

Lord of the White Hell

Book Two



Ginn Hale

"An intricate world, well-integrated social issues, believable sexual encounters, and an interesting mystery make this dense, languorous tale appealing for any fan of romantic fantasy."

—Publishers Weekly



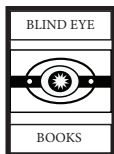
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by Ginn Hale

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This book is dedicated to Triston who will doubtless inspire others as well.

Cadeleon & Neighboring Kingdoms



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Chapter One

Kiram stared with red-rimmed eyes out at the fields lining the road to the Sagrada Academy. Only desiccated sunflower stalks and tracks of broken soil remained from the harvest. The land looked as ragged as he felt and the dark confines of the Tornestal carriage offered him no more rest than his sumptuous bed had the night before. Despite exhaustion, hard liquor and hours spent wandering unknown streets, sleep had eluded him. Just as it evaded his restless mind now.

Outside, blue jays flashed their brilliant wings from a stand of apple trees; red leaves fell as the birds took to the air and swept past the creaking luggage carriage. Kiram shuddered at the sight of them and the scabbed gash in his forearm throbbed as if pulsing with poison. A week ago he could have found the birds a lovely distraction on such a cold fall morning. He might have delighted in their graceful flight and taken little note of how closely the flock followed the steady course of this single carriage.

Now he knew their chase betrayed a malevolent intent. They flew as portents of the shadow curse, spies for the man who controlled it.

Slumped across the seat opposite Kiram, Fedeles Quemanor groaned and twitched, his peaceful doze turning fitful as the jays circled overhead. He gave a strained gasp and rolled his head from beneath his arm. Kiram glanced to Fedeles' face but for an instant he saw only Javier in those sharp, troubled features.

A longing so intense that it felt like pain shot through Kiram. He rubbed his tired eyes. He couldn't afford to think of Javier. What had been between them was over. They had both destroyed it last night.

This morning Javier had hardly met his gaze and offered no response when Kiram greeted him at the breakfast table. Instead he'd risen, abandoning his meal, wished Fedeles good day, and departed for the Sagrada Academy. Less than an hour later the dour staff of the Tornesal townhouse had efficiently packed Kiram and Fedeles into this musty carriage as if they were just two more pieces of Javier's luggage. While Fedeles dozed, Kiram deliberately turned his gaze from the trunks and leather chests emblazoned with Javier's family crest and tried to set his mind to other subjects.

But the strong physical resemblance between Javier and Fedeles roused all the thoughts Kiram had wished to forget. The stench of debauchery seemed to drift from the leather carriage seats. How could it be that those minutes he longed most to forget could burn in his memory with such painful detail?

Fedeles' legs shifted, brushing briefly against Kiram's calf and the contact offered Kiram a strange kind of comfort.

Both Javier and Fedeles were long-limbed, pale-skinned young men who sported ink black hair and handsome features. This morning the random shadows of luggage and Kiram's own exhaustion cast a harder line to Fedeles' jaw and lent an arrogant curve to his lips. The bulk of his new velvet coat offered the illusion of Javier's angular musculature to Fedeles' thinner frame.

The two of them could easily have passed for brothers, even twins. It was no wonder that some gossips whispered of scandalous relations between their parents. But Kiram knew Fedeles deserved better from him than to be seen as some proxy for his cousin, so he shifted his leg away.

Suddenly Fedeles jerked upright. With consciousness, much of his likeness to Javier fled. His dark eyes flashed wide as his mouth twitched between grimaces and grins. He caught Kiram's hand in his long fingers and Kiram couldn't help but note the power of his grip. Nearly as crushing as Javier's had been last night.

“They want to kill him, Kiri,” Fedeles whispered. “The birds—” He cut himself short as a jay dived past the carriage window. The color drained entirely from Fedeles’ face, leaving his mouth pale as chalk.

“I won’t let them harm you, Fedeles,” Kiram assured him. Fedeles shook his head as a violent shudder passed through his body. A wild, manic grin jerked across his lips but his eyes remained wide and terrified.

“Look here, Fedeles.” Kiram lifted his lotus medallion from beneath the collar of his shirt and held it out. Even in the dim light of the closed carriage the gold surface glowed. Sacred Bahiim symbols gleamed as if throwing off their own light. Kiram hoped that, if nothing else, the medallion might distract Fedeles from his own fear.

Fedeles stared at the medallion like a fascinated crow.

“My uncle’s partner is a Bahiim, a Haldiim holy man. He gave this to me. The lotus is a sign of powerful protection among my people, you know.”

According to Alizadeh this medallion was more than that. It served as Alizadeh’s spyglass, offering him the chance to detect the inner workings of the shadow curse and perhaps even to identify the man who controlled it. As Kiram held the medallion up now, he hoped that it would catch some hint of the dark magic that directed the jays in their pursuit of Fedeles.

The medallion swung on its chain as the carriage bounced over rough cobblestones. Light glinted off its polished surface. Then, without warning or seeming reason, the jays suddenly broke off from their chase. With a few harsh calls they fled into the thick woods that encircled the Sagrada Academy.

As he watched them go, Fedeles’ expression lit with joy and he threw his arms around Kiram, crushing the air from him in his fierce embrace. Then Fedeles released him to press his face against the window and glare in the direction that the jays had fled.

"Stay away. Stay away. Stay away," Fedeles whispered as if reciting a holy chant. Then he dropped back into his seat.

"Good riddance." Kiram too felt better with the birds out of sight. He wondered if perhaps now he might steal a few moments of sleep. But when he closed his eyes his thoughts churned with the sour memory of writhing whores and Javier's proud glower.

Kiram straightened up, awake again.

Across from him, Fedeles hummed a bright tune. Now and then he moved his legs and tapped his toes against the floor of the carriage, keeping perfect time. After a few minutes he patted Kiram's knee.

"Dancing, Kiri," Fedeles informed him.

Kiram smiled. He didn't know why, but out of everyone at the Sagrada Academy only Fedeles seemed to know the Haldiim diminutive of his name.

"We'll dance a quaressa." Fedeles continued sweeping his feet in graceful motions across the carriage floor. "Left foot out and back, out and kick." Fedeles demonstrated and then looked expectantly at Kiram's motionless feet.

Though Kiram realized what Fedeles wanted, he still felt a moment of resistance; the bitterness of last night clung to him. But Fedeles was the last person he could blame for any of his troubles with Javier. So Kiram emulated the motions while Fedeles beamed with approval.

"Now right foot." Fedeles again demonstrated the dance step and Kiram copied him.

Laughing and grinning, Fedeles led him through the footwork of an entire quaressa. Last night Kiram had been so hurt and repulsed that he'd imagined he would never again find anything Cadeleonian charming. But this morning his sense of adventure seemed to have returned.

And in his own way, Fedeles was wonderful company, because for all his madness, he accepted Kiram without judgment and right now Kiram appreciated that more than anything.

"Again, again!" Fedeles crowed. Kiram obliged, mirroring Fedeles' steps and kicks from his own seat.

Leather trunks creaked and the carriage bounced beneath their weight. More than once Kiram misstepped, knocking knees and ankles with Fedeles, but Fedeles laughed it off. Kiram quickly improved. By the fourth time, their steps were almost perfectly synchronized. Fedeles sang out the names of his favorite horses, calling often for Kiram's black gelding, Firaj. Then he delightedly crowed for Javier's white stallion, Lunaluz.

Out of the corner of his eye Kiram thought he did catch a flash of white through the dense forest lining the road. Reflexively he looked and then felt the drop of disappointment as he discovered only a stand of white-barked birches growing among the dark woods.

The carriage rattled around another bend and the vast fortress of the Sagrada Academy loomed ahead of them. The heavy stonework of the main building dominated the grounds, rising three stories and thrusting its two watchtowers even higher. Kiram took in the whitewashed expanses of stables and sparring house without regard but scowled at the cerulean roof and gold steeple of the chapel.

Alizadeh and Rafie had only referred to the man controlling the shadow curse as the 'man on the hill' but it seemed obvious that if anyone at the Sagrada Academy would gladly plot murder and torture at the behest of the royal bishop it would be Holy Father Habalan.

Then Kiram wondered just how many jays sheltered among the gnarled oaks and fruit trees on the chapel grounds. Two of the birds perched in the branches of a tall pear tree. As the carriage rattled past Kiram was certain that the birds returned his gaze with calculating stares.

Suddenly Kiram remembered the merciless way that the flocks of blue jays had attacked and ravaged Nakiesh's sisters. Not even their own deaths had deterred the jays' assault.

Kiram looked away from the chapel and caught sight of familiar faces among the students gathered at the stables. A sense of something like safety returned to him. Fedeles leaned back into his seat and closed his eyes.

When the carriage drew to a halt, both Kiram and Fedeles bounded out to greet the waiting Grunito brothers. Nestor welcomed them with a toothy smile while Elezar simply used his massive frame to deflect other giddy students from crashing into their friendly exchange.

Kiram noted the brighter color of Genimo's auburn hair as he ducked past Elezar. Kiram and he exchanged cool, indifferent gazes but said nothing to each other as Genimo sauntered to Fedeles' side.

Kiram searched the throng of Cadeleonian students, grooms and house servants. They surrounded him in a sea of straight brown hair, dark eyes and light, freckled skin; their builds ranged from short, brawny grooms to the mountain of muscle that was Elezar Grunito—all of them quite the opposite of Kiram's slim Haldiim build, light eyes, dark skin and curling blond hair. Javier was not among them. His absence made Kiram anxious and uncertain of what to expect when he did arrive.

"Are we the last of the Hellions?" Kiram had to raise his voice to be heard over all the surrounding shouts and greetings.

"Most of the rest have gone up to the dormitories," Nestor replied and then he yawned widely. Kiram wasn't sure if it was just the hard morning light but Nestor looked nearly as tired as Kiram felt. His plump, pink cheeks seemed hollow and his small gold spectacles couldn't quite hide the shadows beneath his eyes. Nestor had encountered his own romantic troubles last night, Kiram thought, but he didn't want to ask about them in front of everyone.

Housemen in gray liveries slipped past Kiram and Fedeles, hauling away the luggage. Grooms saw to the horses and carriage.

One of the whip-thin Helio twins alighted from a different carriage and his friends greeted him, asking about his brother in hushed voices. Kiram peered past them, still searching.

"Javier's at chapel," Elezar informed him. "How any man can stand to attend morning and afternoon service is beyond me."

"I thought he might be," Kiram replied. All at once he didn't know what more to say. He'd seen too much of his fellow Hellions' passions last night. Now he couldn't quite meet Elezar's hawkish gaze.

"I should see Fedeles to the infirmary." Genimo stepped past Kiram, leading Fedeles by the hand as if he were a child. Fedeles smiled, but Kiram could see him pulling away from Genimo's grip.

"Fedeles can stay with me," Kiram offered. A pained expression flickered across Genimo's narrow features.

"He needs to see Scholar Donamillo for his treatment, but I'd be happy to turn him over to you afterward." Genimo didn't meet Kiram's eyes but instead stole a quick glance to small scar on Kiram's cheek. "Unless Javier objects."

"Why on earth would he?" Kiram responded, though it occurred to him that Javier could refuse just to spite him. Javier could be cruel when angered and as far as Kiram could tell, right now he was furious. Still, Kiram doubted that Javier would be so petty as to use Fedeles like some pawn.

Kiram felt briefly frustrated with himself for being too attached to Javier to think poorly of him even after last night. It would have been much simpler if he could dislike Javier, or failing that, just forget about him.

"If the two of you are going to stand around wondering why Javier does anything he does, Fedeles is never going to get to his treatment," Elezar commented.

Genimo scowled at Elezar, then turned his attention back to Fedeles.

"Come, Fedeles." Genimo pulled Fedeles along while Fedeles stumbled and dragged his feet behind him. There was nothing Kiram could do for him and he knew Scholar Donamillo's treatments were the best hope Fedeles had for survival until someone could find a way to break the curse. Still, Kiram wished that Fedeles didn't dread them so much.

"We'd best clear out from in front of the stables as well," Nestor said as another carriage rolled up.

The three of them took a wandering path towards the main building. Dry golden blades of autumn grass crunched beneath their shoes as they crossed the lawn and Kiram noted that dark rose hips now dotted the potted roses. Many of the apple trees sported bare branches while a litter of yellow leaves lay across the ground. Despite the bright sunlight a chill hung in the air and filled the deep shadows of the main building.

"Summer seems over all at once," Kiram commented.

"True, but there's plenty of ripe apples now." Nestor's broad smile brightened his face despite the dark circles beneath his brown eyes. "And with the autumn tournament over, you and I won't be spending every waking hour in battle practice."

That would be a relief, Kiram decided.

Nestor seemed surprisingly cheerful, given the trouble he'd been in the previous night. Riossa's lonely, hapless arrival at the Grunito house must have worked out.

"Well," Kiram glanced to Nestor, "aren't you going to tell me what happened after I left your mother's party?"

"The dolt got himself engaged," Elezar said in disgust.

At this Nestor smiled quite proudly. "There wasn't anything else to do. I couldn't let Riossa just take a fall, not that she wasn't willing to. She would—"

"She duped you, that's what she did," Elezar interrupted.

Nestor scowled at him. "You weren't there and you have no idea what went on."

Kiram thought this was the first time he'd ever seen Nestor take a stand against his older brother. Elezar didn't seem to appreciate his little brother's newfound sense of independence.

"All I need to know is that you're a fool. That girl fucked you over." Elezar stopped suddenly, catching sight of a figure far across the lawn. Kiram followed his gaze and realized that they were both watching Javier's broad back and long legs as he strode from the chapel towards the stables.

"I'm going to check up on Javier," Elezar announced. "Either of you coming?"

"Maybe later." Kiram hoped the response sounded casual.

"Later," Nestor agreed.

Elezar shrugged as if he couldn't account for their tastes and then hurried after his friend.

"Thank God," Nestor said as soon as Elezar was out of earshot. "He's been badgering me all day."

"Well, it is surprising that you're engaged. You've only known Riossa a week."

"Honestly, Kiram, there wasn't anything else I could have done. And it wasn't like Elezar makes it sound. Riossa didn't come in alone to the Grunito house to cause a scandal. She'd been by herself outside the townhouse for nearly two hours waiting for her sister to join her. She only came inside to try and have a carriage summoned so that she could return to her father's house. But the footman saw her invitation and escorted her into the ballroom."

Kiram frowned at this. He was almost certain that Cadeleonian girls from good families were not supposed to be left alone for hours on end. "So, why did the sister leave Riossa waiting?"

Nestor lowered his voice. "Because she was having an affair with the carriage driver, apparently, and picked last night to run off with him. She told her husband that she was taking Riossa to the celebration so he wouldn't wonder why she was gone. Then she told Riossa that she'd forgotten something and left Riossa outside the townhouse while she took the family carriage and fled."

"Sounds like a rotten sister."

"Yes, and it wasn't as if anyone knew what had happened right away either. At first my mother was thinking the sister intentionally left Riossa so that Riossa could get her claws in me." Nestor rolled his eyes. "As if she would need to do something like that. She's beautiful and funny and smart."

"And a good kisser," Kiram added. "If my source is to be trusted."

"Yeah, she's that too." Nestor grinned.

"So if your mother thought this was all a trick, how did you end up engaged?"

"Riossa's father is an ass. He half lost his mind when he found out about Riossa's sister. He started screaming at Riossa for allowing her sister to ruin their family name—right in front of everyone. And then he told Riossa that he was sending her to the Inancia Convent, and when she said she wouldn't go, he struck her!" Just recounting the event, Nestor flushed with anger. "He knocked her to the floor right in front of me. What was I supposed to do?"

Kiram wondered what he would have done in such a situation—certainly not get engaged to the girl. He kept his thoughts to himself.

Nestor continued heatedly, "I told him that if he ever laid a hand on her again that I'd hit him so hard he'd be talking out his crapper."

"Did you really say *crapper*?"

"I know I should have said asshole, but my mom was right there," Nestor explained sheepishly. "Then I proposed. I guess marrying me sounded a lot better than being sent to a convent."

"So...there'll be a wedding?" Kiram could not have imagined Nestor's engagement would be so dramatic. Perhaps having a black-haired, romantic adventurer like Atreau for an upperclassman had affected Nestor more than Kiram had realized.

"Not until spring, but in the meantime my mom's taken Riossa into her care. She's not happy about the marriage but she was proud that I wouldn't let some bastard treat his daughter so badly."

"Not many men would step up like that." Kiram nodded. "I wouldn't have."

"Well, to be honest, I should have stepped up sooner...you know, right after we first...dallied. But she didn't say anything about it so I let it alone too."

“Dallied?” Kiram didn’t understand the Cadeleonian term at first but then he realized what Nestor meant. “Nestor, you didn’t.”

“How’d you think I knew so much about kissing her?” Then suddenly Nestor became serious. “You won’t tell any of this to Javier or Elezar or any of the others, will you?”

“No,” Kiram assured Nestor. “Though they’d hardly have the right to judge.”

“But they would,” Nestor said. “They’d treat Riossa like she was one of those tarts at the Goldenrod and I couldn’t stand for that.”

“Don’t worry,” Kiram assured him. “I won’t say a word.”

As they made their way past the clusters of first-year students lounging on the steps, Nestor whispered a full confession. While he rhapsodized about slipping his hand inside Riossa’s bodice and touching her breasts, Kiram realized that Nestor hadn’t gotten much farther with Riossa than a few furtive gropes in a fair tent—certainly not far enough to make marriage a necessity. Still, his face flushed and his expression grew ecstatic as he described the stolen moments.

Kiram resisted comparing those brief intimacies to the ones he had shared with Javier. He said, “You’re quite taken with Riossa, aren’t you?”

“Honestly, I never thought I’d meet a girl who wouldn’t seem a little dull, but when I’m with her, we talk and laugh and I don’t even notice the time passing. She’s not like other girls at all. She tells great jokes and she draws really well and she knows law better than I do.”

Kiram didn’t tell Nestor that she sounded like any one of a multitude of Haldiim girls he knew. He’d read enough Cadeleonian literature to know that such traits were not encouraged among Cadeleonian women.

Nestor and he parted ways on the stairs where Nestor saluted him before disappearing into his room to attend his upperclassman’s hangover.

Kiram continued climbing up to the room he and Javier shared in the east watchtower. As he crossed the threshold, a feeling of deep sadness washed over him. Javier had obviously already been here; a discarded jacket hung on the back of his chair and one of his dusty boots peeked from the shadows beneath his bed.

Fresh incantations decorated the floor, new dark ink scrawled over faded red symbols.

Kiram wondered if it would do either of them any good if he went to Javier now. But he didn't know what he would say and Elezar would be there in any case. And he certainly wasn't about to get down on his knees and beg as Javier had demanded. The memory of Javier's pronouncement sent a flare of anger through the melancholy of Kiram's thoughts.

"Kivhash to Javier," Kiram swore in his native Haldiim. He had other ways to occupy his time and other reasons—better reasons—to be at the Sagrada Academy.

Kiram swung his tool bag over his shoulder and left. When he reached his shed, he was pleased to discover that the workmen had raised a section of the roof as he had requested. There would now be enough space to test his steam engine without it tearing through the ceiling supports.

Autumn chill filled the dim interior of the shed. He lit his sweet oil lamp and opened the window shutters, allowing bright afternoon light to pour in. Sunlight and heavy work soon warmed him. The familiar smell of machine oil and the weight of cast iron in his hands soothed him. Steadily, he assembled his secondary steam chamber, taking careful measurements, rechecking his work and making corrections for the pieces he would need forged to create the condensation chamber.

In his mind he could see it already assembled and he didn't suppress his satisfied grin. His situation now might be a wreck of frustration, worry and confusion, but this mechanism would not fail him. It would work as nothing else in his life seemed to: precisely as he planned.

A knock at the shed door interrupted Kiram's thoughts.

"It's unlocked." Kiram wrote down a final measurement, then looked up to see Scholar Donamillo peering in through the doorway. Kiram offered him a welcoming smile. As Donamillo gazed intently at the half-assembled steam engine, afternoon light struck the side of his face catching the thick streaks of gray in his dull brown hair and etching the deep wrinkles that edged his appreciative expression. Not since Kiram's father had another man gazed at Kiram's work with such an expression of delight and curiosity.

"I wanted to make sure your arm wasn't hurting you." Scholar Donamillo didn't pull his eyes from the towering mechanism. Kiram could see him trying to guess at the purpose of unassembled pipes and valves.

"My arm only hurts when I think about it." Kiram pulled back the sleeve of his shirt, allowing Donamillo to see the thick scab that traced his forearm.

"It looks good. I'm glad." Scholar Donamillo's attention returned almost at once to Kiram's mechanism. Slowly Donamillo circled the engine. He cocked his head in curiosity at the mount where the cooling chamber would rest.

Kiram couldn't keep himself from explaining the entire thing to Scholar Donamillo. Months ago, when he had describing his innovations to Javier, he had felt that Javier was humoring him, listening without much understanding or any real concern. Scholar Donamillo smiled in genuine delight when Kiram described the energy the cooling chamber would save and, after examining Kiram's diagrams, he offered several suggestions to rebuild a troubling valve.

"In my early work with the mechanical cures I came across a similar problem. The heat of constant friction distorted a number of my base plates. A few even melted." Scholar Donamillo's sheepish look at this admission gave Kiram a strong impression what Donamillo must have been like as a young man: both intense

and shy. He leaned closer to Kiram and asked quietly, "Do you mind if I take a few measurements of my own? I want to ensure that the crank on Fedeles' mechanical cure will be compatible with your engine."

"Please do." Pride filled Kiram. He knew that his creation might not just win the Crown Challenge but would also aid Scholar Donamillo's work to save Fedeles.

While Scholar Donamillo measured the pistons, Kiram continued his own work, comfortable with the quiet mumbling of another inventor. More than once, as his thoughts drifted, he forgot that he was not once again in his father's workshop. Then fourth bell sounded and Scholar Donamillo excused himself.

Kiram himself had done as much as he could until his new parts were forged. He rewrote his order for the blacksmith in neat, clear print.

Nestor arrived and invited Kiram to join him for a ride, which Kiram accepted with pleasure. At some point during the months of morning lessons with Javier, riding had transformed from a fearful trial to a source of comfort. Now Kiram stroked Firaj's neck and felt the tension in his own body relax into the big gelding's even gait. Nestor and he discussed their upcoming history papers and the new class schedule now that the tournament was over. From time to time Nestor lapsed into some reverie about Riossa. She smelled like flowers; she could burp the entire alphabet. The things that attracted Nestor mystified Kiram.

Tentatively, Nestor asked about Kiram's visit to the Goldenrod last night. As Kiram described the gaudy rooms and the numerous naked women, he tried not to let his revulsion carry through. Still, he couldn't manage any enthusiasm and he guessed that was telling enough.

"Not the place for you?" Nestor casually brushed a yellow leaf from his roan stallion's mane.

"No," Kiram admitted. The pungent, sweet scent of fallen apples drifted on the cool air and Firaj briefly snuffled at the ground to locate an overripe fruit. Kiram indulged him.

“To be honest,” Nestor said quietly, “it doesn’t sound all that appealing to me either. I mean, who wants to have sex with a bunch of other men in the room—especially my brother?”

Kiram laughed at that.

They returned just before the first of the evening bells rang. After brushing down their horses and rinsing themselves in the icy water of the stable troughs, Kiram and Nestor rushed to dinner. Shouldering past the crowds of first and second-year students thronging the lower tables, they took their places at the Hellions’ table. Atreau and Morisio had already claimed their seats and Atreau offered them an offhanded greeting as they dropped down onto the wooden benches. Kiram felt a slight flush spread across his cheeks, meeting Atreau’s gaze and remembering the other man’s drunken rutting. Fortunately Kiram’s dark complexion disguised the worst of his blush and Atreau’s attention quickly shifted as other Hellions arrived for dinner.

Kiram glanced to the empty space reserved for Javier. His longing to see Javier felt as sharp as hunger but also edged with dread. Javier could turn cruel easily.

When Elezar arrived a few minutes later, Kiram considered asking him if Javier had seemed to be in a bad mood but resisted. Instead, he peered around as the dining hall filled with students. In the past week, Kiram had almost forgotten the heat and smell of so many young men gathering in one room. When Kiram happened to take a deep breath, he realized that the pungent scent of horses and sweat saturated his jacket and trousers, making him as much of an odorous offender as any of the grubby first-year boys who sat wiping their noses on the backs of their shirtsleeves.

Javier arrived just before the teachers and Holy Father Habalan. He strode between the rows of tables with a handsome and arrogant expression of assurance. The jacket he wore glinted with silver threads and his black hair gleamed. His trousers were perfectly cut, accentuating the hard muscles of his long legs. Kiram could hardly look away. When he smiled, the warmth

of his expression lent an alluring softness to his sharp features, though there remained a wicked gleam in his eyes.

He knew, Kiram realized. He knew exactly how good he looked and how the sight of him would affect Kiram.

And suddenly Kiram felt very worried. He had been prepared for Javier's most biting remarks, even secretly hoped for them, so that he could just hate Javier and be done. Now he had no idea how he could inure himself to Javier's charms.

And Javier did not relent throughout the meal. He was unerringly funny and pleasant. He didn't lavish his attention upon Kiram, rather, he complimented Kiram's work as his squire in an easy, offhanded manner. He bantered with Morisio and Elezar and very casually allowed one of his long legs to brush against Kiram's calf. A spark of sharp desire flickered through Kiram's body at the small contact.

It required nearly all of Kiram's attention to ignore Javier's appealing presence. The food hardly made any impression upon Kiram and more than once he had to ask Nestor to repeat himself.

"You seem a little distracted this evening, Kiram," Nestor commented at last.

Javier gave him a knowing smile. Kiram could feel a flush rising but he refused to acknowledge it.

"I've been thinking about Scholar Donamillo's mechanical cures," Kiram replied.

A vexed expression flickered across Javier's face.

"They're fascinating, aren't they?" Morisio commented. "I've been studying them myself. I even built a few miniatures but powering them is the real trick."

Morisio went on and Kiram tried to concentrate on his freckled face, but the light sensation of Javier's calf against his own obsessed him. He could feel the warmth of Javier's skin radiating through his stockings and he remembered the weight of Javier's bare body against his own and the heat of his mouth. Kiram hardly heard Morisio's continuing ruminations

on the key to Scholar Donamillo's unprecedented success. "I can't help but wonder if there isn't something more than pure mechanism behind it."

At this Genimo darted a glance to Kiram and Kiram realized that Genimo already knew that Scholar Donamillo used blessings and spells as well as mechanically-generated power for the cure that protected Fedeles. The knowledge that only he and Genimo shared the scholar's secret lent an uncomfortable sense of fraternity to his normally cold regard of Genimo.

"I can't help but wonder if you realize that no one cares a pig's tit about Scholar Donamillo's mechanisms," Elezar told Morisio. In response, Morisio just threw a hunk of bread at him. Elezar leaned back and caught it in his mouth.

"If your fortunes ever fail, no doubt you'll have a place in some circus," Javier told Elezar.

"You're one to talk." Elezar tossed a golden plum at Javier. Javier caught the plum and spun it on the tip of his finger. Then he rolled it between his hands. White sparks of light flickered between his fingers and suddenly the plum appeared to vanish. All conversation at the table quieted as the Hellions watched in fascination.

Javier held out his empty hands, displaying his palms, then with a flourish he reached across the table and caught Kiram's hand in a gentle grip. A conspirator's warmth flashed in his smile. As he pulled his hand back, Kiram felt the plum drop from the cuff of Javier's sleeve into his palm. Hellions hooted and clapped at the seemingly magical reappearance. Students at other tables gawked.

Kiram couldn't help but be delighted—not just with Javier's ingenuity but also at being included in the sleight of hand. He had no doubt that Javier had conceived the gesture hoping that it would charm him but the knowledge did nothing to diminish Kiram's pleasure.

Elezar's demand for another plum brought normalcy back to the table. Atreau needed notes from Holy Father Habalan's

lecture on the conquest of the Labaran Dynasty. Genimo offered his. Elezar complained about Nestor's engagement and Nestor grumbled responses.

Kiram ate the sweet, tender plum and wondered with a terrible sinking dread whether his resistance or Javier's persistence would fail first. He wished he could feel happy at the prospect of either.

Chapter Two

As weeks passed, the weather grew colder and the days shorter. After so many months of climbing out of bed early to ride with Javier, Kiram now found himself waking hours before sunrise. He always glanced to Javier's bed, but more often than not found it empty. Kiram rarely returned to sleep. Instead he lit a lamp and busied himself with schoolwork. Every Primiday he heated his medallion as Alizadeh had instructed, watching the lotus turn luminous white while the golden metal remained strangely cool in his hands.

He hoped that this small ritual would be of some use to Alizadeh, since he'd been able to glean precious little concerning the shadow curse. Being Haldiim, he was banned from the chapel grounds and the few times he'd lingered at the gates Holy Father Habalan had come squawking and flapping at him like an infuriated brown hen.

He considered enlisting Nestor to aid him but then decided against it as far too dangerous. Nestor was a good friend and brave, but far from practiced in deceit or spying.

Javier would have been the best man to turn to but Kiram was already finding it nearly impossible not to be moved by the mere presence of Javier's strong body and knowing smiles. Entangling their relationship further by making Javier his conspirator would only make matters worse. And they were already rather bad.

On the coldest, darkest mornings he wandered to Javier's empty bed and pulled the blankets around his shoulders. He imagined that he could still feel the warmth of Javier's body and smell his skin. From time to time he picked up Calixto Tornesa's

diary and flipped through the strange pages, wondering what it was that Javier read within them.

He knew that lying in Javier's bed was not the best way to put his desire behind him, but he couldn't seem to help himself and as long as Javier didn't know, he supposed that it wouldn't matter.

Already Javier's flirtations were growing rare. The few times he did steal a caress or even a quick kiss, he withdrew easily, Kiram's constant rebuffs having worn him down. Kiram wished that he could take some pride in this triumph over Javier, but instead he felt like the lowest kind of liar. And worse, he yearned desperately for Javier, stealing the scent of him, the feel of him from his belongings every morning.

One such morning Kiram leafed through the diary, studying twisting images, some resembling script and others tangled as tree roots, when he noticed something white fluttering past the window.

Snow.

He went to the frost-laced panes and stared out. Huge white flakes tumbled down. There seemed to be so many that the sky itself turned pale. Kiram watched in fascination as the academy grounds transformed from dark shadows to soft white masses.

Snow rarely fell in Anacleto but here in the north it settled in white swaths that blanketed the entire countryside. Soon Kiram learned that it was not some passing rarity but a condition he could expect to endure for the rest of his term.

He found the icicle-laden trees and snow-covered hills beautiful, but he was not prepared for the penetrating cold of the northern winter. Even wearing two jackets under his coat could not keep the cold at bay. He slipped constantly on patches of ice.

Once, when Javier caught him, it had been so relieving that Kiram had to fight his desire to simply lean into Javier and accept his strength and warmth. But that would only lead him back to another night like the one he had endured at the Goldenrod, so he had thanked Javier and stepped away.

To his chagrin he'd fallen on his ass almost immediately afterwards. Javier hadn't laughed but Kiram could tell he'd wanted to.

The next Sacreday, while the rest of the Hellions attended chapel, Kiram cobbled together a pair of spiked metal plates, which he strapped to the soles of his boots. The devices were not lovely, being assembled from the remains of bridles, old nails, broken forks and anything else Kiram managed to lay his hands on; but they worked. At last his feet stayed where he put them on the damnable ice.

He bundled up in his jackets and coat and marched out to meet the Hellions as they sauntered from the chapel grounds. Other students poured out of the iron gates but the wide berth they gave the Hellions allowed Kiram to find his friends easily within the crowd.

Javier and Elezar shared some joke, Elezar roaring with laughter and Javier appearing to be amused by his own wit. Kiram marveled at the two of them standing knee-deep in snow drifts, wearing only their academy uniforms. Elezar's jacket even hung open as if cold could not penetrate the sheer mass of his muscular body. Morisio, Atreau and Nestor followed close behind Javier and Elezar. Nestor offered Morisio and Atreau glimpses of sketches that he'd scribbled in his prayer book. Behind them Fedeles swayed and sang out the names of his favored horses as if they were holy psalms. Genimo trailed behind him, chewing something and looking bored.

As usual, Javier noticed Kiram first, meeting his gaze and saying nothing. Then Nestor waved at him. Kiram strode forward, planting his steps proudly as he walked across the icy flagstones.

"What are those on your boots?" Nestor hurried closer and Kiram happily demonstrated his new inventions.

"That's really clever!" Nestor declared. Javier appeared more amused than impressed and Elezar just shook his head.

"You think they'll actually keep you from falling on your skinny ass all the time?" Elezar asked.

"Hope so," Kiram replied. "I don't think I could fall on my ass any more than I already do now, anyway."

"True," Elezar agreed.

"What's this?" Atreau stepped closer, inspecting Kiram's boots. "You've made yourself crampons, Kiram."

"I have?" Kiram asked.

"Yes. Back home in the mountains people wear them when the winter gets wet and all the roads turn to sheet ice." Atreau studied the contraptions for a moment longer, then glanced to Kiram. "You've never seen a pair before?"

"No," Kiram replied. "I had no idea."

"I don't think they're normally made with forks but otherwise yours look pretty close."

Kiram smiled at that, pleased that his design at least resembled something people really used.

"We should have him make his own skates," Elezar suggested to Javier, but Javier shook his head.

"Let's not. Otherwise Kiram will spend the next week in that frigid little shed and come back every night snotty from the cold and reeking of machine oil." Javier's gaze seemed to soften for just a moment. Then he turned from Kiram and headed towards the dormitory. The rest of the Hellions followed him like dogs in a pack and Kiram moved with them, taking up his usual position behind Javier and next to Nestor. When he felt a hand ruffle his hair, he knew it belonged to Fedeles and accepted the affection, as all the Hellions did, with good humor.

"You haven't been ice-skating before, have you?" Nestor asked when they reached the dormitory.

"No, but I've read about it." He recalled scrutinizing a small woodblock image of couple holding hands as they balanced on odd-looking shoes. "Is that where you're all going this afternoon?"

"Indeed." Javier glanced back at him. "That's where we're all going. You included."

"Me?" Excitement and nervousness filled him. "I don't know how to ice skate. I don't even have the...shoes."

“Skates,” Atreau supplied. Kiram felt a little embarrassed, because he was sure that he’d known the right word; it had just slipped his mind momentarily.

“And you do have skates, actually,” Nestor told him. “I helped Javier find a pair for you at the fair during the tournament. They’re nice. Double-lined deerskin and probably warmer than those thin boots you’re wearing now.”

And that settled that. Minutes later Nestor had retrieved his own skates and Kiram’s. The other Hellions gathered their skates as well as scarves, caps and gloves. Javier tossed Kiram a woolen cap and a pair of fur lined gloves.

Then all of them made their way through the snow-covered apple orchard. They followed the frozen stream to an open meadow where the waters pooled into a glassy pond. They weren’t the first students to arrive.

Several youths raced from one of the wooden bridges, spanning the stream to the far end of the pond and back. Groups of younger students stumbled and linked arms to spin like dancers out across the ice. Falls seemed common and were generally accompanied with shouts of surprise and laughter.

Kiram eyed the long thin blades of his ice skates as he pulled them on and laced the supple leather tight. He couldn’t imagine how anyone could balance on such a thin edge. And yet many Cadeleonians did so easily. Already Javier and Atreau had joined in on a race. Fedeles spun in amazingly fast circles and even jumped from one foot to the other, landing as easily as if he were barefoot.

Kiram watched Nestor. He shoved off from the bank of the pond and glided in a slow circle, brushing snow off the back of his pants and coat. Then Elezar pounced down from the bank onto the ice. He snatched Nestor’s cap from his head.

“Hey! Give it back!” Nestor demanded.

“Catch me and I will.” Elezar pushed off from the toe of his skate and went hurtling across the frozen surface with Nestor in dogged pursuit.

Kiram stepped gingerly out onto the ice. He felt his skate begin to slip from under him and clutched at the bank to keep from falling. Hanging there, he kicked his feet out attempting to find some kind of footing. Then he felt a firm, steadying hand against his back.

"Stop thrashing around," Javier said. "You look like a startled colt. Relax. I won't let you fall."

Kiram calmed down and discovered that his stability did improve, though he didn't trust it enough to completely release his grip on the bank.

"Good." Javier smacked a thick clump of snow off the front of Kiram's coat. "Now take my hand."

"I'll fall and you'll just come right down on top of me," Kiram responded.

"Only if you pull me down after you. If you start to go down, let go of me. I'm sure you shouldn't have any trouble doing that." There was an edge to Javier's tone, but Kiram wasn't sure if it sounded more bitter or amused.

"Maybe," Kiram suggested, "I should just go back to the academy and finish up my work on the engine."

"Come, Kiram, you know you want to learn how to do this. It's fun and next winter you'll be able to whip past all the first years." Javier gazed at Kiram and it seemed that his mere physical presence drew Kiram. "Come, take my hand."

Kiram watched the other students, spinning and racing across the ice. He did want to join them. Slowly he released his grip on the bank and accepted Javier's hand.

He expected other students to stare, or at least make some comment about the two of them skating hand in hand, but then he saw several of the first-year students offering each other similar support. Atreau swept up beside two of the clumsiest youths—one in particular seemed only able to remain upright in an odd squatting position—and pulled them along by their belts while disseminating advice on proper form.

"You have to relax." Javier pulled him farther out from the bank. "Just push off of the ice and then allow it to slide away beneath you. If you tense up and fight it, you'll fall."

"I'm going to fall no matter what." Kiram tried to emulate Javier's fluid movements with his own jerky ones.

Javier smiled. "True, but you won't get as badly hurt if you give into it."

Kiram did fall numerous times, often on patches where stones and submerged reeds roughened the ice. But he always managed to release Javier and he never hurt himself badly. Between the falls, a wondrous sensation washed over him, a feeling like flying. With just a stroke of his blades he slashed across the ice and giddy delight rushed through him at the novelty of such effortless speed.

He joined Javier in several races, and when Fedeles caught his hand, Kiram allowed himself to be whisked away. Fedeles showed Kiram several tricks, spinning and jumping, which Kiram could never hope to emulate but loved watching. Where Fedeles leaped across the ice, Kiram managed to land a small hop. Still the accomplishment emboldened him.

When a game of tag started up, Kiram joined in, racing and laughing as some bulky third-year student sped by and tagged him. He managed to tag Nestor and Elezar, but was taken utterly unaware when Javier swooped up on him, moving so fast that upon contact, Javier's momentum carried them both away. Their two bodies pressed close as they flew across the ice. Kiram felt the slight stubble of Javier's jaw against his cheek. Javier's hand caressed his hip. Instinctively he leaned into Javier, aching for nearness.

The response startled Javier enough to make him miss his footing. But even falling, he didn't release Kiram. Instead he held him tighter and the two of them tumbled into a deep bank of snow. Kiram landed on top of Javier. From behind them Atreau whooped and Morisio laughed.

"Looks like Kiram took you out, Javier!"

"Looks like he did," Javier agreed but his expression was one of triumph. Kiram pulled himself up, a confusion of emotion roiling through him. The pleasure of embracing Javier tangled up in both his fear of being caught and his embarrassment at being so easily seduced.

Kiram brushed snow from his coat and refused to look at Javier; instead he glanced up at the clear blue sky and narrowed his eyes against the slanting sun.

"I should get back to work on my project while the sun's still up," Kiram decided.

Nestor looked disappointed. "Can't it wait a day?"

It could have, but Kiram simply shook his head. The weeks that he'd spent hiding from Javier's flirtatious smiles and arousing caresses had served his steam engine well. Now it stood complete. Kiram needed only to test it and fine tune his design.

"Let him go," Genimo called. "That steam engine isn't going to build itself."

Kiram didn't remember telling anyone but Javier and Scholar Donamillo that he was building a steam engine. But then Genimo spent much of his time with Scholar Donamillo and he knew that Genimo often cranked the mechanical cures for Fedeles' treatments. Of course he would know what Kiram was building and for what purpose.

Genimo gave Kiram a cold smile and flicked his hand as if he were shooing away a bird. "The work of a genius is never done."

"So true." Javier stepped up beside Kiram. "In fact I have a paper to work on myself. I might as well walk back with you, Kiram."

"You don't have to walk me back."

"Damn it, we were just getting a game going!" Elezar protested. "You can't crap out now!"

"Can and am." Javier brushed the snow from his coat as he spoke to Elezar. "As effortless as my excellence may appear to the rest of you, I do have to put a little work into it from time to time."

Elezar scowled. Javier ignored him and addressed Kiram.
“Shall we?”

“I suppose so.”

They skated side by side across the pond and gathered their boots. But instead of trading their skates out, Javier insisted that it would be better to follow the stream up to the far bridge, where an easy path would already be beaten through the deep drifts of snow.

The surface of the frozen stream was much rougher than the pond and the two of them had to keep close to the center and one another to remain upright. Even so, falls were only narrowly missed by erratic flailing and quickly catching one another.

“This is in no way easier than walking through the snow.” Kiram wobbled and Javier pulled him close.

“No, not at all. But it’s much more fun, you have to admit.”

Kiram didn’t have to admit anything. In fact he had spent the last month fighting nearly every admission he wanted to make to Javier. But this once he relented.

“Yes,” he said. “It is.”

Once they had reached the orchard bridge and exchanged their skates for boots, he asked, “Do you really have a paper to write?”

“I do, but not until later tonight. I was thinking of taking Lun Luz out to give him a little exercise while the weather holds.” Javier smiled up at the clear sky. “Care to ride with me?”

“I took Firaj out this morning.” Kiram briefly considered joining Javier, before reminding himself that he was trying to keep from falling back into the easy trap of Javier’s company. “I really should work on the engine.” But seeing the disappointment in Javier’s face Kiram couldn’t leave it at that. “It’s not just for the Crown Challenge, the steam engine I mean. Scholar Donamillo thinks it could help him break the curse’s hold over Fedeles...It could free you both.”

Javier raised his dark brows, studying Kiram’s face intently.

“How can you care so much for me and mine and still seem to care so little, Kiram?”

"It's not—" the words caught in his throat, only coming out in a rough whisper. "You know it's not that I don't care."

If anything it was just the opposite. If he'd felt just a little less for Javier, then perhaps he could have accepted the necessity for Javier to disguise his nature with brothel orgies and eventually a wife. "But you're Cadeleonian and a duke and we both know what that means."

He couldn't meet Javier's dark gaze and instead lifted his eyes up to the pale expanse of the sky. Javier remained silent beside him.

A dark silhouette spread ragged wings as it soared overhead and for a moment Kiram thought it was another of the countless jays. But this bird was far too black. Kiram's dread changed to delight.

"Look, a crow." Kiram pointed and then waved.

Javier glanced from the crow to Kiram and raised a brow questioningly. Kiram supposed he did look odd waving to a passing bird as if it were an old friend.

"Alizadeh told me to befriend any crows that I saw here," Kiram informed him.

"Ah," Javier replied and then indulged Kiram by offering the rangy crow a brief wave.

To Kiram's surprise the crow dived low and circled them twice before alighting on Kiram's shoulder. Kiram stared at the glossy black beak warily. The crow gave a low clicking call that sounded almost like a laugh to Kiram. It cocked its head to study Javier with rust orange eyes.

Javier stared at the crow with an expression of surprise that Kiram had rarely seen on his face. Very slowly he extended his hand to stroke the bird's chest. The crow indulged him for several moments, even tracing Javier's finger with its beak once. Then it took wing again, swooping across the stream into the darkness of the surrounding orchard.

"It would seem that your new suitor has somewhere else to be," Javier commented.

"My suitor? He seemed more taken with you than me."

"Well, that's certainly never going to work." Javier flashed a wry smile. "Not only is he obviously from a different religion but he seems the flighty type."

"Very funny."

"I do try." Javier turned towards the academy and Kiram joined him. They followed one of the many ancient, crumbling stone walls that had once stood against assaulting armies.

"Will I see you at dinner?" Javier asked as they approached the stables.

"I'll be there," Kiram promised.

Javier accepted that with a nod. They parted at the stables. Kiram stopped off at their room to put away his and Javier's skates and to get a new bottle of writing ink, as well as fresh quills to cut pen nibs from. He packed them up and then dashed down the stairs.

"Kiram!" A distastefully familiar voice called. He spun around to see the odd tableau of Holy Father Habalan's plump, silk-clothed figure waddling alongside the leathery, gaunt War Master Ignacio.

"Kiram Kir-Zaki! Come here, boy. Come here." Holy Father Habalan waved him over. Plump and plain, Habalan appeared utterly benign and yet Kiram knew he was no such thing. Kiram had to suppress a glare every time he caught sight of this man who routinely poisoned Javier and no doubt had used the shadow curse to destroy the entire Tornestal family.

Unable to bring himself to speak, Kiram simply bowed his head and stepped just a little nearer his two instructors.

"No need to be shy." The holy father beckoned Kiram closer. "Master Ignacio and I have a question for you."

Kiram didn't dare ignore Master Ignacio. Only after his outing to the Goldenrod had Kiram risen from the torture of the war master's disdain to the respite of his total disinterest.

"If you can, Underclassman Kiram, describe what you understand of God," the holy father instructed.

“Which god do you mean?” Kiram wasn’t quite sure what the two of them were after. “The Cadeleonian God or Mirogoth Lore or—”

“No, boy,” Holy Father Habalan snapped. “Do try to follow the question. It’s really quite simple. Describe your understanding of God. The divinity of your heathen faith.”

Kiram didn’t even bother to dispute being called heathen; he’d sat through far too many of the holy father’s history lectures to bother. Though, he would have liked to point out that he wasn’t a Bahiim and therefore asking him to sum up the ancient and esoteric theology of his entire race was much like asking a horse to explain the history of mounted warfare. But he knew such a response would only be taken for insolence. So instead he offered them the simple tenet that his grandmother had taught him and which he truly believed.

“All life is sacred. Whether it takes the shape of a moth, a man, or a great oak, every life is precious and part of a greater whole, because no matter how different our physical bodies, all our souls arise from and return to the same divine union of the shajdi.” Kiram could see at once that his response did not please Master Ignacio, but Holy Father Habalan smiled and clapped his hands together.

“You see. Every living thing. Flies, worms, mice.” The holy father turned to Master Ignacio. “Very primitive spiritually, hardly better than those Mirogoth animals. There is always the possibility of conversion, of course, but in most cases it’s not worth the effort of trying. Higher purpose is simply beyond most of them.”

Master Ignacio scowled and handed two gold coins over to the holy father, who happily pocketed them.

“Thank you, Kiram.” The holy father patted Kiram’s head as if he were a pet of some kind that could not have possibly understood his insulting words. “That’s all we needed.”

Savage anger flared through Kiram and it took all of his restraint not to simply slap the smug smile off of Holy Father Habalan’s face. He wanted to see Habalan’s expression when he

spat in his face and announced that he knew Habalan was the man responsible for the brutal deaths of the Tornesal family.

But he had no proof and no hope of anyone backing him up if he raised his hand against a Cadeleonian holy man. Kiram bowed and quickly left them.

In his rush for the dormitory doors he crashed into Scholar Blasio, causing the young, pallid math instructor to spill the armload of the kindling that he had been carrying. Blasio almost fell as well but Kiram caught him.

"I'm so sorry, sir," Kiram told him. Then he dropped to the floor, regathering Blasio's wood.

Blasio knelt beside him, worry showing on his soft features and golden brown eyes.

"Kiram? What's happened?"

Kiram didn't want to admit anything but he couldn't help himself.

"That fat fuck, Habalan—" Kiram began but then shook his head, knowing that his anger was too fresh, too raw to express in anything but a string of obscenities.

Blasio nodded grimly.

"He's an ugly, old idiot," Scholar Blasio said quietly. He took the kindling from Kiram and they both stood. "You on the other hand are bright and kind. Don't give him the satisfaction of taking any of that from you."

"No sir," Kiram replied. "I won't. I'm just angry."

"Yes, and that's understandable. I do know how very frustrating he can be. Just be glad you don't have to take your Sacreday supper at the instructors' table with him." Blasio pulled a mock grimace. "On top of it all he farts and tries to blame the stench on the rest of the staff."

Kiram laughed at that and Blasio smiled.

"Were you on your way to work on your project for the Crown Challenge?" Blasio inquired.

"Yes, sir."

"I won't keep you then." Blasio shifted the kindling in his arms.

Kiram noticed that several of the rough branches had scratched the scholar's cheek and palms. And for the first time, seeing Scholar Blasio's bare hands, he wondered how little a young scholar was paid.

He didn't feel he ought to ask, but he made a note to himself for ask his mother to send something special for Blasio with her next package. Perhaps gloves.

Outside the sun already hung low, casting only a few gold beams across the blue shadows of the deep banks of snow. Frost filled the air and Kiram could feel the moisture in his nose and mouth freezing as he drew in each breath. White clouds plumed from his lips as he exhaled.

He ran for his work shed, hoping that vigor would keep the chill away. As he drew close, a loud crash and a clang rang through the still air. Some low, animal growl carried from the shed and then more crashing of metal. It sounded like some beast had gotten into the work shed. Alarm shot through Kiram and he forgot the cold completely.

The door hung open. Kiram rushed in, expecting to find a badger caught up in his tools. Instead, Fedeles pounced out of the dark shadows, swinging an iron pipe like a staff and slammed it into the face of Kiram's beaten engine.

"No!" Kiram threw himself onto Fedeles.

Fedeles staggered as Kiram collided into him, but then caught himself and shoved Kiram away from him with shocking strength. Kiram fell back against his workbench. Pliers and hammers clattered down with him as he hit the ground. Fedeles spun back to the steam engine. With a howl, he smashed through the delicate valves and then hammered at the secondary tank with a wild abandon. Metal rang and bowed.

Kiram staggered to his feet. Disappointment crashed through him. All that work, destroyed.

"Fedeles! Stop it!" He grabbed one of the hammers that lay at his feet and stepped forward, rage pounding through his body. But he couldn't bring himself to strike.

Fedeles made a sound as if he were in agony. Tears rolled down his face as he beat at the steam engine. A piston snapped from its mounting and smacked into Fedeles' side. He stumbled back, gasping and moaning, then dropped to his knees. The pipe fell from his hands as he gripped his own head and wailed. He looked nearly as wretched as Kiram's mangled engine. Scrapes and cuts marred his hands and arms. Sweat and machine oil coated his face and clothes.

"I'm sorry," Fedeles sobbed, his mouth gaping as he dragged in a choking breath. "I had to kill it! I had to."

"I was building it to help you. To free you from the curse." Kiram's own breath caught in his throat.

"NO!" Fedeles screamed and Kiram recoiled from the fury in his expression. "It's killing me! Eating me from the inside out. Crawling through my guts and laughing in my head. He put it inside me because he couldn't get it into Javier. He—" Suddenly Fedeles went silent and his face drained of all color. Terror contorted his features as he looked down to where his bloody hands rested on the dirt floor.

"I wasn't telling," he whimpered. "I wasn't telling. Please don't hurt him, please..."

A shudder passed through Fedeles' body. Then Kiram saw the shadow. It spread from the dark hollows between Fedeles' splayed fingers and crept out from beneath his folded legs. More and more of it rolled out from Fedeles, moving like a spill of oil, pouring towards Kiram. Prickles of pain bit into Kiram's flesh as the shadow slithered closer.

"Run!" Fedeles shouted.

Kiram sprinted out of the work shed and a wave of darkness followed him.

Chapter Three

Kiram ran hard and the curse rushed after him. He felt its pursuit, like hot breath and sharp teeth snapping at his back. Something sliced through his pant leg and slashed open his calf. The pain flooded him with an animal desperation and his body responded with a rush of speed.

In the back of his mind he knew he should return to the security of the dormitory but the writhing black mass of the curse spread between him and the school, so Kiram wasn't going to turn around.

He abandoned the thought of reaching any destination; nowhere could be safe. All that mattered was escape. He had to keep moving. His muscles burned and his lungs ached as he threw himself ahead too fast to even see where he was going.

Flows of snow dragged at him. He fought through them. He tore across the grounds and raced through the orchard. Twilight shadows engulfed him as he crossed the bridge and sprinted between rows of bare apple trees.

Sweat soaked his shirt. His rapid breath pumped out like steam from one of his engines. At some point he lost the orchard path and found himself stumbling through deeper drifts of snow and surrounded by wild old trees.

He tripped over a fallen branch and crashed into the snow. As he scrambled back to his feet, he caught a glimpse of the roiling black mass rushing through the twilight shadows towards him. He heard whispers, like distant screams. Overhanging tree branches splintered apart the instant the shadow curse fell across them—ripped to shreds just as the groom, Victaro, had been.

Raw panic electrified Kiram's trembling muscles. He fought through the snow and raced into the darkness of the dense woods.

From overhead came the cry of a bird. A crow. First one, then another, and another.

"Help me!" Kiram shouted, praying that this once Bahiim mysticism would serve him. **"Please, sisters, help me!"**

He didn't have the strength to waste waiting for a response. He kept moving; then suddenly black wings swept past his head. A crow circled him and then flew between the big pines on Kiram's left. Desperate for any hope, Kiram plunged through the undergrowth after the bird. Other crows swept down from the branches, leading Kiram and calling him, their harsh voices challenging the terrible growls and shrieks of the curse behind him.

Hard cramps bit through Kiram's legs. His lungs felt raw. He staggered blindly after the crows, running between towering trees and snow-covered brambles. Then, as one the crows alighted in the bare branches of a huge oak. Kiram fell against the rough trunk of the old tree. His legs buckled beneath him.

The black mass of the curse came up fast, rushing after Kiram. It arched up over the snow like a cresting wave. As its shadow neared Kiram a sick pain punched into his body. Something twisted through his intestines.

It must have blood, Kiram. Alizadeh's voice moved over him like a chill wind.

Then the crows dived from their perches, sweeping down over Kiram and the curse crashed across their backs. Burning feathers and blood spattered the snow and pelted Kiram. Crow carcasses fell, smoking, to the ground. The curse rose like a black steam from the mutilated birds. Kiram pressed himself back against the oak, not wanting even a wisp to touch him. The curse hung like smoke in the air.

Kiram held his breath, afraid on some primal level that the curse might somehow hear him gasp or feel him exhale. He stared intently as the black wisps slowly coalesced into the dark silhouette of a man.

Kiram recognized the long body with its broad shoulders and slim hips. The curse could have been either Javier's or Fedeles' shadow, suspended in the air before his eyes. It took a step closer

to Kiram, one hand extending, but then stopped. Suddenly its featureless head turned back as if hearing a call. Its mass dropped to the snow and slithered back across Kiram's tracks. In an instant it was gone.

Kiram dragged in a breath of the frigid air. His entire body shuddered from both cold and shock. The blood streaming down his calf felt alarmingly hot and suddenly he felt aware of the scratches where the crows' bones had grazed his skin. Black feathers matted with blood splattered his arms and face. Pieces of skulls and feathers pitted the snow all around him. His own blood smeared out from his right leg in a rapidly cooling pool.

Impending sobs tightened his throat and tears welled in his eyes. He wanted to curl into a ball and have his mother tell him that everything would be all right. He wanted to be back home and feel his father's strong embrace and know he was safe. Kiram wiped furiously at his face, knowing that he only succeeded in smearing crows' blood across his cheeks.

He couldn't act like a child, damn it.

He watched his breath rise in white clouds and dissipate into the dark. No one was going to come rescue him—certainly not his parents—and if he didn't get back to the academy he was going to freeze to death.

Kiram pushed himself back from the old oak. A pang flared through his calf but the leg still took his weight. He followed his own tracks back towards the academy. Every time he heard a sound or saw a motion in the branches above him he froze in fear. An owl swooped past him. Some small creature shrieked and skittered over a tree limb. Clusters of blue jays watched him in eerie silence.

Snow began to fall in light streams at first, but then it grew heavy. Kiram's old footprints became shallow impressions. He struggled to follow his path back through the forest.

Huge flakes of snow settled in his hair and melted against his skin. Kiram shoved his hands into his coat pockets. At first his feet ached, almost burned from the cold, but now they were numb weights. He couldn't stop shivering.

Lord of the White Hell

It couldn't be much further. Kiram thought he could smell oven smoke in the air. Just a little farther, he promised himself, but his steps were unsteady and he wasn't even sure of where he was anymore. Suddenly his boot caught on a buried stump and he tumbled down an incline, slamming into the trunk of a tree.

He struggled up to his feet, but the snow slipped beneath him and he slid farther down the incline, again only coming to a stop when he crashed against a hard barrier. This time the aged stones of a crumbling wall pummeled his back and shoulder.

Kiram lay still, too cold to care about his scrapes and bruises. Snow drifted down onto him. He was so tired and this fucking day just wouldn't let up. He tried to roll over but his arm wouldn't move. Instead a terrible dislocated feeling shot through his shoulder. His calf seemed dead and he didn't have the strength to force himself up to his feet again.

He had to rest. Just for a few minutes, then he'd go on. Kiram closed his eyes. He imagined how he would brace himself with his left leg and use the wall to support his weight. He'd get up; it wouldn't be all that difficult. If he couldn't climb the slippery incline, then he'd follow the wall. It had to have been part of the academy grounds at one time. Doubtless it would lead him close enough that he could catch a glimpse of the dormitory. He'd probably be back in less than an hour.

With that thought a delirious calm settled over Kiram. He felt a little warmer, almost comfortable, now. Perhaps the snow was letting up. His muscles relaxed and he slept as blankets of snow settled over his body.



The hands that gripped him felt like heated brands. Kiram opened his eyes and for a moment saw nothing but brilliant light, then felt the sensual heat of the white hell.

Javier's black hair and dark eyes came into focus and slowly Kiram made out the rest of his features. He leaned over Kiram. Dark sky spread out behind him. High in the sky a crow circled.

What kind of crow flew when it was so dark? And when had it stopped snowing?

"Kiram." Javier's voice seemed strangely distant and his expression was strained. "Can you hear me?"

Kiram tried to respond but found himself producing only a weak groan. Javier's hand felt blazing hot as it stroked his cheek.

"Just stay awake, Kiram. Stay with me," Javier said. Then he straightened and looked back over his shoulder, shouting, "I found him!"

Kiram was aware of being lifted up against Javier's chest and the sparks from the white hell crackling around him. He thought he heard Nestor's voice and Elezar's as well, but he wasn't sure. Only the heat and light of Javier's presence felt real to him. Slowly the range of his awareness grew. His shoulder and calf hurt. His hands and feet ached. A strange bouncing motion sent pangs through his shoulder. They were riding, he realized. He was on Lunaluz, leaning against Javier, and still high above them the crow circled, calling.

"The curse." Kiram tried to get the words out but his lips felt leaden. "It's in Fedeles. That's where it hides."

"I know." Javier's voice was rough.

Of course Javier knew. Kiram leaned back against Javier's chest.

"Fedeles destroyed my engine." It alarmed him that he couldn't get more than a whisper out and his words sounded slurred. "He didn't want to do it. He was crying the whole time. I think the curse inside him drove him to it." Suddenly Kiram realized what that would mean. The man who controlled the curse must have found out that Scholar Donamillo planned to use Kiram's engine to free Fedeles. How had he found out? Only a few people knew anything about it, aside from himself, Javier, and Master Donamillo. Genimo knew apparently and perhaps Morisio had guessed at the truth. One of them must have let some vital detail slip.

Lord of the White Hell

“Fedeles tried to tell me about the man who put the curse in him but that’s when it came out of him and attacked me.” Speaking just a few words felt exhausting. Kiram drew in a deep breath. Javier said nothing, but he dropped the reins from his right hand and gently touched Kiram’s chest.

The shadows of apple trees danced and jumped as he and Javier rode past. Behind them Kiram could hear other riders. He closed his eyes and then immediately opened them again when a blaze of white light surged over him.

“Don’t sleep, Kiram. Stay with me.” Javier gripped him hard and a searing heat flared through Kiram’s chest as Javier opened the white hell again.

“I’m awake,” Kiram protested. “You don’t have to cook me to wake me up, you know.”

Through the radiant light, Kiram made out the gray silhouettes of the academy buildings. The light dimmed, receding back into Javier. Darkness closed in around them, swallowing their surroundings in shadows.

Despite the night cold, Kiram felt better. His shoulder still ached, but it moved when he shifted his arm to touch the make-shift bandage wrapped around his calf. For the first time all night he had the luxury to be aware of his hunger. A tantalizing scent of roast fowl seemed to linger on the air.

“Something smells like roasted pigeon,” Kiram whispered.

“It’s you,” Javier replied and then Kiram remembered the burned remains of the crows that spattered his entire body.

“I need a bath.”

“You’ll have one soon enough.”

Kiram leaned back against Javier, peering into the shadows of the trees; he thought he could see jays staring back at him. The crow was no longer anywhere to be seen. When Kiram looked back past Javier, he glimpsed the other Hellions riding behind them. Even Genimo rode among them.

“How long have I been gone?” Kiram asked.

"Past last bell, at least." Javier scowled at the stables ahead of them. "That's when Fedeles came and told me that he thought he'd killed you."

"It wasn't him," Kiram said quickly. "It was the curse inside him. Fedeles told me to run. He probably saved my life."

"From himself," Javier replied. "That's cold comfort."

Kiram could only remember Fedeles, stricken and terrified, on the floor of his work shed. Even his ruined engine seemed unimportant now. "Is he all right?"

"*Is he all right?*" Javier sounded annoyed. "He's better than you were when I found you. But yes, Fedeles is fine. He's with Scholar Donamillo, resting."

"Does everyone at the academy know what happened?" Kiram asked.

"Yes and no. They know that someone broke into your work shed and destroyed your project. There was blood and your tracks led out into the orchard at a full run."

As they neared the stables Kiram saw several men step out from the shelter of the doorway holding up lamps. Among the grooms stood Master Ignacio. He scowled at Kiram and deep shadows filled the weathered lines of his lean face.

"Are you going to tell them who it was?" Javier asked in a whisper. Kiram could feel the tension in his body, though his voice remained soft.

"I won't."

"Thank you," Javier replied.

A moment later grooms surrounded them. A young groom helped to steady Kiram as he staggered down from Lunaluz. Javier dismounted quickly and went to speak with Master Ignacio. The rest of the Hellions reached the stable and handed their horses over to grooms. As soon as he dismounted, Nestor rushed to Kiram.

"Are you all right?" Worry transformed his soft features into an almost parental countenance. "You looked dead when we found you in the snow. What happened?"

"I... There was an animal in my work shed." Kiram tried to think desperately. "A bear, I think. When I surprised it, it chased me through the orchard and then I got lost."

"A bear?" Nestor looked a little shocked. "You outran a bear?"

"Maybe it was something else? I didn't see it too clearly in the dark." Kiram knew nothing of bears or really any of the wildlife of these northern lands.

"That's amazing, Kiram!" Nestor clearly liked the idea of the attacker being a bear. "Did you hear that, Elezar? Kiram outdistanced a bear."

"A raccoon more likely." Elezar knocked the snow off his boots.

"Certainly not," Nestor retorted. "Did you see what it did to Kiram's mechanism? It was in pieces! That was no raccoon. It was definitely a bear."

Elezar briefly frowned at Kiram before his expression softened in a manner that Kiram rarely saw, and certainly had never seen directed at himself. He looked sincerely kind and it brought a handsome quality to his harsh features.

"You're lucky to still be among the living then, Kiram." Elezar patted his back lightly. "Next time, though, don't be a cunt and run silently into the woods. You should have screamed your fucking—"

"Language, Elezar." Master Ignacio strode towards them. Javier walked a step behind the war master, his eyes fixed on Kiram with such intensity that Kiram felt his face flushing.

"Pardon, Master," Elezar said quickly then he returned his attention to Kiram. "You should have called for help."

"I will next time."

"There won't be a next time." Javier stopped directly beside Kiram. "This isn't going to happen again."

"The groundsmen will set traps tomorrow morning," Master Ignacio said. "If the creature returns, we'll have it. In the meantime, you will all keep your rides to the roads and the stable grounds."

The Hellions all agreed and then bid the war master good-night. An air of boisterous relief suffused them as they ascended the stairs to their rooms. Atreau teased Kiram and Morisio playfully declared that the bear was some jealous rival mechanist in a fur coat. They laughed and reminded each other about the crow that Javier had picked out from the pitch black sky and followed to Kiram's body.

"It probably thought Kiram was carrion," Genimo said.

"He would have been if we hadn't gotten there when we did," another Hellion commented and then he gave Kiram a wide grin. All of them basked in the glory of their rescue, except Javier, who had gone unusually quiet.

On the way up, Kiram spotted more than one student peeking out of a doorway to spy on the returning Hellions. By morning everyone in the entire academy would probably know the story and Kiram would have to try and describe some encounter with a bear. He tried to think of anything he'd read about the beasts. He recalled some mention of their strong musky odor and the fact that they often rose up onto their hind legs and walked like men. He hoped that would be enough to satisfy the curiosity of his classmates.

Once he and Javier climbed the last flight of stairs to their shared room, Kiram shed his filthy coat and stripped off his jacket and shirt. He needed a bath, badly. Javier threw his own coat over his chair. He studied Kiram's bare chest, then stepped closer and caught Kiram's shoulders in a firm grip. "From now on I am going with you when you go to that work shed."

"You'll be bored out of your mind, hanging around in there. And anyway I'm sure this won't happen..." Kiram trailed off as he realized that he had no reason to assume that the shadow curse would not attack him again if he were to repair the steam engine. The idea suddenly terrified him and for one cowardly moment he considered giving up the engine up altogether.

Was he really willing to risk his life—to face that terrible, killing darkness—just for the sake of two Cadeleonian noblemen?

He only had to glance to Javier to know his answer. He couldn't give up. Though he harbored no hope that he and Javier could share their lives as lovers, he wouldn't allow his friends to fall to that curse. Now that he had felt it—seen it tearing through living flesh—he couldn't abandon Javier to it and still think himself a decent man.

