

Maelstrom and Mage,
Desire Thine Darkling

Vaysh burned.

I'd watched him ride into our collective, and steered away as any sane sentient being, whether human or har, should do around open flame. He would burn and scorch; he was seared into the very marrow of this mutant blood that flowed in my veins; from sight alone my cells were branded. Of course I briefly tried to keep my distance, knowing as instinctively as a plant turns to the sun, or a drowning man clings to anything to keep him from dying in watery depths, that to get close to him would cause an elemental transfiguration.

I was stone: solid, yet porous when necessary.

But you know what happens when rock is punished by relentless heat. Lava. Liquid, destructive, transient.

Could anyone ever look back at our lives and not marvel at our exploits, our so un-refined, un-controlled, Wraeththu-anathema love for each other?

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My first thought when the small entourage came riding in was that some har, somewhere, had made a grave error in judgment. All of us, we Wraeththu, are this mutated amalgam of the sexes, two combined into one, yet presumably not both at once. Ever the enthusiastic pioneer, however, I'd vowed to myself to try and find out, which I did, successfully.

The hara who approached wore leather of rich chestnut, designed scored into them that resembled constellations. They looked heavenly, quite easy on the eyes, but also as haughty and distant as the stars, radiant and far off. We'd known they were coming, as the one who seemed to be their leader had sent out a thought-call. Our clan head, Monarch, had replied and warily bid them approach. Wraeththu hadn't been in existence all that long then. We were still actively hunted down though of course we fought back with deadly vengeance.

Their horses were as well fashioned and groomed as their masters. I wondered if they had some kind of occult or spiritual connection to equines. Each tribe and splinter group I'd come across or heard about appeared to have taken on its own unique personality, passion, and/or perversion. I didn't know, philosophically, what I thought of that, as it reeked of humanity to me. We all came from different backgrounds, though, had been incepted in myriad ways with tales of bliss and horror (or both), so I supposed it made sense that each small stronghold would have a very different culture shaped by their respective leaders.

A willowy har with long hair the colour of burnished sand dismounted, his presence commanding despite his fetching, sinuous body movement. Before I had become har, I'd of course been a human male, with raging hormones that had churned and bruised me though I'd not had an outlet aside from solo release. My fantasies hadn't involved men, back when the decaying world still boasted of its male and female polarities. I'd had a love affair of sorts with the insatiable creature between my legs, dreaming of burying it in a silken heat of some secretive, foreign darkness. A flare of my former self, the insipid human part I'd hoped had been scoured away forever, raised its regressive head when confronted with Vaysh, as I soon learned this compelling har was named.

"He's flaming."

The ancient slur blindsided me, some dormant, pre-har wire in my brain tripped by the sight of him. Perhaps back in the past this Vaysh had favoured his own gender, and been flamboyant about it. It wasn't for me to ferret out of him, or care. We were Wraeththu now, beyond such banal and reductive concepts of she and he. This har evoked more of the feminine in outward display, but I soon discovered he had balls of steel. Vaysh was a sword, clothed as a sylph.

Our tribe leader met with Vaysh and the five har who had accompanied him while the rest of our group got back to what we needed to do, primarily ensuring that our enclave was safe, and our crops tended to. I had additional tasks: I was responsible for writing down in a somewhat organised fashion the lessons to be learned to move from Neoma to Brynie. We had only two Ulani in our tightly-knit group, two Pyralists. They were teaching what they could, but I saw in their eyes and heard in their occasionally strained voices that they knew we would need to seek outside resources. My closest companions, Euclase, Ondin and Belvac, had, like me, been older when incepted; sixteen, or seventeen. In our dead pasts, we'd been groomed for the euphemistically-called higher education; wise-arsed scholars to be, was our triumvirate. Now, as Wraeththu, we hungered ravenously for knowledge, constantly testing our new abilities much to the chagrin of our tribal leaders.

One balmy night a couple of weeks before Vaysh's arrival, I'd been mulling over some bit of telepathic arcana, puzzling over particular uses of controlling energy when I'd paused outside the open windows of Monarch's study.

"Fine. We we'll send for one of the Kakkahaar. Or, perhaps more wisely, enlist one of the Gelaming."

"We've got to do something," I heard my mentor, Kyrgian, say in exasperation. "They could nearly all move on to Ulani, and at least two, Ashmael and Belvac, could, in time, aspire to Nahir-Nuri."

I paused, wondering if they sensed my presence, but they appeared engrossed in their heated discussion.

"Kyrgian, you can't possibly see that in them."

"They're devastatingly intelligent!"

"Many are. It takes more than just brains to achieve those illustrious castes."

"I know that. But it's a crime for them to be stifled at any point in their progress. We've done well so far, but sooner than perhaps you expect, they'll be desperate for more knowledge, at any cost. You know that what I'm saying is the truth. We have an embarrassment of riches in our har, and if they're held back, they'll simply turn to darker, equally powerful conduits."

There was a pause, heavy with foreboding and resignation. My heart had sped up, both at hearing such unexpected praise, but also at the thought of studying the higher levels of instruction. Kyrgian indeed spoke the truth: we weren't particularly brutal or war-like; our sport was learning, seeing just how far we could test and expand our new bodies and energies. I was flattered that Kyrgian thought me capable of achieving such an elevated state within Wraeththu, and didn't doubt for a minute I wouldn't succeed if given the opportunity.

Monarch let out a sigh before taking a drink of something— wine, probably, as we had it in abundance.

"I concur. I've had a premonition, but have been loath to speak of it."

"We'll have visitors soon, won't we? I've had a sense of it as well, vague shadows on the outskirts of my dreams. They won't seek our ruin, at least those are the divinings I've had."

"No, they'll join our tribe, and we'll be stronger for it. But their coming will herald a profound change for us. And the outcome of that I can't envision."

I'd heard enough, and felt both exhilarated and guilty at having eavesdropped on their conversation. It had been an accident, walking by just then, but deep in my guts I'd never been one to think that anything truly happened by chance.

I was brought back from my musings about the premonitions of the arrival of our new guests when Ondin cornered me in the laundry. I'd been supervising the youngest in our clan while he found suitable clothes for the visiting har.

"What do you think? They seem awfully protective, and secretive. And a bit too pretty. I doubt they've ever had to cleanse a town before."

I turned on him, my mouth twisted to the side. "Looks are deceiving, as the pithy saying goes, especially with our kind. *You're* pretty," I said, a biting sting in my voice. "That didn't stop you from killing over a dozen men."

"It had to be done!" he insisted, hurt and prideful anger jostling for dominance on his expressive face. "And I'm not pretty. I wouldn't break a mirror looking at it, but we all know you're the most dashing har in our group."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," I teased, lightening the mood and grabbing at his admittedly shapely backside, tightly encased in leather trousers.

"Oh, bugger off." Ondin's umber eyes flashed mischievously. "Besides, I'm taken."

I groaned at that. "Are you har or not? This idea of possession, of 'mine' and exclusivity, that's human, Ondin."

"It was a joke," he protested, sitting down and beginning to plait a thin braid from long mahogany hair he tugged down from above his ear. It was a nervous habit, and he knew that I knew that. Still, I wasn't in the mood to rub his nose in it.

"You and Wyngarr are chesna. Fine. But you're *not* his, and he's *not* yours."

Ondin sneered, pleasantly. "You're one to talk, tiaharr-steady-aruna-diet-of-Euclase."

I rolled my eyes and heard Jaffa, the young har, snicker.

"Euclase and I have been friends for years. It's natural that we seek each other's company. But we're not all cloying about it."

Ondin's expression grew more grave. "In all seriousness, do you think now that these har have shown up, those changes—"

"Not now," I said meaningfully as I jerked my head toward Jaffa, who'd become still to listen more attentively to our conversation.

"Let's go for a walk, then. Jaffa, I know we don't have much that's spare, but you're bright and can figure something out. The nicest tunic and trousers should be given the Vaysh. He's the one who led them to us."

The youth stood, his gesticulating hands like the fluttering leaves of an aspen. "He looks female."

"For fuck's sake!" I exclaimed, beginning to lose my temper. "Is everyone regressing today?"

Jaffa shrank back, his already wide eyes now as large as saucers. I didn't often raise my voice.

"What are you?" I yelled at him.

Instead of buckling, he stood proudly, though fear still hung in his eyes like a diaphanous veil. "I'm Wraeththu."

"Damn straight. You're male *and* female, got it? Now quit thinking like the mortal youth you were nine months ago and please assure me that you've actually been paying attention to the life you're living."

"I have, honest. Sorry, Ashmael," he said, worrying his lower lip and shoving his hands into the pockets of his overvest. "He was just surprising, that's all. I'd forgotten, or, really, I'd just put my past out of my mind, and seeing him made some of it come back. I'm har, Vaysh is har. No difference."

My heart warmed at the boy's earnestness. He'd been lucky, and had it a hell of a lot easier than most of us. His inception and clan loyalties had been relatively peaceful.

"Yes. That's right. Ondin and I are going to take a walk, but we won't be long. After you've taken the clothes to the cloister where our guests are staying, please find Wycker and make sure that the visitors' horses have been tended to."

I strode over to him and he flinched, but stood his ground as firmly as a tall pine. Leaning down, I held him in a tight embrace until he softened against me. He snuck his wiry arms around my back and nestled his face against my chest for a moment, then eased away.

"I'll be honoured to take care of them," he said, verve again in his voice.

"If I knew more about them, I'd tell you," I said. "I don't think they'll be strangers for long, to any of us."

Jaffa nodded as Ondin stood up, leading the way out of the warm confines of the laundry room into an equally sultry twilight. He offered me a cigarette from a silver case and I decided to indulge. Our bodies weren't negatively affected by it, and I'd discovered that my alcohol tolerance had skyrocketed. I didn't see the need to be a lush nor a chimney, however, just because I could.

I found myself wondering why I'd jumped to the defense of this — effeminate, yes — har who didn't know me from the Aghama's house cat. He had triggered something in me. It was unsettling. No, Vaysh's arrival to our enclave of scholarly har was definitely more than unsettling, or unnerving. I would be changed; my foresight of it was axiomatic. My inner polarity churned, the idea of Strong or Proper or Companion spinning without direction. A part of me wondered, somewhat dazedly, if I would wake tomorrow to see the orb of the sun regally rising— from the West. Angered at my overactive imagination, I took a deep drag off of the cigarette and quashed my whirlwind thoughts.

"As I was saying," Ondin drawled, his Southern accent even more pronounced than mine. We'd all noticed that our speech had been tempered somewhat by our inception, but certainly not made completely neutral, either.

"You were about to go on with your fanciful ideas in front of Jaffa. It was uncalled for."

"You've just been there in your head," Ondin said matter of factly. "It's pretty obvious when you're thinking about things that are either really complex, or you'd prefer to keep secretively to yourself."

"So?" I snapped.

"Down, boy." Ondin put up his hands in mock surrender. "Didn't mean to touch a nerve. But these har, their coming— it's what Monarch and Kyrgian were talking about. Doesn't it have to be?"

"I should never have told you about that."

We ambled slowly, nearly shoulder to shoulder, the droning symphony of cicadas a shimmering backdrop of early evening.

"P'shaw. It's not as though I've not done my share of accidentally hearing things in advance of a Gathering. You and Belvac and me, and maybe Euclase— there's just not all that much left for us to master before we'll be ready to become Ulani. A few months, if that." He shrugged elegantly, taking a deep inhale of his cigarette.

"I don't have the feeling Vaysh and his group are any more advanced than we are," I hedged, wondering what Ondin's thoughts were about their caste. To be honest, it wasn't the caste and its title that interested me, though I'd had a few ridiculous daydreams of exalted status, being a hand-picked strategist for the legendary Gelaming, whomever and wherever they really were.

Ondin cocked his head and grinned wickedly. "If it has to do with aruna, something tells me they're *far* more advanced."

I snorted, trying to suppress the shudder of delight that had frissoned down my spine to lodge teasingly in my groin. I'd thought the same thing, of course. "And what exactly do you think Wyngarr will have to say about your soliciting of... that kind of instruction?"

My tongue tapped the bottom of my front teeth as Ondin's smile grew more feral, but then his enthusiasm for the sleek newcomers seemed to wane. "I don't know. He might consider letting one of them share our bed. Once. Or twice."

I gave him a calculated look, pausing to lean back against the trunk of an ancestral pine, its bark still warm from the heat of the day. "A ménage a trios? How adventurous."

"Surely there's another word for that now," he mused, his handsome face absorbed as he puzzled over the possible harish vocabulary.

"I'll admit it," I said, some drumbeat tapping a brazen tattoo in my chest. "I'd like to ride one of those horse-lords."

Ondin only shook his head, amused and slightly horrified. "Now look who's regressed. Aruna is far more than just a conquering fuck, Ashmael."

"You're crass."

"I learned from a master."

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Dinner was a much more elaborate affair than we usually experienced. Jaffa helped out Vox and Polaris, two Aralids who, thankfully for us, were quite handy at cooking. We sat at circular tables, as was our custom, one each of the visiting har interspersed with our tribe. Trying not to be overt about my undeniable pull to Vaysh, instead I found a place next to the har who seemed to be closest to him, Opequon. His oddly short hair was an intriguing colour; satiny black shot through with bright viridian. Seeing the luminous green strands lit by our torches made me think of the aurora borealis, and I was all set to tell him that until I was brought up short by the anguish harboured carefully behind his calm demeanour.

The others at my table and I made him welcome, trying to stick to updates of Megalithica and any news we could dig out from him, all without discussing the one topic we were so desperate to know: were they staying? What were their plans? That would be discussed at the Gathering, later in the evening.

The outside world appeared not to have changed too terribly much since we'd splintered off from the Unneah. The Varrs held their stronghold in the north, and apparently some Gelaming had caught wind of their conquests and begun voyaging across the sea, creating a protected realm of their own in the south, but these hara did not really know where. The Gelaming wished to remain hidden in plain sight, or so it seemed. There were still humans in existence; tiny, often fierce bands, grimly clawing at their fading numbers and striking out against Wraeththu when they could. Opequon and their small entourage had been ambushed a couple of months back and three of their hara slaughtered. Suddenly Opequon's shorn neck and haunted eyes made sense. None of us needed to ask; the loss he had suffered was lamented with each breath.

Though potentially deadly, our lives, it was exciting, too. We suffered from a human saying, doggedly lodged in my memory: verily, we were cursed to live in interesting times. Not infrequently in my early years as har I had to go off by myself for walks deep into the surrounding primeval forests. There I would scream out my fear and exaltation at traversing this irrevocably post-human terrain. I sometimes felt even my harish body wasn't strong enough to bear it all. I marveled that one day I'd simply fly apart into a dazzling shower of opalescent sentience before being absorbed back into the ceaseless song of the universe.

Aruna was good for getting me out of the galloping rampages of my mind and back into my corporeal self. I sought it out often.

Once we'd all cleaned up from the sumptuous meal — we were far more egalitarian than most tribes, especially back then — Monarch called us to Gather. Though it was a sticky, windless night, he lit a ceremonial fire regardless. Vaysh and Opequon stood slightly apart from the group, not speaking aloud, certainly communicating through mind touch. They approached to flank Monarch and Kyrgian, representing (so the gesture mandated) their integration to our clan, while observing and accepting the leadership already in place. I felt a knot in my stomach ease at the sight of it. It wasn't that I'd thought this honey-haired har and his few followers would come in and try to usurp Monarch and Kyrgian, but their actions showed an intuitive nod to how we functioned as a group. Their assimilation wouldn't be fraught with misunderstanding and strife. The night air caressed us, suffused with peace and the promise of an enterprising dawn.

I stayed up drinking half the night, my appetite for the stories of these new hara insatiable. In some ways all of our tales were variations on the same theme: in a metamorphosis of blood and pain, we'd struggled away from our human lives, abandoning family, so-called civility as it gasped its tormented, putrid last breaths, and embraced new visions, each of us spawned relentlessly by passion. If we were honest with ourselves, it was obvious that Wraeththu were children of desire. Some boys were incepted against their will; I'd heard of it and didn't doubt it for a second. But in those early years, at least as I believed it, to give the gift of becoming har was a sacred rite. I had been religious, back... before. The transformation from sniveling human to Wraeththu took my breath every time, as I humbly knelt before each new, divine manifestation of the inconceivable.

Vaysh had sat and listened to me blather on about my self-perceived profound thoughts on incarnation and inception for ages, matching me glass for glass of robust red wine. I was seized by the need for him to speak, to share with me, this otherworldly creature who was very nearly my age. Yet, he bore his complex harish self with the same inherent ease of being I'd witnessed at the Gathering. I was dying to impress him, though even in my alcohol sodden stupor I recognised I wasn't doing so. If anything, I was only amusing him as I chattered on into the night.

"Tell me about you," I pleaded, finally. "You should've told me to shut up my pompous mouth ages ago."

His grey eyes glinted with mischief. "Okay, Ashmael. I will, but not right this minute. It's been a long and stressful journey for us, and I think that I should heed the call to bed. Before I go," he said, leaning closer, drumming his long fingers on my leg, "you seem as though you have something else you want to tell me. What is it?"

I didn't even pause to think. "I want to share breath with you," I said helplessly.

"You want to do far more than that," he replied with a sly smile.

"Yes, of course I do." The words came out in a torrent, heedless and unchecked by the usual filters between my mind and mouth. "I can't find the words, but there's something about you, you're so compelling," I said, attempting a last-ditch seduction which, even to my ears, sounded pathetic and desperate.

He chuckled, a melodious baritone sound. "Oh, I *am* compelling. Aren't you chesna with Euclase? Or am I misinterpreting the way you act around him?"

"We're..." I fumbled. "We take aruna with each other, yes. He's been a close friend of mine, since boyhood. Human boyhood. But we're not like Ondin and Wyngarr. I don't know how I know, but you and I have a destiny together. I'm certain of it."

Vaysh spread out his fingers so the palm rested close to the juncture of my thigh and hip; I was sitting cross-legged. His expression had changed, no longer playful, but introspective and distant, his thoughts flying to a place I couldn't follow. I gazed at him, at the angle of his cheekbones, the curve of his jaw. Vaysh's face was a geometry of promise, the topography of desire.

"I'm not just trying to get between your legs," I whispered, feeling blood roar in my ears.

A feral, possessive smile bloomed on his lips. "When we first take aruna — and we will, Ashmael, have no doubt," he said, his voice roughened with cigarettes and palpable desire, "it is I who will seek out your depths. I'll sink into your mossy glens, and then you'll truly know the fullness of destiny."

A strangled cry escaped my mouth before my lips claimed his, sharing breath with a ferocity that made my heart stutter in my chest. Vaysh tasted of velvet and stormclouds; he withheld nothing as we kissed. I spun through parts of his past, whirling and dazzling like a hawk above mountains. His breath was sunsets and dew, dappled horses and the erotic tang of leather.

Eventually we parted. Vaysh reached tenderly into my mind. *We each have partings to make.*

I nodded, struggling to my feet and assisting Vaysh up from the ground. In my esoteric studies, I'd spent my energies on distant mind-calling, as well as shielding my thoughts. This speech was so intimate; why hadn't I been practising before now? I struggled for a moment, taming my swirling cacophony of thoughts and longings.

Ashmael, Vaysh chided, lovingly. *Breathe.*

I did, never losing contact with his gaze, his pupils dilated so only the faintest silver ringed the black.

I'm not used to this, I thought back, humbled.

You have a lot to teach me as well. This is only the beginning, Vaysh said reassuringly, inclining his head toward our small station of dwellings. "We should get back. No doubt our absence has been noted."

I took his hand, intertwined our fingers, and wondered at the smearing of damp against my palm. I glanced over at him, surprised when I saw embarrassment flicker in his expression.

"I was nervous," he admitted with a refreshingly awkward shrug. "You, this—" He gestured vaguely at me. "My mind's a jumble of puzzle pieces. I need to get to know you. It'll take time."

"All the time in the world," I bravely pledged, then unclasped his hand, smothering my face with my palms. "What the fuck is happening? We don't *do* this. We're supposed to have evolved beyond this, Vaysh." I turned on him, panic burbling up in me, a rare geyser set to burst with a catastrophic explosion. "Why me? You?"

I almost wanted to hit him, to wipe off the untroubled, accepting set to his face.

"Why not?"

His words weren't sarcastic, and now I could sense his feelings. Deep within himself, in fact, there was an undercurrent of wondrous fear. He would stay up the remainder of the few hours until dawn talking through things with Opequon and Zain, his confidantes and allies. I needed Euclase's understanding arms and perspective, too.

On the way to the cloister we'd passed a few har still chatting, and I noted that Wyngarr and Ondin had taken Opequon under their wing, Ondin massaging the new har's shoulders. Jaffa had fallen asleep near the fire, his sweaty ginger hair plastered to his forehead. The light from the burning embers played on his freckled skin. In my euphoric state, he looked like a seraph. Once at the door to his new residence, I paused. There were lights on inside; I suspected that Zain had waited up for him.

"I'm blind and stumbling," I said, trying to articulate my utter shock at my actions, much less my thoughts. I clawed for my usual eloquence. "I'm not supposed to have feelings like this, without purpose, or source. It's like something out of a human novel. A poorly-written one," I added with a harsh snort.

Vaysh leaned forward until our foreheads touched. "It's okay," he murmured. "This scares the shit out of me too. Good night, tiahaar."

I couldn't keep the smile from tugging at my lips as I took my time walking the short distance to my dwelling, a four-room house shared by my three close companions. Quite often only three rooms were actually used for sleeping, but especially since Euclase and I weren't bound by chesna — though our decades-long friendship brought me tremendous comfort — we slept alone at times, seeking solitude or even taking aruna with one of the others in our tribe. Once inside the house I cleaned my teeth and sought out my old friend. He was in his room, sprawled on his side in the dark. At first I assumed he was asleep, but I decided to test my newly-explored thought communication ability, tentatively seeking his mind. He started at my touch, though he'd been awake, his thoughts a turbulent stream of discontent and resignation. He sat up to face me, lips pursed as he, too, reached out solely through thought while trying to place a protective barrier to shield himself.

What do you want? he asked peevisly. *Did you get tired of fawning over the lovely har and now you want to share my bed? Or did he turn you down?*

His last thought was full of self-congratulation at first. As I shook my head and came to sit next to him, I could sense it change to restlessness. He cared for me a great deal; perhaps only now were we both realising how troublingly complex our interactions had become. I ran my hands through his tousled hair before sharing breath. He resisted just for a moment, but gave in to the comfort and familiarity of such a simple, yet profound exchange. I was enfolded in his warmth as we shared breath; Euclase as always, tasted of book-gilt and rustling leaves.

"I want to hold you," I said, for it was the truth.

"You look as though you need to be held," he said, taking on his usual role of companion more than lover, his unspoken questions hovering busily around him like moths. "Here, let me take off your boots."

I did and then lay on my back, staring sightlessly at the ceiling. From a small hook Euclase had hung a mobile, the fanciful birds hanging motionless in the still night. His artistry and imagination in carving and other woodwork never ceased to astonish me, as well as his intuition to understanding my moods. Euclase stretched out beside me, insinuating his arm under my back and gently nudging until I rolled half across him, my face pressed against the hard plane below his collarbone. With wide fingers, he drew sweeping paths on my back, the finger pads pressing gently on the linen of my tunic. I was at home here, brimming with gratitude and melancholy. Our past seemed so simple; now it was changed, impossible to be undone.

"I spent quite a while talking with their Abelard," he said, his voice low and pensive. "They've had a rougher time of it recently, but it's made them strong. If they'd chosen to attack, instead of join peacefully, well, certainly we'd not be lying here like this."

I made a rumbling sound of assent. They were lissome, but in watching them for as short a time as they'd been with us — mere hours! — it was obvious by their selected armaments and wariness that the world had turned them to warriors. Steely, and supple. No wonder our band of defensive philosophers was so enraptured.

"Did he want to take aruna with you?" I asked.

Like all Wraeththu, Euclase was a beauty; surely Abelard had noticed. Stockier than I was, Euclase's corded muscle was accentuated by olive skin, bronzed a deep tan at the end of a long summer. His ebony

hair fell in loose ringlets down his back and he gazed out at this new world through startlingly pale green eyes.

"It wasn't brought up, but I wouldn't be surprised he asks in the future. I suspect I'll say yes. Would that trouble you?"

His fingers slowed, undulating and kneading as I pondered the question.

"Aruna keeps us whole, and nourishes our spirits. I want your happiness, I always have."

His rich, loamy scent wafted up from the heated hollow of his neck, the sweet acrid tang of sweat.

"That's not an answer." His tone was light, but I felt the grave seriousness behind it. "Are you really beyond jealousy? Or have your sights been swayed that quickly, even though I know you better than anyone?"

I scooted up onto an elbow so I could look into his dear, familiar face. "You know me best," I agreed, cupping his jaw with my other hand, brushing my thumb on his cheek. I drank in the handsome contours, the bewitching sparkle of his eyes that was now lacquered with sorrow. In looking into his eyes, I saw that we felt a similar perplexing weft and weave of wanting to rush forward into our diverging lives, and yet grasp tightly to the moment at hand. Our years together underlay it all, the pentimento only we could perceive in each other. That would change— Euclase did know me best, but that time was coming to its end.

"Anyone you deem worthy to hold in your arms, flesh to flesh, should consider himself exalted," I said, feeling my own flesh stir slowly to life as I rocked my growing arousal against his hip.

"Then you must be a demigod, you flatterer," he teased, canting his groin to further stimulate the stiffening flower that throbbed between my legs. I smiled seductively and was gifted with a predatory stare before our mouths drew together again. Our kisses grew more passionate until the need to remove the hindrance of clothing became overwhelming.

"Let me be behind you," I said, feeling that he was still fully flowered, our lengths sliding together with a delicious friction. Euclase and I had explored myriad avenues of pleasure once he'd become hard. We had discovered much to our mutual satisfaction that our advanced bodies intuited when our ouana-lim wasn't in danger of possible injury and didn't retreat, even when soume.

I spooned behind him, my chest to his back, and slid deep into his welcoming body. We groaned together; I began to thrust into him, a rhythm slow and ancient as waves crashing on the beach. I sowed a blooming path of kisses on his neck and shoulders as he guided my hand to his ouana-lim, a jetting spire of bronze and orange. A near-steady stream of profanity interspersed with my name tumbled from his lips. The curled petals at his tip nudged my fingers as I took him in hand, stroking in tandem with my thrusts.

Euclase was a master of control and skill, both as ouana and soume and he was generous in heightening my pleasure. His body was a silken glove, the spiraling unstoppable in our increasingly frenzied pursuit of each other's completion.

"Mael, please, God, oh fuck," he groaned, clenching around me so that I swore a torrent in return. "Please, release me, so close," he babbled as I snapped my hips a few times and then arched into him, stopping my motions on his outer organ. Deep inside him, my butterfly tongue uncurled; it flickered against his hidden ember and he shouted his ecstasy. As though I were outside of myself, I sensed more than felt his jeweled

drops on my fingers. My simultaneous release had catapulted me to another plain of being, diffused in a chorus of pounding heartbeats, the savoury musk of Euclase's devotion sparking on my tongue.

We lay coupled together for some time until our breathing at last evened out and I carefully withdrew from his warm hold. He shifted and turned over, an apple-red flush in his cheeks and curled, wet tendrils of hair stuck to his forehead.

"You've undone me," I rasped, my voice hoarse from our unusually vocal lovemaking.

Euclase regarded me for a few moments, and then pressed a swath of light kisses along my sweaty brow before he shared breath again. I tried to memorise his taste and the comforting landscape of his soul. We would be parting; perhaps not forever, but that was how it seemed at the time. I brimmed with perceived profundity back then, every action and decision, I felt, sent irrevocable ripples across the bottomless waters of our new race.

"It's you who's undone me," Euclase countered softly, wiping his face on a damp pillowcase. He snuggled against me in defiance of the heat and our sweat-slicked skin. "I may be sore tomorrow. Today. The sun will be up in not too long," he said, his voice plaintive and timid in a way I'd not heard in a long time.

"Think of it as a gift to the tribe. I wouldn't be surprised if the energy from our aruna created a protective aura around the camp," I suggested, half serious.

"We've never even attempted Grissecon," he scoffed, but then he slowly raised his head and used his fingers to move damp strands of hair from out of my eyes. "But maybe these new hara are versed in it. Beyond dry book knowledge, that is."

"That would be welcome, indeed."

I cocked my head before leaning in to press my lips chastely against Euclase's. I was spent in every way, and wanted nothing more than to drift off, sated and at peace. We held each other in weary but contented silence, though I didn't let myself truly relax until I heard his regular, feathery noises and was certain Euclase was asleep. I spared a thought to Vaysh and wondered what the upcoming day would reveal about him as well as the other five hara who were now a part of our tribe, and how we would all certainly be changed. A short time later, I followed Euclase into sleep.

