

# Exiled to Paradise



*A Torquere Press Arcana*  
by Anah Crow

Exiled to Paradise: The Nine of Pentacles  
*by Anah Crow*

**Torquere Press**

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Anyel sat under the heavy, twisted boughs of a palta tree, watching five little boys and a barking, street dog playing soldiers in the ruined foundation of a plantation slave dormitory. Their gleeful shouts and the hearty crack of stout sticks coming together brought back memories of his own childhood. Of all the things he'd dreamed of being, what he was had never occurred to him. Monk. Teacher. Gardener. Exile.

The wind was warm and green and salty, coming up off the weed-clotted tide pools and warming on the stony shore until it rose to the lush gardens of Anyel's adopted home. The smell was familiar, and pleasant, but Anyel longed for the crisp smell of pine and fresh water and wood smoke. He rested his head back on the palta trunk and let his fingers move over the fishing net he was mending, slipping the worn, wooden shuttle back and forth to knot fresh mesh over a hole torn by a curious whale calf.

Anyel rarely fished, but he mended nets for anyone who needed the help, since his time went to waste during the fish runs when there were no children to teach. As a monk, he had nothing of his own: no home, no boat, no garden, not even his clothes. Even his duties, in the end, belonged to Lochan.

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Anyel liked to keep busy. It kept him from thinking about why he was here, which was where his mind went every time he let it out to wander around without a task. After two decades, he should have given up on the subject, but he was still wondering what had happened that he'd ended up here in the first place.

He'd been young, and far from celibate, with more money and libido than he'd known what to do with. And he'd been in love. They'd been in love, he thought, he and Quin. The future had stretched out in front of him like a storybook waiting to be written. He had been freshly freed from his tutors and minders, just come of age, and he'd been in love with the most eligible man in the country for five years.

Five years was an eternity. He'd gone from boy to man with his heart twined with Quin's, Quin who looked every inch the young royal, a prince in waiting with just enough years left in the king's life that they could live like wild things for a full lifetime, and Quin could take his place right before they grew old and jaded.

"I'll have to marry," Quin had said one day when they were lying on a mountain slope, crushed, flowering strawberries under their bare bodies, a perfect pale sky above.

"I could wear a dress," Anyel had offered, and they'd both laughed like a pair of marsh dogs, scaring the thrushes into the sky with their noise.

"It'll only be if it's the best for the country, of course," Quin had said, when they'd caught their breath.

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"Of course," Anyel had agreed. He'd rolled over to look down at Quin's smile. "I hope she's not ugly, though," he'd added generously.

"Why do you care?" Quin had slapped Anyel's bare backside so that it stung. "You'll only be looking at me, like always."

"For the good of the country," Anyel had protested. Taking care of Quin would be his duty some day.

For the good of the country. It was what the scrawled letter from Quin had said, the one that had been left for Anyel in the care of the Abbot at Bisera's ancient little Abbey of Lochan. Men came for him in the dark of night to take him from his mother's home; they'd come in under the royal seal, Anyel assumed, since there had been no resistance but his. A knock to his head had ended what protest he could muster. He'd never even made it to his sword, not that he'd ever cut a man with it.

Anyel had believed the letter when he'd pulled on the coarse monks' robes for the first time. The King was dead, and gods and mercies only knew what troubles faced Quin at the time. Part of him still believed it, a tiny pearl of folly formed around a grain of truth trapped in his closed heart. Quin had married in haste to strengthen the loyalty of the armed forces, his cousin once removed, a Duchess. She had been, as Anyel had hoped, not ugly. She had also been twelve years old.

A wail startled Anyel out of his thoughts, and he dropped the shuttle and the twine. The ball went rolling downhill as Anyel scrambled to his feet, gathering up his robes so they

wouldn't tangle around his ankles. It took him another moment to locate the source of the distress, when a second wail rose from far back in the foundation ruins, under a veil of honeysuckle.

"Children!" Anyel called for them as he took the crumbling steps down into the ruin. The little dog came bounding over a knee-high wall.

"Pere Anyel!" Leggy little Filito was only a step behind, his face ashy under a layer of yellow dust. "The shadows, the shadows have eaten Cleto! Mando pushed him into the dark and he can't get out."

"The shadows don't eat people." Anyel hitched up his robes and vaulted the wall. Footprints led through half a doorway, and he could just see three guilty little dark heads bobbing away beyond the honeysuckle and into the palta grove. He should have kept a closer eye on them: Mando and Alviz were forever being too rough on the poor children, and Naldi was too simple to do anything but follow.

"They did, they did!" Filito's little feet and four little dog paws scrabbled along in Anyel's wake. "He was on the wall and Alviz dared him and then Mando pushed him and the shadows ate him up."

Anyel could hear Cleto's brave snuffling drifting out from somewhere. The older boy never cried; his rough, fisherman father would have given him something to cry about.

Here, where the ground rose up to hold up the foundation walls, the honeysuckle spilled over into the back of the old cellar. Anyel could see the broken fronds where Cleto had

fallen through, but there was no reason the boy couldn't just stand up.

"Cleto, did you hurt your leg?" Anyel called. "Can you get up?"

"No, my arm. And I am up, Pere... it's dark."

Anyel knew where the boy was. His mother's father's estate, built back in the dark eras, had a level below the cellars, too, even in the servant quarters. Dungeons and, worse, oubliettes for punishing the disobedient.

"Filito, give me your stick."

"It's a sword," Filito said, stubborn even in the face of a crisis, but he handed it over anyway.

"Stay where you are, Cleto." Anyel prodded through the spill of greenery with the stick. Stone, stone, stone, stone... wood. The sullen thud said the wood was thick, but time and rain would have worked together to eat through it. Anyel pushed hard and felt the wood give like a dry sponge. He handed the stick back to Filito. "You've fallen into an old cell."

Anyel tore away the honeysuckle with his bare hands, cursing silently that he wasn't allowed a blade. The door set in the floor was revealed, broken through in one corner. "Step away from the light, Cleto. Filito." Anyel gestured toward the far end of the door. "Go hit the stone over there and call Cleto's name, to keep him away from the door when I open it."

Puffed up with the seriousness of his task, Filito scampered away to obey. The little dog followed, skirting the door, and threw itself down on its belly on the stone, adding its urgent yaps to Filito's voice.



"There's a wall, Pere," Cleto called.

"Stand close to it, then." The iron ring in the door was still whole, thick enough that Anyel could grasp it with both hands. He could only hope the lock had corroded.

Anyel might not have trained to fight in twenty years, but in any given year, he cut stone, broke fields, felled trees, hauled nets, and built boats and houses. Work was prayer. He tugged hard and the lock yielded. Unfortunately, so did the hinges and the strapping. The door came to pieces on the second pull, the metal screeching as it tore, and the whole of it plunged down into the dark below. If Cleto had been below, he would have been crushed.

"Cleto?" Anyel's heart was pounding so that his ribs hurt.

There was a spate of coughing from below and from Filito. "I'm here," Cleto said thickly. The dog sneezed.

"Let's get you out." As the dust cleared, Anyel could see that the cell below was just a little more than the height of a grown man.

"My arm, I can't..." Cleto was saying as Anyel jumped down into the cell, landing safely on a whole piece of the door. It rocked slightly, but held steady.

"Come." Anyel held out his hand. "Filito, help Cleto up."

Cleto, in spite of being one-handed, had managed to clamber up Anyel's back and grab Filito's hand to get out, and Anyel was heaving himself up and out when men's voices carried through the palta grove.

"Pere Anyel?" That was Sabin, the foreman of the estate, Filito's father. At least Mando and Alviz had the decency to send help after fleeing the scene.

"All is well." Anyel wiped his forehead with his dusty sleeve. He was pouring sweat under the coarse brown cloth. "The boys found an old oubliette."

"Cleto broke his arm, Papa," Filito chirped. "Mando pushed him and he fell and the shadows ate him, but then Pere Anyel found him."

"Broken arm?" Sabin appeared at the top of the wall, looking down. "Is that so, Pere?"

Anyel cursed in his head. If Cleto's father found out, he'd make trouble with Mando's father, and that meant trouble between the farmers and the fishers, and it might mean Cleto would be forbidden from taking classes with the children of the farmers and merchants. "I'll have to check to know." Anyel gave Sabin and the two workers behind him a narrow look.

Cleto was clutching his arm; his wrist and hand hung at a terrible angle. Even the dog could tell it was broken. Still, Sabin nodded. "Of course, Pere. You'll know best."

Anyel held out his hands and, trusting, Cleto laid his broken arm across Anyel's palms with only a whimper. "Let's see if it's really broken, shall we?" Anyel said gently. He could feel the wrongness in the boy's arm as clearly as he could see it.

"Yes, Pere," Cleto whispered.

Anyel concentrated, drawing a few leather thongs in his mind's eye and pushing them down into the broken bones, bringing the ends together and binding them with knots the same way he mended the nets with his hands. When he ran

his hands over Cleto's arm again, it was whole. He could sense the break still, but it would mend in a few days.

"It seems well enough. Not broken. But he could have been seriously hurt," Anyel said, looking up at Sabin.

"I can see that now, Pere," Sabin said solemnly. He bowed his head and the other men made the sign of the watchful eye on their sweat-beaded brows. "I'll be back later to board up that hole. Come, Filito. Cleto has to rest now."

"But it was broken," Filito protested as he scrambled up the wall. His father bent and lifted him up the rest of the way by the back of his shirt.

"You're a child," Sabin chided. "Pere says it's not broken, it's not broken. Come on. I have work for you."

"What about Pepy?" Filito looked over his shoulder at the little dog rolling in the dust.

"There's enough flea-bitten critters for you to fuss with at home," Sabin said, sending Filito on ahead with a smack on the backside. "Get on."

Anyel watched them go before turning to Cleto, who was rubbing his arm and watching his fingers move with some amazement. "Does anything else hurt?"

"Not so much. Pere..." Cleto held out his arm, his face full of wonder. "Did you..."

"Hush." Anyel put an arm around his shoulders and steered him back toward the half-standing doorways that let out of the ruins. "If you've got two good hands, you can help me mend nets until the moon fills in two days. I'm behind and can't get all these nets done in time for the next run if I don't have help."

"Yes, Pere." Cleto looked up at him and smiled. "Thank you, Pere."

"Don't thank me," Anyel said firmly. The last thing he wanted was any attention. "Say your prayers twice for the next fortnight."

"Yes, Pere."

As they reached the shade of the palta tree, Cleto ran ahead to gather up the ball of twine from where it had rolled away nearly ten paces until it had gotten stuck under a gnarled root pushing up through the soil. The little dog barked at the hem of Anyel's robe where it raised dust on the path.

"What are you complaining about?" Anyel asked it.

It didn't answer; it only ran on to the tree and the knotted linen napkin that held Anyel's lunch of dried fish, a baked potato, and a few figs. Barking once more, it flopped belly-down on the cool earth, nosing the corner of the napkin and wagging its tail. Anyel's lunch was going to have to feed three today, it seemed. It was a good thing he'd learned to do without.

He'd learned to do without food easily enough. Other things were harder to forego. Anyel heard his knees creak as he sank back down under the tree and picked up the net. Busy hands and a busy mind were a cure for anything, he told himself. An empty stomach would help keep his mind from his empty heart better still.

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"You only come home when you're hungry," Anyel chided, looking up at a shadow that passed over his head and circled the little monastery courtyard.

Anyel slit open a silvery fish with a flick of his wrist and scraped the entrails out with the blunt edge of the knife on the way back. The entrails slopped into the basin at his feet and Anyel chopped the head half off before sliding the knife down back of the fish to bare the spine. The side fillets peeled off like the rind of a ripe fruit, leaving head, tail, and bones to go in the pot.

Anyel tossed the head and bones into a stock pot simmering over a bed of coals to his left, slapped each fillet in the basket of coarse salt on the cutting table, and then threaded the fillets onto thin skewers for the drying rack.

The shadow resolved into a falcon that landed on the drying rack. Tilting her head to fix Anyel with a gold eye, she chirped softly.

"Nice to see you've learned to ask." Anyel plucked the liver from the next fish and tossed it to the falcon. The liver disappeared in two quick snaps of her beak. "Not too much of that or it'll thicken your blood." The falcon queried with a single note. "Well, your heart would stop," Anyel clarified.

That got him a disgruntled, sliding squeal like a pennywhistle in a child's hands. The falcon fluttered to the table, eyeing the next head that Anyel pulled free. She trilled flirtatiously and preened the red-flecked snowy feathers on her breast.