"I won't let you be alone down there. You were nearly dead when I found you. You were like ice in my arms." Suddenly he pulled Kiram close. They embraced fiercely, clutching one another. Kiram dug his hands into Javier's shirt and pressed himself so close that he could feel Javier's heart beating against his own chest. Javier whispered, "Don't go without me."

"I won't. I promise." Kiram felt the desperate tension drain from Javier's grip. His hands moved slowly up and down Kiram's back and he, too, relaxed. He would never have thought he could take so much comfort in such a simple touch. Kiram rested his head against Javier's shoulder, closed his eyes, and allowed himself to forget everything but the warmth of Javier's skin, the comfort of his touch.

Kiram didn't want to deny himself this contentment any longer. He wanted Javier and it didn't matter if he would later suffer for it.

Kiram lifted his head to speak but then caught sight of the red stain his brow had left on Javier's white shirt. His face had to be a mess. A quick glance at his hands assured him that they were still spattered with blood and gore. Mortification flooded Kiram.

"I have to take a bath."

Javier didn't release him, but drew back just enough to search Kiram's face. Immediately, Kiram felt a difference in Javier's stance. In an almost formal motion, Javier straightened and stepped back. "Will you need help tending your leg?"

"No, I think I'll be fine." Kiram tried to convey some of his warmth in his voice but Javier didn't seem to notice. He sat on the edge of his bed and unlaced his riding boots. Kiram felt dismayed by how easily he'd given up. He seemed so tired, almost beaten down, as he tossed his boots aside.

Javier said, "You aren't getting any cleaner standing there, are you?"

Kiram withdrew to the bath.

He washed quickly, pausing briefly to inspect the thin gash beneath the bandages engulfing his calf. He favored his left shoulder but didn't linger on it. Instead he focused on Javier. The sensation of Javier's hands on his skin, as well as the pleasure and calm he'd felt leaning into Javier's shoulder, played again and again in his mind. He held it up against the fear he'd felt earlier and allowed it to build until only longing remained with him.

Once he'd washed, Kiram pulled his thin prayer shirt over his head and bolted out of the bathroom. Javier had already retired to his bed and only one lamp remained burning. Momentary doubt gripped Kiram, but he had come so close to losing his life today that the prospect of mere rejection did not seem so great a risk.

He could tell that Javier wasn't asleep. His eyes were closed but his breathing had yet to slow into the deep rhythm of unconsciousness. Kiram crept to Javier's bedside. His right calf was too tender to allow him to drop to both knees, so instead he knelt on one and gently touched Javier's shoulder. Javier opened his eyes and, after taking in Kiram's unexpected posture, raised a brow. "What are you doing?"

"I'm kneeling and asking you to let me into your bed."

"Do you know what you're saying?" The pupils of Javier's dark eyes flared wide. He sat up and the blankets fell back from his naked body. Calixto's medallion shone lustrous and golden against his muscular, pale chest as it always did.

"Yes." Kiram could feel a hot flush rising across his skin as Javier's gaze moved over him.

"Take off the nightshirt," Javier commanded.

Kiram pulled the thin cotton shift up over his head and then let it fall to the floor. Javier stared at his exposed body and then threw the blankets back. "Come."

Kiram climbed into the bed immediately and Javier pulled the blankets back around them both. They kissed with ferocious

need. Kiram let his hands drift low across Javier's sharp hips and curve over his thigh. Javier gasped against his lips as Kiram caressed him.

Javier's hands trembled as he sought Kiram's naked body. Tenderly at first and then with a desperate strength, they took pleasure in the touch and taste of one another. With every stroke a driving rhythm built in the friction of skin, hands and lips, until at last it broke in the hot spill of semen and Javier's breathless moan against the curve of Kiram's neck.

They both lay back, exhausted and tangled in each other's arms. Kiram thought he felt Javier's lips against his cheek and then he fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter Four

Faint morning light illuminated the bruises mottling Kiram's shoulder. Pain flared through his muscles as he rolled his arm experimentally. He'd run harder last night than he'd ever moved in his life and now his entire body ached. Fortunately, the previous months of tournament training had familiarized Kiram with his own discomfort enough that he could classify his injuries as nothing more than strains and scratches.

Javier knelt beside the bed and inspected the cut on Kiram's calf, his touch gentle but not tentative. "It doesn't look bad but you're definitely going to have another scar."

"Mother will be thrilled."

"By spring it will have faded and she'll be happy just to see you." Javier smiled as he rebandaged Kiram's leg. "The mark on your cheek has already faded rather handsomely."

Kiram laughed at the idea of any scar being handsome. It was such a Cadeleonian thought. Though Javier was right about it fading. The scar Genimo had left on his cheek was little more than a faint crescent. Only when his face colored with either rage or desire did it stand out noticeably. However, the dueling scar that glared up from his forearm remained red and tender.

Still, none of his few scars could rival the brand on Javier's shoulder, nor the big white stroke that bisected Elezar's thigh. Certainly by the standards of the Hellions his scars might be handsome.

He doubted that relative comparison would offer his mother much consolation, but then he realized that it didn't really matter. He wasn't a child to be kept safe in her candy kitchen any longer, though only he and Alizadeh seemed capable of recognizing that.

"So," Javier said softly. "How are you this morning?"

“Sore, but really happy just to be here,” Kiram admitted. Javier nodded slowly, thoughtfully. Kiram felt the tension in his fingers change just slightly. He extended his hand along the curve of Kiram’s knee with cautious intent, stroking him softly, gentling him as he would have coaxed a nervous young stallion.

“I’m glad that you’re here as well,” Javier said. “I hope you’ll stay with me.”

Kiram knew that Javier was talking about more than just this morning but he didn’t allow himself to think beyond his present happiness. Nothing had changed. Javier was still a Cadeleonian and a nobleman who one day might very well abandon Kiram for a mistress or a wife. But after last night, Kiram was no longer willing to sacrifice the pleasure of the moment for fear of a loss the future might bring. Not when there was a good chance that he wouldn’t live long enough to see it come about.

Desire welled up in him as Javier’s long fingers traced the tender hollow of his knee and then slowly followed the muscles of his thigh. Kiram felt his cheeks growing hot and he knew that the crescent scar on his cheek probably stood out like a pale moon. Kiram pulled the blankets back. “We have time before first bell.”

Kiram lingered longer and worked Javier more skillfully than the previous night. In the pale morning light he reveled in the details of Javier, both the vulnerability of his arched, naked body and the power of his hard, tensed muscles. He loved the feel of Javier’s strong hands, his tender lips and the prickle of his dark stubble. Kiram wanted more but restrained himself. The academy was not the place for either of them to be so exposed nor did the morning offer them much time.

As it was they had to rush, washing together in the tub, and then throwing their clothes on while racing down the stairs to get down to breakfast before the holy father and scholars arrived.

After gulping down sausages and oatcakes Kiram ventured out to his work shed. Both Javier and Nestor joined him. The light of day offered Kiram no illusion as to the state of his engine. The casings were cracked, the pistons bent and broken. The smell

of spilled oil hung in the cold air and a blood stain colored the floor. Kiram didn't know if it was his own blood or Fedeles'. A tight knot of anxiety clenched through Kiram's chest and again he suppressed the urge to abandon the engine.

"Anything we can help with?" Nestor asked.

Kiram fought back his fear. He stole a glance to Javier and took comfort in the brief, salacious smile he received. Kiram studied the completed, ruined engine one last time, then said, "You can help me dismantle it. Most of the parts will have to be newly forged, so the metal will need to be melted down before being recast."

Javier and Nestor made surprisingly quick work of labor that would have exhausted Kiram alone. Kiram laughed at the beaten, deformed nuts that Nestor deemed to have a nice girlish shape and the bolts he referred to as 'big fellows'.

After they finished hauling the scrap to the blacksmith, who grumbled at the disappointment of having his own work destroyed as well, Javier and Nestor returned to their classes. Kiram took advantage of the fact that he'd been excused from his morning classes to visit Scholar Donamillo in the infirmary.

Happily, Donamillo immediately suggested that Kiram should continue his mechanical work in the infirmary storage space near Donamillo's own mechanical cures.

"It's a bit of a mess at the moment," Donamillo apologized, but Kiram felt elated at the prospect of escaping his cold, isolated work shed. Kiram set to work at once clearing the cluttered area.

Scholar Donamillo tried to assure Kiram that he didn't have to put himself out while he was still so weak from last night's attack, but Kiram would have none of it.

"I'm more than happy to do it since I have the morning free."

Scholar Donamillo reluctantly agreed, though he hovered close while Kiram dragged out heaps of papers and wooden crates filled with aged tomes and arcane talismans. Kiram imagined that the scholar's private rooms must be packed with medical devices and assorted books overflowing their shelves and piling in small towers from the floor.

Kiram hefted a stack of thin, leather-bound books that had been buried under a case of surgical clamps. One of the books caught Kiram's attention immediately, in that it was bound as many old Haldiim texts used to be, along the top and not the left.

"Is this Haldiim?" Kiram wiped the dust off the tattered book cover, exposing stained leather and small decorative stitching.

"Yes." The scholar's thin lips curved up in a faint smile. He removed the volume and gently leafed through its pages. Kiram caught glimpses of hand drawn diagrams and scribbled notes. Suddenly, with a rush of amazement, Kiram recognized one of the images.

"That's Yassin's Constellation of the Dog." Awe softened Kiram's voice to a whisper.

"It is."

"Then, this is Yassin's notebook?" Kiram desperately desired to hold the book in his own hands and read through it.

"One of the few remaining. I found it when I was a student. Holy Father Habalan was scouring all heretical writings from the library. I couldn't bear to see it destroyed so I stole it from his rooms. I should see that it finds a safer home than this." Scholar Donamillo carefully tucked the small book into his coat pocket.

As he watched the book disappear, disappointment cut through Kiram. "May I—"

"Scholar," a student called from the wide doorway of the infirmary. Kiram saw that it was Genimo. "I've brought more needles up from the smith."

"Very good." Scholar Donamillo went and took the little wooden boxes.

Genimo glanced to Kiram. "Here to visit Fedeles?"

Kiram hadn't realized that Fedeles was with them in the infirmary. A terrible instinctive fear shot through him. Blood drained from his face and he couldn't bring himself to speak. The shadows in the room seemed suddenly sinister and deep.

"Is he still sleeping?" Genimo didn't seem to notice Kiram's choked silence. He walked to a bed near the far wall where a

silent form lay under thick blankets. "Fedeles, I know you're awake. Why so quiet?"

The figure burrowed deeper under the bedclothes as if trying to hide. When Genimo peeled the covering back, Fedeles issued a pathetic animal whimper and curled into a ball. Kiram's fear dissipated in the face of sympathy.

"Let him alone." Kiram took the blanket from Genimo and laid it back down over Fedeles. He wasn't to blame for the curse and he had suffered far more than Kiram because of it.

Genimo rolled his eyes. "Going to sing him a lullaby too?"

"Do you have to be an utter ass at all times?" Kiram snapped. Genimo scowled at him but appeared to have no retort.

Kiram turned his attention back to Fedeles. Despite his leering grin, his face was streaked with tears. When he lifted his hand to wipe at his eyes Kiram caught sight of fresh stitches running along his wrist.

Kiram gently caught his hand. "When did this happen?"

"Firaj. Firaj. Run away. I'm bad, bad, bad. I can't stop it." Fedeles' expression contorted and then he began to recite the names of other horses, urging each of them to run away.

"He cut himself." Genimo scowled at Fedeles. "Last night with one of my dueling knives. Scholar Donamillo sewed him up quickly enough."

"Does Javier know?" Kiram asked. Fedeles had gone quiet, shoving his face down into the mattress.

"Of course he knows. He told me to keep it in our circle. So don't go blabbing, all right?"

"Who would I tell?"

Genimo shrugged as if to imply that Kiram's motivations were some incomprehensible mystery, then went to help Scholar Donamillo file away the tomes that Kiram had cleared out from beside the mechanical cures. Part of Kiram wanted to join them, in hopes of getting another chance at Yassin's notebook, but ogling ancient equations seemed less important than comforting Fedeles

right now. He'd have other chances at Scholar Donamillo's library while he was rebuilding the engine.

Very gently, Kiram smoothed Fedeles' hair back from his face. Fedeles looked up at him with an expression of mute sorrow.

"I know you aren't to blame," Kiram quietly told him.

Fedeles relaxed, leaning into Kiram's touch in the same way that Firaj did when he wanted reassurance.

Kiram said, "It's going to be all right, I promise. I'll find a way to help you."

Fedeles closed his eyes and soon he fell asleep. In rare moments of peace such as this, Kiram could see how closely Fedeles resembled Javier. He wondered what Fedeles had been like before the curse had twisted his mind. Then he wondered what might be left of him if he were ever to be freed of it.

Kiram caught himself then. It would not be a matter of *if* Fedeles were freed but *when*. His engine might have been broken but it would be rebuilt. He also reassured himself that Alizadeh was gleaned precious information through Kiram's weekly ritual of lighting his lotus medallion. Perhaps last night's attack had even provided Alizadeh with a vital clue. That thought alone reassured him.

The bells rang and Kiram pulled the blankets over Fedeles' exposed shoulder before heading towards the stables for his riding class. Master Ignacio had not excused him from his lessons. Kiram supposed a man would have to be dead to have the war master give him a day off.

His trip was cut short by Javier, who caught him outside the infirmary.

"You forgot your riding gloves." Javier held them up but didn't proffer them to Kiram. Instead he glanced to the infirmary doors. "Did you see Fedeles?" Javier asked and Kiram heard the second, unasked question in his tone.

"Yes, I told him what happened wasn't his fault. I think that helped him. He's sleeping now."

The anxious tension seemed to melt from Javier. "Thank you."
"It's the truth."

"I know but that's a hard thing to remember after last night."

"Last night wasn't all bad." Kiram took his gloves from Javier's hand. He allowed his fingertips to brush across Javier's bare palm, which elicited a smooth, sensual smile.

"Not bad at all," Javier agreed.

They walked together to the stables. They didn't hold hands or even stand too close but Kiram felt warmth and intimacy in Javier's lingering gaze. They discussed a translation of a Yuan prince's travel diary that Javier had just discovered in the library and thought Kiram would find amusing.

"The man's supposed to be a worldly authority but just from his descriptions of Anacleto and Rauma you can tell he's never left Yuan. It's hilarious." Javier tossed Kiram his riding gloves in an easy manner. "He says that the Cadeleonian men have a ritual of brotherhood, wherein they take hammers to each other's poorly protected bodies and after much pounding choose the one man left standing to be the leader of their now nearly crippled group."

"So, he met Elezar, then?"

"Maybe one of his ancestors," Javier replied. "The thing dates back a hundred years or so."

"Does he mention the Haldiim?"

"Oh yes, he does your people the honor of many an inaccurate and even impossible depiction. Did you know that you are all born as women and only develop into men when fed red meat boiled in goats' milk?"

"Really?" Kiram snorted.

"He includes a recipe."

"I have to read this."

"I'll bring it up to our room. We can go through it together tonight," Javier said, then added, "Good luck riding."

Javier left Kiram feeling so giddy at the prospect of being together in their room again that he nearly forgot that he and

Firaj needed to arrive at the arena punctually or face Master Ignacio's wrath.

Throughout the riding lesson, fellow second-year students who caught Kiram's eye gave him short approving nods. He heard Ollivar whisper something about facing down a bear to two other boys. Master Ignacio ordered them to silence and glared at Kiram. Oddly the master's scowling countenance no longer frightened him. Last night he had faced something so truly terrifying that no scholar, no matter how disapproving or stern, could compare. The shadow curse had been like a nightmare come to life, insubstantial and murderous at once: darkness that killed with the ease of a passing shadow.

Master Ignacio was a man—strong and brutal—but no more than that. His very physicality implied weakness of some kind. He could be exhausted; he could be injured. Studying him now, all his snarls and shouts, Kiram thought that a skilled swordsman would be wise to exploit the war master's quick temper to draw him out, make him overreach.

Not that Kiram was a skilled swordsman. Reminding himself of that, he averted his gaze from the war master's face and concentrated on the lesson. Firaj responded to the commands that Master Ignacio shouted across the arena and Kiram moved with his mount. He felt a certain pleasure at the thought that he was learning nearly as much from his horse as he was from the war master.

After Kiram had brushed Firaj down and spent a few minutes making much of the old gelding, he followed Nestor out of the stables.

Flecks of snow drifted lazily from the white afternoon sky.

Javier waited outside, apparently unperturbed by the cold, a dusting of snowflakes in his dark hair. "You certainly look smug, Kiram."

"He does, doesn't he?" Nestor agreed.

"I'm just relieved to be able to enjoy the day," Kiram replied. "And I'm looking forward to this evening."

Javier and he shared the briefest smile before Javier slyly averted his eyes.

"I'm not." Nestor gave the dormitory a particularly condemning glare. "Have you noticed what's been coming out of the kitchen lately? There's been no fresh meat in weeks and now even the sausages are beginning to look like cabbage and oats. It's going to be nothing but cabbage for the rest of the winter, I know it."

"Don't abandon all hope just yet, young Grunito." Javier looked more pleased with himself than usual as he spoke. "Supply wagons just arrived, and not only did it look like they were weighted down with sides of beef, but there were mail deliveries as well. Probably the last of the year."

"Anything from my mother?" Kiram asked.

"As always," Javier replied. He glanced to Nestor. "Are you game to help haul the damn thing up the stairs?"

"For more of those marzipan pears I'd haul the crate all the way to Anacleto." Nestor's face flushed with a strange excitement that bordered on lust.

The three of them muscled the creaking, wooden crate up the stairs to the tower room. Despite the dozens of other students gawking at them from the staircase, Nestor strode into Javier's room as if it were no different from any other room in the dormitory.

"Are you sure you should let them all see that?" Concern tinged Javier's voice. "If the holy father finds out you've been in here, you could end up spending your whole dinner reciting the prayer of Our Immaculate Father."

"If Kiram can face down a bear, then I figure I can manage the holy father," Nestor replied.

"I didn't really face down a bear so much as run away from it," Kiram corrected.

"You still faced it. You just had the good sense to run away right after that." Nestor shrugged. "In any case Holy Father Habalan wouldn't miss his own supper just to watch me pray."

“True enough,” Javier agreed.

With the bulk of Kiram’s tools now up in the room with them, they made short work of prying the crate open. As always they discovered bags of candies nestled amongst the packages Kiram’s mother had sent. Javier found a silk satchel of hard toffee tucked between two bright winter scarves. Kiram handed out the foil-gilded almonds he found atop a sheaf of writing papers. Nestor sniffed out the marzipan pears before Kiram even had the small box open. Kiram handed the candies over to Nestor and then lifted out a pair of lined leather gloves. A note from his sister Siamak wished him warmth and thanked him for the Solstice gifts he’d sent, even though she hadn’t been able to resist the temptation to open them early.

Alizadeh had sent a book of Bahiim texts to Javier and a silver quill pen for Kiram and a short note with a Solstice blessing that mentioned neither his meeting with the Circle of Red Oaks nor replied to any of Kiram’s letters. Rafie had enclosed a variety of powdered medicines in case Kiram or any of his friends fell ill. Like his husband he wrote no letter, just enclosed a packet of instructions.

Nestor sniffed one of the dry poultices and wrinkled his nose. “I think I’d have to be dying to take that.”

“The instructions say—” Javier paused, concentrating on Rafie’s looping Haldiim script. “—it’s to be mixed with wine-no, wait not wine. An alcohol that’s stronger than wine.”

“You can read that?” Nestor gazed at Javier in surprise. Kiram didn’t bother to express his own curiosity anymore. Javier would never tell him just where or how he had developed his grasp of the Haldiim language.

“I’ve picked a little up from Kiram.” Javier didn’t look up from the paper but went on reading slowly. “Mix with a strong alcohol to produce a plaster. Apply it to a wound to keep it from turning foul.”

“Smells foul enough on its own.” Nestor returned the bag to the small chest with the other poultices.

Then came the thick sheaf of papers from Kiram's mother recounting news of his family and friends. They seemed to all be doing well. His older brother Majdi would be back from sea this spring. Both his sisters were helping his mother keep up with the Solstice candy orders and his father had managed to go another season without setting his workshop on fire.

Musni and his wife were both in good health; though, Kiram's mother added with distinct disapproval, Musni had been seen in the company of street snakes more than once in the past few months.

Hashiem Kir-Naham—Kiram couldn't help but notice the extra flourishes with which his mother wrote the man's name—was doing good business at his mother's pharmacy and had asked after Kiram on three separate occasions. He had even been so thoughtful as to send a Solstice gift along in this very package.

Kiram sat back on his bed, feeling suddenly fatigued and more aware of the ache in his calf than he had been all day. He tried to imagine what his mother would make of Javier as a prospective suitor for her son. A hell-branded Cadeleonian nobleman with a penchant for sleight of hand and a group of friends who were little more than highborn ruffians. He certainly would never be an obedient pharmacist's son.

Noticing Kiram's attention, Javier asked, "Something wrong?"

"I'm just feeling a little done in. My leg's started to hurt some."

"Shall we try your uncle's plaster?" Javier asked.

"We don't have any alcohol, do we?"

"Atreau does. Under his bed," Nestor offered. "Helps to warm girls up when they sneak up to his room."

"Your upperclassman is certainly prepared for all occasions, isn't he?" Kiram laughed and then shook his head. "Thanks, but I'll be fine so long as I get off my feet for a little while."

"All right, you lie there and Javier and I will open up your boxes for you."

Kiram nodded his agreement and the two of them set to work while Kiram lay across his bed on his stomach, watching. Javier's

choice of box yielded two wheels of cheese, a box of dried sugar fish and then three bottles of writing ink. Nestor's face lit up when he open up a box of candied fruit, all decorated and arranged to look like a lover's garland. A small card fell from the box and Javier picked it up. He frowned as he read it silently.

"This is beautiful!" Nestor drew in a deep breath of the fragrant garland. Even from where he lay Kiram could smell the mixture of spiced candy and citrus fruit.

"What's the card say?" Nestor asked Javier.

"Don't know. I couldn't read the handwriting," Javier replied with a shrug. He handed the card to Kiram and Kiram tried not to feel mortified as his eyes fell across the words:

Most beloved youth, I pray that I do not offend in sending something so simple to someone so much more delectable. I await your return as the tulip longs to penetrate the warm earth of spring.

*Ever your admirer,
Hashiem Kir-Naham*

Kiram could hardly believe that the polite older man he remembered had written this to him. He wondered what his mother must have told the pharmacist about him.

"It—it's from a friend of my mother's and she hopes that I will share the candied fruit with all my new friends here at the academy." Kiram crumpled the note quickly.

"Really? That's damn sweet of the lady." Nestor eyed the brilliant red cherries and translucent orange curls of candied tangerine peel in a lascivious manner.

From behind Nestor, Javier gave the garland an irritated glower. "Sweets from the sweet, no doubt."

Kiram forced a laugh. What must Javier have thought, reading that note? The low ring of afternoon bells broke Kiram's thoughts.

Nestor straightened reflexively at the sound. "Time for class already." He glanced to Kiram. "Have you got your paper done for history?"

Kiram nodded, then asked, "You?"

“Not so much,” Nestor admitted. “There are a few holes between page one and three. Most of page two really isn’t worked out.”

“Well, give me what you have and I’ll work on it during art.”

“Thanks so much, Kiram. You’re my academic salvation.”

Nestor bounded to his feet and, with a look of relief, started digging through of his sheaf of drawings. Kiram rose more gingerly. Still, a sharp pang flared through his calf when he placed his weight on it and he flinched. Javier came to him immediately, wrapping his arm around Kiram’s waist to hold him steady.

“Are you sure you shouldn’t just take the afternoon off and rest?” Javier asked.

For a moment Kiram allowed himself to enjoy the strength of Javier’s embrace.

Then Nestor turned back, three crumpled pages of disordered script in hand. “You do look flushed, Kiram. Are you getting a fever?”

“I’m fine. I just stood up too quickly.” Kiram pulled away and Javier released him with a mechanical pat on the back. Kiram limped down the stairs to fine art class.

Chapter five

Scholar Casade, their art instructor, was a pragmatic elderly gentleman whose wispy white hair reminded Kiram a little of his own father. According to Nestor, he'd once been the royal portrait painter before a scandal had driven him from the court at Cieloalta.

Not one to waste his energy on lost causes, the scholar had long since abandoned any attempt at improving Kiram's minimal artistic abilities. He doted on Nestor, however. Kiram suspected that, though the scholar knew Kiram spent most of the class period completing Nestor's history and mathematics assignments, he tolerated it for Nestor's sake.

Not that Kiram didn't pay attention during class. In fact, Scholar Casade's lecture on line weight and form had aided Kiram greatly in forging Nestor's square script. He could sign Nestor's name nearly as well as his own now.

An hour later, Holy Father Habalan accepted the paper from Nestor without comment. When Kiram turned his own essay in the holy father studied it, frowning, then said, "In light of your harrowing night I had expected that you wouldn't have a paper to hand in, Underclassman Kiram. I suppose your bear wasn't so terrible as all that, then."

Kiram bowed his head. Just looking into the holy father's face made him almost too angry to think. How dare the bastard taunt him about last night? Was he so sadistic that he needed to see Kiram's fear even now?

Then another thought came to Kiram. The groom Victaro had been murdered for knowing Habalan controlled the curse. Now, Kiram realized, the holy father might be watching for a response to determine Kiram's knowledge. He had to meet Habalan's gaze

and seem genuine in his belief that a beast had attacked him. He couldn't allow the holy father to see either his fear or his anger.

"I'm only able to turn the paper in because I completed it the day before, sir." Kiram forced himself to lift his head and meet those cow brown eyes imbedded in that plump, plain face. "I saw very little of the creature, but from the damage it did, it must have been very large. I wouldn't want to meet with another."

"Yes, well, let's hope not." The holy father gazed intently at Kiram for a long moment, which seemed to stretch endlessly while Kiram maintained his expression of earnest indifference. Then the holy father moved on to the next student. After that the rest of the history lecture floated past Kiram. He tried to focus on the Treaty of Crown Hill but memories of that creeping darkness invaded his thoughts. He had to fight to keep from staring at the holy father's shadow as it moved across the classroom floor.

Once the class was over Kiram bolted from his seat only to be called back. Habalan took Kiram aside while the rest of the students filed out of the lecture room. His calf began to ache in hard pulses, echoing the tempo of his speeding heart. His palms felt clammy.

"I understand that you have been working quite hard on a project for the Crown Challenge." Holy Father Habalan's expression wasn't sympathetic, though he clearly intended it to appear that way.

"Yes, I have, sir. I want to make the academy proud."

"I'm sure you do. But with things the way they are, you would do well to refocus your time and energy on your work for this class and let the Crown Challenge wait until next year." Holy Father Habalan hefted the stack of papers in his pudgy arms and gave Kiram a limpid gaze. "Considering your recent setback and the winter conditions, I feel that it would be wholly unwise and most likely unhealthy were you to return directly to your mechanist work in that drafty shed."

Dull malevolence showed beneath the holy father's bland expression.

“Yes, sir. I’ve locked the shed up and I don’t think I’ll be returning to work there anytime soon.” Kiram’s mouth felt dry and his words came out in a kind of rasp.

The holy father smiled and excused him.

Kiram rushed from the lecture room. Nestor raced after him with a concerned expression. Kiram didn’t slow down until he reached the library. There he laid his books and papers down on one of the heavy wooden desks and flopped into a worn chair. Nestor sat down across from him.

“So, what did he say?” Nestor asked.

“He wants me to take some time off from the Crown Challenge to focus on my history papers.”

Nestor rolled his eyes. “If he thinks you’re not focused enough the man doesn’t know what the word means. You usually have your papers and mine written days before they’re due.”

“I’m not taking him seriously,” Kiram replied, though the threat of the curse coming for him once more chilled his bravado. “He’s just an old bigot.”

“You’re probably right. He’s certainly not fair to you,” Nestor said. “All the papers you’ve written for me he’s given higher marks than the ones you’ve handed in for yourself, but they’re all your papers.”

Kiram simply nodded. He could vaguely remember a time, early in the summer, when nothing could have worried him more than receiving low marks on his history papers. But now it seemed trivial.

Nestor began sketching, as he always did when Kiram was quiet. Kiram himself picked up a book but couldn’t bring himself to read any of it.

Instead he thought of the threat that Holy Father Habalan had made. Men like the holy father had once brought King Nazario’s edicts down against the Haldiim here and throughout the kingdom, even as far as Anacleto. Facing terrible danger many Haldiim had fled with the Irabiim into the Mirogoth forests or sailed south to the Salt Islands. But Kiram’s ancestors had remained, despite their

fear—and Kiram now had a sense of how terrible and real that fear must have been. The thought of them made him proud.

He couldn't do less than they had. He couldn't give up on his engine. But he wasn't going to be a fool about it either. No great wall or battalions of archers stood between him and the shadow curse. He would have to keep his work in the infirmary secret.

Briefly Kiram wondered if he should warn Scholar Donamillo about Holy Father Habalan, but he decided against it. If the scholar had not been attacked for the work he had already done, then it was unlikely that he would be. Telling him now would only make him a threat to the holy father and put him in danger.

From somewhere in the back of Kiram's mind came the thought that he hadn't heard the soft scratching of Nestor's pen in a while. Kiram glanced to Nestor and discovered that he was absorbed with reading a sheaf of papers. When he turned a sheet over Kiram caught a glimpse of violet ink and fine script. A light floral fragrance wafted off them.

"Did you get a letter?" Kiram asked.

Nestor glanced up, startled. "This afternoon. It's from Riossa."

Kiram smiled, glad for a chance to escape his own worries for a while. "How is she liking living with your mother?"

"Better than I'd expected." Nestor read Kiram brief excerpts from the letter. Riossa expounded upon the vastness of the Grunito house, the astounding number of hunting hounds, lapdogs and rat terriers in residence, and the shock of witnessing Lady Grunito run down a would-be cutpurse so that she could thrash the man. She also wrote of an outing to the Haldiim section of Anacleto. Her descriptions of perfume sellers on the Ammej Bridge and red-dyed doves nesting in garlanded almond trees gave Kiram a pang of homesickness.

"She says she wanted to send me some Kir-Zaki candies but my father ate them all." Nestor carefully folded the letter closed.

"Well, you got some from my mother in any case."

"True. But it would be different if they were from Riossa, you know."

"I know," Kiram replied. Then a motion in the doorway caught his attention and he found himself looking up just as Javier strode into the room. Javier glanced across the tall bookshelves and vacant tables as if assessing a battlefield. Only when he seemed sure that no one else looked on did he approach.

"Knew I'd find you here," Javier said.

At the sound of his voice Nestor jumped. Then he quickly regained his composure. "You were quiet as a thief coming in. What's up?"

"Bored." Javier's eyes lingered on Kiram for just a moment too long before returning to Nestor. "Thought I'd check on bear-bait here to make sure he hadn't succumbed to his wounds."

Nestor laughed and then shot Kiram an apologetic look. Just behind Nestor, Javier watched Kiram with bare longing. Kiram felt his skin flushing.

"Bear-bait is pretty done in actually," Kiram said. "I think I might sneak in a nap before dinner."

A brief, very pleased smile curved Javier's lips. "Come on then, I'll bore you to sleep with readings from Bishop Seferino's sermon to the body traders." Javier glanced to Nestor. "You?"

"I'll pass on the sermon, thanks. I get enough of those at home," Nestor responded.

"See you at dinner, then." Kiram stood, trying to appear fatigued in his motions. The pulsing excitement that rushed through him as Javier placed a hand against his back made it all the harder.

"Maybe we'll get some beef tonight," Nestor replied but his attention wasn't on Kiram or Javier. He'd already unfolded Riessa's letter again.

Kiram did his best to seem worn out as he traipsed up the stairs after Javier, but once they were in their room he was alive with energy and arousal. He slipped his fingers under Javier's supple belt and pulled him close.

"Poor Hashiem Kir-Naham, hmm?" Javier kissed Kiram with hungry force. Kiram all but ripped his shirt off. The two of them tumbled into Javier's bed, still pulling off each other's belts and kicking off their boots.

They devoured each other with hands and mouths, each driving the other towards desperate climax. Kiram's anxiety and fear dissipated as mounting ecstasy consumed his senses. After that, he lay in a state of spent satisfaction, Javier's arm draped across his chest. He nuzzled his face against Kiram's neck, whispering words so softly that Kiram could hardly hear them. Kiram felt sleep take the lingering tension from Javier's body.

Kiram drew in a deep breath, smelling their mingled sweat and sex, and then drifted. He knew that his troubles would not be so easily escaped, but for now the even rhythm of Javier's heartbeat and the warmth of his body lulled him.

Chapter Six

During the brief winter days that followed, Kiram spent much of his free time in the infirmary, rebuilding his engine and studying Scholar Donamillo's mechanical cures. He felt safe there, surrounded by machinery, with the scholar occupied in his own studies but always a near and reassuring presence. Scholar Donamillo seemed to take a quiet interest in Kiram's activities and assisted him without needing to be asked when Kiram labored with too many parts or too much weight.

The scholar was not a talkative man but Kiram found his company soothing. From time to time when he noticed Kiram looking on with interest, he would point out a string of soldering instructions engraved in the iron ribs of the mechanical cure or expose the fine wires that made up the harness and allow Kiram to study them. One afternoon he even demonstrated the way the amber and copper plates at the base of a mechanical cure could be brushed to produce arcing white sparks. The sight delighted Kiram and reminded him of Javier's sparking, hot touch when he opened the white hell. Much to Kiram's embarrassment, a shiver of remembered pleasure tingled down the nape of his neck.

Such responses were becoming more and more common. Throughout his days Kiram felt almost haunted by previous nights of intimacy. Javier's presence suffused Kiram's consciousness, so that now even in broad daylight, thoughts of Javier's body—his touch and his taste—floated up through Kiram's mind, distracting him.

During combat practice the strong smell of sweat and fevered heat of his own body flooded him with a brief but vivid recollection of deep, musky scents and joyous friction. His face flushed and Nestor easily scored a point on him.

“Sorry.” Nestor stopped short, looking startled. “I was sure you’d parry that one.”

“Nope, you got past me.” Kiram couldn’t help but smile at Nestor. He was the only man Kiram could think of who would worry about winning a point. “You should have pressed your advantage.”

“I was too surprised by the novelty of it,” Nestor admitted, but then he gave Kiram a mischievous smile. “Won’t be next time though. Better be on your toes.”

Kiram managed to remain focused throughout the lesson but found himself stealing glances at Javier all through lunch. Catching him staring, Javier gave him an arrogant grin, which was both deeply affecting and embarrassingly knowing. Kiram felt relieved when Elezar attempted some wrestling grip and jerked Javier halfway out of his seat. By the time Javier had fought Elezar off Kiram had regained his composure enough to meet his handsome smile with a studied indifference. Even so, Javier retained a smug expression through the rest of the meal and took every opportunity to stretch and slide one of his legs against Kiram’s.

Kiram loved the sensations and attention of Javier’s reckless desire but he feared exposure as well. Javier’s title and reputation shielded him from suspicion but Kiram possessed neither asset. So he took care never to appear too pleased with Javier’s company. He hoped his frowns and annoyed glances fit the appearance of a long-suffering underclassman who endured as best he could the antics and moods of a man like Javier.

But even reminding himself to remain cautious, Kiram could not help but lean into Javier’s quick embraces and smile in response to Javier’s light compliments. He accepted every invitation to join Javier riding and twice joined the Hellions hunting.

While Javier, Elezar and Atreau attempted to flush a boar from snow-laden thickets, Kiram brought down eighteen of the blue jays that constantly followed them. The birds were made into mince pies and Nestor proclaimed Kiram to be the hero of

the meal, since the others had returned with nothing more than a few stringy hares. Fedeles nudged Kiram and sang, "Blue jays in white skies. Bad birds make good pies," like the refrain of a favorite song. Both Morisio and Atreau picked up the tune and hummed it as they too ate. Javier raised his glass to Kiram in a silent toast.

The winter might have been blissful if only Kiram could have scrubbed Holy Father Habalan's existence from his mind. But he saw the man every day, if not during class, then at the high table leading the Sacreday prayer. Just a glimpse of the holy father gripped Kiram's stomach and sent his pulse racing like a rabbit's. In the holy father's presence Kiram became aware of how deep the winter shadows grew and how they writhed at the edges of the flickering lamplight like living things.

For the first time since he was a young child he woke, terrified in the vast darkness of night, and his fear did not dissipate upon waking. It grew stronger. He lay shaking. Beside him, he felt Javier stir; his muscles shuddered, a gasp caught in his throat, and sudden wakeful tension flooded his body. He wrapped an arm around Kiram's chest, pulling him closer. Kiram knew at once that some terrible dream had woken Javier as well.

"It's all right," Kiram said. "It was just a dream."

"Yours or mine?"

The question didn't quite make sense, but Kiram answered anyway. "Both."

Javier said nothing. His grip on Kiram's chest relaxed and his breathing slowed. Kiram thought he might have fallen asleep again. The darkness seemed to close in on Kiram in a terrible isolating mass. He could see nothing and yet he was afraid to close his eyes.

"Why do dogs dance so poorly?" Javier asked quietly.

"What?" Kiram wasn't sure he'd understood what Javier had said. He rolled over, squinting through the dark to make out Javier's expression, but was unable to see more than a silhouette against the pale bedding.

"Because they have two left feet," Javier replied in the same soft tone.

"Two left..." Then Kiram realized that it was a joke. One of the silly kind that Nestor so loved.

"Stupid, isn't it?" Javier asked. He pulled Kiram closer to him. "Do you know any?"

"No—well, there's one Nestor told me but it's not very good."

"Let's hear it," Javier replied. He laid his head on Kiram's pillow. His skin felt warm.

"All right." Kiram thought for a moment, recollecting Nestor's words. "One day this messy old bear comes upon a very tidy rabbit. He realizes that this is his chance to improve his own atrocious appearance. So the grubby old bear shyly asks the rabbit if it's ever troubled by shit sticking to its fur. The rabbit replies that it certainly is not. Wonderful, the bear says and then he picks up the rabbit and uses it to wipe his ass clean."

A slight snort escaped Javier. "Ah, Grunito humor."

"I told you it wasn't very good," Kiram replied but he found himself amused as well. The absurdity of the joke eased his thoughts and broke the grip of fear that had held him.

Javier told him another joke—this time an appalling pun that Nestor would have relished—and Kiram rolled his eyes.

"That was just stupid," Kiram said.

"I know." The warmth of Javier's tone made Kiram think that he was grinning. "The stallion got colt-feet," Javier repeated the punch line. "It makes me laugh every time, because it's just so dumb."

Kiram sighed and relaxed against Javier. It was strange that he could feel so frightened and then so safe after just exchanging a few bad jokes. But there was a power in humor, especially ridiculous, simple humor. Kiram would never have believed it before this, but now he realized that he couldn't think about puns or riddles and feel terrified at the same time. Their sheer absurdity undermined the darkness and shadows.

This had to be something Javier had known for years, since he had been a child facing the shadow curse alone. Now he offered the knowledge to Kiram in the simplest manner and Kiram was thankful.

Kiram touched Javier's face and then kissed his lips. Javier kissed him back, sweetly and sleepily. Kiram closed his eyes.

"How does a willow respond when a Bahiim flirts with her?" Kiram asked, remembering something Musni had told him once.

"How?" Javier asked softly.

"Leaves."

"Terrible," Javier said but he laughed.

"I know." Kiram grinned and hugged Javier. His body felt so comfortable. Sleep came easily then.

As the days passed Kiram grew accustomed to feeling dread and fighting it back. He worked on his engine, collected jokes from Nestor, and exulted in Javier's intimacy. After every one of Holy Father Habalan's history lessons Kiram strode into the orchard with his bow and hunted blue jays.

He brought down so many of the birds that even Master Ignacio offered him a passing compliment for his skill as an archer. Genimo complained that they were going to be served nothing but stringy jays if Kiram wasn't stopped.

"At least it's meat," Morisio replied. "I don't think I could have stomached many more of those cabbage stews they were sending out from the kitchen last week."

"I'm just wondering if Kiram couldn't manage to bag something a little fatter." Genimo chewed on a thin drumstick. "A snow partridge, perhaps. Or a goose."

"Why not ask for a peacock and a dozen plump lambs while you're dreaming?" Javier replied.

"Lamb. Don't talk about lamb." Elezar sighed heavily. "God, I think I'd give up a month of wine for a rack of lamb right now." He scowled at the breaded jay and heap of turnips on his plate. "If they serve turnips again on the New Year I'm going to break into the kitchen and eat one of the cooks."

Javier raised a brow. "A stringy cook when you've got a tender underclassman? Really, Elezar, cannibalism is no excuse for low standards."

Even a table away Ollivar blanched and the Hellions laughed. The rest of the dinner conversation revolved around which underclassman would make the best meal. Kiram was quickly discounted, as both too skinny and too tricky. Nestor swore that he'd give them all indigestion. Elezar countered that he was more likely to give them all worms.

Despite the morbidity of the topic, Kiram enjoyed the camaraderie. At such times his sense of being foreign disappeared and he melted into the boisterous energy of the Hellions.

Then the darkest day of winter came, the Solstice, and Kiram was suddenly aware of how very different he was from all the others at the academy. Even Javier, who spent at least an hour every evening reading the Bahiim text Alizadeh had sent him, accepted the day as one dedicated to penance and prayer. All the Cadeleonians dressed in their drabest clothes and took neither wine nor meat. Their Solstice required them to attend morning service, take turns at penance, and then spend the evening at chapel, chanting mournful prayers and standing vigil until the next morning.

Kiram found the entire prospect depressing. A Haldiim Solstice was a celebration of light, gifts and feasting. Back at his mother's home in Anacleto, Kiram knew that bright lamps were being lit in all the windows to burn throughout the night, beckoning friends and strangers alike to shelter and feast in their home. Sweets and fragrant meats would fill the tables as their cook and Kiram's sisters carried succulent dish after dish out from the kitchen. Dried cherries, almond candies, ginger squash, lamb, saffron rice, and toasted cheese would soon fill silver dishes and gilded platters. Even from the distance of memory, the smells of steam and spices wafted up to Kiram.

Right at this moment he imagined that his father and Uncle Rafie had hauled in the oak barrels of honey wine.

Soon Haldiim of all callings and stations would arrive, some bearing gifts and coming to stay, others bringing no more than a song or a juggler's trick and accepting stuffed breads and clay cups of mulled honey wine with cheers and blessings before passing on to other houses. Kiram smiled to himself, remembering the sweet sharp taste of stolen sips of the mulled wine on his lips.

The streets would be aglow with lamps and the sounds of singing and laughter would pour from every house. Again and again the familiar refrain of the Solstice song would ring out as one family or another took it up. To Kiram's memory it seemed as if the sweet simple lyrics were always in the air on Solstice.

"Come friend, come stranger, daughter and son. All are welcome, all loved, all one." Kiram sang the refrain to himself and felt all the more abandoned, hearing only his own voice raising a song that he remembered ringing across an entire city.

Alone in his and Javier's room, Kiram briefly surveyed the uniform slate of snow and frost that encased the stones outside the window. No paper flowers decorated the barren branches of the trees; not a single lamp burned back the cold winter shadows. He let the drapes fall closed over the desolate view.

He had thought that the Cadeleonians would at least exchange gifts. He vaguely remembered Scholar Blasio mentioning something like that, but Javier had informed him that they did not. Not until their New Year celebration would any Cadeleonians even be allowed wine or spirits. Neither singing nor dancing was permitted until then either.

Leave it to the Cadeleonian church to render a miserable, cold time of year even more bleak and dispiriting, Kiram thought.

He frowned at the chest of trinkets and sweets he'd dragged out from under his bed. He'd collected gifts for all of the Hellions—even Genimo. Most came from the autumn tournament but there were others he'd specially chosen from the goods his mother had sent to him. Next to the trunk stood the small, silver lamp his father had sent for him. Kiram picked it up, feeling the delicate filigree of almond flowers and honeybees. Each of his brothers had received

a similar lamp when they had left home, so that they too could drive away the darkness when it was at its deepest. Just the weight of the lamp imparted a sense of profundity to Kiram. It didn't matter if he was among Cadeleonians. He would light his lamp and distribute his gifts with pride.

The decision made, Kiram quickly filled the lamp with sweet oil, lit the wick, and placed it on the windowsill.

Then he hefted up his trunk and hauled it down the stairs. With students, scholars and staff all attending chapel, the dormitory halls were deserted and eerily silent. Kiram felt like a thief creeping into each of the Hellions' rooms. Only the red light of dying fires illuminated most of the rooms and each space felt strange and personal as Kiram entered. Little shivers of fear mixed with his greater sense of excitement.

As he went he couldn't help but notice the differences between the Hellions' quarters. Creative disarray reigned through the small room Nestor shared with Atreau. Ink bottles cluttered both their desks and the floor was a maze of books, scribbled poems, sketchbooks and tins of paints. Discarded papers and crumpled sketches collected beside the tiny fireplace to be used as kindling. The earthy smell of Nestor's graphite styluses mingled nicely with the spicy scent of Atreau's cologne.

Two rooms down the hall, Kiram recognized Fedeles' bed at once. Even empty it looked tormented. Tangled sheets and blankets twisted around pillows and discarded clothes. Old bandages hung from the headboard. Wood shavings, tattered papers and odd socks littered the floor. In stark contrast stood six precise rows of small, carved horses. Nearly two dozen filled his desk. Pinned to the wall above them was Nestor's drawing of Firaj.

Both Morisio and Genimo kept their halves of their rooms neat. A few stains of machine oil marred Genimo's desk while a deck of cards lay at Morisio's bedside. They, like most of the Hellions, were not remarkable in their habitations. Tournament ribbons and dice abounded as did liquor flasks and hunting knives.

But Elezar surprised Kiram. He'd expected a mess of sweat-stained jackets, dueling knives and dirty boots. He'd prepared himself to choke on the smell of sweat, sex and white ruin. Instead the space seemed almost abandoned. The desk and shelves stood bare, except for a thin sheaf of blank paper and a pen kit. A simple coverlet stretched over the bed, neither tucked in nor rumped. The sight reminded Kiram of a room at an inn where the resident had not unpacked, expecting to be gone too soon to bother.

When curiosity drew Kiram to open Elezar's dresser, he found nothing but school uniforms and a formal coat. No books, diaries, love tokens or good luck charms lay beneath the folded shirts or among the clean pairs of socks. Then in the pocket of the coat, Kiram discovered a tattered scrap of paper. He unfolded it carefully and found a fine drawing of Javier. The portrait was handsome and skillfully made—one of Nestor's best sketches, Kiram thought. And it was clearly cherished, worn from a constant touch but also folded carefully, so that no crease marred the face.

Suddenly Kiram felt ashamed. What was he doing, digging through Elezar's personal belongings? This was certainly none of his business. Now that he held Elezar's one private treasure in his hands he wished that he had never found it. Kiram returned it to the coat pocket and closed the dresser at once.

He left a long-bladed Irabiim knife with a finely decorated scabbard and fled the room, feeling guilty.

He was relieved that only two gifts remained. He left a set of calipers and six hard lemon candies in the infirmary for Scholar Donamillo, then he slunk down the hall to the door of Scholar Blasio's personal rooms. He had no intention of intruding upon the scholar's privacy. Instead he placed a box of sugared almonds and a pair of fur lined gloves down in front of Scholar Blasio's door. Then just as he rose to his feet the door swung suddenly open. Kiram jumped, an involuntary cry of surprise escaping him. Scholar Blasio's scowl lifted to a gentle smile the moment he met Kiram's startled face.

"I thought you'd be at chapel..." Kiram began and then realized that he needed to explain what he was doing crouching in front of the scholar's door, not why he was surprised to be caught. He picked up the wooden box and the gloves and thrust them out to Scholar Blasio. "I brought Solstice gifts."

The scholar accepted the gifts in apparent stunned silence. For the first time Kiram wondered if such an act could be offensive to a Cadeleonian. Was it wrong to offer them food and luxuries during a time of religious deprivation? "I know Cadeleonians don't celebrate this way but we Haldiim give gifts today. And I thought it couldn't hurt if I shared a few things with my friends."

"Thank you." Scholar Blasio gazed at the box and gloves with a strangely distant expression.

"I didn't mean to offend you—"

"No, you haven't," Scholar Blasio cut him off. "Quite the contrary, actually. I'm touched, Kiram. It's been so long since..." He simply shook his head and then stepped back from the door, holding it open. "Come in. We should talk."

The response was so strange that for a moment Kiram felt afraid, but he trusted Scholar Blasio and so accepted the invitation. The scholar's rooms weren't large. The warmth of the small hearth and the smell of spiced tea immediately calmed him. Familiar math texts lay on a weathered table beside Scholar Blasio's teapot.

"Can I offer you a cup?" Scholar Blasio brushed a hand over the teapot.

"Yes, please." Kiram sat in the worn seat across from the scholar's own. While the scholar poured a second cup of the steaming, fragrant tea, Kiram studied the graceful wood-carvings that decorated the bookshelves. One highly detailed globe held Kiram's attention so deeply that he almost missed the humble clay lamp on the scholar's windowsill. The flame burned low, illuminating little more than the graceful form of the lamp itself.

Once Kiram did notice it, he couldn't easily look away. Its place on the windowsill could have been a chance happening. A

lamp might be set down anywhere at any time. But the shape of the lamp was so distinctly Haldiim that Kiram couldn't help but think it was meant for the Solstice.

"It belonged to my great-great-great-grandmother," Scholar Blasio said.

"It looks like a Haldiim Solstice lamp," Kiram commented cautiously.

"That is, in fact, exactly what it is." Scholar Blasio handed Kiram his tea. Kiram remembered accepting tea from the scholar before and thinking there was something familiar about its flavor. Now he recognized the taste. Musni's mother served the same red-tipped leaves to her guests; many Haldiim descended from northern lineages favored this smoky blend.

"There used to be an entire Haldiim population here before King Nazario purged them from the land." Scholar Blasio opened the wooden box of sugar almonds. He took one but didn't eat it. Instead he handed a second one to Kiram. Kiram hardly tasted the candy. He'd been feeling so alone that he hadn't even considered that other Haldiim could be hidden among the Cadeleonians who surrounded him.

"Most of the Haldiim were killed or fled," Scholar Blasio went on. "But there were a few with Cadeleonian parents or grandparents who could pass without notice."

Instinctively, Kiram searched for some physical trace of Haldiim heritage in Blasio's face. There was nothing. With his thick build, pale skin, and dark eyes and hair, Scholar Blasio could have served as a perfect example of a common Cadeleonian. No doubt Nazario's scourges had wiped away any Haldiim who could be recognized at a glance, leaving behind only the most perfect of chameleons.

"Believe it or not, Donamillo and I are descended from a Bahiim lineage." Scholar Blasio gave Kiram a wry smile.

"I..." Kiram didn't know what to say. "I wouldn't have ever guessed. I mean, not until I saw the lamp."

"This is the first year I've lit it since I left my mother's home." Scholar Blasio's expression was distant. His gaze rested on the

flickering lamp. Absently he popped a sugar almond into his mouth and suddenly his grave countenance brightened. "My word, these are good!"

"They're one of my mother's most popular specialties."

"Yes, I can see how a person could make a fortune with a candy like this one. Sweet success, hmm?"

"Yes, exactly," Kiram agreed. He didn't want to mention his mother's many other assets and properties when Scholar Blasio obviously came from a far more deprived family.

"Donamillo didn't want me to tell you this—I mean, about our heritage. I think he worried that you would let it slip to the other scholars or the holy father, but..." Blasio poured himself a little more tea and then refreshed Kiram's cup as well. "King Nazario is long dead and I see no point in you feeling isolated and alone when there are two other Haldiim living with you. So I decided that I would tell you. I claimed illness to get out of the chapel vigil and lit my lamp for the first time in years." A look of melancholy flickered across Scholar Blasio's face. "Then my courage failed me. I can't say why, but I just couldn't bring myself to fetch you and tell you what I wanted to say. I must sound like a coward to a young man like yourself."

"No," Kiram replied. "I can't imagine having a secret like yours." Even as he spoke Kiram realized, with great irony, that he did have a secret as deep and private as Scholar Blasio's and he was even less inclined to speak of it.

"You keep a secret too long and it gains a kind of power over you, I think. It starts to own you." Scholar Blasio ate another candy almond and then leaned back in his chair, seeming for the first time to completely relax. "You can't know the state I was in when you showed up at my door." Scholar Blasio shook his head. "But now that I've told you, it really doesn't seem so important. I'm Haldiim."

"I'm glad. Now I don't have to spend Solstice alone." Kiram drank more of the tea.

"It is a relief to escape that wretched chapel. The entire affair is dull, depressing and far too sober." Scholar Blasio suddenly

hopped up from his chair and went to a small cabinet. He returned to the table with a round of hard cheese, half a loaf of bread, and a flask that smelled of honey wine.

“Let us have as proper a Haldiim Solstice as we can.” He poured the liquor into Kiram’s empty teacup and then served himself.

“To light, friends and honesty.” Blasio offered a toast.

Kiram drank happily and after several more toasts, he taught Scholar Blasio the Solstice song. They sang together, discussed two new mathematics papers, and from time to time Scholar Blasio made little confessions of his secret life. He described the pranks Donamillo had often played on their Cadeleonian neighbors and his own attempts to reclaim the power of his Bahiim ancestors.

“For nearly two years I kept lurking under old trees, hoping one of them would somehow commune with me. Donamillo would deny it but I know he did it too. We couldn’t help it. Our grandmother was always telling stories of our glorious Bahiim ancestors.” Scholar Blasio rolled his eyes and Kiram laughed. He guessed that he had gotten a little drunk after all.

“It was years before I realized that the Bahiim magic was long lost, if it had ever really existed at all.”

“I used to think it was all just stories,” Kiram admitted. “But there are some things I’ve seen that have given me doubts.”

“I’m sure,” Scholar Blasio said. “Rooming with Javier Tornesal, I imagine you’ve seen quite a lot of Bahiim power. Of course it’s in the completely wrong hands.” Scholar Blasio leaned forward in his chair and gazed intensely at Kiram. “It’s like some kind of divine joke, really. The power of all shajdis lost to the Bahiim and yet somehow a Cadeleonian beef head has inherited one.”

“I don’t think he’s a beef head at all,” Kiram objected.

“No, I suppose he’s not.” Blasio smiled at Kiram and ate another slice of the pungent cheese. “I have to admit I had feared that he would mistreat you when you first arrived. But young Lord Tornesal has proven himself a very decent man, despite his mediocre mathematical skills. He’s earned a great deal of my respect for that. Who knows, maybe the shajdi is not in the wrong hands after all.”

“So, you’ve always known the white hell was a shajdi?” Kiram asked.

“Me? No. Donamillo recognized it when he saw the previous duke burn the city gates in Labara with his bare hands. At the time it infuriated him to realize that a shajdi had fallen into the hands of a Cadeleonian but things changed after he started teaching here. The same thing happened to me. If you spend enough time teaching boys, seeing their families and watching them grow into men, you realize that we are all just people. No matter what faith we follow or how we celebrate. The greatest wisdom of the Bahiim is knowing that we are all one: Haldiim, Cadeleonian, Mirogoth, Yuan. The names are superficial. The same humanity exists within us all. We come from the shajdi and we return to the shajdi. We all carry it within us.”

Kiram nodded, benevolence and alcohol lending a sense of immense profundity to Blasio’s words. It seemed a perfect time to raise the Solstice song and to Kiram’s pleasure Blasio joined him. Then Blasio taught him a hearty, Cadeleonian New Year song so that he’d be able to sing along when his Hellion friends were finally allowed to sing again. The two of them ate and drank and sang until the hour grew late. At last Kiram wandered up to his room, humming to himself, and fell asleep nestled in Javier’s bed.

His slight hangover the next day hardly stood out in the sea of his sleep-deprived classmates and instructors. Most of the classes were released early. For the first time all year Kiram found the library full of students, most napping in the quiet warmth. The Hellions had claimed a big table far from the drafts of the door and noise of the hall.

Most of them slumped forward in their seats, their faces planted against the tabletop, sleeping. Javier slouched in an ornately carved chair, looking exhausted but awake.

“Kiram, join us.” Javier kicked out a chair next to his own. Elezar scowled at the noise as the legs grated across the stone floor.

Kiram dropped into the seat, glad to get off his feet after enduring Master Ignacio's marching drill. He envied Nestor, who had possessed the good sense to volunteer to help tidy the chapel as an escape from combat practice.

"You were in the dormitory last night," Javier said. "You didn't happen to notice an imp scurrying about and depositing gifts in certain students' rooms, did you?"

Kiram flushed with a mixture of guilt and happiness.

"I'm afraid I have no idea of what an imp looks like so I couldn't say."

"This one would have been slim, golden-haired—" Javier's description was broken off.

"—sneaky, scrawny and loaded down with loot. You might have noticed him while you were walking past a mirror or something." Elezar pulled his bloodshot eyes open and gazed levelly at Kiram.

Kiram laughed but admitted nothing.

"Well, if you do see him tell him thanks." Elezar yawned. "He's a fair judge of a good knife."

"If I see him I will certainly tell him," Kiram replied.

"Yes, and ask him why he didn't leave anything for me." There was only a trace of hurt in Javier's tone but Kiram responded to it immediately.

"What? But I did—" Kiram stopped as he caught Javier's smug expression. He scowled at Javier. "I left a fart on your pillow."

Elezar snorted at the response. Javier just smacked the back of Kiram's head lightly. His hand lingered for a moment, almost making a caress of the blow. Belatedly Kiram saw that Javier wore one of his Solstice gifts: a simple gold ring with a Mirogoth knot design forming the centerpiece. Kiram felt a sudden flush of pleasure and something like conquest at the sight of Javier wearing the ring.

Not that they had exchanged oaths or ever would, Kiram reminded himself. But for an instant he sensed the pride that he

might have taken in their pledges and rings. Then he felt foolish for choosing to give Javier a ring and making himself melancholy.

"Something wrong?" Javier asked.

"No." Kiram pulled his gaze from the ring and leaned on the table. "I'm a little hungover, that's all."

"Hungover?" Atreau groggily shoved an oily strand of his black hair back from his face. "How come you get to be hungover when the rest of us just have to be exhausted?"

"Just one of the advantages of being barred from chapel," Kiram replied.

"Yes, well you left our room quite a wreck, and you've hardly begun copying my history essay." Javier stood and stretched. Their room was fine and Javier's history essays never required a rewrite to tidy them, but he didn't object. "I expect that you'll have all in order by the time I'm done with my nap, Underclassman Kiram."

"Yes, Upperclassman." Kiram let a heavy sigh serve as his feigned protest. Atreau weakly waved after him as he followed Javier out of the library.

Once they were up in their room, Javier pulled Kiram into a hard, possessive kiss. Kiram returned his force and desire but then drew back, taking in Javier's wide dark eyes and naked longing. He smiled, and when Javier tried to kiss him again, he offered a teasing evasion.

Javier pinned him against the wall, forcing Kiram to open his lips to him. Pleasure pulsed through Kiram's groin as Javier slowly pressed their hips into contact.

"I missed you last night." Javier kissed him again but this time with a slow sensuality. The buckles of their belts clinked and ground as they pressed themselves closer.

Javier's hands closed on the small of Kiram's back and then cautiously dropped lower to caress Kiram's buttocks.

There was intention in Javier's touch, but neither certainty nor skill. Raw hunger made his grip almost bruising. His strong fingers dug in. It was not the first time that Javier courted a deeper intimacy, but this was by far his most direct overture. Whether he did not know the words or simply could not bring himself to speak them,

Kiram did not know, but Javier never voiced his desire and when Kiram quietly evaded him, Javier always quickly relented.

Javier knew what he wanted, Kiram thought, but he didn't know exactly how to have it. Kiram could have taught him. Running his hand over Javier's taut body, Kiram ached to have him but wasn't sure that he knew Javier well enough to trust where such exchanges might lead them. He had heard too many Cadeleonians—Javier among them—use the word 'bender' as a byword for a weakling or a coward. Kiram wouldn't risk Javier viewing him as either. Nor did he wish to force Javier to accept such an identity.

So Kiram ducked to the side, caught hold of Javier's hand, and pulled him to the bed. He pushed Javier back onto the bedding and straddled his legs.

Kiram's hands had grown skilled at working open the delicate gold buttons of Javier's trousers. A soft moan escaped Javier as Kiram bowed over him.

There was such pleasure feeling Javier's entire body respond to the slightest motion of his tongue and the tension of his throat. There was power as well, working him to the height of ecstasy and withholding his release, again and again. Kiram exulted in Javier's ragged breathing, his desperate grip and even the moment when Javier's control broke and he rolled Kiram beneath him and thrust hard. Then Javier fell back, breathing as though he'd run miles.

Kiram laughed and wiped his face. Javier threw his arm around Kiram and pulled him down into a kiss.

"You are too good at that, Kiram," Javier whispered. "I feel like a novice compared to you."

"Well, they do say that the best way to learn is practice and instruction," Kiram replied.

"Yes, well, I need a little of both." Javier rolled onto his side and traced the line of Kiram's chest down to his hips. Kiram leaned back into the pillows.

That night and many after it they nearly missed dinner. When they did arrive, Kiram's lips were still tender and the taste of Javier's flesh lingered in his mouth. Despite their fatigue, an eager lust overcame them both as soon as they were in their room alone.

Kiram expected his desire for Javier would wane as the winter months passed, but instead it seemed to grow. During the New Year celebration they slipped away between the scholars' speeches and returned with sticky hands. Twice they went riding through the orchard and pleased each other against the bare apple trees. It was dangerous and yet they couldn't seem to stop themselves.

In part Kiram understood that desperation drove them. Once spring arrived the academy year would be at an end. Kiram would return to Anacleto, and Javier would go to Rauma. If they met again it would not be until midsummer and by then Kiram had no idea of how much would have changed between them. The few weeks left became precious. But they passed all too soon.

The snows melted and red crocus flowers pushed up through newly exposed soil. Icicles crashed down from the eaves of the dormitory like thunder strikes. In the infirmary, Kiram's engine stood complete though not yet linked to Scholar Donamillo's mechanical cure. All around Kiram students chattered about their families and homes. Nestor calculated the days until he would see Riossa again.

"Six days to Anacleto if the weather holds and none of the roads have washed out." Nestor scowled at the wet ground. "As many as eighteen if the mountain snows melt all at once."

Kiram nodded but he was hardly listening. Already private coaches had arrived at the academy; among them stood a glossy carriage with the black Tornosal sun emblazoned upon it. Javier would leave within the hour, once his luggage was loaded. They'd already wished each other farewell as best they could with both Nestor and Elezar standing beside them.

"No point in you riding alone, is there?" Nestor's question slowly penetrated Kiram's distraction.

"What?"

"Well, we're all three going to Anacleto. We might as well share a carriage."

"You mean you, me and Elezar?"

"Sure," Nestor replied. "It seems lonely, you staying here an extra night just to ride all that way alone."

Kiram agreed to leave today with Nestor and Elezar. Then at least he wouldn't have to return to his and Javier's room, knowing that Javier would not join him.

Briefly he wondered what Fedeles felt, remaining all year at the academy, maintaining his treatments while all the other students returned to their homes.

If he felt hurt or lonely, none of it showed when he came to see Kiram off. Fedeles sang and danced beside Kiram. After Kiram's belongings had been packed onto the red Grunito carriage, Fedeles hugged him fiercely.

"Don't forget Firaj," Fedeles told him.

"I won't," Kiram reassured him. He wished that he could bring Fedeles with him and remove him from Holy Father Habalan's grasp. But Scholar Donamillo's mechanical cures offered Fedeles far greater protection than Kiram's company could. "You'll look after him while I'm gone, won't you?"

Fedeles nodded but his expression was distant and dreamy. A moment later he dashed away to the Tornosal carriage, singing out a gibberish of students' names and dance steps as he went. Kiram took his seat beside Nestor and across from Elezar. He glanced out the small window and caught sight of Javier.

Kiram's pulse quickened. He prayed desperately that Javier would stride across the grounds to the carriage. If only he would ask to come along to Anacleto or offer to take Kiram to Rauma...

But he did not move. He remained at a distance, watching with an expression of studied indifference. Even when the carriage pulled away, Javier remained where he stood. As they passed through the academy gates Kiram lost sight of him.

Chapter Seven

After eight days of cramped travel Kiram was thrilled to catch sight of Anacleto. The port city rose up from the sea like a white wave of limestone, granite, marble and gold. Square, towering Cadeleonian architecture dominated the northern streets. Churches with gilded steeples shot up between the immense houses of merchants and noblemen. But even here in the most conservative section of the city, Kiram caught sight of Haldiim patterns on men's vests and brilliantly feathered hats in the latest fashion, inspired by the princes of Yuan.

Heavy accents and foreign words mingled with the shouts of Cadeleonian street hawkers and wagon drivers. Amongst the tight press of carts, carriages, pedestrians and horsemen Kiram spied tattooed sailors and red-haired Mirogoths. Wood smoke, animal sweat and rich spices perfumed the air but never blotted out the moist, salty tang of the crashing sea.

"There!" Nestor jabbed his finger against the window, pointing to a massive limestone wall and the thick clusters of cherry blossoms that bowed over it. "That's our house!" His face flushed with joy and he beamed at Kiram. Across from them, Elezar straightened and peered out the window. He smiled but without Nestor's wild enthusiasm. Then again, why would he? Elezar didn't have a lover awaiting him.

Their carriage turned up a narrow street. Immediately the wrought iron gates swung open and they rode past the great lawn with its flowering trees to the entry of the massive marble Grunito house. Red-enameled statues of bulls stood at either side of the stairs and ivory tusks curved like giant horns over the red doorway.

