

# LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

# BONUS VOLUME 2

## Table of Contents

Love Has No Boundaries .....	4
THE EXECUTIVE LOUNGE by Angela Benedetti ( <i>contemporary/businessmen/BDSM</i> )..	7
CHAPTER ONE .....	9
CHAPTER TWO .....	15
CHAPTER THREE .....	23
CHAPTER FOUR .....	30
CHAPTER FIVE .....	37
CHAPTER SIX.....	45
CHAPTER SEVEN .....	52
CHAPTER EIGHT .....	61
CHAPTER NINE .....	69
CHAPTER TEN .....	79
CHAPTER ELEVEN.....	89
CHAPTER TWELVE.....	97
CHAPTER THIRTEEN.....	106
CHAPTER FOURTEEN .....	116
CHAPTER FIFTEEN .....	123
CHAPTER SIXTEEN .....	131
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN .....	136
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN .....	145
CHAPTER NINETEEN .....	151
CHAPTER TWENTY .....	161
Author Bio .....	168
NOR IRON BARS A CAGE by Kaje Harper ( <i>fantasy/hurt/comfort/friends to lovers</i> )....	169
Dedication.....	171
CHAPTER ONE.....	172
CHAPTER TWO .....	180
CHAPTER THREE .....	197
CHAPTER FOUR .....	234
CHAPTER FIVE .....	255

CHAPTER SIX.....	291
CHAPTER SEVEN .....	311
CHAPTER EIGHT .....	346
CHAPTER NINE .....	383
CHAPTER TEN .....	420
EPILOGUE.....	429
Author Bio .....	453
SIX by Tara Spears ( <i>contemporary/men with children/hurt/comfort</i> ).....	454
Dedication.....	456
Acknowledgements.....	457
CHAPTER ONE.....	458
CHAPTER TWO .....	464
CHAPTER THREE .....	472
CHAPTER FOUR .....	478
CHAPTER FIVE .....	484
CHAPTER SIX.....	495
CHAPTER SEVEN .....	505
CHAPTER EIGHT .....	511
CHAPTER NINE .....	515
CHAPTER TEN .....	521
CHAPTER ELEVEN.....	526
CHAPTER TWELVE.....	533
CHAPTER THIRTEEN.....	543
CHAPTER FOURTEEN .....	547
CHAPTER FIFTEEN .....	552
CHAPTER SIXTEEN .....	560
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN.....	565
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN .....	572
EPILOGUE.....	580
Author Bio .....	600
Want more? .....	601

# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance Collection*

## Bonus Volume 2

### Introduction

The stories you are about to read celebrate love, sex and romance between men. They are a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and these anthologies are published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The Goodreads M/M Romance Group invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they produce.

Nearly 190 stories were submitted and have now been published as a twelve volume set, with two additional bonus volumes each featuring several longer stories, titled *Love Has No Boundaries*; this edition is Bonus Volume 2.

Written descriptions of the images that inspired these stories are provided along with the original request letters. If you'd like to view the photos, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

The stories in this collection may contain sexually explicit content and are **intended for adult readers**. They may also contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group*

strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

These stories are a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

## Dedication

As you can imagine, coordinating nearly 190 authors, proofing their work and publishing it both online and in eprint involved hundreds of hours of volunteer work. Nearly two dozen members chipped-in to help; the M/M Romance Group would like to extend a special thanks to the volunteers of the event team for their unwavering commitment and enthusiasm.

## Ebook Layout and Navigation

This ebook can be navigated through the Table of Contents which lists the authors, their story title and its overall genre or theme. Any time you see the words [\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#), you can click on the link and be transported back to the TOC.

The **story titles** link back to the original posts in Goodreads M/M Romance group. The **author names** also link back to their Goodreads author profiles.

The written description that inspired each story, along with the letter that inspired the tale is provided. If you would like to see the actual photo, you can view them at: [www.goodreads.com/group/show/20149-m-m-romance](http://www.goodreads.com/group/show/20149-m-m-romance).

Enjoy.

This ebook is distributed free by the M/M Romance Group and should not be offered for sale. Each story appears courtesy of its respective author and should not be reproduced without express written consent from the author.

This ebook is published by the M/M Romance Group and is not directly endorsed by or affiliated with Goodreads Inc.

M/M Romance Group Publication ©2013

# LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

# THE EXECUTIVE LOUNGE

Angela Benedetti

# THE EXECUTIVE LOUNGE

By Angela Benedetti

## Photo Description

A slightly dazed-looking young man in a rumpled suit is sitting next to a motorcycle, cuffed to it by his wrists. He doesn't seem to be at all unhappy with his situation.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*It happened so quickly and was so unpredictable and completely out of control. A last minute, scratch that, a last second business trip out of town. A surprise office party for the CEO at the end of the very first day. BTW, does he look familiar or is my second martini and jet-lag messing with me? Late night bar hopping after that... and who on earth suggested checking out a BDSM club while we were at it? Certainly it couldn't have been my idea; I know how to keep my kinks well hidden and under control. But here I am, chained to a bike like somebody's pet and... happy? Damn if I haven't seen that bike somewhere else up close before...*

Sincerely,

Mammarella

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** businessmen, lawyers, BDSM, public activity, age gap, over age 40

**Content warnings:** dub-con/non-con

**Word count:** 60,485

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)



# THE EXECUTIVE LOUNGE

**By Angela Benedetti**

## CHAPTER ONE

The first thing I need you to understand is that I really can hold my liquor. Seriously, I'm not a lightweight, I know my capacity, and it's pretty damn good, plus I wasn't even drinking all that much. But Greg sprang this trip on me at the last minute, and I was up all night finding a twenty-four-hour cleaner and doing laundry and...

Okay, let me back up.

I'd been job hunting since graduation and was getting kind of desperate when I got a call-back from Castle Silicasystems. I did my best not to sound hysterically grateful when I made the appointment, then got into my best blue interview suit and headed down to their campus in beautiful downtown San Jose, praying to everyone from Ares to Zoroaster for luck and favors.

Castle has been around a while and is big enough to have an HR department, so it was another five weeks before I actually reported in to work, but finally, one bright Monday morning, there I was.

It took me most of the day to get out of HR—and my signing hand was sore by then, seriously—but I finally made it up to Greg Wyatt's office. Greg was the CTO and had decided that my shiny new degree and I were just what he needed in a personal assistant.

Yeah, I was a glorified secretary with an MBA, and a bachelor's in mechanical engineering. I'd figured that being able to speak to the techies in their own language would give me an advantage in the job market, and sure enough, it did. I still had ambition for more—maybe even Greg's job someday—but right then I was pathetically grateful to have a paycheck coming in, and it wasn't a small one, either. The university Financial Aid office would be really happy about that.

So there I was, settling in and getting to know people and figuring out what Greg needed and how to keep him organized and his office running, when he

does the oh-by-the-way thing and has me book plane tickets and a hotel room for myself for Friday. It seemed that Nicolas Castle—the Mr. Castle—was flying in from Mumbai and planning to overnight in NYC. Executive row, basically the buddies Mr. Castle had hired back in the nineties when he'd started the company, were surprising him on Friday for his birthday.

Yeah, you know a company's solvent when its top dozen execs can fly twenty-five hundred miles for a surprise birthday bash. At least I didn't have to worry about getting laid off in the near future, right?

Greg said it'd be a perfect chance for me to meet everyone and hang out, be casual, get to know the guys. Obviously it's been a while since he was a new hire with a recent diploma, but it was a nice thought, and I was willing to step up for some face time with the big dogs in the company even if I wasn't stupid enough to think I could let it all hang out.

So, cleaning-laundry-packing, and off I went to New York. It was evening—late evening—by the time my plane landed.

I get motion sick, so I took some pills for the flight. I'm mentioning that because I'm pretty sure the drugs—which I totally needed—contributed to what happened later. I got checked in at the Algonquin, which is about twelve classes classier than any hotel I'd ever stayed in before, and found Greg's room. He gave me a once-over and a big smile.

“Hey, Rob, great timing. I was about to head up.” He closed the door behind him, and we went up the hall to the elevators. “Allan and Tony got in last night and ambushed Nick in the lobby, so the secret isn't very secret anymore. Nick cussed me out when I called up, though, so at least he was surprised enough to be growly about it.”

I made an agreeable sounding noise because I couldn't think of anything intelligent to say about that, and figured no specific comment was better than saying something stupid.

Besides, just being in that hotel was blowing me away. I mean, it's the Algonquin, right? Dorothy Parker and the Algonquin Round Table and all that? It's one of *the* landmark hotels in the country, maybe the world, I don't know. I expected it to be fancy, but this was like something out of a movie,

only more so, because movies tend to be flashy and this was pure, long-nosed class.

The carpet was a rich burgundy, and I was willing to bet it was wool. It was thick and soft, with great padding. Okay, you're probably laughing now, but when my mom made a bunch of money on her wrench patent, my parents redid the house and Dad and I learned all about how much of a difference good padding underneath the carpet makes. This was the expensive stuff, and my feet were pretty much orgasming in my sixty-dollar work shoes.

The side tables between each pair of elevator doors were a dark wood, carved and stained and shiny, with potted orchids on them— real ones, not silk or plastic or whatever. The inside of the elevator was polished brass, with a light fixture that was all angled crystal spikes coming down out of the ceiling.

Up on the floor where Mr. Castle's suite was, the carpet was even *better*, which kind of blew me away.

Okay, I'll shut up about the carpet. I was jet-lagged and drugged, remember?

Greg rang the bell—yeah, there was a doorbell outside this hotel room—and someone I'd never seen before opened it. Greg waved a hand between us and said, “Hal, Rob, Rob, Hal,” while walking through the entryway.

Someone put a martini in my hand, and Greg vanished into the suite. There was music playing, classic metal I think, but not loud enough to spike your eardrums, which I appreciated. I thought I recognized a couple of faces from the office, but basically it was a cluster of suits. Hot older guys in suits. Wherever Mr. Castle had met his friends back when, I wanted to go hang out there.

I walked around drinking my drink and occasionally saying hi to people. Some names went by, but none of them stuck. One of the benefits to being the new-kid-slash-secretary-type is that you can just call everyone “sir” and that works, so I didn't stress out about it.

A couple of martinis later—it was over an hour, I swear—I was looking at a painting of an African marketplace that I'm pretty sure didn't come from a

hotel supply catalog when Greg's hand clamped down on my wrist, the one that didn't have a glass in it.

“There you are. I've been looking for you. Come on.” He hauled me across the living room and through an open double door into a bedroom the size of my apartment. A king-size bed dominated the far end to the left, while close to the door was a conversation area with two loveseats and a big upholstered chair, arranged in a square around an expensive looking rug with a fireplace on the fourth side. We walked around in front of the fireplace and turned to face the men whose conversation had stopped as soon as we came in.

Sitting in the chair facing the fireplace—facing me—was an incredibly gorgeous man, even at a party full of hot guys. Thick dark hair, a nose like a hawk, sharp grey eyes, and a mouth I'd sell my mother to have on absolutely any part of my body.

Okay, maybe not my mother, but definitely my sister.

(Have I mentioned I'm seriously gay? I probably should've mentioned that earlier, and at this point it's obvious, so... carry on.)

Greg said, “Hey, Nick, I got you something! Happy birthday!” His hand gave me a push just above my butt, and I took a quick step forward because otherwise I'd have fallen splat on my face. I managed not to spill what was left of my drink either, go me!

It took a few seconds for what Greg had said to penetrate, and when it did I was pretty confused.

Happy birthday? So... I was a birthday present? The first thing that came to my mind was that Greg had hired me to fuck the boss, or be fucked by, or whatever, and part of me was okay with that, however the interpretation went.

The second thing was that if I was a gift—ignoring the real world for a minute—then Mr. Castle would own me, and the thought made me want to fall down to my knees right then. The rug was thick and soft and I could slam right down at his feet and it wouldn't hurt.

The third thing that came to mind (and this was where the real world elbowed its way back into the front of my brain) was that I'd been hired for a real job, I *needed* a real job, and that being the boss's birthday present wasn't a

great career move if you wanted your career to last more than a few days at most. Fun was great, fantasy was awesome, but I had bills and rent and student loans to pay.

Mr. Castle had to've been thinking something similar because he gave me a once-over, then glared over my shoulder at Greg and said, "Birthday present? Seriously?"

The guys in the loveseats to either side were smirking, snickering, ogling, and eye-rolling, respectively. They were all hot, too—yeah, I checked—and the one who was smirking was also eyeing me like he'd be happy to have me be re-gifted in his direction if his boss didn't want me.

Before I could figure out what I thought about *that*, Greg said, "Yes, seriously. You've been fighting me on this for months, but you need an assistant, period. He's got an MBA *and* an engineering degree, so I don't want to hear any shit, okay? You're buried, we're dropping balls, so deal."

Mr. Castle scowled at him, then gave me another look-over, this one a little less primal but actually scarier because we were back in the real world again, talking about that job that'd pay the bills.

I held out my hand and said, "Robert Arvazian, sir. I'm looking forward to working with you."

He stared at my hand for half a second, then leaned forward and shook it. He didn't try to break my fingers off or anything; it was a firm, professional handshake.

"Welcome aboard. I hope you're ready to dive right in."

"Absolutely, sir."

I got a tight nod, and then he looked over at the guy to my right—the one who'd been smirking when we all thought I was meant to be a different kind of birthday present—and they picked up a conversation about a government contract that was slipping its schedule. I stood there for a few seconds, then took a couple of steps backward past Greg and slipped away.

I emptied my glass in one gulp and went looking for something non-alcoholic. I ended up with a highball glass full of ginger ale, and had actually fallen into a conversation with a guy named Nachman Levin, who was the

head of Logistics, when the living room was suddenly a lot fuller and everyone seemed to be migrating toward the main door.

Greg tugged on my sleeve and said, “Rob, Nach, come on, we’re going bar-hopping. You can’t spend the night in New York and never leave your hotel.” He grinned and herded us out.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER TWO

I want to note at this point that I'd stopped drinking, right? The whole bar-hopping thing was *not* my idea, and it wasn't like I could beg off. I was feeling more tired than anything else at that point, and kind of loopy, but I assumed it was because of the tired plus having my brain scrambled by the whole gift-to-the-boss thing—the non-reality of which I'll admit I was still kind of regretting, in the back of my brain where I don't have to take things for-real seriously.

So we all went downstairs and I ended up in the back of a cab between Greg and Nachman. We were kind of squished, but at least I knew them, which was better than being half in the lap of some stranger.

The next few stops were bars I don't remember the names of. Or what they looked like. Or even what I drank, although I'm pretty sure I tried to keep it down to one drink per stop. That wasn't hard—we didn't stay in any one place all that long. We shed a few people here and there as we went, and a couple hours later we were down to just the guys who'd been with Mr. Castle in the bedroom, plus me and Greg and a couple of others.

I was almost done with martini number whatever when one of the executives—I think his name was Hank—said that he used to live in New York and that he'd had all the mundanity he could deal with for one night. Then there was something about how the boss shouldn't have to be bored at his own damn birthday party, and everyone should follow him.

Two minutes later we were back in cabs on our way to someplace not-boring. I think I fell asleep for a few, or maybe just zoned out, I'm not sure, but the cold air that slammed through the car when the doors opened again got my brain cells firing and I followed the crowd into another place.

The outside was pretty plain—cinderblock walls painted grey, which seems kind of redundant to me, but whatever. The lobby area was pretty dull too, with a guy in a leather vest over a T-shirt sitting behind a counter, handing out forms for everyone to sign while the guy we'd followed handed the desk guy a black AmEx.

I was having a hard time getting my eyes to focus that small, so after squinting at the form for a minute or so, I just looked around, saw that everyone else was signing, and figured I could sign too.

I know—stupid, right? I was out of it, is all I can say.

I followed the gang through a heavy wooden door with two bouncers on it, and we ended up in what looked like another basic bar, except it was all men, and a lot of them were wearing leather—pants, boots, wristbands, vests. It took me a minute (loopy, remember?) to figure out that it wasn't just a gay bar but a leather club.

Yeah, I was in New York City, in a BDSM club with a bunch of millionaires—like something out of a bad porny novel.

Okay, I actually like a lot of those books, but still, it's not exactly realistic, except there I was.

It wasn't all marble and velvet and St. Andrew's crosses, anything like that. It was a nice bar with dark wood paneling and comfy looking chairs and springy carpet, which was just as well because here and there I saw guys kneeling on the floor.

And right then it hit me that I was in a BDSM club surrounded by a bunch of really studly guys, some of whom actually knew my name, and I started getting hard. I know, you're thinking I had way too much alcohol for that, but like I keep saying, I wasn't that drunk—it was mostly lack of sleep, and the pills I'd had on the plane and the jet lag and all.

We wandered across the room, weaving between tables and couches and chairs, until a group got up and headed toward a door in the back next to the bar. Hank zipped in behind them and sort of used his aura to lay claim to a grouping of upholstered seats pulled into a vaguely oval-shaped conversation grouping, with a couple of small tables stuffed into gaps.

A server piled empty glasses on a tray and asked what we wanted while we got organized and started sitting. Orders for sodas and waters came at the guy from all directions, so I ordered a ginger ale. By the time the server took off, everyone was sitting but me and two of the other guys, and they settled down on the floor. Umm, okay.



One of the guys who'd been in the bedroom with Mr. Castle was kneeling at the feet of another guy I'd met earlier that week—I think he was a division manager in chip design. He wasn't all formal or anything, the straight back and palms up on his thighs that you see in pictures; he was on his knees but kind of leaning against the chair, and they were talking like two buddies. Another guy I hadn't met yet was sitting cross-legged on a pillow between the feet of another man from Mr. Castle's bedroom; I think he was the director of security.

I should probably also mention that I wasn't exactly a newbie to this stuff. I mean, I'd never actually had a Master or a Sir or anything like that, but I hung out with some people in the community back home. I'd been to a couple of munches, and I'd been going to the gatherings Brandon Cole has at his house every Saturday. They had a flogging demo once, and I tried it out.

I didn't go first or anything, but the Domme doing the demo seemed really cool. When I finally found the nerve to volunteer to be next, she gave me a sweatshirt to put on over my T-shirt for the first few blows so I could get used to it. I took the next few just on my shirt. It was... interesting. I wasn't in orgasmic raptures over it like you see in porn videos, but it was something I was interested in trying again, maybe in private, with the right guy, you know?

So I'm not a newbie, and I didn't get all freaked out or anything. But still, I didn't know any of these guys very well, and I had to work with all of them, and I was the last one standing there in the middle of the ring of seats, with everyone looking at me, and there were no empty chairs.

The guy sitting next to Mr. Castle pulled a big pillow out from where it'd been tucked next to his chair and tossed it down in front of the boss's feet. "There you go," he said, and he gave me this huge grin.

I felt myself blushing, 'cause seriously? And then Mr. Castle said, "No, absolutely not," and shoved the pillow away with one foot.

He was glaring at the guy who'd put the pillow down—it wasn't like he was giving me any nasty looks or anything—but still, that was a pretty major rejection even if I hadn't been all eager to throw myself at his feet. And maybe I would've if he wanted me, you know? Because I *was* loopy and he *was* gorgeous and he could slot into that master-shaped hole in my fantasies pretty

well. But that absolute rejection still stung, especially right there in front of everyone, and that's when I started thinking I could just leave and catch a cab back to the hotel.

But right then someone tugged on the back of my jacket, and the guy who'd been looking me over back at the hotel said, "Here, there's room by me."

I was kind of frozen, what with the whole embarrassment thing, so he didn't have much trouble maneuvering me around and ten seconds later I was sitting cross-legged next to his chair. He wasn't handsy about it, so I let him get me settled on the floor; the carpet really *was* nice to sit on.

The chair on my other side had these tall sides, and the guy'd pushed a side table backward to make room for me, so I was in a little niche, like an animal in its den. I could look around at everyone, but I wasn't really in line of sight for most of them, so a minute later they were all talking about whatever, and so far as I could tell, no one was paying any attention to me. Which was fine, seriously.

When the server came back, the guy I was sitting next to passed me my ginger ale without having to ask what I'd ordered, and he said, "You okay?" in a low voice.

I said, "Yeah, thanks," and took a sip of my drink, because what do you say?

"Good. I'm Evan O'Neill, by the way. I'm the CFO—it's my job to keep everyone else from bankrupting the company."

I had to grin at that, at least a little. "You seem to be pretty good at it, from what I've read about Castle."

"I try." He gave me a grin back, with sort of an eye-rolling glance at the guys around us. "Greg said you have an MBA?"

I told him about my education and the research I'd done for the Masters, and he gave me a sketch of Castle's financial workings. It was all very mundane and by the time I was done with my drink, I was calm again and the embarrassment was just a memory. And when I finished my drink and saw that most of the other guys had finished theirs, I felt comfortable enough to get up and say, "Another round?"

Half a dozen orders came at me. It wasn't complicated, so I headed off to the bar, running through the list in my head.

The place was busier than it seemed from where we'd been sitting. All the seats were full and there were people leaning in, but I found a spot almost the size of a person in between a couple of stools. It took a minute to get one of the bartenders to notice me, but I gave the guy my order and put down enough cash for the drinks and a tip, then turned to look around.

It was nothing like the movies.

First, everyone was dressed, even if some of it would've gotten double-takes on the street.

Second, no one was having sex.

Third, there were all kinds of guys there, and it didn't look like they were all following the same script.

There was a group of guys in a conversation area like ours, where all the men sitting on furniture were wearing leather pants and motorcycle boots and armbands and stuff. Each one of them had a guy on the floor in front of or next to him, kneeling, in what you'd probably think of as "proper" position—either back straight, eyes down, hands palm-up on their thighs, or kneeling down with forehead on the floor and palms flat to either side of the head.

But right behind them was another group sitting however. One of the guys on the floor was clearly the dominant partner, with his boyfriend curled up in his lap. They were talking and laughing, and obviously not trying to play Tough Dom or Perfect Sub.

Toward the middle of the room were two guys in slacks and shirts sitting in chairs and looking like any two guys talking in a bar after work. Except there was a third guy kneeling in front of one of the chairs, his wrists tied behind his back with a necktie, his head resting on his partner's thigh. The guy in the chair was talking to the other guy in a chair, but he was running his fingers through his boyfriend's hair, soft and slow. The boyfriend, the one on his knees, looked perfectly relaxed, like this was his way of shaking off a week of work stress.

The guy to my left at the bar said, "First time?"

He sounded mellow and friendly, not all aggressive, or wink-wink-nudge-nudge, so I gave him half a smile and nodded. “Here, yeah. First time in New York.”

“But not your first time in the scene?”

“No. I have some people I hang out with back home.” Which maybe implied more than was true, but I didn’t want anyone to slot me into the wide-eyed virgin role, you know?

“Cool,” said the guy. “If you’re interested in playing later, come find me.”

“Doesn’t seem to be much playing,” I said, glancing over the room again. There was a lot of stuff that’d probably get you thrown out of a regular bar, but nothing I’d call serious play either.

“The main room’s kind of mellow,” Barstool Guy said, “but it gets more serious in the playroom.” He pointed toward the door I’d noticed before, next to the end of the bar. “Still no sex allowed, but more fun than you can have in the bar.”

“I’ll remember that, thanks. I came with some friends, though, and we’re pretty settled for now.”

“That’s cool. Hey, your drinks are up.”

I looked around and sure enough, there was a tray full of glasses on the bar behind me. “Thanks,” I said, hoisting the tray. “Later.” He nodded and gave me half a wave, and I headed off, careful to balance the tray as I wove through the furniture.

The group was three guys short when I got back. I handed out drinks, dropped the tray on a table, and went to sit on one of the little couches next to Evan, who’d moved—I figured he deliberately shifted to a place where I could sit next to him without having to be on the floor.

“More comfortable?” he asked, taking a sip of his soda.

“Yeah.” I settled back into the padded corner and toasted him with my glass. “I like having a back to lean on, you know?”

He nodded. “You could work on your posture, and you’d be more comfortable on the floor.”

I kind of stopped for a couple of seconds and switched gears. That definitely wasn't business- or finance-related. "Umm, yeah, I've heard that. It's something I'll need to work up to, since I'm usually all about comfort."

He laughed and nodded again. "You'll be happy to know the company has a decent chair budget. We don't want anyone taking time off to hit the chiropractor, or doing substandard work because their attention is all on their aching back."

"Good policy," I said. "More companies should spend some money on prevention. It's cheaper than treatment later."

"Absolutely. We have a great gym—did you get to that in the new-hire tour? It's open to everyone, and you get an extra half hour for lunch three times a week if you spend it in the gym."

"Seriously? Wow. That's probably in one of the pamphlets they gave me Monday. I'll admit I haven't read through everything yet."

"Hey, anyone too lazy to read everything probably wouldn't want to hit the gym anyway." He shrugged, looking me right in the eye. I felt myself blushing, which sucked.

"Probably so. I'll definitely find the gym, though. I was taking PE classes at school so I could use the facilities there, but I haven't gotten around to joining a regular gym."

"Now you don't have to," said Evan.

"Awesome." I took another slug of ginger ale, watching Evan while I drank.

He was a great looking guy. Not that anyone in the group needed a bag over his head or anything, but seriously, you could tell he wasn't a keyboard slug, even when he was wearing a suit, and he had big, strong looking hands, which are one of my major turn-ons. Other guys are size queens about a man's dick, but I'll take an average dick and big hands any day.

His hair was brown and short and kind of messy; it was obvious it wasn't full of product, which is another thing I like. When I touch a guy's hair, I don't want it to crackle. And he had a dimple in his chin, which I'm not usually into, but he made it work.

And he was smiling at me, a sort of knowing, sideways smile, like he knew I was checking him out and was amused by it but didn't mind.

Usually that'd be a little embarrassing—getting caught checking someone out—but I felt relaxed and just grinned back at him.

Evan leaned in, close enough that he could lower his voice so only I could hear, even if someone walked past us. “You know, I think I envy Nick having something this pretty running around his office from now on.”

I had to smile wider at that, and twisted around so I was facing him. “You're on the same floor, right? I could probably arrange to spread the pretty around every now and then.”

“I think that's only fair.” Evan shifted his soda to his left hand and reached out to trace the line of my jaw with two fingers. They were a little damp from condensation, and cold from the ice in the glass, but I could feel the warmth underneath, and that broad palm was right there, just a breath away.

We looked at each other and I could see the wanting in his face. I felt it too, so it was the easiest thing in the world to turn my head just a little and suck one of his fingers into my mouth. I give a pretty good blow job if I do say so myself, and doing a demo on Evan's middle finger was fun and way hotter than sucking on a finger should be. By the time he put down his drink and slid his other hand around the back of my head, my cock was swollen and solid in my pants.

He pulled me out of my corner and manhandled me onto his lap. I spread my thighs and straddled him, pressing my hard-on against his and sinking into a deep kiss. I felt him tug my shirt out of my waistband, and then his hands ran over skin, up onto my lower back and then down to cup the top of my ass.

I pushed my fingers into his hair and hung on to the kiss. I felt like I was falling into his mouth, into hot, wet sex. My hips thrust against his and suddenly I was frantic to grow a couple more arms so I could strip off my pants, and his, without letting go of him.

After that, it all went kind of fuzzy.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER THREE

Next time I... well, I want to say “woke up”, but I’m not sure I was ever really asleep. Let’s say the next time my head was clear enough that I was aware of where I was, I was in a hospital bed. I had that faint hospital-chemical smell in my nose, and a buzz of unintelligible conversation was floating in the open door even at... whatever time it was. It had to be very early-late, because the light coming in the window was faint and grey, and there was no way it was evening. There was a lump in the other bed a few feet away, but whoever it was, he was facing away from me and I didn’t recognize the back of the guy’s head.

My own head ached like hell and I was feeling woozy, like the room was going to start swooping around me if I let go. I wasn’t actually hanging on to anything at that point, so that should tell you something.

I had some fuzzy memories of sharp voices and arguing, and I think a cop, and a bunch of people in uniforms. I think I tried to hit on a couple of them, which made me groan and squinch my eyes closed, ‘cause that’s totally not like me.

Then I remembered what I’d been doing with Evan, a guy I’d known for like an hour, in a mostly public bar, in front of a bunch of guys I have to work with—including my new boss!—and I groaned louder and pulled the covers up over my head.

I mean, it’d been fun and all at the time, but seriously? Looking back, I couldn’t believe that was me.

I’m not stupid, though—despite recent evidence to the contrary—so by the time a woman in scrubs came in with a clipboard, I’d pretty much figured out I’d been drugged.

After the nurse, then the doctor, I talked to a cop—Sergeant Sato, an Asian guy in his mid-thirties or so, hot if you like the short, muscley type—who wanted all the facts for his notebook. I had to admit I hadn’t even caught the name of the club we’d gone to, that I’d been with a group and we’d all followed a guy who knew a place and that was it. He was mostly stone-faced

(unlike TV cops, most real life cops don't get all intensely emotional over their cases, or at least don't show it when they're working) but I saw his jaw tighten when I gave him my incredibly short list of actual facts. I interpreted that as frustration, and maybe a little bit of wanting to smack the dumb guy around for being dumb. Hey, I'd probably have let him at that point.

When he asked me if I remembered anything else that might be useful, I said, "Actually, I've been thinking about it, and the only time anyone could've slipped anything into our drinks was when I was up at the bar. I was talking to this guy, just kind of passing the time, you know? And I didn't notice right away when my drinks were up. He pointed them out to me during a pause in the conversation, and I don't know how long they were there with no one watching them."

"Could the individual you were talking to have introduced the substance into your drinks?" the cop asked, looking like maybe he'd adjusted his opinion of me up high enough to believe that I *might've* been smart enough to finish high school.

"I don't think so. I mean, I wasn't looking at him every second once we started talking, but I was looking back and forth between the other people in the bar and him. If it'd been me, I wouldn't have counted on me-the-other-guy looking away long enough. I was looking back at him kind of at random."

"The people who do this regularly can be incredibly quick about it," he said.

"Right, I get that, but..." I stopped and frowned. "It couldn't have been just me and Evan, right? I mean, there's no way whoever did it would've known which drinks were ours. So he'd have had to dose every drink on the tray. That would've taken longer."

Sato glanced over at the other bed, at my roommate—I'd found out it was Greg when he turned over, still out of it, while the doctor was there—and said, "We haven't been able to interview everyone in your group yet, but from what I've gathered so far, it seems all the drinks you bought were drugged except the two waters."

"So it would've taken more than a second, no matter how fast the guy was."



“Not as long as you’d think, but yes, longer than a second.”

I thought about that, but it still didn’t make sense. “Any idea why? I mean, if I’d been alone then it’d make sense, in a twisted way, if someone tried to roofie me. But no strangers even tried to pick me up after I was drugged. The guy I was talking to at the bar hit on me, but it was kind of low level, nowhere near as intense as you’d expect for someone who planned to drug me and drag me into the bathroom or something.”

“I can’t speculate about the perpetrator’s motives at this time,” he said. Definitely not like a TV show. He finished writing some stuff in his notebook, then asked, “Would you be available to testify if we do apprehend a suspect?”

That stopped me. I really wanted to say yes, seriously, but what I actually said was, “The thing is, I live in California.” He nodded; he’d gotten my vital stats up at the top of the conversation. “I don’t know if I could afford to fly out here again on my own. This was a business trip, and I know what the tickets cost. And I’d have to take time off work...”

“Did you tell the individual you were conversing with at the bar that you were from out of town?”

I had to think about that. Had I told him I was from California? “I mentioned I was from out of town, that it was my first time in New York. I didn’t tell him I’m from the opposite coast, though.”

“Targets from out of town—more than a couple of hours drive away—rarely show up to testify,” said Sato. “A lot of perps target visitors for that reason; they know it’ll be harder for the DA to get a conviction if the target doesn’t testify. And if they are convicted, they usually get a lighter sentence if the jury and judge don’t have the face of a victim right in front of them.”

“Sucks, but makes sense.” I drew in a breath and rubbed my eyes, wishing I could get some more sleep. “If you do catch the guy, I’ll do my best to make it back to testify. But I have to say, I have a lot of student loans, not much money, and I just started a new job on Monday, so I don’t know if I could even get the time off to come out for the trial.”

Another pause while Sato scribbled in his notebook, then he gave me a look and said, in a lower and slightly more normal sounding voice, “All the

other targets work with you, right? And they seemed to be mahogany row types? Maybe they'll give you a seat on the corporate jet when *they* all come out to testify."

I had to laugh at that. "No corporate jet—those things are ridiculously expensive and never pay for themselves—but I get what you're saying. We'll see."

Sergeant Sato wrapped it up and left. About half a second after he vanished through the door, Mr. Castle came striding in looking grim. He glanced over at Greg, then at me and said, "You're all right? Damn doctors wouldn't tell me a thing."

He'd changed into black slacks and a grey shirt with a leather jacket over it, and was pretty clearly pissed off, but he was still gorgeous; that much hadn't been fatigue or jet lag or alcohol or drugs. I remembered that he'd been drinking water at the club, which meant he hadn't been affected. Great—he probably remembered exactly what I'd done, with perfect clarity. I forced myself to meet his gaze and said, "Yes, pretty much. Doctor said I'll be kind of out of it on and off for the next day, and the headache and nausea should go away in a while, but I'm basically functional again."

"Good." He crossed the room and gave Greg's barely-twitching corpse a smack on the shoulder. "Greg! You alive in there? Come on, time to move."

My first instinct was to snap at him to cut it out, since evidence suggested that Greg felt even worse than I did at that point, and if someone had come along hitting and shaking and trying to get me to jump out of bed, I'd have probably vomited on him. Which might've been just deserts for Mr. Castle acting like a jerk, but Greg just moaned and rolled over. He peered up at Mr. Castle and slurred, "Nick? Whafuck?"

"Have you talked to your doctor yet?"

"Doctor?" Greg blinked a few times and levered himself up on to shaky elbows to peer around. He squinted at me, then said, "Hey, Rob."

I said, "Hey, Greg," but his attention was already back on Mr. Castle. "W'happen?"

Mr. Castle stared down at him for a second. I could imagine the expression on his face just from the back of his body language, you know? He finally

said, “The whole gang got roofied, or whatever the hell it was. I don’t know because I’m not related to any of you, and the doctors wouldn’t tell me anything. But everyone was definitely altered, everyone but me and Nach, because we were drinking water. The rest of you pretty much collapsed into a damn orgy right there on the floor. We were about to get thrown out when I persuaded the manager to call the police and a few ambulances instead.”

“Fuck,” said Greg.

“Not quite,” said Mr. Castle. “You were working up to it, though.”

Greg made a snorting sound, kind of like a laugh, then one hand fumbled around until he found the control panel for the bed. He stabbed at a button, and a few minutes later, the same nurse who’d come in to talk to me when I woke up poked her head in.

“Mr. Wyatt? Good, you’re awake. How are you feeling?” She bustled up and checked out some of the monitors over and around his bed.

“Awful,” said Greg. “But I’ve felt worse, and I need to get home. Any way I could bust out of here?”

She gave him a small smile. “I’ll let the doctor know you’re awake.” She sort of herded Mr. Castle out of the way through sheer personality aura, her pleasant expression never shifting, then pulled the curtain around Greg’s bed so she could do whatever—probably the same as I’d gotten when I woke up.

Mr. Castle scowled at the curtain, then came over to my bedside. “I don’t suppose the police had any ideas about who did this or why?”

I shook my head, then stifled a groan and decided not to do that again for a while. “Not really. I mean, there was a guy I talked to for a minute at the bar, while I was waiting for the drinks, but he didn’t really have time to do anything.” I described the conversation, and how I’d been looking between the guy and the room, back and forth.

“So I don’t know,” I said. “I mean, if someone wanted to get laid and was trying to take a shortcut, why hit all the drinks? And how come no one came over after we’d been drinking and tried to follow up?”

“Maybe it took effect faster than they expected? If this was their first time trying it…” He scowled at the wall past my shoulder, thinking. “It seemed like

we were just talking and then suddenly it was like a porno—I wanted to look around for a camera.” He paused, then shook his head. “That’d be stupid. If the house wanted to sell hidden-camera movies, they’d have better luck in the playroom. It’d be stupid to start a lot of activity they usually don’t allow in the bar. And they were about to throw us out before anyone got to anything that’d work as a porno highlight.”

That made sense. I hadn’t thought about being filmed—the idea made me blush again, which was annoying—but Mr. Castle was right that the pieces didn’t fit.

He took a step closer, until he was leaning right over me, and lowered his voice. “That’s the cops’ problem. Before we’re back with the mob, I need to talk to you about Evan.”

I just nodded. He looked pretty grim, and I wondered for a second if maybe he and Evan had something going, and he was going to warn me off. Just my luck, ending up next to the boss’s boyfriend just when the drugs came out, right?

Except when he said, “You need to give Evan some space for a while. He’s married, and he doesn’t fool around. He’s the nicest guy you’ll ever meet. It was pretty obvious you were embarrassed, and he wanted to take you out of the spotlight and make you feel comfortable. He’s just like that. I talked to him earlier, and it’s obvious he feels like hell for what happened between the two of you. He knows it wasn’t your fault, or his fault for that matter. But it still happened, and he feels bad about it. His husband’s not the type to be understanding about it, either, so he’ll be getting shit at home for this for who knows how long—he doesn’t need any more at work.”

That... okay, wow. Totally not what I’d expected, except the part about Evan being really nice. That’d come through loud and clear while we were talking. I nodded and said, “No problem. He’s a great guy. I’ll stay out of his way. Umm, as much as I can?”

Mr. Castle nodded. “Right. You’ll have to interface with him at work at times. Just be professional and leave it at that level. Don’t duck into closets to avoid him, but let him decide how friendly to be, and how fast.”

“Absolutely.”

“Good. I appreciate that.” He looked over at the curtain around Greg’s bed. “I rescheduled all of us for a one-forty flight. Everyone should be ready in time to make that. We’ll meet in the hotel lobby at eleven-fifteen and head out together.” He waited for me to nod understanding, nodded back, and left.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER FOUR

I slept for most of the flight home, and spent the rest of the weekend sleeping, drinking water, and sleeping. Oh, and when I wasn't asleep, I mostly stared at the ceiling and imagined all the ways work would probably suck now.

Although having a bunch of people at work know I was submissive wasn't on that list, which felt pretty weird, but in a good way. I'd had a couple of lovers be jerks about it, and one of them—a guy in my Business Ethics seminar, which is totally ironic—told everyone at school who'd stand still to listen that I was a wussy little prick who wanted someone to tie me up and spank my ass. Which wasn't what I'd said at all, but people who have preconceived ideas they've picked up from bad jokes don't tend to care much about detail accuracy.

Almaden's a big enough school that "everyone Trey knew" wasn't a significant percentage of the student body, and after a couple of weeks the reactions had died down to just an occasional smirk or comment. It sucked, but I dealt with it. I'll admit it made me pretty gun-shy, though, and if I hadn't already been to a couple of Brandon's Saturday things, I probably would've ducked back into the kink closet and nailed the door shut.

So having people at work find out was nightmare fodder, but it looked like most of the executive staff was kinky. And they didn't even seem to be the kind of people who looked down on male subs. I know it's stupid, but a lot of people do. One of the guys on the floor at the bar had been the Security Director, though, and he couldn't do his job if people were smirking at him all the time. I wasn't worried about being harassed because of my preference for being the one kneeling, which... okay, that felt pretty damn good.

But still, I had—okay, a bunch of us had—been way out of line in our behavior, and drugged or not, it had to be embarrassing. I was still trying to get to know everyone and figure out how my cog fit into the company machine. This whole thing was a huge bucket of sand in the gears, and there was no way it wouldn't be awkward. At *least* awkward.

On Monday morning I arrived twenty minutes early. I got off the elevator on the executive floor and followed the seductive scent of coffee to the break

room. Greg was already there too, doctoring his mug and looking normal, except for a tight expression like he had a low level headache, or like someone had chewed him a new asshole, or maybe both.

“Hey, Rob. You feeling okay?”

“Morning,” I said. “Yeah, I am. I spent most of the weekend unconscious and that seems to have taken care of stuff.” I pulled my mug off the shelf and poured. I like mine black with sugar, so I was ready to roll in half a minute.

He laughed and said, “Yeah, me too. Hey, Nick wanted to see you as soon you got in. Go ahead and take your coffee.” He waved a hand down the hall toward the CEO’s office. It took up a huge corner of the building, which wasn’t exactly skinny. I’d been in and out of it a couple of times the previous week while Mr. Castle was travelling. Finding it was no problem, but knowing that Mr. Castle would be in there made it feel completely different. My heart sped up and my mouth went dry.

I took a slug of hot coffee, ignored my screaming tongue, and headed down the hall.

The outer office had a hardwood conference table surrounded by ten expensive-looking chairs off to the left, and a more casual seating area to the right, with a couch, a loveseat, and three comfy chairs. Straight ahead was another door, currently open, to the inner sanctum where the actual work got done.

The morning sun made Mr. Castle look like he was ready for a photo shoot. One of those magazine spreads about the dozen most powerful and rich, hot, single CEOs that non-business mags do when they’re trying to look serious but really are desperate to sell copies and want women (or gay men) to stock up just for the photos. Like that.

Before I could freeze or pop wood or anything else completely disastrous, he glanced up from his computer and said, “Morning. Come in.”

I walked over and stopped in front of the desk. He was still typing when he said, “Greg calls you Rob?”

“Yes, sir.”

He just nodded and said, “Rob, then. Here, tell me what you think.” He

reached over with his mousing hand and shoved a thick folder across the desk at me.

Okay. I picked up the folder and looked around.

“There.” The mouse hand stabbed a finger at a clean desk off to one side.

I took a couple of steps toward it. It looked like overflow rather than an actual assistant’s desk, and I wondered whether it was meant to be permanent.

“Should I, umm, order a desk for the outer room? I should be guarding your door, right?” I smiled to show I was sort of kidding, although not really, but he didn’t look up.

“I don’t need a secretary, Rob. People around here know better than to bug me with trivial crap, and I type my own e-mails and book my own plane tickets. I need someone who can function as my right hand. If that’s you, we’ll find out in the next week or so.”

He still hadn’t looked up, so I said, “Yes, sir,” and settled down at the empty desk. I spent the next hour skimming through the folder, then went to the supply cabinet in the break room. I filled a box lid with a load of loot, filled my new desk, and started through the folder again, taking notes this time.

At eleven-forty, Mr. Castle said, “I have a lunch appointment. I’ll be back around one-thirty,” and left.

Okay, then.

I went to the deli up the block and got a roast beef and cheddar sandwich, a bag of chips and a banana. I got an up-elevator in no time; it was twelve-fifteen and all the traffic was on the way out of the building. I ran into Nachman on my way back to the office—our office?—and he said, “Hey, Rob! You all right? I haven’t seen you this morning, thought you might still be sick.”

“No, I’ve been in Mr. Castle’s office all morning. He has me looking over the Bridger project.”

“That one.” Nachman scowled and gave me a nod. “Have fun.”

“Oh, yeah, it’s great,” I said. “Seriously, are *all* the tech managers here like that?”



That got me a short laugh. “No,” he said.

“Well, that’s a relief.” We exchanged smirks, waved and went our ways, him out to lunch and me back in to work. I was determined to be ready to discuss the project with Mr. Castle when he came back. He hadn’t said when we’d talk about it, but I knew if I slacked off, he’d be on me as soon as he got in from his lunch meeting.

He hadn’t been a jerk or anything, but he hadn’t actually been welcoming, either, and I had a feeling he was just looking for a reason to toss me out. I remembered Greg saying that Mr. Castle had been fighting him on the subject of getting an assistant at all for a while, so it made sense that he’d take any excuse to reject me. My head knew it wasn’t personal—probably wasn’t, although I still wasn’t sure what he thought of the thing on Friday night—but my gut wanted to impress him.

My bank account also wanted to impress him, and the tiny little Financial Aid clerk who lived in my head *definitely* wanted me to impress him.

I had some comments and suggestions about the issue he’d tossed at me, but there was some info I needed before I’d be willing to discuss it with anyone. Certain things were standard, but I wasn’t willing to chance looking like an idiot by making assumptions that might not be accurate in this case. I needed to see the Bridger contract, which was unfortunately down in Contracts. I was pretty sure everyone down there would be out to lunch, and even though I might be able to get away with poking through their files on my own—“Me? I’m Mr. Castle’s personal assistant!”—I didn’t know where exactly it’d be, and going in cold to hunt around on my own could take me the rest of the day, forget lunchtime.

Greg had shown me how to find a lot of data on the company server, though, and I had a log-in for that. If I really was the CEO’s assistant then I imagined my log-in could get me into most of it.

What I didn’t have was a computer, but Mr. Castle had one; there was a laptop on his desk that’d inspire a decent orgasm in anyone even vaguely technical. He wasn’t using it right then, either, being gone and all. I hesitated for about twelve seconds, then took the Bridger file and all my notes over to Mr. Castle’s desk.

Where I stopped and stared. He hadn't logged out.

Wow, that was kind of dumb for a man as smart as Mr. Castle had to be. Sure, he was on the top floor of a building he owned, with decent corporate security and presumably loyal employees all over the place. But one disloyal employee—or one more-or-less loyal employee who thought he deserved a nice raise—could make a lot of mischief on the company servers if he had access to the CEO's log-in.

Mr. Castle wasn't stupid, and Castle wouldn't be where it was if he were careless. So I was going to assume he'd left his account logged in—while he was away for an extra-long lunch meeting—because he wanted to see whether I had the balls to come over here and get the info I needed to complete my assignment.

I have great balls, and that's not just my own opinion, either, so I dove into the system with a huge smirk on my face.

When Mr. Castle returned at about quarter to two, I was still at his desk. I had everything I needed, but at that point it was a matter of pride to let him "catch" me there. I looked him in the eye and said, "Did you have a productive meeting, sir?"

He set his briefcase down on a side chair since I had my stuff spread out all over his desk. "Yes, I did. We're going to make a lot of money on the Pinelli deal." He glared down at me and added, "Making yourself right at home, I see. Anything else you need?"

I swallowed down a sudden surge of nerves, met his gaze and said, "Yes, actually—I need a computer of my own so I don't have to borrow yours." I managed to say it with a pleasant smile, holding his gaze for a full second afterward before I looked down to start clearing my stuff off his desk.

He made a sound that was a cross between a laugh and a cough. I assumed that meant I wasn't going to be fired just yet, and did a little high-five in my head.

"Put in a request to IT," he said. He slid into the chair I'd been sitting in until a moment ago, and said, "So, tell me about Bridger."

I pulled the chair over from my desk to his, and sat, shuffling through my notes. "Bridger has overruns of both cost and schedule. Every time they have a

design review or a trial with the customer, they end up with a list of fixes and changes and additional features.”

“The whole point of reviews and trials is to find things to fix.”

“True, but there’s a difference between fixing a problem to bring a system up to spec, and adding a new feature that isn’t in the spec, or even making an optional change to something that’s already up to spec. There are standard channels for out-of-contract change requests coming from the customer, but the techs and engineers—on both sides—aren’t using them.”

“Why is that anything I should be concerned about?” he asked in a sharp, impatient voice. “I don’t micromanage at the project level.”

I quailed a little, but I knew I was right, so I looked him in the eye and said, “Because this is a management problem, and if you don’t stomp on it, it’s going to spread.” He just cocked his head at me, like he was waiting for me to explain why I wasn’t wasting his time, so I went on.

“The techies in the trenches want to make their shiny thing cooler—if they have any kind of decent morale, they’ll be pretty enthusiastic about that. The techies don’t care what team they’re working for, they’re just messing around with this cool thing they’re building, and if someone comes up with a neat-awesome idea, they’ll want to dive in and do it. I’m sure you remember what that feels like, sir.”

That got an eye roll out of him, but his lips quirked in half a smile for about a millisecond. I thought, Hah! and went on.

“From the customer side,” I said, “Bridger has no reason to rein in their own techies. They’d love to get a shinier system with more bells and whistles, and if their own people can make that happen under the table, that’s a win for Bridger. But from our side, any additional bell or whistle has a price tag. Each additional line of code costs an hour of technical labor, not only for making the change itself, but for testing and documentation changes. That gets expensive.”

Mr. Castle knew all this, so I hurried on with, “It’s up to the managers on our team to rein in our techies. We’re willing to make whatever changes Bridger wants, so long as they go through channels. An official add or change comes with an additional price tag to cover our costs. A change made under

the table because the techies think it's cool, or that it makes sense, or that it's 'quick and easy' because it's just a few lines of code—that costs us money. If our people make the change voluntarily, out of contract, then we have to eat it. We don't want to squash the techies, but we have to get them to understand that every single addition or change, even one line of code, needs to be approved and go through Contracts. Techies think this is stupid, but it's up to their managers to make them toe the line anyway.”

I leaned back and said, “If you don't stomp on this now, the techies will talk to their buddies about what they're doing, and it'll spread to the techies on other projects. And the managers who overlook it will talk to other managers about how much happier *their* customers are, and within a few years every project in the company will have this money drain in it. It's a management issue, and the best way to curb it is from the top.”

He stared at me for a few seconds, then nodded. “I agree with you about the problem. Any suggestions?”

Specifics? Umm... What the heck. “Giving the division and project managers a good verbal reaming, as a group, would be a start. For a more concrete deterrent, separate out the costs associated with the unofficial adds and changes, and take it out of their bonuses. Something like three-quarters from the PMs and one-quarter from the DMs. That'll add up fast, especially for the DMs who are responsible for a dozen or twenty projects, and motivate them to do some trickle-down reaming that'll make an impact on the techies.”

Mr. Castle laughed while shaking his head. “I don't think I'll go quite that far, but I like how you think.” He crossed his arms and stared at me, his expression almost pleasant. “All right,” he said, “you're not completely useless. Go put in a request for a laptop. I'll have a few more projects for you by the time you get back.”

“Yes, sir,” I said. I put my files and notes down on my desk and walked sedately out of his office. As soon as I was sure he couldn't see me anymore, I did one of those jumping fist-pump maneuvers and mouthed, “Yes!”

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER FIVE

By Saturday, I was definitely ready to head over to Brandon Cole's place and relax. The people at Castle were good to work with, but it was intense, and I was constantly aware that people were watching me, like, all the time. I was the new guy, some kid with the ink still wet on his master's. If I'd thought Mr. Castle was waiting for me to screw up on Monday, it was nothing to having dozens of people just looking for reasons to think I'd been hired for my looks or something.

It helped that I could babble techno-needery with the engineers. Most of them visibly mellowed out when they found I had an engineering degree. Being able to mention that I built my own computer in high school helped. The admin and support people were harder to impress, though.

No matter what anyone says, it's hard to stay on point twenty-four-seven. It's impossible, actually, and after a week of trying, I was wrung out.

I drove the few blocks from my apartment near the university to Brandon's house. I parked my eight-year-old Honda in front of a house half a block away from Brandon's, grabbed my contribution—a few of pounds of chicken thighs in a cooler for the barbecue—and walked down the tree-shaded sidewalk past lined up cars and trucks and motorcycles to the house.

It was a grey-blue single story with a private front yard. An intricately pieced wall, painted wood between stone pillars, enclosed most of the yard, with a sturdy gate near the driveway and mounds of jasmine between the wall and the sidewalk. The flowers were blooming in the September heat, and the sweet scent filled the air.

Jasmine vines climbed up the rough stone pillars to the top of the wall, six feet up. The wall was topped with another foot of woven-wood trellis, and the jasmine ran riot up there, filling in all the gaps and blooming with enthusiasm in the sun.

All the houses in the neighborhood were single story, so the front was completely private, unless someone stood on a ladder, or a neighbor climbed up onto their roof. There was no actual sex allowed outside, or impact play

(because of the noise) but when I hauled my chicken in through the gate and closed it behind me, the people already there showed a lot of skin. Which, seriously, wasn't all that unusual in the heat.

We'd done bondage demos out there before, but right then, everyone on the patio was a sub, so far as I could see.

"Hey, Rob!" Brandon came over to close the gate behind me while I wrestled with the cooler. "That goes around in the back, where the grills are. There's more ice in the green cooler if you need it."

I nodded and staggered off down the side, through another gate that was (thankfully) propped open. There were three grills waiting, plus extra folding tables and chairs other people had brought, and mounds of food. I set the cooler down with a thankful "*Oof*," and dug some ice out of the green cooler to pack on top of the chicken.

The grills and tables were lined up on a concrete patio, but most of the back was lawn, like the front. The back fence was lined with trees, a mix of fruit trees and liquid ambers that were just thinking about changing to their fall colors. The cherry and apricot trees were bare of fruit, but two of the apple trees were still ripening, and the corners were anchored by huge, fragrant lemon bushes that were loaded. Some kid could make a fortune with a lemonade stand if they had access to those trees.

I grabbed a ginger ale out of one of the coolers and headed back out front.

A guy I knew from the university, a cute blond with perfect hair, wearing a silver wheat chain collar with a turquoise medallion set into the front, was sitting on one of the loungers. His legs were crossed to make room for an older woman sitting on the foot of his lounger. A guy I'd seen around but hadn't met, who looked like he spent a lot of time at the gym, sat on the grass in front of them. I went over and said, "Hey, Riley," then gestured at the patch of grass next to the muscley guy.

Riley said, "Rob, have a sit. Rob, Marcus and Anna; Marcus and Anna, Rob." He waved his bottle of water at each of us as he said our names, and I grinned and waved around the group while settling down cross-legged next to Marcus.

Once my face was lower down, I noticed that Riley's wrist was handcuffed to the lounge. I blinked a couple of times, then looked a question up at him.

He grinned and said, "Don wanted to be sure I'd be where he left me."

"Romantic," I said, grinning back.

"Totally." Riley glanced up at the house, then down at his watch.

"Only if he doesn't have to pee before the Doms get done with their thing," said Anna.

"I'm going slow," said Riley, waving his water bottle again. "It's actually pretty hot. I mean, being chained up and then left alone is hot to fantasize about, but fucking stupid in real life, right? But he can leave me here because there are people around, but it still *feels* like he's left me."

From my low vantage point, it was pretty obvious how much Riley liked his situation. I hadn't thought about it, but I could see where he was coming from.

"If I'm gonna play, I want someone paying attention to me," said Marcus. "What's the point if they just walk away? That's a punishment, not a reward."

"Why kay eye oh kay," said Anna. Hah, she was a net geek. YKIOK—Your Kink Is Okay, an Internet saying meaning whatever turns you on is cool, even if I'm not into it. "I don't know that I'd like it either," she continued, "but I suppose it'd depend on the situation. Mindset is everything."

"I guess," said Marcus. "Hey, any of you going to the KL party tomorrow? I've never been able to find anyone with connections to get an invite."

Kink Life, or KL, was a big BDSM group up in the city. Their parties were legendary; I heard they even have a party-within-the-party that you need a super-special invite for, where they make movies. I wasn't sure I wanted to get tied up and spanked for a camera, but you didn't *have* to do that and most people were never asked to. For most people, it was just a huge party where you didn't have to worry about people smirking or glaring at you for your kink. It was pretty much the ultimate in exclusive kink groups on this coast.

Riley said, "Nope, I've never been. Either of you?" He looked at me and Anna, and we both shook our heads. Riley shrugged. "Don's not interested in

playing with a bunch of strangers around. I'd have killed for an invite before we hooked up, though."

"I'm with Don," said Anna. "I mean, it's one thing to do a little playing here, where we know everybody, but with hundreds of people around?" She got a look on her face like she'd bitten into a bug.

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to, though, right?" I asked. "I mean, that's the whole point, I thought."

"Any large group has its leaders and followers, and its share of jerks," she said. "I'd be surprised if there's never any social pressure to do this or not do that. The bigger a group, the more assholes there are, and the more jagged the group dynamics get. It's human nature."

Well, yeah, that was definitely true. Still, I remembered the kneeling men from the bar a week ago. I still envied them—both for being able to relax and kneel to someone in a (sorta) public place, and for having someone to kneel to.

My brain flared up with an image of me kneeling next to Mr. Castle's chair, and I knew I was blushing. I took a big slug of ginger ale, which was a huge mistake, of course, and the next minute was taken up with me coughing and Marcus smacking me on the back.

By the time I could breathe without coughing, the front door opened and the rest of the party started to join us. Don, a handsome black guy who was a junior partner in a law firm downtown, came over to the lounge and said, "Still here, babe?" He tilted Riley's head back with one hand in his hair and kissed him, Don being the only person who could touch Riley's hair without getting whined at and swatted. Anna hopped up and settled cross-legged onto the grass on my other side. Don nodded thanks to her, then picked Riley up and slid onto the lounge, settling Riley back down on his lap. Riley was beaming and I was envious.

Anna asked, "Where's everyone else?"

Don said, "Still inside, talking knots. Teacher's got to pack and run, has an appointment or something. Wendy and Charlie and Chris and Jim are desperate to squeeze the last few drops of evil creativity out of the guy."

"You're not interested in a few more drops of evil creativity?" Riley twisted around to give Don an incredibly fake, pouty look of disappointment.



“I have plenty of evil creativity of my own,” said Don, squeezing Riley hard enough to get a yelp out of him. “I’ll show you later. The guy knows his ropes, though, no question. Good stuff.”

“Awesome,” said Riley.

It was. Or it would be. It was for Riley, at least.

Dating is no easier if you’re kinky than it is if you’re vanilla. If anything it’s a little harder, because you have a whole ’nother set of variables to match. Someone who likes a little spanking won’t be happy with someone who has heavy pain kinks. Someone who gets off on harsh rules and humiliation won’t be happy with a caretaker Dom. If you’re into puppy play or age play or electricity, you have to find someone else who’s into that, plus all the usual stuff—matching (other) hobbies and senses of humor and what you like doing for your vacation, and whether you’re a neat freak or don’t mind letting the dishes pile up.

Of course, if you’re just looking for vanilla sex, that’s easier. I’ve had my share of blow jobs and hand jobs and plain rubbing off with guys whose names I was sort of fuzzy about, but playing is a whole other deck of cards. Letting some guy you don’t know well enough to absolutely trust tie you up? Yeah, no.

Well, okay, that’s a “maybe” if I’m with other people I trust to look out for me while I’m helpless, but I’ve never been that big on having people watch me have sex, so that hasn’t happened very often. I can get into a threesome, or even a bed-full, but people just *watching*? I’d be too self-conscious to enjoy myself.

Before I could depress myself into oblivion by contemplating my lack of a love- and/or sex-life, Brandon came over to me and said, “You brought chicken, right?” When I nodded, he said, “Let’s go back and get that started on the gas grill, since it’ll take longest. I’ll fire up the charcoal for the burgers and sausages.”

I said, “Sounds good,” waved to the others and followed Brandon into the back.

I let Brandon set up the gas grill, since I’d only ever used charcoal, while I dug my bags of chicken out of the ice. They were sitting in a thick, garlicky

marinade, so my hand got pretty yucked up while I was pulling pieces out, but there was a hose coiled up to one side where I could wash after, or I could go inside to the kitchen sink if I wanted to be fancy.

While I arranged chicken on the grill, I asked, “So what’s with the classified meeting? Demos are usually open.”

Brandon loaded up a chimney starter for the second charcoal grill and tossed me a grin over his shoulder. “It’s about surprising your sub. Not quite as effective if the subs are right there listening to all the tricks, I guess.”

“I thought it was about bondage?”

“That too. I don’t know, I wasn’t in there, but I guess it all goes together? Nick doesn’t come very often—he’s really busy—but when he teaches, everyone says it’s great, so I asked if he’d come. We just got lucky.”

I stopped with my hand in a chicken bag and stared at him. “Nick?”

“Nick Castle? He owns an electronics company downtown.”

“Holy shit, he’s my boss!” I turned and stared at the house, trying to peer in through the kitchen windows, like he was going to be standing there waving at me. “My boss is in there, right now?”

Brandon grinned. “No, I think I heard his bike a minute ago. He had somewhere to get to after the session.” Brandon left his charcoal to do its thing and came over to pat me on the back, like he was afraid I might faint and need a catcher or something. “You didn’t know your boss was kinky?”

“Oh, no, I knew. I definitely knew.” I gave Brandon a semi-abbreviated run-down on my first meeting with my new boss, eliminating the worst of the personally embarrassing parts. He was snickering up until I mentioned the hospital and that we’d been drugged.

“Shit.” I got a one-armed hug and there wasn’t any teasing in it. “I’m glad you’re okay. What if you hadn’t been with a group?”

“Yeah, that would’ve sucked large. I mean, whoever did it didn’t try to take advantage himself, not that I could tell. But even if it wasn’t an actual rapist, if I’d been alone and come on to some stranger? With no functional brain, no precautions or anything?”

“It still would’ve been rape,” said Brandon. “Maybe not the guy you came on to, unless it was obvious you were out of it when you propositioned him and he took advantage anyway, but the guy who drugged you. I mean, if you’re so impaired you can’t give valid consent, that’s rape.”

That made a kind of sense, but not completely. “I don’t think it’d be prosecutable that way,” I said. “I see where you’re coming from, but you need a rapist, right? To a guy I propositioned, I’d have just been a horny tourist looking to get laid. The criminal was the guy who drugged me, but he didn’t touch me. I mean, there’s got to be some law against drugging someone without their knowledge; if I’d let someone fuck me while I was drugged, that would’ve increased the severity of the charges, right? They take damage done into consideration? But I don’t think ‘rape’ would come into it.”

Brandon went back to the charcoal grills and poked at one of the chimneys. “Moot point anyway,” he said. “I’m just glad nothing serious happened.”

My first instinct was to say that blushing whenever I ran into one of the senior executives in a meeting or passed them in the halls *was* something serious, but I knew what he meant, and yeah, my embarrassment wasn’t major.

It was there, though. It wasn’t nothing.

And if Nick came to Brandon’s sometimes? I hadn’t seen him there before, but then I hadn’t been to all that many myself. That’d be... weird.

It could be a really good weird if I thought there was any chance he might be into me, even just to play with once or twice, because the guy was seriously hot. He’d made it pretty clear on party night that he was definitely *not* into me, though. Very much not.

I finished laying all the chicken out on the big grill, then looked around. Aha, trash bin. I went and dumped the bags, and Brandon looked over at my grill. “Just thighs?” he asked.

“My favorites. Lots of meat, best flavor.” I smirked at him and added, “Anyone wants breasts, they can bring their own.”

“Hey, I just said ‘chicken’, so however you want to define that is up to you.”

“Maybe next time I’ll bring a couple buckets of deep-fried hearts, then? Chewy, but they taste great.”

Brandon got a weird expression on his face and laughed. “Hearts? Seriously?”

“Hey, they’re muscles, just like the thighs or breasts or whatever. You’ve never cooked the heart that comes with a whole chicken?”

“I don’t usually get whole chickens. I wouldn’t know how to cut one up.”

“I’ll show you sometime. It’s easy, and you can save a lot of money.”

“I thought you only liked the thighs?” he asked with a teasing grin.

I gave him a scowl back. “They’re my favorites, but I’ll eat whatever. I figured if I’m cooking six pounds of chicken all at once, I want all the pieces about the same size and shape, and the thigh *is* my favorite piece.”

“So it’s all about doing as little work over the grill as possible,” said Brandon, still teasing. “So much for your selfless contribution to the group event.”

“It’s called being efficient,” I shot back, my nose in the air and the snottiest look I could manage on my face. “I make excellent money being efficient.”

“I’ll bet you do, if you work for Nick. He seems to do pretty well. Plus he’s a handsome guy, and he definitely knows what he’s doing. You could do worse than hang around that all day.”

I didn’t have much to say to that, mainly because I didn’t want to explain just how wrong he was and exactly why.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER SIX

On Tuesday, Mr. Castle sent me to attend a Change Board meeting for the Ferret project. (I know, but the project names are all silly and irrelevant; it's a security thing.) He didn't tell me why he wanted me to go, just that he wanted me to go. That meant he wanted to see if I'd spot something. It might be another test, or it might be that he knew something was squirrely and trusted me to see it. Or just to bring him the data so he could see it. I wished I knew.

Two and a half weeks and I still wasn't sure where I stood at Castle. I mean, okay, I picked up at the party that he had zero interest in me personally. It kind of sucked, but that wasn't why I was there. Mr. Castle isn't the kind of man who lays everything out for you in great detail illustrated with PowerPoint slides; he expects you to pick up on stuff yourself, and if you don't then you're not smart enough to work in his building.

I wish I had a hint, though. If he was still testing me, then it meant I might still find myself pink-slipped at any time. My blood pressure and I wanted to know whether I had a stable job or not.

Anyway, I went to the meeting and sat down at the far end of the long, rectangular table, to one side so I wasn't right in line-of-sight of the person chairing—present, but not in their face. Everyone knew by then that I was the CEO's PA, and I didn't want to freak anyone out.

A woman in jeans and a white polo shirt with some kind of convention logo on it was bustling around the head of the table. She said hi when I walked in, and when I took my seat she slid a stack of papers down the table, a long, smooth slide that ended up right in front of me, still in a neat stack. If I'd tried that, half the papers would've flown across the tabletop and the carpet. I guessed she had a lot of experience in unclipped-paper-stack sliding.

The table was an older one with a slick, Formica top; that probably helped. It sat in a no-frills, windowless conference room. There was a dusty plant in one corner that I knew was real because it had some dead, brown leaves on it. The putty-colored carpet had a few stains, and a large ripple to one side, like a big blister. Everyone coming in who sat on that side of the table stepped over

the rippled carpet, obviously used to it. I scribbled a note to mention it to maintenance anyway; someone not familiar with the room, like a vendor or a customer, or even a regular who was distracted, could trip and break something and sue us into oblivion. Or, all right, not quite into oblivion, but Mr. Castle wouldn't be happy about it.

When the meeting started, though, I was a little boggled to find that the person who'd been setting up wasn't some kind of assistant to the chair, but was the actual meeting chair.

Change Board meetings control and approve requested engineering changes. It was a configuration management thing, and I'd spent the morning boning up, since apparently you can get an engineering degree without knowing much about configuration control. The idea is to make sure the dingus you end up with is actually what you set out to build in the beginning, basically. Does it hit all the specs? Do the interfaces still interface? Are things like reliability and maintainability and upgradeability still in line with company standards, customer standards, any relevant legal standards? The initial set of approved drawings, specs, manuals, test plans and procedures—all the paper (or files) associated with a project—was its baseline configuration. Deviating from the baseline took consideration and high level approval, because going off in the wrong direction could hose the whole thing.

Which is why, according to the manual, a Change Board was supposed to be chaired by the project manager or the senior configuration manager assigned to the project, or the senior engineer. The person chairing the Ferret Change Board meeting was a young woman a little older than me, about thirty I'd guess, and a question whispered to the electrical engineer sitting next to me returned the information that she was a technical assistant with the Configuration Management Lab.

For folks who aren't familiar with technical organizations and job titles, "tech assistant" means a specialized clerk. She was basically a typing-and-filing kind of person who'd been around long enough to pick up some specialized procedures for the area she worked in.

Looked at another way, the person chairing the meeting was the only hourly person there, and the only one without (most likely, or why would she be in a clerical slot?) a college degree.

Ummmm.

I'd looked at org charts before heading down to the meeting, and the configuration manager assigned to the project was a guy named Glenn Calloway. Nobody named "Glenn" seemed to be there.

The tech assistant's name was Julie, and she ran through a stack of minor stuff—a bunch of components being used on the current build because of availability—which were all quickly approved because the subbed parts were better than called for. I flipped through my copies and everything looked in line. Julie noted that we'd already done first article testing with the baseline parts on this box, so the customer wouldn't complain if we put better ones in the production units. Right—you want to test with the lowest level parts called out. If you tested with better components—higher capacity, better reliability, broader environmental operating ranges—that didn't prove squat about what'd happen if you built the dingus with the not-as-good spec parts. Doing a production run with better components was fine, and since the vendors didn't have what we'd ordered, they were giving us the slightly better parts at no additional cost. Which tells you how much mark-up there is on piece parts, but anyway.

Next we had a set of drawings for a mounting plate that went with a different unit, and a QA inspection supervisor explained that some of the holes in the plate were too small—once the plate was painted, the holes closed up and the wires that were supposed to feed through wouldn't go through. The plate went onto the outside of the unit and had to be painted with a protective coating. The holes were to spec, but were still too small, so the spec itself was wrong.

The engineer on my other side cursed under her breath and sorted through her set of the drawings. "That was Lou. At the time he signed off on this, we thought it would go in a housing and wouldn't need painting. The housing was eliminated, and when we noted the paint requirement, nobody thought of the holes. Usually the tolerances aren't that tight, but with wires..." She shrugged. "It'll cost, but we have to fix it."

Everyone agreed, although the program manager—who was also there, sitting halfway down the table and why wasn't *he* chairing the meeting?—wasn't happy about it.

They ran through a few more things, then Julie got to the last packet of papers. “Request to mod the uplink on TA-021834-03,” she said.

The electrical engineer on my right said, “It’s a simple upgrade and we can get a forty percent noise reduction with minimal additional cost. I’ve talked to Stan about it and he says the customer will go for it.”

Julie frowned down at the packet, then flipped to the cover page of the actual drawing and tapped it with her finger. “This box is used by eight other projects. You can’t just make a change without getting them all to sign off on it.”

The PM scowled at her. “That’s not practical. Look, it’s an improvement, it’s cheap, and the customer’s willing to pay for it.”

“I get that, Len,” said Julie, “but you can’t up-rev a drawing that eight other programs are using without getting their approval. I recognize five of these project numbers—they’re long-running projects that’ve had multiple add-ons and upgrades and enhancements over the years, and they’ll probably have more. What if one or two or all five of them don’t want this change for whatever reason?”

“It’s a cheap improvement. They’ll want it.”

“Then you’ll be able to get the other PMs to sign off on it,” said Julie. “It’s company policy—all affected projects have to sign off or you can’t make a change. Your other option is to re-identify. Start over with a new drawing number used only by this program and you can do whatever you want.”

“Re-identifying is expensive,” Len retorted in a voice loaded with exaggerated patience. “We’d have to change every reference to this box number on every piece of paper it appears on.”

“I get that,” she repeated. “But that’s policy. You get the other PMs to sign off, or you re-identify, or you leave it as it is. Those are your only options.”

“I’m going to talk to Glenn about this.”

“Glenn’s buried in the Shoreline tank this afternoon,” she said, referring to another program. “If you can’t get ahold of him there, you can call Carl, but he’ll tell you what I told you. So will Glenn.”



Len the project manager muttered and scowled, but Julie wrapped the meeting and that was the end of it.

When I got back to the office, I dove back into the org charts and made a couple of calls. Carl was the director of the Configuration Management Lab. Glenn was a senior configuration manager, and was also Julie's supervisor. Julie had been with the company for eleven years, having come in as an eighteen-year-old receptionist whose new boss was friends with Julie's mother, who also worked for us. Julie'd done a stint as department clerk in Component Engineering, then moved over to Configuration Management as Carl's secretary. From there she'd moved over to working projects, which is *not* easy, because secretaries get no respect; it's like they're perpetually branded with a scarlet "S" even if they move to another job in the company.

I had to dig into the accounting database, and then look up a few years worth of bid data from proposals, but I finally figured out what was going on.

I sat down with Mr. Castle late the next morning, and he said, "So, what did you find?"

"I found that Carl Emerson has a secret weapon. The CM Lab has gotten into the habit of bidding their chunk of a critical project with some ridiculously low number of hours for someone like Glenn Calloway—the bid for the Ferret project was eight hours a week—and then when it's time to actually *work* the project, they plug Julie Kale in full time. They've been doing it for about six years, and it works beautifully. Julie makes a small fraction of what someone at Glenn's level makes, but she can do the work. She knows her stuff, she's organized, and she's not intimidated by senior people. I saw her face down a ticked off Len Johnson without any sign of nerves and without budging. She makes less than Len's secretary."

"Why am I paying senior CM people if someone who makes less than a secretary can do their job?"

"Probably because no one's figured out how to clone Julie. She should be an engineer, if not a PM herself, except she doesn't have the schooling." I shuffled through my notes. "She's taking classes at night, one or two at a time. Whenever things heat up—a design review or an upcoming delivery or a proposal, anything that requires overtime for more than a week or so, she

drops whatever classes she's taking, and starts over the next semester. The company's paying for her schooling, but only when she finishes a class, which she doesn't do very often, because for all her smarts, she's dumb enough to let the company's needs override her education."

"Sounds like a deal for us, though," said Mr. Castle.

I glared at him and smacked my hand down on my notes. "It's not right. If you want to be cutthroat about it, ask yourself how long before someone headhunts her? They could double her salary and still be saving money on the deal for the work she does. And how much more could she do for the company if she had an engineering degree? Do you know how she learned to chair Change Board meetings?" He just raised an eyebrow at me, so I said, "While she was Carl's secretary, they released a CM Policies Manual and a CM Procedures Handbook. She must've typed them. Probably edited them, incorporated comments, did the formatting, built the indexes... She *typed the manuals* and that was enough to turn her into a senior CM in all but job title. Or pay grade. If she was able to read a few more engineering books, she could probably build us a Mars colony or something."

"We don't have a NASA contract," Mr. Castle pointed out.

I was annoyed enough to give him a huge eye roll for that one. "Fine. Whatever you want, she could probably do it, but she needs to get through school first. This nickel-and-dime stuff isn't working, obviously, and even if we could get her to quit quitting school every time her project goes into overdrive, she'd still be there for another decade, and that'd just be for her bachelor's. If we could get her to sign a work contract for some period of years, it'd be in the company's best interests to send her to school, full time, and get her through—all the way to a doctorate, if that's what she wants. If she's this hot with a damn high school diploma, imagine what she could do with some real education."

"Possibly," he said. "Or we could just give her a few promotions so her title and salary match the actual work she's doing." He gave me a look and added, "I never finished college either."

It was clear I was supposed to say something there, but I couldn't think of anything. Of course I knew he'd dropped out of college—researching the

companies you apply to is Job Search 101. Mr. Castle was one of those Silicon Valley millionaires who'd dropped out of school to start his company in a garage, and one of the very few who hadn't been shoved aside and finally kicked to the curb by his venture capitalists. I knew that, but it hadn't popped up in my head as a piece of relevant info, although it certainly should've. This was one of those head-desk moments, but people don't actually head-desk in real life, so I just sat there looking kind of stupid.

He finally went on to say, "Someone should probably talk to Julie and see what she wants. I'd be willing to sign off on sending her to school if she'd sign a contract to work for us after—at least ten years if she wants a PhD. Or if she likes bossing engineers and PMs around with her high school diploma, we can promote her and let her keep doing it. Her choice; find out."

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER SEVEN

After that, I headed out to the break room because I needed coffee, and a few minutes to reboot my brain. Of course, that's when I ran into Evan. He was standing in front of the coffee maker and had obviously just put up a new pot. It was rumbling and gurgling and dripping coffee into the carafe at a rate of approximately half a drop per minute.

I'd seen him before, of course. We passed in the halls every day, and had been in some of the same meetings. This was the first time since That Night that I'd run into him when we were, one, going to be near each other for more than a few seconds, and two, didn't have anything official to talk about.

I'll admit I had a gut-level impulse to turn right back around and leave. I had a second gut-level impulse to get something quick, like a glass of water, and *then* leave, to save some scrap of face. Courage is about overcoming your gut-level impulses, though, so I said, "Morning, Evan," and stood there next to him with my mug.

"Hey, Rob." He didn't sound tense, but he wasn't looking at me, either. He gave me a glance and a smile, then looked away. The wall in that direction had a few humorous motivational posters on it, plus about twenty Dilbert strips, but Evan had been there long enough that I was pretty sure he'd memorized them all.

Okay, so he was kind of nervous. I empathized, definitely, so I leaned closer and lowered my voice, and said, "I'm really sorry about that night. I should've kept a closer eye on the drinks."

That got him to look right at me, with a sort of surprised expression. He said, "Hey, nobody blames you. The bartender should've made sure you noticed when he put the tray down. Hell, the bartender should be watching for people who are hanging out right up at the damn bar drugging people's drinks. It wasn't your fault."

"Maybe not, but somehow that doesn't make me feel better."

He huffed out a laugh. "No, I guess it wouldn't me, either." He looked away again, then said, "You know, you're a great guy and I like you a lot—"

I interrupted him before he could continue along that painful and awkward road. “No, it’s okay—Mr. Castle told me that you’re married, and you were just being nice. And you *were* being really nice. I appreciated it before the whole drugged-drinks thing.”

“Okay, good.” He nodded and stared at the coffee pot, still drip-drip-dripping. “I just didn’t want you to think I was actually...” He sort of trailed off.

“I won’t think you were actually planning to cheat on your husband if you don’t think I’m the kind of guy who climbs into the lap of a co-worker I’ve only known for half an hour.”

That got me another laugh, a little louder. “Deal.” He glanced at me again and added, “I have to admit that if I were free, I might not have minded the lap-climbing so much.”

I grinned and said, “If you were free, I might’ve made an exception for you. But seriously, not right then. I’d just met most of those guys, including Mr. Castle—who I’d just found out I was working directly for—and he made it pretty clear he wasn’t too impressed with me. I’d have saved the horribly unprofessional behavior for a later time and a different place, even if the circumstances were... different.”

He cocked his head at me and frowned. “Why—?” Then he cut himself off and scowled. “Oh, that. No, that wasn’t about you at all, not really. Greg’d been threatening to get him an assistant since I don’t know when, and then he just sort of sprang you on him. I told Greg that was a bad idea. But when Allan tossed the pillow for you, it was a joke—a jab at Nick, not you. Nick would never look at an employee in a situation like that. Like you said, you’d just been sprung on him and it was obvious you were pretty thrown by it. You were nervous and trying to figure out what the hell was going on, and there’s no way Nick would’ve taken advantage. Allan knows that, so it was a tease, sort of. He’d had a few and thought it was funny, but it wasn’t about you.”

“Oh. Umm, okay. Thanks.”

That was a bomb set off in my head. The thing with Julie faded into nothing—I felt like a spreadsheet trying to recalculate everything after one key number changed.

“So, how’s it going?” asked Evan after a pause. We were both staring at the coffee going drip-drip-drip, but the atmosphere wasn’t quite as thick as it’d been a minute earlier.

“Fine, great. Kind of a mix of routine stuff and interesting stuff.” It suddenly clicked that Evan was CFO, and Carl Emerson’s semi-scam was definitely a money thing. Not something Evan *needed* to take notice of, but I bet he’d enjoy hearing about it. “Umm, do you know Julie Kale?”

Evan frowned for a second, then shook his head.

“She works for Carl Emerson in Configuration. Tech assistant. She’s chairing Ferret’s Change Board meetings.”

Evan turned and looked at me with his mouth just a tiny bit open. I counted four before he said, “What?”

I said, “No, seriously,” and told him the story. It was pretty good, once you got over the sheer boggle of it, and we were both chuckling by the time the coffee was done.

So we were laughing and smiling at each other when one of the security guards poked her head into the break room and said, “Mr. O’Neill? There you are,” and a dark-haired guy wearing a visitor’s badge clipped to his slick suit pushed past the guard into the room. He stared at Evan, then at me, then at Evan.

Evan said, “Nate?” and looked at his watch. “Hey, you’re early. I just got coffee, but we can go now if you want.”

The visitor said, “No reason to rush. Funny story?” and he was staring at me again.

“Yes, kind of.” Evan got a stressed look around his eyes and mouth. “Nate, this is Rob Arvazian, Nick’s new assistant. Rob, this is my husband, Nate.”

Ahh. Oh. I put on a business smile, said, “Hey, Nate. Good to meet you,” and offered my hand.

Nate looked at my hand for about half a second too long, then gave me the most insulting handshake I’ve ever had. Seriously, I don’t know how he did it, but he communicated the fact that I was shit under his shoes with that shake.

“Hopefully Evan mentioned that he’s married more than two seconds ago,” said Nate.

I said, “Yeah, I’ve known for a while now,” doing my best to keep my voice and face even and friendly, or at least civil, because this guy seriously had “JERK” tattooed on his forehead. “Evan’s a great guy, you’re lucky to have him.”

Nate took a step forward and suddenly looked a lot bigger. “Maybe you want some luck for yourself?”

Evan said, “Nate,” and put a hand on the guy’s shoulder, but Nate shrugged him off with an angry twitch.

Crap. “Look, yeah, I’d like some of the same kind of luck for myself, which to me means finding a guy of my own who’s as built and handsome and half as nice as Evan is. But I’m not after your husband. And even if I were it wouldn’t do me any good because, see above, he’s a great guy and wouldn’t prowl around behind your back. Or if he would then I wouldn’t want him, because I’m looking for a great guy of my own, and sneaking cheaters are jerkwads.”

“Easy to say.” Nate hadn’t taken a swing at me yet, but he was still glaring. “You were eager enough to crawl into his lap.”

“If you know that, then you know we were both drugged. And he told you about it, right? See, a sneaking cheat wouldn’t have come home and told you about it. That means he’s not sneaking, and didn’t mean to cheat. Because he was drugged.”

I couldn’t believe this asshole. He’d better be a wildcat in bed, is all I can say, because Evan didn’t deserve this kind of crap. He was tense, his face was all wincing, with gritted teeth, like he didn’t know whether he should crawl under a table or drag his husband out by one leg. I’d vote for the dragging by one leg option—and down the stairs, not the elevator.

If Nate kept this up, I’d be half tempted to go for Evan anyway, just to detach him from this toxic fucker he was shackled to.

Before that thought had a chance to sneak out my mouth, Mr. Castle filled the doorway. He glared at everyone impartially, looking grim, and said, “The

whole floor can hear you. Nate, you're leaving. Evan, if you want to go with him, that's fine—you can have the rest of the day off so you can deal with your shit. If you'd rather stay at work and let your shit cool down before you try to shovel it, that's fine too. Either way, I expect that neither of you will bring this crap into the office again, ever."

Nate glared right back at Mr. Castle and said, "This is personal—" but Mr. Castle cut him off.

"That's exactly why it doesn't belong in the office. Out, now." He stepped into the room and stood to one side of the doorway, staring at Nate until he left. Evan went with him, and I heard him whisper, "Sorry," as he passed Mr. Castle.

Well, shit.

I glanced up at Mr. Castle, who was still wearing an expression right off a stone statue. I turned away and topped up my coffee mug, added sugar. Stirring very thoroughly kept me occupied for another twelve seconds or so, before Mr. Castle said, "Let's order some lunch. I don't feel like leaving right now."

I turned around just in time to see him give a wry smile and add, "If I turn my back on this place, lightning will probably strike, or at least someone'll send a stripper-gram and that'll be it for the rest of the day."

I grinned back and said, "Possibly for the rest of the week."

"Most likely. How about Mexican?"

Since he was asking and not telling, I figured he wanted me to eat with him. We'd done that a couple of times, usually when we had something to work on through lunch. I said, "Sure," and headed out to place the order.

Twenty-two minutes later, I got a call that there was a delivery in the lobby. I headed down and came back up with three bags. I set them down on the work table in Mr. Castle's office, then went to get drinks at the break room. He took Coke Classic, high-octane, and I grabbed a ginger ale for myself.

By the time I got back to the office, Mr. Castle had the three bags. He said, "Let's eat in the lounge," and walked over to the door on the far side of the office, in the corner near my desk.



Oh, *that* lounge.

I'd never been into the executive lounge. It wasn't really an "executive lounge" because not all the executives got a keycard for it, but that's what everyone called it anyway. It was a private lounge for the CEO and his friends, mostly the guys he'd known since before Castle was a business, plus a few others who'd been given cards over the years. There were a lot of rumors about the luxury and general awesomeness of the executive lounge, passed around among the employees who'd never been there.

Mr. Castle slid a key card into the lock, and I followed him inside.

The executive lounge took up the rest of this end of the floor, as deep as Mr. Castle's office suite, and running all the way to the far end of the building; I could see sunlight from the windows on the far side. The long side, to the right, was also all windows, with basically the same view as we had out of Mr. Castle's office.

The inner two-thirds of the lounge was divided from the outer one-third on the window walls by six-foot partitions. The open area by the windows was about a dozen feet wide, and was set with tables and chairs, plus couch-and-chair groupings, with some potted plants on the floor here and there to divide the space. The partitions had gaps on the window side, and I could see that the inner part of the long room was divided into half a dozen smaller sections, like cubicles.

I was wondering why anyone would come to an executive lounge to sit in a cubicle when I saw who was there ahead of us.

A handsome woman in a dark green suit was sitting on one end of a sofa. A man whose face I couldn't see, but who was wearing khakis and a polo, and silver and white sports shoes, was curled up on the sofa with his head in her lap. She was looking out the window, just relaxing, and running her brown hand through his blond curls, slow and gentle. Mr. Castle and I passed them, heading for one of the tables with our lunch, and I saw the guy huff out a sigh and visibly relax. The woman said, "There, good boy," and bent down to press a kiss into his hair.

Ahh. *That* kind of private lounge.

I maintained, because I'm not a dork, and followed Mr. Castle to one of the round tables that sat right in a patch of sun. While digging in the paper sacks, Mr. Castle said in a low voice, "This isn't work. This place is like an embassy—when you're here, you're not at work. This isn't part of Castle Silica. Coming in here is like going off-site."

I said, "Understood," in a voice just as low, and set down our drinks.

"Nothing X-rated out here," he went on. "That's what the cubes are for, or just if you want some privacy. Half of them have beds, two have benches, and the one on the far end is just matted. We keep the noise down; there's some soundproofing on the walls, but that only goes so far, and you never know when someone's going to open a door. If you're a screamer, deal with it, or use a gag."

"Understood," I repeated. I really had no idea what else to say. We sorted out the food and started eating, but even while working my way through a really great burrito, I couldn't help but remember what Evan had said earlier, that Mr. Castle wasn't actually repulsed by me, that he just didn't want to take advantage while I was new and obviously confused.

I was still new, but wasn't at all confused, so when he shifted one of his own burritos and knocked a packet of hot sauce onto the floor, some wild impulse had me say, "I'll get it, Sir." And instead of just bending over and picking it up, I slid out of my chair and knelt on the floor to get it, then offered it up to him in one hand.

I kept my expression neutral the whole time. I still had enough of a grip on sanity to know that not being repulsed by me wasn't the same as wanting anything to do with me outside of business. But there I was, and I guess I was going to find out.

Mr. Castle took the packet, gave me a smile that was a bare half-second quirk of his lips, and said, "Good boy." He brushed his hand through my hair once, then turned back to his lunch.

I stayed on the floor for a couple seconds, but the moment was past, or at least I didn't see anything else coming of it right then, so I got back into my chair and took another bite of burrito.

A minute later he said, “Next time we’ll get fish and chips. You can kneel for me and I’ll feed you.”

I stopped in mid-bite and then had to swallow hard. I’d never done that before, never really seen the point except sort of intellectually. I mean, yes, kneeling next to someone and depending on them to feed you by hand was obviously an expression of submission, sort of like crouching in front of someone’s chair and letting them put their feet up on your back. I’d never thought it was sexy before, but right then my dick was hard and aching, and my balls were sending little messages to my brain begging to get him to feed me.

After explaining to my balls that we were eating burritos today, and trying to hand-feed someone a burrito would only cause hot food to fall into that someone’s lap, possibly causing burns, my balls got the message and calmed down. A little. They were still whining, though, and my dick was standing up with them in support. I was glad I was still sitting down just then.

Mr. Castle looked up at me as though expecting a response, and I said, “Yes, Sir. I’ll remember—fish and chips next time.”

“Do you like fish and chips?” he asked.

“I *love* fish and chips, Sir.”

That got a grin out of him. “Good.”

And that was that. For the rest of lunch we talked about movies. We both liked superhero movies, as long as they were well done. The recent Marvel movies, although the X-Men movies had been progressively suckier. The new Batman movies, definitely—I wanted to get on my knees for either Liam Neeson or Christian Bale, I wasn’t fussy. Mr. Castle said he saw the attraction with Neeson, but wanted to get Bale into a couple of sets of handcuffs.

I could see Bale switching. I have no idea what the guy’s into—he has a gorgeous wife and might be perfectly straight and vanilla for all I know—but if we’re going to be fantasizing, who cares about reality?

He liked old westerns, and I thought they were incredibly cheesy. I told him so, too. I like animated movies, the good ones, like Pixar does. He smirked and said, “Kid stuff.”

I said, “Right, because Batman and Thor totally aren’t kid stuff,” and he threw a wadded-up napkin at me.

It was like hanging with a friend instead of eating lunch with my incredibly rich and powerful boss, and it was cool. I only called him “sir” a couple of times, after I got up off the floor and all.

When we were done, I stuffed all the trash into the bags and took them along. Mr. Castle led the way out the far door, around the other side of the long room, which led to a plain, locked door on a corridor—just to show me the rest of the room and where most people came in. From there we went back to the office, where I dropped the bags into a garbage can. No janitors in the lounge, ever, for obvious reasons.

And then we went back to work, and everything was normal again. Except in my head, where I kept imagining what it’d be like to stay on my knees for him and have him feed me.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER EIGHT

No fish and chips the rest of the week, unfortunately. He was back East again Thursday and Friday, touching base with a government customer who was looking at budget problems in the next fiscal year. Then on Monday we had a major commercial customer come in, en masse, and Mr. Castle was tied up variously playing host and monitoring the dog and pony show. On Monday and Tuesday he sat in on a CDR—a Critical Design Review—for a project we were already working for them, then Wednesday through Friday he was locked up with a mostly-different group of reps from the same customer for a bid presentation on a new project we wanted. I was running around doing everything from ordering lunch to re-crunching numbers to updating PERT charts with Ellen Corvalis, the proposal manager, to try to squeeze everything down into the timeline the customer wanted before Friday's final presentation.

Lunch was never fish and chips.

On Friday, I was in the conference room the proposal team had taken over for proposal work—the actual *work* work, as opposed to the presentation going on in the much fancier conference room across the hall. I sat on a long, battered table with a cheap, fake woodgrain top, watching Ellen stare at the latest version of the program PERT chart, a huge piece of paper tacked down the length of one wall. The project manager on the customer side was in his sixties and liked paper, so we gave him paper, although it was a ridiculous amount of extra work.

Half a dozen other members of the proposal team worked behind us, researching and updating and calculating and reprinting. Keyboards and laser printers clattered and hummed, and the air smelled of the pizza and fruit cups I'd ordered for team lunch, plus the ever-present coffee. Mr. Castle had taken the customer team to lunch at an Italian place about a mile away, giving us some time to work before the final afternoon session.

I thought of something, and picked up a binder of the detailed bid breakdowns. Yes, of course he did.

I clued Ellen in to Carl Emerson's bidding trick—he'd bid ten hours of a senior configuration manager's time, which would probably cover Julie Kale

for full time plus some overtime—and I also mentioned that Julie probably wouldn't be making peanuts for very much longer, one way or the other. Ellen scowled and pulled out her phone to send a text.

“Creative use of resources is great,” Ellen muttered while tapping in a message, “but stretch it too far and it snaps back on your ass.”

I agreed with her with some enthusiasm, and she sent me a smirk while hitting SEND on her text with a flourish. “There,” she said. “Carl has half an hour to get me some real numbers. If he tries to argue, I'll toss you at him—helps to have the CEO's right hand available to load into the rocket launcher.”

I returned a weak scowl for her smirk. Not that I wouldn't like to give Carl Emerson a lecture on long-term retention of valuable personnel resources, but I was still enough of a newbie that I wasn't sure about chewing out someone on that level. I crossed a set of virtual fingers and hoped Emerson would be on the ball. It should be an easy conversion, after all, even if the final figure was larger than he wanted.

Larger than Ellen would like, for that matter, but a later overrun for what was clearly an under-bid wouldn't do our rep any good, especially with a customer who gave us a lot of business.

We went on with our tweaking and crunching and calling people to nag them about inputs and revisions and approvals, and eventually Mr. Castle and the customers returned from lunch and Ellen vanished back into the main conference room. Donald, her second, wasn't as enthused about using me, so I camped out at a table in a corner with my laptop and worked on some of the Pinelli research, which'd been tossed at me to deal with in all my spare time. I was out of the way but available if Donald wanted anything.

I was also right there in case Mr. Castle needed anything, although he didn't. Despite all the scrambling and updating backstage, the proposal presentations were pretty well scripted and, from what I heard, everything went smoothly in front of the customers, which put everyone in a good mood. Tired—some of the people who were working in the proposal room had been putting in eighty-hour weeks for the last month—but having it all come together and the presentations go well kind of makes it worthwhile.

Or if it doesn't, you're probably in the wrong job, you know?

The afternoon went pretty much like the morning. I got through some research I was doing on one of our competitors, and by four I decided to head upstairs to the break room on our floor to get coffee, just to get out of that room for a few minutes.

The pot was empty—probably because most of the execs were down at the proposal presentation, showing our dedication to doing their project on the all-important last day—so I was standing there watching the fresh coffee drip-drip into the pot when Greg came in.

“Hey!” he said with a sneaky grin on his face. “You playing hooky too?”

“Not really,” I replied. “Donald thinks I’m useless so I’m just sort of taking up space in the proposal room, working on Pinelli stuff.” Greg had been on the Pinelli team for over a month—it was a major new business push and it’d had everyone on our floor working overtime for longer than I’d been with the company—so he knew exactly what I was talking about.

I continued with, “So you’re the only one here who’s actually playing hooky. What’ll you give me not to tell Mr. Castle?” I grinned right back at him so he’d know I was kidding.

Greg laughed and held up both hands like he was surrendering. “I’ve been smiling at their chief engineer for so long my face is about to crack off—I had to sneak out for a few. Besides, we’re at the summing-up, all the questions have been asked and answered. Ellen’s the focus right now, Nick’ll probably say a few words at the end, and then it’ll all be handshakes and heading out. Nobody’s going to miss me now.”

I was pretty sure Mr. Castle had noticed him leaving, but I was also pretty sure that if he’d objected, Greg would’ve gotten a stern text before he even hit the elevator.

The coffee finished and I filled Greg’s mug for him, then my own. He doctored his and took a sip, then said, “How’ve you been doing? Aside from Donald, who just takes a while to warm up to people, by the way, so it’s not you.”

“Good to know,” I said. “It’s been great, though, really. Mr. Castle keeps me scrambling, but it’s usually something interesting, so that’s fine. If it were

all easy, routine stuff, I'd be bored, so I'm glad he's throwing me some knots to untangle. Even if I'm pretty sure he already knows the answer to at least some of them when he gives them to me."

Greg laughed and nodded. "Knowing Nick, he probably does. If he weren't happy with your work, you'd be gone by now. I'm not saying relax, but don't stress out over it."

"No stressing out, got it." I put down my mug and pretended to write a note on my palm with one finger.

Greg snorted. "No wonder you and Nick get along—he's a smartass too. I'm glad it's working, though. When you came in to interview, I was pretty sure you'd be perfect for him. I'm glad I was right." He gave me a bright grin and raised his mug in my direction, like he was toasting me, then waved and headed out.

My phone had been on silent—not even vibrate—all day because I just knew that if I left it set to make any noise at all, I'd be sent to run something over to the presentation room and someone would call me at that instant, and I'd have to figure out how to die and somehow make my body melt and soak down into the carpet right there and then. I hadn't figured out the die-and-melt thing yet, so I kept my phone on silent and just checked it whenever I thought about it. I checked it there in the break room and saw that I had a text from Brandon.

*Bsy 2nite?*

I sent back, *No whats up?* then sipped at my coffee until he replied.

*Get2gethr 2nite*

*Place up in the hills want 2 come?*

I figured anything Brandon was inviting me to was a kink-type party. I'd been to enough daytime gatherings at his place that I thought I was ready for something a little more... more. Something in the evening would be "more", right? I typed:

*Sure, sounds like fun*

and then:



*Address or directions?*

There was a pause of a couple of minutes—maybe he was talking to someone else?—and I was almost done with my coffee by the time he replied again.

*Pick u up? 7?*

That'd work fine. I sent:

*Sure thanks*

He sent back:

*Wear sthing nice :D*

Huh. Maybe it was another munch-type thing, but dinner instead of lunch? I knew there were some nice restaurants up in the hills over the valley—especially Los Gatos, or down in New Almaden, south of the university. I sent:

*Will do—see you then*

I finished my coffee, got a refill, and headed back down to the proposal room. Having plans for the evening put me in a better mood, and I didn't even care about Donald ignoring me.

The wrap-up ran long, which everyone who'd worked proposals before said was pretty standard. But that meant it was after six-thirty by the time the customers had left, most of them rushing to the airport, and I followed Mr. Castle back up to our office.

I set my laptop down on my desk and asked, “Do we need to do anything else tonight?”

“No, that's it for now. Ellen sent the team home to collapse for the weekend. She said you were helpful, by the way.”

“Thank you, sir. She was good to work with.”

“Go ahead and get out of here. I'll see you Monday.”

“Yes, sir. Have a good weekend.”

He stuffed a few things into his computer bag, threw me a casual wave and took off.

I looked at my watch and scowled, then sent a quick text to Brandon.

*Running 18, pick me up from work?*

My phone actually rang a minute later, and I gave him directions while taking some teasing for turning into a workaholic executive when I hadn't even been there a month.

I thought about just following him to the event in my car, but then I decided not to. Since I wasn't planning to do any serious playing, I could have a few drinks if I had a ride home. Easier to pick my car up from work on Saturday than to find my way back to whatever place "up in the hills" we were heading to.

I felt pretty good about being done for the week, and about getting through all the presentations, so I figured I'd let Brandon rag me some if he wanted, I didn't really care.

I hit the bathroom to wash my face and comb my hair. My shirt and tie looked okay, and my jacket had spent most of the day hanging off the back of one chair or another, so it was fine. I'd been planning to change at home, but I looked good for a nice restaurant or whatever we ended up doing.

Except when I hopped into Brandon's Toyota ten minutes later, Brandon was wearing black jeans and scruffy black hiking boots, and a tight black tank top with a black open-mesh T-shirt over it. The bars in his pierced nipples showed through both layers. Black leather bands were buckled around both wrists, about two inches wide. One had a watch on it, but the general effect was still wrist cuffs.

I folded myself into the car and pulled the door shut, then grinned at him and said, "Surprised you don't have a collar to go with the cuffs."

Brandon pulled out into traffic, giving me a quick smirk back. "Only club kiddies wear collars they bought themselves. You're looking very... mundane."

"Yeah, I'm getting the impression I'm going to stand out." I wasn't overjoyed, but there wasn't anything I could do about it so I decided not to stress out over my outfit. "You said wear something nice—you didn't define 'nice' for me, so I figured nice-restaurant type nice."

He laughed and said, "Sorry, I just figured you'd get it. Next time I'll be

more specific.” He pulled onto the freeway and added, “Seriously, sorry. I forgot how new you are. I shouldn’t assume.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, I guess. So, umm, where are we going?”

That got me another grin. “Oh, you’ll see. This is going to be fun.”

“For you or for me?”

“Heh. Both, I hope.”

“No, really,” I said. “I don’t get off on making an idiot of myself.” I hadn’t been worried before, but I was starting to.

“Okay, you’re right. I was mostly teasing. It’s a meet-up in a campground—lots of outdoors, but there’s a rec hall too, indoor bathrooms, all the amenities. We’ve got the place all weekend, with gate guards so we shouldn’t be bothered by outsiders. I wasn’t planning to stay the night, but if you find someone you want to share a sleeping bag with, and can get a ride home, just let me know. I won’t leave without you unless you tell me, though, so if you’re going to vanish, text me.”

“Umm, okay.” I paused, then figured what the hell, and asked, “Why a campground?” Because that sounded kind of weird, and chilly.

“Just because,” said Brandon. “I mean, we’re usually inside somewhere, you know? In someone’s house, or at a bar or a club, or a commercial playspace like the KL building. Which is great, but sometimes the walls and the closed doors and the covered windows get kind of oppressive. It’s nice to be able to go on your knees for someone outside, you know?”

I hadn’t thought about it like that, probably because I was still sort of shy about this stuff around outsiders and felt safe with a group of kinky people and some solid walls around us, but I could see what he was saying. I’d probably agree with him in a few years. So I said, “Yeah, that makes sense.” I watched the traffic go by for a minute, then asked, “Is that why you built the wall around your front yard?”

“Yeah, exactly. It’s like ninety-eight percent private, but with fresh air and breezes, and sun and sky overhead.”

“It’s nice,” I agreed. “Great place to hang. It’s cool that you’re willing to play host every week.” I looked out the window on my side while saying that

because it felt like a kind of dorky thing to say, but I really did want to make sure he knew that *we* knew he busted his butt to have everyone over.

“Thanks,” he said. “I like having an active community, and we have a great group. If no one’s willing to step up, the wheels would fall off and it’d be tough to get together.”

I nodded. “There’s always the Internet, but I like meeting in realspace.”

“Me too.”

Brandon pulled off the freeway, and sure enough we were driving through Los Gatos, even if we weren’t heading for a fancy restaurant.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER NINE

We drove up a narrow, windy road for a while, then into a park. I didn't catch the name on the sign. Brandon said there were four rentable areas within the park, and a few minutes later we pulled up to a low, metal-barred gate guarded by four guys who looked a lot like bikers, and in fact there were a couple of motorcycles parked off to one side.

Brandon rolled down his window and one of the biker guys—all leather and studs and chains and shit-kicker boots, with a worked leather collar closed by a scuffed up padlock that proclaimed him to be someone's sub to anyone who knew what that meant—leaned down with a grin and said, “Hey. Here for the biker party?”

“Yep,” said Brandon, grinning back. “Bikers, that's totally us.”

“Cool,” said the gate guard. “Twenty each, for the site rental, plus there's some food and drinks.”

I dug a twenty out of my wallet and passed it to Brandon, who added his own and handed it out to the guard. He gave us a pair of wristbands in trade—leathery-plastic cord bands with metal clasps, with different colored plastic beads strung on the cord. The fattest of the plastic beads was a smooth cylinder that said “Rolling Thunder October 2013.”

One of the other guards opened the gate for us. Brandon waved and drove through. “Rolling Thunder is a club,” he explained, waving his right wrist where he'd put his wristband. “It's all bikers—mostly guys, but some women, too—who are also into kink. They do biker events as just bikers, and kink stuff as both. The two communities have almost identical uniforms, so that works pretty well for them.”

I had to laugh, but he was right—the whole leather and biker boots thing totally worked in the kink community. The guy who'd taken our money was pretty hot, even if we wouldn't have been able to play together very well. I imagined having an argument over who tied who up, and had to snicker.

The road in was narrow and rutted, and we couldn't go very fast. It was also pretty dark; we still had an hour or so until sunset, but the road was lined

with trees, and there were hills all around. I don't recognize all that many kinds of trees on sight, and I don't know what kind these were, but they were pretty, still green even in the fall, the way a lot of trees in California are all year, especially down near sea level. They had little seedpod-thingsies hanging from them, so I guess they knew it was fall even if the leaves hadn't turned.

Another biker guy was directing cars into a big, empty patch of bare dirt they were using for parking. He pointed to a spot and Brandon pulled in, all neat and with an amazing lack of frustration. It was actually better than valet parking since there was no fussing about passing over keys or getting a ticket.

The air was cool and smelled like dirt and trees. Which I know sounds very blah, but you know, that foresty smell? I don't really notice anything wrong with how the air smells down in the valley, even on smoggy days; it just doesn't register, even when other people are griping about it. I've lived in the Santa Clara Valley all my life, and I guess I'm used to it. I only notice that kind of thing when the smell changes—walking past a bunch of roses or jasmine, or a row of full dumpsters. The middle of a forest, even if it's just up the hill overlooking the valley, smells different enough that I notice; I'm just not good at describing the specifics.

I guess if I could do that, I'd be one of those perfume people, right?

The guy directing traffic pointed up the dirt road, which was pretty narrow once we passed the parking area, more of a dirt path. He gave me a weird look for a second before the next car came in and took his attention. I was pretty sure at that point that I was the only person on site wearing a suit and tie, and sure enough, when we got up to the main area—a big, mostly flat spot covered with patchy grass, with tables and barbecues and tents around the perimeter, and a rustic looking single-story building off to one side—everyone else was either in casual jeans or khaki type clothes, or wearing leather or net or chains or straps or latex or whatever they were into.

I got some smirks, but I got checked out a few times, too, so I guess some people liked the young-guy-in-a-suit look and didn't care that it clashed with the setting. That helped me relax some. I wasn't looking to hook up in any serious way, but some flirting would be fun. I'm not exactly an underwear model or anything, so I'll take my ego strokes wherever I can get them, and don't feel at all guilty about it.

Brandon squeezed my arm and took off jogging, dodging in and out through the strolling and chatting people. I followed, and he led me up to Riley and Don, who were hanging out with some other folks. Riley was kneeling in the grass, leaning up against Don's thigh. Don was talking to a guy I didn't know, gesturing with one hand while the other sifted through Riley's hair.

"Hey!" said Brandon. He waved and got a wave back from Don. Riley smiled and said, "Hi." He didn't wave, and I noticed that he was cuffed, with the chain of his handcuffs threaded behind his belt. He was wearing jeans and sneakers and a plain white T-shirt, and other than his collar he looked totally vanilla. Somehow it was hotter seeing him on his knees dressed like a mainstream guy than it would've if he'd been wearing straps and chains and a hood.

Don was wearing shitkickers with three big buckles up the sides, over black leather pants, with a broken-in black leather jacket over a plain white T-shirt like Riley's. His only accessory was a pair of fingerless leather gloves; I stared at the hand that was playing with Riley's hair, and imagined what those gloves would feel like. My cock started taking an interest and I had to look away.

Which was just as well because Don was making introductions.

"Jonas, Karen, Ty, this is Brandon and Rob," he said, introducing the subs to the Doms. Then he glanced at us and, pointing to the others, said, "Andi, Christina." I nodded and said hi to the Doms, then waved to the subs. Andi was kneeling next to Jonas, leaning on his thigh the way Riley was on Don. Christina was standing, but was wearing a leash that Karen held in her hand. Ty was alone, or at least if he had someone, they were off doing something else.

Everyone said hello back and forth, and Karen asked Brandon if he were the Brandon who hosted the West San Jose gatherings. Brandon admitted he was, and there was some back-and-forthing about that. He issued an open invite to anyone who wanted to show up, and handed out some cards with his address, phone number and e-mail on them. I had one that lived in my wallet; I'd had it since a few months before graduation.

Ty was giving me a looking-over, and when I caught his eye his expression just got more predatory. I figured that meant that either he didn't have a sub, or

he was a jerk and I'd figure that out soon. I gave him a grin and a mostly-discreet once-over, then turned my attention back to the others.

He wasn't bad looking. He looked like he was in his mid-thirties, which was fine because, as you've probably figured out by now with all my stressing out over Mr. Castle, I like guys who are older than I am. Ty had a blond buzz and was solidly built, without being cut. He looked like he cared more about being strong than flexing in front of a mirror, and I'm okay with that. He wore leather pants like Don's, dark brown, with a dark green wifebeater that drew my attention to the fact that he had green eyes. That was unusual and kind of cool.

Brandon was saying, "Rob and I just got here, and I haven't eaten yet. I was thinking of finding the food. Rob, how about you?"

"Yeah, I could do with some dinner," I said. I looked around but didn't see anything obvious in the way of food stalls, although I could smell meat cooking somewhere.

Ty looked at the others and said, "Food?"

Everyone nodded and the whole group rambled off in the direction the meaty smells were coming from. We joined a line that led up to a long table laid out in front of a series of barbecues. A woman dressed in biker leathers used a pair of pliers to crack one of the beads off my wristband, then handed me a plate. Okay, easier than keeping track of tickets, I guess. Especially since there were people around who seriously didn't have anywhere to *put* a set of tickets.

I got a couple of chicken thighs—what can I say? They really are my favorite—then filled in the spaces on my plate with a scoop of thick baked beans, a little half-cob of corn, and a hunk of cornbread slathered with honey. I managed to hold a roll of napkin-and-utensils in the same hand that was holding the (thankfully sturdy) paper plate, and grabbed a beer out of a cooler with my other hand. Our group took over a battered wooden picnic table.

Ty slid in next to me.

Brandon was on my other side, and Don and Riley were across from us. The others were farther down the table to my left; I could see them if I leaned



forward or backward, but when we started talking we sort of broke up into separate groups, since the only alternative was a lot of leaning and shouting.

We started out mostly eating, but once a few bites of food had taken the edge off, Riley gave me a smirk and asked, “So, you looking for someone with a suit fetish?”

I scowled at him and made like I was going to catapult a spoonful of baked beans at him. I didn’t actually do it, mostly because I was afraid of missing and hitting Don, but I made the intent clear. “Actually, I had to work a little late. Didn’t have time to go home and change,” I said. “Although it wouldn’t have made that much difference even if I had, because Brandon decided to be all mysterious and hinty—I thought we were going to a nice restaurant or something, and might’ve ended up in a suit anyway.” I gave Brandon’s ribs a poke for emphasis, and he laughed out a protest.

“Sorry you’re the only guy in the valley who can’t put two and two together,” Brandon teased. “Someone you’ve only ever known in a kink community context asks you if you want to go to an event, why the hell would you assume a nice restaurant?”

“I was thinking an evening munch—my apologies for not keeping up with my online telepathy class.” I leaned over and bumped him, and he bumped me back, harder, which knocked me into Ty.

“*Children,*” said Ty, with a fake-menacing voice. “If anything gets slopped on my clothes because you’re rough-housing, I’m gonna start handing out spankings.”

It was a totally fake threat and everyone knew it, so I just stuck out my tongue at him and took another bite of chicken.

“I’m keeping count,” said Ty, then gave me a look while taking a slug of his beer. I washed down my bite of chicken with a slug of my own beer—it was okay, crisp and hoppy, but not my favorite—then clinked my bottle against his. He laughed and we sort of exchanged challenging smirks.

I’ll admit I’m not completely sure where I was going with that. I mean, I wasn’t really looking to hook up with anyone, as in finding a partner or going down for someone, but Ty was good looking and he was fun to flirt with. I’ve

never been all that smooth when it comes to dating or picking up guys or *not* picking up guys, and I have to admit that one of the things I like about being a sub is that most of the time the Doms are the ones who make the first move. I know it's lazy and all, I get that, but it's easier sometimes to just let it run on its traditional rails, you know?

So I was sitting there finishing my dinner and trying to figure out how to let Ty know that I wasn't interested in, like, letting him fuck me or anything, without offending him or getting that "What makes you think I was going to ask you?" kind of response you get from some people when they're hurt and embarrassed and just want to smack you back for making them feel like that.

That was probably why I was twenty-five and had never had a serious boyfriend, much less a Dom to play with for more than an hour or two, and not many of those. All that back-and-forthing and fussing and worrying and what-iffing and shit? That filled my brain and started oozing out my ears whenever I tried to Negotiate The Social World. It was like there was some class everyone else took in high school, or even middle school, but I was absent that day and didn't even know I'd missed anything until it was way too late to start asking questions without looking like a complete idiot.

Which just meant I'd been stumbling around like a complete idiot for years, wishing I'd done my thrashing around and asked my stupid questions years ago and gotten it over with. And five years from now when I'm still wondering how the heck it all works, I'm going to wish I'd done it *now*. I knew that then and know it now, but knowing never makes it any easier.

Or maybe there was no magic class and everyone feels like this? I've always been afraid to ask about that, too. So.

The sun went down while we ate and the site lit up with everything from candles to camp lanterns to tiki torches to flashlights to strings of tiny Christmas lights plugged into who-knew-what. There were people wearing glow necklaces (and sometimes little else) linked and twisted into different configurations—some sexy, some bondagey, and some just bright-colored fun. People gathered around the site in clusters, sometimes within a pool of light and sometimes deliberately in a patch of darkness.

We threw out our trash and walked slowly around the campsite, from

group to group and light to light. I stayed next to Brandon, and Ty stayed next to me. We followed Don and Riley, who seemed to know a lot of people.

Whenever we stopped to talk to someone, Riley sank to his knees next to Don, smooth and graceful like he'd done it a thousand times, which he probably had.

While I was watching Riley, Ty leaned over, his voice low, and said into my ear, "Like that?"

I leaned back a little, but gave him a grin so he wouldn't (I hoped) take it badly. "Yeah," I said, "I do. I mean, what they're doing specifically, but even more for the connection, you know? They're so... together. It wouldn't be the same if Riley knelt for someone else, or if someone else knelt for Don."

"No, I know what you mean," Ty said. He glanced at me, then back at Don and Riley. "You connected to anyone?"

"Umm, not really. I mean, not yet? There's someone who's interested, I think, but we haven't really gone anywhere yet."

"But you want to?"

"I'd really like to. I don't know if it'll work out, though. It's complicated."

He leaned over and bumped my shoulder. "If it doesn't work out, come find me and I'll buy you a beer."

I grinned at him. "Sure, I'll do that."

"Cool." He pulled a card out of his pocket and handed it to me. I nodded and stuck it in the inside pocket of my jacket.

And that was the end of the stressing out around Ty. I love when it works out like that. And see? He made the first move, and it all flowed. It's like, Doms are *supposed* to do that. The world works better when they do.

That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

Twilight faded and it got seriously dark. I wasn't exactly wearing dress shoes, but they weren't sneakers, either, and I slipped a couple of times in the damp, slick grass. I ended up leaning on Ty, who hung onto my arm while we walked. It didn't feel weird at all, and he didn't try to push anything. I figured he was trying to show me his Nice Guy face so if my whatever didn't work

out, I'd remember him and come for that beer he promised me. Whatever he was thinking, it worked out fine and he wasn't all stalkery or pushy or anything. And having a Dom attached to my arm kept anyone else from hitting on me, so I could walk around with the guys and meet their friends, and watch people teaching or demoing or just playing out under the stars without having to stress out about brushing anyone off. I hate doing that, especially in places like this where it's perfectly reasonable to assume that anyone who came alone is looking for at least a casual hook-up.

But I already babbled about my social insecurity, so whatever.

We passed a couple of tables set up with drinks, one official and another not. I got a second beer at the official table in exchange for another bead cracked off my wristband, and Ty bought me one at the other table when he got one for himself. I said next one was on me, and he said okay.

By the time we stopped to watch a mostly naked woman getting expertly worked over by a bullwhip in the hand of a slightly older (but fully dressed) woman, I'd just finished my third beer and it'd been a couple of hours since dinner. I need to emphasize that I was not drunk, not even close.

So we were watching. We were up near the rec building or whatever it was, and the woman being whipped was standing between a couple of lamp posts, just holding on to the poles, a little more than head-high. She wasn't in any kind of bondage, just standing there, arching into the lashes, making these little gasping-whimpering noises when each blow hit. I'm not into women at all, but she was hurting so beautifully, it was just gorgeous, you know?

The lamps let us see every detail, her tanned skin and thick black hair, up in a high ponytail, with a few messy strands down the back of her neck, a little sweaty. The bullwhip was painting red lines on her back, across her shoulders, and a couple down on her ass. Her skin was flushed and starting to swell, but the woman holding the whip obviously knew what she was doing, and she hadn't broken the skin at all. The sub was going to be bruised up and welted, and would be feeling this for days, but she wasn't in any danger.

I leaned up against Ty and we watched. No one was counting, but a minute later the whipping stopped. The Domme coiled her bullwhip and tucked it into a duffle bag to one side, then went up to her sub. I saw her speaking, but

couldn't hear what she said. Then she stepped right up behind her, pressing her body against the other woman's bare and glowing back, her arms wrapped around at waist- and breast-height. I could hear the sub's low wail of pain going on and on, then the Domme slid the waist-high hand farther down and the wail went from pain to orgasm in about a tenth of a second.

The sub lost her grip on the lamp poles, but the Domme held her up through a shuddering climax. When she was done, her Domme picked her up in her arms and carried her out of the light.

Wow.

Ty huffed out a breath. I'd been hyperventilating a little too, and I took a long, deep lungful of air to throttle things back down.

"That was intense," said Ty. He was looking off in the direction the two women had gone.

"Yeah, it was." I took another deep breath, and Ty gave me a pretty hot look.

I'll admit that if he'd wanted to go find a private corner somewhere for a blow job or something, I'd have probably gone for it, but instead he just walked on, slowly, toward the next puddle of light. He still had his beer and his other arm was tucked around my waist, one finger hooked into a belt loop. I liked that he was nursing his beer; I enjoy drinking as much as anyone, but someone who *needs* to get really drunk to have a good time is someone I'll be staying away from, even if I don't feel like playing. Ty was scoring some points whether he was trying or not—better if he wasn't, right?—and was firming up a strong number-two spot on my list.

Like I have enough hot guys panting after me to even have a list, but you know?

Brandon, Riley and Don had wandered off at some point, probably during the bullwhip thing. There weren't so many people there that I was afraid I wouldn't be able to find Brandon later, aside from being able to call him if I needed to, so Ty and I were sort of strolling along by ourselves, past the front of the rec building toward an area on the other side that'd been staked out for something. There were a couple of rows of chairs, pretty much every kind of

portable camping or patio chair you could imagine, a row of blankets around front with people sitting on them, and an empty space in front of all the seating.

Around the back of the building was a stretch of flat, hard dirt surrounded by lights, like a small parking lot. It was full of bikes, pulled up in rows, and about a dozen people in leathers and boots—mostly guys but a few women—were standing around or wandering, checking out the motorcycles and talking about whatever bike people talk about when they're together showing off their rides.

And because the universe didn't seem to care that there were only two guys even penciled in on my "list", and liked to mess with me, number one came walking up out of the bike-park with a backpack slung over one shoulder, tall and handsome, and massively hot in leathers and boots. I stopped to stare and try to get my brain rebooted. Ty stopped next to me and asked if I was okay. And Mr. Castle stopped just a few strides away to glare.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER TEN

Fuck.

Now, I wasn't doing anything wrong. I know that now and I knew it then. But still, it's a classic set-up, and I was half expecting him to stomp up, toss me over his shoulder and haul me off somewhere, just because I've seen that happen in a bunch of movies.

Instead he dropped his backpack at the back of the clear space with all the people sitting around it, and came straight up to me and Ty, where he stopped.

"Rob," he said. "Didn't know you were going to be here."

"Umm, I didn't either. I mean, Brandon invited me kind of last minute. I rode up with him." I shut up before I did any more babbling.

He glanced around, and I guessed he was looking for Brandon, who of course was nowhere nearby. Then he looked at Ty and said, "Nick Castle," and held out his hand.

Ty said, "Ty Granger," and they shook, quick and firm, no obvious knuckle-busting, but they were staring at each other pretty hard. After the shake, Ty leaned over and whispered in my ear, "This your 'complicated wanna'?"

I had to laugh at that, just a little. I nodded, and he nodded back. He whispered, "You good?" and I nodded again. "Okay, then." He gave my shoulder a squeeze, drained the last of his beer and said, "I need to go find a recycle bin. See you, Rob. Good to meet you, Nick," and then he was gone, strolling off out of the light into the shadowed crowd.

Ty was definitely a nice guy. And if Mr. Castle was mad at me now, it was nice to know I had a really promising Plan B. Hell, if Mr. Castle was mad, I'd cross him off the list myself, 'cause like I said, I hadn't done anything wrong. I straightened my shoulders and said, "Doing a demo?" I tilted my head toward where he'd left his backpack.

"Yeah, I am," he said. "Rope bondage. I'm starting in a few minutes."

