

The Iron Hand

Shadowland Chronicles, Volume I

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Introduction:

By the first few years of the twenty second century, modern man finds that all of his dreams have come true. A united world government brings world peace. The perfection of genetically altered foods ends world hunger and computers pave the way to new and wonderful discoveries. All is well until November, 2130 when an asteroid 1.2 miles across falls into the Atlantic Ocean.

The resulting cataclysm destroys civilization as we know it. But the Brotherhood of Wisdom, whose temples were spread in secret all across the land, knew the time of the end was coming. They stored up the knowledge of the world, and each generation of Keepers waited patiently until the earth renewed herself and was ready to support teeming life once again.

Five thousand years after the asteroid strike, a new world arises from the scorched earth. A world unlike any that has gone before, where warriors roam the land freely with their faithful slaveboys by their side.

- I. No Master shall abandon his slave.*
- II. A slave shall obey his Master in perfect trust.*
- III. A Master shall not submit to the rule of another Master.*
- IV. The punishment of the disobedient slave shall be swift and just, according to the laws of Zah Nar.*
- V. The Promised slave shall be bound to his Master for life after his Day of Marking.*
- VI. It is the duty of the Master to satisfy the slave needs of his property.*

***The Six Laws, as they are
written in the Book of Zah Nar
in the Book of The Gods.***

Chapter 1

The slave's screams echoed through the deserted Hall of Pleasure, bouncing off the walls like the maddened cries of angry furies. From his hiding place behind the overturned couch, Metri watched the soldier shove the helpless slaveboy into the brick wall and rape him brutally.

Fear raced through his mind like rabid rats intent on devouring his sanity. As he watched the soldier pounding the slave's ass mercilessly, his heartbeat thundered in his ears like the wild savage drumming of a madman. An endless time later, the slave's screams diminished to agonized whimpers, until finally the soldier grunted and gave a mighty thrust deep into the boy's ass, releasing himself inside him.

Satisfied, he stood back and let the slave's bruised, battered body slither down the wall until he collapsed on the floor in a broken heap, sobbing. Blood flowed in a thin stream from his ass. Metri stifled a gasp when he recognized his friend Julian under the sweaty hair clinging to his blood stained face.

"Told you not to fight me boy," the soldier said. "You shouldn't have gone for my sword. I wouldn't have used you so hard," he said, picking up his sword and stepping over the slave.

The soldier threaded his way among the overturned furniture and dying enemy soldiers, heading for the door, next to Metri's hiding place behind the couch. He ducked his head low and prayed to the Gods in all their thousand names to keep him safe. His sandal slipped on debris. The soldier whirled instantly toward the sound.

"Show yourself enemy dog or I'll hack my way through that couch and tear out your worthless guts!"

The soldier advanced on the couch, his sword high above his head. Metri crawled out from his hiding place and kneeled at the soldier's feet. He kissed his dirt encrusted boots.

"Please Sir, I am but a worthless slave. I beg you to spare my life," Metri said. He kissed his boots again.

The soldier looked down at the petite blonde slaveboy cowering at his feet. The boy could not have seen more than nineteen summers yet.

"Well, well what have we here?" he said, lowering his sword.

"Only a pleasure slave, Sir. May the use of this worthless slave bring you much pleasure Master," Metri said.

He turned on his trembling knees and raised his tunic, offering his ass for the soldier's use. The soldier let his sword drop all the way to his side. He sighed and ran a weary hand through his filthy hair.

"What is your name boy?"

"I am called Demetrius Master," the slave said without lifting his head. His voice rose and fell with the pounding terror of his heart.

The soldier walked around him and Metri braced himself for the killing blow, wondering if he would feel the blade slice his head from his body.

"Such a big name for such a little slaveboy. I shall call you Metri. I am Rulan. Get up from there before one of Dunlon's idiots comes in here and takes you up on your offer boy."

Metri raised himself and looked up, still on his knees. Rulan saw fear and trepidation written large in his soft blue eyes. Metri took in the soldier's shoulder length black hair, matted with sweat and his leather vest, loosely laced across his muscled chest. His frightened eyes were drawn to the dark, wet patches on his black suede trousers. He looked like a man who had

splashed his way through a shallow stream. But Metri knew better. His pants were heavy with the blood of those he had met in battle. Rulan put the point of his sword at Metri's throat.

"You're pretty," he said.

Metri's trembling pink lips were full and inviting and his hair fell in unruly blonde waves to his shoulders. His unmistakable beauty shone from his dirty, frightened face like brilliant spring sunshine captured in the petals of a white rose.

"I'm keeping you." He ran the sharp point of the sword along Metri's throat from ear to ear. "You're mine now. Is that understood?" he said.

He used his sword to lift Metri's chin so that he was forced to look straight into his eyes. Metri's blue eyes widened with fear. He tried to swallow hard, but his throat was drier than a hot desert wind.

"I will be your faithful dog at your feet Master," Metri said. His eyes never left Rulan's face.

"Good," Rulan said. "Then I will not have to do to you what I did to him." He looked back at Julian's motionless body and sheathed his sword. "Get up."

Metri gave a nervous glance over at Julian's broken body and stood up. He looked again straight up into Rulan's eyes.

"My life belongs to you Master."

His eyes traveled further down his body, taking in his thick, muscled chest and his hard, muscular arms. He felt himself stir in spite of his fear.

Rulan sensed Metri's rising lust and felt his own tool harden in response to the growing desire in his eyes. He did not drop his eyes like most slaves. He met his dark eyes, facing his fear, almost daring him to take him and use him. Only once had a slave dared to look upon him

that way. He had kept him, vowing never to be apart from him, a promise broken only by death's rude intrusion.

Rulan grabbed Metri like a man possessed, suddenly, inexplicably consumed by his need to have *this* slaveboy, though he had used so many this long day. He bent him over the couch and ran his rough hands over the soft skin of his silken ass. His smoothly muscled ass was like luscious fruit begging to be devoured. He rubbed his hard, aching tool against his tight, bubble ass. It would be good to use him here and now.

Metri suddenly felt himself pulled up by his hair and forced to his knees. Rulan grabbed his hair hard in both hands, rubbing his face into his swollen crotch.

"Your ass is so smooth and beautiful boy," Rulan said. He undid his trousers and let them fall to the ground.

Rulan's swollen tool was suddenly inches from Metri's face. He twisted his fingers deep into the slaveboy's blonde hair and shoved his tool deep down his throat. He stroked in and out of his hot wet mouth in hard, violent strokes. Metri surrendered to the brutal use, afraid of what Rulan might do if he showed any signs of resisting.

"Soon I'll use that slaveboy ass hard," Rulan said.

He drove his hips into Metri's face, choking the boy, forcing him to take his thick tool. Metri was helpless in his grip. He grabbed Rulan's ass, hanging on while he stretched his aching lips as Rulan thrust in and out of his mouth, gagging him and banging into the back of his throat. He prayed that he would please him so that he would not meet Julian's fate.

"That's it slaveboy," Rulan said, grinding his hips into Metri's face. "Take it all the way down your throat."

He held himself inside his mouth a few long moments, feeling him gag around his throbbing tool. He stroked in and out of his mouth again in long, slow strokes, holding the back of his head.

“Service me good boy,” Rulan said, breathing hard. He jammed himself into the helpless boy’s mouth in quick, hard thrusts. “Or you’ll end up like the other one.”

Rulan smiled in cruel pleasure at the look of fear and despair that came into Metri’s frightened eyes. The slaveboy opened his aching mouth even wider, taking his throbbing tool deep down his throat. Rulan used him hard, grunting and grinding his hips into his trembling lips, forcing his throbbing tool far down the back of his throat.

Finally he gave one last deep thrust and held Metri’s face still while he pumped hard and fast into him like a rutting beast.

“Your hot slaveboy mouth is making me come,” he said. Hot liquid jetted down Metri’s aching throat, choking him, but he didn’t dare struggle.

“Milk that tool boy,” Rulan said, shoving his tool deep into his mouth. “I better not see a drop when I pull out of your mouth.”

Metri sucked hard, catching every drop of his seed. Rulan pulled out slowly, making him lick the head of his tool clean.

When he was finished with him, Rulan stepped back and pulled his trousers up. Night was falling and Commander Dunlon would be expecting him.

“Come on,” he said, pulling Metri to his feet. “I’m late reporting to that fool of a commander.”

Rulan looked down into the boy’s eyes a moment, waiting. He waited to see if the boy would cry and beg to be left behind after watching him rape the other slave and then being forced

to service him. Had he done that, he would have left him to the mercies of Dunlon's men. He had no use for weakness in a slave. Instead Metri looked up at Rulan, meeting his dark brown eyes unflinchingly.

Rulan returned his gaze with such intensity that Metri's cheeks burned red, but his bright blue eyes did not waver from his.

"You're worth keeping boy. More than just a pretty face. Here, take this," Rulan said.

He removed a chain and a tiny padlock from the pack at his waist and took a ring from his finger. He used the padlock to secure both ring and chain around Metri's neck.

"The ring bears my mark. You will be safe from others."

Metri looked up at him with disbelief. He seemed a different creature than the man who had just used his mouth hard enough to leave his lips puffy and sore. Rulan's mark around his neck would save him from repeated rapes at the hands of the other soldiers. A strange attraction to his compassion and cruelty swelled from deep within him, like a dark tide rising, insistent and irresistible.

At last he found his tongue. "Thank you Sir," he said. His voice came from his painful throat in a low, deep whisper.

"Come on. I'm expected," he said, taking Metri's hand. He led him through the debris, holding him up when he almost tripped and fell.