Footmen in crimson liveries ran ahead of the carriage, and even before it had drawn to a halt, people flooded out of the house. Lady Grunito, dressed in a pinstriped gold gown, led the throng of beefy boys and youths. At a glance Kiram knew that these had to be Nestor and Elezar's brothers. One tall, comparatively gaunt young man wore a holy collar and Kiram guessed he was the eldest brother, Timoteo. The other eight boys appeared younger than Nestor. They pushed and bounced off each other like fat puppies.

Then Riossa broke out from the group and rushed down the stairs. Nestor bolted from the carriage, narrowly missed a spill as he hit the mud, and then rushed to Riossa. He swept her up in his arms and kissed her as though he were the hero of some ancient epic poem returning home after twenty years lost at sea. Kiram strongly suspected that Atreau had served as an example and instructor of the technique. Riossa melted into his embrace.

At the top of the stairs, Lady Grunito simply shook her head and Kiram was amused to see her exact expression and gesture mirrored by Elezar, who remained in the carriage seat opposite him. Then the pack of plump young boys pelted down the stairs to embrace and tease Nestor. They squealed and laughed as Nestor grabbed them and pinched their noses. Footmen hurried past the scene to unload baggage from the carriage.

Elezar glanced to Kiram. "Will you stay with us or shall I send the carriage on to your family house?"

"I think I should see my family as soon as possible." Witnessing the warmth of Nestor's return home had made Kiram feel the absence of his own family with sudden intensity.

Elezar gave an understanding nod by way of saying farewell. He exited the carriage with an easy bound. At once his little brothers hurled themselves at him and Elezar swung two of them up off the ground tucking one under each arm, while a rotund child clamped onto his leg and rode his foot.

As Elezar directed the coachman on his way, Nestor shouted, "Kiram, I'll visit soon!"

Then the carriage carried him back out into the crowded streets of Anacleto. As they traveled south, stately marble facades gave way to plaster walls and cramped winding lanes. Buildings leaned into each other; print shops shared walls with taverns, dancehalls and teahouses. Street vendors dressed in gaudy coats shouted and crooned to the dense afternoon crowds. One woman danced in a full skirt while twirling long strings of glass beads. Another simply waved skewers of peppered meat, allowing the strong aroma to advertise her wares. Between them, boys hawked the newest printings of sheet music and broadsheets.

As the carriage bounced over the wooden planks of the Black Moon Bridge, Kiram's heartbeat quickened. He'd crossed this bridge countless times with hardly a thought but now every one of the two hundred and forty beams registered as an increment closer to home.

Across the bridge a huge limestone wall loomed up, marking the boundary of the Haldiim district of the city.

Bored Haldiim sentries stood guard at the top of the wall and two older Haldiim men, dressed in the black uniforms of Civic Guards, lounged at the gates. They waved wagons and carriages through without concern. Kiram smiled, remembering his own turn up on the wall two years earlier. At the time he'd thought that he would never have a use for all the archery practice. He'd complained to his father about the exhausting labor of it. If only he had known what the Sagrada Academy had held in store for him.

As he passed through the massive wood and iron gates the entire world changed. The architecture flowed and curved with color. Brilliant vitreous tiles glittered across domed roofs; floral mosaics glimmered from walls and arches. Almond trees abounded along the red cobbled streets. Their clustering, white blossoms nearly obscuring the ribbons and simple lamps that hung from their branches.

In every direction that Kiram looked he met dark Haldiim faces. Men and women dressed in long vests and bright coats. Most of the men wore wide-legged trousers, while the women

often wore skirts over their thinner trousers. Haldiim voices rang out and the scents of mint, lemon and cinnamon filled the air. Red-dyed doves cooed from their nests. Kiram felt as if the very atmosphere was somehow warmer and more welcoming.

He passed the goat market, the common gardens and then the rough outcropping of seeming wilderness where the Bahiim met in the Circle of Red Oaks. Before he had traveled through other towns and cities Kiram had never realized how strange this place was: untamed forest engulfing four city blocks. Carpets of spring flowers spread around thick walls of thorn brambles and weedgrapes. Above the riot of plant life towered ancient gnarled oaks.

When they'd been children Kiram's sister Dauhd had terrified him with stories of boys abandoned in the shadowy wilderness and how savage creatures lurking in the verdant underbrush devoured them. But now the grove only made him think of Alizadeh. Kiram touched his medallion and felt safe.

The Wahdi River flowed just past the Circle of Red Oaks. Dozens of small bridges throughout the Haldiim district spanned the fast rolling waters. None were as beautiful nor as extravagant as the bright red Ammej Bridge. Thousands of stylized flames were carved into its arching timbers, which were painted a multitude of scarlet shades and inlaid with lustrous amber. It rose like a spectacle of fire over dark waters, and most importantly, it emptied directly onto Gold Street where the Kir-Zaki house stood.

Kiram pressed his face to the window staring as the high, tiled walls that surrounded his home drew closer. The sweet fragrance of perfume and candy saturated the air. The house gates stood open, as they always did on business days, to allow deliverymen and merchants to come and go with ease. As a rule some peddler or hopeful candymaker was always waiting in the courtyard for an opportunity to meet with his mother.

But the large crowd today surprised Kiram. Groups of people stood under the flowering almond trees and leaned against the mosaiced walls of the reflecting pool. Some sat on brightly painted

boxes advertising their wares. Others carried small display cases or covered sampling trays. Fruit sellers, paper makers, butchers, cheese vendors and, oddly, several troupes of musicians filled the steps in front of the gold entry doors. House servants moved between them, taking down names in their ledgers or offering clay cups of warm, spiced tea.

Kiram could only remember this many merchants gathering in their courtyard once before and that had been for his grandmother's funeral. Sudden fear gripped Kiram. Could something have happened to his mother or father? One of his sisters? Had his brother Majdi finally drowned at sea like his grandmother always claimed he would? He hardly waited for the carriage to draw to a stop before he leapt out and charged into the courtyard.

"Fiez!" Kiram called to his mother's secretary, recognizing her by her short hair and large, silver hoop earrings. The slim woman turned and her white curly hair bounced around her face. Shock showed in her expression as she took Kiram in.

"Kiram!" Fiez went to him and took his hand. *"We weren't expecting you for another two days."*

"Why are all these people here?" Kiram hardly heard Fiez's words. Across the courtyard he thought he caught a glimpse of his sister Dauhd. Neither his mother nor his father were anywhere to be seen. His mind raced with terrible scenarios—both of them taken in a carriage wreck or by fever. *"Has something happened?"*

"Not yet. It was meant to be a surprise for you." Fiez sighed and shook her head. *"Well, you did look surprised. Oh, your mother is going to be so annoyed."*

"What do you mean?"

"We're preparing to celebrate your return home," Fiez said. An instant later Kiram's sister Dauhd rushed across the courtyard and pulled him into a hug. Kiram returned the embrace, though somewhat awkwardly. She felt smaller than she had been, almost delicate in his arms. Had he grown so used to the company of men? Perhaps he had simply grown. His shirt did feel tight, now that he thought about it.

"Kiram." Dauhd pulled back a little and smiled up at him. "I can't believe what a wretch you are. Your carriage shouldn't have brought you back until the end of the week."

"I didn't wait for the carriage mother sent. I rode back with Nestor and Elezar Grunito," Kiram explained.

"Nestor and Elezar? You're on first names with the Grunito lords now?" Dauhd raised her fine blonde brows. Both she and Kiram had inherited their father's sharp features and wicked expressions.

"Jealous?" Kiram asked. "I roomed with the Duke of Rauma, you know."

"Yes, we all know." Dauhd rolled her eyes. "Mother wouldn't stop bragging about it all summer."

Fiez nodded in confirmation. "I should inform your mother that you're here, Kiram. She'll want to see you in the sunroom most likely. It's the only quiet place in the house right now. She'll be relieved to see that you're in good health, though she'll be annoyed that she paid for a carriage for nothing."

"It wasn't for nothing. The other one is bringing back my spare machine parts for father to put to use."

"No doubt that will certainly comfort her." Fiez disappeared through the crowd of merchants and performers.

"I can't believe this is all for me," Kiram said.

"Neither can I," Dauhd replied. "But Mother has to show you off. After all you're the first Haldiim to attend the Sagrada Academy and you spoke with Prince Sevanyo himself. Ever since Rafie told her about that she's made sure every mother in the entire district knows." Dauhd glanced past Kiram. "Is that the Grunito carriage?"

He looked back to where the carriage driver and footmen waited patiently for instructions, then guiltily nodded. He'd been so worried about his family that he'd utterly forgotten them.

In a moment Dauhd had two servants unloading Kiram's luggage. She made sure that both the carriage driver and the footman received a generous tip before sending them back to the Grunito house.

"I hate to look stingy in front of Cadeleonians," Dauhd commented. *"I'm probably overcompensating for Auntie Easham. Did I mention that she's here to attend your homecoming?"* Again Dauhd's pale eyebrows rose. *"And she brought Vashir with her."*

"Oh no." Kiram could feel the blood draining from his face. Alizadeh's cousin, Easham, never failed to bring up the prospect of a match between Kiram and her own wild Bahiim son, Vashir.

"Oh yes." Dauhd grinned gleefully at his response. *"You two make a handsome couple! Him, long haired and ranting about the wisdom of the trees. You, trying to find a hole deep enough to hide in."*

"It's not funny," Kiram told her.

"Oh, but it will be." Dauhd led Kiram into the house through the side doors of the kitchen. Fruit, vegetables, flowers and cheeses filled the scullery tables. Pots of sauces and soups bubbled away over every one of the four cooking fires. From the kitchen they went to the sunroom, where afternoon light gleamed across the high polish of the pale elm walls. Costly panes of stained glass framed the view of the small holy garden beyond. Embroidered pillows littered the floor. Both the room and the garden were refreshingly quiet. Kiram dropped down onto a floor pillow in a pool of sun.

Dauhd sat beside the low tea table and propped an orange pillow against her back.

"You know, Vashir isn't the only one who has come to court you," Dauhd informed him.

"I don't even care. I'm just happy to be home." Kiram closed his eyes against the bright sunlight. His skin felt as if it were drinking in the warmth. The hard knots that days of riding in a cramped carriage had left in the muscles of his back and legs melted away. It had been so long since he'd been this comfortable.

Suddenly he wondered where Javier was right now. Was he alone in some drafty mansion? Was he enduring yet another regimen of penance?

"Every mother in the city is digging up a son or nephew to meet you now that you're keeping company with dukes and princes," Dauhd said, interrupting Kiram's thoughts.

"Now that I'm keeping company with dukes and princes who is to say I'll settle for just some mother's son?" Kiram spoke lightly but his heart ached at how close his words were to the truth. None of them would ever compare to Javier.

"I told Mother you wouldn't have any of them." Light laughter softened Dauhd's tone. *"Still, if I were you, I wouldn't hold much hope for Musni either. I mean, if that's what you're thinking."*

"It's not," Kiram assured her.

"Good, because I don't want a prick snatch for a brother. He's married now, you know."

"I know." Kiram drew in deep breaths and listened, reacquainting his senses with the scents and noise of his home. The soft patter of footsteps across wooden floorboards grew louder and Kiram looked up in time to see his mother at the door. His father came in just behind her. Kiram's eldest sister Siamak and his bachelor elder brother Majdi both arrived soon after.

Kiram's mother still wore her gold candy apron over her fine linen clothes. Her long, curling gray hair was pinned back, though a few delicate white curls hung loose. Kiram didn't think she looked anything near her fifty-eight years.

The smell of honey and almonds enfolded Kiram as she knelt down beside him and hugged him.

"You look terrible, Kiram." His mother drew back inspecting him. *"Absolutely filthy. Haven't you had a bath?"* Over her shoulder Kiram saw his father give him a friendly wink. His father too wore his work clothes, but unlike his mother's spotless gold apron his father's leather apron and canvas pants were stained with machine oil and singed in places. His hair burst out from his head like a wild nimbus cloud and black grease streaked his forehead and nose.

Kiram's mother licked her thumb and then reached up and scrubbed it across Kiram's cheek as she had done countless times when he had been a small child. As her warm finger brushed over his scar again and again Kiram realized that she was trying to wipe it off as if it were road dust.

Kiram caught her hand.

"It's just a scar, Mum." Kiram tried to sound offhanded.

His mother looked horrified. *"How on earth did this happen? Did one of those Cadeleonians do this?"*

"It just happened during battle practice. I don't even remember how." Kiram prayed that his mother wouldn't be able to tell that he was lying. To his relief his brother Majdi laughed.

"Mum, you've got to stop babying him." Majdi strode forward and plopped down on a pillow next to Kiram. He squinted at Kiram's face. *"That's hardly a scratch! He probably got it picking a pimple."*

Kiram's pride flared at having one of the worst injuries of his life described as no more than a pimple but at the same time he sensed that his brother was right.

Majdi was a year younger than their widowed sister Siamak but had traveled much more widely. He shared their uncle Rafie's sun-beaten dark skin and short Cadeleonian hairstyle. When it came to worldly experience he seemed to effortlessly outshine Kiram. As if to prove this, Majdi rolled up the sleeve of his light linen shirt, exposing a long jagged scar that ran from his wrist up past his elbow. *"That was just from some piece of rope that got loose when I was in the rigging. Nearly tore my arm off, but I hardly noticed it at the time."*

"Don't encourage your little brother." Kiram's mother pulled Majdi's sleeve back down.

"He's not a baby anymore, Mum," Siamak protested from the doorway. Of all of them she most resembled their mother, her face round and almost childlike in its youthfulness, her hair kinked and thick as rope. She was also the one who most often quarreled with their mother.

"He certainly is," Kiram's mother replied and she gave Siamak the kind of look that told Kiram that the two of them had been arguing about this earlier. *"No child ever stops being a mother's baby, no matter how old she or he gets."*

"We're adults—" Siamak began.

"Won't Uncle Rafie and Alizadeh want to see Kiram?" Dauhd suddenly suggested.

"Yes, absolutely," Kiram's father agreed.

Siamak scowled but allowed the subject to drop, which Kiram appreciated. He didn't feel up to listening to a fight just yet.

"Majdi," Kiram's mother decided, *"go ask Fiez to inform your uncle Rafie that Kiram has returned early. Or better yet, why don't you go yourself? You aren't doing anything, are you?"*

"Nothing important," Majdi replied, then he leaned in close to Kiram. *"Enjoy your freedom while you can. A couple of days from now she's going to be ordering you around as well, you know."*

His mother batted Majdi's shoulder but he just gave her an easy, teasing smile. He stood and ruffled Kiram's hair. *"Welcome home, Kiri."*

Just as Majdi started for the door, Fiez appeared with a tea platter. Rafie and Alizadeh stood behind her in the dim hallway. Kiram waved at the two of them, but something seemed wrong to him. Rafie appeared as youthful as ever—his skin richly dark and his hair the color of cotton. But as they came closer Kiram was shocked to realize that Alizadeh walked with a cane and leaned heavily on Rafie's arm. His lean body seemed almost emaciated and his skin seemed faintly gray.

"Well, looks like my work's done," Majdi said. He dropped back down to a pillow.

"What good timing!" Kiram's father exclaimed.

"You're looking much better, Alizadeh," Siamak commented.

Dauhd nodded her agreement and took the tea tray from Fiez. The entire family choose pillows and sat around the low table. Alizadeh took his seat next to Kiram and offered him a warm smile. Kiram's father poured the steaming, fragrant tea into small green glazed cups and Majdi passed them around the table.

"Do you know what made you so ill?" Kiram asked Alizadeh. He suspected that he already knew what might have harmed Alizadeh so badly. He could remember Alizadeh's voice in his ear, warning him that the curse required blood. At the time he'd just been relieved to have lived, but now that he considered it, he couldn't help but think of the immense distance Alizadeh must have reached

across to draw those crows to Kiram's defense and of their horrific deaths. How much of their suffering had Alizadeh shared?

"You know." Alizadeh shrugged and offered Kiram a quick conspiratorial smile. *"One picks these things up every now and then. The worst is long past. So don't worry yourself. I'm on the mend."*

Kiram hugged Alizadeh fiercely and everyone in the room laughed because it doubtlessly looked like a wildly sentimental action.

"He's fine, Kiram," Siamak told him. *"You're such a child."*

"I'm not," Kiram replied. Even to him, his tone sounded petulant and babyish. *"I just wouldn't want anything to happen to my family, that's all."*

"I didn't say it was a bad thing," Siamak replied. Kiram's mother nodded her agreement as well.

"Familial affection is charming in a young man." Kiram's mother sipped a little of her tea and then looked pointedly at Majdi. *"In an old bachelor, on the other hand, it might seem like he's just gotten spoiled living at home."*

Majdi grinned and accepted a spoonful of honey from Kiram's father.

"We brought this for you, Kiram." Rafie pushed a small box across the table to him.

"Thank you," Kiram responded.

"Now, how did you know he was back?" Dauhd asked Rafie while Kiram carefully opened the tiny latch on the box.

"A bird told me," Alizadeh replied.

"That gossip, Pahmi, you mean," Siamak retorted.

Alizadeh shrugged. Kiram's parents and siblings laughed, but Kiram didn't. He wondered if Alizadeh really had spoken to a crow or if he had known because Kiram wore his medallion. A year ago he might have thought either an absurd idea but now he felt a quiet wonder.

Inside the box Kiram found a folding knife with ivory inlay all along its handle. He lifted it out and marveled at the smooth

motion of the long blade as he slid it out of the handle and locked it in place.

His mother frowned at the knife but his father looked delighted and asked immediately to see it. He inspected the hinge and lock, admiring their construction. Majdi guessed correctly that it had been crafted by a metalworker in Yuan.

"They love their poisons and concealed blades in Yuan." Majdi handed the knife back to Kiram.

"I thought Kiram would find its construction amusing," Rafie said.

"And it's not without its uses," Alizadeh added.

"For a street snake, perhaps," Dauhd said. Then she raised her brows. *"You're not thinking of joining a gang of street snakes are you, Kiri?"*

"Yes, as soon as I'm done with the Sagrada Academy I'm going to go hang around in some filthy alley, mugging drunks." He slid the knife into his pocket.

"It would be hilarious to see you even attempt to rob someone, Kiri." Siamak grinned.

"He'd make a much better prostitute," Majdi stated.

"Thanks for that," Kiram said.

"No, he's right," Siamak said. *"You're far too attractive to be a mugger. Majdi on the other hand is nasty looking enough, I think. Maybe you could lure men in and he could mug them."*

"Sure," Majdi said, grinning. *"What do you think, Mum? Kiri and I could go into business together and you wouldn't need to worry about settling either of us in suitable marriages."*

"Oh, that would be the joy of my life." Kiram's mother helped herself to a honey candy and placed a second one in Kiram's hand.

The conversation moved easily through recent gossip. Siamak briefly mentioned that Musni had just become a father but then quickly changed the subject. Dauhd wanted to know all about the eccentric behavior of Kiram's Cadeleonian classmates. Kiram obliged her for a little while but found that he preferred

to describe his own oddity in the midst of the Cadeleonians. It seemed wrong to poke fun at Nestor or Elezar when they had been so decent to him.

Everyone laughed when he described how he spent nearly two months sitting atop Firaj like a stuffed doll while the horse responded to Master Ignacio's shouted commands.

"He's a good mount then?" Kiram's father asked.

"The best," Kiram assured him and his father looked proud.

"What about the duke?" Siamak asked.

"Javier?" Kiram asked.

"They have a first name acquaintanceship, you know," Dauhd stated and Kiram felt his face flushing. He found it almost impossible to describe Javier and even trying made him feel lonely. Fortunately Rafie changed the subject quite smoothly and soon they were all discussing the upcoming wedding season and all the sweets that would inevitably need to be made.

When Kiram's mother and Siamak renewed their argument over selling of Cadeleonian cookies—particularly meringues—Kiram made the excuse of his tiring travel and need for a bath to excuse himself. His sister Dauhd shot him an envious look. His father hugged him on his way out and whispered, *"Welcome home."*

"It's good to be back." Kiram returned the embrace with strength. Only after he had settled into a steaming bath did he realize that he'd spoken Cadeleonian.

Chapter Eight

His second day back home, Kiram obliged his mother by personally delivering the invitations for his welcome home party to several important mothers. In the stately quiet of the Kir-Naham pharmacy, among the dozens of shelves filled with dried herbs and dark jars containing strange fluids, he glimpsed Hashiem Kir-Naham. There was something about his thoughtful expression and elegant motions as he ground yellow flowers in a mortar that reminded Kiram of Scholar Donamillo. He was slim, even for a Haldiim, but corded muscles flexed along the lengths of his arms as he worked his pestle.

Kiram left the invitation with Hashiem's mother and politely declined her offer of a medicinal tea, accepting instead several drops of fortune oil. It warmed his fingers as he rubbed it into his hands and a perfume of sweet camphor and cinnamon rose around him. As Kiram walked past the cedar shelves on his way out, Hashiem glanced up and offered him a smile. The expression lent his pleasant features a hint of both youth and charm. Despite himself Kiram smiled back and waved.

Back at his mother's house Kiram spent the afternoon standing for his mother's tailor while the old woman took measurements. She noted that he had not only grown a little taller but also much broader in his shoulders, chest and thighs. Between measurements, Kiram entertained Siamak's young daughters. They demanded to view his scarred arm and see demonstrations of his duels at the tournament. Majdi happily stood in for Kiram's Cadeleonian opponents and they fenced with fly whips.

At lunch Alizadeh's cousin Easham seated Kiram next to her son, Vashir. Vashir's hair, like Alizadeh's, hung in long curls nearly

reaching his hips. A rich luster showed in his deeply bronzed skin, and when his bare arm brushed across Kiram's, it radiated warmth. He smelled of earth and smoke. He flirted with Kiram, as he always did, but after the past months of constant secrecy, Kiram found Vashir's public caresses a startling reminder that he was no longer at the Sagrada Academy.

In the past Kiram had always found Vashir's company difficult. Physically he was deeply attractive to Kiram, but his conversation had always seemed to border on delusion. Now Kiram found himself listening to Vashir with such fascination that he failed to take much note of the way Vashir's thigh pressed against his own.

"How do you think a living man could become a vessel for a curse?" Kiram asked. Across the low table Dauhd rolled her eyes and Siamak looked pained.

"A true curse from the ancient times?" Vashir cocked his head and regarded Kiram as if he might have mistaken him for someone else.

"Not a true curse," Kiram clarified. According to Alizadeh a real curse was beyond the control of any single person and it destroyed everything in its path. *"A shadow curse."*

"A shadow curse. That's a deadly thought." Vashir lifted his brows. *"It's Alizadeh you should be talking to about curses. But they're a dangerous interest to take up."* Vashir placed his hand on Kiram's. *"You're far too talented a youth to be lost to a dead age."*

"A dead age?" Kiram didn't withdraw his hand from Vashir's. His fingers felt strong and the rough calluses pleased Kiram, reminding him of Javier's touch. *"Are all curses ancient, then?"*

"All the great curses are ancient," Vashir replied with a relaxed smile. *"Those who knew how to craft them were either destroyed by the Bahiim or took vows and became Bahiim themselves hundreds of years ago. Even before the time of Nazario the Impaler most of the great curses were locked away. The last of the great curses came during Nazario's reign."*

"The Old Rage," Kiram supplied and again Vashir seemed surprised that Kiram knew the name.

"Yes, it arose in dark times and cost many lives before it was sealed away. They say that, even now, it doesn't rest easy." Vashir leaned a little closer to Kiram. "Alizadeh says that it could not be put to rest properly, because the Bahiim had destroyed all their links to the shajdis to keep Nazario from claiming their power."

"Really?" Kiram asked. "I wonder if that would that make it easier to create a shadow—"

"I wonder if you two realize that the rest of us have no interest!" Dauhd announced.

Kiram scowled at her but Vashir simply laughed and allowed the subject to change. They discussed the new silks arriving from Yuan and the latest scandal rag denouncing the royal bishop as the father of another illegitimate son. Vashir left soon after that with a handsome young butcher who wanted his meats blessed.

Only at dusk did Kiram at last manage to slip away from his mother and sisters to Rafie's small house. He found Alizadeh in the garden, wrapped in his heavy leather cloak, and leaning back against the gnarled trunk of a tree.

"Rafie's bringing tea out for us," Kiram said as a way of announcing himself.

Alizadeh smiled just a little and Kiram sat down next to him.

"How are you feeling?" Kiram asked.

"Better by the day," Alizadeh replied. "And how have you been?"

"Me? I'm fine." Kiram gazed up at the violet and gold streaks that the setting sun had blazed across the sky. The sunsets had never been this brilliant at the Sagrada Academy and suddenly Kiram wondered what the sky was like over Rauma.

"Did you get my letters?"

"Yes, I did."

"And did you tell the Circle of Red Oaks about the Tornestal curse?"

Alizadeh closed his eyes and nodded.

"What did they say?" Kiram asked. "Will they help him?"

"Your handsome duke?" Alizadeh asked.

"You know who I mean."

"No, they won't interfere in the machinations of Cadeleonian noblemen." Alizadeh glanced to Kiram with a gentle expression. "But they will not bar me from doing what I will to protect you."

"What about Javier and Fedeles?"

Alizadeh cracked an eye. "I know about your Javier, but tell me about Fedeles."

Kiram explained everything he knew. Only a few sentences in, Rafie joined them. He poured tea and sat beside Alizadeh. Kiram described what he could of the mechanical cures and then the way the shadow curse had seemed to seep from Fedeles' body. Alizadeh leaned against Rafie and drank his tea.

"This happened the day the last mail delivery went out so I didn't have a chance to write you," Kiram ended.

"This boy, Fedeles," Alizadeh asked, "he is Javier's cousin?"

"Yes, but..." Kiram paused unsure if he should repeat a rumor, but then he decided that he should tell Alizadeh everything. "Nestor told me that Fedeles is probably Javier's brother. There was some kind of scandal about Javier's father sleeping with his own sister."

Rafie raised his brows. "Do they resemble each other closely?"

"They do," Kiram admitted. "More closely than Fedeles seems to resemble anyone on the Quemanor side of his family."

"So, let us say they are brothers. Who inherits from whom, do you know?" Alizadeh asked.

"I know that Javier has made Fedeles his heir but Fedeles would be declared unfit as things are now."

"And the title would then go to the church." Rafie refilled all their cups and offered Kiram a dish of pepper eggs, which he accepted. Briefly, he admired the deep red of the tiny egg before popping it into his mouth. The fiery spice and silky filling balanced his sweet tea nicely.

"The question that interests me is this," Alizadeh said, "if the curse is truly hidden inside Fedeles, why is Fedeles still living?"

"Scholar Donamillo's mechanical cures," Kiram said.

"No mechanical cure that I've seen could do more than raise a man's hair and light a few sparks," Rafie replied.

"But Scholar Donamillo's are different." Kiram lowered his voice out of habit after so many months at the Sagrada Academy.

"His has prayers etched into the metal."

"Prayers?" Alizadeh asked. "What kind?"

"All kinds. Some are Cadeleonian. Others looked like Bahiim invocations. There could be Mirogoth blessings as well." Kiram tried to recollect the prayers but there had been far too many for him to memorize, especially when his attention had been so focused on the purely mechanical aspects of the cure. "All I know is that they allow Donamillo to transfer his strength to Fedeles and that keeps the shadow curse from consuming Fedeles completely."

"A transference." Alizadeh considered the idea with a slight frown. "Depending upon the prayer invoked that could prove to be a dangerous proposition in itself. You're sure he didn't mention a particular prayer?"

"No." Kiram shook his head. "Scholar Donamillo told me that the source of the prayers didn't matter. Only their effect was important."

"Indeed?" Alizadeh looked skeptical and none too pleased. "Well, at least one of those prayers must come from the same source as the curse, otherwise it would not have any hold over it. I wish I could see this mechanical cure."

"I could write to Scholar Donamillo and ask him if he knows the sources of his prayers," Kiram suggested. "I think he would be happy for any help in treating Fedeles."

"Yes, write to him," Alizadeh agreed. "Ask him if he knows the names of the prayers that he's copied onto his machine. If not the names, then the texts from which they came."

Kiram nodded. He'd already written to Scholar Blasio and also to Javier, though he knew Javier's letter wouldn't arrive in Rauma for quite some time.

"What about the priest?" Rafie asked.

"Holy Father Habalan? He teaches history. And after I was attacked he told me not so subtly that I would be in danger if I went back to working on my engine."

"Did you go back to the work?" Rafie asked.

"Of course he did," Alizadeh replied. "You can tell from the smug way he's smiling."

Kiram felt his face flush. "I secretly rebuilt the engine in Scholar Donamillo's infirmary."

"Good choice. We Kir-Zakis aren't cowards, but we aren't idiots either, you know." Rafie grinned at Kiram and Alizadeh laughed.

"No, you certainly aren't." Alizadeh kissed Rafie's cheek and then returned his attention to Kiram. "How well do you think the priest knows his history?"

"I don't know. He taught everything as if the Cadeleonians had never done any wrong and all other cultures were backward and in need of conquering."

"Typical Cadeleonian priest then," Rafie replied.

"Yes, but could he have access to old texts? Things written during Nazario's rule and perhaps a little after?" Alizadeh wondered aloud.

"The school does have a huge library of old texts," Kiram replied. "But what kind of texts?"

"It's hard to know." Alizadeh sipped his tea and then added a dash of pepper to it. "They would have been religious, dealing with Haldiim curses and perhaps shajdi."

"Yes!" Kiram almost dropped his cup in his excitement. "Scholar Donamillo told me that when he was younger the holy father collected all the texts dealing with Haldiim writings, claiming they were heresies. He even took one of Yassin Lif-Harun's notebooks and was going to burn it, but Scholar Donamillo stole it back."

"It's not every Cadeleonian scholar that would risk his livelihood like that." Rafie's expression was thoughtfully approving.

Kiram almost informed his uncle that Donamillo was of Haldiim descent, but he stopped himself. The revelation would only make

less of Scholar Donamillo's actions and it couldn't hurt for Rafie to believe something good of a Cadeleonian.

"He's a brave man and a true scholar." Kiram couldn't help feeling proud. *"He's the one who campaigned for my admittance into the academy."*

"Ah, well, then he's surely a man of great reason and impeccable taste." Alizadeh flashed a handsome, teasing smile but then his expression turned serious again. *"So, all of this brings us back to the strong possibility that the holy father had access to all the resources he needed to create the shadow curse at the Sagrada Academy."*

"That could have included notes from the confessions King Nazario tortured out of the Bahiim who were held there," Rafie suggested.

"Probably," Alizadeh agreed. His expression was grim. *"So many men and women died in that place that the transcripts of their tortures would have filled a library of their own. I have no doubt that some papers would have remained on the school grounds long after Nazario's reign ended and the property's purpose was changed."*

"So, what exactly would have been written in these texts?" Kiram asked.

"If I knew that, then I'd know how to destroy this shadow curse," Alizadeh replied. *"As is, I can guess that it would be a perversion of the ritual for opening a shajdi."*

"But that knowledge is lost, isn't it?" Kiram asked.

Alizadeh paused only briefly, but Kiram didn't miss his hesitation. *"It is no longer taught. We cannot risk rousing the avarice of another royal impaler like Nazario."*

Kiram nodded, though the answer was not what he would have wanted. He drank more of his tea. Above him the sky deepened to a rich blue and the setting sun dimmed to a faint yellow streak.

"If the Bahiim really did have the powers of the shajdis back in ancient times, then how did Nazario and his priests ever manage to capture any of them?" Kiram would never have considered the question before—when he still believed the Bahiim to be eccentric storytellers—but now he had seen a shajdi and felt its fire.

Alizadeh studied his teacup for so long that Kiram thought he might not give an answer.

"Bahiiim magic is not the only magic in this world," Alizadeh said at last. *"But ours is the deepest and the most long lived. Even so, it does not make us immune to betrayal or arrogance or even love. Nazario used all he could against us. At first he tricked secrets out of young Bahiiim who were prone to brag after they had defeated his priests or Mirogoth witches. Other Bahiiim, he bribed with the wealth and ease that so rarely accompanies a Bahiiim's life of spiritual battle. And the last of us he defeated simply by taking those people whom we loved as captives."* For a moment, Alizadeh looked old and deeply sad. *"No matter how great a power we wield, we are all still human and we each have our weaknesses. Nazario's real genius was in knowing that."*

"It was long ago, love." Rafie placed his hand on Alizadeh's.

"Always look to your weaknesses, Kiram, and to those of your enemies," Alizadeh advised him.

Kiram nodded, though he wasn't really sure which of his weaknesses he should be concerned about. He knew he was demanding and suspected that he was a little spoiled and maybe that he had a tendency to discredit opinions that he did not hold. To that end, he added, *"Javier doesn't think Holy Father Habalan controls the curse."*

"I suppose he thinks the curse is divine retribution for his terrible sin," Rafie murmured.

"No, he just doesn't think Habalan has the intelligence or cunning to kill the entire Tornesal family without being caught," Kiram said hotly, instantly ready to defend Javier. *"I just thought I should tell you what he thinks. Javier has done enough penance to know the holy father well and he's been living with this curse his entire life."*

"Who does Javier think is controlling the shadow curse?" Alizadeh asked.

"He doesn't know." Kiram hung his head.

"Well, really, it could be anyone," Rafie said. "Even someone you've never seen. Some groom at the academy with a secret lineage and a claim to the Tornesal line. We've seen it happen before."

Alizadeh cocked his head thoughtfully. "True, but a shadow curse requires very exact knowledge and spiritual training. I still favor the holy father."

Kiram nodded his agreement.

A brassy bell chimed and Kiram realized that someone had come to the door. Rafie rose to see who had come calling and a moment later he returned with Kiram's brother Majdi. He held a small oil lamp and waved Kiram over to him. One look at Majdi told Kiram that he was here to escort him home.

Kiram quickly wished Alizadeh and Rafie a good evening. Out on the street Majdi handed the lamp to Kiram.

"Do you think we could stop by the quill shop? I want to buy some papers for letters."

"Not tonight. Mum needs your wisdom back at home." Majdi smirked. "Apparently she's arranged for several esteemed business colleagues to meet you and discuss Cadeleonian tastes."

"What am I supposed to know about it?" Kiram complained, still feeling the emotion of his conversation with Rafie and Alizadeh.

"Nothing," Majdi assured him. "She just wants them all to see that her son has attended the Sagrada Academy and knows all the most important Cadeleonian nobles. She used to have a little dog she showed off the same way."

"By sending it to the Sagrada Academy?"

Majdi laughed out loud at this. "It was a little runty thing, sort of ugly, but she loved it and it was pretty clever. So she was always having the dog perform tricks and the like. You know, so that other people could see why she loved it so much."

Kiram wasn't sure if he should be touched or insulted at being compared to a clever, ugly and beloved dog. The two of them walked along the dusky streets.

"Kiram!" A man called from the shadows of a nearby house. The man held up a lamp and Kiram recognized him at once.

"Musni!" Kiram smiled at the sight of him, though an instant later he thought he probably shouldn't have, judging from Majdi's frown.

Musni bounded across the street, his lamp swinging wildly and scattering shadows as if they were startled birds.

"Kiram! Well met." Musni threw an arm around Kiram, embracing him. Kiram returned the hug, but it was awkward, with both of them holding burning lamps. Drops of flaming oil fell and sizzled at their feet.

"You look good," Kiram said and it was the truth. Even in the dim lamp light, Kiram could see that the last few months had only added to the muscular swell of Musni's chest and deepened his complexion to healthy bronze. The pale ringlets of his hair flashed like gold as the flames of the lamps flickered. His smile was so inviting and his touch so welcome that Kiram could almost ignore the broad band of gold on Musni's right forefinger. But the bracelet adorning his wrist was another matter.

The sight—what it meant—made Kiram's chest ache. He tried to keep smiling but he felt suddenly cold.

"I should congratulate you." Kiram indicated the bracelet. **"A father already?"**

Musni seemed to blanch. **"We should go somewhere and... talk."**

"He's needed at home." Majdi shouldered his way between the two of them.

"My mother," Kiram said by way of explanation. **"You know how she is."**

Musni nodded.

"There's going to be a party for my return," Kiram added quickly as Majdi took the lamp from him and began to walk away.

"The day after tomorrow. Come, will you?"

"I'll try to make it," Musni replied.

Kiram turned and ran to catch up with his brother.

"Welcome back!" Musni shouted after him.

Kiram watched over his shoulder as Musni and his lamp fell back into the darkness of the narrow streets and walled houses.

"He's married now," Majdi said.

"And a father, I know," Kiram replied. *"But he's also my friend."*

Majdi sighed heavily. *"Sometimes you're so smart that it makes you stupid."*

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just what I said," Majdi replied. *"You're so smart and so used to being right that you can't recognize when you're wrong about something."*

"But you can?" Kiram asked.

"About this? Yes. I've been around a lot longer than you and I've seen this kind of thing before. I know about men like Musni."

Kiram frowned at his brother. His expression was hard and closed, almost Cadeleonian in its control. The two of them passed the empty square of the flower market and then began up Gold Street. Above them the slim crescent of the moon looked faint and fragile.

"So what do you know that I don't?" Kiram asked at last. Majdi stopped beside one of the flowering almond trees. He reached up and picked a cluster of the white blossoms.

"It's not his wife or even his child that worries me, though I'll deny it if you tell Mum as much. I know plenty of sailors who have an abundance of both and still take men as their lovers." Majdi rolled the flowers between his fingers, then tossed them into the gutter. *"Musni's not like them. He's angry about the choice he's made and he won't take responsibility for it. So now he's rebelling, keeping company with street snakes in smoke alleys and getting into fights. He's made some poor decisions and I just wouldn't want to see you mixed up in his mistakes. That's all."*

"I won't get mixed up," Kiram assured his brother, but Majdi still didn't look happy.

"I'm not a fool, Kiram. Musni's handsome enough to make me prick up and notice him and you two were lovers. You aren't likely to keep away from him."

"Would it make you feel any better to know that I've been seeing someone else?"

"Who? You've only been back a day." Majdi frowned at Kiram. *"Not Vashir?"*

"No, not anyone here." Kiram said.

"Who then? Not one of those Cadeleonians?"

Kiram simply took the lamp back from his brother and led on to their house.

"Not the plump one you wrote about, is it?" Majdi guessed. *"Or the one with a child's mind? You haven't taken up with a simpleton, have you?"*

Kiram laughed but refused to confirm or deny anything.

The rest of the evening passed pleasantly enough. Kiram described the clothes he'd seen Cadeleonian nobles wearing and admired samples of beautifully dyed silks. Later he drank a little mulled wine with his father while the two of them tinkered with the pump his father was building.

When he retired to his bed, he slept heavily. He dreamed of dark troubling forms and then of a warm, strong body lying beside his own. He woke in the pale chill of dawn with an intense awareness of Javier's absence.

Fortunately, he was not given time or freedom to brood on his loneliness. His father claimed him most of the day to assist in grinding down the gears for a clockwork fountain that had been commissioned by a Cadeleonian spice merchant. The work absorbed Kiram and soothed his restless thoughts. By the time he took his lunch, his muscles were loose and tired from lifting and filing metal and his mind bristled with dozens of minute measurements he'd taken with his father's fine steel calipers.

He joined Dauhd, shopping in the markets after lunch. Once he thought he glimpsed Musni, his trousers slung low and his muscular chest bare, grappling with another man in the shadows of a doorway. Dauhd quickly called Kiram's attention to the newly

printed broadsheet containing the announcement of Nestor's imminent wedding. Kiram entertained her, and later his mother, by explaining the circumstances of the marriage. By the end his mother seemed to have taken a liking to Nestor for his loyalty.

Garlands of flowers arrived and the entire family and house staff worked through the evening, hanging them in the ballroom and hallways in preparation for the following night's dance.

The next day distant relatives arrived early. As a dutiful, youngest son, Kiram greeted them and thanked them for the gifts they brought. He found himself answering the same questions again and again, describing the rigors of Cadeleonian battle training as well as the horrors of their dismal winter meals. His aunts laughed while his cousins looked on with expressions ranging from amusement to jealousy.

Then merchants and council women arrived with their eligible nephews and sons in tow. Kiram's throat began to feel dry and he grew tired of repeating Javier's name when asked who he had roomed with.

More than once Kiram slipped away to the courtyard gardens to escape the attention, but as evening approached, the sky darkened and a downpour of rain drove him back inside.

By that time, musicians had set up in the ballroom and the guests seemed happy to eat from the banquet tables and mix with one another. They were all well dressed but not in Cadeleonian fashion. None of them powdered their hair black, nor did they sprinkle their bodies with gold dust. Both men and women wore strings of beads in their braided hair and most of the children sported crowns of brilliant paper flowers. Many of the younger men, Kiram included, wore short, ornate vests which left their arms and a slim line of their abdomens bare. Most women wore longer vests over their full trousers and sported large earrings.

Kiram noted that more than a few eligible sons were already enjoying each other's company despite their parents' frowns. Among them Kiram caught sight of Vashir, flirting with the Lif-Zibhan twins. Hashiem Kir-Naham smiled at Kiram from across

the room and though Kiram returned his smile, he did not make his way closer to the man.

As the first strains of a familiar song sounded Kiram hurried to the polished dance floor. He linked his little fingers with dancers on either side of him. In moments two long lines were formed and then the music roared out.

Kiram rushed and skipped through the quick steps as the lines crossed and circled. He turned, clapped hands, turned again and almost clapped his palms into his little nephew's forehead. The boy hopped up to slap Kiram's palms and the both laughed and rushed on to the next steps. The musicians doubled the tempo. Kiram and his fellow dancers rushed to keep up, nearly tripping over each other's feet and missing half the claps. Older men and women looking on laughed, as did most of the dancers.

By the time the first dance ended Kiram and his nephew were giggling at each other's harried performances. In the line across from them Dauhd and a young man in a Civic Guard uniform slapped each other on the back in congratulation, both of them having kept perfect time.

Several dancers left the floor to find food and drinks at one of the long banquet tables or to lounge in the comfort of the Cadeleonian-style couches and chairs, but Kiram danced on. He loved the speed and rhythm, the heat and excitement. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed it until now. As the tunes changed Kiram reeled and spun through familiar steps. To his joy someone brought out a set of six red twig brooms. While elderly couples and groups of children held the brooms, Kiram and his fellow dancers leaped over them and wriggled under them. As often as not they got swatted across their butts.

Majdi howled and played up the indignity as did Siamak. Kiram however remained intent upon passing through the brooms unscathed. His fellow dancers bowed out after a few whacks but Kiram leaped and dodged the brooms. Soon his giggling nieces chased him with wooden spoons and Majdi yelled encouragements. He managed three passes perfectly unscathed

before his sister Dauhd lunged in and smacked a broom into his buttocks. Kiram did her the compliment of yelping and falling to the floor. His nieces and nephew threw themselves on top of him, attempting to pin him with their tiny hands. Kiram feigned resistance until Dauhd placed her broom on his chest and proclaimed her triumph.

By the time Kiram got to his feet everyone in the ballroom was laughing, even the musicians. Hashiem Kir-Naham stepped to Kiram's side and offered him a glass of mulled honey wine.

"You're quite quick," Hashiem commented.

"Thank you," Kiram replied. He didn't know what else to say to the other man. He sipped his wine.

"Have you ever danced Cadeleonian style?"

"No, I've seen it done but never had the chance myself."

"I'll speak to the musicians." Hashiem touched his hand as if reassuring him. *"Cadeleonian pair dancing has been quite popular lately, so I'm sure they'll know a few songs."*

"There's no need to do that," Kiram said but Hashiem just smiled at him in an indulgent manner and then strode across the room to where the brilliantly-dressed musicians stood.

Just past the musicians Kiram caught sight of the young boy who kept watch at the front gate in the evening. Rainwater dribbled off his oiled hood and his expression was one of anxiety.

"Master Kiram!" the boy shouted and the entire ballroom went suddenly quiet. *"There's a man at the gate and he's demanding to see you and he doesn't have an invitation and he won't go away!"*

Kiram heard more than one voice hiss Musni's name. Kiram glanced to his mother and noted her scowl as well as his father's deep frown. Majdi just shook his head at Kiram.

"I'll take care of this," Kiram said, hoping that somehow everyone would return to the festivities and ignore him while he talked to Musni.

As Kiram strode out of the ballroom he heard footsteps behind him and knew that members of his family as well as curious

guests followed him. He refused to look back. He borrowed the boy's lamp and rain cloak, then rushed out into the downpour, leaving a pack of witnesses peering after him from the doorway.

As he passed the reflecting pool, Kiram thought he made out a shadow moving near the gate. He wasn't sure but he called out anyway.

"I'm sorry that I didn't give you an invitation. I just assumed that the gate boy—" Kiram suddenly forgot everything he had been about to say as he drew closer to the iron gate. Behind the bars the imposing form of a cloaked Cadeleonian mounted on a huge, white stallion rose like a monument.

Chapter Nine

Javier?" Kiram asked, though he recognized that sharp profile even through the rain and shadows.

"Indeed, though apparently I don't have an invitation to show for it."

Kiram rushed to the gate and hauled it open. At once Javier swung down from Lunaluz's back and led his mount into the courtyard. Light from Kiram's lamp flashed over Javier's hooded cloak, dark and slick with rain. Stubble darkened the hard line of his jaw and stray strands of wet hair hung across his face. He shoved his hair back. He smiled warmly at Kiram and moved forward as if he would embrace him, but then his eyes narrowed at the dozen curious faces staring out from the Kir-Zaki doorway.

"We're having a celebration," Kiram told Javier, but the information didn't seem to ease him. "It's all right. They're friends and family and they'll be delighted to meet you. Come in."

"I can't leave Lunaluz out here."

"I'll take care of it." Kiram called to one of the house servants and directed the man take Lunaluz to Mother Kir-Mahoud's stables, giving the man a fistful of silver coins to ensure that Lunaluz would be well fed and closely attended. Javier hesitantly handed Lunaluz's reins to the servant.

"Mother Kir-Mahoud's stables are the best in the Haldiim district. Cadeleonians always keep their mounts there," Kiram assured Javier. "Lunaluz will be treated like a prince, I promise."

Javier simply nodded.

"Now come out of this rain or we'll both end up getting soaked." Kiram reached to take Javier's arm but Javier quickly shoved his hands beneath his cloak, watching the crowd at the door warily. Kiram realized that it didn't matter to Javier that

they were in a Haldiim district. He still wouldn't be seen publicly taking Kiram's hand.

Inside the house, Kiram's mother greeted Javier warmly. Javier bowed, but still towered over her. Siamak immediately ordered a warm bath for Javier and Majdi went to find him a suitable change of clothes. Dauhd just stared at Javier as if he'd descended from the heavens in a fiery chariot. And she wasn't alone. Several other guests peered out from the ballroom to watch Javier and whisper about him in hushed tones.

Listening to them, Kiram was intensely aware of their assumptions of Javier's inability to understand Haldiim. Two younger women murmured about his thick thighs and wet, clinging pants. One of Kiram's aunts thought he looked as pale as a drowned corpse and he smelled like an animal. Several others agreed with her. Vashir came forward to comment that Javier might be an animal worth taking out for a ride.

"I doubt very much that you'd find a bridle that suited me, sir," Javier replied in Cadeleonian and his hand fell lightly over the hilt of his sheathed sword. Vashir flushed but then laughed.

"Very true." Vashir's Cadeleonian was heavily accented. "Kiram had not said that you were a master of so many tongues."

More than a few people glared at Kiram and his aunt pinched him on his back. Hard.

To Kiram's relief, his mother's unflappable secretary Fiez arrived. She tossed a towel to Kiram and then escorted Javier to his awaiting bath. Kiram almost followed them but decided that it would be too intimate an action. Instead he toweled his hair and followed the rest of the guests back into the ballroom.

The night blooming flowers woven through the garlands had opened fully and their perfume suffused the air. Sweet oil flames blazed gold and red from prism lamps and cast a warm glow over the embroidered seats, the flower-strewn banquet tables and the polished dance floor. Kiram took in the room and the faces of his guests and relations. He hoped that Javier would find it as welcoming and lovely a sight as he did.

"Javier Tornesal, the Duke of Rauma, has arrived," Kiram's mother announced to the few people who did not already know. She looked very pleased as the entire room filled with speculation and awed discussions of how well connected the Kir-Zakis had become.

"You could have mentioned that he spoke Haldiim!" Vashir muttered to Kiram.

"I didn't know anyone would be meeting him tonight," Kiram replied. *"And he doesn't speak it all that well. But he understands a lot more than you'd expect."*

"Obviously. Now he probably thinks I was slandering his birth." Vashir shook his head. *"You'll explain that I meant what I said as a sexual overture, not a racial comment, won't you?"*

"No." Kiram replied, laughing. *"How could a man making sexual overtures to another man be better to a Cadeleonian?"*

"Well, at least it would mean that I found him handsome."

"He's not easily offended. Don't worry." Kiram handed his used towel to a house servant and then retreated to a banquet table to warm himself with a cup of mulled honey wine.

Vashir followed him as did Hashiem and Dauhd. Kiram glanced to his sister and she offered him an encouraging smile. Kiram had no doubt that many of the wealthy mothers longed to ask him about Javier's presence but their need to maintain the appearance of worldliness restrained them from pursuing him. Though many watched Kiram over the rims of their wine glasses and some sent their sons to the table to refill their plates and make a few inquiries.

"I had no idea that the duke had been invited," Hashiem commented. Kiram took a drink of wine to buy himself a moment to think of a response. He didn't want to undermine his mother's impromptu claim.

"We didn't know if he would be able to find the time to come or not, so we didn't announce it." Dauhd helped herself to a fresh strawberry from one of the silver bowls.

Across the room the musicians struck up a merry melody and dozens of youths and children rushed out to have their turn

on the dance floor. Kiram watched them absently, smiling from time to time at some comment his sister or Hashiem made.

Vashir excused himself when it became apparent that Kiram was not going to offer up any amusing gossip about Javier. The Lif-Zibhan twins looked far more appreciative of his attention. Kiram hardly noticed his departure. All he could think of was that Javier was here with him in Anacleto. A breathless happiness filled Kiram's chest.

"He came alone?" Hashiem asked. "That's odd, isn't it? A duke traveling without guards or any escort."

Kiram started to tell him that Javier commanded the white hell and went where he pleased as he pleased, but then Javier himself stepped into the room.

His glossy, black hair stood out in sharp contrast to his pale, freshly shaven face. Majdi had given him the finest Haldiim clothes to wear and, though they did not drape loosely as they would have on a Haldiim youth, they suited Javier's long body quite well. The short gold vest displayed his broad shoulders, muscular arms, and lean abdomen appealingly. The red silk trousers hung on his slim hips and clung to the thick curves of his thighs. He stood in the doorway with an expression of uncertainty that Kiram had never seen on his face before. Kiram went to him at once before anyone else swooped in.

"What's the occasion for the party?" Javier asked quietly.

"My homecoming, actually," Kiram replied. He saw his mother start towards them with several influential council women beside her. "Let's join the dancing. Otherwise you're going to end up cornered by a flock of mothers intent upon discussing import taxes."

"You mean the Haldiim trade tax?" Javier asked as he followed Kiram to the dance floor.

"No idea," Kiram responded. "I always flee before they can inform me."

Javier smiled at this, looking far more at ease than he had earlier.

“What kind of dance is this?” Javier asked.

“It’s called the *red hands dance*,” Kiram said. “You just join one of the lines and clap the hands of the person across from you and then cross to the other side but two places down the line.”

Javier frowned.

“Come on, it’s fun and easy to pick up,” Kiram assured him. “It’s certainly nothing as tricky as ice skating.”

Javier joined the dancers in the left line. Kiram joined those on the right. The girl next to Javier blinked nervously at him but the speed of the dance didn’t allow for gaping. Javier picked up the simple steps easily. As the tempo of the dance increased, so did missed claps, collisions and embarrassed laughter. In the midst of the giddy chaos, Javier’s mistakes were hardly notable.

Each time they passed, Kiram could see him relaxing into the movements more and more. His straight, squared stance gave way to loose strides and easy grace. His smile took on that familiar edge of arrogance and of course he began to show off. He added quick flourishes to the line crosses and bowed to the little girls who clapped his hands.

“How long does this go on?” Javier asked as he and Kiram rushed together to clap hands.

“One more pass at double time,” Kiram replied. Then they both ran to their new partners, clapped hands and dashed off again. By the end of the dance Kiram’s palms were hot and tingling. Javier’s pale hands blazed red from all the slapping. He held them up and grinned at Kiram.

“*Red hands dance*,” Javier said.

Kiram led him to the heavily laden banquet table where Javier sampled a few dishes cautiously and accepted a cup of warm mulled wine with a relieved expression. Kiram wanted to ask him what he thought of the vivid red pepper eggs but he didn’t get the opportunity. Almost at once they were surrounded by Haldiim men and women, who all desired to be introduced to Javier and to engage him in discourse of some kind. Kiram made the introductions, perhaps a little more curtly than he

should have, and Javier pretended to grasp almost nothing of the Haldiim tongue.

Soon several mothers realized that Kiram could serve as the ideal translator. So over and over, Kiram explained that Javier would be staying in Anacleto to attend Nestor Grunito's wedding and that he had never been to the Haldiim section of the city before, but that he found it charming so far. No, Javier didn't have any trade partners in the Haldiim district. Yes, he found Haldiim clothing comfortable. No, he hadn't been to the cloth market yet. Yes, he loved Kir-Zaki candies.

Kiram shot a pleading look to his sister Dauhd but she just raised her hands in a helpless shrug. Next to her Siamak stood, looking amused. But Majdi appeared troubled as he studied Javier, clearly understanding that this must be the Cadeleonian he had taken up with.

After a few niceties the majority of people moved on. They wanted to meet Javier but had no idea of how to engage him in a conversation of any depth. For his part Javier smiled but kept his responses short and polite. Soon only Hashiem remained.

After Kiram made the introduction, Javier studied Hashiem briefly and then gave him a hard smile.

"You sent the candied fruit," Javier said and Kiram translated his response, since Hashiem didn't speak any Cadeleonian.

"*Early in the winter, yes.*" Hashiem looked just a little nervous. Kiram wondered if he was thinking of the poem he had included with the gift.

"It was a little too sweet for someone like Kiram, but then you probably don't know his tastes quite as intimately as I do," Javier commented and Kiram almost choked on his mulled wine.

"*Kiram was kind enough to share a little with me and it was delicious. Thank you so much for sending it,*" Kiram offered as a translation. Javier stepped on his foot. But Hashiem smiled broadly and clapped Javier on the shoulder.

"*Kiram and I were discussing Cadeleonian pair dancing just before you arrived.*" Hashiem stepped a little closer to Kiram

and touched his hand. *"Now that you're here we really ought to perform one."*

"Hashiem wants us to have a Cadeleonian dance in your honor," Kiram translated.

"That's not exactly what he said, is it?" Javier raised a dark brow. "He said your name."

"He'd love to," Kiram told Hashiem and Javier stepped on his foot a second time.

While Hashiem went to the musicians to arrange the music, word spread through the room that they would be having a Cadeleonian pair dance in honor of the Lord Tornesal. Javier moved close to Kiram with an annoyed expression.

"Who the hell am I supposed to dance with?" Javier whispered.

"Well, I'm standing right here," Kiram pointed out. Javier looked shocked and shook his head.

"That girl there." Javier indicated Dauhd. "She's a relation of yours?"

"My sister," Kiram said. "Dauhd."

"She resembles you a little." Javier studied her for a moment longer and Kiram felt a sudden flare of jealousy, seeing the way Javier's expression softened. "I'll ask her to dance," Javier decided and then he strode across the room to do just that, leaving Kiram holding both their drinks.

When Hashiem returned, Kiram drained both his and Javier's mulled wine and then set the cups aside.

"Thank you for arranging the dance." Kiram smiled flirtatiously, hoping that Javier would notice. If he did, he gave no sign of it. Out of the corner of his eye Kiram watched Javier lift Dauhd's hand and politely kiss her fingers.

"It was no trouble at all." Hashiem's words brought Kiram's attention back to his own dance partner. "To be honest," Hashiem's voice dropped and he stepped even closer to Kiram. "I had the ulterior motive of claiming you for myself on the dance floor."

Kiram had to stop himself from laughing at the husky confession. Did Hashiem really think he hadn't known that?

"I'd be glad to dance with you." Kiram took Hashiem's hand. *"Though I should warn you that I really haven't ever participated in a Cadeleonian dance before. I'm going to be pretty bad out on the floor."*

"Don't worry." Hashiem squeezed his fingers. *"Just follow my lead and you'll be fine. You're far too handsome a young man to fault for a few missteps."*

Kiram found the assurance a little annoying, since he would have preferred a few instructions. But he still followed Hashiem onto the dance floor. His mother gave him an encouraging smile and Siamak nodded at him as if he'd made a very good choice. Javier and Dauhd partnered only a few feet away. The mulled wine rolled in Kiram's stomach, reminding him suddenly of the night he'd gone to the Goldenrod.

Other couples quickly filled the space. Some were pairs of men and women, a few of women and women, but most were eligible young men making the most of each other's company and Kiram's party. Kiram saw the confusion in Javier's face as he took in the pairs of men all around him.

Then the woman leading the musicians announced that they would play the quaessa and music filled the air. Kiram concentrated on the footwork that Fedeles had shown him. Left foot out, back, and then a little kick. He was a taken off guard as Hashiem slid his arm around his back and pulled him so close that their faces almost touched.

"There is no need to look so startled, Kiram," Hashiem whispered in Kiram's ear. His breath was hot. *"I know that you haven't had many suitors but I will be gentle with you."*

Kiram would have rolled his eyes, but the combination of Hashiem's foot crushing his toes and the sight of Javier lifting Dauhd to his chest rendered him watery-eyed with pain and flushed with anger. Hashiem seemed to take this as a sign of desire or consent. He pressed against Kiram and sighed contentedly against his neck.

Across the dance floor from them, Javier predictably displayed his physical prowess, spinning and lifting Dauhd easily in time to

the music. Dauhd stared wide-eyed at Javier. Kiram knew exactly what she must have been feeling: a giddy thrill of exhilaration in the grip of Javier's touch and attention. The thought enraged him. He wanted to lunge out and slap Javier, once for flirting so obviously in front of him and a second time for toying with his sister.

As the dance drew to a close, Javier glanced to Kiram with a smug smirk, as if he expected Kiram to be impressed with his performance. At the same moment Kiram felt Hashiem's hand slide up to catch the back of his head. Kiram didn't evade him, but instead when Hashiem thrust his mouth over Kiram's, Kiram kissed him back.

Hashiem's tongue pushed between his lips and Kiram recoiled, offering Hashiem a coy smile. All around them members of Kiram's family looked on in approval. Hashiem's mother was beaming.

Javier's smile vanished. He exchanged a few words with Dauhd, bowed curtly to her, and then strode from the room.

Kiram watched his retreating back for a moment, then looked to Hashiem. *"I think I'd better show Lord Tornesal the way to the water closet. Please excuse me."*

"Certainly." Hashiem offered Kiram an indulgent smile and released his hand.

Kiram rushed after Javier, catching him near the front doors.

"Where are you going?" Kiram demanded. Despite his annoyance, Kiram hated the thought of Javier leaving.

Javier spun on him with that cold, controlled expression that Kiram so disliked. "I'm returning to the Grunito house. I'm their guest after all and it's getting late."

"You plan to walk across the city in the dead of night, during a rainstorm, wearing nothing but my brother's silk clothes?"

"No," Javier snapped. "I am going to fetch Lunaluz and ride to the Grunito house."

"You're going to ride him through the rain in the dark?" Kiram stepped between Javier and the tall double doors.

In response Javier raised his hands and a searing white light blazed up from them. Kiram scowled at the blinding flare until it faded.

"You don't know where the stable is," Kiram said and he leaned back against the doors and crossed his arms over his chest.

"On Briar Street. Your sister told me."

"Yes, but you don't know where Briar Street is." Kiram couldn't keep from grinning in triumph.

"It can't be that hard to find," Javier replied. The haughty disdain of his expression shifted nearer to petulance, which Kiram thought was more human and, in a way, charming.

"Even if you do find it, the place will be locked up by now and I'm sure the Grunitos will all be sound asleep by the time you reached their house." Kiram tried to sound reasonable. "You might as well stay the night here."

"I can't." Javier shoved a lock of his hair back from his face and Kiram couldn't help but momentarily think that it was getting long for Cadeleonian style though it suited him. "There aren't any wards in this house. I can't sleep here."

"Are you joking?" Kiram lowered his voice. "You don't need wards to sleep, Javier. I've slept with you for months without a single ward between our bodies and I'm fine."

Javier frowned down at the floor and Kiram knew that the absence of wards wasn't what troubled Javier. But he also felt certain that neither of them were ready to argue about what had happened on the dance floor, so he addressed the excuse Javier offered him.

"Where were you planning to sleep when you arrived here?"

"I didn't plan anything," Javier admitted and frustration played through his voice. "I just wanted...I just came. I didn't think about it, but I should have. I should have realized that you had friends and family here. That you wouldn't be alone."

Kiram almost asked why Javier had imagined he would be, but then he realized that it was because Javier himself was so isolated. He wouldn't have been prepared for family or friends and certainly not for a crowded Haldiim celebration. "Everyone feels honored to have you here."

“Even if I smell like a beast and look like a corpse?” Javier arched a brow.

“Auntie Fahad aside,” Kiram said. “Even she warmed up to you once you had a bath and a change of clothes. They’re not all perfect people, but if you give them a chance most of them will treat you very well. There’s certainly no reason for you to leave in the middle of the night.” Kiram stepped forward and took Javier’s hand in his own. “I know this is all foreign for you but it can be fun. Stay here with me.”

Javier tensed and Kiram thought he would pull away but instead he jerked Kiram to him and embraced him tightly.

Kiram leaned into him, returning his strong grasp. Javier’s entire body relaxed against him. He bowed his head and rested it on Kiram’s shoulder. Neither of them spoke.

Music drifted from the ballroom, as did the soft noise of conversation and laughter. Kiram drew back from Javier just enough to look at his face and see both his confusion and desire. Kiram kissed his lips and Javier kissed back with a desperate hunger.

Then a door somewhere slammed and Javier bolted back. Vashir wandered into the hall, glanced at the two of them, and then disappeared back into the ballroom. Kiram didn’t release Javier from their embrace though he saw the blood drain from Javier’s face. Kiram waited long enough for Javier to see that nothing was going to happen, to realize that this was not the Sagrada Academy.

“We’re not who he was looking for,” Kiram said.

“No?” Javier’s tense grip relaxed slowly.

“He’s presently engaged in a romance with the twins. I’m not sure if he’s with one or both of them and I don’t think he’s sure either.”

Javier smiled at this.

“I want to show you the *apple cider dance*,” Kiram said. He stepped back but kept hold of Javier’s hand.

“Does it involve actual cider?” Javier asked.

“No. But you get to spin until you nearly fall down.” Kiram grinned. “It’s fun, I promise.”

“Will I have to watch that man, Hashiem, kiss you again?”
Javier asked suddenly serious.

“No,” Kiram assured him.

“I’ll stay. Lead on.”

Kiram led him back to the ballroom. He held Javier’s hand until they reach the threshold and then, feeling how tense his fingers were, he released him. It was enough just to have him stay for now, Kiram realized.

They took part in a number of traditional Haldiim dances and several songs as well. Kiram coached Javier in the words and he picked up the tunes quickly. Neither of them were gifted singers but in the atmosphere of warmth and welcome it hardly mattered. As the evening passed into night, and the youngest children began to fall asleep on scattered pillows, card tables were brought out, which allowed Kiram’s father to show off the deck of cards Kiram had brought back from Zancoda.

Javier and he stayed on dance floor with the younger adults. They hardly touched more than each other’s fingertips, but every time Kiram noticed Javier’s eyes on him he felt the sudden urge to display himself as he never had before. He drank in Javier’s movements as well, feeling as if every flex of muscle was for his benefit alone.

By the time the midnight bells sounded, a fine sweat shone on Kiram’s hot muscles and his entire body seemed to tremble between exhilaration and fatigue. A lively flush colored Javier’s skin and the bare muscles of his arms bulged from his excess of lifting and spinning Kiram’s nephew and nieces during the *spider dance*.

As guests took their leave, Kiram dutifully thanked them for coming and wished them each a good night. He embraced Hashiem but eluded the other man’s attempt at a parting kiss. Once the last guests departed, Kiram raced back to the ballroom where he had left Javier to watch his family play out their final game of cards. He caught Javier’s hand and announced that they would be rooming together.

Kiram's mother and father just nodded, not even seeming to hear him, their attention focused on the game. Kiram could see at a glance that Siamak was on the verge of winning a nice sum in coins. She wasted no more than a cursory wave on Kiram. Dauhd, on the other hand, raised her brows questioningly but the mulled wine had slowed her enough that Kiram managed to pull Javier out of the ballroom before his sister could comment.

He rushed Javier up the stairs despite Javier's statement that there was no point in hurrying.

"You're just getting old and tired," Kiram teased.

"Well, I have been riding for six days straight," Javier replied. "But if I thought there was a reason to rush up here I would."

"There's my bed," Kiram whispered. He pushed the door to his bedroom open.

"And your brother," Javier added.

Kiram scowled at Majdi. He stood in the middle of Kiram's large bedroom with several pinstriped pillows and two quilted blankets at his feet.

"What are you doing here?" Kiram demanded.

"I'm sleeping in your room. Auntie Fahad's taken my bed and Auntie Easham and Vashir have the two guest suites." Majdi looked past him to Javier. "Didn't Lord Tornesal tell you?"

"I didn't get the chance," Javier replied, "because I'm so old and tired."

"Very funny." Kiram dropped down onto the corner of his bed and pulled off his shoes. "*Javier and I get the bed,*" he told Majdi.

Majdi glanced to Javier and nodded.