* * * * *

The next few days were filled with excitement and a few minor power skirmishes as the new hara became fully integrated into our camp. Belvac, who had been spending much of his time off in a hermitage of sorts in the woods, engaged in solitary contemplation and study, renewed his dedication to the future of our group as a whole by actually being bodily present. I'd respected his need for space and individual pursuits, as I'd often felt that same pull myself. Now, however, I saw him conferring with Kyrgian, or trying to take Jaffa back under his wing, though the har would have none of it. He was far too intrigued by the newcomers, especially Iolethe, trailing around after the kindly har like a shadow. One midday I took Iolethe aside to reassure him that if at any point Jaffa became a nuisance, he could let any of us know.

"I don't mind, truly," he said, wiping at the sweat on his ruddy skin. Iolethe wore his thick, caramel hair in a sea of complicated braids, woven full of coral beads. Lively, robin's egg blue eyes evaluated me before he asked, "When was he incepted?"

"Less than a year ago. Wycker is his older brother; they'd fled when their town burned. Rival human gangs had destroyed every decent person they could, and massacred their family."

Iolethe nodded. Violence and death had been the norm in the dystopic playground of most large cities. I didn't know Iolethe's particular inception story, and assumed if and when he wished to share it, he would. "Has he been told about Feybraiha?"

"About what?"

"Feybraiha. Harish puberty."

I must have looked dumbfounded, because he scratched absently at a mosquito bite and continued on. "He'll probably become an emotional mess, have meltdowns, be miserable, feel like his body is on fire, and then he'll need to be instructed in the ways of aruna. It's much like human puberty, but more intense. He'll know who he's been called to take aruna with; it's another one of those things that we just know instinctively as har."

"But he's taken aruna, of a sort. He had to, after his inception. Even though he was only eleven at the time."

"Right, but it was only to finalise his change, I assume. And he doesn't crave it now."

I suddenly felt that I'd done our youngest member a terrible disservice and realised just how much I still needed to learn about our newborn race. All at once Vaysh's calm but sensual voice sounded in my head.

You couldn't have known. Come and find me; I'd like to talk with you.

I felt soothed by his voice, though disconcerted that Vaysh had seemed almost a part of the conversation without physically being there.

Were you eavesdropping on me from wherever you are? I asked through mind-touch. My mind was indeed adapting, the different parts of my brain stretching their newly aware, harish muscles.

Not exactly. I could hear the smile in his voice. *But come when you can.*

"Oh, sorry," I said to Iolethe, who seemed to be expecting a verbal response during my silent exchange with Vaysh. "Vaysh was checking in with me, telepathically." I shook my head. "No doubt it'll become second nature, but chatting like that from a distance with regularity is still a novelty. I still struggle a bit."

He smiled, warmth dancing in his expression. "It's worth learning, but you're wise to be cautious. Getting back to Jaffa, I'd be happy to talk with him about what to expect."

"Shouldn't we all know?" I asked, brushing invisible dirt from my trousers and turning toward the edge of our dwellings nearest the woods; without being told, I knew Vaysh would be there.

"Yes, that would be smart." Iolethe reached out and held my bicep firmly, but in an unthreatening way. "Before Zain and I left our former clan, there were har already trying to create new life, solely among our own kind. It's only a matter of time before it happens here, too. Jaffa is alone in his upcoming bodily trial; the rest of you were older, as is common. I've at least seen somehar go through Feybraiha and know the signs."

My mind was reeling; I'd been stunned into a rare silence by the seeming preposterous statements Iolethe had so earnestly made.

"Har? Procreating?" My riotous imagination envisioned bloody rooms, bellies cut open and reptile-like monstrosities rending the air with hideous cries. "That's... unnatural," I settled on, though 'perverse' and 'horrifying' wanted to slip out instead.

Iolethe loosened his hand and instead pulled me close to him, his hand snugly at my waist. "You're an academic, or were," he said smoothly, taking a step in the direction I'd been heading to heed Vaysh's summons. I walked necessarily at his side, not minding the proximity. He, like Kyrgian, radiated a common sense and caring benevolence I gravitated to at that point in my early harhood.

"Surely you know that eventually humanity will succumb, and become as extinct as wooly mammoths. Inception has been the necessary way of our generation, but we're already evolving as a race."

"I know. It's mind-boggling," I said, jamming my hands into my pockets.

I was fond of Iolethe and his understated mannerisms; even in his few days with us, I'd noted that he had a unique ability to make anyhar around him feel useful and clever, though he rarely praised individuals outright. I didn't think Vaysh would think anything of us walking and talking, should we have our arms slung behind each other's backs, but we were so early in our courtship — he and I were nearly erupting with sexual tension after three days, but I was letting him set the pace and we'd not taken aruna yet, which was excruciating — I wanted him to be sure that I had no designs on anyhar else. No doubt I had every reason to eat my self-aggrandizing words I'd posited to Ondin about possession, and he'd gloat until he'd gorged on it.

My mind was still fixated on harish... pregnancy? Incubation? What the hell would it be? There were no Wraeththu anatomy books, no surgeons. I certainly wasn't going to volunteer as a wielder of a scalpel or as a subject.

"Have you seen?" I asked, my voice low and breathless. "I just can't fathom it."

As we approached the edge of our camp, we saw Vaysh sitting on his horse, Arches. Mine, a diligent mare named Willow, wandered nearby.

"In my mind's eye, I've seen," Iolethe answered with equally quiet reverence. "First things first, though. We'll get Jaffa through his Feybraiha. I think it'll happen before autumn is over, he just has that look about him. For now, enjoy your time with Vaysh. You're good for him."

I turned as he stepped away, glancing up at Vaysh who gave him a knowing, irritated glare. His affection for Iolethe and the others in his small group poured from him, though, an auralic energy that pulsed strongly enough to be felt, like enfolding, protective wings.

"You're meddling," he accused Iolethe before sitting up straight. He tossed back his hair, the mannerism evoking a horse shaking its mane. "I don't need your help, though your unnecessary approval is noted."

An excited crowd of fireflies seemed to have lodged in my belly as I went over and swung myself into Willow's saddle. I knew why there was such a muddling in my stomach, the unrest travelling down to my groin as I discreetly rubbed against the leather for a modicum of relief. Vaysh's eyes were guarded as he told Iolethe we'd be back later in the day. Once we'd ridden for a couple of minutes, however, he glanced at me. The unspoken message was blatant, his formerly tamed hunger now voracious.

To distract myself from the increasing discomfort of suffering an erection while riding, I asked Vaysh whether or not he'd known any har who had tried to generate life together, not through the ritual of inception.

"How on earth did you come to that topic?" he asked, disdainful curiosity reflected in his furrowed brow. "It's inevitable, of course, or as a species we'd not last much longer than our actual life span, which is in itself an unknown. Still. I was first born as a human male, so having a child of my own wasn't a possibility. Reborn as Wraeththu perhaps I can, if the right har comes along." The last part was said dryly and I snickered under my breath.

"Someone to make a respectable har out of you?" I joked, leering at him even as I spent precious seconds reining in my roaring libido. It wasn't the idea of my seed combining with Vaysh's to create an unspeakable, fantastical creature which ensnared me; it was joining with him at all, knowing him intimately from inside and out, his bewitching body, beguiling mind and mysterious soul.

We were riding into the woods, following a disguised trail to Belvac's hermitage. There he and I would take aruna, I simply knew it, just as I'd known where to find Vaysh. I'd never... inseminated? other har when taking aruna, and there were thankfully no har-children around to that effect. A sliver of my rational self tended some embers of fear that Vaysh and I could do such a thing, unwittingly, but a soothing calm from outside myself reassured me that if and when I created harling life, I would *know*. I had every belief that this, Vaysh's and my inaugural and — I dared to treasure the word — sacred joining would be burned into my memory forever.

"Respect like that doesn't interest me," Vaysh declared, rousing me from my musings. He arched an eyebrow and gave me a look so molten with lust I felt my ouana-lim strain against its confines.

"By the Aghama," I moaned, knowing full well he could tell how desperate I was to feel him, to share breath, to share absolutely everything.

"Oh, Ashmael, you're so transparent." False irritation threaded his voice. "I know you're dying to be naked together, after days of waiting. Not much longer now before we burn your companion's bed with the flames of our passion."

"Do you always talk like that about aruna?" I asked candidly. Never mind my own inner flowery thoughts, but I kept them to myself. Vaysh had arrived and without preamble or warning produced the key to my heart and let himself in. But that didn't mean I adored all of his mannerisms.

"Are you always so judgmental?" he shot back.

"No."

I bristled with righteous indignation as the rustic wooden structure came into view. Vaysh had a point, which explained my itchy discomfort with myself. Through all of this, my irrevocable change from human to har, from intended university student to necessary murderer, survivalist, and embarrassingly self-fascinated new creature, I'd never let anyhar truly into my being. I *did* judge, and everyhar, even Euclase, came up wanting. I did love Euclase, but we were like old pines, comfortable and familiar, planted side by side centuries ago.

We dismounted and let the horses wander nearby. I guessed that Vaysh had spoken to Belvac about this spot; like so much about Vaysh, the understanding simply flowed between us, wordless and certain. He

stood before me on the top of the three stairs until I walked up to join him, paused on the threshold of the inevitable. My rancor had melted away; all I felt as I interlaced our fingers was a labyrinthine emptiness, that my soul was a hollow, chambered nautilus.

"Fill me," I whispered, bereft.

I began to drown, swept into his swirling currents of empathy. Then he closed his eyes and tenderly pushed his breath into my awaiting mouth. Vaysh shared pleasant memories from his childhood; images of his inception and banding together with his current clan danced into me. I gifted him with scenes of my own, including some wishful fantasies of the two of us whose time I hoped would yet blossom into being. There was a restless urgency pounding in my blood as our bodies rutted together. I pulled away, breathing heavily, my hands itching to feel every inch of his skin. A question I'd never thought to ask skipped onto my tongue.

"How do I taste?"

Vaysh's gaze was that of a starving man sitting down to a feast. He didn't answer for a time, unbuttoning my shirt, his fingers fumbling in their haste much like my racing, stuttering heartbeat.

"Ashmael," he breathed into the sensitive flesh of my ear, lust frissoning down my spine, "you taste of fire-warmed stone and twilight. Of home."

I could do nothing but worship him. We somehow managed to situate ourselves inside the hermitage and shed our clothes before I fell to my knees before him, drinking in the wonder of his ouana-lim, its pulsing vermilion and plum. I swallowed him down, working my throat to bring him the greatest pleasure I could. Easing back, my tongue darted around the opened petals, lapping and savouring the vinegarsweet of his phosphorescent essence. His curses and adulations rained on me until I was soaked in his praise.

I wanted to absorb him; I needed Vaysh to know every heated, grasping contour, every dark recess of my heart. He put a finger under my chin and tilted up my head. I released my prize, though his crimson stem continued to jut proudly from its thatch of golden curls.

"Bed, I think," he said hoarsely.

We tumbled onto it, rolling and pressing skin against skin, hands flying over muscle and bone like careening birds. I held my breath as I hovered above him, aching empty, soume in its entirety. A flicker of fear ghosted across Vaysh's countenance; neediness seeped from my pores, and doubtless the scent to him was overwhelming. I sank down onto his ouana-lim, he the bolt, and I the latch until with a ragged sigh, we were locked together.

Aruna isn't always transformative or profound, but for we Wraeththu it has the potential to shatter and remake the universe. In my first years as har, for all of my experimentation, I hadn't yet learned much in the arts or finesse of taking aruna. That afternoon, however, as the scent of primeval pine and resin filled our humble bower, I had my first real taste of euphoric delirium. Vaysh clasped me down to him and rolled us over, my legs thrown around his waist, my ankles crossed so I could pull him ever deeper into me. Vaysh's frenzied rockings caused the rickety bed to slam repeatedly against the floor. Through sweat-stung eyes I consumed him, his open, panting mouth, the slightly crooked lower teeth that were so precious in an otherwise too-perfect visage. I was the sea; he was fey and bold. Valiantly he navigated through my roiling waters until at last his thin, whipping sail struck at dry land, deep within me.

Our release was the terrifying rush of a tsunami, and when it had passed we lay in a jumble of limbs, gasping and wide-eyed. Amid the flotsam of sheets and leather wrist bands that had slipped from their fastenings, we gazed at each other, survivors of our passionate shipwreck.

Instead of being exhausted, I was invigorated, yet all I wanted was to clean up a bit and rest together. Trust in my own limbs was suspect. Vaysh gently and carefully uncoupled us; I wasn't all that often soume and due to our athletic enthusiasm, I knew I would be a bit tender for a time.

"You are—" I started to say, but Vaysh placed a finger on my lips, effectively silencing my inadequate commentary.

He manoeuvred to lie on top of me, his lean form not quite as long as mine. My ouana-lim had slowly re-emerged to take its usual place of attention, so Vaysh was especially cautious as he covered me, pale and silent as snow blanketing a mountain. He spread his fingers into mine, burrowing his face against my neck, his lyrical chant only barely audible. At last I figured out that he was offering up a prayer of thanks, or of gratitude, though to whom I wasn't certain. After a few moments he slid to his side, spooning to my torso. That was how I dozed, the haunting hoot of an owl punctuating my hazy dreams.

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"Get up! Ash! The camp!" Vaysh hissed, his eyes wide and terrible.

"What?!" I exclaimed, my nerves instantaneously on alert as well. Then I felt it, Belvac's call and, perhaps most startling of all, Jaffa's abject terror.

"They're under attack. Come on, come on!" he bellowed as we frantically dressed.

The horses had intuited our distress, and raced us home to our small cluster of buildings. The sight assaulted all of my sensibilities— depraved, brutal har battling with those of our clan, who with their own knives and fists were retaliating fiercely.

Uiegna. I've got to find Llembara, Vaysh's clipped voice sounded in my head.

"Vaysh!" I yelled, but he was gone and I fell into the fray.

I wish that had been the day I'd discovered my calling to command, but I was too young then, and everything I did was reaction, not guided action. I saw we were vastly outnumbered, though to my crazed and grateful evaluation, I saw nohar from my clan in my line of sight had been slain. I roared as I galloped past one of the scarred Uigenna, plunging the knife I'd taken from its holder at my waist into his back, ignoring the sickening sensation of the blade sliding through muscle and ribs to pierce his heart.

We fought bravely, but the Uigenna obviously had far more practise at intimidating and killing hara. Eventually I found myself snarling, standing at the front of a group of three of our tribe, slashing at our enemies. Behind me was Jaffa, now soaked in blood, his hand gripping his own knife he'd doubtless stolen from our kitchens. There was a gloating sneer on the har facing me, certain he and his ruthless cronies would murder us all, take our horses and God only knew what else. My blood turned to ice when one of them, a terrifying beauty aside from the gaping wound where his left ear once had been, spoke, his gaze fixated on Jaffa.

"Somehar is a fiery, pretty thing. I think we should take him, unspoiled."

There was a choking, terrified gurgle as Jaffa pressed up behind me.

"Over this har's dead body," I growled.

The macabre joy of his intent to kill me had just passed across the Uigenna's face when we were all cowed by an explosion. Our assailants looked confused for a moment, then horrified as dazzling tendrils of scarlet, corded light wrapped around their necks, disappearing into their bodies as they writhed in agony, falling to the ground.

I could only stare in shock, clawing at my own neck as I watched the three Uigenna die in front of me. They screamed in pain until he life had been choked from their bodies from this unrecognisable, malevolent and yet resplendent force. Regaining my wits, I kicked at them to make sure they were dead, yelling out in mind-touch to Vaysh and Euclase.

Are you okay? What the fuck was that?

Yes, and Oh God, Mael, come now. It's Monarch, ricocheted into my mind both at once, Vaysh's trembling, weary voice and Euclase, in a panic.

I turned around, my body still thrumming with adrenaline. Jaffa, Polaris and Wycker appeared relatively unharmed, albeit in a state of shock.

"I'll be back. The Uigenna are dead. I've got to get to the rest of our clan."

They nodded and Wycker's expression settled into disgust and fury as he looked at the bodies of the dead har on the ground.

"I'll take them out away from here and burn them," he spat.

I knew I needed to find Monarch and Euclase, but I spared precious seconds to pull Jaffa to me. He shuddered.

"I killed one," he said fiercely.

"He won't be the last," I said, realising then just how close we'd all come to being exterminated by these har. "Take care of yourself. I'll be back as soon as I can," I promised before sprinting away to the laundry where I sensed I'd find the one who'd called for me.

The scene I faced there was too terrible for my rational mind to contemplate, yet my body continued to go through the necessary motions as I collapsed by the body of our clan leader. He'd been sliced open from neck to hip, a festering wound oozing a hideous stench. I couldn't imagine what they'd put on the blade to cause this. His pallor was yellowish, the floor around him dark with pooling blood. Euclase's eyes begged for assistance, for relief and consolation. Kyrgian was chanting, his hands held above Monarch, incanting spells of healing and restoration.

"Ondin," I urged, and Euclase flew out the door to find him.

Crouching at Kyrgian's side, I, too put forth what powers I had to try and channel strength and regrowth from the earth. My concentration wasn't what it should have been and I cursed my rampant mind. Ondin ran in a few moments later, an audible gasp dying on his lips before he snapped to attention and fell into the role of surgeon. He readied a nearby pail with herbal water and cleansed the wound until at least the

stink from it had been washed away. Kyrgian was in a trance, his lips never ceasing their intonations as Ondin sewed up the slashed flesh.

Vaysh and Llembara staggered in and I looked helplessly at them. Part of me felt dead. The rest wailed silent banshee cries at the world and the barbaric hara who had attacked us, bringing us to our knees, and for what? Surely it was bloodlust, nothing more. I loathed them with every fibre of being, shaking with wrath even as Vaysh sank down next to me, pulling me to his chest and rocking me as though I were a child.

"What did you do?" I asked once Monarch had been laid in a bed, still unconscious.

"Grissecon," he said quietly, his long fingers cradling my head. "We'd never tried anything that powerful before. Thank God it worked."

Mutely I nodded, unable to formulate a sentence. Vaysh was still at my side when Monarch died, on the cusp of a lilac dawn.

* * * * *

"Sage and guide, may your spirit rise on the winds, whisper in the stars, lighten us in the dark places. In us, your memory will live forever. Be at peace, Monarch Lunidas," Kyrgian intoned, his melodious voice swallowed effortlessly by the hazy heat of noon. The muggy, sweltering air draped heavily on us, the physical discomfort adding to our emotional bruising. A simple ceremony was the most we had to offer; with Iolethe's help, I'd found a way to make something resembling incense. I swung a small bowl of it from a chain as had been done for high services in the eucharists of my early human childhood, censuring the air above Monarch's grave with symbols of protection Belvac suggested.

I hated the smell of our camp right then; I knew it would pass, and doubtless the austere face of death would be no stranger to me in the years to come. There was shock ringing in the air as clearly as the tolls on the brass bell that hung in the kitchen, twenty-one peals for the years on this earth our murdered clan head had lived. I felt the wild animals of my conflicting emotions pulling and snarling, grazing on my bones. I wanted to tell everyone that I was taking Monarch's place as leader; I wanted to take Vaysh by the hand and run away to some hidden land, never once looking back; I wanted to hunt down every fucking Wraeththu who killed pointlessly like a human punk, to slice figure eights into their abdomens and to watch their guts tumble onto the earth like mutant slugs. I wanted to hold Jaffa to me and swear to him that it was going to be all right, that he'd never again have to kill another hara in self-defence, that we were more enlightened than the humans we'd once been...

Of course, I did none of those things. I became as practical and composed as I could, and was gratified when I saw that my actions allowed other hara to mourn openly, or expel their rage, and to seek solace in each other. I took comfort in having helped to bring order so quickly to our chaos; my insightful efficiency and patience was respected and valued. My harbrethren's ability to cope was a salve to my spirit, still reeling from it all.

Opequon, Vaysh, Kyrgian, Belvac and I sat up that night in the library, drinking vralfire. It was a rather potent liquor Ondin had distilled from the peaches found in orchards in the nearby valley.

"We'd known there would be changes soon," Kyrgian said dully.

"Not like this," Belvac said, rocking on the back legs of his chair, his crossed feet propped up on a desk. "I wouldn't want foresight to see my own death."

"He certainly didn't see that," Kyrgian slurred, his face drawn and haggard. "The air's no good here now. We should move."

"I agree."

Vaysh slumped elegantly in his chair, his long legs spread wide, the heels of his boots planted on the wooden floor. It was a sight that normally would have inflamed my passion like a raging forest fire, but the thought of aruna was far from my mind. "There's a stone refuge on a mountain not far from here. There was no sign of human inhabitants for miles around it, and the buildings themselves are vacant. It would be easier to defend, and it has sacred ground. It's haunted me in dreams since we passed through."

"A stone refuge?" I asked, knocking back my drink and pouring another large splash. A fizz of memory crackled in my mind; chills of premonition caused goosebumps to rise on my skin. "I think I know exactly where you mean. But we've got to give it a new name."

Opequon looked curiously at me, his green-striped black hair pulled into a short ponytail at the base of his neck. "Did your clan come from middle Megalithica? From your voices, I assumed you were from further south."

I couldn't bear to say the name of the bombed-out wasteland of my beloved childhood home. Yes, its human refinement had been mauled from it by gangs of humans and then rampaging, untamed Wraeththu when I was still rather young, but I'd seen pictures and been told of the jewel it had been in history. It was so awkward, wanting to shed every trapping of my humanity and yet being so close to it, part dispassionate anthropologist and part regretful scribe of my own former race.

"We did," I said, and poured the rest of my vralfire down my throat. "I had family, uncles and a grandfather, who were scholars at the refuge you passed through. I think it would be a safe place to go. There's arable land around and plenty of it. Lots of woods, too. I doubt there are any working generators, though. Electricity is a dream of the past."

"We'll find other ways," Belvac promised.

"Tomorrow, then," Kyrgian sighed. "Tomorrow we'll gather our things and move on. Ashmael, I think you're the har to organise it."

"I will."

There was time for more remembrances, and talk of the future before we all retired to our rooms. I went with Vaysh, to the former guesthouse. That night we took aruna together, slow and with the promise of healing. Away from everyone else, I watered his compassionate face with my tears.

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It was a few days' unhurried ride to the base of the plateau. This part of Megalithica remained relatively unchanged and unmarred from the cataclysmic events that had gone on around it. The low rollings of hills and trees didn't harbour ghosts, though the oppressive heat was wearing. There was a black ribbon of asphalt I knew led up the mountain, but for our safety we took a route through neglected farms and tree-covered countryside. Euclase and Llembara rode ahead, scouting for humans and hara alike. I'd wanted to talk with Jaffa about his experiences during the attack, but he was tight-lipped, sulky and withdrawn. Wycker and Belvac stayed protectively by his side, and I noticed Iolethe's light eyes returned to the young har time and again, but Jaffa had no words of substance for any of us. On the evening of our fifth day of travelling, after dinner Iolethe suggested to Kyrgian that they go take a walk. Dark stormclouds hunkered

over our destination, and the electric tang of an intense thunderstorm permeated the air. Opequon, Ondin and Wyngarr were tending to our horses, who whinnied their unease as the churning clouds began to unleash their rain, miles away.

It reflected my own turbulence; I was ready to see what the former university looked like, ready to begin this new chapter in my harsh life.

"Kyrgian and Iolethe had best not wander too far," I said to Vaysh as we erected our tent. "And I'd give my right hand for some mosquito netting right now."

"They'll be fine," Vaysh reassured me, futilely waving a pale arm at the swarm of insects that wouldn't leave us alone. "Iolethe never does anything rash. I'm sick of bugs, and summer. I always hated summer anyway." He looked up at the tree-covered mountain, its top under assault from the rain. The leaves on the trees around us were brown from lack of rain, looking as wilted as I felt.

"Autumn will be here soon. I bet it'll be absolutely beautiful once all the leaves change colour," I said. "We sure need the rain, or the earth does," I thought out loud. "Don't know if our tents are designed for the likes of the storm coming, though."

"They'd better hold so I don't spend the night feeling like a drowning rat," Vaysh said, wrinkling his nose in a way that made me think inexplicably of a twitching rabbit. He had such an animated, expressive face, once the mask of chilly haughtiness was dropped. I felt that everybody could see my inner feelings, too, but Euclase had informed me more than once that this wasn't the case.

Vaysh tilted his head, his eyes raking over the structure, presumably looking for flaws. He turned on me suddenly. "Do you know how to reinforce it? Using some of the elemental force from the earth?"

"Me?"

His grey eyes rolled heavenward. "Yes, you. I know you've been studying, several of you. But you're not that far along in your caste, are you?"

"No, but I've gotten to be pretty decent with a knife and a gun, and that's what the Uigenna use as weapons," I snapped defensively. "I could train our group into a small army if need be. Probably should. But Kyrgian knows I can learn anything. We only have — had — two Pyralists, though. Caste progression just doesn't matter a whole lot if there's a bullet lodged in your heart or a steel-toed boot is grinding your guts into the ground."

It was only when I saw Vaysh's widened eyes take on a speculative, knowing look that I realized how sore a spot he'd touched. I was clenching my jaw, bristling like a cornered cat.

"That really wasn't meant to imply anything negative," he said, cautiously snaking out a hand to place on my bicep. His thumb swept back and forth a couple of times on the exposed, hardened muscle; if it weren't for the mosquitoes I'd have been shirtless. "It was just an observation. Not everybody's out to get you, you know. You have some rare gifts, and I know that *you* know you do."

With a slight squeeze he stepped back, playing with a long braid he'd pulled over the front of his shoulder. It was ridiculous, but a feeling of abandonment drifted over me at the loss of contact.

"My gifts aren't all in my strength, or my mind." I wondered where this unexpected need for confession had come from. "I'm not the most soume har around, but I do have a heart. I can make room for someone else in it. I've loved, and do still. Even if it's something we're supposed to have moved beyond."

Noises of the others in the camp drifted in and out of my awareness; I couldn't help but be semi-conscious of where everyone in our clan was, or was supposed to be, even while bearing up under Vaysh's now somewhat frosty scrutiny.

"Does this love dare speak its name?" Vaysh asked imperiously.

Before I could answer and deal with any unnecessary jealousy, an anguished cry of rage sounded from near the stream where we'd set up our bivouac. It was followed by a flood of repetitive invectives ending with another yell, cursing all of us.

"What the hell is Jaffa's problem?" I asked, stomping off to remind the young har that we really didn't need to be broadcasting our presence to every living creature in the woods.

"Ash, he's coping with his change."

Vaysh's pacifying tone didn't make me feel any better, and I doubted it would do anything but piss off the young har to a higher level of rage.

"We're all coping with a lot of baggage, but we're not all telling the world to fuck off," I retorted, unsurprised when I saw Wyngarr and Vox had beaten me to Jaffa's side.

Yes, but you're not dealing with a first crush, obsessing about aruna, being uprooted from your home, all on top of a few days of high excitement with new har, ending with your harbrethren being brutally attacked. He killed for the first time just days ago, and we buried Monarch, who was obviously like a father to him.

I chose to ignore the implied *"you insensitive clod"* that followed his telepathic chastisement.

True. Where's Iolethe? He said he'd help Jaffa out.

Taking aruna with Kygrian, I'm sure, Vaysh's mind-touch stated matter-of-factly.

Oh. I felt sheepish at having not come to that conclusion myself. Of course.

Jaffa's expression was stormy, his cheeks red and splotchy under the constellations of freckles that adorned his whole body. Vox pulled a bottle of white wine out of the stream where it had been chilling and poured some in a tin cup.

"Getting him drunk will only make him miserable *and* hung over!" Wyngarr said, exasperated.

"I won't get drunk, I just want to be able to sleep," Jaffa growled, scratching at his arms. Tension pulled at his limbs like a puppeteer with a willful marionette. "Thanks."

He took the cup from Vox's hands, swallowing it all in several gulps and then belching. "That's *awful*," he moaned, covering his mouth and looking very young again. The fierceness had been plucked from his face, the thorn pulled from a rose. Jaffa's heavy-lidded eyes came to rest on me, then skimmed over to Vaysh. In the background of the drama, Wyngarr made soothing noises and shot dagger glances at Vox.

"Jaffa, I'm sorry you don't feel like yourself." I squatted near to him and Wyngarr made a space for me to sit. Oddly enough, Wyngarr looked more like kin than Jaffa's own brother did, though Wyngarr's hair was more auburn and straight. Jaffa's was a true orange copper that formed ringlets at the slightest provocation.

"I feel like utter shit," he said vehemently. I did notice the wispy smile tug at his mouth when he saw I would let him get away with his swearing, at least for now.

"Iolethe says it's feybraiha and, thank the Aghama, it doesn't last that long. I'm sure we should have some ceremony— you're a celebrity, Jaffa. First in our clan to go through it!"

"It's not exactly anything worth celebrating," he said, scratching under his right armpit. "I'm always itchy, and these damn mosquitoes are terrible, my skin's hot where the hair's growing, and I can't believe..." his rasped voice trailed off. Vox poured more wine into the cup and placed it gently in Jaffa's hand, ignoring the disapproving rumble in Wyngarr's throat. "I killed another har."

His pale hand trembled and just then a deafening crack of lightning ripped at the sky. The white wine soaked Jaffa's shirt as the tin cup went flying over his shoulder with his startled reflexes. A booming roll of thunder pounded above us, though there was still no rain.

