



A SUITABLE  
BODYGUARD

R. COOPER

# A Suitable Bodyguard

R. Cooper

Copyright © 2023 R. Cooper

All Rights Reserved

Cover Art by Lyn Forester

ISBN 9798215626559

Content tags: some drinking and intoxication, discussion of arranged marriage and polyamory (as both exist in this universe), threatened violence, off page violence, character death, on page sex, loss of virginity, magic, heats, magical body changes, inhuman physical traits, implied soulmates, accidental exhibitionism, biting kink, acts of service/service kink

## Table of Contents

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

Eleven

Twelve

Thirteen

Fourteen

Fifteen

Sixteen

Seventeen

Eighteen

Nineteen

Twenty.

Twenty-One

Twenty-Two

Twenty-Three

Epilogue

The End

# One

Without standing on his toes, Zelli could see over the top of the battlement down to the valley below. On his toes, he could see as far as the river, which wasn't terribly distant; it merely seemed so at night, with low clouds and fog obscuring much of the valley.

The fog disappeared for the most part during the summer. To see fog now meant autumn was approaching, though the days were still sunny. Harvest would come soon, an important matter, even to those in the ancient Tialttyrin fortress who had never worked a field in their lives.

Harvest, taking away labor as it did, and the slow approach of winter weather meant that business which should have been done in the summer could be put off no longer. Even The Tialttyrin herself knew this. Yet her health would not allow her to attend to the business personally, and anyone else capable was far from the old fortress, off in the capital or in the rest of the Tialttyrin holdings at the opposite end of the vast valley.

Zelli's cousin would be preparing for his own harvest, and though he might fulfill some magisterial duties near him, viewing the land, hearing complaints, and issuing judgments was the duty of The Tialttyrin and all knew it.

This would be the second year without Zelli's grandmother descending even into the sheltered village at the base of the fortress, much less riding out past the outer wall into the valley proper. People were counting on her and would be disappointed. Moreover, they would begin to doubt the ability of the Tialttyrin family to take care of them and to protect them. What then?

It was not Grandmother's fault that her health had worsened. If there was anyone to blame, it was the various cousins, aunts, uncles, and others who were content to live well in the capital but leave the running of the Tialttyrin estates to Grandmother.

They claimed they could not travel because of the strife that had consumed the country, although to Zelli's way of thinking, the workers transporting great casks of grains and wine from their fertile valley to the rest of the country had to face the risk, so anyone with the name Tialttyrin ought to manage at least one visit. But Zelli's opinion did not carry much weight outside this fortress.

It did not even carry much weight within it, he reflected sourly, although that wasn't entirely fair. Grandmother had understood Zelli's viewpoint; she just did not agree that Zelli should be the one to go in her place. Not as a mark against Zelli, she claimed. Zelli couldn't argue for himself there, in any case. He *was* inexperienced and he *was* young, hardly past twenty. He could not look imposing if he tried, and he had barely left the fortress and the village below it, and that had only been for a journey down the length of the great valley when he'd been a child, before the old queen had been murdered, bless her memory and curse the Canamorra. And, even in a family known for its streak of fae blood, Zelli had unpredictable traits that made him a little *too* fae for many to be comfortable. More fae than human, thanks to his rather indiscreet parent.

But he was not wrong in this. Even Grandmother had agreed with his argument, although that was all she had done. She had stood firm about everything else despite being barely able to hold herself upright with the help of a cane and Tahlen at her elbow to lend his strength. Tahlen, listening stone-faced to Zelli raising his voice when he should not have, had exchanged a look with Grandmother that only had made Grandmother more resolute against the idea of Zelli going anywhere for the foreseeable future.

Zelli hadn't seen anything in that glance; he never did. But Grandmother saw everything, and she and Tahlen were, as ever, in agreement. She had others to go to for counsel: her siblings and cousins, though they were as fragile as she was and not especially inclined to practical discussions, the Head of House, Nya, who had trouble these days recalling the tasks she'd been working on, which was why Zelli smiled for her while doing the tasks himself, the cousins across the valley,

Zelli himself. But it was a guard whose opinion Grandmother valued. A guard sworn to protect the family and the body of The Tialttyrin, one good and dutiful and capable, but nonetheless a guard, one who had only been with their family a handful of years. And Tahlen did not think Zelli should go either, not even just a few days' ride into the valley.

It should not have hurt. Zelli didn't think he had Tahlen's respect, but he would have thought Tahlen would understand the need for The Tialttyrin's duties to be carried out. Tahlen always understood such things, guard or not. That was why Grandmother looked to him as she did, why even Zelli had done it, his gaze catching on the upright, strong figure in armor, with small braids tucked into the thick, complex braid down his back. Elaborate weaving that no other guard had ever bothered with that Zelli had seen, and which likely would have done the noblest beat-of-four in the capital proud—not that any noble would have ever have kept their hair tied back as Tahlen did.

Tahlen's sister wore her hair the same as she worked in the kitchens, where she had the run of the place much like Tahlen had Grandmother's ear. She did not have Tahlen's stone face, at least, not with Zelli. For Zelli, she had scowls and glares, even more so of late.

Zelli sighed heavily before moving to a position where he could look over this part of the valley without effort, although the fog still hid much... perhaps even enemies. So far, the fighting over the throne that consumed many of the noble families had not crept into their valley. Tialttyrin was not a grand house or an ambitious one, which had probably saved them—that and their legendary connection to the fae. The fae were mysterious, hidden, and powerful. Countless songs and stories warned people not to cross them and most heeded the warnings. But for well over a decade, the noble houses had been allying with one another—then betraying one another—and scheming and killing for their chance to take the crown for themselves, and though many had held it, none had kept it.

By all reports, the fighting seemed to be getting more widespread and the ambitious families more determined and

reckless. It was as though the times of the ancient Earls had returned. When families had battled for centuries until one had proven strong enough to make everyone stop and to keep them from starting it all up again at the slightest provocation—except for the occasional uprising or seizure of the crown by force. Then the Canamorra, one of the oldest families, endlessly proud of the four beats of their name and the esteemed lineage it spoke of, had decided to take the crown again. They had failed, but nonetheless, the country had spiraled back into chaos, and the remaining contenders were growing more willing to harm anyone in their way.

Grandmother, and likely Tahlen with whatever his glance had told her, were right. There *was* danger out there. Zelli acknowledged that.

But he thought the risk worth taking.

He was aware it was his life Grandmother was concerned about, but considering that Zelli's life was already being bargained away to help the family, he didn't see how this was much different. It felt far more useful than hoping someone in a powerful family would be so taken with Zelli that they'd consent to an alliance or perhaps even a real marriage. If anyone was going to be taken with anything, it would be with the wines this valley produced, not with Zelli.

A journey into at least the start of the valley would not rule out an alliance, anyway. The journey could be accomplished in a matter of days with fair weather. And if they did not act, another family might decide the valley should be theirs and the people in it might agree with them. The benefits far outweighed the slight risk to Zelli.

Grandmother knew that, but was too fond of him to let him go.

Zelli made a disgruntled face despite the warmth that filled him at the thought.

Tahlen, however.... Tahlen's reasons Zelli did not know. But they would be sensible and practical and Zelli would *like* to know them.

At that, Zelli left the battlement, too restless to be still although it was long past even the latest of late dinners and nearly everyone else in the fortress had probably retired hours ago. He went down staircase after staircase, then up another, then down again and along several corridors, for the fortress of stone had been cut into the foothills and it took some time to go from one end to the other.

He passed a few guards who had known him since childhood and regarded him now with confusion and perhaps even some worry. Zelli wondered idly, as he often did, what they thought of a younger guard, not even from the valley, coming here and rising in position so quickly. But from what he had seen, they didn't mind too much. Tahlen never shirked his duties, even the nights spent down in the guard towers by the gate to the village, which had been a dull job not so long ago.

The guards did not think it dull now. If any trouble came, it would be the guards on duty there who would face it first.

Anyway, Zelli had even seen them laugh with Tahlen, and Tahlen, remarkably, smile back at them. They didn't seem to mind him one bit. It was likely only respect for Ric, the aged Captain of the Guard, that had kept Tahlen from taking on that role. He had a fine sense of tact, their Tahlen, and showed the same respect to old Ric that he showed to Nya.

Zelli reached the armory and the sparring ring, silent and empty at this time of night, and nodded to two guards headed out of their living quarters. Carr and Nel did not stop him but definitely had questions they wished to ask.

Zelli stepped lightly down a couple of stairs to reach the main hallway that held the rooms each guard claimed for their own except for the few who lived in the village. Then he frowned and went back up the stairs with a question for Carr and Nel, since Zelli did not actually know which room was Tahlen's.

Having received the information he needed and gotten yet more curious stares, Zelli ventured back into the guard's living quarters.

It was disrespectful of him to be there. But he would be quick and he would apologize to Tahlen for the visit. Tahlen would



probably not react to the apology one way or the other, but Zelli would apologize all the same. Then he'd be on his way.

He got lost only once, because a candle in one of the wall niches had gone out and the way was dark, and the niches on this level of the hold were too high for Zelli to reach. The family apartments, built for Tialttyrins who were, as a rule, quite small due to their fae ancestry, had much lower niches.

Of course, reaching Tahlen's door and actually knocking on Tahlen's door required different levels of courage, so at the threshold, Zelli faltered.

Tahlen might be asleep, which was a strange thing to realize. Tahlen was a person; obviously he would need to rest like anyone else. Yet Zelli held back from knocking while he imagined Tahlen sleep-soft and relaxed, maybe even grumpy when woken. He might braid his hair differently for sleep. Some did. Not Zelli, but that was because Zelli's hair slipped out of all braids no matter how tight.

Tahlen would surely take off some of his armor at night. It couldn't be comfortable to sleep in.

Of course, thinking about Tahlen without armor was not the sort of thing to do in a moment like this, since it generally led to situations that could not be entirely blamed on Zelli's fae blood and would be extremely unwelcome to Tahlen.

Although Tahlen perhaps did not think so, Zelli reflected, his voice uncertain even in his own mind.

He knocked before he could let thoughts of Tahlen without armor, or clothes, take hold of him again, then twitched when Tahlen called for him to enter.

"Is something wrong?" Tahlen asked before Zelli had pushed open the door, the question trailing at the end as though not even steady, smart Tahlen could fathom the sight of Zelli in his doorway.

This was fair, since Zelli spent several stunned moments blinking at a Tahlen with his hair loose, sitting in a wide, comfortable chair before a fire, a length of cloth across his lap and a sewing needle in one hand.

Before bed, Tahlen apparently unbound his hair and let it fall around him in a shining, smooth curtain of rich brown, marked with the pattern of his braids even now. He wore a white undershirt and the warm, brightly dyed sleep pants worn by villagers who lived in houses without the grand fireplaces and heating systems of buildings like this one. The guards' rooms had only the fireplaces, which was perhaps why Tahlen had the pants on. Woolen socks hid his feet from view. The shirt, open at the top, revealed hair at his chest.

Zelli had not known Tahlen had such hair and foresaw himself obsessing over the visible patch of brown hair for many nights to come.

“Zelli?” Tahlen was already rising to his feet, although Zelli belatedly thought that he ought to assure Tahlen he didn't need to stand; Zelli was unexpectedly visiting him in his private quarters, after all. No ceremony should be required.

Tahlen put his sewing on the bed. As the room was not large, he did not have to step away to do so. Zelli watched the action, stared harder to see the striped tabby cat curled up on Tahlen's bed, then transferred his attention back to Tahlen, who reached for his hair as if he might braid it right then but stopped himself.

The style among the old families in the capital was for braided hair or unbound hair with braids in it and sometimes jewelry as well. A style designed to be annoying for people like Zelli, with hair that was not straight or inclined to fall down his back, and which only reached his shoulder blades. It wasn't as if seeing Tahlen's hair was forbidden or an unearned intimacy. But perhaps it felt like one to Tahlen.

Zelli swallowed, then finally moved his gaze to the fire. Some movement in the hall made him inch forward, nearly silent in his pillowy indoor boots. Then, glancing to Tahlen again, he closed the door behind him so this wouldn't be overheard and cause Tahlen any problems.

“I'm sorry for bothering you.” Zelli could not seem to keep his voice level without effort. That occurred frequently around Tahlen and was even more difficult for him now. Even finding

Tahlen in his armor would have been too much, Zelli realized now, with the two of them alone and the hour late. He opened his mouth to try again to sound as reasonable and calm as Tahlen usually did. "I didn't know you had a cat."

He winced as he said it.

"I don't," Tahlen answered, in the same tone in which he said everything, so controlled that it was nearly emotionless. Apparently, he had recovered from the surprise of Zelli's visit.

Zelli jerked his head up and gestured to the tabby, which, from what he knew of cats, was probably not asleep and merely pretending to be.

"It's not my cat," Tahlen said, but went briefly silent when their eyes met. "It sleeps where it's warm," Tahlen explained further, as though he read things in Zelli's expression even when Zelli said nothing. "It belonged to Reas."

He didn't need to add more. Reas had been another sworn guard, with the family for at least two generations, but who had nonetheless chosen to leave, as some had of late. Sworn guards didn't need to give reasons to leave, only request to be freed from their oath of service, and since no one would keep someone who wished to be free, Grandmother had released anyone who asked. But all in the fortress and the village below could guess the reasons for so many departures. Some guards felt the Tialtтын family were too weak and not worth the rising risk, or they sought better pay and to be part of the action with a bolder, more aggressive house. In the case of Reas, Zelli suspected the first. With constant warring, any great families seen as vulnerable would eventually find themselves in trouble. The Tialtтын had never sought guards who enjoyed fighting, had never needed to, and those like Reas certainly had not signed up to give their lives over a war for a crown the Tialtтын did not even want.

Several times, Zelli had started to ask why a guard as highly regarded as Tahlen had not also left them, but he didn't even know why Tahlen and his sister had come here four years ago. It was not his place to ask and Tahlen was already dissatisfied

with Zelli. But thinking of why that was made Zelli's insides feel decidedly unsteady.

Zelli glanced to the cat again, frowning. "He left his cat behind? I am at least glad you're here to care for it. Loyalty should be rewarded, not thrown away. Maybe we are better off without Reas if he behaved so abominably."

"I don't..." Tahlen stopped his protest short when Zelli looked up. Tahlen gave a slight shake of his head. "It only sleeps here."

Zelli smiled even though the knowledge that a tabby slept on Tahlen's bed was as disconcerting as the unfinished sewing.

Tahlen's eyes were a deeper brown than his hair. He was several years older than Zelli but not even near thirty, when, in different times, he might have expected to be promoted or to take on more responsibilities. His face was that of a young man of twenty-five or twenty-six, but his eyes were so much older. And he was careful with his smiles. The cat might receive some of them. Zelli never had.

Zelli straightened his shoulders. It was a little pointless since much of his too-bright hair had been pulled free of his twin braids by the winds along the battlement and Zelli's clothing had no embellishments, but he tried to have dignity.

"I didn't come here to talk about your cat," Zelli announced calmly, then ruined the effect somewhat by pushing out his bottom lip as he imagined the cat lying against Tahlen's side through the night. "What's its name?"

Tahlen ignored the question and took a small step forward. "Why have you come here, Zelli? What did you have to say that couldn't be said where others can hear?"

Zelli had to tilt his head back, but he had to do that with everyone and couldn't really resent it now. He didn't know what to make of Tahlen's tone, or lack of one. Tahlen's questions felt weighted, though with what, Zelli didn't know.

Tahlen was like the rock in the foothills and mountains around them. Zelli couldn't be that steady if he tried. Even without reaching for one of the weapons leaning against the wall by

the door, Tahlen was ready to leap into action if Zelli gave the word. Zelli would have looked afraid or worried in a moment like that. Tahlen was only so very still, his eyes so very dark.

“Earlier,” Zelli blurted, his thoughts jumbled as they spilled out, “with Grandmother.”

Tahlen turned his head, studying the wall before turning back to Zelli. He gave the impression of stepping away without moving a single one of his many muscles. “Earlier,” he echoed, as nearly emotionless as ever. “You’re here because of what was said today. You’re in your nightclothes,” he observed after that, as though the two things were related.

Zelli glanced down over his long, heavy robe and the boots he wore for his duties inside the hold’s stone walls. The blue wool of the robe was of a fine weave, but thick enough to more than conceal that Zelli wore only a knee-length shirt underneath.

“I couldn’t sleep,” he explained himself, twitching the robe to try to see how Tahlen had guessed what was beneath it.

“Because of earlier, with your grandmother,” Tahlen prompted, meeting Zelli’s eyes again when Zelli raised his head.

Zelli let the folds of the robe fall back down. “Did you think I was foolish? Was I wrong?”

He could not claim Tahlen had no emotions because Tahlen’s eyebrows flicked up for a second’s surprise. “You’re asking me?”

“Who else would I ask?” Genuinely perplexed, Zelli continued to stare at Tahlen despite the crick in his neck. There was no one else remotely suitable, aside from Grandmother herself, which Tahlen was too clever not to realize. “You have no doubt seen things many others have not, in your mysterious travels before you came here. You speak, when you do speak, with knowledge and experience. Grandmother respects your opinion and insight even when she does not share it with me. And I have never seen you act with anything less than sense.”

It might have been nice to see that, Zelli sometimes thought. At least once.

For not even the space of a heartbeat, he almost caught an expression crossing Tahlen's face. Then it was gone.

"You... were not wrong," Tahlen admitted slowly, Zelli tried not to think *reluctantly*. "There are people to be seen to and reassured, as well as places to visit before plans can be made for next year. You were also right in that you might lose more guards if this continues. They are not convinced any sacrifice will be worth it for a family that cannot even take care of its basic obligations, even though most of those remaining like it here and like your family. *This* part of your family," he added, and that *was* with reluctance.

Zelli waved off that piece of forced honesty. The Tialttyrins outside the valley who would not return to do their duty were not worth any politeness, his parent included.

He spoke over the fast beat of his heart, pleased despite the situation to know Tahlen agreed with him. "But no one will step up!" he exclaimed. "If all of that is true, and Grandmother cannot go, then someone must. If there is no one else, then don't you think..."

"Zelli."

"...That I should?" Zelli carried on, moving closer to Tahlen in his agitation. "Not the whole distance! Not even half the distance. Merely enough to get the word out that we are still here! That we will still listen! We have to trust Cousin Adifer is doing what he says he is across the valley, although he always has and he has yet to ask for help or send out any alarms. But a small show of our presence, even just a few days' travel into the valley, to remind people that we stand with them and to hopefully convince them we have more strength than we do. At least... at least until an alliance can be secured to ensure that." There, Zelli darted his gaze away, focusing again on the comfortable, happy cat. "And we must let them know that problems can still be brought to us. Of course, they can't leave the fields for long, which is part of the problem. They won't even want to. I could... I could go as far

as a few waystations along the main roads. Make sure they haven't started to fall down. And there is one village there where I know they have been waiting for messengers and probably judgments as well."

*"Zelli."*

"It should have been done last year. It can't be put off any longer. And... and Grandmother isn't well. What if...?" Zelli pulled in a deep breath. "What if the new Tialttyrin acts too slowly, or foolishly? Then all will be lost, Tahlen!"

"Mizel," Tahlen said in a low voice, drawing Zelli's gaze back to him. "It's good that you think of possibilities. But you need to calm yourself, for your own good."

"We don't even know which cousin would take her place," Zelli complained but did his best to be calm. "I should have suggested you go in her stead." Zelli was less bitter about it than he would have expected himself to be, maybe because it made Tahlen go very still again. How strange that Tahlen should react to surprise as though it might hold a threat. "That would have pleased her, and we both know you would do the job well. I know I would not do it so well. I'm fully aware that I'm only qualified to go because I'm the youngest Tialttyrin here. You don't need to say it."

"Your grandmother does not think you unfit for the task," Tahlen objected.

Zelli waved that off too. "Someone has to see to things. We have not even had outguards pass by here in ever so long. I'm not even sure whoever has the palace now has maintained the Outguard."

"I doubt any of those trying to claim the throne lived long enough to turn their thoughts to practical matters of governance."

It was such a Tahlen thing to say. The other guards did not speak like him.

Not calmer, but trying to be, Zelli ducked his head, peering up once or twice to Tahlen's eyes, to the hair on his chest, to his eyes again. "And, after all, I will have to travel eventually if an

alliance is arranged, and there really won't be anyone here to manage it then, unless Grandmother's health improves. What difference is there between traveling then and now, except that on my way to meet my intended I will have an escort to better demonstrate the dignity of the Tialttyrin?"

Tahlen's profile was unyielding. Nevertheless, Zelli kept trying. "Summer is already fading, Tahlen. Soon it will be time for the harvest. Things have to be seen to. It would be only a matter of days. I would not even offer judgments. I would relate the cases to Grandmother and ensure responses were delivered."

Tahlen finally turned back to him, eyes deep brown and unreadable. "Are you asking me for permission?"

Zelli pursed his lips to hold in his denial. "I'm asking if you approve."

"You don't need my approval." Tahlen said it as though Zelli should have known that, as though Zelli did not know that.

"And you don't have the approval of The Tialttyrin."

Something shifted behind Tahlen's eyes. Zelli only caught it because they were so close. "But you plan to go anyway."

He did not ask.

Zelli did not look away though he wanted to. "Will you watch over her while I am gone? And Nya too?"

A child of an ancient house and the merciful, powerful fae should not beg.

Tahlen lowered his head to study Zelli more intently, his hair falling to where Zelli could easily have touched it. "You could order me to let you go."

Zelli tore his gaze away from the pretty fall of hair. "Your oath is to Grandmother first."

Tahlen drew his dark eyebrows together. "You can't mean to go alone."

Zelli had not thought out all the details, only that he would have to go soon, possibly even by morning. But it was true, he



had never even been to a waystation by himself. He might need some guidance.

“You *will not* go alone,” Tahlen continued, once again knowing what Zelli might have said before he could say it, “because it could be dangerous. That was the original objection, Zelli. You can’t be in danger.” Tahlen said this as though he could make it so with just words, shaping each one so clearly that Zelli was slow to realize he was staring at Tahlen’s lips. “Then I will go with you.”

Startled, Zelli jumped, then stood gaping at Tahlen for far too long. “But you don’t approve,” he managed at last in a whisper, “and Grandmother needs you.”

“She needs *you*,” Tahlen countered. “And no one else would agree to this, no matter how charming you’ll try to be. They won’t defy The Tialttyrin.”

Zelli nearly sputtered. “But you will?”

“I wouldn’t consider it defiance. Not with...” Tahlen shut his mouth with the rest of his sentence unfinished. He could be resolute even half-dressed and unbound. “She knows your determination. She’ll probably guess your intentions by midmorning tomorrow, and if she can’t stop you, it will reassure her to know I’m with you.”

Which was true. She likely wouldn’t even punish Tahlen for it. Zelli frowned at him anyway. “But... you wouldn’t mind? I had no intention of...”

“I know.”

“...Dragging you into trouble,” Zelli finished, lifting his chin to give Tahlen a displeased glare for the interruption. Tahlen stared back at him as if surprised once more.

He would be less surprised if he stopped assuming he knew all of Zelli’s thoughts, Zelli decided, before crossing his arms and glancing away. “Your sister will not be happy with me.”

It made Tahlen sigh. “You worry about everything but what you should. You won’t have much time until your grandmother will anticipate your plans.”

“Yes, I am incapable of being discreet when I feel something strongly,” Zelli agreed testily, having heard those words from his grandmother already. “I was... I had no definite plans, you understand, but I was thinking of leaving early this morning, before dawn, while the fog remains.”

“Earlier than that if you want enough of a lead that she won’t send the other guards after us to haul you back and bury me in some dungeon.”

“I’d never let her.” Zelli looked up sharply, then eased his shoulders down. “She wouldn’t. She respects you too much. Me, however...” He abandoned that thought as he followed Tahlen’s meaning and his mind began to plan around it. “We could leave now, unless you want a few hours of rest.” Zelli would not rest, not with his thoughts leaping forward. “I have only to pack. You really will?” He regarded Tahlen in absolute confusion. “I’ll do my best to ensure no trouble for you.”

Tahlen gave him not even a hint of an expression for that. “Pack light, with clothes for the chill of night in the valley where the fog settles. And... do you have any armor? I’ve never seen you in any.”

“What for?” No one would expect Zelli to fight. No one thought him capable and he wasn’t sure they weren’t right. “There is some in the treasury that belonged to family members in the past. I could...”

“Ancient armor will not help you if it’s not in good condition.” Tahlen’s voice at least had grown stern. “Wear layers then, many of them.”

“But it’s not truly cold enough yet for—oh. For protection. An armor of sorts.”

“I’ll look for mail in your size. If you don’t change your mind,” Tahlen paused there, then went on as if aware that Zelli’s mind would not change, “then I’ll meet you by the kitchens whenever you’re ready.”

“Really?” Zelli could not help the smile on his face as relief and a funny, elated feeling sank into his bones. He swept forward recklessly, nearly taking Tahlen’s hands before he

recalled himself. Tahlen stared down at him, wide-eyed, mouth open. Zelli beamed at him. “I will make you proud. I swear I will. And I will allow no harm to come to you if I can possibly prevent it.”

Tahlen shook his head. “*I* am supposed to swear to *you*, Zelli.”

Zelli nodded excitedly. “Yes, but I would never demand your body for mine, Tahlen. You’re far too precious for that.” He stepped back, bumping into the door when he had trouble breaking Tahlen’s stunned gaze, then turning to slip outside and close the door quietly behind him.

## Two

Perhaps Zelli hadn't fully thought about traveling alone because he'd known it might make him hesitate. He thought about it now, letting it sit alongside the knowledge that he would be attempting this with Tahlen. Even though Zelli would undoubtedly embarrass himself more than once, he moved faster at the idea of Tahlen's company.

Tahlen had gone with Grandmother on one of these trips; he would know what to do. And he believed it was right, as Zelli did. After all, if Tahlen had wanted to stop Zelli, it wouldn't have taken much to hold him or bring him to Grandmother and tell her all. Tahlen was over twice Zelli's size... though plenty of other adults were. Tahlen just made Zelli feel it more than most.

Zelli took the back staircases to his room, mentally assembling which belongings he would need and could fit into the pack he had traded with someone in the village to get a few days ago. The corridors were empty at this time of night, the guards stationed outside, far from the personal apartments of any Tialttyrins and their guests within. The corridors were also considerably warmer than those in the guards' living quarters, something Zelli absently frowned about as he slipped into the large family bathing room. His private bedchamber had a room for bathing and personal grooming, but the communal baths were centuries-old and used the steam within the mountains to keep the room and the water warm at all times, and Zelli was in a hurry.

He didn't linger in the water, scrubbing up quickly to ensure he would hopefully still be presentable when he faced any villagers. He despaired of his hair, as he always did, for it had a life of its own. He dried it hastily and combed it with oil so it would stay malleable for a brief time, and then hurriedly divided it into two braids to rest down his back.

Pinned or braided into place, in dim lighting, Zelli's hair might have been mistaken for dark red or even brown. But the moment it slipped free of any bindings and the light found it, it was the colors of a particularly fiery sunset. Orange, red, and yellow all together, with shades of purple and blue just starting to appear, curls and straight locks, fine and thick, like silk until it wasn't. Fae hair. More obviously fae than anyone else's hair in his family. Or maybe simply what happened when fae traits and human traits mingled to the degree that they did in Zelli.

Back in his room, he chose a hooded cloak to help him hide his wild mane, and swept what jewelry he owned into the pack, fastening the rowan tree pendant that he wore every day around his neck. He looked as respectable and dignified as he possibly could; the freckles that ran down his throat to his shoulders could be hidden, but not the ones across his nose. There was nothing to be done for that, or for the sharpness to some of his teeth, noticeable if he smiled widely or laughed, or for his eyes, which did not seem to stay one color.

It was when he was choosing layers to wear as Tahlen had suggested that Zelli paused to consider the possible problems of traveling with someone else—with Tahlen specifically—while being Zelli. That was to say, while being a Tialttyrin with more than a touch of the other world about him.

It had been months since any of Zelli's other fae complications had popped up to bother him so he hadn't factored them into his plans, except to vaguely consider the best excuses to make if anyone happened to witness anything. Grandmother knew and had stories ready. But out there in the valley, Zelli could hardly keep to his room for days at a time.

Perhaps, if something did happen, it might be better for Tahlen to be there. Zelli would face explanations that would make him cringe, but Tahlen could see that Zelli was undisturbed or return him to the fortress if need be.

Zelli shivered a little, not sure if he liked or disliked the idea of Tahlen seeing him altered, much less Tahlen touching him when he was like that, as Tahlen would have to in order to get Zelli back here. Zelli would humiliate himself, no question,

and Tahlen likely would not react at all. That was good and also somehow terrible.

But it was not the lingering warmth from his bath that stung Zelli's skin as he thought about it.

He did his best to banish the imaginary sensation of Tahlen's hands on him and the crush of Tahlen's disinterest, or disgust to see Zelli out of control. Zelli would worry about that only if his conditions showed signs of appearing, although it would be considerate to warn Tahlen of the possibilities before they left.

But that would raise two problems. One, Tahlen might decide not to let Zelli go, even though the risk was minimal and hardly life-threatening, and anyway, neither complication had happened in months. And two, it would be tricky to explain to Tahlen because it was *Tahlen*. Zelli would stare up at him and feel this... strong pain in the center of him... this inconvenient, aching, sorrowful spot in the middle of his chest that only made things worse, and if that happened, he would have no chance of convincing Tahlen of anything.

Really, it was some sort of fluke that Zelli had managed to get Tahlen to agree to even this.

He would tell Tahlen if the situation required it, he decided, because it wasn't as if it was a total surprise... usually. As satisfied as he could be, Zelli finished dressing and stuffed his pack to the brim, including a handful of coins for those events in which he would be expected to hand over money.

He didn't have much, personally, and could hardly approach the treasury for it now. But hopefully this would do for one attempted session of judgments and a few visits at waystations.

He paused before grabbing his quiver and arrows, only ever used in the practice yard, but since he didn't have any other sort of skill with weaponry, he felt as if he should have something to make Tahlen less annoyed with him.

Then he pulled his hood up and left the room to head for the kitchens.

Zelli took paths that would keep him away from any guards and any questions they might have. He was so focused on that, in fact, that it didn't occur to him why Tahlen would have suggested the kitchens for a meeting place until he got there and found some of the fires going and Tahlen's sister working in front of them.

It was too late, or early, even for the bakers to be at work, which meant Tahlen had woken her and likely told her all. Love for Tahlen had probably kept her from going to Zelli's grandmother with the knowledge, but the glance she shot Zelli when he stopped in front of one of the fires was all cold fury.

Esrin looked like she'd dressed quickly and in the dark, but Zelli did not comment on her sleep pants, though they were a pretty green. Her hair was a lighter brown than her brother's, her skin much paler since she rarely seemed to leave the kitchens or even the fortress. Zelli didn't know her age but suspected she was older than Tahlen from how she fussed over him, which was something he had seen some siblings do.

She wore a sheathed knife at her belt that was not used for cooking. Zelli had witnessed her using it in the sparring ring once or twice. He thought she'd wanted him to see her do it, although he couldn't have said why she'd care enough to.

Maybe it was that Zelli was a beat-of-four and she didn't like members of the old noble families. Esrin had never had much warmth for Zelli no matter how nice he tried to be, but in the past few months, her glares had grown so fierce that Zelli had started to avoid the kitchens altogether.

She said not a word to him now. After her frosty glare, she had returned to her task, which seemed to be preparing and packing up rolls and hand pies. Zelli watched her furtively, debating speaking to thank her or leaving her to her furious silence, but when she was done, she stalked over him and shoved several bundles into his hands, forcing him to drop his bow and quiver.

Esrin scoffed out loud to see them or for the noisy clatter they made on the floor when her every movement was quiet. Her

gaze stayed on the packages, which she rearranged when they started to slip.

“You will make sure he eats, both on your travels and when you stop. He must rest too, do you understand?” She didn’t wait for Zelli to nod, although he did, forcefully. “Those pies are his favorites. They’re for him, not you, Mizel of the Tialttyrin. For you, there’s bread and cheese, as well as a few apples.”

“I thought Tahlen liked apples,” Zelli remarked foolishly, and blinked when Esrin raised her head—then lowered it—to meet his eyes.

She opened her mouth, but closed it and looked behind Zelli to someone coming in. It must have been Tahlen, but oddly, Esrin’s expression didn’t change. She still looked like she wanted an excuse to use her knife.

Zelli twisted around to make sure it *was* Tahlen, and released a small puff of air to find Tahlen in traveling clothes and armor, his hair once more in a braid. He had not chosen heavy armor or any of the more ornate guard equipment available to them, although his light, summer cloak would have the Tialttyrin rowan tree and grape vine embroidered in the center of the back.

His quilted doublet beneath his mail was dark and unassuming, and any shirts beneath that were not visible. He had arm guards, leg guards as well, which Zelli was willing to bet added warmth... but thought Tahlen should have chosen the winter cloak with the fur at the hood, just in case the weather turned.

He had not come armed into the kitchen, except for the practical knife tucked into his belt.

Zelli quickly looked up from Tahlen’s waist and realized his arms were still full of food. He cleared his throat and turned to try to figure out how to get some of it in his pack.

“Not surprised to see me?” he asked Tahlen.

Esrin made a sound in her throat.



“No,” Tahlen answered over the sound of his sister’s annoyance. “You’re not one to go back on your word. Is that your bow?” Tahlen’s voice went stern again. “Leave it.”

Zelli jerked his head up. “Why? I can hit the target every time.” Esrin picked the bow and quiver off the floor and carried them away as if that was that. Zelli stared at her, then at Tahlen again. “I don’t want to be useless.”

“A target of straw is not a person,” Esrin said from the other side of the kitchens.

Tahlen kept his eyes on Zelli. “You would have to be at a distance to be of use with your bow, and have a cool head when you chose to kill someone. I don’t wish that for you.”

Zelli bit his lip instead of letting out his initial responses. He weighed pressing the issue and Tahlen’s possible replies. But it was mostly Tahlen’s phrasing that kept him from protesting. It was probably what had kept Esrin from objecting as well. Wishes were not to be taken lightly. And... and Zelli had not considered killing anyone, though he should have.

He settled on, “Am I supposed to do nothing if you are endangered?” only to glance nervously to Esrin, but she was back to packing up food as though intending to feed them for days.

“You’ve taken no oath to protect me.” Tahlen held up a hand as if to prevent Zelli immediately offering such an oath. Zelli closed his mouth. “If we’re smart, and careful, and lucky, it shouldn’t come to that. As you said, there are no reports of anything and we will only be gone a few days. We are also not attracting attention with a large retinue. And, well, you are of the fae.”

If Zelli revealed himself as being even partly of the fae, anyone wise would not bother him. Unfortunately, people were not always wise. Zelli proved that with his next words.

“If my appearance is so disturbing, then surely you don’t need to come with me,” he heard himself say, sour as old wine. He didn’t even mean it. He wanted Tahlen with him. But he was tired of being odd and avoided.

Tahlen was stiff. "I am aware you didn't plan on my presence. But once The Tialttyrin discovers your absence, it will soothe her to know I'm with you."

"For Grandmother," Zelli muttered, mostly to himself, then jumped when Esrin dumped several more bundles of food into his arms.

"I will protect you," Tahlen said as if in answer to Zelli's whining. Zelli looked up and regretted it with how warm he grew. He always knew what he was doing until Tahlen was near.

Frazzled, confused, faintly embarrassed and uncertain as to why, he grumbled. "I can't fit all this food in my pack."

"I've put another on Lemon Blossom." That Tahlen had already been to the stables and prepared Zelli's favorite horse made Zelli grumble again, not unhappily. "I found no mail in your size within the guards' spare equipment. When we get back, I'll ask for some to be made."

"I'll make a note in the household ledger," Zelli answered with surprise, "if you think I should have it."

"Lolo," Esrin called to her brother from the opposite side of the kitchen. Tahlen left Zelli to go to her. Zelli truly had no more room for all the food, but attempted to find some rather than appear to be listening to the brother and sister across the room. He didn't know why Esrin sometimes called Tahlen by that nickname and could never ask. But if he happened to overhear....

"You don't have to do this," Esrin whispered, low and upset, as if she had already said it but had to try again. Tahlen must sometimes be like stone even with her. "Let him make his own choices or bring someone else."

"Who?" Tahlen asked softly. He didn't say that there was no one else willing to do it or that no one else was nearly as capable as he was, but Esrin must have understood all the same, because she crossed her arms. "I have to," Tahlen added when she didn't speak, his voice even softer. "Even if I didn't, I am sworn to protect them with my body and my life."

“*They* will be up in these hills, behind mighty walls,” Esrin argued. “Where they do little good, but at least don’t get in the way.”

Tahlen shook his head. “And he will be out there alone, doing what they should be doing.”

If Esrin didn’t dislike Zelli so much, Zelli would have shared a smile with her for her aggrieved sigh. Tahlen had a powerful effect on certainty with everyone.

Esrin muttered something else which Zelli did not hear, then lightly shoved her brother out through another door. She stared after him, though, hands clasped tight behind her.

Zelli took his chance. “Do you have any tarts or sweet cakes?”

He stopped abruptly in his approach when Esrin rounded on him. “I just gave you enough to feed a...”

“No, no.” Zelli did his best to gesture placatingly. “I meant, something special. I’m going to leave an offering by the gates to ask the fae to assure his safety.” He didn’t know why that would make Esrin freeze, but he was glad she did. Zelli lowered his voice though Tahlen was gone. “There is no convincing him not to come, but I didn’t mean to drag him into it, and... I don’t want him harmed. It’s a big favor to ask of them, so the offering must be something good. I have nothing they could want, but they do like sweets.”

Esrin stared at him without blinking, then pulled the knife at her belt so quickly Zelli jumped. In one motion, she tugged a lock of hair loose from her braid and sliced it off. She held the lock of pale brown hair out and Zelli shifted the food bundles once again to get one hand free. She set the lock in his palm and gave him a look that for once was not furious. “Don’t tell him.”

Zelli nodded. “I won’t.”

Esrin cleared her throat before turning away. “Then get going. The sooner gone, the sooner back. And be careful.”

She said that for Tahlen’s sake, but Zelli nodded again though she couldn’t see him, then left to make his way to the stables.

Lemon Blossom was happy to see Zelli, happier still to sniff at the food that Tahlen took from Zelli the moment Zelli was close enough. Starfall, Tahlen's horse, had also been readied, with a short staff strapped to the saddle alongside the bags that must have held Tahlen's things and where he stashed the extra bundles of food.

Tahlen had armed himself in the meantime as well. Zelli did not comment on the sword across his back or his own lack of one. He went to get the mounting block for himself only to stop when Tahlen knelt down to offer his help before Zelli could take more than a step.

Tahlen had taken no oath to do that. But the stables at night were no place to argue about it, especially since they were trying not to attract attention. Once seated on Lemon Blossom, Zelli nodded his thanks and held his tongue while Tahlen checked things one final time, then mounted Starfall.

Dark Starfall nearly blended into the night. Lemon Blossom, glossy and bright, would not. But Zelli let Tahlen take the lead as they went out of the stables and began the ride out of the hold, first through the large gate at the entrance and past the heavy stone walls draped with falls of nasturtium, a plant the fae favored, then down the winding paths through the homes and buildings of the village. The torches that lined the road to the land below the fortress and some of the lanes in the village were still burning, and would continue to for a few hours yet.

The air grew colder, although it did not carry the chill of true autumn. Most in the village were sleeping. Only one or two buildings showed signs of lights within. The fires in the guard towers on either side of the smaller gate that closed off the village from the fields around them were visible some distance away, even through the fog.

Tahlen turned once, glancing to Zelli, but when Zelli only stared back, he rode on. He did not even stop when those in one of the towers called to him, although he did answer when they asked what he was doing at that hour.

“We’ve a long way to travel,” Tahlen told them, unreadable as ever. Ivey and Forna’s commiserating jokes ended abruptly when they noticed Zelli behind Tahlen.

“Zelli.” Their greeting to him was more cautious. Zelli gave them both a friendly, if anxious, nod, and rode on as if he expected the gate to open for him. Uncle Rou often said the only people to demand explanations from a beat-of-four were other beat-of-fours.

Whether or not Uncle Rou was right, the gears for the gate mechanisms turned and the doors opened enough for Tahlen and then Zelli to ride through. Tahlen called out something else to Forna that made him laugh, but Zelli’s attention was fixed on the rowan trees in front of each guard tower.

In daylight, the ribbons and trinkets hanging from their branches would glitter and flutter. With little wind and no light, the trees seemed unnaturally still. Zelli left the road to reach one of them, aware of the doors of the gate shutting behind them and Tahlen and probably the other guards in both towers watching him approach the tree.

Some places had statues, or niches in their walls for people to place offerings to the fae. The fae in the other world could be anywhere in this one, though humans did not often see them. But places for offerings were marked and it was felt that the fae were present there.

It must be true, for offerings had a habit of vanishing in the blink of an eye. Someone could leave a bit of fruit or seed cake out for the fae and stare at it for hours, but the moment they glanced away, the offering would disappear.

Zelli pulled Esrin’s lock of hair from his sleeve and secreted it in the crook of two branches, hopefully where Tahlen could not see.

He kept his voice down. “We ask that you keep him safe, if you can. Thank you.”

It was polite to thank them, whether or not they answered. Getting a response might depend on the mood of whoever listened, or the offering itself. Zelli’s family had always

insisted that it was the sentiment attached to the offering that was of interest to the fae. Allegedly, in ancient times, a thimble full of honey had won an Earl a crown, but Zelli suspected there was more to the story than the honey. If it was just a matter of sweets, then a dollop of cream would grant anyone the riches of the wealthiest old family and it clearly did not.

But that might also have been a question of intent, which perhaps the fae could sense. If the fae responded, it would be how *they* felt the wish should be answered, which was not always how the people asking had expected or hoped for.

Zelli did not question how his family knew this any more than he questioned how fae traits carried through generations without affecting everyone in the same ways.

He looked away and then back to make sure the lock of hair was gone.

“Thank you,” he said again not to be heard by anyone else in this world, and turned Lemon Blossom back toward Tahlen, who had kept his gaze turned politely away.

Together, they rode out into the fog.

## Three

Zelli's nerves settled after several hours of riding through the dark, enough for him to yawn more than once, although he wouldn't allow himself to drift off. If Tahlen wouldn't, then he wouldn't. Of course, at times, he thought Tahlen *was* asleep, since Tahlen said not a word except to occasionally whisper to Starfall.

They rode slower than they might have because of the thickness of the fog. Zelli watched Tahlen's unbending figure for a while when peering through the clouds grew dull, then tried to turn his mind to other things. The other things promptly made him anxious again, but he did need to consider what he was going to tell people and also how he would explain himself to Grandmother when he returned. He was hoping his trip would go well enough that Grandmother would not be too angry.

The fog lingered, densest along the river, although they veered away before they could reach the quay where shipments to the capital and other territories came and went. There were places along the river in the holdings of other families that had been destroyed or fought over as the warring went on. That was another problem to eventually contend with; how the winemakers of the valley should export their wines and other goods if the rivers and the countryside were no longer safe. It did no good to grow and make wine if they could not sell it, and the mountains on either side of the valley kept the valley fairly protected but also made transporting large shipments tricky.

Tahlen would no doubt say that Zelli was thinking of things he should not yet, and could not help, in any event.

If the family were stronger, Zelli would not need to worry so much. But he could not make them stronger by force of will. The family would need others to respect them, and if necessary, fear them. They would need guards, and everyone

united in obeying The Tialttyrin. And, in addition to the revenue to benefit the valley that renewed wine sales would bring, they needed the rest of the country to remember their reputation.

Reputation meant a lot. The Arlylian had kept themselves out of the conflict because they were a family famously known to not take sides or to act rashly. They might be drawn in, but the day the Arlylian were finally pulled into the chaos would be calamitous.

Zelli did wonder about the consequence of angering such a family, even if he did not voice his musings aloud. The Arlylian had an iris owl on their crest—dignified, yes, but still a bird that would kill other birds, pretty feathers and venomous talons.

Zelli worried about a lot. He couldn't help it. Some in his family were content to live only in the day-to-day, but Zelli managed the household when Nya couldn't, and the accounts too, and that meant looking to the future. His grandmother said that was what all wise people ought to do. But Zelli thought it didn't mean much if the future was not something he was allowed to change. It meant all he *could* do was worry.

Until this, anyway. If he didn't fuck it up.

That phrase, one overheard by the sparring ring, would have made his grandmother lift an eyebrow.

Zelli thought of it, and how much Tahlen had already troubled himself for him, and kept himself from prodding Tahlen to speak.

They rode on.

They reached a crossroads with a marker and a small waystation just after dawn, when some but not all of the fog had lifted. The waystations were built along the roads through the valley about half a day's ride or a day's walk apart, if there was no village or settlement to offer shelter instead. The stations extended into the mountains on the far side of the



valley, although once beyond the first peak, the stations were farther apart and maintained by the Rossick. Zelli didn't know if other families had such stations, and didn't know the original purpose of them other than to offer some comfort to travelers. Possibly they were meant for the messengers who had frequently gone up and down the valley in busier times.

The waystations were not much more than three walls and a roof, with a thatched extension on one side for animals. Each held a firepit, although, according to reports Zelli had on his desk, the supply of wood in them was often not properly maintained. They were all supposed to have a privy somewhere nearby, redug each year. Only one had a well, but most people traveled with their own water.

Zelli belatedly realized he had not brought any, then sighed. There was a small cask with the bags Starfall carried because of course Tahlen *had* thought of it. He'd probably learned to during his journeying before he'd found the Tialttyrin holding.

Found a home, Zelli hoped, and planned to stay. Though if the others all left, why should Tahlen not go with them?

"Are you hungry?" Tahlen asked, slowing and not showing much concern when Starfall took the chance to nibble on a bush along the roadside.

Zelli was so startled by Tahlen speaking to him that Lemon Blossom came to a stop, both of them staring expectantly at Tahlen before Zelli recalled himself.

Evidently, that was answer enough for Tahlen, who reached into one of the bags on Starfall and took out a wrapped bundle.

He paused when Zelli politely refused one of the pies but accepted an apple and a wedge of cheese.

Zelli thanked Tahlen as he crunched his apple. He thought of Esrin. "You should have something. The pies look good."

For a moment, he thought Tahlen was going to ask why Zelli hadn't wanted one, but Tahlen only studied him before turning away.

Zelli kept his head down but watched Tahlen eat three pies—they truly were his favorite—and did his best to look away

whenever Tahlen glanced at him.

With nothing else to occupy him, Zelli mulled over Tahlen's silence while trying to ride slightly behind Tahlen so that Tahlen would not see the way Zelli studied him. Tahlen was not one for a lot of words, it was true, but Zelli could not tell if he was being cruelly ignored or if Tahlen simply had no interest in talking with him.

There had been a time where they had exchanged words at least once a day. Although, when Zelli had been younger, those had been stumbled, blushing greetings from Zelli and brief acknowledgements from their handsome new guard before Tahlen had carried on with whatever duty Grandmother had given him.

That had changed over time to Tahlen being the one to accompany Zelli down to the village more often than not. Zelli had taken over more and more of the work of the Head of House as he'd gotten older, and he suspected his grandmother had thought he'd appreciate a companion closer to his age... or she'd hoped some of Tahlen's sense and composure would rub off on him.

Then Grandmother had suggested the possible alliance now that Zelli was of age, and since Zelli would never get suitors where he was, he had agreed; he would get to travel and meet others, if nothing else. And shortly afterward, Tahlen had... Tahlen had expressed a desire to court him.

Three months ago. Nearly four now.

Zelli hadn't understood it then and still did not. That Grandmother's favorite guard, who at times seemed to know everything, who was trusted and listened to, who did not smile at Zelli or joke with him or even talk with him as he probably talked to that cat, would ask for courtship without the least flicker of interest on his face.

Zelli had finally broken the silence that followed with a confused, if hopeful, "Are you asking to bed me?"

Because that was an idea from his fantasies, but he would have understood such a request. Perhaps Tahlen had lovers within the fortress or down in the village but had grown bored. He would likely expect Zelli to say yes, because Tahlen must know he was handsome and that Zelli especially found him so.

But Tahlen had drawn his eyebrows together in something too quick to be a frown and repeated himself, “To court you, Zelli.”

Zelli had stared up at him, grateful they were alone in his room at the time, because he was sure any witnesses would have laughed. He would have suspected Tahlen of playing a trick on him if it hadn’t been Tahlen, who wouldn’t anyway and definitely wouldn’t with Zelli.

“But you don’t even like me.” Zelli hadn’t meant to say it, and hearing it had made him stumble on. “Which I understand, Tahlen, truly. I’m not really anything. I don’t know things like you do. Grandmother is trying to secure an alliance, but I think my family was hoping I’d turn out better to make it more advantageous to everyone.” He’d touched his hair, loose and wild again because he’d been correcting accounting errors by himself in his room when Tahlen had knocked on his door. “Being from an old family is my only draw, and the fae blood seems to cancel that out for most. Did you... oh.” Zelli remembered turning his face away. “Is it to make you like a beat-of-four?”

That made much more sense.

He had turned back in time to see the tic in Tahlen’s jaw. Zelli had only realized later that it was anger. Tahlen had been *angry*. “You believe I’d court someone to rise in rank?”

“It’s what many beat-of-fours do,” Zelli had answered honestly. “They don’t put it in exactly those terms when they write to Grandmother about it, but it’s understood. It *is* all I have to offer. They’ve made it more than clear.” Zelli was grown. His lower lip had not wobbled. “If I *were* to have someone for myself outside of that, I would want it to be someone who actually wanted me. Which is foolish, I know. Even if I were allowed to...”

“Allowed?” Tahlen had shocked Zelli by cutting him off.

“When does anything stop you from doing what you want?”

“What I *want*?” Zelli had echoed, suddenly hot all over. He’d been angry too, and painfully embarrassed over what he’d assumed Tahlen had thought of him. But he hadn’t yelled or shouted or even clenched his jaw like Tahlen. He’d been quiet. “Did you expect I’d be grateful for the attention because I stare at you and I’m alone here?”

Tahlen had suddenly been close in front of him, his hands at his sides, his gaze like the fortress they stood in. “You’re not alone. I made this offer because...” Tahlen hadn’t seemed to know what he’d wanted to say and finally finished, “because I admire you,” in a voice without tenderness.

And then, reading Zelli’s thoughts as he always did, Tahlen had bowed his head and murmured, “I’m sorry to have bothered you,” before leaving the room.

Tahlen had not been a besotted would-be lover, Zelli had decided after a sleepless night trying to imagine Tahlen as one. Zelli had seen people in the depths of infatuation before, in the village, among the servants. He had even listened to a visiting cousin describe her affairs with palace guards. Besotted would-be lovers were much *louder* about any feelings they had, and they certainly did not reluctantly admit to merely admiring someone.

A polite lie anyway, since Tahlen almost certainly did not admire Zelli.

Nothing had changed between them, either, except that Tahlen did not make even light conversation with Zelli these days.

Grandmother had observed the two of them for some time. Zelli had felt her curiosity and disapproval and hadn’t been surprised when she’d finally called him into her room to ask him what he’d done to her favorite guard.

Zelli would have glared at her, but the story had come tumbling out instead. She had listened as his grandmother but also as The Tialtтын, and discussed it the same way.

“Do you regret the refusal?”

Zelli had not actually refused, he reflected now as he hadn't then. Tahlen had decided he knew what Zelli was going to say—*again*. But whatever Zelli might have given him in answer, Tahlen had changed his mind quickly, so it didn't matter.

Grandmother, who also liked to read things into Zelli's moments of silence, seemed to think Zelli must have refused over worry about any possible alliances.

"We're hoping for an alliance, yes, but that doesn't mean you can't have a lover or even a hand-fasting of your own, if you wish it." Grandmother had tapped Zelli's cheek. "These things are about appearances, Zelli, and perhaps friendships. Anything else, inside or out of it, is up to you. Your intended could hardly be hurt when they will likely be doing much the same. A few of those I've written to are already married, which you know well." Her teasing manner changed into something shrewder when Zelli met her gaze. "Although... I am not sure you'd be capable of the discretion required to at least pretend to care for another if you had Tahlen for yours."

"Hand-fasting?" Zelli had repeated with surprise. For state purposes, for a matter of Record, some beat-of-fours had large ceremonial weddings. But everyone else who wished to pledge themselves to someone else had a simple hand-fasting, and not everyone even bothered with that. Zelli hadn't considered that someone would want that with him. Tahlen surely could not have meant courtship with the hope for an eventual marriage, even if thinking of it in the months since left Zelli with that hollow ache in his chest. Tahlen thought Zelli considered the future too much, but *that* had never crossed Zelli's mind.

"Discretion?" he'd finally asked his grandmother.

She'd made a gently despairing *tsk* sound. "If there was a spouse waiting for you and yet you had declared your feelings to Tahlen, you would have to treat Tahlen differently in public. At least until you've discussed it with the other parties involved."

"*Differently?*" Zelli had stared without blinking, slow to follow her point. "My *feelings?*"

His heart *still* beat too fast to think of those words.

Grandmother had had long purple-black hair in her youth, but she wore her gray hair short by palace standards, the small braids tucked around her ears for sleep. Her eyes were light brown and stayed that color. But her teeth were as sharp as Zelli's when she smiled. "Well, I'm not sure about a marriage between you, but there are worse people for you to take as a lover, I am sure. I mean, worse as in their character. Not as in their skills in that area. I have no knowledge of Tahlen Vallithi there, so you may cease your scowling, Mizel."

"He's closer to my age than yours!" Zelli had heard himself objecting waspishly, but had tried to compose himself when his grandmother raised her eyebrows. "I know you respect him," Zelli had begun again, carefully. "I assumed you wanted higher for me. Though I don't think I will do as well as you hope. I could not even... I'm not a great beauty or a great talent. I worry. I'm not charming. Tahlen has already forgotten me."

Grandmother shook her head. "In another, safer time, you would have done extremely well, although perhaps you don't believe me. You will discover it anyway, eventually. The person who will find you appealing and remarkable as you are would be ideal for a strong, strategic bond. And also, I think, be wise enough to cherish you."

He could not tell if she had been speaking to cheer him, or if she had meant some other future spouse, or if she had meant Tahlen. Since she had shooed Zelli from her room to let her rest, advising him only to continue being polite to Tahlen and then never raising the subject again, Zelli would never know.

It was something else to worry over in his spare moments, of which there had been few as he had found himself very busy for the past months. He had decided to go through the treasury for a proper inventory, an activity that had taken his energy all day every day for weeks. After that, he would have considered it if he hadn't been so tired from firing arrow after arrow into straw until his arms felt like mush and he fell asleep the moment he went to bed. He supposed he *could* have sat down to puzzle over his irritation and uncertainty, but he had histories of the old families to memorize in preparation for the

future alliance. Histories he had ignored until every other task had been finished and it was return to his studies or lose himself in dreams of being *cherished*.

He didn't even know what that meant and had no one to ask. Anyway, pondering it had led to him being jolted from his daydreaming more than once by the arrival of Tahlen, sent to bring Zelli to Grandmother for one reason or another, and Zelli staring up at Tahlen with a face as pink as a roughberry.

Zelli had been so preoccupied and exhausted during the ensuing months that it was no wonder his fae problems had disappeared. He should still be tired, especially after a night without sleep, but his spine was straight and his skin tingled as though storm clouds full of lightning were close. He watched Tahlen and was warm even in his fingertips.

If Tahlen truly wanted it, Zelli would not mind being courted by him. Zelli might not personally know about anything about courting, but he had long found Tahlen attractive and Tahlen undoubtedly knew it, if not how often he had been in Zelli's thoughts when the lust-fevers or other fae problems had him. When Zelli was hot no matter what the weather, and fantasies of tugging, and kisses, took hold of him no matter what he was doing, and he had to hide in his room for a day, sometimes more, it was Tahlen he dreamed of more than any other.

His heart pounded at the idea of Tahlen discovering that. Not with fear, but neither with anticipation, because he didn't think Tahlen would be pleased. Tahlen did not act as if his heart raced when thinking of Zelli, and he had not looked happy when he'd approached Zelli with courtship on his mind. Or when he saw Zelli, even before the refusal Zelli had not given him. Courting people were supposed to be joyful in the presence of one another.

There were likely others around the holding who regarded Tahlen that way. If Tahlen did desire something more than a friendly alliance with perhaps some bed privileges, he must want that too, that mutual joy. He deserved it, even if he had forgotten Zelli. He deserved lots of things.

A nicer room, with better heat in the winter—though all the guards did. Not to be repairing his own clothes, unless he liked doing that. More time with his sister, and more hand pies, or visits with Grandmother, or whatever else made him smile, which he also did not do enough. As well as a real, proper courtship.

Zelli couldn't resent Tahlen for briefly thinking he might get that with Zelli and silently wished he had a way to explain that to Tahlen. But even broaching the subject might annoy Tahlen further.

If he *was* annoyed. Zelli glanced again to Tahlen, expecting to see his back and finding the side of his face instead, as if Lemon Blossom had changed pace while Zelli had stewed, so Zelli and Tahlen were riding side by side. Zelli looked quickly elsewhere.

Tahlen let out a small exhale.

Zelli peeked over once again.

Tahlen was quiet. "You don't need to worry."

"I wasn't," Zelli answered promptly. "I'm not going to issue any real judgments. I'm just going to listen."

It made Tahlen swivel toward him, frowning. "What?"

"What?" Zelli echoed, confused to have gotten a frown. "I am not taking the place of Grandmother or trying to be The Tialttyrin. I'll be there to listen, and I'll relate everything to her later so she can send a messenger to authorize anything necessary. But..." Zelli paused to bite his lip, "I *am* a little nervous. You were right to think so. I shouldn't have tried to pretend I wasn't."

After another moment's staring, Tahlen faced forward again. "I don't think The Tialttyrin would mind if you spoke for her. She trusts you."

"But," Zelli said what Tahlen wouldn't, "I can't be The Tialttyrin because I have more fae blood than the others." He sighed. "I do *try* not to be too wild."



It earned him Tahlen's open attention again, and another frown. "You are hardly wild." Tahlen said it as if the idea of Zelli being too fae was totally new to him and not something Zelli's relatives and those in the village muttered about often.

Zelli thought of his fae problems, the things he did and imagined when he was holed up in his bedroom. He cleared his throat. "I could be."

That should have been the end of it, but Tahlen spoke again. "So could anyone in your family."

Lips parted in astonishment, Zelli stared at him, but Tahlen apparently had no inclination to ignore him at the moment.

"But they aren't and never will be," Zelli finally sputtered. "Yes, sometimes odd things will happen around them, or they will have strange eyes, or be like my parent, but I'm different. My problems are not like theirs, for one, or are worse." He should not have mentioned his problems, not now with Tahlen seeming to take him seriously, and hurried on. "I *could* be wild, like the fae bards are said to be." And the human bards who emulated them, for that matter. "I *could* grant wishes best left ungranted or... or use these teeth as I sometimes think of doing when people are irritating or too beautiful. I... Sometimes, even though I see the need for an alliance with another family, I think that is the real reason Grandmother has begun to ask around; to get me out of the way."

"To protect you." Tahlen was stiff as he took his gaze from Zelli again. "Out of the way, in a sense, but not for any other reason. *To protect you*. If things go on as they are, even the houses that have stayed out of it will be drawn in. Once that happens, no one will be safe, especially not the head of the family. The Tialttyrin will be the first to lose their life. Perhaps it's not the future that you want for you or for your family, but yours is not the only family trying to keep their heads down while seeming strong enough to deter any attacks. Your grandmother acts to keep you as safe as she can."

"Grandmother asked any Tialttyrin still in the capital to either come home or stay away from the palace," Zelli added, seething as he thought of it. "Few listened. And she can hardly

make them, short of cutting off their money. Which, if she does, some of them might decide to ally themselves with another family who would like to take this valley.” Zelli would not forget that if the country ever grew stable again. He would not forget a single slight his relatives had given his grandmother. But he focused on Tahlen for the moment. “That’s why it’s a risk for you to be out here, as much as me. More, if you put yourself between me and any threats.”

He smiled a little when Tahlen stayed silent but did not ride ahead. It was not a happy smile, but he didn’t think Tahlen would notice.

“Though I understand why you’ve come along, you should know that I also had selfish motives to be here.” Zelli rolled a shoulder nervously as he made the admission. “I didn’t want when I meet my future intended to be the only time I travel. Whoever Grandmother chooses will find me dull, I’m sure, at least in that respect. I’ve never been to the palace. I’ve never even been across the mountains. Although, of course, I will try my best to be interesting to them.”

Tahlen gave him another glance, then yet another. “You’ve never seen more? Even as a child?”

Zelli did not think that was the question Tahlen had intended to ask with that first glance, but Zelli might have also been imagining things.

He sighed. “I’ve seen this valley all the way to the other end. But I was much younger and the memories are vague.” He didn’t ask about what places Tahlen had seen. It wasn’t right for him to demand confidences. “Thank you for agreeing to come with me, Tahlen,” he said instead, formally.

“Grandmother will be reassured and... I find your presence reassuring as well. Although I am sure your weapons will not be necessary.”

“You hope,” Tahlen corrected.

“I hope,” Zelli agreed.

Silence returned between them. Zelli would have sighed about that too, but then Tahlen broke it, as soft as the fog dispersing

around them. “About that. If something does happen, I want you to run.”

Lemon Blossom objected to whatever Zelli must have done upon hearing that. He absently patted her. “*Run?*” he demanded.

Tahlen nodded. “It’s the safest thing you can do. Run. Hide, if possible. If worse comes to worse... do you have a knife, even just for sharpening quills? A rock would do, in a pinch.” He did not say it as if this advice was theoretical. *A rock would do*, Tahlen said, because he must know that for certain. “But before all of that—run, and hide if you can.”

“That is...” Zelli opened and shut his mouth several times, “... insulting and outrageous and... I’m to just leave you to it, then? What if you’re hurt? What if you die?”

A mention of death earned him not even the smallest glance from Tahlen.

Tahlen’s voice stayed soft. “I am sworn to serve the Tialttyrin family, and I have mostly found it a house worth serving.”

*Mostly.*

Zelli *had* annoyed him. He flattened his mouth. “I will strive to do better.”

He did not look over to see what Tahlen did, even though Tahlen’s tone deepened with what might have been dismay. “You haven’t done anything wrong, Zelli.”

“I upset you.” Zelli hadn’t intended to bring it up and fretted over that too. “I’m sorry.”

If anything he said should have been ignored, it was that, but he turned toward Tahlen in grateful relief when Tahlen called his name.

Tahlen’s gaze was steadier than Zelli could ever have managed. “I have no desire to rise in rank, please believe me.” Zelli nodded eagerly to indicate he did believe that and Tahlen blinked, perhaps startled, but continued. “Regarding anything else... you did nothing wrong. Never think that.”

The dreadful sensation in Zelli's chest did not ease even when Tahlen looked away.

"You don't need to be kind to me." Zelli did not allow his voice to tremble. "But you didn't want to speak to me—of it," he added hurriedly, so Tahlen would not think him demanding. "So we don't have to. I'll behave better. And soon, I won't even be around to bother you!" He hoped it came out brightly, although he had not allowed himself to consider that, either, in the past few months.

When he left, he would not see Tahlen again. Not for a long time.

A wretched, horrible thought. Zelli should not have voiced it. And now he had no tasks to distract him from it.

He had spent several months distracting himself, he realized in that very moment, and wondered that Tahlen and Grandmother would bother with him at all.

"You're staring," Tahlen remarked after a while, unexpectedly rough. "You have nothing to worry about," he said again.

This time, Zelli understood. Tahlen meant he wasn't angry, but he wasn't going to ask again or bring it up. That was more than Zelli had hoped for.

He gave Tahlen a wide smile he doubted Tahlen noticed, and like Tahlen, turned away from the previous subject of conversation. "When we get to the village, they're going to think you are The Tialtysin." It was a joke, but he was probably right. "You have a noble bearing I never will."

Tahlen was a legend in a song, the very image of a hero on a faded tapestry full of flowers and fae watching from the corners and lots of armored bodies missing their heads around the feet of his beautiful steed.

"You have the hair... and height... of your family," Tahlen offered, Zelli hoped not with pity. "And they will recognize who you are as soon as you speak. It is inescapable. They will listen whether they want to or not. They'll have to."

Tahlen did not sigh in a melancholic fashion after that, it merely seemed as though he did.

Zelli perked up slightly, even if Tahlen was being polite. “Thank you.” He resisted the urge to squirm at Tahlen’s approval. “As I said, I’m glad to have you with me. Though I still almost wish I were more the sort of beat-of-four who did not rely on guards so much, the sort to be trusted to ride out on their own. But then, I also would like it if things were less dangerous right now, and that, if we are to have a ruler, it will be a good one, who lasts. I don’t much care about the descent from Earls, or the *right* Earls. Though I suppose I should.” He made a face. “I’ve too many things to wish for, really, when wishes should be made with care or not at all, and I don’t have to work in the fields for my wine, or stand in the heat of the kitchens for my bread. Or... wear armor and swear to die for someone else.”

He thought, too late, that if he were speaking of wishes, he might have wished for someone in his future marriage who might love him. Or for Tahlen to. Or for Tahlen to find love elsewhere. But all of that stayed locked in his throat.

Anyway, Tahlen turned to him and the fire in his gaze was so startling that Zelli forgot to breathe.

“Zelli, I could have worked for you without taking any oaths. I chose it. And I tell you again now, I will put my body between yours and danger, freely, *gladly*. Don’t waste a wish thinking otherwise.”

A hoarse, wheezing sound pushed its way from Zelli’s chest.

It was foolish to be glad that Tahlen was not angry with him, and at the same time, to want to shout that he would not accept Tahlen dying for him. Zelli would call the attention of every fae in the other world and this one before he would allow that to happen, and bit his lip with his sharp, sharp teeth to keep that inside with everything else.

“I would never forgive you if you died for me.” He managed it after too long of a silence, when the fog had all but cleared and Tahlen had turned to face forward once more. “Although I would not outlive you long, since your sister would kill me,” Zelli added, only marginally calmer.

He did not imagine the quick twist of Tahlen's lips, the brief half-smile. He did not.

"She might," Tahlen agreed. His tone suggested the smile had never happened.

But it *had*.

Zelli turned his head so he wouldn't be caught staring again and they continued on, side by side, in silence that was confusing, but not as heavy as before.

## Four

The moment a large building for the making of wine came into sight in the distance in one of the fields beyond the road, Tahlen slowed to ride slightly behind Zelli. By the time the shapes of houses in the village could be seen on the horizon, Tahlen had thrown his cloak over one shoulder to free his sword arm and pulled back even more so that Zelli was unquestionably in the lead.

Zelli tried to pat his hair into place and straighten his clothing before anyone could see him, but someone must have noticed their approach because a few children were waiting along the roadside as they started to pass houses that stood alone, and then more children and several adults as well as the houses began to stand closer together on either side of the road that bisected the village.

The skies held only one or two clouds and the sun was high. Tahlen had believed Grandmother wouldn't send anyone after them if it was clear they would reach the nearest village before anyone could catch up with them; she wouldn't want to risk looking foolish by publicly dragging back an unruly family member.

Zelli thought *he* would have done it if he were disobeyed, but then he supposed it wasn't a serious enough matter when considered that way. He wasn't riding to gather forces against her. He was stubbornly and perhaps incompetently trying to help her.