"Well, all right, then." Anyel laid the head and bones at her feet. "Flattery will get you anywhere." She was too busy

plucking out the white-filmed, staring fish eyes to answer him.

Any falcon was sacred to Lochan, the watcher, the god worshiped at the monastery of Bisera. It was only in the books of Lochan's priests, and in the memories of a few people like Anyel's mother, that the mysteries were preserved. Anyel wasn't superstitious, but when he'd found the falcon tangled in a snare in the palta grove, he'd let himself take it as a good sign. The abbot said it meant that things would be made clear to him soon.

Anyel put his mind back to the task before him. His hands were crossed with long, white lines that marked the times his mind had wandered. Over the years, he'd become adept at the task, filling one fish rack after another with stores that would keep the monastery well-fed through the winter.

Many of the other brothers were out in the vineyard, spreading the fish entrails from the first day of the fish run on the hungry clay soil. The sky was full of gray and white scavenger birds except over Anyel's head. The falcon kept them at bay. In another day, there would be more monks at Anyel's task as the fishermen's tithes came in. Anyel preferred to work alone and he was young, so the older monks were happy to let him have at the grueling, stinking chore.

Being alone let him pretend that time wasn't passing, that it was just yesterday that he'd been "helped" off of a creaking carack and onto a tar-soaked pier, sick beyond nausea, empty all the way through. When the wind came up from the

piers, he only shook his hair out of his face. He didn't look anymore to see what was on the horizon.

Today, the sea would be spattered with sun-bleached sails; maybe there would be a few capital ships with their huge sails like patches sewn on the blue seam of the horizon. The island of Bisera was far from the main shipping route, a poor paradise visited only rarely by traders and war ships. Pirates had little use for it; there were no places to hide and the islanders—farmers and fishers alike—were from pirate stock themselves and held close the fighting traditions of their forefathers.

It was the perfect place to disappear.

"Pere Anyel?" Anyel was adept enough with the boning knife that he didn't flick it the wrong way up his wrist when he startled at the interruption. The little voice was familiar: Annit. "I brought what you asked."

Anyel turned, wiping his hands on a rag tucked in his rope belt. "I thought you'd changed your mind."

"No." The young woman in front of him blushed deeply and busied herself arranging the folds of the sling that held a fat baby to her hip. She barely came up to Anyel's shoulder, a tiny thing with long, black braids, red cheeks, and a round body swathed in full skirts and blouse and shawl, just like most of Bisera's women. "I just... I had to speak to Marnyl about... it."

Anyel had seen her come into the world, had seen her mother leave it, and had seen all four of her children born. He'd started studying the mysteries of magic in hopes of escaping Bisera and being of some use to Quin, enough to

excuse whatever offense he'd caused. Time and silence had taught him the folly of that kind of thinking. He'd studied harder when he found that he could preserve the lives of simple people like Annit and her husband and her children with his skills, like he'd mended Cleto's arm and preserved a little peace days before. Along the way, he'd learned the skills of surgeon, midwife, dentist, and hedgewitch.

"Give me what you've brought, then."

Annit paused and then caught her breath as the falcon flitted from the table to Anyel's shoulder. "Here." She was caught between blushing and staring as she shoved a little jar and a folded handkerchief holding a few small things into Anyel's hands. "Marnyl says you're right, that four is enough for us." Her baby looked over his shoulder at Anyel, as wide-eyed as his mother.

Anyel was relieved. Too many children grew up motherless on Bisera and back on the mainland. "I'll have something for you tomorrow," he promised. "As long as you wear the charm, you'll not miss your time. And you'll get to pay attention to the little ones you have. Especially since Marnyl's got his son now." He stroked the baby's downy head and got a coo of approval in return.

"Yes." Annit hugged her baby and kissed his cheek. "Isn't he beautiful?"

"Perfect." Anyel tucked what she'd brought into a pouch at his waist. "Come back after the boats go out in the morning."

"Yes, Pere." She bobbed a little curtsey, in spite of the heavy baby weighing her down. "Thank you, Pere." With that, she scurried off, her sandals raising dust as she pattered



across the courtyard. The falcon piped curiously in Anyel's ear.

"Healing takes all forms." Anyel petted her head and down one wing; his fingers found the small lump in the bone that marked where her wing had been broken and he scratched the skin over it gently, knowing how it still itched and twinged. "Including keeping injury from happening."

The mysteries let him heal, let him understand the falcon, let him keep Annit from having another babe before she saw her twentieth summer, let him read the wind and sky and trees and plants, let him know many things. Anything but how to get home. Of course he could go back, and he could risk his life, his family's lives, even the lives of those on Bisera, and for nothing except to wander his own country like a revenant. The moment he left, he knew, word would go winging toward the capital, fast as the falcon, that he had escaped, and he would be a man hunted.

A loud snore brought Anyel back to himself. He turned back to the baskets of fish waiting to be filleted and caught a glimpse of paws and a tail under the table. The fish runs were a time of plenty for everyone, even little scavenging street dogs. The little dog snored again, and the falcon whistled her disdain as she took to the sky, pricking Anyel's shoulder as she went. Anyel tried not to envy her as he took up the knife again and went back to the task that was as old as the monastery itself.

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The new moon brought the end of the fish run, and Bisera lay quietly in the lull between the rush of silver fish and the ripening of the palta fruit. Anyel's sandals scraped on the cobblestones as he made his way back up from the city on the shore, headed for the dark shadow of the monastery outlined against the indigo sky.

It was a long walk back, longer for the fact that he'd been keeping watch over an old fisherman's last breaths in a shack down by the sea. When the scratch and wheeze of the old man's breath had gone and the only sound still on the night air was the sigh of the sea and the mournful cry of a sand runner, Anyel had said the blessings, woken the old woman in the next house, and left the fisher folk to tend their dead.

The mysteries did nothing to stop death, but that didn't keep some of the people from asking for Anyel to watch over their passing. Others would have nothing to do with him. Anyel never begrudged the requests or the shunning. The other brothers were happy to stay home and happy to go forth, just as he was. They had taught him that flexibility. His rebellious spirit had broken on the sympathetic stone of their faith.

A stray cobblestone caught the toe of one of Anyel's sandals and, before he could stop, he felt and heard one of the straps pop under the strain. On his next step, the sole slapped against his foot and threatened to trip him up. With a sigh, Anyel bent to unlace both sandals. *It's a blessing to go barefoot*, he heard the abbot say in his head. *It reminds us of what we have the rest of the time we go about shod*. Anyel was wrapping the straps around both sandals before tucking

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them into his belt when something exploded in his head. His vision flared with blinding stars before everything went blacker than night.

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Anyel woke in the dark belly of a ship. It took no mysteries to find that truth. He wracked his aching head to remember what ships had been in the main port the last time he had seen it, but could remember nothing but merchant vessels from the usual provinces and islands. Nothing unusual. He struggled a little and found himself bound hand and foot, but whatever he lay on was soft.

Anyel prodded with fingers and toes and, as far as he could tell, he lay on a bed. His robe was rucked up around his thighs and his jaw ached from the rope gag that was drawn so tightly around him that his lips were torn and scabbed. The sea thumped against the hull, out of rhythm with his heart and head.

Who would want him? Anyel's fingers twitched as he found himself making the sign of the watchful eye, as superstitious as a Biseran peasant. He tried to summon the mysteries, but his thoughts were so jumbled that he couldn't focus enough to see his bindings in his mind's eye.

His robe was torn at the shoulder, too, he found, and the bed on which he lay was so very soft. The last time he had lain in a bed like this, it had been with Quin. Mercies and mysteries, he missed Quin. Being a monk was no trial when his body refused to thrill to any touch for mourning the loss of Quin's hands and mouth on his skin. A broken head and

bruised body couldn't move Anyel to tears, but the yearning that slipped through his moment of weakness made his breath catch and his eyes sting.

Anyel closed his eyes against the dark. Even though it made no difference in terms of the blackness he saw, it helped him turn his sight inward instead of yearning into the shadows for a hint of light. He breathed slowly, letting his breath come with the soft stroke of the sea against the hull. Shifting, he learned the shape of the knots that bound him and began to unravel the cords around his hands. Once those were free, he could use his fingers to undo the rest faster than his mind.

The sound of a key being turned in a lock startled Anyel into opening his eyes, and then a thin gold line cut the dark, drawing a door into being. When he twisted to look about, the graying of a square above his head showed dawn coming through a thick, leaded glass window. The line widened until a broad silhouette could fit through the gap, then it narrowed again and disappeared. This time, though, there was no sound of the lock. Someone crossed the room and put something heavy down by the bed.

"Still breathing?" Anyel wracked his mind to put a name to the man's voice. A shadow bent over him and the thin dawn light caught on a pocked, rugged profile. The accent was from the capital, an educated accent on a dry, sarcastic voice; likely the man was one of Quin's noblemen. "So you are. And awake. You've still got a thick skull. You'll forgive me for treating a man of the cloth so harshly. Some things must be done in secret and some things must be done by blunt tools.

I've reprimanded the blunt tools in question for cracking your skull."

Anyel couldn't imagine what someone would want of him that he wouldn't give freely, but that was something that had come with time. When he'd been young and green and when he'd spoken with that same clipped accent, maybe there had been things he'd have refused if they mattered to the wrong person. His wrists were almost free enough for him to slip his hands out of the bonds, so he lay still to hide them.

"I'm going to assume you're not stupid enough to try and swim for it." A blade grated through his gag, cold steel sliding against his cheek. "But, in case you are, I'll be giving you a little jewelry." When the man leaned over to tug the gag away, fresh daylight caught on a device on his shoulder, a silver hawk in a wreath of flames pinned to his heavy velvet coat. Kettyl's Hawk. Quin's cousin. Anyel was so shocked by the symbol that the man had shackled something around one of his ankles before he could protest.

Anyel's dry tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth and his jaw ached, but he managed to say, "Berrit."

"The same." Berrit cut the cords binding Anyel's ankles and straightened. The day had already brightened enough for Anyel to see him clearly now. He looked terrible. So much older than Anyel would have guessed, even adding twenty years onto the last time Anyel had laid eyes on him. He caught the front of Anyel's robe in one big hand and pulled Anyel up to sitting, then dumped him sideways. "I thought you wouldn't be that stupid; maybe I was wrong." He tweaked the loosened cord from around Anyel's wrists.

Anyel ignored that, and the indignity of being manhandled, and struggled to sit up. "You look unwell." His monk's mind was still caught on that; he'd spent twenty years healing and mending. Then a puzzle piece fell into place. He'd felt like this before. *You've still got a thick skull.* "You brought me to Bisera?"

"Perceptive. Island air must have been good for your mind." Berrit crossed the room to where the daylight had revealed a desk and heavy chair. He sank down to sitting with a wince. Anyel could see a silvery haze of cold sweat on his brow.

"Did you choose the place?" All these years, Anyel had thought Quin had sent him to Bisera as a kindness, that the manhandling hadn't been part of the plan. At first, he'd hoped it was so he'd be safe until he was sent for, and later he'd hoped that Quin at least wanted him to have some comfort.

"Does it matter?"

Anyel realized, with a guilty start, that he'd been in Berrit's bed all night. Damn Lochan—a god Anyel didn't even believe in—and the monks and damn Bisera with its common kindness and rural manners. He was prisoner on a ship bound for parts unknown, a weight around his ankle that condemned him to death if the ship foundered, his head was throbbing, his body ached, his mouth was dry and tasted like blood and cheap cordage... and still, he felt guilty for keeping a sick man from his bed, even though that same man was responsible for his present sorry state and for dumping him on Bisera to begin with.

"No," he said at last. It did matter, but it wasn't Berrit's business. "Where I'm going, that matters." So did water, food, and a chance to relieve himself, but Anyel was still trying to gauge Berrit's purpose, and years of asceticism had taught him to ignore the complaints of his body.

"Oranne." Berrit yanked a drawer open against the protest of the swollen wood.

Home. Anyel watched blankly as Berrit thumped a heavy-bottomed crystal glass on the desk and filled it halfway with a sluggish, opaque red liquid. Some kind of fortified wine, probably only partly medicinal. "Is this Quin's idea, or your own?"

"You think I'd be out here like this of my own accord?" Berrit stopped before taking a drink to laugh at Anyel, then coughed thickly.

"You shouldn't be here at all, by the look of you." Anyel leaned over to inspect the weight on his leg. A thick shackle and four links of chain locked him to an iron-bound polished stone. He couldn't lift it higher than his knee if he tried to carry it. Dragging it was going to be the only choice. "I recall that my accommodations on the first trip were considerably less pleasant."