"Quite a show," Vaysh said sardonically. He threw his braid over his back and gazed up at the lightning as it cavorted, streaking blinding white arrows across the churning sky. I could tell the rain wouldn't arrive for a few minutes, perhaps a quarter hour. It seemed prudent to make sure everyhar's tents were as waterproofed as possible.

"It is worth celebrating," I heard Vaysh continue on behind me. I turned around to see he and Wyngarr help Jaffa up from the ground. He cursed his sodden shirt and fate in general. "You've obviously been thinking about what's happening to you; you don't need to be embarrassed. Aruna is the most natural thing in the world. We'd become bitter, hollow creatures without it."

"Nothing against you, tiahaar," Jaffa said, fuming at the world, his lips pursed and hands balled into fists, "but I really, really don't want to talk about this. Not with you."

Vox's gaze lit to mine, his eyebrows raised. I just felt out of place. I was no guide, and Jaffa hadn't been giving me any furtive glances that I'd noticed. And notice I would have, I assumed— he wasn't exactly a paragon of subtlety right now.

"It's okay, I understand," Vaysh said, raising his voice to be heard above the wind. It had picked up, teasing groans and sighs from the overhead tree limbs.

"I suggest we get back to our shelter," I said, unable to stop myself from dropping a hand on Jaffa's shoulder and rubbing at the bony line.

Discussions about who should explain the nuts and bolts of aruna as well as its more esoteric and emotional qualities went on despite Jaffa's wishes otherwise as we walked back to the center of camp. There a fire still crackled, its heat unnecessary but it beckoned cheerily nonetheless.

"Shut up about it!" Jaffa yelled, his face scarlet. "Just leave me the hell alone! I'll take care of this on my own. Not until we're at our new place, don't worry, even though I feel like I'm going to crawl out of my skin," he said spitefully, glaring at me.

"Do what you want!" I said, holding up my hands in surrender. "I'm not your father. Don't hurt yourself, that's all I ask." Why he'd turned on me I couldn't fathom. He was being supremely irritating, even though I did feel sorry for him.

"Fine!" he snapped, his tone dripping with sarcasm and frustration.

"Can't he just do this now? I know he's physically mature enough," Wyngarr said, appealing to Vaysh, which only further grated on me. I wasn't meant for this kind of domestic exchange, but Jaffa held a special place in my heart due to his youth. "What does the difference of a few days make?"

"What do you think?" Vaysh asked of Jaffa as the scent of rain filled my nostrils.

"Nobody asked me, but I still think we should get ready for a downpour," I said, looking pointedly at each of them. We'd approached a pair sitting near the fire, talking in low voices; it was Abelard and Belvac.

"I think you should all leave me the fuck alone! Except you! You're who I want," Jaffa spluttered. He looked to be on the verge of furious tears. I followed the arch of his trembling arm to see he was pointing, inconceivably, at Abelard.

"You want me to do what?" he asked, obviously confused and a bit taken aback at our group arrival and Jaffa's manners. Abelard had seemed the most reticent of their group, dark and brooding in a way that reminded me of Belvac. Those two had drawn closely together and got on like a house on fire. They had a secretive, intense friendship already. How could Jaffa, a blazing comet of good humour and precocious intelligence, be drawn to Abelard?

"I'm going through feybriha. I hate it," he moaned, burying his face in his hands. Seconds later he stood up straight again, looking wretched, as though about to martyr himself. "I just want this to be over with. If you don't think you could stand being with me, I understand. But if I get to choose, it's you I want to take aruna with. Since I'm supposed to, and then it'll get everybody off my back."

Everyone appeared surprised at Jaffa's poignant outburst, Belvac and Abelard not the least. From the gauzy curtain of hurt on Belvac's face, he'd evidently thought he might have been selected, not his companion. Abelard slowly stood up, angular but fluid in his movements, his soume side not particularly pronounced. His dark brown eyes shone with delight, though when he glanced over at me, I saw trepidation and a silent entreaty for approval. I nodded, not that I was Jaffa's guardian, but I was closer to him than Kyrgian was. And Kyrgian had his own agenda right now.

"How about you and I go to my tent with some wine, and let's talk first," Abelard said, walking the few steps to take the bottle from Vox's hands. "From there what we do is up to you. I'm flattered that you want to share yourself with me."

That seemed to be the perfect response. Though the rain and thrashing wind was almost upon us, the storm in Jaffa's expression had passed and he beamed at the lanky har. "Sounds great," he enthused before turning to grin widely at Vox. "Don't you and Polaris wait up." Swinging the bottle of wine to one side and taking Abelard's proffered hand in the other, Jaffa sauntered off to a tent near the outskirts of the circle.

Heavy drops of rain began spattering the ground, forcing us all hurriedly to take cover in our own tents. I've always loved thunderstorms, but they make me sleepy. Being held in Vaysh's arms on as flat and

rock-free a surface we could find, I yawned, still reveling in the novelty of feeling so protected and cherished by another being.

"I hope Jaffa doesn't feel cheated out of a big party," I said, nosing at the sandalwood scent of Vaysh's neck. Given how violently Jaffa's moods were swinging, chances were he'd sulk if we had one, and sulk if we didn't. Hopefully taking aruna with Abelard would smooth out the edges and make him bearable again, even endearing.

"Who's to stop us from having one once we're up on the mountain and get settled in?" Vaysh asked reasonably. He combed his fingers through my hair and I wished I could purr. I was so content, the rain pounding on canvas above our heads, Ondin and Wycker on first watch, my ouana-lim heavy but not demanding attention.

"Nobody. Abelard seemed like an odd choice, but what do I know?"

"You know to follow your instincts," Vaysh murmured in my ear. "It's served you well, and will him, too."

We lay together in a comfortable silence as the storm raged until I heard Vaysh's quiet voice again.

"What was it like for you?"

"My inception?"

He nodded into my scalp. I spread out my palm over his hip, grounding myself against his increasingly-familiar body as I brought back the key memories of that time.

"I was scared. Exhilarated. It was painful, and rebellion, and seduction."

I leaned back and slowly angled my head so that we could share breath. Like an unhurried bee, going from flower to flower, I gave him a memory here, a remembrance there. My becoming Wraeththu had been an act of anarchy, my perceptions and worldliness smashed by the reality of writhing in terror and agony in my own filth for days before it was over.

"Euclase was there?" he asked gently as I laid my head back down on our makeshift pillow of blankets.

I nodded. He'd had an easier time of things. I was now certain that this had been because his imagination soared to truths I couldn't truly believe until I felt my own realities shift and mutate in my own body. I'd had no regrets, but the blunt blade of transformation had torn ragged holes in my spirit which took time to heal.

"What was his name?"

"Before?"

It was difficult to say; it seemed like a defamation, to evoke his human name. "Eric."

I of course knew the next question before it was asked.

And you?

I buried my face into the soft skin of Vaysh's neck, pressed against a masculine, adult jaw and chin that would never again need to know the scrape of a razor. I was changed. My old self was gone forever, our whole former race, doomed. We had moved on, and looking back made me discomfitted and melancholy.

Andrew.

* * * * *

We had our first newcomers well before the first snow fell.

Autumn was a fiery glory; the trees were peacocks, waving their scarlet and copper feathers under the shortening days. The woods displayed their bold colours in a proud, decadent beauty, the sentinel forest marching up and over the plateau and across the lands of Castlegar. I was undone by the vibrant riot of our first autumn. At first there were only small eruptions of colour, daubed here and there as though by a crazed painter. All at once the woods were ablaze in russet and gold, touched by the inflamed whispers of nature's seraphim.

There had been much to be done to prepare for the upcoming winter, but I couldn't help from returning to the many viewing grounds around this mountaintop paradise. There was one location in particular set at the end of a thin asphalt ribbon, where the trees had been cleared to provide an unhindered vista of the valley below. A relic of the religious heritage of the university perched proudly on display, its bold white cross easily visible from any approach on this side of the mountain. I was of two minds about it: it did no harm, but we would be making our own gods now, and this was our home. Ultimately my reason for leaving it be versus its removal was due to practicality; we were sorely lacking in cranes or wrecking balls. Any such heavy machinery that we did find on the grounds was rusting away, already being reclaimed and oxidized by nature's powerful elements.

The view from this particular scenic location, however, was second to none, and I often found myself pulled to the spot as though by an invisible hand. Our group of Wraeththu pioneers felt they had rediscovered Paradise. Several enterprising humans had tended gardens in the past that we were able to cultivate; evidently students had kept horses as there were stables and countless acres for our horses to get exercise; vineyards were on the other side of the mountain, but the scholars on the campus had stashed away enough wine and liquor in their abandoned homes for us easily to get through our first winter without becoming vintners ourselves.

And the stone buildings— they were the soul of Castlegar, as we'd come to name our new home. Some were relatively new but in an old style, and others were genuinely old, perhaps older than a century. A couple of hara did elect to move into actual houses that hadn't yet fallen much into disrepair, but most of us settled into barracks-like dormitories in the heart of what had been the campus. The sandstone structures and spacious grounds beckoned our exploring: there were winding staircases; a peaceful graveyard; squat, solitary huts that still smelled faintly of beer and a lingering, heady tang of testosterone. The campus was evocative of far older enclaves of learning, and the whole mountain seemed to welcome us. We embraced the protection of stone and trees with gratitude. One building held more secrets than the rest. Inside it on the ground floor, some couches were now home for mice and birds as several of the windows were broken or missing. Even on approach to the formerly renovated but now-decrepit dormitory, I felt goose bumps on my flesh; it was haunted by specters and tormented spirits. What Kyrgian discovered through observation, I confirmed by looking through books in a former inhabitant's private library, full of histories of this place.

"It was a hospital, even back before the turn of the century. No wonder," I said to him over coffee one morning. The day had presented another endearing, capricious quality to Castlegar: we were shrouded in

fog. It seemed created for otherworldly phantasms to travel in, a soupy, dense quiet that had crept over the mountain during the night and showed no sign of going anywhere for quite a while.

"Many humans died there," Kyrgian noted, spreading raspberry preserves on a piece of wheat toast. "But many were also born. I'd let it be for now, we have plenty of houses and other residences to choose from. I'm certain that other hara will find us. Maybe this will become a school for our kind as it was for humankind for so many generations."

"As long as it's not more warmongering tribes," I groused. "I want us to be prepared. We should scout around all of the towns within a three-day ride to retrieve any ammunition we can find. Better to get what guns and bullets we can before nature, any rogue humans or somehar else comes along to claim them."

"A prudent course of action," Kyrgian acknowledged through a mouthful of toast. "But not today. I've never seen fog like this. It's a natural phenomenon," he went on, intuiting my question as to its possible malevolent origin.

"Good. Then I'll just go and take a wander around in it, see if any of the legendary human ghosts written about in some of those histories I've read want to show themselves."

Kyrgian looked at me as though I were a juvenile. "Be careful. And don't forget that you and Belvac owe me your afternoon."

"I haven't forgotten. I'll remind Belvac."

With an eye roll, Kyrgian nodded. "Please do. Oh, and would you ask Vaysh to see me? I'll be back at my rooms in not too long."

"Certainly."

I wasn't sure what those two were discussing, but it probably had to do with training for our lowest caste hara. Or maybe it had to do with persuading Vaysh to surrender more of the potent cinnamon tea he'd found and hoarded somewhere. I stood back from the table, swallowing the last of my lukewarm coffee before buttoning up my leather coat and putting on gloves.

Outside of the stone and glass dining hall I paused, drinking in the sight of such dense, milky mist as it shifted and folded in the air. Pockets of visibility would appear and vanish again, shrouded in the chilled, murky air. I couldn't help the cheeky grin as I made my way down one of the sidewalks; this was marvellous. Even the sound of the heels of my boots on the cracking cement was whisked away into the heavy grey haze. Castlegar was full of surprises, this mountaintop cloaking of impenetrable fog being a particularly memorable one to add to my mental list. I walked down what had been the main paved road, out past a small in, ivy and shrubs having begun their inexorable annex of its walls. Behind the inn was a wide, treeless space, the few sandy indentions betraying its former function as a golf course. I'd fancied I'd seen a plethora of angels or shape-shifters as I ambled along, but when I passed the inn, my nerves went on true high alert. Sliding up against a side wall, I felt at my hip and realised that while I had on my holster, it was empty. I swore under my breath before realising I hadn't heard any actual noise to indicate that anything was amiss. The fog was so thick that nothing but stealth was possible. Still, I walked near the treeline, heading back alongside a gravel road toward an overgrown sports field and mouldering tennis courts.

"We're not armed! Put down your guns and let's be civilised about this!"

It was Euclase.

"You're freaks! Killers! We'll kill you first!" An enraged, triumphant young voice shouted.

My heart leapt into my throat as I began running toward whomever it was threatening him. The blood pounded in my ears as I now cursed the soupy air, much less my absent gun.

What's going on? I mind-called to him.

Young humans. Big guns. I'm a fucking idiot, he replied tersely. *Zain's here, too. But Opequon and Ondin are coming up behind them. I just hope—*

There was a startled, confused shout, and an all-too-distinctive crack of a gun firing. I raced toward the sound, heedless of the consequences.

EUCLASE! I yelled into his mind.

"I'm fine! Zain's been shot," he shouted angrily as the indistinct forms I was running to became corporeal realities. The scuffle was over, Zain the casualty. He moaned and spouted a river of curses, his hands protectively covering his knee. Ondin and Opequon held their guns steady at the back of the two humans' skulls. I strode toward the group, shocked that this was our first run-in, and pissed off that we'd been taken unawares.

"Somebody fill me in. NOW," I barked even as I sent a message to Vaysh: *Come to the old sports field behind the inn. On a horse. Zain's been shot in the leg.*

What?! Vaysh's immediate response was full of fear and barely-controlled fury.

I don't know details. I will when you get here. Hurry.

It took only a few minutes for Euclase to tell me what had happened. They'd just been out for a walk, equally intrigued by this unique weather phenomenon, found they couldn't keep their passions in check and were sharing breath when the two humans had startled them. Thankfully Ondin and Opequon had been on their way back from some mind-body exercises Opequon was providing instruction in, and Euclase had sent a silent mind-call warning to Ondin. They'd had sense to be armed and stealthfully crept up on the adolescents but in doing so, had scared one of them who'd accidentally shot Zain in the knee.

"Are there more of you?" I asked one of the youths whose expression of defiance was tempered by encroaching fear as more of us showed up.

"No," he snarled. "But we'll get away, just like last time."

"You know what we are, then?"

"You're murderers. The other ones killed everybody except the guys our age, and fuck only knows what happened to them. Probably made into sex slaves, or something," he said, disgust saturated in the words.

"What're you going to do to us?" his compatriot asked, his arms hugging himself tightly around his ribs.

Ondin had taken the liberty of disarming them and I'd just noticed how underfed they were. I was about to ask their names when I heard a horse galloping toward us.

"Got here as quickly as I could," Vaysh said tersely, dismounting from Arches and giving the youths a hasty glance before striding over to Zain. He held his hands over Zain's knee, closing his eyes and casting some kind of healing energy into him as I focussed my attentions back on the two humans.

"What are your names?" I asked. When they didn't answer immediately, I said, "Opequon, Ondin, you can give them a little breathing space. They're not going anywhere. Vaysh, you stay here, okay? Let Opequon take Zain back to his room."

Ondin gave me a dark look, but then shrugged. He kept one of their own rifles aimed unwaveringly at them, while Opequon went over to assist in getting Zain up and on the horse.

"I'm not telling you anything, you fucked up freak," the more aggressive one growled. "Neither is he."

"We're not going to be able to get out of this!" the second one said to his friend, his anxiety flowing off of him in waves.

Now I was amused, watching them bicker at each other. Neither was shockingly handsome, but they were reasonably attractive in a rustic, unrefined way. I decided to put them out of their misery of unknowing, creating my plan as I spoke it aloud.

"You're going to be incepted, be made like us. There's no choice, really," I said, nodding my head to Vaysh. He raised his eyebrows and came over to my side. Ondin made a menacing sound at the taller of the two adolescents as he began looking quickly around, as though to escape.

"I'd rather die than be one of your perverted fuck toys," he said, his voice low in his throat and hands balled into fists. The other boy just stared, his green eyes wide as saucers as his chest quickly rose and fell.

"I hate to disappoint," I said dryly, "but from what I know of the sexual practices of the rest of our clan, we're pretty pedestrian, and no-one is forced to do anything exotic."

"Then why are you forcing us?" the green-eyed youth asked with a trembling voice.

His name is Jared, Vaysh said to me in my mind. Where do you want to do the inceptions? Is it your intent for us to do this together?

Yes. You can have the angry one. Hopefully some of your calming influence will work on him.

Calming influence? Vaysh said, sounding shocked.

I chuckled softly so only Vaysh heard me before answering the boy. "Because, Jared, we're the future. There is no choice. And besides, as Wraeththu we live far longer than humans, we heal much more quickly, and we have mind skills you could only dream of."

"You know my name," he said in a rasped whisper.

"Shut the fuck up!" the other one yelled at him.

"I think it's high time you learned some manners," Vaysh said coldly, walking the few steps over and holding his chin in a viselike grip. "You don't talk to loyal friends like that, Paul," he said, the words measured and full of disdain.

Paul made a rumbling growl and spat on him. Vaysh let go of his face, and boxed him soundly across the jaw with such force and speed that he fell backwards, barely missing Ondin and Euclase, who'd ventured over to watch the circus. I gawped at the adolescent knocked to the ground now rubbing at his face, as did Jared and Ondin.

Vaysh made a contented, purring sound, flexing his hand a couple of times and then turned to me. A mordant smile settled on his lips. "Let's do this now," he suggested.

I nodded. "No time like the present. Jared, you're with me." I pulled him to me, holding his arm close to my side.

"Get up," Vaysh hissed at Paul, not offering to help him stand. He did, shrugging off Vaysh's hand before Vaysh tugged him close with a strength that surprised me. "You'll behave, Paul, or I'll break every one of your toes and make you walk back. Am I making myself clear?"

Paul grunted, presumably in the affirmative.

"I'd like for us to get along," Vaysh said with slightly less acid in his tone. "You'll be a strong member of our clan, once you get that prideful pole out of your ass."

"Keep an eye on him," I said under my breath to Euclase once Vaysh and a shuffling Paul had passed them. Ondin's gun was still pointed at Paul, and I couldn't help but be grateful. I expected him to try and bolt, to underestimate Vaysh, just as I had done.

Euclase flanked Jared, talking to me just over Jared's head. "Vaysh has quite a tongue on him!" he marvelled as we walked through the thick fog back to the heart of Castlegar.

"You have no idea," I drawled.

He laughed at the implication. At my side, Jared made barely audible whimpers of distress. I was trying to be objective—I really did feel we were doing these two a favour, giving them the gift of hardom. It was that or kill them outright, which would have been a waste. There was indeed a lot of spirit in Paul; Jared, I suspected would come around far more quickly. While Euclase and I chatted in wonderment about the heavy mist, which appeared in no hurry to burn off, Vaysh and I communicated telepathically.

Before an hour had passed, he and I were on our own with the two humans and had taken them to one of the abandoned houses deep in the woods out near my favourite viewing spot. By now they both looked scared to death, and as we approached the house, Paul gurgled, "Gonna be sick." He began retching into the red shrubs proudly flanking the door, which hung slightly askew on its hinges.

"You'll be fine," Vaysh said airily before kicking open the door.

I had to chew the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing, though poor Jared blanched and then turned a sickly shade of green himself. I'd been discovering all sorts of things about Vaysh over the past couple of months, but this wicked, showy side was totally new. I knew it was spiteful actions to retaliate for being held in such contempt, but I was impressed nonetheless. We'd stopped by our room to get a couple of flasks of water, blankets, and some wine. I'd asked Euclase to send Vox and Polaris over after a time,

but the basics were all we needed for now. Vaysh led the way to what had been a sitting room with a working fireplace. I'd also retrieved my pistol and kept it trained on Paul while Vaysh got a fire going. I had butterflies in my stomach; I'd never incepted anyone before. It was a bit nerve-racking, with all of the intimate flutterings of having sex for the first time.

Vaysh must've tapped somewhat into my thoughts as he turned and smiled warmly at me, the look in his eyes anything but innocent. He quickly became serious, however. Paul and Jared sat on a couch whose stuffing had burst out of one side of a cushion, making a fibrous waterfall to the floor. Terror was etched on their faces now, and I felt the need to reassure them.

"This isn't death. We're not going to kill you," I said as tenderly as I could while still aiming the gun at them.

"Ashmael, I think you can put the weapon away," Vaysh said, shrugging off his coat. He was dressed as he so usually was that winter; leather trousers, a tight wool sweater, cordovan cowboy boots. My libido perked up at the sight, but I wasn't there to perform that particular ritual with him right now. He got one of the bottles of wine, rummaged around in our rucksack for a corkscrew, and freed the cork. After pouring wine into tin cups, he handed one apiece to the youths. Jared gulped his down, but the nauseous look on his face shortly thereafter prompted me to give him a water flask. Paul drank his more slowly as the room heated up thanks to the fire. I found a pack of cigarettes and lit one, offering the pack to the innocents on the couch. Paul pulled one out and lit it, now back to glaring at me.

"How old are you?" I asked, pulling over a chair and making sure it wasn't going to collapse as soon as I sat down in it.

"Does it matter?" Paul said, his expression mutinous.

"No. Your attitude doesn't, either," Vaysh said, also getting a chair and taking a seat. He crossed one foot on top of his knee, the very picture of a har at ease with himself. "Oh. I almost forgot."

Jared couldn't keep his huge, fear-filled eyes off of him as Vaysh leaned over, searching again through the rucksack and pulling out a finely decorated leather sheath and knife it protected.

"Oh God," Jared said, hiccupping at the same moment.

I wasn't sure why I had no qualms making these two into hara, though obviously they wanted nothing to do with us. I guess I still firmly believed it was a gift, and that they'd come around. All they could think to do was feast on their own fear, and yet, we were giving them as close to immortality as we could.

"I'm fifteen," Paul said, narrowing his eyes at the knife, still in its scabbard. "Jared's the same."

"Am not! I've been sixteen for two months, not that it was worth celebrating," Jared babbled. Wild-eyed, he looked from the knife which Vaysh smoothly took out from its holder, and up to Vaysh's face, his voice pleading as he said, "Will age make it hurt less?"

"There's not that much pain. C'mon, let's get this done, then I'll ask Vox and Polaris to come and keep vigil during their althaia," I said to Vaysh, who glanced speculatively at me before turning his attentions back to the two youths. "More wine?"

Jared stood up on trembling legs and shuffled over to him before collapsing to a heap at Vaysh's feet, wiping under his nose as he sniffled and made syrupy coughing sounds.

"What we're giving you is a gift," I said gently, raising Jared back up from the floor. *I'd watch out for Paul*, I warned Vaysh in mind-touch.

Oh, I will.

In the end, it wasn't as dramatic as I'd expected. I'd never incepted anyone before, but drew on my own experience to cut a gash in Jared's arm. He gasped at the shock of it. I slit a line down my own forearm until the blood spilled, the same colour as Jared's, but oh, so different. He'd given up the fight a while ago and sat meekly as I pressed our arms together, willing my blood to flow into his body. After a few minutes I figured it was enough and we stepped apart.

Shell-shocked, Jared stared down at his arm, smeared with sticky blood, already congealing. "That's it?" he asked harshly.

"Well, the whole transformation takes a few days. They'll be rough, sorry to say. But Polaris and Vox will be here. They'll look after you, and then once you're successfully changed, there'll be one last ritual."

Paul bristled with defiance. He'd continued to smoke, watching the proceedings until I'd wiped off the blade and handed the knife back to Vaysh.

"Well? Hurry up," Paul demanded, shoving his shirtsleeve to the elbow and wiping at the beads of sweat on his upper lip. A few coppery hints of beard stubble glinted on his jaw, and all of a sudden he seemed heartbreakingly naïve.

"Ah, your common sense has returned. Delightful," Vaysh said, standing up to his full height. He was a couple of inches shorter than I was, but he was impressive enough as he drew next to Paul.

"In blood, in fire, into forever," Vaysh breathed quietly, making twin crimson slashes on their arms and pressing together the open wounds. Paul's lips were a tight, white line. He'd not made a noise, only watched and breathed quickly, his nostrils flaring when the knife cut into his skin.

It was so calm and quiet, the fog drifting outside and muffling other sounds as though the whole mountain were draped in a diaphanous blanket. Jared had backed up against the couch, hugging his knees to his chest. Paul stood, staring at his arm for a time before looking over at me. His eyes were half closed, a profound weariness harboured in their hazel depths.

"Could I get another cigarette?" he asked. I handed him one and he leaned over so I could light it. I helped myself to another and gestured to Vaysh with the pack. He demurred, helping himself to a swig directly from the wine bottle.

I laughed at him, faintly shocked.

"What?" he said with a small shrug. "We're all family now. I'd rather drink from the bottle than these ridiculous camping tins."

It all seemed so anti-climactic, or perhaps I was becoming used to changes like this occurring so suddenly. I did find that I was curious about our new to-be brothers— or sons, almost, as we'd made them, though Vaysh and I weren't that far apart from them in chronological age. Then again, none of us were.

"So. Tell me about yourself," I said cajolingly to Jared. Amazingly enough, he stumbled through a brief history of his life over the next half hour or so, and Paul followed suit.

I'll ask Kyrgian to send the Aralids, Vaysh suggested after an hour began to creep into two. We both remembered our own experiences, and I wanted Jared and Paul's althaia to be as comfortable as possible.

"Two har will take care of you for the next few days," I said, squatting by Jared and running my hand through his stringy hair. They both needed a bath in the worst way, but that could all be done properly once their change was complete.

"You're leaving?" he asked dully. "Who'll protect us?"

"Vox and Polaris will be here with you. At times you may feel like there's a war going on in your body. Because there will be. But you're both strong-spirited. You'll make it, and there's a definite reward at the end."

"Reward?" Paul sneered. "Probably a gang-bang. I've heard about what you get up to. You're all deviants."

Vaysh was almost shaking, trying to keep his temper in check. "You have no idea how much I want to string you up by the balls right now," he said menacingly.

"So do it," Paul said, his upper lip curling.

"No, because somehar will have to take aruna with you and for aesthetic purposes, I want you to be unscarred, you and those jewels of yours."

The sound of two horses approaching cut through the tension and broke their standoff. As Vox and Polaris began to settle in, I introduced them to their two charges. I didn't envy any of them, but it had to be done, and the memory of the moments of agony would fade in time.

"Thank you," I said to Vox, patting him on the back as Vaysh and I left. I glanced over my shoulder to see Jared still huddled on the floor, and Paul standing at the fire, looking smug.

I ventured out only once during the following few days; their screams and moaning were more than I wanted to know about. I'd been elected to get Paul started on his new path; Vaysh and I had discussed it in the comfort of our own bed, sated in post-aruna lassitude.

"You should be with Paul," he said, running his nose along my jaw.

"We could all parade in front of them, let them decide for themselves who they want to do the deflowering," I joked.

"Do be serious. You'll remember that a few hara are only just on speaking terms with you again."

"We can't afford to be principled like that," I insisted, recalling some of the reproachful thrashing I'd received once the news got out. "It was us, or the Uigenna, eventually, or they would've found some other humans and they'd have attacked. We'd have had to kill them. No, there wasn't a choice. Llembara and Belvac can climb down out of their lofty towers. The world's not safe for us, not yet."

Vaysh's long fingers drew fanciful, slow patterns on my abdomen and I tightened my arm across his ribcage. "You don't sound like the worldly scholar you used to," he said thoughtfully, his fingers trailing down to the shadowy, heated juncture where thigh and groin met.

"I think I have a different calling now. I like being a protector, making sure we can take care of and defend ourselves. Especially you." I pulled him impossibly close, nosing at his temple, breathing in his woody scent and painting the skin with dry kisses. "Not that you need me. You'd kick the ass of anyone who tried to attack you."

He snickered, the husky tenor sending a pleasant coil of lust from my ouana-lim slithering all the way down to my toes. "I'm no damsel in distress," he said, inching down to take one of the hardened nubs on my chest between his teeth. He tugged gently until I moaned at the exquisite pain of it.

"No," I rasped. "You can watch my back any day."

His hot tongue licked a stripe to the hollow of my neck. "I do exactly that, my dear Ashmael. I'm your paladin."

That thought made me smile; of Vaysh as my knight in shining armour, his now-red hair fluttering in the breeze. I still wasn't entirely sure why he'd felt compelled to change his hair colour. He'd said something about truly becoming himself, embracing his harish destiny, and other commentary that I'd decided to tune out after a while. It *did* suit him, his hair flowing down his back like crimson, silken ribbons.

"So, paladin," I said raggedly as his nimble fingers stroked my passionate fires back to life, "do you have any particular noble cause of mine to champion?"

"Nothing noble," he purred. "Only my pursuit of your utter sexual conquest."

"Shouldn't I call you a conquistador, then?"

His nonverbal rebuttal lasted well into the night.

