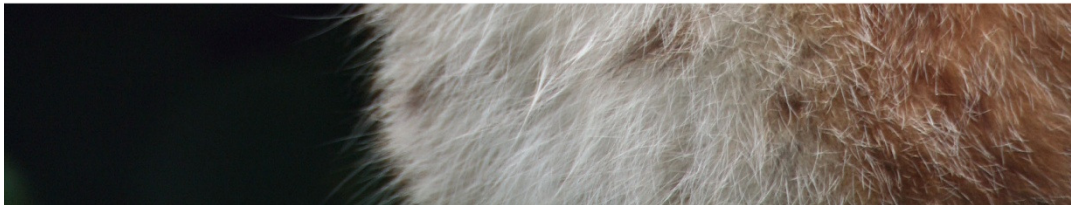




the menagerie

lynx

megan dert



The Menagerie: Lynx
By Megan Derr

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Ramsay heard the cry for help a split second before he saw the boy coming in his direction at full speed, chased by half a dozen men with swords flashing in the hot, bright sunlight. Dropping the dipper from which he'd been drinking water at the well, he drew his own sword and ran forward with a roaring cry.

The men fought tenaciously, and if they had not been so strung out while chasing the boy, they might have stood a chance—six against one should have been an easy victory for them. But they were scattered and tired from running in the exhausting heat, and Ramsay had not lost his edge despite his unexpected and extremely early retirement.

He was still panting heavily when he finished. Kneeling, he cleaned his sword on the robe of a dead man, then sheathed it. He used his own sleeve to wipe the spatters of blood from his face. Turning, he sought out the boy and found him hiding behind the well Ramsay had only just abandoned. "Ho, there," he called, taking care with his Tavamaran. "You all right there, boy?"

"Y-y-yes," the boy stuttered, visibly shaking and crying as he slowly stood up. "T-t-thank you."

"You are welcome. Why is a boy of not more than ten summers out here all alone, being chased by dangerous men?"

The boy looked guilty and afraid, but only shrugged and looked at his feet.

Ramsay examined him. Despite sweat and dirt and grime, the boy was clearly of noble breeding. The clothes were high-quality linen, dyed expensive colors, and he wore a plain gold bracelet that plenty of people would certainly see as sufficient motivation for killing.

Definitely noble, then. So likely taken for ransom, or wandered off on a lark and found himself in over his head. "Were they trying to kidnap you?"

The boy nodded, looking guiltier and more miserable by the second. Ramsay rested a comforting hand on his shoulder. "It will be all right, boy. What's your name? We'll see you home safe."

Rather than give his name, the boy went from scared to terrified, and tears began to stream down his face in earnest.

Ramsay had a sudden awful realization. No noble's son would *fear* giving his name to a complete stranger—especially not one as glaringly foreign as Ramsay. But even a foreigner was likely to recognize the name of royalty, and the King had only one son, a boy of about eight years.

Kneeling, gripping his shoulders, Ramsay said softly, "You are Prince Kajan, aren't you?"

The boy started to sob then and appeared ready to bolt. Ramsay scooped him up and hugged him tight, holding him as he had once held his own little brother. He spoke soft, soothing words, switching between Tavamaran and Tritacian, until Kajan's tears finally calmed.

"It will be all right, Highness," Ramsay said. "I promise, I will not hurt you. Neither will I let another harm you, understand? I promise I will see you returned to your father. Come, come," he said and finally let Kajan go. "No, do not look," he said when Kajan tried to look at the bodies.

He guided Kajan to his horse and settled him on it. Then he went carefully around the rest stop, removing all signs of himself from the area that he possibly could. Once confident he would not be easily traced, he swung up onto the horse behind Kajan and rode from the area, off into the thin forest that eventually would spill into the mountains that much later on formed the border between Tavamara and its northern neighbors. They traveled as quickly as he could manage while stopping frequently to cover their tracks and ensure they were not followed.

By the time they reached his home, he was exhausted. He had not felt this sort of tension, this awareness, for a very long time. He thought he had left it all behind. He had intended to leave it all behind.

Pain twisted in his chest, a wound that would always be raw, as painful now as it had been seven months and six days ago. He would never forget how it had felt, to hold his brother's dead and bloody body in his arms. The light forever gone from brown eyes, so much like their mother's. Dead because Ramsay had been too busy guarding a prince and had trusted his brother to others.

Making a rough sound, he dismounted and led his horse into the stable he had built himself shortly after arriving. The house had already been there, if only barely. He had gotten it for a pittance from a man who had been delighted to have the old cabin—shack, really—off his hands. But Ramsay had nothing but time on his hands, now and so had used it to make the house respectable and add a small stable to the property.

Now, buried in the thin forest, with a view of mountains all around him, he found a reasonable imitation of peace.

Dismounting, Ramsay led the horse into the stable. Kajan laughed as he had to duck to get inside, still on the horse. Only a child, Ramsay thought with a faint smile, could be so easily and delightedly distracted from a situation as dire as running from his kidnappers straight into the arms of a stranger who could be anyone at all.

Luckily for Kajan, he could have run to no one better when it came to these matters. In the stable, he finally helped Kajan down. "Stay out of the way for a bit, Highness, while I take care of Feather, hmm?"

Kajan laughed. "That is a silly name for a horse."

Ramsay smiled and patted his horse affectionately. "Yes, I suppose it is. But he runs as light as a feather, even when I am on his back."

"Well, you're not very big," Kajan said, looking as though he were trying very hard to be nice, especially under the circumstances, but the truth was the truth.

Ramsay burst out laughing, leaning against his horse as he attempted to regain control of himself. He reached out to tousle Kajan's hair. "No, I am not very big. But I am fast and very tough, and I weigh more than you might think." He winked.

Kajan giggled.

Grinning, Ramsay led the way out of the stable and across the way to his small, humble but sturdy cabin. Inside, he hung up his face and head wraps then washed at the basin he always kept filled with fresh water. "Ah, that feels much better. I still am not used to the heat in your country, hmm? Where I come from, it is always very cold. Would you like some tea?" He walked toward the stove, looking over his shoulder for an answer.

"Y-yes, please," Kajan said, looking suddenly uncertain.

Crossing back to Kajan, he knelt and hugged the prince tight. "It's okay, Kajan. We will get you home safe, I promise."

Kajan started crying again and hugged him so tightly that Ramsay struggled to breathe for a moment. "I want papa! I w-w-want to go home!"

"Shh, shh," Ramsay soothed, hugging him tight. "You will see your father again, Kajan. I promise."

Kajan just cried harder.

Ramsay drew back slightly and smiled. "Do you know what I used to be?" He smiled more brightly when Kajan only looked at him in confusion.

Standing, he crossed the room to his bed and drew out the small, wooden chest he kept beneath it. Inside were the few precious objects he had taken when he had left Tritacia behind forever. Picking out the small velvet jeweler's bag he wanted, he strode back to Kajan and knelt again.

Opening the bag, he dug out the only ring it contained. "Do you see this ring, Kajan?"

"Uh-huh," Kajan said, sniffing, tears drying as curiosity overtook fear.

"Once upon a time, it was my duty to protect a prince. I trained for it for a very long time—I was not much older than you are now, in fact. Every day for ten years I protected that prince. He is still alive and safe, because I protected him. Once, he was almost stolen, just like you. I stopped the men who tried to take him and got the prince safely home. That is what this ring means—that I am a Protector. I promise, Kajan, that I will get you safely home, all right? So you do not need to be afraid."

Kajan looked at the ring. "Papa has rings like this." He frowned. "But not like this, too."

Ramsay smiled. It turned a bit sad as he looked at the ring himself. It was beautiful—made from white gold, set with a deep blue sapphire. Over the sapphire was more white gold, molded into the royal flower of Tritacia. The ring of a Holy Protector.

He had given them so much, until they had taken the one thing he had begged them to protect for him while he guarded their prince. Then, they had not even been sorry. He had raged and raged, all to nothing.

So he had buried his brother, dead at only eleven years. Then he had packed all that Feather could comfortably carry and boarded the first ship with room for man and horse. He had left Tritacia and the life of a Protector behind forever.

