

Piety

a work in process
by Marcus Avenier

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Chapter 1

It was the harvest season, although one wouldn't know it from the state of the Azhari estate. The garden's vegetable beds were overgrown with long, golden grasses. The apple trees dropped glistening, golden fruit to the leaf-littered rows of the small orchard to the North. There were no hands pulling the thorny weeds that stretched their fuzzy heads toward the slowly graying sky. There were no children skipping from the crumbling buildings of the estate to pluck shells from the soft beach sand that lined the Eastern border. There were no maids dusting window sills, and the air was lacking in the smell of fresh baked pies and basted boar. There was nothing, Verian thought, to differentiate his birthday from any other day of the year.

The day was, in point of fact, just like every other day since Verian's arrival. He'd woken. He'd bathed. He'd dressed, eaten, and gone off to the thrice-damned school that his uncle insisted on him attending. He'd arrived home to bow his head over his studies, and was occasionally distracted by the sound of a rough voice grousing its way through the wide, chilly corridors that separated the rooms in his wing of the house. Verian lifted his head as his uncle's particularly agitated muttering broke his concentration for easily the fiftieth time that afternoon.

"Uncle!" He cried out loudly in an attempt to pierce the thick slab of oak that filled his doorway. "Please; I am trying to study!"

Verian stared at the tapestry on the wall above his dressing table, the end of his stick pen braced to the corner of his mouth. His uncle gave no coherent reply, but the sound of his muttering trailed off to the left, and gradually out of range of hearing. He tapped the end of his pen to his teeth, let out a hum, and turned his gaze back to the scroll half-curved atop his desk. He found it difficult to concentrate on the flow of his script when his mind was a jumble of sour thoughts. Had his uncle forgotten? His parents would not have. His tutors would not have. There was no cake. There was no braided sweet bread. There was just the smell of the sea and the crumbling plaster of his wall to meet his unseeing stare.

Verian turned away from the tumble jumble of his thoughts with a huff. He stood so quickly that his chair may well have tumbled over were it not for the weight of the massive old thing. He was going into town, his uncle be damned. The man could spare a few coins in order for him to buy something nice. Maybe a new cape, or a case for his scrolls.

The afternoon was growing late, but Verian was determined to make the best of what was left of his day. He lost several precious minutes hunting out his uncle, only to find that the man was not within the

building's walls at all. He was, instead, out in the growing chill of the gardens. The man sat upon a stone bench, its relief nearly worn to nothing. Verian drew to a halt, his gaze snapping from the disheveled, hunched figure of his greasy-haired uncle to the tidily appointed human sitting across from him. Two flat, round brown eyes stared at the newly arrived youth from the round, fleshy thing of the man's face.

"Ah, good afternoon," Verian intoned to break the brittle silence that had ensued with his intrusion. "I'm sorry to interrupt, uncle, but I was ho-," Verian paused as his uncle raised a single boney finger. The yellowed tip of his nail pointed to the sky.

"It is no interruption at all, my boy, no interruption at all," the man replied in his thin, wavering voice. "We were just discussing you, in fact, were we not Mister.. ah.. Bastion, was it? Yes, yes; most fortuitous timing my boy," he went on without waiting for a response from the still-staring Mister Bastion. "Most fortuitous indeed. We were coming to an agreement about your future."

Verian's focus drifted as his uncle nattered on. The strange human was staring at him still, and it was causing the hairs on the backs of his arms and neck to stand on end. He brought his right hand up, catching at the red coils of hair that fell across his eyes, and tucked them behind the tapered lobe of his ear. Verian shifted his weight, jerking his regard to his uncle with a start as he realized that the man had been waiting for the answer to an unheard question.

"I'm sorry, uncle, what was it you said?"

"You see, Mister Bastion," his uncle said as he turned his glossy blue eyes toward the comfortably reclining ball of fat on the wooden bench opposite him. "This is what I have to deal with. Day in and day out. He is inattentive, rude, unruly, and," his uncle punctuated the air with one upturned finger once again, "he snores."

Verian blinked, his jaw working. He attempted to find words, but instead his cheeks flushed with a mixture of embarrassment and indignation. Verian sucked a breath in through his nostrils and minced his feet about on the damp, packed earth of the pathway.

"In any case, uncle," he began with less conviction than his previous effort, only to find himself interrupted once again.

"Now go and pack your small trunk, boy. Three shirts. Three trousers. Some small clothes. And do take your nice coat, not that tattered old one that you enjoy parading about in." His uncle commanded, looking all the while at the fleshy figure, who in turn looked all the while at Verian.

Verian turned dutifully about, his heels dragging along the garden path. He was passing through the slanted servants' doorway before he

realized that he'd not even managed his request for the coin. His brows knitted toward one another as he walked, slowly mounting the steps toward his rooms. He struggled in vain to recall what his uncle had said. Something about proper education and decorum. Respect? No, he was respectful. He certainly wasn't rude, and he definitely didn't snore.

He continued to wonder over the interaction as he packed, nearly snagging the silky fabric of his stockings on his ragged nails. Was he being sent away with that human? He could still feel the strange, silent man's staring eyes. Perhaps that was what the centipedes he'd jarred had felt like when he had studied them.

Verian shook out of his mulling as his uncle called hoarsely up to his open window. It was never good when the old man yelled. He looked to his trunk, ensuring that he had three days' worth of clothes within it. He dropped in an extra kerchief, the hair clip his mother had given him, and kissed the silver frame that held his only permitted portrait of his parents. Knowing how his uncle was about appearances, the youth took the time to adjust the belt at his waist, and to wash his hands in the chilly water of his wash basin. The old man called again, and Verian snatched up his trunk to go racing down the steps. He slid the bannister, as he had a habit of doing when he was in a hurry, and nearly crashed into the scowling, glaring figure at the bottom of the steps. Verian flinched and ducked his head apologetically.

"I'm ready, uncle."

"Good, good. Come along. It's a long journey."

Verian regretted not snatching a scroll from the pile on his desk. No matter. He resisted the urge to ask his uncle about the trip. It had likely been in the bit of rambling that he'd not been paying any attention to, and the old man loathed repeating himself. A boney hand settled to his shoulder, and Verian looked up past the silken drape of sleeve to the sallow skin and angled, pointed tips of his uncle's ears. The poor mad fool.

A carriage was waiting on the gravel-lined crescent of the driveway. A footman stood at the open, black-lacquered door. Verian could just make out the shadowy outline of the man from the garden sitting on a purple upholstered bench. He turned to embrace his uncle, and to kiss him lightly at the hollow of his cheek.

"I shall miss you while I am gone, uncle. I shan't let you down."

"Of course, my boy, of course."

Glossy blue eyes met and held the rich verdant green of Verian's own. Verian smiled hopefully, eliciting a vague nod from the man. It was more of a gesture than acknowledgement, as it tipped toward the waiting

coach. Verian turned and hurried for the carriage, the hard side of his small trunk banging against his racing calves. The footman took the baggage as it was pressed into him, and cast a sneering look over the sheepishly grinning elf. Verian mounted the short series of steps and slipped onto the bench opposite the peculiar man with the flat brown eyes. He turned to wave farewell through the open window of the now closed door, only to find that his uncle was already turning away to the inside of the house. The gathering clouds were growing darker.

"I hope you made your farewells count, boy," said the man opposite him.

His thick accent suggested that he was born to the Southlands, and it clipped his words to funny angles.

"Go ahead and get a good eyefull," he encouraged as Verian looked back. "It will be the last you take of this place."

Verian felt a lump form in his chest, just behind the nervous beat of his heart. It sank slowly downward, settled heavily into his stomach, and began to twist cold snakes through his gut. He turned to look to the retreating estate, watching as it grew smaller and smaller on the horizon. It was gone from his view all too soon, but he held the scent of the sea in his nostrils as he coiled back in the bench. A plump hand lined in lace caught the bronze ring of the shade and pulled it down.

"Oh," he gasped without meaning to.

The man smiled at him, showing his ivory colored teeth, and Verian began to tremble. His heart stilled, his breath as well, and the sky opened up to pour a torrent of rain across their tracks.

Despite the grim portend of the fat man's words, the carriage ride went without much in the way of event. The fear lingered in his heart and shook his gut, but Verian did not give much in the way of complaint. In truth, he did not lend much credence to the stranger's words. It was not what the stranger had said that had frightened him, but something else. Something in the cold glow of his flat eyes, and the way that the shadows clung to the inside of the carriage. There was something unnatural there, something beyond a mundane lack of light.

The man was wrong, though. He would go back. He'd packed three days' worth of clothes, just as he'd been told. His uncle had been very clear on the matter. The old man might be crazy, but he was ever particular about the particulars. It was a trait which Verian appreciated, even if the consequences were occasionally maddening. He would climb the latticework near his window. He would run through the fields and play in the surf. He would cut the legs from the spiny ants and watch their companions pull them to pieces when they fell in their path. He would go

back to what had become his home.

"Wake up." The words were soft and thinner than the fat man's bones.

Verian woke with a start, unaware that he'd fallen to sleep. He'd thought himself in that half-way state, where everything was so distant and yet still so naggingly close. He could hear the creaking of the carriage, feel every jostling bump in the road, taste the humidity on his tongue. Upon lifting his head, however, he realized that most of these things were falsehoods of his imagination. The coach had drawn to a stop, with the tired horses pawing at the ground in eagerness to have their tack drawn away. He saw, as the door swung open, that the rain had cleared, or they had simply ridden out of it. The stars in the sky above shone merrily down upon the world below.

"Go on, boy, go on," the plump human snapped at him.

Verian went. Such was his haste that he nearly fell down the short steps from carriage floor to ground when his sleeping legs protested. He landed hard on the soft earth, and stumbled forward into a puddle that splashed muddy water up over his fine shoes and pale stockings. Dark smears shone black on the silvery white the moon had rendered his trousers. He cursed under his breath, and let out a yip as a flower of white-hot pain shot out from his ear.

"Hey!" He cried in protest, rubbing the pinched tip of his earlobe.

"You will be silent," the man said quietly, and fixed Verian with a look that caused his jaw to snap shut. "Good. We are staying the night here, and will finish our journey in the morning. I expect that you know how to behave in public. I would so hate to have to lock you in the stables for the duration."

Verian wanted to hiss and poke his fingers into the squinty, beady eyes. He wanted to smack this impudent human, who doubtless had no breeding whatsoever, and to stalk off. Did he even know to whom he spoke? The wretch. He did none of these things, despite the impulses. His uncle would have been aghast. He forced himself to smile instead, feeling his lips string themselves too tight across his bared teeth. He gave a dutifully polite nod.

"Yes," he paused a heartbeat, casting about in his memories, "Mister Bastion."

"You may refer to me simply as sir. I dislike your clumsy accent on my name."

Verian straightened, tense from clenched jaw to curling toe, and fixed a stare on the man. He'd drawn a breath to cut back with his own words, to give the pink piggy man a piece of his own mind about the common

tongue. The words never left his mouth. There was something in the way that the man was looking at him. Laughing silently with his smirk, daring with the glimmer of his eyes. Verian thought of his uncle and scoffed lightly.

“Very well, *sir*,” Verian drawled condescendingly.

He saw it coming this time, a pink hand framed by lacy cuff. Verian danced back a step, scowling, and raised one hand defensively. Who did this man think he was??

“How dare you attempt to strike me!” It wasn’t a question.

The man did not answer. The hand twisted, fingers curling upward. Verian’s knees went out from under him, a sharp sting sounding along their backs. He landed hard in the mud, a surprised grunt issuing from his lips. The carriage driver’s whip struck again, the heavy handle catching at his ribs and causing him to cringe and curl. Verian shot a hand out to catch himself as he retreated to the side, but a thick, muddy boot caught him in the gut. He curled into the sloshy earth, the chill water from the mud soaking through his fine clothes where his coat parted.

“Pity. The stables it is.”

Bastion turned and walked the short, plank-lined path to the inn’s door. Gloved fingers caught at Verian’s hair, curling into the brilliant red waves and hauling hard. He was forced up onto his hands and knees, and from there stumbled his way to his feet as he followed. He caught at the driver’s hand, attempting to pry his fingers free, and was rewarded with a stinging blow to his calf. Verian growled and lunged at the man, but he may as well have been lunging at a brick wall for all of the good it had done him. He was tossed about by his hair again, his shoulder hitting the hard ground as he skidded in the mud and gravel before the drafty barn’s doors.

“How dare you treat me this way,” Verian nearly shrieked as he sprang to his feet. “Have you any idea wh-,” he was cut off by the whip, the knotted rope smacking smartly across his cheek.

The driver did not say anything. He had a good two heads on the elf, and his dark eyes were obscured by an overgrowth of bushy brows. His gray hair shone silver here and there, and his thick rounded ears sprang forth their own wealth of the stuff. The thick, square jaw was set with stubble, and a nasty scar ran beneath the man’s left cheekbone. He was broad-shouldered, darkly clothed, and unyielding in his regard. His gloved hand raised, and Verian twisted to the side to get away. The great old brute was faster than he looked. Remarkably fast. The fingers were in his hair again, twisting and hauling, lifting his scalp painfully. Verian wailed in dismay.

“Shut yer gob.” The man growled in a voice that grated and rasped.

The inside of the barn stank of horses and leather, of hay in the loft and the sow that slept in an improvised sty near the back of the place. Verian gagged, and the driver started a sleeping chicken out of his way as he plowed forward. A stall door was opened, though it was fashioned differently from the others. The bottom of the door went flush to the floor, and the top to a high, supporting crossbeam. It slid to the side on a track, and went barely far enough for a person to pass through, let alone any animals. He’d had little more than a second to wonder over it before he was shoved rudely inside. The door slammed in his wake.

“And keep it shut.” The man snapped, as if they were having a continued conversation.

Verian picked himself up off of the hard-packed earth of the floor. There was a heap straw in one corner, and little else in the way of accommodations. A torch burned from a wall-sconce, though it did not burn brightly, and did not look to have much life left in it. There was a barrel in one corner, filled with water as one might leave for a horse. No food, and his stomach was clenching angrily. He was cold, and wet, and a chill gale caused the walls of the barn to creek.

Verian set his weight into the door, attempting to slide it despite the lack of a grip. The weathered wood prickled through his clothing. When that did not work, he attempted to shove it off of its track. He was rewarded with a bruise to his shoulder.

“Let me out of here!” He called out. “I’m hungry, and thirsty, and I need a wash. I’ll behave, just let me out!”

There was silence in return. It stretched on, and on. One of the horses whuffed and stirred, then stilled again. Verian choked on the stink of the animals.

“Let me out!” He cried still louder.

There was a response this time. Heavy, swift footfall. Thump, thump, and thump to the strange sliding door. It rattled noisily open, and the broad-shouldered driver angled his way in. He glowered at Verian, advancing quickly, and caught the youth by the front of his coat.

“I said shut it,” the man snapped.

The driver lifted the elf from the ground, though he attempted to cling to it with his toes, and then slammed him hard into the wall. Verian let out a grunt that was more a squeak of dismay and pain, and grasped desperately to the man’s hand. The wall rushed up to meet his side again, with force enough to jar his joints and his jaw. His head was ringing, and then throbbing, and he realized in a daze that he’d hit it. The third impact caused the wind to leave him, and Verian gasped for air as tears streaked

involuntarily down his cheeks. His bulky assailant let out a grunt of disgust, then tossed him hard into the straw before withdrawing. Verian lay there like a rag doll, feeling the miserable chill of drying mud bite against every ache in his body. He took inventory of each, making a thoroughly detailed list of complaint in his head, and was still at it when sleep stole past the complaints of his empty belly and snatched him away to uneasy dreams.

The morning came too soon for Verian's liking. The chickens were noisy to one end of the barn, the horses stirred. The sharp scent of warm, freshly spilled urine filled his nostrils, and as consciousness speared through the ache in his head, the elf came to realize that he had to piss just as badly. He drew in a deep breath despite the protest of his ribs, but thought twice about calling out. Instead he coughed, rolled in the straw, and went to relieve himself in the corner with more discretion than the horse in the stall beside him had shown.

Verian sucked water from the cupping of his palms, but soon found himself so thirsty, and so hungry, that he simply ducked his mouth to the barrel and sucked eagerly of its contents. The water was not quite clean, but it was cold enough to numb his tongue past the point of caring. He paced from one end of the little stall to the other, attempting to loosen his joints and warm the chill that consumed his thoughts. Once that was accomplished, however, there was little else to do. He stared at the straw, and the wall. He listened to the passage of people to and from the barn, accompanied now and then by the heavy clapping of horse's hooves. He fought the urge to speak, though it was not difficult to beat that urge back given the pain that ran like wildfire each time he drew enough breath to manage it. He probed at his bruises out of curiosity at first, and then out of boredom.

Finally, when he had resorted to lightly tapping the side of his head against the wall for the sake of distraction, the door slid along the track. Verian stilled, staring quietly at the broad, bulky figure that had come to occupy it. A coarse sack was pitched inward, and a sneering voice broke the silence.

"Breakfast for *his lordship*," the dundering dunce paused to chuckle at his mockery. "Eat up," he continued with a sneer, "and get yourself ready. Won't be no more stoppin' for a good hour or so, and you'd best be *behavin'* yourself, boyo."

The door slid shut with a noisy clatter and rattle, and slammed home

with such finality that Verian's gut gave an uneasy twist. He rolled upward, hips and ribs twinging, and hunched to tug the sack close. A hunk of pungent cheese, and the heel of a moldering loaf of bread were inside. Verian grimaced, tossed the bread against the wall, and then picked at the cheese. He was hungry, but damned if he was hungry enough to eat like a street urchin. He scraped the taste of the cheese from his tongue with his teeth, and gulped down another bellyful of water. He had just enough time to relieve himself of the first draught before the man came again. This time Verian moved complacently, sedately, and trudged his way over to the carriage with dragging heels and a downward-pointed chin.

This could not, he thought, possibly end well.

The remainder of the journey was brief by comparison. Verian had settled into a sort of disgruntled resignation, the sensation cemented in by the gnawing of his gut and the cold in his joints. He ached along his ribs, and through his head. It distracted him from his indignation, and kept his complaints at bay.

The fat man was likewise quiet, and stared outside of the carriage as it peeled away from the inn. The sky had cleared, and shone a beautiful, radiant blue. A few wisps of white clouds tarried over the horizon, which itself consisted of rolling green hills and the occasional dark curve of a floating bird. Verian hid from the sun as it spilled through the open window, and tucked himself neatly into the corner opposite of the loathsome Mister Bastion.

Still, when the coach pulled around a bend, and the youthful elf received his first glimpse of their destination, he was drawn inexorably toward the window. He placed his mud-stained knees opposite of the immaculate velvet of the man across from him, and splayed one slender hand to the bench seat near the wall. Nose near the glass, Verian watched as the walls of the cathedral grew larger. His gaze swept up along the smooth facade of the building, taking in the clean lines and the decorative glass in a hundred different colors. The carriage rolled on, past the wide sprawling steps and looming statuary, turning from the main drive to a smaller, unlined path. The coach wheels sank into the still moist ground, splashed here and there through pockets of still water. Narrow windows lined the high exterior walls, which in turn gave way to open-air corridors as they rounded to the interior of the retreat. A few curious faces stared from behind low panels pressed with shallow reliefs and flaking paint, but each man who hesitated soon enough hurried along.

They drew to a halt some distance away from the grand view of the cathedral, tucked behind a low wall with buildings in less repair to either side, and a glimpse of sheep in a field past the front of the carriage. Verian slipped out into the bright glow of the sun when the door was pulled open, and gave a soft gasp of dismay as his shoes sank into the mud puddle at the base of the steps. The footman gave him a leering grin and raised the platform, shutting the door with a snap behind him.

“Good luck, boy,” Mister Bastion leered as he swung open the thin panel window on the carriage door. “Don’t let us down.”

The fat man’s laughter trailed in thin, wispy drifts through the sound of the wheels pulling forward, the horse’s hooves in the mud. Verian stared after the withdrawing coach in dismay, but turned toward the nearest building at the soft sound of a clearing throat. Two round-eared men stood at the entry to the corridor, one gloomy in expression, the other stern.

“He took my bag,” Verian stated in dismay, peering again after the departed coach with a frowning of his brows.

“You won’t be needing it,” replied the sad-eyed human with golden hair.

“Come along, boy. We haven’t got all day,” snapped his companion as he glared down the hawkish angle of his nose.

Verian opened his mouth to argue, and to protest, but the twinge of his ribs and the ache of his mood prompted him to shut it again. His chin sank downward, and he pulled his feet from the mud to trudge along the corridor with its line of weathered wooden doors. He turned when prompted to do so, though his gaze was fixed outward in wide, curious sweeps of his surroundings. The bright sun and muddy courtyard gave way to a barren room comprised of gray stone flooring and gray stone walls. There was a chair to one side, with a thin, once-white towel folded neatly on its seat, and a thin cake of soap settled like an off-center crown. A shallow tub sat in the middle of the room, decidedly lacking in steam from its placid surface.

Verian was nudged inward by the point of an elbow to his spine. He nearly stumbled forward, the muddied toes of his shoes catching on a ridge of uneven granite. The heavy door swung shut behind him, and he had just enough time to center his balance again before there were hands upon him. There were fingers at his shoulders, at his waist. They peeled away layers of fabric even as he twisted, startled, and shook his way out of his sleeves in an attempt to rid himself of the efficient assault.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing,” he snapped as he fought to get his belt back into place.

"You're dirty," one man mumbled.

"You'll feel better after a bath," said the other.

"I'm not bathing in that," Verian protested.

"You are," came stern words from a stern mouth.

They were on him again in a breath, grabbling with a rustle of clothing and dirt. Verian lost in shamelessly short order, and found himself standing in water that leeches the heat from his feet and caused his calves to spasm. He hissed at the strangers, the fine hairs on his arms standing on end as he attempted to cover himself with his hands. His modesty earned him a matching set of amused smiles set beneath cool, glittering eyes.

"It's cold."

"Wash," came the reply.

Verian's hands came up reflexively to catch the soap that was tossed to him. He sniffed at the pale, peeling layers. The sharp stench of it caused his sinuses to burn, and his eyes to water. His mouth twisted back along his teeth as he jerked his head to the side.

"It's revolting," he drew in a breath as the soap hit the water. His hands slid down between his legs again. "I'm not bathing with an audience."

The two men standing opposite Verian exchanged amused looks. One laughed, though the youth could not have said which, and both turned as if on cue. The door shut behind them, and Verian shivered as he turned in place. Wan light spilled through a narrow window, but he doubted it would provide him with much by the way of warmth. He'd just gathered himself to step out of the shallow tub when the door swung open again.

The man who stepped into the room and shut the door behind himself was decidedly taller than the two that had left. He was broader of shoulder, and more defined of musculature. His jaw was wide and square, his nose sharp, and his eyebrows oddly dark beneath a wealth of golden hair. What gave Verian pause was not the hawkish regard of his rich brown eyes, nor the smirk that had settled in self-assured perch upon thin lips, but was instead the fact that the man wore not so much as a scrap of clothing.

"I understand," said the stranger as he stepped closer on the broad bottoms of his feet, "that you do not wish to take your bath."

There was an implied threat in the growl of the man's tone. There was definite danger in the way he moved. He'd seen the cats on his father's estate prowl in much the same way before pouncing on unsuspecting vermin. Was that what he was now? Vermin?

"No, no. It's fine."

Verian sat in a rush as his conviction fled. His belly twisted, and the

cold caused him to whimper. His toes curled to the bottom of the tub, and he set his back to the stranger as the man swept aside the chair's contents in order to press his bare backside to the smooth wooden seat. An uneasy silence fell upon the room, occasionally broken by a soft sniff or the chattering of Verian's teeth.

The man in the chair waited several minutes before he rose. He stood so swiftly that he caused the chair to clatter along the floor. His feet smacked to the ground in swift sequence, their approach prompting Verian to hazard a look over his shoulder. Fingers snared through the vibrant red of his hair, twisting it about even as an arm seized his bruised arm. Verian was shoved abruptly down and to the side, led by his head, so that the water splashed cold and rude along the smooth planes of his pale skin. He wailed in indignant misery as he was hoisted up again.

"Spoiled brat," hissed the man, his mouth near the back of Verian's ear. "It is in your best interests to cooperate."

Water dripped along Verian's cheeks, away from his hair to pat into the water, splatter along his skin. He shivered, teeth chattering audibly, and licked at his lips. At least it was fairly clean. He cringed away from the mouth at his ear, wincing for the cold that cut through the warmth of his limbs and shot tingles along his spine, into his gut.

"What is this place," he finally dared to ask. "Why am I here?"

Silence was his answer. Silence, and then the soft splashing of water near the side of the tub. The man had returned, and was rubbing the cake of sharply scented soap into the thin weave of a washrag. Despite his firm grip and abrupt gestures, the passage of the cloth was surprisingly gentle over Verian's abused skin. The stranger was thorough in his attention, and clinically distant in his treatment. He paid no more mind to washing the soft drape of Verian's cock than he had to smoothing the cloth over the graceful curve of his shoulder. This did not stop Verian from blushing, or from glaring in an attempt to conceal his own embarrassment.

Still, his demeanor was enough to earn Verian's begrudging cooperation. The young man stopped fighting the pulls to his limbs, turned when turned, and even consented to the washing of his hair. He rose when hauled on at the shoulder, and stood shivering and dripping as the thin towel was worked over his pink skin.

"Come. Stand in the sun. It will help some."

Verian was led from the tub to the slanted spill of light through the window. He shivered still, and licked often at his tingling lips. He gratefully took over the task of drying himself, and worked the towel liberally over his belly and legs in an attempt to restore circulation to his numb, distant toes. He was given a few precious moments to warm

himself and run the towel through the heavy drape of his hair.

"There you are. Now come over here and let me tend to you."

Verian, uncertain of the stranger's intentions, cast a hesitant look the man's way. The man raised a coarse bristled brush and crude wooden comb indicatively, though Verian could not have said from whence they came. He stepped away from the source of his relief, angling for the chair. Perhaps he could pull it into the sun before sitting.

Verian bent neatly at the waist, reaching with one hand for the corner of the chair. It was then that the man struck, right hand connecting solidly with already bruised ribs, and a foot tucking about his ankle to drop his balance out from under him. Verian hit the chair with a burst of air from his lungs, and the muscles in his abdomen seized as he struggled to call it back. There was a hand over his mouth making it a very difficult task to accomplish. His thoughts were racing, scrabbling, and the pervasive sense of surreal wrongness compelled him to give a strangled sob once he did manage to breathe inward. He choked softly as he felt the towel twist about his arms, and a roughly calloused hand hauled his hips upward and his legs wide.

"Call out or struggle and I'll make sure it hurts twice as much," came the snarl at his ear.

It did hurt. It hurt a great deal more than he was expecting, really. It hurt enough that Verian dreaded the notion of what twice as much might be. More to the point, it did not seem inclined to stop hurting. He willed it to on the occasion that he managed to focus past his sobs and the equally demanding need to breathe.

The chair creaked beneath their unsteady shifting. He could feel the sweat on the belly of the man behind him, slicking up the small of his back as the man rocked. In and out. The smell of the soap cloyed to his sinuses, washed itself through the waves of snot that came with his tears. The sting of it bit at the wide stretch of his ass around the other man's cock. Each thrust drove it into the abrasions near the surface, so that blood ran in thin, soapy ribbons down the backs of his dangling balls to drip to the floor below. It seemed to him that it should drip with the creaking. It would have been easy to bear. Easier. Nothing in this place was easy. Instead it fell off time, jarring his ears with each splat.

The granite was damp beneath him. He watched the water from the tub drip down the legs of the chair to mingle with his tears. It stank. Of fear. Of blood. Of the barbaric human. Of soap. Of musk and of sweat. The chair rocked, clattering on the damp flooring, scooting some.

His ears were filled with the lewd squelching, smacking, soft grunts and muted whimpers of their joining. Closing his eyes, he could not

escape it. Ignoring his nose, there was still no denying it. Again, again, again he cried out in pain as the man drove steadily forward. Deep. Fast. Unrelenting. Too much to ignore, though he tried. Oh how he tried.

There were fingers in his hair. Pulling, steadying. The chair tipped further on two uncertain legs, rocking precariously away as his back was made to arch and his body was drawn taut. It tested the limits of his balance and set his muscles to quivering.

Ragged breath tore itself out far, far behind him. His own was lost in the sobbing. There was an unbearable forward smack. Another. Then a swelling that flared, ebbed, and flared again with an immediate, deep sense of heat. Verian choked in dismay, though it was the inevitable result of it all.

"Not a word to anyone," came the panting of the man's voice to the shell of his ear. Heat on his back. Weight bearing down against his strained spine. "Not a word or I'll slit your throat in your sleep."

The man pulled back. It took forever for him to fall out. Free. Verian choked on his snot and tears again. It hurt impossibly more for a moment. He felt gutted. Hollow. The chair clattered to all four feet as his limbs were released.

Verian attempted, once again, to breathe. The hand still in his hair twisted. The arm attached to it hauled. He was forced upward, turning, stumbling, and made to splash into the cold water of the shallow tub. More soap. Fingers probed at the flush, swollen heat between his asscheeks. Dug at the tender spots. No escape.

"Not a word."

The towel was coarse against his skin, cool and damp from having been used once already. Little more than a rag. His hair was still dripping as the man reached his ankles. Verian simply stood there, his face dry, still somewhat flush, and his thoughts off on the haze of escape. A hand pressed between his shoulders, propelling him forward with unsteady smacks of his feet to the floor. It hurt again.

The passage from the cold gray room with its shallow tub was a strange thing. It seemed to happen in slow motion at one point, and too fast at others. He was distantly aware of being nude and out of doors, and that there were people spotted here and there through the corridors as they walked outside, and then in. The sun was there, and then gone. No more windows, only torches. Torches and steps that poured down in a spiral. They hurt more than the flat ground had.

Things evened out again in a vast dungeon of a room. A wide corridor split it in two, and cells stood to either side. Four in all, and not a one of them occupied. The cell to Verian's immediate left was more

accommodating than the others. There was fresh straw tossed into the far corners, a chamber pot tucked against the wall, and a low table in the corner opposite the door. Verian was shoved inward, and he stumbled toward the dark wood with its burden of washbasin and fresh, ripe fruit. The smell of the bread on the plate was almost overwhelming to his suddenly gnawing stomach, and his hunger distracted him temporarily from the pain.

"The other new boy is coming tomorrow. You'll get your proper introductions then. Sit quietly for now, and don't bother screaming if you need anything. You're here 'til breakfast at the very least, sunshine."

The grated door did not screech as Verian expected it would. It instead swung gently shut, impacted lightly with its frame, and was locked with a smooth play of tumblers. The elf was left to eat and cry himself to sleep in the flickering glow cast by the torches lining the walls.

* * *

Soft, golden grasses stretched toward the golden glow of the autumn sky. Their heads had gone to seed the week before, amber threads escaping from the stems to catch at a gentle breeze. Verian brought his hand up to throw a shadow across his eyes. He was warm, contented, and spent his time watching his muscles shift and stir beneath the taut pull of his skin.

A whistle trickled in from the distance, and Verian dropped his hand to the ground at his side. He pressed himself up and stared off through the field. A smile lit his face as he caught sight of Mikel approaching. He pushed himself up, dusted off the delicate brocade on his trousers, and hurried off to meet the other man's approach.

They fell together in a crash of chests and wrap of arms, the world spinning precariously as the ground twisted beneath the balls of his feet. Verian's laughter mingled with Mikel's, and their lips crushed warmly against one another's even as the pair of them fought to remain upright. Gravity won out, and they went crashing down into the field. Dirt crept under Verian's shirt, tickling at his belly. They laughed again, rolled and tumbled with drags of limbs and sweeps of hands. It was a race and rush to be on top, with neither of them particularly well suited for such pursuits. They settled to a compromise, both on their sides in a nest of rumpled grass.

"How long do you have," Mikel asked in a hush.

"Until sundown," Verian replied as he stared into the sweet summer blue of Mikel's eyes. "My uncle expects me for dinner."

“Then we will make every moment count.”

Mikel smiled, tensing the cleft in his chin, and wrinkling the corners of his eyes. Verian’s gaze drifted from point to point, taking it all in. He smiled back, sighed with delight, and then leaned forward to deposit kiss after kiss against smiling lips. Legs curled, wrapped, tangling and tugging. Mikel’s hand swept down from the sharp angle of Verian’s hip, creeping over the inside of his thigh to draw upward, inward, cup at the growing bulge of his trousers. Verian sighed softly as his head fell back against the grass. He arched, twisted, and leaned into the exploring fingers.

“Every moment,” he agreed in a breathy echo. Every moment.

Chapter 2

The following morning was a rush of disorientation and confusion. Verian, who had been more than happy to retreat into the comfort of his dreams, was woken by the screech and slam of the door at the end of the hall. He was quick to comply to gruffly barked orders that he wash his face and eat something, and barely had time to make use of the chamber pot before he was being hauled out of the darkness of his cell to the world above. There he was joined by another young man, similarly hauled, and both were subsequently abandoned to the watchful eye of a single clothed guard.

"Hurry up now, hurry up. The vicar don't like being kept waiting, and you're late enough as it is."

The interior of the vicar's office was dim compared to the broad, open passageways that had let the sunlight fall fully on uncovered eyes. There were candles in the stained glass window that seemed to cast more light than the sun that filtered through. Torches burned in the sconces high on the stone walls. Candelabra crowded the sides of the room, so that the interior was lit by a persistent, flickering golden glow. It flattered the reds of the draperies and upholstery, and helped to soften the crags of age that had long since begun to shrivel the vicar's face.

"Now then," the man spoke as he glanced up from the book meticulously laid out on the desk before him, "I do not recall admitting any exotics."

The way he said exotics caused Verian's pointed ears to twitch. Though perhaps it was more the way the sharp gray eyes fixed on him, the wrinkled corners wrinkling further still. Verian squirmed closer to Kellen, whose name he had learned between pokes and prods as they were hurried through the sunny corridors. He knew little of the strange, brown-haired creature save his name, but there was some comfort to be had in sheltering near the only other naked figure in the room.

"Bastion's work, sir," said the guard behind them.

The vicar let a wheeze of air out through his nose, which seemed to grow all the more narrow, as if the loss of air had somehow deflated its insubstantial bulk. He tugged at the layers of his ruffed collar in irritation before dropping his hand to the book on his desk. Verian, rather than fix his own gaze to the shrewd stare of the man before him, instead studied the mottled patch of dark skin near the base of the vicar's thumb.

"That man takes too many liberties."

"If you say so, Vicar Hoch."

"I do," Hoch replied as he turned his gaze past the hooked bridge of his nose and affixed it to the man behind Verian.

"Yessir."

"You, boy."

"Yes, sir?" Kellen asked, though the vicar had not turned his sharp stare away from the now shakey-kneed fellow behind them.

"Not you. The other boy."

"Man," Verian corrected succinctly, though he did not look any older than the young man beside him.

A pair of gray eyes turned slowly toward Verian. The candlelight caught on their glossy surface and reflected off of the clear black circles of the vicar's pupils. Verian curled his toes against the rich carpet beneath his feet, but did not cringe backward. He raised his chin, dragging his hair along his exposed shoulders, and gazed loftily down at the seated figure.

"You, boy." Vicar Hoch repeated.

Verian raised his brows just slightly, but offered no correction. He simply stared.

"Do you know who that is?" Hoch asked as he pointed one knobby finger toward the window. The yellow light emphasized the lines running through the man's nail as it shone through its tapered end.

"The hanged mother," Verian answered without pause.

"Very good. The mother of whom?"

Verian opened his mouth to reply, but his breath stilled at the tip of his tongue. He pressed his teeth together, and then his lips, and lowered his brows in a slow, thoughtful furrow. It was impossible to interact with the humans and not come to recognize the iconic symbol of the hanged mother, but he had never thought to ask of any context behind it.

"Well?"

Kellen, eager to please, let the answer burst from his lips in a haphazard spill of sound. "That is the hanged mother of Misau, Lord of the Sun and the Light, g-." Kellen drew to a halt with a soft gurgle, dark eyes shining with unshed tears.

Verian darted an uneasy look between Kellen and the vicar. The air had turned electric about them, and it made the hairs on his arms raise uncomfortably. The guard was snickering, though the sound was short-lived. Verian reached to place a reassuring hand to Kellen's arm even as the vicar spoke.

"Very well. At least one of you has had proper teaching, but it is clear that you are both lacking in discipline," Hoch said as he cast a lingering look over Verian's bruises. "Take them to Delmi and see to it that they are

properly groomed. This one's battered and the other one looks to have louse."

The guard behind them nodded. Kellen stilled his fingers behind his right ear and cringed closer to Verian. This time Verian did not seek him out in kind, but took a distinct step to the side and away from the other boy. The left corner of the vicar's mouth gave an upward twitch, wrinkles shifting beneath a stray curl of dull gray hair.

"And Charles," Hoch called lightly after them, temporarily halting their retreat. "Return to me promptly after delivering these two. We've some matters to discuss."

"Yes, Vicar Hoch."

Charles' fingernails dug painfully into Verian's shoulder as he was propelled back toward the thick slab of the door. Their steps were now more hurried, and their handling more gruff. Both young men were forced together at the shoulder, though Verian gave a soft choke of disgust. The last thing he wanted was a nest of bugs thriving on his skin.

* * *

The painted sign above the golden wood of the door had read "Infirmarium," but it struck Verian as more a lavishly appointed bedroom. The length of one of the walls was lined with mirrors, the shining glass reflecting every breath of action back to those within. It also reflected the light, and so there was little need for candles given the broad, plant-lined window that sat at the opposite end of the room from the door. The smell of jasmine carried through on a breeze that caught the edges of the gauzy silks hanging from the rack of a massive four-posted bed. The bed dominated the far end of the room, and Verian noted with surprise that there was a smallish figure curled in the purple linens, visible mostly for the shock of golden ringlets that were scattered carelessly across one of the many pillows.

"New arrivals?"

The soft purr of sound was little more than a whisper in volume, but it called Verian's attention away from his investigation of the tapestries hanging over the armoire. He looked instead to the speaker, who was seated at a table made of dark wood, and whose skin was darker still. The man was small, and his smile oddly inviting despite the shocking white of his teeth against his brown lips and black skin.

"Yep. Vicar wants 'em cleaned up good an' proper. 'spect they's startin' trainin' tomorrow. Don't wanna get everyone sick wit' elf rot an' farm boy fleas." Charles smiled broadly at Delmi, his dark brows lifting in

time with the quick canting of his head. Delmi did not smile back.

"Very well, Sharlie." Delmi's purring voice nearly swallowed the other man's name. "You may go now. I will take good care of them. Aahleks will let you know when they are ready, yes?"

Verian stared at the small, dark-skinned man. He was enraptured with the way that air seemed to pass through his teeth every time he hit a thorn sound, as if it might be smothered away to nothing. Kellen was likewise staring, and both stood with a press of shoulder to shoulder as they studied Delmi in blatant fascination.

"Yeah, alright. You obviously got them under yer thumb already anyway." Charles rolled his eyes as he pushed his weight through the outside of his left foot and turned slowly for the door. "Have fun, 'ey Delmi."

"But of course, Sharlie."

Two amber gold eyes turned to regard Verian and Kellen, studying them both at length. Verian did not remember to breathe until his chest began to hurt, and when he did so he did so shallowly, hurriedly. Delmi stood from his simple bench, the brilliant light of the room dancing across the smooth contours of his dark skin. Verian watched as the man passed around the table, his body so lean that his muscles displayed the machinations of every simple gesture. Verian was biting the tip of his tongue, and it hurt, but it kept him from holding his breath again as soft, cool fingers cupped at the side of his neck. The baby hairs at the back rose beneath the tips of Delmi's fingers as they found the knobs of his spine and settled between them.

"A bath first, I think. Then your nails, and your 'air."

Verian drew in a sharp breath. He stared at the rich honey of Delmi's eyes as a pang stirred in his gut. His gaze dropped to the orange shift that lay dormant against the other man's thighs. Verian's head rolled to the side as he fought to place the peculiar sensation that made his fingers twitch. No sooner did he realize that it was reluctance, than the reluctance was gone. He smiled, and Kellen smiled, and both swayed forward to trail after Delmi as the man turned and padded off for a door set in the wall behind his desk.

Delmi's tub was large enough to hold three people who might take it upon themselves to sprawl luxuriantly within the gently sloping bowl of it. It was more than large enough for Kellen and Verian to sit with ease, and they stepped to kneel against the chilled iron without a whisper of hesitation. They set their pale knees one against the other as instructed, though they kept careful track of Delmi as the man moved along the wood-paneled wall.

"You are both good boys, yes," Delmi purred, his fingers catching in a large brass ring. "Take the soap and sponges from that tray there. Very good." A thin brass panel dropped from the ceiling with Delmi's guidance. It settled into place with a low thump. Warm water came sluicing down a moment later, pouring into the basin of the tub. "Wash from air to toe. Be thorough boys, good boys, and you will get treats from Delmi. Do not be naughty. I do not like naughty."

As one, Verian and Kellen turned their heads. They watched Delmi sway from the room, orange fabric fluttering at the backs of his thighs, the brown bottoms of his feet flashing in and out of view. They looked slowly back to one another, Verian's green eyes meeting Kellen's brown, and took to lathering their sponges.

Bathing was an exercise in cooperation, and they moved through the process as if they had been at it for years. Verian washed Kellen's legs as Kellen washed Verian's hair, and vice versa. They took turns to sponge one another's hands, though arms were a simple exchange, and backs required maneuvering. Kellen was gentle over Verian's bruises, and murmured soothingly as he probed a soapy finger past the ache and twinge of his backside. Verian was similarly apologetic when it was his turn to do the same, and both of them laughed and giggled when it came to washing between their toes. They submerged one another to rinse thoroughly in the pool of soapy water that had gathered about their bellies, and both hooked the ring of the plug to pull it free in one smooth gesture. The young men repositioned themselves as the water drained. Once again their knees came to touch, but without Delmi to track they simply closed their eyes and pressed the smooth spans of their brows against one another.

Verian breathed softly through the gentle brush of Kellen's breath, though his teeth stank faintly of rot. He did not feel relief, or elation, but neither was he anxious or frightened. The nerves that had been eating at his gut since his arrival had finally gone quiet. He felt warm and at peace, and as if he could float in the dark behind his eyelids for an eternity without restlessness.