"You were a considerably less pleasant person," Berrit noted. "His Highness didn't specify either time."

That hurt. Anyel breathed through the pain in his chest and smoothed out his robes. "I apologize for my previous unpleasantness," he said quietly. "And for denying you use of your bed." He set his bare feet on the floor and pushed himself to standing.

As noble gestures went, Anyel had done better; it seemed that he wasn't done learning humility. His darkened vision cleared moments later to reveal that he was half on the floor and half on Berrit, who was coughing as though his lungs were loose.

From where he was sprawled, cheek pressed to Berrit's chest, one of Berrit's arms around him, Anyel could tell Berrit was more than a little unwell. Damp heat seeped through Berrit's coat, his breath rattled in his lungs, and as Anyel looked up in concern, he could see the swell of adenitis in Berrit's throat under the jaw and the rawness of fresh pockmarks. Worse, Anyel could feel the sickness coming off of him in waves.

"You should be in bed." That Anyel could hardly stand was no hypocrisy; his troubles were temporary. Water, food, and time would sort him out. Berrit was truly ill.

"You should be less trouble." Berrit pushed Anyel off his lap. "I put you there for good reason. You've a cracked skull."

"And you've got the blight." Anyel gathered his will and his dignity and made it to his feet before Berrit. "It'll spread to your crew."

"Too late for that." Berrit rolled away to kneeling and used the corner of his desk to help him to his feet. "The ones who haven't got it have had it." He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and spit into it, then reached for his glass to take another drink. "I've had it twice. I don't think it'll kill me this time."

Twice. Anyel's head spun and it wasn't from the blow or the rocking of the ship. "Two times? It can't be the same



thing." He tried to cross the room and came up short as the stone at the end of the chain proved heavier than he'd guessed.

"Then there's two plagues in the city," Berrit muttered. "Trust His Highness to do nothing in parts."

"Where did it start?" Anyel tried to move again and managed to shift the stone this time.

"In general?" Berrit shook his head. "A village somewhere in the Pirrone region. The steward's men went up to collect the tithe and the place was empty, graveyard full. They were only there an hour by their reckoning, maybe less. The next week, there was one survivor of that party to say so."

With the rising light and proximity, Anyel got another look at Berrit. Berrit's rugged features were haggard now, sun-dark and scarred skin draped loosely over his bones. The man had never been attractive; now it was a good thing he was titled, if he hadn't married already. The pox didn't usually kill in large numbers. Maybe there were two illnesses afoot, but better to assume not for the moment. "It could have come from that village, or it could have been brought in by some traveler who died elsewhere. Let me examine you."

Berrit, still leaning against the desk, looked skeptical. "If you do anything to me, you'll never make it off this ship."

"I don't want to hurt you. I can help." Anyel would have been exasperated at the best of times. With his head aching so much that it felt he was bleeding inside his skull, his stomach sick and empty at once, his mouth dry and bloody, and his bladder complaining heartily, Anyel was about to forget any oath he'd made, either to the monks or the

mysteries. The idea of knocking Berrit over with a cantrip and curing him was very appealing.

"That's what Quin said. He's locked the city and closed the ports as of this morning. He wanted to make sure you were there, though."

Anyel's knees threatened to dump him on the floor again. He busied himself with evaluating Berrit's condition instead. "He... because of the plague? Why?"

"You think the King is going to ignore the rumors of a 'holy man of mysteries' on the same island where he dumped his... friend?" Berrit, chin up to let Anyel feel the swellings in his throat, looked down his nose at Anyel. "You're just lucky he didn't panic and have you killed before he needed you for something."

Berrit was—and had always been—disapproving of Anyel's affair with Quin. Now, though, he looked almost sympathetic. Anyel pushed away his thoughts on the matter and concentrated on Berrit's illness.

After a moment, Anyel forgot his own body and was lost in his awareness of Berrit's. He could feel Berrit's blood moving and the lymph flowing sluggishly along with it. There was swelling in Berrit's liver and heart; Anyel could feel the remnant toxins of a terrible fever. It was the pox, only worse. Closing his eyes, he tried to remember his mother's teaching on pox and other fever illnesses.

"Where did the pox begin?"

"The village." Berrit pulled back, scowling.

"No." Anyel got him by the chin with one hand and forced Berrit's mouth open. "Where were the first blisters?" He

answered his own question, running a finger along the inside of Berrit's lower lip and finding flat scars there. Berrit spit his finger out and glared at him. "The mouth."

"I hope, for your sake, that you can cure it." Berrit drained the last of the wine in the glass, swishing it around his mouth and glaring at Anyel again. "His Highness will never forgive any of us if his complexion is marred. I'll have someone bring you water to drink and to wash, and food," he said, stepping around Anyel and heading for the door. "There's no chamberpot in here; the water closet is behind the mirrored panel."

"You're..." Anyel tried to follow and came up short. "If you'll stay a little longer, I might be able to heal you."

"Not for me." Berrit coughed heavily, leaning on the handle as he opened the door. "I've no interest in mountain witchery or praying. I healed once, I'll heal again." The door shut behind him and Anyel could hear his coughing fade.

Anyel looked around. Berrit had said the water closet was behind a mirror. Anyel would worry about the plague and Quin and Berrit once he felt more human. The stone dragged as he shuffled across the room. He hoped the floorboards in the closet were sturdy. He was quite full of ignominy for the time being.

\* \* \* \*

They reached the port of the capital city under the blanket of night. Looking out the window as they made their way toward the port through the narrow, high-sided channel, Anyel could see only darkness except high on the city's huge

walls. The signal fires glowed like miniature suns, so bright that Anyel could make out the silhouettes of soldiers patrolling almost all the way from one post's halo to the light of the next. Immediately outside the window, a green glass lamp swung—dark. They were running without lights.

Anyel settled back into the pillows of Berrit's bed. He'd hauled the stone up with him and, well-fed, washed, and dressed in a clean white silk robe, he was in the lap of luxury compared to life in Bisera. He hadn't seen Berrit for two days, and the scruffy, overweight young man barely squeezed into a squire's leather jerkin who brought his food and water wouldn't say where the ship's captain was, or if Berrit was well at all. The squire had removed the wine from Berrit's desk and locked the drawers. Anyel had given in to the aching of his head and slept most of the trip, when not wakened by the demands of his body.

Even without looking out the window, Anyel could tell when they were close. The ship groaned with relief as her sails came down, and Anyel heard the rhythmic splash of oars from several small boats. To his surprise, he heard the splash of the anchor and rattle of the chain far too early for them to be near the docks. He got up on his knees to look, but all he could see was the dark.

The key turned in the lock and the door opened. "Time for you to go." That was Berrit again. His voice was a rasp barely stronger than a whisper now, but Anyel recognized it. It was too dark to make out the features of the dense shadow that moved against the black of the hall beyond the door.

"We're not making landfall?" Anyel pushed the stone off the bed and stood up as it hit the floor. He'd become adept at getting around with it on.

"I told you. City's locked. Put on the cloak and boots." Berrit meant the black leather cloak and boots that had come with the clean robe. "And unlock that thing." The keys hit the floor at Anyel's feet.

Anyel groped where he'd heard them fall and found them after a moment's fumbling. It took a moment to find the smallest key and a little longer to get it into the lock. The key turned easily, at least, and the shackle fell away. Now, he could pull the boots on. They were so soft inside and the fine leather hugged his bare, callused feet. They fit perfectly and he wondered if the royal cobblers still had the original last that had been carved according to drawings of his feet.

*It's a blessing to go barefoot.* Anyel felt bereft, so far from home. He pulled the cloak on and it wrapped him in darkness, the velvet suede interior clinging to his skin like a lingering touch. His rude robes and rope belt belonged to another lifetime.

Berrit coughed, startling him, then spoke. "They'll be waiting for you. Don't be stupid."

"I won't." Anyel headed out the door and Berrit let him pass. He could feel the heat from Berrit's body against his bare cheek, the only thing not wrapped up safe in the cloak. "I could," he started to say. *I could heal you before I go.* It wouldn't take long. "It would be helpful..." The door closed in his face. *It would be helpful to try it, at least.*

*Well. If that's how he's going to be about it.*

Anyel tugged the cloak tighter around him and made for the short steps up onto the deck. It was only when he stepped out into the open air and found the guards waiting for him with their hooded lanterns and their glittering pikes that he understood. Of course Berrit wasn't coming. The city was closed and Berrit was ill. Anyel felt like a fool.

\* \* \* \*

"Yela." Quin's voice was as warm and sweet as ever. Anyel was just pushing back his hood, his eyes adjusting to the light in the room, and Quin was right there, in front of him. "I knew you'd come."

Time hadn't touched Quin. He looked like he was made of amber, he was that timeless and golden. Anyel's gut twisted and his heart slammed against his ribs as though it were trying to break through and leap into Quin's outstretched hands.

"Come in," Quin said, like he was pleading, like the door wasn't closed and guarded behind Anyel, like they weren't deep under the castle in the catacombs. Down in a beautifully furnished oubliette, Anyel's mind murmured. He pushed the thought aside and let his hands fall into Quin's. "You look so worn, my Yela." Anyel's childhood name sounded familiar in Quin's soft voice. Quin's hands closed on his and Quin drew him into the room.

"I'm fine." Anyel spoke before he thought, to calm Quin's concern.

*Fine.* The echo of the word in his mind unleashed a cascade of pent-up thoughts like a raging river and he bit his

lip. Twenty years. His whole youth. His best years. His family growing old without him. The wife and children he might have had if he had played out his role in Quin's court. His reputation. His wealth. His *life*. The taste of blood brought him back to the real world.

"How are you?" Anyel sank down onto the plush chaise to which Quin had led him and made the mistake of looking up at Quin.

*Quin.* Gods and their mercy, they must have had none of it when they blessed Quin. No mercy for Anyel, that was certain. The madness of his love for Quin was never far from him.

"Ashamed," Quin said softly. He wouldn't look Anyel in the eyes and diamond tears beaded his dark lashes. "Yela, I sent you away..." He sank down to his knees and Anyel wanted to sink through the floor so he wouldn't be higher than Quin. "They said you had to go. It was for the kingdom. If I hadn't married Maryen... Her father insisted. He told Berrit to... I promised him the fleet if he would just take you somewhere. Anywhere."

"I understand." Anyel tried to understand. He'd never thought it would matter. What did Taryelin care what his son did as long as no bastards came of it? But with the King dead... Oh, they'd been so careless. "I should have made you be more careful," he whispered, leaning in to kiss Quin's forehead.

"You always gave me everything I wanted," Quin said softly. "You're not to blame for that. I wanted to bring you

back." He turned Anyel's hands palms up and kissed each one. "I just... couldn't. But now, I need you."

"Are you ill?" Anyel pulled his hands away to touch Quin's cheeks and throat. He'd have sensed it already, he was sure.

"No, not yet. But if I were to fall ill, Anyel... I can't die from some damn peasant pox." Quin pushed himself to standing and paced away. "Can you imagine the history books? I have work to do. The north country grows restless and the savages prey on my ships, send raiding parties into the mountains to murder my people and take my beasts. I grow tired of it. And then this. I'm plagued to death by small things."

With the little distance, Anyel could get some perspective, on the room and on his situation. The room was well-decorated, like any other suite in the castle. If it weren't for the lack of windows and all the steps down to get here, Anyel never would have guessed. The stone around them was draped with tapestries and a life-sized portrait of Quin and his wife dominated the wall behind the wide table where Quin had gone to pour two goblets of wine. *King Quayelin Enaid of Oranne and Queen Maryen Urien of Perdire*. Urien was cousin to Kettyl was cousin to Enaid. Anyel's own family followed another line, the line of Taryelin's first wife.

"How is your wife?" Anyel didn't want his mind to continue where it was going, judging Quin's words. Quin always did try and make light of things. Maryen looked lovely in the portrait, her hair parted like sable wings, and her long, slim hands folded in her lap. She was a world away from the little women of Bisera.



"She remains," Quin said, shrugging. The ermine that hung from his shoulders rippled with it. "I tried to have her leave, but she would not go. She has *ideas*." He turned back toward Anyel and contempt was heavy on his features before the smile chased it away like a wayward cloud from a perfect sky.

"That's noble of her." Anyel took the wine Quin offered. He sipped it, but tasted nothing. It might as well have been water.