Except it seemed the Three Goddesses were not done with him yet, not if they had guided him across the ocean to await the arrival of another prince. His father was right, it seemed. But he always had been. One could not escape one's fate.

"There are very few rings like this one," he finally said, then reached into the velvet bag again and extracted a silver chain. He threaded it through the ring then looped it over Kajan's head, to let it fall against his chest. "You wear it, until I have returned you safely to your father. My promise to you, all right?"

Kajan nodded and smiled. "I am glad you found me."

Ramsay smiled, keeping his sighs to himself, and hugged Kajan. "Me too." Then he turned more serious. "Kajan, the first rule of being protected is this—you must obey me. I know that can be hard—"

"I didn't listen to papa," Kajan said sadly, shamefully. "He was always yelling at me, telling me not to run off, not to hide. I didn't listen to him."

"Well, so long as you have learned now that you *should* listen."

"Yes."

"Good." Patting his head, Ramsay stood and strode back across the room, putting a kettle on for tea. As Kajan sat at the table, he pulled out bread, honey, and some dried fruit. "Eat up, Kajan."

"Papa calls me Kaj," Kajan said shyly, then began to shovel in food as if he were starving.

"Kaj. My name is Ramsay."

"Ramsay."

"That's right. Eat up. I need to figure out how to get you home safe. Tell me what happened, Kaj. How did you wind up all the way out here?"

Kajan wolfed down another slice of bread drowned in honey, then said, "I—I was playing. Father was busy with some men, always talking talking. He frowned briefly at this obviously old complaint. "He told me not to wander too far when it was so crowded, but I did, and some men grabbed me when I went out into the gardens. It was scary, I was in a bag and couldn't see, and that was forever, like days and *days*."

Probably more like a few hours, Ramsay thought. "Then what?"

"They let me out, and locked me in this little room. I could hear people then I could hear nothing. They left me some food. The room had a little window way high up, and I managed to reach it and crawl out, even though I was almost too big. But when I got out, I was lost. I tried to find home, but then they found me and I ran—then you killed them."

Ramsay nodded and poured more tea for both of them. "So everyone will be looking for you. Where were you, when they took you?"

"Papa was having one of his parties, in the great big room with the crystals. It leads to the gardens. He told me not to go out there alone, that I was to stay close, but he was talking and talking and talking, so I went off by myself into the gardens. They're papa's gardens. They're vast. What does that mean?"

"Vast means 'big'," Ramsay replied.

"They are big."

"I believe you," Ramsay said with an absent smile as his mind raced. He knew very little about Tavamaran royalty, but royalty did not change in the basics from country to country. No one should have access to the royal gardens, not that easily. Even with a party occurring, access would be limited. Getting into the gardens and out of them again would have likely required some assistance from the inside. Such kidnappings usually involved insiders, anyway. A noble's son was easy enough to steal. A prince was more difficult by far.

Which meant he must use extreme care in contacting the King and telling him of Kajan. If they had lost the boy, they would be frantic to get him back before the King realized it. Hmm...he drummed his fingers on the table in thought. He wished suddenly that he knew certain Tavamaran customs better. He was a foreigner, only seven months in the country. Why would the King deign to see him? It was that or break into the palace and under the circumstances he did not want to attempt so risky a venture. "Kaj, tell me something. If I wanted to speak with your father, without causing trouble, how would I?"

Kajan frowned. "Um. Lots of people talk to papa every day, during session. Fancy people. Plain people. People like you. They crowd in the big room and take turns."

A general audience, of course. He had forgotten they did that here. Back home, it was laughable to think the King would hold general audience with just anyone. And, he recalled suddenly, as a foreigner, he should introduce himself and thank the King for having him. That was an old tradition, not a requirement, but it more than sufficed to gain him the needed audience. Beyond that, he would have to figure it out as he went—but the first step was the most important, and he had that now.

"Kaj, if I were to see your father, what is a secret I could tell him? I mean, what is something the two of you discuss, that I could mention to him, so that he would know I have you but do not want to hurt you?"

Kajan frowned. "Uh—" He fell silent, obviously stumped by the question.

Ramsay smiled. "Do you have a favorite story he tells you?"

"Yes!" Kajan said eagerly, face lighting up. "Papa tells me stories about the Great Desert. They fight a lot, did you know? My favorite is Cobra. And Owl. And Fox. And especially Ghost, even though papa says there probably isn't *really* a Ghost Tribe."

"I see," Ramsay said with a laugh. "Well, I think that will do. The question is, what to do with you in the mean time? I dare not take you into the city, someone will see you for certain and it is too easy to lose

you there." He drummed his fingers on the table, biting at his lip as he thought, but at last conceded with a sigh, "I think you must stay here, Kaj."

Kaj looked panicked. "Here? All alone?"

"Alone," Ramsay repeated grimly. "No one will come here. Stay in the house. Do not go outside for any reason, do you understand me?"

Though he looked like he wanted to cry again, Kajan nodded.

"You are a good, very brave boy," Ramsay with a smile. "Your father will be very proud when he hears how brave you have been. Can you be brave and hide here while I go to the palace to tell your father I have found you? We will come back to take you home, Kaj, I promise."

"Yes," Kajan said, wrapping small fingers around the ring Ramsay had given him. "I can do it."

"Good," Ramsay said, and hugged him, kissing the top of Kajan's head. "Very good."

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The market of Tavamara was famous throughout the world. Other countries strove to emulate it, but none ever succeeded.

To Ramsay, it once would have been a living nightmare. Protecting someone in a mess like this was impossible. Thank the Goddesses he no longer had to worry about such things.

Once he saw Kajan safely home, he could return to his normal life, such as it was, and Goddesses willing. Not that his normal life was anything to covet, but...

But it was free of people trying to kill other people and free of people needing his protection. Free of people he had failed to protect.

He sighed softly in relief as he finally left the crowded streets of the city behind and crossed the empty-by-comparison pavilion and courtyard that led from the edge of the city to the great palace of Tavamara. Legend had it, he knew, that it had taken seventy years to build the palace. Looking at it, estimating the hundreds of rooms it must have and the dozens of secret rooms that is also probably had, he could well believe the legend.

Joining the throng headed for the main audience chamber, he accepted a token from a clerk and then sidled off to the side to wait his turn. Seeing a wide, deep window ledge, he glanced briefly around then hopped neatly up onto it. A couple of guards glanced his way, but no one ordered him down. Ramsay relaxed slightly, and well-situated just above the crowd, finally took in his surroundings.

He glanced toward the front, at the King he sought.

It felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. Hard. That was a King? But... but no King looked that way. Kings were fat, red, and soft-looking, or hard and cold. They wore obscene amounts of costly fabrics and jewels, showy headpieces to emphasize their great and glorious importance.

The man on the throne was presently laughing at something a dusty farmer was saying—kind, genuinely amused laughter. He conversed with the farmer easily, as though they were not King and peasant at all. Ramsay could not recall his own King ever talking to a farmer, let alone so easily. He was striking to look at, the Tavamaran King, with all that dark skin and hair. Were his eyes the same?

He was impressed the King could laugh. Given the ongoing session, the lack of fear and curiosity, the low number of guards... They were trying to keep it secret that the crown prince had been kidnapped.

A wise decision, and a practical one, of course. But he wondered what it cost the King to pretend as though all was well, when his only son was stolen by men who would probably kill him once they had the money, or whatever it was they sought.

The more he watched the striking King, the more closely he watched, the more he saw it cost him a great deal to pretend that all was well. Ramsay wished he could simply stride across the room, up the few steps of the dais, and tell him that his son was safe.

Shafiq, he thought suddenly. That was the King's name. It suited him.

The guards signaled a halt to the proceedings, and Ramsay's gaze was caught by movement as two of the men at the King's side moved. Until then, the men had all been perfectly still. Four of them in total, two on his right, two on his left.

The King's Harem, Ramsay realized. He had heard about that—who hadn't heard about the infamous royal harems of Tavamara? No other country had anything like it. No other King owned five men devoted exclusively to his pleasure and every whim. Despite himself, Ramsay gave in to his curiosity and examined the harem men. Only four, rather than the full five, but those four were plenty distracting.