The brush of a touch over Verian's shoulders caused him to start, and as his eyes snapped open he realized that he must have fallen asleep. He was no longer in the tub, nor was he with Kellen. For that matter, he was not in the bathroom at all. He blinked slowly as he attempted to place himself. Something was soft beneath him, and the room was bright. He could tell because the light from the sun was shimmering on the oiled skin above him. Just enough time to note that before the cat-like gold of Delmi's eyes had caught his own again.

“Verian. You are uurr. Bastion man did this to you, yes?”

Verian attempted to shake his head, but it gave only the faintest rock against the pillow. His hair was damp and cool about the heat of his ears. There were soft, cool fingers running over the dark blotches of bruising at his ribs. The straddle of the man’s thighs was decidedly warm by contrast, and Verian swallowed as Delmi’s shift slid in a drag of orange silk along the planes of his belly. The dark man had leaned closer, so that Verian was staring at the whites of his eyes. He smelled earthy, and of some strange spice. Something, he guessed, from the South.

“Not Bastion? Oooo then, little elf?”

Little? He was not little. Verian opened his mouth to say as much, but found the words stilled. Delmi was scooting further down, dragging silk across Verian’s groin with a lingering ghost of weight behind it. Verian blushed and let out a quiet sound that was meant to be words, but likewise stilled. Delmi settled over Verian’s thighs and fixed his golden gaze downward once again.

“A man with him.”

“Under Bastion man’s orders then, I am thinking.”

Delmi issued forth a strange thrumming noise that seemed to come from his throat, not unlike the purring of a cat. It was lower, though, and deeper. Verian squirmed toward the soft padding of the mattress and its smooth, clean sheets. Something was tugging at his gut, and at his chest. His skin felt at once too hot and too cold. Sweat broke its surface as the mottled bruising began to tingle. Verian swallowed audibly, and again moreso as Delmi drew his shift overhead and tossed it off to the side.

“It makes him feel very large, Delmi thinks. To beat the boys he picks.” Delmi’s voice had gone even softer, hushed in intimacy.

The lithe, dark figure swayed forward to crush the soft skin of his balls to Verian’s and nudge the proud, arching shaft of his cock against the elf’s. Verian gasped softly as his own cock swelled, spasmed, and swelled again. His cheeks raced with heat, but not from embarrassment. It was want that caused his heart to flip and flop in his chest.

“I think this is very naughty.” Delmi whispered as he set his bony hips to Verian’s and gave a long, slow grind.

“Oh.”

Oh. The sound repeated itself in his head as Delmi began to rock his weight deliberately back and forth, dark thighs splayed. Oh. The tops of Delmi’s toes were at the insides of Verian’s knees. Belly to belly, slick dark chest sliding against his ribs. Delmi’s teeth were blunt, but sharp, and they prompted Verian to issue forth another audible “Oh,” as they scraped along his jaw. Oh, teeth at his mouth. Delmi tasted of something sweet

and cool. Like a fruit Verian had never been fortuitous enough to sample.

"And you," Delmi purred into the outside of Verian's ear, "are a very . . ." Delmi slid down in one sinuous writhe, muscles playing from shoulder to knee, feet tucking upward. ". . . good boy." Dark fingers hooked over a pale knee, drawing it up toward Verian's chest. "Yes?"

"Yes," Verian agreed hurriedly, and this time managed to nod.

His skin was still tingling, and he felt ill for sweating so after a bath, but there was nothing to be done for it. Verian swallowed as he felt the light pressure of Delmi's cockhead sliding along the cleft of his ass, but there was no quiver of fear as it pushed against the ring of resistance. There was no frightened tremble in his gut, no urge to pull or push away. Instead there was a shallow tremble of anticipation that seemed to carry from the shoulder under his upturned knee to the small of Verian's spine. Another "Oh," through his thoughts as Delmi pressed forward, splitting Verian wide about the broad flare of his cockhead. Stretching the elf over the slick length of his oiled shaft.

"Verian." Delmi's fingers were tangling through the damp red coils of the elf's hair. "Touch me now."

Verian reached without thought. He pressed his fingertips to Delmi's smooth chest. They slid without resistance over the dark skin, pushing into the firm pad of muscle beyond as Verian's touch moved toward Delmi's shoulders. He cupped at the curve of them, squeezing, and lowered one hand to tweak the brown splotch of a nipple. Delmi rewarded him with a forward roll of his hips, cock burying deep within the tense pulse and pull. More tingling. More warmth. The taut twinges between his ribs eased, and Verian parted his lips in a moan that coincided with the fluttery of silk along the bedframe.

"Good boy."

Oh. Verian's heart skipped for the praise. His eyes squeezed shut, and he smiled so widely that his lips hurt where they pulled across the fronts of his teeth. The smile eased after a moment, though his chest was still tight, and his pulse was still racing. It contorted to a mild grimace of effort as he arched his spine with Delmi's withdrawal, and bowed it again to meet the swift forward thrust that inevitably followed. The knee not hooked over the man's shoulder rolled outward, stretched, and then bent again as he caught his heel against Delmi's back. Verian levered himself, angled to bend and curve gracefully in response to each forward jut, and give his quivering musculature a moment of relaxation for the electric tingle of Delmi's shaft dragging outward once again. In, and deep, and oh. Oh.

Every time Delmi's cockhead bumped hard within Verian, his own cock would twitch. His body tensed, and arched, and quivered. He pulsed

about the buried shaft, sighed and moaned as it withdrew, and licked his lips in silent pleading for more.

Delmi obliged, but seemed in no particular hurry. He filled the tight pull of Verian's ass in lazy strokes, bottomed out, lingered with a rock, and pulled back again with the graceful sway of a sapling caught in a breeze. He watched the elf beneath him, and leaned into the pale fingers that explored the sculpted curve of his belly. He purred as he worked, and only after several long minutes of mixing musk into the spice and flora of the air did he bow his head to taste again of Verian's mouth. Of his jaw. Of the delicate wing of his collarbone. Delmi pressed his pink tongue to the little spots on the elf's pale cheek, and bucked his hips harder when this caused Verian to give a wispy laugh.

"Delmi. Oh please. Just. Oh. Yes, like that. Please. Oh." Verian lapsed into sighs and moans again, cooing with delight for the wrap of soft, cool fingers about his cock. His ears were filled with a guttural chuckling, and his hips shifted with an uncertain jolt. Up to the hand, or back toward the other man's hips? The solution presented itself after a moment, as Delmi's stroking shifted to match their pace.

Verian stopped petting, and simply clung to the other's sides as Delmi thrust harder, faster, his hips coming in short, sharp tucks, his fingers tight and sliding, gliding. Verian gasped again as a thumb slid sideways along his weeping slit. He bucked, twisting, and pressed his mouth to the side of Delmi's bracing arm. Sensitive lips pressed near the finer workings of the man's wrist, breath fluttering over minuscule movements of tendon and bone.

"Boy."

Verian's world stopped, caught on that word. His heart, his breath, his movement. Every sensation hung at a painful crescendo.

"Come now."

The heightened pause turned into a jarring slam of movement and reality. Delmi's cock deep in Verian's ass. Twitching, pulsing, surging, swelling, flowering warmth. Heat. Surging again. His own balls ached, gathered, and the tension low in his belly flowered in an alarming outward burst. Sticky white seed splattered up onto his belly, and again with another surge of his cock beneath the coaxing palm of his partner. Cum surged and trickled and seeped over the backs of Delmi's fingers, slicked up about his cock as he pressed himself in lingering rocks within Verian. Delmi rocked again in place, not withdrawing, and then finally fell against the boy beneath him. Their panting crashed against one another, catching on oil and sweat in light pattering.

"Good. Very good. You must rest now. Rest and 'eal."

Verian drew a deep breath in an attempt to calm his racing nerves. He exhaled it partially, and tossed his voice in an attempt to protest.

“Oh,” was all that would come out. Oh as the world grew fuzzy and began to darken, fading out on the sunlit gleam of Delmi’s amber eyes.

He was warm and snug, and the bed was soft, and it smelled like home. Verian stretched his legs within the soft, combed cotton of the sheets and yawned wide into his pillow. He didn’t want to wake up just yet, and so fought the growing urge to roll about his shoulders and stretch his arms. He pulled a pillow over his head and curled his toes, opting instead to chase the fragmented remains of his dreams. Broken glimpses of bloody suns over broad vistas.

It was no use. The dreams would not return. They were instead banished by the ever increasing sensation of something being not quite right. The sheets were too soft, the pillow did not smell of the sea, and the mattress was too giving. His uncle had frowned on Verian’s indulgence in opulence, as he’d put it. The old man had thought his parents were spoiling him, rotting him to the core of his character. This bed, though, was more sumptuous even than the one he’d had before moving in with that cantankerous old coot.

A low groan drudged itself up from Verian’s lungs, hooking over his lips in order to flop thin in the air. Verian tossed his pillow off to the side and stared balefully up at the ceiling. Not his ceiling. Not his bed. Not his room. The pillow came back and smacked him in the face.

“Hey!”

There was a moment of confusion, of tussling sheets and limbs until the pillow landed off to the side. Two wide, brown eyes stared at Verian. Round eyes above round cheeks and glossy lips. Mousey brown hair fell across Kellen’s brow, cropped short and tidy about the edges. Verian blinked in surprise, then rolled onto his back once again with a huff.

The bed dipped down alongside Verian’s arm as Kellen pursued the retreating elf. He reached over with his callous-toughened fingers to poke curiously at the tip of an ear where it poked from the mass of soft red hair. Verian’s eyes narrowed to shallow slits as they rolled to the side in an attempt to dissuade the other young man with the heat of his glare alone.

“Sorry,” Kellen mumbled, sinking back. “I’ve never seen an elf before.”

“That is obvious.” Verian blew a tuft of hair from alongside his nose.

“I didn’t think I’d see one here, either! Why would an elf join the priesthood?”

Verian turned his head against his pillow and stared quietly at Kellen. Verian's mouth twisted, a single brow twitched upward, and he let a short, audible breath out through his nostrils. "They did not take the time to consult with me on the matter beforehand."

His hand traveled in a sweep up along his side, feeling out the pale skin. The gesture had begun as an indicative one, but it halted after the first inch or so of exposed tissue. Verian probed and prodded, working his way up from waist to ribs. There was not a bruise to be found. No scratches, and no scrapes.

"Delmi probably did it when you were sleeping." Kellen's enthusiastic tone only set Verian's teeth on edge.

"What? Why? Will you stop squirmi- Ow! That was my shin, you clod."

"Sorry." Kellen had leveraged himself up to sit. He scooted a few inches away to ensure that he wouldn't smack his feet against Verian again. "Look, they cut my hair. And yours!" Kellen smoothed his palms back along the close cropping of his mud-colored hair. His teeth showed as he smiled, and Verian found himself preoccupied with studying the many different angles at which they seemed to spring from his gums. "And look what they did to my nails!" Kellen continued as he flashed his fingers before Verian.

Verian had stopped listening. It was a pleasant thing, not hurting. He didn't have a single ache, not a note of twinge. He shifted in the bed and peered at his fingers. His nails were freshly filed, shorter than he cared for, but clean enough. The tips of Verian's fingers pinched on a lock of hair near his scalp, and he felt it out toward the ends. His mouth was tense as he fought with the jutting of his lower lip. The brilliant red waves fell no longer than the bottoms of his ears at their longest point.

"Do you never shut up?" Verian interjected coolly into Kellen's enthusiastic babbling.

Kellen's words cut off abruptly. He brushed his hair habitually toward his ears, though there was no longer enough of it present to make the action necessary. His lips, no longer chapped and rough, were subjected to the workings of his teeth as he scooted uncertainly away from Verian.

A slight pang of regret made itself known to Verian, and he shifted his gaze from the other boy to the ceiling above. He was tired of laying about in the bed. He was done being complacent. He was through with feeling intimidated. He certainly didn't want to spend any more time with a human brat too stupid to realize he'd been conscripted into some lesser level of hell.

Verian set his jaw with a slight grind of teeth, then swung his feet out

of the bed to set flat to the floor. His feet did not reach, so elevated was the grandiose piece of furniture. Movement from the corner of his eye caused him to raise his gaze to the unfamiliar face in the mirror, and he spent more time than he meant to staring into the slant of his own green eyes.

Something moved in the reflection, and Verian straightened up. He hopped from the side of the bed, landing solidly on the generously furred skin that was stretched over the parquetry. He turned in time to see a small boy duck in through the entry to the infirmary, and this one was a boy in the truest sense of the word. The top of his head was capped in coils of golden blonde hair, and two crystal blue eyes stared waifishly outward. The boy shifted his weight from one foot to the other, causing the brown fabric dangling from his waist to flutter against the tops of his pale knees.

"It is time to go now." The boy smiled in the wake of his words, exposing the hole of a missing tooth to both Verian and Kellen. "You are in my bed, and I am tired. You two are so lazy you missed breakfast. Harker said so. So you should go away."

Verian's jaw sagged, then clenched tight again. What a rude little brat! His stomach made an audible protest at the notion of having missed yet another meal. He was damned if he was going to continue going hungry. His anger sparked again, and Verian stalked for the door.

Kellen hurried after the angry elf and flashed a semi-apologetic smile to the boy as they passed. The boy grinned and bounced off for the bed with a gleeful cry. All was once again right in his world.

"Ullo then!" Came a sharp call as Verian stepped out into the open space of the wide corridor. The midmorning sun was bright in his eyes. He turned abruptly on his heel. Charles.

"About time you tw-," Charles began, but was cut off by Verian.

"Listen here. I am tired of being told where to go, what to do, and how to-." Verian's launch into his tirade was truncated by the resounding smack of skin to skin. The heat of impact blushed red across Verian's pale cheek, outlining the broad swath of Charles' palm. The guard smirked and gave his chin an upward jut.

"Don't you be interruptin' me. What I was sayin' was it's about time you tw-uh."

Charles' words swerved off as he ducked back and away from the return sail of Verian's hand. Verian's fingers just clipped the other man's jaw, the tips striking ineffectually near his wide chin. The opposite hand was balled into a tidy fist, but that was kept in check by some obscure sense of self-preservation.

"Boy." Delmi's tone was reproachful, but he had not raised his voice

out of its already familiar lull. "Sharlie. Both of you stop this now. This is a place of eeling."

Verian's chin dipped downward, the ends of his hair bouncing forward in an unfamiliar sway across the backs of his ears. Charles' own hand remained raised, his thick fingers balled into a fist, the back of which he'd been quite clearly going to set across Verian's opposite cheek. He glared hard, then dropped his arm heavily to his side.

"You go now," Delmi unfurled one dark hand in the golden glare of the sunlight and pointed his long finger off to the building across the courtyard. "Find your instruction, yes? Take them, Sharlie."

Charles' fingers clamped hard over Verian's left shoulder, and Kellen's right. He stretched his teeth in something like a smile to the small, dark skinned figure languishing near the door to the infirmary, and then turned to push his charges roughly across the courtyard to the building beyond. Charles bounced the two young men together at their shoulders, causing their arms to crash rudely so they might fit through the doorway. He was rewarded with a cringe from Kellen, and a brief glare from Verian. It was difficult to say which he enjoyed more, but his smirk was clearly quite pleased.

Charles ducked forward to hiss through his teeth. "Now you two just go sit with the other boys and make with the quiet."

Verian blinked repeatedly. His eyes were slow to adjust from the transition of bright, clear sunlight to the cool gray shadows of the room. It was quiet save for the occasional sigh of breath or light clearing of throat, and as such he was surprised to note several young men seated on a mundane brown rug at the far end of the room. Each was as nude as himself and Kellen, and each resting cross-legged in a state of ennui.

There was a chair beyond the rug, upholstered in soft green suede and well stuffed from the look of it. It sat empty. A breeze drifted through the open doorway and brought with it wisps of jasmine from the planters around the building across the courtyard. Verian caught his balance deftly as Charles shoved him forward, but Kellen was less fortunate. He stumbled and smacked hard to his hands and knees on the coarse stone of the floor.

Someone sniggered. Someone else looked away. Most were pointedly quiet. Charles strolled off whistling, the heavy sound of his footfalls carrying through the relatively still air.

"Pleasant lot you are," Verian muttered as he moved to crouch and help Kellen back to his feet.

"I do not recall giving you permission to speak." The voice was deep, and loud, and echoed off of the barren walls.

Verian picked up his head to locate its source. "I do not recall

needing to ask it," he snapped in return.

His challenge, such as it was, did not provoke much of a response from the man who had entered at the opposite end of the room. He was tall, a good head taller than Verian, though his boots had more than adequate heel. The man strode toward the chair with a long, steady gait, and shot Verian a look that seemed more amused than perturbed.

"Then you have been inattentive, boy. Sit."

Verian scowled, but was silent. He did not want a fresh round of bruises to his sides. He stepped forward even as Kellen fled his side to sit amongst the others.

"I did not say walk." The man in the chair snapped. "Sit."

Verian stopped, weight in the balls of his feet, and stared down at the floor. The stone was rough, gray, and decidedly unappealing.

"I do not," the voice was lower, snarling in his ears, ringing through his thoughts, "appreciate having to repeat myself. Use that brain of yours and sit down now, or I will remove it from your skull."

Verian smacked to the ground with a gasp and a wince. Knees first, by some small mercy. He tucked back onto his ass, shifting in a vain attempt to get comfortable, and then settled into relative stillness. Anything to keep the others from shooting him looks. Granted, sitting still did not seem to be accomplishing that.

"For those of you who are unaware, my name is Ulric den Alban, former Lord of Uffenhofen, currently in service foremost to Misau the Almighty, and secondarily to Her Majesty Martie Saldegus. You are all," and here Ulric den Alban took a moment to look pointedly to Verian, "stripped of any name, rank, title, or station you might have had before having the great fortune of arriving to Laudermyn. While you are present in this complex, you are foremost in service to Vicar Hoch, and secondarily to myself. The likes of you are not yet worthy of so much as uttering the name of Misau the Almighty, though you are welcome to pray that in time you may come to be so."

Verian felt his gut twist. He pushed the bellies of his hands against the coarse flooring, slid his weight into his feet, and began to scoot slowly toward the rug at the fore of the room. Ulric stopped speaking to raise his hand from where it had settled in his lap, the wide mouth of his sleeve yawning about his wrist. He leveled a finger at Verian.

"You are trouble. I dislike trouble."

"Splendid. Send me home."

Kellen gasped, and Verian noted the placement of Kellen's hands over his mouth as he stared. Verian's gaze, however, was fixed defiantly on the cool blue eyes of the man at the head of the room. Ulric was unimpressed,

and unintimidated. He gestured to one of the seated young men, his hand loose on his wrist, and flicked his fingers toward Verian.

“Do take him home, boy.”

The remark was met with a confused stare. The youth sitting attentively on the rug darted a look between Verian and Ulric. His voice was soft and tentative as it broke the expectant silence.

“S-sir?”

“Come now, you are not daft.” Ulric’s tone was edged with irritation, though his gaze was steady and unruffled upon Verian.

“B-but,” the young man began to stir, eager to do something in lieu of floundering nervously. “But we are home, sir?”

Ulric’s mouth turned up at the corners and spread into his cheeks, so that he fixed the glaring Verian with a smile wide and white.

“What a very good point, boy.”

Verian scowled, his brows drawing close together and nostrils narrowing. He raised his chin up, and pushed into a stand. Affecting an air of disregard, he took the time to dust the backs of his thighs.

“Well I am not home, and I will be going now.”

There was another soft gasp, this one more muffled. Verian turned and strolled out through the nearby door, into the sunny courtyard. He paused to let his eyes adjust to the change in light.

“Oh, I’ve been waitin’ for this.”

Charles was there to his right, a smirk lighting his eyes, and delight thick in his tone. Verian turned in place. He balled his left hand into a fist and raised a brow at the smirking figure.

Pain exploded through Verian’s right cheekbone, deep into his sinuses, up behind his eye. It extended to his nose, through the bridge of it, and sent him wheeling backward with a flail of arms. No. It was the force of the impact that had done it.

The fist had seemed to come from nowhere, but he saw it clearly the second time. It was aimed for the opposite side. Verian jerked his ear toward his chin and stumbled back another step. The only reason the second blow did not hit was the fact that he’d caught his heel on an uneven ridge in one of the wide slabs of stone that paved the walkway. Verian landed hard on his back, his elbows burning from a vain attempt to catch himself. He grunted, attempting to catch his breath even as Charles came stalking forward and over his sprawled legs.

“And I thought elves was supposed to be graceful.”

Pain to the left. The distant sound of cracking. Burning and wet in his sinuses. The world was jarred, pressure built in his head as the back of it struck the stone a second time. Verian stared at the haze of brown cloth

and light skin moving above him, and then fell into the sickeningly familiar black of oblivion.

Chapter 3

“Wake up, elf.”

Verian was cold. His face was wet, he couldn't breathe properly, and his hands were numb. He did not want to wake up.

“Wake up.”

Water splashed into his face. Verian cracked open his eyes, coughed softly, and labored through a breath. Once he'd woken up, he wished even more that he hadn't.

“There, see. That ain't so hard.”

Charles was smirking, the light from a nearby torch catching on the hard angles of his jaw. He walked in front of Verian and settled down on a small wooden stool. Charles' dull brown eyes were narrowed with venomous delight, and he reached out to poke Verian in the shoulder.

Verian growled softly as his teeth worked against a wad of fabric in his mouth. The gag was soaked through with spittle, and pulled tight against the sides of his mouth. His teeth were damp, his lips dry, and swallowing assaulted his ear with wet squelches. He gave a slight jerk to test the coarse ropes that looped about his arms and legs, pinning wrist to wrist, ankle to ankle. Verian's stopped up nose provided little by way of air, so he sucked another breath past the gag.

“Lord Ulric an' the Vicar done agreed that you get to be my little pet project. Ain't that nice? We're gonna be best buddies, you and me.”

Verian glared. Charles laughed. The sound echoed off of the barren walls and bounced up from the floor. A drop of spittle fell from the side of the gag to plap into the pool cooling under his cheek.

“And bein' the best buddy I be, I got you put up in yer own private suite.”

Charles raised one hand to gesture expansively to their surroundings. Verian cast a look about. He took a mental inventory as he did so. Four stone walls. One torch mounted on the wall. The stone slab of a table upon which he was currently bound. Straw lumped in the corner. The stool. A plain, but solid looking door. Charles.

“Now today,” Charles spoke again as he stood to round the end of the table. “You was bad. Very bad.”

Charles hooked his fingers into the ropes that hemmed Verian's legs together from behind his knees to the tops of his feet. He pulled the elf down over the edge of the slab of stone, letting his legs drop down for a stubbing of toes to the floor.

“You gotta learn to control yer mouth.” Charles set his elbow between Verian's shoulders as he went on, and sank his weight into the point to

drive the elf's chest against the top of the table. "Or somebody's gonna come along and cut out yer tongue."

Charles' hand smacked hard to the pale curve of Verian's ass. Verian jerked his hips forward against the table, letting out a startled grunt. Bent as he was, there was not much mobility to be had. He drew his outstretched arms closer, but could not manage the strength to push Charles off enough to tuck them beneath him.

Another blow struck to the opposite side so that pale skin mottled itself pink. Verian growled into the tight press of the gag, wringing more spittle past his numbed lips. He grunted in dismay an instant later when another blow came, and another. They were fast, and hard. The light stinging slaps turned quickly to more solid strikes, pushing through the spare padding of fat to the muscle beneath. It began to burn, to sting too-sharp, and to hurt. Verian's dismayed vocalizations turned to angry ones, and then simply to higher-pitched, pained wails interrupted by the sound of air being sucked through the wet cloth.

Charles did not stop until some minutes later, when Verian's face had turned to the table and he had degenerated to simply sobbing helplessly against the cold stone. Charles palmed one of Verian's inflamed cheeks and dug his fingertips rudely against the bruises and welts forming.

"Alright, princess." Charles' breath stroked along the tip of Verian's ear as he spoke. "I'm gonna take the gag out," he continued as he raised his elbow, "and you're not gonna say a damn thing. Got it?"

Verian gave a quick, miserable nod.

"Good boy." Though Charles' praise did not sound much like praise at all.

The man pulled at Verian's hair as he worked loose the knot at the back of the elf's head, but Verian did not complain. He remained draped over the end of the table. His skin was stinging and his pulse throbbed angrily beneath that. These things did not lessen awareness of the uncomfortable sensation of pins and needles through his lips a moment later. They were cool, and swollen. His jaw felt locked partially open, and it took a moment of painful working about before he was able to close it and swallow properly.

"Dinner's in twenny minutes," Charles paused to grunt as he hefted Verian from the table. "Try not to soil the straw between now and then, yeah? We'll see if I feel like untyin' you."

Verian glared, but he said nothing. Instead he licked at his lips and shifted where he'd been deposited in the corner. Charles gave Verian his all-too-pleased smirk.

"I'll leave the torch too, so you can get nice and situated, yer

lordship.”

Charles’ boots struck the floor in an even, heavy cadence. His chuckled rolled atop it. The sounds were considerably muffled when the door swung shut, and soon enough fell entirely to silence. Verian breathed a heavy sigh of relief, but it was short-lived.

Something moved at the periphery of Verian’s vision. He turned his head, blinking slowly at the short stretch of shadow that led to a much smaller spider. It sat some centimeters away, a spot of black on the gray of the floor, and shifted its weight as if debating which way to go. Verian pursed his lips to blow a shooing breath at the creature, and it went scuttling off to leave the elf with only the silence for company.

Music. Such sweet, wonderful music. It seemed to roll through the air in waves, surging and ebbing and surging again. There was chatter in the hall. The air was fragrant with the smell of roast pig and pineapple, with cream and berries, with baked cheeses and warm yeasty breads. Wafts of fine ladies’ perfume carried along with the music. Silver clanged against china and all around there was a murmur of voices, the soft shushing whispers of fine cloth.

“Verian.”

Up he looked. Authala was standing above him, one hand to the violet swirl of her skirts. The other was extended in offering. Verian ducked further under the table.

“Come now, Verian. Your father will be very cross if he spots you. You should be in bed.”

“I’m not tired.”

He was whining. Authala crouched down. Verian clutched his stuffed horse close to his chest and blinked past the red ringlets of his hair.

“Then I will read you a story and you can dream of having some of the remaining pastry when you wake, hm?”

“Five stories?”

Authala laughed. “We’ll see. Come on, sweetheart.”

She tucked a lock of soft golden hair behind her ear, and Verian admired the purple of the stones that dripped from the lobe. Verian scooted along the floor, sliding over the smooth parquet and onto the ornately woven rug. He bumped his small, bare toes against Authala’s dancing slippers and leaned into her upward pull.

“I’m hungry.” Verian whined again in sleepy protest.

“Well you cannot have any sweets until the morning,” Authala

murmured fondly down at him as he passed around the legs of several others, "so the sooner you sleep, the sooner you may eat."

"Oh." Verian rubbed at the point of one ear. The silk of his pajamas went shush, shush as they climbed the steps. "Maybe just four stories then."

"Three," Authala countered, her fingers tightening gently about his hand.

"Three."

* * *

"Wake up, sweetcheeks."

Verian clung desperately to sleep. Just one more story. Just one more moment anywhere but there.

"It's dinner time."

Charles slammed a heavy tray to the stone table. The light from the torch had dwindled, and he placed a new bundle in the sconce. The smell of burning pitch did little to calm Verian's appetite. He woke reluctantly, stomach rumbling at the smell of roasted meat and boiled potatoes.

Charles was standing over him, a serrated knife in hand, the blade long and curved. Verian cringed uncertainly back in the straw. His tongue slid out over his chapped and split lower lip. The knife cut through the thick, coarse rope that bound Verian's wrists, and then moved between his shins to saw through one of the loops there. Charles turned away, leaving Verian to unwind it all and pick his way free.

"It's about time," Verian sighed as he rubbed at his wrists, "I'm starving."

Charles turned about. The man's expression darkened, and he raised the tip of the knife as he pointed at Verian. "Are we gonna have a problem?"

Verian shifted, sitting slowly. The straw poked at the bruising along his ass. He thought a moment, then gave a slow shake of his head. "No problem."

Wood raked loudly across stone. Verian squinted as Charles helped himself to a seat on the stool. The bottoms of Verian's feet were sensitive with prickling sensations that sent waves sharply up into his calves as he stood. He winced as he moved toward the stone table.

"The way I figure," Charles said as he set a plate laden with cuts of peppered lamb and young golden potatoes to the stone, "either you ain't reflectin' too good on your people, or you just a exceptionally stupid elf."

Verian's green eyes narrowed, and his mouth set itself to a thin, flat

line. Charles grinned around a broad wooden tankard, then hid half of his face away as he drank. He set the mug down beside the plate and took a small flagon of mead off of the tray. A small wooden bowl was placed alongside that, and Charles nudged the tray to the side.

"Most boys don't need one on one trainin', see. But you. You get to be a special case." Charles shoved half of a potato past his lips. He bit down hard, the tender skin split near his fingers. "Seeing as how the Vicar things you're 'pretty' an' got potential." Charles scoffed. He bit and tore at a piece of lamb, juice from the meat rolling out to dribble along his chin.

"How grand." Verian's tone was biting and thick with sarcasm. He eyed the plate, and then Charles. "Have you come to eat in front of me and leave me without another meal, or do you intend to share some of that?"

One brown eye narrowed moreso than the other, but both did narrow as they turned toward Verian. The bridge of Charles' nose wrinkled, and his mouth twisted in a sneer. He licked the food from his lips. Charles reached over with one tanned, thick-skinned hand and swung to slap at the elf's pale cheek.

Verian leaned easily back and out of range of the blow, predictable as the man's slow movement had made it. Charles' brows rose toward his hairline, and he stood so quickly that the stool went clattering over behind him. He might have been touched in the head to Verian's thinking, but Charles was fast. He overtook Verian's backward scuttling in a few short strides, and soon enough a tight grip was bruising the delicate skin about Verian's wrist.

"There goes yer mouth again."

A loud pop of skin to skin followed the remark. Verian cried out and struggled against the grip, the sting all the sharper for the already battered state of his ass. Charles drew his knuckles in a glancing swipe against the apple of Verian's cheek.

"Stand that up."

The ground came rushing up under Verian's palms and smacked hard at his knees. He let out a shaken, shaky breath. Again came the scrape of wood and stone, his half-numb fingers wrapped about the stool's legs. He met Charles' expectant stare and tightened his fingers about the legs of the stool. Verian was tempted, so tempted to bash in Charles' ugly round face with the thing.

Verian approached Charles slowly, then set the stool upright alongside the larger man. It was best, Verian decided, to wait. He would need to plan his escape, and that would require knowledge. Knowledge he could gain through cooperation, through lulling them into a false sense

of security. Knowledge, he knew, was power.

"Good boy." Charles ruffled the red of Verian's hair. Charles deposited himself atop the stool again, then pointed alongside his boot. "To your knees."

Verian contemplated the floor. The stone was a nondescript gray, speckled here or there with darker blotches and flaked bits of straw. He eyed the outward curve of Charles' mud-flaked boot, grit his teeth, and shifted his weight to the side. Knowledge, he reminded himself. Verian settled down to the floor and glared at the pedestal supporting the stone slab.

"Maybe you ain't *too* stupid after all."

Charles flung a bit tougher gristle into the empty bowl. He gulped loudly from his mug. Another half a potato disappeared, and then the rest of it squeezed from the skin. The skin hit the bowl near the rim and set it to rocking in place. The sound was largely drowned out by the pleased grunts, loud smacks of lip, and guttural swallows that accompanied nearly every bite that Charles took.

Verian glared hard at the underside of the table. The tips of his fingers dug against the tops of his thighs. The tops of his feet were getting sore, and the circulation in his calves left much to be desired. He shifted and squirmed as his stomach gave a pained grumbling. A particularly loud slurp from above caused him to cringe.

"Fill my cup, boy." Charles did not look at Verian as he spoke. He barely paused eating.

"What?" The incredulity could not be helped.

Charles' knee swung about the stool and crowded Verian backward. He lost his balance in a sideways spill, caught himself with his right hand, and shifted the bloody-murder of his glare to Charles. Charles wiped his mouth with his threadbare sleeve, then brought his hand out to bounce his fingers off of Verian's cheek. It didn't hurt, but his ego felt the blow keenly enough. Verian's patience ran thin.

"I know you ain't deaf, but I'm thinkin' maybe yer a bit touched in the head. Fill. My. Cup."

Verian reached jerkily for the flagon. He poured the sweet-smelling liquor into the empty tankard, filling it near to the brim, and set the flagon back to the table with a solid thump of hammered metal. Charles looked up to Verian, his dark eyes set at an expectant slant. Verian grumbled to himself and plopped back to the ground.

"See. Not so hard, is it?"

A somewhat dry cut of meat was pitched into the bowl, followed by the heel of Charles' bread. He went back to grunting and stuffing food into

his mouth. Bits of potato flecked his chin, juice from his meat slicking his lips. Verian's stomach rumbled despite the off-putting sounds of the man's feasting. It was disconcerting to feel ravenous and ill at the same time.

Charles took a long draught from his tankard and smacked his lips yet again. He plucked up his plate, scraped the remnants of his meal into the bowl, and then dropped the bowl to the ground alongside Verian.

"No hands." Charles snapped as Verian reached to take up the bowl.

Verian glared upward. "*Excuse me?*"

"You heard me, highness," Charles sneered. "No hands or no food."

Barbaric humans. Verian continued to glare a long moment. Hunger won out over pride. He could not say for certain how long it had been since his last meal, but the smell of the food had awakened his appetite enough that it cut through him like a knife. He shifted backward, away from Charles' dirty boot, and pressed his palms to the rough floor. Charles rose, gathering his tray, and made for the door.

Verian turned his face in the bowl. He gnawed at a particularly tough bit of meat, kept his chewing struggle hidden as best he could. He tracked Charles, watching as the man exited. The door did not shut entirely, which stilled Verian's hand as it made for the bowl. Instead the door swung open again, and Charles dropped a small pail of water alongside the door.

"This is all you get for a while. Don't waste it."

Verian waited for a moment, his teeth stuck in the half-chewed meat. Charles simply stood there, watching. Verian went back to chewing, watching in return. His jaw worked about the peppered flesh, and he finally spat the hardest lump of it back to the bowl. He swallowed repeatedly, bumping his nose and cheeks to the wood as he sought bits of potato and more tender morsels of meat with his lips.

Charles did not leave until Verian was nearly finished with his meal. The door slid shut, and the two hollow ticks of sound that followed indicated well enough that it was locked. Verian scowled. He pushed himself up onto the stool, set the bowl to the table, and finished his meal with his fingers. He glugged himself on water from the pail once he was finished, and then moved to curl into the straw.

The minutes passed in long, slow stretches. One into the next. His thoughts wandered, touching here on his uncle, there on his inexplicable journey. He thought of the classes he was missing, and of his friends in the village, and of his parents. He thought now and then of Mikel, though it pained him to do so. His mind wandered, the torch flickered, and the nothingness stretched on.

He must have fallen asleep at some point, as when he woke the torch had gone out. Verian took a deep breath and sighed heavily. The air was still thick with the stink of pitch and burnt cloth. He rolled to his side and stood slowly. His skin itched. There was straw in his hair. He couldn't see for all of the dark.

Fingertips to the wall, Verian followed the line of it toward the door. He crouched there alongside the bucket, sipped shallowly, and realized with a pang that he had to piss. Nowhere to go. Nothing to be done for it. Verian ignored his protesting bladder, his stiff limbs, and his cool skin. He curled back up in the straw and stared through the dark. Stared and breathed.

His sleep was uneasy and short-lived. The pressure of Verian's bladder woke him, though he tried very hard to sleep through it. There was more Nothingness waiting on the other side. More of those places he did not want to be.

This time when he opened his eyes, there was light. There was not much of it, but dim hints of color fed through the bars set high in the cell door. The seeped down along the black, smoke-stained streak that speared up the wall toward the dingy ceiling. Light fed down through the smoke gap, fed in around the edges of the door. Just enough to make out everything in varied shades of gray.

There was his water bucket, and there the table. Here was the straw, heaped and half-sliding out from under him. There was the bowl with the tough heel of bread and chewed upon balls of inedible meat. There the bowl.

Verian sprang up in a hurry, dusted himself off. He dumped the bowl's contents onto the table, strode for the wall, and relieved himself into the shallow dish with a long sigh. He set it down alongside the wall, and took to pacing.

It felt good to move. Moving was better than thinking. Still, there was nothing to do. Not really. He paced the length of the room, then the width of the room. He paced in zig-zags and circles. He paced backwards, forwards, round-about again.

Verian went to the door. Jarred it. Jostled it. He pried his fingers about the metal fixing of the knob. He grabbed at the bars and shook hard. It did not give. His voice carried outward, and he heard it travel far. The hall must have been long, though he could not pull himself up high enough to tell for certain. He called and called until his voice went raw. There was no answer. There was no movement. Only nothing. Nothing and no sign of Charles.

More pacing. More thinking. When he was hungry he gnawed at the

dried bread, and when he was thirsty he drank from the remaining bit of water in the bucket. He'd had only half of it, and it occurred to him that perhaps he should be more sparing.

Nothing. The light was constant and dim. Verian dropped himself down into the straw. He closed his eyes, and by some miracle he managed to sleep. All was the same when his eyes opened again. Closed again. Opened to dark. He shrieked and called. No response.

There was only Verian. He did not much care for himself as company. His voice babbled off the walls, and he quieted it with a sharply issued insult. Idiot. He paced. he struck his hands against his thighs, against the floor. He plied at the door. He hollered. He filled the bowl past flowing. He cursed at the stink of the place. He slept.

At least, in his dreams, there was something. At least, in his dreams, he did not have to listen to himself. Still, even Verian could only dream for so long.

Chapter 4

The little cell stank. It was not, Verian supposed, so bad as the latrine in the village had been. Still, that latrine was a memory, and the smell that assailed him at present was impossible to ignore. It filled his sinuses and washed along his tongue. It had been there for hours, and he'd not been able to adjust to it. Perhaps he had, and he just hadn't realized it yet.

He'd been out of water long enough that his eyes were burning, and what spittle lined his dry mouth was tacky between tongue and teeth. Verian stirred sluggishly against the coarse straw beneath him. It was daytime again, judging from the wan rays of ambient light. How many days? He'd given up counting. Given up shrieking since he'd lost his voice. That had been after he'd rolled the last drop of water from the second pail that had miraculously appeared between the haze of his dreams and the long stretches of silence. Silence and himself. Verian had made the second last far longer than the first. The fact that he wasn't hungry anymore was a small blessing.

There were footsteps in the hall. Verian did not stir. His mind had misled him on this fact before. Heavy, trudging things. Shushing of shoes to the stone floor. Up to the door. They would linger a moment and withdraw. He knew. His imagination would not be controlled. It even fancied a rattling of the lock.

The door swung slowly open, and Vernet jolted up into a sit before he'd entirely awoken to reality. His fingers splayed through the rough sticks of straw beneath him. The world gave an uncertain spin and righted itself again to the sight of Charles stepping through the door.

"You gonna behave?" Charles asked with a furrow of his thick brow.

Verian nodded slowly. He would behave. Anything to get out of the stench. Anything to eat and to drink. Anything to be anywhere but alone where he was.

"Good. C'mon, boy."

Verian's thoughts rallied at the address. He opened his mouth, but squeezed it shut again. It was too dry to speak properly in any case. He moved to his feet with protesting twinges of joints all along his body. He hobbled after Charles, one leg asleep, the opposing shoulder wrought with spasms and cramps.

Charles led Verian up the twisting steps and down another hall, into a room with a single window placed high near the ceiling. The daylight was painful after so much time in the dark. It felt as though it were stabbing through his eyes and straight into the back of his skull. Verian rubbed at his eyes with the backs of his knuckles, then tentatively drew his hands

away. There was a wide barrel of a tub located in the center of the room. Too familiar. A chair alongside that. Coarse towel on the seat. A cake of acerbic soap. Verian turned to go, but found Charles looming too close.

"Go wash off," Charles growled. "You stink like shit."

Verian opened his mouth to reply. To object. To blame. His teeth clacked against one another without him having uttered a word.

"Thank you," he muttered in feigned gratitude

The water was cold about his feet. It made his toes curl and his soles tense unbearably. Verian sank slowly, sucking in breaths here and there as he lowered. He whined, shivered, and dipped his hands into the tub to bring pools of water to his palms. Charles shut the door with a resounding slam, and Verian found himself alone again. He cringed in the tub, staring outward. Afraid for his location. Afraid for the isolation. Even that cocky brute was welcome over the silence.

Charles was not gone long, but neither had Verian wasted any time in bathing. His skin was pink from the cold and scrubbing both, and he was rubbing the towel vigorously over his trunk when Charles returned to the room. Charles gave the elf a lingering look, then smiled wide enough to expose his teeth.

"Hungry, boy?"

"Starving," Verian croaked.

"Alrigh' then. Leave the towel here an' come on."

Verian ran the towel through his hair one last time, then dropped it atop the crudely fashioned chair. He edged for the door with a tingle of relief through his limbs, glad to be free of the cool floor and too-familiar tub. The door could not shut fast enough behind him as he followed Charles along the hall.

The long corridor soon gave way to wider spaces. An open hall, a set of stairs to one side. Doors here and there. They transitioned between stone and wood flooring, though all of it was cool beneath Verian's feet. Finally, they turned a corner and stepped into a room flooded with light through the shutters thrown open along one wall.

The dining area was largely unremarkable. Verian wasn't certain what it had been intended for. It was not large enough to entertain, but was not small enough for the intimacy of a smaller meal. There was an old wooden table set in the middle of the room, a bench for seating, a thin wool rug laid at the cap. Heavy tapestries hung from the wall opposite the windows, their unremarkable hunting scenes largely faded from the repeated wash of intense daylight.

"Kitchen's through that door there. G'wan and fetch what's been made."

Verian cringed to the side, glaring at Charles as he did so. So that was to be his life now? Playing errand boy to this dunce? It was better than that cell, perhaps. Perhaps. His eyes turned quickly forward, and Verian went rushing for the far door on the balls of his feet. He had only to bide his time. Behave long enough. He would see his way free of this mess.

“Oh!”

The gasp of sound called Verian’s attention to the moment. Kellen stood alongside a large stewpot slung over a blazing fire. His tanned skin was beaded with sweat from his work, though the kitchen door stood open to the courtyard beyond. His dark eyes narrowed to friendly crescents above his smile, and he raised one finger to point at a nearby shelf.

