

*Dreamspinner Press*  
Fairy Tales



# THE SERVANT

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# SIEGE

They had been riding for days when they were finally rewarded with a view of Castle Iju. It was far worse than either of them could have ever imagined, both riders pulling their horses up hard, stopping on the crest of the first hill, awestruck and horrified at the same time.

“Guardians of Yuan defend us,” Ostyn Tan gasped as he stared out across the valley and took in the crimson-washed sky. He turned and looked at his friend and servant; wincing as he saw the visible pain and dread etched on the face of the only man he would willingly give his life for, Valian. Returning his gaze to the sight before him, he took a deep breath to steady himself. They had seen the smoke every day as they closed in on the site and had lied to themselves and prayed for a blessing, but now, seeing it, there was no question of enduring hope. All was lost.

From where they were, it looked as though the entire hill that the castle sat upon was burning. Every segment of the tower that they could see was engulfed in flames. Smoke rose in billowing clouds of debris and dust, and ash fell like black rain on the clashing armies. There would be no escape for the inhabitants of the besieged stronghold, and Valian shivered with fear even as he urged his mount forward, descending into the valley. They rode hard toward the inferno without hesitation, each knowing that they alone were the only hope for the child and his mother, for they were the only ones that had heard the order of execution given.

Valian chose a route that took him around the left side of what remained of the thick outer stone wall and into the first of many courtyards. Skillfully, he guided his horse through the maze

of carnage and gore only to be faced with a barricade of slaughtered oxen. He felt his mount tense for the leap and felt himself rise up out of the saddle and then separate from it entirely. Instinctively, he curled himself into a ball as he was thrown into the press of bodies. Several men broke his fall when he hit the ground, and he heard them curse him as they got to their feet, pushing and shoving to get free. Winded, he rolled to his side and was stumbled over and stepped on several times before he could move. Struggling to his feet, he turned to his left and saw the flash of metal out of the corner of his eye a moment before he recognized it as a sword. It stopped inches from his face, met there by another sword, the scrape of steel on steel sending up sparks in front of his eyes. Bumped roughly backward, he steadied himself fast, finding his balance. Drawing his sword quickly, he saw Ostyn Tan slice first through the middle of the man that had just tried to attack him and then up in a blur of speed. Blood came from the warrior in a streaming geyser as Ostyn stood still as a statue over him, tense and ready.

“Come!” Valian screamed at him over the din, grabbing his friend’s shoulder, pulling at him to follow.

He pointed to the wall separating the inner bailey from the outer, and he and Ostyn shared a look of understanding. Side by side, they hacked their way through faceless men to reach first the courtyard and then the tower itself. When they arrived at the ground floor they ducked inside a hole made by a battering ram in the stone slab. There were fewer men there, as no one would willingly run into an inferno of falling plaster and collapsing wood. The framework was buckling in sections, and he and Ostyn ran around crushed and still-burning bodies as they made their ascent through the castle.

Up and up they climbed, hoping the stairs they ran over would still support their combined weight. Leaping over rubble, maneuvering through tight passageways created by falling debris,

and climbing over dead and dying men, they moved as quickly as possible, needing to reach the top floor. They sailed across gaps in the wooden floors without thought to falling hundreds of feet to their death.

On the third level of the tower, they raced up the stairs only to find themselves looking down at where they had just been. Forward momentum nearly pushed them both over, but they recovered in time, regaining their balance with much effort, finding it hard to simply come to a dead stop after rushing up so fast and so far. They were faced with nothing, no beams to run across and no way of moving over the yawning expanse of air. Rooms that had been there were no more. Valian looked around fast, hoping for something, anything to aid them.

“Tan!” he yelled suddenly, grabbing Ostyn hard, pointing him to what he saw.

They crashed through a narrow window opening leading out onto one of the many wood-shingled roofs of the castle that extended out from each layered floor. Ostyn followed blindly, joining Valian for the run across that which collapsed under their feet. There was only one place to reach for safety, for a handhold, and they both saw it at the same time. It was a hurling leap, and a scream tore from both their throats as they launched themselves toward the broad overhang of the upper story, sailing through the smoky night sky.

The roof fell away beneath them as they hung there, suspended in mid-air, dangling from the edge, both panting. When Valian turned and looked at his friend, a bittersweet smile filled his eyes.

“Only you would follow me into such as this.”

Ice-blue eyes sparkled with pleasure. “I would follow you ever.”

And Valian knew that, even as he let out a deep breath and nodded. “Come, we must hurry.”

Ever dutiful, Ostyn began pulling himself up just as Valian was, moving up onto the overhang. They whispered prayers together, hoping that they would not plunge to their deaths. Hoping the shingles on the upper roof were still solid and holding together. Ostyn followed Valian as he had always done; there was not a time he could remember being without him. The man was the constant in his life. Only him.

They slipped back inside the tower through another window opening and stepped lightly onto the small beam that touched the stairs leading to the upper story. Arms outstretched for balance, they sprinted over the scaffolding brace, arriving at the foot of the last set of stairs. The quarters of the lord of the castle were reached in a heartbeat, as they took those last steps in a blur of movement. Once there, Valian looked around a moment to get his bearings and saw the door at the far end of a hallway surrounded by twelve heavily armed men. When they were halfway there, a woman in black armor emerged from the darkness of the room to the left, and they came to a dead stop.

“Ravel!” he roared at her. “Step aside!”

“You forget your place, Valian,” the woman yelled back. “Leave me to my duty!”

“I cannot.” Valian exhaled, almost sadly, his breath shaky, advancing slowly toward her, Ostyn walking warily at his side.

The men came from the shadows, swarming around them, crowding him and his servant together, pushing them back-to-back to face them. They attacked fast and furiously, but Valian and Ostyn were of one mind, one body, fluid, effortless grace of movement and precision. They mirrored one another in perfect symmetry, and seeing them, Ravel knew she had only moments to carry out her task.

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Kicking in the door, Ravel, the champion of the Ko-Tai, the Emperor of Narsyk, looked across the room at the woman cowering in the far corner holding a sleeping infant in her arms.

“No,” Tonteen Siu whispered at the approaching woman, the unharc. “You cannot mean to take him.”

“I was not told to take him, lady,” Ravel said solemnly, continuing forward, drawing her blade from the scabbard at her side. “I was told to kill him, as well you know. I am the unharc, the sword of the Ko-Tai, I am only sent to bring an end to life.”

“Wh- why...? What have we done to the Ko-Tai?” she asked, her voice cracking as she trembled, tears streaming down her cheeks as she clutched her son tightly to her chest.

“You know well what your mate has done. He leads the rebels, he challenges his brother for the throne, and now your blood will answer for those crimes.”

Tonteen Siu hugged her four-month-old son against her hard, and as she did, her breasts began to leak with milk. Ravel rushed toward her, sword raised. Tonteen looked as though she were accepting her death, her fate, and so when she lifted her head at the last moment and ran, Ravel was taken off guard. The death stroke caught her across the abdomen instead of severing her head from her body. Tonteen staggered forward and fell to her knees. The movement let her see out into the hall where Valian stood.

“Save my son!” she screamed, rolling onto her side, trying in vain to crawl away from the woman ordered to murder both her and her child.

Valian turned sharply at the sound and, ducking beneath a slicing arc of steel, charged into the room. There was no thought to leaving his servant behind to do battle with five men. He could not think of him, and in fact his mind went blank but for a single thought—that he must save Tonteen and her son.

Ravel was faster and closer. She drove the steel point of her sword down into the woman bleeding to death on the floor, through her back, through her right breast, down until it hit the wooden floor beneath her. Still Tonteen stretched out her hands to Valian, cradling her crying son, her milk and blood pumping from her body in a spreading pool. Valian saw the pleading eyes and leaped, diving toward his nephew held in the hands of his dying mother. Ravel pulled out the sword and blood came with it, covering Tonteen's back and hair, coursing down her sides. Still she held up her son. Ravel walked in front of her and reached down for the child as Tonteen heaved an anguished cry.

The hand never reached the baby. Valian plowed into the middle of Ravel's back with his shoulder, slamming her hard to the side, driving her down head first into the floor, knocking her unconscious. Valian was thrown halfway across the room but came scurrying back fast on all fours to Tonteen. He took the baby and cradled him against his chest as he looked down at the infant's mother.

Eyes met eyes for what seemed a lifetime but lasted no more than a moment.

"Jaron," Tonteen breathed.

"Jaron," Valian nodded, assuring her. "Aye."

Tonteen Siu had enough strength left to lower her head and tell Valian she loved him before she died. Valian heard a scream from the hall and scrambled to his feet as Ostyn flew into the room. His eyes flicked from Tonteen to Ravel and then came to rest on his beloved lord.

Moments passed.

"How shall we flee?" Valian asked Ostyn, taking a deep, quivering breath as he put Ioan's head upon his shoulder, the infant pressed against the side of his neck as he patted his back gently.

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He knew Valian was in shock, saw his slight tremble, and knew too if he comforted him now Valian would cease being able to breathe. He needed the man like this, clear-headed and ready to move.

“The way we came,” Ostyn answered matter-of-factly, leaning down and pulling free the silver talisman that Tonteen wore around her neck. It glittered in his hand, and he stuffed it into the top of the shirt he wore under his iron-plate armor. He stalked across the room and picked up Ravel’s sword from the floor beside her. He placed it in his scabbard but kept his sword drawn.

“Come,” he said gruffly to Valian, motioning him to follow. “We have to run before she wakes.”

“I’m already awake, you fools!”

They both turned to the woman who floated up from the floor, horrified at her display of power, watching, spellbound, as she lifted her hand toward Valian.

“So we finally see your true nature revealed, witch.” Valian spat at her. “I always suspected this truth.”

“You think you’ve won? You think saving this one child changes anything?”

“To his father it will,” Valian informed her, backing away slowly.

The growl that came out of her throat was full of anger and frustration. “Always you thwart my plans, Valian; always you come between me and my just reward.”

“There is reward in killing?” He asked, trying to distract her with his words, continuing to move back, fluidly, gracefully, making no noise to startle the child in his arms and make him cry out.

“There is reward from the Ko-Tai for carrying out his orders!”



Valian knew what the woman really craved, the love she hoped to receive if she was his brother's perfect weapon. He knew too that she vented her frustration at being denied the heart of the emperor on her victims.

"You have followed me to places no other man could." She glanced at Ostyn. "You and your wretched servant."

He was almost to the door.

"You are more cat than man, Valian. Perhaps your true nature should be revealed as well."

His dark amber eyes glinted gold in the fading light.

"What say you?"

He was silent and still even as it felt as though a hot wind blew over him, the hair on the back of his neck standing up.

"What have you done?"

Her sinister smile flashed only for a moment. "And to add to your pain, I will take your man from you forever."

She flew forward in a blur of speed, but even as fast as she was moving, she was no match for Ostyn Tan. She thought, as did everyone at court, that Valian was the swordsman and Ostyn simply his servant, a man without training. The truth was that Ostyn Tan was much more proficient with a weapon than Valian would ever be.

Ostyn shifted his stance as Ravel came at him and as steel rang against steel, he drove her back deep into the cavernous room. A wall of fire exploded between them, and the floor fell away. Neither man checked to see if she had fallen to her death; they didn't stop running to look. And there was always the hope that she had been consumed in the fire, her ashes mixing with those of the countless, faceless multitudes.

A rias Siu walked slowly through the tall grass toward the shrine. He had come, as instructed, alone but for his closest advisor, Trajan Naru. Both men were wary even as the gentle breeze caressed their skin and hair as they moved, feather-light and warm. It was a peaceful spot, with tall leafy trees and, beyond those, a verdant meadow awash in colorful wildflowers that filled the air with traces of exotic perfume. It was so quiet, so undisturbed. No one would ever find it unless directed to the place as he had been. Without warning, a form stepped out from the tree line.

Jaron felt the strong callused hand of his friend grab his shoulder to stop him. “Look well, Traj,” he snapped at him, shrugging the hand off roughly. “Mark the cloak, see the crest... ’tis Val you seek to shield me from.”

Trajan let out a deep breath behind him and raised his hand in greeting. He had always liked Valian, the brother of the man he served, for he truly loved Jaron even when it was hard.

Jaron moved faster, trampling the long grass under his feet. When Ostyn suddenly appeared behind Valian, he stopped, seeing the bundle in the man’s arms. He had not known until that moment why he had been called to the secluded spot in the woods outside of Ebi. He and the rebel leaders had been camped there when the news had come to him that the troops of the Ko-Tai had taken that which he had been assured could not be taken: Castle Iju.

Jaron had left his wife and infant son in the safety of the castle when he had ridden to the front line of the battle of Vohke because he had been assured that the castle was impenetrable. The truth was that against a physical siege, the fortifications would hold. Against betrayal, the castle was vulnerable. Jaron had found his army riddled with traitors to the emperor’s cause, and

Iju had been overrun. It was an ancient story repeated time and time again in Narsyk. Your friend could turn out to be your enemy. Alliances changed with the wind. In a bloody civil war fought for political control, no one could be trusted. The reports had come that no one had emerged alive from the castle. Fires still burned, and those of his followers that had not lost their lives to the flames or the smoke had been executed in the hundreds. Jaron had been naive and shortsighted, and he had paid with the lives of his wife and son. Or so he had thought.

He ran to them, and Valian stepped aside as Ostyn held Ioan out to his father. Jaron snatched his son from his brother's servant and hugged him tight against his chest. Hot tears filled his eyes, and as he raised his eyes to Valian, they slipped down his cheeks.

"Tonteen?"

In answer, Ostyn drew the talisman that Jaron had given his wife from his robe and held it out to him. Jaron turned to Valian without taking it.

"But for her strength and bravery," Valian began gently, his voice soft, "there would be no son for you to hold here in your arms."

Jaron nodded quickly. Valian had answered his question as he had meant it. Not was Tonteen alive—he wanted to know how she had died. The Ko-Tai had sent the unharc to assassinate his family; it was a miracle that his son had survived. There had been no hope held in his heart that his wife was still among the living. Ravel was a legend in Narsyk even though she was so very young. She was the bringer of death, the embodiment of the wrath of the Ko-Tai.

Valian lifted his head and took a deep breath of the sweet summer air, and as he did, Ostyn put a light hand on his shoulder and squeezed it. He sighed before turning to look at his servant.

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The ice-blue eyes held all the warning that was needed. They had to return to court before they were missed. Little did the servant know that the master was not going back.

“You should away,” Jaron spoke the words he was thinking.

Valian looked at his brother, knowing that emotions raged inside the man, the pain of losing the only woman he had ever loved and the joy at having his son restored to him. Valian could not imagine such emptiness and such fullness both at the same time. “We gave him goat milk for the short time he was ours. He seemed to like it.”

Jaron nodded. “I need to find him a nurse, but I’m sure I will have my pick. There are many left wailing in the night from the deaths of their sons and daughters. The emperor’s army takes both old and young.”

“As does yours,” he reminded him.

“He killed my wife!” Jaron railed at his brother, raw emotion surging through him.

“And you killed his,” Valian reminded him, his breath shaky. “When your men attacked the temple in Rais... Drea was there alone but for her son Noor.”

Jaron’s eyes clouded, and for a flickering moment there was sympathy there. “I sent my men to kill him, not his family.”

“And instead they found your brother’s wife and son alone and unprotected.” Valian’s voice, the way it dropped off, quavered slightly, made the younger man shiver. “She was young and beautiful....There was nothing left for Arterus to place in the crypt.”

“Is that why you saved my son?” Jaron snarled at him. “Because you saved his? I heard how you slaughtered my men, how they were all found without their heads!”

“I saved your son because I could.” Valian took a settling breath. “If I could have saved Tonteen, I would have. If I could have saved Drea, I would have.... As it was, she hid her son and led the men away. I arrived when they found him and so interrupted his flight to the grave. It seems I am the guardian of sons but not their mothers. I had wished to be both.”

Jaron’s breath hitched painfully. “I never meant for that atrocity to occur. Drea was—I knew her. I would have killed those men myself if you had not.”

“No one ever intends the casualties of war,” Valian said as he bowed low.

Jaron mirrored the bow, lingering in the respectful position longer than he. As he straightened, looking for his brother’s eyes, the warmth he knew he would find, counted on, craved, it was then that he noticed that Valian had not pushed back the cowl to reveal his face. It was odd that he had not, strange that his sibling allowed his face to remain obscured.

“Why do you hide yourself from me? Were you burned in the fire?”

He shook his head. “Not burned.”

“Then?”

“Changed.”

“How changed?”

Valian shook his head. “Ravel was—is—as we always suspected.”

Jaron frowned, taking a step forward, reaching for the cowl, wanting to whip it back and look on the golden eyes and dark curly brown hair he had known since they were both children.

Even though he was the son of a concubine and Arterus and Valian were the sons of the empress, the Ko-Tan, they had all

grown up together in the palace. The fact that Valian had always treated him as an equal, had loved him and hated him in equal measure as only a sibling could, was how Jaron knew he could trust him with his life. Conversely, his relationship with Arterus, the firstborn, had always been that of master and servant. Arterus had been molded to be emperor, to take their father Novo's place when he died, and he never let Jaron forget it.

"Let me see your face," Jaron demanded, moving forward.

Valian evaded the grasp easily, twisting fast, contorting beyond his brother's reach as though he were boneless.

"Valian!"

"Stop," he ordered, but it came out as more of a plea. "Just listen, I need something of you."

Jaron froze, the truth hitting him. "We always said she was a witch. Ravel, the unharc, you're telling me we were right?"

"Aye, we were."

His eyes got huge. "So you're saying that she what—has cast some sort spell over you."

"Aye, a spell, of a kind."

"Let me see!"

"You need not see, but you would do well to grant me the favor I ask."

"Anything. Well you know this. Only name your desire."

He cleared his throat. "You leave for Caruvia on the tide, do you not?"

"I do, there to regroup, hire men. I will avenge my wife and kinsmen, Valian. Do not think to sway me from my present cour—"

“Your fight, yours with Arterus for the throne, is no longer my concern,” he told him. “I tried to bridge your strife but now I am done. I cannot remain here in Narsyk.”

“Why not? If you say you will not return to court, then say you will with me to Caruvia.”

He shook his head. “I cannot. I cannot betray Arterus anymore than I could you. I love you and he in equal measure, and so wished for my family to be one but now,” he sighed, “now my influence is taken from me and so I must flee.”

“To where?”

He shrugged. “Across the channel, east to Crosas or south to Rieyn, but please, brother, I would you take Ostyn to Holt Skaarn, as he is—”

“Are you mad?” Ostyn whispered harshly under his breath, still, even in his fury, concerned for the infant, of waking him. “I would not leave your side for—”

“I forbid it,” Valian said firmly, turning to glance at his servant. “I will not have you squander your life or the mind the gods gave you to simply walk at my side and be a man of no consequence. Your course was set for the academy this winter, and it is there that you will go. That is my command to you.”

“I will not leave you. You cannot force my hand.”

“We shall see,” Valian said, and with that Ostyn felt a tiny pinprick on the back of his hand.

He had enough time to turn to Valian, call him a son of a whore, before he collapsed at his feet in the lush grass.

“You will take him to Holt Skaarn,” Valian told his brother, tossing the quill of the hurong bird away, “to the academy there.”

Jaron grunted. “Your mother... she taught you well her art of healing and poison.”

“Aye, she did,” Valian agreed, bending down to one knee, his hand on the pulse beating at the base of his friend’s neck.

“She was so different, so frightening compared to mine.”

“Your mother lived in light, mine is darkness, and our father enjoyed having yours on his arm and mine plotting the ruin of rivals. He loved and adored them both.”

“Indeed,” Jaron agreed.

Valian’s grunted softly. “I loved your mother as well; she was a jewel, full of warmth and kindness and was gone, as was mine, far too soon.”

“Aye,” he agreed, sucking in a breath. “You linger there on your knees, are you concerned for your servant? Were you afraid you killed him?”

“No,” Valian snapped at his brother. “I am well versed in the poisoning arts, as you know. I simply wanted to know how long I could stay and speak to you before he woke.” His head tipped up to his brother. “And well you know this man is my friend, so much more than servant.”

“You need not rail at me, simply instruct me as to your desire.”

“I would have you keep him under lock and key to give me the time I need for my scent to grow cold.”

“He’ll come looking for you the moment I release him.”

Valian shook his head. “He won’t. He’s not daft, and his logic will prevail once the time for tracking is gone. When you reach the academy, he will be resigned to his fate.”

Jaron was not as certain as his brother.

“I leave him in your care. If you rise in power, I would the same for him. If I were to remain, fortune would shine on him. I would that not change.”



“Agreed.”

“He has been loyal to me. He will be the same to you now that I have chosen his path for him. Keep him close.”

“I swear it will be done.”

Valian rose in front of his brother. “Even though he will bear me only hatred from this day forward, I will know I have done what was best for him.”

“Is it best for you, Val, to be without your servant?”

“His destiny and mine are no longer tangled.” He sighed deeply, flexing his fingers in the long, black leather gloves. “He is free; make it known at the academy.”

Jaron nodded. “I have coin for him, fear not.”

“That is a blessing, and I thank you.”

He looked down at his child. “It is you who are the blessing, brother, not I.”

Valian took a step back.

“Truly,” Jaron stopped him with his words alone. “I would you come with me,” his tone, his eyes, were supplicating, hopeful.

Valian shook his head. “I cannot, for the reasons already stated, as well as for more that I would not have you know.”

“Ravel will kill you for this,” he said sadly, clutching his son tighter against his chest.

“She has failed the Ko-Tai,” Valian said, his voice somber and low. “Ravel has her own life to care for.”

“Yes.” He nodded, hoping that vengeance would be his and not simply the disappointment of his brother, the emperor, the Ko-Tai.

Jaron took a step back from Valian, and with his advisor, Trajan Naru, bowed low, showing his brother all the respect and

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honor and love he felt. When he straightened up, Valian was gone. Only Tonteen's silver talisman was left hanging on the small stone shrine to Hatsu, the goddess of peace. Jaron bid Trajan pick Ostyn up as he himself went down on one knee and began to pray as his son slept quietly in his arms.

## ONE

Making his way to the stables, Gareth Terhazien heard his mother calling and came to a stop in the middle of the courtyard. His father, who had been walking to intercept him, looked up toward the keep.

“Who calls?” Torbald asked, unsure as to where the sound had come from.

“It is the Baroness, Lord,” Gareth’s friend Penn H’rah answered for him. He stopped next to Torbald, then turned to look up toward the massive stone keep that was the center of life in the holding of Deshal Mar in the barony of Kasan.

Torbald Terhazien shielded his eyes from the setting sun and saw his wife clearly. She was standing atop the age-worn stone steps that led to the enormous iron-belted doors that were the main entrance of the keep. Her left hand covered her heart as she pointed with her right up at the ridge. A shock went through Torbald’s body as he looked at her. The absolute joy showed so clearly in her face, her smile easing features so long worn by sadness and fear. He saw how very beautiful and elegant his wife was.

Long, golden hair only recently dusted with silver fell in a plait down her back. Usually a veil would cover her hair, but as she was home, she had gone without it. It had taken many years for her to forego her courtly upbringing and adopt the ease of country living. It suited her; he found her breathtaking.

Penn interrupted his thoughts abruptly. “Who comes?” he asked slowly, squinting into the sun, trying to see more clearly what the baroness already had.

“By the gods,” Torbald breathed, seeing clearly as the sun set behind the small hill overlooking the courtyard. A smile spread widely across his face. “By the gods!”

“Who comes?” Penn asked again, growing irritable, as was always his first reaction. He looked past the baron to his son. “Gareth? Who comes?”

“Ehron,” he answered flatly. “He has come.”

“He is a scrap early,” Penn complained tightly, trying not to sound quite as disappointed as he felt. He watched two men on horseback descend into the wide courtyard and wondered briefly why they had no escort.

Torbald slapped his son and his son’s closest friend hard on the back and then started walking up to the keep to join his wife. He felt as though his chest would tear apart and his heart would burst. He had all his children with him after so very long. The war had lasted so much longer than anyone could have ever imagined, and Ehron had been away for the entire duration.

“Whore’s blood,” Penn sighed, stepping in close beside Gareth. “Your brother has arrived.”

“I knew he would.” Gareth shrugged and then turned to follow after his father. “And I am pleased for his return. It is only that I will miss being caretaker of the land.”

“Bear a sweet thought,” Penn offered, following close beside Gareth up to the keep. “Perhaps Ehron has no interest in the barony and will travel to Tristan and reside at court after he has paid his respects to your father. Not all men have your desire to care for the land and those who dwell there.”

“Perhaps,” Gareth said softly, thoughtful suddenly. It had been ten years since he had seen his older brother, and Gareth really had no idea what to expect.

Ehron had gone, as had all the other first-born sons of the

noble houses, with Nictorus, the Warlord of Rieyn, to fight against Strad Olerius in the icy north. The campaign against the kingdom of Crosas had lasted ten years, with victory finally coming only after the sack of Castle Wharton in the capital city of Theane. The Crosan king had thought to expand his kingdom by conquering his neighbor to the south. He had paid for his avarice with his life.

“Your father sees that you are the one who has been here with him, Gareth,” Penn reminded him. “He will not forget that you have been his second here.”

“I should have gone to war. That is what my father prizes.”

“The law does not allow for two sons of the same family to go to war,” Penn responded. “Well you know this.”

“I could have gone.”

“More to the truth,” Penn smiled, throwing an arm across his friend’s shoulders, “your father would have never allowed you lost to the war as well.”

“Aye,” he sighed, pushing his friend away from him as they neared the keep. Gareth walked up the age-smoothed steps ahead of Penn and stood beside his father in a show of solidarity. There, he and the others waited for his brother.

Gareth had expected Ehron to arrive home, as others had done, in his dress uniform. He had seen them, as had the rest of his family, in the marketplace at Tanon, and the red and gold garments were beyond compare. It surprised him to see his brother approach in a simple linen tunic, leather jerkin and breeches. The only indication of wealth or rank came from the legionnaire’s saddle with the added crest of his house just under the pommel. Despite them, he did not look like the son of a nobleman.

“He looks so thin,” Odessa Terhazien said worriedly. She clasped her husband’s hand and held it tight.

“He looks old,” Amelina said from beside her mother. “I never imagined him old.”

“You were only nine seasons when he left,” Odessa sighed, stroking her daughter’s long, sun-kissed hair. “Of course he would look aged to your young eyes.”

The two men came to a stop before the keep and quickly dismounted. Torbald could wait no longer and descended the ancient steps in two great leaps to reach his son. He flung himself into Ehron’s waiting arms, grabbing him into a bone-crushing embrace.

“My son, my son,” he chanted, holding Ehron tight, crying into his hair. “My son has returned to his home.”

Ehron buried his face in his father’s shoulder and hugged him back hard. Odessa couldn’t bear seeing her son and not touching him a moment more and so urged all the others down to them so she could once more touch her firstborn pride, for so long a memory to her, now restored. She drew close and put her hand on her son’s arm to draw his attention.

Ehron looked to her and found himself staring into his mother’s sweet eyes. He kissed his father’s cheek hard then released him and went into his mother’s open arms.

“Blessed be the gods, for my son is home,” Odessa cried, the tears coming as she knew they would. “I must make my offerings before I find my bed this night so they will know I am so thankful for their love.”

He held her close, rubbing circles on her back. “You look as you did when I last left you,” he breathed into her hair. “You cannot imagine my happiness seeing your sweet face.”

Torbald put his hand on his son’s shoulder. “You find your sister and your brother about you, do you not?”

Ehron released his mother and straightened. The man

standing before him was a few inches taller than even his towering height. He drew back, clearly in disbelief. "This cannot be Gareth."

"Aye," Gareth said stiffly.

"You rise like Granoc!" Ehron laughed, referring to the mountain that towered above the capital city of Tristan. Laughter erupted from the family as Gareth's face remained unchanged.

He was stunned when his brother stepped forward and pulled him into a fierce embrace. After the initial shock, Gareth hugged him back, some of the tension that had been building up for the past month, as the time of Ehron's inevitable return drew closer easing out of him. He didn't want to feel resentful toward his brother. He hoped desperately that he and Ehron's plans would not conflict. He wanted only to take his father's place as baron, as caretaker of the land, when it was time. He so hoped that Ehron would make a life for himself at court and leave the barony in his capable hands.

"Is this grace Amelina?"

His thoughts were interrupted by Ehron's discovery of the sister he had last seen as she ran after him the day he left for war. She had followed as far down the rutted road as she could before her brother was lost to her sight. Ehron himself had not dared to once look back at her, knowing that he could never have left had he seen her racking sobs. She was only a child, too young to understand duty, wanting only her favorite playmate to stay and never leave her.

Amelina nodded eagerly to Ehron's question. Yes, it was she! Yes, she was grown, but still she loved and adored him.

"Why, you have grown into a goddess!" he said, his voice full of wonder. Amelina caught his tone and heard his words and melted. She threw herself at her brother and wrapped her arms tightly around his neck.

“And fear was with you,” the man beside Ehron scoffed under his breath, crossing his arms across his chest, his voice warm, caressing.

“Not a sound,” Ehron warned him, releasing his sister and turning to Penn. “And how goes the world by you, shadow?”

A slow smile spread across Penn’s face until he was absolutely beaming at Gareth’s older brother. “I had forgotten that.”

Ehron hugged Penn tightly, then pushed him away playfully and turned to the man standing beside him. “Gareth and Penn have been inseparable since they were pups. Penn was left in our stables when he was merely three seasons—”

“Two seasons,” Gareth smiled, interrupting gently for the sake of clarity. He cuffed his friend lightly on the arm. “He has been my shadow for a lifetime.”

“It is good to have a shadow,” the man agreed. “Ehron knows of what you speak.”

Ehron released a snort of laughter. “He speaks loud, as he has saved my life so often that he can no longer recall the count.”

All eyes turned to the young man standing beside Ehron. No one had noticed the companion at first, too overwhelmed with the return of a firstborn son. But now they saw him, and only then, surprisingly, did they notice the cowl.

His entire face was lost in voluminous material that tumbled forward but also in front of his face, so that there were two pieces, one a normal cowl on a robe that fell from the top of his head to his feet, and a second sewn into the lining to drape over the man’s face. He could see out, but no one could see in, his features completely obscured.

“Father,” Ehron said, clamping a heavy hand down on his friend’s shoulder, “this is my consul, Daemon Shar, that I wrote



of.”

Torbald squinted at the man who was now pressing his hand to his heart and bowing low. He had been startled to see an apparition and not a man, Ehron never once explaining in any letter that his consul, his servant, the man who commanded his private guard, was not a citizen of Rieyn. And he couldn't be one of them, as his remarkable clothing suggested some sort of grave difference. “Look to me.”

Daemon lifted his head, but there was only black. “My lord.”

Torbald grew even more apprehensive. It was difficult to look at nothing but darkness. He wanted to see eyes, a face, take in the features of the man beneath the cowl, but as Ehron did not demand the unveiling, neither could he. But to look and see no more than if you were standing in the dark... it was disconcerting. To give voice to his apprehension, though, would be unheard of.

Daemon Shar was his son's consul, the man he trusted more than any other in the world, as was evidenced by his place in Ehron's rank of men. On the battlefield, Ehron had a triari, his second-in-command, and below him his many legates, and reporting to them were his men, the legionnaires. Away from the front, the personal guard that protected each prefect was headed by a consul. Every aspect of the prefect's life, from food and shelter to security and funds were overseen by one man, and in Ehron's case, the man he had chosen was now standing in front of Torbald, cloaked in black.