"She's always been too much like her father. We'll see how noble she feels after." Quin took a sip of wine and then turned back to the table; now his attention fell on the scrolls and maps there. "The blight is in the women's quarters. I had them sealed except for a few woman physicians I let come and go by the lower courtyard. Who knows what brought it. It's on their heads. One lady must have a gypsy lace and ribbon seller come in from the countryside; another must have a white kitten from a bakery by the walls; my wife must have pitayas picked under a full moon by a farmer's virgin daughter. Nonsense. Fortunately, it doesn't seem to have spread into the rest of the palace."

"I should go there now." Anyel put the wine down on a tiny mosaic table and got to his feet. He wished they'd asked him to come; he could have brought his runes and his books and his quills. "I'll need wine, any kind, some quills and ink, a small looking glass, a woman's, and a magnifier as in her sewing kit." There were quills and ink on the table. Without thinking, he brushed past Quin to get it.

"Don't." Quin's hand locked around Anyel's wrist like a shackle, broad and gold and rough with sword calluses. "I

can't have you falling ill when I need you. You're to stay here." His voice was just as hard.

"How." Anyel found himself staring at Quin's hand on him. "Why am I here, if I'm not going to tend the ailing?"

"My physicians tend me alone," Quin said, his voice softening. "You know that. They cannot have their cares divided." Gently, he turned Anyel away from the table and drew him in. "More than that, I cannot risk losing you, Yela," he breathed against Anyel's temple.

"You should stay well away from me." Anyel scrambled for an excuse even as he recoiled, twisting his wrist from Quin's grip. "Berrit is ill, and I was housed in his quarters." Halfway across the room, he paused, his mind caught for a moment on how easy it was to get free. Quin had always been the stronger of them, mind and body.

"I'm sure he took care," Quin said icily. "Did he?" His eyes were hard as he looked Anyel over, head to foot, as though he could read Anyel's body under the cloak and robe.

"He kept his distance." Anyel wasn't going to mention the part where he'd pitched over on his face. "But I don't want to take any chances." He lied with as much ease as he'd pulled away. "You should let me treat him." The words simply rolled out as though something else had taken over him, something that didn't love Quin at all. Something that didn't care to tell the truth, either. "If I can experiment on him, I can secure a cure for both of us, should anything go wrong. And if it works, you can still use him. Or, you can let me treat the women."

Quin's face was still cold, but he nodded slowly. "Who can say what cures a woman will cure a man? I will have him

brought. It would be inconvenient to lose him at this time and he seems to have a predilection for falling ill." He took up his wine again and drank. "Take off that cloak and sit." It wasn't a suggestion.

"As you wish." Anyel slipped the cloak off and draped it over a marble nude holding up a gold ewer, for lack of anything better. He returned to his seat on the couch, trying not to let his wariness show. After his other lifetime on Bisera, he was out of practice when it came to lying with his words or his body. Sipping wine gave him something to do with himself.

"They say many things about you. You're quite a marvel, you know." Quin came to sit with him, so close that his body heat soaked into Anyel's skin through the white silk robe. "They do not discuss your beauty nearly enough." He brushed Anyel's hair aside with a gentle stroke, then he kissed Anyel on the side of the neck, the way he used to do.

Countless nights of dreaming and yearning and now Anyel felt full of ice and uncertainty. "Quin." He turned enough to see Quin out of the corner of his eye. "What would I do if I made you ill? Don't do that to me." He made himself reach over and rest his hand on Quin's thigh, feeling warm, powerful muscle under fine velvet. "All this time... what's a little longer? Weren't you worried about the history books just a moment ago?" He made himself smile and the laugh came a little easier. If he could just look at Quin and not think, the warmth would return.

"I suppose you've built up a surfeit of tolerances that I owe you," Quin said, answering Anyel's smile. "I suppose I

can wait." He stood and then drained the last of his wine. "I will get you your experiment." Looking down at Anyel, Quin let his fingers linger on Anyel's hair. "You make a fine monk. Tempting enough to make me consider attending services. But I think it is past time for that to be over."

With that, Quin turned away and bellowed for some servant to come. The door swung open and the attendants bustled in. One wrapped Quin in a bed gown over his clothing so that it would look as though he'd just risen from his bed, two brought in a heavy chest, and a fourth drew back a tapestry to reveal an alcove with a bed.

"You'll have what you need," Quin said as he allowed a servant to bind his hair back in a braid as though for sleeping. "There are clothes better suited to you here for when you wake. Charming as the monk's garb is, it hardly shows you to best advantage. I'll have a tailor sent to perfect the fit."

"Thank you." Anyel knew Quin well enough than to protest anything he didn't need to absolutely. Quin had always been accustomed to being obeyed and the years would only have ingrained the expectation. He rose, but forced himself not to bow as Quin's attendants ushered him out the door. Before they were gone, one took Quin's empty glass and, folding it in a napkin, tucked it in his jerkin pocket as he followed the rest out.

The door closed with a hollow sound and, a heartbeat later, a bolt fell into place. Anyel turned to look at Quin's likeness on the wall as though it held some answer. Instead, it just made him uneasy, as though Quin could see him even now. He'd long since tried to give up dreaming of this day,

but even in his most pragmatic moments, he'd never imagined being kept beneath the palace in the dark, like a pet mole. His heart beat unbearably fast and he grabbed his wine, draining the glass to try and calm himself.

He had never dreamed that his mind would be racing with ways of escaping. He had never dreamed of running from Quin. Anyel sank down on the couch, cradling the delicate goblet in his hands. Not running from Quin, going where he was needed. He needed to be back in the world, doing the right thing. Not the right thing for Quin. Just the right thing. The two had never been so far apart, as far apart as Anyel was from the man who'd been in love with Quin.

\* \* \* \*

Anyel's conscience wouldn't let him sleep. He tried to tell himself that he'd been just as trapped on Bisera, but it wasn't true. He could have left Bisera and accepted the consequences, but he'd chosen to stay. The people were plain, the library was vast, the abbot was tolerant, and... Anyel had been happy, once he'd stopped sulking about it.

Finally, he had what he'd been so sure he wanted for so many years, and now, he didn't want it anymore. He was trapped underground, trying not to panic. He'd never thought himself one to be claustrophobic. It wasn't just the accommodations. It was Quin. Quin who'd let them lock him in this place. Quin who had him brought like Anyel was a particular bottle of wine for which Quin had developed a craving.

Exiled to Paradise: The Nine of Pentacles  
*by Anah Crow*

Anyel had washed, when a servant was let in to bring him warm water and build up the fire, but he had refused to relinquish the robe, hanging it up to wear later instead. He was what he was, and where once he'd have hurried to dress as Quin fancied, he wasn't about to do so now. All his years of exile and study and asceticism meant something to him, if they didn't to Quin.

Curled up on the bed, in the shadows of the alcove, he tugged close the dressing gown he'd been provided and tried to sleep propped up on soft down pillows. His back ached from the softness of the beds he'd lain in since being abducted from Bisera. All he could do was wait and hope he had a cure for this thing. A chill ran through him, but he pushed it away. He wasn't even going to think about what would happen if he didn't. As hard as he tried, though, fear crept in, even as he drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

The sound of the bolt being pulled brought Anyel back to the world with a jerk. The candles had burned down and the air in the room was stifling, thick with the taste of wax. He scrambled out of the bed, pulling the dressing gown around him as a wash of cold, damp air swept in through the open door.

"His Highness says that whatever else you need, you're to have." Another voice Anyel knew, coming in with the cold air and the light of a lantern in the speaker's hand. "Has no one else come since the man-servant?"

"I slept." Anyel had to get out of the way as more shadowed forms were coming through the dark maw of the door.

"Apparently, so." Vannes lit fresh tapers, bringing the room into view again. Now, Anyel could see her, his mother's third-cousin, with her black hair turned silver and lines on her ruddy, common face. "You might not have woken, by the taste of the air. Put him on the chaise, fools. And wait for the girl to cover it."

Anyel turned to see a pair of soldiers bearing a litter draped in a dark pall, looking harried. A maid scampered past them and drew a heavy woolen blanket over the chaise. Another brought in a stack of linens and yet another carried a basket like one would take to a picnic.

"What else do you need?" Vannes sounded angry, but Anyel remembered his mother's kin well enough to recall that the women often had that sharp edge to their voices in the kitchen.

"I..." Everything. Anyel's mind dropped the list he had compiled before sleep and the items scattered to the corners of his consciousness. *You know what you know*, he told himself. *If we could unknow things, we'd be happier for it.*

"Wine or some fresh juice," he said, because it came to him first. "Dark is better, but any will suffice. Honey. Willowbark. Herbs such as the cook uses, hot water in a kettle, a pail, white cloth, charcoal for writing, a time piece, paper, ink, quills, lancets, a shallow basin of dark material, cold water, palta oil, a branch of ilex, fronds of a gall oak, hard wood for good coals, and a quantity of malabathrum to

fill both hands." As he spoke, he watched them move Berrit from the litter to the chaise and cover him with the pall. This time, they left his face exposed.

"Is that all?"

Anyel couldn't tell if Vannes were being sarcastic or not. "A mirror, since a window is out of the question. A lady's powder mirror as well. A hand glass. And lamps that burn oil; the wax on the air is a danger to weak lungs." As the servants and soldiers hurried out, the silence crept back in until Berrit's thick breathing could be heard above it.

"They say it's the second time he's been ill." Vannes put her lantern down on the table by Berrit's head. "It's often worse."

"People never used to get it twice," Anyel said, approaching slowly. The waves of Berrit's illness lapped up against him like the sea.

"Two of the serving girls in the west wing were carried out today," Vannes said. She stood there, hands folded over the seal on her belt. At her hip, a huge cluster of keys glittered in the light.

"Dead?" Anyel's feet stopped moving as his mind took that in. Two dead, so soon.

"Of course. There's no other way to be getting out, is there, now that His Highness has closed it off." Vannes gave him a sympathetic look. "I'll be bringing you those things, and I'll have them leave the door ajar, but the one at the top of the stairs will be locked. Can't get the men to come down farther anyway, with him in here." She nodded at Berrit on the way past.



The door creaked almost closed behind her and Anyel heard her footsteps retreating as her voice rose to chastise someone in the distance. He was alone again, except for the dry sound of Berrit breathing. This was the acid test, he supposed. Time to learn what he really knew.

There was a little water left in the pitcher from when he'd washed and it would be cold by now. He took a clean kerchief off the top of the stack of linens and went to fill the basin of the little vanity by the garderobe. He'd worked under worse conditions before, he reminded himself. Shacks and tents and hovels, even the stables, and not always tending human patients. Berrit was safely bedded on the chaise, it was warm in the room, and Anyel would have everything he needed.

*Time to stop thinking of yourself, above all else,* Anyel reminded himself. Thinking of himself made it impossible to feel the illness or injury in another. Something about seeing Quin again had left him feeling crippled and drained. He carried the basin back to the chaise, stepping into the now-familiar sphere of wrongness around his patient.

"No wonder you're in this condition," he chided, sinking down to sit by Berrit's side. The fever had brought out the pox again and now Berrit's skin was raw and freshly ruined, burning with a terrible dry heat. "I expect you didn't think it would be this bad. Your kind never do." With the basin in his lap, he wrung out the kerchief and sponged Berrit's face gently.

The kerchief came away stained and encrusted. When he was done sponging Berrit's face and throat and chest, Anyel held it up to look at it in the light, reading the color and

texture of the cruor and crystallized lymph. He knew the pox and he could feel the heat and famine of it in the waste it forced from the body. Blight. Plague. It was like drought and locusts descended on a garden.

"Thought I was rid of you."

Anyel nearly spilled the basin in his lap and his restless thoughts went in all directions, the horses of his mind spooked and running. "For mercy's..." he sputtered. He turned to see Berrit looking at him from one barely cracked eye. Berrit's voice was as ravaged as the rest of him. "Don't speak," he said at last. "You're making this harder." He gave Berrit a glare.

Since Anyel couldn't get his thoughts back in order, he put the bowl down and took the kerchief to what was left of the fire. Though the fine material was wet, the water steamed away in moments and blackness crept through the fibers until the whole of it was consumed. Blackness with only the smallest edge of orange and gold; the smoke of it was white with a twist of gray. Sour smell, not sweet.

"What are you doing?" The question brought on wracking coughs.

"What did I tell you?" Anyel snapped. His goblet and the wine Quin had poured still stood on the table. He tugged the cork free and sloshed wine into his glass, then brought it back to Berrit. "I don't say things just to hear myself." On Bisera, when he had occasion to give orders, people did as they were told.

He stopped lecturing to prop Berrit up enough that he could get some wine down the man's throat. When he'd

managed to get half the glass down Berrit without drowning him, the coughing ceased.