“Bowls are there. I’m happy to see you again, Verian. I was afraid they’d sent you away!”

“I wish they had,” Verian muttered as he stretched onto his toes to retrieve the chipped ceramic dishes.

“Oh, don’t say that!” Kellen gathered a rag to push at the lever keeping the pot in place. “We are so lucky to be here, Verian. Misau has blessed us.”

His smile bore the hint of a dimple, so filled in had Kellen’s cheeks become. Verian could not summon up the will to return it. He extended both of his bowls in silence, and watched sullenly as Kellen ladled out a thick, meaty stew from the pot.

“You are an idiot,” he finally declared as he turned a shrouded look to the other young man.

Kellen continued to smile, though the shifting of musculature about his eyes was indication enough that the insult had stung. He hooked the ladle on its ring and drew carefully between the bowls of stew in Verian’s hands. Kellen wrapped his arms about the elf’s narrow torso and embraced him fondly.

“Misau teaches compassion in the face of adversity,” Kellen murmured. Verian could feel Kellen’s breath near his shoulder, his heart against his chest. “You will see, Verian. We are chosen to learn the Way.”

Verian raised his chin. His spine bowed at the hold that lasted entirely too long. Verian shuddered to the side when released, then gave a vague shake of his head.

“You are still an idiot.”

“Take those, then come back for the bread,” Kellen instructed patiently.

Verian fled the swelter of the kitchen, his skin sticky above his easing musculature. He burst into the dining hall, set both bowls to the table, and glanced about only long enough to note that Charles was absent. He

ducked back into the kitchen in order to retrieve the basket of nearly stale bread from the thick table near the wall. He helped himself to two heavy-handed spoons, two goblets, and a bottle of wine.

"Don't worry, Verian. You'll see. Everything will be alright."

Kellen was smiling at him again. Smiling and friendly. Verian wanted to smack him. Instead he tightened his grip about his procured items and backed for the free-swinging door that separated the kitchen from the dining area.

"I am not worried."

"Good! Go eat."

The wood of the door was cool against his backside as he edged through the door. Still no sign of Charles. Verian was not going to complain. Not after that unsettling run-in with Kellen in the kitchen.

Verian settled at the table. He set the bowls alongside one another and tucked a spoon into each. He filled both goblets with wine, then helped himself to a tough piece of bread. It was dipped into his stew and left sit to soften. Straight-backed and mindful of his loose hair, Verian took to eating his meal in slow, measured bites despite the return of his hunger.

Verian glanced up from his meal as Charles came strolling through the door. Verian studied the fall of light across the man's profile, the sharply angled shadows that it cast across squared features. Charles' thick lips twisted in disapproval, and Verian raised a brow at the man's regard.

"I keep tellin' myself to be patient," Charles began as he took heavy steps deeper into the room. "I do. But you just tryin' my nerves. Ain't you learned anything? You wanna go back into the cell?"

Verian's right shoulder ticked upward in response, ruining his posture in an instant. He turned his cheek toward his shoulder as he eyed Charles. He took a moment to gather his wits about him before giving cautious reply.

"No; I do not."

"Alright then. What's wrong with this?"

Verian's lips twisted downward in a scowl, pulling at the muscles in his face and drawing his eyes tight. He set his spoon down in his bowl, hooked his fingers over the edge of the table, and glowered at Charles. Anger coiled in his belly, knotting and twisting. He was, however, hungry enough that he stood up from the bench. Verian took his bowl, his bread, and his wine over to the mat on the floor. He arranged himself there with as much dignity as he could muster, and resumed spooning stew into his mouth.

"See. Now I'm thinkin' you had some kinda brain fever when you was a child." Charles' boots fell heavily against the stone floor as he

stalked over to Verian.

Verian dropped his spoon into his bowl and twisted it about, tucking it protectively to the side. He narrowed his eyes at the approaching man. His free hand darted for his goblet, but he was seconds too late. Charles' boot had impacted with the side in an angry lashing, and wine seeped into the mundane wool.

"If you want to eat," Charles snarled, spattering flecks of spittle onto Verian's pale skin, "you'd best start behavin', boy. Now."

"You would have me eat like a dog," Verian complained loudly in reply, his features pinching.

"Jus' consider yourself lucky that I ain't making you eat *with* the dogs, boy." Charles' own voice rose, and he kicked at Verian's crossed shins with the mud-encrusted toe of his boot.

Verian yipped. His bowl hit the ground with a clatter of spoon and slight slosh of stew. His fingers twitched with the urge to pluck the bowl up and hurl it into the man's glowering face.

"Now clean up this mess."

"Fine."

A flower of pain from his jaw erupted into his left cheek and shot back behind his ear. Verian swayed as his vision fluttered and went black about the edges. His sinuses burned, as did his eyes. He sniffed wetly, and shot Charles only the briefest of looks before turning to gather up the goblet and spoon.

The kitchen was empty when Verian returned to it. The fire beneath the stew pot had been put out, and the dishes were cleaned. The door to the courtyard was shut, and proved to be barred from the outside when Verian tested his shoulder against the wood. It was easy enough to locate a pair of towels in the orderly little kitchen. Verian dallied long enough to dip the corner of one into the water basin and dab clean his inflamed jaw.

Charles continued to eat in silence as Verian returned and sopped up the mess with the rags. He took them back to the kitchen to rinse in the wash basin, and left them sopping wet along the bottom of it when he was finished. Another bowl was procured from the shelves holding the modest ceramic dishes, and it was into this that he poured his wine upon returning to the table. He refilled Charles' goblet in silence, then returned to the wine-stained rug.

The stew was not unpleasant, though the thinner broth and smaller pieces of fowl and potato presented their own messy challenge. Verian's fingers worked along the mat as he sucked and slurped at his wine, itching to pluck his dishes up with his hands. Crouching with his ass tucked over his heels and his head low caused his neck to ache, and his food to slosh

discontentedly within his belly.

"Hurry up," Charles rumbled from the bench.

Verian licked his lips and pushed himself up to sit. He glared at the too-far setting of the other man's eyes. Verian was not in the mood to hurry, but neither did he relish the idea of a kick to his gut. He bowed over his meal and sucked up one last bit of tender meat to chew as he stood.

"Leave the dishes and come on."

Charles turned to plod out of the dining hall. The man's steps were even heavier when he was full of wine and food. Verian trailed after him, though Charles did not once look back to ensure that he was being followed.

"Alright elf. This is where you're stayin' for now."

Thick fingers nudged at the solid wood of one of many doors along one of many wide corridors. Verian bit at the inside of his cheek and turned to stare down the hall, attempting to place which way he would need to go to get out. His stare was short lived, as a palm connected to his ass with a stinging smack and all but shoved him across the threshold.

The room itself was fairly dark, though light filtered in through the crooked slats of the shutters across from the door. There was a simple bed with a chunky wooden frame and straw mattress shoved along one wall. A simple chest of drawers doubtless housed Charles' clothes, and a small water basin sat atop that. The place smelled dank, and vaguely sharp, as though the shutters were opened only rarely.

"You sleep there." Charles thrust one tanned digit toward a mat on the floor. It looked smooth more than soft, as though woven from sleek straw. "If yer good, you get a blanket. If yer real good, you get a pillow. If yer a proper fuckin' angel," Charles turned to face Verian, his heavy brow furrowing, "you get ta sleep in the bed. You a proper fuckin' angel?"

Verian's jaw ached for how hard his teeth ground against one another. He attempted a civil look at the dull brute, and even drove his lips back along his teeth in order to smile.

"Yeah, didn't think so."

Verian snorted through his nostrils, giving up his more than generous attempts at catering to the idiot. He folded his arms against one another, and shifted his weight impatiently from the left to the right. It served to hide the nervousness that churned in his gut and made his food weigh unpleasantly in his belly.

"I'm not a mean man," Charles went on in what Verian assumed was supposed to be an understanding tone. "So I'mma give you a chance to at least get a blanket and a pillow."

“How delightfully generous.”

He should have expected the blow, but the cuff to Verian’s cheek caught him off guard. Charles could move damnably fast when he wanted to. Verian cupped his bruising cheek with his palm and ducked to the side to shoot the man more dirty looks.

“Just a blanket, ‘less you wanna open that smart mouth of yours again and get stuck back in the cells.”

Verian glowered, but gave no verbal reply. The dull throb under his cheekbone was more than enough to convince him to hold his tongue. The threat of going back to that dreadful box was simply icing on the cake.

“See. Knew you had a brain in there somewhere. Now get on yer knees.”

Verian twisted about, eyeing the floor about him to ensure that it was clear. Charles was not inclined to wait, and his palm connected with one slender shoulder to drive the boy downward. Verian’s knees connected with a solid strike to the stone floor, and a loud yip burst from his lips before he could catch it.

“When I say to do somethin’, you do it. You don’t worry your pretty little head about the consequences.” Charles bent low, looming over Verian’s folded frame. “‘Cus the consequences of not doin’ what I says is a helluva lot worse. Got it?”

Verian nodded in silence, his eyes still narrowed for the pangs through his joints. He brought a hand up to tuck his hair behind the delicate taper of his ear as he sank back to rest on his heels. His gaze trailed along the floor, tracing out the irregularities in color and the edges of the stone slabs where they fit one against the other. Perhaps he could try the shutters when Charles was not present. He could make his way to the stables and hide on one of the carriages as it pulled away. The heavy rustling of coarsely spun cotton caught his attention back to the present.

“Open yer mouth. Swear to the Mother, if I feel so much as a scrape of your teeth, I’m sending you back down.”

Verian stared blearily forward. Charles’ fingers were wrapped about his stout cock, stroking slowly along the shaft so that the skin at the head pulled back just slightly. The smell alone set Verian leaning backward, rancid and edged with undertones of piss. He was quick to drop his gaze to the bunching of dark cloth about Charles’ knees.

“Don’t make me repeat myself, boy.”

Verian’s brows drew apart from one another, hedging away from the lines of worry that formed above them. He leaned upright and squeezed his eyes shut. His lips parted, and he drew a breath through his mouth as he attempted to acclimate to the stink. His breath was cut short by the

press of soft warm skin.

Charles did not give Verian the time to come to terms with the situation. Calloused fingers curled through soft red hair, twisting and grasping so close to the scalp that it caused the muscles about Verian's eyes to tighten. Charles rocked his weight forward, then back, dipping in and out in shallow strokes. His dark eyes were fixed down on Verian's pained expression, on the sight of his cock pushing past soft pink lips.

The taste was dreadful. Verian's tongue rose, pushing against the invasion, as though he could expel it from his mouth. This prompted a gusty sigh from far above, and a more forceful inward shove. Verian forced his jaw wider to keep his teeth away from the thick tissue, though doing so made it ache anew. His lips tugged and pulled along silky skin, were poked with the coarse ends of curly hair as Charles' rocks became more decided.

The only warning that Verian had that something more was about to happen was the tightening of the grip in his hair. It wasn't much warning at all, and he didn't know to recognize it. The thick shaft thrust abruptly forward, plunging deep into the damp of his mouth. It worked past the choke and gag, nudging into his throat and leaving the bitter, filthy taste in a thick paste along his tongue.

Verian raised his hands as his eyes watered, and he shoved at the fronts of Charles' thighs. The man laughed and curled his other hand into Verian's hair, snaring tight.

"What's the matter," he rumbled between panted breaths, "you don't like that? Huh?" Charles drew back at the dig of Verian's nails. "Too bad, princess."

Verian's protesting cry was cut off by another forward drive of Charles' cock. It stretched Verian's mouth wide, tugged painfully on his lips so that they rolled in against his teeth. More tears welled as he gagged and choked, but still he was mindful to keep his teeth away. That had been the deal, and he could obey the letter of the law. It didn't stop him from striking at the solid muscle at the front of Charles' legs, but the sudden blow to the back of his head did.

Verian sagged, held in place by the grip of fingers through his hair. He was dazed, reeling, struggling to breathe through his nose between thrusts. His jaw ached, his knees throbbed, his cheek pulsed, his head was shooting with silver starbursts of pain, and his throat was raw. He gagged, choked, and felt his stomach gave a dangerous lurch.

"Mmmm. See. I knew that mouth of yers was good for somethin'."

Charles drove in hard again, his balls swinging forward to smack at Verian's chin, hair scrubbing rudely along sensitive skin. Verian whined in

an attempt to plea with the man. He gripped at Charles' thighs in an attempt to maintain his balance.

"Ooooooh. You want more? You don't gotta beg, princess. You'll get more."

Another whine, punctuated with a grunt as Verian's throat swelled. He struck Charles' thigh with the side of his fist, was rewarded with another blow and a few strands of hair plucked at the root. That time it was enough to render Verian still.

Verian focused on breathing through his nose every time the thick ridge of Charles' cockhead pulled back toward the backs of his teeth, tried his best to keep his meal down in his gut where it belonged. Opening his eyes only brought him a view of pasty skin and swirls of thick brown hair moving away, close, away, and close again. Verian opted to keep his eyes shut as a result, though it made him more keenly aware of the tears that streamed wet over flush cheeks, hot and constant in their spill.

Above him, Charles' chest heaved and his lips parted as his panting became more erratic. So too did his thrusts as he worked heatedly at Verian's mouth. Bile sloshed against his cheeks, mixed particulates of partially digested food, forcing him to swallow repeatedly. At one point he very nearly scraped against the man, and though his teeth did not actually come into contact with the veiny length of Charles' shaft, the feel of Verian's jaw tightening caused another rough strike to the boy's ear.

It seemed to take forever. It seemed to him that the rawness of his throat and the persistent gagging, retching about the constant forward shove of thick flesh, and spasmodic swallowing would never end. Just as Verian resigned himself to this, Charles' hands tightened against the back of Verian's head and pulled his face close. Crushed into musky, sweat-thick skin as his already fat cock swelled and throbbed. It pulsed heavy and hard, and Verian struggled to swallow the shots of sticky, bitter cum even as his stomach sought to heave them back, along with the rest of his meal. He was still swallowing as Charles pulled back, leaving the last few spurts along Verian's tongue and the swollen curve of his mouth.

Verian was quick to shut his lips, to swallow repeatedly as his arms wrapped about the bottoms of his ribs. His stomach was still cramping, and the taste coating the insides of his mouth, clinging persistently to the back of his throat, was enough to cause it to cramp more. He gasped and shuddered as he hunched, breathing raggedly, pulling down against the lingering tug of Charles' fingers. One hand rose to wipe at the mess about his mouth, to rub his wrist against the tears that smeared across pink cheeks.

Charles said nothing as he tucked backward a step. He tugged up his

trousers, laced them with the mindless ease of routine, and swaggered past Verian. Water was spilled from the chipped earthenware pitcher into the shallow basin, and Verian could hear the light splashing of it past the ragged grunts and whimpers that seemed to be coming from his own lips.

“Quit yer bellyachin,” Charles snapped. “Wash yer face and get a drink if you need it. We’ve got work to do.”

Heavy steps thumped past, sending bits of dirt skittering away. Verian rose on trembling legs and turned for the wash basin. He stuck his face into the pool of water, then pursed his lips to suck it into his mouth and slosh it about. His fingers followed seconds later, rubbing along his cheeks and the backs of his teeth in an attempt to get the taste out. To get the feeling out.

“Now, boy!”

Verian sniffed wetly, sucked up another mouthful of water, and turned to scuttle for the door. It seemed Charles was not inclined to give him the time to recover. Perhaps it was for the best. Verian wanted nothing more than to collapse into the bed that was not his and sob until the sobbing put him to sleep. Instead he was denied that release and made to follow. To simmer, to scrape, and to learn. Learning that would take days to accomplish.

Mud and dirt had lodged themselves uncomfortably into the crevices around Verian’s nails. He’d broken more than one toiling in the fields to the South of the monastery, and the tips of his fingers had fared little better. There were tiny cuts here and there through the ragged skin, and each one stung as he worked the soil from beneath the rough tips of his fingernails. His skin was red and inflamed, and his eyes watered for the pain.

“Does it hurt?”

The voice that came from behind him was soft, tentative. Verian picked his head up and twisted about to peer over his shoulder. Kellen was standing in the doorway, his fingers worrying over the ceramic top of the pot he clutched in his palms. Verian grimaced and went back to tending to his hands. It didn’t hurt as much as the next step would.

“No,” Verian insisted despite the edge in his voice that indicated otherwise.

“Oh, Verian. I’m so sorry.” Kellen’s voice traveled closer as he spoke. “If you would just behave, this would all go much more easily. Why do you have to make it a bad thing? You are spoiling things. Life shouldn’t unhappy for you.”

Verian tensed, stilling. He stared down at the edges of his silhouette in the water, the rest reflecting the wan yellow light of the lamp burning nearby. He sniffed wetly, then took to splashing cool water up along the angry red skin of his arms. Verian's teeth ground as the water slid painfully past the shallow blisters that had appeared late in the afternoon.

"I am no farmhand."

"But you would eat the food."

"I am no farmhand."

Kellen sighed heavily. The rasp of ceramic cut through the uneasy silence. "Who is to grow our food if we do not, Verian?" Kellen set the lid to his pot alongside the wash basin.

"I do not see you in the fields," Verian spat in return. He turned his face away from the smell of the salve. It made his sinuses burn.

"It's not my turn yet." Kellen set the pot alongside its lid, then reached for a towel.

"I want to go home," Verian protested in broken tones. The towel felt to be made of sandpaper as Kellen dabbed at Verian's arms.

"I know," Kellen whispered.

He bowed his head to inspect Verian's burns, then dipped his fingers into the salve. Verian hissed and tensed as he fought the urge to jerk his arm free of Kellen's gentle grip. The cold of the salve was blindingly painful as it cut through the heat on Verian's arms, but the sting of it eased into tingling relief soon enough. Verian eased and sagged on the simple wooden stool that supported his weight.

"I don't understand this," Kellen murmured as he slicked the salve up Verian's opposite arm. "You should have started browning by now. It's been two weeks, and you still need Delmi's medicine."

"Brown?" Verian laughed shallowly and without humor. "I'm cooking. It's a wonder they haven't put me into a stewpot."

Kellen's mouth collapsed in a downward twist. He released Verian's arm, then brought his hand up to cup under the delicate angles of the elf's jaw. Verian's hair was still long enough to get in the way, a fact which often called Kellen's attention when he tipped the elf's face up to expose his sunburnt skin. Kellen carefully brushed aside the strange red waves.

"They won't put you into a stewpot," he chastised lightly as he took to smearing the strong smelling ointment onto Verian's nose and cheeks.

"I'm not convinced."

Verian blinked rapidly as the salve caused his eyes and sinuses to burn.

"I know, but you'll see. If you would just behave, you could come and learn with the rest of us." Kellen bowed his head closer to Verian's,

scrutinizing closely as the salve was smeared in thinner streaks under his eyelids.

"Pagan Gods and crude magics."

Kellen sighed across Verian's cheek. "Is this any better?"

"No." Verian squeezed his eyes shut. His throat worked as Kellen's cool fingers slicked salve along the exterior edges of tapering earlobes. "Will you--" he broke off, finding it difficult to complete the question. It always was.

"You know I can't, Verian."

"Won't. Leave the jar."

"They'll know."

Verian twisted again, awkward on the three-legged stool. "Go away."

"I'm almost d--"

"Leave it," Verian interrupted without heat.

"Verian."

Kellen watched as Verian remained hunched and twisted away, unresponsive. Kellen sighed so deeply that it caused his shoulders to sag. He dipped his fingers into the small jar of salve and slicked them up with the yellow-tinted ointment.

"Lie on the bed," he whispered as he collected the jar.

Verian abandoned the stool with a cringe for the stick of the seat and the subsequent sting of air. He hobbled the short distance to the bed that stank of Charles, and fell into it with relief for not having to sit. The relief was short-lived, as Kellen's fingers were soon sweeping the salve over the backs of Verian's legs.

"I'll do the burns on the front after this," Kellen whispered. "It will give them time to soak up the ointment before anyone can see."

Verian sucked breath after breath through his nose, letting out a little less on each exhale. The ointment was cool on his burns, numbing afterward, but on the welts it was as if he were being made to relive each one anew. Verian cupped his brow on the inside of his forearm and sobbed raggedly into the bedding.

"I'm sorry." Kellen's breath fell near the outside of Verian's thigh. "I'm so sorry." The mattress shifted as Kellen eased toward the simple wooden frame holding the bed in place.

"Stop apologizing," Verian growled through clenched teeth. "You didn't do a damn thing."

"It just looks so painful." Kellen's fingers stopped behind Verian's knee, the pads on the edge of one raised welt.

"It is. Get on with it." A pause, and then. "Please."

"Spread your legs a little further."

Verian sighed as he pulled his knees wider apart. He cringed and flinched as Kellen slicked salve over the thinner welts at the pale skin along the insides of Verian's thighs. It was not a pleasant sensation, even if it did help to dull the pain a few seconds later.

"Better?" Kellen's touches ventured slowly down the backs of Verian's left calf.

"Yes. Thank you."

"Just." Kellen filled his pause with an audible swallow. "Just don't tell anybody."

"I am not an idiot."

Verian sighed heavily. He sank against the blanket beneath him as his muscles twinged, then relaxed, then twinged again. Kellen had reached the bottom of one foot, come up behind the other knee, and then paused.

"I'm not either, you know. I know you think I am, but I'm not."

"I didn't say you were."

"Today. Besides, you didn't have to say anything."

Verian dug at his eyes with the sides of his knuckles. He said nothing.

"You're so difficult," Kellen sighed. "So strange and so stubborn and so pretty. Won't you cooperate even long enough to see if you've got the Gift? You could help people, Verian. Don't you want to help people?"

Verian cringed as Kellen's fingers ran a little too dry across the back of his thigh. "No. I want to go home. I want my parents back. I want to sit on the bridge over the stream and watch the toads in the mud. I'd even settle for going back to my Uncle's estate and staring at the sea with absolutely nothing to do but listen to him talk to himself. Even that is better than this. Help people. Don't be-

"An idiot?" Kellen filled the pause when Verian cut himself off. "See." More salve was applied to inflamed skin, soothing over the pink strips at the top of Verian's thigh. "Maybe it's time to change your life. Maybe it's time to give something to this world. We are chosen, Verian. You should be grateful. I'm grateful."

Verian tucked his face into his arm until the heat from his body forced him to draw it away. "I've seen dogs in the village who are grateful to be kicked."

The back of Verian's thigh tingled and warmed with the flower of a sting, emphasized where the welts from his previous lashing crossed it. He gave a muted cry, and turned a glare over his shoulder as Kellen hurriedly rubbed the smacked span of skin. Idiot.

"Oooh, Verian. I'm sorry. You just. Oh. You just make me so frustrated sometimes! That's no excuse. I shouldn't have hit you." Kellen bowed over Verian's leg, his mouth passing a soft brush of lips to the

abused skin. "You've been hurt enough. I wish the vicar hadn't given you to Charles."

Verian grunted. He turned his cheek to the back of his hand and stared distantly at the wall on the other side of the bed. The burn of the lamp flickered across an imperfection in the wick, the light slanting over low from the right.

"Here. Lift your hips. I'll make it up to you."

Verian peered over his shoulder at Kellen, his brow furrowing. The stinging sensation that worked through the salve drying on Verian's skin caused his expression to smooth. He gave a vague shake of his head.

"Do not worry yourself over it, Kellen."

"The salve will help."

Verian turned his face into his arm. His eyes stung and burned, and he was inclined to blame the ointment. He was tense, breath held as he fought off the urge to cry anew. It was shameful enough without weeping like a child. His thighs tensed, his knees dug, and his hips rose from the blanket beneath him.

The mattress gave at Verian's side as Kellen stretched toward the foot of the bed. The small brown quilt that Verian was occasionally allowed to make use of was folded and tucked gingerly beneath the elf's belly. Kellen laid his cool hand to the small of Verian's back.

"Relax. I'll be gentle."

Verian choked out a sound that was torn between sob and laugh. He turned his head to the side and pressed his palm over his face. There was little reason to believe that Kellen would be anything but gentle. This did not, however, save Verian from the embarrassment.

"Shh."

Verian bit at the inside of his lip. He hadn't been aware of making any sound. As Kellen's fingers slid slick with salve along the crack of his ass, Verian gave a muted whimper. The ring of muscle toward the base was angry red, perched atop a wide tent of swelling that perfectly punctuated the upward, inward reach of a lash mark.

"Ah. Leave it. It will be fine." Verian tensed his hips toward the folded quilt.

Kellen's sigh passed across one salve-slimed ass cheek. "Shh. Just breathe." Kellen continued to paint the ointment about the raised skin, circling it gradually closer to the red rim. He spoke softly as he shifted, angled to watch his finger draw across the tissue. "See. You're alright. I said I'd be gentle. Nice and careful. See? It's fine."

Kellen's finger dabbed ointment thick across the raised pucker, and Verian choked out another strangled sound. He attempted to hide his

shame behind his palm and the webbing that ran between long, cringing fingers. There was little to be done to hide the flushing rush of blood, or the way the muscle tightened and twitched.

"Does that feel better?"

Kellen had left the pad of his finger in place, perfectly centered. Verian's shoulders rose and fell with the force of his sigh. It did feel better, except.

"It will be better after you move your thrice damned finger," Verian muttered into the creases of his palm.

There was a moment after his remark in which Kellen's finger remained in place. Verian imagined the boy's face as he realized what he was doing. Imagined Kellen's cheeks and ears turning red, and his hand trembling on its withdrawal. Instead, Verian's cheeks and ears went red. Flush and warm as Kellen's finger pressed inward with a slick slip of salve. He gulped twice before speaking.

"Kellen."

"You said to move it," Kellen whispered.

"That is not what I meant."

"But it feels good."

More silence. Kellen hadn't asked. No, Kellen knew. Knew that it felt good. Knew that it would cause Verian's ears to burn. Verian, who turned his nearly dry face into the bedding all over again. His fingers curled through his hair. It did feel good. Verian gave a slight, suggestive raise into the touch.

Kellen plunged his finger in shallow probe, just past the swell of one knuckle. He curled it and twisted it about, then pulled it back again. He explored with superficial touches as his breath pattered excitedly near the small of Verian's back.

"Ah!"

Verian muffled his cry between the palm and the bed. His hips raised, fell again as Kellen's fingers fanned along the curve of one ass cheek, pushed him back toward the folded quilt. He grunted as the deep, curling finger brushed the spot that sent warm pulses through his core and made his cock give a series of insistent throbs where it was trapped beneath his belly.

"There, see," Kellen whispered before kissing between the marks on Verian's ass. "Better."

"Yes," Verian moaned, "better."

"I know something even better."

"Hm?"

Kellen answered not with words, but with the warm probe of his

tongue past slick salve and tight, swollen muscle. It was not a sensation that Verian had ever experienced, and as such it took him a moment to realize that it really wasn't Kellen's finger probing with more ointment. His face burned for the fury of his blush.

"Oh."

The tip of Kellen's nose pressed into the close heat, and Verian sighed as the other boy's thumbs rolled and dug as if to squeeze at his own buried tongue. Verian's skin flushed, unpleasantly warm under the burns from the sun, tingling delightfully even there. He exhaled gustily, then drew in a sharp gasp as the delectable dips and curls of Kellen's tongue were coupled with a shallow suction, with a flush press of lips to ridged skin.

"Kellen," Verian gasped.

Kellen's hum started low and arched upward in question. Verian's fingers twisted into the blanket, his knuckles blanching. Long, slender thighs tensed and trembled as he fought the urge to buck between Kellen's mouth and the folded quilt. The ache of his body was markedly helpful in that endeavor.

Amongst all the heat and pressure, the pleasant inward slide and probe, the soft touches and firm nudges coupled with the slight pull of suction, came a brush of fingers lower. A series of firm drags traced the taut passage from the outward swell of Kellen's lower lip to the soft skin at the backs of Verian's balls, where fingers nudged through barely-there curls to splay, reach, and grasp. They tightened, pulling at the hang of Verian's sack, tugging the firm swells within down and away.

Verian moaned and shifted, grinding down toward the quilt. He could not help but move. Could not help but sway and stretch, reach wide and high with one knee. Kellen moved with him, digging tongue deeper as access permitted, and varying the suction of his mouth in the most tantalizing of ways. Verian managed to turn his head and support it on the cupping of his hands about his hairline, though his breath billowed uncomfortably hot against his inflamed skin.

The tongue retracted, the suction broke, and Kellen murmured in a heated slur of breath across salve and skin. "Oh, Verian. You taste so good. I told you it would feel better."

"I highly doubt that it is possible to taste anything beyond Delmi's medicine."

Kellen's fingers tightened in their grip, the heat of his palm pressing up against Verian's balls. "It was a compliment. You're so difficult sometimes."

Verian puffed out a heavy breath. His heart was still racing, his cock

was still pounding, and all he wanted at that moment was to get off and then have a nice cool bath. He groaned and rubbed again at his eyes.

"It does feel better," he conceded generously.

"See. I told you it would."

Verian let Kellen have those moments of self-satisfaction. In some ways to make up for hurting the other boy's feelings, but largely because it meant Kellen would resume. As expected, the mouth returned, and with it the soft probing tongue. The quickening of Verian's pulse. The shallow light gasps of his breath. The stirring of his hips as he nudged the seeping head of his cock against the quilt.

Kellen's fingers left off their grip of soft skin and slight weight. They traced further under Verian, calloused from work despite the neatness of nails. They brushed and petted, grasped when they had just passed the base of Verian's cock, and contrived to curl about in tight grasp. They squeezed briefly in response to Verian's grunt, and swept down along the length of cock as the elf's hips rose to abandon the warm nestle of the quilt.

Soft probes and firm pushes of tongue were coupled with the firmer nudges of nose and chin, with the frantic puffs of Kellen's breath to match Verian's own. Coarse fingers and cupped palm jerked vigorously along the belly of Verian's shaft, smacking up into his balls and angling down again in less than graceful rhythm. Verian panted, heaving, writhing between one point and the next, torn along a procession of sensation that built and layered, progressed inevitably to gather in on itself at some invisible, internal barrier. He ached for it, burned for it, wanted nothing more than to push past. Nudged and rocked and moaned muffled into the blankets.

Kellen's tongue withdrew entirely, pushed past the throbbing pulse of slick muscle, and withdrew again. The heel of his palm bumped over and over to the gathering of Verian's balls as his hand worked, stroking, fingers flicking now and then along the weeping head. The fronts of his teeth touched inadvertently as he ground his face eagerly into the splayed crack of Verian's ass. Sought out each tender ridge and notch with the side of his tongue.

The gathering of heat churned, swelled, crashed over Verian in waves. It speared through his palms and the soles of his feet, crackled up the backs of his legs and low through his belly. It forced him to move, to drive forward from his core and thrust again, again, and again into the hand that milked each surging spasm of his climax. Into the hand that angled the eager spill of seed onto the bunched quilt.

Verian sagged and stilled. He panted and sighed and panted again, his fingers curled too tight in his hair, his chin grinding down against the

blanket. Reality came slowly back to him as Kellen's mouth withdrew, as fingers gave one last, gentle stroke and then departed from the length of Verian's shaft. The bed stank of Charles. The room too strongly of sex and of salve. The low, resonating tolling of the dinner bell filled the air, and under that the soft clicking of ceramic.

"Now roll over," Kellen urged softly. "We still have to do the front."

Verian swallowed back the urge to blush. He wiped at his eyes, calmed his breathing. He took his time, though he was braced for the inevitable blow that doing so would provoke.

No strikes came. Kellen was patient enough to wait as Verian gathered himself. Instead Verian was allowed to roll when he felt ready. Kellen said nothing; only gathered the quilt, wiped his face with it, turned the fold over on itself to hide the mess, and then draped it back at the base of the bed. Verian watched all of this, and then stared up at the ceiling.

It was awkward, not saying anything as Kellen's fingers ran along the tops of his thighs, over his chest and shoulders. He remained silent through the broad, soothing strokes of ointment into his burnt skin, opting instead to gnaw at the inside of his cheek and ponder. Ponder what might have happened had they been caught. Ponder what had motivated Kellen to do it in the first place. Ponder why he had enjoyed it so.

Verian drew a deep breath. "Kellen, I—"

"You don't have to say anything," Kellen interrupted.

Verian tucked his chin toward his chest and peered at Kellen. Kellen whose cheeks were touched with pink despite his seeming confidence. Kellen who wouldn't look back at him. Verian smiled and looked up at the ceiling.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Kellen's sweeping fingers paused. He brought them in under Verian's collarbones, and laid them lightly over the delicate swell as he leaned forward. Kellen's lips were soft, no longer chapped, and warm as they brushed lightly across Verian's.

"You're welcome." Kellen straightened again, and turned to squirm out of the bed. "You should sleep while you can. I'll be back again tomorrow to check on you. I'll try to sneak some bread, in case you still haven't eaten."

"No, don't. You might get in trouble."

Verian pushed himself gingerly upward. He eased off of the blanket, leaving impressions of salve along the dingy surface. At least the hurting had stopped. He rounded the end of the bed to the woven straw of his mat, and hooked his fingers over the draped quilt. He watched Kellen move to the door, pot cradled between his hands.

“Well then.. maybe Delmi can do something about it. You need your strength to get better.”

“We’ll see,” Verian murmured as he pulled the quilt away from the foot of the bed.

Kellen stared silently for a moment, then whispered so quietly that even Verian’s sensitive ears could scarce make out what was said. “Yeah.”

The door shut, and Kellen was gone. Verian peered off at the lamp burning alongside the wash basin. He should quell the flame, but the light was oddly comforting. Golden and low. He laid the quilt down on the mat, sticky side down, and wrapped himself in the warmth of it as he settled to rest. Head cushioned on the fold of his arm, Verian thought on how lovely it would be to have a pillow. Exhaustion caused his limbs to tremble, and his eyelids to weigh shut.

The door swung open before Verian could properly sink into sleep. The comforting light was abrupt and abrasive to dream-starved eyes. Verian stared blearily at the silhouette in the door.

“Get up and draw me a bath, boy. You ain’t too broke for that.”

Verian sighed heavily as Charles went thudding off down the hall. He pulled himself from the quilt, straightened his protesting limbs, and drifted out after the man. Perhaps stolen bread would be a nice reprieve after all.

Chapter 5

The days ticked by faster than Verian would have expected. Each felt an eternity as he was experiencing it, but one blurred into the next, falling off into a haze of memory that the present pain kept at bay. His meals were more and more tasteless, his beatings more and more routine. It wasn't so much that they stopped hurting, as they stopped frightening him. Every blow of fist or foot, every strap of belt, was as predictable as the beating of his heart. He wept, but at some point along the line, he stopped grieving.

Verian no longer liked his fingers. They were tough along the pads, and the skin about his nailbeds was often cracked. His nails were kept short, either through work or the gnawing of his teeth. He did not care for the sensation of earth digging beneath them.

Kellen, though, never seemed to mind the growing toughness of Verian's hands. The monotony of tending to Charles was broken by Kellen's frequent visits. They would steal touches behind closed doors, holding their breath whenever footsteps passed in the hall, and tangled their bodies one to the other as if they had been doing so for years. It was a profound relief, and the few days that Kellen had come to join him in the fields brought a temporary lightness to Verian's heart.

The faces that came to work the fields were frequent in their changing. Long bodies replaced short ones, wide replaced thin. Dark skin one week, pale the next. They came and went; yet day after day, Verian was made to burn in the sun, and to shiver in the rains that came all the more frequent. Day after day he was made to shovel, to pick, and to harvest. His mornings started with laying out Charles' clothes, and his evenings ended with cleaning up from the man's bath.

He had resigned himself. Verian's few attempts at escape had ended poorly, with days lost to hunger and darkness in the miserable little cell that he had so quickly come to despise. So it was that when a true break to his routine finally came, he found himself at a loss.

Verian abandoned the last slice of his pale melon as Charles finished his breakfast. Verian stood, gathered dish and spoon between his hands just as he always did, and turned to go, just as he always did. His steps were halted by the coarse snaring of Charles' fingers about one bruised elbow. The clatter of the ceramic shattering against the stone floor did not cause Verian to flinch so much as the blows that he knew would follow it. He tensed, drawn back against Charles' hold, and hiked one shoulder toward his ear. It took a few seconds for Verian to register that if the blow had not yet come, it was unlikely to do so. His shoulder lowered, his chin

raised, and he opened his eyes fully to blink up at Charles' squinting regard.

"I want you t'remember somethin'," Charles began as he gave Verian a shake and turned to back the elf toward the wall. "Yer mine. Don't go getting any uppity ideas cus yer gettin' treated nicer."

The wall was cold as it came rushing up against Verian's shoulders and ass. Unyielding as the rest of his back was forced flat against it. Verian's fingers worked toward his palms as he cringed between Charles and the wall, the larger man's weight feeling a blaze in contrast.

"What?"

"I'm the one lettin' you go off fer learnin'. You been good, an' the vicar don't think yer as stupid as I know you are. So jus' remember that when you get back here. Got it?"

The growling question was enough to prompt a frantic nod on Verian's part, even if he did not entirely understand what the man was getting at. "Understood."

The chill of the wall eased in time with the heat of the body pressed against his own, and Verian was again left to stand on his own two feet. Charles squinted at Verian still, perpetually suspicious, and then turned to stalk off. The broad-shouldered brute of a man raised one hand near the door, grunted something into the hall, and then turned the corner out of Verian's sight.

The doorway was not left empty for long. It was instead filled by two young men who looked to be exact copies of one another. They had the same creamy skin, the same wispy white hair, and the same wide, pink eyes. One settled to either side of Verian, each gathering his work-roughened hand within their soft ones, and then stepping off in unison to lead him from the dining hall.

The subsequent walk was short, but swift. Verian was drawn a proper bath in a copper tub, and given a coarse satchel of pale pebbles and dried lilacs. The two pale men with strange, pink eyes looked on only long enough to ensure that he was cooperative, and then departed from the room. Verian wasted no time in scrubbing the filth from his skin, and the oil from his scalp and hair. He did not even take care to leave the requisite amount in place. He was quite through with being filthy. He splashed water onto his face, rinsed himself thoroughly with several dunks beneath the surface, and stood to shake the remnants of his bath from his skin even as the door opened once again.

One of the pale men approached him with a towel stretched between his hands. The linen was tightly woven and soft upon his skin, though Verian was dismayed to discover that there had been more freckles hiding

beneath the dirt that had collected on his limbs. He sighed out often and shivered as he was helped to dry, and clutched the towel over his face upon being guided to sit on a four legged stool. Four sets of gentle fingertips urged him upright, and Verian squared off his shoulders as a small, keen set of scissors went snipping the scraggly, trailing ends of his hair away. One pair of pale hands dusted the stray bits of hair from his shoulders and ears, while the other filed his nails and oiled the coarse, cracked skin of Verian's palms and fingers.

Through all of this, none of them had uttered a word. They were likewise silent as they trailed single file, with Verian in the middle, through a maze of halls and corridors. From one building, into the next, and from that into the next. Verian recognized a particular courtyard as they came to pass along a covered walkway. Recognized the smell of jasmine. He likewise recognized the room to which he was led.

The room itself was long, with an entry at either end of it. To the front of the room, opposite their point of entry, was a plain brown rug. Two young men were seated upon the rug, slumped of spine and occasionally fidgeting about restlessly. It seemed that they had been waiting long enough to grow bored. Verian was led forward to join them, and his quiet companions seated themselves each to either side of the rug. Their pink eyes turned forward, fixed on the plush green chair just beyond the rug's reach. Another young man came stumbling in a moment later, and Verian twisted about just in time to see him catch himself. To see a hand retract through the door.

"Stop staring at me and go sit down, dummy," Charles barked from outside.

The new arrival stared widely at the lot of them, and Verian stared back with a lack of any real interest. Well-heeled boots impacted heavily with the floor, calling Verian's attention forward. He watched as the man who had entered seated himself in the sumptuous suede of the chair.

"For those of you who are unaware," began the seated figure, "my name is Ulric den Alban, former Lord of Uffenhofen, currently in service foremost to Misau the Almighty, and secondarily to Her Majesty Martie Saldegus. You are all hereby stripped of any name, rank, title, or station you may have possessed before having the great fortune of arriving to Laudermyn. While you are present in this complex, you are foremost in service to Vicar Hoch, and secondarily to myself. The likes of you are not yet worthy of so much as uttering the name of Misau the Almighty, though you are welcome to pray that in time you may come to be so."

Ulric dan Alban was silent in the wake of his speech. His gaze traveled from one seated figure to the next, and though there were a few

squirms and a shiver to be found, nobody uttered a word. It was quiet enough inside that the barren branches of the tree in the courtyard could be heard clattering against one another. It occurred to Verian then that it would start snowing soon. He wondered if they would be afforded clothing when it did, he wondered if--

"Excellent," Ulric declared, breaking Verian's trailing thought. "No trouble, then. I so dislike trouble." The man's gaze fixed to Verian, rolled to the boy who had arrived after, and then swept through the room. "From this point forward, your lives are to be dedicated to worship. You will be instructed from the Eleven Books and given lessons in the Approved Sciences and Magics. You will learn what it is to serve, what it is to toil, and how to take pleasure from your discipline."

Verian stared ahead at the man before him, but he paid little attention to what was being said. He was exhausted still, and sitting in place was lulling his thoughts. He focused on keeping his eyes open, and his head erect, but it would have been easier to be out in the fields. There he could tell himself that there was just one more furrow. Just one more channel of mud through which to wade. Here, though, it was warmer. Here he was clean, and his body grateful for the respite.

"--you to your appropriate classes."

Verian blinked again. He'd missed a great deal of aggrandizing on Ulric's part, he was certain. The others were in the process of rising, and so Verian did as well. He brushed at his knees and the backs of his thighs self-consciously, and fell into line. He found himself again positioned between the two young men with ethereally white skin and hair.

The group was led out of the long room, and down the exterior hall. Three of their number were ushered past a solid oak door. They stopped again around the opposite corner of the building, and another heavy door was pushed open on quiet hinges. Ulric gave a tip of his head, indicating Verian should pass within.

The door gave a solid thud into its frame, and Verian pressed back against it as his eyes adjusted to the comparatively dim light. A fire was going to one side of the room, and in the middle of it was a large, low-sitting table where a handful of boys sat. The oldest looked to be perhaps seven years of age, and all were finely clothed. There were all staring at Verian, just as Verian was staring at them. One sputtered, another covered his mouth, and still another burst into a particularly loud fit of giggles. The man who was sitting at the table with them turned his head, assessed Verian through somewhat cloudy corrective lenses, and then gave a dry cough.