I figured, what the hell? And besides, I might not've been drunk, but I was a little braver than I usually am—not being in the office helped—so I said,

“Need a model?” I even managed to hold his gaze after the words came out of my mouth.

Mr. Castle just looked at me for a few seconds, then said, “Rob...” He kind of trailed off, then sighed and said, “Okay, I need to know what you want.”

Umm? I wasn't sure what he meant. I said, “You're not just lecturing, right? It's an actual demo? So you'd need someone to demonstrate on, right? Or were you going to use people out of the audience?”

That got me a sigh and a hard stare. “I have a model waiting for me,” he said. “I need to know what you want from me, what you expect. Because what I expected was that we were going to see if we work out together. If you want to experiment with different guys,” and he glanced over in the direction Ty'd headed, “that's fine, but that's not what I'm looking for. I'm not willing to chance a sexual harassment lawsuit just because my assistant wants to have some fun once or twice.”

Well, shit. I'll admit I totally hadn't thought I'd run into Mr. Castle there, and I hadn't planned to play with anyone, so my thinking had been no harm, no foul. I had a right to hang out with whoever I wanted, but at the same time, I could see where he might be wondering.

“I'm sorry, I wasn't doing anything. I mean, I just met Ty, and we were just kind of hanging out. I didn't come to play. When Brandon invited me, I thought it was just an evening munch. I like hanging with other kinky people, so I'm hanging. I wasn't going to play, or have sex with anyone, or even stay the night.” My thought about being willing to blow Ty popped up into my head, but I shoved it aside because it hadn't happened and probably wouldn't have anyway.

Mr. Castle studied my face, and I think he saw maybe a shadow of that blow job thought on it, because he didn't really loosen up any. “So you're just hanging out with another Dom who's obviously very into you, and nothing was going to happen? At all? I was twenty-five once, Rob.” He leaned in closer and took a breath. “And you've been drinking.”

“I had three beers! And it's been hours, it's not like I'm chugging or anything!”



He looked at me, his thumbs hooked through his belt loops while he stared. He let me squirm for a bit, then said, “All right, I probably should’ve been more clear about my intentions and what I expected. I’ve never seen you around the community, so it never occurred to me that there might be any hurry in moving things forward. That’s my mistake, and I apologize for it.”

Huh. Okay, a Dom who could admit he’d made a mistake and say he was sorry—he got a brownie point for that.

“So I’m going to be very clear,” he went on. “I want to see if we suit each other. I’m not ‘playing’ and I’m not taking this lightly. If I thought you were some air-headed party boy, I wouldn’t touch you with gloves on, because I wasn’t kidding—one complaint and you could wreck my company with a lawsuit. I’m an idiot for even considering this, but I like you, and you make me want to take a chance. But if you’re not willing to take this seriously, then that’s it, I’ll see you on Monday, and it’ll be all professional from now on.”

“No!” I reached out a hand on reflex, and stopped myself about half an inch from grabbing his wrist. I yanked my hand back and kept both fists at my sides, but I was leaning forward a little because I couldn’t help it.

“No, that’s what I want too, really. I wasn’t sure what you meant, or if you might’ve changed your mind or what. It’s been a while since the day in the lounge, and we’ve been busy, I know, but you haven’t said anything, so... I don’t know, I just... didn’t know. And I wasn’t doing anything, really. Yes, Ty’s interested, but I told him there was someone else and he was completely cool about it, he wasn’t pushy at all, didn’t try to change my mind. I just—I like to meet people, I have friends—” I paused and looked into his eyes, because this was serious. “I have friends,” I repeated. “I hang out with them, and if I want to... I don’t know, hug someone, I’m going to. If we’re scening that’s one thing, even if it’s a duration-of-event thing where you want to be in role for an evening or a day or a weekend like this, or whatever. But I’m not going to give up my friends, or promise I’ll never be alone with anyone or never touch anyone. That’s not me, and I can’t change that much for anyone. I won’t.”

If that was the end of it, then it was, but I’d seen what jealousy did to people, and I wasn’t having any of it.

He tilted his head a little and gave me a hard look, then nodded. “Good,” he said. “I don’t want a doormat.” He gave me another look, down-and-up, and then smiled at me for the first time *ever*, seriously, and added, “And I believe you didn’t know what kind of event you were coming to.”

I wanted to die and sink into the ground, but only for a second. I laughed and shrugged, spreading my arms and looking down at my suit. “I’d definitely have changed if I’d known.”

“I’ll bet,” he said, still smirking.

“So... now what?” I asked. I was kind of hoping he’d ask me to help him with the demo after all.

Instead he said, “I have to go do a demo in a minute, so I need to make sure you’ll be where I expect you to be when I’m done.” He was looking straight into my eyes like he was trying to read my mind. “Does that sound good to you?”

I said, “Yes, Sir,” because it sounded like an excellent second choice, if I couldn’t be the one in his ropes right then.

“Good,” he said. “Follow.” He turned and strode away, back past the rows of people waiting for him to get it together for his bondage demo, and it finally hit me that we’d been standing Right There and probably a hundred people had been listening to every word. I felt myself blushing so hard it was like my cheeks were going to pop or something. I was following the hottest guy on the site, though, and I wasn’t going to be embarrassed about it.

He led me back to the dirt parking area and down between two rows of bikes. There were still some motorcycle people there. One of the women looked up and called, “Hey, Nick, thought you were in a hurry. Forget something?”

Mr. Castle waved at her but didn’t stop walking. “Just securing something.”

The woman and the two guys she was standing with all laughed, but it wasn’t a *bad* laugh, if you get the difference. It was more of a friendly, good-stuff kind of laugh. I kept my eyes on Mr. Castle’s heels until he stopped in front of a big, black motorcycle. After a second, I remembered seeing it

before—it'd been parked in the driveway at Brandon's the day Mr. Castle'd been there teaching a class for the Doms.

Most of the bikes there were Harleys, with a few BMWs and a bunch of Japanese bikes. Mr. Castle's was different, though. It was... muscular, is the only word I can think of. Like a muscle car is muscular—strong and masculine, nothing fancy that was just for decoration. It was about power more than looks, but it was hot at the same time, like a big, strong man who'd snarf his beer at the thought of using hair gel or body glitter, but is gorgeous anyway. It was that kind of bike, and it fit Mr. Castle perfectly.

He pointed to the ground next to the bike, right in the middle, and said, "Sit."

I sat. The packed dirt wasn't exactly comfortable, but I'd sat on worse. Mr. Castle squatted in front of me, which put a big, leather bulge right there within easy range of my eyeballs. I stared, wondering if I could talk him into a blow job, until a leather-gloved finger tapped up from under my jaw and made me look up at his face. He was smiling again, kind of a smirky grin like he knew exactly what I was thinking.

Of course he did. I was a twenty-five-year-old gay sub, down on the ground, with a gorgeous man's crotch right in front of my face. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out the first thought that'd go through my head.

"I'll be about an hour," he said. His voice was low and intense, and his eyes were straight on me, like I was the only thing in his world at that moment. "I'll be within calling distance if you need me, and there'll be people around the bikes all night. Are you good with staying here?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Good." He reached into a pocket on the left side of his jacket and pulled out a handful of metal and chains. "Wrist."

I held out my right hand, and he clapped a cuff onto it. It looked like a set of standard police-type handcuffs, but I could feel some kind of coating on the inside surface; it felt sort of like the plastic stuff on tool handles. He checked the closure, made sure it was secure but not too tight. Then he attached the second cuff to the front of the bike, one of the bars of the fork, up near the

handlebars. With me sitting on the ground, it was about shoulder high, not too extreme. I could deal with that for an hour.

“Wrist.”

I swallowed hard and gave him my other hand. He had a second set of the cuffs, and he locked my left hand to another bar down under the seat.

I was spread out, locked to his bike, pretty much helpless. I couldn't even scratch my nose if I got an itch, which should've been alarming but wasn't. My cock was like iron and my balls were high and tight and needy, but the rest of my body had gone liquid, warm and tingly and relaxed.

He grasped my tie right up by the knot, and tugged just enough to tilt my face up. I hadn't loosened my tie—I'm used to wearing one and they're not uncomfortable—and with his hand squeezing, I felt it all the way around my throat. It felt like a collar, and I had to stifle a whimper that would've sounded absolutely stupid.

His face was just a couple of inches from mine; I could feel his breath on my lips. “While you're cuffed to my bike, everyone will know you're mine. No one will mess with you, because you're mine. You're safe here.” He searched my face, then asked, “Are you all right?”

I nodded. I was great, everything was awesome, and I'm pretty sure I had a really silly smile on my face. He nodded back, then leaned in and kissed me, long and hot and deep, but not hard. He was exploring territory, but not plundering it—not yet. That was cool, I could wait.

He said, “I'll be back for you,” then stood up and left.

If you're not into it then you won't get it and that's just how it is, but I felt like a thing, like a possession Mr. Castle had chosen and wanted, and intended to hang onto. I was chained to another possession he valued, because he wanted to be sure I'd stay where he put me, he *wanted* me to stay where he put me, because he was going to come get me later and wanted me to be there, to be safe and waiting there for him. If you don't get that then I can't explain it any better, but if you do then you know exactly how I was feeling right then.

The night air was cool, but I was fine in my suit coat. I leaned my head back and it rested right on the side of the leather seat. I imagined some

designer at a motorcycle factory figuring exactly where a biker-Dom might want to chain a sub to his bike and making sure the seat padding was right there. That was funny enough to make me giggle, which tells you something about my state of mind at the time.

There were too many lights around for any stars to be visible, but I could see the black of the night sky overhead. I heard the bikers walking around and talking, mostly about bikes, but about other stuff too. I wasn't paying attention and it all sort of melted together into background noise. I closed my eyes and just sat, relaxed and waiting.

I'd done some meditating in college, when a roommate nagged enough to make me try. Once I stopped griping and got into it, it was relaxing, and I still did it every now and then. This was like that. I could feel my heart beating in my chest, and if I focused on any part of my body—my throat, my wrist, my inner thigh—I could feel the pulse there. I sank lower into myself, and my heartbeat was powerful enough that my whole body jolted to its rhythm. When I was this deep, it was hard to believe that there was ever a time when I *couldn't* feel my heartbeat, it was so strong and so obvious.

I'd never gone this deep before without at least ten or fifteen minutes of deliberate relaxation and meditation. Being spread and chained to Mr. Castle's bike took me there in about thirty seconds.

Footsteps crunched in the dirt behind me, and a male voice said, "Now *that's* a pretty bike."

Another voice said, "I wonder if that's a standard option," and they all laughed. Usually I'd have been thinking about dying of embarrassment, but I was too mellow. They weren't important.

A silver-haired man in motorcycle leathers walked around and squatted down in front of me. He was farther away than Mr. Castle had been, which was good, 'cause I didn't really want some stranger's crotch right in front of my face.

"Hey, boy, you doing all right?"

I nodded. Speaking seemed like too much trouble.

"Need a drink? Anything?"

I shook my head.

The guy leaned closer. “Look into my eyes, boy. Come on, up here, just look at me.”

He wasn't going away, so I looked up at him. He had a rugged face, with both smile and frown lines. He was scowling right then, and he glared at me for a few seconds. A gloved finger appeared in front of my face, then moved back and forth. I watched it, hoping he wasn't going to poke me or something.

The guy huffed out a laugh and stood up. “He's fine, just zoned. So deep in subspace he could probably hitch a ride on the *Enterprise*.”

A bunch of voices all laughed, and someone behind me said, “Like Castle'd ever have to drug a boy.”

The older guy said, “Gotta check. If you think someone never would, that's a reason to check right there.”

They hung around for a minute or two, making comments about the bike, then wandered off.

I focused on my heartbeat and sank back inside myself, right there where Mr. Castle left me. It was a good place, and I hung out there for a time while the event slowly rotated around me.

The next set of legs that stopped in front of me was familiar. Mr. Castle went down on one knee and a big hand ruffled through my hair. “Hey, Rob. How you doing?”

“Hmm?” I blinked slowly, shifting focus from inside to outside. I leaned into the hand, enjoying the feel of it, the patch of solid warmth against my head. “Okay. Right here.”

He grinned at me and said, “I see that. You're a good boy, staying where I put you.”

The praise was warmer than his hand, and I smiled up at him.

“You really are kind of easy, aren't you?” he asked, but he was smiling when he said it and I could tell he meant it as praise, not a slam. “Come on, I'll bet you need to hit the bathroom before we go.” He unlocked the cuffs and stashed them back in his jacket. I missed them. It felt like my wrists were too light, and I didn't know what to do with my hands.

“Come on, Robbie, up we go.” He grabbed me around the chest, under my armpits, and stood up, lifting me with him. He held me while I found my balance, then led me off down the row.

We went into the rec building where there were bathrooms. Once he mentioned it, I did have to go pretty bad. The three beers, I guess, plus dinner’d been a while ago. When we were done he said, “Good, let’s take off. You’re spending the night at my place. Do you need to call anyone?”

I stopped, because that reminded me of something. Except not completely. I knew there was something I needed to do, but I couldn’t think of what.

He waited for me to think, but when I just stood there frowning past his shoulder, he said, “Did you leave anything somewhere? Briefcase, computer bag? Want to say good-bye to anyone? Hopefully someone whose location you know for sure?”

“Brandon!” That was it. “I rode with Brandon. I need to let him know not to look for me when he’s ready to go.” I found my phone and sent Brandon a text.

*Got ride home, call u l8r*

I waited a minute to see if he’d respond, with Mr. Castle standing next to me, perfectly patient, but nothing came in. I hoped that meant Brandon’d found someone to play with, at least for a while. “Okay, ready to go.”

“Good.” Mr. Castle put a hand on my back, between my shoulder blades, and we walked back to the dirt lot. He had his backpack slung over one shoulder, and when we stopped by his bike, he handed it to me. “Here, you’re going to have to wear this.”

I nodded and put it on. I’d never been camping or hiking, and hadn’t worn a backpack since high school. My jacket wanted to slide open and off under the pressure of the straps pulling backward, but I buttoned it up and that fixed that.

Mr. Castle unfastened a helmet that’d been hanging off the right-hand side of his motorcycle, opposite from where I’d been sitting before, and handed it to me. He zipped up his jacket, pulled out a key ring and straddled the bike. “Up you go, behind me. Hold on around my waist.”

I pulled the helmet on—it felt weird and not really comfortable, pressing up against my cheeks—and climbed on behind him. Hanging on wasn't a problem; I plastered myself against his broad, solid back and hung on tight.

“Have you ever ridden a motorcycle before? Ever been a passenger on one?”

“No, Sir,” I called. I could hardly hear him through the helmet and it made me want to yell. Which was probably kind of dumb, but whatever.

“Lean when I lean,” he said. “Don't shift your weight without telling me first. Put your feet on the pegs, there.” He waved a hand down near our feet, and I saw there was a second set of footrest thingies farther back from his, for a passenger. I picked up my feet and put them where they belonged, then shifted around until I felt balanced and comfortable.

“Okay?”

“Ready, Sir!”

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The night air had cooled down and it was even colder once we got going, what with wind chill and all. Mr. Castle wasn't stupid enough to floor it (or whatever you do on a motorcycle to max out the acceleration), but even going at a reasonable speed, it *felt* faster with the wind whipping past my neck and slipping up my sleeves and in through the gaps in the front of my jacket. And the street was right *there*, tearing past just a few inches below my feet.

It was a great excuse to hang on to Mr. Castle as tight as I could, with my chilled front pressed up against his warm back.

I'll admit it was kind of scary at first, aside from being cold. I'd ridden a bicycle as a kid, like every other kid, so leaning into curves made perfect sense, but doing it that fast—and on a motorcycle, even twenty-five or thirty miles per hour feels *fast*—I was terrified we were going to wipe out on a turn, especially on that narrow, twisting mountain road in the dark.

If I hadn't trusted Mr. Castle absolutely, I probably would've been yelling for him to stop and let me walk home within the first five minutes. But I did trust him, so I kept my mouth shut and my eyes closed and hung on, leaning when he leaned. I'd never been so aware of someone else's body before; I guess having it be a matter of life and death focuses your attention.

The scents of the trees and the damp ground streamed by, with an undertone of hot asphalt and engine exhaust. If I were a dog, I'd have probably been smelling birds and animals, too, and I'd have my head leaning out around... no, that was a bad idea. I could prop it up on Mr. Castle's shoulder, and take the helmet off so I'd get the wind right in my face and catch all the smells.

I had to laugh at that, and Mr. Castle yelled, "You all right?"

That just made me laugh again. I yelled back, "Sorry, Sir! I'll bet dogs love riding motorcycles!"

I felt his chest tremble for a few seconds, and he shook his head. He probably thought I was kind of crazy, but I didn't really mind. I'm weird

sometimes—*isn't everybody?*—and it was just as well he figure that out right up front.

By the time we got back down to the valley floor, I'd relaxed a little and was sitting up more, holding Mr. Castle at the hips for balance rather than wrapping myself around him like a squid. Not that I didn't like hanging on to Mr. Castle, but I doubt he wanted to have sex with a squid. I hoped not, anyway.

I was trying to make a good impression, though, and first-time jitters were normal, but he said he didn't want a doormat. I was interpreting that to mean he wanted someone with a backbone, which is definitely *not* a squid. I was still kind of nervous on the bike, especially once we hit traffic, but I didn't have to be a clinging little boy about it. And besides, once I pushed the fear away, the speed and motion and vibration were awesome.

We rode across the valley, from Los Gatos in the southwest, through San Jose to the eastern hills. After about half an hour, he pulled up into the driveway of a huge house—Spanish style, all beige stucco and a tile roof, with a round fountain splashing in the curve of the drive. This was swanky even for Evergreen; we'd passed the nearest neighbor almost a quarter mile back, and there was a wild-looking patch of trees and all in between the properties.

It popped into my head right that second that he could make me scream and I wouldn't have to hold back—no one would hear. I felt my cock getting hard in my trousers at the thought.

The next thought to pop into my head was *?!?* because I wasn't into heavy pain. I mean, I'd never tried it, I'd never done anything like that, never really wanted to, it always sounded kind of scary. That whole flogging-through-my-shirt thing I mentioned before was the only time I'd ever tried pain play. The woman getting bullwhipped at the campground had been fascinating, but I hadn't really imagined myself in her place.

I could imagine trying it with Mr. Castle, though, and that made me sort of nervous. The being-able-to-imagine-it part, I mean. It's like, being there on the bike with him, knowing he really was into me *That Way*, feeling him and smelling him and hanging on to him for almost an hour? It'd remodeled my brain, kind of, and noticing that made me a little uncomfortable.

The garage door rolled up and we headed in. It closed behind us. I looked around—the dim garage was big enough to have a lot of stuff in it without being cluttered, boxes and tools and a sleek silver car—until Mr. Castle nudged me. Oh, right, he'd have a hard time climbing off with me back there. I dismounted, sort of like you would from a horse, and pulled the helmet off. I didn't bother worrying about my hair 'cause I figured it was a lost cause.

He took the helmet and strapped it back to the bike. "We'll have to get you one, if you're going to ride with me," he said. Then he looked at me and asked, "Are you?"

"Yes! I mean, if I can? I was kind of nervous at first, but it was great!"

I managed to stop myself before my extended "yes" turned into babbling, and he smiled at me again. Mr. Castle has the greatest smile, like he's sharing something really cool with you, or like he's happy 'cause you shared something really cool with him, either way. I figured out right then I'd do just about anything for that smile, and I know I sound like an idiot, but I really couldn't help it.

"I'm glad you like riding. I know exactly what you mean—there's nothing like it." He led me inside, pulled off his leather jacket and hung it in a closet in the entryway, where both the garage door and what looked like the main front door were, opposite a big, curving staircase with a wrought iron railing in a geometric pattern. He held out a hand and gave me a look; I handed him my suit jacket—which was in pretty desperate need of a dry cleaner by then—and he hung that up too, next to his. While he fiddled with hangers, I pulled off my tie, rolled it up and stuffed it into my pocket.

When I looked up, he was watching me. After a moment he said, "Well, don't stop."

I just blinked, then got it. I felt myself blushing, but my cock got a little harder. With all that blood occupied in my cheeks and my prick, it took another few seconds before I actually thought, *Oh, yeah*, and went for my shirt buttons.

He said, "Put your clothes on the bench there," pointing to the leather-padded bench against the wall next to the closet. "And let a friend know where

you are. When you're done, come into the living room. Kneel and relax for a while. Think about what you want." And then he walked away.

That was... not quite what I expected, but okay, I could do that.

I pulled out my phone and texted Brandon:

*At Mr Castle's house if I'm murdered he did it :D*

then finished stripping. I piled my stuff on the bench, except for my shoes. I tucked those underneath—hoping that much interpretation of an order would be okay—then went down the hall he'd taken.

It opened out into a big living area with floor-to-ceiling windows and two sets of French doors set all along the back wall. There was a fireplace off to the right, surrounded by Mexican tiles, white with little cartoony pictures on them in bright colors. The sofa and loveseat and chairs were all leather, sort of like the bench in the entryway—dark wood with brown leather upholstery. On the left was a step-up to a kitchen and dining area. There was an island with four stools lined up on this side of it, and beyond the island was a big kitchen, all white and wood. Mr. Castle was there, setting up a coffee machine.

Coffee was good. I looked forward to having some if we weren't going to get to the sex part right away.

Before that, though, I had some other stuff to do.

I stepped into the middle of the living room, behind the loveseat which faced the fireplace, and knelt down. The carpet felt good under my knees, thick and springy and comfortable. I wondered whether he'd gotten that deliberately, because he had guys kneeling on it a lot, or if it was just good carpet? Not something I could ask, at least not right away.

I'd had a couple of people show me how to kneel, but it seemed every Dom wanted something a little different. Since Mr. Castle hadn't given me any instructions, I figured anything in the ballpark would be okay. He'd said to relax, so I spread my knees for stability, straightened my back, and put my hands behind me, my right hand clasping my left wrist, because that was easier to maintain than just crossing my wrists.

At least I thought it would be; I'd never done it for more than a minute or so before.

*Relax.*

*Relax, and think about what you want.*

I started by getting as comfortable as I could and feeling for my heartbeat.

A few minutes later, Mr. Castle came over to the living room with two mugs of coffee. He sat down on the couch, which was up against the wall a few steps from where I knelt, and put the mugs on a side table. He caught my eye, spread his knees and patted his thigh.

What he wanted was obvious. I went over to him—crawling, because I thought he might like it, and because he had that great carpet—and knelt at his feet, between his knees. I could smell the warm leather surrounding me, and it sent a thrill of warmth through my body.

“Good boy.”

And another one. I had to focus on sitting still, because I was excited enough—yes, that way too—that I wanted to fidget. Or just throw myself at him, because after almost an hour of constant contact on the bike, I felt like I *needed* to touch him again, right then. Instead I settled back down, on my knees with my wrist clasped behind my back.

“So, tell me what you want.”

I’d known it was coming, but still, it took me a while to chase down all my thoughts and scrape them up into a pile.

“I want you,” I said. “I want to be touched, a lot. I liked being left cuffed to your bike tonight—you were close by, and there were other people around, they were nice, so I felt safe and that was... that felt really good. But just for a while.”

Mr. Castle just watched me, his hands on his thighs. Mmm, big hands on leather pants, strong thighs. I had a hard time not following the obvious path from there, but I managed to look him in the eye again.

“I want...” This one was hard, just because my damn blush was back, I knew it. I could only hope that once I was used to all this, I’d stop blushing whenever I talked about it, or thought about it, or came within a mile of someone else thinking about it. I knew I had to, though, because the one thing

they emphasize every time someone does a workshop for newbies, or even just starts talking about it with newbies around, is that you have to communicate about what you want and don't want, or this wouldn't work at all. I knew that, I really did, but it was still hard, and years of reading and watching porn where the hottest Doms were totally omniscient and basically telepathic weren't helping. This was reality, though, and I knew I had to make myself talk about it.

"I want bondage," I managed to say. "I really like that, not being able to move, feeling helpless. And I like feeling like you want me to stay where you put me, that you *want* me enough to make sure I stay where you put me, like when you cuffed me to your bike."

Mr. Castle nodded, and I thought I saw a sort of twitchy half-smile for about a microsecond. He reached over and got one of the mugs, handed it to me. I took a sip, and it was black and sweet, exactly the way I like it. I have no idea how he figured that out, unless he'd been paying a lot more attention than I thought during the few times when we were both in the break room and I was getting coffee for myself. Maybe that's where the myth of the omniscient Dom comes from, that they're always paying attention, watching and remembering?

He took his own coffee, but didn't say anything, just watched me. Not getting any feedback made me uncomfortable—I'd have liked some sort of response so I could tell if he agreed, or if I was doing it right. Maybe he just wanted to know what I wanted right then, that night? Or maybe he wanted a handful of bullet points, like a summary at work?

At the same time, though, getting the same response no matter what I said or how I said it helped me relax as I went. I was still kind of twitchy about all this stuff, like I said, and had a hard time talking about it. But the more I said without getting grouched at or smirked at or glared at, the more I felt I could just ramble on and nothing bad would happen.

"I want to feel like I'm yours," I said. "While we're playing, I want to belong to you, like a thing, or a pet." I was still blushing, but I kept going. "Yours to use, however you wanted. Or..." I frowned and looked down for a second, then back up. "It's like, I want to feel like that, but, I mean, there are things I'm really not into. I like the idea that you'll do whatever you want to

me, that I'm there for your use and that whatever you do with me is to please yourself. But there are things I definitely wouldn't want and that'd kind of... I'd safeword out."

That got a very small head tilt, but still no indication of whether he approved or not, so I explained, "It's like, if you decided to tie me down and dump a jar of spiders on me, I'd safeword. I'd start screaming, actually, and I'd never play with you again. And I'd need lots of therapy. Not that I think you're into spiders with your sex, but you know?"

Hah, that got a reaction—I could tell he was stifling a really big grin there. "No spiders," he said. "Noted. And you're right that arachnophilia isn't one of my kinks. What else?"

I took another sip of my coffee, just to buy some time, then took a breath and said, "I think I want to try pain play. Not a lot, not necessarily right away, but something to think about? I don't even know if I'd really like it. I mean, it's sexy to think about, but that doesn't always mean you'd like doing something, right?"

"That's right," he said. "So you've never tried it at all?"

"Not really. I mean, when Christine did a demo a few weeks back, I tried it then. She used a flogger through a T-shirt and a sweatshirt, then just a T-shirt. It was okay, I guess. I mean, I didn't hate it, but it wasn't really fun either. Sort of like..." I stopped to think for a second, then came up with the perfect comparison. "It's like how getting a prostate exam is like anti-sexy, but having someone play with it during sex is awesome? For some people?"

Hah, I made him laugh!

He finally said, "So Christine trying a flogger on you during a demo was like a prostate exam, and you want to see if it's different in a more sexual context."

"Exactly. I mean, I like porn with pain play, watching or reading, but I like kidnapping porn, too, and I know for a fact I wouldn't get off on a gang of strangers kidnapping me and gang-raping me. Some things *only* work in a fantasy."

"True. So, we'll find out how you handle pain and figure out whether you enjoy it or not. Just impact?"

“I don’t know? I guess I’m open? So long as I have a safeword?”

“We won’t worry about that until we get a lot further along,” he said, and I was kind of, *Wait, what??* until he went on with, “No means no, and stop means stop. We’ll talk about safewords if we start role-playing. If you ever want to do a scene where you get kidnapped and raped by someone you can pretend you don’t know, then we’ll talk about safewords. While it’s just us with no pretending, we don’t need code words.”

Oh. Okay, that made sense.

Then what he’d said hit me and damn it, I could feel my cock swelling—even more than it already was—because I’d totally love to have him kidnap and pretend-rape me.

I just hoped we were together long enough to get that far down the list.

“Anything else?” He sipped from his mug, watching me.

“Umm, no, Sir. I mean, just details...?”

“All right, then. How are you doing down there? Sore? Stiff?”

I did *not* make a cheesy pun. I deserved a gold star for that. “Fine, Sir. You have great carpet.”

That got me a quick half-smile, and I took a long gulp of my coffee to hide the fact that I was grinning back.

“Do you have any questions?” he asked.

“No, Sir. I mean, I trust you. I figure you’ll tell me what I need, at least for now, and it’ll probably be more fun if I just go with it, right?”

“Possibly,” he said. “A lot of people think so. Finished with that?”

I peered into my mug. One more good slug emptied it, and I handed it to him. He put it back on the side table with his own.

“Follow me,” he said. “We’re going upstairs, so you can walk.”

I said, “Yes, Sir,” and climbed to my feet to follow.

\*\*\*\*



## CHAPTER TWELVE

We went back out to the entryway and up the stairs. They were carpeted too, and it probably wouldn't have been all that bad to crawl up them, just a little awkward. Down would be harder.

There was a big open area at the top of the stairs, done up like a den, but with a lot of windows, which didn't seem very den-like. But the furniture was more casual than the stuff downstairs, a big, lumpy couch upholstered in what looked like faded denim. The floor in the den—and all along the upstairs hall—was hardwood. That wouldn't be comfortable to kneel on, although I could do it if I had to. One wall was all bookcases, mostly full of paperbacks, and the other wall was a shelving unit full of sound gear.

Mr. Castle's room was down at the end of the hall, through a pair of double doors. He closed them behind me, just because, I guess. There wasn't anyone else in the house who might walk in on us, or hear us, or at least I didn't think there was. I figured probably not, since he'd had me strip down as soon as we came inside. That made sense, right?

The bedroom was carpeted again, which made my knees happy, figuring I'd probably spend a lot of time kneeling there. He had a king-size bed, of course—he was a tall man and probably would've wanted a king even if it was just him. The headboard and footboard had wood frames filled in with wrought iron patterns, complex geometrics like the stair railing, but not exactly the same. It was all solid and expensive looking, without looking like it might as well have a price tag left on it, like whoever owned it wanted nice things, good stuff, because it was good, instead of wanting stuff that'd hit other people over the head with how expensive it was.

The woodwork was kind of medium dark, on the bed and the nightstands, and a tall dresser next to the closet door. The walls were a cream color, like a warm beige, and the carpet was dark brown. It was like the whole room was made of chocolate or coffee. I liked it.

There was a heavy chest of carved wood sitting under the window, and Mr. Castle went over and opened it up. He said, "Get on the bed and lie on your

back,” without looking at me. I obeyed while he rummaged around. The patchwork comforter, shades of brown and cream and black, was made of flannel. It was soft and comfy, and I sort of wallowed around on it, enjoying the feel of it on my bare skin. He hadn’t told me to lie still, so I figured I didn’t have to.

Besides, I was feeling kind of... antsy? I mean, I was exactly where I wanted to be, but still, having sex with somebody for the first time is always kind of jittery. And sure, we’d worked together in the same office for almost a month, but it wasn’t like we’d dated or anything. The closest we’d come was that lunch hour in the lounge, and that was great but there hadn’t been much to it, just a promise for a next time that hadn’t happened yet. So I wasn’t sure what to expect, or what Mr. Castle expected from me. And still being kind of new to all this, I guess I was angsty about doing something stupid.

In theory all I had to do was obey him. When you’re in the middle of it all, though, it feels a lot more complicated than that.

“We’ll start with something simple,” Mr. Castle said. He walked over to the bed with some cuffs clinking in his hands. “On your back, arms over your head.”

I obeyed, and he climbed right up on top of me, his knees on either side of my ribs. He wasn’t quite sitting on me, which was good because all his weight on my belly would’ve made it hard to breathe. Most of his weight was on his knees, and I felt the mattress sink under him.

He buckled a leather cuff to each wrist, then used a kind of squared-off oval clip thing to fasten the chain in the middle to one of the bars in the headboard.

“Don’t come until I tell you. If you’re about to disobey me in that, let me know.”

“Yes, Sir.” I tugged on the cuffs. There was a little slack, but just a couple of inches worth, and pulling on it sent a tingly thrill through my body, which was already having a pretty good time.

Mr. Castle scooted down some, then slipped one hand under my head on the pillow, leaned down and kissed me. It was firm but not harsh, just lips at

first, but I felt surrounded, my whole head cupped in his palm. His fingers were spread out to hold me right where he wanted me, but the kiss was light and gentle. Like he was cradling my head, like all of me was right there in his hand, and I felt warm and safe and secure. My nerves settled down some and I wanted more, so I opened my mouth a little, inviting him to come in if he wanted. He whispered, “Good boy,” then everything got deeper and more intense.

His other hand brushed over my ear, then one finger drew a line along my jaw. The back of his hand glided down my throat, that vulnerable spot where even a light smack can lay you out, but this was just exploration, just enough pressure that I knew he was there.

Then out across my shoulder, firmer, kneading, and a push up my inner arm, not hard enough to bruise but not light enough to tickle.

I felt the solid bulge of his cock pressing into my belly, through the leather of his pants. I arched up against it, wanting to feel it, because it was Mr. Castle’s cock. Damn, even if it wasn’t skin-to-skin, even if it wasn’t in the perfect place, which was about ten inches south and aching for some attention, but that was what he was giving me right then and I wanted more of it.

The chains clinked and jerked, and the leather cuffs pressed against my skin as I yanked on them. Not pulling just to pull this time, but because I wanted to touch him. Maybe help him out of his pants, or even the jacket, pull up his T-shirt, *something*.

His tongue filled my mouth and I moaned around it, couldn’t help myself. The sound came from all the way down in my gut, and I imagined he could feel the vibration against that hard cock that was still pressing down on me. His hips shifted and rubbed harder, so who knows, maybe he did. I wrapped my legs around his thighs and pulled him in tighter, showing him that I loved what he was doing and didn’t want him to move, since I couldn’t exactly say so right then and wasn’t sure if I was even allowed. I’d heard some Doms didn’t like that kind of thing, thought the sub was holding up a scorecard or something, and I didn’t know what Mr. Castle thought of it, but if I *were* holding up a scorecard, it’d be an “11” with lots of exclamation points after it, ‘cause I’ve never felt this close to popping right off with just a kiss and some grinding.

Well, not since I was fourteen, but that doesn't count, right?

The mattress shifted and Mr. Castle sat up. He started to unfasten his pants, and I made a noise that didn't have any words in it, but sounded pretty enthusiastic. I got another one of those little half-smiles for about a quarter of a second.

He knee-walked forward and said, "Do a good job and I'll let you come tonight," right before feeding me his solid, thick cock.

Obviously he didn't want an answer, or at least not a verbal one, so I went straight to tasting him. He was musky and a little salty, and there was a flavor of leather in there, too, which I liked more than I thought I would. I didn't just glom right on—I wanted to show I had some technique. That's what he meant by a good job, right? I mean, anyone can just blindly suck. They probably have machines that do that.

Instead I held him in my mouth and mapped out the territory with my lips and tongue. The head was broad, with a smooth curve to it, and the tiny slit tasted stronger than the rest of it. Which made sense, duh, so I sucked on that and teased it with my tongue, trying to get it to give me more of that flavor that meant I was doing it right.

He let me do that for a while, then pushed a little more into my mouth. Not a big, choking thrust, but just another half inch or so, like he was reminding me there was more where the first part came from.

The shaft was bigger than the head, and I had to suck in a good breath before I clamped my lips down over it. I'd seen cocks like that in porn, but never gotten to play with one before. I gave him a couple of good sucks, then went back to exploring, teasing around the base of the head with my tongue, along the crease where it met the shaft. Feeling how it bulged out there was kind of weird, but it made the whole thing seem bigger.

I thought of him filling my throat with it, cutting off my breath, and that made me moan. My hips thrust up into the air a couple of times, pure frustration with nothing to rub on.

"Easy, settle." His hand was back in my hair—not pulling, not petting, just there, another point of connection, one that had nothing to do with him getting

off. Or at least I didn't think it did. I'd never heard of anyone who had a kink for holding someone's head.

“Breathe.”

I took a big breath and he pushed another inch into my mouth. The angle really wasn't great and that was about as much as I was going to be able to take. It was like he knew that because he stopped right there, just before I would've started gagging. I focused on relaxing, feeling my heartbeat, figuring that if I was relaxed I'd use up my air slower and would be able to work on him longer before having to breathe again.

Relaxing my muscles when all I wanted to do was hump his leg (if he'd put his leg, or anything else, in range to be humped) was tough, but I did my best and I think I succeeded a little. I ran my tongue around the tight skin of his shaft, rubbing up and down the ridge underneath, right there where my tongue was, then explored up one side where I found a squiggly vein that felt pretty neat. It stood out like it was pumped up with a lot of blood—well, of course it was—but I could poke it with my tongue and it gave. That was fun, so I ran the tip of my tongue back and forth over it a few times, but then I needed to breathe again. I tilted my head back a little, as much as I could with his hand supporting it, and he pulled back some right away.

I sucked in a couple gulps of air, then strained forward again, so he pushed back inside—just as far as he had before, no farther, which was great—and I went back to exploring.

The skin was smooth and tight and so warm. It was a solid, thick intruder in my mouth, and he could hurt me with it if he wanted to, which was kind of thrilling to keep in mind, especially when I knew he wouldn't. But I could hurt him too—my teeth were right there, you know, and your jaw muscles are the most powerful in your body—and he trusted *me* just like I trusted him. A blow job was a two-way promise of good will, and that was a connection, or it could be. A lot of people didn't see it that way, although I had, ever since the first time I'd thought of—

“Robbie!” I felt two stiff fingers give me a rough poke on the forehead. “Relax. I can hear the babbling in your brain all the way out here!” It sounded like Mr. Castle was about to laugh, but not quite.

I made a ??? noise, the best I could manage since my mouth was still really full. He seemed to understand, though, because he said, “I know you, your mind is always buzzing when you look like that. Let me handle whatever it is you’re thinking about, or worrying about, or wondering about. I’m running this, you’re experiencing it. Relax, turn off your brain. Your mouth, my cock, everything else can wait.”

I made two noises close together that hopefully approximated, “Okay,” and tried to figure out how to turn my brain off, because he was right, I *had* been thinking too much. They say the brain is your primary sex organ, but I don’t think that’s quite what they meant.

And I was doing it again.

Mr. Castle pulled out about halfway so I could breathe okay without having to pay attention to the timing, and I tried relaxing. Exhale... listen to my heart, feel it beating, let my body inhale. Exhale... feel gravity pulling me down, feel my heart beating, each pulse jolting my chest, let my body inhale.

I closed my eyes and just felt. Exhale. Full mouth, the feel and flavor of the cock filling it, the strong beating of my heart, inhale.

The cock started thrusting, slowly, not too deep at first. Back and forth in my mouth, through my mouth, I was just a passage, something warm and slippery and just tight enough. Exhale, feel it with my tongue, let it move through my mouth, feel it passing through, back and forth.

I heard Mr. Castle let out a short moan and the cock went a little deeper. I couldn’t breathe around it for... I don’t know, a little while, but that was okay because I was just a passage he was using to pleasure himself, and if he was making noise and going deeper, that meant I was serving my function. I was pleasing him, and that was what I was there for.

The thought of him using me, of just lying passive while he made use of me, of him enjoying me like a thing, like a sex toy, made *me* feel good. I shifted and felt the cuffs around my wrists, holding me there for him. Perfect, that was perfect.

A groan, and another one, then he thrust hard and filled my throat with come. I sucked and swallowed, not worrying about air right then, and he

pulled out just about the time my lungs were starting to tap me on the shoulder. I swallowed again, then gasped in a big breath and panted a few times.

I was covered in sweat, mine and his both, and I'm pretty sure I had the goofiest look on my face, so bad I don't want to even imagine it—feel free if you want to. Mr. Castle was still kneeling up, looming over me with one hand braced on the headboard, and he was panting as hard as I was.

It was a great view. I just lay there and enjoyed it while it lasted, which was only a minute or so, dammit.

He moved back down the bed and rubbed his hands up and down my shoulders and upper arms. “How are you doing? Getting stiff?”

“No, Sir. I'm fine.” I was. Actually, I was great, except one particular part that was painfully stiff. I still had just enough blood in my brain to decide not to make that joke, because it was something a sixth-grader would say and then giggle about.

“Good.” He stretched out and lowered his body down onto mine, which meant I didn't need to mention the only uncomfortable part of my body because it was pressing against his balls.

He leaned in and kissed me again, slowly, like he had all night. Which I guess he did, if he wanted to take it. By the time he moved, I was breathing pretty heavy and sweating again, not that I'd ever completely stopped because, you know, not getting to come and all. He explored every inch of me with his lips and tongue and fingers and palms, and here and there with his teeth, flipping me over a couple of times, watching and listening the whole time to see how I responded.

A fingertip behind my ear made me suck in a breath, and his tongue drawing a slow line across my collarbone had me squirming; I couldn't have stopped if I'd wanted to, so good thing I didn't see a reason to try. He sucked hard on a nipple, and when that made me arch my back and whimper, he bit down on it, first a little, then more, until I was yelling in a really good way and trying to rub off on his stomach because I felt like an orgasm was Right There and I couldn't help reaching for it.

He slapped my hip hard and said, “No. Not yet.”

The sting jolted my awareness away from my dick and I was able to hold my hips still, but it was tough and I was kind of cussing him out in my head right then.

The spot to the left of my bellybutton was connected to my balls, but not the spot to the right. Don't ask me why, I just enjoyed the discovery. Kisses across my hipbones did it for me, but my inner thighs were just, like, whatever. The backs of my knees were ticklish when touched with a hand, but a tongue there had me yelling again, and struggling not to hump the mattress.

He found a good spot on my left calf, and my left instep, and I'm pretty sure he sucked a hickey onto the top of my right foot. The burning went straight to my dick and I could feel it leaking a hot, slick drop onto my belly.

He saved my ass for last—almost last, because he still hadn't touched my dick or my balls, which just proved he's a fucking sadist—but by the time his tongue pushed into my hole, I couldn't remember why anyone thought that was a bad thing.

I was up on my knees, leaning on my elbows, and the pillow was wet from where I was crying in frustration. I didn't know how long it'd been, but my dick was so hard it was about to break off and my balls were so tight they'd buried themselves up in my body and were probably somewhere up under my lungs.

I'd never been rimmed before—most guys think it's kind of gross to actually do, even if it's hot in porn—and the feeling was mind blowing. Tongues can move in ways cocks can't, and the only downside is that they're smaller. If someone ever figures out how to get a tongue the size of a cock—or at least long enough to reach your prostate—no gay man will ever let anyone merely fuck him ever again.

Yeah, the genetics people can get right on that. I'll donate a chunk of my salary to fund the research.

Despite the lack in both length and thickness, Mr. Castle knew exactly what to do with his tongue and made the most of it. I couldn't help squirming, even with his hands gripping my hips hard enough that I was sure I'd have



bruises the next day; I was pretty proud of myself for not just letting go and thrusting back onto his tongue. Every nerve in my body was lit up, and I think my ass grew a few new ones for the occasion. I was moaning and whining and didn't even have enough functional brain cells to be embarrassed about it.

He pulled out and asked, "Can you come like this?"

I made a wordless noise of protest, but my dick was swollen and aching and he'd been teasing me for ages and I really didn't know.

Mr. Castle said, "Try. Come on, Robbie—you're so sensitive, I know you can do it. Give it up for me, like this." Then he pushed his tongue back into my ass, and I felt a finger go in below it, stretching, reaching, until it was right there, rubbing on my sweet spot, where I'd been wishing for a lick, a touch, *some* kind of stimulation for the last however long he'd been torturing me, and everything shattered.

It was like the sun exploded and emptied out my balls through my dick, and the heat flashed down every part of my body, from my toes to my hands to my throat where it came out in a long, loud wail that echoed off the walls.

I ended up lying on my side, and a damp washcloth appeared from somewhere. Then a warm, strong, naked body was curled up behind me, holding me close, and the last thing I heard was, "Good boy," before I finally zonked.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When I woke up the next morning, I was alone in bed, and a really good smell was wafting in through the open bedroom door. Two smells, actually—one was coffee, which would've been enough to drag me out of bed all by itself, and the other was... something like pancakes or waffles or something like that, which was an awesome bonus because while I love that stuff, I usually only eat it in restaurants. I like cooking, but I'm not really up for anything more complicated than coffee and maybe a muffin or something (assuming I made some earlier) first thing in the morning.

I hit the bathroom, and when I came back to the bedroom to look for my clothes, I noticed a pair of black sweats and a black T-shirt with a wolf on it laid out down at the foot of my side of the bed. I made the obvious assumptions, and put them on. Much better than crawling back into a beat-up suit on a Saturday morning.

I followed my nose downstairs, and a sizzling sound mated with the frying-batter-and-bacon smell. The combination got my stomach rumbling.

Mr. Castle was standing in front of the stove in a pair of blue shorts that completely held my attention for a good twenty seconds, which is forever in coffee-deprivation time. They weren't painted on or anything, but they were very nicely filled anyway, and even once the siren-scent of coffee dragged me the rest of the way over to the pot, I kept an eye on that muscled ass as long as I could. It made me wonder if he ever bottomed, 'cause damn.

"Hey, Rob," he said, with a quick glance over his shoulder. Luckily after I'd stopped ogling him and was opening cupboards looking for cups. "Mugs are there on the left. French toast will be ready in a few minutes."

I said, "Mmmm," because I love French toast, and besides, a display of appreciation seemed polite. I doctored my coffee with sugar, and once I got about half a mug inside me, we were sitting at the island, on adjacent stools close enough together that I could feel the heat from his body, with about twenty pieces of French toast piled up in front of us.

Okay, probably not that many, but it was a lot. I took four and drowned them in syrup. Mr. Castle grinned at me and said, "Sweet tooth?"

“Replacing all that energy I burned last night,” I said. I did my best to keep a straight face, but it was tough and I was pretty sure I was blushing again, dammit.

He just laughed and pushed the syrup bottle back toward me, which I took as a really good sign for the rest of the weekend.

By the time I got through my breakfast—bacon thicker than I’ve ever seen before, which was seriously incredible—and my second cup of coffee, I had enough brain cells firing to start wondering whether we’d actually have a whole weekend, since he hadn’t really said, and whether any of this was smart, him being my boss and all.

Great time to wonder about that, right? Hey, I’m a guy, I’m in my mid-twenties, I’m supposed to think with my balls at least sometimes. It’s, like, a rule or something.

Thought processes had finally moved farther north, though, and I wondered what’d happen if Mr. Castle only wanted a day, or a weekend—would my job still be safe? Would he be able to sort of forget that he’d had his tongue up my ass—God, that was amazing!—and fall back to a purely professional relationship?

Even if he did want to... I don’t know, see me regularly for a while, how would that work at work? Obviously a lot of other people at the company were seeing each other, and in the same way we were—they wouldn’t need the Executive Lounge if they weren’t. But still, I was just a PA, and a newbie.

I guess I was wondering whether anyone would respect me in the morning.

No matter what was going through my head, I was determined that none of it would show outside my skull, so I finished my breakfast and did my best to look normal. I gathered up dishes and headed over to the sink. Cleaning up seemed like the thing to do, since Mr. Castle had cooked and all, and besides, aren’t subs supposed to do this sort of thing? Maybe not always, but I wanted to make a good impression, and it wasn’t like he’d torn apart half the kitchen anyway.

He didn’t comment, just put away the bread and sugar and syrup, which was good because I had no idea where anything went. He went out and came

back in a couple of minutes later with a stack of mail, which he tossed onto the big dining table we hadn't used. I was just finishing up rinsing out the sink, and as soon as I was done, he took my wrist and hauled me back toward the stairs, saying, "Let's take a shower."

That sounded like a great idea, so I went along.

We were naked, like, forty seconds later and walking into the biggest shower I'd ever seen in someone's house. It didn't have a door, or even a curtain—we just walked in through a gap in the grey tiled bathroom wall, then turned a corner and there was the shower area, half the size of my bedroom at home. There was only one shower head, which sort of surprised me, all things considered, but it was a good one, and when Mr. Castle turned it on, it put out a lot of water. There was a bench built into one side of the enclosure, and a couple of built-in shelves with soap and shampoo and stuff.

The water was just hot enough, and it felt pretty wonderful when I stepped into it—a good, hard pressure on my chest, then hot streams down my belly and legs. I turned around to give my back some of the awesome, and ducked my head under to wet my hair.

Mr. Castle was waiting with a bar of soap and two sudsed-up hands when I turned around, and he started lathering up my shoulders, then my chest. He worked his way down my front, and my cock was half hard before he ever got there, just from the feel of his hands on me.

I'd already figured out he was a horrible tease—and I mean that in the best way, really—so when he lingered over my balls for maybe a little longer than hygiene required, I pulled him up against me under the stream for a kiss. Sharing soap worked, right? By the time we came up for air, his front was as lathered up as mine, and we were both hard and ready to forget the whole getting-clean thing for a while.

He opened up my ass with a finger—not a soapy one, either, which made me very happy, because this other guy I'd been with (only once) thought soap would make a great lube during shower sex and my ass had felt like it was on fire, on the *inside*, for like an hour after, and we hadn't even made it to the sex part. Of course Mr. Castle knew better, and it turned out one of the bottles was waterproof lube.

What is it about being wet, about having water streaming down a naked body, that makes an already handsome, sexy man so much hotter? Not that Mr. Castle needs much help you've picked up on the fact that I was completely gone on him by now, right?—but being wet and slippery and shining in the falling water cranked it all up to twelve.

He bit my earlobe and said, “Relax for me,” in a low voice that penetrated to the nuclei of my cells, and every one of those cells, both singularly and in groups, immediately obeyed him without consulting me at all. I went all soft in his grasp—well, okay, not *completely* soft, but you know—and let him slide his fingers up inside, teasing and touching and working me up into a blob of moaning jelly. He maneuvered me around and planted my hands on the bench, leaving my ass in the air. He nudged my feet wider, then said, “Stay. Just like that.”

I said, “Yes, Sir,” without really thinking about it. I heard him tearing open a condom wrapper and then he was sinking into me.

This is going to sound weird, but the main thing I remember about that time was how safe I felt. Yeah, the sex itself felt awesome and he played me like a piano, but I still didn't know him very well, and I'd pretty much given myself into his hands. I could've said, “No,” or “Wait,” or “Stop” at any time and I know he'd have done exactly that, and there was some security there, sure. But mainly I felt safe in his hands, obeying him, letting him control what happened and do whatever he wanted with me. Not that we'd gotten into anything really freaky (yet—I was still hoping) but the way I felt, he could've pulled out pretty much anything and I'd have gone along, and had a ridiculously adoring expression on my face while doing it. It's one of those things that makes you want to hide under a table when you think of it afterwards, but at the time it's just perfect and natural and doesn't take any thought at all. It just *was*, like I'd slotted right into the space I belonged and that space was within arm's reach of Mr. Castle.

I guess what it comes down to is that I trusted him, absolutely, which allowed me to let go, completely. It was pretty incredible.

He curled over me, his chest rubbing against my back as he thrust in and out. His hands slid up and down my chest, over my water-slick skin, jerking

my cock or teasing a nipple at random. His teeth scraped down the side of my throat; it didn't hurt but it was heading in that direction just enough to get me shivering, anticipating, maybe even wishing for the stinging-hot pain of a bite.

He shifted my hips just a little, and suddenly his cock was sliding past my sweet spot, tight and hard, with every thrust. I was making these little whining noises in time with our movements, louder and louder as the tension built deep in my gut, winding like a spring until my cock was aching and my balls were tight and I needed release more than I needed to fucking breathe.

I was pretty loud, still no words, just noises, heavy gasping with voice behind it because I was desperate and there wasn't enough blood left in my brain to make speech and I was down to raw, primitive communication.

“That's it,” he said, his voice harsh and gasping, right next to my ear. “Let me hear you. Let me hear how much you need this.”

My voice filled the room, echoing off the tile, high and desperate and begging with nothing but vowels. I wasn't consciously obeying him. It was more that the order itself, the command in that tone, with his body behind and inside and around me, his arms tightening while he commanded me—all of that triggered an increase in volume to match the increase in desperation that surged through me. If he'd ordered me to be silent I'd have had to struggle with it, and I can't swear I'd have succeeded.

One soapy hand slid down my body and wrapped around my cock and that was it, the last nudge I needed to send me falling over the edge. I spurted against the streaming tile and felt my ass clenching hard around Mr. Castle's cock.

I pretty much collapsed right there, and he supported me with one arm around my hips and the other across my chest, while thrusting into me harder. Finally he climaxed, long and tense, his grip tightening until I thought I'd end up with two wide, bruised stripes across my body. I didn't much mind the thought, either, and not just because my brain hadn't rebooted yet.

He maneuvered me around and sat on the bench. I ended up on his lap, with my face tucked into the crook of his shoulder. Luckily I was too gone to even think about what I looked like, much less care. Heck, I'd have slid onto the floor of the shower if he hadn't hung on to me.

It took me a few minutes to get back up to fully functional. Mr. Castle said, “Back with me?”

I said, “Yes, Sir,” to the side of his neck, which was about an inch away from my lips. Since it was right there, I pressed a kiss onto it.

I got a hug for that—he just tightened his arms for a second—then he said, “Let’s finish getting clean.”

We did that, and got dressed. While I was putting on the borrowed sweats and T-shirt again, he said, “You do want to stay the weekend, right? How about if we swing over to your place so you can change and pack a bag?”

That answered some questions and brought up others. While I was sorting through them, after a few seconds of silence, he added, “If you need some alone time before transitioning back to work mode, that’d be perfectly natural. Just let me know what you need and that’s what we’ll do.”

He was dressing himself while he spoke, pulling on a pair of faded jeans and a plain grey T-shirt that did gorgeous things for his grey eyes. And yes, I’m totally gay for noticing that, why do you ask?

I said, “Staying the weekend would be great, Sir, if you don’t mind running me over to the office so I can get my car at some point, so I can get home Sunday night without you having to make a round trip to drop me off.”

“Not a problem. For that matter you can grab your work clothes and we can go in together on Monday.”

“Oh, that works too, sure.” More shifting around in my brain, because walking in with the boss after a weekend was A Thing. I ventured, “I don’t mind going in to work with you, if it won’t cause any problems.”

Mr. Castle smirked at me and said, “I’m the boss. If I don’t think it’s a problem then it’s not a problem.”

Well, of course. How else would a strong, dominant man answer that question? It made my dick regret that it couldn’t quite give him the salute he deserved for that, because, hey, I was twenty-five and not sixteen. I mentally gave him a rain check and said, “Sounds good.”

He nodded and started pulling on his boots. “What do you think about going back up to the meet for the day?”

Huh, that was an idea. Now that I'd been there and knew what to expect, it sounded more like fun and less like something to stress over. And going with Mr. Castle? As in, *with* Mr. Castle? Hell, yeah. "I'd like that, Sir."

"Good. Would you be interested in dressing up a little? Do you have any gear?"

I sort of blinked and thought, *Eep?* although luckily I didn't say it out loud. "Umm, do you mean like a leather harness or a collar or something? I don't have anything like that."

"Not a collar—your Dom will give you one when you get into a formal relationship. And a full harness is probably a little much for someone new to the scene to wear in public, although you'd look good in one." He gave me an appreciative look-over that made me want to climb back into his lap, but I focused on fastening my shoes instead because I am not a complete dork a hundred percent of the time.

He went on with, "How about some wrist cuffs? Subtle, but a nice, constant reminder."

"That'd be great—thank you, Sir."

He went back to the wooden chest under the window, rooted around for a second, and came back with a set of black leather cuffs. Each one had two steel rings on it, on opposite sides, and a small key lock set in. I held out my hands and he wrapped the first one around my right wrist. The leather was soft inside, comfortable. He adjusted it so it was loose enough to rotate on my wrist when he tried to turn it, but tight enough not to slide off. He snapped the latch shut, then locked it with a small key.

"If you just close it, it opens with the catch on the side, here." He showed me the small catch on the arm side of the latch. "It takes a key to lock it, and then unlock it. I think I want these locked on for the day."

I felt my dick trying to respond to that while he put the second one on and locked it. It got a little farther than it had earlier. I figured by the time we got to my place, I was going to be pretty uncomfortable. I was okay with that, actually.

"Bundle your clothes up," he said, "and I'll get a plastic bag for you." He went downstairs, and I followed him with my suit and shirt sort of half-folded,



half-wadded up under one arm. Seriously, the suit was wrinkled enough, there wasn't much I could do right then to hurt it.

Mr. Castle gave me a plastic grocery bag for it, then held out his open gear pack. I stuffed the bag in on top of a lot of coiled ropes. There was some stuff on the bottom that rattled and clinked, but I couldn't see what it was.

We headed out, back to the bike. He gave me his helmet again and I put it on, then mounted up behind him, wearing the backpack, and wrapped my arms around him. I didn't need to anymore, but I wanted to and he didn't seem to mind.

I gave him my address before we took off. He nodded, but we made a detour and ended up at a bike shop in East San Jose, where we shopped for a helmet for me.

"Here," he said. "Try this one, see how it fits, whether it's comfortable." It was good but not great. I went through a couple of others, trying on what he handed me, and finally found one I liked. It was dull, dark silver with a black-tinted faceplate, nice looking without being ridiculously flashy, but what I really cared about was that it felt good on.

I pulled it back off and said, "Here, this one." Then I looked inside at the price tag and said, "Umm, wait, this one's kind of..." I looked around and saw there were others that were a lot cheaper. I'd love a nice helmet, but the one I liked was four-twenty and that seemed kind of ridiculous. I walked over to the back wall. "Here, let me try this one—"

Before I could even touch it, Mr. Castle had me by the wrist and hauled me up to the register. "You get a fifty dollar helmet if you have a fifty dollar head," he said. "Don't argue."

I shut up and waited while he paid for the helmet. We were back on the road a minute later.

The next stop was my place. My apartment was in Almaden. It wasn't horribly far from work, and it was cheap without being a dump, which worked out fine if you didn't mind living in a building full of university students.

All right, it *was* a dump next to Mr. Castle's place, but then just about any place that wasn't an actual mansion was a dump next to Mr. Castle's place, so I didn't stress out too much about it.

I let us in, waved toward my ugly beige couch and said, “I’ll be out in a minute,” then headed back to my bedroom.

Now, what to wear? I tossed the bag with my sad suit onto the closet floor and toed off my work shoes while digging around some. I pulled out a pair of jeans about the same faded blue as Mr. Castle’s. They fit really well without being ridiculously tight. I sorted through my shirts, discarding a couple of silk shirts and a spandex tank—club gear wasn’t really what I wanted, especially since Mr. Castle wasn’t fancied up. A cotton muscle shirt was tempting, but not quite.

I finally pulled on a plain black T-shirt. It went with the wrist cuffs, which I was coming to like a lot. Mr. Castle was right—they were comfortable, but I could *feel* them, and they were a constant reminder of what I was to him, at least for the weekend.

When I went back into the living room, I saw that he hadn’t sat down—he was standing in front of my bookcase with his head turned sideways, reading titles. I grinned at his back because I always did that too. You could find out a lot about someone by checking out their books. I hadn’t had a chance to see what Mr. Castle read, but with any luck I’d be able to do that before the weekend was over.

He turned around and said, “Ready?”

“Yes, Sir.”

He very obviously checked me out, and I got an approving look. “Come here.”

I walked over and he pulled me up against him with one hand on the back of my neck and kissed me, hard. Just as I was thinking that I had a perfectly good bed only a few steps away, he bit my lower lip—not enough to draw blood but hard enough to hurt, a sharp, deep sting. I made a startled, pained noise but didn’t pull away. Instead I pressed closer, pushing my hips against his, looking for friction. My dick had definitely recovered from the shower and was enthusiastic again.

Mr. Castle pulled back, gave me another quick kiss that made the pain flare for a second, then tightened his grip on the back of my neck before stepping away. “There,” he said. “The best accessory to go with cuffs is a bruise.”

The hungry, I-own-you look on his face while he studied my swelling lip wasn't discouraging my libido at all, but before I could figure out how to hint that sticking around for a while might be a good idea, he said, "Let's go," and headed for the door.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I grabbed a leather jacket I hadn't worn since I was an undergrad and followed him back out to the bike. It wasn't cold or anything, but when we got up to speed on the road, the wind chill could get dire, even with Mr. Castle right in front of me acting as a windscreen. The jacket kept the goose bumps away, and between Mr. Castle's warm back in front of me and the heavy backpack behind me, I wasn't really cold; it was unfamiliar, but I figured I'd get used to it soon enough.

Riding through the hills in full daylight was a lot different from riding at night, or even riding in a car in the daytime. The colors seemed brighter, not only the brown and green of the trees and bushes and grass, but the sky was a brighter blue and even the pavement seemed more richly textured, looking at it directly without a car wrapped around me.

Everything smelled fresher, wood and dirt and asphalt, and as we pulled up into the campground, the scents of cooking meat and frying dough blew by on the breeze, making me want to ignore the fact that I'd had breakfast less than two hours earlier.

We parked in the same lot near the rec building, and a few people who were hanging around the bikes called or waved to Mr. Castle. He took the backpack from me and bungeed it to the bike. I gave it a worried look, but he said, "The community here is pretty close, and our events are as safe as you're going to get in a situation where you're around people who aren't your personal friends. I've left stuff with my bike before and never lost anything."

"That's pretty awesome, Sir."

"Yes, it is. It's one of the reasons I like these events."

I followed Mr. Castle across the parking lot, stopping a step behind him whenever he paused to talk to someone. He seemed to know a lot of people, and a lot of people knew him. I guess he'd been around for a while.

That was a good thing, actually. Since I was a newbie myself, I wouldn't have felt comfortable with a Dom who was still trying to figure out what to do and how things worked.

We were talking to a couple of biker ladies when Riley came dashing up. He didn't quite tackle-hug me, but it was pretty close, and if I hadn't seen him coming we'd have probably both ended up sprawled in the grass.

"Hey!" he said, "You came back! And you lost the suit! You don't look like a dork anymore!"

I smacked him upside the head, not hard enough to hurt but enough to mess up his hair a little, which is the best revenge against Riley, who yelped and swatted at me. "Cut it out! The hair is sacred!"

I made like I was about to go on a hair-ruffling spree with both hands, with Riley threatening dire revenge, until one of the biker ladies said, "Children! Company manners!" in a sharp tone that suggested she was the kind of aunt or maybe schoolteacher who carried a crop for these situations.

Riley and I chorused, "Yes, Ma'am!" then looked at each other and cracked up.

Mr. Castle tugged me back to his side with one hand around my upper arm—hard enough to hurt some, and not in a good way—then snapped his fingers and pointed at the ground next to his boots. I froze for a couple of seconds, then swallowed hard and went down to my knees with my arms behind me, right hand clasping left wrist. I glued my gaze to the grass between my knees.

"A decent enough boy when you remind him," said the same biker lady who'd spoken before. "What about this other one—who's in charge of him?" No one said anything, and she finally said, "Well, boy? Whose collar is that?"

Riley said, "Don McIlroy's, Ma'am. I'm sorry, Ma'am."

Mr. Castle said, "There he is," then called, "Don, come collect your pet." I couldn't see, but it sounded like he might be smiling. Or at least, he didn't sound like he was really upset at all. Maybe entertained? At least a little? I hoped?

Footsteps approached, crunching through the drying grass, and I heard Don say, "Am I going to have to spank him again?"

"Not unless you want to," said Mr. Castle. "He and Robbie were just getting a little rambunctious."

“He needs to learn to behave a bit better around dominants he doesn’t know,” said the biker lady. Her voice was friendly, now that she wasn’t talking to me or Riley anymore. “Just basic respect when he’s within arm’s reach. Some folks take offense, and that can get nasty.”

“I’ll be sure to remind him,” said Don. Riley made an embarrassed noise and knelt next to him, leaning up against Don’s thigh. Don pushed him away. Not roughly, but he got his point across. “Don’t even think it,” he said. “When I gave you permission to run ahead and say hi to Rob, I didn’t expect you to forget how to behave.”

Riley said, “I apologize, Sir,” in a small voice.

“I’m not the one to whom you owe an apology.”

Riley tried again with, “I’m sorry, Ma’am. Umm, and... Ma’am?”

The second biker lady, who hadn’t said anything yet, laughed. “He’s right, we need a plural for ‘Ma’am’. Two or more men are ‘Sirs,’ but ‘Ma’ams’ isn’t a word.”

“It sounds like what some country kid in a very old movie would’ve called his mother,” said the first biker lady with a huff. She sounded like she thought it was kind of funny, and like it kind of ticked her off, both at the same time.

“That’s because any individual Domme should have the full attention of anyone addressing her,” said Don, which I thought was pretty damn slick.

The first biker lady snorted. The second one laughed again and said, “All right, for that I’ll forgive your boy—clean slate. Make sure he appreciates it.”

“Oh, I will,” said Don. “Thanks, Judy. Ellen. Nick.” There was some shuffling around, and I saw Riley stand and follow Don’s legs away. The biker ladies walked off too in a different direction, chatting about why older subs were so much less hassle but also less fun, until their voices faded away into the background people-buzz of the crowds scattered across the campground.

I stayed where I was and after a few moments of silence Mr. Castle said, “I know Riley instigated that, but you went along. I hope you know better now?”

I wanted to say *yes, of course*, but I honestly couldn’t. I swallowed hard and said, “I’m sorry, Sir. I’ve seen some demos at Brandon’s house, and I’ve

read a couple of books, and I've seen a lot of porn, but I'm still trying to figure all this out. I don't... I don't know what we did wrong, and I'm afraid I'll do it again because I'm not sure what the offense was. I'm really sorry." My hand was clutching my wrist so hard I was losing feeling in my fingers on that side, and I had to focus on my breathing because I knew I'd start hyperventilating if I didn't. I'm used to being pretty quick on the uptake, to learning fast and having a good grip on what was going on around me, but I was feeling seriously stupid right then for the first time in long time, and I was afraid Mr. Castle would decide I was just too much of an idiot to waste his time on.

Mr. Castle was silent for a while, probably just a couple of seconds, but I was kneeling there with my shoulders hunched, staring at an ant climbing a blade of grass in front of me, and it seemed like forever.

Finally he said, "All right, come on." His hand ruffled through my hair, and he helped me up with a firm but definitely non-angry grip on my arm. I stood and walked with him over to a bench made of half a huge log sitting in front of a stand of trees. He sat straddling the bench, and patted the spot in front of him. I copied him and straddled the bench too, facing him.

He reached out and took my wrists, his hands wrapped around the cuffs I was wearing. The natural thing for me to do was clasp his wrists, so I did.

"Robbie, look at me." When I raised my eyes, he was looking at me with a kind of lopsided smile. "I do understand that you're new to this. I'm not going to get mad at you for not knowing something you've never been told, so long as you're obviously trying. That's ninety percent of it—making an obvious effort to be polite and respectful, and usually you do."

I nodded, because yeah, that part seemed obvious. Not just in the BDSM community, no, but how you behaved, depending on your role, was seriously important there. I knew that.

"All right, then. There are particular things, like calling dominants 'Sir' or 'Ma'am' as a default, which are pretty universal, but with other things, different people have different preferences in protocol. No reasonable Dom is going to get offended if, for instance, you look him in the eye when he trains his own subs to never do that unless ordered, but you don't know that. If someone jumps your case for something that's not universal or nearly so,

when you didn't know their preference, then they're an asshole, and I'll tell them where to go and what to do when they get there if they complain to me about your behavior. So long as you were generally polite and respectful."

I nodded again. That sounded reasonable, and I was kind of relieved that he *was* that reasonable about it.

"One thing that is pretty much universal is that ignoring a dominant when you're within close proximity, unless you're deeply focused on your own Dom or have been ordered by your Dom to stay quiet or withdrawn or whatever they asked of you, is rude. Your *submission* is for me alone so long as we're together, but you owe *respect* to everyone who hasn't completely fucked up. Riley's mistake was in coming bouncing up to you and starting to roughhouse while ignoring me and Judy and Ellen. He should've waited quietly for us to acknowledge him, then maybe asked you, as his friend, to introduce him to us—I'd have done that, since you were being quiet and I hadn't introduced you yet—and then asked my permission to take you aside so you could chat. Once you were out of range—call it reasonable conversational earshot—that would be the time to try to knock you down with a hug and start joking back and forth. There are ways of accomplishing all that without going hyper-formal, but Riley didn't do it at *all*, and by acting like we weren't there when he was within arm's reach, he was rude. Does that make sense?"

"Yes, Sir," I said. "Thank you."

"All right, then. You're very well behaved and respectful—I don't want you to think I'm displeased by how you conduct yourself."

"Thank you, Sir," I repeated. "I don't want to make any stupid mistakes, but sometimes it's hard to know, or even know that there's something *to* know."

"Everyone gets that," he said, nodding. "And so long as you're obviously trying, no one reasonable is going to get too bent out of shape."

"I'll try hard not to embarrass you when we're together, Sir."

"I know you will. That became obvious as soon as I got to know you at work. It's one of the things that attracted me, actually." He reached over and stroked a hand through my hair, like a slow, affectionate pet, then pulled me in close for a kiss.



The angle was awkward and our knees were kind of jammed together on either side of the log bench. I couldn't get as much contact as I wanted—Mr. Castle makes me want to sort of melt against him from the lips down—so I wrapped my arms around him, one at shoulder level and the other just below, feeling his body heat through the leather. That also stopped me from losing my balance and ending up in an awkward, back-wrenching angle with my nose squished against his chest, so hanging on to him was useful as well as fun.

Before we could really get into anything, though, Mr. Castle leaned back, looked over my shoulder and said, “Hey, Roy. Did you need something?”

I looked around and saw a guy about my age, Asian, in jeans and a white tank that showed off some decent muscles. He was wearing a pair of wide leather cuffs that didn't look at all like mine—they covered about six inches of each forearm, and didn't have any rings or anything on them. Scuffed leather boots and a seriously un-submissive posture made it obvious he was a Dom, if one of the younger ones around.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he said, “but Tim heard you were back today and wants to know if you'd like any time on the schedule.”

Mr. Castle frowned a little, then looked at me and said, his voice low enough that only I could hear, “We haven't gone very far in private yet, so this is up to you. Would you be comfortable having me put you into serious bondage for the first time in front of an audience? If you'd rather not, I can find someone else to model for me, and you can watch.”

“No, Sir! I mean, yes, Sir, I'd love to model for you.” I still had my hands on him from our interrupted clinch, and I squeezed his shoulders as kind of an emphasis. We didn't have anything formal between us, and I still wasn't sure he'd want to see me outside of work once the weekend was over with, but right then I wanted to be able to at least sort of pretend to myself that he was mine. If I had any choice in the matter, I was going to be the one he focused on when he got his ropes out.

That got me a smile and a quick kiss. “Good, I'm glad.” He looked over at Roy and said, “Sure, we'll be here till at least dinnertime.” Then he glanced between the two of us and added, “Have you two met?”

I said, “No, Sir,” and Roy shook his head.

“Roy, this is Rob. He goes to Brandon’s, so I thought you might’ve run into each other.”

Roy said, “Hey, good to meet you. I haven’t been in a while—my advisor has me running around finding the most esoteric crap for him, and I’ve been trying to do my own research in all my copious spare time.”

I grinned and said, “I feel for you. I just got my MBA this last June and it was pretty insane for a while.”

“Business, ick!” Roy gave me a teasing shudder. Then he said to Mr. Castle, “I’ll let Tim know you’re good with taking a slot, and let you know what he’s got for you.”

Mr. Castle said, “Sounds good, thanks.” Roy waved to us both and left us alone.

“He’s a good guy,” said Mr. Castle. “Young, but with some experience and a clear head. He doesn’t have a sub right now, but I’ve known him for a couple of years, and he’s safe.”

I said, “Sounds like a nice guy,” and nodded, but I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to get from that. I mean, it was good that Roy was a safe Dom and knew what he was doing, but how was that relevant to me? Was Mr. Castle saying that when he was done with me, I should try to hook up with Roy? He was a good looking guy and seemed nice, but even if I didn’t have a thing for older men, I wasn’t about to go on the prowl for a new Dom any time soon.

Or was I? Mr. Castle had said he was serious, but that didn’t necessarily mean long-term. Maybe he just wanted my serious attention for as long as it lasted, however long or short a time that might be.

Mr. Castle tapped me on the forehead with two fingers and said, “You’re thinking too hard. I can hear you. Shut off your brain and come here.”

Before I could move, he lifted me up with his hands under my ass and pulled me into his lap. I yelped in surprise, then laughed and tightened my legs around his waist.

“There,” he said, “much better,” and then he was kissing the stuffing out of me. Not being completely stupid, I relaxed and went with it.

\*\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The slot Tim-the-demo-organizer gave Mr. Castle was at four, a time when, Mr. Castle said, things usually started to kind of wind down and get tangled up as people wrapped afternoon stuff and started doing different dinner things, either cooking or figuring out where to eat. Mr. Castle hadn't let me eat anything since lunch—which sucked because there was Indian fry bread, which is awesome—and cut off liquids at a little before three. Because, he said, running to the bathroom when you were in full-body rope bondage was kind of problematic.

So at three-fifty I was neither hungry nor full, and neither thirsty nor full of liquid, kneeling in one corner of the demo area, hand clasping wrist behind my back. I watched while a guy who'd been demonstrating hot wax play on his cute female sub cuddled his girl, got her a bottle of water, then cleaned up his gear. Once they'd cleared out, a couple of bikers removed a sheet that'd been covering a big, sturdy-looking folding table in the center of the demo space and tossed a new, clean one over it.

Mr. Castle laid two hanks of rope on the table, one black and one red, along with a large pocket knife, which was for emergencies. The silk-blend rope he used was expensive, but he said that if I panicked or got a cramp or anything else happened, he'd cut me out of it right away. I hadn't really been worried about anything like that until he mentioned it, but having that knife there was sort of comforting.

He'd retrieved his backpack from the bike and left it on the ground next to me, along with both our jackets and my folded T-shirt. The breeze was cool, but Mr. Castle had asked if I minded the bare skin—he said the color contrast with the ropes would be pretty—and I said no. Having his hands on my skin or on my shirt? It would've had to be a lot colder to get me to choose to have a shirt on for that.

When he nodded to me, I climbed to my feet and walked over to where he was standing in front of the covered table, and stood facing him, wrist clasped behind my back, with the audience to one side of me. I was sort of nervous

having a couple hundred strangers watching me, but it was easier with them out of my direct line of sight.

Tim, a big guy with a bushy beard whom I'd met earlier, introduced Mr. Castle and ran down his experience with rope bondage, then left us to it.

I focused on my breathing and heartbeat while Mr. Castle said some things I didn't pay much attention to, then he was there with the black rope. He had me turn to face the audience, then got going.

"Folding the rope in half is the easiest way to find the center," he said. "Loop it around the back of the neck. Never the front." He turned and gave the audience a hard stare. "Seriously, *never* loop a rope around the front of the throat unless you've got a rigid collar on first, one you're absolutely sure isn't going to slip out of position. Threading the rope through loops *on* the rigid collar is best, if you have to do that. The windpipe is in front of the vertebrae. If you cut off your sub's air, he won't even be able to safeword."

He looked back at me and knotted the two ropes together at about the top of my breastbone. "This first rope is going to be the foundation," he said, "which is why I'm using the shorter one here. Tie a knot—I just use square knots, although an overhand will work, or anything else that'll hold the two strands secure to each other right where you put it. From here, figure out how much slack you'll need. It depends on the size of your sub and what effect you want."

I looked down and saw him pull the two ends apart at an angle, then pinch the ropes with his fingers and thumbs at a point where they were not quite half way to my nipples.

"I like it about here," he said, stepping aside and turning me slowly so everyone could see. "If you have a female sub and want to outline her breasts, take the rope out to a little less than nipple width. Less because there's always going to be some shift when you tighten things up. This is going to be the outer edge of the center diamond and the inner edge of the spaces going down on either side. Your next knot is going to be twice that length from the first one."

He measured with his hands and tied the two ropes together again, with another square knot.

“From here, you can either space all your knots evenly, or you can position each individually, depending on what effect you want. I usually like them even.” He tied three more knots down the length of the ropes, leaving a couple of feet of tail. “You can pull a loop in this if you want, or tie a bow, just to keep the ends out of the way while you work. I wouldn’t tie a bow with a male sub, but that’s just me.” He gave the audience a crooked smile and got some snickering in return.

He stepped over to the table and picked up the coil of red rope. This one was a lot longer than the black one. He folded it to find the center, then said, “Arms up.”

I lifted my arms straight out from my sides, and Mr. Castle looped the rope around me so the center was at my back, right below my shoulders.

“Here’s where it starts to come together,” he said. “Under the arms,” and he wrapped the rope around to my front, “then the ends go through either side of the first knotted space.” He threaded each end through the loop, pulling the space into a triangle.

“Now, back under the arms.” He wrapped the red rope toward my back, then said, “Arms down.” I lowered my arms and he ordered, “Hold the ropes with your arms.” Then to the audience, “It really helps to have your sub’s cooperation here. If you like having your sub struggling, you’ll probably need a helper. Maybe two. This style is about looks, not just secure restraint.”

He passed the ropes, one at a time, around the outside of my arms, then back underneath to the back, then adjusted both sides so they were secure without being too tight. Then he had me turn around so my back was to the audience.

“Now, cross the ropes around each other, tighten them up just until they’re firm, and back to the front, low enough so they’re level with where the next black loop will be when it’s stretched out. You’ll get a feel for it.”

He turned me to face the audience again and wrapped the red rope around my chest, this time at a level just below my pecs, threading each rope under one of my arms. I couldn’t move them much to help him this time, since the first stretch of the red rope was pinning my upper arms against my sides. I saw

where he was going with this and immediately started to get hard. I was going to be completely immobile by the time he was done, at least from the waist up. I hoped he had plans for my legs, too, because I already felt helpless and kind of excited.

“Through the black loops on each side like before—notice that as you add tension down the black structure, the spaces turn into diamonds—then around to the back again, with a loop around the arms. Then just keep going.”

The red rope zigzagged back and forth around my torso, squeezing, compressing, trapping my arms so I couldn't move them at all. With a rope just wrapped around, you had a lot of slack to move underneath it; I'd seen a couple of subs at Brandon's tied that way. One had knelt in a corner of the yard for most of the afternoon, wrapped in rope and looking pretty hot. I'd imagined myself in her place, and jerked off to the fantasy later that night.

Looping the rope around the arms individually was so much more restrictive, though, it was like the difference between a rubber band and a handcuff.

By the time he was done with my upper body, my arms were tied down to just a few inches above my wrists. I was completely focused on Mr. Castle, aware of him moving around me, touching me, turning me, wrapping my body in his ropes. If he'd told me to go down to my knees and suck him off right there in front of everyone, I probably would have without even thinking about it. My brain wasn't really in “think” mode just then.

“I like this technique because it immobilizes the sub. Robbie, try to move your arms. Wiggle for me.”

I obeyed, squirming back and forth, looking for play in the ropes. There was pretty much no give anywhere. It felt awesome, and I was pretty sure everyone watching could tell I had a hard-on right then.

“This is just a basic application,” said Mr. Castle, “but you can do a lot with this technique. You can make the foundation longer—imagine the black rope structure going down the back as well. In that case, the red rope would go back and forth down each side. Two red ropes would make the whole thing neater. You can also leave the arms free and just bind the torso— that forms a

corset tie, and your sub can wear it under street clothes without attracting attention from mundanes, especially if you use a thinner cord. The hardest part here is maintaining even tension.”

He had me rotate slowly and said, “I’m a perfectionist, so I like everything even, with all the lines and spaces symmetrical and balanced. Sometimes you’ll need to make some temporary knots to tie off one side and maintain tension while you work on another side, especially if you get into the more complicated applications of this technique. If you don’t care about symmetry or neatness and just want to see your sub covered in rope, you can do whatever you want.”

There were a few more laughs at that.

“How to finish is up to you,” he said, “although you’ll want to secure the bottom somehow to prevent the structure from riding up and losing tension. You can take the ends down the crotch and do all sorts of interesting things there, whether your sub is male or female. You can start with the black rope much longer and run a pair of ropes down each leg, zigzagging back and forth, using the same twist on each side that you used down the back of the torso. I tend to get impatient right about here, so I’m going to go for something simple.”

He helped me move back until I was right in front of the table, his hands on me, helping me keep my balance, since if I lost it and fell I wouldn’t be able to catch myself.

“Up on the table.”

I managed an awkward hop and landed on my butt on the table. It protested but held, and felt sturdy enough that I didn’t worry about it collapsing under me.

Mr. Castle had me turn, swinging my legs up, then lifted me and moved me about a foot so I was sitting in the center of the table, facing the short end. He lowered me back until I was lying down, with my feet hanging off.

“On each side, I’ll take the red end down and around the ankle.” He had me bend my knees and secured the ends of the ropes around my ankles so I couldn’t straighten my legs.

“I like this because it’s simple and quick, and gives you access to everything you might be interested in playing with at this point.”

“Your boy is pretty interested too,” called a guy from the crowd. I blushed and turned my head away.

“Robbie is a wonderful sub,” said Mr. Castle, resting a hand on my chest. “Responsive and eager to learn. I’m fortunate to have him.” There was a hard note in his voice and the guy who’d commented didn’t say anything more.

“Any questions,” he asked.

There were a few, but I tuned them out. The embarrassment of having my bulging jeans pointed out in front of a bunch of strangers faded, and I just lay there with my eyes closed. Without vision, my sense of touch seemed to intensify, and the feel of the tight ropes made the world shrink down to just my body, my bondage squeezing it all around, and Mr. Castle’s hand on me. I squirmed a little bit, slowly, just for the pleasure of feeling how restricted I was. It was like my arms were *gone*, absorbed into my body, and I had no ability to manipulate the world at all. I lay there completely powerless and passive, dependent on Mr. Castle for anything and everything. I was sinking into my own helplessness and his domination over me, and it was such a thrill I thought I could almost come from it, if I let myself.

Then it was over, and Mr. Castle leaned down to kiss me while the audience applauded.

When he straightened, I opened my eyes and managed a dreamy smile.

“You liked that?” he asked, although I could tell from the hungry look on his face that he knew the answer.

“Yes, Sir. Very much.”

“Would you like to stay like that for a while?”

“Can I? Don’t they need the space for someone else?”

“Yes, but you’re portable,” he said with a grin. “Maybe not as easily as a skinny little twink type would be, but I can manage.” He looked around, stared somewhere off past my head for a moment, then scooped me up into his arms, bondage and all.



“Roy, bring our stuff?”

“Sure, Nick.” I heard footsteps and some shuffling behind us as Mr. Castle carried me over to a spot under a shady tree. It wasn’t grassy, but the ground was spongy with loam. Mr. Castle set me down, settled himself under the tree with his back to the trunk, then shifted me into his lap. Roy set our jackets, my T-shirt and Mr. Castle’s pack down next to us, waved and left us alone.

I leaned into his chest, cuddling as well as I could.

I really wished we were somewhere private, because I wanted, *needed* him to fuck me while I was tied like this. Or suck me off, jerk me off, play with me, *something*, because I was a bundle of helpless ache and need and not being able to do anything about it was going to make my balls explode.

“You’re such a sweet boy.” Mr. Castle tightened his arms around me, rubbing my back over the tight ropes and pressing a kiss into my hair. I pressed my cheek against his smooth, leather-covered shoulder and kissed the side of his throat, the only part I could reach. He’d been sweating a little in the sun, plus carrying me over to the tree, and his scent surrounded me. I closed my eyes and breathed it in—warm and musky and him. It was familiar even after such a short time, and catching just a hint of it, even at work, made me relax and feel a little aroused. Tied up and curled in his lap? The scent was a desperate tease.

“I want to fuck you so bad it’s driving me crazy,” he said, his voice quiet but intense. “I wish I could teleport us home.”

“I wish so too, Sir,” I said, and my voice had a little more urgency to it than I would’ve chosen to show, if I’d been thinking about it at all. He hugged me again and made a low noise that sounded like a frustrated growl.

I could hear a blurred buzz of voices from where we sat at one end of the campground, with laughter or whooping here and there. Occasionally a motorcycle rumbled in or roared out of the nearby bike lot. A sharp cracking sound and cry of pain marked the start of the next demo, not too far away; I could almost make out the just-unintelligible voice of whoever was instructing, commenting in between strikes.

There were people all around, and a sexual charge filled the space, flowing through the huge, outdoor area. We were all there for the same thing, more or

less, and no one was likely to be offended by whatever anyone else might choose to do, or if they were, I figured they'd probably hide it because dissing someone else's kink is pretty uncool.

Despite all that, though, most of what was going on—definitely what Mr. Castle and I had done for the last hour or however long it'd been—was foreplay, bottom line. Not for everyone, because there are people who are into D&S but don't have sex when they scene, but I'll admit I don't get that, not at the gut level. I never did, but right then, having had my first real experience of complex bondage with an expert Dom I was totally gone on, it was a lot of other things too, but it was definitely foreplay.

And it was *good* foreplay, good enough to get me so worked up I felt like I was going to spontaneously combust if I couldn't get some relief, but there was no way to move on to the obvious next step unless we could borrow a tent from someone. Even then, I didn't know that I'd really want to have everyone walking by within fifty feet hear what we were doing.

Fuck it, that's a lie. The way I felt right then, I wouldn't have given a damn.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

We sat there for a while. I didn't know how long because I wasn't wearing my watch with the wrist cuffs, couldn't have raised my arm to look at it even if I had been, and wasn't thinking about it at the time anyway. But the sun was in a noticeably different place when Mr. Castle gave me a hug and a deep kiss, then shifted me to the grass and undid the knots at my ankles with two quick jerks.

It took almost as long to untie me as it had to tie me in the first place, if you subtract the time he'd taken in the middle of the wrapping and looping and knotting to stop and explain what he was doing. I was shivering before he was halfway through.

"Hang on," he said. "I'll bring your shirt and jacket as soon as I'm done. Your blood pressure is dropping some with the release of tension and that's chilling you down. It'll pass in a little while." He kept working while he talked, but he couldn't go very fast—pulling a rope too fast out of a tight loop against my skin would've left me with some awful rope burns, so that slowed him down.

"I'll be all right, Sir. It's uncomfortable, but not really bad."

I wasn't lying, but goose bumps aren't my best look and I was glad when he tossed me my shirt, then my jacket. Even the T-shirt helped, and the leather jacket made me feel almost normal again.

He pulled me to my feet with both hands, then backed me up against the tree and kissed me again, long and slow, making my bruised lip flare. I was figuring out that Mr. Castle was *really* into kissing, which was fine by me 'cause he's seriously good at it.

We finally wandered off to see what was up and who was around. I hadn't really seen much of the event the previous night, and it was interesting to walk around and look. It *almost* distracted me from my aching erection.

There was an aisle lined with vendor tents selling things I'd only ever seen online, from cuffs and clothes to books and benches to studs and slings. I was trying hard to look without looking like I was looking. I failed miserably, of course.

Mr. Castle just laughed and slowed down, hauling my blushing ass around and talking about things like stitching and rivets and padding and penetration. I saw something called a “spider gag” that I’m pretty sure I don’t want to try any time soon, but there were a few other things that looked like fun.

What I really wanted to look at was the collars, and I very deliberately controlled myself in the four tents that sold them. A collar is a big deal—I guess it’s like a plain gold ring to a vanilla woman?—and I didn’t want Mr. Castle to think I was hinting or anything. Not that I knew him well enough to accept a collar from him right then, even if he’d offered. My brain knew that even if my gut (and parts lower down) didn’t. But still, it’s the idea, you know?

We moved on without buying anything, and when we’d looked at all the vendors, Mr. Castle said, “Let’s go for a walk.”

Since we’d been walking, I was okay with doing more of it, so I said, “Fine with me, Sir.” He steered me over to the edge of the campground, opposite the rec building and the bike lot, and we headed off down a trail into the woods. We just kind of ambled, not heading anywhere in particular.

“It’s been too long since I did this,” said Mr. Castle. “I like living in the valley, high tech and high-rises and lots of activity. And I love my bike, especially when I can just go for a ride away from traffic. But I like nature, too—it’s relaxing and quiet. I wouldn’t want to live in the woods, but it’s a good place to take a break.”

“I guess,” I said. “I mean, I like it here. I’ve never been camping or anything, though—my family wasn’t into it. It’s cool, something different. Usually a forest is just something I see on TV or in a movie, you know?”

“Really? Huh. We’ll have to fix that.”

“Yes, Sir.”

He gave me a look and said, “I’m not going to put you on a leash and drag you along on a twenty-mile hike. If you don’t want to, you don’t have to.”

“No, Sir. I mean, sorry, yes. I don’t know if I’d be up to twenty miles, but this is good. I’m fine being here, and wouldn’t mind doing it again.” I did *not* say “with you” because I’d probably grow tits or something, but the thought was there.

“We’ll have to pencil that in, then.”

“Maybe we could go out on the bike, and stay in places where there’s forest and do shorter walks? Then ride somewhere else and do it again? Sort of seeing a lot of wilderness without having to hike through every bit of it? Is that even a thing?”

He kind of laughed and said, “Sure, it could be. That’s a good idea—motorcycling and hiking, best of both.” We walked along for a few minutes without talking, and I looked around at the big rocks and bigger trees, gnarled roots bulging out onto the side of the trail. A sort of ditch ran along the other side that looked like it’d been cut by water. There was all kinds of nature stuff I’d never really seen in person before. I spotted a little grey lizard clinging to the side of a tree; it scuttled around to the other side out of sight when we passed by.

“So your parents never took you anywhere out of the city?” Mr. Castle asked. “I don’t think I’ve ever known anyone who’s never been camping before, not even once.”

“No, never,” I said with a shrug. “My parents just weren’t into it. We went to Disneyland when I was eight, and we went to Great America once every year or two. We went to movies, and Chuck E. Cheese—I was pretty good at Skeeball when I was a teenager and had a big shoebox full of tickets, although I never traded them in for anything. But except for that one Disney trip, we never did anything major, vacation-wise, when I was a kid. And now we hardly see one another.”

“Did they have a hard time about you being gay?” His voice lowered, like he was ready to be sympathetic, but I shook my head.

“No, not really. I mean, they weren’t thrilled or anything—my mom wanted grandkids, and now she’s going to have to depend on my sister, who’s busy with other things and not interested in having kids any time soon. It wasn’t a huge deal, though. There wasn’t any huge argument about anything, or any big event labeled ‘the break-up of the family’. We’re just different people. Like, when my parents wake up in the morning, the first thing they do is turn on the TV. Whenever they’re at home, the TV’s on unless they’re sleeping. It drives me crazy. I think that was the number one reason I moved

out as soon as I could afford it, even though I went to UA and could've lived at home the whole time."

"Do you see them very often? Sunday dinners?"

"No, I don't. Dad's a VP with a big insurance company, and they transferred him to St. Louis three years ago. I fly out for Christmas, and call on their birthdays and Mother's Day and Father's Day. We e-mail sometimes. We're just not that close." I thought for a moment, then added, "You know, I think the closest we've felt, or at least the one time I felt like my dad was really proud of me and we were having a good time together, the whole family, was when I got my MBA. They came out for my graduation, and Dad was grinning so hard I thought the top of his head would fall off. Business is his life, you know? He was sort of... not really disappointed, but unimpressed when I majored in engineering as an undergrad, although Mom thought it was great because she's a mechanic. Dad approved of the MBA, though."

"Getting both was smart," said Mr. Castle. "I learned engineering because I loved it, and I learned business the hard way because I had to, because I was determined that no asshole in a suit was going to take my company away from me. Most of the people in this business do one or the other, either the business or the tech. Having both is valuable."

"I'm glad you're happy with my work, Sir."

That got me an eye roll and a smack on the shoulder. "Don't pretend you don't know how good you are. For someone who's been with the company less than a month, you've slid right in. A few people thought at first that you were the gay equivalent of the little blonde secretary with huge boobs and no brains, but I've gotten some great comments about you. You're impressing people, and I expect you to keep it up."

"Yes, Sir. I'll try."

We came to a little stream trickling along, and stopped in the middle of a wooden bridge. I leaned against the rail and looked down. The stream was less than a foot deep, but I figured that during the rainy season it was probably more impressive. A breeze blew past, and the air smelled cool, all trees and water and soil. It's funny to think about soil—dirt—smelling clean, but it did.

It's not like dirt on the sidewalk, or in your house. It's more the kind of dirt that belongs where it is and has things growing in it. It's hard to explain why that's different, but it is.

“What about you, Sir?” I asked. “Are you close to your family?”

“Not really. My grandparents raised me, and they've both passed away. My mom had me when she was twelve, then she left me with her parents and ran away from home. Or maybe something happened to her, I don't know. We never heard from her again. I never knew her except from photos.” He said it in a matter-of-fact tone, like it was the weather report, or a listing of the cars his family had owned while he was growing up. Just stuff that happened.

“I'm sorry,” I said, because I didn't know what else to say.

He shrugged. “It's really not an issue. You don't miss what you never had, and I never had my mother around. I had my grandparents, and they were great. They never treated me like a burden, or tried to punish me for my mother's bad choices. I had a good childhood.” He glanced at me, then smirked and added, “We went camping every year when I was a kid. You're the one with a deprived childhood.”

I laughed and leaned over to bump shoulders with him. “You'll just have to make it up to me.”

“I'll have to do that,” he agreed, and that made me happy.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

We stopped at my place again on the way back that evening. I packed a gym bag with underwear and socks, and a T-shirt for the next day, and put a suit and shirt and tie and my work shoes in a garment bag for Monday. Carrying both bags on the bike was awkward, but the next stop was the office where I picked up my car, and I only live about fifteen minutes from Castle, outside of commute time.

Riding with Mr. Castle was definitely more fun, but the car was practical, and I followed him back to his house. We had great sex that night, and I slept with a chain fastening me to the headboard by my neck, the black leather cuffs still on my wrists and Mr. Castle's arm wrapped around my waist from behind.

Sunday we went to see a couple of movies, with an early dinner in the middle. It was kind of weird doing something so normal and date-like, but the movies were good—the new Marvel movie, and an SF movie with aliens and explosions—and I had fun. We talked about a lot of nothing over dinner, and just sort of hung out like two guys getting to know each other. He got a couple of texts, and had to make a call to yell at someone once, but for the most part it was just us.

By Monday morning the bruise on my lip had faded. It was still a little swollen, but the color was pretty much gone and it wasn't really visible unless you knew to look for it. I was sort of happy about that and sort of not, and I figured Mr. Castle had let it fade deliberately, to be reasonably discreet at work.

While we showered, though, Mr. Castle said, "Hold still," and bent to kiss my throat, right below my Adam's apple. The kiss only lasted a second, though, before he started sucking. He sucked hard for almost a minute, then bit, carefully, increasing the pressure of his teeth until I was gasping in short, pained breaths. He held the skin of my throat in his teeth for another minute or so, then backed off to sucking again, then let go.

"There," he said, and went back to washing.

I'll admit I was kind of confused. That patch at the front of my throat was sore, and he'd made sure it'd be bruised purple right away, but why there? It



wouldn't show when I was dressed for work, so he wasn't "marking" me, as in staking a claim to other people. Which I was just as happy about because I wasn't sure I wanted to walk into the office with the boss while showing a hickey, on my neck or my lip or anywhere else. And for a private mark, it was in a weird place—if I wanted to mark someone in a private spot that only we would see, I might go for a hip, an inner thigh, just below the belly button—someplace sexy, you know?

I figured it out while getting dressed. Trousers, shirt, tie... and that was it. The knot of my tie sat right where the mark was. It was only a little raw and sore on its own. The pressure of the tie tightened right on top of it made it hurt a lot more, but loosening the tie would look sloppy. I tried to adjust it a little up or down, just enough to shift the pressure of the knot onto unmarked skin, but it looked stupid either way, and wouldn't stay anyhow.

While I was messing with it, I caught Mr. Castle's eye in the mirror. He gave me a hungry lion smile, then turned to get a suit jacket out of his closet.

I'd just have to deal with it all day, and the raw ache would keep him and the weekend right up at the front of my mind. As if I'd need a reminder.

The office was in Monday mode, and we had mail to read and stuff to sort through and meetings to go to. In addition to the usual, the Pinelli project was coming to a head. We were heading back East on Wednesday for meetings with Pinelli Systems Integration, a big SI house we were romancing. They had a lot of government contracts, and we wanted to build some boxes for them.

They'd been working with one of our competitors, Syntronics Research Labs, for quite a few years, but Mr. Castle was determined to show Pinelli that we could do a better job than SRL for less money. A lot of plans, a lot of data, some alcohol and some smooth talking, and we just might persuade them to kick the competitor to the curb. We were giving it a good shot, anyway, and Mr. Castle is incredibly persuasive when he turns on the charisma.

Or maybe I'm just biased? Probably. But he's still a great negotiator.

I'd been aware of the bruise on my throat all day long, which was why he'd done it, and it worked. I found myself fiddling with the knot every now and then to intensify the sensation, usually while I was reading or something and had a hand free. Greg Wyatt had given me a weird look once, then grinned

when he noticed me noticing him noticing what I was doing. Which I know sounds kind of goofy, but you know? It was just that kind of day. I wondered for a moment whether he knew what was under my tie, but then my phone buzzed and I didn't have time to think about it.

So normal business was going on, for various values of "normal," while the "Backstab SRL" team was finishing up research on both Pinelli and SRL, running numbers, arguing strategy, and getting our presentations ready. Mr. Castle was coordinating and making final decisions, and I was doing a lot of running around. At the end of the day, or at least when I ran out of things that absolutely had to be done right then, Mr. Castle was still in the war room with the rest of the executive types.

I poked my head in and asked if anyone needed anything. Mr. Castle said, "No, we're fine, you can take off," then went back to talking about how Pinelli's VP of subcontracts was a partyer and we could take advantage of that, and on they went, everyone in the room focused on the files scattered across the table and displayed on the half dozen computer monitors, with me looking at the backs of their heads.

Okay, then.

I thought about sticking around for a while to see if maybe they'd wrap up soon, or end up needing some help after all, but then I figured that was way too pathetic so I did what Mr. Castle said and took off.

There was a grocery store on the way home, so I stopped in and picked up dinner, a strip steak and a sweet potato. I like them better than the white ones, which are kind of bland. You don't need to doctor sweet potatoes as much.

When I got home I scrubbed the potato and put it into the oven, then went to change. Sweats and a T-shirt were my usual grubbing-around-at-home clothes, unless it was hot, when I swapped shorts for the sweats. It wasn't hot.

Taking off the tie felt like a loss. Which was kind of ridiculous because I really didn't want to wear a tie when I was slobbering around at home, but still.

When I got undressed, I rubbed the bruise with a finger, then went into the bathroom to look at it in the mirror. It'd bloomed a dark red-purple, and there were darker blotches in the upper right and lower left where Mr. Castle's teeth had dug in extra hard.

Looking at it got my dick swelling. Pressing on it made it worse. Or better, depending on how you wanted to look at it.

I'd told Mr. Castle I wanted to experiment with pain play in a sexual context, and he'd been taking me there. I still wanted to try impact play—if he could make me feel anywhere near as good with a paddle or a flogger or his hand as he could with his teeth, I was going to turn into a major pain slut—but I didn't have any complaints about what he'd done so far. No complaints at all, except maybe that I wanted more and I was having a hard time moving back to normal-life mode by myself. I'd only spent a weekend with him; I wasn't supposed to be this dependent this fast.

It was kind of scary, actually. I mean, submissive doesn't mean dependent. Subs have to be strong, able to figure out what they did and didn't want, able to negotiate that with the Doms they played with. You have to *have* power before you can give it to someone else. If you grant power to someone else because you *can't* take responsibility for your own life, that's not healthy. I knew that, and even so, I was standing there staring into my bathroom mirror, wondering what Mr. Castle was doing and whether he was missing me, thinking about me the way I was thinking about him.

I turned away from the mirror and pulled on a T-shirt. I couldn't put the steak in for a while, so I grabbed my phone, flopped down on the couch and texted Brandon.

*U free 2 talk?*

A minute later the phone rang.

“Hey, Rob, what's up?”

“Just... I don't know, just wanted to BS?” Because once I had him on the phone, I wasn't sure what I wanted to talk about. I sure wasn't going to tell him I was all depressed and confused because I wasn't sure Mr. Castle liked me. Uh, yeah, no.

Brandon wasn't dumb, though, so he said, “Something happen this weekend?”

“Sort of. I mean, there wasn't an ‘incident’ or anything, but I've never spent a whole weekend—or even a whole day—immersed in the community, and going back to work has me a little freaked out, you know?”

“Does the fact that you work in the same office with your Dom make it easier or harder?”

“He’s not my Dom,” I pointed out. “He hasn’t collared me or anything.”

“No, but he made it pretty clear that you’re his and everyone else should back off.”

“Yeah, but I’m not sure what that means. I mean, it was great while we were at the meet-up, but then bam, nothing, and I don’t know what to... I don’t know.”

“So this is about today, not so much the weekend.”

“I guess, yeah.”

“What did you expect?”

“It’s not like I wanted him to pin me to the wall in the lobby or anything!”

“No, I mean seriously, what did you expect him to do, or expect that the two of you would be doing, when you went in to work today? If you’re confused and disappointed, you must have been expecting something different from what happened. Figure out exactly what you expected and why you expected it. Then look at what happened and figure out why it was different from what you expected. Maybe you can work out on your own where the disconnect happened, and that’ll be satisfying. If not, you need to talk to Nick about it, and make sure you’re both on the same page.”

Oh. Usually when someone says, “What did you expect?” they’re razzing you, but if Brandon meant it as a serious question then that was different.

“I don’t know,” I said. “It’s not like I had a plan, or like he said anything and then went back on it. It was just *nothing*—it was like I was hardly even someone he worked with, much less someone he had chained to his bed this weekend. I expected... something. Nothing specific, really, but not just... not to have him completely ignore me.” I growled to myself and said, “I sound like a girl, don’t I?”

Brandon laughed at me. “I know you met a bunch of Dommies this weekend, plus you know a few from Saturdays. Try asking any of them if you ‘sound like a girl’ and see what it gets you.”

The mental image of what'd happen if I were ever that dumb made me wince. "No, I know, you're right. But you know what I mean?"

"Sure. You're confused and off balance trying to reconcile full immersion at a kink event with re-immersion in mundania. And you're disappointed because your guy isn't fulfilling fantasies you didn't know you had. Not really fair to him."

"No, I know, but—"

"Look, instead of focusing on what didn't happen, think about what did. I know you had some great experiences—I watched you and Nick doing that rope demo."

The memory of that made me shift on the couch, my body responding to just the thought. "Yeah, that was awesome. I just wish we could've had some privacy after."

"I know what you mean," said Brandon. "I really envied you. So you had that, and it was great. What else?"

"Umm. Riding with him on his bike was great. And he bought me a helmet, a pretty expensive one, so he must mean to have me riding with him for a while, right? He wouldn't have bothered if he meant to walk away after this weekend."

"True. What else?"

"Great shower sex."

"Okay, Nick's great at sex—I'd kind of figured that anyway, so let's take it as a given. What else?"

"Umm, we went to the movies? And out to dinner. It was pretty ordinary and I don't know if that counts, but we hung out and talked. We took a walk at the event, out into the woods, and talked about stuff. It wasn't exactly exciting, but I liked just hanging with him and getting to know him."

"That definitely counts. A guy who just wants to tie you up and fuck you and move on to the next sub doesn't bother with long conversations or ordinary dates. If you're hoping he'll eventually collar you, if you want to be with him long term, that's a good sign. What else?"

I brushed a finger over my throat and the bruise flared with pain, it made me squirm and want to keep touching it. “He marked me, a huge hickey with teeth marks, right on my throat where the knot in my tie was pressing it all day. It was damn distracting, but I liked it a lot.”

The phone was silent, then Brandon sighed. “Rob? Hello? Anyone in there?”

“Huh?”

“Rob, that’s... Okay, look. He bruised you up, and made sure it was in the one place that you’d be feeling, thinking about, aware of, all day while you were running around at the office in your little suit and tie. Did it occur to you that he intended that?”

“Of course! It’s not like he did it accidentally!” I felt like Rob thought I was stupid, and I didn’t know what he was getting at so I *felt* stupid, which was pissing me off.

“What I mean is, he intended for you to be thinking about him all day, feeling his mark on you? Like maybe he knew he was going to be busy with work all day, knew he wouldn’t be able to give you any personal attention, so he gave you that mark that you’d be feeling *all day long* so you’d know he was thinking about you and that he’d marked you as *his* so you’d know who you belonged to even if he couldn’t be reminding you personally every hour on the hour?”

“Uhh, no, I actually didn’t think of that.” Now I was *sure* I’d had an attack of stupid, but I felt a lot better about Mr. Castle ditching me all day, so I didn’t care.

“Well, think about it,” said Brandon.

“Yeah, thanks. Shit, seriously, thank you.”

“No prob. It’s what I’m here for.”

I heard a rueful note in Brandon’s voice, and some manners came popping back up into my head, so I said, “How about you? Did you have a good time? Do anything fun?”

“Yeah, actually.” His voice perked up and I relaxed, ready to listen for a while. “I met a guy from Gilroy named Trenton who was there with a tent and

all, so I actually got laid.” I heard a tease in that, so I just huffed loud enough for him to hear that he’d gotten a rise out of me.

“I’ve usually played with people who are into ropes or leather, but Trenton’s into chains and metal cuffs. The feel is different, harsher. I don’t know if I’d want to switch over completely to metal, but it’s fun as an option. Made me feel smaller, or like I was in trouble, if that makes sense.”

“Sure,” I said. “I can see that.” I paused then said, “Trenton? Should we be discussing ways to get back at his parents?”

Brandon laughed. “No, that’s his last name. His first name is Edward.”

“Poor guy.”

“Exactly. He’s really pissed off about that.”

We shifted to talking about work for a while. Brandon does software configuration control, so I told him about Julie and he was properly boggled by the situation. He told me about turning down a raise that would’ve had him working on a project where the legacy code, all one point three million lines of it, was in BASIC.

“No amount of money could get me over there, seriously,” he said. “Which is why they offered me twenty-eight percent. Nobody wants to work on that code, so the people who do are the highest-paid in the company.”

I boggled back at him, then said, “You’d think that if they’re having to pay that much of a premium to get people on the project, they’d just say ‘Fuck it’ and pay to have a team rewrite it in something from this century. Or even late last century.”

“You’d think,” he said. “Management isn’t that smart. They won’t do it until they can get a customer willing to pay for the re-code, and nobody will.”

“I can’t imagine Mr. Castle letting a train wreck get that big. It’s been... how many years?”

“Nick was probably in kindergarten when this code was first written,” he said. “But I agree, he would’ve fixed it by now. Our management, not so much.”

“You could put in an application at Castle,” I said. “It’d be cool to have you in the building.”

“If they keep pushing me at this mass of rotting spaghetti, I’ll think about it.”

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Tuesday went by pretty much like Monday, and Wednesday we were on a plane for North Carolina. I was sitting in the middle seat between Greg, who had the aisle, and Brad Kellerman, our VP of Contracts, who had the window. Greg slept and Brad spent the flight on his laptop.

I'd expected this week's dog and pony show to be based out of Pinelli's HQ, but instead we'd rented a conference room at our hotel. Mr. Castle and I had a suite, and within an hour of check-in the living/dining area looked like an office, with multiple computers and phones and binders scattered around.

We met the Pinelli team down in the conference room that afternoon, and everyone was introduced, including me and a woman who seemed to be the Pinelli team flunky—pretty much my opposite number.

I studied their people as the discussions spun up, trying to get a read on the major players, after figuring out who the major players even were. It wasn't always obvious. Mr. Pinelli the Third, their CEO, made some introductory remarks, then turned the business over to a Mr. Olson, who was the overall manager of the projects we wanted in on. The team had found out weeks ago that he was the decision maker here, although his title was "group manager."

The guy Mr. Castle had been talking about Monday evening, Thomas Cotts, the Pinelli subcontracts guy, seemed sharp, but in a kind of oily way, like a stereotypical salesman, you know? If he'd come up in the business negotiating subcontracts, applying pressure and charisma and whatever it took to get the best advantage for his company, then it made sense he'd have evolved into that kind of personality, assuming he hadn't been that way all along. I'm sure he was effective, but I wouldn't want to be buddies with him, especially after I caught him checking me out. He gave me a cruising-you kind of smile, and I had to fight not to react the way I would've in a bar. I managed a neutral nod, then looked back at Mr. Olson, who was speaking.

One of the Pinelli people, a black woman who managed the core project of the linked cluster we were trying to get in on, hadn't been on our list of people to check out for these meetings. Word was she'd be busy in Texas this week,

dealing with Pinelli's customer on these projects. Either the schedule had changed or she'd sent someone else, because there she was, and we had a bare minimum of info on her. Mr. Olson tossed her the conversational ball periodically, and her opinion obviously carried weight, so not knowing about her beyond the basics was a major problem.

As soon as we took a break, Mr. Castle cornered me and said, "Go back upstairs and check out Danielle Mayfield. She carries a big bat, and I want to know her history. Text me when you've got anything significant—if it's more than a text, say so and I'll tell you what to do with it."

I said, "Yes, sir," and left.

I never did make it back down to the conference room that evening. My location up in the command center our suite had turned into made me the de facto research-organizing-compiling-phoning guy; a steady stream of texts, phone calls and e-mails had me too busy to leave the room. I ordered room service for dinner, along with a large supply of coffee packets for the machine in our kitchenette, and kept going.

By ten the info stream slowed down, and Mr. Castle texted me.

*Moving to the bar for social negotiation. Stay upstairs.*

I texted *yes sir* back and thought about going to bed. I expected more of the same the next day, and suspected Mr. Castle would be up getting ready at oh-dark-thirty and would expect me to be with him, awake and bouncy. I was exhausted, even though it was only seven-something back home, just from having to focus and figure and push info around all afternoon and evening without a break. My brain felt like it'd put in a full day's work and was griping at me, and even my body was a little cranky.

To wind down, I switched over to my own e-mail account and worked on that for a while, then checked some blogs. I wrapped up with a bunch of web comics, and by eleven-something I figured I could actually sleep if I went to bed. I shut down my laptop and headed for the bedroom, pulling off my shirt and T-shirt as I went.

I'd just tossed my shoes and socks in the direction of my suitcase when the doorbell rang. Yeah, the suite had a doorbell—I guess Mr. Castle was into that when he travelled.

I padded over to the door in just my suit trousers and opened it.

Mr. Cotts, the Pinelli subcontracts guy, was standing there.

“Mr. Cotts?” I said. “Umm, hello. What can I help you with?”

He gave me a smile that reminded me of a lion about to take a bite out of a dead zebra. “Nick Castle said you’d help me out with something urgent,” he said. He rubbed his pants right next to where his crotch was bulging, his eyes locked on my half-bare body, staring at the still-obvious bruise on my throat. “He said you were really good and that you’d take care of me.”

*What the fuck?* I said, “I beg your pardon?” not believing he was standing there, saying what he was saying. That kind of thing didn’t really happen, it was just in bad porn.

While I was standing there in shock, he reached out and flicked one of my nipples. I yelped and jumped back out of his reach, and he took the opportunity to follow me into the room.

“There must’ve been a misunderstanding,” I said. Actually, I thought Cotts was just a predatory asshole trying to bullshit me, but we were there for business and I didn’t want to overreact.

“Don’t play dumb,” he said. “Everyone knows what the Castle execs get up to out there on the Left Coast. Anything goes, right? You wouldn’t be with Castle if he weren’t fucking you, and probably more than just fucking, so don’t pretend to be so shocked.”

I was still backing up and he was still following me. We were most of the way across the office set-up, and suddenly I had the big dining table pressing against my hips.

What popped into my head right then was Mr. Castle’s voice in the strategy session on Monday, saying that they were going to take advantage of the Pinelli VP of subcontracts being a partyer. And I’ll admit I wondered at that moment whether Cotts was telling the truth.

“Hang on,” I said. My phone was there on the table where I’d been working. I grabbed it and scooted around so there was most of a table and a couple of chairs between me and Cotts. He just smirked and looked around,

strolling slowly in my direction without going fast enough to be accused of chasing me.

I texted Mr. Castle, and asked:

*Did you send Cotts up to our room?*

Half a minute later I got an answer:

*Yes take care of him*

All I could do was stare at the screen. My brain crashed and my stomach tried hard to turn itself inside out.

“What did he say?” asked Cotts, still smirking. He was suddenly behind me, reading the phone over my shoulder. He gave a satisfied grunt and said, “There you go. So, how about if you show me what you’re good at?”

He slid a sweaty hand around my bare waist. His other hand was pushing down into the front of my pants and I felt his breath on my shoulder. The smell of his body—of a too-warm, too-aroused stranger—filled my nose.

“No!” I slammed an elbow back into his gut, then twisted out of his reach and scooted the rest of the way around the table and across the room. I was angry and scared and confused, but the one thing I was sure of was this asshole wasn’t going to touch me again. I glared at him and pointed at the door. “Get out. Or I’ll call hotel security and have you tossed out. If that doesn’t work, I’ll call the police.”

“Drama!” he snarked. “Come on, kid, you’re not going to make a fuss about this. It’s what you’re here for, and you’ll just look stupid if you pretend to be an offended virgin. Castle wants this contract, you’re not going to lose it for him.”

“I don’t give a damn what Mr. Castle wants. You’re not touching me. Get out.”

“You know you’re throwing your job away, and over what?” He moved toward me, but I stood my ground. I put my phone in my pants pocket so I’d have both hands free if it came down to anything physical.

“If this is my job then I don’t want it. I didn’t go to school for seven years to be a whore.”

“You have a naive picture of the job market if you think you can just walk across the street and find anything better,” he said. He stopped just a couple of feet in front of me, and I was strung as tight as a piano wire, waiting for him to try to touch me again, ready to react if he did.

The fuck of it was, I knew he was right. The economy still sucked, and jobs were tough to come by, especially decent jobs at this level for a new grad. There were too many people with all my schooling plus twenty years of experience who were fighting for the same positions. I’d lucked out with Castle—or I thought I had—and my chances of finding anything similar within the next six months, or even the next year, were slim. I knew that.

I also knew I couldn’t let this slimeball touch me, no matter what Mr. Castle expected. I obviously didn’t know him at all, I’d completely misinterpreted what he wanted, who he was, how he saw me. I was so angry I felt tears burning behind my eyes, but damned if I was going to cry in front of this asshole. Or at all. Castle wasn’t worth it.

“Get out,” I repeated.

“Come on, it’s not a big deal,” he coaxed, half whining and half impatient. He reached out to touch me again, and that was it—I slammed my fist into his nose, then drove a knee up into his balls. He collapsed onto the floor, curled up and mewling, all high-pitched pain and cussing.

He wasn’t coming after me anymore, so I left him lying there. I ran into the bedroom, pulled my clothes back on, zipped up my suitcase. I hadn’t unpacked anything, and the laptop I’d been using out on the table belonged to Castle. Socks, shoes, undershirt, shirt, tie. The bruise on my throat still ached under my tie, but it just made me clench my jaw. The last thing I needed was a lasting reminder of all my idiotic delusions about Mr. Castle.

It’d be a lesson. I’d been stupid, but I’d know better next time.

I pulled on my jacket and looked around the room, at Mr. Castle’s suitcase, at the big bed I’d been looking forward to sharing with him that night. Screw that.

I stepped around Cotts, who was still curled up on the floor in the outer room, and left. I took the elevator downstairs, then pulled out my phone as I

crossed the lobby. I asked the doorman to call me a cab, and while I waited, I texted Mr. Castle one last time.

*I quit*

Then I shut my phone off and dropped it into my pocket.

When the cab came a minute later, I headed for the airport.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

The first thing I did when I got home was take a shower, then I fell into bed. I took another one when I woke up, then I started right into looking for a new job. I didn't want to, didn't feel like doing anything except lying in bed staring at the ceiling or maybe watching some mindless TV, but I needed a job and I was determined to find one and move on.

I got online and reactivated my listings on all the job-search sites I'd used before. They weren't even all that out-of-date, since I'd only been at Castle for a few weeks.

Of course, explaining that to a prospective employer was going to be great fun.

"It was going very well, and I got consistently positive feedback, until my boss tried to whore me out to a prospective customer. That task wasn't in my job description, and I'm afraid I'll never be that much of a team player, so..."

Yeah, I needed to work on that.

When I turned my phone on, there were dozens of texts from Mr. Castle. The first few were all on the theme of *WTF?* so I just deleted the rest. I also deleted the four voice messages he left without listening to them. I didn't care how angry he was, or how disappointed, or what he might have to say to try to persuade me that I should have been willing to obey him in that way as part of my submission, or whatever. If I couldn't feel safe in our fucking room, I didn't want anything to do with him.

Around noon I started getting calls on my land line. Caller ID showed the first few were Mr. Castle; I let those ring through to voice mail and turned off the speaker. Mid-afternoon I got a call from a number I didn't recognize, but the area code was the same as the hotel in North Carolina. Sneaky bastard. I ignored that one too.

On Friday, I was lying around wearing the same sweats and T-shirt I'd slept in. I'd started going through Google for job announcements, since I was at the wait-for-responses stage on the job search sites. My mobile rang again, and it was Brandon, so I picked it up.

His first words were, “Rob? What the hell happened? Are you okay?”

Huh? It took me a second, but then it was obvious. “Mr. Castle called you?”

“Yeah, you might say that. Apparently you won’t talk to him, so he’s getting creative.”

“If you’re calling to persuade me to listen to his shit or give him another chance, save it. If you don’t I’ll hang up on you, and I’m not even kidding.”

There was a pause, then Brandon said, “All right, forget him. What about you? Tell me what happened. Are you okay?”

It was a great opportunity to practice what I’d say when an interviewer asked me why I quit Castle with no notice after such a short time, but I still had no idea how to explain it, and Brandon wasn’t a prospective employer anyway. He was a friend, he was in the scene, he knew me better than he knew Mr. Castle—at least I thought he did—so I could probably trust him to be on my side, at least mostly.

Brandon was listening, and I wanted, *needed*, to share all this shit with someone who’d be sympathetic, but I had no idea how to start.

“He just... I don’t even know what happened. I didn’t understand what was going on, what he wanted or expected. I had all these ideas in my head, and I was just being stupidly romantic or something. But he sent that guy to our room, he told me to ‘take care of him’ and I just... I can’t do that. I know some people do, that some Doms share their subs, and the subs are into it and that’s cool. But I’m not like that, it’s not my kink and I can’t do that, and if that’s what he wants then it’s not going to work. And just sending someone up like that, without asking me first? Or even trying to tell me himself, give me a chance to respond ahead of time, offer an opinion?”

I heard Brandon take a breath, like he was about to say something, then just let it out. We sat there in silence, then he tried again. “You still haven’t answered me. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, of course. I mean, I can still feel that asshole’s hands on me, but I’m not hurt or anything. Except my hand’s sore from where I punched him—noses are harder than I thought—but I didn’t need stitches or anything. I just put some ice on it when I got home.”



“So nothing *happened*?”

“What? No! No, shit, I didn’t get raped or anything. Fuck, no, it didn’t get anywhere near that far. He was just an asshole who thought I’d bend over for him to get the contract. He wouldn’t leave and he was grabby, so I punched him and kneed his balls up into his shoulders, and that was it.”

“Okay, good.” Brandon huffed out another breath, and I could hear the worry flow out of his voice. “So long as I don’t have to come over and drag you to the hospital or anything.”

