

A photograph of a very muscular man, shirtless, in a dark, moody environment. He is looking down and to the left. The word "GUARDED" is written across his chest in a stylized, orange, distressed font. The letters have a rough, ink-like texture and some bleed-through or dripping effects. The background is solid black, making the man's physique and the orange text stand out.

# GUARDED

Kim  
Fielding

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## GUARDED

**By Kim Fielding**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

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

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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

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## Photo Description

Two very muscular, shirtless men stand under a cascade of water. The man on the left kneels and rests his head against the other's torso. His eyes are closed and his palm is pressed against the other man's heart. The man on the right leans over his companion slightly and gathers his companion's long wet hair with one hand. He looks down at his companion with tenderness and concern.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*We are on the run, me—a bodyguard—and him—a prince. I have admired him for so long, but he hates me.*

*\*Can be set as a fairy tale/fantasy/medieval. No sci-fi, dystopia, contemporary.*

*\*Feys, warlocks, vampires, shapeshifters if you like (not necessarily), no ghouls, ghosts or zombies.*

*\*Lots of erotic tension, other partners/threesome welcome, non-con okay.*

*\*Must have fighting scene(s) (each other or others) with/without weapons. Slow growing of love. HFN or HEA please.*

*Thank you very much,*

*Margitta*

## Story Info

**Genre:** fantasy

**Tags:** royalty, military men, enemies to lovers, hurt/comfort, prison/captivity

**Content Warnings:** rape

**Word Count:** 37,177

**GUARDED**  
**By Kim Fielding**

## Chapter One

Volos was not afraid.

He had watched his family slaughtered when he was just a boy, but he had survived to grow strong. As an adult he had faced hordes of angry sword-wielding men without backing down. He had spent nearly a year as a prisoner of war under conditions as terrible as the third hell, but he had endured and escaped and continued his life. He was certainly not frightened to have a conversation with one old man.

Not even if the old man was the king.

Captain Hiwot walked so quickly that Volos, despite his longer legs, had trouble keeping up with her. His sword swung at his hip; he hadn't had time to adjust it properly when she came to fetch him. Still, he managed to sneak a few looks at his surroundings as he rushed by. He'd never been in this part of the castle before. The hallways here were narrow and the decorations finer but less lavish. It was a more intimate space than he was used to.

The captain came to a halt in front of a door flanked by two guards who saluted her and gave Volos very slight nods. He knew these men, but not well. Captain Hiwot knocked firmly and opened the door even before receiving an answer. Volos followed like an obedient puppy.

He found himself in a room that was smaller than he had expected and considerably more pedestrian. The most striking feature was an oversized fireplace with roaring flames. Several padded chairs were scattered about, three battered tables supported piles of papers and scrolls, and more papers sat on overloaded shelves. Heavy curtains shrouded the single window, and as elsewhere in the castle, the floor was stone.

Two men stood near the fireplace. One of them was King Tafari. He nodded at Captain Hiwot, who bowed and quickly retreated from the room. At the same time, Volos dropped to one knee and bowed his head, waiting to be acknowledged.

"Get up," the king said. "Formalities aren't wanted now."

Volos rose. "Yes, Your Majesty."

He kept his eyes trained carefully on the floor, but he could still feel the weight of the king's gaze—not to mention that of the other man, Prince

Berhanu. The prince always looked at him with contempt and disdain, but this afternoon he looked furious as well. Volos wondered what he had done to enrage him.

“What is your name?” the king asked. He didn’t sound angry, at least.

“Volos Perun, Your Maj—”

“And is it true that you speak Kozari fluently?”

Volos snapped his head up in surprise. “I... My father was...”

“Your father was Kozari, yes. I am aware of that. But do you speak the language?”

It had been Volos’s first tongue, and although he’d had little occasion to use it for some years, he still dreamed in Kozari. “Yes, Your Maj—”

“Good.” The king turned to Prince Berhanu. “He will accompany you.”

“No,” growled the prince. “I told you. I don’t need a nursemaid.” He stood with his hands on his hips, perhaps deliberately displaying his impressive musculature. He was a couple of inches shorter than Volos but as well built.

“He’s not a nursemaid, he’s a guard. It’s not fitting for a prince to travel alone, not even under these circumstances. And it’s not safe. I won’t allow you to go unaccompanied.”

Any man but the prince would have been tried for treason for glaring at the king like that. “Fine,” Berhanu spat. “Give me a guard. But not him.”

“He can speak the language. His presence may ease your interactions with the Kozari.”

“I won’t spend days with that Kozari trash at my side!”

Volos had beaten men senseless for lesser insults. But now he stood with his face carefully blank, pretending Berhanu’s words hadn’t pierced him like poisoned arrows.

The king had gray hair and a grizzled beard and was much slighter than his son, but when he stomped closer to the prince, Berhanu took a step backward. King Tafari poked him in the chest. “This man is a citizen of Wedeyta. He was born here. His mother was from one of our prominent families. And he proved his loyalty during the war. He was a hero. I’m told he saved several dozen Wedey prisoners.”



A flash of sense memory: the reek of urine, shit, and sweat; the sounds of harsh breathing and terrified screams; the taste of blood. Volos hoped neither of the men saw him flinch.

Berhanu shook his head. "I don't care if he saved half the damn country. I won't go with him. Surely someone else speaks Kozari. One of our *own* people."

King Tafari opened his mouth, then closed it. His shoulders slumped slightly as he gave his son a long look. He turned to face Volos. "My apologies. It seems your services will not be needed in this matter. You may leave."

Ignoring the prince's triumphant smile, Volos bowed. "Yes, Your Majesty. Thank you." He hoped that his failure to address the prince wasn't taken as an unforgivable slight—but then, the prince hadn't said a single word to him. Ever.

Captain Hiwot waited in the hallway. Perhaps she had overheard the conversation through the closed door, or perhaps she could judge the situation from Volos's expression. She was a very perceptive woman. In either case, she motioned him back in the direction of the guards' quarters. Then she entered the room with the king and closed the door behind her.

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*Whack!* The wooden sword slammed into his face, delivering a jolt of pain and a fountain of blood from his nose. Volos staggered a half step backward and glared at his opponent. "You almost broke it," he said, gingerly touching the bridge of his nose.

Seble cackled and waved the tip of her sword in his direction. "No use being vain now. It's been broken before."

"In battle, not in practice." He grabbed his tunic from the floor where he'd flung it earlier and used it to wipe the blood from his face. The flow was slowing already—it had been a glancing blow—but he'd likely end up with an ugly bruise.

"And if you'd been as fuddle-headed in battle as you are today, you'd never have lived this long."

He grunted at her, but she was right and they both knew it. If he'd been paying full attention, she never would have been able to strike him so well with her sword. He knew as well as anyone that distraction was fatal in a fight. If he

and Seble had been sparring with real swords, she would have killed him with that blow. He growled at himself, gave a last swipe to his face, and tossed the wadded fabric aside. "Again," he said, bending his knees into fighting stance.

But Seble shook her head. "I'm done with swordplay for today." She waggled her eyebrows. "Want to wrestle instead?"

"I'm far too heavy for you. You couldn't possibly win."

"Who says winning is my goal?" She flashed a grin before striding to the end of the practice room to stack her sword in a cabinet. Most of the other guards had already left to wash up before lunch, although two women were restringing their bows and a man was tossing a hammer at a target. Volos rarely trained with anyone but Seble. She was shorter and lighter than he was, but then, so were most of the men. She was very quick and clever, however, and he liked to fight her because she forced him to think. She also liked to flirt, even though she must have long ago accepted that he wasn't interested in fucking her. She probably just liked the challenge.

Abandoning his ruined tunic, Volos followed Seble out of the training room. But when she turned left toward the mess hall, he continued forward. He wasn't hungry. He'd lost his appetite two weeks earlier, a few days after meeting with the king, and while he still forced himself to eat breakfast and dinner, he spent his lunchtimes running a circuit atop the castle walls. The guards mocked him as he sped by, but they were friendly taunts, and he simply gestured rudely in return without slowing down.

He'd have to get rid of his boots before he climbed the stairs to the rampart. The heavy footwear was fine for sparring, but he preferred to run barefoot. After he reached the dormitory and sat on his cot, he found himself frozen in the act of unlacing. The large room echoed with emptiness—eighty narrow beds neatly made, eighty locked trunks containing the worldly possessions of their owners. Volos knew what was in his trunk: several clean tunics and trousers, identical to those worn by the other guards; socks; his razor, comb, soap, and tooth-cleaner; a favorite knife in a worn leather scabbard; a few coins; a single set of plain civilian clothes. Not much to show for a lifetime, especially considering that the bulk of it wasn't truly his.

He finished unlacing his boots and pulled them off. But instead of standing, he collapsed back onto his thin mattress and stared at the timbered ceiling. He very rarely spent time alone in this room. Usually there were seventy-nine other

men and women talking, squabbling, laughing. Playing cards or dice, bragging about deeds on the battlefield or in the bedroom, complaining about the food or the drills or their pay. Even at night the room was filled with snoring and farting. Men and women called out in their sleep. Cots squeaked and bedding rustled as people sought a bit of solo pleasure in the false solitude of the dark.

But now Volos lay alone on his cot. His nose throbbed slightly, reminding him of his foolishness.

There was another man who neared Volos's strength and prowess in fighting. Prince Berhanu. He could have practiced on his own; he could have hired whomever he wanted to train with. But he seemed to prefer joining the guards. He arrived nearly every day, attired not in his royal costume but instead wearing the same plain tunic and trousers as the guards. He fought like the guards too, never sparing the force of his strength and always becoming furious if he suspected they were returning less than their full efforts. He was excellent at hand-to-hand combat and skilled with blades. The prince in combat was a fine sight indeed, especially when he took off his tunic and the sweat gleamed on his heavily muscled body. But although they were closely matched in size and skill, he refused to spar with Volos.

Volos liked to believe this was a blessing. It meant that he'd never forget himself when that solid body strained against his. He'd never be humiliated by stroking silky black hair when he ought to be wrestling, or by losing himself entirely in the heat of contact and rubbing his aching cock against his handsome partner. But no matter how many times Volos reminded himself of these things, he didn't *feel* blessed. Not when the prince shot him contemptuous looks, when he deigned to notice him at all. Not when the prince muttered darkly about Kozari scum.

Although Prince Berhanu fought with barely-restrained ferocity, he was charming when he relaxed with the other soldiers. He would squat against the wall with a few other guards, sipping at a cup of water and watching others spar. He joked, laughed, and teased with the easy comfort of a comrade, and he never minded when friendly mockery was made at his expense. He even joined the troops at meals sometimes—although he certainly could have found better food at the royal table—and he'd dig into the plain, hearty fare with as much gusto as anyone else. But every bit of light banter the prince exchanged with others and every good-natured smack to another guard's shoulder wounded Volos worse than a wooden sword ever could.

The dormitory was dark even at midday. The windows were set high in the walls, tucked under the tower's eaves, and received direct sunlight only during a short period every day. Sometimes the vast room felt like a cocoon and sometimes like a prison. Lately it had been feeling like a tomb. But Volos had keen eyesight, so even in the dim light he could make out cobwebs among the rafters. When he was very young, his father used to tuck him in at night with folktales from his homeland. The Kozari said that the universe was spun by a spider and each of the stars was a glittering jewel caught in a vast web. "We're all caught as well," his father used to say as he smoothed the hair from Volos's forehead. "Every one of us. The trick is to keep fighting to be free. We will never achieve freedom—not until the very end—but the fight can be so beautiful."

"Liar," Volos whispered into the empty dormitory, speaking in Kozari.

After several long minutes of listening to his own breathing, Volos sat up. It wasn't Prince Berhanu's hatred that had stolen his appetite and his attention. He'd become used to that hatred over the years, so much so that now he was bothered by its absence. The prince hadn't appeared at practice for two weeks—not since the night Volos had been summoned before the king. Sometimes Berhanu missed a day or two, but he'd never been gone so long. Surely the other guards must have noticed, but nobody mentioned it and Volos hadn't wanted to broach the subject himself. Everyone already knew that Berhanu detested him. It would kill Volos if his comrades suspected that the prince haunted Volos's dreams, if they knew that when Volos furtively pleased himself in the slumbering company of seventy-nine other guards, it was Prince Berhanu he was thinking of.

Volos stood, shook his head, and tucked his boots under the cot. Then he set off for the wall at a jog.

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The Thieving Goose was crowded this evening, but Volos managed to snag a small table in the back. He sipped his ale slowly and watched the other patrons, nodding and waving at a few familiar faces. The Goose stood only a few yards outside the castle walls and catered mostly to off-duty guards and certain civilians who were attracted to the guards. These civilians tended to be fairly well-to-do merchants and craftsmen who added a bit of thrill and ersatz danger to their lives by dressing down and consorting with soldiers. The guards never minded. They had all grown tired of fucking each other, and any willing body was good enough.

Volos must have had a reputation, because although women liked to eye him appreciatively, it was nearly always a man who worked up the courage to sit with him. Such as the man—only a few years past boyhood, really—who grinned at him now and folded himself gracefully into an empty chair. He was very pretty. Delicately built, with honey-colored curls and cinnamon-hued skin, and green eyes twinkling with slightly predatory glee. His tunic was probably meant to look plain, but even Volos could discern the fine quality of the cloth and tailoring. “I’m Adiso,” the young man said, speaking loudly over the din.

“Volos.”

Adiso’s gaze sharpened slightly at the foreign name, but he didn’t appear surprised. No doubt he’d heard of Volos already. There were those who sought him out specifically because he was half Kozari. They liked the hint of exoticism, perhaps, or maybe it added to his allure as an almost-ruffian. Not like Prince Berhanu, who was—No. Not Prince Berhanu, whom Volos shouldn’t even be thinking about.

“I’d like to buy you a drink,” said Adiso.

“I already have one.”

“I’ll buy you another.”

Volos sighed and rubbed his face, wincing a little due to his sore nose. He’d thought the bruise might prove off-putting, but apparently not. “Why don’t we just go somewhere and fuck?”

A wide grin bloomed on Adiso’s face. “I should have known you’d be a man of action.” He stood. “I’ll get us a room upstairs. Come on.”

The ale at the Goose wasn’t bad and the location was handy, but the upstairs rooms were the main draw: cheap by the hour and reasonably clean, not to mention conveniently close. The civilians who came to the Goose certainly wouldn’t be eager to bring a guard back to their fancy houses, and trysts inside the barracks were impractical.

A few people hooted as Volos followed Adiso to the shadowed exit in a corner of the room, but Adiso walked jauntily and Volos ignored the catcalls. No doubt some of his colleagues would ask him later for details about the pretty youth he’d bedded, but Volos was rarely willing to share. Sometimes these brief assignments felt more like a duty than a conquest or diversion.

The stairs were right outside the door. They hugged the exterior of the building tightly, as if emulating all the would-be lovers who’d passed that way.

The old man on the stool at the upstairs landing was missing a leg and an eye, and his face was terribly scarred. He'd been a soldier once, according to rumors, a fighter in some war nearly forgotten now. He held out his hand expectantly. "Two coppers," he croaked.

Volos had a few coins in his purse, but he let Adiso pay. Adiso's purse was probably always full.

"Seven," said the old man as he handed Adiso a folded white cloth.

Ten identical doors lined the hallway, five on either side. Most were closed, and Volos heard grunts and laughter as he walked by. But the door with the large black 7 painted on it was ajar, and he trailed Adiso inside. The wooden floor and walls were unpainted and unadorned, and there was a tiny uncurtained window. The only furniture was a cot somewhat wider than the one on which Volos slept. Its mattress was very thin, but then, it wasn't meant to be slept on.

With a little flourish, Adiso spread the cloth over the mattress. Then he pulled a small object from his purse and held it up with a rakish grin. "Olive oil with frankincense. Expensive, but so much nicer than plain oil, don't you think?"

Volos shrugged. There were plenty of times when he would have been grateful for plain oil but made do with saliva instead. And then there were the months in captivity, when he hadn't even been granted—He didn't want to think about that.

Apparently undaunted by Volos's lack of enthusiasm, Adiso tossed him the little glass vial. Volos uncorked it and took a sniff. Nice, he supposed. And Adiso was nice too, because now he'd kicked off his sandals and stripped off his clothes, standing naked and already erect. He was thin, with neither muscle nor fat padding his bones, and his body was nearly hairless save for the curls at his groin. He wasn't really Volos's type—something Volos had known from the start. But Adiso was willing and he was there, and that was enough.

"I'd like to see what's beneath your clothing," said Adiso. So Volos pulled off his tunic, and Adiso's eyes grew round and shiny. When Volos finished undressing, Adiso licked his lips. "Gorgeous," he purred before closing the distance between them and dropping to his knees.

Just as some wealthy citizens like Adiso got a thrill out of bedding guards, some of the guards got excited over rich men and women kneeling before them like this. It was a little game of sorts, with each side play-acting their roles.

Nothing wrong with that, but it wasn't what Volos yearned for. In fact, given his choice, he preferred to be the one on his knees, tasting another man, feeling him deep in his throat or experiencing the burn of hot flesh in his ass. But he'd learned some time ago that it wasn't what men like Adiso wanted from him. They saw him standing there—bulky, battle-scarred, a little foreign—and stirred at the pretense of being taken by a brute.

Tonight, Volos gave Adiso what he wanted. And Adiso must have been satisfied, because instead of hurriedly dressing and scurrying back to his home, he nestled against Volos on the uncomfortable bed, one thin leg thrown over Volos's heavy ones. They waited for their breathing and heartbeats to even out.

Adiso trailed a fingertip across an indentation on Volos's chest. "Where did you get this one?"

"Guna, I think."

"Was it a sword?"

"No. Just a knife." A knife could be as deadly as any sword, though. He'd taken lives enough in close combat with nothing but a short blade.

Adiso's eyes glittered in the lantern light. "It must be so exciting to be in a real battle."

This wasn't the first time Volos had heard those words, and he knew what Adiso wanted in response: a few fine tales of adventure and bravery, stories he could embroider a little before boasting to his friends about the savage he'd bedded.

But Volos wasn't in the mood to lie. "It's not exciting. It's... terrifying. Confusing. Everyone's screaming like they're in the third hell, everything's moving so quickly while your own body seems so slow. The air reeks of shit and blood and..." He trailed off and didn't try to meet Adiso's eyes.

"Why do you do it then?"

Maybe at one time, the answer would have come easily to Volos. Vengeance. Patriotism. Valor. But now those words would only taste bitter on his tongue. "What else would I do?" he replied, a response not far from the truth.

"What about your parents? Couldn't they give you a profession of some kind?"

"No."

“Ah,” said Adiso, probably guessing—incorrectly—that Volos’s family was poor. “Well, it’s not so bad, really. You got to see something of the world. And life in the castle’s pretty posh, isn’t it?”

“Sure,” said Volos, thinking of his narrow cot in the crowded dormitory, of his pitifully small trunk only half-full of possessions. “Not so bad.”

He might have drifted off after that. The heat of another body against his was pleasant, and Adiso’s fingertips soothed him. But a knock rattled the door. “Time’s up. Two more coppers or get out,” called the old man from the hallway.

Adiso sighed. “We’ll be out in a minute,” he yelled back. He rolled out of bed and began to dress, wincing slightly at the discomfort he must have felt in his ass. But when Volos was dressed and standing there somewhat awkwardly, Adiso smiled at him. “Want that drink now?”

The angry little knot deep in Volos’s chest loosened a bit and he smiled back. “Just one. I have early watch tomorrow.”

“And I have to help my parents with a new shipment of Vuorian tea—which is even more boring and tedious than it sounds.”

They chuckled when they passed room four and heard a woman loudly urging her lover in the foulest terms imaginable. Downstairs, they had a tankard of ale together, and afterward in the darkness of the street, Adiso pulled Volos down for a hard little kiss. “Stay safe, warrior,” Adiso said.

“Best of luck battling the Vuorian tea.”

Long after they’d gone their separate ways, Volos could still hear Adiso’s soft laughter.

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“Volos. Come with me.”

Captain Hiwot knew better than to stand close to his cot when she woke him. That was fortunate, because if she’d been within reach, he would have struck her when he leapt to his feet. His body always awakened before his brain, and when he was startled, his body launched into full defensive mode. The reflex had saved his life multiple times during the war. He’d once become fully alert only to discover a bloodied sword in his hand and a severed head at his feet, the man’s still-twitching body next to it. He’d been enormously relieved to find that the man was an enemy instead of one of his fellow soldiers.



Now, Volos blinked for a moment at the lamp the captain held, then hastily pulled on his trousers and tunic. He lifted his sword from its hook beside the bed and belted it around his waist. Running his fingers through his unruly hair, he hurried after her.

“What is it?” he asked as they descended the stairs from the dormitory to the ground floor.

“The king,” she answered.

Volos knew that if the king were in danger, the whole dormitory would have been awakened. But just as he let go of that thought, his breath almost stopped. “But... I look like I just woke up. My uniform...”

“He doesn't want you for a beauty contest. Just hurry.”

“What does he want me for?” Volos rushed to keep up.

“He'll tell you that himself.”

The king waited in the same crowded room as before, but this time the fire was barely more than glowing coals. Before Volos could even drop to his knee, King Tafari stopped him with a gesture. “I'm sorry to wake you,” said the king.

Volos was nearly speechless with astonishment. “I... I... I'm at your service anytime, Your Majesty.”

“Good.” The king stepped closer, and a nearby lantern illuminated his face. He looked older than Volos remembered, and tired, with dark circles under his eyes. “I want to apologize first for my son's behavior the last time we met. He was unconscionably rude.”

Again, Volos didn't know what to say. He could hardly argue that Prince Berhanu *hadn't* been rude, and the king would think him an idiot if he claimed not to have noticed. He settled on an untruth. “Thank you, sir. But it's not important.”

“Treating others as they deserve to be treated is always important. But you're right. It's not the most pressing matter at the moment.”