"Well, come in, Javier." Majdi defaulted to Cadeleonian for Javier's sake, then belatedly he asked, "Do you mind if I call you by your given name?"

"Not at all."

He strode into the bedroom and sat on the bed very deliberately, watching Majdi intently as if expecting some attack or accusation. Majdi simply spread his blankets out over the pillows

and stretched out on top of them. Kiram purposefully flipped back his own blankets and fluffed his pillows as if somehow these actions would reassure Javier.

"There's water in the basin if either of you want it." Majdi pulled off his vest and then his pants and then rolled his blanket around himself. Kiram didn't miss how quickly Javier averted his eyes from Majdi's naked body.

"Is there anywhere else that you could sleep tonight?" Kiram asked in a quick whisper of Haldiim.

"Maybe," Majdi replied. *"Tell me something first. Does Uncle Rafie know about you two?"*

Javier's entire body tensed and his expression locked into cool disdain but he said nothing. Kiram flopped onto his stomach and stared down at his brother from the bed.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Because someone should warn the two of you about how dangerous this romance of yours could be."

"We've been warned." Kiram couldn't help the exasperation in his voice. Why did all his relatives think he was an idiot? *"And yes, Rafie told me about his failed affair with a Cadeleonian—"*

"Your uncle had an affair with a Cadeleonian?" The information seemed to shock Javier out of his rigid composure.

"Yes," Kiram answered. *"It was when he was young and the other man got frightened and confessed about it. He accused Rafie of seducing him and Rafie had to flee to Yuan until the warrant for him expired."*

"Ten years," Majdi supplied. *"He had to live in exile for ten years."*

"I won't do that to your brother," Javier spoke each of the Haldiim words carefully. *"I swear."*

Majdi nodded then looked to Kiram. *"You know Mum wants you to settle with Hashiem, right?"*

"No," Kiram replied. *"I had no idea because I'm an imbecile and I've been living in a pickle jar for the last two years."*

Majdi rolled his eyes, then glanced to Javier. “He’s a smart ass, you know.”

“I’ve had reason to suspect as much,” Javier replied.

Majdi sighed. “Well, I’m not Mum and I’m pretty certain that there’s a couch that’s a lot more comfortable than your floor, so I’ll be going.” He stood, gathering his blankets around him. “If anyone asks, I never knew anything about this. The two of you have a good night.”

Majdi lumbered out of the bedroom and then disappeared down the stairs.

Javier stared after him as if unable to believe what had transpired. “Did your brother just give us...”

“The go ahead? Pretty much.” Kiram closed and locked the door, then bounded back to the bed.

“His blessing was what I was about to say,” Javier spoke with such a tone of quiet wonder that it gave Kiram pause. He suddenly realized that such approval would be unheard of—utterly unimaginable—in a Cadeleonian household.

“We probably shouldn’t waste it.” He drew Javier into his arms.

The sex was fast, their hands gripping and working with a rough desire that staved off exhaustion only moments past its climax.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Kiram whispered.

“I am as well.” Javier didn’t open his eyes and his expression seemed soft and sweet, almost as if he were dreaming.

Chapter Ten

For the first time in many days, Kiram woke to the familiar sensation of the hot weight of Javier's thigh flopped over his own and for a moment he thought he was back at school. Then the perfume of adhil bread and butter permeated the air and he could hear his mother and Siamak discussing something about sugar out in the courtyard.

He opened his eyes and gazed up at the ceiling of his own bedroom in Anacleto, a good place made better by the fact that Javier had come to him. The man lay sprawled across the bed, utterly bereft of the inhibition that restrained him while awake. As Kiram shifted, Javier's long fingers gripped his hip and Javier pushed his face into Kiram's shoulder but didn't open his eyes.

Briefly Kiram toyed with the idea of waking Javier with a kiss or something better. But the continuing sound of his mother's voice deadened Kiram's arousal.

Javier probably needed the sleep anyway.

So Kiram decided to use the time to write to Scholar Donamillo about his mechanical cure.

Carefully, he disentangled himself from Javier. After relieving himself in the water closet, he sat down at his desk and composed a letter inquiring after Fedeles' health and happiness as well as the prayers Donamillo used for his mechanical cures. While he waited for the ink to dry, Kiram came across a note he'd left for himself fully two days ago.

He needed to request an extension for his entry into the Crown Challenge. Only a brief explanation was required and yet Kiram hesitated. He wanted to win the challenge and he had no doubt that his engine would, but for the first time he found himself wary of where success would lead him.

An appointment to the royal court in Cieloalta inevitably awaited the winner. Prince Sevanyo had said as much, but he had also spoken of an arranged marriage with a Cadeleonian girl and religious conversion. The prospect of either gripped Kiram with dread.

The ink dried on his pen nib and he dipped it in the inkwell again. The royal court offered him recognition and money. As a Haldiim son he would need his own income if he ever wished to claim his independence and do something rash like refuse to marry a pharmacist or decide to travel to Yuan.

He wrote the letter quickly and neatly, went to wash and dress, and by the time he returned the ink had dried. He folded both letters and sealed them with green wax and a gold thread.

Outside a loud clang sounded from Kiram's father's workshop. Javier bolted upright on the bed, his eyes wide and his breath coming fast.

"Just noisy mechanism," Kiram reassured him. "Father's working on the pump for a fountain."

"I should have been up by now anyway." Javier wiped his hands over his face and pushed his hair back. He glanced curiously around the room, seeming to search for something.

"Water closet is the second door on the left down the hall," Kiram offered.

"Thanks." Javier rose and started for the door, then paused in front of Kiram's bookshelf, plainly surveying the titles. Half were textbooks but many of the remaining volumes displayed provocative titles, such as, *The Passionate Adventurer, Among the Untamed Men of Mirogoth* and *Yuan: Kingdom of Blood and Desire*.

"*Untamed Men*, hmm?" Javier read the Haldiim words carefully.

Kiram swiveled in his seat to meet Javier's teasing expression. "It wasn't really my sort of thing but it might suit you. You can borrow it if you like."

"I might take you up on it." Javier selected *Yuan: Kingdom of Blood and Desire*.

Kiram watched him leafing through the pages. The morning light lent a glow to his naked skin and accentuated the sharp planes of his lean muscles as he moved. The dark contrast of Javier's black body hair drew Kiram's eyes down from Javier's chest, past his hard stomach, to his groin. Kiram marveled at how pale Javier's skin was, even there. His own genitals were deep bronze. Then he realized he was ogling and lifted his eyes to find Javier grinning at him.

"Perhaps *The Unshaven Men of Cadeleon* should be among your books," Javier suggested. Kiram felt a flush rise across his cheeks. He considered surprising that smug grin off of Javier by tossing him back onto the bed, but he knew from the noise downstairs that it was already too late in the day.

"Not unless you're interested in the sequel: *Interrupted By My Nosy Sister*," Kiram replied. As if on cue Dauhd called from the floor below, announcing that breakfast would be in the sun-room.

Javier shrugged then found the trousers that he'd worn the night before and pulled them on. While he went to the water closet Kiram hurried downstairs and located more of Majdi's clothes as well as a basin of hot shaving water. When he returned to his room he found Javier once again flipping through the book.

"Clothes and hot water," Kiram announced.

Javier borrowed Kiram's razor and soap while teasing Kiram about owning either when he sported only wisps of fine blond hair for a beard.

"Lady Grunito could grow a fuller beard, I think," Javier observed.

"That might reflect more poorly on the lady than me," Kiram returned.

"True, and I can't say anything bad about her. She's always been good to me and I have to respect anyone who has the patience to raise Elezar." Javier rinsed the razor and then dressed.

As he did, Kiram found himself once again admiring the way the Haldiim trousers clung to Javier's legs and how the vest displayed his broad chest and strong arms. Kiram reached out to

straighten the vest and let his hands linger on Javier's chest just slightly longer than necessary. Javier stepped closer.

"Eat now or starve!" Dauhd shouted from the other side of the door.

Kiram and Javier both started at the sudden intrusion, but then they rushed to breakfast. Life at the Sagrada Academy had cultivated in them an urgent drive to dine before a hall of ravenous youths devoured everything. They passed Dauhd on the stairs; Kiram shimmied ahead of her and Javier launched himself onto the handrail and slid down. Kiram sprinted down the stairs to keep up.

And suddenly it was a race, with both of them bumping and shoving through the arched doorways and laughing at each other. Kiram possessed two definite advantages: he knew the layout of his own house and he was a better sprinter. But Javier wasn't afraid to throw an elbow or trip up Kiram's footing. At last the two of them came tumbling into the sunroom, gasping and laughing.

Majdi and Kiram's father frowned at them from their seats at the low table. Javier immediately drew back from Kiram and straightened. Kiram remained splayed across the floor pillows. Morning light poured from the spring garden and threw pools of color across the room. A splash of gold glowed through Kiram's father's wild, white hair.

"Good morning, Lord Tornesal," Kiram's father greeted Javier.

"A very good morning to you as well, Master Kir-Zaki and Master Kir-Zaki." Javier inclined his head towards Kiram's father and then Majdi.

"We did away with formalities last night." Majdi flicked his hand as if waving an insect aside. *"It's still just Majdi and my father is called Shukri. Mum's given name is Hikmat, but maybe you should stick to Mother Kir-Zaki with her."*

"Of course," Javier replied. *"Please feel free to call me Javier."*

"Javier," Kiram's father said the name experimentally and with a strong accent. *"Please join us to eating this meal."* A smudge of machine oil darkened his father's forehead. Before

Kiram could mention it, Dauhd entered the room and gave an exasperated sigh.

"Dad, you're supposed to wash up before a meal." Dauhd sat down next to him and wiped his forehead clean with a cloth napkin from the table.

"I did, my dear." Kiram's father held up his clean, callused hands. Dauhd shook her head. Majdi poured tea into several cups and passed them around the table.

"Sit here," Kiram gestured for Javier to take a seat on the pillow next to his own. Javier joined him, folding his legs as Kiram did, though it was clearly not natural to him.

The dishes on the table were simple and fragrant. Steam-ing rounds of adhil bread lay heaped on a tray. Lamb, yoghurt, almonds and several thick sauces filled silver bowls. Kiram watched Javier as he studied the silver dish brimming with fahl, a green-black fermented wheat paste. Kiram disliked fahl, but Majdi relished its bodily smell and creamy texture.

"You have to try it," Majdi told Javier.

"But you don't have to like it," Kiram put in.

"Definitely an acquired taste," Dauhd said. She snatched a round of adhil bread and splashed yoghurt and then rounds of cucumber on to it. Kiram's father topped his bread with a saffron sauce and lamb while Majdi smeared grotesque amounts of fahl over his. Kiram took two adhil rounds and handed one to Javier. Kiram flavored his with saffron sauce like his father and then piled on the strips of lamb meat. Javier followed his example.

"Aren't Mother and Siamak joining us?" Kiram asked the question in Cadeleonian so that Javier wouldn't be left out of the conversation.

"They ate hours ago," Majdi replied. "They both got up early to fight about those meringues again."

"Cadeleonian meringues?" Javier asked.

"Just the ones," Majdi replied around a mouthful of food.

"Siamak wants to sell them. Mum doesn't," Dauhd explained.

"It's the same argument every wedding season." Dauhd smiled

at Javier, and Kiram could see that her infatuation with him had not faded. "I suppose there are fights like that in your family as well?"

"No, not really," Javier replied.

Kiram could see both his sister readying another innocent question about Javier's family and Javier steeling himself against the inevitable necessity of telling her that they were all dead, a revelation that would no doubt make for awkward and pitying conversation during the rest of the meal.

"They're not candymakers," Kiram commented and Javier offered him a quick relieved smile. "So, what about the gymnasium? Mum wrote that it was being repaired?"

"Yes!" Kiram's father brightened as he recognized the Cadeleonian word. *"All new plumbing and a boiler! Mother Kir-Nusrat wants a new clock as well, something modern and dynamic, and I mentioned the steam work you've been doing and she seemed very interested. The hillock near the archery range struck me as the best position because of the new water—"*

"Father, in Cadeleonian!" Dauhd cut him off. "So that Lord Tornesal can understand."

"No, it's all right," Javier assured her in very carefully phrased Hal diim. *"I think I understood most of it—at least as much as I ever understand when it comes to Kiram's mechanisms."*

"You and the rest of us," Majdi said. "How are you liking the food?"

"It's good," Javier replied.

"Ready for a challenge, then?" Majdi nudged the dish of fahl towards Javier.

"Always," Javier replied.

Kiram shook his head and handed Javier another round of adhil bread. Majdi and Javier both slathered their bread with fahl. Majdi rolled his bread and took a large bite. Javier bit into his bread more tentatively. He chewed with a look of intense concentration and then swallowed.

"So?" Majdi asked.

"I may have discovered one of the defenses you Haldiim used to drive the Cadeleonians from your famous wall," Javier replied.

Majdi laughed and clapped Javier on the back. Kiram handed him a cup of tea and Javier downed it in a fast gulp.

"Not bad for a first-timer," Majdi told Javier. "My navigator spilled his lunch first time I fed fahl to him."

"That's not something to be proud of," Dauhd said.

"Their mother likes it as well," Kiram's father told Javier. He wrinkled his nose.

Kiram refilled Javier's tea and then his own. As breakfast continued the conversation shifted back and forth between Haldiim and Cadeleonian. The subject ranged from water pumps to Mirogoth ships, the forests of Rauma and at last settled upon a list of the many Haldiim sites Kiram ought to show to Javier.

Between servings of lamb and almonds, Javier returned to his roll of adhil bread and fahl, taking careful bites. By the end of the meal, he'd finished it and had even added a small dollop of fahl to some of his lamb.

"I can't believe that you're eating more of it," Kiram murmured.

"The taste was a little strange at first but it's growing on me." Javier downed the last of his lamb. "Reminds me a little of a very blue cheese."

"Reminds me of dirty foreskin," Majdi whispered. Kiram almost choked on his tea and Javier went scarlet.

"What did he say?" Dauhd demanded.

"You don't want to know." Kiram's father tossed a sprig of mint at Majdi. *"You chew on that to clean your mouth out. You're not at sea now, you know."*

"Sorry. I meant no offense," Majdi told Javier in clear Cadeleonian, then he jammed the mint into his mouth and chewed it obediently.

"No offense taken," Javier assured him. Kiram found it amazing how quickly he regained his composure. Then Javier

leaned closer to Majdi and whispered, "There's definitely a hint of foreskin, but I thought it had more of the smell of balls."

Majdi's brows shot up then. Grinning, he handed a sprig of mint to Javier. Javier took it and chewed it with a look of pride. It was just like him to want to be allied with the offensive rather than the offended, Kiram thought.

Kiram knew that Javier had impressed Majdi at least a little, when after breakfast Majdi brought down a red leather coat that he'd won off a Mirogoth captain and offered it to Javier to wear while his clothes were being laundered and dried.

The coat fit Javier and lent him a striking, exotic air especially in combination with the fine Haldiim vest and trousers and the Cadeleonian boots and sword he wore.

People gawked as Kiram and Javier walked across the Ammej Bridge. The fiery colors of Javier's clothes matched the scarlet beams of the bridge well. As he gazed out at passing merchants and reed riverboats, excitement seemed to illuminate his features. Kiram wished suddenly that he possessed a little of Nestor's skill so that he could capture this moment and somehow hold Javier in this beautiful, exhilarated instant.

But the iridescent flash of a knife dancer's wares caught Javier's eye and he was off. The entire Haldiim district seemed to excite and fascinate him. He grinned at the red doves, ran his hands over the glassy tiles of mosaic walls and raced along the riverbank, chasing a painted, paper hawk kite as it swirled on the wind. Kiram dashed alongside him; from time to time he answered a question or provided a little history but mostly he let Javier's enthusiasm envelop him and show him how strange and wonderful his own home could be.

They passed the Circle of Red Oaks and for a moment Javier went still and silent, studying the dense vines and ancient trees.

"It's different than I imagined," Javier said. "Much bigger. Darker too, like the Mirogoth forests."

Kiram nodded. "My sisters always claimed it was full of monsters and wild beasts."

"And is it?" Javier asked with an arched brow.

"Maybe some foxes or weasels." Kiram shrugged. "But I couldn't say for sure. Only Bahiim go there most of the year."

"Your uncle's partner, Alizadeh, would know, wouldn't he?" Javier asked.

"He probably knows everything about that place," Kiram replied.

"Do you think we could see him?" Javier asked.

Kiram couldn't imagine that the Circle of Red Oaks could be all that interesting to talk about, but then he was sure that wasn't really what Javier wanted to discuss with Alizadeh.

"We'll visit them for lunch," Kiram assured Javier.

They moved to the open market where musicians played for coins and vendors sold spring mint, salt, tea and dozens of different grains. Kiram pointed out the grinder he and his father had designed. Javier commented that he probably ought to hire Kiram to design a few for him back in Rauma. Before either of them could think further about it, the glittering rows of charm vendors attracted Javier's attention.

"I've read about the charms they sell here," Javier commented. "All damned, according to Holy Father Habalan, of course."

Kiram replied, "All the best things are."

Javier grinned at that.

They bought a few trinkets in the charm market: two clay luck whistles and a badly stamped copper talisman depicting what looked like a three legged piglet, which Javier found hilarious for reasons he could not explain.

At Mother Kir-Mahoud's stables, Javier looked in on Lunaluz and Kiram found himself missing Firaj. Cadeleonian merchants came and went with their mounts but few Haldiim used the stables since to most Haldiim horsemanship still smacked of a lurid Irabiim lifestyle.

While Javier exercised Lunaluz in the small arena, Kiram strolled ahead to the Civic Gymnasium. The green lawn of the archery range still dominated the grounds, but the decrepit shelters that Kiram remembered crouching under during rainstorms

were now arching pavilions. A dozen young men in the black uniforms of the Civic Guards fired arrows into straw targets at one end of the range while several wealthy husbands lounged with their bows and quivers, waiting their turns.

The stone dancing circles remained open to the elements, but they had been expanded and new glazed tiles surrounded them. A group of twenty boys and girls stretched along with their instructor in one of the largest circles. Even from across the grounds Kiram could hear the children laugh at each other as the tried to lift their supple little legs up over their heads.

The oddly square mass of a Cadeleonian-style bathhouse rose up beside the ancient, domed training hall. Inside Kiram caught a glimpse of the huge new boiler. He supposed that public baths were better than no baths at all. When Kiram had trained here many of the poorer Haldiim who came to train for their civic duty had no facilities available to them other than the river.

He strolled across the green lawn to the narrow lanes of the runners' track.

He guessed that it would be a while before Javier joined him, so he laid his coat and vest aside and went for a run along the new racecourse. The lane cut through a small stand of willows, where Kiram passed two young women, then looped back to the training hall. As Kiram circled to take a third lap he heard someone running behind him, fast. For an instant Kiram thought it might be Javier chasing him, but when he glanced back he recognized Musni, dressed only in linen trousers and bearing down on him.

As they reached the willows Musni closed the distance between them. Glancing back, Kiram caught the assurance in Musni's expression. No doubt he expected to overtake Kiram easily. Kiram threw himself ahead, his heart pounding as he pushed himself into an all-out sprint. The cool spring air burned in his lungs.

He could hear Musni pounding the track behind him and breathing just as hard. He felt Musni's hand brush his back, tracing his spine.

A wild, competitive energy surged through Kiram and he pulled ahead. His legs burned and the first pang of a cramp bit into his side, but he pushed himself harder. The red clay track and surrounding green grounds blurred. Kiram tore past the training hall and crossed the iron posts of the starting line.

As he turned back to gloat, Musni hurtled into him and both of them fell onto the grass lawn.

"You ass." Kiram tried to rise but Musni remained sprawled on top of him, laughing.

"Keep squirming." Musni grinned at Kiram. *"It feels good."*

Kiram stilled, too tired to fight. The pungent tang of sweat and cut grass rolled over him.

Musni shifted but didn't rise. He pressed the damp heat of his bare chest against Kiram. Almost casually he pressed his hips against Kiram. Kiram's entire body responded to the familiar weight. They had wrestled like this so many times before.

"Get off me," Kiram insisted.

Musni's expression was no longer teasing but aroused. The fragrance of honey wine drifted on his breath. He held Kiram fast.

"Seriously, Musni," Kiram said. *"Get off of me."*

"Why would I want to do that?" Musni asked.

"Because you want to keep breathing," Javier's voice was a low growl.

Startled, Musni recoiled from Kiram. Javier stood less than a foot from Kiram's head with one hand clenched around the hilt of his sword.

"Who the holy fuck are you?" Musni demanded.

"He's a friend of mine." Kiram scrambled to his feet, placing himself between the two men. *"Javier, this is Musni."* Kiram suspected that he could have been shouting gibberish for all the impact his words seemed to have. The look of cold murder on Javier's face was matched by the angry contempt in Musni's expression.

"What the fuck are you glaring at, Cadeleonian?" Musni snapped at Javier. *"You're in the Haldiim district! We have our*

own laws here and if you don't want to see lovers embrace then you shouldn't be here!"

"I wasn't seeing lovers embrace," Javier replied. "He told you to get off him."

"What's between Kiram and me is none of your concern." Musni's hand dropped to his hip and Kiram suddenly realized that he had reached for his knife.

Out of the corner of his eye Kiram glimpsed the black-clad forms of several Civic Guards walking from the archery range towards them. Kiram caught Musni's hand and pulled it off his knife. He looked to Javier.

"How's Lunaluz?" Kiram asked in Cadeleonian. Javier blinked, then he too caught sight of the approaching group of guards. He released his sword hilt and let his coat fall closed.

"He's still tired after our ride from the academy," Javier said. "He just wanted me to feed him and brush him. Make much of him."

Kiram nodded. Javier at least could be counted upon to control himself.

"So." Kiram released Musni's hand. "Let me make the introductions again. Javier, this is my childhood friend, Musni. *Musni, this is my friend and schoolmate, Javier.*"

The two of them exchanged a cold smile but made no move to shake hands.

"How's the racing?" one of the four Civic Guards called out.

"Better than minding your own fucking business, obviously!" Musni sneered back at the guard.

"What is wrong with you?" Kiram demanded of Musni. "Are you looking for a fight?"

Musni just gave Kiram a crooked grin as if he couldn't be held accountable for himself. "A fight or a fuck. Whichever you want, lover."

"Neither," Kiram replied flatly. He guessed that Majdi had been right about Musni. It was disconcerting to see how much he'd changed in a year.

The Civic Guards—there were four—surrounded them in an almost casual manner. One of them seemed very familiar with Musni and after a couple of minutes of conversation the man convinced Musni to join him in the new bathhouse. The other guards watched their comrade escort Musni away, then one of them turned back to Kiram.

"You're Mother Kir-Zaki's youngest?" the guard asked. He was older and appeared to be a career guard with his deeply tanned skin and tightly braided white hair.

"Yes, sir," Kiram replied.

"My son had a wonderful time at your party last night," the guard said.

"I'm glad. Please thank him for coming." Kiram had no idea who the man's son was but he smiled and Javier followed suit.

"Welcome back home. You and your friend be safe." The guard turned and followed his fellows back across the grounds to the archery range.

"Well," Javier said quietly. "That was awkward."

"You think?" Kiram found his vest and coat and dressed despite the sweat clinging to his back and chest. He certainly wasn't going to use the public bath now. "Did you have to go for your sword?"

"He had you down on the ground. How was I supposed to know that it was some kind of love play for the two of you?" Javier's face colored just saying the words.

"It wasn't anything even close." Kiram scowled at Javier.

"No?"

"No," Kiram replied.

Javier raised a brow as though he found this all suddenly funny. "It would have been if I'd been the one lying on top of you."

Kiram smiled in spite of himself but then shook his head. "Last night you couldn't bring yourself to dance with me at a party but today you're going to make love to me on a public race track?"

"Now that I have this piglet talisman," Javier held up the little copper disk, "who knows what I might find the poor judgment to do?"

"Why don't we visit my uncle for lunch and you can show your piglet to Alizadeh?"

"I'd like that."

They left the broad streets of the civic buildings, open markets and teahouses behind. Kiram led Javier past simple private homes and down the narrow lanes that Cadeleonians rarely traveled. Almond trees hung their fragrant clusters of blossoms low and from time to time couples leaned close beneath the trees and flirted.

A block from Rafie's house Javier caught sight of two men kissing and he stopped in his tracks, staring at them. From Javier's expression Kiram would have thought he was witnessing a miracle. They were handsome enough, though neither of them struck Kiram as worthy of the gaping Javier seemed to be giving them.

The young lovers broke apart and one caressed the other's arm and then, hand in hand, they retreated into a house.

"Did you see them?" Javier asked in a whisper. His gaze lingered on the almond tree where the two men had stood. "I've never seen that."

"A kiss?" Kiram asked.

"Not like that. They were like lovers in a poem, but both men..." Javier looked at Kiram suddenly and his expression seemed both tender and searching. "Like us."

"*Adari*," Kiram said. "That's the Haldiim word for men like you and like me, who are drawn to other men. Lots of *adari* live on this street." Kiram continued towards Rafie's house and Javier walked beside him. Doves sheltered in many of the trees, but here Kiram sighted crows as well. The glossy black birds seemed to return Kiram's gaze.

"Your uncle Rafie is...an *adari*?" Javier asked.

"Yes," Kiram replied. "His husband Alizadeh is one as well."

"And everyone knows?" Javier asked.

"It's not like it's illegal here in the Haldiim district."

"Maybe not illegal but still..." Javier trailed off.

"Shameful?" Kiram supplied and Javier's expression told him he'd guessed correctly. Kiram stopped at Rafie's door but didn't pull the bell just yet. "It's not even shameful. It's just normal. Why did you think all those men were dancing with each other at my party last night?"

"There weren't many women there and Cadeleonian dancing seemed new to most of them. I just thought they didn't know any better." Javier stared at Kiram with a strange look of dawning comprehension. "All of them at your party were *adari*? Not just that Hashiem?"

"All of them," Kiram confirmed.

"Even the young Bahiim?" Javier asked.

"Vashir?" Kiram raised his brows. "Especially Vashir. I told you he was courting twins."

"Twins could be women," Javier pointed out.

"He said that he wanted to ride you, Javier."

"Like an animal," Javier protested. "He called me an animal."

"He meant it as a sexual overture." Kiram couldn't keep from smirking. "I suppose I should have told you that last night when he asked me to. But I thought you knew."

"No." A shadow of anxiety crossed Javier's face. "Did they know about me? All of them?"

"No, Majdi's the only one who knows. Well, Rafie and Alizadeh obviously know that I'm close with you but I haven't told them anything. No one else would even suspect. You're just too Cadeleonian."

Javier seemed to relax. "It's strange how different things are here."

"Too different?" Kiram recalled how overwhelmed he had felt the first few weeks he had lived in the Cadeleonian world of the Sagrada Academy. And he had even known what to expect; he'd studied Cadeleonian literature, language and history. He'd spent days wandering through the Cadeleonian district of Anacleto in preparation.

"It just doesn't seem possible that all of this could be real." Javier studied the red physician's star above Rafie's doorway. "This all seems like something I would find in one of those ancient Yuan travel journals."

"Like the one that said that all Haldiim are born women?" Kiram asked.

Javier smirked at that but nodded.

"I do know what you mean," Kiram said. "There were times at the Sagrada Academy—especially early on—when I couldn't quite believe what was happening."

"Like what?" Javier asked, as if he couldn't imagine anything about Cadeleonian society as strange.

Like you, Kiram thought but he decided against it. Instead, he chose the most obvious difference. "The complete absence of women for one thing. I couldn't believe that there could actually be an entire academy without a single woman scholar or student. That's just unheard of in any Haldiim school. And then there was all the riding. To most Haldiim riding horses is a sure sign that you're from a family of thieves or raiders of some kind."

"Really?" Javier smiled, clearly liking the idea of being taken for some kind of wild raider. Just now, with his crooked smile and wind tousled hair, he did look like a dangerous and daring highwayman from one of Kiram's favorite books.

"But it's different, isn't it?" Javier leaned against the doorframe close beside Kiram. "You hadn't wanted to ride horses all your life and then come to the Sagrada Academy and seen everyone around you riding."

Kiram nodded but his mind was hardly on the conversation. There was something in Javier's motion, perhaps the angle of his head, the slight parting of his lips that told Kiram that he was going to kiss him. A rush of heat and excitement flooded Kiram, despite how common such exchanges might be in the Haldiim district.

Javier's lips grazed Kiram's mouth; his hand touched Kiram's hip. Kiram pulled him close, opening his mouth to Javier's. Javier's hesitation broke and he pushed Kiram back against the door.

Their kiss deepened into a rough desperation. Kiram arched his hips against Javier and Javier pulled Kiram so close that Kiram could feel Javier's heart pounding against his own chest.

Above them, a crow let out a sharp call and they bolted apart. The bird swept past them and swooped over Rafie's roof. Kiram laughed, feeling stupid for being so nervous. He wasn't Cadeleonian and yet he'd startled as easily as Javier.

To his relief Javier too laughed. Then he reached out, and Kiram thought he would embrace him again, but instead Javier pulled the chain for the doorbell.

Chapter Eleven

Rafie welcomed Javier and teased Kiram about his inborn ability to time his arrival with the service of any given meal. Then he led them into the garden.

Sunlight filtered through the glossy leaves of plum and almond trees. The perfume of spring flowers paled before the strong aromas of hot oil, garlic and cinnamon. Kiram drew in a deep breath and felt hunger growling through his belly. He noticed that familiar voracity in Javier's expression as well. If they had still been at the Sagrada Academy all pleasantries would have been forgotten in favor of wolfing down hunks of food.

As it was, they both tried not to stare at the spread of aromatic foods. Simple clay dishes heaped with lamb, rice, toasted nuts, sugared fish and greens waited on a low table near a gnarled tree. At Kiram's mother's house it would have been a simple meal, but Kiram knew that for his uncle Rafie this variety of dishes represented a feast.

Alizadeh smiled at them as he filled four cups with stream-cooled tea. He had already laid out plates for Kiram and Javier. Kiram thought that he really shouldn't have been surprised at Alizadeh's prescience by now.

"It's an honor to meet you again, Lord Tornesal." Alizadeh stood carefully, leaning on his cane. He offered Javier a respectful bow.

"Please call me Javier. There's no need for formality," Javier assured Alizadeh. "Have you been ill since we last met?" Obviously Alizadeh's frail condition surprised Javier far more than the lunch preparations.

"A winter malady. It's already passed. I keep the cane so that Rafie will pity me and fetch me things when I'm feeling lazy."

"Which is most every day," Rafie commented.

Kiram thought Alizadeh did look healthier than he had even three days earlier. He toyed with his cane more than leaned on it. Rafie still watched him with that measured, physician's gaze, but he didn't hover as much he had before.

All four of them settled on the ground and ate. Above them crows gathered in the tree branches and from time to time flew down to accept bits of food from Alizadeh's hand.

Rafie tossed one a chunk of fatty lamb and the crow caught it like a trained dog.

"Are these your familiars?" Javier asked Alizadeh.

"Very familiar, yes." Alizadeh laughed and then considered Javier with a sly smile. "I take it you read the book I sent to you."

"I did," Javier said, after gulping down a mouthful of lamb. "I believe I understood it pretty well."

"Really? I can't say that I understand most of Alizadeh's texts." Rafie grinned at Alizadeh. "Crazy old Bahiim aren't the best authors, you know."

In response Alizadeh stole an almond from Rafie's plate. Kiram noticed the attentive way Javier studied the two of them beneath his lowered lashes.

"What about you, Kiri?" Alizadeh's voice pulled Kiram's attention from Javier. "Did you read any of it?"

Kiram shook his head and frowned down at his simple clay plate. He shouldn't let himself fall into the habit of gazing longingly at Javier. They were both going to have to return to Cadeleonian society and mooning wasn't something either of them could afford to indulge in there.

"Should I have read it?" Kiram asked. He'd missed eating sugared minnows and now he helped himself to several as well as a heap of rice.

"No. I was just curious." Alizadeh's attention returned to Javier. "Most of the text concerns the obligations and duties one must accept when becoming a Bahiim. It doesn't make for the lightest of reading nor for the easiest of lives."

"A lot of travel, deprivation and battle. All for very little worldly reward, that's what it sounds like." Javier sampled one of the small sweet fish and then took two more, reverting to an air of nonchalance beneath Alizadeh's direct scrutiny.

"Still better than being hunted all your life by a curse," Alizadeh replied, "don't you think?"

"Yes, the thought had occurred to me," Javier agreed. "Even before you sent the book, but it's...it's a lot to give up."

Kiram looked between Javier and Alizadeh as he realized what they were discussing.

"You're not serious?" Kiram demanded. "If a holy father even suspected that you were suggesting to Javier that he should convert—"

"No one has said anything about conversion," Rafie cut Kiram off. "Not a word."

"No one's said a word about lamb fat either but we're all eating it!"

Alizadeh laughed at this and Rafie gave Kiram a pained scowl.

"I haven't decided on anything," Javier gazed down at his long hands, his expression troubled. "But I have questions that need answers and I haven't found those answers in the Cadeleonian church."

He seemed so serious that Kiram kept his peace.

"I'll tell you what I can," Alizadeh offered.

Javier lifted his gaze to meet Alizadeh's.

"If the white hell is a shajdi, as you and Kiram say, then why haven't I been able to use it break the curse on my family? Why can't I make Fedeles right again?" Javier asked.

"Your white hell is definitely a shajdi," Alizadeh assured Javier. "But you aren't in direct contact with it. Right now you hold it like a man might hold an oil lamp. You can light its fire or snuff it out, but the flame doesn't burn in your bare hand."

Javier frowned. "I don't understand."

"There's a shield between you and the raw power of the shajdi," Alizadeh went on and Kiram found himself listening as closely as Javier. Rafie leaned back against a tree trunk and closed his eyes as if resigned to hearing a long story that he already knew.

"I'm not sure—" Javier began but then his expression lit up. "Do you mean the medallion? Calixto's medallion. My father said that it would protect me from the fire of the white hell. Every Tornestal who has possessed the white hell has worn it."

"You're wearing it now, I assume?" Excitement brightened Alizadeh's face.

"He always wears it," Kiram provided.

Javier lifted the medallion out from his vest. Its thick gold chain looked dull compared to the shining metal of the medallion itself. Though Kiram had seen it countless times he found himself transfixed by the heavy gold circle and the fine incantations that traced its surface.

Even Rafie cracked an eye open and after catching sight of the medallion he sat straight up. "Is that a ghost locket?"

"Indeed it is," Alizadeh gazed at the medallion with a keen, knowing expression. "The question is whose ghost inhabits it?"

Javier glanced to Kiram, his fingers curled protectively around the medallion.

"What on earth is a ghost locket?" Kiram asked, looking between Rafie and Alizadeh for an answer. Rafie shook his head and returned to his slump against the trunk of a plum tree.

"It is dangerous magic, born of greed or desperation," Alizadeh's eyes remained on the medallion as he spoke. "The incantations on a ghost locket hold a soul trapped between the living world that surrounds us and the realm of death."

"Why would anyone want to do that?" Kiram asked. Javier's expression was uncertain as well.

"Because sometimes it is very useful to be able to hold a soul—particularly if it has become a curse," Alizadeh replied, though it wasn't Kiram he looked at but Javier. "But more importantly, a soul trapped in a ghost locket can also be used as a door to a shajdi.

Though in that case the woman or man whose soul is held within the locket must willingly participate in its creation.” Alizadeh sighed heavily and one of his crows dropped to his shoulder and nudged its beak affectionately against his ear.

“No true Bahiim would ever take possession of a shajdi in such a manner. It’s terribly cruel and an imperfect union in any case,” Alizadeh went on, “but someone desperate with only a little training might attempt it not knowing the cost.”

Kiram frowned as he tried to absorb everything Alizadeh was telling them. Javier’s medallion wasn’t just a protection but must have been integral to opening the white hell.

“You mean my ancestor, Calixto,” Javier stated.

“Yes,” Alizadeh replied. “But obviously not him alone. After all, he lived on to control the shajdi. Someone else made an immense sacrifice to give him that power.”

Suddenly Kiram remembered the few pages of Calixto’s diary that Javier had shown him, when he’d been looking for information concerning his hero, Yassin Lif-Harun. A terrible thought came to Kiram.

“Yassin,” Javier said softly. He stole a glance to Kiram, then looked away almost guiltily. “The locket holds Yassin Lif-Harun’s soul.”

“Yassin Lif-Harun?” Rafie sat upright, incredulous. “Yassin Lif-Harun, the famous half-Haldiim astronomer?”

Even Alizadeh raised his brows in surprise.

Javier nodded sheepishly. “I know it sounds mad, but he and Calixto were close, very close...” Again Javier’s dark gaze darted to Kiram and this time Kiram knew exactly what Javier meant.

“They were lovers?” Kiram asked.

Javier nodded. “Calixto wrote about it in his diary, though he never did say how they opened the white—the shajdi. He only wrote that the Mirogoths were at the academy walls and none of them expected to survive. So they had nothing to lose.”

“Yes, they would have seen it that way at the time.” A look of sorrow passed over Alizadeh’s face as he studied the medallion.

“Yassin would have bound himself to Javier’s ancestor, Calixto, with the most powerful of blood oaths, one that would last generations. Here you can see the symbols binding flesh and soul.” Alizadeh reached out and pointed to a circle of tangled incantations.

Kiram felt an odd familiarity when looking at the symbols but he couldn’t place where he’d seen them before. Most likely he was remembering them from countless nights lying with Javier.

“Once Yassin had bound his soul to Calixto’s bloodline,” Alizadeh’s gaze moved over the incantations on the ghost locket as if he were reading them, “he would have taken his own life. Only in death could his soul have entered a shajdi. Then the bond between him and Calixto would have allowed Calixto to reach into the shajdi through him—”

“But that would mean that Yassin’s soul was, and still is, stretched between life and death.” Rafie’s expression was deeply troubled.

“Yes.” Alizadeh drew his hand back from Javier’s medallion. “Half of his soul is held here in this locket, still sheltering Calixto’s descendants and allowing them access to a shajdi without the benefit of Bahiim training. But the other half of Yassin was long ago drawn into the shajdi. His soul will have been distorted and shredded over the years. I can’t say just how intact he would be after so much time.”

Kiram was aware that he and Rafie and Alizadeh all turned their attention to Javier at that moment. Javier flushed slightly under their scrutiny.

“I don’t know...” Javier said quietly. “I haven’t seen or heard him in at least six years. I had begun to think he had been some figment I’d dreamed up...”

“But you did see him?” Alizadeh asked.

“I heard him more than saw him. When I was eight and nine he would speak to me in Cadeleonian and Haldiim and tell me things. He taught me how to call the white hell and to draw wards to protect myself. I only ever saw him in dreams.”

“That does explain a number of things.” Alizadeh gave Javier a crooked smile. “Your amazing fluency in the Haldiim language, why your home is protected by Bahiim spells, and most importantly how the shajdi has remained uncorrupted. Your ghost had some training as a Bahiim.”

Kiram stared at the medallion, trying to imagine some spirit haunting it, but couldn’t picture it. “What did he look like when you saw him?”

“A little like you.” The flush coloring Javier’s cheeks darkened slightly. “When I first saw you in my room wearing your prayer clothes, I thought for a moment that somehow you were him.”

Remembering Javier’s open flirtation that first day and his own awkward responses, Kiram felt his own cheeks growing warm. Thankfully, Javier had already turned his attention back to Alizadeh.

“Could Yassin have known that would happen to him when he did this?” Javier’s voice was oddly strained. He wore the same stricken expression as he had during the autumn tournament when he had seen Enevir Helio’s stallion broken and screaming in the mud.

“Perhaps we should ask the man himself,” Alizadeh suggested.

“You can do that?” Javier asked.

“Indeed I can.” Alizadeh smiled. “Though I’ll have to make a show of the effort, otherwise Rafie is going to know I’m recovered and he’ll make me fetch my own lunch.”

Rafie just rolled his eyes. Then he gestured for Kiram to come join him under the plum tree. Kiram moved quickly to his side, though his attention remained on Alizadeh and Javier.

“You must concentrate on Yassin, Javier.” Alizadeh spoke softly. “Call him as you would have when you were a child.”

Javier nodded and closed his eyes, cupping the medallion tenderly in his hands.

Alizadeh also closed his eyes and reached out with his left hand. He didn’t touch the medallion. Instead he held his palm over it

while folding his right hand against his chest. For a moment they both simply stood there.

Then air around Javier seemed to ripple as if distorted by waves of heat. Steadily the shadows of his body seemed to deepen and spread, rising off Javier like some strange dark steam—the way the shadow curse had risen from Fedeles. Kiram watched it, feeling uneasy.

As Kiram stared into the dark form he caught a glimpse of gold curls, faint flashes of white cloth and dark skin, but they disappeared almost as soon as he saw them.

Javier swayed as if asleep on his feet as Alizadeh traced a symbol in the air and spoke a terrible grating word. All at once the faint shadow coalesced into the form of a sharp-featured Haldiim youth. The heavy line of his jaw struck Kiram as Cadeleonian and his eyes were nearly as dark as Javier's. His slim form flickered between solidity and translucence, shuddering like a candle flame. His shadowy arms wrapped around Javier. His head rested against Javier's shoulder and he glared at Alizadeh.

You will not break this pact, Bahiim. The words slithered into Kiram's mind, making him shudder.

Rafie caught Kiram's arm and pulled him back beside him.

"He's a friend, Yassi." Javier's voice sounded faint as if he were miles from Kiram. "He wants to help us."

All the Bahiim want is to keep their secrets. He will break our pact and strip you of my protection.

Alizadeh laid his left hand on the medallion in Javier's hands.

NO! Yassin shrieked.

White light exploded from Javier and gushed over Alizadeh. Flames burst up over Alizadeh's prayer clothes and a scorching wind tore through his leather cloak. At his feet the spring grass blackened.

Instinctively, Kiram started forward to Alizadeh's aid but Rafie held him in a tight grip and whispered, "*He knows what he's doing, Kiram.*"

Lord of the White Hell

Alizadeh uttered a low guttural word and drove his right hand into Yassin's translucent body. He closed his hand into a fist and the fire of the white hell suddenly died.

Javier swayed on his feet but caught himself. He seemed dazed, his eyes only half open. In front of him, Yassin stared at Alizadeh like a fearful child. He clamped his flickering hands around Alizadeh's forearm, clearly trying to wrench himself free but could not.

"I am Alizadeh Lif-Moussu, little ghost, and I will not harm you or your ward." Alizadeh's tone was gentle but he didn't pull his hand back from where it seemed to grip Yassin's heart. *"Tell me how you came to be Javier Tornesal's guardian."*

Yassin shuddered in Alizadeh's grip.

I bound myself to Calixto and to his bloodline. Between his blood and my spirit we opened the shajdi. We became the white hell that drives back the Mirogoth invaders.

Yassin gave Alizadeh a defiant glare.

"So you were," Alizadeh agreed with that same indulgent smile that Kiram had often seen him offer to impudent youths. *"But that was long ago. Calixto Tornesal has been dead nearly a hundred years. The Mirogoth tribes are allies to the Cadeleonian kings. What are you doing now, Yassin Lif-Harun?"*

Uncertainty crept into Yassin's expression. His entire body faded a little, allowing Kiram to clearly see the branches of oak behind him.

I keep the pact.

Yassin regained a little solidity with this affirmation, though Kiram could still see straight through his legs.

I remain between life and death holding the shajdi open. I wait.

"You wait?" Alizadeh asked.

Kiram thought he saw longing in the ghost's wavering features.

I wait for Calixto.

"To join him?" Alizadeh asked.

Yassin nodded.

"But you can't," Alizadeh said softly. "You trapped yourself between death and rebirth when you opened the shajdi. You can't find Calixto now, can you?"

Yassin shook his head and then glared at Alizadeh as if he were to blame.

If the Bahiim had done their duty, if they had defended the kingdom against the Mirogoth devils, then Calixto and I could have lived—we could have been together.

The anguish in Yassin's words made Kiram shudder.

"History is full of wrongs and regrets." Alizadeh considered the ghost. "Will you let me set this one right?"

You wish to break the pact.

Alizadeh shrugged. *"Calixto's descendant needs to possess the shajdi fully if he is to destroy a curse. While you stand between him and that, he and his family suffer."*

I protect him.

"Too well," Alizadeh chided the ghost.

You want to steal the shajdi for yourself!

At this Alizadeh gave the kind of a hard, cruel laugh that Kiram had never heard from him before.

"If that was my wish," Alizadeh leaned close to the ghost, and his voice grew chilling, "then I would have already ripped the shajdi from the boy's flesh and devoured his heart. I was a master of the Black Fire before I became a Bahiim, little ghost. I have fed on the souls of guardians far stronger than you."

Alizadeh flexed his fingers inside the ghost's chest and a shudder passed through Yassin's faint body. To Kiram's horror, Javier gasped and choked as well. Then Alizadeh opened his hand, allowing Javier to draw in a steady breath.

"It is not my intention to steal from your ward." Alizadeh's voice went soft again. "I am offering to teach him what you cannot. To do so you must allow him to stand in the fire of the shajdi unprotected should he choose to. Will you do that for him?"

Yassin gazed at Javier. His expression seemed to radiate tender concern.

If he takes the shajdi, then there will be no need for me.

"You could join Calixto then," Alizadeh said. "I would see to it that you were freed."

Yassin smiled and he looked almost luminous. *I will allow you to teach him, if that is what he wants.*

"If it is what he wants," Alizadeh agreed.

Alizadeh lifted his hand from the medallion and whispered a word. The medallion slapped back against Javier's chest and the ghost vanished. Javier jerked slightly, stumbling to the side. Alizadeh reached out but Javier managed to find his balance. He drew in a deep breath and looked around as if he'd just awoken and wasn't sure of where he stood.

"I feel like I was dreaming just now," Javier said. "Did you see him, Kiram?"

"I saw him." As Kiram started to rise, Rafie at last loosened his grip. Only as Rafie released his arm did Kiram realize how tightly Rafie had held him. His bicep felt bruised.

As he drew near Kiram saw the sweat beading Alizadeh's brow and the exhaustion in his face. He leaned heavily on his cane.

"*I wish you weren't such a show off.*" Rafie slipped up to Alizadeh's side and wrapped a supporting arm around his back. He helped Alizadeh down into his low seat at the base of the old oak.

"Are you all right?" Javier crouched down beside him.

"Of course." Alizadeh gave both Javier and Kiram a bright smile. "I just like to have Rafie fuss over me, you know."

"*No doubt you'll love the tonic I'm going to make you drink,*" Rafie replied.

Alizadeh made a sour face. "*Can't it wait? I think Javier and I still have a few things to discuss.*"

"*You have the two hours it will take me to pick the duera flowers and brew your draught.*" Rafie ran his hand across Alizadeh's brow, brushing gold ringlets of his damp hair back from his face. "*After that you must rest.*"

Alizadeh caught Rafie's hand and kissed his palm. Kiram found the exchange relieving after so much strangeness but Javier flushed deep red and then averted his gaze to the grass.

Kiram wondered how a small gesture could fluster Javier when a ghost springing up from his body hardly gave him a moment's pause. But then hells, lost souls and black curses had always been part of Javier's life. The existence of a ghostly guardian was probably far less startling than two men displaying the gentle affection of lovers.

As he took his seat beside Alizadeh, Kiram attempted to put his own shock at the sight of the ghost into perspective. Perhaps the ghost of an ancient genius, trapped in a medallion and charged with the guardianship of the Tornosal bloodline, was no more shocking than two men kissing on the open street. Maybe it would seem normal if he were a Bahiim and had spent years apparently fighting curses and hunting shapechangers and eating people's hearts...

Alizadeh had really said that, hadn't he?

There was nothing forbidding or cruel in Alizadeh's countenance now as he smiled tiredly at Javier. Still Kiram felt unnerved by the new perception that there were dangerous, adult aspects of Alizadeh—and doubtless Rafie—he knew nothing about.

Chapter Twelve

Alizadeh said, "I've extracted a promise from your ghost to allow you to take on the full force of the shajdi."

Javier nodded, appearing so calm that Kiram envied him.

"But I won't teach you unless you are willing to accept the responsibility of a Bahiim." Alizadeh batted at the smoking holes in the front of his prayer shirt. Then he seemed to belatedly notice that the rest of his clothes as well as his cloak were scorched and burned through in places. He gave Rafie a crooked smile. *"Why do I bother with clothing at all?"*

"Because your ass gets sun-burned otherwise. I'll find you something less charred to wear." Rafie strode across the garden and disappeared through the kitchen door.

"I would perish without you," Alizadeh called after him and then turned his attention back to Javier. "I imagine you'll want some time to think about this."

"As a Bahiim I will be able to break the curse, yes?"

"Yes," Alizadeh replied. "In fact it would be your sacred obligation to do so."

Javier frowned thoughtfully. "Can I ask why you're willing to teach me but you won't just break the curse yourself if it's a Bahiim's obligation?"

"I'm bound by an old oath and foolish modern politics," Alizadeh replied. "Right now the Bahiim circles are controlled by several younger conservatives who would like to forget what it once meant to be Bahiim. They're happy blessing feasts, officiating weddings and funerals. They don't want to reclaim the responsibilities of controlling and safeguarding the shajdi. They certainly don't want to take on curses or the monstrosities of the shadowed realms."

To them it's a relief that all the ancient shajdis are sealed and that the old Bahiim have sworn not to open any new ones."

"The shajdis were sealed to keep King Nazario from controlling any of them when he was purging the country of Haldiim," Kiram quickly explained, before Javier had to ask.

"Every single shajdi?" Javier raised his dark brows.

"It was a desperate time," Alizadeh said. "All of us who were in possession of the shajdis sealed them and accepted a blood oath, which forbade us from opening any shajdi until the White Tree in the Circle of Red Oaks was again illuminated."

Kiram stared at Alizadeh, caught by the revelation in his words. "You were there? Then?"

Javier too stared at Alizadeh. Even exhausted and streaked with soot, he hardly looked forty.

"I was there and I took the oath, but none of us thought that it would hold for so long. We expected to be in hiding for a few months then gather at the Circle of Red Oaks. Between us we would still have had enough power to ignite the White Tree. But Nazario's purge lasted fifteen years. By the end he had hunted and killed so many of us that we were too few to reignite the White Tree. Now there are hundreds of Bahiim but they have grown indifferent to our obligations. They talk about demon hunting as if it were philosophy and shajdis as if they were metaphors."

Alizadeh's gaze shifted to Javier. "But it would only take one with the fire of an open shajdi to reignite the White Tree. And once that was done the oath would be ended. The Bahiim would have to disperse and battle the demons of this world once again."

Kiram wasn't quite sure how to respond to Alizadeh's words. After all only a year ago he himself had thought that shajdis were metaphors rather than reality. Javier, however, had never labored under any such misconception and Kiram could see that he was at ease with Alizadeh's ideas.

"I see," Javier said after a moment. "So, you need me as much as I need you."

"It's an opportunity for us both," Alizadeh agreed. "But unlike yourself, I can afford to be patient. Other shajdis will be stumbled upon. For me waiting only means enduring an easy life among lazy peers. But you, Lord Tornesal, are facing a curse that will not relent until it has destroyed your entire line."

Pain flickered through Javier's expression. Kiram shot Alizadeh a hard glare.

"It's the truth, Kiram." Alizadeh shrugged and settled back more comfortably against the oak. "I'm only asking that Javier consider it."

"There's nothing to consider. As you say, I don't have the leisure to pretend that there is," Javier stated flatly. "Most of my family has already been killed. My one remaining cousin is going mad."

"Javier, no!" Kiram couldn't keep silent. "You can't do this. If anyone in the Cadeleonian church found out that you'd taken a Bahiim's oaths, they'd charge you with heresy. They'd kill you."

"Not if I legally converted," Javier spoke as if this was the first thing anyone would have thought of. "Technically I'd be a heathen, not a heretic. Bishop Seferino set the precedent in 1298 when he judged a Cadeleonian woman who had converted to her Haldiim husband's beliefs. The royal bishop accepted the ruling, which makes it valid as lord's law. At the worst I'll be scourged, excommunicated and exiled."

Javier's quick, offhanded response made it clear that he'd already been considering conversion. That made perfect sense. He'd been reading ancient Haldiim texts even before he'd met Alizadeh and he'd obviously been familiarizing himself with Bishop Seferino's most obscure writings. He had put more than an afternoon of thought into this.

Still the danger of it made Kiram's heart race. "Are you listening to yourself? Scourged? You'd be whipped bloody. Excommunication would strip you of your title, your lands, and your name. Everything! And on top of that you'd be exiled to a desert in Yuan or the Mirogoth forests or some other terrible place."

"Weren't you suggesting that we run away to Yuan just a few months ago?" Javier arched a black brow and flashed that handsome, arrogant and—at this moment—infuriating smile of his.

"I wasn't thinking that you'd take steps to make it a legal necessity," Kiram snapped. He could feel his face flushing. How could he bring that up in front of Alizadeh?

"I'm not planning on being found out." Javier brushed Kiram's hand with his own but then drew back. "This has to be done. Fedeles is losing his mind, you were nearly killed, and I will be hunted by this curse all of my life. If I can save him, protect you and free myself, it's worth the risk."

Kiram clenched his jaw, not wanting to admit anything and yet unable to deny Javier's reasoning. He glanced to Alizadeh, who watched them both in calm silence.

"Isn't there any other way?" Kiram asked.

Alizadeh's response was a simple, "No."

The plainness of his response struck Kiram with far more force than any number of arguments could have. The single word felt irrefutable.

Kiram glared down at the scorched circle of grass, and noticed the two patches of green leaves where Alizadeh's feet had shielded the plants beneath. White clover blossoms poked up from between the verdant blades of grass.

Javier had made his choice. And in his place, Kiram knew he would have done the same.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Kiram asked and he noted the relief in Javier's expression.

"Not here, not yet," Alizadeh told him. "But if you'd tell Rafie what we're doing I'd appreciate it."

"What are you going to be doing?" Kiram stood.

"We'll try opening the shajdi without Calixto's medallion. We should be done by the fourth bell."

"I'll tell Rafie." Kiram eyed Alizadeh. *"If you hurt Javier I'll never forgive you."*

Javier looked embarrassed and Alizadeh just laughed at the warning. *"I wouldn't risk incurring your wrath, Kiram. Have no fear. Javier will be perfectly safe with me."*

Kiram found Rafie in his office. Instead of the desk a business-woman would have used a large marble pharmacist's table stood at the center of the room. Medical tomes and jars of dried herbs filled the shelves. Rafie was engaged in grinding dark violet flowers in one of several mortars. Kiram noticed the fresh, white prayer clothes folded at the side of the table.

Rafie was neither pleased nor surprised to be informed that Alizadeh had decided to begin Javier's training that afternoon.

"I should have known he wouldn't wait." Rafie handed Kiram a small clay jar. A milky cream filled the red interior. It smelled a little like cut grass.

"Halda salve," Rafie informed Kiram. *"You should take it with you after your duke and my Bahiim are done."*

Kiram resisted the urge to poke a finger into the cream. Instead he closed the jar and set it aside.

"I don't suppose any of this has made you rethink your decision to become involved with a Cadeleonian nobleman?" Rafie inquired.

Kiram suppressed a laugh. It wasn't as if he had carefully considered a relationship with Javier and then decided to become involved. Reason had nothing to do with any of it.

"It doesn't change anything." Saying the words made him feel stronger, more assured.

"Well, then you'd better pay close attention, because you may well need to know a few of these things when you find yourself fleeing into the Mirogoth forests." Rafie beckoned Kiram to his shelves and handed him a book titled *The Physician's Garden: Poisons and Cures*.

Kiram spent the next two hours learning to recognize and prepare the most basic of medical herbs. Halda for burns, duera for pain, yellow coinflower to cleanse, and sunvine to waken.

While Rafie displayed and explained the habitat and preparation of each plant, Kiram cleaned, peeled, and then ground the white pulpy mass of a halda root into a creamy salve. He plucked and crushed deep violet duera flowers with wax-dipped fingers to keep the juice from numbing his hands. Twice he mashed his thumb while attempting to crush the slick seeds of a sunvine. A pungent, earthy smell rose off the dried heads of the coinflowers as they steeped in hot water. Kiram wasn't sure if he liked the fragrance or not. Either way it made him sneeze.

Very distantly Kiram heard the city bells ringing. Rafie carefully siphoned the duera Kiram had made into a vial, then sealed that with a daub of black wax.

"There's enough in that vial to kill a grown man, you realize," Rafie said.

"I'll be careful," Kiram assured him.

"Yes, you should be very careful if it comes to that." Rafie gazed intently at Kiram. *"Cadeleonian beer will hide the taste and color of duera and so will a beef stew, but remember that duera burns off if it boils."*

Kiram wasn't quite sure of what to say. He couldn't imagine poisoning someone, but clearly Rafie could. Perhaps he even had.

Rafie met his shocked silence with amusement. *"I'm not telling you to go out and murder people, Kiram. I'm just telling you how it can be done—either to you or by you. Someday you may need to know."*

"Have you needed to know?" Kiram couldn't keep from whispering despite the fact that they were alone.

"Yes, I have," Rafie replied. *"And fortunately I reheated the stew enough to boil off most of the duera before I ate it. I was dazed for most of a week but I survived."*

Before Kiram could pursue the subject farther, Javier leaned in through the doorway. His hair looked as if it had been whipped by storm winds and his skin shone, both with a sheen of sweat and the pink glow of a slight sunburn. That, combined with Majdi's

red coat and the sword he wore, lent Javier the definite look of a sun-beaten pirate.

“You look like you’ve just come back from sea.”

“I feel more like I’ve been walking on the sun,” Javier said.

Kiram could see his fatigue in the way he leaned against the doorframe. His muscular arms hung languidly and his dark lashes shadowed his eyes. Kiram thought he hadn’t seen Javier look so tired and pleased with himself since he took the Grand Champion’s cloak at the autumn tournament.

“We’ve finished. Alizadeh wants to know if he can have those clothes now.”

Rafie scooped up the clothes and withdrew to the garden without comment, leaving Kiram and Javier alone.

Kiram picked up the jar of halda salve that Rafie had shown him how to make. “You need a bath and a bed.”

“Are you offering yours?” Javier asked.

“You know that I am.”

Javier’s lips parted as if he would make some flippant remark. But then he simply smiled.

Chapter Thirteen

Kiram led Javier along narrow back alleys, avoiding the busy crowds thronging Gold Street. After a day of so many surprises he felt that he, as well as Javier, needed the quiet and peace of empty spaces. A black crow flew above them but it didn't make him feel protected as it once would have.

Javier walked unusually close to him, perhaps too tired to restrain himself. As they passed under flowering almond trees, their arms brushed, their shoulders touched. Heat radiated off of Javier's skin and the smell of sweat hung in air.

"You're quiet," Javier commented.

"Just thinking."

"About anything I would understand? Or is it all pistons and steam chambers?"

"It ought to be, but no." Kiram wanted to tell Javier that he was worried for him and for himself. Instead he said, "I was just wondering what I should pack ahead of time so that when we have to flee for Yuan in the middle of the night I'll be prepared."

"Really? What were you considering?"

"A heavy coat, or two light ones?"

"Probably all three. You're terrible with the cold." Javier looked thoughtful. "You know, we'd be wiser making north to the Mirogoth lands. The border is closer and Cadeleonians are common enough there not to attract too much attention."

"I'll fit right in with all the Cadeleonian mercenaries and Mirogoth wild men."

"If we rubbed a little kohl around your eyes, got you a few bracelets and rolled you in the dirt you could pass for one of the Irabiim."

"I'll pack dirt and bracelets along with my coats then." Kiram smiled as if they were both joking, but he knew that they weren't, not really. Humor made the thought of exile easier to face. If it happened, then it would happen. Brooding wouldn't stop that.

The perfume of honey wafted over them from the Kir-Zaki candy shop. Kiram's mother waved from the door. Kiram waved back but then pulled Javier through the house gates before either of them could be asked to sample the sweets. In the courtyard Kiram dodged his sisters' invitation to lunch, assuring them that he and Javier had already eaten.

"And you two have been to the Civic Gymnasium as well." Dauhd gave Kiram a knowing grin. Kiram couldn't believe that word of his encounter with Musni had gotten around so quickly. Siamak's silent, reproachful glance assured him that it had, and no doubt the story had become more interesting in the retelling.

"We didn't have a chance to sample the baths while we were there and it's been such a hot day. We both need to wash before we could offer any decent company." Kiram began backing towards the house.

"Kiram is speaking for himself. I smell like a bed of roses." Javier followed Kiram's quick retreat.

"You'd better tell me the whole story, Kiri!" Dauhd shouted.

"Later!" Kiram assured her then he ushered Javier into the cool interior of the house and led him to the men's bath.

The bath bore all the hallmarks of one of Kiram's father's indulgences. The natural luster of the oak walls stood unadorned and the tub was little more than a trench of marble sunk deep in the floor. But the plumbing was displayed like a masterpiece. Brass plated pipes snaked along the walls and coiled down into a red boiler. Etched valves, engraved levers and ornate faucets glowed as shafts of afternoon light angled in through slit windows high in the walls.

Javier flopped down on one of the two wooden benches. He studied the boiler as he worked off his boots.

"I didn't get a chance to ask last night but is that some kind of steam engine?" Javier asked at last.

"No," Kiram laughed. "It's just a boiler. On winter mornings we use it to heat bath water." Kiram patted the mechanism. "This pipe on the left draws water straight from the civic pipes, which are usually pretty cold. The pipe on the right curls around the boiler so that by the time the water gets to the faucet it's hot."

Kiram twisted one of the levers and water gushed out into the deep sunken tub.

"Unfortunately for us no one stoked the boiler so we're going to have to live with tepid water for our bath."

"The horror." Javier smirked. He carefully set Majdi's coat aside and then stripped off his shirt and trousers.

Kiram forgot what he'd been about to say and simply took in Javier's naked body. The sharp definitions of Javier's body hair, the clefts and planes of his muscles were familiar but still breathtaking. Kiram had stroked and kissed every inch of him: thick thighs, jutting hips, broad chest, strong arms, even that ugly brand on his shoulder.

The glint of the cheap piglet charm lying against Javier's chest seemed distinctly out of place.

"What happened to Calixto's medallion?" Kiram asked.

"It burned and broke into pieces when Alizadeh released Yassin's ghost."

Kiram frowned at the sunburned expanses of Javier's shoulders, cheeks and arms. In all the time Kiram had known him, Javier had never gotten the slightest burn or even the hint of a tan, not even after days of riding in open fields. Now a few hours in a garden had left him pink.

Normally the white hell shielded him and absorbed any injury, but now without Calixto's medallion he couldn't easily open the white well. If something as innocuous as sunlight could harm him now, what would happen when the holy father administered Javier's customary dose of muerate poison?

"Alizadeh told me what this piglet symbolizes." Javier tapped the tin charm. "It's a Mirogoth charm for the best luck in bad times."

Kiram scowled. Luck wouldn't keep muerate poison from bleeding Javier to death.

Javier stepped close to Kiram and slid his hand over his chest. "Are you going to undress or is that something you'd like me to do for you?"

"I think I can manage for myself." Kiram gazed into Javier's dark eyes and took in the playful smile on his lips. He looked so happy. Kiram released his anxiety, not wanting to ruin Javier's mood. Kiram shed his clothes and the two of them slipped down into the full tub. The water was only a little cooler than the air but Javier shuddered as it washed over his sunburned skin.

"Does it hurt?" Kiram asked.

"Not much." Javier sagged against the side of the tub. Kiram leaned next to him, relaxing. Absently he pushed a lock of wet, black hair back from Javier's face.

"It's getting long," Kiram commented. It felt like silk between his fingers, far finer than Hal diim curls.

"Shorter than Atreau's," Javier replied. He glanced to Kiram. "Don't you like it?"

"It suits you, but shouldn't you look as little like a Bahiim as you can? Especially now."

"Probably," Javier agreed but there was something in his expression that told Kiram that he wouldn't cut his hair. He wore a similar expression when he flirted with men at the Sagrada Academy, as if he harbored some secret desire to be exposed.

"Do you want us to be found out?" Kiram asked softly.

"No." Javier laughed at the question. But then he met Kiram's gaze and his sure smile faltered.

"Sometimes. I get so frustrated with hiding and lying that I want someone to call me out as a bender. I want to face a living man who I can fight and destroy and have done with all of this."

Javier's gaze was distant, his expression angry. He dunked his head under the water and swept his hair back from his face. "You can't understand it, can you?"

"I think I can a little," Kiram answered. "At first I was worried that you were like the Cadeleonian man Rafie was involved with. He obviously felt so guilty about being an *adari* that he sought out punishment and confessed to a holy father. But that's not how you are."

"I certainly don't harbor any fantasies about the pleasure of punishment for one thing. I've done so much penance that some mornings I've seriously considered burning the whole damn chapel down." Javier's jaw clenched but then he looked to Kiram and forced a hard smile. "I suppose I'm more disillusioned with Cadeleonian society than the jackass who betrayed your uncle. I would never betray you like that, Kiram."

"No, but you do want someone to catch you." Kiram spoke carefully, watching Javier's face. "You want the men you fight to know that you're an *adari* when you defeat them."

"It's a fantasy I've entertained, yes," Javier admitted with a shrug. "But I would never actually endanger either of us like that. It's not as though secrecy is new to me. I've been...I've been a bender all my life and I've learned to accept that it's enough to know that I'm better than the men who would disdain me. Though it doesn't hurt to have won the title of Grand Champion from them."

Kiram couldn't keep from smiling at that.

"You're not a bender, anyway," Kiram teased him. "At least as far as I know, you've never—"

"I would be whether I did or not," Javier replied seriously. "I know what I am, though I do like the word *adari* better. It has a beautiful sound to it."

Kiram nodded. He found the soap—Majdi's, he thought, from the strong cedar scent—and worked it into a fragrant lather. He soaped Javier's chest with care for his tender skin.