Twins, he realized, looking at the two on the right. That—was that allowed? Weren't they pleasure slaves or something? Twins? But, they *were* beautiful; all the more so sitting beside each other. Ramsay did not think the finest jewels in the world could display a King's power and wealth better than that perfectly matched pair.

Pure Tavamaran, by the look of them. They had the fine, dark skin, the dark brown-black hair. It was closely cropped, showing off their sharp, elegant features, the beautiful eyes that were pale-colored, even at a distance. Their chests were bare, save for jewels adorning their nipples and belly buttons, with a glittering chain connecting the ones at their nipples. One twin wore rubies, the other sapphires.

Ramsay suspected that no one but the King and the rest of the harem knew which twin was who and the significance of the jewels they wore.

His skin felt suddenly too tight for his body, and the room too small, too hot. What might it be like, to be privy to their secrets?

As though sensing him, one of the twins—Sapphire—glanced his way, caught his eye. His expression never changed, but Ramsay knew an unseen smirk when he saw one.

Hastily jerking his gaze away, mortified and furious with himself for forgetting his purpose, he surreptitiously examined the remaining two. The one nearest the King was pretty rather than beautiful, his hair a tangle of curls that looked more artifice than natural, but were pretty for all that. He had a pouty sort of mouth, though currently he was as expressionless as the others. It was the kind of mouth that always seemed to beg a kiss to take the pout away. All the harem men were bare-chested; they wore only some sort of black skirt, slit up both sides clear to the hip, with black pants beneath. The man with the pouty mouth has chains dripping jewels wrapped around his wrists, throat, and waist; emeralds, pearls, and amber.

The last man was far from the slender, lanky builds of the others. He was broad, well-muscled, large without being overbearing. Ramsay thought with an old, familiar sigh that he would barely reach the man's chest. Short, compact, and fast had always been his fate. He had always envied the tall, broad ones who made everything look so easy, so effortless.

He carefully did not think about the others things he enjoyed from such men; gawking at the twins had been bad enough.

But, he realized with a sudden shock, he was thinking about such things. Since his brother's death, nothing and no one had interested him. Seven months and eight days now. Was he allowed to feel anything again? He did not think ten years, or a hundred, was enough time to forgive his terrible sin. His brother had needed him, and he had not been there, and he had trusted the wrong people—

Turning away from those thoughts, he focused on the prince he was saving. He looked again at the large harem man. His nose looked as though it had been broken a couple of times, but it did not detract at all from his handsome features. None of the four was as striking, as compelling, as the King himself, but they were all damned close.

Was there a fifth one missing? Did the King only have four? What did it matter? Annoyed with himself, not quite certain why, Ramsay shifted his gaze back to the King—and startled to find he was being observed in his turn. He looked straight into those dark, dark eyes for what seemed like an eternity, then wrenched his gaze away.

Doing so was much more difficult than it should have been, and he could not figure out why his heart was suddenly beating so damned fast. What was wrong with him? He was here to tell the King that his son was safe, and could be brought home soon, not to act like a great fool.

A bell rang, signaling the resumption of the audiences.

"One thirteen!" a clerk cried out.

Ramsay frowned, and glanced at his token. That was his, but when they had paused for a break, they had only been in the eighties. The clerk called his number again, and he slid down from his perch, presenting the token to the clerk, who checked him off and motioned that he may approach the throne.

He had spent his life guarding a prince, milling with nobles and royals, the most powerful men in the world. He had punched and otherwise harmed a few of them when they dared to try and bring harm to the man he had been blood sworn to protect. There was nothing about the high and mighty that unsettled him.

Yet his heart was still beating rapidly as he knelt reflexively before King Shafiq.

"You are a long way from home, child of Tritacia," Shafiq said.

Ramsay looked up in surprise. "I did not give my country of origin, Majesty. How did you know it?"

Shafiq seemed amused by something, but said only, "My clerk is a scholar of languages, and he has quite the ear for accents. That aside, your hair is a rather unique coppery orange. I seldom have seen that shade when it did not belong to a child of the Three Goddesses."

"Majesty," Ramsay conceded with a nod. His greatest asset as a Protector had been that he looked quite harmless. His coppery hair seemed too bright for an earnest soldier, his freckles more suited to a child, and his small, compact stature had made him look vulnerable. Too late, people realized he was no kitten.

"So you have come to introduce yourself?" The King asked. "You are a long way from home. Why do you choose to settle here?"

Ramsay almost replied honestly and inwardly recoiled. What was wrong with him? He was a Protector; he had a job to do. Drawing a deep breath, he said, "Majesty. Two days ago, I met a young man while journeying to my house, well outside your magnificent city. He told me some fascinating stories, about Cobra and Owl and Fox—and Ghost, which was his favorite, though he tells me that his father says Ghosts do not exist."

The King looked puzzled for a second—then his eyes snapped open, and too late Ramsay realized his attempt at conveying all was well had not worked.

Everything happened fast. It always did. Even as he heard guards banishing everyone else from the room, others were upon him, drawing swords for what they no doubt thought would be an easy capture.

He caught the first one in the face with his fist, then whirled around and took down two more with well-placed kicks, dropping to sweep another one off his feet, then bounced up neatly—

To find himself going head to head with the broad-shouldered harem man, and for a split second Ramsay had the thought that he would be enjoying himself if the situation were not so dire. Goddesses, the man could fight, and it was obvious he was not fooled for a second by Ramsay's deceptive build and features.

Fighting a sudden, inappropriate urge to laugh, Ramsay tried to keep the man back without doing him real harm. "I'm not—" He dodged, kicked. "A threat. Please—" That time, he dodged too late, and stumbled back with a grunt.

But he recovered in the next moment, until at last they were pinned, locked together in an awkward draw.

"Where is the Prince?" the man demanded.

The King moved forward, even as the rest of the harem tried to hold him back. "My son, where is—"

Everyone froze as the door abruptly opened to admit—

"Jankin?" Ramsay asked, not certain what shocked him more—that of all people, Jankin had just walked in, or that Jankin was obviously the fifth member of the King's harem. "What in the name of the Three are you doing here?"

"Me?" Jankin demanded. "What are you doing here? You're a far way from home, Protector. Oh, Berkant, honestly. Let him go. What in the name of the Great Dragon is going on here?"

"He has Kajan," Berkant replied.

"I saved him!" Ramsay finally managed to get out.

Silence fell for a moment, then Shafiq said quietly but firmly, "Berkant, let him go."

"But—" Berkant muttered something indistinct then obeyed with obvious reluctance.

Shafiq moved closer, pushing away the men clearly protecting him. "Who are you? Where is my son? How do you know Jankin?"

"I was travelling home two days ago," Ramsay said, answering the only important question. "I was taking water at a well, when I heard a cry for help. Six men were chasing down a boy, swords out. I saved him, and soon deduced he was the crown prince. He is hidden in my home, while I am here to try and tell you, as quietly as possible." He grimaced. "It did not go according to plan, but I promise, your Majesty, I intend you and your son no harm."

"Why should we believe you?" Berkant demanded, and nearby the twins and the other man nodded in agreement.

Jankin snorted. "Ramsay is—was—a Holy Protector of Tritacia. It was his sworn duty to protect the Crown Prince of Tritacia. Protecting is his life. He would never harm someone he thinks requires protecting and most certainly not a boy. We met when I was in Tritacia studying dance there. We were friends for a brief period." He slid Ramsay a sly, fond look, then looked at the others again. "I know I have told you stories of Tritacia before."

Ramsay could not resist smiling ever so briefly in return, recalling the brief *friendship* fondly. He had been a Protector, and Jankin had been too devoted to traveling the world to learn and master every style of dance he could find for them to settle into anything permanent. But they'd had many a good stolen night, the few months Jankin had been in the royal court of Tritacia. It had been rare, back then, that he got to spend such time with anyone. People were seldom forgiving of the fact that the prince had to come first in his life, at all times. Only his brother and Jankin had ever understood.