"Come on and sit, then. Move over, boys, move over." He waved a

wrinkled hand at the children, urging them to bump their chairs about until a gap formed. "Be nice to the new pupil, eh?"

Verian eyed the space between two well-appointed children, and bridged the gap between it and himself as slowly as he could manage. He settled on his knees, fingers curling over the tops of his now freckled thighs, and dug the heels of his palms hard against the muscle. Something prodded at his ear, and he flinched so violently to the side that he nearly toppled the boy to his right. There was another chorus of giggling.

"He's funny!"

"I know what that is. That's an elf. You're so thick, Joshua."

"I am not. You're the thick one!"

"Boys," the old man interrupted. "You are correct, Lonso. That is an elf. Please do not poke and prod at him. We are here to learn about the prophet, not to torment the exotics. Do you read and write, elf?"

Verian, who had remained quiet and fairly sedate, focused again on the old man. One brilliant red brow twitched toward his hairline, but he was quick to settle it back into place. The room was warm, and he enjoyed sitting on his knees far more than he enjoyed working in the fields.

"Of course."

"Good. You can help the little ones with theirs as we go along."

Verian, who was feeling much more like himself than he had been the day before, had to actively swallow back a scathing refusal. He peered about at the children, immediately coming to detest each and every one, and then turned a carefully composed smile to their instructor.

"Of course."

"Sir. Mind your manners or you'll be sent to the corner."

Verian could feel the muscles about his mouth twitching and ticking. He gave a quick nod.

"Of course, sir."

"Alright then. Everybody pay attention now." The man paused a moment, looking lost. "Where were we?"

The boy called Lonso flashed his teeth in a grin, but Joshua piped up before he could. "The third trial!"

"Oh, yes. Yes."

Verian shifted his weight again between his knees. He peered about at the boys, noting the dimples here, the gapped teeth there, the carefully ordered hair atop every head. He admired brocade as the old man prattled on about his faith, and did his best, once again, not to fall asleep where he sat.

Mid way through the day, the old man finally stopped talking. Food

was brought in on large platters, and each child received a bowl of porridge with honey and slivers of fig. Verian received one as well, though his was not set to the table with a spoon. Instead he was fed on a familiar mat near the fire, where he did his best to blot out the sound of giggling as he sucked and licked at his meal. Were it not so fine a feast, he might simply have refused it, but it was easily the best he'd had since his arrival. He was sad when it was gone, and moreso disappointed when the conclusion of mealtime meant that there was more monotonous blather that required his pretending to pay attention.

More than once, Verian nearly fell asleep. His head would dip, then lift, the dip again. The boys poked him under the table, though the one on the right was more fond of pinching near Verian's hip. He gave no complaint, as it helped him to remain compliant. The lack of response proved dull, however, and soon enough Verian's drifting thoughts had him oblivious to the old man's nattering on.

Waking came as a surprise to Verian, who hadn't intended to fall asleep, and was dismayed to discover that he had. There were cool fingers at his temple, and they brushed into his hair as his eyes slid open.

"I don't know where you were before this, boy. I don't need to know. I don't even want to know. But you should know that I don't take kindly to inattentive pupils. I'm giving you a pass since this is your first day, but I expect you to be shaped up by tomorrow, got it?"

"Yes, sir." Verian mumbled.

He rubbed at one bleary eye and picked his head up. The smell of food had caught his attention. There was a plate on the mat near the wall. It was loaded with roasted meat, boiled potatoes, flakey, buttered bread, and a pale wedge of cheese.

"Eat up, then. The others have already gone. Someone'll be along shortly to collect you."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

The man nodded his shriveled head, then turned to hobble off through the door that led to the building's interior. Verian drew in a deep breath and glanced about. He skulked over to the mat, eyed the table, but decided that it wasn't worth the risk. It would be too far to travel if anyone entered. He slid his dish into his lap, and took to eating eagerly with his fingers. It wasn't perfect, but it was better than chewing with his ass in the air.

There was more than ample time to eat. More than enough time for Verian to lick his fingers and palms clean. More than enough time for him to lick his plate spotless as well. He sat contentedly, his belly fuller and warmer than it had been in the miserable days since his arrival, and stared

off into the dance of shadows and warm light cast by the fire. So much time passed that he began to grow sleepy.

As he laid on the mat waiting, he wondered if Kellen would know not to come to tend to his wounds. Verian wondered if Kellen would go anyway. If he would be caught. He wondered if the boy would be smart enough to come up with a feasible reason for his presence. He wondered himself right into a restless sleep.

"You've forgotten me." The words were sullen, accusatory.

"No. I could never." Verian insisted.

"You have."

"Why is it so dark?"

"Because you've forgotten me."

"I would never forget you."

"What's my name?"

Name. Name. He could picture him so well. Hair mussed into eyes. The warm, wide smile. Long fingers that fit perfectly into Verian's.

"Mikel," Verian finally answered. It had been more difficult to recall than he liked.

The darkness was silent.

"Hey! Hey!"

A groan rolled past Verian's lips.

"Hey! Who's Mikel?"

"Shut your yap, you dummy. He was sleeping. Hurry up. Mister Martin will be here soon."

One eye cracked open, then the other. Verian rubbed the sleep from their corners and peered hazily up at three youthful faces. Two of the boys withdrew, presumably to go and sit, but the third continued to stare down at Verian with wide brown eyes.

"You slept in." The boy said, then gave an impish grin. "You should hurry up and get something to eat. Mister Martin doesn't like it when rumbles interrupt him."

"I'm surprised the old coot can even hear it," Verian muttered.

"Ooooooh!" One small hand popped against Verian's thigh. "Go eat, elf!"

Verian took to his feet in a flash. His fists balled at his sides, and he

shifted to loom over the child with a low growl. The boy stared up at him, completely without fear. Verian's stomach churned. The child smiled. Verian retreated then, just long enough to dart outside and relieve himself in a jasmine planter.

No one had come, and he did not know where he could go to eat. As he hurried back inside to seat himself at the table, Verian wondered if anyone had laid out Charles' clothes, if the man had gone hungry without someone to serve him his food. He was smiling by the time the aged instructor came shuffling through the door.

The day progressed in tedium. Mister Martin, as the children called him, was patient enough when it came to the rambunctiousness of the boys in his care. Unlike the day prior, there were breaks to be had in the long, rambling teaching. One at midmorning, complete with cool water and baked tubers, another midday, with a platter of roasted meats and crumbled cheese, and still another shortly after that where the boys were simply allowed to run and shriek and cavort about. Verian was more than happy to retreat to his mat for each. He had no desire to linger near poking fingers and wide-eyed stares.

The constant, numbing lecture was interrupted on occasion for sessions of questions and answers, but Verian was never called upon to speak during those times. He assisted the boys in the formation of their letters when appropriate, and found that all but one of them were proficient enough when it came to reading. The scrolls bored him nearly as much as the old man's blathering on. He spent too much time staring blankly at the shifting canvas of mouth and teeth, at the occasional glimpse of tongue.

Verian managed not to fall asleep over the course of the day, save for a brief nap while the children were in the courtyard playing with sticks. When lessons were over, and dinner was served, he sat at the end of his mat and watched the others eat. His gaze shifted frequently between both doors that led into their warm little room. Only when he was certain the old man was not looking did he risk slipping a small, pickled tomato past his lips with the use of his fingers.

"OOoooOOOOooooh!" Lonso pointed one finger in Verian's direction. "He's eating wrong. Mister Martin! He's eating wrong!"

Verian bared his teeth. He very nearly hissed. The old man peered from behind his thick, cloudy spectacles and gave a discontented hum.

"Go back to your meals, boys."

Verian lowered his lip and sucked at his teeth. The old man

continued to stare.

"You too, boy," he said.

Verian grimaced, not bothering to hide away the expression. He twisted about and ducked onto his elbows, hunched to lip up boiled corn and minced pork. He chewed slowly, and pushed himself up to sit again once he was certain the man's attention had moved on.

The inner door opened even as the children were finishing up their meals. A pair of young men in plain spun cotton came to collect the dishes, and did not lift their gazes even to look at Verian. The boys went cavorting out into the hall, and the old man fixed Verian with a bemused look.

"Where is it you belong, boy?"

"The Northlands, sir," Verian stated all too smoothly.

The old man's lips pursed, and he squinted behind his glasses. "Don't be smart with me. I am old, boy, not daft."

"Charles, sir." The words were muttered. Begrudging.

"Ah. Well then. Sit here, and someone will be along to collect you shortly." With that, the old man hobbled across the room and out into the corridor. The silent servants followed suit, and Verian was left alone with his nearly untouched meal.

The wait was long, and while his meal sat nearly untouched, Verian was not inclined to do more than pick at it. His insides felt heavy from the surplus of rich food. He craved water, but did not dare go wandering off to find it. He did not wish to have to endure another set of bruised ribs.

"Come on." Charles barked from the door.

One ear twitched, and Verian pushed himself up to sit with a startled blink. He wiped at the smear of drool that had formed to one side of his mouth, a damp patch at his cheek for the puddling on the mat. He would rather have spent the night alone in the room with the dwindling fire. Verian stood slowly, grimaced at his toes, and shuffled dutifully after Charles.

This time, Verian paid more attention to his surroundings. He noted every turn, counted the steps between each, and watched the progression of the courtyard. Charles led him along the exterior halls, across the wide gaps between buildings, and in through a more ramshackle door. Down familiar corridors, past doors through which he had never been, past the dining hall, the kitchens. Past the surplus storage of books and scrolls. Past the straw-lined floor that led in from the fields. To Charles' room, where Verian was given a shove to his shoulder.

"Draw us a bath then, boy. If you remember how."

Verian turned to fix Charles with a peevish look. "I'm not going to

forget over the course of one day.”

“Forgot enough anyway, did’ncha?” Charles’ hand popped off of Verian’s cheek.

“Which soap, sir?”

“Better. Get that green one Delmi sent last week.”

“Yes, sir.”

Verian swallowed back on the bile that was creeping up his throat. He sniffed wetly and turned. The pails of water were familiar enough, and he threw another log onto the fire to keep it stoked. One after another, until the tub was nearly full. Verian set up the small table with an untouched, carefully molded cake of soap. A soft sponge was set alongside this. A razor, and a squat, boar-haired brush filled the remainder of the tray.

“Took you long ‘nough,” Charles grumbled when Verian pressed into the room once again.

The roof of his mouth was not so adhesive as Verian would have liked, but he managed to refrain from remarking. He simply turned about to drift doggedly back to the tub. To stand and wait until Charles either dismissed him, or demanded assistance with washing.

Water rippled up along the sides of the tub. There was a noise from the tray, another ripple of water. Verian looked up from his contemplation of his toes, his gaze trailing along the defined edges of muscle under Charles’ tanned skin. Verian pondered the man’s hands, watching him lather the soap between his calloused palms. Verian could not help the tension that curled his toes into the floor. It was not a good sign that Charles was still standing outside of the bath.

“Touch yer toes.”

Verian sighed heavily. He turned his heels out, locked his knees, and curled his fingers between his splayed toes. It was easier to stay put if he gripped with his feet as well as his hands. Easier if he remembered to breathe.

“Been told you been good,” Charles rumbled.

Good. Was this reward, then? That Charles took the time to slide his lathered fingers along the crack of Verian’s ass? That those fingers dipped, probed, and withdrew again. They worked with an unusual patience, stretching slowly the resistant ring of muscle that Verian did not wish relax.

“Maybe not as stupid as you seem,” Charles rumbled as a finger slid deep into Verian, stretching as far as it could manage.

“Certainly not as stupid as you look.”

The sound of the slap rolled back at Verian, touching his ears even as

he struggled to keep from toppling over. His fingers tugged from between his toes, and he caught himself on his palms as the second smack came. His eyes were watering by the time the third impacted, warming the curve of his ass with its cup and sting. Verian sniffed thick and wet.

"Then 'gain, maybe you are."

This was more familiar. This was easier to endure than that careful probe and stretch. Another smack warmed his skin, this time to the small of his back. Verian reached up, catching his fingers on the side of the tub. He pulled himself forward, unable to help the sudden urge to get away. To put distance between himself and the source of the jagged nails digging against his spine.

"Nuh uh, boy. You stay put."

Charles hooked a leg alongside Verian's. One hip pivoted to the curve of Verian's ass, and the calloused hand went sliding forward to push down between jutting shoulderblades. Verian strained up against the pressure, but ultimately buckled, folded with a smack of palms to stone. It was as Verian struggled to catch his balance that Charles drove forward. The head of his cock slid slick along lathered soap, popped too-easily past the marginally slack muscle. A startled yalp parted Verian's lips, and he twisted to the side, straining upward in an attempt to grasp the tub for leverage once again.

"I said," Charles growled as he bucked in deep, "stay put. Grab your ankles and pray I don't crack your head open on the floor."

Something in Charles' words struck Verian as funny. He didn't know what it was, and did not take the time to identify it. He laughed as his fingers wrapped about his ankles. Fluttered out a manic edge of sound as Charles drew back and shoved deeper still, angled to the side so that Verian felt the pressure shift uncomfortably well beyond the bruising stroke. The laugh broke off abruptly, and he cringed as his knees gave a dip.

"You just keep it up, boy. Keep it up and we'll see where yer workin' tomorrow."

"Ah!" The cry wasn't quite protest, but was closer to it than Verian liked.

His sinuses were starting to hurt, and his ears to burn. Verian panted, fingernails digging at the skin alongside his tendons as he rocked unsteadily forward and back. Were it not for the hands steadying him at the tuck of his waist, he would likely have fallen. He would rather have fallen than endure the steady back and forth sawing of Charles' cock in his ass.

"Is it in yet? I can't stand like this forever, you kn-" Verian's remark

was cut short by the impact of a fist into his ribs. He labored to catch his breath, arching up to give his lungs more room to expand.

“Cocky little shit.”

Charles’ hips struck Verian hard from behind, bounced away, and pressed again with the firm forward jabbing of cockhead into the warm pull of Verian’s body. The man seemed incited to a frenzy of movement. To bucking in hard, bouncing away, angling and thrusting again as his fingers caught on Verian’s hips. Charles set himself into a violent pace, bruising with momentum and force, his growls and snarls answering the grunts and cries that escaped Verian’s bowed head.

It felt it would never end. Verian’s fingers strained against the floor, splayed and bent backward from his knuckles. His hair crashed again and again along his arm, all the more erratic as the figure behind him took to an unsteady convulsion of pace. Verian was shoved hard from behind, not caught by Charles’ hands this time, and forced forward. Down to the floor with the strike of elbow and knee, his ass left raw and pulsing. He gasped as he caught himself before his face could meet the stone, his weight pitched through his right side and the cold of the ground biting at his bruising skin.

A low, broken roll of sound emanated from above. Verian stared upward in time to catch sight of Charles’ head rocking along one sculpted shoulder. A spurt of sticky white escaped the head of the man’s cock, coaxed by the forward pull of one rough-hewn hand. It cascaded downward to splatter lewdly along Verian’s thigh. Another followed, and another, and still another that drizzled a feeble spurt over Verian’s hip.

The cooling water within the tub sloshed again. The sound was followed by another light splashing about. Verian continued to stare down his side in disgust.

“No blanket tonight. No pillow neither. And don’t you clean that off. You can sleep just like that. See how smart yer feeling when you wake up in the morning, huh?”

The tapered tips of Verian’s fingers had already settled into the mess, and he paused in the process of pushing it toward his knee. It was revolting enough on his leg, moreso that he would have to sleep that way, but now it was on his hand as well. His dismayed stare turned into a sharp grimace.

“Yes, sir,” Verian muttered to the floor.

“Go away. Yer too damn ugly t’keep looking at.”

Verian retreated then, shut the door a little too hard, and made his way back to Charles’ room. He took a moment to wipe his hand clean on the underside of the man’s blanket, though he left the mess where it

continued to seep and slide down along the outside of his leg. Verian curled onto the chill of the mat, and stared along the too familiar flooring.

Perhaps tomorrow he would try again at escape. Tomorrow, while the children were playing, and the old man was half-dozing near the fire. This time he would not attempt to stow away in a wagon. There had to be other farms nearby. There had to be some hope of finding shelter, and people possessing of sanity.

Verian squeezed his eyes shut and pretended to sleep until sleep actually came.

Chapter 6

Joints stiff from cold and sides scattered with fresh bruises, Verian woke slowly the following morning. He was tired enough that he did not leap into action despite the impact of Charles' toes to his shin. Instead movement came slowly, and the grogginess was persistent. It helped that his routine had become a familiar one.

Verian draped Charles' clothes over the end of the bed, which he then tidied. He padded the long hall to the kitchen, set a small fire from the embers remaining in the hearth, and warmed a pot of water. Verian poured the water aside in a bowl, then warmed another pot for Charles' oats. He stirred in one generous spoonful of honey, and set the dish to the table in the hall. Charles had not yet arrived, and Verian was eager to clean himself before he could be told not to. He scuttled back into the kitchen and dipped a worn rag into the bowl of water there. He scrubbed at the sticky mess on his skin with one hand, and scooped spoonful after spoonful of oats into his mouth with the other. Sneaking food so quickly that he might choke on it was preferable to eating on that damned mat.

"Verian!"

The spoon struck the inside of the pot when he dropped it. Verian turned a wide, apprehensive look over the high lift of his shoulder. Kellen was standing in the door leading from the kitchen to the small courtyard.

"Don't do that. Come on, we're going to be late."

Verian frowned at the breakfast mess still littered about. He swallowed the oats that suddenly felt heavy in his mouth, and set his damp rag to the worn table. He was reluctant to leave the mess, as he was reasonably certain he'd be made to suffer the consequences of doing so, but he was also reluctant to be late. Torn between punishments, Verian turned to squint at Kellen.

"Late for what?"

"We've got kitchen chores together. Come on! Delmi told me to get you on the way."

"But--" Verian broke off. The ache along his jaw reminded him to correct his frown, and he shuffled reluctantly to where Kellen was hanging on the door. "I thought I was going back to learn about your cult."

Kellen gave a frustrated groan and rolled his eyes back in his head. Verian frowned again for this reaction, and lurched forward as his wrist was caught. He was out into the courtyard before he managed to pull himself up enough to reclaim his arm.

"Come on," Kellen insisted. "We don't have time to argue about it. You're so stubborn, and you're going to get me in trouble. That's really not

fair, Verian."

Verian peered sidelong at Kellen. The boy's hair was kept in tidy, trimmed contrast to the scraggly return growth of Verian's own. Kellen's hand had been soft on Verian's wrist, and his skin maintained a healthy flush. Verian could not help his pang of envy, and while Kellen was pleasant enough to look at, he could not help but wonder what delusion he had suffered under to rut about with the young man as much as he had. Though thinking back on it, it had been such a pleasant reprieve.

"Oh! Hey, watch where you're going." Kellen reached out to help steady Verian as he tripped over a tree root in the mushy grass.

"I'm fine. Leave off."

Verian pulled his arm hastily back to his side. The furrowing of Kellen's brow and downward turn of his mouth gave Verian a brief pang of regret. He hid it behind a scowl and went stalking for the covered corridor. He'd had enough of plodding hurriedly across the muddy courtyard.

Such was their pace, and so far was it across the compound to the larger, more ornate buildings near the cathedral that dominated the vast monastery, that Verian was winded by the time they ducked through the service entry leading to the kitchen. The warmth from the burning stoves was a welcome relief, and Verian took a moment to let it seep into the ache of his joints as he caught his breath.

"About time you two got here."

A bulbous man with red cheeks and watery blue eyes was staring down at them when Verian opened his eyes. Kellen gave a quick bob of his head and shuffled nervously in place. The action left a bitter taste in the back of Verian's mouth, and he resolved to keep his stare all the more direct.

"Oh. The elf. Charles warned me about you," the man's reedy voice fell flat from his pudgy lips. "Alright then. Come on." The man turned to lead them through the vast workspace of stoves, tables, and cookware.

"You two know how to peel carrots and potatoes?"

"Yes, sir!"

Kellen's enthusiasm left Verian grimacing. At least he wasn't pulling up the carrots and potatoes. "No, sir," Verian muttered.

"Alright, well, the one that knows what he's doing can show the one that don't."

They drew up alongside a large wooden table that was easily three times the size of the one in Verian's kitchen. The thing was loaded with potatoes and carrots that had been divested of their loose dirt and runners. There were two small paring knives waiting for them, and, much to

Verian's relief, a bench that sat before two half-barrels.

"Get going, then. Scraps go in the barrel there," the man's pudgy arms unfolded to sway and ripple as he gestured, "and you can put the finished ones in that barrel there. One of the boys'll be along to swap barrels with you later. Start with the potatoes. They go in first."

The tall, rounded giant of a man turned and shuffled off toward one of the stoves at the far end of the room. Glancing about, Verian could see other boys diligently working. Some were kneading at dough, others were cutting the stalks off of sad scraps of chard. The strange identical boys with pink eyes were sitting not far, pulling the feathers out of fat game hens.

"You're going to get yourself in trouble again, Verian," Kellen cautioned. He had already taken a seat on the bench, and was carving a gnarled sprout out of a fist-sized potato. "Come on. You see these spots? You cut these out." Kellen pointed with the tip of his knife as he spoke. "Then you hold the potato like this, angle the blade just so, and follow the curve. Don't waste the potato. You want to get as close as you can to the skin, alright?"

"Very well."

Verian straddled the bench with a decided lack of enthusiasm. He plucked up one rounded tuber and set to work. The knife skipped and jumped along the curves, dug in here and there unpredictably, and more than once a potato went leaping from Verian's hand. He wasn't at all certain how Kellen managed it at twice the speed, let alone with such apparent ease.

"There, see," Kellen encouraged after several butchered attempts. "You're starting to get a feel for it."

"I'd rather get a feel for one of those cleavers," Verian muttered sourly.

Kellen's eyes went wide, and Verian gave the young man a glare past his brows for it. He went back to working at his potatoes, diligently maintaining the effort of not cutting off his fingers. He doubted that anyone beside himself would care if he did. Well, perhaps Kellen, but the boy was an idiot.

"Verian--"

"Yes, yes. I know. I'm not actually going to cleave anyone." Yet.

"Oh, good."

Kellen slumped with relief, and the pair worked on in silence. The barrels filled at uneven rates, but boys came in twos to swap them out for fresh ones before either was near full. They worked for hours, with their fingers growing starchy and Verian's palms cramping now and again for the constant gripping. On and on, until the potatoes were nearly finished.

A dark-haired young man who resembled Kellen enough that the two might have been cousins, came over to deposit plates of salted beef and bread near their feet. He went darting off without a word. The meal looked utterly unappetizing, and the grumbling of Verian's stomach left him sighing with resignation.

Knives abandoned to the tabletop, Verian followed Kellen's lead in settling on the floor. It was remarkably clean, all things considered, though it still bore smudges of mud from the bottoms of their feet. Kellen feasted at a hurried pace, and with obvious zeal, secreting smiles to Verian between bites. Verian, who was still feeling somewhat groggy, felt that he'd rather be curling up for a nap than gnawing at strips of cold meat and stale bread. Still, it kept his stomach from churning at his ribs, and Verian ate until he felt the meal might revolt and creep its way back up his gullet. He was more than happy to swap dishes with Kellen, who had packed away the entirety of his own meal, and retreat back to the bench. And the potatoes.

The carrots were a somewhat easier transition, though Kellen made frequent corrections to Verian's technique. He stripped away too much flesh, and often the tips would snap off into the scrap barrel. Verian's hands continued to cramp on and off. His shoulders complained, and his back as well. Then, just as they were nearing the end of the pile, more potatoes were stacked onto the table. Verian kicked the barrel in frustration, but again reminded himself that at least he was not out pulling them.

As the hours progressed, the kitchen smelled more and more of delicious food. At some point a boy with glossed hair and a scrap of pale fabric strung about his waist went whisking past with a platter of stuffed and roasted game hens. Verian stared after him, taken more by the smell of the meal than the graceful sway of the server's steps.

"That's going to be me one day," Kellen whispered.

"Pardon?"

"That boy. He gets to work in the dining hall and serve the vicar and his friends. I'm going to do that one day. Delmi is teaching me. I still have a lot to learn, but one day."

Kellen's smile was wide. His gaze distant. Verian squinted suspiciously, then set about violently sawing a patch of thick tendrils from an oblong potato.

"One day, I'm going to get out of here. Then I'll come back and set fire to this awful place."

"Verian! This is a holy place. A sacred place. You mustn't say such things. Why are you always so angry?"

"Why are you always such a cow?"

Kellen frowned, shoulders slumping, and turned back to his work. They went on in silence, neither sharing their hopes, nor their disappointments. It was some time before the fat man returned. His thready voice barely made it through the veil of gloom that had settled on the pair.

"You, boy." He thrust one bulbous finger at Kellen. "You go home. And you come with me."

Verian stared enviously after Kellen's departure. The fat man gestured again in beckon, and Verian trailed discontentedly at the man's heels. They passed along the tables, turned away from the outer wall lined with stoves, and temporarily interrupted the flow of glossed, semi-garbed boys to and from the kitchen. Verian was led to a corner with a wide table and a wall lined with dusty pots and pans. Overflow, he reasoned, for when the monastery was supporting more guests.

"You are staying here," the man said as he nudged stray sticks of straw back beneath the table. "In the morning, you will soak oats with the boy who fetches you. For now, someone will bring you dinner, and then you will sleep. You understand?"

"Yes, sir," Verian muttered dispiritedly.

"Good. Under, and no going anywhere unless you have to piss. You do that out by the tree. No trouble, or I'll lock you in the closet."

"Yes, sir." The words were dull even to Verian's disinterested ears.

Verian ducked low and edged under the table. The straw was dusty, and somewhat itchy against his skin. He curled in the shadows, and tracked the ripple of the cook's pantlegs as he went plodding off. His view was blotted out a moment later by a smiling face, and a plate of cold, salted meat and stale bread was slid his way.

"Welcome to the kitchen," said the pink-cheeked youth who delivered his meal. "I've hidden you a surprise under your bread. Shh." The boy winked before standing upright and hurrying off.

Curious, and apparently ignored for the time being, Verian hazarded lifting the edge of his bread with his fingertips. Hiding beneath the stiff, light slice was the golden glitter of a fat slice of candied pear. Verian dropped his bread back into place, and drew his plate closer in the straw. He rolled over, set his dish near the wall, and set to eating slowly with his fingers, as secretly as he could manage.

There came no angry barks, nor boots to his rear flank. Verian was uninterrupted as the noise of the kitchen began to die off. He was left to eat in peace, and savored each bite of his dessert. Perhaps it would not be so bad here, even if the straw made him itch. Perhaps here he could find

the presence of mind in which to plan his escape, and the weapons with which to manage it.

It took Verian some time to fall asleep. He lay half-awake, listening to the din of pots and pans, to padding footsteps, and to the heavy shuffling about of their overseer. He listened and planned as the boys became fewer and fewer in number, until, unwittingly, Verian nodded off entirely.

He woke slowly many hours later. Though he had slept for some time, he had the distinct sense that he should be sleeping still. It was just that the press of a body behind his own was decidedly jarring. There was a chest warm against his back, and he could feel the racing of the owner's heart. An arm, familiar in weight and drape, wrapped about his ribs.

"I couldn't sleep," Kellen whispered to the back of Verian's ear.

"You're going to get in trouble," Verian cautioned groggily.

"There's nobody here. I checked. And Delmi's sound asleep."

Kellen's hand slid up along Verian's side. The fingers were cool, but the palm was warm. Verian adjusted the lay of his head in the straw, yawned quietly, and settled. What business was it of his if Kellen wanted to get himself a beating?

The pads of Kellen's fingers passed down to Verian's hip, and Verian gave a vague mumble of irritation. He would take it upon himself to mind if Kellen insisted on disturbing his sleep. But then those fingers were sliding toward Verian's navel, lower, brushing past the coils of hair about the base of his cock as the boy went fondling along the drape of it, squeezing at the soft hang of his balls. Verian's eyes slid open, and he stared into the darkness.

"Stop that."

"But I thought—"

"I'm not in the mood."

There was a long moment of stillness. Of silence. Kellen's hand retreated slowly. His arm returned to drape beneath Verian's, and the weight of his hand fell upon Verian's chest instead. Verian closed his eyes, drew a deep breath, and drifted back to sleep with another sigh.

Verian was alone in the straw when he was next made to rise. He was certain that it earlier even than Charles made him get up, though there was no sign of light save that from the fires. The shutters had not yet been thrown open, and there was no warm dawn glow picking at the crevices. Verian peered blearily at the boy who had woken him, then rolled out from under the bed to follow.

He was given time to relieve himself in the brisk of the night, and

though Verian hurried, he was still shivering as he trotted back into the kitchen. The man waiting for him was taller than Verian, with dusky skin and thin lips that had set themselves into a mild frown. He did not stop frowning, except for when he was speaking, and he spoke very little.

The two of them set oats to soak in a large pot, and the man then led Verian to the food closet to haul small sacks of flour out for the morning bread preparations. Water was procured, and then Verian was left alone to oversee the transfer of the oats to the stoked stove while his nearly-mute companion departed for eggs. The man returned with a basket full of browns, golds, and whites, as well as a thick ceramic jar. The jar itself was cold, and its contents pasty and pungent. The man explained that it was necessary for the bread to rise, demonstrated the proper way to mix their ingredients to dough, and then left Verian to work.

Verian mixed, kneaded, tossed, and pounded. Mixed, kneaded, tossed, and pounded. The other man looked after the oats, which were just finishing dawn came seeping in. The large cook came, and boys trickled in. Sometimes alone. Sometimes in pairs. One came over to stand across the table from Verian, and grabbed rolls of dough to smack onto trays for the ovens. The great fat man left only a grunt by way of comment, then shuffled off to oversee the cutting of crisp, sweet apples.

Fresh bread went into the ovens. Sleek boys in white wraps came to fetch hand-trays laden with cooked oats, apple slices, and clumps of brown sugar that caught the morning light streaming past the now-open shutters. Verian continued to work the dough until he ran out of flour and eggs. The ceramic jar with its runny paste was taken away by another set of anonymous hands, and the elf was shuttled off to his corner for a breakfast of cooled oats and half of an apple.

Verian was not given much time to consume his meal before he was escorted to a basket of pheasants in need of plucking. While he very much detested this particular chore at first, he came to find it somewhat cathartic. He grabbed fistful after fistful of clinging feathers, and made more of a mess than he needed to for the way he would shove them down into the pail. Feathers tickled at his nose and clung to his fingers, and the dead birds flopped limply about between his hands. He took to wringing their necks, imagining them the necks of every person in charge he'd yet encountered, and then set one after another into a pathetic pile of plucked flesh.

As he worked, Verian became distantly aware of semi-familiar figures. Here a nose he recognized, there a birthmark on a thigh, another thick-set brow and sunken eyes. Some were grim, others seemed merry. The sleek boys who came only at meal times to take prepared trays were nearly

seductive in their apparent contentment. Verian could understand Kellen's desire, even if he did not aspire to it himself.

One chore turned into another. Apples were peeled, cored, and chopped. Nuts were shelled. Dishes were scrubbed, rinsed, and dried. Mid-day meal came closer to evening than noon, was flavorless, and choked down quickly that he might pull brussels sprouts from their stalks. More dishes were scrubbed, the floor was swept, pheasants were stuffed. On and on, until evening came upon them and Verian was allowed to take refuge once again beneath the table.

Verian was not wretched and miserable as he had been in the fields, but different muscles ached from use, and he was exhausted from the change in hours. He found himself oddly lulled by the clatter of the kitchen as the last of the cleaning up and nightly preparations were made. He was asleep before the last of the lamps was extinguished, and the stoves made dormant.

* * *

"Shh." Mikel's voice was warm with laughter, breathy with mischief and excitement.

"I can't help it, you're--"

Verian's words were cut short by the press of his own hand to his mouth. He fidgeted where he stood, back pressed to the smooth bark of the tree behind him. Whorls of tiny leaves on wispy, drooping branches shifted and swayed in the springtime breeze. Their private alcove did not feel nearly private enough for the way that Mikel was nuzzling at the bulge in Verian's trousers.

"Ooooh," Verian sighed. He pulled his hand down to his throat, his fingers fanning out along the side of his neck. "How long do we have?"

He could feel the warmth of Mikel's breath through his trousers. He ached to move his hips beyond their vague stirring, to loosen his laces and ease the crushing strain of the thick-spun cotton. He wanted so badly to spear his fingers through the other's hair and thrust his cock into the waiting heat of Mikel's mouth.

"Not long enough," Mikel rumbled and gave another nuzzle. He turned his head to bite at the inside of Verian's thigh, right through his trousers.

"Aaaaah. Pity."

"Soon," Mikel promised as he stood.

His palms settled to the tree at either side of Verian's shoulders, and he leaned in to join their mouths in a warm crush. Verian sagged back

against the tree. He was attempting to ease the racing of his heart, but the kiss only seemed to make it skip faster. His cock gave a pulse against his trousers. Verian tipped his head back and brought his hands up to give Mikel a little nudge. Off.

"Stop that. I don't want to go to theory lecture worrying about my trousers scaring anyone off."

"Oh, I don't think it's your trousers that will scare them off," Mikel teased, his teeth warm against Verian's jaw. He relented after a moment, however, and took a sweeping step backward.

"Cad."

The blue of Mikel's eyes were bright, his smile warm and wide.

* * *

"What?"

Verian dug his heels against his closed eyes and drew an unsteady breath. His heart was racing, and he was so hard it nearly hurt. He could still see Mikel's face against the backs of his eyelids, but the voice in his ears was not Mikel's. The hand palming at his balls was not Mikel's.

"Nothing. I was sleeping."

"You're not anymore," Kellen pointed out.

"No." Verian flattened his palms over his face, and shivered back against the tuck of Kellen's body. "I'm not."

"And you're obviously in the mood."

Verian bit the tip of his tongue. He was compelled to argue, but Kellen had wrapped his fingers about Verian's cock and taken to slowly, slowly stroking. He grasped, pulled, twisted, eased down again with another pulsing squeeze. Verian rolled his head in the straw and gave a quiet groan.

"See? I'm getting better."

Verian couldn't argue. Kellen's skills really were improving. Slender fingers passed along Verian's aching cock. They flicked along the swell of the head, slicking thin beads of clear, seeping fluid along the engorged flesh, and then passed down again with a cupping of palm and stretch over the hang of his balls. Verian strained forward into the slow, steady stroking of Kellen's hand. Away from the dig of the other boy's cock against the curve of his ass.

"Ooooooh. You are."

Verian could feel Kellen's smile. The pull of the boy's lips was at Verian's shoulders, and the faces of damp teeth pressed against the jutting of delicate bone. Verian let one hand flop uselessly to the straw, and took

to palming along his chest with the other. He pinched hard at one tingling nipple, and sucked in a sharp breath for the way the sensation leapt down into his gut and up along his spine. He went flush, laughed quietly, and gave a short buck into Kellen's looped grasp.

"Faster," Verian whispered throatily.

Kellen was most obliging. He shifted closer to Verian once again, pressing cock to ass, chest to spine. Kellen's hand went gliding down, up, down again in swift flicks of his wrist. His arm pumped in steady, familiar gesture. Faster, and squeezing, gliding, pulling, teasing more of that seeping fluid. Vigorous in jerk and pull. Kellen's breath pattered warmly at Verian's shoulder, at the back of his neck. His trapped cock ground uncomfortably against the curve of Verian's ass for the way the both of them moved.

"Oh. Good. Yes, yes, Kellen. Very good."

Verian's toes curled. He was flush, trembling. It felt as though there were a fire being held to the bottoms of his feet, to the palms of his hands. He was too hot at the sides of his neck, and he squeezed his eyes tightly shut as the heat mixed with pressure. The stale smell of the straw in his nose was accompanied by the sharper tang of cum as Verian's cock swelled, spattering sticky white globs into the golden stalks, and swelled again. Verian trembled back against Kellen, remembered to breathe with a gasp, and shuddered hard as another burst of eager pulsing ran through his cock and along his nerves. He realized belatedly that Kellen's hand had stilled, and that the small of his own back was smeared with wet warmth.

"I'll go get us some water," Kellen managed between pants.

Verian lay in a daze after Kellen's departure, sticky to the front and the back. He stared through the dark, and poked his fingertips about to locate the mess in front of him. The straw was tussled about, rearranged to cover it as best as he could without seeing. There were hurried footsteps from behind. A cool, coarse rag found Verian's hip, and from there traveled to wipe clean the mess on his skin.

"Here," Kellen whispered, "I've brought you some to drink as well."

Verian propped himself up on his elbow. He twisted about, found the small cup of cool water, and quickly drained it of its contents. He set the thing down to the ground, then snatched the rag away from Kellen impatiently. He made quick work of cleaning his own belly, then pushed the cloth and cup toward the sound of the other boy's breathing.

"You shouldn't be coming here."

"I know."

"What are you doing, then? Do you want to get yourself killed?"

Kellen laughed. Fingers fell clumsily along Verian's cheek. They felt

out the point of his chin, and then the curve of his mouth. Kellen pressed a soft, fleeting kiss to Verian's frown.

"Don't be ridiculous. Delmi's never done anything to hurt me. They might give me a lashing. Maybe. You have all the wrong ideas, Verian." Kellen punctuated the words with another brush of lips.

"You really are an idiot."

Kellen laughed again. Fondly. Quietly. He wrapped his arm about Verian's shoulders in swift embrace, and then turned to pad off.

"I'll be back tomorrow night," the darkness promised, Kellen's voice carrying through it.

"Idiot," Verian muttered before rolling to his side to fall once again to sleep.

Chapter 7

The best thing about working in the kitchen was that it was warm. It was so warm during late afternoon, in fact, that they would often crack the windows despite the rain that came down in sheets on the monastery. The heat carried through into the evenings, keeping his limbs loose and his joints from turning achy.

The second best thing about working in the kitchen was the lack of beatings. Save for the occasional smack from the cook's meaty hand for having been clumsy or done something inattentive, Verian was left in relative peace. The effort of the new work faded in time, though it felt good to strain in the warmth cast by the stoves, ovens, and the hearth fire that kept the place fragrant with the smell of stock. There were no boots to his side, no bruising curls of finger into his flesh. He woke every morning to his silent, stoic companion, but the worst he received on a regular basis was a disapproving glance or curt reprimand.

There were other improvements as well. While the food he ate was largely unappetizing, there was the occasional perk. Bits of honey-basted boar, of peppered, buttery turnips, of sugar-preserved fruits. The occasional spoonful of sugared oats or tart, creamy yogurt. It seemed that all of the men who worked in the kitchen snuck treats here and there, and if the cook noticed, he did not care enough to do anything about it.

Then there was Kellen. Kellen who came every night. Kellen who visited for increasingly longer intervals. While Verian appreciated this on some levels, he worried for Kellen's seeming disregard of any risk involved. Still, it was difficult to focus on that worry when Kellen was tucked up against him, grinding and tantalizing, doing things with his mouth and hands the likes of which Verian had never before experienced. And every time it was better. So often did Kellen introduce him to new tricks. To new sensations with deft touches or the very lack thereof. They did not speak much, nor often, but after many nights of shuffling about in the straw, Verian was content to keep his worries to himself and find solace in Kellen's company.

Verian worked diligently, washing and scrubbing, peeling and plucking. He boiled oats, sliced rutabagas, stuffed birds and boars. He was not allowed access to the carving knives or the butcher cleavers. Instead that privilege was reserved for the same three young men whose aprons and clothes were stained bloody. At night, the blades were locked away in a small, locked closet, and try as he might, Verian did not manage to see where the cook stored the key.

The longer he was there, the less effort Verian put into plotting for his

escape. It was easy to grow complacent. Perhaps Charles meant to abandon him to the kitchen entirely. It certainly seemed that way, as Verian had seen neither hide nor hair of the man.

A month had passed in this relative ease. One afternoon the young men working in the kitchen were gathered to shiver in the storeroom packed with brooms, buckets, and bags of grain. They were made to sit on a stool, one at a time, and to be as still as possible while their hair and nails were trimmed. Verian's hair was cut shorter than it had ever been, and he found himself feeling strangely exposed as his back was dusted free of short, itchy strands. He'd been cooperative enough through the process, but he found mood sinking as he walked away from the stool. Felt his eyes prick and water.

Ashamed more by his reaction than by his new appearance, Verian slipped through the open door and out into the hall. Nobody stopped him. He walked the narrow servant's corridor, past a series of closed doors placed curiously close together, and around a bend. There he found a set of creaky wooden steps that wound steeply up and about. Verian curled to sit, shivering against the cool wall, and wept quietly into his palms. He sniffed and wiped at his face over and over with the calloused contours of his fingers and palms.

Once the peculiar wave of grief had passed, Verian again collected himself to stand. He wiped at his face with the backs of his hands and turned his stare not back the way he came, but up. Up at where the steps and the wall curved to slip out of sight. One step after another, he brought more of the hall into view. There was a door at the top that sat slightly ajar, and Verian pushed it open further. The hinges gave a low, jagged groan that prompted Verian to hunch. To crowd back against the wall.

There were no angry voices. No footsteps to greet his caution. Verian poked his head around the doorframe. He was greeted with the sight of someone's living quarters. From the size of the bed in such a small space, Verian was willing to wager it belonged to the corpulent overseer of the kitchen below. There was a chest of drawers to one side of the rounded room, a small window shut above it. A sidetable, a washbasin, a well-scrubbed chamber pot. At the foot of the bed, a mat on the floor with a well-padded pillow and heavy quilt. Verian scowled. Of more interest was the set of hooks that hung near the door itself. A set of hooks that was conspicuously empty.

Backing slowly, Verian returned the door to the state it had been in. He twisted about to go padding back down the steps, only to draw up short. The steps were creaking beneath the weight of another. Verian pushed himself flush to the wall and stared fretfully down at the curve in

the hall. Held his breath, and let it out in a rush as the one ascending the stairs finally stepped into view.

"I got lost," Verian uttered in a rush, eager to explain.

The man facing him frowned deeper than usual, and cocked his head to the right. His dark eyes turned from Verian to the door beyond, then back again. In typical fashion, Verian's morning instructor was quiet on the matter. He pointed one long finger down the steps, then brushed past the elf to press into the room beyond.