The lantern flame fluttered slightly as a door in the dark corner of the room opened, then shut. Someone stepped closer, and for a brief moment Volos's heart stuttered in his chest. But then the man came close enough to be seen properly, and Volos realized that while there was a definite resemblance, the newcomer was not Prince Berhanu. This man was far less muscular and several

years older, his dark hair shot through with many strands of gray. He looked nearly as haggard as the king.

The king made a small gesture with his hands. "Chide, this is Volos Perun. He's a member of our guard."

Chide—more formally, Crown Prince Chidehu—nodded. "I've seen him around the castle, I believe."

Unsure of the proper etiquette, Volos executed a clumsy bow. He was used to royalty ignoring him, not conversing with him. "At your service, Your Highness."

"You're half Kozari."

"I... yes, sir. But my mother—"

"I know. And my father has told me that my brother was inexcusably ill-mannered to you."

Was the entire royal family intent on apologizing for Berhanu? "I believe the prince dislikes Kozari."

Chidehu's answering laugh held no humor, and his face twisted so bitterly that Volos thought he might even cry. "Two of our brothers were slaughtered by Kozari during the war. One was a soldier but the other—Faraju—was only a child. But perhaps you knew that already."

Volos gave a cautious nod. "Yes, sir. And I'm sorry for your loss."

The king made a small noise deep in his throat. "I understand you lost your own family to the Kozari."

The sharp pang never dulled, not even decades later. Even before the war had begun, Volos's father—an ardent advocate for peace—had been forced to flee Kozar. He hadn't been safe in Wedeyta, though. Kozari assassins had tracked him down eventually. While Volos hid in terror inside a cupboard, the men had murdered everyone. They'd likely have sought out Volos and killed him too, but a neighbor had been visiting at the time—a sweet boy who was friends with one of Volos's sisters—and the assassins had mistaken the child for Volos.

"Yes, sir," Volos said evenly. "My parents and my siblings."

"How do *you* feel about the Kozari?" asked Prince Chidehu.

“I don’t...” Volos scratched at his hair. “I killed a lot of them during the war.”

“And?”

“And... it didn’t bring my family back to life.” Did admitting this amount to treason?

“It never does,” the king replied sadly. Then his gaze sharpened. “How far does your loyalty to the crown go?”

“As far as it needs to.” Volos’s heart began to pound heavily, although he wasn’t sure why.

“You’ve risked your life in service to this country. Would you do it again?”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

“Why?”

“I... I took an oath, sir.”

The king continued to stare at him. “An oath is only words.”

“No, it’s—” Volos stopped himself. Took a deep breath. The ground beneath him now felt more dangerous than any battlefield. “I beg your pardon, Your Majesty. But to me, an oath is much more than that. My promise is... apart from my sword, it’s the only thing of value I possess. And even the best sword can be replaced. My... my integrity cannot.”

It was an honest answer, and perhaps also the right one, because something in the king’s eyes softened slightly, and he nodded. But he wasn’t through with the interrogation. “Captain Hiwot informs me that Berhanu’s display in this room was hardly the first time he’s treated you with... scorn.”

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty. I’ve tried to behave respectfully toward him, and—”

“Yes. Your captain tells me this as well. She says your restraint has been quite admirable, in fact.”

Another shift of the floor beneath him. Volos wished he had something to hold on to for balance. “Thank you, sir.”

“Volos Perun, does your loyalty to the crown extend to Prince Berhanu? Would you risk your life for him as well?”

“Yes, sir,” Volos answered immediately, even though his tongue was thick.

King Tafari and Prince Chidehu exchanged a very long look, clearly having a silent conversation. Perhaps they reached an agreement, because they both turned to him at once.

“I’m glad to hear you say that,” said Chidehu. “Because you may very well end up dying on my brother’s behalf.”

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## Chapter Two

Sitting at a table with a bottle of wine in front of them, exhaustion making gray shadows under their eyes, King Tafari and Crown Prince Chidehu looked remarkably human. They looked like two men sick with worry about their son and brother.

Chidehu stood, walked to the fireplace, and coaxed fresh flames. After he sat down again, he poured wine for all three of them. But while the other two men took healthy swigs, Volos had only a polite sip. His head was swimming enough already.

“Berhanu is a stubborn fool,” said the king, sounding more sorrowful than angry. “He should have taken you with him, as I told him to. You might have been able to protect him.”

“Protect him from what, sir?” asked Volos quietly. He didn’t truly want to hear the answer.

And the king didn’t give him one, at least not immediately. Instead, he toyed with his wineglass, rimmed in gold and inset with jewels at the base. Volos had an identical glass. He hardly wanted to touch it for fear of breaking it.

“There have been rumblings of war from Mudedye,” the king said at last, naming the country to the southeast. “It began as a border dispute after the river changed its course, and now... well, sometimes these things take on a life of their own. The king of Mudedye is not well liked, and I expect he hopes a war with us will improve his popularity. I do not want a war, Volos.”

Volos nodded solemnly. He didn’t want one either.

King Tafari took another gulp, refilled his glass, and continued. “Kozar is a strong ally of Mudedye. Strong enough that the Kozari queen might be able to persuade Mudedye to find a peaceful settlement with us. The trick, of course, is getting her to believe that peace would be in her best interests as well. And as you know, our relationship with her is... complicated.” He paused, perhaps waiting for Volos to digest this knotty situation.

“I see, sir,” Volos said after a moment. It occurred to him that King Tafari must have to juggle these delicate, complex matters all the time. Volos was suddenly very grateful to be simply a guard.

“Even approaching the queen to discuss these issues is something that must be done with a certain amount of secrecy. It wouldn’t do for Mudedye to discover our conversations too soon. So instead of going myself or sending a large delegation, I thought to send a single man. And someone to guard him and translate for him.”

“But—forgive me, Your Majesty. May I ask a question?”

The king waved his wineglass slightly. “Of course.”

“I don’t mean to be impertinent. But was Prince Berhanu the, uh, best choice? Considering his feelings about Kozari, I mean. Sir.” He steeled himself for punishment.

But all he got were bitter chuckles from the other men. “He was a terrible choice,” said Prince Chidehu. “But there weren’t any good alternatives. The journey was bound to be hazardous, and Father didn’t wish to...”

“To risk the heir,” finished the king. “Not to mention that you have a beloved wife and four children, and Berhanu has only his nightly conquests.” He gave his son a fond smile before returning his attention to Volos. “And any messenger but royalty would have offended the queen and doomed us from the beginning. In any case, Berhanu pledged to put his prejudices aside and do what was best for his country. He’s impetuous at times, and he requires a more civil tongue in his head, but he’s a good man, Volos. I trust him.”

Oddly, Volos agreed. Aside from his hatred for Volos, Prince Berhanu had a reputation for fairness and intelligence. Had Volos been in any position to do so, he would have trusted him too. And if Berhanu was able to set aside his ill will for the Kozari enough to travel to their country and negotiate with the queen, Volos refused to be devastated by the revelation that he was unwilling to have Volos at his side as he did so.

“What happened, Your Majesty?” he asked.

It was Prince Chidehu who answered. “He took a translator with him. Some old lady from the university. She may or may not have been adept with the language, but she certainly didn’t know how to wield a sword.” He swallowed the last of the wine in his glass before rubbing his face.

This was the part Volos had been dreading almost since the beginning of the conversation. “A sword would have been useful?” he asked quietly.

“Probably.” Chidehu spoke without any inflection, the way a bored fishmonger might state the price of the day’s catch. “My brother was kidnapped shortly after he crossed the Kozari border.”

The blood rushed loudly in Volos's ears. "Kidnapped by whom, Your Highness?"

"Juganin."

It wasn't an unpleasant word, objectively speaking. In Kozari, it meant "hands". But it actually meant much more than that, because the Juganin was the branch of Kozari military charged with carrying out the most unpleasant tasks. Even Kozari citizens feared them. The assassins who killed Volos's family were Juganin. As were the soldiers who ran the prisoner of war camp where he'd spent eleven hellish months.

Volos downed the entire glass of wine in one long draught and then—without asking permission—poured himself a refill. But even as panic scrambled his thoughts, a single voice of clarity reminded him that the king was asking for help. And that meant that perhaps there was still hope. "Does Prince Berhanu yet live, sir?" he whispered.

King Tafari and the crown prince both nodded.

"The interpreter's body was found several days after they left Wedeyta," said the king, his lip curled with disgust. "But not my son's. And we have recently... we recently received a message from Queen Draga. She says that the men who took him are extremists. Rebellious Juganin who wish to stir hostilities between us. They would have known Berhanu was coming, but she says she did not authorize his capture."

"Is she telling the truth?" asked Volos. Apparently tonight was his time to question the actions of royalty.

"I hope so," the king answered grimly. "And we are... placed in an awkward situation."

Volos frowned slightly as he tried to comprehend the ramifications of Berhanu's kidnapping. He was relieved when Chidehu offered further explanation. "Queen Draga cannot send in her own soldiers to fetch him because doing so would mean she was publicly endorsing his attempt to negotiate with her—and she cannot do that without angering Mudedye. Likewise, she cannot allow us to send our own soldiers to fetch him, although that's clearly what the rebels are hoping for. Besides, it's an embarrassment to her that some of the Juganin have escaped her control. And if we do nothing at all, the Juganin will soon conclude their ploy has failed and they'll simply kill Berhanu. His only value to them is as bait for us."

Volos had never been a strategist, and his head spun with all the impossibilities. In the end, though, he decided it came down to only one thing. “How can I help, sirs? Please. What can I do?”

It had been a night full of surprises, but perhaps none of them greater than the warm, grateful smiles now bestowed on him by the king and prince. King Tafari even went so far as to reach across the table and briefly lay his hand over Volos's. “Good man,” he said, squeezing firmly.

When he took back his hand, he wrapped it around the stem of his wine glass and stared into the ruby liquid as he spoke. “The queen has told us where she believes Berhanu is being held. She's granted us permission to send a single man to attempt to rescue him. And she has pledged that if Berhanu is freed, she will listen most carefully to our entreaties.”

As simple as he was, Volos understood what this meant: it wasn't only Berhanu's life that hung in the balance, but also the lives of the thousands of men and women who would suffer if Mudedye went to war with Wedeyta. “Why only one person, Your Majesty? I see why she wouldn't allow an entire company of soldiers, but surely a small squadron would work, or—”

“Only one,” Prince Chidehu interrupted. “So that if he is caught, both sides can claim he was merely an aberration. A man defying orders. A larger group—even two or three—looks much more like something planned.”

Volos nodded. “When will I leave, sirs?”

Prince Chidehu held up a hand. “You understand that... that the likelihood is high that you will be killed.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And if you are taken alive, we will not send anyone to rescue you. We cannot. If asked, we will claim you acted without orders.”

An echo of pain—years old—resonated in Volos's body. “I won't be taken alive.” He'd die by his own hand first.

“Very well,” said King Tafari solemnly. “And if you are successful, our gratitude will be... very generous.”

Would the king be incredulous if Volos told him he needed no incentives or rewards to take on this task? In truth, Volos would have attempted to rescue Berhanu even had the king expressly forbidden him to do so.



He didn't drink any more wine. And although the hour was very late and he'd had only an hour or two of sleep, he was no longer tired. For the first time in years, he felt a sense of purpose—suicidal as it may have been. After a few final arrangements were made, he bowed to the king and prince and hurried to the dormitory to pack his things.

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## Chapter Three

Although it had been some time since Volos had traveled far from the castle and he'd very rarely had the benefit of a carriage, he didn't enjoy the trip to the border. The road was rutted, and the carriage progressed with jerky rattles. His fellow passengers—two women, a man, and a young child—filled the small space with the reek of their perfumes and stared at him distrustfully the entire way. But the worst part was the slow speed of the journey. Yes, they were going faster than if Volos had been walking, and with fewer stops to rest. But it wasn't fast enough. He wished he were a horseman, riding a steed at full gallop the whole way. No, he wished he could *fly*.

But all he could do was sit, jolting from side to side, trying to distract himself from thoughts of death.

They spent the night at an inn near a busy crossroads. The food was bad and overpriced, but at least his pallet on the floor was no more uncomfortable than his usual cot, and the shared sleeping quarters had a familiar feel. The innkeeper's daughter flirted with him, as did a handsome middle-aged man who was journeying in the opposite direction. But Volos turned them both down and slept with nothing at his side but his pack and sword.

Shortly after dawn, the travelers ate a breakfast of sausages and bread and then set out again on the road. Volos hadn't managed to wash more than his face and hands, and he felt grimy. His unfamiliar civilian clothes chafed. And the toddler was fussy all day, alternately whining and crying or throwing her food on the floor.

During the war, Volos and his fellow soldiers had complained about marching endless miles. His feet had always been sore and blistered, his mouth always tasted of dust. But his current journey was far worse—both the company and the agony of waiting. Besides, he hated having to sit for so long. His ass hurt and his legs were cramped.

A low range of mountains marked the border between Wedeyta and Kozar. As the evening fell, the setting sun turned the ridge dark and forbidding. The last time Volos crossed those mountains, he'd been going the other way. His body and mind had been battered, and his soul had felt more sullied than the dirt beneath his boots. But he was alive, and so were the men and women he'd rescued from the Kozari prison, and he'd counted that as a victory. He'd also sworn never to return, but it seemed he was bound to violate that oath.

The carriage clattered to a stop well after nightfall. Bright lanterns glared in front of another inn, this one much smaller. Even with the war long over, few people crossed the border. But three other travelers were spending the night there: two women who looked to be in their thirties and constantly touched each other, and an older man with a completely bald head. They were all Kozari. They sat at a table together over dinner while Volos sat alone, but even with his attention focused on his meal, he could feel their scrutiny. He had to make an effort not to twitch with discomfort. He hadn't spent time with any Kozari since the war—and the time he'd spent during the war had not been pleasant.

He was grateful to discover that he had a private room for the night. It was tiny—just large enough for a lumpy bed and small washstand—but that was fine. Someone had filled the washbasin and left a towel, so after he undressed, he gave himself a quick wash. He doused the lantern, lay down, and pulled up the covers, but he couldn't fall asleep. Perhaps he was kept awake by the absence of seventy-nine other sleeping companions, or by anxiety about what was to come. In either case, he squirmed unhappily for a long time.

Finally, he sighed with resignation and began to stroke his cock. It didn't remain soft for long under his steady hand. He thought of Adiso—of his fine skin and firm little ass, of the lean planes of his hips and the dark, sensitive nubbins of his nipples. He thought of the scent of olive oil and frankincense, and of tight heat drawing him in. But even as Volos's wrist sped its motions, his thoughts strayed to a larger body, rippling with muscle. Straight hair, dark as a raven's wing, long enough to cover a broad neck. And a wide mouth that turned easily into a grin. Except that grin was never for Volos.

Volos came with a strangled sob.

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Volos hadn't said a word to his new companions over breakfast or as they climbed into the rickety carriage that would take them over the mountains. He'd squashed himself as small as possible into the corner, uncomfortable already with the way the springs poked through the seat's ancient padding. He stared out the window while the others stared at him. After several miles, the red-haired woman could apparently contain her curiosity no longer.

"Where are you from?" she asked.

Volos startled slightly when he realized she was addressing him but then gave a small shrug. "I've lived many places," he answered in Kozari. It was the

first time in years he'd spoken the language out loud, but the words felt comfortable and familiar to his tongue.

"Are you Kozari? I can't place your accent."

"My family is Kozari," he replied half-truthfully. "But it's been a long time since I was there." *Since the war*, he didn't add. *Since your Juganin tried to steal my humanity*.

"And why are you returning?"

He'd forgotten this about his father's people—they were very direct in their dealings. Rude, according to Wedey customs, but his father had claimed there were benefits to plain speaking. You knew what people were thinking. It was much easier to exchange information.

"Family business," said Volos. Again, a not-quite lie. He never said the business involved *his* family.

"Maybe you're coming to find a Kozari wife," said the other woman, who was curvy and dark. She leaned against the redhead so completely as to be almost in her lap. "The Wedey women are very beautiful, but they're strange. Close-mouthed. And they have terrible fashion sense." She smoothed a hand over her brightly patterned tunic.

Volos was making an effort to be polite. "I'm not looking for a wife."

The redhead cocked her head at him. "A husband, then? We used to be short on young men due to the war, but not so much anymore. Besides, I suppose Wedeyta had the same problem."

He did not want to talk about the war. "I'm coming to search for some lost property. And maybe to see some old acquaintances."

For the first time, the man chimed in. "You should consider staying. The prospects in Kozar are better and the cost of living is lower. What do you do for a living?"

*Protect my people from Kozari*. No, probably not the right answer. Would his fellow passengers be so friendly if they knew his bag hid a sword? Volos attempted a smile and thought quickly of a profession that sounded boring yet plausible for a man built like him. "I work in a quarry. I began as a laborer but now I supervise others."

"We have quarries in Kozar. We produce some of the best marble in the world."

“Maybe I’ll take a look.” And then inspiration struck. “Hey. Since it’s been so long since I visited, maybe you folks could recommend some sites to see. What should I see?”

As he’d hoped, that turned the conversation away from him. The others were eager to tell him about stunning scenery, educational historic sites, and all the best places to eat and shop. He pretended to listen eagerly, as if he really were a tourist, but he was relieved when the swaying carriage made the redhead ill and everyone else sleepy, and the conversation faded away. Volos leaned his head against the carriage wall and watched as they ascended the mountain.

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Kozar’s weather was wetter than Wedeyta’s, the fields still green even in late autumn. But the winters were harsher. Volos remembered marching down snow-dusted roads, watching his breath form dragon plumes in the morning air. And shivering, naked in a cell, body curled into a fetal ball, wishing the cold would at least dull some of the pain. Sometimes even in the sweltering height of summer, he’d wake up from dreams where he was still in that cell, and he would step outside into the searing morning sun just to remind himself where he was.

Now, though, as he walked over rolling emerald-colored hills under an ash-gray sky, he was only a little chilly. He’d been traveling in Kozar for three days—more jostling carriages full of curious locals—but he wasn’t yet used to this place. He was constantly unsettled. The soft consonants and liquid vowels reminded him of family and childhood, but the landscape brought memories of blood and fear.

Shortly after his arrival, he’d bought local attire: loose red trousers that cinched at the waist with a black fabric belt, a billowy white shirt with brightly embroidered animal motifs, a thick black cloak with embroidery along the edges. He’d felt ridiculous when he’d first put on his new outfit, although he had faint recollections of his parents dressing him in something similar when he was very young. Back then, he’d been proud of the thread-work dragons and phoenixes that danced across his shirt—so much more interesting than his friends’ plain, dun-colored tunics.

No public carriages served the little village where the queen claimed Berhanu was being held, so Volos had spent the past day on foot, his sword still tucked into his bag. Aside from the slowness of his journey, he didn’t especially mind. He didn’t have to converse with anyone; the inhabitants of a

few tiny hamlets and several little wooden farmhouses only stared curiously at him as he walked by. He wondered if these Kozari thought he was one of them. If they noticed the very slight hitch in his gait, did they guess it was a remnant of the war? And if so, did they assume he'd received the injury from a Wedey weapon rather than a Kozari one?

Volos reached his destination just before sunset. A single sign announced the name of the place: Chorna. The painted lettering was tiny and faded, as if the inhabitants assumed that nobody would care about the name of their town. It certainly didn't seem a place that attracted many visitors. There was a single market square with worn cobbles and a fountain near the middle, and a few streets lined with slumping brick-and-timber buildings. As far as Volos could tell, there was only one tavern, apparently nameless. He went inside.

It wasn't crowded. Perhaps fifteen men and women sat at the tables, drinking ale and eating plates of food. The ceiling was low, the air was close and smoky, and the room smelled strongly of drink and charred meat. Everyone watched while Volos chose an empty table near the door.

"Do you want dinner or just a tankard?" asked a tall young man with a green apron tied around his waist. His blond hair stuck straight up in tufts and his blue eyes were set at a slightly oblique angle. He was smiling.

"Both."

"Are you sure? The food's not that good."

"I'm hungry. Do I have any alternatives?"

"Nope," the man replied cheerfully. "But I thought I'd warn you. Are you from Felekna?"

Volos wasn't particularly adept at Kozari geography, but he knew Felekna was the capital. It had been Berhanu's destination. "No."

"Oh. But you must be from a city, right? You look like you belong in a big city."

"I'm from the south," Volos said truthfully. "But I've lived in cities."

The innkeeper's grin increased. "I knew it. Then you'll really be disappointed with our food, I'm afraid. It's not fancy."

"At this point, I'd eat a raw dragon," said Volos. "I'm starved."

"Well, hunger does make an excellent spice. I'll be back in a moment."

Volos waited impatiently, trying to sneak looks at the other patrons. It was killing him to know that Berhanu was probably somewhere close by, probably in wretched condition, while Volos sat comfortably waiting to be fed. But it was impossible to know where, exactly, Berhanu was; the queen's information had not been specific. Volos was going to have to be patient until he found out.

Most of the other people in the room had returned to their meals and conversations, but a few still stared at him quite frankly. None of them looked like Juganin—but then, maybe Juganin looked perfectly ordinary when they were out of uniform, enjoying a pint or two instead of torturing prisoners. Maybe Juganin even had homes and spouses and children, and maybe they had friends and hobbies too.

The innkeeper was back with a large tankard and an overflowing plate, which he set in front of Volos. But he didn't seem inclined to leave. He watched as Volos picked up a fork, stabbed a chunk of meat, and took a bite. The meat was tough. But the spices... he didn't know what they were called, but he recognized the flavor at once. His father had used them in his cooking.

"You're not dying," the innkeeper observed. "Or puking."

"It's not nearly as terrible as you led me to believe."

The man beamed. "Good. I guess low expectations are the key to customer satisfaction. Is there anything else I can get you?" He wagged his eyebrows slightly, perhaps gently suggesting that he wasn't talking about food or drink.

Volos ignored the innuendo. "Do you have rooms to let?"

"You mean you intend to stay in Chorna?"

"For a little while, yes."