“Father?” Ehron asked after a moment, unsure of what was transpiring.

“Where is your homeland, Consul?”

“Narsyk.”

Torbald nodded. “You are far from the plains you call home.”

Daemon drew in breath. “You know Narsyk.”

"I traveled there during the Unification Wars long seasons ago." The older man smiled, hearing the wistful sound of the Consul's murmur. "But it was beautiful. The sea of grassland, the mountains, and I have never ridden such horses as I did there."

Daemon nodded, smiling wide beneath the cowl. "You make me yearn for it."

"As well as myself." Torbald cleared his throat. "You served Ehron during the war?"

"Aye, my lord," came the husky reply as Daemon bowed deeply again.

"I thank you for your kinship."

"It was my good fortune," Daemon replied, straightening up.

"Nay," Ehron said seriously, staring down at Daemon with soft eyes. "It was mine."

"Come," Odessa cooed, stepping between the two, taking an arm of each man to lead him back up the stairs. "Come, my son, come, Daemon Shar, break bread with us, and speak tales."

Inside the enormous stone keep, the warmth of the home became instantly apparent.

"Is it not all that I told you?" Ehron prodded his friend as he breathed in the smells of home, stared at walls covered in tapestries and armor, and smiled at the fire roaring in the hearth.

"What a grand home you have," Daemon breathed, patting Odessa's arm as he untangled himself from her clutching hand to stroll about the cavernous room. He looked down at the stone floor and knelt to inspect it. The masonry seemed to fascinate him, and Odessa soon lost interest in the curious man, consumed instead with her newly returned son. Not all eyes left Daemon. Amelina's interest did not waver, struck as she was with him.

Unlike the opulent garments that Amelina had seen in the

marketplace being worn home by both nobility and soldier alike, Daemon wore only breeches tucked into knee-high boots, long black gloves, and the rest... the rest was obscured by the full-length, form-fitting robe. It reminded her of a priest's soutane, especially since it buttoned down the front to the waist, where it fell open to reveal his waist and legs that she had seen at first glance. She wondered why such a garment was necessary. What was he hiding beneath the black cassock?

She watched Daemon for a few more moments before her mother asked her to take a seat beside her brother.

Once Odessa had everyone sitting down around the long family dining table, she summoned the kitchen staff and ordered the hasty preparation of the evening meal. They had not expected him, reports having come that he was still several days away, but Odessa had stocked all her son's favorites, sweet meats, fhana eggs, ripe yoke melons, rhodonberries with thick cream, spiced rice, figs, grapes, venison, and Cretah wine that Torbald had traveled to Tamburin for over a month ago. Liena, their cook, had baked fresh brown bread, and there was elice oil in which to dip it. All this Odessa had remembered for her son, hoping that his tastes had not changed in ten years.

While they all waited for the food to be served, Daemon was able to drift away silently in the absence of any attention centered on him. Ehron was begged to speak of his adventures and so began to flesh out the war first-hand for his attentive family. Daemon strolled the great hall before mounting the massive central stairs leading to the second floor. He admired the wall hangings, painted portraits, armor, and antique weapons. The tapestries he examined carefully, amazed at the intricacy and the swirls of rich color running together. He peeked into private rooms, admiring the wide-vaulted chambers with high featherbeds covered in linen and woven wool blankets. The hallways were long, lined with small lanterns that hung from the ceiling, bringing light

even into the smallest crack and corner. Through all the rooms he wandered, while Ehron sat with his family and ate and drank.

“Where is Daemon?” Ehron growled suddenly, stopping in mid-sentence when he discovered his friend missing. He looked around the hall in fear, eyes scanning but finding nothing but gaping space. How long had he been talking? How long had Daemon been gone? He realized suddenly that it might have been hours.

“I did not mark his leaving,” Torbald grunted, filling his son’s goblet again with thick red wine, oblivious to Ehron’s mounting anxiety.

“I marked him,” Amelina said softly, turning bright pink when both her brothers looked at her curiously. “He went to the sleeping chambers. I spied him briefly on the balcony.”

“Will a soul go fetch the blessed before he starves,” Torbald said, speaking fondly now of Daemon, his earlier uncertainty giving way to affection as he had listened to story after story of how well the servant had cared for his son. Ehron spoke almost no words that did not contain his consul’s name.

Penn, Amelina, and Gareth all rose at the same time in answer to Torbald’s request, each ready to go forth and seek the servant. Odessa laughed gently at the show of interest.

Gareth and Penn immediately sat back down, which sent Odessa into peals of throaty laughter. Amelina bowed her head coyly, then excused herself from her family. As she was crossing the floor, the main door opened and one of the Terhazien servants entered with a messenger.

“My lord,” he addressed Torbald, bowing deeply. “There is an urgent missive from Baron Ander.”

Gareth and Penn both watched intently as Torbald motioned for the man to approach. “Have him fed and quartered in the

barracks for the night.”

“Aye, my lord,” the servant replied, motioning for the messenger to follow him back out of the hall.

“A letter from Kohl,” Ehron grunted. “Is that not odd?”

“Not of late,” Gareth sighed, filling his glass with wine. “He seeks an alliance with father. We have been fair drowned in letters from the man.”

Ehron smiled warmly at his brother. “Tell me, how goes the world with Baron Ander? How bends his desire?”

“To Amelina and his Veran.” Gareth lifted a glass to the thought, one brow arched. “Kohl seeks a match well made. He has been courting father for cycles.”

“Has he?” Ehron grinned, sharing a look with Gareth.

“Come now,” Penn began gently. “To whom but the son of another baron may Amelina be wed?”

“Indeed,” Ehron nodded. “A match between the house of Ander and the house of Terhazien would be powerful, would it not?”

“It would,” Gareth said dramatically, “and you know as well as I do, Ehron, that we must secure the fate of our house in the changing landscape of the empire.” He finished, sounding rote, repeating, verbatim, his father’s words from many previous tirades.

Ehron snorted out a laugh. “You hear this as well, do you?”

Gareth could not help but smile. “I do, from father here, but from whom do you bear this now-familiar rant?”

Ehron grunted, smiling, rolling his eyes. “I am reminded of my place, my land, and my house every day from my consul. He drives it into me with a hammer and nail.”

Gareth was smiling wide. “I too am pounded on in

relentless—”

“Silence,” Torbald hissed at his youngest son before turning to look at his oldest. “I would hear the concerns of your consul Daemon Shar.”

Ehron grinned wide. “He’s possessed, father.”

“Tell me.”

The scoff from the back of his throat ended in a deep chuckle. “Well, we were at war, as you recall, but in the middle of this chaos, my consul has me sending gifts to the son of the warlord.”

“Gifts?” Torbald leaned forward. “What sort of gifts?”

Ehron sighed deeply before leaning back on the bench. “The army rations are horrid, father. Stale bread, old wine, dried meat... you know; you were a soldier. ’Tis vile, and so instead of eating simply what we are served, my consul hunted. Every day he hunted, and while others would find the occasional rabbit or squirrel, Daemon Shar returns with deer, boar, quail, pheasant, and sometimes goat.”

“Mountain goat?”

“Aye,” Ehron nodded, “mountain goat.”

“How? That would mean that he was hunting up high above the—”

“Aye, father, he hunts where the wolves do, in snow far too deep and heavy for a man to stride through.”

“And what does he do with this bounty that he brings forth from the mountain?”

Ehron smirked at him. “Hear this,” he said, leaning forward, and everyone followed suit. “He takes half of the game he catches and delivers it to the son of the warlord, Ram Troen, in my name.”

Torbald stared at his son, a sudden flush of excitement

surging through him. If his son was already courting the son of the warlord, perhaps Torbald did not have to marry off his jewel of a daughter, did not need to push for a match with the house of Ander if Ehron had already found favor. “And have you become close to the son of the warlord?”

“Aye.” Ehron grinned wide. “After cycles of this treatment, Ram Troen invited me to his tent so that we might dine together alone, just he and I.”

“But you—”

“Normally we all dine together in the eating tent, all the prefects together, but not Ram, never Ram. Though he is a prefect himself, he is still, as you know, shield bearer as well as being the son of the warlord. He does not need to take his meals with the rest of us dregs.”

“Surely Mycah Ilen, son of the overlord... surely he dined with Ram?” Gareth asked.

Ehron shook his head. “The second legion fought on a different front than the rest of us. The Iron Horse did no mountain fighting; that is not where the strength of the mounted charge lies. Mycah could not move the cavalry through the cold and terrain.”

Torbald nodded, waiting.

“So there were four of us there in camp, myself and two other prefects and the shield bearer. But after receiving the gifts of game, Ram invited me to dine with him alone and there asked me to provide meat for his father’s table when he was in camp as well.”

“For the warlord himself?” Torbald breathed out.

“A greedy request in time of war.” Gareth scowled.

“Agreed, but Daemon did it, pleased to do so, to secure my favor.”

“And did he?”

“Aye, father, he did, and soon I was dining with Ram at every meal and with the warlord whenever he brought his men through.”

Torbald held his breath. His son had included none of this in his letters, and he knew why. Even sealed correspondence was sometimes opened and then discarded. Daemon’s hunting and gifting of the spoils was no one’s business but Ehron’s. “So you were able to secure favor with both the shield bearer and the warlord?”

“Aye, father, with meat and wine as well as the bond between men, your son is one of two men vying for the rank of Shield Bearer of Rieyn. The choice is between Akasus Jaan, Prefect of the Third Legion, and me, Prefect of the First.”

As the war was over, being a prefect, war hero, was a dated honor soon relegated to glorious memory and sometime counsel of the warlord. The three positions of power that mattered were that of warlord, overlord, and shield bearer. The Shield, as the people spoke of the title, was the one in charge of the standing army, who sent out conscription orders when needed, who saw to the military safekeeping of the country. The overlord saw to all domestic affairs; the warlord concerned himself with the garrisons in conquered countries and wars abroad. Over all of them was the archlord, the supreme ruler. It was an understandable division of power.

During the Festival of Heroes held in the capital city of Tristan, it was known that the present warlord, Nictorus Troen, would step down and pass the mantle of power to his son, Ram. The overlord, Janah Ilen, would also pass his power to his son Mycah. When Ram became warlord, the post of shield bearer that he presently held would be vacant, and now, it seemed, the honor of filling it might be won by Ehron Terhazien.

If a baron did not find favor with the warlord, the overlord, or



the archlord, then his barony could be taxed into poverty and his land, title, and gold stripped away. Torbald Terhazien had always enjoyed a strong relationship with Janah Ilen, Overlord of Rieyn, but in recent years the demand for gold and resources like wheat and lumber had been high. With all Janah's concentration on domestic concerns, work for veterans returning home, civic projects, and his son Mycah at war, the youngest son Braedhn had been serving as his father's regent. His last demand had been for land itself, and when Torbald had respectfully declined the offer to sell vast acres, he had been threatened. Kohl Ander had been threatened as well, and this was what had prompted his proposition to Torbald to unite their houses against the threat. But now Ehron was telling him that he was in line to become shield bearer, was favored so highly of Ram Troen that even if the position were not given him, then at least they could go to the son of the warlord, soon to be warlord himself, for aid.

A chuckle brought Torbald from his thoughts. He looked up and found his oldest son smiling at him. "Ehron?"

"You seem pleased." He smiled at his father.

"Your consul is wise," Torbald concluded. "Very wise."

"Aye," Ehron agreed, "he is."

Odessa raised her glass, gazing lovingly at her eldest son. "Let us be thankful for Ehron's safe return from the war. Blessed are the gods in their mercy."

"Aye," Torbald agreed, "raise a glass to Ehron."

All glasses were touched together at the same time, and then everyone drank at once.

"Speak of the letter," Penn said as soon as he swallowed. "We have mused on the contents; let us now know the words."

No one cared about the letter anymore. It no longer mattered what it said. Ehron was favored by Ram Troen; it was all Torbald

cared about.

Torbald opened the parchment and read through the page quickly before answering. "It seems that Kohl has heard the news, too, that Ehron is to be presented with the Gold Cluster in Tristan during the Festival of Heroes and sends his regards and looks forward to seeing us all there." Word had been received a week ago that Ehron was to receive the honor in a letter to Torbald from the warlord himself delivered by Imperial courier. Torbald had been overwhelmed at the missive.

"It is unfortunate that we could not travel with him," Ehron interrupted his father's thoughts.

"Pardon?"

"Traveling with Baron Ander," Ehron explained. "We might have taken the opportunity to learn if Kohl had made any alliances we should know of. His land borders yours, father. We would do well to know his thoughts."

Torbald's eyebrows rose as he regarded his son.

Ehron chuckled, seeing the expression on his father's face. "Daemon says that you must know the mind of your enemy even before your ally."

"Your consul is indeed wise," he told his son.

"I cannot find that man," Amelina announced loudly, clearly frustrated, walking back into the room. "It is as though he has vanished."

Ehron rose quickly and left the table without a word. Soon after, Daemon strolled into the room by way of the long corridor that connected the Great Hall to the kitchen, bake house, and brew house.

"There you are," Torbald called out, motioning for Daemon to take a seat beside him. "First my daughter went in search of you, and now it seems I have lost my son to the same quest."

Daemon smiled underneath the cowl, and had they been able to see, the wicked grin would have revealed rows of perfect, white, even teeth. "I am sure he will return in a scrap."

"Come, sit."

Daemon took a seat on the bench beside Torbald but declined the offer of wine.

"Tell me, Daemon," he said softly, "how is it that you came to serve my son? You are not from Rieyn."

"Tis a long tale, that," he grunted.

"My gracious thanks for taking care of my son," Odessa interrupted, reaching a hand out to Daemon, who took it gently in his own. "I am so thankful that you brought him—"

"There is no need, lady," Daemon interrupted softly, squeezing her hand tightly with his own gloved fingers before releasing it. "Your son has been a true friend. I too can never repay the debt of kinship," he finished as Ehron entered the room.

"Where were you?" Ehron asked as he walked up beside Daemon.

"This I could ask of you, lord," Daemon replied, rising to his feet. "I seemed not the one lost."

"I was not lost," Ehron assured him. "I was searching the keep for you."

Everyone saw the ease between the two men, and it warmed Odessa's heart to think that her son had enjoyed such close camaraderie during his time away from her.

"Did you mark not that I was here?" Ehron continued.

"I marked it," Daemon answered with a grin, bumping Ehron with his shoulder. "I thought you strolling for your ease."

Ehron smiled suddenly, putting a heavy hand on his servant's shoulder and squeezing. "I should by now have grown

accustomed to both your vanishing and reappearance.”

Daemon suddenly turned to Odessa and bowed from the waist deeply. “I thank you for your pains, lady, on the feast that was prepared for the return of your son. I have not seen such devotion in many seasons. It brings a gentle pain to the heart.”

Tears came fast to the mother’s eyes as she regarded the servant. How tender was his heart to speak such gracious words.

“And yet you have had not a bite of this feast,” Gareth remarked casually, bringing everyone’s attention to that detail.

“I thank only for the pains made on Ehron’s behalf,” Daemon assured him, his voice chilling as he regarded his lord’s brother.

“And when do you take your meal?” Gareth asked him.

Ehron sighed deeply. “In time of war, the master eats before the servant,” he told Gareth, reaching down to fill a plate with grapes, figs, and melon for his servant. “It seems that I must still remind my consul that he and I may dine together at our leisure and eat our fill.”

“Never your fill, lord, lest we lose speed and stealth,” Daemon told him.

“Well said,” Torbald agreed.

“Here is your feast,” Ehron grumbled, shoving the plate at him so Daemon had to scramble to grab it. “You must eat before you find your bed.”

Daemon sighed, immediately beginning to eat the grapes, and even then no one could spot a glimpse of his face. “I am starved, but I must also soon find my bed, or I will fall at your feet, my lord.”

“Oh my dear ones,” Odessa said soothingly, rising to stand between her son and his servant, putting an arm around each man. “We must lead you both to your rest.”

“I will aid you, mother,” Amelina offered, following after them as they started away from the eating table.

“The shine be on you, Father,” Ehron called before mounting the central stairs, realizing suddenly how very tired he was.

“As well as on you, son,” Torbald’s voice boomed back. “Good rest, Daemon Shar!”

Daemon stopped, leaving the curve of Odessa’s arm. “Good rest to you, my lord Terhazien.” He bowed again ever so slightly before following Ehron, Odessa, and Amelina up the stairs, eating as he went.

Odessa had to push Ehron into his chambers, but not before her oldest son made Daemon swear to return after Amelina showed him to his chambers.

“Your room is right through here,” Amelina murmured, drawing back a tapestry of rich purple and green to reveal a wooden door.

“How grand this is.” Daemon smiled, following Amelina into the warm candlelit room, putting the bowl of fruit down on a bench beside the wall. He walked from one corner to the other, surveying everything before finally speaking. “Who makes all the fine needlework?” he asked, running his hand over the heavy goose down quilt on the bed.

“I,” she answered, smiling timidly.

“Truly, lady,” Daemon said, and Amelina heard the respect in his voice, “I have not seen the equal.”

No one ever noticed anything Amelina did, overshadowed as she was by Ehron’s warfare and Gareth’s care of the holding. Amelina’s smile became brighter as Daemon took a seat on the bed and carefully put one of her pillows on his lap. He smoothed his hand over it gently, examining it closely.

Amelina leaned back against the wall, willing herself to stand

there instead of crossing to the bed to sit beside Daemon. She wanted more than anything to be close to him, but the rules of propriety had been drilled far too deep. A gentle woman sat on no man's bed save that of her husband. She was thankful for the support the wall offered and swallowed hard as her stomach clenched into a tight knot of anticipation.

"You will enjoy court," Daemon sighed, breaking the silence so suddenly that Amelina squeaked in surprise. "Pardon, lady," he chuckled, standing to cross the room to her.

If he noticed her trembling, he was considerate enough not to remark on it. She was thankful for his courtly manners and longed to gaze deeply into his eyes. They would be, she was certain, dark and warm.

"Are you well, lady?" he asked gently, the concern clear in his voice.

The tone brought her from her fanciful thoughts back to the present. "Speak your meaning that I will enjoy court," she said quickly, the tremor only a whisper in her voice.

"You will be well attended, lady. This is my meaning."

"How so?"

"Surely there are many handsome men at court waiting to show worship to such a beautiful young woman. I hope your brothers prove to be suitable guardians of your charms."

"I have no concerns for my honor, sir. I am no temple virgin locked away from the world. I am the daughter of a baron—"

"Daemon," he said simply, correcting her use of the polite "sir" when she addressed him. "You must use my name ever." He chuckled easily, taking her hand and squeezing it gently.

She felt the smooth, supple leather of his gloves against her silky skin when he touched her. The contact sent heat through her.

She swallowed hard. “Daemon,” she repeated, all her bluster gone as she looked down at his hand on hers. It was such an innocent, chaste touch, and yet her heart danced in her chest.

“You are of age to concern yourself with your own honor. I charge your brothers with only keeping your many would-be suitors at bay so that you may breathe between dances.”

How honeyed were his words, how sweet, how artfully spoken. “Will you bide here while we journey to Tristan or attend my brother?”

“As he desires,” Daemon assured her. “If I stay, shall I write you at court?” he asked, crossing the room back to the bowl of fruit to finish the grapes.

“You write?” In her experience, not many men lower in station than her father wrote. Indeed, of all their servants, only Bren, her father’s second, keeper of the house, could make his letters. None of Amelina’s waiting women could write even their own names.

Daemon laughed, and Amelina was charmed completely. “I will write to you,” he said, “if you will it so.”

She caught her breath as he darted to her side, sharing the wall with her.

“Tell me, what shall we write about?”

“I know not what—”

“Shall we trade secrets?” he asked conspiratorially, leaning close, his tone suggestive, mischievous. “I think we should, you and I. You will be my eyes and ears, and you will spy and tell me everything there is to know about the fat hens at court. How glorious you will be, the sleek cat moving among them.”

It was too much for Amelina. She was too young, too inexperienced to know what to do next. She was overwhelmed by the playfulness, by the unhurried conversation, by the ease she

felt in his presence. A sound that she had never in her life uttered before came out of her.

“Lady? Will you be my spy?” he asked, pressing her for an answer, teasing.

She coughed to clear her throat. “I will.”

“Excellent,” he chuckled, and the sound was husky and low.

She was sensitive of his warm breath as he leaned close for a moment and was afraid to turn and look at him, scared that she would throw herself into his arms and disregard all maidenly modesty. She wanted to brush the cowl back and look at a face that, if it matched the voice, would be flawless. Her heart was hammering in her chest so loud and so hard that she thought he must surely be able to hear it.

“Truly I could not have a more tempting and lovely conspirator,” Daemon told her playfully, sliding away from her, putting space between them the moment before Odessa entered the room.

“Here is my daughter,” Odessa said, smiling warmly at both Daemon and Amelina.

“We spoke of court,” Daemon said cheerfully. “Your child has agreed to send me posts so that I may learn all the comings and goings. She is my spy.”

“As will I be, if you stay behind,” Odessa chuckled.

“Two spies,” Daemon cackled. “Excellent.”

Odessa was charmed completely and then delivered the news that Ehron was requesting Daemon’s presence immediately.

“It seems he must speak to you,” Odessa told him, moving to stand by her daughter. “And he refuses to sleep until he does.”

Daemon sighed heavily. “A matter of some urgency, no doubt.”



Both Odessa and Amelina laughed at him before giving him their blessing for sweet dreams.

Odessa smiled knowingly, having seen her daughter's look of absolute adoration. "Such a lovely young man."

"Aye," Amelina answered dreamily, "the truth of his manner is that of a nobleman, though he is not."

"Nobility lives in the heart of the man, not in the title he bears or in the name of his house."

Amelina turned to look at her mother. "Yet could I join not with a nobleman, mother? Would father ever allow a joining with one who was not to be baron?"

Odessa knew what she was being asked, understood the importance and understood, too, from the flush of her cheeks and the wringing of her hands that Amelina had stumbled hard. "Your father would not allow a union with other than one of the noble houses of Rieyn, Amelina. You are worth no less than a maxim. You are a baron's daughter. You must prize yourself above all other women of Rieyn."

Amelina knew her duty, but her heart did not.

"He is beautiful," Amelina mused, never imagining that her mother had heard her.

"Indeed," Odessa agreed, "though we know only his heart, as we see not his face."

"Do you think Ehron has seen his face?"

"You may well ask him," Odessa said softly. "But you did not ask Daemon yourself, did you, dearest?"

"Oh no, mother, I would never ask. If he wanted me to know, he would tell me."

"Indeed, and as your brother's consul, he is above such queries, even if well-intended."

“Of course.”

“But,” Odessa reminded her, “you may ask your brother whatever you please.”

Amelina meant to first thing the following morning.

Daemon walked back down the long hallway and turned left, the way a passing servant had instructed him, and knocked lightly on the heavy wooden door of Ehron’s room.

“Come,” Ehron called from inside.

Daemon opened the door and found Ehron already in bed.

“Ever I wait upon you,” Ehron grumbled. “Come and sit down.”

“Aye, my lord,” Daemon said pointedly, picking up one of the sturdy wooden chairs by the hearth and carrying it over beside the enormous feather bed.

“Lord me not, Daemon,” Ehron growled, sitting up in bed to look at his friend.

“What name would you be called?”

Ehron growled. “As to what we were discussing shortly before we arrived, I want you to swear the oath to me now.”

“I cannot,” Daemon yawned.

“Cannot or will not?”

“Both.”

“Swear to me now that you will remain in my employ until the end of your days.”

Daemon snorted out a laugh. “You think to maul me into

submission, then?”

“Dae—”

“Your father was pleased to hear that you are in the good graces of Ram Troen, was he not?”

Ehron grunted. “He was.”

“You see, again, I am right.”

The warm sound of his friend’s voice, as always, rolled through Ehron, leaving nothing but comfort in its wake. “Always,” Ehron chuckled. “You are always right.”

“I only want you safe before I leave you.”

“No!” Ehron was instantly irritated. In the beginning Daemon had spoken of leaving only every six months, but he brought it up increasingly more often, first every three months, then every one. Now, he broached the subject daily, and to Ehron, it felt like he was counting the time down, and it made him uneasy. “Constantly you speak of leaving as though this were your choice to make. You are my consul, you daft man. I decide where you go and go not. You forget this fact often.”

Daemon groaned. “The war is over, and I am not a citizen of Rieyn. I go where I like, my good prefect, and well you know this.”

“I make choices for you, not you for yourself. Like the one to save that slave.”

“Oh, shall we hear not this again.” Daemon rolled his eyes beneath the cowl and put his feet up on the edge of the bed.

“You risked your life to save that worthless dreg from death, as though drowning were too good for him. His life is not worth a piece, and yet you leaped into the sea to save him.”

“Is he not a man, the same as I?”

“You are worth ten of him, and well you know this!” Ehron barked at him. “That you could so abandon me by....” He trailed

off, remembering the sight of the high rolling waves, seeing the wall of water beside the ship, staring in horror after Daemon as he leaped from the deck into the churning darkness of the deep.

“And you nearly beat me senseless while I was choking and straining to breathe.” Daemon chuckled, bringing Ehron from his thoughts, remembering how enraged his friend had been, the pain inadvertently inflicted. Sometimes, Ehron did not remember that he was twice the size of Daemon, the top of the consul’s head coming only to his shoulder.

“You care over much for common dregs,” Ehron continued his rant. “You always have.”

Daemon chuckled. “You care as well, only my actions upset you, and so now you rage against them.”

“You will do as I say!”

“Oh, fret not.”

“Take another tone with me, Daemon!” Ehron warned him, giving his servant a scorching look even as he noticed that Daemon was humming faintly.

“Aye, my lord,” he snickered.

“Daemon—”

“I said aye, my lord,” he said indulgently.

“You could vex the patience of a saint.”

Which he had been told often as a child by both of his parents. “If I agree and say aye again, will you have me beaten?”

Ehron grunted before he pulled the heavy quilts up around his shoulders and let out a deep sigh of contentment. It was so good to be home and in his old room, surrounded by his family, with Daemon beside him; Ehron could not remember feeling so good.

Daemon yawned and moved his feet off the bed.

“Where do you run to?” Ehron asked his servant.

“To my bed,” Daemon answered, standing and looking down at Ehron. “Your family is all that you spoke of,” he said tenderly.

“Indeed.”

Daemon regarded his lord and friend thoughtfully. “What troubles you? Your face is twisted with worry. You will soon resemble an old crone.”

“I worry not. I am only pleased that my father seemed so taken with you.” He smiled up at Daemon. “I want him to love you as I do.”

Daemon groaned. “The words you use—please, I beg you, mark them and censure them.”

Ehron squinted up at him. “You are closer to me than my own brother. You have seen me sick at the sight of dead men, held me pressed between your hands so I would not pump my life blood into the snow, and waited patiently at the door as I have rutted away long nights in brothels. I have emptied the vault of my heart to you and no other—what word shall I give you but love, my dear Daemon?”

“You’re a fool,” Daemon assured him.

“But you favor me and so will make me Shield Bearer of Rieyn.”

Daemon grunted. “As though this were in my power to grant.”

“We both know it is. The way you think... before others know a thing, you have already considered it. I know no other man like you.”

Daemon was certain that was true.

“I want you to remain at my side.”

“So you have said.”

“Find your bed,” Ehron ordered, but his voice was gentle. He blew out the flame of the oil lamp next to his bed.

Daemon left Ehron’s room and closed the door quietly behind him. The walk back down the hall to his room seemed endless, and once there, he collapsed onto the bed, bothering only to first bolt his door against late-night intruders.

## Two

When Ehron awoke, he had not only his consul but the captain of his private guard standing over him. He groaned loudly.

“I wish I could sleep the light away,” Seone Amal grouched at him.

Ehron rolled his head to the other side and saw the dark visage of his consul.

“Some of us have to actually attend to our duties,” Daemon said, and the smirking tone was not lost on Ehron.

“Piss,” Ehron rumbled, rolling over and covering his face with a pillow.

Seone gestured at Ehron, but Daemon only shrugged.

Once Ehron finally sat up, he was passed a cup of black tea, and Seone informed him that he and the rest of Ehron’s private guard had arrived from the coast that morning. He had made certain that all of Ehron’s belongings were accounted for and properly disposed of. The slaves Ehron took, as well as the property, trinkets, he had seized in Crosas, had brought a hefty sum at the market.

Ehron sighed audibly and asked why he had been allowed to sleep so late.

“Your father has planned a great feast in your honor, and he wanted you rested for the festivities.”

“I thought the feast was last night.”

“As did I,” Daemon assured him. “But apparently your father

has a far greater celebration in mind.”

He groaned loudly.

“We are all of a similar mind,” Seone sighed deeply. Celebrations were tedious.

“I must have a bath,” Ehron announced to the two men at his bedside.

“Aye, you must.” Seone grimaced, heading for the door.

“Please, we beg you.” Daemon chuckled, ducking a hastily thrown cup.

Later, outside the keep, Gareth watched Ehron’s men walking with Daemon. They had entered the courtyard together, all assessing the walls as battle-trained warriors used to checking for the enemy. Daemon was pointing out the passageways of wood running the length of the walls as well at the gatehouse itself. Gareth wondered why all the attention to detail. The men stayed crowded around him, all listening intently. Gareth felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to find his father beside him.

“They are soldiers, all of them all Rieynan born, and yet they listen to a man who was not,” Gareth mused, inclining his head to mean Daemon. “Is that not odd?”

Torbald smiled at his son. “You do not understand, as war and you have not been acquainted. Daemon proved himself on the battlefield, fighting at Ehron’s side, with loyalty and blood. They follow his orders as though Ehron himself gave them.”

“Will Ehron retain these men?”

“This is his private guard. They will be added to those here on the barony as long as Ehron is here. When he leaves to either take



his own home, or to become shield bearer, they will follow him.”

“Daemon will remain with him as well?”

“Soldiers are in Ehron’s employ for a term of their contracted bond. Once this expires, they can leave to seek other employment or, if Ehron wills it, agree to new terms. Daemon, as a free man and not a career soldier, may leave as he wills now that the war is over. As he is not Rieynan born, there can be no bond in other but time of war.”

“I wonder if he will stay.”

“My guess is that Ehron wonders the same,” he finished, raising his head suddenly as Daemon came bounding over to the stairs leading up to the keep. “Good rise, Daemon!” he called to his son’s servant.

“Good rise to you, my lord,” Daemon greeted the baron cheerfully. “I must know if Ehron’s men and I are to be included in the celebration this set or if we are to stand guard while you take your revelry.”

Torbald had already promised *his* men that they could join the festivities, thinking that the men Ehron brought home with him could perform the service of standing guard of the keep while the others celebrated. “I had thought that Ehron’s men would guard the holding.”

“Aye, my lord. I will inform the men.”

“You, Daemon, are of course invited to dine and drink with us.”

“I will stand with my men, my lord, as is my place,” Daemon assured him, bowing deeply before turning to rejoin the soldiers.

“He said ‘no’ so deftly,” Gareth teased his father, elbowing him in the side gently. He watched Daemon give the news to the men, who only nodded. He saw no look or action that betrayed even the slightest amount of anger.

“Aye, he did,” Torbald agreed, tearing his eyes from Daemon to regard the steady stream of visitors coming through the main gate. “Call your mother and brother to the great hall so that we may begin to receive all our guests.”