Verian pattered down the steps, breath caught and heart racing. His thoughts were frantic in their scramble, turning one over the other as he went. Back around the bend. Back down the short hall. The others had returned to the kitchen, and were working diligently at their appointed tasks. Nobody seemed to have noticed Verian's absence. Nobody seemed to have cared. It was possible, he reasoned, that nobody knew save for the man who had caught him.

Verian panted as he worked. Breathed heavily. He set himself to an empty station, stuffing pies full of chunks of meat and scraps of tubers. He was distracted, and spilled more than he should. He was quick to pluck the bits that landed on the table and drop them back into the waiting shells. Another boy came to collect them, and frowned mildly at Verian.

"Hurry up."

A quick bob of his head was given, and Verian bowed diligently over his task. He set the pies up as swift as he could manage, struggling to catch up to the buckets of mixed ingredients that were being brought over by another. It gave him something to focus on. Something besides his own frantic desires. If that was where the cook slept. That was where the key would be. The difficult was, of course, that that was also where the cook would be. No, no. He had to focus on pies.

Focus Verian did. One after another, until he'd caught up to his companions. The smell of baking pies filled the kitchens, and the sleek boys in their white shifts came funneling through one after another, fetching pitchers and trays stocked with delicious food. Verian stared after them, feeling a brief pang of envy.

The man who had caught him in the hall upstairs arrived with a shallow bowl of boiled potatoes and pickled cabbage. He thrust it at Verian, eyes narrowed, and pointed toward the nook with the table and heap of soiled straw. Verian was, it seemed, being sent to bed early. He ducked his head to hide his grimace, and clutched the dish close as he went padding off. A shift of gaze over his shoulder allowed Verian to catch sight of lingering scrutiny, and as such he placed his bowl to the floor to curl over it and lip up his meal a bite at a time. He choked down all of

half of it before flopping over into the straw.

It was not easy to get to sleep. Verian lay there for some time, staring at the wall, listening to the bustle of the kitchen. He breathed in the delicious aroma of pies. He tossed onto his back, his side, his belly. Rolled and shifted restlessly. There was no getting to sleep. Not even after the noise had died down. Not after the lights had all been snuffed.

The heat from the stoves began to seep, and Verian knew it would be a little too cold at the coldest part of the night. Silence settled over the kitchen, save for the occasional scurry of rats or mice. Noises that did not concern Verian. He lay in the dark, staring up at the blackness that was the underside of the table. Stared and waited. Waited. Too afraid of his own daring to move.

The door leading to the courtyard opened and shut. Swift, shuffling steps whispered closer through the room. A body made chill from the outside air fell into the straw and pressed close, shivering briefly.

"It smells even better in here than usual," Kellen whispered appreciatively.

"We made pies today. May for a while yet. The vegetables are starting to turn."

"Ahhh."

Kellen's arm looped about Verian's belly. The cool tip of his nose pressed to Verian's cheek. Kellen breathed deeply, and the warmth of his sigh poured across Verian's throat.

"I think-" Verian began.

"Oh, no." Kellen interrupted. "Please don't ask me to go."

"Why would you think that?"

"I could tell from your tone. I don't want to go, Verian. I want to show you what I learned today."

"I think it would be best if you left."

"I think it would be best if I stayed."

"Stop being difficult. I could get you caught. Get you in trouble."

"You wouldn't!"

"I might."

There was a considerable pause as Kellen mulled that over. "You might, but you wouldn't."

Verian sighed heavily. "Very well, but stay here. I need to get something."

"What are you up to, Verian?"

"Something that would make it best if you left."

"Oh! Verian, no!"

"Go or stay, but so help me if you make a single sound or movement

that gets me caught..."

Kellen stirred in the darkness. His limbs pulled away from Verian, leaving behind a faint chill where they'd rested. Verian sighed out in relief, shifting to worm out from under the table.

"Go back to Delmi."

"Can I see you tomorrow, then?"

"Perhaps."

"I hope you reconsider. Whatever it is. I hope you go back to sleep and behave."

"Perhaps," Verian muttered darkly, "you should try behaving. Go back, Kellen."

The bottoms of Kellen's feet whispered across the worn kitchen floor. The door opened, letting a cool breeze sweep through the room. It shut again with a muffled thump.

Verian rubbed at his face. He drew a deep breath and picked his way through the dark of the kitchen. One step, another. He was reasonably certain he knew where everything was, but he still moved slowly. Cautiously. He still held one breath, gasped in another, and held that as well. On and on, until he was just at the threshold to the hall.

There came a hiss in the darkness. A spark of light to the left. Blinding at first, for the way it flared, for the way Verian's eyes had been straining. His shoulders fell back against the wall as he turned, and he brought one hand up to shield his eyes.

"That's not a very good idea." The words were clipped. The voice familiar.

"I have to-" Verian broke off as he was interrupted.

"Don't lie." The fire had settled on the wick of a single candle, and the golden light fingered unsteadily across a dusky-skinned cheek. "How long has that other boy been coming here?"

Verian blinked slowly. He stared at the taller figure. The man from the hall. The man who woke him every morning. The man whom Verian had been certain would be sound asleep at this point, if only for the hours he kept.

"What boy?"

The familiar, ever-present frown grew deeper. "Come with me."

"I would rather go back to bed."

"I am certain you would. Come with me."

Verian sighed. He stepped away from the wall, following the man's lead. Out into the hall. Past the door where his hair had been trimmed. They stopped at the nearest of the doors set all too close together. Waning flickers of light from the candle only seemed to emphasize the darkness

beyond the door as it was made to swing inward.

“In.”

Verian backed a step. No, no. Not another cell. He could feel that darkness pulling at him already. Feel it squashing the air from his lungs. He turned over the side of his foot, nearly stumbling. Turned and ran.

The light from the candle jumped and tossed, swaying shadows to odd angles. The flame guttered as the world was plunged again into darkness. There was a hasty smack of bare feet after his own. The smell of melted wax. Breath too close behind him. A sharp pain burst behind Verian’s ear, and he was aware of falling. Falling, and then nothing at all.

The cold was eating at him. It had set into Verian’s ribs and his belly, was sinking its fingers deep into his chest. His thighs were numb, his feet felt frozen, and his head was pounding. Pounding.

Verian rolled slowly to his side. The world about him was dim, and the floor was frigid. A draft gusted between the underside of the door, and the underside of a small, boarded window set high in the wall. He shivered violently as he pushed himself up to sit. The change in position set his stomach to lurching, and his head rolled heavily about on his neck.

Verian swayed to the side, twisting about to brace against the wall, and stared about the cramped interior. The room he was in was long enough to lay in lengthwise, but narrow. It was doubtful that he could sit side by side with another person in so cramped a space. The door was worn, and strangely lacking in a knob.

Work-worn hands trembled in their press over Verian’s face. His head would not stop throbbing. It ached unbearably, even through the cold, so that Verian took to tugging at the ends of his hair in an attempt to ease some of the pressure. A decidedly unsuccessful attempt.

“Hello?”

There was no reply to his hoarse whisper. Only the whisper of the draft and the sound of rain beyond the window. The constant exchange of chilly air brought with it the smell of baking bread. Verian edged closer to the door, where the draft was more warm than frozen. His fingers curled against the smooth wood, and he stared out through the narrow hole where a lock had been fitted. It was impossible to discern much beyond the golden glow, and straining his neck made his head hurt more. Verian bowed his chin toward his chest and slouched to ache and wait in silence.

It was some time before Verian heard footsteps moving past. His heart skipped, and he jerked upright with a catch of breath. His palm tingled with the force of his smack to the door. He pounded at it with the side of

his fist. The steps paused, and the light through the lock blotted out.

"Hello??"

Nothing.

"Let me out," Verian tried again with another smack of his palm to the wood.

More silence. The steps shuffled on. The light returned in its wan stream. Verian sagged against the door as an internal came welling up from his gut and wrapped about his limbs. He collapsed in on himself, held hostage by his own despair.

Unlike the time he spent in Charles' cell, alone for days on end, Verian was not left to sob into his knees for long. Heavier steps approached the door, and the striking of metal echoed near his right ear. Verian floundered forward, abandoning his curl against the wooden slab. He pivoted over his hip, squinting at the familiar silhouette that came to stand over him. His gut gave a nervous tremble, and Verian's elbow went out so suddenly that he found himself crashing down through his arm to settle gracelessly on the frigid floor once again.

"You gotta be the dumbest damn thing livin'," Charles declared without much heat. "Get up and come on. Yer done in the kitchens."

His tongue felt thick in his mouth, and Verian could not rid himself of the choking sensation this provoked no matter how he swallowed. Everything seemed to be happening both too slow and too fast. He moved up onto his feet, hissed for the painful prickling through his toes and heels, and shifted reluctantly closer to Charles. Charles stood immobile for a moment, staring down at Verian, then turned and led the way out. Out through the kitchen, where Verian imagined every shift of eyes his direction was a palpable thing. He cupped his hand over the lump behind his ear, fixed his own stare to the floor, and trailed dejectedly after Charles.

The chill outside was a shock after the momentary relief of walking through the kitchen. Verian exhaled heavily, gasped short and sharp, and took immediately to shivering. To trembling as he crowded closer to Charles' heels. The pace was brisk, and Charles set out across the courtyard without care for the way the heavy curtain of rain. Verian had no choice but to follow, though he slipped and slid dangerously through the muddy grass. Pools of water sprang up between his toes for every step he took, and sent stabbing cold cramping through the bottoms of his feet. Everything was gray and grim, and what little light made it through the heavy storm clouds did little to warm Verian's skin.

One courtyard led to a brick walkway led to another. They passed through an archway that broke a low stone wall, and gravitated closer and

closer to the monstrous cathedral. Verian shivered and coughed, cowered and began to hang back. He didn't like the look of this, not a bit.

Charles disappeared around the corner of a tall building, the edge obscured by the wide green leaves of the vine that climbed it. Verian delayed a half second longer, contemplating turning. Running. Hiding until he could find a way out. But where would he hide? All of his previous attempts had only put him in worse positions. His feet smacked along the cold, slick bricks of the walkway as he hurried to catch up.

Verian was nearly upon Charles when he was made to draw up short. Before him was a sprawling garden framed by three tall buildings, so that its edges were largely shielded from the elements. It was lush, and wet, and would doubtless be beautiful in the spring when the flowers emerged from the abundance of green. Crushed rock and shell lined the paths that ran at stark lines through the garden, the widest of which passed from the wide doors of what was presently the furthest building to the carefully maintained pergola at the garden's center.

It was what was under the pergola that had given Verian pause. There, bound with his back to a post near an enclave of weathered benches, was Kellen. He appeared largely unharmed, though his face was streaked with tears, and his skin prickled as gooseflesh. Drops of rain managed their way through the thick weaving of twigs and leaves, and some had even splattered to leave fat, glistening plops and slender trails along Kellen's skin.

Seated at one of the benches, nearly indistinguishable at first for his gray-toned clothing and statuesque stillness, was the vicar. Charles' fingers locking about Verian's arm caused him to startle, and he pulled against that hold even as he was made to move forward. To step into the sandy path so that pale, gritty grains stuck and dug against the bottoms of his feet. Verian did his best to remain tucked behind Charles, but Charles hauled him about to stand before the still, seated figure.

"Do you wish to die today, boy?" The vicar's words were clear. Concise. There was no emotion behind them, only a hint of boredom.

"No, sir," Verian answered hastily.

"I see. Do you care to explain your continued blatant defiance? Or perhaps your gross misconduct? No, do not speak. You are fortunate that I am lenient."

A dull ache formed at either side of Verian's jaw for the force of its clenching. His toes curled repeatedly against the ground. He pulled at Charles' grip, though without any real effort, and shuffled back against the man's hold as Vicar Hoch rose. The vicar's cold gray eyes slid away from Verian, dismissing him, and settled on Charles.

"Three days. Bloody him first. Perhaps he will learn his lesson this time."

"Yessir, vicar." Charles bowed his chin toward his chest as he spoke. "Sharlie!"

Verian twisted about in Charles' grip. Delmi was rushing along the path on the balls of his feet. He must have left his sanctuary in a hurry, as he'd not taken the time to cover his dark skin from the cool abuse of the rain. It saturated the short crop of hair along the man's scalp and flooded over his brow to leave him blinking his eyes repeatedly. Verian sagged in relief. Delmi would fix this.

"Sharlie, what are you do-- oh. Veecar." Delmi folded just under the shelter of the pergola, kneeling near Hoch. "Veecar, that is my boy there. Sharlie 'has no right to bind 'im so."

Hoch's long, spindly fingers settled to the top of Delmi's hair like the legs of a spider feeling out the vibrations in its web. His yellow fingers curled through the short, dense hair along the top of the man's head.

"Three days, Delmi." The vicar declared evenly.

"But veecar!"

"You may ensure that he survives it, but he will remain tied. If you do not yet know why, then you may discuss the matter with Charles." The vicar's hand rose in a dismissive sweep. "I have other matters which require my attention. I trust the two of you can manage such trivial matters on your own."

Vicar Hoch turned away from the small gathering, Charles still resolutely clinging to Verian, Delmi still down on one knee. The old man gathered a damp umbrella from its prop alongside the bench, and stalked into the rain.

Verian slanted a wide-eyed look between Delmi, Charles, and Kellen. Delmi rose slowly, dusting the path from his leg, and fixed a look on Charles that prompted Verian to cringe away from the dark-skinned man.

"You 'ad no right, Sharlie." Delmi's voice was brittle with anger.

"Ain't 'bout rights, Delmi. He was breakin' the rules. You know how this works. S'prised you didn't catch 'im at it. If yer too busy with Alex t'handle another one, you shouldn't take 'em."

"'e 'as no ability, Sharlie. You suggest I send 'im to learn with Reeshard? 'e would be miserable there."

"What I *suggest*, Delmi, is that you pay more attention to what yer doin'. This is yer fault too. You gotta teach them or they don't learn."

A jerk of arm in its socket had Verian lurching from behind Charles. He was forced up onto his toes, practically suspended from the sudden heft. Verian shivered, the bite of a passing breeze nearly as cold as the

look Delmi had leveled on Charles.

"Some of us 'ave different ways of teaching than others, Sharlie."

"Yeah well, yer way ain't workin' too good, is'it?"

Verian gave a tug at his arm, and reached up with his free hand to try and pry Charles' fingers free. His efforts, while sincere, only served to have him hoisted further. Verian hissed lightly through his teeth, and kicked punitively at Charles' knee. Delmi snorted and stalked off in a fit of palpable anger, leaving Verian to scratch and kick at Charles as he was hauled to a wooden post across from Kellen. A wooden post with a length of rope coiled at its base.

"Nononono!"

"S'yer own damn fault, boy." Charles gave Verian a shake, then smacked him upside the head with the flat of his palm. "Hold still or you'll make it worse."

"Please don't. Please. I'll behave. I swear I'll behave." Verian pleaded rather than demand, though was momentarily interrupted as Charles shoved him into the post. He pushed against it, kicked at the ground, and threw himself into the larger man even as coils of coarse rope bit at his wrists. "Please. It was a mistake."

"Yup, an' this way you'll remember it."

"I'm sorry, Verian," Kellen called from where he sniffed and shivered in his own binds.

"Shut yer trap, you." Charles snapped.

Kellen said nothing more, and the next few minutes were occupied with grunts and pants of effort, with pushing and clutching, straining and growls. In the end, Verian was left with his cheek pressed to a corner of wood, and wrapped with rope in so many places that he could scarcely move. He stared down at the bed of sweeping green leaves and lush clover before him, and gave a deflating sigh. He regretted doing so in an instant, as Charles took that moment of resignation to pull the rope tighter still. The sound of the man stepping away was quickly muffled by the rain.

"I really am sorry," Kellen repeated from behind him.

"Stop apologizing, Kellen."

"But--"

"No."

Verian sighed into the silence that ensued. He closed his eyes and sagged against the rope. Rope that did not give, and instead ate at his wrists, knees, and ankles, bit uncomfortably beneath the edges of his shoulders, squeezed at the lean muscle of his thigh. Verian squirmed in place, attempting to get comfortable, but there was no comfort to be had.

There were footsteps crunching in the fine substrate of the walkway.

A soft, cowed gasp came from Kellen's direction. The air gave an odd hum off to Verian's right. The crack of leather to skin went largely unheard by Verian, who was more concerned with the agonizing burn that had just spread along the lower left of his ribcage. It took a moment before he was able to breathe, and then a moment more before a pained howl escaped him.

No sooner had the sound birthed from his lips before the next strike came. Verian strained against the rope, unconcerned with the fibrous edges, or the splinters that he gleaned from the post. He wretched and choked, so pained that he could not so much as sob. The lash continued to strike, again, and again. Slow and steady, so that he felt his skin warm for the run of his own blood. It tickled along the inner curve of his ankle, then instep of his foot, and trailed between his toes. A strange, maddening contrast to the burn and sting that had his nerves screaming from the backs of his arms to the backs of his calves.

Verian sobbed even after the lashes had stopped. He coughed and choked and wept so violently that he wretched against the wood of the post and over the top of his arm. Kellen's wet sniffs mixed with his own in his ears, until at last Verian ran out of tears. He was left simply to whimper and moan as handfuls of raindrops wove their way through the dense growth atop the pergola and plopped cool onto his inflamed skin.

"You'll be alright, Verian," Kellen called in an attempt to be reassuring.

"Piss off, Kellen." The words were drawn-out and miserable.

"You'll see. Delmi will fix it."

A bitter tide rose into the bile at the back of Verian's throat. He said nothing, but instead focused on breathing as shallowly through his nose as possible. Kellen was obligingly quiet. The silence let his mind drift, and the realization that he would be bound in such a state for the next three days drove Verian into another fit of sobs.

Chapter 8

It was many hours before Delmi's arrival. By that point, the ground beneath Verian was soiled with blood and urine, and a small puddle had formed about his knees and toes for the addition of the rain that plopped and patted onto his skin. Every fat drop felt like the striking of a hammer against his inflamed skin.

Verian's ears twitched as he listened to Delmi's careful steps. He turned his cheek against the post, and held his breath as he felt the man crouch nearer. Cool fingers grazed his ribs, their tips damp from the constant fall of the rain.

"Ooh. Verian. I am sorry." Delmi's breath flooded warm over Verian's cold shoulder, provoking his wrought nerves further. "I can only do so much. You understand, yes?"

The muffled, ragged groan that parted Verian's lips took more effort to muster than he'd expected. He tucked his face into the post again, his eyes squeezing shut. His muscles tensed in anticipation of the tingle and sting that accompanied the cool salve that Kellen had once applied to his wounds, but it did not come. Instead the air about him grew warm and close, as if he were in a confined space. It heated, smothering in its humidity, intent on making every shallow, labored breath an utter waste of resources.

His limbs tingled and his body ached, until the sensation passed so abruptly, so thoroughly that Verian was left panting and dazed. The air was again cool within his chest, refreshing in its passage. The feeling of Delmi's fingers parting from Verian's ribs was not one of agony, and the fat drops that fell from the overhead foliage were no longer abusive in their landing.

"Kellen," Delmi murmured. Verian's ear twitched as he listened to the man twist about, as his weight crushed the ground in his withdrawal. "ere is some food. Eat, yes? Eat."

"What about Verian, Master Delmi?" Kellen's voice quavered as he spoke.

"I 'ave done what I can. Any more, and there will be trouble. There. That is good. Here. Eat more. I will 'ave you down in the morning, yes? I am sorry, Kellen, but it was the best I could do with the veecar."

"Thank you, Master Delmi." The sentiment was more squeaks than words.

Silence followed, and then the sound of Delmi's light, hurried stride. Away, away. So that Verian was again left with his own misery, even

reduced as it was. His misery, and the sound of Kellen's sniveling.

"I'm sorry, Verian."

Verian said nothing. It was easier that way.

The dark of the storm gave way to the dark of night. The rain let off briefly, though the leaves above continued to drip down on him. Steady and slow. It might have been nice to listen to, nice to enjoy, were he not in the position he was in. As it was, it was its own steady torture, and the chill that set in as the night grew bolder left him shivering and twitching against the rope.

Verian woke with a start, though this did little more than abrade his skin further.

He was painfully aware of how cold his feet were, though this was largely due to the distant contrast of warmth along the bottom of one, heating about his toes. There was sniggering from behind him, giggling, as the sharp stink of urine hit his nose. A long, low creak parted from his lips. Two sets of footsteps went scurrying away, boyish laughter trailing with them. The cold bit at his bones, and the world grew hazy again.

"Verian," Mikel's voice called from the distance. "Hurry up!"

"I'm hurrying. I'm hurrying." Verian tugged at his laces, abandoned the treeline with a hop, and hurried for the road. Mikel was well ahead, now. Entirely around the bend. "It's not as though the whales are going to go anywhere."

"The entire point is that they are going somewhere," Mikel called back, his voice migrating along the path.

"Will you wait a moment?" Verian was growing winded in his struggle to catch up to the man.

"Come on, come on. We're nearly there."

Just ahead. Just around the bend. That's where Mikel would be. Verian shuffled his feet faster, kicking dirt up from the road. How had it become so far away?

"Wait, Mikel! Please, wait," he called again.

Verian's chest was tight, and his sinuses burned. The trees seemed so tall, and the golden sunlight that had been so pleasant a moment before, became oppressive. He took to running under its glare, eager for the shade that would come with the bend in the road, eager to catch up to Mikel. Just around the bend.

"No, Sharlie. Kellen is staying 'ome with Alex. You should not leave Verian there. It is not right."

"You know the rules, Delmi. Don't you try any of yer stinkin' tricks on me. Elfboy's stayin' right where he is til his three days is up."

"At least let me tend to 'is fever. Let me clean 'im."

"Nope. He ain't anywhere near close to dyin'. He don't need it. You can patch him up later."

"Sharlie!" Delmi's protests carried on, growing fainter and fainter as dapples of green and black swam through Verian's vision.

The darkness might have been oppressive, except that Verian found it liberating. It was a blessed relief from the brilliant white that had burnt his eyes and his skin. Here, too, there was not the high-pitched tone that pierced his ears. Instead there was a constant shushed whispering, not unlike the lapping of the ocean to the sand. His skin did not burn as it had moments before. Instead he felt nothing, and he realized with a calmness born of clarity, that he'd lost his body. He was, instead, a series of disembodied thoughts. A distant awareness surrounded by shadows, by darkness. And then the darkness spoke.

"There. 'e is mended."

"Why ain't he wakin' up?"

"Maybe if you 'ad let me tend to 'im when I wanted to, 'e would not be so poorly, Sharlie."

"Chase yer tail, Delmi."

The toe of a too familiar boot impacted with Verian's ribs. He sucked in a ragged breath, swallowed down half of a sob, and forced his eyes open. To rounded silhouettes hovered above him, dark against a field of green. The rain had broken, and he could hear birds chirping in the distance.

"Get up, boy. Delmi says yer fine."

Verian bit at the tip of his tongue. He rolled slowly to his side, stiff through all of his joints, aching through to the core of himself. His fingers

splayed on the gritty path, and he slowly, carefully, found his feet.

"Fine is a relative term," he declared as he dusted off his fingers and palms.

"Ain't so bad you can't mouth off," Charles growled.

The sound of the slap hit Verian's ears in time with the warm tingling that spread over his cheek. He hissed through his teeth, and gripped tightly at his right hand with the left, and his left hand with the right. A moment passed in which he calmed himself, and he became aware of Delmi's quiet withdrawal. Verian opened his mouth to thank the man, but Charles was already grabbing at his shoulder and pushing him along in the opposite direction.

"Couldn't be happy with a good job, could ya?" Charles' fingers dug bruisingly into the unmarred skin of Verian's shoulder, and gave a hard, jostling shake. "Hadta go and make things difficult, didn'cha?"

Verian staggered as he walked. His welts from the lashing were gone, his hide intact, but his body still felt strangely numb. Mud from the path clung to the bottoms of his feet and bunched between his toes, but it did not bother him as it once would have. Nor did the cold of the breeze that played beneath the glare of the slate-gray sky.

"C'mon, c'mon. You'n walk faster then that."

"Where are we going?"

"Gotcha some new work. Maybe y'learn yer lesson this time."

Verian ducked his head. He stared quietly at the ground, watching the path pass beneath his feet. The grit of the walkway grew steadily coarser, the greenery at either side less tended. Blocks of shadow interrupted the light, their presence enough to lower the temperature just slightly where they lingered. Verian hurried as the ground pitched upward, and he dared a look over his shoulder. Charles jabbed him in the spine for it, but not before Verian caught a glimpse of a new portion of the monastery. It was so much larger than he'd realized.

"No lollygaggin'," Charles reprimanded.

Up and up they went along a gently sloping hill. Toward a building that was little more than a large shed, one end of it giving way to a wide block of fencing. Verian became aware of the occasional yip or yap of noise, the sound of bodies scuffling. The stench as he wind turned caused his eyes to water. The sickly sweet of rotting meet, the sharp ungent of old urine, and the throat-closing aroma of shit.

"Oi! Charles!"

A hunched, heavy figure emerged from the building ahead. His clothes hung on his body at odd angles, his shoulders far too narrow for

the sheets of fat that draped down from just below his ribs to the tops of his knees. Verian tried not to stare as the man's pant leg bunched into a fold of flesh at the midpoint of his thigh.

"Ian!" Charles' voice boomed past Verian's shoulder. "Yer lookin' more and more like one of them dogsa yers."

"Oh shut it," the large man retorted as he drew to a halt.

Verian angled to the side, intent on keeping as much of a distance between himself and the stranger as possible. He watched as Charles went so far as to embrace the stranger. One bowed his head toward the other, and they exchanged murmured words as Ian rubbed his stubby fingers across his bald pate. Those same fingers delved downward to work at a thick broom of hair on the man's upper lip as he took to bobbing his head at Charles.

Charles turned toward Verian and beckoned him nearer. Verian's toes curled as though he might take root, and he sank his weight through his heels. A gust of wind buffeted at his exposed flank, urging him to run. One heavy, shuffling step followed another until he jolted to a halt before Charles and Ian.

"Huh," Ian half-grunted as he reached to pinch the tip of Verian's ear.

"Ow! Hey!" Verian jerked backward, his hand clapping over the offended point.

Ian laughed. Well, it might have been a laugh. His breath puffed erratically, and his great jowls wobbled against the flaccid droop of his mouth. Verian recoiled.

"Alright, Charles. I'll get him started. Don't you worry about a thing."

"Ain't worried, Ian."

"Yeah, yeah. Just remember we're even now."

"Yeah, yeah," Charles echoed.

Verian twisted about, watching as Charles made his way back down the hill. Verian stared after the forward hunch of the man's shoulders, the strange ambling of his legs. Then came a tug to his hair, and he turned about to stare up at Ian instead. One of the man's eyes was squinty and lined with scars, the ball itself milky-glazed with a splotch of dead-fish-gray in the center. The other, the brown one, was fixed on Verian.

"C'mon, boy. Hope yer ready t'work. We got plenty to do 'round here, and I ain't had proper help in ages." Ian spoke as he turned, setting his back to Verian to make for the nearby door.

Verian followed the man, though with an obvious air of reluctance. The whole of

the place stank to a degree that made him reluctant to breathe. His eyes watered for it, and his nose itched. He gagged, and very nearly wretched through a cough when they stepped across the threshold.

Ian whuffed out another strange, broken laugh. He clapped a hand to Verian's shoulder, and went pulling him further into the dim.

"You'll get used to it. Welcome to the kennel."

Verian stared about the vast interior of the ramshackle building. There was straw everywhere, and stalls not unlike those that might be in a stable, save that they were much closer together. Here, too, was the smell of meat that had been out too long. The stink of urine and feces. There was a pallet to Verian's right, where it seemed that Ian slept. There was a small chest of drawers alongside it, and a tin plate and bowl atop the drawers.

"First thing's first," Ian declared, "I'm takin' a nap. You go introduce yourself to the dogs. Don't stick your fingers through the bars of the caged ones, unless you wanna lose 'em."

Ian's weight toppled, much as a felled tree, and the man landed on his large straw bed with an audible crash. A small dog with long, flapping ears and brown fur immediately turned the edge of a nearby stall. It bounded past Verian, and sprang up to curl on the broad plateau of Ian's trouser seat. The man was breathing heavy, chekrattling breaths in a matter of seconds.

Verian's cheeks ached for the twisting of his own mouth. He continued to breathe as shallowly as possible, and turned slowly about in place. No one but the dogs. He poked his head through the front door. No one. Nothing. Verian stared down the hillside. Not even Charles to be seen.

That was all of the reassurance he needed. Verian exited the kennel on the balls of his feet, and took off at a run. He pounded his feet across the ground as fast and as hard as he could manage, descending the opposite side of the hill through layers of slick grass and nettles. Away from the monastery. Away from the fields. Away from the kennel. From Charles. From the Vicar. From Delmi, and Kellen. Anywhere would do, just so long as it was not there.

Chapter 9

Free. He was free. It was terrifying. Could he let himself believe it? The notion ran over him in waves. It was there in the pounding of his heart, the heavy thuds of his feet. Free. His cheeks ached and his eyes watered, but he ran on.

Verian ran past the point of his lungs burning, his limbs hurting. He ran until he was made to collapse in a patch of itchy grass, his body heaving with the effort of breathing, ribbons of bile climbing up the back of his throat. He coughed and choked, and turned a fearful look past the heaving crest of his shoulder.

In the distance, still visible, was the long, low roofline of the kennel. The grassy crests of the hills blocked part of his view of the monastery, but Verian could see the spires of the cathedral jutting against the mottled gray of the sky. No one was coming. It was still so close. Too close.

Up again. Up until running made him sob, and sobbing forced him to walk. To walk despite the way his feet ached more so than they had even when he'd been working in the fields. On and on he walked, through the long grasses, past the skittish deer and wary field rabbits. He put every tree he spotted between himself and the monastery, so that his route turned serpentine and indirect. An unending path of escape, with no destination set to its finish.

Hours passed before he came along any sign of civilization. It happened abruptly, with the fall off of grassy greens and white clover blossoms, so that he was left staring down a stark embankment at rows of twisted vines and a large, spacious estate set on a level plane amongst a bevy of gently rolling hills.

Verian's heart seized in his chest, and for the first time that day he was frozen with indecision. The air rumbled ominously, the sound of thrumming in from the distance, and Verian was again made to move. The hillside was so steep as to force him to half-trot sideways. Down and down, until he was crouched in the muddy field, hiding amongst the gnarled skeletons of grape vines. He dared to linger there, to catch his breath before creeping along.

Verian kept low to the ground, shuffling and stopping every so often, terrified of being spotted. It was not far to the stable set aside from the main building, and past that he could just make out the barn. It was this that Verian made his temporary goal, though achieving it meant that he would have to abandon his partial shelter and cross a very open section of well maintained road.

Closer and closer he came, though when the time came to hurry

again, to rush, he remained frozen. Verian swallowed against the lump rising in his throat, and cast a frightened look about. Nothing.. nothing. No one. He darted then, running as fast as he could manage, which was not very fast at all given the way his body fought his every move. Wide around the stable, along the broad service path to the barn, and in through the door. Nobody there to shoo him out. Just pigeons in the rafters, and an old cat curled on the haystacks.

He was thirsty, and he was hungry, and he was cold. More than all three of those, he was tired. Verian tucked the cropped ends of his hair back behind his elongated ears, and crept through the relative dark of the barn. He wedged himself behind the stacks of straw, curled amongst the prickling, itchy thatch of remnants, and fell near instantly to sleep.

"Aren't you afraid your mother will find out?" Verian's voice was a nervous flutter in his own ears.

"Aren't you afraid your uncle will find out," Mikel countered in a confident thrum.

"I don't think Uncle even knows what day it is anymore."

Fingers found his in the darkness. They wove, tangling, tugging and curling. He gasped as Mikel's nose tucked along the hollow of his cheek, and the sound echoed back at him. Startled and raspy past the distant white noise of the shore.

"I suspect that my mother would simply be happy that I'm not littering the countryside with bastard children."

Verian's heart skipped, and he drew in a sharp breath. Mikel's hand had slid up along the inside of one goose-fleshed thigh. Verian squeezed his fingers tighter, and turned his head to draw in the musk of the man past the salt of the sea.

"You should take off your shirt," Verian whispered, his lips dragging along the stubble at Mikel's jaw.

"You didn't mind it earlier."

"I don't *mind* it. Besides, that was then. I was in a hurry then."

"And you're not now?"

Mikel's hand turned, his fingers cupping along the drape of Verian's balls. He squeezed and pulled just slightly, the tips of his nails teasing along delicate skin. Verian let out a shaky breath.

"No," he insisted, "I'm not."

"But you're ready to have another go," Mikel purred.

Verian fancied he could hear the smile in the man's tone. "I am."

Lips trailed over stubble, picking their way along the curve of jaw, over the crest of chin. Verian found Mikel's mouth, and gave a soft sigh as he grazed it. Lips dabbed at lips, probed and pressed as tongue met his. Mikel's hand pressed closer, briefly uncomfortable, then eased again. The other remained tangled with Verian's.

Kisses gave way to hums. Sighs. Legs slid along legs, fingers over flesh. Mikel grasped along the length of Verian's shaft, the laces from his sleeve provoking a ticklish laugh. Verian shook his hand free from his lover's and helped in the removal of tunic, doing so while putting as little space between them as possible.

Mouth again found mouth, though the union was initiated by them both. Hips slid along hips, hands along sides. Fingers tangled through hair, tugged, slid free again. Their breath exchanged in heated puffs and starts, the blanket dimpling between heels and sand. A breeze cut through the cave, sending a new wave of goosebumps along Verian's skin.

"Cold!" Verian gasped in surprise. He tucked himself closer to Mikel, riding hip against hip and wrestling their limbs against one another all the more.

"Then let me warm you," Mikel purred at Verian's ear.

The world went tumbling, spinning, and Verian found himself with his chest crushed to the blanket. The heat from their bodies had amassed there, and he wiggled eagerly into it even as Mikel draped across goosebumps and blocked the chill of the breeze. Mikel's heat was all too welcome, and Verian angled his hips eagerly into the guidance of grasping fingers.

"Gently," Verian whispered, the word lost in the wind.

"Always," Mikel agreed.

The head of his cock slid and nudged, slick and hot in its probing. Verian gave a soft gasp as it caught on the gathering of skin in the cleft of his ass. Pressed and stretched, leaving Verian aching for the too-long pulling until it gave all at once, snapping closer with a spasm for the narrower girth of Mikel's shaft. Verian shuddered hard, his fingers working at the blanket in the sand.

"Verian."

The whisper floated from behind him, breathless and full of appreciation. Verian hummed, his heart racing, thumping, his head light. He turned his cheek to his knuckles, sighing out heavily as Mikel took to rocking forward, back, forward again. Light, shallow. Easing gradually deeper. Verian tucked his face into the turn of one palm, his breath welling warm against his nose and lips.

"Mikel-- mmmmn."

A hand slid along his back, gentle in its stroke. From ribs to ass, back up along his spine. It had him shivering anew. Mikel. His Mikel, with eyes that saw into his soul. Verian strained his ears, listening to his gasping breaths mix with Mikel's, mix with the sound of the tide. His weight swayed back, forward again as the man plunged steadily deeper, steadily faster. Gasps turned to sighs, moans. Drawn out and drawling. Echoing off of the walls of the cave.

"So lovely.. so lovely.."

Verian did not know how it was Mikel managed to speak. He was reduced to little more than squeaks and grunts and groans, but he sighed. Moaned louder in response. Agreement. Yes. Yes. It was lovely. Well beyond lovely. And then there was a hand slipping away from his hip, heat pressing closer over the curl of his back. Touch and grasp between his legs. Verian gnawed at the belly of one finger, groaning thickly as his balls were gathered, tugged and rolled and pressed close again. He whimpered for the squeeze of his cock, for the way it made his heart thrum faster, made his shaft swell and pulse. Eager, too eager.

"Yessss," Mikel groaned from behind, from above.

Verian swallowed, pawing at his mouth, his nose. Fanned his fingers over his cheek. The sound of the man caused a tightness to form in his chest, heat to fluctuate and flutter low in his gut. He cried out as Mikel came on faster, jostling him harder against the blanket, shifting the sand beneath his curled frame.

Mikel's hand squeezed and gripped, sliding up, down. Grasped and stroked. His fingers slid along the seeping head of Verian's cock, twisting and gathering, easing the friction between them. Up and down and up again, not quite timed to the jarring of hips, the smacking of skin. Lewd and loud. Heat fanned and flared through Verian's limbs, and he simpered as the burning built low, held at an almost painful crescendo. It intensified into his palms, pooled into his feet, and burst all at once through the whole of him. Spilled over in time with the hard, nearly painful shoves from behind. Verian jerked, bucking into the tight grip of Mikel's hand, rutting shamelessly until his climax was spent and he was left panting, trembling through the residual rocks and grinds of the man tucked behind him, above him.

"Ooooh, Verian. Verian, Verian, Verian."

Mikel's coos were accompanied by sweeps of hands along Verian's sides. Petting and stroking that found his waist, his hips. Verian winced as the man fell back and slid clear. He wiped at the flush of his face, at the moisture that had seeped from his eyes, the spittle that had gathered at the corner of his mouth. He swallowed repeatedly, and finally managed a

hum. He was too warm, too content. His thoughts were reeling still, and his joints were turning loose. Verian toppled to the side, his heavy breathing slowly reaching a more steady cadence.

"Must you leave tomorrow?"

Mikel's nose found the back of Verian's neck as he answered, "It is only for two weeks. We go every year."

"I hope you have a rotten time," Verian muttered, though his tone was not so sulky as he'd meant for it to be. He was feeling sleepier by the moment.

"I'll miss you too," Mikel murmured with a chuckle.

Verian wriggled and wormed, rolling to his opposite side to face Mikel. "I wish you could stay for dinner." He felt through the darkness and set his hand to the side of the other's face.

"One day," Mikel promised quietly.

"One day," Verian breathed in contented echo.

It was growing colder, and the water was drawing nearer their hideaway. Verian shivered and tucked his nose under Mikel's chin. They would have to part soon. But for now, for just a few minutes more, he let himself linger. Let himself breathe in musk, and taste the salt of skin past the salt of the sea.

"I doubt you could have chosen a more obvious place to hide," a quiet voice broke through the uncomfortable clench of Verian's sleep.

He shifted where he lay, prickled by the straw that had compressed and contorted beneath his weight. He was cold and cramped, and even his eyelids seemed intent on remaining clenched as he struggled to wake fully. There was a figure silhouetted far above him, perched like a gargoyle at the edge of a straw bale. Verian rubbed his eyes, sucked in a ragged breath, and fought to focus.

"Really, I thought you would be gone by now," the voice continued after its brief pause.

Verian's eyes rolled about. Bold, bright shafts of light penetrated the darkness above, streaming in at odd angles between loose planks and off-centered boards. It was well into the morning, it seemed. Maybe even afternoon. His tongue worked against his teeth, and he swallowed as he stared up at the long, lean blot of shadow.

"Please help me," Verian murmured, "I've been taken captive by madmen."

The head above ticked to the side. The man passed from his high

stack, to a shorter one, and resumed his crouch. Verian could just make out the whites of the man's eyes past the shadows cast by the forward fall of long black hair. The man passed another stack closer, strangely quiet despite the straw crushing beneath his fine, pointed boots. He tipped his head again, and Verian could make out the strong, sharp angle of his nose and the grim line of thin lips above a pointed, sparsely bearded chin.

"I am afraid that would not go over well with my host," the man murmured. "There were men here before breakfast, asking if they might search the estate. I prevailed upon him to wait until we're meant to be visiting his sister. Even now they are waiting on the road for his leave." The stranger did not seem incline to wedge himself into Verian's hiding place, but he did lean in closer. "They have dogs, and I daresay you won't be outrunning them even if you fled now."

A drawing, sinking feeling passed through Verian. It started at his head, plunged to his feet, and then gathered in at his belly. He pushed himself up slowly, tucking and curling as he did so in a belated attempt to his nudity. The stranger watched on, unabashed.

"But you haven't told them where I am?"

"I have not," the man remarked agreeably enough, keeping his voice as low as Verian's. "I wanted a look at you. It is not often I see your kind. Certainly not this far to the South. The church has taken you in, has it? Interesting."

"I'm not some miserable human waif to be taken in," Verian spat. "I've been taken captive. They are holding me against my will, and I do not mean to return. If you're not going to help me, you could at least get out of my way."

"Do not quarrel with me, boy." Despite the reprimand, the man's voice remained muted, deep and gentle in its timbre. "I am curious if what you say is true. It would be most.. out of character." There was a long, measuring silence. Silence in which Verian glared, and the stranger regarded him calmly. "You will go back with them. Peacefully, if you value your hide. You will learn what they mean to teach you, and I will investigate this matter. You understand?"

"I understand that you're a daft lunatic."

The man chortled quietly. He brought one set of long, tapering fingers up to tuck his hair behind the rounded shell of his ear. His thin lips had drawn a small, amused smile into his angled cheeks.

"You will do these things because you have no choice. You will do them because you are smart enough to know that you need to learn in order to take advantage of the situation. You will know humility, and when they feel that you are prepared, you will come to learn of power.

But this you will not know until they believe you to be safe." The stranger's dark eyes blinked slowly, and his smile spread far enough to show a sliver of even white teeth. "And we both know that they will never be safe from you."

Verian wedged himself in closer to the wall, though the rough wood poked at his skin and threaten to lodge it full of splinters. He drew a shallow breath, and darted a look up. Perhaps if he were to try and scale the stack. The cords on the bales seemed strong enough.

"You're mad," Verian breathed.

"Perhaps," the man agreed with a sly inclination of his chin. "What is your name?"

Hesitation. His name? Perhaps the man really did mean to investigate. Verian's head ticked upward at the sound of a dog baying in the distance, at the crunching of the ground near the wall of the barn. Surely his name would not hurt him.

"Verian."

"It is a pleasure, Verian." The man's head turned as a voice called from beyond the corner of the barn. "I am Jaquen. It is a pity, but I must be going now. We will meet again."

Verian said nothing. Could say nothing. His heart was in his throat, and he felt another tide of despair rising hot along the sides of his neck. He stared as the strange man stood, dusted off the finery of his clothes, and then retreated. He was gone with a hop, his steps just audible past the ragged edges of Verian's breath. Jaquen called in return to the voice outside, and then the two of them were drifting off, engaged in a friendly, though unintelligible discourse.

