sat down by the fire, propping Mikael's limp body against his.

"We'll have to do something about that," Mandric said slowly. "But we'll have to do something about a lot of things."

"Like sending a message to Apa?" Katjin asked hopefully.

Mandric nodded as he chewed on a bit of meat. "Your apa, your clan. Maybe even over the mountains, if we have to." He shook his head. "I'm not sure any of us would know what to do with the two of you."

"How do you know him so well? Apa, I mean?" Katjin asked, fidgeting with the bit of filled roll Mandric handed him. "For all I knew, he hasn't been in the Highlands at least since I was born."

Mandric smiled slightly. "A man doesn't have to be somewhere to still help out. Your apa's better at ferreting out 'paths than anyone I know. He's sent more than I can count on to safer pastures up here. And further on to the Shahi, if need be. See that girl there?" Mandric pointed at one of the redheads, a girl probably a couple years older than Soren. "Anya. She was seven when your apa found her. Sent her here to us before the Empire could get to her. That was nigh on twelve years ago."

He stared at the girl. "She Shahi?" he asked, trying to sound casual about it.

Mandric gave him a reproachful look. "The Shahi aren't that bad, Katjin," he said.

“Look what they did for your mother, after all.”

Katjin stared at him, cold filling the pit of his belly. “Ama? What’s my ama got to do with Shahi demons?”

Mandric blinked. “Your grandparents--your mother’s parents--sent your mother to the Shahi for help with her thought-sensing. I was the one they came to, matter of fact, since your grandfather had dealt with us before for wool. Didn’t you...?” Mandric looked hard at him. “Except you didn’t know that.”

“Ama wasn’t--” Katjin struggled. “She wasn’t a ‘path. All ‘paths work for the Empire. She couldn’t--” Not that Apa had ever said much about Ama. Or his grandparents, for that matter. He had never met any family on Ama’s side, and Apa had never made an effort to tell him much about them. He knew that Apa and Ama had been young when they met, and that Apa had met her on a trading mission of some kind, but never more than that.

“Nolan never told you,” Mandric said matter-of-factly. “Because he doesn’t tell anyone anything unless you pry it out of him. Though,” he looked thoughtful, “it might’ve been better for you in the long run.”

“Did he save her?” Katjin asked, trying to puzzle through all this. “Like he saved the other girl?”

“He didn’t save her,” Mandric corrected, smiling slightly. “The Shahi had already done that. But she was the one who got him involved in all this.” With one sweeping gesture, he motioned toward the camp itself, both the plains and the hills and everything they encompassed.

“Ama was a ‘path.” He was numb. Not sure what to feel. Ama had been a ‘path, and no one said anything. Her own parents had let someone rape her mind, the way the Empire ‘paths had done to Mikael. And that was supposed to be okay? Any of it was supposed to be okay?

“Kat?” Mikael muttered, stirring slightly. “What--”

Katjin smoothed back Mikael’s flyaway hair. “Nothing, Mik. I’ll tell you later.” Later, when he had time to process it and sort it out. He still wasn’t sure what it meant, or what it would mean to him in the long run.

They stayed with the Highland camp for nearly a week, moving deeper and deeper into the Highlands every couple days to make sure that the cavalry wasn't following them. Mandric sent outriders to make sure that Katjin's family was all right. Apparently there were more ties between Highlandfolk and Clanfolk than he knew; it was more than just a similar language and heritage. It was almost a shared culture in itself.

"Some say we were brothers once," Mandric said once. "That we disagreed over something about horses and sheep, so we parted ways." He glanced sideways at Katjin. "But we still remember. And we still sing the aiding song."

Katjin blushed. "That only gets me into trouble," he muttered, looking at the ground.

Mandric laughed. "I'd say that you do have a talent for trouble," he said. "Especially if the stories that your apa told me were true."

Katjin made a face. "Have you heard from Apa at all?" Not that he was too crazy about seeing his father just yet. Not that he knew what he was going to say when he saw Apa again.

"Aye, lad," Mandric said softly. "You'll see him soon, I promise."

Mandric kept that promise, because three days later, Apa himself met them, looking as if Shahi demons themselves were after him.

"Kat," was all he said.

Chapter Eleven

“Why didn’t you tell me Ama was a ‘path?” Katjin demanded, sliding off Shanti. Mikael quickly followed behind him. That wasn’t what he’d planned on saying. Not right away. “And why didn’t you tell me you were trying to bring down the Empire? I could’ve helped!”