Outside the Hall of Pleasure, the castle was a din of chaos. Soldiers shouting orders mixed with the screams of men being attended by the army surgeon. The air was filled with the stench of blood and the agonized screams of enemy soldiers. The soldiers showed no mercy to those they conquered. They either surrendered or they were tortured to death.

Metri trembled at the sights and smells that assaulted him. Without thinking, he drew closer to Rulan. He gripped the boy's hand tightly and whispered softly so only he could hear, "Courage, boy. You're safe by my side."

Metri returned his grip and steeled himself against the assault on his senses. He didn't want Rulan to think him a coward.

To distract him, Rulan said, "I will take great pleasure with you in my sleeping furs. How many summers have you seen boy?"

"Nineteen, Sir."

"How many summers have you spent here in the castle?"

They stepped over a man whose right eye was a gaping hole from which blood streamed freely.

"Eight, Sir."

"How many of those summers were spent in service as a pleasure slave?"

"This is the end of my first Sir," Metri said, averting his eyes. The man's moans followed them down the corridor.

"Who did you belong to here in the Castle?" Rulan asked, leading him around the corpse of a man with a metal arrow sticking out of his chest.

"I was in the pen, Sir. I belonged to any of the King's friends who wished to have me," he said. Shame crept into his voice. Rulan noted his shame and filed it away for future investigation.

"Rulan!"

A sharp voice cut through the reigning chaos almost at Metri's shoulder. Metri came up short, almost tripping over a bloody sword at his feet. Rulan caught him effortlessly and turned to the man in the doorway.

Metri glanced up at him a moment before casting his eyes down again. Where Rulan was thick with muscle, this man had the spare, lean look of a crooked thief whose main occupation is staying one step ahead of his friends and enemies. His green eyes burned from his face with the idiot shine of madness, like twin lamps burning too brightly on their way to extinction.

"Commander Dunlon." Rulan placed his fist over his heart in salute.

"You're late Captain. But with such a pretty piece of meat," he said, turning his glaring green eyes to Metri, "I can see why. I'll send the slave to the pens. You can go inside and join the others."

Terror struck Metri's heart. If Rulan let his commander send him to the pens, not even the ring around his neck bearing his mark would save him. He would be raped without mercy, first by the officers then by the other soldiers.

Rulan felt the boy's body trembling at his side and gave his hand a reassuring squeeze.

"No," he said, giving the commander a sly grin. "This one's mine. He's well behaved. He'll sit quietly at my feet. Won't you boy?" he said, giving Metri a rough shake. At the same time he gave his hand another gentle, reassuring squeeze.

"Yes Sir," Metri said in a trembling voice almost too low to be heard.

His eyes were glued to the floor, as if the commander's filthy blood-stained boots held the answer to some arcane secret.

"Very well. You may keep your sweetmeat with you. But be sure he behaves himself."

His glaring eyes crawled over Metri's face and his slender body like a greedy beggar eyeing a fine jewel. He ran his hands over his silky smooth ivory skin and stroked his blonde curls. He grabbed his face, digging his fingers into the soft flesh of his cheeks.

Metri was suddenly forced to look up into that mad face. The commander's straggling red hair fell into his eyes and wandered about his face, like thin vines strangling a wasting tree. In his years here at the castle, he had seen many like this man. He was a Celestia addict, in the early stages of the wasting sickness brought on by overuse of the drug. His hungry eyes took in Metri's swelling, bruised lips.

"I see that you have already sampled your new slut's pleasures. Have a care with him among my men. There are many who would delight in giving discipline to such a lovely prize."

He let him go and turned away from both men without another word. Rulan had killed men for less. But he overlooked Dunlon's show of disrespect. He wasn't worth soiling his sword. Besides, he was surrounded by his fanatical men. Dunlon might be a fool, but he knew how to make men loyal to him. It would be no use to strike in enemy territory against such overwhelming odds. He wanted simply to get his Sun Tokens and get out.

Chapter 2:

“Pay attention boy. Your life depends on it,” Rulan said, leading Metri across the crowded floor of what used to be the royal Banquet Hall.

He spoke in a low, urgent whisper that carried no further than the ears of the frightened slaveboy who walked by his side.

“You have survived so far on your wits and courage. Be brave a few hours longer and your ordeal will be over.”

Metri looked up sharply at that and opened his mouth to beg for his life.

“Be silent and listen!” Rulan hissed impatiently. “You are in no danger from me. But you must make yourself invisible in here. Be silent, no matter what is said. Under no circumstances are you to meet anyone’s eyes. And above all, do not stray from my side boy. If you do, not even I will be able to save you from the savage hunger of these warrior fools. You have seen their commander.”

He fell silent as a drunken soldier stumbled across their path.

“Rulan,” he said. “I heard your company came through with only two men lost and -” He noticed Metri and stopped short. “What a beauty you’ve found,” he said appreciatively. “Is his ass as pretty as the rest of him?”

“Pretty and with a hole tighter than a virgin whore,” Rulan said and broke into loud, raucous laughter with the other soldier.

The soldier thumped his back and shoved a goblet of wine in his face and turned to harangue another soldier. The lie saved Rulan from having to use Metri here in the Banquet Hall and inviting the others to share his prize. Another soldier was headed their way.

“Rulan – look what I found hiding under a bed!”

A man stood before them with a slaveboy whose hands were bound to his feet in such a way that when he walked he was almost doubled over.

“Turn around and show your pretty ass to the Captain, slavemeat.”

He encouraged him with a savage stroke across his exposed back from the thin, supple leather whip he carried. The slave screamed through his gag and turned around miserably.

Metri gasped softly when he saw the huge artificial phallus that had been shoved deep inside the slave’s ass. It was held there by an expertly knotted rope that had been first wrapped around his balls and then wound around him again and again to keep the huge phallus in place.

“When I mounted him, he told me I was too big for him. So I gave him a slave rod to ease his pain!!!”

The soldier found this immensely amusing and laughed so hard he almost fell over in a drunken heap. Rulan raised his huge hand and slapped the slave’s quivering ass, but Metri saw him cup his hand at the last instant. The blow to the slave was impressively loud, but relatively painless.

Rulan’s expert eyes took in the slave’s injury. Blood was leaking from his hole in a slow, steady stream. If the soldier didn’t take the slave rod out soon, the boy would die a slow, agonizing death.

“It may be time for you to see if his portal is wide enough,” Rulan said, laughing as loudly as the other soldier. “Perhaps he is ready now for your mighty tool.” He thumped the other man on the back and gave him his goblet of wine.

“These drunken fools waste good slaveboys for a mere night’s pleasure,” Rulan said to Metri when they were beyond the soldier’s hearing.

His voice was filled with disgust and loathing at the excesses of these fools who fancied themselves soldiers, but he smiled as though sharing a hilarious joke with Metri.

Drunken soldiers greeted them as they made their way across the crowded room, until at last, Rulan found an empty seat at the banquet table. When he sat down, Metri kneeled at his feet and kept his eyes down and his ears open.

“Captains!! Your attention please!!!”

Metri recognized the bellowing voice as that of Commander Dunlon. He banged his fist on the table until the noise at the table settled down to muted conversations.

“We have done well this day. The city of Gunred has been taken and the losses to our men have been minimal compared to that of our enemies.”

“Yes,” a drunken voice cried out. “We hear the pens are full of royal pleasure slaves ready to ease our needs this night!”

The entire company roared with drunken laughter. The Commander gave them a few moments then banged on the table for their attention again.

“We will remain here in the city for two days, then we will return home. A small force will be left to hold the city. To the mercenary Rulan who lent us his knowledge and his strong arm, we raise a toast of good health. You will be richly rewarded as promised.”

Never again will I lead such fools, Rulan thought to himself, standing and raising his goblet of wine with a smile.

Many fists banged on the table as the men roared their approval and gratitude. Metri’s small gasp of horror was lost in the tumult. He had been captured by the mercenary Rulan.

His reputation for savagery and sheer bloodlust was legendary. Names that he’d heard over the years rolled through his mind like images from a fevered dream. Rulan the Ruthless.

Rulan the Terrible. Rulan the Merciless. The Iron Hand of Wrath. It was said that his sword had slaughtered so many, it was permanently stained with their blood.

Rulan sensed the boy's fear and put a gentle, calming hand on his shoulder. Metri felt lost, like a ship caught up in a terrible storm at sea. What would become of him? He suddenly remembered Rulan beating Julian ruthlessly simply because he had challenged him. He swallowed back his fear and turned his attention back to the commander.

“But for tonight, you have all earned a night of revelry and feasting!”

He clapped his hands quickly three times and slaves came in burdened with all kinds of food and drink. Musicians and naked dancing boys followed them.

The naked slaveboys were royal pleasure slaves and their slender bodies trembled as they moved to the music, terrified at being in the hands of enemy soldiers. Metri saw tears slip from one boy's eyes as the soldier beside Rulan grabbed him and forced him to his knees between his legs.

Metri was starving but he didn't dare say anything to Rulan. He didn't have to. Within minutes of the food being served, Rulan put a plate piled high with food on the floor for him. Metri snatched it up greedily and gobbled it down.

Soon food and wine flowed freely and drunken soldiers cavorted with the naked dancing boys, laughing and using them for their pleasure.

Later, the victory feast flowed into the dark corners of the torch lit room. Metri saw vague shadows in the flickering light, silhouetted soldiers using the royal love slaves for their pleasure. Under the sounds of the soldiers grunting in animal pleasure was the sound of the slaveboys whimpering in fear and pain.

Metri was suddenly grateful that Rulan had laid claim to him. Or else he would be one of the slaveboys in the shadows. He wondered if poor Julian was one of the shadowy slaves, being used by the rutting bulls in heat disguised as victorious soldiers.