“And Amelina?” Gareth asked as he turned to enter the keep, even then trying to track Daemon with his eyes, to keep watch on the man.

“Aye, call my little bird to me as well.” Torbald smiled warmly, thinking about his daughter. “She is the fairest of our house, after her mother, and all are ever enchanted by her beauty.”

Gareth rolled his eyes before taking leave of his father. Clearly he did not share Torbald’s estimation of his youngest child. When Gareth finally found his sister in the passage from the kitchen to the hall, Amelina whined that she would rather find and speak to Daemon Shar.

“As would I,” Gareth snapped, hurrying past her.

“Where did you see him last?”

When Gareth was asked much later the same question by Ehron, he could only answer that some time ago the servant had been walking in the courtyard with his men. Ehron wanted to find him, perturbed that he was stuck, with the rest of his family, greeting the maxims, or lower lords, for hours.

When they were finally finished and the hall was filled with people, Ehron wanted to leave to search for Daemon but was instead informed that the evening meal in honor of his return was to be immediately served.

“In honor of my son!” Torbald called out to everyone again, and all who were there raised a glass of thick, rich elderberry wine to Ehron Terhazien.

Servants came through the crowds then with pitchers and

basins and linen squares for everyone to wash their hands before they sat down to partake in the feast.

Torbald took his place at the center of the table set up for him and his family at the end of the hall closest to the hearth. It was raised up on a dais so that he could see everyone taking his or her seats. Odessa stood then and announced the six courses that they would be having, consisting of a variety of cooked meats, salted fish, wild birds, venison, chicken and duck. There was an audible cheer when the servants began bustling in with food and drink. Each guest was given a choice of wine or ale, and everyone was poured a large glass of cool water.

Odessa didn't eat but rose quickly with her daughter and walked from table to table, answering questions about the food and its preparation. Torbald watched with obvious pride as his wife recited the names of common herbs like mint and sage and rosemary and ingredients like clove of torrel and nassi wine used in the cooking. Trays of fresh fruit were laid at each table for guests to pick from at their leisure.

Everyone applauded again when the small keo songbirds were brought out and presented so artfully with their tail feathers replaced after being cooked. As servants came in to bring more ale and wine, Torbald noticed Daemon dodging around several of them as he made his way to the baron.

Daemon walked around behind the table and didn't stop to address himself to either Ehron or Amelina, just made his way to Torbald and dropped to one knee behind him.

Torbald turned in his seat to face the servant. "Daemon."

"My lord, I would not interrupt your meal but for one of Maxim Carhall's men is drunk and has made several gross slurs toward a member of your family."

Torbald was taken aback. For a man to come to the house of his patron and rebuke him was indeed a gross offense. He wanted

to question Daemon immediately, to know what exactly had been said and about what member of his family. As he looked out at his hundred guests, surveying their number and merry mood, he reined in the impulse, taking a deep swallow of wine. When he spoke, his voice was calm and measured. "Why not simply put him in the stables for the night after you have relieved him of the light."

"Aye, my lord," Daemon agreed, having first thought of rendering the man unconscious as well. "This step I would have taken had he not been overheard by several of Maxim Groe's men."

Torbald nodded. "You tell me now that there is to be a brawl in the courtyard."

"If there is only a brawl, then truly are the gods smiling on you, my lord."

Torbald understood at once. It was tense and critical outside. Tempers had flared, and men were standing ready to do battle. Only due to the fact that Daemon and his men were standing guard had words not escalated to violence.

"Can this event be averted?"

"Aye, my lord," Daemon assured him, "if you will allow me to speak for you in this matter."

"And where goes my steward Penn H'rah?"

"He spoke to me early this set that he would take his meal with Maxim Huhn and his family, as he has a daughter that is fair."

Torbald looked out at the great hall and spotted Penn immediately, since he was the only man at one of the tables wearing the Terhazien colors of purple and green. It frustrated and annoyed him that Penn was not more vigilant about his duties. He was more Gareth's companion than the Terhazien steward. Penn

had proven time and time again that he was not capable of carrying out his responsibilities.

Torbald suddenly put his hand on Daemon's shoulder. "Speak for me, act for me. You have my word."

Daemon rose and turned to go, but Ehron caught his arm as he passed him. "Do you need me there with you?"

"Your presence would only escalate matters, my lord," Daemon told him, patting his hand before giving him a slight bow. He was back across the room in seconds.

Dessert came in the form of rich almond pudding and fruit in heavy cream. Tables were moved back by the servants and the floors quickly cleared so that the dancing could commence. Musicians were ushered into the great hall, and the reel quickly began. Several maxims' daughters pulled Gareth onto the floor, and a quick line formed to be Amelina's partner. Gareth could hardly keep his mind on what step came next, as his thoughts were with Daemon and what was occurring outside.

Suddenly Maxim Rey Quel raised a glass and with a booming voice thanked the baron for graciously providing musicians and dancing for his men as well. Everyone rushed to the large glass windows crudely set into the wall of the keep that faced the courtyard below.

Serving women, handmaids, laundresses, grooms, cooks, seamstresses, chambermaids, and other house servants danced beside a growing bonfire with the soldiers of the maxims. Several people stood and clapped along to the music, while others, including Daemon, danced a reel in the dirt. People flew from one partner to the other; hands clasped and joined in merriment. There was no hint of hostility. The music was provided by fife and pipe and drum played by several of the Terhazien servants. Gareth saw Daemon beckon soldiers down from the wall-walks and send others from the dance back to their duty as guards. Gareth

watched him drift off with the last group leaving for the gatehouse. He clapped along with the music and waved for others to join the dance as he walked away.

“I understand this not,” Torbald said, coming up behind Gareth.

“You gave Daemon your power, father, and instead of using it to punish, he gave them that which they must have wanted from the beginning,” Gareth told him. “To sit outside in the dark and listen to a celebration and not take part must be hard indeed. Daemon gave them their own. He is a shrewd man indeed to glean what was truly wanted.”

“Indeed,” Ehron echoed, leaning in beside Gareth so he could see the dancing and look for Daemon in the crowd.

Torbald announced to everyone that they could come and go as they liked: join the dancers in the courtyard or stay in the great hall. He then went down to the courtyard and announced to the assembled and suddenly silent crowd that if it were agreeable, he and his party would join them. The cheer of approval brought a wide smile to the baron’s face as he greeted the servants, shaking hands with many of them.

Soon servant and lord were so intermingled that it was hard to tell one from the other. The grounds were well lit, with iron lanterns casting off shadows in every corner of the grounds. The warm night air and the baron’s wine and ale gave everyone a joyful glow and a feeling of camaraderie that Torbald had hoped for but was unsure if he could create. As he took in a deep breath of the warm night air, strolling arm-in-arm with his wife and the escort of his children, Torbald could not have imagined a more perfect homecoming celebration for his son.

Gareth saw Daemon first, and he wasn’t sure if it was because he was looking for him or if it was the way that Ehron’s servant alone was standing on the wall, his attention directed out

toward the fields.

“Daemon!” Torbald called to him before Gareth could, wanting to speak with the servant, ready to praise his quick thinking.

“Daemon Shar, come to me!” Ehron roared out, crossing in front of his father.

Daemon turned quickly from his vigil and leaped down off the wall-walk to the ground twenty feet below. He landed lightly on all fours, then stood and crossed the short distance to his lord.

“My lord, please forgive my shortness earlier. I was in haste to find peace with the soldiers,” Daemon explained to Ehron, knowing by his tone from years of service that Ehron had been worried.

The hooded face upturned to him and the husky voice filled with concern made Ehron smile. “Oh, fear me not,” he chuckled, reaching out to squeeze Daemon’s shoulder before turning to look at his father. It was only then that both he and Daemon noticed that everyone was standing there stunned, struck dumb by Daemon’s vault from the height of the outer wall of the manor house. “Father?” Ehron asked slowly, turning to look at Daemon, who could only shrug his shoulders in reply.

“Daemon, how... I have never seen...,” Torbald stammered before trailing off in amazement. He stepped in close to Daemon and examined him. “Are you not hurt?”

“Oh, my dear lord,” Daemon said, taking a step back from the baron, “’tis nothing.”

“Come back up!” one of the men called from the wall-walk.

Ehron laughed suddenly and nodded. “Aye, Seone is right,” he said to Daemon. “Go back up.”

Daemon shrugged again and walked over to the tree that stood beside the wall. He leaped from the ground up into the

branches and then walked out onto one of them. The sweet summer air blew the long bough up and down, and Daemon rode with it, his weight not seeming to hinder the limb in any way. It was as though he were a leaf on the branch, and the wind carried him back up to the wall-walk, and he stepped nimbly from that most delicate sprig onto the wooden beam beside Seone.

Everyone applauded, and Daemon bowed theatrically before waving.

“How now, Daemon!” Torbald cried. “Are you a magician?”

“Tis only the smallest of movements, my lord,” Daemon explained, calling back down to the baron. The laughter he gifted them with was deep and warm, making Amelina sigh heavily.

Looking up at him, it was only then that Torbald saw something that he had not noticed before. “Please come back down before me,” he said quickly. “I promise that you will not be made to climb back up. I know you are not a trained animal. I want only to look at you.”

Daemon leaped down again, startling Amelina for the second time. When he brushed by her, he gave her hand a quick squeeze before stopping in front of Torbald. The older man reached out and touched the baldric that his sword hung from.

“You carry this oddly, and so I had not looked at it before. You must draw your sword from your back.”

“Aye, my lord, it is a curse to be smaller, and so I carry the weight on my back and not at my side. “

Odessa watched her husband intently as his hand traced the line of the baldric down across Daemon’s chest. It was only then, looking from her husband to Daemon, that she saw what Torbald did.

“This baldric, encrusted with the stallions Rudios and Weren, is given only to a soldier who has done great service to the



warlord. I myself have one much like it from when I served in the unification wars with Scerce. Tell me of the service you performed for Nictorus Troen to receive yours, Daemon Shar.”

He cleared his throat and turned his head to Ehron.

All eyes went with him.

Ehron groaned deeply. “Father, I would not ruin this night with tales of—”

“Speak, my son.”

Ehron raked his fingers through his thick hair, eyes flicking to Daemon. “You had to wear the baldric?”

“Tis the only one I have,” Daemon quipped. “You always speak of us procuring another, and yet we—”

“Ehron,” Torbald cut off the banter between the two men.

“I...,” Ehron sighed. “I really prefer that we—”

“Please, my son.”

Heavy sigh before Ehron began. “I was in Adaran prison in Shokee, and Daemon brought me out,” he told his father. “And none but a cat could have done it, a rat-catching cat, finding his way in the dark to me and then bringing me forth.”

He had finished fast, his words tumbling out, one on top of the other, so that it took a moment for everyone to sort through them.

“The prison? In Shokee?” Torbald asked his son. “You were there and emerged alive? How my son?”

He gestured to Daemon.

“Repeat this tale.”

“By the gods,” Odessa winced, drawing her breath in sharply. She grabbed her son’s hand and squeezed it tightly. Atrocities had been committed at the prison. Everyone at home had heard the

stories. When Mycah Ilen and the Second Legion had liberated it, the dead had numbered in the thousands. “Tell me you were not in that hope-forsaken place, Ehron.”

“I was, but it was not my time to die.”

Gareth shook his head, then interrupted, “You ask too much of our faith, Ehron. No one came out of there alive before Mycah liberated it from Crosan forces, and we heard not that you were—”

“I was there!” Ehron yelled at his brother, the pain of the abuse still lingering in the back of his mind even after the parade of years. “I was there, and you may ask Nictorus himself if you believe me not. He had dispatches at the ready to send to you. He had thought me dead and waited only for Mycah to confirm his suspicion when he liberated the prison. But Mycah found me not inside when he came but outside the walls with Daemon!” Ehron ranted on, but they could all see he was calming. “I was with Daemon.”

“With Daemon?” Penn repeated, eyes riveted to Ehron before he turned, as did everyone else, to the consul.

“Daemon liberated me,” Ehron said softly, pulling his hand free of his mother’s grip and raking his fingers through his thick blond hair. “I know not how. One scrap I was to be killed, the next I hear his voice in the dark asking me why I was so willing to die.” Ehron took a breath and smiled ruefully. “By the gods, I remember that so clearly, and that was so many seasons ago.”

Everyone was silent, and Ehron turned quickly, rounding on Daemon, and grabbed the smaller man tight, crushing him to his chest, face buried down in his shoulder.

“My lord.” Daemon coughed dramatically, and everyone smiled. “Must we again have this mauling?”

The laughter released the last of the tension, and Ehron’s lopsided grin as he shoved Daemon away from him was wonderful

to see.

Torbald reached out and put a hand on Daemon's shoulder, squeezing tight. "You saved my son and then received this honor from the warlord. This baldric—the only honor higher is the presentation of land."

"Which I was awarded and so granted my lord."

Torbald's eyes locked on Daemon. "You were given land, and you gave it to Ehron?"

"Aye," Daemon assured the baron. "I was granted the Caraba preserve, and now it belongs to my lord Ehron. The preserve borders the lands of the warlord himself."

"So Ehron has his own land and is the son of a baron, as well as a prefect and..."

"And so perhaps the choice between me and Akasus Jaan will be easier for Ram." Ehron smiled at his father. "I believe that Ram will choose me to succeed him, as he knows I have men in my employ that are prepared to defend me as I defend the realm. All that Daemon has done reflects me in golden glow."

"Aye," Torbald agreed whole-heartedly, a feeling of excitement and certainty washing over him. He had been startled at first by Daemon's dark and somber appearance, but now he knew that his son's servant, his consul, was truly a blessing and was building Ehron's reputation and power brick by brick.

Amelina suddenly grabbed Daemon's hand, breaking the spell of awed silence everyone had fallen under.

"Father, may I please dance with Daemon before the night leaves us?"

"Of course, of course," Torbald said quickly. "Daemon is to be rewarded for his able mind, not to have me bark questions at him all evening."

Daemon looked up at Seone. "I will fast return to you so you do not hold a hard heart toward me."

The glowering man smiled down at Daemon. "As if that could ever be the truth."

Daemon was about to leave with Amelina when he remembered that he was still wearing his sword and baldric. He turned suddenly in the direction of the wall-walk. He took it off and meant to throw it up to Seone for safekeeping, but Ehron reached for it instead.

"My lord?" Daemon asked him.

"I will guard it for you," he assured him.

Daemon handed it to his lord and then allowed Amelina to drag him after her. Torbald stepped forward and pointed at Daemon's baldric before looking at Ehron and waiting.

Ehron sighed in defeat. "What shall I say to you, father, to give you ease?" He smiled widely, unable to keep the amusement out of his voice.

Torbald motioned for the baldric, and Ehron passed it to him. "He simply gave you the land that was given to him."

"Aye, father. As he is not a citizen of Rieyn, he felt he had no right to it."

"And this is what you believe?"

"No." Ehron smiled. "I believe he gave it to me to further secure my station and for no other reason. He is as devoted to my welfare as were you and mother when I was a child. Truly, you could not have asked for me to be gifted with a better servant."

"Indeed." He nodded, lifting the baldric toward Ehron. "And this?"

"If you knew all the man had done, you would not believe me."

“Perhaps not.”

Gareth watched his brother move off to follow after Amelina and Daemon.

“What concerns you, father?” he asked, interested, looking after his retreating brother before looking down at the sword and sheath in his father’s hands.

“Even mine is not this grand,” Torbald explained, tracing the ruby, sapphire, and other sparkling jewels riveted into the leather. “A jewel is given for individual service and is given only by a prefect, the shield bearer or the warlord himself.”

“The baldric is encrusted with them,” Gareth said.

“Aye, it is,” he agreed, turning the heavy baldric over to look at the jewels in the back. “All these jewels given as well as land.... Daemon’s service in the war had to be great.”

“Yet we heard not his name.”

“But we heard your brother’s,” Torbald told Gareth, “and perhaps this is how Daemon planned it. The man has a mind I envy.”

As Gareth absorbed his father’s words, one of Ehron’s soldiers stopped and bowed before the baron as he made his way back to stand guard over the manor house.

“You,” Torbald called to the man before he could walk on. “Know you this baldric?”

“Aye, my lord,” the man said quickly. “’Tis Daemon’s.”

“Was it given to him by the warlord himself?”

“The warlord was there, but ’twas the deliverer who placed it on him.”

They all knew the story. They all knew who the deliverer was: Mycah Ilen, Prefect of the Second Legion, who had delivered all men from Adaran Prison in Shokee. His name had emerged from

the war greatest of all.

Torbald nodded, then smiled at the man. "Tell me, the man who Daemon had to have words with, the one who spoke out against my house, what was done with him?"

"Daemon sent him off the grounds of the keep, my lord. He must sleep outside the gates this set."

"And if he is attacked by—"

"His fate was chosen by his actions, my lord. This is what Daemon spoke to us."

"Thank you," Torbald nodded, giving the man a hard clap on the shoulder. "You have my leave."

"Daemon does not punish with his sword," Gareth said to his father.

"No, he does not, and I find I respect that more than the spilling of blood."

As they strolled back up toward the bonfire, they were surprised to find Amelina standing outside the circle of dancers. She was beside Daemon, her hand around his arm as they stood talking to three daughters of different maxims. As Gareth and his parents neared them, they heard Amelina's voice in a timber that none of them had ever heard before.

"I told you no," she told one of the girls, who immediately bowed deeply. "This should be enough for you, for he is my brother's servant."

"I meant no disrespect, Lady Amelina," the girl stammered.

"By the gods, lady." Ehron smiled, walking up behind his sister. "Will you not share my consul with this sweet and lovely creature?"

Amelina's eyes were huge as she regarded her brother. "I wanted only my turn at the reel with Daemon."

“But you have many dances, and this lady has only this one,” Ehron assured her, gently pushing the maxim’s daughter toward Daemon.

“Aye,” Daemon said, his voice gentle. “But it was Lady Amelina alone who came to seek me, and for that I would not leave her side,” he said, taking her hand and leading her toward the dancers.

The young girl bowed to both the baron and baroness before asking if Ehron himself would dance.

“I will,” he smiled at her, leading her to the reel.

Torbald turned to say something to his wife but was silenced when he saw that her eyes had welled up with unshed tears. “Lady?” he inquired softly. “Are you well?”

“Tis only Daemon Shar,” she said breathlessly. “He knows so well how to care for the fledgling heart of a young girl. I just want to wrap him in my arms and speak soft thanks to him. He is a jewel of a man.”

Torbald looked at his daughter then and saw for the first time what his wife saw: Amelina’s adoring eyes, her flushed cheeks, and the telltale hands that fluttered nervously around Daemon, touching him whenever she had the chance. As they began the reel and moved first away from each other and then back together, he watched his daughter’s face light up with joy.

“I had not realized she was so taken with him,” Gareth said, reading his father’s thoughts as he stepped in beside him.

“I had not either,” Torbald assured him. “We must kill the bud before it blooms.”

“Father?” Gareth asked, turning to look at the older man. “What harm can come of such?”

“She is the daughter of a baron; she is not a chambermaid.”

“Aye,” Odessa said solemnly, “she is the daughter of a baron. She knows well her station and will take no road that would lead us to ruin. Leave her be to dance with the man. No harm will come from this.”

Torbald watched Amelina twirl in a circle before she flew back into Daemon’s arms. As the song ended, she wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder. As the servant was not much taller than she, she was able to coil herself tightly around him. Torbald watched his daughter release a deep sigh of pleasure as she stood there hugging Daemon, and he wondered if his wife knew what she was talking about. Torbald would have watched Amelina and Daemon all night, but he was pulled into the dance himself by the wife of one of his most trusted maxims and could not say no.

Gareth and Penn had danced for hours with woman after woman but were standing together, resting, drinking some ale when Daemon approached them.

“My lord,” Daemon addressed Gareth. “Would you point me in the direction of the house of Belton?”

“Belton the barrel maker?” Penn asked Daemon.

“Aye,” Daemon nodded, smiling as a small face peeked out from behind him. “Belton, it seems, is the father of my dear girl.”

“Ah, Mistress Anya.” Gareth smiled down at the little girl who had one arm wrapped around Daemon’s leg. “Are you lost, lass?”

The little girl stayed mute, stepping further behind Daemon.

“It seems she is, my lord,” Daemon said softly. “Would you speak to me the way?”

“We will walk with you,” Gareth told him even as Penn’s look of annoyance became visible.

Gareth watched as the little girl stepped in front of Daemon and held up her arms for him. He reached down and swept her up



into his arms, settling her against his chest as he walked. He spoke in low tones to her, asking her about animals and flowers and what the trees told her.

Gareth was surprised at the child. He himself found Daemon's cloaked appearance fascinating, but to the little girl he must have looked like some dark specter from the grave. And yet she was not frightened in the least. He wondered at everyone's easy acceptance of clothing and an appearance he felt should have been cause for staring, fear, and concern. He was especially astounded over the reaction of the little girl. It made no sense.

Anya had her chubby little arm wrapped around Daemon's neck as she pointed to the houses that they passed. They stopped short at a woodpile behind the glassmaker's house, and there was some intense discussion before they could move on. As Gareth watched, Anya reached inside the cowl, underneath. He could see her hand stroking under the heavy material, petting the side of Daemon's face. He was gripped with an almost overwhelming urge to whip the cowl back and look in the face underneath. He at least wanted to be granted the same liberty as the child.

He was struck suddenly with the depth of his desire. Always Gareth had been enamored by the beauty and grace of other men. The need that gripped others to bed maids never rose up in the second-born son of the baron. Gareth looked at men, lusted after men, and had bedded many, in secret, over the years. None, however, had captured his absolute interest like Daemon Shar. His brother's servant was a mystery. He moved with a feline grace that was riveting, and the way the breeches and boots hugged his muscular legs and thighs was sinful. The robe that should have been anything but sensual showed off a breadth of shoulder and slimness of waist that had Gareth's mind reeling with possibility. The lines of the man were long, lean, and beautiful, and his rich, mellifluous voice was another problem all together.

Never in his life had Gareth heard a voice so husky and

sultry, so filled with mischief, promising untold decadence and heat. Gareth wanted him badly, and from the looks of every maid that Daemon passed, other soldiers, and even a few of the maxims, he was not the only one intrigued and wanting to taste. He wondered briefly if Ehron had ever stripped his second out of all his clothes and laid him bare beneath him on silken sheets. He had asked Ehron what color Daemon's eyes were and had been told that he did not know. It was a lie, Gareth knew, but to ask, to pry, would have revealed his desire, and the fact that he was a lover of men was not a secret he was ready to share with his brother.

When Penn spoke suddenly, pointing to a house at the end of a small path, Gareth was torn from his sinful thoughts. Daemon tipped his head at the open door, and all three men understood how the wandering had happened.

"Thank you, my lord and brother Penn," Daemon said to both men without turning around as he walked to the door of the house and gently rapped on the doorframe.

Gareth waited and was rewarded with the sight of the relieved and happy reunion. Anya's mother appeared at the door and rushed forward to her daughter and Daemon. She grabbed her child from the consul, and after much kissing and hugging and squeals of delight, she turned and bowed to him. Belton was there in an instant as well, and Gareth watched as Daemon's arm was pulled, and he was led from the doorway into their home. Penn turned to go, but it was soon apparent that Gareth had no intention of moving.

It was a continual source of frustration on Penn's part that his friend had so much interest in common, everyday events. He snatched the empty ale cup from Gareth's hand, hoping that this would prompt some dialogue, but when it did not, he stalked away, clearly annoyed.

Gareth was mesmerized by the picture before him, a moment that, as the son of the lord of the castle, he would never experience, a quaint meeting of simple men. He stood quietly across the path from the small cottage and watched through the door as Anya's parents marveled at her return.

Gareth looked at Anya on Daemon's lap, chatting with everyone, and was again surprised by their easy acceptance of his forbidding appearance. He saw strangers pat his back, leave a hand to linger on his shoulder, saw a brazen young woman try and take a seat in his lap, much to Anya's loud screech of outrage. Laughter floated from the house, but Gareth saw that even as the young woman tried to flee, embarrassed and humiliated, Daemon reached for her hand and drew her close, tracing lines on her palm and speaking soft words so that she had to lean down beside him and put her ear close to the cowl.

The man had an ease with women—and men—that Gareth envied, a knowing of their hearts that he had no hope of ever learning. He saw woman after woman gaze at his brother's second. From sweet little Anya to her mother to Odessa's ancient seamstress, they all melted under the honeyed voice. They all caught their breath, crowded around him, and brought him food, drink, and absolute, rapt attention. When Daemon finally excused himself, parting with Anya after a gift of a polished stone, several of the young men that had been congregating outside the cottage trailed after him.

Gareth followed at a stroll, walking just far enough behind as not to be noticed by Daemon. He was greeted by everyone he passed and noted that they all seemed a bit surprised to find that it was indeed the baron's son walking alone through the castle grounds, so accustomed were they to finding Penn H'rah in attendance of him.

The boys talked with Daemon, bringing forth their knives for him to inspect and pass judgment on. He stopped finally and

nodded, and Gareth watched as they went en masse to the middle of the inner bailey. Several of the boys had bows and arrows, and Daemon instructed them on the finer points of drawing the bow tight. They marveled at how fast Daemon could draw and fire. He turned and spoke, and even though Gareth couldn't hear the words from his distance, he noted their obvious awe, saw their eyes follow Daemon's motions with his hands, saw them jockeying for the position closest to the man, and marveled at the way they fell back into stride with Daemon when they turned to the path. They were blind to everything but the consul. Gareth could not recall a time that he had been asked for his opinion on a weapon, had been called on to demonstrate his prowess with a bow, or had been pursued with such single-mindedness. They soaked Daemon in, nearly stalking him in their desire to be near him.

Ehron's consul was obviously held in much higher regard than the baron's son. The reason for the regard was simple to understand: Gareth had not been to war. Boys who had only heard of battle now saw a warrior. They were drunk with the sight of him. Gareth almost felt sorry for the attention that Daemon would surely soon tire of.

He lost sight of the consul after being drawn into conversation with one of the maxims, and when he looked around, there was no sign of the man. He took the path around the outside of the keep, close to the buttery, and was suddenly shoved up against the side of the rough stone wall. He was startled, fighting for a moment before the deep, sexy voice spoke.

"Why do you hunt me, my lord?"

Gareth trembled under the gloved hand that had him pinned to the wall, looking into the darkness and finding nothing there. The grip Daemon had on him was solid and strong even though the other man was smaller, slighter.

"I..." Gareth swallowed hard. "I wanted to speak with you."

"About what concern, my lord?"

"I..." Gareth tried to think of something to say to the consul but ended up instead simply sighing his defeat. "Any that you would speak to me of, I would hear."

Daemon smiled under his cloak. It was an honest and painful answer. Such a confession deserved a reward.

"You... I mean not to offend you, consul, but you are a wonder to me."

"How so?"

"You are covered from head to toe. No one sees you, and yet they care not. Everyone would have you, and my mind seeks to understand this."

"Because you find me so loathsome?"

"No!" Gareth protested too loudly. "Nothing could be further from the truth. I find you... I... I..."

"My lord?"

"Truly, consul, I am barely able to think of any but you. I pray you do not find that confession a horror to your ears."

The truth, uttered there, quietly between them, with the faintest breath, washed heat through Daemon Shar.

"I mean only to speak to you of my heart."

"Heart indeed," Daemon chuckled, pressing against Gareth, sliding his thigh between the other man's legs, wedging them apart. Gareth could not contain the moan that wrenched itself free of his throat. He was painfully hard, and now Daemon knew it.

"Daemon...."

"Your heart, it seems, is not that which craves audience with me."

The consul leaned in closer, and Gareth saw the edge of the

darkness in the moonlight, the difference between the cloaked figure and the night.

“You—”

“Speak plainly,” Daemon ordered, his warm breath through the cloth ghosting across Gareth’s face. “Do you desire me, or am I merely a curiosity?”

Gareth’s voice cracked. “You, Daemon Shar. I desire only you.”

Quick, smug grunt, and Gareth was about to take offense when Daemon suddenly fell to his knees before him. He gasped at the ferocity of it, the tug on the laces of his breeches, the roughness, and the warm breeze on his cock, had his balls tightening the moment Daemon touched him. It felt good to be wanted. This was his last coherent thought before the consul’s hot, wet mouth engulfed him.

“Daemon!”

It was an assault, brutal and savage, and Gareth cried his pleasure at the violence of the act. The tongue that swirled and ran the length of his cock was coarse, but that only added to the feeling of submission. He was sucked and laved, swallowed down the back of the smaller man’s throat with a practiced ease that was a gift. The pressure, the movement, the fingers and lips moving quickly over sensitized skin, was too much for the son of the baron.

“Daemon, you must cease, or I will spill my seed and... Daemon!”

The suction only increased, and Gareth came undone under the wicked onslaught, rocking forward into the consul’s mouth, uncaring if he was bruising the back of the man’s throat. It felt too good. He was too far gone. As he roared through his climax, Daemon swallowed around his shaft, drinking down his release.

He licked the man clean, and only when Gareth was completely drained did he finally let the spent cock slip from between his lips. Gareth had been ravaged and wanted to voice his request to be so again.

Daemon rose fast, standing in front of the panting, trembling son of the baron.

“Shall I not do the same for you, consul?” he managed to say after several moments.

Daemon grunted. “It was my pleasure, Gareth Terhazien, as now I know that you do indeed taste as succulent as you look.”

His heart was in his throat—the man found him pleasing. “I would have you in any form that you would give to me, consul... for even as I ache to look upon your sweet face, if you come to me so cloaked and do not wish to peel away your layers, I would not ask it of you.”

Daemon was silent.

“I want to sit with you, talk with you, kiss you, and hold your cock in my hands.”

“This is all you hope for?”

He caught his breath. “There will come a time when you will no longer be able to bear keeping your skin from mine; I will wait patiently for you to confess your desire.”

“That day might never come,” Daemon said sadly. Gareth Terhazien, breeches around his ankles, slouching against a wall, eyes heavy-lidded in the moonlight, was enough to stop his heart. Daemon wanted to eat him.

“I beg you, consul,” Gareth began, shuddering as the last tremor of his spine-tingling orgasm rolled through him, “just one kiss.”

Daemon shook his head once and was gone.

“By the gods, man,” Ehron growled, appearing seconds later. “Put your shaft away after you take a piss. That’s the right of it. How drunk are you?”

Gareth watched his brother lurch past him, a chambermaid under each arm, and slowly slid down the wall. He needed a second to gather his thoughts. The long grass tickling his bare backside reminded him that he was half-naked.

He needed to find and speak to Daemon Shar.

Rising after several long minutes, he cinched up his breeches and headed toward the consul’s room. He realized suddenly that he had lied—he could not wait for Daemon to decide if he wanted him; he craved the man now. He wanted Daemon naked beneath him, spread out over his bed. Now that he knew what it could be like between them, now that the question of Daemon’s interest had been answered, his desire was not quenched, the flames only fanned. He would make Daemon his.

He moved faster as he tried to think of what he would say that would not sound idiotic. They had just met, and Gareth wanted to keep him? It was madness. Gareth could only hope that Daemon was just as enchanted as he.

When the revelry finally came to an end only hours before dawn, everyone had taken to their beds or to the road for home. Daemon never saw the inside of his room, and so he had no idea that the baron’s son had been waiting there all night. He did not sleep but kept the watch outside with the others as he had promised the baron.