Apa looked helpless, something Katjin had never seen before. Neither had that amount of gray in Apa’s black hair; it was almost completely silver now.

“Kat...” Apa started, walking over to where Katjin stood, leaning against Shanti’s side for support. “It was never that simple.”

One of Mik’s arms slipped around Katjin’s waist, and waves of reassurance seemed to flow through them. Ease, they seemed to say. Calm.

Katjin took a deep breath before starting again. “Ama was a ‘path.”

“Your ama was a latent ‘path, aye,” Apa said slowly, as if he was considering what to tell Katjin. “She came to it late, like Mikael did.”

Well, that took care of what and when to tell Apa, since it seemed like he already knew.

“See?” Katjin said, turning his head to the side to whisper in Mikael’s ear. “You weren’t the first.” Tension seemed to leak out of Mikael’s body, causing him to slump against Katjin’s back in relief.

“Her parents, her ama and apa, recognized the signs,” Apa continued. “They’d had two other children stolen by the Empire, both as small children. So they brought your Ama here to the Highlands as soon as they figured out what was going on.”

“Did someone--” Katjin wasn’t sure how to put it. “Did someone get rid of her ‘pathy?” The thought of it almost hurt him. Yeah, being a ‘path wasn’t the most comfortable thing in the world, but to have someone actually go into your head and, what, burn out part of it?

“Kat...” Apa moved closer, putting a hand on Katjin’s arm. “You have to understand. Your ama’s parents were desperate to help her. Just like you, riding straight into the cavalry to get your Mikael back.”

“He’s not my--“ Katjin started, before figuring there was no use. “How did you know?”

Apa smiled. “You know how gossip spreads through the plains, little Kat. It’s the same here, in the Highlands. Stories are already being told about Brave Katjin’s ride into the face of the Empire, no matter what the cost.

“So aye, your ama’s thought-sensing was burned out of her mind,” Apa continued. “And her parents brought her back to the Lowlands, where she grew up to be a normal girl.” Apa smiled. “A beautiful girl, kinder and gentler than anyone I’d met.”

“And you met Ama when you were trading,” Katjin said, picking up the story from there. He thought he at least knew this much.

“And I met your ama when I was on a genuine trading run,” Apa said with a nod. “Because not every Clanfolk is satisfied with life on the plains. Not every one is suited to the cavalry either.”

Soren and Katjin exchanged a look.

“And Febe--Ama’s apa--turned out to be involved in a different kind of trade?” Katjin asked, some things starting to make sense.

Apa smiled, pride clearly written on his face. “Aye. And Febe was involved in a different kind of trade. So your ama and I helped your Febe until you were born, and then it fell to me.”

“And I fell to you too.” There was a lump in Katjin’s throat that he couldn’t explain.

“So that’s where you come from,” Apa said, squeezing Katjin’s arm again. “And that’s probably why Mikael was able to find you. You must have some trace of your ama’s powers. Not enough to alert the Empire, but enough to draw him to you.”

“And because his Meke was Clanfolk, he knew where to look.” Katjin squeezed Mikael’s fingers, intertwined with his.

Apa nodded. “A life for a life,” he said softly. “Except that I’ve probably brought the three of you young ones more trouble than it’s worth.”

“It saved my life,” Mikael said, his voice strong and unafraid. “I think it’s worth it.”

Katjin snuck a look at Soren, who had the same proud, defiant look on his face. “Me too, Uncle,” Soren said. “It’s not what I thought I wanted, but...” He shrugged. “It’s

better than what I had.” He grinned at Katjin and Mikael. “And someone has to keep these two idiots in line.”

“I’m glad you feel that way, Soren,” Apa said, sounding relieved. “Because you know you can’t go back to the Clans. Any of you.”

“Kinda figured that when we stole a ‘path from the Empire,” Katjin muttered. He hated when Apa talked down to him like that. As if any of them could still be considered kids after all this. “So what’s gonna happen to us? We stay here in the Highlands?”

Apa and Mandric exchanged looks, which really made Katjin doubt Mandric’s claims to no thought-sensing.

“Something still needs to be done about you and Mikael,” Mandric said. “The bond between the two of you is too unstable.” As Katjin opened his mouth to protest, Mandric held up a hand “We’re not going to split the two of you up. You just need some better help than we can offer you here in the Highlands.”

