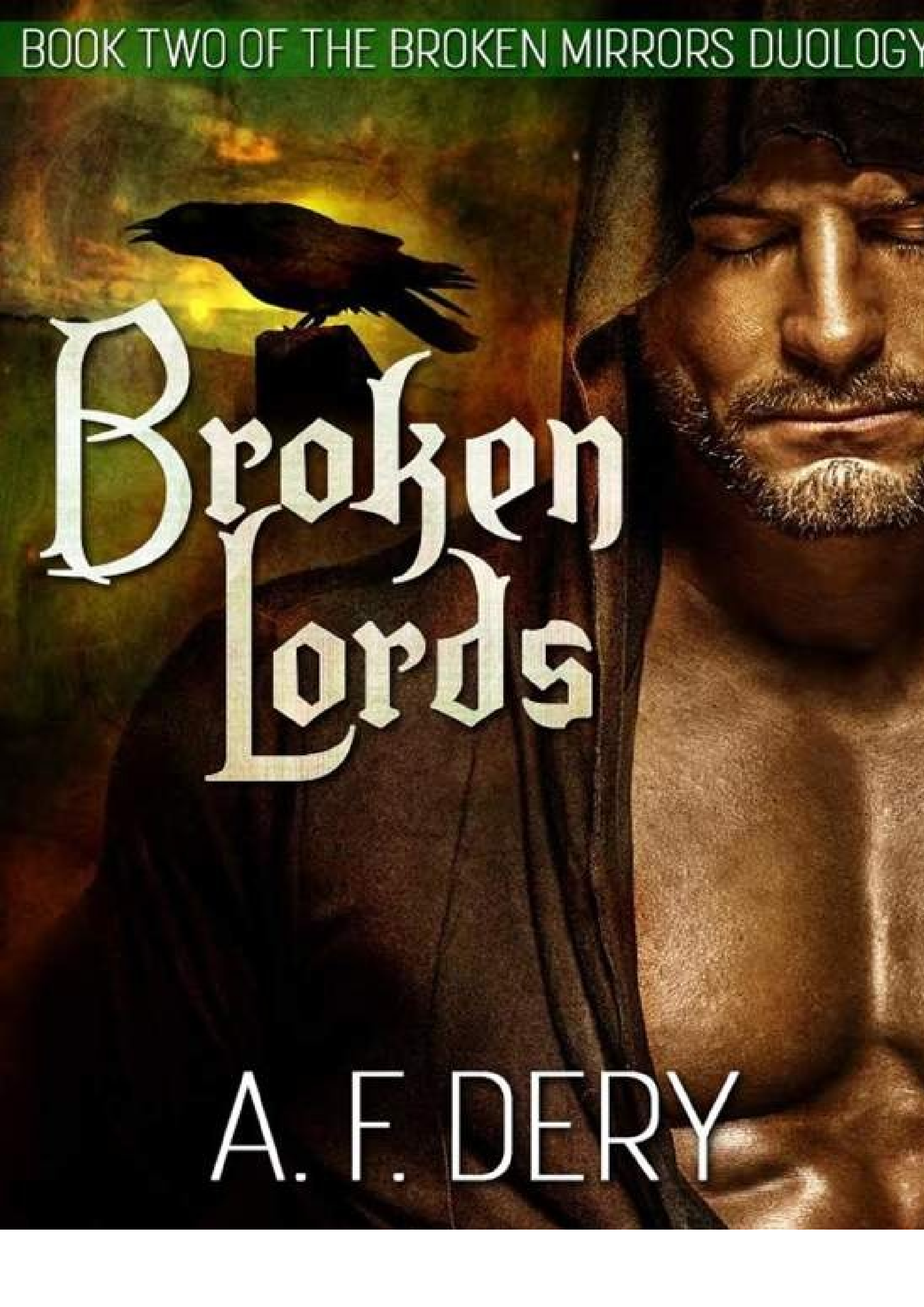


BOOK TWO OF THE BROKEN MIRRORS DUOLOGY



Broken Lords



A. F. DERY

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To Rick
Who taught me all I know about honor.

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CHAPTER ONE

Thane watched Kesara from the corner of his eye, pretending his real focus was outside the window. Ordinarily, he would have ridden on horseback rather than in a carriage — in fact, he only *had* the one carriage, a relic from his father's day, and had been forced to negotiate himself inside very carefully as it had not been built to accommodate a man of his size — but he hadn't needed the bond to recognize Kesara's unease by now. Oh, she had been very polite about it, but there was something about the way she suddenly needed to look at the floor when murmuring her acceptance of his first idea at travel arrangements that seemed to say it all.

He hated to admit it, even to himself, but whereas before their bonding, he had never been one to make others suffer needlessly, now that he could judge how to at least make Kesara comfortable, it was beyond his ability to deny her. Arranging for a carriage to take them to Court, which was supposedly the more "civilized" mode of transport for one of his station in life anyhow, was nothing to him. Not that he had ever particularly cared what others thought. He somehow knew — again, no bond required — that she would have been absolutely miserable riding a horse all that way. It was a journey of several days, and much of the terrain was rough and would already be bound to leave bruises even with the carriage.

Kesara still did not seem very easy even now, seated across from him and next to the other window. His legs filled the space between them like a bridge, shins resting against the bench she was sitting on, and although he did not normally notice his own size, just now he felt like a giant. A giant sealed into a little wooden box. Kesara stared out of her window with a blank look on her face that revealed nothing of discomfort or fatigue, but he knew from their bond that, in the very least, she was exhausted. He was waiting for her to drop off in hopes of doing some creative stretching of his limbs without embarrassing himself, but whatever their bond told him, she *appeared* to be alert and in no imminent danger of succumbing.

And though Thane was having difficulty trusting whatever ephemeral thing linked them together now, he somehow knew, without knowing just *how* he knew, that something was troubling her. Her unusual degree of silence since the bonding would have told him that much anyway, he thought dryly, but that strange "sense" was certainly a handy confirmation of his suspicions.

He could not help but feel somewhat troubled himself about what had taken place during their bonding. He had been wholly unprepared for it and had been unable to find the courage to ask any more about it. He was trying to take it on faith that whatever had happened was normal, but now he feared that he'd been wrong to just let the subject drop. Perhaps it was troubling Kesara now as well.

"Aren't you tired?" he finally asked, and she jumped a little in her seat at the sudden sound of his voice.

"You know I am," she said after a moment, finally looking at him. He was surprised to see that she

had reddened a little.

“It’s no crime to be tired, Kes,” Thane said gently. “I don’t mind or anything. If you wanted to have a little nap...”

“That’s not necessary,” she assured him, turning her gaze back out of the window.

Thane sighed inwardly. Apparently this still caused quite a bit of movement in his chest, because Kesara looked at him again, her eyes questioning.

“Kes, you’ve been a little...quiet, since the whole bonding thing,” he said quietly. “Do you regret accepting me now?”

Her blue eyes widened. “No, of course not!” He waited for her to say more, but she only bit her lower lip, twisting her hands a little anxiously in her lap, the silence growing thick between them until finally she added, “It’s just...well...weird. I mean, knowing you know what I need at any given moment. It’s, I don’t know. A sort of loss of privacy, I guess. I feel awkward. I’m sure I’ll get used to it, it’s just...” She shrugged helplessly.

“Ah,” Thane said, considering this with no small sense of hopefulness. He supposed it *would* be a little awkward if she knew every time his stomach was empty, every time he was nervous or the carriage jolted him a little too hard.

Though of course, he felt no discomfort from the jolting. He didn’t think he would ever get used to that. Ailments he had had and simply thought of no longer due to long familiarity were nearly jarring in their absence now, aches and pains and twinges that he had just learned to live with and usually ignored. He fought back a surge of guilt at the thought of Kesara shouldering all that now.

“What’s wrong, Thane?” he heard her ask, and he realized he’d begun to stare out the window again, his hands fisting helplessly at his sides.

“I was just thinking of how much was wrong with me that I never noticed until it was gone,” he said. When she didn’t reply, he looked back at her and saw she was mouthing the words slowly as if trying to make sense of them. He suppressed a grin and repeated himself slowly, taking what was surely a sick delight in watching the red deepen in her face and neck.