"Why in the third hell would you want to do that?"

Volos had been concocting this tale for days. He hoped it was convincing. "My employer wants to move somewhere quiet. He thought Chorna might do, so he sent me to scout things out." He made a face intended to convey his belief in his employer's eccentricity.

"Well, if he wants lots of nothing, this is the place to find it."

"Good."

"Is this your regular duty—searching for places in the middle of nowhere?"

"I'm his bodyguard."

That earned him an impressed look and, he hoped, added to his credibility. He *looked* like a bodyguard and could even speak intelligently about the needs of the job, if pressed to do so. He shoveled more food into his mouth while the innkeeper rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“We don’t have rooms,” the man said after a moment. “We don’t get much tourist trade here. But my family owns a building on the opposite side of the square. The one with the red door? My grandparents lived there, but they’re dead now and the house is empty. You can stay there if you don’t mind some dust and spider webs.”

“I don’t mind. How much?”

“Oh, let’s say twenty fals a night. And you can take all your meals here.”

They both knew that was an exorbitant price. Volos had paid half that at the inns along the way. But he was playing the servant of a wealthy man. And in truth, King Tafari had given him money—enough that Volos could have fled and lived a comfortable life for many months—which was a mark of trust that had made him proud. “All right, twenty. With clean bedding to sleep on and ale with my meals.”

The innkeeper grinned. “Done. My name’s Mato, by the way. Yours?”

“Volos.”

“Welcome to Chorna, Volos.”

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Mato was right—dust lay thickly in the house and cobwebs festooned the ceilings and furniture. But Mato lent Volos a broom and some rags, and Volos was able to get an upstairs room tolerably clean. After years spent sleeping on the ground or worse, he wasn’t particular. At least the room had a large bed with a decent mattress, and Mato gave him the promised clean bedding, which smelled of lavender. The window looked out on the square, allowing Volos to keep a furtive eye on the villagers’ comings and goings. He hoped to spy the Juganin going about whatever errands they might have.

But tonight he was exhausted and worried. And strangely uneasy, because Mato had been friendly to him. Had even flirted a little. With the exception of his own father, Volos was used to thinking of Kozari as hostile and foreign. They were the enemy—the people who’d tried to kill him. The people he’d killed. They weren’t ordinary folk with unruly hair, who told jokes and worked hard serving mediocre food and drink.



Before he readied himself for sleep, Volos practiced his daily strength and agility exercises and then ended with a meticulous sharpening of his sword and knife.

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## Chapter Four

Mato's breakfast wasn't much more impressive than his dinners, but again the tastes were familiar on Volos's tongue. And Mato himself smiled and joked, setting his hand familiarly on Volos's shoulder when he passed by.

Rain was spitting down from a leaden sky, making Volos grateful for his hooded cloak as he investigated the village. He found nothing remarkable. Villagers going about their daily errands or stopping to chat with each other under the overhangs of doorways. Merchants looking slightly gloomy under canopies in the square. Sleepy cats staring at him from windowsills. Volos wanted to grab every person he passed, shake them violently, and demand they take him to Prince Berhanu. He wanted to summon an army and command them to search every room in every house. He wanted to stand in the center of the square and scream Berhanu's name.

He did none of those things.

Instead he wandered restlessly, first through the village and then down muddy roads into the countryside. He found nothing more interesting than a few curious cows. He had lunch at the inn—at least the bread was fresh and good—before setting out again. But by the time night fell, he felt no closer to Berhanu than he had in the castle.

It was a very slow night at the inn, and an older woman who looked very much like Mato attended most of the customers, leaving Mato free to sit opposite Volos. “You look discouraged, friend. Have you decided already that Chorno won't suit your employer?”

“I don't know,” Volos sighed. He was beginning to hate lying to a man who'd been nothing but pleasant to him.

“If he does move here, will you come with him?”

“I... I suppose.”

“Nothing much to guard anyone from around here. Were you always a bodyguard?”

“For a long time.”

Mato had brought over a little dish of walnuts. He cracked one with his fist, dug out the meat, and ate it. He dropped the shattered shell onto the floor. “Were you a soldier first?”

“Yes,” said Volos.

“I thought so.” Mato looked thoughtful. “My father was a soldier. He died. So did my older brother.”

“I’m sorry.” Volos *was* sorry, although as far as he knew, he could have been the one who’d killed Mato’s family.

“I was only a boy. I hardly remember them. I wonder, though. If they’d survived, would they have been able to come back to boring old Chorna and back to their boring old lives? Some of the other men and women in the village were soldiers too, and most of them... well, I think the war changed them.” He blinked and gave an embarrassed smile. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to imply...”

“I don’t mind. You’re right. War changes everyone.” It was the first time Volos had ever had this sort of discussion with anyone, and he was surprised to find himself soothed rather than discomfited.

Mato crushed another nut, but this time he handed the meat to Volos before cracking one for himself. “Do you want to be a bodyguard, Volos? I mean, if you could capture a wizard and make him do your will, what life would you have him give you?”

Volos had thought about this before, but briefly, furtively, as if even hoping were forbidden. “I’d like to put down my sword. I’d like someone who loves me. A family. I’d like a home.”

“But not here in Chorna, I’m betting.”

“No. I’m sorry. Not here.”

“I understand.” Mato gave him a sweet, wistful smile. Standing, he pushed the bowl of nuts across the table. “I’ve dishes to do. I hope you find what you’re looking for, Volos. The war’s a long time past. You deserve your peace.”

If Volos failed on his mission, he and Berhanu would die. War would likely break out. And young Mato would be called away from his cozy inn in his sleepy little town to become a soldier.

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A storm blustered overnight, making the shutters rattle. Volos huddled in a warm bed, wondering if Berhanu was dry. Assuming he still lived, that was. When Volos had been a prisoner, he’d had mixed feelings about the rain, which leaked in through the patchy ceiling high above him. On the one hand, it soaked

the stone floor and made him colder than ever. But on the other, it was fresher than anything the Juganin gave him to drink. It also washed the filth from his body—the blood, dirt, and come—and sluiced the piss and shit away from his cell.

Tonight he slept fitfully, awakened often by the moan of the wind.

When he awoke and saw the rain still pelting the cobblestones, he decided to delay his search. He had nowhere fresh to examine anyway. He hurried across the square for breakfast, then back to his upstairs room, where he paced back and forth on the creaking floorboards.

The rain had slowed to a drizzle, and he was contemplating going out again when he heard voices below. There was nothing unusual about that—all the villagers passed through the square many times each day. But there was something different about these voices, something louder and more swaggering than the villagers' quiet conversations. Volos crossed the room and lifted a shutter slat so he could see out.

Three figures were crossing the square. He could not see their faces from above, and they all wore dark cloaks with hoods. As far as he could tell, they were not in uniform, but they all moved with the confident grace of seasoned soldiers, stepping almost in unison. They carried large baskets filled with what appeared to be vegetables and meats.

Pulling on his cloak as he went, Volos hurried down the stairs. He didn't have time to strap on his sword, but then perhaps this was not yet the time for an open display of weapons. He rushed out the door and into the square, where the three men were nowhere to be seen. But he knew what direction they'd been going, and he thought they couldn't be far ahead.

He almost lost them at one of the few cross streets, but Chorna was a quiet town, and their loud voices echoed against the buildings. Following their sound, Volos turned to the right and spied them far ahead where the village petered out into countryside. He trailed them, pressing up near the houses and hoping they didn't bother to look behind themselves. But when he ran out of houses and all that remained were sodden fields beside the road, he had to stop. He'd be far too obvious following them outside the village.

The remainder of the day crept by. Volos made an effort to be cordial to Mato, but didn't succeed very well. "I'm sorry," he said when Mato frowned at him worriedly. "I'm not feeling well today. The rain."

Mato nodded. "I can make you some tea, if you like. It soothes my mother when her bones ache. My mother's not quite a witch, but she's good with herbs."

"Thank you."

The tea tasted like honey and sunshine—and exactly like the brew his father gave him when he was a child and had bruised himself roughhousing with his friends. Volos managed to smile his gratitude to Mato before returning to his room and waiting for nightfall.

The rain stopped completely by the time it was fully dark. Volos strapped his knife under his shirt and his sword around his hips. He tightened his boots. If he'd been the sort to pray, he would have, but he'd forsaken the gods long ago as he cowered in a cupboard. He tied his cloak and stepped down the stairs and into the night.

He'd gone this way during his earlier explorations, so he knew there were few houses beyond the edge of the village. The first one he came to was quite close, and light spilled out from between the cracks in the shutters. Somewhere behind the low building, chickens clucked sleepily. Feeling like a thief, Volos crept into the front yard. He was thankful that the mud muted his footsteps. He peeked inside and saw a family sitting around a large table. A young woman sang a tune that sounded familiar, while an old man knitted and an old woman sat and smiled. Two young children ran around, half-dressed and laughing, while their father chased them in circles and pretended to be a bear.

With a pang in his heart, Volos moved on.

The next house was dark and quiet, and in the one after that, two old women rocked by candlelight, chatting too quietly for him to hear. The house after that was nearly the last one before the forest began. It was two stories tall and might once have been a fairly grand place, although it looked decrepit even in the dark. Several half-tumbled outbuildings were arrayed at the back. When Volos had passed this way the previous day, he'd thought the farm abandoned. There were several such places surrounding Chorna. Now, though, faint light shone from some of the windows and he heard voices. And laughter—loud, mocking crows that made the hair on his neck stand up.

With his boots squelching in the mud and his heart hammering in his chest, Volos moved closer to the house.

If the Juganin were staying here, it was quite possible they'd posted guards. If so, they would raise the alarm and he would be unable to kill them all

singlehandedly. But his situation was never going to get better than it was now, and their patience at keeping Berhanu alive might end anytime. He could not force himself to walk away, knowing Berhanu was almost within reach. Instead he had to hope that the Juganin were as cocksure and overconfident as they had been during the war. They'd been so certain then of their superiority over battered, unarmed prisoners that their defenses had been inadequate. With persistence and desperation, Volos and a few others had managed to overcome their captors at last.

Nobody raised the alarm as Volos reached the house. He hugged the ancient walls, moving to the side, where the noises seemed to be coming from. This house had a cellar with a few small windows set low to the ground, shining with flickering candlelight. Volos had to crouch to look inside. What he saw very nearly made him cry out.

A naked man was tied facedown to a table. His legs were spread, the ankles and knees bound tightly to sturdy wooden legs. His arms, stretched over his head, were attached to the other two table legs. He was thin and dirty, and his pale skin was marred with mottled bruises, bloody lash marks, and oozing burns. His face was turned away from the window, allowing Volos to see only his matted long hair.

Seven men slouched against the cellar's stone walls. Several of them clutched bottles of ale. Two of them had their belts unfastened, their trousers pushed low on their hips; they were fondling their cocks. All of the men had swords either around their waists or near at hand.

As Volos watched in horror, one of the men set his bottle on the floor, unbuckled his sword and set it aside, and prowled to the table. When he got there, he slapped the naked man's ass several times, the crack of flesh on flesh very loud. When that brought little response from the captive, the man laughed. He pushed his trousers down, revealing his hard dick. As his companions shouted obscene encouragements, he shoved three of his fingers roughly into the bound man's ass.

"Gods, no," cried the naked man in a voice raspy from either shouting or disuse. He said it in Wedey.

Unable to bear watching the Juganin raping Prince Berhanu, Volos shoved his fist in his mouth to muffle his own screams. He spun around so his back was against the house, and as his knees gave out, he slowly sank down until he was kneeling in the mud. For an immeasurably long moment, his head was

nothing but a raging maelstrom, and he saw only red. He even tasted blood, but that was probably from biting his hand. Not since he had been a young man intent on wreaking vengeance had he so ached to kill.

He had to walk away from the house when the screaming began.

He didn't go far—only to an outbuilding with a mostly intact roof and a scattering of ancient hay on the hard-packed floor. He could crouch far back in the mouse-scented darkness and keep an eye on the house, yet run little risk of being seen. He was fairly certain he wouldn't be able to sleep.

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## Chapter Five

By dawn, Volos was cramped and hungry. He should have brought some food and a waterskin, although he wasn't certain he'd be able to keep anything down. He'd witnessed an endless parade of horrors during the war. He'd seen friends die terrible, shrieking deaths. And he'd been subjected to worse than what the Juganin had done to Berhanu the previous night. But now he kept envisioning the prince, pale and battered, spread out like a feast before ravening dogs. Volos's skin felt clammy and too tight, and his palms had been bloodied by the press of fingernails in his clenched fists.

The Juganin did not awaken early. There were no signs of life around the house until midmorning, when men began straggling forth to use the outhouse and to wash themselves at the pump. They moved slowly, probably still groggy from the night's drinking. None of them so much as glanced in Volos's direction, but he gripped his sword so tightly that his hand cramped.

He'd seen seven men the night before, but that didn't mean there weren't more. Some of them might have been absent from the torture and rape session. So now he watched carefully, taking note of each one's features, trying to get an accurate count. He also assessed their weaponry. Each had one of the thin, slightly curved swords beloved of the Juganin, and Volos knew each man was well versed in the use of his blade. Volos used a straighter, heavier sword, one that would soon tire a soldier unless he was very strong. But Volos *was* strong, and his weapon had the advantage of a longer reach. If Volos wielded it well, a Juganin opponent would be dead before the curved blade struck Volos.

But that was the rub—an opponent, singular. He was badly outnumbered here, and even the best warrior held little chance against seven or more.

Eight, actually. He watched all day and concluded there were eight. And when the sky darkened again, he was no closer to rescuing the prince.

Well into night, Volos crept out of his hiding place. He stretched his muscles carefully and took a few handfuls of water from the pump, which leaked. Feeling as if he might be sick, he peeked into the cellar window.

Of course the Juganin were drinking again. They'd have little to entertain them here except ale and their prisoner. Oh gods, their prisoner. Berhanu's upper body was tied to the table, this time face-up. His arms were stretched cruelly—even from afar, Volos could see the strained muscles and tendons. The



front of his torso was as badly injured as his back. Maybe worse. Nothing was left of his left nipple but a blood-crusting wound. His legs were trussed in a complicated manner, spread, and held high by ropes attached to the ceiling beams. One of the Juganin was fucking him so hard that the entire table shook. But the worst part was Berhanu's bruised face, because although his eyes were open, he stared expressionlessly upward. If it weren't for the hitching of the prince's chest, Volos would have thought he was dead.

Volos could break into the house and slaughter the men in the cellar. But he'd never kill all of them before they stopped him. And two of the men were missing, no doubt elsewhere in the house.

*Gods, I know I don't deserve your grace. But please, I beg you. Show me how I can save him.*

The gods didn't answer his silent prayer. But just when he'd decided he'd rush into the cellar, suicidal as that attack would be, his gaze was caught by the pile of empty bottles that littered one corner of the room. Perhaps it was divine inspiration. In any case, he formulated a plan.

He took off running for the village before the voice in his head could convince him how stupid the plan was.

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"You look as though you earned your dinner tonight. I hadn't realized exploring a village was such strenuous work."

Mato sat opposite Volos in the inn, watching him devour a huge plate of food. The door to the inn had been closed when Volos arrived, breathless, but after a few heavy knocks Mato had opened it for him and hadn't complained about stoking the fire and heating some food.

"I wasn't exploring," Volos said with his mouth full. He took a generous swig of water and let out a deep breath. "I lied to you. I'm not here on behalf of an eccentric employer."

Mato raised an eyebrow but didn't look angry. In fact, his eyes sparkled with excitement. "Why are you here then, my friend?"

Gods, if Mato couldn't be trusted, all was lost. And he was a Kozari, dammit. During the war, the Wedey soldiers said Kozari were lower than snakes—spiteful, malicious, demonic. And although Volos had known better—his father was a good man—he'd believed what he heard. Yet Mato... had been *nice*.

Volos gave him a long look. "Are there other strangers staying in Chorna now, Mato?"

"Not *in* Chorna. Nearby, I think. They come into the village now and then." He narrowed his eyes. "Are you one of them?"

"No. Gods, no. Do you know who they are?"

Mato shook his head. "No. But they're nothing good, I think. There are rumors. Some think they're spies, although I can't imagine what they'd be spying on. Some think they've plans to seize property from the villagers. Do *you* know who they are?"

Volos nodded slowly. "Juganin."

Mato's lips pressed together into a hard white line and he stared fiercely for a moment at the wall. "Why are they here?" he finally asked.

"It's... it's a long story. I'm not at liberty to tell it all. But they're holding—" His voice broke. He swallowed and tried again. "They're holding a prisoner. They're hurting him. Eventually—maybe soon—they'll kill him."

"And you're here to free him?"

"Yes."

"By yourself?"

Volos sighed. "Yes."

"Is he your lover?"

Volos laughed bitterly. "No. He despises me."

"Then why risk your life for him?"

A simple question with complicated answers. Volos settled for one of them. "It's my duty," he said quietly.

Mato might have been a young man, an innkeeper in a gods-forsaken village, but he was no fool. His gaze felt sharp enough to strip away all of Volos's secrets. But he nodded slightly. "Some of the villagers used to be soldiers. I suppose they still remember how to handle a weapon. I'll gather them and—"

"No." Despite the grim circumstances, Volos smiled at Mato's generosity. "It's a delicate situation. It's... if things aren't handled well, there could be another war. I have to do this alone. But... maybe you could help."

“How?”

“Do the Juganin buy their ale from you?”

“There’s nowhere else in Chorna to buy it.”

*Thank the gods.* “And will they buy more soon, do you think?”

Chewing his lip thoughtfully, Mato seemed to calculate. “Yes. In fact, if they keep to their usual schedule, they’ll come in tomorrow or the next day.”

Although the battle was far from over, Volos felt a trickle of relief. “Good. You mentioned yesterday that your mother is good with herbs. Do you think you could slip something into their ale? Something they wouldn’t notice?”

“Poison?”

Volos had considered that idea and rejected it. Many poisons left telltale signs on their victims—vomit, skin discoloration, swelling. If anyone investigated, it was important that Mato’s role not be apparent. And other poisons took far too long to work, or were unpredictable in their effects. “I was thinking more of something to slow them down and make them... woozy. Something that they might mistake as simply being the effects of strong ale.”

“So you could kill them all yourself.”

“Yes.”

After another long pause, Mato stood. “Wait here,” he said and then disappeared behind a door at the back of the room. As far as Volos knew, Mato could be summoning the villagers to seize him. He could be sending someone to warn the Juganin. But Volos waited.

When Mato reappeared, perhaps fifteen minutes later, he was grinning widely. “Mother says yes,” he announced.

“And you—you and your mother—are willing to do this?”

“Of course.”

“Why?”

“Because...” Mato ran his fingers through his clumps of hair. “We don’t get much excitement here. We don’t get *any* excitement, actually. And we certainly don’t get handsome, mysterious heroes. Maybe you’re a story I can tell my grandchildren someday.”

Volos snorted, then drank the last of his water. He pushed his chair back with a noisy scrape and stood. Gods, he was so tired. He felt *old*. "I'm going to try to sleep while I can."

"Sounds wise." Mato walked him to the door but stopped him at the threshold with a hand on a shoulder. "Who are you really, Volos?"

"Just what I told you. I was once a soldier. Now... now I'm a guard." He gave Mato a tired smile and exited into the night.

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He did not sleep well. He tried, and the bed was certainly more comfortable than the outbuilding had been, but every time he closed his eyes, he saw Berhanu. Suffering. Dying. Gods, what if the Juganin had grown tired of their games and were murdering him this very moment? Even when Volos did manage to slumber, he was plagued by nightmares of cold cells, cramped cupboards, ropes and chains and whips and blades.

When he awoke in the morning and went downstairs, he discovered a basket just inside the front door. It contained bread still warm from the oven, a pot of berry jam, several cold sausages, a boiled egg, and a glass jar of milk. Volos took his breakfast upstairs and watched out the window while he ate.

Nothing interesting happened all morning. Villagers passed by, dogs barked, a bit of rain fell for a while. A small girl slipped on the cobblestones and fell, and her father soothed her crying with a funny little song Volos remembered from his childhood. At lunchtime, Mato crossed the street with another basket. He glanced at the shuttered upstairs window and gave a small smile but didn't otherwise acknowledge Volos. He left the food just inside the door.

Late in the afternoon, when Volos had grown nearly mad with impatience and felt as if the floorboards would soon give way beneath his restless pacing, three of the Juganin appeared. One of them pushed a small handcart. Volos watched with narrowed eyes, his hand on his sword, as they entered the inn. They came back out onto the street a few minutes later and loaded armfuls of bottles into the cart. With the glass clanking and wheels rattling, they went back the way they'd come.

Mato brought more food soon afterward, but Volos couldn't eat it. His stomach was clenched as tight as a fist. Instead, he sharpened his blades—which didn't actually need it—and tightened and retightened the scabbard

around his hips. He'd never felt this keyed up before battles, not even when he'd been certain he wouldn't survive. The sun took a thousand years to set that night.

A few villagers still passed through the streets when Volos went outside, so he walked instead of ran and hoped they didn't notice the sword beneath his cloak. As soon as he passed the edge of town, he quickened his pace to a lope. The muddy road sucked at his boots, slowing him down.

When he arrived at the farmhouse, he snuck around the back. The hour was still quite early, and he wasn't sure Mato's ale had been able to do its job yet. He waited near one of the outbuildings and was thankful for his caution when a man appeared around the corner of the house. He held a candle, which lighted his way but didn't illuminate Volos's hiding spot. Volos waited for the man to enter the outhouse, then crept closer. He was waiting, knife in hand, when the man emerged.

Juganin were good fighters. Very good, most of them. But this one was taken completely by surprise when Volos grabbed him from behind, muffling his mouth with one hand. Volos dragged the man backward against his own body and slit his throat. The candle tumbled to the mud and guttered out. A moment later, the Jugan fell. He landed facedown and didn't move.

Volos felt nothing over the man's death aside from slight relief that the odds had now shifted a bit more in his favor.