"What are you doing in Tavamara, Ramsay?" Jankin asked quietly, setting down the tray of wine he'd been holding the entire time. "Did you stop protecting? Where is Colum?"

"Dead," Ramsay said flatly, hands fisting as he was forced to hear his brother's name.

"Oh, Ramsay..." Jankin said, and all of a sudden Ramsay found himself embraced, pressed against the slender, well-toned chest he still remembered years later, only barely noticing the gasps of surprise from the others. "I'm so sorry, Ramsay. He was the sweetest little boy to ever live. No wonder you are here."

Ramsay trembled briefly, simply clinging, secretly grateful for the comfort. No one had held him when Colum had died. They'd murmured what a tragedy, what cruel fate, but then told him to carry on with duty.

But he made himself push Jankin away after a moment and recovered himself. "Majesty," he said, not quite able to make himself meet Shafiq's gaze. "Your son is safe at my home for now. Given all that he told of his kidnapping, I determined that there was some form of inside help. I did not want to risk telling the kidnappers that I had him. Already, too many people know." He glanced around the harem, not trusting any of them save Jankin.

"My harem can be trusted," Shafiq said firmly. "I will in fact send two of them to retrieve my son."

"I'll go," said the pretty man with the pouty lips. "I won't be missed for a few days, not the way the twins or Jankin or Berkant would."

"Two twins would be missed," said the twin wearing sapphires. "One will not, if the rest of you are careful and Ender plays me from time to time." He smiled at his brother.

Ender made a face. "Nadir—"

"I will be careful," Nadir said, cutting him off. "Mazin and I will be fine, hmm?" He turned to Shafiq. "Yes?"

"Just be careful," Shafiq said quietly, reaching out to brush his knuckles across Nadir's cheek. Then he reached out to touch Mazin. "Both of you, be extremely careful. Bring Kaj home to me."

"Of course," Nadir murmured and closed the space between them to kiss Shafiq hard.

Ramsay tore his gaze away, feeling suddenly very much like an interloper. He did not understand harems at all, but it was obvious they were nothing as simple as pleasure slaves. They seemed a mix of lover and friend and protector, though it made his head hurt trying to figure out how that worked with so many men.

He had the depressing, aggravating thought that when he was alone again, he would not mind at all trying to figure out all the different ways they might fit together.

Desperate for distraction, he glanced toward Jankin. "How is it you come to be here, my old wandering friend?"

Jankin smiled, looking fondly at Shafiq, the others, then finally back at Ramsay. "I found a reason to stop wandering. Though, I admit I always thought fondly of you and missed you, Ramsay. It is good to see you again, despite the circumstances. I am truly sorry about your brother."

Ramsay looked away, hating the sudden sting to his eyes, fighting the tears that should have run dry months ago. "Thank you. I missed you, too. It is good to see you happy."

It was good, even if it made him sort of sad, too. His fate had been protector, and protectors spent their lives keeping others safe. It nearly always killed them. He had never known a protector to reach the age of retirement and finally live his own life. He would never have been given the chance to spend his days with someone like Jankin. Handsome, beautiful, elegant, golden Jankin, who danced and moved like something from a dream.

Though he would never have imagined it in a thousand years, somehow the harem life seemed well-suited to Jankin. Ramsay wished he fit somewhere half so well, but he had fled the only life he had known, when the only bright spot in that life had been taken from him. Now he just wanted to save his latest prince and crawl back into the solitude that seemed to be his true fate.

"We can leave whenever your men are ready, Majesty," he said when attention seemed to be turning his way again. "I certainly do not want to linger too long, it took me a day and a half to get here, and the longer he is alone, the greater the danger. I did what I could to hide our tracks, to cover the path to my home, but only a fool is arrogant enough to think he had thought of everything."

"This is very true," Shafiq replied. "Of course I want my son back as quickly as possible. I thank you, for all that you have done for him. Without you, I sense my son would be dead. My debt to you is great."

Ramsay shook his head. "It is my Goddess given duty to protect, as your sacred duty is to rule. One is owed nothing for doing as he should. I am honored to have been helpful to your Majesty."

Shafiq smiled. "You are entirely too humble and gracious. Though, I must say, you do not look like a guardian. I would imagine you have always used that to your favor." He glanced ruefully at his guards, still unconscious on the floor. "Certainly my men underestimated you."

"Yes, Majesty," Ramsay said, stifling a sigh. His looks worked well for him, but he had never enjoyed being thought of as lesser simply because he had been born small and slight and—worst of all—cute. 'Like a kitten' people had been fond of saying, always with that tone of condescension.

Jankin snorted softly. "I never understood why everyone mistook you for a harmless kitten, as they liked to say. Any idiot looking at you can see you are no idle threat. It's all in the way you hold yourself, the way you move."

"It is in every line of his body," Berkant said, startling Ramsay, "and in his eyes. Any fool who mistakes you for a kitten, simply has never seen a lynx, and thinks that all cats must be lions or tigers."

"Uh—" Ramsay could not think of a single thing to say. No one had ever said anything like that to him.

Shafiq smiled. "Let him be. Nadir, Mazin, slip away with him. Jankin, tell the guards outside that audiences are finished for today. Then you and Berkant wake these four, and tell them to keep their mouths shut or else. Ender, pour that wine, if you please."

Then he strode to Ramsay and took hold of his hands. Ramsay was startled to find Shafiq's hands were not soft and smooth. Royal hands were always smooth, unmarred, but these hands were not. "Thank you," Shafiq said.

Ramsay shook his head, but did not draw away from the hands holding his. "You may thank me when you hold your son in your arms again, Majesty. Until that moment, I have accomplished nothing."

"You have accomplished more than anyone else."

"I was in the right place at the right time," Ramsay demurred.

"But the gods saw fit to put you there," Shafiq said insistently. "I thank you for what you have done so far, whatever next comes to pass. Now go, before more people come and things become more difficult to hide."

Ramsay nodded and followed Nadir and Mazin across the room, up the dais. Rather than simple wall, a portion of it proved to be a secret doorway. He was surprised they let him see it, but after this, he was unlikely to come back to the palace, and who would he tell?

They went first to a room that was the simplest yet most luxurious room Ramsay had ever seen in his life. It was quite obviously the King's private chambers—and just as obviously shared by several men. The rooms were enormous, so elegantly appointed, and he tried not to notice the hints of sweat and sex that lingered faintly.

Several minutes later, Nadir and Mazin more suitably attired, they were outside the palace. "I left my horse at a stable in the city," Ramsay said.

"We will purchase some in the city," Nadir said. "We dare not take any from the royal stables." He winked at Ramsay. "We are not permitted to leave the palace. We had best make this journey as quickly as possible, before someone notices we truly are missing."

Ramsay nodded and took the lead from habit, headed for the city, then through the crowds to the small stable at the northern most end.

"I will go get our horses," Mazin said shortly and vanished before anyone could stop him.

Nadir scowled after him and sighed. "I do wish Berkant could have come, but his absence would have been noticed, especially at the supper tomorrow night."

Ramsay only nodded and slipped inside the stable, moving to the further stall where his horse was kept. Feather whinnied at him as he approached, and he greeted her softly in Tritacian. He had been speaking Tavamaran almost exclusively since his arrival; his native language was beginning to feel strange on his tongue, even if his accent was still thick.

After he had paid for the stabling of his horse, they waited outside for Mazin to reappear, which he did several minutes later, two horses in tow. They rode off, traveling as best they could through the crowded city. He could not wait until they reached the open roads and could increase their pace. He was

more than willing to ride through the night and stop only for the horses and the bare minimum rest he needed to stay sharp.

"So I gather from what Jankin said that you are something special. It is no light thing, to be a Protector in your homeland?" Nadir asked, smiling, and Ramsay wondered if he was more talkative than his brother, or if they were equally so, or if he was actually the quieter.

He shrugged in reply. "It is Tritacian custom to take a babe before the altar of the Goddesses and have the priests foretell the child's fate. My destiny reading said that I was meant to Protect, and my skill was great enough that I was given into training to protect our sacred rulers. I protected the Crown Prince for ten years."