“I understood what the words were, my lord, I just couldn’t understand what it meant,” Kesara said a little defensively.

“Oh, of course, of course,” Thane said, losing the war with the corners of his mouth. Kesara, of course, noticed at once and lifted her chin a little.

“It doesn’t bother me...the things you ‘never noticed,’ I mean...I really am just embarrassed...I don’t really know what it is you feel coming from me. I mean, I know it’s supposed to be related to needs, and it’s supposed to be easily dismissed...” Kesara looked at him almost pleadingly. “Can’t you just dismiss it, then? Stop noticing, maybe?”

“What are you worried that I’m finding out about you, Kes?” Thane asked teasingly. “That you find my company horribly boring and can barely keep yourself awake? That I was right about you needing to eat a dozen times a day to compensate for your small stature?”

Thane sensed a stab of anxiety coming from her at the same moment as she insisted, “You were *not* right about that!” Her eyes widened and she added quickly, “Or the other thing!” But he was now too preoccupied to enjoy her flustered state. What he first said had almost panicked her, but that wasn’t the right word. He had struck on the heart of the matter without meaning to, he realized. She *was* worried he’d discern something from whatever it was he sensed from her. He couldn’t even imagine what it might be. If she was actually repulsed by him, it was only what he would have expected, and surely he would have recognized such a feeling by now anyway, particularly in such close quarters as they now traveled in. What could it be?

He felt her tension and embarrassment mounting, and it only took a moment for him to remember that he had failed to answer her denials. “I’m wondering what you’re so worried about,” he said by

way of explanation, looking at her intently. “You are very tired and worried about something. That is all I can tell right now.”

The tension abated; was it relief he felt now? “Well, that makes sense. Though I’m not sure what ‘need’ my mental state could be conveying.”

“The need for reassurance, maybe? Or maybe you should just tell me what’s wrong. Whatever it is won’t be upset, Kes,” Thane said, trying to sound soothing and entirely uncertain as to his level of success.

“I told you already, Thane...it’s just awkward, that’s all. Like I’m not alone in my own head anymore.”

“I can’t read your thoughts, though, Kes. Whatever you may have heard, it’s not a Dread Lord thing.” He let himself smile, just a little. To his surprise, she smiled back, all anxiety gone in a moment.

“I’m glad,” she said simply. “I’m not always very diplomatic in my thoughts.”

“I gathered that already from your reluctance to tell me just what is going on with you and Darius,” Thane said reflectively. He just barely stopped himself in time from widening his grin. “But now that you are my captive audience...”

Kesara groaned a little, crossing her arms. “Speaking of things you could maybe consider dismissing, my lord..”

“Oh, no, I must hear about how a man as...*popular*...as Darius managed to annoy and offend you to the point of rendering yourself unconscious on my breastplate.”

“You know, it’s really remarkable that I have managed to remain lucid in spite of all the head trauma I’ve suffered recently,” Kesara said thoughtfully.

“Isn’t it? So why do you dislike Darius? Come on, you can tell *me*, Kes.” Thane briefly considered batting his eyes in a show of innocence but wisely banished the idea.

“I just misunderstood him, my lord. He did make me angry, and we did have words, but generally, it is the...misunderstanding that is the difficulty where your steward is concerned.” Kesara looked back out of the window, uncrossing her arms and settling against the seat as though that were the end of the matter. Thane snorted, amused despite himself at her naivete.

“And the ‘misunderstanding’ that rendered him so distasteful to you?”

Kesara sighed and returned her gaze to him. “Is it really important? I realize now that I was wrong. Wouldn’t it be wrong to share my unjust suspicions with you now?”

“Not at all. And I’m sure I could come up with some convincing explanation for why this is, if only I wasn’t getting very tired of trying to pry this out of you. Or maybe your fatigue is just contagious. Regardless, can’t you just have pity on your poor guileless Lord and come out with it?” Thane tried his “Court smile” on her, lips firmly pressed together and only just curved. She gave him a strange look, as if she had just seen him try to do something unseemly and bizarre, like lace his boots with furry kitten tails.

“Uh...all right...if you really won’t just let this go?” She gave him a hopeful look, and he slowly shook his head. She swallowed. “Well...it’s just that the other servants, the male servants, liked to inform me regularly of how childish and unwomanly I appear to them.” Kesara looked down at her lap, twisting her hands together once more, and then blurted out in a rush, “So when he tried to be flirtatious, I thought he was interested because he fancies children!”

Thane stared at her in shock as her hands flew up to her face, her embarrassment and uncertainty in the wake of this confession nearly palpable, even without a bond to inform him of it. It took a long moment for his brain to even register what she was suggesting, and then confusion joined the shock.

“Darius? Really?” Thane sputtered. “You thought my steward was a pervert? You thought I’d let a sick person like that run my tower? *Really?*”

“I told you I misunderstood,” she said miserably through her hands. “I didn’t plan on ever telling you. I realized when you said that I don’t look like a child to you that maybe I had it wrong about him.”

“I’m glad you didn’t decide instead that I must be a pervert as well,” Thane declared gravely, his shock quickly giving way to amusement. The more he thought about it, the harder it became not to laugh, until finally he was forced to take refuge in his own hands to hide his bared teeth, lest she also *misunderstand* his mood. He felt his shoulders start to shake ominously, against his will.

“M-my lord?” Kesara ventured warily.

He just shook his head mutely, unable to speak.

“I’m really sorry,” she said tentatively, and he felt her remorse; her need, he supposed, for absolution of some kind.

It was just too much. He started to laugh and couldn’t stop until tears ran down his face and the carriage halted, his driver coming around to express concern and shoot suspicious looks at Kesara, which only made him laugh harder. He finally managed to compose himself well enough to wipe the tears from his face and take in her appearance: arms crossed again, eyes narrowed, face thoroughly unamused.

“I thought I offended you,” she said accusingly at his amused look.

“Me? Don’t worry about me, Kes. Just think of poor Darius!” And Thane relapsed into chuckles as the carriage resumed motion.

“I think I’ll just have that nap you suggested, my lord,” she said, a trifle coolly.

“Oh, come now, Kes, don’t be that way,” Thane said, trying desperately to sober up. “You have to admit, if you think about it objectively...I mean, if you only knew Darius’ reputation with women... well, if you were me, you’d be laughing, I assure you.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Kesara said, looking unconvinced, but to his surprise, she suddenly smiled a little. “I’m glad you were amused, Thane. The alternative was not one I think I would enjoy.”

“Well, I suppose you probably didn’t enjoy my amusement, either,” Thane said doubtfully, suddenly feeling a little guilty. He knew all too well how horrible he looked while simply *grinning*. Teary eyed and bellowing with laughter, he could hardly imagine what he must have looked like to her, and he doubted his hands had been much help.

“I like the way you laugh,” Kesara said lightly, then abruptly her smile vanished, and she looked back down at her hands. “But, um, I really do think I wouldn’t mind a nap...”

Thane gave what he hoped was a regal incline of his head indicating his agreement and looked out his own window again, but he felt his heart suddenly racing. *How in the world do I stop noticing you, Kes*, he wondered silently. *Tell me how to ‘dismiss’ you from my mind.*

What was worse than his inability to do just that had to be his glaring lack of desire to accomplish any such thing. He looked at her again, now that she had leaned her head against the side of the carriage and closed her eyes. She looked so young to him. Their bonding had bought her time, but she would still die relatively young, even if he somehow managed to live to old age himself. That thought saddened him more than he thought possible. *It is a small wonder that she calls herself cursed*, Thane thought, diverting his gaze back to the window. He would have loved to watch her sleep awhile, so rarely was he able to study her unnoticed, but even he had to admit that sort of behavior was more than a little creepy. He really had no right to be “studying” her in the first place, he reminded himself firmly, staring at the scenery unfolding outside his window without actually seeing any of it.

It was not long past dusk before the carriage came to a halt in one of the larger towns not far from

Eladria's western-most border. It would add time to the journey, but Thane had no intention of going through Malachi's territory at a time such as this. Karani bustled with life and activity, miners only just returning to their homes, the few foreigners who traveled through by way of Eladria's outer road seeking refuge at the town's only inn.