## THREE

There were two routes to the capital city. The first was a more expedient and direct course that Torbald had wanted to take, and the second was a wider, more scenic, less direct one. After much discussion and urging, the baron had been persuaded, by his son's consul, to take the longer, less-traveled path, as Ehron, it was said, would do better at a slower pace.

"Why do I need to travel so slowly?" the prefect had snapped at his consul. "Have I taken ill and know not that I am infirmed?"

"I beg your pardon, my lord; I had ceased listening. Did you speak?"

And with that, Ehron had thrown his hands in the air in defeat.

Gareth hated traveling, the endless riding, the warm, sticky air, the boredom, and worst of all was the way Daemon utterly ignored him.

He had fallen asleep in the man's bed only to be woken by Amelina the following morning. She had come to wake Daemon and instead found her brother. They had stood there in the small room, staring at one another in awkward silence, until Ehron had walked in to gather Daemon's few scattered belongings.

"Where is Daemon?" Gareth had asked.

"He kept the watch as father bid him." Ehron squinted at him.

And Gareth understood at once why the man had never appeared. Duty called. He hoped that as they rode together that he would be able to draw the consul into a quiet conversation or at

least ask to speak to him privately. It was not to be. Daemon was in far too great demand, and it was the man's own damn fault.

Daemon's stories were skillfully told. He imitated voices of others and had the baron's family rolling with laughter over Ehron's misadventures in the desolate, icy wasteland that was Crosas. War was horrifying, but the taking down and building of camp, the pitfalls of falling asleep on horseback and of low, overhanging branches were hysterical. He was much too diverting a companion for the others to allow Gareth even a moment of time alone with him.

Ehron was glaring at his consul, threatening him with torture, and sputtering by the time Daemon began asking for the names of the different flowers and trees that they passed. Apparently the fauna was suddenly of great interest.

"I think we're close to winter home of the archlord," Odessa commented.

"Are we?" Daemon asked innocently. "How thrilling."

"I was told by one of the maxims that the daughter of the archlord would be making her pilgrimage back to the capital city soon," Amelina announced. "Perhaps we will see her and could all travel together? Would that not be exciting?"

A sudden thought struck Odessa, and she turned and squinted at her son's second. "Daemon Shar." She lowered her voice so that only he could hear. "Is this the reason for our present course? Are you hatching some form of plot?"

"Me? Plotting?"

She laughed at him, not for a second believing the incredulous tone of his voice.

Ehron scowled at his consul, his dark cobalt eyes firing.

"Perhaps we should stop and eat," Daemon suggested.

“What a marvelous suggestion,” Penn agreed quickly, as he was close to starving.

“You should wash your face and hands first,” Daemon told his prefect. “In the river.”

“Daemon, I—”

“You’ve been riding all day.” Daemon’s voice was coaxing. “It will refresh you.”

“I certainly don’t need to be refreshed like some sort of beast of bur—”

“Oh no?”

He growled at his consul. He was being baited, but to what end? “If I needed to wash, well you know that there are servants to bring the water to—”

“My lord, would you not go to the water instead of straining another’s back for your ease?” Daemon asked sadly.

“Daemon, a servant—”

“Should never be abused,” he told Ehron. “Is that not so?”

“Of course that is so, but—”

“Then you need to go to the river, my lord, if it will not task you over much.”

Ehron was too irritated to speak another word to his consul and stalked away without a backward glance. Before Daemon could follow, Gareth barred his path.

“My lord?”

“I would speak to you.”

Instead of answering, Daemon clapped him on the shoulder. “I would do your bidding, my lord, but time is short, and I must act.”

“Daemon, I—”

“Interfere not with my machinations. I would not stuff you in a barrel.”

His mouth dropped open as he stared at the darkness where Daemon’s smiling face should have been. And he knew that under the cowl the man was indeed smiling. He could hear it in the playful tone and in the low sound of his voice. He was so surprised that Daemon felt comfortable enough to tease him that he was, for a heartbeat of time, struck dumb.

“Did you mark me, my lord?”

Gareth heard the humor, and his stomach did a slow roll.

Daemon reached out and slid his gloved hand around the back of Gareth’s neck, his thumb sliding along the strong jaw and down the long line of his throat. It was a simple gesture but intimate at the same time. Gareth liked Daemon’s hand on him, the familiarity, the warmth. He enjoyed being the focus of the man’s attention, even if for only a fleeting moment.

“Now,” Daemon said, dropping his hand from Gareth to return his eyes to the back of his simmering prefect. “Remember to wash your face as well, my lord,” he called after him.

“Indeed,” Odessa agreed, not sure what Daemon was hatching but happy to help even without knowing the outcome. “Listen to Daemon, dearest. In fact,” she said, voice rising to include her whole family, “let’s all wash for the meal.”

His eyes flicking between his mother and the consul and then back to this mother, Gareth was certain he was missing something. Deciding quickly, he followed after Daemon, who had trailed after Ehron, to see the plot unfold. He found Ehron approaching the riverbank only to be redirected to another spot. Daemon wanted him somewhere else.

“Why?”

“Try there,” Daemon insisted, ignoring the question, pointing

to a place that had to be approached from a bit of an incline.

Ehron made a face, looking for the attack, unsure what was going on in the devious brain of his companion but knowing well enough that something was amiss. When he bent, leaning down toward the water, the foot planted squarely on the small of his back made perfect sense.

“Whoreson,” he growled, turning fast but just not quite fast enough.

Seconds later, he found his footing and stood up in the water, soaked and dripping, and eyed his consul. “You wretched man! What would possess you in the name of—”

“Why are you holding your face?” Daemon called back, noticing the action.

“I hit my cheek on a rock! Not that you care, you ungrateful bag of piss!”

His language was already coloring. “Is that a snake?” Daemon yelled, sounding alarmed.

Ehron jerked back, lost his balance, and fell backward into deep enough water that the fast-moving current that Daemon knew was there, just beyond where the man had been standing, grabbed Ehron hard. He shouted and was whipped sideways, suddenly sucked under for long moments before he broke the surface and was pulled quickly downriver.

“Ehron!” Gareth yelled for him.

“Perfect,” Daemon said under his breath, ending up chuckling over Gareth’s expression when the younger man turned to look at him. His face was a study in outrage.

“You’re trying to kill your lord.”

“A snake in the water.” Daemon made a noise in the back of his throat. “You know as well as I that, as large as the creatures

grow, he would have seen it even before I. Truly, my lord, who is the foolish one?"

"Daemon, this is a high crime you now stand accu—"

"Please," Daemon scoffed. "I've had better chances to kill him." He sighed before jumping straight up in the air, moving fast, far above Gareth, lost to the eye in seconds. He had moved quicker than anything Gareth had ever seen, and the reason was obvious. Even though he was responsible for putting Ehron into the river, he was also making certain that the man didn't drown. It was by far the most confusing thing Gareth had ever witnessed. Daemon was trying to kill his lord and keep him safe at the exact same instant. He was at a complete loss.

Daemon knew from the loud, incessant, and heated slurs about his mother, his family, and his "pox-ridden sire" that Ehron was fine. He was furious, fit to be tied, but he was in no danger of actually drowning or freezing or cramping up and sinking like a stone. It was the middle of summer; the mountain water was chilled, but not cold, and he couldn't sink as fast as the current was carrying him.

Daemon was watchful, whipping through the tree branches, running above the forest floor as fast as if he were flying over the ground. It was one of the only gifts he had received from the transformation: unmatched, untraceable speed.

He had charted the route of the river on a map and had spoken to several servants about the course of the river, how fast it ran, where the current was strongest, into what lake it emptied, and on whose land one would reach shore.

"Daemon, I will have you beaten!"

There was that possibility.

Daemon ran ahead, the leaps he made like giant arcs, looking more like flying than jumping. He was able to float easily

from the trees to the shore and, with the smallest of movement, soar high again on the breeze to finally land lightly on the marble veranda of the country villa that looked out onto the tranquil lake. The guards didn't even have time to react before Daemon was suddenly there, having materialized, it seemed, out of thin air. He stormed out onto the grand portico, yelling for help. Had he been an assassin, the beautiful woman who looked like she was carved from alabaster, the faintest flush of peach on her cheeks, would have been dead.

"Lady, help!"

The men closed in around Daemon, but Llyan Tapal, the daughter of the archlord, lifted her hand and kept them back.

"You poor dear," her voice, like a caress, reached Daemon. "What is your distress, pilgrim?"

He rose up, pointed down toward the shore. "My prefect was swept into the river when he knelt to drink, and now I fear he will perish from the chill."

She was terrified for the poor servant trying to save his master. Her heart swelled at the attire of the obviously diseased creature now prostrate before her. Perhaps he was covered in open sores, had the pox upon him; she could think of no other reason to be so swaddled when it was so warm outside, and yet still he had come to her, risking death, just in the hope that she would aid his lord.

Her voice lowered, grew commanding as she set her house on fire with her words, rallying servants and guards alike, yelling as she flew down the stairs, skirts flying, to reach Ehron Terhazien.

Daemon leaned on the railing of the palatial balcony and watched the villa empty beneath him, looking with satisfaction at the havoc he had created. After several minutes, he yawned loudly. It was nice outside in the sun, the warm summer breeze stirring the fragrances of grass and flowers together; the bouquet

was lovely. The never-ending stream of people following the daughter of the archlord probably had not noticed.

Llyan Tapal came to a sharp stop when the carved specimen of manhood pulled himself from the water. He was dripping with water, his lips were blue, and he was swearing under his breath, enraged... until he saw the angel in front of him.

She absorbed his violet eyes, the shirt that was sticking to his massive chest, his rippling torso, broad shoulders and strapping frame. His breeches were molded to powerful thighs and long, muscular legs. The stubble that lined his jaw, his thick hair running with water, his lips when he licked them, all of him was stunning, and she sucked in her breath. He was easily the most beautiful man she had ever seen.

“Lady,” he said, his voice hoarse and deep.

“Oh.” She tried to breathe. She really did. How she moved forward, she had no idea, but when he knelt to show her the proper respect as befitted her station, she was there, beside him, calling for a blanket to wrap him in. When he tilted his head up, the desire set upon Llyan twofold. At once she was tempted by deep, liquid sapphire eyes framed by thick, curling lashes, and seeing the wince of pain as her hand touched the injured cheek made her gasp. Maternal instinct and carnal appetite both focusing on Ehron, it was quite overwhelming for a girl of eighteen.

As Daemon watched the most sought-after woman in the realm fuss and worry over his prefect, he was very pleased with himself. With gifts of game he had wooed the warlord’s son, and now he had managed an introduction to the daughter of the archlord. Oh yes, before he had to leave, he would make sure that the man who had saved him from death had a life others only dreamed of. He would make certain of it.



## FOUR

They had been invited by Llyan Tapal, the daughter of the archlord, to spend the night at the villa with her and her governess before starting on for Tristan, the capital city, the following morning. Everyone had happily agreed.

Seeing Llyan Tapal and his son strolling together made Torbald so happy he nearly wept with joy, so when Amelina asked for coin to purchase material in a nearby town for a dress, she was given the gold without question. She was also granted the company of Ehron's consul, which was a treat for her and her mother—they had both asked for Daemon to join them—and a punishment for the servant.

"Tried to drown me," Ehron muttered under his breath. "Wretch."

"Did you say something, Ehron?" Llyan asked from where she stood, holding onto his arm.

He grunted out the no and shoved Daemon forward after Amelina. Gareth wanted to go as well, but Torbald wanted him to stay and speak to Llyan's cousins also in attendance at the villa, the nephews of the archlord. The more nobility who knew Gareth and remembered his name the better. Penn was allowed to trail after Daemon and called out to his friend that he should enjoy his visit. He was cackling as he left.

Tamburin was a bustling town that Amelina, who had lived her entire life in the country, always adored visiting. As they rode through, turning again and again down narrower and narrower streets as each split from the previous one, Daemon began to feel a little claustrophobic. The buildings in the part of town that they

were riding through were huge. Hotels and shops were everywhere, and the jostling mob of people seemed to soak up all the air. Daemon could barely breathe.

When they finally arrived at the shop Odessa wanted to visit, Daemon ordered the soldiers who had accompanied them to keep guard outside, dismounting but remaining near their horses. He followed Penn inside, as Odessa and Amelina had already entered the tiny establishment. It was as Daemon had imagined it, barren but for all manner of fabric hanging from the walls and counters. Odessa called the proprietress from the back room by name, and they exchanged squealing greetings before going into each other's arms and hugging warmly. The shop owner was astounded by Amelina's beauty and continued to praise her even as Odessa told her to stop, as she was embarrassing her child.

Daemon watched Odessa and Amelina pick out fabrics that were sheer and translucent, silk and velvet, thick and heavy with brocade, and finally several different kinds of furs. Daemon listened distractedly, wondering what it would be like to feel silk over his bare skin once more. It had been so long he had forgotten what it felt like.

The seamstress was laughing hard over some comment Odessa had made when there was a fierce yell from outside. Both Daemon and Penn ran to the entrance of the shop in time to see a man running into the crowd with Penn's broadsword raised high. All of Torbald's soldiers were on their knees; no one went after the man. Their first duty was to the safety of the baroness and her daughter. To leave Odessa or Amelina would be to forfeit their lives.

"Krishah!" Penn roared, starting after the man, toward the crowd, screaming out the curse of death, praying it would take.

Daemon grabbed hold of his jacket and had just enough leverage to stop him. "Penn, are you mad? What would make you—"

“Look at what it is,” he cried, pointing after the man. “I—I wanted to carry something... it’s not mine, Daemon; it’s Ehron’s. Look.”

And it was. Daemon had not noticed it earlier, and normally he saw everything, but during the ride his thoughts were on Gareth Terhazien instead of on the task at hand. He had been lost in his plan to somehow sneak into Gareth’s room that evening and seduce the man and so had missed everything else around him. But now he saw clearly the jewels on the hilt glinting in the sun, the caress of the light over the curved blade—his prefect’s prize possession from Crosas. It could not be stolen.

“I went to Ehron’s room and borrowed it,” Penn moaned, trying to twist free of Daemon’s grasp, trying to fly forward into the crowd. “I did not want to be rudely armed when all the soldiers had greater swords.”

“All will be well. I will go!” Daemon yelled, leaping in front of him. “I will find it and return it to my lord. On my honor and my life, I will bring it back!”

Penn froze suddenly, stopping himself before he slammed into the consul, and his eyes searched the darkness under the cowl.

“I promise,” Daemon pleaded, his voice low and husky. “I will find it. I swear I will.”

It took every drop of self-control that Penn had not to knock him aside and rush into the teeming mob of people. “Go, then!” he rasped, swallowing hard. “And know that if you find it not, I will be most displeased, and darkness will fall upon you.”

He grunted. “I fear you not, Penn H’rah,” he assured him before turning and running headlong into the crowd and disappearing from sight.

He knew Daemon Shar had no fear of him; he went out of duty to Ehron and nothing more. Smiling bitterly, Penn watched

for him in the throng of people but saw nothing.

“What has happened to Daemon?” Odessa cried, rushing up beside Penn, followed by Amelina.

“He has gone to fetch that which these men could not protect,” he said scornfully, waving his hand toward Torbald’s soldiers to include them all. “If either Daemon or Ehron’s sword is not returned to me, I will have every one of their heads!”

Odessa was terrified for both Daemon and her husband’s private guard. She was frightened of what Ehron’s reaction would be to the loss of his consul, and she was scared to death of her husband’s wrath. She was sorry that she had asked Daemon to come with her, because only Daemon would have insisted on going after Ehron’s cursed weapon. She was afraid of what Torbald would say, for had Daemon not taken responsibility for her and Amelina’s safety? And had Daemon not left without thought for them?

It was a fast, anxious ride back to the villa, and immediately Torbald, Gareth, and Ehron were there asking questions of them. Where was Daemon?

Penn explained to Torbald that he had taken responsibility for his wife and daughter, as Daemon had had no choice but to go after the sword. It was a matter of honor, after all. A man’s sword was his protection and his livelihood.

“Of what sword are we speaking of?” Ehron asked harshly. “Daemon would not have left for... what sword?” His voice lowered as he stepped in close to Penn, towering over the smaller man.

The tirade began soon after, and Llyan Tapal found the passion Ehron exhibited over the loss of his servant to be captivating. He made her breathless.

Torbald was satisfied with the reason for Daemon’s departure, but Gareth was not. He raged at Penn until his friend stalked away, leaving before he could lose control and strike

Torbald's youngest son. Ehron wanted to know if Daemon had been armed. Odessa assured everyone that Ehron's servant had been in possession of his carved baldric and sword. She hoped it was enough. Amelina described the town and the crowds and wondered aloud how Daemon would ever find the thief in the sea of people. Ehron told her that the point was that Daemon would never return without the sword. It was a matter of honor.

"Why can we not return and find Daemon and the sword?" Amelina asked Torbald.

"Mind that we must be at the capital in a cycle," Torbald told her, thinking of how quickly a month would fly by as they traveled. "And now we make the journey with the daughter of the archlord. Even if we rode there now, we would just have to return by dawn to leave. We cannot seek for either Daemon or the sword."

There was no time, even if they knew where to begin the search. It was hopeless, and everyone knew it. The archlord would not understand absence from court for the sake of either Ehron's second or his sword. Both were meaningless and replaceable to him. Cerus Tapal would accept no explanations for disrespect. The Baron of Kasan and his family were traveling with his daughter. They all needed to arrive together.

That night, Gareth sat in Ehron's room at the villa with him and listened to his brother talk about his second. He told Gareth story after story of how Daemon had kept him sane and grounded, the tricks that would be played on him and the kindnesses that were bestowed daily.

"He's been talking about leaving." Ehron sighed, looking out the window. "I wonder if he'll use this opportunity to simply disappear."

The very idea sent a chill down Gareth's back. "He wouldn't leave without saying farewell to you. You're friends, you and

Daemon, not simply prefect and consul.”

“We are, and that is why perhaps he would just leave, to spare us both the pain of the goodbye.”

“Why would you ever be parted?”

“I know not.” He sighed. “I had thought he would remain my consul and come with me from post to post wherever that might be from now to the end of my days.”

“What says Daemon?”

“He says that his... secret... would prevent that.”

Gareth leaned forward. “Would you trust me with that, Ehron? Would you tell me what lies beneath the robe?”

Ehron shook his head. “I know not.”

“In ten seasons....” The idea was just ridiculous. Of course Ehron knew; he just didn’t want to break Daemon’s confidence. “I swear I would never—”

“You think I’m being coy.” Ehron smiled at his brother. “Gareth,” he said, leaning forward, staring into the younger man’s eyes. “Truly, I know not. I have never been able to wrench the cowl away, twist it off him, or even accidentally throw him down and disrobe him. He’s faster than me, he never sleeps, and his eyes miss nothing. Truly, it’s like trying to sneak up on a cat. My guardian, the rat-catcher.”

“Pardon?” Gareth asked. The words had been spoken so wistfully.

Ehron took a breath, reclining once more. “The men of my legion gave him that name. They said that any man who could see in the dark, lead men through mazes with merely his nose, and find his way in and out of places with no doors or windows... aye, he’s a cat, a rat-catching cat.”

Gareth understood that he was being told something dear and important. After a long moment of silence, he finally became

aware of Ehron's fixed regard. "Why do you stare at me so?"

"Your admiration for the man... for my consul... grows. You want to bed him."

"I—no, I—"

Ehron lifted his hand to stop the protesting. "I have been at war long seasons, Gareth. I know the difference between the lust that rides men in close quarters and the look of a deeper, softer persuasion. Your desire is to keep him.... You are not the first."

Gareth cleared his throat. "So his secret... it does not keep him from.... Does he... take lovers to his bed?" He needed to know because it was where he himself wanted to be, in bed with Daemon Shar.

It was not a question that Ehron had ever thought to be asked by his brother. He studied Gareth's face, and after a few moments, nodded the affirmative. "He does."

They lapsed into another long silence, Gareth wondering about Ehron's answer, Ehron dredging his feelings to find the answer of how he felt about this latest development. His brother and his consul.... He had never imagined such a thing, but if Gareth's feelings were returned, if Daemon bound his life to Gareth's, to the house of Terhazien, that would please Ehron. As shield bearer, he could assure safety, prosperity, and to do that for Daemon, to give back even a quarter of what he had been granted, his heart swelled in his chest at the thought.

"Have you spoken to Daemon of your intentions?"

Gareth gave a quick shake of his head. "They were quickly coaxed from me but not easily voiced."

"I understand."

"I had not thought to speak to you of this."

Ehron shrugged. "All I understood before I went to war was consumed in ten seasons of blood and fire and death." He

breathed out. "I saw men I knew draw strength from one another and fight harder with more bravery because the one they loved stood beside them."

Gareth stared at his brother.

"I know no better man than Daemon Shar," Ehron told him. "If your heart desires him, then I can find no fault there."

"I had thought that I would be unseated from father's regard by your return, but now I see that your course and mine do not conflict."

"Of course not," Ehron told his brother. "You are a man of the land, Gareth Terhazien; I am a soldier. The land, the barony, will be yours."

Gareth caught his breath. "And if Daemon would stand at my side...."

"Then I would protect you with all the weight of my coming office," Ehron promised him. "For truly, how could Ram deny me?"

"All would seem blessed but for our missing man."

"And if that man would not be found," Ehron smiled ruefully, "then you will not even catch his tail."

The look on his brother's face let Ehron understand how deep the feelings for his consul truly ran. Gareth had stumbled hard.

"You must remember that he is a stray, and a stray has no home until he claims one. He has to make a stand and decide, and he never has."

"Perhaps he has never wanted to."

Ehron shrugged. "This is not for me to say. I will tell you this: if Daemon decides that he wants you as greatly as you desire him... I pity the man who would try and part him from you. I have seen the heat of his hatred as well as felt the weight of his love. You would be blessed to call the stray your own, Gareth. Truly blessed."



Gareth took a trembling breath. All he wanted was for Daemon to return.

Ehron knew that if Daemon did not want to be found, that he could be easily lost. The entire state of Rieyn was far too big to seek and find a single man. The consul was gone, and there was no way to track him down or bring him back unless he came on his own. It was a waste of time even to try.

They left for Tristan the following morning. Torbald had no choice. There was no sign of Daemon, and no one had really expected one. As days sloughed on into weeks, Torbald watched Ehron's mounting irritation with everyone around him, Amelina's lack of appetite, Gareth's frustration, Odessa's depression, and Penn's growing apprehension as they moved closer to the capital. It was heartwarming to see Llyan try and rally Ehron and his sincere appreciation for her pains. Ehron's sadness over the loss of his companion was absolutely enthralling to Llyan, and Odessa secretly wondered if this too was not part of Daemon Shar's plan in some way. To show a man vulnerable was irresistible to a woman, and Llyan found herself ensnared completely in Ehron Terhazien's web.

She fell into his eyes, his arms, and secretly, after a month, into his bed as well. When he told her he was going to ask for her hand the minute they reached her father, she wept with joy. When he pressed her to his heart, she understood that love was not like she had read in books or heard the court poets recite but was so much sweeter and darker. For living without the man in whose arms she now slept was not even a possibility for her.

Daily, Torbald ordered the camp moved, and each morning he cast his eyes back down the road they had come, searching hopelessly for a man wrapped in black, wondering even as he did it why he so cared. Why they all cared so very deeply.

## FIVE

It was an uneventful trek toward the capital without the humor and ease that had pervaded the early part of the long journey. A day outside of Tristan, with everyone anxious to rest and bring to an end the increasing tension and sadness, all was changed.

Gareth saw Daemon first because he was the only one still searching the horizon with his eyes. He rose slowly from the table where he and his family were having their evening meal. Like some phantom, the familiar shape was suddenly within reach. Daemon had returned to him.

“Gareth,” Odessa said softly, tentatively reaching for her son.

“By the gods,” Penn breathed, awestruck, watching Daemon limp across the torch-lined meadow toward the eating tables. The walk was not healthy but instead jerky and broken. “He has returned.”

“Daemon,” Torbald spoke the name reverently. “Daemon....”

Every step was agony on the swollen ankle, re-injured daily by the hiking that had to be endured. He stopped suddenly, bent over, and put his hands on his knees. Breathing deeply, he tried again to will the pain away.

Amelina gasped, and before Torbald could reach out and grab her, keep her from flying to Daemon so that Ehron, who had noticed his consul soon after Gareth, could go first, she was on her feet. Amelina dashed around the table, long, full skirts balled up in her fists, and ran across the meadow to meet the servant. Daemon straightened and let out a deep sigh before putting his hands on the small of his back. He stretched the long muscles,

leaning back, twisting to dislodge the tension and cramping that accompanied strenuous hiking on one good leg. Looking toward the encampment, he saw Amelina running toward him. Ehron saw the shake of the head, even from a distance, achingly familiar as well as the hand raised in greeting.

“He bears it!” Penn roared from behind the Terhazien clan, startling them all. “By the gods, he bears it!”

They all saw it then, the twin scabbards on his back.

Amelina was almost to Daemon when Penn passed her in a blur of speed. Overjoyed, overwrought, saved from disappointing Ehron, Penn could have wept with joy.

Even though Daemon braced himself for the tackle, preparing did nothing to lessen the ferocity of it. When Penn reached the consul, he threw his arms around Daemon, spun him around off his feet in the air, and crushed him against him hard. It was so hard in fact that the thought washed through Daemon’s mind that perhaps Penn had broken a rib. In his enthusiasm, Penn pounded on his back with his fist while Amelina tried unsuccessfully to pry him away. She wanted to be the one drowning in Daemon Shar.

“Release him, Penn, at once!” she almost screamed at her brother’s friend, furious with being kept from what she wanted.

At the tables, only Ehron and Llyan remained. All the others were running toward Daemon. Like moths to the flame, they went to him. When Ehron reached for Llyan’s hand, she was touched that he would want her with him even to greet his consul. She fell that much more in love and walked beside the man as he started across the meadow to his friend.

“Daemon,” Penn said, his voice husky with emotion. “Blessed be the gods.”

He held him close and patted his back even as Amelina tried to grab hold of his hand. “Fear not,” Daemon said gently, regaining his footing and stepping out of the fierce embrace.

Amelina flung herself into Daemon's arms, throwing him off-balance yet again. "I prayed and prayed," she promised, tightening her arms around his neck.

Daemon chuckled and squeezed Amelina tight. He had evidently been missed.

"Oh, Daemon," Amelina cried, the tears streaming down her cheeks as she buried her face in his shoulder. "Oh, Daemon, I am so pleased to see you."

Odessa pulled her daughter away gently so that she could take Daemon into her own arms.

"Oh, my dear child," Odessa murmured into his shoulder, squeezing him tightly. "My dear, dear child."

Daemon put a gloved hand on Odessa's cheek before releasing the older woman and taking a step back. "All is well," he said before turning to face Ehron, dropping to both knees in front of him.

"My prefect," he said loudly, bowing down before him, his face nearly in the dirt at his feet. "I return to you the sword you were granted by the warlord when you sacked the Crosan city of Talon. By its return, please know my loyalty. Your honor is avenged."

Ehron drew the jewel-encrusted greatsword from the scabbard on his consul's back, looked at it a moment, and then turned and passed it to Penn. "Return this to my wagon." He then looked back at Daemon.

"Rise," he ordered sharply, and Daemon got back up to his feet with a struggling effort. "Fool," he growled, grabbing the younger man, hauling him into his arms, holding him tight. "Your presence, your good company, is a much greater gift than this sword. Stay, remain at my side. I would it were ever this way."

Daemon allowed himself to be held for only moments before he pulled free. The embrace was kind but not what he craved.

After half a lifetime, he needed more, and at that moment the feeling was almost unbearable.

He wanted to go home. He needed to go home. The desire was choking him. He was tired of being unclaimed. No one in Rieyn really knew him. No one whom he had laughed with and drank with and broken bread with for the last ten years knew him at all. They didn't even know his real name. It was time to leave, and now that he had fulfilled this final task, now he could.

Gareth pushed by his brother, stepping around Ehron so he was all, suddenly, that Daemon could see.

He took a breath to steady himself, unsure if Daemon would pull away but unwilling to let another moment pass without touching the smaller man. Gareth reached out and drew Daemon slowly into his arms, tucking his head gently against his chest and holding him tightly against him.

Daemon felt the difference instantly. He was being held tenderly, as though he were fragile. The hands that clutched at him moved quickly, one behind his head, the other on the small of his back, pressing him forward into the other man's chest.

He wanted to lean hard, surrender up his balance and weight, go boneless in the man's arms. To be cared for, loved—this was his singular desire. Daemon ached to be alone with him. To lie down beside him would be so....

And it struck him as suddenly as if the sky had fallen down and crushed him, where he was, who he was, what he was doing! He jerked back sharply, as if burned, and so sudden was the movement that he nearly fell down.

"Ah," Ehron growled, grabbing his arm and yanking him around to face him. "What has happened that you are so weak?"

"I—I fought with...." He trailed off, unable to sustain his thought, incapable of doing anything more than waiting for Gareth's next word.

“By your silence my guess is that you have something to ask,” Gareth soothed him. “Come closer and speak to me.”

Daemon trembled, and Amelina asked if he was well enough to be standing.

“How long?” Daemon asked Gareth, unable to stop his words, visibly shaking now, unaware of all the attention focused on him.

“How long have I what? Wanted to hold you?” Gareth asked softly, bending forward, his mouth close to the cowl so no one else could hear.

Daemon nodded.

“Since you first came to us,” he told him softly, gently. “Before you wrung pleasure from me and allowed me to give nothing in return.”

“I—”

“I would take you to my bed if you would allow it.”

“Whore’s blood,” he gasped, and the ground rushed up to meet him. Daemon would have crumpled to the ground had Gareth not caught him, arm under his legs, scooping him up and tucking him protectively against his chest.

He looked bigger than he was. In the robe and cowl, he looked dark, foreboding, and twice his real size. In a swoon, in Gareth’s arms, Daemon Shar was small, fragile, and a delicate, breakable thing. Gareth had an overwhelming urge to take him and run.

“Mycah!” Ehron yelled, because he saw him first. “Hektar!” he yelled the second he saw the other prefect.

Gareth took a step back, clutching Daemon tighter.

“Mycah!” Ehron’s men cried out in joy from behind them, and everyone turned to look. “Hektar!”

“By the gods.” Torbald grinned widely, seeing Janah Ilen’s

son ride into camp. "It is the deliverer."

Mycah Ilen had ostensibly ridden to meet his friend and fellow prefect, Ehron Terhazien, who was a two-day ride from Castle Addah. He had brought with him Hektar Prahna, who had led the fifth legion, his own consul, Sagaso Fjohr, and his sleeping wagon, but no deployment of men, for who would dare threaten the life of the future Overlord of Rieyn?

He had ridden hard and fast, and his eyes searched out what he had come for. When the gray eyes found Llyan, the woman every nobleman of breeding and title coveted, they darkened, and his deep scowl worried Torbald for reasons he did not understand.

"Oh, Mother," Amelina started, "that is Mycah Ilen?"

"It is," Odessa said breathlessly, as awestruck as her daughter.

