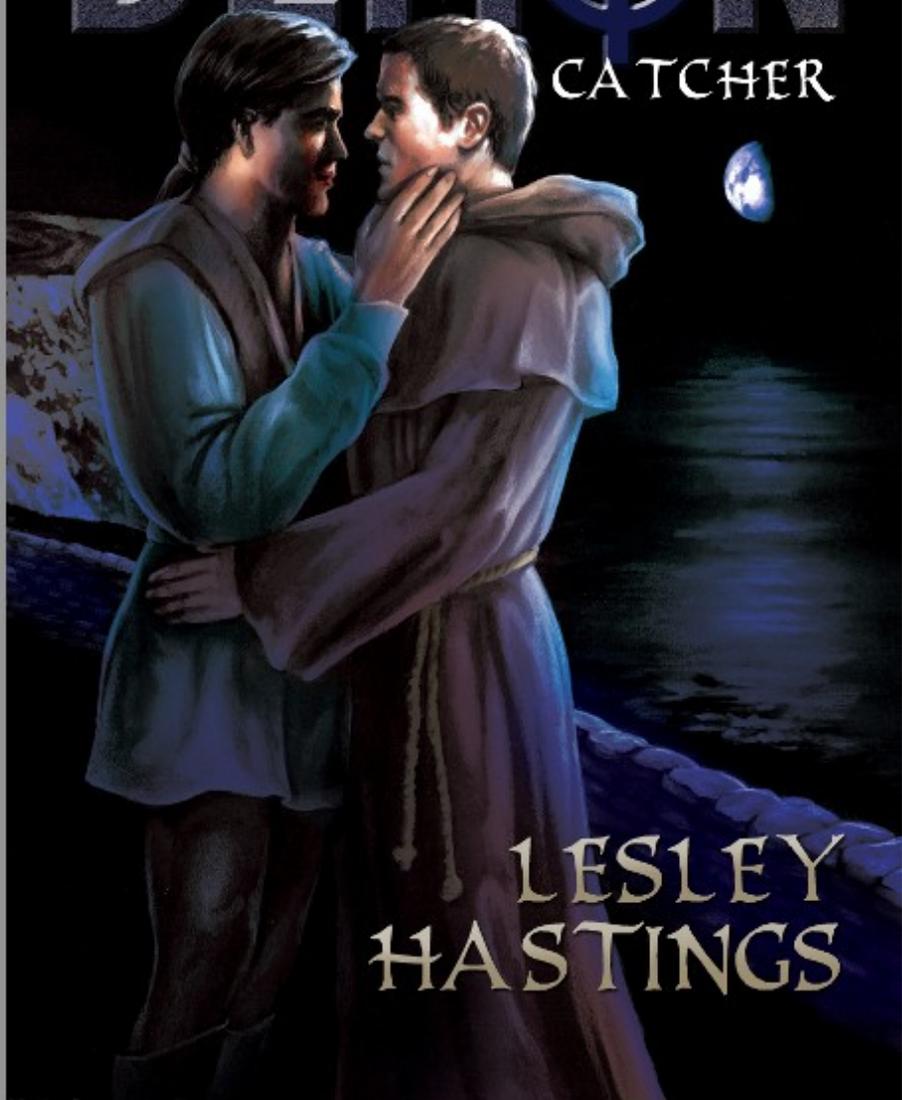


THE  
DEMON  
CATCHER



LESLEY  
HASTINGS

ROUGH summer storms were not uncommon out on the unprotected Anghen Peninsula, although there were few to witness them. The Ajenite monastery out on the cliffs saw the worst of it, but the village of Anghenwic six miles away received its share of heavy rain and violent winds. There were always some who whispered about divine punishment and sin when the storms got particularly bad, but it wasn't until the storm that came eight weeks after the summer solstice that those whispers began to grow louder.

Even Brother Euan felt a flash of wild panic when he heard the near-deafening clap of thunder and the unholy screeching that followed it—cries so terrible that it was easy to believe that they came from the pit of the Damned God himself. They seemed to last an age, as though the hideous keening had somehow stretched time itself to the point of breaking, and when the screeching ceased, the silence that followed was almost as terrifying as the noise had been.

*Holy Ajen, Blessed Kara, save us, Euan thought. Protect us and hold us—*

A second crash was enough to break Euan out of his terrified stupor, bringing his prayer to a halt. The sound of falling stone and splitting timber reverberated throughout the monastery. Euan had only heard something similar once before in his life, but it was unmistakable. Somewhere, a roof was falling in.

Clearly, the monks' cells were not in danger of collapse, but if the novice dormitories were in danger—

Euan rose from his sleeping pallet without even thinking, and he was running along the corridor before he realized what he was doing. He dashed across the courtyard, only coming to a halt when he was close enough to the novice quarters to see that the building was undamaged—instead, it was the refectory to his left that had partially collapsed. The fallen stones shone a dull blue in the moonlight.

Moonlight—and starlight too, Euan realized. Looking up, he saw that the sky was clear, as far as he could see. The heavens held no sign of the storm that had passed through barely a minute earlier. While he had seen many storms come and go in the space of minutes, he'd never seen one disappear so completely before.

He could hear some of the other monks beginning to empty out into the courtyard now, and moments later some of the novices began to emerge from the dormitories too, the older boys of sixteen and seventeen holding some of the younger ones by the hand. Even some of the older boys were trembling, and from the terrified murmurs that Euan could hear behind him, it seemed as though many of the monks were no less frightened than the novices.

Euan turned when he realized that a hush had begun to fall over the monks behind him. His first thought was that the Abbot had arrived, but he soon dismissed that as unlikely—the Abbot's lodgings were set away from the rest of the monastery, and the elderly Father Brennon could not move quickly these days. Instead, Euan saw his Brothers part to make way for the tall, thin frame of Brother Leden, the monastery's Prior. In the near-darkness, his gaunt

cheeks appeared completely hollow, although the scar that ran along his jaw—a relic from his days in the Queen’s Navy—glinted eerily.

“Make no mistake, my Brothers,” Brother Leden’s voice rang out. “The creatures of the Damned God hunger for your souls. If we are not cautious—if we allow ourselves to fall into sin—the demons will take us, they will tear us apart and destroy our faith. Be on your guard, Brothers, watch yourselves and each other, lest Holy Ajen and Blessed Kara abandon us.”

When Euan saw the fear that passed across the faces of his Brothers, he couldn’t help but shiver.

THREE days later, with a rare burst of early afternoon sun warm on his back, Euan found himself contemplating a large fissure running through the wall of the granary. The crack extended from the ground to the roof, threatening the structural integrity of the entire building. It would clearly take quite an effort to repair, and Euan hoped that the coin in the monastery’s meager treasury would be sufficient to bring in a stonemason.

Euan inspected the ledger that he’d been using to record the storm damage. Rebuilding the refectory and repairing the other damaged buildings was going to take months. On top of that, the chickens had been set loose last night, and six of them were still missing. No doubt a fox had been responsible, but after the storm, it didn’t take much for

some of his Brothers to conclude that something more sinister had caused their disappearance.

Running his fingers across the faulty stonework, Euan sighed. He'd have to discuss the costs and organization of the repair work with Brother Leden eventually. Part of him was tempted to take the matter directly to Father Brennon, but Brother Leden wouldn't appreciate it if Euan didn't follow proper protocol. *Every rule broken—every tradition that we refuse to respect—is a doorway opened to the Damned God.*

A sour taste entered Euan's mouth as he recalled Brother Leden's words from the morning sermon. The monks had been on edge since the storm, and this could only make things worse. If every minor infraction became cause for suspicion of demonic activity, the Brothers would never be able to trust each other. Euan frowned, silently cursing the regulations that prevented him from speaking out against an older monk. His position as the monastery's Sacrist—at twenty-one, he was the youngest Sacrist in the last hundred years—meant that he at least had to make a show of doing the right thing.

Clenching his teeth in frustration, Euan kicked the wall in front of him, causing a few loose stones to fall to the ground.

"You want to be careful there, Brother," said a man's voice from behind him. "You'll hurt your foot."

Startled, Euan jumped and turned, only to see the source of the voice leaning against an old oak tree, grinning at him. Suddenly feeling silly for reacting that way, Euan looked away from the man's face, only to find his eyes

wandering down the stranger's body, taking in his short tunic, his tight breeches, and his leather boots—definitely not the clothes of a monk.

Euan's stomach flipped, and for a moment all thoughts of the storm and repair work fled from his head. The man cleared his throat, and Euan looked up again, wondering how obvious his staring had been.

"I, er, did you—I mean—" Euan took a deep breath. "Can I help you with anything?"

He should have asked what the man was doing there—guests to the monastery were to be accompanied by a Brother at all times, and few would have cause to wander amongst the small cluster of buildings behind the kitchens. Yet somehow, at this moment, the lazy smile on the man's face made it impossible to think of protocol.

"I need to find your Abbot. I was told that his office is at the back of the library?"

Euan nodded, trying to place the man's accent. For some reason, it made him think of the vast lands to the south where, according to the books Euan had read, the sun burned hot all year.

"The library's over there," Euan said, pointing toward the correct building. "I—uh—I assume you can make your own way there?"

The man cocked his head to the side, and ran a hand across his shoulder-length black hair, which he wore tied behind his head. Euan found himself oddly conscious of his own light brown hair, which he kept cropped close to his scalp in accordance with the rules of the Ajenite Order.

“I think I can manage—that is, unless you think I need to be protected from the demons around these parts.”

The man’s blue eyes sparkled as he spoke, and Euan couldn’t help but laugh.

“I think you’ll be all right.”

“Some of your Brothers might disagree with me, from what I’ve heard,” the man said. His tone was still light, but there was an edge to his voice now. Whoever he was, this man was definitely interested in what had been happening here over the past few days.

“We Ajenites are a superstitious lot,” Euan said, suppressing his curiosity as to how this man knew so much about recent events. “It was a bad storm, and the wind was harsh. The talk about demons... well, people like to get excited.”

The man grinned again. “Excited, eh?”

Euan shivered at the stranger’s tone, a reaction that had very little resemblance to the nervous excitement of the past few days.

“It’s easy to get scared, when you’re as isolated as we are,” he said. “Easy to let your fears run away with you, if you’re not careful.”

“I suppose you’re one of the careful ones?” the man asked.

Euan nodded. “I try to be.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Euan tried not to feel so ridiculously pleased at the note of approval in the man's voice. He cleared his throat, and pulled his shoulders back. There was *no* excuse for not thinking rationally, he reminded himself.

"Are you certain that you don't want to introduce me to your Abbot?" the man asked.

"Uh—" To himself, Euan had to admit that he *wasn't* certain. Part of him did want to accompany this man to Father Brennon's study. And that, he reminded himself, was exactly why he shouldn't go. "I need to—" Euan gestured toward his ledger. "I have work to do."

The man sighed, but he smiled as he did so. "Ah well," he said, walking up to Euan and clapping him on the shoulder. "Thanks for your help anyway, Brother."

"You're welcome."

The warmth of the man's hand spread throughout Euan's body. He turned to watch as the man walked away toward the library, and it was a good ten minutes before Euan was able to return even half of his attention to his task.