That same inn happened to be rather small and cramped, overseen by a very portly and balding Eladrian whose grim demeanor only relaxed into obsequiousness after he finished cringing in recognition of his Dread Lord's disfigured visage, a development Thane waved away like a pesky gnat.

"Hospitality isn't really what I would call an *Eladrian* trade," Thane admitted to Kesara with an air of vague regret and all the gravity of imparting a confidence. She gave him an incredulous look that he serenely ignored. "As it happens, there is only one room presently vacant, but he is more than willing to evict the patrons who already paid him to make room for us. I, of course, told him that was unnecessary. My escort will be happy to camp outside, and so will I. It's really just you who needs a proper bed."

"That really isn't necessary, my lord," Kesara said, frowning a little. "I have slept outside before. I'll be fine."

But behind her words lurked something else which teased at the edges of Thane's mind. Anxiety. He regarded her curiously.

"I assure you, you will be perfectly safe. It is known that you are with me, and we are still in my country."

"I know, my lord," she said quietly, by all appearances relenting. But he felt her anxiety growing. "This is so strange," he said. "You say one thing but mean something entirely different. Are all women like this? No wonder I'm so unpopular." And he gave a subdued version of a smirk, hoping to cheer her. But she just looked at him blankly. He sighed.

"Remember that whole bit about mind reading? And how I can't actually do that?" Thane tried. "Can you just be frank with me, Kes? Why does the idea of sleeping in the inn bother you?"

"It's irrational, I know that," Kesara said, picking at her sleeve absently and not meeting his eyes. "I know you are here, too, and circumstances are different now. But I didn't have a very nice time the last time I was traveling through your country. Still, I know you are right, and I will go wherever you want me to, my lord."

Thane barely suppressed a frown of his own. There was a lot she wasn't saying, and it troubled him. He knew his people were not exactly kind to foreigners, of course, and that even her treatment in his own Keep had left something to be desired. Hell, his own Cook had tried to have him kill her. But he was suddenly confronted by the still broader implications of being an outsider in a country full of xenophobes when the outsider in question happened to be someone he had come to consider important and it was...uncomfortable. Strangely so.

"I want you to tell me about that," he said quietly. "Later. When you're ready to tell me. If you really don't mind sleeping outdoors...although you could always sleep in the carriage. Without me in there, I'm sure it will feel a lot more spacious."

Kesara glanced up at him, a smile trembling on her lips. "Thank you," she said.

Thane wasn't sure what to say to that. He settled for occupying himself directing the rest of his escort in making camping preparations. The innkeeper had been gracious enough to surrender his rear courtyard, a not inconsiderable stretch of land, fortunately for them. He then went to Graunt, who was comfortably ensconced in an open wagon which she drove herself, the rear filled with all manner of sacks containing Graunt-only-knew-what.

"Do you need any help, old mother?" he asked politely. "Would you like me to set up a tent or something for you?"

Graunt snorted. “Hardly, lad. I’ll be just fine, though it’s kind of you to finally ask after me. You’ve been sealed up in that carriage with the little rabbit all day long and scarcely looked my way when we stopped for luncheon.”

“My apologies, old mother,” he said meekly, lowering his eyes, but not before he caught Graunt giving him a look not unlike Kesara’s of a few minutes’ before. “If it makes you feel better, it is not the most pleasant trip I have ever been on.”

“It’s your own stupid fault for agreeing to a carriage. There’s no reason you can’t ride while she stays in the carriage,” Graunt said flatly. “In fact, she’d probably be relieved to have some time on her own to come to terms with everything that’s happened. Bonding is no small thing for one like her. This is a big change in her life, the last such change she can ever expect to have.”

“You may be right,” Thane allowed, but inside, he felt a certain reluctance. He could not say it to Graunt, but he became uneasy being too far from Kesara. He wasn’t sure if it was actually *her* uneasiness seeping into him through the bond, or if it was all his own, or some blend of the two, but it felt somehow natural to keep her close. He couldn’t even imagine locking her away somewhere and forgetting about her, as Kesara had told him happened with some bonded Mirrors.

Graunt was looking at him curiously, a sly smile starting to curve her mouth, so Thane quickly excused himself, only to hear her cackle at his retreat.

The arrangements were quickly finished, bed pallets laid out, a watch set up. Even on Eladrian soil he would have to be careful now; he knew he would not rest easily until Malachi had answered for his actions and been brought to justice. He checked on Kesara, who was cocooned in blankets on the bench inside the carriage, by all appearances already asleep before he could bid her goodnight. Thus satisfied, he laid down on his pallet, and sleep quickly overtook him.

It didn’t last long. Or at least, he thought blearily, pushing himself up onto his elbows, it didn’t *feel* like long. But the waxing moon was by now overhead and on the descent. He tried to push through thoughts foggy with sleep, frowning in concentration as he tried to figure out what had disturbed him. All was silent. He saw the soldier appointed watchman making his patrol as usual, disappearing into Thane’s periphery.

Cold. That’s what it was. Thane’s frown deepened and he pulled the blanket up to his shoulder. Normally he was extremely tolerant of his native climate, and it *was* still spring and quite mild by his standards. But the sense of coldness failed to abate.

Then his brain caught up with reality. *Kesara* was cold. Odd that it had woken him up, he thought, pushing back the blankets. It was a feeling he could easily dismiss if he wished, now that he recognized it, but he wondered how many blankets he would have tried before figuring it out if he had not.

He made his way carefully to the carriage and peeked inside the window. In the moonlight, he could only just make out the cocoon of blankets on the bench, shivering.

“Ah, you poor thing,” he said sympathetically, clucking his tongue a little. No easy feat for him. “Ytar is tropical, isn’t it? That’s what I’ve heard.”

He heard nothing but a faint clicking that may have been her teeth. He pulled open the door and reached inside easily with one arm, hooking it around the cocoon and tugging it out as it let out a yelp of protest.

“Now, now, Kes. If you freeze to death, well, that would be unfortunate. I’ve not even come halfway down the list of all the things I have in mind to tease you about,” he said gravely. He set her gently on her feet and only just prevented her from falling back over. She was so snugly swathed in blankets, it didn’t appear like she could even move her feet. “How did you even get yourself in there so tightly?”

“I’m talented,” he thought she said. Her voice was muffled by blanket, but now he could see bright blue eyes blinking at him sleepily from a parting in the cloth. Then either: “why’d you wake me up?”

or “time to take tea, huh?” He decided it was probably the first one and said, “It must have been the chattering of your teeth. I have very delicate ears, Kes.”

A brief noise came from the blankets that may have been a snort, a laugh, or something less tactful. He shook his head at her. “I really can’t understand you very well through all those blankets. Why don’t you let me take you inside to warm up?”

The cocoon wagged back and forth in the negative.

“There isn’t a fire pit out here,” Thane pointed out reasonably. “And you’re not the only one who’s tired...so...why not be practical?”

She answered unintelligibly.

“I guess this is my just recompense for being deformed and forcing innocent bystanders to interpret my lordly ravings,” he lamented, rolling his eyes towards the heavens.

Another, possibly rude, noise, followed by a shuffling in the arrangement of the blankets. “I s-said I’m f-fine in the c-carriage, m-milord.”

“Oh, so this is an impediment of speech you’ve just now developed, then? Forgive my mentioning it,” Thane said sweetly. Kesara sighed.

“I’m a l-little c-c-old but I’ll b-be f-fine,” she insisted.

“You’re so stubborn. I’ve already told you, I don’t trust the word ‘fine’ coming from *your* lips. You’re going to force me to be a barbarian and violate all propriety, aren’t you? This is what I get for practicing my manners. All these ‘milords’ in return but not a jot of actual obedience or servility,” Thane said mournfully, tucking her easily under one arm and trudging towards the inn. Kesara started to squirm, then no doubt quickly realizing that to succeed in her aim would be to fall on her head, instead opted to hold herself stiffly still as he marched her into the inn.

Fortunately, the innkeeper was still awake, wiping down a wooden counter with a towel and looking astonished to see the Dread Lord himself casually strolling into his common room, a vaguely person-shaped bundle of blankets under one arm. “Would you mind if we sat a while by your hearth, sir?” Thane asked, slowly and clearly. The innkeeper mutely shook his head, and Thane settled himself in a chair that was only slightly too small next to the fireplace. A small fire still crackled within. The room was empty apart from themselves, the inn’s other patrons evidently having already retired. Thane set the blanket cocoon on top of his leg, now uncertain as to which end was actually up and not relishing the prospect of cracking open Kesara’s head. Again.