Silence set in after a few long moments. Silence, and the watering of his eyes. No. No. He would not go back. Verian scrambled past the stacked bales, chafing his knees and reddening his skin further. He sniffed thickly, sneezed for the nose full of powdery flakes, and went darting swiftly for the barn doors.

Outside, the sun was high. Everything was blindingly bright, and even the ground seemed little more than a mirror for the light as Verian waited through the painful seconds of adjustment to his eyes. A darkly-painted carriage was being drawn through the distant gates by a pair of pale horses. No sooner had they withdrawn, than a crude wagon was pulling about the edge of the wall. Verian sucked in a gasp, turned out past the door to the barn, and broke into a run.

He had no idea where it was he meant to go, and no longer held hope of finding assistance. He would simply have to run. Would simply have to hide even from those who tended the land.

Dogs were baying. Others were barking. Pointed in his direction as he broke through a manicured swath of grasses and fruit trees, past benches and large planters full of strange flora. He ran, sucking in air as he went. Ran without thought, without worry. There was only fear. Fear coursing through his veins. Fear that kept him moving fast, the wind stinging at his eyes, his feet hammering to the ground.

Still, the dogs came closer. Closer. Verian had reached the orderly rows of grapes again, and he went racing down along one. There was now no going to the side, no weaving to escape. Teeth nipped at his heels, and his calves. He could hear the panting breaths of people behind those of the dogs. It was the steady beating of a horse's hooves approaching that terrified him so much more. On he ran, unwilling to look back, unwilling to acknowledge that the dogs were now beginning to crowd his legs, to circle in front of him and have at his knees with their nipping as they swung back around.

The rhythmic pounding of the horse to the loamy earth came up along Verian's left. It drew slower, tighter, and was accompanied momentarily by a strange sort of hissing. A cyclic thing that cut through the air. The dogs peeled off to his sides, darting around the bases of the grape vines, and then Verian's legs went out from under him.

He hit the ground with a grunt and a slide, palms thrust forward and fingers curling. His chest scraped, hip dragging, and his breath left all at once. He rolled to his side, struggling for air. Tears welled in his eyes, and his lips worked, but he could manage neither inhale nor exhale. The silhouettes of the dogs' heads closed in above him, blotting out the blue of the sky as they slobbered, nipped, and licked at him in their excitement.

"Clear off," a woman's voice called from behind the dogs. "Clear off, you stupid mutts."

Verian finally managed a breath. He rasped and gasped desperately through another. Another. Precious air. The darkness at the edges of his vision faded, and he twisted his legs against the tangle of rope that had wrapped about them. Reached to pull at the weights attached to it.

"None of that, boy."

Verian blinked slowly, staring up at the woman standing above him. She toed at his hands with the fronts of her boots. "Now you can come with me the nice and easy, or you can put up a fight. Personally, I'm hoping you go with the fight option," she gestured as she spoke, tapping her gloved fingers against one another. "It's a lot more fun for me. It's not often someone is stupid enough to run away, or put up any real trouble for that matter, and.. well, I've been ever so bored. So what'll it be? Want me to untie you and chase you down again? We could go to fisticuffs, or

wrestle about. Really, it's a shame you have so little muscle, I don't think you're going to be much of a chal--"

"Alright!" Verian threw an arm up as he interrupted. "Just untie me and I'll cooperate!"

"Damn. I hope you're lying. It's never any fun when they give in."

The woman bent then, the light catching on the gold of her hair, and she went tugging at the bola snared about Verian's legs. The weights clacked and clattered against one another, and Verian drew his leg to the side to rub at a bruise on his shin. He smeared blood from the shallow cuts made by the nipping of the dogs, and scowled wide at his toes. He went glaring bloody murder at the woman, who was grinning like a jackal at him.

He'd meant to go peaceably, but there was something in the woman's expression that infuriated Verian. He pushed himself to his knees, and threw a fist clumsily for her temple. She jerked back, letting the blow glance along her cheek, and then laughed in his face. One of the dark wooden weights from the bola was lofted, and Verian went cringing, twisting to duck away, only to feel the thing impact along the back of his head. The burst of pain was edged with silver, tingling along his spine and into his limbs for a scant fraction of a second. After that, everything went black.

Chapter 10

Verian's side was painfully cold. His head hurt, which made everything else hurt. He lay in the dark and the chill, his stomach clenched against the inevitable, and his breath caught in his lungs. His heartbeat grew louder and louder in his ears, until at last he was forced to exhale.

The cool air in his lungs set Verian's extremities to tingling. His stomach twisted itself into a knot beneath his ribs. A wave of frothy bile forced its way past the knot in his chest, and out through the pain-slackened gorge of his mouth. He wretched at length, his body tensing in serpentine waves long after his stomach had been emptied of its bitter, sticky foam.

As Verian's insides finally calmed, he became aware of noise nearby. The darkness was breathing around him, and a steadily gaited click and rasp was approaching from his feet. Verian held his breath anew, his tongue stuck to the revolting slime coating the roof of his mouth. The steady clack and subsequent rasp halted. His thoughts balked, refusing to provide any semblance of logic. Instead they supplied only flashes of nightmare past the steady, pounding pain of his head.

The breathing in the dark was joined by a wet smacking. A steady lap and slurp that, when combined with the brush of coarse fur to Verian's thigh, set him to gagging anew. Realization was nothing short of revolting.

Rather than shoo the beast in the darkness, Verian forced his taut limbs to shift. He rolled slowly to his other side, panting so heavily in the process that it was a wonder he didn't drive the animal off. Perhaps out of concern, or some sense of gratitude for the late-night snack, the dog curled with its back to Verian's spine. The warmth was welcome, and as such Verian endured the disgusting creature's presence.

It took some time for the tension to ease. It did so with no apparent rhyme nor reason, inciting bursts of trembling before he was allowed to fully relax. Verian groaned intermittently, though every noise he made caused his temples to stab at his eyes in protest. The dog at his back did not seem to mind the noise in the least.

It seemed that hours had passed before he was able to string together anything more than a few fragments of thought. The dark stretched on, breathing steadily around him. Verian set to the long task of checking in with his body. He started with his toes. They wiggled about, and a few even went so far as to pop. His right ankle ground most unpleasantly when he rolled his foot, and both of his knees felt raw to the cool of the air. His hips were stiff and his back ached, but everything seemed intact from

tailbone to skull. His wrists were raw, his elbows scraped, and his head was still splitting. Nothing, though, seemed emergent. Nothing seemed fatal.

Assured that he was not in immediate danger of dying, Verian allowed himself to weep. His tears streaked hot and salty across the bridge of his nose and past his temple, where they were lost to his hair and the cool of the stone beneath him. The relief that came with safety enough to cry mollified the throbbing in his head. Stomach uneasily clenched and dog curled at his back, Verian eased from the dark of his surroundings into the anxious dark of sleep.

* * *

It was spring and pleasantly warm. The oppressive heat of summer was a good month away still. A wild breeze sent the bright red and yellow heads of the nearby wildflowers to bobbing merrily up and down.

Verian fancied that they were welcoming him. Verian also fancied that they were warning him. The duality was not something he would question, though it rendered his dream state with more dread and foreshadowing than had been present when the memories themselves were actually forming.

Dressed in the same somber blacks he'd been made to wear for the past several weeks, the young Verian crouched at the edge of the scrubby garden bed and plucked one of those bobbing heads free by its tender green stem. He sniffed at the fat black center of the flower, then tucked the stem behind his ear. He turned to meet the smile of the maid who had traveled with him, and allowed a small smile of his own to tug at his lips. It was exhausting and impossible to be sad all of the time, though guilt was quick to tug his mouth back to a sullen sag.

"That is a fire daisy, Verian. It is related to the wind daisies we have at home. Isn't it lovely?"

Verian's head bobbed slowly. He'd a love of flowers, even at that age, and quickly committed this information to memory. Brienne, who had been his nursemaid for as long as he could remember, turned in place. One hand smoothed over her plain travel clothes, the other reaching to catch Verian's hand as she did so. She walked them both to the wide, simple staircase that led to the grand doors of the main entry. They were heavy and dark, worked over with carvings that were being weathered by time and the salt in the seaside air. They should have opened upon their arrival, but they sat resolutely shut.

Already the coaches in the driveway had been unloaded, and the

drivers sat in stay of their horses. Brienne turned back to the sight of Verian's trunks waiting to be hauled inside. She crouched down, setting her large blue eyes on level with Verian's own.

"Be good and wait right here, sweetheart. I'm going to fetch someone to see us in. I'll be back in just a minute, alright?"

Verian didn't want Brienne to go. He clung to the woman's hand, his palm turning clammy. Her mouth pressed to his brow, and she set her hand to the slight angle of Verian's shoulder.

"I promise," Brienne whispered.

Verian nodded, though his head felt too heavy to move properly. He let go of her hand with a reluctant drag and parting of fingers. Brienne's smiled at him again, pressed with the fleshy part of her palm, and then went rushing off around the far corner of the house.

Verian's stomach growled. He wandered over to one of the trunks from home and climbed atop it. His heels thumped off of the sturdy side. Thumpbump. Thumpbump. He hated waiting. What was taking so long? Thumpbump. Thumpbump. His hose slid down his right leg. Thump. Bump.

Maybe Brienne had been eaten by a dragon. Verian reversed his kicking. Bumpthump. Maybe a wight had killed everyone in the house and that's why nobody had come out to meet them. Bumpthump. Or a troll! Bumpbumpthump. A gigantic, smelly troll with chipped tusks and rows and rows of sharp teeth, and claws six inches long, and--

"Come along, Verian."

Thump. Verian looked up from his paused feet. Brienne was there, smiling down at him, one hand extended. Verian slid his hand into hers, his shoulders slouching with relief. He scarcely noticed the servants that had come with his nursemaid, though they converged quickly enough upon his waiting trunks. Brienne led Verian not up the stairs, but along the facade of the main house and around the corner.

"Are you hungry? Shall we have a spot of tea?"

Verian found his nod to be much easier than the last. They turned past the gravelly edge of a barren flower bed, and through the narrow servant's entry. Small though it was, Verian could feel it swallowing him up as they passed into the dim decay of his uncle's manor.

* * *

The light that struck the stone of the wall before him was both soft and faint, and for this Verian was grateful. He was not so keen on the smell of the place, but it was not so strong as to set his stomach to

churning again. His head still ached, but the need to move was of more pressing concern.

Verian rolled slowly to his hands and knees. His furred companion had gone, and a brief look about confirmed that he was alone. Verian eased his weight back into one knee, then fought the sway of the ground beneath his feet as he made to stand. The roof of the cave was half a head above him, and sloped sharply toward the back. It likewise dipped as Verian crept toward the light, and he was forced to crouch as he rounded the bend to the mouth of the place.

Outside, the sun was approaching its zenith. There were dogs, easily a dozen, and massive in size. Wolf dogs from the look of them, but Verian would not have expected a thing so far South. He stood fully, stretching his stiff jointed, and breathed in the fresh air. Well, fresher than the cave had been, anyway. It seemed impossible to escape the overtones of shit.

Verian climbed his way down the layers of rock, past the dogs who lazed upon them. He was forced to a stop after reaching soft-packed dirt and abused tufts of grass. A crude iron fence segmented the hill, the slope of which was lined with vast pens. A small hound in the adjacent pen raised one long, floppy ear at him, then went back to dozing. Verian grimaced and looked back along the incline, toward the kennel.

Verian consoled himself with the fact that the pen for the wolf dogs seemed larger than the others. It went nearly to the small complex of the kennel above. A circling of his enclosure, with brief pause for a minor scuffle between two of the dogs, allowed Verian to place himself on the North side of the hill. His shouting toward the kennel did little save earn him a few looks from the dogs.

Though his head was aching, and the sun made him uncomfortable, Verian took to pacing. It felt good to move, and the warmth was a welcome change from the storms that had hung so heavily in the sky of late. At first he walked along the perimeter of the enclosure, but after his fifth time up the hill, Verian opted to walk the shorter length of fencing near the top. Back and forth and back again. He was hungry, and tired, and angry somewhere far beneath it all. Furious, really, and beyond disappointed. He had been free! His thoughts toiled one over the other, oscillating between despair and a litany of curses for the woman who had brought him back.

As the afternoon wore on, reaching the peak of its heat and then passing it, Verian grew tired of pacing. His stomach hurt, his limbs were weak, and his mouth parched. His throat was raw from how he'd shouted over and over at the building. A building that had remained unresponsive beyond the pike-topped poles of the fence. Verian sat, and might have

wept, except that his eyes were too hot and gummy to manage it.

One of the smaller dogs came loping up the hill along the edge of the fence. It had thick gray fur, a great, bushy tail, and warm yellow eyes. It stopped before Verian, tail wagging and tongue jutting from between its sharp, white teeth. The animal sat and stared expectantly at him. Verian stared back.

Minutes passed in this fashion. Verian did not know what to make of the beast, and it seemed that the beast did not know what to make of him. Verian was hesitant to move lest he provoke the creature. He had little experience with dogs, and none of that had been positive.

Finally, the animal left off simply cocking its head and staring. It threw itself weightily to the ground and stretched its nose to press at the top of Verian's grimy foot. Yellow eyes fixed upon his own, taking him in past surprisingly animated brows.

"Well."

The dog said nothing, though one of its ears tipped forward.

"Not very talkative, are you?"

The tail moved just enough to tilt its broom of fur the other way.

"I suppose you wouldn't be, being a dog. At least you seem civil enough. Very gracious of you, all things considered."

Without rising, the massive beast wiggled forward. It picked its head up, then set its slender muzzle into the shallow valley of Verian's overlapping legs. Verian peered at the creature, trepidation stilling him briefly, then slowly, carefully, set his fingertips to the flat of the animal's skull. Rather than bite his hand off, it shuffled about its hind legs and compressed itself closer.

"How lovely to make your acquaintance," Verian remarked congenially. "My name is Verian Renaut Azhari. To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

The dog's ears remained attentively pointed. It gave another vague shift of its tail. Verian sighed.

"No? You might at least tell me if I am addressing a duke or a duchess."

The animal tipped its head to the side and took to lapping at the topmost surface of Verian's calf. Verian hissed and drew his leg back.

"No sampling the meal before it is properly prepared," he chastised.

The dog gave him a bored look and tipped to its side.

The dull impact of footsteps to packed earth sounded from beyond the nearby fence. Verian looked up to spy five men so immense in size he would not have been surprised to learn them descended from ogres. Each was carrying two appropriately massive buckets of water attached to a

pole over their shoulders, one end set with thick bristles, the other with a flat shovel. They plodded their way down the slope and toward a patch of fence fixed with thick iron hinges and a heavy padlock that had not so much as budged when Verian had pried at it during his rounds.

It was there that the widest of the brutes stopped, whilst the others filed past to the pens beyond. One by one they set their loads down before their gates, then turned to lumber back up the hill.

"Hail," Verian called.

He received not so much as a glance for his greeting. Verian looked back to the dog.

"You have the most charming subjects, my dear."

The beast licked its nose. It yawned wide, exposing the brilliant white of its teeth and the vibrant pink of its tongue. It rose then, and turned away from Verian. It went padding toward the center of the pen, where the bulk of the animals had already congregated. Verian pushed himself to his feet and brushed himself off, his perplexed stare fixing on the sight before him. He shielded his eyes from the sun, and then picked his way through the pen toward the opposite fence. A tree was growing there, and he relished the idea of shade for his cooking flesh.

The giant men came filing back down the hill, each carrying a half barrel between massive arms. The roundest man set his burden down near the gate, and fitted a half-rusted key into the padlock while the others filed past to tend to the other pens. Verian's heart leapt to his throat, fluttering there as he watched the gate swing open.

The dogs kept obediently back and away from the man as he hauled in his barrel. He set it to the side, and then carried in the buckets of water and the broom that had come with them. The gate was shut. Verian's mouth went dry. The barrel rasped along the ground as the man half-dragged it deeper into the pen. One of the smaller dogs went wriggling forth along the ground, its ears perked toward the sound. A great red and brown haunch of meat was hauled from the barrel and tossed into the mass of dogs.

That was when the chaos began. The air filled with snarls and growls, with yips and the audible clash of jaws and bone, snaps of warning and snarls. Cut after cut of meat was tossed into the pack. Verian gave an uneasy shift, and kept to the shadow of the tree. He did not want to get into the midst of -that-.

The giant then went about with his pole, scooping up piles of shit until the shovel was full, and carrying them to dump into the emptied barrel. When that was through, he took to the places where the stone was bare, splashing water on them from his bucket, and scrubbing at them

with the broom. He did not go into the opening that led to the cave, but instead kept outside.

The dogs had settled, with the more victorious of them settled to gnawing bones, while the younger ones slept or played in the afternoon sun. Verian swallowed, his nagging stomach and increasing restlessness giving him a sense of urgency that translated to false bravado. He pushed to his feet, and went padding over to speak with the brute.

Up close, the man was even taller than Verian had thought. He was forced to crane his neck to look up at him, though the man did not stop in his work.

"Pardon me," Verian said.

This time he was rewarded with a distant, uninterested stare. The gargantuan man said nothing. The bristles of his broom hushed rhythmically along the stone.

"Look. I am clearly not a dog. I do not belong in here. If you would be so kind as to unlock that gate over there, I would be most appreciative."

The immense man paused in his work. He stood up straighter, looming even moreso over Verian. His pasty pink lips twisted slowly into a grin, exposing his few browned teeth.

"Nuh."

Verian's polite facade fell away. His own mouth turned down at the corners, and he could feel his expression tremble between frown and scowl. Of course it would not be so easy.

"Very well." Clipped, heated words. "When am I to eat, then?"

The big man pulled his head back on his neck, looking all the more ponderous for having done so. His deep set eyes rolled about, and then focused on Verian again.

"Nuh." One wide hand with thick, sausage-like fingers swung in gesture of their surroundings.

Verian did not understand the meaning of this at first. When he did, the scowl won out. "Are you trying to kill me?" His tone was nothing short of incredulous.

"Nuh." Two hulking shoulders shifted about in a way that Verian took to be a shrug, though the man seemed to be lacking in the flexibility required to manage it properly.

Verian growled irritably. He kicked the nearly empty bucket, sending the last of the water spilling out over the rocks. The brute fixed him with a frown, but said nothing. Verian turned to sulk his way back to the shade, determined not to limp despite the fact that his toes were smarting terribly.

Verian heaved himself down into the shade once again. He sprawled

on his back in the sparse, itchy grass, and fixed a stare up at the sky.

“Nuh,” Verian mocked at the bottoms of the leaves with a sneer.

In the distance, the gate clattered. Verian pushed himself onto his elbows, watching as the thing was locked shut once again. He flopped back to the earth, his stomach roiling and his heart twisting a knot into his throat. One of the dogs lapped loudly from the small pool of water nearby. Another came to lay alongside him. It dropped a scrap of bone, and took to gnawing loudly. Verian grumbled. He set his back to the wolfhound and pressed his palms to his ears.

It took three days before Verian gave in. By that point he'd already taken to drinking from the murky water the dogs used, to splashing it against his pinkened, freckling skin. He spent most of his time in the cave, avoiding the daylight, and came out only at dusk or at dawn. The dogs were more active then, and a few of them had taken to padding about after him as he paced the pen.

On the third day, his growing hunger won out over the revulsion of his options for food. At the sound of the animals gathering, he went out to meet the large man who fed the beasts. His fingers dug into the heels of his palms, and his cheeks ached for the pinching of his expression, but it didn't stop him glaring. Didn't stop him stalking over to stare into the bucket of mostly raw butcher scraps with its few choice selections of meat. There were other bits in there as well. Burnt chunks of steak and chicken that collected flies just the same as the rest of it. Verian snatched up what he could of the cooked bits, the gargantuan man watching passively, and then turned with a growl. He didn't say a word, but instead retreated back into the cave.

Some days there wasn't cooked meat to be had. Those days, Verian did not eat. Even so, the food made him ill. Those days were difficult. The water was so far away, and the sounds of the wolves cleaning up his vomit only made his stomach lurch all the more.

Time meant little between bouts of dreams that he could not remember. He managed to haul himself to the shallow pond of water, to drink and to coat himself in the murk. Days were then spent in the shade beneath the tree. He was aware of a large boot on the outside of his leg one evening, but he did little more than roll away from it.

The following morning, the fever was gone. The pain in his abdomen had passed as well, and Verian filled himself to bursting from the water. The dog that had been keeping him company stared at him from the middle of the pool, its golden eyes intent. Verian snorted, gagged briefly, but splashed the sick-smelling sweat from his body nonetheless.

The sun passed through the sky again and again, the shadows long and short and long again. Verian let go of his boredom one afternoon when a young dog with its baby fuzz plowed into him, nipped at his ankle with too-sharp teeth, and went darting off again. He cried out in indignation, and the sound of his voice startled him. How long had it been since he'd spoken a word? He'd even given up talking to the bitch that followed him around the pen. He utterly ignored the giant when the man came, save to approach for food. He'd only tried to escape twice, but had been left so bruised and battered the second time that he didn't so much as twitch when the gate opened.

Instead there was play to be had with the dogs. Laughter when the fearsome animals chose to be ridiculous rather than vicious. Tails were chased, heads contorted under bodies in strange fashion. Piles and pounces had while the elders of the pack watched on in placid comfort. Verian did not think to question the purpose of keeping these animals, nor keeping them in such a fashion. Instead he ran with them. Scraped his reluctantly tanning skin, grew filthy and shaggy about the hair. Laughed when he was licked and wrestled with. And should any of the beasts grow too bold and cause Verian to cry out with pain or injury, his golden-eyed shadow would leap into the fray and school the interloper back.

It was the easiest, the happiest, that Verian could recall being in a long, long time.

It seemed that peace and tranquility were not things meant to last in that forsaken place. It was night when the disturbance came. There was a din of racket from outside the cave, where Verian was curled with his face nuzzled into a bed of dirty gray fur. One of the dogs went padding past in the darkness, blotting out the dim light near the mouth of the cave. Verian dug at his eyes with his knuckles.

Outside, dogs were snarling. There was a loud yelp, and a series of low growls. Scuffling. It sounded to be a fight over choice cuts of meat,

likely to escalate given the fact that the ones who usually took the best food were disinclined to move. But it was night, and such a thing would be very odd indeed.

“Nh.”

Verian’s joints ached, and he was ever slow to move as the days progressed. He shifted through the kinks in his spine, and the pinching of one shoulder. His warm curl was abandoned, and he found his way slowly through the dark. A damp nose dabbed at his shoulder, and Verian paused to stroke along the animal’s slender muzzle before continuing on.

He emerged from the cave in time to see a pair of large, dark figures retreating along the hillside. A sack trailed alongside one, bouncing with each ungainly step. Verian frowned at the silhouettes made clear by the light of the gibbous moon. The continued scuffling from the dogs called his attention back to the gate.

It wasn’t clear at first, what was happening. There was food there, certainly. A small pile of butchered meat was just visible past the bickering beasts. There were only a few who had come to investigate as yet, but while one pair argued over opposite ends of a long cut, another slipped stealthily around to catch up a piece. Verian’s tongue pushed about within the tackiness of his mouth, and he snorted mildly. Why would anyone be throwing scraps into the pens at this hour? One of the hounds down the hill let out an envious baying.

Verian went skulking closer to the altercation, circling about it much as the others were. Many somethings were not right here. He lurched back when he was close enough to see the gleam of skin in the silvery light of the moon. His head turned, and he sucked in a shaken breath. Though his eyes closed, Verian could not blot out the image of a dirty-bottomed foot from his mind. Wary and ill for the way his stomach had so abruptly dropped, Verian opened his eyes and looked again to the mess.

It was most definitely a body. Not a very large one, at that, and poorly butchered. One lucky dog had snatched at the fleshy part of a thigh, only to go trotting off with a large portion of hip as well, the rest of the leg trailing by a sloppy cut at the knee. Another beast stepped in to snatch at the dragging foot, and the two pulled and wrestled until the lingering cartilage snapped free. There was bile burning the back of his throat, but Verian could not look away.

How often, he wondered. How often did they dispose of bodies in that fashion? How often did unfortunate souls die in that place? How often did puppies fight over fingers?

His thoughts were interrupted by the smack of something wet on the top of his foot. Verian looked down. He knew it was a mistake as soon as

he'd done it, but it was too late. His gray shadow was there, silver and charcoal in the light of the moon, her golden eyes reflecting up at him. Past the tip of the animal's nose, and the pleased parting of its mouth, a pair of eyes stared up at him. Verian stared back, though those eyes were dead. The nose on the head facing up from Verian's foot was broken, and one cheek torn for the attention of the dogs. The mouth was grotesquely slack, and the ends of the young man's hair clung to the bloody mess of his neck.

Some part of Verian acknowledged that he knew this young man. The rest of him argued. The skin was too loose. The mouth was not right. The eyes were too dull. How strange and different Kellen appeared in death. But when the dog went to pluck up its newfound toy, Verian's denial burst within him. He screamed at the beast and lunged after it, his fingers grappling for whatever he could catch. His nails slid through congealing blood, his fingertips grazed skin and bone. He lurched and caught again, just managing to lay claim to a few coils of glossy hair.

"Let. Go." His voice was foreign to his own ears. It was so calm. So firm and cool. His heart did not feel calm. His sinuses burned, and he was wet from cheek to chin with tears.

Still, the dog released its prize. Verian turned to try and chase the others away from what was left of Kellen's remains, but it was of no use. By that point, more had come. One of the larger animals had deigned to join them, and it took to eyeing what Verian had collected. Verian, knowing that look too well, retreated backward. The gray bitch slid between them, her fangs bared and her ears flattened.

She could scarcely take on the giant of a male, but Verian accepted the distraction. He scuttled quickly away from the animals and over to the tree. He settled there, curled in the deep dark of the nighttime shadows, and clutched Kellen's head to his chest. Verian wept until the tears and the choking and the convulsions of his stomach exhausted him to sleep, a broken nose and slack lips crushed against his skin.

Chapter 11

"Let go, Verian."

Mikel's hands caught Verian about the waist. Good, strong hands that Verian would have gladly left there forever. Just as he would have left the body pressed against his own forever.

"I don't want to," Verian cried woefully into Mikel's shoulder.

"You must."

"No."

"They are waiting for you."

"I don't care."

"You must," Mikel insisted again.

"No."

"Let go, Verian."

* * *

"Hey. What're you doin' there?" Ian's gruff voice broke through the wretched edges of Verian's dreams. "That one's mine. Charles loaned 'im fair and square."

"I do not care," came a more lyrically accented voice, familiar in its quiet, unassuming roll. "'e is mine now. You may discuss this with Sharlie if you like."

Cool fingertips stroked along Verian's brow. The touch was soothing. Soft. It did not stop a whimper from bubbling out past Verian's lips.

"I know, boy," Delmi replied in quiet, kindly tones. "But you must rise, hm? It is time to go from this place."

Verian's arms tightened about hair and oddly textured skin. His hands were itchy and somewhat tacky where they clutched at the round shell of a cold, lifeless ear. He whined as fingers found his own in an attempt to pry the ghastly thing from his grasp. Kellen's hair was still soft where it brushed Verian's ribs, but his skin shifted oddly over the bone.

A loud blustering came from beyond Delmi. Verian's slit his eyes open in time to see the hound master stomp off past the dark bar of Delmi's arm.

"Let go, Verian," Delmi murmured.

Slowly, reluctantly, Verian released the head he'd been clutching to his belly. His body ached, and the soft coil of the wolf at his legs was the only thing that had staved off cramps from the cold. He felt as though he hadn't slept in years. He felt as though he could sleep for all of those years then and there to make up for it.

"It will be well," Delmi whispered in response to the tears that were pooling at the corners of Verian's eyes.

"No; it won't," Verian argued raggedly.

Delmi stepped aside to deposit Kellen's head into a coarse burlap sack. The soft tuck of fur against Verian's legs disappeared, and a large, tanned figure blotted out Verian's view. Two meaty hands grasped at him with a rasp of calloused skin, and Verian was soon cradled like a child to a dusty tunic that stank of sweat and beer. His arms and legs dangled and swayed, but Verian did not gather them near. Instead he lay helpless as a babe, tears streaking past his temples to gather in the red of his hair.

Delmi's back was to Verian as they made their way across the pen and to the gate. Their surroundings went wavery and clear over and over for the constant cycle of tears and blinking. They were near the gate when Charles came into view just beyond the dark curve of Delmi's bare shoulder. Verian squeezed his eyes shut. He did not want to see Charles. He did not want to see anyone.

"That's my boy, Delmi." Charles' voice was thick and stern with warning.

"You took mine, so this one is mine now, Sharlie."

"I didn'!"

"You did," Delmi answered, his voice in a violent snap. "No one else did this, Sharlie." The muted, coarse rustle of burlap underscored Delmi's words. "No one! 'e was a sweet boy, my boy. You think you get your revenge this way? You are a bigger fool than you take me for." Delmi spat into the dirt at Charles' feet. "The veecar already knows. You will pay for this with more than just your leetle elf. *My leetle elf.*"

"Now, Delmi, don--"

"You do not 'Now, Delmi,' me. You move now and let us pass."

"None your little mind tricks is gonna make this okay."

Delmi's laugh was cold and hard, clipped at the edges. It was a loud sound from a little man. "You take it up with the veecar, then. 'e will give you your boy back if you deserve 'im."

Verian slit his eyes open. The man holding him bathed Verian's face in heat, humidity, and the stink of old cheese. Verian gagged as he turned his head, tipping his gaze away from the glassy gray eyes that stared down at him. He took in the sight of Charles glaring first at Delmi, and then beyond to Verian himself.

Charles' fists clenched tight, the muscles at the corners of his jaw jumping. Verian watched as Charles pinned Delmi with a familiar, murderous glare. Delmi remained unflinching, his shoulder blades visible to either side of his spine, dark skin glistening in the blaze of the sun.

It was Charles who finally yielded, turning about on one heel to stalk for the kennel. Delmi set out again, the man carrying Verian trailing after at a slow, lumbering pace. Verian shut his eyes. He was determined to block out the world.

There. That is better," Delmi murmured.

Verian stared up at the streaks of fabric that ran across Delmi's canopy. He'd been washed, had his hair scrubbed, and sucked down all of the milk and honey that Delmi had pressed upon him, but Verian did not feel particularly better. Nor did Verian weep any longer, but the corners of his eyes were raw from their previous steady tearing. Delmi sighed from above him, the sound swooping close. Soft lips touched Verian's brow in gentle press, and his nostrils were filled momentarily with spice.

"'e will have a good burial. Aahleks is gathering pearl blossoms, and the linen is soaking in the four spices of Alden. I know that you do not believe as 'e does, but 'is body will be treated with care and respect. You will 'ave your chance to say farewell when you are ready."

Verian did not answer. It occurred to him, distantly, that perhaps he should. His spittle was thick and sweet along the roof of his mouth and the backs of his teeth. Delmi was petting his hair again, but still Verian could not bring himself to answer. He wanted to sleep. His eyes squeezed shut. He couldn't sleep. Wanted and couldn't and wanted and couldn't. Maybe, if he just pretended for a while, he could manage it. Maybe Delmi would leave him alone.

Verian was growing tired of sleeping. He was tired of Delmi's constant attention and concern, tired of the taste of warm milk and honey, tired of his dreams, of the fabric above the bed, of the bodies that slept next to his at night. He was tired of bowing to his bladder long enough to roll out of bed and piss, when all he desired was to lay there and not move until he'd finally passed on.

Verian was tired of being tired. Tired of being numb. Death was not kind enough to come for him. It had not come when he'd been forced from his family's estate to live with his uncle, had not come with his arrival to that wretched place, and had not come even when he'd been permitted to lie about and do nothing.

Bare feet settled to the smooth fur of the dark animal skin that stretched alongside Delmi's massive bed. Verian took a moment to stare down at the tops of his feet, and then at the lines the sheets had mapped out on his thighs. He padded into the brightly lit room, past the boy with the golden hair, and out to relieve his bladder at the base of the a hedge that was too close to the building to be polite. Verian then settled near the threshold, beneath the shadow of the infirmary sign, and stared out at the courtyard. It was a pleasant change from the gauzy silks that had hung above his head.

The nearby birdsong was underscored by the soft rasp of hard soles to the walkway. Verian drew a deep breath of jasmine and spice and looked over to the approach. The tops of Delmi's feet were bare, crossed over with simple cords that held the bottoms of his shoes in place. His oiled skin glistened faintly in the slanting light, and Verian fell to studying the smooth line where his foot changed color along its lower borders.

"Ah, boy. You are awake."

Verian looked slowly upward. He was made to blink for the brilliance of the yellow cloth that fluttered against the midpoint of Delmi's thighs, but he did not flinch from the odd golden eyes that met his own a moment later.

"Well. Mostly," Delmi qualified. "You come inside. Aahleks brought food for you. You will eat. And drink. Come now. Be good."

The food that was waiting on a small, round table near the mirrored wall was unappealing. It was certainly of higher quality than the scraps he'd received in the kennels, better than what Charles had fed him, and perhaps even nicer than what he'd eaten at his lessons. But his buttered bread was tasteless, and his meat lacking in flavor. Eating and drinking from the provided earthenware cup were mechanical things. He did them because he was told to do them, and because he was tired of fighting.

"Good," Delmi purred once Verian had cleared his plate and drained his cup. "You come with Delmi now. With me."

Standing was as automatic as eating. Walking was much the same. Delmi's arm was warm and soft where it draped along Verian's shoulder. It did not cause him to flinch. It did not set his heart to racing. There was nothing except the persistent lethargy that weighed down his soul.

The deadness persisted all the long way through their walk. The cool of the breeze did not make him shiver, though it did stand his hairs on end. The uneven ground did not make him complain, though his tired feet cramped here and there. The smell of freshly turned earth caused his nose to twitch, but it did not fire Verian's curiosity.

"ere," Delmi murmured, nearly swallowing the word for how

unusually thick his accent had become.

Their shadows stretched across a modest plot of earth. It was not so long as Verian felt it should have been. Someone had planted a pale purple corpse lily near one end, and its thick leaves had sagged to wilt in the dirt. It would spring back soon enough, Verian knew, but not for so long as it should given how little of Kellen's body had been left. Still, staring down at the relatively unmarked grave before him, Verian felt nothing.

"Kellen," he declared mutedly.

"Yes."

"He shouldn't be in the ground." Verian should have been angry. He knew this. It was an abomination. Instead his words were flat and distant.

"It is 'is way, boy."

"Mm."

"'ere."

Delmi took Verian's hand in his. Delmi's fingers were soft, but cool. They pushed aside Verian's own fingers to press a short, slender brown braid to his palm. Verian swallowed against the knot forming in his throat. He was too tired of his own misery. He felt nothing. Nothing. His eyes watered.

"Do you wish some time for yourself?" Delmi's voice was gentle and kind.

"No." Quiet. Flat.

"Hmn. As you like. You come with me, then."

The walk back was much the same as the walk there, save the growing weight in Verian's palm. Despite the earlier watering of his eyes, no tears fell upon his cheeks. Verian's mouth was dry, his steps steady.

"You rest this day."

Verian was tired of resting. Still, he broke away from Delmi to settle again near the door. The shadow from the sign had moved, but the air was still pleasantly fragrant from the hedge vines that lined the space beneath the open window.

The day passed steadily about Verian. Every now and then someone would cross the courtyard. The birds sang. A rabbit bounced from a nearby hedge to graze beneath the central tree. Delmi's quiet voice drifted through the open window every so often, Alex's bright tones ringing in response.

It grew steadily dark, and darker still. Pale moths fluttered about, attracted by the soft glow of lamp and hearth light spilled out of the infirmary. Alex was reading aloud, though Verian did not care enough to make out what he was saying. The crickets sang, and the stars were bright

for the near lack of moon. All of this registered distantly, forming as lists in Verian's mind before fading off to nothing.

He was cold. Alex had stopped reading. The shutters on the window needed oiling. Nothing. Nothing.

"You come to bed when you are ready, boy," Delmi's voice was just audible. "You sleep with Delmi tonight. You are mine now. The bed is good. Soft."

It had been soft. And warm. Verian nodded. There were fingers in his hair, petting lightly. Nothing.

"When you are ready," Delmi repeated quietly.

The man withdrew, and Verian was again left alone. He did not move until his joints were aching and his legs were numb. The lights of the monastery had been quelled, and the stars were dazzling with their brilliance. Nearby, the crickets went silent as Verian rose.

The jasmine fell victim to Verian's grasping hands. He broke off twigs and flowers, tore at thick green leaves. Verian moved to the courtyard to collect broken branches from the tree, though doing so was difficult in the dark. He snapped off dead ends of slender sticks, and clutched at thicker pieces that splintered against his fingertips. Finally, his grip threatening to spill over, he returned to the infirmary.

The door was drawn carefully shut behind Verian, and he crept through the vast room with silent steps. The mirrors on the wall kept the infirmary modestly lit for the glow of the coals in the fireplace. Verian set the sticks and twigs he carried to the bed of embers. He leaned into the warmth, his cheeks filling with air, and blew to encourage his kindling to smoke. Each push of breath was followed by a quiet, near whisper of a chant.

The flowers and leaves were dropped into the fire once it had caught. It was not very large, nor very hot, but the greenery was soon smoldering, and the flowers withering away. Verian turned the small braid he held between his fingertips. Around and around he rolled the thing, feeling out the hairs as they split and broken beneath his touch; feeling out the last woven remnants of all he would know of Kellen.

The hair stank when it began to smolder, though the smell was largely covered by the jasmine. It was a small mercy. Verian's eyelids grew heavy, and his head grew light. He whispered a prayer for Kellen, who he supposed had been his friend. He felt as though he should weep. He did not.

Delmi rose from the bed with a soft whisper of bedsheets and muted padding of feet. He threw open the shutters and the door, then crossed over to Verian.

“Do not burn that flower without much air, boy.” His whisper seemed loud in the quiet of the room.

Delmi clasped his hand to Verian’s shoulder. Verian found the heat of Delmi’s body, the knowledge of him standing near, to be oddly comforting, but still he did not cry. He could not feel more than a distant pang of tension in his chest. A peculiar swelling at the base of his throat that gave all too easily when he swallowed for a second time.

“Come to bed, boy,” Delmi whispered as the fire burned itself out. Verian nodded and did just that.

Chapter 12

Verian had seen dead bodies before. His own parents had been laid out for viewing before their pyre, despite the fact that they had been through a week's worth of transport. No amount of dried flower pouches, powders, or scented oils could cover the smell, despite the efforts of the priest that had prepared them for their journey. By the time that evening had come, the bugs were visible on the discolored, withered skin. The bugs went up in the fire just the same as his parents' bodies, and the small, thin wooden vessels that contained their insides.

Even having been at war, and their delayed, but inevitable decomposition, they had seemed peaceful enough. The bodies had not much resembled how he remembered his parents. Their skin had been little more than strangely colored parchment over the hard edges and smooth curves of their bones, and both were much too thin within the drape of their ceremonial robes. Still, Verian could not have said how it was that they had died, and seeing their bodies laid out had brought a sense of finality. Of reality. It had been both horrifying and comforting.

With Kellen, there had been no such comfort. Verian was uncertain that he would ever rid himself of the image of body parts strewn about, of the feel of flesh sliding along bone like so much butchered meat. Kellen's distended features haunted Verian's dreams, contrasted by the images of animated life in the boy's dark eyes and bright laughter. Verian never questioned how one could exist alongside the other when he was dreaming, but when he woke it set him to clutching at his pillow and willing the memories away.

Delmi had been kind to Verian. Though they shared Delmi's massive bed, the man had not come upon him in the night. Alex would curl up against Delmi in the center, and Verian would curl against a soft feather pillow near the edge. The upper mattress was filled with down, and the blankets were warm. Verian was allowed to sleep until he wished to rise, to eat when he felt the need to do so, and to sleep again at his leisure. He slept often, though never for very long. He did not care for his dreams.

Then came the day that Verian realized that he had done little more than eat and sleep, piss and shit, for quite some time. He had been loathe to go exploring, lest he encounter anyone other than Delmi or the perpetually mute Alex. There were no books in the infirmary or its adjacent rooms. There seemed little at all to do within those walls.

Alex, by contrast, was always doing something. He dusted and swept. He watered and trimmed the plants both inside and out. Every morning he would fluff and make the bed, and every evening he would fluff it again

and turn it down. It was Alex who brought their meals from the kitchen, and Alex who fetched their water. Some days he was gone for hours on end, dressed smartly with his hair bound and his smile wide. Those days, Delmi had told Verian, the boy was off to learn. Verian could go to lessons too if he would like. Did that not appeal to him? Not a lick.

A week passed between the realization of his own uselessness and the day Verian finally decided to do something about it. Delmi was out, and Alex was attending his lessons. Sick with the sight of himself on the mirrored wall, Verian had left off pacing. He found Kellen's duster, shook out the dark ostrich feathers, and stalked about to have at the already clean shelving.

There was something appealing about banishing the few specks of dust that had gathered on the wood and the glass. Soon he was taking to the whole of the infirmary. He cleaned the mirrors and the door frames, washed the tables, sorted the various bandages, jars, and salves. He swept and brushed off the shutters, then tended to the plants. The infirmary was gleaming and organized, and Verian was warm, but not spent. He stood in the doorway, breathing in the jasmine-scented air, and looked over his handiwork. Surely there was something else that needed cleaning.

The clamp of hand over Verian's shoulder startled him. He hadn't heard any approach. Hadn't caught it from the corner of his eye. His response to the touch surprised him more than the touch itself had. Verian had never been particularly violent, and yet he turned, fist sailing, and punched Delmi in the nose before he'd even realized just who was standing there.

Delmi's nose gave a muted crunch and pop. Verian's fingers tingled, and his hand dropped to his side even as blood went flooding from Delmi's nostrils. Delmi did not cry out. He only glared, his dark eyes narrowed and glossy as he took in Verian's horrified expression.

"Fetch a rag, boy," Delmi snapped, his voice nasally and congested.

Verian pulled his heels from where they had taken root. He scurried off to snatch a muslin cloth from one of the baskets near the wall. The hairs on his arms were on end, and the air felt tight about him as he rushed back to Delmi.

Dark fingers snatched the dull, stained fabric from Verian's grasp. Delmi's palm left an imprint of blood, but his nose was intact as he set about swabbing the mess from his face and chest.