The remaining Juganin were gathered in the cellar, but tonight they were considerably more subdued. Some of them sat on the floor, cradling bottles in their hands, while the others slumped against the walls. None of them were fucking Berhanu, who was again bound facedown on the table, but fresh blood glistened on his back and ass and trickled down his sides. He wasn't dead, though. Thank the gods, he still wasn't dead.

The house's side door stood ajar. When Volos went inside, he found himself in a kitchen lit only by a bit of moonlight that fell through the windows. He wished for once that he was a smaller man because the floorboards creaked under his weight as he walked. But the Juganin downstairs were talking; he hoped they wouldn't notice his footsteps.

He opened two doors, but one led to another room and the other revealed a stairway rising to the second floor. The third door, however, rewarded him with the stairs to the cellar. Volos considered waiting a while. But he wasn't sure

how strong the drugged ale was or whether the Juganin would notice their missing comrade. Besides, he couldn't abide the thought of Berhanu tied to that damned table for another minute. So he descended.

From a tactical standpoint, his best place to make a stand would have been a few steps up from the bottom. In addition to the advantage of height, he'd be able to attack any Juganin who tried to escape the cellar, and the tight quarters meant they wouldn't fall on him all at once. But if he fought there, Berhanu would be undefended. The Juganin weren't stupid. While Volos stuck to the stairway, a few of them would kill the prince.

Volos paused on the bottom stair. From this angle, he saw Berhanu's battered face. And Berhanu saw him, because his dazed eyes cleared and widened. He didn't move or make a sound, however. Volos shrugged off his cloak, drew his sword, and with a roar that seemed to shake the rafters, he threw himself into the cellar, rushing to Berhanu's side.

The Juganin were slow to react. In fact, the nearest one was dead already, his head nearly hacked off his shoulders, before the others seemed to realize Volos was not an apparition. Shouting with alarm, they scrambled for their weapons.

Two of them closed in on Volos at once, but he was ready. He was in that strange state that used to settle on him during battles, when time seemed elastic and space seemed to bend. He stopped thinking and let his body do what it did best, what he had spent nearly his entire life training to do. He fought.

Nearly effortlessly, he lopped off the sword arm of one man, then slashed the other deeply in the belly. He was dimly aware that one of their blades had pierced his skin, but he didn't yet feel pain and, since he was still moving, the wound didn't matter.

*Four*, said a dry voice deep in his brain. The emotionless little accountant who kept track of lives instead of coins—lives taken, lives yet to take. *Four more remain.*

Ah, but only three, because Volos's sword slashed a tall man's face. The man shrieked inhumanly as his eye burst, and he fell back, pressing his hands to the gushing wound. He tripped over the Jugan with the belly wound and tumbled to the floor. Maybe not dead, but no longer of consequence.

The remaining three were more cautious. One of them kicked his fallen companions to the side, and then all three advanced on Volos at once, tips of

their blades held forward. Volos backed up until he was pressed against the table. He wished he could take a moment to free Berhanu, but any attempt to do so would mean death for them both. He wanted to say something to Berhanu, but words failed him. He settled for a single grunted Wedey word: "Soon."

"Who are you?" demanded one of the Juganin, a muscular man with a deep scar on his face. He spoke in heavily accented Wedey.

Volos answered in Kozari. "I am the prince's bodyguard." And before the final syllable had quite left his lips, he lunged forward.

Some of Volos's fellow soldiers were known for their style and grace with a sword, the speed with which they could make metal sing. Not Volos. He was all about power. Raw strength. In the heat of battle, when enemies had pressed against him, striking his body innumerable times, he had forged ahead. Among the Kozari, Volos meant dragon, and more than one person had commented on the aptness of the name.

Volos roared like a dragon as he fought. He kept his body between the Juganin and Berhanu, using the advantage of his long blade and long reach as much as he could. He felt the sting of his opponents' blades and smelled his own blood. But none of the Juganin could get close enough to inflict a mortal wound; from a distance, their sword thrusts lacked the force to kill him.

Deep in his head, Volos was thankful for his sparring partner Seble, who had taught him how to counter quickness. When one of the Juganin swept his sword at Volos, Volos stepped forward rather than away, using the man's own momentum to help impale him on the tip of Volos's weapon. That left Volos momentarily undefended as he tried to yank his sword free, and the two remaining Juganin were on him at once, slashing fiercely. One blade bit into his side and the other hit his shoulder. But Volos spun, ducked, and hacked at the nearest legs. His hands slick with blood, he lost his grip on the hilt and dropped the sword. One of the men managed to kick it out of reach. But Volos still had his knife, which he drew from the sheath belted to his chest. He collapsed to his knees and hamstringed one of the Juganin, then stabbed him in the throat when he fell. The last man's sword cut deeply into Volos's back. But Volos simply rolled, grabbed him around the legs, and pulled him down to the floor. After that, it was a simple thing to thrust the knife into his heart.

Nobody was attacking Volos any longer—but some of his enemies still lived. With a cry more beastlike than human, he killed them all. One of them was a man he dimly recognized as one of Berhanu's rapists, and even as the

man gasped his last breaths, Volos stabbed the point of the Jugan's spear into the man's groin.

It took some time for Volos to come back to himself. When his sensibility returned, he found himself on his knees, surrounded by corpses. He had to use a table leg to pull himself upright, and it took nearly all his remaining strength to cut Berhanu's ropes. Berhanu collapsed to the floor, and Volos fell next to him.

No. It was stupid to have accomplished this much and yet die anyway on this bloody stone floor.

"Can you walk?" Volos asked.

But Berhanu had curled into a tight ball and didn't answer him.

If anyone had asked Volos to carry Berhanu up the stairs, he would have said it was impossible. Volos could barely stand upright on his own. And yet somehow he hoisted the prince over his shoulder and got them both up to the ground floor, out the door, and into the muddy side yard. Where, by some small mercy of the gods, the Juganin's handcart was waiting.

Volos dropped Berhanu into the cart with a thud and didn't have enough breath to apologize. He realized blearily that the prince was naked and brutalized and that he was a fucking mess himself. His sword and knife were still in the cellar. His cloak was at the bottom of the stairs. And no way in the third hell was he going to be able to retrieve them.

There comes a point when a man's body is stretched to its absolute limits, when he has done all that the restrictions of muscle, bone, and sinew permit, when he hasn't the strength left to work his heart and lungs. And then there is the point slightly *past* that, when he discovers he can do more than he dreamed. When all that's left of himself is desperation and tenacity. That was Volos's reality as he stood outside the farmhouse.

He pushed the goddamn cart all the way back to the village.

He made it as far as the inn. He even managed to pound once or twice on the closed door. And then he fell on the cobbles in a senseless heap.

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## Chapter Six

“Well. This is more excitement than I thought I’d ever see.”

Volos opened heavy eyelids to find Mato kneeling beside him, hair in more disarray than ever, eyes sparkling. It took a moment for Volos to recognize where they were: on the ground floor of Mato’s grandparents’ house. Volos lay on a pallet on the floor while Mato smeared a stinging medicinal onto his wounds.

“Berhanu!” cried Volos and tried to sit up.

It was a testament to Volos’s weakness that Mato held him in place with a single hand to his chest. “He’s here,” Mato said softly, jerking his head to the side.

A few paces away, Mato’s mother attended a figure who lay sprawled on his back. A lantern lit the two of them oddly, putting Volos in mind of a witch preparing a sacrifice. But when she glanced at Volos, her expression was grave but kind. “He’s very weak but he’ll live,” she said.

A little of the tension in Volos’s chest loosened.

“Volos?” Mato said. “The men who did this to you...”

“Dead.”

Mato nodded. “Good.” He smeared more of the acrid green poultice on Volos’s shoulder. It hurt, but Volos remained still. “You have a lot of scars,” observed Mato.

“I told you. I was a soldier.”

“This man you came to rescue... he has a Wedey name.”

“That’s because he’s from Wedeyta.”

Mato moved back a bit and looked solemnly into Volos’s face. “He’s a Wedey who was captured by the Juganin. Does... does he mean us harm, Volos? Do *you* mean us harm?”

Gods, Volos was so tired, and he hurt, and although he should have been rejoicing over Berhanu’s freedom, he only wanted to sleep. “No. You have my word. He came here in search of peace.”

“And you?”

Volos couldn't exactly say the same, not when the blood of eight slain men still stained his skin. "I came here to save him. That's all."

After a pause, Mato nodded. "Well, you have. Although it looks as though you nearly got yourself killed in the process." He scrunched up his mouth and then patted Volos's uninjured shoulder. "Roll on your side, please. Your back needs tending to."

Volos did as he was told. That left him facing Mato's mother and Berhanu. With her lips pressed together in a grim line, she was smearing some sort of ointment in the crack of Berhanu's ass. Perhaps mercifully, the prince appeared to be unconscious. Volos didn't want to look, yet couldn't seem to avert his gaze. The wounds on his own back burned fiercely, and a part of him was glad for it—penance for not being faster, stronger, more clever. Penance for killing. Penance for living when others died.

Sometime later, Mato covered Volos with a light blanket. "I'm sorry we had to put you here. Mama and I couldn't carry either of you up the stairs to the bed."

"This is fine. This is... Thank you. For caring for us. If you hadn't..."

Mato smiled at him. "You should sleep. Your Wedey friend will need help soon, and Mother and I need to get to the inn."

"Gods, Mato, I'm sorry. You must be exhausted."

"It's no matter. Rest. I'll bring you food and drink soon."

Mato rose to his feet and gathered up the remains of the supplies he'd used to doctor Volos. His mother did the same after laying a blanket over Berhanu. She was unusually silent for a Kozari, but Volos detected no hatred in her expression. Just a sort of weariness that suggested she'd done this sort of thing before.

"How long until he's able to travel, do you think?" Volos asked.

She glanced at her patient. "A few days, if you go slowly."

"You don't have to go," Mato said. "Stay here awhile."

Oddly, Volos wished he could do just that—spend a few weeks in the sleepy village, pretending he was a man with no cares. But he shook his head. "He has to get to Felekna."

"The capital."

“Yes.” Volos didn’t explain. “Besides, if more Juganin come...”

Mato exchanged quick glances with his mother before turning to Volos. “Where did... where was he being held?”

“A big farmhouse near the woods. One with lots of outbuildings.”

“I know the place. Few people pass that way and the house has been empty for years. Since the war. I think your secrets will stay safe for a while.”

Volos nodded gratefully. Mato and his mother left, but they kept a lantern burning on the floor not far from Berhanu. Volos lay and watched the prince slumber until sleep came washing over him as well.

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The day crawled by in a haze of sleep and ache, and sometimes Mato stopped in to bring fresh water or a little food or to check on his patients’ wounds. Berhanu had remained unconscious the entire time. But now that night had fallen and the lanterns were lit, Volos sat on his pallet with a clay goblet of water in his hands and Berhanu lay awake, staring at him.

“He sent *you*.” Berhanu’s voice sounded raw and painful. This was the first time he had ever addressed Volos directly, but the bitterness of his words hurt worse than any of the Juganin’s swords.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Berhanu hissed at him. “Don’t call me that!” He shifted a bit under the blanket, perhaps attempting to sit up, but then moaned and went still. He looked terribly frail, as if he might fall apart at any minute, but his glare was strong. “Why only you? Did you convince him you were capable of taking on countless enemies by yourself?”

“No.” Volos decided not to inform Berhanu that Volos himself had been fairly convinced his rescue effort would fail. “He said it’s a sensitive situation. The queen wouldn’t permit a... larger effort.”

Berhanu seemed to consider this for a while. “But she did allow... you. Which means she didn’t command those bastards to... to capture me.” His voice wavered a little on the last words.

“Your fath—The king told me these Juganin were rogues acting without her consent.”

With a deep, shuddering breath, Berhanu seemed to shed some of his pain. “Then she may still listen to me? There’s still hope?”

“I think so.”

Berhanu pulled the blanket away, and this time his intention to sit up was very clear. “We have to go.”

Moving more quickly than was prudent given the state of his body, Volos slammed down his cup and scurried to Berhanu's pallet. He set a restraining hand on Berhanu's shoulder. “Not yet!”

“I'm not a fucking weakling!” said Berhanu, snarling and showing his teeth like an angry dog.

Suddenly furious, Volos snarled right back. “You're injured! It's a long walk to Felekna and I'm in no condition to fucking carry you there.” He realized, somewhat belatedly, that yelling at a prince was a bad idea and bullying a man who'd recently been tortured was cruel. He modulated his tone to more reasonable levels. “A few more days won't matter. Heal a bit first, then we can go.”

“We?”

Volos bit back more anger. “I'm sure as all hells not letting you go alone.”

Berhanu narrowed his eyes and turned his head away. Staring angrily at the wall, he said, “It was stupid of you to come here alone.”

“It was my duty,” Volos responded quietly.

“Your duty almost killed you.”

It was ridiculous. As angry and hurt as Volos felt, he had to fight desperately to stop himself from reaching out to untangle Berhanu's hair with his fingers. From stroking his overly gaunt cheeks. From holding him tightly to assure them both that they were alive and safe. Abruptly aware that he was naked—that they both were—Volos hurried back to his pallet, where he pulled the blanket over his lap and picked up his cup of water. He stared into the clay vessel as if it were fascinating.

Berhanu said nothing more. Perhaps he had fallen asleep.

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The next day, Mato brought clothing for them. Both sets of trousers were patched and the shirts were very plain, but everything was clean and fit them well. Volos had to help Berhanu get dressed, which angered Berhanu and made Volos blush and stutter like a schoolboy.

Mato wordlessly handed over Volos's sword and knife, as well as the cloak he'd abandoned in the stairway.

Volos took the items and just stood there, chewing his lip. "Mato, you don't—"

"I'm an innkeeper. If I'm fortunate, I'll never have to be a soldier. But that doesn't mean I can't be a little brave, now and then. And it certainly doesn't mean I can't do what's right." He sighed. "There were eight of them, Volos. You took on eight Juganin by yourself."

"Only because they were drugged."

"But you'd have gone in there anyway, even if they weren't. Even if there were eighty of them."

Volos only shrugged.

"What are you saying?" Berhanu demanded in Wedey. He was sitting on his pallet. "Who is that Kozari?"

Volos scowled. "His name is Mato, and neither of us would be alive if it weren't for him. Hate me if you must, but try to at least be civil to him."

A strange look crossed Berhanu's face, one Volos couldn't read. Then he looked away.

When Volos turned back to Mato, the innkeeper had a thoughtful expression. "You speak Wedey well, don't you?"

"At least as well as Kozari."

"But what are you—Wedey or Kozari?"

"Depends who you ask," Volos answered with a sigh.

"I'm asking you."

"I... I don't know." He looked at Mato sadly. "When I was a soldier, I wore a Wedey uniform. I'm sorry."

Mato settled a hand on Volos's uninjured shoulder. "Thank you for being honest. You know what? When I was a boy, after my brother and papa died, I was so angry. I hated Wedeyta. But Mama told me it's not the color of a person's uniform that makes him a good man or a bad one. It's what's in here." He patted Volos's chest, right over his heart. Then he smiled and left the house.

Volos was still standing there, clutching his things, when Berhanu made a small noise. "You're fucking him," Berhanu said.

“No, I’m not. And it wouldn’t be any of your business if I was, Your Highness.” Let the prince be angry with him. He always was anyway.

That night, Volos suggested to Berhanu that they go upstairs, where the bed would be more comfortable than a pallet on the floor. Berhanu agreed with a grunt. Volos had to bear most of Berhanu’s weight as they climbed—and good gods, that small gift of warmth and pressure felt so fucking good!

Berhanu lay down on the mattress with a relieved little moan. “Where are you going?” he asked when Volos started for the door. He sounded slightly panicked.

“I’m fetching my blankets from downstairs.”

“Why? It’s warm enough and there are plenty here.”

“Because I don’t much fancy sleeping on bare boards.” Volos stomped his foot for emphasis.

“Oh, for—We can share the fucking bed. It’s big enough for two and I don’t bite.”

The air was suddenly too thick for breathing. Volos wanted to share Berhanu’s bed more than he desired nearly anything else on earth. And he wanted to avoid it as fervently as if he had to face additional hordes of Juganin. He couldn’t think of a reasonable way to refuse. After several long moments of ridiculous dithering, he unlaced his boots, crossed the room, and got into bed. He was still fully dressed, and he hugged the edge of the mattress.

Berhanu doused the lantern.

Rain pelted the rooftop and pattered against the windows, but inside the attic room, the men’s breaths were very loud. Volos could feel Berhanu’s body heat pooling under the blankets, caressing him, making him hard and a little light-headed. He fisted his hands, squeezed his eyes closed, and prayed for sleep to overcome him.

“What reward did my father offer you?” Berhanu asked in a hoarse whisper.

“He didn’t specify.”

“Something grand?”

“I suppose.”

“You suppose.” Berhanu was silent a moment. “Isn’t that why you came here? Why you risked your life?”

Volos sighed. “Not really. I don’t... there’s nothing I really want.” Nothing he could ever have, anyway.

“Then you did it for glory? No. That doesn’t make sense. You’re a hero already.”

Volos’s stomach made a strange lurch and he didn’t reply.

“Why did you do it, Volos?”

It was the first time Berhanu had ever spoken Volos’s name. Although the room was too dark to see anything—and besides, Volos’s eyes were closed—he knew Berhanu had turned toward him. The prince waited for an answer.

Volos intended to say something about duty and respect for the crown. Instead, what came out of his mouth was “I didn’t want you to die.”

For a long time, Berhanu said nothing, which was a mercy. Volos was grateful he couldn’t see the prince’s face. But he could still *feel*, and when Berhanu reached over and placed his hand on Volos’s bicep, Volos very nearly wept.

“Thank you, Volos.”

The mattress shook as Berhanu turned to face the other direction.

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## Chapter Seven

It was a familiar dream.

Volos was deep within the prison run by Juganin. He was naked, beaten, and cold, and he was so starved that he couldn't remember not being hungry. And he was running, his bare feet slipping on wet stone. He was lost, and he wasn't sure whether he was running *from* something or running *to* it, but either way it didn't matter because he was terrified. Each breath tore from his lungs painfully and his heart felt ready to burst.

He turned a corner and found a squalid room piled high with corpses. He recognized some of them—his parents, his sisters, the little boy who lived nearby and who'd been murdered in his stead. Although they were dead, they looked at him, held their hands out toward him. "Why did you let this happen?" wailed his sisters. "Why didn't you join us?" his mother said. His father just looked at him and shook his head.

He backed away and ran, but his path dead-ended in another room, this one more enormous than the castle training hall. But it too was filled with corpses. Every Kozari soldier he'd slain, every Wedey soldier who'd died at his side was there. They screamed and moaned and blamed him for their deaths.

He wanted to apologize or explain, but his tongue filled his mouth and he couldn't find words in either language. With that strange knowing that comes to one in dreams, he recognized that the ability to speak had been taken from him as punishment and he'd never be able to communicate with anyone again. Nobody would ever want him, neither Wedey nor Kozari.

The third room held Juganin. They drank from ale bottles but weren't sleepy. They waved their curved swords at him. "You're next," sang one of them with a ghoulish grin. "See what we've planned for you!" The Juganin moved to the sides of the room so Volos could see what lay in the center. A naked body, hacked to pieces yet still bleeding. The severed head blinked up at him. "Did you get your reward?" it asked, and of course the body was Berhanu's. "Did you get your glory?"

Volos began to scream.

"Volos! Volos! Wake up! Wake up, dammit!"

Someone was shaking him, and after a few moments Volos realized he was no longer in his dream. The room was still dark, but Berhanu was next to him, jerking Volos's shoulders.



Volos took a steadying breath and willed his heart to slow to a normal tempo. "I'm... I'm sorry."

Berhanu stopped shaking him but didn't move away. His body remained pressed tight against Volos's, his long hair hanging down to tickle Volos's face. "You sounded like you were dying."

"I'm sorry," Volos repeated.

The prince fell to the side, making the mattress shake. "What the *fuck*, Volos?"

Last time he'd had a nightmare like this, someone had poured cold water on his head to wake him up. But he wasn't the only guard to suffer from bad dreams, so nobody complained. "I... It's all right. You can go back to sleep now. I never have them twice in one night."

"But you have them often."

"Not *too* often. Usually."

"What haunts you so badly? What do you dream of?"

"The prison," Volos whispered. He'd never spoken to anyone about this.

"How long were you there?"

Volos didn't really want to answer, but he said, "Nearly a year."

"A year. And those bastards—did they treat you like they did me?"

Worse, sometimes. But Volos didn't say so. "Yes." Nobody had ever asked him what happened during those long months, and he'd never before mentioned it.

"Fuck." A long silence followed, then a tentative question. "How did you survive that, Volos?"

Although nothing was funny, Volos laughed. "I had no alternatives."

Berhanu didn't say anything else. But he shifted a little closer so his shoulder just barely touched Volos's. And for some reason Volos couldn't discern, that small contact was enough to calm him and send him into a peaceful, dreamless sleep.

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For two more days they healed. Berhanu spent a lot of time sleeping, curled up in bed with the blankets pulled nearly over his head, his breathing slow and steady. On Mato's recommendation, Volos made sure Berhanu ate small but

frequent meals. When he wasn't eating or sleeping, Berhanu paced the upper floor cautiously, sometimes holding on to the walls for support. He spoke very little. But at night he always managed to position himself with some part of his body just barely touching Volos: foot against foot, shoulder to shoulder.

Volos paced too, although he kept himself outside of Berhanu's orbit. His wounds were mending well—they itched like mad but no infection had set in, and he was regaining his full range of motion. Mato smiled and told him he'd collected some impressive new scars.

After dinner on the second day, Berhanu set down the bowl of stew he'd been eating. It was a little watery because he couldn't yet handle rich foods, but it contained good meat and nice chunks of vegetables. "We have to go," he said.

Volos would have preferred to wait a few more days, but he nodded. "All right. In the morning."