Fortuitously, it appeared he had guessed right, because gradually Kesara shrugged out of the blankets and turned out to be sitting on his lap. She was blushing furiously, but the effect was detracted from by the persistent chattering of her teeth. He kindly picked her up again and set her down on the floor next to the hearth instead. “You can get a chair if you want, Kes, but you might want to be closer to the fire rather than farther. If you know what I mean.”

Kesara just shook her head at him and hugged her mass of blankets to herself, drawing her knees up to her chest and sitting as close to the grate as her sense of self preservation would allow. Which was still sufficiently close to cause Thane some mild alarm, but he bit it back and kept a watchful eye on her rather than commenting.

He glanced at the innkeeper. “If it is not too much trouble, do you have anything warm for my companion? Some mulled wine or something?” he asked slowly. The innkeeper nodded, still apparently beyond speech, and quickly began to bustle around behind the counter.

A few moments later, he presented a steaming earthenware mug to Thane, who accepted it with a wink that caused the man to jump backwards, knocking over a nearby chair. He stammered apologies as he set it right and scuttled back to his former post. Thane felt like telling the man that he need not wait up, he was hardly going to rob one of his loyal citizens or anything, but he knew it wasn’t going to happen. It wasn’t every day the Dread Lord brought apparently mummified foreigners into one’s

common room, after all. He offered the drink to Kesara, holding it squarely in her periphery and hoping the steam rising from it would have a siren-like appeal to her.

She sighed and turned to him, stretching out her hands with obvious reluctance, but they were shaking so badly he was loath to let go of the tankard when her fingers reached it. "Wait a moment," he told her. He unfolded himself from the chair and sat down on the floor next to her cross-legged, then offered again. Again she reached for it, looking faintly puzzled this time, her dark brows knit together in what was either confusion or concentration. He moved his hands out of the way so she could grip the bottom of the tankard, then he guided it to her lips, letting her tip it to drink while he held it steady. She gave a little shudder and wince when she swallowed.

"We're not very good bartenders, either," he said regretfully. "But if you need something mined or killed, you'll find no one better suited to the task." He was pleased to see a brief smile curve her lips.

"You go to far too much trouble over me," Kesara said, eyeing the mug's murky contents. "I'm trying not to be a bother here, but you thwart me at every turn and make me twice the trouble I would have been!"

"Oh, don't tell me we're back to that, I thought we'd made so much progress, you and I," Thane teased, helping her take another sip.

"You don't feel awkward at all...after the ritual?" she asked after a moment. She stared at the mug as though divining impenetrable secrets from its depths.

"Nothing has really changed, has it? Apart from everything? And 'everything' was changing from the moment you brought me that tea tray, so I've had plenty of time to get used to it." Thane barely suppressed his smile before she looked up at him again. He was surprised to see her eyes were welling up with tears and felt all humor desert him.

"Nothing has gone the way it is supposed to," Kesara said quietly. "I still feel terrible for putting you in the position that I did. I want to make up for it somehow, but I know I can't. I have never known such kindness as I have known from you, and I don't know how to be someone worthy of that. Of you."

Thane stared wide-eyed in horror as first one tear slipped down her cheek, then another. He gently pulled the mug away from her hands and set it down on the hearth. "I didn't realize you were so easily affected by drink or that you would be a *sad* drunk," he said uncertainly. "But please think nothing of the rest of it, Kes. You have done more for me than you know. I have never thought of you as being *unworthy*." He dabbed helplessly at her face with the edge of his sleeve, hoping if he erased the evidence, it might never have happened. She gave a little gurgling laugh, pulling back from his effort with a shake of her head.

"I'm not drunk, and that really isn't helping, Thane," she said with a weak, watery smile.

"How do I make you stop, then?" he asked, concerned. "Will it take violence? I might have to get the innkeeper to do it in that case. I like to think I can control the force of my blows most expertly, but you're not much stronger than a twig, Kes. I might snap your neck by mistake, and I would regret it terribly."

"Please be serious," she pleaded.

"I *am*," he replied, equally pleading.

"I just...need a moment."

"No, if that's all you needed, I'd know about it," and here Thane tapped the side of his head. "As it is, the bond isn't as helpful as one might hope." Indeed, all he sensed from her at the moment, now that she was warming up, was sadness and confusion and something else he couldn't quite identify. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to be doing about it.

A terrible thought occurred to him. "Do you need a hug?" he asked skeptically, eyeing her with fresh suspicion. "Because I'm really not well disposed to that sort of thing. I might could talk Graunt

into doing it, if you really, really *need* one.” Oh, but what that would cost him...he did not even want to think about it.

“Ach, no!” she cried, then quickly clamped her lips together and looked down at her lap. “I mean, no, thank you. I’ll be fine. Without...*hugging*.”

“Thank the gods,” Thane said earnestly.

“Maybe I could do with a pat on the shoulder or something, though,” Kesara said with a sniffle, still addressing her lap. “I mean, if you’re really *that* concerned about it.”

“A pat?” Thane studied her, looking for some indication she was kidding, but as she still appeared both tearful and grave, he sighed. “A pat. Hmmm.” He reached out a hand awkwardly and gave a gentle bop to one slender shoulder, nearly tipping her over backwards. His other hand shot out to her opposite arm to steady her. “You’re determined to hit your head again, I just *know* it,” he told her miserably. She looked up into his eyes, her own impossibly deep and blue, tears still glistening in trails on her cheeks, and he suddenly realized how close their faces were, now that he had leaned forward to grab for her. He froze, uncertainty and confusion warring inside of him as he awaited with an odd sense of dread the inevitable reaction. Recoiling, or gasping, or perhaps just fear. He knew he ought to let her go and back away, but he suddenly couldn’t remember, for the life of him, how to open his hands. He was sure it had something to do with his fingers, though. Fairly sure, anyway.

But Kesara reached up with a hand that was once again trembling. Or perhaps it had never stopped. Her cool fingertips grazed his cheek, and she bit her bottom lip. His mouth went dry and his chest begged for air.

Then she dropped her eyes, and it was like a spell had been broken. He released her, remembering just in time to be slow about it so she wouldn’t fall over backwards and somehow managed to get himself off the floor and back into the chair with what he hoped was an air of nonchalance.

He felt her eyes on his face, but he stared stubbornly at his hands, until finally she said, “That was a good effort. Thank you, milord.”

“I’d say you’re welcome,” Thane said, trying to rally, “but really, you’re not. This obsession you have with causing yourself head trauma simply has got to stop, Kes.”

“Yes, milord,” she murmured meekly. He darted a glance at her suspiciously to find, to his immense relief, that she looked like she was wiping away the last of her tears with the back of her hand.

“All right, then,” he said, and he quickly looked away again before anything on his face could betray the growing turmoil inside of him.

There was still the matter of Kesara freezing outside, though. “I’m sorry, Kes, but you’re going to have to take the vacant room whether you care to or not. I can’t have you freezing to death in the night.”

“I know, milord,” she said, her voice almost inaudible.

“It’s only for a couple of hours, now,” Thane said bracingly. “You’ll be fine. I can sleep out here if it will make you feel better.”

Kesara looked pointedly at the slightly-too-small chair he was balanced on. “I, er, don’t think that would be a very good idea, milord. Just...come get me in the morning, please?”

“Of course,” he agreed quickly. “And I’ll walk you to the door.” He stood and motioned to the innkeeper across the room, who materialized at his elbow. “That room is still vacant, yes, sir?”

“Of course, my lord,” the man said, bowing.

Kesara climbed to her feet. He felt her fatigue anew through the bond. “My companion will not be disturbed,” Thane stated, looking the shorter man in the eyes and giving a brief, humorless flash of teeth.

“N-no, my lord, of course not,” the innkeeper stammered, paling.

“Let us get on with it, then,” Thane said, and the innkeeper showed them hastily up the stairs to a

room at the end of the hall. Thane turned to Kesara as the portly man turned the key in the door. "If it isn't satisfactory, Kes, you need only say the word."