AS THE day passed, the strange man refused to leave Euan's thoughts. In some ways, it was a pleasant enough diversion from the storm and the paranoid whispers that were beginning to grow louder within the monastery, but nonetheless... Euan reminded himself that little good could come from focusing on the impossible.

He made every attempt to lose himself in his duties as Sacrist—finishing his report on the storm damage, cleaning and preparing the Holy Symbols for services, replacing the candles in the chapel and the library, and assessing the monastery’s food stores—yet, somehow, Euan couldn’t quite forget the way that the man had looked at him, or his clothing, or the way he’d leaned so casually against that old oak tree.

Euan closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe deeply.

He wasn’t sure if he could remember the last time he’d been so distracted by something like this. He’d become so accustomed to ignoring the physical urges that crept up on him sometimes, that he’d forgotten to guard himself. This stranger, with his open smile and cheerful manner, was so different from the Brothers who inhabited the monastery that Euan wasn’t even sure he knew *how* to guard himself. It was difficult to imagine this man living his life in fear of sin and the Damned God.

When the time finally came to discuss the necessary repair work with Brother Leden, Euan was afraid that the improper thoughts he’d been entertaining would show, somehow, on his face. The sour expression that Brother Leden wore as Euan approached him didn’t fill him with confidence. Still, he seemed to listen closely enough as Euan explained the extent of the damage, and the estimated costs of repair.

“It will be difficult,” Brother Leden said finally, “but I believe we can find the needed coin. The monastery must be strong, from both without and within.”

“Yes, Brother,” said Euan, keeping his eyes lowered, as he had done as a novice.

“We shall mend ourselves spiritually and physically,” Brother Leden said. “We shall repair those cracks that allow the creatures of the Damned God in. And if Ajen is willing, we shall do so without outside influences gaining a hold over us.”

Euan looked up at that. He wondered, suddenly, if the stranger had anything to do with the bitter twist to Brother Leden’s lips when he spoke of outside influences.

Of course, now that the man was at the forefront of Euan’s mind again—

Euan tried to imagine a bucket of cold water being dumped on his head, and he hoped that Brother Leden would think the expression on his face was born only out of concern for the monastery. To his relief, Euan soon found himself dismissed from the Prior’s presence.

It wasn’t until the evening meal that Euan saw the stranger again. The monks ate in the sheltered courtyard between the novice dormitories and the scriptorium, as they had every evening since the refectory had been made unusable. The man sat at the High Table, to Father Brennon’s left. Brother Leden sat by the Abbot’s right hand, and if Euan had harbored any doubts about the cause of Brother Leden’s earlier bitterness, they were now dispelled. The Prior’s face was stony throughout the meal, except when he looked across his shoulder and past Father Brennon to the stranger—at those times, his expression twisted into pure disdain. If the stranger noticed anything, however, he gave no sign of it.

They ate in silence, as was the Ajenite custom, and Euan tried to keep his eyes on his food. When the meal ended, after the prayer of thanks to Ajen and Kara, Father Brennon stood.

“If I may have your attention, my sons,” he said loudly.

A soft murmur ran through the monks, their heads turned toward the High Table.

“There have been rumors, of late,” said Father Brennon. “Whispers that started after the most unfortunate storm several nights past. Many of you fear that the demons of the Damned God have found their way into our monastery.”

The murmur was louder this time. Father Brennon raised a hand, and silence fell again.

“I would remind you all,” he continued, “that Ajen’s Holy Light has not ceased to shine upon us, nor has Kara’s Grace been withdrawn from this place. Yet, I know that many of you still fear, and so I have here beside me Leon of Tremea, who is something of an expert in these matters.”

As Father Brennon gestured in his direction, the man—Leon of Tremea—stood, and nodded at the monks. For a moment, Euan caught his eye, and Leon smiled at him. Euan tried to distract himself by focusing on the fact that he’d guessed rightly, earlier in the day: Tremea was a southern city. It was built on the shore of the Rangan Ocean, which, according to the books, always shone blue.

“I feel certain that any odd occurrences will prove to have perfectly rational explanations,” said Father Brennon, “and Leon will be able to assure us of our safety. To that

end, I hope that you will all welcome Leon as an honored guest, and provide him with any assistance necessary.”

Euan thought that Brother Leden’s scowl at these words might be enough to bring down another building, but Euan himself began to relax properly for the first time since the storm. Clearly, Father Brennon was not allowing himself to become caught in the web of Brother Leden’s paranoia, and he’d brought Leon in to help the others see that there was no cause for irrational fear.

Of course, Leon’s presence was causing Euan a whole different sort of problem, but this new development strengthened Euan’s resolve to resist the effect that Leon was having upon him. Ajen and Kara had created an ordered world for their children to inhabit, an ordered world with a rational basis, and it would do Euan no harm to maintain that order where his own body was concerned.

At evening mass, as Father Brennon gave a sermon on the subject of trust—the trust that Ajen had in his children, the trust that he wished them to share with each other—Euan kept his eyes firmly focused upon the Blessed Circle of Kara, and the Holy Cross of Ajen inside it. He prayed to Ajen, giving thanks and asking for strength.

Later, lying back on the straw pallet in his cell, Euan clenched his fists around his rough woolen blanket and refused to give in to the baser urges that had been creeping up on him throughout the day. Sleep was a long time in coming.

EUAN wasn't sure if he felt relief or regret when Leon of Tremea did not join the monks when they broke their fast the next morning. He knew that he *should* feel relief, and yet—he hadn't been able to suppress that first stab of disappointment he'd felt when he'd seen that the guest chair to Father Brennon's left was unoccupied. Euan closed his eyes and tried to focus on the sermon that the Abbot had given during morning prayers.

Afterwards, Euan was making his way toward the kitchens to assess some cookware that needed replacement when Brother Tomas found him. They bowed to each other in greeting before Brother Tomas spoke.

"Father Brennon requests your presence in his study," Tomas said.

Euan blinked. "Did he say why?"

Tomas shook his head. "Just that you're to report to him as soon as you're able."

"Of course," said Euan, but while his voice sounded calm, his mind was turning in circles. Although there were many reasons that he might be summoned to the Abbot's study, Euan was struck by the suspicion that Leon was somehow the reason for it.

When Euan arrived in Father Brennon's study, his suspicions were confirmed. Leon sat opposite Father Brennon, his legs stretched out in front of him, and he smiled at Euan as he entered the room. Euan hoped that neither Leon nor Father Brennon noticed the way that his pulse quickened at the sight.

Euan felt a moment of relief when Father Brennon extended his hand across his desk. The customary greeting allowed him to gather his thoughts. He bowed low to kiss the Circled Cross on the Abbot's ring.

“Hail, Father, Holy in Ajen's Light.”

Father Brennon inclined his head. “Greetings, my son, Blessed in Kara's Grace.”

Euan stood straight again. “Brother Tomas said that you required my presence.”

“Indeed.” Father Brennon smiled, and gestured toward the man. “I am given to understand that you and Leon have already met.”

Euan managed to keep his face calm as he turned to look at Leon. “Yes,” he said. “Though we didn't have time for formal introductions.”

“In that case,” said Father Brennon, “allow me the honor. Brother Euan, as you are aware after last night, this is Leon of Tremea. Leon, this is Brother Euan, our Sacrist.”

Leon stood and extended his hand. “Pleased to meet you again, Brother Euan.”

Euan took Leon's hand clumsily, unused to this form of greeting, and fearing that Leon would guess at every single indecent thought in his mind the moment their palms touched.

“Blessings to you, Leon of Tremea.”

“Leon has requested that you assist him in his investigations,” said Father Brennon.

All at once, Euan's mouth felt dry. He'd spent almost a full day now trying *not* to think about spending time with Leon. "Is—are you sure that's a good idea, Father? My duties—"

"Brother Tomas and Brother Efid will see to your duties," Father Brennon told him.

"So... I'm to help him set imaginative minds to rest?" asked Euan, wishing that his own imagination would behave around Leon.

"Perhaps," Father Brennon replied.

"Or," said Leon, "if there's some truth to those rumors... then I can deal with it."

Euan felt his eyebrows rise. Realizing that he must appear rude, he schooled his face into neutrality.

"No one knows the old smugglers' tunnels beneath the monastery as well as you do, and I'm sure your assistance will be invaluable," said Father Brennon. "You are to be excused from prayers and mass for so long as Leon needs you."

Euan knew that it would be pointless to object—and he wasn't even sure that he wanted to object anyway. He was confused though—Leon certainly hadn't struck him as the type to believe in demons, and Father Brennon's speech at dinner the previous evening had seemed to confirm that.

"Here, Euan," said Father Brennon, seeming to sense his unease. The Abbot opened a drawer, and drew out a small Circled Cross that was engraved with a series of fine lines around the edges—a Prayer Circle. A long, leather cord was looped through the circle, so that it could be worn

around one's neck. "If you feel the need for prayer, you may use this at the appointed times," Father Brennon continued, holding the circle out to Euan.

Euan bowed his head. "Yes, Father," he said.

Father Brennon nodded. "That's settled, then."

"Excellent," said Leon, smiling.

Euan tightened his grip on the Prayer Circle. *Holy Ajen, help me*, he prayed.

SEVERAL hours later, Euan found himself squinting in the dim lantern light as he painted symbols onto the rocky floor of the tunnel. The writing on the scroll that Leon had handed him used a series of hieroglyphics that Euan had never seen before, although he was adept in two ancient languages and familiar with at least three others. Euan studied the script closely, his curiosity temporarily distracting him from the more illicit thoughts that had crowded his mind earlier.

As they painted, Leon wore an expression of intense concentration that didn't slip from his face until they stopped working to eat the lunch that Leon had brought along for both of them. After filling his stomach with bread, cheese, and fruit, Euan decided that he could afford to give in to his curiosity on this point.

"I suppose these symbols are meant to keep the demons at bay?" Euan asked.

Leon looked at him. "Something like that."

“I expected that the language of the Damned God would look... scarier.”

One corner of Leon’s mouth turned upwards. “You really are very skeptical for a monk.”

“There’s a difference between faith and superstition,” said Euan. “I believe that when Ajen and Kara made the world, they made it a world that we could understand. There’s nothing in the Holy Book to suggest that the demons and specters of the Damned God have ever left his pit.”

“Really now?”

“If you were looking for someone who believes that the monastery is beset by demons, then... I’m probably not the best person to be helping you, you know,” Euan said, trying not to sound too regretful.

Leon laughed. “I needed someone who wasn’t going to piss himself whenever demons are mentioned. I knew when I met you yesterday that you were the right man to help me, even before Father Brennon told me that you didn’t need a map to make your way around these tunnels.”

“I—uh—thank you.” Euan hoped that the light was dull enough to hide the flush that he could feel creeping into his cheeks. He turned his attention back to the symbols.

“Just—” Leon paused. “Don’t be too surprised if you discover that there’s more to this than you expect.”

“I’ll try to keep an open mind,” Euan said, although he wasn’t sure if he meant it. In the cool and darkness of the tunnels, where their voices echoed so strangely, it almost did seem possible that the Damned God’s creatures could reach this world, but Euan would never have been able to explore

these tunnels as a boy if he'd been the sort of person to let such fancies control him.