"Have you always known?" Kiram asked.

"Probably," Javier replied. He leaned closer to Kiram. "Certainly by the time my father handed Calixto's diary over to me I understood what I read and why it moved me."

Kiram allowed Javier to take a turn at washing him. His touch was gentle but assured and made Kiram think of the way Javier brushed Lunaluz down. And Kiram smiled because only with a Cadeleonian could that have been a good comparison.

"What did you read in Calixto's diary?"

"Sex mostly," Javier admitted. "Calixto filled a number of pages with the details of his encounters with men. Yassin particularly."

Kiram gaped at Javier. "All those nights you were looking so serious and pouring over that diary you were just reading pornography?"

"For the most part, yes," Javier laughed. "It was research. I had to find a way to seduce you, didn't I?"

Kiram briefly ducked beneath the water, rinsing the soap from his body and hair. He wiped water droplets from his face.

"You could have just asked me to seduce you," Kiram suggested.

"I did try on the first day we met."

"By handing me a scrub brush?"

"Yes, well..." Embarrassment and chagrin played in Javier's expression. "You can see why I needed to read over the diary more closely, can't you?"

Kiram laughed. In truth Javier had captured him before they had exchanged a single word, before Kiram had even known his name. The first time he'd seen Javier riding across the open fields, seeming to soar over stone walls, the freedom and beauty of him had riveted Kiram.

Javier stretched in the water, running his hand across Kiram's back. Kiram leaned into his touch and marveled that he'd spent so much time and energy fighting against this simple pleasure.

"Sadly my ancestor's techniques didn't seem to impress you so much as they annoyed you," Javier said softly.

"Maybe they annoyed me because they impressed me."

Javier smiled like a pleased cat and Kiram couldn't help but splash water into his face.

"What?" Javier grinned. "You're the one who said it."

"I was just helping you to rinse your face," Kiram replied.

"Ah, you're a gentleman to the core."

"I am," Kiram replied as seriously as he could. "A gentleman and a scholar."

Javier simply dunked him under the water. Kiram came up sputtering. He grabbed for Javier to return the offense but Javier wriggled from his grasp and, laughing, launched himself out of the sunken tub. Water sloshed across Kiram's chest. He clambered after Javier, catching him at the dressing bench.

Excitement lit Javier's eyes and he allowed Kiram to pull his pants from his hands before lunging after him. Kiram evaded him, dashing to the towels and then making for the door.

Javier scooped up their clothes and gave chase. They raced down the hall half naked and laughing. When Kiram reached his room, he bounded onto his bed. An instant later the door slammed closed and Javier landed on the bed next to him. For a moment they played at grappling over Javier's pants but the friction of their bodies—the strokes of hard muscles and smooth skin—dissolved the pretense.

Kiram shoved Javier onto his back and Javier allowed it, breathing deeply and watching Kiram intently. Kiram ran his hands over Javier's chest and followed the black line of his hair to his groin. Javier's flesh stiffened beneath his fingers.

"Do you want to..." Kiram wasn't sure of what words to use. He didn't want to scare or disgust Javier.

"Yes."

"You don't even know what I'm asking," Kiram caressed Javier, tracing the length of him, taking in the sensation of delicate, warm skin and the steely rigidity beneath. A breathless gasp escaped Javier.

"It's still yes," Javier told him. "I want to."

Kiram realized that Javier wanted him to decide. Kiram surveyed Javier's powerful Cadeleonian body. It would be simple and very pleasant to allow Javier inside him and he knew that Javier would be most at ease with that. But Kiram wasn't sure that he wanted to place himself in the same position as one of the whores at the Goldenrod. And there was also the intense temptation to touch Javier as no lover before him had.

Kiram stood and found the halda salve that Rafie had given him. It felt slick beneath his fingers and cool. As he returned to the bed he warmed the salve in his palm. It smelled slightly of cut grass and melons.

Javier watched him, a mix of excitement and uncertainty in his expression. Kiram offered him a reassuring smile.

"This is halda salve for your sunburn." Kiram worked a little of the salve over Javier's cheeks and shoulders, soothing the pinkish skin. He let his touch turn slightly firmer as he massaged the tension out of Javier's muscular arms and chest. The edge of worry in Javier's expression melted into comfortable arousal.

As Kiram rubbed the slick halda salve lower a soft groan of pleasure escaped Javier. He closed his eyes and slowly relaxed into Kiram's touch.

Kiram took pains to be gentle with Javier but even so, when he slowly eased Javier's legs apart, he felt the tension of alarm surge through Javier's powerful thighs. Javier's eyes flashed wide—aroused but also terrified. His entire body trembled.

Kiram didn't know that he'd ever seen such open vulnerability in Javier before. He'd been less afraid after being run through in the autumn tournament than he was now. Suddenly Kiram grasped how very much more this simple act meant to Javier than himself.

To Kiram it signified a deep intimacy—something lovely and special that he had shared with very few lovers. But for Javier it represented the most profound offering he could submit, not just to another man, but to his own desire.

"Should I stop?" Kiram stilled his hands on Javier's thighs. "We could—"

“No,” Javier replied softly. He met Kiram’s gaze. “I want this... with you.”

Very consciously Javier relaxed, opening himself to Kiram.

His trust touched Kiram more any words could have. Kiram answered him with a tender kiss. Then gently, almost reverently, he explored Javier’s body, touching and kissing his dark hair and delicate skin. Stroking the length of Javier’s flushed, thrusting erection, he caressed the curves of his buttocks and made a slow, sweet play of working the halda salve deep into Javier. His own body ached with desire, but the tension that quivered through Javier’s muscles tempered Kiram’s need.

Steadily Javier melted into his hands. The quietest of pleased gasps escaped his lips as Kiram found just the right angle. At last Kiram moved over him and eased deep into the heat of his powerful body.

He moved with all the skill he possessed, pacing his strokes to Javier’s hungry responses. Something greater than pleasure built between them in steady thrusts and whispers. Soon Javier arched into Kiram, urging him deeper, faster. A fusion of exquisite tenderness and raw desire drove their rhythm. Kiram felt his whole being suffused with joy and marveled that something so simple—the heat and friction of another man—could consume him so completely. Pleasure mounted and Kiram’s resolve broke. Javier met him, arching and driving with desperate need.

Javier climaxed first, calling Kiram’s name out in a soft broken breath. Only a moment later Kiram’s strength and drive burst as a last surge of ecstatic pleasure spilled into Javier’s body.

They lay still a moment. Then very gently Kiram pulled away and then dropped down beside Javier on the bed. He could feel Javier’s pulse, racing nearly as fast as his own. He drew in a deep breath. The smell of sex and halda salve saturated the air. His body felt hot and sticky with sweat.

Javier ran a hand through Kiram’s hair as Kiram studied his face. He looked flushed and handsome. Kiram couldn’t imagine anyone seeming more precious to him than Javier did now.

Lord of the White Hell

“So, now I’m truly bent,” Javier murmured.

“But not broken.” Kiram searched Javier’s distant expression for a sign of what their passion had cost him.

“No.” Javier released a slow breath and then offered Kiram a tired smile. “Not broken. Satisfied.”

Relief flooded Kiram and he grinned.

“Good, because I’m tapped.” Kiram closed his eyes. “You want more you’re going to have to do it yourself.”

Javier laughed in reply, which Kiram thought was a lovely sound. Then he felt Javier’s lips brush his brow.

They slept, entwined and sated.

Chapter fourteen

A few hours later a knock at the door woke Kiram. Moonlight lit the room and the air felt cool. He rose, wrapped a fallen towel around his body, and cracked the door open. Gold lamp-light flared in from the hall, illuminating the scowling face of his brother, Majdi.

"Are you waiting for a written invitation to dinner? Maybe something inscribed on a golden tablet and inlaid with pearls?"

"Could you lower your voice? Javier's sleeping. He's had an exhausting day. We both did."

"I've heard. A nasty run in between your lovers at the Civic Gymnasium." His eyes flickered to Kiram's bed and Javier's naked body. *"Speaking of your lover...It looks like you two have certainly kept busy."*

"It's not my fault if you're jealous." Kiram refused to admit embarrassment, though his face felt warm. *"So I'm going back to bed now."*

"I imagine you'd like to." Majdi caught the door before Kiram could close it. *"But what do you want me to tell our dear mum? You and Lord Tornesal have fucked yourselves into a stupor and can't come down? That might just give your game away, don't you think?"*

Kiram conceded that Majdi had a point. *"Tell her that we ate meringues at Mother Bahoush's sweet shop and now both of us feel ill."*

Majdi raised his brows. *"Slanderous, but clever. I'll tell her, but you can't keep this up and expect no one to notice. Word is going to get around."*

"I know."

Majdi smacked his hand lightly against the top of Kiram's head in a gesture that seemed as much a pat as a slap.

"You know, but you don't seem to understand," Majdi said seriously. *"You must be careful. People are already talking about the tussle at the gymnasium and if word goes far enough it will get outside the Haldiim district."*

"Javier and I didn't do anything at the gymnasium." Kiram stole a quick glance back to make sure Javier still slept. *"Musni made an ass of himself and Javier misunderstood and thought he was assaulting me. Nothing came of it."*

"Nothing but Musni drunk out of his senses and shouting that you suck Cadeleonian cock," Majdi responded.

Anger and hurt flared through Kiram at the thought of how easily Musni turned to maligning him.

"He was drunk. I don't think anyone will take Musni seriously. The Civic Guards certainly didn't."

Majdi seemed to consider this, then released a slow breath.

"I'm going back to bed," Kiram said.

"All right. Go to bed." Majdi shook his head. *"I can't believe that you've turned out so stubborn. You used to be so cute and obliging."*

"You used to be charming and indulgent," Kiram countered.

"And see where that's gotten me." Majdi headed for the stairs. *"Sleep well and dream sweet dreams."*

"Thank you," Kiram whispered after him.

He locked the door and returned to Javier's side in the bed. He tried to sleep well, as Majdi had wished, but most of the night Javier tossed and turned so violently that Kiram kept waking. He whispered calming words, though Javier never fully woke.

"It's all right. It's just a dream."

Wearily, he rubbed Javier's back and Javier settled for a few more minutes before some new nightmare seemed to grip him. Then at last Kiram took off the lotus medallion Alizadeh had given him and slipped it onto Javier. Soon after Javier seemed to settle into a quiet sleep.

As Kiram at last drifted deep into his own dreams, Javier rose. The sudden absence of his body, as much as the shift of mattress, woke Kiram.

Cracking an eye, he studied the curve of Javier's bowed back as he sat on the edge of the bed. Faint predawn light filtered through the curtains, lending his skin a deathly pallor. Javier rubbed a hand over his eyes and then shoved his hair back from his face. What Kiram caught of his expression seemed haunted.

Kiram could guess why Javier was troubled but he didn't know how deeply and he couldn't keep from thinking of his uncle's Cadeleonian lover. One day training with a Bahiim and one night of sex couldn't erase a lifetime of Cadeleonian upbringing, no matter how much he or Javier might want it to.

Kiram remained silent as Javier rose and rinsed himself at Kiram's washbasin. Then he picked up Kiram's razor and contemplated the long blade. Kiram's heart raced and he almost called out, but then Javier very deliberately set the razor aside. He noticed Kiram's medallion beside his cheap Mirogoth charm and lifted it, running his thumb over the surface with something like affection in his expression.

As he turned back to the bed Kiram closed his eyes, relieved that Javier was returning. The mattress bowed and Kiram felt the lightest contact of Javier's lips against his brow. Then Javier withdrew again. He found his sword and gathered up the clothes he'd worn the day before.

"Are you serious?" Kiram asked. "You're really just going to get up and leave now?"

Javier started guiltily. "I thought you were still sleeping."

"Obviously." Kiram dragged himself upright. "Where are you going?"

"I want to take a walk. Maybe see the sunrise from the Ammej Bridge. It's supposed to be an inspiring sight, isn't it?"

"It's amazing at first light." Kiram made a groggy attempt at throwing his blankets aside, managed to flip the end of a quilt over his own face, and then simply slid off the bed. "Well, I'm ready to be newly amazed."

“Kiram, you don’t have to—”

“Yes, I do.” Kiram started to say how much he feared for Javier but then caught himself. Any concern he voiced would only sound condescending. “According to Atreau, it’s a gentleman’s duty to rise with his lover and offer endearing company.” He yawned loudly. “And as I told you yesterday, I am gentleman.”

“A gentleman and a scholar.” A smile broke through Javier’s grim expression. “Anyone could see that just looking at you.”

Kiram ran a hand through the curling tangle of his hair and offered Javier a rude gesture. He said, “I refuse to be criticized by a man who isn’t even wearing pants.”

He staggered to his basin and rinsed his face. His hands felt too shaky to shave just yet. He found fresh clothing in his closet, then glanced to the sweat-soaked vest in Javier’s hand.

“Your clothes will have been laundered and dried by now. They’re probably in a basket in the hall.”

Javier cracked the door and found his own clothes. Kiram stole glances at him while they both dressed. As Javier clothed himself in Cadeleonian long sleeves and heavy material his bearing changed. Reserve and formality returned. His motions became angular and precise as clockwork.

Out on the streets, only Civic Guards and bread vendors seemed to be awake and many of them looked nearly as groggy as Kiram felt. Kiram trailed Javier to the Ammej Bridge and silently watched the first rays of sun light up the red lacquer to a fiery brilliance. Amber inlays glowed like embers. Javier hardly seemed to notice. He stared out at the treetops of the Circle of Red Oaks. Kiram leaned on the bridge railings, half dozing and letting Javier think in peace.

Overhead, the sky turned luminous blue and the scent of cinnamon and mercantile noise of morning steadily filled the air. Vendors called out enticingly, offering goat milk and adhil bread, butter teas, sweet fish and fresh yoghurt. The spicy smell of adhil bread set Kiram’s stomach growling. He glanced to Javier and found him staring back at him.

“What?” Kiram asked, suddenly startled.

"Enjoying the view," Javier replied, though Kiram could see the agitation underlying his smile.

"Really?" Kiram straightened and stretched. "You look like you're thinking about dismantling the view."

"What? No." Javier seemed genuinely surprised. "No, it's just...Everything seems different today."

"Different how?" Kiram asked.

Javier's expression grew troubled and he didn't respond right away. Anxiety slithered through Kiram's gut. He wondered if Javier would eventually come to hate him for what he'd done last night.

Javier said, "It's hard to put into words. I felt something yesterday but it's more distant today."

"Something?"

"An epiphany." Javier laid his hand lightly on the railing of the bridge. He gazed into the distance as if searching. "The Bahiim say that every living thing is linked through the elements of the world around us and through the shajdi. I know the connections are there but today I can't find them."

It was not the response Kiram had been bracing himself for and he felt relieved.

"Maybe you're too hungry to concentrate," Kiram suggested. "We did miss dinner."

"Probably." Javier's expression lightened. "That's adhil bread that woman is selling, isn't it?"

Kiram glanced to the cart where a deeply tanned Haldiim woman poured batter into coal-heated pans. Moments later she flipped golden rounds of adhil bread out onto dried grape leaves with easy expertise. Customers already crowded her cart. Kiram's mouth began to water.

"It smells good," Javier said.

"Why don't you allow me to buy you some?"

They ordered six fresh adhil rounds between them as well as four skewers of sugared fish. They ate beneath a stand of almond trees. The silence between them seemed almost comfortable as they devoured their breakfast.

A courier in a dusty gray uniform rushed passed them with a bulging mail pouch. Kiram watched the man, thinking of the letter he'd sent off just two days earlier. Then a sudden realization came to him.

"I know you promised Alizadeh, but you might not have to go through with fully becoming a Bahiim. There might be another way to defeat the curse."

Javier raised his brows in question as he continued chewing his last sugared fish.

"The day before my return party Alizadeh said that if Scholar Donamillo's mechanical cures were able to protect Fedeles, then at least some of the symbols on the machine had to be related to the curse. If we could figure out which ones were, then we'd know exactly how the curse worked—"

"We would?" Javier asked with an amused smirk.

"Well, Alizadeh would know," Kiram admitted. "He said that if we knew, we'd have a way to stop it."

"You mean Alizadeh would have a way to stop it." Javier made a grab for one of Kiram's fish but Kiram pulled the skewer away.

"I'm trying to help you and you steal my food?"

"You didn't seem too interested in eating it."

"I hadn't eaten yet," Kiram took a bite of his fish and chewed, "because I was in the midst of telling you that I wrote to Scholar Donamillo and asked him about the symbols. If he writes back directly and the couriers are quick, we could have an answer in two weeks."

"An answer that won't mean anything to anyone but Alizadeh or another Bahiim." Javier sounded oddly smug.

"Yes, but I'd put my money on us having that answer before you're trained enough to take your vows in the Circle of Red Oaks."

"Probably," Javier conceded. He frowned at Kiram. "So are you suggesting that once you get word from Scholar Donamillo, you'll have Alizadeh break the curse and then I should betray him by refusing to become a Bahiim?"

Kiram scowled at Javier's words. He hadn't thought of it in those terms, but he supposed that was what his idea amounted to. It suddenly seemed shameful.

"I was just thinking that there might be some way refit Scholar Donamillo's mechanical cure. With my steam engine powering it, we might be able to break the curse. Then you wouldn't need to become a Bahiim."

"I swore an oath yesterday," Javier replied.

"But only because you didn't think there was any other way to save Fedeles." Kiram still felt a flare of anger at Alizadeh for demanding the promise of Javier.

"That doesn't change the fact that I gave my word, does it?"

"It might." Kiram ate the crisp tail of his fish. "An oath given under duress—"

"Duress?" Javier demanded. "Have I become a such a frail maiden in your eyes that lunch in a garden merits duress?"

"It wasn't just lunch! Fedeles' life was held over your head." Kiram lowered his voice to a harsh whisper. "And I didn't say anything about frail maidens."

Kiram noticed the way Javier's eyes flicked away from him at the words.

"Damn it, Javier. You're a man. I know that. I love that. And just so we're clear, nothing we did last night changes that."

A flush colored Javier's pale face, and for a moment he wouldn't meet Kiram's gaze.

"Nothing's changed," Kiram repeated.

"You're wrong." Javier closed his eyes as if the view before him were too much to bear. "Everything has changed."

Kiram's stomach churned and his throat felt too tight to let him swallow. He should have known better than to have taken Javier last night. Kiram glared down at his own dusty shoes.

Then he felt Javier's fingers caress the back of his hand. When he met Javier's gaze, his expression was calm.

"I can't go back now." Javier gave a weirdly soft laugh.

"Do you want to?"

"Maybe a little. You know, ignorance being bliss and all that tripe." Again Javier's eyes flicked away from Kiram. "I wasn't prepared for it to feel...good. Stupid, isn't it? After all my talk in the bath about being a bender. When you started I thought I'd grit my teeth and endure it. You know, take it like a man."

"You did take it like a man."

"A little better than most men, I think." A sardonic smile curved Javier's lips.

"That's nothing to be ashamed of and it doesn't change who you are."

"It does." Javier stared intently into Kiram's face. "It's like the very first time I saw myself in a mirror. I could hardly credit it. I kept thinking, that's really me? Before then I'd thought I was like everyone else. But afterwards I was different. I was myself and I couldn't go back to being just like Timoteo or Elezar."

Kiram almost blurted out that he didn't think Elezar was all that different from either of them but stopped himself. It seemed petty and beside the point.

"Now, I know—deep in my flesh and bones—that I'm—" Javier paused, plainly rejecting the first word that came to his mind and choosing another, "I'm an *adari*. And I don't want to be anything else. I don't even want to pretend anymore, but I have to. We both do."

Kiram nodded. Neither of their lives would be lived in the safe, walled confines of the Haldiim district. And even if they could have been, there still would have been Kiram's mother to contend with.

"I don't know how I'm going to keep my hands off you after this," Javier finished.

Kiram laughed but Javier frowned at him.

"I'm serious. You wouldn't believe the nightmares I had last night. About being caught together and what they did to you."

"I know. Really, I do." Kiram said. He'd felt the same kind of anxiety at the Sagrada Academy. He also knew that brooding on it would only make it worse. "But we won't be caught. We'll be careful and smart."

Javier nodded slowly.

"Though I have to point out that taking vows as a Bahiim is neither of those things," Kiram added.

"I know that."

"Then you shouldn't—"

"I have to," Javier cut him off. "And not just because I made a promise, but because the Bahiim belief is right. There is a unity to all life. I felt it yesterday. For a few minutes with Alizadeh, there were no barriers between me and the surrounding world. I could reach out and catch the wind in my hands. When I took a breath, the air rippled with the vibrations of birds' wings and I could feel you and your uncle Rafie speaking like whispers against my skin." Javier gazed up into the branches of the almond tree above them. His expression seemed to light up as he spoke. "It was just an instant but I felt something real and holy. Something I have never felt in any Cadeleonian chapel. Now that I've experienced it, I can't turn my back on becoming Bahiim any more than I can stop being an *adari*."

His tone and rapturous expression told Kiram as much as his words, perhaps more. Javier had already converted; oaths would just be a formality. Kiram didn't know what to say. He'd never considered the possibility of Javier genuinely experiencing the Bahiim religion, probably because he wasn't all that religious himself. Even now his first thought was purely pragmatic.

"You're going to keep your conversion a secret, aren't you?"

"I'm becoming a Bahiim, not an idiot," Javier replied with a crooked smile. "Obviously I'm going to keep it secret."

"Just making sure." Kiram tried to reason past his own anxiety to reach practical thought. "We have to find some excuse for you to be in the Haldiim district if you're going to keep studying with Alizadeh. And you need to have your hair trimmed."

"I know. I know." Javier laughed. "I'll cut my hair. I was just being obstinate last night. I wanted everything my way."

"Who doesn't?" Kiram replied. A cluster of young girls in bright green school vests crossed the Ammej Bridge, singing their

multiplication tables. Kiram vividly remembered how proud he'd been wearing his own school vest. That seemed so long ago now. Javier watched the students too, but absently.

"Your father is building a fountain right now, isn't he?" Javier asked.

"He's nearly done." Kiram noted Javier's pleased expression. "Next he's thinking of trying his hand at a new design for a water clock. Why?"

"I need a reason to be in the Haldiim district," Javier began and Kiram immediately followed his thoughts.

"If you commissioned my father to design and built a fountain or—"

"—Or a water clock," Javier put in and Kiram nodded.

"Either way it would seem perfectly reasonable for you to be down here, directing the work and observing the progress."

"Perfectly reasonable," Javier said. "I'd probably have to stay the night on more than one occasion."

"You'll definitely have to stay the night."

The two of them exchanged excited grins and suddenly Kiram's exhaustion seemed to dissipate.

"Should I approach your father directly with the commission or would it be better if you brought it up to him?"

"You should talk to him. He'll be thrilled to design something for the Duke of Rauma." Kiram bounded out from the shade of the almond tree and sunlight warmed his skin. "Come on. He'll be up and in his workshop by now."

The two of them raced up Gold Street as morning bells rang out and a flight of doves took to the sky.

Chapter fifteen

After an initial consultation with Kiram's father, Javier took the excuse of tending to Lunaluz to visit Alizadeh for another session of Bahiim training. Kiram spent rest of the morning in his father's workshop, helping him complete his fountain so that he could begin work on Javier's commission immediately.

Across the room his father beamed and hummed to himself as he drew up extravagant designs for a water clock worthy of the Duke of Rauma. Kiram didn't think Javier could have done anything that would have won his father's favor more completely than commissioning this machine.

"What do you think of a second series of waterwheels that track the date?" Kiram's father looked up from his papers. *"Perhaps a gold sun and a silver moon that could rise and set as well."*

"Brilliant." Kiram tightened down the screws on the decorative case, which housed one of eight small spigots. The work was precise and delicate and Kiram found it soothing.

"He'll want some motif," Kiram's father commented.

"A white horse," Kiram replied without looking up from his tiny screws. *"He loves his stallion, Lunaluz. Most Cadeleonians like horses."*

"A horse..." his father repeated, as if it were a suggestion of uncanny genius. *"Yes, that would work."*

Kiram secured copper pipes to spigots with locking bolts and plumbing wax. The fountain was nearly complete. Kiram could already see it as it soon would be: three delicate peacocks with tails made of gold feathers augmented by plumes of water. It would be lovely when it was done.

The two of them might have missed lunch entirely if Dauhd hadn't called them to the table. She rolled her eyes at the sight of them and tossed them a dishtowel to clean the machine oil and graphite dust from their hands and faces.

"We're entertaining guests today." Her smile assured Kiram that she hadn't really expected him or his father to be any more presentable than they were.

"Oh, and a letter came for you today, Kiram." Dauhd pulled the small packet from her vest pocket. "Looks like it's from someone at your school."

Kiram broke the wax seal and quickly read while Dauhd attempted to smooth down their father's wild white hair. He knew that this missive couldn't be a response to the letter he'd sent earlier—no mail wagon traveled that quickly—still he found it relieving to recognize Scholar Blasio's handwriting.

Blasio apologized for having not wished Kiram goodbye when he'd left the academy. Apparently his brother, Scholar Donamillo, had taken ill that afternoon. Blasio expected that he would recover soon enough and assured Kiram that Fedeles was fine, as was Genimo. Then he wished Kiram a happy vacation and a safe return to the school this summer.

"Bad news?" Dauhd asked.

"I hope not." Kiram didn't want to make too much of it. His worry certainly wouldn't help Donamillo's recovery and Blasio had assured him that Fedeles was very well. *"Just a note from one of my instructors."*

"You always were a class pet," Dauhd teased but she let the subject go at that.

In the sunroom, three of Siamak's friends joined them—all of them silk-clad daughters of wealthy mothers—as did Majdi's red-bearded Mirogoth navigator. Kiram's father immediately announced to them all that he was designing a water clock for the Duke of Rauma. Such pride lit his expression that Kiram wondered if his father hadn't always longed to receive such commissions. If he hadn't married and settled in the confines of

the Haldiim district, doubtless he would have long ago achieved much wider fame for his mechanisms.

As their father described his innovations in loving, drawn out detail, Dauhd quietly grilled Kiram about his meeting with Musni at the gymnasium.

"He was drunk and fell on me," Kiram whispered. He poured tea for Siamak and her three well-dressed friends, then sat back down beside Dauhd.

"Chebli says that Lord Tornesal nearly ran Musni through. You wouldn't believe the things people are saying about that." Dauhd's pale eyes gleamed with excitement.

"He didn't even draw his sword. And since when do you talk to Chebli anyway?" Kiram demanded between bites of almond and lamb-stuffed grape leaves.

"He's not so bad." The slightest flush colored Dauhd's face. Kiram raised his brows.

"You used to tease him because he stank like pickles."

"That was years ago. He's in the Civic Guard now," Dauhd defended. *"And he comes from a very good family. His grandmother directed the treasury for forty years."*

"Who's this?" Majdi asked, suddenly taking note of their whispered conversation.

"Chebli Kir-Wassan," Kiram provided and Dauhd pinched him.

"Chebli." Majdi smirked at Dauhd with knowing. *"Now he has certainly filled out from the scrawny, vinegar-seller he used to be, hasn't he?"*

"His mother is looking for a home for him, I hear," one of Siamak's friends commented.

The rest of the meal passed in a flurry of teasing and speculation as to how Dauhd would ever claim Chebli now that he'd matured into such a handsome and obedient young man. Dauhd beamed at the attention. It soon became clear that she had spoken quite extensively and seriously with Chebli's mother and eldest sister. Siamak and her friends gave her advice. The Mirogoth navigator

traced a heart-shaped sign on Dauhd's palm as a charm to let her capture love in her hand.

Majdi just sighed and Kiram refilled everyone's tea once again. He and Majdi would have a new brother soon. Kiram wondered if Chebli still snorted when he laughed. That could get annoying.

Then he realized that it didn't matter. By the time Dauhd brought Chebli into the house Kiram would probably be living far to the north in either Cieloalta or Rauma. Briefly he felt a wave of sadness at the thought of leaving.

But it passed as he thought of the relief that distance would provide. He would have the opportunity to make his own way instead of settling with a pharmacist's son only five blocks from his mother's house.

Besides, he would visit often.

Kiram wondered if Majdi felt the same way, spending so much of his life at sea and in distant lands with strange people. He always returned but never to stay, no matter how their mother tried to settle him in a wife's home.

Even now Majdi and his navigator discussed their next voyage to the western provinces of Yuan. They would set sail just before the Flower Festival while the winds were best. They planned to return next fall with silk and rare plumage from exotic birds.

When Siamak pointed out that two of Mother Rid-Fisse's daughters had expected to court Majdi this summer, Majdi simply shrugged as if putting out to sea was a physical necessity.

"Perhaps your little brother will be sailing with us?" The navigator's accent was strong but Kiram found it pleasant.

"I still have another year of school ahead of me, but after that..." Kiram realized it would be wiser not to say what he was thinking. After that he would be in the north with Javier. *"Who knows where I'll go then?"*

Siamak's friends, all of them mature women with their own children and businesses, indulged Kiram with kind smiles. They no doubt saw his future much as his mother and sisters did. He

would be an indulged son, living close to home and demonstrating his family's wealth with his amusing little mechanisms. For the first time Kiram felt pity as well as adoration when he met his father's gaze.

After lunch, Kiram excused himself to fetch Javier. He ran directly to Mother Kir-Mahoud's stables and wasn't surprised to find Javier brushing Lunaluz down, having just finished a ride.

Something in Javier's expression brought to mind his own sense of ease when he was working with machinery. Javier seemed utterly relaxed and happy tending Lunaluz. The stallion nuzzled his big head into Javier's shoulder and Javier indulged him with a firm rub along his jaw before returning to his brush down his flank.

Kiram leaned against a hay bale near the stall and watched in silence. He took in a deep breath, smelling leather, sweat and the sweet tang of straw. A moment later Javier turned and smiled at him.

"I thought it was you." Javier finished with Lunaluz's coat and let the stallion loose to pose for the two mares stabled near him. Kiram strolled to the stall door.

"Felt me ogling your backside?" Kiram asked.

"Something like that."

"You're sure you didn't just smell all the machine oil wafting off me?" Kiram asked and Javier laughed.

"That might have given you away as well." Javier leaned against the wall of Lunaluz's stall and lightly ran his hand over Kiram's back. "It's weird that I'm beginning to find the scent of machine oil alluring."

Kiram closed his eyes, enjoying the warmth of Javier's touch. He supposed this was just what Lunaluz did.

"So, how did your practice go with Alizadeh?" Kiram asked.

"Very well, according to Alizadeh." An edge of frustration sounded in Javier's voice. Kiram glanced questioningly to him and he shrugged.

"I'm used to being able to open the white hell and hold it without breaking a sweat. Now, even though I know how to do

it, it's exhausting. Though once I do get it open the connection is much stronger. I feel it through my entire body." Javier trailed off, frowning out past the open stable doors.

Kiram followed his gaze to the sunlit courtyard where Nestor stood with the reins of his roan stallion in hand. Beside him Elezar sat on his own black mount and stared straight at Kiram and Javier.

Javier's hand dropped from Kiram's back. Kiram stepped away, picking up a piece of rope as if he had any need for it. Elezar hardly seemed to notice him. His attention remained fixed upon Javier.

Stable hands in brown vests appeared and took the horses' reins. Elezar swung down from his saddle and strode across the courtyard like a charging bull. Behind Elezar, Nestor caught sight of Kiram and waved.

As Elezar stepped into the shadows of the stable, Javier rolled his shoulders in the same way he often loosened his muscles before a fight.

"Two damn days, Tornesall!" Elezar stopped just short of Javier. "All your shit is at my house and you are nowhere to be found."

"I had no idea you'd decided to become my mother." Javier offered Elezar an unconcerned smile. "Were you sitting by the door all night, weeping?"

Elezar gave a derisive snort. "I was dodging my own damn mother's fists while explaining that I couldn't look after you every minute and that I had no idea why you'd ridden off in the dead of night without a word to anyone." Elezar raised his heavy brows. "Which, come to think of it, is an awfully good question."

"I told you he'd be with Kiram!" Nestor ambled in, grinning at Kiram. "This is lucky though, all of us meeting at the stable. We just escorted my mother and Riessa to your mother's candy shop to discuss the sweets for my wedding, but you were gone. I thought we'd have to walk all over the district before we found you. But this is great, isn't it?"

"Perfect," Kiram responded dryly.

Nestor bounded between Javier and Elezar, patted Lunaluz on the neck, then turned to study the sleek black mare in the next stall.

"She's a beauty." Nestor drew a small, leather-bound sketchbook from a pocket of his embroidered red coat and sketched a quick study of the mare. "She has those ears like the racing horses from Yuan do. Any idea who she belongs to?"

"Doesn't matter," Elezar retorted. "You've already got a bride." Though his words were sarcastic, anger no longer sounded in his voice.

Javier too relaxed in Nestor's presence. "She belongs to a church courier. I saw him stable her here earlier. Though I have no idea what the church would want here in the Haldiim district."

"He's probably consulting with our astrologer to be sure of the date of the next full moon," Kiram said. "Your High Mass has to be held on the day of a full moon, doesn't it?"

"Indeed," Javier agreed, though he gave Kiram a curious look as if he hadn't expected him to know as much.

"My mother's best friend is an astrologer with a church contract," Kiram explained.

"You see!" Nestor looked meaningfully at Elezar. "Kiram has all the inside knowledge. He can show us all the secret back passages and dark entries of the Haldiim district."

Elezar snorted and Nestor frowned at him. "That wasn't meant to sound dirty."

"I didn't say anything," Elezar held up his hands but he and Javier exchanged a knowing smirk. Kiram supposed it was a good sign for their friendship, if a bad indicator of the tone the rest of the day would take.

And he was right. Soon after the horses were stabled, Elezar and Javier fell into their usual pattern of camaraderie and rivalry, snickering at fertility charms in the market place and leering at the bare arms and low cut vests of the Haldiim women.

Nestor scowled at his brother. Now and then he stole guilty, furtive glances at Kiram, obviously attempting to judge just how

offensive his brother and Javier's behavior was. For his part, Kiram didn't know if he should laugh at the absurdity of the two of them working so hard to ogle women or just give in to the urge to shove them both into the river.

Just before they reached the Ammej Bridge they encountered a bridegroom's entourage. The young man was dressed in white silk with a desert scarf covering the lower half of his face like a veil. Black kohl outlined his pale eyes and his golden hair was decorated with strings of tiny gold bells. Behind him a small procession of servants carried the few belongings he would take to his new home and flamboyant wedding musicians clanged chimes and beat drums to announce his move.

Kiram didn't know the bridegroom personally but he stepped forward along with most of the other unmarried men on the street to place a few coins in the man's wedding cup.

"It's good luck," Kiram explained when Nestor asked.

The young bridegroom thanked Kiram and wished him happiness and managed to thank Nestor in a heavily accented whisper though he seemed too intimidated by Elezar and Javier both looming over him to say anything to either of them. He bowed his head, lowered his gaze, and even the musicians seemed to quiet.

"Someone so pretty shouldn't be so shy." Elezar flexed his muscular arms unnecessarily as he presented the bridegroom with a silver coin.

Kiram gaped at him.

Then Javier gave the groom a lewd smile and, while handing him a gold coin, stated that it was a pity they couldn't get to know each other a little better. The bridegroom hurried up the street before anyone else could make a donation. His servants and musicians raced after him.

Nestor glared at Elezar through his delicate gold spectacles. "I can't believe you were so forward to that girl."

"We just flirted with her." Elezar shrugged.

"Him," Kiram corrected and he gave Javier a hard look.

“What?” Elezar demanded.

“You were flirting—rudely I might add—with a man,” Kiram said coldly. “A bridegroom on his way to his wife’s home.”

Javier’s smug grin evaporated and he had the decency to pale, though Kiram guessed it was for the wrong reason.

“No!” Elezar shook his head. “No, that was a girl. She was dressed—”

“—In the traditional clothes of a Haldiim bridegroom!” Kiram cut him off. Elezar went surprisingly quiet. He glanced to Javier and then away almost guiltily. Neither seemed able to meet the other’s gaze.

“We aren’t far from your mother’s candy shop, are we?” Nestor asked after a few moments of awkward silence had passed between them all. “Maybe we should look in on Mother and Riossa.”

“We’re only a few minutes away.” Kiram led Nestor along the street while Javier and Elezar mutely trailed them. They passed street vendors and merchants with goat carts loaded with wine barrels and bunches of spring herbs. At a cross street they glimpsed another bridegroom and his entourage. The wedding season was really upon them, Kiram thought.

Beside him, Nestor started to giggle to himself. Kiram watched him fight to maintain a serious expression as he turned back to Elezar.

“Mother would never approve,” Nestor’s voice wavered with suppressed laughter, “but if that was who you wanted, I would support you and your Haldiim bridegroom, Elezar, no matter what. I just want you to be happy.” Then Nestor dissolved into laughter.

“Shut up,” Elezar growled. “It’s not funny.”

“It is a little,” Javier said. He gave Nestor an assessing glance. “It’s good to know you’re so openminded about matters of the heart, Nestor.”

Nestor grinned while Elezar’s face flushed vivid red.

“I didn’t know! And why was he dressed like that anyway?” Elezar demanded.

"It's a different culture," Javier replied calmly. He now seemed more amused by the interaction than mortified. He briefly met Kiram's gaze. "And everyone knows that Haldiim men can be prettier than Cadeleonian women."

"Disgusting," Elezar grumbled.

"No, he wasn't." Javier laughed. "That was the trouble."

That at least drew a smirk from Elezar. Then Javier glanced to Kiram. "We're not going to see you dressed like that anytime soon, are we?"

"Let's hope not." Kiram rounded the corner and found the street in front of the Kir-Zaki candy shop unusually clogged with people. He made polite apologies as Javier, Nestor and Elezar shouldered their way through the throngs.

Kiram wondered what had attracted so many neighbors and onlookers. He prayed it wasn't another of his father's workshop fires, though there was no sign or scent of smoke. Perhaps his mother and Siamak had had another of their infamous arguments in the street. But Kiram didn't hear either of their voices screeching through the murmurs of the gathered crowd.

Then Kiram realized the loiterers were primarily focused on a gleaming red carriage and the four red stallions that were hitched to it. Emblazoned in gold the Grunito crest adorned the doors of the carriage as well as the front of the driver's long coat. A footman standing at the door of the carriage watched the gawking Haldiim passersby with suspicion, but the majority of the crowd hardly seemed to notice his disapproval. They eyed the huge horses and whispered about the expense of the carriage.

Even Kiram stared for a moment. Not because Cadeleonian carriages were new or strange to him, but because this shining, gilded mass was so out of place here on a narrow Haldiim street. As a rule, when Cadeleonians came to the Haldiim district they did not come with carriages and even left their horses at the stable. If they needed goods transported, then they hired goat carts, and if they wished to travel in an indulgent fashion, then it was expected

that they would hire a Hal diim palanquin. That had certainly been how the Grunitos had visited the candy shop in the past.

Nestor exchanged a wave with the carriage driver and Kiram felt the crowd's attention shift from the carriage to himself and the three Cadeleonians with him. Kiram was suddenly very aware of how imposing, foreign and rich Javier and the Grunito brothers would look to the gathered Hal diim.

As Kiram walked past with Javier, Nestor and Elezar, he caught Hal diim whispers and appraising glances, not all of them kind. Someone behind him wondered if Mother Kir-Zaki had whored her son out to all three of those Cadeleonian men in exchange for their business.

Kiram stopped, not shocked by the words as much as the familiarity of the voice, though he refused to turn or to acknowledge the remark.

But Javier spun back to glare at the crowd. Elezar followed Javier's motion, clearly backing him despite the fact that he couldn't have known what had roused Javier's ire. Nestor looked startled, almost panicked, and then Kiram realized that both Javier and Elezar had their hands on their sword hilts.

Only a few feet away two wiry Hal diim men went pale, but Musni gripped his fighting knife. A gasp went through the crowd and mothers pulled their young charges back from Musni and his friends. Kiram noticed the two Civic Guards a few yards away suddenly hefting their short bows.

Kiram instantly caught Javier's forearm and Elezar's elbow and then he stepped between them and the now gaping group of Hal diim.

"There's nothing to be offended about," Kiram said firmly. *"Petty people can't help but say jealous words any more than swine can keep from rolling in filth."* Kiram projected his voice to carry the Hal diim anecdote over the crowd. Several people had the good grace to look embarrassed and an older woman slapped Musni in the back of his head.

"He's not worth it," Kiram said and he met Javier's gaze.

Javier relaxed his grip on his sword though his anger still showed on his face. Elezar followed Javier's lead, dropping his grip from his sword. Kiram wondered if Elezar would follow Javier off a cliff just as blindly.

"What just—" Nestor began to ask but Kiram cut him off.

"A misunderstanding that we don't need to drag out any longer." Kiram turned his back on Musni. "Let's see what there is inside for us, shall we?" He strode purposefully towards the perfumed warmth of his mother's candy shop and was relieved when Javier, Elezar and Nestor followed him.

Inside Lady Grunito dominated the tasting room with the same scale and bold presence that her carriage displayed out on the street. Her red silk gown flashed with gold embroidery and the coils of her dark brown braids sat atop her head like a silk crown, plaited with gold ribbons and gleaming pearls. Two Cadeleonian maids and a pair of footmen in Grunito uniforms hung back by the door, their arms already loaded with baskets of marzipan fruit, candied lemons and bright snips of taffy. Beside Lady Grunito, Riossa looked tiny, despite the spectacle of yellow silk, jeweled butterfly pins and embroidered ribbons billowing from her. She held two glistening honey cakes in her hands as if they were delicate blossoms.

Both of Kiram's sisters flitted between the granite counters, displaying sweets to Lady Grunito. Their mother sat demurely by the side, pretending not to understand a word of Cadeleonian. She glanced briefly to Kiram but remained quiet and aloof, perched on her tall stool with a wooden candy spoon in one hand like a scepter. Dauhd flashed him a quick smile before she handed Lady Grunito a small dish piled with glazed almonds.

Riossa, who seemed to have been watching Dauhd closely, followed her quick glance to the door. Suddenly Riossa's plain features lit with a truly beautiful smile.

"Nestor!" Riossa waved a honey cake. "I purchased these for you!" And she added much more demurely, "There's one for you as well, Elezar."

Nestor bounded to Riossa's side and Elezar strode after him. While Nestor beamed at his bride-to-be, Elezar thanked her with a polite formality that Kiram couldn't ever remember him exhibiting before.

The same display of good manners certainly would have been useful out on the street. Though it hadn't really been Elezar who'd been the problem.

Kiram moved just a little closer to Javier, whispering, "You have got to stop going for your sword every time someone says something you don't like."

"Your friend Musni went for his knife first."

"It was just bravado—you of all people ought to be able to recognize that."

Javier's jaw clenched and Kiram guessed that he was suppressing some cutting remark.

Kiram continued, "People are already talking about us as it is."

"Does that matter?"

It was telling that Javier asked the question in Haldiim. Clearly it mattered what his fellow Cadeleonians thought.

"The last thing either of us needs is a street fight—"

"Javier, my dear boy!" Lady Grunito cut off Kiram's whispered reply as she turned and held out her hand. "I was terribly worried for you."

"Forgive me for troubling you." Javier went to Lady Grunito. He bowed over her outstretched hand and kissed her fingers. "I only behave so badly to attract your attention. Really you should pay me no heed at all or I'll be all the worse for it."

Lady Grunito laughed.

"I have no doubt that's true, dear boy, but you are terribly hard to ignore." Lady Grunito's gaze flickered past Javier to Kiram and her easy smile wavered. Kiram wasn't sure if it was curiosity or suspicion that played in her expression but it was gone in an instant. Dauhd proffered a tray of candied flowers and Lady Grunito gave a murmur of delight after placing one of the delicate violets in her mouth.

"You must taste these, Javier," Lady Grunito announced. "They are absolutely the finest sweets. We're just deciding which ones we will have made for Nestor's wedding feast."

"I like the marzipan," Nestor said.

"You like anything," Elezar muttered. Lady Grunito gave him a warning glare.

"It's true," Elezar said with a shrug.

"*Kiram, we can use your help.*" Siamak slipped up beside him like a shadow and drew him back from Javier and the Grunitos. Kiram followed her to the marble candy tables but was then sent back into the kitchen to have tea brewed and served to their illustrious customers.

Kiram wasn't allowed to take the tea out himself; his mother retained a skilled serving boy for such work. Instead, he was chided not to get underfoot and sent back to the house to inform his father and Majdi that dinner would be late.

Chapter Sixteen

Throughout the following weeks Kiram saw Javier often but almost always in mixed company. His mother, sisters and father took pride in associating with Javier and many of their friends followed suit so that even when Kiram managed to secret Javier away from the house, family acquaintances approached them on the street, insisting on treating Javier to expensive bitter wines and challengingly rarified dishes. Javier behaved politely, engaging foods that even Kiram tried to feed to lapdogs. But the attention wore on them both.

A hunted look flashed through Javier's expression every time a Haldiim mother called out a warm greeting. More and more, Kiram found himself leading Javier through the shabby back streets where no decent Haldiim would travel just so the two of them could steal a few moments of intimacy out of sight of his mother's acquaintances.

A year ago he couldn't have imagined himself purposefully rushing between a tanner's dung pots and oily racks of drying fish to reach a dim alley, much less leaning back against a decaying wall in a passionate embrace. But now that he'd spent more than one evening listening to Hashiem Kir-Naham drone on about dry poultices while surrounded by beautiful furnishings and soothing music, he'd discovered that location mattered far less than the company he kept.

Now the smell of smoked fish and leather almost excited him. And on several lonely afternoons he caught himself gazing into the deep shadows of dank streets with a kind of longing.

Still, he was not fool enough to think that the recesses of the Haldiim district were where he belonged. Along with tanners,

fisherwomen and soot mongers, thieves and cutthroats populated those winding narrow streets. When he ventured there, Kiram kept his coin purse hidden in an inner pocket of his vest. He dressed simply and carried the knife that Alizadeh and Rafie had given him.

Javier seemed to take a certain pleasure in dressing down. He claimed to have won his faded leather pants and slashed coat from a Cadeleonian sailor. In combination with his fine sword and riding boots, the wardrobe lent Javier the air of a mercenary, a street snake as Kiram's father called them.

Kiram supposed it was telling that he'd now seen enough of such men to recognize their characteristic fast hands and clean weapons.

"Knowing you has certainly broadened my horizons," Kiram whispered to Javier as they shimmied between racks of drying river fish. Two fisherwomen watched them pass as if he and Javier were hungry cats.

"I could say the same to you," Javier replied. Ahead of them drying nets formed a canopy over the walkway. River gulls, ravens and doves fought for remnants of fish and riverweeds caught in the rope. Their cries and the noise of their wings filled the air. Then Kiram heard a terrible screech and looked up to see a cluster of bright blue jays settling among the other birds. He felt suddenly wary of walking past them and instead led Javier down a cramped lane where plumes of pungent smoke drifted from kitchen fires.

Javier looked oddly amused.

"What are you smirking about?" Kiram asked.

"Just wondering if we're hiding from birds now too."

"Not necessarily," Kiram replied. "Maybe I just wanted to get you somewhere more private."

"And to think I once imagined I would corrupt and seduce you." Javier paused near the mouth of an alley they had used before. "It's been quite the opposite, really."

"I haven't corrupted you," Kiram objected and Javier just gave him a lewd grin.

“Not this afternoon, you haven’t,” Javier whispered into Kiram’s ear. “And it seems a pity since it’s all I’ve been thinking of.”

Kiram laughed and then drew Javier into the shadows of the alley. In the alcove of a back doorway, he opened the front of Javier’s trousers and Javier slipped his hand past the loose waist of Kiram’s pants. They stroked and thrust into each other’s hands with rushed, furtive need. Javier pulled him close to kiss his mouth as Kiram brought him to climax. There was nothing beautiful in their surroundings and yet the moment felt precious to Kiram. Later in the evening when he was alone he would press his hands to his lips and remember the heat and taste of Javier’s body.



Eventually opportunities for even these clandestine afternoon excursions grew scarce, as Nestor, Elezar and Riossa began accompanying Javier on his regular visits to the Haldiim district. Kiram always volunteered to escort them through the Haldiim district while Javier supposedly consulted with his father over the design of the water clock; in reality Javier simply looked in on Kiram’s father and then sprinted across the district to Rafie and Alizadeh’s house. While Javier fought to wield the raw power of the white hell, Kiram entertained and distracted the Grunitos as best he could.

Nestor was usually satisfied with a tour of some scenic area where he could sketch and sample authentic Haldiim food. But Elezar bored easily and often wondered aloud about Javier’s prolonged absences. Archery and wrestling at the gymnasium occupied him for a time.

Riossa on the other hand grew daily more enthralled with the freedoms that the Haldiim district afforded her. There were entire bookshops and teahouses as well as trade offices that she could enter freely while the men were not allowed inside—not even a Cadeleonian lord of Javier’s stature.

Once she and Dauhd went shopping together in a women-only bookshop and the two of them returned looking smug and worldly. When Nestor asked what Riossa had seen, she simply shrugged. After Nestor pleaded, she relented and showed him her sketches

of elegant Haldiim women playing cards and reading in brightly tiled interiors. Other drawings depicted ornate water pipes and stacks of foreign coins. Nestor delighted in the revelations and encouraged Riossa to explore more.

Kiram smiled at them. Despite being a Cadeleonian, Nestor was one of the most openminded people he'd ever known and in his company, Riossa seemed to blossom into an adventuress. He wondered how many other Cadeleonians might be as liberal as Nestor. Elezar certainly didn't seem concerned when Riossa disappeared with Dauhd for hours on end. But then Elezar rarely concerned himself with the whereabouts of women. Kiram only wished that Elezar could be so easygoing about Javier's absences.

More than once Kiram had caught Elezar frowning at him as if he had Javier secreted away in his pocket. At such times Kiram generally suggested that they attend the foot races at the Civic Gymnasium, and the prospects of exertion and gambling seemed to distract Elezar for the remainder of the afternoon.

Kiram tried not to think too closely on how keenly he missed Javier himself.

This week he'd only managed to steal a fleeting touch of Javier's hand during a torrential downpour when the two of them pressed close together within the crowd of men and women sheltering from the rain beneath a bakery's eaves. He'd met Javier's gaze and neither of them looked away. A woman whom Kiram remembered as one of Siamak's friends watched the two of them and, noticing her raised brows, Kiram released Javier's fingers and bowed his head.

The last thing he wanted was word to get back to his home. His mother would be angry—or more likely furious—when she learned that Kiram had no intention of marrying Hashiem Kir-Naham. Already he'd annoyed her by claiming to be too tired to attend a dinner with Hashiem. He supposed he should have gone but he didn't have it in him to look Hashiem in the face and pretend that he intended to live with the man.

And he'd been genuinely tired. For weeks now he'd woken early to help his father with the water clock. Then he'd spent his

afternoons at the Civic Gymnasium where he practiced archery and honed the skills he'd learned at the Sagrada Academy. Or he'd explored the markets, playhouses, bookshops and public halls of the Haldiim district, searching out anything to distract and entertain the Grunitos. By dusk most evenings, his voice grew hoarse and his feet ached. He often staggered home exhausted.

Still, he slept poorly. Some nights he dreamed terrible things: Scholar Blasio's most recent letter informing him that Scholar Donamillo's condition had worsened had provided grist for several nightmares. But on other evenings, longing haunted him. It was one thing to endure loneliness while believing Javier was far from him in Rauma, but to have Javier near—so close that he could smell his sweat and feel the heat as their shoulders jostled—and to have to restrain himself day after day was maddening.

To console himself, he tried to remember that he needed to master such self-control. Soon both he and Javier could be living in Cadeleonian court and there discretion would be the greatest necessity.

Nothing drove that thought home so strongly as the sight that greeted Kiram early the next morning as he awaited Javier and the Grunitos at Mother Kir-Mahoud's stables.

A towering Cadeleonian priest mounted on a black stallion waited there as well. Kiram stood very still and tried not to meet the gaunt man's cool gaze.

Then to Kiram's horror, just as the Grunito party arrived and had dismounted, the priest reined his steed forward to block Javier's path.

"It has been ten days since you've visited chapel, Javier," he stated.

"Always good to know I'm missed," Javier replied.

Riossa led her horse towards Kiram. In a hushed whisper, she informed him that the priest was Timoteo, the eldest of the Grunito brothers. Timoteo stood nearly as tall as Elezar but looked far leaner. Violet and black robes lent his pale features a

sickly pallor. The deep hollows of his eyes and his gaunt cheeks made Kiram think of a corpse more than a living man.

"You have most certainly been missed," Timoteo informed Javier sourly. "The father confessor in particular has noted your long absence with concern."

"I had no idea he was so attached to me, but now that you mention it, he did seem to particularly relish my tales of debauchery and sin." Javier gave Timoteo a smile that verged on lewd and then went on in a light tone. "Sadly, overseeing the design of this water clock has left me precious little free time to accumulate my normal tally of wanton whoring and dueling."

Javier's fingers slid over his sword hilt in an almost obscene manner. "Do assure my dear father confessor that I will return to whisper more of my dirty adventures in his ear just as soon as I have any."

Kiram strode forward before the conversation could turn truly ugly. Javier's hand was already on his sword, even if only playfully so.

"Speaking of the water clock." Kiram placed himself between Timoteo's horse and Javier. "My father has more questions concerning the pipes."

"Does he?" Javier asked and Kiram could see the amusement in his eyes.

"He needs an answer as soon as possible."

"Certainly. I'll go directly," Javier said.

"What?" Elezar objected from across the stable. "You're leaving already? We all just arrived!" Elezar started for Javier but Timoteo's mount blocked him.

"Timoteo," Elezar growled. "Move your damn horse! This isn't a race track, so either dismount or go home."

"I need a word with Javier." Timoteo's tone was indignant.

"You've had your word," Elezar snapped. "Now ride back to your mistress and let the rest of us alone."

"That woman is not—" Timoteo began.

"You're not fooling anyone." Elezar waved aside whatever excuse Timoteo wanted to make. "And I don't give a shit either way. Your lack of piety is your own damn concern. Just leave Javier alone. He knows his prayers better than you do and we all know it."

Nestor snickered at that and Riossa and her maid pretended to be occupied with their gloves. Flushing, Timoteo turned his mount aside and rode back the way he'd come.

"Well spoken," Kiram told Elezar once Timoteo was out of sight.

"Tim can't help being a jackass sometimes." Elezar shrugged. "He means well, but the royal bishop isn't making it easy for him or any priest to be friendly with Javier right now."

"What do you mean?" Kiram felt a sudden dread at the mention of the royal bishop. He remembered the blue jays he'd seen the week before and the feeling of the shadow curse at his back.

"It's nothing," Javier said firmly and he gave Elezar a hard look.

"It's not nothing. It's serious," Elezar replied, then looked to Kiram. "The year before you came to the academy Javier killed Lord Quemanor's firstborn son in a duel."

"Nestor told me."

"Did he tell you that since then Lord Quemanor has been out to destroy Javier?"

"He didn't need to. I met Lord Quemanor once," Kiram said.

"Well, now the man is blaming Javier for Fedeles' condition, claiming Javier possessed him. Quemanor's even petitioned the royal bishop to have Javier imprisoned and exorcised."

"Exorcised?" Kiram felt the blood draining from his face.

Javier said, "It's an empty threat. Quemanor doesn't have any proof and the royal bishop wouldn't dare move against me without a shred of evidence."

"Not yet, maybe..." Elezar scowled at one of the stable hands and then turned his gaze back to Kiram. "I don't mean any offense to you or your family, Kiram, but all this time in the Haldiim district isn't doing his reputation any good."

“You’ve said more than enough, Elezar,” Javier growled. “None of this is Kiram’s doing or his concern.”

Elezar looked like he might argue but closed his mouth as Riossa approached.

“Why are you three looking so dour?” Riossa inquired. Her maid eyed the three of them suspiciously. Nestor followed Riossa, looking both protective and proud.

“Nothing worth lingering on.” Javier gave Riossa one of his handsome, ingenuous smiles. “Certainly not when I have the construction of a water clock to oversee. I expect it will keep me late. When should I see the rest of you back at the Grunito house?”

“Not until evening. Kiram has promised to show us the Haldiim goat market. They hold races every Mediday,” Riossa replied.

“That sounds quite entertaining, so long as you don’t let Elezar lose too many bets.” Javier bowed slightly to Riossa. “Doubtless you will have a lot to tell me about at dinner this evening.”

Javier slipped away to train while Kiram occupied Elezar, Nestor and Riossa with the amusements of the goat cart races. Teams of goats whipped around the muddy track surrounding the open market while crowds cheered and wagers raged. Regardless of language barriers Elezar dove into the betting, placing money on teams for reasons that eluded Kiram but proved oddly accurate. Nestor and Riossa tended to cheer for the scrawny, weird goats that rarely won.

Between races they all drank spiced tea and ate candied fish. Nestor and Riossa sketched their surroundings and encouraged Riossa’s maid to try Haldiim dishes, though she didn’t seem to care for many. Elezar walked through the crowd at Kiram’s side. He looked as if he had something on his mind but in typical Cadeleonian style remained silent.

“Is there something bothering you?” Kiram asked at last.

Elezar stole a quick glance to where Nestor and Riossa stood with Riossa’s maid at a tanner’s stall. They seemed deeply occupied with the kidskin vellum on display.

“Javier’s up to something here in the Haldiim district,” Elezar whispered. “He’s doing something and it’s changed him.”

“Changed how?” Kiram asked.

“You should tell me. You’re the one who brought him here, who keeps inviting him back,” Elezar replied. His gaze was intent. “What’s he been doing in the Haldiim district this past month? He’s not just talking about some water clock, I know that. He comes back haggard with strange burns all over his body.”

Kiram wondered how exactly Elezar had spied Javier’s burns, but he didn’t ask and Elezar went on quickly. “He’s been avoiding chapel for weeks and the last three days I think he slept outside in an old oak tree. It’s insane.”

“He slept in a tree?” That was something from an archaic holy text, wasn’t it? Javier really was embracing Alizadeh’s Bahiim teachings.

“Yes, up in a tree.” Elezar lowered his voice. “And it’s not just that, when he’s up in the branches I swear...” Elezar suddenly clenched his mouth closed.

“What?” Kiram demanded.

“You really don’t know anything about this?” Elezar’s expression was disbelieving.

“I’ve spent nearly every day with you and Nestor, not Javier. How could I know what he’s been doing?”

Elezar sighed heavily and then nodded.

“He flickers.” Elezar looked uncomfortable even saying the words.

“Flickers?” Kiram asked. “You mean—”

“It’s the white hell. He sits up there in the oak with sparks lighting up and dying all around him. It’s not just one little flash. It’s like a cloud of fireflies—like he’s pulling stars down from the sky.” Elezar scowled as two women passed close by them, then went on. “Late last night he lit up the entire tree. The branches and leaves blazed white all around him and he looked like...like something from another world. Javier has always liked to show off with sparks and tricks but that wasn’t showing off. That was something powerful and unholy.”

Lord of the White Hell

Kiram remembered the image he'd seen in Calixto's diary of a luminous, tangling tree and Alizadeh talking about igniting the White Tree.

"Unholy," Kiram repeated. To any Haldiim luminous branches reaching from the earth to the heavens would be just the opposite. But knowing that wouldn't be any consolation to Elezar. "No wonder Timoteo wants him to attend chapel."

Elezar nodded.

Kiram asked, "Do you think Javier is in real danger from the royal bishop?"

"The way things are right now, he might be," Elezar said. "Something's gotten up Lord Quemanor's ass and stirred him enough to think that he has the evidence to have Javier arrested. I don't think Quemanor is bluffing either."

"And if he convinces the royal bishop to move against Javier, what will happen?" Kiram asked.

"We'll give him one hell of a fight." Elezar's hand dropped reflexively to his sword hilt. "Atreau and Morisio are both here for the wedding and they've sworn to stand with him."

Kiram frowned at the thought of a small group of schoolboys holding out against the royal bishop's personal army. They'd be slaughtered.

"What about you?" Elezar asked. "Will you stand with him or run if trouble comes?"

"I'll fight for Javier, no matter what," Kiram said, though the prospect frightened him. The royal bishop was a prince and his men certainly wouldn't abide by the neat rules of a tournament.

Suddenly the scent of hay and goats, the sound of the surrounding crowd, and even the warmth of the noonday sun seemed distant and dull. The cold pain of his final duel in the autumn tournament rolled over him. His forearm ached as if the stitches had once again split apart. How much worse would it be to die in battle?

They needed to find a way out of this that didn't include battle. But why would the royal bishop want to arrest Javier at all when he wielded the shadow curse?

"Has Javier mentioned that Fedeles may be back with us again?" Elezar absently watched Nestor chatting with a Civic Guard.

"Back with us?" Kiram asked but something in Elezar's expression gave him his own answer. "You mean he's better?"

"Maybe fully recovered. If it's true, it would be good. Not that he was ever much of a fighter. But still, if he were here and well again it would mean the world to Javier..." Elezar's expression softened for just a moment. Then he pulled himself back. "Morisio swears he saw him in Zancoda, walking with a magistrate and speaking very rationally."

"That's wonderful!" Kiram felt almost giddy with joy. Scholar Donamillo must have broken the curse despite his illness. Kiram had left his engine in working order with the scholar and he wondered if it had made the difference.

But even as Kiram spoke a dark thought came to him. If Scholar Donamillo had driven the shadow curse from Fedeles, then the royal bishop would have to alter his tactics against Javier. A cold dread gripped Kiram.

"If the royal bishop did decide to arrest Javier, how do you think he'd go about it?" Kiram's throat felt dry and his words came out too quiet.

"I don't know..." Elezar frowned and for a moment Kiram thought he looked as desolate as Kiram felt at the prospect. But then some Cadeleonian reflex surged and Elezar gave a brutish smile. "He'll want to seize Javier while he's away from Rauma and his own men. If he's going to do it he'll have to move soon, before Prince Sevanyo can get word."

"Soon, and most likely here or at the academy?" Kiram asked.

Elezar nodded. "Even so, Javier has the white hell. The royal bishop knows that and I'd bet my left ball that scares the shit out of him."

Only Javier didn't really have the white hell now. From what Javier had told him, his control over it was touch and go.

"The bishop will need to find a way to restrain Javier," Elezar went on.

"He'll want Javier to go to confession." Kiram suddenly realized. "Once Javier has been given muerate poison he'll be vulnerable."

Elezar's face actually paled. "That would be exactly when he'd want to move."

"Then I suppose it's good that Javier's been avoiding chapel," Kiram commented.

"God, yes," Elezar murmured. "It makes sense now."

"What makes sense?" Nestor asked.

Both Kiram and Elezar spun around. Nestor smiled at them benignly. He carried a thick roll of supple vellum sheets over his left arm. Riossa gripped his right arm with a shy pleased expression while her maid trailed behind them, occupied with a sweet roll.

Elezar scowled at his younger brother but Kiram took heart in Nestor's friendly ease. Talking with Elezar he'd felt like any moment they might both die, but just looking at Nestor Kiram felt the warmth and cheer of their surroundings return. He reminded himself that what he and Elezar had been discussing were only rumors and suppositions. Certainly, if anything were truly wrong, Javier would be the first to know and be the one to tell Kiram.

He noticed that new teams of goats waited on the muddy track and that bets were again being taken.

"I was explaining to Elezar that the red goats were originally bred for their meat, not their milk, so they tend to be bigger and make better racers," Kiram supplied.

"Oh, but the little white ones are very quick and their carts are smaller," Riossa commented. "So if the race is only half the track they get to the finish before the red fellows can work up any speed."

"That's true." Kiram smiled, realizing that Riossa had actually been paying much closer attention to the races than he had.

"I'd place my bets with your future sister-in-law," Kiram told Elezar. Elezar nodded absently, but Riossa gave Kiram a genuine, thankful smile.

Dauhd and Majdi found them a few hours later, just as a team of red goats with black lacquered horns pulled their young driver past the finishing posts and a wild cheer went up through the crowd. Elezar collected his winnings, while Riossa, Nestor and even Riossa's shy maid continued to shout encouragements for a team of spotted goats whose cart driver appeared to be a blind woman. Kiram cheered along with his friends when the goats took third.

"I daresay that sometimes a valiant loss is more inspiring than a certain win," Riossa commented.

"Well, certainly. You remember Kiram and me at the autumn tournament," Nestor replied and Riossa nodded.

"That was more like a certain loss," Elezar remarked.

"It wasn't!" Nestor frowned at his brother. "Not Kiram. He fought like a..."

"Yes?" Elezar prompted.

"Like a stoat!" Riossa supplied and Kiram laughed out loud.

"They're fierce creatures when they're cornered. Fierce and brave," Riossa protested.

"You're quite the stoat yourself, Riossa," Elezar told her and then he patted her lightly on the head.

Riossa grinned as if Elezar couldn't have paid her a higher compliment and knowing Elezar, Kiram thought that perhaps he couldn't have.

Chapter Seventeen

Walking to the stables with the Grunitos and his own siblings, Kiram enjoyed listening to them all chat and tease each other. He basked in the mood of gentle happiness that Nestor and Riossa effortlessly created. Even Elezar seemed to have given in to their warmth. Certainly his teasing smiles were a far cry from the autumn afternoon when he'd snarled Riossa's name and told Nestor that the girl had duped him. Now it felt as if they were all a family, even himself and Dauhd and Majdi.

That sense of comfort lingered and might have stayed with Kiram even after the Grunitos had departed, if only he hadn't noticed the column of bright blue jays flying overhead. These were not just the few birds he'd noted a week ago. Dozens and dozens of birds filled the sky, circling the dark treetops of the Circle of Red Oaks.

They most certainly belonged to the man on the hill.

A terrible dread crept over Kiram as he wondered why they had come and what else followed in their wake.