"I'm sure it can't be any worse than my arrangements were on the way to your Keep, milord," she answered dryly. He raised an eyebrow and took the proffered key from the innkeeper, handing it to her. They waited just outside the room until the innkeeper lit a fire in the small fireplace within, after which he disappeared down the hallway, his retreat punctuated with bows.

"I don't understand why I get that reaction," Thane said sadly. Kesara had the grace not to reply. He waited in the doorway while she stepped inside and looked around. The room consisted of a single bed, too small to be comfortable for Thane but surely large enough to dwarf the little Ytaren woman; chest of drawers; a chair; and not much more.

"It is fine, Thane," Kesara told him, smothering a yawn with her hand.

Thane tried not to smile. "Goodnight, Kes. Lock the door behind me, and I'll be up to collect you when we're ready to depart. If you need me before then, you can either yell out the window, or go for the innkeeper. I doubt he would give you any trouble."

He pulled the door shut before she could answer and waited until he heard the key scrape in the keyhole before he headed downstairs and back outside to his pallet. He welcomed the cold night air as he laid down again, as it seemed to clear his spinning head.

His mind kept going back to sitting next to Kesara by the fireplace, and he kept just as persistently pushing those thoughts aside in favor of dreading another day folded in half in that carriage, until sleep at last granted him peace once more.

Kesara woke at dawn, the first pale rays of sunlight leaking like spilled milk through the mottled glass of the window pane. She stretched gingerly in the unfamiliar bed, still not entirely accustomed to the new infirmities she felt in her bones, though not really disturbed by them. Although the bonding had come in time to save her life, she had been sufficiently weakened by both the delay and the abrupt severing of the temporary bond that had come before it that she was finding herself easily fatigued. It was all she could do to stay awake during the day, and though she suspected Lord Eladria — *Thane*, she reminded herself — wouldn't really mind if she dozed off all day long in the carriage, she couldn't help but feel a certain sense of obligation born of courtesy to remain as alert as possible in his presence.

It was a presence whose continuation she couldn't really explain. It seemed obvious he was uncomfortable in the carriage — she felt the ache of his stiff muscles even if he did not — so why did he remain? She had thought at first that perhaps he had been nerving himself up to discuss something with her. Just what that might be, she didn't know, but she still knew so little of the High Lord and what went on at Court that she rather hoped he would begin some sort of tutorial for her without her having to ask. Such information did not seem to be forthcoming, however, and she was still reluctant to bring the subject up. Even though they were bonded now, she was still a foreigner in his eyes, or at least, she thought she was.

I don't really know what he thinks, she thought ruefully, relieved anew that he apparently did not know what *she* thought, either. Perhaps it was the fatigue, or perhaps it was normal — she was no longer in any contact with any of her fellow Mirrors or her teachers to be able to ask — but her thoughts kept returning to their bonding ritual, and though she tried to distract herself with other thoughts or with speculations about their upcoming visit to the High Lord, it was to the ritual and the look in Thane's eyes that her mind unerringly went back to. She couldn't imagine what he would think if he knew that, but judging from the alacrity with which he'd sprung up and returned to his chair the night before, she doubted it would be anything amiable.

Her cheeks burned and she groaned as she recalled it. *What was I thinking? Was I thinking? He didn't seem offended, at any rate. He had seemed a little odd to her, however.*

Of course, everything about him seemed odd to her now. He behaved just the same now as he had before their bonding, confirming in her own mind that he must not have felt the way she had. That shouldn't have surprised her at all, and yet she felt strangely saddened. Disappointed, even, which was ridiculous.

Yet he was astonishingly, painstakingly solicitous of her in a way she had never expected. She couldn't even describe her own shock when he'd suddenly agreed to bring her with him to Court, despite his previous misgivings. He'd done that just to please her, she was sure, and...it made no sense. She had been assured time and again by her teachers that the needs which the *refrere* could sense through the bond could easily be dismissed or ignored or even, for those with the motivation and temperament, tuned out entirely, with time and patience. She had heard from the very lips of bonded Mirrors of just that occurring and had heard the stories of Mirrors killed when deemed inconvenient or obnoxious by those they were bonded to, stories never meant to reach her, or the other students', ears but which never seemed to fail to.

But Thane seemed to insist on addressing every little need that came into his awareness. He had even somehow realized that she yearned to be close to him the evening before when she'd finally broken down in exhaustion and guilt in front of him. *Was that even, properly speaking, a need?* she wondered, and yet it must have been, for he had known about it.

Kesara sighed, shaking her head to try to clear it as she got out of bed. She dressed and cleaned herself up as best she could, knowing full well that it made little difference. Another long day crammed into a carriage with the Dread Lord and struggling to remain conscious would be sure to quickly reverse any improvements she happened to make regarding her general appearance.

Perhaps if I encouraged him to ride today, she thought, feeling a little guilty at the idea. After all, she didn't want him to think that she was shunning his company or something. Maybe he sensed that she did want to be near him and was just trying to respond to that. She had no idea anymore. Being a Mirror was supposed to be such a straightforward thing, she thought glumly. *When did it all become so complicated?*

As if answering her thought, she heard a polite knocking at her door, followed by an obnoxiously cheerful "Time to go, Kes!"

She took a deep breath and unlocked the door, pushing it tentatively open. Thane stood in the hall in a pose of such exaggerated casualness, leaning against the wall with one long leg crossed in front of the other, that it made her fight back a smile.

"Good morning, milord," she said politely.

"Good morning, miss," he answered, just as politely. "Did you rest well?"

"Just so, milord," Kesara lost the fight against smiling. "And you?"

"It was most adequate, thank you, miss," Thane said. His lips remained compressed in a neutral line but his brown eyes twinkled at her. "Did you need to eat something before we go?"

"I'm not hungry," she said cautiously.

"I know, but I thought I'd ask anyway." Thane motioned towards the stairs and she obediently started walking. "We won't be stopping for quite a while. Going the long way around means long days on the road to get there on schedule. The High Lord does not appreciate tardiness." There was something about the way he said this last that suggested he was parroting it from some source that was, to her, unknown.

"Um, yes, and about the long days and the traveling..." Kesara took another breath to steel herself, grateful that she was walking in front of him and could conscientiously direct her gaze to the stairway she was presently descending rather than have to make eye contact. "It's just, well, milord, it's not

that I don't...uh...*value* your company..."

"Are you breaking things off with me, Kesara?" Thane asked in a woeful tone from behind her. "Are you tired of me so quickly? Let me guess, it's not my fault, and you'll always cherish me like the friend you never had." She turned at the landing to face him and saw him smiling the tight, close-lipped smile she knew he wore when he was trying very hard not to smile openly.

"Oh, milord, you are far too perceptive for the likes of me," Kesara said, lowering her eyes demurely and digging her fingernails into her palms in an effort to stop herself from laughing. "You have it just right. I'm so glad you understand. I was so afraid you would make a scene."

"I'm still very tempted to do so. I can't tell you how I'm suffering in this moment," Thane said gravely, but there was a tremor in his voice that gave him away, along with the slight shaking of his shoulders when she looked back up at him.

Somehow, his amusement gave her courage, and as they stepped outside the inn, she blurted out in a rush, "Just ride your horse, milord, *please*. I'm really tired and all I want to do is sleep, and I don't feel right doing that when you're obviously just cramming yourself in that carriage on my behalf." She watched him uncertainly as he made a show of thinking it over, rubbing at his chin thoughtfully.

"It's really nice when you just say what you're thinking, you know," he said at last. "You might just spoil me if you keep this up."

Kesara let out the breath she'd been holding. "You're not upset? I don't want you to think the wrong thing."

"Too late," Thane said sadly. "I think lots of wrong things. I can hardly help myself. But fortunately, in this case, you're asking me to do what I'd rather do anyway, so right or wrong, how can I be upset about that?"

Kesara thought that over for a moment, but before she could say anything else, she found herself standing outside the carriage, and Thane was looking at her intently with such a serious look in his eyes that she felt a momentary pang of anxiety that he might actually be upset after all.

"Milord?"

"Kes, why are you so tired?" he asked bluntly. "You never used to sleep so much. I know you've been through a lot recently, but it's not anything more than that, is it?"