Euan was pulled out of his boyhood memories by Leon touching him lightly on the arm. He started, and Leon grinned at him.

“We should get back to work,” Leon said.

“Ah—good idea,” Euan agreed. He was *very* glad that there wasn't too much light down here.

They painted the symbols throughout the afternoon. Leon's fierce concentration returned, but on the brief occasions when he spoke—to issue an instruction or to ask a question about the tunnels—his voice was warm. Euan tried to emulate Leon's focus on their work, counting the seconds and minutes in his head to help him keep his mind on the job and not on the way Leon's forearms flexed as he worked.

Sometimes he even succeeded, losing himself in the enigmatic writing.

When they finally emerged from the tunnels, the sun was hanging low in the sky, and Euan realized that the time for the evening meal was close. Leon excused himself to use the privy, and Euan slowly started in the direction of the courtyard, berating himself for his sudden reluctance to rejoin his Brothers. The day had passed awkwardly at times, and slowly at others, but still—Euan couldn't help wanting to know more about Leon, about these symbols and his apparent belief that they might have some connection to demonic activity.

“Brother Euan!”

Euan turned toward the voice, and saw Brother Efid approaching him, his face grim. They inclined their heads toward each other in greeting before Euan replied.

“Is something wrong, Brother?” he asked. “Do you need my help with any of my usual duties?”

Efid shook his head. “No, Tomas and I took care of everything.”

“You seem worried about something,” Euan noted.

“Euan,” Efid said, dropping the formal address, “I heard that you’ve been assisting the stranger, Leon.”

“That’s right,” said Euan, frowning. “Father Brennon asked me to.”

Efid scowled. “It isn’t right,” he said. “You need to be careful, Euan.”

Euan tried to smile. “I don’t think I’m in any danger,” he said.

“Euan,” said Efid, “there are those of us who don’t trust this Leon of Tremea. Those of us who think that he will only cause greater harm to the monastery than has already been done. Brother Leden thinks—”

“Brother Leden would not speak out against the Abbot, I am sure,” said Euan sharply. It wasn’t right for a monk to display anger, he knew, but for Brother Leden to incite such mistrust in someone like Efid, who had always been good-natured, even when they were novices... Euan had to bite his lower lip to prevent himself from saying something he might regret.

“I just thought I should tell you, Euan,” Efid said. “Whatever Leon is doing, it might not be trustworthy.”

“It’s not for either of us to question Father Brennon’s judgment,” said Euan stiffly. Before Efid could respond, Euan bowed his head and murmured, “Blessings, Brother,” trying not to allow too much bitterness to seep into his voice.

Sensing that Euan wasn’t willing to continue their conversation, Efid returned the gesture and walked away, his head turning over his shoulder once to look back at Euan, his expression sorrowful.

Euan stood rooted to the spot, his hands clenched into fists so tight that his fingernails dug into his palms. If Father Brennon had hoped that Leon’s presence would help settle the Brothers’ fears, he’d clearly been mistaken.

“Euan?” came Leon’s voice from behind him. “Did something happen?”

Euan turned to face Leon. “No,” he said. “Nothing important, anyway.”

“Hmm,” said Leon. “I see.”

Euan wondered if Leon was somehow aware of the Brothers speaking against him.

“I—” Euan started, “I should attend the evening meal. Will you be joining us again?”

Leon shrugged. “I might,” he said. “Of course....”

“Of course?” Euan asked.

“Well,” Leon continued, “I have food in the quarters Father Brennon assigned to me. I could eat there.” He paused. “You could join me, if you wanted to.”

Euan froze. He *did* want to, there was no denying that, and for that reason alone, he knew he should decline the invitation. He was trying to avoid temptation, after all.

Euan opened his mouth to say no, but the memory of his recent encounter with Brother Efid stopped him from speaking. He’d been reluctant before, but after seeing Efid, the thought of spending an hour in the company of his Brothers—many of whom were turning against each other, whispering poison, spreading fear—the thought of that seemed abhorrent to Euan. Leon, on the other hand—well, he might have some irrational belief in demons, but he didn’t use it to spread discord.

“Euan?” Leon asked, and Euan realized that he still hadn’t responded.

“All right,” said Euan, surprised by how firm he sounded. “I’ll join you.”

“Excellent,” said Leon.

AS THEY walked together to Leon’s room, Euan prepared himself for an evening of struggling against himself, so he was surprised to find that he actually found it rather easy to relax in Leon’s room in the High Quarters, the rooms reserved for special guests: nobility, Bishops and Arch-prelates. A large, open fireplace warmed the chamber and

cast a bright orange glow. A red quilt woven from fine wool was draped across the bed, and a small table in the middle of the room was covered with fruits, pastries, and cold meats. Euan chose a seat facing away from the bed—at least if he wasn't looking at it, he didn't have to keep thinking on the size of it, easily big enough for two.

Instead of focusing on the bed, Euan let himself become absorbed in Leon's conversation. As they ate, Leon told him stories of the places he'd visited—Bytto, which was even further south than Tremea, Tvaniko to the east, and Selnat, the Queen's city, home to the marble palaces and public buildings of legend.

Euan asked questions, eager to know if the books he'd read had been accurate. As he'd suspected, the stories had glossed over some of the less savory aspects of the cities, but Leon was more than happy to tell him everything. Euan couldn't help but feel slightly envious that Leon had done and seen so much, although he couldn't be more than five years older than Euan himself.

As they finished their meal, Leon grew silent for a moment, and Euan was just about to ask more about the poor quarter of Selnat when Leon spoke instead.

“What made you become a monk, Euan?”

Euan tried to conceal his surprise at the question. “I—when I was three years old, a fever killed my mother and two of my sisters. After that, my father... he didn't feel he could take care of a child so young, not while he was grieving, so he dedicated my life to Ajen. I've been here ever since.”

“Did you ever think about leaving?”

Euan hesitated a moment before answering. He tried to avoid thinking about that, most of the time. “Once. When I was sixteen.”

“And now?”

“Now... my life is here. I’m useful. There’s been no reason to go anywhere.” No reason that was good enough.

“No wanderlust?”

“Uh—” The words caught in Euan’s throat. He’d planned to say no, but part of him knew that that was a lie, and he didn’t feel like lying at the moment. “I have a place here,” Euan said, finally.

“And you like that place?”

Euan swallowed. “Most of the time,” he said. “And besides, I *know* this place, better than anyone. I can’t say that for anywhere else.”

Leon nodded slowly. “That’s something, I suppose,” he said, but something about the way he looked at Euan was disquieting. It was almost as though Leon didn’t quite believe that Euan belonged here. Or maybe, Euan admitted to himself, he was simply attributing his own fears to Leon.

In the distance, Euan heard the bell that was used to summon the monks to evening prayers. He stood. “I should go,” he said.

Leon stood too. “You don’t have to. Father Brennon said you were excused.”

“I know,” said Euan. “But... I’d like to attend the service.” Perhaps the service would help him think clearly again.

“I understand,” said Leon.

They walked across to the door together, and as Euan pulled it open, Leon spoke.

“Thank you for joining me,” he said.

Euan looked at him. “I—I should be thanking you, I think. I enjoyed the meal.”

Leon smiled, and Euan was struck by how easy it would have been, right then, to lean forward and brush his lips against Leon’s. He was certain, somehow, that if he did so, Leon would not object at all.

Euan stepped outside. “Uh—good night,” he said.

A flash of something that might have been disappointment passed across Leon’s face, but he hid it quickly. “I’ll see you in the morning, Euan,” he said.

Euan nodded before he turned and walked away. He heard Leon’s door shut softly behind him.

Later that night, after prayers, Euan made his way back to his tiny cell, which held his small, narrow sleeping pallet—so different from Leon’s accommodations. Euan prepared himself for another night of struggling against his own body, but to his surprise, sleep found him easily, and he woke before dawn the next morning, rested and relaxed.

WHEN Euan emerged from his cell, Leon was waiting for him.

“I thought we could get an early start,” he said, handing Euan a spiced bread roll, speckled with fruit. “We have some more work to do in the passages between the scriptorium and the old chapel.”

Euan nodded. “This way then.”

They stepped out of the building that housed the monks’ cells, and the first rays of sun creeping over the horizon told Euan that it would be a rare clear day.

“Almost makes me regret spending today underground,” Leon commented.

“Almost?” Euan asked.

“Well, at least underground, I’ll be in good company.” He grinned at Euan, and Euan found himself returning the expression.

Although the direct passage between the scriptorium and the old chapel was relatively short, a series of other tunnels branched off from the main one, and it was one of these that Leon chose once they were underground. Euan recognized it as a passageway that led to the cliffs by the sea. About halfway along the tunnel—when the roar of the sea crashing against the cliffs was becoming audible—Leon told him to stop, and once again they set about their work of copying symbols.

As the morning passed, Euan found that he’d grown accustomed to Leon’s presence. Leon’s company certainly made the grim, dull tunnels a better place to work—it had been a long time since Euan had given up hope of finding the smugglers’ treasure that had once made these passages so fascinating to him. He began to enjoy himself as he led Leon

through the tunnels, waiting for him to identify yet another point that needed to be marked with symbols—sometimes on the wall, sometimes on the floor, and always indecipherable. And if he still found himself indulging in thoughts that no monk should entertain—well, the Prayer Circle worked well enough, he supposed.

Euan was about to suggest that they stop work for their midday meal when a gust of wind rushed past him, bringing the smell of salt and seaweed with it. The moving air whistled as it made its way through the tunnels, and Euan was thankful that he knew the cause of it. It would be easy to imagine the low keening coming from the mouth of a wounded animal—or worse.

Leon, however, was not so complacent. He raised his head and frowned, listening carefully for a few moments before he swore loudly. “We need to get out of here.”

“What?” Euan said. “Why?”

“No time for explanations,” said Leon, jumping to his feet, his lantern in hand. “Just—”

Leon broke off, whatever he had been about to say lost in the midst of a high-pitched shriek that sounded like no wind that Euan had ever heard, and no animal either.

“Run!” Leon said, in a tone that made Euan follow the order without question.

Another shriek joined the first, and then a third and a fourth and—Euan lost count after that. He ran as quickly as he could, trying not to stumble on the uneven surface of the tunnel.

The sounds grew less distant every moment. The screeching seemed to pierce Euan's eardrums, and he wondered how it was that he could keep moving with that terrible sound filling his head.

"We need somewhere to hide," Leon yelled.

His voice was barely audible over all the noise, but it was enough—enough to remind Euan that he couldn't fall apart, not now.

"I know a place," he shouted, although he couldn't tell if Leon had heard him.

Finding a place of safety, Leon's presence beside him—Euan tried to focus on those things as his breath grew short and the unholy screeching drew closer.

Euan thought he might have missed their refuge if Leon had held his lantern in his left hand instead of his right. The way that the rock jutted out, just so—it looked natural, but Euan knew otherwise. He grabbed Leon by the arm to stop him running, and began to search for the right pattern in the stone.

Euan's fingers fumbled as he sought out the correct place. Behind them, the screeching grew louder, sounds from the very pits of the Damned God—sounds that only minutes ago Euan would have sworn could never be real. He trembled, and suddenly he was aware of a warm hand on his back.