But Tahlen might be right. They'd heard no fast-approaching riders chasing after them. Zelli was free, for the moment. Grandmother would have to trust him.

The enormity of that hit him as they reached a good-sized building, the biggest structure within sight, and Tahlen cleared his throat as if to tell Zelli something.

People were gathered around, although keeping their distance, and they all seemed to have stopped, so Zelli stopped too. He was wondering if he ought to ask one of them where to go when a dainty woman stepped out of the large building to appraise Zelli. She looked past him when she'd completed her study and smiled widely.

Twisting around, Zelli saw Tahlen smiling back at her, and faced forward again to consider her with interest.

Younger than Grandmother by decades, with some silver in her nearly black hair, which was twisted up atop her head like a crown, a length of cloth woven in with it. Her pants looked to be wool and her long shirt was likely linen. Her apron had flour all over it. Her skin was darker than Aunt Bet's—who was really a cousin but old enough to be an aunt and the title made things less confusing—and her smile for Tahlen revealed a dimple on one cheek.

Tahlen had not been trained in protocol or the traditions of the Tialttyrin family, but he must have remembered quite a bit from his visit here years before, because he dismounted gracefully, moved to stand between the woman and Zelli, and then said in a voice that carried, “This is Mizel of the Tialttyrin. He is here to listen and to offer judgments on whatever you put before him. He will be speaking as The Tialttyrin.”

Zelli snapped his jaw shut just before the woman turned to study him again. He shot Tahlen a quick look full of many questions and Tahlen stared back, as unperturbed as ever.

“This is the owner of this inn,” Tahlen informed Zelli smoothly, “Stern Sar.”

“And mayor this year,” Stern Sar added merrily. “It's my turn.”

She gazed expectantly up at Zelli.

Zelli, not used to being looked up to, immediately thought he should get down and did so, forgetting in his haste that he did not have a mounting block to rely on. He hit the ground harder



than he would have liked but smiled as though he didn't hear giggles.

"We have smaller horses, but I am fond of Lemon Blossom," he explained himself to no one in particular, then faced Stern Sar. "Good day," he told her with palace manners he'd never gotten to use. "I'm here to offer my help as one of the Tialttyrin. It's an honor to meet you. We might have met before, but I would have been a child at the time, and my hair was darker then." Like many of his fae traits, the colors of his hair had not been obvious at birth or in his younger years, and had changed over time. He was not certain they were done changing, but the arrival of new shades had slowed even as his other problems had started to meld together. He suspected that humans and the fae did not age at quite the same pace.

Stern Sar seemed intrigued but didn't indicate if she'd seen Zelli then.

Zelli bowed his head, slightly, then continued on, faltering at the end. "You wrote that you wished for official judgments to be offered. I'm sorry we couldn't send advance notice of our arrival and I understand that there might be delays as things are readied. I would be pleased to wait in your inn, if you're willing, and will pay you for the privilege."

Any Tialttyrin staying with villagers within the valley was to offer to pay for any service done for them. The payment would be politely refused at least once, and then payment would be left anyway, usually for more than any bill would have said. Back when Grandmother had considered regularly taking Zelli with her on these trips, that had been the first lesson.

Stern Sar's mouth twitched, as if she had heard that speech many times before. But she inclined her head, so Zelli pressed on.

"If you please, could someone see to our horses, and find a room for me and a room for my guard, Tahlen?" He gestured to Tahlen though Mayor Sar seemed to remember him. "Thank you."

Mayor Sar did not ask why Zelli had only the one guard or why Grandmother had not come herself, though she did grow

more serious, dropping some of her smile. “We *do* have a matter that is bigger than the usual scrapes some get into... and a few people who will never listen to the mayor but have to listen to The Tialttyrin—or at least pretend to,” she confided to Zelli, smiling wider again.

Zelli sighed in relief at her humor and gave her a smile in return. “I understand.” Some of his relatives were much the same.

The mayor directed a look toward the crowd behind them, but called out to someone who came and took the reins of both horses. Then she waved Zelli into the inn and waited for him to step inside before she followed him. If she was insulted that Tahlen stayed between her and Zelli, it didn’t show on her face.

The common room was wide and clean and mostly empty of people, which made sense so early in the day. More people trickled in behind them, which was not a coincidence of timing, but Zelli pretended they weren’t there as best as he could and admired aloud the space of the inn.

Mayor Sar did not preen, but she did ask Zelli if he wanted a private room to wait while his bedroom was prepared, and when he said no, she was obviously proud to show Zelli to her best table. Then she stepped away to bring refreshments.

Zelli had never been to an inn before and had no desire to hide upstairs, even with his growing audience. He pulled his cloak back in order to sit and stared expectantly at Tahlen until Tahlen sat too.

“It’s not fitting,” Tahlen said, close to a complaint.

“Hurts my neck,” Zelli snipped back. “And I am not The Tialttyrin.”

He hadn’t expected an apology or explanation and of course did not get one. What he got was a shamed, “I should have chosen a smaller horse for you.”

Zelli nearly slid his hand over the one Tahlen had on the table. “You chose my favorite, which was thoughtful in its own way.

I didn't think about dismounting in front of strangers. Why should you have?"

He would have said more, but Mayor Sar returned, bringing Zelli a tiny cup. From the size of the cup and the scent in the air, the drink was likely the version of *warmth* made in this part of the valley. *Warmth*, to those who were fond of it, *headache* to those who weren't, was made from the leftovers of grapes crushed for wine. It was usually clear and sometimes sweet, and was much, much stronger than wine.

Zelli thought of his breakfast of cheese and one apple, but smiled and accepted the glass. He downed it in one swallow, as was expected, and also pretended not to see the people watching eagerly for his reaction. Winegrowers from each region were particular about their wines, but especially about their versions of warmth, which was only brought out for special occasions.

The cellars at the fortress had many varieties from all over the valley and even some of the spicy liquor made over the mountains by the Rossick. Zelli had had warmth before, and this one wasn't terrible, but he gave Tahlen a warning glance before he bobbed his head to Mayor Sar to thank her.

"Delicious. I've always enjoyed the variety from here." His voice was only slightly strained. He hoped Tahlen would not have to walk him to his room so he wouldn't fall on his face. Mayor Sar gestured to one of the inn's employees, and they came over quickly with a tray with a bottle and cups on it, and a small plate of nuts and dried fruit.

They were being served wine this time. There was a cup for Tahlen as well though Zelli doubted Tahlen would do more than sip anything poured for him. The mayor sat at their table, also acting as though the other tables in the inn weren't filling up with people trying to listen in.

"It shouldn't take long for your room to be ready. Business is slow, of late. No one wants to travel these days unless it's unavoidable, not even to visit family across the valley." Mayor Sar paused in pouring their wine to look at Zelli significantly. "If they do travel, they cut through the fields instead of taking

the roads. The only ones on the roads are those buying wine for other towns, and they now travel with hired guards.”

Tahlen made a quiet sound of scorn for the idea of hired guards. Zelli patted the air soothingly in his direction while keeping his focus on the mayor.

“Has there been a threat? Any sort of attack?” Zelli lowered his voice. “Have they heard rumors that there might be?”

Mayor Sar hesitated. “Not exactly rumors. Stories about seeing strangers in the fields. But people are afraid and fearful people can imagine things. It’s going to hurt us in a few weeks. Workers will need to move with the harvests but they won’t want to use the roads.”

The mention of the harvest, as Zelli had been taught, meant taking a moment to discuss the weather no matter what else was under discussion. The weather was critical in knowing which grapes would ripen first. “It’s predicted that it will stay sunny and dry for some time yet, but the fog has returned early.”

Mayor Sar gave Zelli a wide smile, then stood back up, taking her wine with her. “I’ll go attend to your things and send in some food for you. This time of day, it will be light, but it should hold you until dinner.”

“And food for Tahlen too, please,” Zelli requested with firm politeness. “He’ll need to rest soon as well.”

“I’m not leaving you here alone.” Tahlen had yet to touch his wine. Neither had Zelli, but that was because Zelli was going to start feeling his first drink any moment now.

Zelli settled in to give Tahlen an unimpressed look. Tahlen gazed back, so blank he might as well have been a wall. Zelli gave in with a huff. “Very well,” he conceded. “But you still must eat. Please. If only so your sister will not poison my apples in the future. A jest,” he turned to explain to Mayor Sar, who observed the two of them with her eyebrows raised high.

But after the mayor nodded and stepped away, Zelli released a deep breath. “I do not speak for The Tialtтын. Why would

you...?" He stopped there. "Thank you." He stopped there too. "I don't understand you."

"What is there to understand?" Tahlen asked. His eyes widened slightly when Zelli lifted his chin but he didn't look away.

Eventually, Zelli was the one to do it. His cheeks were hot and it was not from his cup of warmth, not entirely. He should try not to look at Tahlen directly, he decided, already knowing he would fail in the attempt.

He cautiously turned to consider the room and the countless people suddenly looking elsewhere except for the children standing beside their parents while their parents judged Zelli's lack of retinue or finery.

At least they could not claim Zelli was not a Tialttyrin; Tahlen was correct again. Some of the children were taller than Zelli, and there was no telling what Zelli's hair was doing, but he suspected enough strands had escaped that the streams of sunlight from the windows had set his hair aflame. He was unmistakably of the fae, even at a distance.

But he was not much of a display of Tialttyrin dignity or might. Zelli was in well-made but comfortable clothes, had not styled his hair, and hadn't even been graceful in front of them. He'd have to put more of an effort into his appearance for the judgments and for the rest of his travels, limited though they were.

"They're not going to listen to me," he murmured, sighing a little.

Tahlen answered as if that sigh had been directed at him. "You know you're persuasive, Zelli."

Zelli flicked Tahlen a puzzled look. "I know no such thing."

The warmth was starting to make his vision blur and shimmer at the edges. Tahlen fairly twinkled in the inn's sunny main room. His gaze was almost hot, perhaps with anger.

But Tahlen said, "You come in with arguments that consider nearly everything, except yourself, and you speak with conviction. If she didn't love you so much, your grandmother

would have you as The Tialttyrin after her.” Tahlen closed his eyes as if that was something to terrify even him. Zelli’s heart thudded against his ribs. Then Tahlen opened his eyes again. “But she wants to spare you that.”

Zelli shook his head, not fully believing it, although Tahlen had no reason to lie. “So she is sending me away.” He reached for his wine and had a large swallow. “I would not make a good Tialttyrin. I have no discretion.” He looked back up to Tahlen’s fiery gaze and fiercely drawn eyebrows. “But it was kind of you to say so.”

“Ah, Mizel,” Mayor Sar greeted Zelli as she came up to their table. “I expect we can get things in enough order to hold the judgments tomorrow, if that suits you.”

Zelli gave her a polite smile and raised his voice to be heard although the hushed conversations around them had stopped at her approach. “We gave you no notice and even this appearance is late by over a year. Tomorrow is more than acceptable, as this situation is our fault. The Tialttyrin is not well, though she’d hoped to be strong enough this summer to continue on. Only when it was clear that she couldn’t manage the journey was it decided that I should come in her stead.”

Tahlen said nothing.

Zelli went on, just for those at his table. “You sent word of a prisoner?” That would normally have been the sort of matter handled by the Outguard, if a village could not solve the issue themselves and no one could bring the prisoner to the Tialttyrin fortress. But they must not have seen outguards in some time. “Then I suppose even slightly rushed judgments is better than nothing. In the meantime, once we eat, I will need to rest. Our journey began early.”

Tahlen again did not comment on Zelli’s evasions.

“A way to clean up would also be welcome,” Zelli added.

Mayor Sar was the most helpful of innkeepers. “There’s a small hot house for bathing not far down the road, or we can bring some basins of heated water to your room. There’s also the cold-water bath in the back of the inn.”

Zelli hid a shudder. “To my room, if you don’t mind. But rest first... for me, at least.” He glanced to Tahlen in question. “Don’t worry. I’ll stay put,” Zelli said in answer to Tahlen’s unhappy silence. “You need sleep too. You can’t protect me if you’re tired, can you?”

“Persuasive,” Tahlen exhaled it. “With daggers drawn.”

“He worries,” Zelli explained to Mayor Sar.

She looked at Tahlen, both eyebrows raised, then to Zelli. “Things are getting more frightening than most would like, but you will be safe in my inn for the time being.” She glanced to Tahlen again, quirking a smile. “Best do what The Tialtтын says.” She bowed her head. “I’ll go finish seeing to it.”

Zelli thanked her, then fiddled with the fruit and nuts before finally eating some. “You do need to rest,” he said to Tahlen, not sorry.

“Yes. But you didn’t need to make it plain, especially when you have only one guard.”

Zelli dropped a handful of nuts back onto the plate. “Oh.” He nodded slowly. “I will think more like that in the future. But, Tahlen,” he lowered his voice to a whisper, “if we are at the point where our people are murdering us in our beds, all is lost anyway.”

Tahlen leaned in. “Is that supposed to make me less right or you less dead?”

Zelli crossed his arms and turned his head. He nearly jumped to find three children next to their table. Tahlen had undoubtedly noticed them already.

The oldest child might have been around ten years old, the youngest possibly six or seven, but Zelli knew children only from the village around the fortress and he was hardly allowed to be familiar with any of them.

The oldest would overtake Zelli’s height within the year, Zelli guessed, but smiled for the children anyway.

“Hello,” he said pleasantly. “Did you have a question?”

The middle one said, to the others, not to Zelli. “Not supposed to bother the fae.”

Zelli nodded. “That is true. But it isn’t always obvious what annoys them. And I am not totally of the fae, so I can take some bothering.”

“We’re not supposed to annoy nobles either,” the oldest volunteered.

Zelli glanced around for any aggrieved parents, but they must not have noticed their children sneaking off.

As a child who had often snuck away—though not as often as he would have liked—Zelli faced the children with a wider smile. “Now, if you were talking with a true fae, you’d be wise to offer them a sweet. So, how about I give you some of my treats, and you keep some for yourselves and leave some wherever you leave offerings here?”

He swept dried fruit and nuts into his palm and then waited until several little hands were underneath his to distribute them. “You have to be careful when you ask things of the fae. That is the most important part. Promise me you’ll remember?”

Some alarmed parents were starting to move forward at last.

Zelli smiled for them too, and again, wider, for the children, who nodded to answer him but looked already distracted and forgetful with their hands full of sweets. He let the parents call their children back and then had to fight not to sag in his chair.

“You’re staring,” he mumbled to Tahlen, who, of course, said nothing. “I’m never sure how to act with children,” he added in explanation, in case he’d done something wrong.

Tahlen gazed at him for a moment more, then gently pushed the plate with the remaining fruit and nuts toward Zelli. He moved not an inch until Zelli ate some.

Zelli’s room was about the size of his personal bathing room at home, and consisted of a high bed with steps thoughtfully



provided on one side, a small fireplace, and table and mirror, with space for a pitcher of fresh water and a cup.

He didn't know where Tahlen's room was, though Tahlen had walked Zelli to his and stayed until Zelli had locked the door as promised. Zelli, full of soup and warm bread and wine, feeling his long night, had stripped off his boots and several of his layers and then collapsed on the bed.

He'd woken to Tahlen's polite knock on his door and Tahlen informing him he was going to request the hot water now, if Zelli wanted to be cleaned and dressed to come downstairs to dinner. The sky outside was dark. Hopefully, Tahlen had slept as long and as well, even if he hadn't had wine to help.

Zelli had washed up and shaken some travel dust out of his clothes before dressing again in one of his under layers, since he wanted his finer clothing for tomorrow. He fought with his hair, unpacking his hair oil to get the mess into braids that would fall down his back. He got out some of his jewelry as well, leaving the rowan tree at the hollow of his throat, but affixing a silver ear cuff to each ear, then debating whether or not to attach a chain to those and putting cuffs in his nose.

Wearing delicate chains across his face always made him anxious that he would reach up to fix his hair and snag one, so were perhaps best left for the judgments. He had nothing in gold and no real gemstones unless he used something from the family collection, which he never had. The cuffs were bands at the top and bottom of his ears, with links running between them along the shell.

Tahlen had visibly paused in the hall by his door when Zelli had come out, but hadn't said anything, so Zelli had assumed he looked presentable enough and followed Tahlen out to the main room for their dinner and more staring from the villagers.

Zelli wore jewelry so rarely, he'd sort of hoped Tahlen might comment. Since Zelli's hopes had likely been all over his face for Tahlen to see, he kept his head down while he ate and whenever he looked toward Tahlen, he made sure to hide behind his cup.

A mistake which he was aware of making even while making it. But it did make the candlelight sparkle and the room warm, and it let him breathe, a little, even though people still did not approach him and Tahlen focused on his food without uttering a word.

Zelli had never had a night out. This one was disappointing.

“What sort of story will this be to tell my intended?” he wondered mournfully after a while, keeping his attention on the dark-haired person across the room who was either eyeing him or eyeing Tahlen. Probably Tahlen.

Tahlen seemed very still. Zelli determinedly did not look at him.

“Maybe they will live around the capital and they’ll think me regrettably unsophisticated.” He had another sip. “This is my only night out, possibly ever, and all I did was eat potatoes and have a cup more of wine than I should.”

“More than a cup,” Tahlen observed. There was a sentiment beneath the words, probably something about how Zelli could not do his duty with his head full of wine.

Zelli still would not look at him. “I am as close to as stylish as I will ever be, unless my intended wants to give me jewels.” He could not imagine it. Tahlen was so unmoving, so silent. Zelli had another sip. “No one will even talk to me. It’s... I am a Tialttyrin. I am fae and strange looking. So they will not speak. But I could never get a stare like you are getting. I am not one to be admired.”

He hadn’t meant to use that word. He glanced to Tahlen.

“I’m sorry.” Zelli put the cup down so he could gesture safely. “You didn’t take an oath to listen to my whining.”

“I think most would whine in your place, although you consented to the idea of the alliance readily enough.”

Tahlen did not have to say things like that. Zelli almost wished he wouldn’t. It was confusing.

“You’re confusing,” Zelli informed him in case Tahlen did not know that. He turned back so he could keep watching the one

watching Tahlen. Yes, definitely watching Tahlen. “Are you angry, Tahly—Tahlen?” Zelli corrected himself, shooting Tahlen another glance. He had once, only once, called Tahlen that out loud when Tahlen had been new to their family guard and Zelli had followed him around like an infatuated puppy. Tahlen had turned to face him and then Grandmother had beckoned Zelli away and given him a scolding he had not forgotten.

Zelli sat up. “That was overly familiar. I apologize.”

“You can call me that if you want.” The permission did not sound reluctant. Neither did it sound enthusiastic.

The terrible feeling was back in Zelli’s chest. He gave a small shake of his head. “Your sister calls you Lolo.”

This at least made Tahlen sigh. “Because as a child, she used to call me Tahlo, and over time, it became just Lolo.”

“Really?” Zelli held the scrap of knowledge close. “That’s adorable. I don’t have any siblings, of course. And the cousins near my age are all farther away. Some in the capital, where my parent is. I won’t call you Tahly, or Lolo. I *am* sorry, truly.”

“You don’t need to keep apologizing,” Tahlen said quietly.

Zelli could feel Tahlen staring but avoided his eyes. He reached for his wine again. He was rather surprised Tahlen hadn’t stopped him from drinking too much, since Tahlen seemed to give orders when it pleased him to.

“You have an admirer,” Zelli remarked without indicating the person he meant. “No one will approach me even to discuss their problems. I despair for my intended. This is a sign. I would not even make a good spouse for a wine merchant. I’m not approachable and this is as beautiful as I will ever be. And that’s not much.”

“*Zelli.*” Tahlen broke into Zelli’s melancholy thoughts and Zelli turned to him in surprise. Tahlen’s voice was hard. “What do you expect me to say to this?”

“Expect?” Zelli regarded him in tipsy astonishment. “I don’t expect you to say anything, Tahlen. I already know how you

think of me, and it's... it's not well, is it?"

Tahlen's wonderful mouth was open, his lips just parted. Zelli stared at them for as long as he dared, then returned to his probably obvious study of Tahlen's admirer, who was... heading toward them.

"Tahlen!" the woman called out. Woman, unless she was like the true bards or anyone else who claimed a between status like Zelli's parent.

Tahlen jerked his head up to follow the sound, then *relaxed* to see her. Zelli could not think of another, better word for it. His brow smoothed and his shoulders eased down, if only a little. When he glanced to Zelli, the tension returned.

Zelli lowered his head to stare at the table and said nothing when Tahlen stood to greet this person and got enveloped in a hug. Zelli did not think he should have more wine but did anyway.

"Strange times without yearly visits from the nosiest of the Tialtтын," the woman said, bold as anything with Zelli right there. Zelli almost liked her for it, but she still had her arms around Tahlen, who was still allowing it. "Thought we'd see you last year at least."

"The Tialtтын hasn't been well," Tahlen explained politely, possibly irritated on Grandmother's behalf. Or possibly he was irritated that he hadn't been here last year so he could repeat whatever he had done with this person the first time.

"If only we all got a rest like that when we didn't feel well," the woman added.

Zelli looked up.

She met his gaze as if expecting that.

Zelli, because he could, raised his eyebrows and looked away again as if bored.

Tahlen's friend made a small noise in her throat as though that had surprised her. She was welcome to try being ruder; Zelli had a long memory.

She wore her hair short, which didn't necessarily mean she was a guard of some kind, but often did. It could have meant a fieldworker or something as well, someone with a difficult job who wasn't interested in fussing with their hair no matter what the fashion. Zelli had considered chopping his hair off once or twice, but the family would be in an uproar if he did.

She had skin touched by the sun but lightly, and freckles across her nose that, unlike Zelli's, were striking, especially with her eyes, which were a startling golden brown. Maybe she had some fae in her bloodline. The fae did like this valley.

She did not reach even Tahlen's shoulder, which she gently punched when Tahlen spoke to her, suggesting something Zelli didn't catch. She shivered when Tahlen's breath hit her neck and then smiled, pleased and warm.

Zelli found himself wondering if she and Tahlen had flirted the first time they'd met, before they had obviously gone to bed together. He'd always wanted to try flirting. It took some practice to do well, from what he understood. But as with so many things, there was no one for him to practice on.

Much like being the sort of Tialttyrin that people might want to talk to. In the village around the fortress, they knew Zelli, and fae or not, were used to him. They had grown up with him there. These people who did not know him found him... odd, perhaps disappointing, perhaps terrifying. Zelli ran his tongue over the points of his teeth, resolving to keep them hidden from now on when he smiled at strangers.

"Surely, you can't be expected to do your duty *all* the time," Tahlen's friend's coaxing voice pulled Zelli from what he had been trying hard to focus on. "I only want to talk for a moment."

*Talk.* Zelli barely held back his scoff.

"I won't leave Zelli here alone," Tahlen said, mindful of his duty.

That was *quite* enough.

Zelli put his cup down and got to his feet. "Actually, Zelli is tired and thinks he might go to bed." He watched Tahlen's

eyes narrow and chose not to acknowledge it. “You’ll be free to spend the evening with....”

Tahlen’s suspicious, displeased stare did not abate. “Zelli, this is Kat Ryssa.”

“Zelli?” echoed Tahlen’s friend Kat Ryssa. “I thought it was Mizel.”

*Kat Ryssa.* Zelli made a note to himself for all the good it did him, then shrugged with as much grace as several cups of wine gave him. “Mizel of the Tialttyrin,” he introduced himself although the entire village knew his name and so must she. Playful and bold must be qualities Tahlen liked in a lover. And lovely. Kat was lovely, if not a great beauty any more than Zelli was. “I’m pleased to meet a friend of Tahlen’s.”

“Zelli,” Tahlen said sharply, warning.

Zelli gazed at Tahlen loftily. “Really, don’t worry about me. I’ll stick to my room and lock the door again. You’ll have the whole night free.” He had to break eye contact to say that, but he did at least get it out.

“Zelli,” Tahlen said it again, softer now.

Zelli wondered if Tahlen was sorry. If he could read Zelli and felt bad because he knew that Zelli would go to his room and bury his head under his pillow. He shouldn’t. Tahlen had offered courtship to Zelli out of desperation and loneliness, and Zelli understood loneliness better than anyone else possibly ever would. Kat Ryssa was what Tahlen wanted when he had more choice and Zelli couldn’t blame him for that.

“I’ll be all right,” Zelli told the both of them, told Tahlen’s shoulder, really. He gestured vaguely toward the bar, where Stern Sar was pouring someone a drink. “I’ll ask the mayor to see me to my room so you can enjoy yourself. Good night,” he told, also to Tahlen’s shoulder, then walked slowly and carefully toward the bar, wishing people would not skip out of his way as if afraid to be near him.



## Five

Zelli did not sleep well and woke early. Not bothering with relighting the fire in the fireplace, he washed up with cold water and poked his head out of his room in time to catch one of the inn's employees going past. She brought tea with lein spice and honey, which Zelli had one sip of before his stomach turned.

He had resolved to think only of what must be done today, which had not helped him sleep peacefully and had unsettled his stomach more than two cups too many of wine had. He forced himself to drink more tea, nicely refused the offer of food made through the door a while later, and then sat on his bed to sulk and chew on the leather cord for his necklace. A childish habit that he had tried to train himself out of, mostly by keeping the length of the cord too short for him to do it unless he took the necklace off first.

The fae must lead interesting lives in the other world if biting things soothed them as it soothed Zelli—*usually* soothed Zelli. There was no calming him today.

He finally decided to get dressed, putting the necklace back around his throat where it belonged. He rewashed his face and combed his hair, swearing to himself, and then put on pants of a stormy dark blue, boots, and a clean shirt and vest of deep purple, although the coat that went over it all hid most everything but his pants from sight.

The coat, also blue, had grape vines in silver embroidered along the cuffs and the hem, but was otherwise fairly simple. The cloth was not even patterned. His ears he decorated again, putting tiny cuffs to the sides of his nose as well and hoping he would not snag the chains that connected them to his ear cuffs and which hopefully hid most of his freckles. He ought to wear the nose cuffs and chains more once he was home to get used to them and not embarrass his future intended. He wore



no rings. Zelli's hands were small even by his family's standards and most rings fell off.

Mayor Sar knocked on the door to inform him that people were gathering downstairs. The judgments were apparently always held in the inn, being a large building with seating for so many readily available.

Zelli combed his hair again, then wasted a good half an hour trying to get it to do something more than the usual simple braids down his back. He was hot and frustrated when he got another knock on the door.

He stomped to the door, unlocked it so Tahlen would hear the sound, and swung it open.

Tahlen was dressed and in mail again, standing directly in front of the door so that when Zelli opened it, he blinked down in silent surprise at whatever red-faced mess Zelli presented.

Zelli was foolish to wear jewelry to try to make himself sparkle. Foolish to look over Tahlen's face and neck for signs of... anything. Foolish to turn away from Tahlen without a word and go back to the mirror.

Tahlen's braid was intricate, the lines of it smooth. Zelli thought of those long, shining strands in Kat Ryssa's hands and tightened his jaw. He said not a word but Tahlen eventually came in and then shut the door behind him.

Zelli got his hair into two fluffy braids only to realize he had not gotten clasps from his pack. He sighed and let the braids fall. He wouldn't attempt to wear them up. That was inviting disaster. But he'd wanted to look good in front of everyone. Certain people in particular.

Foolish again.

"No food?" Tahlen asked at last, standing by the bed. "You didn't finish your tea."

"I can't handle food this morning," Zelli confessed shortly, going to his pack for the clasps so he wouldn't have to look at Tahlen in the mirror.

He didn't know what to make of Tahlen's careful tone. "I didn't think you drank *that* much last night."

Zelli combed his hair yet again, making it crackle and rise upward to the ceiling. "Last night," he pronounced crisply. But last night was something he was not thinking about today, so he shook his head. "I'm nervous, which must seem silly to you. As if you've ever doubted yourself. As if you've ever had reason to."

"What does that mean?" Tahlen deliberately moved so their eyes would meet in the mirror.

Zelli rubbed his cheek, bumping one of the fine chains, then swore in a way that would make Grandmother shake her head. "It means nothing," he said miserably. "I apologize. I'm sure I'm safe up here, if you wanted to spend time elsewhere. You can wait for me downstairs if you prefer. With whomever you like."

"You are acting as head of your family and will be responsible for the lives and livelihoods of everyone in this village."

Tahlen undoubtedly meant this to be calming. "Anyone would doubt themselves."

Zelli harrumphed like Cousin Ona. "Not you."

Tahlen firmed his voice. "*Anyone.*"

"It really isn't your job to listen to me whining yet again," Zelli whispered in reply, ashamed. "Nor to try to cheer me up, although I suppose it's in your interest for the Tialttyrin to prosper."

Tahlen let out a breath. Zelli was beginning to think it was Tahlen's one indication of irritation.

"Thank you for the attempt, anyway." Zelli straightened his shoulders and picked up his comb to attack his hair again. "You really can wait downstairs if you want. My hair will take a while. Sometimes I think... sometimes I think it knows when I want to look best and it grows more uncontrollable out of spite. It isn't as though it rewards my efforts by looking pretty. Perhaps... perhaps I should cut it all off once I am safely hand-fastened away." He suggested it as lightly as he could.

“After my intended has learned I am unsophisticated and will no longer be shocked by my lack of taste or interest in demonstrating my high birth with how elaborately I have styled my hair.”

Tahlen’s reflected glare made him flinch. Tahlen’s words, however, were gentle. “The judgments will take hours, possibly even all day. You need to eat. If... if it would help calm you, I could manage your hair for you. If it lets me,” he added, possibly making a joke, which was even more shocking than his suggestion.

Zelli blinked several times.

“It’s often easier to have someone else do the braiding,” Tahlen went on, stilling when Zelli’s eyes shimmered to a darker green than they’d been the moment before.

Immediately distracted from more thoughts of Kat Ryssa touching Tahlen’s hair, Zelli leaned closer to the mirror, watching his eye color settle to a greenish-brown. “That’s quicker than the last time I noticed. Have my eyes been doing this for long?”

“Yes.” Tahlen glanced down when Zelli looked back at him. “I assumed you knew.”

That they would not stay one color, yes. That they had begun changing so fast, no. Zelli uneasily considered if that was a sign of yet another fae problem, or a sign of an older one that he had never noticed, or something else entirely. Something else to fret over once he was home again.

They shimmered darker and then to a deep blue before Zelli turned around to look at Tahlen directly. “I can’t ask you to braid my hair.”

“I’m offering,” Tahlen insisted.

Zelli snorted with doubtful amusement. “Only because you’ve never dealt with my hair. I’ve already used oil this morning, too much will weigh it down. Although it will absorb it all by this afternoon no matter how much you use.”

Tahlen raised his head. “That is a yes?”

“Your hair is always beautiful.” Zelli sighed it. “I’d be a fool not to let you at least try.”

Tahlen swallowed and stood there, staring, before seeming to spur himself away from the bed. Zelli turned to face the mirror again as Tahlen came up behind him, realizing all at once that Tahlen was going to have to be close to him for this, that Tahlen would be touching him, and that Zelli might not be able to see much of Tahlen’s face in the mirror, but Tahlen could certainly see his.

Tahlen’s hands came into sight in the reflection. Zelli could not feel the touch but avidly watched the slow glide of Tahlen’s fingers through the near-rainbow of his hair—until they snagged on a tangle that hadn’t been there before.

Zelli frowned dejectedly. Tahlen paused, then extracted his hand and pulled the total of Zelli’s hair to the back, gently testing the weight as he arranged it so he could see it. He took the comb from Zelli’s useless hands and then said, hardly to be heard, “Your hair is lovely, Zelli. Have you tried telling it that?”

Zelli’s chest seemed to tighten. “You are suggesting I flatter my hair into submission?” he wondered, no louder than Tahlen had been.

“It doesn’t need to submit.” Tahlen used the comb to make a part and... Zelli’s hair allowed itself to be parted.

Zelli could not even be annoyed. The comb dragged lightly across his scalp as Tahlen created sections to put into clasps while he combed out the remaining tangles, which did not fight him.

“I don’t understand,” Zelli complained breathlessly. “Are you part fae? You aren’t even using extra oil.”

“It’s soft as it is,” Tahlen remarked. Maybe he had forgotten he was whispering. His hand brushed the spot behind Zelli’s ear. Zelli shivered and lowered his gaze. He kept it down, uncertain what color his eyes would be for this or what that might mean.

“It does not lie flat like yours,” Zelli reminded him.

“No, it has more life.” Tahlen undid the first few clasps, apparently satisfied that Zelli’s hair would do what he pleased now. Zelli believed it would.

Tahlen was careful. His hands did not brush Zelli’s skin again, except for a small, light touch across Zelli’s nape that sent another shiver down Zelli’s back, and a final sweep to get the wispy strays around Zelli’s ears and tuck them into the rest of the braiding.

“Sorry,” Tahlen murmured for that.

Zelli felt like Kat Ryssa must have felt with Tahlen’s breath on her neck.

“What?” He had no idea what Tahlen was apologizing for. “It’s well—fine. More than fine.” He wondered if his voice too high.

Tahlen used the clasps again as Zelli generally didn’t bother to do, as though Tahlen didn’t think it was ridiculous for Zelli to have shining silver grape leaves throughout his hair. He stepped back a moment later, apparently finished.

Zelli took a calming breath, then looked at his reflection. *Purple*, he thought distractedly, caught by his eyes. He hadn’t known purple could seem hot. The freckles across his nose and cheeks seemed darker against his flush. The glinting silver metalwork would not disguise them or the red of Zelli’s lips where he’d bitten them. Then his hair took the rest of his attention.

Tahlen had not braided it tightly, the way Zelli usually tried to do. It would come loose in no time at all, Zelli worried, but then stopped, uncertain. He crept closer to the mirror, turning his head to each side to see the braid Tahlen had started behind each ear and then twisted together at his nape. There were two tiny braids to accent the rest, pulled back into the same twist. With nothing more than clasps to hold it down, the rest of Zelli’s hair was free to shift and shine in the light. The colors were not hidden.

Zelli bit his bottom lip hard.

“Less for it to escape from,” Tahlen explained himself. Maybe he thought Zelli was angry.

Zelli faced him. “It’s better than anything I have ever done,” he told Tahlen honestly. “I love it. But they will think I’m wild.”

Tahlen looked over Zelli’s hair one last time, then Zelli’s face, their eyes not meeting. “I can take it down.”

“No!” Zelli objected immediately, dizzy as he turned back to the mirror. “I look like a beat-of-four for the first time in my life. I look like a Tialttyrin, a real one. Thank you,” he said to Tahlen’s now-scowling reflection. “I even almost feel beautiful.”

Tahlen opened his mouth, then closed it. He coughed. “I’ll go get you some food, unless you want to eat downstairs with the gathering crowd.”

Zelli shook his head forcefully at that idea, then worried he’d damaged Tahlen’s work and leaned toward the mirror again to admire it.

“Tahlen,” he stopped Tahlen before he was out the door, “thank you.”

Tahlen stared out into the hall. “Ask anytime, if you need it.” Then he was gone, except for a low, “Lock the door again, please, Zelli,” once the door was closed behind him.

After honeyed toast and enough tea to keep Tahlen from grumbling, and removing the silver links across one side of his face because he got honey on them, Zelli took a steadying breath and left the room. It would be rude to keep people waiting any longer, even if burying his head beneath a pillow once again seemed appealing.

Tahlen would have been disappointed in him. Grandmother too, who would have also reminded Zelli that he had chosen this so it was now his responsibility.

Nonetheless, Zelli hesitated on the last step down to the main room, catching his breath at the number of people seated on the rearranged chairs or standing in the rest of the available space. A single table remained, in front of the fireplace on one side of the room. Mayor Sar was more than used to hosting these proceedings, judging from the pitcher and cup on the table, and even a few sheets of paper next to a quill and a pot of ink.

The crowd went silent at the sight of him. Zelli tried not to think about that, nodding in greeting and then hurrying to his seat at the table, which Mayor Sar pulled out for him. Seated, Zelli's feet did not fully touch the floor, which he hoped people would not notice. Tahlen stood behind Zelli on his other side. Zelli suppressed the urge to glance pleadingly at him to stand nearer so Zelli could check his reactions.

He braced himself, then swept a look over the room. In the group by the door, a few held papers. Petitioners, most probably there with straightforward requests, news of which would be passed on to Grandmother. The others who were not in any sort of line must be here to watch and form an opinion of Zelli. By the bar, with several large people obviously standing guard, was a woman perhaps slightly older than Tahlen, her hair once short but now growing out somewhat unevenly. She was thin but not alarmingly so, and her clothing did not seem to fit her; the shirt too big, the pants slightly small. One of her wrists had rope looped around it, the end of which was in the hands of one of the figures guarding her.

Zelli took another steadying breath. The room was quiet save for a bit of coughing and shuffling feet.

“I am very sorry for the missing judgments last year. Grandmother is in poor health but is thinking of all of you. I am equally sorry for the lack of warning about this one. If anyone could not make it in time, messages can always be sent to The Tialtтын directly. Messengers themselves will be fed and cared for in our house before their return journey.” He cleared his throat to banish a waver, then turned to address the prisoner. “I am also sorry for making you wait.”

The prisoner straightened, startled. Her skin was yellow-brown, her eyes darker, like charred wood. Her eyes flicked from Zelli to the rest of the room, almost questioning. “That’s fine,” she said at last. Though there was little else she *could* say in response, Zelli supposed, but turned away from her to continue.

“Anyone asking formal permission from The Tialttyrin for land rights or drastic improvements,” permission almost always granted, “I will speak with you last, I think, so I can truly listen to your needs.” He did not glance to Tahlen to see if that was acceptable. “Now, other than the prisoner, who present has an issue that needs the immediate judgment of The Tialttyrin?”

Two people immediately pushed forward. The groan from the others in the crowd signaled a problem. Zelli understood the nature of the problem when both petitioners began to speak at the same time, spilling jumbled details about a dissolved hand-fasting, a shared boundary line, and a walnut tree.

The couple—former couple—were familiar to Zelli from his grandmother’s notations about past judgments. Knowing that did not untie the knot in his stomach, but it did allow him to sit back slightly as he let them both talk.

Two neighbors at the northern edge of the village who had once gone so far as to get hand-fasted, only to sever that tie a few years later. It had not ended well, for reasons no one had ever made clear to Grandmother. The neighbors fought over everything and brought their disputes to nearly every session of judgments.

As they carried on, Zelli twisted to look at Tahlen. Tahlen immediately bent down over him as if Zelli had a request and the two bickering neighbors sputtered to a stop. Zelli gave a slight shake of his head in answer to Tahlen, then turned back to face the room and take advantage of the silence.

“I’m familiar with you and your history,” he said, and several people in the crowd had small coughing fits that might have been laughter. Zelli briefly bit his lip. Grandmother said the best way to deal with these two was to listen until they got



tired, and to interfere as little as possible. He shouldn't have embarrassed them.

Then again, he supposed they were embarrassing themselves. "This is about a walnut tree?" he asked. Hardly worth the time of The Tialtтын with everything else going on in the country. "It grows on the line between your properties and each of you feel the other is taking too many nuts for themselves?"

Maybe he should have gotten a biscuit with his tea. This was going to be just as long of a day as Tahlen had said it would be.

The two began to talk again, over each other, although each was saying nearly the same words. He didn't understand how they had ever ended up married or how they had let it come to this. But it wasn't his business to understand, though he wanted to.

He finally frowned as he sometimes did when traders tried to pass off poor quality glass as Balithyan crystal, and once again, both of them abruptly stopped talking.

"If it will help, Tahlen and I can go cut down the tree in question right now." Zelli paused. "Though Tahlen would probably end up doing most of the work."

Some coughing overtook the audience again, along with a few titters. Tahlen reacted not at all. Zelli sighed, since this would not be the solution to the issue and also since he would have liked to watch Tahlen swing an axe and sweat like a farmer laying out hay to dry in the summer sun.

The thought was beneath The Tialtтын. However, Zelli was not really The Tialtтын, and it was in his own mind, so he let it momentarily distract him.

"Anyway," he had to clear another waver from his voice, "we can't chop down everything on your properties you might fight over. You'd end up with nothing, I suspect. Because this cannot only be about a tree—that would be asinine."

Someone gasped.

"*Zelli*," Tahlen murmured.

Zelli nodded to show he'd heard Tahlen but kept going, his frown in place. "There are other solutions. I could tell you to simply divide up the nuts by wherever they fall, but I am sure you would find a reason to object to that. To be honest, I can't understand begrudging someone else a handful of walnuts in times of plenty, but you two apparently can, so that is what must be addressed."

Mayor Sar shifted slightly. Zelli glanced to her. She considered him with interest but not a hint of what she thought of his words.

Zelli turned to the former couple, who stood side by side, looking equally startled.

"I *could* ask why you are wasting my time and the time of all these others when the country is how it is and harvest is approaching. I *could* wonder if I should ban you," ask Grandmother to ban them, "from any future judgments on any matter related to your properties." A ripple seemed to go through the room. Zelli studied several faces and saw more than a few with growing smiles. He waited, but Tahlen had no other warnings to offer. The prisoner looked intrigued.

Zelli inclined his head. "I'd rather not. Everyone should be able to seek justice. So then, I could suggest for each of you, separately, to tell me why you ever hand-fasted with each other and why you changed your minds. I don't know that it's relevant, and it's certainly not my business, but I don't understand these things, and I would like to know how affection turned into years of squabbling." He quickly raised a hand to end the complaints from both of them. "I am *not* asking for that. Both of you only desire to talk about the tree, so I will talk about the tree."

His mouth was already dry. He hoped that was not wine in the pitcher. He didn't want to end up slipping beneath the table.

"If you don't want to wait for each walnut to fall, the tree should be shaken to dislodge them. Someone from the village with no stake in this should do the shaking. Whoever is mayor at the time would do, unless they are physically unable to do so or have a connection to one or both of you. In which case,

they can choose a proxy. Or,” Zelli made a noise when both of them tried to argue again, “you let the ripe walnuts fall to the ground each season, and whatever the squirrels leave you should be collected by another disinterested party and counted out to ensure the number given to each of you is the same.” Absolutely ridiculous. These were adults. He leaned forward. “If you still fight over that, then when the next judgments are held, I will rule that neither of you get the nuts from the tree and they are to be gathered up and distributed elsewhere. Maybe the children of this area should have them. And then I *will* advise that you can no longer bring petitions to Grandmother—The Tialtтын—no matter what their nature. The Tialtтын has more responsibilities than just the two of you.”

He looked over the room again. “All that seems to place a burden on others for so simple a problem, but at least it does not leave the walnuts to rot. Hmm. I suppose the one doing the shaking or counting should be paid for their services as well, so the walnuts would have to be divided into thirds, not halves.”

The prisoner made a snorting sound of amusement and slapped a hand over her mouth. But she wasn’t the only one stifling laughter.

Zelli turned to peek at Tahlen, who glanced to him, the faintest glimmer in his eyes.

It disappeared in an instant when one member of the former couple stepped forward.

“I don’t see why we should lose a third share!” she started, then squeaked to an abrupt stop when Tahlen moved. Only a step, but more than enough to indicate he would stand between her and Zelli.

Zelli clenched his hands so he wouldn’t reach out to grab Tahlen and pull him back, then cleared his throat to speak soothingly.

“All of that is, of course, only a possibility. I’m sure you two can work something out. And,” he dropped his voice although everyone was still listening, “if either of you did want to talk

to me later, I will be here tonight. But you'll have to be civil or Tahlen will get upset.”

The snickering from near the bar almost definitely came from the prisoner.

Zelli would get to her in time. “Now,” he said pleasantly, “some of these people have been waiting for more than a year, so we should move on.”

## Six

Zelli did not get a break for some time after that, although Tahlen and the mayor must have exchanged a look over his head, because midway through listening to what ought to be done to repair and improve the mill, biscuits and a pot of tea had been placed next to him.

He handed a biscuit to the miller's assistant for gazing at them longingly, and made it through a cup and a half of tea before some of the audience drifted away. Many of them had chores waiting, and Zelli, apparently, was less of a spectacle than they might have expected him to be. That was a relief. It meant he wasn't doing anything too outlandish or unacceptable.

For the most part, the process of the judgments was not too different from handling household business, except that it was condensed into one day, and most of the petitions presented to him were done so out of tradition and a show of respect more than a need for advice, so he didn't have to take long to consider them.

Kat Ryssa did not bring anything before him or even seem to be present. Zelli didn't know if he should be pleased or not, but decided not to think of her unless he had to. Anyway, even with chores needing to be done, plenty of people stayed, some taking the time to eat a midday meal while they watched. Zelli fought the urge to kick his feet during the speeches of some of the more longwinded petitioners, handed a biscuit to Tahlen, who ate it despite not having asked for one, and reflected absently that if more relatives understood the tedium involved in being The Tialttyrin, they might not want the title.

It was after most had eaten that Zelli turned his attention to the prisoner still waiting for her fate to be decided, as she had been waiting for weeks.

"No outguards have been in this area?" he asked the mayor, his eye on the prisoner who had sat for hours with barely a

fidget like Tahlen might have. Like a trained guard would do while on duty. It was probably a difficult habit to break.

“Not for years,” the mayor corrected him, but glanced to the prisoner as well. “She was seen in a few fields, finally caught sleeping in one, and suspected of stealing eggs and a shirt drying on a line. Not enough for anyone to summon any outguards who might wander this way, but people are scared and didn’t want to let her go, either.”

“You might have sent her on to us,” Zelli remarked, “though I suppose no one wanted to travel. What has she done in the meantime?”

“The thinness was not our doing. We’ve had her working here and in the stable to make up the cost of her room and board, but she wasn’t stealing eggs to play with them.” Mayor Sar sighed. “I’d say she was hungry long before she reached us.”

“Did she have weapons? Armor?” Zelli put his chin in his hand thoughtfully.

“Knives and leather gloves, but not even a horse to carry her.” Mayor Sar paused, then continued slowly. “Though she handles horses well. She hasn’t spoken of her past, not a word to anyone. You think she’s a guard.”

Zelli shrugged. “She watches the world like Tahlen does.” Although her face revealed much more than Tahlen’s did. If she hadn’t come into the valley by the roads or the river, then she had trekked over the mountains. If she wasn’t familiar with them, it was remarkable that she’d made it across them alive.

He turned toward the rest of the room. “I think it’s time I address the prisoner.” He turned to her. She had gone very still, almost Tahlen-still. “I don’t know your name, I’m sorry.”

“Bree,” Mayor Sar informed him discreetly.

“Bree of no family you need to know,” the prisoner volunteered. “At your service, Mizel of the Tialtтын.”

That remained to be seen so Zelli waved it off. “It sounds to me as if you have more than earned back the cost of some eggs, although I hope you caused no more damage that has yet

to be discovered. But that isn't really why you're being held here."

"No, I suppose it isn't," Bree answered. Her tone was smart but the downward turn of her lips was bitter.

"I'd like to know what a guard like you is doing in this valley." Zelli did kick his feet a little, but didn't think anyone noticed. Everyone was too busy turning to stare at Bree in shock.

Even Bree seemed thrown. "I didn't say I was a guard."

"Not an outguard," Zelli observed, although he had last laid eyes on an outguard more than five years ago and they might have changed in that time. But they were generally prepared for hard travel and knew enough to come to the holdings of any beat-of-four for food or shelter while on their palace-assigned rounds. They didn't need to sneak about in fields or steal eggs. Innkeepers offered them at least a space in their stable for the night if the rooms were all taken.

"I doubt a palace guard would end up out here, for any reason." Zelli did not understand palace guards. Serving one family made a sort of sense. Serving whoever happened to be on the throne at that moment made no sense whatsoever. Too many rulers did not reward that loyalty.

"That makes you a former sworn guard to a noble family or a hired guard who is out of work." Zelli glanced back to Tahlen for his opinion. Tahlen, fae bless him, looked at Bree for several moments, then said, "Family," and nothing else.

"Thank you," Zelli told him before swinging back to Bree.

"Did you work for Adifer Tialtyrin? Perhaps for the Rossick?" The Rossick tended to defend themselves, but they did have some sworn guards.

"Lyralinah," Bree answered, then snapped her mouth closed as if she hadn't meant to say it.

"Lyralinah?" Zelli repeated in astonishment. Their holdings were along the sea, a great distance away.

"I was last with them in the capital," Bree explained tensely. "I am with them no longer."

Since a guard asking to be released from service was not something that needed to be concealed, Zelli imagined other reasons for her hesitation in naming them and raised his eyebrows. “If there are Lyralinah somewhere in this valley who have not announced themselves, I would very much like to hear about it, Bree of no family I need to know.”

Tahlen didn't offer a warning for Zelli's tone this time.

Bree shifted but said nothing. Zelli scratched his cheek, making a fine silver chain jingle. “If you had family or business here, surely you would say so. Which leaves me to wonder if you're accused of a crime so horrible that you fled the capital...” Bree's expression became indignant, so Zelli paused thoughtfully. “Or if you were not released from your oath of service. Did you ask and they denied you?”

“Who *are* you?” Bree demanded in barely a whisper.

“I'm Zelli of the Tialttyrin.” Zelli wiggled his feet. “The Tialttyrin are of the fae. You should know this if you plan to stay in our valley.”

“I can stay?” Bree asked with obvious surprise.

“Do you want to?” Zelli asked in return. “I have no objection, provided that you are not here for terrible reasons. Which is why I am asking about your former service. If you left over a personal difficulty, you may tell me in private. Shh,” he added before Tahlen could say a word, “you would be there too, of course, Tahlen.” He focused on Bree again. “But I will need an answer.”

Bree turned to look over Zelli's head, to Tahlen, no doubt. Zelli couldn't be angry about it; all the guards at the fortress looked to him too. “I did not ask,” she said at last, returning her gaze to Zelli. “The last of us to try that was refused and sent to escort one of the Lyralinah down the river. Where he perished... in an accident.”

The murmurs through the crowd said they understood Bree's pause as well as Zelli had.

“Why did you want to leave?” The mayor spoke up. Zelli had the same question.



Bree stood in silence for long moments, her expressions unhappy and conflicted. Then she pulled in a deep breath. “The new head of the family had ambitions, as many now seem to. He sent some of us to assist Tye of the Villucatto as she moved against the Racetia and the Diirlyian. We are not sworn to *Tye*.” Bree spat the name. “Alliances made with our lives. Without our choice, or any say. We were sworn to the Lyralinah as honored guards, not as hired strength. But even those who had protected them through their family line for generations were not spared. Every guard for every family knows where this will lead. We remember the Vallithi and the guards who died with them for nothing more than staying loyal to the old queen and her succession plans. So some tried to leave as we are supposed to, and when that didn’t work, some snuck away. We broke our oaths. Is that a terrible reason to you, Tialtysin?”

“Vallithi?” Zelli’s strained whisper nonetheless carried through the suddenly quiet room. He was slow to turn. Tahlen gave him a glance, then tightened his mouth before facing away.

Mayor Sar made a small, sad sound as though she also knew the name and the story of that family, or perhaps she recognized it because Tahlen had shared his family name with her. Zelli did not imagine many outside of the Tialtysin fortress knew it, partly because Tahlen rarely offered it, and partly because many would not bother to learn the family of a guard. Zelli had no reason to question Tahlen about his family and Tahlen had no reason to answer him, so Zelli hadn’t dared.

Zelli considered Bree for a long time because he didn’t trust himself not to touch Tahlen. Despite Zelli’s recent efforts, he hadn’t made his way through the histories of all of the beat-of-four families yet, much less the lesser noble families. A three-beat name didn’t even necessarily mean they were a lesser family. The Rossick were descended from Earls but kept their name of two beats.

Tahlen still hadn’t spoken.

“The family was killed and their guards died with them?” Zelli finally asked, shaken, then raised his hand to prevent hearing

the answer. Not where others would hear. Tahlen did not deserve that.

Maybe Tahlen was one of them, but a distant relation. Vallithi enough to mourn but not enough to have personally lived through....

Zelli didn't want to think of it. *Couldn't* think of it with so many watching.

"Do you not know the story?" Bree wondered, almost with offense.

Zelli quickly shook his head. "I was young in the first years of this chaos. And the Tialtтын do not take part in politics." He desperately cleared his throat, though his thoughts stayed a tangle of frightened calculation. Tahlen could not have been that old, he realized, but tried to put it from his mind because Tahlen probably wanted him to. "So... so you were betrayed by the family you were meant to protect and you left?"

"Betrayed?" Bree seemed astonished. "I would not say *betrayed*, merely..." She couldn't find another word.

Zelli gestured impatiently. "You give them your oath but they offer one to you in return. Or... they should, if they did not. They have a duty to not risk your life needlessly and they failed. The sacrifice is supposed to be mutual. You protect your chosen family, they feed you and clothe you and house you, and reward you with as much peace as they can give you." He wondered how many people outside of the home of a beat-of-four had ever heard that and then how many inside the home of a beat-of-four had *not* heard it. "You are not supposed to want your guards to fight for you," he lectured the entire room, then swung back to Bree. "You swear to me that you have harmed no one in your time in this valley and that you have no intention to?"

"I..." Bree hesitated. "I scared some cows when I first came down from the mountains. No," she went on over the sound of somewhat nervous laughter. "No, I have no plans to harm anyone."

“Well, then.” Zelli was not relieved but he could breathe easier. “I suggest you seek work in a new field, if that suits you. Or, if you plan to return to sworn service as a guard, then to leave this valley and find a house who do not pursue the crown.” She would have to work for a while to earn money to travel and purchase new armor or weapons, but a few months in a busy village wouldn’t hurt her any.

“What of your house?” Bree asked boldly.

Zelli gave himself a moment by having a sip of cold tea. “You may follow this road all the way to the hilltop fortress that overlooks the river, but for the matter of hiring guards, you would have to speak to Ric, the guard captain, not The Tialttyrin.” That they needed new guards, he didn’t say. Tahlen should have been pleased.

At the thought, Zelli half-turned to consider Tahlen’s unbending figure. “When she gets to the lower gate, what should she do?”

“Tell them you are unarmed and ask to speak to the captain,” Tahlen explained to Bree. “They might take you in for the night, but they might not choose to keep you.”

“Ah.” Zelli did not flail helplessly though he wanted to. Bree nodded her head and thanked Tahlen, and Zelli wondered what she would do once she knew Tahlen’s family name, and if that mattered, and then whether or not she planned something wicked by joining their service, but that did not seem a likely plot.

Bree thanked Zelli too, and then, before he could ask her about her path through the mountains, someone in the crowd demanded, “But what of the others?”

That sparked many in the crowd to jump to their feet to anxiously ask the same question and then many new questions. People had glimpsed strangers passing through or hiding in the fields and wild spaces, strangers who did not follow the roads and seemed to want to stay hidden. Some were said to be like Bree, with scarcely the clothes on their backs. Others might be armed, might be looking for trouble, or searching for the best way to take the whole valley.

Their fears echoed to the ceiling and probably out into the street. The mayor stood up to try to settle people. Tahlen put a hand to Zelli's shoulder as if ready to drag him from the room. But the people weren't angry with Zelli or Grandmother, not really. They were afraid. Everyone was afraid, even Zelli. That was why he was there.

"If you would..." Zelli tried, but wasn't nearly loud enough to be heard. "I really think..." He put his hands flat on the table and got to his feet, debating whether or not standing on the table would cost him his dignity and if he had dignity to lose.

"To attack this valley is to anger the fae!" Zelli shouted. It was probably the mention of the fae that made some shut up. Zelli took a breath. "Though the Tialtтын are not what we once were, few other noble families are after over a decade of this fighting. Some might still eventually turn our way, but anyone wise will think on what it might cost them to come here."

Some of the rest of the anxious crowd fell silent, exchanging looks with one another or glancing from Zelli to the mayor or to Tahlen.

"Are the other Tialtтын as... fae as you are?" The question, which did come from a child but from an adult in a simple dress and apron, made Zelli raise his eyebrows.

"No," he finally answered, after realizing the place had quieted even more to hear his response. "But that is also why none of us will seek the throne. People fear us and that would not make us good rulers, would it? So at least you don't have to worry about that."

Some Tialtтын around the capital might want to influence the current ruler, but if the fae wanted someone of fae blood in the palace, they had only to act, and they did not.

"Since you've brought up these concerns... the warring has been going on now for fifteen years. For most of my life and the lives of your children. We don't know how it will end, or when." Or if. "But even here in our valley, we are affected by the chaos in the capital and elsewhere. And now there are strangers."

Zelli glanced at Bree. “Maybe many of them are fleeing the capital and avoid the roads because they feel it safer. They might pass through the valley without disturbing anyone.” He considered Tahlen without turning toward him. “They might also be desperate and they might cause harm if you resist them or get in their way. We can’t ignore that possibility.”

Zelli paused. “Grandmother worries because it’s people that matter. So, she would remind you that if it’s regular people out there, travelers who are scared like you, you ought to feed them and take them in. If you can’t afford it, to send them on to us. And... and I will remind you that if it’s anyone with harsher intentions, you are welcome to shelter within our walls. Some other families have chosen to forget their responsibilities, but we have not.”

He and Nya had been setting aside more on top of the usual preparations for winter, out of concern for the harder future that might lie ahead.

Zelli bit his lip in frustration. “I don’t know what the other noble families will do, if anything, in our valley. They have lost their sense. But this place and the people in it are beloved of the fae and my family.” Some of his family. “Even if it was only Tahlen and myself, we would seek to protect you.”

He did look over then. Tahlen did not seem startled, but their eyes met and Zelli struggled to look away again.

Zelli turned back to everyone else, noticed the mayor once again at the bar, pouring drinks as if to calm people, and Bree, watching Zelli with open interest.

He slowly sat down and observed the crowd, now talking amongst themselves and darting him looks, and then his notes on what he needed to mention to Grandmother, the empty plate of biscuits.

“My plan was to go as far as one more waystation,” he said for Tahlen to hear. “I don’t have enough money of my own to visit another village. I only wanted our presence felt.”

“You want to go farther,” Tahlen responded flatly, not asking.

“No,” Zelli denied. “Yes, but not like this. Yes, because it’s necessary. I want to know what—who—they are seeing and if it’s a threat. Right now, I don’t have enough to tell Grandmother and no way to plan.”

“I doubt a large force bent on bloodshed would hide in farmers’ fields.” Tahlen’s voice was hoarser than usual. Zelli didn’t prod him about it.

“But why are they coming across the mountains?” Zelli asked instead. “And, from the look of Bree, not by the usual caravan paths. They’re hiding.”

“Someone is chasing them?” Tahlen’s surprise was audible. “Why would anyone waste their resources pursuing anyone all the way to this valley, risking the attention of the Rossick, the Tialtтын, *and* the fae?”

Zelli looked up. “The other families are breaking their oaths and disregarding tradition. They make even less sense to me than my family members who ignore Grandmother. I can’t guess why they do anything or what they will do next.”

Tahlen’s jaw had a tic again, although Zelli didn’t think Tahlen’s anger was directed at him. “Your habit of thinking ahead is often not a comfort, Zelli.”

Zelli shrugged his shoulders sadly. “I know.” He hesitated, then looked up again. “Tahlen...”

“Someone is trying to get your attention,” Tahlen said brusquely, and turned from Zelli and whatever question Zelli might have asked.

Too many people wanted to talk with Zelli outside of the more formal proceedings, which was how some preferred to do business. It meant he could not sneak away for dinner or give Tahlen a rest. Tahlen had been on duty for far longer than any one guard should have been and that was without considering how upset he must be.

Even the most steadfast of guards would normally have sat down or had a meal at some point. But Tahlen had not, not even when Zelli had been served some steamed dumplings and soup and repeatedly asked if Tahlen would like some of his own.

Zelli had finally ordered food for him anyway, suspicious and unhappy when Tahlen had eaten it standing up and out of reach of a private conversation.

After sharing a drink of warmth with Mayor Sar to conclude the official side of things, Zelli had moved to a different table, as the other tables had been brought back into the inn by then. He left Tahlen to follow or not follow, and sipped wine and tea and more wine while various people told him things about their children, or strangers in the valley, or stories they'd heard from the last of the merchants they'd seen.

He didn't know how late it was, but he was exhausted, so despite his interest in the tale of two neighbors who had bound themselves together in marriage and later become a nuisance to everyone including The Tialtтын, a tale currently being told to him by one of those neighbors, he also wanted to retire and to force Tahlen to rest, if not speak.

The neighbor, Leda, had had more than a little wine herself by the time she'd come over to complain about Zelli's earlier tone then plopped down into the seat across from him and tell him everything about her former spouse. Zelli understood even less now than he had that morning.

"Some people will not bend," Leda said bitterly. "Strength will carry you both through harsh winters and short summers with less to store for the returning cold. But there can be too much strength." She gestured with her hands and her cup, splashing quite a bit. "Will not bend. Like arguing with a wall. Is not even the keeper of their heart allowed in?"

Zelli gently took the cup from her, replacing it with tea. "It's been many years, but you still have strength yourself, to keep throwing yourself at that wall. That suggests that you also do not bend. Perhaps this is a case of two walls."

Bree had approached Tahlen while Zelli had been listening to stories of stubbornness and walnut trees. The two of them were now engaged in discreet conversation. Zelli met Bree's eyes without meaning to and quickly looked elsewhere.

"I don't know what to tell you," Zelli said to Leda while encouraging her to finish the tea. "I know nothing of handfasting or even close friendships. I have no lover and I do not think I am a wall. But I've grown up behind them, and I would... I would give up the tree and all that it offers."

Something flickered in Leda's gaze.

Zelli gestured uncertainly. "If it hurts you, perhaps it hurts her too. In that case, even though fights bring you close for a time, I would leave the food and the shade to her, and hope it made her happy. I care for very few people, but I don't like to think of them in pain. Now, if you don't mind, I think I will go to bed. I've had a long day and will have an early morning. If I... if I am here next year, I hope to find you happier."

He got to his feet before he could be drawn back down, and, in an instant, Tahlen was at his shoulder. Zelli did not look up at him. "I am going to bed. Your evening is, of course, your own, but I wish..." He could not wish for Tahlen to do anything. "Perhaps you should rest as well, or at least sit down." He nodded to Bree, even giving her a faint smile. "If I don't see you again, may the fae guide you well."

"Tialttyrin." She nodded in return.

Zelli turned to go upstairs, unsurprised that Tahlen would follow. That would likely stop at his door, where Tahlen would request that Zelli lock it and then... go find Kat Ryssa, or someone else, or do whatever it was he did when alone.

Sewing by the fireside came to mind. Zelli did his best to banish the memory, but if Tahlen was from a noble family, he would not have been raised to repair his own garments. Even Zelli, far from the capital, with no interests and little money of his own, did not do his own sewing, although some worked in needlepoint as an artistic pursuit.



They reached his door, where Tahlen would leave him. Zelli could not stand it any longer.

“I know you don’t want to speak of it, but I am sorry.” Zelli said it to the wall, his head down. “I’m sorry if you knew them, and if you didn’t. I’m sorry that something horrible was done and that you feel pain over it. And I’m sorry that I didn’t know.”

His grandmother knew. That was obvious now. The other guards as well, if Bree was any indication. And they’d known Zelli didn’t and hadn’t told him. Tahlen never would have, but Grandmother....

“Why would you know?” Tahlen surprised Zelli by meeting Zelli’s gaze when Zelli turned around. “The fate of one small house didn’t seem to bother too many at the time. And you were a child.”

“Weren’t you?” Zelli was proficient at math. He could note when the old queen had died and how many years ago it had been. “You were a child too, or barely more than.”

“Zelli.” Tahlen directed his eyes elsewhere, then took a breath. He put his shoulders back and returned his gaze to Zelli, unbothered once again.

*A wall*, Zelli thought, though he couldn’t fault Tahlen for it. Tahlen might not want to say it, but he *had* been barely more than a child. It was incredible he’d made it through, even if doing so had also left him this way.

“And Esrin?” Zelli had to put his hands behind his back to keep from reaching out. “Tell me you are not all that is left.”

“Zelli,” Tahlen said again, not begging, barely asking. “There are a few,” he explained once Zelli stared up at him in distress. “Scattered. Our lands are gone and any money with them. Because it was treason to defend the old queen’s plans, and though we were old, we were not descended from Earls. Not directly. Not enough.” He flicked a look over Zelli’s head. “There is an estate, I think, that was left for any survivors by one of the rulers who followed the queen. Out of pity. I’m not sure it’s still there.”

“Were you...?” Zelli dropped his voice. “Were you a fighter then?” At not-quite-fifteen, Tahlen might have been, although Zelli didn’t want to think of him being present for those events, his family killed. Zelli had only Grandmother, really, and couldn’t bear to imagine it.

“No.” Tahlen might have left it there. But he glanced down to Zelli and then swallowed. “I tried, at the end, but I barely knew anything. One of our guards pulled me back and got me and Es away.”

“You were just children.” Zelli stared at his hand on Tahlen’s chest and couldn’t fully believe what he’d done.

But Tahlen didn’t react to it. He said, “They don’t always fare well, innocent or not,” as if Zelli wasn’t now determined to learn which family had done this to the Vallithi and if that family still stood or had fallen to their ambitions.

“But you didn’t hide your name,” he worried, thinking of two children and one guard running for their lives.

“By the time I started looking for work, it didn’t matter. There was so much fighting, the murder of one family was no longer worth talking about.”

Zelli considered what he knew of Tahlen, and of Esrin, and suspected they might have used their family name regardless of any danger.

The mail over Tahlen’s chest was surprisingly warm. “Your guard friend trained you?”

“Me and Esrin, yes.” Tahlen’s hand was warm as well atop Zelli’s. “Though given the opportunity, Es discovered her talents in the kitchen and preferred that to sworn service. I wonder if she would enjoy it more in kitchens of her own, but she is content enough.” Zelli must have looked doubtful because Tahlen added. “Your family has been good to us. Better than other families we tried to serve. I willingly gave your grandmother my oath.”

“And that is why you had to come with me?” Zelli asked with horror and tugged his hand away to briefly bite his fingertips. Tahlen frowned, either for that or failing to understand Zelli’s

fretting. “I hope we continue to be kind to you. To reward you. You’re... I won’t say comforting, for I never know how I feel around you, but *sure*. You always seem very sure. Although, of course now I learn that you must not have been, and that, though you carefully aren’t saying so, you suffered before you came to us.”

Tahlen let his hand fall to his side. “I was well enough. There’s no use discussing this.”

“If you say so,” Zelli told him sadly, “but I would have liked to have known.”

“Why?” The hard edge in Tahlen’s voice sent Zelli stumbling back. “What difference would it have made?” Tahlen demanded, then raised both eyebrows. “Ah! I would no longer have been just a guard, but someone from a noble family? Is that it?”

He opened the door to Zelli’s room, where there was some light as if someone had already lit an evening fire, gave the room a glance to determine it held no threats, then put his back to Zelli.

“I’ll leave you to your rest. Lock the door behind you,” Tahlen offered as parting words, then disappeared down the stairs, his long braid the last part of him in sight.

*That braid.*

Zelli reached up to touch his own hair. Today had been the first time he’d felt like a stylish member of a noble family.

Because someone from a noble family had done his hair for him.

“Knowing would have helped me understand you!” he growled after Tahlen, who wouldn’t hear.

He stepped into his room far enough to slam the door, although he didn’t, because he would never damage Mayor Sar’s inn. He closed the door, firmly, then glared at it since Tahlen wasn’t there to pretend he was fine with the deaths of his family due to beat-of-four treachery.