Commander Dunlon tapped Rulan on the shoulder and said, "Come. We will discuss your payment now."

Rulan gave Metri a seemingly savage kick, but he turned his foot and pulled back at the last moment. Metri made himself go sprawling to the floor, as though the kick had knocked him over. Pleased with the boy's quick thinking, Rulan bent over and grabbed him roughly.

"Get up you clumsy animal."

He dragged Metri to his feet and gave him a wink that went by so fast, he thought he might have imagined it. They followed the Commander into a dimly lit alcove.

"Come in Rulan," the Commander said.

His manner had changed from that of a gruff commanding officer. He used a deferential, respectful tone with Rulan.

He waved him into the small alcove off the main dining room. Metri followed close behind. The torches lining the walls of the small room threw mysterious shadows on the men's faces. Rulan and Dunlon faced each other over a small table. In the center of the table lay a hide bag whose inside had the dull shine of Sun Tokens.

"It's all there, Rulan. Do you care to count it?"

"I have no need," he said, picking up the heavy bag.

It all but disappeared in his huge fist. He had no need to count because the Commander knew that if he cheated The Iron Hand, he would be a walking dead man.

"Two fresh horses and a fully stocked wagon are outside. All is as you requested."

The Commander seemed to be in a hurry to be rid of Rulan. As if being this close to a man who dealt in death and carnage unnerved him.

Metri risked a quick up look at him. Fear crawled over the sharp angles of his leathery face like spiders, weaving webs of anxious doubt. It was almost as if he expected Rulan to draw his sword and strike him down where he stood.

“It’s been a pleasure,” Rulan said, although no hint of pleasure showed in his voice. He turned to go.

“If we should have need of your services again?” the Commander said. He moved around the table, almost but not quite, blocking Rulan’s way out.

“Then you know how to find me,” Rulan said.

The Commander inclined his head slightly, a gesture of respect. Rulan returned the gesture, although only barely, and exited the room into the Banquet Hall.

He went straight to a side passage that led to dark, deserted corridors, and then finally, to the outer courtyard. Outside, fresh horses waited along with a covered wagon stocked with water, food, a tent and other supplies he’d need for the journey ahead.

Metri was relieved to be outside of the castle walls at last. He turned to look at the rising turrets behind him. Those walls had been his prison for the last eight summers of his life. He shifted his gaze up. A sliver of a new moon shone down on them from a star filled sky. After the carnage inside the castle, the outside air smelled as fresh and clean as a spring garden at dawn.

“Get up in the wagon Metri. There’s blankets and such that you can make yourself comfortable with.”

Metri looked up at him in surprise. Nobody had called him by his name for many summers now. He had grown used to answering to names like ‘sweetmeat’ or ‘slavemeat’, and after he was sent to the pens to serve, he became ‘slutboy’.

“What is it?” Rulan looked down at him. “Do you have to relieve yourself before we go?”

Rulan suddenly looked tired and weary, like a slave who’s worked in the fields from sunrise to sundown. Or like a man who’s killed more than his fair share in one day.

“No Master, I - ”

“Don’t call me that!”

Rulan thumped the side of the wagon with a huge fist. It rocked on its wheels. Only one slave had ever earned the right to call him ‘Master’. But the Gods had betrayed him many summers ago and taken away the only love he had ever known.

“I’ve had enough for one day, by the Gods.”

When he saw the fear on Metri’s face, his voice softened.

“You will call me Rulan or Sir.”

“No Sir, I don’t have to relieve myself,” Metri said quietly.

He looked up at Rulan uncertainly, like a man trying to anticipate the next strike of a tightly coiled snake.

“Good,” Rulan said, smiling down at him in the darkness. “Then climb up there.”

Metri, who had escaped his prison at last, decided to risk asking Rulan for a favor. After all, he hadn’t killed him yet.

“I haven’t been out of the castle in a long time Mas – I mean Rulan,” Metri corrected himself quickly. “Do you think I could ride up front with you?”

Rulan looked down at the slaveboy with genuine affection. He was courageous and smart. Which was a lot more than he could say for the buffoons that Dunlon commanded. He passed his fingers gently through his blonde curls. So much like his lost Merik.

“Not in this town. Not tonight. There’ll be other towns. For tonight, in the back with you,” he said.

Metri climbed nimbly into the back of the wagon, giving Rulan a delicious view of his smooth ass under his tunic. He felt himself harden again, despite his exhaustion as he let the back flaps down, tying them loosely. Metri was left in total darkness, like a child inside a womb.

He lay in the back of the wagon, comfortable on a large pile of soft blankets and sleeping furs. As they drove through the gates of the castle, the sounds of the war came through the covered wagon.

The roar of flames was punctuated by the sound of the heavy step of marching soldiers. The sound of drunken soldiers singing in taverns floated out through open windows on the scent of wine. The moans of the wounded and dying hung over everything like a pall of death. Metri was suddenly glad Rulan had spared him more horrors of the war.

That thought brought him back to his own fate. Metri took stock of his situation. He was riding in the wagon of a well known mercenary soldier who murdered and raped for a living, and whose reputation was known throughout the land. Even if he climbed down out of the wagon now, how would he escape the soldiers wandering the streets?

The collar around his neck marked him as Rulan’s property. If he jumped from the wagon through the loosely closed flaps, he would meet one of two fates. Soldiers would find him and return him to Rulan, hoping for a reward. Once Rulan got him back, he would surely

kill him. Or soldiers would find him, use him for their pleasure and then kill him, so that Rulan could not avenge them stealing his property.

Either way, leaving the wagon meant certain death for him. The safest place now was in the wagon, under Rulan's safekeeping. There was a strange, secret part of him that didn't mind the idea of being kept safe by a man like Rulan.

Gradually the sounds of the war torn city fell behind. Soon, they were out in open country and the only sounds were the wagon wheels on the road and the soft sound of Rulan's steady breathing. Metri lay listening to these soothing sounds as his old life fell further and further behind with every turn of the wagon's wheels. As the gentle rocking lulled him to sleep, it didn't occur to him to wonder why Rulan had left him free, unbound in the back of the wagon.

In the front of the wagon, the ugly sights and sounds of war washed over Rulan, slipping with a quiet ease born of experience to the back of his mind. He had seen worse carnage in many other wars, in many other towns. Underneath it all, he listened carefully for the stealthy sound of Metri trying to escape him.

He didn't want to sell him. He had shown such courage and quick wit in the midst of carnage and unspeakable horrors that Rulan felt a growing admiration for him. But if he tried to escape, he would be left with no choice but to sell him to a slaver in the next town. A royal pleasure slave would bring a high price. It wasn't the gold. That meant little to him. His life as a mercenary had amassed him a fortune.

He would sell Metri if he ran because he had long since tired of beating his slaves into submission. Long, bitter experience had taught him that a slave intent on escape could not be whipped into staying. He had no wish to part with his new slaveboy. But he would not force him to stay.

In his younger days, Rulan had killed only in the service of the Gods and their many temples spread throughout the land. He had been swift and efficient in meting out justice as dictated by the Temple of Pelay. Rulan had deserted his vows many summers ago, abandoning the path of the Brotherhood of Wisdom. Or, as he liked to tell his few friends, the Gods had abandoned him. Now the uncertain path of gold led him to fools like Dunlon and scores of others like him. Petty men with petty minds and petty goals who sickened him.

He heard the pattern of Metri's breathing change subtly. Good. He was asleep. He breathed a sigh of relief. He would not have to sell the slaveboy after all. Metri had awakened an old dream of love lost in him, like the soft scent of a blooming rose stirs memories of summers long past.

Hours later, when the new moon had traveled half way across the night sky, Rulan pulled up in front of an Inn. The sudden quiet brought Metri awake instantly. He sat up in the back of the wagon, listening to Rulan's approaching footsteps.

He pushed his face up against the back flaps of the wagon, trying to see where they were. He made out the sign for an Inn – a small house with a lit candle in the front window. He had never learned to read beyond a rudimentary level, so the words 'Hanah's Inn' meant nothing to him. Metri was so busy trying to see his new surroundings that when Rulan undid the back flaps of the wagon, he fell out into his strong arms.

Rulan laughed in genuine amusement when the boy came tumbling from the back of the wagon into his arms, almost knocking him over.

He put him down gently, and said, "We're at Hanah's Inn."

When Metri gave him a blank stare, he said, "About forty miles outside of town."

"Oh," Metri said uncertainly. "Are we staying the night here?"

“Yes. I’m too tired to pitch a tent tonight.”

Metri followed him closely to the Inn’s door. After a lifetime spent in noisy crowded cities, the strange sounds of the wilderness were unnerving.

“Rulan?” The quiver in his voice made the other man pause in the act of knocking on the door and turn around.

“Yes?”

“Where are all the other houses and the other people?”

Metri turned in a small circle as he spoke, peering into the thick darkness surrounding him like a cocoon.

“There are no other people. Except for the Inn, this country is as pure and free as the Gods made it.”

“Then what’s that roaring sound? Is it some kind of wild animal?” Metri said, trying to look everywhere at once.

Rulan cocked his ears and listened for a moment. For him, the roar of the waterfall had blended into the sounds of this place many summers ago.

“A waterfall.”

“Like a mountain of water?”

Metri had heard of such things, but he’d never seen one.

“Yes,” Rulan said, looking over at him. At the mention of the waterfall his eyes sparkled like sunshine on bright blue seas.

“Can we go see it? Please?” Metri said. He was already moving through the darkness, looking for the roaring water mountain.