"I can't wait—"

"The road is too dark. I don't want to trip over something and break my neck." Didn't want Berhanu to collapse in the night, far from help.

Berhanu bristled. "Since when do you give me orders?"

"My job is to get you safely to Queen Draga, Your Highness. I will fulfill that duty even if it means tying you up and carrying you over my shoulder."

After staring incredulously at Volos for a moment, Berhanu barked a short laugh. "You're a stubborn bastard, aren't you?"

"If I wasn't, we'd both be dead."

They shared the bed in silence that night, Berhanu's leg touching Volos's.

Mato brought them food and waterskins in the morning, but as the three men stood downstairs in his grandparents' house, he looked worried. "Are you sure you won't stay a little longer?"

"He's restless. He has a mission to fulfill."

"And so do you." Mato sighed. "Take care, Volos."

"I will. And gods, I don't have the words to thank you for what you've done. You're a true hero, Mato."

Mato blushed and ducked his head, but he was smiling widely. When he looked up again there was a gleam in his eyes. "Maybe someday you'll return for a visit. You're always welcome here."

Well, that was an odd sort of thing—to know there was a little village in Kozar that Volos could call home, if he wanted. The knowledge glowed warmly in his chest. “Thank you.” He reached into the pocket of his cloak and pulled out a heavy purse, which he held to Mato.

Mato took the purse, weighed it in his hand. “This is far too much.”

“It’s not nearly enough. Besides, he can afford it.” He jerked his head in Berhanu’s direction.

Berhanu glared. “Stop gossiping with the innkeeper. It’s time to go.”

“What is he saying?” Mato asked.

Volos allowed a grin to tug at the corners of his mouth. “He’s saying he’s an impatient fool.”

Mato laughed as he tucked the purse into his clothing. And then he grabbed Volos’s head and tugged him down for a hard and passionate kiss. Volos was taken by surprise. For a moment or two, he permitted himself to be lost in the delicious sensation of another man’s lips against his, another man’s tongue entering his mouth. When he pulled away, he was slightly breathless and Mato’s lips were reddened.

“Safe journeys, Volos,” Mato said. Then he turned to Berhanu and executed a deep and graceful bow.

Berhanu looked as if he wanted to tear someone’s head off, yet he managed to bow back. “Thank you,” he said in heavily accented Kozari.

Clouds shrouded the sun as Volos and Berhanu began their walk, but the road remained dry. Volos’s sword felt comfortable and comforting around his hips, and the bag containing his and Berhanu’s few possessions hung on his back. Berhanu carried nothing—he could barely carry himself—but Volos had given him the knife, more to stop Berhanu from complaining than from any real hope that the prince could use it effectively.

And in the unforgiving daylight, the sight of Berhanu broke Volos’s heart. Where once the prince had been brawny with muscle, now he was little more than a skin-covered skeleton. Once he’d swaggered; now he stepped slowly, carefully, like an old man on the way to market. And he stopped often, his expression promising murder to anyone who said anything about it. He’d sit for a few minutes on a large stone or fallen tree before slowly levering himself upright and continuing their march.

Around midday, Berhanu stumbled. He would have fallen if Volos hadn't caught his arm and grimly led him to the grassy roadside, where they both sat down. "Fucking weak," Berhanu mumbled.

Volos opened his bag and took out some of the food they'd packed. He handed Berhanu a bread roll stuffed with minced meat and vegetables. "When I first became a soldier I was still a boy. I was gangly. Scrawny. I could barely hold a sword. My captain told me that the only true weakness is to give up."

Berhanu snorted, but perhaps the tense lines of his body eased a bit.

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Walking at a normal pace, Volos would have reached the nearest city before the evening meal. As it was, however, they didn't get there until very late. Berhanu had spent the last several miles leaning on Volos, no doubt seething silently over the need for support. Eventually they shuffled into town, and Volos steered them to the first inn he saw. The proprietress—a young woman who wasn't pleased to be roused at such a late hour—gave them a small private room, along with some cold meat and cheese and a couple pints of watery ale.

The room had only one bed, which was fine. There was also a washbasin and a pair of towels. While Volos finished eating, Berhanu wearily stripped off his clothing. Volos averted his eyes, which was silly. But he leapt to his feet when Berhanu collapsed onto his knees. "Get in bed!" Volos ordered, attempting to drag Berhanu there.

But Berhanu fought back weakly. "I'm filthy from travel. I hate sleeping in dirtied linens." So Volos grabbed the towel and gave Berhanu a wipe-down. He wanted to linger over the task, but Berhanu could barely remain upright, and Volos didn't quite trust himself to not get carried away with touching him. Besides, after what had happened with the Juganin, surely the last thing Berhanu wanted was another man pawing his body.

Tucked into bed, Berhanu apparently had no compunction about watching Volos undress and wash himself. Volos's skin itched under the close scrutiny. He prayed for his cock to stay soft, and he cast about desperately for the most disgusting memories he could dredge up. Still, he was half erect when he doused the lantern and dove beneath the blankets.

"I didn't realize you were wounded so badly," said Berhanu, who seemed to find conversation easier in the dark.

"I've been hurt worse."

“Like the injury to your leg. That’s why you limp a bit after you’ve exercised hard.”

“Yes.” Volos wasn’t sure what to make of the fact that Berhanu had noticed his limp. Prior to their Kozari adventure, he didn’t think the prince had spared him more than a few disdainful glances.

“I don’t understand you. You keep risking your neck for Wedeyta, and for what? To prove you’re a true Wedey patriot?”

“That’s not... I fought because Kozari slaughtered my family and I wanted revenge. By the time I realized how foolish I was, we were in the middle of a war, and I’m no deserter. After the war I became a guard because what else was there for me to do? And I came after you because—” He stopped so suddenly he nearly bit his tongue.

“Because?”

“I told you. I didn’t want you to die.”

“Why not? I’ve always treated you like shit. I’d think you’d be thrilled to be rid of me.”

“No,” said Volos thickly. “I wouldn’t be.”

Berhanu said nothing else, and Volos thought he must have fallen asleep. But then Berhanu shifted position, making sure he lay touching Volos. He sighed loudly. “Good night, Volos.”

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Over an early breakfast, Volos made inquiries about how to find a carriage to Felekna. The landlady assured them that carriages were frequent, but they’d have to pass through most of the city to catch one. So Volos pulled his cloak tightly around himself in hope that his sword would be less obvious, and he and Berhanu set out. The prince looked drawn and pale, and the planes of his face were set with pain. But he struggled along and didn’t lean on Volos at all.

It was past midday when they reached the street where the coaches were. But the man in charge informed Volos that the last one for Felekna had already gone. “I can get you on the first one in the morning, though. Thirty fals each and you’ll be there by lunchtime.”

If Berhanu hadn’t been completely exhausted, he probably would have thrown a tantrum after Volos translated. Volos paid the man sixty fals and received two tokens in exchange. Berhanu glared bloody murder at everyone

until Volos dragged him to an inn, this one larger and more crowded than the previous night's.

"It's just as well, don't you think?" said Volos as they sat with their tankards of ale. "This way you'll be fresher when you speak with the queen."

"Fresher!" Berhanu took a large swallow and slammed his tankard onto the table. "I'm not a fucking flower, Volos. I'm a man and a prince and—"

"And you'll be there tomorrow."

"Do you realize what's at stake?"

Volos was tired of being angry at this man. "I may not be royalty, but I'm not an idiot. Of course I realize. I just don't think one more day will make a difference." He lowered his voice, although he doubted anyone here understood Wedey. "If she knew where you were, she probably has had news that those men are dead."

Berhanu rubbed his face. "Gods. I should have been there weeks ago. I should have... The interpreter I hired—they killed her. She's dead because of me."

The statement was true, so Volos didn't argue with it. He'd seen many innocent people die. Infants. Old people. His own family.

"She was a terrible interpreter anyway," Berhanu said. "She didn't speak Kozari nearly as well as you do. And she kept flirting with me even though she was old enough to be my mother, and she complained constantly about the journey, and..." His voice broke, and for a shocking moment, Volos thought he might cry. But Berhanu just cleared his throat and shook his head. "If I'd fought better when they attacked us, she'd be alive and I wouldn't..."

"There were eight of them."

"*You* managed it."

"Only because Mato and his mother drugged their ale."

Berhanu's face twisted. "Mato. You kissed him."

"He kissed me." Volos frowned. "You did know I prefer men, didn't you?"

"I knew. I've heard about you. You prefer those insipid twits who frequent the Thieving Goose."

Volos blinked at him. Since when had the prince been keeping track of who he fucked? "They're willing and convenient. I wouldn't say that I prefer them."

Berhanu opened his mouth, then closed it. He shook his head before downing a good bit of his ale. "I'm sorry," he mumbled after a moment. "It's none of my fucking business, is it? Tell me something, Volos. Be honest. Forget for now that I'm a damned prince. Do you hate me?"

"I... No. Gods, no."

"But I've treated you so badly. And you saw me... You saw what those fuckers did to me."

Volos decided to ignore the first part of Berhanu's statement. "I didn't see anything I haven't seen before." He looked the prince carefully in the eyes. "I didn't see anything I haven't experienced myself."

Berhanu's jaw worked. "Have you—"

But before he could finish his question, a large man with a wild beard parked himself next to their table. He had a soldier's stance. "What are you doing, talking that Wedey shit here?" he demanded in Kozari. "Who the fuck are you?"

Narrowing his eyes, Volos growled at him. "None of your business."

"This is *my* city, *my* country. That makes it my business." He took a step closer. "Who are you anyway? Wedey scum?"

Volos stood. He allowed his cloak to fall open and he placed his hand on the hilt of his sword. "I am Volos Perun, and I am this man's guard. Stop being an ass and show some courtesy to a weary traveler."

"Courtesy!" The man drew a knife from his belt. It had an impressively big blade, but it would be no match for a sword. Besides, his eyes were red and he reeked of alcohol. "I'll show him the courtesy of a quick death," he snarled.

Berhanu stood too. But although he clutched his borrowed knife, he wouldn't last a moment in a fight. He looked as if a strong wind might knock him over. A crowd had formed, the other patrons of the tavern gathering in a rapt circle just out of reach of Volos's sword.

Instead of drawing his sword, Volos stepped closer to the bearded man. Fear flashed in the man's eyes, which was good. But it would be unwise to back him into a metaphorical corner when he had an audience.

"Friend," Volos said calmly. He shot Berhanu a quick warning look before turning his attention back to the bearded man. "I understand your feelings about

Wedey. I fought in that war too.” He didn’t mention for which side. “But the war is over, man. Let us show the Wedey that Kozari can practice peace as well.”

The man wavered visibly, and a few members of the crowd shouted words of agreement.

Volos managed a smile. “We were nearly done here anyway. Put your knife away and we’ll leave.”

When the man hesitated, two men and a woman stepped forward to grasp his arms gently. They tugged him backward.

“Let’s go,” Volos said to Berhanu in Wedey. For a terrible minute he thought Berhanu was going to refuse, but then the prince growled and resheathed his knife.

An older woman moved to their table. “I’m sorry for this,” she said, giving Volos and Berhanu a smile. She dropped a few coins on their table—enough to pay for their ale. “We’re not all rude.”

“Thank you,” said Volos. Then, hoping that Berhanu would follow, he walked to the stairs leading to their room.

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## Chapter Eight

Berhanu said nothing as they readied themselves for bed, but he was clearly furious. He threw his boots onto the floor, tossed the holstered knife across the room, and stripped off his clothes so viciously that he nearly ripped them. He leaned against the washstand as he toweled himself off, but the tightness of his wasted muscles was very apparent on his thin body.

Volos waited stupidly in the corner until it became clear that Berhanu did not intend to get into bed anytime soon. Volos sighed and slowly began to undress. He was down to nothing but his baggy Kozari trousers when Berhanu whirled around to look at him.

“You just walked away from that bastard,” Berhanu spat.

“Yes.”

“He threatened us, didn't he? And I don't know what he said but I've no doubt it was insulting. And you just smiled and walked away.”

“What did you want me to do, Your Highness?” Volos allowed a mocking tone into his voice. “Kill him for insulting us?”

“Yes!” Berhanu's hands were fisted at his side.

“Just because someone is an ill-mannered oaf doesn't mean he deserves to die.”

Berhanu stomped across the room until they were nearly chest to chest. Volos was certain Berhanu was going to hit him, and he prepared himself to restrain the prince without injuring him. Which was why he was taken completely by surprise when Berhanu kissed him instead.

It was a fierce kiss. Berhanu's lips pressed against Volos's teeth so hard that Volos tasted blood, and then Berhanu's tongue invaded his mouth as ferociously as an army. At the same time, Berhanu held tightly to handfuls of Volos's hair and pushed their pelvises together.

Volos didn't know what to do with his hands, but they seemed to make a decision on their own, settling on Berhanu's bare shoulders. Volos hung on as if for dear life.

Oh gods. He'd never even dared dream of this, and now Berhanu was so real against him, so *there*. They were grinding their groins together and Volos was distantly aware that he was very close to coming.

But Berhanu pulled himself away, staggering back a half step. His cock was fully rampant, the head slick and red. He looked down to where Volos's own erection tented his trousers. Then he growled like an angry dog and surged forward so quickly that he pushed Volos backward against the wall.

Volos could only tip his head back and squeeze his eyes shut as Berhanu's mouth roved everywhere—licking and biting at his chin, his jawline, his neck, his collarbones. Sucking and then nipping his tingling nipples. Somehow Berhanu managed to avoid the healing wounds on Volos's body, but he was surely leaving marks nearly everywhere else. Some of the bites might have been deep enough to draw blood, but Volos was a thousand leagues from minding.

Berhanu's hands were busy too, tugging at Volos's waistband until the trousers fell to his knees and then squirming between Volos and the wall and grabbing on to his ass. His fingers dug into the crack, burning sweetly, while he urged Volos's hips forward so their cocks could find better friction.

"Gods," Volos moaned. He was so overcome with pleasure that he felt turned inside out, his nerves singing more loudly with every passing second.

Moving more quickly than Volos would have thought possible, Berhanu spun him around to face the wall. The trousers fell to Volos's ankles, hobbling him, but he spread his legs as far as he was able, pressed his palms and forehead against the smooth wood, and canted his ass backward.

Rough, spit-slicked fingers entered his body, first two and then three. It hurt. But the keening noise Volos made was due to disappointment that Berhanu wasn't giving him more. He wanted to be filled so tightly that there was no room left inside him for anything but Berhanu. He wanted hard and fast and merciless.

As if in answer to Volos's unspoken pleas, Berhanu lined up the tip of his cock against Volos's twitching hole and then plunged deep inside. They both cried out. Berhanu's fingers bruised Volos's hips as he fucked Volos quickly. When his furious pumping became uneven jerks and he sank his teeth into the meat of Volos's uninjured shoulder, lightning struck the deepest core of Volos's body. His untouched cock spurted a thick stream of seed against the wall.

For just a moment, Berhanu sagged against Volos's sweaty back—contact so sweet that Volos very nearly climaxed again.

But then Berhanu withdrew with a ragged cry, making Volos feel empty. Bereft. Berhanu stumbled a bit, snarling when Volos reached out to steady him. Hectic spots of red colored Berhanu's cheeks, and his eyes were as wide and wild as a terrified animal's. He made another sound—a sob?—before staggering to the bed and burrowing under the covers like a frightened child.

Volos stood there, panting, feeling warm liquid drip down his inner thighs.

After a while, he pulled his trousers high enough so he could walk to the washstand and give himself a cursory cleaning. He was usually fastidious after he fucked, but he was sorry to remove Berhanu's spend from his body. He tied his trousers around his waist before dousing the lantern and getting into bed.

Berhanu was still awake; his breathing remained ragged. But he didn't say anything, didn't move over to make contact with Volos as had become his custom. They simply lay there on their backs until exhaustion overcame them both.

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## Chapter Nine

Volos expected Berhanu to be surly in the morning, but instead the prince was subdued. His body seemed to take up even less space than usual as they made their morning ablutions and dressed, and he didn't say a single word over a breakfast of cold meat and hard bread.

When their carriage was ready, Volos handed the tokens to the driver while Berhanu climbed carefully inside. Volos moved a bit carefully too. He was sore. If Berhanu had seemed happier about their coupling, Volos might have welcomed the twinge in his ass, the protests of bruised and bitten skin.

They were the only passengers. They sat opposite one another—Berhanu facing forward and Volos backward—not quite letting their eyes meet. Berhanu picked at the threads of the fraying upholstery. The journey took a thousand years.

Felekna was a much larger city than the Wedey capital. It had not been besieged during the war, and its buildings sprawled well beyond the ancient city walls. As impressive as it was in size, large portions of it were shockingly squalid. The carriage rattled past reeking neighborhoods with houses that leaned drunkenly, scrawny children who stared with hollow eyes, and both trash and humans scattered in the gutters.

But the city became increasingly grand as they neared the palace, which ruled flamboyantly atop a hill. The carriage let them off near the bottom of the slope. After Berhanu got out, he started marching upward right away, not checking to make sure Volos was at his heels. By the time they reached the gilded palace gates, Berhanu was out of breath and looking angry about it.

The gates were guarded, of course. A half-dozen men and women in gaudy uniforms and ridiculous braided hats stood at somber attention, hands on the ornamented hilts of their swords.

Berhanu stopped several paces away. "I had a letter from my father—all done up with seals and everything. But it's gone now. And I'm not exactly looking princely. I don't know how we'll get in." He looked discouraged. Broken.

Volos patted his shoulder awkwardly. "Let me try." He walked confidently to the guards, who eyed him—and his sword—distrustfully.

“My name is Volos Perun. I am here as bodyguard to this man, who has a vital message for Queen Draga. I know we don’t look like much—it’s been a hard journey. But I assure you, she will want to see him. And if she finds out you’ve turned him away, the consequences will be dire. Go verify what I’m telling you. We’ll wait.”

The guards exchanged glances. Volos knew that they were thinking he was probably lying, but none of them wanted to bear responsibility in case he was telling the truth. Finally a guard with red hair coiled into braids lifted her chin at him. “Who is he?”

“You can tell her... he’s the man from the south, the one she’s been waiting to see. The man who was recently freed.”

The guard was clearly still skeptical. “If this is a ruse—”

“It would be a very stupid one.”

She thought for a moment before giving two sharp nods. “You’ll wait in the courtyard. In chains.”

That proposition didn’t thrill Volos, but it didn’t surprise him either. “Fine.” He turned to Berhanu and spoke in Wedey. “They’ll give her my message. But they’ll bind us in the meantime. Please don’t put up a fuss.”

“I’m not a child.”

“I know.”

One of the guards scurried away to convey the news. Meanwhile, the others frowned at hearing Wedey, then ushered Volos and Berhanu through the gate and into the courtyard. The redhead put manacles on Volos first, binding his arms behind his back, but she made sure the irons weren’t too tight, and she didn’t take his sword.

Berhanu went pale at her gesture to put his hands behind his back. “Volos,” he said quietly. He sounded strangled. “I can’t...”

Volos answered in a soothing tone. “It’s only for a few minutes. These are not the Juganin.”

“Yes. All right.” Berhanu stepped very close to Volos and looked as if he wanted to run, but he placed his hands as ordered. When the shackles clinked shut, he winced.

They ended up having to wait considerably longer than a few minutes. Volos understood—it wasn’t as if royalty was available at a moment’s notice.

Perhaps noting the way Berhanu swayed slightly on his feet, the redheaded guard led them to a stone bench near the wall and asked them to sit. They did, Berhanu so close that his thigh was pressed against Volos's.

"Do you think we should get a fountain like that at the castle?" Berhanu asked after a while. He nodded his head toward an enormous monstrosity covered in gilded dragons, lions, eagles, and gods knew what else.

"I think you should get two of them."

Volos was rewarded with a brief smile—one of the first Berhanu had ever given him—and then Berhanu spoke. "Once when I was still a boy, my mother bought my father a statue as a gift. It was hideous and it cost a fortune. My brothers and I used to call it the Nightmare. Father was forced to keep it in his study so he wouldn't offend her. After she died, he moved it into his bedchamber." A softness settled on Berhanu's features. "I think my mother would have loved this fountain." He sighed. "What's your mother like, Volos?"

"Dead. Juganin killed my whole family when I was a child."

"Gods. I'm sorry. I didn't... I'm so sorry."

Volos shrugged, which was a bit awkward in chains. "It was a long time ago."

"And you've no family left at all?"

"No."

"My father said your mother's family is prominent."

"They weren't pleased she married a Kozari." Volos had never met them and knew little about them. His mother had preferred not to speak about her relatives.

"Then who did you go to for comfort after you were... after the prison?"

Volos looked away.

Perhaps Berhanu would have asked more questions, and perhaps Volos would have answered, because at least the conversation was distracting the prince from his unease. But two important-seeming men came marching purposefully in their direction, both of them looking appalled.

"Unchain these men at once!" ordered the one with a narrow face and long beard.

His companion, almost his twin but for the missing beard, bowed deeply to Berhanu. "I beg your pardon, sir. I do apologize for this horrid treatment."

Volos translated while the redhead unlocked Berhanu's manacles and then Volos's. Berhanu bowed back, albeit not quite so deeply. "It's not necessary. Of course you must be very careful about security. Your guards were not at all unkind."

When Volos translated that little speech into Kozari, the thin-faced men looked relieved and the redhead smiled slightly.

Berhanu and Volos were led into the palace, an edifice of endless marble hallways lined with colorful carpets, paintings, tapestries, and statues. Passersby gaped at Berhanu and Volos, then scurried out of their way. The foursome finally arrived at a large room with silk-upholstered chairs and more tapestries. Large windows overlooked an elaborate walled garden, while inside the room, numerous vases overflowed with fresh flowers.

"Her Majesty will join you very shortly," said the bearded man. "Would you, er, care to freshen up first?"

After Volos translated, Berhanu shook his head. "No. All the freshening up in the world won't make me look less disreputable."

The men listened as Volos conveyed the message, and then they bowed and hurried out of the room.