Katjin blinked at him, wondering Mandric was hinting at what he thought Mandric was hinting at. If they weren’t staying in the Highlands, that meant the Shahi. If Mandric and Apa were sending them to the Shahi--

“No. No, no, no. Not like Ama. Not like--” He couldn’t tell if his shaking was because of him, or Mikael. “You can’t send us to the Shahi, they’ll--“ He clutched at Mikael, who clung back just as tight.

Apa’s eyes widened. “Send you to the—Kat! I taught you better than that.”

“Uncle Nolan,” Soren said suddenly. “It’s not the Shahi.”

“I’d hope not,” Mandric’s voice was quiet, almost deathly quiet with what felt like an old anger. He pushed back his hair, which Katjin noticed just covered the tips of his ears. The pointed tips of his ears. And when he stood in the sunlight, Kat could just see a sheen of red in Mandric’s dark hair.

“They aren’t mind-rapists,” Mandric continued, eyes narrowed and voice cool. “No matter what you think.”

“Even though they stole Ama’s ‘pathy?” Katjin shot back, pushing Mikael behind him. “You’re sending us there to separate us.”

“We’re sending you there because they’re the only ones who can help,” Apa said, reaching out to Katjin with one hand. Katjin danced away from it, still keeping himself between the others and Mikael.

“They’ve married into the Clans on occasion,” Mandric said in a mild voice. “They

share blood and they have knowledge of the mind gifts that we just don't have. They helped your ama."

Katjin snorted at that.

Apa actually looked embarrassed. "Kat, we have no choice about this. As Mandric said, you're too unstable. You can't stay like... like *this*. It's not healthy for you."

"Why can't we just go back to the plains?" Katjin asked, suddenly tired of it all. He just wanted to go home and rest.

Apa just shook his head. "That's not an option anymore, Kat."

Katjin looked down at his feet, reminded one more time of what he'd cost them with what he'd done. Soren could probably go back, if he wanted. The soldiers hadn't gotten close enough to really identify him. The question was, if Soren wanted to now, if he had the stomach for it. Somehow, Katjin didn't think his cousin did anymore. And Apa, if the Empire actually got wind of whose son it was that had plucked a 'path from under their noses, would find no end of difficulty with the work he was trying to do.

And they had yet to count the cost in lives when it came to their family on the plains.

"Apa," he said suddenly, "has there been word of Meke? And Febe?"

His father's eyes were downcast. Katjin didn't need Mikael's reading ability to be able to pick up those feelings. Not with them written so plainly on Apa's face.

"I'm sorry, little Kat," his father said in a gruff voice. "Word says that the camp is deserted. There were signs of struggle. The adults," Apa swallowed, "the adults were found, but the children--your cousins, all the young ones--are missing."

Katjin hissed, exhaling a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "They took them? The Empire?"

Apa nodded. "You don't hear about it, but it happens sometimes. To make an object lesson, they'll take out the threat and remove the potential."

"Kill the adults," Katjin said dully. "Kidnap the kids."

"Re-educate," Mandric corrected. "That's what they've tried to do with some of our young, especially the ones that are obviously half- or part-Shahi. Get them young enough, as they do with the 'paths, and you'll have soldiers for life."

The world blurred, and Katjin felt the weight of the world in his throat, blocking his ability to breathe. He tried to swallow, but couldn't. His eyes burned, but tears wouldn't come, and the ice was starting to lick at his feet again, freezing his body solid as it crept its way up and up.

It was them. It was their fault. No, not Soren's. Not Mikael's. Soren hadn't sung the aiding song. And Mikael hadn't asked to be a 'path. But him, Katjin, messing in things he shouldn't have; that was the deciding factor. That was his responsibility, as a man, not as a child.

The cold was at the pit of his stomach, slowly freezing his insides. It worked his way up his ribs to his heart, then started to itch up his throat. He thought he'd vomit. He thought he'd scream. All he felt was the cold.

They were dead. They were missing. They were gone. And he could've prevented it with one simple choice.

"Katjin!"

He heard shouting, moans of pain. Mikael's fingers dug into his arm so tight that it cut off circulation, but not the stinging chill that froze his body. The tears welled up, but they wouldn't fall, becoming solid ice in his veins. His fault, all his fault; could he trade Mikael for the lives of his family? Was anyone worth that price?