“No, nothing like that. He was just some pudgy sales-type—no way he could’ve forced me.”

“Good. So, what next? Have you made any plans?”

“Looking for a new job,” I said. “I started yesterday, re-activated all my accounts, started cruising for openings. I’m moving on from this, seriously. I’m not just moping around, crying lonely tears over lost love or any shit like that.”

“Well, good. You coming over tomorrow?”

I almost said *of course*, but then I thought about it. If Mr. Castle was trying to chase me down, that’d be one place he’d know to look for me. The team was scheduled to stay in North Carolina through that night, Friday, then fly back Saturday morning. I personally never felt up to doing anything complicated after a long flight—that’s what got me into this mess in the first place, or part of it—but Mr. Castle was a determined bastard, and when he wanted something he went for it like a machine. I could see him showing up at Brandon’s straight from the airport or something.

“No, not tomorrow,” I said. “He’ll be flying back tomorrow, and if he’s still trying to get ahold of me, I don’t want to be anywhere he knows to look. Shit, I should probably get out of here, actually. He knows where I live. Maybe I’ll go visit Mom and Dad.”

I headed over to the computer, holding my phone with a cocked shoulder to free up both hands, and did a search for plane tickets to St. Louis, that night. My parents would be surprised to see me, but not angry or anything. We could be civil and get along for a week or so.

I'd have to think about what to tell them, since there was no way in hell I could explain to my mom and dad why I'd quit Castle.

"You shouldn't have to run away from your own place," said Brandon. "Look, talk to him once, tell him to fuck off to his face. Make sure he gets that you don't want any contact with him anymore, and that'll do it. Nick's not the stalkery type."

"I can't do that."

It just fell out of my mouth without my conscious permission, but it was true. I wasn't exactly proud of it, but it was still true. I knew I should be able to look Mr. Castle in the eye and have that last conversation, but I didn't want to. The thought of seeing him again, of standing in front of him, made me want to curl up and hide under the bed, because that teenage girl inside me who'd been doodling hearts and flowers in her imaginary notebook whenever I thought about Mr. Castle just could not handle seeing him again. Yes, I was a coward with the emotional maturity of a high school kid. At least I knew where my issues were, right?

So I went on with, "I just can't. I can't handle seeing him, or talking to him. Not right now. When I come back from my parents', maybe then. I'll send him an e-mail or something, let him know I don't want any contact. Then maybe in a few months or so, I can handle seeing him at your place, or wherever. But right now I just can't."

"Rob... okay, I get it. I've been there. Your brain knows the obvious answer, but your gut isn't cooperating. That's normal. Just don't bury yourself, all right? Avoiding an ex is one thing, but don't try to hide from everyone. Nick doesn't come to Saturdays very often anyway, so I'll tell him to stay clear for a few months. You need the rest of your life to go on as normal, so come see everyone, hang out, relax. If you need to go visit your folks, do that after."

"I don't know..." I trailed off, scanning through flight information. I'd lucked out getting home Wednesday night—or actually, early Thursday morning—but the airline gods weren't cooperating this time. The earliest flight I could get to St. Louis without paying a ridiculous price was leaving at almost midnight Saturday. Shit.

“All right, I’ll come. I can’t get a flight out ’til that night anyway. I’ll pack tonight and come over with my stuff, and if I can stick around a while tomorrow night then I’ll head right to the airport from your place, or if you have plans then I can hit a coffee shop or something, and—”

I stopped, realizing that I was babbling and that I sounded pretty crazy. Brandon just waited for me, and finally I said, “Okay, I’ll be there. And I won’t be a twitching wreck curled up in the corner, either.”

“Good,” said Brandon. “And seriously, if you’re not up to it, you can hole up in my room, relax, veg, whatever you need.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I appreciate it, seriously. I know I sound like an idiot.”

“No, you don’t,” he said. “But you won’t have any perspective for a while, so I won’t argue with you. I expect you by two, though, or I’ll come looking for you.”

“Two it is,” I said, and we hung up after a minute or so of good-byes.

\*\*\*\*

Two it was, when I pulled up in front of Brandon’s place the next day. It was earlier than I usually got there, and I parked right in front. I didn’t even have a packed suitcase in the trunk, although I did pack the night before, and the bag was near my front door, ready to go to the airport that night. My flight was at eleven-fifty and I planned to head for SJC at nine-thirty.

I’d had a bunch of ground beef in my fridge and I wanted to use it up instead of tossing it out, so I’d made a huge batch of chili to bring. I headed up the walk to Brandon’s gate with a full crockpot in my arms. (Yes, I own a crockpot—I said earlier I like to cook, remember?)

The walled yard was still empty, although the chairs and loungers and tables and pillows were scattered around. I went up to the front door and rang the bell with one elbow.

Brandon answered a few seconds later. “Rob! You’re here, great. It’s good to see you.” He let me in, and we went to the kitchen where I put the crockpot down and plugged it in. As soon as my arms were empty, Brandon pulled me into a hug.

“I was worried about you,” he said. “I’m glad you came.”

I hugged him back and said, “I figured if I made you come drag me out of my place when you had people coming over, you’d be kind of ticked off, so I didn’t have much choice.”

“Damn straight!” He glared at me, then smiled. “No, really, I’m glad you’re here. You’ll be fine, I promise.”

“Sure, I’m just twitchy. Umm, I’ve got more chili in the car—back in a minute.”

I headed out to get the other container, feeling a lot more relaxed. Honestly, I’d half expected Mr. Castle to be there, lurking, waiting for me, which was kind of crazy because his plane wouldn’t even land for over four hours, but my gut wasn’t listening to facts or logic. It’d taken a lot of effort and will to screw up my courage and come over, and I only did it because I *knew* Brandon would come get me if I didn’t, and that making him come deal with my shit on Saturday afternoon would completely fuck up his day.

I hadn’t trusted him enough, and I should’ve. It was going to be fine, and it was good to be outside. I grabbed the big plastic container of chili from the passenger side floor and took it in to the fridge. When what was in the crockpot ran out, I’d refill it and heat up a new batch.

When other people starting arriving, Brandon stuck near me and played shield. I felt bad that he needed to but was glad to have him doing it. Especially when Don and Riley came into the yard and Riley bounced up to me, looked around, and said, “Hey, Rob! Where’s your Dom?”

Brandon stepped right up and said, “Rob, could you go get another flat of sodas out of the garage? Thanks,” and steered me off toward the front door. I heard his lowered voice talking in an urgent tone to Riley, and probably Don.

I felt like shit, felt like going home, felt like going into Brandon’s garage and just staying there. I’m not that much of a coward, though, so I picked up a flat of cans and brought them back out to load into an ice chest. I felt Riley kind of hovering behind me, and when I stood up with the empty flat, he was right there, looking like someone had run over his dog.

“Dude, this sucks!” He gave me a big hug. Then he grabbed my arm and

pulled me across the yard. “Come on, I’ll share Don. And we brought cookies—cookies always help.”

“Riley...” I detached myself before I had to find out what Don thought about being “shared.” “I need to go dump the box,” I said, waving the cardboard flat, “but I’ll be back in a minute.”

I headed back to the front door before Riley could latch on again, and took the box into the garage where the garbage can was. Once there, I stopped for a minute to breathe and focus on my heartbeat. I knew Riley meant well, but that kind of puppy-eyed sympathy would break down all the barriers I’d built up. I couldn’t deal with that, especially not in front of everyone.

It was closer to five minutes than one, but I didn’t let myself hide for very long. I did some breathing exercises and when I felt the stress backing off, I headed back to the yard.

I got a few glances but no one was staring at me. Which was a little weird in and of itself, because when you walk into a big space where you know just about everyone, it’s more common for at least a couple of people to be looking at you, wanting to wave or call you over or just smile. I appreciated the effort, though.

Riley was over near Don, and I saw that Don had cuffed him to the lounge again. I had to kind of grin at that. Don caught my eye, gave me a wry smile, then went back to his conversation with Christine, the Domme who’d let me try out flogging a few weeks earlier.

The gate swung open and Anna came in carrying a multi-layered stack of trays. I headed over and took the top two from her, then led the way into the house.

“Thanks!” she said, following me into the kitchen. “I almost dropped the whole pile coming up the driveway.”

“That would’ve been a shame,” I said. “Whatever these are, they smell good.”

“Bacon and cheese quiches,” she said. She set down the two trays she was carrying on the counter next to the fridge, then opened it up and started shuffling things around. “I love this recipe, but I’m never making this many minis again.”

“Quiche pastry isn’t that hard, but four trays’ worth of tiny little shells is too many unless you’re being paid to cater,” I said with a nod.

“Definitely.” She set her two trays on one of the fridge shelves, then eyed the result, took my trays and added them. They all fit stacked up, barely. “There. I didn’t want to put them into an ice chest—they’d get all gummy.” She closed the fridge and turned around to smile at me. “How’s life? Did you make it to the Rolling Thunder event last weekend? I had to work.”

My stomach clenched, but only a little. “Yeah, I did,” I said. “Brandon took me up. It was fun. I’ve never been to anything like that before, and would’ve liked to stay longer.”

“I haven’t been to many,” she said. “Working an odd schedule sucks.”

“True,” I said. “But I’m back to job-hunting, and right now my checkbook would trade places with your checkbook any time you want.”

She laughed and said, “True, at least I’m working. That sucks—good luck hunting. I’ll keep an ear out, and if I hear of any openings, I’ll let you know. You’re an MBA, right?”

I nodded. “Also mechanical engineering, but only a BS in that. I’ll take anything I qualify for, though, so long as it’ll keep the Financial Aid people at bay.”

“I remember that,” she said with a grimace. “Anything is better than nothing, but I’d much rather have a job with a regular schedule. It’s probably just as well I don’t have any kids.”

She squeezed my shoulder, and we headed back outside. I followed her over toward Riley and Don, and sat in the grass next to her. Riley was behaving, and Marcus came over with an armful of sodas, so I was chatting and feeling pretty relaxed when I heard a motorcycle come roaring up in front of the house.

I think my heart stopped for a second. I found myself staring at Brandon, eyes wide, wondering if I could get away through the back somehow. Brandon must’ve seen my “fight-or-flight” response revving up, because he pointed at me and snapped, “Stay!” before heading out the gate, making sure it shut behind him.

Sharp voices started up. It *was* Mr. Castle—I was pretty sure I recognized the bike, but I definitely recognized his voice—not yelling but definitely snapping. Brandon’s voice was just as hard, and he snapped right back, “Keep your damn voice down!”

I curled up right there, sitting on the grass with my arms around my knees and my face buried in them. I wanted to listen but couldn’t stand to hear his voice. I wanted to die because this was happening in front of twenty-some people I knew, people I hung out with, and leaving this group meant leaving the scene, and I didn’t want to do that but I didn’t want to face them after my pathetic break-up drama happened right in front of them.

“Fuck you, Brandon! I would *never* do that to him!” Mr. Castle was pissed, and I bet everyone for a block around could hear him.

“I don’t give a damn! He doesn’t want to see you, and forcing it won’t do anything to prove he should ever trust you again. I told you not to come, and this is my property so what I say goes. Get out or I’m calling the cops.”

That didn’t work. I’d tried that back at the hotel and if they didn’t want to leave, it wouldn’t work.

A hand rested lightly on my shoulder, and Anna said, “Come on, hon, let’s go in the house. You shouldn’t have to hear this.” I let her coax me up onto my feet and inside. She steered me back to the kitchen and into one of the chairs at Brandon’s tiny table. It sat right next to a window looking out over the backyard, as far away from the driveway as you could get and still be in the house.

She brought me a glass of water and I drank some of it, just because it was there.

“I’m really sorry, hon. I didn’t put it together, what you losing your job meant, since you’d been with Nick.”

“No, it’s okay. It was actually good to talk to someone who hadn’t figured it out.”

She kind of laughed, and nodded. “Yeah, I get it. Okay, so, what else is going on with you? Or I could talk about this last call I got, which I promise will take your mind off your own issues for at least a few minutes.”

“Sure, sounds good,” I said. “Hit me.”

“So I get a call at five this morning. The cops raided a meth lab, and there were three little kids in it, all under the age of four. They’re sick and malnourished, and I’m pretty sure two were born addicted, although the tests haven’t come in yet—”

She chatted on about some really horrific stuff. I hadn’t known, but it seemed Anna was a social worker. She’s one of the ones they call when they find kids in serious trouble at odd hours—like imminent-danger kind of trouble, not daddy-let-him-have-a-sip-of-beer kind of trouble. She was right, it *was* distracting, and it put my problem of not wanting to talk to my persistent ex-boyfriend (ex-Dom? ex-fuck-buddy? what’d we actually been, anyway?) into some perspective.

When Brandon came in and said, “He’s gone,” I was feeling almost normal.

“Good,” I said. “Thanks.”

“I’m really sorry, Rob. After I talked to you, I called him and told him not to come.”

“He shouldn’t even have been here,” I said. “Our tickets were for a four o’clock flight. He should still be in the air over, like, Kansas or something right now. I was afraid he might show up this evening, but he shouldn’t have been here yet.”

Brandon and Anna looked at each other for a second, then looked away.

Yeah. Obviously he’d taken an earlier flight. He’d wanted to get home sooner so he could come find me. I wasn’t sure whether to be afraid of him or sorry I hadn’t talked to him.

No, that was my gut talking, like Brandon had said earlier. My brain knew what was right, but my gut wasn’t cooperating. That kind of persistence was scary. That Cotts guy had been just as persistent—the only difference was I hadn’t been attracted to him.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)



## CHAPTER TWENTY

I was back home by five. I stuck around at Brandon's for a little while, mostly hovering in the kitchen. I heated up the chili and picked at some food when Brandon put a plate in front of me, but I didn't feel like socializing, so I told him I'd be fine and left.

Actually, I was exhausted. I hadn't done much that day, but all the emotional crap really sucked it out of you, so when I got home, I kicked off my shoes, set the alarm on my phone for nine and crashed out on the couch.

It seemed like I'd just fallen asleep when the doorbell woke me up.

I hauled my butt off the couch and staggered over to the door. My brain wasn't fully fired up yet, or I'd probably have expected what I saw when I looked through the peephole, which was Mr. Castle, standing there in his leather jacket and that damn grey T-shirt, with a grim look on his face.

Fuck.

He rang the doorbell again, and I heard him say, "Rob? Come on, I know you're in there. I just want to talk."

But I *didn't* want to talk, and he didn't seem to get that. Or maybe he got it but just didn't care.

It didn't matter. I couldn't imagine him breaking the door down, and I didn't have to open it. If I just ignored him, he'd go away eventually. I'd go catch my flight and that'd be the end of it. I was going to be at Mom and Dad's for a little over a week—I was flying back a week from Sunday—and by then he'd have cooled down, gotten distracted, and he'd leave me alone.

"Robbie?" That time he knocked, four times, hard.

I looked out through the peephole again. He was staring at the door, right at eye level, as though he could see me looking at him. He waited. We both waited. I didn't say anything. Finally he looked away and his face fell. He looked lost for just a second, and I almost wanted—

No. That was my gut talking again, and my gut was an idiot. I clenched my jaw and turned around, but I couldn't walk away. I focused on not saying

anything, not making any noise at all, as I sat down right there on the floor and leaned back against the door, like I was barricading it with my body.

“Robbie, come on, let me in? Please?” He waited a few seconds, then said, “Fine, we can talk like this.” As if he knew I was there, knew I was listening.

“I didn’t send Cotts up to the room for sex. He had some questions about our org chart, and I knew you were up there with all the info. I was talking to Olson, and Cotts said he was going to head for bed, that his room was on our floor so he’d be glad to stop by and ask you for the info. He’s a slimeball, and he’s already cost Pinelli over a million dollars to pay off employees he’s harassed. They told him not to swim in the company pool anymore, so he went after you. I’m sorry it happened—I can’t express how pissed off I was when I found out—but I would never try to order you to have sex with someone else, certainly not an asshole like Cotts.”

I heard a thump, like he’d leaned up against the door, and I kind of jumped. He probably heard me, because he went on. “When I got your text I texted you back, but you weren’t answering. I went up to the room and Cotts was there. He admitted propositioning you, that he’d twisted what I’d said to make you think I’d told you to. I’d have kicked his ass, but you’d already done that—good job, by the way—so I called Olson up. That’s when I found out Cotts had done it before. I told Olson that I didn’t want Cotts on our projects, that if I ever saw his face again we’d walk. Olson’s used to cleaning up after the guy, so he agreed.”

That was... damn. Everyone knew what he’d done, he’d cost his company money with his shit, and they hadn’t fired him? And Mr. Castle seemed to think that was normal?

“Robbie, this is my fault. I should’ve made sure you understood what I expected, what we had. I never really established what was happening with us, and that was stupid. I suppose at first I wasn’t sure it’d work out, and then even after I was sure I wanted you for—” he paused, then went on, “for long term, I just let it go, never got around to talking about it. I left you hanging, and that was stupid. Maybe I thought you’d try harder if you weren’t sure of me? I don’t know, that’s... it was an asshole move, and I’m sorry. If I’d told you what was going on, made sure you understood, you’d have been secure

enough to know that this was bullshit, that I'd *never* have done that to you. The fact that you could think that for even half a second proves how badly I fucked up."

I heard another *bonk* and imagined the back of his head hitting the door.

"I don't even know what to say now, so I guess that's it. I just wanted you to know I didn't send him up for sex. I'd never do that, no contract is worth that, not with anyone, and definitely not with you. If you hadn't already taken him down, I'd have done it myself, and if he'd actually touched you—"

"He did."

Mr. Castle went silent, and I had to think back to realize I'd said it, that I'd interrupted him. I hadn't intended to say anything, but I couldn't stand him thinking I'd quit over nothing.

"What?" he finally said. "Robbie, what happened? Robbie?" The door creaked, he was leaning on it, I could almost hear him breathing.

"He did," I repeated. I just sat there on the floor, staring at the carpet. He wasn't really in the room, so it was like I was talking to myself. "I was getting ready for bed, I just had my pants on and he rang the bell. I didn't think about it, I guess I thought it was Greg or Hank or someone, so I opened it. He said you'd sent him up so I could take care of him, and he was staring at me and rubbing his crotch. He grabbed my, my chest, and I backed off, but he came inside."

"Robbie, let me in. Please?" I could hear the stress in his voice, and there was a light smack against the door.

I had to finish once I started, I couldn't stop, it was like it was all just flowing out, so I ignored him and went on. "He said everyone knew what the Castle execs get up to, and that you had to be fucking me and I shouldn't pretend to be shocked. He sort of chased me across the room, and my phone was there so I texted you. You said to take care of him, and he saw and said, 'See? Your boss wants you to,' and he put his arm around me, pulled me back against him and put his hand down my pants. I elbowed him in the gut and got away. I said I'd call hotel security or the cops if he didn't leave, but he kept saying it wasn't a big deal, that I'd lose the contract, I'd lose my job. I felt sick

and didn't know what to do, except I knew I couldn't do what he wanted, what I thought you wanted. He tried to touch me again and that's when I punched him in the nose, and kneed him. He went down, and I got dressed and left."

We were both silent for a moment, then he said, "Robbie? Please? I need to see that you're okay, I need to—Please? Let me in."

And I needed to see him too, so I opened the door.

He was right there in front of me, with his hands up like he'd been leaning on the door. He looked me up and down, and for the first time there wasn't any desire in his gaze. It was more like he was checking for injuries, as if he'd been expecting to see bandages, or missing parts.

"Are you all right?"

I nodded. "Nothing really happened. He just had his hands on me, and I didn't know what to do, until..." I shrugged. "It wasn't really a big deal, it was more what I thought, what he set me up to think." I looked away and said, "I'm sorry, I should've trusted you."

"I didn't give you much reason to," he said. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah." I backed up and let him in, then closed the door behind him. I saw him notice my suitcase, then look away.

"So, umm..." I leaned back against the door with my arms kind of crossed, like I was hanging on to myself. My gut really wanted to just go to him and have him hold me, but I wasn't sure if I could trust it yet.

He met my eyes and said, "I'm sorry. I want to fly back and kick that bastard's ass. He said he just propositioned you, that you attacked him when he hadn't actually touched you. I should've known better."

I just shrugged because yeah, he should've.

He laced his hands together behind his neck and looked down, shifting his weight back and forth. I'd never seen him look so unsure.

Somehow that helped. Right then I didn't need Mr. Castle the perfect Dom, the unbreakable CEO who always knew what to do, who set an impossibly high standard and then challenged everyone around him to try to come within a couple of zip codes of it. It was a great fantasy, but it also made him hard to read, hard to approach, hard to get close to.

I needed him to be human, the guy I'd gone for a walk with, and the fact that he'd not only admitted he'd fucked up, but that he looked like he felt awful, like he was kind of wrecked and didn't know what to do next? That helped, a lot.

I reached out with one hand and said, "Nick?"

He looked at me, then took my hand and pulled me up against him in a crushing hug.

"Fuck, Robbie, I'm so sorry."

We rocked back and forth, slowly, while hanging on to each other. Even after everything that happened, I felt safe with him. In fact, it was the first time I'd felt really safe since that hotel room on the other side of the continent. I relaxed, a stage at a time, like staggering down some steps until I was at the bottom, leaning against him with my head on his shoulder and his arms around me. He was practically holding me up, and the release of tension-fear-stress I hadn't realized I was carrying sent a wave of fatigue running through me.

"Come on," he whispered. "Let's go lie down."

I nodded, and we maneuvered back into my bedroom without letting go. Once we got there, he lowered me down onto the bed, dropped his jacket on the floor and pulled off his boots, then crawled up beside me. We stretched out and wrapped up in each other, touching from faces to feet. He had a leg tangled with one of mine, and I had a hand pushed up under his shirt, slowly rubbing across his back. I needed that skin contact—I'd have wrapped myself in his skin if I could have.

Once we were there, I didn't fall asleep. I'd kind of expected to, but my brain was still swirling, even if my body was wiped out, and sleep wasn't on the agenda right then. That was fine, I hadn't hoped for this, for the world to turn out to be one where I could have Nick back, and I wanted to be conscious enough to actually experience it for a while.

I shifted a little, snuggling in closer. His arms tightened around me, and he whispered, "You know I love you, right?"

I shook my head, then whispered back, "I do now."

“You’d have known sooner if I weren’t an idiot.”

“Maybe. But so long as it’s obvious you’re trying hard, I won’t get really mad at you.”

He growled, “Brat,” and I went tense for a moment, looking up into his eyes to see if I’d gone too far. He must’ve felt the shift, because his hands moved over my back, gentle and comforting. “No, sorry,” he said, “it’s too soon for that.” He shifted us around so I was on my back and he was kneeling over me. “You still don’t feel safe.” He was scowling, and I shook my head.

“No, I do, it’s just—”

“I got off track. When you said that bastard touched you, everything else went out of my brain and... Damn. Wait a sec.” He went down and rummaged around on the floor. I heard his jacket moving, that unmistakable sound of leather. When he came back up, he sat down on the side of the bed, twisted around to look at me, his eyes solemn. He was holding a flat, white box.

“Here,” he said. “It arrived last week. I was waiting for the right time to give it to you, as if the ‘right time’ would just sort of pop up with a big sign hanging in the air.”

I sat up, staring at the box. I knew what it was, I was sure I knew what it was, but I hadn’t expected anything like it, it was too soon.

He was holding it out, waiting for me to take it with that perfect patience he’d shown when I was still drifting in subspace after he’d chained me to his bike, waiting for me to remember what I had to do, content to wait for me forever. He’d give me as much time as I needed, I knew.

I took the box and opened it. Inside was a gold collar. It was about an inch wide, made like chainmail. The gold links were small but not particularly fine for their size—it was obviously meant for a man.

The clasp was a flat plate with a hole in the center and a latch on one side. I recognized it—it was the same kind of clasp that’d been on the leather cuffs I’d worn to the meet-up, the ones I’d worn when Nick had tied me up in front of hundreds of people, made me so hard, and kissed me, and carried me off to cuddle.

I'd been silent for a while when he said, "If you don't want to lock it right away, that's fine. Or ever. You can wear it to work under your shirt—it won't show, and even if it did, it's discreet enough to pass to a mundane."

I knew how this worked, I'd seen this, read about it. I took the collar out of its box, slid down to the floor and knelt between Nick's feet. I held up the collar and bent my head.

Nick sucked in a long breath, then whispered, "Robbie..." I just knelt there, offering the collar, until he took it out of my hands and wrapped it gently around my neck. He clicked it shut, then asked, "Do you want...?"

"Please, Sir."

Another huff of breath, then he reached into a pocket and brought out a small gold key. His arms went around me again and he found the hole with the key, turned it until it clicked.

The collar rested right where the bruise on my throat was, the yellow-purple splotch that still twinged when something brushed against it. The collar was a solid weight on my neck, and it pressed down on the bruised spot, making it ache. I wanted it to last forever, and figured I could persuade Nick to keep it fresh.

He put the key into a tiny pocket in his jacket and zipped it closed, then leaned down and kissed me, light at first, and gentle. When I leaned in closer and opened my mouth for him, our tongues met and he went deep, intense, pulling me close while claiming territory that was completely his.

Once we were both hard and panting, he leaned back and pulled me up, then shifted farther onto the bed, taking me along. I relaxed on top of him, leaned down for another slow kiss, then whispered, "You know I love you back, right?"

"I do now," he said.

And that's the end, because what more do you need?

**THE END**

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Author Bio

*Angela Benedetti lives in Seattle with her husband and shares her skull with a small horde of diverse people. She writes what the most eager and enthusiastic of them tell her. That gives the others a bar to shoot for.*

## Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [LiveJournal](#)

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)





Nor  
Iron Bars  
a  
Cage

Kaje  
Harper

Love Has No Boundaries ~ 2013

# NOR IRON BARS A CAGE

By Kaje Harper

## Photo Description

In black and white, back-lit and tightly-focused, half of a man's bare chest is exposed. Every curve of pec and shoulder is silvered, the nipple tight. Another man's face hovers, upturned, clearly kneeling before him. Only the straight nose, strong chin, and open mouth can be seen. The kneeling man extends his tongue with the tip curled, waiting, half an inch—a hesitation's width—from that expectant nipple. In the next breath, they will touch.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*For so long, years that seemed to go on forever, I couldn't bear to be touched. I put up not just walls but whole concrete bunkers to keep people out—not just emotionally, but physically as well. Sure, I was alone. But I felt safe. Only, after a while, I wasn't sure any longer whether a totally "safe" life was really worth living. But I was still too afraid to reach out. I started to think about a way out—a way out of living, that is.*

*Then someone came along. Someone... completely unexpected. How do I explain him? I can't. But he wouldn't give up on me, and he never believed in walls.*

Thanks,

Plainbrownwrapper

## Story Info

**Genre:** fantasy

**Tags:** mage/sorcerer, first time, hurt/comfort, friends to lovers, magic users, PTSD

**Content warnings:** history of past abuse, self-harm

**Word count:** 103,826

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

*Dedication*

For Plainbrownwrapper, whose prompt gave me these two men, and for my excellent beta readers, who spent a lot of time and effort to make my story better.

# NOR IRON BARS A CAGE

by Kaje Harper

## CHAPTER ONE

There's a silence that's the opposite of peaceful. It's that moment when the wind drops, and you see the storm-clouds piled up high and dark in the sky. That hot noontime when all birdsong in the forest fades away, and you realize the dappled shadow on the branch above is a hunting cat—when you freeze, and hold your breath, and hold your breath, as it blinks glowing amber eyes, and decides whether it's hungry. I heard that silence when I woke.

It froze me there in my bed, eyes still closed, not moving. I was on my familiar little cot in my third-floor room, which I'd been given as Meldov's junior apprentice and kept even now. I felt the scratch of the cheap wool blanket under my cheek, and smelled the musty combination of old books and stale air. Nothing stirred, nothing broke the stillness, there was no reason for my fear, but my heart pounded a staccato rhythm. I held my breath, fighting awareness, until I could it put off no longer.

From the moment I opened my eyes, I knew I was still dreaming. Fifteen years of meditation and study had given me the ability to tell the difference. Sometimes, though, I wasn't sure if that was a blessing or a curse, to be aware of my state and to watch my younger self, knowing where this was going, knowing where it would end, and to be unable to do *anything*.

In this dream, it was always dark in my old bedroom. I'd lain down for just a moment to rest, tired from the work Meldov had set me. My mentor was a strong believer that a tired body made for a quiet mind. It was common for him to give me chores hard enough that I longed for a moment's respite. But tonight my stolen minute had clearly lasted longer than I'd intended. While my eyes were closed, dusk had turned to full night.

I sprang from the bed, my heart pounding. A year ago, even six months ago, Meldov might've made me clean the privy, or cuffed me lightly, with inventive curses for my lateness. But now... now his anger came faster and

more sharply and his punishments had a bitter bite. I could only hope that he hadn't called for me yet, and my absence might not have been noticed.

*Asleep, aware but helpless, I wished I could reach into that dream and stop myself, longed to grab that young, unbroken boy and make him turn around.* The window was there, with a clean, free night beyond it. The old apple tree had been an easy route for an agile teenager, on the nights when I'd chosen roaming over sleep. I could have run. But I had no idea then that there was a reason to flee.

I made my way out of my familiar dark room, half by touch, and ran down the stairs as quickly and silently as I could. The only light on the floor below came from the study. I hurried over there and paused in the doorway. Meldov was sitting in his favorite upholstered chair, reading an old book with yellowed corners, his long fingers turning the pages with slow deliberation. When he noticed me, he set the volume aside, open on the small table. Very slowly and deliberately he laid a black ribbon in the book to mark his place.

I braced myself for his anger, but instead he slowly smiled at me and said, "There you are, boy." He looked me over, head to toe and back up, until my nails bit my palms in the effort to hold still under his eyes. Finally he added, "Did you have a nice *nap*?" The last word held the whip of acid I'd been expecting.

"I'm sorry, sir." I bent my head.

"No harm done. I had preparations to make anyway. Follow me." He stood and turned toward the door into the workroom.

"Now?" I was startled into speaking out of turn. Usually we prepared for a working together, now that I was a true apprentice. Meldov would discuss who we were searching for, what the questions would be. He'd show me the focus, make me work out the ritual and check it for mistakes. This sudden decision was very unlike him.

"Yes, now. What did you think I meant, next week?" He pulled the heavy door open, and glanced back at me. "Oh, do you feel unprepared? Don't worry, boy, we're not summoning anyone tonight. Or anything. I have a different ritual planned."

I followed him inside. The familiar walls of the workroom looked closer, higher and wreathed in deeper shadows, although that had to be illusion. There were no windows. We always worked by the same candle light. Still there was a claustrophobic feel to the room that night, and it wasn't just the foreknowledge of my older self leaking into the dream. Even in real life, fifteen years ago, I'd been reluctant to cross that familiar threshold.

But I followed him in obediently, took the lit taper from his hand, and set flame to the candles he indicated, in the prescribed order. First the door-ward candles, with the words of protection as I lit them. Then the beeswax altar pillars, with a prayer for guidance. I'd sometimes been a bit perfunctory in my prayers to Na, god of mages, but my words were heartfelt that night. Last, the candles of the working laid out on the floor.

It was an unfamiliar shape. Not the usual circle in a triangle, designed to call a spirit to us, but a straight line with only two points, less than an arm's length apart. There were only three candles on it, short white stubs glued to the floor with dark wax, and I lit them all. Meldov took back the taper. "Good. Now take one of the two ends."

As I stepped into the charcoal circle at one end of the line, I could feel the power building in the spell. It whispered through me, like a chill wind with the laughter of waiting ghosts in it. I shuddered. "Sir, are you sure?"

"Silence, boy." His voice snapped with restrained tension. "Do your part and all will be well."

I wanted to argue more. I should have. But this was Meldov, my mentor and teacher, and the man I thought I loved, whether he had an inkling of that or not. Meldov, who'd seen in a scrawny boy the hidden signs of talent, and brought me here, raised me, taught me. We'd probably done a hundred workings in here in the last two years, since he began letting me help in his true craft. And every one had been controlled and effective, and I'd come through safely in Meldov's hands.

Sorcery was a science as well as an art to Meldov. He chose his foci carefully, called spirits he could learn from, and sent them cleanly on their way. He was one of the best. So I set aside my fears, and tried to center myself and breathe from my belly. Slowly the working trance came over me.

Meldov stepped onto the other end of the line. I saw it, heard it, felt it, as his presence woke the spell. The charcoal line lit with the illusion of cold fire, while the spell stirred and stretched like a cat. It locked onto me, curling tendrils of power around my ankles, reaching slowly up toward my knees. It was definitely different. I was used to the power serving as a fence, sweeping around the central circle to imprison the being we brought there to interrogate. All those times, I'd stood outside the circle, raising and controlling it, but not part of it. Tonight the spell touched me, and it latched tight around me with little hooked barbs I could feel but not see.

I wanted to brush it off of my legs. With every moment, I wanted more and more to get away from that room and that chill force. But I didn't move a foot, or even open my mouth. I waited obediently for my mentor to explain. Meldov reached out toward me above that glowing line of power, his familiar hand looking different in the odd light. I realized he wore gloves.

“Take my hand, Lyon of Riverrun.”

I reached toward him and took his fingers in my own. An action taken of my own free will, because he asked it of me. The last really free thing I did in that house. Until the end. In the dream, the chill of his fingers froze mine despite the gloves, although there was nothing to see. Then his thumb pressed over the life-point on my wrist. It burned me, the pain sharp and real. Or was it freezing cold? I tried to pull free, but he held me still a long, agonizing minute. The ache from it spread up my arm and into my heart. Then he eased his grip, and turned my hand over. There, burned into my wrist, was his symbol—a feather quill, drawing a circle of power.

I sucked in a harsh breath. My hand shook in his grasp. “What did you do?” The burn itself had an odd silver-black shine, and around it the skin was already rising, puffy and red.

“You wanted to advance to the next level,” he said, in a voice that sounded reasonable, as if he'd just had me sign a contract. “This will help us work together. Your power and mine will meld. Don't be a child. The effect is only skin deep. I wouldn't harm your body for the world.”

*I opened my mouth to protest, to ask what he meant. But when I met his eyes, my questions died unspoken. Because he smiled, and it was slow and*

*hungry and dark, and for the first time, he let me see the wraith who'd taken up residence behind his once-human eyes...*

I woke shaking. Not screaming and not puking, which was an improvement. I sat up in bed, cradling my useless right hand against my chest, blinking in the light of the lantern I always kept lit. My wrist throbbed, as it had the night the brand had been set there. I couldn't help looking at it, even though I knew what I would see. No circle. No feather. Just the wide, rough patch of thickly-scarred skin where I'd burned that mark off with real flame, afterward.

I rubbed the spot slowly with my left thumb, the habit of so many years. The ridges and tightness of it, even the atrophied way my hand curled over the ruined tendons, were reassurance. It was over. Cleansed and healed, as much as it would ever heal, and long over. I was here in my own home, with my own stone walls around me.

I felt both sick and embarrassed, even though there was no one to see me. It had been fifteen years since I was that boy. Almost half my lifetime. Surely I should be over this stupid, senseless panic. Whatever had happened then, I'd been safe for so long now that its effects should have faded. Surely a *normal* man would have gone on with his life, cheerfully, or at least sanely.

Sometimes there were stretches of time when all was well, and I believed I was finally past it; that my quiet solitary routine was now a matter of choice and preference, not necessity. Then something would set me off, and there would be night after night of bad dreams again, and days when speaking to anyone was difficult. Sometimes the trigger was something so humiliatingly minuscule as to be undefinable. I had no idea what had set me off now, only that last night and this, the wraith had once again stalked my sleep.

I took slow breaths, and looked about me for comfort. My house was small and I liked it like that. There was an alcove with my bed, a cleverly-designed fireplace, a kitchen area with sink and iron cookstove on the facing wall, and a table, a desk, a bookshelf. Other than the small door leading to the bath and garderobe, I could see every inch of the room. Even the desk was made of a spindly table with open shelves above it for my quills and paper. There was no place anyone could hide.



I sat in my tangled bedclothes and waited for my heart to slow down. Of all the nasty, terrifying dreams I had, that one was always somehow the worst—the first time I saw the soulless hunger, the spirit-eater, living in my mentor’s mind.

After a while I got up and fumbled about my kitchen shelves for the canister of dried mint. There’d clearly be no more sleep for me tonight. A cup of herb tea and something to read might get me through until morning. I’d done this for so long I had a rhythm for working the pump handle with my right forearm while holding the kettle in my left hand. The stove was cold, but a small fire burned in the fireplace as always, and I hooked the kettle onto the swing-arm and lowered it over the flames.

I knelt in front of the fire, added a log, and watched the tongues of red and gold lick over the fresh bark. Sparks of flickering white snapped out from the droplets of resin hiding there. The good smell of burning pine filled me, erasing the memory of burning flesh. Almost. I rubbed my wrist again. I’m not sure I’d have the courage now to do what had needed to be done. But back then I’d been desperate enough, and young enough, not to care how much it would hurt.

The kettle began to whistle. I swung it off the flame, wrapped a cloth round the handle and poured hot water into the pot. The rising steam further soothed me, carrying the fresh-grass smell of the mint and a hint of dried lemon peel in it. That was a luxury, but one that made a huge difference for me. Meldov, my real Meldov, had loved lemon but the wraith had hated it. The day we gave up lemon tea after a hard working, I should have known something was wrong. These days I couldn’t afford a lot of the imported fruit, but I added a hint to all my teas, and that citrus astringency in the steam was balm to my heart. *There’s nothing to fear here.*

I took the cup with me to my favorite chair, placed tight against the wall where nothing could lurk behind it. It was my only comfortable chair, actually, but then for fifteen years no one but me had crossed that threshold, so I had no need of more. It was deep and soft, upholstered in leather, big enough that it had been all I could do to haul it across the room one-handed, when the craftsman had left it by the door. Over the years, I’d dozed in it enough to be glad a hundred times over for its solid size.

I sank into the familiar leather upholstery, and held the cup to my nose to breathe the steam. *So good.*

Truly, I had no cause for complaints. Half the men in the world, more than half, would've given their own right arms for the life I led. In this house I was safe, warm enough in winter, cool in summer. I worked in my garden, gathered wood nearby, cleaned and cooked, but my labor was far less demanding than that of most men. These days, my skill with languages was becoming more widely known. Translations now brought enough money to keep me well-supplied, even after I'd spent every penny I'd stolen from Meldov. I had clothing, good boots. I even had books of my own and the leisure to read them.

I was in no real pain, although my wrist ached sometimes when the wind was wrong. I had no dependents to worry and coerce me, no overlord to threaten me, no illnesses, no loss. Well, no more loss. This was as close to Paradise as this world offered. So it was wrong, very wrong, that the little knife on my desk should call to me with a siren song as sweet as the whisper of an incubus in my ear.

It was mostly lack of sleep making me weak. I knew that. But I set the cup aside and stood, and went to the desk. The little knife lay beside my blotter, with the whetstone above it. I picked up both in my left hand, and took them to my chair. The knife was a pretty thing—bone-handled, with a fine, thin blade no longer than my thumb, and sharper than my shaving razor. I pinned it between my right wrist and knee, picked up the oiled stone, and stroked it along the edge. I used a feather touch. Really, there was no need to sharpen it. I'd cut perhaps three quills since the last time. But it soothed me to hear the fine steel sing under the stroke of the stone.

Eventually I set the whetstone on the table beside my cup, pushed up my right sleeve, and picked up the blade. With the tip, I barely traced the lines of blue that marked the veins in my forearm, following them down from the crook of my elbow to where the color became hidden by the dense scar. I pressed inward there, lightly, and watched a drop of blood well up from under the blade. Blood was bad for steel. I'd have to clean the knife again. *Or not.* I pressed harder, and saw a second drop and a third, beading on that lumpy, taut white surface, like rain on a windowpane. *See, there's life under the scar. I can cut through to it and set it free. Forever free.*

After a long, long time, I put the blade beside the stone, and lifted the cup instead. The small stain on the cuff of my nightshirt turned from crimson to burgundy to russet. After I washed it, it would be as faded as the rest. Eventually, slowly, the sun came up.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER TWO

I was cleaning up from my morning meal when there was a knock on the door. I was pleased to see Dag, the market boy, waiting on the step. He'd made good time today. He held out a full basket to me. "Here 'tis, Mister Lyon. Same as always, but Mum says to tell you there weren't no eggs, on account of the hens weren't laying well yesterday. She put in an extra rasher of bacon to go round."

I took the handle from him, but set the basket on the step. "Thank her for me. I hope there's nothing seriously wrong with the hens."

"Oh no, sir. A fox came by, we think, and frightened them. But he couldn't get through the coop I built. 'Twas too solid for him." He gave me a crooked-toothed grin of pride.

I nodded back. Dag was skinny, his clothes worn thin, and his eyes were steadier than most youngsters'. His grin was pure happiness though. Despite being the man of the house since he was nine, he was every inch a fun-loving boy. He'd made this trip to see me twice a week for years now, and I'd come to enjoy our few moments of chat. *For years...* "How old are you now, Dag?"

"Near on fourteen, sir."

That old. Sometimes I was amazed I was still here, after so long. "Getting too old for barley candy then, I guess."

"Never too old," he said cheekily. "Else why would there be a bag full of it in your *own* shopping? Sir."

I laughed. "Take your wages, imp, while I get your mother's money."

I left the door ajar as I went to my desk and located my purse. I'd learned that if I tipped the boy with coin, it went straight to his mother's hand. So I paid her well in coin, and him in candy. I brought him the money, in the old basket. "Here, keep that safe. And take a barley-stick for each of your sisters too."

"Thank you sir." He dug into the basket and pulled out two more sticks.

"And there's a bit of paper in the basket to wrap them in." We both pretended that wasn't the most important thing I gave him, that he wouldn't

hold the candy gently in it and then at home press it flat and render wonderfully detailed drawings of animals in charcoal on it. I'd found a drawing of his once, when his mother had wrapped a cut of meat with it. I'd offered him a clean paper for the one clearly often used, erased and reused, and now spoiled. The light in his eyes had been something to see, and though we never spoke of it, I gave him another clean page weekly. His mother was a wonderful woman, but she'd never encourage something that frivolous.

I should have probably done more for him. Dag had amazing talent, and village life would give him no outlet for it. Unless the local temple decided to paint a mural or something, he might live and die here and leave not a trace of his art. By this time, I had contacts among the literate rich folk back in the cities. I could have done more to find him a mentor. But even this little chat on my doorstep sometimes made my skin twitch for hours afterward. And he was just fourteen and his mother needed him. I said, "Be off with you then. My regards to your mother. I'll see you in three days."

"Right, sir. See you then." He gave me a jaunty wave, cheek distended with the candy, and turned. I liked that about him, that he would stay and chat if I chose, seeming quite happy to pass along gossip and news, but showed no hurt on the days I dismissed him abruptly. I desperately envied him that contented nature. I'd never been that way, even as a child.

I picked up the full basket, shut the door and carried my bounty over to the kitchen area. It took only a few minutes to set the food in its places, with the butter and cheese in the cool stone box low beneath the counter. When there was another knock, I almost cracked my head on the wooden edge above me. Grumbling to myself, I went to see what Dag could have possibly forgotten. But when I yanked open the door, the face staring at me was familiar, but not a fourteen-year-old boy.

"Lyon! It *is* you!"

I slammed the door in Tobin's face. I'd have collapsed into my chair, but I didn't even make it that far. My knees gave out halfway across the room.

*How? Why?* My mind screamed in protest. *What was Tobin doing here?* Seventeen years without a word between us, and there he stood on my doorstep. And here I lay in some shameful puddle of dismay and self-disgust,

and mangled unquenchable hope. That scared me more than all the rest. I was settled and safe here, and none could pry me out of my shell. But I hadn't expected Tobin.

“Lyon?” He rapped on the door again, more slowly. “It’s me. Tobin. Remember me? We were friends once.”

*Remember me.* I’d have laughed if I could have got breath to do it. Of course I remembered. Strong, sensible Tobin, two years older and headed for a high position, and all that I was not. He’d let me tag along after him for years. He’d been the focus of my days, and truth to tell, of my solitary nights, until Meldov’s cool, dark power had caught my full attention when I was sixteen. And after that...

I couldn’t stand to see Tobin now.

“Lyon? Can you answer the door? I need to talk to you.” After a long silence, in which I just managed to sit up enough to pull my knees to my chest and clamp my hands between them, he added, “I’m not here to do any harm. By Samal’s Hand, I swear it.”

I no longer believed in any gods, but for Tobin that oath apparently still meant something. I’d never thought he’d planned to hurt me. He just had no idea the harm he could do, simply by saying my name in that voice, as if I were still that boy. I didn’t uncurl from the floor or make a sound. Maybe he’d go away, if I said nothing, did nothing. He knew I was in here—there was no hope he’d believe the house was empty—but if I ignored him long enough maybe he’d go away and leave me in peace.

He knocked again, a slow steady rhythm that beat into my ears and echoed around my head until after many minutes I could no longer stand it. “Go away! Just go *away!*”

There was a moment’s silence. “It’s Tobin. We were boys together, back in Riverrun. Remember? I used to get us into trouble, and you figured out how to get us out.”

I remembered it the other way. He’d rescued me from the consequences of my folly, more than once.

He said, “Remember the time I said I was going to ride the white-foot stallion, and he got away from me? And you nailed a horseshoe to a bat and

then lured the guards away for me, while I made it look like he'd kicked his way out of the stall?"

*I'd been thirteen then. We'd met in the orchard afterward, half delighted, half appalled at our own daring, watching through the trees as six men with ropes were needed to catch the wayward horse and put him in a stronger pen. Tobin's dark eyes had danced with amusement, but his voice had been wistful as he said, "I still think I could have ridden him."*

*And I'd replied, "If you really want to kill yourself, do it without me next time."*

*He'd turned to me, looking startled. "Really?"*

*And I'd said, "No. Of course not." I'd punched his arm and he'd wrestled me to the ground, laughing...*

*"Go away."*

"Lyon, please. It's me. I thought we were friends. Don't you remember anything?"

I'd never been able to say no when he begged me. And although I'd thought I was stronger now, or perhaps more self-centered, I dragged myself to my feet and went to the door. I pulled it ajar, and stood in the gap, taking a better look at him.

The years had been kind to Tobin. Like me, he'd passed thirty and entered his middle age, but he was as solidly-built and dark of hair as ever. There was a light crease between his strong brows, and a hint of laugh-lines around his eyes to counterweight it. The shadow of stubble on his chin was darker than I recalled, but perhaps he'd missed shaving. His lips curved up when he saw me, but slowly sobered as I just stared coldly at him.

"Lyon?"

"Hello, Tobin."

"So you *do* remember me."

This time I did laugh. It came out hoarse. "What do you want?"

"Can I come in and talk to you?"

"You seem to be talking just fine right here."

“Yes, but... Lyon, it’s been seventeen years. Don’t you want to at least spend a moment catching up?” His voice caught. “I’ve missed you. I thought you might have missed me too. I thought we were friends, close friends.”

“Bian’s Grace, Tobin!” Two minutes and he was returning me to my childhood ways. I straightened more, holding my right hand behind me. “All right, yes, we were. But I can’t... Just tell me how you found me. Why you bothered, after so long.”

“So long?” He stared at me. “I thought you were dead! That fire in Meldov’s house took all day and night to burn itself out, and there was nothing but ashes left. We thought you both were dead. When I was sent to track down the scholar who translated *Dar Vanskiet Nichsenst* for Lord Pardo, I had no idea it would turn out to be you. Even riding here, I told myself with each mile not to keep my hopes up. Because if you had lived, *surely you would have contacted me long ago!*” His eyes blazed.

I wasn’t going to apologize, but I couldn’t help saying, “I was ill for a long time afterward.” It was even the truth.

“And for the seventeen years since then?” He gritted his teeth. “Is Meldov alive too? Are you still with him?”

“No!”

That was clearly too forceful, because his expression went from angry to thoughtful. “With someone else, then?”

“No.” I made the effort to say it casually, but from the narrowing of his eyes I might have failed. I added quickly, “What about you? Still in the king’s service? Wife? Children?”

He snorted. “If you couldn’t tell I was fay by the time I was sixteen, then you were the only one. But no. I have had a lover or three. None the last few years though.”

Just like that. “*I was fay.*” Like it made no difference. Like it didn’t unlock the door I’d closed against a hundred memories of him. I hardened my heart. The man that I was now had no right to touch those innocent childhood moments.

“So you were sent to find me then? You have work for me?” The languages that I knew were mainly long out of use. Most of what I did was



esoteric translation of dry old books, for scholars and sorcerers, but I'd done some antique contracts, and an old erotic story or two. I was becoming better known, which was good for my purse, but clearly had suddenly become bad for my peace of mind.

Tobin hesitated, and then reached into the neck of his shirt. The medallion he pulled out was one I'd never seen, but I knew what it was. The gold lips pursed around a clear crystal were the sigil of a King's Voice. He said clearly and loudly, "His Majesty commands you to come with me to Riverrun, where he has need of your services. You will, of course, be well paid for your time."

I said, "No." And shut the door on him again.

There was a moment's pause before he knocked. I think for once I'd caught Tobin completely by surprise. After the second knock, he muttered something, then raised his voice. "Lyon. You can't say no to the king."

"Watch me," I called back through the wood. I was almost laughing, because this day that had started so simply was decaying into confusion and darkness. The *king* wanted *me* to come back to *Riverrun*. I'd had nightmares that went like this, although they'd never included Tobin at my door. Perhaps what separated nightmare from life was that extra edge of pain that your own mind could not conceive of.

"Lyon, really. Let me in and we'll talk about it. We don't have to set off right away."

"We're not setting off at all."

"Be *reasonable*. I speak for the king."

I glared at the door. "I speak for myself. And I said no." I had that power now, to say no and stand by it. And I wasn't leaving my stone walls and my peaceful garden and my workable life for anyone, not even His High and Mightiness King Faro the Second. "If he needs something translated, he can send it here."

"I don't think it's that simple. Come on, Lyon, open the door. I don't want to shout at you through an inch of wood."

"Then *go away!*" I was done. Just flat out done. I went to bed, burrowed deep under the covers, and pulled the pillow over my head. It was a good

tightly-stuffed down one, and muffled Tobin's comments enough to make his words undecipherable. I counted metaphorical sheep, and pretended that the sound of his voice didn't go right through me.

I actually fell asleep. Crazy, but it had been a horrible night, and I often slept better in the daylight. And instinctively I must not have considered Tobin a threat, because I dropped off peacefully to the droning backdrop of his words. Tobin's "*just be reasonable*" tone. So familiar, and something I had practice ignoring.

When I woke, the angle of the sun told me it was late afternoon. I struggled out of the warm, smothering embrace of covers and pillow and listened. All I heard outside was the familiar chirp and whistle of birdsong. I wondered if perhaps I'd dreamed the whole morning, but the market basket was a new one, and there was a fresh loaf on the counter.

I somehow felt better rested than I had in many weeks. I slid out of bed and stood as quietly as I could. Despite the silence, I had no illusion that the episode was over. Tobin wasn't sneaky—that had always been my role. But he was tenacious, relentless even. Set Tobin at a goal and he'd reach it or die trying. He'd ridden that gods-bedamned whitefoot stallion a week later.

His knock came as the sun was getting low. I looked up from the book I'd been too distracted to really read, and didn't answer.

"Lyon, you can't hide in here forever."

I muttered, "It worked for fifteen years." I didn't say it quite loud enough for him to catch, and I heard him growl in frustration.

"Let me in!"

Fifteen years and no one had crossed that threshold. But I was under no illusions that they couldn't. Even Meldov hadn't been powerful enough to set a ward that would keep physical beings out, and the wards I had on my windows and doors were a pale shadow of his. At best they might give a wraith a bad case of itch on its way through. Tobin had the authority of the king and his own curiosity behind him. There was no real sense in dragging this out like a petulant child. But I still moved slowly, as I stood and went to the door.

He ducked his head low, coming inside. He'd always been taller than me, and my lintel barely cleared my own hair. I'd liked that.

Tobin stopped inside the room and looked around. "This is more snug than I imagined from outside."

"I like it."

"Have you lived here long?"

"Fifteen years."

He glanced at me from under lowered brows. "Since the fire?"

"More or less." As soon as I could travel. It had taken a month. I still kept my hand behind me.

"Alone?"

"Yes." I just let that stand.

Tobin nodded as if he'd heard more than I said. "So. Are you ready to listen to the King's Voice?"

"No. I might listen to an old friend though."

"So you do remember being friends." Tobin tried to make his voice acid, but really, I'd heard it done far better.

"Of course I remember. But there's no way to go back there. Tell me what the king wants with a humble translator. In your own words."

He glanced around the room. "Can we at least sit down? I've been on my feet for hours and my knee isn't up to that anymore."

"Your knee?" I'd started to sit in my favorite chair, but stood again hastily, and only just remembered not to reach for him. With either hand. "Are you hurt?"

"Three years ago. Which was when I left the cavalry and was offered this job. I'm fine, as long as I don't overdo things."

"Oh." I made a point of lowering myself to the soft leather, tucking my hand under my left arm. I nodded to the straight kitchen chair. "You can have that one."

He gave me a grin as he sat. “Compared to pointy rocks and rotting logs, this is perfect. Thank you.”

“I wouldn’t think one of the King’s Voices would sit on rocks.”

“The job involves a lot of travel. And really, we’re more like exalted messenger boys than anything. Even in Riverrun, we often sit below the salt, when we get to sit down at all.”

I paused and just looked at him. *Tobin, in my own home*. He looked relaxed and confident, stretching his booted feet out in front of him with a sigh. Behind him, my simple kitchen looked smaller. He cocked his head, but didn’t speak. Once, I’d have been the first to come out with questions or to spill my story on the floor at his boots. But now I could hold my tongue for hours if necessary. I said nothing.

It was Tobin who broke first. “So, did Meldov actually die in the fire? Or did he escape too?”

“Burned to a crisp.” I didn’t mention that he’d been dead well before that happened.

“I thought you liked him.”

“Things change.”

Tobin frowned, but didn’t pursue that. “And now you make a living doing translations.”

“I do. Which brings me to what the king wants from me. And why me? Surely there must be other translators closer and better.” I’d gotten as far from Riverrun as I could without leaving the kingdom.

“Actually, not as many as you’d think. And not one he trusts to translate ancient *tridescant* or *kanshishel* and not make a hash of it. We checked and there used to be a couple, but, well, Meldov was one, and another died of old age, and that leaves you. You *do* know the languages?”

His doubt stung me. “I do. Although ancient *tridescant* was never a written tongue, so it won’t help you much. *Kanshishel* is as close to the written form as it gets. I see it now and then, and I know it as well as anyone.” *Probably better than anyone else now alive.*

“The king mentioned both, and some urgency.”

“If it’s so critical, why didn’t he just send the document with you? I could be translating it right now and he could have had his answer as fast as you could ride back. Why send for me instead?”

“I’m just His Majesty’s voice. I’m not privy to his plans. If I was to speculate, which I did plenty of on the ride out here, I’d say either the item is too valuable to risk on the road, even with a guard, or too difficult or too fragile to transport.”

It made sense of sorts. Which wasn’t reassuring to my prospects. “I can’t go. Not won’t. I can’t.”

“Why?” he asked bluntly.

*Because I’m crazy. Because I’m scared and damaged and if I leave these stone walls I think I may lose my mind altogether.* I’d thought I was far more healed than that. I’d even wondered lately if the cure to my ill-humor might be to get away for a while, and set foot in the world again, but all it had taken was his arrival on my doorstep to disabuse me of that notion. He said “*Riverrun*” and my mind was full of smoke and screaming.

“I can’t explain it.”

“Is it to do with the sorcery? A spell?”

“Yes.” I leaped on that. In a way, it was true. It began with a spell. “So you see, if he’ll just send the item here, or perhaps a tracing of the inscription or the text, then he can have his answer.”

“He has his own sorcerers. If I asked him, he would send one here to see if they could free you.”

“No! I mean, it’s slowly wearing off. Messing with it might make it worse.”

“I’ve never heard of a spell that could trap a live human. Not since the days of the mages.” He leaned forward to look more closely. “You look okay. Other than the hand you’re hiding.” But his own hand dropped to hover near his belt knife. “Show me.”

“Go to Na’s own hell.”

He shook off my best glare like he didn't even see it. "Show me what you have, or I'll force you. Is it a weapon? Or some mark of damnation?"

I laughed, and the sound hurt my own ears. He winced, but didn't take his fingers from the hilt.

"Oh, I've done damnation," I said gaily. "And believe me, this isn't it." But I could tell he'd follow through with his threat, so I pulled my hand out from under my elbow and waved it at him. "Lovely, right?"

It actually wasn't that bad. The fingers were untouched, although a little thin from disuse. It was the way they curled in to my palm, and the hand in turn curled toward my wrist, that looked horrible. Like a claw, frozen in a coil of unnatural tension. Living hands were not made to look like that. But since the moment I'd set a flame to the tendons of my wrist, to wrest myself free of the wraith, I hadn't had a living hand.

He grunted like he'd taken a blow, and dropped his fingers away from his knife. "The fire."

"Yes."

"I'm so sorry."

"Nothing to do with you." I couldn't drop the light, happy voice, although he winced again when I used it. "It's been a long time. I hardly even notice now."

"Stop!" He went to his knees in front of me, reaching for my hand, but when I drew back out of reach he didn't pursue me. "Don't pretend."

"I'm not pretending." I smiled to show him I meant it. "I've learned to do everything left-handed. My penmanship is better than it ever was. I'm fine."

"Lyon." It came out a groan.

I kicked at him, one foot catching his hip and spilling him on the floor. "And you wondered why I never wrote you." *Here was a lie that would serve me, twisted up in truth.* "I can't stand that look. Don't you *dare* pity me. I'd like to see you have the guts to burn..." I bit my tongue so hard I tasted blood.

He rolled to his feet and asked slowly, "Burn what?"

“Nothing. Go away and leave me alone. Tell your king you couldn’t find me. Tell him I died. Or tell him to have some scribe trace the document and bring it and I’ll translate it. For free, even, since he’s a friend of yours. Just go.”

“I can’t. He’s my liege and has my oath. And he’s your king too.”

“I really don’t care.”

“But I care for you. I don’t want to see you get in trouble or hurt. More hurt. There is no spell holding you here, is there?”

I glared at him.

“Be reasonable, lion-boy. He commands you.”

“Don’t call me that!” I surged to my feet, facing him, furious. He was ripping open all the old wounds today. “Just get the hells out of here!” I set my hand on the back of the chair, swaying and hearing the rush of blood in my ears.

“All right.” I must have looked bad, because he backed away from me, hands held out at his sides. “Listen, I’ll go away for a bit. But you know he *is* king. If he wants you in court, sooner or later you’ll have to go.”

“The hells I will.”

He backed toward the door. “I’ll come back later. You should maybe eat something. Think about it a bit. How bad would it be, really, to come with me? It would be like the old days, but with horses. You and me on an adventure. Five days ride, a little job for your king, and I promise I’d escort you all the way back. You’d not be gone more than three weeks, maybe less. And well paid for it. And we could catch each other up on old times. How bad could it be?”

“Worse than the fire,” I said, and meant it.

When he was gone, I had barely enough strength to shut and bolt the door before dropping back into my chair. I pulled my feet up on the seat, heedless of my shoes on the fine leather, and wrapped my arms around my knees. *How bad could it be?*

Part of me wanted to go. Oh Mother Bian, the picture he painted. Tobin and me riding side by side, comrades again. And not just friends, but two fay

men. We were no longer boys, and neither of us virgins, even if... *not going there.*

I closed my eyes. I could almost picture it. I could also picture his face the first time I woke screaming and puking in the night. The first time I put a fist in his face, in unknowing panic, as I'd done to one of the nurses at the hostel so long ago. He'd watch me trying to cut my meat left-handed as it slid about my plate, or buttoning buttons, or any of another thousand simple tasks that I did slowly and not well. He'd get that look in his eyes again and I could not *bear* it.

I had a life here, and however circumscribed it was, it suited me well.

I looked up at the shelf that held my books. I had dozens now. Faithful friends who took me on journeys without judgment and without pity. Over there on the counter, Mother Fiona's bread was fresh and good, and I could haggle off a thick slice in here with no one to watch. I was my own man, and I would choose, and my choice was to stay here.

\*\*\*\*

In an odd way, the thought of leaving had made my home lovelier in my eyes. Although I didn't sleep, that also meant no bad dreams. I spent a quiet night in my chair, resting, and each time I opened my eyes I took in the thick stone walls and the glow of lamplight with satisfaction. I read a little, off and on, from a book in *teshmidoran*. I'd gotten it cheap, because there was no one else around who could now read it.

It was a travelogue, which had almost made me set it aside tonight. But in fact, I thought it was probably mostly fiction. Surely no real trip went half that smoothly, and although I'd never been to the far Southlands across the seas, some of the adventures he described had to be apocryphal. I'd heard of elephants, although no one I knew had ever seen one. But riding on the back of an elephant in a little house filled with soft cushions was taking it a bit far. I read along with pleasure at the author's imagination.

By morning I'd convinced myself that Tobin would take my "No" this time and go back to his king with it. I'm not sure where that delusion came from, because I surely knew better.



He showed up mid-morning, as I was pulling weeds in the garden. I heard him whistling before I saw him striding up the lane.

“In seventeen years you never learned another song?” I teased him. But I said it lightly. The sun was warm and the lettuces were growing well, and in a little while he would be gone.

“I like that one.”

“I know.”

“Show me your garden,” he said.

“I imagine one is pretty much like another.”

“No doubt. But I was a horse-boy and then a squire and then a knight and company commander, and now I do my king’s errands. I’ve never owned a garden.”

“You poor man. There’s nothing more worth having. Well, other than books. Look here.” I showed him the early greens, leafing out well enough already to harvest from around the edges. I pointed to the lacy fronds of carrots, and the beans galloping skyward on the climbing frames I’d made for them.

“What’s that? It’s doing well.” He pointed, and then made a sound as I tugged the plant up, leaf and root.

“Coldwort. It’s a weed. It likes the cool weather so it outgrows the rest in this season, if you let it.” I tossed it on the compost pile.

He bent to touch a smaller furry leaf. “Is this the same?”

“Yes. You can slay it for me.”

He glanced up through his eyelashes at me, but yanked on it. The leaves came free, leaving the root in the soil. He peered at his trophy. “Mine’s falling apart.”

“You only wounded it. Oh well. I’ll get the root next time.”

“I never leave a wounded enemy behind me.” He knelt to dig around the root with his fingers. I passed him the trowel, and he quickly worked the taproot free and tossed it with the rest.

“Victorious over weeds. Congratulations, Tobin.”

He laughed. It was the same laugh he’d shared with me a hundred times. I’d missed that laugh. I moved quickly on down the row. “Here we have the squash. Nothing much yet, but by fall there will be more than I can eat. Luckily it keeps well.”

He looked around. “This is nice and big. No chickens though? No cow? What do you do for meat and milk?”

“I’ve a woman in the village who supplies me. Chickens are noisy and a cow needs too much tending. I have some money coming in, and she can use a little coin, with three young ones to clothe and shoe.”

“You always were good with children.”

I looked over, startled. “That was you. The little ones followed you all over. I barely put up with them.” I’d been jealous, truth be told, of the easy way he’d smile and kiss small cheeks and hold them on his hip. “I thought you’d have a brood of your own by now.” It was one of the things that had made it easier not to go to him, thinking that he’d have a wife and a family, and not need a strange man—a very strange man—coming near them.

“I wouldn’t have minded children,” he said. “But no amount of prayers to Bian can make the union of two men fertile. Plus I’ve never found a man I’d actually want to raise a child with.”

“I hope you do someday,” I said, and meant it, even if it took him one step further from me. He was leaving soon, no matter what, and if ever a man was meant to be a father it was Tobin. “There are plenty of orphan children who need a good home.”

“Maybe. What about you? You’re settled here with a house and an income. If you never found a girl to please you, why not take in a child?”

I shuddered. In the orderly routines and quiet I needed to survive, a child would be a disaster. As for the rest... “What makes you think I was looking for a girl?”

He gave me another sidelong look. “Weren’t you?”

“I’m as fay as you are,” I said tartly. “Now who’s blind?”

“I’d guessed it,” he admitted. “But it’s not something I like to assume, unless the man tells me so himself.”

“Well, now you know for certain.” My good mood was fading. I wrapped my hand around a fast-growing strand of threadbind, and pulled hard, heedless of the way it dug into my fingers. The long, wiry stuff resisted my efforts. I’d have twined it around my right forearm for an assist, as I often had to, but Tobin’s strong hands landed on the stem below mine and together we dragged it from the earth. I dropped it on the pile, and wriggled my fingers to return circulation.

“It’s not a bad thing that you’re fay,” he murmured, closer to my ear than I’d realized.

I jumped sideways, and concealed it with a quick tug at my boot. “I didn’t say it was.” But I moved away from him down the row.

“Is your garden why you don’t want to leave? Are you worried about this place? I’m sure someone from the village will be willing care for it for a few weeks. On the king’s coin, of course.”

He hadn’t followed after me. At a safe distance I turned. The sun was behind him and I had to squint to see him while my features were no doubt clear in the light. Unfair. “I’m sure they would, except that I’m not leaving it.”

He scrubbed his face with one hand. “How do I convince you? You don’t have a choice. I’m charged with bringing you back to Riverrun, one way or the other.”

“You’d have to tie me up and throw me across the horse!”

The long silence that followed was cold as winter.

“You wouldn’t.”

“This isn’t some kind of whim for His Majesty. Something serious is afoot, something vital. I could tell by the way my instructions were given. I’ve already waited a day for you to agree, but... I have orders.”

“Damn you then. You’ll have to do it! You’ll have to drag me back there.” I was so angry it froze my bones. Deep down shaking-with-it angry. I’d said *never again*. Never again would I let myself be suborned or coerced or forced

at another's will. I'd die first. I wished there was something nearby to hold onto. I took three steps back to put my hip against the fence.

He hadn't moved forward. "Please. Don't make me choose between my duty and what you prefer."

"What I *prefer*." I put both hands behind me to hide the shaking. "Yes. You will have to choose, you bastard. Now get off my land or arrest me."

"I'm not a constable. I don't arrest..."

"Whatever it is you do, when your king commands you. Either go or take me."

He froze, even more still. The sun shone in his dark hair, raising the red in it. I'd said, "*or take me*." I suddenly heard the double meaning in that, totally unintended. But retracting or explaining would dilute the words, and if he heard both meanings he was welcome to them. But not to me, in any way, shape or form. I'd fight him on this as long as I could.

"I've just found you again, after so long." His voice was weary. "Could we please not do this? Could we just sit and talk? Get to know each other again? And then you can pack a few things and make a small trip. One short job for your king, and you'll be back here in your sanctuary none the worse for wear. I'll be at your side the whole time, I swear it."

I could almost taste the picture that made. So my voice was harsher than ever when I asked, "How can you swear to it? What if your *king* wants me to stay in Riverrun at his beck and call? What if he *orders* you on another errand?"

He gave me no answer then, and I turned away. "I'm going inside. You can stay here, or leave, or come and drag me out by my hair. I see no other choices."

I'd gone a dozen steps toward the house, hearing nothing behind me, when his voice drifted to me, softly. "I like your hair."

Gods-bedamned mother-screwing bastard. I went inside and closed and bolted the door.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER THREE

I spent the evening curled up with my most prized possession. The book was battered, with some of the first pages torn out. The peddler who'd brought it to me said they'd been used to start a fire. "*What good is a book no-one can read, save for the paper?*" He was lucky I'd had to let him live. If my glare could have started a fire, he'd have been charred.

Still, for once, *no-one* included me. The wraith had left me owning a dozen old and forgotten tongues, and a few newer ones, but this one was unknown to me. It was naggingly familiar, having the sound of *britarian* when read phonetically, and here and there a few words that seemed to make sense in that language. I thought it might be a much older form, but the paper was modern. Perhaps it was a copy. I puzzled at it when I needed my brain totally engaged.

And tonight I really needed that. I'd spent all afternoon and half the evening waiting for Tobin to knock on my door and take up his arguments. I had my heart hardened against even opening the latch for him. So it was a distraction and annoyance, instead of a relief, when the sun was long down and he still hadn't come. I leaned closer to the book. Could *teshmian* mean the same thing as *tesh-man*? If so, this might be a household guide of some kind, dealing with the running of a large keep. The words I'd found were mostly domestic ones.

Eventually I put the book carefully back on the shelf. I hadn't jotted a note for over an hour. I glanced out at the dark beyond the window, and wondered what time it was. I'd had a clock once, but I'd beaten the little gears out of it one night, when it refused to move forward at a reasonable pace. I'd decided not to replace it. The cycle of light and dark were enough for me.

My knife called to me and tonight I didn't even try to fight it. The little blade winked in the lamplight as I picked it up.

I wondered if Tobin actually had the stones to make me go with him. If I cried—make that if I screamed—would he still bundle me up and drag me back to his king, like a cat bringing home a half-dead mouse? He'd called me

friend. He'd even said he liked my hair. *I couldn't afford to get distracted down that path.*

Tobin had been a soldier, for over a decade apparently. I was sure he'd been a good one. And he liked King Faro, or at least trusted him. I could hear it in his voice and see in his flinches when I defied the wishes of the Crown. Set that long history of service, and his duty to his liege lord, against some old, lingering friendship for me, and I knew where his loyalty would fall.

What choices did I have? I could sit here and force him to come in after me and drag me out. I could run away, leave all my comforts and start again. I'd almost have done that, if I wasn't certain that, now that he knew where I lived, Tobin would have little difficulty in finding me again. Probably six miles down the road and already limping.

*I could try to kill him before I ran. A stranger coming later to the hunt might never locate me again.*

Sometimes I wondered if the thoughts of violence that came to me were the normal imaginings anyone might have, or some kind of stain on my soul left by the wraith. This one was pure stupidity anyway. I had my kitchen cleaver, an axe, and this little blade. Tobin had a dagger and his sword, and a decade of experience. Not to mention three inches of height on me. He'd disarm me and laugh doing it. And not even I had enough darkness in my soul to imagine killing him by stealth or poison.

So truly, it came down to letting him take me, or hoping that my powers of persuasion would somehow miraculously change his mind. I could tell him that a spell would drive me mad if I left these walls. It might be no more than the truth. But he might still feel compelled to try it.

The tip of the little blade slid familiarly over my skin. I pushed my shirt sleeve higher to keep it clean. I hadn't bothered to change for bed, knowing I'd never sleep. This was my good shirt, that I'd put on after washing the garden soil off myself, because... well, it was my favorite. And I didn't want it stained.

I looked at my forearm, bared to the light. I always tried to use the arm as much as possible. I had a bag I'd made with handles that fit my elbow, to fetch

and carry with. Sometimes I filled it with stone weights and lifted it up and down, until I had to stop. I did exercises, holding myself up in a plank on my elbows. But some days, some weeks, it ached too much to do that, and despite my efforts the muscles had dwindled until my wrist was as small around as a child's. Useless. The skin was thinner too, and against its winter pale, the veins stood blue. I wondered idly if this would be the night. Would I finally push the tip a little deeper, and let the crimson spill inexorably from those blue lines? I dipped the tip just deep enough to coax free a drop.

The window across from me exploded with a shattering crash, as a heavy body plunged through it. I was knocked from my chair. Even as I fell, I knew Tobin's touch and his voice, gasping, "No! Gods, no. Don't."

He wrestled me for the knife, pried it from my startled grasp, and threw it across the room.

"Damn it, that was my good blade!" I struggled to get free from him. "If you've broken it..."

"Broken it!" He held me in an unshakable grip, wrapped against his chest with both wrists prisoned in his hands. "You son of a whore. I hope it's shattered!"

His arms were bands of steel around me, his chest a stone wall at my back, and I fought him. I struggled with all my might, my vision dark with the need to get free. "Let go. Let go. Let GO!"

"Promise you won't move if I do. Promise you'll stay right here."

*His breath was a foul thing against my cheek, in my hair, the whisper of graveyards and creatures long dead. I fought to get free. The fetters bound my wrists to the wall. The floor under my bare feet was cold. He pressed against me, whispering of the power we would gain. He asked for permission, asked for free will, told me of the riches of the world laid before us if I yielded to his request. His eyes were Meldov's brown ones, the words ones I'd longed to hear, but under the honey was acid and decay. I fought him. I denied him. Until he turned me around and took what he wanted, with a snarl at my intransigence. Took and drugged and cajoled and suborned me. And I was left with only a shred of free will, deep inside, hoarded and cowering in the dark of my soul. Kept hidden against the day...*

I eventually realized I was sobbing. My cheek was pressed to my floor, my hair glued to my face with tears and snot and sweat. I was curled as tightly as possible, knees to my chest, the flagstones hard under my hip. Something rubbed across my shoulders with a firm soft pressure, like a friendly cat. I realized it was a man's hand, and scrambled away, dragging myself up to my knees. I couldn't stand. I pushed off from the floor with both arms, whimpering as my bad wrist took the strain. I raised my head.

Tobin sat back on his heels, staring at me. His pupils were so wide they swallowed the honey-brown of his eyes. He held his hands up, empty. "Do you know who I am?" His voice was agonizingly gentle.

I sat back on my heels, and wiped my face with my sleeve. "The bastard who's going to drag me back to Riverrun."

"You called me Meldov."

I had no good answer for that.

Tobin whispered, "I thought he was a good man. What did he do to you?"

"Oh, he *was* a good man," I said jauntily. "He was long dead when he did that."

If Tobin had been pale before he was sheet-white now. "He was *what*?"

I sighed. "It's a long story." The tears had done something for me, emptied me out. I actually felt better than I had. I was loose and drifting and untouchable, all my doors swinging open. That was a dangerous thought, and I tried to care about it.

"I have lots of time. Tell me?"

"You should just go."

"The hells I will." He stood up. "You're bleeding. Do you have any bandages?"

"This?" I looked at my arm dispassionately. I'd cut deeper than usual, when he grabbed me. Still, it was nothing that wouldn't heal. In fact, when I looked at him, I saw way more blood than that on his own sleeve. Which reminded me—"You broke my window! Who told you to dive through like some run-away beer wagon and break it? Damn you, do you know how much



that cost?" I'd had to buy the large panes in the city and have them carefully shipped, and paid the local carpenter to frame it. I'd loved it. The local glassmaker couldn't come close to it. "And you're bleeding worse than I am. Look to your own wounds."

He looked down in surprise, as if he hadn't noticed anything, and slid his sleeve up his arm to check it. A shard of bright glass fell from the fabric to the floor. A long, shallow gash scored his tanned forearm. Blood welled slowly out. He grimaced and wrapped his hand over it. "That's nothing. But you. You were going to..." He swallowed, the sound loud in the quiet night.

"No, I wasn't." *At least, probably not.* "I like to play with the knife. It calms me."

"*Calms you?*"

I shrugged. I wasn't going to explain myself to him.

"Well it sure as hells didn't calm me." He took down my dishcloth from the rack, not looking at me. "I was so damned scared."

"Don't use that. It's for the dishes. There's a basket of cotton strips under the sink there." Because this wasn't the first time I'd gone a bit deep.

He wrapped his own arm, his motions so practiced, down to tying the strip with left hand and teeth that it came home to me how often he must have done something like this. *He was a soldier.* I'd known, intellectually, that he was in the cavalry all those years ago. But that simple, practical action brought home the impact of that. *He might have died.* That realization stunned the breath out of me so well that I scarcely moved as he came over and knelt in front of me, reaching very slowly for my arm.

I came out of my distraction before he touched me though. "Just give me a bandage."

He handed it over, careful not to brush my fingers with his own.

Well, I had practice at bandaging too. I wiped my wrist clean, knowing he was looking at it as I did so, and resisting the impulse to hide from his gaze. The original damage was less visible in the lamplight, but the low angle somehow brought out the lines of scars that overlay the first, parallel ridge

after ridge, and small nicks, old and new, marking my bad nights. I hadn't realized there were so many. I covered them in stained but washed cotton, and pulled my sleeve down over it all.

Tobin said, "If you weren't going to kill yourself, what were you doing?"

"It's a distraction."

"Cutting yourself?"

"Sometimes." I had the impulse to see if he could understand this. "Or just knowing that I could. Knowing that I can make that choice, can lay the blade on skin, or push in just a little and draw blood, or go deeper and no one can stop me."

"I stopped you tonight."

"You grabbed me. That's not the same thing."

He shook his head. "I don't understand. I want to though. I want to help."

"I thought you wanted to take me back to your king." I stood and turned my back on him.

"Watch where you walk," he said quickly. "There's glass on the floor and you're barefoot."

I had to laugh. It came out surprisingly real, and after a moment he chuckled too.

"Well, you can clean it up then," I told him. "You have boots on, and anyway it's your mess."

I went to my chair, managing to avoid cutting myself, and sat down with my feet on the seat while he worked. He picked up the big shards and pieces of the frame, and then swept the small stuff into a corner with my broom. "I'll get that swept out the door in the morning."

I wasn't sure how he knew I didn't want the door opened to the dark, but I said, "The market boy comes barefoot. You'd better get it away from the path."

"I can do that." He set the broom in its place and looked at me. "I'm really sorry about your window. I thought I was saving your life."

He seemed so sad, I had to give him something. “Maybe you were. I’ve always known one day I might use the freedom to cut deep. This might have been the night.”

That didn’t make him happier. “Because I came here and ruined your nice quiet life.”

“Hardly. I mean, yes, right now I’m really not happy with you. But you saw the scars. I’ve cut myself often enough when you were hundreds of miles away. It’s not your fault.”

“Then whose?” He grabbed the kitchen chair, swung it around, and sat on it backwards to look at me, his arms crossed on the wooden rail. “Can you tell me? Please? You said Meldov was dead, and you sounded... tortured.”

I tried to say it wasn’t that bad, but it had been. Perhaps not torture of the body, but of the mind and soul. It had been.

After a silence he said, “Can you tell me about the fire maybe? We knew it wasn’t an ordinary blaze when we arrived to put it out, from how long and hot it burned. And you said Meldov was caught in it. And clearly you were injured.”

He was a soldier. He’d seen injuries. I guessed he could see that the burn on my wrist, isolated as it was, was unlikely to be from a house fire. But he waited patiently for my answer.

“I got out,” I said hoarsely. “Ran as far as I could.” I hadn’t been certain the fire would be enough to destroy the wraith, until I felt its hold finally let go. I’d been two miles down the road by then, with no reason to go back.

“And afterward?”

“I hid in an old barn, for days.” I’d cowered in the hayloft, as high above the ground as I could get. The fever had come on fast, but it had taken a thirst so severe I no longer cared if I died, to drive me out of my refuge. “Eventually I made it to the hostel of the Sisters of Bian in Lowbridge.”

“I searched for you. You and Meldov. I asked at the local hostels and everywhere else I could think of.” Tobin’s voice was thin. “No one had heard of you. Even in Lowbridge.”

“Perhaps I hadn’t arrived yet. In any case, I begged them to hide me. I was afraid, and delirious. The burn was suppurating by then.” And I was babbling, in a panic over some nebulous pursuit, and wouldn’t tell them my own name. They’d either believed my fears were real, or humored me. “They tended me for a little while. Then I... traveled, and eventually wound up here. It was peaceful. I stayed.”

His lips twisted ruefully. “And here I am to drag you out of your refuge. I am so, so sorry. But that doesn’t change the fact that the king commands it.”

“It won’t serve him if I wind up a babbling idiot drooling all over his floor.”

“Is that likely?” He looked at me intently. “Is there truly a spell tying you to this place?”

I was exhausted and wrung out. It was the only reason I could see for telling him the truth. “No. No spell. Just my own crazy mind, that likes hiding inside these stone walls. The books and the work come to me, and I stay here safe and snug.” I growled. “Less snug now my window’s broken.”

“But alone.”

“I like being alone. I wasn’t alone even in my own head back then.”

He was giving me that look again, pity and fear, and I couldn’t stand it.

“I’ve done fine. I built a life. I survived and I won and every year it gets easier. Keep your pity to yourself.”

“Every year?”

“Screw you.”

“Have you ever?”

“What?”

He cleared his throat. “Been with a man? You apprenticed to Meldov when I was sixteen, which means you were fourteen. And he was a cool man, and not one for boys, I thought, for all his looks.”

I made a sound, and Tobin shot me a glare. “You don’t think I was paying attention? I was a horny bastard at sixteen, and I was worried about you. But he seemed all right. So you went into his house, and then I went to training,

and when I saw you off and on you seemed content. And then I was called out into the field. I had plenty of boys around in training, and later enough fay men in the cavalry to not be alone if I didn't choose to be. But what about you? Did you ever have someone to hold you?"

I had to cut this off right here. "I'm not a virgin," I said flatly. I set my feet onto the floor and pushed upright. "So now what? What should I pack? Will I need court clothes, because I don't have any."

He stared at me. "You're coming?"

"Do I have a choice? I've pulled out all the stops, I asked, I *begged*, bargained and whined, and I haven't shifted you. I remember how stubborn you are. So it looks like I'm going with you." It felt oddly freeing to say so.

He looked pained and dropped his eyes. "I don't understand you," he said. "At all. But yes, we still have to go. So if you're willing, now, somehow, then pack whatever you wish to have with you for three weeks, with travel. Don't worry about fine clothes. If King Faro wants you in court finery, he'll buy it for you."

"This is my best shirt. Although hardly fit for court." I stretched my arms upward, knowing that it had become short with many washings, and that the action would bare my midriff to his eyes. There at least I was muscled and toned and sleek, if a bit pale, and I wanted to shake him out of thinking of me as a victim.

"I like the shirt," he muttered. "Bring it."

I took the way his eyes followed me across the room as a sign he'd noticed. Although he might have just been making sure I wouldn't go for my knife, sitting where he'd put it onto the counter not six feet away. The edge of the blade was dull with blood. I'd have to clean it soon. Or make him do it.

\*\*\*\*

He made me try to sleep before we left. I didn't think I could, especially with him there in my house, but I caught a couple of misty hours, drifting in and out on the edges of unconsciousness. I didn't want to go too deep anyway. After that waking remembrance, I wasn't sure what my dreams might be.

When the sun rose, I got up and went into the garderobe with a pitcher of water to wash and dress. I felt sticky with the sweat of old nightmares and wished I could have a bath, but heating and carrying water to fill the tin tub would take half the morning. I did the best I could with a cloth.

I chose sturdy clothes for traveling, and tucked my shirt into my trousers, with a good leather belt round me. I chose long thick stockings to go under my boots, and pulled a warm knit vest over the shirt. We'd be five nights on the trail, according to Tobin, and it would still get cold. I combed my hair, untangling it to lie sleek past the nape of my neck. My hair was more trouble long, but Meldov had made me wear it short, and its length was now one more choice I kept for myself.

*And Tobin had liked it.* Maybe I should cut it after all. I lifted the long strands at my neck in my hand, considering. But cutting hair, at least any shorter than a horse-tail I could tie up and saw through with a knife, was not a task for a one-handed man. All right, there were several reasons I kept it this length. *Pathetic, that I couldn't sit still under the village barber's hand for a trim. But there it was.*

When I finally emerged, Tobin gave me a shrewd glance. "I was beginning to wonder if you'd drowned yourself in the ewer. Second thoughts?"

"My hair had knots." I tossed my head to let it fall further across my eyes.

He grunted and hefted my pack. "We'll walk to the village and make arrangements for your house. And get the horses."

"You could go do that and fetch the horses while I water the garden," I said.

"You watered yesterday. No."

"Afraid I'll change my mind?"

I could see that he was, but he said, "Seizing the moment."

I took the pack from him and slung it on my back. He picked up my bedroll, and the second bag, grunting at the weight. "What did you put in here?"

"Books. You saw me."

“Yeah. Didn’t realize how heavy they were. Do you really need all of these?”

*If he didn’t want me to spend my nights pacing.* I gave him the short answer. “Yes.”

He didn’t argue, just hooked it over his shoulder. I paused for one last look around. This had been home and refuge, and prison at times, for so long. I’d thought I’d never leave it alive. If they’d sent anyone else after me, I might not have.

My other books on the shelves were wrapped to keep out damp and insects. We’d nailed several layers of oilcloth over the broken window too, and the interior was almost as dim as the onset of night. The dishes were clean, the food packed for the road or stored in its tins for safekeeping. The bedclothes were stripped off and bundled with my bedroll. What I wasn’t taking, Dag’s mother could fetch to launder and send back with him. Already the place looked dingy and unused.

On the sills and the lintel of the door, my spells were visible as a fine burned tracery in the wood. Spells of banishment, of warding, of life-not-death. Tonight I’d be sleeping outside those wards. I was tempted to claim the call of nature and barricade myself in the garderobe after all. But the time for that had passed.

“I’ll get you a new window,” Tobin promised. “A better one. I took measurements and I’ll order it in the city. A single pane even. We can bring it back with us.”

I shrugged. I had the feeling I’d never come back.

Still, I pulled the door shut behind me, and set the bar. No sense leaving the place wide open. I tugged my pack higher on my shoulders and set off down the path. This was still familiar territory. For the last decade, I’d been to the village every month or so, and sometimes even on to the town, on market days. I might live alone, but I didn’t make my own boots or my own tools. Some commerce was necessary. Walking down this way with Tobin at my shoulder made it new, though. His footsteps behind me and the weight on my back were reminders with every yard we covered that I wasn’t coming right back.

Despite the cool of the morning, I could feel sweat on my face. I wished I'd tied my hair back that morning, but then, loose and long made it convenient for hiding behind. I might need that screen before the day was done. We walked in silence, as the sun rose to clear the trees.

At the village, I went to visit Mother Fiona, while Tobin headed to the inn to retrieve his horses and pay his shot. When I told her where I was headed and what I wanted, she gave me a long look. "Might be a good thing. You're too young a man to be a hermit."

"Not so young as that," I protested. "And my hermitage was a sight more comfortable than this trip will be."

"Comfort isn't everything. And you're younger than me anyway. Go have an adventure. Come back and tell us about it." She smiled at me.

Dag got his smile from her. It seemed genuine. I wondered if she was maybe tired out from taking sole care of a house and children for years, and was wishing she was the one going. But when little Guinna ran up, Fiona's face lit with affection.

"Mama, Dag says the stranger with the horses is getting them ready to travel. Can I go see?"

"Better stay out of the way, childling."

The little girl's eyes teared up. I heard myself say, "Those horses belong to a friend of mine. Would you really like to see them?"

"Oh yes." She grinned up at me, a gap where her middle teeth had been. "They're big 'uns, and shiny and black. Like king's horses. You've never seen the like."

Her mother laughed. "I'm betting Mister Lyon's seen far more exciting things than that, but if he'll take you, you can go." She nodded to me. "Send her back with Dag. I need the boy anyway."

Guinna squealed, "Thank you!" She bounced up and down. "Can we hurry? He's grooming them now, so it won't be much longer."

I handed her mother a small stack of coins. "I should be back in three weeks. If I'm not I'll send word."



“We’ll keep your place nice for you.”

“Thank you.” I was surprised by a sudden reluctance to say farewell to her. She just gave me a nod, though, and went back in to her baking.

Guinna skipped along beside me as I walked up the rutted lane to the inn. “This is so great! No one good ever stays here. Those horses are the best. They’d make two of Farmer Comnal’s brown stud. And he’s the finest beast for miles. I wonder what load they can pull. Do you know? Do you reckon your friend might know?”

“If they’re riding horses, they’re not bred to pull loads,” I said bemusedly.

“But they *could*. ’Cause a horse is a horse.”

“I suppose so.”

The inn was barely worthy of the name—two guest rooms upstairs and stabling for four horses. The pair of blacks that Tobin had hitched to the rail for saddling had drawn quite a crowd. They were true king’s horses, with rumps round as apples and coats like black sunshine. Even standing there, hips askew, resting a hoof, you could tell they were made for both speed and endurance. I had a moment’s qualm. I’d loved horses as a boy, but riding was another thing I hadn’t done for fifteen years.

Tobin lifted his head from picking out a hoof and saw me. The relief on his face made me wonder if he’d worried I might take the chance to run away. The crowd parted to let me through, with little Guinna dogging my heels.

“Almost ready?” I asked.

“Just give me your bag and I’ll put it in the pack.”

I handed over the rucksack and he settled it carefully behind the saddle of the smaller gelding, adjusting it and tying the load so it wouldn’t shift or chafe.

Behind me, someone said, “Th’art leaving then, Mister Lyon?”

Before I could answer, Guinna spoke up. “He’s going for three whole weeks and to the city an’ all. But he’ll be back. My mum is keeping his place ever-so. And he said I could see the horses.”

Tobin laughed with the rest and then bent to her level. “Who are you, missy, who wants to see a war horse up close.”

“I’m Guinna.” But her thumb crept toward her mouth at being addressed by a stranger. “Are they really fighting war-horses? Sir? M’lord?”

“No, hon, no fear,” Tobin said. “They don’t fight now. They’re fast runners though. Would you like to sit one? Just for a moment?”

“*Could I?*” The thumb was forgotten in the glory of that vision.

I caught sight of Dag in the crowd, scowling, and saw the other children gathered there. I leaned toward Tobin to mutter, “If you let her, you’ll have to let the lot of them. Or at least her brother, or I may come home to rats in the pantry.”

Tobin laughed, and for a moment he looked as young and cheerful as Dag had been two days ago. “Why not. *‘Begin a trip with a kindness, and good fortune will follow you.’* We can afford a few minutes.”

“Still a sucker for the kids,” I muttered. I stood against the stable wall and watched, while he lifted one small child after another into the saddle of his horse and led them around. Then a couple of the boys were let ride by themselves to the paddock fence and back. Dag didn’t step forward. The others had all been younger.

I knew he’d ridden their old plow horse since before he could walk. I called out, “Hey Dag?”

He hurried to me. “Yes, Mister Lyon?”

“It’s been a while since I was on a horse. You think you could get on mine and give him a quick turn, down to the lane and back? Take the buck out of him before I get on?”

“I could, sir!”

“Go on then.”

He turned to the horses, and despite his eagerness, managed to walk over slow enough not to startle them. He untied my horse’s leadrope, scrambled into the saddle without use of the stirrups, and gathered up the reins. Tobin turned to me with an eyebrow raised, but I shrugged. If Dag couldn’t handle the beast, I was going to be in trouble myself.

He turned toward the road, and gave the horse’s silken sides a kick that made me wince. I should perhaps have warned him. The gelding’s first plunge

forward nearly unseated him, but he clung to the saddle like a burr, and a hundred yards down the lane he successfully pulled the horse to a walk, and turned for home. When he reached me, he slid out of the saddle, landing with a thump. He handed me the reins. "He's a beauty, sir. Smooth as satin, and not a foot wrong!"

"Thank you."

Tobin helped another gangling young boy down from his mount and said, "Time for us to go."

I started to mount, and found it an awkward business, with my right hand useless to grab stirrup or cantle. My mount was tall enough to have me bouncing around on one foot, trying for leverage. Somehow, I made it aboard. When I glanced over at Tobin he was adjusting the length of his stirrup and not looking my way. Good.

The village constable came toward me. "Fare well, Mister Lyon. We'll hope to see you back soon and in good health. And I'll keep an extra watch on your place." He directed a glare at someone in the crowd.

"Thank you."

Tobin wheeled his horse toward the road and mine followed suit unasked. I saw more familiar faces than I realized I knew, as we trotted easily down the center of the village and out into the countryside. Some of them smiled and waved, their expressions open and easy. I wondered if any of them knew what I'd once been.

Once out of town, Tobin reined his horse back alongside mine and grinned at me. "Canter?"

"Sure." Bravado maybe, but it had to be better than the damned trot. I'd forgotten how to relax into the gait, and both my horse and I would be sore soon at this rate. Tobin gave a whoop and set his mount loose. It was more a controlled gallop than a canter, but I gave mine its head and chased him.

It was exhilarating, in a mad reckless way, to be charging across the countryside into the unknown with the wind in my hair and the sun on my face. After the first few minutes of holding on for dear life, my body somehow remembered the way of it, and I relaxed. And Dag had been right about the

gelding's gaits. I'd never had a smoother ride. Tobin's was faster, but after a while he pulled back to let me come even with him. I had no breath for speech, even if we could have heard each other over the pounding hooves, but I glanced over at him and smiled.

When the horses began blowing and sweating, we reined back to a fast walk. Tobin said, "So good! It's been a lifetime since I rode out with you."

"Yes." We'd mostly run about his father's land or the city on foot as youngsters. Only after he'd begun training, and I'd started my apprenticeship, had we both had horses to ride. A few golden afternoons when we'd managed to meet up for an adventure, before the end. I tried not to let my mind go to dark places, not now, when I was having my first new adventure in years. Even if not by choice. "Tell me what you've been up to. Where have you traveled? What's your brother up to?"

"Kirt is Lord of Goldwood now, since m'father passed."

"I'm sorry." I wasn't surprised to hear his father had died—the old Lord would have been near sixty. But I'd liked that old man on the rare occasions he'd noticed me. His distracted good humor had been almost the same for me as for Tobin.

"It's been years ago now. M'mother's still hale, and giving Kirt's wife fits about how to run the manorhouse."

"He's married then?"

"Oh yes, years ago, to the lovely Lady Ami. Seven children. Took the pressure right off me. Mother has even stopped asking if I've found a good woman and started asking about a good man."

"Wow." I couldn't picture that. His mother had been very much the proper lady of the manor, although I'd only met her a few times.

"She's happy as a pig in mud with the children."

I snorted at the image. "Don't say that about your mother."

He grinned. "She's a good soul, is my mum. And she's eased off a lot since she let Ami take over her formal duties. Even if she does try to keep Ami up to snuff."

He went on talking easily whenever we walked the horses, telling me of his campaigns and his family. And if sometimes his stories wandered into places and people that meant nothing to me, still it was good to hear his voice. All I had to do was nod, and murmur the occasional, “*He did?*” or “*Really?*” to keep him going.

He was no fool. He knew I was forcing him to do all the talking, but whenever a pause began to stretch without a comment from me, he would just move on with his tales. It was oddly restful.

Which the riding was not. When he finally called a halt for a bite and a rest, I fell off more than dismounted. The jolt of my heels hitting the grass traveled right up my spine and my thighs felt like rubber. “Just kill me now,” I muttered.

Tobin laughed at me. “Done in by half a day’s ride. You’re getting old, lion-boy.”

“That’s sophistication, you soldier.”

“And proud of it. Here, sit over here in the shade while I unsaddle the horses for an hour.”

“I prefer the sun,” I said, making my way stiffly to a large rock.

“And so you may, but you’re going to be burned by the day’s end. You should’ve worn a hat.”

“Curses.” I made myself get up and move under a tree. It was cool there, but he was right. I could already feel the tightness of the skin on my nose and forehead. I had to be glad my hair shielded my neck.

Tobin untacked the horses and haltered them to a downed tree, with grass and water at hand. They set to grazing happily. When his stallion lowered itself, grunting in anticipation of a good roll, I expected Tobin to stop it, but he watched indulgently.

“Won’t he get tangled in the rope?”

“He’s my old cavalry mount. If he couldn’t roll with a halter on him, he’d have broken a leg long ago.”

“What’s his name?”

From the look he gave me, I gathered that information had probably been somewhere in the morning's chatter, but he just said, "Goldwood's Darkwind. And yours is Cricket."

"Not fair."

He laughed. "I was younger when I named Dark. Much younger."

We ate and then he repacked the gear, brushed and tacked the horses, while I sat idly, watching the clouds roll by overhead. "I wish this was all there was," I said. "Daylight and traveling with you. I could do this forever."

"I'll remind you you said that when you wake up sore in the morning."

"We have to get through the night first."

He came back and crouched in front of me, sitting easily on his heels. "What will happen in the night?"

"Probably nothing." I didn't meet his eyes.

"Lyon, I saw the writing on your windows and doors. And I saw the... way you acted. Is there something out here, some threat? Because if so, I need to know about it."

"Nothing. Only ghosts. Unsummoned, long-dead, impotent ghosts. Nothing to worry about."

"No one's that afraid of nothing."

"I am." I glared right at him. "I am, all right? I'm that afraid. There's nothing left of him, and his ashes were no doubt sprouting weeds long ago. Nothing taps at my window or cozens me through the gap beneath my door. And I'm still that afraid."

"Why?"

Good question. "Because I'm a coward, I guess. Because every time I wake I think, for just a moment, that he's waiting..."

Tobin put his hand on my knee. "*What did he do?*"

I shook him off and stood. "Just don't touch me. Don't come near me if I wake up. Don't listen to anything I say and don't by all the gods ask me why I'm screaming." I went to my horse. Cricket. Poor thing, what a name for so

lovely a beast. “Oh, and there might be puking. But if you leave me be, I’ll clean it in the morning. Just ignore me and we can move on once it’s light.”

“There must be something I can do to help.”

“Will you give me back my knife?” It hadn’t escaped my notice that he’d removed it from my pen case where I’d stored it, and taken the longer one out of my pack as well.

“No.”

“Then no, there probably isn’t. Don’t let me spook the horses.” I swung into the saddle, trying to look dignified, which was marred by the pained grunt I couldn’t help uttering. I gathered my reins. “We should head on while it’s light.”

He let the subject drop, but the afternoon was much quieter than the morning had been. After an hour I was becoming sorry to have broken the mood. But maybe it was just as well. Riding with him had almost made me forget who and what I was now. That would be a mistake.

An hour or so from sunset he pulled up at a crossroads. “Lyon? I need your opinion on this.”

I stopped beside him and tried to pretend I still had attention for anything except my aching thighs. “Yes?”

He pointed. “A couple of miles down there is an inn, not large but comfortable. I stayed there on the way up. It’s off the direct route, but only half an hour or so, and we’d get hot food and real beds.”

“Or?”

“Or we could keep going. Find a place to camp. We have food and bedrolls.”

“But why?” I could barely keep my eyes open and a bed sounded heavenly.

“You said screaming. Could be a problem in an inn.”

“Oh. Damn. Yeah.”

He hesitated. “How likely is it? I mean, every night? Or just the off chance?”

It was many years since it had been a predictable part of each night, but this trip was likely to be a damned good trigger. “Bedrolls,” I said morosely.

“All right.”

We rode on for about fifteen minutes and then turned aside down a country track. It petered out into a meadow, which we crossed. The forest beyond was thin, and rising behind the trees was a small hill. Tobin set Darkwind at the rocky slope and the stallion scrambled up with barely a clatter. Cricket made heavier work of it, but soon enough we were on a grassy plateau just below the crown.

“This is good,” Tobin said. “A bit sheltered, and we’ll hear anyone else coming up. Grazing for the horses.”

“Lovely.” I barely managed to swing my right leg high enough to clear the saddle, before sliding down to the ground beside Cricket’s front feet. “I’ll sleep here.”

Tobin chuckled, damn him. “I’ll get things set up.”

Watching him make camp was almost enough to keep my eyelids open. He took on each task with a neat economy of motion that spoke of long practice, and an ease that spoke of muscles. Tobin bending, squatting, rising, his riding trews tight across his thighs, was a sight. I closed my eyes. Not for me.

I must have actually slept, because the next thing I knew was the smell of woodsmoke. I looked up. The sky was darkening, streaks of amber and crimson to the west, and the first faint stars in a deep blue-velvet firmament to the east. I rolled my head, with the grass tickling my cheek, and saw a fire, neat and contained, with sparks flickering heavensward. Tobin was silhouetted against it, cleaning a knife. Some instinct must have warned him, because he noticed my gaze right away.

“Hey, sleepyhead. Want some food?”

I licked my dry lips. “Water first?”

“Oh sure. I found a good stream and refilled the canteens.” He watched me struggle to sit up, the blanket he’d apparently draped over me sliding to my knees. “Do you need a hand?”



“I’m fine.” I staggered to my feet and walked in a small circle, trying to shake off the pins and prickles in my legs. The muscle aches that replaced them weren’t a lot better, but at least I could move. I went to the fire and sat carefully, as far from Tobin as I could without being downwind of the smoke. He handed me a canteen, and then a hunk of bread filled with cheese. I hadn’t realized I was hungry until I wolfed it down in three bites. He handed me another.

“Beautiful night.” His voice was soft. “I used to love that part of being on campaign, traveling across the land with my men, and my fellow officers. I thought having to retire from active service was the worst thing that could happen. And it has been lonely. But there’s a lot to be said for looking out across a quiet countryside and knowing you won’t have to kill anyone tomorrow.”

“I can probably drive you to contemplate murder.”

“No. Thank you.”

We ate in silence for a while. Eventually he said, “I’m not going to press you to talk to me. You’ve said enough for me to, well, guess at least, that something truly awful happened in Meldov’s house. But if it would help you to tell me, or if you think it would help me be what you need, I’d like to know.”

I sat and waited. Waited as the sky lost its blush and night crept in. I expected him, for all his fine words, to push me and nag me. He’d hated when I kept secrets as a boy. Somewhere he’d learned patience, though, because he sat quietly and kept the fire fed, as the sky turned to black and more stars came out.

“You know what sorcerers do.” I almost didn’t realize I was speaking until he turned to me, his eyes catching the flicker of the fire. Gold lights, not red.

He nodded, and then shrugged. “I guess so. I’ve met the King’s Mages a few times. King Faro consults them about strategy but... I guess I don’t know exactly how they help him. Scrying the future? I know they talk to the dead. As far as I can tell, whatever they do isn’t useful on the battlefield. At least, we’ve never had a sorcerer with us on a campaign.”

“No,” I said bitterly. “Not very useful, really.”

“Well, there aren’t a lot of them, you, of sorcerers around.”

“We’re a fading breed,” I said. “The King’s Mages are the most powerful in the land, and they still don’t *do* much.”

“But magic is real.”

“Oh, yes.” *Although not as real as it used to be.*

“And working magic must give you some kind of powers.”

“Or maybe not,” I said. “Most people believe that, and most sorcerers let them go on thinking it. We’re all-powerful, searching out spells that might let us work the weather or turn charcoal to gold, or raise stone towers like the mages of old.”

“Now that would be useful on campaign.”

“Yes. You’d think the fact that sorcerers don’t seem to be useful anymore would be a clue that we’re overrated. We’re more like glorified librarians. But instead of reading books, we hunt for treasures of information in the ephemeral and the arcane.”

“Information can be very useful too.”

“Oh yes, no denying that. And some of those secrets are worth more than others. Meldov loved forgotten languages and old books. He would summon the shades of men from the distant past, or ghosts from other lands, and ask for translations to things he’d found in old scrolls and half-mouldering parchments.”

“How odd. And I guess, yeah, pretty useless. But relatively harmless.”

“You’d think. It was a bond between us, because I loved books too, and he found that in addition to a talent for summoning, I had a talent for languages.”

“How did he make a living though? That house was huge.”

“Partly family money. And sometimes there was a secret worth knowing in those old papers. He found an old forgotten property record, and located deeds there that settled a land dispute.” Sometimes there had been secrets more recent and less benign that he’d come across too. He didn’t count hush money the same as blackmail, but I’d been hard-pressed to see the difference.

“So he was just a... translator? Like you are now?”

“More often he’d be hired to summon a particular ghost or spirit to answer a question. He would, for a nice fee, interrogate someone’s deceased relatives about their secrets. Or perhaps to dispel a spirit that was supposedly haunting someone. That work paid well.” I’d enjoyed that part, tracking down the focus that was holding a ghost to the material world, summoning and dispelling it. It was like detection work. But Meldov had scorned commonplace spirits with no more to tell him than who murdered them, or why their heart had been broken. “He just wasn’t as interested in all that.”

“He was teaching you sorcery? Did you ever pass out of your apprenticeship?”

“Yes.”

When I’d been quiet for a while, Tobin said, “Did you like it?”

“Some of it, yes.” The long nights spent pouring over a book, as we applied some new scrap of knowledge gleaned from a summoning. Meldov’s dark head bent above the page, as his fingertip hovered over the fragile parchment. He would make this little grunt when I said something clever, and look at me in approval, which was almost better than the puzzle itself. Although now when I pictured it, I didn’t want to meet his eyes, just in case there was someone else there.

“I’d pictured sorcery as something more glamorous,” Tobin admitted.

“Back in the age of mages, there was the possibility of graduating from mere sorcery to real magecraft. They could work water, stone and fire with spells. Well, you’ve probably seen the mages’ tower at the palace.” I’d only seen it from outside the gates. It was a marvel by all accounts, smooth as glass on the outside, raised from the living bedrock. But that had happened more than a thousand years ago. The palace had been rebuilt around it more than once, in far more mundane ways. “Sorcerers like to pretend we still have those gifts, but if anyone still knows actual magecraft, they’re keeping it secret. Even the king’s three, well they’re called mages, but Meldov...” I cleared my throat. “Meldov said they’re just sorcerers now, like the rest of us. We deal with ghosts, spirits, with the dead,” *and the undead*. “But that’s all.”

“But where did the other kinds of magic go? Did people just forget how to do the spells, or wouldn’t they work anymore?”

“No one knows.”

“Couldn’t you call up the ghost of an old mage and ask?”

“Believe me, it’s been tried. But you can only call spirits who are still hanging around the material world. Spirits who have strong reasons to linger. I guess true mages don’t. You also have to have a focus, an object that was precious or personal to the ghost you’re calling. The custom of burning the dead mage with all his personal effects was probably intended to help prevent that.” *I’d guess I’d inadvertently been following ancient tradition, when I gave Meldov his send-off by fire.*

“So all that stuff from the old tales is lost?”

“Perhaps some of it never was true. But there are enough artifacts like that tower to say that mages once had talents that no one now can duplicate.”

“And no one wrote that stuff down, to pass it on?”

“That was Meldov’s holy quest. Finding an old book that would unlock the secrets of the mages. He never did though, no matter where he looked. You know, the plague years coincide with the passing of the last true mages. Meldov theorized that maybe in the dark years that followed, when a lot of people died and books were burned to keep warm, the secrets passed out of human keeping. He still thought they might be out there somewhere. He summoned other old spirits to question about it, but never learned more than that.”

Tobin shuddered and I almost laughed. He didn’t know the half of it.

He said, “I can understand wanting to know. But summoning spirits sounds uncanny. Not something I’d care to do. Although I guess, if that’s where your talents lie...”

“I was fourteen when he apprenticed me and began teaching me the basics. You remember.” I’d been flying high as a kite, because the marvelous Meldov had chosen me. “He told me I had a rare gift, but I’d have to earn true apprenticeship. Lots of basic chores, of course, and languages the hard way.”

“There’s an easy way?”

I shuddered in my turn. “Oh yes.” Eventually I said, “When I was sixteen he began including me in the rituals. You were gone on your first campaign by then, and he told me I was ready. Summoning takes strength of will and attention to detail. Get the spell wrong, let your attention slip, and the revenant spirit may escape, either back out of reach or loose to haunt somewhere. Two people can hold fixed attention better than one, and two people checking the spellcraft means fewer mistakes.”

“Could anyone do it then? Raise a ghost? If they know the right spells?”

“I don’t think so. Meldov said we were special, that the focus of will needed to complete a spell was something not many men could accomplish. He said sorcerers were ninety percent training, but without the ten percent spark all the training in the world would be useless.”

“And you had the spark.”

“So it seems.” There, that was the easy part done with. I could stop there. Tobin had said he wouldn’t push me. But perhaps telling him just a bit more would help him understand my reactions. I hadn’t expected to ever share this with anyone, but then I hadn’t anticipated ever seeing Tobin again.

“When I was almost eighteen, things began to change. Meldov had always liked the nighttime more than the day. Since most summoning spells work far better in the darkness, he’d taken to waking at dusk and going to bed at daybreak.”

“I’ve heard most sorcerers do that. I know the king usually consults his mages after dark.”

“Maybe. But in the past Meldov would sometimes spend daylight hours awake too, working well past a summer dawn or even working straight through from one night to the next. So I was surprised to realize as winter became spring that he was still going to bed with the sun that year even as the nights got shorter, and not rising until dark. But I didn’t think much of it. He got more reclusive, more secretive. His personal habits changed. At the same time, he made superlative progress on some of the scrolls and old books we were translating. So maybe working only in the night was effective.”

“You were eighteen? I’d have been twenty then,” Tobin noted. “Commanding my first platoon.”

“Yes. Almost two years gone, in the hills of Galglay, I heard.” Even with my infatuation with Meldov, I’d kept track of Tobin back then, as my best and only friend.

“That was a bad campaign, slow and bitter. Give me defense over offense any time.” Tobin’s eyes held a shadow, hard to make out in the dim light, but I thought he’d found some pain of his own in those hills.

“I wish you’d been home.”

“Oh, I wished it many times too.” He sighed. “Maybe even more now. Tell me what I missed.”

I suddenly didn’t want to drag it out. Tobin didn’t need to know how Meldov had gone from being my teacher and mentor to the center of my universe, how I’d mooned over him and obsessed over every word and gesture, hoping to make him see me as more than his apprentice. Or how it went bad. If the wraith had only been willing from the very start to seduce instead of command me, it might well have owned me.

I said, “When a spell fails, the revenant spirit sometimes escapes. One night, when I was ill, Meldov decided to go ahead with a spell to trap a ghost he’d heard of, one with better language skills than any before. I don’t know what went wrong. Maybe he’d grown used to me checking his work, or sharing my strength.”

I hated to think that my illness had caused the disaster. I could probably have helped him that night. I’d been sick, but not on my death bed. I’d used my symptoms as the chance to take a break from the work. Since then I’d cursed myself up and down unceasingly for it. But there were also times when some part of me wondered if my illness had been Meldov’s deliberate doing, to keep me from being there, so he wouldn’t have to share his latest, best find. He’d shown signs of being jealous of my talents already. He’d been a complex man.

“Maybe he was tired or distracted. Or perhaps it offered him knowledge he wanted so badly that he chose to take a risk. It was an old, old spirit, with half

a hundred languages at its command, including the archaic forms no one now remembers.” *Except me, perforce.* “But that spirit was no ghost. It was a full-blown wraith. And when it escaped his circle, it ate him.”

In the silence that followed, I added, “Metaphorically, of course.”

“Explain.” Tobin’s hand hovered near his hip, as if reaching for a sword hilt, and his eyes searched the darkness for enemies. It looked like at least that hypothetical sword wasn’t aimed at me.

“A wraith is one of the undead. They have autonomy far beyond any mere ghost. It took over his mind, controlled his body. It rode him like a horse. He was dead from that moment, and the wraith was, well, not alive again but animated, I guess.” *I hoped Meldov had been truly dead, and not confined back behind those eyes, screaming helplessly. I didn’t dare imagine that, for my own sanity.*

“Could you tell it wasn’t really Meldov?”

“Eventually.”

“How long?”

“Six months. Or so.”

“Gods, Lyon!”

“I suspected something was wrong right away of course. But the wraith had access to all his memories. So I couldn’t be sure.” I’d thought the fault was in me. I’d gotten up the next evening and gone to work around the house, and when Meldov arose at full dark he’d called me into his study, accused me of being lazy, named a dozen errors I’d made, and laid down new rules...

“What did you do when you figured it out?”

I took a breath. Couldn’t say anything. I bit my lip so hard I tasted blood. Eventually I decided to skip ahead a bit. “I killed him, of course. Both of them.”

“You?”

I pushed to my feet, even though my thighs strongly voted against the move. “What? You think I’m small and weak and can’t protect myself?” I strode away from the fire, forcing myself to walk fast.

Behind me, Tobin said, “I never thought of you as weak.”

I went to the horses. Cricket ignored me, standing head low and eyes closed, but Dark looked my way and whickered softly. I moved cautiously, because warhorses were often taught to accept only one master, but he let me come up to him and lay a hand on his strong neck. I stroked him, feeling a faint ridge here and there on his skin. I slid a hand down over his shoulder, leaning against him. There was a knot of scar tissue there right where the saddle would end. I rubbed it firmly—small, slow circles like the ones that usually felt good on my wrist—and he shifted his weight against me.

I staggered, and then Tobin’s hand on Dark’s neck pushed the big horse off a bit. Tobin laid his fingertips beside mine on the scar. “That was the one that almost took my leg,” he said quietly. “If he hadn’t moved in time I’d have lost it. As it was we both took months healing, and fighting was over for both of us.”

“Where was I when that happened?” I muttered, in echo of his thought. He might have needed me. He had family, though, and other friends.

“Long dead,” Tobin said bleakly. “Or so I assumed. Did you burn Meldov’s manor?”

“Yes. I wasn’t sure the wraith would die when his body did. But it was trapped in him until sunset, at least. All I could think of was a fire, fast and hot, to burn them both while the sun still shone.”

“Good for you.”

I laughed. Never thought I would laugh about that, but Tobin sounded so fierce and proud.

“Remember when we saw those boys tormenting a kitten?” I said. “And I figured out how to get the stablemaster to catch them at it the next time and deliver a beating of their own. You said, ‘*Good for you*’ just like that.”

“I meant it then, and I mean it now. Whatever you did, to escape and survive, I’m behind you in it. I’d have been cheering you on.”

His arm on Dark’s neck was right beside my shoulder. If I moved two inches that way I could lean on it. I turned the other direction.



“It wasn’t quite that easy.”

“I gathered.”

“I’m leaving stuff out.”

“You tell me what you need to. Or don’t. Lyon, I’ve had your back since we were kids and I have it now. Believe me on this.”

I did. Or I wanted to. But it was dark out here under the stars and there were no wards on the windows. I thought of drawing a circle of protection around us all. But the ground was rough and I had no good tools, and a broken circle was worse than useless. Who knew that better than I? “I’m going to try to get some sleep. Maybe that horse of yours has beat my ass hard enough for me to drop off.”

“He has gaits like flowing water.”

“With big rocks in it.” But I was too wrung out to banter. He’d set my bedroll a small distance from the fire, between the flame and the rockface of the little cliff below the crown of the hill. Even a non-combatant like me could see it was the best-defended position. I wondered idly if that was a sop to my fears, or if he really had worries of his own. Or perhaps it was just habit. Put the weak ones in the middle. I was too tired to really care.

I found a place to piss, came back and dropped on the bed without removing my boots. After a minute he came over, and knelt at my feet.

“You don’ have to do that.” Even my voice dragged.

He still sounded wide awake. “You’ll thank me in the morning. And since I have to travel with you, *and* hear your grumbling, *I’ll* thank me in the morning.”

I closed my eyes and pretended that the tug and pull of his hands was a puppy, playing with my laces and not a man, removing a piece of my clothing. That idea was far too nauseatingly appealing to think about right now. He eased my boots off one by one, and set them aside somewhere. The blanket he’d used before settled over my shoulders. He might have said, “Sleep well,” but I wasn’t sure. Against all instincts I did sleep. *And of course, I dreamed...*

*The manacles were new. Or at least they were newly bolted into the red brick wall. I’d been in the workroom just yesterday, and the wall had been*

*bare. I stopped short, but he was behind me and he pushed me forward. "Against the wall. Close one cuff on your wrist." I tried to fight the instruction, and the brand on my arm flared to agony.*

*"It will ease when you put the cuff on." It was still my mentor's voice. The tone Meldov had used when I was being obtuse and not seeing something right in front of my eyes.*

*I was learning to take the pain. I could handle it for minutes at a time now. I gauged the distance between us. He'd been controlling me like this for days, but all he had was the pain. At first, he could put me writhing on the floor with it, nearly senseless at just a touch. But as I got better at living with it, I was gathering strength. Not long now, and I'd make a move on him. I'd get free and run.*

*I don't know if the thing could see my resolve, or just got impatient. My arm flared white hot, dropping me to my knees. When the pain faded, my arm was locked in steel and chained to the wall. "Now," my mentor wraith said. "We'll put on the other one." And the admagnium-laced steel closed on my left arm too.*

I woke choking. Tobin rolled me on my side and held my hair, and I was shaking too hard to even fight him. When my stomach was empty, he let go and I sat up. He passed me a canteen, and sat back on his heels. I rinsed my mouth, spat, and then drank.

He took it back. "Better?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"More?"

I shook my head. "Was I screaming?"

"Just moaning a bit. And then that." He gestured at the mess.

"Sorry."

"You warned me. We should pull your bed out of the way though."

I wasn't going to sleep again, but I got up and let him move my bedroll several feet over. I sat on it, feeling creaky and old. "He wanted me. He tried..."

“You don’t have to explain.”

I needed to. All those years of silence—I needed him to understand. “Meldov—his body—was getting sick. I don’t know if that was coincidence or something to do with being taken, or gods forbend, two intelligences sharing it.” *That had been my biggest horror, that Meldov might be still inside there, watching, helpless.* “The wraith was frantic, searching through all the records for ways to stay alive, or as close as it was to alive. It didn’t dare leave the house, even in the night, because moving too far from Meldov’s workshop seemed to weaken it, but it had spent six months enjoying the pleasures of being alive in the flesh.” *I’d learned that from its mind, later.*

Tobin made a gutted sound.

“Oh, I wasn’t one of those pleasures.” *Not yet.* “But it decided that it needed to move into my body. Meldov was twenty years older than me and although he should have been still young and hale, he was falling apart. It didn’t know how to do the transfer though. It came to believe the only way was to be welcomed in, as it had somehow tricked or persuaded Meldov to do.”

“It wanted to possess you? Your mind?”

“Yes—well, my flesh, more like. It wanted me, but by the time it made a move, I’d found out what it was.” *Too late. And missed a chance to run. I was a fool, so infatuated that no change, no cruelty on Meldov’s part had been enough to shake me, until it was too late and the mark was on my wrist. Such a fool.*

“I realized too late to get away. And it needed me to give it house-room voluntarily. So it chained me to a wall in the work-room and... tried things.” I couldn’t believe I could say all this, in a dispassionate voice. I’d barely been able to even think about it awake, until now.

“It tortured you?” Tobin’s tone was admirably steady.

“Not really. It wanted my body whole and healthy, after all. It tried persuasion first, offering me bribes, knowledge, power, pleasure.” *Meldov’s familiar voice, offering things I hadn’t thought to imagine.* “It kept me fed and clean, but it whispered at me, hours on end, night after night, and raged, and

threatened.” It had learned fast not to stand where I could get a kick in. A pity I hadn’t gelded it the one chance I got, but the body had still been Meldov’s and I hadn’t been desperate enough yet to put the full force behind it. After that it drugged me most days, so I woke groggy and disoriented. “It would touch my arm, in that vulnerable place where the brand was, and I would *feel* it searching for the cracks in my thoughts, the way to make me let it in.”

“A brand? It was inside your mind? It could do that?”

“The brand on my wrist came first.” I touched the spot, rubbing it. “Some kind of rune that let it get a spell into me. A pain spell at first, no more.” But it had been enough to get that first control. Ironic, that the wraith had some kind of magecraft. Meldov had finally found his source for the old magics, and not lived to know it. “Then the first night I was... restrained, it painted a spell on my back, tied into a branded key on my wrist. I never saw the details. It drugged me unconscious for the spellwork—couldn’t risk me moving and messing up the lines, I’m sure. I imagine it hoped to do the whole job of possession while I was out, but I guess you can’t consent while unconscious. But the spell hooked into my mentor’s mark, and let the wraith speak to me, inside.” I started trembling, long rippling shudders that shook me against the blankets. Tobin reached for me and I barked, “Don’t!” I couldn’t bear a touch right now. He drew back and waited.