"And now you are protecting our Crown Prince," Nadir said thoughtfully. "I do not like the idea of being told what to do from birth, but it does seem your Goddesses knew what they were about with you. Hmm..." He smiled. "My brother and I dabble in poetry, a bit. Perhaps we shall compose a poem about you and all you have done for our King."

Ramsay grimaced at the idea. "Any poem about me would be very boring indeed."

Nadir smiled in a way that would have made him shiver had he permitted it and were it not stupid to be so affected by a man who belonged to a King. Ramsay did not even want to know the penalties involved for touching a King's concubine. "I sincerely doubt anything about you is boring, Lynx."

He had never been the sort to blush, but something about the way first Berkant, and now Nadir, called him that completely undid him. He was not used to being noticed, not in a complimentary way. He should not be receiving compliments from such men, anyway. He was certain that violated laws as well. In reply, he only shrugged again and hoped his flush did not give too much of his thoughts away.

"We should be moving faster," Mazin broke in, looking annoyed. The look did not suit his pretty face at all; it made him look pinched and soured.

"Soon enough," Nadir said patiently. "Rushing through the city would attract attention, and there are more reasons than I can list that we should avoid attention at all costs. So tell me, my new friend, what do you do here in Tavamara?"

"Nothing," Ramsay said, voice level, neither polite nor impolite—but definitely not inviting questions. But it was true enough, as far as it went. He did his little carvings to trade for necessities. He fixed up his house. He kept up his training, because he loathed the idea of getting soft and weak. Occasionally he tried himself against others, in the fight rings in the city on his infrequent trips.

Mostly, he just did whatever he could to avoid thinking. Probably he avoided living, too. He had never much cared.

"That is a pity," Nadir said lightly. "As I said, my brother and I dabble in poetry. Berkant, as I'm sure you saw, is a fighter trained. He and Jankin have been working on a knife dance performance for the past couple of months. Though, so far as knives go, Mazin is the best by far. I'm certain I need not tell you what Jankin does."

Ramsay almost smiled. "No, you need not tell me. I am fascinated you caught him, when so many have tried and failed."

Nadir smiled faintly, and his voice was barely audible when he replied, "Oh, I think there was always one piece of him we never caught."

What was that supposed to mean? Ramsay frowned and turned away, dismissing the subject. He didn't understand what Nadir was implying, and he didn't want to understand. He just wanted to be left alone.

He wished the words didn't sound suddenly so hollow. He wished he knew what was *wrong* with him. "Unless you need to stop, I suggest we push on toward the first rest stop."

"I agree," Mazin said coolly, glaring at Nadir, who only stared blandly back. "The sooner we retrieve the prince, the better."

Nadir nodded. "I agree, but there is no harm in conversation while conversation is possible. It is not often we encounter so fascinating a foreigner—a person, really."

Mazin made a face. "You are quite hopeless, and the only one more hopeless is your brother."

"You are welcome to your opinion," Nadir said lightly, but Ramsay could see the words grated.

He wished he knew how to ease the tension, but his role had always been the silent one. Still he struggled for something to say, but in the end he could only come up with, "I don't understand how—uh—" He fumbled, and gave up, not certain how to ask or even if he should. It had been a stupid attempt at getting them to stop arguing.

But Nadir only chuckled and smiled at him. "How we come to be in the harem?"

Ramsay nodded. "It is not something I've seen practiced anywhere else in the world, and I traveled extensively with his Highness for five years. People talk and talk about the strange royal customs of Tavamara. Stranger still to actually, finally see."

Nadir laughed. "Yes, I guess it would be. But you are kind for not thinking less of us for it. Many do, you know."

"Why?" Ramsay asked, surprised. "I admit it is unusual, and no doubt complicated, but why think less of you for managing it?"

"Most would say it is wrong, to love so many? Love is one on one," Nadir said thoughtfully. "Not to mention the immorality of certain other acts performed with more than two."

Ramsay very carefully did not think about immoral acts. "People love in multiples all the time. I loved my parents, my brother, all at once. I do not see why love must be limited, depending on its nature."

Nadir smiled at him, and Ramsay had the sudden, absurd impression he had just passed some test. He shook off the strange thought, and was quietly relieved when they finally reached the edge of the city.

"Finally," Mazin said, and spurred his horse forward, taking off ahead of them, racing off down the path.

"We had best not let him out of our sight too long," Nadir said, and there was a grimness to his tone that drew Ramsay up short. He looked at Nadir, who returned the stare blandly.

Nodding, Ramsay signaled his own horse and raced off after Mazin, into the growing dark.

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Ramsay had never been so happy to see his humble little cabin. Soon all would be well again, and he could go back to his normal life. Even if felt more and more like simply existing.

He turned away from those thoughts, because they were a waste of time and would get him nowhere. Reaching his yard he dismounted and told Feather to stay. Then he strode to the house and unlocked the door with the key around his neck.

The inside smelled like tea and honey, and as though the house had not been properly cleaned for several days. Of a person, there was no immediately obvious sign. Smiling, he called out, "Kaj! You can come out, it's only me."

Immediately the hidden door to his cellar—which he had been careful to show Kaj before he left—sprang up from the floor beneath the table. Kaj scrambled out and bolted straight to him. "Ramsay!"

Ramsay scooped him up and hugged him close, kissing his cheek before finally setting him down on his feet again. "Were you good while I was gone? Did you stay hidden? Did anyone come by?"

"Only a peddler, and I did not answer the door or say anything or even move," Kajan said proudly. "I was good."

"I knew you would be and so brave," Ramsay said with a smile and tousled his hair. Then he nodded toward the door, where Nadir stood. "Look who has come to see you home."

Kajan's mouth dropped open then he screamed in delight. "Nadir! Nadir!" He bolted across the cabin and threw himself into Nadir's arms, laughing in delight as he was scooped up a second time. As slight as the boy was for his age, Ramsay suspected he took after his late mother rather than his father, and would probably never be quite as filled out as the King.

But, that was hardly a problem. He was living proof small and slight meant nothing when it came to strength and ability.

"Where is papa?" Kajan asked.

"He is waiting at home for you, where it is safe," Nadir replied. "Where you should be, Kaj."

"I know, I'm sorry," Kajan said, looking downcast.

Nadir sighed softly. "Well, so long as you are safe now, hm? And what a fine rescuer you have. Did you properly thank Ramsay for saving your life?"

"Yes," Kajan replied, then proudly shoved his ring in Nadir's face. "Look at what he gave me. He said I could keep it until he took me home. Isn't it pretty? I thought papa had rings like this, but I do not think so anymore. It's special."

"Yes," Nadir replied, smiling in amusement at Ramsay. "Quite special. You should be grateful someone so special saved you, and found us, and now will be taking you home to papa. Are you ready to go?"

Kajan nodded. "Yes, I want to go home and see papa."

"Then I say we leave in a couple of hours," Ramsay said. "Give us time to eat and rest, let the horses refresh. Though, really, you have no further need of me. I could just stay here—"

"Don't even think about it," Nadir said firmly, glaring at him. "Shafiq will want to thank you personally, and I am certain Kajan here would like to show you around the palace. Wouldn't you, Kajan?"

Kajan began to all but vibrate in place as this idea was put into his head, and he fled back eagerly to Ramsay's side. Ramsay shot Nadir a suspicious look, not entirely certain why he was suspicious, but then dutifully turned his attention to Kajan, who was talking faster than he could actually manage, perhaps correctly speaking one word in ten.

Tousling the boy's hair again, smiling fondly, he guided him toward the door, nodding absently as Mazin finally stepped inside, but alert as to why Mazin would have been outside so long. "Come and keep me company while I tend the horses, Kaj. How many horses does your father have, hmm?" He laughed as that started the rapid-fire chattering up again and led Kajan outside.

He should have been surprised to see the line of seven men arrayed outside, but mostly he was just irritated with himself for not anticipating them arriving sooner. He had thought such an attack would wait until they were on the road. He should not have let Mazin stay outside by himself for so long. "Kajan, run to the stables."