"Mum is expecting you to attend Mother Kir-Naham's dinner tonight." Dauhd's words hardly penetrated Kiram's anxious thoughts, seeming almost meaningless. He knew it couldn't be a coincidence that those shrieking spies had arrived just when the royal bishop was planning to arrest Javier, but what could be done about it?

"Kiram, did you hear me?" Dauhd demanded.

"What? Yes," Kiram replied. *"Yes, I heard you."*

Both Dauhd and Majdi studied him with unconvinced expressions. Kiram felt suddenly tired of pretending that dinners with Hashiem's mother—or Hashiem himself—mattered.

"She'll be expecting you by the sixth bell," Dauhd went on.

Kiram just rolled his eyes. *"Does anyone honestly think that I'm going to settle down with—"*

"Don't you dare!" Dauhd cut him off, holding both of her hands up as if to cover Kiram's mouth. *"Don't you dare tell Majdi or me what you're planning to do! I refuse to be blamed for failing to stop you."*

Kiram just stared at his sister and Majdi burst into convulsive laughter.

"Well spoken," Majdi told Dauhd when he at last recovered his decorum. Then he turned his attention to Kiram. *"It really would be best if you didn't make either of us a knowing accomplice to this affair of yours, Kiram."*

"But you do know."

"No. We suspect," Dauhd stated firmly. *"And I don't think I'm willing to go even that far. Not when I need Mum to approve of Chebli. She's not going to do that if she thinks I helped you to—do whatever it is that I have no suspicion that you're getting up to! Understood?"*

"Yes." Kiram sighed heavily, then looked back to the sky where the jays seemed to spread like storm clouds. *"I need to go speak to Uncle Rafie."*

"Good choice," Majdi told him.

Dauhd frowned at him, and for the first time Kiram could clearly see one of their mother's expressions on her face; it was as much concern as consternation. *"You take care, Kiram."*

"I'm only visiting Uncle Rafie, not storming the Cadeleonian church." Kiram offered her a game smile. *"I'll see you this evening for dinner with Mother Kir-Naham."*

He turned and ran to Rafie's house, almost colliding with his uncle as he came bounding up to the front door.

"Kiram! I was just going out to find you." Rafie's grim expression brightened a little but he still studied the sky with agitation. *"Alizadeh needs you."*

"Those jays—" Kiram began to ask but Rafie cut him off.

"We'll talk about it inside. Come in. Quickly now." Rafie hurried Kiram into the house and out to the garden.

Javier and Alizadeh both knelt beside a twisted pine. Their eyes were closed.

"Kiram is here," Javier said, though he didn't look up.

Alizadeh glanced to the door and smiled at Kiram.

"You're right. He is." Alizadeh cocked his head slightly. *"You certainly found him quickly enough, Rafie."*

"He found us," Rafie replied.

"I came because I saw a huge flock of jays."

"Yes, their numbers have been growing over the last week and now I think there may be enough for them to attempt to take the Circle of Red Oaks." Alizadeh rose slowly from his crouch beside the tree. Javier remained where he was, eyes closed, one hand curled around a root of the old pine. *"It seems that the shadow curse is moving, trying to reach into Anacleto."*

"Can you stop it?" Kiram asked. He glanced again to Javier, finding it odd that he remained so still and quiet at a time like this. Javier drew in a deep slow breath but said nothing.

"If the White Tree were ignited then no curse could settle upon the city, much less the mere shadow of one." Alizadeh waved his hand as if batting aside a fly.

"But it isn't ignited." A clammy sweat began to rise as Kiram tried not to remember that rushing shadow hunting him through the woods and cutting into his body. He focused on Alizadeh's calm expression, his easy stance.

"No, the White Tree is not yet ignited but neither has the shadow curse settled. The force behind it feels stronger but not so powerful that it can take the city without placing wards first. That's why he's sent those jays. If they can beat their way through the Bahiim wards and settle in the Circle of Red Oaks, then the shadow curse will infiltrate our places of power. The man controlling the shadow curse will own the circle and the White Tree. Whoever he is, he knows the old Bahiim ways well." Alizadeh scowled. *"If we hope to stop him then the White Tree must be ignited tonight."*

"Is Javier ready for that?" Kiram asked.

"No, but when has that ever stopped me?" Javier gave Kiram a brief smile. Kiram thought he looked tired already.

"And that's why we need you, Kiram," Rafie said.

"If you come with us to the Circle of Red Oaks tonight you can serve as Javier's anchor. You'll keep him from being lost in the shajdi."

Kiram had no idea what that even meant, much less what it would require. He opened his mouth to ask but Alizadeh cut him off.

"Rafie and I will take the spring pool. We should be able to feed the wards there long enough to distract most attention from the two of you."

"Other Bahiim may be there as well." Rafie's tone didn't tell Kiram if that was good or bad. "Not even the most lazy of them can ignore what's happening right now."

"Willing to put money on that?" Alizadeh asked.

"Not much," Rafie conceded and then he returned his attention to Kiram. "Once the White Tree is ignited you'll need to get Javier and yourself away from the Circle of Red Oaks as quickly and discreetly as possible."

Alizadeh swung up his traveling satchel and nodded.

"These aren't the circumstances under which Javier should be introduced to the other Bahiim. Not only will the circle be in an uproar because of the shadow curse but many of them will be furious after the White Tree is ignited. The last thing we want is for one of them to lash out against him."

"Or to expose him to his fellow Cadeleonians," Rafie put in.

"But how will I anchor Javier?" Kiram finally managed to get a word in. "And how will I know when the White Tree is ignited? I don't even know what the White Tree looks like."

"I know what it is and where," Javier said. He rose to his feet, keeping one hand still in contact with the twisted old pine tree.

"The moment it's ignited you, and everyone within a few miles, will know." A knowing smile spread across Alizadeh's lips.

Lord of the White Hell

"As for anchoring Javier, you only need to hold his bare hand in your own and stand with him."

"That's all?" It sounded far too simple for Kiram to believe.

Alizadeh gave a short laugh. *"You were hoping for more?"*

"No, no. It just sounds like something anyone—"

Javier reached out and caught Kiram's hand. His grip felt like hot iron.

He said, "We'll be in the midst of the white hell. It won't be easy for either of us."

"But at least you've been there before," Alizadeh said. *"Now go. You don't have much time."*

Chapter Eighteen

The silhouettes of countless jays darkened the sunset sky. Their shadows swept like storm clouds over Gold Street and blackened the waters of the Wahdi River. People on the street stared and wondered aloud at why such a huge flock had congregated over the vast wilderness of the Circle of Red Oaks. Columns of the brilliant blue jays circled and sheared away from the gnarled oaks, shrieking as if infuriated.

As Javier and Kiram raced nearer, they passed men and women rushing in the opposite direction, their faces and exposed arms lacerated with scratches.

"Those birds are crazed," a woman warned them, but neither Kiram nor Javier slowed. Stray jays swooped and dived at them, clawing Kiram's hair and grazing his cheek. Many more swept across the tree tops ahead of them. They were closing in and Kiram could feel the very first pangs of the shadow curse drawing near.

Fear slithered through Kiram's stomach.

Javier glanced to him, seeming to read his thoughts. "The curse hasn't settled yet. And if we can reach the White Tree quickly, it won't even get the chance."

The wild brambles and verdant trees of the Circle of Red Oaks offered the best protection they could hope for.

"Then we should probably run faster," Kiram said.

Javier nodded and they sprinted into the dark wood. Kiram raced at Javier's side, dodging branches and the black talons of birds alike.

Jays screamed and swooped. Their brilliant blue bodies gleamed against the darkening sky as they flashed between branches overhead. A chill ran down his back each time one of their diving shadows swept over him. A cold breeze seemed to

rise in the wake hundreds of beating wings. Kiram thought he could taste a coming storm in each fast breath he took.

Javier didn't spare Kiram a glance. Instead he searched the tangles of thickets and brambles as if he were a hound tracking elusive prey. He bounded ahead and Kiram followed him deeper into the dark woods.

Twilight shadows and wild vines spread over what once must have been a cobbled path. Kiram's boots caught on loose stones. Roots seemed to grasp at his heels. Javier stumbled down to his knee but instantly shoved himself up to his feet.

"The White Tree is close," Javier muttered. "I can feel it."

Through the cacophony of jay shrieks, Kiram could hear men and women calling to each other throughout the grove. The Bahiim had come to defend their circle. Rafie had won his bet.

Overhead Kiram heard the high-pitched whistle of an arrow. It speared a jay and the bird plummeted down. But when the dead jay hit the branches of an oak its body burst apart, spattering black fluid over the tree. Branches steamed and leaves blackened. As more arrows flew and more jays fell an acrid burning odor filled the air. Shouts of alarm and panic sounded through the woods. In the midst of it, Kiram thought he heard Alizadeh's voice roar out strange words. Overhead two jays burst into flames, their plumes turning to dark smoke as they fell.

"I hate those damn birds," Kiram growled.

"They aren't birds—not anymore."

"What are they?"

"Ill will on wings," Javier muttered, but he wasn't watching the jays. He stared into the deep shadows of the surrounding foliage as he raced ahead. Then he suddenly stopped short and Kiram almost slammed into him.

"Is something wrong?" Kiram asked but Javier didn't seem to hear him. He turned in a circle, drawing in deep breaths as if searching for a scent.

"There." Javier bolted into a wall of brambles and Kiram followed after him. Thorns scraped at his hands and gripped his hair, but Kiram ripped himself free and kept after Javier, fighting his

way deep into the thicket where wild creatures had created hollows in beds of decayed leaves. The walls of thorns opened like the corridors of a strange maze. The last rays of twilight filtered through knots of thorns and leaves in a diffuse blue glow.

"Yes." Javier's voice sounded distant. He charged ahead, hardly seeming to care what branches slashed at him. Something about the space felt deeply eerie, like a place from a fairy story. Perched in the brambles, black-eyed ravens watched them pass while rabbits and squirrels fled ahead of them, rushing into the dense briar walls.

He was certain that they were turning in circles. He wished Javier would slow down so that they could both catch their breath and work out just where they were. Instead Javier ran faster even as the last light disappeared. Sweat tricked down Kiram's sides and chest. His legs burned as he struggled to follow.

Night air rushed over him as he burst through a tangle of brambles into a dark circle of twisted, stooped oaks. Thirteen. All bore branches as twisted and bare as roots. He could hear dozens of voices chanting some Bahiim prayer. They sounded miles away, though Kiram knew that wasn't possible.

Javier hunched, gasping for air, with his head bowed and his hands on his knees. Kiram almost fell; his legs felt drained and weak.

"Here," Javier gasped. "It's here."

A sharp screech pierced the air. Kiram looked up to see several blue jays circling overhead.

"They're following us," Kiram said.

"They know what we're doing."

"So, which one is the White Tree?" Kiram surveyed the oaks that encircled them, searching for some sign.

"The White Tree is here." Javier moved to the center of the circle and dropped to his knees.

"But there's nothing there." Kiram shivered as the wind chilled his sweat-soaked body.

"I'm here." Javier smiled up at him and then lifted his hand to Kiram. His fingers were gashed. Streaks of his blood stood out like dark strokes against his pale skin. "You're here."

Kiram came forward and laced his fingers with Javier's.

"Don't let go," Javier told him.

"I won't."

Then Javier placed his free hand on the ground and bowed his head. He whispered a Bahiim word again and again. White sparks flared over his fingers. Where they struck Kiram's skin a hot, pulsing sensation flared up but then faded at once to a dead cold. Javier's entire body tensed and his voice grew rough with the force he pushed into each word.

Above them the jays shrieked and swirled and then, as a mass, they dived. Kiram hunched over Javier, shielding his face. If Javier noticed he gave no sign.

Kiram felt the wind of hundreds of wings descending and steeled for their impact. A single sweep of talons clawed across his bowed neck and then an explosion of white fire ripped up from Javier. A wave of intense heat washed through Kiram. The jays screamed and then went suddenly silent. All around Kiram the world burned away and strange forms rose from the waves of power emanating from the white hell.

A curling gray smoke hung where brambles had once formed dark walls. Where twisted oaks had stood, now thirteen tangled black knots loomed up. Like crooked fingers opening from huge fists they unfurled the way the simple letters of Calixto's diary had opened. But these trees were far more complex. Every twig and branch twisted into forms of script. Roots erupted and surged forward like black eels, all of them swimming straight for Javier's extended hand.

A blinding white symbol glowed from beneath Javier's fingers. As Kiram watched it grew more intense, turning Javier's flesh luminous as a paper lantern and casting shadows of the bones of his hand. A trembling, electric sensation shot up from Javier through

Kiram's arm. Kiram jerked out of reflex but kept his hold on Javier's hand. The sensation grew painfully hot but Kiram hung on.

Cold, black roots slithered over Kiram's feet and ankles as they swarmed up over Javier's outstretched hand. They writhed up his arm and for a horrifying moment Kiram thought they would engulf Javier, but as they touched his skin, light scorched along their tangled lengths and shot up into the surrounding trees.

In moments all thirteen trees were ablaze with light. Their writhing branches traced glowing golden script into the air and the symbols seemed to take flight, spreading over the brambles and woods, then filling the sky. The symbols shone like stars and then fell like snowflakes.

One drifted down to Kiram's arm. It looked like the symbol for protection. It felt like the lightest kiss against his skin, and then it melted away leaving Kiram feeling somehow safer and stronger, despite the fierce heat rolling over him.

All around the symbols settled, illuminating the surrounding wilderness, and suddenly Kiram realized that this was the White Tree: the entire circle, lit and luminous with blessings.

Still kneeling at his side, Javier didn't seem to see anything. He still gripped the ground and Kiram could feel tremors of exhaustion rocking his muscles.

"Javier, I think it's done. We should go." Kiram tugged at Javier's hand. "You can stop now."

When Javier didn't respond, Kiram jerked his arm hard and Javier suddenly looked up at him. The black shadows of his skull and teeth showed through his luminous, pale skin. Blinding white fire filled the hollows of his eyes. It was as if the face of death leered up at him.

Kiram jumped and almost lost his hold on Javier's hand.

"Javier!" Terror lifted the pitch of Kiram's voice. "Close the white hell! Close it!"

The jaw of the skull dropped as if to speak but only white vapor rose from the gaping mouth. He was burning away before Kiram's eyes.

“Stop this! Stop it now!” Panic flooded Kiram and he struck Javier hard. Javier fell back, pulling Kiram to the ground with him, and suddenly all the light and fire receded. Kiram smelled the blackberry leaves and soil beneath him. Wild grass tickled his cheek.

Kiram turned his face out of the mulch-strewn ground and for a moment he simply stared up at the tree branches and sky above him. Thousands of tiny lights flickered like golden fireflies, illuminating the grove in a diffuse glow. Green leaves and spring flowers lit up as the lights settled upon them. In the sky the gleaming lights soared in banners of blazing script.

There was no sign of the jays that had previously swarmed over the grove. Now turning constellations of delicate lights filled the sky. He wondered what immense incantation whirled above him.

“Javier, do you know what it says?”

Next to him Javier groaned and then shifted.

“Did you punch me?” Javier’s voice was rough and dry as if he’d just awoken. Leaves and pieces of bramble clung to his clothes and hair. He looked exhausted but alive and human and a little vexed.

“You did punch me, didn’t you?” Javier lifted one hand to his jaw. “Why the hell did you do that?”

“Because you scared the shit out of me.” Kiram sat up and Javier followed suit, though Kiram could see that even that was tiring for him.

“You wouldn’t close the white hell,” Kiram explained. “And I was worried that you were getting lost in it.”

“So you punched me?” Javier smirked. “Very romantic.”

“You had a flaming skull for a face, you—” Kiram went silent at the sound of other voices nearby. He was sure he recognized Vashir demanding to know how this could have happened. A woman growled that she didn’t know. And somewhere in the midst of a dozen more arguments, Kiram recognized Alizadeh’s laughter.

"We have to go." Javier rose unsteadily to his feet and to Kiram's amusement offered him his hand as if Kiram were the one who would need help.

Kiram took his hand and then rose up close to him so that he could steady Javier as they fled from the grove.

As they broke from the brambles and trees Kiram was stunned to realize that half the population of the Haldiim district was up and out. Crowds of men and women in their nightclothes stood at the edges of the grove, all of them staring at the display of dancing, swirling gold lights.

Kiram prayed that somehow no one would notice him and Javier as they worked their way into the crowd.

"Kiram?" A woman's familiar voice called. "Kiram Kir-Zakil!"

He looked to see both Mother Kir-Naham and her son, Hashiem, watching him.

"Oh lovely," Javier murmured.

"What on earth were you two doing?" Mother Kir-Naham demanded.

"We...ahm..." Kiram tried to look innocent. He could feel the sweat on his face. *"We tried to get a closer look in the grove, but we didn't see anything. I mean not anything other than those lights."*

Beside him Javier just smiled as if he couldn't quite follow the conversation.

Mother Kir-Naham scowled at Kiram so angrily that Kiram wondered if she could somehow tell that they had been responsible for all of this. Then he realized what he and Javier looked like, stumbling out of the woods, dirt and leaves in their hair and clothes, holding hands and leaning close.

The last thing Mother Kir-Naham would suspect was that they'd ignited the White Tree. More likely she and Hashiem—and the dozen other people who'd taken note—assumed the two of them had gone to the grove for furtive sex and now had been caught because of the brilliant disturbance.

Kiram thought of claiming that the two of them had become lost in a bramble and fallen in the mud. He could claim Javier had

hit his head and was injured. But it seemed pointless and Kiram had neither the energy nor the interest to remain and make excuses to placate Hashiem and his mother.

Hashiem gave Kiram a cold glare and then very purposefully turned away from him. Kiram almost laughed at how childish the gesture seemed, especially after everything else that had happened tonight. Hashiem's snub meant hardly anything to him.

"We must be going, Mother Kir-Naham," Kiram said. *"Good evening."*

Mother Kir-Naham refused to even respond.

Kiram shrugged and led Javier through the press of the gathered crowd. A few people greeted them but most were far too engaged in speculation about the illumination of the Circle of Red Oaks.

"All the lights from the Solstice have come home!" A child suggested. An older boy wondered if the lights were all just bugs but the wrinkled man beside him shook his head and pointed out the whirling symbols the lights formed.

"That's the Bahiim symbol for life," the old man said, *"and all that is sacred. That's impressive writing for bugs."*

"It's beautiful," one woman whispered and she gazed at the sky as if she were falling in love.

Javier smiled and the pride of his expression seemed to lift even his exhaustion. Still Kiram wasn't about to shove him onto Lunaluz's back and just hope he made the trip home. Nor did he feel like returning to his own house.

The ambient golden glow made it easy to wander the streets and find a hostel. Kiram rented a room where Javier fell asleep before he'd even gotten both his boots off. Kiram lay down with him but didn't sleep right away. In the dark of their little room the symbol that had fallen upon Kiram's arm gave off the faintest light. Kiram watched it shine and slowly fade as the lights outside dimmed and at last gave way to darkness.

Chapter Nineteen

Kiram arrived back at his family house just after the fourth morning bell rang out. He had planned to get home earlier but having Javier to himself in a bed had proved too much of a temptation.

The smell of earth and sweat still clung to his body and the taste of Javier's semen lingered in his mouth. Stray leaves clung to the curls of his hair and his rumpled clothes made it look like he'd spent the night under a bush.

In the courtyard his mother's secretary, Fiez, gave him a disapproving glance before hurrying to the candy shop to no doubt inform Kiram's mother that he had at last dragged himself home.

Kiram hurried to the only refuge he could claim. Unfortunately, Majdi already occupied the men's bath. Steaming vapor rose from the water and the smell of sweet soap filled the air. From where he stretched out in the tub, Majdi took in Kiram's dirty, rumpled appearance and then shook his head.

"Do you know if Mum's very mad at me?" Kiram asked.

"Very mad?" Majdi raised his brows. *"She's furious."*

"How furious?"

"Too furious for you to be hiding with me," Majdi replied. *"This is your trouble, Kiram. You'd best go out and face it."*

"But—"

"All you had to do was go to a dinner." Majdi sounded exasperated. *"You could have avoided this but you chose not to. Now go and face the consequences like an adult."*

"But I didn't mean to miss the dinner."

"Don't tell me your excuses," Majdi snapped. "And don't think you can go to father or Dauhd either. Mum had it out with all of us last night. You're on your own. I suggest you take responsibility like the grown man you play at being."

Kiram wanted to argue, to plead with Majdi to help him, but he realized that Majdi was right. How could he expect to embark on a life amidst Cadeleonian courtiers, bullies and princes when he couldn't even muster the courage to face his own mother? He supposed that if their situations had been reversed Javier would have gone straight to his mother, just as he had marched directly to his penance the morning after he knocked Genimo out.

Kiram wiped his face clean and rinsed his hands, then left Majdi to his bath.

He met his mother at the back door of the candy shop.

"So, you've decided to come home?" She watched him like he was a fly she planned to swat. Behind her, Kiram noticed Dauhd and Siamak both peeking out of the doorway.

"I—" Kiram began.

"Your Cadeleonian duke didn't take you home to show off to his people?" The rage in her voice belied her cool expression.

"No." Kiram rolled his eyes at the absurdity of the thought. *"Of course not—"*

"Don't you dare take that tone with me, Kiram!" His mother's voice rang shrill and strange. Her tightly controlled expression broke into rage and she slapped him across the face. *"Don't you dare even open your mouth!"*

Kiram could only stare at his mother. He'd been struck far harder in the last year and yet that single blow shocked him. Never in his life had he seen his mother like this, not even when she and Siamak had fought.

"You humiliated Mother Kir-Naham and her son last night! And you made a liar of me and your father, and why? So you could throw yourself after some well-hung, rich animal! I'd rather have found out that you were letting a dog fuck you!"

Fury flooded Kiram, immolating his earlier thoughts of simply bowing his head and apologizing. Instead he met his mother's glare with his own.

"Javier is not—"

His mother swung for him, but this time Kiram caught her hand and shoved her back. Both Dauhd and Siamak rushed from the candy shop to their mother.

"Javier is not an animal!" Kiram snarled. *"He's been gracious and generous and he has never said one bad word against any of you!"*

"He's not safe!" Siamak shouted at him. *"If you'd just be reasonable, Kiram you'd see that. He's a Cadeleonian—"*

"I know he's a fucking Cadeleonian!" Kiram's heart pounded hard now, like he was about to get in a real fight. *"You can all stop telling me. I know! I don't care, because he's a better human being than Hashiem, his mother or any of you. He doesn't care that you're Haldiim, you know that? He treats you all with respect."*

"I know, Kiram." Dauhd looked frightened. *"Javier's a good man. He is. But if you get involved with him, you could end up being exiled or worse. We just want to keep you safe."*

"No, you don't," Kiram bellowed. *"You want to use me for an alliance with Mother Kir-Naham. Well, I'm not going to go live with that bitter old woman or marry her dull son."*

"Don't you speak of Mother Kir-Naham in that fashion." Kiram's mother glowered at him.

"I'll speak how I like!"

"Not while you're in my house you won't!" His mother's voice rang through the courtyard. Kiram noticed a fruit seller standing near the fountain gaping at them.

"Well, then," Kiram ground the words out in a low growl, *"I won't be staying in your house."*

His mother and sisters all looked stunned at that and Kiram turned and strode towards the gates.

"Don't think you can come back if you walk out now, Kiram! Don't you dare!" His mother shouted after him as he stepped past

the gates. Still, he thought he heard Siamak assuring his mother and Dauhd that he'd be back before nightfall.

But he wouldn't, he promised himself. He was not going to go back home, not ever.

He fumed and paced the streets, attempting to walk off some of his anger while making his way to Rafie's house. As he wandered Kiram overheard constant chatter between street vendors, their patrons, guards and passerby. All of them discussed last night's illuminated sky. Only the rarest individual seemed to have slept the night through. Most were bleary-eyed but still excited and filled with a delighted euphoria. People spoke unabashedly of miracles occurring all through the city, of a new age of enlightenment. Some even confessed their own mystical premonitions of the moment. Men and women who Kiram knew had never been religious were suddenly speaking rapturously of sacred groves and the holiness of the Haldiim people.

Kiram felt alien in the midst of so much jubilation. He couldn't keep from wondering how many of these people would be delighted if they knew that a Cadeleonian nobleman had ignited the sky with those Bahiim blessings? What would they have thought if they knew that it had been done secretly and against the wishes of the majority of the Bahiim community?

The roiling anger in the pit of Kiram's belly made him want to shout the truth but he stifled his desire. It was a petty, childish urge, one that would do more harm than good if he acted upon it.

So Kiram kept quiet when people smiled at him in that dazed, joyous manner that assured him that they'd spent the morning imagining a new magical life instead of fighting with their mothers and being banished from their homes.

When Kiram arrived at Rafie's house, he found it empty and the door locked. A neighbor informed him that neither Alizadeh nor Rafie had come home last night.

"They left so suddenly that I thought there might have been some trouble with the Cadeleonian law again." The gray-haired

neighbor lowered her voice. *"You know your uncle was a wanted man once."*

"I've heard." Kiram wondered if everyone of that age knew about Rafie's exile. He guessed that it must have been a huge scandal at the time, especially since Rafie would have invariably been promised to someone else...just like Kiram had been.

Kiram felt a prickling dread at the thought.

How long would it be before word spread about his broken engagement and his departure from his mother's house? His mother would hate that. Nevertheless gossip wouldn't really do any harm so long as Javier wasn't brought into it.

But how many people had seen them together last night? Or on earlier afternoons, in alleys and back doorways? How many would put it together with his broken engagement?

Kiram shuddered but Rafie's neighbor didn't seem to notice. She gazed up at the blue sky.

"As soon as those beautiful lights appeared I knew your uncle and Alizadeh had gone to the Circle of Red Oaks. It must have been wonderful being right there." She leaned against the simple mosaic wall that surrounded her house and she tilted her face into the sunlight. *"I just know things are going to be different. It's going to be better."*

Kiram shared none of her optimism, but he nodded anyway. He wondered what excuse Javier had offered the Grunitos for his absence last night and then he wondered when, if ever, Alizadeh and Rafie would come home.

While Kiram waited, crouched on Rafie's doorstep, Rafie's neighbor and a passing candlemaker chatted about the amazing lights in the grove. The candlemaker sold Rafie's neighbor a round of raw beeswax before they both departed to the public market.

The sun passed its zenith and Kiram paced the grounds of Rafie's house and then the block. At last boredom and hunger got the better of him and he followed the smell of frying lamb and cinnamon cakes past the Ammej Bridge to a busy street vendor.

Only after purchasing and devouring his meal did Kiram pause to consider just how few coins remained in his pocket. If he was careful he might be able to make them last until next week. If Rafie and Alizadeh would take him in then...

Kiram stopped himself mid-thought, suddenly struck by the realization of what he would be asking of Rafie: not just that his uncle should take him in and support him, but that in doing so Rafie should publicly disregard his own sister's wishes.

Kiram didn't know how much of Rafie's money came from his mother but he did know that no one in the district would give Rafie so much as a smile if Mother Kir-Zaki forbade it. And that wasn't even considering Mother Kir-Naham. The last thing Rafie would need was a powerful pharmacist and all of her friends refusing to supply him or his patients with medicine.

Kiram scowled at the gristle clinging to his blackened skewer as doubt crept over him. Still, even as he began to regret storming out of his mother's house, he remembered that she had called Javier an animal and his resolve hardened. He couldn't return and apologize; it would be the lowest cowardice. At the same time he didn't know if he could thrust himself upon his uncle in good conscience.

He followed the river road for a while, walking aimlessly. Bookstores, tearrooms and tailor shops gave way to smoke rooms, cramped wine houses and gambling parlors. He wondered how much renting a room would cost him and then how much he could win playing cards or throwing dice in one of the gambling parlors. At the Sagrada Academy he'd won most games he played and he'd been very good at counting the Hellions' cards. But the weathered, sinister faces of the men he saw entering and departing the gambling parlors gave him pause. A number of them seemed to be considering murdering him just for meeting their hard stares; he didn't want to find out what they'd do after he took their money from them.

No, he'd think of something else. In the meantime he wanted to get back to familiar ground. Already the sinking sun turned

the sky orange and shadows invaded the surrounding alcoves and alleys. The last thing he needed was to go stumbling around this part of town in the dark and get himself mugged.

He strode quickly through the lanes as shadows lengthened and street vendors closed up their stalls. Someone called his name in a low, drunken slur. Kiram knew the voice and knew that he shouldn't turn around but he couldn't stop himself.

Musni and another rough-looking man leaned against the wall of a wine house. Long shafts of red sunlight colored Musni's hair and glinted off his rings and off the hilt of his fighting knife.

"Lost your way already, Kiram?" Musni stepped forward. His companion watched Kiram but not with any real interest.

"I'm not lost. I just went for a walk." He wondered how it could be that he'd once thought he loved Musni. Now he felt only disgust at the sight of him. And Musni, who'd once professed to adore him, seemed set upon lowering Kiram's opinion of him with their every encounter.

"Didn't your mommy warn you that this was a bad part of town?" Musni sneered.

"Fuck off," Kiram snapped. *"You're the one who got married because you didn't have the balls to stand up to your mother. In fact, aren't you late getting home for your evening suckle?"*

The man behind Musni laughed and Musni's taunting expression turned to rage.

"You spoiled shit, I ought to kill you." Musni drew his knife and lunged for Kiram.

Kiram jerked aside, feeling Musni's blade slice across his vest. Suddenly Kiram's heart hammered in his throat. This couldn't be happening. He leaped back as Musni thrust again. Behind them Musni's companion whooped with excitement but someone else who Kiram had not seen in the shadows hissed, *"Idiot! Are you trying to bring down the Civic Guards?"*

Kiram didn't dare to glance back at them. He watched Musni slowly circle him. The blade of Musni's knife looked wet and Kiram was aware of something warm trickling down his stomach. He felt a sting more than any pain. He'd fought through injury worse

than this in the tournament. He'd fought for hours. But that hadn't been against a drunk and angry ex-lover. He had to get that knife out of Musni's hand before he actually got hurt.

Musni charged. This time Kiram stepped into him and was grimly satisfied to see the shock in Musni's expression.

Kiram pounced, catching Musni's wrists. Musni fought to break free, slashing his knife awkwardly between their bodies and jerking at Kiram's grip.

Kiram held him. His hands felt slick with sweat and his heart pounded wildly. The flat of Musni's blade slapped across his forearm and Kiram dug his fingers into Musni's tendons, drawing blood as he loosened Musni's grip on the knife hilt.

"*Fucker*," Musni growled as he tried to wrench his hands free. He was strong and Kiram's muscles trembled from restraining him.

They grappled so close they could have kissed. Instead, Kiram kicked hard against Musni's knee and heard a terrible ripping sound. Musni howled and fell and Kiram let him go.

As Musni sprawled on the ground Kiram crushed his boot heel into Musni's wrist and kicked the knife away. Then Kiram bounded back from Musni's reach. But he needn't have. Musni lay where he'd fallen, tears coursing down his face as he curled into a ball clutching his knee.

Exhilaration and relief flooded Kiram's body in a shaking rush. He was alive. He'd won. For the first time he dared to look at the wound in his side. He found no more than a thin scratch beneath the gash in his vest. He was very lucky that Musni had slashed at him instead of stabbing.

A shadow fell across Kiram. He looked up in time to see Musni's glaring companion. The man's fist smashed into the side of his head, sending him staggering. Kiram hardly took in anything but a snarling mass of hard muscle and punishing fists as the big man pounded his skull.

Reflexively, Kiram blocked a second blow to his face and struck back. The man took two of Kiram's fast jabs, grunting at the impact. Then he hurled Kiram back against the stone wall of the wine house.

Kiram thought he heard someone shouting for help, glimpsed the blur of a young woman running up the street, but he could hardly think. Blood poured down his nose. The knuckles of his right fist felt split and broken. The man in front of him grinned and the wall behind him offered no escape.

When the man swung Kiram dropped into a crouch, letting the wine house take the blow. The man shouted in pain and Kiram bounded up, driving his whole weight into the man's face, crushing his nose and hurling him back. Blood gushed over Kiram's fist. His attacker groaned and stumbled and Kiram bolted free.

A block away he heard the alarm whistles of the Civic Guards but he didn't look back and he didn't stop running.

Chapter Twenty

By the time that Kiram reached the Grunito house, the streets were dark and a full, yellow moon lit the sky. To Kiram's surprise he found the gates enclosing the vast grounds open. Bright torches illuminated the marble entry and dozens of glossy carriages lined the drive. Footmen in the Grunito colors escorted opulently dressed Cadeleonians from their carriages into the house. Very faintly Kiram caught the melody of Cadeleonian dance music floating from the huge building.

Kiram felt criminal, hiding in the shadows of a cherry tree and watching this brocade and silk-swathed parade of wealthy men and women, their faces glittering with gold dust and their hair powdered black. Gold and silver threads flashed in their clothes and jewels glittered around their necks and hands. No doubt they were all perfumed with the oils of rare flowers and exotic musks.

All Kiram could smell was the blood that clotted his nose.

He recalled how out of place Riossa had appeared when she had been admitted alone to Lady Grunito's dance in Zancoda. She had brought the entire room to a silent halt and Riossa had been a well-dressed Cadeleonian girl from a good family, possessing a legitimate invitation. Kiram on the other hand was a ragged Haldiim without so much as a scrap of paper to prove that he knew anyone. His face and clothes were bloodied from a street fight. Just glancing at him a footman would know better than to allow him up the steps, much less through the door.

He slunk away from the light and music and wandered between the cherry trees. He heard a distant bark and vaguely recalled Nestor talking about his father's many dogs. The last thing he needed was to be mauled by a pack of hounds. He ought to just leave.

But he was hesitant to explore the unfamiliar Cadeleonian streets searching for shelter. After his fight with Musni he wanted to be somewhere that felt safe. Knowing that friends were close at hand seemed more important now than any real physical comfort or security. And he could think of at least one place where he could find shelter, if nothing else.

He crept through the shadows, catching distant laughter and music as well as the whinnies of horses. His chest ached in a dull, deep way while his hands felt swollen and clumsy; he hoped he wouldn't have to attempt to force a door open. But the flashing lights of swinging lamps and busy voices reassured him that nothing had been locked up for the night.

At last he reached the stables. They were well lit but nearly empty due to the sheer number of grooms required in the carriage house to attend the needs of so many teams of carriage horses and their drivers. One man shouted to another about a scratch on a carriage door, while another called out for a drink from a flask of white ruin.

Kiram slipped past the carriage house and into the warmth of the stables. Inside he wandered past tack rooms and walls of straw bales until he reached the long rows of stalls where horses of all colors and sizes were stabled. Once he would have been terrified by the way the animals watched him, but now he understood the flick of their ears and their flared nostrils. He felt at ease among them. Most took no more note of him than they would have a new groom.

As he moved farther from the noise and activity of the carriages one big piebald gelding thrust his head out and snuffled at Kiram's hair as if it were a mess of straw. Kiram drew back and patted the horse's muzzle. It lipped at the salty sweat of his brow and then, finding neither an apple nor feed proffered, gave Kiram a bored sigh.

Kiram smiled at the big animal. He didn't know why but just that simple caress of its soft muzzle and warm breath on his skin made him feel a little better, somehow more cared for.

Then Kiram caught the sound of quiet laughter.

"Lunaluz, I'm serious. You eat any more of Lady Grunito's flowers and she's going to banish us both."

At the sound of Javier's voice Kiram wanted to call out but feared he'd just attract a groom. He followed Javier's soft murmurs until he reached an open stall where Javier stood, dressed in costly black and silver brocade, grooming Lunaluz. Kiram noticed the faint glow of gold dust on Javier's skin. He almost shimmered in the flicking lamplight.

Kiram simply watched him. Javier looked so handsome and calm. Just seeing him made Kiram feel sure that he'd made the right decisions last night and today, as bloody and tired as they'd gotten him.

Lunaluz lifted his head, catching sight or perhaps scent of Kiram. Javier turned back. At first he didn't seem to recognize Kiram, then his eyes widened and he strode forward.

"What the hell happened to you?"

What hadn't happened to him, Kiram thought. He'd lost his family, beaten his previous lover to the ground, and then nearly been killed by a stranger. He'd evaded the Haldiim Civic Guards and run across half of Anacleto.

"I've had a rough day." Kiram laughed despite himself. "Can we just leave it at that for now? I don't really want to talk about it."

Javier considered him and then nodded.

"Do you need to see a physician?" Javier carefully lifted Kiram's bloodied right hand. One of his knuckles sported a dark scab from where he'd broken his skin against another man's face. Dried blood caked his nails and fingers.

"No. Most of that isn't my blood."

"Good to know," Javier replied but his expression was still troubled. "Should I ask whose blood it is or would that ruin the surprise when we find the body in the morning?"

"It's nothing so dramatic," Kiram replied, but a shudder trembled through him as if shaking loose the bone deep knowledge that his fight with Musni could easily have turned deadly.

If Musni's knife had struck him at a different angle, if Musni's friend had pinned him against that wall a little longer...

It didn't bear thinking about—not now that he was here and safe.

"I had no idea you dressed so formally when you were alone with Lunaluz," Kiram commented just to change the subject.

"I'm simply demonstrating the difference good grooming can make." Javier released Kiram's hand. "He's prone to let himself go otherwise."

"I can imagine," Kiram replied. Somewhere far away a peal of laughter and brassy trumpet notes rose. Lunaluz flicked his ears. "It sounds like Lady Grunito is holding another dance."

"Indeed. She wants everyone to meet Riossa and see that the Grunitos are proud of her despite her common birth."

"That's admirable," Kiram commented.

"It is, but I don't think I can stand one more baron's daughter pretending to faint when I take her hand." Javier scowled. "You really look terrible, Kiram. There's blood—"

"I know. I got hit in the face a couple times."

"Is that supposed to be a reassurance?"

"No," Kiram replied and he realized that he wasn't thinking all that clearly or maybe he wasn't explaining himself very well. "It's just that you know how noses bleed."

"I do." Javier leaned a little closer to Kiram, studying his face. "Come here, will you? I can't just stand here chatting when you look like this." Javier led Kiram to a trough of fresh water. He moistened a cloth and then wiped the blood and dust from Kiram's face and hands. Kiram wanted to protest that he could clean his own face but at the same time it was relieving to be tended.

"I need somewhere to sleep," Kiram admitted at last. "I can't go home."

"Can't or won't?" Javier asked.

"Both." Kiram closed his eyes for a moment. The heat of Javier's body soothed him and distracted his senses, making the ache of his bruises seem to fade. "I had a fight with my mother. She's thrown me out for refusing to marry Hashiem."

“Your mother did this to you?”

Kiram laughed. “She wishes she beat me up this badly. No I...I got into a fight on the street. And it really doesn’t matter who it was with. It’s over and he’s in worse shape than I am.”

“A lot worse?”

“I think I broke his knee.” A weird mix of pride and horror wriggled through him. “He tried to stab me and I kicked his knee backward. I heard it tear.”

“Good.” Javier’s tone was harsh. “I hope you crippled him.”

Kiram hoped he hadn’t. He didn’t want to be responsible for that. “I’m too tired to think about it.”

“You should stay here. I mean with the Grunitos, not in the stables.” Javier rubbed his shoulder gently. “Nestor’s been wanting you to come for weeks now. He’ll be overjoyed.”

The voices of two bickering grooms carried to them and both he and Javier drew apart. Neither of the grooms appeared but Javier turned back to Lunaluz.

“Help me bed him down and then we’ll get you up into the house.”

Between the two of them they finished brushing Lunaluz down and returned the stallion to his stall. Then Kiram followed Javier out of the stables and down a series of winding garden paths towards the back of the Grunito house. Rows of irises filled the flowerbeds and the perfume of lilacs hung in the air.

Soon the sound of music washed over them. Through wide windows Kiram saw the silhouettes of men and women dancing in close couples. He watched them, remembering the night he and Javier had danced at his mother’s house. They hadn’t ever gotten to share a Cadeleonian dance.

Wistfully, Kiram brushed Javier’s fingers with his hand. Javier turned to him questioningly.

“Do you mind if we don’t go in just yet?”

“Why would I mind?” Javier arched a brow. “I was the one who escaped to the stables to groom a horse rather than remain inside. But don’t you want to warm up inside? At least sit down?”

"I'd rather stay out here with you for a little while." A breeze brushed over Kiram's face; it felt almost warm. Overhead, brilliant stars gleamed around the golden orb of the moon. "I hadn't noticed before, but it really is a beautiful evening for a dance."

Javier studied him a moment then he took Kiram's hand. As he drew Kiram close, Kiram realized his intent. They could hear the music and the moonlight offered them just enough illumination.

At first they were both self-conscious and uneasy. They jostled and knocked knees and laughed at themselves. But then Kiram allowed himself to relax. He forgot about the stables behind them and the house ahead. He focused on Javier's body and his own—the heat of their hands, the rhythm of their footsteps. They looked only at each other.

A familiar grace came to them then; their motions coupled in a perfect synchronicity that could have been battle or sex. But there was no desperation here, no conquest or loss. Their two bodies united in one dance, simple and beautiful and only meant for the two of them.

The music stopped and they stood, still lost in the moment. Kiram thought he might kiss Javier or that Javier might kiss him.

"What the hell is going on?" Elezar's voice boomed through the darkness. Kiram jumped. Javier straightened and turned to face Elezar.

If he hadn't recognized the voice, Kiram might not have known Elezar at first glance. He looked too refined, dressed in scarlet brocade, his hair blackened, gold powder glittering across his face. Even his expression was strange in its uncertainty—both anger and confusion showed as he stalked closer to them. Kiram realized that Elezar was furious with jealousy but didn't understand why. Or perhaps he couldn't bring himself to admit why.

"I'm teaching Kiram the quaressa," Javier said offhandedly. "The Haldiim don't have any dances like it and he can't follow to save his life."

Elezar glared at Kiram but then his heavy brows knit together in dismay at what he saw. He glanced back to Javier.

"Did you beat his face into a tree first?" Elezar demanded. "Or did you bloody his nose after he trod on your toes?"

Kiram lifted his hand to his nose. During their dance he'd somehow forgotten the discomfort of his injuries but now the throbbing ache returned to his awareness.

"I had to soften him up somehow," Javier replied.

"I've been told that a bottle of gin is a lot more effective," Elezar returned with a smirk. His anger seemed forgotten. "So what really happened? Not that it wouldn't take a trouncing to get most men to dance with Javier."

"I got into a street fight with a couple of drunks," Kiram explained before Elezar could think more about what he was saying or Javier could respond. "And before you ask, I won. I beat one man badly enough that I don't think I can show my face in the Haldiim district for a while."

"I told him he could stay here," Javier finished.

To Kiram's relief Elezar replied, "Absolutely."

Inside the Grunito house, musicians struck up a new melody. It sounded familiar but Kiram couldn't quite put a name to it.

"He's not exactly in a condition to present to our guests, though," Elezar commented.

"That's why we were biding our time out here," Javier replied as easily as if it were the truth. "We've been waiting for a chance to slip in through the card room, but it looks like it's still full."

"It will be all night, what with Morisio making his living in there," Elezar sighed. "There's the back staircase around the kitchen. We could haul Kiram up to the second floor that way."

"I'm not a sack of flour," Kiram protested. But Javier and Elezar had already agreed that the kitchen would be the best route. The three of them went quietly.

Near a fountain they caught sight of a man gracefully opening the front of a young woman's gown. The woman offered neither protest nor assistance and seemed to Kiram strangely docile in

the man's hands. Kiram wasn't sure but he thought he recognized Atreau's voice as the young man murmured sweetly to the woman. Kiram, Javier and Elezar skirted the couple—the woman's dress was now up around her waist—slinking through the shadows of rosemary hedges they reached the kitchen door.

Inside, only the faint glow of embers in the hearth offered any illumination. An aged dog glanced up from the hearthstones but only wagged its tail as it caught sight of Elezar.

"Wait here," Elezar whispered.

He strolled through the gloom of the kitchen, going first to the dog and patting its big head, then his figure receded into the darkness of the scullery. Kiram could smell the tang of Cadeleonian yeast and cow's butter hanging in the air.

Elezar returned with three tallow candles and thrust them to Javier. Kiram caught a pungent whiff of their animal odor even at a distance.

"I figured you'd be able to light them," Elezar said.

Javier scowled at the candles and for a brief moment Kiram thought Javier found them too rank to light. But then he realized that to set the candles aflame Javier would have to open the white hell.

"We'll attract less attention if we go through the dark," Kiram said.

Elezar snorted derisively.

"Sure. No one will notice us crashing into pots and knocking over cooking stools," Elezar replied. "We'd be very stealthy then."

"I'm just saying that too much light might attract someone. Maybe we could leave the door open to let in the moonlight." Kiram's attention wasn't really on the argument but on Javier's silence and the close tension of his body—the shaking intake of a single breath then its painfully slow release.

"Just light the candles," Elezar said.

All three of them stood in the dark for what seemed far too long.

Then a huge flash of white light flared up from Javier's hand. Elezar's frown and Javier's clenched brow were both clearly illuminated. Kiram guessed that his own expression of concern was probably caught by the sudden burst as well. The light dimmed in an instant to be replaced by flickering candle flames.

Something like suspicion still showed in Elezar's expression.

"My nose hurts," Kiram announced, hoping to draw Elezar's attention from Javier.

"Were you punched in the nose?" Javier asked.

"Yes."

"Mystery solved." Javier sounded tired.

Elezar gave a soft laugh. Then to Kiram's surprise Elezar reached out and patted his shoulder. "It hurts like hell, I know, but it doesn't look broken. You'll be fine."

The pungent odor of tallow curled into the air. Elezar took one candle and Kiram accepted another. They negotiated their way between long wooden worktables, tall stools and racks of hanging pots and pans to a small door. Elezar dug a key out from his coat pocket and unlocked the door to expose a wrought iron staircase.

The steps were small and wound upward at such a sharp angle that Kiram had to wonder how many servants had tumbled down them. Spiraling shadows danced around him in the flickering candlelight.

At last they emerged from behind a decorative panel and stepped out into a long corridor. Large silver mirrors caught the light of their candles and illuminated several doors.

"That's an odd staircase," Kiram commented. "What's it used for?"

"Deliveries from the kitchen to the men's chambers." Javier gave a wicked grin. "Timoteo likes to have his sweets waiting for him in his bed. And of course we use it to creep upstairs."

"More often downstairs when we were children. Javier and I used to sneak out all the time." Elezar led them along the corridor past ornate mirrors and doors painted bright red.

"But Lady Grunito has to know about the staircase, doesn't she?" Kiram asked. Paintings in heavy gold frames hung on the walls but all Kiram could make out of them was shadowy landscapes and ghostly pale faces.

"Obviously she knows, but it suits her dignity to ignore it," Elezar replied.

"The mark of any truly refined Cadeleonian is how well he can ignore indecency without seeming indecently ignorant," Javier said, and Kiram thought he was quoting someone but wasn't sure who. Probably Bishop Seferino, his perennial favorite.

Before he could ask, his attention fell on a black door with gold symbols gilded across its surface. Incantations gleamed even over the doorknob. Javier drew to a halt and Kiram stopped beside him. Only Elezar continued on several steps before turning back to them.

"He might as well use my room," Javier said to Elezar. Then glancing to Kiram, he added, "This room was originally designed for my great-grandfather. The Tornesals have been taking advantage of Grunito hospitality for several generations so it's quite a sight."

"You're sure?" Elezar asked, though Kiram wasn't certain whom he was addressing. "We have an empty guest room."

"It won't have been aired or have a fire. Tonight he'll be more comfortable with me. And that gives your mother the opportunity to decide how best to house a Haldiim guest."

"There's always my..." Elezar didn't seem capable of fully extending the invitation and instead he just shrugged. "Fine. Go clean up and bed down. I'll wait out here for Javier."

Even here in his own house Elezar wouldn't cross the threshold of Javier's bedroom. Kiram, however, walked directly in.

The room turned out to be a suite with gold wards and blessings written across the floor and walls so densely that the chambers looked like they were gilded. Even the bedding bore Cadeleonian blessings embroidered into the coverlet.

"They certainly weren't taking any chances, were they?" Kiram commented.

Javier smiled. “Makes the incantations at the academy look like shoddy work.”

Kiram ran his hand over the gilded script and curling lines that decorated the back of a chair.

Javier opened a wardrobe and tossed Kiram a long white nightshirt. “I’ll be back as soon as I can. Do you need something to eat?”

“I’m fine.”

“Really?” Javier asked. He seemed almost nervous. “I could stay—”

“Not with Elezar waiting outside the door. He’s already suspicious as is.” Kiram shook his head and found that it didn’t hurt too badly to do so. “I’m fine. Really. Just sore and tired. I think my pride is more injured than anything else.”

“Not much I can do about that but my bed is yours,” Javier assured him. He lowered his voice. “I only wish I could join you in it.”

“I wish you could too.”

“Later.” Javier kissed his lips lightly and then withdrew.

Alone in the glittering gold bedchamber, Kiram listened as Javier and Elezar’s voices receded down the hall. He fed a log into the fireplace, then stripped and washed at Javier’s basin. Blood rinsed away from his hands and face. Warm light crackled up from the fire as Kiram dressed in Javier’s nightshirt and retreated into the soft comfort of the bed.

He didn’t think he would sleep—not this early in the evening—but then he closed his eyes and drew in the subtle scents of Javier’s body that lingered in the bedding. Moments later he lay snoring.

Intense warmth rolled over him. He thought that the fire must have heated the room more than he’d expected. But when he cracked an eye only embers glowed in the fireplace. Yet a golden light flickered over the gilded walls. He closed his eyes again and drifted, half dreaming of the warm hands that caressed his back and traced the curve of his spine. He stretched into the sensation. The dull ache of his muscles seemed to fade.

Then he felt long fingers slip under his nightshirt to rest on his buttocks.

Kiram opened his eyes again. The golden incantations on the far wall flashed and gleamed.

"Javier?" Kiram asked, though the name came in a rough whisper. He started to roll over to look at the man behind him but a firm grip caught his shoulder, not quite restraining him but slowing his movement.

"Don't punch me," Javier said.

"Why would I punch you?" Kiram turned around and realized why. White flames curled and twisted over Javier's hands and his bare skin looked luminous, almost as if lit from within. Kiram caught a brief glimpse of the hollows of Javier's skull and bones beneath his flesh but Javier drew in a slow breath and the eerie skeletal shadows fled.

"You nearly laid me out flat in the grove last night," Javier replied. "I feel justified in my concern."

"I made it up to you in bed later, didn't I?"

"You did indeed." Javier reached down and stroked Kiram's cheek. Soothing heat rushed over Kiram's skin and the tenderness of his bruised jaw and nose faded. "Is that better?"

Kiram nodded. Javier continued to stroke his cheek and then ran his hand along Kiram's neck. His motions were smooth but very deliberate as he restrained the raw power of the shajdi so that it soothed and warmed Kiram gently. Beads of sweat rose across Javier's brow, but he continued to caress Kiram.

"Lady Grunito feels that it would best for her other guests and you as well if you continued to room with me since you're Hal diim," Javier informed him with a slight smirk. "Apparently, it's now widely agreed upon that being Hal diim makes you immune to my nocturnal corruptions."

"Hardly." Kiram laughed but then he asked, "Did you tell her why I'm here? About my family?"

"No, I told her that you'd come to visit Nestor but didn't feel lively enough to be presented at a formal dance." Javier gazed

down at Kiram and smoothed a lock of his hair back from his face. "You do look better now."

Kiram nodded. He felt warm and languid under Javier's hands. As he studied Javier, the light radiating from him receded and gave way the flickering glow of the fireplace.

"I certainly don't look as good as you." Kiram ran a hand over the embroidered silk of Javier's trousers. Silver suns glinted beneath his fingers.

"Maybe not tonight," Javier conceded. "But I'm not the one who was beaten and thrown out of his house."

"I was thrown out of the house first," Kiram clarified. "And then I got into a fight for a completely different reason." It wasn't absolutely the truth. Both arguments had stemmed from his refusal to be what other people wanted.

"Really?" Javier raised a brow. "Your brother didn't do this to you?"

"Majdi?" Kiram almost laughed at the idea of his brother bothering to abuse him. "Never. Beating an unruly son isn't the Haldiim way. Much too straightforward. They just throw you out and make sure no one in the entire community will help you with anything."

Kiram tried not to think on how effective that course of action could be.

He had no idea what he would do for money. How would he even return to the Sagrada Academy or pay for his tuition? Hundreds of anxieties crawled through him but he refused to think on them. Not now.

"But why would your mother do that?" Javier asked.

"It was inevitable." Kiram sighed and leaned his head against Javier's thigh. "Sooner or later she had to realize that I wouldn't ever settle down with Hashiem or anyone else like him. I guess it was sooner rather than later."

"She threw you out for that?"

"She was angry about me breaking her promises and embarrassing her but, yes, what it really came down to was that I

wouldn't marry the man she chose." He didn't want to recount the full argument, because to do so would mean passing his mother's insulting words on to Javier. And he felt too ashamed that his own mother could have said such things to do that. When Javier had first come to his house he'd assured him that his people weren't so bigoted as to disdain him for merely being Cadeleonian. At the time he'd feared that Javier might insult them for their strange Haldiim ways. He couldn't have been more wrong.

Javier said, "So she discovered that you and I are lovers?"

Kiram glanced to Javier's face in surprise. He couldn't remember Javier ever outrightly calling them lovers before. Certainly he'd never used the Cadeleonian word.

"Yes," Kiram said. "She found out that you and I are lovers."

"Would it do any good if I talked to her?" He stroked Kiram's shoulder absently.

"No. She's in no mood to listen." Kiram watched the fire-light dance across the gilded walls and felt Javier's strong fingers play over his skin. The moment seemed almost perfect. But it couldn't last.

"I don't know what I'm going to do..." Kiram's voice failed him.

"What do you want to do?" Javier asked, as if it could be that simple.

"I want to be a mechanist," Kiram replied out of habit, but then a deeper longing came to him. "I want to travel and see the world. I want to be your lover."

A proud smile broke through Javier's concerned expression. "I'd be happy to fulfill your third wish this very moment."

"Very generous." Kiram laughed briefly but then felt cold fear close in on him once more. "That's fine for one night but tomorrow—"

"We'll still be lovers tomorrow." Javier leaned close and kissed him.

Kiram longed to allow Javier's desire to eclipse his own anxiety. But Javier drew back. He straightened and lifted a gold

chain from around his neck. As he held the necklace out, Kiram recognized the lotus charm. Alizadeh had blessed it for Kiram and Kiram had given it to Javier with the hope that it would ease his troubled dreams.

“Do you remember the night you gave this to me?” Javier slipped the necklace over Kiram’s head.

Kiram nodded. He couldn’t have forgotten. It had been the same night that Javier had first called himself a bender and accepted Kiram into him.

And suddenly Kiram realized that on that day Javier too had faced the loss of so many certainties that had once been his assured future. He’d been terrified that night and yet he hadn’t backed down—not from the physical reality of sex with another man and not from the loss of his Cadeleonian faith.

Kiram touched the medallion. It still felt warm from Javier’s body.

“Do you want to go back to your mother’s house?” Javier asked and Kiram could see the fear beneath his composure.

“No, I want to stay with you,” Kiram said, realizing that this was what mattered most. He’d wanted Javier and he’d wanted independence and now he had them both. “I made the right choice. I know I did.”

Kiram flopped back on the bed and gazed up at the gleaming gold blessings above him. “I’ll worry about tomorrow when it comes. Tonight, it’s just us.”

All the tension drained from Javier’s careful expression and he smiled an easy, seductive smile.

“Let’s make the night last long then.” Javier rose from the bed and then returned with a jar of sweet oil. He rested it on the bedside table as if leaving its use to Kiram’s discretion. Javier’s generosity and trust touched Kiram deeply. He could hardly believe that at one time he’d felt too unsure of Javier to share his body with him. Now it was all he wanted. Just the thought of taking Javier deep within himself, feeling him so close, sent a shock of longing through Kiram’s body.

"You're far too formally dressed for this occasion," Kiram informed him.

"Indeed?" Javier arched a brow and smiled. "Shall I call for a valet?"

"I think it would be wisest if you learned to live with my untrained services." Kiram slid the opulent jacket from Javier's shoulders. He stripped away Javier's silver raiment, taking care with the costly clothes at first but then growing more desperate as Javier kissed and caressed him throughout the ministrations. Kiram gave a soft groan as Javier's hands slid under his nightshirt and skimmed over his loins.

"I'm never going to get these stockings off you at this rate." Kiram laughed breathlessly.

Javier simply grinned.

At last Kiram tossed aside the silver-threaded stockings, leaving Javier beautifully naked. Together they fell back on to the embroidered pillows and made the night last as if another might not come.

Chapter Twenty-One

In terms of representing Cadeleonian family life, Javier's desolate townhouse in Zanconda had in no way prepared Kiram for the exuberance, noise and population of the Grunito household. Here the multitude of relations and houseguests who had gathered for Nestor's wedding stirred up gangs of playful young children and excited the indulged dogs. The prim Cadeleonian social restraint that Kiram had grown to expect seemed banished.

At breakfast a veritable pack of lanky hounds bounded beneath the huge table, licking people's fingers, sniffing their crotches, and gobbling up any morsels that the younger boys and Lord Grunito secreted to them. Nestor waved wildly at Kiram from the far end of the table and tossed him a hard candy before Lady Grunito called for a prayer.

Even the piety of the breakfast prayer eroded considerably in the face of a howling lapdog, the loudly misspoken words of Lord Grunito's deaf mother, and peals of half-suppressed laughter. Cheers and whoops closed the morning prayer and brought several of the dogs out from under the table, barking in excitement. Servants deftly skirted the hounds, heaping the table with meats and breads that Kiram would never have encountered in a Haldiim house.

Far down the table Kiram caught Javier's gaze and held it for a moment before forcing himself to look away. Atreau and Morisio were both seated to Javier's left while Elezar commanded the seat on his right. Nestor sat just past Elezar. He winked at Kiram.

In a way it was like they were still at the academy. Only this morning instead of getting to sit with the Hellions, Kiram had been directed by Lady Grunito to a gilded chair between Timoteo and Riossa. Lord Grunito loomed across from him, a giant of a man made even more terrifying by a twisted, scarred face and a weirdly wide-eyed smile.

The wiry dog that had howled through the breakfast prayer stood proudly on Lord Grunito's lap and from time to time Lord Grunito let the creature eat from his hand. When he noticed Kiram watching him, he winked at Kiram just as Nestor had earlier. Kiram tried not to stare at Lord Grunito as the big man piled his plate high with eggs and sausage. The brutal scar that deformed the right side of his head seemed so at odds with his constant smiles and unrestrained childlike laughter.

It soon became obvious from various comments and Riossa's whispered conversation that long ago Lord Grunito had suffered a terrible blow to his skull in a tournament and had never fully recovered. For the last two decades Lady Grunito had maintained the order of the household while her husband remained as rambunctious and giddy as one of her young sons. Kiram thought he could now see why Nestor and Elezar were so tolerant of Fedeles.

Lady Grunito watched Kiram from beside her husband.

"It is so lovely to have you for a visit at last, Kiram." She smiled just a little at him as if she was not quite sure of what to make of his sudden appearance. "You must promise to stay as long as you can."

"It would be a pleasure," Kiram answered, though his time in the Haldiim district had dulled his sense of proper Cadeleonian conduct. Then he quickly added, "Thank you so much for your generous hospitality."

Lady Grunito nodded as if he'd just given the proper response to a quiz. "You slept well, I hope?"

"Very well, thank you," Kiram assured her.

"Very good." She glanced at his empty plate and gave a little shake of her head. "But you certainly must eat a little more."

Then she rang a small gold bell and instantly servants paraded in from the kitchen with second helpings of sausages, kidneys, bacon, sweetbreads, eggs, toast and golden fruit, which turned out to be pickled lemons.

Kiram accepted a second serving of sausage as well as a wedge of pickled lemon from a strikingly blond servant. He

nearly thanked the young man in Haldiim before catching himself. The words came like a reflex when he laid eyes on another Haldiim.

Somehow he had failed to imagine that poorer Haldiim men and women would accept work as maids, cooks and footmen outside of the Haldiim district. The young, blond table servant was not alone on the staff. Of course work was work, whether it was for Mother Kir-Zaki or Lady Grunito.

Watching them all and noticing their whispered Haldiim words, Kiram couldn't help but think of his own home and feel an ache at the thought that he might never return there.

"Most have converted or are the children of converts," Timoteo said, noting Kiram's gaze. "Mother feels it's important to help them find steady work since often they are shunned in their prior communities."

"Very kind of her," Kiram replied. He could not bring any warmth to his voice, thinking of how isolated those servants must feel being so cut off from their families and homes.

"It is of the utmost importance to welcome those who come willingly to the true God and salvation." Timoteo studied Kiram as if he were already making plans for his future position in their house.

"Watch out, Kiram," Javier called out from down the table. "Timoteo is recruiting choirboys for his chapel."

Beside him Elezar snorted and then shouted, "Watch out, Tim, Kiram can't sing to save his life!"

They both burst into laughter, as did Morisio and Atreau. Lord Grunito looked confused but then simply began laughing with the others. Lady Grunito ignored them all and continued her discussion with an older Cadeleonian gentleman.

Timoteo's gaunt face flushed. He glared at the clot of Hellions at the far end of the table before returning his attention to Kiram. But Kiram didn't want to discuss conversion or how well an unwanted Haldiim son would be treated by Lady Grunito—certainly not with this man.

"We don't have any sausages like this in the Haldiim district," Kiram said before Timoteo could get a word out. "They're quite delicious."

To Kiram's relief Riossa responded, telling him that she too had been surprised by the unusual spices and that she'd since discovered that it was a special recipe a Mirogoth cook made just for the Grunito household. Timoteo scowled in a way that made Kiram think that the cook had not been converted. Or maybe Timoteo just didn't like the sausages. Either way he soon excused himself to prepare his sermon for the morning chapel service. Riossa and Kiram briefly shared a look of relief after his departure.

After breakfast most of the Cadeleonians departed for the Grunitos' private chapel to hear Timoteo and receive blessings. Nestor rushed to Kiram and, to Kiram's shock, embraced him.

"About time you came and stayed with us! I'm so pleased you'll be here for my wedding tomorrow." Nestor released Kiram but continued to grin. "You are on my team for charades tonight."

"All right," Kiram agreed, though he had no idea what it would involve. It just felt good to be genuinely welcomed.

"You'll love it," Nestor told him. "Oh and I want you to pose for me. I'm working on a painting with Riossa and I want you in it."

"Nestor!" Lady Grunito called.

"I have to attend chapel but afterward I am going to give you a full tour of the grounds. I owe you for taking me everywhere in the Haldiim district." Nestor glanced over his shoulder at his mother and father. "I have to go."

Through the crowd of Cadeleonians Kiram heard Javier decline an invitation to chapel, claiming that he didn't want to burden Timoteo with the difficulty of his personal absolution during a short service as it would take so much time from others in attendance.

"I see my salvation as requiring at least three days and nights of uninterrupted torture—at least for the priest involved." Kiram

caught a glimpse of Javier's wicked smile and the shocked expression of a Cadeleonian noblewoman.

Kiram didn't hear the woman's response but he recognized Elezar's shout of derisive laughter. No one else broached the subject with Javier.

After the others had filed across the verdant courtyard into the ornate chapel, Javier took Kiram riding. They leisurely followed a little dirt trail through the small park that the Grunitos retained for their sport.

Kiram rode a young piebald gelding called Verano. At first the new mount made him nervous, but the animal was gentle and good natured and Kiram soon grew used to its jaunty gait.

A crow flew overhead and they both watched it. The black wings looked like a spill of ink against the pale morning sky.

"How are you today?" Javier asked him.

"Better," Kiram decided. "You?"

Javier studied him with a slow, alluring smile. "After last night I'm very good indeed."

"Ah, well, last night you were excellent," Kiram responded just to see Javier's proud smile.

The crow circled them and called out two piercing cries before it swept far beyond Kiram's sight. Kiram glanced to Javier and saw concern dim his sensual radiance. "There's been trouble at the Circle of Red Oaks apparently."

"Did that crow just tell you that?" Kiram asked in a whisper. Javier laughed and gazed at him with amused affection.

"It can happen." Kiram defended. "Alizadeh spoke to me once through a flock of crows."

"Oh, I have no doubt that Alizadeh can speak through many forms when he needs to, but yesterday a note seemed sufficient." Javier's smile faded as he went on, "The Bahiim are fighting him. Many of them want to extinguish the White Tree again."

"What?" Kiram stared at Javier in disbelief. "But once it was ignited they were obligated to return to their duties."

"That was Alizadeh's belief, but it seems he failed to consider that many of the Bahiim might feel that their duty is to lock the shajdis away a second time." A cynical amusement sounded in Javier's voice. "It's so much easier to relinquish power rather than accept responsibility, you know."

"But the shadow curse nearly took over the circle. Don't they realize that?"

"You'd think so, since most of them were there," Javier replied.

"They can't just ignore that!"

"Maybe they can," Javier replied. "It's amazing what some people will choose to do."

"But that's idiotic." The idea of the Bahiim turning their backs on the majesty of the White Tree and on the threat of the shadow curse infuriated him and not just because they were abandoning Javier's hope for help.

"The curse won't go away just because they wish it would!" Both horses flicked their ears at Kiram's harsh tone.

"I know." Javier patted Lunaluz's neck soothingly. "But obviously none of this is mine or yours to decide."

Javier's calm resignation annoyed Kiram but he kept his peace while the two of them rode further. Two more crows passed overhead. Kiram watched them, thinking of the night he'd run for his life from the shadow curse. He couldn't imagine how anyone could in good conscience allow something like the shadow curse to continue to torture and hunt.

"What do they think they're going to do when the shadow curse comes for them personally?" Kiram asked.

"I don't know." Javier simply shook his head. "Alizadeh just wrote to warn me to stay away and keep a low profile for a week or so. He'll send word when it's right to come forward."