He tried to scream, but he couldn't, because the cold found his throat. It found his nose and his eyes, making them water and burn and freeze and burn again. The emotions were stuck, nothing could be released. The pain hurt so much that he wished he could cry it away, but somehow he knew that would never work. It was too late, for everything and everyone.

"Kat!"

A yelp, a crack; pain in his head, and sudden blackness.

Katjin stared up at the ceiling of the yer. He could smell fry bread somewhere. Maybe Meke—

The burning was back, but at least it was warm. At least it melted the ice. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he bit the inside of his mouth, trying not to cry. Except that didn't work.

Meke and Febe. The cousins. Soren's ama and apa. The list went on.

"It's my fault, too," Mikael said softly. "You sang the aiding song, but I answered. I left when they all disappeared. I could've gone to the Empire. I dragged you into this."

There were no words that Katjin could say. He grabbed Mikael, burying his face in

Mik's shoulder as he'd wanted to do for moons now, and just cried.

"I won't tell you not to cry," Mikael whispered. "Because I know there's no point. It's our fault, and we have to do something about it."

"The babies, the kids," Katjin muttered. "And Meke and Febe, who might still be somewhere."

Mikael rocked him slowly, humming under his breath. "So we find them. So we save them," he said, kissing Katjin's temple.

"How?" Katjin pushed back, tight with anger. "It's not like we can find them, and even if we did, we still can't rescue them by ourselves."

"Maybe you should get some help," Soren said from the yer opening. "All you have to do is ask."

Katjin wiped at his eyes. "What happened?" His head hurt, almost as bad as when the soldier had knocked him out. "Someone hit me?"

"Had to," Soren said, settling down beside the two of them. "You almost knocked out the whole camp with that little guilt trip of yours." His cousin's old sarcasm and bitterness was back, and it hurt just as much as it had, all those seasons ago.

More guilt weighed down on Katjin's shoulders. Mikael physically wilted into Katjin. "Ancestors," Katjin muttered. He was not going to add one more mistake to his growing list, not this time. "We have to do it, don't we?"

Soren nodded, knowing what Katjin meant. "You've got two choices. Well, one, really, if you don't want that happening again."

Katjin closed his eyes tight, not wanting to imagine that. Not wanting to think about. He couldn't lose Mikael again. Not after Meke and Febe. Not after Ama. Not after everyone, down to the newest baby in the camp.

"So we go to the Shahi." Katjin turned around to face Mikael. "We learn what they have to teach us, and we come back."

Mikael nodded. "And we take down the Empire. Because no one should have to endure this."

A little bit of the weight seemed to lift off his shoulders. Katjin knew it wasn't the grief that lessened, but his ability to deal with it seemed to increase a bit. Especially since he knew there was something he could do in memory of what had been done, in retribution.

For his ama. For Mikael's family. For everyone in camp. For all the innocents the Empire had hurt over the years.

“Tomorrow,” he said. “Tomorrow, we go to the Shahi.”

“And now?” Mikael’s hand touched his face lightly.

Katjin kissed Mikael’s hand again. “Now, we rest.

He wasn’t sure if this much sleep was good for either of them. They woke up later, in the dark. At least his bladder wasn’t protesting this time. This time, it was his stomach, rumbling with an insistent hunger.

“C’mon,” he muttered to Mikael, all but hauling Mikael out of the yer with him. It was still empty, but for the two of them. “If I’m awake, you’re awake. Or I can leave you here with the headache for company.”

“One more reason to go to the Shahi now,” was Mikael’s response. “The chance to be alone again.”

Alone again. Katjin almost couldn’t imagine it. Alone in his thoughts, by himself, not touching anyone? Then he thought of those days without Mikael, the absence of everything but his own clearly-defined emotions. The lack. The loss. And he shuddered. Maybe he wasn’t ready for that just yet. Or maybe the Shahi could at least make the break easy. Not that anyone knew how to do it, or what it would do to him and Mikael. They’d just have to wait and see.

Apa and Mandric sat around the fire. Soren was noticeably absent. But the other two men looked up in almost relief when they caught sight of him and Mikael.

“We’ll go to the Shahi,” Katjin said, before either Apa or Mandric could get a word in edgewise.

Apa nodded. “They may have a better idea of how to stabilize the two of you, especially after--.” Apa shook his head, as if he changed his mind. Then a wry half-smile touched his mouth. “You can’t go through life attached at the hip. Unless you want to. But it may cause issues later on.”