Mycah Ilen stood well over six feet tall with jet-black hair that fell thick and straight to just past his shoulders. The hair had been grown out during the war, worn long to help keep warm in the icy wind of the north. It was tied back now with a black leather cord, and the eye was drawn to the chiseled features, the hard line of his jaw, the short, well-groomed beard, before moving over broad shoulders and a wide chest. At that moment, watching him come toward them, Torbald had no doubt that this man would be overlord. Janah had sired a god, just as Nictorus had.

With every eye on Mycah, Gareth was able to move away faster, thankful for the interruption, the diversion. When Daemon's head fell back, the youngest son of the baron was rewarded with a long line of throat, smooth bronze skin, and the edge of a firm jaw. The collar showed the same unblemished flesh, and Gareth could not stop himself from tasting.

Ducking behind the tree line at the edge of the camp, he leaned close, opened his mouth against the succulent, delicious skin, and kissed the pulse at the base of the man's throat.

Daemon moaned in his arms.

The sound, the soft, sultry sound, sent a wall of heat through Gareth Terhazien. His cock strained against the laces of his breeches. Truly, after so many weeks of doing nothing but thinking of Daemon Shar, to now have the man in his arms was too much. To wait even another moment would have been torture.

Kneeling, supporting Daemon's head with a hand at the back of his head, he tenderly, carefully, eased the cowl back from the dear face so that all of the man was visible. The unveiling was a revelation.

Daemon Shar was beautifully made. Full lips, smooth, skin, high cheekbones, and a straight nose came into focus under Gareth's close scrutiny. The dark eyebrows were delicately formed, slightly arched, and the eyelashes were long and thick. He had never seen such sharp, fragile features. Taking a quick breath, he reached out and ran the back of his fingers slowly down the smooth cheek, so soft and warm. The lips were even softer to the touch, but he moved his hand away as though burned. Dark brown curls framed his face, and when Gareth put his hand through them, they tangled around his fingers, soft to the touch, silky.

As he took inventory of the beauty that was Daemon Shar, Gareth finally understood the feeling that had taken up residence in his heart. He wanted to keep him.

Never had Gareth wanted a wife; he wanted instead a friend, a helpmate, another man to love. His eye was never drawn to the curves of women. It was also never drawn to large, muscular men like himself, but instead to smaller, slighter, sinewy, lean-muscled men who moved gracefully, fluidly, like Daemon Shar. The man's looks, combined with what Gareth knew of a sharp mind, ready wit, and a deep sense of loyalty and honor, made him utterly irresistible. Daemon Shar could, Gareth knew, satisfy his heart, mind, and body. Here, finally, was the man who could stand at his



side. Having his happiness within reach, Gareth was sorely tempted to simply slip from camp and return home with his prize.

Daemon made a noise of waking, and Gareth quickly adjusted the cowl, the first piece that slid over the man's face and the second that came forward, completely swallowing him in heavy black fabric. Gareth had no idea how Daemon could even see out of it.

"There you are." Gareth smiled down at the smaller man as he jerked in his arms, pulling away from Gareth, moving back until he hit a tree, stopping there to sit up. "Daemon," he said softly, reverently, "would you come with me, allow me to care for you? May I tend to you?"

It was there in his eyes. All of the Terhazien clan had gorgeous, clear violet eyes beginning with Torbald, who had gifted all his children. But in Gareth, the eyes had taken on a different light. His were brimming with warmth and kindness and... home. Gareth looked like home and sounded like home with his quiet voice and gentle smile. Daemon couldn't speak, so he nodded instead.

Gareth rose to his towering height and reached a hand down for Daemon. "Come with me."

When Daemon stood, the throbbing ankle brought back the last few weeks. The thieves he had killed, the inn he had fled. The deliberate jump from a second-story balcony that had caused his ankle only momentary agony on landing, as he'd had to change direction mid-leap to miss striking people suddenly passing below. The arrow hitting his shoulder had been a surprise. The one thief had led him back to a den, and the fight had been harder than expected. He reached to touch the scabbed-over wound through the robe, wondering what this new scar would look like when he was finally able to examine it in a mirror. It would be as grotesque as the rest of his reminders of the war; of that, he was sure.

“Brocha bait,” he whispered to himself, turning in the direction of the eating-tables, meaning to collapse down onto one of the long wooden benches.

“No,” Gareth said softly, wrapping his arm around Daemon’s waist as he tucked the man into his side. “I am taking you to my wagon.”

Daemon caught his breath, and the sound, combined with the shiver, made Gareth smile. Perhaps he was not the only one feeling the crushing, devouring need.

Gareth let out a deep sigh as he leaned in close, his mouth down next to Daemon’s ear. “Why are you so weary? What have you done?”

Daemon couldn’t answer. There had been no sleep for the last few days, and fatigue was beginning to take its toll on his reflexes and senses. His body and brain were slowing. Daemon told him quietly about Ehron’s sword and what he had gone through to secure its return. Small in comparison to most of his deeds, it was nevertheless hard.

“How many thieves?” Gareth asked to clarify.

“Five, I believe, perhaps six.”

“A ring of them.”

“Aye.”

“At least it was a fair fight with that number.”

He groaned as Gareth laughed and the sound ran right through Daemon. He liked hearing Gareth laugh, liked all the noises the man made, liked him plain and simple.

It was the sigh, the slight whimper of absolute surrender at the end, that did it. Gareth turned, faced Daemon, and grabbed him, crushing him to his heart.

“My lord,” Daemon protested weakly, not moving, not trying to squirm free, not wanting to do anything at all to scare Gareth

off. Having Gareth hold him, be possessive, was a gift. “Are you well?”

Gareth dropped his face down into the other man’s shoulder, and his hands moved across Daemon’s back, tightening his grip, slowly, careful not to frighten him. “First you intrigue me, then attack me—”

“Oh.” Daemon shoved free, realizing immediately what Gareth had been moved to say. “Please, my lord, forgive me. I....” Daemon searched for the words to assure the baron’s son that he would never, ever, touch him again. Gareth obviously did not want a second occurrence of the mauling that he had been forced to submit to the first time. He was revolted by what had been done to—

“No,” Gareth cut him off, strong hand on Daemon’s bicep, yanking him forward, back into his arms. He held Daemon tighter, breathing in sweat and sun and dust and the rich, spicy scent that was the consul’s alone. “Listen, truly hear me.”

Daemon trembled in his arms, not daring to return the embrace, desperate to hold the other man and terrified that he might pull away if he did.

“Even though I am certain that there are greater words, more polished to declare myself to you with, I fear that I do not possess them,” Gareth said, clutching Daemon tighter. “So you must simply hear these and accept the weight that they carry.” He took a quick breath. “You belong to me, my dearest Daemon, for now until the end of days.”

Surely Daemon has misheard. “My lord?”

Gareth sighed deeply, leaning his head against Daemon’s. “You know nothing of me, you have taken me for less than I am, and I have allowed this false conclusion to be drawn.”

“I—”

“The day you pretended to drown my brother, I saw your true

power and so know well that if you were not hurt and tired that I would not be able to hold you thus unless you allowed the touch."

"My lord, you—"

"Would you have me hold you, touch you... tell me. Would you?"

There was a path that duty demanded, that common sense demanded, and there was another that his heart hoped for, wanted. He had to choose.

"Daemon?" Gareth asked hesitantly.

He heard the growing apprehension in the other man's voice, knew he was the cause and hated it. Lifting up, Daemon wrapped his arms around Gareth's neck, pressing himself to the larger man so there could be no mistake. "Any touch that you would gift me with, my lord, I would greedily accept. I had thought that I frightened you that night I took my liberty with—"

"No," Gareth cut him off, hands clutching him tight. "You took nothing I would not have willingly given had you—"

"There you are," came the deep, booming voice.

They flew apart, both turning together to face the huge man striding toward them, built square and solid and covered in heavy-plated armor. A huge broadsword hung at his hip. He was quite a sight with his bald head, beard, and mustache.

"Stand still," the man called laughingly to Daemon. "I would greet you."

Daemon began to drop down to one knee even though it hurt to do so.

"No," Gareth ordered, stopping him before turning fast and kneeling himself.

"What are you—"

"Silence," Gareth cut him off, flipping Daemon over his

shoulder and rising in one smooth motion.

“My lord!” Daemon gasped. “I am the Consul of the Prefect of the First Legion, and the man you see walking there is the Prefect of the Fifth Legion, Hektar Prahna! Now put me down so I may greet—”

“Be still,” Gareth ordered sharply, liking the feel of Daemon Shar’s hands on his back, his groin pressed to his shoulder, and the swell of the firm, round globes of his ass under his fingers as he patted them gently.

“You take too many liberties, sir, you—”

“I will enjoy having you flat on your back, your legs wrapped around me. I can barely wait, Daemon Shar... truly, it is all my mind conjures.”

Daemon’s heart stopped. “I—”

“Come, Prefect,” Gareth yelled over to Hektar Prahna, cutting Daemon off. “If you would have words with the consul, then follow me. He’s hurt, and I need to tend him.”

“Aye,” Hektar Prahna agreed, increasing his stride to catch up, falling into step beside the one man as he carried the other. “How were you injured now, Shar? More raiding for your prefect?”

“I? Raiding? That’s a gross slur on my character, sir!”

Hektar laughed hard, reaching out to tug gently on the cowl. “Can we not dispense with this artifice now that the war is won? I grow weary of it and would look on your true face instead of this present darkness.”

“Prahna, I—”

“Alma, Jalen,” Gareth called out to the two serving women he saw first when he entered the area where all the Terhazien wagons had been camped for the night. “I need bath water and food and drink for the prefect. Prepare my wagon for guests!”

They ran to do as he ordered, and Gareth stopped walking

and swung around to face the prefect.

“My brother was Prefect of the First Legion, you of the Fifth. Are you friends or rivals, sir, for he will marry Llyan Tapal, I would wager you.”

“You speak plain. I like this.” Hektar smiled wide, disregarding completely Daemon’s plight, as Gareth had not addressed it. “Aye, boy, we are friends, and if he has spellbound Llyan Tapal as he has every woman that sees his golden hair and jewel-colored eyes, then I will not be the one to snatch her from him with my battle-worn visage. Well I know that both Ram Troen and Mycah Ilen thought to woo the girl, but as always they have forgotten the quick mind of his servant and so have missed the mark.”

“I don’t understand,” Gareth said, flinching slightly as it felt as though Daemon Shar had put claws into his thigh and buttocks. “And if you don’t stop squirming, I will relieve you of the light.”

“Then put me down, you daft man.”

“If I do, will you promise to sit still with your leg up and not move?”

Daemon growled, absolutely stunned at the change that had come over Gareth Terhazien. He had never been anything but the soul of propriety. Even when Daemon had attacked him, he had stood by passively and allowed the assault. But now he had suddenly changed into... what? He was acting as though Daemon belonged to him and more. “I am the con—”

Gareth bounced him on his shoulder to show him who was in control. “I apologize, Prefect; the consul needs to learn his place in a world without war.”

“Indeed he does. With the war over, the purses all paid, and as he is not a citizen of Rieyn and so cannot serve in the military in other than wartime, his commission is gone. He is a freeman

with no ties to any. He stays with Ehron at his urging and none other. Daemon Shar could leave your brother, and this is the matter I would speak to him of.”

“And what is your desire, Prefect?” Gareth asked on Daemon’s behalf.

Prahna gave Gareth a sly grin. “I had thought to invite him to be steward of my estate, but I see that perhaps you have other plans for the hellion.”

“I am not a—”

“Make no mistake,” Prahna cut off the smaller man dangling behind Gareth. “He has plotted to secure the seat of shield bearer for your brother by way of befriending Ram Troen and forging a match of your house to that of the archlord’s. I know not how it was done, but I know well his handiwork when I see it.”

“Prahna!”

Laughter from the prefect was interrupted by a call from the serving women.

“Oh,” Gareth said, “My servants bid me that preparations have been made. Come inside.” Gareth presented his modest sleeping wagon. “Enter, Prefect.”

It was larger inside than Daemon would have guessed. There was a bigger area for eating and entertaining and, behind a sliding wooden door, a tiny bedchamber. There were furs to sit on and linen pillows and a low table covered in meat and cheese and bread. An enormous platter of fruit sat in the center with a steeping pot of tea, a pitcher of water, and an open wine decanter. As Prahna sat down, Gareth passed him by, carried Daemon the length of the wagon, threw open the door, and tossed him down onto his pallet bed. He wasn’t prepared for how fast Daemon rolled over and tried to scramble away, but the space was tiny and so his quarry easy to secure. Gareth grabbed Daemon’s good ankle and yanked him back to him.

“Let me—”

In the same moment, Gareth shoved the cowl away, pushing the piece covering Daemon’s face back, revealing the consul. Daemon tried to shove his hand away, but it was too late. Gareth brushed the long mahogany curls from his face and unveiled the amber eyes that appeared when Daemon lifted his head. Thick, brown lashes fluttered for a moment before he looked for the first time on Gareth without the cover of black.

Daemon couldn’t breathe.

Gareth’s eyes slid all over him.

He swallowed hard. “Speak.”

“Tis hard when you steal my very breath,” Gareth confessed shakily.

The mischievous brows, chiseled features, and the full, soft, sinful mouth was enough to make Gareth Terhazien raw with need.

*Mine.*

He heard the word in his head and felt it in every beat of his heart, in the blood rushing through him, in the clenching of his stomach.

*Mine.*

The man belonged to him, and it was done.

Daemon was shaking as his eyes remained locked with Gareth’s.

“Why do you tremble?”

“No one has seen the man that I am in ten seasons, my lord.”

“For what cause?”

“I am a beast.”

Gareth reached out a hand, and Daemon leaned forward into it, closing his eyes as the fingers slid over his cheek and jaw,



joined fast by the other hand as Gareth greedily mapped the terrain of the face of his love. "You are beautiful. 'Tis all I see."

*But how?* Daemon's mind reeled.

Ravel, Unharc of his brother the Ko-Tai, had cursed him. Whether or not his brother Arterus knew what she had done, he knew not. What he did know was that he was a cat.

He was covered from head to tail in gray fur. His muzzle was white, and his eyes, which had been a deep burnished-amber, had changed to a bright, frightening, glittering gold. He was stronger and faster now that he was half-man, half-cat, but that was the one and only benefit he had ever found. For ten long years there had been only the transformation drowned in blood as he had gone to war instead of going mad. The metamorphosis would have killed a weaker man, but Daemon, raised to accept fate and to accept duty, had resigned himself to a life of disguise. When he had come upon the battle on the field at Arca, he had rushed forward to save Ehron, seeing the man ready to attack him from behind. The prefect had turned in time to find himself not impaled at the end of a broadsword but instead saved by a man cloaked in black whom he would come to trust with his life.

All of him was disguised so no one would shriek in horror at the animal pretending to be a man. For ten years he had hidden himself. Serving Ehron had given him purpose. Plotting his ascension gave him a path, but now... now this man he had never expected, had never seen coming, the brother of his lord—this man had looked past the frightening exterior to his heart. This man had wanted what lay beneath sight unseen. And now, by whatever magic bound the spell, he was transformed, and Gareth saw his true form.

Daemon wanted to test, to see if, by the removal of Gareth's hand, the fur would return. Would claws again grow where fingers were? Would smells, sights, and sounds assail him? Would he be able to move like the wind? He wanted to know and so asked, "Lift

your hand from me, my lord.”

Gareth’s eyes narrowed. “I would not have you leave me.”

The only truth Daemon knew at the moment was that never from this moment forward would Gareth ever need to consume himself with such a worry. “I will remain in this wagon unless you order me from it.” His breath hitched. “I swear on my life.”

Gareth nodded and released the man he had no intention of ever allowing to leave him.

Daemon sat still and silent, trying not to so much as breathe as he waited for something to happen, for his body to run with fur or to be seized by a devouring pain before he crumpled and died.

Gareth arched a golden eyebrow.

“Will you break bread with me or no?” Prahna called to them.

“We will, Prefect,” Gareth called back, chuckling, leaning forward, and bending down close to the man he planned to make his own. “Perhaps you will spare me a kiss, Consul, that will slake my thirst through this meal.”

Daemon whined in the back of his throat as he realized that the only transformation he was going through was the one of his body heating, his skin on fire as he ached to press all of it against the man hovering over him.

“Your rod strains against your lacings,” Gareth growled into his ear. “Shall I suck that for you and drink down your offering?”

The man was wicked and wanton, and how in the name of the high ones had Daemon missed that?

“I have taken many men to my bed,” he told Daemon, his voice husky and low, “but never have I taken one as bewitching as you, and if you will be mine, I will never take another.”

Such sweet words.

Daemon lifted his hand, reaching up for Gareth, but he

suddenly stopped, staring at the glove. Slowly, carefully, he removed the elbow-length leather covering to reveal smooth, pale skin. He wiggled his fingers in wonder before his head tipped back to look at Gareth.

“Do you want to touch me?”

He swallowed hard, nodding.

Gareth took hold of the hand and placed it gently on the side of his neck.

Daemon’s breath caught, and his eyes, the beautiful, amber-flecked eyes, absorbed Gareth’s face.

He smiled slowly, and Gareth found that breathing was suddenly hard. The beguiling, bewitching creature lying beneath him, staring up at him with such trust, such hope, had stolen his heart without him even noticing. He’d known he wanted the consul, wanted him in his bed, but until that moment, he didn’t realize it was love. How it had happened was hard to fathom, but it was a certainty.

“As you no longer belong in the service of Rieyn or to my brother,” Gareth said softly, “I would you belong to me, my dearest Daemon.”

Daemon’s hand slid around the back of the man’s neck and up his nape into his hair. The noise that Gareth made in the back of his throat made him smile. “Such a sensual creature you are.”

“I simply need you to touch me and bed me and just... stay.”

But could Daemon stay? “Let me first give you the kiss you crave, Gareth Terhazien,” he said, easing him down close. “For my heart beats with the same desire.”

Gareth bent and sealed his lips over Daemon’s. He expected the kiss to feel and taste like others he had received and so was overwhelmed that it was not. Daemon ravaged his mouth, kissed him voraciously, sucking, licking, biting, his tongue swirling

around Gareth's as he took absolute possession. Gareth fell into the kiss, stretching out over Daemon, his leg between Daemon's thighs, pinning him under him, wrapping the smaller man tight in his arms.

The moan that came out of Daemon made Gareth smile against the man's mouth.

"I would speak to you, consul!" Hektar Prahna barked from the other side of the small sliding door. "Molest your man later."

Gareth lifted up, his own heavy-lidded eyes locked on Daemon's. Looking at the consul, seeing his passion-clouded gaze, the dark, swollen lips, hearing his panting breath, Gareth realized how much he ached to be alone with the man.

"Send him away," he said, his voice deep and husky. "I need to be buried in you, Daemon Shar. I need to make you mine."

Daemon smiled slowly, wickedly, but then sucked in his breath when Gareth accidentally touched his ankle.

"Oh." His brows furrowed, his hand instantly in Daemon's curls, brushing them back from the eyes he was already a slave to seeing. "Forgive me; I forgot, in my ardor, that you were hurt." He turned and looked over his shoulder. "A scrap more, Prefect."

Daemon sighed deeply.

"The prefect begs for attention, but I will care for your first," Gareth told him, his hands sliding down Daemon's leg to his ankle. He propped up the wounded ankle, peeling off the stocking to reveal a small, finely boned, high-arched foot. The wounded ankle was clearly visible, the redness and swelling making Gareth wince.

"I am well," Daemon lied, tears welling up in his eyes, overwhelmed and amazed at seeing his own skin.

"You are hurt," Gareth corrected him, "and we must wrap this, but first you need a bath."

A bath sounded like a dream.

Gareth opened the sliding door, stepped out, and then closed it behind him. Daemon closed his eyes and let his head fall back on the pillows. It felt so good to be lying down, having another care for him—overwhelming.

“I will speak to the consul now, Gareth Terhazien.”

“You will hold on my word, Prefect, or remove yourself from my wagon.”

Daemon waited to hear Hektar’s decision. The fact that Gareth had given the dangerous man an ultimatum was stunning, and it was even more so that Hektar seemed to be considering the terms.

“He has only just now been restored, Prefect. I wish to speak to him as much as you.”

Daemon was surprised at Hektar’s grunt of agreement but had noticed that there was something about Gareth that commanded respect. He was not loud and hard like Ram or Mycah or even his brother. It was more of a quiet strength that radiated off the man.

Gareth opened the door and called outside. As water was continually heated in several vats throughout the day, minutes later, four male servants carried a large copper tub into the wagon for Daemon to bathe in. A screen was set up so that Daemon could sink naked under hot water without any eyes to see but his own. After a few minutes of soaking and listening to Gareth and Hektar discuss the food, horses, and the ride from the castle, he began to wash himself with the abrasive soap made from meal that Gareth had left for him. It was rough to the skin from the tiny pieces of nuts and seeds in it. The only aroma it gave off at all was to make the washer smell like newly milled grain.

“Hear me from where you are?” Hektar called to him.

“Aye, Prefect,” Daemon sighed, the water so soothing he was

trembling.

Gareth sat beside the screen, guarding the only path to the man, wanting more than anything to lift the consul from the water and return him to his bed.

“Would you hear the news from court?”

“I would.”

Deep breath. “It seems that I have been commanded by the warlord to sack Caruvia for her part in the war.”

“For providing supplies to Crosas?”

“Aye.”

“And what of Narsyk?”

“Why would an empire as vast as Narsyk care about a tiny country like Caruvia?”

“For the same reason that Crosas cared about Rieyn,” Daemon told him firmly. “Your country bordered theirs. Mind you, one of the many reasons, outside greed, that Crosas even began war with Rieyn was out of fear of Narsyk.”

“True, Narsyk was rumored to be ending their civil war, and so the King of Crosas wanted to unite the borders of the continent in preparation of an attack from that quarter.”

“As well as to acquire more land and gold,” Daemon told him.

“Aye, and only when Rieyn refused to submit did we become the object of war.”

“So I say to you then, why would a smart man like the warlord ever believe that Narsyk would simply sit idly by and allow Rieyn to conquer a country on their border? This path makes no sense.”

“I do not understand the move myself, but I was to go, and only this set were those plans changed when I spoke to Mycah,” Hektar told him.

"Tell me," Daemon urged, rinsing away the soap and dirt from his skin and hair.

"It seems that Crosas has been taken under the rule of Narsyk. Cisidian Vahl of the newly formed sixth legion was expelled from Crosas a fortnight ago. The entire occupational force was ordered from Crosan soil on threat of death."

Daemon stood up fast and cried out when too much weight was put on his ankle. Gareth was immediately at his side, wrapping him in a thick robe before scooping him up into his arms. He tucked him against his chest, again marveling at how small and fragile the man was.

"I am well," he told the bigger man who held him. "I am no trembling maid, Gareth Terhazien. I am the Consul of the First Legion."

"You are mine; 'tis all you are," Gareth told him.

Normally Daemon would have argued over anyone telling him what he was or was not, but somehow hearing Gareth's declaration of possessiveness sat well instead of goading his temper.

"Bring the consul to me," Hektar ordered.

Daemon's fingers trailed over the stubble that lined Gareth's jaw and across his cheek.

Gareth turned his face so that he could kiss the palm, his eyes fluttering shut as he drank in the contact of skin on skin.

Never, ever, had Daemon had another that so wanted him. Even more astonishing was that, sight unseen, Gareth had desired him. Even if he returned to his previous form, Daemon was certain that Gareth's feelings would remain unchanged. The man craved his attention as much as his touch. It was a stunning revelation.

"The form that I have so long covered is beastly Gareth Terhazien and well I might find myself returned."

Gareth's eyes opened a crack and glinted in the waning light. "There is no shape you would take that I would not find favor in."

"You cannot know the horror I could be."

"I have no fear and neither should you."

It was pointless to argue. "Set me before the prefect."

When Gareth placed Daemon down on the furs beside the table, Hektar's smile was wide.

Daemon sighed deeply. "Speak, dreg."

Hektar shrugged. "I had not thought there would be golden eyes on you, rat-catcher."

"No? What other color for a cat?"

He nodded, reaching out to gently pat the face of the consul. "I am so glad to finally see you, but tell me, why the dark visage during the war?"

Daemon cleared his throat. "To be mistaken for a maid in a sea of men could be dangerous, Prefect, could it not?"

"Indeed," he said, taking in the smooth skin, thick, dark lashes, and plump lips. The man who had stood beside him in battle, been lethal and deadly in combat, had the most delicate features Hektar Prahna had ever seen. Even as he was not a lover of men, there was still no denying that Daemon Shar was not a handsome man—he was a beautiful one. Had he walked through camp with his long, curling hair and big, golden eyes, Hektar did not doubt that he would have been molested. The disguise had been an inspired choice.

"Speak of Narsyk," Daemon prodded him as he drank deeply from the goblet of water that Gareth passed him.

The long line of the man's throat as he drank had the prefect momentarily transfixed, but the question brought him back to himself.



“The men leaving Crosas by ship saw a fleet of corsairs flying the flag of the hawk, the great raptor of Narsyk. Others reported seeing an entire armada sailing toward the bay of Creon when they were leaving it. The giant of the west has been awakened by our small war, Daemon, and they will wipe us off the map of the world if they choose.”

“What are you saying?” Gareth gasped. “Are you telling us that Narsyk has turned its predatory eye on Rieyn and they seek to do us harm?”

“I tell you that they have left us alone only because they have been engaged in their own civil war. Now that their war is over and they are a country united, it makes sense that they would seek to destroy any that they would consider a threat.”

“But we pose no threat to them. We don’t even share a border. We border Crosas only on this continent. Caruvia is across the channel from us, and Narsyk lies above that.”

“The commander from Narsyk informed Cisian that Caruvia is now under their protection and that Crosas itself is now a territory of Narsyk. Their plan is to place a steward there, a regent who will report directly to the new emperor. So now, as Crosas has become, in fact, a territory of Narsyk, a holding, we do share a border with the giant.”

“Is that where Cisian Vahl bides? Is he guarding the border with the sixth legion?”

Hektar nodded. “After being expelled, Cisian retreated only as far as Rieynan soil and is there now, in the mountains of Esher, building, preparing fortifications, bracing for an invasion should one occur.”

Daemon stared at Hektar. “And what of this fleet of theirs? This armada?”

“We know not. We have reports of it but have not yet spotted any ships.”

“You spoke of a delegation,” Daemon said, holding his goblet still as Gareth refilled it.

“A ship flying under the colors of truce was met by several of our own and is being escorted to an audience with the archlord. They are expected to make landfall within a cycle.”

“What does the warlord say?”

“Nictorus says to prepare for war. He says that the giant has come to slaughter us all.”

Daemon trembled hard.

“War cannot be averted if it comes to our shore,” Gareth said, looking for agreement from the Prefect.

“Aye, but why send a delegation to speak with the archlord if their thought was only of invasion?” Daemon asked.

“Yours are the same words, the same questions, that Mycah’s father, Janah Ilen, speaks. The overlord counsels for peace and not war, to hear what the delegation has to say before arming ourselves for a siege.”

Daemon sucked in his breath. “Tell me, Prahna, is the civil war in Narsyk truly over?”

“Aye. We have confirmation from Ram himself. When he set sail from Crosas, Cisdian Vahl was receiving a messenger from Narsyk informing him of the end of their civil war and the annihilation of the imperial forces... or the rebel ones.” He sighed. “We know not. Tell me who was on the throne when you were there.”

“Arterus.”

“Well then perhaps your Arterus has defeated the rebel horde, or the rebels have routed him, but again, we know not. Even the name of the family of the emperor we are not privy to. We know nothing of this man.”

Daemon was silent, thinking.

Gareth was about to ask another question when there was a knock. "Come," he called out.

The door opened, and a servant stood in the doorway. "My lord, Mycah Ilen asks that you and Prefect Prahna attend him at once."

Hektar grunted and began to rise. "Come, Gareth, we are summoned before the deliverer."

The messenger gave a quick bow and was gone. Gareth stood slowly, torn, not wanting to leave but knowing he had no choice.

"Daemon."

He turned to look up the long line of Gareth to his face.

"You must rest. Do not leave the wagon," Gareth told him, leaning in, hand on Daemon's cheek, caressing his skin. His voice lowered. "I need to know you are here waiting for me."

"Aye, my lord."

Daemon's hair was tousled suddenly, and he realized the touch was harder, lacking tenderness. He smiled as he tipped his head to look up at Hektar Prahna.

"It was good to truly see you, rat-catcher, and now I would have you eat and drink more water and rest. These are my orders for you. Attend them."

As Hektar stepped down out of the wagon, Gareth put his hand back through the thick, unruly curls. He massaged Daemon's scalp, rubbing where Hektar had tugged.

"He didn't hurt me," he assured Gareth, liking the feel of the man's fingers in his hair.

"But he wasn't gentle. No one is gentle with you, and they should be."

It made Daemon's chest hurt to think that Gareth both noticed and concerned himself.

“Stay here,” Gareth said shakily, hand under Daemon’s chin, tipping his face up. “Please. You swore to not leave the wagon. Are you a man of your word?”

Daemon nodded, not trusting his voice, unsure if it might give out on him.

“I will return,” Gareth promised, tracing a wicked eyebrow with his thumb. “Stay.”

When the two men were gone, Daemon immediately pushed Gareth from his mind and turned his attention to Narsyk. How in the world was he going to best a giant?

## SIX

“Good rise to you both,” came the greeting.

Amelina and Penn both looked up as they passed Gareth’s sleeping wagon and saw Daemon leaning over the side. He was swaddled in his cloak, so they could not see his face, but the voice, the warm, husky voice, put them both at ease.

“Good rise to you, Daemon Shar,” Penn called out the greeting in return. “How goes the world for you?”

“I cannot complain.” He chuckled; the slumberous quality of his words was not lost on either the daughter or the steward. “I ride into your great city of power on top of this wagon stretched out in warmth and leisure. I am content.”

“May I ride there with you?” Penn asked, forgetting about the entrance he would or would not be making, more interested in safety. He felt safe with Daemon, as though he would care for him, let no harm come to him. As they now traveled with prefects and the daughter of the archlord, it was easy to forget one’s manners. Penn preferred knowing that he could simply speak his mind and not be punished for it.

“May he?” Daemon asked the servant driving the wagon, Iures Jok. “Or may he not?”

It was kind of Daemon to ask, and the older man was delighted. As steward, Penn did as he liked, but the former consul had given Iures say in the matter, and he was pleased. “He may,” Iures smiled, his tone gentle. “One more does not weight the load overly much.”

Penn threw his horse's reins to Iures while swinging his leg over the pommel of his saddle. As Gareth's servant hitched Penn's mount to the lead bar, Penn stepped deftly from the stirrup up onto the wagon. Standing beside the driver, he then pulled himself up to where Daemon was lying languidly in the sun, all stretched out.

"I would ride there as well?" Amelina asked timidly of Iures Jok. He shook his head, she was a gentlewoman, she should not be atop a wagon, but her sweet smile and big eyes swallowed him whole. In the end, the wagon had to be stopped for Amelina to be raised up beside Penn H'rah and Daemon Shar.

"Not one of us has ever been to the city," Daemon said to Iures, leaning over the edge, directly above the driver's head. "Will you guide us?"

"Aye," the servant chuckled. "I will point out the sights for your new eyes to see."

Penn stretched out beside Daemon, between him and Amelina, and watched the landscape even as he was aware that his side was brushing against Daemon's as they jostled along.

"Why do you ride here on Gareth's wagon and not with Ehron or his men?"