"It's all right," said Leon, his mouth close to Euan's ear. "You're doing fine. You'll get us there."

Euan nodded, and took a deep breath. He ran his hands across the stone and found the latch hidden behind a

carefully concealed groove. Just one tug, and— Leon wasted no time; as soon as the door opened, he took hold of Euan by the waist and pulled him in.

“How do you close this thing?” Leon yelled.

“There’s a lever.” Euan reached around Leon and found it, set deeply inside the wall, and the door closed with a loud, low rumble. “Are we safe?” he asked, when it shut completely. They could, at least, hear each other properly in here.

“We’ll be fine.” Leon’s voice was confident, but as the sound of the approaching demons grew louder again, Euan struggled to share that feeling. When he heard them just outside, when he knew they were only feet away, he thought he might scream.

But then Leon’s hand—still at his waist—squeezed him, assuring him, and all at once they were gone, the terrible screeches disappearing into the distance again. The demons hadn’t taken them. They were safe.

Euan felt a moment of relief as the fear left him; he laughed against Leon’s shoulder, leaning into him and then—his laughter came to an abrupt halt, as he found himself filled by a different kind of horror.

The hidden chamber was barely large enough for two people. A narrow shelf above their heads had given Leon a place to rest his lantern, which was burning low. It cast just enough light for Euan to discern the outline of Leon’s face, positioned—beautifully, terrifyingly—barely an inch away from his own. Leon’s hand still held him tightly, and he could feel the contours of the other man’s body through his

robes. Trying to ignore the blood that was rushing to his groin, Euan closed his eyes and prayed the First Prayer.

*Holy Ajen, Blessed Kara—*

He could feel himself growing hard, the proof of his lust pressed close against Leon's thigh. He could feel Leon's breath against his lips, so near that they must almost be touching him. Euan shifted, trying to hide the evidence of his arousal, but somehow, Leon's other hand found its way around his waist, pulling him even closer, so he could feel—

*—guide us through the night and into dawn—*

"Holy Ajen," Euan whispered, his eyes flying open.

He could feel it now that they were aligned directly against each other; Leon's body mirrored his own in every way. In every way.

"Holy Ajen, what are we—"

Leon's lips met his.

*—forgive us when we err—*

Or maybe his lips met Leon's. And whichever one of them had moved first, Euan knew it was his tongue that darted forward first to lick the inside of Leon's upper lip, and it was his hands that looped up behind Leon's head, and it was his throat making that low moan, because surely, surely, there was nothing this side of Ajen's Holy Kingdom that could save him now.

*—for we cannot see the path that you have set for us—*

Leon ran his hands across Euan's hips, and took hold of Euan's habit, pulling it upwards, until he was able to reach

beneath it. Euan gasped—or perhaps it was more of a strangled cry—when he felt Leon’s fingertips brush across the inside of his thigh.

Euan shuddered. “Please,” he said softly. “Please.”

Leon’s hand closed around his cock.

*—allow us bread when we are hungry and water when we thirst—*

Merciful Kara, who needed bread for sustenance when they had *this*? Leon’s hand moved over him, finding exactly the right places, at exactly the right speed, as though he knew Euan’s body as well as his own.

Euan knew that the sounds he could hear were coming from his own throat, and he didn’t care.

*—Show us grace and hold us—*

Their mouths found each other again, messily, gloriously, and all the while, Leon didn’t stop, bringing Euan closer and closer to total incoherence.

Everything he’d been taught told him this was sin, and sometimes he’d even believed it, but none of that seemed to matter now.

Half-blindly, Euan reached forward until he found the front of Leon’s breeches.

*— as we extend that grace to others—*

He struggled with the unfamiliar laces, determined suddenly that, if this was sin for which he would need to seek forgiveness, they would at least commit it together.

Euan couldn't suppress a cry of dismay when Leon moved back slightly and ceased his ministrations on Euan's body. But the intercession was brief—only one moment, while Leon opened his breeches far more deftly than Euan could have done. And then he was close again, his hands working Euan's habit above his hips once more.

*—so that all may shine in your light—*

Nothing—*nothing*—could have prepared him for the sensation of Leon's naked cock against his own, the sudden jolt of warmth, of shame, of joy, the sheer intimacy of it. He made a sound that was part gasp, part sob, and part laughter as Leon pushed closer.

Euan realized that Leon was guiding his hand, urging him to lock his fingers around both their cocks, while Leon's own hands encased his, leading him, setting a rhythm that worked for both of them; fast, desperate, and intense.

*—your holy wisdom, your blessed fire—*

He could feel the moment of release building in him, and whether that moment delivered him into good or evil he didn't care anymore; there was only Leon, rubbing against him, moving his hands again now to squeeze him just so—

*—surround us now, and always—*

Euan bit down on Leon's shoulder as he came, and he thought in that moment that all the glory of Ajen and Kara combined must be rushing through his veins. And then, a moment later, Leon gave a yell, and his seed mingled with Euan's own, its warmth covering their hands.

*—For we believe in you.*

They clung to each other, after, holding each other up as they tried to catch their breath. Euan felt his habit fall back into place; it was uncomfortably sticky against his legs, but at that moment it was worth it, it was all worth it.

AS THEY made their way back to the surface, Euan tried to hold onto the bliss he'd experienced earlier, but in the tunnels again, with Leon's lantern casting eerie shadows against the walls, it became difficult to recall the feeling. With the heat of Leon's body against him there had been little room for thought, but now, as his sweat dried cold on his skin, Euan's mind became tangled. There had been demons. Real demons, creatures of the Damned God; creatures Euan had believed an impossibility in the world that Ajen and Kara had created.

And then, driven by fear, he had—with Leon—he had—

Euan couldn't even bring himself to put a name to it. He wasn't sure if he was scared that naming their act would make him feel worse—or if he was scared that he wouldn't feel bad enough. Leon seemed to sense his disquiet; he extended his free arm and his hand came to rest on Euan's elbow, but Euan felt himself grow tense at the touch, and Leon's hand fell away again.

Relief coursed through Euan when he finally saw the ladder to the trapdoor, but when he tried to open it, he found it stuck. He pushed hard against it, twice, three times, but still it didn't move.

"Need some help?" asked Leon from below.

Euan paused for a moment, before he realized that he had no choice. “Yes.”

He shifted to the side, allowing Leon space to climb the ladder beside him. Together, they pressed their hands against the trapdoor, and at last it began to swing open. A scene of chaos emerged before them.

The trapdoor had been stuck on a broken beam from the scriptorium ceiling; had it fallen a few inches differently, the door wouldn't have opened at all. Above them, blue sky was clearly visible, and all around Euan could see nothing but splintered desks, scraps of parchment and vellum, and rubble from a collapsed wall and partially fallen roof. The floor was covered with water, and outside he could hear the Brothers yelling to each other fearfully.

“Holy Ajen,” Euan breathed as he pulled himself up out of the trapdoor. “What's happened here?”

Euan heard Leon scrambling up behind him. “There's been another storm,” Leon said, his voice tight.

“The—the demons?”

Leon nodded.

Euan forced himself to breathe, forced himself not to give in to the panic he felt rising within him.

“We should—” Leon began, but Euan never found out what he'd been about to say. Instead, Leon stood, fixed in place, staring across the shattered chamber. When Euan followed his gaze, he saw a pale white hand amongst the rubble.

“Holy Ajen, no.” Euan's stomach clenched.

Leon began to pick his way across the shattered room, and Euan followed him. They pulled the fallen stones away without speaking until, finally, they uncovered the body. The Brother's face was so bloody and battered that it took Euan a moment to recognize him, but when he saw the bright white scar on the man's jaw—a patch of skin miraculously untouched by the fallen rubble—Euan knew.

“Brother Leden,” he whispered.

Leon placed his fingers against Leden's neck, but there was no hope. Euan knew there was a prayer he should utter over the dead man, but he couldn't quite form the words. Dimly, he was aware of Leon rising to his feet and walking around to stand beside him.

“I'm sorry,” said Leon. “I didn't mean for this to happen.”

“It wasn't your fault,” said Euan, trying to keep his voice steady. “You were trying to stop this.”

Leon didn't answer, although Euan could hear him breathing. Every sound, every movement of air seemed to hit him sharply, biting into him. Euan hadn't liked Brother Leden, especially not in recent years, but he'd always been there, a permanent fixture in the monastery.

“We should find Father Brennon,” Euan found himself saying, although it felt as if someone else was speaking the words for him.

“Yes,” Leon agreed. “We should.” His hand fell onto Euan's shoulder, but Euan stepped away, turning toward the exit—the arched doorway that, against the odds, remained intact.

Later, when Euan looked back on that afternoon, it hardly seemed real—finding his way to the Abbot, with Leon close behind him, and stammering as he told Father Brennon about Brother Leden’s body. He remembered being swept away by the need to help an injured monk, and then by Brother Tomas, who took him to assess the damage to the novice dormitories; if those rooms had become unstable, then an alternative would need to be found promptly.

The only thing that seemed clear in Euan’s memories was the sick feeling that settled into the bottom of his stomach and stayed there. The image of Brother Leden’s battered and lifeless face seemed burned into his eyes. He’d seen death before, brought about by illness, or accident, or old age, but never like this. It was as though the Damned God himself had touched Brother Leden’s face. When Euan remembered the sound those terrible creatures had made, he thought maybe that was indeed what had happened.

Yet—yet—interspersed with the images of Brother Leden’s lifeless body were flashes of heat and sweat; the memory of Leon’s body, Leon’s lips on his, their exposed skin pressed together, urgently, recklessly—all of this, they had done as Brother Leden lay dead or dying.

He hadn’t wanted death, Euan told himself. He’d wanted Brother Leden to stop feeding the fears of the Brothers; he hadn’t wanted him to die. And now it seemed that Brother Leden had been right about the demons after all... that Euan’s most firmly held convictions had been torn to shreds.

Part of Euan wanted to find Leon, so that he could lose himself again, so that they could take solace in each other, whatever the consequences. Another part of him was

terrified; terrified that no good could come from seeking that respite.

AS NIGHT fell, Father Brennon called for the regular evening mass. Euan didn't know if he was included in that call; perhaps he was still excused on account of his work with Leon. For a moment he thought that the familiar rituals of prayer could help him somehow, but after this day—after all he had done with Leon—Euan wasn't sure that he was worthy of that comfort. He wasn't even sure that prayers to Ajen could help anymore, not when the creatures of the Damned God could infiltrate this world.

Rather than heading toward the chapel, Euan made his way to the low stone wall that surrounded the monastery, so that he could look out over the cliffs and the ocean, which were illuminated only by the pale light of the waning half-moon. He shivered in the cold wind that blew in off the sea, but he made no attempt to pull his habit more tightly around himself.

After what must have been at least half an hour, Euan heard footsteps behind him, and somehow, he felt no surprise when Leon stepped up beside him.

“Are you all right?” Leon asked.

Euan continued to stare out at the water. “I don't know,” he said.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t help today.” Leon paused. “I needed to check on the—I needed to check some of the calculations I’ve been working on.”

“I understand.”

“I would’ve liked to have spent more time with you after—after what happened earlier.”