“It tried other things. For a while. Eventually I, um, went away for a bit, and that made space in my mind, I guess.” I was never going to tell Tobin how that was done, my ankles restrained by the steel bar, my body taken and filled as it slipped through my defenses. *Say yes. Just say yes.* Not violence but slow, repeated, unwanted pleasure, over and over, stopping on the brink. And then trying again. Another night. And another. The first pain disappearing until I couldn’t remember why I didn’t want this, but only that with all my heart I *did not*. I couldn’t say no, was not willing to ever say yes. I went away for a while. “The wraith thought it had won, but it was mistaken.”

I grinned in the darkness, glad that Tobin couldn’t see me clearly. It didn’t feel like a nice grin at all, more like a thing of sharp teeth and bitter glee. That had been the most intense moment of my life, as the wraith struggled to puppet-control my newly-acquired body, and to decide what to do with the old

man. I'd covered in the back of my mind, still aware. I don't think it knew I was there. It had hovered between me and Meldov for a moment, trying to animate us both. And succeeding.

It used Meldov to take off my cuffs, and then walked my body over to the table. It let him drop unheeded to the floor, still as death. I could feel the *thing* inside me. The weight of all those years, the narrow but deep knowledge, the hunger. It was deciding if it was safest to kill Meldov, or keep him in reserve. Wondering whether it had really slipped free of him, or was still inhabiting us both. And if both, whether Meldov would have to die, in order to free it to fully inhabit me. It cared less than nothing for the man whose life it had shared for six months. It was greedy to become me.

“There was a lantern on the table. I'd been hiding, somehow, down inside my own head. I made us stumble, just enough. It didn't realize—it thought it was just its own clumsiness with the new flesh. The lamp tipped over and the glass broke. And I set my wrist in the flame.”

“Sweet goddess!”

“It was the best pain I've ever felt.” Just shock at first, and soaring, screaming exultation. Then agony, of course.

The wraith had fought me. But I'd caught it by surprise, and as the brand sizzled and warped I could feel it leaving me, sucked back into Meldov.

“When it was back inside Meldov, before it could get up off the floor, I killed them.” There'd been a knife on that table. We'd never used it for anything but cutting writing supplies, and I was working left-handed. But it went through a man's arteries just fine. “I cut its throat. His. I cut his throat.” I caught back a sob. “Oh, gods, Tobin. I killed Meldov.”

“You had to.”

“I thought so then. But I managed to get free of its hold. Maybe he could have too. Was he still in there? If I could have dragged the body outside and chained it up, waiting for daylight, might that have weakened the wraith enough for him to force it out, as I did?”

“It was in you, controlled you for how long? Minutes?”

“Yes. And not completely.”

“And it walked around in his body doing things he’d never have consented to for how long?”

That was nothing I hadn’t told myself, over and over for years, but hearing it in Tobin’s voice helped.

He said, “You were tortured, captive and possessed, and you got free. You have nothing to be sorry for. Meldov had already had a long time to get loose, if he could have. So you cut its throat. The thing was dead. What did you do next?”

It was a relief to move on from that moment. “I wasn’t sure it was really destroyed. A wraith isn’t alive to begin with, after all. But I knew we had to be close to morning, and it hated the daylight. I put a containment circle around the body, because I couldn’t manage to move it.” Not because it was heavy, although I was weakened and one-handed. But because I hadn’t dared touch it skin to skin. Even when I found a glove, reaching for the body was impossible. “I thought I’d use heat and fire, and maybe I’d burn the roof off overhead and let in the sun. I put everything we had that would burn well in that room. Including our stock of admagnium.” The precious metal we used for augmenting spellcraft burned with a white-hot flame. “All our oils, distilled spirits, candle wax, paper. Even most of the books.” I’d perhaps been a little crazy. “I packed a bag with a few things. I stole his money, and the best three books.”

“Good,” Tobin repeated with the same conviction.

“Then I threw in a lighted candle and ran.” I’d almost caught myself in the inferno. The workroom was in the basement. I’d dashed up the stairs as fast as I could, my arm cradled to my chest and the bag bumping my shoulder. The roar of the flames behind me was like a living beast, and the heat rolled up the staircase, turning it into an oven.

“I was two miles away when the sun came up, and I still wasn’t sure I was safe. I kept running. Eventually I was certain it was gone.” I’d been sick, over and over until I fell into the ditch beside the road. I’d thought I pushed it out completely before, when the mark on my wrist was gone, but I’d felt the moment an hour later when the wraith was banished. There’d been a greasy, lingering touch on my skin, on my back, in the curves and words of the spell,

and I felt when it left me. Only then did I realize its hand had still been on me, and I hadn't even known it was there.

“Where did you go? Why didn't you come to me?” Tobin's voice rose thinly. “I would have helped you. Whatever you needed.”

“At first, I was too scared and sick, barely able to hide myself away before I fell apart. When I finally emerged from hiding days later, a traveler came across me stumbling and raving and got me to the hostel at Lowbridge.” And hadn't robbed me. I never knew his name but, despite my unbelief, I gave a tithe to the goddess Bian every year, on his behalf.

“And the sisters tended you?”

“Yes. I was out of my head for a while. And after that, I needed to find a sanctuary somewhere alone. Completely alone.” Even from my oldest friend. In appeasement, I added, “Anyway, I assumed you were outcountry somewhere.” During those last six months before the wraith tipped its hand, it hadn't let me go to town at all. I'd thought it was just Meldov being angry and disciplining me. I'd tried to do better, and followed every rule, accepted the restrictions, and lost track of Tobin in my own personal hell. Not that I'd looked for him, after.

He nodded. “Maybe I was away by the time you recovered. You know, I probably was. I'd just got home on leave to Riverrun when we heard about the fire. By the time I reached the manor, it was a pile of ash with the flames still dancing in it. It was too hot to approach, and clearly far too late. I sought word of you, or Meldov, for days afterward, but when none came I was sure you were dead. I volunteered to cut my leave short and went back to the front. Depending on how long you were ill?”

“A month,” I said. I'd almost lost the arm, as the wound suppurated. The Mistress Healer had wanted to amputate, but I'd refused to let her get near it with a knife. I think I'd hoped I would die. But the sisters of Bian were skilled physickers and eventually it got better, although the damaged tendons pulled it into the claw I now lived with.

“A month? Yeah, by then I was back to chasing tribesmen in their own hills. Bloody work, but it kept me busy.”

“I just wanted a place to rest. A safe place, and far from the city. Far from people. I paid an agent to find me that little house. I’d stolen enough money from Meldov to buy the place outright. It was perfect.” *The trip there had been hell, but once I’d arrived I’d gone to ground inside its walls and not come out for a long, long time.*

“And you’ve lived there alone, all this time.”

“From the moment I could get myself there. Gods, yes.” Alone. It had been such a relief. I’d spent most of my month with the sisters first out of my head, then drugged, and eventually pretending all was well and trying not to kill the nice ladies every time they laid a hand on me. Pretending to be sane enough to be let go. *Alone* had been my goal, my only hope for salvation.

“Weren’t you lonely?”

“I wasn’t fit for human company.” It was an answer, and yet not. I’d been desperately alone. I hadn’t wanted anyone near, but still the emptiness had echoed.

Tobin’s eyes narrowed. “You seemed to be doing okay now. The boy and his mother like you. You’re known in the village.”

“Now. Yes, I can hold a conversation without running away. But at first?” I laughed. “When I got there, I had them brick up the window. And put a dozen iron bars over the bricks as further comfort. I hid behind my stone walls and thought myself safe as humanly possible. And yet the thing I was afraid of could creep beneath a door. I wrote the wards over and over.” Sometimes hourly, in fear that some passing breath of air might have altered them. “I slept inside a circle. I had my household goods brought to me, and ventured out no further than to dump the night-soil in the blazing sun of midday.”

“But you’re much better now?”

“The day I took out the bricks and replaced them with glass was a victory. I was so tired of the dark. The day I took out the bars from behind that glass, so I could look at my garden unobscured—that was when I finally felt at home.”

“How long ago?”

“Oh, years and years now,” I said airily, to hide how ashamed I was of how long it had taken me. “I donated those bars to the king’s iron drive, to be made



into swords. I felt quite pleased with myself.” I’d imagined Tobin perhaps armed with a new weapon, forged out of my escape from insanity. I’d forgotten that, but now it came back to me. I’d missed him fiercely that day.

“So you were happy there? Really? Before I came?”

*Should I say “yes”, so he would blame himself for dragging me away, or “no”, and appear to give consent to this madness? “I was content.”*

“I’m so sorry I had to force you to leave.”

I shrugged. “It’s done now.” Although there was still the city to come, and all its crowds and the king himself, waiting. *Done* was likely to be an optimistic statement.

“I’m glad you didn’t still have those window bars in place,” he added. “I’d have beaten through the door to get to you.”

“I wasn’t trying to kill myself,” I repeated peevishly. “You misunderstood.”

“I’m still not giving you the knife back.”

I was glad he was making me irritable. I’d come too close to feeling soft about him. “Suit yourself. You can keep watch then.” I rolled myself in my blanket, turned away from him, and watched the flames dance, as the night wore on.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER FOUR

In the morning I was as sore as if I'd been beaten with a stick, and a little sick at heart over the things I'd told Tobin. At least I hadn't told him the worst of it. But I'd said enough about weakness and pain that I thought I'd never share with anyone. I watched closely to see if it would change the way he treated me.

Tobin raised an eyebrow. "Do I have soot on my face? You're staring."

"You're imagining things." I forced myself to my feet. We ate a hurried and cold breakfast, to get on the road faster. Then I made the mistake of insisting I could bridle and saddle my own damned horse. Forgetting that I'd never tried it one handed. Cricket let me slide the bit into his mouth, but then spit it out when I tried to move up the cheekpieces to loop the crown over his ears. We did that little dance several times. Then he stopped opening his mouth for me. I called him names. In several languages.

Tobin laughed. "I've heard more heart-felt cursing, but not classier. Can I help now?"

I threw the bridle at him. He caught it, shook it straight with one practiced motion and moved to Cricket's head. I stepped back and pretended I liked having Tobin waiting on me. He saddled quickly, with a smack at Cricket's belly to keep him from bloating under the girth, and then handed the reins to me.

"Aren't you going to lift me on?" I grumbled. "And set my feet into the stirrups? What kind of groom are you?"

"I'm not the groom here, I'm the commander," he returned. "Mount up."

"Some commander." I made it into the saddle on the second try. My thighs were already declaring mutiny. "Reduced to bossing around one cripple. What a comedown for you."

"Stop!" He wheeled Darkwind so the stallion's shoulder came against Cricket's, forcing me to cling on to the saddle as my mount sidestepped.

I glared at him. "What's the matter with you?"

“You’re not a cripple.”

I waved my hand under his nose. “This says I am.”

“A cripple is someone who can’t work. Someone reduced to living on his lord’s dole, or begging at the gate. You work. You earn a living. You tend a garden and write and cook and live a life.”

I paused, a lump in my throat. But what I said was, “Not anymore.” I turned Cricket abruptly for the slope toward the lane.

We made it down the hill with no more than a scramble or two on the loose scree. Tobin let me go ahead at first, but at the main road he pushed Darkwind forward. Perforce, I watched his rigid back as he rode his horse out into a steady lope. Cricket tossed his head against my pull on the reins, and I gave in and let him speed up to follow. His smooth gait rocked me, but my body still protested. I muttered a few of those creative curses at Tobin, as we rode out through the bright morning.

When we’d cantered a stretch, Tobin reined back and dropped us to a walk. I gave Cricket loose reins and he lowered his head, snatching at a plant here and there to munch as we went along. I decided, since Tobin would have to clean the tack, I’d let my horse have his fun. Tobin glanced back. “You’re teaching him bad habits.”

“Seems like he came with this one.”

Tobin sighed and fell back alongside me. “If you’re a cripple, lion-boy, then so am I.”

I snorted.

“Seriously.” He slapped his left knee. “If you look under here I have plenty of ugly scars. And I can’t do the job I was born to. So if that’s your definition, then it fits me too. By my measure, though, it doesn’t fit either of us.”

He was trying to be kind, but it made me furious. “Are you seriously comparing that to this?” I waved my claw again. “You hardly even limp. So you walk a bit slower and had to stop killing people. That did what? Made you change jobs? But everything that needs doing in life seems to require two good hands. Try a day with one wrist tied behind your back and see how you get on. And then tell me how alike we are.”

“I might just do that sometime, to understand you better.” Then he grinned at me. “Although I can think of one or two important things that can be done with just one hand.” He raised an eyebrow at me, and ran his hand slowly from his knee up his thigh.

For the first time in gods knew how long, my body responded to that thought. Springing wood in the saddle of a horse, when your body already hurts like damnation, is not the fun you might take it to be. I shifted uncomfortably, and glared at him some more.

He managed not to laugh.

We rode on in silence. Eventually he said, “There was a Sergeant in my company, a big brawny man. He took an axe-blow to his left arm, lost the hand completely. I sent him to my brother when he was healed. Last I heard, he was running the manor farm, and production was nearly doubled on his watch. I doubt they consider him a cripple either.”

“Shut up,” I said, but there wasn’t much heat in it.

Getting through the morning’s ride was hard, and getting back on the horse after lunch almost impossible. Tobin offered a boost, several times. It was only the thought of avoiding his hands on my leg or my ass that helped me get myself onboard in the end. Well, that and a large rock. We set out into the warming afternoon, riding through open fields and light-dappled woodlands. We passed a few other travelers. When someone did come along, I hung back behind Tobin and let him make all the conversation with strangers. I’d forgotten how to do that.

Once my legs were numb, it was almost like a holiday again to be riding out with Tobin. His manner was easy, as if none of our hard words had happened. He took it easier on me that afternoon, too, probably out of necessity. We alternated cantering and walking, with only one stretch of trotting. And that was payback for my calling him *The King’s Crystal-sucking Lips*. He stopped as soon as I called time though, and his laugh was a pleasant one. “I know. What a symbol, eh? That mouth wrapped around a finger of quartz. I do wonder at the mage who made them. Either he was an oblivious monk, a twisted old man, or a joker.”

“You’d think the king might change it. Even a round crystal in place of the long one would look better.”

“Hallowed tradition. I’ve heard that once upon a time, the medallions were bespelled by the Kings’ Mages, so the king could actually speak through them somehow. I’m not entirely sorry that spell’s been lost. Hanging magic around my neck wouldn’t be my first choice. But no matter how much they look like a cocksucker, they’re antique symbols and no one will change them now.”

“You like it though? Your new job?”

“I do.” He shrugged. “I get to ride, see the country, serve my king. And all without killing anyone. In truth, although the leg made me quit, a dozen years on the battlefields had already quite quenched my thirst for the blood of our enemies. Nothing out there is ever as clear-cut as it seems in the history books.”

“Do you ever want to settle down?” I asked slowly. “Find a home?”

“The thought’s occurred, now and then. But walls alone don’t make a home. It’s what’s inside them.”

“For me the walls were what counted. Oh, the books are good, and a bed and a bath. But not essential.”

He looked at me steadily. “I misspoke. I meant, it’s *who*’s inside them that counts.”

“Waiting for the right man, then.” I kept my tone academic.

“Yes.”

“Tell me about King Faro,” I said quickly. “What’s he like? His father was still king when I was in the capital, and by the time news of Faro’s coronation and deeds reached my village it was often a bit bent around the edges.”

Tobin smiled. But he took up the topic, giving me a word-picture of our young king. Tobin clearly liked and respected him. Faro was only a couple years older than we were, but he’d spent time in every branch of his father’s service before inheriting the throne.

A practical man, according to Tobin, and a shrewd one. Less ambitious than his father. “He wants to keep his nation safe but not to expand it. Right

now, our borders have natural defenses, in the mountains to the east and north and the river on the south, the ocean west. The old king kept trying to push further into the mountains, but Faro was smart enough to make peace there.”

“So things are quiet?” My village was far enough from the borders that affairs of nations rarely came to our attention, even if my news hadn’t mostly come via a fourteen-year-old with more interest in cows than kings.

“I wouldn’t say quiet. The nomads in Icefeld test the northern borders, most autumns. And there’s a new Prince Regent in R’gin that His Majesty has us keeping an eye on. They like to start foreign wars over there, to distract the nobles from mismanagement at home.”

“But we have the mountains between us,” I pointed out, “And the mountain tribes, who don’t like us or the R’gin. Surely they won’t look our way.” Of course a study of history and languages made me very aware that our ancestors and the R’ginads had flowed through those mountains back and forth over the centuries. And sometimes even taken to ships and sailed around the peninsula, or crossed the broad southern marshes of Canan to meet in battle.

“They might give it another try, if they’re looking for a fight. Faro’s only been king three years, while the king in Canan is long established and very well garrisoned. They might even see our new treaty with the tribes as indication of weakness. Who knows?”

I shivered. Some of the ancient tales of battles with the R’gin were quite graphic. They believed a warrior gained strength from each man they killed in battle, and took fierce pride in their skills. They took no prisoners and left no wounded behind on the battlefield. There was a time I might have imagined that last detail a kindness, putting the wounded out of their misery, but Tobin was right, curse him. However hard it was to live crippled, I was beginning to believe it could be better than being dead.

Tobin said reminiscently, “I was in R’gin once.”

“You were? When?”

“After the leg. It was healing slowly, and I guess I was driving everyone around me crazy. Or so the king claimed.” There was a little smile on Tobin’s lips that for some reason annoyed me, but I just nodded. “So he said I might as

well recover while doing something useful. He sent me by boat, all the way around the peninsula. Two weeks going there, with the wind. Almost four coming back beating against it.”

“Why did he send you?”

“To meet a man.” Tobin sighed. “Where there are kings and hostile borders, there are spies. This was a man I’d known, one of my riding instructors actually, from when I was young. He was dark-complexioned enough to pass as a R’gin. Apparently, he’d been sent there years before and managed to work his way into their army command. But he’d sent word he had a problem.”

“So the king dispatched you to R’gin? While you were injured?”

“The man had gotten married and had two small sons over there. He wanted to send his family home before he was discovered. I don’t know how close the hunt was on his heels, but he asked that someone he knew come get them, as proof that it was safe for them. All I had to do was show up. On a boat, no less. That was about my speed at the time. I wasn’t fit for any active duty.” There was an edge of bitterness in Tobin’s voice that made me think giving up his position in the cavalry had been less easy than he led me to believe.

To distract him, I asked, “What was R’gin like?”

“Well, I barely set foot on shore, and even that was in a remote spot far away from anything interesting. It wasn’t so different from our own coastline. A little less rocky, a little more lush with trees, at least in that spot.”

“So you met the man?”

“Yes. Took his wife and children onboard, gave him money.”

“He *stayed behind*?”

“He said he had something important yet to do. I couldn’t dissuade him.” Tobin’s mouth twisted. “I brought the family back to Riverrun, under royal protection.” He hesitated, then added, “I heard the R’gin caught and executed him, eventually. But the boys are safe in the capital. I visit them sometimes.”

I winced.

“It was his choice, and I think... I think, whatever he was up to, he never hoped to outlive it. I saw his eyes when he kissed his wife goodbye...” Tobin gave a little snort. “And isn’t that a cheerful story for you. Never say I don’t know how to liven the atmosphere. Shall we canter a bit?”

He sent Darkwind surging forward without waiting for my answer. As I reluctantly set my knees in the saddle and let Cricket follow suit, I thought that it had been a good reminder, actually. I should recall that Tobin hadn’t been sitting home eating cream cakes while I was facing my own demons. He knew something of pain himself, and not just the pain of a sword-wound.

That night, we stopped in a village to buy a hot meal at an inn, but without comment Tobin had the horses resaddled and we rode another hour on before finding a place to camp. I let him set up again, and light the fire, while I stayed on my aching legs long enough to brush down the horses. Cricket rubbed against me, coating my chest with black hairs. Darkwind slobbered on my sleeve and tried to eat my hair.

“He thinks it’s straw.” Tobin was closer than I thought. “It’s the color of wheatfields still. I thought it might darken with age.”

“It’s just hair,” I said. “I’m surprised it didn’t all go grey.”

“I’m very pleased that it didn’t.”

I turned to Tobin, putting the bulk of his horse at my back. “Are you flirting with me?”

“Would it bother you if I was?”

“Yes.” I said firmly. Then, “Maybe.”

“You let me know when you decide.” He walked away to add wood to the fire.

“Your master’s crazy,” I told Darkwind, perhaps loud enough for Tobin to hear. “What on the green earth does he ever think he’ll get from me?”

Darkwind blew softly against my neck. It was no kind of answer.

\*\*\*\*

It took us three more days to reach the capital. Until we hit the Coolrapids bridge, I’d actually come to enjoy the trip. Nights were still not much fun. I



woke often, rarely screaming, more frequently just panting with fears I couldn't even name, sometimes frozen in place like a bird under the eye of a snake. Tobin always woke too, even when I thought I was silent. He would put another branch on the fire, or hand me a canteen, but he asked no questions, and I didn't tell him more. So nights weren't good.

But mornings were fine, coming out of a hazy doze to know that a day of riding was ahead. A day of sunshine, of wide-ranging conversations and easy silences. As my body became used to the routine, I had more energy for debate, and we sparred over the usefulness of the military and the best methods of taxation. Tobin was a lord's son, not just a simple soldier, and although his education didn't match my own, he'd become shrewder than I remembered. What I knew in theory, he'd sometimes seen in practice.

So the bridge took me by surprise. We were arguing about whether it made sense for the crown to set up separate hostels for injured soldiers, or to let them depend on the charity of the Sisters of Bian. I said, "Any time you create two similar systems side by side, there's going to be waste. It makes more sense for the king to just give money to the Sisters directly." I looked past Tobin and noticed the familiar arch of the bridge come into view. And fell off my horse.

I couldn't breathe. Tobin swung down and dropped to his knees on the road beside me. "Lyon! What's wrong?"

Every muscle in my body seized tight like a bad case of lock-jaw. I curled in, until all I could see was the fabric of my own trousers, inches from my eyes. I'd winded myself in a fall before, and this felt almost the same. My chest knew how to suck in air, but it wouldn't move. I wasn't even blinking. Tobin's voice above me had taken a more panicked tone, but I could no longer make out the words above the rushing in my ears. Then the world went dark.

When I came to, my head was pillowed on something warm and firm, and someone's hand was rubbing my chest. I yelped, and scrambled away. When I looked up, Tobin's startled gaze met mine. I forced myself to take a deeper breath, and another.

"Oy, he's better then," A voice behind me said.

I whirled around, tangling myself in the dust. We were at the side of the road, and on the gravel verge a small crowd had gathered. I gritted my teeth so

as not to scream at them to all stop looking at me. Tobin stood quickly and put himself between me and the other travelers. “Just a fit,” he said. “He’s been prone to them since he was a lad. He’ll be well enough now.”

“Shall I run to the hostel for one of the Sisters?” a woman asked. “It won’t take but an hour, and I’d do it for five coppers.”

“I’ll do it for four,” someone else called.

“I don’t need help,” I ground out through still clenched teeth.

“Thanks for the offer,” Tobin said more clearly. “But we’ll be fine. We’ll be on our way soon enough. Thanks for your concern.”

The crowd muttered a bit, but when it became clear I wasn’t going to do anything more exciting than sit around in the dirt they headed off on their own errands. I made my way up the embankment away from the road to the trees and sat under an old oak. Tobin coaxed the horses up too, and sat down near me, holding both sets of reins.

I was aware of his eyes on me, as I laid my hands on my knees and consciously relaxed each muscle, one by one. I’d found the technique helpful to prepare for spellcasting, when Meldov first taught it to me. I’d used it a thousand times since then, when my mind was trying to crawl out of my skin.

I focused on my breathing, trying to make each breath just a beat longer than the last, and finally felt my heart slow its frantic beat. The afternoon was quiet, with just a light wind stirring the leaves. A horse passed on the road below, hooves steady, saddle creaking under its rider’s weight. Two women went by on foot, lost in conversation. They barely glanced our way. A flock of starlings rose from the field across the way, spiraling upward with raucous cries. To my right, the ramparts of the bridge were screened by the hillside.

“What was that?” Only a small rise in tone betrayed Tobin’s worry. “I thought you’d been shot. Or had apoplexy.”

“I don’t know.” Although perhaps I did. “Half an hour’s walk further on is Lowbridge, and the Sisters’ hostel. Two hours’ ride on is the city. An hour’s ride between is the mansion.”

“You’re not... it’s not the wraith? Come after you again, after all this time?”

Now wasn't that a pretty thought, sure to raise my heart rate drastically. But no. "It's broad daylight, the mansion is miles away, and besides I felt it go. No, it's just me."

"You what?"

"Me, being afraid. I'd almost forgotten where we were headed, after all these days riding. Then I looked around and the bridge was there. I panicked."

"You fell off your fecking horse!"

"Well, yes. It was a rather feeble sort of panic."

"Don't joke about it." Tobin's eyes were bright. "Your muscles were hard as rock and I don't think you were breathing. For a moment I thought you were dead."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah." He rubbed his face with his free hand. Darkwind lowered his head to nudge his master, and Tobin scratched the horse's wide forehead absently. "Are you better? Breathing okay?"

"Seems like it."

"Do you think it will happen again?"

"How would I know?"

"Guess," he growled.

I rolled my head, flexed my shoulders. Nothing seized up. My vision stayed clear. "Not right away, at least."

"So now what? We can make camp here for the night, if we must. I'd hoped to make it to the castle tonight though. His Majesty told me not to delay."

"Well, clearly we must keep Faro happy."

"Don't be stupid. He's the *king*. He won't take kindly to that attitude."

"He'll take me as he finds me," I grumped. "And lucky to have that."

"Lyon. Please, don't make him angry."

"I thought you liked our *dear* king." Maybe too much. I'd heard a lot in the last few days about what a good king Faro was. Faro had his queen of course,

and two sons already. But a king had no choice in that, and a lover on the side was hardly unknown.

“Don’t be an ass.”

I looked over at him, startled.

He pushed Dark’s head out of the way and leaned toward me. “Sure, I like him. I think we could, and have, done far worse for a king. He’s a good man and a good ruler. He’s even a friend, or as close as a reigning monarch can be to one of his men. But in the last extremity, if it came down to him or you, I’d choose you.”

“You what?”

“You’re the best friend I ever had. Now you’re back from the dead. I’d do almost anything to keep you that way. However, if it’s not life or death...” He paused, then resumed more slowly. “If it’s just hard but not impossible, then the king has commanded you to his service and his word is law. Tell me how to make this work.”

“I don’t know.” I looked down at the road. “I was caught by surprise. I’m more prepared now. But, um, this road goes close to the mansion. It might be smart to take some less familiar route, even if it adds a bit of time.” I could feel my pulse race whenever I thought of the road I’d staggered along that day, with my arm a world of pain, and an old dead thing lingering in my mind.

“I know other routes. You think that will be enough?”

“I think we’d better try it and find out.”

We sat a while longer, looking down side by side.

“Soon?” he asked.

“Any time now.”

Another long pause.

“Need me to lead your horse, sonny?”

“Screw off, grandpa.”

Eventually I took Cricket’s reins from his hand, led the gelding down to the road, and mounted up.

Crossing the bridge turned out to be the hardest part. I actually rode up to it three times, and each time Cricket's hooves hitting the first boards sounded like a dying man's heartbeat, hollow and slow. The third time I did have Tobin lead him, so I couldn't turn back, while I clung to the saddle. My heart tried to climb into my throat, and my vision went a little grey. But once we were across it was like something in me gave up the fight.

Tobin turned off the road almost at once, leading us at a walk cross country, between farm fields. He went far enough that the bridge was out of sight and then stopped and came back beside me. "Still with me, lion-boy?"

"Mouse-boy," I said hoarsely. I squeaked at him for good measure. "With you, albeit weak and trembling." I showed him how my hand shook as I reached for the reins.

He raised his left hand toward my face and paused, a whisper away from my cheek. I could feel the heat of his palm across that gap, smell sweat and horse and leather. "I have *never* thought of you as weak."

He lowered his hand, gave me my reins and we went on, riding side by side.

\*\*\*\*

I'd never actually been inside the palace. Although my father was a minor noble, he died when I was small. My mother had hung around on the fringes of the court, but never snared another husband. And once I apprenticed with Meldov, I was on the lowest rung of a new society. Only a few sorcerers ever crossed the king's threshold. Monarchs tended to be wary of powers they didn't understand and couldn't control by force, and Meldov had claimed the King's Mages were jealous of their position, as an excuse why he'd never been inside.

Tobin got us through the outer gates, and then the inner, by showing his cocksucker badge. I giggled each time. I was a little punchy by then, with lack of sleep and stress and a fluttering heart-rate that would have put a sparrow's to shame. Tobin glanced over at me, but said nothing, just moved Dark a little closer to Cricket. Close enough to grab the reins maybe, if I turned to bolt. Once we were through the inner gates, he turned left along the wall and stopped, holding out his hand. "I'll take your horse now."

“I’m not going to try to ride away.”

He sighed. “You’re also not going to ride Cricket through a bath and into the throne room. Get down and I’ll find a groom to take them. Stay here. It won’t take me long.”

“Oh.”

I thought about just sitting there in the saddle for a bit longer. Getting used to the place. Actually letting my feet hit the cobbles seemed like a decisive move. But Tobin had that look of compassionate patience on his face and it irked me. I swung off Cricket and handed over the reins.

“Stay here. Don’t move.” He eyed me for a moment, as if gauging my compliance. Then he rode off, towing Cricket behind Dark, the horses’ hooves clattering on the cobbles.

I put my back to the stone wall, and tried to take comfort from its solidity and bulk. The courtyard was a busy place. I got a few curious looks and after a couple of minutes a tall man in the tunic of the Household Guard came up to me. “Can I help you, sir?”

“I’m waiting for Tobin.” I cleared my throat to firm up my voice. “He said he’d be right back.”

“Tobin?”

“He’s, um, a King’s Voice? He used to be in the cavalry?”

“*Captain* Tobin?”

“You know him?”

“Of course. I’ll wait with you, sir.”

I wanted to tell him to screw off, and leave me to my solitary patch of wall, but I didn’t dare. I slid a little further away from him and set my teeth and waited.

Ten minutes later, a boy in a page’s tunic came running up. “Excuse me sir, but are you Mister Lyon?”

“Yes.”

“Captain Tobin sent me, sir. He said to tell you,”—the page drew himself up to his full, if rather puny, height and tried to deepen his voice—“he’s been called to attend the king, but he will try to be quick. In the meantime, your

bags have been taken to the room and your bath water is being drawn as I speak. He said to tell you you have first chance at the bath. Sir.” He smiled with pride at his smooth delivery.

And I wanted to scream. So much for putting me ahead of Faro. The king crooked his little finger and Tobin went running, leaving me here in a strange place, surrounded by a crowd of people. My logical side tried to remind me that, for most men, an invitation to go inside and take a bath after a long trip wouldn't be a cause for panic. But I was no longer *most men*, and panic was very near.

As I hesitated, the page reached into his pouch and held something out. “He bade me give you this as a token. And to say twice, he'll not be long. And I'm to show you the way.”

Hesitantly I took the small hilt from the boy's fingers. It was my own knife. It wasn't much use as a defensive weapon, so he meant it as a sign. That he trusted me? That I could control myself? He clearly had more faith than I did. I had nowhere to sheathe it, but it was a comfort in my hand. “Lead on,” I said.

After the third turn, I couldn't have found my way out in a fire. I was distracted by the tapestries and stained glass windows, the slate floors inlaid with marble, and the carved, vaulted ceilings even in the corridors. I followed the boy in blind trust, up stairs and down halls, the knife in my hand. Eventually we fetched up at a door, one in a row of similar maplewood slabs set along a look-alike corridor. The boy swung the door open. Inside was a modest room, with tall mullioned windows, now showing a rapidly-darkening sky. There was one large bed with a fur rug on the floor beside it, a wardrobe and a few free-standing shelves. In the center of the room sat a large, glorious metal bath filled with water that steamed gently in the light of a single lamp.

The boy motioned me inside, and pretended not to notice as I squeezed past as far from him as I could manage. My bags and Tobin's were set at the foot of the bed.

“Shall I send someone to help you with your bath?”

“Hells, no!” I took a breath, and backed up a step further into the room. “Thank you. This is fine. Will Tobin, Captain Tobin, find me here, do you think?”

“These are his rooms, whenever he’s here,” the boy said cheerfully. “Enjoy your bath, sir.”

After he’d given me a sketchy bow, indicating uncertainty about my rank, and left, I closed and barred the door. *Tobin’s own rooms*. It was logical that he’d want to keep an eye on me, and truthfully I didn’t want to be alone here. After four nights on the road, I trusted him not to be disgusted or dismayed by my displays. Or at least never to show it. But I did wonder what that boy had thought. There was only one bed in here. Did he know Tobin was fay? Could he tell that I was? Would they all be thinking that I was Tobin’s lover?

Surely not. He’d been sent to find me for the king, after all. And sharing a bed was not unknown, when space was tight.

The temptation to explore his rooms was strong. But I allowed myself just a look through the archway. There was a second room attached, with similar large windows and a table and chairs set in front of them. There was a rack of maps, rolled in metal map-cases, and several books on a shelf. I couldn’t resist the lure of checking the titles. It was a very mixed collection; *The Military Genius of Colonel Lennard* sat cheek-by-jowl with *Tales of the Wood*. I caught my hand back before opening that to see if it was the rare first edition.

*Bath. I was supposed to have a bath.* Not that the idea was any hardship. I tried to remember how long it had been since I’d had a real, deep, hot bath. I came up with a number I didn’t want to think about. I had a bathtub in my garderobe back home, but I was mostly too lazy to fill it full and then have to empty it. I’d typically settled for just enough water to get clean in. That tub in the other room was the height of luxury. *Meldov loved luxury.*

The water had stopped steaming by the time I made myself go back through the archway.

The front room was still empty. The door was still barred. I stripped slowly, my tired fingers fumbling the buttons I had in place of laces on my clothes. Once naked, I scrambled into the water. It was no longer hot, but it was still heavenly. I sank down, letting the water rise to my chin, and closed my eyes. There was soap on a clever rack clipped to one side. I should scrub myself. Eventually.

Water going up my nose woke me with a jolt. I coughed and surged up, soaking the floor, and then sat down fast as I realized I was naked. The room



was still empty. Fortunately. I took up the soap and cloth and set about getting five days of road dirt off my hair and body.

It was a decent body, I thought. If you could just ignore the cursed hand, and the way one shoulder had a little less bulk than the other. There was a time when I'd been rail-thin, enough to count every rib, but the last eight or nine years I'd gotten past that, putting effort into eating well and becoming strong. My chest had definition, my stomach was still flat. I ran the soapy cloth over myself slowly. I had very little body hair, and what there was was as blond and fine as the rest. My skin was pale and smooth enough. *How did Tobin like his men? Did he want them small and boyish, or muscled and furred like he himself was? I was neither of those.*

As if summoned by my thoughts, there was a rattle of the door handle and then a knock. "Lyon? It's me."

I dropped the cloth, knocked the soap into the tub with my elbow, and splashed the floor again.

"Can you let me in? It's me, Tobin."

No joke. Like I wouldn't remember him or something. Unfortunately I was soaking wet and naked, and getting dressed with one hand was not an instant process. I stepped out of the tub, getting the floor even more wet, and grabbed for the towel draped on the handle. It was generous, but I could clutch it around my hips or around my shoulders, not both. I opted for hips, and went to lift the bar.

Tobin raised an eyebrow at me, and the way his eyes trailed down from my wet hair to my face, to my chest and lower, made me shiver.

He said, "I'm sorry. I thought you'd be done."

I cleared my throat. "It took me a while to get started."

"I'd offer to come back later, but our time is limited. Can I come in?"

I backed away from the door. "Sure."

He followed me in and reclosed the door. I hesitated there awkwardly, aware that he was standing close to me. He reached out and snagged another towel from the stack. "You're dripping." His voice was soft, and he raised the

cloth slowly to my head, rubbing at my hair. After a first startled moment I stood still and let him do it. His hands cradled my head, through the rough absorbent fabric. I could almost feel his fingers, his palms, but not quite. It was touch without being touch. It was wonderful. I closed my eyes.

After a while he moved lower, drying my neck, my back; when he slid the cloth to my chest I stepped back. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure. Truly.” He looked at me steadily. “Too much?”

“No.”

He smiled and tossed the towel over my head. “My turn for the tub anyway.”

“It’s cool and no longer clean. Do you want to ring for fresh water?” I had no real knowledge of castle life, but if they could conjure one bath that fast, they could surely bring up another.

Tobin shook his head. “No time. Anyway I’m filthy enough that second-hand water will be just fine.”

“I was just as filthy as you are,” I protested.

He wagged his eyebrows at me, and began unlacing his shirt.

I turned my back on him, and went to my bag. It was still tied tight, and I couldn’t hold onto the towel and untie it as well. Behind me I heard the water slosh as Tobin got in. He said, “Wait just a minute, and I’ll find you some clothes of mine to wear. We’re summoned to the king right after dinner, and you’ll want to look better than a smallhold farmer.”

“Do we actually get dinner?”

“I asked them to bring up a tray when it’s served. I thought you’d want to avoid the great hall, at least your first night.”

“Oh. Yes. Good idea.”

There were more water sounds, and then he said, from suddenly close behind me, “Are you still doing all right?”

I turned. He was standing naked, toweling his hair with another cloth. His body was different from what I remembered, though there were echoes of the

eighteen-year-old in this man. He still had long legs, slim hips, and big feet. His chest was much wider and more muscled, his nipples larger and darker, hiding in a forest of chest hair much thicker than he'd had when we were young. Other things had changed too. I jerked my eyes up to his face, feeling my skin blaze.

He smiled gently. "You can look. I like it."

My eyes tracked down, willed or no. *Yes, he clearly did like it.* I whirled around.

From behind me, he said, "I'm sorry. I'm pushing you again."

"No. Don't be sorry. If I was a normal man, I'd be flattered."

"A normal fay man. If you were straight, you might punch me."

"Well, that's clearly not the problem." The tent I was creating in my own towel made that quite clear. "But I can't. Not now."

"And a good thing too," he said, in a matter-of-fact voice. "Since we'll have the kitchen maid knocking on the door with dinner any time now. Come on, let's find you something to wear."

My erection flagged fast at the thought of being interrupted by a stranger. I heard him open the wardrobe and turned. He was still unselfconsciously naked, digging around in one of his drawers. He was fine to look at from this angle too, with a broad back only faintly graced with hair, and a smooth, naked ass. I could see the scar on the side of his leg, a deep groove of white, with an arc of rough redness beside it. It was a big scar, but it hardly touched the perfection of his body.

He pulled out a shirt and held it up. "This might fit you. And these." More clothing. "Trews. Or trousers? I wonder if I have any good ones left. I've worn uniforms for far too long."

He tossed several things on the bed and said, "Get the smalls on and then I'll give you a hand with the laces."

I felt better once I had my ass covered. Enough better to watch as he dressed hurriedly in a blue uniform jacket with matching trews. Enough to stand still as he chose a shirt, jacket and trousers for me, and laced me into them. "Sorry," he muttered as he knotted the shirt lace at my throat, and then

began on the jacket buttons. “I thought we’d have time to get you something altered, but the king’s in a tearing hurry.”

“That’s all right.” I kind of liked wearing his clothes. Even if the jacket was falling off my shoulders, it felt like some kind of armor.

He stood back, looked at me, and clearly smothered a laugh. “Well, it’s better than anything you have, so it’ll have to do.”

“Do I look like a boy, dressed in his father’s togs?”

“Actually, more like a lover who grabbed the wrong jacket in the dark.”

I actually growled at him, and he did laugh. The kitchenmaid’s knock on the door distracted us both. “No time to fight. Don’t get soup on my good coat.”

There was no soup, but there was half a roast fowl for each of us, with good bread and carrots, and a dish of stewed apples. Tobin dismissed the maid, carried the tray to the table in the other room and set it down. We ate well, although fast. A boy brought a pitcher of beer and one of water before we were through. Tobin eyed the beer wistfully. “That looks damned good, but I think we want a clear head.” He set it aside. “Maybe after.” We stuck to the water.

A bell rang somewhere below while we were finishing off the apples, and Tobin startled. “Crap. That’s the end of the meal. Evening court will be next. Come on.” He hurried to the door, and I followed automatically.

The castle wasn’t any less confusing in the full dark, even with lamps along every wall. I stuck close behind Tobin. This was a new route, with three flights of stairs and a long portrait gallery I’d have liked to see better. Twice I lagged behind, and each time Tobin noticed immediately and slowed for me to catch up. Despite his leg, he was faster on the stairs than I was. Although it was something besides fatigue that slowed my steps.

We turned a last corner, and came out into a large hall thronged with people. At the end of the hall, two huge inlaid doors led to yet another room. I recognized the place from descriptions. Beyond that portal was our monarch’s throne room. And in front of it was a crowd of strangers, some of whom were even now turning to look at me. My courage deserted me all at once, and I turned and ran.

Tobin caught up with me at the top of the first flight of stairs. He grabbed my arm. “Where are you going? You can’t leave now.”

I broke free of his hold. “Watch me.”

“This isn’t some game!”

“Do I look like I think it’s funny?” My chest heaved as I fought for breath. “I can’t go back there!”

“What’s wrong?”

“All those people.” I put my back to the wall and slid down it, unable to keep my knees from bending. “Tobin, I spent weeks seeing no one at all. Months sometimes. I left money on the doorstep and they left my food. Even now. The boy comes on Naday and Choday. Just twice in a week. Two days of six. He stays for a few minutes, maybe a bit more. Sometimes I manage to chat for half an hour before I have to send him on his way. *I can’t go down there.*” I started sobbing, harsh breaths that racked through my chest. “Please don’t make me. Don’t let the king make me go in there.”

“Ah gods! Lyon!” Tobin bent over me, his hand hovering above my hair.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I know you think I’m strong, but I’m not.” I wrapped my arms around my stomach. The king commanded us, and he wanted me to walk in there and stand before his throne. Probably with a hundred people watching. He might ask me questions. I could no more do that than I could fly. I held myself tighter. The chicken I’d eaten was making a bid for freedom. I clenched my teeth on the bile that filled my mouth. That would be perfect—to puke on the king’s inlaid wooden floor. I swallowed hard. “I’m a disaster.”

Tobin touched my hair, a feather’s brush. “Lyon, don’t say that.”

“I’m sorry but it’s true. I’m useless and he can force me, *you* can force me, but I’ll probably throw up on his shoes and he still won’t get whatever he wants from me. I beg you. Let me go home.” I pressed my face to my knees. “I just want to go home.”

Tobin turned and sat beside me. His shoulder touched mine and I let it. It felt almost like another wall. “Let me see what I can do. All right? He wants something from you. He wouldn’t want to break... to hurt you. At least not without getting it first.”

I choked a tiny laugh at the realism of that.

Tobin leaned closer. “I’ll tell him you can’t abide crowds. I’ll ask him to meet you somewhere quiet. The odds are, whatever he wants isn’t something he’d spread around an open court anyway. The real work usually comes after. This was probably just to get a measure of you.”

“Well, now he’ll know.”

He bent over me. I felt something, like a brush of lips on my hair, and looked up to find a look of helpless tenderness on Tobin’s face.

Or maybe it was just pity. I hid my face again.

“Can you at least do that, lion-boy? If I get him to meet you with just a few advisors around, can you speak with him?”

I shook my head against my knees. “I want to. You know I do. Just like I want to cross bridges and sleep through the night.” *And touch you. Gods, I want to be able to touch you.* “It’s not my choice. I’ll try. But I’d much rather go home.”

“At least try.”

“I said I would.”

Tobin sighed. “Can you find your way back to our room, if I go into the throne room?”

I just raised my head and looked at him.

“Yeah, silly question. Everyone gets lost in here at least seven times, before they get the hang of it.” He glanced around. The corridor was empty, which had been a relief during my display of extreme mewling and panicking. But he frowned. “If I find a page, will you let them show you the way back?”

How could I say no? I wanted to. I would have begged him to come with me, to stay with me. I’d have told him I only felt safe when he was nearby. But he had his duties, and I was trying not to be a baby about this. I nodded.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER FIVE

I waited in his room, for what felt like hours. His knock on the closed door made me jump. I didn't move to answer until he said his name, twice, and my name. Then I went and unbolted the door. He came inside saying, "I got him to agree..." and then he stopped, looking around.

There was no chalk in his rooms and no charcoal. Pens write badly on stone. But he had ink in plenty, and I had a working fingertip. I'd sketched the runes of protection and exclusion everywhere I could, dipping over and over in the ink-bottle. I'd used up all his black, and most of the blue. Over the windows first, and then the door. Then every bare wall as high as I could reach. I'd heard that the castle had secret passages and that walls could open with hidden doors. I was taking no chances.

He sighed, just loud enough for me to hear it, and then reached for my hand. I was so wrung out I let him do it. He looked at my finger, and then led me over to the ewer on the sideboard. "Here. Let's see if we can wash some of that off." He poured water in the basin and rubbed soap on my indigo fingers, the blue foam rising between his knuckles. He rinsed me, scrubbed, rinsed again. I let him. He raised my hand to inspect it. "You've rubbed the tip raw."

"The stone is rougher than it looks."

"Oh, thank Bian, there you are."

"What?"

"You looked so lost. I was worried."

"Well you said yourself, everyone gets lost in this castle." That wasn't what he'd meant and I knew it. But we both pretended it was. It had been a near thing. When the page brought me back, there had been a very strong temptation to burrow under the covers and disappear into my head. But writing the spells, keeping the symbols clean and proportional, and avoiding drips, had kept me grounded. One can't do sorcery with less than full concentration, not even the spells I knew in my sleep.

I pulled my hand free, and pinned the towel with my forearm while I

rubbed it dry. “You were telling me the king had agreed? Will he come here? I made it very safe.”

“No, Lyon, you know that. He’s the king. You go to him, he won’t come to you. But the court was just for introduction. He didn’t much care. Where he really wants you is after sixth bell, in his sorcerer’s workrooms.”

“Doing what?” My voice rose. “I don’t do sorcery any more. He knows that, right? You told him?”

“I didn’t have to. He doesn’t want a sorcerer but a translator. I don’t think he even knows whether you finished your apprenticeship. Whatever he wants you to translate is there, I think. Be calm.”

“I am calm.” The absurdity of that made me giggle helplessly, and after a moment he laughed too. Oddly, it helped a lot.

“Well, I’m looking forward to getting this over with,” I said, determinedly cheerful. I’d had time already to gibber in panic, then bemoan my idiocy, and then pursue the meditation of work. I *was* better. “And maybe I’ll get a look at the castle libraries, before I go home. That could make the trip worthwhile.”

Tobin gave me a warm, pleased smile. I’d have done a lot for that look. He went to the other room and returned with two cups. “Here. Drink something.”

I lifted it and smelled ale. “I should keep a clear head.”

“I watered it. You need to wet your voice.”

I raised an eyebrow at him, but drank obediently. He was right. I hadn’t realized how dry my throat was until that cool liquid went down it. “Blessed Na, that’s good.”

“Finish it fast. The bell will ring soon. We have to go.”

I’d barely emptied the cup before he was taking it from my hand, his brow furrowed. “We need to head out now. He doesn’t like to be kept waiting.” He reached to adjust the collar of my shirt, where I’d tugged it open in search of air to breathe. The back of his hand barely brushed my chin in passing, but it felt like a caress. *I will not lean into that.* I froze, not moving a muscle as he tidied me.

“Ready?”



“Yes.”

“I’m sorry.” He glanced around the room. “You did all this work.”

“It wasn’t really for the king. I may be crazy, but I’m not stupid. I knew he wouldn’t come here.” Although some craven part of me might have hoped. “Once we’re done, I’ll sleep sounder, knowing the wards are there.”

“Ah. Good thought.”

“His sorcerer’s rooms will be warded anyway,” I told him, and myself. “Probably better wards than anything I can devise. Almost certainly.” I’d made a study of runes of protection in the last fifteen years, but the Royal Mages were wise and learned men, and had access to far more resources. “It will be safe there.”

“Right.” He gave me a firm nod. “So, shall we go?”

I nodded back, but it still took a long moment, as he held the door open, before I crossed back over that threshold.

The nighttime castle had a different feel. With the evening meal over, and many of the inhabitants retired to their chambers, the halls were emptier and more businesslike. Most of the people passing had a pressing reason to be out, and we garnered no more than a glance or two. Tobin led me across, up, and then down. And down, and down, and down.

It made sense that the sorcerers’ workrooms would be underground. Even Meldov’s had been, as defense against sunlight ever disrupting a fragile working. Here there would be vast cellars anyway, for storage and provisions. There would be room for a dozen of Meldov’s rooms, and more to spare. But it still felt like the air got thicker and harder to breathe with each staircase we descended.

To distract myself I said, “I’d have thought they’d use the mages’ tower to work.”

“Apparently not. If you have the stones, you can ask them why.”

I shook my head hard. *Really not that interested.* Although the curiosity would nag at me later, no doubt. At the bottom of the third flight, we were challenged by a pair of guards. Tobin had to show his pendant and give his

name to pass. At the bottom of the fourth, there was another pair. Those knew him by sight and passed him on.

“The king’s security has been tighter than usual for weeks,” Tobin commented to me, as we finally, blessedly, turned left down a corridor instead of taking another flight of steps. “He’s worried about something.”

At the double doors at the end of the hall, two more guards waited. The doors were shut, and I could see runes of power and warding written across them. They looked as though they were inlaid with admagnium, perhaps mixed with silver. Either for show or because it augmented their strength. Meldov had never used admagnium for much. He’d hoarded it though, as a sign of wealth and against some future plan. The only working I’d seen made with it was the handcuffs on the wall...

I paused and took three slow breaths, while Tobin hovered beside me. If I let every glimpse of admagnium overset me, we would no doubt be in for a long night. The King’s Mages could surely afford to use the stuff at will. I took another breath and began walking again. They were impressive doors, all right.

The guards there didn’t challenge us either, but they rapped on the doors rather than opening them. There was a long wait. Personally, I’d have either knocked again or left, but apparently you didn’t do that to kings. When I reflected that there were an unknown number of powerful sorcerers in there too, I decided I could stand waiting.

We sorcerers aren’t able to kill a man with a glare or set your liver on fire with a gesture, like the mages of legend, but we’re nasty, sneaky infighters in a realm where information is a weapon. I did *not* want someone raising Meldov and asking him how he died.

Eventually one of the doors opened and a dour, older man beckoned us inside. I let Tobin take the lead and followed at his shoulder.

Although the room was a dozen times the size of Melov’s, it looked familiar. The protective wards were painted on the walls, not inlaid after all, and I couldn’t help checking them all for accuracy and completeness, turning on my heel to look behind me too. When I finished my circuit, I realized

everyone was staring at me. A tall, thin man with greying hair cleared his throat meaningfully at me, with a superior glare at my antics. “Your attention, sir?”

The smaller man beside him said, “I want speed, not ceremony.” I looked at him, and realized I was face to face with my king.

I dropped to my knees, and Tobin did the same, with less speed and more grace. King Faro the Second eyed me for a long moment. I wanted to lower my eyes, and couldn’t. I didn’t speak either. It was one thing to have mouthed off to him in my mind, in the safety of my rooms. It was altogether a different thing to consider here, under the stare of his intense amber eyes, with the King’s Mages beside him. I could almost feel all the power in the room, and none was mine.

King Faro said, without preamble, “I hear you can translate from ancient *kanshishel*.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“What about the hill tribes, the *tridescant* they use?”

“I know a little of the modern tongue. A lot more of the ancient one.”

“It’s the ancient that I need.” He looked at me thoughtfully. “Get up, Lyon of Riverrun, and let’s begin.”

I stood, but in horror heard myself say, “Not of Riverrun anymore, my liege.”

Luckily he was more curious than offended. “Of where then?”

*Of a tiny stone house, locked away on the edge of a small village, far from the next town.* “Of nowhere.”

He frowned. “Very well. Come along.” He and the man—the sorcerer, now that I noted his manner—went across the room to a workspace. Against the back wall, the altar to Na was simple, with a single candle in a glass chimney. The floor was tiled in white marble, slightly roughened to take a mark. A spellworking was laid out on the floor. A summoning. I checked the power vectors and saw they were going after someone, or something, very, very old. I shuddered.

“My liege. Your Majesty, I don’t do summonings.”

He glanced at me. “My sorcerers will do the summoning, of course. I need you to listen and translate. Tobin?”

“Yes, sir?”

He actually smiled at Tobin. It bothered me, even more when Tobin smiled back the same way.

“There’s paper and pens on that table. Keep a record of everything your friend says. We may not get many more chances to call up this shade.”

“Yes, sir.”

I hugged myself, aware my hands were starting to shake. It was only partly to delay things, though, when I said, “Your Majesty, if I’m to translate for a ghost, with time of the essence, the more I know ahead of time, the more sharp and accurate my words will be.” *Translate for a ghost. Na, Lord of Magic, protect me from my own folly.* I fervently hoped these tall austere men with their fine clothes and cool eyes knew what in the hells they were doing. I clung to the thought that at least it would not be me in any of the points of the working.

King Faro said slowly, “I suppose that’s fair. But...” He looked at Tobin. “Captain, you vouch for this man? Completely and on your life?”

“I do, sir.”

He turned to me. “This is a matter of state secrets, in deadly earnest. You must swear to tell no one, not your wife, not your mother on her deathbed, not the mentor your rever.”

“I’ve none of those now, Your Majesty.” When his glare turned molten hot, I added, “I swear, my liege.”

He nodded and then gestured at the cluster of guards in the room. Most of them went to the doors and all but two stepped out, pulling the doors shut behind them.

King Faro said, “This secret is known only to those in this room and my trusted generals. We may soon be under attack.”

I flinched, but bit back my question.

“The Prince Regent of R’gin is massing an army. He’s pretending it’s to attack the Falday to his east, but supplies are moving in other ways, openly toward the coast, but larger amounts in secret west across his country to the mountains. I have more than enough clues to know we are his most likely target.”

I glanced at Tobin, wondering if he’d known about this and hidden it at his king’s command, but he looked startled. Faro raised an eyebrow at Tobin in silent permission to speak, and Tobin said, “Foolish of him, surely, my liege, after the way the mountain tribes beat each of us to a standstill in the last twenty years. To attack by sea is a long, slow sail against the tradewinds, to attack from our east, he’d have to get through their mountains first, and the tribes will not allow it. I don’t think we have much to worry about, until he actually clears the last range with enough men to still do damage.”

“Ah, but we believe he’s not planning to go over the mountains, but under them.”

Tobin frowned, and clearly restrained whatever skeptical comment had occurred to him.

King Faro said, “Remember the legend of the invasion of the NaR’gin, a millennium ago? The Path of the NaR’gin?”

“I thought that was a legend. An old wives tale.”

I’d thought that too. There were fantastical stories of how the army of the NaR’gin, the Mage-God’s chosen people, suddenly appeared this side of the mountains, on the foothills of our western border. There was no doubt they’d shown up in their thousands, and beaten our unprepared western army. The invasion and conquest had lasted for centuries. Eventually, it had become less invasion and more settlement as they intermarried with us, and R’gin blood was diluted by ours. Darker skin and their smaller stature were still common enough among us.

The various legends claimed that mages of the NaR’gin had transported the entire army by magic on a bridge of air or perhaps a deep tunnel. But every history book I’d read assumed that they’d actually crossed over the mountain passes, in a masking snowstorm or a cloud of illusion at most. The NaR’gin

were supposed to have had true mages, who could alter matter with the force of will. But the idea of the Path, a magical tunnel under or over the mountains, was considered aggrandizement and fairytale. The mountains were many miles wide, and towered high. A tunnel would have been magecraft on a whole different level even from creating a stone tower without seams.

The tall man whom I assumed to be Firstmage said, “Well, we’re skeptical of the idea that their mages created a tunnel with magic. Those of us who’ve made a lifelong study of sorcery know that’s probably nonsense. But there are ways to tunnel without magic, possibly with armies of slaves. If we can create a mine with miles of tunnels in the span of a few years, they could dig under the mountains, given time and men. Perhaps their mages helped with ventilation shafts or in other smaller ways, to make the work go faster and let an army move through safely. In those days, we knew far less of the NaR’gin, and had fewer spies there, thinking the mountains were impassable. They could have worked on a tunnel for decades without our ancestors knowing it was more than another silver mine.”

“If there was a simple physical tunnel, wouldn’t they have continued to use it?” Tobin asked. “The whole reason we became separate countries again was because travel between us and R’gin was so hard and long that no one ruler could effectively command both. Or so it’s been assumed. If there’d been an easy road, surely it would’ve been used.”

“Roads go both ways,” King Faro said. “They may have kept its location a secret, for fear of an invasion in return. Perhaps their mages clouded their soldiers’ minds into forgetting where the opening was. And then there was so much turmoil in the years that followed, with the Plague and unrest on our side, and three assassinations and changes of ruler on theirs. Maybe the secret died with someone. Maybe it collapsed. Maybe their mages hid it from the new rulers. There’s no way to know.

“We’ve obviously assumed either it never existed or it was permanently lost, because we all know that nothing has been heard of it for at least nine hundred years. But now there is a whisper that the tunnel of the NaR’gin has been found. On their side. And that they plan to bring another army through it.”

“A whisper? You trust this information, sir?”

“Enough to take it seriously. It came from more than one source, and a good man risked his life in the mountain passes in winter to bring me word of it. I believe that my best agents think it’s real. Which is enough to get my sorcerers to take up work on it. Their approach was to call up ghosts old enough to perhaps know the truth.”

That rocked me again. True ghosts lost power as they aged, slowly fading. *Unless they were undead. Surely the King’s Mages would know the difference.* I took a breath, and forced myself to think it through. They might locate such a ghost. One that was a millenium old would have to be either a very powerful man in life, or filled with emotion strong enough to sear the summoner. I was deeply glad not to be part of the actual working. In fact, I really didn’t want to be anywhere near it.

I didn’t realize I’d made a pained sound, a whine of “No,” until Tobin took my arm in a punishing grip. The king was glaring at me. I said quickly, “You don’t want to mess with ghosts that old, Your Majesty. Truly you don’t.” I pulled my arm free of Tobin’s hand.

The king had the gall to smile. “I think my sorcerers can handle it.”

I looked at them. There were always three of them, titled Firstmage, Secondmage, and Thirdmage, even though they no longer had powers of true magecraft. That I knew of. Meldov had said they didn’t. But perhaps that was another state secret. Or perhaps, as we all assumed, it was just a name. They stood behind the king, three men all tall and lean and grey, ranging from late middle age through elderhood. They all had piercing eyes, which at that moment were turned on me with the disdainful expression I bet they’d use on a new apprentice who’d spilled soup on a working.

I said to them, “I saw a wraith, once.”

“I assure you,” Firstmage said, “This is a ghost and no wraith. I *do* know how to identify a revenant spirit.”

I could only nod.

“This man was a hillstribes leader, judging by the style of the focus. We believe from the artifact that he led one of the largest tribes on this side of the

mountains, at the time the NaR'gin invaded. But he will speak only the ancient tridescant of his people and none of us know enough to understand more than a word or two. We brought in a questioner able to ask our questions in modern tridescant and got no responses. It took weeks of work to find this ghost and the chance we'll locate another spirit from that era are vanishingly small."

I had to ask, "How did you choose him? Was there no one else?" I regretted the implied criticism before it left my lips. But the king gestured at Firstmage to answer me.

"We know the date of the invasion, of course, and the plague which followed. The treasury has artifacts from many leaders and artists of the times, whose date of death was recorded. We inspected all that we could find of their possessions, for signs that they still served as focus for a ghost we could call. As expected, over that span of time, almost all were inert. Other than that." He pointed to the fourth point of the working, where the focus object had been placed. From where I was, all I could see was that it looked like some kind of necklace. "That one still had resonance, although its original owner was not one of our people. When we called the ghost forth, none of us could speak with him." It was clear how much that annoyed Firstmage.

King Faro said, "My sorcerers will call the ghost and control him, and compel him to speak. I will tell you what I need to know. You'll ask him, in his own language, and listen to the answers, and translate for us." As if it would be just that simple.

At least I wouldn't have to be close to the ghost, or bound into the working. I still asked, "What's his driver?"

"Driver?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. The thing that makes him linger as a ghost, so long after all his people have moved on. It pays to know what it is, because speaking of a ghost's driver can turn them to such grief or hate or fear that they'll rage and cry and speak no more sense."

"What we call the ghost's *motivator*, Your Majesty." Firstmage's tone was superior.

"Oh, that. We don't know, obviously. If we could ask that, we'd be able to ask the rest."



I supposed that was true. My whole body felt chilled. Tobin bumped my shoulder with his, as if trying to compensate for the shortness of King Faro's response. I shivered and leaned against him, hard enough to really feel his solid bulk.

"We're ready, my liege," one of the other sorcerers said.

"Begin."

Without further ceremony they took their places on the working. Because they were three, their pattern was a circle within a square, with a sorcerer in each of three active corners, and the framework of the spell, the focus used to find and bind the right spirit, in the fourth corner. I wondered how a tribesman's artifact had come to be in the palace treasury. Perhaps a spoil of war. The tribes of that time had sniped at both us and the NaR'gin equally, whenever we got too far into the hills, and we'd returned the hostilities. Something which had not changed over the centuries.

The King's Mages worked fast. Thirdmage lit the intersect-candles with brisk economy of movement. Then they turned to building the spell-construct with their chant. A small part of me wanted to join in. My memory supplied the form, the responses, whispering to me that I had done this before, that the magic still sang in my bones. I'd had this power once. A far larger part of me wanted to run far and fast. I leaned harder against Tobin and kept my place. There were guards on the door anyway, and I knew the king's secrets. They wouldn't let me go. *They might never let me go.*

I was staring at my feet and hyperventilating badly enough that I almost missed the ghost's arrival, but I felt Tobin tense to living steel beside me. I looked up. The ghost was standing there, shorter and browner than a modern hillsman, dressed in simple furs and leathers, with a spear in his hand. I fervently hoped their circle was well wrought.

"*Who calls me?*" he asked, in *tridescant* far more liquid and tonal than the modern. In fact, tone was all-important and the words barely ran under it. Ancient *tridescant* was more like music than speech. I hoped I had the voice for it.

"*We command you,*" Firstmage said, in the modern vernacular.

The ghost turned to look at him, cranking his head further round than anyone could in life. Some old ghosts began to forget their original shape, or perhaps he'd died of a broken neck. "*Who speaks?*"

Firstmage looked at me. Already the word "speaks" had a tonal lift at the end missing in the modern. The closest modern equivalent that I knew would mean, "*Who makes music*", and I could see where they'd needed me. But with every eye in the room turned my way, I shook like a leaf, unable to open my mouth.

Against my side I felt Tobin move, as if getting ready to explain or excuse. To cover for me. Well, to all the deepest hells with *that*. I said, "*I will speak for us.*" I must have gotten it about right, despite the hoarse edge in my voice, because the ghost focused his dead eyes on mine.

*"You speak strangely, man of the plains."*

*"I learned your tongue late."*

*"Most do not learn it at all."*

"What are you saying?" the king snapped.

"Introductions, my liege. He wants to know who we are."

"Tell him as little as possible. He might be called up later by someone in R'gin."

That was always a possibility. Calling a ghost gave you no more ownership than the time it spent in your circle. It could be summoned elsewhere a minute later, if they had another focus for it. Although you could sometimes wear it down too thin to be recalled by anyone. I hated when the Meldov-wraith had done that deliberately, to keep secrets for himself. For itself.

I gave the ghost a nod. "*My leader wishes information.*"

The ghost seemed to struggle for a moment. But the King's Mages knew their work—calling a ghost would be of little worth if it could just refuse to speak to you. Compulsion was part of the spell. He said slowly, "*It seems I must answer.*"

"*Who are you?*" It seemed smart to establish that first. "*When were you born?*"

*“I am Xan, leader of the Swiftrock peoples. I was born in the fourth turn of the Hunter’s Year.”*

That was pretty useless. Their cycle of years turned over every fifteen. Sixty Hunter’s Years had possibly passed between then and now. But I translated, and Tobin hurriedly left my side to fetch the book and pen. I was more thankful than I could express when he came back to my side to write, brushing my sleeve with his.

King Faro said, “Ask him about the invasion. If he saw it, then his age is settled.”

*“Were you there, when the horsemen of the east crossed the mountains? When they poured by their thousands into the land of the west to conquer it?”*

He turned and spat, although nothing hit the floor. *“I was there.”*

King Faro straightened his shoulders when I relayed that. “Good. Very good. We should have brought a translator like you into this weeks ago, as soon as we knew it was a tribe artifact. Ask him what he saw.”

*“I need to hear what happened then, Chief Xan of the Swiftrock.”* There was no harm in courtesy. Although a ghost was constrained to speak truth, the stronger ones could resist in small ways. The stronger the spellcaster, and the weaker the ghost, the more complete truth you got. These sorcerers were strong, but despite his age, Xan was not weak. I added, *“I will go slowly, and ask your indulgence to do the same. Your musical tongue is hard for me and I must translate for those who don’t speak it at all.”*

*“You bray like a mule.”* That sounded more like dispassionate truth than insult. *“Ask your questions.”*

I didn’t translate the mule part. I had some pride. I’d almost stopped shaking too, in the fascination of this. I was using an ancient tongue, however painfully learned—*don’t think about that*—an almost unknown tongue, at least in this country, to speak to a man a millennium old. The things I’d have liked to ask him, about customs and people, would probably have no chance to be uttered, but it was still a thrill to me. I said, *“Tell me about the invasion.”*

*“It was none of our concern. At first.”*

*“How did it begin?”*

*“We heard rumblings from across the God’s Horns pass, that things were stirring.”*

*“In the east?”*

*“Yes.”*

“Ask him how they crossed the mountains,” the king urged me.

*“Did the Easterners ride through the mountain passes?”*

*“No.”*

Everyone in the room took a breath when I reported that. I could feel the burning concentration in all of them. My next question came out hoarse and incomprehensible. I swallowed and tried again. *“How did they come, then?”*

*“Boiling up out of the earth like ants from a hive. Small hand by small hand. In an unending stream.”*

A small hand was four. The king said, “A narrow opening then, but not too narrow, if it let four men come through abreast.”

*“Did you see them yourself?”* I asked.

*“On the second day. For a day and a night and another day they came. Word was brought to me, and I went to see.”*

*“Soldiers came out of the ground?”*

*“An army of the East, leading horses, they came. A small hand at a time, massing into ranks in the narrow valley. More men than I have ever seen, and even small wagons.”* He spit again. *“Flatlanders need too many things when they travel. But they had good bows, and swords.”*

“Where?” King Faro demanded. “Ask him where.”

I did so.

*“On the edge of the plains.”*

*“That’s a big place, Chief Xan. Where on the edge?”*

*“Where the foothills rise.”*

I thought he was being deliberately unhelpful. Clearly the King’s Mages did too, because I felt the increased force of will that they put into the

compulsion. The ghost's face twisted and his seeming thinned slightly. I could see the floor through the corner of his cloak.

*"Tell me about this place. Describe it."*

*"There are rocks. There is brush. There is a hidden trail below, but from above I watched them come."*

*"How far from..."* I tried to think of my history, of a town that would have been known to him. *"from Camrocktown?"*

*"A day and a half's ride."*

Nice and ambiguous, depending on how fast one rode. *"How many..."* I tried to say "miles" or "leagues" and realized that the language I was speaking didn't seem to have equivalents. My voice faltered.

King Faro growled at me. "Go on. Ask more. We can't search all the foothills for it."

A thought came. *"How many arrow-flights from Camrocktown?"*

*"Ah, many and many."*

That might not be deliberate obfuscation. The tribes didn't have much use for higher math back then. Even now, they tended to count in other languages than their own. *"How far from the trail head that leads to Eagle's Pass, beside the Twins?"*

*"Many and many."*

*"How far from Whitecliff?"*

*"I don't know that name."*

It occurred to me that mountain names change too, even if the rocks themselves didn't. I said, *"The place where the cliff is chalk and gleams in the sunlight, white as snow."* Or so I'd heard. I'd never been there.

*"Even more days."* He grinned at me, showing yellowed teeth.

I took a steady breath. At least this querying with a ghost was familiar territory, although I wished desperately I'd studied more history. I was fast running out of famous places in the foothills of antiquity. *"How many from the Tallribbon Falls, where the river that will be the Snake begins?"*

*“Maiden’s Hair Falls lead to the Snake.”*

*“From those then.”*

He frowned. *“Many hands of hands worth.”*

*“How many?”*

He shrugged. *“Beyond my count. A shaman could count it. Less far than Camrocktown.”*

*“Less than a day’s ride on a good horse?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“A half day’s ride at full speed?”* I tried to make the parameters narrower.

*“Yes”*

*“Less than two hour’s ride.”*

*“No.”*

Now we were getting somewhere. Assuming we were actually talking about the same falls, and he had some similar idea of a horse’s pace.

*“North or south of the falls?”*

I could feel him fight the compulsion, and saw one of the King’s Mages sway and put a hand to his head. Xan was strong and stubborn, for a shade. Eventually he ground out, *“North.”*

*“Yes.”* King Faro’s exclamation came out with a hiss. He took a step closer to me. *“Ask for a description, more details.”*

*“What shape is the mouth of the cave where the men came out?”*

*“I saw it from above.”*

*“Is there a notable rock formation there that marks it?”*

*“All rocks in my mountains are notable.”*

*“What rock was closest then?”*

*“The one I call the Roadbeast.”*

*“What do others call it?”*

*“Flatlanders do not name rocks, or if they do, the names are wrong.”*

I breathed in and out through my nose, centering myself. The ghost was becoming fainter, his legs fading under the strain of the spell. Tobin bumped my shoulder very lightly.

The king said, “Ask what he could see from his perch then, what landmarks.”

Xan answered, “*From all places, one can see the Horns of the Gods.*”

“*Which mountain was closest then?*”

“*Skygod’s Knife.*”

No modern mountain bore that name, at least that I knew of. Maybe someone else would know it. “*And when you looked out at the plains, what could you see?*”

“*Flat uninteresting land crawling with small-eyed people.*”

I was just giving him an excuse to insult us. “*Is there a trail into the hills at that place?*”

“*No.*”

“*How far to the nearest trail towards a pass?*”

“*Two hands of bowshots, or near enough.*”

About a mile then. A thought occurred to me. “*Does the place itself have a name?*”

He resisted, grinding out, “*Why are you asking me all this?*”

I didn’t want to answer with specifics but perhaps if he fought me less it would be worth it. “*We fear another invasion, coming soon. Many would die, women and children as well as men.*”

“*Flatlanders all.*”

“*Perhaps not—we have a treaty with your descendants.*” It contained nothing but a cease-fire, nothing that would bring them into the fight, but although I could not lie under the context of the spell, I could bend the truth.

“*Fools. Treaties with flatlanders end in death.*”

I was clearly not going to gain his sympathy. I asked again, “*Does the place have a name?*”

He wavered, going thinner than smoke, even put his hands over his mouth, but in the end he said, "*Beasumblean.*"

It was a jumble to my ears. Most place names held some sense of their main feature—like Riverrun, or Tallribbon—this sounded like nonsense. "*Repeat it.*"

"*Beasumblean.*"

My mind caught the even-more-archaic term for water—*beasu*. "*By the water?*"

"*Water. Yes.*" He suddenly flung his arms wide. "*Strike me now. I care not. They died, all of them, and could not be saved. I hope you all slay each other and your bones rot in the foothills, food for crows!*" And then he was gone, and all the candles snuffed out as one.

The sorcerers staggered at the sudden release of tension. The youngest sat on the floor, right where he was. The oldest ran a shaking hand over his face.

The king demanded, "Bring him back!"

Firstmage shook his head. "We would only strain ourselves and the ghost, to no benefit. We need to rest and he needs to remain on the other side for a while, to regain strength on both our parts, before we try again."

"How long?"

"Two days. Perhaps three."

"Damnation!"

Firstmage said, "We might well get no more information from him in any case. He apparently has no love for us and was being obscure. The harder we press him the faster he fades."

The king frowned harder. "Any more delay is a risk at this point. The latest news I had from the east had to come around the coast, and the boat trip is long. The intelligence is a nearly a month old. The Prince Regent has had that time to complete his plans while we struggle to catch up with him here. And if he attacks that way this year, it will surely be very soon, before we would expect trouble from that direction. Both sides usually ignore the mountain border as long as the snow block the passes. But in another few weeks he'd



expect us to step up our patrols again.” The king paced, two steps away and back, while we all waited on his decisions.

Tobin moved further behind me and I turned fast, so I could keep him in my sight. The motion made my head spin. He frowned, but when I set my shoulder to his, he stood firm and let me lean against him. My knees began to shake. It was over and I’d done what was asked of me. I’d actually queried a ghost again, and met my king’s commands. I’d succeeded. Now other people would do the rest, and I could go home. The relief was making me lightheaded.

King Faro turned to me. “So, scholar. You heard his words directly. You believe there is such a place and that it lies somewhere north of Tallribbon? Less than sixty miles, more than, say, fifteen? That does fit the general area of the first battle of the invasion. And he said about a mile from some mountain path that climbs the hills. And near water.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” I felt I had to add, “We don’t know what he considers a fast horse. And any path that existed that long ago may be gone now, although the falls appear to endure.”

“This name he spoke, that you said meant water. Can you do anything render it any more clearly?”

I cleared my throat and tried to call back my scattering wits. “*Beasumblean*, he said. The first part means water. The rest...” I tried to think. For once my ill-gotten knowledge was failing me when it counted most. *Umblean*, *m’blean*, *lean*. That last word had a dozen meanings in as many tongues. The second, though—“It’s possible that *m’blean* means going through or between. There is a similar form in the more modern language. *Shae m’bleanne*—to pass through an archway or door, or between gateposts. I’m sorry. That’s as close as I get.”

“So it might mean, ‘between the waters’? There might be a fork in the river or two rivers there?”

“Maybe. It’s no more than a guess, though.”

“It’s more than we had. My fault.” He slammed a fist into his palm. “I should have had faith a friend of Tobin’s would know his work, and prepared

better. I'd despaired of getting a word of sense from the shade, until all I hoped for was that you could get some hint of confirmation that such a tunnel existed. Now to find he actually saw it firsthand! I should have had a map made ready, with the places of antiquity marked, and all the main features. We might have compelled him to show us the place."

Firstmage said, "We could still try that. We'll have to think on the best way to do so. We might hold up the map and point, perhaps, if he will not speak plainly. Or play the game of hot and cold. He might be compelled to a simple yes or no."

The king's voice was bitter. "We expected the worst and failed to plan for the best, and lost this chance. We *must* make the very clearest use of the next one. We'll take counsel together in an hour." He turned to me. "You did well, Lyon of Riverrun—or of nowhere." His smile was wry. "As you choose. I'm more than impressed with your skill."

I managed to bow my head and say, "Thank you, my liege."

He pulled a ring off one finger and held it out to me. "Here, a token payment. You'll receive a purse later. You have my thanks. Now we'll work on how we proceed from here."

I nodded. I managed to hold out my left hand, and he dropped the ring in my palm. It was a wide band, with one small red stone.

The king turned to Tobin, who handed him the written record of Xan's words. The king took it and gave him a nod in return. "Once more, you've found what I needed. Take your friend to his chambers and let him rest. I'll send word to you later."

"Yes, sir."

"Go on, then." He turned his back on us, which I guess freed us to go. In any case, it was the signal for Tobin to head toward the big doors. I was able to follow him on my wobbly legs, out those doors, past the soldiers, down the hallway. At the foot of the first stairs, I leaned on the wall, and to my surprise I started laughing.

"I did it."

Tobin paused, and then a smile crept over his face. "You surely did."

“I spoke to a ghost, and Firstmage, and the king!”

“Yep.”

“You know, I used to have to rehearse what I would say to the market boy. How I would greet him. How I would ask after his mother.” I was laughing harder. “There were weeks I spoke not one word. In any language.”

“I was impressed with your talents tonight. So was the king. You were a big help to him, and the mages. They won’t forget.”

That sobered me, like cold water. I didn’t want men of power to remember me. “Now I want to go to bed.” I pushed off the wall and headed determinedly up the stairs.

At my shoulder Tobin said quietly, “Did I say something wrong?”

I jumped at having him behind me again. With Tobin, I already felt so easy that sometimes I forgot... I put my back to the stone, and gestured for him to lead on. “I’m a mass of foolish reactions. You can provoke one just by saying goodnight the wrong way.”

“If you ever want to explain them to me, I’ll listen.”

“Maybe.” I felt my darkness ease a bit. I’d done what I came for, and maybe sometime there’d be a moment for the two of us. “And now I can go home!”

We reached the rooms eventually. Tobin barred the door behind us. I had the impulse to start packing, perhaps even leave right now. But the thought of a night outside, compared to a night on a soft bed with stone walls around me, made that seem foolish.

“Do you think you’ll sleep?” Tobin asked with studied casualness. “You have your stone walls and your spells back. Will that help?”

“They’re worth a lot,” I said. “I never feel as safe as with a wall at my back.”

Tobin nodded, but said, “I prefer a good friend.” He grinned. “Perhaps one with a knife handy, if there’s trouble about.”

“Gods, no. Something solid and unmoving.”

Tobin turned away, shedding his jacket and unlacing his shirt. “I’ve seen a

lot of sieges broken, from both sides of the stone. I don't believe in walls. I believe in people."

"I really don't like people at my back."

"How about at your front?" He turned back toward me.

I said, "I'm not good with... hands on me at all."

He was still dressed, although his shirt was unlaced enough to show the dark hair of his chest. He came closer, until I could feel his presence across a fingersworth of space. "How long since someone just came close to you, Lyon? How long since someone kissed you?"

He waited for me to answer, but I couldn't. My throat was dry from all the *tridescant*... no, that was a lie. It was dry from fear. And from want and from not knowing how to proceed. He leaned forward with his hands locked behind his back, not touching me anywhere else, and pressed his lips to mine.

The first kiss was short and soft. It burned like a brand, but lasted barely an instant. He leaned back and looked at me, his eyes shadowed in the lamplight. "All right?"

I nodded. He leaned in again, and I tipped my head back just a bit, to match his height. He kissed me, sweet and slow, plucking gently at my lips with his, touching his tongue to my teeth. I let him. I stood there and felt it all and let him kiss me. After a minute he stopped.

"Say something, lion-boy. I can't tell if you like it or you're humoring me or I've scared you so much you're about to run."

I said, "Don't stop."

Ah, gods above, that smile. I'd have walked over hot coals for that smile. He kissed me again, and this time, when he pressed with his tongue, I opened my mouth for him. The kiss was still gentle. I got the sense of fires banked and waiting, but everything that he did was slow and careful, and yet warm as a hearthfire on a cold night. I could feel that warmth seeping into me, unfreezing my heart. Until I broke away, because I couldn't breathe for the way my heart was beating.

"Still all right?"

I turned away from him and paced to the window, checking my inscriptions on the sill. There were no smudges. They should hold. I kept my back to him.

Odd, after having told the truth about my fears, that there was one man in all the world I now trusted unseen behind me. I said to the darkness beyond the glass, “Meldov taught me some languages. It was his passion, and also his claim to fame, that he could speak to ghosts and shades in languages no other living man knew. I had a talent. But nothing like you saw tonight. The wraith gave me my ancient *tridescant*.”

Behind me, Tobin made a sound that didn’t become a word.

“It was meant as a bribe. Perhaps the same one that had worked on Meldov. After the first working, the first night, it could touch my mind, speak deep within there. It knew my interests. Somehow, it gave me languages, one after another, whole and complete as I could never hope to learn them. It showed me how many more it knew, how much knowledge would be opened up to me if I just let it in.”

“You said no.”

*Said it. Said it over and over. Begged it. Eventually screamed it.* “I got a handful of languages out of the deal, before it realized I was not becoming convinced.”

“And you remember them still, even though it’s destroyed?”

“Apparently. Yes.” I’d been terrified by that at first—that the gifts of the wraith lingered. Each morning in my small house, I’d open one of the old books I’d stolen and stare at the words, half-hoping, half-dreading that their meaning would be lost. It never happened. I was still afraid that meant the wraith existed, somewhere. I was so tired of being afraid. “I want to believe that it was a permanent transfer of information and not a sign that the wraith wasn’t destroyed.”

I didn’t realize that I was shaking again, until Tobin said, “Turn around. I won’t come up behind you.”

I turned, even though I said, “You of all people could.” I wanted that to be true. That there could be someone in the world who wouldn’t make my skin crawl if they touched me from behind.

He shook his head, and waited for me to face him, before slowly moving close so he stood a whisker's breadth away from me all along my front. It was unimagined comfort, my own warm, strong, living, breathing wall. He kept his hands at his sides, and said, "Even if you hate to be held, you can still hold onto me."

And I did. I wrapped my arms around him and leaned on him and gripped him tight.

I don't know how long we stood like that. But eventually I raised my head from his shoulder where I'd found rest, and kissed him. His cheek first, with a shyness that felt different from fear. And then his mouth. He opened his lips, inviting my tongue. I tried, unsure, and he simply hummed and licked back at my own, sharing warmth, sharing breath. My mouth wasn't dry anymore and the kiss did other things for my whole body. I broke away from him, needing a little space. "Thank you."

"I missed you so much, all those years." He said it simply. "I didn't realize how much you meant to me, until you weren't there anymore. I always thought there would be time. You were busy with your studies, and soldiering was what I'd worked for since I was small. I always thought, '*After I get home, I'll have time to be with Lyon*'. Even when I came home when you were sixteen and found you becoming infatuated with Meldov, I knew he'd have no interest. Gods help me, I thought it would keep you safely distracted for a while. Then I was suddenly standing there at the burned mansion, looking at the smoking ruin of that hope. I've lived fifteen years imagining you long dead and gone."

"I'm sorry."

"No. I understand. Really. You needed time and space and healing. I just wish..." He broke off short.

"What?"

He shook his head. "It was probably for the best. I rode out there to the mansion in a panic, suddenly realizing what was important, determined to throw all my affection and need at your feet if you lived. If I'd found you then, I'd never have had the patience to give you time to heal. Not at twenty. I've

been hard schooled in patience since then.” He looked straight at me. “That thing inside Meldov raped you, didn’t it?”

My silence was answer enough. *He didn’t hurt me*—I wanted to say that, to reassure Tobin. But nothing was more of a lie than that particular truth.

He took two long shaking breaths and whirled aside. His fist landed on the stone of the wall twice, before I realized he was sobbing. I managed to grab his arm before the third blow. “Holy Bian, stop you fool. You can’t beat bricks with flesh. You’re a soldier, you should know that.” There was a smear of blood on the stone. I’m ashamed now to say I checked that it hadn’t marred the protections I’d scrawled there, before I inspected his hand.

“Idiot.” I turned his arm over to see where the skin was split on his knuckle. I felt strangely older and tender. “We only have three good hands between us. We can’t afford to break one.”

He wiped his face on his shoulder, without taking back his hand from mine. His laugh was shaky. “Good thought.”

“Or who would unlace me from this shirt?”

That stopped his breath. “What?”

I hadn’t meant more than that simple fact, but his arrested attention made me hear my own words. “I can’t, um, do that,” I said. “Not yet. I think. But holding you was very... very warm.”

“I’ll keep you as warm as you’ll let me,” he said softly. When I didn’t move or speak, he added, “Let me clean my hand first. That’s my best court shirt you’re wearing and I’d hate to get blood on it. Then I’ll unlace it for you, and if that’s all, I won’t mind one bit.”

He went to the ewer on its stand, dampened a cloth and wiped at his fingers. Then he came back to where I stood. He reached calmly for my coat, sliding it off my shoulders and taking it to hang in the wardrobe. When he put steady hands on my shirt-laces I raised my chin to help. He undid the knots. His fingers brushed my skin lightly, warm and slightly rough against my neck.

“Arms up.”

I could have done that part myself, but instead I raised my hands and let him tug the shirt up and over my head. I’d thought he might look closer or

touch me then, but he immediately moved across the room, shaking out the fabric, his eyes on the shirt. I felt let down.

I stood there, naked to the waist, my nipples pebbled in the cool evening air. I'd never been so aware of my own skin. He folded the shirt slowly.

I said, "It probably needs washing. I sweated a lot. Sorry. I should probably wash myself again too."

Turning to look at me, he raised the folded shirt slowly to his face, closed his eyes, and pressed his nose to it. "It smells like you," he murmured, eyes still shut. "Oh, yes."

I shuddered but it was a good shudder this time, dragged out of me by the sound of Tobin's voice and the sight of his lashes dark against his cheeks. He set the shirt into the drawer and opened his eyes. His gaze was steady and undemanding, but I still found it hard to breathe. He came back toward me, step by step. I knew that at any moment I could tell him to stop and he would. When he stood in front of me, he let his gaze move from my eyes to my mouth and lower, and lower. "You've more muscle than I'd have expected for a man who spends his days indoors."

"I have a big garden." After a moment I added, "I've worked to feel strong."

"I like it."

He was taller than me. As Meldov had been, and...

As if he'd read my thought, he lowered himself awkwardly to his knees, refusing to take his hands out from behind his back for balance, despite the hindrance of his leg. I could have reached out to steady him. I didn't. I didn't dare move and risk breaking this spell.

Kneeling, he looked up at me. The window was dark, but the lamp on the wall was a bright one and it showed me the line of his jaw, his straight short nose, the shape of his mouth. He said, "You have trousers on, and even if you beg me, they are not coming off you tonight. But I want to show you that touch doesn't have to hurt. Can I do that?"

I felt weak, for having a hard time saying yes.

I felt safe, that he waited patiently to hear it. "Yes."



I expected him to unlock his fingers and reach for me, but he didn't. Slowly, watching my face, he rose higher up off his knees, one foot tucked under him, leaned forward, lips parted. A breath away from my tight-clenched nipple he paused. I could feel the heat of each exhalation on my skin. "Say it again. Tell me yes."

The same and so different. This time I had all the choice in the world, and only one thing I wanted to say. "Yes."

He touched me with his tongue, just the slightest flick of tongue-tip against me. The lightest brush of wetness on a place I'd not bared by my own choice to another man, ever. And I shook with the sweet pain of it. I was lifted up with the realization that I was able to stand it—no, that I *wanted* it. I'd thought I burned desire out of myself, killed it when I cut the throat of the man I'd thought I could love. But this was desire, oh yes. And need. And still a dark wall of fear. My cock strained against my trousers, but if he'd touched me there, I'd have done my best to kill him.

He made no move to unclasp his hands from behind his back. Slowly he traced my chest with his tongue. His eyes fluttered half-closed as he moved. The touch of his mouth changed, varied, here a lick, there a brush of lips, and then a kiss over my other nipple. He lowered himself back to his knees and rubbed his cheek against my belly above the waistband of those trousers. He was close to where I desperately wanted, and didn't want him. But he ignored that and just purred like a big cat. His skin was soft on mine, just the faintest roughness from his chin. He must have shaved earlier, before going to see his king. He pressed a kiss above my navel and sat back on his heels. "All right?"

"Yes." *Three times tell me yes.* The words of an old spell-chant, warning and directions. It didn't matter. This was Tobin.

"I will never force you," he said. "I'll try never to hurt you, but no man can safely promise that. Any hurt I do to you, I will be desperately sorry for and try to repair."

"I know. I believe that."

He stood. "Time for sleep then." He reached to the bright lamp, and extinguished it. The room was cast into dimness, one small light left. He

turned away and walked back across to the wardrobe. I watched him strip with his back turned to me. I'd have said he was casual, but I thought he didn't really have to bend over that often, in removing his trews and stockings. He had a very fine ass.

He got out a nightshirt, laid it on the bed, and then tugged another one on himself. That significantly diminished the quality of the view, but also eased the tightness of my chest. He climbed onto the mattress, still without looking at me, and moved under the covers to the far side, with his back to me. "We can share the bed." His voice was quiet. "There's space enough that we don't have to touch. It's a big bed. And should you choose to move closer, I'll keep my hands to myself."

I was left standing there by the windows, torn between frustration and overwhelming relief. Eventually exhaustion eclipsed them both. I wrestled the button of the trousers open and pulled them down. Leaving my smalls on, I slid into the nightshirt. It was soft and large, and smelled of soap and sunshine.

Tobin didn't stir as I got into bed. I could tell he was awake, but he held statue-still as I slipped under the sheets and moved around, trying to get comfortable. Comfortable seemed to be lying on my side, looking at the faintly-lit bulk of his shoulders.

I was so tired I'd thought I would fall asleep immediately, but I couldn't relax. I could tell Tobin wasn't sleeping either. After nights on the road, I was familiar with the way his breathing eased and deepened in sleep. The thought of not hearing that beside me in the weeks to come was troubling. I was glad to be done with the king's task, but the safe home-life ahead, that should have been a relief, seemed dry and empty. I finally couldn't resist asking, "Will you still ride back home with me?"

I saw him tense and it took a moment before he said, "If the king allows me. I hadn't known we were this close to an invasion, but I will beg it of him, to let me take the time."

"And perhaps... visit me sometimes, when you can?"

"That I can swear. Now I know where to find you, you'll see me whenever I can manage it. I do wish you were closer, but Dark has a good turn of speed."

“I’d be pleased. Any time you could get away.”

“You might eventually be very pleased.” There was a warm note of teasing in his voice, despite the slur of tiredness.

The events of the day spun in giddy circles in my head. Last night we’d camped together under the stars, and life had been simpler. Now the man I’d considered just my friend lay inches away and was... something more. And yet, I didn’t think I would trade this confusion for yesterday’s simplicity.

Tobin’s breathing was deepening at last. I could feel the softening of my personal living wall, but it still felt safe to have him between me and the door. I couldn’t lean on him—it didn’t feel right in bed like this, with just two thicknesses of linen between us. But I reached out and fisted my hand in the back of his nightshirt, like a child clutching their doll, and pressed my clenched fingers against the strength of his shoulders.

I wished that would be enough to keep away the nightmares, but it wasn’t. Through the dark hours, I dozed, and each time, I woke after an hour or two with my heart pounding. I remembered each dream and they were all the same—Tobin knelt before me, entreating me to accept his touch, and each time, after I said yes, he raised his head and his face became Meldov’s, revealing the wraith-light in his eyes.

I managed not to scream though, and only woke him once from his well-earned rest, so it could be counted a success of sorts. And it took no more than a moment each time for me to remember who truly was with me, warm against my hand.

A loud knock at the door roused us both. The room was faintly lit by an early dawn. The lamp on the wall still burned feebly. Tobin rolled out of bed fast, reaching to his waist as if for a knife. When he felt only the nightshirt, and saw the walls around him, his tension eased, but he still stopped at the door without opening it and called, “Who is it?”

“Message from His Majesty.”

I wanted to ask Tobin not to open the door. I had a bad feeling about this. But of course he did.

The page on the doorstep held out a well-filled bag, and a folded paper. “A

note of explanation, sir. And he bids you both take breakfast and council with him at fourth bell.”

Tobin took the items slowly. Perhaps he shared my bad feeling. He shut the door on the boy’s cheerful face, and glanced at a clock on the shelf above his hearth. “We have twenty minutes. You’d better get up.”

“Surely it’s you that he wants. Probably to stop you from taking off to see me home.” There was clearly an affection between Tobin and the monarch—Tobin was the only man in the room last night to get a real smile, and he called the king “sir.” If I had Tobin at my disposal, I wouldn’t let him hare off from a difficult situation to see a cripple slowly across country.

Tobin carefully unsealed the flap. He read the first few lines and then cursed.

“What?”

“I was afraid of this. He sends us this letter of marque authorizing us to use the crown’s purse to immediately outfit ourselves however we think best, for a journey to the eastern foothills. Both of us.”

“I can’t!”

“It seems you must. He’s planning to head out with speed. He’s cagey in his writing, but he says that *“once there, we’ll repeat our successful experiment.”* Which I take to mean raising the ghost again. Can they do that? Raise it in a new place, that is?”

“Sure. It’s the focus and the details of the working that call the ghost from the aether. Done right, you can haul the same poor shade all over the countryside nightly.” I got out of bed, but muttered, “I’m still not going.” I yearned for my own stone walls this morning, and for time to think in peace.

Tobin didn’t even try to debate with me, just went to his wardrobe and found me a fresh shirt. And eventually ushered me out the door.

We took yet another route through the warren of the palace, which was bustling with activity despite the early hour. Tobin guided us to a small breakfast parlor with, gods help me, a king, a general, three of the most powerful sorcerers in the land, a smattering of other important men, and me. It was probably wise of Tobin to take a firm hold on my elbow, although I could only abide his grip for a moment before pulling my arm free.

The king returned a nod when we bowed, gestured at the buffet against the wall and said, “Help yourselves,” through a mouthful of food as greeting. I guess at some level of power and familiarity, protocol stops being essential. Tobin led me over to the food, where I faced the problem of holding a plate and scooping food onto it. Tobin said, “Let me help.” But instead of ladling food onto my plate willy-nilly, he took both plates and said, “I’ll hold, you serve.” I could have kissed him for that alone. Although perhaps not in front of the king.

The food was simpler than I’d have expected for a high society meal, and we all finished quickly. The king rapped on the table and everyone turned and was silent.

“I’ve consulted with everyone from my Firstmage to the centuries-long dead.” His lips quirked in a quick smile despite the seriousness of the topic. “My decision is that we will ride to the foothills, as soon as we can. I’ll lead a company of archers and light cavalry and my household guard, a few scouts and my Voices, to be the vanguard. General Estray will get the rest of our forces organized, and select those who’ll follow behind us.”

A senior-looking man I didn’t recognize said, “I still don’t like you putting yourself out ahead of your army, my liege. What if the invasion has already begun, and you arrive to find yourselves outnumbered? If you fall, we are lost. Send the scouts ahead and wait for your rightful place among your troops.”

“If there are decisions to be made in the field, they’re mine and can’t be made by waiting behind. You’ll just have to get that army moving quickly, Estray.”

The man grunted, but didn’t reply. The king added, “My King’s Own guards will be with me of course. And my mages. We’ll call up the shade of Xan, and interrogate him again for further guidance once we reach the general area. If it does come to all-out fighting, I’ll command from behind the front lines, I promise.”

“But not far behind,” Tobin whispered, and gave the king a warm glance.

I hadn’t missed the king’s casual assumption that I’d be there to translate for Xan. What if I said no? Would the king clap me in irons and haul me

along? The very thought made me feel ill, and Tobin must have caught something of that because he leaned closer to me.

There was a disturbance in the hall, and then the door to the chamber was thrown open. “Your Majesty, your pardon, but there’s a messenger.”

The man who entered had clearly come from a long, hard ride. His clothing was covered in dust, and his face showed streaks where he had wiped away sweat. He bowed to the king, swaying slightly, and Estray grabbed a chair and shoved it behind his knees. “Sit, man.”

The messenger collapsed into it. The king said, “You’re Fram. You’re stationed at the coast in Calbay, yes?”

“You remember? Yes, Your Majesty. I left there three days ago, and took post horses to get here. I bring word of a possible invasion.”

“At the coast?” The king exchanged quick glances with his advisors. He lifted his own goblet of ale and handed it to the man. “Drink a little and tell it in full, and quickly.”

The man took a mouthful, and made a sound of relief. “One of the local fishermen took his boat much further out than usual—two days’ sailing south-east round the coast and well out to sea. He was in open waters when he spotted masts on the horizon. He says the hulls were below the curve, but there were many ships, and the rigging marked them as R’gin. He counted a dozen, before making all speed home. He thinks he was probably not seen, with his single boat and much smaller mast. The fleet was sailing out of sight of land, in our general direction. He says most of the sails were furled, so they weren’t making all possible speed, even though the weather was fine. He thought they might even have been hove to, waiting for something. He brought word to his village constable, who brought it to me. I also questioned his three crewmen, who told the same tale. They’re simple folk and I see no reason to disbelieve them.”

Estray said, “Maybe the movement of supplies to the coast of R’gin wasn’t just a ruse. Our information could have been wrong. Perhaps a sea-borne invasion is what all the preparations were for.”

“Have you any more news than that right now, Fram?”

He shook his head, and looked a bit woozy. “No, Your Majesty. I dispatched other boats to spy out the fleet more carefully and report back, but I thought to bring you first word now, with all speed, and let their reports follow. I left the message-birds for their use, so their information should come hard on my heels.”

“Good.” The king gave him a nod. “Go now and get some rest. You’ve done your part.”

When the messenger had left and the door was shut, King Faro turned to his generals. “Thoughts?”

An older man said, “This could have been the true cause for the war preparations your spies reported. It wouldn’t be the first time the R’gin have come by sea rather than over the mountains.”

Estray added, “Perhaps the reports of the mythical tunnel were intended to send us with our forces east to the mountains while they bring in an army to the south-west by boat.”

King Faro frowned. “It’s certainly possible. Even probable, except...” He paced, and the others made space for him. “Except the reports all fit, of movement feinted to be all in one direction but actually much of it headed for the mountains, and that part in secret. I trust the men who sent that word. And now the mythical tunnel is at least confirmed as fact.” His intense gaze suddenly lit on me. “It is confirmed, yes? There’s no way that the ghost could have been shading his words to make that seem true when it’s not?”

I bowed my head, trying to get words to come out. “Sire, I, um, I believe he saw soldiers emerge from the ground. Of course there’s no knowing where the other end of the tunnel was—back in R’gin or somewhere closer. But he was certain they hadn’t crossed over the mountains anywhere nearby. Your Majesty.”

“Yes.” He paced another couple of turns. “So we have a probable invasion by normal means on the coast, and the hint of a secret invasion by unlikely means in the mountains. Are both real? Is one a feint to draw us away from the other? Does the mountain invasion even exist?”

“It’s easy to plant such a rumor, Sire,” Estray said.

“I am aware.” The king’s voice was dry. “And yet we’ve obtained confirmation that it’s at least possible, from a source the R’gin could’ve neither corrupted nor deceived.”

“I hold by the coast as being the true threat,” the oldest general said. “Even if that tunnel existed long ago, the odds are far better that the Prince Regent heard of it and decided to use it as bait, than that he actually found it intact and usable after all these years.”

“True. It would’ve been an engineering marvel to begin with, and almost certainly also an arcane one. If it really travels under the mountains it would have to be many miles long, far longer than the best mine ever dug. They’d need fresh air throughout, and if they brought horses it can’t narrow too much anywhere. It does sound like it would have to be magecraft. And then to survive a thousand years?”

“Exactly. Not likely.”

“Except...” Again the king paced. “I keep coming back to two things. First that the movement of goods toward the mountains was reported as very subtle and stealthy. My informants were proud of their skills in discovering it. Surely if it was purely a feint, the Prince Regent would have wanted to make sure it was noticed and reported to me.”

“Perhaps he trusts the quality of your spies. He has to know you have them. He’s not stupid.”

“He’s a brother-slaying whoreson, but no, not stupid. I don’t think he’s that crafty, though. Of all the men I have in R’gin, only three sent such reports to me. Three of the very best. I think a feint would be more obvious. And then the second thing. The fisherman reported the fleet hove to and waiting. Why?”

“Dark of the moon is in six days,” Firstmage said.

Estray said, “You don’t land an army from ships on a strange coast in the dark of the moon at night. Too dangerous. For a land invasion maybe, but not from the sea. They’d be better off now, with a sliver of moon to light their way.”

“Dark of the moon,” the king repeated. “I wonder if that *is* the key.”

“Sire,” Estray’s tone sounded like Meldov’s, when he was about to correct some error of mine.



The king flashed him a look. “*Not* for a nighttime landing, but as a signal. Think of it. You sail a fleet weeks round the coast, out of sight and out of contact. If this were just invasion, then you would attack as soon as you could, to minimize the risk of being spotted ahead of time, as in fact just happened. But say there was another attack coming from elsewhere. You’d want to have a signal, to time it right.”

Estray was beginning to nod. “Use the moon-phase. And the day after is the spring equinox. If they wanted to coordinate an attack that would make sense.”

“Say the fleet made good time. You’d have to send them out early, to allow for storms or calms along the way. Say they reached position ahead of schedule—there they would have to wait, for the right day to move in.”

“It does fit.”

Secondmage said, “There could be another reason for the delay. Perhaps they had an augury that success was more likely after the dark of moon. They’re a superstitious people.”

“The Prince Regent strikes me as eminently practical, and not one to pay heed to the gods, or he’d not have killed his own brother. But yes, there could be a dozen reasons, even something so simple as the commander fallen ill with a flux, and the fleet waiting on his recovery. The question is, can we afford to ignore either threat?”

Estray said, “I think not. But I’d gauge the fleet a far bigger risk. At least, I think it’s not some decoy but a second prong of the attack. If they’re going to sail dozens of ships, beating against the wind for weeks, they’re going to make more use of them than just show.”

“True.” King Faro stopped pacing and folded his arms. “So instead of following me, you’ll lead two thirds of our forces toward the coast and set up a welcome for them there. Pridal?” The youngest general came to attention. “You’ll follow behind me with the other third as soon as they’re mustered. And get a company of mounted archers ready to ride now in my first wave, along with one of light cavalry.”

“Yes, Sire.”

“General Vio, you have the home defenses and coordination here in the capital.”

There was a brisk fifteen minutes of discussion with maps and much taking of notes, as the military members of the party conferred of who and what was going where with what speed. Most of the names meant nothing to me. All that was clear was that I'd somehow been drafted to ride at speed to the mountains, there to extract truth about ancient magecraft from a reluctant ghost, while the whole R'gin army might suddenly appear out of nowhere. And no one was bothering to ask if I was willing.

I desperately craved my stone walls. And yet there was a thrumming of excitement behind my fear. Once I was that man, the one who stood on the edge of a summoning circle commanding the spell and waited to see what would appear there, and what new knowledge might be found. That man would have been willing, even eager, for this venture. Was I that much less than I had been?

I hugged myself and whispered to Tobin, “You’ll be coming with us? With me?”

“Absolutely.” His hand found my elbow, and this time the warmth of his grip was comfort. “You’ll be in my personal care.”

Even in a room full of powerful men, he made that sound suggestive. I had a memory of bare skin and lamplight.

“And then I’ll take you home afterward and we’ll have time to get to know one another again.”

I craved that far more than excitement, or safety. Time with Tobin. Well, if we were both headed out with the king, at least Tobin wouldn’t be sent away from me on some errand, as I’d half expected. I tried to be pleased about that.

The discussion around the table petered out and the king rapped on the wood for attention. “Time is short, if we’re to reach the mountains before dark-moon night. My advance party will ride out at noon.”

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER SIX

Riding out with the king and company was very different from riding alone with Tobin. It was crowded, unsettled and noisy and dusty. Too many people, strings of horses, voices calling back and forth. I felt like I couldn't breathe. The dust got up my nose and I coughed, and despite the easy gaits of the new horse I was riding, it wasn't Cricket and it felt all wrong. I entertained fantasies of reining around and dashing for home. Of course, that wasn't likely to work, with the whole company of soldiers riding behind me.

Tobin kned his horse next to mine, took my reins from my hand and passed over a canteen. I drank, expecting water, and almost choked on the hard-fermented cider instead.

"That's better. You were looking a bit pale there."

"You thought I'd look better turning blue?"

His horse jostled mine, and he grinned. "I remembered you liked the stuff. The kitchen had some put by."

I was struck by that. I had liked it, back when we were young. Meldov had scorned any drink that wasn't wine, and I'd not had cider since then. Not even lately, in the village, where it was a common tippie in the fall. Why not? *Because it made me think of easier days?* "Thank you." I tried to hand it back but he hung the canteen on my saddlebow.

"Keep it. Just stay sober enough to stay on your horse."

The afternoon passed in a blur of horses and men and sweat and dust and the taste of childhood. The canteen had been large, and full. I had to pin my reins under my bad wrist to drink, but the horse followed the rest and I didn't let the difficulty hamper me. I was perhaps a bit tipsy when we finally stopped for the night.

Tobin led me somewhat apart from the main bulk of the company, around the lee of a hill. The king's tent was set up on the top of the rise and men went back and forth on various errands. Tobin found us a place sheltered by some rocks but flat enough to sleep on, and unrolled his bedding and my own. He made up one pallet with both of them.

“You would share a bed? Here?”

He shrugged. “We won’t be the only ones. And there’s not much exciting that can be done with all our clothes on.” His smile was wry. “Even if you weren’t about to collapse.”

“And you’re not worried about appearing fay?”

“Lyon, they already know I’m fay. It’s not a problem.” He layered the bedding thicker on the hard ground, and laid one blanket over it. “There. You stretch out and I’ll go fetch us supper in just a minute.”

I should have protested, and insisted I could see to myself, but instead I collapsed on the bedroll. My head was still jittering with the rhythm of hooves, and my eyes were sore and dry. I closed them, just for a moment.

I woke to something wet on my face. Just a week ago, that would have made me bolt upright in panic, but I could smell Tobin’s skin and knew his touch. Still, pride made me sit up and take the cloth from him, to clean my own face. I opened my eyes, and began wiping the grit from my hand as best I could, working the cloth between my fingers.

Tobin took it from me and passed over a hunk of bread stuffed with ground meat. “Here, eat something.”

I wanted to please him, but just the sight of food after hours lurching and jolting made me ill. “I’m not hungry, really. Can you eat both?”

He paused, mouth full and then nodded. But when he’d finished his portion he took mine and pinched a bit of bread off the outside. “Open your mouth.”

I did, and he placed the bread on my tongue. It was simple and flavorful, and somehow I got it down. I said, “I’m not some chick you have to feed. I’m just too tired to eat.”

“Indulge me.” He broke off another piece.

He fed me half a slice that way, before I really could take no more. I forced off my new riding boots and lay back down, pulling the covers around me. Beside me Tobin sat down too. I heard him swear softly and glanced up at him. He said, “I’m so sorry. You shouldn’t have to be out here in this crowd. I promised—one job and I’d see you right back home.”

The painful regret in his expression drove me to lighten my own. “And so you will, when this is over. And now I’m having an adventure. I’m just a bit too worn out and drunk to really appreciate it at the moment.”

His smile was forced. “Riding out with the King’s Own. A tale to tell your grandchildren.”

I snorted. “What grandchildren, oh fay soldierboy?”

“There is that. Maybe you’ll regale Dag and his sister with it.”

I sighed. Before this week I’d never spoken more than a few words to little Guinna. My life had changed so fast that something that would have been almost beyond me, now sounded wistfully easy.

I needed sleep. I rolled over further and closed my eyes. Tobin moved around for a while, sorting things out and then slid under the covers. I could feel his warmth, although he didn’t touch me. He said, “If you don’t want me behind you, you’ll have to turn over.”

I did so, and found his face inches from mine. His eyes caught the moonlight. There were little flecks of gold in the brown, like warm stars in a russet sky. He just looked at me with that steady gaze as I moved slowly closer and kissed him.

His mouth was cool, his lips slightly chapped and dry. But when he opened for me, his tongue was warm and he let me in softly. We kissed, without demand. I was tired enough that I almost drifted off in the simple pleasure of lips on lips. The second time my eyelids fluttered shut in fatigue and not passion, Tobin chuckled softly against my mouth. “Lucky for you I’m too tired to be insulted. Go to sleep, lion-boy.”

He rolled over, so his back was to my front. After a moment’s hesitation I moved in close. The night was cool, and Tobin was warm and strong. I wrapped my good arm around him, and closed my eyes. And all through the night, whenever I woke from nebulous dreams of pounding hooves and something bad coming, coming nearer, coming louder... he was there. I pressed my cheek to the back of his neck and breathed in the sweat and dust and scent of Tobin, and drifted off again without a sound.

The morning dawned cold and clear. I felt sore, but not as badly as I’d expected. Either the cider, or the days riding with Tobin, had eased my

muscles enough that I only groaned and stretched, and didn't come close to falling over. Improvement indeed. Tobin got up as soon as he felt me stir and he smiled to see me up and moving. "You look better. I'll fetch water and breakfast. We won't have long. The king travels fast when he sets his mind to it."

I couldn't help asking, "Why do you call him '*sir*', when everyone else calls him Sire?" I wanted to ask why the king smiled at him differently, why they were so easy together. That was the closest I was willing to come to the real question.

"He was my field commander, back when he was just the prince. He began to consider me his favorite aide and when the damned leg happened, he insisted that I should move to the Voices. I'm not going to claim friendship with His Majesty, but we're easy together, and he likes me to treat him more as commander than lord, unless we're in formal court."

Tobin's tone was so ordinary, so unconcerned, that it eased my mind somewhat. I said, "What do you think about this mad dash across the country? He really got us moving fast."

Tobin laughed. "That's my commander. Once he sees what needs to be done, he doesn't wait around. I do think he's right—if anything is going to happen out in those hills, it will be soon. In a few weeks the mountain passes will be open, and the Prince Regent knows our sentries will be watching closely by then. If he wants to benefit from surprise, he has to do it before that. If that tunnel exists and is that small, he needs time to get his people through it a few at a time. What did the ghost say? It took two days last time? That has to happen while we're looking the other way because we think the mountains are still impassible."

"If we have to fight them... I'm no kind of soldier."

"If you try to join in a battle I'll beat you myself. That's not your role, or mine for that matter, anymore. We're here to give our king the best information we can, so the active forces can do their job."

"So you won't have to fight either?" My pulse beat faster, waiting on his answer.

"Let's hope not. It's been years since I swung a sword in earnest."

I hadn't realized how terrified I was of having to watch him go to war, until I felt that weight fall away. I was less afraid of being killed than of losing Tobin. I told myself it was because he was my oldest friend, possibly my only friend, and I'd just found him again. But I knew that was a lie.

He was my safety and my wall, the mirror in whose eyes I somehow looked brave and desirable. If I stayed with Tobin long enough, maybe I could become a man worthy of what he saw in me. It was more hope than I'd had in a long time. As he turned and headed toward the cookfires to fetch us breakfast, I sent up a petition to Samal, a god I'd never spoken to before, for Tobin's safety. He was every soldierly virtue in the flesh—he must surely be loved by the soldiers' god.

When it was time to mount up, I was surprised and oddly pleased to see Tobin approaching with Dark and Cricket in tow. "I thought we left them at the castle."

"Not likely. With the speed the king wants, each man has a remount. We'll switch off during the day from now on. But I thought these two could use the first day unburdened, after the trip they'd already had. Dark is raring to go this morning."

"I'm just as happy if Cricket isn't raring." I put my foot into the stirrup and managed to haul myself up on the first try. I was apparently getting the hang of this. "But I'm glad to have him."

"Didn't you like the mare? She's also one of mine. Her name's Bess."

I chuckled. "You weren't the one to name her, were you?"

Tobin swung onto Darkwind with his usual skill. "What makes you say that?"

"She's named something sensible, not all fancy and not after an insect."

"Ooh, smart man, just for that you can eat my dust." He whirled Dark in a tight circle that did raise the dirt from under the stallion's hooves, and lit out downhill, but it only took a few strides before he reined back to ride beside me as usual.

And so began another day like the last, only worse because I was out of cider. Men and horses and dust and aches. It was so foreign to who I was that I

fumbled the reins once, trying to pinch myself and prove it wasn't all some fever-dream. Although why a pinch should be more proof of reality than my aching thighs I really don't know.

Tobin had friends in the army and among the Voices. The soldiers mainly greeted him with a call and a wave. I guess they couldn't leave formation. But several of the other King's Voices appeared out of the maelstrom to ride near us for a stretch and talk to Tobin. At first Tobin introduced me and tried to draw me into the conversation. But by the time three of the other Voices had failed utterly to lull me into joining in their banter, and ridden on, Tobin gave me a sideways look.

"They're good men, all of them. Handpicked by the king."

"I'm sure."

"Friends of mine. Some more than others, of course, but Doyd there is a close friend. If I happen not to be around, you can trust him to help you out."

My expression must have told him the likelihood of that, because he sighed softly. "I wish there'd been time to introduce you, in less chaotic circumstances. I think you'd like him. He's solid as a rock, and speaks sense. Most of the time." A quick smile flickered over his face, at some memory, no doubt.

I said roughly, "Having me nodding a greeting and not running for home is as good as you're going to get right now. You go chat with them, if you like, and leave me be."

I was ashamed of my ill temper as soon as I said it, though I had no more control over that than anything else in this insane day. But Tobin just said, "Surly cur," with a grin that seemed more fond than annoyed. And stayed by my side.

Oddly, as the day went on, I found myself becoming more at ease. Cricket's gaits fit me well, my muscles gave up fighting the saddle, and I was learning to ride off to the side when the men ahead raised heavy clouds of dust. Tobin's good cheer was contagious and I began to look around me more.

Now a day's ride out from the capital, the land was already becoming more open and rolling. There were fewer trees, and the tops of the hills were often



tallgrass and not cultivated fields. We saw fewer people too, although everyone we passed did stop to stand, openmouthed or frowning, to watch our company go by. Ahead of us the mountains stood along the horizon, seeming to grow no larger despite the hours of travel.

I turned to Tobin during a stretch of walking. “Have you been out this way before?”

“Oh yes, I think I’ve traveled most of the major roads in this country, either as a soldier or as a Voice. I did a couple of seasons in the eastern patrol. Boring work for the most part, wandering around looking menacing and keeping the hill folk worried enough about us not to ally with the R’gin.”

“You didn’t fight the R’gin though.”

“Lords and ladies, no. Where’s your history gone, lion-boy? The R’gin haven’t sent a force over the mountains since before we were born.”

“The battle of Trimount,” I remembered.

“Right. That was the last one. Not that I think they wouldn’t have loved to try again, but the hill tribes learned their lesson about alliances with the R’gin then, and it hasn’t been long enough for them to forget it. I did fight in the north when King Olan decided to try our borders. And in the campaign to push forward the boundary far enough to discourage him ever doing it again. Shit work, that was.”

He fell silent, and I realized that was the time he’d mentioned, the one that put sadness in his warm eyes. I quickly said, “I know nothing about the mountains, really. Are there truly goats that can climb steep cliffs? I assume that’s an old wives’ tale.”

“No, that’s true enough.” He began to tell me about the wonders of the Rockcomb range, about waterfalls that dropped two hundred feet down sheer rockfaces and the eagles that nested high on the crags above. “Gallim and I once climbed to an eagle’s nest and stole a chick for King Faro’s collection. The head falconer said it was a rare Bronzed Eagle and was pleased, but Gallim panicked on the top of the cliff and it took me hours to talk him down. Meanwhile the mother eagle showed up and began circling over us.” Tobin grinned. “I teased Gallim for a season afterward about sounding so like a

bleating sheep that the mother decided we were harmless and went to look elsewhere.”

We stopped briefly for a cold noon meal, and to change horses. Tobin stayed close, and gave me a smile that was almost proud when I swung up easily into the mare’s saddle. His bright grin, and joke about sacks of potatoes having more grace, were my reward. And we rode on again, with Tobin still animated and at ease at my side.

I could have listened to Tobin forever, hearing the adventurous boy I’d known echoed in the deep tones of the man. But bit by bit, whenever we slowed enough for conversation, he began to drag out my story too. Not the hard parts. We each shied away from moments that cut too deep. When I said how I respected Meldov’s passion for languages, and then reflected on where that dragged him down to, Tobin was quick with a funny story about a loose girth. When Tobin talked about a friend who’d fought beside him, and said, “He fell,” in a thick voice and paused, I filled in with the time Dag set the market basket down and a mouse got in, only to leap out at me when I unpacked it in my kitchen. The day passed faster than I ever would have expected.

The king pressed forward until the sky was dark and it was hard to see the men ahead of me. When Tobin finally led the way to our space in the camp, I once more fell off Bess more than dismounted. Tobin caught my arm and I leaned against him for a moment. “You’re doing well,” he said. “This speed is taxing everyone.”

I cursed him out halfheartedly for still looking strong. He laughed and leaned close to murmur, “Since I’m going to fetch your food and make your bed, you should be glad of it.

I saw the shock in his eyes as I brushed the smallest of kisses on his cheek, and said, “Oh, I am.”

When he’d laid out the bedding, and led the horses away to the picket line, I sat down, and tried not to look around and see who might be staring at me. *I kissed Tobin, just like that.* I gave up the struggle, and let myself glance around. He’d found a sheltered place for us again, but there were a few men nearby. However if any had seen that kiss, or cared, their attention was already on other things.

That night, bundled together, I kissed him much more thoroughly. And when he'd have rolled over to give me his back, I pressed my face to his throat and murmured, "No. Stay." He froze and then very slowly put his arm around my shoulders. I felt its weight and didn't run away. I fell asleep to the slow ruffle of his breath against my hair.

\*\*\*\*

The next day was easier still. It was as if this forced immersion in a crowd of men was doing what fifteen years of solitude had not, to make me human again. Or perhaps the solitude had been necessary to get me to the point of being able to ride out in this company. As I grew familiar with all of it, with the sound of hooves, the creak of leather, the rise and fall of men's voices, and the dust and the smell, it became a backdrop for Tobin.

This was where he'd been, all those years I'd spent away from him, at first sleeping days and working for Meldov at night, and later ensconced in my stone walls in my own personal darkness. Tobin had been riding out in the light.

It astounded me that he had any interest in my life, where the most exciting moments had been no more than ferreting out secrets carried by the dead. But he listened with attention that didn't seem feigned to my story of the Lady Anella and the missing body of the heir to Caraclo. As I told him how we'd tracked the right ghost to get an answer in the end, his laugh was of triumph and pleasure, not mockery. And although he'd seen and done so much more, he would time and again stop his own tales to coax me into one of my own.

We were so different. We always had been. As teens, we'd both loved to climb to the rooftops and wander through the town, but for him it had been for the adventure. For me it had been the secret glimpses of other lives. I'd wanted him then, at thirteen and fourteen, and spent many a night in my cot thinking about his laugh, or the way his hand felt rough and strong, held out to help me over a steep pitch. I'd never imagined he might be interested too, and never dared reach out or say one single word that might change the way we were, as friends.

Now he was the one reaching out. I was determined to stop holding back, if I could only convince the cowering fool I'd become to take the chance.

I slept each night in his arms now. Clothed of course, but warm and safe in a way I'd never known. I still woke often though, my breath tight in my chest. Old dreams and new ones merged. It was Tobin now, who was manacled to the wall while the wraith used my body against him, and I was trapped, silent and screaming in my own head. Or the mansion was burning, and there in the ashes the throat-cut body was not Meldov but Tobin. At least the dreams were dispelled fast. No better cure than waking to find him alive and solid, still asleep or perhaps whispering comfort against my cheek. And now that I could tolerate his hold, his arms tight around me seemed to keep some of the darkness at bay.

On the fourth night we drew rein earlier than usual. At the top of one of the rising hills was a strong manor. It looked huge and old, its weathered greystone walls rising against the sunset-hued sky. Tobin said, "Deepwell Keep." I stared at him and then took another look. This place was a legend, the one keep that had held out against the army of Prince Kal, over a century ago. Besieged for almost a year, they were saved by their water that never ran dry, and the foresight of their lord. With food stores exhausted, they'd still managed a mounted sortie against the flank of the Prince's army, when he thought they were fully subdued, and killed his best commander. That action was the start of Kal's downfall.