It was not Zelli's place to pry. They were not friends, not as others were. But he couldn't help but think that Tahlen had offered to court him with this between them, and still would not have said. Now he would be distant again, without even the faintest glimmer of humor for Zelli to see and share in.

"I would have known," Zelli furiously told an absent Tahlen. "I could have turned the talk in the inn away from the Vallithi for you. I could have insisted another guard accompany us and you could have spared yourself that, and you would not now think I... think I... You are supposed to be with me, you unbending *wall!*"

Zelli tore at his necklace until it was free and he could bite savagely at the leather.

"Your sister is right to hate me for dragging you into this if you're all she has!" he hissed around it. "A person is not a target of straw, Tahlen of the Vallithi, but if it came to that or letting you die, I would..."

He didn't know what he would do. But Tahlen had taken that choice from him.

Because Tahlen had once been an innocent child of a noble house who had faced violence and he didn't want that for Zelli.

*Fifteen*, Zelli thought, sagging against the side of the bed. Zelli had been only two years older than that when Tahlen had come to their fortress. Tahlen might dislike beat-of-fours, might dislike Zelli, yet he still wanted better for Zelli, because Tahlen had lived it and it must have hurt.

"I would have known you better," he told Tahlen, angry and then sad and exhausted. "Even if I didn't understand, I would have known you better. Always, I cause you harm, when you've already felt too much. I wish I could understand you, but I suppose I never will."

The room swayed. Zelli dropped the necklace in his hands and shook his head, trying to clear it of dizziness. He hadn't thought he'd had that much wine, but he must have, first yelling at no one and now sick and unsteady on his feet.

He went to the stand and mirror to leave the rowan tree necklace someplace safe, and caught sight of himself: the fine silver links now twisted, his mouth red from wine, hair that had begun to wriggle free sometime in the past few hours. Barely a beat-of-four and he had teased Tahlen that Tahlen had more noble bearing than him.

The room swayed again, so Zelli turned and climbed onto the bed. He buried his head under the pillows without regard for his braids or hair clasps and tried to let the dark, muffled quiet soothe him.

He bit the pillow when he could not get his heart to calm and his chest seemed a yawning, cavernous thing. He shredded the pillow's cover with his teeth and presented the destroyed fabric to Stern Sar in the morning with deeply embarrassed apologies and what was left of his money.

He did not explain.

Thankfully, she didn't ask him to.

## Seven

He and Tahlen were on their way before the sun could peek through the morning fog. They had not exchanged many words, and for once, that was not due to Tahlen. Tahlen, upon coming to wake Zelli and finding him ready to go, his cloak fastened, his hair in two messy braids, had started to say something. Zelli had politely told him there was no need to speak of the night before, aimed a smile in the direction of Tahlen's collarbone, and then swept past him, his pack hanging from his arm.

Most of the village residents had been still abed as he and Tahlen had left. Zelli had kept Lemon Blossom behind Tahlen and Starfall and slumped down, partly due to the cold, and partly because he was tired after his restless night.

He wanted a bath, a real one, to settle his nerves and make him less aware of how *wrong* he felt this morning. He supposed that was the consequence of hurting someone he cared about. Guilt or sorrow had him weary and nearly itching with discomfort. A hot bath would have done much.

And a change of clothes, and hiding from Tahlen for at least a week, and perhaps some food. But none of Mayor Sar's offerings of pastry or tea had appealed, so Zelli had not eaten. He assumed Tahlen had. Tahlen was not unbothered, only pretending to be, but he was sensible and practical and probably knew what it was to be weak with hunger, so he would eat no matter what he felt, Zelli was sure.

Zelli also had not appreciated Tahlen's worried second glance upon first seeing him. Zelli was aware he was a wreck this morning. He would thank Tahlen not to mention it, just as Zelli had not asked about Tahlen's evening or if he'd been sorry to say farewell to anyone in particular. Not even when Tahlen had knelt down again to help Zelli onto Lemon Blossom though Mayor Sar, her stable hand, and Bree had

been right there, or when Tahlen had hovered near him in concern to see Zelli's hands trembling.

Zelli should have thanked him and given him more time to go trade kisses with the probably *understanding* Kat Ryssa.

He pulled in a long breath, held it, then let it out.

Tahlen twisted around to give him a look.

Zelli directed his eyes elsewhere.

By midday, Zelli had his hood up to conceal his face from anyone working in the fields who might look to the road, and also from Tahlen. Grandmother might have implied he was sulking, but Zelli was tired and didn't feel like talking, that was all.

Anyway, Tahlen got to behave this way all the time. No reason Zelli couldn't.

"Would you like something to eat?" Tahlen had asked a while ago, when the fog had been reduced to wisps along the ground and a few clouds in the sky.

"No. But thank you." Zelli's answer had earned him one of Tahlen's little exhales of irritation.

Zelli did not care. He should not care, it was perhaps better to say. Tahlen did not want him to care, so he would not.

He sank down miserably and scratched at his arms, at his neck, through his clothes and cloak. A long, hot bath, that's what he needed. And tea. And news that a powerful but peaceful beat-of-four family had a son about his age, who would love to tie himself to a short, wild creature with no manners, a tendency to sulk, and *feelings* he could not contain.

"Zelli," Tahlen tried again when the sun was getting high, "would you like something to eat?"

Zelli blinked, then raised his head to hear Tahlen's voice so close. Tahlen rode alongside him, observing Zelli intently. Whatever he saw, he obviously did not like, because he pulled

back, then steered Starfall off the road to a stand of scrubby trees.

Since it was leave him there or join him, Zelli followed, sliding clumsily from Lemon Blossom when it was clear Tahlen had no intention of getting back to the road. “What are you doing?”

Tahlen pulled a cloth bundle from one of his packs and handed the whole thing to Zelli before turning away. “It’s good to walk for a bit.”

Zelli decided to ignore that true, if strange coming from Tahlen, sentiment in favor of opening the cloth bundle. It was full of spiced biscuits, the kind he’d eaten with relish the day before.

Zelli hadn’t thought to add to their supply of provisions, but Tahlen had. Zelli really was in Tahlen’s way. He could have sent Tahlen out here by himself and Tahlen would have learned everything by now. Not that Zelli would ever have sent Tahlen on his own.

His cheeks were hot. Maybe his itchiness was illness. Wouldn’t that be just like Zelli? Finally get a chance to have a small adventure and be useful, only to immediately get sick.

Zelli looked up. “I am not ungrateful. But it’s not your duty to ensure I eat.”

Tahlen held an apple, which he spun in one hand even while giving Zelli a piercing study. “No. But I usually wouldn’t have to. If this is about your nerves and what your grandmother might say, I thought you did well.”

“You do?” Zelli’s disbelief made Tahlen draw his brows together.

Even Tahlen’s frown was rather beautiful, although he had shadows beneath his eyes. “Why is that so surprising?”

Zelli quickly shook his head. “I didn’t mean to suggest that you could not have opinions as a guard. You are Grandmother’s guard and she values your opinions—highly. I’m sure she would even if she didn’t know... your family



name.” He finished with a stumble, cross with himself for mentioning it.

But Tahlen’s brow smoothed and then he sighed. “I shouldn’t have spoken to you that way last night.”

“Why?” Zelli wondered, staring moodily at the biscuits.

“Because you are a guard and I am a beat-of-four? I *am* a beat-of-four. That is about all I am. You needn’t apologize. I’m the one who needs reminding that you are not my friend and don’t want to be, and I shouldn’t have questioned you. I’m sorry for that and for whatever someone said or did that hurt you so deeply that it still pains you.”

“Zelli,” Tahlen said hoarsely, “are you apologizing for others now too?”

Zelli looked up. “I can be sorry without apologizing for someone else.” The people who had hurt Tahlen and Esrin did not deserve Zelli’s apologies. “Having people act as though your family’s loss meant nothing is not the same as having people afraid of you and what your wild blood might do, but when I say even noble blood only goes so far with some, you know precisely what I mean, though I’d rather you didn’t. I’m sorry you were treated badly. That’s all I meant to say last night.”

Tahlen stared at him, then turned away. “It taught me things, anyway.”

“I imagine it did. Were you like this before?” Zelli gave a start. “Forget I asked that. I’m not prying. I’m eating.” He marched over to a small fallen tree and sat before shoving a biscuit into his mouth.

Tahlen studied him, eyes narrowed. “What is it that I am like now?”

“Watchful. Silent. Impossible to read.” Zelli hoped his crunching sounds drowned out most of the words.

“It’s my job to be watchful,” Tahlen insisted, truly scowling now, although Zelli didn’t call attention to it. “You’d have to ask Esrin about how I used to be.” He was still holding the apple, although he was no longer spinning it. He inhaled and

exhaled and made his scowl vanish, only for a fraction of it to sneak back onto his face anyway. “I was not a fighter, not seriously. Not beyond the usual lessons.”

That veered dangerously close to their conversation last night.

Zelli nonetheless considered the information he had been given, and Tahlen at age fifteen. Tahlen certainly did not seem to have problems charming people now when he wanted to. But Zelli didn’t want to think of him as a young flirt chasing after potential bed partners. “Were you more into hunting and the like? Or were you a scholar perhaps?”

Tahlen’s eyebrows flitted up. His answer was slow, like someone dredging up a distant memory. “I did favor the histories, a little.”

That was more to consider, and more reason for Tahlen to despair of Zelli, who bothered with the histories only when forced. “Is that how you know to advise Grandmother?”

Tahlen had the gall to dismiss his contributions. “It’s only advice.”

“*Good* advice.” Zelli huffed before realizing that Grandmother had likely also consulted Tahlen about her plans for Zelli’s future, possibly even before she’d brought it up to Zelli. “Did you...? Do you have thoughts on my impending alliance?”

“I have thoughts,” Tahlen told the apple before shoving it back into the pack, uneaten, “but not your grandmother’s ear. Not on that. You still don’t eat. You don’t like the biscuits?”

Zelli dutifully had another biscuit, although the one felt like more than enough. He forced himself to swallow, then tried to convince himself to eat more. His mouth was too dry. So was his skin. He twitched with a thousand little itches that vanished before he could scratch them, not that scratching would ease anything.

He *must* be getting sick, though he didn’t recognize the illness. With the long night and then the stinging in his blood, it almost felt like the early stages of his....

Zelli quickly dropped his gaze to his lap so Tahlen wouldn’t read panic in his expression. He tried to remember

experiencing any other symptoms of his lust-fever or his changing problem. But other than some intimate thoughts brought on by Tahlen's proximity, Zelli didn't think he was feeling more aroused than usual. He wasn't restless and craving something he couldn't identify. And the changing problem usually began while Zelli was asleep.

But if it wasn't those, then what was it? Normal illness, or some new fae complication?

Tahlen came closer, scarcely making a sound, and bent down to take a biscuit, which he stood up to eat. "They taste fine to me," he mumbled, then bent again to hand one to Zelli before gently taking the bundle from him.

His fingers brushed Zelli's, an accidental touch almost certainly.

Yet it was the fire in Zelli's bedroom fireplace in the depths of wintertime, and a cup of lavender and lemon drink cooled by ice from the mountains in the summer. It was honey in his tea and sweet-smelling balm to soothe the stinging nettles scraping across his flesh.

Zelli snatched his hand to his chest and gazed up, panting, into Tahlen's frozen look of concern.

"What's wrong?"

"I would rather you had the biscuit," Zelli pronounced carefully, then held out the biscuit in question. He did not tremble when their hands touched again, or melt at Tahlen's feet, or curl against him in grateful relief. He did not, but it was a near thing.

Zelli bit his tongue so he would not moan, then closed his eyes.

The wrongness went away when Tahlen touched him. That was... that was not a good sign. If this was a new fae complication, or a development in one of his existing ones, he really wished his fae relations would have bothered to warn him of it.

He wished....

Zelli had made a wish last night.

“I didn’t realize anyone was listening!” he complained fretfully.

“What?” Tahlen asked.

Zelli’s eyes flew open. “Oh, no.” He had only just gotten Tahlen to not actively dislike him and now he’d done something to make the fae do *this* to him.

“Are you feeling all right?” Tahlen looked as if he might check Zelli for fever that very moment.

Zelli wanted the touch of Tahlen’s hand more than he’d ever wanted anything in his life. Beneath his clothes, he burned.

He jumped to his feet. “We should get going!” he announced while moving toward Lemon Blossom and frantically trying to think of ways to escape the help from the fae that he had not asked for. This was not what he’d meant.

But the fae answered how they would and there was little Zelli could do about it now. He had to think of something to offer the fae that would make them understand this sort of assistance would only make Tahlen more distant, not bring them closer.

Zelli just hoped he could bear it until that happened or they returned home and he could ask Grandmother what he ought to do.

He led Lemon Blossom to the fallen tree so he could use that as a mounting block, not wanting to even risk Tahlen’s touch on his boot, and hurried back to the road, leaving Tahlen to follow.

They reached a waystation not long after that. Tahlen gave Zelli another suspicious study when Zelli suggested they pass it without stopping. Since Zelli’s original plans had been to reach at least this waystation, and now he had not truly eaten as well and could use checking over the waystation as an excuse to stop, Tahlen was right to be suspicious.

It didn't help that Tahlen had caught Zelli gnawing at the cord to his necklace. In another time, Zelli might have been delighted to witness Tahlen clearly holding back his questions. But all it meant was that when Zelli tried to avoid stopping, Tahlen said, "I'm hungry," and stopped at the waystation anyway.

Whether or not Tahlen was actually hungry was hardly the point; Zelli wasn't going to keep him from eating and Tahlen knew it.

He dug out a small metal cup from one of the packs and brought Zelli water the moment Zelli was on his feet. "You're flushed," Tahlen said shortly, and stood there, being resolute and armed and taller than Zelli, until Zelli drank it.

Zelli gazed up at him but had no idea what to say. Tahlen was *in a mood*, as Nya would have described it, and it couldn't have all been because Zelli wasn't eating.

When Zelli didn't speak, Tahlen eventually took the cup and went over to Starfall to replace it and to return with one of the apples. He offered it to Zelli with a stare that said Grandmother was going to hear everything about this if Zelli wasn't careful.

Zelli raised his hands so Tahlen could drop the apple into his palms.

The tic in Tahlen's jaw returned. "Do you think I'm going to...?" He cut himself off and shook his head. "You can chew an apple just as well as your necklace. Better, even, some might say."

Zelli gave Tahlen a glower for that, then lowered his glower to the apple itself. "It isn't that I'm not hungry," he began tentatively, "it's that I don't feel well enough to want to eat."

"You *are* sick." Tahlen snatched the apple from Zelli's hands and stepped in closer all in one movement, so Zelli was too stunned to react in time when Tahlen put the inside of his wrist to Zelli's forehead.

The sound that tore from Zelli, a rising gasp of pleasure that slid into a sigh of relief, made them both freeze.

Zelli stumbled back too late, tripping and landing painfully on his ass, where he stayed for a few stunned moments, wheezing.

Tahlen, out of habit, out of manners or concern, leaned down to tug Zelli back to his feet. The absence of itching at the strong clasp of Tahlen's hand had Zelli shuddering and closing his eyes. He tripped on Tahlen's boots instead of standing upright, squashing his face against a mail-covered chest.

Tahlen's arms came up to steady him, hot as embers through Zelli's cloak and shirts. Embers that warmed yet did not cause pain.

Zelli kept his eyes shut and swallowed the breathless noises that continued to spill from him. With more care, he pushed himself out of Tahlen's arms.

Discomfort began to crawl through his skin again almost immediately.

"I'm sorry," Zelli apologized feverishly, then tried to take another step back.

Something strong kept him from moving. He opened his eyes and found Tahlen holding him by a fistful of his cloak.

"You'll trip again," Tahlen warned him before letting go. He had color along his cheekbones. His eyes were wide. But he shut his mouth and stood there, his chest heaving for several moments more.

Zelli suspected his chest was doing much the same. "I'm sorry," he said again, "I didn't know they were listening. I know better, and I still.... They shouldn't have involved you!"

"Zelli." Tahlen stopped him. They both took another moment, Zelli to try to think of an explanation that wasn't embarrassing. Tahlen... probably to compose himself after Zelli had *moaned* at him. "Zelli," Tahlen said again at last, almost pleading.

"Fae blood!" Zelli blurted. "It does things. Attracts attention, I think."

“What does that mean? Not in general.” Tahlen raised his head and crossed his arms. “What does that mean for you *right now*?”

Zelli hunched his shoulders and glanced away. “It shows up in different ways. Not strongly in most of my family. I mean, considering the generations since the original fae, uh, couplings happened, I’m surprised it still manifests at all. But that’s the fae for you.” Zelli paused, then raised his voice to a near shout in case they were listening again. “Bless them!” He cleared his throat, then returned to a normal speaking voice. “But the fae traits linger. Unusual hair or eye colors. Odd teeth. Sometimes, er, other physical conditions. And they listen to us, allegedly, more than they listen to others.”

He risked a glance at Tahlen.

Tahlen was a blank except for his tone, which was pointed. “But you *didn’t* think they were listening.”

“Right.” Zelli rubbed his neck, then across his upper chest, before he caught himself doing it and stopped. “I am more fae than most. I should have thought before I... I wear their emblem and I am the child of one of them and one of their descendants. I should have thought. But I was... upset last night.”

“Is this about what had changed about you this morning?”

Tahlen’s question was a surprise in several ways.

Zelli peered up at him. “I was changed?”

“Something was different.” Tahlen did not unbend, but neither had he stormed away at the mention of their conversation the night before. “I thought it was your anger with me. But there was nothing obviously wrong.”

“*Wrong.*” Zelli looked away again, then resigned himself to the confession. It was practice, he told himself, for what he’d have to tell his intended. A thought which only increased his misery.

“You might say I am wrong,” he went on. “Sometimes I experience things that most do not experience. And yes, before you say it, I knew I might experience them when out here with

you, but they usually are not like this and also haven't happened in months, so the risk seemed minimal." He could *feel* Tahlen's objections building and held up a hand. "Also, as I said, I have their attention, possibly more than most other Tialttyrins. I knew better than to wish recklessly, so if that is the cause, I will be furious with myself. You don't deserve this."

Instead of fury, he got concerned curiosity. "So... whatever is going on is something new to you?"

"Yes." Zelli exhaled in relief before facing Tahlen again.

"Thank you for understanding. And I don't think there's too much reason to worry. If this turns out to *not* be something that I caused, then it's something natural for me and I will just have to figure out what it is. Most of those are bearable. Um." Zelli wet his lips. "I would need some privacy, but they are bearable."

"*Most?*" Of all of the words for Tahlen to note, it was that one. "Do we need to head back?"

"No," Zelli answered honestly, but slow and hesitating. "I don't think so," he amended. "I truly think I caused this." Tahlen's silence was somehow stubborn, as if he would stand there and wait until Zelli told him everything. He probably would. Zelli briefly scowled. "I was frustrated last night. You're frustrating. I want to understand you. I try, but I can't. I don't know what you mean, or why you do what you do, or why you would share smiles with that..." Zelli scratched pointlessly over his ribs. "I may have wished something."

The silence now could have been shock or outrage. Zelli tensed.

Tahlen's tone was flat. "*May have wished something.*"

"It shouldn't affect you," Zelli assured him.

"Are you sick?" Tahlen demanded. "Because then it does affect me."

"This is what I mean." Zelli rubbed harder when annoyance and frustration seemed to combine into an especially terrible *wrong* patch. "You're so confusing! I didn't plan this, please



believe me. I wouldn't do that to you." All the rubbing and scratching was useless. He knew that. But he had to do something with Tahlen quiet and alarmed. "The situation is... that... I don't feel *well*, but I seem to feel *better* when you... are close." He continued on in a mortified rush. "Better still when you touch me."

He raised his head, miserable and half-convinced Tahlen was going to leave him here to suffer alone until he remembered this was Tahlen. Even hating Zelli, he wouldn't do that. "Just riding next to you should be fine!" Zelli promised him without knowing if that was remotely true. "If it's natural for me, it will likely fade after a day or so, as those situations tend to. Three days at the most, and that has only happened once, when you—never mind that. If it's an answer to a wish... I can deal with it when we're home."

"You wished for this?" Tahlen asked, very soft. "To have me touch you?"

"Ah," Zelli said first, uselessly. "If you pay attention to the stories, the fae do not exactly grant wishes how people expect. They provide a path. And that only if they feel like it. This is the path they've given me. I'm so sorry."

Tahlen dropped his arms to his sides. "To help you to understand me?" he prompted, brows joined in stiff displeasure. "I don't think I'm hard to understand."

"Pft." Zelli couldn't help himself. He met Tahlen's bewildered gaze. "I just found out about your family yesterday, Tahlen! You make decisions and think things based on all you have learned, and your life has very much not been mine! It hasn't been like the life of anyone else I know, except your sister, who would not speak with me if I were to ask about you. *Of course* I don't understand you!"

He was breathing hard.

Tahlen gave him no reply for several aching moments, then said uncertainly, "You could ask me."

"And you will speak?" Zelli paused his scratching to wave at the empty air between them. "You talk to Grandmother as you

do not talk to me. Not unless I act as I do right now, childish and too emotional.”

Tahlen shook his head. “Not childish. Angry. *Hurt*. I—why do you believe I don’t like you?”

Zelli forgot the wrongness and the itch. “What?”

“You said....” Tahlen did not explain whatever Zelli had apparently once said. He squared his shoulders and then went on. “You speak and act as though you’re a problem for me, as though I don’t like you.”

Zelli briefly looked to the horses, but the horses offered him no clues as to how the conversation had come to this.

“Well,” he began at last, “you don’t.” He tried not to make it a question. “When you first came to us, you did not like me at all and I did nothing to help that. You’re tired of me apologizing, but I *am* sorry for how I was then, how I followed you and called you Tahly as though you were mine to name. I’d just never....” His voice grew as small as he was. “I’m very alone there. And you’re impressive. You know you are. You *should* know it, if you don’t.”

He wasn’t surprised to get more silence this time. But since Tahlen stared at him, he stared back. Zelli wasn’t defiant or even angry anymore. Tahlen didn’t understand Zelli either, it seemed. Although he’d be wise to stop assuming he did and interrupting Zelli before Zelli could finish talking.

Tahlen abruptly lowered his head. “When I first came to the Tialttyrin’s stronghold, I was too willing to see you as a spoiled beat-of-four who knew nothing and had never wanted for anything.”

“And I was annoying,” Zelli added, *almost* light. “You can say it.”

“You were curious,” Tahlen corrected him. “But you never demanded anything, not even my attention. That was always an accident, and felt... impersonal when we first met.”

Zelli imagined Tahlen would have welcomed torture over this conversation. Or maybe he thought it *was* torture. He clenched his jaw between one sentence and the next. Yet he was

speaking. Zelli didn't know why, but he wasn't going to ignore it or quibble over memories.

"All right. Regarding those days, I believe you." Zelli was willing to accept Tahlen's view of their first meetings. "But you don't joke with me as you do with others. You'll share smiles with Mayor Sar but even when I try to be amusing.... It's nothing. Don't worry. You don't need to like me."

Eyebrows raised, lips parted, Tahlen actually seemed taken aback, as though Zelli hadn't spoken the truth. "I suppose I've learned to be reserved," he said at last, after a long, long pause.

"With me more than anyone else?" Zelli scowled again but turned his head so Tahlen wouldn't take the brunt of it. "It's probably because I *cannot* be reserved. It's a skill I don't have," he admitted sadly. "You learned it for a reason. I don't blame you. But you asked why I don't understand you and the answer is that you don't let me."

Tahlen's flummoxed expression did not disappear. But he pressed his lips together, then allowed a handsome frown to take over his handsome face. "Maybe, when I found a place of safety, I should have learned how to be less guarded."

"Really, Tahlen, don't worry over it." Zelli resumed trying to ease the discomfort beneath his skin. "I'm certain I am the problem. I am always the problem."

"The fae don't think so if they watch over you." Tahlen's warm disagreement nearly stole Zelli's breath. "They're also your family, even if you don't know them and they are distant. Only one day away from the walls of your home and they found you and tried to help you after I left you upset."

"Tahlen." Zelli could only manage that. He stilled his hand over his heart. "Oh, *Tahlen*."

Tahlen seemed confused by how sweetly Zelli exhaled his name. "Are you in pain?"

"What?" Zelli asked, struggling to recall what they had been talking about before all this. "No, not exactly. I am... uncomfortable. As if my clothes are too tight or I've stepped

into a patch of itchy weeds and they somehow entered my veins.” As if the hollow place in his chest had grown so large that he would never be able to settle or know peace. “It’s vexing, which makes it not unlike my one of my other problems. So, it should be bearable, at least.”

He tried to smile to reassure Tahlen.

Tahlen held out his hand.

Zelli stared at it, mesmerized. He swallowed. Despite the water, his mouth was very dry. “I wouldn’t force you to.”

“I’m well aware of that, Zelli of the Tialttyrin. And that if you say you can bear it, you will do your best to do so.”

Yet he offered his hand anyway.

Zelli lifted his gaze to meet Tahlen’s. He still could not read it, but wondered what Tahlen saw in his and what color his eyes were for this.

He put his hand in Tahlen’s and sighed heavily as the wrongness slid away.

“Now,” Tahlen announced, “you’ll eat and rest.”

Zelli could not fault him for his satisfaction. “All of a sudden, I find I’m ravenously hungry.”

He had a pie—Tahlen insisted—and two apples, and three biscuits. He worried over the state of his palm against Tahlen’s—perhaps it was too sweaty—and finally tugged his hand free to brush away crumbs and the dirt from his fall.

The unpleasantness returned, but he bit his lip and attempted to straighten his hair while Tahlen put away the rest of the food.

Tahlen broke the peaceful silence with the question. “You said it was new to you?”

Zelli glanced over. “Yes. But, usually, with most of the issues, they are brief. A day or two and only rarely debilitating.”

Tahlen was deadly serious. “You’ll tell me if you think it will become so?”

It would be rather obvious, Zelli reflected, burying his panic at the thought. No words would be needed.

“Is it something embarrassing?” Tahlen, fae curse him, read Zelli’s thoughts again, and correctly this time. “You’ve certainly hidden that well, you and your grandmother.” He put up a hand. “You don’t have to share what it is. Simply tell me if you think we need to hurry home, or... or if you have any other needs I can help you with.”

He had no idea what he was doing to Zelli, no matter what color Zelli’s eyes were. Zelli wanted to sink his teeth into Tahlen’s muscled shoulder or just put his mouth there; he wasn’t really sure which. He made himself look away.

“Your duty doesn’t extend that far,” he fairly squeaked.

Tahlen did not sound pleased. “Zelli, you called down the fae because I was too distant with you. I don’t want that to happen again. Please, will you tell me if something gets worse?”

“All right. I’ll tell you,” Zelli agreed delicately. “But you were understandably distant.” He looked back at Tahlen. “You don’t have to speak about your family to me. To be clear, that wasn’t what upset me. They’re yours to remember. I disliked that I stumbled onto the subject and you were hurt.”

Tahlen inclined his head. “I would like them to be known as more than the family who... perished as they did. Perhaps I should speak of them more.”

“Well,” Zelli finished hesitantly. “Good, then. Tell whoever you wish—want—to tell. Whenever you feel like doing so. I’m sure they’ll be pleased to listen.”

“As you would be?” Tahlen asked, but didn’t wait for an answer. He came over to Zelli and knelt down, offering his body as a mounting block yet again. “We should get going.”

“Right. Yes.” Zelli caught a glimpse of his dusty boot in Tahlen’s hand, then he was getting settled atop Lemon Blossom.

“*You’re* supposed to order *me* around,” Tahlen remarked, the glimmer once more in his eyes when Zelli turned to look at him.

“I am seeking counsel before making a decision,” Zelli informed him loftily after staring for a beat too long. “And thank you.”

Tahlen’s hand was warm over Zelli’s knee for another moment after that. “You’re welcome.”

They stopped without dismounting when they came to a crossroads where the main road connected to a lane that divided two swaths of land. The smaller path was either a shortcut formed over generations by regular travelers in order to reach the other large road that went up and down the valley, or it was a lane the landowners had put in to make their work in these fields easier and it wouldn’t extend very far. But if there were people hiding or sneaking through the valley, they wouldn’t be found along the main roads. A point Zelli made.

Tahlen, of course, reminded him that unless they encountered friendly farmers or grape growers, they were not likely to find comfortable places to sleep, and what food they had with them would have to last until the journey back.

Zelli took his eyes off the horizon and smiled at Tahlen despite how he felt inside. “But you brought more for that purpose?”

Tahlen arched an eyebrow but gave in with a sigh. “Yes.”

“Then we go on.” Zelli attempted to say it with even a fraction of Tahlen’s resolve, then stilled at the warm clasp of Tahlen’s hand around his ankle. The touch was not Tahlen’s skin to his, but nevertheless, Zelli dropped his shoulders in relief.

“Don’t wait until it’s worse,” Tahlen ordered, stern. “I can worry over you if you can worry over me. You said the oath was mutual,” he added, destroying any argument Zelli might have offered.

“You know, you have a stubborn way about you,” Zelli told him anyway, “in addition to your stiff kindnesses.”

“So, you have already learned that about me.” Tahlen crooked a smile, there and gone, but enough to send Zelli’s thoughts to the clouds. “And you’re meant to learn something from this, aren’t you?”

“I wouldn’t have expected you to be so calm about it,” Zelli told him, marveling a little. More than a little.

“To live with the fae near, you have to appreciate them, even the things they do that puzzle you. I’ve had years of that already, so why should this be different?” Tahlen lifted his hand, leaving it out for Zelli to reach over to take, which Zelli did, grasping it tight until much of the ache went away.

Zelli found he could not meet Tahlen’s eyes and wasn’t sure why, since Tahlen didn’t seem to mind. Zelli flushed in the shared moments of silence and only reluctantly pulled away.

He reached out again not long after, uncertain until he caught a glimpse of another of Tahlen’s quick smiles. Then he did not know what to do, or feel, besides the squirming warmth in his chest where the ache had been. But he didn’t let go, either.

# Eight

They did not encounter anyone as the sun rose higher and then began to fall, but they did find themselves staring at a waystation that was not on any map of the valley the Tialtтын possessed. Situated between several fields, one of which was a lumber field, full of young trees in varying stages of growth, the station was somewhat small, with a firepit in the center surrounded by rocks that must have been dug out of the ground during plowing. It was near one of the irrigation streams, obviously for water, and it had no covered stable area.

The farmers and hands must have built it for when they worked around here. It was certainly better than camping out in the open, especially in the winter, when the grape growers froze but had to see to their vines. Zelli wondered how many of these informal waystations there might be. They were worth mentioning to Grandmother. The Tialtтын might supplement their firewood supplies, or give a stipend toward their maintenance, provided lost travelers were permitted to use the stations.

Tahlen poked around the building, inside and out, then grunted to let Zelli know he was welcome to come inside. Behind the waystation was a pile of old vines and some wood from felled trees. Tahlen brought logs in and Zelli started a fire before the chill of the fog reached them.

Zelli hadn't packed a roll to sleep in, but he had his cloak, and he was dressed in layers to make up for his lack of armor, and it was, technically, still summer.

Tahlen did not relax despite the fire and the food Zelli eventually set out. He stood at the edge of the building, watching the fog draw nearer.

"If there is a force from another family in this valley intent upon harm, they will be lost in the fog the same as anyone else," Zelli called out after a while.



Tahlen turned to give Zelli a look that bordered on sour, but came away from his sentry duty. “If we do get visitors, you should not announce that you’re a Tialttyrin.” From how unhappily Tahlen said it, Zelli guessed he was fretting. But, considering that Tahlen was prepared to fling himself between Zelli and threats, Zelli couldn’t fault him for it. He nodded his agreement.

Tahlen exhaled for that, then sat down at last. Unlike Zelli, he sat on one of the rocks. The rocks were flat enough, but not particularly comfortable. Zelli was fine on the tamped earth, seated with his legs crossed. He had devoured cheese, apples, and a boiled egg while Tahlen had stared down any approaching enemies, and now had his comb out to get the road dust from his hair.

His night on the ground would be uncomfortable, but at least it wasn’t winter. As adventures went, it was a mild one, and Zelli was determined to be content and not complain. Then Tahlen sat down next to him, his knee close enough for Zelli to lean against it, perhaps inviting Zelli to touch it if needed, and Zelli realized he had not considered the sleeping arrangements.

He was still not complaining, but things might get awkward.

“You know,” he began, voice slightly strained, “we might not spot any strangers if they really want to stay hidden. Although, by autumn, when the bushes and trees stop providing cover for them, they *will* be found if they are still here.”

Tahlen paused while reaching for a pie, then carried on. “You and your grandmother will have to plan for that. Although, hiding that long implies they aren’t here to cause trouble.”

“No, avoiding trouble.” Zelli didn’t like that idea, though he should. It meant the possible strangers were being pursued and he did not know by whom or why. “No one else but a ruler has the right to act in this valley, and that would require a *legitimate* ruler, and they should have informed Grandmother first.”

A ruler’s legitimacy was only partly a matter of being from a line traced back to the original Earls. In actuality, it involved that someone being of such a bloodline—mostly to get the

support of the other families and not for any other reason Zelli could find—getting and keeping the throne, and then ruling wisely enough that the other families allowed it. The ruler was supposed to solve disputes between families, not cause them. If another family had sent armed guards here, no matter what the reason, they either believed they had that right as potential rulers—which they did not—or they no longer cared about tradition.

“People do things they would not believe themselves capable of when they’re desperate,” Tahlen said suddenly, as if his thoughts had gone in a different direction. Zelli twisted to look up at him. Tahlen had stopped with an egg in one hand, the shell uncracked. “I imagine, if you wanted to appear stronger and nobler than you really are, then no one could be allowed to know that your sworn guards had fled you. Even if it meant slowing your other plans, you could not leave those guards to run loose and tell the rest of the country how you’ve failed them.”

His voice was soft.

Zelli shivered.

Tahlen focused on him, frowning. “Nothing will happen to you. I won’t let it.”

That wasn’t why Zelli had shivered. But he shook his head. “And I won’t let you sacrifice yourself, so we find ourselves at an impasse, don’t we?”

He got nothing in response to that. Tahlen went back to eating, which Zelli now took for more stubbornness. Tahlen wasn’t going to argue with Zelli over it. He would just *act* if the time came. *With his body* the oath said, *with his life*. He would die and leave Zelli to.... He would leave Zelli, and Zelli would feel what Tahlen and his sister must have felt in their first moments of survival.

How very terrible of him.

Zelli curled a hand around the bottom of Tahlen’s leg, fidgeting with his comb with his other hand.

Tahlen turned his head. He wiped his hands on his pants, studied Zelli for another moment, or at least the top of Zelli's head and the side of his face since Zelli did not look back to meet his gaze. He cleared his throat.

"I can arrange your hair for sleep, if you like."

He would need to touch Zelli again if Zelli hoped to get any sleep, but Zelli had nearly forgotten the matter of his hair. Or rather, Tahlen's offer to take care of it for him.

"You wear it almost as you do in the daytime, don't you?" Tahlen went on when Zelli gave a jerky nod of permission. Tahlen was using his soft voice once again. He gestured for Zelli to move closer, and Zelli did that jerkily as well, scooting over until his back was against Tahlen's legs.

Zelli sat rigidly for the first moments, sure this was not what Tahlen had meant, but then Tahlen shifted to let Zelli fall back a little, the stone there to support him but Tahlen's legs on either side of his body.

Zelli stared wide-eyed at the fire and wished, silently, that he would not embarrass himself or Tahlen. Without a word, he held up the comb and the discarded bits of cord for tying the ends of braids. Tahlen began to work almost immediately, gently combing the length down Zelli's back, fingertips occasionally brushing Zelli's neck on either side.

Zelli closed his eyes. "Um." It was more a hum than a word. "No one has ever done my hair for me before."

The smallest hesitation between strokes of the comb could have meant anything. "Not even your parent before they returned to their life in the capital?"

So Tahlen's parents had sometimes brushed or combed their children's hair. It was possible most children experienced that.

Zelli coughed lightly. "No. None of the servants here are trained to do it as they are in the capital, and there was really no need since I never go anywhere. Grandmother was going to call one of the cousins home for a visit before I... before I leave, if I leave, to teach me. Although we did worry my hair would be too difficult to handle." Tahlen gently parted Zelli's

hair, first into two big sections and then one smaller one near Zelli's nape. Zelli sucked in a breath. "You have no problems, however."

Tahlen's knuckles glanced across Zelli's skin as he braided, putting a tiny plait behind Zelli's ear that Zelli wanted to touch but also didn't want to draw attention to. The tiny braid went into one of the larger ones, which were secure but not tight enough to pull at Zelli's scalp.

Tahlen fastened the last cord, released a long breath, then handed Zelli his comb.

Zelli took it but didn't turn for a while, passing his fingertips over each braid, lingering on the braid-within-a-braid. "I'll hate to mess them up," he confessed, tipping his head back, pleased when Tahlen leaned forward to make it easier for Zelli to see him. "But I likely will. I was restless last night and might be so again."

Though he ought to have been bothered by this, Tahlen did not appear to be. He said, "You'll have to lie near me, then," in a reasonable voice, before reaching back to tug the end of his braid over his shoulder.

When he untied the cord and began to slowly comb out the braid with his fingers, Zelli felt his lips part. He twisted around to consider that Tahlen's hair shined in the light of all fires and probably also in the light of the sun, if Zelli was ever fortunate enough to witness that.

Tahlen's eyes met Zelli's as he continued to unravel the intricate weave.

Zelli's throat was quite dry. He realized his hand was on Tahlen's knee. He snatched it away, then felt foolish and put it back since he had permission to touch Tahlen now.

"You have beautiful hair," Zelli told him earnestly, only to give a start. "I should..." He stuttered to silence because there was nothing he should do. Nothing he had to do at that moment, anyway.

"Would you like to try braiding it?" Tahlen offered, still regarding Zelli with his warm, watchful eyes. "For practice,"

he tacked on, possibly because Zelli was gaping at him.

Zelli dug his fingernails into his palms at the idea of that hair sliding between his fingers.

“Come up here behind me,” Tahlen instructed when Zelli did not otherwise move, and Zelli found himself scrambling to sit on the stone recently warmed by Tahlen’s backside as Tahlen descended gracefully to the ground.

He had to reach out almost immediately to keep the ends of Tahlen’s long hair from falling into the dirt. Then, of course, he spent several moments letting it trail through his hands. He recalled himself too late and quickly began to comb it, starting at the top.

Tahlen, voice nearly as smooth as his hair, had Zelli start near the bottom instead to catch any knots from the undone braid before Zelli combed the rest. Zelli didn’t know how long he did that, to be honest. He might have combed Tahlen’s hair for hours, but Tahlen didn’t stop Zelli or suggest he should get on with it. Zelli took care around Tahlen’s ears, trying not to touch at first, but then giving in when he remembered Tahlen had touched him there and he shouldn’t shy from it.

“Any braid I can do will be simple,” Zelli warned him, whispering for some reason. He lifted the mass of Tahlen’s hair in one hand, the other slowly collecting any strands he’d missed.

“It’s for tonight only,” Tahlen whispered back. “And only for you to see, if it bothers you that much.”

“I won’t have you looking foolish,” Zelli informed him indignantly, still unable to raise his voice. He petted the shining strands one last time before attempting to part them into sections. “You should wear it loose sometimes, with little braids, like the palace beat-of-fours are said to.”

“It would get in my way.” Tahlen reached back, took Zelli’s hand by the wrist without turning to find it, and directed it down to the side of his neck where a lock of hair had come loose. He was very warm. Zelli was never going to be able to fall asleep now.

He gulped, but collected the errant lock and decided he should speak to it as Tahlen had spoken to his hair. “Now, now,” Zelli scolded Tahlen’s hair, “you are much too lovely to be this disobedient. I will not allow you to make our Tahlen look silly. Oh.” His words seemed loud. “That is to say... Tahlen wouldn’t like it, and Esrin certainly wouldn’t either.”

“You’re giving my hair orders?” Tahlen wondered without anger and reached back again to once more guide Zelli’s hand. Zelli didn’t mind, though Tahlen would feel the wild beat of his pulse if he cared to notice it. Zelli had braided ahead of himself and made a small tangle. But that didn’t seem a shameful mistake since Tahlen said nothing when Zelli had to unravel and comb and start again.

Zelli was more careful with his second attempt, deciding not to speak and braid at the same time since his thoughts were distracting him and liable to spill out of his mouth if he didn’t focus. When he was finally finished, he reached for the cord to fasten the braid with a sad sigh that made Tahlen start to turn around.

Tahlen had barely moved before he stopped again, fixing his attention on the open side of the waystation and the thickening fog. He reached for his sword on top of the packs Zelli had taken off the horses and curled his hand around the sword hilt without drawing it.

His words were low and urgent. “Zelli, get back.”

Zelli scrambled backward, nearly falling, then saving himself by tumbling onto the stone next to the one he’d been on.

“See now,” a voice said casually but loudly from within the fog, “I told you we should announce ourselves. These valley people are jumpy.”

Another voice responded to the first. “Can you blame them? These are times to set anyone on edge.” The second voice, which was as deep as the first but of a richer timbre, went on, apparently speaking to Zelli and Tahlen now. “This fog of yours is something. We were debating stopping where we were and hoping daylight wouldn’t reveal we were utterly lost. Then we saw your fire.”

Two figures leading horses emerged from the swirling fog. Two *large* figures, even by the standards of people who were not Zelli.

“A nice fire,” one of them grunted, the first speaker, Zelli thought, who was the larger of the two. “Might we enjoy it with you?”

Asking politely to sit in a Tialttyrin waystation, usually meant for the public to use, would have marked them as people from outside the valley even if their clothing and hair hadn’t immediately made their profession clear.

“Brilliant, these little houses you do here,” said the other one, glancing around the farmer-made waystation with interest.

“The Rossick have a few as well, but not nearly so many. More families should take up the idea. Maybe we could have some along the highways, sponsored by the ruler.”

“Be sure to mention that to whoever occupies the palace these days.” The first one practically grunted that too.

“No, thank you, my love,” the other one responded mildly. “I’m fond of my head where it is. But I might suggest it to Ral.”

“*Suggest*, he says.” A third grunt, this one sarcastic.

They were outguards almost certainly. From their short-cropped hair, the layers of durable wool in dark colors, the oiled cloaks, to the array of weaponry. The last outguards Zelli had laid eyes on, and indeed most of them, had worn swords of different sizes and sometimes a mace or something easily carried. Both of them had swords, one with an additional long knife in a sheath, and both wore armor that looked years-old.

Tahlen turned to Zelli. To deny them would be inhospitable and against the idea behind the waystations, even though this one had not built for the public. Besides that, they were outguards.

Tahlen’s steady gaze acknowledged that, but the choice was still Zelli’s.

Zelli faced the two new arrivals and found them both observing the exchange. He cleared his throat.

“All are welcome in the waystations,” he said, polite, but not the warmest possible greeting.

Tahlen relaxed his grip but did not take his hand far from the sword.

“Thank you,” said the second outguard, the one with the rich voice. “We’ll just see to our horses.”

Tahlen eased back up onto one of the stone seats without taking his attention from the outguards and whispered to Zelli, “Do not blindly trust them. The Outguard serve the throne and we don’t even know who’s on it.”

Zelli nodded, also keeping his attention on the two, who moved smoothly around one other. The outguards had a moment of intense staring between them, as if something were silently being argued, and then both of them removed their swords. They carried the swords within their bundles of blankets and food when they returned to the fire.

A gesture Zelli appreciated, even if Tahlen likely didn’t. He suspected the second outguard, the one with curly black hair and a dark complexion, had suggested it. The other one, taller, paler, with deep red hair, had yet to smile. The darker one had a scar down one side of his face that appeared to still be healing and was probably a fright in the light of day. That and their size must have sent more than one villager into a panic. It was no wonder the two outguards were cautious now or that they’d gotten lost. No one had probably wanted to talk to them to give them directions.

Once the scar had healed all the way, the second outguard would turn heads for a different reason. Both of them were exceedingly well-made, really. Separately, the people in the valley might have responded to them with more openness. But together, they were a sight both appealing and alarming. Zelli stared openly.

Other than their armor—a personal choice for most guards, Zelli had learned—they wore nothing else distinctive, save one plain silver metal ear cuff on the ear of the smaller one.



*Smaller.* Zelli nearly laughed. He was grateful they sat across the fire or he would have had to tilt his head up to talk to them.

They dropped blanket rolls and some bundles onto the ground with their weapons, and then made identical groans of exhaustion. They were putting on a nice show of being tired and harmless but they both looked as if they had seen fighting many times in their lives and could face more. Like Tahlen would have if he hadn't come to the fortress of the Tialtтын and been offered some peace and comfort.

Zelli realized he was leaning closer to Tahlen and glanced over to him. He was unsurprised to see Tahlen's face was impassive. He looked back at their Outguard visitors. They had a few years on Tahlen and, the larger one at least would stand taller. Tahlen had reached the age where he would not gain any more height, but he would gain bulk over time as these two had. That was the way of things for most, and with guards the bulk became even more muscle unless they retired.

Zelli would not object to Tahlen growing thicker if Tahlen wished it, but hoped Tahlen would never grow so battle-ready. He was filled with sorrow at even the idea.

But he realized Tahlen was speaking and he yanked himself back into the conversation in time to catch the end of an introduction. The second outguard, with the ear cuff, was named Arden. Zelli had missed the name of the other one.

The unnamed one politely offered Tahlen and Zelli some of their food, dried meats along with oat and nut cakes made for those traveling long distances. Zelli and Tahlen politely refused, as was the tradition, but Zelli would have refused the cakes anyway; they tended to be dry.

Zelli let them eat, remembering to finally stow his comb as Tahlen stiffly informed the outguards of the way they ought to travel in the morning.

"There are two main roads, all the way up and down the valley," Zelli jumped in. Roads that were straightforward to follow unless the fog was extremely dense or two outguards were feeling nosy. But he supposed it was part of their job to be nosy.

“Roads like that are good for trading, bad for defense,” the larger one commented, not in a grunt. Zelli frowned since he wasn’t sure if it was meant as criticism or in praise of their so-far peaceful valley.

“Has the current ruler sent you out here for records?” he asked. “It’s been a long time since we’ve seen any outguards.”

The larger one turned to look at Zelli, then paused. Zelli couldn’t tell what color the man’s eyes were in the firelight. Whatever the color, they dipped down to Zelli’s side where Zelli had apparently reached out for Tahlen, then came back up to Zelli’s face.

“Reckon I seem a brute,” the larger said, his grunt changing to something clearer. “And I am. But if I look worse, it’s been a hard ride over the mountains from the lands of the Rossick, with more folk running from us than inclined to give directions or share some food. Though I suspect they’d regard all strangers with worry and I shouldn’t take it personally.”

“It has not been a restful journey,” Arden agreed. “There have been fewer places to stop, even for outguards. People are frightened and we don’t want to frighten them more.”

The other one looked between Tahlen and Zelli again. “Just you two out here?” he asked with clear disapproval, only to seem startled and raise his hands innocently when Zelli lifted his chin. “Not that your guard isn’t more than enough from the look of him, little one. But things are not what they once were.”

“He means the country outside this lovely valley has remembered this lovely valley exists,” Arden interjected, the diplomatic half of the pair. “We remembered it too, and thought we should get an idea of what is going on here for our own knowledge.” He leaned in as if confiding a secret.

“Honestly, I’m not even sure who’s on the throne right now. Unless either of you happen to know?” He paused but didn’t seem surprised neither of them had an answer. He went back to eating, stopping to break apart one of the cakes and offer the larger piece to his friend, who had his own but took that one as well. “Didn’t get your names,” Arden said, while chewing his

chunk of cake, his gaze on the fire as though he was not terribly interested.

*Oh, Zelli realized, this one was like a canny trader.*

“Tahlen,” Zelli gestured to Tahlen, offering no family name. “I’m Mizel.”

“At your service,” Arden said easily before looking to Tahlen. “Not to tell you your business, but wherever you are getting to, I’d suggest you get to it quicker, unless you have a force of guards hidden in the bushes.”

“*Suggest*, he says again.” The other one snorted with amusement, then explained. “When this one suggests, it means you’re going to end up doing it anyway. Just to warn you. Do I... smell spiced biscuits or is that my imagination?” He sniffed the air with such a hopeful expression that Zelli sighed and dug into his pack for the bundle of biscuits.

He stretched across the side of the firepit to hand the man the bundle, nearly dropping it when their eyes met, then plopping without grace back onto his seat, warmer even than the fire should have made him.

“Fuck me,” the larger one said roughly. “You’re like one of those tiny poppets for the noble children. All you’d need is a robe of silk, ribbons in your hair, and some color painted on your cheeks—no, I see that’s there already.”

Zelli stared at the man for some time before remembering to blink.

The larger one turned to Tahlen. “Now, now, no harm meant. He’s little, is all. Built delicate, too. Never seen anything like it except for the...” He stopped so abruptly it was clear what he’d realized.

“For the images of the fae on a tapestry?” Zelli offered, biting his lip but not certain if he was angry. His face was too hot and he didn’t think it was right that he should feel an itchy longing to touch Tahlen and, at the same time, be so aware of how small he was in comparison to everyone else. He didn’t know why that mattered, but it did. It made him want to touch

Tahlen even more, but he wasn't sure if he should now in front of the others, and that *did* make him angry, or at least irritable.

"Like the fae in person," Arden corrected, words to make even Tahlen give a start. Zelli curled his hand around Tahlen's elbow. Once again, Zelli didn't know what he felt. Arden and possibly the other one had seen the fae up close, possibly more than once from how Arden spoke of them. He held tighter to Tahlen, then realized it and loosened his grip.

Tahlen kept most of his focus on Arden and spoke as though the fae had never been mentioned. "What have you seen that should worry me?"

Arden smiled a little but answered. "There were ten riders on the northern edge of the valley a few days ago. Maybe they were heading elsewhere and went over a mountain path without knowing these mountains—they certainly looked worn and furious about it. Maybe they were scared of the Rossick or were trying to sneak up on them."

"Fools, if so," remarked the larger one.

Zelli gave a nod, which drew the larger one's attention back to him, eyes gleaming.

"These riders seemed to have a goal in mind, I would say," Arden offered. "Though they were not nearly enough to take the whole valley and they didn't seem sure of where to go next. But I couldn't say where they *did* want to go; they were not in the mood to talk to two outguards." His partner held out a biscuit for him but Arden shook his head for it and said, "No, thank you, my love."

The larger one, Arden's love, either as a light, playful endearment or genuinely meant, ate that biscuit but tied up the bundle to hand the rest back to Zelli. "I'd say they were annoyed to have us see them, but weren't sure if killing us and risking the wrath of the rest of the Outguard was worth it."

Zelli gasped as he absently shoved the bundle of biscuits aside.

"Exactly." Arden sighed in agreement with Zelli's shock. "You see the danger."

"He generally does," Tahlen said, not happy about it.

“Wise as well as pretty, then,” Arden murmured mournfully to Tahlen. “You must not have stood a chance.”

The larger one choked on the remnants of his cake. Tahlen said nothing, which was enough to make Zelli slip a hand to Tahlen’s side, partially hidden by the fall of Tahlen’s cloak.

He gazed at Tahlen for another moment, who stubbornly did not look back, then turned to the outguards. Mostly to Arden. “May I ask you something?”

“Please do,” the large one muttered.

Arden shot his partner a wry look but smiled for Zelli. “You can certainly ask.”

Zelli posed the question all at once. “This force you saw, is it possible they are chasing something, or someone?”

Both of Arden’s eyebrows went up. He traded another look with his love, who had also grown more serious.

“Aye,” said the larger one at last, “it’s possible.” He gave Zelli a frown, then Tahlen one as well. Zelli belatedly realized that the outguards might think he and Tahlen were the ones being chased.

Tahlen let out his irritated little exhale. “Have you seen anything else unusual?” He apparently was not even going to address the outguards’ suspicions of them. He did, however, give Zelli another glance when Zelli let his hand rest on the small of Tahlen’s back.

“Other than people hiding from us until they realize we’re outguards and then still not fully trusting us?” Arden acknowledged Tahlen’s tension with a smile. He really was one to watch, like a crow waiting to snatch someone’s lunch, then bringing them a shiny rock in exchange. No matter how shiny the rock, the crow came out the best in the affair.

“It says to me that people are scared.” Arden lost his smile. “I doubt it’s groundless fear, since this is farm country and farmers have things to see to, and they can’t do that if they’re hiding from people all day.”

Zelli had barely spoken to the last outguards to visit the fortress and wondered if they were all this careful. The larger one had implied that Arden was different, used to giving orders. Maybe the Outguard had captains or higher ranks. If so, Arden must be one.

Arden considered Tahlen again, then Zelli. “Mil and I don’t know this valley and its ways, but in a wooded glen between fields, we saw signs of a small, mostly concealed camp. Whether those hiding there had been there for a while or just a few days, we couldn’t say.”

“Away from the roads,” the larger one, Mil, offered thoughtfully. “Streams for water. With small game available too, if the hawks and eagles don’t get the game first. Hmm. With no food on offer, we should stop tomorrow, hunt some rabbits or something.” That was said to Arden alone.

“There are big rats in the fields. They’re often eaten when winters are bad,” Tahlen offered. It was true, if not said in the friendliest tone. Mil grinned toothily in Tahlen’s direction.

“There’s also a village about a day’s ride from here, once you reach the main road.” Zelli pointed in the direction they would need to take in case they’d forgotten Tahlen’s instructions. “I *suggest*,” Mil lit up at the word and the weight Zelli gave it, “you speak to their mayor about the possibility of this strange force showing up, and perhaps also mention those who could be hiding in the fields. Mayor Sar is sensible and will feed you as is expected. And...” Zelli glanced to Arden, “if you continue down that road, you will reach a holding of the Tialttyrin family. You could inform them as well, if you are going that way anyway. They will also feed you. They remember how things used to be and have rooms for outguards still ready for use, even though we have not seen any in years.”

Tahlen turned to him, one eyebrow raised pointedly.

Zelli shrugged. “They have a duty.”

“That we do,” Mil agreed.

Arden seemed almost merry. “Of all the asses who have tried to hold the palace for the last fifteen years, none have thought to end the Outguard. But neither have any of them given much thought to our duties. I don’t think it occurred to them that we are here to help as needed, but also to serve as the eyes-and-ears of the ruler.”

“Or maybe they thought a legion of trained, armed people with a grudge against them would be a bad idea and left them alone.” Zelli wrinkled his nose. “But I suspect you’re right.”

Arden’s amusement only became more obvious. “Most of us have been sticking to familiar territories, for lack of assignment elsewhere. My husband and I tend to wander.”

“It’s probably better that we’ve been ignored,” Zelli admitted with a sigh. “No reports of our crop yields or anything to remind anyone we exist.”

“*We?*” echoed Tahlen lowly.

Mil gave no sign he’d heard that, though Zelli thought both outguards had. “Best to avoid notice. The palace is an unstable place.”

“Curse the Canamorra,” Tahlen added fervently.

Mil’s grin grew mean even as he busied himself with clearing up the remaining bits of their provisions.

“It’s long past time for one of these grasping fools to at least prove competent at ruling,” Arden remarked. “I think the beat-of-fours might accept anyone at this point, provided they were sensible and not too cruel.”

“And yet, does anyone currently fighting for a crown fit that description?” Tahlen asked, but paused and gave Zelli another look. Zelli lowered his gaze to where his hand had moved to rest on Tahlen’s thigh. He lifted his hand away guiltily. Tahlen frowned.

Zelli quickly turned to Arden. “Tahlen is right. They spend their time attacking each other instead of building alliances. Now, with all this bad feeling between the families, to get the crown *would* require some sort of violence... unless someone was very lucky. All of the contenders have done that—

violence, that is. But none of them have been smart enough to stop there, to turn immediately to security and governance, as Tahlen might say. People want things to be calm, to be normal, for the river to safely be used for trade and travel again, for nobles to keep to their work in their own lands. If the majority of the people are happy, then the other families can rattle their swords all they like but they'll have no support. Even the most warlike beat-of-four has to turn their attention to their people or their land will suffer, and they will rule nothing." Zelli took a deep breath, then added, thoughtfully, "If this person also happened to have a family name that no one would contest had a right to be in the capital, that would stop them too."

Arden put his hands on his knees to lean forward as if Zelli had said something fascinating. "Wise enough to take the palace in such a way that it would not be seen as the actions of a traitor *and* bold enough to then drop their weapons? Then also clever enough to learn the running of the country? I would welcome this person too, should they exist."

"Ask the fae." Mil gestured at the air but looked to Zelli.

"In return for what?" Arden shook his head. "What would possibly please them enough for them to show us the way to a new ruler and a time of peace?"

"I find the more emotional an offering, the more it pleases them," Zelli remarked, but his thoughts were similar to Arden's. If the fae wanted the matter settled, they could do so now. They either didn't care or were waiting, and no human was likely to discover the answer. The fae would interfere when they felt they needed to and not a moment before.

"That, I suspect, is very true," Arden commented. "The fae are ever-delighted with proof of our human foibles and devotions, bless and keep them well."

A tricky dealer he might be, but Arden's quick thinking might also be why the fae had favored Arden with a glimpse of themselves. Even Zelli had not been granted that.

He regarded Arden in slightly envious wonder and Arden stared back, eyes wide and sparkling, before he turned again to Tahlen. "It's no shame to be captivated by them."



That Tahlen stayed silent in response was not a surprise, but Zelli answered for him. “Tahlen is possibly the one doing the captivating. The fae think highly of him, even if they’ve allowed him to get stuck in some of my messes. Perhaps because he’s so strong. They know he can bear it.”

A sweet sigh from Mil startled him. Zelli looked to Mil in question but found Mil, like Arden, now also considering Tahlen. Unlike Arden, Mil frowned, then smiled and sighed again.

“The line of your shoulders,” Mil volunteered suddenly. “The determined silence. Reminds me of a young beat-of-four in the palace I once knew, who was often gentle despite the world around him. But don’t mind me. I’m just thinking of the past.”

“Ah, my love,” Arden whispered sadly and pressed a kiss to Mil’s cheek.

Zelli curled his hands into his cloak and wriggled in his seat because he couldn’t scratch. The side of Tahlen’s face showed little emotion. Tahlen might welcome a kiss on the cheek from someone, but not Zelli and not in that moment.

“The palace?” Zelli’s voice was husky. “I’ve never been. Maybe someday, when things are better again. I’d like to at least see it once.”

Arden’s rolled a shoulder. “You might like the palace if fashions and intrigue interest you. Most of the young nobles like their bed sport as well, as I remember.”

Tahlen’s jaw tightened. No doubt he was thinking of what could have been his life.

“Maybe someday you will go,” Zelli whispered to him encouragingly, stopping his hand from settling on Tahlen’s knee just in time.

Tahlen turned his whole body toward Zelli and gave him such a baffled stare that Zelli had to return it.

Where before, Tahlen might have simply turned back, silent and stone, this time he started to, visibly checked himself, and then said, “I have no need to see the palace, Zelli. Not unless

you want to,” before he returned to keeping a watchful Tahlen eye on their guests.

“Oh, that is adorab...” Mil harrumphed at the nudge to his arm from his husband and didn’t finish whatever he’d been about to say. He muttered something, got up to return some of their provisions to the horses, and came back with a huge log, which he laid on top of the fire before sitting down again.

“I notice you have a short staff with you,” Mil began, looking to Tahlen with another toothy, almost hungry smile. “Bet you’re a good hand with it. Too many rely on just one skill set. I don’t suppose.... No. It’s too late and dark for sparring, but I’d like to see your work with it someday.”

Arden’s snorted, then briefly hid his mouth behind his hand when his husband grew indignant. Arden leaned over to whisper something in Mil’s ear, which only slightly mollified Mil from what Zelli could tell, although he still didn’t understand what the original offense had been. Mil got another kiss on the cheek. The glance he gave Tahlen and Zelli was rueful.

“Suppose you’re right,” Mil told his husband discreetly. “Be a crime to get in their way.”

“You are sweeter than honey from orange blossoms,” Arden replied. Mil twitched away from him with an expression that was both disgruntled and highly pleased.

Zelli bit down hard on his lower lip. When he looked at Tahlen, Tahlen turned before their eyes could meet, then cleared his throat. “The matter of the palace,” Tahlen said, as if he had no interest in praise between lovers. “Have you heard anything of the Villucatto? There are rumors.”

Arden slowly turned from his husband and seemed to consider the matter, and Tahlen’s face again, before answering. “We’ve heard a few of those. They might only be stories put out by their enemies.”

“Or they might be true.” Mil was back to grunting.

Zelli spoke carefully. “Some of their sworn guards are said to be fleeing. To where, I don’t know. Maybe to more peaceful

lands.”

Mil straightened. Arden’s eyebrows flew up, then lowered into an unhappy frown.

“Hopefully *these* lands stay peaceful,” Arden said. “Your people, like the other sensible ones who have tried to stay out of it, should be protected, if it please the fae.”

“Does it?” Mil glanced significantly to Zelli. Zelli narrowed his eyes but someone like Mil was hardly going to be wary of him. “Does it please the fae?” Mil made his meaning clearer. “Have your kin said nothing of it to you? You are very much one of them, more so than any true bard I’ve ever seen. Your size, and... do you know what your hair does in firelight? Like a sunset over the water, it is. With your big eyes like the flowers on a moonrise vine.”

“Oh, no, my love,” Arden cut in pleasantly, “this is no flower and no vine. This is a mountain wolf.”

If Zelli’s jaw went slack, he could hardly be blamed for it. He had never seen a mountain wolf as they rarely came down into the valley itself. They were said to be smaller than other wolves, with thick coats of coarse fluff in the winter. They lived and hunted in large packs, which allowed them to take down prey much bigger than a single wolf.

He was distantly aware of Mil asking a question of Arden. “A wolf? Ah, I see what you mean. I wonder if *he’d* like to spar.”

Arden ignored this. “But you are right about the rest, Mizel of the Tialtтын.” He raised a hand in a calming gesture to Tahlen as if Tahlen had moved at the name. “A simple guess. The Tialtтын are known for their fae blood and the fae’s favor, as I recall. This is their valley. And here you are, with your sworn guard.”

“You remember that?” Mil inquired idly. “From how many years ago?”

Arden shrugged. “I remember some of my lessons. And it wasn’t *that* many years ago.”

“Hmm,” Mil said without actually agreeing.

Zelli rubbed his chest, then growled a little and tore his hand away. It was caught and held in one of Tahlen's warm hands and Zelli dropped his head to exhale in relief. He didn't care what the outguards thought. He was already strange to them, more fae than human.

He laced his fingers with Tahlen's before lifting his head again. "I'm afraid I don't know much of anything about the—about that side of my kin. They've never explained themselves and I've never noticed any patterns in their dealings with me." He didn't believe he was part of any sort of fae plan. One of the fae had been feeling lusty and Zelli was the result of that bit of carelessness. But he looked at Mil with interest. "What does a moonrise vine flower look like?"

"If I may?" Arden extended a hand toward Tahlen again, who was more riled wolf than Zelli. "I mean this as a gift that may come back to bless me one day. Some advice for dealing with your seemingly absent kin: be honest in your dealings—emotionally honest if nothing else. Once you start doing that, their reasons will become slightly more clear. They do not see as we do, but they see true enough. And farther, I think."

"I *have* often wondered at which requests get answered," Zelli admitted. "Feelings and intent matter, but maybe so does the person asking."

"They see far," Arden said again, as if his experience with the fae was extensive indeed. "And do not feel in the ways that we do. If say, Tye of the Villucatto honored them and gave them something interesting, some of them might be inclined to answer her."

"Their answer might not be what she wants." Zelli had been told that many times in his life and truly understood it now.

Arden smiled. "Yes." His gaze slid to Tahlen, then down to their joined hands. "But, and here I only guess, I do think certain types appeal to them. Certain stories."

Zelli also gazed at Tahlen, someone Arden thought the fae would be drawn to. "Some people are complicated, maybe even difficult, but also trustworthy and straightforward in

ways many others are not. Honest, as you said, if not open. Why should they be open, when the world has hurt them so?"

Tahlen seemed open now, eyes wide and warmer than Zelli had ever seen them.

"Been a long day," Arden remarked, sounding very far away, but when Zelli turned, Arden hadn't moved. "We should probably try to rest."

Mil opened his mouth only to say nothing. He and Arden exchanged another look.

"Ah well, that's a different story indeed," Mil finally said, tone regretful. "But I like the idea of doing a favor for one such as them, and, do you know, I've a desire to see the stars tonight." Zelli looked out at the fog, thinking stars would only be glimpsed at best, but Mil didn't allow him to voice his concerns. "You ever really lie back and look at the stars?" Mil asked, glancing from Zelli to Tahlen. "It's a worthwhile way to spend some time, even for brutes like us."

Arden laughed, a gentle sound. "You continue to surprise me," he told Mil affectionately, then got to his feet in one smooth motion, his rolled blanket and sheathed sword already in hand. "Have a good night, and safe travels on the morrow." He inclined his head to Zelli, winked at Tahlen, which Zelli thought was a bit much, and then, confusingly, went to the edge of the firelight, barely beneath the roof of the waystation, and laid out his blanket.

Mil gave them each a nod before following his husband to their chosen spot, where it would not be much warmer than outside and they would not see many stars. But they sat close, and Arden fell against Mil almost immediately. Whatever they murmured to each other made Mil laugh, then slip an arm beneath Arden's traveling cloak to wrap around his back.

Zelli realized he was staring at the wily Arden, now just a weary man curled up with his husband, and Mil the brute, cradling Arden ever so carefully, and tore his gaze away. But it went back almost immediately. His heart pounded and his fingers hurt with how tightly he gripped Tahlen's hand, so he winced and pulled his free.

His lower lip was swollen, as if he'd bitten it too often during their odd conversation.

There was no reason for his heart to act this way. No reason for his face to be warm except the fire. He tugged his hand to his mouth to chew his fingernails and jolted when Tahlen's arm was suddenly before his eyes.

Tahlen's forearm, specifically, still covered in its leather vambrace.

Zelli looked to Tahlen himself, shifting on his stone seat when Tahlen kept his arm where it was.

"You'll do less damage here," Tahlen suggested, keeping his voice low. "The leather can take it more than your hands."

"It..." Zelli flushed even hotter, miserable, itchy, aching for a tender embrace under the stars that he would never know. "I shouldn't need to do it," he confessed sadly. "I don't know why I do."

"Do you want me to take it off first?" Tahlen asked as though this had only now occurred to him and he had offered expecting Zelli to gnaw on his arm like a teething puppy.

*A wolf pup*, Zelli thought, with slightly less misery than before. Perhaps that was how Tahlen saw him.

Shyly, Zelli pulled Tahlen's arm closer, thrilling a little at the heat from Tahlen's body and the smell of the leather, then hiding his face behind it after giving in to the first urge to bite down.

Tahlen turned more toward him, not exactly shielding Zelli from sight, but letting Zelli twist away from the fire as much as he could. Tahlen touched Zelli's cheek with his other hand, exhaling roughly at how hot Zelli must feel. His eyes were warm again, although not as open as they'd been moments before. He was watchful now, yet still offering the leather brace for Zelli to turn his head and sink his sharpest teeth into.

Zelli did, only just keeping himself from growling.

Tahlen made a small sound, pleased or shocked, Zelli couldn't tell. But he opened his hand so that his fingertips grazed

Zelli's cheek as Zelli bit down again.