Euan felt something jump inside of him. Finally, he turned his head to look at Leon. “After the storm, you mean?” he asked. “After Brother Leden?”

“That,” said Leon. “And also, what happened before that. When we were hiding.”

Euan was silent for a moment. “According to everything I’ve been taught,” he said, “we should be asking for Ajen’s forgiveness right now.”

“Do you believe what you’ve been taught?” Leon asked.

Euan swallowed, but he didn’t answer. Even now, Leon’s presence was affecting him; Euan’s skin tingled as he remembered the way Leon had touched him, the feel of his lips and his hands....

“It wasn’t wrong,” said Leon. “I promise you, nothing that’s passed between us has been wrong.”

“Someone was dying.”

“We couldn’t have helped Brother Leden... not at that point.” Leon’s hand came to rest on Euan’s arm. “It was too late for him by then.”

“I—” Euan started. “I don’t want to believe it was wrong, what happened between us.”

“Don’t then,” said Leon softly. “You don’t have to believe that.”

“The Holy Book—”

“The Holy Book has nothing to say about what we did.” Leon’s voice was firm now.

*“And men and women shall join together, for that is the way that Ajen and Kara wished them to be,”* Euan quoted. “Chapter twelve, verse six.”

“In that case, every man in this monastery is sinning,” said Leon. “There don’t seem to be many women to join with around here.”

“That’s different,” said Euan.

Leon raised his hand to cup Euan’s face. “How is it different?”

Euan thought he should move away, but he found himself leaning into Leon’s hand instead. “Because—the monks—we’ve always been apart.”

Even to his own ears, Euan’s voice sounded hollow. There was nothing rational, nothing logical, about what he was saying now.

“Tell me, Euan,” said Leon, his voice low, “did you always listen to your teachers when they told you it was wrong to feel this way about other men?”

“I—” Euan shook his head. “No,” he said. “Not always.”

“What changed?”

Euan closed his eyes as memories overtook him. A face turned away in disgust, jeering at him. He’d cared for that

face, and the person behind it, once. “It was easier, in the end,” Euan said. “It was easier to... go along with it.”

It had been easier. So much easier to let himself believe what they’d told him. But that didn’t necessarily mean it had been the right thing to do. And now....

“It didn’t feel wrong to you earlier,” said Leon. “I know it didn’t.”

Euan opened his eyes and saw that Leon was looking at him intently. When their eyes met, Euan found himself shaking his head. Leon’s palm brushed across his cheek.

“No,” Euan whispered. “It didn’t feel wrong then. It felt—it felt right.” As he spoke, Euan felt something slip into place inside of him.

“Your teachers,” said Leon, “they’re the ones who were wrong.”

Euan’s teachers would have wanted him to argue, to stand firm, but somehow, Euan knew there was no chance of that now. It *had* felt right earlier, whatever had come after. It had *been* right.

Leon must have sensed the change in him, because he leaned forward and brushed his own lips across Euan’s. The touch was light, but it was enough to make Euan shudder, and when Leon began to pull away from him, Euan laced his hands behind Leon’s head, pulling him close again.

“Yes,” said Euan, his mouth against Leon’s. “They were wrong.”

So much that Euan believed had been proven wrong today, but Leon was solid and real, and *close*. Euan’s tongue

pressed forward as Leon's mouth opened, and Euan felt, once again, his entire body responding to Leon's closeness.

When they finally broke apart, Euan spoke. "I want to come back to your room," he said. "I don't want to be alone tonight."

Leon's breath caught. "I'd like that," he said. "I'd like it a lot."

Euan pressed his forehead against Leon's. "Thank you," he said.

AS THEY made their way from the cliffs to Leon's room, Euan found himself contemplating exactly what they might do once they were alone in Leon's chamber. The very thought of it made him feel as though a hummingbird was beating its wings inside his stomach. Earlier, when they'd been hiding together, there hadn't been time to think, but now—Euan wondered if his inexperience would show, if he'd manage to make a fool of himself.

Desperately, Euan tried to think back to the illicit scrolls that had been passed around the novice dormitories when he was a boy—a joke for most, but a secret source of arousal for some. Surely some of the pictures and stories from those scrolls could help him now?

Lost in his thoughts, Euan didn't watch where he was going, and he found himself colliding with Leon as they stepped onto the narrow path that led to the High Quarters.

“Hey,” said Leon with a chuckle, placing a steadying hand on Euan’s back. “Easy there.”

Euan felt his body respond to the touch, and he wondered, suddenly, what would happen if he pressed Leon up against the high stone wall to their left. The thought was almost enough to overcome his nerves—and it might have done so had he not heard, at that moment, the faint strains of a hymn from the chapel. The evening service would be ending soon, and if any of the Brothers saw them....

Euan decided not to think about that. Instead, he quickened his step, eager to reach the luxurious privacy of Leon’s room as soon as possible. He wasn’t feeling any less nervous, exactly, but the heat pooling in his groin made his nerves easier to ignore.

Finally, they found themselves standing outside Leon’s door. It seemed to take Leon an age to turn the key in the lock, and when the door finally swung upon, Euan stepped inside, with Leon following.

“At last,” Euan breathed as the door closed behind them.

“At last?” Leon asked. “At last what?”

Euan couldn’t see Leon’s face in the near-darkness, but there was a hint of suggestion in his voice, a hint that he’d like to know about the thoughts running through Euan’s mind in great detail.

“Uh—” Euan cleared his throat, embarrassed that he’d spoken.

Leon seemed to sense Euan’s hesitation. “I’ll build up the fire,” he said.

Euan watched as Leon made his way over to the hearth, to add a new log to the low-burning coals, taking in the way that the orange glow from the grate outlined the silhouette of Leon's body. Euan felt sure that his own physique would not appear quite so impressive, and he hoped that Leon wouldn't find him disappointing. To distract himself from that thought, Euan lit the two lamps that stood on the table, and when he was done, he found that Leon had finished with the fire and was removing his boots.

When Leon stood upright again, their eyes met, and Euan took a step forward. He knew that he couldn't allow nerves or apprehension to hold him back anymore; he was done with holding back. Determined now, Euan closed the distance between himself and Leon, placed a hand behind Leon's head, and kissed him.

Everything seemed to melt away, everything except the feel of Leon's mouth, and Leon's body against him. Euan began to work a hand between them, reaching under Leon's short tunic to press his palm against Leon's stomach.

"Leon," Euan murmured against his neck. "Leon, I—"

"Hmm?"

"I'm going to undress you," said Euan.

"Ah...", said Leon, exhaling as Euan's hand slipped lower and came to rest on the front of his breeches. "Good idea."

It wasn't so difficult to unlace Leon's breeches this time, not with the light from the lanterns and the fireplace illuminating both of them. Euan pulled Leon's tunic over his head, and took a moment to admire Leon's lightly muscled

chest, and his stomach with its trail of hair leading downward—*Holy Ajen*—all the way down to his cock.

Euan didn't want to stop—he *couldn't* stop—touching Leon, running his hands along his shoulders, down his sides, past his navel. Leon pressed back against Euan's palms, and Euan admired the contrast between Leon's pale stomach and his own darker hands. He ran his hands lower still, enjoying the way that Leon's lips were parting in response to his touch.

When Euan's fingers found Leon's cock, Leon gave a low groan. The sound made Euan shiver, and he found himself pushing Leon's breeches down further, trying to get at every inch of him.

Leon seemed to have the same idea. His hands grabbed at Euan's habit, pulling it up, and Euan paused for a moment to help lift the awkward garment over his head. He kicked off his soft leather shoes, and then there was nothing between them. Euan pulled Leon as close as possible as their mouths found each other yet again. He ran his hands down Leon's back, and Leon responded to his touch by grinding into him.

"Leon," said Euan. "Mmmph—I want —"

"You want?"

"Bed," said Euan. "We should be—should be on the bed."

A distant part of him thought that he might have sounded foolish, but mostly he didn't care, and it seemed that Leon didn't either. Euan wasn't quite sure if he was pulling Leon back onto the bed or if it was the other way

around, and really, it didn't matter. All that mattered was that they were falling back onto the mattress in an awkward tangle of limbs and skin and breath, and then they were untangling themselves, realigning themselves until Leon was above him, his lips on Euan's neck, his hands running over Euan's hips and onto his buttocks, pulling him closer so that their hard cocks rubbed against each other.

As Leon's hands pressed into the sensitive skin of his backside, Euan's mind again seized on the forbidden scrolls he'd read as a novice. He remembered the acts described in them; acts that had been burned into his memory and stayed there, long after he'd given up all hope that he'd ever have the chance to try them. Other acts too, that he'd thought he would never be brave enough to try. But now—now he was here, with Leon, and so much of what he'd believed—so much of what he'd let himself believe—had been wrong.

There was no reason to hold back anymore.

Euan shifted and pulled Leon down to him, kissing him fiercely. "Leon," he said.

"Ngh... yes?"

"I want—" Euan swallowed, searching for the right words. "I want—I want your cock inside me."

For a moment, Leon didn't seem to have heard, but then he grew still. He raised his head, looking at Euan directly. "Are you sure?"

Euan nodded, his fingers digging into Leon's shoulders. "I want to. Holy Ajen, I want to."

“You know that it might hurt, at first? If you’re not used to it—it can be hard to relax.”

“I’ll be fine,” Euan said. “I think you know how to relax me.”

Leon chuckled. “I’ll do my best.” And then, his face becoming serious, he said, “If you need me to stop at any time—”

Euan reached up to grab Leon’s hair, pulling him down again, bringing their faces close. “I don’t want you to stop,” said Euan, his voice a low growl.

Leon smiled. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Leon kissed his way down Euan’s chest, pushing his Prayer Circle to the side before he paused to tease at Euan’s nipples. When that was done, he licked a line down Euan’s stomach until at last, Euan felt Leon’s tongue brush against the head of his cock.

“Ajen’s Light,” Euan gasped.

“You like that?” Leon raised his head, a smug smile on his face.

“Nngh.” Euan couldn’t quite manage any more than that, but it didn’t seem to matter.

“There’ll be more in a moment,” Leon promised, before he leaned away, reaching for a satchel that sat beside the bed.

Euan watched as Leon retrieved what appeared to be a bottle of fine oil, and he felt a wave of heat crash through him when he thought of its purpose. That heat intensified tenfold when Leon returned, and this time, instead of merely

teasing Euan's cock with his tongue, Leon enveloped it with his mouth. It didn't matter that it was awkward, as Leon struggled to uncork the bottle while his mouth was occupied. All of it was glorious.

And then—and then—Euan felt Leon's hand, slick with oil, reach behind him. One finger came to rest on his hole, pushing forward ever so gently. Euan pressed back against it, and suddenly it was easing its way inside him. A second finger joined the first, stretching him, and burning a little. Euan felt Leon curl them around until—

“Oh!” Euan cried out in surprise as Leon touched—something—some wonderful place inside of him. “By Ajen and Kara....”

As Leon continued to press his fingers forward, Euan thought that in his entire life he'd never felt anything as beautiful as this. And this was only the beginning.

“Leon,” said Euan.

Leon pulled his mouth slowly away from Euan's cock and looked up at him, waiting.

“I'm—I'm ready for more now.”

“You're certain?” Leon asked.