"As Prefect Prahna reminded me last night," Daemon yawned, "I have no commission. I am no longer a soldier of Rieyn and must cease to carry myself that way. Ehron may employ me as his consul, but we have no formal contract drawn between us. I am a freeman, Penn H'rah, and so should comport myself in a manner befitting my new station."

"And so you languish here in the sun and do nothing."

"Aye, I bide at Gareth's discretion."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "I am not yet ready to leave, and as I have no

wagon and want not to place myself in the way of secret meetings between Ehron and Llyan Ander, his wagon is no longer a place that I may not find myself a burden."

"I am certain that Ehron does not see you as a burden."

"He is a man in love," Daemon corrected him. "Any impediment to his love is a bother. I would stand clear of him."

"And the men?"

"The men are no longer bound to me. They will listen to Seone or another in my stead. My rank, my title, has been stripped from me."

"Ehron's men, your men... it's doubtful they see you diminished in any way."

"That decision is not theirs to make."

"Daemon—"

"Peace." Daemon yawned, moving forward to lean over the edge so that he was close to Iures. "What is that statue there, Iures?"

"That is a rendering of Cerus Tapal," Iures answered, turning to look at Daemon. "Have you not seen the archlord, lad?"

"No, sir, I have not."

"Oh, look," Amelina said suddenly. "There rides Gareth."

They all turned to look and saw Gareth riding between Mycah Ilen and his brother, with Hektar Prahna on the other side of Ehron.

Daemon raised a hand, and all four men returned the wave.

"It would seem," Mycah chuckled softly, taking in the sight of the three heads atop Gareth's sleeping wagon, "that Daemon's company is once again appealing."

Ehron grunted. "I was not able to speak to him last night, as

we all spoke well into the rise, but I would have him sign a contract to remain my consul.”

Gareth had not been able to return to his wagon and speak to Daemon either. The news from court had occupied his father as well as he and Ehron. When he finally returned, Daemon was sleeping soundly and all he could do was collapse down onto his bed beside the smaller man. As he had spooned around Daemon, even that small amount of contact gave him an overwhelming feeling of contentment. He was only disappointed when he woke hours later to find himself alone. And even though Daemon had only gone as far as the roof of his wagon, the day had begun and Gareth had to bathe and dress for his entrance into the city. There was no time left to seduce his brother’s consul.

“If we are to war,” Mycah said, recapturing Gareth’s wandering attention, “Daemon will be a great asset, as he is from Narsyk and knows the mind of the plainsmen, knows their tactics.”

Ehron looked over at Mycah. “There is more on your mind. Well I know this.”

Mycah grunted. “If we ride to battle, I will have him as my consul, Ehron, and as I am to be Ram’s equal, he will not deny me. As you know, during the feast, I will become overlord and Ram warlord. Should we to war, you will not have Daemon Shar with you. He will ride with me and the Iron Horse.”

“How does that make sense?” Hektar Prahna asked. “Ehron proved himself in battle, and Daemon was the most decorated consul in the army. They should remain united.”

Ehron reached out and clapped Prahna on the shoulder. From his friend, the argument made sense. From him it would have simply sounded like whining.

“I will be overlord in a matter of days,” Mycah told them, “and as I willingly choose to go to war instead of remaining at home as



all my predecessors have, then I will have my choice of those I would have with me. I will have Sagaso on my right and Daemon on my left.”

“And what if Ram wants Daemon at his left?” Prahna asked him.

“I will make the claim the moment I see him.”

Gareth cleared his throat, and the Prefect of the Second Legion, the deliverer, the most decorated man in the realm, Mycah Ilen, turned to look at him. “Daemon Shar was given a battlefield commission, was he not? He saved Ehron’s life, and to reward him, Ehron made him his consul. Is that not so?”

“Aye.” Mycah scowled at him.

“Then, my lord Ilen, is it not Daemon’s decision as to what he will and will not do, as he is not a soldier and not a citizen of Rieyn?”

Mycah’s brows furrowed.

“Perhaps Daemon has seen enough blood and war and would remain here to be—”

“He will do at the overlord says,” Ehron cut him off. “And as the new shield bearer bids him,” he said, turning to look at Mycah. “Aye, Prefect?”

Mycah grunted in approval. “Indeed, we understand one another. I had heard that Ram will give you his seat. Is it done, then?”

“If you add your voice to sway him to my cause, I can see no hope for any other. You will have Daemon, and me, my seat.”

“Done,” Mycah said, spurring his horse forward.

“Ehron,” Gareth gasped. “How can you—”

“Silence,” Ehron hissed at his brother. “The moment I am shield bearer, I will make Daemon my second, and that is a

peacetime post, not one of war. He will be bound to me, to the house of Terhazien, for all time." He turned to look at Gareth. "You will have him with you on the land. I will make it so."

Gareth caught his breath. He should never have doubted his brother. Ehron's love for Daemon outweighed his own ambition. Gareth covered the hand that was placed on his shoulder with his own.

"I will deliver Daemon Shar safely from the trap he now finds himself in."

Hektar was not so certain and watched Mycah close in on Gareth's sleeping wagon.

"Daemon Shar," Mycah greeted him.

"My Lord Ilen." Daemon moved to his knees and was preparing to stand.

"No, no." Mycah lifted his hand to still Daemon's movement. "Just know that I would speak to you when we reach the castle."

"Aye, my lord."

Mycah smiled up at him. "I understand that Hektar and Gareth were gifted with seeing your face last set," he said softly. "Might I too see?"

"What?" Amelina gasped, unable to stop herself.

"Oh." Mycah chuckled. "Perhaps we shall wait so that we might all have the unveiling at once, my dear consul."

Daemon gave a deep bow, and the prefect returned to the others.

"May I see now?" Amelina asked him.

"You heard Mycah," Penn reminded her, though clearly not wanting to wait either. "Daemon will have to show everyone at once. For now, let us look at the great company we have joined!"

Iures pointed out the procession of a maxim that they had come up behind. He explained that he knew the men belonged to a maxim because of the crest on their doublets and the standard that waved from each of their wagons. When the narrow dirt track they were on joined the highway leading to Tristan, it widened, and their procession became lost in a larger one.

There was a sea of wagons, chariots, horses, and people. The country villas were pushed back from the now tree-lined highway, and Amelina was awed by the beauty of the estates set on the lush green land, some high on hills, some so close that they could have run across fields to visit them.

There were houses clustered closer and closer together, still with thick wood surrounding them, but some only a few feet away from one another. Suddenly, Penn felt a jolt and realized that they were riding on cobblestones. Looking up as the others gasped, he saw the towering arch of Kydahl.

This was the great arch erected by Cerus Tapal to stand in silent testament to the power of Rieyn and in memory of the end of the unification wars. It stood for all those fallen in battle and as a warning to all those who would seek to war against Rieyn. As one passed beneath it, not being able to see the top from that vantage point, one could spy Mount Granoc in the distance, silent guardian over the capital city of Rieyn. Tristan sat at the foot of Granoc and had been built beside the Bay of Creon. Large barges often sailed from the dock behind Castle Addah to the harbor at Skel. From there, one sailed northwest to Caruvia and Narsyk or north to Crosas.

It was an awesome sight, the arch and then Granoc. Daemon shivered with the beauty and spectacle of it. Looking at Penn and Amelina, he could see that they were both as affected.

The larger homes along the highway became smaller and more modest until they transformed into inns, taverns, and shops.

The open-air market was alive with people who made room for the passing of the long procession of nobles. Daemon knew the cheering from ahead of them was for Mycah. Adulation for him was only just beginning. Mycah would have to take great care now with his stallion. Too many people would try to touch him and his mount, putting their hands on Ujhar. The warhorse would have to be physically restrained by continued contact from Mycah. A reassuring pat on the neck and gentle words from his god would keep him sane and calm. He was trained to plow through bodies and trample them to pulp under his hooves. This would not serve Mycah well as he rode triumphantly through the city.

Amelina waved to people as she passed just below their second-story windows and balconies. The buildings were now packed tightly together, each with no space between them. The city was dense and teeming with people, and the procession came to a standstill. It would take hours to go even a few feet. The inns were higher than any Penn had ever seen, stacked six or seven stories high, topped with roof gardens and large porticos.

Everywhere there were warriors of every description with hundreds of unique crests and different standards. Banners of every shape and size imaginable decorated the streets, hanging above the road, crossing from one hotel balcony to another, layer upon layer of brilliant, glittering color. Flags fluttered in the breeze, announcing every noble house in Rieyn. Amelina spotted the Terhazien crest hanging beside that of the house of Ilen and wondered if Mycah had planned it that way. She and Penn were sitting up now, whereas Daemon was still content to lie with his chin on his hands and view the spectacle.

“It will take us until set to reach Castle Addah.” Penn yawned. “We will all starve by then.”

Daemon chuckled. “With all this, you still speak of yourself.”

“Look there,” Amelina breathed, and both men looked to

where she was pointing.

Castle Addah.

Even at this distance, they could see only a part of it. The segment they saw was enormous. It was by far the largest structure Daemon had ever seen. Rising in level upon level, made entirely of whitestone mined from deep inside the earth, it seemed to glow in the sunlight, dazzling the eye and causing Penn to have to look away for a moment. They saw the looming walls and high turrets, and Amelina claimed that she could make out the soldiers walking the ramparts even at so great a distance.

“Soon we will enter the great plaza of Arizames,” Iures told them, “and the highway will open up and divide into hundreds of smaller roads. As only the nobility is allowed into the castle until the rise of the celebration honoring the heroes of the war, we will then move on toward Addah much faster.”

Daemon was not sure if he and Iures measured time in the same way, for after several hours of moving only inches, he saw that they were getting no closer to the plaza. Amelina was still absorbed with the sights, smells, and sounds of Tristan. Never had she seen so many men, women, and children.

“Shall we leap off this wagon and down into the mob?” Penn suggested, rising suddenly. “I grow restless and tired.”

“You need to stay here,” Daemon told the brash man. “You must attend Amelina.”

Penn rolled his eyes. “The Terhazien soldiers ride now in front of us, on the sides, and behind. She is well-guarded, my dear Daemon, and I will wither from boredom if I remain here another moment.”

“Stay,” Daemon ordered gently.

“I won’t.” Penn smiled, stretching languidly. “I am in need of diversion. Amelina, will you accompany me?”

She was dying to see Tristan, walk the streets, move with the crowd, but she feared her father more than she desired adventure. "I cannot, for I wish to live to see another rise."

"I will return before you have traveled far," Penn teased her, motioning for Daemon to follow him.

"No," Daemon told him, sitting up, reaching for the other man. "You don't know your way, Penn."

He shrugged and moments later jumped from the wagon. Amelina lost sight of him almost immediately and lay down beside Daemon.

"I so missed you," she said softly, smiling at him. "And would love to see—"

"Soon," he soothed her.

She took a trembling breath. "Daemon, where you come from, is there a castle such as this?"

"There is," he told her. "But it looks not as this does."

"What is the difference?"

"We build for beauty; you build for strength. There has never been such a fortification in Narsyk."

"Why is that?"

"There are so very many castles in Narsyk, as court is held not in only one place but in several."

"So the archlord there—"

"The Ko-Tai," Daemon corrected her gently. "In Narsyk there is an emperor, and he is called Ko-Tai."

"Oh," she replied cheerfully, happy to be learning about Daemon's home. "Then the Ko-Tai travels from one place to the next so he can see everyone."

"Aye," Daemon said, and she could hear the smile in his

voice. "It is the emperor's greatest wish to see all whom he rules and protects. All his advisors have their own court, where the emperor may dwell as he sees fit."

"How wonderful," she sighed. "I doubt our archlord sees half of the citizens of our country, and I understand that Narsyk is over three or four times the size of Rieyn."

Daemon didn't answer, just looked out at the crowd.

"Do you not miss your home, Daemon?"

"Very much," he said wistfully. "So very much."

They fell silent then as Amelina stared up at the flags strung on ropes between the hotels and at the clouds above them.

When Gareth found his sister and Daemon, they were both fast asleep, Amelina curled into a tight ball and Daemon on his stomach, head cradled in his arms. He stood over the two of them for long moments. He had brought them something to eat and sat down beside Daemon. Without thinking, he reached out and pushed the cowl back from Daemon's face.

Lifting up, more asleep than awake, Daemon moved into Gareth's lap, head on his thigh.

"Gareth?" Amelina yawned, waking up slowly, groggy from sleeping in the sun.

"Aye," he grumbled, putting the roasted pork skewers and fruit in front of her. "I brought food and water for you and Daemon."

"How thoughtful of you," she said honestly, her voice still hoarse with sleep. The smile she lavished on her brother was loving. "How much further to the castle?"

"Mycah says it is more than a league away."

"Oh," she gasped.

Gareth's eyes flicked to her face, and only then did he see

where she was looking. “Amelina, I—”

“On my life, Gareth, he’s beautiful,” she said, reaching out to touch the russet curls that framed Daemon’s face and touched his shoulders. She drank in the sight of the long lashes, curling mouth, and thick brows. His features were delicate but masculine at the same time, and his mouth... his mouth was spellbinding. “I have never seen a more—”

“Aye,” Gareth told her, lifting her hand away, running his fingers through the curls. “He is all you say.”

“Gareth, what—”

The hard bump startled both Amelina and Gareth and woke Daemon up with a start.

“By the gods!” Daemon complained loudly, sitting up and turning around to face the others.

Gareth chuckled, covering his face so no one else could see now that Daemon was sitting up. “Remind me never to wake you. You’re as growly as an old dog.”

Daemon smiled beneath his layers and leaned forward into Gareth’s chest.

“Forgive me for not returning last set,” Gareth said, slipping his hand inside the cowl and around the back of Daemon’s neck. “Mycah had much to impart.”

Daemon sighed, enjoying Gareth’s touch.

“I liked finding you asleep in my bed, Daemon Shar. ’Tis where you belong.”

Sliding open the door to his tiny bed chamber before dawn, Gareth had found the younger man curled up on his pallet with his face buried in his pillow. Gareth had felt his heart swell in his chest just looking at Daemon. He was content.

“Daemon.”



He turned to look at Amelina.

"You look good sitting there with my brother and—"

"I brought you some food," Gareth interrupted her, smiling at his sister. "Is Penn in the wagon sleeping?"

Her brows furrowed. "No, Gareth, he left."

"Left?" he asked her. "Left for where? When?"

"To walk at his leisure."

"No," Gareth snapped at her. "He cannot. Penn is a steward and cannot enter the castle unless he travels with his house."

"I had no... Gareth, I didn't know, and—"

"I will find him," Daemon promised, getting up and walking the length of the wagon roof and leaping up onto a thick branch of a low-hanging tree.

"No, Daemon," Gareth called, standing and nearly pitching forward. Daemon made the walk look so easy, but now, as they were bouncing over cobblestones, the movement was harder than it looked. "Let me find him."

"You cannot," Daemon informed him, taking a running jump and leaping from the tree to an empty balcony on the fourth floor of an inn. "You must travel at the head of the procession with Ehron and the rest of your family."

"Daemon," Gareth called out to him. "I would have you ride at my—"

"You will be only a short way further when I rejoin you," Daemon promised, waving to Gareth before disappearing off the balcony and into the darkness of a room.

"Gareth!"

He turned and saw Ehron moving up beside the wagon. "Where has Daemon gone?"

“To fetch Penn,” Gareth groaned, “for he has become lost. By the gods, can the man not rest?” he muttered, turning away from the others.

It took longer than Gareth suspected to close in on the castle, and as the late afternoon shadows drifted around them and a cooling breeze soothed the weary travelers, there was still no sight of Daemon or Penn. Gareth was not only worried that they would not be given entrance to the castle but was also concerned for their safety in the teeming mob of people.

As the procession left the great plaza, they began to move at a quicker pace, since those travelers other than nobility were siphoned off onto the ever-splitting side streets. As they finally approached the great ramp of Castle Addah at nightfall, the nobility entered with their retinue of troops and servants.

Starting up the ramp that led to the drawbridge of Castle Addah itself, Gareth took a deep breath. The castle glowed with light from hundreds of windows and from torches along the battlements. The stone rise leveled off and became flat at the top where it met the drawbridge leading into the castle. Gareth could smell the water of the moat, but he could not see it in the darkness. He could see the outer wall of Castle Addah, though, and gasped at the sheer size of it.

Everything about the castle seemed designed for grandeur as well as protection. The thickness of the walls, the amount of men standing guard, the construction of the gatehouses themselves, all of it built to intimidate. The fortification was like nothing the baron’s son had ever seen.

“Castle Wharton in Crosas,” Mycah began, turning Gareth’s attention to him, “was built in much the same style as this, though there were three walls of fortification instead of two.”

“How did you ever break her defenses?”

“We destroyed it from the outside in,” he squinted at Gareth.

“Have you never heard the details of our final victory?”

“No I have not, but would enjoy hearing you recount such.”

Mycah nodded because he could hear the sincerity in Gareth’s tone. “You know when we first went to Crosas, all of us had thought that victory would be swift. We were in grave error.”

“Indeed,” Ehron echoed the man’s sentiment and shared a knowing look with Mycah.

Ehron remembered the confidence with which he had led his men only to find it crushed when the Army of Rieyn found Crosas a country covered with snow, ice, jagged peaks, and hard, frozen ground. To those not skilled in the ways of enduring eternal winter, the endless days of howling squall proved debilitating and fatal. Blizzards, sleet, hail, frost and icy rain filled both days and nights. Each day was dark, cold, wet, and freezing from dawn to dusk with the sky a constant gray in every direction and the land forever a desolate, blinding white. The only perceptible change in this formidable weather occurred when snow turned to frigid rain and covered the land in slick, hard ice. For the southern soldiers of Rieyn, and especially for the First Legion fighting in the mountains under Ehron Terhazien, the climate and terrain were as hard to fight as the Crosan army. Some of Ehron’s men went mad while Ehron himself nearly succumbed to the utter hopelessness of his task until he had met Daemon. The man had both boosted his spirits and shown him how to revere even so hostile a land.

“Speak,” Ehron urged Mycah.

“It was Ram who began the victory,” Mycah said softly. “The Fourth Legion had slowly pushed the Crosan army down out of the mountains of Esher to the interior of the country: first to the fields of Arca, then on to Castle Tilone and finally to Castle Wharton itself, the stronghold of the resistance in the city of Theane. Ram was to hold the opposing army there using his legion

as bait, until the rest of the Rieynan forces joined them. He allowed the Fourth Legion to become completely encircled without chance of escape as he waited for reinforcements. As he heard the rejoicing of Olerius' men, I am certain, though he will never admit to such, that he was terrified that he had miscalculated the arrival of the other legions. As he looked across the frozen tundra and saw a wave of Crosan reinforcements approaching from the east, I am certain that he prayed to the gods for deliverance."

"Deliverance?" Ehron asked with an arched eyebrow.

Mycah smiled evilly, "Am I not to be considered deliverance?"

Ehron rolled his eyes. "Speak on, my brother craves this tale."

"His triari answered his prayers when he reported that the reason the Crosan troops were making such haste toward Castle Wharton was the arrival of my legion, the second."

Gareth had actually heard that part: that Mycah, leading the second legion, who had been fighting first on the plains of Reve and then in Teh, had finally broken through the line of defense there and was bringing the Second Legion east. Mycah had joined forces with Hektar Prahna, who had brought the Fifth Legion north, overland and together they were driving the Crosans back into the interior toward Ram. Akasus Jaan, in command of the Third, arrived at Wharton a month later, having come from the northern tip of Crosas, across the country following Ram. All five legions had attacked from opposite directions to ensure success. Nictorus, in command of his own forces, the standing army at Appogia, did not join the others at Wharton but stayed instead at Baelocke holding at Castle Creolan Frae, to the West of Wharton, to guard against possible attack from Caruvia, the supporter of Crosas and their neighbor across the Frozen Sea. If Caruvia saw fit to send reinforcements of men and weapons to their embattled ally, the warlord would be there to guard the flank of the other two

legions. No one in Rieyn had even known of Caruvia before the war but after ten years of supplies coming by ship then carried through underground tunnels to their enemy, they came to know the caretakers of the Crosan army. It was understood that a marriage allied the two countries but nothing else was known.

Finally, the Crosan army found themselves surrounded in their fortress by five Rieynan legions. The Warlord of Rieyn felt assured of a quick, decisive victory. It was maddening when Castle Wharton held against all siege for another two years.

It was not until Mycah Ilen moved the Second Legion to the coastal town of Lorn and was finally successful in destroying the supply lines coming from Caruvia that the castle finally fell. Mycah seized all underground tunnels and arrested and executed all the men moving provisions through them. Even without hope of aid, the soldiers at Wharton would have fought on had Sagaso Fjohr not been successful in bribing a small band of Crosan dissidents into poisoning the castle's main well. Without water, there could be no more war. The Crosan army surrendered and the war of ten seasons was over. The Crosan flag was set on fire at the highest turret of Castle Wharton and the drawbridge was slowly lowered.

"I remember the day the war was over," Mycah said, his voice strained suddenly. "It was a blessed one until we entered the castle."

Ehron nodded in agreement. He too had thought he would be celebrating long into the night, but the reveling was left to the men because after the siege of Castle Wharton, the army that they found inside the fortress of iron and stone was not made of the hard men that had held off the forces of Rieyn for ten years. The men they found were ready to be conquered and grateful that they would be fed and clothed. Even those who were still too proud to admit defeat refused to fight on. Too weary, starving, and cold, they fell on their swords in the hundreds. Ram had gone to speak

with one of Strad Olerius' regents the night before the man committed ritual suicide. He found that he knew relatively little about his adversary as the man spoke to him of Strad Olerius. A cruel and sadistic ruler, the king of Crosas had used everyone to further his own ambitions. The regent told Ram that he was ready to die, feeling that it was just punishment for following a monster that led them into a war because of his pride.

"War is a horror," Mycah told Gareth. "Believe no other truth."

Gareth leaned back in the saddle and prayed quickly that his country would never see another. He never wanted the beautiful castle they now entered to fall.

As they rode beneath the second gatehouse and out into the inner bailey, they were greeted by a wave of cheering, the passage opening to reveal a vast lantern-lit courtyard. The grounds were covered in flower petals that had rained from above, thrown by citizens of Rieyn that lined the battlements.

As Gareth looked up, he saw in front of him, on a raised dais, the archlord of Rieyn, Cerus Tapal. Seated behind him were his wife, the lady Faroyan Tapal, his consort, Phylsytah Kos, and his son out of his consort, Alcoban. His daughter had yet to join her parents as she was riding with Odessa further behind. Standing beside Cerus Tapal were Nictorus Troen, the Warlord of Rieyn, and his son Ram, as well as Janah Ilen, Mycah's father, the overlord.

On the ground beneath the dais, standing on the red carpet, were the barons and their families, the maxims and their families, and the regents from the southern provinces, from Scerce and Man Ruan, who had come to pay their respects. They had arrived days earlier from their long journey. There were hundreds of servants, row after row, all on hands and knees, exhibiting the proper respect for the great powers of Rieyn.

Being at the very front of the grand procession, Mycah stopped before the dais. All those behind him were forced to fan out to the right and left along the sides of the inner ward. Gareth joined his family as Mycah dismounted.

The prefect was about to step forward when he remembered Ujhar. If anyone walked past the warhorse on their way to the dais, they would be bitten, kicked, or worse. His mount was already restless and tired; the only thing that had kept him in check all day was Mycah holding him firm. Leaving him to stand alone was madness. He would lash out savagely at the next human or animal that neared him. As Mycah turned, though, he saw that Ehron's consul was suddenly there, stepping as though out of the night, waiting to take the reins.

For whatever reason, and Mycah knew not what, his great beast of a warhorse adored the consul. Whenever the two legions were together, only Daemon could enter the enclosure where Ujhar was and brush him or ride him bareback. Mycah would watch his murderous horse follow Daemon like a dog and wonder why. In that moment though, the how did not matter, only the fact that Daemon was there did. No one else could have allowed Mycah to walk to the archlord, and he knew it.

"You have my thanks, Daemon Shar."

Daemon dipped his head slightly to the prefect and took the reins that were passed him without a word. Mycah immediately strode toward the dais, toward the archlord, and when he passed his father, he saw the look of absolute glowing pride on the face of Janah Ilen.

Mycah took the stairs quickly and dropped to one knee in front of the leader of Rieyn.

"May the gods praise you, Mycah Ilen," Cerus boomed out, "for all the great and glorious services you have bestowed upon us."

“It was my duty, my lord,” he said quietly, still not raising his head.

“Your duty was bravely borne, and we are honored that you have come to grace us with your presence.”

When Mycah stood, nothing could be heard above the roar of the crowd. The cheering grew louder as he turned and waved to everyone. In that moment, Cerus looked at the man who would be overlord and smiled. It was done, for Ram had been mobbed in the street when he came through as well. It had taken a command from him, from the archlord, to quiet the din at the approach of this procession. The country loved Ram, and the country loved Mycah. The seats of power would move from fathers to sons seamlessly.

Mycah moved to Ram, greeting the shield bearer, the Prefect of the Fourth Legion, warmly. They grasped wrists hard, each smiling at the other. Then it was time for Mycah to take the hand of the Warlord of Rieyn.

“My dear lord,” Mycah croaked out, overcome with emotion suddenly, knowing that this power was now within his reach.

Nictorus slapped him across the back hard. “Go and greet your father. He waits on you.”

Mycah reached around Nictorus first and grasped hands with Hanjer Yol, triari of the Fourth Legion, and then Akasus Jaan, Prefect of the Third Legion and his triari, Butero Muss. When Mycah turned and went into his father’s arms, another cheer went up.

It was time then for everyone else to make his or her way up the dais to the archlord. Torbald led his family to the dais, while Penn stood back and held the reins of both Gareth and Torbald’s horses. He stood silent and watchful beside Daemon, having reappeared out of the night with him.



Torbald and Odessa walked up together, followed by Gareth and Amelina. Cerus met them graciously, as did Faroyan, Phylsytah, and Alcoban. Cerus then stepped away to greet his daughter.

Llyan Tapal took the steps to the dais as though she were a queen, fairly glowing with the love that infused her. Instantly Cerus noticed the way she clung to the arm of the Prefect of the Fifth Legion. When they were close enough, she flung herself into her father's waiting arms. Ehron went down to one knee and waited.

The crowd got quiet, the anticipation of an announcement hanging heavy in the air.

Ehron lifted his head and asked for the hand of the archlord's daughter. When Cerus turned his head to look at the face of his child, he saw her face alight with hope. He had hoped for her to marry either Mycah Ilen or Ram Troen, either the new overlord or the new warlord, but this was apparently not to be. He had even hoped to offer her as a branch of peace to the new emperor of Narsyk. He had not known that she even knew Ehron Terhazien, but her love was etched on her face, clearly visible to anyone that looked at her. How that had been accomplished he had not the faintest idea.

The archlord had purposely kept her away from court. When he had been told that she was traveling with the family of the Baron of Kasan, he had thought nothing of it, believing it merely a chance meeting along the road. Now the archlord understood that the encounter had led to his girl losing her heart. And the child Llyan bore Ehron Terhazien would be archlord after Cerus. Turning, he gestured for Ram.

"Aye, my lord," Ram said, moving up beside his sovereign.

Cerus Tapal regarded his new warlord, the man with the same strong jaw and piercing blue eyes that his father had as well

as the towering height and breadth of shoulder and chest. He looked every bit the leader of the military might of Rieyn. “As we are in agreement, you and I, would you make both announcements?”

Ram smiled down at the prefect of the First Legion, at his friend, Ehron Terhazien. “You and your servant, your clever plotting consul—you two make quite the pair.”

Ehron’s eyes glinted, catching the light. “Aye, my lord.”

Ram turned and shook his head before suddenly lifting his hands, walking forward to the edge of the dais. As the crowd quieted even more, his voice rose. “This set you will all bear witness to the handfasting of Ehron Terhazien, Prefect of the First Legion, son of the Baron of Kasan, Torbald Terhazien, to Llyan Ander, daughter of our sovereign lord the Archlord of Rieyn, Cerus Tapal. Blessed are we all to share their joy.”

The cheering was a wave of sound as Ehron rose and Llyan rushed into his arms, clutching him tight. When he bent to kiss her, another wave exploded over the powers of Rieyn.

It took Ram long minutes to settle the crowd enough to hear his second announcement.

“This rise also marks my choice for my soon-vacant seat, and I will pass that mantle of command to my friend, the future husband of the daughter of the archlord, Ehron Terhazien. He is now named Shield Bearer of Rieyn.”

The courtyard exploded in sound, petals again fell from the sky, and Torbald Terhazien trembled with relief and happiness and absolute awe. He looked for Daemon in the crowd, for surely this was his triumph as much as Ehron’s. His son’s life had been a chess match that Daemon had expertly played. He would thank him as soon as he saw him.

Torbald’s smile was wide as he drew Janah Ilen, Mycah’s father, to him, as the man had descended the dais to greet his

oldest friend and his family. Their brief embrace was crushing. Daemon watched the Baron of Kasan and saw his contented expression as he continued to smile at Janah Ilen. He knew that all would be well for both Ehron and the Terhazien clan as long as war did not settle on the Rieynan shore.

“Come, Penn.” Daemon smiled over at him. “Let us retire the horses to the stables and find our beds.”

He followed Daemon without hesitation, and no one saw them disappear with all the other servants leading horses, wagons, and chariots from the field.

There was a flurry of activity as guests of the castle began to be shown to their quarters. The Terhazien family was given a suite of rooms in the west wing of the castle, three as sleeping quarters and one as a meeting room. The Ilen family was quartered above them, directly beside the rooms of Hektar Prahna and Akasus Jaan. When Hektar asked Akasus if he was surprised that he would not be shield bearer, he replied that with the rat-catcher plotting Ehron’s rise to power, he truly had never thought he stood a chance.

“Agreed,” Hektar chuckled, clapping his friend on the back. “You were routed before you began.”

“The consul of the prefect is far too clever for me.”

“And me.” Hektar smiled. “Perhaps for all of us.”

Akasus agreed with a heavy sigh. “I will marry and grow fat in the country on the barony I will inherit from my father.” He smiled at his friend.

“If there comes no war, then you shall.”

“Aye, my friend,” Akasus agreed. “If there is no war.”

## SEVEN

The following weeks were a blur of activity that everyone found hard to keep straight from one day to another. A festival descended on the castle, and time went from being meaningful to meaningless. No one could keep track of the day or the hour or the minute. They all drowned in celebration.

The doors were opened for the people the very next morning after the arrival of the barons, and everyone came and went to and from the great castle as they pleased. Every quarter of the grounds was mobbed with people, the crowds thick at every turn with artisans, musicians, gypsies, jugglers, soldiers, magicians, tumblers, fortunetellers, and peddlers selling all manner of wares. Animals were brought to the castle in droves—sheep, pigs, cattle, chickens, and goats as well as bees in wicker hives, pheasant, and rabbits. The elite of Rieyn mixed with the citizens, the merchant classes as well as the local gentry and the lower classes. There were imperial guards at every turn, always ready to step in and separate, threaten or cajole, or imprison with impunity.