Katjin didn’t respond to that. He just didn’t have the energy to, even if Apa meant it as some attempt at a joke.

“It’s no easy road,” Apa continued. “There will be times when you’ll probably resent all this. There’s no guarantee how far or for how long you’ll be apart. The chances of either of you having another relationship, well...”

“We’ll deal with it when it comes,” Katjin broke in. “For now, we go to the Shahi because it’s what we need to do.”

Apa nodded. He gave Katjin a strange look, almost as if he was reassessing his own son and what he thought about Kat.

“Would it help if I said I was sorry?” Apa asked softly. “If I said that I didn’t know--didn’t think, really--what the consequences would be, all these years later?”

Katjin looked over his shoulder at Mikael, who nodded. “I’ll consider it,” he said slowly. “I’ll have some time now, with the Shahi.” He still winced whenever he said the word. They couldn’t all be flame-winged demons who swept down to suck the blood out of innocent Clanfolk and sheep.

Apa nodded. Then he held out his arms to Kat. “Can I at least have one hug from my son before he goes? My grown-up son?”

Katjin nodded, almost falling into Apa’s arms. He winced in pain as Mikael stubbornly hung back.

“What are you doing, idiot?” Katjin hissed through gritted teeth. “I know it’s hurting you as much as it hurts me.”

“But--“ Mikael actually looked confused, hesitant about the whole thing. “He’s your apa.”

“He’s your apa too, now,” Katjin said, yanking Mikael by the arm and into reach again.

Mikael shot back a grin, latching onto Katjin’s free hand again. “Um, sir,” he said to Apa, looking down.

Apa reached out, lifting up Mikael’s chin. For the first time, Katjin realized that Apa wore gloves on his hands, so that the touch of his bare skin wouldn’t hurt Mik. “My wife only bore me one son,” Apa said, his voice thick with emotion. “But I’m happy to finally have another.”

Mikael nodded, as if not sure what to say. Katjin could feel the confusion mixed up inside of Mikael: sorrow at the loss of his own parents, longing for some kind of family, and the sheer happiness of finding Kat.

At that, Katjin gave Mikael’s hand one more tug, drawing him into Apa’s arms as well. “See, we’re family,” Katjin said softly. “Just to drill it in your head one more time.”

And Mikael let himself relax against Apa’s chest. No one said anything about the wet spots that appeared on the shoulders of Apa’s robe.

Katjin looked over his shoulder, noticing Soren nearby, a cloud of anxiety hovering around him so strongly that it was almost visible in the air. Katjin broke away from Apa to give Soren some time alone with him.

“He’ll visit,” Mik said, as they watched Soren and Apa having some kind of animated discussion in hushed tones. “And Soren will mother-hen us to death.”

“And we’ll confuse the Shahi until they figure out what we did wrong--and right,” Katjin added. “If they don’t eat us alive first.” He shuddered as Mikael gave him a look. “I’m not a ‘path. I can’t figure out if Mandric’s telling the truth.”

Mik only grinned back.

The Shahi. Highlandfolk had proved not too bad. And Mandric wasn’t a demon. Maybe this whole Shahi business would be more of an adventure than he thought. At least he’d have Mikael with him, to protect and to protect himself. And Soren to watch over them both.

At that, Katjin started humming. And who knows? Maybe the Shahi appreciated his music a little more than Apa did.

Epilogue

If he thought the Highlands had been bad up to this point, nothing had prepared him for trekking through the real passes, the narrow valleys that cut through the high mountains. He wondered why Mandric insisted on leaving the horses behind with the Highlandfolk. But as they climbed higher and higher, and the trails got narrower and narrower, the drops even more sheer with every switchback, he finally understood. No horse, Hill or Plains, could make this journey. One of the fleet-footed mountain goats could probably just find footing here. And yet, up and up they went until Katjin thought the very breath would freeze in his chest.

They went single-file, because that was all there was room for. Mandric led, Katjin and Mikael sidling along behind hand-in-hand, backs against the cliffside, and Soren brought up the rear. None of them carried much, just a pack with some provisions, a warm cloak and a bedroll. Apa had at least found spare robes for the three of them, so Katjin didn't quite feel so naked going into this new life. As funny and strange as Mandric had found it, Katjin still couldn't quite give up that last part of him. It was the robe that separated Clan from Hill folk. That was one connection he wasn't ready to forget.