"Stop staring," Delmi said as he turned the muslin about. "'ere, clean up the mess on the floor, then wash your 'ands. The veecar 'as called for you."

The blood that had cooled for Verian's mortification over what he had

done, turned abruptly to ice. He felt it plummet from his face, and then his throat, sinking swiftly for his belly. The world slowed about him as his stomach churned. The room edged with darkness and tipped beneath his feet. He tried to tip with it, but he was upright, and the floor wouldn't stop slanting. It left him falling. Falling.

Verian's elbow ached. His stomach was cramped so tight that he couldn't move, and could scarcely breathe. Yet Delmi was smacking at his cheeks and insisting repeatedly that he wake up. That now was not the time for dramatics. Verian meant to reply that he'd tried very hard not to fall, but he was wondering even then if he had. Maybe he was simply napping gain.

"urry up, boy. The veecar is not a patient man."

Not napping. Besides, the floor was much harder than the bed. Verian opened his eyes and stared vaguely up at Delmi.

"You have magic."

Delmi's snort was nothing short of incredulous. "Maybe you are not so smart as I was thinking. Get up. Come. This mess will wait."

Verian stood shakily. Delmi pressed a cup of water into his palm.

"Drink this. Then we go."

Verian did not question. He drank even as he balked internally. He might refuse, but then they were making their way along the covered corridor. He might still refuse, but they were crossing a patch of grass. Down a stone pathway. Around a bend. He could still turn about. Into a building. And then they were there, standing before the distantly familiar doors that led to the vicar's offices. Still he did not turn away.

The dark sheen of Delmi's arm passed before Verian, and the door was pushed open. It swung on silent hinges, and Verian turned his stare down himself. He gazed past the tuck of his belly, which had grown too thin, and the knobs of his knees, which seemed too pronounced. He stared at his toes, and shuffled in. To the side to let Delmi pass. Whatever it was, surely Delmi would defend him.

But Delmi did not enter. Instead the door drew shut. The room was silent, lit by the sun that streamed through the stained glass, and pleasantly warm for the embers that remained subdued in the hearth.

"It is about time you joined us," declared a voice that was not the vicar's.

Verian picked his head up. He blinked slowly, still adjusting to the relative dim of the place. He took in the vicar regarding him from the massive thing of his desk, and then the man stationed on the opposite side of it. He was tall and lean, with sharp features for a human. His hair was

black and worn in a long tail, and his eyes were brilliant blue and cunning. There was something strangely familiar in the way he held his head, and the position of his shoulders. Something about his cat-like grin that made Verian's heart squeeze in his chest.

"Boy," the vicar remarked coolly. "This is Sir Jaquen Montclair. Stop standing there like the idiot you are and pay him your respects."

The blood drained from Verian's face, but at the same time, it left his cheeks hot. The sensation was not a pleasant one, and he could not help but press his palms low against his belly. Despite the churning of his gut, all was still beneath his touch. Jaquen raised a brow, and Verian bowed his head.

"Sir," he muttered through clenched teeth.

"You must forgive me for presenting you with such fodder," the vicar declared. "As I told you, this one is not as yet trained. Are you certain he is the one you would like?"

"Have you any other elves with red hair lurking about this pitiful excuse for a monastery?"

The wrinkles around the vicar's lips grew all the more craggy and sharp as the man's mouth tightened. "I still do not know how it is you became aware of him," the vicar admitted with obvious rancor.

The two exchanged a long, tense stare. Verian, uncertain of what he was meant to do, shifted his weight in place. His hands swung slowly up and in to fold before his groin. No reprimand was given for it, and so he watched on as the silence drew itself out. Uncomfortable, and all too long. Jaquen's expression finally shifted from its stony resolve. The man smiled, as if at a jest, and chuckled low.

"The rumor is about, sir. I daresay you'll have every well informed man within half a hundred leagues clamoring to see this little marvel of yours soon enough." Jaquen's blue eyes sparkled with mirth as he looked to Verian. "How fortuitous that I was the first to arrive."

"Indeed." The vicar did not sound convinced.

A gust of air rolled up against Verian's backside. He turned as a young man in a plain woolen tunic stepped through the door. Though it was neither silk nor brocade, Verian envied him the garment. He would have been happy for even a sack to cover his nudity.

"I was beginning to think you'd died in the hall," the vicar snapped.

The manservant stammered an apology as he bowed. Verian turned back to the pair at the desk, only to find that Jaquen's stare had not moved on.

"No matter," Jaquen declared dismissively as he stood, one fine-boned hand sliding along the panel of his coat.

His gaze had at last turned away from Verian. It touched briefly upon the manservant, carried on through the door, and then turned back to Hoch.

"I shall see you soon, vicar," Jaquen purred.

"Not too soon, I hope," Vicar Hoch muttered in reply.

"It is never *too* soon," Jaquen said, laughing.

And then Jaquen was gone, the manservant with him. Verian stared at the desk as the vicar turned in his seat. Hoch seemed to contemplate the ornate stained glass of the tall window that had been behind him. It seemed that Verian was worth as much note as any other piece of furniture in the room. Verian squirmed in place.

"Someone killed Kellen," he ventured.

The vicar's arm jolted along the rest. The man turned a mild glare on Verian.

"Are you daft, boy?" Footsteps smacked hurriedly along the hall, audible through the crack in the door. "What are you still doing here?"

The manservant darted into the room and caught Verian's elbow. Breath hissed through his teeth as he jerked in the stranger's grasp.

"I think it was Charles," Verian pleaded urgently, though he did not know for what.

The vicar's palm smacked hard and loud to the top of his desk. "Get out before I have you beaten for this insolence."

Verian backed one step, then another, moving into the frantic tugging at his arm. He hurried alongside the manservant. Out into the hall, where the door was drawn shut, and he found himself again tugged along. The other man was too well trained to frown, scowl, or strike at Verian, but his tone when he spoke suggested well enough that he would like to do all three.

"You shouldn't have done that. You were supposed to come with us. Now he'll be in a sour mood all day, and you've got this rich man's underthings in a bunch too. You'll end up red tonight if you ain't careful."

"I don't care," Verian insisted.

"You will when they're beating you."

"They killed my friend."

"No such thing as friends for the likes of you, and don't you forget it. You keep your head down and do your job 'less you wanna end up mud the same as him."

Verian was silent a long moment. He'd lost track of where they were. Had it been two right turns, or one?

"He was fed to the dogs." The words were flat, but audible, and easier to say than Verian would have expected given the tightness in his chest.

The man's face screwed up, then went carefully neutral. "Well I'm sorry 'bout that, but I'd wager you don't wanna end up dogfood neither." He drew up short, and Verian did the same. "So you'd best behave yourself for his worship and his lordship." The words were given in unfriendly caution, just before a heavy door was pushed open on quiet hinges.

Verian could just make out the side of a bed, and a table alongside that, from where he stood at the threshold. The manservant gave an impatient tuck of his hand. Verian hastened inside.

A tall, now familiar silhouette was outlined at the window. Jaquen stood with his back to the door. He spoke without turning.

"Hock was quite serious about your lack of training. If that man had two wits to rub together, he would not have wasted you on one of his apes."

"Charles," Verian supplied.

"Ape Charles," Jaquen said as he turned. "Sit down, then. I'll not have you standing there like some blushing maid.

"I'm not blushing." But Verian knelt, though the floor was in dire need of sweeping.

Jaquen's sigh was loud and drawn out. "I did not say you were. Sit in a *chair*, Verian."

Startled, but not needing to be told twice, Verian rose. He set himself into one of the two horsehair chairs at a small, round table near the modest hearth. The floral tapestry of the upholstery dug against his skin, but Verian gave no complaint. He did not even squirm, tempting as it was to lift a leg and scratch.

"Now then," Jaquen said as he turned back to the window. "Have you done as I told you?"

"I have not tried to run again."

"That is something, at least. However, I do not care to be made to repeat myself."

Verian sank slowly back in his seat. It was not proper, nor polite, but the tone had him feeling more himself. As did the chair. Even as a child he had not enjoyed being spoken to in such a fashion. He cleared his throat as his elbow met with the padded armrest.

"A great deal has happened since then. I confess that I do not recall all that you told me."

Jaquen's head turned side to side in a slow shake. "That is most unfortunate."

Verian sighed out heavily. He tipped the back of his head toward the wing of the chair, and peered at Jaquen through the near orange of his

eyelashes.

"Do you truly believe that you can free me from this place?"

"Not if you are uncooperative."

"And if I am very cooperative?"

"Then you will be out all the sooner."

"I want to go now," Verian remarked petulantly.

"Would you like a nursemaid to tuck you in as well?" Jaquen asked as he turned. A long, easy stride carried the man across the short span of the narrow room. "Who is it you are with?"

"I am with you." Verian squinted up at Jaquen.

"Don't be difficult," Jaquen chastised as he slid his fingers into Verian's hair. "I am here to help you."

The man's touch was light and gentle. Verian found himself leaning into the petting, and his eyes lidded as careful fingers worked loose a snarl of tangled hair.

"Delmi," Verian sighed.

"Ahh." Jaquen paused, then resumed his petting. He chuckled. The sound was so low and so quiet that Verian felt it more than heard it, though it was short-lived. "Good. Good. Delmi is not an ape."

"You know him?"

"I know many, even when they do not know me. I want you to learn all of what Delmi has to teach you. You shall be made to endure things you do not care to endure, but the result will be worthwhile."

Verian grimaced up at Jaquen. "What does that have to do with me leaving this dreadful place?"

"You must have patience, Verian. You will see. All will be revealed to you in time."

"I want to go home."

"I know."

They lapsed to silence then, Verian indolent in his seat, and Jaquen stroking his hair.

A strange cloud of guilt had settled itself upon Verian's thoughts. It left him shuffling as he wandered his way back to the infirmary. He'd taken four wrong turns in trying to find the way, and each time he had been given clear directions. The last had finally managed to stick. He'd paid them marginally more attention, if only for the fact that the man who had given them had been particularly quiet in their delivery.

"Boy," Delmi called to Verian in greeting upon his arrival. "I was

beginning to have worry."

One lank arm pressed to Verian's back, leaving a smear of oil in its wake. Verian breathed deeply of the jasmine fragrance that hung heavily in the air. It did not mingle well with the smell of dinner. Verian said nothing, but acknowledged Delmi and Alex both with his eyes as he made his way to mat and bowl.

"'e did not 'urt you, did 'e?"

Verian cupped his hands about the thick earthenware of his dish. He peered at the stew within. Cool enough that it no longer steamed. Verian watched tiny oil bubbles find one another at the surface.

"No. There was a man there who wanted to see me."

"'oo? Why?"

Verian sipped at his dinner. It wanted for salt. "Lord Jaquen Montclair." Ah, but why was trickier than who. Verian lipped a chunk of mealy potato into his mouth, and chewed at it slowly as he considered. "He told me to learn everything that you have to teach me."

Delmi snorted incredulously. The man lowered to sit at the table opposite Alex. "You are not needing a dandy 'igh born man to tell you this. There is something more."

Verian did not supply what that something more might be. He tipped his bowl to his lips again, indulging in the little privileges that Delmi allowed him. The soft clicking of Alex's spoon against the bottom of his bowl underscored the silence.

"Nnn. Do not worry over this, boy. I will fix. Soon you will see."

"Is something broken?"

Delmi's strange amber eyes fixed on Verian again. Verian did not like the intensity of that stare, nor the way that his skin took to prickling. He slurped at his stew, a thick noodle smacking wet against his upper lip.

"No more sleeping, I am thinking." Delmi curled his hand over the fold of his knee. "The sun will rise, and Verian will rise. Today was the opening of eyes. You did good work 'ere. But tomorrow we begin."

"Begin what?" A stringy cut of chicken fell to pieces between Verian's grinding teeth.

"Everything."

Chapter 13

“What about Salise?”

“What about her?”

Verian’s uncle rounded on him. The man was tall and sharp of feature. His long nose and hunched shoulders reminded Verian of the vultures he had seen in the trees back home. He never saw them at his uncle’s estate. Only sea birds, crows, and the little song birds that liked to attack the cats.

“Where is she?” Verian asked, suddenly regretting having even brought it up.

“I sent her away.”

“What? Why??”

“She was stealing from the kitchens.”

Verian peered up, and up. His uncle was even taller than his father had been. The intensity of the man’s stare left Verian’s heart thumping wildly in his chest.

“But she was going to take me to find more shells today. We were going to practice sums.”

“Ha! Practicing sums with a thief! There’s a laugh, boy.”

Verian’s tongue worked against his teeth. It felt heavy and thick in his mouth. His uncle’s wild and unpredictable moods left the child wary.

“I don’t think Salise would steal, uncle,” he said in as gently suggestive a tone as he could manage.

The man swooped down, his long limbs tucking and his fingers digging as he clasped Verian’s shoulders. Stern eyes hovered just before Verian’s own, intent in their regard.

“Everyone will steal. Remember this. They will steal from us simply because we have more than they do, even if what they have is sufficient. They will steal from me because they dislike me, and they will steal from you because you are well born. Especially here, where the humans have spread like rodents through our lands. There are thieves everywhere, and no one is to be trusted.”

Verian thought on this, and chewed at the inside of his cheek as he did so. His uncle’s fingers continued to dig at the girdles of his shoulders, working mild bruises past the soft silk of his tunic.

“Except for you, uncle?”

Thin lips twitched into a cutting smile beneath the hook of the man’s nose. The sliver of teeth that showed there did not make him look any less a vulture in Verian’s mind, though his blue eyes seemed kinder somehow.

The gripping hands hauled on Verian, tugging him into his uncle's boney embrace.

"Except for me, child."

* * *

"No."

Delmi's voice broke through Verian's contemplation of his dreams. Verian flinched, though no blow followed the reprimand. He hissed lightly through his teeth.

"It is no good. I do not believe in your god. Why should he bless me with what I ask of him?"

"You are missing the point. You must stop being--" Delmi paused as he sometimes did when searching for the appropriate word.

"A heathen?" Verian supplied impatiently.

"No." Delmi's replied with a snap of irritation to his usually smooth, purring tone. "Petulant. I have done you no wrong--"

"You haven't helped me to escape to my home," Verian interrupted.

"Enough! You make my blood hot at the neck, boy. You say you wish to learn, so you will learn. Less moving of your mouth and more using of your ears will be of great 'elp for you, I 'ave thinking."

Verian sagged back through his heels. He was growing tired of standing in the grassy field. Every bob and sway of delicate wildflower made him pine for home. These were not his flowers. This was not his breeze.

"Now," Delmi said with regained composure, "you are a clever boy. I know this to be true. You tell me why you say the prayer I have taught to you."

Verian grimaced as he looked up from his reverie. It was difficult not to be sullen and peevish. The flattery helped.

"To ask Misau's blessing that I might provide assistance to my bretheren."

"No," Delmi said in his usual quiet thrum. "That is the meaning of the words. That is not why."

Verian's brow rumped, and he fixed Delmi with a puzzled look. The man stepped forward to gather Verian's hands.

"The words serve the same purpose as the movements," Delmi said, speaking quietly for his proximity. "These are things to focus. To guide." Delmi's hands brought Verian's wide, and then up. The smaller man had to press close to reach. "When you 'ave mastered the gift, you do not need these things. Until then, you remember. Misau does not matter in this."

Dismay distracted Verian from the ungainly manipulation of his arms. What was a man serving the monastery doing saying such a thing? What was he doing even thinking it?

Delmi's amber eyes were glinting with amusement. Verian realized that the man was grinning.

"Look at me, boy," Delmi commanded as he let go of Verian's pressed palms and took a step back. "Do I look like these other men 'ere? Do I look like a follower of Misau that you 'ave ever beheld?"

Verian studied delmi. The man was lean and rail thin. His skin was so dark that when he smiled his teeth seemed a radiant white light in his face. The strange color of his eyes was flecked in the way of flawed gemstones, and the man was prone to going about in brightly colored shifts and loincloths even in the middle of winter. So, too, were his feet bare.

"You do not resemble any other man that I have ever laid eyes on, sir," Verian answered hesitantly, wary of a trap.

"Exactly so. The prayer is your focus boy. The gift is inside of you. It is there, and you must breathe, move, and pray. You must draw it forth. Not Misau, not the spirits of sky, water, and earth, and not the four dead Gods of the sands. Just you, and all that is inside. Try once more."

Once more. Delmi had been saying that for over a week now. Sighing and dubious, Verian brought his arms wide. He raised his palms to the sky, and set into the quiet chanting of his prayer. Skin clapped to skin, and his hands traveled down before him as he begged through his prayer.

Nothing happened. Delmi's mouth grew tight and small.

"Come," Delmi spoke as he turned. "We go learn more of 'erbs."

The rest of the afternoon was spent drawling about the field. Verian recited the flowers he knew when he came across them, and learned the names of the ones he did not. Some he knew the names of already, but had failed to recognize. Either because the plant had multiple stages of transformation through the course of its blooming, or because he had fixated too much on the blossom and not enough on the foliage.

It had been a long day, and by the time the sun dipped low along the horizon, Verian was ravenous. He hurried back to the infirmary ahead of Delmi, and took the time to wash his hands before tearing into thew arm bread on his plate. Alex was there, and the boy stared at him with eyes that were glossy and wide behind the unruly golden coils of his hair. He said nothing, but Alex never said anything.

"Boy," Delmi said as he crossed the threshold. "Bathe first. Food after."

The mouthful of bread in Verian's mouth was not well chewed, and swallowing brought tears to his eyes. "But--"

"No," Delmi said succinctly, cutting him off. "I dislike 'ow you do not follow instructions. You be good. Bath. Now."

Verian hopped up to scuttle off to the room adjoining the infirmary. He stole a look back as he went. Delmi and Alex were seated at the table with its gleaming black and white woods, supping on bread and roast pork. Verian stuffed back his pang of envy, though it cut deep, and turned to pump water into the massive tub while the heavy iron pot was left to heat over the fire.

"Learn all he has to teach me," Verian told himself. He breathed out heavily as he wiped his sweaty brow with his arm. "But what if that is nothing at all?"

It was not nothing at all.

After dinner had been cleared, and the three were given ample time to digest and relax by the fire, Delmi broke their routine to send Alex away. Verian watched the boy shuffle through the door, where Alex slowed only long enough to glance reproachfully at Verian. Verian turned away from the shutting of the door to peer curiously at Delmi. The firelight reflected through Delmi's eyes, making them seem almost molten. It gave his steady regard an undeniable intensity. Verian's skin prickled, and he told himself it was only from the brush of cool night air at Alex's departure.

"You are afraid," Delmi observed.

"No," Verian protested louder than he'd meant to.

"You are. Why? I 'ave never 'urt you. I 'ave tended you and kept you safe 'ere. What reason do you 'ave to fear me, boy?"

Verian pushed his tongue against his teeth, his entire mouth tightening for how dry it had gone. Was it fear that caused his belly to churn? He wanted to call it revulsion, but Delmi did not bring him disgust. The entire situation did so, perhaps, but Delmi had been kind enough. Kind within the limitations of his role. But then, was that not the very reason? Verian shifted his attention from the tips of his fingers to meet Delmi's stare.

"You have all of the power," Verian mumbled. "I have nothing. I cannot eat at the table. I do not even have a scrap of clothing to call my own."

Delmi's head tipped to the side, one brow sweeping upward.

"Good. It is good that you 'ave answered." Delmi moved to join Verian on the floor. "But you must keep in mind, boy, that many things are not as they 'ave seeming. Also, that no matter what power you 'ave in this

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"I 'ave said I will not 'urt you. Why do you guard yourself so?"

Verian shoved the heels of his palms against the red and orange quilt beneath him. "I don't."

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"I could make you," Delmi interrupted sternly. "You realize this by now."

"Yes," Verian replied reluctantly. He forced his shoulders away from the bottoms of his ears. "I would rather you not."

"Me also. So you relax. And you be respectful. These things are important in all places, but most especially 'ere. A relaxed mind is an aware mind, and a respectful person is easily forgotten, or easily remembered, depending on what you desire. You understand?"

"I'm not an idiot," Verian nearly snapped in return. He lay his head to the pillow behind him, his arms crossing over his chest.

Delmi's sigh spoke volumes.

"I'm not an idiot, *sir*," Verian corrected.

"You would be funny if you were not being so willful, boy. There, move further that way. Good. Now you set hands to your belly. Yes. And breathe like I 'ave shown to you."

It was no easy task, that breathing. It should have been. How difficult could it be to draw air in and out? Slow and deep? But his chest was tight, and his belly moreso, and Verian did not want to breathe. He wanted to strike Delmi. He wanted to flee. He wanted to weep again. He wanted to flay Charles. He wanted to feel dead inside. It had been easier than this. Easier than breathing.

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His head hurt, and his sinuses burned. Verian's lips pursed. He bunched the quilt beneath him into tight gathers between his fingers.

"More. That will pass, yes," Delmi encouraged. "You breathe. Close your eyes, maybe it is easier for you that way."

Closing his eyes did not help. Verian's mouth was dry, and his throat was full. But he continued to breathe. In and out. Slow and deep. Until the knot in his belly began to ease, and with it the tightness in his chest. On and on, while Delmi watched in silence. On and on, until his body grew tired of the tension that ran in his limbs, and he felt as though he were sinking into the bed beneath him.

"Good boy," Delmi praised in a low thrum.

Verian slit open his eyes, but closed them again when Delmi shook his head.

"Now I speak, and you listen." Delmi's voice was quiet and unobtrusive, just loud and firm enough to guide Verian's thoughts without jarring them. "You and Kellen spent intimate time together. You know there are good things to learn there." The bed dipped to Verian's left, moving as Delmi climbed into it. "But you are different, and your learning will be different. You 'ave a gift, and you must learn that, but you are also for someone in particular, not just those who visit, and so you must learn other things as well."

It was difficult for Verian not to open his eyes and look at Delmi. So soothing was the man's voice, so lulling the warmth of the room and the softness of the bed, that Verian did not startle when Delmi touched his hip. He simply breathed, and in so doing let the contact pass through him, the sensation of it fading like the stilling of a pond about the landing of a leaf.

"Did you know you can realize your desire without touching?" Delmi paused for a breath, but went on before Verian could answer. "It is

possible. But I will touch you for now, so you might learn what I mean when I say these things."

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"Keep them closed. Easier for this." Delmi's fingertips trailed along the top of Verian's thigh. "Not all men are the same. What pleases one, does not always please another. But if you know what pleases yourself, then it will give you a place for starting."

Delmi slid his fingers along the inside of Verian's knee. They cupped at the juncture of thigh, and moved to graze over the lines of skin on the underside. "I do not mean crude grabbing and rutting like an animal."

Delmi's voice was closing in on Verian again, wrapping about him so that he was floating in a red darkness and surrounded by the steady thrum of accented words. It was a safe place. A tranquil place. Relaxing, even with the little flutter of thrill that had him following the man's shifting touch.

"But there are other things. Petting and rubbing in other places." Delmi's thumb stroked down over the top of Verian's calf. His palm pressed flush, and his entire hand moved upward in a slow, warm drag. "And where you do not pet and rub is just as important."

The hand turned, pulling and sliding, easing instead along the outside of Verian's thigh. Verian's heart skipped, and his insides flooded with warmth. He let out a tremor of a breath. Delmi picked his hand up enough to walk his fingertips over Verian's hip.

"And sometimes there are things we do not like," Delmi went on, dragging his hand in a tickling scrabble of nail along the lower curvature of Verian's belly, "but because of what we are doing, and 'oo we are with, we find them more enjoyable."

The side of Delmi's finger dipped along the edge of Verian's navel, prompting a brief hiss of breath through teeth. Delmi chuckled quietly, making up for the sensation with a drag of fingertips lower. And lower. Though once they had found the base of Verian's cock, they again retreated to flutter their way upward. Verian found himself wishing they had continued their downward path.

"You 'ave loved before, boy? Some man or woman you would do anything for? Someone you thought you might die if you could never see them again?"

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"Yes," Verian croaked.

"Good," Delmi purred in response. "Keep your eyes closed. Think of those times when you were most enthralled with this person. Remember their smiles and laughter. Remember the way they smelled, 'ow they tasted, or 'ow you thought they would taste."

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Verian was hard by the time Delmi's crafty hands found the length of his cock. Verian's breath caught for the graze of contact. He swallowed as his blood pooled and pulled, and sighed pleasantly when Delmi appeased the building heat with a single, strong stroke.

"Remember the way their skin felt on yours. The texture of their 'air . . ."

Delmi was still speaking, but Verian could scarcely focus on the sound of the man's voice. He was lost on the sensation of the trailing low along his belly, the one that was grasping his shaft to slide with slow, pulling drags of skin. He remembered Mikel's teeth at his throat. The low, husky laughter in his ear the first time they had lain together. The rub of stiff nipples across his own as they shivered in an early spring pond.

". . . and the way they would move. The slide of their fingers. The sigh of their breathing . . ."

Tension wound through his belly and settled low past Verian's hips. He pushed his heels to the bed, unable to help the way his ass flexed and raised. Unable to help the groan that passed his lips as his cock fed through the tight grasp of Delmi's hand.

". . . of their cries, and their moans . . ."

Verian's tongue went probing against his teeth, and then his lips. He remembered the way Mikel had trembled and rocked beneath him in the dark of the dusty old wine cellar. How tight he had been then. How much oil they'd spent on one another. That first move beyond hand and mouth, beyond writhing naked in the woods. He remembered the ragged panting and moans Mikel had tucked into his arm as Verian worked into him harder and faster.

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sliding with lewd, rapid smacks of skin. He met every raise of Verian's hips. Every unintentional thrust was rewarded with a wisp of palm along the head of his cock, so that Delmi's hand traveled with the easy slide of the fluid that beaded there.

Delmi spoke on. Verian groaned and trembled. He heard nothing. There was a roaring in his ears. A rush of pulse. His throat was tight again. His chest equally so. He moved because he was compelled to move. To buck and grunt and writhe. Lavender mixed with jasmine. Mikel's laughter and cocky smile blurred with fuzzy glimpses of dark skin and subdued expression.

The roaring in Verian's ears broke to a soft, keening cry. His vision went from black to red, and then to orange. He strained his hips up, and up, pushing against the squeeze and stroke that milked pulse after thick pulse from his cock until the urge to drive forward was abruptly gone. Verian's muscles cramped exquisitely to the strain, then all at once went limp. He sagged back into the bed, panting as he remembered that he should be breathing.

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"You cheated," Verian accused, the back of his other hand wiping at his damp eyelids.

"I did not."

"You used your magic," Verian insisted.

Delmi sighed. "No, boy. We all want relief, yes? We all want to feel good. Do not think that because you were not miserable that I 'ave meddled. You are allowed to be something other than sad. You are allowed to permit yourself moments of joy. You must stop living in grief for your life some time."

Delmi slid away and off of the bed. He returned a moment later with a damp cloth. The chill of it left Verian gasping when the rag landed over his navel.

"Clean yourself," Delmi instructed. His slender fingers took to the tie at the outside of his hip. "Then we see 'ow well you were paying attention." Soft silk fell away with a whisper of rippling fabric.

Delmi was dark and beautiful. His body glistened in the light of the fading fire. Verian's gaze swept from head to toe, taking in the liveness of the man. He wondered how it was that so small a human left so weighty an impression.

Verian could argue that he hadn't been paying attention. He considered doing so as he found his gaze trailing toward the half-hard

swelling of Delmi's cock. He could point out that he'd been imagining as Delmi had instructed him to do. Yet, as the cloth ran cold along his belly, and the bed came to dip gently at his side, Verian found that he had no desire to do so. The messy rag landed heavy on the rug alongside the bed, and Verian rolled to warm his cooled skin against Delmi's side.

It was not nothing at all.

After dinner had been cleared, and the three were given ample time to digest and relax by the fire, Delmi broke their routine to send Alex away. Verian watched the boy shuffle through the door, where Alex slowed only long enough to glance reproachfully at Verian. Verian turned away from the shutting of the door to peer curiously at Delmi. The firelight reflected through Delmi's eyes, making them seem almost molten. It gave his steady regard an undeniable intensity. Verian's skin prickled, and he told himself it was only from the brush of cool night air at Alex's departure.

"You are afraid," Delmi observed.

"No," Verian protested louder than he'd meant to.

"You are. Why? I 'ave never 'urt you. I 'ave tended you and kept you safe 'ere. What reason do you 'ave to fear me, boy?"

Verian pushed his tongue against his teeth, his entire mouth tightening for how dry it had gone. Was it fear that caused his belly to churn? He wanted to call it revulsion, but Delmi did not bring him disgust. The entire situation did so, perhaps, but Delmi had been kind enough. Kind within the limitations of his role. But then, was that not the very reason? Verian shifted his attention from the tips of his fingers to meet Delmi's stare.

"You have all of the power," Verian mumbled. "I have nothing. I

cannot eat at the table. I do not even have a scrap of clothing to call my own."

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Chapter 14

The day it finally came, it came as a quickening of pulse, a warm tingling through the tips of his fingers. The sun had just risen over the hills, and the golden slant of light made him doubt the glimmer that formed between his cupped palms. But there it was, growing steadily warmer, steadily brighter, until its presence could not be denied. The air about him was alive and crackling in the way it had during the thunderstorms three days prior. Verian held his breath as the magic gathered, growing stronger by the second. It became vivid, blazing and concrete.

“Good,” Delmi purred near Verian’s shoulder. “Now bring it up. Let it wash over you. Let it fill you. Like scooping water.”

Verian tracked the cupped raising of his hands. Up and up, high overhead. He tipped his joined palms, but the golden shimmer did not pour as water did. It seemed to dissipate as he threw his arms in a wide sweep. Still, when he brought his arms in again, there it was. Strong, golden, and good.

Verian was smiling. It hurt his cheeks. His voice shook from him in an uncertain stammer. Laughter — or something near enough. His head was light, and his chest was full. He felt as though he might float away into the steady rise of the sun. Up again, over, up and over. He was life, and he was light. Warmth and divinity. This. This was why people worshipped. It had to be.

Cool fingers settled over the crest of Verian’s shoulder. He brought his hands down once more, settling them to his sides. Another sound, slipped uneasily between his lips and fell awkwardly short of proper merriment.

“Good,” Delmi repeated firmly. His hand squeezed in its clasp over Verian’s shoulder. “Now you ‘ave doe it. Now it will be easier to do again. You will see. Let it go now.”

“But we’ve only just begun,” Verian protested.

“Do not argue, boy. They will think I am too lenient.”

Verian drew a breath deep into his belly and let it out slowly. He focused on the air, on letting it slip away. Bit by bit, he let the gathered magic ease from his core, from his limbs. He felt too heavy. Wan. Where

the world had been radiant in color, it was now reduced to shades of gray. The sun was still rising. The hills were still verdant with bursts of pink and yellow wildflowers that made themselves known between the clumps of grass. Yet it was so dull compared to what it had been moments before. Hollow to look upon.

“Very good,” Delmi cooed in praise. “It will come faster with practice. Sometimes you must let it go so you may go undetected. Now, do it again. Gather, then release.”

Verian obliged Delmi, eager again to feel that sensation racing through him, to restore the world to life and color. It was easier to draw the magic inward, though it still took time. Time to pull it from the air even though he felt it there. Scoop, and up, and scoop again.

He laughed. Louder. More certainly. This. This was good. This was life coursing through him as it never had before. He was elated. His body trembled with it. More. He needed more.

“Stop,” Delmi commanded quietly.

Verian had not noticed the man reposition himself. Delmi stood before Verian, seeming to radiate light. Life. He was a conduit, blazing bright enough that it near hurt Verian to look upon the man.

“Good,” Delmi praised again. “Very good. Now you must focus.” Delmi plucked the bone handled knife he’d been carrying from the strap at his hip. “It is easier to work first on yourself. Be still.”

Verian had already begun to back away. He was staring at the blade, wondering why it was he hadn’t tried to steal it. Why it was he hadn’t realized that Delmi meant to turn on him as well. Everyone would. It was only a matter of time. And really, had Delmi ever been on his side?

“No,” the word passed so quietly from Verian’s lips that he scarcely heard it himself.

Delmi let out a soft sigh. He turned the knife about in his hands, lowering it as he did so.

“I am not going to ‘urt you, boy. It is not my desire. Just a prick to your finger. Like so.”

Delmi raised his hand to poke the sharp point of the dagger into the soft, coppery pad of his fingertip. A bead of blood welled to the surface,

dark at first, and then bright and brilliant red. He drew the dagger back and wiped it clean on the outside of his thigh.

"There; see? 'armless."

Verian watched the point of Delmi's finger. The blood continued to bead, and it spilled to the side to catch under his finger and drip down to the grass. Delmi brought his hand up to suckle his finger clean. It was pulled from the man's mouth with a sheen of spittle, the blood gone, the bleeding stopped. Verian hadn't even been aware of him casting the spell to mend it.

"Now, come 'ere, boy."

His feet were heavy. How could he know that Delmi did not mean to hurt him beyond that? Oh, but had he ever? Delmi was but a piece of a wicked game, but he was as kind a piece as Verian had met since his unwilling participation. Verian took another step, then swayed to a halt.

"You are afraid," Delmi observed.

"I am not," Verian replied through grit teeth.

"You are, but you are good to come anyway."

There was no lying to Delmi. He always knew. Despite his fear, Verian managed not to flinch as his hand was grasped and the point of the blade dimpled, then pushed past the callous of his fingertip.

"Good," came Delmi's soothing purr as Verian lowered his hand. "Now you do it again, and when your prayer is answered, you pray for your injury. You pray to be whole."

Verian's mouth worked. He didn't point out that he wasn't praying. Doing so would have been wasted breath. They both knew the truth of the matter. Delmi insisted on maintaining the facade, and Verian had learned not to disrupt it.

Instead he focused. He focused on his breathing. He focused on the heat that expanded from his belly and into his chest. He focused on the tingle of his arms as he swept them out, around, down, and up. He focused on the static of his fingers, and on the golden shimmer of magic spilling back into him as he raised his arms anew. Up, palms pressing, blood tickling the belly of his index finger, down, elbows out. He focused on the lingering sting at his fingertip. On mending it, though he knew not

how.

His eyes had shut without him realizing it. Verian drew another breath in the darkness, then squinted one open to peer hesitantly into his palms as they parted. Whole. Intact. The only evidence that the injury had been there at all was the blood drying on his hand. A dismayed, thrilled bark escaped him.

"You see?" Delmi was grinning his jackal's grin, wide and white.

"Yes," Verian breathed in wonder. "Again!"

He thrust his hand at Delmi.

"Once more," and then we return. Ah-leks will 'ave tea set, and then you may rest for today. A reward."

Delmi lifted a hand expectantly between them, and Verian met it in kind. The blade again pierced his skin, and again he focused. Again he breathed. Again he moved. Again he mended.

Delmi had the knife tucked away before Verian had finished. Verian was left ecstatic, giddy despite how worn he felt. Warm from within for the first time in months. No longer was the chill in his bones. No longer did he fear losing his fingers or toes. He was impervious. He was powerful.

"Every morning you will great the sun this way. Every afternoon you will thank it for the gift of life," Delmi instructed. "Every evening you will pray for its safe return."

"Yes, sir," Verian replied obediently. The words had become second nature.

It was on the long walk back that Verian came to realize that he was exhausted. He wanted to gorge himself on sweet meats and sleep for the remainder of the day. Perhaps even the rest of the week.

Alas, he was not nearly so fortunate as that. Verian sat on his mat and sipped his tea. He ate of the hard bread and slices of buttered turnip that had been laid out for him, and then curled into the bead with heavy limbs and heavier eyelids. Sleep, at least, was a fine reward.

* * *

"You cannot trust them, boy."

Verian pushed the heavy wooden ball between his outstretched legs. It was his favorite of his uncle's set, the surface marked with bands of flaking yellow and pink. The size of the ball made it ideal for pushing between small hands.

"But they're my friends, uncle."

Tuk, tuk, tuk. The ball rolled across the uneven joints of the floorboards. Verian stared at it, determined not to meet the man's cold blue eyes. Tuk, tuk, tuk went the ball as it rolled to the crook of Verian's other knee.

"No, child. We have been over this before. They are *humans*. Humans who infest the hills and spread their blight." The ball rolled through the flecks of spittle that landed upon the dusty floorboards. "Squat, stubby, round-eared *pests*. Not our friends, Verian!"

Tuk, tuk— A mud-encrusted black boot settled over the top of the ball. Verian's eyes went wide, and his belly twisted up inside of him. He stared up into his uncle's scowling face.

"However," his uncle continued with a kinder pitch to his voice, "you need your education, and I cannot afford to hire on private tutors. You may continue to attend this school of theirs, but I am not to hear anything further of this friend nonsense. Understood?"

Verian's teeth clacked together. His chin bobbed slowly down. Slowly up.

"Very well. Clean up this mess and get washed. Supper is ready."

"Yes, uncle. Thank you, uncle."

"Thank your insufferable parents for dying so foolishly and not taking your wellbeing into account," the man snarled in return.

A clatter sounded from the door as it jarred into the frame. Verian pushed the ball across the floor. He listened to it tuk against the board joints and whisper across the thin rug before clacking to a stop beneath his bed.

* * *

The following morning came entirely too early. Verian woke to Alex's hand on his shoulder. The boy gave a wan smile before turning to slip from

the infirmary.

Through the distant window, the sky was the color of slate, and the inside of their room was dim. The warmth of Delmi's body tangled with his own was further lure to stay. To shut his eyes, if even for a few minutes more.

Verian woke again with a gasp. His shoulder was smarting, and his heart was hammering wildly in his chest. Alex stood at the bedside frowning down at him. When the boy pointed to the shut door, Verian wanted very much to slap him. Instead, Verian wormed from beneath Delmi's arm.

Outside, the sky was growing lighter. Thick clouds gathered in the distance, promising more rain. The tufts of grass and wildflowers were damp under Verian's feet as he made his way up the small hill just outside of the monastery walls. He took a long look at the imposing complex, then turned his back upon it.

The rolling fields with their crops lay before him. More lush, green grass beyond. His fingertips twitched. His toes curled. There were only a couple of workers there. He could blend with them, slip past. No one would miss him. Not for the next hour, in any case.

"Please do," came the almost lustful invitation of a woman's voice from behind. "It's been damned dull around here."

Verian spun in place. He was met by a cheeky grin, the edge of a dimple. A woman stood there, picking at her nails with the tip of a dull dagger. Verian let out a breath as his head went light.

"You."

"Mmm, yes. Me. You're not very clever, are you? I thought you might be worth more salt than the rest of the cattle. I'm wrong again. What a disappointment."

She did not sound disappointed.

A flash of heat rose along Verian's spine. He bit back the urge to retort. He didn't want his lip split.

"Did Delmi send you?" He asked suspiciously.

"Delmi? No. That little fool is far too trusting to send me to check up on his little pets."

Bile crawled up the back of Verian's throat.

"Why are you here, then?"

"Admiring the view."

Verian's cheeks lit with heat. His teeth worked against one another, and he very nearly turned away from the woman. His distrust, however, kept him facing firmly forward despite his embarrassment.

"Why are you really here?" To his relief, the question did not quaver.

"No reason," the woman replied with a flick of grime from the corner of her nail.

"Go away."

"Why should I?" She was moving as she asked, stepping wide around Verian. Her bola rolled against the outside of her thigh.

"You are distracting me."

Verian turned in place, tracking the woman.

"So you learn how to focus through distraction."

"Go. Away," Verian insisted through grit teeth, the words more growl than he should have given.

"Hmm," the woman trailed thoughtfully, then gave a decisive shake of her head. "No."

Verian's lips peeled back from his teeth, and he gave the woman a frustrated hiss. He could not curse her. He could not lash out at her. He had risked enough as it was.

"You're cute when you're angry."

One moment he was telling himself to stay calm, and the next that woman had ruined it all with her words. Verian's hand moved in a swift arc. His fingers tingled, his palm as well. A pink imprint was developing on the woman's cheek, but Verian did not notice. His jaw ached, and there was blood spilling over his teeth from where the inside of his own cheek had split along their edges.

"Sloppy," the woman commented as she shook out her fist. "And slow. Really, I expected more than a slap."

Verian's eyes glossed, and his fingertips probed cautiously along his forming bruise. The woman gave a disapproving cluck of her tongue.

"I'll be back when you're feeling more playful, kid."

She turned with a generous roll of her wide hips, her steps confident despite the sink of her boot heels into the soft earth. Veria watched until she disappeared behind the ivy-covered wall. Only then did he turn back to his task.

The sun had risen far beyond the hills. The clouds were brighter for it, lighter, and threatening to burn off in patches to reveal the vibrant blue sky beyond. Still, he had not come to pray. The prayer was a focus. The ruse. Verian said nothing. He breathed. He moved. Then came the warm flood and tingle of magic as it coursed into him. He mended the ache in his jaw, the raw throbbing of his cheek. He stayed on the hill, channeling it in, and out, and in again until Alex came to fetch him with a steady look and beckoning tip of head.

Breakfast was dried blueberries made plump again by cooking them with the porridge that had been generously ladled into his dish. Verian gorged himself on it before returning to his duties. He went to the hill again at noon, and at dusk.

Verian was less tired that night, and was attentive to Delmi's instruction as he pleased the man with his hands. But it drew on for hours, and the next morning was all the more difficult to face. Alex had to pinch Verian twice to get him out of bed.

Verian was left alone to his work that day, and the following three. Breakfasts were hardy, teas modest, and suppers sparing. The nights were reserved for learning how to apply his fingers to skin, and how best to press against the muscle beneath. He learned how to move from spreading oil over the body to smearing it within without being abrupt.

Delmi encouraged Verian's exploration of stiff, gripping muscle and the soft, pulsing flesh beyond. Delmi's critique was constant, but supportive, and Verian soon learned how to find the firmer lump hidden deep within, and to exploit its sensations. The tangled multiple times in those nights, Delmi graciously allowing Verian his share of pleasure in their coupling.

Then came the day that Alex did not wake him. Verian woke slowly, rested but langorous. The bed was empty, but still warm. The infirmary had been thrown open, and the breeze that passed through was musky with the promise of rain. Delmi sat near the hearth, sharing a breakfast of

peppered eggs and potatoes with Alex.

"You may sleep longer if you like, boy," Delmi called softly. "Tonight you meet with Lord Montclair, and tomorrow you mend more than little finger pokes."