I'd read of it in history books, and even once spoken to a ghost from that era who'd sworn to tell the truth in the name of the Lord of Deepwell, as if he were a saint. And now here the famous keep was.

"No comment?" Tobin teased me. "I'd have expected you to be thrilled. It's kind of a storybook place."

"I'm speechless," I admitted. "Deepwell. Do you think we'll get a chance to see the famous well, or the cellars where they hid those last remaining horses for the sortie, so they wouldn't be eaten. Or..."

He laughed. "Maybe. There won't be a lot of time for tours, but I can ask."

I shrugged, trying to be casual. "Odds are we won't even see the inside, right?"

"Now there you're wrong. The regular soldiers will camp in the field, right enough, but the king and all the upper staff will have quarters in the keep."

“We’re upper staff?”

“I am. You’re baggage.”

I laughed and kneed Cricket against Darkwind’s shoulder. At least that was something to come out of this trip—my riding skills were all brushed up again.

It turned out Tobin was right. All of the King’s Own Guard, and the King’s Voices were among the guests ushered into the courtyard. So were the sorcerers, which made me feel less like I was hanging on Tobin’s coattails. He spoke aside to someone, and we were met by a dapper little man in servant’s livery. “My lord asked me to escort you to your chamber. Would you like to go the long way round and see a little of Deepwell Keep as we go?”

Tobin said, “You must be too busy for that.”

The man’s teeth were surprisingly white in his tanned face. “Never too busy to show off my keep. This way, sirs.”

The tour was a whirlwind of the cellars, where the deep well was guarded day and night by two of the keep’s men, to the parapets where the army of Prince Kal had been monitored through narrow archer’s slits. Tobin asked a few questions but I just took it in, and concentrated on keeping my saddle-worn legs under me. We finished up at a door on a fourth floor corridor.

“Not what you’re used to perhaps, sir,” the servant said, opening it. “We’ve seldom had so many worthy guests at one time and the lower apartments are all full. But you said you’d take quiet over luxury.”

“That’s fine.” Tobin handed him a small coin. “Thanks for the tour. Any chance at all of a bath?”

“Maybe. I’ll see what I can do.”

When the man had left, I closed the door and looked around. The room was small indeed, probably a mid-ranked servant’s chambers. There was a narrow window, set in the outer wall. The window-fabrics were plain and worn, the lamp on the wall smoked slightly when Tobin lit it, but the bed would hold two, if they were willing to stay close. After three nights on the ground it looked heavenly.

I said, “This is quite a place. You haven’t been here before?”

“Not inside. I’ve been here once with my men, but I chose to sleep outdoors with them. I was a young officer, and intent on winning their respect.”

“I bet you didn’t have to sleep on the ground to do that.”

“Perhaps not, but sharing their state in good times and bad did make them more willing to follow me. Still, I’m glad to have the chance to see Deepwell now. Those cellars are something else.”

“Yes.” I brushed futilely at my rump to remove the road dust and then sat on the edge of the bed. “Imagine being the Lord back then. You have horses there, safe under guard for a sortie, but above you have the people of your keep growing weak from lack of food. How long do you hold off on slaughtering them for meat? Or if you were the common soldier, asked to keep his lord’s mounts safe while his family starves. Imagine the temptation to lame one and then suggest it go for food.” I shook my head.

“It’s a much better siege I’m contemplating now,” Tobin said, his voice half an octave lower. “We have privacy here and a little time and a bed. And it seems as if my arms are not as distasteful to you as they were.”

I pushed to my feet and went to stare out the window. The sun had fully set, but the sky still held streaks of lavender and gold. “You were never *distasteful*.”

“I’m sorry.” He was close behind me now. “I misspoke. I didn’t mean that the way it came out.”

I shook my head. “It’s my fault. I’m abnormal.”

“You’re wounded.” He was closer still. “Turn around please.”

I did so, and he closed the distance between us. I’d been irked by his command, but now I realized he was still holding to my request not to come up behind me. In front was better anyway. He kissed me slowly. As sweet as the last few nights had been, this was better, standing and awake with no one to see us. His mouth tasted of the dust of the road at first, but no doubt mine did too. After a few minutes there were no tastes between us but our own.

A knock on the door, broke us apart. Tobin went to answer. Two servants stood there with large water jugs. One said, “We’re so sorry sir, there’s not a bath to be had. But we brought some warm water and towels.”

When they were gone, Tobin said, “A pity. I do love a bath. And it eases getting naked.” He glanced at me.

With a dry mouth, I said, “I’m dirty enough to need washing all over.”

“That could be arranged.” Tobin set one of the ewers on the floor and dropped a towel beside it. “Let’s get your boots off and you can stand on that.” He knelt at my feet and took hold of one boot and then the other, as I dragged my feet free. He would have reached for my socks, but I said, “Now *your* boots. Sit on the bed.”

He did as I asked, gravely raising one foot, although his eyes danced.

“Don’t make fun of me,” I muttered.

“Never.” His voice was soft. “Tell me what you want.”

“To be equal. To take turns.” I couldn’t do this if there was a master and a servant in this room, even if the master was me. I helped tug his boots off, although with just one hand I was perhaps more hindrance than help. Still we managed it. I backed away when that was done and set hands to my own shirt.

“I can...” Tobin began.

“Not this time.” I averted my eyes as I stripped off my travel-stained clothes. I could hear the sound of him doing the same but I couldn’t look over there. When I was down to my small-clothes I hesitated. *What did I want?* I wasn’t yet sure. I trusted Tobin, but didn’t trust my own responses. I felt hot and then cold, and was only half aroused, despite knowing that Tobin now stood less than three feet away, unclothed and waiting.

For the first year in my little house, I hadn’t even pleased myself. Every attempt was aborted in images of wraith-light and the panicked feel of being a passenger in my own body. Gradually I’d gotten past that, but pleasure had remained a fast and furtive thing, a matter of touch and friction and hard breaths—impersonal and unemotional. I drove my body to release, but without letting myself think about it, without engaging my mind or emotions.

This was different. This was Tobin. He was worth time and thought. And yet there was still a gibbering terror beneath my determination that said he would take me and harm me and control me. I *wanted*, and I was still afraid. I

kept my eyes on the floor as I pushed my smalls off, walked over and stepped onto the towel.

“Lyon, look at me.”

My eyes were fixed down, staring at my own near-hairless legs and arched feet, standing on the bleached-white cloth. I heard Tobin approach, and then he knelt, lowering his head to come into my field of view. I turned aside, staring at the smooth-worn boards of the floor.

“Lyon, if you don’t want me to come so close without clothes, say so. I won’t leave you or think less of you. It’s been what—barely a week since I forced you out of your safe shell? I’ll understand if you don’t want me to touch you at all. Or if you prefer, let me start slowly, and you can call a halt whenever you choose.”

“All right.” I wasn’t sure he could hear that, so softly did it come out. But there was the sound of water as he dunked a cloth and then he stood and reached out toward me. Even looking to the side, I could see his strong arm, all muscles and tan and dark hair, as he laid the cloth on my shoulder. The water was clean and good. He wiped gently up my neck to my jaw and around. Then he rinsed the cloth and gave it into my hand. “Do your face. I don’t want to blind or smother you by accident.”

I scrubbed roughly at my cheeks and forehead, and then over my eyes, glad of a reason to close them. When I opened them again I looked at him and handed the cloth back. Tobin smiled, and then took his time, rinsing my shoulders and arms. He held the ewer up for me to dip my hands, and then he wiped them both, good and bad, with equal attention. When the cloth moved down my chest and brushed a nipple I shivered. I remembered clean lamplight, his dark eyes flecked with amber, and the touch of his mouth, and my breath came faster.

Tobin knelt and continued. He washed me to my waist, and then very slowly lower. Over my hips, and around down the outsides of my thighs. Each time moving a little closer and a little closer to... I grabbed his wrist. “Enough.”

He took just one deep breath, and then said in the same quiet voice, “What now?”



I dropped another towel from the stack onto the boards. “You stand there.”

Tobin glanced at me and then smiled slow and wide. He stepped onto the towel and held his hands out at his sides. “I’m yours. Do what you will.”

*Mine.* What was I that this man should give himself over to me? And yet, what a gift. I took the fresh water and began with his face, even though he’d not done mine. I wiped to his hairline, where the day’s sweat had caked the dust in dark runnels over the tan of his brow. He had faint lines there from squinting. I carried on, over the straight nose, the high cheeks, the wide mouth. He was trying to be sober and still, but I saw him hide another smile as I scrubbed a spot from his chin.

I moved to his strong shoulders, wider than my own. To his arms. His hands. His chest. That chest... If you’d asked me a month before, I’d have said I preferred a man with less hair, with the planes of muscle clearly seen. But this was perfection. His curls were silkier than they looked, and as I wiped and rinsed, the flat arcs of chest muscle were outlined by the wet hair. His nipples were larger than mine and darker, and as I watched they tightened. I dared to press the wet cloth against one, rubbing in small circles, and Tobin made a soft sound.

And that was all. I shoved the cloth into his hand and stepped back. He stood still and let me look at him. He was fully hard now, and larger than any of the boys I’d traded touches with, as a teenager in the streets of Riverrun. His wet chest rose and fell in short breaths. His thighs were strong. He was mine, and I couldn’t take him.

I turned away, toweling myself off roughly, and muttered, “If you wish to do something about that, or find someone else who will, I won’t mind.”

“Tell me that’s a lie.”

I jumped because he was suddenly close behind me. But when I turned his eyes held no apology.

“Tell me you’d care if I went and buggered some willing soldier.”

I took a breath. “All right, yes, of course I’d care. But how can I ask you not to, when I can’t even touch you below the waist.”

“You don’t have to ask. Just don’t push me at someone else unless you mean for me to go.”

I gritted my teeth. I'd been off balance since the moment he showed up on my doorstep. What was one more fall? "Don't, then. Don't go."

"Thank you." He took a step back. "As for the other. Would it please you to watch me get myself off, or bother you?"

I stared at him. "I really... don't know." But my body felt warm at the idea, and my own cock stirred.

"Get into the bed under the covers and keep warm," Tobin said. "I'm going to finish washing up." He waited until I was safely beneath the blankets and then picked up the cloth. Moving slowly, each action deliberate, he soaked it, wrung it out, and bent to wash his feet. The curve of his ass in the lamplight was a work of art. He cleaned himself slowly, washing up and around his legs, along his thighs, and higher. Then he looked at me, as he laid the wet cloth on his erect shaft.

I shuddered, but couldn't look away. He wiped slowly, tip to root and back, and then into the nest of curls at its base. He spread his legs and washed over his sac, hanging low and full between his thighs. He turned, and squeezed out the rag on his spine, so trickles of water from the small of his back ran down into the hidden recesses of his ass-crack. I watched the shimmering stream disappear, and then fall below, drop by drop, to the towel at his feet.

He turned back, and fixed his eyes on mine, as he let the cloth drop to his feet. With one strong hand, he grasped his shaft and tugged, circling the tip with his palm. His breath quickened and he did it again, faster. Up and around. The head of his cock grew shiny and purple in his fist. He moaned softly and then quieted, making no sound but his ragged panting as he stroked himself off.

I was mesmerized, watching that hand. I could almost feel the firm, dry touch. Under the concealing blankets, I was getting fully hard. I shifted restlessly, feeling the fabric of the blanket rasp against my sensitive skin.

"Still all right?" Tobin asked calmly, only a hint of the effort it took in his tone.

"Yes."

He worked himself faster, almost roughly. "Please say my name."

“Tobin.”

He rubbed himself hard, pumping his fist in swirling strokes. He spread his legs slightly and cupped his sac with his other hand, squeezing its shape under the curls of his pubes. “Say it again.”

“Tobin,” I said. And added, “You’re beautiful.”

He came then, the cream spurting in small arcs and dripping on his fingers, as he grunted and shuddered. And laughed. “Ah, Lyon. Beautiful. Gods. Hardly.”

“You are,” I insisted.

He picked up a towel and wiped his hands and softening cock. Then he pulled on a clean shirt and trews.

“What? Are you going somewhere?”

“I’ll go see if I can find someone to come get the dirty towels. Including this one.” He picked up one from the clean pile and tossed it to me on the bed. “It’ll probably take me fifteen minutes or so.”

He slipped out the door, shutting it firmly behind him. I was left both grateful and bereft. *Why didn’t he stay?* Of course I knew why. I hated that I’d made him so careful of me. But as I slid a hand under the blanket and took hold of myself I knew I wouldn’t have done this with him in the room.

I stroked my length, feeling my cock harden more with each pass of my fingers. I slid the foreskin around, and that silken caress sent echoes through my groin. I closed my eyes and, for the first time in longer than I could remember, imagined not some nebulous sensation, but the touch of another real man.

Tobin’s hand would be rougher than mine, and warmer, as he always seemed to be. Like he carried the heat of sunshine inside him. He would smell of horses and dust and skin. He would breathe fast and hard, and get that rasp in his voice I’d only heard once, but now would never forget. He would touch me, oh gods, he would touch me and want this, want my pleasure, want the way I was whining in my throat as desire rose in waves, almost painful, until I crashed through to climax. It burned. All that heat leaving me felt like death. And like a beginning.

I mopped up as well as I could with the towel. Stupid of me not to have put it in place first, but the memory of Tobin had been too urgent for me to be rational. I wiped my fingers and pitched the thing back into the damp pile on the floor.

It was closer to half an hour before Tobin knocked, called my name and came back in. “Not asleep yet?”

“No.”

“Good. I bespoke supper. They’ll be up soon to clear the room and bring us a tray.”

A thousand things I wanted to say, but all I managed was, “Thank you.”

He grinned lasciviously, “Oh, my pleasure, definitely.”

“Not for that, you knobhead.”

“No?”

“Well, that too.” I grinned, still lightheaded with emotions.

“Anytime. Well, perhaps not *any* time.”

I threw the pillow at him and he ducked. Then he dug in my bag and passed me a shirt and treads. “Get dressed. The servant will be here soon. You need to eat and keep up your strength.”

The tray arrived shortly after, and we ate in companionable silence. The food was good, although simple. I said, “Do you think they gave the king this same bread and turnips and mutton?”

“Probably not. Although he’s eaten worse in the field. I’m just as glad to have this as my portion, and not to have to stay awake through five courses of dainties while making polite conversation. Poor Faro.”

I was replete and mostly relaxed and so was able to ask, with assumed calm, “Did you ever fancy him?”

“Faro? Gods, no. Well, maybe a bit right at first. He’s good looking and a good leader. But he *is* my king and he’s not fay. And he was already married. The old king made sure of that, and a babe in the cradle, before he let him command in the field. For all that it was a political marriage, Faro loves his queen.”

I relaxed all the way. “I’m stupid.”

“Were you jealous?” Tobin grinned. “That’s excellent. There were a few men I did have a thing for, over the years. Let me know if you want to hear about them.”

“No, thank you.”

He laughed, but then set his plate aside and asked quietly, “What about you? Were there other men? Besides...”

“The wraith?” That hadn’t been Meldov, it *had not been Meldov*. I swallowed and said lightly, “A few boys, when I was just an apprentice. None after that.”

“Did you...” Tobin rubbed his mouth. “I’m just going to ask straight out, because I want to know what you’ve done. Physically, that is, so I don’t scare you moving too fast.”

“It’s not the physical part that really bothers me,” I said, and it was only half a lie.

“Nonetheless. Boys in the streets, or an empty room. I did that too, once or twice, but it was no more than a quick hand job.”

“Yes.”

“Did you ever, um, use mouths?”

“No.”

“Anything but hands?”

I looked down. He leaned close, still careful to watch for my reaction as he kissed my temple. “You’re safe with me. I was already planning to go as slowly as you need. This is just one more piece of the puzzle.”

“Mostly we just stroked off together, side by side and watching,” I said. It was both intimate and uncomfortable to talk about this with Tobin. “Sometimes we did it for each other, with our hands. That was all I did, before.”

“Oh, lion-boy, do I have plans for you. Eventually.” He kissed my cheek, and then used the back of his fingers to turn my head for a real kiss. “Tonight, though, we should get some sleep. The king wants to head out at dawn. We

have a day and a half yet to travel, and in two nights it'll be darkmoon. We're cutting it pretty fine."

He stood and set the tray outside the door and then looked at me. "I either need to put smalls on under these trews, or strip naked to sleep. Your call."

I said slowly, "It's a small bed. We'll have to sleep really close together."

"And that's easier for you if we're dressed? Not a problem." This time when he took off his trews to add smallclothes, he didn't flaunt his taut ass or draw the process out. And I was grateful. We came together in the bed, and he put his arms around me without a word of complaint. I rolled over and pressed my back to his chest. I could at least give him this, that I trusted him behind me. Because I did.

He gathered me in close, and we quickly fell asleep.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER SEVEN

A day later we began really getting into the foothills. The mountains seemed to suddenly grow, looming against the sky now in crisp, hard-edged shapes of purple-grey rock and white snow. The lower slopes were covered in the greenish haze of brush and shrubs, and the dark-green arrows of conifer trees marched in ranks toward us. The hills we climbed were still mainly grassland, but the rises were becoming steeper. Clumps of trees were more common and the air tasted clean and thin.

At noon, we halted beside a small river. I dismounted and we led the horses to drink downstream. I stood back, and let Tobin shoulder our mounts in with the rest, where they snorted and drank, cooling their hooves and muddying the bank. Then Tobin headed us back up the river and we found a place out of the way to tether them to a fallen log. I was hot and sweaty. I knelt by the water and loosened my shirt, wondering if there was time to wash a bit. Tobin smiled at me. "Taste it first."

I scooped my canteen full and took a sip. It was good, but so cold that it froze my teeth.

"Snowmelt," Tobin said. "Not that I've never swum in it, but it will send your balls screaming for cover."

I poured water on a cloth and managed a wipe-up, and then refilled my canteen. "Do you know where we are?"

"We're getting close to the end of the ride. This is the Snake River. Tallribbon Falls lead into it, about twenty miles south and east. If we cross the ford going northeast, we'll come to one of the Mage's Fingers, Gullywatch. That's where the king plans to set up camp."

The Fingers were even more ancient than Deepwell, a series of stone towers built a millenium ago to keep watch on the eastern border. "I thought they were just outlook towers, not true keeps."

"That's right. No hope of a real bath or even a well-cooked meal. There's just a garrison there. But Gullywatch is as close to the area the ghost named as we can get. And it has a cellar."

I forced my mind away from that. I'd been carefully not thinking about another session with the sorcerers and the ghost of an angry man, down in the dark. *Not now. Not yet.* "So we'll set up camp there, and then what?"

"That's for the king to say, but I imagine he'll send out patrols. And then consult with the ghost tonight."

"Right away?"

"If it's going to be done at all. Tonight is darkmoon."

I'd lost track somewhere. "This could all be a wild goose chase. The real invasion could be just the one on the coast."

"It could. But the king trusts his intelligencers enough to come here, and he's a good judge of men."

"And if there is a tunnel and we find it, what then?"

Tobin flashed me his grin. "If we find it before they put an army through it, then we've won. We can blockade the end of it with little trouble. Like a cat keeping a mouse in its hole. Something like this tunnel is an advantage only as long as it's secret."

"And if we're too late?"

"Well, that's what the archers and cavalry are for. We'll slow them down until the army behind us arrives."

That sounded optimistic, but I didn't say so.

The company ate quickly and we were soon on our way. By mid-afternoon I saw the stone tower of Gullywatch rising up on a hillside, and an hour later we reached its foot. The company set up camp on the hillside around the tower. Tobin found us a place apart, but before we could unload our saddlebags a man came over to us. "Voice Tobin and Translator Lyon? You're summoned to a meeting in the tower. I'll take care of your mounts."

We left him to tether the horses and untack them, and made our way to the tower. Gullywatch was larger than it seemed from a distance. It was built of pinkish-grey stone rising a hundred feet above the top of the hill, with the same uncanny smoothness as the mage's tower back home. At its crown was an open viewing deck. Below that windows studded its walls, many not much more than arrow-slits, particularly in the bottom floors. The door was



reinforced with iron, and fronted by a portcullis, but both stood open now. We passed the King's Own guard at the gate, walked under the ironwork and into the main hall.

The king looked up from where he stood peering at papers spread on a long table. "Oh, there you are. Good. Come on."

He led the way out briskly, not pausing for courtesies, and everyone in the room followed along, with Tobin and me bringing up the rear. We went down two flights of narrow, curved stairs and ended up in what appeared to be a storage cellar. The walls were lined with casks and boxes. The King and his sorcerers prowled around the room while I stood bemused at the foot of the stairs. I wasn't hiding behind Tobin's shoulder. Much.

"We can clear all this out," the king said, turning to Firstmage. "What do you think, will it do?"

"Well enough," The old man said. I thought he looked drawn and ill. The trip had clearly been a strain on his endurance. Secondmage hovered nearby.

"And you still think it can be done the way you planned?"

"Yes, sire. It will not be my first transference. I'm familiar with both theory and practice."

The king waved at the military man to his left. "Go on up and guard the stairs now." When the man had gone, King Faro looked around at us. "So now that we're here and we beat darkmoon, if only by a few hours, it's time to make plans. We will of course send scouts out tonight across the area, and man the watch-tower. If the R'gin come through in the dark tonight they'll need torches or lanterns. We'll keep watch for any light in the hills."

"If I were them, I'd wait till morning for exactly that reason," a man in colonel's insignia said. "If they're even coming at all. I'd start pushing through at first light."

"Yes. And they may also. Or they may have started coming through today. We'll use bigger mounted patrols tomorrow. But it's my mages' hope that we can pinpoint the location more precisely."

"By calling the ghost?"

"That, at least." The king nodded to Firstmage.

“We’ll call the ghost and question him again,” the old man said. “We’ll show him maps, and a couple of drawings of the mountains, and try to induce him to mark the location of the tunnel for us. But the hillpeople don’t use maps and never have. If he can’t or won’t give us the information, we have one more resort to try. We will do a transference.”

“A what?” the colonel asked.

A cold feeling started in the pit of my stomach. According to Meldov, there were things that could be done with ghosts besides confining and questioning them. None were simple, and few ended well for either party. He’d never given me the details.

Secondmage spoke up. “In a transference, the ghost entity, the consciousness if you will, is sent into the mind of one of his summoners. For a day and a night, the ghost shares his body and speaks directly to him.”

“What happens after the day and night?”

“We use the spell to banish the ghost, performed at daybreak. The ghost is usually quite weakened by then anyway. The process drains its strength. This is a technique of last resort, because once banished the ghost is gone forever. You can only do it once.”

“You’re crazy if you do it at all!” I only realized I’d spoken when everyone stared at me.

Firstmage said, “I have practice with this spell, young man. It’s delicate and powerful work, but I’ve carried two different ghosts myself. If it’s done right, there’s nothing to fear.”

*And if it’s not done right? They were crazy to even think of it!* I kept silent with an effort, but couldn’t help sidling toward the stairs. Tobin moved to keep his shoulder against mine.

Secondmage said, “I will carry the ghost, should it be necessary. Of course, we hope that it isn’t, but if we can’t get the information we need by questioning, I’ll stand ready.”

The general asked, “How much information will you get if you go through with this... transference? Will you know everything that the ghost knows? Can you lead us straight to that tunnel? If so, surely that’s worth simply doing without any delay, messing about with questions.”

“It’s not that straightforward,” Firstmage said. “If we do a transference, the spirit is housed within the host’s body for that brief period. There the ghost is safe from outside influences. It can’t be summoned away by another, cannot be harmed by daylight, and is tied to the host for the duration of the spell. However the ghost will merely speak to the host, mind to mind, much as they speak to us here. They share what knowledge they can be induced to share, a word at a time. It’s an extension of questioning, no more.”

“Then it’s just a way to ask more questions?” The general looked as disappointed as I was relieved to hear it.

“There’s no deep transfer of knowledge, no real touching of minds. Otherwise it might be done more often. Because it’s only an extension of questioning, it’s seldom considered worth the risk. In this case, however, to be able to walk the ghost outside in the daylight and show him the mountain landscape is worth trying. What he won’t or can’t identify on a map, he’ll surely recognize in real life.”

“What are the risks?”

“Few when it’s done right. The host could be overwhelmed by the presence of another entity speaking in his mind, or be confused, unable to do his part. Or even driven mad by the oddness of the situation. In this case, that isn’t a concern.” Firstmage gave Secondmage an approving nod. “Or the ghost’s strength may be too taxed to complete the spell without losing the spirit completely and permanently before the transference takes hold. The process is a strain on both sorcerer and ghost. That’s why this is a last resort. If we try it, and cannot bind Xan to Secondmage, we’ll have no more chances to speak with him.”

“No risk of having the ghost decide to stay in the host permanently?”

“No, not at all,” Firstmage said. “Ghosts are ephemeral. They don’t have that kind of power. Unless you’ve summoned a far different spirit, a ravager or wraith, one of the undead, then the biggest problem we have is keeping the ghost around long enough.”

“And we’re sure this ghost isn’t, um, those undead?”

“Positive.”

Firstmage turned to me. “Translator Lyon, if we perform the transference you’ll be required to stay close to Secondmage, since you alone speak Xan’s language. As the ghost speaks to him, Secondmage will render the sounds aloud as closely as he can, and you’ll have to translate. Then when we decide on the next question, you’ll have to render it in *tridescant* for his ears and hence the ghost’s.”

I blinked. “You mean, he’s going to take this ghost into his head and then not understand a word it says?” I didn’t know what the wraith’s first tongue had been, but when it spoke in my mind I’d understood each nuance of its thoughts. Of course, it had used more than simple words, with its hooks set deep in my thoughts. It had been no powerless passenger.

“Transference is very limited. The host only hears what the ghost chooses or is compelled to say. And vice versa. Any closer bonding of mind to spirit is an abomination.”

*You can say that again.*

I swallowed a surge of nausea and tried to be diplomatic. “I will of course help with any translation I can.” Even though the thought of a ghost in a man’s head made me feel like turning and running. “If Secondmage knows modern *tridescant*, then rendering the sounds of the older tongue shouldn’t be too hard.”

Secondmage shook his head slowly. “I know neither, but I’m skilled in several other languages.”

*Tridescant was different though.* I said, “Perhaps it would be wiser to use a host who does at least know the modern version. There are sounds, inflections, the use of sliding pitch, that carry over from the old version to the new. There are three levels to that language—the phonemes, the rhythm, and the pitch. All of them carry meaning.”

“The host must be a sorcerer involved in the rite,” Firstmage said.

The king said, “Do any of you three speak the modern language at all? I know we had Doyd try it before, for fluency, but have you any skill with it?”

“I think you’ll find Secondmage quite capable.”

The translation by proxy idea sounded unwieldy and doomed to failure. I was the only person in the room, apparently, with the language skills needed to

effectively host this spirit. I'd rather die first. *Would Tobin expect me to step up and volunteer to help with this madness? Would the king?* I said, "I'll do my very best with the translations, then."

There was a pause, as I looked at my feet and hoped fervently that I was imagining their eyes on me. Finally the king said, "So we have a course of action. Patrols are already out. Those of us in this room will meet here again, an hour after sunset, for the summoning. You're all free until then."

I didn't run for the stairs, but I did walk fast. At the top of the steps, one of the King's Own was waiting. He said, "Translator Lyon? The king has assigned a room for you here in the tower. And for Voice Tobin, of course. He wants to house everyone he needs close at hand."

I turned toward the main tower door anyway. Outside, the late afternoon sun gilded the long grass. I could smell the cookfires burning, and hear the murmur of soldiers. The guard gestured away from the door toward the stairs, and Tobin bumped against my shoulder lightly. I turned and followed the guard.

He led us up six flights, and then into a short curved corridor, opening the first door on the left. "The tower's small, and this is what's available." The room behind the door was very cramped, with one curved wall, a small window, room for the narrow bed and not much more.

Tobin said, "Better than a patch of dirt in a field. Thank you."

The guard gave him a little salute and went out. As soon as he was gone I rounded on Tobin. "Did you know what they were planning? This transference insanity?"

He raised both hands, "Lyon, come on, how could I have known? What do I know about sorcerers? If anyone could have expected that twist, it would have been you."

"The king tells you things."

"His sorcerers don't. And His Majesty has been far too busy to be giving me updates."

"It's madness. Inviting a ghost into your mind!" I whirled away to stare out the window. It was so narrow and deeply recessed that it showed only a tiny

slice of the world outside—a patch of grass, half of a grazing horse, a slice of sky. Narrow enough that no one could come in. It didn't make me feel safe.

“Firstmage seemed pretty confident it would work.” Tobin hesitated, then asked, “Is it something you've heard of, this transference?”

“No. Although I was still in the early stages of my education when, when Meldov was lost.” *And also when he died. Six months later.*

“This sounds different from what you, um, described.”

“Yes.”

“More limited”

“Yes.”

“So it could be safe.”

“He's going to have a thousand year old ghost in his head. In what way does that sound safe?”

“Well, if it's just for a day. With nothing more than conversation.”

*...the dense, smothering feel of the wraith's thoughts as it spoke to me, eager, wanting, hungry—“Say yes...”*

“It was far more than conversation for me.” *My hand rising without my control, against my desperate will, to slip the open cuff off my wrist...* I took a deep breath and reminded myself that the wraith was long destroyed. Well, long gone, definitely... I leaned into the window. There was no glass in it, and the smell of the wind carried heather and grass and woodsmoke to my nose. I took another breath.

Tobin sighed. “I'm a simple man. I don't understand sorcery. If my king and Firstmage tell me it will work, my place is to stand behind them.”

“I've never been one to take orders.” I liked to know the whys and wherefores, to question and doubt and test things out. The mark of a true sorcerer, Meldov had once said. Although he'd added, “*Or a true librarian.*” He'd claimed the difference was the courage and will to make the bold experiments. Something I'd clearly lost along the way. I didn't want to see this experiment happen, ever, to anyone.

I asked, “Tobin, what is it you see in me? Besides the old friend who kept you from falling through Widow Baker's roof?”

“I don’t know what you’re asking. You’re my friend.”

I shook my head roughly. “That’s no explanation.” I turned to face him, putting the rough stone of the tower at my back. “Look at you. You’re strong and patient and kind, and brave. I’m such a coward that I can barely get through each day. I’m useless, a sorcerer who won’t do sorcery, a fay man who won’t... I’m a librarian. Not even that, because if a patron came to ask me where to find a book, I’d probably hide behind the desk.”

“There’s nothing wrong with librarians. I like a good book. But there’s more to you than that.” Tobin reached out to lay his hand against my cheek, his rough palm warm and steady. “Sure, you’d been hurt until you hid inside your stone walls and iron bars. But you were winning your way back, even before I came. You replaced bars with glass, and started going to town.”

“Baby steps that took me fifteen years!”

“And look at you now. I asked you for help, and here you are, speaking with kings and hobnobbing with the most powerful sorcerers in the land, riding badly-named horses, and letting me kiss you.” He did so, a swift peck. “And kissing me back.” He waited, and I wanted to kiss him, more than I wanted to prove him wrong.

But when our mouths separated, after a long satisfying moment, I said, “There has to be something more. You protect me and help me and keep me going.” *And make me feel, make me want, when I thought that was gone forever.* “What do I do for you?”

“You make me see,” Tobin said. “You always have. When we climbed a tree as boys, I’d rejoice at how high up we were, but you were the one who’d look out beyond the branches and see some tower, or a bird soaring in the sky, or a woman burying something in her yard. And you’d show me, and make up a story about it. Or speculate. *What’s she burying? Could it be money? Perhaps her husband drinks, and she has to keep their money hidden. Or her ne’er-do-well son is coming to town, and might steal it.* A hundred explanations you had sometimes, and each more fanciful than the last, and yet with a grain of sense.”

“I talked a lot.”

“Well, yes. But I liked it. You made me look beyond the immediate thing to the larger world, to a realm of possibilities. I liked that.”

“And now?”

“And now? You still do. With your talk of languages and cultures, of books and sorcery. Worlds I know nothing of.”

“You’ve traveled far more.”

“If you’d been with me, I’d have seen all those places better. I thought of you sometimes, when I was far afield, and tried to imagine what you’d have noticed.”

“I’ve done almost nothing in my life.”

“You survived. You overcame darkness. You sacrificed and won your freedom. And then you recovered enough to find your way back.” He kissed me and said, “Also in the meantime you got damned pretty.”

“I’ll show you pretty.” I bit his lip, and then his neck, hard enough to leave a mark.

He laughed. “Desirable. Fine. Strong.” He fended me off and kissed my throat, and then my chest. “Edible.” He slid down my front to his knees. The friction of his body down mine was sweet pain.

He rubbed his cheek against my belly. The rasp of his stubble on my shirt was flame across my skin. He slid his hands inside the front of my shirt, and stayed there.

I put my hand on his head, feeling the texture of his hair between my fingers. His breath warmed me through the fabric. He made a small sound that might have been a laugh. “I’m pushing again, aren’t I? Gods, Lyon, you have no idea what you do to me. I’m just going to stay here for a minute. Don’t mind me.”

I stroked his head, then laid the fingers of my dead clawed hand against his cheek. I wanted to pretend it wasn’t a test, but knew it was. He just leaned into my touch though, and then, turned and pressed a kiss to my thumb. It warmed me. That hand might be useless, but I could feel the heat of his mouth.

He murmured, “This is good. Just to know it’s you touching me. I used to make up stories in my mind sometimes, where you’d lived through the fire. I never dreamed they could be true.”

“I’m sorry.”



“No!” He tipped his head back to look up at me. “I regret none of it, except that I wasn’t there when you needed me. But I’m here now. And so are you. That was how the best dreams started.”

He freed a hand from my shirt, reached up slowly and cupped my bad hand in his. I said, “That’s so ugly.”

He kissed it again, slowly, drawing lips and tongue over those frozen joints. My fingers twitched at his touch. He asked, “I know you can’t use it, but does it still feel?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” He returned to his exploration, his mouth becoming frankly lewd on the end of my bent thumb. I watched as he sucked me into his mouth past the knuckle, then slid off with a wet pop. My whole body yearned toward that touch. I felt the heat in my groin rising to match the heat of his busy, licking tongue. The way he curled his tongue-tip round my thumb and over... I groaned softly, and tightened my other hand in his hair.

“You like that.”

“Mm.”

“So do I.” He took my other hand, pulling it away from his hair to suck my forefinger in deep. His eyes drooped half-closed as he made slow, lascivious love to every finger on that hand. By the time he was done, my hips were jerking toward him without conscious intent. I was hard and aching, and when he let my hand go, I was glad of the wall behind me for support, not protection.

Tobin’s voice had that rough quality when he said, “Now what? Shall I pleasure myself again for you? Because it will be a very short but enthusiastic show.”

I couldn’t say what I wanted, but I took his hand in my turn, raised it to my mouth for a kiss, and then moved it to the waistband of my treads.

His eyes were honey in the late sunlight. “You’re sure? Yes?”

I wanted this more than I feared it. “Yes.”

He opened my buttons and slid the fabric down off my hips. Then my smalls, pushing them to my thighs. I leaned hard on the stone wall at my back

and watched him. He locked his hands behind himself again and leaned forward, to place a soft kiss on my belly.

I said, “I don’t mind your hands if they’re not behind me, pinning me. I mean, I want them.” Somehow it had become true.

The smile he gave me was soft with affection. He reached out slowly, so slowly, and ran his fingers from my hips down to where the scant blond curls started at my groin. There he flattened his palms against me. My cock rose a little at his touch, but I was still far from hard. He kissed the swelling tip, plucking at my foreskin with his lips, and I whimpered. That touch was like nothing I’d ever felt. My cock hardened further, begging for more. Gods above, his mouth was soft and wet and gentle, sliding over me in a way a boy’s hand never could. And his face!

I looked down at him, and for all my vaunted breadth of vision, I could see nothing except Tobin. His eyes were half-closed with pleasure, his cheeks rough with a day’s worth of beard, his mouth touching me. His lips were parted to pluck at the rim of my cockhead, slowly rising from the foreskin. His tongue emerged to swipe across me, smearing a silver trail of my preslick that caught the light. Then his jaw opened as he enveloped the whole head and shaft in his mouth.

I gasped with pleasure, and he pulled off me with a slurp, looked up, and grinned. “More?”

“Please.”

“Thank the gods.” He bent back to his task. I had no idea those sensations were possible. The feel of his tongue in the sensitive places under my foreskin, the suction of his mouth drawing me in, the pressure of his throat around me. I put my palms against the rough stone, and watched Tobin pleasure me until I had neither voice nor breath nor sense left in my head.

As my wordless cries got louder, he sped up. He pressed his palms on my hips, without taking hold, and bobbed his head, working my hard shaft deep in his mouth. I felt my release rushing toward me, the heat boiling up from my balls and spilling outward. I tried to tell him, but managed only a deeper groan. And then I came. He swallowed it down, eyes closed and throat working as he milked me dry. When he finally let me go I just slid down the

wall on wobbly knees, sat hard on the floor, and kissed him. His mouth tasted of my spend, and he smiled against my lips.

It was a long time before I found words. Wonder filled me, at the sensations, at the fact that I'd been able to permit that, at the most wondrous thing of all—that he'd enjoyed doing it. With me. "That was... astounding."

"First time, right?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"Very much my pleasure. You make wonderful sounds." When I would have turned away, embarrassed, he caught my head between his hands and kissed me again. "That was praise, lion-boy. I liked it, a lot."

He hugged me, moving carefully as always, and I wrapped my arms around him, pulling him close. I wanted to be part of him, and have him part of me. I was dizzy and content and too satisfied to be afraid. I nuzzled into his hair behind his ear and he laughed. "That tickles." But he pulled me in tighter instead of pushing me away.

After a while, my ass started to get cold on the stone. I said, "How long, do you think, till sunset?"

He glanced at our window. "An hour perhaps, not more."

"And an hour after that until we're needed. There's a bed."

"So there is."

"We could be more comfortable."

"I'm liking this."

"Come to bed and I'll make you like that more."

He pulled back to look at me. "Is that an offer?"

"Maybe." I had to admit, "I'm not sure of what."

"I'll take whatever you've got." He stood and reached a hand down for me.

I was half undressed, shirt pushed up and treads at my knees. It was easiest just to strip and get into bed, scooting over close to the wall. Tobin stripped fast, got in beside me, and then lay on his back, arms folded behind his head.

"I like this," I said, rolling up on one elbow to look at him. I had my bad arm supporting me, so my good hand was free to reach out and touch him. I

explored his textures. His stubble was rough under my fingers, his throat smooth. His lips were dry, but as I ran a finger over them he sucked it into his mouth, and I felt again that wet clinging softness. Even though I'd just come, the touch and sight of his working mouth made me breathe harder.

I pulled my hand free, and stroked over his chest, letting his soft hairs brush my palm as I made ever wider circles on those fine planes of muscle. When I came to a nipple, I explored its texture, plucking and wiggling it as it crinkled tighter between my fingers. His nipple was pliable but his chest was so hard. I tried to dig my fingers into his pecs, and he tightened them until it was like pressing into sculpted stone. I slid my palm lower, over the washboard of his stomach. And lower yet.

The wet tip of his cock slid across my wrist. "Touch me there," Tobin whispered. "Put your hand on me."

I met his eyes. He said, "I'll keep my hands locked behind my head. I'm all yours."

How could anyone say no to that? I slid my hand lower, to where his curls became coarser and thicker. The shaft of his cock stroked over the back of my hand. I bumped it slightly, on purpose, and Tobin hissed. *What was I waiting for?* I'd done this a dozen times when I was fifteen and sixteen, meeting Jol or Dallon in some dark corner, both of us eager and ready to explode. We'd gotten each other off with more speed than skill, panting in the darkness. This was far better.

I turned my hand over and cupped his cock in my palm. Slowly I closed my fingers around him. He made no sound as I stroked him upward, inch by inch, but I felt his whole body arch toward my touch. I changed positions, bracing over him to kiss him. Tobin's mouth still tasted salty, and for a moment it seemed unpleasantly strange. But under my flavor was his familiar presence, and the strangeness faded. I gave him one more kiss, and then positioned myself above his groin, where I could look, and touch.

All those years of solitude might not have made me an expert, and I had only one hand to use, but my fingers were bigger and stronger than when I was a boy, and with Tobin I was unhurried. I let my mind go back, back *before*, to the time when I'd dreamed of this at night, and put the thought out of my mind

by day. This was Tobin here under my hand, asking for something I *did* know how to give him. I was damned well going to do this right.

I began slowly, feeling his size and textures against my fingers. His shaft was veiny and hard, the head pliable, the foreskin slippery satin. I changed to a faster firm grip that soon had him writhing and breathing open-mouthed. His gaze dropped to where I'd pushed back the sheets, and he watched my hand avidly. My fingers circled him, pleasuring him, and the head of his cock rose red and damp from my fist.

"That's so good," he muttered. "More. Gods and goddess, Lyon, that's good."

He was at my mercy, under my control. I felt powerful and tender at the same time. I wished I had my other hand to add. But one would have to be enough. I watched intently as he bucked his hips off the bed, pushing into my touch. He was panting now, each fast breath ending in a whimper. Every stroke made him shake and jerk, and my hand was eased by his preslick.

I paused, my fingers wrapped tight around him. He shivered, and muttered, "Don't stop. Oh, please." I looked down at him, as another drop welled free. I wanted to lick him. I wanted to take him in my mouth and do for him what he'd done for me. But the thought of it made my heart speed up, and not in a good way. I wasn't ready to be that vulnerable, to give over my mouth and breath to this. It was all I could do to lean over him and place a tiny kiss on the wet, shiny tip. He groaned, deep in his throat, and came in spurts that hit my face and neck, and barely missed my eye.

"Oh, gods." His voice shook with passion and laughter. "Oh, yes. Sorry, lion-boy. I didn't plan to drown you in it. Your own fault. So good."

I'd felt inadequate, with that one silly kiss. But there was no doubt it had done the job. I grabbed the corner of the sheet and wiped myself off. "I'll do better next time."

"The heavens help me. I may not live through it." He pulled me back down beside him, grabbed the sheet and took over the job of cleaning my neck and cheek. He was still laughing softly, but it felt like a good kind of laugh. I didn't think he was mocking me. It sounded like joy.

I shifted, brushing against him, and he shook with echoes of pleasure. I'd done that for Tobin. Until now I'd mostly been a burden. This time I'd set my

fears aside and I'd made him feel this good.

He quit rubbing at my face, tucked the sheet around us, and snuggled me in close against his side. "We should rest," he murmured drowsily. "You especially. It's likely to be a long night."

That sparked the anxiety that lingered like smoke in the back of my mind. "Do you really think they'll try that transference? Secondmage can't even speak effectively with the ghost. It makes no sense."

His voice became clearer. "I don't know. But I'm here to stand at your elbow if they do."

"So I can help your king," I said bitterly.

"Well, yes." He paused and then said more coolly, "If you're suggesting something different that I should understand, please just say it."

I missed the drowsy warmth from him. I wasn't even sure why I was irritated. He wasn't trying to convince me it was my logical job to take Secondmage's place. If it hadn't occurred to him, I didn't want to bring it up. Or perhaps he'd thought of it, and realized I could never stand to do it. I didn't want to know I'd already failed in his eyes. I wished I'd never heard of transference.

I would pretend that was true, and grab for one more hour of safety and comfort with Tobin. "It's nothing. I'm just worried about how tonight will go."

"I can imagine. But you can only do the best translations you're able, and hope it works. We're here in the foothills now, anyway, and thanks to you we're probably near the right place for the tunnel. If they are coming, then being even this prepared is already more than the R'gin bastards are expecting. We'll be waiting for them. That's huge and it's due to you. Anything more is a bonus."

I closed my eyes and pressed closer to him again, until we were settled back together. He was so solid. Did he not feel the same fear, of letting a ghost move into the body of a man of power? Or had he learned through years as a soldier to let go of what he couldn't control? I was so grateful to share this space and time with him. Which brought another question to mind. I said, "Does the king know about you being fay? Does he think we, you and I..."

“Are lovers? Possibly. Even probably. He certainly knows about me. I told you I haven’t hidden it. There are plenty of us in the forces who are fay, and not a few who favor women in town, but are more than willing to roll with a man when in the field. King Faro does know we’re old and close friends. I wasn’t sure if you wanted to have it known you’re also fay, but he may have guessed. The king’s a very good judge of men.” Tobin glanced across the room and back. “The size of this room suggests he does think we’re together.”

It didn’t really matter, and if it gave me the right to have Tobin in my bed in the dark nights, I was more than willing to have it known. “What else does he know about me, about my background?”

“He’s aware you were apprenticed to Meldov. He knows I thought you were dead, and just found out you survived the fire. I told him you were burned and retired to a quiet life. No more.”

I was grateful to have my confidences kept. I trusted Tobin with my weakness, but no one else. But if that was all the king knew, with not a hint of my fears or their source, he must be wondering even more why I’d failed to volunteer for Firstmage’s mad scheme. Although... he called me “Translator”. “Does he know I was a qualified sorcerer myself, before the end?”

“I didn’t tell him.” Tobin’s voice was dragging, slow and thick. “He might know.”

Too many possibilities, so much potential for disaster, and my panic lying in wait—I took slow calming breaths and tried to let it go. Tonight would come, no matter what I did now, and perhaps Xan would simply tell us what we needed to know. If not, then we’d see if the old sorcerer truly had the skill he claimed or was deluded. And if he managed a transference, and didn’t have the vaunted control... I trembled, and even though he was dropping off into post-climax stupor, Tobin felt it, and murmured something. I took more slow breaths. At least if Firstmage failed to restrain the ghost, it wouldn’t be my knife slitting Secondmage’s throat. I burrowed in harder against Tobin and tried to sleep.

\*\*\*\*

We rested fitfully. Once, a boy woke us with a knock, bringing food and drink, and later we dressed in preparation, and went back to bed fully clothed

to wait for the summons. We spoke very little, but touched often. Tobin made an effort to seem calm, but I felt a tight-strung tension slowly building in him as well.

As the sky outside our small window darkened, we reluctantly got off the bed. Tobin stretched, which was worth my pausing to watch. He limbered up deliberately, like a fighter preparing for battle, spending extra time stretching and working his bad leg. He saw me standing staring, and gave me a thin smile. “I stiffen up so much faster in my dotage here.”

“Hah.” For that foolishness he had to be kissed, until he sighed under my mouth. I said, “You’re such an old man.”

“Less so with you pressed up against me.” He held me still, and returned my kiss with interest. But neither of us could keep our attention on the pleasures of touch, and we drew apart again. Tobin slipped on his boots, then lent a hand under my elbow as I forced my feet into the sweat-damp confines of my own. He hooked his knife on his belt and checked that it moved easily in its sheath.

“That’s not making me feel better,” I muttered.

“How about the thought that it will only be drawn on your behalf or the king’s?”

“I guess. High company I’m keeping these days.” I felt queasy, and was regretting eating.

There was a loud tap on the door, and one of the King’s Own Guard glanced in to tell us, “Time, sirs. I’ll follow you down.”

The cellar had been cleared and lined with extra torches, but it somehow felt smaller and stuffier. The King’s Mages had already laid out their square and circle, with all the right runes, but there was no power of sorcery raised in them yet. The king and his officers stood to one side, talking quietly. When we came in, they all looked up. I tried not to react to that scrutiny.

A final soldier came in close on our heels and closed the cellar door, setting his back to it. The flicker of the torches sent shadows dancing across the wall. Tobin was steady at my side. The king said, “We’re ready then.”

And I said, “Wait.”



If I'd thought they were looking at me before, it was nothing to the glares I got now. But I'd been thinking this over and over and *over*, and if we could avoid mistakes before it got complicated, so much the better. Before someone rented out space in their mind to a dead man. The thought of that sent cold fingers down my spine. Not something I'd *ever* be able to do, and not something I wanted to even witness, unless the chance of success was really high. I said, "I want to say something in ancient *tridescant* and have Secondmage repeat it back. See how close he can get."

The king nodded. "Good idea."

Secondmage turned to me and raised an elegant eyebrow, waiting. His superior attitude washed away my hesitation and I said, "Repeat after me, '*I see only five men*'."

He tried. He said something that sounded like uninflected word-salad, with the terms for "see" and "men" understandable. Maybe. If I tried hard. I shook my head. "That would be worthless. Try again. Listen to the way my tone rises and falls, as well as the sounds." I went for short and simple. "*I saw a horse.*"

His repeat said, *Mumble-sounds* "*a feather.*"

I laughed shortly. The king stared at me. "What?"

"If you want to go finding men mounted on giant birds, just say the word. This isn't going to work."

Secondmage said, "You'll have to show me how to get it right. Give me some guidance to the language."

I shook my head. "If we had a month, or even a week, I might try to teach you. But in an hour, all you could learn would be enough to confuse your words more effectively. The transference won't gain us anything this way. We should stick to regular questioning."

One of the King's Voices, a short, middle-aged man with a weathered face that I remembered vaguely from recent days, said diffidently, "You know I speak modern *tridescant* fluently. I agree with Translator Lyon—Secondmage is clearly not hearing the inflection and pitch components of the language. But perhaps I could do this. I could render the sounds more clearly."

"The transference host must be a sorcerer," Secondmage snapped. "Unless you've developed new skills in the last month, Doyd, I doubt you qualify."

The king slammed his hand down on the table in frustration, and I felt Tobin move restlessly behind me. “There must be a way,” the king said. He turned to Secondmage. “Could you perhaps ride out with the transferred ghost in your head, and have him just point out the right direction without speaking?”

Firstmage said, “The ghost won’t have that kind of ability, to do anything physical. It can only speak as a disembodied voice to its host. Anything beyond mere speech is possible only if a revenant has an unhealthy grip on the host’s mind and the strength to go with it, to break through that barrier. That’s possible only for undead, wraiths and such. Which this ghost is clearly not.”

*All praise to the gods and the goddess for that.* I gritted my teeth, and heard Tobin clear his throat at my shoulder.

“Damnation. Then we must do our best with just the questioning, I guess,” the king said. “Unless Firstmage or Third have more skill with *tridescant*?”

Both men shook their heads with reluctance, and Thirdmage said, “I could try, I suppose. Translator Lyon?”

I opened my mouth to give him a test phrase, when Tobin grabbed my arm and squeezed hard enough to silence me to a squeak. He said, “Your Majesty, by your leave, I’d like to speak to Translator Lyon alone for a minute.”

Before King Faro even nodded, he was propelling me toward the door. The guard stepped aside, staring at us, and Tobin pushed me through and up the first flight of stairs. I recovered enough to pull my arm free. “What in the hells, Tobin!”

“Not here,” he muttered. He looked around, spotted a door and dragged me through it. The small room was some kind of root storage, dank with the earth-musty smell of potatoes and turnips. He pushed the door half-shut, letting just a sliver of light come in the crack.

“Okay,” I said with what felt like miraculous patience, in the sense that I hadn’t hit him yet. “What are you thinking of, you maniac, dragging me out of the room in front of King and company?”

“Don’t do it.” His tone was low and urgent.

“Do what?”

“Volunteer for that transference thing. I could see you were about to say something about being a sorcerer yourself. Just don’t, all right? They don’t need it that badly. Not badly enough for you to let another dead man into your head.”

I was silent, stunned. Stunned by Tobin telling me not to do something that would help his king, and even more by his casual assumption that I’d been about to offer. I wasn’t sure if it bothered me more to see his faith in my courage, or his lack of faith in my strength. Or maybe it was my stability he doubted. “It can’t be that dangerous, if Secondmage was willing to do it. He seems like a man with a healthy regard for his own skin.”

“You don’t know that. He’s bound to serve the king to the best of his skill. Maybe he thought he had to volunteer. Anyway, it could be more dangerous to you than to him.”

“I know I don’t have his skills.”

“And he doesn’t have your past.”

“Is that what worries you?”

Tobin sighed, and held my head as he pressed his forehead to mine. “I just got you back. That wraith took you, and you needed fifteen years to recover from it.”

“And that means I’m too weak to do this for our country?” I pushed him away.

“Not weak. Gods, Lyon, anyone would have been damaged by what happened to you. But maybe you *are* more vulnerable. Maybe having had the wraith changed something. The point is, we can’t know that. I don’t want to take a chance.”

“So you get to put your life on the line in battle, but I should avoid taking any risks?”

“You’re putting words in my mouth.”

“Then tell me what you really are saying.”

“I...” He paused. “All right, sort of. But when I fight, which I don’t really do any more, all I’m risking is death. Not losing my mind.”

“You could lose a leg, or your eyes, or anything, really. And Firstmage will be protecting me, not trying to put a sword through me.”

“It’s not necessary, though! We’re here in the right part of the hills, waiting for them. And that’s thanks to you. If there’s an invasion, we won’t be distracted and off at the coast. We’ll stop it. We don’t need the last location details, really. Or you might succeed with just questions. You don’t need to offer this.”

“But it would save lives, wouldn’t it? To be waiting at the exit of the tunnel, rather than finding them already emerged and an army strong, two days too late?”

He was silent for a moment. “Yes. It might.”

“And one of the lives I save could be yours.”

“I don’t want you to risk it.”

“You don’t get to make that choice for me.” I stopped, suddenly dizzy. How was it that three minutes ago I’d been absolutely determined to remain silent and a coward forever, and now suddenly I was committed to offering this? It was all Tobin’s fault, for his unquestioning belief that I’d been about to volunteer. I’d rather be eaten by the ghost than let him see I wasn’t the man he’d thought I was.

“Lyon... lion-boy, I hear you still scream at night. I know how often you wake up shaking. You haven’t put the wraith behind you yet. What if this brings it all back?”

“Then I deal with it. Again.” Because the truest thing I’d said was that the life I saved might be his. I *did* have to offer. If I didn’t, and Tobin was killed, it would damage me far more than the wraith ever had. “With your help?” I made that a question.

For just an instant he shook his head, but then he pulled me into a hug. “If you have to... Damnation. Hells, yes, any help I can give.”

I clung to him, cursing even more violently, if silently, in my head. How had I come to this? He always made me want to be more than I was for him. But my blood ran like ice water in my veins.

“You’ll keep watch on me, right? No one knows me better than you. If I act... not like myself, you’ll stop me somehow. Tie me up. Kill me if you have

to. I won't be a tool for a ghost again." I felt it, horribly, vividly, that unstoppable puppeting as my hand moved at the wraith's command and I could only watch. One inch more of control and it would have had me, body and soul. It could have made me cut Meldov's throat on command. Although, in the end it hadn't needed to...

Without easing his grip, Tobin said in my ear, "Are you truly set on doing this?"

"Yes." My mouth was bone-dry.

"Well, no matter what comes, I won't kill you. Not ever. You can't ask me that!"

"I'd rather be dead than... taken."

"Then, by all that's holy, don't volunteer!" His arms tightened until I could hardly breathe.

"I have to. You know I do. You would, if you were able."

"That's different." He sighed and rubbed his cheek on my hair. "Gods, Lyon, *I don't want to lose you.*"

I tried to joke, my voice coming out hoarse. "Oh, nice. That's showing a lot of faith."

"It's not a matter of not having faith. Or maybe yes, but not in you. In those old, grey sorcerers."

I swallowed hard. I was placing my fate in their unknown hands. "They're the best in the land, right?"

"Right." I felt his heart beating fast against my chest. "Damn. All right. I can promise to restrain you, if need be, and find a way to free you. That I do promise."

"The King's Sorcerers act like it's pretty routine."

"Yes."

"I can do this. Chat with an old ghost for a day, get the information, then have him banished. I can." I was trying to convince myself more than him, but Tobin didn't hear that.

"I don't doubt you. I'm just scared. There's always something that can't be anticipated."

“I do doubt me,” I admitted. “But I hid behind my walls and iron bars for so long. I’m tired of hiding.”

For another moment we stood there, pressed together in the musty, cool, little room. Then I set Tobin away from me and pulled open the door. We went down the stairs calmly, with Tobin at my shoulder. In the work-room, the king had been in conversation with one of his colonels over the maps, but everyone looked at us as we entered.

I said thinly, “Your Majesty, I’m also a sorcerer.”

Secondmage said, “An apprentice is not...”

“A full sorcerer,” I cut in over him. “Apprentice for two years with Meldov of Riverrun, and then his qualified trainee for two more. I’ve done summonings before.”

I waited for the king to ask why I’d taken so long to mention it, but instead his expression simply lightened. “Well, that’s a bit of good luck. Thank you! Firstmage, what’s needed to include Translator... Sorcerer Lyon in the working?”

Firstmage stared at me for a long minute, then said, “I suppose we could redraw the summons with the five-point star, rebalance the equations. About fifteen minutes work, Sire.”

“Do it.”

“If I may, Sire, I’d like to examine, um, Sorcerer Lyon’s knowledge first. To be sure he’s really capable of carrying out his part.”

“Swiftly, then. Let me know when you’re ready.” He bent over the map again, and resumed a discussion of where to post scouts for the best view of the terrain in question.

Firstmage beckoned me with an imperious finger. I went to him, with Tobin trailing me. The sorcerer shook his head at Tobin. “Not you.” I gave Tobin a reassuring glance and then followed the old man into a corner. There he quizzed me up, down, and sideways, about basic theory. I think I did well, although the answers came less quickly than they had during my apprenticeship. When he reached the theory of transference, I said, “We never touched on that aspect. I have no experience with that. But...” I didn’t want to

discuss the wraith with this man, but I knew that balance was all, in writing the summoning equations. And my past might have to be factored in. I added, “Meldov did summon a wraith once, and that’s what killed him.”

“He’s fortunate to have just died,” Firstmage muttered. “Criminal carelessness. No amount of information is worth that risk. Were you in that working?”

“No. But I, um, encountered it before he, they, died.”

His eyes seemed to pierce me. “Encountered. How closely?”

My courage failed. “It spoke to me. Through him.”

“Ah. Well, that’s not too bad then.” He nodded. “You’ll do. Nothing that a few weeks retraining wouldn’t improve, but at least for this, you need only lend your voice and strength to the summons, and then stand ready to receive the transfer. Nothing difficult.”

*Nothing difficult.* I tasted acid in the back of my throat, but stood tall and tried to look unconcerned as he ran through all the technical details.

The three King’s Mages and I... lords above, I can’t believe I said that sentence. But it’s the truth. The four of us, working together, erased their circle in a square, and created a new working, consisting of circle in a five-pointed star. We placed Xan’s necklace in the focus point and took our places on the other four. The men around the room turned from their own discussions to look at us, and quieted.

Firstmage said, “We’ll summon Xan again first and simply try more questions, but if he cannot give us the information we seek then we’ll proceed to transference. Sorcerer Lyon will be the ghost’s host, and I will anchor the sorcery.”

I deliberately didn’t look at Tobin at all. If I saw any doubt in his eyes, I thought it might undo me. Here I stood, where I’d sworn I never would again, on the edge of a summoning circle with the power of sorcery humming in my veins. In the past, it had made me feel strong and in command, to hold the reins of a working. Now it just made me feel ill. But I was committed.

Firstmage said, “We’re ready, Sire.”

“Begin.”

Thirdmage lit the candles, one at each intersection point. They were fine beeswax, burning smoothly with almost no smoke. We raised the star first, containing the working, and then the circle, to contain the ghost. Working with these three men was an order of magnitude different from working with Meldov, less familiar, but filled with power. As we chanted the invocation, linking the necklace on the ghost-point as the focus for our summons, I could almost feel the pull in my own chest. No surprise that even a thousand-year-old ghost would heed it. The only surprise was that it took several minutes for him to appear.

When Xan did materialize in our circle, he looked less solid than the last time. Firstmage frowned but didn't comment. The sorcerer nodded to the king, who approached the edge of the circle. Beside him, several men brought papers and canvases.

The king said, "Chief Xan, our need is serious and immediate. We must find the end of that tunnel before the invasion from the east begins."

I translated, and Xan turned to look at me. He said, "*Why should I care?*"

We were back to this. How could I get this man long dead to care about the fate of living people he didn't know? "*Is there anything you want?*"

He ran a hand down his side, and then held it in front of his eyes. It was transparent enough we could see each other through it. "*What could I want now?*"

*"For your people then?"*

*"I have no more people. They died, long ago."*

*"There are still tribes in the hills."*

*"No more of mine."*

*"If you answer my king's questions, we will trouble you no more."*

Xan smiled and it was feral. "*Oh, it's no trouble at all to watch you desire something I will not give you."*

The king held up a painting of the Rockcomb range, clearly done from the vantage of the top of this very tower. "Chief Xan, tell me what boon I might offer to have you direct Sorcerer Lyon to a location on this picture." He nodded to me to translate.



*“Bring back my wife and my sons. For that, I’ll walk you to the very mouth of the cave from which the invading army issued into the daylight.”*

The king said to Firstmage, “Can we offer to raise them as ghosts for him to speak to?”

“No, Sire. We have no focus for any of them. Moreover, it’s very unlikely that any of them died with enough will and emotion to hold them on this side of the veil for a millennium. You recall how hard it was to find *anyone* from that era, even among heroes and rulers.”

I told Xan, “*We don’t have that power.*”

*“Of course not. You would have to be gods, and not small, impotent men.”*

Firstmage said, “Sire, he’s growing fainter. If we want the transference to work, we must begin soon.”

“You believe Sorcerer Lyon will be able to get more from Chief Xan that way?”

“I don’t know. But it will preserve the ghost longer, using Lyon’s body to shield and protect it. It’ll give us time, and the chance to question him outside and in daylight. Even that may still fail, but I see no other better choice.”

I felt my fingernails cutting into my palm. *Using Lyon’s body.* He hadn’t meant that in the way I heard it, like a knife sliding through my skin. I’d agreed to this. I could do this. It occurred to me that it wouldn’t take much now for me to let Xan’s ghost escape the working and fade away. I could sabotage this and perhaps not be seen as anything but clumsy. But I forced my feet to stay fixed to the floor at my correct station. I didn’t scuff the smooth elaborate lines drawn just inches from my toes.

King Faro turned to me. “I’m reluctant to ask you to do this. I wouldn’t want to have another person inside my mind. And yet, the gain seems worth the risk, if you’re willing. Sorcerer Lyon, do you consent to this?”

I hated that he was giving me another choice, that he was making me fight my fears and say yes yet again. But I also would have hated to be forced to do it without that chance. I managed to get my thick, spitless mouth to shape the word, “Yes.”

The king nodded to Firstmage. “Proceed.”

I caught one glance of Tobin's worried face, and then made myself look away. I fixed my gaze on the center of our working and the ghost prisoned there. If I was going to do this, I was damned well doing it right. I wasn't risking my sanity, only to mess things up by not paying attention.

The process was basically simple, although the spell-working that had been set up to permit it was not. I took a deep breath, and then another. In front of me, the curved wall of our containment circle was visible to me, although I knew it was invisible to those outside the spell. At most, they would see an unnatural curling of the faint candle-haze, marking its place. That translucent barrier, humming with energy, stood between me and Xan, between present and past, living and dead. And I would have to cross it.

Quickly, before I could change my mind, I said the triggering words that opened my way and stepped into the circle.

Xan reared back as I crossed, his expression shocked. For a moment I stood and looked at him. Through his thinning chest I could see Secondmage, reciting the words that kept the rest of the barrier intact. Xan said, "*No one has ever come into the circle with me, and I've been brought here to the living world a hand of hands times. What are you doing?*"

"*What I must.*" I stepped closer to him, and reached out to touch him, my hand just brushing his bare arm, feeling an odd, crawling, stickiness of not-flesh. Then I pushed against the other side of the circle, moving into the focus point, and bent, and picked up his necklace. Around me the circle bowed and stretched. I could feel it deform, trying to contain me. Then it snapped, the two candle-flames at my feet went out, and with the suddenness of a slap to the face, I *felt* Xan arrow home to my mind.

*-By the Skygod! What have you done, witchman?*

I was too busy dropping to my knees to answer, teeth clenched, trying not to throw up all over our elegant working before it had done its duty. I heard Firstmage's rapid chanting, designed to stabilize the new arrangement, to hold the ghost inside me, outside the circle's confines.

Standing a bare foot from the limits of the spell, Tobin demanded, "Can I touch him?"

The mages' voices rose together, blended, echoed in completion of the spell, and cut off. I heard the sizzle as Thirdmage snuffed the remaining candles hurriedly with dampened fingertips. Then Firstmage said, "Now, yes." Tobin's arm around me was sudden support and anchor. I retched again, then vomited bile, the dizziness almost overwhelming me. Through the buzzing of my ears I heard the king demand, "What's wrong? Didn't it work?"

"I don't know, Sire." Firstmage bent over me. "Sorcerer Lyon, look up and answer me. Are you all right?"

I managed to raise my eyes to his, leaning against Tobin. "I'm... not sure." I could feel Xan, in my head—his panic and wonder and grief and an ill-defined bottomless hunger.

Tobin said urgently, "Lyon. Do you know who I am?"

"Yes. Tobin. But... But my head hurts and it's not just me. His head hurts too. I can feel it! He's angry and afraid, and yet so curious." I glared at Firstmage. "You swore to me! You swore that he could do nothing but speak to me. Oh, gods."

"I told the truth!"

"Then why do I *feel* him? Why can I tell that he's both terrified and thrilled at this event? How do I know that he has the most hatred for you because you're the image of someone he loathed?"

"Perhaps it's your imagination," Firstmage said calmly. "It takes a prepared mind to not be overset by hearing another's voice inside."

*-He's a fool, Xan's voice told me. He looks like the one who threw the stone. You felt the truth of my hate. This is strange.*

I gripped my head with both hands, pulling on my hair. "This is more than just words. I *feel* him."

The king said, "Can you bear it? Must we get him out of you?"

Firstmage said, "If we do that, we'll lose Xan completely. That ghost won't stand up to any more manipulations."

"Does that matter?" Tobin's growl was fierce. "If he's harming Lyon, we won't learn anything anyway. Get him out!"

“Wait.” I unclenched my hands from my hair. “Just wait. Let me see what’s what.”

They all froze, looking at me as I blinked hard. I moved one hand and then the other, touched my face. Everything worked. I didn’t feel as if this invader controlled me. But he might just be biding his time. The thought nearly sent me into a panic again.

*-Calm down, young witchman. You’ll have us both overset. Be calm, so we can figure this out.*

I said aloud in the modern vernacular, “Can you understand me?” How deep in my brain was he? I felt only puzzlement mixed with the roil of his other emotions. I said, “Your wife was a money-grubbing whore.” His emotions didn’t shift. Could I trust that? Could I believe that he knew only what I spoke in his own language? I said, “I’m going to slit our wrists.”

It was Tobin who grabbed me fiercely in his arms. The ghost didn’t react to my words, although he did send waves of surprise as Tobin’s arms went around me.

*-Are you mare to this stallion then?*

I gritted my teeth against the double emotions in me. To Tobin I said, “Stand down. I’m testing.” And to Xan, aloud to the room, but in his own tongue that only he would understand, “*Don’t call me a mare!*”

*-I meant no insult; it’s a common phrase for the half-souled man who receives.*

His mind-voice was in fact dispassionate. Inside my head, I formed the words, *-Half-souled?* Despite all of Tobin’s assurances, this I didn’t want to discuss aloud in front of these men, even in a tongue none of them knew.

*-Yes. Don’t you say it that way? The single-souled folk look for their match, man to woman, woman to man, to join and have children. But the half-souled yearn for the one of their own kind who completes them. Sometimes, once they find their other half, the two will then seek a third, and also have children. But some do not.*

*-We say fay. Or synfay, for two women.*

*-Do the words matter?* The old man already felt calmer, more curious and less panicked.

*-I guess not. But I don't like "mare."* In my youth, the term bandied about had been "bitch" and I hadn't liked that one either.

*-He is yours, though?*

*-Yes. I suppose he is.* Tobin supported me still, his arms pinning me as if afraid to let go. He said nothing, but his eyes asked a thousand questions. Talking about him had taken the edge off my panic, anyway.

I turned to Tobin. "He's in here. In my head. Chief Xan. More than just words, but I don't feel... possessed. I feel like my body's still my own. Mostly." I tried a smile.

Tobin didn't look enormously reassured, but he did relax his death-grip on my arms. The king came and knelt in front of me to meet my eyes levelly. "Sorcerer Lyon, Chief Xan, I greet you."

I said, "Sire."

"Can you bear to continue, Lyon?"

"Yes." I couldn't say differently with his hopeful gaze on me.

He waved behind him, and the painting was hurriedly thrust into his hands. He held it up in front of me. "This is still the answer I need."

*-Does he think you command me now? I'll still not help him.* But I could feel a different emotion from Xan, a kind of wistfulness.

The king held the painting closer, and Tobin let go of my left wrist. I reached out and touched the painted mountains. The king drew a sharp breath. "There?"

"No," I told him. "Wait." I ran my finger across the scene, over the glacier-white slopes of The Twins, past the rounded crown of Sugarloaf, and then to the sharp spike of The Fang. I felt Xan surprised, puzzled, and yet comforted. A mash of emotions came and went too fast to catalog. He was clearly seeing what I saw, interested in the painting and something more than just interested. But there was no jolt of "there, that spot." After a couple of minutes I pulled back my hand. "Sorry, Sire. He's not going to tell me."

“There must be something we can offer him.”

I could feel that Xan’s attention was still on that painting. As a test, I moved my gaze away, staring at a boring bit of floor. I felt his irritation, but he either couldn’t or didn’t force my eyes back.

After a minute, he said, *-Child’s games*

*-We’re neither of us children*

The king waved and had the map of the frontier brought and laid out in front of me. Even to my unaccustomed eyes, the shapes of the mountains were unclear, and Xan’s reaction was puzzled scorn. I said, “I don’t think a map will be helpful. The picture was better. Or the real thing.”

*-What now, witchman? You can’t hold my feet to the fire, since they’re also your feet.* I felt grim amusement from him.

*-Now I bother and badger you for hours, and when dawn comes we climb the tower or perhaps ride out and look at the mountains.*

*-Ride out? In the daylight?*

*-So Firstmage claims.*

*-He’s a man of power, all right, if not of wisdom. Why does he not craft a spell to find what you seek?*

*-A spell?*

*-Yes. A strong mage should have far more tools than just one lone ghost at his fingertips. Why not use his magic to help your king directly.*

There were plenty of stories about all the things mages could do, back when we had mages. Now we were not only more limited, but had no doubt forgotten half of the tales. The librarian in me longed to pursue the topic with this living relic, but that wasn’t why we were here. *-Magic has changed*, I hedged.

The king said, “Lyon? Are you still all right?”

“Hm? Yes, Sire. I’m just... talking with the ghost.”

“What does he say? Anything useful?”

“Not so far. He’s noting that the world has changed.”

“In what way?”

*-What are you saying to him?*

Having to translate doubly would drive me crazy. I said, “Sire, I need to talk to him without stopping every sentence, but I will let you know if he says anything to the point.” I didn’t bother to tell the ghost the same. If he was frustrated, so much the better.

“I understand.” The king sat back on his heels, trying to look patient. It was a pose I’d seen from Tobin. I wondered if it was an army thing. “We have ten hours until daybreak.”

Ten hours. So far, Xan was a lot more inert and less scary than the wraith, but some part of me was tight as a bowstring, waiting for that to change. I wondered if ten hours of this tension might not burst my racing heart. But I nodded.

*-Why are you so set against helping us, Chief Xan? What would it hurt now, to give us aid?*

*-It would dishonor my kin, break my vow.*

*-What vow?*

There was a wave of bitter anger so intense that I was rocked by it. Tobin, who still held me, said, “Lyon? All right?”

“Yes.” *-What vow?*

*-The one I swore before I stepped off the side of Eagle Ridge.*

I shook against Tobin. There was a whirling echo of fear/hate/despair, then falling/darkness/darkness/darkness. I said, *-Would you tell me about it? So I can understand?*

*-Why would you care?*

*-Because it’s history? Because it’s keeping you from perhaps saving Tobin’s life? Because I feel how you felt, when you did it, and it hurts my heart and I don’t know why?*

*-It’s not a pretty tale.*

I snorted and deliberately thought of slitting Meldov’s throat. I hoped he

would catch that emotion in return. It would only be fair. *-My life hasn't all been pretty either.*

*-Few are.* His emotions changed again, more sad than angry. *-It's a long story. We might choose to be more comfortable than this stone floor to tell it, especially if we must ride tomorrow. Somewhere more quiet and less crowded?*

*-Yes, all right.* I turned to Tobin, my mouth almost brushing his cheek. "Let me up."

"You're sure?"

"As sure as I can be."

He gradually let go of me, and then set a hand under my elbow to help me stand. The king rose easily too, his eyes on me. I said, "Chief Xan wants to talk about other things. About his life. I'm hoping that as he does so, I might get clues. Or perhaps he'll be persuaded to help us after all, but it won't happen fast. Is there a place I can go to sit, that's not this... cold and distracting?"

"Yes. Come this way." The king gestured toward the stair.

"We should come along," Firstmage said, stepping closer. "In case."

*-I won't talk around that man*

I said, "Chief Xan expresses a dislike for you. Do you have to stay in the same room with me for the transference to hold?"

"Well, no. Not absolutely. The enchantment is set and running, and while my strength maintains it, I don't have to be close to you."

"Then better not," I said quickly. "Xan wants privacy." I could feel that, despite his strength of will, he shrank from the thought of telling his past in front of so many eyes, whether they could hear him or not.

"You're not going anywhere without me," Tobin said.

"I'd like to come too. If that's workable." The king didn't seem like he'd had to ask permission very often, but he did it without more than a faint flush across his cheeks.

*-Xan? My chief wants to hear you too?*



*-That one has no ears to understand me.*

*-True. I'll tell him what he should know, though. Is that all right?*

*-It's no concern of mine. As long as he's quiet.*

I cleared my throat nervously. "Of course, Sire. So, um, he—Xan—is going to tell me about his life and times. He wants to do it in comfort. I'll translate anything that's relevant. I think perhaps he's curious, and enjoying simple conversation after so long." I'd felt his panic gradually transforming into interest as the minutes passed. Mine was doing the same. "Perhaps we can get something from him eventually after all."

"I'll show you to my rooms," King Faro said. "They're well-guarded and not as far away as your own."

"Is that wise, Sire?" asked the captain of the King's Own.

"I think so. Tobin will keep him from attacking me, right?"

Tobin muttered, "Yes, Sire," but looked harassed.

The captain said, "I'd feel better with at least one more man in there. Myself, by preference."

*-What are they arguing about?*

*-Whether they need very many men to protect the king from us. I thought the truth might amuse him, and increase trust.*

I could almost hear his dry chuckle. *-I'm not at my most dangerous right now.*

I looked down at my right hand. *-Nor I.*

*-Tell them I've no objection to two or three men. But I'll not weep in front of a horde.*

I didn't like the sound of that. How linked were we? If he cried, would I do the same? I didn't like to ask. I said, "He's fine with you there too, Captain. Can we go?" I could feel the stares of the three sorcerers on my shoulder blades and they were making me twitch. I was already shaky enough. I wanted stillness, less light, less noise, less pressure. I couldn't coherently explain it, but I needed fewer eyes upon me.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER EIGHT

It took a bit more negotiation, some enchantment-checking from Firstmage, and climbing three flights of stairs with my heart hammering rapidly. Eventually I slid down into an upholstered chair in the king's own apartment. Tobin stood beside me, ignoring all my suggestions that he rest his bad knee. The king sat in a short lounge by the window, looking stiff and wearing his short sword. The captain stood by the door, his hand on his sword hilt.

There was blessed stillness. The room was well lit, with lanterns on the walls and oil lamps on several tables. I could feel Xan's curiosity coming to the fore, as he took in the details. Curiosity tinged by a bit of frustration. *-Can you look over at that soldier by the door, mage?*

*-Can't you see him?*

*-Not unless you turn your head. I seem to be limited by your body.*

That was hopeful. I stared down at blank floor instead, and felt his irritation grow.

*-What would it hurt you to just look around?*

I did nothing, said nothing, waiting. But despite the slowly mounting anger on his part, I felt no ghostly control. My eyes didn't rise of their own accord. My head didn't turn. My breathing *did* speed up, but whether it was his emotion or my own I couldn't say.

*-Shall I tell you my sad tale then? Will you give me more than two flat boards to look at on this rare visit to the mortal world, if I entertain you?* Although his words were light, I could feel that heavy emotions lay behind them.

Did I really want to know? I wasn't sure I could handle someone else's tragedy, and I was certain it *was* tragedy. And yet, knowing more about Xan could only help. It was promising that he was willing to make any kind of trade for anything.

King Faro said, "Are you talking to him? Can you translate?"

“We’re, um, negotiating. If I keep him better entertained, he might tell me more.” I added to Xan, *-We can trade our interests then?*

“Entertained how?” Tobin said suspiciously.

Xan *laughed*. It felt so strange, but it lightened things between us. *-The look on his face. Tell your stallion that as much as I might enjoy feeling touch again, I won’t ask you to jump him in front of his chief.*

I could feel my blush. *-I’m sure he wasn’t thinking of that.* “He wants me to look around the room, to show him things.”

King Faro said, “That you can surely do. If there’s anything that he particularly wishes to see...”

“Let me ask him. It may take a while.”

I turned my attention inward. *-Will you trade then? Your story for a good look at the world here?*

*-It’s been a long, long time, since I said more than a dozen words to anyone. Perhaps I will.*

*-Perhaps isn’t good enough.* My curiosity made me add, *-You’ve been summoned by others before then?*

*-Not in... well, I don’t know how long. I was drifting an eternity in the grey, before your old mage brought me forth. But long ago, not much after my death, I was called to speak time and again by the witchmen of other tribes. With tokens taken from my body, they asked for help and advice, for aid against illness and enemies. I had very little to give. And then they stopped calling.*

I said aloud, “He was summoned by hillfolk in the years after his death. But not recently.” I wanted more than anything to explore this topic. What was the grey? How did it feel to be dead? What was summoning like? Did we harm the ghosts we brought forth that way? Or was it a blessing to wear them out or banish them to some further place? But this wasn’t the time for my curiosity. Maybe, after this was done, if we rode out tomorrow and found the tunnel, then I might have the next night, before he left me, to ask all my questions. Now, I said, *-Does it please you to be back in the world?*

*-Not ‘please’ exactly. But it is at least something to be doing, something to remind me there is more than waiting, and hating.*

I looked slowly around the room, at the Captain, in his riding uniform with sheathed dagger and sword; at my king, his eye fixed on me, grave and intelligent; at Tobin.

*-He is your soul's other half.*

I wished I was as certain, but I said, *-I hope so.*

*-You feel it. I can tell.*

I let my eyes move slowly over the scant furnishings, the tapestry hung up to curtain the window, the books and map cases on the table.

Eventually, Xan said, *-So much the same, and yet much that is different. Although I've never been in the home of a flatlander before. Perhaps it's only that which makes it so strange.*

King Faro said, "Do you want to drink something? Or eat? Would he, um, taste it? Firstmage said you'd only hold conversations, but this seems like something more."

"Yes," I said tensely. "It is more. And I don't know."

The king poured a cup half full of wine from a bottle on the table and passed it to me. "Try that."

I took a careful sip. The taste was luscious, deep and rich and beyond any wine I could have afforded. In my head, Xan said, *-Ah, yes, that's good.*

I dropped the cup, spilling the wine across the floor. "He tastes it. Or feels me taste it. Or something." My voice squeaked at the end of the last word.

Tobin grabbed a cloth and knelt to wipe up the stain, leaning his shoulder against my knee as he did so. The steadiness of him soothed me. Xan said, *-I didn't mean to startle you. It was good wine.*

*-Yes.*

*-This is strange for me too. One more strange thing in an eternity of strange, since I threw myself off that cliff.*

*-You did what?*

*-Do you want the story now? Or perhaps you might eat first?*

My stomach definitely vetoed that idea. *-Story*

-*Very well.* I thought he was less reluctant to talk than he pretended, because he felt like a man settling in before a fire, comfort over pain.

“He’s going to tell me about himself. I’ll translate at the end.”

“Do that,” King Faro said, but he relaxed back in his seat to wait.

*-I am Xan, leader of the Sheergoat Clan, last Chief of the Swiftrock people. Hear my tale.*

*In the years before the Easterners came through the mountain, I led a thriving tribe. We were many hands of hands, men, women and children, three clans within the tribe. Each year, the clans split up to climb to our summer ranges, and each fall returned together to our winter home in the Valley of the Mist. That year, my clan included my wife, our daughter and three sons, and others dear to me. My youngest son, Nav, had seen but two summers. My clan always climbed highest of the three, living and hunting in the crags in summer, like our namesake, the sheergoat.*

*My people lived well apart from the flatlanders. We traded, yes, in their markets. A few times a year we would bring down furs and baskets, horn carvings, and perhaps a flamestone. We traded for grain and cloth, steel knives and oil. But we were not friends.*

*Three times in my father’s lifespan, the flatlanders had come into the mountains with swords raised against us. Once they were only seeking to cross to go to war. Twice, greedy men were trying to get the source of our flamestones from us. They tortured my uncle to death, but he wouldn’t tell them where the stones could be found.*

I felt his mind voice shift from narrative pain to a mild curiosity. *-Are the gems of my people still known and prized among you?*

I lifted his necklace from my chest. *-This one would buy food and housing for a year in the finest inn in the land, and more besides.*

*-Mine!* I felt his shock. *-I thought it was lost, taken. Well, of course it was. That’s how it came to your hands.*

He was angry and distressed. I waited, unsure how to proceed. Eventually he said, *-What’s a stone against lives? When I found my chiefstone, it was the largest one my tribe had ever seen. My mother said it meant I was destined to be a great leader. I believed it too. More fool I.*

King Faro said, “Does he recognize the necklace?”

“Oh yes. He’s angry about it, or about me having it. I’m not quite sure.”

“Tell him that, if he asks, we’ll gladly return it to his people in exchange for his help.”

I relayed the information and felt Xan ease back a little. *-At least your king also puts lives before stones. Many of your people didn’t. Many of mine died for flatlander’s greed for shiny things.*

*-I’m sorry.* I tried to let him feel that it was true. I’d never been truly next-meal poor, so perhaps it was easy for me to scorn wealth and its trappings. But then, the kind of men who killed for gems were rarely the poorest of the poor either.

*-Long past. Well, the easterners came before the snowmelt, the next spring. I was in our winter home when word was brought of fighting men coming up out of the earth. I traveled a day to see if it could be true. When I arrived, they still were coming out. It was a large army, but their eyes were turned away from us toward the fertile valleys below, and the distant coast. Still, we climbed to the summer pastures early that year.*

I told the king, “Wherever they emerged, it’s a day’s ride from the winter home of his clan.”

“I’ll get Doyd. He’s my expert on the tribes. Perhaps he’ll have some idea.” He waved to the Captain at the door, who stepped outside to run the errand.

*-The flatlanders fought each other all summer and into the fall. It was no real concern of ours. It kept them out of our mountains. They killed off the game in the foothills, but hunting was still good higher in the mountains. We didn’t trade at the flatland markets that summer, and the women complained about the lack of ground corn for bread, but we ate as our ancestors had done and all was well.*

*All through winter, we saw little of the people from the plains below. Then, in the summer, the Great Sickness came.*

My heart sank. The plague had followed the invasion, close on its heels. We’d suffered far more from it than the NaR’gin did, and I’d heard it was even

worse in the mountain tribes. There'd been a lot of claims back then of an enchantment, a vile spell used to level the last of our resistance. But men had died of Plague on all sides, if not evenly. Modern historians believed it was a natural illness, perhaps brought by the NaR'gin soldiers as they swept across our land. There was an illness like it they called the Summer Shakes, in their home, but although this began the same, it was far worse, and often ended in death. I'd read accounts of those next three years. They'd never failed to make me deeply glad not to have lived back then.

*-I can tell you've heard of the Sickness.*

He'd felt my distress. I said, *-Yes.*

*-Hearing of it and seeing it, those are two different things.*

*-You don't have to tell me.*

*-Ah, but you wanted my story, didn't you?*

I'd thought perhaps I could glean information from it that might help us. I really didn't want to hear about a death so bleak that it kept him lingering as a ghost for a thousand years. I asked, *-What town did you trade with?*

*-I'll not name it.* I thought he was just being obstructive, but he added, *-I pray to the Skygod that it was wiped from the face of the earth.*

I swallowed hard. My mind was a dark enough place, but the corrosive sadness and hate that Xan carried was drowning me. I didn't realize I'd put out a protesting hand until Tobin took it in both of his.

"Lyon, what? Do you need to stop? Is there anything I can do?"

Some scholar I was. Faced with a first-hand account of the Great Plague, and desperate to spare myself the hearing of it. I stiffened my spine and shook my head. "No. But... he's telling me of deaths and... stay close?"

"Always." He sat on the floor beside my chair, still holding my hand, and braced my knee with his shoulder. The warmth of that touch dispelled a little of my darkness.

The King asked, "What deaths?" but I couldn't tell him yet.

I said to Xan, *-Go on.*

*-We were in the high mountains. The clans were split, each to their own pastures. It was a lovely summer, with rain to keep the grasses green. The*

*goats were sleek and fat. One day a runner arrived. It was Pak, of the Kestrel clan of my Swiftrock tribe, and my wife's brother. He was thin and ragged, and he came into camp and collapsed at my feet. And told me the Kestrel clan was no more. They were all dead.*

*-All of them? I knew that the Plague had been fierce, but still, a whole clan?*

*-Down to the babes in arms. He described it, how the Sickness came upon them, and within days half the clan was suffering from it. How it waxed stronger and stronger, the healthy trying to care for the sick, and then falling ill in their turn. Until all were dead but Pak. He said he burned the bodies in the end, and came to find me and bring the news.*

I had no words for that. I felt his grief and disbelief, and the ominous welling up of worse to come.

*-My wife took him into our tent. He slept a night and a day. When he woke, I asked if he'd heard from the Marmot Clan. He had not, for weeks, and nor had I. I decided to set out to find them.*

Acid regret made my eyes burn. My fingers tightened on Tobin's and he squeezed back.

*-I should have sent someone else, but... they were my people. If they too were suddenly stricken, too ill to send for help, it was my duty to know that. And if they were not, there had been Marmot daughters and cousins among the dead. It was my place to carry the news. Further, our tribe's witchman was with Marmot, and I urgently wanted his advice. So I set out the next day.*

*When I found them, the illness was there too. Five had already died, and half the rest lay shaking and sweating in their bedrolls. The witchman had no cure for them. But he said the flatlanders did. He'd heard of the Sickness. He'd been told that the flatlanders fell ill of it too, but had a miraculous root that could save the dying.*

I had a bad feeling where this story was going. *-Corms from the root of the spreadtree, I told Xan. I'd heard of how that had been used. -It helped. It was not a cure.*

*-It was more than we had. We agreed that I would return immediately to*



*my camp and gather our stock of flamestones, and offer all of them to the flatlanders below, in exchange for this miraculous root.*

*It had taken two days for me to climb down to the camp of the Marmot clan, and a day spent there, three more to climb back up to our own. Six days. And in those six days, my wife had died.*

I said aloud, “Goddess give her rest.” And to Xan, *-May the Earthmother hold her safe.*

*-The Earthmother failed us all. When I reached camp, seven of my clan, including Tia, already lay dead. Many more were ill. My son, small Nav, had the first flush of fever on him. Pak said that it took three days or four or perhaps five, from that moment until death. I put Nav in a pack on my back, took the three flamestones we’d found so far that season, and Goli’s best horn carvings, better than any we ever sold, and headed down the mountain.*

*I stopped for nothing but to give Nav a little goat’s milk. And when he stopped taking it, to trickle water in his mouth. I reached the grazing grounds and got my pony. Then I rode when I could, led the beast when I must. In four days I stood on the outskirts of that accursed town. Nav was limp in my arms, his heat like a stone laid on the fire, but he still breathed.*

I felt ill at what would surely come next. I could imagine the town, with the Plague loose and a ragged, alien stranger at the gates. No matter how many flamestones he brought. Spreadtree corms had been prized above diamonds in those years.

*-The man who spoke our tongue came out. I told him of our need. I showed him my son. He said, perhaps they had the medicine. I laid all the goods I’d brought on the ground for him. He laughed. I added my chiefstone, that same stone you wear. He was silent a moment then. I’d bet he’d never in his days seen the like of that stone. He picked it all up and told me to wait. I stood at the gate, with my child in my arms. In the hot sun, but that was like ice compared to my son’s fever. I waited. Until they began throwing stones.*

*I begged them. I, who’d never asked for so much as a stalk of grass from another, dropped on my knees and begged them. A stone struck Nav’s face, bringing blood. He was too ill to even know it. I held him up, for them to see what they’d done. When the next stone flew, I left.*

*A day back into the hills, I burned the body of my son. Two days in, I fell ill myself. I welcomed it. Better dead than to return a failure. But I lived. Three days I lay fevered and then it passed. I was weak but I climbed, night and day, until I reached the summer camp. There were only a few left alive, and all but Pak and I were sick.*

*We tried. I climbed to find snow and we packed it around them, until it steamed away in the heat of their fevers. We laid Col in the stream when he began to convulse, but even the snowmelt couldn't cool him. Day and night we nursed them, and day and night they suffered and died. One morning I laid my head down, just for a moment, just to close my burning eyes, and fell asleep. When I woke, the camp was silent. They were all gone. My sons, my daughter. And Pak lay among them, dead by his own hand.*

I could feel my own chest heave with Xan's emotions. Or maybe mine. There was no way to separate them. His mind-voice was steady, but each word heaped pain upon anguish.

*-I climbed to the top of Eagle Ridge. The sun was bright. A soft wind kissed the bare rock, and in the air above a hawk soared. All was as it ever had been, but below me, all of my clan lay dead. I stood on the edge and I spoke to the Skygod. I asked him, if ever he favored my tribe, to let one of my people someday hold in their own hand the way to save the lives of flatlanders. Let my kin laugh in their faces and deny them. I begged my revenge, in my son Nav's name. And then I stepped out onto the air.*

There was a long pause, as I fought for breath, and then he added, *-This was not what I envisioned, and yet, it feels like the answer of the god.*

"Crap. Shit. Mother of us all." I tried to think of better swearwords, but all I could do was cry for a dead child and an eternity of hate. Tobin reached up for me and I leaned down so he could hold me. It was safer and less dark in his arms.

King Faro said, "Tell us what went wrong."

I took a shaky breath and said, "A moment, Sire." I rubbed my face on my shoulder and tried to give Tobin a smile. The words that came were from our childhood. "This stinks worse'n a dead mole-rat."

His return smile was tentative. “Can you explain?”

“I found our ghost’s driver. The thing that kept him on this side of the veil for a millennium. Ready for it? He begged a god for the chance to say no to a flatlander in desperate need. Isn’t that perfect?”

King Faro said, “Crap. Shit.”

I actually laughed, and he gave me a tight return smile.

“Sorcerer Lyon, do you think there’s a chance he might change his mind? Or that you might change it for him?”

“Not by force or sorcery. Maybe by persuasion. He’s not an evil man, or uncaring. A big wrong was done to him before he died, and he’s been seeking to balance the scales. Maybe I can change the game.” I pulled back out of Tobin’s hold.

*-Chief Xan, I apologize for the actions of my people.*

*-That’s worth the spit in my mouth*

*-It’s all I can offer. I can’t bring back the dead, yours or mine.*

For a while I/we just sat there, contemplating the truth of that. Slowly his bitter anger ebbed.

*-I feel empty, like the hate has leached out of me. And yet, if I’m not meant to deny you this, what am I still doing here?*

I was on tricky theological ground, and didn’t want to annoy him, but I suggested, *-Maybe the god allowed the anger to preserve you this long, so you could give up your hate before crossing to the other side.*

*-Sounds more like something the Earthmother would do.*

*-Yeah. My mother too.*

Xan felt tired, resigned, bitterly amused. *-Tell me then, if you’d been in that village, would you have shared the cure with a man of the mountains and his small son?*

I wanted to lie and say, of course, I’d have made sure they got what they needed. But although I wasn’t a historian, I had enough interest to have read accounts of those desperate days. And he would know if I lied.

I said, *-Probably not. I'd never throw a stone at a child, but... you have to understand, the Plague hit my people hard too. Not like yours, killing everyone. But among us, one in four died in the next three years. And one in ten of the NaR'gin. Spreadtree corms were worth more than gold, more than any price. Boiled and eaten early in the sickness, they brought down the killing fever, enough to prevent the convulsions and damage. They saved many lives, but not all. And there were never even close to enough to go around.*

I tried to recall the words in the old texts, to give him the feel of it. *-People went crazy looking for them. Almost all the spreadtrees in the populated lands were cut down and uprooted, and the corms clinging to their roots were taken. The trees grow slowly, and only in wet, low-lying places. A person who had a tree on their land might wake one morning to find it had been dismantled in the night, and their friends and neighbors were digging around like demented badgers, searching for every last corm.*

*So out in the dry foothills here, a town likely had few, if any, local sources, and no way to get more. They'd have had many sick and dead of their own. If there was any root left, by the time you came, it would still have been less than their own needs. And if I'd been there... no, I probably would not have taken the cure from my family's mouth to give to yours.*

I felt him go still and silent. It was a relief to be free of the burning flame of his emotions. I sagged gratefully against the back of the chair. Tobin said, "Still all right? Better?"

"His whole tribe died of the plague. He chose to die with them."

King Faro inclined his head in a shallow bow. "My condolences, Chief Xan. The whole ruling family of this land died then too. Those who were not killed by the plague were put to the sword by the NaR'gin, down to the smallest babe in arms." I translated that, word for word.

The door opened and Doyd came in tentatively. He saluted the king and said, "You sent for me, Sire?"

"We're negotiating with Chief Xan for any bargain he might make with us. I thought having someone familiar with the modern tribes would be useful."

I had a sudden thought. "Doyd, are there still Swiftrock tribesmen?"

“There is a tribe by that name.”

“What are the clans?”

“Um, Leehawk, Ringfox, and Marmot.”

“Marmot.” Xan hadn’t said he ever went back to the camp of his third clan. I asked, *-Chief Xan. Did you have word from the Marmot clan, before you, um, died?*

*-No.*

*-There is to this day a Marmot clan of the Swiftrock people. No Sheergoat, no Kestrel, but there is a Marmot clan.*

*-Truly! I could feel doubt and hope and disbelief surge up in him. -It need not be the same clan*

*-But it might be. Would a new clan take the old name?*

*-There are only so many animals in my hills. Still there was no doubt that hope was overrunning his doubts. -I never went there. They had the witchman, and I could give them nothing more. Perhaps some did survive.*

I stayed silent for a while, and let him wrestle with the idea. Eventually he said, *-I’d give much to hear their ancestor chants. But no, you say I’ve been dead a hand of hands of generations. The best chants rarely reach that far back.*

I said, “He’s asking about ancestor chants.”

Doyd said, “They keep an oral history going. Not a millennium back though, I don’t think. And while I could try to arrange a meeting it couldn’t happen before sunrise tomorrow, even if I rode night and day.”

I passed that along. Xan said, *-Well, I will keep it as a hope. My sister and her sons were Marmot, and still lived, last I saw them there.*

There was another long pause. I swayed, feeling more tired than I could remember since the early days inside my stone walls, when sleep came only as a collapse when I could stay awake no longer. I said, *-Could you give up your grudge against people long, long dead and help us now?*

*-I’ll think on it. But... I’m not sure I can change my nature anymore. There’s not much of me left.*

There was a knock on the door. At the king's command, one of his colonels came in. "Begging your leave, sire, but there's news from the west." He glanced around at all of us.

King Faro said, "Just tell it."

"A message-bird came to Scarphill and they sent a runner on to us. The R'gin ships landed three days ago now. General Estray engaged the enemy. It's a serious attack, but when the message was sent, the fight was just beginning. They promised more news soon."

The captain said, "Will you head back there, Sire?"

King Faro shook his head. "The die is cast. I decided this threat in the east was a risk that needed investigating. Knowing that there actually is an army attacking in the west doesn't change that."

"A true attack weighed against an unlikely one?"

"No. And it still fits the pattern we considered. If we'd been in the capital when news of the R'gin ships came, we'd have ridden west, two days ago. This part of the border would have been scantily manned and out of my mind. We might even have summoned some of the existing patrols away. That could still be the Prince Regent's goal."

"As you say, Sire." The captain bowed his head.

King Faro turned to the colonel. "See that the messenger is cared for and I'll meet you in the map room soon."

When the colonel had gone, the king turned to me, asking simple questions, seeking any kind of clue. I felt no anger from Xan, but when I translated, he simply gave me no answer at all. He seemed to have retreated, far into the distance. Eventually he said, *-Can you leave it until morning? I'd give a lot to simply see the sun again.*

I said to the king, "I think we're better off not pressing him now. Perhaps in the morning. Can you please find out from the mages whether I can safely sleep? I don't think things will change tonight, and I can't seem to keep my eyes open. I'm so tired..."

The king looked displeased, but there was little he could do. He sent the guard outside the door to inquire. Firstmage came back himself, and checked

me. He worked another binding, and I could feel it pull at Xan, like reins on a horse. Xan muttered, *-I do not like that mage.*

*-He's trying to keep me safe.*

*-He's trying to compel me.*

*-You have my word, I'll do nothing until the morning.*

Firstmage said, "I've never slept when I had a transference in place. There's so much to potentially learn and do in this situation. Sorcerer Lyon, if he won't discuss what we need most to hear, have you at least asked him about the world beyond the veil? About what it's like to be summoned? Any of the details we all speculate on? I've not found a ghost who could, or would, give me an answer, in a circle or in my mind, but I ask them all. It could be vital information for our craft."

I felt a deep reluctance to examine Xan like a bug pinned to a board. "He asked for time and quiet. I want to give him that."

Firstmage clucked his tongue at me, like I was some disappointing apprentice. "Well, it should be safe to sleep, I suppose. It's not what I would choose to do."

I looked past him at the king. "If we ride out tomorrow, I'd prefer not to fall off my horse." My muscles felt like jelly, and just sitting upright was an effort.

King Faro said, "Certainly. Use my bed. I have other arrangements to make anyway. Tobin, you'll watch him of course."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll also stay, if I may," the captain said. His expression was cool. "I'm not certain Voice Tobin could do what might need to be done."

Tobin rounded on him with a snarl. "Nothing will need to be *done*."

"We hope not."

The king sighed. "Don't argue, gentlemen. You may both watch. Everyone else, let's retire to the workroom and the maps."

Firstmage was last to leave, looking disgruntled. But his king held the door open, and perforce he went through it. The king gave me a last long look, a

small nod, and closed the door. Tobin, the captain and I were alone in the room.

Ignoring the captain, Tobin said, “You want to lie down?”

“Oh, yes.” I swayed on my feet.

He took my arm. “This way. Ten steps. You lucky bugger, you’ll be able, all your life after this, to say you slept in the king’s bed.” At my snort, he added quickly, “Not like that, of course.”

The captain muttered, “You’d better not.”

Tobin didn’t so much as look at him. He eased me onto the bed, and tugged off my boots. The mattress was wool-stuffed and comfortable. The sheets were soft. I closed my eyes, but it made me dizzy, as if I’d been launched into empty space and I snapped them open again. Tobin said, “What?”

“I don’t think I can actually sleep. Don’t go too far.”

“Not going anywhere.” He gave the captain a shark’s grin and said, “We could share the bed.”

Whether he was tweaking the captain’s coattail or not, it sounded like heaven. “Yes, please.”

He sat and removed his own boots, and then got onto the bed beside me. I slid over to give him room. He put an arm across my shoulders, warm and steady at my side. In my ear, barely a breath, he whispered, “Pity the captain’s there, but I’d hate to give him apoplexy by making out in front of him in the king’s sheets. What a lost opportunity, eh lion-boy?”

I snorted.

*-What does he say?*

*-Something rude about the soldier.*

*-I like your man.*

I did too. I pressed in closer to him and kept my eyes open. The night passed slowly. I felt Tobin eventually give in to sleep, perhaps fooled by my immobility into thinking I’d done the same. I couldn’t. Every time I thought of letting go, panic yanked my attention back and my eyelids open. But getting some rest, at his side, was far better than nothing.



The king returned in the pre-dawn light. He pushed aside the window tapestry to look at the sky. In the east beyond, the first shading of lavender and gold blushed the sky behind the mountains. Tobin had woken the instant the door opened, but he stayed at my side. The king smiled at me and then at him, and it seemed like genuine affection.

“I’ve bespoken breakfast, any minute now. The horses will be brought around in half an hour.”

I rubbed my eyes and sat up. Xan said, *-What now?*

*-We eat and then ride out.*

*-I look forward to both.*

I wasn’t so sure. The odd sense of being doubled, of having two of each sensation, was worse this morning than last night. I wondered what it would be like to have Xan with me as I tried to sit a horse, or to eat a piece of bread. But I did feel hungry.

The food arrived shortly. Tobin had barely finished tugging on his boots. It was simple fare, bread and cheese and dried fruit. Xan’s attention was fixed on the plate. I nibbled at first, waiting to see what my innards would think of this oddly intimate sharing. Xan said nothing, but I could in fact feel his pleasure at the sweet-tart taste of the fruit. It bothered me to know that, but not enough to keep me from taking another.

Tobin said, “What’s the plan, sir?”

“We’ll ride out, with the transferred ghost in Sorcerer Lyon along. We plan to ride along the border, starting north at Bridal Veil, which should be the limit of the range Chief Xan named. We’ll move on south toward Tallribbon and the mouth of the Snake River. That stretch has the most caves, and several streams and waterfalls. The ghost called the place “between the waters” and said it was north of Tallribbon, so we’re hedging our bets as best we can. Firstmage hopes that, given the unexpected depth of this transference, even if the ghost won’t tell Lyon any more, he may react in some way that Lyon can sense, if we get near the right place. The scouts went out last night. I have other troops riding out along that and other stretches of the borderlands here. Even if we don’t catch the R’gin emerging, we should be able to spot those bastards before they have a chance to fall on us from behind.”

“So this morning’s effort isn’t essential, really,” Tobin said without looking at me. “For Lyon to do this.”

“Shut up,” I hissed through my teeth. “I promised Xan.”

Tobin frowned, but said no more. The king gave me a nod. “If you’re ready, we’ll mount up in ten minutes.”

I went in search of the garderobe, and Tobin squeezed in behind me. I grumbled, “What, you need to keep an eye on me while I piss, too?”

“We can take turns.” He bumped against my shoulder. “Don’t be angry with me.”

I couldn’t help softening. “I’m not, really. It’s just too late to do anything but see this through.”

“I know. But... there’s a chance we’ll come up against the R’gin, somewhere out there today. And you’re not a fighter.”

I’d forgotten that. One more danger. I don’t think my body had it in me to react to that. “I’ll run away fast then.”

“See that you do.”

I knew I couldn’t ask him to do the same. He was oath-bound to protect the king. I’d been worrying all night about myself, about what if the ghost was just biding its time to take over my mind, or what if Firstmage couldn’t banish it, or what if it tricked me into giving the king the wrong information. I’d forgotten to be afraid for Tobin.

I washed my hands awkwardly as usual, and then gripped Tobin’s bicep and, despite the ghost in my head, I kissed him fast and hard. “And if need be, you fight well, hear me? You dragged me out of my refuge of stone and bars. You can’t abandon me here.”

“You were pretty much out of there on your own already,” Tobin said. “But no, I promise.”

I didn’t correct his faith. If he’d forgotten that night when I sat with a knife pressed to my skin, I wasn’t going to remind him.

When we emerged from the door of the tower into the early morning, I felt Xan’s pleasure and a touch of surprise. *-I didn’t think I’d ever see the sun again.*

*-It's not up yet.*

*-Soon though. He noticed the waiting horses, and added, -Fine beasts, those. Although they'd not last an hour on our steep mountain tracks.*

*-Hopefully they won't have to.*

*-We'll have to reach the high hills though.*

I tried not to react with satisfaction to that hint, but Xan said, *-I cannot guide you.*

*-Can't or won't?*

*-Both. For so long I've been made of unyielding hate, and though you're not the townsfolk who stoned my son, if I gave aid to you, beyond what you've already forced, it would be the end of me, I think.*

*-You'll end at tomorrow's sunrise anyway. I hoped it would be to move on to something better, but could offer no assurance of that. -End this existence, anyway.*

*-So says the mage. Do you trust his word?*

I felt ill, but said, *-I have to. And he wouldn't lie about this to his chief.*

*-Perhaps. Maybe tomorrow then, before the sun comes up, I'll be able to say more.*

The captain held Cricket's reins as I mounted. Then instead of passing them to me, he swung up on his own horse and took me in tow. Tobin spurred Dark over close. "What are you doing?"

"Being careful." The captain barely glanced at him.

King Faro said, "It makes sense, Tobin. You wouldn't want the ghost to ride off with Lyon, would you?"

I glanced over at the archers waiting to follow us, and said vehemently, "If you see that happening, just shoot me."

Tobin muttered to the captain, "Keep the damned reins then." He added to me, under his breath, "If you ask anyone else to kill you, I'll knock you out, tie you up, and stuff you in the garderobe until tomorrow."

King Faro, riding up on my other side, overheard him and laughed. He

turned to me. “Do you have any suggestion that would change the direction we ride out?”

“Up into the hills somewhere?” I didn’t have much to offer.

“Bridal Veil first then. It’s well up there. We’ll work our way back over toward the Snake.”

The morning gradually brightened as we rode. Xan was mainly silent, although he asked the occasional simple question, like how long Faro had been ruler, or what our horse was called. I thought about not answering, of giving him silence for silence. But I decided to try for goodwill instead.

We came into the valley of the Bridal River less than an hour after the sun cleared the peaks. The higher we climbed, the sharper Xan’s attention became. With his thoughts in mine, I noticed the tang of pine trees and the slight bitterness in the wind. *-Storm coming, with snow down to the foothills. Two days off. Maybe less.*

I hoped fervently we’d be done before then. I’d felt so cold for so long that snow held no appeal.

The waterfall was worth seeing though. From a ribbon of glacier-blue stream, high on the mountainside, it fell a hundred yards to a rock shelf, and then fanned out in the lacy wide spray that gave the place its name. The moving water was hypnotic and I stared at it until I realized Xan was saying for the fourth time, *-Look up.*

I tracked higher, up towards the peaks of the mountains, still heavily clothed in snow. The rounded sides of Sugarloaf were frosted evenly white, but the steep flanks of the Fang showed runnels of darker snow and stretches of bare rock. I could feel Xan’s heart leap at the sight of the peaks.

*-What are the grey stripes on the Fang from?* I asked.

*-The Fang?*

*-That sharp peak, the pointy one.*

*-Ah, the God’s Knife. Those are avalanches. The snow lets go and races down the slope, carrying all with it. The color comes from the broken surface, and the rocks and trees tumbled along by the snow.*

I couldn't picture it. Snow lay flat on fields in my experience. When Xan talked about avalanches he sounded like a man discussing army-wagon racing, excitement and alarm mixed.

Xan said meditatively, *-This is... worth all the pain of the summoning. Just this, to see those mountains again and to know that my people, if not my clan, are up there still. You'd better hope that mage of yours knows his stuff. I'm not sure I could give this up of my own choice.*

That sucked all the air out of my lungs. I grabbed the pommel of my saddle, and bent forward trying to draw breath. Tobin said, "What's wrong?"

"Get him out! I want it out of me!" I grabbed at my head, pulling my hair in some ridiculous attempt to empty my brain. My bad hand fumbled uselessly at my temple, while my left yanked my head sideways, wrenching my neck.

Tobin grabbed my wrists. "What? Did something happen?"

*-BE CALM.* Xan's voice was loud enough in my brain to cut through the panic. *-Stop hurting yourself. I only spoke my thought aloud. I have no control here. In the morning I will be gone.*

*-Unless you can prevent it!*

*-Your mage was strong enough to pull me in across all those years, and stuff me into your hard head. I imagine he's strong enough to get me out again. Him and his cronies.*

I looked behind me. Secondmage and Thirdmage rode ten feet back, abreast on matched greys. Firstmage had remained in the tower, to guard and maintain the working itself. But neither of the other two looked worried in the least.

Tobin shook me lightly. "Lyon. Talk to me. What's wrong?"

"I just... panicked for a minute. I'm fine."

He kned Dark to stay close and didn't let go. "You're sure."

"Certain. I think. Unless I'm wrong."

That got a faint smile. "Now that sounds like you." He let my wrists go, but stayed beside me. "Be sure though."

King Faro reined back to join us. "News?"

“Sorry, Sire.” I quickly asked Xan, *-What do you call this place in the old tongue?*

*-Kielbeasu. Widewaters.*

*-Not Beasumblean then.*

He said nothing. I told the king, “I don’t think it’s here. This place has a different name.”

The king nodded. “We’ll leave scouts here, then, and move south.”

We turned and rode up a steep hillside with the peaks on our left. The air was still quite cool, and the sun low enough that most of the ground was in shade. The trees were only scrubby evergreens, but in the depths beneath their boughs, I saw glimpses of snow. Despite the jacket I’d been given, I shivered.

*-Flatlander. Xan’s voice was almost teasing. -This is like a summer’s day up in my mountains.*

I was just as glad not to be climbing higher then. I didn’t say so. Xan’s mood brightened with every glimpse of those bright peaks. I kept my eyes on them for his sake, and let the captain lead Cricket onward.

An hour later, after a rough scrambling ride that the king and Tobin seemed to relish far more than I, we reached the next stream. This one fell in tumbling rivulets down the rock face, dividing again and again into narrow threads of water. The advance men waved to us, and we moved down from the ridge to the gully where the waters rejoined into a sizable stream. The king reined in and turned to me. “How about here? When you said, ‘between the waters’ I thought of this place. The water divides again and again around the rocks, and one of those openings could be far deeper than it looks. A cave surrounded by water could be that *Bausumblin* thing, right?”

“Perhaps.” I looked around, forcing Xan to do the same. His interest was sharp, but tinged by a hint of unfamiliarity.

*-Is this the place? Beasumblean?*

*-In my day this was a dry hillside. Xan seemed exasperated. -Look up, witchman. I want to see where the water comes from.*

I complied slowly. His interest was caught by the cliff face above us, and the tumble of rock at its foot. *-It looks like there was a major rock fall here.*

*Not recently, the tracks of the water are already worn deep. After my time though. Perhaps that diverted the stream.*

“I don’t think this is it,” I told King Faro. “If he’s still constrained to tell the truth, then it’s not familiar to him.”

“The terrain might indeed have changed over the years,” the king said slowly. “Which could make this a useless exercise. No other part of the hills have more caves than here. Have him look again.”

“He says there was no water here back then.”

“Ah. Well then, onward.” The king wheeled his horse on its haunches and waved the advance guard forward. The captain, Tobin and I splashed across the wide stream in his wake, and headed up the next ridge. The sun was rising and taking some of the chill from the air. If you could ignore the troop of cavalry and archers riding behind us, this might have been a pleasure-outing.

Xan said, *-Tell me about your chief. Is he a good man?*

*-Tobin likes him. I don’t know him well.*

*-And his nemesis. The one who may come through these mountains? What of him?*

I shrugged irritably. *-What do you want me to do? Plead our case again? The Prince Regent of the R’gin is a devil of a man, evil in every way, who breathes fire and eats small children for breakfast.*

*-Don’t play the fool. What do you know of him?*

*-In truth? Not much. It’s said he killed his elder brother who was ruler of their land, to become guardian for his small son and take command in his place. And that he now looks for foreign wars to distract his people from his crime. But our side is capable of misinformation large and small. It could all be lies. All I really know is that the R’gin have invaded before, and that they aren’t kind to those whom they conquer. This is my home and I don’t want to see it in their hands. And that would be true even if they were the kindest overlords the world has known.*

*-We tribes of the mountains aren’t fond of overlords, Xan said slowly.*

We climbed another ridge, and the steep, slippery rocks forced me to pay attention to my riding. At first, when my head ached, I thought it was from the

jerking motion of Cricket's hooves on the rolling gravel. But the next pain was sharp and sudden. I cried out and grabbed the saddle. And then I was falling. The captain and Tobin both grabbed for me, and the captain got a hand on my knee as I slid over the side, enough to at least slow my fall. I landed on the rocks in a ball, arms wrapped around my head.

Tobin leaped down from Dark, and half-fell on his knees beside me. I heard other shouting. Something about mages. The sound rang in echoes through my head. Tobin lifted me against his lap. "What's wrong!"

Faintly through the noise I heard Xan say, *-M'blean means "through"*. And then his presence in my head faded.

The king loomed over me. "Both my sorcerers are unconscious. What happened?"

I managed to rasp, "Don't know." I felt lightheaded, but it seemed to be easing now, not worsening. "If I had to guess, I think something happened to the working." We'd all four of us been tied into that piece of sorcery. It had hung there in the back of my awareness since we set it in motion. Now it was gone.

The king grabbed my arm roughly. "And Xan?"

I yanked free of his hold, trying to get away but managing no more than a feeble scrabble of my heels against the ground, as I rolled off Tobin's knees. "Don't touch me!" Tobin aborted his own reach for me, but stayed kneeling at my side. I curled up tighter, breathing through my nose, quelling my panic.

The king glared, but stepped back. "The ghost?"

"Gone, I think." I tried to feel for him. But there was no human sense for that, no eyes I could open to look around inside my head. I didn't feel his presence as I had for hours, but how could I be sure? I said, *-Chief Xan? Are you there? Can you still speak?*

Silence answered me. But if the summoning-working was gone then so was his compulsion to talk to me. Which didn't mean he was out of my head. I tried not to think of that, but a decade of nightmares hovered. I pressed my forearms to my skull. "He's gone. I think he's gone."

"Gods and goddess damn it!" The king straightened. "Now what? Hoy, medic? How are the sorcerers?"



“Coming around, Sire.”

Tobin put an arm under me, moving slowly. When I didn't reject his touch, his frown eased. “Can you stand, Lyon? I'd like to get you off this damned slope.”

“I'll try.” I struggled to my feet, and with his help started back down the escarpment. Below me, men were helping the King's Mages do the same. We made it to the meadow at the foot of the slope and stopped on the more level ground there. The captain had brought our horses down with him and he hovered nearby, the three sets of reins in his left hand to keep his sword hand free. He stared at me with a wealth of suspicion. I tried to give him an evil look, but it probably came out just painful. My knees were still weak and Tobin was my rock. But I was tired of leaning on the poor man all the time. I tried to stand straighter.

Secondmage said hoarsely, “The working collapsed. I'm very worried about Firstmage. The rebound will have hit him even harder than the rest of us.”

“He, at least, is safely in the tower,” the king said. “The question is, what now? Is it worth continuing as we have been, or do we just go to the back-up plan and array watchers all along this stretch and wait for a sighting?”

I realized they were all looking at me. Saying, “How would I know?” was probably not going to be popular. I tried to think about it. A recollection of Xan's voice lingered somewhere in my head, although whether it was just memory or some continued presence I couldn't tell. I finally said, “I think we should go on. I don't sense him anymore. I don't hear him in my head. But still, I think there's a chance I might recognize something or feel something. I don't see how it can hurt to try.”

“Can you ride?” the king asked.

“I think so.”

Secondmage said, “With your permission, Sire, I think my colleague and I should ride back to the tower. With the working broken, we're of little use to you or to Sorcerer Lyon out here. If Firstmage has been injured we can at least help him, and perhaps investigate the working and see what went wrong.”

“Lyon? Your choice. Do you want them to stay with us?”

For a moment I relished the look on the two sorcerer’s faces, as the king put them in my hands. But I really had no desire to have them close by, if they wanted to be elsewhere. “Whatever they think’s best, Sire.”

“We’ll go assist Firstmage, then.” Secondmage turned toward his horse, but was clearly unable to mount it. The king called for a complement of guardsmen to assist the two sorcerers on the ride back.

The captain led Cricket back over to me. I felt like I was made of pudding, but I dodged his hand under my arm. Tobin’s strong grip and a hearty shove to my butt got me back into the saddle. Cricket stood still, bless him, and let me get settled. Tobin set my foot into my stirrup and looked up at me. “You’re really all right for this?”

“I’m fine. It was just the shock.”

“And the ghost is gone?”

He expected a quick affirmative. I saw the lines around his eyes become drawn as I failed to answer him. After a moment he limped around to the other side of Dark and swung himself up.

Riding out felt different without Xan a strong presence in my head. I hadn’t realized how much of my enjoyment of the morning had been colored by his delight at seeing his beloved mountains. Without that, I was exhausted and cold, a little scared and a whole lot intimidated by the impossible task of finding one specific cave mouth in a hillside littered with them. As we rode along, a contingent of men peeled off to explore any opening we saw. Most were apparently shallow, and the men returned fast. A few were deeper, deep enough that a cursory look didn’t find the end of them, and there men were left behind to keep watch.

The next waterfall we came to was a low tumbling affair of wide shallow water. The king looked at me. I could only shake my head. I felt nothing, saw nothing, one way or the other. Perhaps Xan truly was gone. We continued, up and down hills. My knees were getting raw from bracing against the saddle, and my back ached. As we topped the next ridge, the king waited for me. Pointing up ahead he said, “That’s the Cascade. It’s a hard place to get to the

base of. The river runs through a narrow canyon before coming out of the deep rock. But there are caves around the outsides of the canyon. What do you say?”

I stared at it. The water fell from one ledge to the next, going from a deep tumbling torrent to wider and flatter, before disappearing from view behind the trees on the ridge. “I don’t think we can count it out.”

Tobin pointed further along the skyline. “The Silverwend comes out about three miles further on. If that odd name meant ‘between the waters’ then perhaps the opening is in that three mile stretch between them.”

“Good thought.” The king waved an officer over, and a large contingent of the cavalry moved off at a good clip. “They’ll start looking.” He glanced at me. “There’s no visible cave mouth in the canyon of the Cascade, but it’s quite a sight. At least you’ll get a look while we’re here.”

The captain said reprovably, “This is hardly a time for sightseeing, your majesty.”

“Indeed. But if we cross the Cascade River at the high point instead of the lower ford, Lyon will see one of the local wonders, and we won’t have lost any time.”

“As you wish, Sire.”

The king waved at his forward guard and we turned east from the route the cavalry had taken, and up a narrower trail. The king rode close beside me. “I love this area,” he said. “Although the first time I passed through was after the Badlands campaign, and I was too tired to appreciate it. We were here again six years ago though, Tobin. You remember?”

“Yes, sir.”

“There was a rumor then too, that Prince Miacosta was bringing troops through the Skyfield pass. It turned out to be false, but we had a good summer patrolling here.”

“It got damned cold by the start of winter, though.” Tobin said reminiscently.

“Yes. Father could really have called us off the scent a month earlier than he did.”

I listened to them talk in low voices as we climbed higher. The air was thin, and the clumps of pine trees were full of birds. After fifteen minutes we crested the ridge.

“We’ll work down at an angle to cross the river.” The king pointed out a route. “And search the caves south of it. But first, take a minute to look at the Cascade. Isn’t that a sight?”

I peered down into the dimness of the narrow canyon. At our feet the water of the river burst forth from the rocky canyon sides into a tumbling shallow river along the ravine. Upstream, it ran silent and deep, between high rock walls. And at the cliff, it fell, a hundred feet of free drop in a glistening rippling sheet. I stared at it, hypnotized. The water was like a solid living thing, shimmering on the surface, with undreamed-of motion in its depths. Behind the sparkling waterfall, the cliff was dark with spray and mysterious.