Berrit had only just drawn one whole breath when he looked about to ask another question. "Don't talk," Anyel said firmly. "No." Berrit glared at him a long moment with more heat than just the fever in his eyes. "If you die, I'm in trouble," Anyel said, hoping that it would convince Berrit to be still. Berrit opened his mouth again. "Aha! No." Anyel covered Berrit's mouth with his hand. "Don't make me gag you." Any further threats were postponed by the sound of feet on the stairs and voices.

"I mean it. Close your eyes."

"Your requirements are complete." Vannes barreled through the door as Anyel was rising to his feet. "Fortunate for you, a few stern souls still staff the yard." She was carrying a huge basket; behind her, a burly man carried bundles of wood in a sling on his back. "The wood and the water are coming, the herbs and oil are in the basket. I must go and see that the halfwit bearing the lanterns doesn't come down the steps on his head."

It seemed wisest to stay out of the way. Anyel took up a fresh kerchief and sat back down with the basin at his feet. To his surprise, Berrit behaved and suffered Anyel bathing his face and throat and hands without complaint even while awake. The water was still cold and likely soothed, but Anyel knew it was unlikely something as irrelevant as comfort would move Berrit to good behavior. Berrit was even tractable enough to let Anyel get a few measures of cold, fresh water into him when that arrived.

They brought him everything he needed—Quin had been true in that, at least. Before Vannes and the men who smelled of the stables were gone, the room was beginning to look like Anyel's work room at the abbey.

"You'll need to eat." Vannes came in again as the last of the men lumbered out. "I've brought you some plain stew." She carried the iron pot by the cloth-wrapped handle. "I'll leave it on the fire." The men had put a rod across the fire to hold the kettle; Vannes added the pot to the rod, with the hook turned so that it would be out of the strongest heat. "You can send a note with the guards if you need anything, I'm to bed. It's coming on midnight. His Majesty will want to hear of your progress in the morning."

"I'll keep that in mind." Anyel brought the now-warm basin of water over and poured it into the slop pail one of the men had left by the door.

"Lochan keep you," Vannes murmured. She made the sign on her forehead with her thumb and then hurried out. Guards must have been waiting for her outside the door. They didn't close or bolt it, but Anyel heard a chain drawn across.

Anyel stood there a moment, gathering himself so that he could get to work. The familiar gesture of faith here in this sphere of power and vanity comforted him a little. He might not be a believer, but he was a good student and the people he cared for believed in him.

"What in blazes are you playing at?" Berri rasped.

Most of the people he cared for, Anyel amended. All but one at the most. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "This isn't about you," he said, reminding himself that arguing

with the ill was as profitable as arguing with the pigs in the yard. Nature drove them, not common sense. "I needed to experiment on someone. I guessed that Quin would most likely allow it if it benefited him."

"All right then." When Anyel turned to look, surprised, Berrit looked placated under the mask of his illness. "Get to it."

"Fine. Don't talk." Anyel dragged his eyes away from the look of Berrit's fevered, dark gaze and put his attention to the array of supplies and devices on the table where Quin's maps and scrolls had been.

"I won't."

Anyel exhaled through his nose. It wasn't worth responding to, he told himself. The man just couldn't help having the last word. Too bad that couldn't be cured while keeping his oaths intact.

Lancet, powder mirror. The mirror was a pretty little thing with violets under glass on the back; he wondered if it were Vannes' own. The lancets were probably hers; they weren't something anyone but the woman of a house or a healer would keep. Returning to Berrit, he sat down and put the mirror on one knee. He took Berrit's hand in his, turning it to hold Berrit's wrist over the mirror.

He could feel Berrit's stare on him and it made his cheeks hot. The man had scars from work and fighting on his hand and arm; one more nick wouldn't matter, no more than a fly bite. Anyel twitched his hand that held the lancet and a tiny red 'V' showed over a thin blue vein, then opened like a little mouth to let out a drop of blood. The droplet swelled and fell,

then another. Anyel collected three, then put Berrit's hand down, covering the tiny cut with a finger.

A cut, Anyel could heal, though he usually told people it was best to leave them be to let the mind remember its mistakes. In his mind's eye, he brought the edges of the wound together and knit it up with threads of blood, cruor that formed and set and sank back under the unwounded skin. The little task made him feel a bit better. He took the mirror back to the table where the light was good.

The time piece he'd been brought was a gold and steel clock in a glass dome. Anyel set that where he could see it and got to work, adding water to Berrit's blood to make a film over the whole of the mirror. This was simply another puzzle.

Four hundred years before, the abbey at Bisera had been the site of another cure, one for a fever of boils that spread from manger to house, killing kine and men alike. Anyel had studied that and at least here, he only had to heal one man at a time. The film over the mirror was dry and Anyel had another look at his adversary, or at the spirit of it caught between the blood and the glass. He began writing in charcoal on the malabathrum, one rune for each leaf, to divine what he could from the answers they would return.

"Must we both fast for this? You should eat. Or at least let me drink."

The rasping voice broke Anyel's concentration and he threw down the quill he held, spattering the table with ink. "Do you have no self-control?" he burst out. The stool he'd been perched on fell over as he struggled to his feet, fighting the stiff curve of his spine. "I asked you for a little quiet and

you can't bear to keep your mouth shut." He grabbed the dipper out of the tall ewer of well water he'd been brought and sloshed water into a glass measure. "Did I really offend you so much all those years ago that you'd spite me by making sure you die?"

"I won't last long if I go another four hours without a drink," Berrit said wearily.

That stopped Anyel before he went so far as to pour the water down Berrit's throat by force. *Four*. He checked over his shoulder and the clock's hour hand was in the small hours, the moon dial headed toward setting.

"I do apologize for considering you an empty-headed influence on His Highness."

"I'm so sorry." All the frustration went out of Anyel and he sat down on the chaise as his knees threatened to give out. His body was furious with him. "Here, drink." He was furious with himself. How could he forget to tend the person he was supposed to cure? "I'm sorry, I'm not... not myself."

"Too bad." Berrit was still so hot with fever. "You're tolerable this way."

Carefully, he helped Berrit drink. "You should have..." But he'd told Berrit to be silent. "Let me make you a tea for that fever." Anyel was wracked with guilt. He started to settle the pall back in place and then realized what it was, as though he were seeing it for the first time. "You shouldn't be covered in this," he said, tugging it away as he stood. "That's horrible. I'll get you a proper blanket. Gods, what am I..." He let the words trail off as he gathered up the pall and bundled it out the door. He didn't want to see the damn thing again.

"Anyel," Berrit said quietly. "I was sleeping."

"As you should have been." Anyel stalked to the bed where he yanked aside the heavy feather coverlet to get at the silky wool blankets and soft linens. Berrit was wearing a night shirt and leggings; they'd pulled him from his bed without anything else. Anyel tucked him in with the linens and then the blankets, then slid a soft pillow under his head.

"Am I allowed to talk?"

"Not unless you need something." Anyel turned his back on Berrit and filled a cup with willow bark and hot water. He picked up the stool and thumped his backside down on it. This time he kept his eye on the clock. He was so close to a solution, but he remembered to get up and fish the bark out of the cup and bring it to Berrit, sweetened with honey.

"Now?" Berrit asked, once he'd choked down the tea. The honey was more of an apology than a cure for the bitterness.

"No."

Anyel filled the basin with cold water, then mixed in seaweed powders—fan-leaf and tangleweed—until it was almost a thick gel. He knew them well and if they soothed, he could work their essences into a cure. Berrit tolerated Anyel coating his skin with it, as least as much as Anyel could bare without actually undressing him.

Berrit was too lean from the fevers the blight had brought, and his skin was marked with old pocks where it wasn't sprinkled with new ones. On the whole, though, he was well-made, with heavy limbs roped with muscle and sparse, sleek black hair over deep olive skin. Anyel remembered him being rangier, raw-boned, and caustic when he did bother to speak.



Quin was always sending him away, laughing at his attempts to keep up with them, teasing him for being so serious. What was there to protect Quin from in those days? Quin's father's lands had been their playground, Anyel's grandfather's mountain duchy their secret hide-away where Anyel's mother fed them and turned a blind eye to their indiscretions.

"Now?" Berrit sounded half sleeping for all that Anyel was spreading cold gel on his feet.

"No."

"You never *offended* me," Berrit said drowsily. His eyes were closed, but his mouth wouldn't stay shut. Anyel had obviously missed this garrulous facet of his personality.

"That's not something you need," Anyel reminded him, trying not to be too sharp.

"Says you," Berrit retorted, like they were young again. "You never offended me, Anyel. Quin, not you. He still does."

"You're sick," Anyel said. "Shut up." He draped a sheet back over Berrit and went to get the palta oil.

"Can't be that sick if you're forgetting me."

"Shut up," Anyel said again, feeling twenty and irritable about it. He poured oil on a bit of the gauze that had been in one of Vannes' baskets and came back to dab the green oil on Berrit's cracked lips.

"I'm rather forgettable," Berrit admitted.

"You're far too irritating to forget," Anyel said flatly.

Berrit cracked an eye open. "Am I *green*?"

"Yes." Anyel tucked him in and then pushed himself back to his feet, ignoring the creak of his knees. "And I can make it

permanent if you don't sleep." That won him some silence, and Anyel tidied up and got himself a drink of water before sitting down to write a report for Quin. The last thing he needed was for Quin to barge down here in a rage over being ignored.

"He ruined you."

Anyel's hand froze and then he remembered to move it before the quill left a blotch on the page. His heart was hurting itself, trying to get out between his ribs or up his throat. Quin hadn't... wouldn't... Anyel couldn't see, his eyes were burning.

Anyel put the quill down and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. He would have to rest soon; hopefully this would be done before the sun set again. Berrit was feverish and talking nonsense.

"I'm sorry, Anyel."

"Oh, gods, *shut up*." Anyel made his hand stop shaking so he could pick up the quill. "You're delirious. I need to cure you before your brains cook."

Of course he'd never gone back. Someone else might have, someone else might have had more than a dying, ancient duke of a scrap of mountainside to speak for them. Not Anyel. He swallowed and kept writing his report for Quin, quill scraping on the page like a crow speaking.

*He ruined you.*

They'd been in love. Quin would always care for him, Anyel had been so sure of it. What reputation had he needed, when he had Quin? Anyel's breath could hardly slither through the tightness in his throat. Of course, if they'd let anyone come

with them, if they'd not been alone all the time, if they'd done anything but what Quin wanted, maybe Anyel would have had some scrap of dignity left.

*His Highness didn't specify either time... You're just lucky he didn't panic and have you killed before he needed you for something.*

"He didn't tell you to send me to Bisera." Anyel couldn't stop his voice from shaking. Now, from a distance, he could see the whole of it. "He told you... he told you..." He could see it but he couldn't say it. "Oh, gods, he must have been furious with you." Furious to find out that Berrit had let him live. Furious to find out that Anyel had taken orders and joined the abbey.

"It's bad form to kill a monk, even when you're the king," Berrit said reluctantly.

"You lied. The letter, the everything, you..." Anyel's mind was running around his skull like a man in a hall of mirrors.

"I used to write his papers for him." Berrit didn't even sound smug.

Anyel forced himself to write the last line. *I should have a definite solution for Your Highness by sunset.* Definite solution. Potion. Pill. Cure. If he left here alive, he'd never waste another day of his life on Quin. If. *Father Anyel of Bisera Lochan Abbey, at Palace Oranne, Day One Hundred and Eighty-Five, Fifth Hour, Year Quyelin XX.*

"Anyel."

"Sleep." Anyel folded the letter in three and stood.

"Anyel." Berrit held out a green-smeared hand, red-speckled palm up.

Anyel couldn't look at him. "I said sleep." He ignored the hand and murmured a few words from an old lullaby his mother had sung when he was a baby, his personal cantrip for sleep. It was kitchen magic at the core, but Berrit's hand fell to dangle limp over the edge of the chaise, and his breath shifted into the slow pace of sleeping.

At the door, Anyel called for the guard. "Deliver this to His Highness when he requests a report."

King. Monk. The only way they could have parted ways further would have been for one to betray the other. *Trust His Highness to do nothing by halves.*

\* \* \* \*

The clock on the table turned over the hours like pages of a book while Anyel worked. Between thoughts, he remembered to get up and tend to Berrit. The fever ran wild, burning off his flesh until the lines around his eyes and mouth deepened and his cheeks hollowed. Anyel would have worried more, except that Berrit was strong, his heart beating too fast but without missing a beat, and Anyel was nearly at a solution.