His enemies claimed that Rulan had no heart. For that matter, they were right. His heart had died with Merik. Or so he had thought until tonight. Metri's carefree innocence touched Rulan's heart like the first rays of spring sunshine melting winter's cold, harsh frost. The boy had already put the day's horrors behind him. And now here, in this vast wild land was something new to be explored.

"Not now," Rulan said with a weary smile. He turned back to the door. "It's late. Besides, the waterfall is dangerous at night. Before we leave. I promise," he said over his shoulder.

He suddenly turned back towards Metri. His face had turned deadly serious. Metri fell back a step, thinking that he had pushed his good will too far.

"You're not to go wandering around these woods without permission. Do you understand me boy?"

"Yes Sir," Metri said, immediately subdued by his suddenly serious mood.

Metri had spent almost half his life learning how to survive the savage wilderness of places like the castle and the brutal politics that went with them. This place of whispering darkness and mountains of water that roared like restless dragons, had a wild, untamed beauty unlike anything he had ever known. Here would be new rules to be learned and mastered.

"Come on," Rulan said, taking his hand patiently. "We must leave early tomorrow and continue our journey."

Metri took one last wistful look in the direction of the water mountain, then turned to follow quietly after Rulan.

Chapter 3:

When he knocked softly on the door, it was opened by a boy who had seen perhaps nineteen summers.

“Welcome Rulan,” he said. He stepped aside and held the door open for them.

“Greetings Hanlon. How have you been?”

“Well Sir,” he said.

He handed him a tall mug of ale. The young man kept his eyes down, as if Rulan were a mighty God whose gaze might turn him to stone.

Rulan sensed his discomfort and treated him kindly. He was miles removed from the man who had beaten and raped a slave viciously in the castle some few hours ago.

“Thank you. Your mother? She is well?”

“Yes Sir. She is also well. What will your companion drink?” he said, turning to Metri and raising his eyes for the first time.

Metri saw superstitious awe and worship in his light brown eyes. As if the young man believed that Rulan was a warrior God who had swooped down from the skies on his golden chariot drawn by fire breathing dragons.

“He will drink from my mug. Is my room ready?”

“All of the rooms are empty now in the planting season. But your room has been kept clean and ready these past few weeks, Sir.”

“Very well, we will show ourselves up,” Rulan said.

He made to move past the boy, but Hanlon jumped into his path as if a snake had bitten the tender cheeks of his ass. He moved so fast that Metri almost bumped into him.

“No! Please Sir. I will show you to your room myself,” he said hastily.

He gave a hurried glance at a dark, empty alcove and a strange expression of fear and grief crossed his face.

“Very well.”

Rulan’s voice was suddenly cold and flat. He put his ale down and placed his hand over the hilt of his sword.

“Stay to my left,” he told Metri softly without looking at him.

“I will see my room now,” he said to Hanlon.

The boy took a candle from a small table in the corner of the room. The flame jittered wildly in his trembling hand.

He led them slowly up the stairs, all the while keeping up a steady stream of meaningless chatter.

“My mother has kept well these many months you have not seen her Sir,” Hanlon said.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Rulan said, drawing his sword slowly from its sheath.

“She says that soon I will be ready to manage the accounts of the Inn.” Hanlon lead them slowly up the winding staircase.

“You’re a very smart boy,” Rulan said.

His sword was in front of him, ready. They were standing on a landing at the top of the staircase. A single torch threw dancing shadows on their faces.

Suddenly two soldiers appeared in front of them where before there had been only shadows.

“Commander Dunlon requests a refund for your services,” one of them said.

“Yes,” the other said. “It seems your advice made great use of the obvious.”

Rulan ignored their talk. “Down!” he hissed to Hanlon.

The boy flattened himself to the ground, instantly merging with the shadows. In the next moment, Rulan's sword gleamed in the torchlight as he swung through a powerful arc that slit one soldier's throat from ear to ear and dealt the other a disabling blow to the shoulder. He turned to run, but Rulan sank his sword deep between his shoulder blades, piercing his lungs. He sank to the ground, drowning in his own blood.

The exchange with the men had been quick and silent. Rulan whirled with the blade high above his head and pushed Metri hard up against the wall.

"Stay," he whispered.

He flowed past Metri like a liquid shadow, his passage swift and silent. Hanlon crept down the stairs and stood next to Metri in the near total darkness, the torch above them hidden by the twisting staircase. Metri took the boy's trembling hand in his own and gripped him with a courage he didn't feel. Downstairs they both heard the scuffs of leather on concrete and then the unmistakable sound of a sword thudding into flesh. That was followed by the meaty sound of a body falling heavily to the ground.

A woman's voice pierced the darkness. "Get this soldier scum off me!"

"Hanlon!" Rulan's voice cut through the gloom. "Come and attend to your mother."

"Coming!" He sprang down the stairs two at a time guided by nineteen summers of memory.

"Metri!"

"Coming Sir," Metri said.

He crept slowly down the stairs in the darkness until he reached the ground floor of the Inn.

It was gradually getting lighter as Hanlon went along the perimeter of the room lighting torches in wall sconces. His hands trembled like dry leaves in a strong breeze.

Rulan walked back into the room. Metri gasped at the blood streaming down his neck, staining his chest.

“Softly,” he said. “It’s not my blood.”

At the sound of his voice, Hanlon ran to him and dropped to his knees.

“Please Sir. It wasn’t our idea. My mother – they said – I had to – please Sir – if you have to kill someone – take me – spare my mother,” he ended miserably, close to tears.

Metri was shocked at the idea that the men would threaten a woman with harm. And Hanlon had to be half mad with fear to suggest that Rulan would harm a woman. He would be hunted down by every warrior in the land, Iron Hand or not. Women were such rare, sacred creatures that the penalty for violence of any kind against them was death.

“Hanlon! Get up off that floor this instant. How dare you insult him that way?”

Metri jumped at the sound of that voice. A matronly woman of wide girth came sweeping into the room like the enraged spirit of a mighty storm. She was nothing like the elegant, soft spoken Priestesses he remembered from his early childhood. The top of her head barely reached Rulan’s chin, but he fell back before her wrath.

“Go softly Hanah. His young heart is no doubt beating it’s way out of his chest,” Rulan said quietly.

Hanah knelt beside her son and he sobbed softly into her bosom.

“I’m truly sorry for the misery I’ve brought upon your house,” Rulan said. Metri saw him look uncomfortable and unsure of himself for the first time.

“Cease your useless chatter,” she said to Rulan. She stroked her son’s head tenderly. “You would have only brought misery on my house if you had let those worthless ruffians harm you or my son.”

“Maybe me and Hanlon could clean the mess upstairs Ma’am?” Metri said.

His disgust at cleaning such a mess showed on his tired face, but he’d taken an instant liking to Hanah and her boy. They reminded him of the temple of his youth. He was angry with the soldiers for bringing such trouble to Hanah’s little Inn.

“Now there’s a young man with sense,” she said, favoring Metri with a soft smile. “Better than the empty headed beauties you usually show up with,” she said, giving Rulan a piercing look. He dropped his eyes first.

“Hanlon,” she said to her son gently, “why don’t you show Metri where the cleaning things are?”

“I’m sorry mother. I didn’t mean to shame you,” he said, looking down into his hands.

“Men. You’re all the same,” Hanah said. She stroked the back of his neck gently. “You’ve shown only great courage. You behaved like a true warrior. Didn’t he Rulan?” she said. She gave him a surreptitious wink over the boy’s bowed head.

“Yes indeed.” Rulan played along with her. “Braver than many I’ve served with,” he said with great seriousness. Considering the buffoon army he’d just left behind, that wasn’t too far from the truth.

“You’re putting me on Sir,” Hanlon said. But Metri could see that he was secretly pleased.

“Go on now,” Hanah said. “Show Metri where things are.”

Filled with the pride of Rulan's compliment, Hanlon came to his feet and said to Metri, "Come on. Back here."

When both boys had left the room, Hanah sank shakily into a chair.

"He is my only child," she said in a small voice.

"He is safe," Rulan said. He laid a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"I love him so," she said. She put her hand on Rulan's and a single tear slid down her cheek.

Hours later, after Rulan had helped the boys clean up, Hanah made them all a large breakfast. By the time Rulan and Metri got to their sleeping furs, the spring sun was peeking over the horizon. Hanah curtained their window with a special dark fabric that made the room dark as night.

Metri had bathed in warm water that came from the ground in back of the Inn. He had never seen anything like it. It had been so hot that Hanlon had warned him not to stay too long in the bubbling waters. He was warm, clean and full and he hadn't slept in almost two days. He slipped between the sleeping furs in their room, and fell instantly asleep.

Half an hour later, Rulan slid into the furs beside him. He ran his big, rough hands over Metri's naked body. He became hard almost immediately and he was desperate to sink into his new boy's tight hole. When he turned Metri gently towards him, he was fast asleep. Rulan sighed and covered him again with the soft furs. He settled down beside him and pulled him close, so that Metri's head rested on his massive chest. Soon he slept as deeply as the boy who rested in his arms.

Hours later, when the sun was about halfway through the sky, Metri's eyes snapped open. For a moment, he thought he was back in the castle next to one of the King's repulsive lackeys.

But then he felt Rulan's solid muscle against him and everything came back to him in a rush. He slipped quietly out of bed and got dressed.

Rulan came awake the instant he felt Metri stir from his arms. He lay perfectly still and kept his breathing steady while he watched the boy dress through barely slitted eyes. When Metri looked towards him, he closed his eyes again and listened to him creep stealthily to the door and open it. He didn't go after him. Not yet. He knew where he was going - the woods were too great a temptation to a boy his age.

If Metri hadn't run away yet, he wasn't going to. He was a natural born slave. Rulan had known that immediately in the castle. That was one of the reasons he had brought the boy with him. Soon he would belong to Rulan body and soul. But along the way, there would be many painful lessons. He turned over to relax in the furs for a little while longer.