Javier reined Lunaluz to a halt as they reached a clearing full of spring flowers and outlined by tall oaks. Kiram heard the distant melody of a prayer being sung and realized that they were very near the Grunito family's chapel. Javier swung down from his saddle and freed his stallion to sample the young shoots of grass.

"This is where I usually come to practice the lessons Alizadeh has taught me." Javier indicated one tall, old oak. "What do you think?"

"It's beautiful," Kiram replied. Swaths of wildflowers bloomed between the trees and bright gold butterflies flitted through the air. But Kiram's mind wasn't really on the view. "Does Alizadeh think he can convince the other Bahiim to support him?"

"I don't know," Javier answered mildly.

Kiram frowned at the idea of the Bahiim rejecting Alizadeh's arguments. He wished there was something he could do. "Can they be so deluded that they think the White Tree will ignite on its own the next time the shadow curse returns?"

Javier simply gave him a tired smile. "I've pretty much told you everything Alizadeh wrote to me. Would you like me to make some answers up? Or I could attempt to interview a squirrel or something, if you'd like."

Kiram sighed. He supposed it was pointless to rail against the Bahiim to Javier. He swung down from Verano's back and allowed the gelding to graze alongside Lunaluz. "We're on our own again, aren't we?"

"For now it would seem so." Javier strolled between the trees and Kiram walked beside him. "I don't suppose Scholar Donamillo has written back to you?"

"No, but in his last letter Scholar Blasio mentioned that Scholar Donamillo has been quite ill." Kiram didn't like to think of how bad the sickness must be for the scholar not to respond to his letter.

"It's not likely to have been his treatments, then..." Javier commented.

"What do you mean?"

Javier sighed as if defeated. "Supposedly Fedeles has fully recovered his senses."

"Elezar mentioned something about that. It's wonderful, isn't it?" Kiram started to smile but Javier's grim expression warned him that the news was not cause for jubilation.

"It should be," Javier said carefully. "But it seems that he's accused me of being responsible for his madness both to Lord Quemanor and before the royal bishop, Prince Nugalo."

"Fedeles wouldn't..." Kiram began but realized that he couldn't really know what Fedeles would do. He would never have imagined Fedeles tearing apart his steam engine either and yet he had. Although that had been the shadow curse, not Fedeles.

And suddenly a terrible thought occurred to him. What if Scholar Donamillo had been too ill to treat Fedeles? What if the curse's hold over him had grown? "When did this happen?"

"There were rumors for a while," Javier replied. "But three weeks ago Prince Sevanyo was in attendance for Lord Quemanor's complaint before the royal bishop. Fedeles gave a personal testimony."

"Fedeles spoke?" All Kiram could imagine was Fedeles singing out the names of beloved horses.

"He was quite eloquent, apparently. The bishop was horrified enough by his descriptions of the black magic I practiced against him to dispatch a troop of his men to bring me to stand trial." Javier scowled. "Luckily, only Prince Sevanyo knew I hadn't returned to Rauma. He sent me a warning."

"And all of this began a month ago?"

"So it would seem."

A month ago would have been at the start of Scholar Donamillo's illness. Kiram felt suddenly foolish for all the time he'd wasted in the last few weeks. If only he'd known he might have done something.

A nervous fear prickled through him. The bishop's men could be well on their way by now. If they were swift they would reach Anacleto any day. "You should have said something sooner."

"It wouldn't have changed anything if I had. I didn't know anything for certain until I received Prince Sevanyo's letter." Javier shrugged. "Anyway I thought Elezar was already causing enough of a panic. He demanded that Morisio and Atreau swear loyalty to me, you know."

"I know," Kiram replied. "I promised to stand with you as well."

"Did you?" Javier's calm expression wavered and for an instant Kiram thought he saw fear in his face. Then Javier stepped into the shadows of a towering oak tree. He leaned back against the gnarled trunk. "I won't let it come to that."

"It might not be your choice."

Javier gave him a hard look. His fingers gripped the rough bark of the tree. Kiram knew he didn't want to talk about this but they were too far in to stop now. Kiram couldn't be like Javier and simply wait to see what fate awaited him; he needed to have a plan. "So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know what I'm going to do. But the one thing I'm certain of is that Fedeles wouldn't betray me of his own will. Something has happened to him."

"It has to be Father Habalan's doing," Kiram decided. "He's using the shadow curse to control Fedeles just like he used it to make Fedeles destroy my steam—"

"Someone is using the shadow curse." Javier cut Kiram off. "But I don't think it's Habalan. Now more than ever."

"It has to be him."

"Habalan knows next to nothing anything about the Bahiim ways...certainly not enough to create and control a shadow curse," Javier said. "The more I've studied under Alizadeh, the more certain I've become that the man on the hill isn't Habalan."

Kiram wanted to dispute Javier's argument but he had little evidence beyond his own deep dislike of the holy father. "He was in possession of Bahiim writings and confessions."

"Even if he did have them he wouldn't be able to read them." Javier glanced away and when he spoke again his voice sounded raw. "At this point it doesn't matter who's behind the curse. It's Fedeles who's riding with the bishop's men to arrest me. He's the one I would have to kill to win a trial by combat."

Kiram didn't need to be told that combat would be the only way that Javier could win his trial. The royal bishop certainly wouldn't accept Alizadeh's expert testimony.

Kiram tried to imagine Fedeles in any state but that of blissful mania. All that came to mind were those brief instances when he'd seemed tortured and the sad morning after he'd tried to kill himself.

"Fedeles wouldn't want to betray you," Kiram said at last. "And if the shadow curse has finally taken over his mind, death might be a mercy—"

"I won't kill him!" Javier glared at Kiram, the muscles of his jaw flexing with restrained anger. Kiram met Javier's hard gaze, though the fury in his expression frightened him.

"Refusing to think about it won't make it go away," Kiram said firmly. "You have to face this."

"No!" Javier slammed his fist into the tree and hissed in pain as his knuckles scraped open.

"Would you let him kill you, then?" Kiram demanded. Just the thought of that hurt Kiram far more deeply than any blow Musni had struck against him the previous night.

Javier met his gaze for only a moment, then lifted his head and stared up into the bare branches above him. "He's the only family I have."

"I know. And I understand how hard it is to lose your family, I do. But getting yourself killed won't save Fedeles. It won't free him."

"I know. The truth of the matter is that I'm too much of a coward to make any such sacrifice. If it came down to a duel, I'd kill him... I will kill him." He looked desolate.

"Maybe it doesn't have to come down to a duel. Maybe there is still a way to break the shadow curse and bring Fedeles back to his senses."

"There's one way that Alizadeh mentioned but it's just more of the same." Javier scowled at his bleeding knuckles.

"What is it?" Kiram asked.

"At this point the simplest course would be to destroy the vessel that houses the curse the same way Alizadeh broke the ghost locket that held Yassin's spirit."

“And that would also mean killing Fedeles, wouldn’t it?” Kiram asked.

Javier gave a single nod in response.

They stood in silence, Javier staring up at the sky and Kiram trying to think of some solution. Absently, he watched their horses grazing contentedly on wildflowers and spring grasses. A pair of swallows darted through warm shafts of sunlight. It seemed terribly wrong that the world could be so beautiful even now.

A breeze rolled over him, bringing the scents of blossoms and the sea.

“My brother’s ship will be sailing to Yuan tomorrow. We could go with him.” Kiram didn’t know what he’d have to do to convince Majdi to let him board the ship but it didn’t matter if it meant saving Javier.

Javier continued to watch the faint wisp of a cloud as it rolled against the sky. “There has to be a way to free Fedeles...some way that I can save him.”

Javier was wrong; there didn’t have to be a way. Some problems had no solutions. A right answer was not assured, not in mathematics, not in mechanism, and especially not in the lives of men. Kiram was beginning to truly understand that and yet he needed to be able to offer Javier some hope.

And then the steel ribs and shining glass panes of Donamillo’s mechanical cures whirled in his mind. Dark etched symbols shifted and blurred as Kiram tried to remember them exactly.

“What about Donamillo’s mechanical cures?” Kiram suggested. “Even if Donamillo is too ill to help us you might recognize some of the Bahiim symbols that he used.” Kiram nodded to himself. “If we need to, I think I could build another mechanical cure. The symbols aside, I saw enough of Donamillo’s work that it wouldn’t be too difficult.”

“Are you joking?” Javier looked uncertain.

“Not at all. It’s what Alizadeh himself said, isn’t it? The key to the shadow curse is in those mechanical cures and I’m a very good mechanist, you know.”

Javier laughed and to Kiram's surprise he pulled him into his arms. He held Kiram tightly, resting his head on Kiram's shoulder. "You're the best mechanist I know."

Kiram could feel his face flushing and his entire body surging with a flustered excitement.

"I'm the only mechanist that you know." Kiram drew back but Javier kept one arm across his shoulder. Kiram leaned into him despite the close sound of chapel bells ringing and the knowledge that they were in the Cadeleonian district.

"You're a genius." Javier gazed at him with proud affection.

"I haven't gotten it all figured out," Kiram cautioned. "I don't know how we'll get Fedeles inside the mechanical cure if the shadow curse really has taken control of him."

"If what Prince Sevanyo says is true, then Fedeles will come to us," Javier said. "He's riding with the royal bishop's men to arrest me and seize control of my title and holdings. He'll follow where I lead."

"All the way into a mechanical cure?" Kiram asked.

"Close enough." Javier nodded. "I've overpowered Fedeles before, even when the curse was full upon him. I can do it again."

"So that's our plan, then?" Kiram asked.

Javier was quiet for moment, thinking. "We should give Alizadeh this week to convince the Bahiim to help but after that, if they're still refusing him, then we'll ride for the Sagrada Academy."

"A week..." The idea of waiting, knowing that the bishop's men could arrive any moment, made Kiram nervous but if the Bahiim could be convinced to act against the shadow curse then their problems would be solved. It was worth the risk.

"Lady Grunito would kill me if I wasn't here to stand at Nestor's wedding tomorrow," Javier said lightly.

"True." Kiram smirked. "It would be a shame if after all this you were killed by Lady Grunito."

"You'd cry, wouldn't you?" Javier asked with a teasing smile.

Kiram started to laugh but Javier quieted him with a kiss. Kiram knew it was meant to be light and fleeting but as he leaned in Javier responded, gripping him hard, and suddenly the tender touch of lips deepened. Kiram opened his mouth and pulled Javier against him, returning the thrust and heat of his kiss. Longing surged through Kiram. He needed to feel the raw strength and heat of Javier's body against his own.

"We shouldn't..." Javier whispered as he caressed Kiram's back, holding him close.

"I know..." Kiram's words came out in a breathless murmur and Javier kissed him again. Reflexively, Kiram's fingers traced the buttons at the front of Javier's trousers. A stiff heat rose beneath his touch. And all at once his own clothes seemed too hot and confining. "Why does Cadeleonian clothing have to be so complicated?"

"Perhaps it ought to be done away with." Javier reached for Kiram's belt, loosening it with a hungry desperation.

Soon their clothes hung open and they fell upon each other among the grasses and flowers, crushing blossoms beneath the thrust and drive of their passion. It was rough and wanton but he exalted in the sweat and dirt, feeling alive and unafraid in the throes of ecstasy.

Afterwards they lay grass stained and spent. From across the glade the horses watched them as if they were ridiculous curiosities. Shafts of sunlight dappled Javier's bare chest like the light from the glowing blessings that had fallen from the White Tree. Javier closed his eyes, a satisfied smile curving his lips even as he drifted on the edge of sleep.

Kiram stretched and rolled to his feet.

"Lazy man." Kiram poked Javier with his toe. "You can't just lie around like this all day you know."

Javier's only response was a sigh.

Kiram turned to find his belt and froze at the sight of Elezar standing only ten feet away. A look of rage contorted Elezar's features and his hand was already on the hilt of his sword.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Kiram fastened his belt but didn't bother with the buttons of his shirt.

"Elezar..." Kiram stepped forward and instantly realized his error in closing any distance between Elezar and himself.

"You filthy whore!" Elezar swung his blade and Kiram lunged back, but not quickly enough. The tip of the sword slashed a thin furrow across Kiram's chest. Hot rivulets of blood sprung up and a sick wave of terror surged through Kiram. There was no way he could fight Elezar and win.

A bestial roar of rage burst from Elezar as he charged forward. His sword flashed and Kiram heard the blade cut the air. He lunged to the side but Elezar moved with shocking speed. Kiram slipped and he went down to one knee. Elezar thrust for his throat.

Then suddenly Javier bounded between them and everything seemed to stop.

Elezar stood dead still, his face suddenly pale and his eyes locked on Javier. Javier gave an odd gasp, almost like a laugh. The open front of his white shirt reflected the sun, flashing as it waved in the breeze. For an instant Kiram thought that Elezar had stayed his hand. But then he saw the tip of Elezar's blade jutting from the back of Javier's shirt. Blood streamed from the wound as Javier jerked himself back off the sword.

"How stupid," Javier whispered and he fell at Kiram's feet.

Elezar stared at Javier, his sword still stretched out over Javier's prone body, the blade black with blood.

A wild rage enveloped Kiram. He threw himself at Elezar, hammering his face with savage fury and then wrenching the

bloody sword from his hand. Elezar offered him no resistance. Kiram knocked him to his knees and then kicked him down into the ground. Elezar lay there and sobbed in the dirt.

Kiram stumbled to Javier. He dropped to his side and shoved his hands against the hot pulse of blood that welled up from Javier's chest. He couldn't keep it in. Rivulets seeped between his fingers and spilled over his hands. The pungent smell of blood filled the air and hot, dark pulses surged against Kiram's palms. Flies buzzed over his fingers. More blood seeped from Javier's back and soaked the soil to a red mud beneath his knees.

A wracking sob broke from Kiram. Javier tried to lift his hand to Kiram's and failed. His eyes fluttered and his gaze slipped from Kiram's face to stare at the empty sky above them.

"Use the white hell," Kiram hissed to him. "Javier, open the shajdi!"

"...me to oak..." Javier whispered.

"Your oak? Where you practice?"

Javier gave no response but that had to be it. They had to get to the oak.

"Elezar, you bastard!" Kiram screamed. "Help me, you fucker!"

Elezar came immediately. Dirt and blood caked his face. Despite his miserable appearance he moved fast and with sure strength, lifting Javier while Kiram kept his hands pressed into Javier's wound. They moved him to the foot of the oak tree without once meeting each other's gaze. As they laid him down Lunaluz came running from across the glade. The stallion circled them in agitation, attempting to protect Javier but unable to discern what threatened him.

"Calm the horse," Kiram commanded. Elezar did as he was told, taking Lunaluz's bridle and whispering soft, broken words to the stallion.

"He'll be all right," Elezar murmured, on the edge of tears. "The white hell will heal him."

Anger flared through Kiram at Elezar's blind faith.

"He doesn't have the control of it he used to have," Kiram snapped at Elezar. "He sacrificed that to save Fedeles."

Elezar went dead white.

Kiram turned his attention to Javier. "You have to open the shajdi," he insisted. "Open it now!"

Javier curled his hand weakly over Kiram's. His touch felt like ice and his skin looked almost blue from blood loss.

"Please, God. Please..." Elezar moaned.

"We brought you to the oak. You have to open the shajdi." Kiram's voice broke in his throat but he kept talking. "Come on, Javier. You love to show off. Open the shajdi and show me what you learned from Alizadeh. Show me."

The slightest tic flickered at the corner of Javier's mouth as if even now he was trying to flash one of his arrogant smiles.

"Show me how amazing you are," Kiram coaxed.

He felt a shiver pass through Javier's cold hand and an answering pulse of heat rushed up from the gnarled oak roots beneath them. The air stilled. Then a blazing white fire roared up from Javier's chest, scorching Kiram's fingers and searing up his arms as it grew larger and brighter. Kiram clenched his eyes against the blinding light and yet it still shone into him. Waves of consuming heat rolled over him and a deafening roar filled his ears but he didn't dare to withdraw from Javier's side. He kept his hands pressed over Javier's wounded chest as searing white flames engulfed them both like a burning shroud.

The gash in Kiram's chest felt as if it were filled with boiling lead and he knew he was screaming, but all he heard was the roar of the flames invading his body and burning deep into his flesh.

Somewhere in the back of his mind Kiram knew that this was the shajdi as Javier felt it: raw power to be shaped and controlled, but Kiram had no training and without Javier to shield him, he could only burn in the shajdi's flame.

Then he felt Javier's grasp on his hand tighten. The flames dimmed and the terrible heat relented to a luminous shimmer and then even that faded, leaving Kiram shivering.

"Kiram," Javier said in a hoarse whisper.

Opening his eyes, Kiram realized that he had collapsed across Javier's chest and jerked himself upright. Ash and dying red embers encircled them and the air smelled of smoldering wood. Charred streaks traced the trunk of the oak and the earth all around the two of them had blackened to soot. Flakes of white ash drifted down over them like strange snow.

"Are you all right?" Javier asked. He still looked deathly pale and fallen ash powdered his hair dull gray. Only the beginning of a raw scab closed Javier's wound, but it no longer bled.

"I'll live." Kiram looked down at his chest. A ropy scar stood where Elezar's blade had sliced him open. "What about you?"

"For today at least." Javier slowly pushed himself up onto his elbows.

"Thank God!" Elezar sounded like he might burst into tears again. He cautiously led Lunaluz closer to Javier.

"God had nothing to do with it." Javier scowled at Elezar, who bowed his head like a beaten dog. With Kiram's help Javier rose to his feet.

"I can't believe you stabbed me," Javier told Elezar.

"I didn't mean to hurt you!" Elezar protested. "I would never...It was Kiram—"

"No, Elezar," Javier growled. "You drove your sword right through my chest. That wasn't Kiram's doing. And it is no more forgivable that you intended that blow to kill him."

Elezar shot Kiram an angry glare that made Kiram want to lunge for Elezar's fallen sword and make the man swallow it. But he controlled his anger. There had been more than enough swordplay already.

"He's done something to you, Javier." Elezar wiped the back of his sleeve across his bloodied, filthy face. He sounded like a petulant child. "He's bewitched you, seduced—"

"Open your eyes, Elezar," Javier snapped. "If there was a seduction or a bewitching you know it would be my doing. Kiram is a decent man from a good family whereas I'm the hell-branded

duke. Honestly, which of the two of us do you think would resort to seduction? Kiram has been nothing but good and honest in all the time we've been together. He was loyal to me even when it cost him the comfort of his home. It might be even more telling to ask yourself what it is that you have done to me, Elezar. Counting the autumn tournament this is the second time you've stabbed me. Is this really how you keep your oath of loyalty? How you treat our friendship?"

"I didn't mean to do it." Elezar sounded so miserable that Kiram nearly felt compassion for him. But the fact that Elezar had fully intended to murder him and had nearly killed Javier squelched his sympathy.

Elezar stroked Lunaluz's cheek gently and laid his face against the stallion's neck. "I would die for you, Javier. I swear it. I would die."

Javier's hard expression softened a little and he stepped forward. "I don't want you to die. But I do want your word that you will never raise a hand against Kiram."

"But he...you and he..." Elezar protested.

"I will not have him harmed," Javier stated firmly. "He is dear to me, Elezar. More dear than my own life. He is my heart and soul. And if you raise a hand against him again, then you make me your enemy."

Hearing this Kiram felt both horrified that Javier would confess so much to a man who had nearly murdered him and who could still witness against him before a court of law, and at the same time he flushed with pride at Javier's open, ardent words.

Elezar looked sick and miserable. He clung to Lunaluz and the stallion nuzzled him with familiar affection.

"I swear that I won't harm you, Javier. I won't betray you," Elezar said.

"And Kiram?" Javier demanded.

Elezar scowled at Kiram. His jaw flexed and his lips twitched as if forming a single word was an immense effort.

"Forget it," Kiram said. "His word doesn't mean anything."

"You know nothing of it!" Elezar shouted at Kiram.

"Bullshit," Kiram snapped back. "I've seen enough to know that you'll forget any oath you swear when you lose your temper. You're a bad loser, Elezar."

Despite himself Kiram stepped closer to Elezar. His heart raced as he met Elezar's angry gaze. Suddenly Kiram felt aware of the weight of the sheathed knife hanging from his belt. Very deliberately, he placed himself between Elezar and his fallen sword. If it came to a fight he would need every advantage he could claim.

"You've made promises to Javier and broken them already." Kiram shook his head as Javier started to speak. This needed to be settled between him and Elezar and it had to be done before the bishop's men came. They couldn't afford to be fighting the shadow curse and Elezar at the same time. Sweat beaded under Kiram's arms but he stepped right up beside Elezar.

"It's only your actions that matter. So let's get this out in the open. You want to fight me. Let's do it now."

Elezar's fist came up and Kiram gripped his knife. But then Elezar's dark gaze softened. He squeezed his eyes shut and dropped his hand to his side.

"I'm not going to kill you, Kiram. You're my little brother's best friend." He sighed heavily and wiped again at the blood caked beneath his nose, seeming nearly as exhausted as Javier. "If you want to bend for Javier, that's your business. Just don't do it in front of me."

Kiram nodded. He doubted that he could get better than that from Elezar. He certainly wasn't going to argue over who bent for whom more often. He stepped back, feeling sore and relieved.

"We're all good?" Javier asked.

Elezar and Kiram both nodded though neither could bring themselves to look at each other.

"Good." Javier looked relieved. Lunaluz sauntered to him and butted his head gently against Javier's shoulder. Both Kiram and Elezar stood silently by as Javier scratched Lunaluz and the stallion

sniffed and inspected Javier. Kiram wondered where his mount, Verano, had gone. Probably back to the Grunito stables.

Then Kiram heard Nestor's voice, booming from a distance. He called Kiram's name and before Kiram could call back he appeared on the road, riding his roan gelding and leading Verano out to the glade.

As he approached, Nestor's expression grew more horrified and worried. "What in God's name happened to all of you?"

Kiram opened his mouth and then closed it, unable to think of anything to say that wouldn't horrify Nestor further. He certainly couldn't tell the truth.

"It's my fault," Javier said. "I wanted to test how easily I could recover from being run through." He flashed that dashing smile that so often made his more rash or ill-conceived actions seem daring and bold.

Nestor seemed only half convinced.

"Turns out," Javier went on casually, "it's not so easily done. At least not without making quite a mess."

"It looks like there's been a murder." Nestor squinted through his spectacles at Javier's torn, bloody shirtfront, then at the huge burned circle at the base of the old oak tree.

"There nearly was." Elezar gave a game smile but his tone was oddly flat. "It's a good thing there weren't any ladies about, that's for certain."

"That's madness," Nestor told Javier. "You were run all the way through?"

Kiram caught the flinch in Elezar's expression though he doubted that Nestor did.

"Straight through." Javier turned slowly for Nestor, who gaped all the more at the blood-soaked shirt.

"Madness," Nestor repeated. "I mean, what if you hadn't been able to recover? You could have been killed, you know." He gave the three of them a look that clearly conveyed that he was reassessing his high opinion of their intellects.

"Yes," Javier replied. "Well, it's not something I'm likely to attempt again."

"I hope not." Nestor continued to peer in silence at the ugly scabbed wound in Javier's chest and a queasy sallow color crept into his complexion.

"Why were you calling me?" Kiram asked Nestor.

"Oh." Nestor brought himself up sharply. "Sorry, I nearly forgot. It's your brother, Majdi. He's come to see you and I think it's important."

"Where is he?" Kiram asked.

"He was waiting at the house gates when I left him," Nestor replied. "I don't think you should talk to him looking like you do though. I mean, he's likely to think that you're being treated abominably."

"Why don't you invite the man into the house while the three of us clean up," Elezar suggested.

Nestor nodded and handed Verano's reigns over to Kiram.

"You tried to stop them, didn't you?" Nestor asked in a whisper.

"Some things can't be avoided no matter how hard you try." Kiram smiled to reassure Nestor. "At least we're all right now. That's all that matters, really."



Twenty minutes later Kiram sprinted down the grand staircase of the Grunito house wearing a loose pair of Javier's fencing trousers, one of Morisio's spare shirts and a servant's coat. They were the only clothes to be found in short order and Kiram was happy enough to have them even if members of the house staff did pause and eye him suspiciously as he hurried past them.

Majdi awaited him out in the spring garden, leaning against a huge bronze planter from which an explosion of rose vines burst up in a tangle of green leaves and gold flowers. He wore his brilliant red Mirogoth coat and rested his foot on a traveler's trunk. He furrowed his brow as Kiram drew closer. "*Why are you wearing a servant's clothes?*"

"*My own are filthy. These are what fit on short notice.*" Kiram crossed his arms over his chest. "*Did you really come all this way to criticize my wardrobe?*"

"I came to see how you were."

"I'm fine."

"Yes, you look it," Majdi replied with a smirk.

"I've had a rough day." Considering everything that had happened he felt that the faded bruises, random scratches, small burns and singed hair he sported weren't all that bad. *"In fact, I've had several rough days but I feel as though things might be looking up now."*

Majdi gave a slow, knowing nod and it worried Kiram a little. *"Mum's been worried sick about you."*

Kiram laughed out loud at that. Last he remembered she'd slapped him and thrown him out of the house. *"Worried sick about my marriage to Hashiem, you mean?"*

"No, I mean she's worried about you." Majdi gave him the same look of aggravation that he often cast upon their more spoiled cousins.

"Majdi, you don't know what she said."

"Not something mean?" Majdi taunted. *"Are you telling me that you infuriated Mum and she didn't just hug and kiss you to bits?"*

"I'm serious!" Kiram almost cringed at the tone of petulance in his own voice. *"She called Javier—"*

"Some things are best not repeated." Majdi held up his hand and glanced up to the balcony above. Kiram thought he glimpsed Cadeleonian faces looking down at them. *"I know what she said. Half the Haldiim district knows thanks to some fruit vendor. But you know Mum, Kiram. You have to know that she didn't mean it."*

"Then why did she say it?"

Majdi rolled his eyes. *"Are you really such a child that you can't understand that people say things they don't mean when they're angry? Do you really not know that you behave exactly the same way?"*

Instantly the memory of hurling a scrub brush at Javier's face returned to Kiram as did his demand that Javier never speak to him again. Kiram felt his cheeks flushing with guilt.

Majdi nodded as if cementing his conversational victory. Kiram straightened the cuff of his coat to avoid meeting Majdi's gaze. At least he hadn't called Javier an animal or run him through.

"Look." Majdi's tone relaxed and when Kiram looked at him his expression had softened. *"I know from personal experience that you don't want to be a little snot about this. You'll just end up feeling like an ungrateful brat later."*

"She threw me out and I'm the one who is ungrateful?"

"She assumed you'd go to Uncle Rafie and be perfectly safe," Majdi replied. *"But no. Instead we find out that you wandered off into the smoke district and got attacked by Musni and his drunk friends."*

Kiram blinked at Majdi for one uncomprehending moment. He'd almost forgotten about his scuffle with Musni. It seemed like such a petty fight compared to what had just occurred with Elezar. *"How did you find out about that?"*

"Chebli—you remember the Civic Guard Dauhd is courting?"

"Of course I know Chebli. I'm not the one who goes to sea for years at a time."

"Temper," Majdi commented.

"Sorry." The apology came like a reflex after so many years.

"Well," Majdi went on easily, *"Chebli was at the prison and he heard Musni's confession. He ran immediately to our house to make sure that you had made it home safe, which of course you hadn't. When Chebli told Mum that Musni admitted to stabbing you she nearly fainted. A minute later she had half the city out searching the streets and the river for you."*

Kiram felt a petty gratification but it died in the face of Majdi's pained expression.

"I've never seen her like that, Kiram. She was out on the street screaming your name and weeping. Her voice gave out from calling for you but she wouldn't stop. If you had seen her..." Majdi's voice caught with emotion and for a moment he simply gazed up at the blue sky above them. *"The thought that she'd sent you out to be hurt ripped her up inside."*

An aching guilt gripped Kiram. He wanted to shrug it off but just the idea of his mother suffering for his sake tore at him. Despite their argument and her words he still loved her too deeply to remain unmoved by her pain.

"Tell her I'm fine."

"Oh, she knows." Majdi gave a short laugh. "If she hadn't found you, we'd still be hearing her scream your name. She came here a little past midnight last night and Lady Grunito assured her that you were safe and well."

Kiram wondered how that exchange had gone: his frantic, weeping mother and the golden monument that was Lady Grunito. He supposed it explained the curious way Lady Grunito had watched him this morning at breakfast.

"Is Mum all right now?" Kiram asked.

"You gave her a damn good scare but Mum's tough. Once she knew you were alive I think everything she'd been angry about didn't matter so much."

"So why are you here now?" Kiram asked. He couldn't help but glance at the chest and wonder what was in it and whether or not it was intended for him.

"Mum asked me to tell you that you can come home anytime you want and bring whom you want."

All at once the empty ache that had settled into Kiram's chest a day ago left him.

"But that's not what I wanted to tell you," Majdi said.

"What?"

"I've packed up some of your things, some of my old things, and a parcel that came for you from the Sagrada Academy." Majdi nudged the traveling chest towards Kiram with the toe of his boot.

"Why?" Kiram asked. There was something suspicious in Majdi's lazy smile.

"You're finally rebelling," Majdi replied. "You've found something that moves you enough to give you the courage to stand up to Mum. That's not something you should leave for the comfort

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of home. Because home will always be there for you. That's the promise of family. But what you have with your Cadeleonian is a chance to make the future that you want for yourself and that may never come again."

"So you've packed for me?" Kiram could hardly suppress his wide smile. He never would have thought such a gesture could feel so much like a blessing or touch him so deeply.

"I figured I'd do a better job of it than you would, having lived on my own longer."

"At sea," Kiram teased his brother. "Not at the Sagrada Academy."

Majdi waved his objection aside. "Mum and Dad will send you anything you might need for some academy. What I'm talking about are troubles you'll face...like last night's encounter with Musni or if things go bad for you and the duke."

Kiram couldn't imagine facing more hardship than he already had this past week. Meeting Majdi's pale, serious gaze he suddenly knew that out in the world even greater challenges might await him.

"Now, there's one last thing." Majdi shoved the chest the rest of the way across the cobbles till it bumped against Kiram's shin. "I want you to think about this seriously because the offer won't last beyond tomorrow evening. My ship sails tomorrow. If you and Javier come aboard, I won't ask any questions and neither will my crew."

Kiram grinned and knew he looked ridiculous. But Majdi was sailing to Yuan and Kiram had always wanted to go. He imagined himself and Javier leaving everything behind them.

But they couldn't—not just because Javier wouldn't do it but also because the man controlling the shadow curse would pursue them. They wouldn't be escaping trouble, only bringing it onto his brother's ship. Still, the offer moved Kiram and he embraced his brother like he had so many times when he had been just a boy.

Majdi patted him on the back. "The Cadeleonians watching us from the balcony are going to think you're a brother fucker."

Kiram released him. *"Don't drown out at sea, all right?"*

"No, I plan to die at home in the bathtub." Majdi started across the grounds towards the drive and the iron gates at the front of the house.

"Take care," Kiram called after him.

"You as well." Majdi turned back briefly. *"Give him my best. Be good to each other."*

Kiram glanced up just as Javier stepped back from the edge of the balcony. Nestor waved down at him.

Up in Javier's room Kiram unpacked the trunk. He found that Majdi had included Kiram's bow as well as a quiver of fine black arrows. Nestor admired them while Javier reclined in a chair near the fire.

Deep in the chest, wrapped in a soft cloth, Kiram discovered Rafie's sealed vial of poison as well as six sheathed knives. Amidst traveling clothes, an adhil pan and a pouch filled with a wild assortment of coins, Kiram found the package that Scholar Blasio had sent to him. Inside it were two thin journals and letter. A jay's bright blue feather fell from one of the journal pages.

Chapter Twenty-Three

That's a rather fetching feather," Nestor commented. Kiram could hardly acknowledge Nestor's words. He stared in silence. Strange how it gripped him, this single feather from a common bird. A year ago he would have hardly registered more than a brief admiration for its color. Now the sight of it made his heart kick hard at his ribs.

Javier looked up from his contemplation of the hearth and scowled at the bright wing feather in Kiram's hand.

"It came with a package from Scholar Blasio." Kiram felt suddenly afraid to read the letter. Today had already been so hard.

"Odd." Javier studied the feather with a suspicion that mirrored Kiram's own. The firelight cast deep shadows across the angles of his face and made black hollows of his dark eyes.

He didn't need more to worry about. Neither of them did.

"It's not that odd," Nestor said. "There had to be thousands of those birds in the orchards surrounding the academy. Remember? Kiram shot something like sixty of them for our meals in the winter."

"Sixty-eight," Kiram provided. He snapped the feather in half and let it fall, broken, to the floor.

Javier simply nodded and returned his attention to his half-packed saddlebags, which slumped at his feet like a sleeping dog. Out in the hall Kiram heard Morisio and Atreau arguing good humouredly over which liquor they should pack for their impending ride back to the academy.

"Sixty-eight is a lot when you really think about it." Nestor toyed with one of Kiram's arrows and then sighed. "I'm sorry you

and the rest of the Hellions are riding back to school at the end of the week.” He replaced Kiram’s arrow carefully. “I was going to feel left out but then I realized that I’ll be on my honeymoon, so it will be all of you feeling left out.”

Javier snorted.

“You’ll certainly be sleeping more comfortably than we will be,” Kiram agreed.

“No sweets or anything in there?” Nestor asked as he peered into the trunk. The assortment of knives inspired a low whistle.

“No, just my brother’s old stuff.”

“Can this wait till tomorrow?” Nestor asked. He gave Kiram an anxious look. “It’s just the party is about to start and I bragged quite a bit about you. How you can divide almost any number and count cards and all the Haldiim dances you could teach us.”

“There’s a party?” Kiram supposed that if he hadn’t been so distracted and tired he would have known as much from all the noise floating up from downstairs.

“It’s the last night I’ll be a bachelor,” Nestor replied. “There has to be a party!”

“I thought that was last night.”

“No, last night was to introduce Riossa to Anacleto society. That was all formal dancing and very serious. Tonight will be charades and party tricks!” Nestor grinned in delight. “We’ve hired jugglers and acrobats even a troupe of Haldiim musicians.”

“Certainly beats brooding in my room all night.” Javier pushed himself up from his seat and started for the door. Nestor bounded after him.

Kiram set Scholar Blasio’s letter and the two journals aside. They could wait a couple of hours, he supposed.

But he soon discovered that he’d underestimated how very entertaining and deeply relieving a night of wild games, informal dancing, and wine could prove to be. He laughed and threw dice and taught some fifty drunk Cadeleonians the red hands dance. Well past midnight he and Javier stumbled up to their shared room. They lay curled together and fell asleep immediately.

The next morning the sunlight felt bruising against Kiram's eyes and every sound jarred through his head and heaved his stomach. For all the advice his brother and Rafie had offered about surviving his new life, neither of them had mentioned anything about Cadeleonian drinking games. His mouth tasted like old socks and a vague image of Nestor running naked through the gardens lingered in his hazy memory.

Kiram chose to forgo breakfast in favor of a few more hours of sleep, but only a few minutes after Javier left the room a restless unease overcame him. A weird anxiety gnawed at him every time he closed his eyes. As much as he wanted to sleep he knew Scholar Blasio's letter awaited. He clenched his eyes shut and attempted to will himself to sleep as if it were a matter of pure concentration.

The noise of conversation and laughter, barking, and the clattering dishes rose from the floor below. The more Kiram attempted to ignore the sounds, the more jarring they seemed to become. At last Kiram simply threw off his blankets and got up.

He washed, dressed in the traveling clothes that Majdi had packed for him, and picked up Scholar Blasio's letter. His eyes didn't want to focus on the fine script.

The deafening clang of the Grunito chapel bells broke Kiram's concentration entirely. It resounded through his aching head. As the bells continued to sound Kiram realized that they were some cruel announcement of the coming nuptials and more than likely would not cease until the ceremony had begun.

Kiram was almost certain he would be dead before then, because his head seemed about to explode. Either he or the hateful bells had to go. Kiram gathered the journals and the coin purse Majdi had given him and slunk out of the Grunito house using the back stairs.

He walked a ways along the city streets to get clear of the damned ringing bells and at last found a public house among the row of inns that surrounded the vast city stables. As travelers and soldiers came and went, a kindly-looking Cadeleonian woman seated Kiram near an airy window and served him hot Cadeleonian malt porridge and some kind of warm milky drink.

Kiram opened Scholar Blasio's letter as he sipped his drink and read through the cursory greeting and brief news of the academy. Not surprisingly, Blasio wrote most extensively of Donamillo's illness and his attempts to care for his brother. Blasio's neat handwriting deteriorated as he described searching through Donamillo's medical texts and journals for anything that might wake his brother from the wasting stupor that had seized him.

Kiram's heart went out to both brothers. Then he turned the page and found only a short, agitated scrawl.

Dear boy, in my search I fear I have discovered something terrible. I pray I am wrong but if I am not then I hope that I have not waited too long to write to you. I do not know what to do but you might. Please read the pages I have marked in both my brother's journal and the one belonging to Yassin Lif-Harun. I pray with all my heart that I am not too late and that you know some way to make this right.

—Blasio

Kiram considered the journals, choosing Yassin's first. As he ate his head cleared and his stomach settled but his anxiety grew.

Among Yassin's many observations of the heavens and his notes about how closely they matched the Bahiim legends were a growing number of references to spells and curses. It soon became clear to Kiram that, as the Mirogoth army had approached, Yassin and Calixto had not only considered opening a shajdi to drive back the invaders but also unleashing a shadow curse by carving away the wards in the trees that held the Old Rage in check.

Kiram stared at the yellowed page of curling Haldiim script in front of him. It was all right there: a step by step guide to creating a shadow curse. Yet even as Yassin wrote the steps out it was clear from his notes that he despised the idea of using such a tactic.

Can there be any more monstrous act than to deprive those tortured souls of their rest and inflict their agony upon the living world?

Apart from his moral hesitance, Yassin noted that he couldn't think of a way to control the shadow curse once it was created.

Directly after that, Yassin's journal turned to the subject of the shajdi. Over the course of seven pages Kiram found the basic instructions for creating a ghost locket.

As he studied the rough diagrams and notes he recognized the Bahiim incantations that had marked the locket Javier had worn. But with Scholar Donamillo in his thoughts he suddenly realized that he'd seen the same symbols etched across the huge iron ribs of one of Scholar Donamillo's mechanical cures.

A rush of dread went through Kiram.

He immediately flipped through Donamillo's journal. The reading was much more difficult. The script, which at a glance looked like Cadeleonian, was in fact phonetic Haldiim spelled out in Cadeleonian letters. Still, Kiram soon discovered the words he dreaded finding.

Scholar Donamillo had solved Yassin's problem of controlling the shadow curse by trapping the tortured souls of the Old Rage in an immense and very refined ghost locket. But more than that he'd figured out that the shadow curse could be fed into a living body. Too much at once and the result would be agonizing nightmares, madness and death. Donamillo had filled several pages with notes detailing the effects of his tests on the Tornestal family. He'd made a record, with a tone of cool pleasure, of the minutiae of each and every death.

But subtle control of the shadow curse had eluded him and, even more insulting to his secret Bahiim heritage, the shajdi had protected the Tornestal heir from even his most direct assault.

Donamillo had wanted the shajdi—the white hell. He'd felt that it was his due and it'd infuriated him that the height of Bahiim achievement had been tied to a Cadeleonian bloodline.

Kiram didn't want to read more. And yet he had to. He tried to push back his revulsion at what Scholar Donamillo had done—at how betrayed he felt—and focus on the information in the journal. He supposed he could take a bitter consolation in the fact

that Donamillo had been exact and meticulous in his notes: a repellant human being but scholarly in his monstrosity.

When two students of Tornesa blood came into his grasp Donamillo realized that he could use them against one another. He knew he couldn't directly attack Javier. Not even by placing him directly in one of his mechanical cures could Donamillo get past the power of the shajdi.

But Fedeles was different. He was Javier's heir and close friend. He was the chink in Javier's armor and the route for Donamillo's ambition.

Careful not to kill Fedeles, Donamillo had fed the shadow curse into his body slowly in insidious monthly treatments. Fedeles had adapted as if he were building immunity to a poison. He'd suffered horribly as the curse tortured him and ground away his identity, but he hadn't died.

A nauseous guilt roiled in Kiram's belly. How many assurances had he offered Fedeles while escorting him to those treatments?

Once the shadow curse had suffused Fedeles' blood, flesh and bones, Donamillo had discovered that he could use his mechanical cure to further invade Fedeles' body with his own spirit. Again he'd been patient, infiltrating Fedeles like a cancer while slowly abandoning his own body.

Kiram realized that once Donamillo completely controlled Fedeles he would be positioned to destroy Javier and inherit both the shajdi and all of Rauma. He felt almost nauseated but he kept reading.

According to the journal, even isolated and tortured, Fedeles still fought. He'd managed to tell a groom some of what had happened to him and Donamillo had acted immediately to keep from being exposed. An edge of worry invaded Donamillo's notes. For all his power over Fedeles the young man had resisted his dominion. Fedeles had defied him with fits of wild manic hysteria and successive attempts at suicide.

To overcome Fedeles in one sweeping treatment, Donamillo had needed more power than his hand crank provided, but he'd had no way to generate such sustained energy. And then like a blessing Kiram Kir-Zaki and his steam engine had fallen into Donamillo's hands.

Kiram snapped the journal closed, unable to bear the gleeful pleasure with which Donamillo wrote about bringing Kiram to the academy and gaining his trust.

He felt sick. Really sick.

With shaking hands he stuffed the journals in his coat pocket, tossed down his payment for the meal, and dashed out of the public house. He staggered behind a stable and threw up. After a few minutes his nausea subsided, though his guilt did not.

Kiram found a trough of fresh water and rinsed the sick, sour taste from his mouth. Fedeles had begged Kiram for help. He thought he was so clever, so noble, promising to save him. Instead Kiram had brought ruin. More than that, he'd been brought to the academy specifically for this purpose. Not because of his brilliance, not because Donamillo believed that he could win the Crown Challenge, but simply to serve the other man's desire for a shajdi.

No wonder that Fedeles had attacked his engine. He'd been trying to save not only his own life but Javier's as well.

A seething hate coursed through Kiram as he thought of Scholar Donamillo's cruelty. A shajdi could never—never—be allowed to fall into the hands of a man like him.

Kiram's head pounded. He closed his eyes and drew in a deep calming breath. Far away the bells of the Grunito chapel still rang. The musky, sweet smell of hay drifted over Kiram. Fedeles had always hidden in the stables. Now Kiram thought he could almost hear Fedeles' voice, whispering the names of horses.

An instant later the faint voice grew closer. A long black shadow stretched through the stable door. Then another and another darkened the floor and as Kiram listened he realized that Fedeles really was here in Anacleto.

For just an instant he couldn't understand how that could be, but when he heard Fedeles speak in cold, controlled tones he knew with certainty.

It might be Fedeles' body standing in the stable, but the mind and spirit within belonged to Donamillo. According to all Kiram had read in the journals, Donamillo would have full control of Fedeles' body by now. He would be young and strong and just one trial away from inheriting all of Rauma and achieving his life's goal.

Kiram's stomach lurched. He ducked back into the cover of an empty stall and fought to control his racing heart and flipping stomach. If he was caught now with the journals, Donamillo would surely kill him.

"It is an absolute imperative that the medallion Javier Tornesal wears should be brought to me the moment he is taken." Though the voice was Fedeles' the words and tone so obviously belonged to Scholar Donamillo that Kiram couldn't believe no one else noted it.

Kiram peered through the crack between the loosely hung stall door and the wall. In the sharp morning light Fedeles' tall figure stood out in almost impossible blackness. His eyes, hair, clothes were all black but more than that, the shadows he cast and those clinging to his body were darker than any others in the stable, utterly devoid of light.

Somehow none of the two dozen men who trailed him into the stable seemed to take any note of the eerie shadows. They attended Fedeles' possessed body with the unquestioning regard most common Cadeleonians held for noblemen. From the violet crosses marking their uniforms Kiram guessed that they were the royal bishop's men and from the ease with which they wore their swords Kiram knew they were experienced soldiers.

"I have sent Lieutenant Montaval with six pikemen to guard the city gate, in case he gets past you," Fedeles informed one of the men. From the gold bars on the man's cloak Kiram guessed he was a captain. Despite his white beard he looked strong and agile.

"He won't get past us," the captain replied with certainty. "Our blades are soaked in muerate poison and he'll be unarmed when he comes out of the chapel. Demon or not, we'll bring him down."

Fedeles frowned at the man's confident smile. "You shouldn't underestimate him." He paced past several stalls, his gaze flickering up to the horses' faces as if it were a tic. His lips moved, mouthing names but making no sound.

The captain watched him with a pitying expression.

"Do not fear, my lord. I have not underestimated him," the captain assured him. "Even if he manages to slip past us at the Grunito house, I have twelve of my best riders posted on the High Street and another ten watching the gates of the Haldiim district. No matter where he goes, we'll have him."

Fedeles nodded. He stopped in front of a stall and stroked the muzzle of the big black horse inside. For an instant Kiram couldn't believe his eyes.

"Firaj," Fedeles cooed the big gelding's name.

Kiram felt a flush of outrage that Donamillo had taken his horse but an instant later the knowledge brought him a spark of hope. Donamillo would never have chosen to ride Firaj. He cared nothing for the animal but Fedeles loved the old horse. Despite everything some shred of Fedeles had to still be alive inside his possessed body.

"He's an old horse," the captain commented.

"The wisdom of age always defeats the strength of youth, Captain." There was nothing but Donamillo's assurance in the reply. He took Firaj's reins and led him out of the stable.

The captain ordered his men to ready their mounts. He expected the men and their animals to be prepared to ride before the next bell.

Kiram had no time to waste if he was going to be able to make it back to the Grunito house on foot before Fedeles and the royal bishop's men arrived.

A merchant leading two gray mares passed slowly by. As they did so, Kiram stepped out of the stall and started for the stable

doors as if he'd just finished settling his own mount like any other traveler. He walked up the narrow aisle past several of the royal bishop's armed soldiers with Fedeles and Firaj only twenty feet ahead of him. His heart pounded so hard that it felt like it was shaking his whole body.

The black shadows stretching from Fedeles' feet curled and spread with a frightening disregard for the angle of the morning light. As Fedeles turned towards a small paddock his shadow fell across Kiram and for an instant Kiram felt a deathly chill and suffocating darkness grip him. He thought he saw Fedeles straighten and almost turn back towards him.

But then Firaj snorted anxiously, pulling him ahead. Fedeles gave a strange laugh and then followed the horse to the paddock without even a glance back.

Kiram was shuddering and clammy when he reached the street. Sunlight felt like a blessing as it touched his face. Far out across the city he spotted crows flying and thought he even heard their voices. Then he realized that the Grunito chapel bells had stopped ringing. Nestor's wedding was underway.

And the perfection of Donamillo's plan took his breath away. During the wedding Javier and every other Hellion in the chapel would be unarmed.

Kiram sprinted for the Grunito house.

Chapter Twenty-four

Bar the gates!" Kiram didn't wait for the two footmen to respond. He threw himself against the heavy wrought iron. The hinges groaned and squealed as if they hadn't been moved in decades.

"Soldiers are riding against the Grunito house!" Kiram shouted. "Help me get these gates closed, damn it!"

A young Cadeleonian footman opened his mouth to question Kiram but then, catching Kiram's expression, he and his companion simply threw their weight against the gates, slamming them closed. It took all three of them to lift the thick crossbars into place and lock them down. Even as heavy as they were Kiram knew the bars wouldn't hold for long, not against two dozen mounted soldiers.

"They're armed so don't try to fight them," Kiram told the two footmen. "But don't open the gates for them either. Make them break them down. We need all the time we can get."

Both the footmen blanched—their eyes were wide and scared now. One of them nodded to Kiram. He left it at that.

His lungs burned and his body was drenched with sweat, but he still raced as fast as he could for the house. Inside he caught a Hal diim servant whom he'd seen directing the household staff.

The woman looked alarmed by the sight of Kiram and even more worried when Kiram grabbed her arm.

"There are mounted soldiers coming to assault the wedding party," Kiram gasped at her.

"I beg your pardon, young Master Kir-Zaki?"

"Soldiers are riding here to attack the wedding party, damn it!" Kiram dragged in a deep breath of air. He didn't have time for this, but he couldn't do it all on his own either. "Someone needs to warn them in the chapel. The Hellions' horses need to

be saddled and they'll need weapons. We have fifteen minutes, maybe less."

For an instant the woman looked as if she hadn't understood a single word Kiram had said. Then her eyes locked on his and realization dawned in her expression.

"How many soldiers?" Her face had gone gray but her voice remained calm.

"At least two dozen of the royal bishop's men. They've poisoned their blades and they're riding warhorses. They'll have the gate down in no time."

"Then we will need to be quick," the woman replied. Kiram nodded. His legs already ached and his head still pounded.

The woman called out orders to other members of the staff and suddenly the hall echoed with shouts of acknowledgment and alarm. Men and women in the Grunito house colors raced to fulfill a flurry of orders: warning the wedding party, readying horses and securing the house for an assault. Wedding garlands were dropped. Trays of tiny cakes and Kir-Zaki sweets were abandoned to the dogs.

"You'd better be right about this," the Haldiim woman warned Kiram and there was something about her tone that made Kiram think briefly of his mother.

"I wish I weren't, but I am right," Kiram responded. "I'll gather the Hellions' saddlebags and their weapons. Can you send a few footmen up to help me?"

She nodded and Kiram bolted up the stairs. He tore through the Hellions' rooms, hurling their half-packed saddlebags to footmen and gathering the best weapons he could lay his hands on.

From his own trunk he only took the few supplies he could shove in his pockets. His bow, quiver and knives were far more important at the moment. He quickly strung his bow and slipped it and his quiver over his shoulders. Then he swept up Javier's saddlebags and sword and sprinted back down the stairs.

He ran for the chapel. He was halfway across the green lawn when a metallic scream wrenched the air. Men shouted threats and

obscenities as the clang of hooves pounding down the Grunito gate rang out. Kiram saw terror in the faces of the servants as they ran for the shelter of the main house.

Ahead of him the chapel doors flew open. Elezar and Javier rushed out, both unarmed but standing at the doors as if they could defend the chapel with just the ferocity of their glares. The delicate beauty of their silk clothes struck Kiram as pitiful protection after seeing the heavy leather armor and long swords of the bishop's men.

"Go now!" Javier shouted back into the chapel.

Cadeleonian men and women in silks and jewels burst from the chapel. Kiram wove between them, catching glimpses of familiar faces and briefly meeting the terrified glances of strangers. Lady Grunito carried one of her young sons in her arms and Lord Grunito swept up another of the boys when he tripped. Kiram thought he saw Nestor and Riossa running side by side as he dodged through the chaos of fleeing wedding guests. He lurched out of the way of two beefy choirboys and sped through a gaggle of women in velvet gowns. At last he broke clear of the panicked crowd and reached Javier. He tossed him his sword.

"Well done, Underclassman Kiram." Javier gave him the briefest smile; then his attention returned to the grounds ahead of him.

"Take this." Kiram handed one of Majdi's long fighting knives over to Elezar. "Your long sword is with your horse. They should—"

Timoteo and several footmen sprinted past them, their arms loaded with gold chalices and jewel-studded books. They raced down across the lawn towards the house. Then Atreau and Morisio appeared at the doors.

"Everyone's out," Morisio told Javier. His face looked clammy with sweat and Atreau was pallid as a corpse.

Javier glanced to Kiram. "You were saying something about horses?"

"They should be saddled and ready by now," Kiram informed him. "I had weapons sent to the stables as well."

"Thank God for you, Kiram," Atreau whispered. And even Elezar gave him a nod of acknowledgment.

"There are other soldiers—" Kiram began to explain but Javier cut him off.

"Tell me on the way to the stable."

Then all five of them bolted for the stables. Kiram shouted what he had overheard of the captain's plans as they ran.

"So if we can get past these two dozen soldiers we'll still be trapped between the twelve mounted soldiers at the High Street and pikemen at the city gate." Javier shook his head. "This is a hell of a day to have a hangover."

Atreau simply moaned in response. Morisio gave a strained laugh.

In the stables Kiram found that Verano had been saddled for him to ride and that Nestor had saddled a roan gelding for himself. He looked oddly contradictory tightening a girth while dressed in a resplendent red brocade coat and dusted with gold powder.

"What do you think you're doing?" Elezar demanded of Nestor.

"Fighting beside my fellow Hellions," Nestor responded.

"You should be with your wife—" The rest of Elezar's argument was drowned out by the loud sounds of Atreau vomiting into a feed pail.

"You need all the help you can get," Nestor said. "And you don't have time to argue."

"He's right. The more of us there are the better our chances of taking the city gates." Javier swung up onto Lunacruz's back. He frowned down at Atreau. "Can you do this?"

"Certainly." Atreau shoved his black hair back from his face. Just looking at them Kiram felt sure they wouldn't last in a fight, certainly not against rested professional soldiers. Atreau looked

dead already—his skin even more pale than Javier's. And then an idea came to Kiram.

"Javier, you and Atreau should change coats. And Atreau you should ride Morisio's gray stallion."

"What?" Atreau asked.

"Why?" Elezar demanded at the same moment.

Realization lit Nestor's face. "Brilliant! Atreau and Javier look enough alike that they could be mistaken for each other at a glance."

"Right," Kiram said. "When we reach the High Street Atreau and Morisio will ride for the dock. At the fourth pier you'll find a ship called the *Red Witch*. It's my brother's ship. Tell them Kiram sent you and he will see that you're safe."

"So we'll be drawing off the riders from the High Street?" Morisio asked.

"They'll have to split their numbers to pursue two parties," Kiram responded.

"I don't like Atreau posing as me." The concern in Javier's voice was obvious to them all.

"Honestly, it'll do your reputation with the ladies some good," Atreau responded with a wan smile, then swung up onto Morisio's light gray stallion. "I want to do it, Javier. I may be in no shape to fight but I can stay on a horse's back even in my sleep. I can be sick on a ship just as well as I can be sick on the road. And this way there will be fewer men after you when you take the city gates."

"I'll make sure he's safe," Morisio added.

They didn't have time to argue, Javier had to know that. He didn't look happy but he exchanged his formal black and silver coat for Atreau's amber one.

"All right." Javier's spoke coolly, his expression hard. "We go into the woods and draw the bishop's men from the front gate. Once they're amidst the trees, we circle back and make for the street."

Suddenly the crashing noise in the distance went silent. The front gate of the Grunito house had fallen.

There were no questions; they simply rode as Javier commanded, racing to reach the wooded cover of the Grunitos' private hunting grounds.

Kiram's pulse surged as the thunder of the horses charging from behind rolled over him. A rider shouted for them to halt and invoked the name of the royal bishop. Javier responded with an obscene gesture and then they all swept into the shadows of the woods.

Only a few yards in, Javier reined Lunaluz off the dirt path and into the thickest trees. Kiram and the rest of the Hellions followed. First Atreau and then Morisio surged past Kiram. The terrifying awareness that he was falling behind gripped him. Branches brushed past his face as he veered between trees. Wild birds startled into flight and still he knew he wasn't riding fast enough. Already he'd lost sight of Javier. Then Nestor swept in beside him.

"I think we've got them all in the woods now!" Nestor shouted over the thunder of horses' hooves.

A glance back assured Kiram that they had. A wall of men in leather armor riding huge warhorses charged down upon them. Sunlight flashed on the naked blades of their swords.

Kiram clenched his reins and despite his fear of falling he urged his mount ahead faster.

Behind him the royal bishop's men fanned out as the density of trees forced them apart. Ahead Kiram glimpsed a white stallion flashing between the dark trunks of the old oaks.

"Right!" Elezar shouted, his eyes on Nestor. Kiram realized that they had to break clear of the bishop's men now and make for the gate.

Kiram turned his mount to the right, demanding all of the horse's speed for the charge out of the woods. Beneath him, Verano responded with more power than Kiram was prepared for. He nearly slipped from his seat as they suddenly catapulted

ahead. Branches slapped his arms and legs. His heart hammered in his throat. The dark shadows of trees blurred as Kiram flashed past them.

And then he was in the open, racing across Lady Grunito's gardens, then out past the ruined front gate and into the open street. Javier and Atreau rode nearly abreast. Morisio charged just behind them. Nestor rode only a few feet to Kiram's right and Elezar came up on his left.

Ahead of them all on High Street, twelve mounted soldiers formed a dark, still line in the midst of bustling carts and carriages.

In an instant they charged Javier and Atreau. Men and women on the street cried out. Cart drivers veered out of the way as best they could. The street became a riot and in the wave of panic, Atreau and Morisio both drove their mounts left towards the docks while Javier rode right into the busy road leading to the city gate.

Kiram followed Javier, as did Nestor and Elezar. Glancing back Kiram saw two of the bishop's men light out after Atreau and Morisio but the rest followed Kiram in his pursuit of Javier.

Ahead of him, Kiram could see why so few of the soldiers had mistaken Atreau for Javier. Mounted on Lunaluz, Javier seemed to fly through the crowded street. They soared over a goat cart as if lifted by magic. They veered and bounded through the press of carriages and street vendors like light skipping across a lake. Even terrified as they were, bystanders stared in awe as Javier passed them. No one else could have been the lord of the white hell.

Kiram's own passage was in no way so easy or majestic. Peddlers and beggars seemed to veer out at him. Wine barrels and oxen appeared in the middle of his path. It took all of his concentration to keep Verano from charging straight into a Mirogoth man and his dog.

Kiram could hear the bishop's men gaining ground behind him and suddenly he remembered the race through Zancoda. He'd done this before, he told himself. He could do it again.

But the women up on the balconies of the buildings weren't throwing down flowers but instead emptying chamber pots, and the riders behind Kiram weren't just after some ribbon. The chaos choking the street seemed impossible to navigate.

Then up ahead of him Kiram saw an opening. He charged forward and found a lane that must have opened in Javier's wake. Kiram thought he could see Nestor's and Elezar's brilliant brocade coats shining ahead of him.

Then a tiny form darted out into the road—a little girl, running for her mother across the street. Kiram jerked Verano back and nearly flew off the horse. He dug into his saddle as Verano turned aside and tossed his head. He steeled himself for a blow from the soldiers pursuing him.

But the bishop's men took no pause. They sped past Kiram into the open road. The little girl froze in terror and then fell beneath the soldiers' horses. Her single pathetic cry crushed to silence in a moment.

Kiram jerked his eyes away from the bloody dress and broken limbs. He heard a woman screaming but couldn't bring himself to look at her. The cold, terrible reality of just what these men would do rushed over Kiram.

At Kiram's urging, Verano leapt clear of the child's remains and surged after the bishop's men. One of them bore down on Elezar and a second shot after Nestor. The remaining eight tore after Javier. Kiram only wondered briefly why he had been of no interest to them. The bishop's men were expecting to hunt down well-dressed Cadeleonian noblemen fleeing from a wedding, not some Haldiim boy wearing traveler's leathers. He was nothing to them, just as that child had been.

The clash of blades rang out as one of the bishop's men swung his sword and Elezar parried the blow and then struck back with such force that the other man tumbled from his horse. Kiram glimpsed Elezar's expression then. He looked terrified. Following his glance, Kiram saw why.

The man pursuing Nestor was almost on top of him and Nestor didn't even know it. Elezar rode for his brother, but Kiram could see that he wouldn't arrive before the soldier's naked blade drove through Nestor's back.

Kiram's heart felt like it was ripping apart in his chest. Fury and frustration at his own helplessness coursed through him. And then Kiram realized that there was something he could do, must do. The thought terrified him—but not so much as watching his friend die.

He urged Verano ahead and gave him free rein, trusting the horse's training and instincts. In a quick shrug he swung his bow from his shoulder and drew an arrow. Kiram concentrated on the man riding down on Nestor as if he were just another of so many targets Kiram had struck. The chaos of the street, Elezar's wild howls of rage, even his own pounding heartbeat seemed to fade.

He released the arrow. It punched through the man's neck. The rider jerked. Then his sword dropped from his hand and he fell beneath his own horse. Only as the horse whinnied and veered to the side did Nestor see it. His face was ashen as he peered through his gold spectacles.

Kiram met Elezar's gaze for just an instant and Elezar nodded to him. Then Elezar closed the distance between himself and his brother. Kiram concentrated on the men pursuing Javier.

Kiram had eleven arrows left and ahead of him rode eight men. No, eight targets. He couldn't think of them as men with faces and families. They were things, things that would kill Javier if they weren't stopped.

Kiram shot two men down before a third turned back from his pursuit of Javier. When the soldier laid eyes on Kiram and saw the bow in his hand, his wary expression turned to rage and he charged. Kiram loosed an arrow. But he missed the exposed gap at the man's throat and instead his arrow punched into the thick leather protecting the man's chest. The strike only seemed to enrage the soldier more.

“Haldiim coward!” the soldier screamed. He was close enough that Kiram could see his pale face clearly. Kiram fired a second arrow and this time it drove deep into the soldier’s mount, burying up to the fletching in the animal’s unprotected leg. The horse fell, throwing its rider like a rag doll into the flagstones of the street. The soldier didn’t move again, though the horse struggled piteously to rise.

Kiram felt sick but raced on. The street curved and as Kiram rode past abandoned carriages and overturned flower carts, he saw the bloody bodies of two more of the bishop’s men. Just ahead of him, the bishop’s three remaining men closed in on Javier.

Javier wheeled Lunaluz around and met the nearest of the soldiers head on. Their blades crashed and rang as they passed and circled each other. Then the other two soldiers attacked Javier’s back.

Kiram screamed a warning but still one of the soldiers landed a blow across Javier’s shoulder. Kiram buried a black arrow in the man’s skull. The remaining two soldiers were already on Javier and he parried their blows with a blinding speed. But Kiram saw Javier’s blood spill across Lunaluz’s white hide.

The combat was too close for Kiram to dare release another arrow. He raced to reach Javier’s side.

Javier swore in Cadeleonian and Haldiim. Lunaluz reared back, striking at the other horses. Then Javier plunged his sword into one of the soldier’s chests. The man rocked back and toppled from his saddle. Javier spun his blade back, parrying a blow from his one remaining attacker. The soldier thrust for Javier’s thigh but Javier moved faster, driving his sword up through the man’s leather armor and severing his neck.

The soldier’s head struck the ground a moment before his body. The flagstones of the street were slick and red with blood.

When Kiram reached Javier’s side he could see that Javier had received at least two deep slashes, one across his right shoulder and another just above his left knee.

“I’m fine,” Javier said before Kiram could ask.

"Their swords were poisoned."

"That would explain the familiar tingling." Javier flashed a hard smile, all teeth and bravado. "Honestly, I'm beginning to find muerate poison a little passé."

"I'm serious."

"I know. But let's not frighten the children. We've still got a city gate to get past." Javier pointed and Kiram turned back to see Elezar and Nestor round the corner. All semblance of gold dust was long gone from their faces and Elezar's coat front was spattered with blood, though as far as Kiram could see he looked unhurt. They drew to a halt beside Kiram and Javier.

"How bad?" Elezar asked, taking in Javier's injuries.

"I'll live. You two?"

"Safe and whole, thanks to Kiram," Nestor responded. "Good shooting."

Kiram just nodded. He was glad to have saved Nestor and Javier, but the fact that he'd murdered five men wasn't something he was ready to feel proud of.

"The two soldiers who went after Atreau and Morisio apparently lost them and came back for you," Elezar informed Javier. "They've been dealt with."

That explained the blood on Elezar's coat. Nestor looked a little queasy.

In the relative quiet Kiram could hear alarm bells ringing. People watched them warily from balconies and the doorways of shops.

"The men we lost at the Grunito house will probably have regrouped by now. They'll follow us up from High Street, I'll bet," Kiram commented.

Javier nodded his agreement almost absently. He scanned the discarded and abandoned carts, wagons and barrels that littered the street around them.

"Any thoughts about the city gates?" Elezar asked Javier.

"One." Javier offered them all a smug smile. "What do you say to dazzling them with a little hellfire?"

Kiram knew better than to point out that the ‘hellfire’ hadn’t been all that dependable or that Javier didn’t seem to be in any condition to control the shajdi even if he could summon it. Javier gave him a glance as if expecting an objection.

“Hellfire sounds good as anything else at this point,” Elezar replied. Nestor nodded his agreement.

“All right. Then we need those jars of oil.” Javier pointed to the red clay jars in a cart. He glanced at Kiram. “You don’t by chance remember the name of that lieutenant who’s waiting for us with his pikemen, do you?”

“Montaval,” Kiram supplied.

“Good. Then I think we’re ready to depart Anacleto.”

The huge northern gates of Anacleto stood open, but a slow moving sea of merchant’s wagons, farm carts and carriages filled the wide street. Herders directed flocks of goats, sheep, and even geese around their fellow travelers. Ahead Kiram recognized the purple crosses and gold bars on the uniforms of the bishop’s men. The city guards stood aside, looking annoyed, while the bishop’s men harassed traders, travelers and beggars alike in their search for Javier.

When a Mirogoth musician attempted to ride past, he and his horse were nearly impaled on the long pikes that the bishop’s men held ready. Even at a distance Kiram could see that the musician was simply drunk. Still the bishop’s men knocked him to the ground and searched him for coins and trinkets before allowing him to pass.

Kiram took a deep breath and gauged the route he would ride between carriages and wagons one last time. Nestor, Elezar and Javier would be charging down behind him and he knew he wouldn’t have the luxury to pause or slow his ride.

“In the name of the royal bishop, make way!” Kiram shouted. He urged Verano down the slight hill and between two black lacquered carriages.

“A message for Lieutenant Montaval! Make way!” Kiram roared. Men and women bolted out of his path. Kiram didn’t dare look back to see how well the confusion in his wake masked Javier, Elezar and Nestor’s passage through the crowd.