Noon passed and the day Anyel couldn't see began its downward slide into night. He poured wine into the dark wooden bowl and picked up the ilex. He knew Berrit's illness better than he knew Berrit now; he would remember it for years. Like clockwork locusts, the blight ate up its victim and the body burned in its wake. Anyel touched willowbark and seaweed, reminding himself of their essence, and wrote what he saw into the wine.

As the sharp end of the ilex branch cut the surface of the wine again and again, the wine thickened and changed, first losing color and then darkening to the color of dry blood. Once the seaweed was written into it, and a cold wind off the water, the wine slowed to something sluggish that held the shape of a word for a heartbeat after the word was written.

When Anyel set the ilex down, his hand was shaking. He passed his palm over his brow and it came away slick with sweat. When he checked the clock again, it was now a full half-day since Berrit had interrupted him the first time.

The wine had been reduced to half. Anyel took a drop from the tip of the ilex and tasted it. It was surprisingly sweet, with a hint of vinegar to it like a tonic. His hands were shaking too much to pour it, though. He had to take a little ivory dram measure and dip out a small portion instead.

Getting up was agony. How had he gotten so old? Anyel blamed the soft bed and the hours spent bent over the desk. On Bisera, he was never still this long, certainly never confined.

Berrit was so deep in the sleep of the sick, his closed eyes sunken deep in his head so that with the dried, flaking green seaweed gel and the discoloration of the blight on him, he looked like he'd been dead some days. It was more than a little disconcerting, but Anyel had dealt with worse. He just had to hope he had the cure right the first time.

Getting the cure into Berrit was harder than Anyel had expected. Berrit barely roused when Anyel sat down and only whimpered when Anyel patted his cheek. That sound, like a kicked street dog, made Anyel's stomach ache. Still, this was

something he'd done before, getting the insensible to take a potion. It took careful hands and patience, so that Berrit didn't breathe it in, but soon the little cup was empty. All Anyel could do was wait.

Time was useful, still. Anyel cleaned the desk, cleaned out the grate, put fresh wood on the fire, and refilled the kettle. When that was done, he sat to review his notes. His head was so heavy, he propped it up on one hand. His eyes were hot and dry; maybe he should dose himself with the cure. Later, he told himself, if he felt worse. Once he knew it worked.

\* \* \* \*

"I didn't know people actually did that."

Startled out of sleep, Anyel almost fell off the stool. Rubbing the back of his hand over his eyes, he turned around, feeling guilty. "Did what?"

"Fell asleep at their desks." Berrit was sitting up, feet on the floor, blankets shoved down to the end of the chaise. He brushed at his cheeks, scowling. "Can this come off now?"

Fully awake all of a sudden, Anyel got to his feet as fast as his joints would allow. Berrit looked remarkably well for a man who'd been on the decline. "It can." He could hardly tell if the pox was healed with all that seaweed in the way. It took him a moment to find a clean cloth and fill the basin, but then he was at Berrit's side.

"I can wash my own face," Berrit grumbled, but he let Anyel have at it anyway.

"You'll pull away the scabs," Anyel said. When he'd passed the cloth over Berrit's skin enough times, though, rinsing it

out between washes, there was nothing under the mess to pull away. The old pockmarks were there, but faded to paler speckles against Berrit's dark skin, and nothing more. "Or not."

Anyel put everything down and took Berrit's face in his hands, tilting it face toward the best light.

"What is it?"

Aside from the scowl and the hollowness from the fever there was... "Nothing. Nothing at all." Lank hair from being sick, dark circles under the eyes like bruises, chapped lips, but nothing wrong. "You seem well." Anyel slid his hands down Berrit's throat and found nothing there but stubble and then smooth skin. No swelling. "How do you feel?"

"Like the fourth day of a three-day holiday, but nothing worse," Berrit said, still scowling. "Aside from being covered in dried green slime."

"You'll live." Anyel rolled his eyes and let Berrit go. "You're welcome."

"I was going to thank you," Berrit muttered. "I'm not bereft of all good manners."

"You'll need to take it easy for a few days." Anyel turned his back on Berrit and made his way back to the table, slowly. "I'll need to see you again to make sure the blight doesn't come back, since it seems so fond of you. But I can duplicate the cure, multiply it, even."

"I take it I may wash, then?"

"Go ahead." Anyel gestured toward the alcove. "The garderobe is there by the bed. Don't fall down on the way there."

"I remember how to walk," Berrit said testily. Anyel heard him groan as he got to his feet, though.

Anyel turned his attention back to his work. With the ilex, he began writing on parchment with the cure itself, sketching the shape of the blight and the interlocking form of the cure. Later, a monk or hedgewitch trained in the mysteries could read it and know—without needing to know the exact ingredients—how to shape a cure. It wasn't the ingredients that mattered so much as the form and meaning of them in Anyel's mind. Someone else might make the same cure with different herbs, with water or the juice of berries instead of wine.

Peripherally, he was aware of Berrit mixing water from the kettle and the ewer in a basin and washing with it. The other presence in the room with them, the ghost of the blight, was gone. It was just the two of them with their personalities scraping against each other in the small space.

"I do owe you a great deal of thanks," Berrit said. He sounded tired and low.

"This is my work," Anyel said. "I would do it for anyone."

"I know. But you could have done it for someone else. One of the stable boys, one of the ladies-in-waiting, some beggar on the street. Someone less likely to irritate Quin."

"I thought you were useful to him, that's the only reason," Anyel said, keeping his eyes on his work. With a few strokes, he outlined Berrit's figure lying on a couch near the bottom of the paper. The first patient was as salient to the essence of the cure as the disease and the healer. Anyel marked the



angled spikes of Berrit's personality, the tightness of his jaw, the rebellion that was the keystone of his nature.

"You're very difficult, you know." Anyel put down the ilex and spun around. In the middle of the room, Berrit was stripped to his leggings, standing on one leg like a stork to wash the other clean of the green scum. Berrit looked at him from under a stringy curtain of dirty hair. "You are."

"Me?" Anyel took a breath and let it out slowly. "Fortunately, my calling allows people to avoid me until they need me." He turned back around to his work. "That's the pot calling the kettle black, anyway."

Berrit only snorted, then coughed. Anyel froze, but the cough faded as fast as it had come. "I should go present myself to His Highness," Berrit said. "If I may."

"I can hardly keep you here," Anyel murmured. He didn't want to be alone again, but Berrit would regain his strength best out in the open air. "If you could send me Vannes, please. I'm in need of some single dram vials."

"I'll do that. Are these your clothes?" Anyel looked over his shoulder to see Berrit pointing at the clothing Quin had sent.

"Quin had them delivered," Anyel said.

"That would be a no, then. May I?" Berrit shook out a dark green shirt embroidered with peacock eyes.

"As you will," Anyel said, turning away again. "That one seems suited to you. But I doubt it will fit."

"First, being unpleasant is hardly the same as being vain, if that's what you're implying," Berrit said, his voice muffled by the fabric as he pulled on the shirt. "Second, I gathered you'd been a little lax about the vanity yourself, being a monk

and all, but I hardly figured you'd missed that we're nearly of a size. When they brought you on the ship, I nearly sent them back again because I didn't recognize you."

Anyel had to think about that. Berrit had been wearing boots on board the ship, heavy enough to give him a few inches on Anyel. It had been too long since Anyel had worn anything but the same size of robe, tailored to him by little old Father Merrin who never measured but relied on his fading sight to gauge a man's size. "I suppose I was young when you saw me last." He shrugged it off and went back to work on the marginalia of his cure.

"Too young." Berrit's voice was soft.

"Old enough. Didn't we have this argument once?" More than twenty years ago.

"Oh, yes." Berrit snorted softly. Anyel heard him fasten a buckle. "Not nearly as many times as I had it with Quin, but I remember."

Anyel had to stop writing for fear of making a mistake. "You argued with Quin about me?"

"You would have, if you had been in my position. I owe you a great deal for healing me. And I did before that. I'm in your debt, Anyel."

"It was nothing. And you owed me nothing, then or now. I think I am the one at a disadvantage, still," Anyel said, making himself go back to writing instead of turning around. "Before you leave the palace, you should come see me, in case you need another dose, and so I can see if you are fully well."

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"As you wish." There was a moment's silence, and then Anyel heard Berrit's fist against the door just before he bellowed for the guards. Anyel took a deep breath and kept writing, even when the chain on the door was loosened and the guards allowed Berrit to leave, even when the door was closed and locked again. Berrit wasn't the only one with this illness, and Anyel couldn't sit around and wait while people were dying elsewhere.

\* \* \* \*

The door opened shortly after Berrit had left, and the guards let Vannes and a pair of serving girls into Anyel's cell. "Don't disturb the good Father," Vannes muttered. "Just clean the room and behave yourselves." Anyel could hear the whisper of their gowns on the stone floor as they curtsied to her, and their murmurs of, "Yes, miss."

"Did you bring me bottles?" Anyel's attention was on the herbs and other ingredients before him. A small bundle of catalysts would help him make more cure with less magic, especially if he put some magic in them to begin with.

"And something with which to fill them." Vannes set a wooden case on the table and Anyel glanced over to see her open it, revealing rows of little white glass bottles set in velvet and padding. "They're for storing perfumes, but I hoped they'd suffice." Their stoppers were also glass, threaded to twist tight, and a small glass funnel was set to one side of the rows.

"They're perfect." Anyel stood and put aside the papers and herbs. "If I fill some, will you be able to get them into the women's quarters?"

Vannes looked up at him, her face set in wary, suspicious lines. "Why?"

"Because I could use more proof than one man that this works." Anyel started setting up a row of bottles on the desk before him. "And if you think I'm going to sit around down here while people die upstairs, you're as mad as..." As mad as Quin. "Well, you're just mad."

"I'll see they get it," Vannes murmured. She gave Anyel a tight, little approving smile. "I'll set the bottles, Father. You pour the cure."

The rest of the cure that Anyel had given Berrit filled eight bottles. He set two aside for Quin and handed the other six to Vannes, who folded them carefully inside a handkerchief and tucked them in one of her many pockets in her long dress.

"Give those to one of the woman physicians. I think it should work within the hour. Tell her to write down her observations of the patient." Anyel had no illusions about being allowed out to go and tend to the women, not at this point. Besides, he needed to make more of the cure, and study the illness deeper if the cure were faulty. "I will need more wine. A cask, not just a bottle, and a deep wooden basin in which to mix the solution. Also, more of the following ingredients." He pulled the list from under a bundle of oak fronds and passed it over.

"More?" Vannes looked puzzled. "No one else in the palace is sick; the disease seems confined to the countryside. There are some sick near the city walls, but..."

"But nothing." Anyel sat down again and turned his back to her. "It hasn't stopped moving through the countryside, it won't stop moving here. There's a pause, a lull as it takes hold, but it will get worse." Anyel waited, but she didn't retreat. "Ask Quin if you must. He said I could have anything I wanted."

"When His Highness has a moment, I will. But." Vanne hesitated and Anyel heard the chime of the keys on her belt, the sign of her position as chatelaine of Quin's palace. "In the meantime, it won't do any harm to let you have what you want. I'll bring more food to you as well. You should eat, Father."

"Of course. Thank you." Anyel started laying ingredients out in front of him, trying to decide if he could make substitutions for some of the more expensive things, like the seaweed and the palta oil. Both were plentiful on Bisera, where they were gathered, but they were delicacies on the mainland, as the Biserans exported little of what they grew or caught aside from seasonal surpluses of palta, fish, and wine from a few estates.

\* \* \* \*

"Yela, what is this nonsense?" Quin's voice startled Anyel from his work and he nearly dumped an entire pouch of tangleweed into a small cask of wine. He turned, twisting the

pouch closed, to see Quin in the doorway. "You've worked your magic, and there's no need for this right now."

Quin came in, fastening his brocade tunic at the throat. He looked as though he were freshly out of bed, ready for riding or hunting, if the breeches and boots were any indication. His dark honey hair was carefully twisted and pinned so that it was out of his face and off his shoulders.

"Come with me. I'm going hunting today. The boars are running amok."

"There are hundreds of people out there who are sick, Quin." Anyel rubbed at his eyes and went back to the table to get the fan-leaf powder. The idea of the disease spreading to Bisera haunted him. "Thousands."

"And there are people out there who are old, and people out there who are falling off ladders and breaking their necks." Quin took the second pouch of powder from Anyel's hand and tossed it onto the table. "Anyel. You have to be reasonable about this. We have another chance to be together, to make up for lost time. You can stay, be my personal physician. I would prefer no other. Swear to me you'll stay, so I can bring you out from this place."

A short nap on the chaise had given Anyel a few hours rest, but it hadn't done anything for his temper.