No. Not dark with spray. I grabbed Tobin’s arm in a grip that must have hurt him. “M’blean means through,” I said. “The tunnel is through the waterfall.”

“It’s *what*?” Tobin and the king both turned to look more closely.

“There’s something moving behind the water. I swear it.” I broke into a sweat. The air on that wide hilltop felt close and still and silent. Not even birds sang. “That’s the place.”

As we watched, we all saw it. A flicker of light showed in the darkness behind the water. Just a moment and then gone. But we were certain then. The king turned to the officers behind us, snapping out orders. The archers were sent to find vantage points, guarding all exits from that canyon. The remaining cavalry were sent elsewhere. Voices were hushed. I leaned toward Tobin. “Why are we whispering?”

“The more of them we can trap at the mouth of the cave, before they know that we’ve spotted them, the better.”

“Do you think...?” I was going to ask if we were in time, when the sound of fighting suddenly broke out to our left.

Tobin swore. “Some of them must have already come through before we got here. Come on, let’s find a more defensible spot.”

A horn blew loudly, and then another. Off down the valley, a faint reply was heard. Tobin made Dark jostle Cricket toward a field of boulders. "Over there, lion-boy. Get some rocks at your back. They may have archers too."

I let him guide me. The king was beside us for a moment, and then a different horn call made him raise his head. "That's Cliban. He's in trouble. Come on." He whirled his horse and plunged off to the right. The captain gave me one glance, and then he and the rest of the King's Own charged after the king. Tobin and I were left alone on the hill. I saw Tobin looking frantically back and forth, between me and the route the king had taken.

"You should go help," I said.

"They'll do fine. I'm not leaving you alone."

"I'll be safe here." I steered Cricket into a narrow space between two big boulders. "See. Hidden and protected. I can wait here for you."

"Not a chance." He turned Dark to put himself in front of me, his sword in his hand.

There we stood still, listening. The hilltop was quiet. Downslope the sounds of fighting moved further away. There suddenly was a loud cry, like a growling roar, and then distant voices calling, "The king! To the king! He's down!"

Tobin quivered like a horse struck with a whip. I said, "Go. I'll be fine."

He whirled and stared at me, his eyes boring into mine. "You'd better be. Stay hidden." He and Dark leaped forward as if shot from a bow and disappeared from sight.

I was left shivering, sitting on my patient horse, in a damp, cold, blind pocket of rock. I whistled tunelessly, then remembered I was supposed to be hiding. I could hear nothing intelligible. Above me the open sky was blue and cloudless. I said, *-Xan? Are you there?* There was still no hint of his presence in my mind.

I wondered where Tobin was and what he was doing. There was still the ring and clank of a distant clash, and shouting. There must have been quite a few R'gin around, to still be engaging the king's men. If I'd managed to persuade Xan to bring us directly here, perhaps there would have been fewer. Perhaps Tobin was dying right now because I failed to control a ghost.

No. I wasn't going to picture Tobin dying or even admit that he could. He was perfect and immortal and was even now smiting the king's enemies, after which he would return to me and... Something scraped over rocks, down and to my right. Tobin had ridden off to the left.

I froze, trying not to even breathe. Cricket seemed to catch my mood and raised his head, flicking one ear back and forth uneasily.

The sounds came again, louder. And then I barely caught a voice, in modern *r'ginian*, saying, "*fan out, clear it and go down...*"

*Shit!* Giving orders meant there was more than one man, and I had no illusions about taking on even one. Maybe they wouldn't find me. But Cricket was awfully big. My safe niche felt like a trap. The sounds grew louder. I slid off Cricket's back, squeezed between him and the rocks, and glanced around wildly.

The hillside was littered with rocks and trees, and plenty of places to hide. But as the sounds increased, they suggested several men on horses. Could I hide that well? My fear rose, echoed inside me, a drumming in my head that made it hard to hear and almost impossible to think. I looked around frantically. Behind me, a cliff face reared another hundred feet up to the rock pinnacle. It was steep, but rough, with hand- and foot-holds aplenty. Flatlanders never looked up.

With a touch of apology on Cricket's shoulder for leaving him, I kicked off my boots and wriggled out of the niche. The R'gin wouldn't hurt the horse. Although they'd probably steal him. My stomach lurched, and my pulse sped still faster. I told myself to take a breath, be calm. Tobin would just have to steal him back. At the base of the cliff I paused, but the sounds of the R'gin in the trees below spurred me on. I began to climb.

It was a challenge with my hand. I couldn't grab the handholds properly. But fear drove me upward. I would find a way. I had to. I could jam my curled fingers into gaps in the rock, and apply pressure at just the right angle to keep them there. It worked, if I chose my spots carefully. Yes. There, and there. I was doing it! Despite the danger, I began to feel an exhilaration in the climb. My bare toes were soon sore and bleeding, but they found their way from one outcropping to the next almost without thought. I was fifteen feet up before I knew it. Twenty feet. Twenty-five. Thirty. Thirty-five.

Past my braced feet, I saw motion. I froze again, plastered against the rock. A brief flash of dark armor, a man's shoulder, alien in its details, moved below me. I was out of his line of sight, but a sitting duck for arrows, should any of them actually look up. There was an outcropping to my left, with a dark sliver of shadow beside it. A deep fissure in the rock, almost a chimney although it petered out barely twenty feet higher. That might hide and shelter me. Thank the Skygod it was to the left, because I needed all the strength of my good fingers to pull me sideways across the rock. I jammed my scraped right hand into a narrow fissure, torqued it to the side, and swung a foot over.

Inch by painful, slow inch, I moved into that shadow. I found places to put my feet, enough support to take the strain off my tiring arms. I pressed my back to the stone behind me, worked out the most comfortable positions to hold onto, and took a slow, steadying breath. And looked down over my shoulder.

A shout from below startled me, but luckily I was well braced in my niche. A R'gin came into view, tugging Cricket out from between the rocks. I bit my lip hard. The horse would be fine, even though he was fighting the rough pull on his bridle. And thank the Earthmother I'd moved to safer ground when I had the chance. The R'gin soldiers scattered, searching, but sure enough, not one ran his eyes up the near-vertical cliffside. I set my feet more comfortably, to wait. I wished I could give my left hand a break, but didn't dare. I did slide my right hand out of its crack and flexed the elbow for a moment. Using it that way to climb was the most useful thing I'd done with the damned thing in months, but it ached in unfamiliar ways.

Below me the R'gin were still failing to find the owner of that fine horse. They gathered for a discussion in hushed whispers too low to make out. I saw six of them, but thought I heard others moving downslope. They were all lean, wiry men with smooth beardless faces and darkened armor. The horses were dark too, blacks and two bays without white markings, sleek-coated and smaller than Cricket.

There was a sudden clash of noise on the hillside. I heard shouts, and the ring of metal. The men below me raised their heads, and then whirled. A group of our soldiers charged out of the trees, weaving through the boulders at a

gallop. The R'gin met them, swords swinging. The bulk of the battle heaved and roiled, in and out of my range of view, men and horses jostling. The sounds were loud and yet thinned and attenuated by the air below me. I saw a R'gin fall from his horse, saw one of our soldiers slumped over his saddlebow, blood on his back.

I felt detached, most of my attention focused on remaining still and bracing myself on the rocks. The sounds were moving off a bit. Below me, Tobin suddenly came into view at a gallop. He reined Dark in on his haunches, staring into my empty hiding place between the boulders. He hissed what was probably a curse, and looked around wildly. He too never looked up.

Tobin turned Dark slowly, his eyes scanning the ground, and the spaces between and under the giant boulders on the hillside. I hesitated, not wanting to attract attention yet. The fighting clearly wasn't yet over. As I watched, I saw an unmounted R'gin soldier pull himself up onto the large boulder behind Tobin, holding a short sword. From the way he moved, I thought his leg pained him, but he was alert, the hilt steady in his hand. Slowly and silently, the R'gin slithered forward over the stone's massive flat top toward Tobin.

I could call out. But Tobin would probably look up my way, which would distract him and put his back to the R'gin even more. I needed to throw something, a stone, to guide his attention. It was doable. Probably not to hit the R'gin, but to at least turn Tobin that way, to warn him. I could jam my right hand in again and let go with my left, grab a flake of stone and, and...

The knowledge of how to brace my useless, stupid, fecking right hand fell away from me. I felt a *presence* withdraw from my mind. I found myself high up on a *fecking cliff*, clinging on for dear life. Alone and up in the air crazy, unbalanced, frozen and useless, with Tobin *about to die down there*...

*-Xan! Dammit, Xan!*

*-Perhaps this is the moment I prayed for.* His voice was dispassionate. *-Not the knowledge of the place where the men issued forth, but this moment, when a flatlander needs my help to save another, and I can deny it.*

*-Help him! Show me how to help him!* I was too terrified, watching the R'gin below sliding into position behind Tobin, to even care that Xan was still



there in my head. He could stay, could have all of me, if he'd just let me warn Tobin. *-All of me, forever. Whatever you ask. Help him!*

Below me, Tobin turned Darkwind in another slow circle. The R'gin flattened himself to the rock, waiting. Tobin's gaze didn't rise. He was looking for me, no doubt assumed that with my hand, I'd never have been able to climb. *Without someone guiding each move.*

Tobin completed his circle, turning his back again to the R'gin. The man on the rock drew himself forward, raising his blade, leg-muscles bunched under him to leap. My heart tried to beat itself out of my chest, and my vision blurred. Tobin would die, and then I would fall. By then it wouldn't matter. I bit back a sob. That bastard Xan wouldn't hear me cry. Maybe I'd come back and haunt the mother-raping mountain man until the ends of time for this...

My right hand slammed into a crack with enough force to break a knuckle. I didn't even feel the pain. My left hand let go of its grip, reached out, and plucked a loose flake of shale from the cliffside like a man picking a flower in his familiar garden. I threw the shard out and down, with aim I never in my life possessed. It struck the R'gin on the arm, before clattering to the stone. His startled movement scraped his boots on the boulder, and Tobin whirled and pulled Dark up on his hind legs.

The R'gin couldn't halt his leap. He crashed against Dark's raised shoulder, instead of Tobin's unprotected back. Dark lashed out with his hooves, and Tobin's blade flashed. Both men yelled. There was blood running down Dark's neck, but Tobin struck again, and again, and the R'gin fell flat, and lay still. Tobin stood in his stirrups, blade raised, looking around, finally looking up. "Lyon!"

I had to clutch at the stone with both hands again, gritting my teeth at the pain in my finger. I couldn't wave. I could hardly breathe. So at first he missed me, in my stone shelter. But the second time he searched the cliff-face, I moved my elbow just enough. I saw him catch the motion.

He rode Dark over right underneath me. It was harder to see him there, but easier to hear.

"You crazy man." His voice echoed my relief. "What are you doing up there?"

“Hiding?” I said it thinly, but he caught the words.

“Good thought. Interesting choice of a hiding place.”

“People don’t look up.”

“I certainly didn’t.” He hesitated. “Are you going to come down?”

“Almost certainly.” Then I added in bitter honesty, “One way or the other.”

“You climbed up there all right.”

“Well, yes. But I had help. And down is harder, I think.” Especially if Xan left me to my own devices.

“Help? You...?” I heard his voice change. “The ghost isn’t gone.”

“Not yet. Fortunately.” I tried to make it sound light, and indeed I would forever be grateful. But promises made in a life-or-death moment are harder to keep in the stillness of the aftermath.

“Goddess, Lyon. What can I do?”

“Watch your fecking back, until I can get down and do it. There were a bunch of those bastards roaming about.”

“True. I think we got most of them. Obviously not all. Maybe you should stay there, until I get some company to guard you. Can you do that? Just stay safe there?”

“Probably.”

“And will... will the ghost help you down?”

Good question. I stayed silent. Tobin stared up at me for a long time, his gaze intense and worried. Trying to look down over my arm at him was too hard on my neck, or maybe on my heart, so I turned my eyes to the rock in front of me. Eventually he said again, “Just stay put. I’ll bring help.”

I heard him ride off.

I turned my attention to the cliff face. How hard could it be? I just had to retrace my steps. I’d come up here fast and easily, well, sort of easily. Surely I could do the reverse. I pulled my aching hand out of its crack, and tried to remember where I’d put it before that. That little ledge thing? It didn’t look safe enough. My left fingers were clenched white on the stone and I wasn’t sure I’d ever have the nerve to let go.

*-You have to read the stone. Xan sounded like Meldov in a pedantic mood.*  
*-The shape, the cracks, see where the shadows mark depth. Flow across the stone like water.*

I laughed bitterly. *-Waterfall, you mean.*

*-You won't fall.*

*-Will you guide me down then, to keep this body intact?*

*-I'll guide you. Do you wish to wait for your stallion man to return?*

*-Goddess, no. If I fell, I didn't want Tobin to see it. Bad enough for him to pick up the pieces afterward. And every minute that passed made me shakier.*

*-Very well then.*

The climb down turned out to be far harder than up. One move at a time, Xan guided me in placing a foot, and then a hand. Jamming my right hand correctly was frustrating agony. Over and over, Xan said sharply, *-No! You're not braced right.*

What felt like hours later, and less than halfway, I snarled *"Just take over, damn it! Just do it!"*

*-I can't.*

*-The hells you can't. You did on the way up.*

*-I didn't. I whispered to you, guided you, yes. You felt my reactions—relief whenever I saw a move was well done, concern when I feared disaster. And you were focused on climbing and followed each detail, since you thought it was unsuspected skill. But I can't move a muscle of one of your fingers on my own.*

*-Well, feck it. I wasn't sure how I actually felt about that, or even whether I believed it. I'd have jumped for joy, I suppose, if I hadn't still been twenty feet up above a field of boulders. I tried to reposition my hand instead.*

At some point I became aware that there were people below me. I couldn't look down. The absence of arrows suggested it wasn't the R'gin, but even if it had been, the minutes of clinging that I had left in me were dwindling. My world narrowed down to the face of the rock, and Xan's steady voice. *-To the left, a hand's breadth. Down a hair more. There. Brace your toes further right. Now the left hand. Lean.*

I eased myself down the rock, inch by inch, and didn't fall.

Eventually Tobin's voice said, "I'm going to touch you."

It barely penetrated my concentration, but his hand on my right calf almost made me fall. He guided my foot lower to another outcropping. Then my left foot. And then as I slid my left hand downward, his palm braced my butt. The relief made me sob. But I didn't fall backwards onto him as I longed to. Tobin had been catching and propping me up for too long. I was going to come back to him this time with both my own feet on the ground.

The last moves were fast and rough, and perhaps his grip did help. But finally I stood on flat stone with both feet. I turned.

Tobin grabbed me and wrapped me tight against him, knocking the breath from my chest. "Holy Bian," he groaned against my cheek. "When I saw them leading Cricket with an empty saddle... and then the cliff."

My arms were too sore to even raise them. I leaned against him. "I was safe. You were the one with a R'gin behind him with a sword. And with..." I leaned back to get a better look. "Tobin, you have blood in your hair, and on your jacket. How bad is it?"

He didn't ease off enough for me to see much. "Mostly not mine. A slice on my shoulder, maybe. It doesn't matter."

"The hells it doesn't." I tried to shove him away. "Let me see how bad it is, hero-man."

I think even then he wouldn't have let go, but the king rode up, with his guardsmen behind him. "Tobin, we're mopping up now. How's Lyon?"

"I'm fine, Your Majesty," I said. *And able to speak for myself, thank you.* Although I didn't say that aloud. "Did we get here too late?"

"Not on your life." He gave me a tired but exultant grin. "About fifty of their advance party had come through. They weren't even set up in their positions yet when we rode in on them. We caught another fifteen or so before they realized we were waiting for them. The bulk of the Prince-Regent's army is now down in that tunnel, trying to turn themselves around." His grin got wider. "In the dark, after hours, maybe days, of walking. With tired spooked horses, and lanterns running low on oil, I'd bet."

“So it was worth all this?”

“Absolutely. Another two days, and we’d have had thousands of enemies in these hills, maybe more men than I have with me. Even a few hours more and they’d have had their scouts out to protect the beachhead. We’d have lost a lot of men, driving them back. Of course, once we knew they were coming, the attack became likely to fail, but this way saved hundreds of lives on both sides. We’ve got archers set up across from the waterfall now, and all along the little crevasse that leads from behind it out to the valley. That terrain works in our favor now. They’re bottled in and they know it. It’s over.”

I sighed, and let my eyes close for a moment. Tobin alive. Hundreds of men. Worth it.

Tobin said, “Lyon needs rest and, um, a consultation with the sorcerers.”

I shook my head. I didn’t really want to talk to those old men. But the king and Tobin were speaking rapidly, spilling all my secrets like marbles from a pouch, strewn across the ground. And I was too tired to pick them up. I heard, “...still in his head... was possessed before... ghost.... wraith... maybe affected... sunrise.”

I bestirred myself enough to knee Tobin’s thigh and say, “Big mouth.”

He turned his attention to me. “What? Oh, I’m sorry. But it’s the king. He needs to know.”

“Not *all* my secrets.” There was darkness that was no one’s business but my own. I couldn’t remember now how much Tobin knew of it.

“Not all, I swear. But enough to get that ghost out of you, goddess willing.”

“I guess.” I sat abruptly on the ground, sliding out of his surprised hold. “I’ll wait here while you figure it out.”

Tobin knelt behind me. “Do you need to lie down? Are you hurt?”

That reminded me. “No, you are. Go get a medic to look at it.”

“It’s not important.”

The king said sharply, “Tobin?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Are you wounded?”

“A scratch, sir.”

“Well, get it seen to. And Lyon’s hand too. Then mount up and we’ll head home. We’ll consult with Firstmage on the situation with the ghost.” He whirled his horse away and rode off.

Tobin gave a short laugh, and took my battered hand in his. “And I didn’t even see this. Come on, let’s get us both to the medic as my king commands.”

“It’s a good thing you listen to someone,” I grumbled. Together, we got ourselves up off the ground and went in search of someone with a medic’s white tunic to see to our hurts.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER NINE

I'd have been pacing around the room, except I was far too exhausted. I lay on the bed and let Tobin do it for me.

Tobin said, "So you thought the ghost left when the enchantment broke, but he was still in there. *Is still there.*"

"Yep." We'd been through this a dozen times. At least.

"But he doesn't control you. Not really."

"Not at all. So he says." Who knew? Could I really have just been following his directions on that fast smooth ascent? Xan had been silent since getting me off the cliff wall, but I hadn't asked him anything more either. I wasn't sure I wanted the answers. What was my consent to his possession worth, in this situation? Had my impulsive offer on that cliff bound me to him, or him to me, or neither one? I hadn't told Tobin about that part.

"And it doesn't..." Tobin came and sat on the side of the bed, looking at me. "It doesn't *hurt* you?"

"No."

"But he hears us talking."

"He doesn't speak the language, remember? That's what got me into this mess in the first place."

"No, it's not. I did. If I hadn't ridden out to fetch you..."

"Then I might well be already dead." I took Tobin's forefinger, and ran it along those straight scars that lined my wrist above my bandaged hand. "Remember? I'd been locked in my own version of safety so long, I was seeing only one way out. I regret nothing." Almost nothing.

"You said you weren't trying to kill yourself."

"I wasn't trying. But I still might have succeeded." I could remember the seductive darkness of it, the feeling of controlling one vital thing in my life, the pleasure-pain of skin parting under the blade, as that first drop of the rest of my life rolled free. Now, deep in my mind, I felt Xan stir uneasily. *-Don't worry, I told him. -I've found something better.*

Tobin took my face between his hands and stared into my eyes. “That’s over with though, right? You’re going to make every effort to live for me?”

“I promise.”

He leaned forward and kissed me warmly, then hesitated. “Does he feel that? What we do together?”

“I guess so.”

*-He kisses well, for a man.*

*-Don’t do that.*

*-What?*

*-Talk about him. Or him and me. At all.*

*-You needn’t fear I want him myself. I was always one-souled, and then two-souled with Tia.*

*-Either way, it’s private.*

*-Very well.*

Tobin was eyeing me. “Was that a conversation with Xan?”

“Yes.”

“What did he say?”

“He thinks you’re sexy,” I said provocatively.

“Oh. Um.” He looked nonplussed. For once I’d shut Tobin up cold.

I closed my eyes, although my brain was still racing. “I’m going to sleep until the sorcerers come up here.”

Whenever that might be. We’d arrived back at the tower to discover that Firstmage was dead. He’d simply fallen over onto the working, halfway through the morning. Which explained why the thing failed. His colleagues were busily trying to figure out if the working killed him, or just strain and old age. And if it was in fact the sorcery, then what went wrong and how to fix it. Until they thought they had some answers, I was “resting”, which technically meant confined to our room under guard. That was fine with me. I kept discovering whole new levels of exhaustion. Maybe I’d write a treatise on the topic someday.



At some point, my lie became truth and I slept. I woke with a start, thinking I'd heard thunder, and laughter. But the only real sound was someone knocking on the door. Tobin rolled away from my side, where he'd apparently been lying, and went to answer it. I'd expected the King's Mages, but instead it was the king himself.

"Can I come in?"

"Of course, sir."

Behind him the captain said, "I don't think this is wise until your sorcerers examine him."

King Faro said over his shoulder, "I'll take that under advisement." He stepped into the room and closed the door on the captain.

Tobin said mildly, "He's only looking out for your safety, sir. It's his job."

"I'm aware of that. Sometimes he needs to have a little faith though."

Tobin's lip quirked. "In you or in me?"

"All three of us." He pulled up a chair at my bedside, and waved Tobin back onto the bed. "Hello, Lyon, how's the hand?"

I cleared my throat and sat up against the headboard. "Fine, Sire. I mean, it's broken, but nothing that won't heal."

"That's good."

There was an awkward silence. King Faro added, "The Crown is well aware of the debt We owe you, Sorcerer Lyon."

Tobin muttered something very softly about, "...stick up your butt."

I was apprehensive, but King Faro laughed. "I miss you when you're not around, Tobin. I really do. But I was trying to offer Lyon the protection and gratitude of his king."

"Then you could try saying thank you."

King Faro smacked Tobin's shoulder, but gave me a warmer smile. "Thank you, Lyon. Is there anything that I can do for you?"

I tried to imagine it. Fix my head? He was no sorcerer. Make Tobin resign from the Voices, or post him to my remote farming village? Where he would

no doubt go crazy in a week? Anyway, as long as Xan was in my mind that was irrelevant. “I can’t think of anything, Sire.”

“How refreshing.” He shrugged. “Maybe it will come to you. Secondmage and Thirdmage are still down in the workroom, muttering and pacing about. But they said to tell you, either way, they want you down there before sunrise.”

“All right.” I’d lost track. “How long?”

“Two hours now.”

That soon? More of the night had passed than I’d realized. “Have they said what might happen then?”

“Not in detail. I know they intend to do something to end the transference.”

Tobin said, “Without killing Lyon in the process.”

“Of course. I gather an enchantment that keeps working after it’s broken is a big puzzle. No doubt, Sorcerer Lyon, you’d understand them better than I.”

“If they were even talking to me about it.”

“Ah.” King Faro looked brighter. “That I can do. Order them to include you in the work. Would you prefer that?”

My first impulse was to shout yes. The thought that two other people were going to determine my fate in arcane ways without consulting me made me want to scream. At the same time, I had no illusions about our relative talents and experience. Having to explain everything to me might slow them down. I let my good sense prevail. It helped that what I wanted most was to spend the next two hours with Tobin. “If you could just tell them that once they decide, I want the whole final working explained to me, in every detail, before they perform it.”

“I’ll do that.”

Tobin said, “Any new word from the coast?”

“Oh, yes. Got another bird. There’s serious fighting. General Estray is doing well, though. If we’d split the forces evenly, or had not had warning, it might be different. But the extra archers give him enough strength to keep the R’gin pinned on and near the beaches. He expects they’ll eventually give up and retreat.”

“Especially since their second front has failed.”

“Yes. Although they probably don’t know that yet. Communication is all.” He reached out and tapped Tobin’s badge of office. “Back when mages could do that kind of work, a man’s words could be heard across the country. It must have been nice. Instead of relying on riders and carrier-birds.”

“If uncanny,” Tobin said, and it made me laugh.

The king glanced at me, and then as if deliberately distracting me, mused, “I’ve always wondered why so much has been lost.” I could have told him it was the subject of fruitless debate whenever two sorcerers got together. Why the physical magics had vanished from the world, leaving only the command of the dead behind. He said, “Talking with Xan reminded me of how devastating the Plague was. I wondered if that perhaps made the NaR’gin deliberately close and hide the tunnel—perhaps they covered it up and hid it on the R’gin end so men here couldn’t bring the really lethal version of the sickness back home?”

Tobin said, “Maybe. It might have been deliberate for that reason. A sick man wouldn’t survive the long voyage by ship, or weeks through the mountain passes, to bring the Plague with him. Maybe they thought to bottle it up here. Or even thought that the tunnel caused it.”

“There’s a small chance it might have,” I pointed out. “We don’t yet know if that tunnel was made and maintained by magic. Or why the Summer Sickness suddenly became the Plague. Maybe the tunnel magic acted on the illness in the soldiers passing through, strengthened it somehow.”

“Gods.” The king looked stricken. “I hope it wasn’t that. We just had eighty men come through there. What are the chances none of them was sick with anything?”

I shook my head, and gave an unfortunate snicker. “Another nice conundrum to set to your sorcerers.”

“Not funny,” the king protested.

“No. But we can hope it’s not true.” Unlike the millennium old ghost inside me. I said, *-Xan, was there true magic in the world, when you were alive?*

Any hope he wasn't still around disappeared when he said immediately, -*Yes. Spells for finding and keeping things, spells to warn of enemies approaching. But our witchmen said it was nothing compared to what had been possible generations before. They said the magic was fading from the land.*

*-Did you ever actually see anyone work a spell?*

*-I knew a man who could find water with a forked stick. I don't know if it was true magic, but it seemed so. Our witchmen used spells to keep the herds safe. But we still lost a kid to predators now and then. They said nothing was perfect. Mostly, the witchborn spoke with our ancestors, for wisdom and help.*

I refocused my eyes to see the king watching me. "Xan says the magic was fading even in his time. So it wasn't all due to the plague."

He nodded. "It must be interesting, to talk to someone so old. To hear about those times first-hand."

"Yes."

"I have an itch to set a real historian on you, to ask questions until morning comes."

I recognized the impulse, but said, "I'd rather you didn't." If my last hours were coming, it should have been gratifying to spend them adding to human knowledge. But I had other wishes.

He shrugged. "I don't have one handy anyway. And most of the burning questions the palace historian spoke of in my lessons were about the settled lands, and not the mountains."

Tobin said, "Sire?"

The king turned, startled by the formality. "Yes?"

"Would you tell your sorcerers that if this process will harm Lyon, in any way, I'd rather have the ghost around forever. Much rather."

"I'm not sure that's a choice." The king turned to me. "What about you, Lyon? Could you live like this forever?"

I hesitated, and asked Xan, *-Did I bind myself to giving you a place forever in my body, when I was desperate there on the cliff?*

*-You offered. I didn't accept it. I'm not sure I could. I feel very stretched and thin.*

*-You let me save Tobin. Helped me.*

*-Not because of your offer. Only because you love him, and I would not see that end. The hate was finally burned out of me, and I let it go.*

*-Thank you.*

*-Each moment of love in the world lifts us all up. Any kind of love. I miss my Tia. Very much now.*

*-Perhaps you'll see her again when you go.*

*-That would be a true blessing of the Skygod.*

I reached out and put my palm on Tobin's cheek. His stubble rasped my skin. I felt Xan notice the texture of it, with a little hitch of surprise from a man used to a woman's smooth face. He was a good man, but... I couldn't bear it. I said, "I want the ghost gone from my head. One way or the other." I didn't move my hand from where it lay.

The king said, "I'll leave you for now. Someone will fetch you early enough for a full explanation, before the working of the new enchantment begins."

I didn't even hear him open the door, because Tobin turned his head, and pressed a kiss to my palm. "What now?"

"Let me hold you," I said. "I can't do much more, or won't, not with him in my head. But let me put my arms around you."

"Gladly."

We lay down again, fully clothed, and Tobin came into my arms. I found a way to hold him that kept my bandaged, throbbing hand clear. Not that the pain really mattered now, but it was a distraction. Fortunately one I had years of practice at ignoring. I laid my cheek on the pillow, facing him. He kissed me slowly, and looked into my eyes. "We'll have lots of time, after today. We'll go slowly, get to know each other as grown men without a crisis blowing down our necks."

"Yes." I explored his mouth. Xan was silent and still. The bad hand was

nothing. I could focus only on Tobin, on the soft slide of his tongue, the little gap in his teeth, the sweet stretch of his lip, taken in a gentle bite.

He said, "Come back to Riverrun. I'll show you the palace and the grounds. The libraries. There are three of them. You'll enjoy the libraries."

I licked his neck and the angle of his jaw, loving the drag of his unshaven skin over my tongue. "I can't live there though. Not yet. I'm better, gods and goddess, miles better than I thought I would ever be. But it's still too many people."

"I know. We can explore it at night, when all the world's asleep. And then I'll take you home."

It made such a nice fantasy. For right now I'd go along with it. We had two hours. "You'll come visit me in my house. I'll learn to bake you cakes."

Tobin laughed. "Don't strain yourself."

I said in a hurt tone, "You think it'll be hard for me? I'll have you know I'm a decent cook."

Tobin nuzzled against my neck. "I won't be visiting you for your cakes. I'll bring some from town."

"Five days stale," I teased. But immediately my heart ached at the reminder. Five days out and five days back. How often would he come?

"You could move closer," he said. "We can look for a place."

"Yes." I could do that. Surely I could. My stone walls had saved my sanity, but there were other solid houses out there. "Something similar. Something safe."

"Ah, Lyon." He kissed me, feverishly and then gently. "I hate that you still need a place to feel safe."

"I'm just glad if I can find one," I said softly. "For a long time, nothing felt safe. Not for a moment."

He wriggled carefully out of my arms, to take me in his. "Let me..." He pulled me in tighter, throwing a leg around my hips too, as if to engulf me. "Does it feel worse again now, with Xan in there?"

"Well, it's not better. It's different. It's, it's not the same." Xan had not compelled me to do anything. Xan didn't fell hungry for my life. But he was

alien and in my head and I couldn't get him out. I COULDN'T GET HIM OUT.

At first, I didn't realize I was fighting Tobin, until a guard shouting, "What's wrong?" startled me from my blind panic. I was still on the bed, still wrapped in Tobin's grip, with my eyes squeezed shut. Tobin said fiercely over my shoulder, "Just a nightmare. Close the door."

I froze, still as a rabbit under the hawk's hunt, until the door clicked shut. Then I slumped, all of a heap. Tobin rocked me against him. "Did I hurt you?" He reached for my right wrist to rub it with his thumb. "Sorry, so sorry, I shouldn't have said it. I shouldn't have mentioned it."

I shook my head against his shoulder. When I could speak past my gasping breaths I said, "S'all right. Not your fault."

"Another hour, beloved. Another hour and he'll be gone. I swear. I'll *make* them do it."

I imagined Tobin with drawn sword, compelling the King's Mages to fix me, and chuckled weakly. Although... "What did you call me?"

He kissed my eyelids, and when I opened my eyes he was gazing into them from inches away. "Too soon, I know. But someday, when we're free of ghosts and armies and invasions and magic tunnels, I'll call you that again."

I kissed him to silence him. An hour was already too far to look ahead. I took two more slow, steady breaths, and gave every scrap of my attention to kissing Tobin. Kissing was pure and simple, untainted, warmth and need. The wraith, for all its foul desires, had never... I looked deep in his eyes, and kissed him some more.

\*\*\*\*

The workroom was well lit, and no doubt was actually warm enough. The king sat in his chair in his shirtsleeves looking comfortable. It was only in my mind that frigid air pooled around my feet on the threshold, sucking the heat from my flesh. It was only imagination to hear whispers, and see shadows dancing in the corners.

Tobin entered slightly ahead of me, and looked around before stepping aside to let me in. The two remaining King's Mages stood in front of a new

working sketched out on the floor. This one had been scaled back down, not just from star to square but to a triangle with inscribed circle, meaning just two working points for sorcerers. I frowned. It wasn't that I wanted to be part of another working, pretty much ever. But at the same time, I hated the thought of being a passenger in one of theirs.

Secondmage said, "Ah. There you are." As if we hadn't followed right on the heels of the guard who summoned us. He gave the king a small bow. "We will explain the basics, Your Majesty. Then if Sorcerer Lyon has more technical questions he can ask them."

"Go ahead."

"Put simply, the problem is that we have a ghost who has taken up residence in a living person. The spell structure intended to keep him there failed with the death of Firstmage, and yet the ghost remained. We speculate that it was the pressure of daylight around the subject that prevented the ghost from escaping."

"His name is Sorcerer Lyon," Tobin growled. "Not *the subject*."

Secondmage gave him a small nod. "My apologies, Voice Tobin."

I thought it would have been nice if he'd apologized to *me*, but I didn't want to slow down the proceedings.

"In any case, Your Majesty, we speculated that the onset of night might cause the ghost to leave. However that didn't happen." He raised an eyebrow at me. "Correct?"

"He's still here," I said shortly.

*-Someday he'll be stuck with his face twisted that way, Xan said dryly. -  
What does he say?*

For once, I was on the side of the tribesman. *-He thought the night might call you forth from my body, but it didn't. Could you go now, if you chose?*

*-No. I've tried. I wouldn't stand between a man and his lover for hours, if I had a choice.*

*-Not even to remain in flesh?*

*-I'm tired, young man. I've seen and felt enough. But I have no idea how to begin to leave. I have no form but yours.*



“He’s still here,” I repeated. “He’ll leave if he can, though.”

Secondmage’s expression wasn’t one of belief, but he let my statement stand. “We have concluded that the death of Firstmage was natural and not a result of the working. It was a cause, and not a consequence, of our current difficulties.”

“But you have an answer?” the king asked.

“We hope so. What we intend to do is to set up a summoning for Chief Xan with Sorcerer Lyon inside the circle.”

“Inside!” I couldn’t help exclaiming. “A sorcerer never steps inside the circle during a summons. It invites... contact.”

“Well, yes, normally. But first of all, we will be the sorcerers guiding the summoning. You will not be part of the call, but only hold the focus, the necklace. And then, Chief Xan is already inside you. So the harm that could result is minimized.”

“Minimized.”

“Well, this particular spell structure is new to us. Possibly there are books back in Riverrun in our working libraries that might offer alternatives, but here we must work with what we know. There are no guarantees.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to wait, then?” King Faro asked. “See if daybreak does anything. If not, then ride back and consult the libraries?”

“We thought of that.” Secondmage’s superior tone really invited a violent response. I clenched my fist, and pressed my bad hand against my thigh. “Our investigation of the existing spell-remnants showed a strong probability that if we don’t separate Chief Xan from Sorcerer Lyon before the end of the original span, meaning sunrise, then we may not be able to do it at all. Instead of separation, the rising of the sun is likely to complete a binding.”

“How sure are you?” I demanded. “That sounds like a strange outcome.”

“We will of course show you the energy calculations. It’s a rebound effect from the breaking of the original binding.”

“Show me,” I insisted.

Secondmage heaved a barely-concealed sigh, but gestured to Thirdmage, who brought over their working notebook. He went through the logic symbols

with me, showing where they thought the binding had inverted with Firstmage's death. I wasn't skilled enough to have made that conclusion, but once shown the flow chart, I couldn't argue with it either.

"Satisfied?" Secondmage asked.

"I see the possibility," I admitted.

"Our plan is to perform a summoning, slightly modified, to call the ghost already inside your body, and then have you toss the focus through the circle to the usual balance point. You *can* toss a necklace into a square of floor accurately with your existing hand?"

I gritted my teeth.

Tobin said, "He hit a R'gin with a rock while clinging to a cliff-face forty feet in the air."

Secondmage inclined his head. To Tobin. *Again*. Feck it, I was going to surprise the bastard somehow if it was the last thing I did. Of course, in this situation it might be.

"Once the focus leaves the circle we anticipate that the ghost will be forced to manifest within the circle as usual, outside of Sorcerer Lyon's person. At which time we will banish and close the summoning. The banishment should get rid of the ghost but should not affect a living person."

"Should," Tobin said.

"Yes. This is all theoretical. But I assure you that I have an excellent grasp and decades of training in the theory of summoning."

"And yet you've never come across this before."

"Transference is rarely practiced, due to the complexity and energy control needed. A sorcerer dying during a working is even more rare. The two together? Well, it may have an historical precedent, but I haven't heard of one."

I asked, "What about just the closing and banishing with a person in the circle? Has that been done before?" Clearly, Meldov had only touched on the basics with his "never, ever do this" lecture. I had visions of my spirit being sent elsewhere by the banishing, while my body fell over uninhabited.

“The technique has been used for the wraith-ridden. That’s the source for the template we’re using.”

“And did it work?”

“If you can get the spirit out of the person, yes. That’s more difficult with a wraith than a ghost, of course, since they can compel their host not to remove the focus. It’s not unknown to have to weaken and then bind the subject in the circle, wait until the host collapses and hope that the focus for the wraith rolls free, clear enough to be reached from outside the circle.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“You can dismantle the working without banishing and try again. Or just perform banishment and closure.” He looked slightly uncomfortable.

“Which does what?”

“Well, if the wraith is still within the host, it kills the host. But it does banish the wraith.”

“Lovely.”

“That hardly applies in this case. You stated time and again that Xan has no control. We’ve examined you and there’s no sign he’s one of the undead. And we were the ones who summoned the ghost originally. You only have to watch when Thirdmage cuts an opening for you to the focus point, and then toss the focus out where it belongs. It should be simple.”

Meldov had been fond of saying when you are told something is simple and obvious, start looking for the catch. But I couldn’t argue with anything Secondmage had said. “I want to see the equations. I need...” I needed to know it would work, but I was never going to get that certainty. And really, what were my choices? Refuse to let them try, and take a chance, a good chance, on being bound to old Xan forever? He was no wraith, but he was in my mind, inescapable. And he stood between me and Tobin and a future. I knew there were some people who could have a three-sided relationship. I would never be one of them. And if one of the sides was a dead man? Just no.

So it was either trust the talents of the two most capable living sorcerers in the land, or... nothing. I pressed my palm to my forehead for a moment. “Just show me how it will be done.”

Thirdmage turned to a new page in the notebook. I ran through the code and diagrams. “That’s a lot of power in the circle.”

“This is the technique used for wraiths. There has to be really good confinement. Probably not necessary in this case, for Xan, but he’s deeper in your mind than we anticipated, and we didn’t want to change the known parameters where it wasn’t necessary.”

“I guess that makes sense.” Unlike the previous time, I wouldn’t be able to just walk through this circle with a ghost in my head. Thirdmage would be cutting an opening in it briefly with his working knife to let me in, and then the focus out. I didn’t like the thought that I’d be trapped in there, held at his will, even if it would be temporary and more metaphysical than physical. But I could hardly blame them for being careful. If I’d had a wraith in me, that strength of circle would have been a good thing.

I turned the page. “Wait. Here. I have to be naked?”

“Other than the necklace that’s the focus, yes, of course. You’ll be inside the circle during a summoning. You should have nothing on your person that might be a focus for another dead spirit. What if the cobbler who made your boots has died and lingered? Or the seamstress who stitched your drawers? It would be unfortunate if your smallclothes served to draw someone to you.”

And Tobin had to snicker suggestively. Which made me laugh in the startled sorcerer’s face. I would *kill* Tobin when this was done. “Sorry, Thirdmage. A stray thought. But I do see the point.” I might not like standing there naked, but I’d enjoy sharing my body with a seamstress even less. A randy seamstress. I pressed my lips together. Tobin would *die*. *The dear man*.

“This part is the separation.” Thirdmage pointed to the diagram. “And here the banishing and closure. You see that the working should collapse around you, taking the dead, leaving only the living with intrinsic energy signatures like this.”

I could see it. I could believe it. I *would* believe it. “Yes.”

“Good. We’ll get set up, and you get stripped and we’ll begin. There’s only an hour until sunrise. Although if this works it really shouldn’t take more than a few minutes.”

Oh, hells, he had to say “if.” I ducked my head in mute assent, and turned away. The sorcerers put their heads together, checking all the inscribed lines for precision. I turned my back on them and moved toward a corner of the room, almost unaware of where I was going. Naked. I needed to be naked. I reached for the buttons of my jacket, and realized my hand was shaking.

“Here.” Tobin was at my side, reaching to help. “Let me. You need everything off?”

I swallowed. “Yes.”

“I’ll consider it practice.” He slid my jacket off my shoulders.

In my head, Xan said, *-What happens now?*

*-They’ll try to separate us. Set me free and send you... back.*

*-Will it work?*

*-I certainly hope so.* I paused. Where would Xan go when he was banished? I’d never seen any real answer other than “the far side of the veil” or “across the veil”, lovely meaningless euphemisms. *-Do you remember anything about where you go when you’re... not here?*

*-No. You say I’ve been dead for so, so long. But when I’m with the living, all I remember clearly are the other times of summoning. A handful of snatched hours in dark places, and now one rather interesting day.*

*-I’m sorry. There’s no way...*

*-No. I meant what I said. I’m tired, and my fire is all burned out. Maybe this time I’ll cross, to somewhere.*

*-I hope so.*

Tobin said, “Will he fight it? Try to stay in you? Do you trust him?”

“I think he’ll go. Trust? I’m not sure, but I believe him when he tells me he’s tired.” I could feel the truth of that. Xan’s hate and anger and fear and disdain had all faded into a deep sea of exhaustion. All he longed for now was rest.

“And you think those two old sorcerers have it right?”

“If they don’t, I can’t imagine who would. It looks right to me.”

Tobin pulled my shirt over my head. I shivered with the air on my bare skin. He knelt, reaching for my boots. Looking somewhere around my knees, he said, “If there’s danger... I don’t mind sharing you with Xan. Even if we never, um, do anything more, I’d rather have you in my arms like we just were this last hour than lose you.”

“But I wouldn’t.” I laid my hand on his hair. “I wish I could say that was possible, but I think if I go for much longer without being alone in my own head, I’ll go crazy. Xan isn’t malicious, but he is *other*. I sometimes want to claw my eyes out, to dig him from my brain.” My voice was shaking by the end of that. I hadn’t realized how close to the edge I was, until the words tumbled free.

Tobin took hold of both my wrists and kissed them behind the screen of my body. “Hold on. You’ll be all right.”

“Yes.”

He let go to undo my belt. I put my hands back on his head. They felt safest there.

I was down to my smalls when the king stood and came over to us. I resisted the impulse to put my hands over my privates. He’d been a soldier; he’d seen far worse. Hells, he was going to see me completely naked in a moment, if he stayed. I said as casually as I could, “Will you watch this, Sire? Or retreat and await a report?”

He looked steadily at me. “You saw the plans. Do you think there’s danger to onlookers?”

“No. Or I’d have sent Tobin away already.”

“Like I’d have gone,” Tobin muttered.

“Then We will stay,” King Faro said. “You went through this at Our request and on Our behalf.” I could hear the stately capitals in that. Although he spoiled the effect by adding meditatively, “And curiosity has always been one of my besetting sins.”

Tobin stood and said, “It’s not a bad thing in a leader, sir, to want to know the why of things. In moderation, of course.”

“Thank you, I think.” The king held out his hand to me. “Best of luck. If there’s anything I can do to make this work better, let me know.”

There was an awkward moment, as he worked out why I was holding out my left hand, inverted, instead of my right. Then he shook it gravely.

“Think good thoughts,” I suggested. “If you happen to be beloved of a god, you might ask for a favor.”

His mouth twitched. “Sorry. A simple petition might have to do.”

“Not unless it’s to Na.” The other gods and the goddess generally had little patience with sorcery.

“All right.” He retreated back to his chair, well away from the working. His captain moved slightly ahead of him, as if he might have to fend off an attack, but the king reached out and pushed him over to the side, out of his field of view. I imagined that protecting King Faro might be a bit of a challenge.

Then I forgot about the king, because Tobin reached for the drawstring of my smalls. I looked down at his broad hands, saw his fingers fumble, surprisingly clumsy with the simple slip knot I used. “I can do that,” I said.

“Let me.” He eased it open and pushed the fabric down. I set my hand on his shoulder to step out of them.

I had a moment of a different regret as I straightened. I should have hugged him before. Now, fully naked, it was a different thing and I couldn’t do it. I gave him a smile instead and turned away. But he grabbed my arm and muttered, “The hells you do.” He pulled me close, leaning forward so only our shoulders touched. He murmured in my ear, “Don’t feck it up.” And then he let me go.

Thirdmage said, “Take off the bandages too. Better be safe.”

Silently, Tobin untied and unwound them, revealing my paralyzed and swollen hand. The curved metal brace for my finger, bent to shape by the medic when he couldn’t get my hand to straighten, had left an imprint in my wrist. I rubbed at it fitfully, feeling the ridges and thickness of the scars there. My whole hand ached badly.

I straightened my shoulders, raised my chin, and dropped my hands to my sides. My fingers brushed bare skin on my thighs, and I shivered. Xan’s necklace hung heavy against my bare chest.

Secondmage said, "Let's begin." They raised the chant first, building the structures as we watched. The room fairly hummed with power. I gave Tobin one last look. His eyes were wide and dark, but steady.

After a minute Secondmage added, "Sorcerer Lyon, take your place outside the circle now and prepare yourself."

It was time to focus on the sorcery. I turned away from Tobin, and took one long slow breath, counted to three, let it out. Then another. With each breath I took a steady step toward the working. One more breath and I stepped into the focus point. I touched the necklace and looked down at the rim of the containment circle. And saw how they managed to push that kind of power into it. This circle was scribed by a metal cable, laid on the floor. The runes and lines of the charcoal working wound over and around it, but the cable drew all of my attention. It was grey steel, made of cunningly woven strands like rope, but mixed into each strand were silver-white threads of admagnium.

Thirdmage stood close by, his working knife ready. He would cut my way through the power-barrier into that circle and then those two old men would chant it closed. I'd be trapped, inside admagnium-laced steel, until someone let me out.

Admagnium doesn't alloy. It holds its properties, remaining separate, in shimmers of light within the dullness. That material was so familiar. How long... how many hours... how many days had I stared at the manacles on my wrists? They were made like this. This same blend of steel and magic, the near invisible tendrils winding around each other, admagnium seeming to flow and move, to write words that might release me, if only I could read them, if only they stopped dancing before my eyes...

I stepped back out of the focus point. "I've changed my mind."

Secondmage said, "You what?"

"I changed my mind." I thought my voice was admirably steady. "I don't like the chances of having this not work, after all. I can put up with having Xan around, if he doesn't fade. Think of all the history I might learn. I can get used to it, to sharing with him."

In my head, Xan said, *-You're lying. What terrifies you so, that you'd rather have me around forever?*



I ignored him. “Sorry for being a bother and all. We can just put everything away.” Starting with that cable, coiled like an obscene snake to trap me.

Secondmage said, “Nonsense. Everything is prepared.”

Tobin said, “Lyon, are you sure?”

Thirdmage said, “Why?”

I turned to him, my mind racing for a way to explain without exposing myself. But... but maybe the time had come to be truthful. I could dodge around and lie, and pretend I wanted to keep Xan, but it was no doubt clear to everyone that I was simply afraid. I could make up reasons for that, in desperate search for one that didn't brand me a simple coward. Or I could just tell the truth. I heard Secondmage huff impatiently, but Thirdmage's expression was more curious than condemning.

I said, “I hate to be trapped. I hate to be held against my will. And it's worse when that trap is made of admagnium and steel.”

I heard Tobin draw a sharp breath, and knew he understood me. After one nightmare, I'd told him about those manacles in more detail than I'd ever planned. He said, “Could the circle be redone without the metal there?”

Secondmage sniffed. “Not before daybreak. Come now, Sorcerer Lyon.” He gave my title a twist of scorn. “Surely you can stand inside our circle for a few minutes without breaking down.”

Had I said I would surprise him one day? Ha. He was right, I was weak. “I can't. When you let me in and then seal the circle, seal it from the outside...” I hugged my arms around myself and shivered, naked and exposed and such a fool.

There'd been no need for admagnium in those manacles, to keep me prisoner. Iron would have held me just as well. Would I have then covered in fear from my cooking pots?

Xan said, *-Perhaps I can steady you for this, if you let me.*

It did *not* make me feel better to have a dead man whispering in my ear. I shook my head hard.

Thirdmage asked, “What makes it hardest for you?”

“That I can’t get out!” The answer was ripped from my throat.

Over Secondmage’s response, Thirdmage said clearly, “What if you could?”

Secondmage and I both stared at him. He said, “What if I give you the scribing knife? You cut your way in and take it with you. You cut the opening to the focus point again when it’s needed. You control it.”

Secondmage said scornfully, “That’s unheard of. Why do a circle like this, and then give the entity inside the ability to break it? The sorcerer controls the blade. That’s nonsense, Third.”

“Hardly nonsense. Usually, yes, of course we wouldn’t give a wraith-ridden subject the means of escape. But Sorcerer Lyon isn’t going to try to escape. He wants this to work correctly. Why not let him have the ability to do it himself?”

“And if it goes wrong, and the knife is locked inside the circle?”

“We can take the whole working down without the knife, if we must. It would be no worse than not making the attempt.”

Secondmage turned to me. “Surely you see this is a poor choice. Banishment is always controlled from outside, and all the more so if there is a case of possession.”

I could only shake my head. I’d been controlled. I couldn’t do that again, not even when my own brain was screaming at me for being foolish and calling me every name in the book.

Thirdmage said, “If there’s only one way open, what do we lose by trying it?”

Secondmage gestured to him urgently and they retired to a corner of the room, consulting in sharp whispers. I stood where I was and looked at the working. The energy of that containment was a whole different level from any I’d done, although it rose in a wall as colorless as any other. I let my eyes glide around the diagram, noting the inscriptions, the protections, the way the energy should flow. When they raised the chant again, the rest of the spell would take shape. It was all as I had expected, except for that silver noose, waiting.

Xan said, *-I don't know that metal. Is it truly so fearsome?*

*-Only in my mind.* Knowing I was wrong didn't make it any more possible to take a step forward.

After several minutes of argument, the sorcerers returned. Secondmage said, "We have decided that there is no intrinsic reason why Sorcerer Lyon couldn't be the one to open the circle. If that's the only way for us to proceed." He frowned at me. "I trust that will be enough to allay your... concerns? And you will follow directions explicitly? You do remember the procedure?"

I swallowed. My mouth was full of dust and my heart pounded, but when Thirdmage touched his short blade to the tip of his work-point, and then held it to me, hilt-first over his forearm, I took it.

He said formally, "This blade built the working, scribed the lines that bind it. This blade can force the circle to open for you."

A sorcerer's blade was forged new for him and tempered in the flames by him, so that no one else's energy would be tied to it. The hilt came sweetly to my hand, and the short silver blade caught the light. I turned it over, familiar in my hand. A thought occurred, and I wasn't delaying, or not much, when I said, "Don't you die and become a ghost while I'm doing this." I was only half joking. "Not while I have your knife in there."

I expected a frown for my levity, but he said, "I'll try not to. Your head's already crowded."

At least he had a sense of humor.

The sorcerers stepped back into their points. After a long, long moment I did the same. Their chant brought the power up once more. I looked at each sorcerer in turn, and when they nodded, I lifted the blade and sliced once down the side of the power-bounded space.

I directed my cut where the energy visible only to its makers must surely be, over that gleaming cable. From head height, downward, stopping only a finger's breadth above that metal boundary. Then I lowered the knife and stepped forward through that opening, naked, into the confines of the working.

It was reluctant to let me in. The power crawled over my skin, thick and clinging. But its builder's blade had demanded entrance and it let me through.

At the center I stopped and turned around slowly. From inside, power visibly shimmered in a cylinder around me, floor to ceiling. Through it, the other people in the room had a wavering unreality. The king's curious intensity, Tobin's focused attention, the guard captain's alertness, all seemed faded. The space inside the circle was the most real thing in the universe. The shining line I'd cut for access thinned, dimmed, and was gone.

I hefted the knife for a moment, feeling the hilt comforting in my hand. I wasn't trapped. I had control. I believed that. The impulse to cut again, to claw my way back out, was almost a live thing in my chest.

Xan murmured, *-Steady now.*

I held the knife, until the shape of the hilt was printed in my palm. I could do this. I would. I kept my eyes away from the circle itself, and watched Thirdmage instead.

Xan said, *-It feels different from before in here. Stronger.*

*-This is a stronger design.*

*-Ah. I won't be sorry to leave it.*

Time to continue. Daybreak was no doubt approaching. I knew what was required. Very slowly I uncramped my fingers from around the hilt, and laid the knife at my feet, the tip of the blade pointing toward the focus point. As directed, I closed the flamestone on its chain between my left palm and right wrist, holding it steady away from my chest. I saw both sorcerers in their supporting corners take a deep breath to begin the next part, looking enviably calm and composed. Of course it wasn't their ass naked for the taking inside this circle. ...don't think about that, don't think, don't...

They took up the chant, raising more power. I tried to breathe along with it, letting the familiar words of summoning wash through me.

*-It hurts. It pulls at me, but I'm already here.* Xan's mind-voice was labored.

The chant built. The flamestone between my hands felt warm to the touch. Its heat radiated through my skin, built slowly higher, sparking to raw agony against my damaged wrist. I hung onto it, not wanting that heat to hit my chest if I let go. It felt like it was burning me, a familiar pain, but there was no smell

of singed flesh. I did know what that smelled like. Twice in my life, I'd had the tang of my own seared meat in my nose. Once of my own accord. Once before that...

I cried out as the hurt stabbed me deep to the bone. Cried out, dropped to my knees, and closed my eyes. Deep in my mind I heard Xan shout, -*What's this?*

And in words not nearly as ancient, I heard Meldov's familiar voice say, -*Boy, what have you done?*

And then the wraith, silky smooth as butter sliding along my bones. -*Ah, yes, second chances. I adore second chances.*

I'm sure I screamed. I couldn't hear the sound. My eyes were closed, and yet I found myself in a grey misty landscape. Less than twenty feet away, every detail faded to a haze. But within that space stood three figures. Xan, in the leathers and fur I knew well, Meldov, as I'd seen him a thousand times, in the black trousers and long coat he favored, and a tall, thin man with eyes glowing red as hunger.

"No. No. No. I'm not here." I chanted it aloud, battling the pain in my wrist to get the sounds out. "I'm not here. You're not really here. I'm not. I'm not. You're not."

"Unfortunately we are, Lyon. What kind of mess have you got yourself into?" Meldov's expression was disapproving and familiar.

I couldn't help answering him. "Me?" I glared at him. "You're the one who said yes to a wraith. It was you!"

"I don't remember." He looked around. "Where are we?"

Xan took a step toward me. "Who are these two?"

Meldov said, in the same tongue, "I'm his master."

The wraith smiled, slow and sharp as a knife, and said, "No. In fact, I am."

I shook, and the whole world rocked, the dry earth beneath our feet heaving and trembling with me. Meldov staggered. The motions startled me, but in a good way, making it seem like I mattered in this place.

Xan braced himself against the motion. "You both can understand me?"

The wraith said, “I have a gift of languages. I like to share it. With the *right* people.”

Xan peered more closely at him. “I know what you are. Wicked undead, creeping stain on the ancestors. Begone.”

The wraith laughed. “Creeping stain. Oh, I like that. I haven’t heard that in ages. The little witchy folk of the hills called me that. Usually before I ate them.”

“You’ll not eat me, foul blight.”

“I have no interest in you at present. You’re already dead. What I’m in the market for is a live host. And I know just the man.” It showed me its teeth.

Xan stepped between us. “Leave the boy alone.”

Meldov said, “You can’t protect the boy. No one can.”

“I’m not a boy!” Not anymore. Not for fifteen years. “And I’ll drive you all out. Out!”

They turned to me as one. The wraith just kept smiling. Meldov began to look confused. But Xan glared at me. “You must go back. Go back and tell them what happened here. Go back.”

The wraith put his arm around Meldov’s shoulders, and Meldov let it lean against him. My mentor’s expression didn’t change. His arms hung at his sides. The wraith was taller than Meldov, and it set its pointy chin on Meldov’s hair, and gave his cheek a little slap. Meldov didn’t react to either gesture. His face became steadily paler. The wraith winked at me. “He’s been fun, but I seem to have eaten him up. What a pity.”

Meldov said to me, “Boy, what have you done?” He didn’t seem to notice the undead draped against his shoulder. His voice had lost its depth, though, and his *tridescant* was flat and hard to understand.

I wrenched my eyes away to look desperately at Xan. “What do I do?”

“Go back. Go back and ask them.”

“Ask whom?” I couldn’t remember where *back* was. This place was all I knew.

“Back to the circle. Back to the sorcery, the tall, old mages.” When I shook

my head slowly, Xan added, “Back to Tobin. He’s calling you. Can you hear it?”

“Tobin?”

I listened and heard something. A man’s voice, deeply familiar, calling “Lyon? Lyon? Can you hear me? Wake up. Lyon?”

I needed to close my eyes. It was hard though, with Meldov’s puzzled gaze on me, and the hot, hungry eyes of the wraith meeting mine. I couldn’t take my attention from him long enough to think. I didn’t dare turn my back on him. On *it*. Not for a moment. Never turn, never let *it* get too near.

Xan stepped in front of me, breaking the lock between my eyes and the wraith’s. “You should go back. Quickly now. I’ll stand between you and him as long as I can.”

I stared at the old hillsman. His face was weathered, his eyes deepset, his strong nose, once broken, jutted above thin lips. He was ancient and unlovely, and wonderful. “Why would you do that?”

“It can’t truly hurt me now. And I’d like to see us all go home.”

The wraith bent sideways and waved at me over Xan’s shoulder. “Hurry back now. I’ll be waiting for you.”

Xan’s growl reminded me vividly of Tobin’s. Tobin... I closed my eyes. He was still calling me, his voice getting hoarse. I ignored everything else and followed that sound, followed, until I could smell lamp oil and charcoal, and piss. I blinked my sticky eyes open.

I was lying on the stone floor in the middle of the circle, curled in a ball, clutching the necklace to my chest. I was damp and cold and stiff, and nauseous.

From somewhere, Tobin kept saying, “Lyon? Lyon? Can you hear me? Lion-boy, come on. Come on!”

I mumbled, “I’m not a boy.”

“Ah, goddess, thank the heavens.” Tobin’s voice came from behind me.

I could see the lines of a working on the floor not far from my nose. I turned over carefully, pushing myself off the stone with my good hand to sit

up. There was a circle around me, up and running. I could see the shimmer, feel the hum, see, oh gods, see a metal cable that underlay it. I feared that cable, but I couldn't remember why. My naked ass was cold on the stone, and outside the circle, just far enough not to touch its surface, I saw Tobin, and the king, and... oh, hells! I put my head in my hands, remembering.

“Sorcerer Lyon.” A voice I disliked broke through my distress. “Speak to us, now!”

“What?” I snapped.

“What happened?”

I gave myself one more moment to look at Tobin's worried face and then turned to Secondmage. “You invoked the summoning and somehow...” My voice broke. I tried again. “Somehow I've ended up with Xan, *and* Meldov, *and* the wraith.”

“You what? Who? Impossible.”

I clenched my fist in my hair. “Tell them.”

“Your imagination, perhaps. Overwrought, confused.”

“Not likely.”

“But that's impossible.”

In my mind, I heard the wraith's delighted laughter, and Xan's deep voice.

“Well, they're in there. The wraith said... it said, ‘second chance.’” I pulled on my hair. The pain was real and present, on my scalp and not somewhere off inside my mind.

“This is the same wraith that took Meldov?”

I stared at Secondmage. “You know about that?” Had I shared that secret with them? And not remembered?

“I told them,” Tobin said painfully. “I had to. You were unconscious for over ten minutes. They were trying to guess why. It seemed like the time to explain. I'm sorry.”

I shrugged a shoulder. “It's done. You were trying to help.” But I felt angry and very naked in every way, in front of this audience. I turned away from him and said, “Now I have all three of them in my skull.”



“But there’s no focus for them.” Secondmage leaned as close to the circle as he dared to get. “You have nothing on your person, correct? No objects beyond the necklace? No rings, toe rings, ear studs, nothing?”

“Nothing.” The wraith’s laughter was getting closer and I let go of my hair to wrap my arm around my middle. “I swear. I’m not stupid. I understood the reasoning. I have nothing.”

“It makes no sense.” Secondmage’s tone became dispassionate, like a lecturer. It made me angry, but in a way, that anger anchored me here, listening and not floating off into the grey.

“Even if the necklace had gained secondary significance for some other spirit, it can hardly have been important to Sorcerer Meldov. He didn’t visit the palace, and that necklace was locked away in one of the vaults, until we went looking for a piece of the right vintage.”

“In any case,” Thirdmage said, “We’ve used it more than once before. If it had the pull to bring in another ghost, we’d have noticed. Definitely if it could hook a revenant spirit like a wraith. We’d never have missed that.”

“It can’t be the necklace,” Secondmage concurred. “Which means you should be able to at least get Chief Xan out of your head, by sending that focus out of the circle as planned.”

“Not yet!” I pressed my arm harder against my stomach. “If any of them are on my side, it’s Xan.”

“He’s hillfolk. Surely Meldov...”

“This is Meldov’s fault in the first place! And he just stands there.” I dragged in a ragged breath. “He stands there and the wraith touches him. He lets it touch him.”

Behind me, Tobin breathed, “Oh, Lyon.”

I didn’t turn. Secondmage said, “We have to be logical about this. The laws of the working cannot be broken. There must be a focus. Something you ate...? Unlikely. You didn’t swallow a coin for luck, or any such superstitious nonsense?”

“Of course not.”

“A tattoo?” Thirdmage suggested. “Perhaps with bespelled ink? It would take a lot of ink to be a focus, but I suppose it could be done.”

“No tattoo.” I clutched my wrist. The throbbing in my broken finger was matched by the bounding heat under my fingers. “But... how about a burn? A brand?”

“I don’t see how,” Thirdmage said. “There must be a physical token to serve. A brand, even if a metaphysically significant one, has no physicality. It is only your flesh, shaped to another’s will perhaps, but not an object.”

“How was the brand done?” Secondmage asked. “Was it Meldov’s doing?”

“He was the wraith then,” I said. Secrets were a lost cause, here bound in a circle of light while the undead gibbered their amusement in my brain. “He... I don’t remember.” I tried to think back. It was hazy, unreal... the burn on my wrist, the look in the wraith’s eyes. “He pressed his thumb to my skin.”

“His *thumb*? Was it true magic then? Surely not.”

I rubbed hard across the thick irregular scars. “I don’t remember. He put his thumb there. It burned, deep and black and clear. His symbol on my skin.” I rubbed faster. “I guess I thought it was magic.”

“How about acid?”

“What?”

“Aqua regia? A solution perhaps, painted on.”

“I don’t know.”

“Did it burn, or perhaps bubble?”

“I didn’t... I don’t remember. The wraith spoke to me. It held me for a while. When I looked down at my arm, the brand was deep and set. Clean edges, but swollen around it. Like he’d set his heated seal ring there, but I saw no ring.”

“Was his hand bare or gloved? Do you remember?”

I tried hard to think. The wraith and the ghosts were silent for a moment, but they pressed against me. Hot/dry/warm/sticky/cold too much there, too close. “Maybe gloves.”

Secondmage turned to the Third. “A powdered metal solution in the acid? Or perhaps a thin carrier coin, for the edges of the burn to be sharp? The bookbinders in Anthay used to use acid stamps to mark the leather bindings of their books. It would have had to be finely judged, in the amount of acid and the delivery. Or perhaps simply a heated coin pressed deep, although that would be harder to deliver and control.”

“You think it could have been done that way?” Tobin demanded.

Secondmage said, “Show me your wrist.”

I held it up for him, all the wreckage of tight-drawn tendons and thick scars and the thin parallel lines of my despair. I had nothing left to hide now. Except maybe that knife, drawn in desperation across Meldov’s throat. That I still held back.

Secondmage peered at me through the circle. “You destroyed the markings on purpose?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“I burned over it.”

“Not cut it away?”

“No.” I’d had one moment of free will, and one tool before me. How could I have known? Would it have made a difference? Could I have spared myself a decade of nightmares by cutting it free?

“That’s it then.” Secondmage looked pleased to have solved the puzzle. “I would bet that somewhere in there, under the surface scar, there’s something metallic that was used to create the burn. Something still present in your flesh and strong enough to bring Meldov to you. And the wraith followed along. Or perhaps the other way around. It makes sense.”

“So what do I *do*?”

“The only chance I can see is to do the same thing we planned for Xan. Toss the focus out to the balance point and as soon as the spirits separate from you, collapse the working. Banish them, and leave you standing.”

“But the focus is *in* me.”

“You’ll have to get it out.”

There was a moment of shocked silence all around, and then Tobin’s snarl was the loudest. “What are you saying?”

Secondmage shrugged, although I thought his attempt to look unconcerned failed. “There’s no other way. *If*, mind you, this is truth and not some crazed fear, brought on by Sorcerer Lyon’s admittedly difficult past. *We* cannot, after all, see these new spirits.”

I *hated* that for just a moment everyone looked at me with speculation, even Tobin. I managed to say, “Test the power equation. You should be able to tell how much weight is in your circle, *if* you know what you’re doing.”

Thirdmage had the grace to look abashed, but Secondmage, damn his eyes, went ahead and pushed more power into the binding while I waited. “Well, young man,” he said after a few minutes. “It seems you have indeed caught an undead spirit.”

I wanted to say “*I told you so*” but I didn’t have *time* for that. “So tell me again what to do.”

“You’ll have to locate the focus in your wrist, get it free, and get it out of the circle into the balance point.”

“Cut it out of me.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

To my surprise, it was the guard captain who said, “That’s asking a lot. Setting a knife to your own flesh is hard. I’ve known hardened soldiers who let an arrowhead fester because they were shot while scouting alone and couldn’t bear to cut it out. There’s no way for us to help him?”

“Nothing can cross the circle right now, except in the order and the manner we’ve designed it for. We might kill Sorcerer Lyon, or worse yet, set loose the wraith.”

“Worse yet,” Tobin sneered.

I said, “Yes.” Which silenced him.

They all watched as I pressed the fingers of my left hand over my wrist. I could feel the lumps and ridges, the marks of pain over pain. And in the center,

as I'd always been able to feel it, the round dense scar that had been the wraith's mark. Maybe still was. I said, "If it's still there," and had to pause to fight a surge of nausea. "If it is, then why did the burning help me get free last time?"

Secondmage said, "Maybe you warped it, changed it enough to alter its function as a spell equation. Not enough to get rid of it. Does it matter right now? Time is getting shorter."

I glanced at him, hearing strain in his voice, and saw a fine sheen of sweat on his face. I realized that holding containment on three contentious spirits, in a working designed for one calm one, was probably demanding a lot of energy. Most of which would come from him as the prime sorcerer. And dawn would be approaching outside. I picked up the knife. Put it down again. Took a fast breath.

Tobin said quietly, "At least I finally see a good side to your favorite old pastime."

I glanced at him, startled, and he drew the tips of two fingers across his own wrist. Heat and then cold washed over me. He was right. This was nothing I hadn't done a dozen times. Perhaps a hundred. It would just be... a bit more.

I sat up straighter, and picked up the knife. My hand was steady. I laid my wrist upon my knee, the straining tendons up, a familiar, oh so familiar pose. Slowly I breathed, centering myself in that dispassionate place where a drop of blood rolling free across my skin was art and release and opportunity, not pain. Then I set the tip of the blade at the edge of that old spot, and pressed in.

At first, I felt almost nothing. The tissue there was thick and dead and there wasn't even any bleeding. I traced a circle around where the brand had been, wide enough to encompass it, and saw the white and purple skin part open under the blade. A second circle, and now red droplets welled behind the knife, forming a thin trickle down my hand. Still no pain.

None in my wrist. In my head though, the wraith screamed, and its voice went through my skull like jagged glass. I dropped the knife and clapped hands over my ears. It did nothing to shut out that sound. My ears grated into my skull, burrowing deep, my brain seemed liquid, churning, incapable.

“Lyon! Lyon!” Tobin’s voice cut through the sound. “Look at me. Lyon.”

I opened eyes I’d obviously shut. Tobin squatted in his familiar pose, just outside the limit of the circle. “What’s wrong? Is it the wraith?”

I’d have nodded, but I thought that moving might make my head fall off. “Yes! It’s shouting.”

“Attacking you?”

I turned my attention inward for a moment. Closed my eyes, looked for... for Xan. On that grey plane in my head, Meldov slumped on the ground, his head burrowed in his arms, shaking like a man taking a fit. Beside him the wraith stood, head thrown back in a wholly inhuman posture, its mouth open in that scream. The sound was worse here, so loud it rang in my bones. But Xan was still on his feet, a short knife in his hand pointed at the wraith. He glanced at me and said, “*Hurry. I can hold him yet a while. Go back, now!*”

I opened my streaming eyes, and wiped them on my arm. Tobin’s teeth were bared in a grimace but he kept his gaze fixed on me and didn’t move. His face relaxed slightly as I shook my head. “Not physically attacking.”

“You can do this. Keep going. I want the chance to be with you without an audience of three dead men.”

If this failed, the three would be more than just an audience. But I tried to smile. And he had distracted me a little from the scream knifing through me. I said, “Keep talking to me. Tell me things. Tell me about your horses. Or the ocean. Something.” I fumbled to pick up the knife. My fingers shook, and I was clumsy and slow, but I set it again at my arm. “Talk a lot.”

It was far harder to do this with the wraith shrieking in my head. My hand trembled, and the knife slipped. I couldn’t find my quiet place, couldn’t make the pain and blood feel good. It just hurt. Like the first time. But I kept cutting and kept listening to Tobin, and when the wraith gave up wailing and began threatening, describing tortures, maiming and burning and rape, I tried to fill my head with Tobin saying, “He was the most willful colt I ever had. Dumped me in the mud five times before he ever let me ride the full length of the arena.”

I touched something hard under my skin, and dropped the knife again. Tobin said, “Lyon? Doing all right?”

“Keep talking.” I pried under the thing in there, cutting, reckless now. It was in me. Something in me, a piece of the wraith, of the presence I thought I’d scoured and doused from my body over and over and over, day after day. IT WAS STILL IN ME! I cut deep, uncaring that the blood welled faster, flowing to the floor.

Tobin said, “Lyon, be careful. Don’t kill yourself, after all this. Lyon, please.”

I didn’t care. I could feel it coming loose. One more slice, my hand shaking, ears near to bleeding, wrist on fire. Then it came free. A small, small flap of skin for so much pain. And as it hit the floor, it flipped to show, embedded in its underside, a thin sliver of metal, fire-warped out of shape, but still recognizably, once upon a time, a circle with a feathered plume.

I sat and stared at it. So many years. So many nightmares and it had been festering inside me after all. I stared at it.

A loud scream pulled me out of that contemplation. Not from the wraith, but outside the circle. I looked up slowly, to see Tobin on his feet, yelling at me. “Lyon! Damn you, son of a weasel, listen to me! Lyon!”

“What?” I said slowly. The dark metal, the red blood, the white dead skin, drew my eye back down.

“Lyon! Keep your eyes on me, you mother-fucking bastard.”

I glanced back up. Oh, yes. Tobin. His face was flushed and red, his eyes snapping with heat.

“Good. Look away again and I’ll beat you. Now listen. You have to pick up that thing and put it in the balance point.”

I cleared my throat, twice. “I don’t want to touch it.” I swayed tiredly, started to look at down it again, but Tobin’s voice whipped at me.

“Look up!”

I did. He was paler now, but he gave me a nod. “Secondmage says pick it up with the tip of the knife. Bring it to the boundary. Cut the way through. Drop it out. Do it now.”

“I’m tired,” I said. My head felt thick. There were voices in there, but I’d

stopped listening. Nothing much mattered, but Tobin's voice was worth hearing. I kept my eyes on him.

"You're bleeding," Tobin said. "A lot. You need to do this now. You can rest afterward."

"Promise?" I tried to smile.

"You can do nothing but sleep and eat for a week. I'll cook for you myself."

He looked so worried. I said, "Is that a threat?"

He snorted. "There's my Lyon. Get that thing and get up. Now."

It was hard but I picked up the knife, and then used it to scoop that obscene lump of flesh and metal off the stone. Two shaky steps, and I stood at the boundary of the circle. I set the thing on the floor there, and almost touched the tip of the blade to the energy. At the last minute, I paused and wiped it as clean as I could on my thigh first. Blood mixes oddly with sorcery sometimes.

Then I knelt. Tobin said, "Lyon? Keep going."

"I am." I cut into the barrier with the knife, not a dramatic slice at face level, but a little mousehole, right at the floor. And then with the tip of the knife, I pushed the wraith's token to it. The thickness of the admagnium cable stopped it for a moment, the braided metal shining balefully at me, keeping the wraith inside me. *Not this time. Never again.* I lifted that scrap with the knife, flipped it through and into the balance point.

It burned me, as the focus passed through. My whole body felt dipped in fire, stretched, pulled apart. But Tobin said, "Yes!" And when I could turn my head to look over my shoulder, the wraith stood behind me, translucent and circle-trapped, with Meldov's ghost stretched out on the floor beside it.

I fell over, turning around so fast. *Not behind me, never behind me!* The wraith smiled at me, as if it knew what I was thinking. In my head, I heard Xan say, *-Well done.*

From off to my left, Secondmage said, "Now the necklace. Quickly."

I slid the chain of the flamestone from around my neck, and put it behind me, pushing it toward the barrier. It slid and stopped. I could feel the circle



energy buzzing against my fingers. The edge of the cable marked the space. I forced my fingers along it, seeking. The hole had to be somewhere. The wraith took a step toward me and stretched out its hand. “Still a good-looking boy. We could do so much together.”

I shivered, pushing at the necklace behind my back, unable to take my eyes off that *thing*. It was Meldov, and yet not. Features like his, stretched and elongated, thin hands, long legs, burning eyes. A smile like a trapspider’s lair.

“Swiftly! Get it through.” Secondmage repeated. “I can’t hold the binding much longer.”

Tobin said fiercely, “Hurry, Lyon!”

My wrist throbbed. I laid my useless hand in my lap, and I could feel the sticky wetness of blood soaking my legs. Behind me the barrier buzzed and hummed. The opening should have been right there, right *there*, but I couldn’t feel it. The wraith’s gaze burned into me, making dark promises.

*-Let me.* Xan’s voice was cool wind off a glacier, dry as a stone cliff

*-What?*

*-If you can’t turn and look, then give me leave to guide you to the opening. Though I see only with your eyes, I can feel the energy of it, better than you do, I think.*

*-Guide me how?* I was NOT turning around.

*-As we did on that cliff. Give me trust and listen to me.*

Could I? Did I trust that he actually wanted his time in the living world to be over and done with? Would he guide my hand away from the opening instead of to it? If the working collapsed now, I might be free of Meldov and the wraith, and Xan could have me forever.

I should just turn and look. Just for a moment. That’s all it would take.

The wraith took another step closer. I couldn’t look away. *-All right.*

I tried to relax enough to feel his whisper in my bones. That sense of rightness and wrongness as I moved. *-Left. More left. Back a bit. There. Lift it and push now.*

My hand slid, fumbled, and then found the opening. The necklace slipped

through. For a moment the big gem caught on the lip, and then I gave it a firm push, and it slid out on the stone point.

This pain was familiar, welcome, the flesh-rending rip and pull as Xan left me. For just a moment I saw him, faded and thin, his lined face drawn with effort. He gave me a nod, and stepped between me and the wraith. I smelled the dank wool of his shirt and the leather of his treads. The wraith stared at him, and shouted, “What have you done?”

And then the world fell.

It filled my eyes and ears with rushing tumbling darkness, threaded through with chanted words and whips of flame. There was pressure that dropped me flat to the floor, the buffets of strong winds, coming impossibly from all directions. The wraith screamed again, vicious and shrill, but fading into an impossible distance. Meldov’s voice whispered, more human than he’d sounded in a long time. “Oh? This?” And then softly, “Oh.” There was one more blast of sound, but clean sound, like a waterfall crashing to the rocks below. Then the chanting stopped. There was blessed silence, cool stone against my cheek, and the smell of fresh blood, candlewax, and dry dust. Someone with a hoarse, low voice said, “All right. Now.”

Tobin grabbed me and rolled me over, searching my eyes with an intense gaze. I tried to smile. For a second he returned it, and then swiftly he jerked me around like a puppet against his chest, closing his hand hard over the most agonizing part of my wrist.

“Ouch! Damn you!” I tried feebly to get free.

“Stop, you fool. I’m holding off the bleeding. Only you would open a vein like that and think nothing of it. Hold still.” He glanced up. “The bandages! Quickly!”

It was too much work to fight him. Too much work to keep my eyes open. But I had to ask, “Is it over? Done?”

“I think so.”

Thirddmage leaned down to look at me over Tobin’s shoulder. “We performed the banishment. We saw three spirits leave, and felt them pass out of the working. You should be free of them now.”

*Should be.* I knew that was just his way. No sorcerer ever claimed absolute certainty. It was part of the practice of sorcery, to perform the work as if you had no doubts, while holding to the knowledge that we could never encompass all of it. There was always a risk. For now I tried to take '*should be*' as enough, as I fell into the darkness.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER TEN

I woke slowly, to an unfamiliar sound. There was a cat, purring in my ear. A different rumble somewhere in the vicinity of my chest was deeper, far less melodic, and beautifully familiar. I'd know Tobin's snore anywhere. I opened my eyes.

I was lying on a comfortable bed, in a small stone room flooded with afternoon sun from a narrow window. There was a brazier in one corner, but it was unlit, and the room held a slight chill. I was loaded down with something soft and heavy. I turned my head, and the cat beside me made a *hmp* sound and jumped away off the bed. I caught just a glimpse of orange fur as she went, and then Tobin grunted and snuffled against my chest, and leaned over me into view. "Hey, you're awake." His smile was soft and fond. "There you are."

I licked my dry lips.

Tobin said, "Wait." He raised me with an arm at my back and held a cup to my lips. I took a sip. The water was the best thing I'd ever tasted, cool with a hint of bitter herbs.

"How long did I, um, sleep?"

"Two days. I know I said you could rest, but you were becoming really boring."

"I'll try to do better."

He smiled, and bent to kiss me, persisting even when I tried to keep my something-died-in-my-mouth breath to myself. "I was just a little worried," he whispered against my mouth.

"Sorry."

He sat back. "Here. Drink some more." He held the cup for me again, and its astringency rinsed the foul fuzz from my mouth. I drained the cup.

"Well done." Tobin set the cup aside, shoved more pillows behind my back, and settled himself more comfortably on the bed beside my hip.

I wanted to talk, but exhaustion sucked me under. I closed my eyes, aware of his steady solidity against me, and dozed. It might have been a few minutes, or an hour. When I woke, he was still there. For a while, I just looked at him, which was never a hardship, while I tried to get the past events ordered in my mind. I still felt light, floaty, cotton-cloudy. I blinked, and touched his hip with my fingers, trying to anchor myself in the present. “Am I on some kind of medicine?”

“The medic had us giving you poppy, for your wrist. When you could be roused enough to swallow it.”

At his words, my hand gave a hard throb, pain lancing from my finger through my wrist. I winced. “Damn. Don’t remind me.”

“Sorry.”

I raised my arm, with difficulty, to look at it. My broken finger was once again padded and wrapped. Above that, bulky bandages encased my forearm from knuckles to elbow. It was a mess, but... “Is it my imagination, or does my wrist look straighter than it was?”

“The king sent his best medic to put you back together. Once the bleeding had stopped, the medic said, since you weren’t stirring, he might as well see what could be done to improve the healing. He cut some things, pulled the skin around. You’ve got more stitches than a wedding gown under there. But he said you might have a bit more use of it, now that the scar tissue is eased somewhat. He gave me detailed instructions for how you’re to exercise and stretch it, once the real healing begins.”

“Truly?” I tried to move my fingers. The middle ones twitched a bit. Which was more than I’d had in a decade. “It might be better?”

“He said it’ll never be much use to you. The tendons are badly damaged. But yes, he thought it might get a bit better.” Tobin gave me a steady look. “He asked me how long you’d been trying to kill yourself. I told him the best part of fifteen years. He said it was a good thing you were such a poor hand at it, although this last effort wasn’t bad.”

“I’m sorry.”

Tobin laughed roughly. “Shall we apologize back and forth a dozen times and have done with it?”

“What are you sorry for? It was all my doing.”

“I rode down after the king and left you on a hilltop with the R’gin around. That for starters.”

“No.” I reached out with my good hand and he folded it between his own. “It was your sworn duty. And the king was in trouble. Anyway, if you hadn’t, I might not have had to listen to Xan. And then not have dared to follow Xan’s guidance again, there at the end.”

Tobin raised my hand to his mouth and brushed a kiss over my knuckles. “Someday I’ll want to know what in the hells that means. For now, all I care is that you don’t hate me for it.”

“Gods and goddess, no, Tobin, never.”

He pressed my hand against his cheek.

I dozed again then. The next time I woke, the sun was lower, but Tobin wore the same shirt. When he offered me the cup, I was able to raise it with only a little help and drink well. My head was finally free of the haze.

I said, “Two days. Can you tell me what’s happened?”

Tobin tucked the covers closer around me. “The king is gone, riding west to the coast with half the archers and all of the cavalry. Now we have this end guarded, he wanted to give Estray some help. There was another message-bird, and although Estray’s confident in the outcome, he’s still fighting. He had our navy come and blockade their ships at the landing. He wants a victory, not a retreat, so perhaps we can come to terms with them and put an end to this.”

“Terms with the Prince Regent?”

“Or his successor. The strategists think his status was heavily invested in this attempt to conquer us. If it fails, and fails badly, he might be replaced as Regent. Anyway, the king wants to be there to direct how it falls out.”

“He’s a good man,” I said slowly. “I can see why you serve him.”

“He’s not bad, for an obsessive tyrant.” Tobin’s smile belied his words. “He offered you his rooms, but I thought you might feel safer up here, in a smaller space. So he left you his mattress and furs, his thanks and a letter.”

“Hand it over.”

Tobin got up and fetched a folded paper off the dresser. “I could read it to you.” His wagging eyebrow and finger hovering over the wax seal made his curiosity clear.

“Just open the seal and hand it over. He might be giving me the tools to blackmail you into doing my bidding.”

Tobin flicked the seal open and passed the paper over, but held onto his end for a moment as I took it. “I will always do your bidding.”

“Unless you think you know better.”

“Well, that, of course.”

I smiled at him. “Wouldn’t have you any other way.” I shook open the page, ostentatiously turned it so he couldn’t see the text, and squinted at it in the fading sunlight.

*“Sorcerer Lyon,*

*“We regret that the demands of Our office force Us to depart with your recovery uncertain. If you are reading these words, then Our concerns are eased. We hereby acknowledge that you did place life and liberty in the service of the Crown, for which you have earned Our unending gratitude. More substantial rewards will follow.”*

The writing became sloppier, as if penned in haste.

*“~That’s the formal part. Just a few more things I wanted to say for now. First, do pick out some kind of reward or I’ll pick one for you. And Tobin says I have horrible taste.*

*“Second, Chief Xan’s flamestone is yours. Do what you like with it—sell it, put it on display, drop it off a cliff. I had Secondmage test it, and it doesn’t seem to work as a focus anymore. He says Xan’s ghost probably didn’t last through the banishment. Hopefully the old man is in a better place.”*

I fervently hoped so too. May he have found his Tia at last.

*“Last, Tobin. He’s a good man, a better man than me, although I’ll consider it treason for you to tell him I said so. Ever*

*since I've known him, when he would get really drunk, he'd talk about you. When he came to me in the palace, after finding you again, he was happier than I've seen before. I thought you might be doubting that, so I wanted to make it clear. It would please me to see you together.*

*"I hope to get to know you better, but this is not the time. Let Tobin take care of you, and bring you back to Riverrun. It will comfort him, and I look forward to seeing you there.*

*His Majesty Faro II, Duke of Umbria, Lord of Westmarch, etc. etc."*

"Hm. A letter from the king himself." I folded it in a small square, and slipped it under my pillow.

"Is there a reason you're treating it like a love note? Anything I should know?"

I smacked Tobin's thigh weakly with the back of my good hand. "He told me all your secrets."

"Ha. He doesn't know most of them."

"He gave me Xan's flamestone."

"Really? That came out of the palace treasury. Which I suppose does mean the king can give it away if he chooses to." Tobin tilted his head, seeming to calculate something. "That's one hell of a gem. You could do a lot with the money. Or will you keep it as a memento?"

It was tempting to sell it. I had some new dreams, and a fund of cash would help immensely. But I thought I owed Xan more than that. "I want to give it to the Marmot clan. Chief Xan gave it in trade to us flatlanders for something he never received. I'd like to see it go back where it belongs. There may be descendants of his still there."

"That's admirable, if a little unworldly of you."

"I owe the old man a hell of a lot more than that."

"Can you..." Tobin hesitated. "Is it too soon for you to tell me what happened?"



I pleated the coverlet between my good fingers, folding and unfolding it until Tobin covered my hand with his own. “You don’t have to.”

“I want to. But I may leave some things out.” I tried to explain what the transference had been like, and the feeling when it broke. The sensation of climbing the cliff with Xan’s subtle help. The way he guided me in throwing the stone at the R’gin. I didn’t mention the moment of agony when Tobin’s life hung in the balance, weighed against a millennium of bitter anger. Xan had helped me in the end. Let him be an uncomplicated hero.

Tobin sat still as stone, while I talked about the summoning circle and the wraith. I said, “When I felt him, saw him, saw it, I thought... Oh gods above, I thought everything was over. But we beat it—Xan and I and you.”

Tobin said painfully, “I didn’t do anything.”

“Yes, you did. You brought me back from the grey, and kept me sane enough to do what needed to be done. Your voice was my anchor, through it all.” I had a cold thought, slithering through my gut. “What happened to that, um, token thing?”

“The one that was in your arm?” At least Tobin could say that without an apparent waver, although his eyes were serious. “I asked Thirdmage what to do with it. He stayed, by the way. I’m guessing he’ll want to examine you at some point.”

“For further residue.” The good thing about being so tired, and dosed on poppy, was that it blunted things. I didn’t manage more than a shiver.

“Yes. He said there was a hint of activity to it still. He said a wraith could not be banished forever the way a ghost can be. They’re creatures of the grey. But he said the more changed that thing was, the less of a focus it would be. So I gave it to Doyd, and he took it to the blacksmith, had it melted and hammered into a lump, with all of, well, you, burned off it. Then cased it in iron. I’d have done it myself, but I didn’t want to leave you still... sleeping. But I trust Doyd. He stuck around because he’s heading up into the hills soon, to talk to the current tribes about the tunnel and about the guard tower King Faro is going to erect to watch the entrance. Wouldn’t want them to take that the wrong way.”

“And now where is the *thing*?”

“Doyd has it for now. I didn’t know if you’d want to dispose of it, or lock it away safe, or have him take it into the mountains with him and drop it in a crevasse?”

I thought about it, about having that thing, even cased in iron, lurking in a safe somewhere, always there. “Would he do that? Drop it somewhere really deep?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then yeah, sounds good. If you trust him. Maybe he can return the flamestone to Marmot Clan too.”

Tobin grinned. “Put temptation in the poor man’s way, would you? Luckily he’s a good friend, and as honest as the day is long, so yes. That might even be a good opener to his conversation with the tribes. You know, *‘Here, my king wants to return this fabulous gem to you, and talk about a tower we’re building.’* Could be good.”

“That’s settled then. I’m glad you did that. Thank you.”

“Any time. Anything. Will you feel better now? Do you think that thing was giving you the dreams?”

I didn’t know. Maybe. But the specters and threats that had stalked my nights had felt nebulous and fantastical, not deliberate. “I hope it helps.” I didn’t want to talk about it anymore, though. Even in the bright sunlight, I could hear a laugh, dark and dry as grave dust. “So, once I’m doing better we’ll head back to the capital? Has the king given you leave from your job to escort me there?”

“I didn’t give him much choice, but yes, we have as much time as you need to heal and travel.”

I said, “Lying here in this comfortable bed, I’m actually looking forward to riding out with you again, at our leisure and at a sane pace. It sounds like fun. Of course, my first night on the hard ground may dispel that illusion.”

“I’ll pack a few luxuries. We’ll have the extra horses for baggage. The king left our remounts.”

That reminded me. “How’s Darkwind? I saw him kick that R’gin soldier in the chest, but I thought Dark might have been cut up in the process.” I remembered bright blood on the sleek coat. I’d been too caught up in my own problems to remember until now. “And Cricket? We got him back safely?”

“We got Cricket without trouble. He’s eating his head off in the meadow. Dark’s fine too. Yes, he got a bit of a slice on his neck. But it’ll heal, even if it gives him one more scar.”

“No amount of scars could make that stallion less than beautiful,” I said fervently. He’d defended Tobin at need. He was the perfect horse.

Tobin smiled. “I’m glad you think so. I agree, and someday I’d like to breed horses with him as my foundation sire. He’s only eleven, so there’s a bit of time yet to do it.”

“Is that your dream? To raise horses?” I was getting tired, and my hand throbbed wickedly. I slid lower on my pillows, and let my eyes droop half shut. “Tell me about it.”

“Someday, yes, I’d love to have a stud. A small breeding farm, with Dark’s colts running around, and maybe a few ginger cats, and somewhere on it a small stone house with thick safe walls.” He hesitated and then bent to kiss my lips. “Waiting for you, for whenever you’re ready to join me there.”

“Sounds nice.” I sighed, and tipped my face up slightly, inviting another kiss. Tobin’s lips met mine again, soft and skilled, claiming my mouth and breath and all my thoughts. I was drifting, sliding down into slumber, but kissing Tobin was the best reason I could imagine to stay awake a few more minutes. I nipped at his lip, without opening my eyes. “You would miss your post with the Voices, though, wouldn’t you? The travel and being the king’s man?”

“Maybe. I might do both, hire a stud manager. But the lure of travel and excitement is reduced when you have someone to come home for. To stay home for.”

“Wouldn’t want you to get bored,” I murmured.

“It’s a pipe dream, anyway. Until I raise more money. But the part about coming home to you? That I want, any way I can have it, any time you’re ready.”

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders to pull him closer, and the brush of my wrist across his arm woke the pain still more. “I’m a poor bet. Battered and scarred and half-useless.” I waved my hand near his face.

He caught it gently in his own hands and kissed me, on the one exposed square inch of skin over my last knuckle. “No amount of scars could make you less than beautiful.”

Ah, goddess, that caught my heart and squeezed it. That this man could believe that, of me. When I could breathe, I said, “You don’t really know me. Who I am now.”

“I know enough. I’ll learn more, take all the time you need. But from the moment I saw you again, I knew. You were older and bigger, scarred up and hurt and afraid and so damned gorgeous and strong under it all. I needed you, and you needed me too. You gave me back the light I’d been missing so long, and I could give you a wall at your back wherever you went. We just fit. We always have.”

I surely didn’t feel strong, not back then and not now. I didn’t feel gorgeous, and I didn’t feel like light. But when Tobin looked at me like that, how could I doubt him? “You’ll have to teach me to believe it too.”

“Now there’s a job I can really put my heart into.” He smiled, soft at first, and then he let it slide into wicked. “And also other body parts. Rest up, lion-boy. It’s a week’s slow ride back to the city, and I have plans for every day of it.”

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## EPILOGUE

I stood at Tobin's high window and looked out into the palace courtyard. The sun was still high, and the space was full of people hurrying about. Riverrun was bustling with activity today. Below me, a running page collided with a man carrying a saddle over his shoulder. A nearby guardsman caught the saddle and steadied the man before he fell. From the look on his face, he said something sharp to the page, who barely hesitated before dashing off. I winced. *So many people.*

I wanted to love this place, I really did. Tobin fit here. He knew half of them by name and the other half by sight. Most of them liked him a lot too, although I'd caught more than one crack about "fay bastards" from an old man in the stables. I tried to tell myself it was sour grapes. The stallion the man owned was no match for Darkwind, even with its flashy bay coat and long mane.

We'd been here two weeks now. Two weeks and three days. And every day I hovered between wanting to leave and promising to stay. And in the end did neither. Tobin was probably ready to have "Give me time" tattooed on my forehead, even if he never betrayed his impatience.

The trip here had been... well, lovely. Perfect. Just me and Tobin, and four horses who knew how to mind their own business. Thirdmage had offered us his company and the protection of his guard, when he'd left the tower to return to Riverrun. I'd had an *unfortunate* relapse of weakness and been unable to leave at that time. So sad. We'd followed a few days later.

We traveled lightly the first day, covering far less ground than I thought I could have managed. But when Tobin said he wanted me to have lots of energy that night, I'd found his logic compelling. We stopped early, in a sheltered spot away from the trail. He set me enthroned on a boulder and made me stir dinner in a pot while he took care of all else. After dinner we lay together, with the stars overhead, and talked in foolish whispers, and kissed. His arms were around me, his body hot against mine. We moved together, softly at first and then urgently. And came, just like that, with his mouth eagerly swallowing my cries. I'd slept for a while, afterward. And found

through that night, and the ones that followed, that waking in the dark could be put to very good use.

I sighed, and moved away from the window. That was another thing. The damned nightmares hadn't gone away with getting the token out of my arm. They'd just multiplied and mutated. My favorite now seemed to be one where I perched, unmoving, high and safe on a cliff, while below me a R'gin soldier hacked Tobin to bloody bits. In that dream, Xan cursed me and then the wraith crept in and told me how much it relished watching... I woke crying from that one.

Tobin had begun to learn the sounds I made when demons stalked my dreams and he was getting good at waking me early. But sometimes he failed. Sometimes, in fear, I hit at him, and although he laughed at the idea I'd ever really hurt him, there had been a few days when he wore a bruise on his cheek from my fist. And more than one night, early on, when our nearest neighbors down the hall came pounding on our door in alarm at my cries. So damned embarrassing. If Tobin would have let me, I'd have been tempted to wear a gag to bed.

What I really needed was my own space. A place alone, where I couldn't hurt anyone or alarm them or rob them of sleep. Every day I vowed to tell him that, and every day he brought me delicacies from the palace kitchen and led me through evening-quiet corridors to some new museum room or library.

The first time I'd picked up an unfamiliar old book, I'd been unable to open it. I stared at the cover. Cutting out the token from my wrist, banishing the wraith, hadn't cured the nightmares. But what if it had taken my skill with languages from me? What if they in fact had been lingering whispers of the wraith?

I set the book on a table, and stared blankly at the shelves. Picked it up again. The title on the binding was still clear, in *kanshishel*—*Native Fauna of the Mountains*. I opened it, flipping through with half-glazed eyes, not trying to see more than the drawings. There was a picture of a woolly goat, high on a crag. I paused. The text read, "*The mountain goat, or sheergoat, is known for its unusual skill in navigating the high places of...*" I read no more, as my eyes blurred with tears. The words came easy and clear. I hadn't lost that skill.

Good sign or bad, I didn't know. But it had been my solace so long, I'd have desperately mourned the loss.

In the evenings, once I regained confidence, I came into my own, finding treasures to show Tobin. I'd even located two pictures of elephants wearing structures on their backs not unlike little houses. After a scurry of delightful research, we decided that my favorite travelogue was less fantasy than I'd thought. Tobin and I discussed what would be involved in making a trip to the Southlands, and regretfully discarded the idea. But I found a translation of another traveler's journals, and read it to him that night while he lay with his head on my shoulder. And once more, I said nothing about leaving.

We went riding out into the palace park, and saw the herd of white roe deer that the king raised there. We even took a boat on the river. Tobin rejected the boatman's help and poled us along upstream himself. We anchored by the bank, and ate early strawberries and soft cheese and new bread. I showed Tobin a pair of shy willowlarks, flitting branch to branch. He'd never seen one and I twitted him that the noise soldiers made would scare wild things from miles away. And then we floated back down on the current, lazily fending off the bank when needed. That, I'd even been able to do one handed, and Tobin had napped for a while in the stern, a hat pulled down over his eyes, while I kept us safe in the channel. And every night we went to bed, together.

How could I leave? Nights with Tobin were a revelation. He hadn't been joking about wanting to show me things. Despite my lingering fears, I'd at least had my mouth on every part of him by now, and discovered the flame-hot pleasure of his skilled tongue on me, most places. I was past the worst of choking and spitting—able to have him come in my mouth and to find it a pleasure I hadn't imagined. There was more that he promised me, when I got up the nerve to try. And then there were the long, soft hours, in velvet darkness, folded into his arms.

How could I go? But how could I stay?

King Faro had finally come home two days ago. They'd fought to victory on the coast, although with significant losses. A first surrender had been signed by the R'gin commander, and prisoners were already set to work at repairs. A treaty with the Prince Regent would be a far slower thing.

We'd heard the king had decided to keep the tunnel in the hills open, although guarded. According to R'gin prisoners, it took only four long days of march to pass through it. The other end was somewhere deep in their own foothills, many miles from the nearest city. Still, compared to the sea route or the high mountain passes, it was a very fast path from our land to theirs.

Tobin said the king hoped to someday open it as a trade route. But we needed that treaty first. And maybe a less rabid leader for the R'gin.

I hadn't seen King Faro recently, other than a brief moment two days ago, as we lined the road to the palace to cheer him and his soldiers home. He'd seen Tobin beside me in the crowd near the gate and reined back. His eyes had tracked to me, and he'd given me a little salute, fingers flicking his forehead. I bowed low, and before I straightened he'd ridden on. Since then, Tobin had met with him twice but I hadn't. I'd sent him a note, though...

There was a quick triple tap on our door in Tobin's rhythm, and then he came inside. We'd instituted that signal the third time he'd seen me leaping to a corner at an unexpected servant's knock on the door behind me. He was so good at finding practical solutions to my problems. Sometimes I wanted to cry at his patience. Sometimes I wanted to hit him really hard, for his unwavering faith that it all could be surmounted.

For now, I smiled and did neither. "Hey, he let you go early?"

"Yes. Meeting's done. He's having a formal court tonight, and we have to attend, on pain of pissing off our monarch. But he said if you wish, you may sit up on one of the balconies pretty much by yourself. I told him you would rather be boiled in oil than mingle with the crowd on the floor."

"Not quite that bad."

"Anyway, I'll show you where. But I have to be down there. Apparently he's awarding me something, in full public view. I couldn't get him to tell me what it is, or call it off."

I hoped I knew the what. And that it would make him happy. "Well, you'll find out, I guess."

"Mm. I hope it's not some badge or ring or something. I've no fondness for jewels."



“If it is, you can still sell it, and put the money towards your stable someday.”

“Selling a gift you were given by the king is frowned upon, but yes, I would. For a stone house first. Then the stud.”

I shrugged. We’d looked at houses nearby, just a few times. Neither of us had the kind of money that a solid stone place close to the palace would command. In any case, all of them had cellars, and I’d realized I could no more live over a cellar than I could live in a house built of lathe and wood. Not yet anyway. I’d have to retreat to my little cottage and try to either earn a boatload of money, or become less cowardly.

“Maybe he’ll find you a better reward than some jewel.”

“I can hope. He has the most gods-awful taste. Look at the Voice badges.”

I hid a smile. “I’d heard that about him. Although some ancestor is responsible for the badges.”

“Hereditary bad taste. Whereas you...” He took my shoulders between his hands and pulled me close. “You taste good.”

I kissed him thoroughly. I was getting practiced at this. Then I looked over his shoulder. “You maniac, close the door first.”

“I’m not hiding how I feel about you.” But he went and did it, and then came back to me. “I missed you.”

“In the whole two hours you were gone.”

“Longer than that. Did you find the book you were looking for?”

“Yes. That old librarian in the antiquities room was very helpful.” It had been peaceful there, and the old man had wanted to talk about really ancient history and books. I’d actually managed a nice long conversation. But after that there’d been crowded hallways to navigate, to get back here. Spending time there at night would be far more pleasant, even if the librarian would be gone to his bed.

“Good, I’m glad he did well for you. King Faro said he’d given instructions that all the libraries were open to you.”

“That was kind of him,” I said, and meant it.

“You can thank me for it.” Tobin smirked. “I suggested it. I can suggest ways to express your gratitude.”

“To the king?” I teased, lowering my voice.

“To me,” he growled.

“Oh, yes?” I moved closer to him and took his jaw in my hand. A hint of beard rasped my fingers, already regrowing from his morning shave. I kissed him there, feeling the slight roughness catch my lips. I touched my tongue to the sensitive skin below his jawbone, to hear him catch his breath. Then I kissed his mouth, probing with my tongue. He opened for me on a sigh. I knew how this went now, how much he loved to have me cup the back of his head with my hand, and take his mouth.

My Tobin, so strong and yet so soft and pliant when the mood was on him. I wrapped my other arm around his back and walked him toward the bed, not breaking the kiss. He cupped my ass with his hands and drew me tightly against him, proving that both of us were already hard.

At the bed we paused. I stepped back and said, “Strip for me.” I liked taking his clothes off, bit by bit, with kisses to trail over exposed skin. My hand had just enough function now that I could untie laces, given time and a bit of patience. But I also liked watching him undress for me, in the mellow afternoon light.

He smiled, and the sun caught amber lights in his eyes. His hands went to his jacket buttons, popping them free one by one. He slid it off, swung the collar around on one finger and whipped it in the direction of the chair. The jacket landed on it, but in a heap. When I would have shaken it out for him, he said, “No. Leave it.” He tugged his shirt-laces looser, and moved his hands to the hem.

There was no reason to look anywhere but at him. He slid the fabric up slowly, exposing inch after inch of toned stomach, ornamented with dark hair. So strong, so male, and so mine. I reached out and laid my palm flat on that firm, warm flesh. He whispered, “Oh, yes,” and pulled the shirt swiftly over his head. He whipped that to the side too, and I didn’t even bother to see where it fell.

He stood there half clothed, his strong shoulders bare in the daylight. None of us had come away from the foothills unmarked, and there was a new scar on him too, pink and scabbed at one end still, but healing well. It joined the host of others, all marking him as a soldier, a fighter, a man of courage. All adding to his beauty. Being with Tobin was truly teaching me not to worry about outward scars.

I traced his sternum upward with my hand, feeling the soft crinkle of curly hair. Then I slid my touch sideways to cup the hard shape of his chest-muscle in my palm. His nipple was a firm bud under my thumb, and I rubbed it and saw the other side tightening too. I pressed, mounding his flesh, and he took a sharp breath.

When I reached for my own buttons, though, he put his hand on mine to stop me. “Not yet. Wait.”

He finished the show, toeing off boots, stockings, sliding his uniform trows down his strong thighs. When he stood in just his smalls, the linen tented with clear evidence of his desire, he said, “Would you take them off me?”

I touched him through the fabric. His cock jerked into my palm, and a small bead of moisture dampened the cloth. Slowly I traced the length of him, the hot, hard rod under the slip and bunch of his smallclothes. He moaned at my touch, and I kissed his mouth again, leaning forward and keeping his cock gripped in my fingers.

His kiss was hungry, starving. He sucked my tongue deep with needy little whimpers. As I probed the soft, wet space, filling his mouth, I fumbled my hand inside his waistband and pushed his smalls down to his thighs. His hard sex brushed against my wrist, silk and steel and mine to have. I wrapped my fingers around it, cupping and twisting in the way I’d learned he loved. His eyes, blurry inches from my own, closed with the pleasure of it, and he clung tightly to my shoulders. His fingers dug into me. Then he tipped his head back and said, “Wait. Go slower.”

“What? Shall I undress?”

“No. I...” He took a shaky breath and stepped back from me, kicked the smallclothes away, and waited for me to look at him. I happily complied,

running my gaze over every part of him. He was flushed, rampantly erect, his chest rising and falling with his breaths. His cock jerked with just the heat of my glance. “Would you take me, really take me this time?”

“You mean...?” I felt hot and then cold with the thought. He’d mentioned this, often enough, and dropped it immediately when I shied away. “You want me to...?”

“Be inside me. Yes.” He came close again and cupped my face in his hands. “I wish you would. You make too much of a big thing out of this. It doesn’t have to be pain. It doesn’t have to be possession. To all the hells with an old man’s talk of mares and stallions too.” He kissed me swiftly. “Do I look like a mare to you?”

I choked a laugh. He was all man, even naked here in my arms. Maybe especially here.

“This can just be pleasure. Just another way to touch and feel and be together. It’s something I love. Top or bottom. Something I’d like to share with you, if you feel able. There’s something special about having someone inside you...”

He paused, probably seeing the spasm of chill that went through me. I’d *had* people inside me, in various ways, and it had never been a good thing.

“Hush, Lyon, I’m sorry.” This kiss was soft apology. “I know that means something else to you. And I’m not asking you to let me inside, not ever. But I’ve been aching to have *your* cock in *my* ass, if you’re willing to try.”

“You truly want this?” I still couldn’t imagine it, even though in my mind I knew men did this, and took pleasure from it. Even though he’d told me a dozen times over that he liked it.

“I’ve been ready to beg for it, with you. Yes. But tell me again if it’s too soon, and I’ll wait some more. I want us both to love it, not to push you if it will be bad for you.”

“I don’t know. How can I know?”

“Do you want to know? Or am I being selfish?”

I touched his face. I couldn’t imagine a more generous lover. “Not selfish. I admit I’m... curious. And I do like, um, looking at you there.”

“Then will you let me try?” He knelt down, there, naked at my fully-clothed feet. “Please? Let me show you?”

“Gods, Tobin.” I grabbed his elbows to pull him up. Inadvertently I used both hands, and my half-healed wrist and elbow twinged. But my fingers had actually curled a little to hold him. It was a good thing. I said, “Don’t ever beg me for something you want. Just ask.”

“I’m asking then.”

“I’ll try.” I shifted from one foot to the other. “What do I do?”

“Will you feel safer clothed or unclothed?”

My mind brought up a sense-image of the wraith, opening his treads as I stood chained naked to the wall. “Please, naked. Let us be equal.”

“Hush.” He kissed me slowly. “Remember, it’s not a big thing. It’s another road to pleasure. Naked it is. Let me.”

He undressed me slowly and sensuously, but without stopping. As the clothes came off, he kissed me all over, in oddly sensitized places. Why his tongue in the bend of my elbow, or his teeth scraped over the point of my hip, should set me afire I didn’t know. But by the time he stripped off my smallclothes I was as hard and damp as he was.

He said softly, “Come lie down with me.” He guided me onto the bed, and slid onto the mattress beside me, then bent over the side, reaching to the floor. He came back up with a small stoppered flask in his hand. “Let’s try this first.”

“What?” Even I could hear the quaver in my voice, and my cock softened a bit, in spite of being on a bed with Tobin naked and waiting.

He laughed, although not unkindly. “The dreaded massage oil. Lie on your back, keep your eyes on me, and let me start.”

I did so, and he tugged the bedclothes out from under me until I lay on just the undersheet. “No need to make more work for the laundress. Lie flat now and relax.”

Tobin pulled the stopper from the jar, and tipped it slowly over my chest so a thin stream trickled out and dripped on me. The oil was clear gold and smelled faintly of fruit. He set the remainder on the table at the head of the

bed, and carefully replaced the plug. “Callofruit oil. It has a nice, um, sliiiiide to it.” He set his palms flat on my oiled sternum and then slid up and out with firm pressure, until he reached my shoulders. There he dug his fingers in, kneading tight muscles until I groaned with a different kind of pleasure.

“Oh, yeah. I like that sound. Relax.” He worked my flesh, stroking and pressing, smoothing the oil over my chest and down to the flat ridges of my stomach. “I love how little hair you have,” he murmured, stroking in firm circles. “I love your skin. I love the way you feel under my hands.” He moved lower, pressing slippery fingers into the grooves of my hips, until he closed his hands around my sex. My hips came up off the bed to meet him.

Till now, we’d mostly gotten by with spit, or the dry friction of eager hands, until the spill of the first fluids from our arousal smoothed the way. But he’d done me once with a little saddle oil on his hands, out under the stars, and the memory of that slippery, glorious touch was almost enough to bring me now. He laughed with pleasure, and ringed the base of my cock with hard fingers. “Not yet. Damn, I should have bought some of this two weeks ago for you, just for this. But today I don’t want you going off early.”

He stroked me in less responsive places a while longer. I stuffed an extra pillow under my head to watch his strong hands, shiny with oil, gliding around and over my needy skin. Twice he stopped to let me catch my breath, before finally bending over and just kissing my tip, where clear fluid welled from the slit. “Mm, fruit and salt. But I think it’s time to trade places.”

I got enough control back to scoot around and give him space to lie down on the bed. He stretched out and folded his arms behind his head. His sex reared up, long and thick, straining towards his belly. He grinned at me. “Pet it. It wants your touch.”

“Hah. Disclaiming responsibility.” But I bent to kiss him, exactly where he’d kissed me. I loved that taste, the thin, almost sweet slick of his arousal. The taste of his actual spend, or perhaps the texture, still occasionally caught at my throat, but this was pure bliss. I gripped his shaft upright and took slow, regular licks, as drop after drop welled free.

Tobin groaned. “Lyon, you’re killing me. Try the oil.”

I reached across for the jar. Removing the stopper one-handed was a trick, and when I pried it free, it dropped onto Tobin’s tight abdomen and bounced

to the floor. A large dollop of oil followed it, pooling in the grooves of those strong muscles. Tobin laughed breathlessly. "That should do the job."

I set the open jar aside, and stroked my fingertips through the oil on his stomach. It was slicker than I expected, turning even Tobin's furry skin to silk under my hands. I smeared it around, enjoying both the shimmer of reflected light on Tobin's body and the helpless little sounds he made whenever I accidentally-on-purpose brushed his cock.

"You're mean. Heartless. A cocktease. Ah!" He gasped as I closed my fingers tightly around his cock.

I squeezed just a bit more, holding him in a rough grip. "A what?"

"A prince among lovers. A genius. Move your fecking hands a bit, lion-boy."

I laughed and began stroking him off, sliding my hand up him from base to tip and then dropping loosely down again in a steady rhythm. He pumped his hips upward into my hand and his face grew flushed. "Wait. Stop." He wriggled around, raised and separated his legs and grabbed his shins to pull himself open further. "Go lower."

I paused, looking at him there. He was so clean I knew he'd prepared for this. His skin was paler in between his cheeks, with a dark pink rim at his opening. His balls, heavy and furry, hung low, the soft skin of his ballsac wrinkled beneath the coarse curls. I let go of his cock, and it bobbed against his stomach, a thin thread of slick dripping from the tip.

"Touch me, Lyon. It's all right. I want you so much."

I reached out again, carefully, and fondled his balls, feeling the firm rounded shape sliding under thin skin. This I'd done before, kissed him there, even taken them into my mouth more than once. I curved my hand around the tender forms and he moaned. His eyes were fixed on my hand where it touched him.

I let my fingertips trail lower, down the soft skin beneath his sac. He had hair there too, but it was short and thin and silky, disappearing as I reached his... I snatched my fingers away.

"Lyon, it's okay. I'm yours. Every part of me is yours, because I want to be. That felt good."

I touched him again, circling him with a now-dry finger. His pucker clenched and relaxed at the brush of my fingertip, clenched again. I felt my own ass clutch tight in sympathy.

Tobin said, "It's not such an important thing. One more bit of me that you can play with. Like this." He let go of one knee and rubbed his fingers in the oil on his stomach, then slipped his own hand between his legs and pressed his fingertip inside. He made no sound, although I saw his stomach tighten as the knuckle passed in. He rubbed back and forth slowly, opening himself. I couldn't look away. I couldn't reach out.

Tobin said, "All right? Too much? Here, try this." He removed his hand and pulled me over him, braced on my arms, then closed his oily hand around our cocks together. "Come on, we've done this before. Rub on me, this is good too. Mm, nice."

I pumped my hips, thrusting into the tightness of his fist, feeling his erection sliding against my own. It was so good. My body *knew* how this went, and I began driving a hard, plunging rhythm.

This was what Tobin wanted in his body. Why couldn't I give it to him? It would be easy. Slip a little lower, find the place, push inside. I braced on my right elbow, reached down, and guided my tip lower. Tobin smiled up at me, his thighs spread wide. It would be just there.

My wrist sparked with pain, and I had to catch my balance. The pain moved up my arm. *Right there. Just shove up inside him.* I fumbled, feeling my cock softening in my hand. I closed my fingers tighter on myself, trying to line that rubbery head up with that little hole, where Tobin said he wanted me to go, where I could invade and take him. I tried harder, with no leverage, no force, bracing differently, squeezing my shaft so hard I saw stars trying to keep it rigid. I was softening so fast, shrinking in my hand. It wasn't going to work.

I didn't realize my panting had become sobbing until Tobin grabbed my arms, and pulled me down against him, forcing my hands up to cradle them at his chest. "Stop. Lyon. Stop. It's all right. You don't need to do that. It's all right. I don't need it like that."

I collapsed on him, hiding my face in his neck. "Sorry. I'm so sorry. So useless."



“Oh, no.” He pressed little kisses to my hair, my temple. “It doesn’t matter. Really it doesn’t. Even if we never ever do anything with asses, sex with you is still better than I’ve ever had.” He rocked me against him, and kissed my hair again. His voice lightened. “Best ever. And I’ve had a lot of sex. Lots of guys. Maybe hundreds. Some hung like horses. With decades of experience.”

I sniffled and laughed against his skin. And then bit him on the neck. “Bastard.”

“That’s better.” He wrapped his arms around me. “What happened there?”

“I don’t know.”

“Was your arm hurting?”

“A bit maybe. Not much. I just...”

He kissed me for a while and then prodded me, “What? Just what?”

I said through a tight throat, “I felt like I was forcing you.”

“*You* were forcing *me*?” He pushed me off enough to meet my eyes. “Seriously? Even with me pulling myself open and sticking my own fingers in there for you?”

“Yes.” It sounded stupid but it felt like truth. “I wanted to do it, because you wanted it. I know you did. But when I thought about pushing, just shoving inside you... goddess, I’m so incapable.”

“No, wait, let me think.” Tobin hugged me hard and settled me back against his shoulder. He stroked my hair, his legs wrapped over my hips, pulling me in against him. I could feel he was still hard, although not the way he had been.

After a while he said, “I figured you would need to be on top, so you wouldn’t feel trapped. But that made you feel like you were trapping me.”

“I guess so.”

“Was it only when you tried to push in that you didn’t like it? It’s not the idea that disgusts you, or the look of my ass, or anything?”

“Oh no.” It had been very arousing to watch his thick finger sliding up inside him. He was beautiful all over, including there. It was just my stupid flesh that wasn’t willing.

He nodded, sliding his cheek against my forehead. “Okay. I think I know what I want to try another time. So. What would you like right now? Because we still have two whole hours we can spend in bed and I don’t plan to waste them.”

I breathed in the scent of his skin. The slight fruit tang of the oil blended with sweat and arousal. His legs were heavy on me. His arms were strong. I knew that for all my work making myself muscular, he could always take me in a fight. Why did I fear hurting him so much? Physically, at least. I knew there were other ways I could hurt this man, but not with my body. Not when he wanted me in every way. I said, “Can we try whatever it is now?”

“My idea, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Well... I suppose so. I thought you’d like to just relax and make each other happy.”

I thought before saying carefully, “I want to try. You know, I may never be able to let you do *that* to me.” The thought took me places I couldn’t bear to go. “But I want to trust myself with you. It’s important to me.”

“All right,” he said, with reluctance in his voice. “We’ll start slowly. You know, sex isn’t supposed to be serious, though. It’s supposed to be fun, and arousing and pleasurable and maybe curl your toes a bit. But never make you cry. So if something isn’t working, let me know. I have a whole list of other things I still want to show you. It doesn’t have to be this.”

I said, “Please.”

“Well, hells, yeah, if you’re willing to give it a try. Get on your back.”

Tobin worked for a bit, getting me positioned on my back, my shoulders propped up partway on pillows, with my legs together. Then he straddled my thighs. “Now let me know if you feel pinned down or trapped at all, right?”

“Yes.” I shifted around—his legs were spread enough not to restrict me.

He leaned forward over me, braced on his arms, and kissed me. “First, we need the mood.” He kissed my cheek, nipped at the end of my nose. “Lots of kissing.”

I was tense at first, wondering what he'd planned, but Tobin, intent on kissing me silly, was impossible to ignore. After a while, I could barely remember my own name. This pleasure was so uniquely his, not something I'd done with the boys before, or anyone else. His mouth and tongue claimed me, in safe, sweet, climbing heat.

After a while, he reached for the oil and I tensed again. He said, "Quit undoing all my work. You'll like this." He filled his palm with the stuff and then leaned forward again, bringing his engorged cock against mine. He slathered the oil on us, stroking his skin and mine, under our foreskins and over the red helmets of our emerging cockheads. "So pretty," he murmured, squeezing and molding us together.

I looked down, and bit my lip, my hips starting to flex up of their own accord. Tobin closed his fingers and pushed down at the same time, driving us together into his hand, through the gloriously slick caress of the oil. It was so good, so damned good. Tight and hot and snugly arousing. His sex and mine, sliding and kissing within the confines of his fingers. This was one of my favorite things, made even better by the slippery glide of the oil.

And then he shifted up on his knees, let his own cock go free, and drew mine down, erect and upright underneath him. For a moment he paused, pressing my tip against himself, right there. "May I, Lyon, please let me?" His voice was hoarse and breathless.

I said, "Yes," and watched as he sank slowly down upon me.

*This* was a different and altogether overwhelming tightness. No ridges and bumps of fingers, no uneven hard shaft against mine, just unbelievably hot, gripping, satiny pressure everywhere around me. Tobin sat slowly but steadily, impaling himself deeper and deeper with my cock. His eyes were bright and eager, his own cock hard and bobbing and unafraid.

He murmured over and over, "Oh, yes. Gods, yes. So good. So damned good. I want this, Lyon. I want you in me so, so much." It was reassurance, and yet, hearing the heartfelt yearning of it, I couldn't doubt that it was also the truth. He arched his back, and spared one hand to stroke down his own abdomen and out over his hard erection. He was so incredibly stunning, like that, like sex and want and pleasure carved in living stone. He pushed himself

lower, and I groaned at the feel of it. Groaned again at the sight of the smile spreading on his face. His look of need and relief and *joy* went deep into me, deeper than I was in him, and healed something there. Filled a space that had always been empty.

Then I had no place for deep thoughts, because Tobin began to move on top of me. Little circles first, and tiny slides up and down. His insides clung to me, despite the oil, in the most intimate caress. My toes did curl, and I think my eyes crossed. “Oh, Tobin, it feels so good.”

“Feels amazing.” His smile widened and became more wicked. “I’m going to drive us both blind.” He rose higher and dropped fast, drawing a harsh grunt from both of us. “Touch me, my cock. Feel how much I like this. Feel what you do to me.” He pulled my hand to his hard shaft. “Please.”