With throngs of people, it was impossible to keep track of any one individual if you became separated and useless to think of seeking someone out. The days were spent at festival or with becoming reacquainted with those last seen years and years ago. Odessa and Amelina were asked to so many sittings that they quickly had to start writing their appointments down. Torbald and Janah spent every waking moment together hunting, riding, and walking through the grounds of the castle and through the town of Tristan itself. Gareth spent the bulk of his time with Mycah and his brother, following after Ehron as he drifted through his circles: the archlord and his son; Nictorus and Ram; their fathers and

endless hunts. The castle fascinated Gareth, and listening for hours to the history of the building as Mycah recounted it was riveting for him. Or so he made it seem. Gareth's real interest was in only one pursuit: finding Daemon.

He looked for the former consul in every crowd but was never rewarded with finding him. Gareth had thought he had seen him once or twice, but when he reached the spot where he had seen him, he was never there. He was sure he had seen him at the ceremony transferring power from Nictorus to Ram and from Janah to Mycah, the offices of warlord and overlord now officially changed, but when he reached the spot where he had thought Ehron's consul stood, he was gone. Ehron had reached the spot by different route at the same time, and both men agreed that the shadow had been there but had disappeared like smoke in the air.

Every evening the nobility of Rieyn was ushered into the inner sanctum of the castle, sequestered from the rest of the citizens, and treated to the most exquisite delicacies in the main dining hall. Tables overflowed with food brought by the endless stream of servants carrying trays, jugs, plates, and wine. So plentiful was the banquet that most of the food turned up the following day on the eating tables for the public, and after the meal there was always dancing and drinking.

In the great hall hung velvet tapestries so intricate and rich with color that many of the women and men stood mesmerized at their beauty. The beams in the ceiling were draped with a shower of silk, shimmering in the candlelight from thousands of candles that lit the room. The walls were covered in thick-textured crimson-and-gold embroidered fabric. Enormous paintings and mirrors hung from the walls in heavy gilded frames. The marble floors shone like glass, giving the whole room the feeling that it glittered and sparkled, ablaze with light.

Servants carried trays of blood-red wine in delicate hand-blown goblets, each a different color, flecked with gold and silver.

Men and women floated across the floor in a dream of swirling color, everyone stunning in their finery. In dark, quiet alcoves of the room, lovers pressed desperately together, caught up in the lure of flesh and the flight of their inhibitions, desire and heat unlocked by the archlord's private reserve of red hironberry wine.

Amelina gave urgent first kisses to a desperate Alcoban. Gareth was hunted by many a breathtaking beauty but slipped through all their fingers like water. Mycah danced a new woman to his bed nightly, and Hektar and the other prefects stole away to the gambling tables.

There were the sights and sounds of the great city to be taken in, and Amelina delighted in being escorted to the theatre and the circus as well as the boat races and the great marketplace at Cresey. She forgot about Daemon as her thirst for the archlord's illegitimate son grew. It was understood that though he would never be archlord, he would be rich in gold and land. Torbald was pleased with the match.

The prefects of Rieyn were escorted under cover of darkness to the silk houses in the blue flame district of the city. There stood opulent brothels where the finest courtesans in all of Rieyn resided. Each woman was exquisite, each gifted in the art of seduction. Gareth begged off nightly, absorbing the taunts of the other men as he retired to his room or walked the darkened streets alone. His favorite place was the Steppes of Shanguard. The stairs began at the top of a steep incline and descended into the fog. The steps were cut directly through a heavily wooded area, and during the day it was quite safe, but at night, all manner of thief or cutthroat could be lying in wait. Gareth found it serene: the darkness, the shrouded stairs, the still and quiet. Each time he got closer to the bottom, he wondered what he might find there. Always he turned into the pub that was just around the corner, stopping for a warm cup of steaming cider. He enjoyed being alone, but he knew he would enjoy company more, if it were the

right kind. If it were Daemon's.

By the beginning of the third week, Gareth was desperate to find Daemon. The man's absence was taking its toll on him, body and soul. As he stood on the enormous patio and looked out across the bay, he heard his name whispered on the night air.

Turning, he saw the darkness move beside a pillar. He bolted around the corner and came to a sudden stop when hands clutched at his doublet. He saw nothing, and then suddenly half a face appeared out of the shadows. One golden eye narrowed, half a curving mouth lifted, and he caught his breath.

Daemon had moved the cowl for him, allowing him to see his face, a gift he bestowed on no other. Gareth was momentarily overcome.

They stood there for long moments, silent, eyes locked together.

"I missed you."

"And I you," Daemon replied huskily.

"You look hungry," Gareth said, licking his lips. "Are you, rat-catcher? Are you hungry?"

There was a shadow of a wicked smile before Gareth was yanked deep into the shadows and thrust back hard against a wall. He felt the lacings on his breeches tugged on as he let his head drop back against the hard, cold wall.

"Where have you... been? Where... I... Daemon!"

There was light suddenly, and Gareth realized that Daemon had pushed him down to the very end of the portico, where a lone lantern hung.

"Push back the cowl so you may see."

Gareth did as he was told, freeing the mahogany curls, watching them catch fire in the light, and when Daemon looked up

at him, he was swallowed in gold.

“Watch me; don’t take your eyes off me.”

As though Gareth would have to be reminded not to look away. He reached out and brushed the curls from Daemon’s face so he could see the man’s lips slide over the head of his cock and slither down his shaft. Daemon swallowed the length down the back of his throat, and Gareth felt his body convulse against his lover. Watching Daemon suck and lick and lave his cock, feeling the saliva running down his balls, his thighs, was making it hard to breathe. The way Daemon stroked him, tugged gently, increased his suction, taking him deeper inside, his eyes glazed over with desire as he moved with fevered need and heat all the while, was more than Gareth could bear.

“I cannot... Daemon!”

The head of his cock pounded against the back of Daemon’s throat, and the surging orgasm ravaged him as he shuddered with his release. Never, ever, had Gareth had such a demanding lover, and the way the man swallowed down the thick, hot spend brought a loud moan from his chest. Daemon didn’t move until Gareth was completely drained, panting, the wall bracing him up, standing in for his deserted strength.

When the heavy-lidded eyes were slowly raised to meet his, Gareth fisted his hand in the man’s hair, tugging gently. “Come kiss me so I might taste myself on you.”

Watching his flaccid shaft slide from between the man’s parted lips was the most arousing thing Gareth had ever seen. “Come here,” he growled.

His cock was tucked back into his breeches, the lacings done quickly, efficiently, before Daemon rose in a seamless, fluid motion. Gareth bent his head at the same time, and when the swollen lips met his, he gasped with the contact.



Daemon Shar tasted like come and tart ale and honey. The longer he kissed him, the longer their tongues tangled, the longer he sucked and bit, the more he realized that the man was the sweetest thing he had ever tasted.

“I forbid you to leave me,” Gareth rasped, arms wrapping around Daemon fiercely, tightly. “I forbid it.... Do you hear me?”

Daemon tried to recapture the lips, but Gareth’s hands were suddenly on his face, stilling him, staring deep into the beloved eyes. “Did you hear me? You cannot leave me. You’re mine, and I will have you.”

“You do not know who I truly.... I tried to leave. I tried to see if I could avert the coming of.... But I don’t. It’s been so long that I no longer know any who—”

Gareth bent and kissed Daemon breathless, the kiss claiming and devouring and utterly draining, drawing from the smaller man all the fight that was left in him. When Gareth finally lifted his lips from Daemon’s, they were both panting.

“I tried to find a charter to sail to intercept the lead ship, but all is lost, Gareth,” he moaned, staring up into the man’s eyes. “I was a part of a reign that no longer exists. The Narsyk I knew is no longer. I’m too late.”

He could not explain that he had paid handsomely, the balance of his war purse, to hire a ship and a captain to find the corsair from Narsyk flying under the sail of truce and intercept it. But where it should have been, it was not, the intelligence that Hektar had faulty. The fleet was closer than anyone knew, and so, for Daemon, there was no recourse but to return.

“No,” Gareth comforted him, reclaiming his wandering thoughts as he molded the man’s body to his. “You are not too late. All is well. You’re mine, and I’m the brother of the shield bearer, brother of the man who will marry the daughter of the archlord. And he bears you so much love—they all do. To hear

them speak of you, speak your name.... Daemon.” He exhaled deeply, taking the face he loved in his hands. “Please, stay with me, have faith.”

Daemon stared up into Gareth’s face, and the truth hit him hard. He could not bear to say goodbye to the man. He simply could not. “I want... I...”

Gareth’s eyes raked over Daemon’s beautiful face, the eyes, the lips, and in that moment, his resolve turned to stone. “If you test me I will tie you down, and while I am loathe to do so, there is, I admit to you, some desire for the deed as well.”

Daemon was stunned at the admission of the baron’s son.

“To have you shackled to my bed”—Gareth took a steadying breath, staring down into the molten gold of Daemon’s eyes—“is such that I have only dreamed of.”

Daemon trembled under the man’s hands, the idea of being chained to the man’s bed thrilling him, heating his blood, and filling his cock.

“You will not leave me,” Gareth told him. “Swear it.”

Daemon nodded, and Gareth pulled the cowl down over his face, grabbed his hand, and dragged him to the entryway to the ballroom. It was late, and the lanterns were low, and Gareth moved quickly, keeping Daemon in the shadows on the edge of the dance floor. They were outside in the hall moments later.

They ran together, and it was exhilarating, as was Gareth throwing open the doors to his room and locking them tight behind him. The windows were ajar, allowing in the warm summer air, and a cool breeze moved gently through the space. Daemon was startled when Gareth tackled him, and they went sprawling together down onto the bed.

“Tell me, my lord,” Daemon said, smiling up at him, “what would you have of me?”

Daemon laughed as Gareth attacked him, answering with his voracious actions, yanking and tugging, pulling at the cowl, disrobing him fast, not caring if he ripped the garment to shreds. When Daemon finally lay under him, naked and heaving, disheveled and flushed, Gareth could barely breathe.

“Why... please, you must tell me: why hide yourself from the eyes of the world when you are by far the most beautiful man I have ever seen?”

“I was cursed by a witch.” He sighed, reaching up for Gareth. “And I do not know what magic you have that binds the spell or delays its return... I know not. I perhaps appear to those that want me as—”

“Not want you, daft man—love! I love you, Hektar Prahna loves you, my brother loves you! Even Mycah Ilen, for all his poxy pride, loves you! We all love you, and if that is what is needed to truly see you, then all the powers of Rieyn will only ever see a man with golden eyes and the most sinful mouth I—”

“Peace,” Daemon cut him off, lifting up and drawing Gareth down at the very same time. Their lips met in ravenous need, and Gareth was disrobed in a frantic rush. When Daemon’s hot skin slid over Gareth’s, he moaned loudly, deeply. He slanted his mouth down over Daemon’s and kissed him hard and long, missing nothing, savoring the taste of his lover, wanting it all. When Daemon’s hands pushed at him, it took all of his steely control to lift his lips from the smaller man’s.

“You... I need—”

“Move onto the bed.”

Gareth knew ways to take another man, either on hands and knees or with legs locked around his waist. Being asked to move so that he was seated, naked, against the headboard did not seem to be what he had envisioned. But Daemon had asked him to move, and looking at the man, just being allowed to watch the

glow of the firelight slither over his bronze skin, was a blessing. The gold eyes looked as though they were melting, and the carnal heat in them made the muscles in his jaw clench. Scrambling over the bed, he did as he was asked and sat, legs parted in anxious anticipation.

Gareth watched as Daemon walked the length of the room, disappearing in shadow for a moment only to reappear carrying a small crystal flagon with a cork stopper. He crawled slow and boneless up the bed. His eyes narrowed in half as he reached out and wrapped a hand around Gareth's ankle.

"Daemon, please, let me wet my cock to make the way—"

"Be still," Daemon told him, uncorking the small flagon and pouring several drops of the spicy musk-scented oil into the palm of his left hand.

"What is that that you have?"

When Daemon wrapped his hand around Gareth's already hardening shaft, the younger man cried out in pleasure.

"In a great nation like Rieyn," Daemon began, "how is it that you know nothing of the oils of the East? The spit that would ease your way leaves no time for exploration and games."

"I have used grease and—"

"Feel my skin slide over yours... is this not better than any that you have felt before?"

Gareth could only nod, as he could barely breathe. Watching Daemon's hand stroke over his pulsing, swollen cock was almost painful. When Daemon straddled his thighs, lifting up, moving Gareth's cock under him, his heart stopped.

"Daemon—"

"I mean to ride you."

The smile was wicked and dark and rolled Gareth's stomach

over. Never, ever, had his couplings been anything but fast rutting in the dark. It was all the experience he had, and even though he wanted Daemon as he had never wanted another, he had thought it would be more of the same. The slow, sensual movement that he was being treated to was so much more than he could have ever imagined.

Daemon's eyes locked on Gareth's as he slowly lowered himself over the long, hard length of him.

"I had thought," Gareth began, his breath shaky, strained, "that between men, the tenderness I craved could not be found."

"Foolish man," Daemon murmured, lifting up only to sink back down deeper.

Gareth's moan of need was deep and husky, and as he clutched Daemon's thighs, his fingers dug into the smooth, warm flesh.

"Tell me what you want."

Gareth's eyes as he looked at Daemon were almost black, so dark and liquid. "I want you under me."

"Then take me. Make me yours."

Gareth was careful when he rolled Daemon to his back because he didn't, even for a moment, want to be separated. Having Daemon impaled on his shaft, watching him, was a dream he had no intention of waking from.

When he was looking down into the adored eyes, he gently bent and kissed each leg before he lifted them over his shoulders. "We cannot be parted, you and I.... I could not bear it a second time. I have too much that I want, and only if you see it with me, will it be real."

Daemon nodded, unable to speak as Gareth eased out of the fluttering hole only to thrust back inside, sheathing the length of him in one smooth stroke.

“Please,” Gareth gasped, watching as Daemon arched up off the bed, “bind yourself to me. I want your oath.”

Daemon was lost in the sensations rolling through him, and looking up at Gareth, at the picture he made, eyes clouded, trembling with desire, he understood that for the man he loved, it was the same.

Gareth had been in bed with many men, but never had it felt like a joining, like a mating. As he pushed in and out of Daemon, feeling the hot, slick channel squeezing around his shaft, as he pushed deeper with each thrust, the muscles gripping him in velvet heat, he knew clearly why.

“You are my love,” he chanted with strangled breath and urgent pleading. It felt too good; there was too much emotion, too much raw, physical need. “Never leave me.”

“Never,” Daemon promised as one of Gareth’s hands anchored him to a lean hip and the other fisted his leaking shaft.

Gareth shifted his angle, at the same time lifting Daemon higher as he plunged down into him.

His name became a prayer.

Daemon’s shuddering climax brought Gareth’s roaring through him seconds later. Hearing Daemon call his name, watching him come apart under him, and feeling the muscles clamp down around his cock, contracting and squeezing, was more than he could bear.

He was certain, for a moment, that he had died, and then his arms could no longer hold him, and he collapsed on top of his lover.

The throaty laughter was the sweetest sound he had ever heard.

Gareth was careful as he eased out of his lover and then rolled sideways so Daemon could breathe. When he could see

again, when the world had form again, he turned his head to look at the beautiful man in his bed.

“I need water.”

Gareth scowled at him. “These are the first words you would give me?”

One wickedly arched brow lifted rakishly. “I need water, my love.”

Gareth rolled off the bed to his feet. “Then I will fetch it for you.”

Daemon laughed and gestured Gareth to him. The kiss, when Gareth leaned back down, was scorching. The arms wrapped around his neck, the way he was held, made him dizzy. Gareth forgot that he was supposed to be doing something, and Daemon forgot what he needed. He pinned Daemon under him and devoured his mouth as he clutched the smaller man to his heart. Nothing else mattered but kissing Daemon and making up for lost time.

Daemon woke to find Gareth spooned around him. When he pressed back against him, the bigger man trembled. Daemon smiled against the bicep under his cheek.

“I think you still need me,” he said as Gareth’s hand slid up his thigh.

“No, you need to sleep.”

“You’re a terrible liar,” Daemon chuckled, wriggling in the man’s arms. “And we both know you harden even now with desire.”

“Aye,” Gareth agreed, his voice a husky whisper as he licked a line up the side of his neck to behind his ear, at the same time

fisting the hard length of Daemon in his hand.

“Have me again.”

Gareth moaned like he was in pain. “I’m trying to think of you and not me.”

“I know.” Daemon’s breath caught as Gareth continued to stroke him. “But perhaps I need you just as badly. Perhaps I want to be reminded to whom I belong.”

“You belong to me,” Gareth said hoarsely, his voice full of emotion.

“Then please”—he squirmed against him—“oh, Gareth, please.”

To hear Daemon plead, the desire thick in his voice, sent a wave of heat through the baron’s son. He moved the arm that had been under Daemon’s head, lifting it so he could turn and kiss him over his shoulder. Daemon’s mouth was ravaged, the kiss hungry.

“Gareth,” he breathed out when he finally had to pull back to drag in air. He let his head fall back over the thick, powerful bicep, eyes closing as Gareth eased himself inside him, the channel still slick with oil and semen. Daemon’s deep, hoarse moan of pleasure was not to be missed.

“You are a gift,” Gareth said as he anchored the smaller man against him, his hand tight on his hip, sliding in so deep then slowly out. He felt Daemon’s body clench tight around him, listening to his labored breathing. “And one I never hoped to have.”

“Your plan is to keep me, then?” Daemon tried to tease him but failed miserably as his heart was in his throat.

“Always,” Gareth assured him with a deep contented sigh. “Say you are mine.”



“Yours,” he panted, pushing back against Gareth as he deepened his thrusts. “Until my last breath is taken.”

The words lodged in Gareth’s heart, and he would have made his own promise to the man in his arms if he had been able to speak.

## EIGHT

Gareth Terhazien stood at his window when his father entered his room. He didn't turn at the sound behind him, too absorbed in the view and his thoughts. Torbald was about to call to his son but stopped himself as he regarded him. He watched Gareth stare out the window at the clay-colored sky. The breeze was blowing his hair back gently from his face, and Torbald could see his son's profile clearly. He wondered when it had been that Gareth had taken on such a determined look.

Looking at his second-born, Torbald swelled with pride. Having looked on Ram and Mycah for nearly a month, he had borne witness to their regal bearing and had admired both men as well as their fathers. Suddenly, though, he saw those same qualities manifested in his own son. Gareth carried himself with the same confidence and grace. It was as his wife had been telling him for many years: Gareth needed to prove nothing to anyone. He simply was.

As Gareth turned and looked at his father, Torbald felt a chill steal down his spine. When had Gareth become a man? He had not marked the transition from the boy who sought to fill Ehron's place at his side to this man standing in front of him.

"You look well," Torbald told his son.

Gareth nodded, trying, as he had since he had woken alone that morning, to rally his spirits.

Talking to his family over breakfast had been agonizing when all he wanted to do was find Daemon. The inquisition of what he had done the previous night, where he had gone when he left the ballroom, was almost physically painful. He was too freshly

abandoned to be so interrogated.

He craved only Daemon's gentle touch and quiet voice. To be lying with him as he had been only hours ago, Daemon's face buried in the hollow of his throat, the man's arm thrown across his chest, snuggled tightly up against him, warm and naked—this was all he wanted. Slow breath on his skin, lean-muscled body in his arms, all that his senses could bear. Only sighs and whispers and sweet, urgent cries of pleasure—all he yearned to hear. Daemon's gentle laughter, his shining eyes gazing at him with absolute adoration, making his heart swell. His throat hurt just to look at him. His hands smoothing the hair back from Gareth's forehead, the feather-soft kisses on his closed eyes, cheeks, lips, and throat as he smiled up at him. Fingertips tracing a path down his chest, the flat plains of his stomach, and lower, his kisses branding, his husky voice so sensual, knotting his stomach with expectation. Gareth wanted Daemon to rush into his room and throw himself into his waiting arms. This was his only desire.

"Father, we must to the receiving hall," Amelina called out to him as she swept into the room in a flurry of voluminous gold silk and brocade.

Never had Gareth been so thrilled to see her.

Torbald turned to her and then back to Gareth. The moment broken, he regarded his daughter.

"Oh," Amelina breathed, crossing the room to her brother. He was stunning in his cobalt-blue doublet, which matched the deep-sea color of his eyes, with a high collar trimmed in silver. "Gareth, you take my very breath," she said, bowing gracefully to him.

He smiled at her, and it lit his eyes, making them glow blue fire. She was transfixed at seeing him so genuinely pleased to see her. There had always been a rivalry between them, but of late it had drifted away as if it had never existed.

"Come, Gareth," Amelina said softly, threading her arm

around her brother's. "Let us stroll together to the great hall."

Odessa smiled as she watched her children a few moments later as they walked in front of their parents toward the meeting with the delegation from Narsyk. Amelina was relating an amusing incident, by the way she was smiling and laughing, and Penn grinned widely at her from the other side of Gareth. She had no idea where her oldest son was, and she realized suddenly that she had not even concerned herself with his whereabouts in many days. She startled, and Torbald squeezed her hand against his arm before asking her if she was well.

"Do you mark where your son Ehron goes, my love?"

"He is with his intended and his new family," Torbald soothed her. "I know he was just returned to you, but you must release him again."

She nodded. All had worked out for the very best, and she owed Daemon for that.

Gareth searched the crowd for Daemon but could not find him. The crowd thickened the closer they got to the Great Hall, and people moved in a slow press now down the twin staircases, each able to accommodate ten people across.

The aristocracy came in their finest silks, brocades, fur, glittering jewels, shimmering gold and silver. The nobility of Rieyn was a feast for the eyes, the wealth of the nation on display for the delegation from faraway Narsyk.

As the crowd filled the hall, Daemon stood still and silent with the other consuls behind the seconds, or triaris, who were lined up behind their prefects. When Caseen Jun, Ehron's second, turned to look at him, Daemon's head tipped up.

"I had thought you would discard those robes once the war was over, consul."

"I would not frighten anyone, triari."

Caseen grunted, his voice lowering. “Hektar speaks that the man beneath the robes is exquisite, meant more for concubine than war.”

Daemon shrugged. “And yet you yourself have reaped the benefit of my blade.”

Caseen chuckled, reaching out to pat Daemon’s unseen cheek. “Indeed. I would have you stand at my side ever.”

Daemon nodded, and Caseen turned back to face forward.

More people surged into the hall, and as the nobility moved in front of the row of prefects, everyone had to step back. Daemon was pressed back into the folds of the twenty-foot-high drapes that hung in front of the iron doors of the Hall of Judgment.

Daemon shifted on his feet, nervous suddenly, accidentally bumping Caseen from behind. Caseen turned and scowled at the consul before straightening up and shifting his stance so that he was just behind and to the side of Ehron. Mycah stood on the other side of him, with Ram to his right. Nictorus had taken position beside his son.

At that moment, Eculis Pol, Keeper of the Castle, the head of the archlord’s private guard, walked into the circle that the crowd had made around the powers of Rieyn and sank to his knees before the archlord.

“Cerus Tapal, there are men here from Narsyk that ask for the privilege of an audience.”

Cerus turned, and as he did the crowd parted, creating a path for the small twenty-member delegation from Narsyk to walk through. They had already been granted permission to see the archlord as soon as they could make their way from the harbor to the castle. They had made landfall that morning and now waited to be received. Cerus gestured to Eculis Pol to allow them to approach.

Cerus did not know what he had expected from the people of Narsyk, but it was decidedly not what he was seeing. In contrast to the richness of fabric, design, and color that the nobility of Rieyn displayed, the simple black and white of the contingent from Narsyk was a shock. He had expected similar opulence, but there was none. All wore the same wide-legged black pants and soft, black leather boots. Over a white high-collared shirt that was tight around the neck and throat and fastened down the front came a stiff white jacket with a wide collar that covered completely the entire back of the neck and was cinched tight at the waist with a wide black leather belt. All wore black gloves that seemed iridescent in the morning light. The only discernable difference from one to the other was that the three women in the party wore their hair up in intricate knots held in place by several ornate combs and straight, lacquered pieces of wood. The combs had charms attached to them that flickered and caught the light.

The entire party bowed at once, and only the man in front straightened again. He took one step forward, and then his black eyes settled on the archlord. His voice resonated in the silent room, deep and clear without a trace of accent or warmth.

“Great Archlord of Rieyn, we humbly come before you seeking to offer you a gift in exchange for that which we seek.”

“Please, please,” Cerus said, motioning to the others to raise their heads. “Tell us who you are so that we may all know the speaker whom we have the pleasure of addressing.”

He bowed again deeply before clapping his hands together sharply. The others straightened immediately. “I am Ostyn Tan, the Hyson of Narsyk, and I have come to bring you the word of the Emperor of Narsyk, the Light of Time, Jaron Siu.”

At the mention of the name of the emperor, all in the party put their hands out to their sides, then turned their palms up.

“I am pleased to greet you, Ostyn Tan,” Cerus said, smiling

widely. “We have been most anxious at the thought of your imminent arrival. We looked forward to meeting you all.”

Again, Ostyn bowed. “Our emperor sends his deepest regards with the hope that you will accept our gift and will be able to grant us that which we seek.”

“Please,” Cerus asked, “allow us to know our gift.”

“The great Ko-Tai, our emperor, he proposes that the empire of Narsyk and the kingdom of Rieyn together rule the ruined kingdom of Crosas. Our emperor says that we can rebuild it together, create a place where both cultures and people may meet and blend along with those remaining Crosans. We will create a safe haven for those of any race, and so your border will once more be your own, and your vigilance can be traded for brotherhood.”

“We had thought that the empire of Narsyk meant to go to war.”

Ostyn looked sad suddenly. “And well we still might, great archlord, if you cannot grant us the brother of the Ko-Tai.”

Voices came from everywhere at once. It took Cerus several moments, with the help of Nictorus, who came forward to where he and Ostyn Tan were standing, to quiet everyone back down.

“You would plan and create a new state with us, together as equals?” Nictorus asked. “If only we would grant you the brother of your emperor?”

“Indeed. The emperor has two brothers. One he displaced when they fought for the throne, and the other, he lost during the war. The brother he displaced, Arterus—now there is only strife and blood between them, but his other brother.... He is precious to him, to all of us, and we would have him restored.”

More outbursts of noise, disbelief mixed with awe, as all information was absorbed.

“Ostyn Tan, Hyson of Narsyk, we cannot give to you what we do not have in our possession.”

Ostyn straightened and turned to look at one of the men who had entered the hall with him, Irachis Qhan, the Scion of Narsyk. In so doing, he directed everyone’s attention to him, including the archlord’s. Cerus stared, seeing a man with unnaturally red hair. It looked as though it had been dyed with blood. So dark, yet so visibly crimson, and not a color the archlord had ever seen before. The scion’s hair was tied back from his face with a long, black silk sash that hung down his back. The ferocity of the eyes that regarded him took the archlord by surprise; they allowed for no trace of softness. He wasn’t sure what to make of the man, whether to be fearful or not.

His voice when he spoke was soft but deep, with a thick accent that no one had ever heard before but was in fact from the plains of Narsyk. He spoke at length to Ostyn in a stream of mellifluous sound, but then, after a minute, realized his rudeness and suddenly bowed.

“Forgive my breach of courtesy,” he said, and the words, spoken in the language of the west, in Jebet, were clipped and halting, as though he were forming and choosing them quite carefully, not at all comfortable with his usage. “Perhaps there are more to ask?” he suggested, turning from Cerus to the hyson.

Ostyn nodded, agreeing, and turned his attention back to Cerus. “Great archlord, may we put the question to some of your warriors?”

“It would be our pleasure to find an answer to your quest in the form of one of the Prefects of Rieyn,” Cerus assured him, and he ordered every prefect to come and stand before the hyson. Ram did not want to be the first to be interrogated and so prodded Ehron up before him.



The Prefect of the First Legion stepped forward to face the man. The hyson leaned forward to bow, and Ehron, wanting to show the man the deepest respect, wishing that Daemon were there beside him to whisper what was culturally correct, followed his lead. The small gold medallion that he wore around his neck escaped from under his doublet, and when he rose, it fell against his burgundy velvet jacket and glittered brightly against the darker surface, catching the light.

“Ah.” Ostyn Tan smiled broadly, taking everyone by surprise, beaming at Ehron after appearing so somber and stern. “Fortune smiles on us indeed. It seems we take a step closer to finding ourselves at the end of a great journey,” he said as he reached inside his coat and withdrew an exact match of the medallion Ehron wore. It hung from a similar chain around his neck.

“By the gods,” Cerus breathed, and many echoed him as Nictorus and Ram and Mycah crowded around Ehron.

“I received this of my consul,” Ehron told Ostyn, staring at the medallion the man held even as he clutched at his.

“If I may be permitted to question this man as to where he received the likeness of the Empress Juto, I would be most grateful. Perhaps he knows of our beloved Daemon.”

There was a choice. He could run. He could remain a stray and leave his birthright unclaimed and remain forever in obscurity. Or he could accept his place whether cursed or not. It was time to choose. The decision was finally upon him.

*Daemon.*

The name echoed through the room as Daemon pushed past Caseen, moved through the crowd, and stepped out into the space between the edge of the room and where the contingent from Narsyk stood before the archlord, warlord, overlord, and all the prefects and barons of Rieyn. He took a deep, quivering breath and raised his arms level with his shoulders before turning his

palms face up.

Ehron turned and looked at him, as did every head in the room. There was not a pair of eyes not locked on him. Ehron caught his breath as he saw the shudder run through his consul.

Ostyn turned to where everyone else looked, and his breath caught in his throat. “The will of Hatsu be praised,” he whispered, walking around Ehron and dropping to one knee. He knew who he was looking at, of course he knew, under the cloak could be no other than the man he sought. He had been similarly clad the last time they had looked on each other. The entire delegation followed suit, unsure of their hyson but never, ever, doubting him. They were not allowed to.

“All praise to the Emperor of Light, he who grants us our life and our death. All sing the glory of Jaron Siu,” Daemon said softly, tears running down his cheeks under the cowl. “Hatsu be praised.”

Ostyn rose slowly and staggered a moment before drawing himself up and walking toward him. When he was only a few feet away, he stopped and bowed deeply. Daemon returned the bow even as his vision blurred with tears. When they both straightened after what seemed forever to those assembled, Ostyn lunged at Daemon and grabbed him tight.

“Still you wear this mark of disgrace,” he gasped, leaning back and pushing the cowl away, revealing, finally, to everyone, the animal underneath.

Gasps and cries filled the hall, and when Daemon tried to push Ostyn away, to cover himself, cover the cat that he was, the other man held tighter.

“You fool,” he growled. “It’s a glamour that lasts because you believe, and nothing more. I wrung the truth from the witch before I took her head. It holds no power over you, none at all.”

Daemon pushed free and breathed. His eyes tore around the room, looking, searching, until they landed on Gareth. He expected to see fear, loathing, and instead found only the same expression from the night before.

*Love.*

Gareth Terhazien loved him, and so did the man standing before him, his best and truest friend, the man who had never given up on finding him.

“We need you at home,” Ostyn told him. “I am hyson now. Jaron is—”

“How are you thus?”

“Jaron kept me with him as you would have once I finished my studies.”

Daemon only nodded because his throat had closed up.

“Hear me, Jaron now is emperor, and Arterus... Arterus will be a horror if you do not return and temper his rage with truth. He only listens to you, and only you can be a bridge between them. He is still powerful. There are still men that will follow him to the abyss and drag innocents along with them. Transform now, save Rieyn from the giant of the west, save Narsyk from more civil war, and return to your station. You have lived as a beast. Now live as a man.”

Daemon closed his eyes tight and tried to believe all the words that his friend spoke.