Kesara frowned, taken aback by the question and the intensity in his face. "N-no, of course not, milord. I'm just still recovering..."

She hesitated. She didn't want to bring up what had happened when she'd been bonded to him temporarily. Even though she couldn't sense or take away any emotional pain he might experience, she still had no desire to cause it.

But he seemed to make the leap without her. "I did this, didn't I?" he asked quietly.

"No, *I* did, by my own choices," Kesara told him firmly. "I'll be fine, Thane. I just need to sleep. By the time we get to Court, I'll be as good as...well, as I've ever been."

"If you need anything, you'll tell me, won't you? I can't always interpret what the bond tells me," Thane said in a low voice.

"All I need right now is some rest," she assured him, then thoughtfully, "And maybe a fire, wherever we stop tonight?"

Thane inclined his head, relaxing visibly. "That much I think we can manage."

"What in the hells is keeping you lot?" Graunt bellowed from the other side of the courtyard. "You had all day yesterday to chit-chat with rabbits, lad. Let's get on with it before you have to bury me here."

"How exactly *would* you bury her here?" Kesara wondered, looking doubtfully at the rocky ground. It appeared the inn's rear courtyard had been left unpaved as a matter of redundancy.

Thane tugged open the carriage door and gestured inside. "Get some sleep, Kes. Your mind's going

strange.”

“Going?” Kesara muttered under her breath as she complied. She thought he wouldn’t hear her, but he chuckled low in his throat as he shut the door.

The next few days passed in a fog. Kesara napped fitfully in the carriage by day and curled up by a fire or, on occasion, in a bed at an inn by night. When she woke, she felt bleary eyed and muddled, as though always woken too soon from the middle of some dream. But by the week’s end, her head was starting to clear, her episodes of wakefulness lengthened, and she now barely noticed the new aches and pains she was carrying around, just in time for another of Thane’s headaches to descend.

“Going to Court...disturbs you, doesn’t it?” Kesara asked him carefully at camp that night. They were now in the country of Almryn, bordering the Western Range of the High Lord. The roads had gone from cobblestone to some smoother paving Kesara had never seen before, and they wended their way in smooth dark trails through deep green forests shrouded in light mist. It was lovely and vaguely reminiscent of Ytar except that it was still too cold for Kesara’s comfort.

They were seated next to each other on a fallen log before a small fire, Kesara picking at the remains of some sort of stew one of the soldiers had made, and Thane filling his pipe for the first time that evening.

“Disturbing...that might be a good word for Court,” Thane said dryly, tamping down the tobacco in his pipe. “Why do you ask?”

“You’re getting another headache,” Kesara said.

Thane grunted. “Graunt shared her theory that they are stress related, I take it. Well, it’s as good a reason as any. I do find being at Court stressful, that much is certain.”

Kesara hesitated, unsure as to what the reception to her next question would be, and took her time stabbing a piece of what she hoped was potato with her fork. “Is there anything I should know before we get there, milord?” she finally asked.

Thane by this time had lit the pipe, and he slowly exhaled smoke as he said, “Ah, I wondered when we’d come to that. Truth is, Kes, I’m not the most refined or diplomatic of rulers by far. Generally speaking, you could take off your clothes and dance on the tables and the only thing anyone would find surprising is that you are a *foreigner* in Lord Eladria’s company. Not that we Eladrians normally go in for that kind of behavior, mind you. It’s just the point that the other nobles at Court generally expect anyone or anything associated with me or my homeland to be barbaric and uncivilized. You will doubtlessly hear no end of little comments to that effect from the servants as well as the nobles. They would not dare to go *too* far — most of them fear me too much for that — but they know I generally ignore the truly petty trifles, and they take full advantage of the fact. I advise you to ignore it as well, but if anyone troubles you or says something you don’t understand the reference to, you need only ask me when we’re alone.”

“I understand,” Kesara said, watching the smoke rise from the end of his pipe. “This stresses you? That they think you’re a barbarian?”

Thane snorted. “No, I *am* a barbarian. Why should it bother me that they think so? What ‘stresses’ me is that I’m on a short leash when I’m around the High Lord. I give the man a tremendous amount of respect, and I try to be worthy of the respect and trust he has shown me in return. It is most difficult to pretend to civility that I don’t in fact possess around those who deserve anything but that from me. Malachi will be there, and as much as I’d love to just separate his head from his neck and be done with it, I will be forced to plead my case like one of my own petitioners at Judgment day and accept that whatever penalty he receives will no doubt be far less than what he deserves.”

“I’m not certain things are as straightforward as you seem to think they are, Thane. What you have

told me makes sense, and yet...why would someone who had been your friend once take such measures as he did? He had to know it would come to the High Lord's attention sooner or later. Does he really hate you so much?" She was practically burning with curiosity to know where such avid dislike would come from, and she was sure he *had* to sense it through their bond, but she could not bring herself to question him about it directly, and he was obviously not volunteering the information. He had always been open enough with her, but somehow she had the impression that this was not a subject to go barging into at the moment.

"I don't honestly know the answer to that, Kes, but I am sure we will find out when we get there," Thane said grimly.

Kesara considered this a moment, then asked, "Who are your allies at Court?"

Thane looked down at her, nearly dropping his pipe. "What a strange question! We're all allies in the Union. Yes, even Malachi and I, which makes the sting that much keener, doesn't it?"

"No, I mean, is there anyone especially sympathetic with Eladrian interests? Someone who doesn't stoop to the pettiness you mentioned?"

"Uh, what, like a friend or something?" Thane took another puff on his pipe, looking bemused. "Not that I know of. I'm in favor with the High Lord, but generally, I don't seem to get along very well with the rest of the Court on what you might call a *social* level."

"I see," Kesara said slowly, eyeing him anew. "Really, you don't seem so very difficult to get along with to me, milord. Or so uncivilized as you suggest."

Thane gave something like a smirk in the direction of the fire and said, "You met me under much different circumstances than most do, Kes. There's really no valid basis for comparison here."

"Do you act so differently at Court than you do around me?" Kesara persisted.

Thane gave her a tight-lipped smile. "Not really. My behavior isn't really the issue. If you think about it, I should be even *easier* to get along with when I am forced to behave myself around the High Lord, shouldn't I?"

"Then what is it?" Kesara abandoned all efforts to finish her dinner, staring at Thane's profile in puzzlement.

Thane turned his head and looked her directly in the eyes. "You really have to ask that?" he asked, so softly that even right next to him, she had to strain to hear him.

Kesara felt heat flood her face as she suddenly realized what he was getting at. "Your appearance can be...intimidating, milord. I won't try to tell you otherwise. But surely it isn't so important as all that?"

Thane's face was unreadable as he said mildly, "Well, that depends on how you define 'all that.' Appearances are very important at Court. *Your* appearance, for example, could either be to the benefit of my reputation — because I apparently 'obtained' a rare commodity, if you will forgive such vulgarity for a moment — or to my detriment because I am so weak that I must require the services of one with your abilities. The odds are stacked in favor of the latter impression given that my feelings on foreigners are so well known. It might give anyone planning to test the cracks in Eladrian defenses all the impetus they need or even cause me to lose favor with the High Lord, rendering such an event more likely than not. Not that this concerns me. No one has ever invaded Eladria successfully since we cast out our first occupants, centuries ago."

Kesara stared at him, stunned. "Is that why you did not want to bring me? I would have stayed if you told me to. I did not realize I'd be to your detriment if I came."

Thane's eyebrows knit together, and he shook his head. "No, I told you my reasons. And while it would be unfortunate to lose favor with one as powerful as the High Lord, it wouldn't be the end of the world nor a permanent state of affairs, if I can help it. I do not welcome the prospect of battle on Eladrian soil if I am suddenly perceived as the weak link in the chain, but I am confident in our

defenses and in our men. I'm not trying to blame you for whatever is to come. It was ultimately my decision whether to bring you or not, and I do not regret my choice." He looked away from her, towards the fire again. "It's a comfort to know you will be there, actually. There is no one for me to talk to anymore except Graunt, and she is sufficiently disgruntled at accompanying us to not be very sympathetic company, in case you somehow failed to notice." Kesara had, in all honesty. She had barely seen or heard Graunt since they departed but had attributed this to the fact that she had been spending most of her time of late sleeping.