I took him in my grip. It was probably the clumsiest hand job I’d ever given anyone, nothing more than a clench of trembling fingers against the thrust of Tobin’s hips. He rode my cock vigorously, now up and down, now around in erotic motion. We both gasped and shook with the push and slide of my flesh in his. He braced his hands on my ribcage and used the leverage to shove me so deep inside himself that I groaned and shook with it. “Gods, Lyon, I’m close,” he grated through clenched teeth.

All I had breath for was, “Yes.”

He leaned forward. “Sit up. Sit up more.”

I did so, and he wrapped his arms around me. I slipped out of him part way, but bracing my knees stopped the slide, and our bodies pressed together, his sex trapped against my stomach, his hands on my back, his mouth locked to mine. His movements were slower like this, more constrained, but oh so sweet against me. We kissed and arched and rocked and drove together, with Tobin seated deep on my lap, holding me in his hot core. We loved one another, and came. And came.

We sat like that for a long time after, wrapped together, sharing breath. Finally Tobin wiggled and I slid out of him with a groan. He said, “Lie with me now,” and pulled us down on the bed together.

Gradually I became aware of the world again. The air moved cool over my bare skin. In the courtyard outside, someone shouted and a set of wheels

rumbled over the cobbles. The sun gilded our bedroom wall at an angle that suggested the dinner bell was approaching. The mellow light brought out the flecks in the grey granite, and the little ridges and hollows of the rough stone.

Tobin sighed contentedly against me. I said, “Fourth bell can’t be far off. When is the king’s court?”

“Not till Fifth. I bespoke a supper for us up here. We’ll go to court afterward.”

“Foresighted of you.” I stretched in luxurious sloth. “I’m not sure I can get up yet.”

“Me either. In fact, I may be walking crooked in front of court and king.”

A shadow of anxiety passed over me. “Did I hurt you?”

“Gods, no. Ploughed me good though. Exactly what I was craving.”

“Really?” I still had a hard time wrapping my mind around Tobin wanting that from me. “Have you ever, um, done that before?”

“Done which? Been the bottom from on top?”

“Yes. I still don’t know what’s possible. You say you like that, but I have a hard time picturing you...”

There was a little smile in his voice as he asked, “Playing mare to another stallion?”

I smacked what I could reach of him, with the wrong hand, and said, “Ouch.”

He caught my hand. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

“You said, no mares, no stallions.”

“That’s right, none of that crap. It was just a joke. And of course I’ve been on the bottom before, plenty of ways. Did you think I was lying about liking it? Face up, face down, straddling a man, bent over a table. Or a boulder, for that matter. I like it all. More than being the top, actually, although I enjoy doing both.”

“Oh.” He really hadn’t bent himself out of shape just for me, then, choosing that role because I couldn’t. I was torn between relief, and an ignoble desire to cut the cock off every man who’d had him before me.

I thought I'd controlled my reaction, but he reached for me, turned my face his way and kissed me. "In all those times, it never felt quite like that before." He grinned. "Spoiled me for anyone else, you have. You'll have to stay with me now."

"I want to." I really did. But it wasn't that simple.

He kissed my forehead. "I know. It will be all right."

We dozed for a while. Until a sudden knock on the door caught me on the edge of sleep, and I reacted by rolling off the bed and tight into the corner of the room. Tobin grabbed for me, missed and then sat up. His eyes fixed on me, he called out at the closed door, "Who is it?"

"Your dinner, sirs."

"Set it there by the door, thank you."

The messenger's feet retreated down the passageway.

I stood up, trying not to look shaken. "Sorry. I fell."

"Uh huh." Tobin got up too, wrapped the sheet around himself, and opened the door enough to retrieve the tray. He gave me a good effort at a smile and sniffed at the covered dish. "Stew, I think. That should hold for a bit, while we wash up."

"Good idea."

"I'd love a bath, but with a formal court tonight, they'll be in demand. I'm betting by the time we'd get any hot water it would be too late to take it."

"Probably."

He set the tray on the table and came to me. "Doing all right?"

"Oh yes. Except you covered up my view." I waved at the sheet.

Tobin's expression lightened. "That ship has sailed, at least for now. Share the wash water?"

"Sure."

We took turns cleaning up, and put on smalls and shirts before eating. It was decadent to sit around in my underclothes with Tobin, sharing a meal and remembering how he'd felt, wrapped around me. I shifted restlessly in my

chair. Tobin glanced cautiously at me and then read my expression and grinned. "I gather you're not upset with me."

"Counting the hours until we can do it again."

"Praise the gods." He sucked a piece of carrot off his spoon in a deliberately provocative way. "Later. The night is young and so are we."

"Optimist." I hadn't felt young for a long time, but with Tobin I did. Young and soft and foolish and, yes, optimistic myself. Maybe I was fixable. Maybe it would just be a matter of time.

We dressed in court clothes, Tobin in his uniform with his sword at his hip, me in a dark suit I'd had tailored after we got back from the east. If Tobin was going to openly acknowledge me around the palace, then I wasn't going to embarrass him by appearing ill-dressed. Tobin took over my buttons, and tied my neckcloth. He tugged and straightened, and then gave my shoulder a pat. "All the court maidens will be weeping, because you only have eyes for me."

"I think you have that backwards." I looked at him. The uniform suited him well, emphasizing his trim waist and the width of his shoulders. He'd shaved again, and combed his hair with water. He looked every inch the officer and gentleman.

"We're a handsome couple, if we do say so ourselves." He gave me a nod. "Ready? The balconies are one floor up, so I'll take you there before going down to the scrimmage on the floor of the ballroom."

"Thank you."

We made our way through the busy corridors. The palace was in a bustle with the hour for court approaching. This was going to be a big ceremonial thing, held in the grand ballroom instead of the smaller, working King's Court. It looked like everybody in the palace was headed that way, and a few more besides. Finally we turned aside, down a side hall, and to an anteroom. Several doors led off it, and behind them I could hear the hum and susurrations of a gathering crowd. A few fashionable couples stood around the room, and they glanced up as we entered. Tobin ignored them. He said, "The blue balcony. This way."

I followed him through one of the doors. On the other side was a small box-like balcony, jutting out above the crowded, noisy floor of the ballroom.

There were six seats, four of which were filled. Tobin gestured me to the one on the other end, leaving a space open beside me. "Sit there."

I lowered myself carefully, my knees shaking. The two men and two women in the box looked at me, and Tobin gave them a nod. "Lord and Lady Cairngarden, Lord and Lady Freemantle? Sorcerer Lyon."

We all inclined our heads at each other. Tobin pressed my shoulder. "Just stay here, all right. Promise me?"

"Yes."

"I'll come back and get you afterward."

"All right." I grabbed his arm. "Be careful."

He smiled sweetly at me. "It's just an awards ceremony. I think I'll live."

I tried a joke. "Depends on what the king is giving you."

"True. See you later." He hurried out.

I peered over the rail. There was a raised dais at the far end of the room, hung with colored bunting. An ornate chair suggested a throne, but it was currently empty. The room was packed with fashionable people and men in uniform. As I watched, they began arranging themselves in some kind of order. I saw Tobin hurry in and set himself up against the wall to the left of the dais. He looked up, searching for me, and gave me a nod when he caught my eye.

The man next to me, whose name I'd already forgotten, said, "Are you a friend of Voice Tobin's?"

"Yes, My Lord."

"Now there's a young man who is going places," he said with a nod. "Very high in the king's favor."

"Yes." I didn't want to think about the places Tobin might be going. We'd had over a month together now, and half of it off duty. That was bound to end soon.

Before the man could comment further, a horn-call rang out. In the silence that followed, the speaker called, "All rise for the king, His Majesty Faro the Second, Duke..." He ran through the king's list of titles, as we all got to our



feet. Down below, the back door of the hall opened, and King Faro came in, resplendent in carmine robes and fur, wearing the crown of state. He moved easily, powerfully, looking every inch the monarch. It was hard to imagine this was the man who had told me to feel free to throw a gem off a cliff. The man I'd written a casual note to yesterday. My face flamed, imagining what he'd thought of my presumption. Although... he *had* written me that letter.

The king sat on his throne. That appeared to be the signal for those of us with chairs to seat ourselves too. I perched uneasily on the edge of mine. Down below, Tobin moved from ramrod straight to some kind of parade rest, with his hands behind him.

King Faro said, "This is a happy occasion, a celebration of victory, in the east and in the west. But We are well aware that victory always comes at a price. So We have chosen to begin this night with a moment of silence, in remembrance of those who fell to keep all of us free." He bowed his head, and everyone in the room did the same.

I thought of Xan. Of Firstmage, even if I hadn't much liked him. Of our soldiers who had no doubt died out of my sight on that hilltop. Of Meldov, fifteen years a ghost, but perhaps moved on out of the grey at last, and even the R'gin soldier, dead at Tobin's hand because I threw a stone... I was glad when the king began speaking again.

"Tonight it's Our privilege and honor to thank, and to reward, Our loyal subjects, whose bravery and attention to duty made those victories possible. Beginning with Our right hand in battle to the west. General Estray, please step forward."

The king gave Estray a singularly ugly jeweled pin, or so I surmised from the little smirk Tobin threw me when it was pinned on the General's chest. Also a courtesy title and some lands somewhere. I only half listened. A dozen other men were rewarded for bravery and heroics against the R'gin ships and the invasion. The fisherman who brought first word of the fleet was there, and was given a bigger boat, new nets, and a handful of silver.

When that was done, the king spoke of the campaign in the east. Word of the tunnel had long since spread, so there were no cries of surprise. King Faro thankfully didn't seem to feel the need to share any details of how that tunnel

was found. He said, “In doing the enchantments to bring Us this vital information, Firstmage, chief sorcerer of Our realm, overtaxed his strength and burst his heart.”

I wondered if that was an official diagnosis, or just poetic license. Not that it mattered a lot, but if it was truth, it might make transference an even less popular spell. I couldn't be sorry about that. King Faro confirmed the promotion of Second and Thirdmages to First and Second, and called for a conclave to choose a new Thirdmage. He awarded the brother of the fallen sorcerer some valuable recompense, and gave other rewards to the surviving pair.

“And now, the man who saved Our life, when We were unhorsed and sorely beset on the field of battle. Voice Tobin?”

I sat there, stunned, as Tobin strode forward to stand before the king. I'd known Tobin had charged off to the king's side when it sounded like Faro was in trouble. I'd had no idea the trouble had been that dire, or that Tobin had been so vital in the rescue. He hadn't said a word. I suddenly was less angry at him for deserting me on that hillside, an emotion I'd have denied existed until I felt it go. Of course, I became more angry at him for not telling me the details. Did he think I wouldn't like to know he was a hero? *Damned man.*

King Faro said, “We owe you Our life, Voice Tobin. No reward is enough for that.”

Tobin said, “It was my duty and my honor, Your Majesty. That I succeeded, and that we both survived, is all the reward I need.”

King Faro gave him a smile, fast and fond. “Perhaps. But it's not all the reward you're getting. So listen well. About half an hour's ride from the palace there is a farm. The land is called Sweetmeadows. There's a well laid-out stable, and good grazing. The fences need repair, and there is no house upon it, but it's fine, fertile land.”

I saw Tobin lose his amusement. He drew even straighter, staring intently at the king. I hugged myself. The absolute monarch of the land apparently did read notes from lowly translators, telling him what reward would please *me* most.

Tobin seemed about to speak, but the king held up his hand. “Now a farm, suitable for a breeding stud, is only small recompense for saving Our life. About two miles further on there also stands an empty stone house. The owner of the land has another manor, and no use for this house.”

My stomach fluttered in panic. I’d checked out that farm I’d asked him to give Tobin, and so I also knew the house he spoke of. In fact, I’d looked at the house with Tobin, which was how I’d stumbled across the farm in the first place. But I’d only suggested giving Tobin the stud. Not this. It was a fine house, solid, a little big but well-made. But it had deep cellars below that made my skin crawl. King Faro was going to give it to Tobin, and then he’d expect us to live in it, and I just *couldn’t*. I bit my lip until I tasted blood.

King Faro glanced up at my balcony, and then said to Tobin, “You’ll want to live on your own land, of course. So We hereby give you the stone of that house, and all its furnishings. You may command the labor of a company of Our troops, whose lives did not have to be spent in battle in the east because of how we prevailed there. You may also command the expertise of one or two of our Royal Engineers. They will move that house for you, stone by stone, and rebuild it in the style you prefer. Is it well?”

Tobin said, “I’ll rebuild on solid bedrock, then. I am most grateful, Your Majesty. Most grateful.” He didn’t glance my way, but I knew he said that for me, to show me he understood. I blinked hard, biting my lip. We *would* make our future work together, somehow. Tobin clearly could see it no other way.

The king nodded. “It’s little enough. Is there anything else you need?”

Tobin hesitated. He turned sideways, so as not to put his back to the king, and looked quickly up at me. I could have stayed in my seat, and shared his secret smile. But something pulled me to my feet, and I took one step to reach the balcony rail. I looked back down.

The room was almost silent, with just a rustle here and there of a woman’s skirts, the scuff of a man’s boots on the marble floor. Tobin seemed surprised and then very pleased to see me stand. He kept his eyes on my face. Everyone’s gaze gradually turned toward me and I gripped the balcony rail, feeling dizzy. On his throne, King Faro II gave me another tiny salute, no more than the brush of two fingers against his hair.

Tobin looked steadily up at me, and I straightened. I would stand there for him gladly, for all the court to see that I was his. Tobin said clearly into the silence, “Lyon? What do you think, beloved? Is there aught else that we need in our house?”

I looked down at him, that man, in his formal uniform in front of his king, but with every ounce of his attention fixed on me. I had to clear my throat, but then I found voice to say, “Tobin.” My endearments would have to wait for privacy, and maybe darkness. But I could give him this. “It sounds good to me. Perhaps a large kitchen window, with no bars, just glass, so I can look out and see our kitchen garden in the moonlight.”

**THE END**

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Author Bio

*Kaje Harper grew up in Montreal, and spent her teen years writing, filling binders with stories about what guys like Starsky and Hutch really did on their days off. But as life got busy, the stories began to just live in her head. The characters grew up, met, endured, loved, in any quiet moment she had. But the stories rarely made it to paper. Serious authorship got further sidetracked by ventures into psychology, teaching, and a biomedical career. And by a decade enthralled by the challenges of raising children.*

*Then around 2006, when the kids were more independent, her husband gave her a computer she didn't have to share. She began putting words down in print again, just for fun. Hours of fun. Lots of hours of fun. The stories began piling up, and her husband suggested if she was going to spend that much time on the keyboard she ought to try to publish one. MLR Press accepted her first submission, Life Lessons, which was released in May 2011. Kaje now has over twenty novels and short stories in print, including Amazon bestseller The Rebuilding Year, a contemporary m/m romance released by Samhain Publishing in March 2012, and several free stories available on Smashwords and elsewhere. She currently lives in Minnesota with a creative teenager, a crazy little omnivorous white dog, and a remarkably patient spouse.*

## Contact & Media Info

[Website](#) | [Goodreads Author Page](#)

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

LOVE HAS NO BOUNDARIES 2013



*Six*  
TARA SPEARS

# SIX

By Tara Spears

## Photo Description

A smiling, dark-haired man is lying on a bed opposite a grinning baby. The baby has a grip on his finger, and a tattoo on his biceps reads, *Lover of my soul*.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I've been a very happy man for the past six years, but my partner left me right after our baby was born. That's us in the picture.*

*While I love my son/daughter, I feel like I lost a part of me, like I could never open myself again to someone who isn't a kid. Even if I did, how many men want to have a kid with a twenty-four-year-old kindergarten teacher?*

*Please, dear author, show me how true love is supposed to be!*

Sincerely,

Anna

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** phone sex, sweet, men with children, teacher, accountant, hurt/comfort, illness, slow burn

**Word count:** 50,062

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

*Dedication*

This story is dedicated to “Anna” whose prompt stretched my boundaries of creativity, and brought me out of my dark self.



*Acknowledgements*

A special thank you to my beta readers; Anke, Vicki and Seiran. Without your encouraging words I'm not sure I would have ever been happy with this. I would also like to thank Jen and her faithful helpers. Without them there would be no event to write for.

# SIX

**By Tara Spears**

## CHAPTER ONE

“Chey, sweetie, give me a break, okay?”

Her poor bottom. I was never giving her apple juice again. She had a legitimate reason to cry this time, but my head couldn't handle any more in the confines of the Volvo. That such a high, earsplitting sound could come from something so small always amazed me.

My little girl had been opinionated and loud from the moment she was born. She didn't get it from me. I had been a quiet, easily amused baby according to my mother. Chey had to have inherited her lungs and voice from Erica, her birth mom.

Suddenly and without warning, in the silent but deadly manner she had, the car filled with a gag worthy odor.

“Oh, God. You are really testing me today, aren't you?”

She started bawling anew as I cracked open my window, and then hit the control for the ones in the far back of the wagon. It didn't help any and I coughed, trying hard not to gag. If I threw up it would serve me right for only having coffee this morning. First day of school, first time dropping Chey off with strangers, I couldn't eat. The three messy diapers through the wee hours of the morning hadn't helped. *Definitely no more apple juice, ever.*

I was going to be late. Not a good way to start the school year. Not to mention my lack of sleep and the migraine worming its way behind my eyes. My class was going to ravage me and leave nothing but a pile of picked clean bones.

“Chey, we're here!” I said cheerfully then muttered. “Finally.”

I parked in the driveway of the private daycare. I had interviewed twelve, and Nancy's Toddler Train had been, by far, the hands down best. A rambler, meaning no stairs, set off the road with a large chain-link yard. Her and her

assistant, Molly, only accepted six kids, all under five years of age. We had been very lucky they had an opening. They were both sweet middle-aged women who had fawned all over Chey during the interview. They may not think her such a sweetheart by the end of the day.

I unbuckled my daughter and wrestled her, and the diaper bag, out of the car. She stopped wailing for a second and gazed at me with her huge hazel eyes. She had my eyes and dark hair, but she was so much prettier than me. Even with the snot running down her upper lip. I set the diaper bag down and dug a tissue out of my pocket.

“Blow.” She sniffed instead. “Good girl.” We were still working on it. I wiped her lip and nose, then dabbed her eyes and round cheeks.

I went to pick up the bag and she grabbed my cheeks in her little hands and pinched. This had been her thing since she could control her arms. She always touched my face when she was unsure, not feeling well, wanted affection. And I couldn’t deny her even now, late and surrounded by the toxic smell of her diaper. She leaned her forehead in and bonked against mine.

“Kee,” she said, wanting a kiss. I lifted my head enough to smooch her wet lips. My eyes stung and I blinked hard. I refused to get emotional over this. It was just daycare. Lots of kids went to daycare. *But she’s only thirteen months old!* My mind screamed. I shoved the thought away.

“And if daddy doesn’t get his tush to work we won’t have to worry about it, because we’ll be on the streets.” I nuzzled her, and she laughed, her diaper and sore bottom forgotten for the moment.

I swung the diaper bag onto my shoulder and headed through the gate. The door opened before I reached it, and Nancy smiled warmly at us.

“Is Cheyanne ready to have some fun?” Nancy asked in her soft, sweet voice. Chey hid in my neck. “Has she had any breakfast?”

I shook my head and grimaced. “We tried apple juice for the first time last night and it didn’t agree with her. There’s pumpkin juice in her bag and some Cheerios. I need to change her before I leave her.”

“Oh, I can do that—” She glanced over her shoulder—“Didn’t you say 6:30?”

“Yeah, I’m late, sorry.” We stepped into the house, and I saw Molly watching over a boy, a few months older than Chey, as he ate scrambled eggs off the tray of a highchair. The house was as immaculate as it had been on our first visit.

Nancy reached for Chey and I hugged her before handing her over. The crying I had known would come, began. She pushed against Nancy’s chest, giving me the most imploring look as she sobbed, her lower lip pooched out.

I put my hand on the doorknob. “Thanks for taking her.” It was all I could manage as Chey began to scream. It was my fault of course. I had had her to myself all summer, and had been much too overprotective of who I allowed to hold her.

“We’ll see you around 3:00.” With that, Nancy backed away, rubbing Chey’s back, and my heart squeezed painfully. I nodded and left.

Once in the car, I took a few deep breaths. I knew better than to make a big deal of leaving but, wow, that had been harder than I imagined. I wiped off my eyes as I turned the key.

\*\*\*\*

Half an hour of bliss before the kids returned from lunch. The morning hadn’t been so bad. Eric had punched Josh, and Amy had thrown up all over the activity table, but all in all... I threw back two aspirin with some orange juice.

“I hope those are prescription,” Mrs. Lily Dupree, the principal, said as she stepped into the room from the central area entrance.

“Just aspirin.” I showed her the bottle and she chuckled as she waved her hand dismissively.

This was my second year at The Heights, and I had learned my first year that Lily had a very dry sense of humor when it came to the teachers here. Not as amused if the kids misbehaved, however.

“Day’s been that good so far, eh?” She quirked her eyebrows up as she perched on the edge of my grey metal desk. Her dark hands went to smoothing invisible wrinkles from her sage-green skirt. She was always impeccably dressed.

“No, not bad,” I said and we both laughed.

Eric had ended up in her office and Amy had gone to the nurse, who sent her right back with a note saying it was nerves. She was a meek girl and I had figured as much, yet I felt it was better to be safe and have the pro decide whether she stayed or went home.

“Don’t forget you have a late arrival—” Lily glanced at her gold-tone watch—“that should be here any minute.”

“I didn’t forget.” Oops, I *had* forgotten. Good thing I packed my lunch and was eating in my classroom.

She gave me a sympathetic smile. “Only a few more hours, Angel, then you can go rescue that little girl of yours. Oh, don’t look so surprised. I know these things... single dad, worried about his precious daughter in the incapable hands of a daycare.” She smirked.

“Well, they are not incapable, but, yeah, end of the day can’t come soon enough.”

She nodded. “First day is always the worst.”

The outer door squeaked, drawing my attention, and Lily disappeared before my head even swung back to her. I rose and went to welcome my late arrival. I think her name was Ryan? No, Riana, that was it. I smiled a welcome to the red haired girl that was trying to disappear behind her dad’s grey trousers.

I squatted down.

“Who are you?” the man asked brusquely.

“The kindergarten teacher, Mr. Tucco, and you must be Riana?” I offered her a smile.

She held her ground, clinging to her father’s leg, and managed a nod. The hardest day, I think, of a child’s life is the first day of kindergarten. Add to that the fact Riana had just moved here, and she had a right to be shy.

“Angel Tucco?” the deep, solid voice asked. I could tell from his tone that he had assumed I was a woman. I got that a lot.

“Angelo Tucco, actually.” I stood. “Everyone took to calling me Angel—” I paused as my eyes wandered up the crisp suit and silver tie to the face

frowning down at me. *Oh, Jesus, he was tall... and broad.* And attractive despite the disdain plastered across his face.

His eyes inspected me like a viper, and I couldn't see even a hint of his lips. Maybe God had forgotten to give him any? The man didn't look like he smiled much, so he probably didn't need them. There wasn't one laugh line marring the corners of his green eyes, yet his forehead held two big creases above his flaring nose. He was either an angry type or he worried a lot.

I cleared my throat. "Everyone started calling me Angel when I was a kid and it just stuck. Angelo Tucco, kindergarten teacher extraordinaire." I extended my hand and he stared at it for a moment, probably contemplating whether I was worth shaking hands with.

"Marcus O'Keefe." He clasped my hand and I tried really hard not to squeak as I felt the bones shift. I was taking a stab at guessing he was Irish, just as folks usually assumed I was Italian. Well, half anyway, from my dad. The pale skin threw them at times. Polish-Dutch-Swedish mother would throw anyone. He let go, and I resisted the urge to shake my hand to reset the bones.

"I'll come pick her up at 2:30. No one else is authorized to pick her up, understand?" He was practically glaring at me, and I had yet to see his lips.

"Not a problem. Which lot?"

He shook his head and that was when I noticed his hair. It was the most unusual shade of bronze with bright copper highlights. I was fairly certain it was his natural color, although it looked like something a whacky stylist would charge a small fortune for.

"I'll pick her up right here." He pointed to his feet.

Well, I guess I better make sure she was right there when he came then. Actually, I had been through this with a student last year. Poor boy was smack dab in the middle of a custody battle.

I gave him an empathetic smile. "Nasty divorce?" It wasn't my business, really, and I shouldn't have pried, yet I always felt akin to recent divorcees. Having been dumped I knew what it felt like.

"Something like that." He scratched his neck then blew out a low breath.

I nodded in sympathy. A year later, I could still feel Todd's abrupt betrayal. Six years together and he hadn't even had the decency to tell me why. Four words texted to me right as our daughter entered the world; *I can't do this*. Not even a sorry, not even a goodbye.

Mr. O'Keefe cleared his throat and my head snapped up and out of the damaging thoughts. He was looking at me with the oddest expression on his face. It took me a moment to realize why it looked strange. I could see his lips, and they were plush, and delectable, and he was biting the outer edge in an indecisive way.

Indecision did not belong on this man's strong face. He was chewing on that plump lip aggressively and I wanted to reach up and pull it from his abusive teeth.

*Oh!* Where had *that* come from? Not a suitable thought to have right now. Not at all.

I smiled, hoping it looked reassuring, but I was pretty sure I was beginning to blush. I hadn't so much as looked at another man since Todd left, let alone admire even a part of one. I was pretty sure my cock no longer worked. My libido had either vacated the premises when Chey arrived, or had left with Todd. I wasn't sure which, and honestly it didn't really matter. I had a daughter to raise now.

I was saved from further embarrassment by my class tumbling in noisily as they returned from lunch. Mr. O'Keefe let his poor lip go.

"Right." He bent down and hugged his daughter, whispering something she nodded at. He gave her a reassuring smile and helped her out of her red wool coat. I gestured to the coat area, and she headed right over to hang it up.

"I'll take care of her," I told him when he hesitated at the door.

"Thank you," he said quietly as he glanced at his daughter then took one last look at me. He was probably deciding whether or not I was capable of the task of keeping his beloved daughter safe. With a small lift of his lips, he nodded curtly and left. Well, I guess I passed muster.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER TWO

Chey giggled when she saw me, and handed up a red block from the pile in front of her. The movement caused her to sway, and I was about to steady her when she planted her other hand on the carpet. She still had the red block extended up to me, and I took it from her, grinning madly over her little triumph. It really was amazing to watch a child figure out all the small things, we, as adults, take for granted.

“Thank you!” I showed her the block then hugged it to my chest. Her hand made a grabbing motion, and I squatted down and handed it back to her. She snatched it away and put it in her mouth. *Everything in the mouth.*

“They’ve been disinfected,” Molly said, setting a boy close to Chey’s age down on the other side of the blocks.

“I’m not worried. I grew up with dogs, cats, and a pet chicken in our house, and somehow managed to survive.”

The little blond boy picked up a green rectangle and threw it at Chey, hitting her in the chest.

“Ronald!” Molly grabbed his hand. “No, we do not throw things.”

Chey didn’t cry, or even seem to care. So I turned to watch the exchange between Molly and Ronald, curious on how discipline was handled. Suddenly a purple triangle smacked him right in the face. I turned to my daughter, and found her pouting, and about to throw another block. I seized her hand and slapped it lightly. The block fell from her surprised grasp as her eyes pooled with tears.

“Absolutely not, young lady. No throwing.” I shook her hand gently for emphasis.

Molly sputtered, then snorted as her laughter broke free. Just then Ronald began to cry, and not to be outdone, Chey let loose a mighty wail drowning him out.

I groaned and hid behind my hands for a second. “Fabulous, my daughter’s a prima donna.” That made Molly laugh so hard she fell over, rolling around



on the caramel carpet with her hands over her face. I looked at Chey with her mouth open and eyes closed, screaming for all she was worth, and began to laugh myself.

I shouldn't find this funny, yet I couldn't help myself. My thirteen-month old little girl had put a boy in his place. All right maybe not the best way to do it, but still, it was freaking hilarious.

\*\*\*\*

*TGIF.* I tipped the beer to my lips and savored the golden liquid as it slithered down my throat. I rarely indulged, but I felt I deserved one tonight in celebration. I had survived my first week with a new class *and* I could leave Chey at daycare now without blubbering. It was progress.

I glanced down at her asleep on my chest, a fist rammed into her mouth. Her bath had finished her, and she had dozed off while I was putting on her pajamas. I really should put her to bed, but she looked so comfortable, and these moments wouldn't last forever. I bent my head down and nuzzled her dark hair. She smelled wonderful, a mix of baby shampoo and her own sweet scent.

Todd had no idea what he was missing. Chey had been his desire. From almost the day we met, he had wanted to be a father. What nineteen-year-old wants to be a father? Yet he had. I laid my lips on Chey's head. He had wanted her so desperately. I was the one that had been hard to convince, and in the end, my dad was the one who persuaded me.

She was supposed to have been Todd's biological daughter, but after several tries, we were told he wasn't viable. He had a low count that wouldn't have been a problem normally, however with insemination it was a big problem. We did the next best thing, and one ejaculation later, we were going to be parents. Even the doctor took to calling me a one shot wonder. I remembered being extremely embarrassed over that.

Then, when I thought I had given him everything he wanted, everything he needed, he left us without even a backwards glance. He left me for someone else. I knew that now, but I had been so blinded and in love, I hadn't seen the signs until it was too late.

We'd had our ups and downs just like everyone else. He always bitched about our sex life, but I had never denied him. Not once. He was always trying to lure me into kinky stuff, and he had a thing for ferries. My refusal to have sex on a damn ferry had been the cause of more than one row. Maybe if I had given in just once...

I sighed as I looked at the perfection huddled on my chest, her tiny hand fisting my T-shirt. It didn't matter now. He was gone and I was a father. Thanks to Todd, my life was forever wrapped up in *his* deepest desire and I didn't have room for anyone else anymore.

Was that a cop out? I sipped my beer while I thought about that. I was a twenty-six-year-old gay man with a daughter. It's not like I could go to the bars. I shuddered over *that* idea. Me and bars—not a good combination. Most of the guys there wanted a fling, and I wasn't the one-night stand type. I needed to feel a connection with my partners. That left work, grocery stores, and the parks Chey and I frequented. Not a lot of options for romance there.

I could do without sex, but I missed the companionship. I loved Chey and couldn't imagine life without her, but sometimes... I grimaced, remembering I almost gave her up. That seemed so long ago now and better forgotten.

I took another swallow of beer and made a face. Warm. I slid it onto the coffee table and struggled off the couch, hoisting Chey into my arms. She let out a little whimper then went to sucking on her tongue. The girl could sleep through anything.

Before I laid her down in her crib, I kissed her head one last time and lingered, laying my cheek against her soft hair. *You're the best and the worst thing to ever happen to me.* I settled her in her crib then went to my big empty bed.

\*\*\*\*

Chey giggled, and screeched, and giggled some more at the dogs racing around inside the chain-link play area. She loved watching them. Dogs and ducks could occupy her for hours. I had my foot on her stroller and was reading a Ted Dekker novel. It was a perfect Indian summer day, warm and sunny, and it seemed everyone was out enjoying it. One last hurrah before the rain began to fall.

When I discovered Chey's dog and duck fetish I took full advantage. It had become a Saturday tradition. I was no dummy. Something she would sit and watch happily for a few hours that wasn't a purple dinosaur, or weird people in terrycloth costumes? I felt I had won the lottery. She watched enraptured as I read something not written by Dr. Seuss or Mother Goose.

I was at the good part, where the detective finds out his own daughter had been taken by the same madman he was after, when my name rang out.

"Mr. Tucco, Mr. Tucco," the little voice sang. When you're a teacher, your students seem to pop-up at the most inopportune times. And they *always* recognized you, even from a mile away it seemed. I turned just as Riana slammed into the back of the bench.

"Hi!" she said grinning as if she had found a prize.

I smiled back, closing my book. "Hello, you enjoying the sunshine?"

She nodded enthusiastically, strands of red hair dancing around happily, having escaped her braid.

"Sorry, she had to come and say hi."

I glanced up into the smiling face of Mr. O'Keefe. The man was actually quite handsome when he let his lips out to play.

"Not a problem. We're just enjoying other people's dogs." I gestured to the fenced area with my book. Riana gasped and ran to the fence, locking her fingers in the chain-link.

"I didn't know you had kids." Mr. O'Keefe gestured to the stroller I still had my foot on.

"Just one. My daughter, Cheyanne." At the sound of her name, Chey gurgled, and I spun her around so she could see us.

Mr. O'Keefe leaned over the back of the bench and grinned at her. "Aren't you just the cutest thing?" He cooed at her.

I couldn't stop the smile from breaking out at seeing this man ogling my daughter like only women usually did. Chey grinned back and held up her hands, making grabby motions.

He looked at me, his green eyes dancing. "Can I hold her?"

I opened my mouth, but rather than refusing, I found myself saying, “Sure.” The man was obviously smitten and Chey seemed to think he was okay. He smiled enthusiastically and hustled around the bench while I unbuckled her and lifted her out of the stroller.

The second he sat down he reached for her, getting his fingers tangled with mine. His were soft, and warm, and I swear he stroked them across my knuckles. It was ridiculous of course. Yet, ridiculous or not, I felt my face warm. Crap, I was blushing. His vibrant green eyes watched me for a second before they turned to Chey.

“Hi, sweetie. Oh, you are just too precious.” He settled her feet into his crotch and let her lean against his broad chest.

*Lucky girl.* Oh, where had *that* come from? That was the second time I had thought something inappropriate around this man, and I wasn’t even sure he was gay. I bit back a groan. Chey grabbed his face, and he laughed, then turned his head and pretended to gobble her hand. She squealed in delight.

“She looks like you.”

I nodded knowing it was true. “Thankfully she’s prettier than me though. She has her mother’s cheeks and mouth.”

He looked over at me. “I don’t know. I think she has your mouth too.”

I licked my lips without meaning to and his eyes followed the movement for a second before turning back to Chey. I felt my whole body warm. I was sure under my clothes I was pinker than Chey’s corduroy pants.

*What was wrong with me?* I was blushing like a school kid over a straight guy, who wasn’t being sexual in any way, shape, or form... well, maybe his gorgeous form. *Jesus! Stop it!* I turned away, concentrating on the bridge in the distance. It *had* been over a year. Not even a morning hard-on in that time. Maybe my libido had just been sleeping. I cleared my throat to stop from snorting. A coma more like it. He *was* an attractive man, not that I needed to be thinking about him that way. Definitely not in *that* way.

“Is she your daughter?” Riana wedged herself into the tiny space between her father and me.

I cleared my throat and brought myself out of my musings. “Yeah, she’s mine.” I turned back and watched Chey grasp the finger Riana offered her.

“Where’s her mom?”

“We’re not together,” I told her. It was a good honest answer for a child her age.

She nodded. “Like my mom and dad.” There wasn’t any sadness there, just fact.

I noticed the hardness return to Mr. O’Keefe’s face and wondered what had happened. A daughter detached from her mother and a husband who obviously didn’t like his ex-wife much at all. There must have been some tragedy there to cause their reactions.

Chey must have felt the tension in him because she began to squirm and pout.

“Shhh, it’s okay.” He cuddled her in his arms and bounced her gently. He turned his face away and Chey butted her head into his cheek.

“Kee.”

I gawked at her. She had never asked for a kiss from anyone but me. It was my fault she was shy around people, yet obviously she wasn’t shy with Mr. O’Keefe.

“*Kee*,” she said more insistently.

“She wants a kiss,” I said quietly. I wasn’t sure he had heard me as he didn’t move.

“Dad, she wants a kiss.” Riana climbed up until she was standing on the bench, and leaned over her father’s shoulder. “Dad? Are you thinking about Toby?” Riana laid over her father in an awkward hug. I heard his breathing, harsh and broken, and felt like an interloper despite my daughter being crushed between them.

“Ah, ah, *KEEEE!*” Chey demanded. It was enough to break them apart, and they chuckled at her.

Riana gave her father a smooch on his temple. “She’s so cute.” She ruffled Chey’s hair and received an indignant squeal in return. She bounced down and went back to watching the dogs.

Chey pinched Mr. O’Keefe’s cheeks hard. He glanced at me with the silliest, most adoring look on his face.

“Go ahead. She’s obviously in love.” I waved a hand dismissively, while I mock sniffled.

He smirked at me for a long few seconds as the skin in Chey’s fingers turned pink then red. She was really pinching him. Chey bounced on her feet causing him to wince.

“I think you better give her what she wants before she really hurts you.” I twirled my finger at my daughter and laughed.

He bent down and kissed her forehead.

“Nao,” she said with a pout.

“Gotta be on the lips,” I told him, tapping mine when he looked to me with a cocked eyebrow.

He bent down and she smacked her gooey lips to his then giggled without lifting her head. He chuckled back as he stared into her wide eyes. It was one of the most adorable things I had ever seen.

Chey goo-gooed as she twisted around, trying to see the dogs again. She was done with us. I reached for her and Mr. O’Keefe handed her over a bit reluctantly. I smooched her cheek while she tried to push me away. *Well, isn’t that a fine how do you do!*

“Who’s Toby?” I asked as I settled Chey in her stroller and tugged her shirt down. He didn’t answer. I clicked her harness on. “Sorry, I was being nosey.”

He sighed heavily, settling his elbows on the back of the bench. His navy Henley stretched tight across his wide, and I couldn’t help but notice, shapely chest. *Mmm, I wonder if he has a six-pack.* I sighed with a hint of dejection in there. I wasn’t stupid. Even if he *were* gay, he would be completely out of my league. Regardless, my mouth filled with saliva and I turned back to fuss with the strollers harness, swallowing before I began drooling. My libido drug a foot out of bed.

“He’s my son; a few months younger than your daughter actually. My wife’s—*ex-wife*’s parents took him. He’s special needs and I worry they’re not taking care of him properly.” He wrinkled his nose and I could see he barely had his emotions under control. “I haven’t seen him since... they just took him

and I can't find him." He looked away, his shoulders lifting and falling with each breath.

Jeez, that was rough. I glanced at Riana giggling as a beagle licked her fingers through the fence. I couldn't imagine having two kids. I could barely take care of one, but even so, not knowing must be unbearable.

"You didn't have to tell me. It's really none of my business." I repositioned Chey so she could watch the dogs. Riana began talking animatedly to a girl a few years older than her while the beagle pawed at a tennis ball trying to get their attention.

"You're right. I didn't mean to impose on you." He scratched his head then tried to smooth his hair out. Between the two girls, it had become a lost cause some time ago. In jeans, Henley, and messy hair, he looked vulnerable. A soft contrast to the stiff suit I knew him as. I liked this side of him much better.

"You didn't," I answered. "Sometimes we need to talk to a stranger." I smiled at him reassuringly as I settled against the back of the bench and crossed my legs.

He chuckled. "Are we strangers? I mean, aren't I supposed to be able to trust my kid's teacher? That makes you more than a stranger I would say." He twirled a hunk of his hair between his fingers, tattering it even further. It was an odd thing for a man to do.

"Well, I appreciate the ear, and the baby fix—"

"Anyone ever tell you, you sound like a woman." *Jesus, did I just say that?* I did, I did just say that. He laughed and, thankfully, there was actual amusement there.

"Yeah, my ex-wife, actually. All the time. We didn't get along very well." He didn't elaborate and I didn't ask, afraid I might say something I'd regret even more than the last tumbled words.

Talking to kids all day seemed to have rendered my adult communication skills practically obsolete. Not that I had a chance to practice with many adults these days. Most of my friends, which had been Todd's friends too, had disappeared once Chey entered my life, or rather when Todd exited it.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER THREE

I didn't see Mr. O'Keefe again until Wednesday afternoon. He had arranged with the office for his sister to drop off and pick up Riana for a few days. I barely saw the woman, let alone spoke to her. She was in and out in seconds, but there was no denying the resemblance to her brother. Same wildly marked hair, same bright green eyes, and based on the huge grin Riana gave her, a well-loved relative.

I was re-organizing my classroom while Riana colored at the activity table, when her father finally arrived, late, to pick her up. The door had already auto-locked, and at his knock, I went to let him in. He was peering through the small window, and even though he looked tired, he was smiling.

"Your dad's here," I told Riana. She glanced up then started putting the crayons quickly away.

He entered carrying two bags and apologizing.

I waved off his rapid-fire words. "Don't worry about it. It takes me half an hour to put the chaos back in order." I indicated the room, which was actually almost clean.

Flu season had arrived, so I needed to wipe off the tables with disinfectant then put the chairs up for the janitor, and I would be done.

Riana put the crayons away then ran over and crashed into her father's legs. He set the bags down and scooped her up, gobbling at her neck. She squealed and giggled before remembering she was too old for that. She pushed on him trying to stop giggling and failing. He hugged her tight, closing his eyes for a moment before setting her down.

"Sorry I'm late. Were you good for Mr. Tucco?" He gave her a serious look.

She nodded and he glanced at me. I confirmed with a nod of my own. Once Riana settled in, she had become an exemplary student. Well, as kindergarteners go anyway.

"I guess you earned this then." He handed her one of the bags. She peeked over the edge, then dove in and wrestled the object out. She hugged the pink



and turquoise Dora the Explorer backpack against her chest and hopped up and down.

“Thank you, Daddy. Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, go get your things. Daddy’s tired, and wants McDonald’s and a nap.”

She grinned, her eyes going round over the McDonald’s part, as she scooted to the coat area.

“You’re welcome to join us. You and Chey, I mean.” He rocked back on his heels, waiting for my answer.

“I, um, thank you for the offer.” I shook my head. “I have to pick up Chey from daycare.”

He chuckled. “I figured she wasn’t stashed here somewhere. Pick her up and meet us there. We just go to the one on Sunset with all the tubes.”

Dating a student was grounds for immediate dismissal. I had laughed when I read that part of the district’s policy structure knowing it applied to upper grades. Even so, I found it amusing being a kindergarten teacher. There hadn’t been anything in there about dating parents however. And although I knew this wasn’t a date, per se, I felt if I went I was overstepping an invisible line.

“Thank you for the invitation but I—”

“Oh, come on. You deserve dinner out after six hours of cranky kids. Besides, I’d love to see Chey’s face when she gets this.” He lifted up the other bag.

He’d bought her a gift? Crap. I’d never been good at accepting gifts, and for some reason Chey getting a gift from Mr. O’Keefe was terrifying me.

He wrapped his hand around my arm and I jumped, knocking the bag out of his hand. He let it fall to the floor at our feet. At least now I knew it wasn’t fragile.

“Relax. It’s not a date, it’s just McDonald’s. Here.” He pulled out one of the tiny plastic chairs. “Sit down. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

I sat down and heard the chair creak. They weren’t exactly made for adults and I hoped I didn’t break it. *Wait, did he say date?* Or rather not a date, but still, he used the word.

I looked at him crouched next to me, and he looked back, concern etching his face and drawing the lines between his eyes deep. Gosh, he smelled good. There was a slight sweaty tang that just made him more enticing. I found myself leaning towards him then saw him reaching out. I moved my head and fended off his hand as he tried to feel my forehead. If my face was flushed, it wasn't from fever.

"I'm fine. I must be tired or something," I murmured. I needed to get a grip. It was a gift for Chey from a man that smelled like, well, a man. It wasn't *that* unusual.

He lowered his hand and laid it on a much less appropriate part of me. My thigh. I pretended not to notice because every part of me was screaming *YES*, and I didn't want him to know *that*. No one over the age of six had touched me in a long time, and every drop of blood and nerve ending jostled inside me, trying to be beneath his strong, warm hand.

"You don't look okay. You're all flushed. The flu's going around..." He glanced at Riana investigating her new backpack near the door. "All right, maybe another time." He slid the bag next to me.

I didn't even want to look at it.

"And maybe you'll let me know if she likes this." He fingered the bag reverently, and for some reason that touched me. "Riana had one when she was a baby and loved it."

His hand left my thigh as he stood and I saw myself doing it, but couldn't stop, as my fingers traveled over where his hand had just been. I heard the door open and snapped my head up.

"Mr. O'Keefe, thank you. I'm sure she will love whatever you got her."

He looked at me over his shoulder. "Marcus, call me Marcus." The door closed behind him.

I sat in that tiny chair for several minutes as I wished so many things, but most of all, I wished I wasn't a coward.

\*\*\*\*

"I don't feel good."

I glanced down just as Jeffery's partially digested lunch splattered all over my beige trousers and leather dress shoes. I had no idea what possessed me to wear nice clothes today. That was the second time my shoes had been hit, a first for my pants though. What was it about six-year-olds? They only realized they were sick when their stomachs were already beginning to rebel, and I swear they had projectile vomiting down to a science.

Thankfully, Jeffery didn't start crying like Calvin and Amy had. I retrieved the baby wipes off my desk, and cleaned off his narrow face. I already knew the nurse's office was full. Amy was on a mat near the coat closet, her parents unable to pick her up for another hour. I felt Jeffery's forehead. He was pretty warm. I had lost nine in four days to the flu, and for some reason every one of them had come to school then had to be sent back home. What were their parents thinking? School was not a babysitting service for God's sake.

I steered Jeffery towards the back wall where a few of the lights had been turned off so Amy could sleep. I settled him on another nap mat, and covered him with a blanket before calling the front office.

"All right, who's sick now?" Lily Dupree, the principal asked.

"It must be a madhouse there if you're answering the phone."

"You have no idea. It seems several parental sets can't get off work to pick up their sick kids. What's with people these days?"

"I was just thinking the same thing. I still have one here whose parents were called two hours ago. Anyway, Jeffery Lyons just decorated my pants with his lunch. Spaghetti on linen." I glanced down at my more than likely ruined slacks. "And it looks like Jujy Fruits, no, wait, gummy bears, there's a green head stuck to my shoe. Any chance—"

She laughed. "I can come watch your class while you clean up. Anything to get me out of here for a few minutes."

Now I laughed. "And you think twenty-three kindergarteners are a break?"

This flu outbreak was a nasty one, and I was glad I had taken the free flu shot Chey's pediatrician had offered when she got hers. As I knelt down to clean the carpet, I decided it might be smart to bring a change of clothes tomorrow, and leave them here until this worked its way through.

I was instantly worried when Nancy informed me Chey had been crabby all day, refusing to eat anything but Cheerios and mashed pears.

I felt her head again when we got home. She wasn't warm, but she was definitely being a brat. The instant she knew I was going to set her down, she screamed loud enough I thought the windows might shatter. I kept her in my arms.

“Okay, okay. I suppose a bath isn't going to go over well either?”

She whimpered around her pouted lower lip as she cuddled against my chest. I really needed to change but I could give her a few minutes. I swung my shoulders back and forth as I rubbed her back. She took several sharp, snotty, breaths then wiped her nose on my ivory shirt.

“Gee, thanks.” I glanced down and below the yellow snot streak was a pale pink wet spot. *Oh, thank God.* Not that a new tooth was better than the flu, but at least I could make her feel a little better. Baby Orajel was a *wonderful* product, and Chey actually didn't mind the taste.

I kissed her head. “Let's both get changed, and then Daddy will make everything better.”

Even with the Orajel Chey didn't want me to put her down, only eating half a jar of chicken noodle, which was one of her favorites. She sat in my lap as I ate leftover Chicken Fettuccine, doing her best to grab my fork, the noodles, the plate. It was like trying to eat around a starving monkey, only this monkey spit out the piece of noodle I gave her.

After dinner I went to put her down for the night, and the second I stepped into her room she went off again.

“Cry all you want, you're not sleeping with me.” I kissed her cheeks, which brought the decibel level up a few notches. I had read not to coddle your baby when they were like this. I did it anyway, rubbing her back until she relaxed before laying her in her crib.

I grabbed the baby monitor before shutting her door. I could feel a headache coming on and it was only going to get worse once I balanced my checkbook, and read and signed the new safety regulations the school district adopted. Oh, crap, I left them in the car.

I put my slippers on, opened the door, and groaned at the fat drops of water falling from the sky. Of course, the umbrella was in the car. I raced out, unlocked the trunk and grabbed my messenger bag. Just as I was about to slam the trunk, I saw the plum colored bag Mr. O’Keefe had given Chey shoved behind the toolbox. I’d forgotten about it, maybe conveniently. I yanked it out and darted back inside, managing to only get wet, not soaked.

I set everything on the table then stripped off my T-shirt. Water dripped off my hair and down my back. *Brrr*. Maybe a little soaked—and now cold.

After depositing my wet shirt in the laundry room, I went back to the table and stared at Chey’s gift for several minutes. Or rather the bag. I knew I was being a coward. But what if it was something special, something he had put some thought into?

I pulled the bag over and leaned my head down to peek inside. I breathed a sigh of relief. It was a stuffed animal. I drew the purple dog out of the bag and suddenly the room was full of stars.

*Dang*. Not just a stuffed animal. I’d seen these advertised, and every time I saw the commercial I thought; *Chey would love that*, but then I would forget until the next time I saw the commercial. I squeezed until I found the switch and it shut off. I set it on the table and stared at it. Now I would have to thank him personally. I let my head fall onto the stuffed dog, and stars lit the air again.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER FOUR

I passed Amy off to her mom for the second time this week. I was more than a little disappointed she had sent her daughter to school still sick. Poor girl hadn't even made it two hours before she was feverish and complaining she didn't feel well.

“Hopefully she'll be better by Monday,” I told her with a forced smile.

The starchy woman appeared rather put out, and didn't say one word as she wrestled her daughter against her shoulder and left. I shook my head at her back. I couldn't understand why some people had kids when they obviously didn't have time for them.

I was growing tired of sick kids, and irresponsible parents, and was thankful I had a whole weekend before I had to deal with them again. I loved all the kids in my class, even the naughty ones like Eric, but every now and then, I needed a break. This was one of those rare times.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Eric throwing a box of crayons at Aleese, and of course she screamed. Why couldn't Eric get the flu? That would probably upset the whole dynamics of the universe. I swear there was a cosmic law that stated every class had to have a bully. Last year it had been a girl named Keeva, who had been six going on seven, instead of five going on six. And everything had been beneath her, including her classmates. This year it was Eric, who loved to make girls cry, and seemed perfectly content in time out.

\*\*\*\*\*

Riana was being a big help while we waited for her father to pick her up. She had put all the art supplies away and even picked up the little pieces of paper off the floor. Now she was helping me put the chairs up on the tables.

Lily walked in and smiled when she saw my little helper. “Did you get a chance to sign the new safety protocol?”

“Sorry, I forgot to drop them at the office this morning. I've got them right here.” I pulled the manila envelope from my bag and handed it to her.

“You’re not the only one. I figured I’d just come around and collect them before the weekend.”

The door handle rattled and I ran over to let Mr. O’Keefe in. He had his sister with him, and the second Riana saw her she squealed and tackled her with a hug.

“Aunt Kim wants to know if you want to spend the night with her?”

Riana nodded enthusiastically.

“All right, go get your coat and backpack.” Mr. O’Keefe gestured to the coat area and Riana hustled over so fast she tripped and fell into the cubbies.

“I’m okay.” She waved a hand out and we all laughed.

“Mr. Tucco, this is my sister, Kim, Riana’s aunt obviously.” Mr. O’Keefe stepped aside and Kim stuck out her hand.

I shook it. “We didn’t get a chance to meet last week; you were in and out so fast. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

She smiled and fanned her face. “Sorry about that. It’s been a crazy few weeks. Riana seems to love your class. She’s always talking about you and your *cool* art projects.”

“Well, I don’t know how *cool* they are, but thank you. I try to keep them entertained while educating at the same time.” I clasped my hands behind my back and realized I was rocking on my feet and stopped.

“They are cool. Today we made a zoo out of paper. The animals stand up and everything. See?” Riana ran over to the table where our 3-D zoo resided. They followed her then her dad picked up a green giraffe with gold stars for spots.

“This *is* cool. Which one is yours?” He turned the giraffe around in his hands then set it back down as Riana grabbed her pink and purple zebra.

“Wow, that’s great. You got the stripes perfect, honey. Don’t you wish zebras actually came in these colors? How neat would that be?” He smiled and held the zebra out in his hand for her to put back.

“Oh, that would be sooo cool. I wish I could see a real one.” She sighed as she set her creation back in the Popsicle stick pen.

“I promise as soon as the weather’s nice again we’ll go to the zoo. Maybe we can convince Mr. Tucco and Chey to come with us?”

She grinned and nodded while I gaped stupidly. I had a feeling I would be doing a lot of that around him. He seemed to have a way of surprising me. Riana looked at me expectantly.

“Um, yeah, maybe.” I glanced quickly at Lily, who was sitting at my desk thumbing through some books there, and either not paying attention or feigning disinterest. Riana was clapping her approval.

“Ready, sweetie? I’m sure Andy is wondering if we got lost.” Kim held out her hand and Riana ran over and took it. “I’ll give you a call tomorrow.”

Mr. O’Keefe nodded and waved at his daughter as they left. As soon as the door closed he turned to me with a mischievous look on his face.

“I forgot to thank you for the nightlight. Thank you.” I glanced nervously at Lily but she was now reading *Clifford the Big Red Dog*. I had the feeling she wasn’t actually reading though. He was still looking at me like he had a secret and I was beginning to get a little uncomfortable.

“Since I’m alone, and really not sure I want to be, I wondered if I could talk you and Chey into dinner tonight.” He tipped his head and his expression changed, becoming soft and maybe a little pensive. I didn’t even have to think about my answer. There was only one right one, even if it wasn’t the one I wanted to give.

“I’m sorry, Mr. O’Keefe—”

“Marcus.”

“Mr. O’Keefe, I just can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?” He said it so quietly I almost didn’t hear him.

“Can’t.”

“Mr. O’Keefe, can I borrow Mr. Tucco for a minute so I can get out of here? We’ll only be a moment.” Lily smiled as he nodded then ticked her head towards the central area. I followed her out. She grabbed my shirt and dragged me into Mrs. Scott’s second grade classroom causing me to stumble into the wall.



“Do you have the flu?” She laid the back of her hand on my cheek. “You don’t feel like you have a fever.”

I ducked away from her touch and shook my head at her. “What? I feel fine.”

“Mm, I thought maybe you were feverish since you turned down that nice and fairly handsome man’s invitation.” Her voice ended in an accusatory tone that made even me squirm. She laid her hand on my arm. “Angel, it’s been over a year, time to get out and live again.”

I couldn’t believe what she was saying to me. She knew about Todd, heck the whole school knew about my being dumped since I had taken time off, and then spent a few weeks in mopey mode. I ate a lot of cupcakes, cookies, and salads that appeared mysteriously on my desk during that time. I guess everyone thought since I was a man I could very possibly starve of a broken heart. But Lily had never stepped into my personal life before.

I didn’t realize I was concentrating on my loafers, shaking my head, until Lily spoke again.

“Angelo Tucco, I have a fair idea how your mind works. Let me see if I have this right.”

She took a breath and straightened her dark blue dress as if she was about to speak in front of an audience. I crossed my arms over my chest and waited, actually wanting to hear what she came up with. The woman was incredibly intuitive and had guessed I was gay before I even told her. When I wouldn’t stop fidgeting at my interview, she touted the district’s policy on sexual discrimination letting me know it was not tolerated. Her way of telling me she knew and was fine with who I was.

She tapped her dark finger to her lips then spoke. “The district does not police what teachers do off campus, provided said activities are legal. That includes befriending parents. However, we will step in if you’re caught necking in the parking lot or kissing in the cubbies. So don’t do that.” She pointed a finger at me trying to look firm but her face was triumphant if not amused.

“But he’s a parent.” It was a straw grab and one I needed a solid resolution to.

“And you’re both adults. So go forth and fornicate, Angel—just not on school grounds,” she said slyly.

I gasped. “I’m not...”

She laughed as she turned and walked towards the library, waving the manila envelope over her shoulder. “I made you think about it though, didn’t I?”

I couldn’t believe she had just given me permission to go *fornicate* with a parent. I chuckled in spite of the fact I knew I was blushing madly. I was pretty sure she had just overstepped the boundaries of principal-teacher relations. And dangit, now I *was* thinking. Thinking of all the possibilities an evening with Mr. O’Keefe, Marcus, could hold. Heck, I didn’t even know if he was gay.

I supposed by the end of the evening I might have my answer. At least I hoped so. That thought had my heart racing a little. I went back into my classroom feeling awfully giddy for a twenty-six-year-old.

He turned from the construction paper zoo, his hands shooting behind his back as if he had been caught touching precious art. He smiled tentatively at me and seeing him nervous, was my undoing.

“Yes,” I blurted out, and sighed at how good it felt to let that word free.

His brow furrowed. “Yes?”

“To dinner.” It was a whiplash style turnaround from *I can’t to hell yeah* and I watched to see what his response would be.

His palmed the back of his neck as a huge smile broke out across his face.

“One condition.” I straightened the chairs on a table to stop from staring at him. It wasn’t easy because now my mind was thinking about him in *that* way and my eyes kept roving to places they shouldn’t. I was going to kill Lily.

He nodded and walked towards me, apparently not worried about my condition in the slightest. His smile morphed into this sexy smirk. When he let those lips out to play... *okay, breathe, Tucco.*

I cleared my throat. “Where was I? Oh, condition. I’d rather order in and eat at the house, you know, since Chey goes to sleep early.”

He had stopped a foot away from me and his scent was raising havoc throughout my body. I'd forgotten how seductive a man could smell and he smelled divine. Musky and male in all the best ways. *God, let him be gay.*

“That sounds like a fine condition.” He put his hands in the pockets of his long coat and began playing with his keys. “Are you ready then? I'll just follow you.”

“Um.” I glanced around the room. “Yeah, I'm ready.”

If my body was any indication, I was more than ready. I managed to get my lungs working efficiently again as I collected my things. My pulse was another matter entirely. It wouldn't stop racing through my body, all of my body. This could end up being the most embarrassing evening of my life if he proved to be straight.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER FIVE

He stayed in his black Accord while I picked up Chey. I was thankful she was in a very good mood, and *talked* all the way home managing to keep me grounded. It had been over seven years since I had been on a date. No, this wasn't a date. Just two guys having dinner. Okay, that sounded like a date, but I refused to look at it that way. Still...

I was so nervous by the time we reached the house I was afraid I was going to drop Chey as I unbuckled her. Suddenly she squealed right in my ear at the same time a hand landed on my back. I rose up and cracked my head on the doorframe of my old Volvo.

"Ow." I hissed and clutched the back of my head.

"Are you okay?" Marcus rubbed my arm like I was a kid needing reassurance. Despite the pain, I didn't miss how nice his fingers felt fondling through my jacket.

"Yeah, just stupid." I grimaced, embarrassed, and he chuckled.

"I'll get her. You work on getting in the house without killing yourself."

"I think I can do that."

I continued to rub my head as I collected our bags while he picked up Chey. She immediately smacked her hands to his face and giggled. Obviously, she remembered him. And judging by his enamored look he was pretty darn infatuated with her too.

"This is quaint," Marcus commented as we stepped through the door.

"Yeah, if tiny is the new quaint. It's what we could afford and at least it's solid."

"Like a bunker. You're definitely safe if we get bombed."

I laughed and shrugged over my cinderblock house. If it hadn't been a Fannie Mae home, I never would have been able to keep it after Todd left. I thanked my lucky stars for that one every time I paid the mortgage.

With my head somewhere in the clouds, I managed to make it all the way to the kitchen without harming myself. I set my bag down and turned.

“Mind if I change?”

He didn't take his eyes off Chey. “Nope, what's your address? I'll call for pizza, if that's okay with you?”

I pulled a piece of yesterday's mail off the counter and plopped it on the table. “Mmm, pizza works, I'm starving. Just nothing with pineapple—or anchovies.”

“No anchovies? Your dad doesn't know what he's missing.” He rubbed his nose against Chey's making her giggle and squirm.

I made a face. “Yuck. Pizza should taste like pizza, not fish and salt.”

“Yeah, I don't like anchovies either.” He glanced at me, his green eyes sparkling.

“Brat.” I shook my head and went to change out of my slacks and dress shirt.

As I changed into jeans and a T-shirt, I couldn't keep the grin off my face. I wasn't sure where the easy banter was coming from, it wasn't like me, but I loved it. I washed my face and hands then put on fresh deodorant and headed back out.

The second I hit the hall I could hear Chey squealing with laughter. I found them on the couch with Marcus's lips on my daughter's belly as he zrbitted her. He looked up when I walked in.

“Sorry, I couldn't resist.” He rearranged her shirt as if he had been caught doing something he shouldn't have. I couldn't help finding that sweet. Maybe if his daughter wasn't so well adjusted I wouldn't have had the same reaction, yet I felt completely comfortable leaving Chey with him. That, right there, said a lot.

“She loves belly zrbits, and neck zrbits, and cheek zrbits. Pretty much any zrbbit.” I grinned and sat down next to them.

Chey leaned towards me. “Da, kee.” I stared at my daughter. I could feel the lump forming in my throat over that one syllable. Marcus must have noticed my shock, as he handed her over.

“It's the first time she's said it?”

I nodded, knowing I should be elated, but the softer emotions pouring over me were overwhelming. Chey had no idea what she had just done, and demanded her kiss by pinching my cheeks.

I bent my head and kissed her wet lips trying really hard not to become a blubbering idiot. Marcus laid his arm over the back of the couch then his fingers trailed through my short hair. It was a barely there touch, yet it sent a tremor through me.

“I cried for an hour the first time Riana said it,” he said softly.

I hugged Chey to my shoulder and hid behind her while I reined in my scattered emotions.

“I’m trying really hard not to, and you go and say that.” I took a few shallow breaths.

Chey began to squirm so I loosened my grip.

“Sorry. Who ever thought Da would have so much power?”

His fingers feathered through my hair again and suddenly all I wanted was to lean against him. To share this with someone who understood.

I smiled as I looked at Chey drooling all over her hand. “Yeah. What am I going to do when she’s a teenager?”

He groaned and flopped his head back. “Don’t even go there. I’m dreading it already.”

I glanced at him and grinned. “They certainly have us around their little fingers don’t they?”

He leaned over and ran a finger down Chey’s cheek. “Little monsters, that’s what girls are. You know what you’re doing don’t you?”

Chey looked at him with her big expressive eyes as if she had been caught doing something naughty, and we both started laughing. She kept looking at us like we had just figured out her deepest secrets and that made us laugh harder.

Finally, her eyes squinted and she laughed too. The doorbell rang and Marcus straightened up, wiping off his eyes.

“I’ve got it.” He went to the door, pulling his wallet out.

Somewhere in the middle of our hysterics he had laid his forehead on my shoulder and wrapped his fingers around my neck. I had been laughing so hard I missed it. Now that he wasn't there, my shoulder, my neck, my arm felt surprisingly cold and lonely.

I leaned over and smooched Chey's neck. "Thank you, baby girl. You've already made this night special," I whispered then swung her and I off the couch.

I was on my third piece of chicken carbonara pizza while Chey thoroughly enjoyed her first spaghetti escapade, managing to get sauce even in her ears. Marcus was making it hard to keep my eyes on my daughter however. He looked so relaxed, so happy, and so sexy sitting at my table. Every time he licked his lips or sucked on his fingers, I wanted to do it for him. I think he knew it too, as his movements slowed considerably the longer we ate.

I had become pretty confident in the last hour that he was gay, or at least bi, but I needed to know for sure. I didn't think I could hang with him only to find out he was straight. I liked him too much.

"How long were you married?" I picked up a piece of chicken off my plate and popped it in my mouth trying to come off casual. It was a normal dinner type question, wasn't it?

"Six years. We were married our senior year of high school."

My head snapped up and I found him watching me with a raw intensity that might have made me blush, had his admission not shocked me to my core.

"You don't have to tell me, but I'm curious—"

"Do you always give everyone an out? If you want to ask a question just ask." He wiped his fingers off on his paper towel.

"Yeah, I guess I always do. So what happened?" I leaned back and pushed my plate off to the side.

"Claudia was a dare. A drunken one at that. Never a good combination. Throw in a fair chunk of the football team, one gay boy trying to convince everyone he was bi, and you have a disaster in the making. I used a condom that was too small and it tore. Marrying her was the right thing to do in a

backwoods Montana town. Riana was born five months after the wedding, and two weeks after we graduated.” He wrinkled his nose. “We never loved each other but we tried to make it work, in the beginning anyway. Then Claudia pushed the boundaries of infidelity, got caught up with the wrong crowd, and involved in drugs. We had a really nasty fight and I got drunk for the first time in years.” He shook his head then laid a hand on his forehead as if it all gave him a headache. Maybe it did.

“I don’t remember any of it. We were already divorced when Toby arrived nine weeks premature and addicted to meth. I didn’t believe he was mine, I couldn’t even remember having sex with her, but a paternity test proved he was.” Marcus sighed and scrubbed his face hard. He leaned his arms on the table and fingered his pizza crusts.

“After the divorce I was kinda lost, newly single dad, two kids. Claudia disappeared, didn’t even show for the custody hearing. I had left the kids with Claudia’s folks and when I arrived home, Riana was at the neighbors in hysterics, and my in-laws’ RV was gone along with my son. She was such a smart girl. She knew what they were doing was wrong and broke away, running right into the neighbor’s house. Anyway, we moved here four days later, and I’ve had a private investigator searching for them for the past month.” He glanced at Chey and smiled, drawing my eyes to her. “It looks like someone is ready for bed.”

She was sound asleep in her high chair, covered in sticky orange sauce and tiny bits of noodles. She was a contented mess.

“Dang, I wanted to give her a bath.” Her highchair was in need of a bath itself. I glanced down, so was the floor.

“Between the two of us, I think we can get her cleaned up and to bed.” Marcus began removing her bib. I was still thinking about everything he had said. He had lost six years of his life because of a stupid bet. But in those six years he had gained a son and a daughter. Suddenly our lives seemed somehow similar.

They weren’t of course, since I had been happy with Todd and he had been stuck in a lie. I couldn’t even imagine what he had gone through living with someone he didn’t love.



“Marcus, if—”

“Say that again, my name, say it again.” He set his hands on the table and stared at me esuriently.

It was my turn to smirk as I leaned over the table. “Marcus,” I drawled out.

His eyes closed as his mouth moved, like I had just given him a tasty morsel. He opened his eyes and my libido made a valiant attempt at resurrecting itself. God, he looked like he wanted to eat me.

“You have the sweetest, sexiest voice. It’s like a caress when you say my name.”

I opened my mouth and all that came out was a squeak. No one had ever said anything like that to me. I could feel the heat rising up my cheeks. Why did I always have to blush?

“Sorry. That was probably too much. I’m a bit out of practice. I do love my name on your lips though.” He gave me a sexy half-smile then stood and lifted Chey into his arms.

“No, um, its, I—thank you,” I finally managed. So much for being articulate. *And you’re his daughter’s teacher for God’s sake.*

I reached out to take Chey and he turned away.

“I’ve got her, just lead the way.” His smile was soft and teasing.

“You just want to look at my ass.” I couldn’t believe I had just said that. *Good for me.*

“Oh, sass!” He chuckled as I headed down the hall. “I can’t lie though. I do like looking at your ass. It’s... very nice, and you tend to swing your hips when you walk.”

I didn’t dare look back at him, knowing I would blush furiously. “I do not swing my hips.” I said indignantly, trying very hard to walk straight. *Did I really swing my hips?*

“Mmm, yeah, you do.”

I bit my cheek to keep from groaning. *Talk about a sexy voice, dang.* I tried hard not to imagine what it would sound like when he was really turned on. I couldn’t help it though. Would it go deeper, be more breathy, or would it just

get huskier? Jesus, he had my daughter in his arms for God's sake. I flipped the light on as we entered Chey's room.

“Wow, did you paint the walls?”

I looked over my shoulder at him while I pulled out a diaper and the tub of baby wipes. He was turning slowly, his mouth open. I felt a flush of pride over the pastel forest on her walls.

“Yeah. It was kinda like therapy after she came home.”

He brought her over and laid her carefully on the changing table. She didn't stir, not even a *num*.

“Sounds like there's some heartache in your past too. You know, I listen better than I talk.”

I glanced at him as I removed Chey's overalls. “You told me yours, now I tell you mine?”

He shook his head. “I didn't mean it like that.”

I sighed. “I know. Sorry, it still hurts and it's hard to talk about.”

He ran a hand down my arm before reaching for a baby wipe. As we cleaned most of the orange from one dead to the world girl, I realized I wanted to talk to Marcus. He had opened himself up to me and suddenly I wanted to give him a part of my past too. Maybe opening up would alleviate some of the deep ache I still held on to.

I picked up Chey and Marcus slipped her arms into her sleeper then zipped her up. She opened her eyes for a second as I cuddled and kissed her goodnight. They closed again with a few smacks of her tongue. The spaghetti had obviously won this time but she'd had a blast during the battle. I laid her down and pressed the plush dog, lighting the room with diffused stars. I turned around and caught Marcus watching me.

“You're a great dad.”

“Thank you. So are you,” I replied.

Something in his expression had me looking closer. I didn't like what I saw. I knew what self-loathing looked like. I'd seen it on myself in the mirror more than once.

“Yeah—that’s why I *let* my son be kidnapped.” His lips disappeared before he shook his head and walked out.

I gaped at the empty doorway. I couldn’t help it, what he just said was ludicrous. I chased after him. “I can’t believe you blame yourself.”

“Believe it. It was *my* fault.”

I grabbed his arm and pulled. He could have kept walking, I wouldn’t have been able to stop him, but he didn’t.

“You can’t blame yourself for something you had no control over.”

He sneered, his eyes hardening then he collapsed back against the wall. “I’m a horrible person.” He dropped his head into his hands. “I wanted the judge to give full custody to Claudia. I didn’t want the kids. When she didn’t show up, and they were automatically remitted to me, I got in my car and drove off. I was fifty miles away when I turned back. I couldn’t leave them to become wards of the state, or worse, end up with her parents. They barely take care of themselves for God’s sake.” He lifted his head and hugged his arms around himself. “It’s just so hard some days. Between worrying about Riana and worrying about whether Toby is getting the care he needs. I don’t want him with them but I’m not sure I can take care of him either.”

I guess I wasn’t the only one who needed someone to talk to. I knew he was a good man and even good men doubted themselves at times.

“You went back. That makes you a good person, and of course, you’ll be able to do right by him. I don’t see you as the type of person who gives up easily.” I glanced down, somewhat remiss. “I, um, almost put Chey up for adoption. I filled the paperwork out and everything. I thought I didn’t want her. Then I suddenly didn’t want anyone else to have her. What if she ended up with someone who couldn’t take care of her, or treated her badly? I threw the paperwork away and went and picked up my daughter. I’ve never regretted that decision.” I looked up at him. “Do you regret turning around?”

He met my eyes and understanding dawned slowly across his face. “No.” He shook his head. “But what kind of father doesn’t want his kids?”

I leaned against the wall next to him. “I bet more than we can imagine. Some run and never come back.” My point hit its mark and he sighed as a sad smile touched his lips.

“Thank you for that. I don’t feel I deserve it, but thank you anyway.” He glanced at the door a few feet away. “I should probably go.”

“You still owe me an ear.” I didn’t want him to leave yet. He needed someone and I was beginning to believe I just might too.

He looked at me and nodded as he uncoiled himself from the wall.

“Wine?” I asked, and he wrinkled his nose. I chuckled and tried again. “Beer?” That made him smile. Not a wine man. Good to know. I headed to the kitchen.

“You’re wiggling your hips.”

I threw my hands over my butt and tossed a snitty look over my shoulder. He snickered, and my heart swelled over the fact I could make him laugh and forget himself, if only for a moment.

I retrieved two bottles from the fridge and turned around to find Marcus undoing his belt. I must have looked surprised, and, well, honestly I was wondering what he was doing. He gave me a rakish half-grin as he slowly pulled his belt through the loops on his charcoal slacks.

“You don’t mind do you?” He paused to lick his lips. “Getting comfortable, I mean.”

With the heated look he was giving me, I wasn’t sure how comfortable he was planning to get.

I managed to shake my head. “N-no.” *I can’t believe I just stuttered.*

His tie had disappeared while I was changing and now he undid a few buttons of his shirt, drawing my eyes right to his chest. Or rather, the bevy of tight auburn curls amassed on the slip of skin he’d exposed. I’d never been with anyone who had a hairy chest, and I’d never really thought whether it was sexy or not. However, I seemed to be swiftly developing this odd hankering... I wanted to run my fingers, my cheek, my tongue through that kinky profusion. I bet he tasted like he smelled. I sucked up the escaping saliva and swallowed.

He pushed up his sleeves and exposed well-covered arms and my skin tingled. Before I ended up with an embarrassing hard-on, over his body hair of

all things, I turned and headed to the couch. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of his belly as he tugged his shirt loose. *Oh, happy day...*

*Jesus, who are you and what did you do with Angel?* This wasn't me. I wasn't an instigator. I was more comfortable letting guys lead and quietly got off on my partner's pleasure. I liked it that way. I *wanted* it that way.

I set one of the beers down, opened the other, then chugged down half the bottle. I sat down on the couch and pulled my knees up. Marcus opened his beer and settled next to me, turning sideways and pulling a leg under him.

Boy, he was a handsome man, and he was sitting on my couch looking at me as if I were someone special, someone he wanted to know. What if he ended up bored with me? He would eventually leave me just like Todd had, like everyone in my life had.

"Tell me your story. How is it you have a daughter?"

I looked at him dumbly for a moment, hugging my knees tight.

"Okay, start with something small. Tell me about your parents."

I looked away and cleared my throat. That was definitely not something small. It had been over three years now, and I could talk about them. At least I thought I could. I turned my head and laid it on my knees as I thought of where to start.

"Jesus, Angel, do you have anyone?"

I felt the familiar ache in my chest that I knew as loss. But I wasn't alone, not really.

"I have Chey," I told him.

He rubbed his lips and looked away.

"My parents, they were killed by a drunk driver three years ago. I miss them, but I'm luckier than some. I only have fond memories of them. A day never went by that I didn't know they loved me. My father..." I smiled and shook my head. "He's a big reason I have Chey and the real reason I chose to be a teacher. He was always lending me out to watch everyone's kids. I hated him for that. But, one day I went home upset that Todd was pushing so hard to have a child. I wasn't ready and I thought my parents would be on my side." I

chuckled. “They weren’t. My dad told me it would make him sad to know I hadn’t shared my life with a child. That he didn’t know anyone who would make a better father. I don’t know about that, but he was so adamant he succeeded in swaying me. I do have one regret. I wish they could have met their granddaughter, at least once.” I swallowed and took a few deep breaths, proud of myself for not crying.

“I lost both my parents too, but I’m thankful I still have my sister and brother. They make things easier.”

“What happened?” I asked, jumping at the chance to learn more about him and give my haggard emotions a chance to settle.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER SIX

He picked at the label on his beer. “Mom died of breast cancer when I was twelve and Dad—he died when I was twenty-one of a brain aneurysm in his sleep.” He shrugged and took a swallow from the bottle. “It was one of those fluke things that can’t be explained.”

I curled my legs underneath me and leaned into the cushions. “I’d say I’m sorry but I know how much I hate that myself,” I said, tipping my beer to my lips.

He lifted his in salute then took a huge swallow. I was beginning to really like Marcus. He wasn’t perfect and didn’t pretend to be. Yet, even with his trials, he had an ease about him that made me comfortable.

“Do you want to hear Chey’s story?” I asked.

“Only if you want to tell it.” He adjusted which brought his knee against my foot. Such a simple touch, yet I could feel it all the way up my leg.

I nodded. “I do. First, I’ll answer the most common question. Chey’s mom was a surrogate.”

“I’ve always wondered where people find surrogates.”

“Surrogates-are-us,” I told him with a perfectly straight face.

“Seriously?” he asked, his face thoughtful.

I chuckled. “No. But there are websites and personal ads everywhere. We found Erica through a personal ad. She’d already been a surrogate so we felt pretty comfortable with her.”

“How long were you and Todd together?” he broke in.

I rolled my eyes over to Marcus. “Are you going to let me tell the story?” However, I was rather impressed he had remembered his name, since I had mentioned it only once and in passing.

He gave me a sheepish look. “Sorry, bad habit.” He held his hand out. “Please, I promise I won’t interrupt again.”

“I seriously doubt that, but I’ll try to forgive you when you do.”

He stuck his tongue out at me. I chuckled and went on, telling him about Todd wanting to be a father, my not wanting to be a father, and how it took three years and my own father's comment to convince me otherwise. He laughed over how I ended up Chey's biological father by default. Then I grew quiet for several moments as I approached her birth and Todd's betrayal. I didn't know how to voice it without my own emotions muddling it up.

Marcus noticed my apprehension and squeezed my foot. He then went and got us each another beer while I grappled with my thoughts. When he returned I took a healthy sip and went on, hoping I could keep things on a light note.

"I was about to leave the school when Erica called to let me know she was in labor. She'd already left a message on Todd's phone, but I left another one. I couldn't believe how excited I was. I drove straight to the hospital with a grin cemented on my face. *Our* child was entering the world, how amazing was that? An hour flew by and still no Todd. I called him again and it went right to voicemail. I didn't think anything of it at the time. He worked construction and he left his phone in his truck most days. Another hour later, I began to worry, and called his foreman. He told me he had left some time ago, something about his kid being born." I felt a mild ache developing above my eyes and realized I was frowning. I rubbed the creases from my forehead and went on.

"Not long after that Chey was born and I couldn't believe he had missed it. I waited and waited and he never showed. I blew up his phone, our friend's phones, but no one had seen him. I panicked, thinking he'd been in an accident. I was unlocking the door of my car when he texted me." I glanced at my hands wrapped tightly around the bottle. Marcus carefully moved his leg against my feet and I took the offer, wiggling my toes under his thigh. It was just a small comfort but it felt immense right then.

"Four little words, that when strung together sent me to my knees; *I can't do this*. That was it. That was all I was worth. When I got home his stuff was gone and I never heard from him again. He disappeared, left his job, even our friends *said* they didn't know where he was."

I took another long draw from my bottle remembering the sting of *our* friends lying to me. That they would do that in order to maintain Todd's favor had hurt deeply.



“Man, that’s messed up.” Marcus blew out a noisy breath as he scratched his head.

“Tell me about it. The most fucked up thing was me. For two days, I hated that little girl. I blamed it all on her. That’s when I almost put her up for adoption. Of course it wasn’t her fault, none of it.” I set my empty bottle on the table and went to stretch my legs out. Marcus pulled them onto his lap and began rubbing my calves as he looked tensely off into the corner. I wasn’t sure what he was staring at until he jutted his chin.

“I take it that’s Todd?”

I glanced at the pictures on the bookshelf. “Yeah, that’s him.”

“How long were you two together?” His hands stilled as he turned to me.

“As long as you were married. Six years.”

He blinked. “That’s a bit of a coincidence.”

I slid down, getting more comfortable. “I thought so too.” I closed my eyes as he went back to massaging my legs. The man had talented hands.

“Tired?”

I shook my head. “No.” I wedged my arm behind my head and opened my eyes. “It’s been a long time since anyone over the age of six has touched me. I didn’t realize how much I missed it.” I couldn’t believe how easy that was to admit to him.

He leaned over, supporting himself against the back of the couch. “I’d be more than happy to touch you anywhere that feels lonely.”

I snorted a laugh. “Talk about your all-time cheesy lines. Was that supposed to be sexy?”

He leaned on his hand and smiled. “It sounded better in my head. I told you, I’m out of practice.”

“And am I just someone to practice on?” *Jesus, why’d I say that?* Actually, I knew why I had said it. He was way out of my league, and honestly, I was afraid of getting hurt again.

His eyes narrowed. “What made you say that?” he asks quietly.

I looked away, unable to meet his gaze. “Are you kidding? You’re masculine, and gorgeous, and sexy, and—”

“You think I’m gorgeous and sexy?” he asked dubiously.

*He had to be kidding.* “Well, *yeah*, and guys like you don’t go for guys like me.”

“Guys like me?” He curled around my legs and groaned. “Jesus, Angel, do you have any idea what you do to me? I’ve been having wet dreams about you for two weeks, and I haven’t had a wet dream in ten years. I’ve taken to wearing *really* tight underwear so I don’t get arrested for walking around with a hard-on at a grade school. Do you know how uncomfortable that is?”

I slapped my hand over my mouth to keep from laughing, but it didn’t help. The vision was spectacular, and he definitely would get arrested for being a pervert. He turned his head and grinned coyly. My whole body flushed as my libido stood up and shook the dust off. *Hello, shy boy.*

“So, where do we go next?”

He bit his lip as his fingers dug into my calves. “Bed?”

Okay, he’s not *that* shy. His suggestion was tempting but I wasn’t ready yet. Well, mentally anyway.

“I was thinking more along the lines of movie, popcorn, cuddling.”

He leaned against the back of the couch again and looked at me. “I could cuddle.”

Never in the history of the world had a man uttered a less likely phrase. Cuddle didn’t belong on those lips.

I chuckled. “All right, stud. Movies are behind the bookcase. Pick one, I’ll make popcorn.”

“Oh, now I’m a stud.” He leered at me and I scrambled off the couch making him laugh.

I straightened my clothes ceremoniously. “Yeah, you’re a stud.”

He glanced to the black bookcase. “How do I get to your movies? Is there a secret passage or something?” He turned back to me. “Now I’m curious what might be in your collection to warrant such measures.”

“That was here when we bought the house. There are a few other hidden spots like that. Just push on the bookcase and it clicks open.” I headed to the kitchen then threw over my shoulder. “And no, there are no pornos there.”

“Bedroom?”

“What kind of a kindergarten teacher do you think I am?” I reached for the microwave kettle corn on the top shelf.

“Normal. *Whoa*, cool.”

I looked over and saw him swinging the bookcase in awe. It was kinda cool. I unwrapped the popcorn and tossed it in the microwave.

“I don’t watch porn. That was Todd’s thing and thankfully he took them all with him.” I cleared our plates off the table and set Chey’s tray in the sink while the popcorn popped. I stared at the crusted tray. I’d deal with it in the morning. I was sure it would require scraping with a spatula in order to get it clean.

I poured the popcorn in a bowl and turned to find Marcus holding a DVD case against his chest.

I rolled my eyes. “Really? Patrick Swayze in drag?”

“What? Is it truly awful? I’ve never seen it. Actually, you have a lot of movies I didn’t dare watch while I was married.”

“It’s entertaining. At least you didn’t pick *Rocky Horror*. Todd liked to go to the midnight showing and I can recite every-damn-word.”

I snatched *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* out of his hands. He grabbed me and yanked me against his chest, brushing his lips over mine. *Uhhnhh*. I had to pinch my fingers around the rim of the popcorn bowl to stop myself from dropping it. He had done it playfully, not realizing, but I knew, and wanted to toss everything and make this a proper first kiss. His lips left me much too quickly.

“Thank you. I feel like I’ve been shackled in a closet for six years and I’m finally back in the daylight again.” He nuzzled my neck, lingering for a moment. Someone should bottle his scent. They’d make a fortune. His lips touched down on my neck sending a shiver down my back. Okay, he could watch anything he darn well wanted.

He leaned back and looked lazily at me. “Bed?”

“I have one.” I was ready to give him anything.

He laughed. “Maybe after the movie.” He laid a kiss on my nose and let me go. He adjusted himself, none too discreetly, and snatched the movie back. I sighed and tried not to crumple to the floor. Bastard. He had known exactly what he was doing.

Halfway through the movie, the popcorn gone, he pulled me down next to him and adjusted me until I was laying partially on his chest with a leg over his. He didn’t say a word, just let out a long hum.

He went back to watching the movie and I closed my eyes reveling in the feel of him, his warmth, his musky scent, *mmmm*, his hard body. God, how did he find the time to work out? I was exhausted the second I walked through the door. I let my hand wander down and bit my lip when I felt the ridges along his stomach. I so wanted to slip my hand under his shirt, but I wasn’t bold enough. I settled for snuggling against him and drowning in his masculine scent.

\*\*\*\*

“Todd, it’s too early.” I squirmed away from his hand rubbing my ass.

“I’ll forgive you that—once.”

My eyes bolted open and I looked into Marcus’s stern face. Oh, crap. We’d fallen asleep on the couch and I seemed to be sprawled across him. Not seemed, I *was* sprawled across him.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” I scrambled to get up and his arms cinched around me.

“Oh, no. You’re not getting away that easily. Obviously I have yet to make a withstanding impression on you, and I aim to rectify that.” His face turned fierce and I froze. *Oh, help me.* He was fricken hot with his face flushed from sleep and edged in anger. Unfortunately, I wasn’t into punishment and even verbal abuse left me shaking at times.

“How?” I asked hesitantly.

He gripped my ass and hoisted me up his chest until we were face to face. His hand wormed up then grasped the nape of my neck.

I pushed on his shoulders half-heartedly, not really wanting to get away. Wow, his shoulders were so well muscled I couldn't even feel any bones beneath his warm skin. I was going to faint when I finally saw him without his shirt. He tugged on the back of my neck.

“But I have morning breath. Just let me—”

“I. Don't. Care,” he said, his tone coarse.

I opened my mouth to retort and his tongue slid in just before his lips crushed against mine. In an instant I didn't care anymore either. His kiss was harsh, possessive, and so exciting. However, after only a moment his hold loosened and I felt him withdraw.

“Angel, is this okay?”

It was until he stopped. “Yeah, why?”

“Because you're not responding—at all.” He closed his eyes and ran his hand through his hair then dropped his arm across his face. “I understand if I don't excite you, just tell me and I'll leave—”

I pressed my fingers to his mouth causing his arm to lift and his eyes to open. He had caught me off-guard but I didn't think I was being nonresponsive. I could feel every inch of him beneath me, even his heart, which was beating rather fast... and every inch of me screamed to feel his skin. Even my cock was squirreling in my jeans trying to get out. And that rarely happened with just a kiss.

“No, don't leave. I'm sorry, I was just surprised. Kiss me again—please.”

I saw the doubt creep into his eyes. If I didn't do something I knew he was going to leave. Todd had always said I was horrid at seduction, but he wasn't here. Marcus was, and he didn't know about my shortcomings. I could be sexy, I knew I could.

I bent my head, laying my lips below the hollow of his throat and traveled up, dipping my tongue into the concave. He tasted salty-sweet with a hint of soap, and he smelled heavenly. When I sniffed his neck, making a sound of appreciation, he swallowed.

As my tongue laved up the side to his ear, he sighed deeply. I ran my hand

down to his chest and caressed his nipple, then as my teeth raked his earlobe I squeezed the pert nub.

His hands landed on my ass as he pushed his hips up, his body arching underneath me.

A shot of sensation zinged through my groin and landed in my gut. My fingers clenched, digging into the hard flesh of his pec. He grunted then twisted his head around, capturing my lips roughly.

I wasn't nonresponsive now. I gripped his side while my other hand grabbed his hair. I felt everything at once. His soft hair, the firmness of his body, his warm wet mouth, and his hard length pressed against mine. All the sensation made me dizzy. He sucked my tongue as he ground against me. *Mmm*. Yep, libido just sleeping, thank God.

My hips answered and began rocking. *Damn couch*. I reached down and yanked on his pant leg. He responded and threw his leg over the back of the couch. The closer contact made him groan and me gasp.

Tongues parried, hands groped, and body slid against body. I levered against the back of the couch changing the angle of my thrust, bringing my cock hard against his. His fingers bit into my ass as he threw his head back.

“Oh, fuck, six years. Ah, Angel, I'm going to come.”

I watched his face tense in concentration, as he reached for a release denied too long.

God, it was one of the most erotic things I had ever seen. I felt my own release building as I ground against his length. *Right there... oh, yeah...* I pressed my lips down and wrapped my tongue around his as my throat vibrated in appreciation.

A loud wail cut through the sensuous fog building in my head. Just another minute, Chey, *please*. Her demanding screams continued and my orgasm disappeared, poof.

Marcus groaned then started chuckling. “Damn, so close,” he panted out. “That girl's got impeccable timing.”

“5:45 every morning.” Chey was more reliable than my alarm clock.

I buried my face in his neck and grumbled, my hard-on shrinking as Chey continued to vocalize her discontent. I lifted my head and glanced towards her room with a sigh. Marcus wrapped me in a tight embrace, kissing my temple then let me go.

“Better get her before she breaks our eardrums. She already sent my cock into hiding.” He shook his head. “I swear it’s never been so small.”

I chuckled and reached down, finding him still semi-hard. “Doesn’t feel small to me.” I traced his length with my fingers and he sucked in a breath.

“God, that is *so* not fair.” He seized my wrist.

I bit my lip feeling suddenly very bold. “Chey takes her nap around noon.”

“Is that an invitation into your bed? Because if it is, I’m definitely staying.”

I climbed off him and stood up, pulling my jeans out of my crack. He was looking up at me expectantly, desire still lacing his features.

“Definitely stay.”

Marcus glanced at the clock on the kitchen wall and clapped his hands over his face, groaning. “Six hours.”

I grinned. “You waited six years, what’s six more hours?”

God, they were the longest six hours of my life. Marcus was ruthless. Pressing against me every chance he had, teasing my lips, running his hands down my chest, my ass, and even over my hips. I swear the man was hard the whole time. I wasn’t that far off myself and was downright ruthless to poor Chey.

Of course she didn’t know our motives and had a wonderful time being tickled until she was breathless, and squealing with glee when Marcus swung her around or I bounced her on my knee. She’d never had a better time.

Chey yawned and I glanced at the clock. 11:30, right on cue. I scooped her up and set her in her highchair then heated her turkey noodle and peas. It was a good thing she didn’t judge her food on appearance yet. I couldn’t even taste this one. It looked like it had already been regurgitated once. It was the most awful color of olive green with this yellow sludge on top.

Marcus paced the living room, calling his sister, while I fed Chey. She devoured the glop and finished with a few animal crackers she softened with

copious amounts of drool. I heard his cell hit the glass coffee table and glanced up from wiping Chey's hands.

His tongue was caught between his teeth as he stalked towards me. My breath hitched. I'd never wanted anyone more.

"How's Riana?" I wiped the slime off Chey's chin while she tried to bite the washcloth.

"Excited. Kim and Andy are taking her to a movie then dinner at Chuck E. Cheese." He stopped behind Chey's highchair and fingered her fine hair. She looked up at him and giggled. I couldn't get over how much she liked him.

"Lucky girl." I tossed the washcloth in the sink then lifted Chey out of her chair.

"Lucky Dad." He stepped forward, bending down to kiss me.

"Down boy. She still has to fall asleep."

He changed trajectory and gobbled her neck. She giggled softly then yawned.

I kissed the top of her head and she let herself fall against my chest. "All right, off to bed with you." I headed to her room.

"Mmmm," Marcus hummed loudly from the kitchen.

I wiggled my hips and grinned. "Uncle Marcus likes your dad's butt." I rubbed my lips in her hair, smelling her strawberry baby shampoo. "And I kinda like all of him," I whispered.

Chey was asleep before I even finished with her diaper. I laid her down, and for a second I felt guilty for making her tired so I could have sex. Then I thought about all the parents out there, and seriously doubted I was the first one to do such a thing.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)



## CHAPTER SEVEN

I found Marcus touching a picture of me as a boy wedged between my parents on our old porch swing. When he saw me his hands shot behind his back as they had in my classroom.

“Sorry. I was snooping.”

God, he was adorable when he looked contrite. I rubbed the grin off my face and shook my head.

“I don’t have anything to hide.”

“Cute kid.” He gestured towards the picture.

I shrugged. I had been a gangly, gawky thing. All knees and elbows. “I know better, but thanks.” We had exactly an hour and a half before Chey woke up and I really didn’t want to spend it talking about me as a geeky kid. Marcus perused the pictures for a few more seconds then turned and gave me a rakish grin as he came towards me.

“Let’s try this one more time. Bed?”

“You kinda have a one track mind don’t you? Um...”

I teased him with a confused look as I thought about it a second, tapping a finger to my lips. His grin widened.

I gestured over my shoulder. “I think I have one in the bedroom. Would you like to see it?”

“I’d rather see you on it, naked with your ass in the air.”

*Oh.* Well, the man had waited six years and who was I to deny him *that*?

“Can you give me a few minutes? Bedroom—first door on the right.” I grinned. “Make yourself comfortable.”

He covered the last few feet and snatched me around the waist, pulling me against him. His lips covered mine in a searing kiss as he ran his fingers firmly up my crack giving me a bit of a wedgy. He bit my bottom lip as he let me go.

“Don’t make me wait too long. I have a feeling time is of the essence here and I’d like to take my time.” He turned me and gave me a gentle shove.

I hurried down the hall and into the bathroom, shutting and locking the hall door then the access from the bedroom. I wondered what kind of a lover he was going to be. I'd seen his soft side as well as a rather demanding side too. Not that I cared, I just really wanted to make him happy.

As I stripped out of my clothes, a thought slammed into me. "Crap." I wasn't sure I had any lube or condoms that were any good. For some odd reason Todd had taken most of the sex paraphernalia when he left. All the toys and DVDs were his anyway, but he had taken practically everything.

I fumbled with the child lock on the bottom drawer and finally got it open. I riffling around and found four condoms that were still squishy in their wrapping then I spotted a tube of lube in the melee and grabbed it.

"Ew." That one wouldn't work. Something had punctured the tube and it had leaked all over the corner of the drawer. I chucked it in the trash and shoved the drawer closed with my foot while I checked the medicine cabinet. Bingo. Behind the Tums was a brand new tube of Eros.

I went through my little ritual as fast as I dared then grabbed the lube and condoms before entering the bedroom.

"Ah, umm, nuymmm." I wasn't sure I actually managed words. They were overrated anyway.

Marcus was lying on his side reading my Ted Dekker novel, and absolutely gorgeous, and male, and so hard I could see all the glorious veins pumping to keep him that way. My fingers twitched and I almost dropped the lube.

His chest was carpeted with dark red curls so thick you could barely see his nipples peeking out. Oh, man, his stomach was ripped. A luscious four-pack hunkered into a deep V of muscle. I wiped the drool off my chin and swallowed. *Not out of my league, not out of my league...* If I kept repeating that maybe I could get through this.

He set the book onto the nightstand. "I think there's more to Angelo Tucco than meets the eye. Pretty deep book."

"I read everything. From romance to horror. Gives me something to do." I set everything next to the book and kneeled on the bed.

"Yeah, in your hours of spare time." His hand went to caressing my thigh. I

almost gurgled. He had no idea that was one of my favorite things a man could do.

“Look who’s talking, Mr. Gym.” My voice was fleeing quickly as I raked my eyes over him, appreciating every edge, curve, and ripple.

“Pfft. I don’t have the time or money to work out. Stupid cash hounds think they own me, and pay slave wages to prove it.”

“You’re an accountant?”

“Mm-hm.” He stroked along my belly with the back of his fingers, just grazing my hardening cock. It pulled up tight against my body before bouncing down again. Marcus groaned in his throat. “Enough talking...”

He stroked my length and my cock leapt in his hand. I fought the urge to thrust. A few more strokes and I’d explode. I squeezed my knees closed not wanting to come before he did.

“What—”

I scrambled onto my hands and knees, gathering the pillows up and hugging them.

“*Okay*, I guess we’re done with foreplay.”

I didn’t say anything. Instead, I reached back and pulled my cheeks apart. I wasn’t used to a lot of talking, or being touched much before sex. Just enough to get me ready... and I was ready.

“Oh, God, that’s—fuck.” He snapped up the lube and a second later I felt his slick finger massaging me. I worked on staying relaxed and breathing deeply. His finger slid in and he groaned.

“Jesus, you’re so tight.”

I widened my stance and glanced back. His eyes were closed and his mouth open.

“I’m ready though.”

He opened his eyes and looked at me dubiously. “You don’t feel ready.”

“I am. I’m always tight, that was one of the things Todd liked about me.”

A small frown flitted across his face at the mention of Todd. Shoot, I was

going to have to watch that. I'd spent most of my adult life with him and it was a hard habit to break.

His hands left me and I took a few deep breathes, steadying myself for his entry.

He moved up behind me and caressed my back. His hands were so warm and solid, and I arched into his touch. His hands traveled down my thighs and back up then he palmed my balls and I sat back in surprise, ramming into his cock.

"Someone's a little sensitive." He fondled my testicles again, sending a rather uncomfortable shock through my groin and straight up my back. I yelped and arched up like a cat. He let out a husky chuckle. "Definitely need to play with those again when we have more time."

His hand closed over my cock and my hips jerked erratically.

"Ah... ahh." I slapped a hand on the headboard and gripped tightly. I wasn't used to all this... *ah, shit*. He pumped me then ran his hand over my cockhead making my hips misbehave again.

"Someone's very sensitive." His hand slid back between my legs and I felt his cock against me. *Oh, thank God*. I couldn't handle all this touching and fondling. I just wanted him to screw me and be done.

He wrapped his fingers around one of my hips and pushed inside me. I bit my lip to keep from wincing. *Relax, relax, relax*. He worked himself in slowly, and I gripped the pillow and the headboard, keeping a firm hold on my lip to keep from whimpering. He was bigger than I was used to and it was uncomfortable as heck.

"Oh, God, Angel," he panted and with a flick of his hips he slid the rest of the way in. I bit down and tasted blood.

He rubbed my back. "Are you okay?"

I nodded and his hands stopped. "I'm fine." I rolled my hips to prove it. He groaned and his hands shot to my hips, his fingers digging in. He pulled out and slid back in and I pushed against him, making him grunt and thrust. The discomfort faded and I released my lip, licking the blood off.

Marcus picked up a rhythm, his fingers flexing against my hips with each thrust. I smiled as I listened to his appreciative murmurings. I nestled my forehead onto the pillows and waited.

“Damn it,” he muttered and pulled out.

Well, that was rather anticlimactic. When he didn’t say anything, when he didn’t touch me, I dropped onto my side and looked at him. His arm was resting on his bent knee while his fingers worried his lips. He settled his eyes on me as his nostrils flared with each breath he took. He shook his head and yanked the condom off, tossing it onto the floor. It was empty.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, worried I had done something to displease him.

He flicked his hand towards me. “Angel, are you even sure you’re gay?”

“*What?* Of course I am.” My tone came out indignant. What the hell made him think that?

“You’re not even hard,” he said, lowering his head and rubbing the back of his neck. “If you are gay, you’re not for me.”

“I’ve always been like this. I get hard listening to you come then I finish myself off.” I pulled my knees up, suddenly feeling exposed. “It’s—it’s just the way I am.”

His head shot up. “*Pardon?* Have you ever had an orgasm during sex?”

I shook my head wondering what the big deal was. “I get off listening to my partners enjoy me.” I couldn’t understand why he was so surprised.

“Angel, there are so many things wrong with that, I don’t know where to start. Didn’t Todd ever jack you during sex?”

I shrugged a little. He had a few times but he was usually too into it, and it was easier to let him go and take care of myself after he was done. He always held me while he slept afterwards. It wasn’t a big deal and I really loved cuddling with him afterwards, even if he was asleep.

“Jesus. And he’d just fuck you and that was it?”

“It wasn’t like that,” I snapped.

“Yeah, I think it was. Fucker used you. Jesus, Angel, how many others have used you?”

I couldn't stand the disapproving look on his face and turned away. "They didn't use me. It's just..." *Todd loved me. I knew he had.* And what happened wasn't any of Marcus's business. "I don't want to talk about this." I got up and grabbed a pair of sweats from the dresser then stormed out of the room.

*He has no right to judge me, or Todd, or how I am.* There were a lot of people who didn't have orgasms during sex. I stopped in the hall to slip on my sweatpants. There were, weren't there? Of course there were. I wasn't so unusual. Was I?

Without warning, the times Todd had called me a freak and frigid crashed over me. *Oh, God, I am unusual.* No wonder he'd left me. I cried out, crumbling under the weight of it all.

Marcus dropped to his knees in front of me. "Oh, Angel."

He reached to touch my face and I turned away, burying my face in my hands as my body shook out of control. He should just go. I didn't want his pity.

He pulled me against him and I struggled, pushing against his chest. His grip tightened until I could barely move.

"I'm not letting you go," he breathed, pressing his lips against my temple.

*But you will...* I tried to say, yet all that came out was a pathetic squeak. When the tears fell I couldn't stop them. I hadn't cried when Todd left, I'd been too shocked. Now they came in body wracking torrents. Marcus sat back and pulled me into his lap, stroking the back of my head. I had no fight left and sagged against his chest.

I felt so insecure now. Knowing I was the reason behind my few failed relationships. Frigid. A cold fish. A bad lay. And what had Marcus said? *Unresponsive.* I shuddered.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“Wake up, you need to eat something.” A hand brushed down my cheek and I rolled into the pillow, grumbling.

My brain engaged then, and I opened my eyes, my lashes catching on the pillowcase. I turned my head towards the deep voice and blinked, trying to recall how I had made it into my bed. Marcus sat on the edge watching me with a soft pensive expression. I struggled onto my elbow.

“What... how...” I scrubbed my face trying to dislodge the mire of sleep.

“You passed out and I carried you in here.” He smiled tentatively. “I only almost dropped you once.”

“You carried me in here?” I may look it, but at just under two-hundred I wasn’t exactly light. I couldn’t believe he had done that, or that he was still here and acting as if nothing had happened.

He nodded. “It didn’t seem right to leave you in the hall. I think it’s only fair you pay my chiropractic bill though.” He rubbed the small of his back.

My lips twitched as I stretched. “Good luck with that. I’m a lowly teacher and a single parent—Crap, what time is it?” I whipped my head to the nightstand and groaned when I saw it was almost nine.

“Relax. She’s fine. I already put her to bed.”

I opened my mouth to make sure he had fed and changed her then closed it knowing he had. Marcus was a good man, a good father, and someone, until this afternoon, I had hoped to explore a relationship with. The quaking in my gut reminded me that was over now.

I threw back the covers. “I can’t believe I slept so long. You should have woken me. I feel bad about keeping you here this late.” My feet landed on the grey carpet and that was as far as I went. I felt heavy and uncoordinated. I sat there, slumped over as I gained my bearings.

“Don’t worry about it. My sister’s keeping Riana tonight. I didn’t want to leave you alone, not when it’s my fault you ended up here.” He rubbed his forehead after gesturing to the bed.

I let out a half-snort, half-grunt. “Yeah, better to find out I’m a freak now rather than later.”

“God dammit, don’t ever say that, you’re not a freak.” He sighed and leaned his hands on the edge of the bed, but didn’t get up. “I’ve thought a lot about this, us, what I said, how you reacted. I had the whole afternoon to think.” He paused, pulling his leg up and resting a foot on the bed as he stared at the wall straight ahead. “I’m a really, mm, *affectionate* person, and your lack of passion has thrown me for a loop. Angelo, plain and simple, you were abused.” He held up a hand when I shifted and opened my mouth. “Not in the classical sense, but used nonetheless. And I keep telling myself to leave, walk away and find someone else.”

This was it. What I knew was coming. Marcus had shown me something about myself I wish I had never seen. Moldable, sexually repressed, basically a doormat. I shuffled back and crossed my legs, leaning heavily on my elbows. I felt like I had been in a wreck. Sore, tired, depressed and I didn’t know how to go forward.

He frowned slightly then turned his head my way. “But everything in me wants to stay and try to work through this.”

“What?”

“If I take away everything I know about your relationships with other men, I’m able to look at you as a virgin, a clean slate, someone who might blossom,” He ran his fingers over my knee, “possibly with me. And that,” He gave me the sexiest smile, “excites me.”

*But, why would he...* “Why would you want to stay with me?” I asked utterly confused. I was pretty sure even I wouldn’t want to stay with me.

“Because I like you, a lot I think, and I believe, deep inside you is a very passionate person just waiting to be let out. I’d really like to be the one who opens that door. Maybe that’s selfish.” He shook his head lightly as his brows pulled together.

I gazed at the beautiful man picking nervously at my comforter and couldn’t believe he wanted me. I very much wanted him to find that door and let out the person he thought I was.



He looked at me then bowed his head and went to get up. “Right, I understand.”

“Wait.” I lunged for him and lost my balance, slamming into him and toppling us both onto the bed. My elbow rammed his chest and he grunted. I ignored the damage and looked into his surprised face then without realizing I was doing it, I kissed him hard.

The instant sensation sent a tremor through me that could only be desire. I’d never had anyone who made me want them with just a kiss. It was... *fantastic*. I plunged my tongue into his mouth wanting to taste him as my fingers feasted in his soft hair. His warm hands moved aggressively up my back making me shiver.

After a few seconds he pulled away and took a deep breath. “I take it I can stay?” His voice came out husky and my cock stiffened against his thigh.

I looked into his green eyes. They were so dark they were the color of jade. I licked my lips and they followed the movement of my tongue, emboldening me.

I nodded slowly then bowed my head. “Show me, Marcus... Show me what I’ve been missing.” I nuzzled against his neck, filling my nose with the musky scent of him as my hand ran down his chest, his glorious stomach. “I want to feel. Make me feel,” I whispered into his ear as my hand reached its destination. I felt the shiver run through his body and smiled against his neck.

“Mmm, definitely want to do that. But, um, God, Angel, I can’t think when you are stroking me. *Please...*”

I grazed my teeth along his neck, reveling in the control I was having over him. His leg came up underneath me and pushed against my cock. The heady sensation caused me to bite the skin on his neck. His hips thrust against my hand in response. I sucked and licked the spot I had just bitten as he continued to rock against my hand, letting out little hums of encouragement. I’d never met anyone who liked to be bit. This was a first for me. Todd, and my first boyfriend Eric, used to flinch whenever my teeth came out.

My fingers strolled down his chest until they encountered the nub beneath his shirt. I ran my thumb over his nipple until it was erect then pinched gently. He arched into my touch.

“Ahh, Jesus, Angel, stop, please.” His hands closed over mine, arresting them both. He pushed his groin into my palm once more before he removed my hand. His fingers tangled with my fingers as he moved them both to the bed. He met my confused gaze and shook his head slowly.

“This isn’t what I had in mind. I, um, had this whole thing planned out. You seducing me wasn’t part of my plan.” He kissed me, running his tongue along my lips. “I’m supposed to be seducing you. I want to make you writhe in ecstasy. I want to show you how a real man treats his lover.”

He kissed me then. Soft and sweet and laced with so much promise he took my breath away. Yes, I wanted him to love me. As I drowned in his kiss, I felt myself falling and knew this might be a hard landing if he didn’t catch me. My fingers tightened around his. Maybe if I held on tight he couldn’t let me go.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER NINE

I sat at the table while he made me a grilled cheese sandwich and heated tomato soup. He had insisted on feeding me, afraid I might pass out from hunger. I hadn't been hungry at the time, wanting to stay in bed with him, but once the smell of sizzling butter hit my nose I realized I was starving.

“What is it about *Barney* that kids are so infatuated with? When I was a kid it was *Sesame Street*. I turned it on, but Chey would have nothing to do with it. Not even a minute. The second Barney hit the screen she was watching.” He shook his head as he stirred the soup. “He is one annoying dinosaur.”

“I think it's his voice. She actually tips her head like a dog when he sings. It's hilarious.” I leaned back and enjoyed the view of Marcus in my kitchen actually cooking. I couldn't remember the last time someone had cooked for me. My mother, I think.

He came over and set the bowl and plate in front of me.

“Eat. If it's truly awful don't tell me, you'll hurt my feelings.” He turned a chair and settled next to me.

“I don't think anyone can screw up grilled cheese and soup.” I frowned. “Aren't you eating?”

“Oh, I can. Ask Riana.” He chuckled. “No. I had the rest of the pizza with Chey.” He pointed to the food in front of me and I picked up half the grilled cheese and bit into it. He'd used a lot of butter but my stomach didn't care as it rumbled wantonly.

“You didn't give Chey pizza did you?” I didn't mean to blurt that, dang it.

“I wasn't supposed to?” He was regarding me with a remarkably concerned expression, and for a second I thought he was serious then I saw the glint in his eyes. I shoved him with my foot. He caught it and drew it into his lap refusing to give it back even when I tugged.

“You can be a brat you know?” I couldn't help grinning. I liked him playful, even if it took me a second to get some of his jokes. His thumbs dug into the pad of my foot.

“Mmm,” I hummed around the fingers I was licking.

He wrapped his warm hands around my foot and rubbed from my ankle to my toes making me melt against the chair.

He stopped and moved his hands to my ankle. “I don’t think I should do this until you’ve finished eating.” He laughed.

I was still sucking on one of my fingers and slipped it out. “Do I have to beg? I will. Oh, God, will I.” I wiggled my toes.

He glanced down at my foot, running a hand over the top. “As long as you eat, I’ll rub your feet.” He tipped his head up and smiled maliciously.

I slid the soup over. “Fine. What’s this infatuation with me eating?” I shoved a spoonful into my mouth and he went back to massaging my feet.

He snorted. “You had a bowl of fruit loops for breakfast. You’re not exactly fat.”

I knew what he meant. I was a thinner build. I couldn’t help teasing him though. “So, you have a thing for fluffy guys?” I swallowed another spoonful of soup and was rewarded with his thumbs pushing into the ball of my foot. “Oh, Jesus...” My eyes closed and the spoon fell from my hand, plopping in the soup.

“No, I think you’re perfect the way you are. I just don’t want to see you pass out again.” He paused both in his speech and the movement of his hands. “What does this do for you?” He sounded amused and I opened my eyes to look at him. He was amused.

I bit my lower lip. I felt uncomfortable admitting it but I wanted to be honest. “My feet have always been connected to my groin. It’s like a line directly to my cock.”

“I noticed that. I just wanted to hear you say it.”

I didn’t have to look down to know I was hard. My dick had sprung up the second he touched my foot, becoming a tent pole beneath my green sweats. I reached down and adjusted myself, reducing the drag of fabric across the sensitive head. I gave myself a few cursory strokes.

“No touching,” Marcus said firmly, causing me to glare at him a little.

“That’s my job.” He removed his hands from my foot and pointed to the other half of my sandwich.

I growled at him but took a big bite. His eyes locked on my cock as he attended to my foot again. How did he expect me to eat when he was looking at me like he wanted to eat me himself? My cock jumped at the thought. I reached down and pressed it against my body. Marcus ran a thumbnail along the bottom of my foot and I thrust against my hand.

“Dammit, Angel.” He dropped my foot onto the floor, my heel hitting the linoleum hard enough I winced. He was up and striding down the hall before I knew he had even left.

“Crap.” I wiped my fingers off on a napkin and was about to follow him and see what I had done wrong when he returned.

“Sit.” His demanding tone had me sitting without question. He dropped onto his knees and wrenched the chair, with me in it, to face him. His hands slid up to my hips as he dropped his head and nuzzled my crotch. *Oh, that was... hot.*

His fingers dug into my backside. “Do you know how hard it is to live with someone you can’t stand to touch?” He buried his face and took a deep breath. “I was patient as I waited. Knowing someday I would find someone. Six years I waited, and you had to keep touching yourself—I’m done being patient.” He raised his head and I saw the flush across his cheeks. Definitely one of the hottest things anyone had done or said to me.

“Lift your hips.”

I squirmed. The blinds were turned open on the slider and anyone could see us. They’d have to look over the fence but still. We were in full view.

He looked up at me rather surprised. “Please don’t tell me you don’t like blow jobs.”

“What kind of a man would I be if I told you that?” I tried for a teasing tone but it came out breathless. I could ignore the slider. It was dark... even if the kitchen was blaringly bright.

His lips twitched. “Then lift your hips or I’ll rip them off.” He took hold of the waistband of my sweats and began to pull. I leaned on the table and he tugged my sweats all the way off, tossing them to the side.

“God, you’re beautiful.”

The admiration in his voice sent a thrill through me and I felt myself tremble under his hungry gaze.

I squeaked as his warm, wet mouth took me in, swallowing all of me. My fingers landed in his hair as my throat constricted. I locked eyes with him as his mouth slid up. His hand stroked my base as he suckled the pre-come drooling from my tip. His tongue swathed around my head and I groaned at the sensuousness. His eyes softened before he looked down and sucked me back in.

“Ahh... danngg.” *Okay, screw the neighbors.* If anyone was peeping they deserved—*Oh, Jesus.* I gripped the silky strands as his head began to bob. Man he was good. Not that I had a lot to base it on, but I knew what I liked and Marcus was sucking and tonguing me quickly to insanity.

I rocked into his mouth and his fingers cinched down around my waist, almost pulling me off the chair. His hands ran down my thighs and he lifted one of my legs onto his shoulder. His head rose and I opened my eyes at the sudden departure. When had I closed my eyes?

“I want to feel you quake, Angel.” His hand ran possessively over my hip as he nuzzled against my crotch. “And I will make you scream my name before morning.” His tongue traveled up my shaft as a lubed finger entered my ass. That explained his hasty departure a few minutes ago.

I tensed at the invasion, finding it hard to enjoy his enthusiastic mouth devouring my cock. I gripped the edge of the table with one hand as my other fell to his shoulder. I took a deep breath, trying to relax as he slid his finger out then back in deeper.

Suddenly he lifted his head, and glanced at me curiously.

Something was wrong I could see it in his face. “What?”

“Maybe nothing. Put your foot on the table.” He pulled his finger out of my ass as I wedged my foot against the oak trim. He lubed up his middle finger and slid it slowly in with a look of concentration I wasn’t feeling very comfortable with. I felt him rooting around and watched his tongue peek out between his teeth.

I just about jumped off the chair. “Oh, fuck.” I gripped the table as the shot of sensation powered through my balls and straight down my dick. It left a tingle in its wake that had me wanting to stroke my now throbbing cock. God, it was like Marcus had rammed a live wire up my ass.

He massaged my thigh and zapped me again. I groaned, my toes curling around the table as my cock jumped begging to be touched.

“You’ve never felt that before?” His face was awfully serious for someone with his finger up my ass doing God knew what.

I shook my head. “No, I would have remembered that.” *Oh, Jesus, I was panting.*

“That’s what you’re supposed to feel.” He removed his finger and stood up. For the first time ever I felt rather disappointed over someone vacating my ass.

“Why did you stop? Because I definitely would have screamed your name.” I was still trying to catch my runaway breath.

He chewed on his lower lip for a second before meeting my eyes. “Listen, I’m not a proctologist, and it’s been a long time since I’ve had a finger up anyone’s ass but my own, but something’s not right. There’s a mass or thickening or something where it shouldn’t be. Um...” He moved to the sink and began washing his hands and I took that as a really bad sign.

“Shit.” I lowered my foot to the floor and rubbed my head and neck. Cancer was the first thing that entered my head. I dismissed it immediately. I’d been sexually active for ten years and if it was cancer then I probably would have had a lot more problems before now. At least that seemed a logical argument.

Marcus came back over, sliding his chair in front of me and gently removing my hands from my face. His concern was touching but it was one more wall we would have to climb and I couldn’t ask him to do that for me. Regardless of that fact, he looked like his whole world had just crumbled around him.

“My brother had an infection a few years back. It messed his sex life up something fierce, but once they found it and treated him he was better than

ever.” He lifted my hands to his lips. “It could be something small, something easily treated.”

“Yeah, or it could be something nasty or permanent.” I knocked my head against our hands and felt his fingers unfurl and brush down my temple.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions and think the worst before a doctor takes a look.”

“Marcus, I don’t expect you to go through this with me. We’ve only known each other a month and this is our first date.”

He let go of my hands and lifted my face. “Would you shut up? I can’t believe—I’m not…” He kissed me and I felt the desperation in his lips. I grabbed his forearms and held on, not wanting to let him go even if I knew I should. We’d spent one day together, yet I felt I had lived a lifetime in that short time. He’d done more for me, shown me more compassion, more love than anyone ever had.

He feathered several short kisses across my lips then leaned his forehead against mine.

“Don’t push me away. When I found you crumpled in the hall I felt the world tilt, then it shattered when I felt that abnormality. It might only be lust but I’ve never lusted after anyone so completely in my life, and I’m not going anywhere until this craving burns out.” He kissed my forehead. “That could be weeks, months, or even years from now.”

“So, you’re just going to keep me around as a sex toy?” I tilted my head and managed a smirk.

“Well, not in your current condition, but yeah, that was my plan.”

We smiled at each other glad some levity had re-entered the room.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)



## CHAPTER TEN

I took a bite of my tuna sandwich and sneered at it. Not my favorite. Marcus and the internet had proven to be a bad combination. Somewhere on a website he found out fish oil was good for me, but he also compiled a list of what was bad for a man with a possible prostate problem; like cheese, beef, sugar, salt, basically everything tasty. And let's not forget sex, or ejaculation anyway. Only he had known that from his brother's experience, yet he had even managed to find links confirming his hypocrisy on the internet, dang it.

It had become apparent my libido hadn't read the same information. Every time I thought about what I had felt, which was proving to be often, I was instantly hard. Unfortunately I also had a lush vision of Marcus naked seared into my mind, and that was equally as tantalizing. I had never been so wrecked in my life.

I bit down on the sandwich Marcus had packed for me, and chewed voraciously, trying to clear my mind. It didn't help. Stupid over thinking contraption. My phone buzzed, skittering on my desk. I grabbed it and looked at the screen then answered it.

"You know I'm going to get arrested today."

"What?" Marcus belted.

"I don't have tight enough underwear."

Marcus's deep chuckle drifted across the line. I sighed not finding it nearly as amusing as I had found his admission. I supposed I deserved his mirth.

"I guess you'll be giving Dr. Peters a show then."

"Who?" I asked.

"He's a gay-friendly proctologist that my doctor recommended. We have an appointment at 4:00 tonight."

There was that *we* again, as if this was our problem not mine. He hadn't even asked if tonight was good before making the appointment. Not that I had anything going, but what if I had?

"We? Is he sticking his finger up your butt too?" I said, a bit angrier than I intended.

“If you want him to,” Marcus replied cautiously.

I sighed. “I’m sorry. I’m just—I don’t know, on edge I guess.”

“If you want to make your own appointment, I’ll cancel with him.”

I smiled, listening to Marcus back pedal. I leaned back making my chair protest. “No, it’s fine. I’ll meet you at the house around 3:30?”

“That works. I, ah, I miss you.”

I missed him too, but I wasn’t ready to admit how much. If this ended up being something big I wasn’t about to let him stay with me, no matter how cold my bed had been without him last night.

“I’ll see you then.” I turned off my phone just as Jolene scurried in whimpering and holding her arm. Blood seeped through the sleeve of her teal shirt.

“I fell,” she said shakily. She wasn’t really crying though. What a tough girl.

\*\*\*\*

I sat on a burgundy chair, waiting pensively in the small exam room. I wished I had let Marcus come back with me now, but I hadn’t wanted Chey in here during the exam. Not that she would know what was going on, or even remember it, but it was the principal. It just seemed wrong. Honestly, it seemed wrong to have my... what was he? I guess future boyfriend? Boyfriend in training?

I rubbed a hand over my face and shook my head. That would be more like me. Regardless of what he was at this point, I hadn’t been sure I wanted him in here while another man rooted around in my ass.

I glanced over at the oversize poster of a crosscut of the male genitalia. It was the same picture Marcus had found online. The door opened and I turned to see a loose-jawed balding man with tiny black-rimmed glasses looking at me, a chart in his hand.

“Mr. Tucco?”

I nodded.

“Dr. Peters.” He smiled but didn’t offer his hand. He flipped a page back. “I thought the age on the chart was wrong, but you are young. So, according to your partner you have a mass that maybe shouldn’t be there.”

I nodded again. For some reason it seemed to be all I was required to do.

“How long have you had problems?”