"Yes, sir," Verian replied as he tucked himself back into the warm bundle of blankets and pillow.

He shut his eyes, but he could not sleep. Jaquen. It had been nearly a month since he'd seen the man. Had he come to free him at last?

Verian's hands felt swollen, his palms slick with sweat. He weaseled his way from beneath the covers and relieved himself in the chamber pot. Alex set a plate of eggs and potato, sadly without pepper, on the end of Verian's mat.

"May I go to the hill after I've finished, sir?" Verian asked between bites.

"Only if you do not expend yourself greatly, boy. Lord Montclair will be displeased if you are worn when you go to him."

Verian could not afford to miss the practice, this he knew. Jaquen wanted him to learn, and so learn he must. He would learn as much as possible, as quickly as possible, lest he risk finding himself stuck at the monastery for the rest of his days.

He finished the rest of his breakfast, though the cooled grease made it less than appealing, and he went to the hill. He cleaned the infirmary, and he went to the hill. He ate again, and he stole off to the hill for a short time before having to return in order to bathe and ready himself.

Jaquen was waiting in the same room of the main building. The remnants of his supper littered the table, and a fire was blazing in the hearth. Stubs of candles littered throughout the room left everything bathed in a soothing, golden glow.

The man himself stood near the window, staring out through panes of thickly poured glass. He turned when Verian entered, and favored him with a smile that was more cunning than warm.

"Ah. There you are," Jaquen said as he approached. "Oh, come now. Don't look at me like that."

"Where have you been?" Verian hissed.

"Busy, my boy. I do have things which require my attention."

Jaquen spread his arms, and Verian threw himself forward with a chuff. His arms wrapped about Jaquen in a tight hold. Forgiven, with little more than an embrace.

"Is it time?" Verian asked.

"Time?"

"To go!"

"No, Verian. I told you. You must be patient."

Verian sulked as he rocked back and finally disengaged from Jaquen.

"Have you been learning from Delmi?" Jaquen asked, his hands lowering to his sides.

"Yes, sir."

"Splendid. And practicing?"

"Yes, sir."

Jaquen had turned to the table, and he poured himself a glass of rich burgundy wine as he spoke.

"And how is it coming?"

Verian's cheeks went flush. He glanced aside, then crawled up onto the bed.

"I can show you."

Jaquen made a face at his wine.

"That is not what I meant."

"Oh." Verian peered at his palms, at his filed nails. His chin dipped. "It.. It took me some time to manage it, but I finally did. I am practicing regularly."

Jaquen hummed, his lips tight as he swallowed.

"I am not surprised," the man remarked mildly.

"You're not?" Verian asked as he cupped his palms about his ankles.

"Not in the least. I suppose he had you praying like some pious little bird?"

Verian nodded.

"And he has you chasing the sun for its light?"

Verian nodded again.

"As expected." Jaquen returned his wine glass to the table. "And while

that path is possible for you, Verian, it will never be easy.”

“Sir?”

“Yours is another path. It is true that most elves are graced, but not all experience that grace in the same way.”

A flicker of sensation tickled along Verian’s nerves. It niggled at his thoughts, disrupting his curiosity and attentiveness to Jaquen. The shadows that pooled between the globes of light from the candles seemed that much darker, that much richer. Verian’s heart drummed. The light from the hearth fire diminished, but still he was warm. He squinted at the heavy drapes, though they were barely visible for the growing darkness. The tapers of flame on the candles were as stars, vivid, but casting little light by which to see. Verian grabbed at his shins, and turned an uneasy stare to Jaquen.

“How are you doing that?”

“Magic,” Jaquen answered off-handedly. “There are many sorts of magic, but the principles are largely the same. Tell me, Verian, do you feel it?”

He did feel it. It brushed against him, light as a feather. He could taste it, though he hadn’t noticed until Jaquen asked.

“It tastes of rain,” Verian answered.

Jaquen’s smile was wide. Biting, but handsome. He nodded approvingly.

“Did you feel Delmi’s magic when he cast it? Did you taste it? Were you aware of every stirring of it as a fish is aware of the current?”

“No, sir,” Verian answered.

Verian’s heart was a wild thing in his chest. He could not recall ever having been so excited. Not even those moments of racing down the hill from the kennel could compare. This was his freedom. This power would be his escape.

“But you feel this,” Jaquen said through the twilight of the room.

“Yes, sir.”

The shadows grew thicker still. The vast suite was awash in darkness that was nearly tangible. It brushed across him like a mist, ethereal and constantly shifting. Verian shivered despite the hearth fire that warmed the

air.

“Splendid. Now take it.”

“Sir?”

“I have gathered it, Verian.” Jaquen’s voice was deep and rolling in the darkness. “Take it that you may know the feel of it bowing to your will. It will be easier to gather on your own once you know what you are feeling for.”

“How?”

“Do not over think this, boy.”

That was easier said than done. Verian found himself wondering when he had become so inhibited. When had he become so very afraid?

Steeling himself, Verian stuck a hand out and drew his fingers through the air. There was no warm tingle, no empowering swell through his chest. There were shadows, and ghosts, and try as he might he could not grasp them.

But they, it seemed, would grasp him. Not by the hand that he wove through the air like a blind beggar boy, but by his elbow. By his belly, and his knee. By one shoulder, and the side of his neck.

Fingers of sensation brushed across his skin and steeped inward. In like cold, or like heat, but they were neither. They were something else entirely. Something that had him snorting through his nose, had him rubbing at his agitated earlobes. But he would not refuse them. Not this gift. He welcomed it instead, the strange imbuing of shadows passing through his flesh. He welcomed it with lowered hands and upturned knees. With an open and rapidly beating heart.

“Good,” Jaquen rumbled.

Good. And it was so much better than when Delmi had said it. Verian laughed.

Chapter 15

Life became strangely easy for Verian. He spent his days tending to the infirmary, which saw little actual use, and to learning from Delmi. He learned how to gather magic, and to focus it. He progressed from healing cuts in the skin, to healing those through fat and muscle. When one of the young, well-dressed boys from Mister Martin's class fell from a tree and broke his arm, Delmi showed Verian how to set it and encourage its mending. Alex was ever-present, hovering in the background. An inexplicable cherub whom Verian never saw cast a spell, but who attended to Delmi with unfailing devotion.

Nights were for different sorts of lessons; for tangling and writhing about. Verian learned the advantages of positioning, learned the merits of fingers, mouths, and toes. He learned not just to tolerate Delmi's instruction, but to enjoy it.

It was for this reason, perhaps, that he was unafraid when, in the early evening, Delmi had Verian open the trunk at the foot of the bed. Within he found bundles of rope and objects of polished wood and stone that varied in size and weight. A tingle ran along Verian's spine and sent a flare of heat across his ribs. His cheeks went warm, but not pleasantly so. There was a vague burning behind his eyes.

"The black bundle with the blue ribbon, boy," Delmi instructed quietly.

There on the left, nestled between a horsehair brush and a coil of course red rope, were loops of soft black rope wound in a tidy figure eight. At the apex of one rondure was a tag of frayed blue ribbon. Verian pulled it from the chest, fingers tightening, and looked askance to Delmi.

"There are many ways to please the body, boy." Delmi rumbled in reply. "Get in the bed."

Verian complied with neither question nor hesitation. He placed the rope to his lap as he settled cross-legged upon the padded quilt beneath him. The rope was soft and light against the inside of his thigh, more core batting than loosely-woven sheathe. It tickled Verian's knee when the bed moved for the introduction of Delmi's weight.

Delmi's fingers tickled the belly of Verian's thigh. The rope lifted, ends

trailing and swaying. It was then, seeing Delmi unwind the short loops of two intertwined ropes, that Verian felt a flutter of nerves low in his belly. He set his jaw against it.

"I've done nothing wrong," Verian insisted quietly.

An enigmatic look met Verian's own. Delmi stroked one hand across the top of Verian's head, palm sliding over hair as though he were a dog.

"You 'ave just now spoken out of turn," Delmi pointed out. He spoke on as Verian's shoulders slumped. "But this is not for punishment. You do not fret, boy. Lord Montclair 'as dark desires, yes, but I do not believe 'e means to cause you real pain. Give me your arm."

Verian, his arm heavy and slow with reluctance, did as he was bid. Delmi wrapped the rope around Verian's wrist and gestured for his other hand.

"There are many ways to do this, yes? This is one. When in front, you put the 'ands like so." Delmi turned Verian's palms outward and crossed his wrists. "Tonight I tie like this."

The rope was wrapped about each of Verian's wrists in turn, and then doubled back on itself. Delmi took the time to ensure that Verian was watching as he slid a loop through a loop, repeating with a careful splay of fingertips that Verian might see how they were threaded into one another.

Verian watched attentively. His heart surged against his breastbone, eased, and then surged again. The rope was soft and loose, he told himself. There was no whipping post, no cell with a dangling hook. Delmi had never hurt him. Delmi did not intend to hurt him. He was only teaching. Teaching as it seemed the man always did.

"I do this," Delmi continued, seemingly oblivious to the fact that Verian had, in reality, paid little attention at all to the precise gestures, "so you may be comfortable." Delmi tucked a loop of rope between Verian's fingers. "To get free, you pull on that. All will come loose." Delmi tucked the other end into the tangle of the knot where it stretched from Verian's wrists. "This is not normally done. It is also usually tight, not loose. You will learn to do this properly, but for now we begin as so."

Verian slid the insides of his knuckles along the rope. The pile gave to the pressure of his fingers, and he was more than half tempted to undo

Delmi's work. Verian refrained, as he did not believe that Delmi would take kindly to his doing so.

Delmi eased back where he sat, then gestured to the crossing of his legs. He patted one thigh with his palm.

"Lie down. Put your belly 'ere, and bend your legs."

Verian hesitated, his gaze falling to the second rope that lay coiled and waiting at Delmi's side. The muscle at the left side of Delmi's jaw shifted. Verian hurried to drape himself across the man's lap. He braced his elbows and knees to the bed in an attempt to ease the awkward pressure at his torso, then kicked his heels into the air.

Soft fingers caught up Verian's calloused feet. Delmi guided Verian's ankles to cross, and again took to his quiet instruction.

"You bring the ankles together like this. Stop squirming. Close your eyes and picture what I say."

The rope dithered where it dangled across Verian's calves. It tickled as it was wound about. Delmi spoke in soft, low tones. His voice was steady as he wrapped the rope about, cinching it tighter but still leaving it quite slack.

"This is too loose. Normally tighter, yes? Not too tight. You want the blood to move."

Delmi's fingers tickled their way up the back of Verian's thigh, palm lowering to stroke across the pale crest of his upturned ass. The petting set goose prickles to his skin, rendering the touch nearly unpleasant. Verian sucked in a breath and held it, fighting the nervousness that tickled his spine and fingered the insides of his ribs.

"You are frightened," Delmi murmured.

"No, I—"

"You are," Delmi corrected, cutting Verian off matter-of-factly. "Why?"

Why? The answers were so multitudinous, so *obvious*, that Verian did not know whether to laugh or to cry. A strange, strangled bark of sound twisted past his lips. Delmi sighed and continued his petting, spreading his attention up along the contours of Verian's back. It was soothing in its own way, though less so than Delmi's touches often were.

"It does not matter," Delmi conceded. "I will teach. You will learn. Lord

Montclair will be most pleased, and if 'e ever 'urts you, I will make you better."

Verian wanted to argue. Jaquen never touched him. Not in that fashion, in any case. None of this was necessary. But he had been warned. He would maintain the ruse, lest he be made to suffer the consequences. He would not risk Jaquen's wrath, not when the man meant to liberate him.

Delmi continued to pet, saying nothing as Verian wrestled with his thoughts. Gradually, reluctantly, Verian relaxed. His spine sagged, his weight draping across the brace of Delmi's lap. He turned his head to rest against his arm, and his toes curled against the coverlet. The tight hold he'd given the rope eased, though he did part with it entirely.

"Good," Delmi purred encouragingly.

Delmi's hand stroked across the narrow curve of Verian's hip, and dipped beneath and past in easy reach. His fingers grazed across the shaft of Verian's dangling cock, then turned to wrap about it. A pulse ran through Verian, stemming from that grasp, and he squeezed his eyes shut.

"It is not unpleasant, hm?"

Delmi's question was not truly a question, and Verian knew this. He gave a voiced sigh in reply. Verian tucked his nose against his arm as his cock swelled and throbbed.

Everything was a lesson. Verian knew this. Every moment was an opportunity to learn. Delmi had said as much time and again. Verian, though, paid little attention as Delmi continued to slide his fingers along the contours of Verian's shaft. As he traced out vein and ridge, as he kneaded the engorged flesh and felt the way the skin slipped along it. So it was that Verian was surprised when the man's other hand returned to the crack of Verian's ass in a slick, slimy drag of fingers. Delmi's fingers diverted from their pleasant stroking when Verian did not immediately raise, diverting instead to pinch at the inside of one lean hip.

"Ah," Verian protested.

"Do not be difficult, boy," Delmi chided in turn.

In response, Verian dug his knees to the bed and stretched out his shoulders. He rolled his weight backward, pushing it from elbows to knees. Delmi's fingers stroked more intimately into the warm cleft of

Verian's ass.

A single fingertip, soft-skinned and well-oiled, probed more invasively than the others. It traced a circle along sensitive nerve endings, then pushed inward. Verian sputtered into his elbow. He twisted his feet against the rope, picking them up from the bed as he did so.

"You see," Delmi murmured. "There is no 'arm in enjoying yourself 'ere."

Delmi's finger slid in deeper, crooking as it went. Verian pulled his hands against the loose binds. They were nice in their own way, nice for giving him something to twist against. Something to move against rather than rut heedlessly into Delmi's hand.

Another finger joined the first, and Verian felt his muscles give, felt them yield all too easily. His breathing turned shallow along his arm as Delmi's fingers slid in deeper. Deeper still, they eased, only to wriggle, part, and twist with the pivoting of his hand. Verian's belly tightened, and his cock pulsed eagerly into Delmi's stilled grasp.

As if reminded by this sudden urgency of Verian's need, the gripping hand withdrew. It slid away with one last stroke, and then the other pulled out entirely too swiftly for comfort. Verian wiggled, hips ducking, and grazed the seeping head of his cock against the bedding. He sighed, and swallowed, and again pulled against the ropes.

"Raise." The command was muted, but clear.

Skin prickling anew, Verian brought his hips up and away from Delmi's lap. Something warm and smooth nudged against the cleft of Verian's ass as he shifted his weight back to his knees. His eyes rolled open, and he stared blindly into the shadows that had gathered between his chest and Delmi's thigh as the slick, rounded point pressed inward.

The thing proved to be tapered, so that it spread him bit by bit as it sank steadily inward. Verian's breath caught when it threatened to be too much, and Delmi eased the thing back an inch. Another. Then it was pressing forward again. The superficial sensation had Verian's jaw hanging slack, but it was the deep sense of pressure that had him groaning.

Delmi set a hand to the small of Verian's back, his hand touch leaving a smear of oil, and then slowly, methodically, took to fucking him with the

full length and awful, stretching girth of the thing. The retreat was gradual, nearly careful, as was the advance. Verian squirmed against the ropes, against the leverage at his spine. It would have been so much more bearable if the man would have gone faster. If Delmi would not neglect his cock so.

The thing slid in deep, uncomfortably so, and stilled as Verian's stretched ass cinched tighter about the channel near its end. A flared base kept his cheeks spread to a degree, and Delmi did something to have the weight of it rocking deep and slow. Verian groaned.

Then came the smack. It bit and stung at the cushion of Verian's ass, just above one thigh. Verian cried out as his ass tightened about the object within him. His hips tucked toward Delmi's lap in reflex, but rocked back immediately to alleviate the strain of clenching about the buried toy. Verian whimpered as Delmi's palm rubbed out the tingle and heat.

Delmi slapped him again. Not once, but twice. The blows were not overly hard, more bark than bite, but Verian was made to suffer the thing within him all too keenly each time he jerked forward in response.

Delmi's coo was soft and encouraging to Verian's ears. He eased slowly as Delmi's hand moved from Verian's back to slide smooth as a snake beneath him. Delmi's hand returned to its previous stroke and squeeze, feeling out the length of Verian's still hard cock.

Verian sighed and turned his pinkened cheeks into the fold of his arm once again. He'd just settled into that pleasant slide when Delmi's hand struck. He slapped, stinging with one hand, and stroked and pulled with the other. Verian stirred, uncertain of which way to move. Back was easiest on the thing lodged within him, but it countered his instinct to drive forward. Forward delayed the arrival of those slaps, but tightened him uncomfortably about the weight that was lodged more deeply than he cared to dwell upon. He gave a soft, dismayed cry and resolved to stay put.

Deft, agile fingers left off the dance of twisting slide and pinch. Delmi's arm came down across Verian, forcing him against the soft padding of well-muscled legs. Verian was made to tighten about the thing, his straining cock dangling. He choked as Delmi rocked the thing again, and

cried out loudly for the next slap, which came harder than those previous.

Delmi's hand came down again and again. The sting turned to tingling, to a rising heat that numbed his senses. On and on it went so that those slaps, which did not exactly hurt individually, began to collect into a throbbing, breath-stealing pain. To make it worse, Delmi would stop every so often and snare his fingers about the smooth, warm curvature that dug at the surface of Verian's ass. He would draw it out, then nudge it in again, pumping it shallowly before letting it lodge deep once again.

Then came more spanking. Verian's nerves were a jumble of arousal and pain, of delight and shame. He wept against his arm, against the bed, but he did not demand that Delmi stop. He'd long since learned better than that.

Still, Delmi did eventually stop. The man was breathing hard, and his hand was painfully hot against Verian's inflamed ass. Verian could well imagine how red it must have been for how his cheeks throbbed, for how the air stung his raw skin. He continued to weep, salting the crook of his arm and the coverlet further.

Delmi's fingers pinched again about the base of the tool and pulled, forcing Verian wide about the smooth, slick flare of the thing. Delmi drew it out and out, slow and steady just as before. His other hand nudged Verian by the hip, and was soon squeezing and stroking at his cock again.

Verian whimpered. Delmi paid it little mind. The polished thing probed in, and out, and in again. Delmi's fingers grasped and stroked, warm and passing easily for the oil that had been smeared between them. The pace of this increased steadily, and Verian could hear Delmi's deepened breath past the lurid wet squelching at his rear, past the ragged, frantic panting of his own. Verian twisted his hands and feet, pulling at the rope that bound his wrists and ankles. A moan, undeniably his own, whispered at the edges of his hearing.

Swift and steady. Pumping and stroking. Verian writhed, the heat along his ass cheeks mingling and melding with that of his gut. He mewled as he pushed forward into Delmi's hand. Candlelight flickered along the dark coverlet, emphasizing the way it moved in response to Verian's eager tips of hip.

Verian's belly went taut, and his balls ached. Delmi was fucking him mercilessly hard and fast. Cunning fingers slid along Verian's cock, squeezing at all the right points, drawing and tugging, and occasionally pinching along the spongy head in a way that made it twitch and seep all the more. Verian hid his face for his shame, for his wanton tip and roll.

It seemed an eternity before he finally came. His cock swelled and surged, and his ass tightened and trembled against the unyielding contours of the thing lodged within him. His breath hitched. His eyes watered. The world stopped. It condensed itself into a blissful pause. A wash of darkness. Of rope against his wrists and ankles. Of thumb along the belly of his twitching cock. Of heat at his ass cheeks, and pressure along that perfect electric spot deep within.

But then Verian had to breathe. The world raced forward to catch up with itself. Delmi's hand stroked, and stroked again before stilling. The ripple of Verian's ass against the hard, slick thing spearing him wide eased. Verian gasped, his breath rasping the next instant, and he trembled from strain. From overwhelm. He was red at the wrists for how he'd strained at the ropes, though he did not recall doing so violently. He sagged, his feet lowering, his head lulling. The world resumed at a normal pace.

"Good," Delmi purred.

Delmi's hand swept along Verian's back and shoulders. Delmi touched, and soothed, and Verian felt himself grow languorous despite the throb and heat at his ass.

"I am glad you did not untie yourself, boy." Delmi's fingers nudged at the thing wedged between the cheeks of Verian's ass, and pulled it free despite his yip of protest. "It is best you leave that for 'oever 'as bound you." Delmi's lap shifted beneath Verian as the man leaned. The rope that bound Verian's ankles draped and loosened further. "You also should not 'eal yourself from this without permission. You understand?"

Verian hummed in response.

"Good boy," Delmi rumbled as he twisted to untie Verian's hands.

Freeing his limbs took much less time than binding them had. Delmi nudged Verian from his lap, then slid from the bed.

"You rest. Do not 'eal that," he cautioned again. "I will send Alecks

with cream to 'elp the sting, and then you sleep til the morning."

Verian sighed out heavily, eyelids drooping.

"Yes, sir."

Then, most unusually for the hour, Delmi took his leave from the infirmary. Verian drifted to sleep along the top over the bedding, alone to his thoughts and the crackle of the fire. Why, he wondered as his consciousness dipped nearer to dreams, had he not unbound the rope? Why had he not stopped it all in its tracks? Why did Delmi believe that this was what Jaquen desired of him?

The fire did not answer the unvoiced musings, but Verian was soon lost to the tide of his dreams. Delmi's commands were, alas, ever difficult to resist.

Verian was raw and tender, but not in the same awful way as he had been after Charlie's beatings. Delmi had smacked and paddled him for three nights in a row, from upturned ass to the backs of thighs and calves. Delmi had departed afterward each time, and Alex came in his wake with cream to rub into Verian's inflamed skin. Verian had been so upset the last time that he'd snatched the jar away and chased the boy off with hissing words and heated eyes.

Now he was sitting and waiting. He hated waiting. Waiting made him anxious. It gave him too much time to think. To feel, and to contemplate his feelings.

Already he'd paced the length and width of the expansive room. Fifty-two times in each direction. He'd stared through the window and into the sunny courtyard below, admiring the flowers that bloomed in clusters on the edges of neatly trimmed paths. His view of the front gardens included the drive, the pale dirt and stone glaring in the bright afternoon light.

Why he had been summoned to the lavishly appointed room to sit and wait had not been explained to Verian. It was after the midday meal, and he should have been out on the hill. He should have felt the sun baking

into his shoulders and back. He might have practiced in the room, despite the lack of sun, but instead he paced. Instead he stared.

A carriage rounded the base of one gently sloping hill, pulling briefly into Verian's sight and out again. It was several minutes before he spotted the thing ambling along in the distance. Its approach was reprehensibly slow, but the arrival was inevitable. The carriage would have turned along another path when Verian first spotted it were it destined elsewhere. As it was, it drew steadily larger, steadily nearer, until at last it was clattering to a halt in the courtyard far below.

A young man in a posh uniform hopped down from the bench alongside the driver and drew open the carriage door. Jaquen montclair stepped out, a hand raising to shield his eyes as he peered up at the main building. His arms rose, hands balling to fists, and he lifted onto his toes with an arch of spine and slow, back and forth twisting of his hips. The carriage door closed behind the man, and the horses were urged on as Jaquen mounted the wide, shallow steps that led to the grand doors that Verian could not see, but knew were present. It was there that Verian lost sight of the man.

Despite Jaquen's arrival, Verian was made to wait. He returned to pacing when it became apparent that the man was not going to arrive any time soon. When pacing lost its nostalgic appeal, Verian returned to staring out at the serene landscape. Slope after slope of rolling green hill promised freedom, and he was locked away behind a pane of thick glass. His throat went dry for his yearning, and he curled his toes against the parquet as he imagined the soft soil giving way beneath them.

It was as Verian was fighting the bitterness at the back of his mouth that the door finally opened. He turned to watch Jaquen step in, the servant in the hall drawing the door shut behind him. A bundle of rich woody brown and olive green fabric sat atop Jaquen's upturned palms. His smile was subdued, but even so hinted toward a smirk.

"A gift," Jaquen purred. "You may only wear them here, and you must tell no one."

Verian set his hands to the top of the bundle. His fingers curled into the soft cotton tunic and he drew it up to stare at it for a long moment. The

frustration that had been building within him was made to halt for the confusing conflict of emotion so intense that he might have thought he felt nothing at all.

He fed one arm, then the other, slowly through the soft green sleeves of the tunic. The trousers were given a shake, and put on just as slowly, just as carefully. The lacing at the top of them was drawn tight, and he tied it off with a deft twist of fingers and long, deliberate exhale. He hadn't even realized he'd been holding his breath.

"There," Jaquen rumbled approvingly.

It felt strange to be wearing clothing after so long. It was plain enough that the fit was loose without being billowy, but he was too aware of how the cotton and wool brushed and shifted for every move he made. Even breathing caused the material to brush against him in ways that were not entirely pleasant. Still, Verian would not have given it up for the world. He turned away from Jaquen and stared through the window, one arm lifting to draw across his face.

"My thanks," Verian croaked with as much dignity as he could muster.

Jaquen's touch was light, but confident as he cupped his hands over Verian's shoulders.

"No need," Jaquen murmured in dismissal. "I will be staying here for a month. You will share this room with me while I am here. There is only one bed, but I would not have you sleeping on the floor like a dog." Jaquen's fingers grasped in a gentle squeeze. "After breakfast, you will go to Delmi for your lessons, and return to me at midday."

Verian nodded. His chest was tight, his eyes burning. He said nothing for some time, too afraid that his voice would break. That he might cry again. He yearned for his wit, for his ability to converse as he should and not as a petulant child. His shoulders dipped back, and as he twisted, Jaquen drew his hands up from Verian's shoulders.

"You said you would take me away."

"And I shall," Jaquen reassured. His palm was cool against the heat of Verian's cheek. "These things take time, Verian. You must be patient."

"I have been."

"Yes, and you must continue to be so."

"For how long?" Verian demanded.

"For however long it takes." Jaquen returned his hands to Verian's shoulders for a tight grasp.

Verian lapsed again to silence. His tongue pushed hard at his teeth, and his jaw clenched tight. He gave a grunt of noise through the roof of his mouth and tore away to stare again through the window.

"Did you tell Delmi to hit me?" Verian asked quietly, his breath ghosting against the glass.

"What?"

"Delmi. He didn't used to hit me. He said that it was for you."

Jaquen's hands settled again to Verian's shoulders, and the man pressed himself up close from behind. "I did not tell him to harm you in any way. I would not do such a thing, Verian."

"So he lies?"

"Or you have misunderstood."

"Why would he lie to me?"

Jaquen's fingers kneaded reassuringly. "Why would I? I realize that it is taking longer than you like to free you of this place, but have I not always treated you well? Have I not always treated you kindly, and with respect?"

Verian's mouth drew taut.

"Delmi is the vicar's puppet as much as any of the others, Verian," Jaquen murmured, near enough now that Verian could feel breath at the back of his ear. "An exotic pet doing his bidding and little more. Do not think for a moment that you can trust anyone in this place."

"Not even you?" Verian asked in tease.

A chuckle rumbled up from Jaquen's chest. "I am glad that you have not lost all of your fire. Won't you sit with me? Supper will be along soon, and you may tell me of the spells you've been learning."

The tension bled from Verian's shoulders, and then his back. He sighed as he slumped, then turned with a brush of shoulder to tip into Jaquen. The tunic tickled the hairs on Verian's freckled arms as he wound them about the man for a brief, appreciative embrace.

"I would kill to eat at the table and with proper silverware."

"I'd rather you not," Jaquen rumbled with a gesture to the settee and

chair before the hearth. "I am quite fond of living."

Verian fell weightily into the chair. He draped his arms along the padded upholstery, slumped back in the deep seat, and sprawled his legs out before him. A long, pleased sigh parted his lips. How long since he had been allowed to revel in such a simple pleasure?

One dark brow perked toward Jaquen's hairline as he watched. His wide mouth tugged into an amused grin.

"I do not believe I have ever seen anyone enjoy a chair quite so much."

Verian grinned widely up at Jaquen. "Then you should try sharing one with a lady some time," he quipped.

Jaquen's laughter was low and rolling, brushing up against Verian's spirits like a balm. Verian settled into place with a cementing of his smile and turned a pleased look to the hearth. He was feeling more himself by the moment.

Chapter 16

"Good boy," Delmi praised.

Verian rocked to his heels, his hands returning to his sides. He sucked briefly on his teeth.

"This is dull."

Jaquen had only been present for two days, but already he found himself impatient with Delmi. He wanted to go back to the vast room in the main building and eat duck, to read the books that lined the shelves and lounge while Jaquen petted his hair. He wanted to be treated like a person rather than a thing. Instead he was stuck out on the hill, his skin slowly burning, and repeating spells he'd learned weeks ago.

"Is it?" Delmi tipped his head to the side, a shrewd look leveled on Verian.

"Yes." Verian gave pause, then spoke on with less imperiousness. "Can we not learn something new?"

"It is like building muscle, boy. You must repeat and repeat until you are strong enough for more."

"I am strong enough now," Verian insisted.

"We will see," Delmi said quietly as he eyed Verian. "But that is for tomorrow."

"Are we to do this for the next hour then?"

"No; we are finished."

"What?"

"Finished. Go back to Lord Montclair. I do not teach those 'oo lack respect."

Had he really grown so unruly in so short a period of time? Verian squinted, backed a step, and then took it forward again.

"I apologize," he mumbled to his toes.

"Good. You go now. We start better tomorrow."

The nod was as easy to deliver as the slumping of his shoulders was to affect. Verian backed again, then turned. He trotted down the hill, eager to be away from the tedium, away from Delmi's praise over childish tricks. How long now had he been doing the same thing? Over and over every

day. At least with Jaquen he had new material to practice. At least with Jaquen he had a name.

Verian slowed when he reached the courtyard. He skirted wide past the pergola at the intersection of paths, choosing instead to tiptoe through the flowers and across the grass. He slid in through the gap where one massive wooden door had been propped for the fresh warm air, and stole like a ghost along the spacious halls.

A younger gentleman in velvet and silk was descending the steps even as Verian hurried up them. The man was so pale as to seem sickly. His eyes were watery and gray, set beneath unremarkable brows. His nose was too small and too sharp for his features, and his thin little lips twisted in a grimace when his eyes met with Verian's.

"Did no one ever teach you any manners, boy?"

A sneer loomed before Verian, and he worked to fight a grimace.

"My mother taught me not to pull faces when I was a babe, *sir*," Verian replied with a surprising amount of respect in his delivery, if not in content.

One veiny hand lashed out for Verian's chest, and he found himself pushed back against the wall. The speed and force of the maneuver left Verian grunting in surprise.

"If you were not Jaquen's boy," the reedy voice snarled, "I would pitch you down the steps for such insolence." The man brought his nose just shy of Verian's, fingers digging hard enough to bruise. "As it is, I am tempted to demand your tongue."

"That's enough, Gorch," Jaquen interrupted from the upper landing.

Gorch's eyes narrowed venomously at Verian, but his fingers eased in their dig against pale flesh. His arm retracted a moment later, and Gorch turned to give Jaquen a lofty bow. He then spun about on the side of his foot and carried on down the steps.

Jaquen adjusted the dressing robe that hung loosely from his shoulders, the dark panels of fabric framing the center of his chest and belly. He drew his fingers through his mussed hair, raised a brow at Verian, then turned to pad barefooted along the hall.

"You're early," Jaquen observed as Verian trotted up from behind.

"Yes."

"See that it does not happen again."

"Delmi sent me; I cannot very well say no!"

Jaquen turned in place, his fingertips caught on the handle of the door, one dark brow arched high. "And why did Delmi send you before the agreed upon time?"

Verian pinched his tongue lightly between his teeth.

Jaquen hummed as he pressed open the door. "I am making every effort to see to your release, Verian. If you are not going to cooperate fully, I would appreciate your telling me now. I do not care to waste my time."

Verian's frown deepened as he stepped into the room. It was warm and humid with the musk of sweat and sex. His mouth pursed tight with discontent.

"I will do better tomorrow," Verian muttered.

"See that you do," Jaquen said crisply.

Verian crossed the room to a wide, squat chest of drawers. He drew open the topmost and pulled free his clothes. Every action was careful and precise, as though he could mask his upset behind a veil of control.

"Who was that man?" Verian asked in brittle tones as he dressed.

"A friend."

"Well I would not assume he was your enemy."

"That is because you are intelligent, Verian. Just as you are intelligent enough to recognize an evasive response."

Verian was frowning outright by the time he had his trousers cinched and tied. He ran his hands over the baggy tunic that draped from his shoulders. Still careful. Still precise. The material refused to be orderly.

"Come now. Did you think that I would not have friends, Verian?"

Verian turned to eye Jaquen. The man was lounging in the bed, propped by a stack of pillows. His eyes were lidded and limbs loose. Jaquen had shed his robe and was reclined with a large book braced to the slope of his belly. He hadn't even looked up from it to speak.

"Of course you have friends," Verian finally answered. "No doubt you have a great many friends. Do you mind if I crack the window?"

"I do," Jaquen answered without looking up.

"It reeks."

"I rather enjoy the smell."

"Well I don't."

Well you're early," Jaquen countered in mild mockery of Verian's petulant inflection.

Frustration welled up within Verian's chest, and though familiar, was far from comforting. It tamped down his tongue and set his hands to trembling. He wanted to throttle Jaquen then as surely as he wanted to throttle Delmi.

Jaquen's hand slipped from the side of the book to settle over the page. He looked up to Verian, a sigh parting his lips, his dark eyes mild in their regard. Then the hand rose, and he beckoned Verian near.

"Let's not bicker, Verian. There is no reason to be angry."

Still frowning, Verian drifted to the bed. It smelled worse there, and he could well imagine Gorch's pale body convulsing every rumple into the bedding at Jaquen's side. He ignored the twisting of his gut and crawled up to nestle along Jaquen's side. The man's outstretched arm draped down along Verian's back. Verian settled and sighed past the wisps of dark hair that made Jaquen's chest seem all the more white.

"What are you reading?" Verian asked quietly.

"The Song of Ramishta."

"How dull."

"It is," Jaquen agreed, obviously amused. "A trunk of my own books is due to arrive this afternoon. I daresay that they will be something of a relief."

"Will you spend all of our time reading, then?" Verian asked as he propped himself up on one elbow.

"You'll not get out of lessons that easily," Jaquen replied ruefully, though his attention was back on the book.

"Good."

Silence fell upon them both. Jaquen read, and Verian attempted to match the cadence of his breathing to the rise and fall of the chest beneath his head. Jaquen did not smell as he usually did, and Verian disliked that despite his grudging acceptance of the stink of the bed.

Verian twisted in place, unpinning his arm to push himself up with a brace of palm and splay of fingers. He leaned in past Jaquen's book to set his mouth against the man's. It was not a kind, gentle kiss, but instead crashed hard and demanding onto Jaquen's unresponsive mouth. When the moment for surprise had passed and Jaquen had neither hissed in return nor pushed him away, Verian drew back. He stared down at the man's lean features, at the vague frown set above the narrow stripping of precisely maintained beard. Jaquen's dark eyes remained locked on Verian for a long moment, then dipped back to the book.

The tide came welling up in Verian's chest again. It made it difficult to breathe. It set his teeth to gritting. He slid his hand along Jaquen's belly, fingertips grazing the well of Jaquen's navel on their way to his waistband.

"Verian," Jaquen growled warningly.

Verian froze, scowling. "Are we not friends?"

"Stop."

"Do not desire me? Delmi says you do, and I have seen you looking."

"That does not matter."

"I can make you feel good," Verian insisted.

His fingertips dipped into the heat beneath Jaquen's waistband, though froze when Jaquen caught his wrist. The book snapped shut as their eyes locked.

"You do not know what you are doing," Jaquen insisted.

"I do," Verian whispered, leaning to smear a kiss to Jaquen's cheek.

Jaquen caught Verian's shoulder to still him.

"You do not. One day you may, but this is not that day. That day will not come so long as you are here in this place."

Verian's fingers were twitching again. He drew back slowly, yielding to the steady press of Jaquen's hand. Verian's eyes stung, and his chest had gone from swollen to sinking. He sat quickly and turned away.

"You are wrong," Verian whispered. He scarcely recognized his own voice.

"Perhaps," Jaquen allowed. "But this is how it will be."

Verian's fingers worked over the wool covering his knees. He breathed

deeply and drew his arm across his eyes as he stood. A knock at the door announced the arrival of Jaquen's meal.

"Fetch that, will you?" Jaquen asked.

Verian moved numbly to do just that. The servant with the food-heavy tray eyed Verian dubiously, but Verian ignored the look in favor of shutting the door in the poor man's face. Rather than chide him, Jaquen was chuckling as Verian slid the tray onto the table.

"Eat with me," Jaquen invited as he abandoned the bed. "Then we will practice and you will feel better, hm?"

Verian nodded. He was grateful for the invitation, for the sense of normalcy that came with it. He threw himself into it headlong, and dropped promptly into one of the chairs at the table. Verian draped himself in such a way as to occupy as much space as possible. His space. His meal. His practice. These would continue despite the rejection of other things.

"What will we practice today?" Verian asked, his fingers pinched about a fat purple grape.

The look Jaquen gave Verian was a sly one, his eyes slits above a grin that was wide and full of teeth.

"You'll see."

"What is that?" Verian asked incredulously.

"A thelkin," came Jaquen's blithe reply.

"Well I can see that, but what is it doing here?"

Verian had stripped to go after a flagon of wine for Jaquen, and was hastily drawing his clothes back on. He did not care to face a thelkin in the nude, even if it was contained by a barrier of glowing white runes.

"I felt it more appropriate than practicing on a person," Jaquen purred. "At least," he paused for effect, "at this point."

The thelkin rolled its cloudy gray eyes about. It was testing the runic barrier with thick gray appendages that were a bizarre cross of octopus

tentacle and arm. It was no more than two feet high, but its size did not diminish its fury. It was frothing past protruding, pointed teeth, and its gelatinous body was excreting a foul-smelling sludge.

“What do you mean to do with it?” Verian asked as he brought his arm up to cover his nose and mouth.

“Nothing,” said Jaquen, his smirk reflected in his tone. “But you are.”

“I am?”

“Yes. Today you will learn to steal magic.”

“Is that even possible??” Verian’s incredulity had not left his voice.

“It is, and I suspect you will find it remarkably easy.” Jaquen flipped open the trunk that had also arrived in Verian’s absence, and drew out a small scroll. He passed it negligently to Verian. “One day you will not need these crutches, but they can make learning easier in the meantime. Read this to yourself, and then aloud with intent. Mind your pronunciation.”

“I always do,” Verian commented as he drew the scroll open.

“It bears repeating.”

Jaquen settled to sip his wine and watch.

At casual glance, the words on the scroll seemed to dither and dance. It took Verian a good deal of focus and two passes to pin them down. He read them twice to himself, then turned toward the noxious creature. One hand rose toward the contained thelim, and Verian spoke the words on the scroll. He enunciated each syllable with mindful precision, and at the end of the incantation he curled his fingers as if in beckon.

Nothing happened.

The thelim rolled its eyes about independently of one another and thrashed itself against the boundaries of its containment. Jaquen hummed musingly behind Verian.

“I don’t believe it means to cooperate,” Jaquen observed.

“What good is a spell that requires permission from your victim?”

“Indeed.”

Verian rolled his weight up through the balls of his feet. Oh but Jaquen frustrated him! At least with Delmi things were clear and defined. What was expected of him was laid out step by step. Ah, but did Jaquen not give

him more room to think? To breathe and be himself? It was a difficult thing to go from dutifully minding every little instruction to dipping into the tides of complex thoughts.

“Ah.” It was an approving sound of realization, quiet from Jaquen’s lips.

The shadows in the shrouded room had angled slightly off, grown more defined where they should be soft, and more blurred where they should be crisp. Verian was pulling at them, gathering a little pool of darkness that lapped at his toes like inky water.

Verian focused intently on the frothing thelim. An instant later, with neither sound nor gesture, a dark lash struck across its mottled gray back. Another followed suit, striking as the thelim raised a pained, angry bellow and series of snotty snarls.

“I daresay you’ve improved with that,” Jaquen purred.

Still Verian was lashing the thing. He did not stop until the thelim had drawn in on itself, its thick appendages tucked into its slimy coating. Verian drew a deep breath and read the scroll in one fluid stream of words.

There was no fancy show of light such as that from the runic barrier. There was no plying of shadow, though the pool of darkness lingered at Verian’s feet. Oh, but Verian could feel it. The effect was subtle at first, like a hint of cool current into the warm shallows of a sun-baked lake. But then it grew more pronounced, a creeping sensation rippling along Verian’s outstretched fingers. The ghostly brush of it crept along his hand, over his wrist, and steeped its way into his flesh as it slid along his arm. The feeling spread quickly, and Verian nearly panicked as it crept across his shoulder and over his neck. But then it was dispersing, sinking in so strongly, so quickly, that Verian felt himself growing giddy. The more he pulled, the more he could pull, and the more he wanted to do so. Verian’s cackle mixed with the thelim’s wretched grunts and howls, forming a wild cacophony of sound.

When the steady siphoning stopped, it was like the sudden snapping of a taut rope. Verian gasped for the sudden give. He was eager for more, euphoric for how he’d gluttoned himself on the creature’s magic, but when he managed to focus his eyes there was nothing within the boundary of

runes save a half formed puddle of goo. The runes themselves were dormant.

“What?” Verian asked in confusion. He was reeling too much to ask a coherent question, let alone think clearly.

“Thelim are magical entities, Verian,” Jaquen answered, his breath brushing along Verian’s temples for how he’d stolen near. “You pulled in its very essence.” Long, spindly fingers took perch upon Verian’s shoulders, grasping there in familiar fashion.

“I did not know it could— I never imagined,” Verian trailed, the words nearly groaned.

“There is still much, much more,” Jaquen promised, lips grazing the back of Verian’s ear. “But first, you’ll do this again.”

Jaquen parted from Verian after another lingering squeeze. Jaquen approached the fetid mess within the runic boundary, drawing a smokey glass sphere from his pocket as he did so. His fingers fanned outward, releasing the ball to fall the short distance and land with a wet squelch. An instant later, the thelim sprang up like a rapidly inflated balloon. The runes sprang brightly to life, and Jaquen gestured to the struggling thelim as he stepped away.

“Carry on.”

Verian licked his lips in delighted anticipation. The pool at his feet grew deeper, spread wider.

“Gladly,” Verian breathed in reply.

The thelim’s howling was soon filling the room once again, mixed with Verian’s exultations of delight. This he would happily repeat and repeat until he was strong enough for more.