The leather was quite satisfyingly resistant and the brush of Tahlen's fingertips kept Zelli's chest from aching. His scrawny growl faded to nothing.

But his face stung and his cheeks and Tahlen's leather were wet with spit. As time went on and he made more faint marks from his teeth and had to stop to swallow, he thought that Tahlen would say something, or ask about his inhumanity as Arden and Mil had. But though Tahlen turned his head to keep an eye on the two outguards, he was silent.

When Zelli finally let go, too content to need to bite any longer and suddenly so very tired, Tahlen relocated easily to the spot behind the stones, with the wall at his back and the fire still near, and sat cross-legged, with his sword near his free hand, and indicated Zelli should lie beside him.

## Nine

Zelli woke to Tahlen's faint stirrings and a whispered conversation somewhere close. He opened his eyes to a lightened but still clouded sky, and raised his head from Tahlen's thigh, only to be distracted by the fact that his *head* had been on Tahlen's *thigh*.

Tahlen's eyes were open. Though he was resting against the wall behind them, Zelli suspected Tahlen had stayed awake through the night.

He was unsurprised to see the outguards gone and the fire very low. He turned back to Tahlen, sleepy, with the chill nipping at the edge of his awareness, and irritable for reasons that had nothing to do with either of those things.

But there was no point in chastising Tahlen now for choosing not to sleep. Zelli simply raised himself up and said, "There's some time until dawn and we're not in a terrible hurry. Get some sleep now and I'll wake you if I need to."

Tahlen had stubble on his jaw and a slight glaze to his tired eyes, but he studied Zelli, then sighed and moved, putting more of his weight against the wall. He shut his eyes, apparently thinking he would sleep like that.

"Honestly," Zelli grumbled as he got to his feet. "Lie down and do it properly or I'll tell Esrin."

Tahlen's eyes flicked open, then narrowed. But exhaustion meant he didn't protest, he just stared oddly at Zelli while lying down on his side and pulling his cloak over his legs. "Only for an hour," he grumbled, then was silent except for his breathing.

Zelli stared at Tahlen's sleep-softened, unshaven face for far too long before he forcibly turned around to stare down the rest of the world. Tahlen trusted Zelli for this small duty and Zelli would see to it with everything he had.



Of course, poking around a waystation with nothing to do gave Zelli perhaps too much time to think. And recalling how he'd used Tahlen's vambrace, in front of Tahlen no less, made him pace for a while and think of how he was going to explain chewing on his grandmother's favorite guard to her. Even if she did believe Zelli ought to take Tahlen as a lover, that was surely crossing a line.

Tahlen was so patient with him, was so *good* about it. It was only going to make Zelli's *feelings*, as Grandmother called them, worse.

He washed his face in the nearby stream as he moped and then took care of the horses. He ate a little and walked around the waystation at least nine times rather than risk waking Tahlen with any stolen touches, and waited until a while after dawn—when any longer would possibly irritate Tahlen more than please him—and put out the fire before calling for Tahlen to wake up.

“They knew who you were,” was the first thing Tahlen said to him after rising to his feet.

Zelli crossed his arms tightly over the wrong and terrible *need* in his chest. “You deferred to me like I was... like I was The Tialttyrin.”

Tahlen observed Zelli in silence until Zelli wanted to snap at him. But all Tahlen said was, “Do you need to touch me?”

To which Zelli hissed, “Yes,” and couldn't even be shocked at himself.

Stubble rasped wonderfully under Zelli's palms. Tahlen's hair was just as soft in the mornings as it was at night, although Tahlen braided it himself this time, efficient and quick before turning to attend to Zelli's, which was back to being wild until Tahlen whispered to it.

Zelli watched Tahlen shave with cold water and caught Tahlen glancing curiously at Zelli's smoother face. He insisted Tahlen eat something. Then they were on their way once more.

If they were to keep going in their current direction, they would eventually reach the other road following the length of the valley, although Tahlen would make them turn around before they went that far. Short of finding a friendly farmer or hunting some rabbits or field rats as the outguards might be doing, they would run out of food.

It did all feel ridiculous, in that respect. The need for more information was urgent, but Zelli hadn't planned on being in the open for this long and they weren't even sure where to look. The outguards had mentioned a wooded glen, but the spaces between fields were often left as chunks of wilderness for owls and deer and the plants that only grew among the trees.

Several hours had gone by when he and Tahlen began to pass heavy thickets of green vines off to the side of the road, some full of chattering birds happily feasting on the dark berries that must not have been ripe enough to pluck when the rest of the berries had been harvested.

Zelli turned his horse in that direction without thought. He slid from Lemon Blossom's back in his excitement and was gathering blackberries over the sound of Tahlen's bewildered, "You're berry picking?"

Zelli had hunted for berries before in his life, although the small bushes down in village were nothing to the wild bramble in front of him, so tall that Tahlen would likely have to stretch to see over it. Zelli stood up on his toes to reach berries deep within the tangle, snagging his sleeves and then his hands on nearly invisible thorns. He ate some berries before gathering more, then, after fighting with the thorns to get free, brought spilling, sun-warmed handfuls over to Tahlen, who was standing beside Starfall and giving Zelli that odd look again.

"The last of summer's gifts," Zelli said, holding his hands up so Tahlen could take some berries. "It's not childish," he added when Tahlen hesitated. "We need food, and they've

already harvested this patch, else there would be berries everywhere.”

“You’re bleeding,” Tahlen observed, but let Zelli fill his palms with blackberries.

Zelli’s hands and wrists *were* bleeding, in fact, but only in two places. The purple stains on Zelli’s fingertips more than made up for a few cuts.

“Barely,” Zelli dismissed this before devouring several more berries. “If a beat-of-four can wear a sword and risk being killed by one, I can bear a few scratches and have purple fingers for a while.”

Tahlen pulled in a long breath. “I wish more of them had your ideas.”

“No!” Zelli poured the remaining berries into Tahlen’s hands and pushed them up toward Tahlen’s face to fill his reckless mouth. “No wishing!” he ordered, not teasing, then snatched his hands away. “I should... I should offer some of the berries to them, though they can pick their own.”

He hurried back to the thicket, offending a few birds by taking more of their berries. No offering place was obvious, so Zelli brought his handful to a stunted and bare apple tree nearby and set the berries on the ground at the base of the trunk. “No wishes,” he told any listening fae, “only a greeting. We are family, after all.”

He’d known that. Everyone who saw Zelli knew that. But no one had ever called them that until Tahlen, and then two outguards. Even Grandmother usually only spoke of their shared fae blood, not of their shared fae family.

“Zelli, come back here, if you please,” Tahlen requested gruffly, all his berries gone, his lips only hinting at a darker color. Zelli looked apprehensively at the corner of Tahlen’s cloak, which Tahlen had soaked with water, thinking Tahlen was going to tell him he had blackberry juice all over his face. But Tahlen took Zelli’s hands, one at a time, and washed away the trickles of blood and the worst of the purple.

It would stain the cloak, but Zelli would see it replaced if it could not be cleaned.

Tahlen focused on his work, so Zelli studied Tahlen's bent head and the length of his braid fallen over his shoulder, and how he had to stoop to get near to Zelli's level. Tahlen had nice ears. Zelli fantasized about covering them in cuffs like the one Arden had worn. Not gold for Tahlen, though Tahlen deserved it, but a shining metal like silver or platinum. Necklaces and cuffs and bracelets, with jeweled clasps climbing his braid.

Then Tahlen's eyes came up and Zelli thought warmly that Tahlen needed no decorations. Maybe Zelli could pay a trader to bring him moonrise vine seeds so he could plant them and see the blooms for himself. Maybe, if his alliance turned him into the sort of beat-of-four to wear jewelry of his own, he would commission clasps in the shape of flowers, so he could imagine them in Tahlen's hair.

*Imagine only*, he reminded himself.

He pulled his hands from Tahlen's grasp and smiled shakily before returning to Lemon Blossom. "Thank you." He had no idea how to get back onto his horse but only stood there in any case, listening to himself say foolish things because he didn't want Tahlen's silence to go on or to be broken by Tahlen asking him what was wrong. "Do you know, Tahlen, I think those outguards wanted to take you to bed."

Never mind. He had changed Tahlen's silence. It was tangible, almost like Tahlen grabbing a handful of Zelli's cloak to forcibly turn him around.

Zelli risked a look back. Tahlen's eyebrows were knitted in a such a way that Zelli suspected Tahlen didn't believe him or couldn't believe Zelli would mention it.

Zelli readied an apology, then heard himself continuing on in the same fashion as before. "Particularly Mil," he added before turning away again. "I wonder who you reminded him of." Mil must have known a hero too, in his time. Unless he'd meant Arden, which would mean Arden was a beat-of-four who had become an outguard and that was practically unheard of. There

was only one song Zelli knew that mentioned anything like that, and that was about....

“*Oh.*” Zelli turned back to Tahlen on the heels of a revelation, but Tahlen had his brows raised now, in unhappy inquiry. “What?”

Tahlen watched Zelli carefully. “*You* could have gone with them.”

Zelli raised a hand to argue, then dropped it, thinking over the entire conversation. “Are you sure?” he asked at last.

Tahlen’s voice was flat. “Yes.”

There were nuances to flirting, Zelli decided absently, because he’d missed all of them. “But they spent all their time looking at you.” The objection was reasonable. “They only called me...” *Tiny. Pretty.* “*Oh.*” Tahlen’s steady, burning stare wasn’t the only thing making Zelli feel too hot. “But they’re so *big*, I’d—both of them? Really? But Mil was so handsome.”

Zelli realized he was staring dazedly at nothing while dreaming of being between Arden and Mil beneath the stars. Zelli had taken his own fingers before, as much as he could get when twisting his wrist and stretching, but he wasn’t at all sure that he could have taken Mil’s cock. That was, if Mil’s cock was proportional to the rest of him. Arden’s... possibly. Arden was near Tahlen’s height, and again, assuming proportions.

“*Oh,*” Zelli said again, thinking of Tahlen now, which he often had, but never like that. Tahlen might have watched them. Tahlen might have joined in, and then at least Zelli would have been able to see Tahlen be someone else’s lover.

The thought made his blood pound. It also stabbed Zelli right near his heart. “I don’t think I would like that,” he said in a whisper, meaning both allowing the two outguards to tup him and watching them with Tahlen. If he was thinking about that instead of the pleasure he might have had with two compelling strangers, then the pleasure they’d offered still would have not eased the feelings that the fae and his grandmother seemed to want him to face.

He chewed his bottom lip. “Would you have also gone off with them? If I hadn’t been there,” he anticipated Tahlen’s argument, “and it was the three of you, with no Zelli to protect, you could have. They looked at you in a certain way.”

He pulled at his necklace, but unless he unfastened it, it wouldn’t reach his teeth for him to bite on it.

Arden did not seem easily trusting. Neither did Mil. And yet when Zelli thought of it, he saw Mil on his back or Mil with his hungry mouth around Tahlen’s cock. Tahlen might make noises or relax or smile as he had for Kat Ryssa, and Arden would look so proud of them both before he reached out to...

Zelli shook his head firmly. “Arden can keep his shiny rock,” he spat, “I wouldn’t trust him with you.”

“*A certain way*,” Tahlen echoed, ignoring all mention of rocks. “How did they look at me, Zelli?”

Since Tahlen was unlikely to have missed the heat in their gazes, Zelli crossed his arms and muttered under his breath.

“You know how they looked at you. It’s how many look at you. They—Mil—would like you to fuck him. Arden... I think Arden thought you were beautiful.” Zelli got even quieter.

“Which you are.” His cuts were beginning to sting in earnest but it was a nice distraction from his other discomforts. “They were married,” he added, more thoughtful now. “And in love. And open to other lovers, as some are. But I don’t know if they were open to more love, as some are not. And some are not open to either. Couples, that is. Some are content with just themselves. Grandmother is...” he looked down,

“Grandmother has sent letters to some who are already hand-fastened or all but hand-fastened with another. I’m not sure if I am supposed to... I guess I will meet them and discover how we all feel. It seemed nice, what Arden and Mil had. I would like to have that, but I imagine I won’t. Still, perhaps my intended and I will be friends. I’d like a friend. You... you are more experienced than I am, obviously.” Everyone was more experienced than Zelli. “You’re... more like them, I expect. But you should have that, if you want it. The love, as well as the lovers.”

Tahlen had gone silent again. Zelli couldn't find any anger in himself about it.

"We could gain a strong ally, of course, with whoever Grandmother chooses for me. For that, I would do my best to like them. It might grow into more, although she cautioned me about finding another in my time there. She says...." Zelli raised his head but didn't meet Tahlen's eyes. "She says my feelings are strong, and I would make them too public and forget about the feelings of my other partner. So maybe I am not meant for such a relationship. But others... I mean... *you* might not mind such an arrangement? Or would possibly prefer it?"

"Your intended will be charmed by you in time," Tahlen said evenly, gaze steady on Zelli when Zelli finally raised his. "That you care deeply shouldn't be held against you, and if your intended is smart and deserving of you, they will appreciate that."

A good and sensible answer. The correct answer, even. Zelli frowned to hear it, pulling at his necklace. "But what do *you* think of such things?"

Tahlen's face told him absolutely nothing. "If such an arrangement were required of me, I would do my best."

"Required of you?" Zelli said back to him curiously. "So you don't want that? Tahlen, do you... want someone all to yourself? Would you like a one-and-only?"

"I didn't say that," Tahlen argued, stiffening.

"And you don't have a cat," Zelli returned pointedly. "Why would you..." ask to court Zelli knowing Zelli was nearly promised to another? But he knew the answer; the Tialtтын holding could be a lonely place. Tahlen might have been willing to tolerate sharing a lover if it meant less loneliness.

"Many people have or want just one other," Zelli tried to reassure him, ready to dislike anyone who would get all that steadfast Tahlen attention for themselves. "Some people have a one-and-only, then years later surprise themselves by falling in love again. Or some seem to choose a one-and-only for a

while and then they move on to another.” Tahlen was likely not either sort, and he should have what he truly wanted. Zelli held in a sigh and pretended he could put Tahlen from his mind once and for all. “I suppose I will learn about all that in time as well, or if I would desire tuppung enough to want it from many, or just one.”

“I’m sorry,” he added, although Tahlen would despair of him apologizing yet again. “I shouldn’t be saying all these things to you when you can’t want to hear them. It’s because you’re kind enough to listen and there’s no one else. As ever with me. No one near my age or station who will even come near me, much less let me worry aloud to them or flirt with them or try kissing them or... or any of that. There is only you, and you don’t—you say you like me and I believe you. But I’ve no desire to test your patience further.”

Tahlen’s expression could not have been called a frown. It was slow to form, and though his eyebrows descended, his eyes themselves were full of wonder.

Tahlen spoke slowly as well. “You haven’t even had a friend to learn or play with when you were younger? Or someone in the village when you were a little older? No one?”

“They are wary of me.” Zelli gestured at himself. “I’m not fully human, Tahlen.” He smiled sadly, showing a hint of too many sharp teeth. “I’m a flower only to one outguard I will never see again.”

Tahlen dropped his attention to his hand, which was clenched. He seemed to force it to open, and then said, more to the ground than to Zelli, “The nasturtiums, the ones with vines that fall from the lower fortress walls to the ground below.” His voice was rough. “Your hair is nearly every color they have.”

Zelli went warm all over without even being certain it was a compliment. “People pluck the blossoms sometimes to eat them,” he informed Tahlen breathlessly.

“I have often done so.” Tahlen looked up and seemed startled when their eyes met. “I’m very fond of them.”



Tahlen had looked at those flowers and thought of Zelli. Tahlen had thought of Zelli with the bright, peppery citrus of them on his tongue.

Zelli tripped forward until he had to stop or tumble over Tahlen's boots. He tipped his head back so he wouldn't miss the light in Tahlen's eyes.

"You've truly never kissed anyone?" Tahlen wondered, amazed, Zelli suspected, though he couldn't see why. "No one has ever kissed you? Not even that?"

"Is that pathetic?" Zelli worried over that more than he should. A good match would not think so, or at least wouldn't say so. "Do you think my intended will find this sad?" he asked, anxious. This time, Tahlen *did* frown. "The lack of experience in kissing is more of a problem for me than it might be for others because of my teeth." Zelli opened his mouth to touch his tongue to the tips of his cutter teeth. Most of those without fae blood had sets of two canine teeth, one on the top and bottom of each side of their mouths. Zelli had grown in two sets of two, each with sharp points.

He flinched in surprise when Tahlen raised a hand. Tahlen stopped. "May I?"

His intention was unbelievable. Nonetheless, suddenly desperately curious, Zelli held still and angled his face toward Tahlen. He tried not to gasp when Tahlen touched his bottom lip to tug it down. Then Tahlen put his fingertips to the points of Zelli's teeth, his eyes wide, the pupils large.

"I think," Tahlen finally said, his face flushing darker and his voice interestingly husky, "you'll just have to be careful. You and... whoever you choose." He took his hand away at last and looked up to Zelli's eyes.

"You're not repelled by the sight of them this close?" Zelli licked his lip for traces of Tahlen but found only salt.

"No, not repelled," Tahlen answered, then glanced away. "You don't understand me. Maybe I don't either. Never mind. No, I'm not repelled."

“Thank you,” Zelli told him sincerely, even though Tahlen was correct and Zelli did not understand him at all. “You give me hope the rest won’t be a problem.”

Tahlen turned sharply back to him. “The rest?”

Zelli rolled his eyes. “As those outguards noticed almost immediately, Tahlen, I am not all that human.”

“Yes, but...” Tahlen raked his gaze down Zelli’s body, then seemed to bring himself up short. “Has that been part of your worries over your grandmother’s plans for you? Then why did you agree to them?”

Zelli sighed heavily. He’d hoped Tahlen had grasped his reasons so they wouldn’t need to be discussed.

“It will help everyone here. More security, and, incidentally, better trade for their wines and other products. And... it’s lonely being what I am where I am. I will possibly end up lonely somewhere else. But I don’t have to stay there forever. And I will do something useful in the meantime.”

“You didn’t have to be lonely.”

The quiet statement drew Zelli’s attention up to Tahlen’s face. “You were lonely too,” Zelli said, his voice only shaking a little. “But I’ve seen who you would choose now if you had more options available to you.”

Tahlen dared to look confused. “What are you talking about?”

“Kat Ryssa,” Zelli pronounced the name clearly, then glanced away. The offering beneath the apple tree was still there. He huffed.

“*What.*” Tahlen did not ask it. “You see too much.” In response, Zelli huffed again. Tahlen continued, his tone like a sparking fire. “But you don’t understand a great deal of what you see. How those outguards looked at me and yet not that look in anyone else’s eyes for you.”

Zelli had a glare for that which Tahlen deserved, since Zelli had told him he had no experience. “How am I supposed to?” he demanded, then stopped nervously. “Do you think this ignorance will upset my intended?”

Tahlen was irked by the glare, or at least did not pretend not to see it. "I have no desire to talk about your intended."

Zelli's glare probably shifted into a muddled look of bewilderment. "But what did you think would happen if an alliance *was* arranged and you and I were...? Oh. You don't want to speak of that."

Tahlen nonetheless spoke of it, straightening to seem even taller. "I would have dealt with it," he admitted without looking away. "I would never have let you go, in any case." He froze, then shook his head. "Not alone," he corrected himself stiffly and only got more stone-like as he went on. "I would never have let you go alone to meet this person. I would have to assure your grandmother of your safety and happiness."

"Happiness?" It hurt to know Tahlen thought Zelli would be happy far away from them all.

"Yes, happiness." Tahlen pulled in a breath and some warmth returned to his voice. "I'd want you to be happy, Zelli."

"That could take some time," Zelli reasoned aloud, light filling some of the hollow inside him. "Months or even years. What if *you* were unhappy there?" He watched Tahlen closely. "You will say, 'I am offering, Zelli,' and, 'Gladly,' and then I will say, 'I couldn't force you, Tahlen,' as though we both don't know that, and I will be confused again." He took a breath, then let it out. "What if I am never happy there? May I tell you something in confidence? Though I want to visit other places, I don't think I'm meant for them. I'm meant to be here, or it feels so at night when I can't sleep. Which is why I don't think about it."

"You mention it enough." Tahlen watched Zelli just as closely.

Zelli flapped a hand dismissively. "I worry over the things I need to learn, the role I am to play. Not the rest of it." His voice broke. "When you and the others will finally leave me there and I will be alone again. More alone than I am even now. I'll be in a place where I do not belong, and there will be very few people, or no people, like me. And my grandmother will be ill without me, and you will be far from me and I might

not ever see you again. I..." Zelli shut his eyes. "I don't think about it. I've worked hard to not think about it."

Tahlen took his hand, a gentle hold Zelli could have broken without effort. Zelli blinked up at him.

"Zelli," Tahlen put weight on each word, "I won't leave you."

"Tahlen," Zelli tried to keep the wobble from his voice, "I can't ask that of you."

"I'm offering," Tahlen answered with not even a flicker of humor in his eyes. "Gladly."

The sound that burst from Zelli was a trifle unsteady but still might have been called a laugh. "Why must you be like this?" he despaired, smiling despite how Tahlen pulled Zelli's hand to his chest and kept it there. The gesture hurt, somehow, and felt wonderful too.

Tahlen held Zelli's stare, looking so serious that Zelli's smile slowly left him.

"I did this wrong," Tahlen said, drawing his eyebrows together but otherwise almost calm. "I didn't consider that you wouldn't know how things are done and I'm sorry if embarrassed you or made you feel..." he hesitated, apparently over what word to use, "uncertain. If you like, I can do better." His frown cleared, and Zelli imagined Tahlen at fifteen, learning a new way of life and putting his whole being into it. "I *will* do better."

The sound of whistling carried over the birdsong and the thunder of Zelli's heart.

Tahlen turned his head to follow the sound, so Zelli did the same, noting distractedly as he did that the berries had disappeared from beneath the tree.

# Ten

The source of the whistling was named Fy, or said he was. He was closer to Zelli's age than Tahlen's, reached only Tahlen's shoulders but was broader, and wore the same sort of thick doublet for armor that Tahlen wore, although his had not had a good scrubbing in some time. He had a blue-green cloak with a torn hem and marks where some embroidery had been plucked out. Zelli guessed that the emblem of a beat-of-four house was what was now missing, not that he needed to guess.

Fy had been whistling merrily when he'd rounded the blackberry thicket and found Tahlen and Zelli waiting for him, but he'd reached for the sword at his belt quickly enough—a sword farmers tended not to carry.

He was also a clever one, or hadn't wanted to risk harming another sworn guard without cause, because he'd taken a good look at Zelli, taken a better look at Tahlen, and moved his hand from his sword hilt. "Just here to collect some berries," he'd explained himself, smiling. Zelli didn't think he'd been lying.

"If *I* thought the berries were appealing, of course a group of wayward family guards would think the same," Zelli had observed, making Fy turn to him with his bushy brown eyebrows sky high.

Tahlen had not been amused. He had Fy's sword strapped to Starfall and Fy's various knives in his belt. Fy carried a lot of knives, only one of which was for practical everyday use.

They didn't have rope, but there was nowhere for Fy to run in any case. He walked ahead of them or sometimes alongside them as he led them across the field to a small wooded area. He glowered a few times about this, a glower that faded whenever Zelli reassured him that he and Tahlen would have known about the woods his friends were in anyway, since outguards had spotted them, and there were few other places

Fy could have come from on his way to the blackberry bramble.

“The real question is: how many of you are there?” Zelli mused thoughtfully. “And, I suppose: what are your intentions? And then: what’s to be done with you?”

“Who *are* you?” Fy wondered.

“Mizel,” Zelli answered absently. “This is Tahlen. The odd patch on your cloak, Fy.... What was torn out? The image of a spear and a net? Is that for the Lyralinah?”

Fy clenched his jaw.

Zelli shook his head. “Is it something sworn guards learn? To be silent like that?”

Tahlen simply said, “*Zelli*,” in warning, as they came closer to the trees. “Stay behind me.”

“They aren’t going to shoot him!” Fy complained indignantly. Sworn guards took offense at the strangest things.

“Then are they going to shoot Tahlen?” Zelli demanded. “It’s not as if you take oaths to not kill anyone, is it? If it’s in defense of your chosen families, or, I assume, yourselves.”

“The oath was to protect first,” someone called out from the trees. “At least, ours was. Not sure about your guard there.”

Tahlen and Starfall stopped, so Zelli stopped too.

“If you’re a representative of the people in this valley, we mean you no harm!” the person added, voice raised, then emerged from the shadows under the trees.

She wasn’t alone. Four others came out with her—four that Zelli could see. Tahlen might have seen more. Two of the people standing at the edge of the trees were visibly injured, one using what looked like a repurposed tree branch as a crutch, the other with an arm bound to their chest.

“You all right, Fy?” asked the older woman who must have been the leader of the group.

“They didn’t hurt me,” Fy replied almost cheerfully. “I didn’t get any berries, though.”

If Zelli were going to try to intimidate others and give the impression of strength, he wouldn't have brought out his injured guards first. He also liked that she'd asked after Fy. He slipped down from Lemon Blossom and heard Tahlen swear before dismounting.

The sound kept Zelli from going any closer to the trees, but he didn't move back.

"Six, plus Bree, makes at least seven," he murmured. "But I don't think Bree knew they were here since she came from the capital." He glanced to Tahlen, who had his attention fixed on the guards ahead of them. "Seven explains ten riders. Could even be more than seven." Zelli turned to the guards again. They were living off berries and whatever they'd scrounged from the area, after hiking across the mountains. If they were like Bree, they had not been prepared for the mountains and had avoided the established paths, which would have made it a hard crossing. They were not starving, but by late autumn, they would be. They were hardly in fighting condition as it was.

Fy was a few feet from Zelli, giving Zelli a strange look instead of running to his friends.

"Did Bree come here first and you all followed?" Zelli asked, glancing from Fy to the older woman. "How many lands have you fled across?"

"Bree?" Fy echoed, astonished. "Bree is here?"

Zelli was just as astonished. "How many guards fled?" If they'd scattered so widely that even they didn't know, the number must have been considerable. "Are you all Lyralinah?"

"I didn't tell him anything, Let," Fy shouted. "He just seems to know things!"

"We do not serve the Lyralinah," answered Let, and dropped her hand to her sword hilt.

Zelli pursed his lips. "Do you mean you no longer serve them? Or do you mean you broke your oath to a different family?"

"Do you see what I mean?" Fy stood there goggling at Zelli. "He just *knows*."

Zelli briefly frowned at him. “If it is the Lyralinah or some other family, it does not overly matter, except that the people in this valley might like to know who is attacking them as the guards of this other family search for you.”

“What sort of fae curse is this?” swore the guard leaning on a crutch.

“Are people searching for us here?” Let drew Zelli’s focus to her. “If so, I’m sorry. We hoped they were gone.”

But had stayed hidden, suspecting they were not gone at all. Zelli kept that in and hoped Tahlen appreciated it. Tahlen was going to be vexed with him, but Zelli was not going to leave him to take risks alone, and certainly not without at least doing something useful.

Let looked about the age of Zelli’s parent, although Zelli’s parent took pains to seem younger than Zelli doubted Let bothered with. Let’s face was not lined with age, but it had a stillness that spoke of experience and leadership, like Ric’s. Perhaps she had been the Captain of the Guard once. Her hair was short and gray-white, with streaks of dark brown.

Zelli addressed only her. “I think you should tell us why they’ve chased you this far and also who is doing the chasing.”

“Why should we tell you anything, tiny beat-of-four with your one guard?” Let raised her head in challenge, although her tone wasn’t angry or even irritated. Sworn guards really were remarkable.

Zelli tipped his head to the side to consider that. “If these other riders don’t find you and kill each of you in your hiding place here, the frightened people in this valley might do it for them. But even if neither of those things were to happen, none of you will last the winter without food. So you will have to act soon, if not by talking with me, then by leaving this spot.” He glanced to the two injured guards. “If you can. And harvest is coming. You won’t be able to skulk through the fields without being seen.”

“Nobody was skulking,” Fy objected, then coughed. “He probably already knows, Let. I think he’s making it a question



to be polite.”

Let observed Zelli for several moments while Zelli did his best to look both mysterious and knowing. Then she said, “As far as we know, it is the Villucatto who ride after us, though whether it is guards only or guards and members of that family, I couldn’t say. There might also be Lyralinah with them, and if so, I’d like to face them before I die.”

“Guards. So willing to speak of their own deaths,” Zelli complained, loud enough for Tahlen and perhaps Fy to hear. He raised his voice. “If I understand the situation: the Lyralinah chose to use their guards to further the ambitions of the Villucatto, and some of the Lyralinah guards objected and were forced to flee. Breaking their oaths,” he added after a pause, because they were thinking of it so it might as well be said. “But why pursue you this far, risking more conflict with every family whose land they entered?”

“To be honest,” the guard with their arm in a sling spoke up, “I don’t think they care much who they offend. Not anymore. If some other noble family objects, they’d better object strongly or Tye and her allies will come for them too.”

Zelli did not like the sound of that. Destroy or decimate enough families and the remaining families would stay out of the way.

It required a lot of force to make it work, though. Or patience and time. Even with allies, since the other families would also have allies and.... Zelli tossed his head to be rid of all that for now. “Tye has made herself head of the Villucatto and chosen this action, but they aren’t a family with ties to a crown.” He thought so; he might have fallen asleep and forgotten a history lesson. But he was reasonably sure the Villucatto had only tried for the crown because so many others had already been killed and cleared a path for them. “They have more to prove, and more ground to make up than, say, the Tyrabalith. In that case, I suppose they couldn’t let it be known that their allies were losing their guards, and so many of them.”

That was, if Let spoke the truth. But that would mean she and Bree had coordinated a lie without ever meeting Zelli.

“So,” Zelli began again, sharply, “are you staying here or are you passing through? Because it is a matter of weeks until you will be in the way, if these riders don’t find you first.”

“How were we to know that?” Fy scoffed. “We’re not farmers.”

“It is farmers who feed you!” Zelli snapped, then lowered his shoulders. “And they are afraid of you. You’re strangers, and armed, and they are aware of the violence going on outside this valley. You have also brought more armed strangers to their door, and none of you have approached them in peace or asked for help, leaving them to make up stories.”

“We did wonder if we ought to find the family who rules this valley,” Let admitted cautiously. “But we weren’t sure if they were also allies of the Villucatto, and, as you said, we have broken our oaths.”

Zelli heaved an annoyed breath. “How is it that so many of you grow up with these families and promise to protect them with your bodies and your lives, and yet none of you expect these families to do the same for you? If they took your oath and gave none in return, then you owe them nothing.”

Not a single one of them had relaxed their posture and Let was not the only one now staring hard at Zelli while keeping a hand near a weapon. “What is your name, tiny beat-of-four?”

Zelli did not back up although he suspected Tahlen wanted him to.

“Mizel of the Tialttyrin,” he introduced himself. “And others will come for you if you harm me.” It was not a lie, though Zelli did not have the forces they might think he did. He narrowed his focus to Let. “If you can.”

Let had no visible reaction to that, but her tone was faintly amused. “If we can?” she repeated. “I see just one guard for you.”

Zelli nodded, which made her blink. “Even if you weren’t all exhausted and underfed, two of you are noticeably injured, and one of you has already been disarmed. Tahlen is more than enough.”

He turned so he could see Tahlen, more than a little startled to see that Tahlen had moved and Zelli hadn't heard a whisper. Tahlen was now just behind and to the side of Zelli, one hand still at his belt near his knife, the other holding the short staff. Zelli hadn't heard him draw that either.

When Zelli turned back, Let continued to watch Zelli but the others all had their eyes on Tahlen.

"He's force enough?" Let prodded curiously.

Zelli angled his head toward Tahlen but didn't look at him. "Tahlen of the Vallithi," he said clearly, noting the reactions in the other guards, "wait for my word."

It really was a name to make guards pause. Good. Zelli had no intention of seeing any fighting today. "In case you haven't noticed yet," he went on, "I am part fae, as is my family, and the fae often listen to me. So if any of you did somehow manage to get past Tahlen, you can guess what I will do to you if you harm him."

He was going to have to offer the fae something very special to make up for the boast. He would worry about what later.

Let took her hand from her sword hilt at last. "You would call down the fae on us?"

"Yes." Zelli wasn't lying now. "But I'm certain there is a way we can resolve things without that. It's very wasteful for you to get all the way out here, looking for somewhere safe to sleep, just to die at Tahlen's hands. Those remaining—if any—should know that if we are dead, you'll have to keep wandering. The holdings of the Tialttyrin would only offer new threats, such as Tahlen's sister. So why do any of that when you can talk with me instead? You didn't spend most of your lives training and working to protect the family you were sworn to only to end up bleeding out here because you found me annoying. I'm sure I'm annoying to a lot of people, but they don't try to kill me or hurt Tahlen for it."

Fy looked from Tahlen to Zelli then back to Tahlen. He made a pained face, then a puzzled one, before studying Zelli once again. "Just to avenge your guard? All of that?"

“Tahlen is the family’s sworn guard,” Zelli corrected him.  
“And the kindest person, really, despite how silent he often chooses to be.”

“*Zelli.*” Tahlen protested.

Fy’s attention went to Tahlen again. “Is his sister as pretty as he is?”

Hearing that, of all questions, made Zelli twist to look at Tahlen as well.

Tahlen flipped the short staff so that the end was in the dirt and then shot Fy a warning glance. “She is also Vallithi.”

Fy closed his mouth.

“So, there won’t be any fighting?” Zelli guessed aloud. Sworn guards did a lot of talking in silence or with strange words.  
“Good. It really is pointless—not that you all aren’t impressive when you train. When I was younger....” He cleared his throat. “Anyway. I admire, truly, the vows of a guard. I can’t imagine doing any of that unless I truly loved the family I served. The Lyralinah should have rewarded you for that. You must be hurting.”

“Leave them *something*, Zelli,” Tahlen remarked.

“Right,” Zelli agreed. Guards did not speak of feelings. He nodded, first to Tahlen, then more pointedly to Let. “If you want to go to see The Tialttyrin, we can direct you to her. But why not keep on to the capital and become palace guards or even outguards?”

“I’d stay well clear of the palace,” said the one with their arm in a sling. “It’s soaked in blood, I hear. And Tye has her sights on it anyway.”

Zelli accepted that but had another question. “Was it your plan to come here?”

Let shook her head. “No plan, just running. We’ve not heard of much fighting around this valley.”

“And you make wine here!” shouted one of the uninjured ones.

“We do!” Zelli shouted back with enthusiasm before growing serious again. “I would like to talk with you more, if that is all right. Things will have to be decided.” He started to walk forward, heard Tahlen’s little exhale, and stopped. “Tahlen, I recognize your worry, but killing me would only make their situation more dire, and killing you would leave them at the mercy of one more noble family. You will grumble that I will still be dead in that case but say nothing about *your* life.” Zelli sighed heavily to Let. “Always concerned with *me*.”

“I’d imagine he would be,” Fy commented, “seeing as there’s no one else left for him to protect but you and a fierce sister. Unless I am wrong and he is of a different Vallithi family.”

Zelli dropped his head to study the tops of his boots. “Thank you for chiding me, Fy,” he said formally before looking up. “I was being thoughtless. Tahlen, I am...”

“Don’t.” Tahlen said only that.

“Who *are* you?” Fy asked Zelli again. “What kind of beat-of-four are you?”

“Mizel of the Tialttyrin,” Zelli introduced himself to Fy for the second or third time. “But you may as well call me Zelli. Most everyone does. If you would like to return to the blackberries, you may, although I’d recommend taking something to carry them, and I don’t think Tahlen will give you your weapons back yet.”

Fy spun around to gesture confusingly at Tahlen. “*Who*.”

Tahlen, even more confusingly, answered, “The Mountain Wolf of the Tialttyrin.” Zelli jumped. Tahlen gave no sign he’d noticed, continuing to say odd things to Fy. “It will be easier for you if you give in now.” He waited until Fy had stepped away—toward his friends in the trees and not the blackberries, gesticulating excitedly—before facing Zelli, his expression as impenetrable as the fortress’ oldest walls.

Zelli raised his hands. “You’re upset about how I stepped forward without you, and you’re also going to tell me not to make promises for Grandmother. I know—although that is a

bit rich since you are the one who introduced me as speaking for The Tialttyrin.”

“You practically *are* The Tialttyrin,” Tahlen bent down to say it nearly in Zelli’s face. “And when I tell you to stay back, I need you to *stay back*, Zelli. Please.” The *please* was Zelli’s undoing and Tahlen probably knew it. It made Zelli swallow his arguments, recalling Fy’s words only too clearly.

“Yes, Tahlen.”

Tahlen looked confused at Zelli’s acquiescence, but then shook it off. “Thank you for your faith in me, but even the best in the country is at risk in every fight, no matter who it is against.”

“Oh.” Zelli bit his lip before peeking up for a hint that Tahlen wasn’t that angry with him anymore. “Did I worry you? I was hoping to talk them out of fighting by saying that. I don’t think they wanted to in the first place.”

Tahlen inched his shoulders down. “Probably not. But I would have done it if you had asked.”

“I would never ask that of you,” Zelli assured him immediately.

Zelli had never seen anyone, much less any sworn guard, much less *Tahlen*, look as frustrated as Tahlen did in that moment.

“It’s my purpose.” His expression said he was vexed at levels beyond Zelli’s understanding. “Protecting the one I have sworn to protect.”

“Do not say ‘gladly,’” Zelli rushed to insist. “Your purpose is more than that. It must be. But... I thank you.” He reached out, then became aware of the silence from those by the trees. One of the former Lyralinah guards could have been smirking beneath his beard. Fy had his eyebrows raised. Zelli pulled his hand back, then braced himself. “We’re going to go speak with them now. Or, I will speak, more than likely, and you will loom menacingly unless you want to speak too. I won’t stop you from doing either. But I’m sorry that you won’t be able to relax. And that I...” Zelli left the other subject for a different time. “Is this right?” he asked at last, letting his nerves show.

Tahlen's reply was gentle and only for Zelli to hear. "Lead, and I will follow."

Zelli rounded on the others with a wide, beaming smile he couldn't have concealed even if he'd tried.

# Eleven

Nya often said that people talked easier and were more generous with full bellies and warm toes. Zelli could not control the weather, but he did offer to share some of his and Tahlen's food, including the biscuits, which had prompted Let to somewhat tensely invite Zelli and Tahlen to join them for their evening meal.

Since traveling in the fog was impossible unless one had a carriage or cart with lanterns, that meant staying for the night.

Zelli had smiled for Let at that. He suspected it had startled her again, without being sure why.

“Just give in now,’ he said,” Fy had told Let, his tone knowing. Then, with the same cheerful attitude as before, Fy had invited Zelli to return to the blackberry bramble with him. “You could tell your Vallithi that we aren't going to hurt you.”

Zelli, after a glance over his shoulder at Tahlen, who was giving Let a lesson in how blank faces could be, had shrugged. “I could,” he agreed, “but I'm not sure he would listen.”

“No, I don't think he would,” the tall, thin one had muttered. Wain, if Zelli remembered his name correctly.

Zelli had decided a subject change was necessary and had asked if there was anything he could help with.

As Zelli was not allowed near the kitchens and had never cooked a meal out of doors, he was not much good at helping with anything. He had known that was the case, but had held out hopes he might be useful.

Fortunately, no one seemed to expect him to be. Fy, at least, had seemed sympathetic. He'd come back from his berry picking and, after Tahlen returned his smallest knife, had tried to teach Zelli to skin rabbits. It had not gone well.

Zelli, after washing in a nearby stream, had eventually taken himself over to the tamped-down space between some exposed



tree roots where the two injured guards sat, and had inquired about their needs. Nari's broken collarbone had happened in the mountains. Tern's leg injury was a deep cut that had not been allowed to heal, and kept reopening and worsening on the journey, which was why the guards had stopped here, hoping it would mend enough that they could continue on.

Zelli was pleased at the show of concern and loyalty. It said a great deal more than any broken oaths.

Everyone, even Let, appreciated the biscuits. Zelli told them all about Esrin's tarts and pies, even though he personally did not know how to get on her good side to get more.

"She's not afraid of you?" Tern was also a grunter, but that might have been the pain of her injury.

Zelli frowned, then frowned harder at Tahlen's snort. The Tialtтын were not the sort to mistreat servants. But he caught several of the others exchanging looks before he could explain that and didn't care for how they all then glanced curiously at Tahlen.

Thankfully, Let sat down not far from them and asked if the fog was normal and how long it lasted, and Tahlen surprised him by answering her. Maybe they shared a guard captain bond, if that existed. Not that Tahlen was the guard captain. Not yet.

Zelli listened to the description of how the coastal fog rolled in nightly from the sea, faster than the fog here but not as thick or as lasting, then sat back to observe them all, Let, Wain, Fy, Tern, Nari, and Vint. Vint, like Tahlen, did not say much. He also had a piece of one ear missing, though the wound looked very old, and he scowled at Fy a lot.

People were so very interesting, guards like these even more so. They might have families but they also *were* a family, in a way, to live and work so closely together, to consider possibly dying together someday. Zelli couldn't sit and stare at his own guards, they would complain to Grandmother, but he could study these ones.

They didn't seem to object to Tahlen, either, as the hours went by and the day turned to evening, although, if necessary, they would all do their best to kill each other.

"What are you frowning over, Zelli of the Tialttyrin?" Fy wondered from over by the stewpot. He was very friendly and forward, even though some of his cheer was likely false. Zelli did not ask where the stewpot had come from; the guards had traveled enough from their home that it was just possible they'd purchased one somewhere. The firepit had been in this spot already, according to Fy. The field workers probably sometimes camped beneath the trees after long days.

"I am debating what is to be done with you all," Zelli answered seriously.

The conversations around him fell to silence. Zelli straightened, grateful that though he'd chosen a larger root for a seat, his feet could touch the earth below.

"You can't stay here." He gestured to the firepit, then the road. "You've already been seen." He held his hands up as though imitating a scale and weighed each point. "Lyralinah or Villucatto or both, they have offered the Tialttyrin insult by coming here without asking or informing us. But if they will do this to their own guards, they will likely seek us out as well the moment they are able. The Tialttyrin have a responsibility to the people in this valley, and a family that has abandoned its oaths will not care for its people as they should be cared for."

"Then, of course, the Tialttyrin also have a duty to those in need, and lost travelers. The—I will say Villucatto until I know better—would likely not see it that way. Right now, they're distracted with several conflicts. Even attempting to find you all takes some of their strength, but they felt it important enough." Still puzzled by this, Zelli paused. "It can only be to appear stronger than they are. But if they are successful at that, they will win others to their side and then it will no longer be a matter of appearances."

Zelli noticed Fy had lost his smile.

"To send you on your way quickly seems best," Zelli concluded, then paused again, rubbing his chest. "On the

surface. Yet... if the Tialttyrin cannot honor even one duty, then do we have any business sitting in our fortress anymore?"

"Zelli," sighed Tahlen from above and behind him.

"I know, Tahlen," Zelli acknowledged without turning. "You'll say that honoring that duty matters only to us and will still end with us all dead. You have good reason to say that, a better reason than anyone else in the country, I think. But there is the possibility that the Villucatto might be reasonable or be called back to other concerns and let these guards go for now. Many things might happen. The fae might direct a real ruler to the palace."

He said that hopefully, in case this meeting had unseen witnesses, but then returned the rest of his attention to the listening guards. "We have force enough to take care of you, should we need to. But... several families acting against us? We do not have force enough for that."

"I thought you weren't The Tialttyrin." Let almost made it a question.

"He's near enough." Tahlen started in with that again. "But he does get ahead of himself in his mind."

Zelli hunched his shoulders, then twisted around to let Tahlen know the remark had stung. Though then Zelli had to nod in acceptance because it was also true. "For example," Zelli began slowly because Tahlen's warm pride struck him silent for several moments, "we can pretend you are our prisoners." He finally got his attention back on the others, wary when several of them frowned. He *had* said 'pretend.' "Though who will look at you all and believe that? Hmm. We'd have to take your weapons and you'd all have to learn to stop acting so... like sworn guards. And then, if the Villucatto did come to us, prisoners would have to be handed over. Normally, you could appeal to the throne, but by then, Tye might be on it. So, it's a problem we will have to handle ourselves."

The only sound to follow that was a long exhale from Tahlen. He understood what Zelli meant, and he wasn't arguing, but he didn't like it.

Let didn't even glance to Tahlen. "You would be at war for us?"

Zelli had avoided that word. The Tialttyrin were not prepared for one, though others were.

"I would protect the reputation of my family and our valley." That, he would say. "And you. I'm so sorry, Tahlen. I think it's unavoidable now if they've come this far into the valley. But I will ask for help. As far as I know, the fae still protect us here."

"If only the other beat-of-fours had your ideas, Zelli." Tahlen must have crouched down to be closer to Zelli, because the ache within Zelli eased slightly, and then Tahlen put a hand on Zelli's shoulder and the ache vanished altogether. Zelli put his hand over Tahlen's and tried not to hold it too tightly.

"Is this how the Tialttyrin are?" Wain asked the others. "I thought... if people say anything about them at all, it's that this is the place to get the best wine. Or, begging your pardon, rumors. About the other world and the fae and... the things the fae can get up to."

Fy snickered. "You mean in bed."

"They might be listening to you," Zelli informed Fy and Wain helpfully. "And you both have just all but asked them to bed you." Wain looked frozen, as if unsure whether or not he ought to be frightened. Fy started searching the canopy above them as if seeking his fae audience. Zelli leaned forward. "But, um, what is it they say about the bed sport of the fae, exactly? No one's ever told me."

Fy lowered his head to direct a desperate look behind Zelli to Tahlen, who didn't offer whatever aid Fy had hoped for. "Oh, you know," Fy finally attempted to be dismissive, "that a good time should be had. Or that you might end up with a baby, one way or the other, so you'd better make the fuck worth it."

"That's true of many couplings." Vint sneered a little. "Don't be daft, Fy."

"Oh." Zelli did not pout in his disappointment. "Is that all?"

Fy seemed intrigued now. "What did you think it would be?"

Unprepared, Zelli floundered, then shrugged as diffidently as he could. “I expected talk of their wildness, or something along those lines. They are not human.” Surely that much was obvious. “Even if they can choose to seem human, or mostly human. I assumed they may not... do things... as humans do them. Or that they do them differently. I mean, the claws,” he swallowed, “the teeth. I thought people would have stories of biting... or some such thing.”

He shut his mouth so his sharper teeth could not be glimpsed but could do nothing for his burning face. His suggestion distracted a few of them at least, Fy included, who appeared to be trying to imagine what Zelli meant.

Zelli had always thought his odder impulses were something from the hidden half of his family. But maybe that was all Zelli and he was too strange even for the fae.

Let made a strangled coughing sound, then said, polite and smooth, “Perhaps some were too embarrassed to speak of such things to others.”

She was kind to say it. Zelli lowered his head and heaved a sigh. The root beneath Zelli shifted as Tahlen dropped down to sit beside him. Their hands came apart, but then Tahlen took hold of Zelli’s hand again and placed it gently on his forearm over the vambrace.

He did not look at Zelli; his attention was on all the others. His expression, if he had one, was meant for them. Fy responded with a muttered, “Message fucking received,” before regaining his cheerful attitude. “Supper’s ready, anyway!” he called to the others, who, except for the two injured, rose to get some food. Let brought her injured guards some stew before returning to serve herself.

Tahlen leaned closer. “Have you thought about biting people, Zelli?” he asked in a private whisper, his breath brushing Zelli’s ear.

Zelli curled his fingers and toes. He turned toward Tahlen but couldn’t look at him. “Sometimes. Sometimes, you—*people* are so beautiful that it’s overwhelming and I can’t...” He made a garbled sound of frustration. “Or there is all *this*”—he waved

over his torso—“inside, and I... And sometimes... sometimes I think about it without any of those reasons. I thought it was them, but what if it’s just me? Tahlen, am I...?” He did not get a chance to say *wrong*.

Tahlen leaned closer. “Because you want to hurt people? Or because you think it might feel good to them? Or for some other reason?”

Zelli did not think the two remaining guards could hear, but glanced to them anyway. “I don’t know. Should I think about it?”

Tahlen pressed down, urging Zelli’s fingers over tiny bumps and imperfections in the leather, then let go, leaving Zelli’s hand curled around the arm brace, which was marked, Zelli realized when he finally looked down, with faint traces of Zelli’s teeth.

“You have enough to worry over now,” Tahlen told him. “This can wait.” He then returned to keeping an eye on the others, as though Zelli wasn’t trailing his fingertips over the dents left by what some might have unfavorably referred to as his fangs.

Zelli wondered if Tahlen could feel the touches through the leather, but didn’t ask. He didn’t know what to say, and, in any case, was already biting his own lip in pained confusion.

His stomach growled, an almost pleasant distraction from his moment of shame. But since he and Tahlen had not brought bowls to eat from, and the others needed the food far more, and Zelli was still blushing hotly, he was content to sit in silence.

Fy eventually brought Zelli a bowl full of stew. Zelli thanked him for it even if he could not quite meet his eye. Not until he immediately handed the bowl to Tahlen and Fy laughed a little.

“You would avenge him exactly as you promised to,” Fy explained his laughter, then smiled and added, “and perhaps your other guards also. They’re lucky to have found you.”

Most of the Tialttyrin guards had served the family for generations, but that was the situation with most sworn guards except this group, and Zelli didn't want to hurt them more by mentioning it.

"Vallithi," Vint said from over by the fire, loud enough to ensure everyone could not pretend they weren't also listening, "I can see the Tialttyrin treat you well. Would you say they are all like this one?"

Tahlen, trying to push Zelli to eat first, shared a frown with all of them. "No. His grandmother, The Tialttyrin, comes close. If you're asking if it's home for me—yes, it is. My sister and I freely chose to stay there over all other places we'd seen, and I take comfort in wearing the emblem of his family."

Zelli wanted to sink his teeth into Tahlen for that statement more than he wanted any stew or dinner. That meant something. He just wasn't sure what.

He quickly looked away. The other guards around Tahlen did not.

"A Vallithi," Tern began, changing her tone into something more than a grunt, "a guard in the house of a beat-of-four." Zelli could not tell if she disapproved.

It was not a question, though Tahlen responded as though it had been. "We were welcomed and treated with respect."

"Bit more than that," Fy muttered around a cough, sitting down not far from Zelli and Tahlen.

A tingle went down Zelli's spine. Fy and the others had seen Zelli's *feelings* on display; Zelli had known that from how Fy joked before. But they had also decided he and Tahlen were lovers, or perhaps that Zelli used Tahlen as some of Zelli's relatives in the capital had sometimes used guards. Those around the palace liked their bed sport, Arden had said.

If the courtship had gone ahead, he and Tahlen would have been lovers by now, almost certainly. There was no schedule for such a thing, but Zelli would have jumped at the chance, even with all his uncertainties. There was no courtship because

of Zelli. Yet Tahlen, who had likely realized all this already, had taken no steps to discourage the idea among these guards.

Maybe he didn't find the thought painful and it was only Zelli's silliness to think he would. Or possibly he liked people to believe they were courting. Perhaps he wanted to try to court Zelli again or at least wanted to take him to bed, even with risk of being bitten.

"I don't understand. Another noble family should have taken you in, surely." Wain appeared confused. "A guard and a cook?"

"We're happy enough." Tahlen stopped to look down in surprise at Zelli's hand on his knee. Zelli withdrew it immediately. Tahlen took Zelli by the wrist to place Zelli's hand back on his knee, then, easy as breathing, as if that were nothing bold, continued to talk to the others. "Some noble families have not fared well of late, but who would trouble a cook?"

"Not me," Zelli murmured, meaning it.

"But a guard for another family." Let ruefully shook her head. "To choose that."

It did seem an inexplicable choice now that Let had drawn attention to it. Most of the Vallithi guards had died with the family.

Zelli raised his head. Whatever Tahlen saw in his face made him sigh, then hand Zelli the bowl and order him to eat.

"A guard saved us," Tahlen explained to the others. He might have intended to leave it there. "*Eat, Zelli.*" Zelli huffed but obeyed. Tahlen glanced around and though Zelli did not understand what the multiple stares he got meant, Tahlen must have. He worked his jaw but then elaborated. "It is Vallithi to offer our loyalty." *To our peril and end*, he did not say, but Zelli heard it. "It's in... *was* in the family histories. But it's just a story. The Lith and the Val offering their swords in service to the first Earl to calm so many of the others." *Calm* meant *subdue* in some cases, but since the actions of that Earl had led to an eventual peace, many ignored that part of the



histories. “Once the families joined, they kept that legacy. But first, there was the tale of one of the initial rebellions, when they had to flee and found themselves in a strange land. They asked the fae for guidance or a light to travel by, and the stars above them grew brighter. The Morning Lance,” Tahlen named the constellation, which had the shape of the clusters of tiny white flowers that popped up in fields in the spring. “To give them direction.”

“So the Vallithi have always been favored by the fae, huh?”

The question did not come from Fy. Zelli twisted around to stare at Nari in surprise and then indignation. But Nari was grinning, and soon, so were some of the others. Small, playful expressions that Zelli had often seen on the faces of the Tialttyrin guards when they teased one another. Zelli turned back to Tahlen, who showed no sign of irritation. He merely looked at Zelli and said, “Eat.”

Zelli ate resentfully though the stew was good. “I forgot you liked your histories. Do you know more?”

Tahlen was openly surprised. “More Vallithi history?”

Zelli shrugged. “Any histories that are not boring.”

“Maybe they’re not boring because *he* is the one telling them?” Fy suggested, nearly cooing. He stopped when Zelli nodded.

“Yes, exactly. Oh, but first he should eat.” Zelli smiled at the others. “I would tell you Tialttyrin stories while he does that, but I don’t know many of them, and they mostly involve, um, bedding the fae.” He quickly shoveled more stew into his mouth.

“No, no. Go on. Tahlen has to eat, after all.” Fy gave Zelli a look that reminded him of the outguard Mil, though Zelli couldn’t have said why.

Tahlen got to his feet and Fy skittered out of his way, to Vint’s amusement, although Fy came back soon enough, his chin on his hands. “I am sure we all would like to hear these family histories. Wouldn’t we, everyone? Tahlen?”

“Oh.” Zelli paused. “If you think it’s interesting, though it does not involve any stars.” He met Tahlen’s eyes, so very far away over by the firepit. “My uncle calls this story Alwyn Tyrin—the families had not intermarried yet—and the Autumn Gift.”

## Twelve

In truth, even though there were at least three different tales claiming to be about the first Tialtтын to lie with the fae and be given a sign of their favor, tales the family regarded as love stories, Zelli *did* think they were more about fucking.

Though they were surprisingly short on details in that respect. At least, as Zelli's uncles had told them to him. At crucial points, the language turned to imagery more suited to poems, as if people had fruit and flowers between their legs, or pearls at their breasts, or wore robes made of jewels. Maybe that was why the other guards were content to listen to Tahlen tell them another history afterward.

This history, of one of the original Earls, was not a Vallithi story, but no one pressed Tahlen for more of those. Zelli appreciated that. Not even Fy, who seemed to be the most daring, was willing to risk dredging up a painful memory for Tahlen.

They offered no tales of the Lyralinah and Zelli returned their kindness and discretion by not asking for any, although he did wonder if any of them had left family behind and what was to be done about that.

When it grew dark enough and fog was visible in the distance, they built up the fire and everyone began to settle in the places each must have claimed for a bed. A few of them chose spaces next to each other, although that might have been for warmth, since none of them embraced or as much as held hands.

Tahlen put his and Zelli's packs at the base of a large tree, farther from the fire than most of the others but near enough to use its light. He wanted to watch the other guards, even now, and likely would not sleep again if Zelli allowed it.

Zelli cleaned as best as he could in the cold stream, then, shivering, kneeled down between their packs to watch Tahlen

watch everyone. He stared until Tahlen sat down next to him, then looked at him with an eyebrow raised.

“I’m sorry for telling them your name.” Zelli whispered even with the others at a distance, some already lying down to sleep. He felt it needed to be said, although Tahlen probably knew why he’d done it. “From how it was spoken by Bree at the judgments, I thought it might be useful in convincing them to trust us. But I still should not have done it.”

Tahlen regarded Zelli steadily, then shook his head. “It’s not a secret. I don’t mind.” That might have been true or only partly true. Zelli continued to stare. Tahlen’s expression hardened, then all at once he sighed and his ire vanished. “They would have liked our name used to protect you. That, I don’t mind.”

“It was Vallithi to do it?” Zelli guessed carefully. “Or to have the name used so? Then I’m glad, but I still won’t do it again.”

“If only others were more like you.” Tahlen made his strange almost-wish for the third time. “And, yes, you will do it again, if you think it will help. And I will follow, I said, and I meant it. I don’t always understand you, but you try to do what is best for everyone. Even when you refused me, you did it because you didn’t think the courtship would make me happy. I can trust your intentions, though they might hurt.”

“I didn’t actually...” Zelli inched closer, frowning. “Is that what you were about to say earlier?”

Tahlen swept a look over the campsite, the flickering firelight and the bodies still moving. Sounds, if not words, drifted over to them. Wain was on guard duty, sitting up in a tree branch, as if that would let anyone see through the fog.

“We can talk about that at another time,” Tahlen said at last. “When we’re somewhere else and alone.”

“I did not actually refuse you,” Zelli remembered to say. Tahlen’s attention was sudden and sharp. Zelli held up a hand. “You should know that, at least. If it matters.” He swallowed. “I don’t know what I would have done, but you heard words I didn’t say.”

He was grateful the firelight spared him some of the terrible beauty of Tahlen's eyes. Tahlen did not look away. Zelli finally did, his breath catching when Tahlen took his hand.

"Would you like to hear more stories of the stars, Mizel of the Tialttyrin?" The formality of the question did not calm Zelli although Tahlen's touch was a balm to his every other problem. "Or to gaze at them with me?"

As though the fog and the trees would allow them to see any. But, as with Arden and Mil, perhaps it was not about the stars but the company.

Zelli looked into Tahlen's beautiful eyes. "The others think I'm using you," he worried aloud, chewing his bottom lip. "But I would like to hear your stories and sit with you."

Tahlen shifted to the side, giving Zelli room to come closer. "I could tend to your hair," he offered, leaving Zelli to imagine sitting with his back to Tahlen's chest and breathe harder.

"It will only be a mess again by morning," he answered after much heated thought. He wanted to ask if Tahlen meant the offer as it sounded, but Wain hummed snatches of a song and one of those already fast asleep began to lightly snore. They weren't alone. Tahlen had suggested they wait to speak of it. "I could comb yours for you."

Zelli could barely be still. But he did not have to be for long. Tahlen waved him toward one of his packs, which Zelli looked away at last to dig into. He found the comb and more slips of cord, and then Tahlen, thinking of the future as Zelli could not without bursting into flame, moved forward to let Zelli kneel behind him.

Remembering last night's lesson, Zelli undid Tahlen's braid with his fingers first, then began to comb the ends as gently as he could. A shiver ran down Tahlen's back more than once.

Zelli glanced over and up, found Wain observing them, then kept his attention firmly on Tahlen.

"Do you have another story about the constellations?" he wondered, letting the heavy length of Tahlen's hair fall across the back of his hand.

“Did you know that the Rossick call the Waterfall the Lover’s Plait?” Tahlen asked, not remarking on the eager sound Zelli made.

“Is that the origin of the trend?” Zelli demanded in a whisper. “I thought the hair braiding around the capital was the fashion because the tastes of some forgotten ruler. Did the braids once have meanings? They must have if one was named for lovers.”

“I hadn’t considered it,” Tahlen was thoughtful. “I don’t even know how long different braids and waist-length hair have been the style. I have a vague memory of my great-grandmother complaining about the work involved in her hair, but she had curls. I suspect you’re right and they did once mean something. Something more than simply ‘the time to fuss over hair several times a day.’”

“My family have done what we pleased for the most part,” Zelli informed Tahlen when he remembered to speak again, after getting distracted by the fall of shining brown hair and thinking of waterfalls and lovers. He pulled strands like silk thread from Tahlen’s neck. “With our hair and with most things, although my cousins seem to have embraced palace tastes. I like the idea of meanings,” he confessed. “I bet a Master Keeper at the Great Library would know if there had once been meanings and could find out if I asked. Maybe I could write to them.... No, I suppose they have other things on their minds right now.”

He separated a section of Tahlen’s hair to weave a small, thin braid that would fall behind Tahlen’s ear. “I’ll imagine a meaning for this one.” Zelli said it to be playful, but touched his work tenderly once he was done. He started another simple braid for the rest, knowing Tahlen would comb it out and redo it properly in the morning. The little braid nearly disappeared from sight, exactly as Zelli had thought it would.

“And you won’t tell me what that meaning is?” Tahlen asked in the lightest of whispers, almost as if he were dreaming.

Unable to put it off any longer, Zelli draped Tahlen’s finished braid over Tahlen’s shoulder, then moved back to sit near

Tahlen's elbow. "I've been embarrassed enough for one day. For once, I will keep my foolishness to myself."

Tahlen half-turned, one hand sliding down the end of the braid. "Will I think it's foolish?"

"I don't know," Zell returned honestly. "I still don't understand you. But I care for you," he glanced down and then back, "which everyone seems to know. And I think it's ridiculous that you will stay awake again tonight for me. Do not deny it, Tahlen." He nearly raised his voice for that and for Tahlen's frown. "It's ridiculous for you to do it when you clearly like these people, and it's bad for you personally, and also you cannot protect me if you're tired, you know you can't. You should sleep. I will stay awake for a while, and watch over you, and wake you if I need to." He liked this solution once he had it, and nodded firmly. "Yes, that's what I'll do. There's no use arguing, Tahlen."

Tahlen was not arguing. Tahlen frowned and then unknit his brow. The light was behind him, so some of his beauty was dimmed, but that did not make it any less of a struggle for Zelli when Tahlen moved and suddenly they were even closer.

"You're going to keep watch for me?" Tahlen asked, unsmiling. Zelli would have said it was a challenge, except that Tahlen was now only inches away and his voice was feathers upon feathers. Zelli nodded. Tahlen's lips curved up.

Zelli was so preoccupied with this hint of good feeling that he did not notice Tahlen's hand until just before Tahlen gently lifted Zelli's chin. He swept his thumb over Zelli's lips, which parted for him. Something hot shot through Zelli, up and then back down again, making him shiver and fight not to push forward.

Tahlen touched Zelli's mouth again but didn't lean forward as he did in Zelli's fantasies.

"Biting, Zelli?" He looked away from Zelli's lips to meet his eyes. He left his hand where it was.

That was all that kept Zelli from flinching away. "Not to bleed," he closed his eyes to say. "I don't think. Maybe? Am I

too wild?”

“Bed partners often nibble,” Tahlen told him, breath at Zelli’s cheek. “But I don’t think that is what you mean.”

“I don’t know,” Zelli exhaled it in a rush, his eyes fluttering open. “Have your lovers nibbled you?” He was too lit up to snarl, though he wanted to. He tipped his head in a way that seemed to make sense with how Tahlen held him. Not that Tahlen *held* him; his fingers merely curled under Zelli’s jaw. “But we’re not lovers?”

He hadn’t meant it to be a question.

Tahlen inclined his head a fraction. “That was partly my fault, but not my doing, Zelli.”

Zelli flexed his hands because when he bit his lip, Tahlen watched closely and then biting only himself did not feel *enough*. “Are you teasing me?” Tahlen shaking his head for ‘no’ was almost cruel. Zelli put his hand on Tahlen’s knee, snatched it away, then let it creep back. “Tahlen.” He had no idea what to say or why his voice was rough. “Tahlen, we’re not alone. I want.... We can’t. But what if you change your mind tomorrow?”

Tahlen twitched as if surprised, pulling away from Zelli by the smallest of distances before sliding his hand beneath Zelli’s messy braid to the back of his neck and tugging Zelli closer.

Zelli shuddered against him. He was hot, or that was Tahlen’s mouth. Tahlen’s lovely, perfect mouth, pressed to Zelli’s, not seeming to mind that Zelli’s lips were open. It moved, Tahlen’s lovely, perfect mouth, brushing another kiss—another *kiss*—over Zelli’s cheek and then again over Zelli’s mouth. That was Tahlen. *Tahlen* gently quieting the hungry sound that tore out of Zelli, and Tahlen pulling back again to stroke Zelli’s bottom lip with his thumb and stare into Zelli’s wide eyes.

“You are not a wall.” Zelli didn’t fully know what he said but Tahlen was no wall as Zelli was no vine. “If I’m a wolf, then what are you?”



Tahlen pressed lightly on Zelli's lip where Zelli had last bitten it. "You still don't know?"

Zelli whined. Tahlen stroked his lip again. Zelli thought of biting that thumb. He thought of *nibbles*. He looked up into Tahlen's eyes.

Tahlen pushed out a pained breath, then moved to put his back to the tree, tugging Zelli with him. He looked pointedly at the spot next to him until Zelli scooted in. Tahlen held up his arm, offering his vambrace for Zelli's use yet again.

Zelli continued to stare. "But..."

"You're right. I'm tired and I do need to sleep." Tahlen lowered his slightly roughened voice. "And you want to keep watch for me."

"You kissed me." Zelli leaned in, then crept in, because it seemed to be allowed. Slowly, very slowly, he settled at Tahlen's side where it was warmer, gazing up at Tahlen the entire time. "I couldn't sleep now if I wanted to. You kissed me," he repeated with amazement, "even though I want to bite you."

The curve at Tahlen's mouth now was no hint. It was a warm, if careful, smile. "Zelli."

"But I won't," Zelli insisted. "I'll protect you."

Tahlen offered his arm once more, not concealing a shiver when Zelli wrapped his hands around it and held it to his chest. "You could do both, if you like."

Zelli stared at him, uncomprehending for a long while, then, stinging all over with heat, brought Tahlen's arm up. He touched the points of his teeth to the meat of Tahlen's thumb. Tahlen made a not-altogether-quiet sound. Zelli twitched in surprise and turned his head so that his teeth pushed into the hard leather.

The sound he made was too near a growl.

He dropped Tahlen's hand and then said quickly, "If you want to rest, do it now, or I will truly be foolish." He could feel Tahlen staring and also his warmth and the weight of his arm,

which he left in Zelli's lap, no doubt for Zelli to do with as he pleased.

Which, at the moment, would have been to tear that bit of leather into strips.

"Zelli," Tahlen said again. He dared to sound *fond* when Zelli wanted to gnash his teeth and jump on top of him.

"You smiled at me too," Zelli marveled, curling into the space at Tahlen's side before raising Tahlen's arm. He closed his teeth over Tahlen's fingertips without biting down.

A nibble, and not terrible.

Tahlen smiled again, less careful.

Zelli kissed his hand and knew he would not sleep a wink.

# Thirteen

Tahlen had not appeared happy with Zelli when he woke up before dawn and found Zelli struggling to stay awake. He'd narrowed his eyes and gotten to his feet, no traces of last night's incredible fondness for Zelli to be seen.

Nonetheless, Zelli had told him the ideas that had occupied him during his damp and sleepless night, and Tahlen must have agreed with them, because after shaving and cleaning up, he had spoken to Let. The Lyralinah guards could not stay here and Tahlen and Zelli had to return soon. If the guards wanted Tahlen and Zelli's protection or help, they must leave with them. Considering the distance to travel in a day, they had to leave early.