Chapter 4:

“Come on Metri. This is one of my favorite places,” Hanlon said.

Metri followed swiftly behind him.

“Here it is,” Hanlon said.

Metri looked puzzled. “What? All I see is a cave.”

“Wait ‘til you see inside,” Hanlon said, stepping into the mouth of the cave.

Inside, the cave was dark and cool. When they had gone a little way, they rounded a curve and the path became pitch black. They were inside a wide tunnel, Metri barely sensed the walls on either side of him.

“Are you sure you know where you’re going?” Metri said. He felt Hanlon’s guiding hand slip into his own hand in the darkness.

“It’s just up ahead. You’ll see.”

In a few more steps, the cave opened into a high domed circle of light. In the center of the open space stood a still pool of water surrounded by clear crystals. Golden sunlight streamed through a natural opening in the domed roof. The forest of jagged crystals around the water broke the sunlight into dazzling colors that splashed on the face of the water and lit up the cave walls like a jeweler’s display of precious stones.

“This is my secret place,” Hanlon said. “I come here a lot after my chores.”

“It’s like a magic kingdom,” Metri said, delighted.

The water reflected the broken light in too many colors to count, like a pool filled with glittering gems. At any moment Metri thought Eh Ler, goddess of the waters might rise with elegant grace from the dark, still depths and grant them each their heart’s desire.

“Can we get in?”

Hanlon looked at his pale skin and soft muscles, doubtful.

“It’s real deep. Can you swim?”

Metri was crestfallen. “No,” he said.

They settled for sitting on the very edge of the natural lake and talking. Hanlon had never been inside a real castle and he begged Metri to tell him stories of life there. Metri, who had never lived outside of a city, listened in fascinated silence to Hanlon’s tales of the woods.

Both boys were so absorbed in their talk that they didn’t hear Rulan’s soft footsteps behind them. He settled down and listened.

“I love it out here. I can teach you everything about the woods. We better get back though. Didn’t you say Rulan told you not to come out here?”

“I’ve been punished before Han,” Metri said. “I’m a slave, remember?”

“What’s it like?”

“What?”

“You know. Being a slave at the castle? My mother says soon my time will come to be Promised to a good Master.”

“It’s pretty bad. You better pray you never get captured and stolen away. Like I did.”

He paused, looking at Hanlon with a steady gaze that made the other boy drop his eyes.

“You want me to tell you about it?”

Hanlon studied the ground, suddenly embarrassed.

“Not if you don’t want to,” he said. “I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

Metri laid a hand on his shoulder gently.

“You didn’t. I’ll tell. It’ll make you mind your mother, that’s for sure.”

A shiver ran through Hanlon as he listened in solemn silence to Metri’s tale of horror.

“I guess the worst part was being treated like an animal. Like I wasn’t even human. The King passed me around like a basket of treats to his friends and lackeys.”

Hanlon’s eyes went wide with shock and disbelief.

“You had to serve whoever he said?”

Metri nodded.

“And if I didn’t please someone, the slavers punished me. Not a whipping. No,” he said. His voice was full of unforgiving anger. “Not for a pleasure slave. It might leave marks, you see.”

“What *did* they do?”

“Depends on the offense. They had cages that you couldn’t stand up in. You’d be like this for hours on end.” He squatted to demonstrate.

“Or they’d lock you up in a room so dark you couldn’t see your hand in front of your face. They left you there, chained to the wall on a chain so short, you couldn’t even sit up. The real horror of that punishment was that each hour seemed like a day and each day was another season in Hades. They let you starve for days while you lay there in your own filth, crying, begging, promising to do *anything* if they would only let you see the light of day again.”

A chill crept up Hanlon’s spine, a liquid fear that seeped into his blood, numbing him like the cold deep waters beneath a frozen winter lake.

“Did they do that to you?”

Metri didn’t answer. Instead he said, “I hated every one of those men I served. I would have killed them if I could. I was glad to get out of that house of sin and corruption.”

“What about Rulan?”

Rulan leaned forward slightly in his position in the darkness behind the boys and listened intently.

“He’s different. He doesn’t treat me like a piece of sweetmeat laying around on a tray.”

Metri looked around the cave, thinking of the wilderness beyond.

“I suppose I could run away if I wanted to.”

“No!” Hanlon said, alarmed. “He’d find you and kill you.” Tears stood in his eyes.

“There are worse horrors than death Hanlon,” Metri said. His eyes suddenly looked as old as the world.

After a long, silent moment he said, “Rulan is a hard man. But he’s a good man. I don’t plan on running from him. I’ll stay around as long as he’ll have me.”

In that moment Rulan knew that Metri would one day surrender completely to him and then he would own him forever. His foot slipped on a pebble as he turned to go. He froze, barely breathing.

Hanlon knew the sounds of his cave like the sound of his own heartbeat. He looked back the way they had come, cocking his head, listening. He thought he might have heard something, but he wasn’t sure.

“What?” Metri said.

He was suddenly chilled at the thought of Rulan coming out here and finding him exactly where he’d told him not to go. His earlier bravado with Hanlon seemed foolish. Worse, it seemed dangerous. Yes, he’d been punished before. But like he’d told Hanlon, Rulan was a hard man.

“You’re right. We better head back,” Metri told a relieved Hanlon.

“Yes,” he said. He got up, turning back the way they had come. “Mother doesn’t like me to be out here after dark.”

Rulan melted further back into the shadows of the cave, pressing himself into the cool stone wall, and let the boys pass him. Then he took a shorter, more dangerous path back through the woods to the Inn that would get him back a few minutes ahead of the boys.

Chapter 5:

When Rulan stepped through the door, Hanah looked up from her work.

“Well?” She said, trying to see behind his massive bulk. “Where are they? I thought you went out to find them.”

“They’ll be along presently. Hanah, I must ask a favor of you,” Rulan said. He hesitated a moment.

“Well? Come on, there’s dinner to see to.”

“I’m going back upstairs. If the boys ask, tell them I’m still sleeping.”

She gave him a shrewd look. “You’re falling in love with this one aren’t you?”

Before he could answer, there was the sound of far off voices drawing closer.

“You’d better hurry upstairs then,” she said.

A few minutes after Rulan had disappeared upstairs, the door came crashing open.

“I won!” Hanlon screamed delightedly.

A winded Metri came straggling in behind him.

“You run like the very wind itself,” he managed between panted breaths.

“Where have you two been?” Hanah demanded. “It’s almost dark outside,” she said, giving Hanlon a narrow look.

“I took him to see my secret cave and - ”

“Metri!”

Rulan’s voice floated down from the top of the stairs.

“Please don’t tell Hanah,” Metri whispered.

He looked up at her with pleading eyes that she found utterly irresistible.

“No one is telling anyone anything. Honestly, this house has more secrets than the cave of the oracle.” Both boys gave her a puzzled look.

“What do you mean mother?”

“Never mind. Go on now,” she said, shooing them away. “You’re both filthy. Clean yourselves up. And Hanlon?”

“Yes mother?”

“Watch what you say. You could get Metri in a lot of trouble. Understand?”

“Yes mother. I’m sorry,” he said, accepting Hanah’s mild rebuke.

“Metri!” Rulan’s voice came again as he came down the stairs.

“Go,” Hanah said. “I’ll deal with him.”

Both boys went to the alcove off the main dining room where a pump supplied fresh, clean water.

“Here now,” Hanah said, going to bottom of the stairs. “What’s all this shouting in my house?” She looked up at Rulan and winked, inclining her head at the alcove.

“Sorry Hanah. Where’s Metri?”

“Getting cleaned up for dinner. How did you sleep?”

“Like an overworked field slave,” he said loud enough for Metri to overhear.

He sat down at a table and accepted the mug of ale Hanah brought him. Later, Hanah served dinner and they all sat down to eat.

“What did you boys do while I was sleeping?”

Panic struck Metri. He almost dropped the plate he was passing to Hanlon. Rulan observed his reaction carefully while pretending to be intent on the window behind Metri.

“They helped me with chores around the place,” Hanah said, covering smoothly for him. “Look at him. The boy probably hasn’t seen sun in an age. He’s as pale as a newborn babe.”

“Pleasure slaves are kept out of the sun. It keeps the skin soft and pale,” Metri said.

In his panic, it was the first thing that had flown into his head.

“I’m sorry Ma’am. I didn’t mean to discuss such things at your table,” he said, looking down at his plate in embarrassment.

“There’ve been much worse things said at my table,” Hanah said. “And by guests much less charming than you.” She laughed gaily.

After that, talked turned to more serious matters. Metri was relieved.

“Those soldiers last night were not Dunlon’s men,” Rulan said.

“But they wore his colors,” Metri said.

“They were renegades. They stole those clothes from dead soldiers. Or perhaps they killed the soldiers themselves. Who knows.”

“Are we leaving tonight then, Sir?” Metri said.

His voice held a note of sadness. He had hoped they would stay longer. He liked the Inn. It was the closest thing to a real home that he had ever seen.

“No. We’ll stay the night and leave at first light tomorrow.”

As they finished eating, Metri became more and more nervous. Rulan had not used him yet on their journey. There had not been time since leaving the castle. But there would be plenty of time tonight. His palms grew sweaty and his heart thudded heavily, like a slave new to the pens.

Hanah and Hanlon began clearing the dishes away.

Rulan saw the look on Metri's face. The boy was no fool and he realized what the night held in store for him. Rulan knew that the longer he was made to lay in bed, waiting to be used, the worse his anticipation would be.

"Metri?" Rulan said when both Hanlon and his mother were beyond the sound of his voice.