“Make way!” Kiram drew as much attention to himself as he could. “A message for Lieutenant Montaval! In the name of the royal bishop, make way!”

Hearing his name called, the lieutenant commanded travelers to the side, just as Javier had said he would.

Verano dodged a slow-moving old man and nearly threw Kiram as he leaped past two snarling Mirogoth hounds.

Ahead of him a path cleared. The city guards looked curious but made no attempt to approach. They left Kiram to Lieutenant Montaval and his hulking pikemen. The portly lieutenant started towards Kiram. The pikemen studied him, some with curiosity, others with suspicion. But not one of them watched the movements to Kiram’s left.

“Message for Lieutenant Montaval!” Kiram hollered as if he could somehow fail to recognize who the lieutenant was.

“What’s your damn message!” the lieutenant demanded.

Verano pranced and snorted beneath Kiram, seeming to catch Kiram’s nervous energy.

“Javier Tornesal is on his way!” Kiram pointed back through the crowd and out to his right, where a group of horse traders mingled among carriages and carts.

As the lieutenant and his pikemen turned to the right, Nestor and Elezar hurled their oil jars at the pikemen. The clay shattered, spattering oil, and Javier charged forward. White flames gushed from his hands and wild sparks sprayed out. In an instant the oil caught fire and the pikemen fled or fell burning. Lieutenant Montaval spun on Kiram and Kiram kicked the man back into the wall.

Javier charged past the burning gates and Kiram joined Elezar and Nestor behind him. Mounted city guards lit out behind them but

gave up the chase soon after the road turned into the wild northern woods. Kiram suspected that the speed with which they abandoned their pursuit had more to do with their resentment of the royal bishop's troops than the threatening shadows of the forest.

Still the shadows gave Kiram a chill and sped his heart as they seemed to snake and dance between the wind-tossed branches.

As they continued riding, fatigue and a growing familiarity with the forest darkness wore away the edge of Kiram's nervousness. As much as the surrounding shadows seemed to move and watch, the road they traveled seemed always the same. Hours passed. Hunger gnawed at Kiram's stomach. The sunlight dimmed and cold evening winds whipped over the open expanse of the road. At last Javier signaled them to halt.

Kiram's legs almost buckled beneath him as he swung off Verano. Nestor moaned softly and rubbed his own back.

The four of them stumbled off the road and found a small glade where the horses could feed on wild grass and flowers.

The only bedding to be found were mats of soft moss and saddle blankets. Nestor had brought several wedding cookies and a goat-skin of water but there was nothing else to eat or drink. Kiram knew that hunting now would only waste his remaining arrows. It was far too dark to find any animal, much less hit one.

"Help yourselves to my share of the bounty. I'm too tired to care." Elezar dropped down onto his saddle blanket and closed his eyes.

"Wait!" Nestor dug into his dusty coat. "I have a couple marzipan pears, as well. Here, Elezar, you love them."

Elezar gave no response, but Javier took one and thanked Nestor. Kiram frowned down at Elezar's still form. In the dim light he couldn't be sure but it seemed to him that some of the blood on Elezar's coat was still wet.

"Here, Kiram." Nestor handed him a golden cookie studded with candy rosettes. Kiram ate it thankfully and drank a little of Nestor's water.

"Should we make a fire?" Kiram asked.

"It's not cold enough that we'll freeze without one. And the light will only attract unwanted attention." Javier winced as he knelt down on his blanket. He ran his hand over his thigh. The deep shadows didn't quite hide the look of pain on his face. Then a little light flickered beneath his hands and Javier relaxed back against the trunk of a tree.

"We all just need to rest right now," Javier murmured and then he fell silent. After a few more moments, Kiram heard his breathing deepen and slow to the rhythm of sleep.

"I feel like one of us should keep guard, or something," Nestor said quietly.

"Do you think you could stay awake?" Kiram asked.

"No," Nestor admitted.

"Me either," Kiram replied. "At least if we sleep we'll all be rested by the morning."

"True," Nestor agreed. They both settled in their blankets. Kiram watched the overhead stars. Nestor nibbled the last of his marzipan pear.

"Hell of a honeymoon," Nestor sighed softly, almost speaking to himself.

"I'm sorry about that."

"Couldn't be helped, could it?" Nestor responded.

"You could have stayed at the Grunito house."

"Nah." Nestor shook his head. "Even Riossa knew that I had to stand with my friends when it came to a fight." Nestor lay back in his blanket.

Kiram could think of a lot of men and women who wouldn't have agreed with that sentiment. Certainly Musni wouldn't have put a friend's welfare before his own pleasure.

"You're the best friend any man could hope for, Nestor."

"Thanks." Nestor sounded touched and being a Cadeleonian no doubt the sentiment embarrassed him a little. "No point in falling in love with me, though. I'm a married man now."

Kiram laughed and then he wished Nestor good night. Nestor gave a groggy response, already settling into sleep.

Kiram's blanket reeked of animal sweat but he didn't care. He was just relieved that they had all gotten away. He glanced again to Elezar. He lay so still, his chest hardly rising with breath. Kiram wondered if he should wake him. Elezar would hate that. Doubtless he'd call Kiram some filthy name. Elezar shifted a little and Kiram let go of his worry.

He slept and dreamed of screaming horses and the sound of arrows plunging into living flesh. Blood spilled, turned black, and moved like a dark stream as it pooled around Kiram. Something cold and terrible pierced his flesh, plunging deep into his chest. A dark hand held him against escape. He tried to cry out but he couldn't draw a breath.

Kiram.

The voice was soft and familiar. The pain of his dream seemed to lift.

Kiram, you must wake up.

Alizadeh, Kiram thought and even in his sleep his hand curled around the lotus medallion he wore.

Wake up! You are in danger and your friend is dying!

Kiram's eyes shot open. Predawn light and long blue shadows filled the small glade. *Alizadeh* stood a few feet in front of him beneath a tall elm tree. A cold wind rustled through the branches and *Alizadeh's* form flickered and shuddered and for an instant Kiram glimpsed black crows' wings and glassy eyes staring at him from the hollows of *Alizadeh's* body.

I cannot hide you from the shadow curse much longer. You must be quick. Wake the others.

Kiram staggered to his feet. He shook Nestor awake and then Javier, but Elezar only groaned. His body felt like ice.

"Who is that?" Nestor stared at *Alizadeh* and held his blanket close as if he'd been found naked. "How did he find us?"

"It's all right, Nestor. He's my teacher." Javier stepped closer to *Alizadeh* and held up his hand in a Bahiim gesture of welcome that *Alizadeh* returned.

Lord of the White Hell

The shadow curse is hunting you and you are too far from the Circle of Red Oaks for me to hide your presence any longer. Alizadeh's voice carried over them like a whispering breeze.

Still lying in his saddle blanket, Elezar opened his eyes but didn't seem to see Kiram, much less Alizadeh. He closed his eyes again and didn't respond as Kiram shook him harder.

Ride the Old Road, Alizadeh told Javier. The blessed willows will know the shajdi's light and protect your path to the foot of Zancoda. But you must be fast. Death is already among you.

Alizadeh suddenly turned his head, and again Kiram caught the flash of crow's feathers and sharp beaks. Alizadeh looked straight at Elezar.

As if pulled by an invisible force Elezar's eyes opened and he lifted his head to face Alizadeh.

If you throw away your life, boy, then I will lay claim to it. Your strength is needed now. Rise and live!

Alizadeh shuddered and then his body broke apart as if it were no more than a play of light upon the elm leaves. Hundreds of black crows rose from the surrounding trees. They circled and then plunged down upon Elezar. Kiram fell back as a powerful wind pushed him aside. Nestor cried out in horror and stumbled to his feet. Only Javier remained still and calm.

The crows struck Elezar like shadows, falling across his body without leaving a mark. Yet with each impact Elezar gasped in a breath and shook. Color rose in his cheeks and light shone in his gaze. Then the crows were gone and the entire forest seemed strangely quiet.

Elezar sat up, breathing fast, his face sweating and flushed.

"You should have told me you were injured!" Javier frowned at Elezar.

"You had enough to worry about." Elezar looked away.

"Your death wouldn't exactly take a load off my mind, Elezar," Javier snapped.

Elezar's jaw worked and he sighed heavily. "I'm sorry. I'll be more careful next time."

Kiram supposed that was the best any of them could hope for but Nestor looked deeply hurt. Despite Elezar's embarrassed expression Nestor threw his arms around his older brother, hugging him and then bursting into tears.

"Nestor." Elezar's face flushed deeper red but his voice went soft. "Nestor, I won't do it again, all right. I promise. I'm fine... Nestor, you have to let me get up."

Nestor drew back and wiped his face with his dirty shirt-sleeve. "You better not die."

"Same goes for you," Elezar returned. Kiram didn't think he'd ever seen Elezar look so touched or so self-conscious all at once.

"All right. Now that we're all agreed that staying alive is the course we want to follow," Javier interrupted, "we need to get moving. There is something worse than the bishop's men after us now. If it catches us I'm not sure that any of us will survive."

"What do you mean?" Elezar asked. "What is it?"

"The Tornesal curse." Javier rolled up his saddle blanket and quickly buckled his sword belt around his waist. He didn't offer any further explanation but both Nestor and Elezar seemed to catch his urgency.

They gathered their gear and saddled the horses. Kiram's mouth tasted like dirt and his hair was full of fallen leaves and moss. His body ached and the morning cold numbed his fingers. But despite clumsy discomfort, the memory of the shadow curse hunting him sped his movements.

"The Tornesal curse?" Nestor fumbled with his stirrup and then climbed into his saddle.

Javier gave him a curt nod but his attention was on the surrounding trees. He stroked Lunaluz's neck absently.

"It's taken possession of Fedeles and we have to get to the academy if we're going to stop it and save him," Kiram explained.

"And that man just now, was he a ghost? Or some kind of forest spirit?" Nestor asked. "What does he teach you?"

Javier sprang up into his saddle. "He's a Bahiim, a Hal diim holy man. He's been training me since I converted."

Nestor gaped at Javier. "You converted?"

"I knew something was going on," Elezar grumbled. "You never used to hang around in trees day and night."

Kiram silently mounted his own horse.

"So, it was Bahiim magic that saved Elezar just now, wasn't it?" Nestor asked.

Javier nodded and whatever gripe Elezar might have voiced against Javier's conversion went unspoken.

"Can you do that?" Nestor asked Javier. "I mean, turn into birds or bring someone back to life?"

"No." Javier shook his head. "Magic like that takes years of practice and requires a kind of self control that I haven't mastered."

"But Kiram's been part of the Haldiim religion all his life. I bet he knows all kinds of magic." Nestor looked excited and Kiram realized that Nestor was as delighted by Bahiim magic as he'd been with the idea of Mirogoths who could transform themselves into wolves.

"No such luck," Kiram informed Nestor. "I know less about it than Javier does."

A cold chill passed over them and suddenly the entire forest around them seemed darker. Elezar sat up straight in his saddle and Nestor gasped. Birds flew from the surrounding trees. Wild hares and squirrels fled as if racing to escape a fire.

"What was that?" Elezar demanded.

"The shadow curse. We don't have time to talk. We have to find the Old Road. Now." Javier urged Lunaluz ahead.

They followed Javier through the forest as he searched among stands of gnarled trees and around moss covered outcroppings of stone. Kiram had no idea what Javier was looking for and apparently Javier didn't either. When Nestor asked, Javier simply told him that he'd know when he found it.

The shadows around them deepened and every twig that cracked beneath the horses' hooves echoed through the eerie quiet of the seemingly empty forest. Kiram tried to ignore the

sharp cramps cutting into his belly, but when Nestor groaned and gripped his gut, Kiram realized that he wasn't the only one feeling the shadow curse's presence. Even the horses seemed agitated and uncomfortable. Kiram murmured soothing words to his mount while Javier turned Lunaluz back and forth through the forest.

Then at the edge of a stream, Javier stopped his restless search. Two huge willows stood on either side of the mossy stream bank.

"Here." Javier urged Lunaluz down into the shallow waters. "Come quickly and stay close to me."

The huge willows bowed over the stream, their long branches dangling into the waters and obscuring the view ahead.

Javier whispered words that Kiram only half understood: the names of ancient deities and invocations of arcane guardians. An eerie cool wind whipped through the willow branches. They swayed and trembled like anxious fingers. Javier raised his arms and flexed his hands as if he were wrenching some invisible cord asunder. As Javier jerked his arms apart, a loud crack sounded and the ground trembled. All the horses except Lunaluz pranced nervously. Kiram soothed Verano as best he could.

"This path is mine to take. I will not be barred from it!" Javier shouted. His tone alone was enough to make Nestor startle. Elezar scanned the surrounding woods as if expecting an attack.

White flames gushed from Javier's hands and leaped into the branches of the willow trees. But like the trees in the Circle of Red Oaks they did not burn but instead lit up like stained glass in sunlight. A second shudder passed through the ground beneath them and the waters flowing over the stream bed parted to reveal a path of white stones etched with Bahiim symbols.

Overhead the willow branches curled back like gleaming glass curtains, revealing a delicate white archway and the flat darkness within it. Kiram knew that there should be more of the streambed on the other side, not this deep blackness.

Lord of the White Hell

A dry, bitter breeze crept from the archway and Kiram shuddered as it brushed over his face. He remembered the smell of the poison Rafie had made and the feeling of his grandmother's dead hand in his own. Beneath him, Verano shivered.

White flames spread over Javier's body as he lowered his arms and took up his reins. Then he urged Lunaluz ahead and they plunged into the darkness of the archway.

Without a word, Kiram, Elezar and Nestor followed him.

Chapter Twenty-five

Darkness pervaded. If a sky hung above him or ground stretched beneath him, Kiram could not see it. He felt Verano moving under him, but he couldn't hear the horse's hooves strike ground. Javier and Lunaluz blazed ahead of him and he chased that only source of light. Beside him Elezar and Nestor were dim figures, illuminated only by the white blaze Javier cast across them.

They rode ceaselessly but their surroundings never seemed to change. Kiram felt his legs going numb, but he didn't dare to slow for fear of losing sight of Javier. The ache of hunger ground at his belly and then dulled. Kiram clung to his reins, unsure how many hours had passed or even if they had stretched into days. His eyes burned and strange images flickered at the corners of his vision.

"Elezar," Nestor called suddenly. He was smiling into the darkness. "Look, it's Lady-dog! I think she's hurt. Here, girl!"

"Lady-dog is dead, Nestor." Elezar's gaze didn't leave Javier. "This place is full of devils. Don't be tricked."

But when Kiram glanced after a movement to his left, he could swear he saw his grandmother beckoning to him through the darkness. His heart ached at the thought of her all alone in this desolate place. He couldn't just leave her.

Suddenly a strong hand caught his reins and jerked Kiram back into the faint light. Kiram looked up to see Elezar leaning from his own mount.

"Don't look at them, damn it!" Elezar snarled.

Kiram's heart raced at the thought of what he'd nearly done. If he'd lost Javier's light he would never have found his way out of this place.

Elezar straightened and snapped his attention back onto Javier. Nestor rode close beside Elezar, looking frantic.

“Where are we?” Nestor asked.

“I think this is the Sorrowland,” Elezar said.

Nestor looked suddenly very frightened and lifted one hand as if shielding himself from the view of the surrounding blackness.

“What’s the Sorrowland?” Kiram asked.

Elezar glanced only briefly to Kiram. “The dead must cross the Sorrowland to reach heaven. It’s filled with the regrets and losses of a lifetime. If they lure you into the darkness, your soul is lost for eternity.”

Kiram frowned at the answer. He only half believed in much of his own religion, and he certainly didn’t hold with any Cadeleonian beliefs. Still, Kiram couldn’t deny that Elezar seemed to be right.

Memories of his grandmother, the warmth and comfort she had always offered him, haunted Kiram. He wished, not for the first time, that he’d been able to tell her how much he loved her before she’d died. He thought he could hear her crying but didn’t dare to look out into the darkness again. He concentrated on Javier’s straight back, desperately trying to ignore the ghostly images flickering at the edges of his vision.

Kiram pondered how it was possible that Elezar so easily maintained his focus on Javier. But then Kiram wondered if Javier was the single greatest loss in Elezar’s life. Nothing in the surrounding darkness could inspire more desire or regret. Nothing else could feel as lost to him.

As for what Javier himself saw, Kiram had no idea. He prayed that it was nothing, that the light of the shajdi protected him, because of all of them he had known the most grief and suffered the deepest losses.

But Javier didn’t waver from his path. He never slowed or called out into the surrounding black. He rode and they followed. And it seemed that their constant chase would never end. Kiram’s entire body hurt from the pounding rhythm of riding. He didn’t know how the horses could keep moving or how he could remain

awake. Sometimes it seemed like the light radiating from Javier held them all in one endless motion and only its constancy kept them all from plunging into complete oblivion.

Then suddenly a dusky sky broke overhead and the horses' hooves clattered against cobblestones. Kiram blinked at the evening stars and the moon as if he were looking at a blazing sun. He'd grown so used to pitch blackness that twilight seemed bright, almost luminous.

Glancing again to the moon, Kiram realized that it was now full, which meant that nearly three days had passed since they had entered the archway. Three days of riding without food, water or rest. He had no idea how they had done it or even how far they had come.

Slowly, he picked out the details of their surroundings. Apple trees lined the winding road. Low, stone walls divided open fields where young stalks of sunflowers stood among rows of spring wheat. Before them the road wound up to the dark fortress of the Sagrada Academy.

"Thank God!" Nestor cried. His voice sounded dry and cracked.

"I don't think God had much to do with it," Elezar told Nestor.

The light of the moon seemed to burn away Javier's dark form. Kiram studied his hunched back. He swayed in his saddle with his head bowed low and the reins hanging limply from his hands. Suddenly Kiram realized that he was about to fall.

Kiram spurred Verano ahead and caught Javier before he toppled from Lunaluz's back. He reeked of sweat, smoke and dry blood. The sharp angles of his body seemed terribly pronounced as if he'd been starved for weeks. His dark eyes looked hollow and haunted.

"Kiram?" Javier's voice came out in a rasp.

"I'm here," Kiram assured him.

Javier grasped his hand with silent desperation. He said nothing but bowed his head against Kiram's shoulder and held

him as if he could not bear to let go. Kiram couldn't imagine what visions Javier had endured in the Sorrowland. He could only return Javier's embrace with all his strength and try not to think of what Nestor or Elezar made of their display. He held Javier and forgot everything else.

Then Lunaluz gave an exasperated snort and Javier drew back from Kiram.

"Apparently we're boring my horse." Javier patted the stallion's muscular neck. Then he sighed and turned his gaze to the dark silhouette of the Sagrada Academy. "Well, I suppose there's still much to be done."

He straightened in his saddle, composure lending him an air of command despite his obvious exhaustion. Then he turned to address Elezar and Nestor. "Are you still with me?"

Elezar nodded his assent. Nestor gaped for a moment but then he too agreed.

When they reached the academy grounds they found them mostly deserted. One groom greeted them at the stable but didn't rouse himself when Javier assured him that they could stable their own horses. However, as they left the stables Kiram noticed blue jays gathering in the surrounding trees and circling the academy roofs.

"That's odd," Nestor commented as he peered up at the birds.

"What are they looking for?" Elezar asked.

"Us." Javier sped up his pace.

"Are they your teacher's birds?" Nestor asked hopefully.

"No, they belong to our enemy," Kiram replied. The surrounding trees looked like they had bloomed with thousands of brilliant blue bodies.

"I think we might be in trouble," Kiram said. They were still yards from the dormitory and too far from the stables to retreat there for shelter.

Then the jays dived them.

"Run!" Javier shouted and they all bolted for the dormitory. Talons clawed at their scalps and exposed arms. Hard beaks

slashed and stabbed. Blood dribbled into Kiram's eyes as a jay lacerated his brow. Kiram struck back at the small bodies but there were so many. For each one that he knocked away another swept down.

In the flurry of wings and beaks, Elezar swore and Nestor howled. Javier snarled a low grating word and flames gushed up to engulf the birds soaring above them. The jays shrieked and burning bodies fell from the air, but moments later more took flight, pursuing Kiram, Elezar, Javier and Nestor as they raced to the doors of the dormitory.

Inside, Elezar barred the doors and continued to swear at the jays under his breath. Blood trickled from a cut across his nose and his hands were a mass of scratches. Nestor pressed his hand against a gash in his cheek. His gold spectacles had been torn away and his calf was bleeding.

Javier leaned against a wall, breathing hard. He too bore a multitude of small scrapes and cuts but they didn't worry Kiram as much as Javier's pure exhaustion. Javier closed his eyes and swayed on his feet, seeming to be on the edge of collapse, but he caught himself.

He needed to sleep. Kiram wondered how well the wards up in their old tower room would protect Javier. Could he afford to rest up there for a few hours?

"We need to get Kiram to the infirmary," Javier said. Both Elezar and Nestor glanced to Kiram in alarm.

"I need to get to the mechanical cure that Scholar Donamillo created. They aren't what we thought they were, but if I'm right we can still use them," Kiram said. Now even Javier regarded him curiously. "I'll tell you everything on the way there."

As they staggered and limped through the halls, Kiram explained what he'd discovered in Yassin's journal and Scholar Donamillo's diary. Both Nestor and Elezar were horrified. Javier looked desolate.

"Every time I took him to a treatment," Javier murmured, "I was killing him."

"You couldn't have known, Javier," Elezar said. "None of us knew."

"He's right," Kiram agreed. "You aren't to blame. You thought you were protecting him and you did everything you could to help him."

"But I wasn't helping him at all."

"Now we will," Kiram assured him. "Fedeles is still there, I'm sure. Donamillo hasn't won yet."

As they moved deeper into the building, they passed servants dressed in the Sagrada colors. All of the men stared at their bloody, filthy condition, but strangely said nothing.

"Birds!" Nestor announced to one man. "Bloody birds went mad and attacked us."

"We're just popping in to the infirmary to get cleaned up," Kiram added.

But Kiram could tell that the servant's attention wasn't really on him, Elezar or Nestor. It was Javier, whom all of the passing staff members watched with a kind of shocked apprehension.

Kiram suddenly wondered if word of the royal bishop's ruling against Javier had reached the academy. He suspected that it had and when one servant suddenly bolted away, Kiram felt sure that the man had gone to raise some alarm that the hell-branded duke had returned to their midst.

"How hard do you think it would be to barricade the infirmary?" Kiram asked.

Javier offered him a weary smile. "We do think alike, don't we?"

When they reached the infirmary, they found the lamps dimmed but still burning. Scholar Blasio sat beside a bed, while across the room Genimo stood polishing one of Scholar Donamillo's mechanical cures. Genimo's eyes went wide at the sight of the four of them at the door and the polishing cloth dropped silently from his hand.

Donamillo lay on a bed, sunken and still as a corpse. Scholar Blasio stroked his older brother's waxy brow and whispered what sounded like a prayer over him. Only after smoothing the

blankets that covered his brother did he look up and see them in the doorway.

"Dear God!" Blasio cried. "Sit down. Sit down all of you and let me see what I can do."

"We aren't here for medical attention, Scholar," Kiram told him. "We're here because you were right about what your brother wrote in his journal. We have to stop him."

A watery gleam came to the scholar's eyes and he glanced to where Donamillo's body lay on the infirmary bed.

"He's nearly gone," Blasio said softly. Then he looked to Kiram. "I've been nursing his body for weeks hoping that he would come back—that if he would just return to me, it would somehow undo what he has done to himself and to everyone else."

"What on earth are you all talking about?" Genimo demanded. "What happened to you?"

"You wouldn't believe it," Nestor told him.

Scholar Blasio cleaned and dressed their wounds and ordered the servants to bring them food and drink.

Nestor nearly fell asleep on his feet once his wounds had been tended and he'd eaten. Elezar guided him to one of the cots and tucked him in. When Javier dropped to another cot moments later, Kiram felt relieved. It had been almost painful to watch Javier struggling to stay awake. Now he sprawled across a cot, snoring quietly. Elezar sat, bleary-eyed, on a cot between Javier's and Nestor's. He maintained his vigil over the two of them for nearly an hour before he too succumbed.

In the meantime Kiram inspected Scholar Donamillo's mechanical cures and flipped between the two journals, taking notes.

"What do you think you're going to do?" Genimo asked. His tone was genial enough but there was something in his wording that bothered Kiram.

"What I can," Kiram responded.

"Why don't I have a look?" Genimo reached for Yassin's journal but Kiram pulled it back from him.

“Thanks, but it wouldn’t do any good. They’re both written in Hal diim,” Kiram said quickly.

“Suit yourself.” Genimo shrugged and stalked back to the medicine cabinets. He picked up a tattered book and flipped through the pages. But as Kiram checked the mechanical cures for the symbols and invocations he found in Yassin’s journal, he felt Genimo watching him. The sensation made him uneasy and he considered writing his own notes in Hal diim.

But that would just make it more difficult for everyone else to help him reconstruct the mechanical cures. Besides, he might not like Genimo but that didn’t make him a traitor.

Kiram had already made that mistake once, in assuming that just because he was off-putting and bigoted Holy Father Habalan had to be the man responsible for the shadow curse. All the while he’d been blind to Scholar Donamillo’s machinations, simply because the two of them had shared tastes and ideas. He didn’t want to think that he could have idolized a man who committed such cruelty and yet he had.

Even now, Kiram felt sick with awe as he took in the beauty and pure mechanical mastery of Scholar Donamillo’s work. Every screw and incantation was precisely placed, perfectly crafted. The twelve iron ribs arched in magnificent geometry supporting 792 glass panels which interlocked to exactly align every curse and command that gave the mechanism its purpose. Even the wires of the harnesses were carefully braided and measured to exact lengths.

Kiram couldn’t deny that the mechanical cure was a masterpiece and the thought both repulsed and frightened him. He needed to reverse what Donamillo had done as quickly as possible but the intricacy and perfection of the mechanical cure defied replication. New glass panels and iron ribs as perfect as these certainly couldn’t be fabricated in a matter of weeks, much less a few days.

Kiram knelt on the floor, exhausted and frustrated. He glared at Donamillo’s journal, fighting the urge to hurl it across the room. He couldn’t compete with this level of experience and perfection.

His own steam engine looked simple and dull in comparison to Donamillo's breathtaking mechanism.

"The wisdom of age defeats the strength of youth," Kiram whispered to himself, remembering how smug Donamillo had been in the stable in Anacleto.

But Donamillo hadn't always been old and wise, had he? Kiram suddenly thought. Wisdom came with experience: trial and error. This perfect mechanical cure wasn't the first machine that Donamillo had built. There had been others and Kiram knew exactly where to find those slightly less ideal iron ribs and glass panels—the tower room.

Elation surged through Kiram's exhaustion. He bolted to his feet and, grabbing a lamp, started out the infirmary doors.

"Kiram?" Scholar Blasio gazed at him with gentle worry. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to bring your brother back to you." Kiram grinned. "Don't wait up for me."



In the tower storage room Kiram moved between the dozens of disused mechanical cures like a moth searching for a flame. In one only a few glass panels were viable, but among them was exactly the sequence of incantations that Kiram needed. He jotted notes and then moved to another broken machine. As he found more and more of the pieces he needed his pulse raced faster and he laughed to himself, half delirious with exhaustion and excitement. Steadily his notes grew into an exact design for the parts he required. He mapped everything out: where each glass panel and iron screw would come from and where they should go.

When he at last stumbled from the tower, he found morning light illuminating the marble staircase and glowing through the vast halls of the academy. In the infirmary everyone was sleeping until Kiram entered and let out a wild crow of triumph. Then only Donamillo remained motionless in his bed.

Kiram bounded gleefully between the cots while Elezar and Nestor stared at him and Javier shoved his tousled hair back

from his face. Kiram waved his notes and explained everything much too quickly. He smirked at Donamillo's mechanical cure and feigned punching it. For a moment even Javier looked at him like he might have gone mad.

"You're off your nut, underclassman." Genimo shook his head at Kiram.

"No. I am *on* my nut! We can do this. We really can." Kiram tried to calm down but only his excitement was keeping him awake and on his feet. "We can rebuild Donamillo's mechanical cure using the parts from his old machines up in the tower. If we do it right we'll be able to exactly reverse the effect. We'll be able to force Donamillo back into his own body. I've worked it all out! We're going to beat the bastard at his own game." Kiram held his notes out to Javier. "The strength of youth farts in the face of age and experience, ha!"

Scholar Blasio's brows rose with worry, but Javier took the notes and carefully read through them.

"This will work?" Javier asked. Thin red scratches slashed his pale skin, bandages wrapped his deeper wounds, and shadows darkened the hollows of his face and yet the hope that lit his expression made him beautiful.

Kiram nodded and his head felt like it was bouncing on a spring.

"Then we'd better get started." Javier turned to Elezar and Nestor. "It's going to be heavy lifting and I think the staff might give us some trouble—"

"I'll talk to the staff," Blasio assured him. "Just do what you have to."

"I'll get my tools—" Kiram started for the doors but Javier caught his shoulder and spun him back around.

"Have you slept at all?" Javier asked him.

"Not yet but—"

"Then rest." Javier pushed him to a cot. "We'll gather the things you need. Once it's all here, I'll wake you to put it all together. You're going to need your sleep for that."

Kiram would have objected but lying down just felt so very good. He decided that he would rest his eyes for a few minutes just to placate Javier and then get right back to work. He rested his head on his pillow and closed his eyes. An instant later a thoughtless deep sleep took him.

The clang of metal and swearing nearly woke him. His eyes fluttered open, and he caught a glimpse of Javier and Elezar muscling huge pieces of iron through the infirmary doors. Nestor tugged a thick coil of wire into the room behind them. Then Kiram's lids dropped and he slept on.

In the heat of afternoon Javier shook him awake. Kiram groaned and slowly dragged his aching, stiff body out of the cot. His hands were a mess of abrasions and bruises. And he suspected that his face wasn't much better. At least he wasn't the only one. Javier, Nestor and Elezar all sported welts and scratches from last night's encounter with the jays.

Though Kiram couldn't see why several deep scratches slashed across Scholar Blasio's forehead.

"The birds are getting worse. They're mobbing just about anybody," Nestor announced. "And it's getting dark outside, even though it's only noon."

The shadow curse was drawing closer.

Suddenly he was very awake. Hundreds of machine parts greeted him as he surveyed the infirmary. Last night when he'd been writing it out on paper, transforming Donamillo's mechanical cure had seemed so simple. Now the physical reality of all that metal, glass and wire loomed over Kiram.

Javier handed Kiram his notes and his tools.

"Can you still do it?" Javier asked and Kiram knew that Javier was afraid that Kiram's plan had been more the product of delirium than realism.

"I can do it," Kiram assured him.

He didn't waste time but went straight to the heart of the matter, wrenching apart the iron ribs and smashing out the glass panels that needed to be removed.

“Let me help with that.” Elezar hefted up one of the braces that Kiram had struggled with.

“Thanks.”

“Anything I could do?” Nestor asked.

Kiram put them both to work, hauling, lifting and bracing ungainly machine parts. Javier however stepped back from them all and knelt on the floor, writing curling Bahiim symbols in tight columns. As Kiram spliced new wires into the stripped harness of Donamillo’s mechanical cure, Javier enclosed them in protective wards.

Genimo offered to help, but he worked too slowly and too sloppily for Kiram to use him. Fortunately Scholar Blasio asked Genimo to help him with Donamillo’s body. Genimo seemed far more suited to dribbling water between the old man’s lips than aligning delicate glass panels.

The raucous screams of blue jays became so constant that Kiram stopped hearing them. But the growing darkness outside the windows gnawed at him. He disregarded the stew Genimo brought him in favor of his work.

Javier looked like he was going to insist but then the infirmary doors flew open and Master Ignacio charged in with a bleeding groom in his arms. Ignacio took all of them and the chaos of machinery in with a single sweeping glare.

“Blasio!” Ignacio shouted. “This boy needs your help. NOW!”

Blasio bolted from his brother’s bedside and rushed to help Ignacio lay the groom on one of the cots. As they laid him back Kiram felt bile rise in his throat. The young man was nearly cut in half: bowels hung exposed from a bloody, gaping wound.

“What the hell happened to him?” Elezar demanded.

“Some demon tore him open in the shadows of the orchard!” Master Ignacio turned his furious gaze on Javier and his hand went to his sword hilt.

“It wasn’t my doing.” Javier stood straight and met the master’s glare directly.

"It wasn't!" Scholar Blasio insisted. He met Ignacio's gaze for only a moment and then looked back down at the groom. "It's my brother's handiwork. This and Fedeles Quemanor's madness, and even the murder of the groom last year. He's done so much harm." Blasio's voice broke and he turned away.

"What in the name of God are you talking about?" Ignacio demanded. Blasio looked too close to tears to speak. He simply shook his head, then lifted a sheet and laid it over the unmoving groom. Then he turned and sat beside his brother's body.

The groom was dead, Kiram realized.

"If you'll listen I'll tell you, Master Ignacio." Javier cautiously stepped closer to Ignacio.

Ignacio studied Javier and then nodded.

While Javier spoke with the war master, Kiram tried to put the dead groom out of his mind. Red stains seeped up through the sheet that Blasio had laid over the body. In the heat of the afternoon the smell of blood and death saturated the air.

Kiram focused on the last glass panel, wedging it into place and then ever so carefully screwing in the brackets that linked it to the curving ribs. With that done, he stoked the fire of his own steam engine. Heat radiated from the boiler and Kiram tossed in more wood.

"Can you keep it hot?" Kiram asked Nestor.

"Will do." Nestor too flinched from the sight of the groom's corpse. Kiram turned to Elezar. Sweat soaked his already stained shirt and a dark bruise colored the scab that cut across his nose.

"After we've strapped Scholar Donamillo's body into the red harness, we'll need to hand crank the mechanical cure until the steam engine's built up enough force to drive it," Kiram told him. "Can you do that?"

Elezar nodded and hefted up the drive bar.

"Now we just need Donamillo's body."

"Are you sure?" Genimo scowled at the rough monstrosity that Kiram had created from Donamillo's beautiful mechanical cure. "That thing looks like it's about to fall apart."

“How it looks doesn’t matter,” Kiram snapped. “And I’m not asking you in any case.”

“No need to shout, Kiram. I’m just saying what everyone is thinking. It doesn’t look like it will work for shit and if it doesn’t, then what happens to all of us?”

“Genimo,” Elezar said flatly. “Shut up before I shut you up.”

Kiram found himself smiling at Elezar with exactly the same happy expression as Nestor. Genimo dropped back against the wall, sulking.

“Scholar Blasio?” Kiram called.

Blasio rose from his chair at his brother’s bedside. Kiram didn’t have to say anything more. Blasio lifted Donamillo’s emaciated body easily and carried him like an infant into Kiram’s rebuilt machine.

Master Ignacio stood next to Javier, watching Kiram and Blasio strap Donamillo into the harness. His expression seemed equal parts revulsion and confusion. Kiram wondered what all Javier had confessed to the war master during their quiet, tense conversation.

“It’s pitch black outside.” Nestor nodded at the barred windows. Suddenly something smacked against the window. A second blow cracked apart the glass. A bleeding blue jay shrieked at them through the opening. Then dozens more birds threw themselves against the glass, breaking the panes as they shattered their own bodies. Black blood poured from them and an acrid steam began to rise from the wrought iron bars that held the windows closed. As the bars crumbled and streams of viscous darkness spilled down the walls, Kiram felt a terrible, sick pain twist through his guts.

“Get behind the wards!” Javier shouted. He all but hurled Master Ignacio into the circle of Bahiim symbols. Genimo scurried into the circle and stared wide-eyed as the entire window casing collapsed. Blasio dropped to his knees near the steam engine and covered his face with his hands.

Kiram tightened the last strap of Donamillo’s harness and let the old man’s body hang limp. He grabbed the wires of the second harness and leapt out from the mechanical cure.

Jays crashed into the infirmary and a seeping darkness followed them, pooling across the floor, burning stones and eating through pieces of iron. The birds screamed and swooped, but none of them seemed capable of flying over the wards Javier had laid down.

“Get the mechanical cure moving!” Kiram called to Elezar. To Kiram’s relief, Elezar pumped the drive bar fast and the iron ribs of the mechanical cure swung around, building speed. Faint sparks lit up along the harness wires. Javier and Master Ignacio joined Elezar and the mechanical cure spun like a gigantic top.

Something struck the infirmary doors. They broke open and a wall of darkness flooded the room. Only the blaze in the belly of Kiram’s steam engine and the faint sparks given off from the mechanical cure offered them any illumination.

Hissing screams and the shrieks of blue jays rose from the darkness. Master Ignacio groaned and Elezar swore as the discomfort of the shadow curse intensified. Kiram gritted his teeth against the pain. And yet Javier’s wards still held the darkness back.

Javier glared at the black mass roiling over them and mouthed Bahiim incantations as he pumped the drive bar.

“Nestor? The engine?” Kiram had to shout over the screams and shrieks that tore the air.

“It’s hot!” Nestor yelled back. Even in the dim light Kiram could see the pain in Nestor’s face but he still locked the boiler door down and gripped the engine release as Kiram had shown him earlier.

“Let the steam engine take over!” Kiram shouted. “Let go of the drive bar!”

Elezar, Javier and Master Ignacio released the bar and jumped back as the pistons of Kiram’s steam pump took over. The ribs of the mechanical cure whirled by at a blinding speed and suddenly the faint sparks inside the mechanical cure erupted to brilliant light.

Only then did Kiram see Genimo crouched over a patch of Javier’s wards, scrubbing them away.

“Stop him!” Kiram shouted.

Nestor tackled Genimo and flattened him to the ground but it was already too late. Cold blackness hit Kiram. Agony stabbed through his chest and hot blood spilled down his belly. His knees buckled.

Elezar and Nestor both lay on the ground writhing from pain, as did Master Ignacio and Scholar Blasio. Blood erupted from wounds that opened wherever the curse touched them. Only Genimo remained unscathed, but he looked terrified when he met Kiram’s gaze. Then suddenly hot white light blazed over them all.

Javier stood, hands raised with walls of white light pouring from him. As Kiram forced himself up to his feet Genimo bolted from the sphere of the shajdi’s light, fleeing back to his master in the darkness.

“Javier, this doesn’t need to go on.” Fedeles’ voice silenced the cacophony of screams. And suddenly he stood there, smiling, at the edge of the shajdi’s light. His eyes were too dark and his skin too luminous. This was not Fedeles, Kiram reminded himself. This was Donamillo wearing Fedeles’ body.

The whirr of the mechanical cure’s spinning ribs and the steady hiss and clang of the steam engine created a strange rhythm, like the beat of a mechanical heart that even Donamillo’s shadow curse couldn’t stop.

“Your friends don’t need to suffer, Javier.” Fedeles circled them as if he were enjoying an easy stroll. “Give me the white hell and I will release them. You know I don’t want to hurt Kiram. Why force me to kill him?”

Javier didn’t respond, but a shudder passed through his body. The light around him intensified, illuminating his bare bones.

“I’m a patient man, Javier. I can wait while you burn away like a candle.” Fedeles paused only a few feet from Kiram, though he hardly seemed to take notice. Instead he stared at Javier with an expression of rapt avarice. Kiram could almost see Donamillo’s want rising up through Fedeles’ features. “We both know you

won't kill me, big brother. You promised me you would keep me safe."

Javier trembled and Kiram hated Donamillo, not just for taking such a cruel tactic, but because he knew it would work. Javier would let the shajdi burn him hollow before he would kill Fedeles.

Kiram gripped the wires of the second harness. Donamillo was only a foot from him now. He just had to step into the killing darkness of the shadow curse and close the wires around Fedeles' body. Donamillo's spirit would be drawn back into his own body and they would all be saved.

It was the only way.

Kiram didn't think beyond that.

He threw himself onto Fedeles, embracing him and closing the circuit of the harness. Black blades punched through Kiram's body. Fedeles shouted and shook in his arms. Pain ripped deeper into Kiram, but he held his grip and saw the white sparks of the mechanical cure flurry over Fedeles.

They both fell to the floor. It was hot and slick with blood and Kiram knew it was his own. He tried to draw a breath but his lungs only brought a red froth up into his mouth.

He couldn't survive this. The thought hurt him nearly as deeply as his wounds and yet there was light overhead. The shadow curse had fallen back. This agony hadn't been for nothing.

Kiram tried to hold onto Fedeles even then, but strong hands pulled him away.

"Kiri, Kiri. No, please don't bleed. Don't go!"

Kiram recognized Fedeles' voice, devoid of Donamillo's cold tone, crying from a distance.

But it was Javier who held him. Tears rolled down his face and raw grief broke his voice as he spoke Kiram's name again and again.

"It's good." Kiram could hardly form the words. "I saved you..." He wanted to say more, but Javier was fading from his sight just as the pain drained from his ruined body.

Lord of the White Hell

He knew he was dying, but he wasn't scared. He had already crossed the Sorrowlands. Whether it was heaven or a shajdi that awaited him, Kiram didn't know, but a soft light fell across him and seemed to draw him deeper into its purity. It felt so simple and beautiful.

Then something caught him, held him. Pale shadows like the hollows of a skull rose from the light. Long bones wreathed in white flames gripped him as if death itself were embracing him and barring him from its respite.

"I won't let you go." Gentle flames licked Kiram's flesh and he knew the voice was Javier's.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Kiram woke to terrible pain. He felt like he was on fire, like someone had cut him open and filled his intestines with burning coals. He wanted to scream from the hurt. Maybe he did.

Someone forced something down his throat, something bitter and cold. He spat and slurred a string of angry obscenities but then a deep sleep took him. He dreamed of crows' wings fluttering over him and then that Alizadeh's cool hand touched his fevered brow. Darkness closed over him.

After that he drifted in and out of consciousness, waking at odd hours and searching his dim surroundings for a familiar face.

At least twice Nestor leaned over him, his pale skin peppered with faded bruises, and assured him that he was safe. Kiram questioned Nestor, but then couldn't remember most of Nestor's replies. Words burned away in Kiram's fevered mind leaving him with only impressions of the conversations: the lingering assurance that Fedeles was better and that Scholar Donamillo had died days ago in his brother's arms. But above all else Kiram remembered what Nestor would not tell him, which was where Javier was.

In Kiram's dreams Javier often lay beside him, whispering foolish jokes or teasing him. But he could never quite see Javier, could never touch him and it frightened Kiram.

When Nestor gently woke him, he was confused, finding himself alone in the bed. Bright morning light burned at Nestor's pale complexion, but Kiram was relieved to see that the worst of his cuts and scratches had healed.

"I'm sorry, but we have to go," Nestor said quietly.

"Where?" Kiram tried to sit up and Nestor caught him in alarm. "Where are we going?" Kiram asked, even as Nestor gently eased him back into the bedding.

"You don't have to get up," Nestor said. "It's just Elezar and me. We're being sent back to Anacleto."

Anacleto seemed years away.

"You'll finally get to have your honeymoon," Kiram whispered.

Nestor smiled at that, but then concern returned to his countenance. "What should I tell your family?"

A pang of loneliness caught Kiram at the thought of his family, but then he remembered Majdi's approval of his gambit for independence.

"Tell them that I'm fine," Kiram decided. "That I love them and that they shouldn't worry."

Nestor nodded. He started to rise from Kiram's bedside but then stopped and looked back down at Kiram. "You're a hero, you know. All of us would have died if you hadn't...I can't imagine how much it hurt." Nestor's gaze dropped to black stitches and rope scars that cut across Kiram's stomach and chest. "You nearly died."

Kiram wasn't certain that he hadn't died, but he didn't say as much. Nestor seemed to be on the verge of tears as was.

Finally, Nestor said, "I guess I'm just trying to say that I think—no, I know—that you are the best friend any man could ever hope to have."

Kiram grinned at Nestor, as he remembered telling Nestor much the same thing.

"No point in falling in love with me, though," Kiram responded as cavalierly as he could. "You're a married man."

Nestor laughed and then gave Kiram a knowing look. "I doubt I'd last long against your current suitor, in any case." His cheeks flushed red but he went on in a whisper. "I'm not against it, you know...It was strange—I mean at first I couldn't...But I realized that it's not what all those old priests screech on and on about...You're both brave and strong and...I think I can see it now...It's good. Both of you."

Kiram raised his brows, amazed that Nestor could be so frank, decent and compassionate and that he could move Kiram so deeply with such a string of broken phrases.

"Thank you, Nestor."

Nestor shrugged despite his flushed face. "Yeah, well, don't tell Elezar. He'd be pissed if he knew he wasn't fooling me anymore."

Kiram laughed at that and his stitches hurt, but it still felt good. Then Elezar shouted for Nestor and Nestor left Kiram alone. Kiram returned to his dreams, searching them for Javier.

That afternoon, Scholar Blasio removed Kiram's stitches with a quiet exclamation of wonder. He hadn't thought Kiram would survive and yet somehow his mortal injuries had healed faster than the scratch on Blasio's brow.

"They say God blesses the brave." Scholar Blasio touched Kiram's forehead. His hand felt soft and cool against Kiram's hot skin. "I'm inclined to think you're living proof of that."

Kiram wanted to tell the scholar that he was sorry that he'd lost his brother, but at the same time he couldn't bring himself to regret Donamillo's death, only the pain that it had caused.

"Rest now, Kiram," Scholar Blasio told him. Kiram felt sick of resting. He wanted to see Javier. He wanted to get up and find him, and yet a few moments later Kiram slipped back into the darkness of sleep.

When at last his fever broke and his senses returned, he found red scars criss-crossing his belly and chest. He stank of medicinal herbs, but a fresh breeze floated through the room.

Just from the angles of the walls and the long shafts of afternoon light, he knew at once that he was in his old bed in the tower room. But he was far from alone in the chamber.

Well-dressed courtiers conversed at the windows and lounged around the empty hearth. Servants attended them, offering silver goblets and dishes of olives and roasted nuts.

It seemed utterly wrong that so many strangers had invaded the space that had been a private sanctuary for Javier and himself. A year ago no one casually entered Javier's chambers, much less lingered, spilling wine and dropping olive pits on the floor as if it were a cheap room in a tavern.

A sensation like horror welled in Kiram as he noticed that all traces of Javier's wards had been scoured from the floors.

"No," Kiram whispered.

“Are you awake, then?”

Kiram turned to the voice and suddenly realized that a man had been sitting at his bedside watching him. Kiram didn't know if he should feel honored or terrified.

Dressed in violet and gold raiment, Prince Sevanyo looked out of place seated on a wooden school chair. Behind the prince, armed guards and young pages lounged and whispered among themselves.

Kiram pulled himself a little more upright. He tensed, expecting the motion to hurt, but only the slightest ache arose from his scarred body.

“Do you recognize me this time, young Master Kir-Zaki?”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Kiram bowed awkwardly in the bed. Had he failed to recognize the prince previously? He prayed that he hadn't been too rude. Something in the prince's amused smile made Kiram think that he'd been more flattered than insulted. Kiram wondered if he'd called out to Javier.

“Very good.” The prince nodded.

“Do you know where Lord Tornesal is?” Kiram asked. He searched the faces of the men loitering in the room but none were Javier.

“I do, but before I answer your question I would have you answer one of mine.”

“Of course, Your Highness.”

“What did you see?” Prince Sevanyo leaned closer to Kiram and spoke in a hushed voice. “When you died, what was there?”

“It was light,” Kiram responded. He could see that Prince Sevanyo wanted more than just that. “There was no pain and I wasn't afraid.”

“Did you see angels or devils?” The prince gazed at Kiram intently and the afternoon light etched the deep lines of his gaunt face. “A garden of jewels and gold?”

“No, Your Highness.” Kiram couldn't bring himself to lie. “There was only light and comfort...and then I think I saw Javier and he brought me back.” Kiram met the prince's gaze. “Will you please tell me where he is?”

Prince Sevanyo sighed and leaned back in the simple wooden chair.

"He is presently in the room below this one, being held prisoner until the royal bishop arrives."

"But he didn't possess Fedeles—"

Prince Sevanyo rolled his eyes and raised a gloved hand against Kiram's protests. His rings gleamed in the afternoon light.

"We know that he did nothing to his cousin. The Grunito brothers, War Master Ignacio and Scholar Blasio have all testified as much. And of course Fedeles Quemador has corroborated their stories." The prince shook his head. "It seems that my young brother, the royal bishop, was far too rash in his judgment. His imprudence nearly allowed a madman to seize control of the dukedom of Rauma as well as the white hell. And it has cost him the lives of his own men."

"But if you know that, then why is Jav—Lord Tornesal being held prisoner?" Kiram flushed at his gaffe but the prince didn't seem to care. He sighed and stretched out his long legs.

"Javier," Prince Sevanyo said, "has proclaimed himself a convert to the Bahiim religion."

Kiram winced at the idea of Javier cavalierly making such an announcement.

"Indeed." Prince Sevanyo sighed. "The royal bishop has demanded that Javier be held prisoner until he arrives here to try him for heresy."

"No." Kiram couldn't help his response.

Prince Sevanyo raised a white brow, and the gesture reminded Kiram painfully of Javier.

"The royal bishop is well within his rights, Master Kir-Zaki. At the very least he will have the pleasure of excommunicating Javier."

"But doesn't Javier deserve some lenience? He did keep Scholar Donamillo from—"

Again the prince stopped Kiram's protest with a wave of his hand.

“Javier has made the royal bishop look like a fool. Worse yet, a fraud who can’t recognize a possessed man when he stands before him and who knows less of heaven’s designs than a pack of schoolboys and a Haldiim mechanist.” Prince Sevanyo shook his head. “Word of the bishop’s folly has already spread too far for him to suppress it. Now the royal bishop can only hope that in punishing Javier he can make an example of what happens to those who would embarrass him.”

“You can stop him, can’t you?” Kiram couldn’t help the begging tone in his voice. Prince Sevanyo shook his head.

“Javier is dear to me,” the prince admitted. “But when he chose to convert he placed himself firmly in my brother’s grasp and well beyond the realm of my protection. Only the king could forgive Javier and he chooses not involve himself in this matter.”

Kiram bowed his head into his hands, silently cursing Javier for not having the sense to lie or at least flee. Certainly a single locked door couldn’t keep Javier prisoner here. So, why stay?

“Are you strong enough to stand?” the prince asked Kiram.

Kiram looked up and met Prince Sevanyo’s cool gaze, unsure as to what could have sparked this new direction of inquiry. The prince glanced to one of his pages and the boy came close.

“I think so...” Kiram replied. “I feel better.”

Sevanyo nodded. The page offered him a chalice of wine, which the prince took a single drink from before waving the boy aside. He returned his attention to Kiram.

“The royal bishop will be arriving here tomorrow. More than likely he will expect to interview you as well as Javier.”

Sick dread clenched Kiram’s chest.

“Time is short,” Prince Sevanyo said quietly then he raised his voice. “It is good that you are feeling recovered, but I can see that I and all of these fine men of my father’s court have kept you awake too long.” The prince indicated the surrounding courtiers with a theatrical wave of his gloved hands. “You have been good enough to answer my question and I appreciate it greatly. We should leave you to your rest.”

The prince's guards straightened and several of the courtiers turned their cups and dishes over to servants, making ready to depart with the prince. Kiram wondered briefly at how strange it would be to live constantly surrounded by so many other people.

Then Prince Sevanyo surprised him by grasping his hand suddenly.

"Before I go, let us both pray that Javier sees the error of his ways," the prince told him. Something hard slipped from the prince's glove and pressed into Kiram's palm. "Let us hope that down in the room directly below this one, he feels our ardent prayer and comes to his senses."

Kiram nodded. He remained still and silent while the prince bowed his head. Then Prince Sevanyo stood and Kiram closed his hand around the key the prince had slipped to him.

"Take care," Prince Sevanyo told Kiram.

Then he left and the crowd of guards, servants and nobles trailed out after him. For a few minutes Kiram lay still in the bed, mustering his strength and resolve. The royal bishop was on his way, and Kiram had little doubt about which door this key unlocked.

His first steps were awkward but as he moved his strength and balance returned. He packed only what he could easily carry and knew would be needed. Of Javier's things he chose the strongest of his fencing swords as well as the simplest of his clothes and all the money he could lay his hands on.

The golden glow of dusk filtered through the academy as Kiram left his room and crept down the stairs. Smokey, sweet scents of roasting meats and fresh bread wafted up to him and he guessed that most people would be gathered in the dining hall for the evening meal.

Still, Kiram had to crouch in the shadows of the staircase and wait for the night warden to pass on his patrol of the academy halls. As soon as the big man was out of sight Kiram raced to the room where Javier was being held. Cadeleonian holy symbols had been painted on the door and Kiram thought he

recognized Holy Father Habalan's writing. He quickly unlocked the door and slipped inside.

Only a sliver of fading sunlight illuminated the barren room. Javier looked up immediately.

Kiram almost cried out at the sight of him. His arms and legs were bound with heavy shackles and he still wore the filthy, blood-stained clothes that he'd been dressed in the night they fought Donamillo. At least a week had passed since he'd last shaved or probably bathed. And yet he still stood straight and proud. He met Kiram's gaze with a quick smile.

"Tell me you brought soap and I'm yours forever," Javier said.

"I brought your sword, a change of clothes, and a key to the door." Kiram forced himself to return Javier's smile, though it made his heart ache seeing Javier like this.

"Better still," Javier replied.

Kiram brought the pack but Javier simply caught him in an awkward embrace of lean muscle and chains. Kiram grasped him in return. They held each other for no more than a moment, but relief and longing made it feel almost endless and unbreakable.

"I missed you so much," Kiram whispered.

"I'm just glad you're all right," Javier murmured in nearly the same breath. "They wouldn't tell me what had happened to you. Only that you were fevered. I feared—" His voice caught, almost breaking on the emotion beneath the simple words. "You can't know how good it is to see you."

"It will be better when we're away from here." Kiram drew back. Up close he could see how very lean Javier had grown, but the force of his embrace assured Kiram that he still possessed the strength to run and ride.

"The royal bishop is on his way," Kiram informed Javier.

Javier nodded. "Sevanyo told me as much."

"We need to get you out of these chains." Kiram hoped the tools he'd packed would be enough. He hadn't reckoned on having to dismantle such massive shackles. They looked like things meant to restrain bulls, not men.

"I think I can crack through the links—"

"It's all right, Kiram."

Then Javier opened his hands and white sparks skipped up from his fingers and darted over the locks of the dark shackles. The chains clattered against the floor as they fell aside. Kiram stared at Javier. He'd made it look so easy—almost as effortless as in the days when he'd worn Calixto's medallion.

"If you could have done that for yourself, you should have already have been out of here," Kiram told him.

"I couldn't just leave you." Javier looked almost embarrassed. "So I decided to wait."

"In chains?" Kiram demanded in a hash whisper.

"If my guards thought that chains were enough to hold me, then it kept them from using anything stronger and it allowed me to stay here at the academy." Javier spoke as if this were what any sensible prisoner would do.

"The bastards could have at least given you a bath," Kiram muttered. He handed Javier fresh clothes and tried not to feel a pang of guilt. While he had been tended and gently treated, Javier had been living like an animal.

Javier tossed his blood-caked clothes aside and dressed quickly. He took his sword with a look of relief, as if he'd felt the absence of a weapon as sorely as a bath.

"I think most everyone is eating right now. Hopefully we'll be able to get to the stables unnoticed," Kiram informed Javier.

"Are you sure you want to come with me?" Javier gave him a hard, appraising gaze. "There'll be no coming back if you do, you know."

Kiram knew.

If he rode away with Javier now he would leave everything behind: steam engines and the Crown Challenge, his appointment to the royal court and the accolades of his fellow scholars. Beyond even that he risked losing both friends and family. The uncertainty of it all frightened him, but not enough to make him believe that he could simply let Javier go and live with the regret.

He'd seen what became of men who sacrificed their hearts' desires for security. He'd seen what it had done to Musni.

With Javier, the reality of all those adventures he longed to live stood before him. Certainly, they would come at a cost and without assurances. But he had never wanted anything more.

"Of course I'm coming," Kiram responded. "I'm the one with the maps."

With that they slipped out of the room. A quick glance down the stairs sent Kiram's heart racing. Far too many of Prince Sevanyo's retainers lingered around the statues and portraits that filled the entryway of the dormitory for he and Javier to simply walk past without notice.

"We'll have to take the gear lift down," Kiram said.

Javier nodded and they fled upstairs and picked their way through the wreckage of Donamillo's machines. As Kiram ducked under rusted, arching ribs he felt a fleeting pang of betrayal but then pride in his own triumph. He stepped between panes of milky, cracked glass and realized that they were like fragments of naive childhood that he'd torn apart and scavenged to build his adult life. He'd seen both beauty and horror here and now he was moving on.

If Javier felt anything looking at the wreckage, he didn't show it.

Once they reached the lift Kiram worked the gears while Javier hauled them down to the ground. Outside the shadows of dusk disguised their flight across the grounds. They crept into the stables, unnoticed.

Lunaluz gave a soft snort of welcome when Javier reached him. Kiram gazed at Firaj and then realized that the old horse was not alone.

Fedeles stepped out from the stall as quietly as a shadow. Kiram's pulse pounded and a cold sweat pricked his brow. Javier glanced to Kiram and then catching sight of Fedeles, he froze in place.

Hurt flickered through Fedeles' expression, but then he turned and stroked Firaj's nose. The old horse leaned into his hands.

"Where will you go?" Fedeles asked.

"North." Javier relaxed and led Lunacruz from the stall. "We'll make for the Mirogoth border."

"You don't have to go." Fedeles gazed at Javier. "Rauma could stand against the royal bishop. We could fight him."

"Too many people have already died." Javier shook his head. "Besides, this isn't just because of the royal bishop. I'm a Bahiim now. I can't retain my title."

"But I don't want you to go," Fedeles said. "I don't want to be the Duke of Rauma."

"I'm sorry, Fedeles. But this is what must happen." To Kiram's surprise Javier closed the distance between them and pulled Fedeles into an embrace. Kiram realized that this was how they had been before Donamillo had assaulted Fedeles.

"I'm depending on you," Javier told Fedeles. "You're the only one who will be able to provide sanctuary for Kiram and I when we need a place to rest and recover." Javier stepped back slightly and Kiram could see that Fedeles took Javier's words to heart. He straightened, obviously emulating his older brother, and nodded.

"You will always be welcome in Rauma." Fedeles glanced to Kiram. "Both of you. Always."

"Thank you, Fedeles," Kiram replied. He forced himself to move closer to Fedeles, despite the memory of so much pain. Fedeles had not been to blame for any of it.

He stood beside Fedeles and stroked Firaj's jaw. Even in the dim light of the stable he could see that the horse looked more glossy than usual.

"You've really taken good care of my horse," Kiram commented.

Fedeles gave him an easy smile and Firaj leaned forward to allow Fedeles to pet him.

"We like each other," Fedeles said. "We both know what it's like not to be able to say what you feel. He's always telling me things with the angle of his ears and the set of his head. And I think sometimes he understands me."

“His spirit has survived hard battle,” Javier said quietly. “And so has yours.”

Fedeles shrugged Javier’s sentiment aside, but Kiram thought that Javier was probably right. Firaj had been a warhorse. Doubtless he had seen horrors and yet he still retained his gentle nature. Kiram wanted the same to be true for Fedeles.

“Promise me you’ll take care of him,” Kiram said.

Fedeles looked at Kiram in surprise.

“Firaj deserves to live an easy life in his old age, and I know I won’t be able to give that to him. But you could.”

“He’ll live like a prince,” Fedeles assured him.

“Good. Then I’ll take Verano. He certainly doesn’t spook easily,” Kiram decided.

“Neither do you,” Fedeles commented. “He’s a good choice for you.”

Kiram gave Javier and Fedeles a few moments of privacy to say their farewells while he saddled Verano and slipped his bow over his shoulder.

“You should go while there’s still light,” Fedeles said at last. Though the sadness remained in his expression, the hurt no longer lingered there. “Go with God.”

Javier smirked and even Fedeles smiled a little.

Then Kiram and Javier rode from the academy. They passed through fields and woods, racing between long blue shadows and gold shafts of setting sunlight.

By the morning, they had crossed through ancient paths of mist and darkness to reach the Mirogoth border. That night they shared a small room in a port town, where they lay in each other’s arms and, at last, slept in peace.

List of Characters and Other Notes

- Alizadeh Lif-Moussu:** Bahiim holy man, husband of Kiram's uncle Rafie.
- Atreau Vediya:** Third-year student, Hellion, Nestor's upperclassman.
- Blasio Urracon:** Scholar of mathematics.
- Calixto Tornesal:** Tornesal ancestor who opened the white hell.
- Chebli:** Dauhd's friend and member of Haldiim Civil Guard.
- Cocuyo Helio:** Fourth-year Sagrada student.
- Dauhd Kir-Zaki:** Kiram's sister, second daughter of Mother Kir-Zaki.
- Donamillo Urracon:** Scholar of natural law.
- Elezar Grunito:** Third-year student and Hellion.
- Enevir Helio:** Fourth-year student.
- Fedeles Quemanor:** Javier's cousin, heir to the dukedom.
- Fiez Lif-Worijd:** Kiram's mother's secretary.
- Genimo Plunado:** Future Count of Verida and third-year student.
- Hashiem Kir-Naham:** Haldiim son of a respected pharmacist.
- Hierro Fures:** Fourth-year Yillar student, future Duke of Gavado.
- Hikmat Kir-Zaki:** Kiram's mother, a wealthy Haldiim business woman.
- Holy Father Habalan:** Sagrada clergy and history teacher.
- Ignacio Nubaran:** Sagrada master of war arts.
- Javier Tornesal :** Third-year student, Duke of Rauma.
- Kiram Kir-Zaki:** First full-blooded Haldiim admitted to the Sagrada Academy.
- Ladisló Bayezar:** Second-year student.
- Majdi Kir-Zaki:** Kiram's brother, Captain of the Red Witch.
- Morisio Cavada:** Third-year student from a scholarly family, Hellion.
- Musni Rid-Asira:** Haldiim friend of Kiram Kir-Zaki's.
- Nakiesh:** Irabiim Bahiim.
- Liahn:** Irabiim Bahiim.
- Nazario Sagrada:** Historic king, committed atrocities against the Haldiim.
- Nestor Grunito:** Second-year student, Kiram's friend, Elezar's brother.
- Nugalo Sagrada:** Royal bishop and second son of the king.
- Ollivar Falarío:** Second-year student, Elezar's underclassman.
- Rafie Kir-Zaki:** Kiram's uncle on his mother's side.
- Riossa Arevillo:** Common Cadeleonian girl, daughter of a judge.
- Sevanyo Sagrada:** Heir to the Cadeleonian throne.
- Shukri Kir-Zaki:** Kiram's inventor father.

List of Characters and Other Notes

Siamak Kir-Zaki: *Kiram's eldest sister.*

Timoteo Grunito: *Eldest of the Grunito sons, recently taken clergy vows.*

Vashir: *Haldiim Bahiim, distant cousin of Alizadeh.*

Yassin Lif-Harun: *Historic half-Haldiim scholar.*

Places and Peoples

Anacleto: *Costal trade city, home to the oldest and largest Haldiim district of Cadeleon.*

Bahiim: *Ancient Haldiim holy order that traces its history back to the original Jhahiim.*

Cieloalta: *Cadelonian capitol.*

Circle of Red Oaks: *Holy Grove in Haldiim district of Anacleto.*

Circle of the Crooked Pines: *Irabiim Holy Grove.*

Haldiim: *Naturalized minority descended from Jhahiim.*

Irabiim: *Nomadic tribe descended from Jhahiim.*

Jhahiim: *Tribe from which both Haldiim and Irabiin descend.*

Mirogoths: *Cadeleonian name for a vast number of northern tribes, the majority of whom are led by witches and shapeshifters.*

Muerate: *One of the few poisons strong enough to kill even Javier.*

White Tree of the Red Oaks: *The center of the Red Oaks Holy Grove and a symbol of the Bahiim power; oaths and spells are bound by its light.*

Yuan: *An exotic kingdom far across the South Sea.*

Days & Hours

Primiday: *First day of the week.*

Dosiday: *Second day of the week.*

Mediday: *Third day of the week.*

Levaniday: *Fourth day of the week.*

Traviday: *Fifth day of the week.*

Auguiday: *Sixth day of the week.*

Sacreday: *Seventh day of the week.*

Bells: *A system of time keeping by sounding off loud or softer bells, which divide summer days into fourteen brassy day bells and ten wooden night bells.*

Winter days consist of only ten day bells and fourteen night bells.

List of Characters and Other Notes

Brief Cadeleonian History

1000: *The Sagrada fortress is built to stand against the first waves of Mirogoths.*

1090-1105: *King Nazario purges Haldiim from all of northern Cadeleon but dies before his forces can break the defenses of Anacleto and other southern cities.*

1096: *Bahiim lock the shajdis away to keep them from Nazario.*

1106: *The curse, the Old Rage is put to rest, but cannot be dissipated.*

1150: *Civil war sends the Sagrada king into hiding in Rauma.*

1190: *The Restoration of the Sagrada rulership.*

1200: *Sagrada Academy is founded on the grounds of the old fortress. The school is dedicated to training the brightest nobles. Thirty years later the sons of merchants and scholars are granted admittance.*

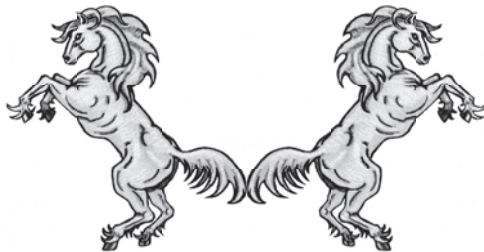
1226: *The Yillar Academy is founded. Admittance is limited to Cadeleonian nobles and members of the high clergy.*

1242: *Second Mirogoth invasion begins in north.*

1250: *Calixto Tornesal opens the white hell and defeats the invading Mirogoth forces at the Sagrada Academy.*

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