Tern could ride on Lemon Blossom, Zelli had also decided. Zelli would walk.

He thought that as he helped the guards take down their camp, and introduced Lemon Blossom to Tern, and hastily combed and braided his hair because he didn't want to bother Tahlen. He continued thinking that until Tahlen appeared from nowhere and put a hand on Zelli's shoulder to steer him toward Starfall, who now bore no packs or even Tahlen's short staff.

"Oh, no, I couldn't leave you to walk," Zelli tried to argue, already placing his boot in Tahlen's hands as though he'd been trained to by the sight of Tahlen kneeling in front of him. Starfall's ears flicked back and forth at the sound of Zelli's breathless protest. Starfall himself stayed still until Tahlen slid into the saddle behind Zelli and Zelli tensed without thinking.

Tahlen clicked his tongue and Starfall calmed. Zelli kept his back straight but otherwise tried to relax so he wouldn't disturb the horse even more.

"Tahlen," Zelli whined, voice rising at the end when Tahlen's hand landed on his hip. He almost thought Tahlen might click

his tongue at him this time.

“You need to rest,” Tahlen informed Zelli in a low tone. “And I don’t trust you not to run off in search of blackberries and stumble into those ten riders we all fear so much.”

Zelli managed a scoff but couldn’t argue with most of that, since he *had* stopped for blackberries and run into a group of people they’d been looking for. Unsure what to do with his hands, he crossed his arms over his chest. “If we cut across the fields—carefully, to minimize damage—and do not stop, we should reach Mayor Sar’s inn tonight.” He had already told Tahlen this, but he had to say *something*. Tahlen’s chest was firm and his *thighs* were firm and Zelli had to think of anything else lest he embarrass Tahlen and not just himself. “I really could walk the whole way,” he added, refusing to look over toward anyone else who might be watching him blush and lean away from Tahlen’s lap.

Tahlen briefly put his chin over Zelli’s shoulder. “It’s been a long time since anyone but Esrin has looked out for me.” He let that float between them as if aware without asking that Zelli was warmed by it. “But you need your rest as well. And since you must touch me, this seems easiest.”

“Easiest?” Zelli echoed, feeling faint.

“Simplest,” Tahlen corrected himself, then withdrew his hand.

“But, Tahlen,” Zelli whispered, only to trail off because he couldn’t think of anything to say that wouldn’t embarrass them both. Tahlen surely already knew what he did to Zelli. He didn’t even object, judging from the night before, although he might if Zelli ended up panting in his lap.

Zelli shifted forward in an attempt to put some space between them, which did not work and made Tahlen put his hand, quite firmly, on Zelli’s hip.

“Simpler if you hold still,” he bit out above Zelli’s ear, his hand tightening.

Zelli shivered but otherwise kept himself motionless. When Tahlen’s grip on him eased, he tried to subtly fall back into a

more natural posture while also tipping his head up to catch more of Tahlen's breath on his neck.

It was dangerous how he fit into Tahlen's arms.

He belatedly answered, as stiff in manner as Tahlen could be, "If you think it best."

Tahlen's answer had an edge. "Am I not allowed to care for you in return?"

Zelli did not see how he had implied otherwise, even if he also had not and did not expect any such care.

"I have never been held before," he confessed at last, staring down at his hands. "Except by Grandmother." Tahlen's dismay was obvious in how he murmured Zelli's name. Zelli gave a quick shake of his head. "I didn't mean to offend you. I'll try to be still."

"*Mizel.*" Tahlen's breath stirred Zelli's hair, was warm on his neck. "I meant to do better. I'm sorry." With his face against the back of Zelli's head, he sighed. "I held you last night," he explained. At one point during the night, Tahlen's arm *had* curled around Zelli's waist, but Zelli had thought Tahlen had been sleeping or absently seeking out more warmth. "You don't have to be still. My problems are my own. If being held is not to your liking, only give the order." Tahlen's closeness seemed at odds with those words, and his care as he asked for orders made no sense.

"I think it *is* to my liking," Zelli admitted, but sighed at the same time. The day would be torturous. "No need for any order."

Tahlen pushed out a breath, the irritated one.

Cautiously, Zelli put a hand over Tahlen's on his hip. "Do you...?" The touching did not help him understand, but his fae relatives seemed to think it would. "Do you *want* me to give you orders?"

Tahlen pushed out that breath again. "I scarcely know anymore," he muttered, then, "I would follow them if you gave them."

Zelli did not know why he shivered; he was more than warm enough. “Then,” he began, no less cautious or confused, “we should go, if everyone is ready.”

Tahlen straightened immediately.

He might have no expression at all. Zelli knew his own face was red and his lip already sore from how he’d bitten it. But the morning was dark and the fog was thick, and perhaps no one else would see him clearly until he’d had time to calm himself.

He hadn’t been that fortunate once yet on this journey, but he silently asked for it now. Or would have, if they hadn’t started to move and he’d had to immediately drop his head to whimper.

The first time Zelli’s body had been taken over by heat and a clawing hunger for any sort of touch, he had been just at the age to furtively touch himself in the dark of his room at night and many other moments if he was alone. So he had not realized the fever-like feeling was something to distinguish from how he always felt until his second day of locking himself in his room, when various concerned servants and then Grandmother had knocked on his door.

One more humiliation in a life of them, but bearable. Those within the family quarters of the fortress were used to the strange traits sometimes exhibited by Tialttyrins, and he and Grandmother had developed a system where Zelli would let her know if that problem was imminent, and she would make his excuses and have food and drink left by his door—a system they had expanded to include some of his other difficulties when they had begun to appear.

People outside the family, if they thought of Zelli at all, might think he was sickly with how often he had to sequester himself in his room. Some in the family knew, and a couple of the servants must suspect the exact nature of Zelli’s complaints, but, perhaps out of loyalty, did not seem to speak of it.

The last incident had been unexpectedly stronger than any of the previous fevers. But after that, he hadn't experienced one again. He assumed they were over, that they were part of a fae's growth and he was too old for them now.

That final fever had come on so immediately and been so instantly overwhelming that Zelli had barely made it to his room in time. The fever must have been building before then and he hadn't noticed. That's what he'd told Grandmother later when she'd delicately inquired. People had remarked on Zelli's sudden illness, she had confided. She had not said which people, but since Tahlen had been the one to watch Zelli flee the archery range, his face red and his walk stiff, he must have been the one to ask.

Zelli had added that humiliation to his collection of them.

At least Tahlen had been concerned, and hopefully had not realized that the unexpected press of his hands to Zelli's back and waist, the comment above Zelli's ear about *form* and something else about his shoulders that Zelli truly could not remember, had turned Zelli into a shuddering wreck within a heartbeat.

Then, of course, being Tahlen, he had met Zelli's gaze when Zelli had turned to stare up at him, goggle up at him, really, his thoughts a lustful blur and his skin aflame. Tahlen had taken the bow from Zelli's useless hands as well, their fingers brushing.

He'd said something. Zelli had even less of a memory of that, only the sound of Tahlen's voice, which had stayed with Zelli for the following two days. Two days instead of one or one and a half. Three in truth, but Zelli had made himself rejoin the world after the second day, and buried himself under accounting ledgers.

Zelli had not wanted to think much of it after that. The lust had been so distinctly Tahlen-shaped that it had felt different from Zelli's frequent, if vague and inexperienced thoughts of Tahlen's hands or thighs or chest. Or mouth.

Or fingers.

Or mouth again.

It was generally Tahlen on Zelli's mind in those sorts of moments, had been ever since first meeting Tahlen. But that last time the hunger had been so intensely focused on Tahlen and the unknown but urgent things Zelli wanted Tahlen to do to him, that he'd had trouble meeting Tahlen's eyes afterward.

Not long after, Tahlen had asked to court him and that had ended how it had ended. In the weeks and then months that followed, the lust-fevers had vanished. Indeed, Zelli had felt not much inclination for anything, even without the fever.

The fevers, all ravenous need and not a single thought in Zelli's mind, should not be of concern to him now. But his regular randy dreams of Tahlen had returned with force during their small journey and would only be worse now, Zelli was sure of it. Being near Tahlen might help Zelli understand him, but it was not going to make anything else easier for Zelli in the future.

At the moment, tired, warm, lulled by Starfall's slow, steady pace, Zelli drifted, half-asleep until suddenly, starkly aware again that he was in Tahlen's arms, that he was all but between Tahlen's legs.

Tahlen did not help although he must have thought he did. He would turn his head to answer a question from someone and his breath would shiver down Zelli's neck. Or he would slide an arm around Zelli's waist before they went over a particularly large mound of dirt in one of the fields and Zelli would be up and alert and indescribably hot.

He thought about asking to walk several times, then considered the chances that Tahlen might grow tired of him and rescind his offer of... whatever last night had been, and how Zelli might never get to be in Tahlen's arms again. Asking the first time had seemed to frustrate Tahlen, something Zelli was still puzzling over.

At least Zelli did not have to worry about a lust-fever now. That was some consolation. Zelli had paused to consider his body for a while, making sure he did not feel any of the warning symptoms despite how lascivious his thoughts had



grown. Restlessness usually came first, though it was really more the sensation of needing to find something—and never finding it, of course. Just scuttling off to his room to wriggle his fingers inside of himself and wish for more oil, or less oil, depending on whatever Zelli's body was up to.

He *was* hot, but it was after midday and he was ensconced in Tahlen's arms. Last night, Tahlen had kissed him. Anyone would be hot in Zelli's place.

The occasional glances from the others were not helping, Zelli decided, and remembered frowning back at Fy when Fy twisted around and winked at him. Although the last look Fy had given him, some time ago now, had seemed almost worried.

Either Fy was surprised to learn that Zelli could sulk or he assumed Zelli was sick or weak. Maybe they all did. Just a useless beat-of-four, playing idly with Tahlen's hand whenever it landed on his hip.

Or there was something in Tahlen's manner that made them think Zelli was not entirely well. He did persist in offering Zelli water and then apples from the trees they passed.

Zelli duly ate two apples so Tahlen wouldn't fret, but eventually turned his head and shut his eyes. Lack of sleep was probably the reason for his mood. It was also the reason he was here, comfortable and suffering in Tahlen's lap. He should try to get some rest and then perhaps he'd understand more.

Zelli bit his lip hard then released it, liking the pounding rush of blood that followed and how his lips felt like the rest of him, swollen-hot and wet. He whined. Tahlen held him tighter, adding Zelli's name in a sweet growl above Zelli's ear. Tahlen was cruel, heartless, a wall of muscle and stone that surrounded Zelli with warmth but wouldn't let him move back though it felt so good. Zelli whined again because his teeth were useless.

“*Tahlen*,” he complained, shifting, only to be pinned down once again by unrelenting strength when all he wanted was to move. If he should be held down, it should be harder, with more of *Tahlen* against him.

*In him*, he thought dizzily and rolled his hips again.

“*Zelli*,” *Tahlen* ground out against the side of *Zelli*’s neck.

His voice was good but not enough, not nearly. *Zelli* turned his head, his lips parted to let his complaints escape.

“Why won’t you fill me? *Tahlen*, please.” He tugged *Tahlen*’s hand, but couldn’t get it to budge. He touched himself instead, sinking his teeth into his lip again.

“*Zelli!*” *Tahlen* snapped and *Zelli* opened his eyes to see sky, and part of a field and *Tahlen*’s shoulder.

He looked forward, dazed, sweating beneath his layers, and saw *Lemon Blossom* as well as all of the *Lyralinah* guards. Not one of them glanced back, not even *Fy*. They all had the determined postures of sworn guards who would keep their eyes only on their assigned duties no matter what was going on around them.

*Zelli* squeezed his eyes shut. His mouth was dry, his lip stinging. The guards were some distance ahead. *Tahlen* must have slowed down, or they had moved faster, all to spare *Zelli* more humiliation, as though that was possible.

Or maybe it was to spare *Tahlen*, whose body had reacted to *Zelli*’s desperate movements, probably despite his wishes. *Zelli* could not even politely pull away. There was nowhere to go.

“I’m so sorry,” he said at last, burning further at how rough his voice was. “Oh, *Tahlen*. I’m so sor...”

“*Zelli*,” *Tahlen* didn’t allow him to finish, “it’s all right.”

*Zelli* put his face in his hands and struggled to catch his breath. He shook his head. “No, it isn’t.” He’d had more control at fifteen than he had now. He still wanted to press back, to keep pressing back, until one or both of them spent. He wanted to be pulled to the ground and taken, and now they all knew it.

He was so hot that his bottom layer of clothing stuck to his skin. He was hard and Tahlen had only to look down to see it, probably *had* seen it. He would have felt it if Zelli had succeeded in moving Tahlen's hand.

"I'm so sorry," Zelli said again. "I'd offer to walk but," he kept his face hidden, "I couldn't right now without everyone seeing. Please, not in front of the others, Tahlen. Please."

"It's all right," Tahlen kept his voice as low as Zelli's. "It's all right and I will keep telling you so." He lifted his hand and splayed it over Zelli's stomach, petting as though Zelli were a startled cat. Zelli swallowed the sound he wanted to make and held himself so his fine tremors would be less obvious. "You called for me," Tahlen added, something like fire in his voice. Zelli nearly moaned again.

"Always, I am embarrassed." Zelli scrubbed his face with his hands but didn't open his eyes. A shiver went through him. Always, his body betrayed him. He took a deep breath, then another. "I think," he announced shakily, "that I *would* like to walk for a while. I'll stay behind the others."

Tahlen stilled his hand, then said nothing, as if waiting for Zelli to add something else. When Zelli didn't, Tahlen expelled a long breath but brought Starfall to a halt. He got down easily, as if he could not lack grace even when accidentally aroused because of Zelli's silliness. Then he held out his hand for Zelli.

Surprised, Zelli looked from the hand to Tahlen's serious, if darkened, face.

He took the offered hand, then looked away as he slid down. He let go the moment his boots were on the ground. Tahlen took Starfall's reins in one hand and stood, waiting.

Zelli tugged at his pants and could not meet Tahlen's eye again. "You're impossibly kind."

"You are the only one to think to say so." As if unconcerned with the guards ahead of them, and as if also not willing to risk more embarrassment for Zelli, Tahlen continued to speak quietly. "Who would care if their guard was kind or not? Only

Mizel. It makes me want to be kinder to you. For you, I suppose.” His focus was intent upon Zelli when Zelli darted a glance to him. “To do things for you, if you would ask, or tell me.”

Intense heat curled at the base of Zelli’s spine. He wrapped his arms around himself as if that could contain it. He swallowed wetly, then shuddered when flames seemed to lick across every inch of his skin.

It was not as immediate as the last time, but he recognized the sensation and dropped his head. There had been no restlessness. But then, what had there been to search for? He had spent the night and most of the day in Tahlen’s arms. That was at least part of what his body wanted.

He wondered how far they had to go before they reached Mayor Sar’s inn. If he had time before he lost his mind and not even Tahlen’s kindness could shield him. Tahlen’s kindness might even bring it on faster. It had the last time. Zelli couldn’t pretend otherwise now with this evidence.

“I am so sick of being strange.” Zelli glared at the row of dirt he had disturbed. “Of being special. Only Mizel,” he echoed Tahlen. “The only one in all of the country, it feels like. Since I was a child, it’s made others fear me or avoid me. And since I was seventeen, it has been near-constant embarrassment like this. Near-constant reactions, burning and wanting.” He raised his head but only managed to look at Tahlen’s shoulder. “Don’t worry. I’ll be fine. I’ll bear it. I always do.”

He started to walk before Tahlen could stop him, or fret more, or tell him to at least ride Starfall alone.

Zelli didn’t want to risk drifting again and the walking might help. The sun was high but already descending. A few hours until dark. He would have to make it.

“Zelli,” Tahlen said somewhere behind him.

“It’s better that you don’t speak,” Zelli warned him without explaining, and moved faster to make up some of the distance between them and the other guards.

By the time the sun began to set, Zelli's feverish shivers were noticeable and the frequent looks from the former Lyralinah guards were obvious even though he tried to avoid their gazes. Wain brought him more apples. Fy offered water. Zelli thanked them both politely but didn't manage much more than a few swallows of each gift.

The guards looked to Tahlen, probably wanting an explanation. Since Tahlen would not have one, Zelli had answered for him, telling Fy, "Fae blood sometimes has complications."

Tahlen was keeping close to Zelli without crowding him and so must have heard it, although he didn't comment. That would be later. Zelli was going to have to tell him. Tahlen had a right to know, and it would be inescapable before long anyway.

But knowing more humiliation awaited Zelli in the inn did not improve his mood. His steps slowed, grew more lumbering as his thoughts wandered to Tahlen, his arms, his breath, the strength in his hand, the tantalizing impression of his cock.

His blushes did not cease. All the water in the land could not ease his tight throat.

"Combined?" he asked the fae once, head turned up to the sky, which showed him nothing. No stars to guide his path. Only the shame of a stiffening prick where others could see and the distant approach of fog.

When they reached the main road, Tahlen came up to Zelli's side and took Zelli's hand. His stone expression returned when Zelli tore away from him.

"It's nothing," Zelli lied, foolishly, since Tahlen would know it was a lie. He stared at Tahlen's shoulder. "How long until we reach the inn? I hope they'll still have room."

“They will make room for you, beat-of-four,” Let said lightly from ahead of him. “And if they didn’t, we would ensure they did.”

Zelli stared at her, then, pained, at Tahlen—his chin this time. “Tahlen,” he began uncertainly, but couldn’t think of what else to say.

“The inn is close,” Tahlen assured him. “If we need to go faster, I will take you there myself on Starfall. Only ask, Zelli, and I will.” Tahlen leaned in, slightly closer, but enough to leave Zelli’s knees wobbly. “Do you need something in particular?” He was so careful. “You were hot to the touch. You’re weakening even now.”

Even his breath was too much. Zelli raised his head. Tahlen’s beautiful eyes widened as though he saw Zelli’s desperation.

Zelli quickly resumed walking. “I need to rest. As do you.” He could not sound less breathless no matter how he tried. “When you find your room and everything is seen to, I... I order you to rest.”

Several of the others glanced back, maybe for the order, even a gently given one.

Zelli nodded to them. “I suggest you hide any remaining signs of the family you once served. If you want to carry on without us, the Tialtтын fortress is down this road. I will see that the inn welcomes you. But I’d rather not have people assume you are here to attack them, or for your former family to think we’ve insulted them or...” His thoughts slipped away again. He was too hot. He wanted. He did not know what he wanted. He knew precisely what he wanted.

He clenched his hands into fists.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like to eat?” Wain prodded again.

Zelli wondered if he looked hungry. He supposed he must. He shook his head anyway, which made him trip.

“Enough,” Tahlen barked. Then his hands were on Zelli’s waist and Zelli nearly bit his tongue in his fight to keep his reaction to himself. Tahlen lifted Zelli onto Starfall and

frowned until Zelli stopped struggling and settled in the saddle.

The others were all facing different directions again. Some of Zelli's moan must have escaped.

Tahlen tore at the clasp of his cloak but was gentle when he draped the length of the cloak across Zelli's lap.

Zelli stared at the white knuckles of his own hands, then Tahlen's fingers, the thickness of them, the grace in Tahlen's movements. He looked away, but likely not before Tahlen noticed.

The cloak hid Zelli's state of physical arousal, but Tahlen had noticed that too. That was why the cloak was there.

"I'm sorry," Zelli whispered.

Tahlen shook his head once. "We'll talk later." He didn't ask. He also took hold of the reins, then led Starfall forward.

Zelli wore his hood low and had hunched his shoulders by the time they started to pass houses on the outskirts of the village. In need of direction, the former Lyralinah guards had slowed to walk on either side of Starfall, although their attention stayed pointedly elsewhere. Zelli wanted to thank them but kept silent, worrying his bottom lip until it bled.

The sun had set and the fog dimmed the light that remained, but Zelli wrapped his cloak around himself and kept a tight hold on Tahlen's. He should offer to give it back, but didn't do that, either.

Some villagers had seen them and must have darted ahead to speak to Mayor Sar, because she came out from the inn with a lantern in hand to meet them.

The warm orange glow from within said the inn had customers. Zelli did not know whether to be relieved or beg to enter through a back door. But that was not the sort of thing a Tialtтын did. He only wished... but it was no good wishing, as he'd learned.

“Mizel.” Mayor Sar greeted Zelli with a smile that began to fall when she glanced from him to Tahlen. “I wasn’t sure when we’d see you again, or if you were going to continue to the other side of the valley.”

Zelli had to clear his throat. “We’ve found some strangers in need of help.” He made it an announcement since the whole village was no doubt listening or would hear of it. “I would greatly appreciate it if they were fed and given a place to sleep. Even a warm barn would do, if there is no room elsewhere. Oh, and baths if they desire them.” He paused. “I don’t have coin on me, but if you prepare a bill, payment will be sent back.”

“We don’t want to be any trouble,” Let interjected stiffly. “We can offer our services, those of us who can.”

Mayor Sar gave Let a study, then a smile, before turning her attention once more to Zelli. “Bree left. In the direction of your family’s holding, though I’ve no idea if she went there.”

Zelli nodded and looked at Mayor Sar from beneath from the edge of his hood. “There might be other riders in the valley. I’d ask that you stay wary but put no one at risk. There is nothing else to be done about them yet. If they come here and insist upon questions, then tell them to ask The Tialttyrin. Grandmother will not be pleased. But there isn’t much else I could do. I think she might have done the same in my place.”

Mayor Sar’s gaze drifted to Tahlen. Her eyebrows went up. She finally turned to Zelli again, gesturing in welcome even while she grew concerned. “Are you well?”

“Mizel will also need a room,” Tahlen cut in. “And food, even if he chooses to leave himself out of that discussion. Is the room he had before available?”

Mayor Sar’s expression indicated that the room would have been available even if someone else had paid for it, exactly as Let had said, and probably as both Tahlen and the mayor knew well. Beyond the mayor, several inn patrons had come to the door. Zelli identified Kat Ryssa and her cool smile and hunched his shoulders even more.



He slipped from Starfall and landed with a stumble, but it was kinder to everyone than letting Tahlen help him down in his current state. He kept Tahlen's cloak and held it to his chest, the length of cloth shielding him from even more embarrassment. He looked only at the mayor. "If you can, I'd like that cold-water bath tonight. Please."

"Of course," Mayor Sar answered, gentle and probably confused. She glanced over Zelli's shoulder to where Tahlen was either expressionless or glowering... or gazing with pleasure at the much less troublesome Kat Ryssa.

"I'll see to everything while you bathe, Zelli." Tahlen's tone was not exactly bland, but Zelli wasn't sure any others would have heard the concern behind the offer.

Zelli nodded quickly without turning. "Thank you, Tahlen. I... thank you."

Then the mayor stepped back to lead the way and clear some of the inn's customers from Zelli's path, and Zelli followed her as closely as he dared.

## Fourteen

The cold water shocked Zelli's mind into clarity and offered relief from the fever, although he shuddered uncontrollably as he dried and redressed in some of his dusty traveling clothes.

Mayor Sar was outside the bath room when he emerged, and escorted him to the same bedroom he'd had before with the air of someone pointedly not prying. It was her own discretion or Tahlen's request. Zelli was grateful either way, and gave her a quick smile when she revealed his packs had been brought to his room, and a fire lit, and that a tray with butter, bread, and tea waited for him.

"I know I must look dreadful, but I'll be fine in a day or two," Zelli assured her, although the mayor still had not asked. "Fae lineage can be uncomfortable," he added, abruptly remembering that he had destroyed a pillow cover of hers and she had yet to speak of it. "Thank you. For everything."

She inclined her head and her gaze was understanding, as it would be in a valley where fae traits appeared in the populace a bit more than they did elsewhere. Zelli nonetheless locked the door behind her once she stepped out, then fell against it to support his trembling legs.

The fire lit the room, but the heat was too much, so first he stumbled to the window to open it. He removed his clothes next, wanting only to be clean and cool, and then, while his fever was somewhat abated from the bath, devoured the bread with a thick layer of butter. He downed the tea as well, not bothering with spice or honey.

He might have to ask for water in the morning, depending on the duration of this fever. Or have Tahlen ask for him, since Zelli was certainly going to have to tell Tahlen everything.

With that hanging over him, Zelli tore through his packs, tossing his comb and some of his cleaner clothes to the floor until he found the remainder of his hair oil and the jar of the

cream meant to leave his hands soft. Then he considered each, although neither was perfect.

His hair fell into his eyes as he fretted, slipping from the knot that had kept it out of the bathwater. He pulled the last cord free and didn't bother to rearrange anything. His hair was the least of his problems.

On that thought, he returned the jar of cream to his pack. He'd use the oil, though it was thicker than was ideal and his hair would become unmanageable even to Tahlen for the rest of the journey.

Thinking of Tahlen's hands in his hair was too much. Zelli's knees buckled. He leaned against the bed until he steadied himself, then, panting, reached for his cloak, which had been left with his pack. Tahlen's cloak was not there, but he told himself he didn't miss it as he spread the wool over the bed.

He had destroyed enough of the mayor's furnishings and would be too ashamed to ever meet her eyes if he damaged more. Several of the pillows went to the floor and out of his reach as well. Then, already starting to prickle with sweat again and aware that he didn't have much time to find some release and clear his thoughts enough to seem reasonable to Tahlen, Zelli climbed onto the bed, taking his oil with him.

Tahlen might delay their conversation until the morning. He might prefer to spend his evening in the company of people who were not so bothersome or embarrassing. That might be best, even if it made Zelli roll over to whine into the wool of his cloak. Zelli could please himself uninterrupted and hopefully, assuage the lust-fever enough that he could travel with the others in the morning. He'd grow flushed and get hard all throughout the day, but he had already done that. He could even send the others on ahead of him. Tahlen would never go, and the guards' welcome with Grandmother would be less certain, but Zelli was hardly going to make them wait while he hid in Mayor Sar's inn touching himself and spilling buckets all over a cloak he'd never be able to wear again.

At least the fever had lessened the itch for Tahlen to touch him, or just made Zelli less concerned with that particular

ache. He found he could not bear the thought of Tahlen chasing after him to help with that when he'd rather be elsewhere, then finding Zelli like this and feeling duty-bound to stay with him.

Zelli rolled over again, seeking out the cold draft from the window only to immediately turn from it, wanting heat at his back. He kept his hands away from his prick to spare himself the chafing while he still had the mind to. Instead, he coated his fingers with too-thick hair oil and shut his eyes, not bothering to make it teasing or pleasant as he worked himself open. A foolish desire to prove himself, to help when he was useless. A foolish wish on top of that. Now he was here, where he would soon be begging the air to fuck him and, judging by today, crying out for Tahlen as he had probably done all along. But he wasn't at home in his large room and his curtained bed. Others would hear unless he gagged himself.

Heat began to build despite everything, a tight, steady coil at the base of his spine, and then slow fire through his veins. He had felt Tahlen's cock, his wicked brain reminded him. Against Tahlen's will or not, Zelli's body did not seem to care. Zelli had felt that right where his fingers were now, and no matter he pressed his teeth into his lip, he could not control his whimpers.

Maybe on the floor with the fire at his back he could better pretend he was not alone. He would burn, and sweat, and imagine Tahlen's hand on his hip as it had been, immovable and bruising. Tahlen would keep Zelli still. He wouldn't allow Zelli to push back no matter how Zelli moaned for him. Tahlen was stone that would not move unless he chose to, oath or no oath.

Not unless Zelli asked.

Or told him to.

*Nonsense.* Zelli had misunderstood what Tahlen meant. In any case, it would not apply to this. Tahlen would not replace Zelli's frustratingly small fingers with his own and then the thick length Zelli had felt pressed to him that afternoon just because Zelli ordered him to. But the idea made Zelli writhe

down on his fingers and whisper words of longing into his cloak.

His trapped breath was hot on his face. His words didn't carry. But at the knock on the door, his heart leapt into his throat.

He stopped, wrist aching, stomach quivering.

Tahlen knocked again. "Zelli?" he called out, not loudly, but enough to be heard clearly through the door. "Answer me, please. I need to know you're all right."

"I thought you were downstairs flirting," Zelli remarked breathlessly, then turned toward the door at the sound of Tahlen's incredulous, "*What?*"

"You heard me," Zelli told him with a fury so potent it surprised him. Imagining Tahlen, only yards away, clean and in the clothes he might wear for sleep or other activities did not calm him. "You ought to be somewhere with no irritating fae problems," he informed Tahlen, no less breathless or angry.

"Zelli." He couldn't tell if Tahlen was also angry. "Is this about the," Tahlen lowered his voice, "touching? Or earlier, on Starfall?"

How careful he tried to be, even when annoyed with Zelli. He'd probably ask like that even if he knew where Zelli's fingers currently were.

Zelli slid them a little deeper, catching most of his whine before it could escape.

But not all of it.

"What's going on?" Tahlen demanded immediately. "You told me you would tell me if there was anything I needed to know."

Zelli closed his eyes. Though it left another unresolved ache to make him weak, he pulled his fingers free and wiped them on the cloak.

"Tahlen." Zelli opened his eyes before tumbling from the bed, creating a series of noises that made Tahlen say his name again, this time with alarm.

Zelli got up and plastered himself to the door. His prick was only partially stiff, as it sometimes was when he used his fingers elsewhere, but he curled his hand around it. “Tahlen,” he sighed, cheek to the wood.

“Yes?” Tahlen answered. He’d dropped his voice even more, apparently realizing how close Zelli was.

“Tahlen.” Zelli would say nothing else if he had his way, for tonight at least. But Tahlen would get concerned enough to break through the door if Zelli didn’t say more than just his name soon, so he wet his lips, tasting where he’d bitten down. “Tahlen, it is.... I am experiencing a complication. From my fae blood. I’ve experienced it before. You don’t need to be concerned. I can deal with it as I always do.” He realized his hand was sliding slowly up and down his prick.

He tore his hand away and pressed both to the door, pressed *hard* to help him focus. “I might... it might last longer than tonight. In the morning... in the morning....” If the fever didn’t fade by morning, Tahlen really might storm the door and then he would see everything.

“What about the other thing?” Tahlen wondered, unaware of Zelli shuddering only inches from him. “Do you still need me to touch you?”

“*Ye-s*,” Zelli moaned it, drawing out the short word and raising his voice in the middle. Tahlen shouldn’t speak of touching him. Zelli rubbed his face, but only his face, against the door. “I don’t think that’s a good idea at the moment,” he added, hoping foolishly that Tahlen had not heard the moan. “I’m sorry. I truly didn’t think this would happen. But apparently I can experience two fae problems at once, so why not the other one too—wait, no!” Zelli twisted to address anyone else who might be listening. “I did not mean that!” He held tight to his necklace to ensure his sincerity came through, then exhaled and put his forehead to the door.

The door was firm, if not nearly as warm as Tahlen.

As if he could hear Zelli panting and needed to make sure Zelli understood him, Tahlen grew stern. “Open the door, Zelli.”

Zelli slid one of his hands down his side to the crease of his hip. He stopped just short of touching his cock again. “Really,” he said, weak even to his own ears, “I often do this at home. I stay in my room until it passes. You must have heard Grandmother make my excuses. It’ll be fine.”

It seemed as if Tahlen was even closer. He might have ducked his head to be nearer Zelli’s height on the other side of the door. “What about tomorrow?”

Zelli bit his lip, which hurt, but in a way he didn’t mind. “I can... I can send the others on and stay here if it doesn’t get better. But it will. It *will*.” Zelli would exhaust himself to ensure it would. “And tomorrow will be like today, mortifying but bearable. That’s how it is for me. I should really get used to the embarrassment. If I travel to meet someone for... I don’t want to talk about that anymore. I...” Zelli pushed against the door, the only thing giving him any dignity. “Tahlen,” he whispered, “it’s my body, you see. It *wants*. It wants so much that sometimes that I can’t really control it. It wants more than what others must want. There was an aunt, they tell me, with a somewhat similar problem. Although, with me, sometimes, there are also *changes*.” He stared at his hands, his normal, if small, fingers, some shining with oil. His shamed whisper stayed. “Those times, you can tell how fae I am. I... I don’t want you to fear me. Or to think I’m too strange. Or too demanding with what I want. I want you to stay. With me, I mean. In the future. And now this....”

He couldn’t tell if Tahlen was still there.

“I should have warned you before we left.” Zelli made it an apology. “But I didn’t think it would be an issue. It used to happen every few months, but not recently, so we’d hoped they were over. They weren’t.” He didn’t laugh.

“Zelli,” Tahlen started, stopping when Zelli made a throaty sound. “What is it?”

“It’s your voice.” Zelli confessed to that too. He didn’t think he *could* lie right now. “I’m sorry.”

“My voice?”

Zelli stroked a hand down the door because he couldn't bite Tahlen for failing to understand how incredible his voice was. "It's always you, Tahlen. I'm truly..." He was not exactly sorry. Not for that. Only for everything else. "I never meant to embarrass you like this."

"Embarrass me?" Tahlen must have been truly shocked to sound so confused. But he shifted to action quickly, as he always did. "Zelli." He made each word clear and distinct. "Open. The. Door."

Zelli undid the lock before he remembered he was naked. Then, because he had nothing to throw on, opened the door only a crack, leaning so Tahlen could just see his head and part of his shoulder.

The air from the hall was cooler. Zelli was distantly aware of goosebumps on his overheated skin. Tahlen stared down at him, gaze traveling over Zelli's bare shoulder to the rowan tree nestled at his throat, the careless spill of his hair. He probably saw Zelli's dark flush and bitten lip too.

"This is making it worse," Zelli told him, shivering when he glanced up to find himself still under study.

"Worse?" Tahlen asked in a whisper. He was without his mail or braces or even the doublet. Just a shirt and belt with his pants and boots.

Zelli dragged his eyes up. "Stronger," he explained after a great, heavy pause, mesmerized by the curve of Tahlen's lips. "The desire."

He was not at all sure he'd gotten his point across. He wasn't sure of anything except that Tahlen was inches from him and had yet to look away.

Then Tahlen took a step, filling the doorway and making Zelli's heart pound. Tahlen bent his head, speaking for Zelli's ears only. "I can help you with that too. If you want me to. If you'd ask."

Zelli leaned harder on the door to stay upright. He thought Tahlen could see him shaking. He should definitely hear it in Zelli's tremulous, "You're not sworn to do that."



“You really think this has anything to do with my oath?”  
Tahlen held his hand between them, giving Zelli time to see it and move away. When he didn’t, Tahlen put it to Zelli’s shoulder. So light, it was barely more than his fingertips on Zelli’s skin. He sucked in a breath.

When Zelli looked, ripples of purple traveled outward from Tahlen’s touch, then vanished.

Zelli met Tahlen’s stunned stare. “I never imagined that.”

“You imagined this?” Tahlen asked. For a beat, Zelli’s thoughts were clear enough to let him find that funny.

“I just told you I did.” He blinked several times. “Do that again, please.”

Tahlen smoothed his palm over Zelli’s shoulder. The color did not return, but Zelli thought he felt the touch beneath his skin, warming his chest in a manner unlike the intense heat of his fever. The feeling was not like a touch at all. More like the moments after a sip of wine, like *warmth*. It sparkled and made Zelli want to smile and draw Tahlen closer so he wouldn’t worry.

Tahlen *would* worry if Zelli shut the door between them. He might even spend his night outside, fretting and listening, waiting for Zelli to ask for help.

Zelli *could* ask. Tahlen wanted him to. He’d said so, more than once.

The possibility of it stole his breath. Zelli clung harder to the door. “Tahlen,” Tahlen’s eyes fixed on his and Zelli’s knees knocked together, “would you help me? With this,” Zelli clarified in a rasp. “Please?”

Tahlen pulled in a breath so deep it straightened his already straight shoulders. He released it, gaze locked on Zelli’s face as though waiting for Zelli to speak again or take it back. When Zelli did neither, Tahlen nodded once, curtly. “Let me in, Zelli.”

Zelli had forgotten he was behind the door. He managed to take two steps back, his chest heaving with the effort, and then

Tahlen was in his room and the door was closed. If Tahlen used the lock, he did so without taking his gaze from Zelli.

His attention stayed on Zelli's face for another moment, then slowly moved down to Zelli's neck and shoulders and chest, dropping further to Zelli's stomach and Zelli's plump prick, which Zelli held in one hand.

"I do have hair. Just not on my chin." Zelli had no idea what he was saying. But delicate patches of hair in shades of sunset decorated his chest and his legs and between his legs as well. "I don't know why I don't need to shave. I hoped to, when I was younger. You don't care about that, but I can't seem to stop talking. Do you think you could...?"

Tahlen stepped closer. Zelli tripped backward until he bumped into the bed. Tahlen's stare made him restless. Zelli was hurtling toward the depths of his fever but having Tahlen in front of him now made him feel like it was beginning all over again. This was what he'd been searching for years.

"Do you think you could come here?" Zelli finished his question at last, then quickly added to it. "Although if you wanted to leave, I wouldn't blame you."

He blinked and Tahlen was looming over him. Zelli tipped his head back and Tahlen's gaze returned to his.

Zelli was very hot. So was Tahlen, although it could not be with the same fever. Zelli let go of his cock to bring both of his hands up, then stopped short of resting them on Tahlen's chest.

Tahlen reached out to take hold of them both and placed them on his chest exactly where Zelli had wanted to. He swept a thumb over Zelli's wrist. "What do you need?"

Zelli was barely aware of his low whine. "You know I don't know." That was not helpful and not befitting a Tialtтын. If his antecedents let themselves be fucked by the fae, he could certainly manage to speak his desires to Tahlen. He spread his fingers out over Tahlen's chest, thinking of walls again, and those moments before waking in Tahlen's arms earlier. "To touch you," he offered first, voice lifting in question. "If you're sure."

Tahlen's eyes narrowed.

Zelli was, after all, still touching him and Tahlen was still standing there. But, after considering Zelli for another moment, Tahlen exhaled and gave another curt nod. He tugged Zelli's hand lower, then released it, leaving Zelli the choice to trace the swelling length of Tahlen's cock through his clothing or to continue to ask if Tahlen was sure.

Zelli's stuttering sigh of Tahlen's name was a little embarrassing, but almost nothing compared to everything else that day. Tahlen made sounds too when he was touched, a small grunt before he clenched his jaw.

Zelli's gaze drifted down to watch the motions of his hand and the outline of Tahlen's stiffening cock. Tahlen made that sound again but no move to stop him.

Zelli dragged his eyes back up. "Tahlen, I'm naked."

"Yes." Tahlen's voice was markedly rougher. Zelli *was* teasing his prick, after all, and could not seem to stop although he also wanted to see it, which was why he'd spoken. Tahlen's brow was furrowed, but he seemed to finally understand. "You want me naked as well?"

Zelli's spine melted like candlewax. His legs were water. He slipped forward, hiding his hot face in Tahlen's shirt. Tahlen smoothed his hands over Zelli's shoulders, which were damp with heat when the touch was gone.

"Then say so," Tahlen requested quietly. "If I'm to help, if I'm to be good for you, you'll have to tell me what you want."

Tahlen's shirt slid between Zelli's teeth. Zelli left it there when he angled his head back to glower at Tahlen, red-faced.

"*Everything*," Zelli growled, weak as a kitten. "You're beautiful and I want to see you." And to touch him with his hands and mouth. To drag his tongue over Tahlen's skin in some way. For Tahlen to feel him inside and out.

Tahlen frowned at him for another moment, then bent down, lifting Zelli's chin at the same time so that their mouths met. The kiss was soft. Tahlen's voice was as well. "You'll see me,"

he vowed against Zelli's lips. "But do you want me to undress or did you want to undress me?"

Untold possibilities ran through Zelli's mind. He nodded eagerly to answer the question and to show he understood what Tahlen was telling him. "I must be specific," he murmured, going to his toes to press their mouths together again.

Tahlen smiled for it. "If I want to stop, I'll stop, if that's your worry." The smile left his lips even as he cupped Zelli's jaw and stroked his cheek. "You worry for me. Precious Zelli."

"I never want to hurt you." Zelli turned his cheek into Tahlen's hand.

"Except to bite me," Tahlen answered, motionless when Zelli's eyes came up guiltily. Tahlen didn't look like he shivered, but Zelli felt it travel through Tahlen's chest. He frowned and Tahlen frowned back, before slowly standing straight. He tugged at the fastening for his belt, pulling that free and letting it fall.

"This?" Tahlen prompted, as though Zelli wasn't staring and breathing heavily with his mouth open. Tahlen reached for the hem of his shirt to draw it over his head and Zelli was back against him in less than a heartbeat.

"Yes." Zelli didn't quite dare to put his mouth to Tahlen's skin but skimmed his hands over Tahlen's ribs. "Yes. Yes, this is it. This is what I want, Tahlen. You're so good." Heat ran beneath Tahlen's skin. The hair trailing down below his navel was coarse and soft at the same time. Zelli inched away to stare at lean muscle and tiny marks, like old scars, and the flush of color descending from Tahlen's collarbone, then pressed in again, shaking. "You're too kind, Tahlen. I want you in my mouth. In my *teeth*. I want..."

"*Kind*." Tahlen almost laughed, a harsh sound that gentled when he curled a hand at the back of Zelli's neck. "Maybe I want that too."

An animal sound escaped Zelli. He pushed his palms across Tahlen's bared skin, then finally closed the distance to let his

mouth follow. Skin over muscle, hot and pulsing. He tried the flat of his tongue, then the light scrape of a tooth. Tahlen's hand tightened.

Zelli tried a nipple next, burning for what he must look like, licking and then pressing it between two of his sharpest teeth. Tahlen expelled a breath. Zelli stopped. He flicked a look up to Tahlen's perfect red mouth and heavy-lidded, shining eyes, and then brought his hand down, as slowly and deliberately as he could with how he was shaking.

Tahlen's cock jumped against his palm.

Zelli swallowed the spit filling his mouth and the noise trapped in his throat. Tahlen was beautiful, but that wasn't a strong enough word for him. Zelli exhaled wetly over Tahlen's ribs and used his teeth again when Tahlen slid his fingers into Zelli's hair. A brushing touch, then a harder press, until Tahlen's hipbone offered enough flesh for him to *bite*.

Tahlen made not a sound this time except to catch his breath, but the twitch against Zelli's palm said clear enough that Zelli could keep going. He pulled off despite that, wanting to see the red traces of where his teeth had pinched. It would bruise, but bleed only beneath the surface.

Zelli closed his eyes to kiss the spot. "Tahlen," he whispered dreamily before he looked up. "Soon, I won't be coherent." He wasn't sure he was now. "But you are beautiful."

Tahlen's gaze gained more focus. "Then tell me what you want while you can. More of this?" He put his hand carefully over the fading impression of Zelli's teeth, uncomplaining when Zelli then dragged his hand away so he could see the mark again.

Keeping Tahlen's hand, Zelli leaned back, grateful the bed was there to keep him up. "I've never had anything inside me but my own fingers," he told Tahlen's knuckles, then bit them lightly when he could feel his blush even through the fever. "Will you tup me? I'll beg you for it soon. But I'd like to have you first while I can still think a little."

He lost his hold on Tahlen's hand when Tahlen moved in to lift Zelli onto the bed. Confused, then hurt, Zelli watched Tahlen step back and bend down. Tahlen had one boot removed before Zelli realized Tahlen was saying yes. Zelli was halfway to sliding down to the floor to assist Tahlen in undressing when Tahlen took care of that boot too. Tahlen was naked within moments of that.

Zelli stayed right where he was.

He curled his fingers around his cock and opened his legs. Tahlen's braid fell over his shoulder when Tahlen stood up. It swayed forward when Tahlen leaned over Zelli and pushed Zelli's hand out of the way so that it was Tahlen stroking him.

"I'll..." Zelli's voice rose to the ceiling. He put his hands to Tahlen's shoulders. "Tahlen, I'll finish."

Tahlen was relentless, muscles flexing under Zelli's hands while Zelli's cock slid in and out of his fist. He kissed Zelli after Zelli started to rock his hips but then stopped uncertainly. He didn't urge Zelli's head back to kiss him deeply the way Zelli had seen others do, but when Zelli slid his fingers into his hair, Tahlen made a small sound. Zelli curled his fingers, pulling and disrupting the braiding, and Tahlen made the sound again. It felt *eager*.

Zelli choked on a cry and got a kiss for that too, warm and slow, both of them panting. "I thought you were going to fuck me. Please. Fuck me, Tahlen, *please*." That *was* a cry, carrying to the door and perhaps into the hall.

Tahlen stopped long enough to tug one of Zelli's hands down to his hip where the bitten skin radiated heat. He kissed Zelli again, short, carefully gentle kisses that made Zelli want more. Tahlen must have as well, because he kept giving them while urging Zelli onto his back and climbing over him.

"*Zelli*," Tahlen breathed, taking his hand from Zelli's cock at last so he could put his hands on either side of Zelli and lean down to share more kisses that could not go deeper. His braid brushed Zelli's ribs. Zelli could not feel Tahlen's weight yet but Tahlen was nearly as hot as Zelli now, his cock hotter than that.

Zelli bent his knees to make room for him. Tahlen wanted this, wanted *Zelli*, and hadn't meant to deny him. Zelli couldn't speak to apologize for misunderstanding. He meant to, but then the smooth warmth of Tahlen's back was his to explore and Tahlen had more kisses for him.

"Zelli," Tahlen said, more than once, sweet against Zelli's lips, damp on Zelli's neck. He curled a hand under Zelli's hip when Zelli started to move only to stop himself again. He used it to pull their bodies flush.

Zelli was vaguely aware of the draft from the open window. He lifted his hips and shuddered with pleasure when Tahlen responded by pushing down. Zelli slid his hands lower to feel their bodies together.

Tahlen's eyes met his.

"Zelli." He kept saying that. Zelli moved against him, watching the changes in Tahlen's expression, the way his lips slipped apart. "Is this what you need?"

"*Beautiful*," Zelli told him. It was all he could seem to say aside from Tahlen's name. The muscles of Tahlen's back rippled beneath his palms. Tahlen's ass made him wish for claws to hold it to him always. He couldn't do that, or bite, so he arched up for more of Tahlen's mouth. He wondered how long they had been like this, kissing and then whispering between kisses, then he was kissed again and forgot to wonder.

"Can you still think?" Tahlen murmured. Time must have passed because Zelli's lips felt plump and buzzing. Tahlen shifted to match Zelli's movements against him, rolling, insistent pleasure to teach Zelli the rhythm. "Are you with me?"

Zelli's eyes fluttered shut. He nodded. "There's oil... somewhere. I started to ready myself. I imagined you."

Tahlen pushed himself up. Zelli shivered without him close and Tahlen lowered himself to sweep some of Zelli's hair from his eyes. He ran his fingers down Zelli's chest, then paused before keeping his fingers on the same path, over Zelli's stomach to his hip, and then down to the first traces of oil.

“I imagined you,” Zelli said again, tipping his head back. “Like we were today, with your hand on my hip and you behind me.”

Tahlen’s finger slipped inside. He exhaled roughly as if surprised. “Do you want that now?”

Zelli arched up to make that finger go deeper, then shook his head. He opened his eyes to find Tahlen watching him intently. Zelli frowned, struggling to find and use words. “Want you,” he decided on at last. “Do you want me?”

Tahlen’s mouth returned to Zelli’s mouth and then his cheek and his forehead. Zelli was so on fire that Tahlen felt almost cool. He moved over Zelli, withdrawing his finger to do it, but he kissed Zelli when Zelli whined, then turned his head to present his shoulder. “Here,” he murmured, as though giving a gift. After a half a beat’s confusion, Zelli tangled his hands in the thickest portion of Tahlen’s braid and put his mouth to Tahlen’s pretty shoulder and bit down. He squirmed for Tahlen’s heavy breathing, how hot it was between them, then let go.

“*Oh*,” Zelli realized out loud, only for his revelation to slip away. Tahlen brought a hand up to the spot, then turned to look at Zelli from very close. His gaze was a night sky without fog. “Beautiful.” Zelli was burning up. “Like nothing else.”

Tahlen said something. *Zelli* again, airy and light. Zelli burned and ached and rolled against him, but he answered, because Tahlen seemed to want him to. “Please, Tahlen. Tahlen, please. I’ve waited so long.”

Tahlen pressed his mouth to Zelli’s again. “Only a moment, Zelli. I want you. Only one moment.”

Zelli turned his head to sink his teeth into wool. He shivered for Tahlen being away from him again but spread his legs as he watched the spill of oil onto Tahlen’s hands and reached for Tahlen even before Tahlen had come back to him.

Tahlen’s hands were larger than Zelli’s. Zelli held his breath for the slide inward, the way Tahlen held him as if he thought Zelli might wriggle. Maybe Zelli *did* wriggle. He was fairly



certain he was moaning. The window was open. There were rooms around this one. A part of him registered that this might embarrass him later. The concern vanished nearly as he had it.

Tahlen pressed his fingers deeper, still not letting Zelli rise to take more. Zelli turned to bite the wool again, glaring at beautiful Tahlen for not knowing Zelli had taken his fingers many, many times and with much less care. His moans continued around his mouthful. His limbs were shaking, his blood hot. Zelli closed his eyes but Tahlen stroked inside of him, and petted his prick too, until Zelli spat out the bit of his cloak in his mouth and tried to pull Tahlen to him.

Tahlen was back over Zelli almost instantly, taking Zelli's hand and guiding it to the slippery length of his cock as if he thought Zelli wanted more sport. Zelli did, awed by the weight and the heat and how every touch seemed to make Tahlen's eyes impossibly brighter. But he eventually tugged his hand away to curl his arms around Tahlen's back. He used his fingernails like claws at last and was nearly satisfied. "Tahlen," Zelli insisted, eyes meeting Tahlen's, "now."

Tahlen snapped to obey, muscles tense as he arranged himself, his gaze searing as he began to push inside.

It was not at all like fingers. Zelli stopped moving, aware of his shallow breaths, of Tahlen's worry, the faint scent of the oil. He curled and uncurled his fingers. He wet his lips, remembering the cuts from his own teeth, tasting his warm blood and wishing... wishing for things that made him swallow. He smoothed a hand down Tahlen's spine over and over, soothing Tahlen's shivers.

He pushed his palm into the small of Tahlen's back.

"Good," he murmured for Tahlen, then shifted so Tahlen would keep going.

Tahlen grunted but let him. He let Zelli do it again a moment later, but only moved when Zelli growled. Tahlen's gaze was still hot but less focused as he took Zelli by the hips and pulled Zelli onto his cock until Zelli had all of him and Zelli's chest was heaving.

Zelli drew Tahlen to him with his arms and then his legs, moaning quietly at first with Tahlen's careful motions, then for the whole valley to hear when Tahlen began to take him. Tup him. Fuck him. Zelli could not decide on a word. None of them were enough. Like *beautiful*. Tahlen was more than beautiful. This was more than fucking.

Zelli ached and he didn't. He was burning but it didn't matter. He whined because it felt good and he didn't know what else to do but be loud and tug on Tahlen's hair and run his hands over Tahlen's skin.

Tahlen kissed his brow, brushing his mouth over Zelli's temple before he pushed Zelli's legs up higher. It stole Zelli's breath but allowed Tahlen to thrust deeper. Zelli shook uncontrollably and still could not find enough air. He was hot along his skin and beneath it. Hot inside, bright as Tahlen's eyes, full and *taken*.

He drew his fingers up the length of Tahlen's back, wanting Tahlen to feel like he did, like he belonged in this moment. He wanted Tahlen in him always, and to hold him without marring him, and then to mar him too.

He pictured scratches in Tahlen's skin that matched his fingers, how they would frame Tahlen's thick braid, and his vision went white.

"*Tahl...*" he tried to say, gasping, but could not get the name out as he arched up beneath Tahlen's weight, Tahlen's cock pressed inside of him in a way that seemed to draw out the sharp pleasure of his climax. Or that was Tahlen, motionless now except for little exhalations in Zelli's hair while Zelli trembled and painted them both.

When Zelli collapsed to the bed, Tahlen started to lower Zelli's leg. He stopped when Zelli whined, and stared down at Zelli, worried and exquisite, as though he hadn't been the one to do this to him.

Zelli should reassure Tahlen that he wasn't broken. He drifted instead, reveling in the shocks in his blood and the momentary lack of any ache or urgent need. He opened his eyes and only then realized they had fallen closed.

His throat hurt. His skin stung in strange places. He was too warm. Tahlen was fretting. Kind Tahlen. Beautiful Tahlen.

Zelli pulled him down to kiss his perfect mouth, swallowing another gasp for the slight change in position. He clumsily petted Tahlen's hair and then the back of his neck, his disturbed braid, his smooth shoulders. "More than fighting," Zelli told him earnestly so Tahlen would finally *see*.

He could not move much as he was, but stopped Tahlen again when Tahlen tried to pull away. "I like how you feel." This was said in earnest as well, though it made Tahlen knit his brow and it sent more, less pleasant shocks through Zelli whenever Tahlen shifted. Tahlen was not rocking his hips, but Zelli thought he might want to.

Zelli struggled to think clearly. "If I trust you with me later, wouldn't I trust you now?"

Tahlen closed his eyes. Zelli sought out another kiss, which Tahlen gave him.

A violent shudder went through Tahlen before he opened his eyes. His voice was gravel. "You'll be sore as it is."

Over Zelli's soft, pained protests, he separated them, then lowered Zelli's legs, which offered relief Zelli wasn't aware he'd needed.

"Ah," Zelli murmured, but had no time for any more embarrassment to seep into his foggy contentment. Tahlen covered him once again, watching Zelli closely while drawing Zelli's hand to his cock. Zelli ran his thumb over the thick head, wanting it inside of him again, wanting to keep it in his hand, curious how it would taste and regretting his fangs.

He did not have much time to regret. Tahlen turned his head, baring a shoulder already reddened and marked.

"Please," Tahlen requested of him, eyes down.

Need tore through Zelli so fast he was surprised he wasn't hard again. "Beautiful Tahlen," he whispered, overwhelmed with the truth of it. He bent a leg for better leverage, to surround Tahlen with his body and keep him warm, and tried to kiss Tahlen as Tahlen had kissed him, careful but hungry.

He kept his grip firm and listened to what sounds Tahlen made so he would know what Tahlen liked the most. But it was the press and release of his teeth in Tahlen's skin that led to the hot spill over his chest.

Something settled into Zelli alongside humming pleasure and the building ache from the fever. It was wild and proud and it made his heart race. Then he turned his head to meet Tahlen's mouth again, and the bed was warm at his back, and there was nothing else that mattered.

Zelli spilled into Tahlen's mouth twice, begging the second time to feel Tahlen's cock move in him again. He wanted it in him forever and told Tahlen so.

"*Zelli*," Tahlen begged in return, as though Zelli were a trial and he was not kissing Zelli's stomach and his balls before taking Zelli's cock into his throat.

Zelli didn't know if Tahlen had spent again. He wanted him to. He'd called out for it in a rasping voice until Tahlen gave him the dregs of the cold tea and made him drink it before he used his mouth to make Zelli finish. He wouldn't let Zelli do the same or even try, even though Tahlen's hand was tight around the base of his flushed cock and he'd stared at Zelli's lips while Zelli had pleaded.

He brushed Zelli's sweaty hair from his forehead. "Not now, Zelli. Later. Later, you can try."

Zelli was a hungry, hurtful creature and Tahlen should hate him. But Tahlen stroked Zelli's hair some more and eventually brought Zelli off with his hand and a great deal more oil, and must have thought that was enough to get Zelli to sleep.

For a while, it was.

Zelli woke to Tahlen stoking the fire and immediately slid off the bed and get on his hands and knees on the floor in front of

him.

“Please, please, please, Tahlen,” Zelli whined, a nuisance and a pest, and got lifted to the bed for his trouble. He rolled over immediately, legs open so he could try to push his fingers inside.

Tahlen glared at him from far away and then from much closer. He pinned Zelli’s wrists to the bed and grunted when Zelli trembled for it.

“Tahlen.” Zelli stared up at him feverishly, pleased with the sight of naked Tahlen backed by firelight. “Beautiful Tahlen,” he added, because it made Tahlen breathe harder. But at the words, Tahlen released him, giving in with a growl and then a shaky sigh. Zelli was free to wrap his arms around Tahlen’s shoulders and encourage Tahlen to plow deeper, though Tahlen would not. Tahlen fucked him slowly, if not completely gently, his jaw set. His determination was terrible when Zelli wanted him so much.

Zelli moaned until his voice was gone and did his best to keep Tahlen from pulling away. Tahlen fended him off easily, then kissed him and finished again, using his own hand to bring himself off.

Zelli rolled over to sulk. Tahlen curled up along his back to explain himself. He was protecting Zelli as always. He did not want Zelli to hurt too much, to be uncomfortable. He said these things as though they did not make Zelli burn inside, but Zelli sighed and sweated with the heat and didn’t push him away.

The fever in his blood could not keep him from closing his eyes or from pulling Tahlen’s arm around his waist.

“Rest, my beautiful Zelli,” Tahlen whispered between kisses to Zelli’s nape. “You need it.”

Zelli was not beautiful, but he was warm and tired, and nothing could be wrong with Tahlen near.

He settled and rested.

Zelli twitched to wakefulness because it felt like fire all down his back and where his legs pressed together. He was sticky with perspiration and tacky with oil and seed. He *ached* again.

Tahlen was on his back with his eyes closed. Zelli had enough of a mind left to recognize that Tahlen needed to sleep and that Zelli should let him. He did not touch Tahlen, though even in the dying firelight, he could see the pretty mark over Tahlen's hip from Zelli's teeth and the disheveled state of Tahlen's braid. The mess was Zelli's doing. That was pleasing.

Zelli studied Tahlen's cock while stroking his own, trying to memorize the sight and the trails of hair down Tahlen's chest and the darker hair around his prick and on his legs.

"Don't let me go." Zelli realized he was shivering, too hot and too cold together. The fire was low, the window open, but he burned. No one else, no matter how agreeable, would be like Tahlen. Zelli did not, would not, want them like he wanted Tahlen. "Please don't let me go."

He sighed for the warm arm that curled around his waist and closed his eyes as he was pulled down. Then his eyes shot open when he wasn't dragged to the bed but instead on top of Tahlen, his back to Tahlen's chest.

Tahlen ran his hands over him, soothing, sweeping touches at first, and then harder when Zelli began to hitch his hips.

"Zelli..." Tahlen said it like he meant to say more, but stopped and took a hand from Zelli for several long moments. He lazily stroked Zelli's cock when Zelli complained. When Tahlen brought his other hand back, it was covered in warm, thick oil, and he slipped it between them to where Zelli could feel Tahlen's cock hardening against him. Tahlen lifted Zelli as he pleased, cupping Zelli's ass to pull him open, then pushing his fingers inside before Zelli could beg him to.

Zelli begged him anyway, breathless and whining within moments, and Tahlen responded by replacing his fingers with his cock and fucking into him with Zelli on his back and barely able to move unless Tahlen wanted him to. Zelli hadn't

known people could be tugged in this way, helplessly taking each slow thrust. He could not even demand more. He tried, gasping in a hoarse voice, and Tahlen held him tighter and fucked him slower.

Tahlen was strong. Zelli hadn't considered what that might mean for this. He was even glad; the knowledge would have driven him out of his mind with wanting during every lust-fever he'd ever had.

He whined more, or whimpered, or cried out when Tahlen tugged him down to take all of his cock and Zelli could not move with how full he was.

Tahlen murmured things above Zelli's ear and eventually brought Zelli off when Zelli had exhausted himself pleading and lost himself to moaning. Tahlen hauled Zelli down against him, bruising and tight and good, and finished hot inside him.

Tahlen groaned for it and Zelli did not object, but Tahlen was frowning when Zelli finally looked at him, as though he had failed in some way even while Zelli was humming happily to feel *satisfied* at last.

Afterward, after Tahlen had tried to clean Zelli and had snuck downstairs to bring him water, after Zelli had drowsily accepted countless strange, wonderful, apologetic kisses at the line of his hair and behind his ears, Zelli had rolled over and put his head on Tahlen's chest to keep Tahlen from getting up again.

"Oh, Tahly, how you've sated me," he told Tahlen's frown, feeling like a rainbow in a dew drop, and allowed Tahlen to pull him up so that Zelli could rest in the crook of his arm.

Tahlen exhaled noisily.

Zelli kissed the patch of skin nearest his mouth, considering a bite but wanting Tahlen to rest. "Thank you."

Tahlen turned his head, burying his nose in Zelli's hair. He didn't answer.

# Fifteen

The room was dark when Zelli woke to Tahlen above him, dressed in his clothing from the night before and considering Zelli with the faintest furrow of concern in his brow. Tahlen's hair was neatly braided once more.

The sight startled Zelli into a bit more awareness. He was beneath the covers of the bed and his cloak was elsewhere. He remained naked.

He had never slept so much while in one of his fevers. Not that he could have gotten much rest if the sky outside the window said it was before dawn. But even a little was more than usual. He stared at Tahlen with a stinging face and wondered if his blush was visible.

Tahlen did not comment on it or reach for Zelli. He said, "I meant to discuss this last night. We planned to leave at dawn, or earlier, to reach the Tialttyrin fortress before dark and hopefully avoid any other riders. But if you're still unable, the Lyralinah guards can go on and I'll stay here with you."

Zelli shook his head, which helped clear it more. There was a heaviness in his bones, exhaustion and several nights without much sleep would do that. He was warm, but not burning up. It had only been a few hours of the fever. It was likely not over, which was what Tahlen was inquiring about. But the fever also didn't feel like it ever had before at this stage, probably due to Tahlen's dedication to pleasuring him.

Zelli pulled his hands from the blankets and put them to his cheeks. "I... I don't know."

"I'm not going to leave you." Without more light, he couldn't read Tahlen's gaze or tell if Tahlen's cheeks were darker or if those were shadows. "I only need to know if you want to travel today."

*Wanting to and being able to* were different beasts.



“It will be embarrassing.” Even the ending phases of his fevers left Zelli sensitive. “I will react to... even a breeze, really. Or a look from you,” Zelli added, glancing away. “The need might build up again. Sometimes it does. But last night was,” he looked up to Tahlen’s eyes, “incredible.” Tahlen straightened. “And I don’t feel nearly as ravenous or empty as I usually do at this time. I think you slowed it down, or satisfied it more than my efforts usually do.” He chewed his lip thoughtfully, becoming aware that his lip stung and was split. “If it returns, it should hopefully be milder.”

Tahlen’s expression did not change. “But still embarrassing for you?”

Zelli flapped a hand and tried to clear his raw throat. He could not make his voice even. “What isn’t embarrassing for me? They all saw me yesterday, didn’t they? And heard me when I dreamed? What is another day of that?” he asked lightly as though he felt no shame. “It will go better for them with Grandmother if we are there. She and the guards won’t be as alarmed. And Let is thoughtful, but she won’t know how to appeal to Grandmother like I do. So, we should go. It’s only,” he took a deep breath, “a few more hours. I can bear it.”

He was always saying that. Tahlen looked at him but didn’t point that out. He said, almost cautiously, “I’ve brought some more water for you to wash if you’d like. It’s cold,” he added, warning, then paused. “And tea that will help with aches and pains.”

Zelli sat up at the idea of scrubbing some of the prickling warmth from his skin and hissed as the motion pulled his body in several directions. “*Ah*,” he exhaled slowly, waiting for the sensations to subside. “Muscles I didn’t know I had,” he realized aloud, like how his first time using a bow had pained his back and shoulders the next day. He didn’t usually bend himself as Tahlen had bent him, though it had felt fantastic at the time. What he recalled of it.

“I’m sorry,” Tahlen said, his posture so severe that he looked like the Tahlen Zelli had met at seventeen. “I shouldn’t have made you ride with me yesterday.” Zelli opened his mouth to object but Tahlen carried on. “Although I didn’t mean to, I

added to your discomfort. Now you're uncomfortable as well as sore, and we don't have time for a hot bath, which would also help. But I'll go see to the others while you attend to that, and bring you back something to eat."

Zelli sank into the pillows which someone had piled behind him, suddenly tired and cold enough to want the blankets to cover his shoulders. Perhaps even his face. "You aren't a servant, Tahlen. You're not sworn to do that, either."

"Do you truly believe this has to do with my oath?" Tahlen's rather impatient question brought Zelli's gaze up. Tahlen didn't seem to have looked away. "I can do your hair when I return. If you like."

"Oh." Zelli pushed the blankets down. "Yours is already done. You must have risen very early. You didn't sleep enough although—ah—that is my fault. The fault of my heritage, I suppose. At least partially. I would have enjoyed riding with you if not for... you know." Zelli nodded quickly to be as orderly and professional as Tahlen. "I'll just clean, then. And get ready."

He didn't shoo Tahlen from the room or even imply he should leave. But Tahlen was out the door by the time Zelli disentangled himself from the bedding and tumbled to the floor on startlingly shaky legs.

He wobbled for several moments, increasingly aware of sticky, itchy places, and rather uncomfortable stinging in intimate spots. The weight in his bones was serious but not unpleasant. He didn't burn with fever, though he was too warm. The wrongness and discomfort were present, but last night must have satisfied that for a while as well.

Tahlen had folded Zelli's cloak and left it by his pack and the pitcher of water. He'd also straightened the mess Zelli had made the night before. Steam rose from the tea.

Zelli ducked his head, warm now in an entirely different way.

Tahlen returned wearing his armor and cloak for travel.

“Did I misstep?” Zelli worried at him the moment the door opened.

That stopped Tahlen, then he came the rest of the way in and shut the door. His gaze skimmed over Zelli, clean and dressed, hair crackling from how quickly Zelli had combed it.

The tea had soothed Zelli’s throat, although he didn’t feel any other effects yet. “I mean,” Zelli went on, “should I have thanked you more? Or do you feel you should have gotten to enjoy yourself more? I know others have treated you badly. Maybe not in your morning-afters, but perhaps in general? Which could affect morning-afters. I don’t want you to feel as though I used you. You did offer,” Zelli reminded him, peering up in question.

Tahlen worked his jaw. “Zelli.” He worked his jaw again. “I shouldn’t have accused you of thinking better of me only once you learned my family name. That I did was because you’re right; others had. I didn’t think it bothered me as much as it did.” Tahlen took another moment. “When Esrin and I were first looking for what to do, Morry, our guard, suggested we conceal our family name or choose another. We didn’t because it was *ours*. It was what we had left. But hearing it makes most people look at me differently. Even you.” He met Zelli’s gaze squarely. “Although, with you it wasn’t about sudden respect.”

“I’ve always respected you.” Zelli thought that was more than obvious. “Everyone does after knowing you even just a short while. You’re incredible. In general,” he added through his blush, “and not only for how you made me feel. Much of the night is like a dream, but I know I felt good. *So good*. Thank you.”

Tahlen took a further step into the room. “You were pleased?”

“Oh, Tahlen.” Zelli inched closer to him, reaching out without touching. “*Pleased* isn’t the word. But I can’t think about it now or....” He shivered. “We’re leaving soon, so I *shouldn’t* think about it.” He suspected he would anyway.

Tahlen inclined his head, eyes very bright. “Would it help for me to touch you again now, or should we wait?”

Zelli could not breathe with the memory of Tahlen's hands on him. "I have no idea," he admitted honestly. "I've never done this before. I want you to, but perhaps then we wouldn't leave at all. From what I remember, once you touched me, all I wanted was you inside me."

Tahlen inhaled deeply. "I can still do your hair."