* * * * *

Paul's change took more out of him than Jared; given his anger and perhaps false bravado, he wasn't able to stand on his own or clean himself for several days once his althaiia had run its course. Jared had already taken a harish name, Gladwyne, and begun learning of his new race (and the delights to be found in his newly-modified body) with Wycker. Jaffa also spent a lot of time with him, as they were closest in age. And Jaffa was drawn to novelty, as a newly-incepted har certainly was. Maybe Gladwyne's pull to Wycker had brought Jaffa back in harmony with his brother. Wycker and Jaffa were enough alike to be thick as thieves, especially in times of danger. Not infrequently, however, they sniped and were at each other's throats.

Apparently I'd made an impression on Paul as he did ask for me to come and complete the pact he'd been forced to sign with Wraeththu. Polaris had sidled over to me during dinner, squeezing Vaysh over on the bench so he could speak low in my ear. I'd felt Paul's eyes on me through the meal, his first with us as a group. His gaze had felt like burning coals, stirring embers of intrigue in my loins.

"Paul's well enough now, and his body's going berserk. You remember what it's like," Polaris said softly, though doubtless everyhar at the table knew why he'd undertaken his mission to talk to me. We lived rather in a communal fishbowl, none of us taking residence too far away from the centre structures of Castlegar. There were also no secrets, and relatively little privacy, which was beginning to gnaw at me.

"I didn't have the best first aruna experience," I said candidly, using my dinner roll to sop of the last of a tasty venison stew Vox and Jaffa had created. "More along the 'wham, bam, thank you ma'am' variety. I'll make sure Paul's is more memorable. In a good way," I felt the need to clarify.

"Of course," Polaris said, the words dripping with innuendo before his face took on a more sombre expression. "You will treat him well? I've become quite fond of him. And he's a stunning har. Who'd've thought under all that vitriol and filthy mouth would be such raw beauty?"

Vaysh turned and gave the new har a look under which anyone else, even myself, would have withered and turned to a pile of ash. Paul took a long drink of wine but held Vaysh's gaze, challenging him unflinchingly. Though I didn't let it show, my soume aspect kicked into high gear for a moment—I swooned at the ferocity etched in Paul's face.

"Vaysh incepted him," I said, stabbing at some chunks of potato still in my bowl. "Are you sure he doesn't want him? You have my word Paul won't be disappointed."

Vaysh growled low in his throat, then composed himself as though this were perfectly normal dinner conversation.

"I might get carried away with one that feisty," he said, angling his head to speak to us in conspiratorial tones. It also allowed him to show off the bruised blossoms of my enthusiastic kisses on his neck from the night before. "He should only be broken in, not broken, full stop."

"Enough," I said, my brow furrowing even though I knew, or really hoped, it was all in jest.

Polaris clearly reveled in our banter; a born gossip, thankfully his fists were as fast and lethal as his tongue. "He's been staying with us, but Vox got him set up in his own room. On the second floor."

I nodded. They lived in a large residence in the heart of the grounds, a home the size of an inn and structurally sound. Anything of value had been stolen ages ago, and there were shadowy marks on the walls where pictures had hung for a few decades according to the histories I'd read.

"I could keep you company, Vaysh," Polaris offered, genuine warmth in his voice. "I just happen to have an unopened bottle of bourbon that I found during my last scouting mission. That and some cards and my charming self? You'd be a fool to say no."

My heart swelled at his hopeful earnestness. Our two groups had merged near-seamlessly once we'd settled on the mountain, and everybody adored Vaysh in their own way.

"Bourbon?" Vaysh's head snapped to Polaris, eyes twinkling. "You're a rogue for not telling me until now. Come to our room later. The door will be open." A sly smile slid onto his lips.

"I guess I'll be going," I said to nohar in particular, and there was no answer. I did feel the scrutiny of several pair of eyes as I left the dining hall and found that I stood up straighter under their pressure. Back in the suite of rooms I shared with Vaysh, I took my time engaging in some perfunctory primping; knowing Vox and Jaffa, who'd been close as shadows to Paul during the meal, they'd try and turn him into some prettified manwoman. I suspected that at first, until he learned to understand his feminine aspects, Paul would shun his less familiar side. I'd be the first to teach him, through lessons of transcendent pleasure — I hoped! — to welcome and embrace that unknown, secretive and strong part of himself. Soume. To be honest, it still intimidated and perplexed me at times.

It was bracingly cold; I was glad I didn't have to walk far to get to the building I thought of as 'the chancellery,' as the chancellors of the school had lived there in the past. My pulse quickened once I was inside and could take off my gloves, warming my hands over a merry fire down in the main foyer. Somehar had also thoughtfully placed a decanter of some liquor on a side table, though I wasn't sure what it was. It seemed like a mix of vralfire infused with cinnamon, and I poured two glasses, taking them upstairs.

Paul's room wasn't hard to find, a band of light cheerily escaping into the corridor and beckoning me in to behold the treasure hidden within. Since my hands were full, I nudged open the door and found myself engulfed in the scent of spruce and sandalwood. Paul was pacing, but stopped when he heard me enter. I placed the glasses on a dresser and shut the door behind me, leaning on it for stability. Whatever Jaffa and Vox had done to him was subtle, bringing out the stark beauty that had been formerly hidden under his arrogant façade. I couldn't help but stare, devouring him with my gaze, suddenly irritated when a feeling of guilt flitted in my chest. Taking aruna after inception was a necessary act, and besides— it was integral to our being, like eating or breathing. Jealousy and the idea of possession was a human trait. Though I strove to cast such things off, back then, they continued to mark me like the whorls on my fingers.

"What are you thinking?" he asked hesitantly, striding over to pick up one of the glasses of amber liquid. "One of these is for me, right?"

"Yes, sorry."

I didn't know if my apology was for not offering it to him, or for my regressive thoughts. "I was thinking about how attractive you are."

This was no fiction. His hair was a rich chestnut, wavy and hanging around his face. His hazel eyes as he evaluated me, tended toward a tawny gold, though I well imagined they would seem to change colour depending on the light or his mood. Paul's face transformed at my words; timidity and uncertainty fled, replaced by a sultry stare.

"So you don't mind, then?"

He drank the entirety of his liqueur and ran the back of his hand against his lips. It was such an unassuming gesture, I felt my reserve give way. His lips weren't particularly lush; in truth, his more soume aspects were elusive.

"No. I hope I don't disappoint," I said, putting down my glass to walk over to him. I rested one hand at the base of his spine, the other cradling the back of his head.

He made a dismissive sound.

"Impossible."

Paul moved against me, wrapping his arm about my waist, swaying his hips slightly. I felt a noticeable hardness pressing into my thigh. This was going to be interesting.

"Breathe into me," he commanded softly. "Don't hold back tonight, not with anything." His gaze was molten, ferocity gleaming in his eyes.

"You seem to have taken this well," I said, my lips hovering over his as he let out hot puffs of air. "Not going to surprise me by kneeling me in the balls and running off, are you?"

Paul leaned back just a bit, licking at the corner of his lips where a sticky moisture from the drink still remained. Desire and physical want radiated from him. I knew that feeling, of being parched and needy, desperate for the renewal only another har's touch could bring.

"No." A sheepish look crossed his face. "I'm glad I still have my own balls, to be honest. You were a damn bastard, you know," he said, beginning to grind against me with more intention. "You didn't say a word about the fact that all of our changes would be sexual."

"Because they're not!" I insisted, leaning in to share breath with him, but he evaded my lips to get out another confession.

"I've had my hand in my pants. A lot. The new parts— they kind of creep me out, so I need you to make it right. I know you can, that's why I picked you. You're strong and you act like a man. You seem safe to me."

"Let's go lie down on your bed," I said and Paul nodded. My ouana-lim was beginning to press insistently against my own trousers, but I felt I owed him a short explanation and clarification before I ravaged him. No doubt he'd heard plenty from everyhar else, but I was with him now.

I took the liberty of tossing another couple of logs on the fire before joining him. I also took off my sweater, shirt and boots, and forced him to keep my gaze while with unhurried hands, I unbuttoned his shirt. Skin on skin was sublime. It took all of my willpower not to shove down our trousers and swallow his stiff length and make him writhe in pleasure. A quick — very quick — overview of being a hermaphrodite, and *then* I would tease to life the pleasures inside of him he formerly never could have imagined.

"Like all hara, I'm male and female, though I know I don't express my feminine as blatantly as some. Having both genders is our gift, one of them," I said, kneading at the narrow flesh of his backside. Paul and Gladwyne both could stand to put meat on their newly harish bones.

"I know. I just didn't..." his voice trailed off, and he buried his face in my neck. "I've been stuck in my head, analysing things, and feeling myself up. I'm tired of both," he said impatiently, pressing faint, chaste kisses on my skin.

I felt another embarrassing swoon coming on.

"Share breath with me," Paul said, his voice raspy, all but begging. "I'm ready to really be one of you."

"You already are."

Deep and expansive, we shared breath, images and rising winds of desire flowing back and forth. Our tongues danced and teased; I savoured sparkling summer starlight and the flavour of tart apples, Paul's warm taste. When his fingers became grasping talons, I broke away and we finished undressing. He'd been bountifully endowed in the ouana-lim realm, and felt my body warring with its two polarities. I *had* to penetrate him, that was the way our bodies shuddered and threw off the last vestige of being human. We might contain both sexes, but right then I wanted nothing more than us both to be ouana, to cross swords and spill our delights on each other. What if that only made his body more crazed?

"Ashmael," Paul said, his voice demanding. He turned so he lay on his back, his kiss-swollen lips parted, eyes heavy-lidded as they'd been the afternoon Vaysh had incepted him. He tugged me on top of him, pulling me down and intermingling our hands in a tight grip. Velvet over steel, soft petals opened as we rubbed together, slick with opalescent offerings. I sighed and growled, rutting against him, not heeding how thin and wiry he was. My own passions had become like a wild horse, bucking and running amok. This wasn't for me, however, the focus was on Paul. I eased out of his grip, mapping the cartography of his bony torso with kisses.

He groaned and uttered other, less-defined noises, sounding like a wounded creature. I pushed him up the bed and lay on my stomach, ignoring for now the shimmering pearl of his ouana-lim and instead trying something whose inspiration had come just moments before: I licked and drank, teasing forth the honey-lemon nectar from his soume-lim. Paul's moans softened to surprised gasps and trills of pleasure. When my tongue and jaw began to ache, I sat back and noticed his body had responded to my ministrations.

Taking aruna with Paul that first time, I was a long spade, digging deeply into warm, loamy earth. He kept his eyes open, unable or unwilling not to keep my expressions in his sights. With each thrust I planted my own strength and hope for harakind into him; he seemed like the embodiment of a comet, a constellation of light fallen to earth.

He chanted a steady stream of monosyllabic profanity as our energies neared completion. "Don't hold back," I panted, tossing back his earlier comment as I sensed the interweaving of our release.

With him, our energies were tightly wound, like a compressed double helix that spun explosively apart as he shouted into the room. Lights danced behind my eyes as the last of our exultant energies flew far off out into the fathomless universe. Eventually the subtle noises of the room faded back into my consciousness and we uncoupled. I lay back down at Paul's side where he looked at me, his cheeks flushed and his eyes full of wonderment. Long, companionable moments went by.

Licking at his dry lips, eventually he said in a hoarse voice, "You didn't say anything about that, either."

"Did so. I said there was a reward, didn't I?"

His attempt at a disdainful look largely failed. "Reward doesn't cover how amazing that felt."

I smiled and began to hold him to me but he made an embarrassed noise. "Um, think I should go to the bathroom or something. I'm... well... leaking."

I cringed inwardly for him, but gave him a reassuring smile. He returned minutes later and at last I was able to feel his warm body splayed next to mine again. We spoke for a while before the warmth and exertion caught up to me and I started to drift off.

"I know my name," he said thoughtfully, and I opened my eyes.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, but I'm not telling until the morning."

"Fair enough. Now rest up a bit, because there's more to this experience. The night is quite young," I said, attempting a feral smile.

Later, in the heart of the night, I became soume for him, and was unsurprised at his ferocity. Were I not as well-muscled as I was, no doubt I'd have returned to Vaysh with bruises on my shoulders from where Paul had gripped me. As it was, we rejoined our group at lunch the next day to catcalls and leering comments made in jest. I shrugged them off, casting my gaze around for Vaysh, but he wasn't there. Disquiet rumbled in my chest, but I forced myself to ignore it, instead acting like the leader I was being groomed to be.

"Fellow companions of Castlegar," I announced, "I present to you Parallax, our newest har. Proper celebrations and caste ascensions will be held at the feast of the solstice, twelve days from now."

Jaffa and Vox waved Parallax over, and after a longing, heated gaze up into my eyes, he walked over and joined them. I sat near Euclase and Kyrgian, who was, as usual, engrossed in a conversation with Iolethe.

"So!" Euclase said, wagging his eyebrows.

"Oh, give it a rest," I muttered gamely, reaching past him for a platter with smoked meats. "I know you have more interesting things to set your mind on than details of my experiences last night."

"Well, of course," he said, pouring me a glass of barely-fermented apple cider. "We need to talk about this party coming up. And besides, you and I were no strangers to aruna. I'm sure he'll treasure those memories for years to come."

I snorted. "I just do what comes naturally. Now have you gone through and catalogued our stores like I asked?"

"Yes, commandant," he said, a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

He'd taken to calling me that since we'd settled in up on the mountain. I found I didn't mind, even if he seemed a bit rankled or surprised by my behaviour. I saw it as common sense; winter had tentatively blustered in and out but would entrench itself for the season very soon and we needed to know what provisions we had. Plus, I'd been talking with Kyrgian, Iolethe and Vaysh, and we all assumed that other hara would find us, probably sooner than we expected. The likelihood of our stronghold becoming an outpost or even a small town wasn't at all improbable, especially if the Uigenna kept terrorising smaller clans. Just as Vaysh and his band had been drawn to us, surely others would do the same, pulled to our mountain haven by some harish instinct.

"Thank you," I said a bit curtly. "Where's Vaysh?"

Euclase shrugged, cutting a wedge of sharp cheese into smaller blocks. "Out taking a walk, maybe. Or sulking. Hard to say."

His challenging gaze flickered over to me, but I didn't rise to the bait. Instead, I made a noncommittal sound and got back to the meal at hand. I was famished; Parallax's former guardians had kindly left us a carafe of coffee and some sweet bread in the morning, but I'd been awake and energetically occupied most of the night.

After bundling up, I journeyed out to the stables and went for a ride around the perimeter trail I'd discovered. Willow seemed happy to be out for a long ride, and I treated her to a thorough rubdown and extra care once we returned at dusk. I was so absorbed in the tactile enjoyment of brushing her coat, humming to myself, that I started, turning quickly and brandishing the mitt I'd been using when I smelled cigarette smoke. It was Vaysh. The fact that he was smoking wasn't a good portend, as he didn't do it very

often, usually only when he was in a particularly foul mood. He leaned against a nearby stall, silent and lovely, his expression inscrutable.

I looked at him, and I slowly relaxed after the burst of adrenaline of being caught by surprise. He was almost painful to gaze upon, his beauty and inner power pulsing around him like violet flames. Neither of us spoke; some primal magnetism hung in the fragrant air, and I felt both the inexorable attraction as well as a self-preserving caution to pull away. My horse whinnied softly; I felt myself pierced by a dart of self-knowledge. Vaysh was no paragon of hardom, but when it came to him, I could no longer deny that every cell in my body, the very marrow of my soul, rang with the forbidden word: *mine*.

Vaysh continued to appraise me before he strode over, dressed head to toe in mahogany leather, and offered me a cigarette. I took one and let him light it from the glowing end of his, a weirdly intimate act. I inhaled deeply and then turned my head out of courtesy so as not to exhale smoke into his face. I knew that he knew what word trembled in me. At last, with the kindness of an executioner, he relieved my agony.

Yours.

* * * * *

Winter ebbed into a lush spring. As though we had conjured them by our very planning, hara did arrive in twos or small groups, so that by the end of that first year we were nearly fifty hara strong. Some were Unneah, some of nameless origin as we had been, and even two bewitching marvels who had made their way from a great distance in the north, two misfits of the Coluraste tribe. We tended crops, took care of livestock brought into our fold from the endless scouting sojourns, made wine, tore down some of the human dwellings and let the forests take their claim. I did become commandant, in charge of ensuring every hara was armed and trained to fight and defend our home, while Kyrgian and Iolethe took upon themselves the mantle of spiritual guides.

So the months marched on, and I took on the role of proud mentor as Parallax shone in his martial and spiritual advancement. He and I took aruna together on occasion, as did Vaysh and Abelard. One memorable night while out on patrol, Vaysh, Parallax and I explored the myriad ways in which three hara could feast at the table of physical and spiritual delights. I couldn't bring myself to say the word aloud very often, as it had been ingrained in me that it was sacrilege, but my love for Vaysh deepened and expanded as the days went on. We were marked by it, though not to the naked eye; we were like trees, whose tale in rings is only truly told once cut down and exposed for the world to see.

At the time, I couldn't have known how apt and terrible that comparison would be.

As we approached Smoketide, Kyrgian, Vaysh and I sat at Crossview, gazing out at the sedate mountains. We drank wine and discussed the logistics of draining the indoor pool we'd been using all summer. Kyrgian went into a kind of trance, which didn't give me pause; it happened not infrequently. Vaysh and I refilled our cups, watching a hawk soar on the heated air currents wafting up from the valley floor, until Kyrgian rejoined us in spirit as well as body.

"They'll be here before dusk," he said, a youthful excitement in his voice I'd not heard in a long time.

"Who'll be here before dusk?" I asked.

"Our newest hara." His eyes gleamed as he held out his cup. Vaysh poured wine into it, glancing at me with a quizzical expression.

"Newest hara? Excuse me? If you knew new harafolk were coming, why didn't you tell me before now?" I asked, both baffled and frankly angered that I'd been kept in the dark. "That was irresponsible of you."

"We've been communicating for some time," he admitted, taking a deep draught.

"Why didn't you tell us? Are they in danger?" Vaysh asked, voicing my next sentiment.

"I wanted it to be a surprise."

"A surprise?!"

"Dammit Ashmael, quit repeating me," Kyrgian blustered, but his obvious enthusiasm temporarily triumphed over my ire.

"Well, don't you think maybe I should alert our guards at the gates, or have you instructed them to sneak in? It'd best not be the latter or you and I are going to have to have a serious talk about who has ultimate authority here." It was only Vaysh's calming touch on my leg that brought my hackles down.

"Let's put off the power plays to another time," Vaysh offered, evidently not wanting to have to be witness to a shouting match on what had been such a pleasant late summer afternoon.

"So now I know," I said, feeling my brows furrow. "They're obviously special if you've kept this secret for so long. I won't allow you to let me look like an idiot, so fill me in."

"They're just hara," Kyrgian started until I growled, low in my chest. "Oh Ashmael, it's fine. They're from the line of an ancient indigenous human tribe, but it's their third companion that is the most astonishing thing about them."

"Quit explaining with more riddles!" By now I was exasperated.

"It'll be clear shortly."

"Do they need special accommodations?" Vaysh asked, sparing Kyrgian from the invective-rich tongue-lashing I was about to serve up. I looked gratefully at him; he was as practical as I was, but far more innately diplomatic.

"No— they can stay in the guest quarters for a few days until they decide where in Castlegar to set up a more permanent residence." Kyrgian couldn't suppress the smile that was loathe to leave his lips.

"For the record, I'm *not* happy about this, your keeping information from me," I stated, getting up from the wooden bench we'd made. It had replaced the rotted one that had been there when we arrived.

"Duly noted."

"I know my title is considered somewhat a joke, but I am essentially in charge of our growing town. I need to know about anything disruptive, especially if that knowledge is available in advance!"

"Go get cleaned up," Kyrgian said with a lighthearted wave of his hand. "No need for you to get your drawers in a twist."

"Don't be condescending!" I fumed. "I have every right to be pissed off at you."

"Kyrgian hasn't ever done anything to jeopardise us," Vaysh reminded me as he forcefully steered me away and to the path that led back to the heart of the grounds.

"It's the principle of the thing," I found myself muttering an hour later. I'd taken a shower and dressed in my most officious outfit, which looked much like the rest of my clothes worn at that time of year: brown leather pants, linen sleeveless tunic, leather braided armbands worn about the bicep, and my boots. It was really too hot for the leather, but I wanted to make an impression.

Vaysh came over, shaking his head in disbelief. "Let. It. Go," he said, kissing me in between words.

"But—"

He placed a nail, lacquered in darkest indigo, against my lips. "They're heading in from the gates."

"How do you know that?"

Vaysh tapped at his temple impatiently. "Kyrgian. Come on, let's go."

Curiosity overwhelmed my continued annoyance of being bossed around as though I were a child. We'd taken a residence in one of the buildings on the main quadrangle at the very heart of the former campus, and I heard a bell tolling, calling the hara who chose to eat communally to our evening meal. Some preferred to stay in their dwellings, especially those spread out further afield on the mountain, but hara tend to be social creatures. For the most part, we enjoyed each other's company, and those not out on patrol, or tending the vineyards, usually ate together. I stood out beside the main road, its asphalt beginning to crack as tendrils of grass teased through fissures granted by its lack of maintenance. Vaysh came to stand beside me, a decorative fan in his hand, creating a welcome slight breeze as he moved it through the air. I found my mind wandering: there were repairs in the stonework I wanted to have done to one of the small buildings being readied to house canned fruits and vegetables.

"I think I'll make an announcement at breakfast to find out if anyone in our ranks knows anything about masonry," I said. "If not, I'll need to conscript some volunteers to learn. Surely some har knows at least *something* about construction..."

My voice trailed off when I heard the sounds of horses' hooves clopping slowly on the road. Oddly enough, Kyrgian appeared to be riding one of the new hara's horses, one har was on the other horse, and another walked ahead of them, a shorter figure at his side who couldn't be an adult. Unless it was a diminutive human. Kyrgian hadn't said anything about that! When they were only a few hundred yards away, I realised why Kyrgian had kept this secret to himself; they were striking to behold, burnt sienna skin and hawk-like, regal noses, flowing black hair with braids and coloured beads. It was the smaller one that defied reason, and made the blood roar in my ears so that for a moment, all other sounds faded to silence. Time slowed to molasses speed as they drew up to us, and I saw with my own eyes a harchild. There could be no doubt of it; I couldn't explain how I knew it was so. Vaysh had been shocked into a similar, reverent torpor.

Coming to myself, realising I was staring and acting in a manner devoid of any decorum, I straightened up and looked at the two adult hara. "My name is Ashmael," I said, unseemly grateful that my voice hadn't cracked. "I serve as commandant of Castlegar, our town here on the mountain. Welcome."

Vaysh also introduced himself while the har on the horse dismounted to flank the harling whose age I couldn't begin to guess. All of their eyes were black, harbouring incomprehensible depths of emotion and wisdom. I suffered the unpleasant sensation of feeling like a young child, yet again.

"I'm Firestorm," one said, beads of cerulean and onyx woven into his plaits and embroidered on his vest. "This is Cloudblaze. We are chesnari. And this is our son, Firethorn."

I swallowed thickly, startled at my sudden urge to fall to my knees, weeping at how perfect and astounding their son was. Firethorn, for his part, seemed to realise the distressing effect he had and it unsettled him. He evaluated Vaysh and myself before turning back to Cloudblaze to comment, "I'm really hungry."

"You're here just in time for dinner," Kyrgian reassured him, and the harling nodded solemnly. The youth tilted his head, his gaze going back and forth from me to Vaysh and back again.

"How did you change your hair colour?" he asked me, walking over to pull some gently into his palm.

"I didn't. I'm a natural blond."

"The hara here will look different, Thorn. We talked about that," his father said, chiding him.

But... weren't they both his fathers? My legs threatened to buckle as this exquisite proof of harish procreation looked down at the ground, chastened, before fixing his gaze back on my face.

"You are strong and beautiful," he said.

I didn't know how to respond, shocked as I was, but flattered nonetheless.

"Don't say things like that to him, it'll go to his head," Vaysh said, the smile infused in his voice.

"We have been isolated for many years," Cloudblaze said apologetically, shimmers of blackcurrant glinting in his hair as it caught light from the setting sun. "We speak plainly by nature."

"Not a problem," I said, battling to regain my composure. "If more of us did that, we'd be better off."

Firethorn caught my eye as Kyrgian suggested we get to the dining hall and make proper introductions. I raised my eyebrow in anticipation of another question from the harling. At last a smile settled on his lips, his face bright as sunrise. He was going to melt the hearts of no few hara. The repercussions of the arrival of these three into our midst were going to be far-reaching, that was indubitable.

"Will I meet your son at dinner?" Firethorn asked, idly playing with the redviolet beads in his braids.

"We don't have one," I said, and saw confusion in his dark eyes.

"Yet," Vaysh said warmly.

YET?! I shot back directly to his mind. We don't even know what it takes to make a harchild, or how rare it is!

The hara will tell us before the night's out, I'm sure of it.

"You're the first harchild I've seen," I said as we walked the short distance to the dining hall. I was content to let Kyrgian continue his introduction of our enclave to Cloudblaze and Firestorm, and they seemed equally at ease for Vaysh and myself to get to know their son. "Did your fathers tell you how special you are?"

"Firestorm is my father," he said emphatically. "And Cloudblaze is my hostling. But Firestorm could have a child, if he wanted to. I think Cloudblaze wants me to have a brother, and he thinks he's a better choice as a hostling than my father. He's stronger in spirit, he says, to carry a pearl."

So this was it. My mind reeled. It truly, emphatically sank in that already there was a generation — of one, at least — for whom the word mother was utterly meaningless.

"How old are you?" Vaysh asked as the new hara tethered their horses and we prepared to enter the bustle and clamour of an everyday meal. But today we would walk in with tangible, heart-bruising beauty; evidence that when there were no more human inceptions, our race would continue.

"I have five winters."

I stopped dead in my tracks, my hand on the door. "You're only five?" I asked hoarsely. He appeared to be twice that.

"I think pureborns, or wholly hara, I don't know what to call him, other than dazzling," Vaysh said, running a finger across Firethorn's high cheekbone in a languorous caress, "they must mature far faster than human children."

My heart had leapt into my throat, but I opened the door. Firethorn had the sense to join his father and hostling, his fingers interlaced with those of Cloudblaze for support, no doubt. Though it felt like weakness, I did the same, taking Vaysh's hand. When he squeezed my fingers, however, it transformed into strength.

* * * * *

That night, torches were set up along the rectangular sides of a grassy sward, an enclosure between two of the stone buildings in the middle of the grounds. At the base of the slope a covered walkway provided shelter, and in front of it perched a stone shelf and stairs, much like a small stage. Cloudblaze and Firestorm sat cross-legged on some cushions somehar thoughtfully had provided for them. The composed hara faced us, wondrous secrets dancing in their auras like fireflies. Firethorn had gone off, jealously escorted by Jaffa, Gladwyne and Parallax to explore the grounds. Jaffa, of course, had seen nothing so novel as a harling, and he appeared as though he would explode with excitement, Gladwyne in tow. Parallax feigned relative disinterest, but I knew him well enough to be sure that he, too, was bursting with questions. As were we— hence the informal Gathering with our new hara.

Kyrgian made a short speech filling us in as to their reaching out to him through the ethers and how they had been led here from lands far to the west. While these two hadn't pursued any particular caste ascensions, it was obvious to all of us that through their own, unique pursuits, they were enlightened nearly beyond us all, Kyrgian and Iolethe as exceptions. And perhaps Belvac. Mostly, however, the hara wanted to know what had occurred between these two to make it possible to create life as they had. An instantaneous plague of paternal fervour had swept through our group, leaving nearly none untouched. We had experienced peace on the mountain since the surprising arrival of Gladwyne and Parallax, but news had come through the year with the arrival of our other new inhabitants. Much of Megalithica was

under the control of former Uigenna now known as Varrs; we seemed like an island, though if we could somehow bear harchildren, we could grow fairly rapidly in strength and number.

As Firestorm spoke, with Cloudblaze interjecting occasional thoughtful phrases and explanations, it became apparent that none of us had even begun to guess at particular powers to be found in aruna. There were some in Castlegar who had explored the potential of Grissecon, Vaysh included. But nohar had ever dared, so it seemed, to surrender so absolutely, to be led to another plane of being while in those ecstatic throes. There, apparently, the souls of potential life dwelled, awaiting an unspoken invitation to return to earth, nestled in a secret chamber inside the body. It seemed rather capricious to me, and required an intensity of devotion I personally doubted to exist between even our few who were chesnari with one another. And yet, many in our group nodded their heads, captivated by the thought.

"We think it is rare, and won't happen to everyhar," Cloudblaze said, his gentle voice carrying even to the back of the group where I sat, keeping watch out of ingrained habit. "I have meditated, asking the Aghama's will for us, if he would deign to share such knowledge. He seems not to wish for our race to scurry over the world in hordes like locusts, but he adores and cherishes new life. It is a paradox."

I couldn't help but imagine my harbretheren over the next few weeks, tired out at their daily tasks as roonfests reigned at night, and I sighed.

"It's novelty, and will wear off," Vaysh said to soothe me. He knew many of my thoughts seemingly before I even knew they were there.