Berhanu paced while Volos waited near one of the paneled walls. It wasn't long before a door swung open and a woman stepped into the room. She wasn't what Volos had expected. For one thing, a detailed rendering of a flowering vine crept from her neck up one cheek. Volos had never seen a tattoo before but vaguely remembered his father once mentioning that Kozari nobility applied ink to their bodies. The queen was in her sixties and had probably never been beautiful, but her clear eyes showed keen intelligence. Her trousers, blouse, and long vest were obviously made of expensive cloth yet were mostly unadorned. Her gray hair formed a nimbus of tight curls around her face.

"Prince Berhanu," she said and curtseyed. "I am so relieved to see you." She spoke in heavily accented and quite formal Wedey.

Berhanu's answering bow was very deep. As battered and poorly dressed as he was, there was no mistaking him for anything but a prince. "Your Majesty. Thank you for agreeing to speak to me."

“Of course.” She frowned. “I cannot properly express my regrets over the treatment you have received in my country. I know you understand why I could not act more directly. But please understand how pained I am at what you have endured.”

After a very brief pause, Berhanu bowed again. “I do understand. And I’d like you to know that I owe my life, in part, to the kindness of some of your subjects.” He gave an unhappy little smile. “Every country has its villains and its heroes.”

She trailed her fingertips along an ivory-inlaid tabletop. “And speaking of heroes...?” She gave Volos a significant look.

Berhanu turned to look at Volos, who tensed. But then Berhanu shocked him with a warm smile. “I apologize, My Lady. Let me present my bodyguard, Volos Perun.”

Volos felt huge and shabby. Rather belatedly, he dropped to one knee, but the queen quickly motioned for him to stand. She gave him a very close look, and then her eyes widened. “Perun! Your father was Rok Perun!”

“I... Yes, Your Majesty.”

“I should have seen it immediately. You look so much like him.” The corners of her lips twitched. “I had a terrible crush on him when I was a girl.”

“You... you knew my father?”

“Not well, but yes. He was one of my mother’s advisors. He was very young for that position, actually, but I believe he inherited it. And he had a reputation for plain speaking. If more people had listened to him, a great deal of pain could have been avoided.”

Volos didn’t know how to respond to that. His tongue felt thick and stupid, so he nodded awkwardly. Then he risked a glance at Berhanu, who was giving him an odd, unreadable look.

“So many sorrows,” said Queen Draga. “But perhaps due to the bravery of both of you, we can avoid yet more.”

“That’s my hope too,” said Berhanu.

“Good. And I must apologize again, but I was in the middle of a meeting. I think perhaps you might like some rest and refreshment after the ardors of your journey. Will you accept my hospitality? This evening we can begin our discussions in earnest.”



“Thank you, My Lady.”

“Good. Please wait here. In a few minutes someone will come to take you to your rooms.”

But before she could leave, Berhanu held up a hand. “My Lady? I’d prefer it if Volos stayed with me. He can translate for me if necessary. And he’s my guard.”

“Of course.”

A brief round of bowing and curtsying accompanied the queen’s departure. Afterward, Berhanu crossed the room to the window, leaned against the sill, and looked out at the thick afternoon mist. Not only did Volos have no idea what the prince might be thinking, he wasn’t all that sure of his own thoughts, which were jumbled and confused.

“Do you think she’ll be sympathetic to my arguments?” Berhanu asked, still facing away.

“I don’t know. She seemed... well-disposed.”

“Maybe. But you never know with royalty. Quite often we say or do one thing and we mean something else entirely.”

Volos was still chewing over the meaning of that statement when a woman arrived to lead them away.

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## Chapter Ten

Berhanu and Volos were taken to chambers fit for a prince. The main room was large and generously furnished. An elevated platform held an enormous bed, covered by an opulent bedspread and piled with pillows. In a smaller attached room, a spacious window provided a fine view of the city from the carved wooden table placed in front of it, which was set with gold cutlery and gilded plates. A small feast awaited them under covered dishes. But the accommodation that excited them both was the washroom with a huge porcelain tub filled with steaming, scented water. The room also included a pile of thick towels, a painted washbasin, a mirror with an ornate frame, two sets of toiletries, and a rack hung with several sets of clothing.

"I suspect the queen thinks we're filthy," Berhanu said with a small grin. "And she's right. What do you think—eat first or bathe?"

"I... uh..."

"Bathe, I think. Better a cold dinner than cold bath water." Berhanu sat on a marble bench to remove his boots. Then, while Volos stood like a complete fool, the prince stripped completely and climbed into the tub. He uttered a deep sigh and submerged to his neck. "Heaven."

Volos was carefully averting his eyes, as if he hadn't already seen Berhanu naked many times. As if he hadn't felt him, deep inside, just the night before.

Berhanu made an exasperated little noise. "Get in the tub, Volos."

"But you're—"

"It's big enough for us both. No point in you having to endure cold, second-hand water."

Volos hung his sword on a hook and quickly undressed. He felt acutely self-conscious as he crossed the room, but Berhanu didn't say anything as he climbed into the tub. They faced each other in silence. The deep water was soft with scented oil; it felt wonderful.

After lifting a large cake of soap from a basket, Berhanu gestured imperiously. "Turn around. I'll wash your back."

Were all princes so inscrutable? Volos turned around, sloshing some of the water onto the tile floor in the process. He tried not to swoon like a lovesick

maiden when Berhanu set one slick hand on his shoulder and used the other to smooth the soap over his spine. Volos had never been bathed before—well, not since he was a child. In the quiet of the washroom, with the only sounds being their breaths and the small splashes of water, the act was strangely intimate. More intimate, in fact, than most of the fucks he'd had at the Thieving Goose. And Berhanu was taking his time over it, moving the soap in small, slow circles.

“There's no tub in the barracks, is there?” asked Berhanu.

“No.”

“Then how do you stay clean? When you spar, you never—” He stopped suddenly, then cleared his throat.

“We make do with wash bowls. When my purse is feeling especially full I might go to the baths.”

“I have a private washroom. I've never been to the public baths.” Did Berhanu sound slightly wistful?

“They're not nearly as nice as this. At least, not the one I go to. It's near the Goose.”

“I've never been there either.”

Volos twisted his head around to look at him. “Really?”

“I'm a fucking *prince*, Volos. Do you think I'd be allowed in a place like that without an entire company of guards?” He sighed. “My social life happens at official dinners where I have to pretend to be fascinated with the Duke of Dumbshit or the Baroness of Boredom. And when I want to get a leg over, there's a list of whores who are approved for royal use. They're all very clean and pretty and proper.”

That was an aspect of Berhanu's life that had never occurred to Volos. Berhanu trained with the guards and, to the extent Volos had thought about it at all, he assumed he played like the guards as well. He opened his mouth to say something—an apology, maybe?—but Berhanu snorted at him. “Tilt your head back. I'll wash your hair.”

Volos closed his eyes as Berhanu upended several cups of bathwater over his head. And then... good gods. Berhanu used his fingertips to massage soap into Volos's scalp; it was a gentle sensation since his fingers had lost some strength during his captivity. Volos had thought it felt good to have his back

soaped, but *this* was unbelievably wonderful. It was altogether possible he might climax from it.

Berhanu chuckled. "You're moaning, Volos."

"I... uh..."

"Feels nice, doesn't it?"

"Gods, yes!"

The answering laughter sounded delighted.

Before Volos could quite melt with pleasure, Berhanu dumped more water over his head to rinse away the shampoo. Then he patted Volos's back. "My turn!"

More water sloshed out as they both turned around.

As much as Volos had enjoyed being bathed, he enjoyed bathing Berhanu even more. It was a wonderful excuse to touch him, to examine him not as a combatant or a patient but as a man. He had wide shoulders dotted with a few freckles, which Volos would have liked to lick. The knobs of his spine were still too prominent, but his skin was soft, and the nape of his neck looked so tender and vulnerable that Volos nearly bit through his own lip.

Volos spent a very long time cleaning Berhanu's hair, gently working out the tangles with his fingers. Not that Berhanu minded—the sounds he made were positively obscene.

About the same time that the water cooled, Volos's empty belly growled, making Berhanu laugh again. "I guess your stomach cares little about your outsides being clean."

With a slight tangle of limbs and considerable splashing, they climbed out of the tub. Volos gasped when he saw that Berhanu's cock was as erect as his own. Berhanu licked his lips and gave Volos one of his long, unreadable stares before shaking his head and grabbing a towel. "We'd better eat before the queen sends for me."

There was enough food to feed a small army, and even though most of it had cooled to room temperature, it was delicious. Berhanu ate slowly, no doubt mindful of his still-recovering digestive system, but in the end he managed to down quite a lot. Volos ate like a starving wolf—albeit one with relatively good manners.

They had just finished their meal when a knock sounded at the door. Volos answered it, not especially surprised to discover the thin-faced duo from earlier in the day. "Her Majesty requests the presence of her guest," said the bearded one.

Unlike Volos, Berhanu wouldn't have noticed the singular *guest*, but he put up his hand when Volos tried to leave with him. "This is bound to be long and tedious, Volos, and I don't need you to translate. Stay here."

Volos set his jaw. "I'm your guard."

"I know. But if she decides to do away with me, even you can't stand up to a palace full of soldiers. I'll be fine." He gave Volos a stern look. "Stand down."

"Yes, Your Highness," Volos replied, feeling like a sullen child. But then he hastily added, "Wait!" and trotted to the washroom. He returned a few seconds later with his scabbarded sword, which he held out to Berhanu.

"That's generous of you. But I can hardly lift it in my current state."

"You're a warrior. You ought to look like one."

Berhanu gave him a strange smile as he took the blade.

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Volos had experienced far too much idleness lately. He wasn't used to it and didn't like it. There was little in the bedchamber to keep him busy, and he had the feeling he wouldn't be very welcome were he to prowl the palace halls. He paced instead, staring out the windows where darkness hid the gardens, and examining the details of the tapestries on the walls. On close inspection, one of them turned out to depict couples—and threesomes and foursomes—in a bewildering variety of sexual positions. Volos looked at that one for a long time, which was probably a mistake. Two well-built men in the lower right-hand corner were happily sucking each other's cocks. One of them had long dark hair.

Even though the bath was long over, Volos's dick had never quite softened all the way. Now it perked back up, and a pleasant little twinge in his ass reminded him of the previous night. Gods. With a sigh of resignation, Volos closed himself in the washroom and dropped his trousers. He sat on the edge of the tub while he stroked himself, and when he thought of Berhanu marking his shoulder with his teeth, Volos came.

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Berhanu returned very late. He weaved slightly as he walked, perhaps from the exhaustion that was plain on his face. Perhaps from the wine that scented his breath. He slammed the chamber door behind him and staggered to the room with the table, where he found some leftover ale. He swallowed it in one long draught.

Volos hovered.

Then Berhanu slammed the empty tankard onto the table, snarled, and swept the tankard aside. It clattered loudly against the floor. "Fucking royalty!"

"Is she not—"

"Oh, she'll come around. But not until after I spend days talking myself in circles and making all sorts of promises. It's a power thing. Prove you have the upper hand by stringing the other party along until he wants to strangle you." He unbuckled the sword and hung it over a chair back. "Not that I'd be able. I couldn't strangle a newborn kitten right now."

Volos made a face, and Berhanu grimaced. "I don't strangle kittens, Volos. It's a *saying*. Gods, I hadn't realized you were the savior of animals too. Is that what I am to you? A fluffy little puppy, maybe? A baby bunny?"

"No. You're a prince."

This time, Berhanu shoved a plate to the floor. It shattered. Then he stomped over to Volos and stood so close that they almost touched. "A *prince*? A precious little bundle of blue-blooded titles. The living embodiment of your patriotic fucking duty."

Fuck. "A man!" Volos yelled at him. "That's what you are to me." The living embodiment of his deepest desire.

And of course Berhanu kissed him. There was no tenderness to it, just a bruising invasion that tasted of wine and ale. Volos's scalp hurt where Berhanu gripped his hair. But then Berhanu grabbed one of Volos's hands and pushed it to Berhanu's groin, where the hardness of his cock was very evident. "A man like this?" His voice was deep and raspy. "You want a man like this?"

"Yes. Please, yes."

This time, some of their fine borrowed clothing might have been torn—Volos wasn't sure. What he did know was that very soon he was naked and bending over the thick mattress with Berhanu pounding into him with all the ferocity of a winter storm. Volos was thankful for the friction of the smooth

bedcovers against his cock, but even more thankful for the heat that filled him. The massive bed squeaked as they shook it; their skin slapped together and their lungs labored. When Berhanu angled himself just right, setting off colored lights behind Volos's closed eyelids, Volos swore in Wedey, Kozari, and a smattering of other tongues as well.

He moaned when Berhanu pulled out of him.

This time at least Berhanu met his gaze. "I'll go wash up," said Berhanu. "And then I'll go to sleep. I have hours of talking to look forward to tomorrow."

"All right."

Volos wasn't really tired. But he went to bed when Berhanu did and lay beside him in the huge bed, listening to him whimper slightly in his sleep.

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## Chapter Eleven

The next several days dragged by. Berhanu spent long periods of time in conversation with Queen Draga, returning to his room for meals and brief rests. He didn't tell Volos much about what went on in those meetings, although he did say he was optimistic about a positive outcome in the end. But in the meantime he alternated between foul moods and despondent ones, and Volos got only brief glimpses of his spirit and humor. While Berhanu's physical state gradually improved, Volos imagined that underneath the healing skin was a thick layer of jagged glass grating painfully over heart and nerves.

Volos spent most of his time caged in their chambers, although one afternoon a smiling guard took him for a long tour of the palace. She showed him the grand public spaces such as the throne room and ballroom, and she even allowed him to see the more pedestrian areas where the guards trained.

"How does it compare to your home?" she asked.

He'd never really thought of the castle as home—it was just the place where he lived. "The training space isn't much different."

"I suppose we all need the same things, more or less." She cocked her head slightly. "You sound like a Kozari but you're from Wedeyta."

"Some of my family was from here."

"Ah. Well, you should consider this your home too, then. You'd be welcome here."

"Thank you."

She found cloaks for them both and took him on a tour of the gardens.

When Volos and Berhanu were in their room together, they fucked. Three, sometimes four times a day. Each time, Berhanu took him brutally, so they were both raw when they finished. He saved his gentle touches for the bath and for just before they fell asleep. Volos took whatever Berhanu gave him and was thankful for it, but he gradually realized that it wasn't enough. Which was stupid. Less than a month ago he would have been thrilled for any crumbs of Berhanu's affection. But now he'd become a glutton, always hungry for more than he received.

They had been at the palace for a week—and Volos was beginning to go slightly mad from confinement—when Berhanu returned to their chambers



looking more relaxed than usual. "She's finally agreed," he said as he unbuckled Volos's sword from his hips. "She's going to tell Mudedye that unless they cease their hostilities with us, she'll cut off trade with them. And they can't afford that because they're landlocked."

"So it's the outcome you hoped for?"

"Yes. Mostly. I had to agree to a few concessions. She wants better prices on some of the goods we send them, and she wants a monopoly as our only supplier of linen and pearls. It'll drive up the costs on our end and people will grumble, but the people who buy those goods can afford to pay more for them. We've made some mutual compacts of defense support, which I think will please my father as much as the queen. And she's going to come visit us in the spring. It'll be the first official delegation from Kozar since the war. The entire Wedey nobility are going to be thrilled about that." He gave a wry smile. "Queen Draga has some marriageable nieces and nephews, and she's not averse to creating some Wedey family ties."

"That's wonderful! You've saved... gods, you've probably saved thousands of lives."

Berhanu shrugged. "Maybe. I don't feel very heroic. Although anyone who can survive three days of Kozari equinox ceremonies probably deserves a fucking medal."

"You'll have to make sure the king has one struck for you."

"Yeah," said Berhanu with a sigh. "Look. She's going to do some goodbye thing in the morning. She wants you there. And then she'll be giving us a private carriage and escort all the way to the border. She's promised me there will be no more problems from the Juganin."

"Do you believe her?"

"Yes." He sat on a chair to take off his boots, then wiggled his toes as if they were cramped. "Now that my presence here is more official, she's arranged a reception tonight. There will be a lot of Kozari there in their very best clothes, and tons of food." He glanced at Volos, then away. "And dancing."

"Oh." Volos had attended similar events at the Wedey castle, but as security rather than a celebrant. Everyone always seemed to drink and gossip too much, but they seemed to enjoy themselves.

"Will you come with me tonight, Volos? Please?"

“Of course. It’ll be my privilege to guard you.”

Berhanu made a sour face. “Not to guard me. Come as a guest. Have some fun. Get a chance to chat with more of your—with more Kozari before we leave.”

“I don’t think someone like me is meant—”

“Oh, fuck that! You’re a hero how many times over? You’re a better man than all the Kozari and Wedey nobility put together. They should be thrilled to have someone of your quality attend.”

Volos’s chest warmed with the unexpected praise, and he had to look down at the floor. “I’ll come,” he said.

“Good. Because I’ve already asked them to bring you something to wear.”

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If left to his own devices, Volos would have stayed close to the walls of the huge room. Instead, Berhanu had dragged him right into the center and everyone was staring openly at him. He wished he were smaller. He wished the clothing he’d been given weren’t quite so gaudy. He wished he were back in Wedeyta, sweaty and bare-chested, crashing a wooden sword onto someone’s head.

Berhanu presented him formally to Queen Draga. Volos attempted to fall to his knee, but Berhanu wouldn’t let him. So Volos made an awkward bow instead, which the queen gracefully accepted.

Then they got to sit at a long table with an elaborately inlaid top. Berhanu was seated right next to the queen, and Volos beside him. Although the seating order might or might not have been according to Kozari rules of etiquette, it served the handy function of sandwiching Berhanu between the only two people in the room with whom he shared a language. And it made Volos feel more comfortable, although that had probably not been the intent.

Dozens of people lined their table and several others. Everyone was so brightly dressed and chattering so loudly that they reminded Volos of a flock of parrots. But they were well-fed parrots, with servants bringing them plate after plate of delicacies. Queen Draga must have spoken to someone about Berhanu’s somewhat delicate constitution, because his portions were very small. Volos, on the other hand, was given enough to feed a dragon.

During the meal, the queen engaged Berhanu in small talk about things like roads and crops, and although Volos suspected the prince had little interest in

these topics, Berhanu managed to be witty and engaging. Volos said very little, although he appreciated Berhanu's occasional attempts to include him in the conversation.

When the mountains of food were gone, Queen Draga stood. The room went instantly silent. "My dear guests, thank you for joining me tonight. I am delighted to present to you His Highness, Prince Berhanu of Wedeyta. He is accompanied by Volos Perun, a man whose heroic feats honor his Wedey and Kozari forebears." She spoke in Kozari, of course, which meant Volos leaned close to Berhanu's ear to translate. The nearness of the prince's face was terribly distracting—Volos wanted to kiss those cheekbones and smooth his thumb along the dark brows.

Everyone clapped politely after the queen's introduction, then listened with various degrees of interest as she gave a longish speech about the importance of setting aside past differences and growing peace between the neighboring countries. She said that, together, Wedeyta and Kozar would prove a force too powerful for any other nations to challenge. And so forth. Volos whispered his translation into Berhanu's ear, and Berhanu sipped slowly at some very fine wine.

At very long last, the formalities were over. Servants hurried in to take away the tables, while a troupe of musicians filled one end of the room and began to tune their instruments. Queen Draga smiled at Berhanu. "I am afraid I must only watch. An old injury prevents me from participating. Please, will you choose your partner for the first dance?"

There were many handsome men and beautiful women in the room. Volos looked around, wondering which one Berhanu would pick. He was startled when he realized Berhanu stood directly in front of him, hand out. "Dance with me, Volos. I'll let you lead."

Volos felt his face grow red. "I don't really know..."

"Then I'll lead instead." Berhanu grabbed his hand and dragged him to the center of the floor.

Members of the nobility no doubt spent many hours receiving dancing instruction. Volos had not. In fact, his only previous experiences consisted of drunken revels at firesides and in taverns, when the steps were more like rhythmic stumbles than anything else. But Berhanu grinned charmingly, wrapped an arm around Volos's waist, and quietly gave him instructions as they moved.

Probably Volos was fooling himself, but he felt so wonderful in this embrace that he imagined he didn't look too much an idiot.

"Very good," Berhanu encouraged. "Think of it like fighting. You always know how to move your body so well when you fight. You're naturally graceful, Volos. I don't know how you manage it when you're so big. Now, pretend we're fighting... only slowly, and to a beat."

Volos obeyed. And it turned out Berhanu was right—as long as Volos didn't try to think too hard about what his body was doing, he managed to move with a modicum of grace.

"Wonderful!" said Berhanu. "You're amazing."

Volos smiled at him. "Some might say it's the man who teaches an ox to dance who's more amazing."

"You're no ox. You're a dragon, right?"

Before Volos could think of an answer, the song ended. A tiny woman with blonde hair in a gravity-defying arrangement glided up to them. "May I have the next dance, Your Highness?" she asked.

Berhanu apparently didn't need an interpreter for that. He nodded regally and took her hands.

As Volos attempted to make a dignified journey to an unobtrusive corner, his way was blocked by a man who was as tall as he was—maybe even a bit taller—but much more slender. He was in his mid-thirties and dashing handsome, with a square jaw, sparkling green eyes, and sand-colored hair. He had a small crescent moon and stars tattooed near one eye. "Will you dance with me, sir?" he asked.

"I'll probably step on your feet."

"No, I was watching you with your prince. You were beautiful. Please?"

Volos couldn't refuse without giving offense. He smiled wanly and nodded.

The music started up again, the man grasped Volos's waist, and they began to move together. "My name is Klemen," said the man. "Of course, I know your name already."

"Shouldn't I call you by a title instead?"

"Oh, I'd rather you wouldn't. It always makes me think of my father when someone does that. It makes me feel old." He had dimples when he smiled.

“Then Klemen it is.”