"I'm afraid all the oil is gone." Zelli stared at him raptly, watching Tahlen lick his lips at the reminder and feeling decidedly hotter than he had a moment before. "It won't even hold a simple braid now, except maybe for you."

"Everyone will see all your colors?" Tahlen carefully drew his fingers through Zelli's hair. Even barely combed and with no oil to smooth it down, Zelli's hair refused to tangle for him.

Zelli raised his chin, but only because Tahlen was closer now. "Do you think they'll mind?"

Tahlen shook his head slowly. "They'll wish their hair was a sunset too."

Zelli pursed his lips, but it felt silly to object. "It's not like yours, which is brown yet shines like gold." He sighed at the remembered beauty of it. "And so sleek. It would never dare knot. The first time I saw it down, I had to fight not to reach out and touch it."

The first time he'd seen it down had been in Tahlen's room only a few days ago, when he'd assumed Tahlen had disliked him.

Tahlen bent his head, which seemed to be an invitation for Zelli to touch his hair now. Zelli took hold of the fattest part of the braid and let it slide through his fingers. When he went to do it again, he stopped. There was a tiny braid behind Tahlen's ear, woven into the rest of design.

Tahlen had deliberately put Zelli's braid back into his hair. "You never told me the meaning."

*Nasturtium trailing from a battlement.* Zelli licked one of the points of his teeth. "It means Mizel Tialttyrin was once permitted to touch Tahlen Vallithi."

“Only once?” Tahlen asked, watching Zelli from the corner of his eye as Zelli stroked the little braid and then the spot beneath Tahlen’s ear.

The sound in Zelli’s throat was a growl though he tried to turn it into a huff. “If I am careful,” he began, avoiding Tahlen’s eye, “I should be able to at least somewhat use my mouth on you. Someday. If you’d like.” He had ideas, spurred largely by fevered memories of Tahlen’s mouth, and Tahlen should know it.

Tahlen took Zelli’s hand but did nothing more than hold it. “Are you trying not to think of it now?”

Zelli nodded sadly. He was doing a terrible job, which Tahlen could clearly tell. “Is it always like this, or is this my lust-fever returning?”

“We should find out before we leave,” Tahlen said, serious and grave, then pulled Zelli close and snuck his hand efficiently into Zelli’s clothing to tug Zelli’s cock until Zelli was gasping and spilling over Tahlen’s wrist. Then Tahlen backed Zelli into the bed and brought him off again, using his mouth and keeping Zelli unfairly pinned down so Zelli couldn’t touch him.

Tahlen’s braid was pristine when he finally let Zelli up. Zelli, flushed, sweaty, dazed, let himself be straightened, then took Tahlen’s hand and bit it.

Tahlen, his cheeks a few shades darker, his breath coming faster, let him.

The staff of the inn were the only ones present when Zelli finally followed Tahlen’s sure path down the stairs and through the main room. Mayor Sar was awake. She greeted Zelli warmly but gave Tahlen a frostier look. Tahlen paused to talk to her despite that, speaking of horses, so Zelli stopped next to him.

His face and hands were chilled. He was hot beneath his layers. His thoughts were still on his bed and the sport which

had occurred there. As a Tialttyrin, he ought to do better, so he tried to smile for the mayor. He froze when she returned it and then put her arms around him, but he found he didn't mind the embrace.

"Zelli," he requested she call him, surprised he hadn't already, and after she accepted, stepped around her and Tahlen so they could resume their discussion. The mayor's disapproval of Tahlen returned.

The kitchens were warm and seemed to be bustling. Zelli went to the front of the inn and stepped outside.

The former guards of the Lyralinah milled around in the foggy street, muttering to themselves and adjusting the saddles and reins of the horses Tahlen must have arranged for them. The sun had not properly risen but the sky was starting to lighten. Lanterns had been hung for them above the inn's entrance.

Vint noticed Zelli first, pausing in his tasks. The others followed shortly thereafter. Fy's eyebrows were raised high.

Zelli shivered, missing his cloak. He told himself the others could not see his reddened face although he thought they could.

The window had been open. But even if it hadn't been, Zelli had not been able to hide his desires yesterday and the others would certainly suspect how he had spent the night and who he had spent it with. Because Zelli had feelings and couldn't seem to hide them.

He coughed. "I apologize if I've kept you waiting." He looked at Let instead of Fy. "I hope you all slept well and had breakfast."

"We did. Thank you for thinking of us, Tialttyrin," Let answered.

"Amazed he could think at all, from the sound of it." Fy's mutter would probably not have been audible at a different, busier time of day.

Vint reached over and smacked Fy on the back of the head.

Zelli looked down, then up quickly when Mayor Sar came to the doorway behind him.

“I’ve packed some biscuits for you,” she informed Zelli. “For all of them, but particularly for you. Tahlen,” the name was crisp, “asked for them for you.”

Zelli had not thought his face could get so hot outside of a lust-fever. He nodded his thanks and offered her a parting smile before stepping over to where Lemon Blossom stood patiently. Tahlen was there next to her where he hadn’t been a moment ago.

Wain slapped Tahlen lightly on the back. Tahlen didn’t seem to notice. He looked steadily at Zelli until Zelli was close enough, then knelt down to make himself a mounting block for Zelli once again.

Someone made a small noise and was firmly shushed. Zelli did not glance around to see who it was. He was more occupied with trying not to wince as new pains made themselves known.

Tahlen stood as Zelli gingerly settled in the saddle, then removed his cloak and held it up.

Zelli stared at him with wide eyes but kept the cloak bundled to his chest until Tahlen gently took it back from him and indicated Zelli ought to wear it. Which, yes, made more sense. It was large enough to hide any of Zelli’s more embarrassing reactions throughout the day.

Tahlen tugged the ends down to let it drape over most of Zelli’s body before looking up. His expression, and he had one, hot and proud, made Zelli briefly forget the various aches, pains, and humiliations of the morning.

Tahlen had kissed Zelli in between their sport last night. Zelli thought Tahlen wanted to kiss him again now. Zelli wouldn’t mind, even with his embarrassment. But that might not be appropriate. The others already thought Zelli had used him.

“Thank you.” Zelli could not raise his voice. “You don’t have to.”

“With my body.” Tahlen bent his head and put his lips to Zelli’s knee. “Gladly.”

Even at a busier time of day others would have heard him.

“*Well,*” remarked someone breathlessly. It might have been Fy.

Tahlen met Zelli’s stunned stare and smiled beautifully when Zelli said without looking away from him, “Terribly sorry, everyone, but I think we will need to travel fast.”

A few hours might be too long.

“Understood,” Let replied dryly, signaling to the others.

Tahlen left Zelli then, going to Starfall.

Zelli finally glanced around, bewildered and aroused, and caught a glimpse of Mayor Sar, smiling at Tahlen fondly again at last.

But Zelli’s attention was already skittering back to Tahlen. He gave the mayor an absent nod and urged Lemon Blossom forward when they all began to ride.



## Sixteen

Zelli spent the morning trying to think of how best to explain himself to Grandmother. He had to do something to take his mind off everything else, and the issue was pressing. Tahlen seemed to think Zelli was persuasive. Zelli was not convinced.

But even a fleeting thought of Tahlen would make Zelli look for him, and find him, usually riding somewhere close, and then stare at him until Tahlen would look back.

Then, growing hot, Zelli would turn away only to begin the whole process again.

Tahlen must have recognized the problem. He didn't seem insulted, anyway, when Zelli couldn't look at him. He did sometimes ride closer and offer Zelli a hand to hold when he must have judged that Zelli's first problem outweighed the second. Occasionally, he'd also offer water, or say, "Have a biscuit, Zelli."

The command made Zelli even warmer and he glared at the side of Tahlen's face for it. But he ate the biscuits each time, just as Tahlen ignored his continued sulking, and in that fashion, they rode on.

By the time the sun was high, Zelli was aching more than a little. He was tired from his mostly sleepless nights, he was hungry but not for biscuits, and he itched beneath his skin for more of Tahlen's touch yet could not think of it without squirming. He also wanted a bath.

With Tahlen's cloak's hood up over his head, he slumped in the saddle, disliking everything but thoughts of Tahlen and the night before—which he could not think of without sighing loudly and drawing someone's eyes to him. Usually Tahlen's, sometimes Fy's, who would wink.

They stopped for a short time to rest, all of them chatting with Tahlen about the weather and how much longer the sunny days would last while Zelli paced to ease some of his restlessness. It wasn't enough. He chided himself for wanting Tahlen in his bed tonight when Tahlen was undoubtedly as exhausted as he was and also had made no promises to be there. Zelli had told Tahlen the lust-fever was better today than it had been last night, and it was, comparatively. But there was still Zelli's wish-induced problem to consider. The more Zelli thought about it, the more possible it seemed that he would have to ask Tahlen to help him through the night, or spend several more miserable hours even after he arrived home.

At least he could bathe properly once he was there. He tried to cheer himself with that.

"Vint thinks I have no manners," Fy said slowly and clearly. Zelli turned to consider Fy in confused astonishment.

Tahlen was not far away, probably listening, but he hadn't glared Fy off.

Zelli did his best to focus on Fy's merry countenance. "You have manners, but they aren't palace manners," he remarked as lightly as he could.

"Which means none, to Vint. Very proper, my brother. Meant to be the sort of guard to follow around The Lyralinah himself." Fy's smile did not slip but somehow felt false.

Zelli glanced toward Vint. He looked not at all like Fy, but that happened in families, even without fae blood. Many also adopted. Even the rulers liked to choose their heirs.

"Our parents came together when Vint was around thirteen years," Fy explained, as if he'd seen Zelli's questioning look. "He found me very annoying, always, and I was. Am." He shrugged. "No manners, as he says."

"But he's here with you," Zelli reminded him. "Or are you with him?"

"He's with me," Fy said, quieter now.

Zelli frowned, though he had been frowning long before Fy had decided to speak to him. "He was meant to personally

serve The Lyralinah, but he came with you when you broke your oath? What of...?" Zelli didn't let himself ask the question. Sworn guards often served a family for generations. Fy and Vint's parents might still serve the Lyralinah, might even be with the Villucatto chasing them, although Zelli hoped not.

"He's a very proper kind of person," Fy reiterated. "But there was this time he and one of the kitchen workers decided to get friendly. Nothing improper in that, but they chose a spot between buildings, and forgot it was a balmy night and windows were open. And well, half of the kitchen staff heard them, as well as anyone else in the kitchens. Which was a great deal of us, since a shift had just ended and people were hungry."

Zelli put a hand over his mouth. "Oh no."

Fy winked at him again. "Which is to say nothing of how all the guards who are unattached and live with the main Lyralinah branch of the family stay in the same barracks, so we tend to hear *things* from time to time." Fy inclined his head toward Zelli. "We do not deal with the fae as easily as you do." Zelli made a frustrated face which Fy didn't seem to notice. "But we recognize that fae gifts—bless them and keep them—can be tricky."

Zelli blew out a breath. "I was hot. I didn't think about the window," he complained. "But thank you for this, Fy. You have manners, even if you are the only one who knows the rules to them. Perhaps you would be kind enough to tell me about how those on the coast deal with planting seasons."

Fy blinked rapidly several times.

"There are many around here who would be interested," Zelli added in explanation. "And... I would appreciate a distraction."

"Ah," said Fy, and began to gesture to Wain. "I can tell you what little I know, but Wain's people were grocers and he might know more."

"That will do," Zelli said earnestly. "I thank you again."

Despite the lecture from Wain, Fy's jokes, and Tern's interest in how warmth was made and the different varieties within the valley, Zelli began to lose track of the conversations. He stared at Tahlen too much and had to bite his lip when Tahlen offered his hand to hold.

They passed the small waystation and Zelli forgot himself while imagining Tahlen taking him there as the others rode ahead.

The sound of Tahlen calling his name pulled him from the daydream. Zelli kept his head down after that, and his arms crossed, and wore Tahlen's cloak like a tent.

Their odd little force began to ride faster, leaving Zelli to wonder if they'd all exchanged annoyed or despairing glances above his head and decided to pick up the pace.

"What sort of impression of the Tialtтын I am giving?" he worried out loud to Tahlen, who was riding alongside Zelli once again.

"You're hurrying home despite your obvious discomfort, *for them*, and they know that," Tahlen answered. "Don't mind the rest. We're almost there."

"I don't feel well," Zelli informed him, very softly.

Tahlen answered in the same manner. "I know. Do you want to stop?"

Zelli closed his eyes. "Do not tempt me."

"Should I have Fy distract you again?" Tahlen wondered, dryly playful.

Zelli looked at him, then at all the backs deliberately turned to them to grant the illusion of privacy. "They're trying to be kind, even though they all know something of my situation. I think they're wonderful. Did they bother you this morning?"

"Bother *me*?" Tahlen was visibly surprised, then eased his shoulders down and turned his face up to the sun for a

moment, smiling faintly. “I think *you* are wonderful, Zelli.”

Zelli stared at him, torn between demanding Tahlen explain himself and basking in the sight of Tahlen happily soaking in sunshine. He finally wrangled his hand out of Tahlen’s cloak and held it out, keeping his eyes down to conceal some of his pleasure when Tahlen took it.

“This has been a strange adventure,” Zelli mused, trying not to think of how else Tahlen’s hand might be used, “but not an altogether bad one. I might want another someday. Aside from...” He shook his head. “I might want another someday.”

“Just let me rest first,” Tahlen replied, dry like before.

Zelli was so delighted to hear Tahlen joking—*twice*—that it distracted him from his every other complaint for a good while.

# Seventeen

The moment of ease did not last.

Zelli was too shaky to enjoy the remarks from the Lyralinah guards at their first sight of the fortress carved out of the foothills, and then too nervous to reassure them.

By the time their group was visible to the guards at the lower gate, the fog was beginning to roll along the river and the sun had not set, but was nearly hidden by the distant mountains. The gate was already shut and did not begin to open until one of the guards in one of the towers, Hari, Zelli thought, from her voice, had a shouted exchange with Tahlen, which Zelli had finally interrupted by asking if Hari had her dog with her on duty again.

It wasn't against the rules, but Ric thought the puppy was a distraction.

Zelli supposed it was. When the gate was finally opened and they all were inside, Let, out of all of them, was the one to drop from her horse to go fuss over it.

The floppy ears were very cute. Zelli could admit, though at the moment he just stared blearily at them.

"Ah! Those puppy teeth!" Let cooed as the dog nibbled her, making Zelli swing his gaze to Tahlen, who glanced to Zelli in the same moment.

"You've got a poppet made of rope!" Hari scolded the puppy without real ire. "Don't be chewing people now."

Zelli tore his gaze from Tahlen, his face burning hot.

The guards in the second gate tower came down to study the six guards Zelli and Tahlen had dragged in with them, but did not leave their post. The guards in the first tower came down as well, three instead of two, because two, armed and ready, were possibly training the third.

The third, unarmed, in pants rolled up at the cuffs and a cloak clearly several years old, was Bree.

She was descended upon by several of the former Lyralinah guards within moments of recognition. They all had questions, and they were so obviously ecstatic to have found each other that Zelli left them to it. Tahlen said something to the tower guards. Zelli hunched into his cloak.

When he could see the torch lighters making their way down from the fortress, putting up and lighting the torches that allowed villagers, guards, and servants to walk the streets and the winding path up to the fortress without getting lost in the fog, he finally cleared his throat.

“Bree.” He smiled. “It’s good to see you. You’re thinking of staying?”

Bree immediately pulled away from her conversation with Tern and stood straighter, like a sworn guard on duty. But she smiled, smaller than Zelli’s, but still a smile. “It seemed a place to try. This is only my probationary period, and the first night at that. Thank you, and Tahlen, for this, and for bringing me some of my friends. I understand why your absence from this place has been so lamented.”

“Oh?” Zelli asked anxiously. “Really?” He coughed. “I’m sorry we can’t linger for your reunion, but we must attend to things. My grandmother will retire for the night soon and I need to catch her first.”

“I’m on duty anyway.” Bree nodded respectfully to him, then to Tahlen, then to Let, before smiling widely for the others. Hari waved her back into the tower, whistled for her puppy, then gave Zelli a look, eyebrows up, before disappearing inside as well.

“You have a funny relationship with your guards here,” Let commented after Tahlen had moved on, an act which silently told them all to do the same.

“They watched me grow up.” Zelli sighed. “And Grandmother is only formal when she chooses to be. But when she does...”

“We should all listen,” Let finished as a guess, but glanced pointedly at the others, who each gave a nod.

The way up to the fortress was never as easy as the way down and the horses were tired as well. But some of the torch lighters greeted them in between the murmurs of the Lyralinah guards about the fog. *Thick as chowder*, they said. He didn't ask what they meant.

The nasturtiums hanging from the walls were not in bloom, but Zelli imagined plucking some and nestling them into Tahlen's braid. They would probably fall out, he reflected sadly. It was a shame Zelli did not have the sort of funds to have jeweled versions made. Perhaps he could manage colored glass or enamel if he put off his own purchases for a while, but then Grandmother would say something about the discretion he was supposed to be learning.

Putting flowers that reminded Tahlen of Zelli into Tahlen's hair *was* quite indiscreet, actually. Zelli considered it longingly anyway, and what might transpire afterward.

The upper gate and portcullis were not yet closed, and several of the guards on duty there came out to greet Zelli and speak with Tahlen as Tahlen led everyone into the courtyard. Tahlen slipped gracefully from Starfall's back the moment they were all inside, and asked about Ric and spoke with someone about the borrowed horses.

The Lyralinah guards dismounted after Zelli did, then stood about stiffly as they were observed by an increasing number of guards and servants.

Nya was probably readying for bed as well, so Zelli stopped one of her assistants to mention that the visiting guards would need beds and some food while Ric and Grandmother considered what to do with them.

He also said, to the stoically watchful guards of the Lyralinah, “Providing no one comes looking for you, you might get to stay. You will at least be fed and housed for the night. I'll come see you in the morning.”



Then he patted Lemon Blossom, smiled somewhat tiredly at Gil, one of the stable hands, and set out with determination to get to Grandmother's bedside before she fell asleep. Though someone had likely run to her with this information by now.

He took his pack with him. He didn't hear footsteps at his side, only the faint jingle of mail, and turned to Tahlen in pleased surprise.

"You should go see Esrin," Zelli whispered nonetheless, not only because he didn't want Esrin to be angrier with him. "I can face Grandmother alone."

Tahlen captured Zelli's hand and kept on, leaving Zelli to stumble over his feet while staring up at him.

"All right," Zelli allowed at last, "but I will talk first."

"Yes, Zelli," Tahlen agreed, not even looking at him.

Zelli's grandmother was in her nightclothes and a long robe but very much awake, even standing, when a frowning Nya let Zelli and Tahlen into Grandmother's room before shutting the door behind them.

A cup of tea sat on a table near Grandmother's favorite chair by the fire. There were letters on the table as well. Zelli tried not to look at them.

Leaning on her cane, Grandmother stared hard at Zelli as though Tahlen wasn't there. Tahlen had released Zelli's hand upon entering the room and now stood to the side and a step behind Zelli, silent, his face probably impassive.

Zelli had forgotten the cloak he was wearing and the cloak Tahlen wasn't wearing. His grandmother's attention fixed on it the moment the door was closed, and then Zelli's unbound hair, but all she said was, "Mizel."

"I'm not sorry that I went," Zelli said immediately. "But I am sorry that I worried you. Tahlen was with me. I hope that eased your mind, at least a little." He did not say that this had

been Tahlen's idea because Zelli hadn't considered it. The knowledge wouldn't improve her mood.

She might have guessed the truth regardless, because she narrowed her eyes and directed some of her glare at Tahlen.

"I also did not mean to be gone for this long," Zelli acknowledged. "My intention was to be seen, inspect a few waystations, and let people bring cases to me to pass on to you for your judgment. Which I have notes on!" He shook the pack to demonstrate and did not mention yet that he had issued some judgments anyway. "But then I discovered a situation and it needed dealing with. When you find dampness in the storerooms, you can't hesitate. You have to act quickly, or at least try to discover the source and how big the problem is."

"You don't look well," Grandmother remarked as if Zelli hadn't spoken. "And Tahlen looks weary indeed. One guard was not enough, Mizel."

"Tahlen was more than enough—oh." Zelli ducked his head. "Yes. He needs rest."

"He couldn't have gotten much with no one else to relieve him," Grandmother added.

Zelli deserved the scolding, even if Tahlen had been the one to insist on accompanying him. "That is my fault," he admitted, glancing over to Tahlen. "I'm sorry—though you dislike me saying so."

"Too many beat-of-fours never learn to apologize," Tahlen said evenly. "You apologize when you've no need to."

Zelli gestured wildly. "But I did keep forcing you into more adventures."

"Hardly forced." Tahlen's attention on him did not waver. *Gladly* was unsaid but hung in the air.

Flustered, Zelli swung back around to look at his grandmother, fully aware that his face was flushed and his eyes were no doubt some outlandish color.

In contrast, Grandmother's dark eyes were nearly black in the fire and candlelight of the room. After a long moment, she

angled her head toward Tahlen without taking her gaze from Zelli. “Tahlen, perhaps you should go reassure your sister, who, some whisper where they think I can’t hear, has been in a state these past few days. Rest, if you can, and clean up. I will speak to you when you’re finished.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Zelli saw Tahlen nod. Yet Tahlen stayed where he was. “I believed his intention to be right when he stated it to me, and I went with him without being asked or ordered.”

“Tahlen’s advice was very helpful,” Zelli added quickly.

Tahlen still had not taken a single step. “Zelli does not act as I would, or sometimes even as you would, but I would obey his orders.”

Zelli reached up to tug at his necklace without pulling it free. He let the initial sting from Tahlen’s assessment carry through him, then the warmth that followed. “I never gave you any orders.”

Tahlen held a stare with Grandmother, not looking to Zelli at all.

Zelli pursed his lips thoughtfully. “I will try to give you orders?” he suggested, only to realize that he might have issued some sort of commands when in bed with Tahlen and Tahlen would certainly remember them.

The remark earned him a sideways glance and a glimpse of a light in Tahlen’s eye.

For a moment, Zelli was no longer even remotely tired. His skin sizzled with added heat.

“All things I will consider in my own time, Tahlen,” Grandmother cut in, unimpressed. “Go see your family. Rest, eat, wash, and then return to me. I will have questions.”

She was very sure.

Tahlen offered her another respectful nod, then turned. He met Zelli’s stare with one eyebrow arched.

The look was meant to inquire about Zelli’s condition, not to imply Tahlen would obey Zelli over Grandmother, but Zelli

gulped.

“Esrin’s probably worried sick,” he told Tahlen anyway. “And you barely got any sleep last night because of me.” He froze, his shoulders so tense they nearly touched his ears. He didn’t look at his grandmother as he cleared his throat. “And I’m well enough. Thank you. Go see your sister.”

“Yes, Zelli,” said Tahlen, daring to have that same light in his eyes. With a final nod, he backed out of the door and closed it silently behind him.

Zelli, who could not follow him, turned to face his grandmother.

“Mizel.” Grandmother’s tone was a warning and her eyes saw more than Zelli’s did. She held out her hand and waited until Zelli supported her arm before making her slow, shuffling way toward her bed. She sat on the edge with a heaving sigh, but yanked him down next to her with surprising strength. Her eyes remained dark.

“Now,” she didn’t let him look away, “tell me everything.”

## Eighteen

Zelli bathed immediately upon returning to his room, dropping the pack and slipping off his clothes as he went to the bathing room. Someone had been instructed to ready his bedchamber for him on his arrival, because a fire was lit and there was a tray of food and tea on the little table before it. But getting clean and soaking away various aches and pains in the water were of more interest to him at present.

He had told Grandmother everything, except for details of what had happened between him and Tahlen last night. She'd interrupted him twice, first to be concerned over Zelli's foolish wish, then to ask if any of Zelli's other problems were affecting him.

Her shoulders had dropped with worry or exhaustion by the time he was done and she'd let him settle her into bed without much complaining.

"I couldn't leave them there," Zelli had finally argued, drawing her eyes to him again. "But they don't have to stay beyond the night. Hospitality demands at least that, and no one could claim we were doing otherwise. No one *should* claim it."

Grandmother was much better at hiding her feelings than Zelli was. He really needed to learn how to do that. Not even lingering in the hot water could calm some of his nerves at the memory of Grandmother's impassive expression.

"As for the rest," he'd gone on, wondering why Tahlen thought Zelli was persuasive when he clearly wasn't, "I was perfectly safe. Tahlen took excellent care of me."

Zelli, in the bath, squirmed at the way Grandmother had said nothing there so the words had seemed to echo. "The judgments went well. Most people were happy to hear from us. Oh—did outguards stop here?"

That had made Grandmother speak, at least. “No.”

Zelli wondered if the outguards had gotten lost in the fog again, but that really wasn't his concern.

“Tahlen did nothing wrong,” he had insisted to Grandmother. He thought it right that he'd said it. But the memory made him restless again.

He pulled himself from the bath before he could fall asleep, and slipped on a nightshirt and his robe without doing much more than squeezing the water from his hair and patting himself dry.

Someone had brought food into the room while he'd been bathing, which he devoured while further drying his hair and rehashing his talk with Grandmother to consider what she must have been considering while Zelli had gone on and on.

“Your current issues,” she'd begun thoughtfully. “One of which is something we hadn't seen in months.”

“Possibly another,” Zelli had admitted, although without evidence except for his suspicions that the fae were listening or watching and doing this to him on purpose. This lust-fever felt different than before, certainly, which was probably due to Tahlen's help. But Zelli, beneath his exhaustion and the wrongness from the wish, still felt rather... unlike himself.

Or, rather, like himself, but more aware of his body and his thoughts and his desires. His desires had surprised Tahlen. He wasn't going to share them with his grandmother. “I feel wild, or almost so.”

“Your age, I would say,” Grandmother had answered. “My child settled into their ears at this time. Before they sliced them to look more like everyone else and hid the scars with cuffs of gold.”

Grandmother never shared much of her thoughts on her child, other than to refer to them as Zelli's parent and to pay some of their expenses in the capital, and to sometimes remark, if Zelli's parent was mentioned, that trying to escape the family ties to the fae by fleeing to the capital had only earned them a fae baby. Then she would sigh.

This time, she hadn't. She'd taken Zelli's hand, studied his flushed face and watched him absently rub his chest, then said, "Or it's Tahlen."

She'd probably enjoyed making Zelli jump, revenge for leaving her to worry.

"You've been extremely close to him for several days, and your fevers did get worse after he arrived here. I'm not exactly sure how, but I've always suspected things are different for the other side of our family in more ways than the obvious where romance or what-have-you is concerned. Is there anything else I should know about, Mizel? Anything you're not telling me?"

The color that had spread through him at the touch of Tahlen's hand had come to mind, but Zelli had stayed silent rather than try to form the words to describe it.

Grandmother had finally released him and stared thoughtfully into the distance. "I'll speak with Tahlen tonight and then with some of these guards tomorrow. The one who arrived before them mentioned your name. Which at least meant I knew you were alive."

Zelli drank his cold tea to help him swallow the guilty lump in his throat from the memory. But after that, Grandmother had kissed his forehead and told him to go to his room as usual for the duration of his fever, and that she'd send food. She hadn't responded to his pressing questions about the possible fate of the guards, or to his defense of Tahlen, except to finally say, "You acted like a Tialtтын. Now go."

Having soaked a great deal of his pains away, and taken care of some of his lust-fever desires while trying to summon clearer memories of the night before, and with some food in him, Zelli heaved himself out of the chair by the fire, leaving the tray on the table for now so he could fall face-first onto his bed and curl up in the warm darkness behind the heavy curtains.

He moved only to scratch at an itch that wasn't really there.

"When you ignored me, it hurt," he said to any listening fae, family or otherwise. "But now this? You could allow me *some*

dignity around him, you know. You answer wishes as you see best, but is this truly what's best for me? What am I to discover this way?"

Tahlen was likely talking to Grandmother by now. He might come here afterward, if only to check on the status of Zelli's discomfort. Or he might not, but Zelli quailed at the idea of the walk through the fortress in his condition to find Tahlen, and then, if Tahlen was less than excited about helping him, the miserable walk back.

He wriggled up to grab a pillow to bite but stopped at the gentle knock on the door.

"Zelli?" Tahlen asked, as though the door wasn't unlocked and he couldn't simply walk inside if he wanted to. "It's Tahlen" he said next, leaving Zelli to boggle for a moment that Tahlen would assume Zelli didn't know his voice when one of Zelli's distinct memories of the night before was telling Tahlen how much he liked it.

Zelli flew off the bed and ran to the door to fling it open.

"I wasn't sure if you..." Tahlen trailed to a stop at Zelli's sudden, breathless appearance. Tahlen had scrubbed away some of the travel dust, although his hair looked too dry to have been washed, even if it had been combed and rebraided into one his simpler nighttime braids. He was in no armor, at least, and clean clothes, and stared as if Zelli had left him stunned.

Zelli didn't know why; he was mostly dressed, and even if he hadn't been, Tahlen had seen him in less.

Tahlen leaned in, evidently concerned about eavesdroppers. The family apartments were occupied by older relatives who had long since gone to bed and were several rooms away from Zelli, in any case. Any guards were stationed outside at the entrance to the corridors for their chambers rather than in the corridor itself. But Tahlen kept his voice down. "You didn't look well when I left you with your grandmother. Do you still need me?"



Zelli gazed up at him, itching and restless, his spine liquid, his face hot.

Tahlen seemed worried, maybe because Zelli didn't speak. "Is there anything I can do?"

"I ache even hearing you," Zelli revealed in a daze, then recalled himself enough to straighten and add, "not like yesterday. Not to lose all reason. But I *have* been lying in bed thinking of you."

"*Zelli.*" Tahlen shut his eyes before saying it, then opened them to give Zelli a look that should have been chiding but was so bright Zelli couldn't be sure.

"But you must be more tired than I am." Thinking about why that was made Zelli shift from foot to foot. "Did you eat? Did Esrin forgive you?" He poked his head out into the hall but as he'd expected, he and Tahlen were very much alone. "Would you like to come in?"

Once the invitation was extended and he'd stepped back to let Tahlen in, he remembered the last time Tahlen had been his room. Tahlen might have been remembering it too, because he made his expression blank and went to stand in front of the fire, exactly as he'd done the previous time.

Zelli nervously chewed his lip, but closed the door and then moved to follow him.

Instead of launching into a speech about courtship and admiration, Tahlen studied Zelli, starting at his bare feet and legs and ending with Zelli's damp hair.

"You got a bath?" Zelli asked, voice high.

Tahlen darted one glance to his cloak and the trail of clothes Zelli had left on the floor. "Are you in any pain?"

So he *had* come here to see about Zelli's discomfort. Zelli tried to be pleased by that and found he wasn't.

"I bathed and that helped," he told Tahlen anyway, then stepped closer, ignoring the crick in his neck this caused. "I was surprised to discover faint bruises from your fingers, mostly around my thighs and under my knees, where I have

some memory of you holding me. Are *you* sore? I suppose you're more used to bedroom exertions than I am, or maybe the acts we did don't leave you sore in the same way?"

"I'm tired, more from lack of sleep." Tahlen didn't look too pleased to learn of Zelli's bruises, although Zelli had been giddy upon finding them. "You should soak longer. Your bath is heated, isn't it? Or is that only the family one?"

"Is yours not heated?" Zelli demanded with loud outrage. "There is a house for..."

He fell silent in confusion over Tahlen's small, incredibly lovely smile. "There is the house for the staff and guards to bathe. I cleaned myself, but I wanted to make sure you were well and didn't need me."

"Well. I did." Zelli didn't know or care what that was in response to. He had soaked and he had needed Tahlen. He reached out and took Tahlen's hand by the wrist, pulling it and then Tahlen closer to him while he inspected Tahlen's fingernails. His relief at the simple touch was overwhelming. With the lust-fever slowly fading, his original problem was getting more noticeable. "Would you like to use my bath? That is the very least I can offer you. You will say I don't owe you anything, but I would like it. To give you comfort, and also... I'm sure you'll look pretty there."

Tahlen laced their fingers together. "Would you like to join me?"

"In the bath?" Zelli wheezed, wondering vaguely what color his eyes had turned upon hearing *that*.

"People do sometimes share them," Tahlen explained, watching Zelli's face and apparently pleased with what he saw. "Lovers," he added deliberately, "will sometimes share them."

Because they were lovers now.

Zelli gaped for several moments, smiling before he caught himself, then confused as to why he ought to stop himself if Tahlen didn't mind.

"I don't know that we'd both fit," he said finally, though not reluctantly. "It was built for Tialttrins, like the lower sconces

in the halls and the beds in the family apartments.” He waved his hand in the direction of his bed, which did not require him to climb a small ladder to get into it. “But now I wonder if I should ask for a higher bed.”

His breathy whisper brought a full smile to Tahlen’s face. “You can stay with me, then, while I bathe. If you like.”

“You always say ‘if you like.’” Zelli complained, or didn’t complain, as Tahlen began to walk toward the bathing room door, their hands still linked. “Then other times, you’ll want me to tell you what I like regardless of what you may like. I’m really not sure what the difference is when you do it. But I would. I would like to stay with you while you bathe.” He said it as though it wasn’t obvious by then with him trailing after Tahlen and standing there when Tahlen pulled away to consider the room.

Zelli got the water going for the bath, glad the tub itself was still warm from his soak. He hadn’t bothered with more than one candle to light the room for his own bath, but he went around lighting a few more, then drew the cord to close the curtains on the high windows, keeping in what heat the water would provide.

Tahlen looked over Zelli’s table loaded with brushes, soaps, and oils. He picked up one jar just to frown at it. “Juniper?”

“A gift from my parent,” Zelli explained as he kneeled down by the bath, which had been carved into the floor and the rock polished to smoothness. It was connected to the same system that filled and warmed the family baths, which was why he used those when he didn’t feel like waiting for his bathing tub to fill.

“You’ve never smelled of juniper,” Tahlen observed.

“It’s not to my taste, no.” Zelli splashed the water as it rose, then looked up. Tahlen’s mouth was a flat line. “I believe it was meant to show me a current trend around the palace.” Tahlen narrowed his eyes. Zelli made his words soft. “You loved your parents very much and they loved you. But mine never intended to be a parent—the consequences of a fae lover; that part of the stories is true. Or can be.” He tested the

water again. “There’s a soap there made with goat’s milk and honey that’s much better.”

Tahlen found that one and brought it to the side of the bath without a word, not even to comment on Zelli mentioning his family. He undid the cord at the end of his braid and began to unravel it. Zelli hadn’t considered that Tahlen might wash his hair as well. Zelli was going to get hard while Tahlen cleaned himself, but Tahlen must have known that when he’d suggested this.

“Was...” Zelli simply had to control himself until Tahlen was done and try to keep his mind on other things, although this was a little unfair of Tahlen since he knew Zelli was still experiencing some of his lust-fever. “Was Esrin angry with you?”

Tahlen dragged his fingers through his hair to comb it and watched Zelli watch him do it. “We were gone longer than I told her we would be. So yes. But she was worried. Not angry.”

Zelli was not convinced of that, but whatever he might have argued slipped from his thoughts and did not return. Tahlen took care of his boots and socks, then his belt and his pants. Zelli inhaled deeply, looked away, then looked back because Tahlen wanted him to. Tahlen kept his gaze on Zelli as he pulled his shirt over his head and added it to the pile of his clothes on the floor.

Zelli had not imagined Tahlen’s beauty last night. But the red marks on Tahlen’s shoulder, and lower, near his hip, stole his breath.

Those had been hidden beneath Tahlen’s clothes all day and Zelli hadn’t known until now. “I *did* bite you that hard,” he exhaled the realization. “Did it hurt? No, that was a silly question. Ignore it, please. *Do* they hurt?”

Tahlen, still gloriously naked, reached down to brush his thumb over the imprint of Zelli’s teeth at his hip. He met Zelli’s eyes. “Not much. Like a bruise.”

“Did others see them when you bathed?” Zelli was horrified but only for a second. Then smug pleasure made him blush and shift restlessly on his knees.

“They may have.” The movement of Tahlen’s thumb was mesmerizing. Zelli had a few difficult moments trying to look away.

“They will know it was me—that I did that to you. They’ll know soon enough if they don’t already with how I behave.” Zelli meant to cover his mouth to stop himself from speaking but ended up sinking his teeth into the meat of his thumb and muttering with his mouth full.

“They will,” Tahlen agreed.

Zelli’s gaze flew up to Tahlen’s face, then down to the mark Tahlen insisted on pressing his fingertips to, and then lower, to Tahlen’s flushed, swelling cock.

Asking if Tahlen minded seemed foolish with *that* evidence before him.

Zelli bit down harder, then let go. “But you didn’t like leaving bruises on me?” One of many questions Zelli now had.

Tahlen stopped stroking the mark. “You can’t remember getting them. I should’ve been better.”

“I hardly think so.” Admittedly, Zelli couldn’t recall a lot of details of the night before, but he knew he’d been happy. “I remember the first time, you know. Mostly. I don’t think it could’ve been better. So I’d rather you not say that again.” He frowned and looked at Tahlen until Tahlen swallowed, then nodded. Zelli nodded too. “But... later, if you could show me how you held me to mark me so, and perhaps do it again, I would not object.”

Tahlen tipped his head up and shut his eyes. He released a slow breath and continued touching the pinprick spots of red and darker bruising from Zelli’s bite. Zelli didn’t think he should apologize for it, not with how Tahlen was acting, but he didn’t understand. From what Tahlen had said, his other lovers might have nibbled, but certainly hadn’t done anything so forceful.

“I remember the first two bites as well,” Zelli offered, no less confused but much, much hotter when Tahlen’s second sigh echoed with the same longing. “The water is ready for you.” Zelli waited until Tahlen’s eyes opened to stir the surface with his hand. “You know how you look and you invited me to watch you bathe. Yet, I think if you knew what it did to me, you might not have. I might give you more of those. I’ll want to, anyway.”

Tahlen studied Zelli for another moment, then eased himself into the water. The tub, although not long, was at least deep enough for the water to reach Tahlen’s waist, then his chest when he came over to sit on the low, carved bench seat at the end near Zelli. The ends of his hair swayed in the water. His skin flushed with color as it warmed.

“This is how it feels,” Tahlen remarked so softly Zelli wasn’t certain he was meant to hear.

Tahlen sank down until all of him was beneath the surface, then sat up again, a thousand shimmering trails of water running down his shoulders and chest, leaving Zelli no one place to stare at.

“Maybe I shouldn’t improve the bath house for all of you so you’ll keep coming to mine,” Zelli mused. “No,” he added sadly not even a heartbeat later. “No, I should improve it anyway. The guards’ living quarters as well. They’re too cold and it’s still summer. Winters must be uncomfortable.”

Tahlen turned toward him, frowning without any other sign of anger or displeasure. “I believe you care about these things. But if there’s something else on your mind, or you have a question, you can ask me.” He paused. “Or tell me.”

Zelli snorted at that but inched closer on his knees. “I don’t know what kind of lovers we are. May I touch you?”

Tahlen raised his eyebrows, then indicated the spot behind his ear where there had been a braid. “You were allowed that anyway.”

Zelli shifted in place. “But you’re naked, and though I desire you as ever, I’m not mindless now. It’s different. I offered the

bath to help you, but I also want to touch you in intimate ways.”

Tahlen took hold of the soap and pressed the jar of sweet-smelling flakes into Zelli’s hands. “If you like.”

Tahlen already knew he liked. Or maybe he didn’t. He didn’t always read Zelli correctly, even knowing Zelli as he did and as obvious as Zelli was.

Zelli poured a handful of flakes into Tahlen’s palm and clutched the jar desperately when Tahlen rubbed his hands together to make the soap grow foamy, then smoothed his hands over himself below the surface of the water.

He was going to smell like Zelli everywhere: on his stomach, down between his legs, along his thighs. Zelli stared avidly while offering more soap flakes for Tahlen to wash his chest. Tahlen had already washed tonight. It was really only his hair that needed the attention. But he had invited Zelli to this, and he reached up once to brush his thumb over Zelli’s lip in order to gently pull it from where it was pressed by Zelli’s teeth. Then he left his thumb there, so Zelli bit it instead.

“Warm honey,” Zelli breathed.

“Better than juniper,” Tahlen agreed with a shiver. He held out his hand for more soap, but withdrew it before Zelli could give it to him. He considered Zelli with cautious interest. “Is there something you would like? You’ve said you wanted to help me and to touch me. But I thought with your fae problem, you might be bolder. Instead, you stare and bite your lip.”

“You’re worth staring at.” Zelli swallowed painfully. “I bite because I can’t think of what else to do with—rather, I can, but I shouldn’t. I would like to remember more of last night, what I was allowed to do with you. I’m certain that, you being as you are, you pleased me greatly. But what did I do for you? What may I do for you out of the many impulses I have now?”

Tahlen’s expression was not exactly a frown. “It doesn’t have to be tit for tat. I don’t need it to be. For me it’s... you worrying. You worried last night too, even with your fever.

*Ask, Zelli,*” he said at last. “Ask and we’ll see. Hurt me or protect me, or both, remember?”

Zelli nodded slowly. “Right now, I think I want to protect you more. Protect is not the word I want, but you confuse me so often. Is it protective to want you to use my bath? Are we the sort of lovers where I might wash your hair for you?” He blinked to hear himself. “Or help you wash it? Though I only have these soaps and not whatever you might use to make it so....”

His compliments for Tahlen’s shining hair went unsaid. Tahlen was too still for a moment but then ducked his head in assent and sat back.

Zelli poured far too many flakes into his hand and scooted to the edge of the tub behind Tahlen, part of the hem of his robe falling into the water. His sleeves dipped into the water too. He hastily rolled them over his wrists before giving up on them altogether. Tahlen’s wet hair curled around his forearms like grass in a pond. The water was hot and the heat had seeped into Tahlen’s skin, which was mostly smooth but marked with traces of old scars and moles that Zelli didn’t remember from the haze of the previous night.

Lifting the mass of Tahlen’s pretty hair exposed Tahlen’s back and shoulders. Zelli spent several distracted moments running his hand over them, leaving bubbles behind and sometimes gooseflesh, although his hands should have been as hot as the water by now.

He rinsed Tahlen off once he realized how distracted he was and Tahlen let out a small grunt before sliding down. He had a fist around his erect cock but wasn’t stroking himself or trying to bring himself off. Zelli nearly suggested he should, but Tahlen opened eyes that must have been closed to look at Zelli upside-down. In the candlelight, his gaze seemed unfocused.

“It is quite a thing, being your chew-toy.” He didn’t remark on Zelli’s small sound of indignation. He reached up to draw Zelli’s hand back to his shoulder and pressed it over the bite mark. Then he shuddered. “More than I imagined.”



They stayed like that, Tahlen eventually closing his eyes again, Zelli breathing hard and damp under his nightshirt, until Zelli abruptly remembered what he was supposed to be doing. His hand shook around the jar, which was ridiculous. He was a Tialttyrin, as well as an adult, with a chew—a lover.

He used a proper amount of soap and took his time both so his excited tremors would stop and because this was a privilege. He soaped the ends and then worked his way up, lightly scratching around the roots, pleased when this drew a groan from Tahlen.

“Do your others also bathe with you and do this for you?” Zelli wondered after telling Tahlen to lean back again so Zelli could rinse his hair without getting soap in his eyes.

“Did they ever wash my hair?” Tahlen asked in a warm, faraway tone. “They didn’t ask to and I wouldn’t have let them.”

“Ah.” Zelli didn’t understand but pretended to so Tahlen would stay where he was, and dipped his hand down over Tahlen’s bitten shoulder. He couldn’t really feel the bruising from his teeth and eventually pulled his hand away to finish his task.

“Zelli,” Tahlen said after Zelli had rinsed his hair free of every bubble and was worrying over adding more water to the bath or letting the water cool, “I am protected. Is there anything else you want—aside from a good and decent ruler in the capital?” It was probably the cooling water that made Tahlen sound a bit more aware and awake, but he must have been dreaming still because he made no sense. “I mean, with your fever or without your fever. With or without the consequences of your wish. Is there anything else you want?”

“I would like you and everyone else safe.” Zelli expressed this sincerely, but spread his hand over Tahlen’s shoulder and left it there. “I’d like you to get the rest you need.” Tahlen pushed out a testy little breath. “I’d also like to get the rest *I* need,” Zelli added. “Which is why I have not asked you to tup me again. Although obviously, I would like that too.”

“Obviously,” Tahlen echoed. Then he turned, and Zelli didn’t know what he did, but Tahlen took hold of Zelli’s hands and then his waist and suddenly Zelli was in the water with him.

Zelli shouted in surprise and possibly shrieked too, which, thankfully no one would hear. He put his hands on the edge on either side of Tahlen, who settled onto the bench seat and pulled Zelli with him.

“Good thing you’re small,” Tahlen whispered, pleased with himself. He leaned back enough that most of Zelli would be in the water if Zelli let his legs float. He left his hands at Zelli’s ribs.

“My robe,” Zelli complained while staring at Tahlen in confusion. His robe and shirt tangled around him, the robe heavier by the moment. “In the bath?” he asked a while later, drifting closer to Tahlen and ending up with his knees on the seat and Tahlen sitting up with his arm around Zelli’s waist. “If I like?” he interpreted the light in Tahlen’s eye, then raised his arms agreeably. “But the robe is heavy now.”

Tahlen helped peel it off him, and the nightshirt too, and tossed them elsewhere. He smoothed his hands up Zelli’s spine and then down to his backside, trickling water over Zelli’s skin. It should have been too hot combined with the fever, but Zelli found it pleasing and told Tahlen so. He also liked Tahlen’s hands settling on his thighs.

“Do they match up with the bruises?” Zelli wondered absently after first leaning in to fit his teeth gently over the impression on Tahlen’s shoulder.

Tahlen considered Zelli with that distracted, dreaming look in his eyes again. “Should I tell you all we did last night?”

Zelli considered the offer, then Tahlen’s pretty eyes and pretty face. His mouth was also of interest. “We could just do it all again?” he suggested, his attention narrowing to Tahlen’s lips when Tahlen smiled. “Kiss?”

He’d meant to use a full sentence, but Tahlen leaned forward eagerly so Zelli kissed him without bothering with more words. His kiss was brief and careful. He still was not sure of

his teeth, and though he remembered many kisses from the night before, open-mouthed, closed-mouthed, lips just parted, lips brushing in shivery teases, none had been deep.

He wondered if that bothered Tahlen, but it was a distant wonder. They kissed. Tahlen pulled Zelli closer. Zelli flattened his palm against Tahlen's side and slid it lower since that was permitted. *Anything* might be permitted. Zelli bit down at the thought, then startled back to stare wide-eyed at Tahlen.

Tahlen put two fingertips to his reddened bottom lip. He spoke after a pause, his voice husky. "You were overwhelmed?"

Zelli nodded slowly. "I didn't mean to accidentally hurt you."

"*Accidentally*," Tahlen echoed dryly, but leaned in again. "I was too much?"

Zelli shook his head. "Too much choice. I got excited. I'm sorry."

Tahlen came that much closer, letting their mouths nearly touch. "I'm not."

He *was* too much. "*Beautiful*," Zelli told him crossly and took Tahlen's face in his hands to kiss him again.

The water was cool compared to the fires in him. Tahlen had done this and Zelli wanted to make him feel the same. He slipped his hands down, through damp chest hair and over taut nipples and smooth muscle. He broke their kiss but didn't pull away, glancing down as he curled his hand around Tahlen's cock. Tahlen drew in a breath.

Zelli's whole body clenched, the fever and the cloudy memories of the night before leaving him with a need he tried to ignore. But his hips twitched and his mouth went dry as he explored.

Tahlen had been hard since the moment he'd entered the water, half-aroused before then. Zelli didn't want to make him wait. He needed it to be good for him and eventually snapped heatedly for Tahlen to show him *how* to make it good for him. Tahlen said his name, nearly a sigh, and closed his hand over Zelli's. Then he wrapped an arm around Zelli's waist to haul him closer.

Zelli slapped a hand on the edge of the tub to brace himself and watched, teeth sunk hard into his bottom lip. Tahlen's cock felt and looked good in Zelli's hand, wet and shining. Zelli licked his abused, swollen lip and dropped his forehead to Tahlen's shoulder. Tahlen's chest was heaving. His forearm made Zelli *hungry* and he told Tahlen so, breathless and shuddering.

Tahlen's hold on him tightened, then he pulled Zelli down against him with a groan. He spent white and thick along his chest and on Zelli's hand. Zelli lurched up to place kisses all over his face and shoulders.

*"Beautiful,"* Zelli kissed Tahlen's bruised mouth too. Tahlen shivered and Zelli felt another pulse against his hand.

Though the water would wash away Tahlen's spunk, Zelli used the same hand to start to bring himself off. There was some spill left on Tahlen's chest in the lovely patch of hair, and Zelli thought of finishing there and adding his mess to it.

Tahlen, eyes half-shut, lips red and parted, watched. His hand flexed at Zelli's hip, tightening and releasing. His breathing did not even out.

He finally whispered, *"Zelli,"* so urgently that Zelli stopped to kiss him again without thinking.

*"What?"* Zelli whispered back, trembling as he tried to be still. *"What can I give you?"* He brushed more half-kisses over Tahlen's sweet mouth and put his palm to the side of his face. He pushed on Tahlen's bruised shoulder and kissed Tahlen's throat when he caught the sound Tahlen tried to hide from him. *"Tell me."* Zelli shifted forward and sighed when both of Tahlen's arms came around him. *"You want to please me, is that it?"* Tahlen had to know Zelli wanted that. But if he didn't, if he wanted to hear it, Zelli gave it to him with more shallow kisses. *"Then do it, Tahlen. Please me."*

Tahlen turned again and lifted Zelli easily, moving him forward until Zelli's elbows were on the edge of the bath and his knees were on the seat. It was cold there with Zelli's skin so hot he must be red all over. He thought Tahlen was going to

fuck him until he felt Tahlen's breath, warm on intimate places. Zelli squirmed and then held himself still.

If he had Tahlen's backside in front of him, he'd probably bite into it like an apple. But Tahlen was not like him. Tahlen ran light touches in all the places his breath had gone, and when Zelli squirmed again, replaced his hands with his mouth.

Zelli hadn't realized mouths could go there. He cried out, then dropped his head to blush and pant into the wet rock. Tahlen spread him open and used what must be his tongue to put more aches in Zelli instead of relieving them. Not that Zelli complained. He couldn't manage a word. He did not even have the strength to take one hand to stroke himself. He shuddered and pushed back and Tahlen answered with fingers as well as tongue.

Zelli's legs began to shake. He should have been cold and was not, not at all.

"Tahlen," he stuttered finally when he could no longer bear it. "*Please.*"

Tahlen took a firmer hold of him, then withdrew his fingers so he could wrap that hand around Zelli's cock.

Zelli finished within moments, trembling and falling into his own spill the moment Tahlen slowed his strokes and eased back.

Zelli considered asking why Tahlen hadn't fucked him, but Tahlen slowly pulled him into the water, which was just warm enough to still feel pleasant though not for much longer, and washed Zelli's chest and stomach for him with some of Zelli's soap. He asked a question of his own, soft above Zelli's ear.

"Do you know how it feels to get to take care of you?" Tahlen asked a second question a moment after the first. "Do you know yet what you are?"

Zelli gave the smallest possible shake of his head. He still hadn't determined what Tahlen was and that was far more interesting. "Everyone takes care of me. I'm useless."

Tahlen held him closer. "You fuss over everyone here, even the ones in awe of you who can barely manage a word. It was

strange, then baffling, and then a thorn buried deep under my skin; why should you be this way? Now, you let me take care of you and I....”

Zelli waited but Tahlen didn't go on, so he turned around, ensuring first that Tahlen's arms would stay around him. Tahlen was tense.

Zelli wanted to be as soothing to him as milk and honey on stinging skin. “You're going to get cold with your hair wet. Let's go to the fire in the other room. I can ask for tea or more food, if you need some.”

Tahlen closed his eyes as if pained. “Zelli.”

“It pleases you to help me onto Lemon Blossom, or to show off your body to me like you did just now, or to ask for biscuits you think I might like?” Zelli guessed. “As it pleases you to make me spill even when I haven't touched you in return?”

Tahlen opened his eyes. He exhaled, then gave a short nod.

Zelli considered this as calmly as he could with his heart racing. “And to allow me to.... To be my chew-toy?” He didn't understand, but he wanted Tahlen to be pleased and he liked all those things Tahlen had done. “And when I take care of you?”

Tahlen's exhale this time was shaky. “I wasn't expecting it. I should have. Yes, I like that too, in much the same way.”

“Well,” Zelli said, out of breath, “I will think about that while I dry your hair before the fire. And perhaps mine, since someone dragged me into his bath with him.”

Tahlen made a noise in his throat but nodded again.

“It seemed playful,” Zelli considered the dunking out loud. “I wouldn't have expected you to do it or for me to like it. Though I did like it, very much.” He suddenly felt like smiling, so he did, and enjoyed watching Tahlen's careful blankness melt into a small smile of his own.

“Come on then,” Zelli ordered at last, curious, and Tahlen lifted Zelli gently to the edge of the tub and then pushed

himself up from the water.

Zelli got to his feet and took Tahlen's hand, ignoring Tahlen's look of surprise. He led him to the table for oils and combs, then to gather towels, before returning to his bedroom and a place in front of the fire.

"You're a very good chew-toy," Zelli observed later, cross-legged on the rug in front of the fire as they both dried their hair.

Tahlen *laughed*, quiet chuckles into Zelli's neck that made Zelli feel as if he had won something. He'd never won anything, since no one would ever compete with him, but he imagined it made one feel like he did in that moment: alight and smug.

Still, he hadn't been trying to make Tahlen laugh. He'd been trying to give him more compliments, because even though Tahlen must be used to receiving them, he responded to each one from Zelli with a look more bright than stern, or a sigh, or by closing his eyes as if basking in warmth.

He *was*, if Zelli had understood Tahlen's short explanation.

"It feels like the bath," Tahlen had told him, eyes shut while Zelli combed his hair for him. "And each time, the feeling is stronger."

"Is it something to do with the fae?" Zelli had worried over that. He didn't see what else could make Tahlen feel like he was floating in warm water except some fae interference.

"Only because it's you." Tahlen hadn't opened his eyes. Zelli had stopped to pet his peaceful, lovely face.

"You are in water, but you are not drowning," Zelli had tried to reason it out. "I don't understand, but neither do you, so we're even."

For that, Tahlen had lost some of his peace and frowned. "I wouldn't have said I wanted it before."

“Well, maybe it *is* fae then,” Zelli had mused. “And you made a wish a long time ago you don’t remember making, that might have had nothing to do with this—or so you thought. And they’ve finally granted it. Thank you,” Zelli had added to the air, just in case.

He said it again now because Tahlen had a nice laugh, slow and rusty, but happy.

Tahlen tugged Zelli onto his lap and kissed the side of his neck above the cord to Zelli’s necklace, which Zelli had forgotten to remove before his first bath and hadn’t had a chance to remove before the second. Zelli’s hair, left to dry as it was, without even oil because Zelli had been preoccupied with Tahlen’s, did not get in Tahlen’s way.

Zelli decorated Tahlen’s other shoulder for that, and, tired or not, was pleased to deal with Tahlen’s resulting arousal. He had decided to try his tongue, though not his whole mouth, and his hand again. He worried, like with the kissing, that Tahlen might find it boring or lacking, but he didn’t seem to. He kept his hands away from Zelli, but made tiny, pleading sounds that Zelli would have enjoyed for longer if he hadn’t already been struggling to keep his eyes open.

“*A beautiful* chew-toy,” Zelli said seriously sometime afterward, drowsing in Tahlen’s arms, playing with Tahlen’s lazily done nighttime braid. “Beautiful is the wrong word but I don’t know the right one.”

“I’m a body to most and a name to the rest.” Tahlen spoke into Zelli’s hair. “Family only to Esrin.”

“Exquisite,” Zelli argued without opening his eyes. “Lovely. Wonderful. Remarkable.” He cracked one eye, then the other, before pulling back to study Tahlen’s exhausted, contented face. “Will you sleep here with me?”

Tahlen didn’t bother to even nod. He got to his feet, hauling Zelli up with him, and swept them both to the bed. Zelli was the one to laugh then, close to giggling by the time he was on his back on the bedding, with Tahlen curled around him.



He took Tahlen's face in his hands to kiss him, less for the fever and more because he could. It made Tahlen smile against him, so Zelli did it again, although slower. Tahlen's eyes closed, and after a while, his arms loosened. Zelli lay next to him, adjusting to being held in sleep. He could probably move now and it wouldn't wake Tahlen, but he stayed where he was.

As he drifted, eyes half-open to watch Tahlen's face grow young again, he thought that there wasn't much he wouldn't do to make that mouth smile more. Then, that he had no desire to be discreet about it.

A problem to consider later, he decided, much like the floating-in-warmth feeling he apparently created in Tahlen when he cared for him or bit him, or Zelli's eventual handfasting to another. But at that thought, he shifted over to put himself firmly in Tahlen's arms before finally letting his eyes close.

# Nineteen

Zelli rolled onto his back, uncertain why he was awake. He wasn't overly hot except wherever his body and Tahlen's had been pressed together beneath the blanket Tahlen must have pulled over them at some point. Zelli had woken up a few hours ago stinging with fever and had touched himself while letting Tahlen rest—though Tahlen had stirred as Zelli had finished and scowled when Zelli had shushed him back to sleep.

That must have been the last of Zelli's lust-fever because Zelli could feel the chillier air on his bare skin now.

Tahlen was sitting up and looking down at Zelli with his face blank, something that sent a bolt of alarm through Zelli. Before Zelli could move, Tahlen reached out to drag his fingertips along the curve of Zelli's ear, all the way up to the point at the top.

Zelli pulled in a breath. "Tahlen..."

Tahlen met Zelli's worried stare but continued his delicate exploration, two fingers tracing the swirls and dots of fur that overlaid the freckles down the side of Zelli's neck to his shoulder and outer arm where Zelli's skin turned pink under the touch. The fur, more short fuzz than anything that might be called a pelt, was a paler version of the darker sunset of Zelli's hair. The markings carried on down Zelli's back to the curve of his ass and the backs of his legs, and then on the top of his feet in the same way it decorated the tops of his hands. He had some on his lower stomach as well, trailing down to his...

Zelli gave a start before throwing off the blanket to consider his cock, which was still there, if changed.

Tahlen made a small sound, as surprised as he was going to let show.

“Sometimes, it’s not a prick. Sometimes, it’s a prick but... larger than mine is normally,” Zelli explained, inexplicably embarrassed by the rather sizable and partially tumescent cock on display. He considered covering it up again, but though Tahlen took another moment to stare at it, he brought his gaze back to Zelli’s face.

“What is it when it’s not a prick?” Tahlen wondered, voice slightly rough.

Zelli waited for his heart to slow. It had started racing the moment he’d realized his body had changed in the night and Tahlen had seen it.

“Occasionally, although not often, I get a,” Zelli paused, “cunt. You know, I’ve heard others say that word and talk about theirs, but I’ve never said it to anyone. I wasn’t intentionally eavesdropping. Sometimes when I’m at a table bent over my work for hours people forget I’m there.”

Tahlen’s lips curled at one corner as if Zelli had surprised him into nearly smiling.

“When that happens,” Zelli went on, encouraged by that hint of amusement, “I also get a bit swollen here.” He swept his hands over his nipples. “Too small to really be breasts, but the whole area gets sensitive. It also usually only lasts for a day or two.”

Zelli realized he was absently thumbing his nipples and stopped.

Tahlen took a deep breath. “I know some of the bards and a few others with fae ancestry are not like those without it. But that isn’t something that appears randomly. They choose it.”

Zelli shrugged, hoping it disguised his nervousness. “So far, it simply happens when it happens, for me. I think my family—my other family—can choose. They can, after all, choose to look more human when they want to, if you believe the stories of fae in disguise. And I don’t think anyone should doubt those, even if I’ve never seen proof of them. Other than the inconvenience of it, my real concern with it all is that it makes the other fae stories feel more true—I must assume the

possibility of pregnancy exists when I am like that. Which... was only a distant possibility before.”

“Less distant now?” Tahlen wondered, his voice almost back to its usual smoothness. “Because you have a lover?”

Zelli squirmed and forcibly removed his hands from his chest. “I don’t know if I’m ready for such a thing or would ever be. It sounds terrifying, and there is so much else going on with my body, and with the country for that matter.”

Tahlen’s lips twitched up again but his gaze was intense. He resumed tracing Zelli’s markings, heading back up to Zelli’s ears. “So, if that were to happen to you while you’re with me, you’d like me not to touch you there?”

“In the future?” Zelli asked, so delighted he was dizzy with it. Or maybe that was his absurdly large cock swelling with excitement and leaving him lightheaded. Tahlen cleared his throat. Zelli turned his cheek into Tahlen’s hand. “You could touch it a little?” he suggested. “I usually do. Although now that I know how you feel elsewhere inside me, I’m going to wonder how you’d feel inside my cunt too.”

“The colors are back,” Tahlen revealed, yanking Zelli out of his sudden fantasy of Tahlen tugging him in that manner as well. “And your eyes are black, as black as your horns.”

“Black eyes?” Zelli touched his eyelids as if that would tell him anything. “*Horns?*” He reached up to where two nubs of gleaming onyx usually grew near the crown of his head. The nubs were now two small horns. “That is...” He blinked at Tahlen. “Black eyes as well? Colors? You mean like before? In my skin?”

“Pink—light, then darker, and purple again, and blue, sometimes, before it fades. This is new?” Tahlen bent over him to consider Zelli with an air of faint alarm. “That’s a lot of changes in a few days.”

“Yes,” Zelli agreed faintly. “It must mean something, though I have no idea what. Perhaps I am nearly done growing, as Grandmother suggested. Not by human accounting, but by how the fae grow. Maybe I’ll stay this way.” He closed his

eyes and tried not to tremble. His parent had not been able to bear life with odd hair and odder ears. Zelli might have more than even that.

“Does this change usually happen so close to your other problem?” Tahlen was not any less alarmed, although he resumed stroking soft fur in already soft places.

A shiver went through Zelli before he opened his eyes. He curled his fingers around the rowan tree at his throat, then shook his head. “Grandmother also suggested the difference the past few days is you.”

“This is for me?” Tahlen’s eyebrows went up, then lowered to knit together. “Done by you?”

Zelli briefly bit his lip. “I have no control over these things that I’m aware of. But... it’s usually easy to hide. Now black eyes... and these horns.” Zelli felt them again. “For years, I could keep them buried in my hair. Then a hood would do. These are going to be difficult to conceal.”

“And the ears?”

His ears would now be pointed, with more fuzz along the back that disappeared into the rest of Zelli’s hair.

“I also used to hide those in my hair. My parent cut theirs in order to look more like everyone else. It’s hard to be a Tialttyrin, even here. Maybe here more than elsewhere. I don’t know.”

“With these markings, you almost look like a baby deer,” Tahlen observed. “Except for the teeth and your eyes.”

Zelli scoffed. “Some mountain wolf.”

Tahlen’s gaze sharpened. “The outguard, the one who said that, who had dealt with the fae before. What did he say? They watch over you, and for a reason, even if you don’t know the reason at first?”

“They watch over you too,” Zelli told him, suspecting Tahlen would dismiss the point but needing it said. “They must think highly of you, your strength and your intentions, and whatever it is that guides you.”

“And for that, they remind me here, in the privacy of your room, that it is one of their own that I have taken into my bed—your bed?” Tahlen put the tip of one finger against Zelli’s mouth, lighting up when Zelli bit it. “You were pretty before, but now you look...” Zelli tensed. Tahlen sighed heavily. “Alluring but dangerous. As though you will taste my blood this time.”

He did not scream and flee the bed. He did not back away. He pressed his fingertip against the edges of Zelli’s cutter teeth and caught his breath.

“Do you want me to taste your blood?” Zelli also did not run away at the thought. He wriggled and stretched against the bedding, warm again without any fever. Tahlen’s attention fell to Zelli’s current cock, then came up to Zelli’s nipples, then back to his mouth. “You’re wonderful, Tahlen, and I’d like to reward you in a way that pleases us both.”

“Your eyes can’t show purple,” Tahlen remarked, tossing aside any blankets near him so he could climb over Zelli. “They’ve been purple every other time you’ve been...”

“Aroused by you?” Zelli guessed, less concerned with his eye color now with Tahlen on top of him. “Well, I am, as you will feel if you keep moving as you are and...” He gasped, then ducked his head under Tahlen’s chin. Tahlen flinched out of the way.

They stared at each other.

“One more thing for us to be careful of, that’s all,” Tahlen said at last, leaning down to press a kiss to one of the horns, which must end in wicked points.

Zelli could not feel Tahlen’s lips there but the gesture warmed him. He fell back down to stare somewhat grumpily at the canopy above the bed. “I cannot even be close to you how I want to. I’m getting used to kisses, and being held by you, and getting to hold you, and now this.”

Tahlen sat back, straddling Zelli without putting much weight on him.

Zelli could hardly stand to meet his eyes. “I keep getting stranger and more inconvenient for you. I’m sorry. At least I don’t have to ride a horse today and can finally be tugged again. It has been a whole night and day since I last remember having you.”

Tahlen gave a long-suffering sigh.

“I was *trying* to make sure you were well,” Tahlen explained, close to disgruntled. “I didn’t realize how insistent you would be. I should have, knowing you as I do.”

“Was I?” Zelli did not know how to take that, but it was truly the least of the things that Tahlen could have been upset about. “I’m sorry. You wanted to do your best and I was annoying?”

“Not annoying,” Tahlen drew his hands down the length of Zelli’s body as if mesmerized by the bloom and slow fade of different colors, or maybe the feel of Zelli’s markings. “You got on all fours and begged me. You pleaded with me. ‘Please, Tahlen,’ you said, and whined when I tried to go slow. I did not *want* to be slow. I wanted to be slow *for you*.”

“I’m persuasive,” Zelli reminded him breathlessly.

“You’re dangerous.” Tahlen regarded Zelli brightly despite his words. He ran his fingertips over Zelli’s stomach, smiling when Zelli surprised them both with a ticklish laugh.

“Yellow,” he remarked thoughtfully, “and orange.” He brought his hands up to Zelli’s nipples, his touch lighter than Zelli’s had been. “You didn’t respond much when I touched you here before.”

Zelli did not appreciate Tahlen’s calm study of him when he could not do much more than arch his back to press himself into Tahlen’s hands.

“They get sort of hot,” he explained, or tried to, “when I am like this. Swollen, too, if I touch them too much. I used to worry—*ah*.” His voice rose as Tahlen plucked on his nipples before pinching them. “Tahlen!” he gasped, pressing Tahlen’s hands back down when Tahlen startled and tried to pull away. “Don’t stop.”

Tahlen had to know what he was doing to him; Zelli's cock was difficult to miss.

"You used to worry?" Tahlen prompted, sending currents of lightning through Zelli's chest and creating a heavy, pleasing ache under his caresses.

Zelli left his hands over Tahlen's and closed his eyes. He moaned softly and considered asking Tahlen to do this to him forever. "It's too much—not this." He kept Tahlen's hands right where they were, and wriggled, as much as he could, when Tahlen responded with a tug. "I used to worry," he explained reluctantly, eyes firmly shut, "when I knew less about this... and about bodies in general... that the heaviness meant I was going... make milk, or something. Don't laugh. I was young."