"True. I'm glad we have Jaffa around, who can help Firethorn understand and cope with his Feybraiha. He may only be five years old, but I'd wager he'll be going through it far sooner than we expect. But Vaysh, the rest of our community..." I said, looking bleakly at him.

He smiled. "I know, Ash. You're commandant of a town, and you want it to stay that way, not turn into a nursery. I really don't think you need to worry much about it. Our hara are independent, and were content in pursuing their lives and ensuring we can serve as a haven for others as they find us. I'm not saying that I don't think some hara will become hostlings in time— doubtless, it will happen."

"Firethorn is captivating. It's not *him*, it's the process that's just so... strange," I muttered, milling around the outskirts of the group. By now the meeting had turned into an impromptu party, soon to take over the whole centre of the grounds.

"Of course it is," Vaysh stated, taking my arm and guiding us to find Vox and Polaris, always the first to bring wine or liquor to an event. "All of us here lived the first parts of our lives as human males. It seems freakish to imagine hosting a child. And then again, it doesn't at all."

"It's unnatural," I said, with emphasis.

"Only if you insist on holding on to those older patterns of thoughts. We can create life after all. I think it's terribly exciting," he enthused, but he addressed my worry before I could voice it. "And no, I'm not suggesting that you and I go straight to our bed to try and create a harish lovechild. If it's meant to be, we'll know. I'm sure of that."

Relief flooded through me and I pulled him close, sharing breath with him. I was filled with his rich velvet taste and gratitude for our life; I soared on the wings of his untamable affection, riding a dragon through uncharted skies.

"When you're quite through," Polaris drawled, mischief glittering in his eyes and waving a two-thirds full bottle of bourbon at Vaysh.

"Oh Polaris. You're absolutely divine," Vaysh said, turning away from me to mouth open kisses along the side of his face.

"Yes, yes," Polaris said, grinning. "Do go on. I have all night."

"Feel free to keep buttering him up," I said to Vaysh, squeezing his hand. "I should go and spend some more time with Cloudblaze and Firestorm, make sure they're settled, figure out what skills and talents they've brought with them."

"Ashmael. It's a party. Lighten up!" Vox said, having draped himself over Polaris' side and giving the bourbon bottle a mournful gaze. "Do you have to give that away?"

"No, dear," Polaris replied, tapping his chesnari lightly on the cheek. "We're sharing."

"It's not as though you'll ever go lacking for liquor," I said, resigned. "In fact, if some hara would spend half of the amount of energy on work that needs to be done as they do on their private distilleries, this place..." I didn't finish the sentence, because the truth was, our environment was in good shape. "Well, there's plenty around. If you get through that, surely you two can find more."

"Forget that," Vaysh said, looking imperiously at them, the pale skin of his exposed chest damp with sweat from the muggy air. "I know where all the good stuff is." He winked at me and I quirked a smile in return.

"Well, we already knew that," Vox said. He glanced coyly at me before they set to the very serious task of drinking copiously.

"Polaris!" I called after I'd walked a few steps into the celebratory throng. "Did you or Wycker give Jaffa and the others a curfew?"

"No, but once they catch wind of the festivities, I'm sure they'll turn up."

Reassured, I made my way through the clusters of revelers, finding a much-appreciated glass of chilled, tart wine in my hands after a few minutes. It took me some time to get to the new celebrities because I stopped to chat with several hara I'd not seen as often as I would have liked. I was gratified at how well the minimalist structure of our society worked; after only one year we had plenty of stores for the winter, we'd not had any brawls, there was almost equal rebuilding and dismantling to claim these lands as our own. I had a core group of defenders — it would have been an overstatement to call them soldiers — and our hara practised spiritual studies as well as their own artistic and creative pursuits.

For all of that peaceful and prideful thinking, the knowledge of disquiet to the north and the vast unknowns to the south, east and west sometimes kept me awake at night. Would we go to war with each other over land, or, heaven forbid, philosophical differences, replaying the human legacy which preceded us?

I was so caught up in my reverie that I almost passed Firestorm as he stood with Belvac and Abelard.

"Woah, Ashmael! Slow down!" Belvac joked, already well into his cups. "I can tell your mind is racing, probably caught up in details about the next scouting mission, or archery tournament. Something dreadfully serious."

I frowned at being belittled. "For your information," I said, helping myself to the wine he'd placed on a nearby waist-high stone wall, "I was thinking about how successful we've become. No fights, no deaths, everyhar clothed and fed, enough wine and liquor to satisfy at least two small armies!" I toasted him, inclining my glass as well to Abelard and Firestorm.

"We are grateful for your open arms of peace," Firestorm said, bowing his head slightly.

I did the same, before acknowledging Abelard's subtle movements to tug Belvac away so I could speak privately with the har.

"Do you have a shrine to our creator?" he asked.

I shook my head, as shame bloomed crimson in my chest. "Everyhar has his own ritual," I explained, though it sounded like an excuse.

"Do not debase yourself." Firestorm gestured at the base of the wall and we sat. He leaned against the blocks of sandstone; I sat across from him, struck by the irrational wish to please him. "Evidently it was not the time, before. But perhaps now it is."

With a fluid gesture, he drew out a pipe, tobacco and a small tinderbox. I patted down my vest pocket and discovered, thankfully, I'd put a pack of cigarettes there before dinner. We sat, smoking, until he began speaking again. He told me of his people, and how many had converted back to the old ways when the pervading culture spasmed, choking on its noxious self-hatred. With unflinching honesty, Firestorm told me of his nightly prayers to the gods of wind and death to carry him away, but instead they brought a small group of angels— or so it had seemed. A hoobuk from his tribe, Cloudblaze, had also been incepted, attaining the most natural state s/he could have. Then a sickness from some desperate humans who'd lived in the closest city infected his angels, and several died. The rest took good horses and headed west. Cloudblaze had stayed, and as though seeing his true self for the first time, Firestorm had bonded with him, giving heart, mind and body.

"Only a few months after our blood-binding ceremony, our bodies took their joy. Out under the stars one night, I felt a faint latch open. Suddenly we were swimming in fire, our souls shining together, the sun eaten by the blazing moon. It really was like that," he said, laughing at my bemused, cynical expression.

"You're a romantic," I said, pouring the last of the second bottle of wine we'd shared during his narrative.

"Guilty," he grinned, and I saw a couple of missing teeth in the bottom row of his mouth; his life hadn't been an easy one.

"A couple of months later, Blaze was in terrible pain, we were both scared out of our wits, thinking he might be dying. I tried to meditate and call for help from the spirits. In the end, he just yelled and cried and common sense took over. He birthed a luminous sac that hardened; we were both shocked, as you can imagine. Firethorn came out of his pearl several days later. Blaze didn't let go of it once it came out of his body. He kept it warm, murmuring how much we wanted him to break out so we could see him with our eyes, how precious he was. Now you see him, nearly six winters later. He is a blessing to us."

I lit a new cigarette, comforted and at peace, as though my spirit lay at the edge of a balmy pool, soft waves lapping tenderly at it.

"Your coming has changed us," I said. "Iolethe said knowledge of harish procreation would come to us. I could never have guessed it'd come and knock me on my ass! Metaphorically speaking." I only slurred some of my words.

"You have good instincts. Your aura is strong, like a restless mountain reaching for the sun."

"Do you think it's heresy to love?"

He blinked slowly. I held my breath, expecting wise words as written in the inky pools of his eyes.

"Things shift out of balance when you deny self. Not denying as in keeping things away, but pretending that self-truth is falsehood."

"That's a non-answer," I said eventually.

"Be true, Ashmael, and the true heresies will reveal themselves."

He stood and helped me up. I swayed slightly; Firestorm, too, was feeling the effects of the wine.

"I would like to give you something before I go and find my chesnari," he said before enfolding me in his arms, swift and supple; a bobcat protecting a cub. His breath was wind-stirred trees and sunset, a laughing, triumphant force that sought out my worries and shook them free.

Light-hearted, I drew back, my fingers tracing the beaded symbols sewn into the leather of his jerkin. "Thank you." The words were wholly inadequate.

We were called here. It is our son's destiny more than ours, and even that remains vague. We'll gift you with what we have.

I hope we can treat you with the respect you're due.

"Shelter, loyalty, strength of heart and arms. Laughter and storytelling, tears and bloodshed. I hope there's not as much of the last two, but all of these things are spokes in our wheel of life. We're all of us reborn, new children of earth."

Firestorm cradled my jaw in his hand; I was struck that he was slightly shorter than I was. His presence rose far taller and commanding than his actual frame. "Go and dance with your soulmate."

"Sound advice," I replied, feeling a need for the familiarity Vaysh would provide.

Firestorm headed back in the direction of the grassy, wide alley and I ventured to the heart of the laughing, talking, singing hara. When I found Vaysh, he immediately plucked the not quite empty liquor bottle from Vox's hands and levered unsteadily to his feet.

"Let's go out to the lake," he said, sliding provocatively next to me and draping his arm down to cup my arse.

"Whatever will you do out there?" Polaris hooted at us.

"Good God, you're all fucking smashed." I wasn't sober, to be sure, but I had some sense of decorum. Or thought I did. The Aralids exploded into fits of laughter, fumbling with each other's tunics and pawing at their exposed skin as we took our leave.

The cicadas droned their unceasing, nightly symphony, accompanying us as we walked along quiet paths. Millions of glistening stars flickered in the silken black as a milky swath stretched across the sky. Out on the shore of the small lake, to the chants of crickets and dazzling silence of space far above us, Vaysh and I made love. We danced ancient steps, slick with salty sweat. It wasn't a sharing of energies as aruna is; we gave each other body and emotions unbounded, a corporeal, grounding act of supplication.

Later, after a cleansing dip in the tepid waters, Vaysh sat in the vee of my legs, his back to my chest. "We should build a small shrine to the Aghama here," he said, running his long fingers up and down my calves.

"How strange," I murmured, kissing the back of his fiery hair before lying back on the ground, swallowed by the light of the radiant stars. "Firestorm asked if we had one earlier when he and I spoke."

"There are no coincidences," Vaysh said simply.

* * * * *

In late October I held a council with our self-appointed leaders, laying out my plan for five or six of us to go and investigate and map out the harish settlements to the north that were reasonably close.

"You want to go and spy?" Abelard asked, his skepticism apparent.

"Not spy, but venture out beyond our shorter scouting missions. We'd be gone for a couple of months, probably. See what's going on, how Megalithica is changing."

"You want to see how far Varrish territory goes, and evaluate their strength," Euclase said insightfully, coming to my defense.

"Yes. Most of our recent settlers have sought refuge from there. I'm keen to see the source of their troubles."

"But we're coming up on winter," Cloudblaze noted. "If you were going to go anywhere, why not head south?"

"I've sensed a powerful tribe far south of us," Kyrgian said, smoking a pipe, a new trait he'd picked up from our newest hara. "But they've not set their minds to conquest. Darker magic is their pursuit. If the Varrs are like the Uigenna, or part Uigenna, it's in our best interest to know where their strongholds are, who their leader is."

"It's a huge land, Ashmael," Mabast interjected. He was an independent Unneah who had been found half-starved the February before, rescued by Opequon and Ondin. "And there are plenty of scared, angry humans still around, wanting vengeance."

"I'm not suggesting that we travel without any destination in mind," I said, keeping my calm. "I'm just saying that the more we know about the state of things, harish and human, the better off we'll be here. We're building Castlegar from the ground up—"

"Metaphorically speaking," Abelard interrupted with an arched eyebrow.

"The life here, not the actual buildings, dammit," I snapped. "Surely we're not going to hide here and wait for any proverbial bombs to drop, right?"

"No, not at all," Mabast said quickly as he peeled an orange. The fruit was evidence of a successful experiment in a small tropical greenhouse Jaffa and Firethorn had undertaken as a project, fueled largely by Jaffa's uncontainable creative enterprise.

"I'll be the first to offer to go with you. It's just that 'north' is rather a vague term," he went on. He eased his chair back onto two legs, the delicate care in which he pulled the veiny strands from the orange slices in contrast to his imposing, muscled form. He reminded me a lot of Monarch, and I newly warmed to him.

"It is," I acquiesced. "For the next several days, I want to set up informal interviews of every har who's come here since spring to get a sense of the distances traveled, the state of the former human cities, places to avoid, and create a proper map. At least of how things are now. No doubt it's all in a restless state of change."

"I'd like to do the same, but from the west. Our travels. Another map," Cloudblaze finally clarified, since it took me a second to follow his train of thought.

"I'll ask our friends, Ahalenia and Eleu, to contribute their path from the far northeast. If we're only going for a couple of months we won't go nearly that far a distance, but forewarned is forearmed. So they say." Vaysh cocked his head at me and I nodded, grateful.

"The Colurastes aren't the most forthcoming, but *you* don't seem to offend them," I said, a tang of bitterness in the words.

Their attitude toward most of us was a distant tolerance, though they were quite friendly to Vaysh and Wyngarr; Vox and Polaris also appeared to be in their graces. The two sybaritic libertines positively fawned on Firethorn, now in danger of becoming doted on by the entire community. I'd found myself — to my discredit — praying that somewhere else on the mountain would beget another harling just to take some of the focus off of him, though he bore up under the attention with an amused kindness that seemed beyond his nearly six years.

"Do you have your scouting party in mind? Do tell," Belvac said airily, tapping cigarette ash into a wooden bowl.

"Do you want to rip apart my reasoning now or later?" I fumed, the words dripping scorn.

"You shouldn't go," Euclase snickered, jabbing a thumb at Belvac. "You'll be too busy trying to do each other in. It would be distracting."

"We're still friends," I insisted through gritted teeth.

"So we can see." A ghost of a smile flitted across Cloudblaze's lips.

"Well, if my valued opinion were sought," Vaysh said primly, steepling his fingers on the parchments in front of him, "I'd suggest myself, Ashmael, Mabast, Euclase, and Firestorm. If we take a sixth, Parallax."

"He's still young!" Belvac barked.

"He's a born warrior," I countered.

"He's nearly ascended to Brynie." Belvac leaned aggressively over the table. "He's born to do more than fight, much like some others I know. Or thought I did." The reproach in his comment wasn't lost on me.

"When do you feel Parallax will be ready?" Kyrgian asked.

"In a few days, if he devoted himself to it fully," Belvac grumbled.

"I know him well, too," I reminded him. Belvac was now fidgeting with the braided copper armband Abelard had crafted for him. I was certain a flurry of conversation was flying privately between the two. "He and Gladwyne want to be treated as adults just like every other har. I think Vaysh's list is a sound one. Does anyhar have serious objections, or alternatives?"

A mottled silence hung in the air as I looked pointedly at Belvac. He gave a mirthless shrug; I'd won that round.

"Excellent." I glanced at Vaysh, sitting at my right, swirling the remains of some cold coffee in a tin. "Llembara's drawing skills are superb. I'd like for him to join me during the next few days to create the actual maps. Perhaps you, Cloudblaze, would like to assist me as well?"

"If that's where I'm needed."

"Kyrgian, I respectfully ask you to call a Gathering in five days. Those of us going on this mission will leave the day after that."

Why don't you ask Abelard and Belvac to stand in as Commandant and Archon? Vaysh sent the suggestion fast as quicksilver.

You're a genius, I marvelled. *What would I do without you?*

You wouldn't. His snark was unimpeded by his telepathic voice. *I can think of all kinds of ways you can thank me...*

Later, I thought, suppressing a smile.

"Abelard. Belvac." They turned, expectant, and surprised. "I'd like to ask you to serve in Vaysh's and my stead as Commandant and Archon while we're gone. Are you willing to take on those tasks as need be?"

"Sure," Belvac said.

"Yes. Most everyhar here looks out for each other, but we can step into those roles in your absence," Abelard replied with far more politesse.

Six days later we left Castlegar; a small entourage bid us safe travels and prayers of protection at the stone gates, mostly consorts and chesnari. The mountain itself appeared not in the mood to let us go easily, cloaking the realm in the impenetrable fog we'd come to expect in the year and few months we'd been residing here. Parallax had insisted that he be allowed to go, and it seemed that his determination had tempered Belvac's scorn for the whole endeavour.

We rode north for sixteen days, following our new harish maps. Euclase and Parallax became our group scribes, taking copious notes and modifying the maps when we passed ruined towns, and the very few human settlements still inhabited. We circuitously bypassed one, sensing their numbers; two nights later we were ambushed, but there were only a few of them, full of bloodlust and not nearly quick enough on their feet once we figured out what was happening. We burned their bodies the next morning. Firestorm and Vaysh both had well-honed abilities to seek and guard against harish mind-thought, but after a fortnight had come and gone and there hadn't been even a flicker of sentience, I began to wonder. Perhaps I was unwittingly leading us all into a trap, riding into territory that could be protected by Wraeththu who were superior to us in masking their presence.

It was with a cold shock of relief, then, when I heard both Vaysh and Firestorm gasp audibly, looking wildly for the other as we rode in pairs.

"What is it?" I asked, trotting Willow up from Mabast's side to match Arches' pace.

"Hara. Three, and two are dying of some human-caused disease. Firestorm thinks it may be what killed some of the hara who incepted him."

"What tribe are they?" Parallax asked, though we all suspected there could be only one answer, given what all our maps indicated.

"Varrs. But only just," Firestorm said cryptically.

With guidance, we urged our horses on. The afflicted hara weren't that far away; the one still immune had felt the brush of Vaysh's scan and screamed a plea for help. Not quite two hours later we found ourselves approaching a long-abandoned human barn, skulking at the edge of acres of dead cornfields.

"Are we sure this isn't some Varrish snare?" Mabast called to me, the first to believe the worst about all things Varr. In that regard, I was as close behind him as shadow.

"No, but it doesn't seem their style, luring us in instead of fighting outright," I yelled back, my words snatched away by the wind.

Tired of keeping their treasure, the leaden clouds overhead began to release their wintry offering; thick snowflakes fell as we pulled up to the decrepit structure. Sagging windows looked mournfully at us. An uncomfortable prickling crawled down my spine and I looked up, sensing that all of my companions were doing the same. Above the middle of the field, the clouds churned and darkened, as though a cauldron boiled behind it, readying to expel something far more malevolent than snow.

"What the fuck?" Vaysh swore, tugging his hood closer around his face, glancing wide-eyed at me. All I could do was briskly shake my head. The air was rent with the metallic crack of thunder and all of a sudden, a malapropos, tangy scent of ozone. With a triumphant, booming clap, a horse and rider burst out of the sky and pummelled the ground, slowing from a gallop to a canter, eventually to a brisk walk in their final approach to us.

Vaysh and Parallax had fallen to their knees as the har approached. Har? He was a god, a lurid, dark angel, a fire in corporeal form. He shone as though bathed in sunlight from an invisible source. Hair of flame streamed behind him, ice crystals falling from it and the luminous equine king's nostrils despite the relative cold of our reality. Power, knowledge—it pulsed and danced in him, radiating blue flame, igniting fear and awe, shattering my imagination, caressing tender wings across my thudding heart.

The falling snow muffled nature's ambient noises; I wondered if any of us were still breathing.

Dressed in an outlandish ermine coat, aubergine leather boots that laced up to his knees, pity and love were chiseled on this creature's features, ageless and young. He dismounted and walked forward with the deadly grace of a puma. When he smiled, I felt no reassurance, instead I drowned in wretched unworth.

"I am Thiede," he said, the answer to all questions.

I felt that my tongue had been wrenched from my mouth. A maelstrom of love and despair spun and floundered in my heart. This was a har. How could we even dream to reach the lofty heights he'd achieved?

"You all are doing tremendous things, truly splendid, my dears," he went on, sweeping over to Parallax and Vaysh. He placed fingers with long, talon-like nails under their chins, lifting up their faces to gaze on his munificent being. "Please get up," he said sweetly, and Vaysh and Parallax did so. "There's no need to worship me— I am one of you, after all."

His glance flickered over to me and with resolve pouring from I don't know where, I managed to stay standing, and held his gaze. An intrigued appreciation simmered in his eyes; I felt refined, purged. I had passed a test, and been deemed worthy. Thunder rolled in my heart.

"There are ill ones inside. I believe you know what must be done, but I'll assist you. Yes, you and you," he said, pointing his immaculate claws at Vaysh and Firestorm.

I tentatively reached out in mind-touch to Vaysh and saw him startle; he'd been wholly absorbed by the presence of this otherworldly har.

Ash! God! Grissecon. Come and shelter us. This is— oh, god, god, god... he babbled in a silent frenzy.

I calmed him as best I could, but the next while was a blur. Inside of the ramshackle barn, Thiede's radiance was all the more striking. He was all business, now, orchestrating events with the merest suggestion of thoughts. The poor hara inside had collapsed in fits of fear and relief, overwhelmed at being rescued from death. The one caring for the other two sat sobbing. Whatever inner dam of control he'd had was long broken as torrents of gratitude and the hopelessness he'd felt hours before came flooding out of him.

Thiede evaluated the wasted hara, clinging to each other, huddled under some moth-eaten horse blankets. He closed his eyes for a moment then looked again at me. "I'll need to take them to your mountaintop home faster than you can travel. I've just sent for someone. He'll arrive shortly."

Pockets of hushed conversations drifted; everything seemed to happen in slowed, honeyed time despite the innate urgency imprinted on everyone's face. Thiede stood behind me as I cast spells of warmth and sanctity while Firestorm and Vaysh composed themselves for this act. Thiede's aura seeped around me, guiding me with a tantalising hint of just how much power germinated within me, having come nowhere near fruition. With wordless thoughts, fingers of electricity, he guided my incantations. Firestorm and Vaysh became an altar, a pyre— I lowered my hands and moved away, rejoining the rest of the small assembly. Thiede spoke conspiratorially to Parallax, who looked as though he were face to face with a ravenous lion.

Another har strode through the door, resplendent in an ebony pelt. His silver hair glistened with the same ice crystals and he carried the faint odour of ozone as Thiede had when he'd first come to land. Far less

aetherial than Thiede but just as commanding, he pulled out an azure crystal phial and handed it to Thiede before taking a moment to assess our motley band. I sought his gaze and he arched an eyebrow at me. His fingers rested briefly on the silver chains and amulets resting on his chest as he nodded, acknowledging my greeting.

The walls now seemed to curve protectively around us, breathing with the slow chant Thiede had begun and into which, one by one, we'd added our voices. At the point of Vaysh and Firestorm's completion, a warmth and sparks of a thousand comets cascaded into the room. Parallax, with shaking hands, took the phial and a delicate, long-handled spoon from Thiede and went to the corner where Vaysh and Firestorm lay, returning to our circle a few moments later. Their fruits shone with amber phosphorescence, brightening the faces of all of us enraptured by the slow, fluid movement inside the glass. I saw Parallax's cheeks damp with tears, his expression beatific in its wonder.

I thought suddenly of Vaysh and his well-being and hurried to go and check up on them both. Vaysh's face was flushed with exertion and the glow of aruna; silently I thanked him and Firestorm, also breathing heavily. Once Vaysh had dressed I ran a thumb across his cheekbone, undone by his vivacious beauty, this loving firebrand, my heart's comrade in arms, my truest desire. The affection shining in his eyes bruised my soul.

We were being called to return to the circle, to watch and reach hands forth, radiating power as Thiede performed a series of chants and spells until he deemed the Grissecon offering ready.

"Arahal. I believe you brought wine?"

"I did."

The incongruity of such a casual statement after the potency of ritual was jarring, but the moment passed. Arahal, so this other har was apparently called, poured wine into two of our tin cups. Thiede, with a last dramatic swirl of the phial, poured half into each dented tin. I almost laughed.

Euclase took the cups to the sick hara, their grey skin appearing all the more lifeless compared to the vibrancy of we who'd been a part of this ceremony for healing. His role as high priest concluded, Thiede resumed his former aloof, but captivating demeanour.

"Arahal, you and I will each take one of these poor dears to— what do you call it? Castlegar?" he asked me, though the comment was no true question.

"You know a lot about us," I ventured. "Where did you come from?"

"All in time, Commandant, all in time," he said, the words sensuous and yet the thread of amusement never left his voice. "I'll come and visit you again, soon. Then I shall tell you of my plans and dreams, just beginning to take place in a land far from here. I've been waiting for a good moment to make my presence known, and this seemed as good a time as any. Arahal? Are you quite ready?"

Arahal threw his head back, his hair cascading down his back, a thick waterfall of mercury. He had the sickly hara tucked to his sides, an arm about each one. He seemed somewhat immune to the extravagance of this demiurge, and I respected the authority that emanated from him.

"Yes. It's a good thing we're not travelling far, though. I don't think they'd survive in the otherlanes for long."

Their compatriot who'd been their caretaker made an anguished noise at that statement. Euclase stepped over to comfort him.

"Don't you worry," Thiede said, smiling brightly, showing clearly his long teeth. With a jolt I was reminded that he wasn't remotely human. None of us were, of course, but the awe he inspired and the fact that he — and Arahall — had arrived from God knew where on horses that flew... I half-expected shining wings to pop from his shoulders and a flaming sword to appear in his manicured hands, like the angelic messengers in the church windows of my human boyhood.

With great pomp and a swirling of fur coats, they were gone, leaving the rest of us in a stunned, empty silence. Some of the residual energy still pulsed in the air, dissipating slowly like a shimmering rainbow as it fades into nothingness, making you wonder if it had ever really existed.

"Well," I said raggedly. "This wasn't exactly in the plan, but I think we should go home. Anyhar disagree?"

Silence continued to reign, so I nodded. "We'll stay here for the night, and then begin the return trek tomorrow."

"Do you really think they took them to your mountain?" the anxious barely-Varr asked, wringing his hands.

"It's all we can assume," Mabast replied, his thumb stroking the hilt of the gun nestled at his hip. "Where do you really think they came from?"

Without missing a beat, Vaysh gave him a look of rueful melancholy.

"Paradise."

* * * * *

We returned twelve days later, hastened with the help of our newly improved routes. Rumour, gossip and theories of all kinds had apparently run rampant about the mysterious appearance of Thiede and Arahall. Their sensational materialisation at Castlegar with two barely-alive hara, on horses that defied gravity and a slew of other usual laws of physics, had caused quite a ruckus. The ceaseless questions to which no-one had answers eventually died down, helped in no small part by the discovery that Ahalenia, one of the Colurastes, was carrying a pearl.

Kyrgian was in the welcoming party at the stables where we left our horses in the fine hands of a few stablehara. He seemed rather perturbed at Thiede's non-answers to his questions during his brief visit, and elaborated as we walked back to the centre of town.

"I asked Thiede about birthing spells and incantations," Kyrgian said, frustration in his voice. "He just waved his arms and said, 'Oh, think on it for a few days. The answers will come to you. You're a har, don't worry, it'll be just fine.' I don't know where he came from, but I'll admit it, I was impressed. How could you not be? But you, Ashmael, you'd *never* be as vague as that about something so important," he declared, and I had to agree.

"Opequon has been writing down the thoughts and visions that have come to him in dream states and in meditation," Cloudblaze informed me as our weary group headed to the dining hall. "We need books, or need some way to teach our spiritual and magical understandings with more structure than we do now. But we're all so new!" he laughed, and I couldn't help smiling at the incredulity in his voice.

"And I guess come early January we'll have a brand new harling," I said. "I don't know that I can stand to watch. That should be a private matter."

Cloudblaze gave me a piercing look. "You don't seem to shirk from fighting; you can't tell me that you're squeamish."

I couldn't suppress my shudder. "I'll do whatever's necessary to protect our community, but I'd far rather be in combat with a crazed human than at the feet of a crazed har with his legs spread, other hara yelling at him to push!"

A secretive smile of remembrance lit Cloudblaze's face. I saw Vaysh catalogue the serenity in the former hoobuk, and I could almost feel his tremour of acceptance. He would never pressure me, but an ember had been lit in him; Vaysh had heard the Siren call. He wanted to travel with me to that weave and weft of souls, to nurture and cocoon a son who would be uniquely ours. I sensed Cloudblaze's knowing gaze and turned back to him. He was thoughtful enough not to say anything, though I believed he'd intuited Vaysh's silent hopes. He instead chatted about general topics, and the miraculous recovery of the new hara, easing his arm through his chesnari's to place their clasped hands in Firestorm's large front pocket.

"Vox, Polaris and Jaffa will have a grand time making plans for this year's solstice," Vaysh mused as we walked down the gravel path, past slumbering stone buildings and toward the cheery lights of the dining hall. "There's so much to celebrate— Mabast may try to convince them to let him double the size of the kitchens so they'll have room to properly cook and bake for a huge feast."

"It's hard to believe it's our second winter up here already," I said, shaking my head. My nose was running from the cold and I reached into my back pocket to get a cloth. "And in other ways these past few years are like several lifetimes."

"Not since you met me, though," Vaysh said archly, putting more swagger into his steps. "If you want to keep the peace, you'll say that our time together has passed far too quickly."

I squeezed his shoulder, though the gesture was done through layers of glove, coat and his wool tunic. "There was no time in my life before you, was there?"

"Absolutely not. I'm your alpha, your genesis."

"And so modest!"