He gave a guilty start. "Yes Sir?"

His heartbeat sounded in his trembling voice. He knew he was being foolish. He had served many men before. *But none like him*, an inner voice said.

"Go upstairs, get naked and wait under the furs for me to come and use your slave ass."

Metri had heard such a command many times. But this time, it set his nerve endings on fire with a mysterious heat he had never felt before. His tool rose and hardened between his legs.

"Yes Sir," he said, blushing deeply.

He felt utterly foolish. He blushed like a virgin going to his bridal bed. He got up and walked past Rulan without looking up at him. He climbed the stairs to their bedroom cautiously, like a man leaving the borders of his homeland and crossing into the dangers of unknown territory.

Upstairs, Metri lay naked between the warm furs, waiting. For the first time in his life, he *wanted* to serve. His whole body was alive with a heat he'd never felt before. He was rock hard and what he wanted more than anything was to feel Rulan deep inside him, using him like he'd never been used before. But at the same time he was terrified of the big man.

Ugly pictures of Julian's beating and rape ran back and forth across the darkness behind his closed eyes like colored marbles in a darkened box that refused to lie at rest. By the time the door opened, Metri had worked himself into a state of near terror. Like a fox who feels the hot

breath of the baying hounds on the back of his neck before their sharp teeth rip out his throat. He held his breath and lay trembling in the darkness, caught between the dark twins of fear and desire. His swollen tool jutted from between his legs – hard and ready.

He barely heard Rulan put the oil lamp on a nearby table and then undress over the sound of his pounding heart. He was aroused and terrified all at once.

“On your back boy,” Rulan said. “Spread your legs.”

When Rulan slipped between the furs and caressed him gently, Metri moaned – a sound full of desire fueled by fear. Rulan sensed his fear and used it to his advantage.

“Why are you trembling boy?” he said in a low, menacing voice.

“I don’t know Sir,” Metri said.

His voice bumped up and down to the jagged beat of his heart. Rulan moved between his legs and kneeled over Metri. His big hand encircled his engorged tool.

“What’s this?” he said in mock surprise. “Feels like a hot slaveboy’s tool to me,” he said, sliding his hand up and down in a slow sensual rhythm. Metri’s hips rose and fell to the stroking pleasure of Rulan’s hand on him.

“Tell me what you are Metri.”

“A slave, Sir,” he said.

He was going to make his new boy desperate before he took him for the first time. Rulan’s open hand whipped across his face, a hard backhand blow. But his other hand never stopped that delicious rhythm.

“No. You’re *my* slave now,” he said.

Metri’s body already belonged to him. Soon he would own his mind and soul too.

“Yes Sir.” He was desperate to explode all over Rulan’s hand.

“Tell me what you are boy.”

Rulan’s hand suddenly closed painfully around his tool.

“Your slave, Sir,” Metri said, writhing in pain.

Rulan was different than any man he had ever served. For the first time in his life, he *needed* to feel the hot tool of a real man pounding into him, using him hard. Making him submit out of desire, not fear. He wanted Rulan to enslave him.

“Good,” Rulan said, sliding his hand up and down again.

He ached with a need he had not felt in years. He wanted to take this innocent boy’s sweet hole and pound his will into him until all he could think of was pleasing him and serving him. His hand moved gently to Metri’s balls. The boy moved his hips up and down, helpless against the rising tide of need within him.

“What do slaveboys need?”

“I don’t know, Sir,” Metri said.

His whole body was suffused in a liquid heat of desire. Rulan’s touch made a wild animal hunger roar through him. He needed to be used. He would do anything to feel Rulan’s thick tool pounding his ass hard into the bed, making him submit and writhe around like a desperate animal.

When Rulan slid a thick finger into his tight hole, he almost exploded. He groaned deep in the back of his throat and arched his back with a need so fierce it engulfed him, like a wave crashing into him again and again.

“Mmm. This hole is so hot boy. What do you need right now Metri?”

He slid his finger in and out of his pulsing hole, sending Metri to the edge of desire. Soon Rulan would have what he needed – a willing slave desperate to serve him, eager to submit

and be used for his pleasure. When he sank his throbbing tool into his new slave's ass, Metri would know that he had no choice but to submit to Rulan's will.

"I need to be used Sir," Metri said.

He slid his greedy asshole up and down Rulan's finger in an ecstasy of need and desire.

"Why?" Rulan said, sliding another finger into his wet hole. "Why do you need to be used?"

His fingers slid in and out, making Metri into the desperate animal he was born to be.

"Because I'm a slave Sir," Metri said.

Rulan's calloused hand slammed hard into his face twice, forehand and backhand. He jammed a third finger hard up his ass, making Metri cry out.

"Because I'm *your* slave Sir," he said.

Rulan sensed Metri's deep need to submit and be used as the slave property of another man. Burning hunger rushed through his blood, erupting deep within him like a spring bursting from the dark depths of the earth.

"Tell me what you need boy."

Rulan slid his fingers out of him, and rubbed his aching tool up against Metri's tight, wet hole.

"I need to be used Sir."

Metri moved his ass, rubbing himself against Rulan's hardness.

"Why?"

He put the head of his tool just outside Metri's hole, making him want it. He teased his ass with two fingers until Metri's desperate body writhed mindlessly to the maddening rhythm of Rulan's fingers sliding in and out of him. Metri was forced to admit the truth of his slavery.

“Because I’m your slave Sir.”

Rulan lay full length on top of Metri and twined his fingers deep into his thick, blonde hair. He let the boy feel his hardness between their bodies as he kissed him long and hard.

“How do slaves get used boy?” he whispered into his ear.

“Up the ass Sir,” Metri said in a breathless whisper.

He wrapped his legs around Rulan’s hard ass and ran his hands all over his tight, hard body.

Rulan pushed himself up, kneeling between his legs again.

“You want me to mount you like a bitch and ride you hard? Is that what slaves need boy?” he asked, looking down into Metri’s eyes.

There was no escaping those dark brown eyes boring into him like twin knives seeking the secret truth deep within him. Rulan slid his fingers into the boy’s ass again, setting Metri on fire with a hunger he had never known.

“Yes,” Metri said, panting with his need. “Yes Sir, please.”

“Please what boy? You want me to use you like a slave?”

“Yes, please Sir.” Rulan’s fingers inside his ass were relentless.

“Beg me. Beg me to mount you and use you like a slave,” Rulan said.

Rulan needed to make him submit to his ownership of him. He needed to hear him beg like a desperate animal to be used hard.

Metri submitted to his own dark need. There was no denying the hunger to be used that surged through him, carrying him on a wave of pure animal lust.

“Please Sir. Please use my ass. I need to feel you inside me Sir. Please use your slave’s ass Sir,” Metri said, writhing around desperately.

“You need it bad don’t you boy?”

Rulan’s fingers moved and twisted inside him.

“Yes Sir, please use your slave. I need it bad Sir. I need you to mount me like a bitch. Use me hard,” Metri begged.

Metri’s utter surrender to his will sent a savage lust coursing through Rulan’s blood like a tidal wave of pure, aching need.

“Good slaveboy. I’m gonna pound that ass hard. The way a slave should be used,” Rulan said.

He slid his fingers out of him and reached for the Love Oil he’d put next to the furs. He lubricated his thick, throbbing shaft and moved between Metri’s legs.

“Put your legs on my shoulders boy,” he said and pressed the head of his throbbing tool up against Metri’s tight hole.

“Show me how much you want me inside your tight slave hole. Move that ass around like a good slutboy,” he said.

He writhed his tight, bubble ass around, moaning, aching to feel Rulan inside his hot hole. Metri wanted to be *Rulan’s* slutboy. Rulan had waited as long as he could. He drilled deep into Metri’s delicious hole in one hard thrust. Metri gasped in agony and tried to fight him.

“Don’t fight me boy. Don’t make me hurt you,” Rulan, said pinning his arms to the furs.

He held himself still deep inside his tight hole, and kissed him long and deep. Metri relaxed into the kiss and let his asshole relax.

“Get used to this tool inside your hole boy,” Rulan whispered into his ear. “You’re my property now and it’s your place to serve me,” he said, sliding slowly out of his hole.

He slid almost all the way out, then slid slowly back into his delicious wetness.

“You feel so good boy,” Rulan said.

He slid slowly in and out of him, grinding his balls into the boy’s bubble ass.

“You’re going to make such a good slave Metri. You were born to serve me, weren’t you boy?”

Metri was drowning in a pool of desire and need. He had never known that serving could bring him so much pleasure.

“Yes Sir,” he said. He moved his hips to meet Rulan’s slow, deep strokes.

“Tell me,” Rulan said, sinking deep into him. “Tell me what you were born to do.”

“I was born to serve you, Sir,” Metri said.

He felt like he was floating. Every stroke into his aching ass was ecstasy laced with pain. Rulan’s tool was better than Celestia, the finest drug he’d ever had.

Rulan slapped his face, hard.

“Tell me again boy!” he demanded, sinking hard into his tight hole.

“Tell me what a slave you were born to be.”

He sank into him in short hard strokes, driving his bulk into him, drilling his slavery into him.

“I was born to be your slave and be used by you Sir,” Metri said.

His heart pounded hard in his chest and his whole body pulsated with a hot, primitive need he had never felt before. He felt like his whole life had led to this one moment, here, being used and given pleasure by his lover for the first time in his life.

“Touch yourself boy. Give me the pleasure of seeing my new slaveboy come like a bitch with a hot tool pounding up his ass.”

Metri reached for his throbbing tool and stroked himself. Rulan rammed himself into his tight hole again and again, hammering away at his resistance to his new slavery.