“Yes,” said Euan, breathless and exasperated. “Leon, please, I'm ready. *Please.*”

Leon laughed. “All right,” he said. “If you insist.”

Leon moved backward a little, and pulled Euan's legs further apart while pushing them back, so they folded against Euan's body. “Is this good for you?”

Euan nodded, silently praising Ajen that he was more flexible than most. Leon applied some more oil and positioned himself against Euan, and then, at last, he pushed inside.

Euan gasped, because it *did* hurt, more than he expected, in spite of the oil and everything else. It felt as though Leon was tearing him in two, stretching him too far. Leon's entire body froze, except for one hand, which came to rest on Euan's abdomen.

"Do you want me to stop?" Leon asked.

For a moment, Euan considered saying yes, but Leon's palm against his stomach calmed him, made him breathe again, and then, suddenly, the pain—it didn't disappear exactly, but it felt different somehow. As he relaxed, Euan's skin broke out into goose bumps, and nerves that had previously cried out in protest suddenly demanded more.

"Don't—don't stop," Euan managed. "Just—don't go too fast."

"I can do that," Leon replied.

As good as his word, Leon pressed forward carefully, and when he began to rock back and forth, the pace he set was agonizingly slow. Euan could hardly believe that this was happening, that he'd asked for it, that he'd *wanted* it, and yet—it felt as though this was the way that things always should have been. The sensation of Leon thrusting into him, of Leon's hand closing around his cock—at that moment, it seemed as though nothing else in the world was real.

Euan pressed back against Leon, telling him through actions rather than words that he was ready for more now, that Leon didn't need to be gentle anymore. As their movements increased in speed, Euan saw Leon's lips part, his breath coming more quickly now, low moans escaping his mouth.

“Holy—Sleeping Goddess—Euan, I can't—Euan—”

Leon's ragged breathing, the way his lips parted, the urgency behind each thrust now—somewhere, within the haze of his own arousal, Euan felt a fierce stab of joy at the knowledge that he was making Leon come undone like this. Leon's thrusts grew faster, more intense, too intense; it was—it was—

Euan cried out as his climax broke over him, and moments later, Leon's cries joined his.

When he was done, Leon collapsed on top of Euan and kissed him, his mouth working lazily. As he responded in kind, Euan raised his arms and placed them around Leon's shoulders.

“That was—that was good,” Euan said. “More than good.”

“Definitely,” Leon said, his breathing still uneven. “Definitely good.”

Euan knew that he'd have to move soon, that they'd need to clean up and find a position that was less likely to result in his extremities becoming numb, but right now that didn't seem important. Leon's body was still against his, Leon's breath was tickling his neck, and Leon's hands were

idly stroking his hips. There was no reason to change anything.

Euan sighed, spent, sore, and content.

EVENTUALLY, they did shift, and Leon found a cloth they could use to tidy themselves up a bit. Euan shut off the lanterns, so that once again, only the fire lit the room. When they returned to the bed, however, they didn't sleep—not immediately.

“Someday,” said Leon, running a finger along Euan's jawline, “you're going to have to tell me how a beautiful young man like yourself managed to grow up in a place like this, without ever once lying with another man.”

Euan yawned. “Never had the chance, I guess.”

“There was never anyone special?”

Euan closed his eyes again at that question, but to his surprise, he found that the memories that it evoked were no longer as painful as they once had been.

“Trevin,” Euan said.

“Who was he?”

“An orphan who came here at the same time I did. He was a few years older than me. I... cared for him.”

“What happened?” Leon asked.

Euan sighed. “When I was sixteen, he met a girl who lived in the village. He told me he was leaving the monastery to marry her.”

“What did you do?”

“I—I told him how I felt. I thought that might change things somehow.”

“But it didn’t.” It wasn’t a question.

Euan shook his head. “It was worse than that,” he said quietly.

“Ah,” said Leon.

“He told me that there was something wrong with me, if I felt that way. He said I was sick, that he was glad to get away from me. The way he looked at me... I disgusted him.”

One of Leon’s hands found Euan’s. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I suppose that explains a few things.”

Euan nodded. “After Trevin left, after he told me all those things, I had to make a choice. I could leave, and hope that I’d find someone else to care for, someone who wouldn’t think that way, or I could stay here, and believe what the monks told me about... men like us. I thought it would be safer here.”

“What do you think now?”

“Now... nowhere is safe, I suppose.” Somehow, speaking those words filled him with joy, rather than fear.

“That’s true enough,” said Leon.

Euan smiled.

“What is it?” Leon asked him.

“It’s just,” said Euan, “that after tonight, I feel sorry for Trevin, I think.”

“Oh?”

“Well, he’ll never get to lie with you, for one thing.”

Leon laughed. “And he’ll never get to lie with you either. Believe me, he missed a wonderful opportunity there.”

“I’m glad you think so,” said Euan.

The last he’d heard, Trevin was living in the village, with his wife and two children, with another on the way. He hoped that they were happy; he thought they probably were.

“At least he’s not lonely,” Euan mused.

“There’s definitely something to be said for that,” said Leon.

Something in Leon’s tone—something almost wistful—gave Euan pause. “Are you lonely?” he asked.

Leon squeezed his hand again. “Not right at the moment.”

“At other times?”

A sigh escaped from Leon’s lips. “Sometimes,” he said. “There aren’t many who would choose to share my life, not once they know what it involves.”

Euan swallowed. “Perhaps—perhaps you’ll find someone soon who does want to share—those things—with you.”

Euan wasn’t certain that Leon would take his meaning, but when he saw a smile ghost across the other man’s face, he knew that Leon had understood.

“Perhaps,” said Leon, his voice full of promise. “Perhaps.”

They settled into a comfortable silence, broken only by the crackling of the fire and the hooting of an owl. Euan closed his eyes, and allowed himself to drift into sleep.

WHEN Euan awoke, only glowing red coals remained in the fireplace. The only other source of light in the room was a single candle beside the bed. Leon remained beside him, but he sat upright in the bed, fully dressed; he appeared to have been awake for some time. On his lap was a scroll covered in the same mysterious script they had been painting onto the tunnels beneath the monastery.

When he realized that Euan was stirring, Leon looked down at him, a gentle smile crossing his face.

“Hello,” said Euan.

“Good morning.”

Euan blinked. “Are you going somewhere?” he asked.

Leon was silent for a moment. “Not far,” he said. “I was waiting for you to wake up. I didn’t want to run off on you.”

“What’s happening?”

Leon sighed. “I need to—I need to leave you here for a bit. Just a few hours. When I come back, we’ll talk some more.”

Euan pulled himself up, until he was sitting upright. “What do you need to do?”

“I just need to attend to some things.”

“Is it about the demons?”

Leon paused, then nodded.

“You know I can help with that,” Euan said.

“Not with this, you couldn’t,” Leon replied. “There are things you don’t know. It could be dangerous for you.”

“But—”

“Please, Euan.”

Euan thought to protest again, but something in Leon’s eyes stopped him. Instead, he simply nodded. “If that’s what you want,” he said.

“It is,” Leon replied.

Euan lowered his eyes, hoping that Leon was unable to discern his thoughts. Nowhere was safe anymore, and that changed everything.

When Leon left the room, Euan sprang from the bed and pulled his habit over his head. He allowed enough time for Leon to get a reasonable lead on him, took the candle from the bedside table, and then slipped outside.

Looking to the east, Euan realized that dawn was less than an hour away. The other monks would already be gathered for morning mass, and as the thought crossed his mind, Euan heard their voices from the chapel, raised in a song that praised Ajen’s mercy. He pushed aside the guilt he felt at not joining them, and instead concentrated on the bobbing light of Leon’s lantern.

Euan wasn’t surprised to discover that Leon was heading back toward the ruined scriptorium. No doubt he wanted to return to the site of the demon incursion. Euan saw, when he reached the shattered building, that Leon had

left the trapdoor open, presumably to allow for a quick escape. He descended into the tunnels carefully, knowing that sound traveled easily there, and he hoped that the small point of light from his candle wouldn't alert Leon to his presence.

In the distance, Euan saw Leon's light ahead of him once again, following the path they'd taken the previous day. When he realized that Leon must be approaching the tunnels that split away toward the coast, Euan expected the light to disappear, and when it didn't, Euan felt a twinge of surprise. Had Leon missed the turnoff, without Euan there to guide him?

Euan almost called out, but then thought better of it. Perhaps, after all, Leon meant to go to the old chapel, and Euan would not be able to discover Leon's purpose if he revealed himself. And then, thinking of the old chapel, Euan frowned.

He'd spent much of the previous day running back and forth between all the buildings in the monastery, checking them for signs of damage. Surely he had checked the old chapel too? Although the building was rarely visited, it was still used for storage, and Euan felt certain that he must have taken some time to see that everything was in order. Yet, as he pondered the matter, Euan realized that he couldn't remember doing so.

Euan's heart began to beat quickly when he saw Leon climb the ladder that led into the old chapel. When Leon's light disappeared, and the need for silence had passed, Euan broke into a run, hoping that his speed wouldn't extinguish his candle.

As he approached the ladder, however, Euan found himself stopping short. The air began to shimmer, resisting him somehow. Euan felt as though he was trying to push his way through a dense wall of water, and then, all at once, the sensation passed.

Euan didn't even consider turning back. He climbed the ladder quickly, not allowing himself to think, and pulled himself up into the alcove that housed the secret door, which Leon had once again left open. He stepped into the chapel, and—

There were six of them. Six demons, gnarled creatures with wrinkled green-gray skin, none of them standing more than four feet high. Webbed wings extended from their backs, and sharp claws protruded from their hands and feet. They stood in a nest of straw, which was littered with chicken bones, stripped bare of all flesh.

And there, amongst them, stood Leon. He was turned away from Euan, but Euan could see one of his hands resting gently on a demon's head, as though he was performing some kind of benediction.

The demon Leon was touching gave a guttural cry, and Leon responded. The noises that came from his throat sounded like no human language that Euan had ever heard. It sounded like the language of the Damned God himself. And then, Leon looked over his shoulder, revealing his face. He was smiling.

Euan turned, and fled.

EUAN ran back through the tunnel without thinking. When his candle guttered out, he kept going, relying on his knowledge of the tunnels to save him—if he kept to a straight line, he would be fine. He didn't know if Leon had seen him, or if Leon was following him, and it hardly seemed to matter. When he saw the light of the still-open scriptorium trapdoor, he didn't even feel relief.

He was barely aware of climbing the ladder, but the sudden bright light of the scriptorium stopped him. Euan blinked and rubbed at his eyes, and when he pulled his hands away, he was surprised to find that they were wet with tears.

Breathing heavily, Euan started picking his way through the scriptorium, and when he reached the exit, he broke into a run again. Only then did he realize that he was heading toward the chapel—the new chapel—where the monks would still be gathered. He could raise the alarm; he could tell them, tell Father Brennon what Leon had been doing. They would find a way to stop him. Even if it meant that everything that had passed between them would be revealed—

Euan stopped that thought before it could form fully. He wasn't ready to deal with that yet. Instead, he kept his eyes focused on the arched chapel doorway. Once he was there, everything would be all right; everything would make sense again.