He cuffed me playfully on the back of the head as we went in through the doors and were absorbed into the din of the evening meal. Not surprisingly, Vaysh took a seat with Ahalenia and Eleu; Zain and Llembara were also close by the Colurastes. I wanted to know how Thiede's brief appearance had affected our mountaintop hara, so I placed myself next to Polaris as I was sure he'd share his thoughts— and as town gossip, he'd share the prevailing sentiments of everyhar else. He didn't disappoint.

"With clothes and an ego like that? Thiede'll be back for our solstice party," Polaris declared, pouring me a full glass of wine and a refill for himself.

"I think he'll be too busy having his own grand fete in his own lands," Vox countered. He fingered a couple of fuscous, fuzzy fruits on a small platter before selecting one and beginning to peel it. "He's from Megalithica, originally, but I listened carefully to what he *didn't* say, and I've figured out he's set up a new

realm for himself across the sea." He looked quite smug and pleased with himself as he uncovered the bright emerald flesh of the kiwi fruit.

"You're glad he went back so quickly, too," Polaris said, puncturing his chesnari's bravado and garnering a murderous look. "It's true! He was fucking scary. Gorgeous, freakish, angelic, those purple boots... 'dear' this and 'darling' that, and he could probably have killed any of us with just a whisper of a thought while buffing those long fingernails. Flamboyant and flaming in all senses of the word, even if that word's meaningless now," Polaris mused. He dipped a piece of pineapple in some melted chocolate in a chafing dish above a flame and, much to my surprise, placed it in my mouth, intrigue flickering briefly in his eyes.

"That silver-haired one, Arahal, he oozed power, too, and was sexy as hell, don't get me wrong," Polaris went on as though no current had passed between us. Maybe I'd imagined it. "I could tell he thought we're a bit rustic, but he seemed nominally impressed. They were both so composed, so self-aware and confident," he reflected, swirling another sunny chunk of fruit in the chocolate.

"Is all of this fruit out of Jaffa's greenhouse?" I asked, looking down the long table and noticing there weren't that many dishes of it after all.

"Jaffa and Firethorn," Opequon said admiringly from his seat across the table. "They're potent influences on each other, even though Firethorn's still young."

Once he had my attention, Opequon asked me several questions about our travels and what plans we had for the future in regards to continuing our mapping. As we spoke, I was struck at the lush health emanating from him. The distinctive vivid green in his hair shone amidst the black, which he currently wore long with decorative, complex braids on one side and a strip shaved above his left ear. At one point he made a sweeping gesture, and my gaze fell on a jewel-coloured scarab tattooed on the inside of his right forearm. It seemed familiar, but it took me a while to remember why. Once I did, several niggling puzzle pieces all snapped into place. Ondin and Wyngarr had identical art, having asked Wycker to do the tattoos when they'd pledged their affections to each other. At a lull in our conversation, I stretched out my hand and let my fingers smooth across the bright aquamarine and jade inked on his skin. My suspicions were confirmed when his coltish, often severe expression softened and one side of his lips quirked a smile.

"We were going to approach Kyrgian because we thought you'd be out scouting and mapping for a couple of months. Since you've returned and will be here for the solstice, well..." He looked apologetic. I almost didn't recognise the sentiment for what it was as I'd never seen it on his face. "You've been close friends with Ondin for many years."

"Let's just call it forever," I agreed with an inviting smile.

"Right. You know that I was still in bad shape when Vaysh managed to make contact with Monarch and we first joined your clan. I'd been pretty crazy about someone, and mourning him and his death consumed me for a long time. I'll never forget him, of course, but Ondin and Wyngarr, just as the cliché goes, gave me a reason beyond revenge to want to live."

I tilted my head and poured myself some more wine. I was no longer certain where this conversation was heading. "I've been glad to see your healing, and Vaysh is, too. I know you two have had your differences, but—"

"He's always respected my opinions," Opequon said quickly. "He's taken on the roles required of him, but he's been fiercely protective of all of us."

"So. The tattoo?"

They secretly fascinated me. Once I'd succumbed to the humbling truth that I wanted to share everything with Vaysh, to the end of time and beyond, I'd thought of going to one of our resident artisans to ink something on me in commemoration. The thin sliver of the romantic in me wanted to see, of course, whether or not I could convince Vaysh to do the same.

"Symbol of immortality. You know why Wyngarr and Ondin have theirs. Well, their hearts are large enough to have invited in a third, and we want to mark this formally. We'd like for you and Vaysh to perform a blood-binding ceremony for us at the solstice."

I nearly choked on my wine. "All three? Together?" I asked a bit stupidly.

Opequon's face lit brightly with amusement. "I'd no idea you could be so easily shocked!"

"Not shocked, just... surprised," I hedged. "I'm very happy for you. All three of you."

Opequon's beaming smile reverted to his more taciturn expression, but now I saw the hidden joy behind it. "Thank you."

"Yet another momentous event to celebrate. We'll be eating, drinking and dancing for days," I said, my eyes glazing over for a moment as the logistics began to creep in stealthfully despite my best efforts to put them off until tomorrow.

"You say that as though it's a *bad* thing." Vaysh's voice sounded behind me and I leaned my head back, resting against his ribcage. He slid his hands down and clasped them across my chest. I covered them with one of my hands, making a low rumbling sound of appreciation. I looked up and saw Vaysh's bemused expression, his porcelain features upside-down. He gave me a nearly imperceptible wink that caused a current of pleasure to snake down between my legs.

"You simply have to be different, don't you?" Vaysh said to Opequon with mock exasperation. "I do have eyes, you know. I've seen what's been blossoming just under my nose."

Opequon's eyebrows raised and he stared defiantly back, his grey eyes eerily similar to Vaysh's own. "You've always said to follow my instincts, especially those of my heart."

"Vaysh, you didn't really council your clan to madness like that, did you?" I asked, reaching out and trying to drink from my decidedly empty glass.

"Of course I did. Look what it got me!" His warm baritone was supple leather sliding on my skin and I decided that any further debriefings and conversations of all kinds could wait until tomorrow.

"Opequon, of all who are dear to me, your happiness now is the most deserved," Vaysh continued, his words simple and heartfelt. Admiration for my chesnari flooded my chest with a warm stain of pride. "You've always been brave, and only now can we see how progressive as well. Who knows— perhaps you, Ondin and Wyngarr are the true future of handom. Three has always been a sacred, mystical number, after all."

"I quit noting how often images of threes appeared in my dreams," Opequon said with a huffed laugh. "I'm glad to have your blessing, though the ceremony is only a public showing of what already exists, unbreakable."

"Blood-bindings can't be undone. Ever," I cautioned, thanking Polaris who'd poured me some more wine before he and Vox left the table.

"I don't know Ondin and Wyngarr as you do," Vaysh said to me, splaying his hands so they fanned out across my abdomen, "but for all his bravado, Opequon does nothing in haste."

"I was hollow and they both filled me," Opequon stated with a devotion that pierced me to my core.

"Should Wraeththu need poets, you should heed the call," I said without a trace of sarcasm.

A knowing smile drifted across Opequon's features as Vaysh nuzzled the top of my head.

"Let's take advantage of the fact that we're back far sooner than planned. I'd like to sleep on our soft bed, Commandant."

"Excellent suggestion."

Vaysh released me so that I could stand up from the table, downing most of my wine once I was on my feet. "Where are the rest of your partners?" I asked Opequon, who was also readying himself to leave.

"They ate earlier and went to spend time with the new hara. Ondin, as you know, is quite the healer, and Wyngarr has a gift for putting anyhar at ease. Vox and Wycker have him in a steel trap with projects for our upcoming festivities. For all I know, Wyngarr has enlisted these two new to the mountain to carve personalised napkin holders or God knows what else."

I groaned at that image. "Our reputation is going to spread far and wide as being a place to come for days of wild partying."

"It's only once a year," Vaysh countered with an arched eyebrow. "And unless the napkin holders get used to decorate usually hidden parts of our anatomy, they're hardly wild."

Opequon stifled a laugh. "Go enjoy being back in Castlegar," he said, pulling on his woolen coat. "I would like to speak with you in the next few days about sending out another scouting party, but to the south," he continued, tugging his hair out from the collar so it spilled down his back.

"The south? Yes, that's a strategic thought—"

"Tomorrow, Ash," Vaysh said impatiently and Opequon waved his farewell.

I was pleasantly mellow from the wine and willing to be led back to our suite of rooms with no further cajoling.

"As much as I love Arches, I'm desperate to clean her smell off of me," Vaysh declared as we hung up our coats and I got a fire going in our bedroom. "I'm taking a hot bath."

He lit several pillar candles with piney scents as well as two sticks of incense. After our time in the cold wilds, their aromas were particularly delightful. I heard Vaysh filling our bathtub and I stripped down to

just my underleggings. I stood in front of the crackling fire for several minutes, engulfed in the scent and sound of what had become truly home.

I needed a thorough wash as well and ambled over to the bathroom, where the door was cracked slightly ajar. I nudged it open and stepped into the humid warmth. In a corner a coil of sandalwood incense let off a thin tendril of savoury smoke. Vaysh stood naked in front of the sink, wrestling with some stubborn tangles.

"May I join you?" I asked, easing the comb from his fingers. He loved it when I massaged his scalp or did anything tactile with his hair.

"Of course." His voice was huskier than usual. I swallowed down his essence as we shared breath until I felt I was lined with velvet; my soul was dressed in raiment of a king. With a low laugh, he said, "You're greedy."

"I'll be generous after our bath," I promised, allowing Vaysh to pull off my underleggings. My ouana-lim had quickened at the sight of his strong, lean form, his refined features a handsome terrain both masculine and feminine.

"You're a gorgeous enigma," I told him later as we soaked in the hot waters.

"Me?" he scoffed, situating himself in the vee of my legs so that I let out a soft groan at the tempting pressure. "I've kept no secrets from you. Ask me anything."

A wispy pall of foreboding skittered across my thoughts and I pulled Vaysh closer to me. His warm skin and the steady rise and fall of his chest chased away my disquiet. Something he'd said months before floated back to memory. "Do you really believe there are no coincidences, or were you trying to sound particularly profound that night by the lake?"

Vaysh pondered the question for a brief time, swirling one hand under the surface of the water. "I think there are patterns that originate far beyond this earth, maybe even this part of the universe. I don't believe that everything has been pre-ordained and is going along some inexorable path, though. I can't shake the thought that we as a race might be a beautiful accident. Even if not, whoever created the first Wraeththu, and those very first ones who created themselves, I think any planning or control has gone awry."

I let my eyes drift closed, ruminating on what he'd said. "I think we're destined for amazing things, Vaysh," I murmured, the faint lilac scent of his freshly washed hair tickling my senses. "I want to know it all, to go everywhere in this crazy world with you at my side. You're my obsession. I don't care anymore that we're supposed to be enlightened and not feel that way— I do. You're everything."

He craned his neck around to kiss me lightly on the jawbone. "And doubtless you had plenty to drink at dinner. But thank you."

"I mean every word," I said stubbornly, easing my fingers down to tease in the soft curls at his groin. I purposefully lit flames of his arousal, letting my fingers stroke his quiescent ouana-lim as he shuddered, pressing back against me. "I want you to prepare yourself with oil. I'll ready our bed and then, well, you'll see."

"You're wicked," Vaysh purred. He let out a breathy cry when my fingers drifted against the folds of his soume-lim.

"I am. Be the sword of air; be ouana," I encouraged him, kissing the side of his head before easing out of the tub.

I dried off and toweled my hair, pulling it back in a tie as I tended the fire and arranged the candles in a pleasing pattern. I *was* wicked, and grinned at my own plans. I moved our full-length mirror closer to the bed, angling it sideways so we'd be able to see ourselves while taking aruna. More than anything, I wanted Vaysh to see himself in the heated moments of our coupling, his flushed face and wanton expressions.

The room was our sacred bower, inviting and protective, filled with spicy and tree-scented aromas. Vaysh walked in, his skin shining with the oil absorbing into his pale flesh. He'd tied on his leather armbands at the wrists and around his biceps, as well as compelling strips at the top of his thighs. His vibrant ouana-lim jutted proudly, the petals slightly parted, and my mouth watered at the sight. In a nod to his feminine aspect, he'd lined his eyes in regal purple, but he carried himself with the aggressiveness of a warrior. I was undone.

"Com here," I said, my voice gravelly with need.

His grey eyes were warm and loving, like sun-warmed fur; there wasn't a hint of stone. I fell to my knees, paying homage to the altar of his body, hands kneading his muscled legs as I fellated the red-violet spire tantalysingly there for the offering. He gripped my head so tightly I had to ease my mouth from his ouana-lim.

"Gentle, love," I said with a small smile before I again devoured my prize. I teased and sucked at the soft skin over steely length, nudging my tongue to every succulent crevice until I felt his thighs tremble.

With a last kiss to the crown, I eased back and rose to my feet. I, too, had focussed my energies into my ouana aspect, as it was my most natural state. Vaysh had been biting his lower lip and I kissed him, alternately sharing breath and kissing with pure passion, letting the images rest. "Be as loud as you wish," I said. "The walls are thick enough."

"I'm wondering what all you have in mind, you rogue," Vaysh said huskily, frotting against me so the stalks of our ouana-lims pushed together. I groaned at the contact. "Do you want me to tie you to our bed?" His eyes glinted with feral delight.

"Not tonight, though that is intriguing."

I licked his lips, seeking entrance yet again, our tongues dueling as our breath carried across torrents of desire until Vaysh broke away. Breathing heavily, he caught a glimpse of the mirror, pausing to look curiously at it.

"Stay ouana," I spoke low in his ear, moving us over so our torsos and below were visible in the reflection. I stood behind him and wetted my palm before taking the crimson plum organ in hand. He watched, enrapt, as I pulled and caressed him, easing my own hard length between the rounded curves of his buttocks.

"Our bodies are clever enough to know when the ouana-lim isn't in danger of being damaged. I'm going to plunge into your seas, and you'll stay cradled in my hand. Both at once, Vaysh, and you'll watch yourself in the mirror. I'll be in you, around you. It's aruna so powerful; you'll be ouana and soume, all at once."

"Oh my God," he said, voice cracking. He snaked his arms behind my back, grinding himself into my pelvis.

"Your lover. Your acolyte," I rumbled, releasing my hold on him so we could crawl on the bed. I made certain his body was prepared but he was wild, on hands and knees. He tossed back his head, the ribbons of red hair falling down his back. He made demands of me using the harsh, human word to tell me in no uncertain terms what he wanted me to do. With one long stroke, I was sheathed in his grasping heat. I was an eel, swimming in his slippery depths, and also a relentless pleasure, caging his ouana-lim in clenching fingers. He cried out, bucking back and forth, guttural, broken noises rending the air.

"Look!" I rasped, and he gazed wild-eyed into the mirror, entranced at our reflection. I sank into him again and again, quicksilver moonlight dipping in and out of the waves. His mouth was slack, his pale knuckles a stark white where he grabbed for purchase at the bedcoverings. The fire of his ouana-lim glowed; the air around us blazed blue-hot, our energies building to a crescendo with the power of a volcano.

Our rapture burst upon us; the flames of the candles flared up, filling the room with golden shadows. Deep inside his embracing warmth I was a comet, a light striking out and swallowed by the sun. He yelled inarticulate words as his seed fountained over my fingers and onto the bed with the sparkle of a thousand diamonds. My heart was thundering, drumming to the beat of the god of aruna, of little deaths and fiery sacrifice.

Eventually a tranquil peace drifted upon us, and we settled together. He held me closely, like the ivy on the stones of Castlegar. My fingers played idly with the leather plait on the corded muscle of his bicep.

"You're quite a passionate storm, when you want to be," Vaysh said, his fingers carding through my hair that had come loose from its ribbon.

"You inspire me."

I kissed his sternum and then rose up to plant kisses on his eyelids. Easing out of the bed, I padded over to a small cabinet and poured us each a glass of vralfire. Vaysh discreetly tended to the damp patches on the bed and undid the leather thongs on his legs before we spooned together again. We sat side-by-side, legs intertwined.

"Things are changing," Vaysh said contemplatively, sipping the amber liquid.

"Are you talking about anything in particular?"

"Thiede. Arahah. They'll be back. They were so..."

"Unbelievable?" I took a healthy swallow.

"Yes. But they're like us, hara, as we are. Think about it. And Thiede seemed interested in us. We've got to ask him questions, demand answers as to how they've learned to do what they do. And then there's Ahalenia—I'm going to be there, when he gives birth."

"It's a child in a shell," I said, hearing the whimper in my voice, embarrassed at my fear.

"It will be a harling. Another pure-born, like Firethorn. It's miraculous. I want to be with them when he comes into the world. How can you not want to know what that's like?" he asked plaintively.

"I do, really," I reassured him. "It still seems like a female thing, but I'm working on wrapping my mind around it."

"Try wrapping your heart around it, Ash." Vaysh ran the back of his hand tenderly down the side of my cheek, his face still radiant from aruna. "That might be easier."

* * * * *

Rain lashed at the tents, but I was pleased to see that their construction held, and they were pegged solidly into the ground. The protection spells woven around their perimeters didn't hurt, either. An unexpected few days of warmer weather had put everyone on the mountain in an even more festive mood just before our newly named Natalia celebration—the precocious Firethorn and Jaffa had decided the birthday of the new year should have an appropriate name. The day itself woke in a foul mood, overcast and windy. A storm front had scampered up the plateau, now battering the mountain with rain and gusts of wind. Despite the wretched weather, all of the community seemed to be in upbeat spirits. There were tables groaning under burdens of food and drink; small, brightly coloured globes of glass with candles hung from everywhere, filling the three conjoined tents with flickering rainbow lights. Vaysh and then Polaris had pointed out a few darker corners of intrigue where enthusiastic, drunk, or simply libido-driven hara groped at each other or shared breath. I noted the goings-on with bemusement; were my situation different, perhaps I'd be doing the same, though I suspected I'd always be the type who preferred to keep most of my physical exploits away from curious eyes.

"I think we should have the ceremony before it gets much later," I said to Vaysh over a plate of honeyed ham and a helping of steaming scalloped potatoes.

"Wygarr came to me to say the same thing not long ago," he said, drinking a glass of tangy, sparkling white wine. "He also asked that we keep it simple."

"That's for the best. I'll get some sage to purify the space, and let you be the primary speaker for the ceremony. You're more eloquent than I am."

An incredulous look crossed Vaysh's face, more heavily accented with cosmetics than usual due to the party. "You think I'm eloquent?"

"Yes! Don't look so surprised. I do try to compliment you on your many talents, but maybe I left that one out."

Eyebrows still raised he smiled crookedly. It was an endearing expression, and shockingly innocent; I realised he must be very at ease. I wondered how much he'd had to drink, not that I could chide him, but we did have a solemn duty to perform.

"Vaysh, are you drunk?" I finally asked.

He attempted to sneer, failed, and instead took an asparagus spear off of my plate and began chewing on it. "No. I may be mellow, but I most certainly am not in my cups."

"Mellow?!" The cause hit me like the proverbial tonne of bricks. "Vox and Polaris gave you something, didn't they?" Vaysh had spent much of the afternoon with Polaris, which had seemed like a good idea at the time since I was up to my eyeballs in last-minute issues to do with the weather.

"No, and I suspect they'd take offense to the fact that you always assume they're the ones up to no good."

"Only because it's the truth," I muttered, taking a long quaff of wine.

"I spent a little time with our resident Unneah, and he shared some early Natalia cheer with me."

I couldn't help but stare at him. "Mabast? Fascinating. You didn't ingest or inhale anything hallucinogenic, did you?"

Vaysh rolled his eyes. "For the Aghama's sake. I'm just a bit stoned, but I swear I can perform my required functions with aplomb and grace. I wouldn't dream of embarrassing you, nor would I act like an idiot when my clanshar has asked me to perform such a sacred ritual." With a delicate hand he pulled some stray hair behind his ear and I noticed the dark brick red of his lacquered fingernails.

"You're really something," I said, reaching out to take his hand. He gave me a quick squeeze in return and a soft smile of gratitude.

"I know. You're incredibly fortunate. Let's go and bind these three together for eternity. Good God. As though being a pair isn't challenge enough, dear Opequon has fallen for two hara. Better him than me."

I led the way through the milling, celebratory throng, greeting and granting well wishes to everyone we passed. Jaffa came bounding up to me, sprigs of mistletoe wound into his riotous orange curls. I was stunned to realise he was only a couple of inches shorter than I was now.

"Thorn and I have a ballad to sing. We've made sure it's okay with Wyn, Ondin and Opequon," he said breathlessly, and I noticed he had a wide strap across his chest. He twisted his back slightly so I could see the rest— there was a guitar, neck down, against his back.

"You! What? You're going to sing for their binding ceremony? Since when have you been playing the guitar? Vaysh, you're not telling me things I need to know," I said, but he ignored me.

"He's great!" Firethorn enthused, having suddenly materialised at Jaffa's side, his black hair in two simple braids with a crown of holly on his head.

"That sounds splendid," Vaysh said dreamily.

"Thanks! Is that okay, Ashmael?" Jaffa asked. "We really did write it for them. Well, for them, and for new beginnings, new year, all of that."

"I... well. Yes."

I wasn't at my most fluent, but no one was at his most sober, either. It was a night of rebirth and joy; taking Vaysh's arm, we went to find our novel threesome.

It was a simple ceremony. Jaffa and Firethorn sang a beautiful duet as Jaffa played the guitar. I caught a glimpse of Cloudblaze and Firestorm, at their striking profiles, two parents radiating pride. I spoke words of commitment and devotion, of trial and calm. With the same ceremonial knife he'd used to conduct the inception of over a year ago, Vaysh cut a thin line on the right forearm of each of them, above the bright scarabs. His voice was so low I wasn't sure what he incanted as he pressed their arms together in turn, but I trusted him implicitly. Final prayers and blessings were made; I sanctified a small bowl of honey and a plate of crushed herbs.

"Together, through bitter and sweet," I intoned, drizzling a small amount of each of their tongues. Vaysh prayed ancient words, whispering into a chalice of wine before handing it to Opequon. With strong hands he took it, his fingers brushing Vaysh's and his eyes awash in gratitude. He drank, and passed it to Ondin and then from him to Wyngarr before it circled around to me. I shared in the communal cup before raising it in both hands to my chesnari. A bouncing sprig of mistletoe caught my eye— Firethorn was grinning like a maniac, riding piggybacked on Jaffa. The old human symbol swung side to side as he tried to get it to dangle over the threesome without poking any of them with the jostling stick.

The hairs on my neck prickled and I turned away from the re-emerging revelry to scan quickly through our group, instantly on guard. My gaze was drawn inexorably to lurid red and shimmering silver, the two lissotrichous hara as startlingly otherworldly as when I'd seen them several weeks before. They'd come. Even from a distance, Thiede's pleasure at the festivities radiated from him. Arahal was far more inscrutable, though I noticed his face became more animated when Polaris swooped in to offer him a glass of wine.

The celebrations were back into full swing; I'd given congratulations all around one final time and had turned to find Vaysh to go and greet our guests when I heard Firethorn shouting gleefully, "Kiss him! Kiss him!"

Trying to find the source, I jerked my head around until I saw him. He was still on Jaffa's back, his legs held tightly as the mistletoe dangled over Vaysh's and my head. Firethorn's eyes danced with mirth, and I felt the keen weight of yet another's eyes on us. Still in his unusually — for him — carefree, effusive state, Vaysh took two slow, dancelike steps to reach me. His arms wrapped nimbly around my waist, and he made a sensuous, purring sound before exhaling along my jaw to my ear.

"*He's* watching," he said. "Let's give him a good show."

The raucous cries around me faded to an indistinct noise as we shared breath. Even my tenacious thoughts of setting a good example were smothered in satiny caresses. Embers flared and coiled low in my belly; Vaysh's supple fingers skated up my back to rub gently at the base of my skull.

Eventually my decorum freed itself from its tender bonds. I broke away from the kiss, our lips smacking wetly as we caught our breath. I looked into Vaysh's eyes, luminous and innocent, the grey a thin ring around his dilated pupils. He glanced over my shoulder and a conniving smile quirked his lips.

"That's what happens when you stare, young har," he drawled. "You get an eyeful. One day this will make sense; your body will come to life and you'll crave that kind of contact." Vaysh leaned his chin on my shoulder. I could only imagine the look of curiosity or distaste on Firethorn's expressive face.

"Hey Thorn, I'd like to go and talk with Euclase for a bit," Jaffa said, easing Firethorn from his back. I was under no impression that talking was really what he had in mind.

"Guess I'll go and see Eleu and Ahalenia," Firethorn said sullenly, leaning the branch with the mistletoe against a nearby table. "*They* won't get all gooey-eyed and—"

"I do not get gooey-eyed!" Jaffa said, indignant.

Vaysh had stepped back from me and with unspoken agreement, we left the arguing pair to receive our guests. We found Thiede in an animated conversation with Kyrgian, Iolethe and Abelard. Arahal was being chatted up by Polaris and Vox. Their fascination for him and his complicated but skimpy leather

lacings that decorated his torso was apparent from a mile away. I only hoped that Arahall had a lot of stamina.

"Ah, the Commandant and the Archon," Thiede enthused, and I couldn't sense whether he was sincere or sarcastic; I decided it was the former. "What a dreadful night outside, but all hara here are in high spirits. I assumed you all wouldn't mind that I paid you another visit— you couldn't have known how to send me an invitation," he said graciously, picking up a chocolate-covered strawberry with his long, taloned fingers. He held Vaysh's gaze captive as he slid the fruit past his glossy, crimson lips. I'd never thought that chewing could be an indecent act, but as in so many things, Thiede was simply outside of any set of usual rules.

"Welcome to Castlegar. Again," I said, proud that I was able to see him not as a demigod, but another har like me. An unprecedented, latently threatening har, but still flesh and blood. "On behalf of all of the Regents, please make yourself at home and be at peace. Will you and Arahall be needing a temporary home to spend a few days, or just one night? Or even longer?"

To Vaysh in mind-touch, I said, *"Get a hold of yourself! You're practically drooling."*

"Am not," he insisted with little conviction.

"Well, let's see," Thiede drawled gamely, glancing over to Arahall. He now was sharing a plate of smoked meats and cheeses with Mabast. Vox and Polaris were nearby, giving Mabast murderous looks that he blithely ignored. Arahall sampled the savouries, but he was absolutely devouring the Unneah. Arahall's attraction was so potent it seemed to crackle in the air.

"My own commandant," Thiede began, smiling slyly as his attentions swung back to me. I braced myself under the onslaught of intensity and mischief that poured from him like perfume. "He would accuse me of not ever allowing him any fun if we were to leave before mid-afternoon tomorrow. I cannot stay longer than that, though I do thank you for your generosity. All of you." He regally inclined his head, acknowledging the rest of the small group.

All at once, it was as though Thiede had caused his inner flame to subside. It was much like seeing an eclipsed sun; all of the energy was there, but pulsing behind a screen. Thiede had become a sleeping wolf; he'd found a way to wear the raiment of an ordinary har, or as close to ordinary as he could possibly become. The effect allowed him to move among the dancing, socialising group without being stared at. He asked Vaysh and myself to follow him to an empty table away from the impromptu music where we could speak without yelling.

Parallax must have felt Thiede's presence, as he hurried over to us, bringing two bottles of wine and a youthful, awestruck attitude. This appeared to please Thiede tremendously. Chagrined, I felt a near-paternal protective instinct for Parallax bare its teeth.

"Vox thinks you're from across the sea," he said, his hazel eyes turned a shining wheat, set off by his flaxen tunic. "I want you to tell me everything! Us, I mean," he added a bit guiltily. He thrummed with excitement, a swooning fan crouched at the feet of a rock star.

"But then there'd be no mystery!" Thiede said airily, patting Parallax's hand with his rake-like fingers. "And what fun is life if there are no sordid secrets to be uncovered?"

Parallax hung on his words, and Thiede revelled in it. He was calculating, as well; I could see it behind the benevolent persona he currently projected.

"You're a lovely har, Parallax, and I think I shall have use for you in the future." Thiede refocused his attentions on Vaysh and me. "I'm building a new realm for Wraeththu, where enlightenment and beauty will reign. It has only just begun. Construction is underway even as I speak, which is why I can't stay longer, though I would enjoy that a great deal. I'm impressed with your mountaintop community; you have an exotic collection of inhabitants, all things considered," he mused thoughtfully, taking a sip of wine. "Even a pure-born, already."

From Thiede's commentary, Parallax's imagination appeared to have flown to lands of self-gloried fantasy. If Thiede had suggested they take a side trip to Hell itself, I had no doubt Parallax would have gone without hesitation, asking to lead the way.

"Immanion," Thiede said, eyes vibrant, the word casting its own spell. "It's my Castlegar. And I'd like to speak to these two about it. Alone."

Parallax's face fell. He was like a kicked puppy, his whimpering all but audible.

"It's nothing personal, tigerling," Thiede murmured, but I felt jealously for Parallax, and knew that my body language betrayed me. "I want you to have more experience here before I whisk you away. I'll plant seeds of intrigue where I see fit, just you wait," he said conspiratorially, which appeased the pride-wounded har.