Metri moaned desperately and slid his hungry asshole up and down Rulan's hard tool. The only sounds were the animal grunts Rulan made as he slammed into his new boy's ass over and over and Metri's groans of pain and ecstasy.

"Please Sir, permission to come?" Metri's balls were bursting. His tool was on the desperate edge of exploding.

"Yes boy. Tell me who owns your slave ass, boy," Rulan said, pounding his tight hole harder and harder.

"You do Sir," Metri said.

He exploded all over his hand and his hips shot up and down Rulan's tool in a rhythm of pure animal hunger, taking him deeper and deeper into himself.

"You're mine now boy," Rulan said and shoved his tool hard up Metri's tight ass without mercy one last time. Metri screamed and Rulan released himself deep inside him, pumping hot liquid into his boy hole.

Moments later, Rulan rolled off him and took him into his arms, cradling his head on his broad chest. He kissed the top of his head. Metri wrapped his free arm around him and sighed, deeply satisfied.

They lay like that for a short while before Metri became restless.

"Rulan?" he said, sitting up in the furs.

"Mmmm?" he said sleepily.

"Did you know that I can sound like other people?"

"No, boy. I didn't know that. Show me tomorrow."

He closed his eyes and reached out to gather him into his strong arms.

“What have you two men been doing on my furs? Get up from there this instant I tell you!”

It was such a near perfect imitation of Hanah that Rulan almost jumped out of his skin at hearing her so close to him in this intimate moment.

Metri laughed merrily and said in his own voice, “We made a real mess of her furs. Love Oil everywhere, liquid from us.”

He cleared his throat and her voice came from his mouth again.

“I keep this place clean, I do. I’ll have none of that man stuff on my furs,” he said, shaking his finger in Rulan’s face.

Helpless laughter bubbled up out of Rulan, tears spilled from his eyes, washing away the last of yesterday’s dark horrors. Metri looked down at Rulan in the furs, suddenly serious.

“What is it?” Rulan said, looking up at him.

“You won’t leave without me in the morning will you, Sir?”

Rulan sighed patiently. It would be a long time before Metri could bring himself to trust anyone completely. He pulled him down into the furs and laid his head gently on his chest.

“You will always be with me boy. You’re mine now,” he said, running soothing fingers through his silken curls.

“I’ll never leave you. I promise. Sleep now.”

Metri snuggled closer to him and slipped into a deep, contented sleep.

Chapter 6

The sun's first rays in the eastern sky found Rulan and Metri on their way to the waterfall. Rulan had woken Metri before dawn to keep his promise to the boy.

The sound of the waterfall grew in Metri's ears until it seemed to fill the world. Finally they burst through a copse of trees.

It was the most magnificent thing that Metri had ever seen. Three mountains of water rushed down from high cliffs and splashed into the river below. In the light of the rising sun, the water was a brilliant orange, like liquid fire.

"Take your tunic off boy," Rulan said. He took off his own clothes.

"This is the best way to enjoy it," he said when they were both naked.

A fine mist fell on both of them, caressing their naked bodies with gentle kisses of rain.

"It's like looking at a place in Paradise," Metri said. He was spellbound.

"Yes. I never get used to it," Rulan said. He held his face up to the mist, eyes closed.

"Can we go under the falling water?" Metri said, fascinated.

Rulan led him across a path of stones that led to one of the smaller falls. They stood beneath the falling curtain of water, like two Gods freshly emerged from the underground caves behind the falls. The cool waters ran over Rulan in smooth gentle streams, washing away the anger and sense of betrayal he had carried with him all these summers, like a heavy bag of broken glass slung over his shoulder, cutting into him with memories of what had been.

Metri pushed his head under the water and let it fall into his open mouth, laughing with delight.

Rulan grabbed him and kissed his full lips, tasting his fresh sweet breath of laughter and faith in things to come.

Where the water fell, the rock was worn smooth. He leaned up against the smooth rock, out of the stream of water and pushed Metri gently to his knees. His tool was rock hard, throbbing between his legs. Metri took him into his mouth, caressing his balls gently, and sliding his hot mouth and up down his thick tool.

The water fell on them in a gentle spray while he used Metri's mouth much more kindly than before. He slid in and out of him without hurting him, letting him lick the thickness of his tool with his wet tongue.

"Touch yourself boy. I want you to have pleasure," Rulan said, sliding himself in and out of Metri's willing mouth.

Metri stroked his own throbbing tool, moaning around Rulan in his mouth. Soon Rulan's thrusts became more urgent and he breathed harder.

"I'm coming boy," he said, grabbing Metri's head in both hands and thrusting fast in and out of his mouth.

"That's it boy, take my seed," Rulan said, pumping hot liquid down his throat.

He pulled out of his mouth and played with Metri's nipples while he touched himself. He squeezed and pinched, making him moan desperately.

"Please Sir," Metri said, gasping in pleasure. "Please can I come?"

"Yes boy," Rulan said, pulling hard on his nipples.

Metri moaned as his throbbing tool exploded all over his hand, jetting hot liquid that blended with the soothing waters of the falls.

Metri looked up at Rulan, smiling, then he bent and kissed his feet. At the sight of his naked round ass up in the air, Rulan felt himself stirring again.

“Get up from there boy or we won’t be leaving ‘til lunchtime.”

Metri laughed and sprang up, quick as a shooting arrow, and raced across the slippery stones to their clothes on the river bank. Rulan followed, fear thrilling through him, stabbing his clenching gut like lightening rods of fire. He knew that there was no way Metri could have learned to swim at the castle, but the boy seemed utterly unconcerned, leaping from rock to rock, laughing happily. He slipped and Rulan’s breath caught in his throat.

In the sun dappled waters of the swiftly flowing river, his eyes played a cruel trick on him. Beneath the roiling waters, for a fleeting moment, he thought he saw the ghostly white face of his lost Merik, sinking peacefully into the dark depths. He readied himself to dive into the deep waters after Metri, but the boy recovered his footing and raced on to the river bank.

When he caught up to him on the river’s edge, Rulan grabbed him and whirled him around with such violence that Metri’s arm was sore for days afterward.

“Are you crazy boy?”

Metri looked up at his face, pale with anger, genuinely surprised.

“What’s wrong?” he said, alarmed that he had angered him.

He looked close into his eyes and saw anger and fear writhing across his face like restless snakes seeking prey. Rulan’s open hand crashed into Metri’s face, a hard backhand that sent him reeling across the grass.

“Did you suddenly learn to swim during the night boy? Or have you grown fins? You ran over those rocks like nothing would happen to you if you fell in.”

Metri sensed that this was about much more than him running across rocks in a river. He rubbed his stinging cheek in silence, looking up at Rulan. Finally, he spoke, choosing his words carefully.

“But Rulan,” he said in the patient tones of an adult explaining the obvious to a child, “you were here. You wouldn’t have let anything happen to me.”

There it is, Rulan thought. As simple and easy as that. Metri’s utter faith in him to protect him from whatever might come was as certain to him as his knowledge that the sun must rise in the east each morning.

“Well have a little less faith next time. You almost stopped my heart boy.”

Metri smiled up at him, his face bathed in the rising sun like a forgotten promise of light returning at last. Rulan ruffled his wet hair and let it go at that.

He supposed that he had forgotten what it was like to have a slave like Metri. Some men liked slaves who bowed their heads in fear, trembling at their every word. Rulan was not such a man. He liked a slave who met life unafraid, refusing to give in to his own inner fears. Such a slave was a great challenge to own, but their submission was worth infinitely more than that of a cowering, simpering weakling.

When they were both dressed, they headed back to Hanah’s to say their goodbyes. Back at the Inn, they packed what little they had unpacked and put everything back in the wagon. After breakfast, they were ready to leave.

“Take good care,” Hanah said, looking up into Rulan’s eyes. Her gaze shifted to Metri. “And take good care of him.”

The three of them were outside alone, Hanlon had refused to come and see them off. He was sad to see Metri and Rulan go. He did not wish to shame himself with tears again.

“I will Hanah. I’ll pass by next time I’m this way. Take good care. Gods be with you,” Rulan said.

He mounted up into the front of the wagon and took the reins of the horses.

“Bye, Ma’am,” Metri said, looking down at Hanah from his place in the front of the wagon. “I liked your Inn a lot. Please tell Han I said bye.”

“I will Metri,” Hanah said, waving to them as their wagon got underway. She stood and watched them disappear down the path into the thick forest.

They drove the horses at a gentle trot most of the day.

“Will I be able to get down soon?” Metri said, looking around at the endless forest. He cocked his head.

“I hear water Rulan. Is it another waterfall?”

“No, just a river,” Rulan said, pleased.

The subtle sounds of the forest were difficult for a life long city dweller to hear. The slow flowing river was a soft sound under the busy secret sounds of the forest. He was impressed that Metri heard it over the wagon wheels.

“River?” Metri said.

He peered so intently into the thick trees that he almost fell out of the wagon.

“Can I get down now? Please? Can we see the river?”

Metri had driven Rulan nearly to distraction with his unending pleas to get down and walk through the forest.

“Metri, let this be the last time I tell you no. If you ask again, you will ride the rest of the day in the back.”

“But Rulan - ”

“Blindfolded,” Rulan said ominously.

“Alright,” Metri said, relenting.

He sat back quietly, watching the broken sunlight fall through the leaves of the ancient trees. Rulan glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. Metri was almost comical in his effort to contain himself.

During the twenty days it took them to get to Shanara, Rulan discovered that Metri was a natural born woodsman. When he showed him the ways of the forest, he took to it like a wild innocent creature born to the woods. They fell into an easy rhythm of traveling from dawn until the sun reached its midpoint in the sky. Then Rulan found a campsite and Metri’s lessons of the forest began.