The doors were open—they always were during mass, so that any who might seek solace could find it there. Euan took the steps two at a time and crossed the threshold, his insides twisted with both hope and torment.

“Father Brennon! Father—”

The chapel was silent.

The Brothers were all frozen in place, halfway to kneeling in front of their pews. At the altar, Father Brennon’s left hand was raised above the Circled Cross, and his mouth was open, paused in the act of prayer.

“Holy Ajen,” Euan whispered.

He walked slowly to the front of the chapel, his footsteps echoing in the eerie silence. He passed Brother Efid, and Euan thought he might be sick when he remembered the conversation that had passed between them. Efid had tried to warn him. Brother Leden had tried to warn him, and Euan hadn’t listened. Perhaps—*Holy Ajen, no*—perhaps Leon had even arranged for the demons to take Brother Leden’s life. And Euan—Euan had been so distracted by his bodily desires that he hadn’t even considered the possibility.

Trying to swallow the bile that he felt rising in his throat, Euan continued toward Father Brennon. When he reached the Abbot, Euan raised a hand toward him, but when he tried to touch the Abbot’s hand, Euan’s arm fell straight through him, as though he was made of air. Euan allowed his hand to fall onto the large Circled Cross between them, and was surprised to find that he could touch it. His hand encircled the cold metal, and he gripped it tightly. At least something in all of this felt real.

Euan didn’t let go of the Circled Cross when he heard footsteps approaching the building. Instead, he lifted it from the altar and held it in front of him. He stood there,

trembling, as Leon came into view, running up the steps and into the chapel.

“Euan—” Leon’s breathing was strained. “Euan, you have to—”

“You betrayed us.”

Leon stepped toward him. “Please, Euan—let me explain. I can—”

“I *saw* you,” Euan said. “You were helping them. The demons, you were helping them. You brought them here. And me—you told me—you lied to me so that I would—” Euan paused, his self control slipping away. “I should have known it was wrong.”

Euan cursed himself for believing that what he’d done with Leon had been right—that it had been a good thing. He’d *wanted* to believe that it was right.

“It wasn’t wrong,” Leon said, his voice low and desperate. “I promise, it wasn’t. There’s a reason for everything, you just have to listen—”

“Brother Leden died because of you!” Euan said, his voice louder now. Brother Leden had been right about everything. He’d been right not to trust Leon, to tell the other Brothers not to trust him.

A pained expression crossed Leon’s face, but he continued to walk toward Euan. “Brother Leden’s death was my fault,” Leon agreed. “But it’s not what you think.”

“I know what I saw. I can see what you’ve done here, to all my Brothers.”

Leon reached him. “Please, Euan,” he said. “Please, just—”

Leon stopped talking and crumpled into a heap as the Circled Cross in Euan’s hand came crashing down on his head. Euan looked down at his own hands, not quite believing what he’d done.

For several long moments, Euan held his breath and stood still, as frozen as his Brother monks. Only when he saw Leon’s chest rise and fall did Euan begin to move again, releasing the breath he’d been holding in a strangled sob. Even after everything, part of him wanted to kneel at Leon’s head, to comfort him.

He couldn’t allow himself that weakness, however. Leon’s betrayal would be revealed now, and the Abbot would decide what to do with him.

There would never be any hope of justice if the monks remained this way. Euan knew that he was going to have to deal with the demons himself. Running his hands along the edge of the Circled Cross, he wondered if the Holy Symbol would be enough—it *should* be enough, but then—Euan couldn’t be certain of anything.

Just in case, Euan retrieved two of the lamps used as part of the evening services, filling them with oil, and he took two of the flints they used to light them. If he needed fire—well, that should help him. Euan swallowed, trying not to think that he himself might die in the blaze. There was no time to worry about that anymore.

His purpose clear to him, Euan set forth, Holy Symbol in one hand and lanterns in the other. He walked quickly,

but didn't run as he made his way overland, rather than back through the tunnel, to the old chapel. He counted his steps as he went, keeping time to avoid thinking about everything that had passed between him and Leon, everything that he'd let himself believe.

Euan only paused when he reached the entrance to the old building. *Holy Ajen, be with me now.* He could do this. He could make it right. If he could do that, then Ajen might forgive him for his own part in it. Looping the Circled Cross over his wrist, Euan took the key to the old chapel from his belt, unlocked the large wooden doors, and pushed them open.

The demons turned to look at him as he entered the building. One of them made a high-pitched trilling noise that turned Euan's stomach to ice. Euan wondered if they could hear his heart beating. One of them extended its wings, stretching them as far as they would go.

Holding his hands as steady as possible, Euan raised the Circled Cross.

"By Ajen's Light and Kara's Grace, I banish you," said Euan. "In their names, I bid you return to the pit of the Damned God."

Nothing happened. For a moment everything was still, and then one of the demons cocked its head at Euan, as though it was curious. It screeched, its sharp-toothed mouth opening, and Euan wondered how a single being could make such a noise. It sounded as though a dozen of them were hiding within its throat.

With shaking hands, Euan lit the lanterns. Then, he raised both of them and threw them into the straw nest.

Everything went black.

A SILVER haze shimmered in front of his eyes. There was light and there was shadow, and the shadow seemed to take the shape of a man.

“Euan! Euan!”

Something tapped at his face.

“Euan! Euan, wake up!”

The voice was familiar. Euan blinked and shook his head, trying to clear his vision.

“Come on, Euan, I know you can do it.”

Euan breathed in deeply, and the world came into focus. He was in the old chapel. A man’s face resolved itself in front of him: a handsome face marred only by an ugly bruise forming on his forehead.

“Leon.”

“Thank the Sleeping Goddess,” Leon breathed. He lowered his head to Euan’s. “Oh, Euan, you fool.”

Euan’s head still felt fuzzy, but he remembered something. “I am a fool,” he said. “Should never have trusted you.”

Leon sighed. “And I should have trusted you more. I’m sorry.”

Euan tried to move, and realized that his wrists and ankles were tied. “Are you going to kill me? Are you going to give me to the demons?”

Leon ran a hand across Euan’s head. “No,” he said. “I’m not going to kill you. And those so-called demons are gone for the moment.”

“Then what are you going to do?” Euan thought that perhaps he should feel afraid, but he was still too numb, too disconnected from what had happened.

“First,” said Leon, “I’m going to give you some water. And then I’m going to tell you exactly why I’m here. Do you think you can sit up?”

Euan nodded, and Leon grabbed him beneath his arms, dragging him into a sitting position against the hard stone wall. Then, Leon held a flask to Euan’s lips, and cold sweet water ran over his tongue.

“Are you ready to listen?” Leon asked.

“Yes.” He didn’t have much choice in the matter.

“Good,” said Leon. He settled himself beside Euan, his legs crossed.

Euan looked across at him, indicating that he was paying attention.

“The first time we met,” Leon started, “you told me that you were one of the careful ones. One of the ones who didn’t believe in demons just because of a bad storm. Later, you said you believed that if there were demons, they were confined to the pit of the Damned God.”

Euan sighed. “Like you said, I’m a fool.”

“No,” said Leon. “You’re not. Or you weren’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are no demons, Euan.”

Euan laughed; he thought he sounded a little crazy. “I *saw* them,” he said. “I didn’t believe in them before because I had no reason to. But now...”

“They weren’t demons,” Leon said. “They were—they are—intelligent creatures. And generally, they are gentle beings.”

“I’ve never heard of these creatures,” said Euan. “All the books, all the scrolls in the library... the only ones that mention anything like them are the treatises that talk about the Damned God’s minions.”

“Those treatises were written by idiots,” Leon growled. “I promise you, you have never seen a demon. Those creatures, they were—”

“What?”

“It’s difficult to explain.” Leon’s brow furrowed. “Our world—it overlaps with other worlds. We exist side by side, on top of each other, in the same space as each other, but we don’t see into them, not usually.”

“Not usually?” Euan asked.

“Sometimes,” Leon continued, “there’s a breach. Something snaps, and people or things fall through. Those storms, they’re what happens sometimes, when a certain type of breach occurs. And those creatures—the Ghaghki—they slipped through.”

“You know their language,” Euan said. “You could read their scrolls.”

Leon nodded. “It’s what I do. When there’s a breach between worlds—and it can happen anywhere—I go there, and I try to fix it if I can. There’s a whole group of us, scattered about the place. Most people just think we exorcise demons, and we let them believe that. It’s easier that way.”

“So, you’ve seen them, these Gh—Gah—”

“Ghaghki.”

“Yes. You’ve seen them before?”

“I have,” said Leon. “I’ve studied them. But not well enough, I’m afraid.”

“Not well enough?”

“The Ghaghki family groups share strong psychic bonds. When I arrived and saw three of them here, I thought that would be it. Those symbols we were painting on the tunnel walls—those were supposed to help them leave, when the time came. But instead, they enhanced the psychic bond, so that the rest of the family group was pulled through. And when they come through—the shock of it disorients them. A lot of energy is involved, and it’s dangerous to get too close to them. And then there are the storms on top of that.” Leon sighed. “Brother Leden died for my mistake.”

Euan remained silent as he processed Leon’s words. “All those creatures,” he said, finally, “they were a family?”

“Yes.”

“Holy Ajen.” Euan looked down at his hands, still tied in his lap. “I killed them. I threw the lanterns at them, and I—”

“You didn’t kill them.”

“I didn’t?”

“No. But....” Leon paused. “What you did, it might have been worse.”

“Worse?” Euan’s chest tightened.

“The Ghaghki, when they cross over into this world—they have the ability to manipulate time. Usually, it’s just enough that they can put themselves slightly out of step with everyone else. When that happens, they don’t get noticed, most of the time. Wherever they choose to wait, it’s contained in a sort of protective field, and people just avoid it without thinking about it.”

“You didn’t avoid it,” Euan said. “You noticed them.”

Leon nodded. “I’m... sensitive to creatures from other realities. Their abilities to manipulate our world don’t usually affect me in the same way. I think—I think the reason you were able to pass through into that bubble was because....” Leon hesitated, and for a moment he almost looked bashful. “Well, it was because you had part of me inside you last night.”

Euan felt himself turning red. “Ah,” he said. “I take it that I shouldn’t have been able to get inside the protective field then?”

“You shouldn’t have, no,” Leon confirmed. “You made it unstable. When you left the area, the bubble began to expand. I think it covers the whole monastery now.”

“So all the frozen monks,” said Euan, his stomach sinking, “that was my fault?”

“It was my fault as much as yours,” said Leon. “If I’d told you what was happening...”

“What about the creatures?” Euan asked. “What happened to them?”

Leon frowned. “This is where it gets really bad,” he said.

“How so?”

“Normally, the Ghaghki can only shift time a little bit. When they’re in real danger, though, they can take themselves and their whole nest out of time completely. That’s what they did when you attacked them.”

“What does that mean?”

“For them, it means they’re safe. For us, it’s not good.”

“Oh.” Euan couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“It takes an enormous amount of energy for the Ghaghki to pull themselves out of time. They can’t maintain it for long. Maybe an hour more, at the most. And when they come back, all that energy is released.”

“What will that do?”

“It—it could destroy the whole monastery. Everything inside the protective field.”

“Can’t we go for help?”