“You are needed. Cast off this mantle and return to us.”

Into Daemon’s thoughts came Gareth and his expression when he saw Daemon was a beast—unchanged, the love still strong and brave, a living, breathing thing. When he opened his eyes, he heard new murmuring and whispers. Everyone saw the looks of stunned joy on the faces of the contingent from Narsyk. They were a study in astonishment, relief, and adoration.

“There is my friend.” Ostyn smiled widely, hand on Daemon’s cheek. “I have missed your face,” he whispered.

A voice spoke then, and the tone was gentle, and the words flowed in a stream of sound that caused the hyson to rise and look at the scion as he finished addressing him. They moved to exchange places, Ostyn Tan returning to stand before the archlord, Irachis Qhan slowly advancing toward Daemon. All watched as he looked at him with swimming eyes and then bowed low. He mirrored his action, bowing before Daemon.

“Great archlord,” Ostyn said suddenly, his voice startling everyone as it filled the space around them. Eyes turned away from Daemon and Irachis, all attention shifting back to the hyson. “We have no words to tell you of our joy in having Valian Shar returned to us. His brother, the Ko-Tai, sends you all his blessings. We look forward to working along side you to secure the peaceful country of Crosas. We will be pleased to meet your regent and have you meet the one we chose as soon as you appoint one that they might rule together.”

Cerus couldn’t speak. None of them could. No one could speak except Ehron, because he saw Daemon no differently than he had a moment ago. He could not separate who he was from the fact that he had been his consul for ten years.

“Daemon,” Ehron called to him as he advanced toward him, Nictorus and Ram trailing behind him.

“You address him with his title?” Ostyn asked, barring his way, as was his first instinct.

Ehron stopped short. “His title?”

“Daemon,” Ostyn said, looking back at him and then at Ehron again. “Yes? You said Daemon, did you not? This means ‘brother of war’ or ‘brother of blood.’ It translates to both and is the title of the brother of the Ko-Tai. It is not a name, Daemon, but how he is addressed at court and by our people. The brother of the

Ko-Tai is the daemon, but he is called by his name, Valian.”

“Valian?” Ehron breathed it. Never had he uttered it, not once. Beside him suddenly was Gareth, and he too said his name.

“I saw him look for you in the crowd.” Ostyn Tan smiled at Gareth. “Are you his intended, or have you already spoken vows?”

Gareth shook his head, strangely unafraid to speak his heart in front of the hyson. “In Rieyn, it is not permitted for two men to bind themselves together.”

Ostyn smiled at him. “In Narsyk it is. To put limits on the heart is not the place of the state, only to ensure health and prosperity.”

Gareth nodded. “In Narsyk I could claim him? He would be mine?”

“Aye.” Ostyn smiled wider. “Though from the look on his face, I would say that you already have.”

Gareth watched as Ostyn took a step back and bowed to him.

“You will be his wudon, or consort, and when we return to Narsyk, the ritual of binding will be performed. You will love Narsyk, and Valian’s home, Deline, runs from the edge of the Corollian Sea to the mountains of Jerris.” He sighed deeply. “I have been steward of it these many seasons but look forward to granting the land and people to you. All that is his will be yours. Tell me your name.”

“Gareth Terhazien.”

Ostyn offered him his hand, and when Gareth clasped it, the other man’s smile was wide. Gareth felt a wave of energy go through him. It felt like rolling heat and made his teeth clench and his eyes water. He couldn’t breathe for a moment, but he shook his head hard to gather his thoughts, and the blast receded even as it left him shivering.

“You loved him before he was revealed to you.” Ostyn nodded. “You will make a fine wudon for him, Gareth Terhazien. The entire state will be well-pleased, and you will be a great ambassador for your people.”

He was aware of all the eyes on him when he took a breath.

Ehron’s hand on his shoulders steadied him. “You are to be consort of the Daemon of Narsyk,” he said softly. “Is this your desire, Gareth?”

He nodded, smiling sadly. “I will miss Rieyn, but to be caretaker of the land, Daemon’s land and mine... how could I want for anything more?”

“My mind reels!” Cerus announced loudly, capturing everyone’s attention. “Let us hear more from Ostyn Tan, the Hyson of Narsyk.”

Everyone looked to Ostyn and found Valian suddenly beside him. They stood together now, whispering urgently. All saw Valian’s hand pressed between Ostyn’s two palms.

“Great archlord, it seems that you have sheltered the daemon, though you knew it not. We ask now for your indulgence as we suspend our speech with you so that he may greet his brother.”

“Greet him?” Cerus asked. “I understand this not.”

Ostyn Tan lifted his hand from Valian’s and then presented Irachis with his outstretched palm. “I give you the Scion, the Portal of Narsyk, Irachis Qhan, the eyes of the Ko-Tai.”

All eyes moved to Irachis as he stepped forward alone into the newly made circle of the nobility of Rieyn. He stretched his arms wide to each side, and as he did, it seemed as though he drew light to him. It was subtle at first, something one saw out of the corner of the eye, taken for a trick of the shadows or a flight of imagination. And then there were the murmurs for the gods to

protect them from the aberration as Irachis Qhan threw his head back as shards of light came from every corner of the room and slowly illuminated him. The grimace of pain was clear as beads of sweat collected on his forehead and his hands clenched into fists. A blue light hovered around him, first as small as a child's fist and then suddenly three times the size of the scion. The wind rose out of nowhere and whipped through the Hall of Judgment, sending the fallen rose petals into the air like a snow flurry. The blue light paled to opalescence and then became clear as it took up an unwavering position over his head. The cries came loud with murmurs of shock and disbelief, everyone knowing at once that had they not been here to see for themselves, they would never had believed it possible. For where there had been nothing a few moments before, there was now a window that had opened to Narsyk.

There was at once a long roofed walkway that attached one section of a house to another. So quiet, so peaceful, and there came the drifting aroma of quince tea. Everyone started. Even Nictorus gasped, as he could smell the heavy, humid air rife with the fragrance of djarny blossoms and wet dirt. Suddenly all eyes saw a figure standing on an ornately carved wooden bridge, painted bright red, that curved up over the meandering garden pond.

There came a rush of quick movement, a blur of the portal, and then a man filled the vision of all those collected in the hall. Cerus saw the delegation of Narsyk go to their knees along with Valian. He turned to Nictorus and saw his eyes widen. When he turned back to the sight before him, he saw what had made the warlord gape in wonder. They were looking at the man, and he was clearly looking back at all of them. The level gaze left no mistake that he could see everyone in the room.

"My humble greetings to you, mighty archlord," the man said softly, his voice ominously low. "May the house of Tapal ever

prosper.”

Cerus wasn't sure if he should speak or not. He was too stunned to do anything more than bow.

The show of respect was returned, but only slightly. It was the barest of acknowledgements before the man turned his attention to the others.

“I am the Ko-Tai of Narsyk, Jaron Siu, and I send all my blessings to you at the deliverance of my brother, the Daemon, Valian Shar.”

His eyes came to rest on Valian then, and everyone saw them fill as he regarded him. “I am so pleased you live.”

Raising his head off the polished marble floor of the Hall of Judgment, Valian regarded his brother.

He was dressed for war. Valian knew that to the men and women of Rieyn, the sight of him now had to be terrifying. From the enormous black lacquered helmet to the plated body armor and chain mail, arm- and leg-armor, to the long sword that hung at his waist, he looked vicious. Nictorus took in the smaller sword thrust through the sash, also at his waist, as well as the dagger fastened around this right thigh. The weight of the armor was carried on the neck and shoulders. Jaron was tall with broad shoulders and a wide chest and back. His features were not soft and delicate but chiseled: a straight nose, sculpted mouth, hard line of jaw. And finally the dark brown eyes, not dark, warm liquid, but hard. Unlike Valian with his warm bearing, he was able to stand completely still and offer threatening menace.

“You and Arterus must speak,” Valian said, his voice the only sound in the hall, bringing everyone's attention back to him. “And bring an end to this strife between you.”

“If he comes in your presence, I would see him.”

Valian rose to smile at his brother before turning to look at



Gareth. "Come."

Gareth moved quickly to the man's side. When he was close enough, Valian reached for his hand and drew him close.

"I would present Gareth Terhazien, son of Torbald Terhazien, baron of Rieyn." He took a breath. "He is my... my...." He wasn't sure what to say. Nothing had been discussed between them, and he realized he had been hasty in calling Gareth to him.

"I am his wudon," he told Jaron levelly, having never seen a more frightening man. "And I will be returning with him to your home, mighty Ko-Tai."

Jaron nodded. "I am pleased that my brother has not been alone and welcome you, Gareth Terhazien, to Narsyk. I will look forward to your counsel when dealing with the regent that your kingdom will place in Crosas. It would be best if you knew the man."

And that quickly, Torbald Terhazien went from having one powerful son to two. His firstborn would be shield bearer, and his second was the consort of the daemon, the second-most powerful man in the empire of Narsyk.

"I look forward to having you at my side," Jaron told Valian. "A Ko-Tai cannot rule without his brother... without his Daemon."

"I belong as much to Arterus as to you," he said honestly. "We both know this."

"And because of this, after all that has come between us, I would still hear him. Only," he emphasized, "for you."

"Thank you," Valian said, hand over his heart.

"He and I...." Jaron tipped his head. "Well you know our legacy."

"I will be home soon," Valian assured him, the tears rolling down his cheeks as he clutched Gareth's hand. "And we will all

“speak together.”

“I will hold dear the kingdom of Rieyn for its shelter of you.” His eyes darkened suddenly. “For well you know the outcome had you been lost to me.”

“I do know.” He nodded. “Your rage, like your brother’s, is a horror.”

Jaron’s smile was cold for the moment before he bowed. “I await you with open arms.”

The portal did not close as it had opened; it shut with a thunderclap of booming sound and was simply gone. The gasps and murmurs filled the hall as Cerus stepped forward to offer the delegation of Narsyk quarters within the castle.

Cerus gestured for Eculis Pol to come forward to guide the men and women of Narsyk to their chambers so they might rest before the coming revels. There was much to discuss with the hyson and the newly discovered daemon. But before they could take their leave of him, Valian stepped forward and bowed low to Cerus Tapal.

He looked at the man, at the daemon, at a man he might have never seen, merely a consul, important only to a prefect but never to an archlord. Valian had fooled them all, and Cerus was much more than grateful. For had he not been among the living, Cerus wondered what the Ko-Tai of Narsyk would have had planned for them. Crystal clear had been his message. His brother was precious to him.

“I would ask your permission for us to not retire in seclusion as I would have one of your nobility accompany us, great archlord.”

“You would have Gareth Terhazien attend you?” the archlord asked knowingly.

“I would, my lord.”

“And you shall have him.” Cerus smiled warmly, thrilled at the outcome of the day. The son of one of his most trusted barons would accompany the daemon and be a champion in Narsyk for Rieyn. He could not have been more pleased.

Valian smiled softly at him and turned toward the door, tugging Gareth after him, their hands, the archlord finally noticed, clasped tightly.

Gareth let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding and then covered Daemon’s hand with his as he allowed himself to be drawn into step beside him.

“Ostyn Tan,” Valian called out, “will you attend me or no?”

He would have rolled his eyes if they were alone, but protocol had been drilled into him, and too much emotion had already been spilled on the floor of the great hall. In time he would have to explain to Valian all that decorum demanded. On the other hand, the surge of happiness he felt at being ordered about had been desperately missed.

Everyone saw the enormous smile on the face of the Hyson of Narsyk as he jogged after the man he had searched for since the day they had been parted in the woods of Ebi ten years before.

## NINE

**T**he contingent from Narsyk was allowed to take refuge on the lead ship still anchored in the Bay of Creon. Ostyn Tan had gently argued that the archlord could not guarantee the safety of the daemon, and to allow anything to happen to the brother of the Ko-Tai was simply foolish. The archlord could find no fault with the hyson's logic and so gave the delegation safe passage from the castle. He hated to have them out of his sight, as he had so many more questions, but there was simply no diplomatic recourse open to him. With permission granted to leave, soldiers from Narsyk came ashore and escorted the daemon, the hyson, and the scion back to the ships. It was there in the following days that the powers of Rieyn arrived to see them off.

The mist rolled in as the procession moved slowly toward the dock. The stairs they descended seemed endless as they dropped from the main road down to the harbor. Eons-old trees and thick brush framed both sides of the path, and the stairs went down, stopped for a plateau before descending once more. Cerus led the way, with his lady and his consort flanking him. Behind him came Ram and Mycah and Ehron, followed by the barons and their families. The streets had been cleared for the departure, as Cerus wanted no surprises. He wanted the delegation of Narsyk off his shore without any mishap.

When finally the last step was taken, Cerus led the royalty of Rieyn out onto the docks and looked out over the Bay of Creon. Everyone had fanned out to the side of him and created a vast circle. They all waited silently and were soon rewarded with the appearance of the daemon of Narsyk. Ehron Terhazien, standing silently beside Ram, realized how different his friend appeared

now. He was no longer simply allowed to attend them without guards. Forty men walked by before Ostyn appeared, followed by Irachis Qhan and finally Valian and Gareth. The son of the Baron of Kasan brought forth the daemon to the archlord. He stepped forward and bowed low. When he straightened, he offered the older man his hand. Cerus grasped it tight before bowing low, returning the deep show of respect.

“I will carry your hope of peace to the emperor, great archlord,” Valian assured Cerus.

“See that you do, my Daemon,” he said sincerely, smiling at him ever so slightly. “I would have the giant of Narsyk ever be a friend of Rieyn and never a foe.”

“May Hatsu grant you peace,” Valian smiled at him, stepping back

The consort and the lady both bowed to the daemon, who inclined his head before straightening to look once more at the archlord.

“Come!” Cerus announced to the assembled masses. “Let us bid our friends farewell as they embark on their journey across the sea.”

Everyone rushed together to hug and bestow prayers for safe travel.

Valian moved quickly around several that barred his path until he stood before the men of the house of Terhazien. Ehron looked down at his former consul, still overcome to see the gold eyes staring back at him.

“From this moment forward, I will miss having you at my side.”

Valian couldn’t speak; he only leaned forward into the Shield Bearer of Rieyn.

“All that I am, you have made me, rat-catcher, and it seems

still that you would watch over me even from across the sea.”

Valian turned his head so that his cheek was pressed against Ehron’s chest. He didn’t lift his arms, only stayed still as Ehron hugged him tight.

“My brother belongs to you now; keep him close to your heart.”

The wind was steady and cold as it whipped around them, and all eyes watched Valian’s pale gray cloak envelope Ehron.

Gareth was hugged tight by both his parents and then his sister before he thanked his father again for allowing Penn to accompany him. The man had never been anything more than Gareth’s companion and so would continue to do what he did best. Odessa was openly sobbing as she kissed and hugged first Gareth and then Penn H’rah. Torbald had to drop his hand from Gareth’s shoulder to gather his wife in his arms.

The crowd parted then for Ostyn Tan. His black garments were a stark contrast with his white-blond hair and pale-blue eyes. An enormous bow was strapped across his back, and a sword hung at his waist. He looked outfitted more for battle than a sea voyage. It was clearly evident that he was taking his leave and that the daemon and his consort were to accompany him.

“I will count every rise and set until I bide with you again, Valian Shar,” Ehron told his friend. “You will always have my heart.”

“And you mine, my lord,” he said, taking a step back and bowing low.

Ehron sighed, grabbed Gareth fast, hugged him tight and hard, and then shoved him away from him. “I wish you both great joy. Know that you are always welcome wherever I am.”

“And you with me, Ehron Terhazien.” Valian smiled brightly, reaching for Gareth’s hand before he took a deep breath.

Everyone watched as they walked side by side into the fog with Penn and then Ostyn Tan following behind. Hours later, the ship finally cleared the bay, and both Gareth and his friend stood in awe on the deck staring out across the waves.

Were they not there to bear witness to the spectacle for themselves, they would not have believed. As far as either man could see, there were ships. Just beyond the Bay of Creon, no less than three miles from the coast of Rieyn, was an armada of corsairs. Gareth turned to face Ostyn Tan, the Hyson of Narsyk.

“What is the meaning of this, my lord?”

Ostyn Tan strode forward and stood between the two men. “There are two banners, my lord, that of the Ko-Tai and that of the daemon.”

Gareth stared as the two separate banners were brought forth. They were unfurled, and he saw the black banner with the head of the raptor done in scarlet. The other was green with no trace of any other decoration.

“They mean to invade Rieyn,” Penn whispered nervously, his hand heavy on Gareth’s shoulder. “We must return to shore at once and warn the state.”

Turning, Gareth saw Valian holding onto the rigging, leaning out into the wind, head back eyes closed, and was filled with too much peace to consider anything else. “You speak of banners, Hyson.”

“I do.” Ostyn smiled knowingly, appreciating Gareth’s lack of alarm. “I raise now the banner of the daemon and in so doing turn the wolf from your door.”

Gareth understood at once. “If the daemon was not found with us, then the black banner would have been raised and our city would have been sacked.”

Ostyn nodded even as he signaled the men to raise the green.

It was not until that very instant that Gareth truly understood who Valian was, his rank, his title, and what he meant to so many... to the man able to grant life or bring death. The Empire of Narsyk was too vast to ever hope to fight and win against, but one man masquerading as a consul, disguised under a black robe, had saved them all.

“The black banner is the mark of the Ko-Tai. If his banner were raised, he himself would be here in a cycle to bring Rieyn under the yoke of Narsyk. You must believe me when I tell you this.”

Gareth did not doubt the word of Ostyn Tan.

“In finding Valian, we have triumphed and reach now toward Rieyn with an open hand of friendship and trade.” As he spoke the last, the banner of the daemon was raised on the main mast. When the colors of the daemon were flown, Gareth and Penn were treated to another spectacle. One after another, ship after ship raised the flag of the daemon until every corsair flew the same green banner of the brother of the Emperor of Narsyk. It was a wave of color that swept the fleet and left Gareth breathless with the synchronicity of the action.

“Truly, Ostyn Tan, the might of your country is something I dread.”

“Fear not.” He smiled, clapping Gareth on the back. “For the power of the realm lies in the emperor, and Jaron Siu is a good man, fair and loyal to friends. More to the point, his actions are soon to be guided and counseled”—he turned and pointed at Valian—“by that man. And he, we both know, was made kind and honest and true.”

He watched as Valian waved to men on other ships, and saw too the returned gesture. The low sound of thunder startled him until he realized he was hearing voices in song, a wall of sound that reached the corsair.



“What is that they chant?” He asked Ostyn.

“The song of Cheron, he who was the first Daemon,” Ostyn chuckled. “You cannot know the happiness of my country Gareth. We will be mobbed in the streets.”

As Gareth stared at the man he would soon bind his life to, the fear that had been choking him moments before left him. With Valian as the guardian of Rieyn, what worry could he have?

That evening as he lay on tangled sheets, enjoying the freedom of everyone on the ship knowing that he slept in Valian’s cabin and in his bed, Gareth had his lover howling with laughter as he recounted Penn’s questions to him from earlier in the day. His friend had pressed Gareth to understand how a man, instead of a woman, could steal his heart.

“He was seeking answers, and you were a proper ass to him.”

Gareth knew better. Penn wanted to know about mechanics, and Gareth had been honest—and vivid—in his detail.

Valian rubbed the tears from his eyes. His new mate was wicked and mean, and it was, in his estimation, just another reason why he adored the man.

Gareth wasn’t listening anymore, interested instead in the feel of Valian’s skin sliding over his. “Pour me some water, dreg.”

Valian smiled as he rose over Gareth, straddling his hips as he reached for the pitcher and glass.

Gareth was rough when he grabbed hold of the smaller man’s thighs, yanking him forward, shifting him momentarily off balance as his hand slid over the side of the bed to retrieve the small crystal pitcher of oil. He passed it to Valian.

“This will not quench your thirst, my lord.”

“Aye, it will,” he assured Valian. “Your scent, your lips, your hair, your skin... all of you calls to me, and I would show you again who your master is.”

Just his words sent sizzling heat over Valian’s skin. He had never known his own desire for a possessive, demanding lover until Gareth. As he coated the man’s throbbing, needy cock in oil, a whimper came up out of him.

“It would seem,” Gareth moaned as Valian lifted up and slowly, the anticipation building in him, “that being my servant pleases you. Kiss me, I want to taste you.”

Valian sank down over the long, hard, thick cock of his lover until every inch was buried inside of him. The moan of pleasure rose up out of him and brought a now familiar ache to Gareth’s heart.

His fluttering eyes, his catch of breath, watching the beads of sweat on the man’s smooth chest, all of it, together coupled with the way he felt when he simply held Valian in his arms, brought the words up from his soul. “You are my heart, Valian Shar.”

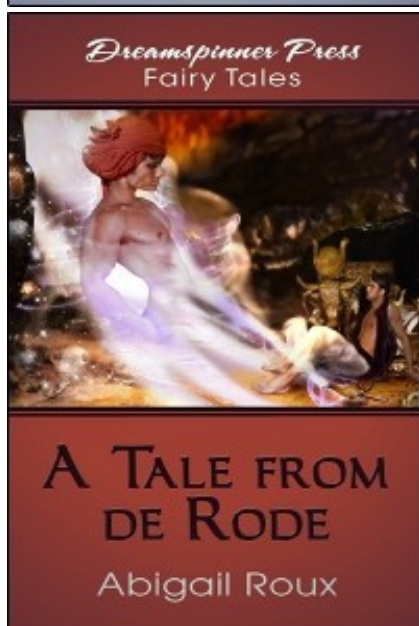
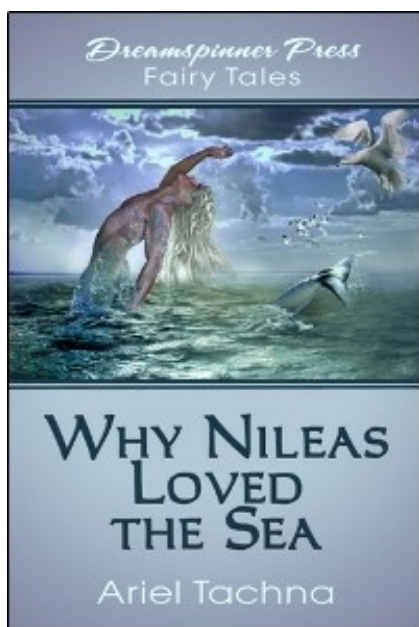
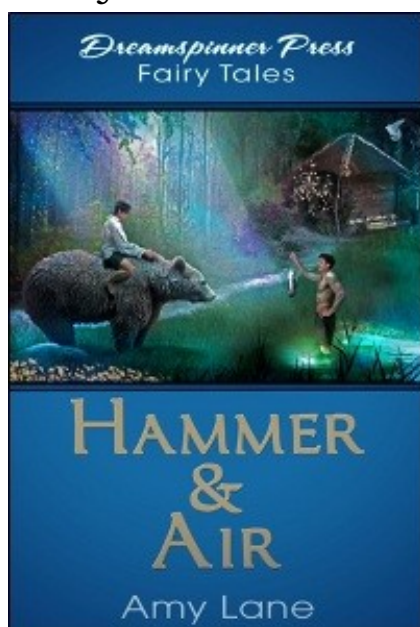
Valian saw the love pooled there in the man’s eyes and knew, even without benefit of reaching the shores of Narsyk, that he was already home. Wherever Gareth was, for the rest of his life, would be home.

“Kiss me and seal this bond between us. I would claim what is mine.”

Valian could think of no greater gift than being claimed by the man he loved.

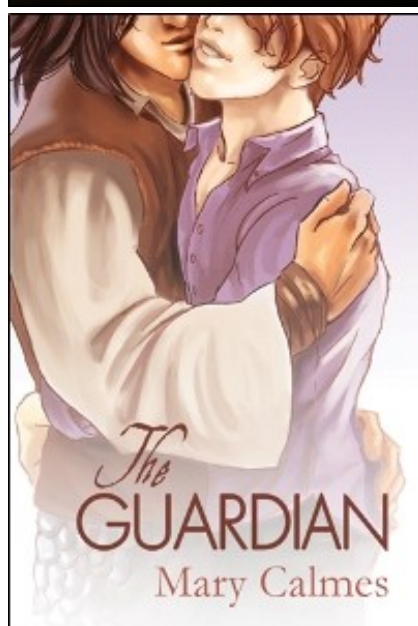
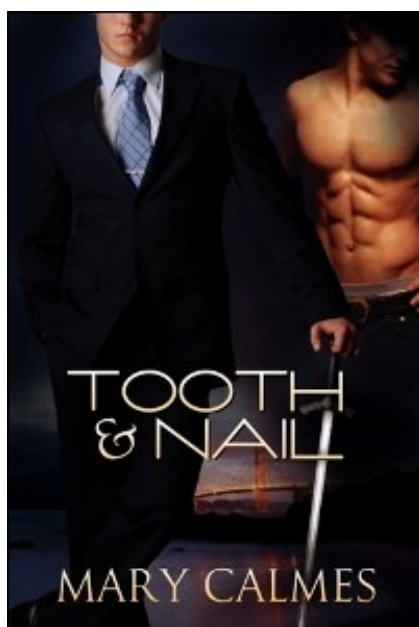
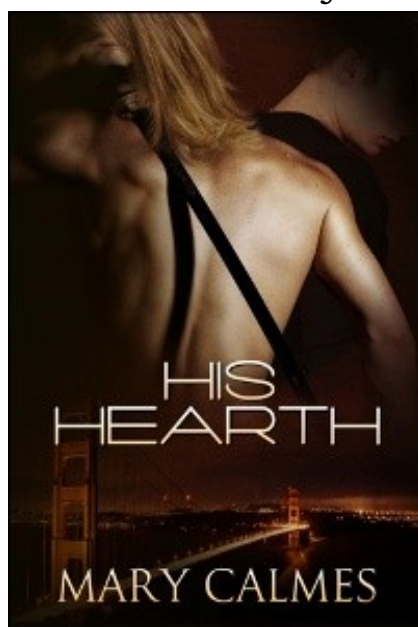
MARY CALMES currently lives in Honolulu, Hawaii, with her husband and two children and hopes to eventually move off the rock to a place where her children can experience fall and even winter. She graduated from the University of the Pacific (ironic) in Stockton, California, with a bachelor's degree in English literature. Due to the fact that it is English lit and not English grammar, do not ask her to point out a clause for you, as it will so not happen. She loves writing, becoming immersed in the process, and falling into the work. She can even tell you what her characters smell like. She works at a copy store but has been unable to incorporate that into a book... yet. She also buys way too many books on Amazon.

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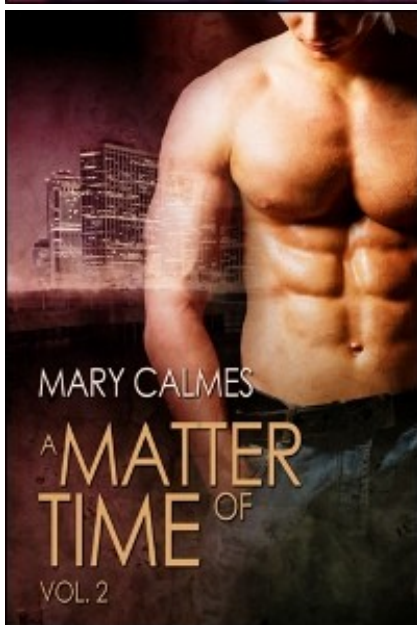
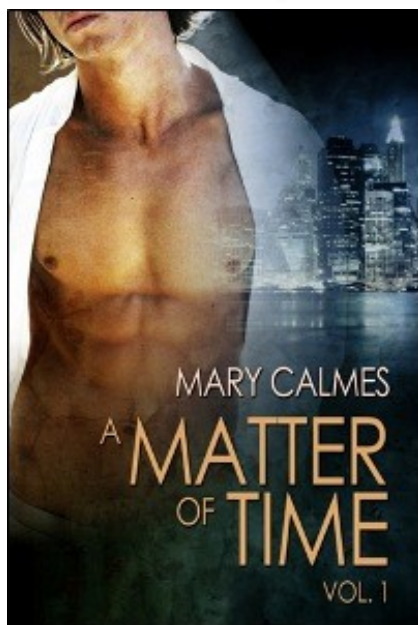
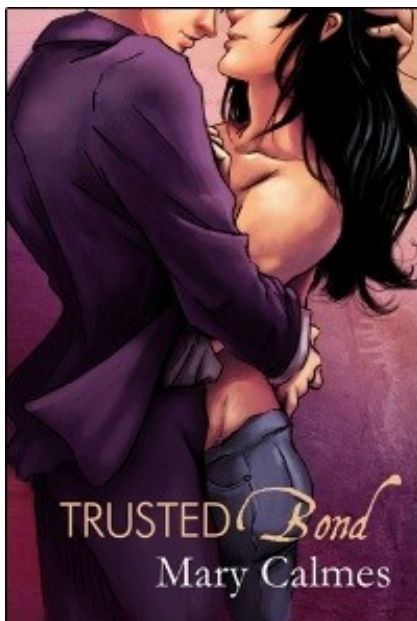
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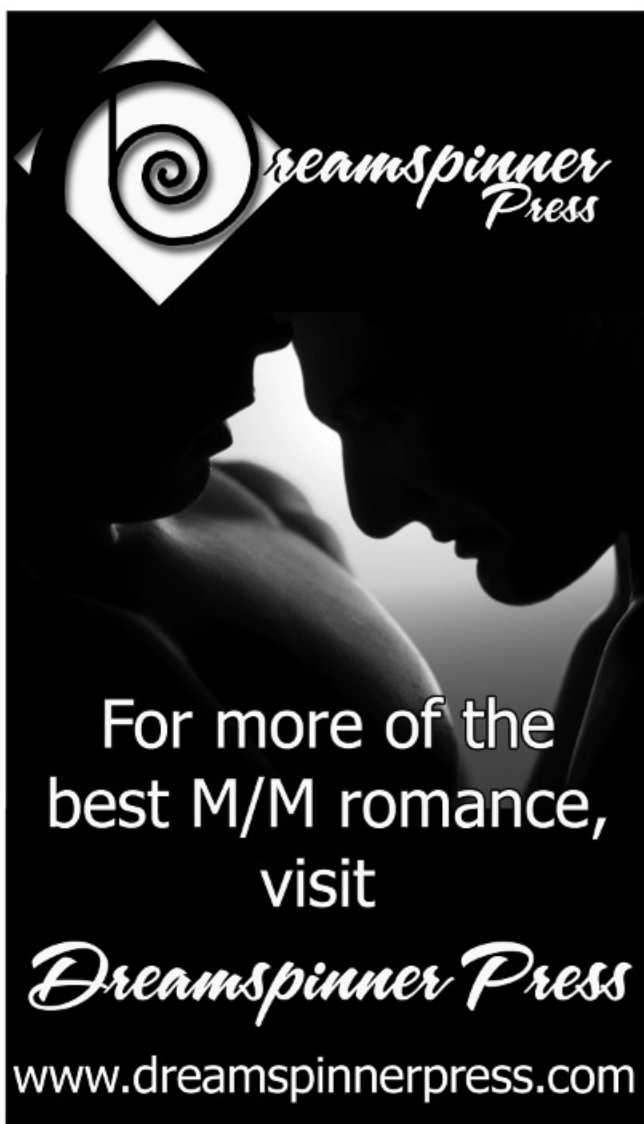
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