“Excellent! Have you visited Kozar before, Volos?”

Volos winced. “Um, during the war...”

“Oh. Of course. You hardly saw us at our best, then.” He frowned slightly. “I fought as well.”

“And it doesn't bother you to dance with me?”

“It bothers me... but only in a delicious sort of way.” Klemen waggled his eyebrows to make his meaning clear.

Allowing himself a small smile, Volos said, “I see.”

“Oh, but you could see much more, my dear, if you wanted. Give me a bit of time and I can whisk you away. I know where there are quiet rooms.”

Once upon a time, Volos would have been both flattered and aroused. He would have eagerly joined Klemen in a deserted palace nook, and they would have fucked until neither of them could walk straight.

“Thank you,” said Volos. “But I can't.”

“You don't fancy men?”

“I do. But...” He didn't know how to express this. Although he and Berhanu had been having a lot of sex, they weren't truly lovers. Berhanu used him to work out his frustrations and anxieties and as a way of reclaiming his body after the mistreatment by the Juganin. Volos understood that. And he was happy to provide that service. He was. But by all the demons in the third hell, he was pretty sure he'd allowed himself to fall in love with the prince.

“I'm sorry,” said Volos. “But I can't. I have... obligations.”

His gaze must have momentarily strayed to Berhanu, because Klemen nodded. “I see. He is more than your dance partner.”

“No. I mean... I'm his guard and... and...” Gods, what had happened to his tongue? “And I can't,” he finished lamely.

“A pity. But you can dance with me at least, can't you? Seeing as how your prince is otherwise engaged.”

“Of course. I'd like to.”

So they danced. Klemen was very good at it, and he was patient when Volos was clumsy. The song ended, Berhanu switched to an older man with a very

straight posture, and Volos remained with Klemen. He remained for the next song as well, and then the next. Nobody else tried to cut in, so either Klemen was the only one interested in a Wedey guard or he was subtly motioning others away. Berhanu, on the other hand, had a different partner for every song. He must have danced with nearly everyone there except Klemen—and except Queen Draga, who watched from a padded chair near the musicians.

The musicians took two breaks, during which people pressed wineglasses into Volos's hand. Then Klemen captured him again, and by the end of the evening, Volos was doing most of the leading, much to Klemen's delight. They spoke of boots and weapons and terrible food—soldiers' talk—and it didn't matter that they'd fought for opposite sides. Klemen laughed easily, told jokes, shared little anecdotes about various places in Kozar. Volos felt comfortable in his presence.

But as the hour grew late, Volos glanced across the room and saw Berhanu dancing with a pretty young woman. Berhanu smiled at his partner, but Volos could see the strain and fatigue in his face. The prince was moving a bit too slowly for the beat, his footsteps slightly unsteady.

"I'm sorry," Volos said, pulling away from Klemen. "I have to go."

"You won't reconsider my offer? I've had such a good time with you tonight."

"I have too. But I can't."

Klemen bent in a courtly bow. "Then thank you for a lovely evening. I hope you return to Kozar soon, Volos. For pleasure instead of business. And when you do, please come stay with me at my villa."

"Thank you." Impulsively, Volos gave him a quick hug. "Now if you'll excuse me."

Instead of going to Berhanu, Volos hurried across the room to where the queen sat, chatting with an older man and sipping from a goblet. Volos dropped to his knee before her.

"Oh, you need not be so formal with me," said the queen, waving her hand. "Are you enjoying the evening?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. Thank you. But... I beg your pardon, but Prince Berhanu has been through... quite a lot lately. I think he needs to rest." Not wanting anyone else to understand, he spoke in Wedey.

She looked over at Berhanu. He still danced, but he was staring at Volos and Queen Draga, his eyes narrowed.

“You are right, of course,” said the queen. “Please forgive me for failing to notice.” She stood and made a motion with her hands, and the musicians stopped at once. She spoke loudly in Kozari. “I am afraid the hour is quite late and I must retire. Thank you all for your attendance.”

*It must be nice to be queen*, Volos thought, as the guests immediately filed toward her to pay their respects. Berhanu limped over and stood near her, nodding slightly at everyone, while Volos took a position directly behind his prince. He wished he could have offered Berhanu his body to lean against.

It took forever for the guests to disperse, and then Berhanu spent a few minutes chatting with the queen about the following morning's arrangements. But Berhanu said nothing at all to Volos as a servant led them back to their quarters.

Even when they were alone again, Berhanu began to undress in silence. His expression was stony.

“Do you need anything?” asked Volos. “I can ask a servant for some food. Or maybe you'd like a bath or—”

“I don't need anything.”

“All right.” Volos sat on the edge of the bed to take off his boots. His feet were a little sore.

“You seemed to be enjoying yourself,” Berhanu said quietly.

Volos smiled at him. “I learned to dance.”

“That duke or whatever he was seemed appreciative.”

“I suppose so. Is there something wrong with that?”

Berhanu had been in the middle of untying his belt, but he stopped and lifted his chin. “He wanted to fuck you.”

“Actually, I'm pretty sure he wanted me to fuck *him*. But I didn't.”

“Why not?”

“Kozari custom frowns on sex in the middle of the dance floor.”

Berhanu stomped over, barefooted, and pointed his finger in Volos's face. “But you wanted to!”

“No. I didn’t,” Volos replied honestly. He didn’t understand why Berhanu was so upset, but then there were many things about the prince he failed to understand.

After making a rude sort of noise, Berhanu whirled around and stalked to the washroom. He spent a long time in there, doing gods knew what. Meanwhile, Volos stripped off his fancy attire and put on plainer clothes. He stood staring at the small mountain of clothing and other things he and Berhanu had recently acquired. Were they supposed to leave the things here, or were they expected to take them back to Wedeyta? If the latter, how in the third hell were they supposed to get them there? Would someone at the palace be giving them luggage?

Volos was still puzzling over these matters when Berhanu emerged from the washroom. He was completely naked and he’d combed his wet hair back from his face. He’d gained back a little weight already, thanks to the palace’s variety of good foods, but he was still far too thin. The scars were evident on his pale skin, and the marks and scabs where his left nipple had been were especially nasty-looking. “I’m going to bed. If you want to go off in search of your duke, you can. I doubt anyone here will murder me in my sleep.”

“He’s not my duke. And I’ll stay here.”

“Of course. You wouldn’t dare abandon your duty.”

Volos wanted to strangle him. “It has nothing to do with my sense of duty.”

“Right.” Berhanu sat heavily on the bed but didn’t cover himself. “Did you know you never call me by name? You say ‘Your Highness’ when you’re being sarcastic, but that’s it. Even when we’re fucking you don’t use my name.”

“I’m sorry. Berhanu.”

The prince shook his head irritably. “Is it out of excessive politeness? Because I’d think we’d be past that by now. Or is it out of disgust?”

“Disgust? Why would I be disgusted?”

“You saw them. The Juganin. You saw me tied up and begging, and you saw them rape me.”

Gods. “And I told you already. I’ve seen them do it to others. They did it to me, again and again.”

“Right. But you didn’t need someone to come running to your rescue, did you? No, you’re a hero. Volos the Dragon, who breaks free of the prison. Who kills eight enemies single-handed.”



"I'm just a man," Volos said thickly. Before he could add anything he'd regret, he went into the washroom. He took as long as he reasonably could in there, hoping that Berhanu would be asleep when he came back out.

But he wasn't so lucky. Berhanu sprawled naked atop the bedcovers, looking disturbingly like a sacrifice. His face was turned toward the washroom and he tracked Volos with his gaze. Volos stopped in his tracks, unwilling to get closer to the bed and hesitant to remove his trousers.

"Do you want to fuck *me*?" asked Berhanu. And before Volos could answer, he flipped over, raised himself on all fours, and waggled his ass slightly. "Is this what you've been wanting?"

Volos's mouth was desert dry. He *did* want that, but he wouldn't have it. Berhanu was too damaged right now—psychologically, if not physically.

Angered at Volos's silence, Berhanu got off the bed. He stalked closer. "What's wrong, Volos? A poncey Kozari duke is good enough for you but I'm not?"

"Are you *jealous* of him?" Volos asked, slightly incredulous.

"You danced with him. All fucking night."

"But you were busy. And I never thought..."

"What?"

"I never thought it would matter to you."

"Matter? We've been sleeping with each other every fucking night. We've been... I know every inch of your body, inside and out. I know every one of your scars. I know the way your face goes all soft for a moment and you make a surprised little gasp when you climax. I know the taste of you. How could it not matter?"

Volos felt exactly like he'd been whacked in the face by a wooden sword. He blinked quickly and tried to make sense of his thoughts. "I didn't realize..."

Berhanu's face hardened. "You thought I was just using you. And you allowed it because it was your damned *duty*."

"I told you! This has nothing to do with my fucking duty! It never has."

"I hurt you. I bent you over and I fucked you raw. I marked you. And you liked it, didn't you? The Juganin twisted and warped you and now you get off on being used."

Volos's roar was equal parts anger and frustration. He surged forward like a wave, driving Berhanu backward with the force of his body until Berhanu's legs hit the mattress and he fell back. Volos landed on top of him and pinned his wrists to the bed. He could kill this man so easily. He could snap his neck, bash his face to bloody pulp, pummel his chest until his ribs were nothing but splintered bone.

Volos kissed him on the forehead instead.

"I let you fuck me like that because it was all I thought I could have from you," he said, his voice as raw as his nerves. "And I *did* get off on it because it was you, and so it was *good*. It's the most I've ever had, Berhanu."

He was far too close to crying. He released Berhanu's wrists and lifted himself off the limp body. And because he was still caged in their quarters, he walked into the washroom. He didn't light a lantern. Moonlight shone softly through the window, making the porcelain and marble glow. He sat on the edge of the tub with his face in his hands.

Soft footsteps padded against the floor, then stopped near the doorway. "You want *me*?" asked Berhanu.

"Yes." His answer was slightly muffled by his palms.

"Because I'm a prince?"

Volos snorted. "I wouldn't care if you were the man who mucks out the pigsties. I'd still want you." A tiny sob tried to escape, but he swallowed it.

Berhanu moved closer, crouched beside him, balanced himself with his hands on Volos's leg. "Why?"

"I always have," Volos admitted with a heavy sigh. He still hid his face. "From the first time I saw you. You were beautiful and... you had this *light* to you. It drew me like a moth. I thought, *This is a man powerful enough to let me protect him and strong enough to take me*. I thought, with you, maybe sometimes I could let my guard down at last. Except you hated me."

"Gods, Volos. I never hated you."

Volos lifted his head and gave Berhanu a very skeptical look. Berhanu barked a short laugh in return. "Yes, I know. I treated you like garbage. Called you names. I was a complete and utter shit. Still am."

"You're not like that to everyone else."

Berhanu sighed. “Not generally. Gods, Volos. When I saw *you* for the first time, you were perfect. So handsome, and a true warrior. Brave—everyone says what a hero you are. I wanted to seduce you. But I didn’t know if you were... seduceable. And even if you were, I wouldn’t have had any idea what to do with you. You’re not remotely like the pretty little whores I usually have. So I asked around about you. Subtly. And I found out you liked to go to the Thieving Goose and fuck the effete twits who take it up the ass from a hulking brute, then scurry back to their shops to boast how brave they are.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “Sorry. Being a bastard again.”

“You are,” agreed Volos, somewhat amused despite everything.

“Yeah. I tend to do that when I feel defensive. My father says my tongue is sharper and faster than my blades have ever been. I’m sure the boys at the Goose are lovely people. It’s only... they aren’t me. They’re nothing like me.”

“That’s true.”

“I assumed they were what you wanted, and therefore you’d never fancy me. So I tried to tell myself how much I detested you. ‘Filthy Kozari,’ I said. But by all the gods in heaven, I swear I never meant it.”

Volos’s hands were clasped in his lap. “All right,” he rasped. He’d never in his life had a conversation anything like this. He’d possibly have rather gone into battle.

Berhanu chuckled. “For a Kozari, you’re a tight-lipped son of a bitch.” He suddenly sobered. “But sweet gods, Volos—what I’ve been doing to you these last days! Maybe I can be forgiven for speaking harshly, but not for—” His voice broke. He stood, walked to the doorway, and leaned his forehead against the smooth wood of the frame.

After a moment, Volos stood and followed him. He pressed close, with one hand on Berhanu’s bare shoulder. “I could easily have stopped you if I wanted to. I didn’t want to. As you pointed out, I got off on it.”

“How?”

Volos closed his eyes. He smelled the citrus oil and soap they used in the tub and the slight odor of wine from Berhanu’s breath. It was a heady combination. It made him dizzy.

“After I escaped from the Juganin prison, for a long time I couldn’t bear for anyone to touch me. I didn’t even want them standing close. It was a lonely

way to live. I was still a young man. Eventually I went to taverns or brothels, and I'd choose partners who were very small, and I'd fuck them hard. But it didn't... I'd be pounding away at someone, and suddenly I'd picture the Juganin and... and sometimes I wondered if I was so very different from them."

"You're nothing like them!" Berhanu snapped.

"Maybe. But I wasn't convinced. And more than that. The more often I fucked these men who'd never fight back, the weaker I felt."

"I... I understand that."

Although Berhanu couldn't see him, Volos nodded. Then he nestled his forehead into the crook of Berhanu's neck. "Eventually I got the courage to ask men to fuck me. It was very difficult at first. I didn't even get hard. But gradually... I realized that although I was the passive partner, I was controlling what happened to my body. I was receiving them by choice, not force. That's when I began to enjoy it. When I felt as if I'd got my own body back." His smile was a little bitter, but it was real. "I'd lay there and I'd think, *Look at me now, Juganin. You're dead and I'm alive, and this man's cock is inside me because I want it there and it feels so fucking good.*"

"Sex as a victory dance."

"Perhaps."

Berhanu squirmed around until he faced Volos. They wrapped their arms around each other in a tight embrace. Gods, Berhanu felt so good and right against him!

"I can't..." Berhanu began. His throat clicked. "I'm not ready for a victory dance, Volos."

"Of course not. It's been only a few days."

"I want to give you... what you want. What you deserve. I want to love you." His voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "I want to be *your* guard, Volos."

Although the room—and the embrace—were quite warm, Volos shivered.

But then Berhanu pulled away. "I'm not sure I'd have been capable of that ever, and I'm certainly not now. I can barely keep my own pieces together."

"I understand."

"I might... I might never be what you need. And I don't expect you to wait for me." He stood straighter, squared his shoulders, and lifted his chin. "But I'm sure as all hells going to try."

Volos felt a smile spread across his face. He executed a brief but perfectly sincere bow. “Being afraid, being uncertain you’ll succeed, but going ahead anyway—that’s what makes a hero, Berhanu.”

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## Chapter Twelve

The carriage that Queen Draga lent them was luxurious. The interior was spacious, with clever fold-down tables on which to place food and drinks. The walls were paneled in precious woods in an intricate inlaid pattern. The seats had good springs, a thick layer of cushioning, and plush velvet upholstery. And they didn't stop at inns like regular people. Instead they spent two nights in mansions that may or may not have belonged to the queen, where armies of servants fell over themselves trying to cater to Volos and Berhanu's every need.

Volos had never journeyed in such comfort and probably never would again. But he was miserable. He had traveled with a broken body before, but traveling with a broken heart was worse.

There was Berhanu, so close to him for league after league. And at night, beside him in bed, protecting him from nightmares. But they spoke very little, and Berhanu's eyes were dark and haunted. Volos wanted to hold him tight all the time, to keep him close until all the shattered bits fell back into their proper places. But he suspected that the more protectively he acted and the more desperately he clutched at Berhanu, the more irreparable the damage might become.

"We wasted all that time," Berhanu said suddenly as they neared the border. He was staring out the window and his voice sounded far away.

"What time?"

"These past years when I was too stupid to understand what was right in front of me. We could have been fighting together, fucking... loving."

Volos's thoughts had been along similar lines. "But suppose you had spoken to me, Berhanu. You'd have had me with no effort at all. One soft look and I'd have fallen at your feet."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Not at first. But eventually you'd have learned what happened to me when I was a prisoner. I wouldn't have told you the details and... I doubt you'd have been able to comprehend it all. But you'd have heard my nightmares and you'd have known enough. And then how would you have felt about me?"

"I would have—" Berhanu stopped and covered his mouth with one hand. He closed his eyes for a moment, as if he were in pain, and when he opened

them again they glistened. "I would never have understood, Volos. I might I have tried. But you know me—I'm impatient and stubborn and fucking spoiled. I would have wrecked us."

Volos nodded. "I need... I'm a guard. I'm strong. I'd protect you to my last breath. But I need someone who... who's there for me if I start to crumble a little."

"Even a dragon has his limits," Berhanu said with the shadow of a smile.

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When they reached the border, Berhanu sent a messenger on a fast horse to the castle, letting the king know they were on their way. He and Volos had to give up the queen's fancy carriage for a much more prosaic one with sagging seats and a pervasive smell of old cheese. They were trying to travel incognito because that was simpler, but the innkeeper that night must have smelled money in the quantity of their luggage and the cut of their expensive Kozari clothes. Instead of pallets on the floor of a shared room, they were given a small private chamber with a lumpy bed and tin washtub.

"Do you want a bath?" Berhanu asked, eyeing the tub doubtfully. "I'll pay extra for it."

"No, thank you. I'll go to the baths when we're back home."

"Home." Berhanu rubbed his chin. "For a while, I was certain I'd never see it again. I missed it much more than I would have expected. Where did you think about when you were in that prison?"

Volos sat on the edge of the bed. His bones were still rattling from the journey, and his head ached. "I didn't have a home then. So I thought about the home I'd like to have someday."

"Not a barracks, I assume."

"No."

Berhanu walked to the washbasin, poured some water from a pitcher, and splashed his face. He frowned at himself briefly in the cracked looking glass before turning around and beginning to undress. "So what *did* you imagine? A castle? A hut in the wilderness? A Kozari palace where they cover you with gilding if you stand still too long?"

"Doesn't matter. The... the structure could be anything with a roof. All I dreamt of was a place I could always go back to. Where somebody waited for me."

“You still don’t have that, do you? Not really.”

“No.” Volos shrugged. “Maybe I haven’t made enough effort to find it.”

Berhanu drew his tunic over his head and carelessly tossed it aside. “Let’s sleep. We’ve one more day to go.”

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Their messenger must have fulfilled his duty because a royal coach waited at the last carriage stop. Berhanu hurried into the coach with his head down, while Volos helped a porter transfer their luggage as curious bystanders stared. The coach hurried through the city. The capital of Wedeyta was smaller than Felekna and showed little in the way of garish magnificence, but there was also none of the wretched filth and poverty Volos had glimpsed in Kozar.

The coach sped through the castle gate without pausing, careened around a few corners, and came to a sudden stop near a door close to the royal quarters. Servants, guards, and various agitated men and women swarmed out to greet them, all of them seeming to chatter at once. Volos would have quietly snuck away, but Berhanu clutched his sleeve and dragged him into the castle, down a long hall, and then into a room with high vaulted ceilings. Someone slammed the door in the faces of the concerned retinue, leaving Berhanu and Volos alone with two other men—King Tafari and Prince Chidehu.

As the king and crown prince rushed over, Volos tried to drop to his knee, but Berhanu’s grip wouldn’t let him. “Stop doing that,” Berhanu grumbled at him.

And then Tafari and Chidehu were embracing Berhanu. Volos stood back to watch. He saw tears in the men’s eyes. For a few minutes, they weren’t a king and two princes, but instead a family—father and sons who loved and worried over one another. Volos’s heart ached and he had to look away.

Finally, with considerable throat clearing, the embrace ended. But the king kept a hand on Berhanu’s shoulder. “Are you well, son? You look...”

“I look like I’ve been dragged through the third hell. Feel like it too.”

“I’ll call for a healer and—”

“I don’t need one.” Berhanu attempted a smile. “Some Kozari friends tended to my physical injuries and I’m healing well. I just need rest now and some time to mend.”

King Tafari nodded, but then his expression darkened. “Those Juganin—”



“Are all dead. Volos killed them.”

Everyone turned to look at Volos, which made him acutely uncomfortable. He executed a rather stiff little bow.

And to his complete astonishment, the king bowed back. “For saving our son, we owe you our deepest gratitude.”

“We owe him for more than that,” said Berhanu. “He saved my stupid neck, and because of that, I was able to get to Felekna to parley with the queen. She’s agreed to support us, Sire. In fact, she’s agreed to better than that. She wants to negotiate an alignment of mutual defense and cooperation.”

King Tafari closed his eyes briefly as relief flooded his features, and Prince Chidehu raised his gaze to the ceiling in silent prayer. “With Kozar backing us, Mudedye won’t dare to continue offending us,” said Chidehu.

Berhanu nodded. “I know. Volos didn’t just win me my freedom—he’s won peace for us all.”

Volos fought the instinct to duck his head when everyone looked at him. He kept his chin up and shoulders straight but couldn’t avoid a slight blush across his cheeks. King Tafari strode closer and clasped his hand in a hearty shake. “Before you left, we promised you our gratitude if you were successful. It appears as if you have more than fulfilled your duty. Name your reward and it is yours.”

“I... Thank you, Your Majesty. But there’s nothing—”

“We can grant you a title. Land. Enough money to live extravagantly for the rest of your life. Whatever you wish. You deserve it.”

“Thank you,” Volos repeated. “I appreciate your generosity. But... please. I’d just like to return to my place as guard. There’s honestly nothing else I want.” Nothing he could have, in any case.

King Tafari gave him a very long look before slowly nodding his head. “Very well. But we remain in your debt, Volos Perun. If ever there is something we can grant you, we will.”

Volos bowed.

Berhanu had watched the entire interchange solemnly. Now he came over and, like his father, bowed to Volos. “I think you know how much I owe you, Volos. I hope... I hope someday to see you get what you deserve.” And then he

pulled Volos into a fraternal embrace that didn't seem to shock Tafari or Chidehu.