Four days they walked up. When they reached the top of the pass, there wasn't anything to see beyond the mountains but clouds. He could feel the difference in the air: the sudden weight of it, the heavy moisture, the damp taste to it all. This wasn't the dry, crisp air of the Highlands or the high plains. This was dark, deep.

They wound down until Katjin's knees hurt, straining to support him and his pack. They walked until he wanted to crawl, especially where the track was so narrow that they literally had to edge around the face of the cliff, praying to the ancestors as they went. Never mind the looming masses of mountain hanging high overhead, still shrouded with snow even in high summer. Never mind the panic that occasionally set in, to the point

where Soren and Mandric had to all but carry him and Mikael across some of the rocky slips. They descended until it was easier to breathe again, the band around Katjin's chest dissipating until he could fill his lungs completely with air and not have it burn as he did so.

And when they finally came out of the mountains, Katjin was able to look his destiny in the face; this new country, that his ama had been the last of his kin to see.

Green spread out, almost pouring out of the mountain valleys and crevasses in the craggy peaks. It grew like a carpet, clinging to the sides of the foothills and finally plunging into a forest so thick and tangled that it looked like no one had lived there for hundreds of years. As far as the eye could see, it was nothing but gnarled shades of brown and green.

Katjin's gasp seemed to echo off of each of the peaks.

"No one said anything about trees!"

They didn't just go into the forest; they went up. They actually climbed up the trunk of a tree like it was a ladder, up and up and up until Katjin thought he was going to die. Well, Soren and the others climbed. He and Mikael were hauled up in rope harnesses like children, since they couldn't exactly climb up one-handed without risk of slamming into the forest below.

And it was wet. The trees dripped with moss and lichen and green carpets. The forest floor was crowded with ferns. Even the rocks here were draped in green. With the wet came a damp heat, which made Katjin itch inside his heavy robe, not that he was about to give that up.

They arrived at some kind of walkway, a wooden slat bridge that hung between two branches. As Katjin looked into the distant treetops, he could see small, thatched cottages perched on the branches, looking as if they'd grown there. Rope and wood walkways connected them to form a small camp. It looked more permanent than any of the Clan camps, almost like a small farming village, which meant...

"They live in trees." Katjin groaned. "They live in trees all the time." He turned to Mandric. "I changed my mind, you can let the Empire have me."

"Maybe we could find a clearing and set the yer up there," Mikael added, looking

around with wide eyes.

“If you want to get eaten by a Nari cat or trampled by a moah, be my guest,” Mandric said with a grin. “Nari don’t climb and moah can’t fly.”

“Moah?” Did he even want to know?

“A ground hen the size of a horse, with a neck the length of two arms,” Mandric said. “Their feet are bigger than mine.”

Katjin close dhis eyes. Maybe the Shahi demons would protect them. He could only hope. Demons had to have their uses, after all...

“We’re here, lads,” Mandric said softly, as they moved onto a large, square platform about ten horselenghts wide and long. The platform was fenced off at about waist height with a rope net, which made Katjin feel a little better. At least they wouldn’t fall off, since it was a long, long way down.

“Mandric!” A short, skinny redheaded man ran up, grabbing Mandric by the arm and tugging him into a hard embrace. “You made it.” The red-haired man looked toward Katjin and Mikael. “These are the boys?”

Katjin eyed the man, studying him for any sign of horns or wings. He wore his hair pulled tightly back in a tail, and wore a close-cut leather vest over light breeks. His eyes were a yellow-gold color, like hawk eyes, but that didn’t necessarily mean ‘demon’. Everything was almost skin-tight, probably pulled back so it wouldn’t catch on any trees. Katjin couldn’t help looking down at his own robe, wondering how long it would last.

“Aye, these are the boys,” Mandric said, shoving Katjin lightly forward. “Katjin, Mikael, this is Tai, your Shahi demon.”

Tai at least had the decency to grin at that, even if his grin did look a little feral.

There were no words to describe Katjin’s misgivings about all this. No amount of singing in the world was going to get him out of this one.

It had been forced on him young, if forced was the right word. There had been choices that had been taken from both of them--from all of them, since Soren was just as cut off from everyone as they were now. But did he regret it, really, when he thought about it? Not now, even if he was being exiled to the far side of the Highlands. Because it had brought him Mikael. It’d even brought him Soren, which was an odd comfort in itself.

And it proved that he really wouldn't be alone. Not after this. And for that itself, Katjin knew it was worth it.

The End