Kajan immediately obeyed, bless him, and a man bolted after him. Ramsay drew a dagger and let it fly, taking the man out in his neck. He did not wait to see the man drop, only drew his sword and went for the others. He managed to throw one more dagger before he was forced to contend with the remaining five.

Unfortunately for them, they made the same timeless mistake as everyone upon seeing him, and did not realize until they had gone from seven to five in a matter of seconds that looks could be very deceiving. By the time they could sufficiently act on it, he had reduced them to four.

Some indeterminate amount of time later, he had managed to kill them all. He wiped blood and sweat from his face and strode to the stables. But he was not even halfway there when Mazin came out of the stables with the prince in his arms, and a knife to his throat. Kajan was crying. Damn it. Mazin must have gotten the better of Nadir, then, and heard him order Kajan to the stables.

"You won't get far," Ramsay said quietly. "Why would you do this?"

"The King is trying to hurt my family, all for money. Why should I not hurt his for the same?" Mazin hissed. "Let us go, or I will kill the boy here and now."

Ramsay kept his face expressionless. "If you do that, you will have no protection left, and I will kill you."

Mazin sneered. "You might think you are a tough little *kitten*, but as Nadir said, I am better with a knife by far. Before they were nobles, my family was a band of robbers. Through the generations, we have been careful not to forget the valuable skills with which our ancestors rose through the ranks."

"Like kidnapping and murdering harmless young boys?" Ramsay asked coolly.

"Drop your sword," Mazin said. "Lay down upon the ground, hands where I can see them. Do not move from that spot."

"It will be all right, Kaj. You have my ring, right? Then everything—"

"Shut up and get on the ground!" Mazin snarled.

Winking at Kajan, Ramsay obeyed.

He waited silently as they moved past him, then mounted the only horse remaining in the yard—Feather. In the noise and blood of battle, the other horses had all fled. Only Feather, trained as a protector's horse, had stood as he had been ordered.

With some very vocal difficulty, Mazin managed to get the prince and himself mounted. Then he began to swear loudly and colorfully. "What is wrong with this damned horse?"

Ramsay said nothing, merely lay quietly.

"Tell me what is wrong with your fool horse, you damned foreign bastard," Mazin snarled.

"He will not move for anyone but me," Ramsay finally said. "It is the way he was trained. If I am not on him, or at least with him, he shall not move."

"Make him move, or it will be the prince's life."

"You dare not kill Kajan, skill or no skill, until you have what you want from the King," Ramsay replied calmly. "If you want me to make that horse move, you shall have to try other tactics. And harming Kajan will not change the simple facts of my horse' training—he will only move when I am physically with him."

Snarling and cursing in frustration, Mazin tied Kajan to the saddle, then slid off the horse and stalked back toward Ramsay. He stopped well out of harm's way. "Get up."

Ramsay obeyed—and whistled sharply as he did so. Immediately obedient, Feather raced off, vanishing down the path and into the forest before Ramsay had even completely risen to his feet.

Mazin bellowed in anger and charged him.

The fight was brutal and bitter. Mazin had not lied—he knew how to use the knives he carried. But a man trained to kill would never be better than one raised since childhood to stop those killers at all costs.

When Mazin was at last disarmed, Ramsay finally took hold and snapped his neck. He let the body drop, then put fingers to his lips and whistled high and long. Then he turned and bolted into the house.

Nadir sat in front of the stove, pale-faced and bloody, but definitely alive. "He left me for dead, eager to get to the prince. He did not bother to make certain of it," he said with a weak smile. "I suspect I left you the bulk of the work. I am sorry."

Ramsay went to his bed and fetched a chest that held the medical supplies he had bought shortly after arriving and settling into his new home. Returning to Nadir, he set them down. "One moment, I must fetch his Highness, then we will patch you right up."

"I'll be fine," Nadir said.

Nodding, Ramsay went outside just as his horse returned to the clearing. "Are you all right, Kajan?"

"Uh-uh-huh," Kajan managed. "Why did papa's man try to take me?" He clung tight to Ramsay once he was freed from the horse, shaking and crying.

"I do not know," Ramsay said quietly. "But he will not hurt you anymore, all right? Come on, let's go help poor Nadir, who tried to stop him."

Inside, Kajan sniffled and sat curled up against Nadir's good side while Ramsay patched up his wounded one. "You should be fine in a matter of weeks," Ramsay said as he finished, examining the wound carefully before finally finishing the bandaging. "You must be damned good with knives yourselves, to have survived his."

"Not nearly as good as you," Nadir said, envy clear in his voice. "There is not so much as a scratch upon you."

Ramsay shrugged the praise aside. "It is what I have been trained to do since I was a boy. If men like that could mark me so easily, I would not be fit to be a Protector. It is a very sacred duty in my homeland."

"Sacred usually means lonely," Nadir said softly.

Ramsay did not reply. Instead he said only, "You need rest."

"We need to get home more," Nadir argued. "Mazin is dead, but the rest of his family is still about and who knows what else is waiting for us between here and the capital."

"Nothing," Ramsay said flatly. "They would not dare risk it, not when Mazin was right here in the thick of it and seven men were following us. The rest of their resources are waiting in the city or the palace. With so much at stake, they would not put themselves at risk until absolutely necessary. What I do not know is why."

Nadir grimaced as Ramsay helped him to his feet. "Have you a spare change of clothes? And I can answer the why—tariffs. Every import to this country is taxed at a flat rate except wine. Anyone familiar with Tavamara knows how much we value wine. The stuff we export is more than a little expensive, and the government has always accrued a great deal of revenue from the taxes placed on imported wine. Unlike the rest of the imports, however, wine was always taxed according to percentage, rather than a flat rate. That is changing, for a multitude of reasons, not least among them heavy corruption in the system. Mazin's family is amongst the most heavily corrupt. Several of them were recently arrested on a host of charges, including embezzlement and various tax violations. The changing of the wine tariff from a percentage to a flat rate would have made things extremely difficult for a great many nobles taking advantage of the percentage system. Not to mention, it would have lost them a great deal of their private income."

Ramsay nodded. "I see. They thought to kidnap the prince, to force the King not to go through with the change in the tariff system."

"Yes," Nadir replied. "It goes for final voting and the King's signature in four more days. If we had not been able to locate Kajan by then, the King would have been forced not to sign and Mazin's family—along with others—would have continued to flourish at the cost of others."

"That is why they were especially frantic to get the boy back," Ramsay said, nodding. "They dare not take further action, then, until they do—or do not—hear from Mazin."

Nadir sighed as he stripped off his torn and bloody clothes and accepted the ones Ramsay had pulled out for him. They did not really fit well, but the loose pants and robes were slightly too big for Ramsay, having been bought used, and so fit Nadir better than they might have otherwise. "Shafiq suspected, but we hoped we were wrong..."

Ramsay nodded and motioned to Kajan. "Come along, it is time to go home for real this time, Kajan. I promise. In two days, you will see your papa."

Outside, he grimaced at the mess and made certain Kajan did not look upon it. He was not looking forward to his return in a few days, when he would have to clean up the bodies; especially since they would have been sitting out after all that time. Disgusting work.

But delaying their departure to tend the matter now would not do; they had to get the prince home sooner rather than later. Thankfully, they found a couple of horses not too far away. Mounted, the prince well-covered against being recognized, they rode off.

They reached the palace in record time, if half dead and hungry enough to eat their horses. Kajan, poor thing, had not been able to stay awake. They had abandoned his horse at the first rest stop, and Kajan had ridden with Ramsay the rest of the way to the palace.

They arrived late at night. Nadir rode on ahead to arrange everything, leaving instructions for Ramsay to follow in order to get to the King unobserved. The instructions took him around the palace to the far southeast corner. Given his limited knowledge of the palace, and the more obvious prince in his arms, he surmised he was being directed to yet another secret entrance to the King's private wing.

As promised, Jankin waited just outside the wall, right at the corner. He smiled as he saw them, and motioned them forward. Reaching him, Ramsay carefully dismounted. Then, with Jankin's help, he pulled the prince down and bundled him close. Throughout, Kajan remained fast asleep.