"Reasonable?" Anyel stepped out of the way as Quin reached for him. "Reasonable is not locking me up in your gods damned cellar like some antique you might want to use some day. Reasonable is not watching your people die when you could do something about it." Reasonable was not... not Quin, that was certain.

"I'm not watching anyone die. Everyone around me is well. Not everyone is created equal, Anyel," Quin said coolly. "It's the order of things. Some of us are more useful than others. And some of us would be wise not to push past the limits of our usefulness."

Anyel stood there, stunned into silence for a heartbeat. "This isn't who you used to be, Quin." Twenty years ago, Anyel was sure Quin would have agreed with him. It was Quin who did things like giving money to the poor or helping pull a farmer's mule out of the muddy ditch, even if Anyel had to remind him once in a while.

"Twenty years ago, I could afford to humor you. I won't say it wasn't quite heart-warming." Quin looked over the things on the table and picked up the inkwell. "Now, I cannot. If word gets out that there is a cure here, the city will be flooded with refugees, they will be beating down the palace gates. They would pull you to pieces and take home your bones." With a flick of his wrist, Quin tossed the inkwell into the wine cask, ruining the potion. "There would be chaos. You never did understand what it takes to keep these people under control."

"Only because my conscience has a louder voice than my pride," Anyel spat. "It insists that people's lives come before my convenience."

The back of Quin's hand cracked across Anyel's mouth. "You'll have no voice at all if you don't learn to control yourself." Quin's expression was still smooth and pleasant, as though he were talking about the weather or his favorite dog. "You're lucky to still have your head."

Anyel touched his fingers to his lips and they came away bloody. He thought it should hurt where Quin struck him, but he felt nothing. Just a strange calm. "Send me back to Bisera." He made himself look at Quin, at Quin's beautiful eyes. He drew in the mysteries and wrote behind Quin's eyes with the ink of his own will. *It's the most reasonable thing to do. You don't want me here. You'll feel better if I'm far away from you.*

"You'll return to Bisera." Quin turned away, wiping Anyel's blood from the back of his hand with a handkerchief. He paused in the doorway and, beyond him, Anyel could see the passive shapes of his guards waiting for him. Looking over his shoulder at Anyel, he frowned, as though he'd forgotten something, then shook his head. "Don't think I'm not grateful, though, Yela. I am. For that, you may return to Bisera."

"Be well, Your Highness."

\* \* \* \*

They came and cleared out the little room, taking away with them all of the materials and papers. Anyel could feel the paper on which he'd written the cure crinkling against his skin like a guilty conscience, tucked away under his dressing gown. When they were gone, he washed and put on the white robe Berit had provided him, keeping nothing of Quin's world with him but the single paper that he had folded in eight and then folded into a kerchief fastened around his forearm under his sleeve. The monks of Lochan wore prayers that way, tucked out of sight, so that the pulse against them was a constant invocation to their god.



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Anyel wasn't feeling worthy of any such attention from any person or deity. Once he was clean on the skin, he sat on the chaise, staring into the fire. He'd done the unthinkable, broken a fundamental oath, and turned the mysteries against someone else's will. To sway a person by logic and persuasion was fair enough, and lying, while frowned upon, was a necessity of life. What he'd done to Quin was unforgiveable, no matter what Quin had done to him, or might do in future.

"I suppose this time, you can enjoy the trip."

Anyel hadn't heard the door open, but he didn't startle at the voice. "Yes, I suppose."

"I'm not dead yet." Berrit held out the obvious like a peace offering.

"I'm glad." Anyel managed to smile a little, even though it felt like his face was going to crack, and turned to see Berrit leaning in the doorway. Berrit was dressed for sea, sturdy common clothes under a green woolen cloak thrown around his shoulders and fastened over one with a Kettyl's Hawk clasp. He looked well, so much better than before, in spite of the hollowness of his cheeks. He looked like he'd been cut from rock or redwood, hard and natural. Permanent.

"His Highness says I'm to return you to Bisera." Berrit took Anyel's cloak from the statue that had been holding it for days, and shook it out. "Come on, Father." He draped the cloak around Anyel's shoulders. "Don't make me crack you over the head a third time."

"The one time I might deserve it," Anyel mumbled. But he let Berrit guide him out of the room, up the dark, dark stairs, through a long passage under the palace, and out a side door

to where a carriage was waiting, shining in the sunlight, along with a small company of mounted guards. Anyel pulled the hood of the cloak up over his head, and Berrit handed him up into the carriage.

"Let's go." Berrit closed the carriage door and then swung up on a big, rangy, bay horse.

To his surprise, Anyel wasn't alone in the carriage. Vannes sat opposite him, dressed in travelling clothes, with an embellished bag on her knees. "Vannes. What are you..."

"I've been let go," she said stiffly. "For my part in taking the potions to the women's quarters. Her Majesty was kind enough to suggest I might find employment on Bisera, and allowed me to go. It's for the best."

There was no house on Bisera that had cause to keep a chatelaine. Anyel turned the island's geography over in his mind. There was a house on the western point that a noble family had used as a second estate, but it had been left for years, since the lady died there, falling from her horse, and the nobleman had closed it up. That had been before Anyel's exile there. The islanders ventured onto the land to pick fruit from the orchards and vineyards, but the gardens had all gone wild, and there was none there any longer but a irascible old gamekeeper and a pack of hounds and a herd of horses gone wild.

"Vannes, I'm sorry." Anyel felt sick. Taryelin had kept her on after her sister, Taryelin's first wife and first queen, had died. It was the only life Vannes had known. The carriage started with a lurch that made Anyel's stomach flip disturbingly.

"Time to see new things," Vannes said staunchly. "I hear they have long lives there."

"It's true. And..." Anyel had been about to offer her the protection of the abbey, should she need it. They had some small holdings, little farms and gardens, that they rented out. But Anyel couldn't go back to being a monk. Not after what he'd done to Quin. "...I'm sure you'll make your way there. You're a good person, Vannes. The Biserans, they can tell these things."

"I'm sure." Vannes fell silent, watching the city pass by outside her window. They might never come this way again. Anyel didn't watch; he closed his eyes and tried to pray.

\* \* \* \*

"I don't want... isn't there another..." Anyel stammered as one of the midshipmen led him into Berrit's quarters again. The rather pimply young squire was nowhere to be seen.

"It's not acceptable, Father?" The young man looked worried. "We have some moments before we leave port. I could send someone to get you..." He looked around the room. "...better linens. A better bed. What about some holy books. Wine?"

"No, no." Anyel held up a hand to stop him. "Don't worry. I'm fine. Please, don't let me keep you from your duties."

"Thank you, Father." The midshipman gave him a grateful look. "Ring the bell if you need anything."

"Of course." Anyel closed the door behind him. He took off his cloak, and hung it by the door, then tucked his boots underneath.

In the top drawers of Berrit's desk—once Anyel learned his way around all the little latches and hooks that kept things secure in high seas—there was paper and pens and an ink bottle that settled neatly into well carved into the desktop. Anyel swallowed hard and then picked up a pen. He had to write his confession and resignation to the Abbot now, before he managed to talk himself out of doing so, out of fear or some sense of justification.

*Year Quyelin XX, Day One Hundred and Eighty-Seven, 11th Hour.* Anyel could hear shouting as the oar boats began to move the ship, turning her and aiming her back out at sea. He put his head down and started to write, keeping to the facts, refusing to suggest that he deserved any lenience. He didn't. What he'd done to Quin, he'd do again. When thinking back, it didn't make him ill, it made him burn with the certainty that it had been the very least that Quin deserved.

They were out on the open sea by the time Anyel finished. He turned the papers in on themselves carefully, tucking the instructions for the cure inside, and folded them into a tight packet with an outer layer of oiled parchment. All he needed was some twine or some wax. Surely there was some in the room. When a search of the desk proved fruitless—some wax, but no seal—Anyel went and, after a moment of hesitation, opened the drawers and cupboards that held Berrit's belongings. He tried to pick ones that wouldn't hold anything personal.

The door opened with a click and a soft creak, startling Anyel into straightening and knocking his head lightly on a half-closed drawer above him.

"Did you need something?" Berrit didn't look upset. He was carrying a mid-day meal on a tray; coming in, he kicked the door closed.

"Twine, or a seal."

"Ah." Berrit put the tray down on the desk and wrested a ring from his finger. "It's mine, but it'll have to do, unless you want me to get some twine from the galley."

"Thank you. I..." Anyel's words were cut short when Berrit tossed the heavy ring at him and he had to concentrate to catch it.

"Let me guess." Berrit watched Anyel light the thick, soft brown candle. "A scathing chastisement of His Highness? A long over due retraction of your affections?" He poured Anyel a glass of wine from a fat-bellied crystal decanter.

"My resignation from the abbey." Anyel watched the candle burn and willed it to hurry up so there would be wax with which to seal the letter and get this over. Berrit's ring sat on the packet of papers, waiting.

"Resignation. Anyel, why?"

"I broke my oaths," Anyel said softly, putting his head in his hands to try and keep tears from welling up in his eyes.

"With Quin?" Berrit's voice went sharp. "Did he... you could hardly have refused him. There are penances you can do for your indiscretions." Berrit took Anyel by the shoulders, his big hands strong even after the long illness, and drew him up out of the chair. "Anyel, look at me. Why would you do this? You love the abbey."

"I used the mysteries against him." Anyel stopped hiding his face to push Berrit's hands from his shoulders. He ducked

away, around the desk, putting his back to Berrit and looking out the stern window. The sea boiled away behind them as they cut through the blue water faster than a horse could run. "I wanted to try and save as many as I could. He disagreed. Ruined my work. I argued with him. He hit me. Said I was lucky to have my head." Anyel's throat was so tight and he wrapped his arms around himself and couldn't make himself let go. "I made him send me away to Bisera. If I didn't..." Prisoner. Or worse.

"I thought at least from Bisera, I could do *something*. Find a way to help people, still." Anyel blinked back tears. "I didn't want to live in Quin's oubliette. I wanted to go home, such as it is." Bisera might have been another kind of oubliette, but Anyel had found himself there, and if the world had forgotten the boy he'd been before, all the better. *Home*. Not the abbey, but maybe... he could find a little house in the fishing village.

"I'll still have work. I can mend nets. Heal people. The abbot might be able to find a way to make the cure so that it could be sent to the mainland, and..."

Berrit's hands on his shoulders, turning him away from the window, interrupted the flow of babble. "Anyel," Berrit said gently. Suddenly, Anyel was terrified that Berrit was going to insist that he return to Oranne, return to confess his sins. The priests of the church council would break him to be sure that no control remained on Quin's mind.

"I promise that all I did was ask him to return me to Bisera." Anyel reached out and his hands tangled in the soft wool of Berrit's cloak. "I would never do anything to..."

Berrit silenced him again, this time with his mouth on Anyel's. It was like being struck by lightning. Anyel was paralyzed, but he was sure his hair was standing on end. Still. It was so good. Tender and sweet and chaste.

"I trust you," Berrit said softly, hardly moving away so that his lips still brushed Anyel's. "Trust me?" Now he withdrew a little so that Anyel could see his face, his dear, rough face with all the lines and scars of life drawn on it. "All I have ever wanted to do is see you treated as you deserve. Even when you were offensively haughty and stupidly, blindly in love with someone who thought you were a trinket, I only wanted good things for you." He punctuated his words with little shakes as frustration overflowed his self-control. "Please."

"I do." As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Anyel knew it was true. Even if he couldn't see it in Berrit's face so plainly, the man Berrit was by reputation was one worth trusting. Beyond that, Berrit had saved his life at a time when Quin... when Quin would have had him killed. Anyel took a deep breath and let it out slowly, letting the truth wash away the lies he'd told himself. "I trust you."

"Good, good." Berrit shook his head and frowned, distress gathering on his face. He let Anyel go, looking at his own hands as though he didn't know what they had been up to on their own. "I'm sorry, Anyel. Father. That was... I'm sorry. I'm not myself."

"I hope that's not true." Anyel caught Berrit by one wrist. "I find you tolerable this way."

There were shouts from above as the ship began to change course, swinging her stern through the wind; both of them

stopped to listen and make sure she came about fairly. The swells made her rise and fall and then Anyel was using Berrit for support as much as trying to keep him from leaving.

The pause let Anyel breathe and think. Clarity was one of the most expensive gifts he'd ever earned. No wonder people worshipped Lochan, who saw the truth of everything. The ship shuddered through as the sails hit the limits of the sheets and boomed full of the fresh-caught wind, then she leapt forward joyfully, sending Anyel stumbling into Berrit.