"What *are* you?" Parallax asked as he stood, pulling his hopelessly tousled hair behind his ears and gathering his dignity.

Thiede's smile was the graceful architecture of tenderness. "I am Wraeththu. Nothing more, nothing less. Now go," he said playfully, those arresting hands fluttering in the air. "You have adventures to pursue while I speak to your creators of the mundane nuts and bolts of crafting a dynasty."

With a sigh, Parallax turned and headed toward Gladwyne and Wycker, who waved encouragingly at him.

"So."

Thiede steepled his fingers, resting his chin on them. He looked back and forth at us, his fathomless eyes like searchlights, blazing into my soul.

"I want you to have positions of high authority in my new world. And what I want, I get. That's not to sound threatening, it just is. I'll have need of a general," he said to me, "and a beautiful monarch," he said to Vaysh. "Any questions?"

I couldn't help but let out a choked laugh before taking a long drink from my cup.

"But—" Vaysh was saying helplessly, obviously flummoxed by such an extravagant and unbelievable mandate. "We don't even know where this Immanion is! We've never been there. I've never ruled anything or anyone in my life!"

"Trifles, Vaysh, mere trifles," Thiede soothed, sitting back to stroke idly at the column of his eerily pale, long neck. "I would take you both with me tomorrow but you must be more advanced spiritually in order to ride the *sedim*. Therefore, that is my first charge— you and Ashmael need to focus on achieving the caste of Ulani, to become Pyralists. I'll be able to monitor your progress but if it's from afar, don't be

dismayed. My attentions are needed in Immanion; I have elite hara engineering the construction of the city."

My tongue finally decided to cooperate and I was able to formulate a sentence. "What is a *sedu*? Why can't you take us now? And if I'm to be a general, what is Arahal?"

Thiede loosed a melodious chuckle. "I wondered when your torrent of questions would be unleashed. All will become plain, but only in time. Even I cannot build a kingdom in a day. A *sedu* is the horse — creature — you saw us riding when we emerged from the otherlanes. It's a way to travel inter-dimensionally, to cover great distances without machinery."

He held up his hand to stave off the flurry of other questions that jostled in my mouth. "I'll spend this night with Kyrgian and Iolethe, to guide their spiritual path so they can lead you. As for Arahal, he is..." His ruby lips quirked to the side and I felt Vaysh's hand grab for mine under the table. If he weren't stoned, I suspected that he'd have become catatonic, overwhelmed by the vast changes Thiede had stated were inevitable. "He's many things to me," he said mysteriously. "An officer of the New World. Now I need to go and make the best use of my hours here with your Pyralists. Do forgive me." He stood up elegantly from the table, a swan set to glide to other waters.

"What about the Varrs?" I found myself asking, trying to wrest back control of my own destiny. "What if Vaysh and I want to stay here? This is where we've made our home."

"These things take time, Ashmael. Don't fret," Thiede said, moving away. "You can't even fathom what I'm offering. Trust me." His smile gleamed, and then he'd vanished into the assembly.

Vaysh gazed at me, his fingers clenched in mine, his expression dazed. "Monarch?" he mouthed.

"I don't like being manipulated," I said darkly.

"We don't have a choice."

"We always have a choice."

"I need a drink."

I pushed my glass over to him. He let go of my hand, lifting the cup and taking two deep swallows before he grimaced. He placed the glass on the table, staring off into space.

"Our harling would be a prince," he said after a time, his eyes misty.

"What is Immanion is off somewhere in the frozen steppes?" I said, intentionally provocative.

"It wouldn't be. He wouldn't live in a place like that," Vaysh said with surprising logic.

The noises of our carefree, celebratory harafolk began to reassert themselves into my awareness. Vaysh was similarly brought back to the present and gave me a weak smile, which strengthened as time went on.

"Come on, Ash. We're missing a fabulous party." He leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. I closed my eyes, centering myself in his familiar light scent of sandalwood, a hint of autumn always around him.

Unexpectedly I felt Cloudblaze send a tentative message to me via mind-touch.

"Ashmael? Firestorm and I have solstice rituals from our original tribe we'd like to share. I can sense your troubled spirit. Let us be with you and Vaysh."

His comforting voice put me more at ease and I nodded, but then Vaysh looked at me, confused. "Cloudblaze and Firestorm want us to join them. I think we could stand to be grounded a bit after what we've been told."

He drew circles on the table with his finger before nodding.

"Thank you," I replied telepathically. *"Shall we go to your rooms?"*

"Yes."

I took a deep breath and drained the rest of my wine.

"This is certainly an interesting beginning to the new year."

Vaysh looked at me, his face grave. "I'll go with you anywhere, you know."

"I know."

* * * * *

"Ashmael? Come here! He's standing up— and walking! Kinda!" Firethorn said, his voice elated and incredulous.

I got up from my desk where I'd been documenting the arrival of another pair of hara, these from the northwest of us, and hurried into the living room. Firethorn and Vaysh were both making a flood of encouraging noises as the harling, sure enough, grasped hold of a chair leg. He stood, wobbling at the knees before bouncing a bit, and took a few shaky steps. He grinned widely, then fell flat on his behind. The tot's expression of joy transformed to shock and then his face reddened as he began to wail.

"Oh Lemmy, it's okay, don't cry," Firethorn said, scooping him up in his arms and rubbing his back. Vaysh cooed comfortingly to him as well while Firethorn paced a few steps back and forth, quieting down the harling.

"It's amazing how fast he's growing," Vaysh said, coming over to stand at my side.

"I'll say."

Lemuel was only a few weeks old. He'd eaten regular food almost since birth, though it had been served in a mash until his teeth began to come in. He had a cherubic, laughing face most of the time, and a sweet temperament. His curly black hair seemed to have a mind of its own, though this, too, was hardly unexpected since his sirelings also shared that disconcerting trait.

"Don't forget, we're keeping him tonight," Vaysh reminded me.

"He could stay with us," Firethorn said hopefully before nuzzling his face into the waving curls that fell from Lemuel's head. "Father and Blaze won't mind."

"Yes, but Vaysh will," I retorted. "I'm going to make us some dinner. Firethorn, are you staying?"

"No." His voice was glum. "Mabast's given me reading to do and we're meeting tomorrow morning. Thanks, though."

He passed the harling into Vaysh's awaiting arms. The infant promptly grabbed a fat fistful of Vaysh's hair and started chewing on it.

"Careful, or you'll spoil your appetite!" I said to the child, who looked at me through vast, light blue eyes and kept gnawing on the clump of red hair. "Fine. Don't listen."

Firethorn came through the kitchen a few moments later on his way out, bundled in a fur vest and overcoat to protect against the lingering winter chill. He picked up a piece of pickled beetroot and popped it into his mouth, his fingertips stained purple.

"When do they get back from their retreat?" he asked, wiping his fingers on a damp cloth.

"Tomorrow."

"What are they doing?"

"To tell the truth, I don't really know."

I continued chopping up lettuce, more of the hydroponic and magical genius coming from the greenhouse now mostly in Firethorn's care. Since Natalia, Jaffa had been spending much of his free time with Euclase. Fortunately this had coincided with the delivery of Ahalenia's pearl and the harling's birth into the world a few days following. Firethorn had been nearly inseparable from little Lemuel, and the Colurastes didn't seem to mind.

"I didn't think I needed to pry," I continued. "Their tribe has its own rituals, but I get the feeling that Eleu and Ahalenia were never average Colurastes, hence why they left. Or were exiled. I've never asked."

"Hmmm."

Firethorn gazed speculatively at the salad I assembled, though his thoughts seemed elsewhere. He'd grown a few inches since his arrival last autumn; thankfully he didn't yet seem to be suffering any awkwardness or inexplicable brooding that would indicate the onset of adolescence.

"I'm going to plan an herb garden in the summer," he proclaimed, watching as I put water on to boil on our hybrid stove that ran on a generator.

"A good plan."

"I'll teach Lemmy everything I know. And maybe," he said slyly, looking at me with an arresting lack of innocence given his age, "maybe there'll be another harling by then, too."

I just gazed at him. "Maybe so. Honestly, I don't think we'll ever have very many. It's not like before, with humans, who could get pregnant by accident, just like that."

The befuddled expression on his face was priceless.

"Ask Mabast. He was human, too, back in the dark ages. Actually, I hope that once it's spring and we start scouting again that we'll find some human enclaves with young men who can be incepted. Not that harlings aren't superior, but until we know a lot more about our race and what's really required, flowery phrases notwithstanding, to create harish life, I don't foresee Castlegar having lots of doting parents."

"I'm glad I'm not the only pure-born anymore," he said his long brown fingers deftly plaiting a new braid from the nape of his neck.

"I thought you'd gotten used to being a celebrity!"

Firethorn pursed his lips. "I should go. I need to ask some questions to my akuchi."

"Your what?" I measured out some rice, poured it into the boiling water and placed a lid on the pot.

"Cards. Blaze and Opequon see things in dreams, but I don't. If I have questions that other people can't answer, or don't want to, I sit and think on it and ask the akuchi."

"Fascinating. Maybe you'll show me sometime?"

He nodded. "Sure. Well, I'd really better go." His mood seemed back to its usual upbeat keel. "See you! Bye Vaysh!" he called.

"Bye, Firethorn!"

We spent a comfortably domestic evening, the harling holding us both in his sway as only a child can. Vaysh put Lemuel to bed in the makeshift crib we'd fashioned for him, spending quite a bit of time reading stories and even singing a soft lullaby. I sat in my study with a decanter of vralfire, poring over a map of southern Megalithica and beyond. Ondin, Opequon and Wyngarr had declared their intentions to go on another extended mapping and scouting mission at the first signs of spring. Belvac and Abelard voiced their plans to join them. I wasn't surprised; their thinly veiled comments about needing to get away from the rumour mill and potential turf wars had become more strident since Thiede and Arahall's Natalia visit. It all meant that many of those I knew the best and were our strongest hara in both brawn and intellect would be gone for an indeterminate amount of time. It made me uneasy, which led me to the realisation that I needed to re-evaluate the roles of all of the hara in our community.

"You look so preoccupied," Vaysh said as he came to stand behind me, rubbing my shoulders until I surrendered to his touch. He let out a low purr of triumph. "I can think of at least a dozen ways to get your mind off of whatever it is you're worried about."

"A dozen?"

"Just for starters."

He prowled around the desk and I saw he'd changed into a flowing, heavy silk dressing gown, belted at the waist but showing off the middle of his finely sculpted chest. I murmured my appreciation, especially when he straddled my legs and sat provocatively in my lap. My ouana-lim had started to awaken when Vaysh's hands had massaged down to my chest, but I felt no answering hardness in his body. He was in full soume form, then.

"We've not christened this chair, have we?" he asked throatily, beginning to grind his pelvis into mine. The friction caused heat to spiral outwards from my groin, desire frissoning up my spine and clambering into my stiff, sensitive ouana-lim.

"No. Not yet," I managed to groan before he leaned in to possess my mouth.

There are times when sharing breath is companionable, even verging on platonic. This, however, was not one of those occasions. This was an explosion of supernovas, suns cavorting as Vaysh's desire and singing chorus of need soared like comets until I had to pull away with a gasp.

"Fuck, Vaysh!" I said, breathing heavily as his nimble fingers unlaced the front of my trousers. "You might give a har a warning before kissing the daylights out of him."

Vaysh tut-tutted, insinuating his warm hand through the gap in the flannel-lined fabric to free my trapped length from its confines. "Nonsense," he said as I hissed at his skilled motions, his palm sliding up and down my heated flesh.

"Still, if you feel you need a warning, you should know that parenting has made me horny. I'm about to take you so deep, I'm going to ride you so hard you can't even say your own name."

He breathed into my ear before flicking around his tongue and nibbling gently on the lobe. Without preamble or warning, he rocked his hips and sank back down into my lap, sheathing my upright ouana-lim with the tightness of a glove. I gave a cry of disbelief, which changed to a stream of inarticulate groans pebbled with profanity. Vaysh was the aggressor, milking his own intense pleasure while I tried not to lose myself in the exquisite tortuous pleasure of his seas. I needed an anchor— instead, he shared breath again and I was further, hopelessly lost. The energies of our arunic bliss catapulted us farther than I'd been before, into wilds of amethyst, teeming oceans that crackled with the living jubilation of fireworks. Like passing into the eye of a storm, Vaysh slowed, the tsunami of erotic force quieted and I was able to catch my breath. My heart thundered in my chest; my fingers were gripping his hips tightly enough to bruise.

His grey eyes were feral; he possessed me. I had drowned, and the glow about his disheveled hair was the phosphorescence of incalculable deeps. He started to say something, and instead closed his eyes, leaning back his head as he began our intimate dance once again. My climax pounded in my groin; he brought me to the brink once more before he let abandon overtake him and my release flooded into his body.

Once the final currents had ebbed away, I chanced a look at Vaysh. The robe had fallen down his back; his flat belly trembled as his inner muscles gave my spent ouana-lim a last squeezing caress. He glowed with arunic strength. I was suddenly jealous for him and how he was so innately accomplished in the mysterious powers of Grissecon. Other hara adored him, his abilities to console, his surprising physical prowess, his wild abandon at our festivities when he let his hair down. But no one else knew just how brightly his flame for me burned, nor could anyone have known how singularly my own fire for him blazed.

"Where did we go?" I finally asked after we'd uncoupled and tidied up only to sprawl out, back to front, naked in front of the roaring fire.

"I'm not sure." He seemed pensive. "Not to worry, though," he said in a voice light and fearless. "I wouldn't go anywhere you couldn't follow."

Affection spilled out from me. I bled with it, holding him tightly to me, the firelight drawing cheery shadows on his white skin.

"I love you," I admitted softly, burying my nose into the musky hollow of his neck.

He drew my fingers into an enclave inside his own, clasped to his ribs. "There should be no shame in that."

"It doesn't seem enlightened. This Immanion, where we'll visit and apparently play some major part, whether we like it or not... What if love is seen as too human, too regressive?" It sounded ridiculous as the words tumbled out, and I finally formed aloud the words that continually troubled me. "Surely even Thiede can't forbid it outright."

Vaysh leaned his head down and placed a soft kiss on my knuckles.

"If he does, then we'll be clandestine outlaws."

I wished that I shared his conviction in love's willingness to subterfuge.

* * * * *

Winter thawed into a wet, oppressive, indecisive spring that was much like winter, only warmer. I craved sunlight, and grew to curse the overcast skies and still frequent fogs that often cloaked Castlegar. Five of our finest left several weeks after Natalia; the allure of sunny days and escaping a perception of too many inquisitive eyes — for Belvac, at least — encouraging their departure earlier than I'd hoped. I didn't keep a human calendar anymore, but I knew it was late April when the mountain ceased being coy and the grounds and trees alike exploded in an exhilarated panoply of life. Everything seemed to happen at once; flowers popped out of the ground, leaves burst from formerly lifeless branches. The overall mood on the mountain lightened a thousand fold, though the fate of our scouts, my friends, remained a niggling worry in the recessed of my mind.

Arahal visited several times, always on one of the regal white stallion-appearing creatures. The *sedim* could somehow travel paths through space, time and dimensions; I wasn't sure how and Arahal chose not to be forthcoming. He wasn't unfriendly, just focussed on his liege's demands. He would only stay one night, he continued to dress in a confection of black leather and silver chains no matter what the weather, and without fail, found a welcome respite in Mabast's home.

I chomped at the bit to see this Immanion, and I threw myself into the exhausting dedication to my caste work. Vaysh was more advanced than I was, and spent much of his daily time with Kyrgian. I was entrusted to Iolethe's care. Our educations were uniquely flavoured as we spent more than a few evenings with Firestorm and Cloudblaze, drinking deeply of the wisdom of their human tribal ancestry. A rustic sauna had been built; that spring Vaysh, Jaffa, Parallax and I met with Firestorm, Cloudblaze and Firethorn for weekly cleansings of spirit and body. Sometimes the simple pleasure of chatting in friendly conversation was refreshment enough.

Castlegar had emerged like a butterfly from a cocoon into a thriving, if relatively intimate community, complete with a weekly market out on the fields near the small lake and shrine to the Aghama. Goods and artistic outpourings of surprising variety, considering our populace, were available for barter or trade. We didn't have any true currency except in the skills and time to offer one another. Our hara were resourceful and talented: you could find everything from crafted leather shoes to hand-designed and built fanciful wooden furniture; inks and pressed paper; kites to fly colourfully on the wind.

One morning I was haggling with a particularly inspired artisan over a ring. It was bold, set with citrine and amber. I'd seen Vaysh fawn over it in weeks prior, trying to come to a satisfactory trade with the jeweller. All at once, Arahal interrupted me via mind-touch.

Thiede is here. It's time for you to come to Immanion.

My shock and zeal must have shown on my face, as the har asked me if I was okay.

"Yes, but I've got to go. Please take this ring off display," I pleaded, and my tone, or rank, seemed enough for him to agree. "I've been called away, but I promise I'll come to an acceptable payment for it."

"I'll be sure to come up with something!" he called out suggestively, and my step faltered for a moment.

Maybe he was joking. Maybe not—no hara were totally exclusive in rooming, of course, it was just that I'd not been approached even in jest by anyone outside of an elite group in quite some time. Parallax wasn't a stranger to Vaysh's and my bed. After particularly gruelling spiritual exercises, at times I'd given myself over to Jaffa or Polaris, both vibrant souls with whom aruna was exuberant and playful.

Where are you? I asked Arahal, stopping in my tracks and wondering if I had time to go to my rooms to tidy up.

Out at the stables. Just come as you are.

I shrugged, and strode quickly away to the barns and lush fields. My mind swarmed with fanciful images, thankfully brought to rest when I approached the stables. There were four *sedim*, their glorious bearing almost too much to stare at for too long. Vaysh stroked the neck of one, his obvious love for horses evident in his worshipful reverie. Thiede looked on with proud bemusement, dressed in flowing robes of copper and azure. Arahal, in a shocking change of pace, wore deep turquoise leather pants, though the black web of laces still adorned his strong torso. Lambent peacock feathers winked in his hair and copper chains flashed around his neck and hung from his ears. It was a pity Mabast wasn't here to see him like this!

"Today you'll see the beginnings of Immanion," Thiede said, gliding past Vaysh with a gentle touch to the small of his back. Vaysh reached up and tugged at the hair at his neck, the gesture one I knew meant he was nervous and preoccupied.

Standing in front of me, I realised Thiede wasn't too much taller than I was, though I felt dwarfed in comparison with his knowledge and seemingly careless ease with which he carried himself. It occurred to me how regal he was, and like any shrewd leader, he was hand picking the most useful and potentially loyal subjects to serve in his own kind of court— all done with a nod to beauty, I noted, as I glanced over at Vaysh, his red hair rippling in the fragrant spring air.

"Congratulations on your progress," he said. I felt he evaluated me from my choice of tunic to the beating centre of my heart's intents. "To ride a *sedu*, you must let him guide you. Give over absolutely to him; they know the routes through the aethers, so trust them. And hold on," he said with a wicked smile.

"What are their names? And what are they really?" Vaysh asked as the *sedu* appointed for him nuzzled at his palm.

"This one is Tassia. You need to open your mind to him. Go ahead and mount up— Immanion awaits."

Vaysh caught my eye, his face flushed with excitement or fear, I couldn't tell.

"You must connect with your *sedu*," Thiede was saying as I stepped into a stirrup and threw my leg up and over the creature. "I wish we weren't going so far, this first time, but there's nothing for it," he went on cheerfully. "Let yourself be guided. These *sedim* know the paths well. Hold on, but above all, focus. Align your intentions with them, and don't be swayed by visions you may see out in the vapors. Follow me!"

It's impossible to put into words how that first voyage felt. I opened my mind and nearly recoiled in shock at the alien intelligence Zephyr possessed. There was movement and rushing winds until all at once we were all linked, Thiede's vast power forming a link for hara and *sedim* alike and the universe cavorted around us. The trip took forever and yet no time at all; I clung blindly to Zephyr as we rode through freezing stardust, haunted by ululating alien wraiths. Like flickering shadows I saw Monarch, leaning in his doorway with a pitying smile; Euclase whittling a piece of wood with a mournful face before cutting out his heart, the pulsing muscle changing to a pomegranate in Vaysh's hand, his eyes dancing as he flung the seeds as stars into the triumphant, flashing cavern of space.

Down and through and out— I nearly choked on the sea-scented air when I came to, back in our earthly realm. Shocked, I discovered I still clutched Zephyr's reins in a death grip, ice clinging to my hair and fingers. The horses thundered onto solid ground; I heard Vaysh's joyous, unfettered laugh tinkling on my ears. The *sedim* seemed invigorated by the journey, as did I, though the faint shadow of a headache pressed behind my eyes. After the frigid shears of the otherlanes, the balm of salty air in my lungs caused my blood to thaw and two shudders wracked my body.

"How do you feel?" Arahall asked as I turned my face to the warming sun.

"A bit discombobulated."

"That was fucking unbelievable!" Vaysh exclaimed, his eyes mad with euphoria and his hair a vibrant, tousled mess. I knew he'd been affected even more profoundly than I had; he was usually far more careful about his language, unless in the heat of the moment of taking aruna, that is.

"Isn't it?" Thiede said, seeming for an instant like a giddy child showing off a treasured gift. He canted up next to Vaysh to reach out and stroke his hand and Vaysh beamed, his face as dazzling as sunrise on a snowfield. They rode together, two porcelain figures with waterfalls of crimson hair. I felt a stab of worry, a lightning-fast dagger wound to my pride. I tried to shake it off, but I felt bruised, the grit of jealousy never completely leaving my mouth until we returned to Castlegar.

We rode down a grassy slope toward a bay, the air tangy with salt and sweet scent of cypress. Vaysh and Thiede chatted animatedly while Arahall and I travelled more or less in silence. I could see human influence still holding sway in some of the houses that clustered near the cerulean waters, but it didn't seem to be sinking into the same tortured decay we saw in Megalithica. As we rounded a curve, the shimmering outlines of Immanion spun elegantly from the sun-kissed earth. The scale of it was breathtaking, made all the more so because it was obviously only in the earliest stages of construction. I was no architect, but through flights of imagination — or visions planted by Thiede himself — I could see the yet unbuilt curving spires, the minarets and balconies, fountains and groves of shade trees, gleaming stone of onyx and marble, mosaics and pools in a realm in which the very stones breathed their order and beauty with the scent of jasmine.

Thiede turned around, caught my eye, and smiled. This was his harling, forming a perfect, living space of Wraeththu. Pride streamed from him with persimmon ribbons. Just as Thiede often as larger than life, his vision made physically manifest overwhelmed the senses. I remembered his words: 'What I want, I get.' Perhaps there was no one har who could contain his procreation; instead, there would be fruit of his mind and heart, rather than his loins. Again, I wondered how much of these lofty thoughts were mine, and if some were being conveniently placed there by him.

There was an extended tour, time spent poring over scrolls of designs and sketches, partially the product of a human architect, I was surprised to hear. Later, over a scrumptious meal of mild cheeses, savoury fruits and tart wine, I asked Thiede point blank about his past. To my shock and Vaysh's delight, for once he was forthcoming, at least to the degree he was ever willing to be.

"Like both of you, I was made in Megalithica and like you, I was part of no particular tribe," Thiede stated factually before allowing himself to reminisce. "Those were dangerous, thrilling, glorious nightmares of days. I had a small group; we spread and grew in number, but never sought outright battles against humans. The world was descending into madness, and I had no desire to be taken down quickly with it. We transformed angry youths, wild punks and Goths, the outcasts and rebels into a gorgeous, death-defying brotherhood. Sadly, some of them spurned their gifts. Tribes broke off and rather than rising above humanity, rather than cherishing our near-immortality and wanting to pursue goals and enterprises simply unfathomable to humanity, poor, pathetic race that was trying — and as you know, failing — to retain its supremacy on the earth, instead they became megalomaniacs. They bred psychopaths and sycophants. Destruction as its own end was their primary endeavour: swarm over the lands, kill, incept anyone whenever possible, rape and murder if inception proved impossible, create mayhem and start petty wars among each other. They became absolutely no better than bullies, turning on each other and unforgivably squandering such a gift as has never been seen before on this planet."

Vaysh reached under the table to take my hand. He was moved by Thiede's impassioned speech; I squeezed his fingers in sympathy.

"I grew tired of watching them, some like bulls in an already ruined china shop, others too dull to fully appreciate or value this treasure. I could tell that I needed to begin anew, and so here I am. I keep tabs on those still in Megalithica, of course. I'm not fond of the cold, regardless," he said, one side of his lips quirking upward. "This climate suits me. I am influential on all hara, but I have only our best interests at heart," he went on, his voice fervent like a zealot. "Here I'll bring only the most extraordinary of Wraeththu kind, plucking them from all over the world to create a garden unrivaled by any this world has seen. It's my dream, my dear Vaysh and Ashmael. I have the ability to cause dreams to become realities so potent and vital that were I to let you in on even a tenth of it, your heads would positively explode with shock."

I doubted this, but I admired him for being so cocky. To get to where I currently sat, I'd travelled via a way that had been totally inconceivable before today, and if Thiede had discovered it and managed to teach it to others, God only knew what else he had designs on for our fledgling race. In that moment I made up my mind voluntarily to become a part of his plan. I took a sip of wine and fastened my gaze on Thiede who seemed to be waiting for me to speak.

"I'd like to flatter myself and say that even if I chose not to be a part of your shining city on a hill, that my strength would be such to resist you. However, I doubt that's the case, and I doubt even more that you'd allow such dissent. I do have reservations, but I'll come. Your methods of coercion are becoming legendary, but so are your ideals. I've felt I was being groomed for something— perhaps this is it. Perhaps you've been manipulating me all along," I said a bit in challenge.

Thiede arched a fiery eyebrow. "I'll never admit it. Well, not yet, anyway."

Arahal chuckled softly into his wineglass. I suspected he'd been one of Thiede's confidantes from the beginning, or as close to the beginning as either of them would reveal.

"Who incepted you?" Vaysh asked brazenly.

"Yes, the question everyhar wants to know." A sly smile graced Thiede's lips, but I thought I saw the tiniest flash of sorrow in his eyes, gone in an instant. "It's one of the great mysteries, and not one I'll reveal just now."

Just then a har of exquisite beauty even by our rarified standards entered the room. I sensed Vaysh's defenses clanging up around him as he did when he felt a potential rival appear.

"Ah, Velaxis," Thiede crooned. "Thank you for stopping by. This is Ashmael and Vaysh, as you know."

"Welcome to Almagabra, tiahaar," he said graciously, inclining his long neck with the grace of a swan. His heavy hair was a white brilliant as titanium dioxide. "Are you in need of anything?"

"Velaxis is my personal assistant," Thiede said. It was stultifyingly obvious that this har, no matter his title, wielded a tremendous amount of clout. He nodded in greeting to Arahal and looked at us with detached expectation.

"Are we staying?" Vaysh asked, the question purposefully open to interpretation.

"Is that your preference?" Thiede queried back sweetly.

"We didn't tell anyone we'd be gone," I began before realising that I spoke only for myself. "I didn't, anyway."

"You travelled a tremendous distance," Arahal said, speaking up after a long silence. "It would probably be best for you to spend the night, at the very least."

"Your own hilltop community needs to learn to get along without you," Thiede said pointedly.

"Yes, but some of our best hara are on an extended scouting mission," I said a bit peevishly. I'd said that I'd join his new vision, and presumably Vaysh would as well, but I wanted to do this on my terms. "Still, one night should be fine. Vaysh, does that suit you?"

Velaxis scoured Vaysh with a clinical once-over much like a butcher evaluating a cut of meat. Vaysh sat up straighter, giving Velaxis a haughty, defiant glare in return. "That's fine. I would love a bath though. Could that be arranged?"

"It would be my pleasure. I'll have one of the house-hara escort you both to a set of rooms." The willowy har flicked a glance at Thiede, and I had no doubt they were communicating privately.

Vaysh and I spent the rest of the afternoon taking a leisurely nap after a luxurious soak in a marble tub set into the floor of our bathroom suite. That evening the four of us dined together again, a late meal taken outdoors in the balmy evening. Once we'd eaten our fill, Thiede expressed his wish to go on a private walk with Vaysh. I immediately sought him through mind-touch, but he gently rebuked me.

I can hold my own, you remember, he said, but there was little sting to the words.

Once they'd gone, Velaxis again appeared, this time with a bottle of some liqueur I'd not had before. Arahal asked him to join us but he begged off, demurely explaining that he had other matters which required his attention. Arahal and I spent a couple of hours drinking the exotic beverage that smelled strongly of liquorice and had an oily consistency. The taste grew on me, as did Arahal's company, perhaps due to the alcohol loosening our tongues. We were getting on like fast friends when Vaysh and Thiede returned and Arahal pushed the last third of the bottle into my hand before I left.

My spirits were light and my heart expansive as Vaysh pulled me out on the balcony that opened off of our room.

"Ash, look," he said excitedly, pointing up at the sky. "It's a meteor shower. Very auspicious, don't you think?"

"As much as anything. You're the one who planted the thought in my head that there are no coincidences, you know."