Thane sighed and continued in a quieter tone, "It does get...stressful, being surrounded by people who never stop talking, always at you or about you but never quite to you. That is what Court is like Kes. Nonstop chattering by people too stupid to use whatever sense the gods gave them."

They sat a moment in silence, and Kesara felt steeped in remorse. His words were so contrary to her understanding of the world that she wasn't even sure what to think about it. She wished now she had not asked to come. She knew how much his country and his people and his duty meant to him, and that he was willing to take any risk on behalf of her, a foreigner...it was too much to take in. She thought of his eyes when they bonded and felt herself flush again, suddenly grateful he was no longer looking at her. *Perhaps he did feel it, too. I don't understand him at all.*

"I didn't mean to cause you trouble, Thane," she ventured at last. "I will do what I can to prevent that. Just because I am yours, that doesn't mean you are weak. It makes you stronger, actually. Where I am from, it is a sign of prestige to be bonded to a Mirror. Nobles bond who are in perfect health, if they have the money and reputation to be able to do so. It never occurred to me anyone would interpret it any differently in your case."

"They might not have if it wasn't me. But don't worry about it, Kes. If there is trouble, it is for another day. All will be well," Thane said kindly, tapping his pipe against the log to empty it. "And this is all theoretical, anyhow. There's no telling just how exactly your presence will be taken, but I'm not really worried about it. My point was simply that appearances matter a hell of a lot more at Court than you seem to realize. I am repulsive to them, and that alone is enough for them to justify their antipathy amongst each other. They will try to veil it, in their pathetic way, because I am in favor. But I am not taken in, and somehow I doubt you will be, either, when you see it."

"There is no need for me to see it, though," Kesara protested, then she brightened as an idea occurred to her. "And that would solve all the trouble, wouldn't it? You can just keep me in your quarters. No one even need know I am there except maybe the servants. And if it gets out through them that you have some fetish for small foreign women, whose business is it, really?"

Thane choked on nothing at all.

"Shall I thump your back for you?" she asked politely.

"Good gods," was all he said, pressing a hand to his chest. "You're going to kill me if you keep coming up with things like that. Next you'll suggest I keep you chained to the bed for authenticity."

"I don't mind if you leave enough slack for my muscles not to cramp," Kesara volunteered bravely.

"Are you insane?" Thane's voice sounded a little high.

"But you wouldn't have to worry about people thinking you're weak for having me there. A little perverted, maybe, but that's taken differently among nobles than most people, isn't it?"

"Absolutely not! Whatever happened to your maidenly virtue you were so keen on defending? Eh? Remember that?" Thane rolled his large shoulders, appearing uncomfortable.

"Needs must," Kesara said resolutely, lifting her chin.

"No."

"But Thane-"

"Oh please, gods, tell me I'm not sitting here trying to talk a woman out of chaining herself to my bed," Thane muttered, raising his eyes and hands to the heavens. "It's like some sort of nightmare. O

dream. Or nightmare. I can't decide just now, but whatever it is, it isn't reality. It isn't even *sane*."

~~"Oh, fine, milord. Have it your way. Risk Eladrian interests for the sake of a foreigner's reputation which incidentally, I really doubt anyone there is going to care about in the slightest anyway,"~~ Kesara huffed, crossing her arms.

"I'm so glad my prayers have been answered and you have seen reason," Thane declared, ignoring her utter failure to do any such thing and lowering his hands to his knees.

Kesara sighed, fighting a smile. She would not be amused, not when he was being so...*difficult*. It seemed like such a clean and simple solution, she couldn't believe he was arguing with it.

"It's going to be fine, Kes," he continued, "without any...fetishism." Thane rose to his feet. "Now you don't mind, I'm going to bed, and I think you ought to do the same."

"I thought you didn't want me to go to your bed," Kesara said sweetly, offering a demure smile. Thane rolled his eyes and walked away, but not before Kesara saw the red spreading up his neck.

CHAPTER TWO

Graunt watched the red sun beginning to melt into the clouds, disappearing behind the hulking magnificence that was the High Lord's palace.

And a fine palace it was, too. Not made of fine old Eladrian stone like her lad's Keep, of course, but made of the darker, grittier stuff that flourished in profusion in the High Lord's domain. It rose up in a crown of many spires that were actually elaborately designed towers, ringing around a massive, glass-topped dome that reminded Graunt strongly of a bald man's pate, reflecting in its gleam the darkening sky and drifting clouds rather than the ceiling and the first dim stars of night rather than lit wall sconces. Heavy, lush green vines dripped from the towers and ran down the outer walls, somehow contriving to look as they belonged there rather than being invaders spawned by the waters below.

For the palace was hemmed in with a traditional moat, so fathomless and deep that even Graunt's canny eyes could not discern its bottom, and only Graunt's sensitive ears could perceive the distant threatening ripple of what those waters homed. What lived there, she could not say, but it was most certainly not uninhabited. Whatever swam within, she sensed, was as old and hungry and strange as herself, and she felt an odd kinship to the stranger in the dark waters.

She cackled a greeting to it that would be indecipherable to human ears and was gratified to hear an answering ripple just before the drawbridge was lowered at the Eladrian entourage's approach. She stifled her annoyance at the interruption in this unexpected communion as the drawbridge groaned its heavy way down to the dark-paved path before them, effectively drowning out anything more the stranger may have had to tell.

There would be many more annoyances and far more grating ones before this little trip was through, she thought wearily, narrowing her dark little eyes as the High Lord's emissary approached with a formal greeting for her lad. It was not unusual protocol for the High Lord to initially greet everyone in this manner before greeting them more personally himself in his own chambers within, but it still gnawed at Graunt's nerves, the endless stiff prattling and obsequious bows, the eyes carefully diverted from her lad's deformity, lest they be interpreted as offensive. No matter how many times Thane came to call — and it had been about once every three years since he had assumed his worthless father's throne, if she was not mistaken — they never knew him any better. They never cared to know.

She didn't even have to look back at Thane from her spot in their formation, towards the front and to the western side, to know how he was reacting, his studied look of neutral composure, lips smoothly compressed, the carefully practiced respectful incline of his head towards the emissary. It made her vomit a little in the back of her mouth to see him displaying such artificial courtesies to those of the Court. In her opinion, he gave the High Lord and his minions far too much respect, but she supposed that was what came of things when a man with even an ounce of backbone acted more paternal towards a vulnerable youth than his own negligent and dissolute father had ever bothered to. Graunt,

of course, had been suspicious of such solicitousness in an instant, but Thane had been starry-eyed. He was starry-eyed no longer, of course — or at least, not as much as he had been two decades before — but his exaggerated sense of regard for the High Lord lingered on and still managed to pique her. He usually did not invite her along to Court, knowing well her feelings about the place and its endless array of empty headed buffoons with too much power for their own good, but she was oddly pleased to have managed to end up coming this time, though she could never tell Thane this. He would not understand. He knew nothing of Mirrors beyond what he had been told, and although his little rabbit had all the appearance of transparency, she had none of its taste. She took much for granted, and Graunt could hardly wait to see those granted things unfold. Her bark-brown folds of flesh quivered in excitement, and her tongue darted out to lick her lips as she contemplated it, a low chortling rising up in her chest.

“Something amusing, old mother?” Thane asked gently, riding up alongside her wagon.

“Oh, all done with your bowing and scraping to the High Lord’s lick-spittle, are you?” Graunt said too loudly, curving her mouth into a satisfied smile as she saw the emissary, who was already moving back across the drawbridge, stiffen his shoulders as her words reached his ears.

Thane winced slightly himself and said in a quieter tone, no doubt in hopes of inspiring her to emulation, “I wouldn’t call it *scraping*, exactly, but yes, we are to cross now and be shown to our rooms.”

“Do we get our own tower? Or will we be placed out in the courtyard with the other beasts?” Graunt wondered, somewhere near the top of her lung capacity.

Thane smiled tightly between compressed lips and said, “No, in a tower, old mother.”

“Did you say anything to the emissary about your rabbit?” Graunt knew he had not and was unsurprised when he gave a slight shake of his head.

“No, I thought to introduce her myself, if she will be introduced.”

“Oh?” Graunt would have raised her eyebrows, if in fact she had any to raise. *Too much time around humans*, she chided herself.