Tahlen noticeably paused what he was doing, but then returned to it, using the edge of his thumbnail to make Zelli gasp.

"Your body surprises you all the time," Tahlen offered, voice gone hoarse once again. "And with everything else, it seems a natural worry."

"You really are beautiful." Zelli was only complaining a little.

Tahlen took his hands away, then bent down just as Zelli opened his eyes. He began to use his lips and tongue as he had used his fingers.

Zelli made a sound, made a lot of sounds, and dug his hands into Tahlen's hair. He moaned at the ceiling and wished a mirror existed there so he could watch Tahlen suck one nipple, then the other, soft at first, and then harder when Zelli liked it. He bit, too, not as hard as Zelli would have, but pleased with himself, Zelli could tell. His mouth made Zelli ache, made Zelli think of filling that mouth in whatever way he could, milk or seed or his cock.

His cock was so large it might choke Tahlen. Zelli could pull back, let Tahlen suckle as he was now, and then spill thick down his throat and on his tongue, over his chest. Zelli would decorate his shoulder with his teeth and spill there too. But never on his braid. Not unless Tahlen asked him to.



“*Tahlen.*” Zelli pulled Tahlen’s hair to urge him to whichever nipple needed his attentions. He blushed for it, but Tahlen didn’t stop. He whined, a mere hint of a sound but enough for Zelli to wonder if Tahlen ached like Zelli did.

“Will you suck me again? I mean, my cock and not only my nipples?” Zelli managed to make that a question at least, though he could not find a *please* in his heart. One wasn’t needed anyway. The hint of a whine slipped from Tahlen again, then he slid all the way to the floor onto his knees in front of the low bed. He looked up Zelli’s body to meet Zelli’s stare and took a deep breath.

“Oh,” Zelli added breathlessly, “that wasn’t quite an order, was it? I’ll work on it.”

Smiling faintly, Tahlen pulled Zelli toward him by his calves, then curled his hands around Zelli’s cock without hesitation and brought it to his lips. He had to open his mouth wide.

Zelli was transfixed.

He tried clumsily to prop himself up only to need to touch Tahlen a moment later. His hands found Tahlen’s hair again, then Tahlen’s shoulders and the muscles of his back.

Tahlen wanted his mouth filled *so much*. Zelli fell to the bed again, legs spread as he touched his reddened nipples. Tahlen’s eyes were closed, his lips stretched. He made wet, muffled sounds as he licked and swallowed, then he hauled Zelli closer.

“Can you breathe?” Zelli worried, pushing up whenever Tahlen let him. “Look at me.”

Tahlen’s eyes were slow to open. His lashes were wet. He did not stop his hands or the greedy pulls of his lips and tongue.

“When I am better at this,” Zelli promised roughly, toying with his nipples for Tahlen to see, “I will not let you hold me down. I will... if you want it so much, I’ll give it to you.” What better use for an absurdly large cock than to stuff Tahlen with it? “I’ll fill you and paint you, if you like.”

Tahlen dropped a hand for a moment, down out of sight, probably to touch himself.

Zelli bit his lip hard. "I'll fill you now." He couldn't remember if he had before. The night and day before were a blur of pleasant memories and Tahlen trying to be thorough, perhaps neat. Zelli did not want to be neat. He wanted his spend bursting from Tahlen's mouth and dripping down his face. He wanted to pull Tahlen down to him to bite his shoulder. He wanted Tahlen to fuck him as he did it.

He said that, shouted it, growled it, he hardly knew which, too busy bending himself in half and scrambling up again to grab Tahlen's hair and watch his cock pulse and Tahlen swallow. Tahlen swallowed again, then let Zelli's cock slip from his lips, which were soon covered as well.

Some hit Tahlen's cheek before he took Zelli's cock back into his mouth, lovely eyes shut.

Zelli had wrapped Tahlen's braid around his hand and wrist and pulled on it to rouse Tahlen from his dream and bring him back to Zelli's bed.

Tahlen climbed back over Zelli to resume mouthing Zelli's nipples. His face was damp and sticky and burning hot. Zelli shifted up, slightly pained from his recent pleasure but unwilling to stop. Tahlen moved with him, his cock so hard he must have been in some pain as well. He slipped his hands over Zelli's ribs, then down to his hips to bring them closer.

He stilled.

His hands, curving over Zelli's ass, stopped, then slid up, toward the small bit of bone and fluff that could only be described as a tail.

Rather like a deer's tail, Zelli knew, from twisting around to see it in his reflection.

"Tahlen?" Zelli asked after what felt like a very long silence.

Tahlen's gaze was bright, his version of purple. "Turn over so I can see?"

Zelli wiggled and shifted to get Tahlen to move back a bit, then rolled over onto his stomach. A trace of anxiety made him cold for not even one moment, and then Tahlen exhaled and put his hands back on Zelli's body. He traced more

markings, the trailing dots and curving lines that led from Zelli's shoulder blades down to the tail which, uncontrolled by Zelli, twitched at the touch. "Pink again," Tahlen offered, his throat hoarse from taking Zelli's cock. "Deep pink. Camellia petals. And golden yellow, like sunlight."

"*Tahlen*," Zelli complained, increasingly warm from Tahlen's rapt attention. "Tup me like this, however you please, but first I must bite you."

Tahlen leaned down to put his lips against Zelli's ass, his breath stirring Zelli's fur, his tail. "I want to fuck you hard, not like we did before."

"The oil I like is back in the other room," Zelli answered breathlessly, then pulled down a pillow to bite, since he suspected he was going to need it.

## Twenty

Zelli sleepily decided his fae family members were right to trust Tahlen with Zelli's fae side, and perhaps were also right in bringing all of Zelli's problems out at once even if he would have preferred a more private setting.

Although, since he didn't actually know they had done any of that, and perhaps it was all a coincidence, or Zelli's fae body maturing, or several days spent around someone beautiful who gave Zelli *feelings*, he decided not to thank them with any offerings yet.

And also, he didn't want to get out of bed to do it.

He stretched over warm, ruffled bedding, expecting the sore muscles and stinging places. He grinned into the remaining shreds of his pillow and twisted his back just to feel the pleasant pull all through his body.

The only thing that could have stolen his smile in that moment was the glimpse of pale light beginning to creep into the room and the empty space in the bed beside him. But the curtains around the bed were open and Zelli only had to move his head a little to see Tahlen.

Cleaned and dressed, Tahlen was tying off the bottom of his braid when he noticed Zelli watching him. "I don't actually know if I'm supposed to be on duty," he explained, as close to sheepish as he would ever be. "I forgot to check before I came here last night." He must have heard Zelli's languid sigh. "I would stay, but I ought to see what's going on, and you should sleep more."

"I did have a long night," Zelli chirped back at him, splaying his limbs in a wide stretch, then snagging the pillow Tahlen had used and curling around it. He moved his leg to make sure part of his tail showed.

Tahlen took a long time to remember to blink. He exhaled, then seemed to focus. “You’re teasing me?”

Zelli considered this. “I suppose I am.” It wasn’t his fault that Tahlen’s cock felt so good or that Tahlen seemed fascinated with the tail in particular. Zelli wouldn’t have expected it of Tahlen, but even Tahlen hadn’t expected it of Tahlen.

“...Keep discovering things about myself,” Tahlen had grumbled to himself at some point in the night, one arm slung across his face to hide it, his cock stirring for every brush of Zelli’s teeth over his thigh.

The memory was like stoking a fire and being doused with cold water at the same time. Zelli touched his tongue to one of his teeth, then propped himself up on his elbow to consider the obvious faeness of his body, the colors and the fur, his cock, the horns that he had yet to see.

“Oh,” he said as he realized. “I make people uncomfortable as I normally am. What would they say to this? I’ll have to hide today, possibly tomorrow too.”

Tahlen paused in the act of picking up his cloak off the floor where Zelli had left it and draping it over the chair by the fireplace. “The Lyralinah guards saw your hair and didn’t mind.” They’d seen, or at least heard, a bit more than that, but Zelli kept his mouth shut when faced with Tahlen’s frown. “Everyone here already knows who you are and that you’re fae. That’s why many people originally settled here and stayed here, even if they won’t say so: for the fae and their protection. If it makes those people as uncomfortable as it makes you to know that I have used my weapons and will use them again, then so be it. They’ll be uncomfortable, but they’ll be protected.”

Zelli gave Tahlen a frown in return. “I’m not uncomfortable with it. But weapons and fighting are not all of you. I know they aren’t, and I won’t allow them to ever be.”

Tahlen raised his chin. “I will do what I swore to do, Zelli. You can’t stop that or wish it away.”

Zelli sat up so he could cross his arms. “I can’t help that I don’t like the thought of you hurt, or dying, or dead, and that I can’t hide it. Maybe I should try harder to be more of a Tialttyrin. Maybe I should strive to be more like you.”

“No.”

Zelli reached for a blanket to cover himself. “Yes,” he countered. “I think I should. Grandmother already despairs of my lack of discretion. If I am to be any good in any sort of alliance, I should try to be more like someone from the old houses who knows what duty means. And I should not be thoughtless and say something to land me and someone else in trouble. Or vex you when you are only trying to do what you have sworn to do.”

“*No*,” Tahlen said again, harder. His tone almost immediately gentled. “You still don’t understand.”

Zelli scoffed while agreeing. “There are many things I don’t understand, such as...”

“I don’t want you to be like me,” Tahlen cut him off harshly. He took a moment before he spoke again. “I’d save you from that, no matter the cost. *No*.” He didn’t let Zelli interrupt. “You don’t always understand, but you try to. Because you care. Obviously, palpably, about everyone and everything. You can’t be discreet for that reason, but what a gift that will be to... to whoever you choose to love. They will be publicly adored by you in a way few ever are or could even dream of.”

Zelli was barely aware of moving to the edge of the bed. He gathered a blanket around him without taking his gaze from Tahlen, half of the blanket dragging behind him as he crossed the room. He stopped in front of Tahlen, close enough that he had to raise his head to keep eye contact.

Tahlen looked resolute and grim but allowed Zelli to stare without comment. He had put Zelli’s small braid in his hair again. He hadn’t tucked it away as Zelli had.

Zelli felt shaky and dry-mouthed, like he’d had too much drink the night before.

“Is that what *you* want?” he asked at last.

Tahlen went from grim, to pained, to resolute once again. “I don’t expect anything.”

“You asked to court me knowing I would be sent away to be courted by another.” Zelli rubbed his chest with the hand holding up the blanket. “I wouldn’t have been able to publicly adore you. I would have had to try not to.”

Tahlen swept a glance up to Zelli’s ears or maybe his horns, then met his eyes again. “I expected nothing.”

Zelli shook his head. “But you *asked*.”

Tahlen turned his head to grimace.

“You don’t have to explain.” Zelli said with some shame. “It’s not your fault I don’t understand.”

Tahlen put his shoulders back. “I don’t expect to hold onto anything, now, or in the future. You were going to leave, and still are. If I wanted to know you, even a little, I *had* to ask.”

Zelli stared at him, lips parted in amazement.

Tahlen would have had to share Zelli’s attention to some extent, and leave this place and Esrin, at least for a time, yet he’d asked. And that when he had clearly thought Zelli didn’t want him that much, except perhaps in his bed.

He would have, in his words, *dealt with*, Zelli’s future intended, even after he had thought himself refused. Possibly to help the alliance and keep the people under Tialttyrin rule protected, but mostly to keep *Zelli* protected. His desires and his feelings, like his body and his life, to be ignored or used or thrown away.

He didn’t even seem sorry.

Zelli felt himself frowning but didn’t try to banish it. Tahlen could have spoken of this before. Zelli had even asked him. In front of this very fireplace, Zelli had asked Tahlen about what he wanted. Wishes Tahlen had not voiced, because even wishes could be taken away. *Had* been taken away, in the life of Tahlen Vallithi.

Zelli dropped his hand from his chest, leaving the blanket to fall where it would. “This is your home. You told the other

guards it was and that you wore our symbols with pride. But you would have left it to make sure I was safe.”

“And happy,” Tahlen added stiffly.

“And happy.” Zelli glared at him for the interruption, for that word, when it was Tahlen’s happiness on his mind. “For my occasional attention? For the chance I might call you Tahly again someday?” He still didn’t understand. “Because you liked that I was eager for you? Because I was kind to you and you admired me?”

Tahlen narrowed his eyes at the far wall. His hands were clenched. He finally turned his head to face Zelli again and said, as though he had to force himself to speak, “Because I love you, Zelli.”

Tahlen kept talking over the sound of Zelli’s strangled gasp. “I’m always confused around you, yet never seem to mind. And I feel different under your attention, which used to bother me, but now it... I told you how it makes me feel. I will give myself for that and have no problems doing so. I’ll do it, gladly, and not even you can persuade me not to no matter how much you gaze up at me.”

Zelli hadn’t earned the life or the love of Tahlen of the Vallithi. Not one soul in the valley had done that, but certainly not Zelli. Tahlen would be miserable for him and fight for him and die for him, yet tell Zelli he expected nothing? That he could not hold Zelli, not for long, but he could please him and protect him *for a while*?

Zelli pulled in a breath and held it for a beat before letting it out. He was strangely warm for someone without any clothes on. He wasn’t quite sure what his heart was doing, filling the space between his ribs and pushing out every breath he tried to draw in and every scrap of sorrow that had plagued him for months now. His *feelings*, he realized, too many of them.

“Are you all right?” Tahlen inquired, manners normal, his beautiful face stone once more although Zelli’s black eyes could not be telling him anything.

“You said you admired me.” Zelli didn’t make it a question.



A shadow flickered across Tahlen's face. "I do."

"I admire you as well," Zelli revealed, though Tahlen should know that already. Some of the pressure in Zelli's chest eased, so he took a breath. He inched that much closer. Tahlen glanced between them, startled. Zelli managed another breath. "Would you... do you think, even with everything, that you might allow me to court you?"

He could take full breaths again, almost dizzy with it. His heart had not slowed but at least the rest of his chest held only air and light.

"I don't know what gifts I could give you," Zelli went on nervously, because Tahlen hadn't said a word and he was much better at hiding what he felt than Zelli was.

Of course, he was, Zelli realized, letting his shoulders droop. Other than his name, Esrin, Starfall, and a few bits of armor, Tahlen only had whatever he held in his heart. He would not risk losing that by letting it show or speaking of it.

Except to Zelli, once he'd realized Zelli didn't understand and he hadn't wanted Zelli to be distressed.

"Please," Zelli heard himself plead. He didn't want Tahlen to be distressed either, and didn't know what else to do. "I won't know what I'm doing, but I'd like to keep you, Tahlen. If I can. If you like. Even if I have to also find someone else and can't give you all that you want."

The knock on the door to his bedroom made him jump then duck behind Tahlen when Tahlen turned to face it. Tahlen put his arm back to keep Zelli at his back, although the door stayed shut.

"Zelli?" someone called tentatively. Carr, Zelli thought it was. "Sorry to bother you. But we can't locate Tahlen and The Tialttyrin..." Carr gave a polite cough. "She suggested we try here."

Tahlen raised his voice to be heard. "What is it?"

The door cracked open, although Carr did not poke his head inside. Zelli stayed hidden behind Tahlen all the same.

“A party has arrived at the lower gate.” Carr was abruptly deathly serious. “From the Villucatto, apparently. They sent a message to The Tialttyrin and await her reply. She waits on you.”

Zelli’s mouth twisted, although naturally, Grandmother would want Tahlen with her more than Zelli.

“I’ll be out in a moment,” Tahlen replied and Carr tactfully shut the door to wait.

At first, Tahlen did not move or even speak. Then he turned all at once without giving Zelli a chance to step away or reach for his blanket.

Zelli was going to take Tahlen’s silence as a refusal, but it seemed something Tahlen would do, and there were other, more important things happening now than just the frantic beat of Zelli’s heart, so Zelli stood straight and did his best to withstand Tahlen’s study.

“Zelli,” Tahlen finally began, quiet again, “I ask that you stay back.”

“What?” Zelli squawked. He had been trying to ready himself for a polite refusal, not that.

“Stay back,” Tahlen said again. “With guards. With your grandmother, if that’s where she wants you. But whatever she decides, abide by it. *Please.*”

That was, of course, what any of the guards would say, although they would not have begged.

Zelli bit his lip. “Even if I think what she decides is wrong?”

Tahlen was quick to nod. “If it will keep you alive? Yes. Even if it *is* wrong and it means the end of your family. You can survive that,” he went on over Zelli’s soft protest. “You *will* survive that,” Tahlen insisted. “I will ensure it.”

He meant with his life. Which was also what any guard might say. But Tahlen was not any guard.

“You cannot lose me too?” Zelli guessed.

Tahlen closed his eyes. They stayed closed as he nodded again. When he finally looked at Zelli, his gaze was bright. That was *not* his version of Zelli's aroused purple, Zelli realized belatedly. It was something else entirely.

"Why do I feel as though I won't see you again once you go out the door?" Zelli wondered, his chest cold now although his heart was still pounding. His hands shook as he pulled at his necklace, scrambling to get the knot unbound so he could use his teeth on the leather.

"It's only a message and The Tialttyrin is clever," Tahlen said, deliberately mild and even. He swept his hands over Zelli's shoulders. "Your skin is chilled and I know you didn't get enough sleep. You should go back to bed."

"*Go back to bed!*" Zelli was shivering uncontrollably now. He pulled hard, wincing as the knot finally came free against his neck. "How am I to court you if you're dead?"

Tahlen paused, then bent his head to frown at him. "I will do what I will do, Zelli."

Zelli closed the rowan tree in his fist. "That stupid oath."

Tahlen looked from Zelli's fist to Zelli's shoulders, where a blue deeper than the midnight sky carried through the skin from the touch of Tahlen's hands. "It has nothing to do with that oath," Tahlen told him. "You know that now."

Unable to look at him and his terrible, beautiful eyes any longer, Zelli dropped his head. He opened his hand to stare blankly at the silver tree.

"May I give you something?" he asked at last, as quiet as Tahlen had been, "even if we're not courting?" He didn't wait for an answer, using his teeth on the remaining bits of knotted leather to make the cord as long as he could get it. "You'll have to bend down," he added, still not looking up.

"That necklace is meant to protect you." Tahlen's tone was stern, but he bent his shoulders and lowered his head.

Zelli spoke in a near whisper. "You told others this symbol was home to you." He got on his toes to steady himself as he

tied a knot in the ends of the cord, which barely fit around Tahlen's neck. "People might recognize this as mine."

"They might," Tahlen agreed as Zelli arranged the silver charm to rest at the base of his throat.

"But it will keep you safe, if the fae are merciful." Mindful of his horns, Zelli tilted his head to press his lips to the little tree and speak to his wilder kin. "Please be merciful."

Tahlen put a hand to the center of Zelli's back. He might have meant it to steady Zelli, but despite being on his toes, Zelli was in no danger of stumbling. Tahlen was breathing hard. A shiver wracked him, then he seemed to force it to stop.

Zelli let his breath warm Tahlen. He wanted Tahlen to bask in it. "People will see this and suspect I gave it to you. They will know you are favored by the fae. They will know you are favored by *me*." Zelli opened his mouth to press his teeth to the side of Tahlen's throat but didn't bite down. He pulled back with reluctance. "You'll wear it and think of me?"

"Zelli," Tahlen answered weakly, shivering again. "Yes."

Zelli wanted to devour him.

A thought which made him startle back. He would've fallen if not for Tahlen's hand.

Purple and the same deep blue echoed through his skin until Tahlen took his hand away. Tahlen was slow to pull his gaze up from Zelli's body.

Zelli saw the stars in Tahlen's eyes.

A small, polite knock on the door broke the moment.

All emotion disappeared from Tahlen's face as he straightened his shoulders. He put a hand to his throat, covering the rowan tree, and inclined his head toward Zelli. Then he went to the door, where he stopped without opening it.

"Stay back," he asked without turning. "So that I can do what I need to without worry. Please, Zelli." Then he slipped out the door, not opening it wide enough for anyone else to see Zelli standing there, naked and fae.

Zelli dropped into the chair in front of the low fire, pulling Tahlen's cloak down over him while he wondered, and worried, and waited for Grandmother to call for him.

## Twenty-One

Time passed. Zelli built up the fire, then went to clean himself. When he opened the curtains in the bathing room, he saw the weather had turned and the skies were gray. He hoped there wouldn't be a summer storm to add to Grandmother's worries.

Whatever was on Grandmother's mind at that moment, Zelli couldn't say, since she did not send for him. Tahlen would likely tell him that was out of concern. It might even have been that Tahlen had described Zelli's current state to her and Grandmother had decided it was best to leave Zelli out of sight.

Nonetheless, Zelli dressed himself in loose pants that would allow for his tail but which closed at his ankles so that boots would hide all traces of fur on his legs. He chose a shirt of long sleeves, in case The Tialttyrin might need him, and tucked a pair of gloves into his belt. Then he walked the length of his room, back and forth, listening for a rap at the door that did not come.

No one came to offer him food or tea, which meant the kitchen staff was aflutter with the news as well and Zelli had been forgotten even by them. He couldn't have eaten a thing, but he would have liked some information.

He ought to act like a beat-of-four in the capital and get himself some eyes-and-ears to listen to gossip and report to him. At least that would have been *something*.

He finally stood with his ear pressed to the door and was rewarded with the sound of rustling.

When he opened the door enough to peer outside, he saw Uncle Rou in an embroidered cloak that had last been worn a decade ago at the palace. His uncle, who was a great uncle, did not act happy as he hurried down the corridor in his best. Nel trailed after him, in heavier armor than was generally worn within the fortress' inner walls.

Zelli shut the door before he could be noticed, then fell against it. Grandmother insisting that Rou and possibly others be seen with her was not much of a show of strength, even if the numbers impressed anyone. The aunts and uncles had not moved in palace circles in a long time, or ever. But they were all part fae, if more subtly than Zelli. Pointed ears and unusual hair colors would be on display.

She might have used Zelli for that. That she wasn't doing so meant Tahlen had definitely related Zelli's condition to her.

Zelli glared at the fireplace in Tahlen's stead. Tahlen, who was probably in the same armor as Nel by now. That *was* a show of strength, and possibly a threat. Grandmother probably knew that Tahlen would do whatever she asked today, even without an oath. Tahlen and Esrin had found a new home and now another beat-of-four family might take it from them. Their fear and grief would be raw.

Zelli should have thought of that. Tahlen would not be calm today, no matter how blank his face. The necklace was not enough comfort, but Zelli hoped Tahlen touched it and felt something to calm him, as it would calm him to think of Zelli out of danger.

If Zelli *was* out of danger. He wasn't facing it, but that didn't mean it wasn't there.

He heard more rustling and opened his door. Cousin Ona, shuffling quickly down the corridor in defiance of her ancient, badly healed injury, was wearing glittering mail Zelli did not recognize from the family treasury and a short sword at her belt with a jeweled hilt. That *had* come from the treasury, but it had also been hers, back when she had regularly worn it.

An agitated falcon perched on her shoulder.

"What's going on?" Zelli demanded, sorry when it agitated the falcon even more. He couldn't tell Ona's birds apart or he would have named it.

Ona swiveled around and fixed him with her one remaining eye.

“Mizel,” she sniffed, relaxing, then really seemed to see him. “Been hiding *that*,” she said snippily. “The blood is strong in you, isn’t it?”

Zelli gestured impatiently. “What’s going on? Are we inviting them in?”

“In?” Ona echoed gruffly. “Aleen is meeting their party at the lower gate—outside the gate. She’s no fool to let them in or to offer insult by ignoring them.”

“She’s going all the way down to personally meet a *messenger*?”

“More than a messenger,” Ona said, as though Zelli could have known that. “Younger brother to The Villucatto.” She stopped. “Is this because of those guards who followed you home? Shame.” She seemed to answer her own question. “We could have used them.”

“We aren’t giving them up,” Zelli snarled. He wasn’t in the mood to pretend he didn’t want to.

Ona arched an eyebrow, but surprised Zelli by trying to placate him. “Aleen knows what she’s doing. You’d best get back in your room unless she sends for you. Which she might. You looking like that is liable to scare the little humans.”

*Little humans.* Cousin Ona was only slightly taller than Zelli.

She carried on down the corridor, the rest of her words reserved for her bird.

Zelli slammed his door behind him and stormed into the bathing room. He swept a comb through his hair, expecting a tangle and yet the teeth of the comb easily passed through even the most snarled curl. He looked into the mirror to see the colors of sunset settle around horns of shining black. His eyes were of the same gleaming dark hue, wide and watchful and inhuman. They suited his near-fangs, though his teeth were hidden unless he smiled.

His hair rose and fell in waves and curls around his ears, leaving them in plain sight. Short, pale fur decorated his cheeks, his jaw, his neck, and the backs of his hands.



He left the room immediately, pulling on the gloves then reaching for a robe only to remember his biggest robe was on the floor by the bath, undoubtedly still heavy with water. He barely paused before putting Tahlen's cloak over his shoulders instead. No one would expect a Tialttyrin to be in a guard's cloak and it was large enough that the hood fell over Zelli's face.

Zelli would get better information but keep back as Tahlen had asked. Grandmother or Nya would have news for him, and that wouldn't involve going beyond the inner gate.

Except he could not find his grandmother, or Nya, for that matter. They were not in their rooms, nor in any of the usual places. A flurry of anxious staff were cleaning the receiving rooms, either for something to take their minds off the visitors at the lower gate, or they'd been ordered to in preparation for a possible second meeting of those visitors. Zelli didn't pester them, sneaking outside instead, but keeping to what shadows he could so a short guard would not be noticed.

But he didn't think his efforts would have mattered. Everyone was in too much of a state to pay any attention to anyone else. Many seemed to be on actual errands, but others were finding reasons to linger around the inner gate. The guards on duty at the gate were also in heavier armor, pole-axes glinting even under the gray skies. They didn't stop anyone from leaving, but Zelli wondered if the people hurrying down the road to go observe the visitors realized that those guards would not let them back in if Grandmother gave the order to lower the portcullis and shut the gate.

That seemed unlikely, unless it was a larger party than ten riders the younger brother to The Villucatto had brought with him. He couldn't expect the whole group to be allowed in, any case. That *would* be offering insult: no single beat-of-four was allowed more than one or two sworn guards even when within the palace, for obvious reasons.

No one ever said anything about multiple beat-of-fours from the same family each having their own guards inside the palace walls. But Zelli supposed that oversight was why so many lost the crown after gaining it.

He skirted the practice yard and the stable, noting the number of horses gone, the lack of any guards who seemed to be off duty, and realizing all at once why that was, and why so many others were venturing down to the lower gate; Grandmother must already be on her way there. She would travel slowly, even in a carriage or on horseback.

He caught a glimpse of Ona on her horse in the distance, her falcon on her arm, very probably intending to meet Grandmother's retinue on the way down, and lowered his head before following her. It gave him a view of not much beyond his feet, but it kept his face out of sight.

He trailed Ona at a distance, which was easy since he didn't stop for a horse. He hovered near a group from the kitchens, keeping his back turned away from the guards at the gate until they were out of his sight. Then he darted past the kitchen staff, moving as close to a run as he dared.

The air was thick and unpleasant; a storm *was* on the way. Zelli reached up to touch the rowan tree at his throat and ask if the fae meant something with that, but his necklace was hopefully protecting Tahlen now, so he let his hand fall to his side and kept moving.

When he was closer to the lower gate, he slowed his pace and tipped his head up enough to peer at the scene ahead of him. Many in the village stood along the road. Perhaps they'd wanted to see Grandmother, since few had in recent years. But once Grandmother and the others of the Tialtтын force had passed, some of the villagers trickled onto the road to follow, mingling with those from the fortress.

Zelli followed until Grandmother's retinue approached the gate. Tahlen and Grandmother wanted him out of danger. He had... well, he had not actually agreed to stay back, but he was going to. Tahlen had too many things to upset him today and shouldn't have Zelli's safety on his mind as well.

He assumed the small figure in the long, velvet cloak in the middle of the orderly chaos was Grandmother, which meant one of the guards flanking her was Tahlen. The other was likely Ric. Tahlen had found a new cloak. There were guards around them on foot, holding pole-axes.

None of that was a surprise, except possibly the choice of weapon. The staffs were so big they had to be carried and could not be slung in a belt. Zelli remembered Mil approving of such things, so the choice must have been important.

The gate would be opened within moments. Where Zelli stood, he would not be able to hear anything. Nor he would have anywhere to run to except back to the fortress, should running be required. Although, he imagined he could be caught easily if he went uphill trying to escape someone on horseback.

He moved farther down the road, stopping again at the edge of the crowd. He should learn something of weaponry, he decided, and in the meantime, glanced down at the ground, looking for a decent-sized rock. Tahlen had suggested a rock, and though it was improbable that Zelli might need it, it wasn't a complete impossibility either.

“What are you doing here?”

Zelli brought his head up guiltily at the pointed question.

Sworn guard Ivey, about the age of Zelli's parent, with oddly shaped ears that suggested *some* fae blood, even if only a trickle, and close-cut brown hair, was looking around them almost furiously. “If you're not with The Tialtтын, then you should be in one of the towers. Not gawping like the rest of these fools.”

He tugged on Tahlen's cloak, pulling Zelli with him for several steps before it must have occurred to him that the person he was pulling was rather small for a sworn guard.

Zelli said, “I can wait in the tower, Ivey, if you don't mind me there.” Then he hurried forward in the direction Ivey had been pulling him, toward the tower without the gate mechanism.

“Zelli?” Ivey hissed, following close.

“This is a better place for me to be, I think. Thank you. I’ll keep out of your way,” Zelli promised, glad the gate was beginning to open so no one around Grandmother would think to look his way.

Inside the base of the tower was an exhausted-looking Bree. She frowned in confusion when Zelli appeared, but said nothing because Ivey grunted, “It’s not our place to question,” and then closed the tower door and lowered the bar to seal it shut.

Bree went up the small spiral staircase and Zelli followed, with Ivey probably glowering at his back. Gurn waited for them all in the room at the top. Bree went immediately to the narrow window. Zelli imagined she knew some of those out there if Lyralinah guards had accompanied the Villucatto.

“Who is this?” Gurn demanded, then yelped and flailed and fell against Bree when Zelli pulled his hood down. “Please be gracious!” he begged, only to pull himself up and regard Zelli in scowling amazement. “Zelli?”

“*Oh,*” Bree whispered, wide-eyed. “You didn’t look like... that... before. Like this, I mean.”

Zelli ducked his head, peering up at each of them in turn after Ivey came around to study him. “I usually hide when I’m more fae. But I wanted to see.” He gestured toward the window, then looked at each of them again. “I’m still just me. As far as I know, I can’t grant your wishes. That would be too useful of a skill for me to have.”

It shouldn’t have surprised him that Ivey would recover first. “The Tialttyrin are of the fae and we should remember that. But, uh, I’ve never actually seen one. Just the rest of your relatives and a bard or two. Don’t mean to stare. Sorry.”

“You still haven’t seen one.” Zelli gave him a distracted smile. “I’ve no idea how I compare to the real thing.” He looked away. “Bree, are you all right?”

Bree seemed uncomfortable with the attention on her. “I’m well enough. Thank you for asking. How are the others?”

“I haven’t seen them yet today.” Zelli gestured over his horns and ears. “This happened. They aren’t prisoners, but I imagine Grandmother wouldn’t encourage them to be here.” Much like Zelli. Which made him wonder if Fy and the others were in the crowd. “We never promised them safety, but we’ll do what’s right. It’s why I think the fae liked us in the first place. Well, I hope it is.”

“That why you’re here?” Gurn grunted again. Guards of all kinds did love to communicate with noises.

Zelli crossed his arms. “I am staying back,” he told them all insistently. “If Tahlen asks you later—I stayed back.”

Bree stared at him incredulously. Ivey widened, then narrowed, his eyes.

Gurn turned back to the window. “Yes, Zelli,” he agreed, with words and everything. He did not sound like he believed Zelli, but he wasn’t going to question a beat-of-four, not even one in a borrowed guard’s cloak, who happened to have horns and fur.

Zelli chose not to say anything else and pulled his hood back up. The guards wanted, and needed, to watch the scene and he did not, and they’d been touchingly kind about his appearance. He gave them all a smile, then crept to the other window.

Beyond the gate, between and in front of the two rowan trees, fifteen riders waited. Fifteen, not ten. There must have been a separate group in the valley who had met up with the first. That was a big group for one family to spare if they were truly fighting on other fronts. Some of the riders must have been Lyralinah guards or more members of the Villucatto family instead of just their guards. They wore swords and the lighter sort of armor Tahlen had worn for traveling. A few had bows and quivers of arrows at their backs. Those seemed to be only the Villucatto guards. Perhaps the Lyralinah did not need or use archers.

The rider in the center of the hunting party must have been the brother of Tye of the Villucatto. Zelli didn’t remember his name, if he’d ever learned it.

He was sizable. Possibly Tahlen's height but broader in the shoulders, though he had nothing on Mil the outguard. His cloak was off one shoulder and crimson in color. His hair was enviably straight and fell nearly to his waist, with small braids at his temples. He looked a little travel-weary, as anyone would in his place, but his mail and braces were clean enough.

This Villucatto was probably older than Tahlen by one or two years, and either didn't want to conceal his impatience or didn't bother to. He was decent-looking, but not as pretty as Mil, nor as compelling as Arden. He didn't compare to Tahlen's beauty, either, but few would.

If Zelli leaned in as close to the window ledge as possible without sticking his head out, he might see the faces of some of the Tialtysin family and guards lined up in front of the open gate. But for the most part, he could see only their backs and their profiles if they turned. Grandmother hadn't brought all of the family or even all of the guards with her, but there really were not that many more to spare. He wondered if the Villucatto knew that. If their leader looked at Cousin Ona and Uncle Rou and Grandmother and saw representatives of an ancient family connected to the fae, or three older people in out-of-style clothing making a show with their guards to seem stronger than they were. A wise person might see both.

"...An arduous journey," Grandmother said, "even by river."

Not every word made its way to Zelli's tower and Zelli had missed the exchange of greetings while he'd been considering the Villucatto leader. The riders hadn't traveled by river, but that might have been his grandmother's subtle comment on the way the riders hadn't sent her word before carrying on through her valley.

Despite the remark, she didn't offer them welcome the way she would have offered it to invited guests, not even to their leader alone.

"Our apologies," the leader of the riders said, as formal as Grandmother. "In our haste to catch traitors, we may have forgotten some traditions."

Bree pulled in a breath.

“*Traitors*,” Zelli scoffed. “Traitors to whom? Tye doesn’t have the crown yet, and even so, guards have the freedom to choose.”

“Traitors?” Grandmother asked as she’d been meant to.

“That’s a serious matter indeed. I’ve received no news about this from the capital, and the outguards in this valley failed to mention anything so critical.” She added something else. Zelli didn’t hear all of it. Probably inquiring politely about who they were chasing and what they might have done.

Zelli leaned in closer to catch whatever the Villucatto leader, Kear, if Zelli had heard Grandmother correctly, would say in answer.

“They haven’t fulfilled their oaths, and there is concern that they may provide details of the Lyralinah holdings to others in exchange for security. As friends of the Lyralinah family, we offered to help in their search.” Kear directed a question to one of those with him, who had a cloak of blue-green. A Lyralinah guard, Zelli guessed, and turned to glance at Bree, but her face told him little. Consultation over, Kear went on, “Their families also would like to see them and discuss the foolishness of their actions.”

Zelli had been foolish and yet his grandmother had not chased him down the entire length of the valley or over mountains.

“A serious matter, to upset a family such as the Lyralinah.” Grandmother could have been smiling coolly. “But a messenger might have been arranged. After all, it is our duty to help travelers through our valley, and I’d hate to think we aided troublemakers,” she did not say traitors, “simply because we didn’t know to look for them. Do these guards carry weapons? I would have liked to have warned my people, if they were in danger. Shall I send word to the capital for you and request outguards to deal with these oath-breakers, so that you and the Lyralinah might rest?”

Grandmother was not one to be provoked into heated words despite the presence of so many armed people in the valley and now at her gates. She gave Kear of the Villucatto nothing to argue with.

To the man's credit, he didn't try. He said, smiling, "... Wouldn't want to trouble you out here. Why, even the capital is not a safe place for many families. Wouldn't you rather stay in your peaceful valley and let such troubles pass you by?"

Zelli didn't hear anything strange in the words at first, but reconsidered them when Gurn muttered under his breath and Ivey said, "Fucking prick."

Zelli wasn't sure if Kear meant to insult their valley for being peaceful and no longer able to defend themselves, but he suspected the rest was meant as a slippery threat. The buried message was that troubles would come to the valley if Grandmother pressed the issue, and she would not easily find aid in the capital.

"I don't believe these troubles will pass anyone by, before long," Grandmother observed. Ona's falcon let out a cry.

Kear didn't seem to notice the bird. "They might. They could. I cannot speak for the Lyralinah," which Zelli doubted, if Tye was using their guards as her own, "but the Villucatto have no desire to disturb you and yours." He turned his head to glance over Rou and Ona and whoever else was with them. "Tye has the utmost respect for the oldest families. Those who know how things have been done but can appreciate how that might need to change."

A chill went down Zelli's back. More subtle threats. Now, or in the future if Tye did take the crown, she would reward those who had helped her or stayed out of her way, and punish those who had not. Not because the guards mattered to her personally, but because guards resisting her damaged the image she wanted to present.

The Villucatto were an ancient family, but they had never worn a crown, not even one of the original Earls' crowns. Tye didn't have history to help her claim, and she apparently relied more on people like her brother for cunning. Tye herself used force. Which did not mean she could not rule, not by any traditions or laws Zelli knew. But it did not make her a ruler he would want to have.



But, according to Tye's brother, Zelli and all the Tialttyrin would not be around to live through her reign. Not for very long. Not if they didn't hand over the former guards of the Lyralinah.

"I did this," Zelli murmured to himself, fists clenched. He had done what was right, but as Tahlen had warned him, that wouldn't make Grandmother and the others less dead.

Grandmother said something quiet. "...Peaceful because of how we choose to act. The Tialttyrin give aid, that has always been our way."

Kear smiled again. "That is really all we're asking—for aid. It's a tradition worth rewarding, and the Villucatto believe in friendliness between the houses. A Lyralinah is to be allied with a cousin of mine. Tye has many such cousins and nieces and nephews, and I recall, there are younger Tialttyrin around the capital, aren't there?"

For the first time, Grandmother hesitated to answer. "Yes. The young do often prefer the capital."

"A shame," Kear went on smoothly. "Having now seen your valley, I find it lovely. Of the many lands I've visited in these past few years, this seems like an ideal place for a true beat-of-four to be happy."

"And Tye has many cousins and nieces and nephews," Grandmother echoed blandly.

Gurn was close to grunting again. "Why does that matter?"

"Because Tye, once crowned, will offer them up as alliances in the lands of her supporters, and set them up in the lands of her enemies, and thus gain even more control over the remaining families." Zelli was grateful he hadn't eaten; his stomach was a cold knot.

It could work if those allying with the Villucatto were weak or fearful. The Villucatto would take over the domains of various families, ruling them in all but name, and surround everyone else. The remaining families should know that threat now. But they wouldn't believe Zelli if he tried to convince them. They didn't even know who Zelli was.

Uncle Rou said something, Zelli couldn't make it out, but it didn't sound pleased.

Grandmother's tone was suddenly dry. "This land is a little different than most. The Tialttyrin are of the fae," she reminded Kear. "These nieces and nephews and cousins—and brothers—would have to know what sort of alliance they'd be getting into in this peaceful valley."

Kear did not seem deterred. "That is a matter of manners. We've done nothing to offend the fae."

Zelli raised his eyebrows.

Ona said, loud enough to be heard in the tower, "You can never be too sure of that." Rou shushed her.

Ona was making threats, even if Kear probably would not understand it or be intimidated if he did. Most people outside of this family and this valley did not interact with the fae except to leave offerings or occasionally ask for help.

Zelli was proof that having the fae's attention was not always a good thing. He had not offended them either, not that he knew of, yet they had done this to him, now, of all times.

"I can certainly imagine many in your family might find it pleasant to stay here." Grandmother's tone was still polite, almost kindly. "But the Tialttyrin have a centuries-long tie to the fae. Anyone entering this valley should be aware that it may involve more than perhaps spending time with someone small, with odd-shaped ears or strange-colored eyes."

"Do the fae frequently visit you?" For one moment, Kear seemed worried, but his smile returned quickly. Zelli didn't like it.

The threat of the fae's displeasure did not bother Kear, because it was not much of a threat. Grandmother could not summon the fae on command or make them do her bidding. She could only ask. And the fae did not answer wishes in ways that humans understood, and often not in the timely fashion most humans hoped for.

Kear was smart enough to know that. But Grandmother must have deduced that about him from something in his manner.

She had, after all, included him, Tye's brother, in the potential alliances. In the potential alliances *with Zelli*.

Zelli bit his lip and strained to see as much as the Tialtтын side of things that he could without exposing himself. The sight of Esrin, in her kitchen clothes but wearing mail and a sword, gave him a start. She stood with the guards who were not on horseback. He couldn't tell if she was meant to be there or not. But like Tahlen, she was going to defend her chosen home.

The figure on Grandmother's right must have been Ric. The upright figure on her other side had a long braid falling from beneath his helmet. Zelli could not see his face but doubted it would have told him anything. Tahlen hid his emotions most when on duty but also when Zelli pestered him too much or had accidentally hurt him. Right now, his expression would reveal nothing, but he was listening. He would also be aware that this suggested alliance was meant for Zelli.

Zelli had wanted so very much to give Tahlen the things he dreamed of. Now he could have Tahlen, but he could not adore him how Tahlen should be adored. That was why Tahlen didn't speak of his dreams and said he had no wishes. Losing them was terrible.

"That is certainly something to consider," Grandmother remarked, bringing Zelli back to the present and forcing him to try to figure out what he'd missed while he'd stared at Tahlen, "on a different day's meeting. But if such a thing were desired, I would advise you or whoever might be interested in this hypothetical alliance to remember that you would be allying with our family, and they take our duties seriously."

"The Tialtтын?" Kear pressed with distant amusement.

"The fae." Uncle Rou had a mouth full of teeth like Zelli. If he smiled, they would show. "They are our family too."

Zelli reached for his necklace and remembered again that Tahlen had it. Because Zelli favored him, but so did the fae. They had shown him all of Zelli and they had granted Zelli's wish for him. They *approved* of Tahlen.

The question was then, did they approve of Kear?

“The Villucatto honor the fae as they honor tradition,” Kear insisted politely to Uncle Rou.

“The truth of the matter,” Zelli murmured. “Do they really?”

He became aware of a stillness in the room and turned from the window to find three guards staring at him.

“If the Villucatto do not honor tradition, as they clearly do not, then do they honor the fae?” Zelli explained, blinking. “If they don’t honor tradition and they don’t honor the fae, can they be trusted with anything else? Their word? This valley? The alliance they want? *There’s* the answer I need, but I’m not going to wish for it. I’ve made that mistake before. The fae see into the heart of things. Whatever you wish for out loud, the fae will give you what you’re truly asking for inside. Remember that. And that they might not choose the easiest path to get you there.”

“They won’t help us now?” Bree worried.

Zelli gestured weakly. “Perhaps they like this Villucatto. I don’t know. It will have to be discovered.”

“Aye.” Gurn frowned. “Likely the hard way.”

“I’m trying to avoid that,” Zelli admitted nervously, “since I got everyone into this mess and don’t want to make it worse.”

Ivey spat on the ground. “The Canamorra got us into this mess, curse their name.”

Zelli stared at him.

“Right!” he burst out as that idea sank in. “This chaos was caused by one family. Well, it must have existed before, but was hidden, and one family’s selfishness exposed it. We haven’t had a moment of peace since. But that’s what people keep forgetting in their schemes. How long can Tye keep the crown? What if her plans fail? She’s making a lot of enemies and not all of them have been crushed like the Vallithi. In fact, even the Vallithi still exist under the fae’s guiding light. An alliance might be suffered, might be survived. Might even be beneficial—to us.”

Zelli stared at Bree, who stared back at him with the same face she'd worn during the judgments, confused but fascinated.

“Tye has to actually govern once she’s there—and that is where they always fail. Meanwhile, to get to the palace, she’ll have to take all these guards with her to use elsewhere. Kear, or whoever else, would be dependent on a handful of his own. He’d be alone in a place where no one trusts him. He’d be *so* alone in his alliance, and he probably does not have a Tahlen to stay with him. He hasn’t had to consider that like I have. He doesn’t realize he will have to appeal to *us*, not the other way around. At least until Tye’s battles are over. If they ever are.”

Bree knitted her eyebrows together. “Do you mean to tie yourself to him? I thought...”

“Maybe he is decent under his posturing. Maybe he speaks to please his vengeful sister, but privately he respects the fae and treats his guards well. I cannot be sure yet.” Zelli really wanted something to chew. He pulled Tahlen’s cloak up to gnaw on part of the lining.

Bree’s eyes were wide.

“But I don’t like how the Lyralinah have treated all of you,” Zelli added. “And by extension, how he has. It will have to be the hard way. Tahlen is going to be... He...” loved Zelli. He’d said so. Although all it seemed to mean for him was constant worry. Maybe that’s what love was, and the songs about it skipped that part in favor of kisses and longing. Or maybe the problem was Zelli, and Zelli should find someone for Tahlen who would give him love in return and not just a tangle of painful feelings.

Zelli raised a hand to rub away the terrible feeling of wrongness in his chest, only to let his hand fall because the feeling wasn’t there. He couldn’t remember it any time earlier than last night before Tahlen had come to his room and it hadn’t returned after Tahlen had left.

“I should return to my room.” Zelli frowned at the air, full of questions the fae would never answer. “The least I can do is stay back as he asked and wait for Grandmother to arrange a meeting between us. In a few days, likely. I wonder if they will

stay here the whole time, or if more of them will come. The longer it takes to resolve things, the weaker our position will be. But it's not right to let them have you or the others." He focused on Bree. "Tahlen and Grandmother admit that, but with so many others to protect, I'm not sure what can be done. All we really have to intimidate them is the threat of the fae, which we don't even know we have." He turned to Ivey and Gurn. "You'll assure him I stayed back when he finds out, as he will?" He smiled faintly when they nodded. "Thank you."

Ivey followed Zelli down the staircase to lift the bar on the door for him, although Zelli might have managed it. Ivey's expression was far too grave, but there was nothing Zelli could do about that. He pulled the hood of his cloak even lower over his face, keeping his head down and his eyes on his feet as he tried to slip through the crowd on the internal side of the gate.

"The Tialttyrin is generous," Kear said. He had either raised his voice to be heard or his voice had not carried easily up to the tower, because he was louder now. "My people will be pleased to accept your gifts of food and wine while they are here. And I am honored you'd welcome me into your home."

"It seems more fair to you," Grandmother answered. The trace of amusement in her tone might not have been obvious to Kear, but it made Zelli stop in his tracks. "You ought to understand who you will be dealing with before you make any promises on behalf of your sister."

"I've found The Tialttyrin to be a reasonable, sensible leader."

Zelli wondered if Kear frowned in confusion as he said that or kept his smile, but he couldn't raise his head to find out without risking being seen.

"I'm not speaking of myself. Haven't you heard the stories of the fae?" Grandmother *was* amused, or at least pretending to be. "An alliance is a bargain. I'm not sure you're prepared."

"I recognize that I don't have as many years as the Tialttyrin," Kear was *not* amused, "but I have my sister's esteem and I am more than capable of settling on terms with you."

“I am not speaking of myself,” Grandmother said again. Uncle Rou coughed.

Puzzled, Zelli decided to risk lifting his head, then pulled his hood slightly from his face. He hissed when he caught sight of his gloves, the fingertips torn through by black nails. No—*claws*. They were gleaming black like his horns and seemed blunt compared to his teeth, yet they’d grown out and ripped through fabric.

Amazed, he stared at them and heard someone next to him gasp.

“Would I not be bargaining with you?” Kear’s impatience was clear. He spoke as though Grandmother were a bit dotty. “Are you not The Tialttyrin?”

“Kear of the Villucatto,” Grandmother sighed it, “as I have been trying to tell you and everyone with you; to deal with us is to deal with the fae, and it is their representative you would be speaking to and perhaps allying with.”

Zelli’s claws disappeared before his eyes with an uncomfortable *pushing* sensation, as if they’d withdrawn back into his skin though he did not bleed. He stared at his raised hand, waiting and wondering, then willed the claws to return.

They did.

He stumbled into someone, apologizing profusely even before they turned around. Ott, the blacksmith from the village, opened his mouth but no sound came out. Zelli stared blankly back up at him.

“One of the fae?” Kear was near to scoffing. “Then where are they?”

*Oh*, Zelli realized.

“Here!” he called and was irked by the tremor in his own voice. He turned away from Ott and stood straighter. “I’m here!”

People were shoving each other in order to step away from him. Several of the Tialttyrin guards on foot twisted around to

search for the speaker. Starfall shifted in place though Tahlen did not look back.

Zelli peeled his gloves off because they felt strange and too tight.

“I would....” His voice was weak. He tried again. “I might consent to such an alliance if you could promise the safety and continued well-being of the people in this valley, and to cease your pursuit of any guards who have broken their oaths,” more people were turning to look at him, including Ona and Rou, their horses stepping aside and leaving a space where Zelli could see the line of Villucatto and Lyralinah guards, “as it is their established right to do.”

He stepped forward awkwardly. His boots felt too tight as well, but he didn't want to think about claws on his toes.

Though she must be tired, Grandmother did not sway or bend. Tahlen, at her side, remained unmoving.

Zelli tore his gaze from him to focus on Kear, now in his line of sight.

“Who are you?” Kear demanded.

Zelli stopped just behind the Tialtтын line and pulled in a breath before he lowered the hood of the cloak.

The people around him didn't scream, but there were audible gasps and a few whispered pleas for the fae to be merciful.

“Mizel of the Tialtтын.” As he introduced himself, Zelli watched Kear. Kear wasn't as good as some guards at making his expression hard to read, but he did well enough. Other than his stillness, Zelli might not have known he was shocked. Zelli couldn't tell if Kear was also horrified, but assumed he was.

“The Mountain Wolf of the Tialtтын!” someone shouted from behind him.

Zelli did not even breathe. He turned around, scanning the crowd for the speaker. It had to have been Fy, because no one else would know that silly title or be so bold as to use it, but Zelli didn't see him.



“Mizel the Mountain Wolf!” The shout came again in a different voice.

Zelli searched the crowd, trying not to notice the startled faces or how a few seemed to recognize him but didn't come closer. But if the former Lyralinah guards were out there, they were well-hidden. Helpless to stop their nonsense, Zelli turned back toward Kear.

“Mountain Wolf?” Kear repeated, staring, then dropped his shoulders as though he were perfectly at ease. The people with him weren't; there were tense, frowning faces and hands near sword hilts. “You demand a lot, and I don't see that you're in any position to do so, though I am willing to listen. I'm even looking forward to it. I've never talked with a wolf before.”

“I've already warned you,” Grandmother said almost wearily. “You think I am a silly old relic in a decrepit fortress telling tales of the fae, but remember that I warned you.”

Kear was openly irritated, or perhaps wary now that Zelli was there looking the way he did. “Warned me of what?”

“If you promise me the guards you seek will go free, and that the valley will remain a place of peace, I will consider an alliance with you,” Zelli offered again. “If you want to rule this valley, if you want to wait out your sister's violence and carve a land for yourself here like an Earl of old and grow your power as they did, you will need a Tialtтын.”

Kear's hand twitched toward a weapon before he forced it down.

“That *is* what you want, isn't it?” Zelli asked politely. “I'm the only Tialtтын who might do. I know the people and the fields and the traditions. And, despite some inconveniences, I am favored by the fae.”

If they *were* meant as inconveniences. But Zelli didn't have time to dwell on it.

“I'm also the one closest to your age.” Whether or not they would share a bed, that seemed relevant. “I don't know about taking the crown from Tye, but we can certainly discuss it. I

might be able to help. A Canamorra seemed to think I had interesting thoughts in that direction.”

“A Canamorra?” Kear demanded, wary now. “Who... *what* are you?”

An unhappy stirring went through the line of Tialttyrin guards.

“You’re smarter than Tye, I think,” Zelli continued. “Maybe more inclined to reason? You assumed we would be like some of the other families because we stay out of palace matters. But we stay out of the palace because if the fae wanted us there, they would lead us there. Perhaps you are here to do that, I don’t know. It would depend on the fae’s opinion of you. Have you asked them to give you a crown?”

Zelli tipped his head up, frowning for the glimpse of light in the distance. Lightning. A storm on the way.

It would get here quickly, judging from the wind tearing up from the river and stirring the branches of the rowan trees on either side of Kear’s people. He wondered if Grandmother had noticed it, then knew it was so. She’d caught on before Zelli had.

“Oh.” Zelli shivered, cold all over. “I would have been willing to try despite my other feelings and it might have been all right. I’m persuasive, they tell me, and I only bite a little. But I think you *have* asked the fae. And I think they do not like you. At least, they wouldn’t like you here,” he added. And probably not in the capital, either, although he didn’t say that. “They don’t trust you with their valley.” He paused to add delicately, “Neither do I. I’m sorry.”

“I did warn you,” said Grandmother.

Then there was noise.

So much noise, sudden and overwhelming. Shouts and a clang of metal, snorting and feet stamping from the horses. A scream.

It was only when Tahlen and Starfall pushed in front of Grandmother that Zelli realized what had happened. Kear had lost patience and chosen more direct action; removing The Tialttyrin and seizing the fortress in the resulting chaos.

“Grandmother!” Zelli foolishly joined the shouting though he’d never be heard above the din, and stared in astonishment at Cousin Ona charging forward as though she were several decades younger.

“For the Tialttyrin!” A series of cries and howls made him jump. They came from the Tialttyrin guards and then from behind them, from even behind Zelli. “For the Mountain Wolf!”

Zelli turned, because that *had* to be Fy, but saw Vint instead, who rose from nowhere to grab Zelli by his cloak and yank him to the side.

“Get to safety, Tialttyrin!” Vint gave Zelli an order he had no right to, then darted forward into the fighting. *A battle*, Zelli thought, voice shrill in his own mind, although surely this scene was too small for be called that. Zelli caught movement, people and horses surrounding Grandmother, others twisting to look at Zelli, eyes wide with alarm.

He was supposed to stay back, Zelli remembered at last. There were villagers with more sense than him—and others with less, storming forward without even weapons in their hands. Without even armor.

Zelli managed a halting step, nearly tripping over something or someone behind him, then he looked up, over the heads of the Tialttyrin guards reaching for him to the sky of menacing gray. Warm rain hit his face before the wind changed direction.

Something groaned, like the sound of a tree about to topple in a storm, but the two rowan stood firm. Beyond the gates, out where the Villucatto and Lyralinah had their weapons drawn, rain began to fall with a roar, pelting the ground and stripping the offerings from every tree branch.

Kear was directly ahead of him. Kear turned his head to the person at his side and his mouth moved. He pointed to Zelli.

Zelli had not even a moment to worry over it.

He hit the ground, must have, because he found himself staring up at the sky again. Funny that it should rain only on the other side of the gate, he reflected, not sure why it

bothered him. The weather would cause problems for both sides, though possibly more for the Villucatto, who had no shelter unless they broke through the line of Grandmother's guards, and former Lyralinah guards, and villagers, and Cousin Ona.

*Grandmother.* Zelli began to panic to think of her. He tried to tell himself that Tahlen would save her but it didn't calm him. His heart was loud in his ears, louder even than the rain, and he couldn't catch his breath. He must have hit the ground hard. He must have stumbled over something, though he couldn't recall what had tripped him.

He lifted his head, which was difficult to do. He frowned at his body, uncooperative yet again, and then at the shaft sticking up from his chest. An arrow, he realized faintly. Larger than the ones he used, but everything seemed to be larger than what Zelli used.

He stared at the arrow until holding his head up made him tired. All of him was tired, no matter how his pounding heart said otherwise. His arms and legs were heavy and he couldn't draw a full breath. After the way Tahlen had talked about it, he'd thought an arrow would hurt, but for the moment, it didn't seem to. But Tahlen had been right that Zelli wouldn't have wanted to do this to someone else. Straw targets were enough.

The sky got darker. He wondered if he ought to try to move again. Before he could attempt it, someone leaned over him and blocked his view.

Bree's short hair was wet, as were her shoulders. She glanced over Zelli's body several times, and then stared at the arrow before dragging her gaze up to his face.

She looked feverish, flushed and pale at the same time. Then she tore her gaze away and put her hands on Zelli's chest before pressing down.

Zelli felt his mouth fall open. A sound pushed out him. Bree pressed down anyway, pressure and fire coming from her palms and Zelli couldn't even raise his arms to make her stop.

“I’m sorry,” Bree said, kept saying. She wiped her face. Her hand was bloody.

Zelli still could not breathe. Bree’s hand was covered in his blood and she was distressed.

The realization of what this meant was quiet, as if Zelli’s heart and the storm no longer mattered.

He was dying.

He needed to apologize to Grandmother. Then Tahlen.

Tahlen would be in pain. He’d already lost so many and now Zelli too, and whoever else might have died in the skirmish by the gate. He would blame himself. He’d be alone again. That shouldn’t be allowed to happen.

Zelli got his fingers to work and grasped at the fabric of Bree’s pants until she looked at him.

*Tahlen.* He tried to say it. He meant to say it. He tried again. “Tahl...”

He could barely hear himself, but Bree must have caught the sound. She glanced away, pained, then nodded.

“I’ll tell him,” she promised, without explaining what it was she would tell Tahlen. But she had been through this before, like Tahlen had. Maybe she knew what to say.

Zelli suspected he frowned at her. Since his death wasn’t her fault, he aimed his frown at the dark sky and then at the five figures who walked up to where Zelli lay. The five were arranged in nearly the shape of a v with one of them at the head

They were not tall figures. Zelli wouldn’t have gotten a crick in his neck to speak with them. One of them might even have been smaller than Zelli if he’d been standing. They had short hair and long hair in many colors, and skin the same. Two were naked, with lines of feathers down the backs of their arms and legs, and pointed ears that reached higher than Zelli’s. Fur or more feathers trailed down over the rest of them in familiar dots and swirls.

Of the three in clothes, only one could have been said to have been fully dressed, though that was just a vest, tight pants, and a belt. The pants were short enough to show bare feet that were not completely like a human's feet.

The last two wore bands of cloth around their waist. Perhaps their heavier fur warmed them enough to not require more.

Zelli stared at the one in the center, the one with what he thought were antlers grown and twisted together, but which seemed more like a circlet the longer he looked at it. The figure's horns were black and glossy and much bigger than Zelli's.

They all had dark eyes, darker than Tahlen's, possibly darker than Zelli's had been in the mirror that morning. At least one had a tail, a long, lashing thing, tipped with fur. Not like Zelli's tail at all. But their claws were the same, and the shape of their ears. Zelli had never thought of his hair as beautiful, but theirs was.

He could hear his heart again, too loud and too fast.

As if they could hear Zelli's panic too, they began to shimmer and change before his eyes until five ordinary, if small and somewhat undressed, humans stood in front of him. They focused intently on Zelli and then four of them turned to consider the one at the center.

That one came closer and dropped down to kneel next to Bree, who didn't take her hands or eyes from Zelli's wound, although she raised her head twice to shout something to someone nearby.

The circlet between the large, black, wickedly sharp horns, if it was a circlet, was not made of metal. It might have been stone, or wood, or painted bone. Zelli wanted to touch it, but only got his arm up as far as the figure's knee.

Their skin was warm and bloomed violet beneath Zelli's palm.

The figure smiled at him. That was warm too. They gently picked up Zelli's hand to hold it and Zelli's wrist and part of his forearm filled with pink and then orange, like just-ripened peaches in the summer sun.

He felt himself smiling back although the colors began to run blue, pale like spring water.

“I wish—no,” Zelli stopped there and altered his words though words felt unnecessary. “I would have liked to have known you were proud of me,” he whispered to his other parent and let his eyes close for a moment at the gentle touch to the side of his face. “I think you were trying to help me.” It was difficult to get his eyes open again, which was worrying, but the worry was vague. “I’m sorry I was upset. It’s different with humans. There’s so much to be embarrassed over.”

He glanced to the others, all of them wearing sweet, woeful expressions that made his eyes sting, then back to Bree, who was very calm for someone surrounded by the fae. She must not see them.

Zelli must be very close to death, then.

He focused on his parent and the shining tears in their black eyes, how gently they smiled.

“It’s much to ask, but you will keep them safe? Grandmother and the guards, and Bree and the village? The valley? You will keep them safe through all this? I don’t have anything to offer. But I would like that. Are you keeping me warm?” Zelli’s skin was so pale it was nearly white except for where it bloomed deep pink. Like a camellia, Tahlen had said. “Tahlen.” Zelli could say it clearly now, if he was speaking; Bree glanced to him occasionally but didn’t seem to hear him. “You’re fond of him. Will you...?”

Beyond the ring of fae watching over Zelli were new figures, tall and human, dressed, most of them in the summer cloaks of Tialttyrin sworn guards. They didn’t look at Zelli, but swung their heads in the different direction, toward the gate.

Bree turned that way, flinching, then looked across Zelli’s body to Esrin, who slid onto her knees at Zelli’s other side. She was dripping with rain and frowning as if Zelli done something new to irritate her.

She and Bree were the only ones not turned toward whatever was going on at the gate. She also had no interest in the naked

fae around her.

Zelli focused on Esrin with effort. He wanted to tell Bree to stop pushing on the wound, that there was nothing to be done and he could not breathe, but her hands were gone. So he stared at Esrin until her brow furrowed with some new upset and her lower lip trembled before she flattened it.

“Tahl...” Zelli was rather pleased with himself for getting it out. “Tahl,” he repeated urgently.

Esrin bent over him to hear him, then met his stare. She gave one firm nod. It was her voice that was unsteady. “I’ll watch over him for you, Tialttyrin.”

Esrin understood. Zelli collapsed in relief, breath hitching because he couldn’t sigh.

He turned to his parent and touched them again to see the colors. “Keep her safe too, please, if you can.”

Words that required no breath. Zelli would find that fascinating later.

Or not, he supposed.

A small hand cupped the side of his face. Black eyes met his, sad and wonderful.

“I wish I had known you,” Zelli told them honestly.

“Mizel,” they answered, cobweb-soft, as soothing as honeyed tea. “My Mizel.”

Someone was crying. Maybe it was one of the guards, although that seemed strange. Maybe it was Esrin, but that seemed even stranger.

He looked for whatever it was they were all looking at, the guards and the fae and Bree and Esrin. Down toward the gate, but for Zelli really just toward his feet. Where Tahlen stood, breathing hard, his helmet gone, mud and blood splattered across his face and into the braid that had fallen over his shoulder.

A pole-axe as bloodied as he was fell from his hand. Zelli didn’t hear it land.



If Tahlen was here, it meant Grandmother was safe. That would comfort Tahlen later.

Zelli couldn't see his silver rowan at Tahlen's neck. If Tahlen wore it, the collar of his doublet concealed it. Unhappy, Zelli looked up from that to Tahlen's beautiful face.

"Please," Zelli said to the fae starting to appear less and less human as the air grew heavier. "I know I've asked too much. But another wish: don't let him be alone." Zelli had nothing to give in exchange but his blood, which was likely everywhere. Tahlen wouldn't like that, but it was Zelli's blood to offer.

Zelli looked to Tahlen again.

Tahlen's dark eyes were hollow, the lovely brightness giving way to something cold. Zelli held tight to the hand in his. *Please*, he asked again as Tahlen reached for the knife at his belt.

"Gladly," Zelli tried to say. Only a whisper escaped, a slow, endless sigh. Then his eyes closed. He heard the rain in the distance, and a horrible sound, like nothing he'd ever heard before.

Then he heard nothing.

## Twenty-Two

Zelli's grandmother was in a chair covered in cushions that had not been at the side of Zelli's bed the day before. Her hair was done up for sleep, and she was in a thick robe with a blanket on her lap, but she was awake, her gaze tired and faraway.

Zelli stirred, ready to apologize for keeping her up without being certain what he had done to make her sit at his bedside, but at the hint of movement, she turned to him. Zelli blinked at her in return, his eyes, like his mouth, very dry.

Grandmother startled him by getting up from her chair, which was closer to Zelli's bed than it seemed at first glance. She poured him a cup of water from a pitcher on a table also placed by his bed. There were lit candles on the table as well, and a fire in his fireplace. The curtains were drawn.

She only poured a few mouthfuls of water, but Zelli downed them gratefully then put the cup on the table. His hands trembled with the effort. His arm was heavy.

He looked to her in question.

"We gave you something to make you sleep easier," Grandmother explained, her voice cracking. "You kept trying to get up."

Zelli frowned over that, though it seemed something he would do. He reached for the cup and Grandmother got up once more, groaning this time, but again only poured him a small amount.

He drank it anyway, and nodded when he was told no more until that stayed down. He must have been sick. "Why shouldn't I get up?" He did wonder that, even with the fog in his mind. "Was I fainting?"

Instead of immediately sitting back down, Grandmother took the cup from him and spent several moments sweeping some

of Zelli's hair from his eyes. Most of his hair was split into two braids for sleep. A tiny bit had escaped, but only the tiny bit. Very unlike his hair's usual behavior, but Zelli accepted that for the moment too.

"We didn't know if you'd be fully healed or how long that might take. Enforced rest seemed the best option."

Grandmother pulled one of the many—many, many—blankets and furs now piled on his bed to his chest and smacked the pillows at Zelli's back that were keeping him propped up. Then her eyes met his, dark and devastated.

Zelli had seen that look before.

He sat up with a gasp, his hands grasping the front of his nightshirt where there should have been the shaft of an arrow.

Grandmother's hands were gentle on his shoulders as she urged him back against the pillows. "You're well and you're with us. Breathe, Mizel. Just breathe."

Zelli turned to her. He *was* breathing, too fast and raspy, but he was breathing. He couldn't relax his hold on his shirt, but Grandmother didn't make him. She smoothed his hair again and wondered aloud if she ought to try giving him some watered-down tea.

"What happened?" Zelli demanded weakly, then glanced more intently around the room, which was empty except for the two of them. "Tahlen? Is he all right?"

Grandmother heaved herself back into her cushioned chair with a weary sigh. "Tahlen is not the one who had us worried, Mizel."

Zelli's heart thundered against his hands. He looked around his bedroom again, noting his clothing had been picked up from the floor and moved elsewhere.

"He's angry with me." Zelli didn't ask. "But he's well. That's... that's good. He won't want to see me now. He asked me to stay back and I didn't, and he had so much more to worry about today."

"Calm yourself." That was an order from The Tialtтын.  
"Don't make yourself sick when we only just got you back."

Zelli turned to his grandmother again. “Was I gone?”

The bleak look returned to her eyes. “Yes.”

Zelli slowly lowered his gaze to his hands, to his chest and the arrow that wasn't there. “What happened?”

“You mean, after Kear of the Villucatto tried to kill me?” Grandmother must have seen Zelli's flinch but didn't let him speak. “You were rather confident in your assertions,” she went on, perhaps hinting that she would like more explanation. “I think he took offense. But then, of course, you did accuse him of future treason in front of witnesses. I'm not sure how else he could have responded. I expected you to be bold, Mizel. I did not quite expect that.” She stopped for a moment. “When did you speak to a Canamorra?”