He pulled me to him, sucking my lower lip into his mouth, running his tongue over it before sliding his tongue into my awaiting mouth. The passionate kiss became a sharing of breath, which in turn became an incendiary taking of aruna; Vaysh held on to the balcony, staring at the stars and sounding like a wildcat in heat while I stood behind him, burying myself in his scorching depths.

The next afternoon we returned to Castlegar, all four of us. Arahal left his *sedu* in the starry-eyed hands of the young stable-har, which I knew meant he would soon be seeking out his Unneah companion. He'd returned to his usual all black ensemble, but the showy peacock feathers still graced his hair. I idly wondered if I'd see one or two of the opalescent feathers tucked into Mabast's chestnut hair in the coming days.

Thiede, Vaysh and I took a long stroll through the sacred greeny space of the forest. I almost wanted to reach out and take Thiede's hand; though he was a har and presumably as sensual as any of us, he radiated an aura of physical distance that I didn't want to violate. In silence we walked along paths strewn with bark and fern fronds, birds occasionally calling one another and hearing the snapping of twigs as deer, hidden from the eye, travelled in the woods. From my childhood religious upbringing, I had a keen sense of being in the Garden of Eden, before the snake had appeared, before knowledge had been consumed. Vaysh and I were walking in the lands with a Creator, out in the dusky gloaming of the day; he loved us, and he would have us be at his side in his new Paradise.

He wouldn't wait forever for us to take up residence in Almagabra, however, and I knew I didn't want to go until after the next Natalia. This would be done on his timeline, I suspected. If it took placing an angelic looking har at the gate of Castlegar with a flaming sword in his hand, barring us re-admittance, then I had no doubt that was what would happen.

* * * * *

"Saltrock."

I blew out the word in a stream of cigarette smoke.

Out in the small lake, Ondin continued to float in the patched-up inner tube he'd managed to repair using methods I couldn't begin to fathom. "What about it?"

Parallax swam up behind him before letting out a triumphant yell. He cupped his hands and slammed them into the water so that a small wave soaked Ondin's left side.

"ARRRRGH!" Ondin spluttered as Parallax gave an evil laugh. He swam away on his back, kicking more water at him in the process. "You know this means war!"

"Bring it on!" Parallax taunted as he got to shore. He pulled himself up on one of the small boulders and stood aggressively, gesturing at his chest. He shimmied just a bit and my eyes couldn't help watching his dancing ouana-lim as it slapped from thigh to thigh. He really had been blessed with a great many gifts.

I took another drag off of my cigarette. It was a perfect summer day: hot, but not oppressively humid, enough of a breeze that the insects weren't swarming. It was a market day so I didn't feel the need to be roaming the Castlegar grounds or doing anything that remotely resembled business. I'd wanted to bend Ondin's ear much more in depth about their months spent at the other solitary outpost, as well as other aspects of their trip. At breakfast I'd suggested that we take our horses and go out to a secluded natural pool down the mountain. Parallax had been eavesdropping and managed to wheedle his way into the outing. I didn't mind; I felt he should know what was really going on. I hadn't said as much to him, or anyhar for that matter, but I hoped to bring him to Immanion as well, as my own personal aide. Thiede had one, and besides, Thiede had seemed serious enough about adding Parallax to his list of fawning acolytes. Or potentially useful hara, whichever.

"What do you think was so compelling about Saltrock that made them want to say?" I asked Ondin, reviving my line of thought.

"I don't know. It seemed a bit more rustic, fewer rules, a bit more like the wild west?" Ondin offered. His gaze had also drawn to Parallax, who'd come over to sprawl by me, bumming a cigarette and showing off his rather masculine glory. "To be honest, I think they wanted to make more of a name for themselves. Belvac has felt like he's in your shadow, held back, I guess. In Saltrock he and Abelard can do whatever the fuck they want, and their skills are definitely needed. I don't think it's really all that personal."

I snorted at that. It wasn't the end of the world that they'd decided to stay, leaving all of their personal possessions here in Castlegar unless they decided they absolutely couldn't live without some knickknack or sentimental treasure. But after two and a half years of having hara be drawn to Castlegar, if I were being honest with myself, it stung my pride that someone from my original clan had defected to another outpost of harish life. Then again, Belvac and I had been butting heads for months. Perhaps it was better that he and his equally enigmatic lover had decided to stay in Saltrock. Our shouting matches during Regents' conferences had almost become regular enough to be an agenda item.

"Had Thiede visited Saltrock?" Parallax asked Ondin, now taking a drink from the wine bottle that trailed after him, bobbing in the water.

"I don't know. They already have somebody really powerful there, Orien. I talked about him at the Regents' meeting," he reminded Parallax.

"I know. But that was a more formal event. Now we're just three hara, friends, sometimes more..." he let the words drift off as he looked up at me and raised his eyebrows.

I gave a reciprocal acknowledgement.

"We should have a name." Parallax stated.

"What?" Ondin asked.

"A name. Ahalenia and Eleu, and little Lemmy, of course, they're Colurastes. Mabast is Unneah. There are the Varrs just north of us, and you all told us about the Kakkahaar further south of Saltrock," he went on, gesturing at Ondin with a newly lit cigarette. "I've talked with Blaze, Firestorm and even Thorn on my own, and they shared with me the name of their human ancestral tribe. They were Chickasaw. But we don't have a name," he finished, his brow furrowed. "I think we should."

"Thiede and Arahah don't seem to have a tribal name," I said reasonably. "A name doesn't make you more or less Wraeththu."

"The hara at Saltrock don't either." Ondin paddled to shore, where he engineered a makeshift shade and helped himself to more wine. "But you have a good point. We could use a self-identifier."

"Shouldn't things like that happen naturally?" I asked.

"What, like inceptions? Or our race in general?" Parallax's voice held no malice, just dark humour.

"What name would you deem appropriate?"

He mused for a time and finally looked at me, giving a rueful shrug. "Don't know. But I'll think about it."

"No doubt!" Ondin said with a short laugh and a warm smile.

"It's good to have you back," I said to my old friend. "And a bit jealous of all that you experienced."

"Well, I'm glad to be back, though you've apparently had your own share of highly unique adventures!"

I huffed a laugh at that and beckoned at his wine bottle.

"When do the Kakkahaar arrive?" Parallax asked, now sitting cross-legged. He'd pulled his bag of beads and hand tools to him and begun working on an intricate armband.

"In a couple of weeks."

I was both intrigued and no small bit wary of their upcoming visit. They had taken in our hara as guests, however, and we needed to return the favour. Besides, I wanted us to have allies. Even though we'd not had direct run-ins with the Varrs, or Uigenna, since the attack which had claimed Monarch's life, I was under no illusion that the peace would last. News of our presence would travel; it was bound to. There weren't nearly enough of us to take on a fully armed battalion, especially if, as both the Kakkahaar and residents of Saltrock had told our envoys, the Varrs were actively pursuing the dark avenues of magic our race possessed. Then again, according to Opequon's private discussion with me once the triumvirate chesnari had returned without Belvac and Abelard, the Kakkahaar were doing far more than dabble in dark arts themselves.

"Did they have any harlings?" I asked Ondin, the question having just popped into my head. I was beginning to correlate tribal spiritual advancement with harlings as evidence, though I'd only said such a thing aloud to Vaysh.

"Not that we saw," he replied, pulling his knees to his chest and resting his head on his knees. "But for all of their hospitality— and I'll say it again, Ash, they were *very* hospitable —"

I sensed Parallax's attentions snap to attention, like a fox suddenly sniffing a tasty scent.

"They're a secretive tribe," Ondin continued. "Still, I think if they had managed to generate new harsh life like that, from the feelings I got, they would have had the child on display. They're really private, and I didn't truly relax the entire time we were with them. They're quite proud."

"Very astute, Ondin. And since you are, I have another question. I'd like your opinion too, Parallax."

"All you need to do is ask!" he said with a beguiling smile.

"And so I am. Ondin, the scarabs you and your chesnari have inspired me, as well as some of the tribal markings on Blaze and Firestorm. I'm thinking of asking Wycker to draw one for me, about Vaysh. I just can't seem to come up with just one symbol."

"Ashmael," Ondin drawled, his face gleeful. "How romantic! I'm shocked! How very unlike you."

"That's not true!" I blustered. "I don't feel the need to shout my feelings from the rooftop, but I do unexpected things for him not infrequently."

"You want the tattoo to be about Vaysh? Or the two of you, together?" Parallax asked, still busily threading beads on a tiny loom.

"Just him."

"What about a horse?" Ondin suggested. "Or the horse constellation since he's fond of astronomy. Or maybe you two aren't looking at stars at all when you spend time up at that tower."

I didn't answer that, but saw a conspiratorial smile traipse on Parallax's lips. The three of us had repaired one of the telescopes in the former astronomy tower but we'd also taken advantage of the privacy and novelty to take aruna a few times as well.

"Pegasus," Parallax said. "A flying horse. That'd be a good choice— it has the constellation idea, and a horse that gallops through the skies, like that one that Arahall rides. Vaysh couldn't stop talking about your unbelievable trip through space or however you got to Immanion. His tone of voice when he talked about Tassia was eerily similar to how he sounds when he talks about you," he said with a wry smile. "When he's feeling generous, anyway."

"What do you think he would get? For me?" I asked, thinking I might really do this and wanting to give Vaysh suggestions if he felt like doing something similarly permanent. Oddly enough we hadn't talked about a blood-binding ceremony, or even spoken aloud about trying to conceive a harling; I guessed that Vaysh felt as I did after Immanion, which was that those two events would occur once we were there. We'd have Thiede's approval and even participation, at least in regards to a blood-binding ceremony.

"Vaysh is not getting a tattoo," Ondin declared, easing out from his rigged shelter to go and retrieve another bottle of wine from its tethered point near the edge of the water.

"You're underestimating him," Parallax challenged.

"He's more innately soume than I am," I said, "but he's fearless. I've never seen him shirk from anything dangerous."

"Still, I don't know that he would. He's quite vain about his flawless pale skin," Parallax went on with a disdainful shrug. His own skin had tanned to a dark, tawny gold. "But if I were him, or if I were chesna with you, I'd probably ask Wycker to ink in a sword, since you're so into defense. Maybe a sword with ivy twisted around it, or on the blade or something."

"I still say he'd never agree to it," Ondin said, handing me the bottle of wine.

"Is that a bet?"

"Certainly!" he said, eyes dancing. "But it can't be forever. Since our bodies are so hardy, we might live to be two hundred years old! I bet Vaysh won't get a tattoo to do with you or anyone else in the next year."

"That's not very long!"

"A lot can happen in a year."

"Okay, fine. But what are the terms?"

"You don't need terms," Parallax scoffed.

"Of course we do," Ondin said. "You have that really nice leather coat, the dark maroon one. If I win, and after a year Vaysh's skin is as pristine as ever, I get the coat."

"Hmmmph." I really did love that coat, and wasn't sure I wanted it to be a part of this silly bet. I'd started it, though, and I couldn't back down now. "Well, you have that pistol with the mother of pearl set in the handle. If I win, I get it."

He looked at me with incredulity.

"Tiahaar!" Parallax said, shaking his head. "You're being way too serious. Ashmael, if you lose, you should dye your hair blue for a few months or something. Or run laps around the chancellery in the nude."

Ondin snickered.

"And you, Ondin, if you lose, you'll have to cook Ash's favourite three course meal, or cook personally for him and Vaysh for a week. None of this ridiculous favourite coat and pistol bullshit."

"I think Ashmael would look stunning if he had green hair, actually," Ondin said brightly.

"All right. One year from now, high midsummer of... well, next year. If Vaysh has a tattoo, you cook for me for a week. And I get a massage a day."

Ondin groaned, but nodded.

"If he doesn't, then I'll dye my hair green and keep it that way for a month or so."

"Don't forget the laps!" Parallax said, grinning.

"Nobody wants to see me run around like an idiot in the nude," I insisted, but Parallax's expression seemed to indicate otherwise. "Fine."

Snatches of that conversation still peppered my thoughts when I went to Wycker a few days later. I had a drawing from Parallax in hand and a few strands of Vaysh's hair taken from his hairbrush.

"Are you sure you want his actual essence in the ink?" he asked uncertainly when I explained why I had the hair.

"Of course," I said, defensive. Then I realised he was just trying to look out for me. "We're chesna. We haven't jumped into a blood-binding, but I don't doubt we'll do that in the future as a formality."

"Well, if you're certain..." he said, looking relieved.

It was exquisite, a rather tribal looking Pegasus, the shape of the constellation visible within the overall form. Even after it healed it remained faintly warm to the touch, a legacy of the magical infusion of Vaysh's hair. His blood would have made it even more potent — and vibrant — but I couldn't get any from him without him asking why. Once I unveiled the tattoo to Vaysh, he said he loved it. He kept insisting that I walk around shirtless so he could admire it, inked across my left shoulder blade, opposite my heart. To Ondin's chagrin, he lost the bet far sooner than he imagined when Vaysh sought out Firethorn and Wycker and got his own. It was a narrow, intertwining plait around his left bicep in colours of red, green and purple. He said the red was for him, the purple for me and the green to symbolise growth, all bound up together. The two of us ate quite well for a week and Ondin, to his credit, didn't complain. Much.

Three emissaries from the Kakkahaar came in the waning, sultry days of summer, welcomed with a large feast and live music by Thorn, Jaffa and a couple of others who had made a band of sorts. After a week or so for them to get used to our very different environment and rather eclectic host of hara, they began giving instruction to a dozen or so individuals particularly gifted in the spiritual and esoteric powers. Vaysh, Parallax and Firethorn were avid students, also Mabast and others who had come to the mountain in the past year. The Kakkahaar slowly became more open and less isolationist as the first month went on. They also met regularly with our own spiritual leaders. They were fascinated by Firethorn and his sirelings as well as Lemuel, but they were only this side of frosty with the two adult Colurastes.

Everyone in Castlegar came out for a full day and night of bacchanalian revelry at the autumnal equinox. At the geographic heart of our community there was all kinds of food, singing, copious amounts of wine and all other varieties of alcohol, dancing, and hara dressed in their finest, tightest clothes. Those with skills in tailoring and jewellery making must have engaged in a brisk trade given the parading hara all decked out. Some were ostentatious, but others were more simply clad though elegant in a less fussy way. The scent of aruna and swirling perfumes of desire and lust hung like a thick velvet canopy over the grounds.

Vaysh and I certainly weren't immune. We took a somewhat drunken walk out to the viewing area I loved so much and were delighted to discover no one else was there. One thing led to another, and soon one of my nicest tunics was covered in grass stains. I didn't care because Vaysh was spread out on it like a luscious, ripe peach. I licked and kissed and drank down his juices while the stars watched impassively. I crawled up from between his trembling thighs to nip and nuzzle at the band inked around his arm. In a throaty voice, he demanded that I kneel near his face. What a wicked, talented tongue he had. My ouananim flowered as he swallowed and swirled his tongue around my hard length; the petals curled back so no sensitive spot was held hidden from him.

When neither of us could bear the relative separation any longer, I knee-walked back down to the beckoning vee of his legs and sank into him. His body welcomed me; I wanted to bury myself forever in

the grasping, fierce coals of his passion. Like diamond smoke, his desire poured into me as we shared breath; as once before, I was drawn with him into enchanted wilds of plum and musky shadow. Deep within my ouana-lim, I felt as though a spring had snapped— a butterfly tongue unfurled, and I drowned in the warm silver of Vaysh's eyes.

Yes, Ashmael, yes, he said without speaking as a secret chamber deep within him began to open, rapture blazing from his face.

Without warning, we both felt a painful shock, a resounding, silent clang as a force from outside of us barred Vaysh's pulsing centre of creation. Even as I looked in his panicked eyes, our arunic energies were stirred up into a pleasure so intense I screamed with it. Our bodies spasmed and shook as our unbearable ecstasy roared and stretched relentlessly on until I thought we would be ripped apart. Dizzy, ghostly stars danced in my peripheral vision. After long minutes the thundering waves of our release subsided and we lay on the ground, gasping like nearly drowned hara spat out of the sea.

I was crying; I choked out hiccoughing, syrupy sobs of anger into Vaysh's wreck of hair. I knew with all of my heart what that should have been and who had halted it so abruptly.

"Damn you Thiede, you bastard!" I growled brokenly, clutching Vaysh to me and trying to stop my hands from shaking.

"Shhhhh, Ash, it's okay. More than him, I felt *ours*," he whispered, which caused more tears to stain my face. "He's still there. This wasn't the time."

"What kind of fucking god does Thiede think he is to decide when is right?" I ground out bitterly until all at once, my anger was scoured away. I felt battered and ravaged, chewed up and most importantly, warned.

Vaysh was my angel, somehow consoling me when he'd been just as mauled, just as violated. He'd felt that secret, sweet harbour open its gates to me for the first time—

"Next time we'll know, for certain," he said softly, running a hand through my hair and the other fanned out on my tattoo, the spot thrumming warmly with his spirit. "Our son should be delivered in Immanion. Thiede must want him conceived there, too. He wants us Ash, *so much*." His tender voice tore at my heart with the edge of a jagged knife.

Wrapped in Vaysh's wings of comfort, I cried again. I wasn't sure which *he* Vaysh meant.

* * * * *

Another glorious autumn spread its colourful cheer over the mountain, but I was preoccupied and didn't marvel at the display as I had the prior two years. I felt Thiede's presence not infrequently, and sensed him distantly watching us, though his focus seemed primarily to be on Vaysh. For several weeks after our experience at the equinox, I held back when we took aruna, unwilling to experience that heartbreak again. I now knew how it felt to be climbing to that plane of consciousness, and we were both careful not to allow ourselves near that path. Eventually I began readying myself to leave Castlegar and as I did, I was aware of doors opening for me, of difficult situations resolving themselves. I marvelled, yet again, at how powerful Thiede's desires must be if they could grease the wheels of life itself. Arahal even spoke at the Regents' assembly at which Vaysh and I formally announced that we would depart for Immanion a few days after Natalia. Our harborthren were going to miss us, but we promised to return to visit, and Arahal extended the arm of hospitality on Thiede's behalf to any who wished to see us once we were settled in.

Winter had just curled its frosty toes into the ground when we had another leaving feast. This one was for the Kakkahaar, who were quite ready to return to their desert climes. Parallax and Galen, one of the two nearly dead hara we'd found in that ramshackle barn a year ago, went with them to continue their caste studies. The night before they left, Vaysh and I invited Parallax to our bed, exhausting him in the fiercest, most loving way possible.

"They're so good at mind-touch, over incredibly long distances," he informed us later. We'd curled around each other in front of the fire like sluggish snakes under the sun. "I should be able to communicate with you, at least until you're across the waters. I'm not sure after that."

"You just learn all you can," Vaysh encouraged him, his pale, delicate fingers combing gently through the tight curls at Parallax's groin. "Before you know it, you'll be summoned to Immanion, too. What a reunion that'll be!"

"We have a last Natalia to experience here," I reminded him. "Vox and Polaris said it'll be especially memorable. Pity you'll miss it," I said to Parallax, leaning in to nibble teasingly on his earlobe. He groaned, the baritone of his voice roughened by his vocal enthusiasm through the night.

"You two have worn me out. I won't want to think about rooning again for ages!" he said, a sensual smile gliding onto his lips as he stretched out his long limbs.

"I don't doubt that the Kakkahaar will give in-depth instruction in every skill they pride themselves," Vaysh said silkily, his fingers toying with the girth of Parallax's ouana-lim. "And they are a *very* prideful tribe."

Parallax turned his head to me, his hazel eyes awash in mirth and gratitude. There was none of the angry, smart-mouthed human at whose head I'd held a gun those seasons ago; he'd truly blossomed into an extraordinary har.

I'll look forward to you joining us in Immanion, whenever that is, I said to him telepathically.

One thing at a time, he said blithely, his ouana-lim being brought expertly back to full flower in Vaysh's skilled fingers. "Didn't you mention something about tying me to your bed?"

* * * * *

Natalia was a lively, raucous celebration as it had been in years past, though Thiede didn't appear. Arahah did, though he now seemed like an honorary resident of Castlegar rather than a guest. He brought a powerful har with him named Tharmifex, whom I took a liking to immediately. We arranged to meet for breakfast at a reasonable hour the next day before Polaris, with the subtlety of a wolf among sheep, led him away.

Early the following morning, I was awakened by a strange sound I couldn't place. It was eerily quiet, with a tinkling noise tapping on the roof. Vaysh's eyes fluttered open when I got out of bed and he pulled the covers around himself. Looking out of our windows I saw a surreal, frozen landscape— ice blanketed every surface, glinting in the watery dawn. Plinking notes of tiny frozen pellets danced through the hushed air; it was a wonderland of translucent beauty.

"What is it?" Vaysh asked sleepily.

"An ice storm," I said, shaking my head. "It's beautiful."

"Is it worth getting out of bed for?"

"I'd say so."

After a time, curiosity got the better of him, and with a bit of grumbling, he pulled on a dressing gown and joined me, gazing out at the trees, encrusted and frozen. Each surface was a hardened mirror, glittering and silent.

"It's gorgeous," he breathed. "We've got to go out for a walk. It'll warm up and be gone by mid-day, don't you think?" he asked, all at once a flurry of activity.

"It's pretty cold," I said, but I put on my coat and boots, woolen trousers and tunic. "I've never seen anything like it. It's very different from snow."

I took a quick turn in our bathroom, and was surprised to see Vaysh busying himself in the kitchen when I got out.

"Thought I'd put some coffee on so it'll be ready when we get back," he explained. We'd found several unexpected and welcome containers of oil over time and most residences now had working generators. Things that had been luxuries when he'd first arrived were now far more commonplace.

"Awfully nice of you," I said and he gave me a wry smile.

"I like you better after your first cup of coffee."

"I like me better after my first cup of coffee," I agreed as we left the house.

My feet skated and I nearly took a nosedive my first few steps; it took me scant seconds to develop a very healthy appreciation for just how slick the ground was. I warned Vaysh even though he was already quite aware of the treacherous surface under our boots. With shuffling steps, we slowly, cautiously made our way across the courtyard, and then the paved road with its many gaping potholes. The sun wasn't far above the horizon and not very bright, but the effect of any light on the shining branches and shrubs was breathtaking.

"This is unbelievable!" Vaysh said, turning around to gesture at me, a wide smile on his face. He almost lost his footing and slid, nearly stumbling to the frozen ground. His expression snapped to one of intense concentration.

"Be careful!" My heart raced from seeing his near catastrophe. "As beautiful as it is, one misstep and you'll be flat on your ass. I don't want to try and carry you to see Ondin."

"I'm as agile as a cat," he insisted, but I noted gratefully that he was far more cautious as we went into the woods. The path was slightly more easy to traverse, and I held back a bit, taking some time to look around at all of the naked branches, now clad in hard shells of ice. The tinkling, melodious sounds were occasionally overshadowed by a staccatoed barrage as a squirrel or bird shifted a branch. There was the rare crack or groan as a tree complained under the weight of the ice.

Vaysh had gone deeper into the alcove than I wished; my imagination had already gone to Vox or Jaffa, trudging to the dining hall to make breakfast, underestimating the elements, and falling. The sparkling ice

was beyond treacherous, and it might not melt until tomorrow, or the day after, and most hara were probably hung over from Natalia—

I heard Vaysh let out a surprised cry and swear loudly as he fell. I grimaced, and hoped to God he hadn't broken anything.

"Are you all right?" I called, shuffling as quickly as I could, which wasn't very fast.

"Yes, but— ow. Fuck!"

I could see he was sprawled out on his stomach, arms stretched out and trying to gain purchase somewhere, when I heard a resounding, thunderous crack. I jerked my head to the side, trying to place where it came from. My gaze whipped back in front of me and I shouted, my stomach clenched instantly into a knot. I watched the terrible, inexorable motion of a heavy limb as it fell, crushing Vaysh with a sickening explosion of ice and cracking bone.

"VAYSH!"

I screamed his name, trying to run and sliding, falling, tears bursting from my eyes as I scrambled to get to him. I scuttled on hands and bruised, aching knees, calling his name again and again. Once I got closer I saw the nauseating trajectory of the branch that had thudded against his spine and skull. He was broken, shattered. With strength borne from abject terror, I heaved the branch away, but the damage to Vaysh's head was— I couldn't bear it. I could barely see him; I couldn't focus through the wet sheen of my eyes. I sounded like a wounded animal as I tried to hold him, blood everywhere.

"Vaysh, Vaysh, Vaysh, ohgodohgod, no, you can't, no, don't go," I sobbed, trying to lift his bludgeoned head into my lap. I saw his chest rise, and fall; clumsily I smeared matted clots of hair out of his closed eyes.

"Vaysh," I pleaded, choking on bile. I was wheezing; the air was a razor in my lungs and I coughed, unable to catch my breath. With what must have been tremendous effort, Vaysh laboriously opened his eyes, but I didn't think he could see me. Wild horror knifed clarity into my thoughts: I needed him to know I was with him.

"Vaysh, it's me, your Ash. For the love of God, don't leave me, I'm here, right here," I said hysterically. I was going insane; Vaysh's blood soaked my lap. The pungent scent of so much blood was an abomination. My vision started to go black, phantom stars were crowding out the atrocity of my beloved, dying. I couldn't move, only chanted his name, over and over and over as my reason seeped into the unforgiving, scarlet stained ice.

A gurgle lodged in his throat; a thick, wet cough coated his mouth and my fingers with more blood. He gasped and stilled, his unseeing gaze locked on mine.

I screamed, bellowing anger and maniacal hopelessness until my voice was a pitiful, unrecognisable mewl. I rocked him in my arms; the world shattered into nightmarish crystalline shards of nothingness.

Vaysh was dead.

. : ~ Epilogue ~ : .

The next year was a threnody for Vaysh. I was inconsolable; I abhorred everyone's company, anyone else's touch was loathsome. In my rages against a world that blithely continued to exist without Vaysh in it, I wished for a human photograph of him, then railed against myself at my own lunatic folly. A picture couldn't have begun to capture even the smallest grain of the endless sands of his being. I thought back to the night when we could have conceived a harling, and wondered if he would have been able to console me, or if it would have twisted the knife too deeply to see Vaysh's likeness in a creation of our own flesh... I obsessed about what our son might have looked like, how it would have been to hold him as together, he and I mourned the loss of his hostling, my chesnari, my beloved. Under the crushing anvil of grief, my heart was ground into a mealy pulp, a quivering mash beating feebly in my chest. It was with relief that I sank into the yawning maw of darkness; I let depression and futility count my days as my body forced me to stay alive. I could have cared less.

I spent the rest of the winter living with Firestorm, Cloudblaze and Firethorn. For a few days after we buried Vaysh, I tormented myself in our home. I pulled all of his clothes from their drawers and covered myself with them in our bed, desperate for his scent which still clung to his tunics and leggings. Polaris finally forced me out of the tomb I'd made for myself. He plied me with bourbon until I couldn't fight him with my fists anymore, and he and Jaffa held me up during the march over to my temporary lodging.

Cloudblaze washed me, a thankless task after the several days I'd lain inert and rank. He combed out my hair and didn't balk when I asked him to shave my head entirely. Firethorn tiptoed around me, his eyes red; he'd never seen anything like the punishment I now suffered, and he felt powerless to help. After a few days when I continued to do nothing but eat when commanded to and heeded my body's demands to expel the extra when necessary, Cloudblaze came into my narrow bed in the room I shared with Thorn. He'd insisted on being there when I woke up yelling, unable to escape the nightmares of Vaysh's death happening in front of me again and again. I could do nothing but receive, and Cloudblaze was astute enough to know I would have gone absolutely mad to take aruna in such a state. He shared breath with me, sending healing images. His taste of windswept sage and leather gently sought out the bottomless fissures in my spirit, filling some of the deepest shadows with his concern and affection.

The months passed. I spent much of the time in a drunken stupor. I stayed in the Nayati for days on end, in silent, morbid brooding. Thiede never came; he didn't send even a flicker of thought to me. Vaysh, however, was everywhere— in the pungent scent of hay and horses; in the heady red of wine; an eternal pulse under my skin. Parallax returned from the Kakkahaar at Natalia and did what nohar else could: he laid hands and heated breath on me. His anguish at seeing me in the pathetic state to which I'd declined was matched by his unwillingness to let it continue. For three days he sequestered me away; we ate, meditated, drank, and took aruna. He poured himself into me with unsurpassed generosity until my will to live had again been set alight.

Arahal arrived the next day.

Zephyr nosed at my hand, his bewilderingly intelligent eyes giving me a message of hope I didn't immediately dismiss out of hand. Castlegar was too full of memories; it was a vibrant tomb, filled with the spirits of my innocence. Parallax kept a small phial of my seed, with my request that he plant a mountain ash at the spot where Vaysh lay in the ground. Once it took root, he was to pour out my essence at its base, the legacy of my love for my chesnari.

I've occasionally felt pity for the hara who have fallen for me in recent years; I feel no need to apologise for how I am, but I've never led anyhar on. I am Ashmael Aldebaran, General of the Gelaming armies in Thiede's service.

Once upon a time, I loved.