I shook my head. “I don’t really know.”

“All right let’s take a look. Pants down, hands here.” He patted the edge of a padded table. “Do you want a nurse present?”

I unbuttoned my pants and shook my head. “No.”

Dr. Peters came off cool but I wasn’t getting any pervy vibe from him. Pants around my knees I leaned my hands on the paper covering the exam table. It wasn’t your typical exam couch like you saw in a general practitioners office. This one was a mint-green vinyl mat on an actual stainless table.

“Might be a little cold.” His hand pressed onto my back as he started his groping. The lube was definitely cold. A few *hums* and an *interesting* later, the exam was done. I blew out a breath when I heard him pull off his gloves.

“Up on the table, lying on your stomach please. You can take your pants off if it’s easier. I need to take a closer look with my little camera.”

“Okay.” I kicked my shoes and pants off. The man had obviously found something but he appeared rather indifferent, like it wasn’t anything he hadn’t seen before. I hoped that was a good sign.

The camera was tiny and I hardly felt it at all. It was all over in a few minutes, and other than having a stranger’s hands on me, the experience hadn’t been all that bad.

“Get dressed and I’ll meet you and, if you wish, your partner in my office. Turn left and it’s the second door on the left.” He gestured to over his shoulder. I didn’t correct him on the partner reference.

A few minutes later I walked into the waiting area. Marcus looked up while continuing to bounce a thrilled Chey in his lap. She was reaching for the huge leaf of a fake banana plant. So close, yet just far enough away. I scooped her up and she shrieked in surprise.

Her big eyes looked at me, blinked, then she said. “Da!”

I’d never get tired of hearing that. I kissed her cheek and glanced over her shoulder at Marcus. He appeared about to come unglued. I held my hand out to him and he snapped it up. He hadn’t been doing well since meeting me at the house. He had been waiting when Chey and I arrived, and if I had to wager, he had been there quite a while. You’d think he was the one with the problem. Regardless, his concern had touched me more deeply than I ever would have imagined.

I squeezed his hand and he tightened his grip enough that I winced. “I don’t know anything yet. He’s meeting us in his office.” I tugged him past reception while Chey happily sucked on my shirt.

Dr. Peters was waiting when we walked in and he gestured to close the door. His office was rather bland. The only color in the room was a small shelf of books behind his beige desk and two abstract art prints on one wall. We sat down in the tan chairs in front of his desk.

Without preamble, he launched in. “You have a mass in the most inconvenient of locations. At first, I thought it might be a poorly healed fissure but it isn’t a scar. It appears to be something you’ve had for a while.” He shrugged and looked over his glasses. “Hard to tell, but you might have even been born with it. It’s a simple procedure to remove the mass and I can do it here in office. We’ll send a sample out for testing, however I doubt anything will come back. It’s not irritated and doesn’t appear to be growing.”

He arched his eyebrows as he pushed his glasses up. “If it had been in any other location, or you had been straight, you probably never would have found it. I’m rather surprised you didn’t question it earlier. But you’re here now and I can get you fixed up. Any questions?” He tossed his hands apart then clamped them back together as he looked from one of us to the other.

Even though I knew I needed to ask questions, I couldn’t think of a single one. That wasn’t true. I could think of one but I was too embarrassed to ask. I thought I already knew the answer based on my experience in the kitchen. Oh, Jesus, how different was I going to be in bed? Was this Marcus’s door?

Marcus began talking and asked all the pertinent questions I should have been asking. However, I only heard about every third word. I couldn’t seem to

process anything past the man sitting next to me or our future. And of course Chey, who was sticking her fingers in my mouth.

I must have looked shell-shocked and I didn't hear the room quiet. Marcus appeared in front of me and crouched down, laying an arm behind Chey.

“Hey, it's good news.” He palmed my neck.

I just stared at him wondering where he had come from, and how he had ended up in my life. Chey wooed and leaned back, looking at him fondly. Okay, our life.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

My *procedure* was Friday and Marcus had already arranged to spend the weekend coddling me. He said taking care of me, but I knew it would be coddling since he'd been doing it all week. It was driving me nuts. He'd barely touched me since my appointment and the few times he had, had gone from frigid to inferno in seconds but he always stopped, saying he didn't want to take a chance. Ten days until my follow up, it seemed an eternity away.

I was put under with a short-term anesthetic, which enabled me to forgo the injustice of actually meeting the female nurse that shaved, and then swabbed my ass during my procedure. I woke up feeling queasy and they gave me juice, and some crackers I managed to choke down. Then without any preamble they sent me on my way with a maxi pad stuck to my underwear, blow up donut pillow, antibiotic ointment, prescription for antibiotics, and a sheet of ridiculous didacticisms. I swear the medical profession thinks us all idiots. *Don't put anything up your rectum* and right below that *No anal sex...* I would have thought the two went hand in hand.

I wasn't sore. Not until we arrived at the house and I had to get out of the car. Marcus must have seen me wince because he hustled over and grabbed me. Of course the loud *Sonofabitch* might have had something to do with it too. I rarely swore, but the feeling of a knife being twisted inside my rectum, I felt, justified it.

"You should have waited for me." He clasped me around the waist.

"Yeah, well, it didn't hurt until I moved." I leaned on him and gripped his other hand. "Don't take this the wrong way, but this is *really* embarrassing." I started walking very slowly and rather bowlegged to the house.

"How so?"

"Do I really have to count the ways?" I asked dryly then whimpered as I made my way up the one concrete step to the door.

"Angel, this is what couples do for each other. You shouldn't feel embarrassed."

I stopped at the threshold and looked up at him. "But we're not a couple."

A small flash of emotion streaked across his handsome face, so quick I couldn't be sure what it was. Then his face solidified and became quiet.

"I thought we were, maybe I was wrong," he said quietly then went to help me through the door and I stopped us with a hand on the doorjamb.

"Wait. Marcus, you barely know me, and what you do know isn't exactly the most romantic of discoveries."

He looked at me as if I was Riana's age. "But I do know you. You're kind and a good person. A great dad who loves his daughter despite everything he went through to get her. You forgive people for things you shouldn't." He made a face over that. "You don't take compliments well, which I actually find endearing, so of course I'll just keep giving them. Not to mention you're sexy as hell without realizing it, despite the fact you haven't had a satisfying sexual experience possibly ever." He moved to within an inch of me, letting go of my hand and taking hold of my waist. "Now you look me in the eye and tell me I don't know you."

I stared at him. I was surprised at how accurate that was. I blinked and smiled coyly.

"You think I'm sexy?"

He growled and I watched the flush bloom on his face as his eyes darkened so quickly I actually swooned. I gripped his shirt to keep my body from falling. I was pretty sure my heart and soul already had. He kissed me and I again felt the possessiveness there. Only this time it rocketed through me leaving me dizzy. I had definitely fallen and I was his for the taking. Body, heart, and soul. I clung to him and kissed him back with a desperation that surprised me. Of course, this could all be due to the anesthetic, and I kicked that possibility right out of my head.

\*\*\*\*

I managed to nap while Marcus picked up the girls. That had been an experience, dropping Chey off this morning. Nancy and Molly didn't know my sexual orientation, and even though I introduced Marcus as a friend, Molly kept fanning herself and giving me the thumbs-up sign. Marcus leaning against me, rubbing my back had probably been a clincher that we were more than friends.

Thankfully, neither seemed uncomfortable, and I had breathed a sigh of relief over that. I didn't do well with people who were uneasy around gays, and having to move Chey would have devastated me. She liked it there, and I liked, and trusted, Nancy and Molly.

I jerked awake and found Riana on the bed perched on her hands and knees staring at me.

"Is the classroom still in one piece?" I rolled onto my side and perched my head on my hand.

She rolled her eyes and let out a sound of disgust. I tried not to grin and failed. Obviously, I'd been missed and that made me feel good.

"Nobody liked the teacher. She was old and mean. Are you sick? Will you be back Monday?"

"No, I'm not sick. I got something cut out of me. Sort of like going to the dentist. I'll be back on Monday."

"You remember how much you hated going to the dentist," Marcus said just as Chey pushed on his chest and screamed. He cringed and wrung a finger in his ear. "He's right there. Geez." He wrinkled his face at her then set her next to me. "She wasn't too happy to find me alone when I picked her up. She's been voicing her displeasure ever since."

I looked down at her and grinned. "Did you miss me? Did you give Marcus a hard time? I bet his ears are ringing, yes they are." I lifted her ladybug shirt and gobbled her belly making her squeal in delight. Now my ears were ringing. She better grow up to be a rock star or an opera singer with that volume.

"Ow." Riana made a face and scootched back. "Daddy, was I that loud?"

"No, thank God." He looked to the heavens then grinned at me as he slid onto the bed and cuddled up against me.

I shot him a quizzical look then glanced at Riana who was blinking rapidly at her father wrapped around her teacher. He groaned and buried his face against my back for a second before sitting up.

"I guess now's as good a time as any. Riana—"



“I like Mr. Tucco a lot better than I liked Mommy,” she blurted out and now it was our turn to blink stupidly.

On the one hand, it was sad to hear her obvious dislike of her own mother, but on the other hand her instant grasp of the situation was astounding.

“Honey, what do you mean?” His hand balled up the back of my shirt. I wasn’t saying a word, unless he really needed rescuing.

“You’re going to marry Mr. Tucco right? Sarah has two dads. She’s so lucky.” She looked at her dad as if this was all obvious and *normal*.

I snorted loudly and buried my face in my pillow hoping to muffle my amusement. It didn’t help. Chey launched onto my head, using my ear as a handhold, and giggling with glee over what she thought was a game of peek-a-boo.

“Who’s Sarah?” He asked.

I lifted my head. “A girl in our class. But I didn’t know she had two dads. How do you know she has two dads?” I looked at Riana. “Don’t suck on your hair.” I reached out and pulled the strands from her mouth. She let out an annoyed sigh and went to twirling it around her finger instead.

“She talks about them all the time.” She said it as if I should know this and maybe I should.

“Well, we won’t be getting married for a while but, um, would it bother you if we did?”

I knew he was searching for the easy answer from her, yet I didn’t miss the softening in his voice and my heart beat faster because of it. Marriage, lifelong commitment, something I couldn’t even get Todd to approach, and here Marcus threw it out like it was easy, the most natural thing. His hand unfurled and gently stroked my back and I knew he hadn’t thrown it out there lightly.

I felt my heart beating in my chest and was sure he could feel it too. It was too soon to think about that kind of commitment. Yet my mind was whirling with the idea. I turned my head and Chey poked me in the eye.

“Ow. No poking, you little monster.” I pulled her against my chest and hugged her. Her timing was impeccable. Riana laughed.

“Riana, you didn’t answer me.” Marcus lowered himself and leaned into my back, looking at her over my shoulder. She looked at him in total confusion having already forgotten the question.

“Does Mr. Tucco’s and my friendship bother you?”

“No, why? They can be my sister.” She took Chey’s hand and Chey screamed at her and pulled it away.

Riana laughed and tickled her.

Chey squirmed. “Nao,” she huffed.

Yep, they definitely could be sisters. Riana smiled and looked at her dad.

“Just wondered,” he breathed then collapsed and buried his face in the nape of my neck. I felt his breathing heavy against my skin and I reached down, removing his hand from my waist and planted a kiss on his palm. He shuddered and I realized it had taken everything he had to have this conversation with his daughter. I knew how resilient kids were but he must have been worried she wouldn’t accept him, us, this. She had though, with all the openness only a child has.

\*\*\*\*

I walked into my classroom on Monday, not really wanting to be there. The weekend had been wonderful. Chaotic, but wonderful. Riana decided annoying Chey was her new job in life and she was very good at it. Sunday afternoon Chey had finally quit screaming every time Riana touched her or one of her toys. It had been a few hours of bliss. Then it all started again on the drive in this morning. Chey didn’t like Riana sitting by her and kept throwing toys at her. When Riana picked them up to hand them back, Chey screamed because Riana was touching her toys.

“Can I pull the chairs down?” Riana looked at me expectantly.

“Sure. Go for it. Thanks.” Kids found joy in the strangest things and if she wanted to put all the chairs down, who was I to say no?

I set my messenger bag down and dropped the donut pillow on my chair. I still couldn’t sit comfortably without it. I watched Riana while leaning against my desk, sipping my coffee.

“Welcome back.” Lily Dupree glanced at Riana and raised her eyebrows then smiled knowingly. “Obviously I don’t need to ask how things are going.”

“Hi, Mrs. Dupree. We stayed with Mr. Tucco all weekend. My dad’s going to marry him.”

I choked on my coffee and winced over the pain in my ass. Coughing, not a good idea.

“Is he really? Are you excited?”

I reached out to smack her arm but she ducked away, grinning. She was remarkably quick for a woman wearing stiletto heels. So much for keeping things on the down low. Lily was going to have a heyday with this.

“Riana.” I gave her a look, feeling a little too much like her father.

“I know, Dad told me it was a secret.” She looked at Lily. “So, don’t tell anyone okay?”

Lily locked her lips and threw away the key. “I won’t, I promise.”

Satisfied, Riana went back to her task.

“Wow, he moves fast. What has it been... two... three weeks?”

I rolled my eyes at her. “We had to have *the conversation*. It just ended up coming out that way. So wipe that silly grin off your face. We are not engaged.” I flopped down on my chair. “Ow.” I centered myself on the pillow making Lily cackle when she saw what I was doing. “Don’t even go there,” I warned. She only knew I had an outpatient procedure and I wasn’t about to discuss what that procedure had been.

“You better invite me to the wedding.”

“There isn’t going to be a wedding.”

“Yet. Whenever the blessed event happens, I want to be there to see that my vote helped someone I know.”

I glanced at her. “So let me get this straight. *If* I ever get married, I have to invite you only because you voted *yes* on Referendum 74?”

“No. I hope you’ll invite me because I’m your friend. But if that isn’t enough, then because I’m your boss.” She smiled sweetly, only I knew there was nothing sweet about that smile.

“Great, now I’m being threatened at work.” I dropped my head onto the desk.

“Was that a threat? Oh, maybe it was.” She laughed as she sashayed out to the common area.

*Bitch.* I loved her though, and if I ever did get married she would be on the guest list. It was sad, but she was about the only person I could loosely consider a friend. I shook my head feeling the sting of Todd’s and my friends’ betrayal again. My class began arriving in a noisy array, saving me from my own mind. That seemed to be happening a lot lately. It was as if I was no longer allowed to mourn my past. Maybe I should take the hint and start living in the present.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER TWELVE

“I have to leave.” Marcus sounded frantic and way past upset.

I gripped my phone. “Okay, slow down. What’s wrong?”

“I just—Oh, God. I just received a picture of Toby from Ms. Taylor. He doesn’t look so good. Of course the, ah, picture is from a ways away. Angel, he looks so small.” His voice broke and I heard him clear his throat.

“Who’s Ms. Taylor and are you sure it’s him?” Marcus had been getting more and more worried the past week as the PI he hired had lost Claudia’s parents thus losing track of Toby.

“Yeah, it’s him. Claudia’s dad is in the picture. Taylor’s the PI I hired. Listen, if I leave now I can be there before dark.”

For some reason I assumed the private investigator had been a man and was rather surprised to hear she was a woman. I wasn’t sure I wanted him driving so upset but I knew going with him was out of the question. I didn’t have anyone to watch Chey, and missing another day of work in a week’s time was a bad idea.

“Where is *there*?” I asked, pacing the front of my classroom.

“Bend, Oregon. They’re at a campground there. At least they are right now.”

“What about the sheriff? Can’t you call the police?”

“I already did. They don’t extradite to Montana. Told me to call them if things become violent. Claudia’s parents are idiots but they aren’t *that* stupid. If I show up they won’t stop me from taking him.”

I didn’t like this at all. “Will Ms. Taylor be there?”

“Yeah.”

That was a small consolation. I sighed and rubbed my eyes. “I know you need to go but please stay in touch so I know you’re okay. Don’t worry about Riana, I’ll take care of her.” They had been practically living at the house for a week now and I knew she had clothes in the dryer.

“I can call Kim. She’ll come get her.”

“What, you don’t trust me?” I tried to tease him.

“I trust you explicitly. I thought you might like a night off.”

“I wouldn’t know what to do with both of you gone. You’ve kinda become a fixture at the house. All right, you better get going. Just... Come home safe.”

“We will. I, ah—I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

He hung up and a second later my phone beeped. I opened the text and sat down on a table, winced, and rolled onto a hip. Sprawled across the screen was a picture of a thin elderly man in ragged clothing leaning over a stroller that contained a gaunt yellow-skinned baby. I knew Toby was only two months younger than my daughter, yet he appeared to be half her size. Even though the picture was grainy, I couldn’t dismiss the fact he appeared lifeless. His mouth was open and shadows engulfed his closed eyes.

It had been a month since the last sighting and Marcus had been too late. They had disappeared again before he had arrived. I hoped for Toby’s sake Marcus wasn’t too late this time.

\*\*\*\*

Riana was pulling on her red windbreaker while I put the last of the chairs up. Today we had made glitter pictures and the grey carpet sparkled with a myriad of colors. There was no way the janitor would get it all out in one vacuum.

I picked up my bag then walked over and took Riana’s hand, leading her out the door. “Your dad had to go out of town and he won’t be back until tomorrow. Are you going to be okay staying with me and Chey?” I glanced down at her as we walked to the Volvo.

She looked up, squinting in the sun, and nodded. “Yeah. Is he getting Toby?”

“I hope so.” I squeezed her hand and she smiled up at me and squeezed back. “You want to sit in the front?”

“Yeah!” She jumped up and down as I unlocked and opened her door.

“Your chariot, my Lady.” I bowed and winked at her.

She rolled her eyes at me. I guess she wasn't the princess type. I closed her door and wondered, as I walked to the driver's side, when had six-year-olds become so opinionated and grown up? I remembered being confused at what to do with a large box when I was her age, and didn't even know how to make a telephone call until I was in second or third grade. Riana knew how to play games on Marcus's cell phone. Something neither one of us could figure out. We had tried after she went to bed the other night and it had been a hilarious travesty.

\*\*\*\*

The girls were asleep, Chey in her crib and Riana set up on the couch when my cell finally rang. I scrambled for it, knocking it to the other side of the table.

I finally got my hands on it. "Are you okay?" I blurted in lieu of a greeting as I headed to my bedroom so as not to wake up Riana.

"I could be better. I was arrested for stalking."

I stopped in the hall. "Arrested? How? What the heck happened?" I didn't even ask if he had Toby. His dejected tone was answer enough.

"I didn't think they'd run but I'll be damned if they did. The second they saw me they locked the doors and took off. I followed them and the next thing I know a sheriff's stopping me. I can't believe they did that." The emotion was thick in his voice and my heart went out to him.

I continued into my bedroom and closed the door. "Is there anything I can do? I mean, I could come down there." I wasn't sure what I would do with the girls but if he needed me I'd figure it out. I found myself looking around my room for things to pack and had to stop myself.

"No, I'm out now but impound has my car until morning. The cop wouldn't even listen to my side. He just cuffed me and tossed me in the cruiser. It took three hours for them to pull up the kidnapping report proving my innocence. Then they had the nerve to ask why I hadn't called them in the first place. Assholes." He sounded exhausted and I hoped he wasn't planning on sitting at the station all night.

I sat down on the bed wishing he hadn't gone, or at least that I could have gone with him. I grabbed the pillow Marcus had slept on when he was here

and cradled it against my chest. It was a poor substitute for his warm body but I could still smell him on it.

“What a crappy system. Our tax dollars at work, arresting the innocent and letting the bad guys get away. Where are you now?”

“Some crappy motel with olive green carpet, and gold curtains, that’s *conveniently* located right across from the station. I think they rent by the hour as I’m pretty sure I saw a cowboy dragging another cowboy into one of the rooms. They looked awfully friendly.”

He sounded like he was being facetious. Even so, I felt my pulse take a hike and my jaw tense. I couldn’t believe I was jealous.

“What, do you have a thing for cowboys?” The second the words were out of my mouth I knew how stupid they sounded.

“Actually, I wouldn’t mind seeing you in a pair of chaps someday. That tight round ass of yours along with leather... mmm, yeah, I’d like to see that.”

I chuckled. “I don’t know how you do it, but you always say the right thing, even in the middle of a calamity.”

“Was that the right thing?” He sighed.

I hugged his pillow tighter. “Yeah, it was. Now I miss you,” I said gently.

“You didn’t miss me before? Shit, I’ve been missing you like crazy.” I could hear the tease in his voice and it made me smile.

“The girls kept me busy. Are you going after them tomorrow?” I hoped he said no. I didn’t want him chasing them in case they proved to be dangerous when threatened.

“Give my girl a kiss, tell her Daddy misses her and I will be home tomorrow. So, no, I’m not chasing them. That’s what Ms. Taylor’s for.”

“Where was she through all this, by the way?” I hadn’t forgotten about her but his cowboy comment had thrown me off track.

“Bathroom. That’s the ironic part, where I come off stupid. She told me to wait until she came back, and I didn’t. I already received a lecture from her...”

“I wasn’t going to give you one. I know you’ve already beaten yourself up enough. Get some sleep and we’ll see you tomorrow. By the way, I can still smell you on my pillow.”



“Hey, that’s *my* pillow. I suppose I can let you use it just this once, but I’m taking it back tomorrow night.”

“I can handle that.”

We said goodnight and I shuffled down and buried my face into Marcus’s scent.

\*\*\*\*

“Have you had any pain or discomfort?” Dr. Peters asked.

“Not in a few days.”

“Good. Climb up, let’s take a look-see.” He patted the table then pulled green gloves from a wall dispenser.

I dropped my slacks to my knees and shuffled up onto the crinkly paper. Marcus had really wanted to be here, but Dr. Peters had been kind enough to squeeze me in immediately after work, and Marcus just couldn’t get the time off. It worked out though since Nancy agreed to watch Riana during my appointment and I could pick up both girls when I was done here.

Dr. Peters rolled over a screen. “Just using the camera today. Might be a little cold.”

*A little? What, do they keep their lube in the fridge? Dang.*

“Relax, Mr. Tucco.”

*Let’s see you relax with an ice cube up your butt.* “Sorry. It is a little cold.” I seemed to recall reading somewhere about crazy people that actually liked ice cubes shoved into their orifices. Marcus better not even think about it, or we’ll definitely be having words.

The last few days had been hard on both of us. But no matter how much an act of virtue sleeping in the same bed became, Marcus refused to go home. Not that I had actually asked. I rather liked having him there.

“You’re healing nicely. Just another minute and we’ll be done.”

I nodded, not sure what to think of the healing rather than healed part. Marcus was being a saint and refusing to even play until I was completely healed. He decided since he had been waiting for six years, he could wait two

more weeks. I, on the other hand, felt like a horny teenager waiting for his first time. The brat knew what he did to me, but then I had heard him grunting in the shower on more than one morning, so I knew the exasperation was mutual.

Dr. Peters pulled the camera out and I sighed. Crap. Shouldn't have been thinking about Marcus, and sex, and Marcus stroking himself in the shower... This was going to be embarrassing. I could feel my cock hard beneath me.

"All done. Love my laser. It was the best investment I ever made. You're perfectly smooth in there now, not even a pimple of skin out of place. You still have some redness in the area but it should go away in the next three or four days."

He turned to clean his equipment and I slid off the side of the table, yanking my underwear and pants up.

"So, um, when, um, how long..."

He cleared his throat loudly and I knew he was trying not to laugh. "Give it four more days and go easy until you're sure there's no discomfort. If anything hurts, stop and wait a few more days."

My face felt sunburned and I knew I was blushing furiously. I managed to face him despite my discomfort.

"Thank you, Dr. Peters." My eyes began to sting and I blinked hard, managing to dispel the flash of emotion that had hit me. I wasn't ignorant. I knew this small thing was about to change my life forever, and I found it exciting and terrifying all at once.

Dr. Peters smiled. "I'm glad I could help. If you have any problems at all, you call me." He opened the door with a reassuring smile, and I managed a nod as I passed him. I was sure the man knew what he had done for me.

I sat in the car for a few minutes until my emotions were back under control. Riana was an intuitive girl and didn't miss much. She would see immediately that I wasn't quite all together.

My phone rang as I turned down Nancy's road. I pulled off and answered Marcus's call, surprised he had been so patient.

"Well?"

“Hello to you too,” I said wryly.

He chuckled. “Just worried.”

“Mm, yes, worried.” Suddenly I felt the need to know the answer to *what if?* “What would happen if I told you the surgery wasn’t successful?” I held my breath waiting.

“Oh, Angel, I’m so sorry. But it doesn’t change how I feel about you. I wanted this for *you*. There are so many other ways I can make love to you.”

The fact he would still want me was overwhelming. I swiped at the wetness on my cheeks.

“You always say the right thing.”

“Angel, baby, are you crying? I’m so sorry—”

“I’m not crying.” My voice hitched. “Okay, yes, I’m crying, but not for the reason you think. It was mean, I needed to know. I don’t know why, I just did.”

“You’re not making any sense.”

“I know. I, um, the surgery was a success. I’m sorry, Marcus. I needed to know—and you said those wonderful things, and now I feel horrible for deceiving you.” I sniffed loudly and grabbed a napkin from the glove box.

Marcus started laughing. Laughing I didn’t expect. Anger, hurt, distrust... Not the loud breathless sounds coming across the line.

“You didn’t deceive me. I can’t blame you for needing to know. But Angel, I’m not going anywhere. However, now I have an obscenely large anticipatory woody and a client due in about five minutes.” He sighed loudly then chuckled again.

I felt the smile on my face. “Sorry. This might help with your small, um—large problem. My ass is still off limits for another four days.”

“Doesn’t help. That’s Sunday. A whole day... Oh, man, what I could do to you with a whole day. I’m calling Kim; see if she can take the girls.”

I laughed at the huskiness that had crawled into his voice. “You’ll have to pry Chey out of my hands you know? I’ve never left her with a babysitter or anyone but Nancy and Molly.”

“I’ll just occupy you while she kidnaps the girls. Damn. All right, too many visions. Throbbing painfully now. Oh, man, I need to take care of this before I embarrass myself. Maybe I should stay at my apartment tonight.”

“You have to pick up Riana remember?” *Eek*, my voice had dropped just listening to him.

“Don’t talk about her right now.” He grunted and I recognized that low primal noise.

“Are you jacking off with me on the phone?”

“Say something dirty, Angel.”

I guess he was and... “Oh, God, that’s fucking hot, thinking about you stroking yourself.” It was too. This was not a good place to have a hard-on. Two blocks from a daycare in a residential neighborhood. Marcus was going to get me arrested. I gripped the steering wheel with one hand and my phone with the other.

“Are you hard?” His voice was gruff.

“Bastard.” I closed my eyes but that made things worse as images of Marcus naked, Marcus licking, Marcus sucking. Crap. My hips rocked. I reached behind the seats and fumbled around until I found something soft and pulled it onto my lap. One of Chey’s blankets. Yeah, not happening. I tossed it in the back.

“Tell me you’re stroking that sexy cock of yours.”

Oh, he called my cock sexy. *Okay, tight and uncomfortable now*. I undid my slacks and threw my jacket over my lap. “Not fair, Marcus. When did this turn into phone sex?” I wormed my hand beneath my briefs and my head fell back the second I ran my hand along my length.

He chuckled. “The second you told me I could have you Sunday. I’m going to make you scream my name, Angel. Over... ahh... and... mmm... over. Oh, fuck.”

Marcus started grunting and my hips began thrusting in time to his guttural vocalizations. I reached over and laid the seat back and pumped into my hand like a madman. Listening to Marcus, knowing he was doing the same thing,

was one of the most erotic things I'd ever experienced. I ran my thumb through the pool of slickness oozing from my head and moaned as my thighs and belly tightened.

"Ohh, I'm gonna come." I caressed my tip and groaned as my pelvis lifted. "Oh, yeah, oh, Marcus."

"Oh, fuck, that did—ahhh, *shit*." Marcus continued to swear for several seconds and the thought of him coming that long had me moaning as I pushed into my hand faster, harder, *ohhh, Jesus*. My whole body seized at once as heat exploded up my shaft. I jerked as I came, my knee hitting the steering wheel. *Sonofabitch*. I kept stroking until it became too much and I had to pull my hand away so I could breathe again.

I lay there with my eyes closed, trembling. I couldn't remember the last time I had been so excited, or come so hard. My whole body felt like overboiled mush. Marcus's voice brought me out of my euphoric haze.

"Angel, you there? Did you drop your phone? Angel, hello?"

I scabbled a hand on the floor and found my phone. "Yeah, dropped my phone."

"You sound deliciously breathless."

He actually did too.

"So do you. You know I could have been arrested." I wrestled some napkins from the glove box. The inside of my jacket was a mess and my shirt wasn't much better. I should have used the blanket.

"Did the allure of getting caught make it more exciting?"

"I forgot completely, to be honest." I glanced around quickly as I righted my seat. There wasn't a soul around.

"You know, you made these growly purring noises. God, they were sexy."

I wiped off the liner of my coat and looked at the wad of napkins, not sure what to do with them. "Did I? I didn't know I was making any noise." I shoved the napkins in my tiny garbage bag and stuck it under my seat.

"Oh, you were quite vocal. You sounded like some wild cat. It was—God, I can't wait to hear that again. I missed the climax when you dropped your phone. Why didn't you have your Bluetooth on?"

“If I had, this wouldn’t have happened. I would have been sitting in front of Nancy’s and would have hung up on you. That might have been better actually, since my coat and shirt are, hm, yeah.” I chuckled as I wrestled my jacket on. Yuck. At least it would cover up my slightly slimy shirt.

“Mmm, that would have been perverted for sure. All right, you’re forgiven for leaving me hanging. You are so-damn-sexy over the phone, and as much as I would like to keep you here for hours, I have to go make money.”

I smiled over his disappointed tone. “And I need to go get our kids before Nancy wonders what happened to me. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I awoke to Marcus's lips traveling down my spine. Last night, after getting a less than positive call from Taylor, he had spent over an hour massaging me with this fabulous oil that made me warm everywhere. It was as if he needed to touch me, or maybe it was a way for him to work out his frustrations on my body. When he was done, he pulled me into his arms and immediately fell asleep, leaving me hard, hot, and completely bothered. I didn't think I would ever fall asleep but I must have.

I stretched the kinks out of my back and his hands traveled up my stomach and over my chest. He'd been more forthcoming with his affection over the last four days and I was blossoming under his avid ministrations. I'd never been so bold with anyone and each day saw me more confident in our relationship.

It wasn't only sexual. He touched me in ways no one ever had. Sometimes his hands were so gentle, as if he thought I might break and other times they were rough and possessive. But the times he held me tight, like he had last night, left me breathless. He was always so still, like he was afraid to move, afraid I would disappear.

Right now, he was touching me as if I might break or bolt like a frightened animal. But I wasn't going anywhere. For as long as he would have me, I was his. I'd realized that last night as he slept pressed against my back. It's amazing how four short days can change a person and their entire outlook on life. Marcus had shown me what real desire was and I wanted to explore that world with him forever.

I turned to face him and captured his smiling lips. He tipped his head back and I deepened my kiss. His hands slipped under the waistband of my pajamas and as his fingers slid down my ass, for the first time I pushed my derriere against them rather than tensing or pulling away. He groaned into my mouth and pulled me roughly against him.

She squealed out her morning greeting.

I threw my leg over his waist and ground against him until he was panting

against my mouth. I parried with his tongue one last time then flounced off the bed.

“Hey...” He leaned over the edge and tried to grab me.

“Daughter, crying, will only get louder until Riana comes in.” I raised my eyebrows at him. He looked so sexy all flushed and exasperated.

“Brat.” He sighed and rolled into the pillows letting out a holler of indignation.

“That’s my line.” I chuckled as I found my robe kicked under the bed.

He turned his head and I hummed appreciatively at the seductive look plastered across his flushed face. He tensed his shoulders and pushed against the mattress with a little sound that was pure sex. I couldn’t believe this glorious man was in my bed, let alone my life. His hair was every which way, while his green eyes glittered softly at me. I couldn’t even look at his muscular back without my fingers itching and cock throbbing.

“When is Kim picking up the girls?” I asked as I tucked my cock against my body. It didn’t help and my hard-on jutted proudly back out.

Riana flounced through the door without knocking. “Two o’clock.” She pounced onto the bed, causing Marcus to tuck the comforter around him quickly before she sidled up to him.

I tied my robe closed and decided it might be time to start locking the door at night, or at least get firmer on the knocking policy.

“I’m gonna go get Chey. I think Denny’s would be a good idea for breakfast.”

At least it would get me out of this house and into a public place until the girls were gone. It was a good plan in theory. Riana agreed, although for a completely different reason I was sure.

\*\*\*\*

I watched Marcus helping Riana decide on her breakfast from the kids menu, and felt like we were on our first date. The tension was definitely there, although more of an adult content since we were past that first kiss and wondering if the chemistry would be there. We already knew it was, in spades, and building by the minute.



The kids had made our relationship different. They had pushed it forward in a way I never would have thought I could handle. But everything had come so naturally with Marcus that it just felt right; every step, every laugh, every trial, and every emotion.

He caught me staring and smiled softly before pointing at Chey. “Napkin.”

I glanced over and started picking the soggy pieces out of her mouth. “How did you get a hold of that?”

She swung her head back and forth as she shoved at my hand. When that didn’t work, she squealed. Her indignation grew louder as I opened her mouth to make sure I had all the pieces. Satisfied, I slid everything another few inches further away then handed her a blue hippo teething toy. She threw it on the table.

I dug through her bag and found the pink glittery gel heart. I handed that to her, and content with that one, she shoved it in her mouth and immediately went to drooling.

“Oh, how sweet. I love seeing fathers out together giving moms a day off. Hi, I’m Susan, and I’ll be your server. Let’s start with the pretty young lady.” She pointed her pen at Riana.

“We don’t have a mommy. Angel and my dad are going to get married and then Chey and I will have two dads,” Riana explained. “I want the strawberry pancakes.”

Susan didn’t bat an eye as she wrote down Riana’s order. “Lots of whipped cream?”

Riana nodded enthusiastically while I grinned behind my hand.

The waitress scribbled on her pad. “Orange juice?”

Riana shook her head. “Chocolate milk.”

She looked up and winked at her. “Good choice.” She turned her attention to Marcus and I noticed the wide-eyed blank look on his face.

“I’ll have the French toast. Scrambled, and an orange juice,” I said giving Marcus a chance to recover from his daughter’s announcement. Obviously, this was the first time she had dropped *that* one on him away from home.

Susan wrote my order down and still Marcus was blank. I reached behind Riana and squeezed his shoulder. He turned, and upon seeing me, shook out of his daze.

“Sorry, I’ll have the French toast too, over medium and orange juice. And pardon my daughter. She’s six.” He gathered up the menus and handed them to her with an awkward smile.

“I’m not one of those weird ones. Nope. I support the gay community and voted the same as Obama. People should be allowed to love and marry whoever they want.” She gave us both a knowing grin. *Nope, she wasn’t weird at all.* Marcus and I shared a look as she left.

“What’s gay mean?” Riana asked as she began coloring her placemat.

Marcus looked lost for the second time in five minutes so I stepped up. “It’s what your dad and I are. Two men who are happier together than apart.”

She thought about that for a moment and nodded. “Do you love each other?”

I swallowed and glanced at Marcus. He was gazing at me with that soft intensity I had come to love. I smiled at him and he smiled back. “Yes,” we both answered. I reached behind Riana and Marcus found my hand, twining his fingers with mine.

“I knew you did.” She glanced from one of us to the other. “I can see it in your faces.”

I leaned down and kissed her temple then Marcus did the same and Riana giggled.

“No,” Chey yelled. “Da, kee.” She threw the gel heart and it landed with a plop on Riana’s picture.

“Eww.” Riana picked it up between a finger and her thumb. “I’m glad I don’t drool like that anymore.” She handed it back to Chey, and she blinked her big eyes at Riana for a moment, then giggled and snatched it away. A second later she tossed it at Riana again. Riana laughed and Chey laughed and a new game took form.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

We walked through Eastside Park in an awed but comfortable silence while Riana skipped a few feet ahead. I had Chey in her sling against my chest, Marcus had his hand in my back pocket, and I had mine in his. He kept leaning over nuzzling my neck, or kissing Chey's cheek, or every now and then nibbling her neck then mine, making us both giggle. He couldn't stop smiling and neither could I.

As we reached the edge of the garden, Riana ran back.

"Can I play on the playground?" She was moving from one foot to the other like she had to pee.

We both looked over at the colorful jungle gym with all the slides, and Marcus nodded.

"Yeah, be careful."

She turned and dashed off. "I will."

"Does she need to use the bathroom?" I asked.

"No, she does that when she's excited." He grinned. "I seem to be the only one who doesn't wiggle my hips."

"Shut up." But I laughed in spite of myself. Marcus traced down my cheekbone then turned my head and kissed me. It was so sweet it made my heart ache. His hand cupped my neck as his thumb continued feathering my cheek. I grasped his arm and leaned into him trying not to crush Chey in the process. I'd never felt anything so perfect and I wanted to feel with my whole body. His hand traveled down, his thumb caressing my jaw and my eyes closed.

Chey palmed my cheek and I opened my eyes to see she had Marcus's cheek with her other hand. Marcus smiled against my mouth then moved to kiss my cheek.

"Thank you for everything," he said quietly before laying his lips carefully on my neck.

I froze at his words just as his phone rang.

“Talk about bad timing. That’s Taylor. I have to take it.” His hand slipped out of my pocket and I removed mine as he let me go and answered his phone.

I staggered sideways and wrapped my arms around Chey. What did he mean by *thank you for everything*? I felt my stomach begin to tremble and turned away from him, walking towards the playground. I stopped at the fountain and took a drink. The cold water hit like a punch in the gut.

“Da?” Chey placed her hands on my face then bonked me with her head.

“I’m okay.” But I wasn’t. His words were burning through me, destroying everything in their path. It was the same feeling I’d had when I realized Todd had left me. That kiss, I thought so full of emotion, ate at my lips. I refused to believe it might have been a goodbye kiss.

I sank onto a bench and stared at Riana waving at me as she slid down a blue slide. Suddenly Marcus was yelling and I turned to see him running towards us waving his phone.

“Toby, here, now, here.” He reached me and shoved the phone in front of me. “Do you know this restaurant?” He scrolled through a few pictures and I recognized it immediately.

“That’s Ma’s Place. It’s about twenty minutes away. We used to go there when I was a kid.” I looked up at him and saw the tears just as they spilled over.

“Riana!” he yelled. “We have to go now.” He looked down at me. “He’s there, right now.” He was seconds from a full out meltdown and I’d never seen him like this. I couldn’t just turn away. Even if he was planning to leave me, I loved him and couldn’t stand to see him fail again.

I glanced over to find Riana moving towards us in a sulky manner. “Riana, honey, hurry. We have to go get Toby.” I stood up and tightened my hold on Chey before looking at him. “Let’s go get your son.”

His eyes closed for a split second and when they opened he had managed to somehow pull himself together. He nodded and scooped up Riana, who was talking a mile a minute. She protested but clung to him like a monkey as we started sprinting across the park towards my car.

Chey worked like a siren as she screamed and squealed over the fast pace and excessive bouncing. People glanced back then moved out of the way. When we reached the car, I was huffing twice as hard as Marcus despite carrying a lighter load. I managed to unlock the doors and get Chey strapped into her car seat in about a minute. She thought all this was great fun and was giggling so hard her face was pink from forehead to chin. Riana on the other hand looked about to lose her breakfast.

As I turned the key, I leaned over to retrieve a bottle of water from under Marcus's seat. His hand brushed through my hair, making me jump and hit my head on his knee. He reached for me and I pulled away.

"I'm fine." I held up my hand to him then handed the water back to Riana. Her pallor was getting worse so I handed her one of Chey's blankets just in case. I knew the journey wasn't going to help her stomach one bit. She set the water next to her and cuddled up to the blanket.

I backed out then headed towards the freeway, and hopefully Toby. I hadn't looked closely at the pictures but I doubted he had improved much from eleven days ago. He needed his father and if it was my last act as Marcus's boyfriend I would move heaven and earth to make sure he got him. Or maybe it should be hell and earth in this instance.

I tromped the gas as I merged onto the freeway. Poor Riana moaned but she held her breakfast. I wished my parents were alive. My dad would have rallied some of his retired buddies from the force and had Toby in his custody by now. But he wasn't alive, and I hadn't seen any of his fellow officers since the funeral. They had a tendency to look on me with pity, like I had been born without legs instead of being born gay. So, despite the customary stay in touch, I hadn't called a one of them. I wished I could have called on them now.

Marcus sat in solemn silence thumbing through the four pictures over and over, throwing a text in now and then. I assumed Taylor was keeping him apprised of the situation, and would let us know if they left. We reached the exit in record time. I would have to thank my old Volvo with an oil change. She'd maintained eighty the whole way without a shudder or cough.

"Taylor says they just got their food. How much farther?" Marcus looked up from his phone. The creases above his nose were deep and he was ravaging the side of his lip.

“No more than ten minutes. Less if the lights are with us. There’s a door in from the back lot if it’s still in use. It opens into the hall where the restrooms are. They won’t see you coming. I can drop you there and swing around to the front.” I glanced at him quickly and he was staring at me in what I could only assume was awe. “What? I know the restaurant and my dad was a cop. Maybe some of him rubbed off on me.”

“Or you could just be his son and it comes naturally.”

“Mm, maybe. I was never like my dad though. He was always attentive wherever he was—always watching out for the little guy. I’m nothing like that.” I hit the brakes as the light ahead flipped to yellow. “Riana, you doing okay?” I glanced in my rearview mirror. She didn’t seem as pale now.

“Yeah.”

I smiled at her in the mirror and she smiled back. “Good girl. Chey asleep?”

She glanced sideways and nodded. “Yeah.”

“I figured. She’s only this quiet when she’s asleep.” I turned my eyes back to the road and waited for the light.

Marcus shifted sideways and leaned over the headrest. “We’re almost there, sweetie. I want you to stay in the car with Angel and Chey. Can you do that for me?”

“Mm-hm.”

“That’s my girl.” He turned back around and laid his hand on my headrest.

I tried really hard to ignore it but then he began stroking the back of my head absently, and I began to wonder if I had jumped to conclusions. I really hoped I had. An ache had already set up residence in my chest over the possibility and if he left me, I knew my body would be one big mass of pain. I knew now that I hadn’t loved Todd, at least not in the way I loved Marcus. My love for him was all-consuming and was there every minute of every day.

I wasn’t going to think about that right now though. I turned left on Center then right into the side alley that would take us behind the restaurant. I slowed down and pointed out my window.

“There’s the place. I don’t see a motorhome though.”

I stopped as Marcus wrapped his arm around my shoulders then leaned over me and looked around the area. “There, across the street.” He pointed. “At least they won’t be running this time.” He turned towards me and lowered his forehead to mine. “Now I’m scared,” he whispered so Riana couldn’t hear.

I palmed his neck. “You’ll be fine. He’s your son, and I’m here if you need me.”

He closed his eyes as his jaw and hand on my neck tensed. He still didn’t believe in himself as a father but I knew he would do right by Toby. Finally, he nodded against my forehead and opened his eyes. He gave me a quick strong kiss then took a deep breath as he settled back in his seat.

“I’m ready. Let’s go.” He smiled and I noticed it was strained. But I knew him well enough now to know he would be fine no matter what happened between him and me. His kids were lucky to have such a strong father.

I shifted into drive then took his hand. He cinched down tight as if he could draw strength from that very connection. For all I knew he could.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I drove to the back as he texted Taylor one handed, refusing to let go of me. I crawled up to the door and was relieved to see it was still an entrance. A woman dressed in jeans and a grey T-shirt, with shoulder length dark hair and glasses came out the back typing on a cell phone. She looked up and Marcus cleared his throat. With a bone-crushing squeeze of my hand, he stepped out of the car. Taylor came to my window and I rolled it down.

“Ms. Taylor, I presume?” I asked.

“Ha-ha, very funny. You have thirty seconds to get to the front. So move, but don’t leave the car unless there is no other option. Understand?” she instructed in a clipped matter-of-fact way that reminded me of my father at times.

“Yes, ma’am.” I nodded.

“Smart aleck.” She turned and gestured Marcus into the building.

I headed around to the front. “Riana, can you either duck down or cover yourself with the blanket so your grandparents can’t see you?” I watched her in the rearview mirror for any signs of remorse, regret, or possible excitement over seeing her grandparents, but there was only compliance. Like her mom, they must have done a number on her too. With a nod, she lay down on the seat and covered herself.

“Just tell me when I can get up.” She popped her head out.

“I will, sweetie. Thank you.”

She shuffled back under as I pulled into a parking spot left conveniently for me one slot down from the door. I scanned the front windows but couldn’t find Marcus or Taylor. I looked to the back right corner and I could just barely see the ivy restrooms sign painted on the wall.

The place hadn’t changed other than looking more rundown than I remembered. It was still black and white outside with chocolate brown booths inside. I was sure the carpet was the same threadbare burgundy it had been ten years ago.



I sat up when I caught sight of Marcus striding from the hallway and across the dining hall. He was frowning and right on his heels was Taylor with her cell phone in her hand. It looked like she had her thumb on a button. Maybe she had the sheriff on speed dial. I'd have to give her props if she did. I hadn't been impressed with her thus far. Three months getting to this point. Not impressed at all.

Marcus walked past the cash register near the door and into the other side of the dining room. Taylor stopped near the door with her phone held up and her thumb still in position. I leaned forward but I could no longer see Marcus. I kept my eyes on Taylor, watching for any sign of trouble since she seemed to have her eyes glued to something important. She looked like a dog staring at a cat just waiting for that cat to move so she could attack.

Suddenly her thumb hit the button as she raised the phone to her mouth and jumped into action. My heart sank all the way to my toes as I watched her run across the restaurant and out of sight. Every muscle in my body wanted to bolt from the car, but I gripped the steering wheel instead knowing I couldn't leave the girls.

Taylor reappeared moving in a swift, awkward way. When I could see all of her I noticed the bundle held tightly against her chest and knew it was Toby. She turned towards the door and I opened mine and stepped out of the car.

She was already talking as she pushed the door open. "Assholes. Take him and lock the doors. Cops and ambulance are on the way." She carefully handed him over. He was so small and the blanket he was wrapped in smelled musty and like urine.

"Where's Marcus?" I asked as she turned to head back inside.

She looked at me over her shoulder and her face was pinched in making her look like an angry bird. I didn't think my heart could sink any lower but I felt it fall.

"The old man stabbed him with a steak knife. Idiot. Marcus just stood there and let it happen." She pressed a hand to her head. "The old man was so shocked Marcus didn't move that I was able to swoop in and grab Toby. A busboy came out of nowhere and stopped him from stabbing Marcus again. I

don't know..." She shook her head as she glanced back inside. "I'm going to find out and I'll come back and let you know. Ambulance should be here any minute."

I was hyperventilating, I just knew it. I felt like a car was sitting on my chest and my lungs wouldn't expand no matter how hard I tried. Taylor headed back in with her head bowed. I felt my knees go numb, then Toby coughed. This weak, croupy, wet sound, and with that one small sound, I was myself again.

I gently took the blanket off him refusing to let the foul thing in my car. What I found beneath the blanket made me gasp. I'd never seen a jaundiced person in real life but I knew the signs. Even the whites of his eyes were pale yellow. His hands were dirty and he was trying to suck on one. I pulled it from his mouth and he opened his eyes. Marcus's eyes. Bright green and just as expressive. He looked up at me and blinked. His eyelashes were dark blond and I found myself wishing they were auburn like Marcus's and Riana's. Then he did something amazing and smiled.

This tiny, sick child that had been through only God knew what, smiled, and the happiness went all the way to his eyes. I bent my head down and kissed his forehead. His hands grabbed at my neck.

"Such a strong boy. You're going to be just fine aren't you?" I kissed him again and realized he smelled rather fierce. Old sweat, rotten milk, and what I suspected was a fairly dirty diaper. This I could fix right away. I climbed into the car and moved my seat back a few notches.

"Riana, you can quit hiding. Hand me Chey's diaper bag, please. And a blanket. If you don't want to give up yours there should be another one behind your seat."

The blanket she had been using came forward then Riana grunted and dropped the diaper bag into the passenger seat. She leaned between the seats and watched quietly as I went to work cleaning him up.

When I peeled off his onesie she sucked in a breath and went to touch his arm.

"Don't touch him. I think that's a staph infection and you'll get it. Sorry, honey."

There were several spots where his skin was dark, thick and scaling off. I suspected staph but hoped it wasn't. Until I knew for sure, I couldn't touch Chey though.

“Is he going to be okay?”

I glanced back at her and saw the worry on her sweet face. Cleaning up Toby had taken my mind off Marcus for several minutes but now, looking at his daughter and son, an emotional tidal wave threatened me. Where's the damn ambulance and why hasn't Taylor come back out?

“Yeah, he's going to be fine. He's going to be fine.” *Please, let him be fine.*

A few minutes later, the parking lot became a swirl of lights and people in uniforms. They charged in and out of the door, past us in the car, and I felt like I was watching a scene. Detached from the reality of it all, forgotten in our little bubble.

Toby had fallen asleep in the passenger seat the second I cocooned him in the blanket. His onesie had joined the blanket on the pavement. I was resting my head on the steering wheel while Riana read a picture book. Someone knocked on my window and I was so emotionally drained, it didn't even startle me.

I looked at the round-faced woman with the ponytail as I rolled the window down. She was in a brown polyester suit the same color as her hair and looked nothing like a cop or paramedic.

She leaned down, resting on the window ledge, and gave me an apologetic smile. “Hi, I'm from Child Protective Servi—”

“You're not taking him.” I couldn't believe how vehement my voice was but I wasn't about to let Marcus lose him again.

“Actually it's within our right to take him based on his condition, but no, he needs medical care and we'll be investigating the situation while he's treated. Right now, all I need are a few pictures.”

“All right. Try not to wake him.” I gestured to the passenger door while I unlocked it.

She took her pictures, shaking her head the whole time.

“It’s a good thing Mr. O’Keefe beat us to him or he would have ended up in our custody and it would have been a lot harder to get him back. Is that Staph?” She took an exam glove from her pocket and put it on, then leaned down and picked at one of the lesions. The scruff flaked off and underneath the skin was inflamed. She shook her head. “It looks like bedsores. It’s not staph, but might be a fungal infection, so be sure you all shower when you get home.”

“We will. Thank you.” Relieved, I glanced in my rearview at Chey drooling in her sleep.

A hand clamped around my shoulder through my window. And this time I did startle with a loud squeal that sounded more pig than Chey ever did.

“Sorry.” Taylor raised her shoulders and grimaced apologetically. “They’re bringing Marcus out in a minute. He’s going to be okay but he needs to be checked out and stitched up, so they’re taking him to the hospital down the hill. South something.”

“South Hill Medical. What about Toby?” I knew the hospital and it was only a few miles away.

“An EMT should have come and collected him already. I’ll check, be right back.” She went over to one of the paramedics stowing gear back in his rig. He pulled out a red box he had just put away and followed her over. They were waylaid by an officer. Bureaucratic bullshit I was sure.

“Mr. Tucco, I’m done for now. Here’s my card, please call me when you have a few minutes. I’d like to get a statement from you for his record.” The CPS officer held out a card and I took it, nodding. She closed the passenger door and I locked the door again.

A bang and rattle brought my eyes around and I jumped out of the car as they wheeled Marcus out on a stretcher. My hand clamped over my mouth when I saw the large red circle on his shirt. I glanced at Riana and she appeared to be immersed in the book but I knew her. I knew she would spot him in the next minute or two.

“Riana, get out of the car and come take my hand.”

She glanced up, but thankfully there were too many people between us and the ambulance to see her dad clearly now. She did as I asked and I locked the car. I made a stop on our way.

“Watch the car, please. There are two very precious babies in there.” I handed Taylor the keys and she nodded.

“We’re going to get Toby ready for transport, just so you know.” She patted my shoulder as I turned to where they were about to load Marcus.

“Come on, honey.” I reached down to pick up Riana and she put her arms up without question.

We made our way over and when she saw him she whimpered. “Daddy?” She buried her head in my neck and started to cry.

I rubbed her back. “He’s going to be okay. It’s just a cut. He’ll be back with us very soon.” She nodded at my explanation but continued to cry softly. Marcus’s kids were so strong, just like their father. I would have been wailing. I actually wanted to.

“Wait. We need to see him, please,” I called out to the paramedics about to lift the gurney. Marcus looked at us and his hand fell over his eyes. As we drew closer I saw his lips trembling.

“Hey.” I reached down and touched his cheek and had my hand captured as he pressed into it. He held it against his cheek for several moments before letting me go and reaching to rub Riana’s leg.

“Hey, quit crying.”

Riana looked down at him, nodded and sobbed.

“I’m okay. It’s just a scratch but they have to give me some stitches and a big Band-Aid. I’ll be good as new by dinner. I think I need ice cream though. Will you help me eat some ice cream?”

She sniffed and nodded. “You’re really okay?”

Marcus managed a smile for her and nodded then looked at me and his face crumbled.

“Toby’s going to be fine. He has a little bit of a road ahead of him, but he’s a strong, resilient boy.” I set Riana down, pointing her to the other side of the

gurney and her dad's hand. She walked over and clasped his hand with both of hers.

"Thank God." Marcus looked at me with that soft intensity of his. "Come here."

I gestured to his side instead. "Does it hurt?" I had always wondered why people asked that when it was obvious. Now I knew. *Because you don't know what else to say.*

"Only when I breathe." His eyes narrowed. "So, no rough stuff for a while. Now come here so I can talk to you."

I searched his face and he was giving me that fierce look of his that usually meant I was in trouble but not necessarily in a bad way. I leaned down and he grabbed my neck tightly and pulled me next to his head.

"How could you think I was going to leave you? Don't deny it, I can still see it in your face," he whispered against my ear causing me to duck my head. I didn't know if I did it out of shame or fear. "Honey, Daddy needs his hand." His other hand landed roughly against the back of my head. "That hurt. It hurt so much, that you would think that. I love you, dammit, and I thought you knew that." He kissed my ear then my neck as his hands gripped me, holding me in place.

"I did, I do. I—I should have trusted you." I clasped his forearms as the emotion rolled over me. Toby was safe, Marcus was okay, and he still loved me, *he still loved me*. "I'm sorry..." I said in a voice barely there. I shook as I realized I had been a fool to even think he would leave me. He wasn't Todd, or Eric, or even Scott who had taken my virginity then ignored me at school. Marcus had only ever loved me for who I was, not what I wasn't.

I turned my head into his neck. "I'm sorry. I didn't see."

"Can you now?" he asked hesitantly. I nodded and breathed him in. He smelled like desire, and life, and...

He smelled like home.

He guided my head over and kissed me hard, his fingers digging into my head and neck. I could feel it all the way to my toes. So many emotions at once. All I could do was hold on for the ride.

He pulled away and stared at me. His eyes damp and his face flushed. He was so beautiful.

“Tell me, I need to hear you say it.” His hands relaxed their hold, then stroked my neck and cheek.

I gave him what I hoped was a sexy smile. “I love you, Marcus.”

His eyes drifted closed for a moment. When they opened again they were soft and incredibly warm.

“I love you too, Angel—and don’t ever forget it.”

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Stupid things. Why did everything pretty have to be such a pain in the butt to grow? I picked the dead Rhododendron pods off my gloves, only to have them stick obstinately to the fingers in a large rust colored clump.

The tap of a car horn had me glancing over my shoulder. I smiled as the black Accord rolled around the corner. What was Marcus doing home so early? I tore my gardening gloves off and tossed them in the bucket with the dead blooms. I hadn't been a fan of them anyway. They had been the only ones in stock at the hardware store that fit me. Teal and bright pink. You can't get much gayer than that.

I walked over as Marcus pulled in next to my grey Volvo. He climbed from the car and leaned on the roof, a smile as big as the sun on his face.

"I thought we were meeting at the hospital at six?"

He nodded. "We were. I received a call though." He paused and the smile lit his face again. "They're releasing Toby. We can pick him up first thing in the morning. So, I decided to take the rest of the day off and already went to see him. I can't believe how normal he looks now."

"He's a different little boy now isn't he?"

He nodded and watched me come around the car. As I grew closer, his expression changed.

*Oh. Oh, God, yes.* I wasn't about to get overly excited about the heated look on his face though. The girls were home, and it was still forever before they went to bed. He turned towards me as I rounded the bumper, and it was clearly evident he was excited, and obviously not wearing his tight briefs. *Drooling*—I wiped my chin and swallowed.

"I can't believe he's coming home already." I stopped in front of him and shook my head in disbelief. That boy had been a miracle to say the least. When he had been admitted, the doctor had told us to expect two weeks in intensive care, but they moved him to pediatrics in less than a week. He'd been improving so rapidly we never knew what we were going to find when we



visited him. Last night he had pulled himself up and cuddled against Marcus's chest making his father quietly cry.

Marcus nodded and swallowed then cleared his throat. I had learned over the past eighteen days that, although Marcus did cry, he preferred not to and would swallow his emotions whenever he could. It didn't make him cold as one would assume, but quite the opposite. If one knew where to look, they would see he was a very passionate man, and I knew right where to look.

I laid my hand on his chest and was immediately engulfed. He buried his face in my neck and held me tight. I cradled him in my arms, rubbing his back, as he muttered over and over against my skin. "He's coming home."

A hand squeezed one of mine and I lifted myself onto my toes to see who it was.

"He likes you to think he's all tough, but inside he's always been a big softy." Kim rubbed her brother's arm.

I glanced to the curb and was surprised I hadn't heard her puke-green Prius pull up. It was a quiet car but not *that* quiet. Marcus quit his little mantra and threw an arm around his sister's neck, giving her a quick hug.

"You're early," he said.

"Early for what?" I asked.

She pursed her lips and raised her eyebrows at Marcus. "Girls in the house?" She gestured at the front door.

Marcus looked to me. "I assume so."

I nodded dumbly. "Early for what?" I asked again.

She patted my cheek before heading into the house. I blinked at her back, then at Marcus unlocking his trunk, knowing I was missing something.

"Help me put this stuff in the garage." He lifted a box from the trunk and passed it to me.

"You're not going to tell me what you're up too are you?" I juggled the box against my chest.

"Nope." He grabbed his keys and hit the garage door opener.

I followed him into the garage and set the box down with the others from his apartment. I gazed over the ever growing pile and had no idea where we were going to put everything.

“You’re worrying again.” He pulled me back against his chest. “If you’re having second thoughts we could move back to the apartment for a while.”

I shook my head and leaned against him. “I’d be too lonely, and if Riana wasn’t here who would Chey scream at?” Three days after Toby’s rescue, Marcus and Riana had spent two nights at their apartment cleaning and catching up on paperwork Marcus had been neglecting. It had been awful without them. Even Chey had seemed out of sorts with them gone. I called him that second night and asked them to move in. Marcus almost broke down and brought over the first load before breakfast.

Regardless of how chaotic things became, or where we ended up down the road, I’d never regret that decision.

He kissed my temple. “That’s good because I cancelled the lease today. If you kick us out, we’d be homeless.” He let me go and headed back to his Accord. “Last two boxes.”

“Really?” I followed him, enjoying the view. Marcus in slacks was a handsome devil, but Marcus in jeans and a tight T-shirt was downright sinful. I could see every muscle bunch and coil along his shoulders as he moved, and his thighs, *mmm*, I knew every brawny inch of them.

The baby monitor crackled and Chey’s wails reached me from inside the house. I turned and trotted towards the front door.

“I’m sure she’s fine. She’s probably figured out Kim’s taking her,” Marcus called.

“Taking her where?” I hesitated at the front step just as the door opened and Chey’s outrage reached an all-new volume. I reached for her and Kim batted my hands away, losing the diaper bag in the process.

“She’s fine. She always calms down once I start driving.” She hoisted her onto a hip as Riana heaved the bag up and handed it to her aunt.

I stepped in front of them and placed my hands on my hips. “All right, what’s going on?”

Kim glanced at Marcus who was setting the box he had been carrying on the hood of his car. “I think you might need to tell him.”

“Mm, maybe.” Brother and sister shared a look.

Chey leaned towards me almost toppling out of Kim’s arms. “Da—DA!” Her face was already red from screaming but now the lip came out and the tears spilled over.

I reached to grab her and Kim hugged her to her chest, ducking off just as Marcus seized my waist and swung me away from them.

I huffed at him, yet he held on to me as Kim hustled to the car. I could hear her laughing over Chey’s undignified screaming.

“I’m not going to chase after her, so you can let me go.” I had already figured out Marcus was up to something, I just wasn’t sure what.

He let me go only long enough to spin me around. It would have been a graceful move if my feet hadn’t gotten in the way. Marcus caught me and hauled me against him. When I looked up at him he was chewing on his lip and looking anywhere but at me. His fingers dug into the backside of my jeans as he released his lip then he blew out a breath before letting me go and striding back towards his car.

“Marcus, how long are the girls staying with Kim?” I asked curiously, turning around and heading over to grab the last box.

He glanced at me, scooping the box off the hood, then just as he turned away I saw the smirk. Girls gone, an empty house and Marcus acting weird, *breathe Tucco*.

“Until I call her.”

“And when are you planning on doing that?” I wrestled the box out of the trunk and closed it.

“I don’t know.” He shrugged but the smirk was morphing into a rather sexy grin making it hard to breathe again. “Probably after we bring Toby home.” He took the box from me and set it with the rest then turned and picked part of a Rhodie flower from my hair. I seemed to have lost the ability to move and felt like I was about to melt into a puddle at his feet. “Is that

okay?” He tried to frown, yet his lips didn’t seem to be cooperating. *Mmm*, love those lips.

“Yunmm,” was all that I managed before he bent down and kissed me oh so sweetly.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*Alone.* For the first time in over two weeks, we were alone! I grabbed his shirt in one hand, and his hair in the other, tugging hard on both as I pressed my lips firmly against his. He responded immediately and the second my mouth parted, his tongue shot in and aggressively began exploring. God, he was a good kisser and, oh, I wanted, definitely wanted...

He grabbed hold of the back of my jeans pulling them tight as I tugged at the hem of his T-shirt, unable to find my way beneath it.

I pulled away and managed to jerk his shirt up. "Has to go," I said, fighting to get it over his head. He reached up and ripped it off then wrestled mine off. I ran my hands up his ribs, over his pecs and down his stomach. So beautiful. I buried my face in his chest hair and breathed in his musky scent.

I felt Marcus yank the buttons free on my jeans then his hands slid under the waistband and he groaned as he cupped my ass. Hands, warm, strong, *mmm*. I laved my tongue through his chest hair relishing the salty taste of his golden skin. My tongue skittered over his nipple and he levered me against his thigh, throwing his head back and letting out a hiss. My cock twitched over the erotic sound and I rubbed against his thigh, latching my lips over his nipple.

"Ahh, yesss." Marcus dug his fingers in and hoisted me up as he shoved me back. We hit something unforgiving and I realized he had me wedged against the metal rack that held cans of paint and my gardening supplies. A shelf dug into my back but the second Marcus's mouth crashed down on mine I forgot about everything except the feel of him pressed against me.

My hands roamed every inch of his back, savoring the hard curves and shallow valleys. Fingers pressed between my cheeks and caressed, making me whimper, making me want, and I tore my mouth free.

"Lube, lube, we need lube," I said, surprised to hear the gruffness in my voice.

Marcus blinked at me, his face flushed and eyes blazing. "Um," His eyes wandered to his boxes and he dropped me onto my feet. I was amazed my legs weren't shaking more than they were. Even so, I had to grip the rack to keep myself from slipping to the floor.

I watched him shove a few boxes out of the way then punch through the top of one and rip it open. I licked my lips staring at the play of muscle and the sweat beginning to glisten on his skin, highlighting his natural golden tone. I'd seen him naked more than once but this was different somehow. I couldn't put my finger on it, more erotic maybe, or sensual. I didn't know, but I did know I wanted him desperately, and not just to make him happy, but to make me happy.

I leaned my head back against one of the supports, and as I looked out into the neighborhood, I laughed. Marcus stood up and looked at me.

I lifted an eyebrow. "Do you have your keys?" I pointed to the open garage door.

He gave me a sexy smirk. "You don't want to educate the neighbors?" Even as he said it, he fished out his keys, and hit the button.

I shook my head. "Maybe another time. Did you find lube?"

He held a silver tube up, along with a condom and walked back over, kicking his shoes off as he came. He set the condom on the shelf behind me, dropped the lube at our feet, then bent down and ran his lips and tongue over the front of my body while his hands caressed my back. *Numnumnum*. By the time he reached my belly button my fingers were latched in his hair and I was breathing hard.

He pushed his face into my crotch and I ground against him, feeling pre-come ooze from my cockhead. I marveled at my own boldness, and was in awe of the man who had found a part of me I never knew existed. His hands flattened on the small of my back as he latched his lips over the wet spot on my boxer briefs and sucked on the fabric.

"Oh, God, do you know how hot that is?" I gripped his hair and rocked against his lips.

His hand came around and tugged my waistband down just enough to free my tip. I watched his head nuzzle in closer, then his tongue swathed across my tip and my hips jerked.

"Anh-ahh." My head lolled back and my lungs quit working for a second. My dick drooled in appreciation and Marcus sucked off the dribble as his

hands took hold of my waistband and yanked my jeans and underwear down on one swift move. I should have felt exposed, normally I would have, but I didn't. I just wanted to feel Marcus's hands, his mouth, on every inch of me. One hand palmed my ass while the other wrapped around my cock and my hips went to thrusting. Too much touching. *Shit.*

“Oh, God, Marcus, you're going to make me come.” I pulled on his hair.

He let go of my dick and kissed my hip. “Lift your foot.”

I did and he slid my jeans over one foot then the other, and tossed my pants aside.

“Turn around,” he breathed.

I turned to face the shelves and grasped a support above my head as he pushed my feet apart with his knees. I was breathing hard but I wasn't sure if I was nervous or excited. Maybe a little bit of both. His hands ran over my hips, my thighs, and my lower back as he laid kisses all over my buttocks. His hands disappeared and I took a deep steadying breath. His tongue laved up my crack and I yipped then shuddered over the odd sensation. That was a first and I think I liked it. He ran his tongue up again, finishing with a small suck at the top. I moaned, pushing back against his mouth. *I definitely liked that.*

He caressed my hole with the pad of his lubed thumb, and it was warm and I think—yeah, nice. His hand massaged my thigh as he pushed his thumb in. I tensed even though I tried not to. I felt his hair tickle.

“Relax, Angel.” His warm breath touched my skin. He continued to massage my thigh as his thumb lubed me up, and I felt myself relaxing into his gentle ministrations. When he removed his thumb, I found myself slumped against the rack, my breath stirring up tiny clouds of dust.

“God, you are so damn sexy.” He stood and leaned against me, running his hands over my chest as he rubbed his hard-on slowly against my ass. I pushed back and sighed as my grip tightened on the shelf.

“You think I'm sexy?” The words came out in short puffs. I leaned my head back as Marcus's hand ran up my throat.

“So, fucking sexy.” He thrust his hips and his chest vibrated against my back. My ass clenched hard and I felt a little flutter of sensation travel through my groin. He wasn't even inside me and I was already falling apart.

“*More*,” I pleaded.

“Tell me what you want, Angel? I want to hear you say it.” He rocked against me, his cock sliding up my crack, leaving a warm slick trail.

My dick leapt so hard it slapped my belly. I just about lost my grip on the shelf, my stomach tensing as I ground my ass against Marcus. He swore and began to shake as his hands seized my hips. He moved away, keeping me firmly pressed against the rack.

“I need a minute. Don’t move. Stay right where you are.” He took his hands off my hips, and I glanced back as he walked away with his hands running through his hair.

He was sweating, panting, and marred by smears of dirt from the shelving unit. He was glorious, strutting along, trying to pull himself together, his dick so hard it barely moved as he wandered around the garage. My mouth watered as I stared at the dark veins standing out. God, he was downright erotic. He had the type of cock you begged to see in pornos, yet never did. There wasn’t anything pretty about it, but it was magnificent in that rough-boy sort of way. Thick, and ugly, and meant to be used—hard.

My ass clenched apprehensively even as I trembled in anticipation. He glanced at me and gave me a lopsided smile.

“I, ah, yeah.” He clasped the back of his neck, shook his head and looked at the floor.

I couldn’t help grinning. “Marcus, first times are flurried things full of lust and overactive hormones. We have all night to play and find each other.” The fact he could barely contain himself with me made me lightheaded. I’d never had that kind of power over anyone.

He turned his head towards me, a smirk on his face. “That was not the right thing to say to me.” He took a deep breath, came back over and pulled me against him. “I’ll be lucky if I last two minutes.” He kissed me, a rough, deep, mind-spinning event. His finger worked its way inside me at some point but I hardly felt it until...

“AHHH.” I practically climbed up his body as the charge fired through, tightening every muscle.



“Oh, Angel, you’re like a virgin without all the nervous bullshit,” Marcus breathed into my ear. I think I answered with one of Chey’s favorite noises—*numnumnum*.

He held me tight and continued to torture me. And it was torture; wonderful, brain twisting, body wracking torture. I’m not sure how many times I swore, or leapt into his arms, or almost puddled on the floor, and through it all he held me tight, kissing my neck, my face, my lips.

The whole episode probably only lasted a minute or two, but it felt like an eternity, and when he removed his evil fingers, my legs were around his waist and I couldn’t remember how I had ended up there.

I doubted I would have even noticed the garage door open at this point or even the whole neighborhood watching if it was. I was flying and I wanted more, regardless of whether my trembling body could handle it or not. He had called me a virgin and although that was fairly apropos, I didn’t feel like a virgin, more like awakened.

“I so want to fuck you like this but, baby, my legs are beginning to shake,” Marcus said.

I kissed him and dropped my legs to the concrete floor, surprised at how solid they were. I let his lips go, traced my hand across his chest, and turned my ass to him, hoping I was wiggling it enticingly.

He swallowed noisily and snatched up the condom. I felt a little slutty, and a lot naughty, as I grasped the support and extended my derriere behind me. I wanted to know what Marcus would feel like inside me, and whether his cock could finish what his fingers had started.

He settled between my cheeks and leaned over. “You tell me if anything’s uncomfortable. You hear me, Angel?”

I nodded and pushed back, forcing his head in.

“Jesus.” Marcus’s hips jerked and I felt his fist butt up against my ass.

I was about to tell him to go all the way when his hands came up, linking with mine, and he slid steadily in. His fingers were squeezing mine hard, and I could hear his labored breathing as he tried to control himself. I didn’t want him to hurt me but I didn’t want him to control himself either.

“I’m not a virgin. You don’t have to be so careful; my ass has seen a lot of play.”

“I didn’t need to hear that...” He drove the rest of the way in with a hard flick of his hips. “*Oh, fuck.* I didn’t mean to do that.”

I chuckled both at his apology, and over the fact that I didn’t feel a damn bit of discomfort. As a matter of fact, I *really* wanted him to move.

“Quit laughing, dammit.” He let out a breathy snicker even though his hips were keeling in short bursts, wanting to move too. I rocked my pelvis forward, then back, and Marcus finally gave up his attempt at control and started to move in long thrusts.

There wasn’t any pain, or that God awful uncomfortable tightness, but it wasn’t as pleasurable as I had hoped it would be. I concentrated on Marcus moving inside me and the sexy little sounds he was making in his throat.

He pushed all the way in and stopped. “Lift your leg onto the first shelf.”

“What?”

“Angel, I know you’re not feeling what you should be. Lift your goddamn leg.”

“I’m okay. It’s not uncomfortable like it used to be—I’m even still hard.” As I argued, however, I set my foot on the shelf and Marcus slid his leg under mine, raising it onto his thigh.

He didn’t give me any warning. He twisted his body and rammed into me. I saw stars, or at least oddly shaped spots of light that looked like stars as they danced across my vision. I think I even yelled, not a word just a loud expression of surprise as the current zipped up my spine.

“Oh, fuck yeah.” Marcus groaned and thrust hard, over and over until my whole body was so tight I thought it was going to break.

I didn’t even have time to recover from one electric shock before another ripped through me. I wasn’t sure if I was crying out or whimpering wantonly. And just when I thought I couldn’t handle anymore, just when I was sure I was about to collapse, sweat broke across my body and that harsh pleasant tickle licked my balls.

“Oh, fuck, coming, coming...” I tried to get a hand free, I wanted to hold my cock but Marcus reached it first and pumped me. My hips thrust into Marcus’s hand and I groaned as I came.

“Fuck, so fucking hot.” Marcus drove into me as his hand slid over my now slimy cock.

His thumb caressed my slit and my back inverted as a last blast of heat shot forth before my body gave out. I gripped the shelf to keep from collapsing and felt a flash of pain across my thumb before my mind blanked.

A few seconds, or maybe minutes later, I couldn’t be sure since time seemed to have stopped, Marcus let out a long groan as he wrapped around me, his whole body shivering violently.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Marcus held me and I leaned against him, hugging his strong arms, while we both came down from the euphoria. As his breathing regulated, he laughed.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“You. Hold on...” He let go of me for a second and pulled out, tossing the condom in the garbage near the workbench. He turned me around to face him, his expression soft and his eyes burning. He shook his head slowly, amusement still playing with his lush kiss-swollen lips. “I can’t believe how *energetic* you become when you’re enjoying yourself.”

“Do I?” I really couldn’t remember much past the incredible orgasm.

“Yeah, you do, and it’s a major turn on, but if you ever become passive like that again I’m going to beat you senseless.” He tried to be serious, yet he couldn’t straighten his face and his threat lost any edge he might have intended.

His stomach *rowled* loudly and he rubbed it. “All right, I didn’t eat lunch and I’m starving.” He grazed over my body. “Then maybe a shower—” he sniffed along my shoulder—“mmm, or maybe not. God, you smell good. Sex and sweat, and that soft sweet smell that’s so damn enticing.”

“What do I smell like?” I asked, rolling my head to the side when he nudged. He buried his face against my skin.

“I can’t explain it. You smell clean and pure and good—and right now a little sinful.” He chuckled and I laughed. “I corrupted the Angel.” He leaned back and gazed at me, his eyes glittering as he bit the side of his lip.

I shook my head still laughing. “I was already corrupted. You awakened me—with a little help from Dr. Peters.”

“I think I owe that man a debt of gratitude. Maybe flowers or a card or a side of beef—I’ll think of something.” Marcus took my hand and tugged me into the house. He lifted my hand as we entered the kitchen and glanced at the damp spot on my thumb. “Eww, blood.” He dropped my hand and looked away, clearing his throat. “Go put a Band-Aid on please.”

I laughed. “How in the world do you clean Riana’s cuts?”

He made a face. “Quickly. Thankfully she’s a hardy kid or she probably would have died of an infection a long time ago.” He opened the fridge and pulled out the leftover garlic shrimp and fruit salad. Then without looking at me, he ushered me out with a few flicks of his hand and a grimace on his face.

I chuckled all the way to the bathroom. I couldn’t believe blood made my big, masculine man queasy. I looked at the smear of red down my thumb. It was just a shallow slice, similar to a bad paper cut. I peed and washed the grime off my hands then covered the cut with antibiotic ointment and a Band-Aid.

I glanced in the mirror and smiled. There were a few swaths of dirt across my cheeks and one up my neck. My face and narrow shoulders were still pink, and with my fair skin the flush would probably stick around for a while longer. My thin lips were plumper than I had ever seen them and red from Marcus ravaging them. I touched them and grinned feeling giddy then silly for feeling that way.

I headed back to the kitchen. It was only once, yet I felt my life had shifted and Marcus was in my house, our house, living with me, sharing a life, and the way he looked at me—like he could have me for breakfast, lunch and dinner and still want more, made my heart race, and my skin tingle, and yeah...

As I entered the kitchen, Marcus turned and shoved a chunk of cantaloupe at me. I opened my mouth and let him feed it to me. He glanced down at my woody and the corner of his mouth rose in query.

“I thought you just went to get a Band-Aid? What were you up too?”

I felt the blush burn across my chest and cheekbones. “I was just thinking...” I picked a strawberry out of the bowl and popped it in my mouth.

His eyebrow lifted. “About?” He speared a shrimp.

I gave him a thoughtful look. “My first boyfriend actually.”

He quit chewing for a second then continued slowly before swallowing. “Are you trying to piss me off? I’m not normally a jealous person but your ex’s seem to bring out the worst in me.”

I swiped my thumb across his lower lip, catching the butter about to drip down his chin and sucked my thumb. “You’re too damn sexy for your own good when you’re pissed off.”

He chuckled and continued feeding us both. I nipped his fingers a few times and his cock jumped to attention. As he pushed the last grape into my mouth, I bit down and watched his eyes close rapturously. When I sucked, he hissed and his hand found my ass and kneaded it roughly.

He bent his head down, stopping half an inch from my lips. “Are you sore?”

“No.” I bit his lip and gripped his ass hard.

He didn’t say another word as he literally dragged me to the bedroom. I had to jog to keep up with his long stride. He pushed me down on the bed, donned a condom from the nightstand, and lubed his cock up in a minute, maybe less. I squeaked like a mouse as he dropped on top of me. He pulled one knee up and I drew up the other. He kissed me and it was a raunchy, needful, sloppy, and erotic kiss. Tongues fought, teeth clashed, lips bruised and in the middle of it he pushed into me and immediately started to move... fast. He was grunting in seconds and my dick was tapping my belly, drooling uncontrollably.

The sensation he elicited from me ricocheted through my groin like an anomic Ping-Pong ball, driving me crazy. I was panting into his mouth, and his body, slicked with sweat, slid seductively against mine. It was a salacious, greedy, dirty fuck and I was so damn turned on my orgasm was already spiraling up and would soon be out of control.

His arms wrenched my legs higher as he grasped the headboard, levering against it and increasing the power of his thrusts. My back arched, my legs pushed against his biceps as I clasped his forearms, meeting every thrust. He drove his tongue in and out of my mouth as if he was fucking me with it. *Oh, God, so good, sooo good.* I sucked on it and his whole body hitched for a second then he groaned so hard his body vibrated. He buried himself inside me in one forceful thrust as his arms shook then caved, and he crumpled on top of me.

I untangled my legs and wrapped them around his waist as I kissed his temple, cheek and neck while my fingers caressed his damp hair. I held him until his body relaxed. It was okay that I didn't come. Even though my cock throbbed, I felt more liberated than I ever had. Free to want, to need, and to instigate for the first time in my life.

Marcus stirred and pulled out, moaning as he did so. He discarded the condom then settled between my legs and began kissing down my chest. I stroked his hair and watched him.

“So, sexy...” Kiss.

“What did I do to deserve you?” Lick.

“I'm so lucky...” Suck.

“To have you...” His tongue laved across my cockhead and I moaned as my eyes fluttered.

“I love you, Angel.”

I tried to respond but his mouth closed over my dick and my ability to speak fled. He slid one of my feet up then pushed a finger in and immediately found my spot. He stroked, I thrust, his tongue teased and my fingers grappled with his hair. I felt my balls tense, and my hips began pumping erratically as my body wound tight.

“Oh, God. Oh, God, ahhh fuck, *Marcus*, ah, yeessss.” My head snapped back as he sucked me, and I came on a bone-rattling shudder. He kept teasing my cock, and stroking inside me, and I swear I kept coming in short harsh spurts. It finally became too much and I whimpered like the whapped boy I was. My body trembled and I could feel the haziness trying to take me down.

Marcus kissed me lazily as his hands caressed me until my body calmed. He curled up next to me and cradled me in his arms. I immediately began to doze, fighting to keep my eyes open, but I was losing.

“My amazing Angel,” Marcus whispered, and I clung to his arms as I lost the battle and sleep overtook me.

The dusty pink of dawn woke me and I wondered if the smile stretched across my face had been there all night. Marcus was cozied up to my back,

snoring softly, his palm flat on my chest as if I might try to get away. I wasn't going anywhere though. Except to the bathroom but that could wait a minute or two—maybe—or maybe not.

I went to slide out from under Marcus's arm and his fingers clutched at my chest. *Eek*, was I glad I didn't have more than five chest hairs. I managed to wiggle out from under his hand and was headed towards the bathroom when he stirred.

“Where are you going?” he mumbled through a yawn.

“Bathroom.” I pointed to the wood door. “Go back to sleep, I think it's still early.”

After I peed, I washed my face and wiped the smudges from my neck and arms before heading back out to cuddle. I knew I wouldn't fall back to sleep but that didn't stop me from wanting to go back to the warm body waiting for me. Only he wasn't waiting for me. The bed was empty.

We only had one bathroom in the house and I had a sinking feeling he had gone outside to pee. Marcus didn't have any problem with PDAs, or educating the neighbors, or even strangers for that matter. I, on the other hand, was a bit more reserved about that sort of thing. Not that my unease ever stopped Marcus from ravaging me in public.

I was about to go find him when I heard him coming down the hall. I never realized he walked so heavily, but then the house *was* dead quiet right now. Well, except for the creaking of the floor beneath Marcus's heavy feet. I crawled back in bed and snuggled under the comforter.

He was guzzling a bottle of water and scratching his back when he re-entered. His hair was trashed and his morning woody, that had been poking me minutes earlier, hung limp.

I gave him a questing look. “Did you pee outside?”

He nodded and I rolled my eyes. “What? I'm a Montana boy, we pee anywhere. Besides, there's a six foot privacy fence, and if a neighbor is peeking over it at seven a.m. on a Saturday they deserve what they get.” He handed the last of the water to me and climbed back in bed.



“You told me you grew up smack dab in the middle of Missoula and didn’t have a single friend who owned a cow or a horse. I don’t think you qualify as a rough and tumble Montanan.” I gave him a wry look.

He shrugged. “Probably not.” His fingers gently ran down my arm. “Are you sore?”

I narrowed my eyes at him and lowered the bottle from my mouth. “Why do you keep asking me that? And no I’m not, but I won’t get into why since it would probably raise your hackles.” I took a drink and set the bottle on the nightstand. He didn’t need to know Eric, my first real boyfriend, had handled me none to gently, and any soreness I might experience now couldn’t come close to comparing with what I felt after he used me.

Marcus looked at his hands then raised his head and rested his lips on my shoulder, peeking at me from under his auburn lashes. “I just—I was worried I had gone too far last night. I told you I was an affectionate person but I, um, have never...” He dropped his forehead onto my shoulder and took a deep breath.

I knew he wasn’t a virgin. He had admitted that he had only had sex with his wife a handful of times, but I was under the impression he had done a lot of experimenting prior to marrying her. So if this sexy, assured man was about to tell me he had never been with a guy, I knew I would faint straight away.

“Just tell me what you’re trying to say.”

He looked up at me, and his eyes were the brightest green, and a myriad of emotions were swirling, unsure in their depths.

He shook his head slightly. “I’ve never loved anyone, and the first time I said it to you I wasn’t sure it was true since I didn’t know what love felt like. I mean, I love Riana and if anything ever happened to her I’d end up in a ball somewhere for days, but...” He stopped and his face screwed up as if he was in physical pain.

He was babbling and I’d never seen him like this. Obviously, something was upsetting him and he was having a hard time telling me what it was.

I reached over and moved the curl of hair out of his eye. “What is it, Marcus.”

He stopped fidgeting and looked right at me. “If anything ever happened to you I wouldn’t be able to go on. If I ever hurt you—I don’t know what came over me last night, you do that to me, and I was rough and I’m not exactly small but you are—well, you’re so tight and the surgery and...”

I started laughing and he looked at me incredulously. God, he was adorable with his eyes wide and his mouth open.

“Honey, you can do that to me anytime. I was so turned on that you wanted me so desperately. No one has ever wanted me so much, and you’re not going to break me so easily.” I scooted down and laid my forehead against his.

His eyes pinched closed. “I was so worried. I lay awake for hours. If I hurt you, if I upset you, if you told me to get out...”

I kissed him to shut him up, and this time he clung to me like I was the one who would leave him at any minute. No one had ever been so concerned over me, or made me feel so cherished, so loved, and I would be a fool to ever let him go.

He pulled away and said. “Don’t freak out, okay?”

I opened my mouth to tell him I wasn’t when he rolled over and leaned off the bed. He turned back to face me and the worried look had returned to his handsome face. He began chewing on his lip as he brought his hand forward and revealed two black velvet boxes. I stared at them feeling my chin beginning to tremble.

“I’m not asking you to marry me—well, I am, but not this second because I know it’s too soon. Not for me, but for you it probably is, ahm, so, think of these as partnership rings. I just, I don’t know, I’ve known for a long time, since that day we got Toby back, it was what I was trying to say in the park when Taylor called, I knew then I loved you and I wanted to spend my life with you, that is if you want...”

I started crying and he stopped, his teeth grabbing his lower lip. I reached out and pulled it loose.

“Don’t do that, it drives me nuts.” I sniffled and wiped off my eyes. “And yes, I want to spend my life with you too.” I held out my left hand and Marcus swallowed. “I’m not ready to get married tomorrow, but maybe we can be

engaged until we are both ready?” I suggested. Waiting was the smart thing to do, and even though I suggested it, I didn’t feel like being smart. My heart was racing, and I knew if he had wanted to get married tomorrow I would have been right by his side doing just that.

Marcus tackled me, and crushed both me and the ring boxes underneath him as he kissed me. I wrapped my legs around him, and felt that little spark of desire that had arrived with Marcus ignite.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## EPILOGUE

“He was being an asshole and he deserved what he got.”

“Language,” I chastised as I handed Chey a bag of frozen corn. I lifted her chin, surveying the bruising along her eye and cheek. It had been a defensive elbow, not a fist. Even so, the damage had been done. She blinked at me, annoyed.

“And now you’re going to be beautiful for graduation.” I sighed and released her chin.

“She was just defending my honor. You and Dad used to think that was cute.” Toby smirked, raising an eyebrow. He was rocking his chair on its rear wheels and I pointed to the floor. He let go of the grips, dropping the front end with a thud. He drove the thing like an Indy car and I was constantly amazed our floors weren’t more torn up from him ripping his wheelchair through the house.

I pointed at him. “You’re not helping.”

I couldn’t be mad at her though. Jerry *was* an asshole. Ever since Toby came out, very loudly at that, Jerry and his football buddies had been verbally picking on him, and knocking his wheelchair over. They knew Toby, by himself, couldn’t stop them, but they never bothered him when Randy was around. I’d heard Randy had a *talent* for taking care of things in a quiet, firm way that everyone respected. I wasn’t sure what that way was, but I never saw a bruise or any busted knuckles on him, so I assumed it was a verbal lashing rather than physical.

This time Chey had just been in the wrong place at the right time, and finally heard the faggot bashing first hand. She hadn’t taken it well, beating the crap out of Jerry and one of his buddies. Chey was tall and willowy, but ten years of Judo had made her a tough adversary for anyone, and she was a tenacious thing you didn’t want to mess with. It was her never give up attitude that had carried her to district wrestling champion four years in a row.

It wasn’t the first time she played vigilante, and it wouldn’t be the last. She didn’t tolerate bullying of any kind, whether the victim was family or not. Someone picking on Toby had always brought out the badass in her though.

“Graduation is still ten days away. And I seem to recall—” She tapped her lips—“there is something called foundation. I think it’s makeup that covers imperfections and comes in several shades and thicknesses.” Chey waved the corn at me just like I waved my pen at my class when making a point.

“Smart aleck.” I gestured for her to put the bag back where it would do some good. I couldn’t remember the last time she had worn anything other than lip balm. I wondered if she even knew how to apply it.

“If you need some, Chey, I think I have your skin tone. I might even have a concealer that would work,” Randy offered.

“Of course he does,” I muttered under my breath as I glanced at Randy flat out on the couch, his thumbs moving so fast across his phone a mortal man couldn’t follow them. They did have a similar skin tone, smooth and fair like mine, and for the first time I realized if Randy had dark brown hair he could almost be my son. I shuddered at the thought, not that he wasn’t a good kid, he just had a propensity for smarting off.

“I heard that.” He looked up just long enough to stick his tongue out at me.  
*I rest my case.*

I shook my head and waved my hand at him. “You spend all that time making yourself pretty, but no one can see your face through all that hair.”

It was true. Randy’s black hair engulfed his face making it impossible to see his eyes, or the elaborate make up he wore to accentuate their unusual lavender color. People had been telling him for years he needed to model and he always laughed them off. Then a Christian rock band came up to him on the street, and asked him to be the dark angel on their album cover, and suddenly he began taking all the comments seriously. After the shoot, the makeup became a regular thing. We all teased him for a while, but I had to admit, the way he applied it transformed him from pretty to stunning.

“Toby likes my hair this long. Gives him something to grab,” Randy said seriously without lifting his eyes off his phone.

Toby smacked Randy’s leg hard, while he snorted back a laugh. Chey chortled behind her hand. I rolled my eyes to the heavens, but couldn’t hide my amusement over his brash statement. Ever since *they* turned eighteen, *they*

had become completely unabashed and considered themselves adults. Which by law, they were—barely. Marcus and I were still adjusting, and most days had a hard time seeing them that way. To us they were still our kids. But then, they would always be our kids.

I wasn't sure where the time had gone. I still remembered the first time I held Toby as if it were days ago, instead of years ago. He had been so tiny, and now his shoulders were wider than Marcus's, and Chey had breasts for God's sake. I couldn't even think about Riana clear across the country in New York, trying to find her way in that big city. I missed her so much, we all did.

"Dad, you okay?" Chey asked, staring at me with her expressive hazel eyes. At least her eyes hadn't changed. Marcus was always saying she looked like a female version of me, but she was so much prettier. She had fuller lips and higher cheekbones and those big round eyes that made everyone swoon.

I looked at Chey and smiled. "Yeah, just reminiscing."

"Dude, I just cleared 10 million on Flare." Randy bolted off the couch.

"*No way*. Did you really?"

Randy nodded, wrapping his arms around Toby's shoulders and shoving his phone in front of him excitedly.

"Oh, shit, you did. We gotta go post this, man."

Randy moved Toby's blond hair, geez they *both* needed a haircut, and kissed his cheek. He hooted and started dancing around behind his wheelchair as they headed to Toby's room. I supposed it was actually their room since Randy had practically lived here for almost a year now.

"Door open," I called.

"When is Angel going to realize we're over eighteen?" I heard Randy ask.

"Our house, our rules, Randy." Not that they actually abided by them, but at least they were still rather covert about the sexual aspect of their relationship. Marcus and I were extremely grateful for that.

He turned around and grinned as he walked backwards. "Yeah, but think about it. We've been sharing a bed since we were twelve."

I glared at him. He liked to make that point as often as possible. I think he did it just to make us squirm. They had been friends since they were eleven,

but when Toby came out at fifteen and instantly snagged a boyfriend, the fighting between them began. Then, during a rather heated debate right here in our living room, Randy kissed Toby in front of all of us. It hadn't been just a peck either.

That was all it took. Randy was out, Toby dumped his boyfriend, and they've never looked back. It would be a sweet story if their teenage hormones weren't always getting in the way.

"I try not to think about it," I said dryly then added. "You know I can send you home."

I wouldn't, but it was usually a good enough threat to bring him back into line. Randy's parents weren't as open or welcoming as we were. They had a tendency to treat Toby with unintentional disdain whenever he was over there, making everyone uncomfortable. Unfortunately, by doing so, they were pushing their son away, and he now spent ninety percent of his time here. I doubted he even had any clothes left at home.

"Sorry, Mr. O. Open it is." Randy turned back around and muttered something to Toby, making him chuckle.

"You know, he might be a jerk at times, but he loves you guys more than his own parents."

I turned to Chey who was prodding at her bruises with her fingertips. "I know he does. I just like to assert my authority now and then, lest he forget who owns this house." I leaned against the wall and rubbed my tired eyes.

I should have taken a nap. I was going to fall asleep on Marcus tonight and that wouldn't be a good thing. Of course, he was the one who wanted a quickie in the shower this morning. Not that I was complaining, but he had gotten me up an hour early just to sate his urges and now I was dragging.

"Lest? Your smarts are showing." She stood up and slid her chair in. "Are you two going out tonight?"

I shook my head. "I want to cook."

She stopped in front of me and smirked. "Let me guess. New recipe. Something exotic, or—maybe erotic? Dessert with whip cream, or maybe honey. Oh! I know. Melted chocolate, strawberries and champagne?"

“Gad, you’re as bad as the boys. What we decide to do after dinner is none of your business, young lady. But if you must know—I’m making Prosciutto Carbonara and stuffed Portobellos.”

She grinned and tipped her head, and for a second I saw the little girl she used to be.

“When did you get so big?” I brushed her wavy brunette hair off her shoulder. I couldn’t believe she was almost as tall as me.

“I grew up, and you’re getting all misty. Honestly, you get this way every year. Now give me a kiss before you start blubbing.”

She turned her cheek allowing me to give her a kiss. These moments of affection were getting fewer and fewer, and I never missed a chance when she offered. I kissed her un-bruised cheek and even snagged a quick hug.

“You know that was your first word?” I said.

“I know.” She rolled her eyes, but the smile stayed on her lips. “You’ve told me that like a million times, Dad.”

“That was your third word. Kiss, no, then dad.” I ran my thumb lightly over the bruise on her cheek and shook my head slightly. She’d always been a tough girl, and I wasn’t sure where it had come from. Definitely not me, I was a wuss.

I couldn’t believe my little girl would be gone in a month. She had been snatched up her junior year by the U.S. women’s wrestling coach as a first pick. We were extremely proud of her, but she was going so far from home, and I couldn’t stop missing her even though she hadn’t left yet.

“See, I had my priorities straight even then.” She plopped the bag of corn in my empty hand.

I looked at it as she patted my cheek and turned to leave. “You know the fridge is only six feet away.” I gestured towards the big white rectangle.

“Ten and you’re a foot closer,” she threw over her shoulder as she headed towards the hall, hips swinging. *That* she did get from me.

I tossed the corn in the freezer and heard Chey yell. “Gross. Close the door if you’re gonna do that.”



I bonked my head against the enamel and wondered if I even wanted to know how far they had gone before getting caught. I heard some muffled talking and pushed off the fridge to investigate.

“Just kidding, Dad.” Chey said, laughing.

I rubbed my face again. I really wanted a nap.

\*\*\*\*

“Where is everyone?” Marcus called as I heard the front door close.

“Kitchen,” I called back.

“Where are the kids?”

I glanced over my shoulder as he set his briefcase near the buffet. “Mm, Chey is probably posting pictures of her newest battle wounds online, and your son and his *fiancé* are more than likely fornicating in their room.” I didn’t miss the small grimace that past over his face at the word *fiancé*. He still hadn’t accepted it even though we had talked the boys into waiting a year.

The fact we had waited a year had helped to sway them, even if we had waited for an entirely different reason. It had been a rough time for us, with Toby going into renal failure and needing dialysis on more than one occasion, not to mention his recurring anemia. A light box lived in our home for months so we could treat his jaundice without running to the hospital every time. Then, right before the wedding, we found out his joints weren’t developing correctly and he would never walk. Against all odds, we made it through though, and came out the other side a stronger couple.

I still remember how cute Chey had been in her pink and white dress, racing up and down the aisle showing everyone the rings tied on her pretty pillow. She ended up with the pillow. Getting it away from her would have resulted in an all-out war, and to my knowledge she still had the thing.

“I thought we were going out?” He huddled against my back and kissed my neck. He lingered, his way of letting me know he was feeling rather amorous. Not that it was hard to get Marcus in the mood, but he became extra affectionate on special occasions. Even the kid’s birthdays brought out the emotional side of him.

“I never said that.” I stirred in the pesto and lime juice as Marcus ran his hands over my chest. The amorous part of him pressed firmly against my backside.

“All right, I assumed.”

“Well, you assumed wrong.” I scooped some noodles from the pan. “Taste.”

He licked my neck. “Mmm.”

I turned around, chuckling. “Not me.” I held the fork up and he opened his mouth, wrapping his lips around the noodles. “Well?” I waited.

His tongue ran across his lips then across mine. “Delicious,” he murmured against my mouth.

I tasted my lips. Definitely delicious. I let the fork clatter to the counter and let Marcus kiss me thoroughly senseless. Something the man could still do after all our years together. Suddenly he pulled back and frowned.

“Did you say the boys were fornicating in their room?”

“I haven’t checked, but probably. They’ve been awfully quiet.” Neither one of us had actually caught them in the act, but we were positive they had lost their virginity about a year ago. One day they were still nervous and jumpy, the next they couldn’t seem to keep their hands off each other and the apprehensiveness had disappeared. I gave the boys props for waiting so long. Both Marcus and I had lost ours when we were fifteen, and not to anyone either of us cared about, or that cared about us.

Marcus’s face transformed into an evil smile if ever I’d seen one. “I think we should go check. It’s our parental right. You know, fear of God and all that.”

I barely clapped the lid on the noodles when Marcus dragged me by my hand out of the kitchen. We snuck down the hall, listening for anything that would give them away, but it was eerily quiet considering there were three teenagers within twenty feet of us.

Marcus peeked around the doorjamb, grinned and pulled out his phone. He tugged me forward and I stepped up as Marcus clicked a few pictures. The

boys were curled up asleep, facing each other with their hands clasped between them and heads bowed. Their bodies were almost a perfect heart. They were precious, and the pictures Marcus had just taken would be a welcome addition to our growing embarrassing photos collection we planned to unveil at the reception. That is, if they ended up getting married.

We couldn't deny we were excited about the wedding, but they had a long road ahead with Toby's first year at the university and Randy trying to launch his modeling career. They would be apart more than they were together, and we knew a lot could happen in that time. If they survived the next year, then they should be able to weather anything.

Marcus hugged me against his side and we watched them sleep for several minutes. It was a rare moment of tranquility in an otherwise chaotic household.

\*\*\*\*

"Oh, God, I'm stuffed. I don't know why you didn't become a chef, Mr. O." Randy leaned back and stretched, having practically licked his plate clean.

"Thank you, but I'm not sure you even tasted it." I chuckled then shook my head. "I like my job. I get to try and mold future generations, fix the little problems before they become big issues." I shrugged. "At least that's what I keep telling myself."

"He learned how to cook to impress me." Marcus ran his hand down my spine then settled it on the back of my chair.

"I did not," I said, incensed. "I already knew how to cook when I met you. My mother taught me some and I learned the rest from the *Food Network*. Besides, I seem to recall I didn't have to do anything to keep you. You were too stubborn and stupid to leave me."

Marcus chuckled. "True. But I had to be stubborn to deal with your pigheadedness."

Toby groaned and flopped back in his wheelchair. "Not again. We've heard it all a hundred times."

Marcus gave him an exasperated look. Toby was right though. They had heard it all *many* times.

“Well, you haven’t heard *everything*,” Marcus said, amused.

Toby held up his hand. “Oh, we’ve heard *everything*. Trust me.” He snickered and glanced at Chey, who was concentrating on her empty plate trying not to laugh, and when his gaze settled on Randy, Randy grinned lecherously.

He laid a hand on his chest and grabbed hold of Toby’s shoulder. “*Ah eff, Angel*,” Randy cried, panting for emphasis. My mouth fell open as Chey broke up and dropped her head on the table. *Well, at least he had given us the PG 13 version.*

“When did you hear that?” Marcus asked, not as appalled as he should have been.

“This morning. You know the tile in the shower magnifies sound.” Randy pointed to Marcus and nodded with a knowing grin on his smart-ass face. “I think the neighbors might have even heard you this time,” he said thoughtfully.

“All right that’s enough, smart aleck.” Marcus bowed his head and shook it. However, I saw the curl of lips he was trying to hide. It was my fault he had been so loud, though I wasn’t about to admit that to the kids. He had been murmuring his appreciation quietly to the wall then I nipped his shoulder hard enough to leave a mark, and it had thrown him violently over the edge. I loved that I could still do that to him, but maybe I needed to keep my biting to the bedroom—at least when the kids were home.

“Okay, It’s getting late and I have wrestling practice at six,” Chey said, sitting up and pulling herself back together. She could turn serious in a second and that had always amazed everyone.

“Yeah, we have to hit the gym before school ourselves,” Toby added then waved his hand at her. “Well, get on with it woman.” He grinned.

I felt Marcus shift, controlling his urge to say something about Randy and Toby’s insane workout schedule. Toby’s knee might be new, but his chances of walking were still slim to none. Even so, Toby held on tenaciously to that slight possibility he might walk with crutches. His other leg would always be useless, yet his very talented surgeon had managed to rebuild his left hip and

replace his left knee a year ago, giving him what Marcus and I believed was false hope.

Regardless, he could now leg press a hundred pounds with his left leg, and stand for more than a few seconds, provided he had someone or something to lean on. It was incredible progress from barely being able to lift his feet from the rests on his chair. Still, he was pushing himself way too hard and we worried about him doing more damage than good in the long run.

“Okay, here we go, and I’ll try not to cry...”

“Please don’t. I never know what to do with you when you cry. It’s totally out of character,” Toby said, smiling fondly at his sister.

She rolled her eyes and sighed. “Quiet you. Okay, so, you know we love you and we couldn’t have asked for better parents—even if it was odd at times.” She smiled at us and I took Marcus’s hand and brought it to my lips knowing they were up to something. “You’ve always been there to support us in everything, even our bad ideas.”

“Like when I entered that downhill race and ended up at the ER,” Toby broke in. “I couldn’t believe you let me do that.” He shook his head. “And look at the monster you created by letting Chey take Judo instead of ballet, like Angel wanted her to.”

Chey threw a spoon at him, and Randy caught it before it pegged Toby, setting it back on the table.

“That was Marcus, not me.” I laughed and squeezed Marcus’s hand, remembering the gift he had given her on her eighth birthday without even consulting with me first. We had argued over that for days, and I had been so obstinate I even slept on the couch two nights. I wanted her to be a girl, and she wanted to do Judo. Marcus had just given her what she wanted.

“Hello, trying to make a speech here.” Chey leaned onto her elbows and slapped her hands down on the table. “Anyway, before I was so rudely interrupted—you both have always been here for us, and you’ve never done anything for yourselves. You’ve never even taken a vacation together. Not one night away. So, we talked and decided it was about time you took a honeymoon.” She caught the envelope Toby slid across the table.

Marcus and I shared a look, and I opened my mouth to object when he leaned over and whispered to me. “Don’t you dare. Look at them. You’ll break their hearts if you refuse their gift.”

He was right on both counts. He knew I was about to object and it would have devastated them. My aversion towards gifts had caused more than a few tears through the years. I took a deep breath and hid behind Marcus’s hand.

“We’re all grown up—” Chey’s voice cracked and she cleared her throat. “This is from all of us.” She handed the envelope to Marcus, knowing from experience not to give it to me. I would just stare at it.

Marcus took his hand back and opened it. He leaned against me so I could see, or maybe he felt I needed the support. He pulled out a card they had made, and I smiled. Our kids knew I did better with gifts they made, and they had become quite talented at making elaborate cards. This one was a masterpiece I knew they had worked on for a while. A picture of Marcus and me from our family vacation to Long Beach two summers ago was set into an oval cardboard frame. We were on the boardwalk with the kite festival in full swing behind us. Riana had taken the picture and it was one of her favorites.

The card was decorated with tiny satin bows along with blue and green jeweled hearts. It looked more like a Valentine’s Day card than an anniversary card. But the kids could be sappy that way. Marcus opened the card and a second envelope fell out. He set it on the table as we read the card.

*To most, the time you have spent raising our family would be considered a feat unto itself and the end of an era. We know better. It was only the beginning...*

*So begins the next adventure...*

*Love always; Riana, Chey, Toby and, yes, even Randy.*

*Oh, by the way, Riana will be coming home for graduation!  
Yeah!*

Marcus covered his eyes after reading the last line. It had been over a year since we had seen Riana. The fashion designer she had been working for in New York had to let her go right after Thanksgiving. Instead of flying her home, we decided to send her the money we had saved for her ticket so she

could pay her rent, and survive safely until she found another job. It had been the first Christmas without her, and we had all taken it hard, but no one more than Marcus. I wrapped my arm around him and pulled him against my shoulder.

She had a better job as a buyer for a large fashion house now, but she had told us she couldn't take the time off. I knew our kids, and was sure that had been a ploy from the beginning. I also knew they understood the turmoil they had just put their father through.

He raised his head. "Is she really coming home?"

They all nodded. "She'll be here in six days and she's bringing someone with her but won't tell us who," Chey said, flipping her hand in exasperation.

"Yeah, she's still a brat, being all secretive and shit." Toby grunted.

"Language," I muttered out of habit.

Marcus picked up the other envelope and held it out to me. "I think you should open this."

I noticed his hand was trembling and took it from him, opening it. I pulled the thick contents out and stared at the six tickets and green brochure. This was worse than I ever could have imagined. Even so, my insides fluttered excitedly. Two cruises and a two week tour of the interior by train.

"Oh, my God. I can't—we can't..." Marcus stuttered.

I turned to him. "Those are my lines," I said and he shook his head in disbelief at me. "Remember what you said. You're going to hurt their feelings," I added softly.

"You will hurt our feelings. Besides, the tickets are non-refundable. We made sure of it. We know you better than you think," Toby stated.

I set the tickets on the table and ran my fingers over them reverently as I blew out a deep steadying breath. I turned to Marcus and found him watching me carefully, but I could see the excitement building in his eyes too. The kids were all watching pensively and I wasn't about to ruin this. I leaned forward and whispered into his ear.

"I've never been fucked on a boat."

“Ship,” Marcus corrected. “And I’ve never been fucked on a train,” he whispered directly in my ear, sending a shiver down my back. He knew I only swore when extremely agitated or extremely turned on. It was the latter in this case. A whole month alone with Marcus. He better pack his Viagra, the stubborn S.O.B.

We had been drooling over going for years and I couldn’t believe the kids had given us Alaska. I grinned at them all then kissed my husband, letting the excitement unfold.

\*\*\*\*

“I can’t believe they did that. How long have they been planning it do you think?” Marcus hadn’t stopped grinning, and the instant the kids had said goodnight he had dragged me to our bedroom. It had been the garage at one time, but when Toby was old enough for his own room, we had remodeled, turning it into our bedroom. We had saved a ton of money by not moving, and the area was practically soundproof except near the door.

I kicked my shoes into the closet. “I have no idea. A long time I bet. It was definitely a surprise.”

He came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. “Married sixteen years and we’re finally getting to go on a honeymoon.” He kissed my neck and I leaned back against his chest, tipping my head to give him better access. “I wish I could have given you a honeymoon back when we were married,” he said, ruefully.

I shook my head slightly and hugged his arms against my chest before letting them go. “I don’t. I’ve never regretted even a minute of our life together.” I turned to face him and began unbuttoning his shirt.

He looked down at me. “Not even the rough spots?”

“Not even the rough spots. They made us stronger, and they made the kids stronger.” I pushed his striped dress shirt over his shoulders and ran my hands across the breadth appreciatively. Marcus was still a sight to behold at forty-two, and I doubted I’d ever get tired of touching him. I pushed my fingers through the graying forest on his chest as I breathed in his musky scent. He always smelled so damn sexy.



His hands slid down and cupped my butt. “Mm, yeah, me neither. I wouldn’t change anything.” He pushed me against him as he nuzzled my neck. “Not one damn thing.”

“Not even your outburst this morning?” I ran my thumbs teasingly over his nipples, knowing he would prefer my mouth there.

“Especially not that. They’re always telling us they’re adults. They can handle it.” His breathing started to increase.

I bent my head and paused over his left pec. His breath caught in anticipation. My tongue flicked across the nub, sending his head back on a small sigh. I tickled with my tongue again, and his fingers flexed into my flesh.

“Knock it off.” Marcus looked at me as his chest rose and fell swiftly.

I cocked my head coyly. “Knock what off?”

“You’re being a tease and I’m about to fuck you against the wall and be done with it.”

I pinched one of his nipples, making him wince slightly. “Now you’re teasing me.” I unzipped his slacks and reached inside to tease him some more.

“Don’t. I’m about to explode as it is. I’ve been fucking aroused since lunch. You’re a Goddamn hussy you know that?” Regardless he pushed against my hand and closed his eyes.

“Pardon? Who called who?” I ran my knuckles down his length, smiling when his hips jerked.

His eyes opened and gave me a monitory look as he removed my hand from his pants. He pulled me roughly against him and kissed me as only Marcus could. I loved him when he was like this, agitated and demanding. It made my toes curl and my insides quiver. He reached down and cupped my butt then hoisted me against his chest. I had to grab his shoulders not to topple backwards.

“Marcus! I’m too heavy. You’re going to hurt yourself.” I wiggled, trying to get him to let me go before he pulled something.

He glared at me. “Don’t tell me what I can’t do. Jesus, it makes me feel like an old man. I carried you across the threshold after our wedding. I can

carry you four feet to the bed.” He grunted and shucked me higher against his chest. “Quit squirming. Damn, when did you get so heavy?”

“Our wedding was years ago and I’ve only gained a few pounds since then—and you know that. You’re just out of shape.”

He growled at me then dumped me unceremoniously on the bed. He reached for my jeans and unbuttoned them then yanked them over my feet. I wasn’t into pain like Marcus was, but damn if I didn’t like it rough at times, and this was one of those times. I shimmied out of my underwear then pulled my shirt over my head as Marcus finished undressing.

When he leaned over a bead of pre-come dripped to the floor in a long glistening strand. My dick leapt, and I began stroking myself while I watched Marcus digging around in the nightstand drawer. Even after all these years I couldn’t believe he was mine.

“Use the Slick,” I suggested, my voice coming out a purr. Marcus had this deep, husky voice when he was turned on. Mine sounded like a cat in heat and always made me cringe despite Marcus calling it sexy.

He glanced over and gave me a quirky grin. He knew what I was asking. That particular lube had a slimy consistency that held up through even the rough stuff. His eyes lingered on my hand pulling slowly on my cock.

He turned back to the drawer and found the lube. “Quit touching yourself.”

Now he was just being a brat and I ignored him. He kneeled on the bed and reached over, running his thumb across my wet tip before sliding it in his mouth. I had to close my eyes against the erotic image. He’d made me come once by doing that and it still brought me close to the edge.

I let go of my dick and he dropped on top of me, grinding his hips as he kissed me. His tongue darted in and wrapped around mine, sharing my sharp tangy taste. I moaned as my hands shot into his hair holding him there. He smiled against my lips. God, he was being a brat.

He went to move away and I latched my legs around his waist and thrust my hips.

He chuckled. “Naughty. I swear you’re trying to make me come and I don’t think either of us wants that—yet.”

I nipped his lower lip, but loosened my grip. He moved and kissed down my breastbone as his hands slid along my ribs. He had the warmest hands, and they were always firm and sure. His tongue traced the tat directly over my heart then he kissed it reverently. Marcus had one too, in the same spot.

We had gotten them the day after our wedding when he dragged me to a tattoo parlor and insisted I change the tat along my arm. He'd never once commented on it, but he had obviously been stewing over it, and knew it had been for Todd. I couldn't blame him, and thought it sweet he couldn't stand another man's mark on me. I added *My Daughter* to the beginning, and had the tattoo artist cover the *r* in lover with a heart, making it read *My Daughter, love of my soul*. He had been satisfied with that.

Then in a crazy-romantic move, we decided to have each other's names tattooed over our hearts. I ran my fingers gently through his hair as he nuzzled against the mark that told everyone I was his. I didn't need the tattoo to know I would always belong to him, but I liked having it. I knew he did too, as I'd caught him time and again running his fingers over my name with the goofiest look on his face.

Our other matching tattoos held a much different meaning, and were in a place only we would ever see. As if he had read my mind he rolled off me and urged me onto my stomach. His hand caressed the scars down my side, and hip, as he feathered kisses over the ones on my back. I knew where he was going and closed my eyes against the emotion that flashed through me.

When his lips closed over the small 6 on my right buttock, I trembled remembering the crash exactly ten years ago, the morning of our sixth anniversary. We were all headed to the mountain when the driver of a fuel truck had fallen asleep at the wheel and barreled through a stop sign out in the middle of nowhere. Riana had ended up in a body cast, and I almost lost my life as our side of the car caved. Marcus and the truck driver were pulling Riana free when the fire erupted. Marcus still had nightmares about it, and if he reached for me and I wasn't there, he became hysterical, his mind tricking him into believing I had never made it out.

I was in a medical coma for months as the burns healed. It was years before Marcus quit fretting every time I got behind the wheel. He never has grasped the fact it would have happened regardless of who was driving.

Every once in a while he still became overly emotional about it all, and I suppose I couldn't blame him, but I hoped this wouldn't be one of those times. I wanted my dominant lover tonight. Marcus squeezed my ass gently then I felt his lips land on the Y at the top of my crack. I could feel them trembling and sighed, sure I had lost him in an emotional maelstrom.

Suddenly his lubed thumb pushed inside me as his hand dug into my waist. *Oh, God, yes.* My leg shot up and I pushed against his thumb.

He snickered and drove his thumb in. "God, you're a slut."

I glanced over my shoulder at him and licked my lips. "Only for you."

He removed his thumb and slid in two fingers. I rocked back and he twisted them until he found the spot that made me shudder and arch my back.

"On your knees," He commanded and I complied quickly. He bent around and his mouth clamped around my dick and suckled the pre-come off my head. His fingers continued to slide in and out, stroking and pushing until my hips started thrusting. Marcus moaned and sucked hard as I gave up the first small spurt on a little squeal. He licked my dick clean while I caught my breath.

He pulled his fingers out and looked up at my face hanging between my shoulders. "I love that about you."

"What? That you can torment me for hours before you let me climax?"

He grinned and ran his knuckles along my stomach. "Yep. You're awfully hot when you beg."

I laughed. "Sadistic bastard."

Honestly, the first time it had happened had amazed me, and delighted Marcus. He had been stroking my long buried prostate when I groaned and squirted. He thought I had come, but I was still hard as marble. He'd played with me that day until I was exhausted and collapsed into a happy heap, still hard. I'd immediately fallen asleep and he hovered over me, afraid he'd overdone it. When I woke up I asked for more and he fucked me until I came so violently I thought my body would shake apart. It had been wonderful, and I couldn't get enough those first few months. But now I swear he used it against me at times just to keep me in bed all day.

Marcus began stroking himself then reached out with his other hand and fondled my balls. I widened my stance and bit my lip as the tiny jolts of sensation traveled up my dick and tingled inside me. My fingers dug into the pillows as my ass clenched and unclenched. Marcus had worked hard to desensitize my testicles, much to my chagrin since he thought it amusing to make me yelp like a puppy. Even so, I still couldn't handle his mouth on them. Not that it stopped him from sucking on them now and then just to see me jump around, squealing.

When my hips shot forward he let them go, and wormed his way up. He pulled me onto his chest and kissed me slowly at first, then deeper and more desirous as my fingers ran through his hair, then caressed his neck and shoulders.

He rolled me onto my back and continued to kiss me as he donned a condom. When he settled back on top of me I pulled my legs up and grabbed my knees. He tried to keep kissing me, but when his cock tapped my hole he groaned and tore his mouth away.

“I can't believe you're still so damn limber.”

I gave him a cocky grin and pulled my knees higher. He reached between us and rubbed his tip against me causing my head to loll back in anticipation. He watched me as he pushed in. He always watched me to make sure I didn't feel any discomfort. But that hadn't happened in years. He stopped and pulled back and inch.

I looked right into his green eyes. “Damn it Marcus, all the way, go all the way. I want to feel you inside me—*now*.”

His eyes darkened and his jaw tensed as he tenaciously held onto his control. *Damn him*. He did it his way and slid in slowly until we were both breathing hard in anticipation. I let my right leg go, settling my foot in his raised thigh. I threw my other leg over his shoulder as he began to move. He wrapped his arm around my leg and pressed his fingers into the inside of my thigh with every thrust. He wasn't quite there, and unless he shifted, I was never going to come.

“Marcus,” I said, and instantly his hand shot to the headboard as he twisted his hips then drove in hard. “Oh, God...” I grasped his wrist over my head and

dug my toes into his thigh. He pounded into me sending shockwave after shockwave through my body. The headboard creaked beneath his hand, threatening for the thousandth time. One of these days it was going to give up and break on us.

Marcus sent me spiraling with a few short, quick jabs.

“Ahhhnnuunn.” My back arched, and my other hand dug into his shoulder. My cock was throbbing, but I knew better than to touch myself no matter how much I wanted to. One stroke and I’d be gone.

“Ah... mmhh... ahh, damn.” Marcus thrust hard, his wrist pulsing beneath my hand, and I tipped.

My insides quivered as my ass clenched down. Marcus began to grunt and I felt his sweat drip onto my chest. I groaned as it trickled down my body mingling with my own. I levered against him and tilted my hips up. Marcus hit me spot on and my mind flashed white.

My stomach muscles tensed hard trying to keep my hips up. His cock caressed me over and over, and suddenly everything went at once. Every muscle tightened as my head snapped back into the pillows. I felt the hot rush push down my dick just as the shock of sensation shot up my spine.

“Ahhh, fuck,” I cried as I came, holding onto him, hoping I wouldn’t disappear in the miasma of emotions storming through me. It didn’t work, and my mind fogged as the emotions crashed over me, pulling me under.

Marcus growling my name against my neck brought me back. My leg was off his shoulder and he was holding me tight as his body shook. I wrapped my arms and legs around him, holding him just as tightly as the last shudder wracked his body. He sagged against me, and I stroked his soft hair while he panted hotly against my skin.

God, I was lucky to have him. He’d taught me so much about myself, never once giving up on me no matter how hard I had tried to retreat. He had given me this wonderful life I had never even dared dream about.

I looked at him still clinging to me, and pushed the damp strands off his forehead. If I lost him tomorrow I knew there would never be another. He was the love of my life.

He lifted his head then touched my face. “Hey, why are you crying?”

I shook my head and sniffed. “I just—because, I love you.”

“Awwhh, Toby, right there.” Rent the air, clear as day.

We both looked to the door then back at each other incredulously. I never would have thought...

Marcus gestured towards the door. “I’m going to choose not to have heard that right at this moment.” Marcus grinned, rather proudly considering they were breaking one of our biggest rules. I didn’t blame him though. For Toby to go from where he started to where he was currently at, obviously topping his boyfr—fiancé, was remarkable. Marcus blinked and suddenly I saw our humorous, chaotic, perfect life revealed in his eyes. I smiled up at him.

He rubbed his nose against mine. “Where were we? Oh, I remember—I love you too.” He kissed me and I held on, knowing as long as I had a hold of him he was mine and he’d never leave me.

**THE END**

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Author Bio

*Tara Spears has only been writing for a little over a year. She started in the urban fantasy genre, then in an odd twist of fate, her first M/M novel erupted from the closeted area of her mind, and The Darker Side of Trey Grey was born. This first book has gone on to garner numerous hook and opener awards and she's been writing M/M ever since. She has a few short stories due out in 2014 through various publishers, as well as the above mentioned book being released for Kindle and Nook the first of June, with the paperback due out by July 1st, 2013.*

## Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Blog](#) | [Goodreads](#)

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)



## **Want more?**

If you enjoyed these stories and want more, be sure to look for the other twelve volumes in the Love Has No Boundaries Anthology series, as well as another special bonus volume, available for free download at [M/M Romance Group.com](http://M/M Romance Group.com)

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)