Zelli shook his head but it only made him dizzy. “Did I say that? I was only guessing. I usually have to guess because I don't understand what's going on. But the storm! You saw it too.”

“Yes, I did.” Grandmother agreed. “And when I did, it occurred to me that I had been too busy to send you a message, though I meant to speak with you if—*when* I returned. It also occurred to me that, without word, you would take it upon yourself to find out what was going on. So I was sure you were somewhere in the crowd and decided to speak as though you were.”

Zelli dragged in a deep breath, holding it to feel the air fill his chest; the simplest blessing. He forcibly unclenched one hand before looking at Grandmother. “I'm sorry.”

“No, you're not.” She grumbled as she sat back. “Not for that, anyway. Perhaps for the rest.” She studied him, unforgiving. “If not, you should be.”

“Yes, Grandmother.” Zelli ducked his head. “I didn't think—you will say ‘No, you *didn't* think.’ And you are right. Tahlen... I...”

*Tahlen standing over him, jaw set, his eyes empty.*

Zelli shook his head again, harder. His breathing was loud. “I *am* sorry.”

“You’ve been here since yesterday.” Grandmother explained as though Zelli hadn’t spoken. “It’s early morning now. Not quite dawn, I’d imagine. You are also mostly yourself again. Or perhaps this is you, now.”

Zelli gave her a glance, startled, then studied his hands, which had no fur. Or claws. He seemed to remember claws. He reached up to pat the top of his head. No horns, either.

“Your eyes,” Grandmother explained further. “In the night, when we checked your eyes, they were black. They are still black. I don’t know if that will change or if it’s another gift.”

“Do I have eyes like they do?” Zelli could feel no fur on his face and his ears were again small and human.

“They?”

“Our family,” Zelli answered, abandoning his self-study to put his hands back over his chest. He had the strangest urge to keep them there, as if they had to hold something in.

Grandmother’s eyebrows shot up. “Did you meet them when you were gone?”

“I met my other parent, I think.” Zelli’s voice grew hoarse. “They were proud of me.”

Grandmother softened. “It’s easy to be proud of you, Mizel, although it is equally easy to worry over you. Did they say anything? About, well, anything?”

“Not exactly *say*.” Zelli tried to grab and hold his thoughts, but he was surprised he hadn’t fallen back to sleep with how slow and heavy his body was. He put out his hand and Grandmother reached over to take it. Her hand was warm and dry, but there were no colors in her skin or in his. “Maybe it’s only when I’m more like them,” Zelli mused. “I asked them to keep everyone safe. I asked them... I didn’t have anything to offer but my blood. But it was already there so....” He closed his mouth when the sadness filled her gaze again. “Grandmother, I....” She shut her eyes, so Zelli let it go for her sake. “I don’t know if they said yes.”

To which she said nothing, but she did eventually reopen her eyes.

“He is really all right?” Zelli pressed. “Uninjured?”

“Tahlen is as well as can be expected.” Grandmother deliberately wasn’t telling Zelli more but she wasn’t lying. “There were some injuries from those on our side—including those guards of yours.”

“Mine?” Zelli shook his head and had to take a moment to recover from the dizziness that created. “They’ve sworn no oaths.”

“Hmm.”

Zelli was too tired and queer-feeling to interpret her *hmm*. “What did the Villucatto think about all this? Have you spoken to them?”

“I imagine when the news reaches the rest of them, they will be furious. Some perhaps even hurt over the loss of Kear.”

*Loss.* Zelli jumped. His grandmother didn’t remark on it.

“But they are fighting on several fronts and Tye is more interested in the capital right now,” Grandmother continued. “Perhaps, if Tye gains that and manages to hold it, she will turn her attention to us. But I think she will hesitate before she acts. Most, if not all, of the ancient families will hesitate before they come here once word of this gets out. I’m not sure if that was the fae’s answer to you or if it was their plan all along. But I would say the country will remember our ties to the fae now. Maybe the fae felt others needed the reminder of their power, and it had nothing to do with us or with the life you seemingly offered them.”

She gave Zelli a hard look.

“I didn’t intentionally...” The argument only made his grandmother flintier. “That is, I was already d...” Zelli paused, suddenly aware that he had thought he was dying, that he *had* been dying, or so it had seemed. But now he was fine. He rubbed his chest. The itchy wrong feeling had been replaced with a hot, sore ache, but he was definitely not dead. “My blood was there,” he finished quietly. “So I used it.”

“You did,” Grandmother agreed. “I wonder more that they took it. But I do not and perhaps will not ever understand their

ways. You died, my Mizel. And they let you. Your other parent....” She went momentarily silent. “They let you die.”

Zelli shuddered and turned his head. “Many dead, from the sound of it. The Villucatto and Lyralinah guards?”

He half-expected to be told it could wait or that he ought to go back to sleep. But Grandmother appraised him for a moment, then said, “After they tried for me, our people were upset. Tahlen,” she gave the name weight, “was not in the mood to offer mercy, and I was not of a mind to ask him to, not after what he and his sister had already lived through. Neither were your adopted guards, who seem to understand some of what those two were feeling. But four of those with Kear survived and were pulled from the muddy pit that the rain created to swallow them.”

“What?” Zelli demanded in a faint voice. “Pit?”

Grandmother swept on, but gently. “The fae gave them no escape, leaving them to drown in the mud if they were not hunted down. But two of those who were taken by the pit had prior injuries and so did not survive for long.”

“Mud?” Zelli tried to grasp this fact but couldn’t imagine it. “A pit? Is it still there?”

His grandmother nodded. “That rain. It soaked the land on the other side of the gate. The fighting might have continued, but the pit opened up almost immediately, pulling most of theirs and some of ours down. A problem to repair, but at least it stopped Tahlen and brought him back to us. To you. I don’t think....” Grandmother paused but it wasn’t to be delicate. “Without that, I don’t think he would have gotten to you when he did.”

Zelli’s hands shook. He put his palm to the middle of his chest. “I... died.”

Grandmother was carved from rock. “As far as we could tell.”

“But it helped?” Zelli met her sorrowful, furious stare. “I helped by calling down the fae at least?”

Her voice cracked once more. “Mizel.”

“I’m sorry.”

She only sighed. “But you’d do it again.”

Zelli’s chest felt unnervingly unmarked. “I did offer to ally with the Villucatto.”

“You did.” Grandmother agreed, but she wasn’t nice about it.

“Was...?” No, Zelli was not going to ask if Tahlen had been upset about that too. “I already know how he feels about that.”

“After yesterday, I suspect some of our negotiations may tactfully fall to silence,” Grandmother remarked, not amused, but with something pleased and perhaps vicious in her tone.

“Although those who choose to continue our talks will certainly want to give us generous terms. But I will leave that question, if you choose to keep asking it, for the future. At the moment, I am grateful to be looking into your face again and have you looking back at me.”

Zelli’s throat tightened, allowing just one word.

“Grandmother.”

“You did not have to earn your place with us, Zelli.” She was deliberate, intending to hurt. “You do not. You acted as you saw fit, but you should never think your death would be acceptable to me.”

“Yes, Grandmother,” Zelli answered, barely more than a croak.

She gave him several moments to clear his throat and swallow and try to compose himself.

“Everyone else?” he asked at last.

“Minor wounds for the most part,” Grandmother assured him, gentle once again. “Except for you.”

He stared at her in confusion. “Shouldn’t I be in pain?”

“The sleeping draught has other effects, but I’ve never heard of the fae doing this. I am not at all sure what the consequences will be. Maybe some pain would teach you caution, for Tahlen’s sake if not for yours or mine.”

Zelli gave her a harder look for that but couldn’t maintain it.



“He doesn’t want to see me.” His voice was small. “I understand. He asked one thing of me and I didn’t even manage that.” He rubbed his chest again, from habit and the need to know the arrow was gone even if he felt nothing. “I know I’m not discreet about him. I *know*. Everyone can tell what I think when I look at him... that I have *feelings*. Which... he likes.” Zelli filled his whole, unpunctured lungs with air so he could sigh. “Did you know that Tahlen likes that? *Liked* that,” he corrected himself. “And now I’ve hurt him as he did not deserve to be hurt.”

“You were dead when I came to you and you were dying when he saw you.” Grandmother took Zelli’s hand but she still had not forgiven him. “Is it any wonder that Tahlen would be hurt?”

It was disconcerting to have supposedly been dead and have little memory of it, and only some memories of dying. “I asked them to take care of him,” Zelli remembered suddenly, “to take care of all you. That was my wish.” If the fae thought helping Tahlen kill people was taking care of him, then they had not read Zelli’s heart as they should have. “I asked that he not be alone. I don’t understand.”

Zelli tossed his head despite the bursts it created behind his eyes. “I already know he would die for me. He reminds me of it often. He was prepared to do so. He was not prepared for me to do it?”

It emerged as a question.

Grandmother harrumphed. “This is a conversation you should be having with Tahlen, if you have chosen him at last.”

“Tahlen should be resting,” Zelli argued immediately.

Grandmother was carefully unamused. “It took Esrin and several of Tahlen’s guard friends to get him to finally go down to the kitchens to get something to eat, and I believe their plan is to slip him something so he will sleep.”

“He hasn’t slept at all?” Zelli demanded, though raising his voice made his chest hurt, a muffled hurt, as if felt through layers of down and wool. “He will persist in doing that!” he

complained anyway, and threw the pile of blankets and furs from him. He swung his feet off the side of the bed and then spent several moments sitting very still while his head spun.

The hurt remained, not dull enough to be an ache, but far from splitting agony. It was like the memory of pain without the pain itself. But perhaps that was the sleeping draught affecting his thinking.

He released his grandmother's hand to cling to a bedpost, then braced himself before peering down his nightshirt to see the damage.

There was scarring, or something like scarring. A smooth patch of pinkish, silvery skin, hard to miss, and yet not at all what such a wound should have looked like after only a few hours.

"If you're going to chase after him, you'll need to dress," Grandmother's opinion of this was evident in her crisp tone. "Or you could sit back and I can summon him."

"If you do that, he will come, but only because of his oath." Zelli firmed his grip on the bedpost before hauling himself to his feet, where he swayed until the room settled around him once again. "I will apologize and ensure he is rested. Then I'll return here to..." Drink more draught and hide in bed until all his aches were gone, if that would ever happen.

"Well, you aren't going like that." Grandmother acceded to a request Zelli hadn't made of her and got to her feet. "You will dress. Tahlen will not be any more pleased to discover you crossed the fortress to find him while in your night things."

Tahlen had, in fact, once commented on Zelli's nightclothes, so Zelli nodded.

Grandmother took off her robe and handed it to him. "Now, where are your boots?"

The two guards outside his room surprised him. Grandmother, on her way to her bedroom, did not explain them being within

the family apartments instead of outside them. Nel and Lirra were just as surprised to see Zelli, or maybe to see Zelli in a robe and boots and probably sickly in appearance, but told him where he might find Tahlen. They also followed Zelli as he made his slow way outside, and stayed with him on his journey to the kitchens.

“Orders,” Lirra supplied, giving Zelli their arm for a while when Zelli stumbled. “As long as any Villucatto are here, even locked up, you’re to have a guard or two with you.”

“Orders from Grandmother?” Zelli wondered, only to receive two knowing, even chiding, looks.

Tahlen was not yet guard captain, but was giving orders that were obeyed even though most of the guards had been on duty since yesterday and had to be tired.

“When I reach the kitchens, you should both go rest if you need to,” Zelli told them at last.

“I think we’ll hear it from him first.” Nel answered with tact. “If you don’t mind.”

“Perfectly understandable,” Zelli agreed, out of breath. “The fae are a rare threat. Tahlen’s displeasure must be lived with every day.”

“As you say, Tialttyrin,” Lirra added, with a smile that Zelli caught when he turned to them incredulously.

Since Zelli had no response to that and too much on his mind to bother thinking of one, the three of them walked the rest of the way in silence.

It was just before dawn, the sky subtly lightening despite the fog, when Zelli left his escort outside and entered the kitchens.

He had to catch his breath and hold the wall to keep upright on his weak limbs. The kitchens were shockingly hot compared to the air outside, and he shuddered as he looked over the noisy, crowded space before him.

It was about the time when many were waking and seeking out breakfast, or ending their duties and grabbing a meal before heading to their rooms to rest. The kitchen staff would have been up for hours, making bread to take to the ovens or starting items for later meals. The long table sometimes used for food preparation was now filled with guards, both those sworn to the Tialttyrin family and those not yet sworn to anyone, along with a few members of the kitchen staff half-snoring into bowls of porridge.

Fy and Vint sat together at the start of the table, Let and Wain not far from them, with Bree wedged sleepily against Carr, who leaned against a displeased Gurn. Despite all the guards present, there was not a weapon to be seen except for the kitchen knives in use and the blade in Esrin's belt.

Wain noticed Zelli before Zelli could finish following Esrin's path through the room. He jerked upright, then raised his cup to the sky.

"Mountain Wolf!" he greeted Zelli with a cheer, bringing everyone else's heads up.

"Zelli!" Fy called, then whistled. "You're with us once again! And not dressed!"

Zelli barely noticed Fy's leering grin or Vint rolling his eyes.

Esrin, at the far end of the table as she put a cup in front of Tahlen, stopped.

Tahlen's eyes came up, meeting Zelli's across the length of the table. He did not otherwise move.

The chatter around Zelli fell away or simply ceased to matter.

Tahlen looked weary, as Zelli had expected him to. He was in a loose shirt with no armor and had washed and shaved, probably at Esrin's insistence, although something about him was off, as if he wasn't as neatly put together as he should have been.

The plate in front of him wasn't empty but wasn't full; Tahlen had eaten, at least. Esrin should have less to worry over. When Tahlen didn't speak, Zelli glanced to her.

Esrin dipped her gaze down over Zelli's body in a pointed manner, which made Zelli drop his head to consider that his robe had come undone. Grandmother's robe was of a dark purple, and recognizable as hers to at least Tahlen, if Tahlen cared to notice. But he, like everyone else, was probably wondering what Zelli was doing out of his sick bed in just a long shirt and boots, in a robe he hadn't buttoned properly.

He took a moment to do that and the excited talk in the room grew subdued.

"Good to see you up and about," Let offered diplomatically. The others agreed, including some of the kitchen staff, doubtlessly watching or listening to whatever foolishness Zelli would manage now. Zelli looked back at Tahlen.

Tahlen's gaze had not changed from the last time Zelli had seen it.

"Tahlen." Zelli realized he was trembling. "I..."

"I asked you to stay back," Tahlen said, clear enough to ring through the quiet that followed.

Zelli nodded quickly. "You did. I'm sorry. But I was with other guards. And I was leaving to come back here when..." Tahlen glanced away, the tic in his jaw visible. Zelli inched forward. "I'm sorry."

"Armor will be made for you." Tahlen did not look at Zelli until he added, "You will wear it."

Zelli opened his mouth to argue that wearing armor whenever he left the fortress was hardly going to be necessary but faltered upon meeting Tahlen's eyes. "Yes, Tahlen," he agreed, then frowned and lowered his head. He had come here to apologize and to make sure Tahlen would sleep. He had no right to push for anything else. But the silence through the normally bustling kitchens suggested he ought to apologize more. "I would..." No, he shouldn't say he would do it again if he had to, although hopefully he would do it differently. "I shouldn't have done that to you. The day was already stressful for you and I made you worry more."

"*Stressful?*" Esrin echoed quietly as if in disbelief.

“Esrin.” Tahlen glanced at her without raising his head.

Zelli turned to the guards around the table, who were shooting looks between him and Tahlen with mostly blank expressions, except for Vint, who glowered at Zelli in disapproval.

Zelli nodded to Vint and tried to do better, the way Tahlen would have done. “I caused you pain,” he amended his words, readying himself for the effect of Tahlen’s gaze this time. “I understand if you don’t want to see me, now or ever again. I just came here to make sure you were all right. I see that you ate, which is good. Grandmother tells me you haven’t slept yet, and you should.” That was not exactly what Zelli had had in mind and he wasn’t sure it would work on this Tahlen. “I will get Grandmother to order it, if I must. Sorry.”

“As though you don’t give orders too,” Fy muttered around several ostentatious coughs.

“I...” Zelli started again. “I thought you would be angry with me. But... but I didn’t mean to leave you.” The heat of the room made his face sting, along with some embarrassment. He fought to stay upright and did his best to avoid all other eyes. Tahlen wanted someone to care for him publicly. Zelli could give him that, if nothing else. “I didn’t want to leave you. I’d never want to, even though,” Zelli briefly scowled, “you were out there in your armor and I was just supposed to be in my room, making myself sick with worry for you.”

Tahlen’s voice went hard. “That is my duty, Zelli, and my choice.”

Zelli jerked his head up. “My duty is to try to keep you from needing to do that. And I did. I think. Possibly.”

“By *dying*.”

Zelli’s breath caught in his throat at the tension in Tahlen’s voice. He thought Tahlen struggled to make his expression blank.

“You and Grandmother keep saying that,” Zelli complained. “Surely I was only nearly dead—which is enough for me.” He was sure of that. “I saw no healers with me upon waking from this.” He waved a hand over his chest and Tahlen blanched. It

made Zelli swallow his next words and consider new ones. “Did my family—I mean, did the fae do something? I’ll have to find a special way to thank them. Later. When I am not....” He didn’t know what he was at the moment, exhausted and more and more afraid that Tahlen hated him.

Tahlen was finally so annoyed with Zelli that he would leave. Physically, he would be there at Grandmother’s side, but he would become distant and made of stone again and Zelli could not blame him. Zelli’s breath came faster, too fast to not be noticed by everyone else.

Zelli blinked rapidly, willing his tears away. “I am always a burden, I know. When I’m not being useless, I’m creating problems. I thought I could fix that. I’m sorry. I’ll go back to my room. Excuse me.”

The kitchen was a blur. Zelli looked to the side, at nothing in particular. Even the months of Tahlen avoiding him hadn’t felt like this. Perhaps his wound was reopening. There wasn’t a hole in his chest when he touched that spot, but he could feel it there.

“Do you need help?” Tahlen asked before Zelli could muster the strength for the walk back. “An escort to make sure you get there?”

“I have one, apparently.” Zell nodded in Tahlen’s direction without looking at him. “Thank you.”

Tahlen stopped Zelli again before Zelli could move. “What about your other problem? The original one?”

Zelli shook his head, still without looking at Tahlen. “It’s very kind of you to ask,” he said, the words proper but shamefully brittle. “It seems to have resolved itself.” *A little too late*, he thought resentfully, although he wondered if understanding Tahlen earlier would have changed his decisions or only made Zelli even more determined to protect him.

“What problem?” Fy nosed in. Several people whispered for him to shut up.

Tahlen exhaled, sounding worn to the bone. “Have you eaten?”

Zelli glanced back, wiping his eyes when blinking did not clear them. Esrin came into focus first, at Tahlen's shoulder, her expression almost fretful.

"Since you've mentioned it, I can't recall eating anything since the night we returned," Zelli admitted. He hadn't eaten much during their day of traveling, either. "But I'm not sure I have an appetite."

Tahlen pushed his plate to the space at the table next to him.

Esrin reached down and pushed it back in front of her brother. "That is yours," she scolded Tahlen. "*He* will have to get something light if he hasn't eaten in that long. I'll get something." Which she did, sweeping away to the other side of the kitchens, leaving Zelli to stare after her, and then at Tahlen. His feet caught up before he did, walking him slowly down the length of the table. He passed guards making furtive, encouraging faces at him that made his stomach turn.

He didn't think he could eat, but approached the end of the table and Tahlen anyway, barely aware of people shifting to make more room.

He tripped, his focus solely on Tahlen, and nearly fell onto the seat at Tahlen's side, only to recover, then stumble gracelessly at the sight of the tabby curled up in Tahlen's lap.

Tahlen had one hand buried in the cat's fur. The cat didn't even crack one eye to consider Zelli, content in ways Zelli could barely imagine.

He got clumsily into his seat, nodding absently when Esrin set a bowl of porridge in front of him.

"What's the cat's name?" Zelli felt as if he was always asking that.

"Tippit." Tahlen stared sternly at Zelli until Zelli reached for a spoon. "Reas named it."

Zelli nodded for this too. "I'm glad Tippit was here for you while you waited for me to wake up."

"Waited to see if you *would* wake up," Bree corrected gently. "Because no one was sure you would. You were dead. I was



there. Nothing ‘nearly’ about it.”

The cat made a small sound of protest as if it had been petted wrong or held too hard, then stood up, shaking off Tahlen’s hand.

Esrin raised an eyebrow at Zelli, as judgmental as the cat now jumping to the floor. “I’d hoped I was done watching innocent people die.”

“I’m sorry,” Zelli apologized to her too, and to Bree. “I was trying to keep the Villucatto or any others from destroying us, and I didn’t think I mattered enough to be a threat to them.” He took a deep breath. “Grandmother seems to think it’s over now and that it will be a while before we have to deal with anything else. It should mean none of you will have to fight, or see anything like that, for some time. It *should*. I asked them for that too... You *are* all right?” He rounded on his audience, looking everyone over in concern. “Grandmother said only four of the others survived?”

“The weather and the sinkhole took the ones we couldn’t get to,” Wain offered with some cheer.

“Thankfully, your momentary intended was already done for by then,” Fy added, wincing afterward, although Vint didn’t move to smack him or even glare at him.

Zelli gave a start, turning to Tahlen.

Tahlen looked back at him, his expression set, his eyes very dark. “I chased Kear of the Villucatto down and I killed him.” He paused, as if waiting for Zelli to object or flinch. When Zelli only swallowed, Tahlen went on. “He attacked your grandmother.”

True, but that was not what had had Tahlen on edge yesterday before Kear had ever said a word. “He attacked your home,” Zelli corrected.

“He attacked *you*,” Tahlen responded instantly, daring Zelli to argue.

Zelli bit his lip instead, then glanced up. “You look tired. You ought to sleep.”

Tahlen's challenging expression did not fade. "I couldn't."

Zelli hunched his shoulders. "I'm sorry."

"Are you?" Tahlen raised his voice to demand, something so shocking that even Esrin froze.

"Why did you?" Bree wondered, breaking the silence and drawing Zelli's attention to her, which gave him a moment to breathe. "I mean, you could have waited, right? Until the actual negotiations? Why go out there like you did?"

Zelli put the spoon down with care. "The fae made me as I was then on purpose. They wanted others to see. Then they sent the storm... or *were* the storm? I'm not clear on how they do things. There was going to be fighting no matter what anyone did. But I didn't want people harmed." He tried and failed to smother the tremor in his voice, willing Bree, and Tahlen, to understand. "I didn't want *him* harmed. I couldn't have that, even though he no longer wants me."

Tahlen moved without warning, pulling Zelli to him, then falling back into his seat with Zelli half in his lap. He bent his head while Zelli was mid-gasp and buried his face in Zelli's hair, his breath too fast against Zelli's ear. He wound his arms around Zelli's ribs to hold him, tight, then gentle, then tight again.

Some of the porridge must have spilled and the others must have been as startled as Zelli, judging from their exclamations. Zelli held in his noise of surprise but not his slight grunt of discomfort. His position, twisted sideways on Tahlen's lap, made the area around his scar twinge. It should have been embarrassing as well, to be picked up and held like this, but the others had heard worse and Zelli couldn't make himself care about them.

He put a hand on Tahlen's arm and closed his eyes.

"You didn't have to do that," Tahlen whispered into the top of one of Zelli's neat braids that had to be Tahlen's work. Tahlen must have done them while sitting with Grandmother at Zelli's bedside, where he had been for hours, waiting to see if Zelli

would wake. He sounded furious but Zelli didn't think he was. "You didn't have to do that to be valued."

"That wasn't why," Zelli informed him shakily, then wasn't sure that was true. He turned his face toward the warmth of Tahlen's chest as much as he could, and Tahlen raised his head and moved an arm to bring Zelli's legs up with the rest of him. On another day, Zelli might have objected. But since he hadn't expected Tahlen to hold him ever again, he stayed where he was, although the scar over his wound pulled and then throbbed.

Zelli opened his eyes but kept his gaze away from anyone else in the room. "Do you know, Tahlen, I have feelings about you? *For* you?" He might not be looking at them, but Zelli had no doubt everyone else in the room was listening. He had nothing to say they didn't already know. *He* was the one who hadn't realized. "Everyone seems to know my feelings, except me. Grandmother, Mayor Sar, Kat Ryssa," he growled that final name. "I didn't *want* to know what those feelings were, because... you saw them but you didn't want them. That's what I thought." For a moment, he couldn't breathe because Tahlen's hold was crushing. Then Tahlen exhaled and Zelli had air again. "And because I was leaving, so the feelings wouldn't matter in the end. But they are still here even though I ignored them, and I think they are love. I think they're what I feel because I love you, and I can pretend they aren't there, but I've never learned to hide them. That's why everyone smirks at me, or is rude to me, or smiles behind their hands when I look at you—because I love you. I love you so greatly that it's all I thought about when I was lying there."

Tahlen's voice was hoarse. "*Zelli.*"

"I'm sorry if that bothers you," Zelli sighed, "or is unwanted now that I've hurt you like this."

"Suppose we ought to be getting to bed, whoever's bed that may be," Let announced loudly. Several of the others politely muttered their agreement yet Zelli heard no footsteps taking anyone away.

“So much that my family in the capital would think this shames me now,” Zelli continued, squirming with some traces of shame despite his words. “But Zelli of the Tialttyrin loves Tahlen of the Vallithi, and when you leave me, you should know that. Everyone who doesn’t already know that will hear of it, I suspect. I can give you that, for hurting you, and to... to make you feel as warmed as you do in the sun.”

“Ah, if you don’t mind, Tahlen,” Zelli continued when Tahlen’s only answer was to pull him closer, “this position hurts a little. My chest...” Tahlen’s hold loosened before Zelli could finish. Tahlen held his breath. Zelli shifted a bit, glancing up to Tahlen’s clenched jaw. “One would think, if my fae relatives were going to heal me, they’d heal me completely. But I wonder if I am meant to feel it as a reminder. Perhaps they are as angry with me as you are. Which would mean they care, as you and Grandmother do. Isn’t that strange? To care from a distance? In secret?” Zelli frowned. “But some have reasons to do so, don’t they?”

He lifted his hand to cup that tense jawline and turn Tahlen’s face toward him.

Rose-pink bloomed in Zelli’s hand, spreading from his fingertips to his wrist before fading. It warmed, deepening the shade, when Zelli kept his hand there. Someone behind them swore. Zelli only smiled in relief to know the colors hadn’t gone away.

“Thank you,” he told his perhaps-watching relatives as well as Tahlen. “It didn’t appear for Grandmother,” he informed Tahlen. “I’ll have to try again during one of my problems, when I am more fae than I am now. That’s when it must happen, except for with you even though you’re not fae. I think it was a gift from them to show me I could trust this with you. Your jaw is a bit rough,” Zelli observed, able to take a deep breath again when Tahlen’s gaze began to warm. “You shaved in a hurry? That’s not like you, my Tahlen—um.”

Zelli sat up as much as his current position would allow. “That is, uh, something that people say to those they care about, isn’t it? My parent said it to me—not that one. My other one,” he filled in to banish Tahlen’s momentary frown. “Maybe they

were trying to show me that. Maybe they should have before, so I would have known to do this sooner.”

“Zelli, please.”

“Too much?” Zelli inquired curiously, stroking Tahlen’s mouth. “Why don’t you eat some more? And pet your cat, who missed you while I took you away.”

“I chose to accompany you,” Tahlen insisted, devastation creeping back into his expression.

Zelli couldn’t have that. “You chose,” he agreed. “And you were more helpful than I could have imagined.”

Tahlen pulled in a shaky breath, then tossed his head as if to deny Zelli’s words.

Despite the motion, no braid moved behind him.

Zelli jerked up, wriggling both arms free so he could turn Tahlen’s head and reach for what wasn’t there. The ends of Tahlen’s hair were damp to the touch, freshly washed and trimmed close to his head into something messier than the usual guard’s haircut, as though it had been done in a hurry or without much of Tahlen’s cooperation.

“Tahlen!” Zelli peered anxiously into Tahlen’s eyes when Tahlen turned back to him. “Tahlen, your hair! Who did this to you?” None of what hair remained was long enough for even the smallest braid. “Was it the Villucatto?” Zelli bit his lip to bruise it. “It’s my fault. I’m sorry.”

Tahlen shook his head almost gently but said, firm and final, “We *are* getting you armor that fits you. And you will wear it even when just attending judgments or touring the valley.”

That had nothing to do with Tahlen’s hair being gone.

“You will worry over me and I accept that,” Zelli conceded. “But we are speaking of who hurt you.”

“Zelli,” Tahlen said, not giving an inch.

“Yes, Tahlen.” Zelli agreed to the armor, although he had already done so. “But your hair.” No other guard wore their hair as Tahlen had, not that anyone would stop them if they

tried. Long hair was inconvenient, as Zelli could attest. The sort of thing a beat-of-four did because they could. That braid was Vallithi. Tahlen had been proud to wear it.

“Tea with milk and honey, if you will not eat,” Esrin said gruffly, holding a sturdy cup in front of Zelli until Zelli took it.

“Thank you.” Zelli glanced up to her, though she was already turning away, her long hair in a neat weave that made him immediately turn back to Tahlen. Actions, with the Vallithi siblings, he realized absently. Actions more than words or even whatever they chose to show.

“I don’t understand,” Zelli worried between sips of the tea Tahlen nudged toward his mouth. “Was it the mud? But why cut it off, and so carelessly?”

Tahlen released a long breath.

“He asked them to save you,” Bree said softly, staring into the distance when Zelli looked to her.

“Cut it off then and there,” Fy joined in using the same awed tone. “Laid it down and then it was gone when I blinked. I’ve never seen that for myself, the fae taking something. To think they value hair...”

“It’s not the hair,” Zelli interrupted, turning once again to Tahlen and Tahlen’s defiant glare. “It’s the emotion behind the offering. Well... sometimes it’s the offering.”

Zelli stroked the shell of Tahlen’s ear and his neck, letting pinks of all shades trickle through his skin to disappear beneath the sleeve of Grandmother’s robe.

“Your hair to bring me back?” The need in the offering would have pleased the fae, but they shouldn’t have accepted it if they’d planned on reviving Zelli regardless. “You’ve already had so much taken from you.”

Tahlen closed his eyes before putting his head down. “Don’t let me go.” The whisper was only for Zelli. “Please, Zelli.”

“I didn’t,” Zelli tried to assure him, trailing a touch down Tahlen’s throat to the glint of silver now visible at Tahlen’s collar. He tugged his charm free of the cloth, pleased the silver

was warm from Tahlen's skin. Tahlen had worn it for hours, perhaps had never taken it off.

He would have been wearing it when he'd made his request. That would have pleased them too, even if the fae hadn't already been delighted with Tahlen. And as they had done for Zelli, they had answered him. "They granted my wish," Zelli realized aloud. "Oh."

Tahlen opened his eyes.

Zelli kept his fingertips against the rowan tree and confessed to it. "As I was..." *dying*. "When I was there, I asked the fae to take care of you. To make sure you wouldn't be alone, and they agreed. But not how I was expecting. They let me come back to you."

Tahlen blinked, stunned or exhausted or both.

"And I will, Tahlen," Zelli promised earnestly. "I will take care of you. I will not leave you no matter whom I might be offered to—if I even agree to that now. Grandmother implied I might not need to. I was... You all gave me a sleeping draught and my mind is not the clearest. But though I will think it over, if I decide to go ahead and seek out an alliance, my possible intended will have to accept that I have sworn myself to Tahlen Vallithi before the fae themselves."

He had no idea which person in the kitchen with them squealed. He only had eyes for Tahlen, as it had been since Tahlen had arrived here years ago.

"I have not been as good to you as you have been to me, but," Zelli hooked his fingers into the cord around Tahlen's neck, "I will have to do better." Starting with getting Tahlen to rest, and then maybe getting a cord for the necklace that fit Tahlen more comfortably and had fewer marks from Zelli's teeth in it.

Zelli's face might have been as pink as his fingers but he found he didn't care. Tahlen had put himself into Zelli's hands again, though Zelli had hurt him.

"You've been so kind and strong and patient," Zelli praised him, heating up himself at how this brought all of Tahlen's

attention to him, Tahlen's gaze scorching. But the sudden flurry of movement at the table made him turn in surprise.

"I have things to see to," Let assured Zelli, pulling several of the others up with her. The others were looking everywhere but toward Zelli and Tahlen.

Fy stayed where he was, observing Zelli and Tahlen with his chin in his hands. Not even Vint tugging on his sleeve could make him budge.

Bree was studying the ceiling but grinning to herself.

Zelli smiled at all of them. "I don't understand any of you, either, but I think you're wonderful too. Those of you who choose to stay with us are welcome. Are they not, Gurn?" He didn't wait to find out if Gurn grunted in agreement. He turned his attention back to Tahlen. "If you are finished here, it's time you rested. Isn't it, Esrin?"

"Yes," Esrin said from somewhere. "See to it, Tialttyrin. But do not break his heart again, or...."

Zelli glanced to her in time to catch her motioning with her hand across her throat. She wasn't frowning. He didn't know what to make of it or Tahlen's vexed little exhale, but he inclined his head in response and let Tahlen take the cup of tea from him—after Tahlen first nudged Zelli to drain it—and set it on the table.

Tahlen was on his feet in moments, Zelli firmly in his arms.

"I can walk," Zelli insisted, embarrassed again although being carried was nothing to everything else between them that had been witnessed by so many others. Maybe it was Tahlen taking care of him instead of the other way around. "I don't want to be any trouble," he added, but closed his mouth when that drew another irritated exhale from Tahlen. "This once, then," he allowed weakly, and dropped his head to Tahlen's shoulder.



## Twenty-Three

“Did I break your heart before?” Zelli asked once Tahlen had dismissed Zelli’s escort. Which had not been a vocal dismissal. Tahlen had emerged from the kitchen holding Zelli and the other two had raised their eyebrows, grinned, then vanished into the morning fog.

“Are you in pain?” Tahlen asked, dangerously close to grunting.

Zelli rubbed his cheek on Tahlen’s shoulder. He was comfortable and uncomfortable at the same time, but he didn’t think Tahlen was asking about how it felt to be carried.

“It doesn’t hurt.” He pressed a palm to his chest. “It just... reminds me it’s there. It’s a scar,” he added, to calm Tahlen in case Tahlen had not seen it while watching Zelli sleep, “not a wound. I’m fine.”

He wasn’t certain Tahlen believed him. But Tahlen walked on, finding his way without issue, unbothered by the lack of clear light or Zelli’s weight.

“Are we going to your room?”

At Zelli’s question, Tahlen paused. “Do you want to?”

Zelli had slept on the ground with Tahlen, he was more than fine to return to Tahlen’s small room with him. “Will your cat come to mine?” He didn’t know how to extend a welcome to a cat.

Tahlen did grunt; perhaps the short hair brought it out in guards. “It’s not my....” He didn’t finish because Zelli waved toward the ground, where Tippit trotted alongside Tahlen as if eager to once again share Tahlen’s bed.

“I have a lot in common with that cat,” Zelli commented over Tahlen’s sigh of resignation. “It missed you and it doesn’t want to be parted from you now.”

“I didn’t go anywhere,” Tahlen answered, strained.

Zelli put the back of one hand against Tahlen’s cheek to soothe him. “I saw my family.” He didn’t know if that would help, but he wanted Tahlen to know. “My other family. While I was... away. They tricked me when I asked that you not be alone. I think they already knew they were going to bring me back—not that I’m not grateful!” Zelli added, briefly addressing the air. “You asked what you asked of them, but I suspect they were going to do it anyway. Maybe they wanted to be absolutely sure of you first. I didn’t think I mattered to them, but,” a tender *My Mizel* lingered in his mind, “maybe I do.”

Tahlen was not appeased by this information. “You do matter, to all of us.”

Zelli didn’t argue, although it was strange to hear and he didn’t find it as warming as Tahlen found Zelli’s praise of him. “It seems so,” he allowed at last. “I will try to adjust to that.”

“Zelli.” Tahlen could growl too.

He’d growled *and* raised his voice this morning. He was more upset than he was allowing Zelli to see.

“Will you ever forgive me?” Zelli wondered, vaguely aware that others were moving around the courtyard: various staff heading to the kitchens for breakfast before starting their days, guards ducking past them to get to their chambers to rest.

He could feel Tahlen tense as he hesitated over his answer.

“I’m not angry.”

“I know.” That much, Zelli *did* know. “I understand you now... the important parts. The things that confused me about you before. I know you care for your family, living and dead, blood and chosen. That you will protect them with your life. That this includes me. And that it’s not anger which makes you sigh at me,” he lowered his voice apologetically, “it’s worry. Not that you don’t get angry with me for other things.”

“Zelli.” Tahlen turned his face into Zelli’s hand.

“I don’t need to touch you,” Zelli revealed, twisting his wrist so it was easier to pet Tahlen. Tahlen continued to allow it.

Zelli licked his teeth because he could not bite now. “Not because of my wish, I mean. I didn’t since before everything yesterday. I just didn’t notice. What a gift they gave me.” The mention of gifts reminded him. “Do my eyes bother you now? Grandmother says they’ve changed again.”

Tahlen barely paused he headed into the guards’ quarters where the corridor was dark, as if the candles lit the night before had melted down and not been replaced yet. “You didn’t look in a mirror before you left your room in barely any clothes while still weakened and tired?”

“Grandmother said you would notice my clothes,” Zelli marveled aloud at this, curious as to how she’d known. “But I had to see you. To apologize and to make sure you were all right.” He took his hand from Tahlen’s face to consider Tahlen shyly. “Thank you for letting me.”

Tahlen stopped in front of his room. His arms were shaking minutely, either with the strain of carrying Zelli so far after a trying night and day or for some other reason. He stared straight ahead at the plain wood of his door. “Say it again.”

Another apology was on Zelli’s tongue before he realized what Tahlen meant.

“I love you.” He was sure his face was growing as pink as his hands when he touched Tahlen. “Everyone can see it, but I can say it more if you like.”

Tahlen slid Zelli to his feet, but Zelli was barely on the ground long enough to blink before he was in Tahlen’s arms again. He held to Tahlen’s shoulders to bring his legs up around Tahlen’s waist, nodded a startled greeting to Hari and her puppy heading out, then closed his eyes and relaxed when Tahlen pulled him closer and exhaled over his head.

“I think you enjoy how small I am,” Zelli grumbled, stroking the back of Tahlen’s neck when Tahlen shivered. “You don’t argue with me; you just move me how you please.”

“Are you hurt?” Tahlen asked, brushing a kiss into Zelli’s hair. Zelli shook his head. Tahlen moved his kisses to Zelli’s forehead, his temple. “Should I put you down?”

“No,” Zelli answered honestly. “But my legs are bare and the corridor is not warm. And this robe doesn’t precisely...”

Tahlen opened the door and swept into the room, where he surprised Zelli again by setting him down on the bed and then stepping away. The cat jumped onto the bed and Tahlen closed the door. He did not return to Zelli for more kisses. He went to the fireplace, and once he had a fire going, looked at Zelli before sitting down in the chair by the hearth.

Zelli tugged his shirt and robe back down to cover at least his knees, then considered his bare calves and boots when he didn’t know how to interpret this silence. Tahlen’s gaze said something, but *what* was unclear.

“Kat Ryssa would know what you mean,” Zelli complained to his boots.

Tahlen sighed heavily. “I knew you didn’t like her.”

“*She* didn’t like *me*,” Zelli replied tartly, then released a sigh of his own. “Just because I’ve finally realized what my feelings for you are doesn’t mean you have to return them. If you’d rather...”

“Zelli.”

“Do you still love me?” Zelli turned toward Tahlen again, only to fix his gaze on the fire instead of Tahlen’s stormy brow. “This is a lot like the last time I was in your room,” he observed quickly.

In the place of mending, Tahlen’s cat was once again in Tahlen’s lap, with Tahlen’s hand buried in its fur. Tippit’s purr was just audible. Heat from the fire was growing, but something was going to have to be done about the guards’ quarters. Then probably the other servants’ quarters as well. The fortress had been built in a different time, with a mind to strength and defenses and not comfort. It was long past time for comfort now.

“The last time you were here,” Tahlen echoed, possibly prompting Zelli to explain. Or wanting Zelli to leave, having changed his mind about Zelli because Zelli was not what anyone would want, especially not Tahlen, a hero from a story.

Tahlen had brought him here. Zelli swallowed and tried to remember that.

“The only time,” Zelli corrected him. “And in my nightclothes. I shouldn’t have intruded on your off-duty hours. I apologize again for that.”

“Zelli,” Tahlen said, strained, as if his jaw was clenched.

“You want something from me and I don’t know what.” Zelli huffed. “I can give you what wealth I have, which isn’t much, not personally, though I don’t have a lot of expenditures, so perhaps I can offer more if I look at the numbers. I can love you without discretion—though I will apparently do that even if you don’t want it. Sorry. And... there is my body. Though perhaps it’s too much trouble? Kear didn’t like the look of me. Does it bother you, how I look now?” Zelli gestured to his face, his eyes. “Maybe you couldn’t see me fully in the kitchens?”

“I might miss the colors of your eyes,” Tahlen admitted. “They told me a lot about what you were feeling... or I thought they did; I wasn’t as good at reading them as I assumed. But no, I’m not bothered by your eyes now. They’re yours, and even black, when they should swallow all light, they seem to reflect it. They’re beautiful, Zelli.”

*Tahlen* was beautiful. Of the two of them, he was the one who ought to be called a flower, like the scattered clusters of pale blossoms that only unfurled in the light of morning. Flowers as white as the stars above. Flowers the fae had used to guide the ancient Vallithi to safety.

“I couldn’t believe you’d want to court me,” Zelli admitted in return. “But I didn’t say no. I never would have.”

Tahlen didn’t lose his frown, but slowly inclined his head. “Perhaps I didn’t believe you’d say yes.”

Zelli stared at Tahlen in baffled consternation. “Then why ask?”

“Your grandmother told me—warned me—that she was considering an alliance for you.” Tahlen briefly dropped his attention to Tippit, who seemed to revel in it, purring his

knuckles. “And I believed from how she said it that she was telling me that I should try before that happened. Esrin also. She said that how you watch me meant you were taken with me, and that you were not a fool, so of course you would. . . . She thought you cared for me.”

No wonder Zelli had been glared out of the kitchen since then.

He raised a hand to try to chew his fingernails, then lowered it again after several moments of consideration.

“Maybe I was too public with the others?” Zelli didn’t think that Tahlen, capable of acting like a stone wall, if not of being one, would have promised anything to Zelli to save Zelli the embarrassment of a public refusal. But then again, Zelli had not actually asked him anything. “When I spoke of this before, you didn’t answer.” He tried to flatten the anxious tremor in his voice. “So, to have it be clear: I would like to court you, Tahlen, if you would like that. You are already wearing a gift from me, so mere *courting* also sounds foolish. But it’s far too early to speak of hand-fasting. I don’t even know what vow I’d make to you, but I would want for us to speak. Even if later you wouldn’t desire to stay with me.”

Tahlen narrowed his eyes, then all feeling disappeared from his face.

Zelli straightened. “You’re telling me you wouldn’t leave me. That even though it’s too early to say it, you would be my one-and-only until we’re both old and gray.” Zelli looked down, then back up. “But that’s what I mean. Even if. . . .” He swallowed what he might have said so he wouldn’t hurt Tahlen again. “If you were to stop speaking to me, if we ended up like those two with their walnut tree, I would miss you. It would be unbearable to have been close to you and then to not be anymore. So that’s what I’d want in my vows. For you to know, even with that, I’d still want to talk with you. Is that wrong? I suppose it’s not something people ask for.”

“If Mizel says something is unbearable, then it truly must be.”

“This feels terrible,” Zelli informed Tahlen moments later, because that was all Tahlen said. “How long do people usually wait for an answer? Oh, they probably are already close to one

another before the courtship officially begins. I don't know where that leaves us."

The mattress dipped near Zelli's side. Tippit, satisfied with attention for the moment, was curling up in its usual spot on the bed, readying for a nap.

"You don't need to court me," Tahlen offered, no longer frowning.

Zelli didn't mean to argue but an argument seemed necessary. "But you should have it."

"So should you," Tahlen returned seriously.

Zelli sputtered. "I never imagined it for myself, so I don't miss it. Besides," he added firmly in response to Tahlen's determined expression, "you will do as you will do, as you told me once, and you like pleasing me." Zelli kicked his feet. "If you want to call that courting, then, yes, I agree to it for you to hear. Yes. Please court me. You... you've been trying to court me, haven't you?" He asked it as he realized it. Ever since Zelli had told Tahlen he knew nothing of lovers, or kissing, or courtship, Tahlen had been trying to make it plain. "Probably as you would have the first time."

Tahlen's lovely mouth went soft with surprise, but he disagreed. "No. This time I was trying to do better, so you'd understand."

"I liked your stories of the stars," Zelli revealed, shy and giddy at once. "Though we never got to see any together." He slid to his feet, pausing to smooth out his clothing and also to recover when this made him dizzy. He hoped Tahlen didn't notice, but assumed he did.

"That doesn't mean you need to court me," Tahlen finally said.

He *had* noticed and thought Zelli was weak. Zelli was, a bit, but that had nothing to do with anything.

"I am the Mountain Wolf of the Tialttyrin," Zelli used the title Tahlen had given him, "and I also will do as I will do." He lowered his raised chin almost immediately. "I like making you feel warm, so won't you let me?"

Tahlen's breath rasped, in and out. He nodded.

Zelli nodded in reply, relieved that was settled. He shifted slightly closer to Tahlen and to the fire. "Your hair remains damp from your bath," he remarked, although with it so short the fire would dry it soon if it hadn't already. "May I comb it for you before you rest?"

He had not forgotten that Tahlen needed rest, even if Tahlen had.

He waited, holding onto the bed while his knees wobbled, but when Tahlen only continued to stare at him, he took that as permission to look around until he found Tahlen's packs, abandoned on the floor. He found the comb easily. If Tahlen hadn't been so weary, he might have done more than sit still as Zelli came around his chair.

Zelli gently swept the comb through what hair remained, sighing to realizing Tahlen had chopped the braid off at the back of his neck and the rest of this was someone's—probably Esrin's—attempt to even the length.

He worked carefully around Tahlen's ears, stopping helplessly when he reached the spot where he would have put a small braid if Tahlen would have let him. He spoke in a whisper. "Will you grow it out again or leave it short like the other guards?"

Tahlen dropped his shoulders in a shrug. "I've been thinking of you, not my hair."

Zelli tossed the comb to the bed, then didn't know what to do with his useless hands except rest them on the chair. "I *am* sorry for hurting you."

Tahlen reached up to take hold of one of Zelli's hands and tugged until Zelli shuffled closer. Then Zelli was pulled into Tahlen's lap once again, slowly, with the tenderest care. It left him warm and undoubtedly affectionate-pink beneath his clothes, or perhaps different shades of pleased-yellows—or possibly a light blue as he thought of why Tahlen needed him so close.



He wasn't sure of the chair, but though it creaked, it didn't break. Tahlen's sigh was satisfied.

Zelli tapped his shoulder. "I will court you regardless of any intended." He would make that clear too. "Grandmother seems to think the fae's actions were dramatic enough that no one will bother us, not without significant motivation. You would think killing her brother would be that for Tye, but... I don't understand people like Tye of the Villucatto. Regardless, if an alliance is still required, which Grandmother doubts, I will make it clear to everyone how much I value you. How much *they* should value you." He found the rowan tree and petted it, then the hollow of Tahlen's throat, while Tahlen breathed faster and let him. "Any intended will have to be strong enough to deal with that. As strong as you are. I still don't know the correct word to describe you, so beautiful will have to do."

A shudder tore through Tahlen.

"I don't know what I would say to you as our hands are bound together." Tahlen stopped there, probably for the sound Zelli made, too close to a squeak. "But I'd want it to be like what I said to you the first time I approached you, even if I'd hope you'd understand me now." Zelli shook his head, because he didn't. Tahlen briefly shut his eyes as if pained. "When I had been here a while, your grandmother took me with her and the others to travel the valley. The journey lasted a month because she didn't want to travel fast. And when we finally returned, you were out. In the village on some errand, I think. You had undoubtedly noticed her retinue being welcomed back, but you kept to your work. I thought I would see you that evening, but I was sent to rest, so it was several days before I saw you again. I remember being irritated that I hadn't gotten to hear your grandmother tell you of her judgments and listen to your thoughts on them. I remember my annoyance keenly."

"You made friends on that journey," Zelli commented. "More than one, I bet, as a handsome young guard who shares his smiles with others."

Tahlen gave Zelli a heated look. "But then," he began sternly, "there you were. Nothing had changed about you; a month is

not long enough for that if you're grown. But you *had* changed. You grew red as you spoke to me, but you kept yourself back. That bothered me too, though I knew it meant your grandmother must have said something to you."

Zelli put his hands to his cheeks and stayed silent.

Tahlen tugged Zelli's hands down. "You said, 'I'm happy you've returned and have decided to stay for good. Grandmother tells me you've given her your oath. Did it help you decide, to witness her judgments and see her with everyone? You're very thoughtful. I admire that about you.'"

"I said I admired you?" Zelli asked, not meekly, but hardly proud of himself. He should have remembered.

"Yes." Tahlen plucked at one of Zelli's sleeves. "For something other than what I was usually admired for."

Zelli's frown of outrage at how guards and Tahlen were sometimes treated melted away when Tahlen spoke again.

"And I thought, *Oh, this little Tialttyrin is as dangerous as the others say*. Then I left you there and performed my duties for weeks while thinking of it. You gave me that gift for no reason. You listen when I talk. You care if I've been on my feet all day and haven't eaten, if I've been away and haven't seen Esrin, if my cat has a name." Tahlen paused and glanced to Tippit before sighing and lowering Zelli's hand. "You are generous, powerful, and clever. More people are going to realize that soon. They'll want you before they ever meet you."

"And then they will be afraid of me, as Kear was." Zelli went still, then raised his head when Tahlen splayed a hand over his chest where the scar was, as if he knew the spot well.

"Some of them will want you more," Tahlen said, low and sad.

He seemed sure of it. Zelli wasn't. "Kear thought I was a creature from a nightmare, but I would have hand-fasted with him to keep you from fighting. For the others as well, as is my duty. But mostly for you."

Tahlen didn't lift his gaze from the button on Zelli's robe he was toying with. "You deserve better than your family. Either

side.”

“Be careful,” Zelli shushed him, putting a hand over Tahlen’s mouth.

“They like the truth and I will speak it,” Tahlen said against Zelli’s palm. “Your grandmother is wise and does the best she can, but this fortress, this village, hold together because of your efforts. *You* do Nya’s tasks when she’s forgotten them, and the staff have learned to speak with *you* when matters need to be attended to urgently. It’s your relatives in the capital who are useless, which is why I never realized you thought you were. I didn’t realize many things, because you were matter-of-fact about being a bargaining piece in a negotiation to save a family that did not care about you, and your arguments are always—mostly—thought through, and you are determined and so full of care that you cannot be still.”

The robe had been unbuttoned at the top while Zelli had stared at Tahlen in disbelief, and Tahlen, without returning Zelli’s stare, slid a hand over the scar. His palm was warm through Zelli’s shirt.

“You are also very pretty, Zelli.” For that, Tahlen looked at him again at last. “I like your shoulders and the red of your mouth and the way you sit a horse. The rest... that is merely more of you to admire. It’s pretty as well, the way that wolves are pretty.”

Zelli picked up Tahlen’s hand from his chest to gnaw lightly on his knuckles.

“I am nibbling,” he admitted, biting a little harder when Tahlen began to grow flushed. “Because you like this part of me, and you forgive me—or will forgive me, someday—for what happened. No one else would, I suspect, not in the way that you do, and that is why....” He stopped chewing to whisper. “Don’t be upset, but I wonder if that they knew this, the fae, in the way that they know things. And that’s one of the reasons they brought you here.”

“Did they bring me here?” Tahlen asked, surprisingly mild about it, but he *was* very tired.

Zelli made a face but nodded. “I think they see much farther ahead than we do, or something like that. It’s why their answers to wishes seem to make no sense or be torturous at the time. Then, later, you realize... I was there, in that place, with that person, and it wasn’t terrible. It was wonderful, in fact.” He smiled for a moment. “In so many other ways, with so many other people, it could have been disastrous. Before they showed me to Kear as a nightmare, they showed me to you and you loved me. Maybe things are awkward to us because the fae don’t quite understand our ways or care to learn them, or they think awkwardness is part of it. But they made sure I got to be happy with you first.”

Zelli kissed Tahlen’s reddened knuckles. “I think it’s like your family story, only sometimes the fae are more subtle. They take little interest in human affairs and politics, but they like humans. Certain ones especially. Like you. You were alone and lost, and you wished something out loud or in your heart, and they led you to one of their favorite places. You wanted a home. They led you here.”

“To you?” Tahlen regarded Zelli with interest, seemingly unconcerned with the pinpricks left behind by Zelli’s teeth.

“To me?” Zelli nearly dropped Tahlen’s hand in his astonishment. “Oh. Do you think so? My colors stay now, for you. Just you. But I’m not that favored.”

“Aren’t you?” Tahlen wasn’t really asking.

Zelli turned to hide his face. “Later,” he whispered around a surge of love left him tingling and warm, “I must tell you about meeting them, my family. They’re not like humans. I’m not fully human, either. Tahlen,” Zelli took a deep breath, “I could probably give you a Vallithi, if you like. At some point. I think that’s also why I am how I am. Possibly.”

The jolt that went through Tahlen made Zelli tense.

Tahlen pulled his hand free of Zelli’s desperate grip and used it to urge Zelli’s head up. He studied Zelli, not blank but still not easy to read.

“The children of such unions take the name of the more powerful and ancient line. That’s tradition.”

Zelli scoffed with a lightness he didn’t feel. “I will do what I please, Tahlen Vallithi. Are you going to tell me no?”

Tahlen raised both eyebrows. “Have I ever?”

He had, in fact, though not often. But Zelli didn’t want to want think on those few times. He tugged Tahlen’s hand up so he could nibble Tahlen’s fingertips. He thought, idly, in the midst of his many other thoughts, that if he could learn to bite Tahlen so as to only draw blood or leave marks when he wanted to, then he could certainly learn enough control to be allowed to have Tahlen’s cock all the way in his mouth. But that would have to wait, like many things.

“A child would be far in the future and it’s a possibility only.” Zelli was distantly terrified, but if his parent could do it, so could he. “It’s a shame we can’t combine our family names like nobles did in the days of the first Earls to get the beat-of-four names.” The practice had been forbidden centuries ago. “A Vallithi-Tialttyrin,” he mused, “would please the fae greatly. I think that wish would be granted, and woe to anyone who tried to prevent it.”

Tahlen shut his eyes and took several moments to force his breathing to even out. His arms tightened around Zelli, but not enough to hurt or to even be uncomfortable. “I don’t know how I ever thought I wouldn’t love you.” He opened his eyes at the sound Zelli made. “Are you all right? Is something wrong?”

“Only a few nights ago, you said that very same thing as I came in here.” Zelli blinked. Had it only been a few nights? It was no wonder Tahlen was exhausted. He peered at Tahlen, missing the shining fall of his hair but loving the gleaming pleasure in Tahlen’s eyes. “Are you all right?” you said. I thought you’d be annoyed with me, but you weren’t. You stood up and you seemed... excited, in your careful way. Why did you think I’d come? Oh,” Zelli realized the answer almost in the same moment. “You hoped I’d changed my mind and I had come to say yes. That seems obvious now. I was in my

nightclothes and was in your bedroom late at night.” He silently chided himself for his foolishness but didn’t want to waste time on it with Tahlen regarding him steadily, his pleasure falling away. “*If* I had said no, I would have changed my mind at seeing you like that. I forgot everything I came in here to say, and you made it very difficult not to touch you.” Zelli sighed, not unhappily. “If you had touched me, I probably would have fallen into your arms then and there, and embarrassed myself thoroughly.”

“What would have been embarrassing about that?” Tahlen pulled on the end of one of Zelli’s braids. “You don’t know how you looked at me.”

Zelli peeked up at him. “Did you know my feelings then as well?” Everyone had, but Zelli hadn’t considered that this would have meant Tahlen too. “Your sister said I cared for you, but what did you think?”

Tahlen glanced away, to Tippet, to the bed. “I thought so too. Until, you—until you refused me. Then, this journey through the valley....” He looked back at Zelli. “You fussed over me, and you were jealous of Kat, and you told me you thought I disliked you. You kept looking at me in that way you do, as if you want to eat me but also put flowers in my hair.” Zelli twitched but Tahlen didn’t seem to notice. “I didn’t understand until you fed me berries and told me that the idea of losing me was so painful to you that you couldn’t bear it. You didn’t even know what you were telling me. But if you say you can’t bear it, I know it’s too much for anyone. Your family ignoring you, countless humiliations, being sent away to a stranger, those you could live through. But not me leaving you.”

“Tahlen.” Zelli’s voice cracked.

“As I told you then, I won’t. Not over a distance and not while next to you. I will not leave you.” Tahlen put his hand to Zelli’s chest, pushing gently but deliberately against the scar, or maybe making sure he could feel Zelli’s heart beating. “I told you that, and I vowed to myself to make sure you knew you weren’t alone and to wait until you understood. I just wasn’t expecting... what you said, tried to say, as you were dying.”

“With my body, beautiful Tahlen,” Zelli murmured, throat tightening on the rest.

“I will not leave you, my Mizel,” Tahlen said back just as softly, and kissed him.

# Epilogue

Zelli raised his head at the sound of the door opening without actually taking his eyes from the planting reports in front of him. He was surprised by the ambitious plans from Cousin Adifer, but Adifer wasn't the only one to consider taking more chances after several years of a consistent peace, and the valley could use some change that wasn't any worse than perhaps a new grape variety no one wanted.

The peace might be shattered at any moment, but it had held for five years now, barring one incident at the capital that had been quickly and efficiently squelched. Zelli was not privy to the details outside of letters from his family members around the palace, but the ruler had been surprisingly—yet wisely—merciful, despite the direct threat to his life. The perpetrators had been punished, certainly, but the entire Tyrabalith family had not. Zelli hoped that meant The Tyrabalith—The *new* Tyrabalith, since the last one was now deceased—would see reason and settle down.

Their current ruler had kept the crown for five years and would keep it for years more if everyone else was as tired of the fighting as Zelli suspected they were. The king was ruthless enough, and canny enough, to survive, but also sensible enough to think before he acted. That might be all it took to maintain this peace.

That, and the correct bloodline and name to please the older families.

“A messenger arrived with this for The Tialtтын,” Tahlen announced, somewhere else in the room.

Zelli hummed and forced his eyes up from the reports. He saw no sign of Tahlen. “Grandmother will want to see it,” he said anyway.

Grandmother was resting, which she needed to do more and more, but she would be interested, and Zelli would like to



know her opinion on whatever information the message conveyed.

Tahlen emerged from the bathing room, most of his armor already removed. Zelli inhaled deeply in pleasure, as he always did when Tahlen was down to his woolens.

Tahlen kneeled down to remove his boots, then stood up. He took the message he must have left on the table by the fire and brought it to Zelli at his desk. Zelli had been forced to move the desk into their room several years ago after realizing that in order to get his work done without being interrupted by questions every moment of the day, he had to have a place to hide. It was also convenient for the waning days of his lust-fevers.

“You know the message is for you,” Tahlen said, as he said nearly every time, concerned that Zelli might be doubting himself again. He placed the thick envelope covered in gold ink on Zelli’s desk.

“She is still The Tialttyrin,” Zelli reminded him, as he also did nearly every time, making the words light so Tahlen wouldn’t worry.

Tahlen leaned in, wiping a trace of something, likely ink, from Zelli’s cheek, his braid trailing against Zelli’s shoulder. The ornaments running down the length of the braid were glass. Tahlen would not accept jewels after the other gifts Zelli had given him, but would allow colored glass and some precious metals. The sight of the white clusters of flowers nestled into Tahlen’s rich brown hair warmed Zelli to his toes, diamonds or not. Others might not know what those flowers meant, but Zelli did, and Tahlen wearing them for him was his gift in return.

Tahlen had a smudge on one sleeve, a splash of red that would have alarmed Zelli if he hadn’t known it was a mashed berry. A berry was the kind of sweet that a child of four like Daslin might gobble up at every opportunity. And the opportunities were plentiful, since the berries seemed to appear as if from nowhere.

Zelli's mouth twisted, pleasure and sadness mixing in equal measure as they always did when he thought how their child would never know loneliness as Zelli had, but wondered anew why he'd had to.

There would be no answers for his questions, even if he voiced them.

Tahlen had stopped in the nursery before coming here, but hadn't stayed long. He thought the message was important enough to merit giving Zelli time to absorb its contents before dragging Zelli from the room for dinner and to put Daslin to bed. Staying with Daslin to tell him stories as he fell asleep was something parents did, Tahlen had assured Zelli, and Zelli liked the ritual, although he didn't know nearly the number of stories that Tahlen did.

He wondered idly and not idly if another child would require more stories or the same ones, but had yet to ask Tahlen about it. Tahlen was protective at the best of times and giving him another source of worry might be too much. Then again, if the fae thought Tahlen couldn't take it, they wouldn't have sent him here. Besides, if Zelli was thinking it, then Tahlen was likely wishing it, even if he kept his wishes to himself. He would say, "I don't need another Vallithi. If anything, you need a Tialtтын." Or, "You were uncomfortable and in pain last time, and I couldn't help you." Or, "You've already given me so much, Zelli."

As if Zelli hadn't made the fae promise to never let Tahlen be alone. As if Zelli hadn't promised it to himself as well. As if Daslin didn't make even Esrin smile.

A bit smug at the thought, Zelli picked up the envelope. He read the front, then unfolded it to read the rest. It was opened. Grandmother had seen it already then. That was good, except...

"It is also addressed to the Mountain Wolf of the Tialtтын," Tahlen supplied helpfully as Zelli read those very words.

"That story going around the valley again?" Zelli was absently bothered, but not enough to question it now. The rest of the message was far more interesting.

“The message is not from the valley,” Tahlen said significantly.

Zelli glanced up at him, lost briefly in the brightness of the eyes looking back at him. It did not help when Tahlen pulled his shirt over his head, moving away to set it carefully aside though the berry juice would stain it as it had stained so much of his clothing already.

The impression of Zelli’s teeth at Tahlen’s shoulder blade was just as distracting as Tahlen’s eyes, more so, at the moment, with the light glinting off the flowered clasps in Tahlen’s braid so close to that bite mark.

“What do you think?” Tahlen asked.

It took Zelli a beat too long to remember the message, which was what Tahlen was asking about.

Or possibly not. He did like showing off for Zelli. Zelli should reward him for it.

But he cleared his throat and focused, for the moment, on the message.

Which was very much *not* from the valley.

“An invitation to a wedding?” Zelli wondered in amazement, reading it through again more slowly. Letters from family in the capital had said a royal wedding was being planned, a celebration of the peace, really, which the king’s upcoming second marriage was supposed to help secure. The king and his husband were making a public display of their love for a librarian. A beat-of-four and a Master Keeper in the Great Library as well, but still a librarian.

Zelli had been pleased at the gossip, and like many others hoped it meant the times of chaos were over. He hadn’t considered attending the wedding himself.

He wanted to travel, of course, beyond his yearly journey up and down the length of the valley and his one small, carefully planned visit with some of the Rossick. But to the palace.... Even by river, it was not a trip to be taken lightly. He would have to consider which members of the household would accompany him, soothe over hurt feelings for those left

behind, assign tasks, prepare Daslin, deal with the guards' worries, deal with *Tahlen's* worries.... His family in the capital would be a challenge as well, some perhaps genuinely welcoming, others only out of fear Zelli would cut their funds.

At that thought, Zelli smiled a little, pressing his tongue to one of his fangs.

Then he tried to be serious again. "Probably everyone from every beat-of-four family is invited."

He had barely said it when a slip of paper fell out from the folds of the first one.

He picked it up, and saw, scribbled in crimson ink:

*To Mizel of the Tialttyrin, and, if the songs I hear are true, his husband, Tahlen of the Vallithi. Please accept this invitation to attend my wedding and stay in the palace as my honored guests. The smallest gesture to acknowledge your service to us all.*

It was signed, *Arden of the Canamorra, Traitor King.*

"Tricky," Zelli said fiercely though his thoughts were racing. "Fae bless him."

Tahlen, equally fae blessed, came to stand at Zelli's desk. Within reach, if Zelli wanted. Silver glinted at his throat. He stroked up the length of Zelli's ear, pointed now at all times, then did the same to one of Zelli's horns.

He did not ask what Zelli wanted to do or if Zelli had considered the stares that were sure to follow him. Tahlen, who would bare those bite marks in any sparring ring in the summer when shirts were often optional, wouldn't. Sometimes, Zelli suspected Tahlen bared those marks to make Zelli feel better. Then Tahlen would submit himself for more, gasping quietly with his pleasure, and Zelli would remember the truth.

"I didn't expect to be remembered." That was what confused him, in this moment at least. But he looked up at Tahlen with wide eyes in the exact way that drove most of the reason from Tahlen's thoughts.

“Tahly,” he began sweetly, “would you like to visit the capital?”

# The End

## A Suitable Consort (For the King and His Husband)

Everyone expects the king to rage at the suggestion that he find a new spouse to stand alongside—or better yet, replace—his beloved husband. Some might be planning on it, hoping to incite another conflict like what has plagued the country since the death of the last legitimate ruler. But to everyone's surprise, the infamous Traitor King, Arden Canamorra, reacts to the suggestion with amusement, perhaps even interest.

Decades of chaos ended with Arden's ascension to the throne.

But many in the oldest noble families want more influence over the crown—noble influence, that is. Not from the king's lower-rank and somewhat rough palace guard husband, Mil. They don't care that Mil is a hero who helped secure peace at Arden's side, and that, at least among the common people, Arden and Mil's love story is legendary.

Mattin, however, is outraged. A librarian at the royal library and advisor to the king despite his relatively young age, Mattin deeply admires the royal couple. That they happen to also be incredibly attractive is something he very determinedly ignores. If Arden and Mil are going to marry again for political purposes—since Mattin is sure no new love could ever match their great passion for each other—he will at least find someone perfect for them. If thinking about it makes Mattin miserable, well, he ignores that, too.

But the king and his husband seem less interested in meeting appropriate nobles and more interested in fussing over Mattin

while making plans of their own. It's a more complicated matter than an innocent librarian could have realized, with more at risk than just his heart. The most suitable consort might not be enough to appease certain nobles, but the most beloved might win over the entire country.

An m/m/m romance

## More queer romance by R. Cooper

Taji From Beyond the Rings

The Devotion of Delfenor

The Familiar Spirits Series

The Being(s) in Love Series

## About R. Cooper

R. Cooper lives in a pink palace by the—no. R. Cooper longs to live the life of a fictional 1980s romance novelist (but queer), but, alas, her life is actually mostly spent daydreaming and trying to write, which is at least a little Joan Wilder in spirit, including the crying over manuscripts. R. thought about gender for a while and settled on she/her/they in lieu of anything better, but don't call her a woman because it feels oogie. She likes *Moonstruck* too maybe much, hates fascists, does her best not to be a jerk, hides from most humans, and lives with her cat in her semi-haunted house somewhere between the Northern California Redwoods and wine country.

[www.riscooper.com](http://www.riscooper.com)