“She is concerned about the possible implications of her appearance here and has been devising all manner of insane schemes to avoid being identified as...well, what she is,” Thane said in a low voice. “It’s my fault, I never should have mentioned it to her, but I didn’t realize she would take it so personally or be so *determined* about it.”

“Oh, dear me, no! That, we cannot have. That, she cannot do,” Graunt murmured, drumming long, pointy fingers against her thigh.

Thane looked askance at her, his brows knit together in bafflement, but she waved him away with her other hand. “Go on, lead us to victory or subjugation to powers too great for us to comprehend, or whatever it is you mean to do in this stuffy hole in the wall,” she said absently, her mind already mulling over the situation at hand.

She vaguely noticed Thane giving her a bow before he moved on, and she followed the forward motion of the entourage while scarcely noticing what she was doing, twirling and un-twirling the reins distractedly around her spindly fingers as she drove alongside all the rest. The Mirror could not simply be tucked discreetly away, covered with a drape or hidden in a closet. Thane would be obliged to impart word of her value to the High Lord when he discussed her abduction, after all; he could hardly hope to keep what she was to himself. Did the Ytaren really hope it would go no further than the High Lord’s ears? Ridiculous! She never would have thought of one from Ytar’s soil as being so damned naive even if politics in this part of the world probably mattered very little where the girl was from. They were embroiled in their own scandals over there, their own feuds, their own wars, where Mirrors existed as a matter of course as handy tools for the powerful and wealthy and sadistic. They didn’t care what the unwashed heathens beyond their own borders and that of their allies did. Even

Lyntara had not dared reach so far with the High Lord's Union standing betwixt them, and she suspected he would not meet with much success even if he managed the crossing. He did not expect what lay across those rivers and through those dense jungles, teeming with life and hate.

But one little Mirror, all alone, had managed the crossing and had made it as far as Eladria! Graunt wondered that Thane had never expressed curiosity about that. It would have been the first thing she had asked, if she had been him. But the poor boy had been too hung up about sorcery. Graunt clucked her tongue to herself, wagging her pointy head as she disembarked from the wagon before anyone could warily approach to offer assistance. She would accept none anyway, except perhaps Thane's, and she made a point of avoiding him these days. He couldn't think she was too interested in being here with them or be deterred from confiding in the Mirror. The Ytaren would need to know his mind if she was to do all she could do for him, and he was not one to open up so readily if he had a more comfortable alternative near to hand.

Ah, my lad, one day I won't have to coax and herd and heckle you into your own best interests. Odds are, it'll be because one of us is dead, but that's neither here nor there, Graunt thought, chortling a little to herself.

"You're having quite an evening by the sound of things, old mother," Thane observed mildly as he walked up to her.

She showed him her teeth. "It's nothing like the evening you're going to be having with the High Lord, I'm sure, my lad. Help a poor old woman to her room, won't you? And mind you don't rush me along, I haven't your long legs, you know."

"Of course," Thane said, offering his arm. She hung onto it a little more heavily than absolutely necessary, knowing her weight was nothing to him anyway but figuring it couldn't hurt to play the ag card a little.

Past the front gates and into the paved courtyard, their horses and wagon and carriage were taken away by the High Lord's servants, and they entered the palace, flanked by Eladrian soldiers, through an exterior door that led into a large, circular hallway that ringed the dome which was, as it turned out, only capped with glass. The bottom three-quarters of the thing were opaque and covered with tapestries and ornaments that Graunt found needlessly showy and paid little attention to. A wide, shallow staircase behind the dome led up to the second floor, which was hemmed in only by an ornate iron railing and from which one could look down into the glass part of the dome. The towers led off from doors punctuating this level of the hallway, with the largest door — or pair of doors, to be precise — leading into the largest tower, which was exclusively the High Lord's province.

Thane led her with all due care around the dome and up the stairs, which she dawdled on as much as possible, pretending to gaze around in wide eyed curiosity and taking delight in his increasingly tense composure. Graunt paused for the umpteenth time and turned to him slowly. "Why are you in such a hurry, my lad? The High Lord want to see you straightaway, does he?"

"Not just yet, Graunt. I have time still," Thane said stiffly, attempting to nudge her gently up the next step by her elbow. She would not be nudged.

"Then what is it?" Graunt opened her eyes as widely as she could. Thane made a face that would have been positively gruesome to anyone else's eyes, twisting his mouth and pushing down one eyebrow.

"I suspect you know, old mother, and you think you're going to persuade me to say something I don't mean or want to say, but there's nothing unseemly about it. Kes is a bit nervous, and I just need to make sure she isn't going to chain herself to anything now that she's here."

Graunt did not have to feign eye widening at that, but Thane pressed on as if he did not notice. "I had a pair of my men escort her to my room, just until we figure out what her accommodations should be. I never confirmed or denied bringing her here in my correspondence with the High Lord so it isn't

quite settled yet. That's all, nothing odd about it."

"No, of course not, perfectly natural, dear. You always did like things to be orderly and sorted out," Graunt said soothingly. Thane looked down at her with narrowed eyes.

"Are you patronizing me?" he asked suspiciously.

"Of course not, lad. Would I do something like that?" Graunt batted nonexistent eyelashes at him. He snorted and she feigned surprise, pressing an open hand to her chest.

"Dear me, you'd best not behave like this in front of the High Lord, my lad."

"You seem to be in awfully good humor for someone who was determined to ignore, avoid, and otherwise ostracize me the whole way here," Thane observed. His voice was mild but she detected discomfort in the way he avoided her gaze as he urged her onto the next step.

She took it docilely and said, "Not at all, lad. I just preferred to focus on the journey. Besides which it's not like you don't have anyone else to talk to now, is it?"

Thane frowned a little, suddenly looking distinctly uneasy to Graunt's practiced eye. "Don't tell me you didn't speak with me because you're...*envious* of the time I've spent with Kes?"

"Did you know it is very insulting to call her that? Where she's from, given names are only shortened when referring to small children, idiots, and pet animals. Which is she, I wonder? Well, I suppose she *is* a rabbit," Graunt mused, tapping her chin thoughtfully. "Though I suppose she might fall into the idiot category as well. She *did* decide to cast her lot in with a country full of xenophobes."

Thane, suddenly frozen in place at Graunt's side, hissed something in a low voice through his teeth that even Graunt couldn't quite make out, but she decided it was probably laced with profanity anyway and chastised him accordingly.

"Language, my lad," she chided. But Thane was looking at her now, visibly aghast.

"I had no idea. Why did she not say anything?" he stammered, more or less clearly.

Graunt shrugged. "Who the hell knows. She's a foreigner. What can you do?"

Thane cursed again, this time intelligibly, and resumed forward motion with a decided air of distraction. They made it the rest of the way up the stairs in silence when he finally seemed to remember himself and reddened.

"Oh, I *am* sorry, old mother," he said sheepishly. "That was uncalled for."

"Damn straight, don't do it again," Graunt said, smiling toothily. "Well, here we are." For they had come to a door that Thane was already opening for her. Graunt pushed past him with a wave of her hand.

"Go check on your pet rabbit," she said slyly over her shoulder as she went. "Who knows what trouble she is getting into. Didn't you tell me the last time you left her alone with a pair of your men, she almost got her face broken and fell down a stairwell?"

Thane stared at her for a moment, turned amusingly pale, and, bowing to her, hastened off down the corridor without another word.

Graunt cackled as she settled in a chair to await her baggage. It arrived in short order, the High Lord's impeccably groomed and bright-eyed servants, all dressed in pale blue and silver, anxiously placing each piece where she indicated. The High Lord trained his servants far better than Thane had his, she noted with amusement, for they behaved as if they did not notice that she was nothing like them, as if they did not know that their very proximity was making her belly growl. They could not fool old Graunt, though. She could taste their fear on the air, salty and savory, even as their faces remained smiling masks, and her dark beady eyes, even while ostensibly directed to other pursuits, still did not fail to notice the speeding of their steps when they left her room.

Their quickening pace was a horrible tease. There was nothing Graunt enjoyed as much as flight in the objects of her interest. She sighed in disappointment as the last of them hastened away. There would be no enjoyment here in this miserable edifice of stone and pomp. No, she had work to do.

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