When Berrit caught him up in both arms and kissed him again, Anyel was hardly going to explain that it was all because he couldn't keep his footing on a ship. He wrapped his arms around Berrit's neck and kissed him fiercely. Berrit picked him up and tumbled him into bed, into the soft safety of it where the rise and fall of the ship on the waves couldn't make him stumble again.

For a moment, Anyel was afraid Berrit would leave him there. But Berrit had only stopped to divest himself of cloak and knife and sword and anything else that could prove dangerous in close quarters. He hung them on hooks at the end of the bed and then took Anyel's reaching hands in his, letting Anyel draw him down.

"Let me see you." Anyel tugged at the ties of Berrit's linen tunic. "So I can see how well it worked." Berrit had been so terribly ill, hardly an inch of his skin without at least one painful, fevered blister.

"Is that the only reason?" Obediently, Berrit sat up enough to strip the tunic away, baring smooth, olive skin barely



touched by the scars from the first illness and affected not at all by the second.

Anyel had forgotten how to speak. It was only when he was running his hands over soft skin and muscle and bone that he remembered. "No," he confessed.

"Then let me tend to the candle and the seal, and you will have what you want when I return." Berrit kissed him softly on the mouth, like a promise, and then withdrew to do what he'd said.

Anyel sat up, back to the wall, to watch Berrit seal the packet, fighting a twinge of regret. That part of his life was over. He was free now. Free of Quin. Free of dreaming that some day he'd be reclaimed and redeemed.

"I'm sorry," Berrit said, breaking into Anyel's haze of thought.

"What for?"

"Not defending you better. Not telling you the truth all those years." Berrit came back to sit on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, looking down at his big, scarred hands. "I could have done better by you, Anyel. Someone should have."

"I'm not sorry." Anyel hitched his robe so that he could kneel up and shuffle close enough to put his hand on Berrit's bare shoulder. "It was what was right for me." He loved Bisera, for its own merits, nothing more. He wanted to spend the rest of his life there. "Whatever Gods there are, they knew what was best for me."

"And what is best for you now?" Berrit turned a little and reached back to run his fingers over Anyel's mouth where

Quin had hit him. "To throw away twenty years of devotion because of an indiscretion?"

"It was more than that. I broke my oath. Something too serious to simply pray forgiveness over, even if I did believe in the god to whom I'd be praying." Anyel kissed Berrit's fingertips. "*This* is an indiscretion. But that time is over for me."

"Good." Berrit leaned in and kissed Anyel on the mouth, tenderly, again and again, between words. "Then let me be the patron of your studies. Let me be the envoy of your miraculous cures."

"You would?" It was so hard to think when he was being kissed like that, but Anyel pulled the scattered herd of his thoughts back together and made sense of them. "You could... so many people are ill."

"And they will get well." Berrit nudged Anyel and Anyel found himself sprawling back into the pillows. "For my sins, Quin made me commander of his armada, you know that. What you need carried," Berrit said softly, crawling up the bed to lean over Anyel, "I will carry for you. As far as it must go."

"Will you come back to Bisera?" Anyel was breathless, as though he'd been running. The idea of not seeing Berrit again was achingly terrible.

"My mother had a house there, above the sea. My father built it for her, because she missed her home too much. They called it Prasynne, for the gardens. It's been closed since she died, but it's time, I think, to open it again." Berrit smiled as he leaned in to kiss Anyel on the mouth.

"That's why you picked Bisera." Anyel put a hand on Berrit's chest to push him back gently. "You knew it."

"I did." Berrit resisted being pushed away and leaned in for another kiss. "I couldn't put you just anywhere. Even if I thought you needed a good spanking and a few years to think about what a fool you were. You were still a better person than almost anyone else I knew. Better than Quin. Better than me."

Anyel made a face at him for that last and Berrit laughed, then kissed him again, and this time, he didn't seem inclined to stop.

\* \* \* \*

Anyel stood on a weed-choked marble terrace, watching the horizon grow dark. Behind him, in the house, he could hear Vannes' voice raised, chiding, and some very unrepentant barking. Not all the doors in the house closed firmly and the little dog, Pepy, had taken to finding a way in. She had, in fact, followed Anyel all the way up the winding road from the main port to the abbey and then on to Prasynne.

Berrit had stayed behind to carry the first cures and letters from the abbot to the mainland where they would be given to the abbeys of Lochan and to the hedgewitches of the lowlands and the hearthwitches of the mountain country. Passed on from hand to hand, they would be so widespread that no one, in any one place, could own it all.

Anyel and Vannes and the hired men and women had come to restore Prasynne to its former state—or as close to it

as they could come before winter set in this year. The seasons were changing already, summer giving way to autumn. There would be a few rooms fit for living and the fireplaces and chimneys would be rebuilt. Enough room was made for Berrit's men to sleep in the guard house when he came in on his ship.

There were even plumes of smoke rising from beyond the trees, the first of the little cotholds were occupied by a few families that chose to follow "Pere" Anyel to his new home. They still called him Pere and nothing would dissuade them. It wasn't far from the main port to Prasynne; only the neglect of the road and the rise and fall of a ridge of trees made it seem so.

But today, Anyel wasn't watching for smoke or workers or even the little dog. He had his eyes on the sea far below and a mile away. His days of having nothing to look for had passed. The falcon cried overhead and circled down to land on the terrace rail.

"You saw him?" Anyel was irrationally flattered that she'd changed hunting grounds to stay near him. The falcon bobbed her head and sidled closer along the rail, so that Anyel could pet her and scratch the itchy spot on her wing. For all that he'd been raised with no religion other than the mysteries his mother practiced, he had developed a fondness for Lochan, or at least the idea of that the god was present. "We should go meet him."

By the time Anyel made his way down to the cove where the ships made landfall, he would be able to see the ship coming in. To his surprise, he missed Berrit. He'd thought the

attraction and the convenience of the relationship would be the whole of it, but he'd been wrong. Monastery life had been ill-preparation for such things.

The notes they sent by messenger bird—sometimes several a day—had brought them closer together than Anyel had expected. He found himself tracing the words with his fingers as though he could feel Berrit's touch there. In his head, he could hear Berrit's voice when he read the letters, again and again. It never wore thin.

They had three horses in the stable and four fit for the plough out in the paddock. They had ten cows and a bull, a small herd of sheep and a ram, chickens that ran in the yard. It was a tiny seed of an estate, but it would grow. In the stable, Anyel saddled two horses while Pepy made a warm nest in the hay on the floor. In a thick bag, he had hot mead in a padded wineskin, meat rolls, and baked potatoes still in their clay shells. It would be a decent meal, if he had to wait a while. On the spare horse, he packed the food, a lantern, and an extra cloak.

The monks' robes had long-since gone by the wayside. The last time he'd worn anything like them, Anyel had been bidding Berrit goodbye. Now, in warm silk and wool breeches, high boots, and a thick tunic under a heavy cloak, Anyel was dressed to ride, like any rural lord. He tugged on his gloves and swung up on the horse he'd named Gall, for the gelding's scarred knees. A lack of beauty hadn't swayed his affections in years.

As he rode out, the falcon came down to perch on the empty saddle. The stallion, Surrige, after the waves before a

storm, put his ears back at her but didn't complain. Anyel turned to see Vannes waving from the kitchen door. In a year or two, they'd have gardens all the way along the road to the gate. Prasynne would be like a garden within the garden of Bisera.

The rising wind sang through the palta groves and the pitayas orchard. Anyel was following the broken road around a scrubby stand of cedars with tiquisque plants flourishing around them, when he heard a distant yap. He whistled sharply and the falcon took to the air. Pepy was huffing furiously when she finally caught up to Anyel.

"Well." Anyel leaned over and held out his hands. "You were the one who wanted a nap."

Pepy barked, but jumped into his arms anyway. She made a good little travelling companion, sitting across Anyel's saddle just in front of him with her nose peeping through the part in his cloak. She was also a good hot water bottle on cooler days. The morning had come in warm, but the wind rode in from the sea like a herd of ghost horses, chilling everything in their path.

By the time Anyel rode to where the broken road turned whole again and came curving out of the cedar forest that thatched the coastline, he could see white sails on a dark ship running hard before the wind. He nudged Gall with his heels and they clattered down the road with Surridge behind them. The falcon swept by them and out to sea to meet the ship coming in.

The piers were broken in many places and the pilings were rotted and crumbled; except for one, the docks canted and

dipped under the waves. But, for Anyel, one was good enough. He stood where the pier met the shore, holding Pepy under one arm and the reins for Gall and Surrige in the other hand, waiting for Berrit's ship, *Tagetes*, to come in. He had been waiting for this feeling for so long, for the wrong person.

The wind threw waves up onto the stone piers and the wooden docks that remained. *Tagetes* shortened her sails as she drew near, the booms banging as the sails were gathered up and tied down. She was coming in so fast Anyel thought his heart would stop, but then her bow swung out at the last minute, the sailors threw bumpers over the sides and she came to rest slowly, drifting to a halt with the wind pressing her close against the dock.

Anyel was holding his breath for fear that all of this would be some illusion that would fall to pieces when he saw Berrit again. Pepy squirmed—he was holding her too tight—and so he let her go run and sniff. He stood still, like he was frozen, and waited until, at last, a man came down the gangplank and broke away from the rest. Anyel didn't need to see his face to know who it was. Even at a distance, he could tell.

"You're here." Berrit sounded almost surprised, but mostly pleased. Thumbs hooked in his belt, he made his way toward Anyel at a lazy pace. When he tossed his head to get his hair out of his face, Anyel could see him smile. The work went on around *Tagetes*, but it felt like they were alone.

Anyel swallowed down the lump in his throat. "Welcome back," he managed to say.

Berrit drew near, looking serious. "Let me look at you."

Anyel shook his hair out of his face and stepped back so Berrit could get a good look at him. "Yes?"

"Just..." Berrit shook his head, still smiling. "It's good to be back."

"I brought a meal, in case you were hungry." Anyel offered his hand tentatively and Berrit took it without hesitation.

"Thank you." Berrit squeezed his hand gently. "I am hungry," he admitted.

"Do you want to eat now? I can..." He got only that far before Berrit reeled him in with a tug that nearly took him off his feet and into Berrit's arms. "...or not."

Berrit kissed him hard, with a low growl. "Not hungry for *food*," he corrected. "Gods, I left you a monk too long."

"I... oh." Anyel couldn't help the way his cheeks burned. "No, you didn't." He leaned in and kissed Berrit shamelessly, seducing him with everything he could remember. They had done little more than this before, talking for hours instead, lying in each other's arms, comforting each other, learning. When Anyel finally pulled away, he was trembling. "I'm definitely hungry, too. Let's go home and..." He ran out of words, suddenly shy.

Berrit kissed him gently on the cheek. "Is it home now?"

Anyel nuzzled against Berrit's cheek and then let his head rest on Berrit's shoulder. "If you come back to it, it is," he said, just loud enough for Berrit to hear him over the wind.

"If you're here, I'll come back." Berrit held him close and they stood there for a long time, interrupted only by the huff of the horses and the cry of the falcon above, until Pepy came



running back—sodden—to hide under the hem of Anyel's cloak. "Always."

"Then let's go home." Anyel stole one last kiss before taking Gall's reins and swinging up into the saddle. While Berrit mounted Surridge, Anyel leaned over and let Pepy jump up. He sighed and scrubbed her with his cloak before settling her in place. Once she was settled Anyel reached over and took the bag of food from Berrit's saddle. They could eat as they rode, filling one kind of hunger.

They made good time going uphill, pushed onward by the incoming storm; the cold wind blew too noisy and mischievous for them to talk. But as they reached the gates—the rusted open gates that would have to wait for summer to be repaired—the wind split the clouds apart just long enough for the sun to spill down over Prasynne, lighting the whole of the little estate up in glorious gold and green. The falcon—perhaps some day Anyel would name her—came down to rest on his shoulder with a contented whistle.

"I think she says welcome home," Anyel said, looking over at Berrit. To his surprise, Berrit wasn't looking at Prasynne or the sky or even the bird. Berrit's eyes were on him alone, as though Berrit could find nothing better to look at around him.

"Welcome home, Anyel." Berrit nudged Surridge closer to Gall and leaned over to steal a kiss from Anyel's lips.

"Everything of mine is yours, if you'll have it."

Anyel looked around him as the wind whipped the horses back into a walk. "As long as it's yours," he said, reaching out for Berrit's hand. "As long as it's yours, I'll keep it."

End

Exiled to Paradise: The Nine of Pentacles  
*by Anah Crow*

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