“There isn’t time,” said Leon softly. “The village is an hour away, even if we run. And besides, the time field is so fragile now—if you, or even I, left it, we could cause it to burst. If that happens... I don’t know how far it would spread. All we can do now is hope that I’m wrong again—that it won’t be as bad as I think it will.”

Euan closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the wall. “Holy Ajen,” he said. “Holy Ajen, I didn’t know.”

“I know,” said Leon. “There’s no way you could have known, not without me telling you.”

Euan opened his eyes when Leon’s hands found his wrists. “You’re untying me.”

Leon looked up at him. “I don’t think there’s much of a chance that you’ll try to kill me again.”

“I suppose not,” said Euan.

When Euan’s wrists and ankles were free again, Leon settled back down beside him. After sitting in silence for several minutes, Euan felt Leon’s hand slip into his. He turned to look at Leon, and found that Leon was looking back at him.

They moved in toward each other at the same time, and when their lips touched, their kiss was gentle, almost tentative. Euan felt Leon’s lips open beneath his, and he raised one hand to the back of Leon’s head, as though he could draw him in closer by doing so.

*There are worse ways to spend one’s final hour,* Euan thought.

Leon placed a hand on Euan’s neck, fingertips brushing lightly against his spine. His hand dipped inside Euan’s habit, his fingers curling around the leather cord that held the Prayer Circle. Euan moaned and grabbed the front of Leon’s tunic with his free hand—and then he paused when he realized that Leon was pulling away from him.

“What’s wrong?” Euan asked.

Slowly, Leon drew the Prayer Circle out from beneath Euan's habit. "This," said Leon. "It's a timepiece, isn't it?"

"It's for prayer," said Euan.

"But you use it to time your prayers, don't you?"

"In a way, I suppose. If we do it properly, each prayer is one minute, and one round of prayers will take an hour."

"Can you do it properly?"

"I can," said Euan. He was one of the best.

Leon stared at the Prayer Circle a few moments longer, as though it was some kind of precious jewel. "In that case," he said, "we might have a chance to fix this."

A surge of hope rose in Euan's chest. "How?"

"You and I are still linked by—by last night. On my own I couldn't do it, but if you have a timepiece, if you can keep time for me—I might be able to harness some of the energy the Ghaghki used to take themselves out of time. And maybe I can disperse it, and send them home."

"So..." said Euan, "I just need to say my prayers?"

Leon nodded. "But you have to get the timing exactly right. I can manipulate the Ghaghki powers because I'm sensitive to their presence and I know their language, but they aren't *my* powers. If the slightest thing goes wrong, it could all fall apart."

"I can do that," Euan said, pushing all doubt to the side. There was no room for that now.

Leon stood and offered a hand to Euan. When they were both upright and facing each other, Leon laid one of his own hands on each side of Euan's head.

"Are you ready?"

"I am."

"On three, then."

Leon counted to three, and Euan began to whisper the First Prayer, his index finger against the Prayer Circle.

*"Holy Ajen, Blessed Kara, guide us through the night and into dawn...."*

A distant, disconnected part of Euan's mind recalled the way he'd prayed that first time with Leon—it hardly seemed possible that it had been only yesterday. In contrast to the previous day, however, Leon stood perfectly still as Euan mouthed the words of the prayer—had it not been for the warm, solid sensation of Leon's palms against his temples, Euan might have thought that Leon was frozen, like the monks in the chapel.

When Euan started on the Second Prayer, Leon began to speak in the same guttural language, interspersed with high-pitched trills and squawks, that Euan had heard him speaking earlier. The rhythm of the language matched the prayer, reminding Euan of the way their bodies had moved together the previous night; they worked both with and against each other, perfectly matched in point and counterpoint.

Euan made his way through the Third Prayer and the Fourth. When he started on the Fifth, Leon's voice grew

louder and the building started to shake. Euan focused all his energy on the words he'd learned as a boy.

*"...and guard the world against the Damned God, who seethes in his pit and brings only despair..."*

Euan never reached the Sixth Prayer. Darkness fell, a crash of thunder sounded outside, and the air inside the chapel was suddenly full of screeching and guttural cries. The air moved violently as the Ghaghki flapped their wings. Euan fell to the floor, and he felt Leon falling with him. He could hear rain when the thunder stopped, and the rain was almost as loud as the thunder had been.

And then, suddenly, there was silence. Euan could feel Leon breathing heavily on top of him, and moments later his face came into view as light returned to the world.

"Did we do it?" asked Euan.

Leon's breath continued to come in raggedly, and Euan could feel his heart beating quickly. But then, somehow, Leon's strangled breathing became something else, and Euan realized he was laughing. Leon's body relaxed against Euan's, and Euan found himself shaking with relief. Leon took Euan's head between his hands and kissed him soundly, his lips pressed firmly against Euan's.

"We did it," said Leon. "We did it."

EUAN would have liked to stay in the old chapel, with Leon's mouth on his, with his own hands working beneath Leon's tunic. It would have been an appropriate way of celebrating,

he thought, lying together in the old chapel, sharing their relief. He knew, however, that the other monks—and the monastery itself—would need seeing to. Reluctantly, Euan pulled away from Leon, and helped him stand.

They emerged into bright sunlight, adjusting their clothing, and saw, in the distance, the other monks streaming out of the new chapel, bewildered once again by another storm. Euan ran toward them, with Leon following a few steps behind. Father Brennon met them halfway.

“Is it over?” the Abbot asked, looking past Euan to catch Leon’s gaze.

Leon nodded. “Your monastery won’t be troubled by any more storms. And the creatures are gone.”

Father Brennon bowed to Leon formally. “I thank you, Leon, and pray that Ajen’s Light and Kara’s Grace will always be with you.”

Leon bowed in return. “Thank you, Father.”

A small crowd of monks gathering behind Father Brennon clearly heard the exchange, and Euan saw a palpable wave of relief pass through them. While Euan was sure there would still be rumors and whispers passed between his Brothers, the conviction in Leon’s voice and Father Brennon’s gratitude would be a balm to many who had allowed themselves to grow paranoid in the last week. Euan was pleased to see Brother Efid amongst the monks who had witnessed the meeting between Leon and Father Brennon.

When Father Brennon and Leon stood upright once more, Leon spoke again. “You should thank Brother Euan too. I couldn’t have driven the creatures away without him.”

“Uh—” Euan wanted to point out that his actions had almost caused the destruction of the monastery, but speaking of that would lead to questions about where he’d spent the previous night, and—well, Euan suspected that Father Brennon was rather more open-minded about such things than most of his other teachers had been, but many of the other monks would not be.

In the end, Euan simply bowed toward Father Brennon as Leon had done; at least that way he was able to hide his burning cheeks.

Soon enough, though, there were practical matters to attend to. As all of the Brothers had been gathered in the chapel, no one had been hurt, but the monastery had to be inspected for damage yet again. Two of the kitchen chimneys had been toppled, Euan found—although aside from that, very little was harmed.

After talking to the other monks, Euan soon realized that none of them had any memory of what the Ghaghki protective field had done to them. The storm had simply seemed to come upon them suddenly, in the middle of the morning mass.

Over the next several days, Euan resumed his duties as Sacrist, putting the day-to-day affairs of the monastery in order, seeing to the ledgers with Brother Efid and Brother Tomas, and organizing repairs, but he spent his nights in Leon’s bed, making up for the time he’d lost in believing that his desires were somehow wrong. Euan thought that Brother

Efid might have noticed something, but if he had, he said nothing about it. Everyone knew now of Leon's role in banishing the so-called demons from the monastery, and his decision to stay on longer, helping the monks with their rebuilding, had further endeared him to many of the Brothers. Euan knew, however, that they couldn't keep on in this way—eventually, someone would notice who didn't take a kindly view of Euan and Leon sharing a bed.

On the third day after the final storm, they held Brother Leden's funeral, and Euan prayed that he'd found peace with Ajen, trying to remember that whatever their disagreements had been, Brother Leden had loved this monastery as his home. It made Euan wonder though, how much longer the monastery would still feel like a home to him. There was a place for him here, there was no doubt about that, but that place no longer fit him particularly well.

With Leon, on the other hand... things definitely fit with Leon, in more ways than one.

Seven days after they had saved the monastery, Leon received a missive sealed with red wax at the evening meal. His face grew serious as he read it, but it wasn't until later that night that Leon told Euan what it had contained.

"I've been called away," Leon said as they lay in bed together. "The people I work for need me." Leon spoke plainly, but there was a hint of—something—in his voice. Something that suggested that he was waiting for Euan to speak up.

Euan rolled so that he could look Leon in the eye. "Are you planning to leave on your own?" he asked, wondering if

he should be dreading the response. Perhaps Leon didn't think that Euan could handle the life that he led.

Leon looked back at him; he raised a hand to cup Euan's cheek. "I'll only leave alone if you want me to."

Euan's breath caught. "I—I don't want that," he said. "I think that when you leave, I should go with you."

Leon was silent for a long moment. "Are you certain?" he asked.

Euan nodded. "I want to go with you," he said.

There was a pause before Leon's face broke into a smile. "I want that too," he said.

Euan realized that Leon was actually relieved, that he'd been worried about Euan's answer. "Did you think I wouldn't go?" he asked.

"You've spent your whole life here," said Leon. "I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to stay."

"I don't," said Euan firmly. "I don't want to stay. All those years ago, when I decided that I wanted to be safe... I made the wrong choice then. I don't want to make the same mistake again."

"You don't think you'll miss it here?"

Euan sighed. "I might, but I think I'd miss the rest of the world more if I stayed here. And...."

"And?" Leon prompted him.

"I'd miss *you*."

Leon's smile turned into a grin moments before he lowered his head and pressed his mouth to Euan's.

“We’ll leave tomorrow,” said Leon, when they broke apart. “If you think that gives you enough time.”

Euan felt his heart beat faster. “I’ll need to talk to Father Brennon,” he said. “And I should probably speak with Brother Tomas and Brother Efid too.” Telling them of his choice would be difficult, Euan knew. But it would be worth it.

Leon nodded. “We won’t leave until late afternoon,” he said. “We can stay in the village overnight.”

The village... Anghenwic, where Trevin had traded the confines of the monastery for the arms of a pretty girl. The village that had always seemed so far away, although it was little more than an hour away. The village that, tomorrow, would become the gateway to Euan’s new life.

Leon ran his fingertips along Euan’s chest, gently tickling his skin. Euan closed his eyes and drew Leon close to him. Nothing in the world was as Euan had believed it to be, and nothing was certain anymore—but all of it was wonderful.

LESLEY HASTINGS lives in Sydney, Australia with her partner and no cats. She has been writing since she was a child, but for some reason, she suspects that the teachers who encouraged her back then didn't exactly have erotica and romance in mind when they imagined her future career. That's okay, though—Lesley believes that the most successful fiction is fiction that makes people smile while asking them to think along the way, and writing erotic romance is the best way to achieve that.

When she's not writing, Lesley enjoys photography, traveling (when she can afford it), attending rallies for marriage equality, and, of course, reading everything from contemporary urban fantasy to classics from the nineteenth century. (Well, except Dickens. She never managed to get into Dickens.) She also won't say no to sharing a bottle (or three) of good red wine with close friends.

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