Kajan secured, Jankin pulled a key from a hidden pocket in his pants and used it on an equally hidden keyhole in the wall. In the dark, Ramsay could not properly make note of it, and thought tiredly that he would have to find another way out later.

Jankin pushed the door open and led the way down a short flight of stairs to a tunnel that most likely ran beneath the gardens of which Ramsay had caught the barest sight. Jankin continued onward, through a long hallway, then up another set of stairs that spilled out into a large room. A sitting room, Ramsay decided.

At the far end sat the King, surrounded by the rest of his harem. Nadir smiled briefly, arm rebandaged and in his proper harem clothing again. Ramsay ignored all of them, intent only upon the King. Crossing the room, he knelt and placed Kajan in Shafiq's arms, then drew back and bowed his head. "Majesty."

"Thank you," Shafiq said roughly, and held his son tight. "Thank you, Ramsay."

Ramsay said nothing, only nodded.

In Shafiq's arms, Kajan began to squirm and mutter, eyes slowly opening. Then they widened. "Papa! Papa! Papa!" He threw his arms around his father and began to cry and apologize and talk all at once, achieving in the end little more than a garbled mess.

"Shh, Kaj, all is well now," Shafiq soothed his son, holding him just as tightly.

Ramsay stood and fell back, keeping out of the way now that his part was done.

"You better not try to sneak off," Jankin said, a knowing look on his face.

Ramsay did not reply, too busy trying not to watch the scene before him.

Shafiq was still absorbed in his son, calming him slowly, listening to everything he said, somehow able to easily understand the clumsy spill of words. With his son returned, Shafiq looked years younger, almost a completely different person. Astonishing the amount of fear he had managed to hide, and yet how obvious it was that it was now gone.

On one side of the King were the twins, Nadir adding to Kajan's tales where he could. He was curled up in Ender's arms, who constantly caressed and petted his brother, as though assuring them both that Nadir was well.

On Shafiq's other side, Berkant hovered protectively. Ramsay approved.

He was also beginning to feel like an interloper again. His duty was done, his role played out, and he had no good reason to linger. Even if they made him want to smile. Even if they made him want a lot of things; things he had thought he'd buried with his brother.

Jankin was warm beside him, despite the fact they were not quite touching. Ramsay moved away from temptation, stifling a sudden yawn as he leaned against a wall.

He jerked when someone touched him and realized with complete shock that he had dozed off.

That shook him. Badly. Protectors never fell asleep in unfamiliar places, surrounded by unfamiliar people, especially when the safety of the person they protected was tenuous at best. But, was it tenuous? Though he should be suspicious of all of them, he could not help but feel that every man in this room was indeed safe. He did not realize until now that the warmth they showed, Mazin had not.

"What?" he finally asked, looking at Jankin, noticing sadly that everyone else was gone.

"Come, my dear old friend. We prepared a bed for you. The others thought you might like to rest, though they are extremely eager to see you in the morning. This way."

Too tired to argue, knowing he would need the rest if he was going to slip away in a few hours, he followed obediently along.

"You had better be here in the morning," Jankin admonished, opening a door and bowing him playfully into his room. "Here is your bed. Truly, Ramsay—stay. You saved Kajan, and Shafiq wants very badly to express his gratitude properly for that. He can never repay the fact you saved and returned his son. I know you—do not sneak out."

Ramsay sighed. "Thank you for the bed. Goodnight, Jankin. It truly was good to see you again."

Jankin smiled and softly kissed his cheek. "You too. Sweet dreams, Ramsay."

He was fairly certain Jankin was not supposed to do that, but Ramsay said nothing, save to grunt a reply. Then he tumbled into his bed, where he fell immediately asleep.

He woke up a few hours later, while the half moon was still high and bright in the sky, shreds of it filtering through his window and bed curtains. Jankin must have drawn them. Pushing them aside, he climbed out of bed and saw immediately that water and clothes had already been set out for him to find in the morning.

Don't sneak away, Jankin had said. More than once. But why should he stay? His duty was done, and there was no place for him here. Why would he even expect or hope for there to be? Flexing and stretching to work the stiffness and soreness from his muscles, he then quickly rinsed off and dressed in the fresh clothes.

He left the room and stood pondering a moment, thinking back carefully all the twists and turns they had made. Even mostly asleep, he had noted where he moved. When he was confident he remembered the way, he traveled back the way they had come.

It was only as he reached the secret door that he realized he did not have the key, and even if he did, he could not find the hidden keyhole.

Hmm.

Turning away, he retraced his steps and paused at a set of double doors that, if he had his bearings correct, should be the King's bed chamber. Opening one door cautiously, he slipped inside and closed it again. Then he glanced around. Sure enough. He moved soundlessly through the room, more than a little annoyed that in the entire wing, not so much as a single guard patrolled. Perhaps they were posted outside the wing, to give the King as much privacy as possible.

It was also true that should anyone make it this far, they would have a rather formidable harem with which to contend. He also conceded that having guards within the wing would have made the sneaking around this evening impossible.

Ramsay crept along through the bedroom, careful to watch every step, every sleeping person. Shafiq slept in his bed with his son, the twins twined together on the right side of it, Jankin on the left, and Berkant at the foot.

He paused, despite himself, to memorize every detail that moonlight was kind enough to reveal. How did they sleep, he wondered, when Kajan was not in the room? What must it be like to live this life? Hard, he would imagine, but rewarding. Lover and friend and protector, all rolled into one. All of the duties that had rested upon his shoulder for so long, but none of the loneliness. It sounded so ideal, so very much like a dream, it made him ache.

These men would never have let Colum die.

Forcing himself to move on, Ramsay finally left the bedroom and stepped out into the garden. It was impressive by moonlight, and probably truly beautiful by daylight. He strode through it quickly, fighting with all his might against the desire to turn back, until he at last reached the high walls that turned the palace into its own private world.

It was harder than he thought it would be, to make himself scale the wall and leap down neatly on the other side. But he did it, brushing off dirt as he stood up, finally free to return to his normal life.

His normal existence.

Feeling wretched and miserable, resenting that his fragile peace had been snatched away from him by one little boy and five strangely compelling, fascinating men. Not seeing Feather where he had been left, he went off in search of the stables.

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Ramsay looked up in confusion as he heard the sound of roughly six horses coming toward his cabin. Putting down his book, he strode outside to greet the visitors, pulling his sword from its hook as an afterthought.

He stared in dismay as he saw six Tavamaran royal soldiers lined up neatly in his yard. "Can I help you?" he asked, relaxed but ready to draw and strike in a moment.

The guards seemed more than a little surprised by him. "We are looking for a man by the name of Ramsay Reid."

"You found him. What do you want?"

He almost laughed at the looks upon their faces; no doubt they had expected something else entirely. "Uh—" the guard who seemed in charge paused and recovered himself, then said more politely and with almost no trace of astonishment, "My Lord Ramsay, you have been requested by his Majesty the King to dine with him at his palace. My orders are to escort you if you agree, or to take you by force if you attempt to refuse."

Ramsay snorted in amusement. Take him by force. As if six mere palace guards could handle him. "Very well," he said. "I'll come willingly. Give me a moment to gather my things. Wait out here." He slammed the door in their faces, then strapped his sword on and quickly grabbed all he would need to survive in the woods for a few days.

Why would the King bother sending for him? Shafiq had no further use for him, even if he had saved the prince. In saving the prince, he had killed a man for whom Shafiq must have cared, traitor or not.

Ready, he glanced around his cabin to make certain all would be well without for him a bit, then strode to the back door and opened it—and immediately scowled. "What in the name of the Three are you doing here?"

Berkant smirked. "We were ordered to bring you home, Lynx. One way or another. I am here because I am the only one who stands a chance of doing it by force, hmm?"

Ramsay glared, furious. "There is no point."

"My King desires your presence," Berkant replied. "That is reason enough for me to deliver you. But there are others."

He would not go back. He wouldn't.

Berkant continued, "Shafiq was crushed when we realized you were gone. You will return, by choice, by force, even if must get on my knees and beg."

That drew Ramsay up short. "No one is doing any begging," he said flatly. "If he wants to see me, then so be it, but I do not see the point."