After Berhanu drew back, the king addressed him. "We've much to discuss. But perhaps you'd like to rest first."

"No. Just give me some food and wine and let me sit, and I'll be fine."

"Very well. Volos, you've certainly earned some rest. If we have any questions for you, we'll send for you tomorrow."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Volos allowed himself one last glance at Berhanu—who was looking at him—before bowing and leaving the room. His narrow cot in the barracks sounded welcoming.

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## Chapter Thirteen

“If you fight that slowly in battle, your opponent will have time to go home, eat dinner, fuck her husband, and then come back and eviscerate you.”

Volos's opponent scowled and lowered his sword. “I was lining up for a proper angle.”

“And you think the person who's trying to kill you will stand there patiently while you calculate this proper angle?”

“No. But if I don't get a killing blow in, if I only wound her, she's just going to get angry and—”

“And she was already in such a good mood, seeing as how the two of you were engaged in mortal combat.”

The man hung his head. No, not a man; although he was nearly as big as Volos, he was still a boy. He looked as if he was straight off the farm, although he'd evidently spent a few months as a foot soldier, guarding the Mudedye border. His captain must have decided he had potential, so the boy had been sent to the castle to be a guard. Perhaps the captain was correct, but in Volos's opinion, the boy had a long way to go.

“Look,” Volos said, trying to suppress a sigh. “It's true that it's best if you can kill the enemy right away. But that's not always possible. And it's far better to only wound her than to be killed yourself. Sometimes even a minor injury can be enough to throw someone off or make them panic, and then it's much easier to aim for somewhere deadly.”

The boy nodded. “All right. Thank you, sir.”

Volos winced. “I'm not nobility, an officer, or your master, so don't call me that. My name is Volos.”

“I know. I've... I've heard lots about you.”

Oh, good gods. The boy was blushing.

“Is it true you killed an entire company of Juganin singlehandedly?” asked the boy eagerly.

“There were eight of them, not a company. And I wasn't acting alone. They were drugged, or I'd never have been able to handle that many. Nobody could.” He pointed his finger at the boy. “Don't go getting wild ideas about being a hero. You'll get yourself killed. You do your best to do your duty—that's all.”

“Words of wisdom.”

Volos spun around at the new voice, although of course he'd recognized it at once. Berhanu stood very close, grinning. He wore nothing but a pair of the loose trousers the guards practiced in. In the months since they'd returned from Kozar, he'd regained the weight and musculature he'd lost in captivity, and although his chest was now marred with many scars, he was more magnificent than ever. He'd been sparring with the guards nearly every day for weeks, and every time Volos caught a glimpse of him, his breath would catch in his throat.

But a glimpse was nearly all he'd been given, because just as before, Berhanu had practiced with nearly everyone except Volos. And these were the first words he'd spoken to Volos since they'd returned.

Perhaps the boy wasn't a lost cause. He certainly wasn't a complete fool, because he caught on to the charged atmosphere at once. He mumbled something unintelligible and scurried away.

That left Volos and Berhanu staring at each other.

“You haven't lost your sense of duty,” Berhanu said mildly after a long moment.

“No.”

“Good. Because I've specifically requested that you lead the ceremonial march to welcome Queen Draga in a couple of weeks.”

“Trotting me out like a pet monkey?” Volos growled.

“Oh, good gods. You know that's not how I think of you.”

“I wasn't aware you thought of me at all.” Volos knew he sounded petulant. But Berhanu's disregard had hurt.

Berhanu wrapped a hand around Volos's forearm. “We talked about this, Volos. I told you... I want you more than I've wanted anything in my life. But—”

“But you can't because you're healing. I know. I understand. But does that mean you can't even look at me?” Volos wrenched his arm away. A few people were still in the training room, so he tried to keep his voice quiet. It came out as an angry hiss. “I tried to check on you. Just to make sure you were all right. But your servants wouldn't let me anywhere near your apartment.”

“I'm sorry, Volos, I—”

“And then you started coming here, but you stay at the opposite end of the room, and... I understand that we can't be lovers. But I'd hoped maybe we could at least be friends.” He tried to stalk away, but Berhanu caught his arm again.

“We *can* be. It's just—”

“Never mind.” This time when Volos jerked himself free, it hurt. “You don't have to be nice to me.”

Berhanu danced around to block his exit. “I *want* to be nice to you.”

“But you don't—Argh!” Unable to articulate his feelings, Volos was left with nothing to do but growl like a beast. Even he wasn't sure why he was so angry at Berhanu. Or maybe he was mostly angry at himself.

“Do you want to fight?”

“What?”

Berhanu pointed at the wooden sword Volos held. “Fight. We never have. Hang on.” As Volos waited dumbly, Berhanu sprinted across the room, grabbed a practice sword from a rack, and ran back. He positioned himself in front of Volos with his wooden blade raised.

Maybe he thought Volos would refuse, or at least be confused over his offer. But Volos didn't hesitate. He lifted his own sword and swung it straight at Berhanu's head. If Berhanu hadn't jumped back with a startled yelp, he might have ended up with a concussion. But he was quick, and the blunt tip of the wooden blade merely grazed his head. Not only that—he immediately took a good swing of his own, lunging forward at Volos's chest. Volos leapt nimbly to the side.

After that, they began to spar in earnest.

Neither of them said anything as they fought, although they grunted loudly and soon their breaths were noisy. Sometimes Volos's sword smacked against Berhanu, although never in what would have been a mortal blow had they been fighting with steel. And sometimes it was Berhanu's weapon that hit its target, sending jolts of pain through Volos's body.

It was a good fight. They were very evenly matched. Volos had a somewhat longer reach, but Berhanu was better at controlling his attacks. Both had considerable strength and stamina, so even as their fight grew long and their bodies became soaked with sweat, they didn't stop. Their bare feet shuffled on

the floorboards, and the swords thud-thwacked against their flesh. They'd both have bruises by morning.

Berhanu spun and clipped his sword against Volos's hip. Volos countered with a lunge at Berhanu's neck, but the prince managed to duck out of the way. While he was still off-balance, however, Volos slammed the flat of the blade against his back hard enough to make Berhanu lose his footing and go sprawling facedown. He rolled over at once, sweeping the sword at Volos's legs. But this time it was Volos who danced up and away. And when he landed—his legs straddling Berhanu's supine body—he jammed the rounded point of his sword into Berhanu's chest, right over his heart. Berhanu cried out in pain.

But then the prince caught his breath and said softly, "Go ahead, Volos. Punish me for what I've done to you."

Volos bellowed and heaved his sword away. Still wearing nothing but his sweat-soaked trousers, he stomped out the nearest door.

The spring sun was already strong, casting sharp shadows onto the courtyard. Queen Draga had sent a gift to King Tafari in advance of her visit: an enormous stone fountain. It had arrived as several wagonloads of pieces and had taken a team of workmen weeks to assemble. Fortunately, it wasn't nearly as gaudy as the one in her palace, although it did feature multiple cascades of water flowing into a shallow pool. The guards had taken to using it to cool down after practice, and nobody had objected.

Volos headed straight for the fountain. He stepped over the low marble wall, splashed through the pool, and stopped directly underneath the largest water flow. It was like standing under a waterfall, and although it soaked his body instantly, it did nothing to cool the flames of his emotions. He closed his eyes and imagined giant plumes of steam rising from his head, far above the castle walls and into the flawless blue sky.

"Volos."

Over the roar of the water, Volos heard Berhanu call him. He opened his eyes to find Berhanu striding through the pool toward him. Berhanu's wet trousers clung to his body, revealing the narrow curve of his hips and the heavy muscles of his thighs. The large scar on his chest looked red and angry. He stopped in front of Volos, just out of reach.

"Stop running away," Berhanu said.

Volos's jaw was clenched so hard it ached. "Why?"

"Because I've been thinking about this for months. I've thought of almost nothing else. I've thought of *you*. I wake up in the middle of the night, wondering if you're having a nightmare and wishing I was there to comfort you. Sometimes—no, *often* I think about those Juganin bastards, the feel of them when they used me, and I chase that away with my memories of feeling *you*. But then you're not there and I'm empty, and..." He stopped and tilted his head into the cascade, letting it soak his long hair. He smoothed the strands behind him. Then he looked at Volos. "I told you I needed to put my pieces together before I could come to you. That was a fucking lie, Volos. I know that now. The only way I'm ever going to heal is in your arms."

Berhanu stepped forward and then fell to his knees in front of Volos. He leaned his cheek against Volos's torso. "Please," he said, just loud enough to be heard over the fountain.

"People are watching us."

"I don't fucking care if the entire kingdom watches. This is where I need to be. Please, Volos. I need you. I'll always need you. Guard me. Guard me here." He pressed his palm against Volos's heart. "Keep me safe in here, Volos, and I swear I'll keep you safe as well."

Volos looked down at the powerful man who knelt before him, who leaned against him. And something as ferocious as a dragon grew inside him. It wasn't a desire for vengeance, and it wasn't a sense of duty. It was love—a love that meant not only would he give his life for Berhanu, but also that he'd trust Berhanu with his.

He leaned forward slightly and gathered Berhanu's hair tenderly at the nape of his neck. It was a gesture a parent might make to comfort a child—or a lover to comfort his beloved.

"I'll guard you always, Berhanu." He said it first in Wedey, and then in Kozari. "And please... please guard me back."

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## Chapter Fourteen

Volos trailed his fingertips along a familiar stretch of wall and didn't startle when boot steps clomped behind him.

"Don't tell me you're missing the barracks. Surely your current quarters are much nicer."

He turned to smile at Captain Hiwot. "They are."

"And if you left something of yours behind, I'm sure the other guards took it weeks ago."

"If I did leave anything, they're welcome to it."

"Well, is there something I can do for you, Count Volos?"

He winced. "You don't have to call me that."

"You prefer the title the Kozari queen gave you instead? Let's see... Marquis, wasn't it?" Captain Hiwot's mouth quirked into a crooked smile.

Volos hadn't asked for any titles. But during one of the countless—and endless—ceremonies they'd attended during Queen Draga's visit, Berhanu had unexpectedly dragged him to the center of the stage. Volos had blushed and glared at his smug lover, while King Tafari had made a speech and then granted Volos a fancy title—and, Volos learned later, some very nice farmlands to the south.

Apparently not to be outdone, the following day Queen Draga made a speech of her own, and before Volos realized what was happening, he was somehow also Kozari nobility. His Kozari title came with an entire village.

Berhanu had later calmed Volos by pointing out that the dual titles helped to reinforce the new alliance between Wedeyta and Kozar. "And," he'd added with a grin, "it wouldn't do for the prince's betrothed to have anything but a long string of impressive designations after his name."

So Volos couldn't exactly complain. But ownership of property in two countries had got him thinking about home. His heart felt so much stronger and his soul so much lighter now that he had places to call his own. The best of those places was here in the castle, in a quiet corner of the royal apartments, where he and Berhanu shared a room, a bed, a life. And because Berhanu was gone all this afternoon on some business related to the queen's imminent



departure, leaving Volos feeling a bit at loose ends, Volos had wandered to the barracks to meditate a bit.

Captain Hiwot walked closer. As always, her back was very straight, but now there was a softness to her expression that Volos had never seen from her before. "I've been hearing some stories about your father from our Kozari guests," she said.

He automatically tensed. "You knew my father was Kozari. I've never tried to hide that." Not even when his life might have been easier had he changed his name to a Wedey one. He wouldn't dishonor his father's memory that way.

"No, you never have. But now I've learned that Rok Perun risked everything he had in an attempt to keep peace between Kozar and Wedeyta. And even when his efforts failed and he was forced to flee over the border—to a country where he knew he'd face prejudice—he kept trying."

"It cost him his life. Cost my entire family their lives."

"I know. But consider what he was trying to do, Volos. Even if he wasn't successful, even if it led to tragedy—do you think he did the right thing?"

Volos considered this question for a moment, but deep inside he knew the answer. "He did," he said quietly.

The captain nodded. "He would be so proud of you, Volos." She turned around and marched out of the barracks.

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Volos paced the spacious room he now called home. He had put on the ridiculously extravagant clothes he was expected to wear to formal ceremonies: shiny black boots; soft trousers so tight as to leave little to anyone's imagination, the outer legs marked with a stripe of elaborately embroidered red ribbon; a shirt in a matching shade of silk; and a black velvet vest, pinned with various gold and silver insignias of rank and the buttons capped with rubies. His familiar old sword was strapped around his waist in a new bronze-and-steel scabbard, and he wore a cloak—midnight-black on the outside, red silk on the inside, and trimmed with soft black fur. A heavy gold chain hung around his neck, suspending a gold and ruby pendant at his chest. That was the only bit of finery he treasured, because it had been a gift from Berhanu to signify their union. Volos had given Berhanu a finely made sword with a jeweled hilt—by far the most expensive item Volos had ever purchased—and Berhanu wore it every day.

But right now Berhanu was missing and Volos paced. Berhanu had said he'd return to their quarters to change after his afternoon duties were over and before the queen's farewell dinner began. The dinner would start very soon, and there was no sign of him.

When a knock sounded on the door, Volos rushed to answer it. A maidservant bowed at him. "Prince Berhanu awaits you in the Grand Hall, my lord."

Grumbling to himself, Volos followed her down the hall.

Every Wedey citizen with a drop of noble blood had turned out to say goodbye to Queen Draga, and she'd brought a large retinue of Kozari with her. As a result, the hall was packed and the noise level was high enough to give Volos a headache. Still, he found Berhanu right away—the prince was even more breathtaking than usual in his royal finery, and he smiled at Volos from across the vast room.

Getting to Berhanu was like fighting a battle, only instead of swordplay there were handshakes and bursts of greetings in two languages, and enough glittering jewelry and shining silk to make Volos's head spin. But Berhanu fought to get to him from the other direction and they met halfway. They embraced, but Berhanu quickly made a startled grunt and drew back.

"Is something wrong?" Volos asked.

"No. And I'm sorry for the delay. My... errand took longer than I expected."

"But your clothes..."

"I had a servant fetch them when I started to realize things were dragging on." For no reason Volos could discern, Berhanu snickered. "Dragging on. Anyway, the servant told me you weren't in our chamber."

"I went for a walk."

"Good. Now come eat." Berhanu took his hand and led him through the throngs to the dais at the end of the room. A long table had been arranged on the platform with ornate chairs for King Tafari and Queen Draga, who sat side by side. Still not quite out of the habit of kneeling before royalty, Volos executed an awkward bow. They both smiled and nodded back.

Although Volos had been seated at the royal table for the past several weeks, he still felt as though someone had made a mistake, putting him there

among men and women who ruled nations. Not that the others seemed to mind. Berhanu had a private conversation with his father very soon after he and Volos had pledged to one another, and King Tafari had welcomed Volos with open arms. Sometimes, when it was just the king, the princes, and Volos in the room, King Tafari called Volos *my son*. Every time he did so, Volos felt warmed from head to toe, and Berhanu smiled so widely his cheeks must have ached.

So now Volos took his seat beside Berhanu, servants filled their glasses with wine, and the speeches began. Everything took twice as long because it had to be translated, and the more wine the speakers drank, the longer and more flowery their addresses became. Volos might have been more bothered, but Berhanu was leaning against him, holding his hand, and exchanging funny little comments about the speeches in half-choked whispers.

Halfway through Queen Draga's gushing praise over her new Wedey friends, Volos had a very strange moment. He looked out over the sea of richly dressed people—people from both his mother's country and his father's—and then he turned his head to look at the handsome man seated beside him. Berhanu squeezed his hand. And briefly, everything seemed so wonderful, so too-good-to-be-true, that Volos was convinced he'd blink his eyes and wake up on a lonely barracks cot. Or naked and broken in a prison cell. But after he blinked his eyes, he was still on the dais with his belly full of good food and his beloved at his side.

An ancient shard of ice deep in his soul softened at that moment and began to melt.

"Hey," Berhanu whispered, giving him a nudge. "What's wrong?"

Volos smiled at him. "Nothing. Nothing at all, actually. I'm just... happy."

Berhanu's eyes glittered and he swallowed twice. "Me too," he finally rasped.

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After the din of the Grand Hall, Volos welcomed the hush of their room. A servant had set a fire against the evening's chill and placed some fruit and bread on the table for the unlikely chance that Volos and Berhanu might still be hungry after the dinner.

"Would you like me to call for the bath to be filled?" asked Volos as he untied his cloak.

“No, not tonight. In the morning. Or... better yet, we’ll spar and have a nice run, and then we’ll bathe.”

“Fine. But if you think you’re going to win, you’re mistaken.”

“What if I choose to practice wrestling instead of sword fighting? Then I’ll win no matter what.” Berhanu wagged his eyebrows.

Volos hung his cloak on a hook, shrugged off the vest, and pulled the shirt over his head. “I don’t know that we need to practice *that* sort of thing. We’re already pretty good at it.”

“Ah. But one must always strive for perfection.” Berhanu strode closer and caught him around the waist, pulling him close. He nuzzled under Volos’s ear. “In fact, I think we should practice tonight too.”

Volos would travel through the third hell a thousand times over just for the touch of this man’s hands on his skin. He growled deeply and grabbed Berhanu’s muscular ass with both hands.

But Berhanu abruptly drew away and took a few steps backward. “I have a surprise for you.”

Volos liked Berhanu’s surprises. “Oh?”

“Finish undressing first. Then kneel on the bed.”

Over the past few weeks, they had discovered they both enjoyed it when Volos bossed Berhanu around in the bedroom. But tonight, it seemed, Berhanu was in charge—and Volos liked that even better. He quickly stripped out of his boots, trousers, and stockings. By the time he was on his knees on the mattress, with the necklace warm around his neck and his hands resting on his spread thighs, his cock was already bobbing eagerly.

Berhanu spent a long moment staring at him, licking his lips hungrily. But then he shook himself slightly and bent to remove his boots and stockings. His trousers came off next and then his vest, until finally he wore only his blue silk shirt. He walked slowly to the bed. Then in a movement as graceful as any dancer’s, he drew the shirt over his head and tossed it away.

Volos gasped.

A dragon curled around the large scar on Berhanu’s chest. Although the dragon lay at rest, the fierceness of its gaze left no question that it would protect what it held dear. Its scales were executed with fine detail in red, gold, and black. Around its neck hung a golden chain with a familiar ruby pendant.

Volos reached forward to touch, but then drew his hand away. The skin under and around the tattoo was still a bit red and inflamed. “Wedey don’t tattoo themselves,” he said stupidly.

“No. But Kozari do. And as it happens, one of the members of Queen Draga’s retinue is also one of her country’s most skilled tattoo artists. Do you like it?”

“It’s... it’s beautiful.”

“I wanted... It’s guarding my heart, Volos. It’s not that I need a reminder of what you are to me. It’s only that you’re so *important* to me, so deeply imbedded in my skin, that I wanted to mark that. It’s like when my ancestors won a battle and put up some sort of gaudy monument. I won... I won so much more.”

“We both did.” And Volos couldn’t follow orders any longer. He launched himself forward, nearly knocking Berhanu off his feet, and then allowed his mouth to speak his love without words. Soon Berhanu lay beneath him on the mattress, splayed like an offering, whimpering as Volos licked and nibbled at his remaining nipple. When Volos moved down to Berhanu’s lightly furred belly and then his heavy balls, the whimpers turned to loud moans.

And here was a thing they had both learned lately. Sex didn’t have to be a hard, quick fuck—although that was fun too, sometimes. It could be slow and sweet, and they could torment each other with tender torture until nothing was left of them but raw nerves and straining flesh. It didn’t really matter whether they gave or received, because either way the pleasure was equal, each of them delighting in the other’s bliss as much as his own.

Volos slid the heavy, salty head of Berhanu’s cock between his lips and teased a moistened finger into Berhanu’s body, making his lover writhe and thrust, and pull at Volos’s hair. “Voloos,” Berhanu croaked after a few minutes. “I order you to—Oh gods!—f-fuck me. Now. P-p-please.”

Laughing, Volos released Berhanu’s cock and wriggled up his torso. “Of course, Your Highness. I am yours to command.”

Berhanu squirmed beneath him, bending his knees, folding himself, spreading himself for Volos’s entry. Precome was plenty to smooth Volos’s way in, and they both shuddered as their bodies fully connected.

“Hard,” Berhanu ordered.

Volos obeyed—pistoning his hips and driving deeply inside—because their bodies were strong and they could take it. But he also bent down and licked at Berhanu's tattoo and mouthed gently at his neck, because both men needed soft as well. Berhanu's cock was trapped between them, and that must have given him enough friction, because when Volos captured his mouth in a kiss, Berhanu's cry slipped right down Volos's throat. Clenching muscles were enough for Volos too—he buried himself to the root and jerked helplessly.

Afterward they lay with legs entangled, Volos's head on Berhanu's shoulder while Berhanu slowly stroked his hair. The room was dark and smelled intoxicatingly of sex; sweat still cooled their skin. Volos was safe. Needed. Wanted.

"I love you," Berhanu murmured sleepily.

"I love you too. But I'll still beat you when we fight tomorrow."

"I wouldn't depend on it, Count Volos. I've been practicing my swordplay lately."

"Ah, but so have I." Volos reached down and began to stroke his lover's soft, damp cock.

Berhanu reacted by quickly flipping them over, straddling Volos, and rubbing their groins together. Volos countered with a hard swat to Berhanu's ass followed by a shimmying twist of his hips.

What followed then was somewhere between wrestling and lovemaking. But as they moved together, perhaps the best part was their laughter. It rang out freely, loudly. Unguarded.

**The End**

## Author Bio

*Kim Fielding is an award-winning author of several dozen novels, novellas, and short stories. She is very pleased every time someone calls her eclectic. Having migrated back and forth across the western two-thirds of the United States, she currently lives in California, where she long ago ran out of bookshelf space. She's a university professor who dreams of being able to travel and write full time. She also dreams of having two perfectly behaved children, a husband who isn't obsessed with football, and a house that cleans itself. Some dreams are more easily obtained than others.*

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