In reply, Berkant only smiled and took hold of his wrist, dragging him outside and around to the front of the cabin, where his horse was already saddled and waiting.

He mounted silently and only rolled his eyes when he was neatly boxed in by the soldiers, Berkant riding beside him, all to ensure he would not bolt. "I said I would come," he said.

Berkant only continued to smile and ordered the soldiers to move out.

When they reached the palace a day and a half later, all he wanted was to turn and run. And never make that damned trip again. He was used to doing it every few weeks, not several times in a row. Dismounting, he followed Berkant through still more secret entrances, finally emerging in the King's

wing again. Berkant led him into the room in which he had slept before and bowed. "His Majesty will be free to speak with you shortly. Someone will come to fetch you. See you later." He winked then was gone.

Making a face, Ramsay nevertheless obediently stripped out of his filthy clothes and washed off, then put on the new clothes that had been set out for him. What was the point of all this, he wondered as he pulled on the fine clothes. Did they want him to resume his duties full time? That seemed the likeliest, but there was no way he could do it.

Not if it meant watching the five of them every single day.

He'd just finished dressing when the door opened and Nadir—no, it wasn't Nadir. "You're the other one."

Ender smiled. "Indeed I am. Most cannot tell, even with the jewels."

"Yes, well, most think I am harmless."

Laughing, Ender motioned. "The King awaits, Lynx."

Increasingly disconcerted at the way they kept calling him that, Ramsay followed Ender from the room, through a couple of hallways, and finally to a small dining room where the King already sat waiting. Ender bowed, smiled at them both, then left, closing the door quietly behind him.

"Please, sit," Shafiq said, motioning. "I am happy to see you again and hope you are not too unhappy." He poured them wine as Ramsay slowly sat.

Ramsay did not know much Tavamaran etiquette, but he was pretty certain Kings were not supposed to pour wine. "No, Majesty. I simply do not see the point of my presence here. I returned your son. Past that, I serve no purpose."

"That is not true," Shafiq said softly and took a sip of his own wine. He was dressed more casually than the two other occasions in which Ramsay had seen him. The collar of his robe was unfastened, and Ramsay tried not to think about slipping a hand inside and pushing the clothes away entirely. It was not his place to entertain such thoughts.

"You saved my son; that is a debt I can never repay," Shafiq continued. "If not for your presence, I do not know what would have become of him except tragedy. My wife died of illness only a year after he was born. Kaj was very dear to both of us, and he is all that I have left of her."

"He's a beautiful boy. He—he reminds me of my brother."

Shafiq's expression then was so understanding and kind, Ramsay could hardly bear it. "He died."

"He was killed by men angry with me and the throne," Ramsay said flatly. "I told them to protect my brother, and they said they would, and the men got to him anyway." It still hurt so goddamned much. All his years of service and they had done nothing to answer the one favor he had begged of them.

Shafiq's hand covered his own, squeezing gently. "Did you at least kill the men who did it?"

"No," Ramsay replied and tossed back his wine, not particularly caring at the moment if he was being rude. "Empty revenge will not bring my brother back, and if my King had kept his promise, my brother would not be dead. I simply left."

"Hmm," Shafiq said, hand still covering Ramsay's. "His loss is my gain, I hope. I am sorry that the burden of killing Mazin fell to you. My council would have preferred he be taken alive, but I am just as happy to have him dead and the matter over. The rest of his family was arrested and executed yesterday."

Ramsay stared at the table. "I am sorry he betrayed you, Majesty. I am sorry that I had to kill him."

"Do not be. Mazin was... misguided and desperate, and he never quite fit. We tried, of course." He sighed softly. "But he never wanted to be in the harem, not really, and he never should have been. I made a poor choice in the hopes it would appease various persons, and instead it almost cost me that which I hold most dear. But Mazin put himself on his destructive path when he chose his family and their corrupt ways over everything else he was offered. You should not have been forced to kill him. That was not your responsibility."

"Any threat to the Prince was my responsibility the moment I chose to protect him," Ramsay replied. "It is hardly the first time I have killed men." Though he always hoped each time would be the last. "Please, trouble yourself no further upon it. I am honored my meager skills proved useful here in Tavamara."

Shafiq snorted. "Meager skills. My guards are all highly trained and rigorously tested—often. Those who guard me directly must meet the highest of standards. You finished them in a matter of seconds. Berkant, before he gave up his life to join me, was the best hand to hand combatant in the country. You draw even with him. I cannot imagine there is a single thing about you which even approaches meager."

Ramsay jerked his head up at the words and their underlying heat. There was no mistaking the implication in that tone. "Majesty—"

"Let me put this to you plainly," Shafiq said, hand tighter on Ramsay's now. "You saved my son. Whatever you want is yours for the asking. I do mean whatever you want, regardless of cost or time or effort on my part. But what I hope you want is this—to join me, to be mine. Jankin has always loved you. Ender and Nadir are quite entranced by you, and Berkant is complaining that since fighting you, everyone else he spars with is too easy a fight. It can be a hard life, but if you want it, the life is yours."

"But—but Mazin—I killed him."

Shafiq smiled sadly. "Mazin never fit. We all tried, but the hard truth was that he never wanted to fit. I offered, and he accepted, but it was always for the wrong reasons. You, however... from the first, I thought you would fit."

"I—but—" Ramsay stared at him in shock, hardly daring to believe what he was hearing. "I don't know anything about—such things."

At that, Shafiq laughed. "So long as it is what you want, then you can be taught." He smirked. "Though, according to Jankin, you know plenty about *such things*."

Ramsay felt his face heat, damn it. "That is not what I meant," he muttered, dropping his face in embarrassment.

Shafiq laughed again and the gentle sound of it made Ramsay want to smile despite himself.

"Jankin needs to stop telling tales outside of school," Ramsay finally said, dragging his eyes up. "I still don't think I understand why you would offer me such a thing. There must be better choices than me."

"There are not," Shafiq said, "though if you want practical, political reasons, the council approves of foreign additions. They say it makes me look even more powerful, to have capture pieces of foreign nations for my own pleasure."

Ramsay laughed at that.

"The simple truth is that there is an empty place, and I feel you are meant to fill it."

"I—" Ramsay looked at the table again, heart beating fiercely, skin feeling too tight for his body again, and real hope was so foreign a feeling to him, he only barely knew what it was. "I left because that's what I wanted, and I did not think I could have it."

The hand still on his took firmer hold and tugged until Ramsay looked up again. "It is yours, if only you say yes."

Ramsay looked at Shafiq, then nodded, scarcely believing this was happening. "Then yes, Majesty. I accept and gladly."

Shafiq broke into a wide smile and pulled more firmly. Ramsay went easily, looping his arms boldly around Shafiq's neck, eager to have now that it had been offered and accepted. Shafiq's kiss was hard, possessive—claiming. Ramsay could not believe this was actually happening, but he kissed back for all he was worth, determined to get what he could for as long as the dream lasted.

"Jankin was right," Shafiq murmured when they finally broke apart. "You know much about *such things*."

Ramsay made a face. "I am going to beat him black and blue."

Shafiq laughed, breath warm on Ramsay's skin as he brushed it lightly with his mouth, kissing and tasting. "Now, I am certain you know there are much better ways to discipline him, my Lynx."

Ramsay shivered at the touches, at the memories of the best ways to make Jankin suffer. "Yes," he agreed, word coming out a hiss as Shafiq bit with entirely too much awareness at a particular spot on his throat. "I am not a cat," he added, belatedly noting what Shafiq had called him.

That made Shafiq laugh again. "I am afraid you are stuck with it and not least of all because it suits you. I am afraid my harem is often compared to wild animals. They can be quite unruly, you see. People have taken to calling them my Menagerie."

"Somehow, that does not surprise me," Ramsay replied, words trailing into a moan as hands slid beneath his clothing.

"Perhaps they will behave for a little while, distracted by petting our new cat?"

Ramsay tried to roll his eyes, because he really did get tired of being compared to cats, but it was extremely hard to think when Shafiq did some petting of his own, and maybe being a cat was not so bad a thing after all, so long as he was Shafiq's cat.

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