As the days passed, his weakened muscles became smooth and supple and his pale skin tanned deeply. Soon Metri learned the secret ways of the woods and his fear of getting lost among the vast trees faded. He spent his days running through the green wilderness with wild abandon. At night, Rulan captured him and they spent their nights making love like animals, then fell asleep in each other’s arms under the stars.

“Shanara is just over the next rise,” Rulan said one day when they made their midday stop. “We will stop in their marketplace for supplies.”

“Okay,” Metri said agreeably. “Can we get sweetmeats?”

Rulan smiled. Sweets were definitely Metri’s weakness. He would have to watch him carefully in the market.

“Of course boy.”

As they rode into Shanara, Rulan gave Metri strict instructions.

“Cities can be just as dangerous as forests Metri.”

“I grew up in one, remember?” Metri said.

His attention was split between Rulan’s words and the sights and sounds around him.

Rulan grabbed his face and slapped him hard. “Pay attention boy. This is important.”

“Sorry Sir,” Metri said, rubbing the side of his face.

“You grew up in a castle inside a city. You were always under royal protection. This is different. Under no circumstances are you to leave my side.”

He grabbed Metri’s face again in a painfully tight grip.

“Do not wander off Demetrius. Do you understand me?”

His voice was low in his throat, almost a growl. He never called Metri that. The boy nodded, afraid to say anything that might anger his Master.

“Good boy,” Rulan said. He got down and secured the horses.

Metri was used to the clean, orderly marketplace on the grounds of the castle. By comparison, the market of Shanara was a chaotic confusion of merchants and customers haggling over merchandise in decrepit stalls shoved up close to each other like old men crouched in the rain.

“Come on,” Rulan said. “We need food, a blanket to replace the one you lost in the river and an extra water skin.”

“And sweetmeats?” Metri said hopefully.

“And sweetmeats,” he said, heading down the main concourse of the market.

The blanket merchant was a friendly man who moved with all the speed of a snake sunning comfortably on a river shore. He folded and unfolded his wares with slow care, all the while keeping up a steady stream of chatter with his customers.

“No. Come now. If I sold things at that price, I would go begging,” he said, haggling with a customer examining his blankets.

Metri quickly grew bored and let the conversations slip to the back of his mind. Down the crowded concourse, he spotted the bright red canopy of a sweetmeat merchant. Rulan’s warning came back to him. He glanced quickly at him, but he was deep in negotiations with the blanket man. They both seemed to be enjoying themselves, shouting back and forth, insisting on getting a fair price.

Sweetmeat merchants always gave away free samples. He could be down there and back before Rulan missed him. Metri gave one last quick glance at Rulan, then faded back into the people around him.

He headed off, a beautiful enthusiastic boy with blonde curls the color of the sun. He was completely unaware of the hungry stares that followed in his wake. Alone and unprotected in the marketplace, Metri was like a lamb who had stumbled into a den of wolves.

“What do you think of that one boy?”

When Metri didn’t answer, Rulan turned to find him, but the boy was nowhere to be found. He dropped the blanket he had been bargaining for.

His brow darkened with anger as he strode through the market looking for Metri, examining the customers at all the booths he passed. Metri’s diet had been severely restricted at the castle. Now he sought out sweetmeats like a child. Of course. There he was. Rulan’s eagle eyes spotted his blonde curls at the stand of a sweetmeat merchant.

Rulan walked up in time to hear the merchant talking to Metri.

“You like it boy?” the man said.

His eyes crawled busily over Metri's body, paying special attention to his tight, round ass which was almost visible in his short tunic. But Metri was too busy nibbling a sweetmeat to notice.

Rulan studied the short fat man carefully and suddenly recognition dawned. Aldon the black market slaver. He recognized him from slave auctions. He'd seen him getting merchandise for the auctions on other occasions. He lured boys with sweetmeats laced with the Morfeus herb. No doubt accomplices waited inside the tent behind him ready to subdue unwary victims.

"My best meats are inside," Rulan heard Aldon say. "We're having a sweetmeat eating contest today. You're welcome to sample the meats to be used. Free of charge, of course."

Aldon didn't know how he had lucked into a sweet piece like this boy, but he thanked the Gods. He would bring a good price at auction. He looked like he might be a royal pleasure slave. He might make more money if he returned him to his owner. They would probably mutilate him. Cutting off the toes of runaway pleasure slaves was a common punishment, but that was not his concern.

"Would you like to sample my meats inside?" Aldon said, reeling in the catch.

"Put that down boy!" Rulan said, coming forward. He knocked the sweetmeat from Metri's hands.

"Rulan!" Metri said. He looked up at him, guilty and frightened. "I'm sorry Sir. I was coming right back."

All at once he saw the anger that darkened Rulan's face and he became silent and watchful. Rulan ignored him for the moment, turning to Aldon.

“This one is mine. See to it that you and your sort know his face well. Make sure they know that the Iron Hand of Wrath will hunt down any slaver who steals his property.”

“Rulan, my friend,” Aldon said in a voice breathless with fear.

His fat face had paled under Rulan’s threat. His ringed fingers ran nervously through his long coarse hair, scattering it like windblown straw.

“You wound me. The boy looked lost. Wandering around the market, he was. He looked hungry.”

Aldon’s words spilled from his mouth in a nervous rush. Rulan’s hatred of black market slavers was legendary.

“I merely offered him refreshment,” he said.

He clamped his mouth shut against the stream of half-nonsense that threatened to slip out endlessly.

“Then you were not stealing my property?”

“No,” Aldon said, as if surprised that Rulan would think such a thing of him. “Of course not.” He gave him his most ingratiating smile.

“Good,” Rulan said, resting his hand thoughtfully on the hilt of his sword.

“Because had that been the case, I would have slit your fat stinking guts wide open.”

He turned on his heel, back the way he had come, dragging a shocked, unresisting Metri with him.

Rulan’s fingers dug into Metri’s arm painfully as he dragged him into an alley near the end of the marketplace. In the alleyway, he grabbed his tunic and pulled him close until their faces were only inches apart.

“Do you have any idea who that was boy?” Rulan said through clenched teeth.

The burning fury in Rulan's eyes almost unhinged Metri's knees. If his tunic had not been caught in Rulan's fist, he would have simply melted to the ground in a boneless heap.

"N-n-no Sir," he said and swallowed hard.

"A slaver!" Rulan yelled into his face. Metri paled.

Rulan shoved him hard into the wall. Now his bulk towered over Metri and he felt like a mouse hidden in the shadow of an angry God.

"That's right boy. A few more bites and you would have been on your way to a slave auction Gods only know where."

Rulan's hand crashed into Metri's face, a cruel backhand that sent the boy spinning. In the instant before he was knocked to the ground, he saw something unexpected in Rulan's eyes: fear.

He's afraid to lose me, was Metri's last thought before he went sprawling to the ground. He had waited a long time to be owned by a man like Rulan, but his new Master's anger terrified him. He heard Rulan coming for him and curled his trembling body into a protective ball.

Rulan stood looking down at him, breathing hard. Rage boiled through his veins like idiot fire, inflaming his reason. And beneath the anger ran a fear he had not felt for a slave in almost eleven summers. The fear of losing Metri gnawed at his raw nerve endings like sharp toothed rats devouring fresh meat. He had the nearly irresistible urge to kick the trembling boy at his feet into the wall over and over again screaming 'Never disobey me boy! Never!' at the top of his lungs until his voice gave out.

At his feet, Metri sensed his wild urge to tear him limb from limb and he whimpered in his terror like a frightened animal.

“Please don’t hurt me Sir,” he said in a fractured voice that rose and fell to the fear crazed rhythm of his heart.

At the pathetic sound of Metri’s quivering voice, Rulan’s anger broke like a fevered delirium. In that moment, he knew that Hanah was right. He was falling in love with Metri.

“Get up from there boy,” he said. “No one’s going to hurt you.”

He squatted low to the ground and reached for Metri. But he cringed from his touch as if the meaning of Rulan’s words had not penetrated his terror. He stroked the boy’s body gently, murmuring soothing words. Long minutes later, Metri finally sat up and looked up at him, ashamed.

“If you had not come, that man would have - ” He lowered his head, unable to continue.

“But I *did* come. You’re safe now.”

“Are you going to sell me?”

Metri could not keep the question from escaping his traitorous lips. Tears slipped from his lowered eyes.

“I’ve been so much trouble to you. First the waterfall, now this. I’m sorry Sir.”

Rulan sighed patiently. He never used the threat of selling his slaves. He liked his lovers to obey him out of love, not fear. He found no honor in using a slave’s fear of abandonment against them.

He looked down at the top of Metri’s bowed head. He understood the minds of slaves, so he knew that many times logic played no role in their thinking. It didn’t occur to Metri that Rulan could have sold him to Aldon instead of rescuing him.

“No boy, I’m not going to sell you. But when we get back to the woods, I’m going to whip your ass for disobeying me and wandering off.”

Metri looked up into his eyes, frightened. He had never been whipped. He had seen house slaves and others get the whip, but he had never felt the biting sting of leather on his flesh. He had heard from others that it was horrible.

“You have never felt the whip, have you boy?” Rulan said, looking into Metri’s wide, frightened eyes.

The boy shook his head slowly back and forth, as if it was something too terrible for words.

“Well, you are no longer a pleasure slave, boy. Your pleasure is serving me now. And tonight, that back of yours will have plenty of stripes to show for your disobedience.”

Metri tried to control his fear. He was Rulan’s property now. He had disobeyed and tonight he would be punished. All was as it should be. He tried, but all he could think of was the slaves he had seen with blood flowing from their backs. The memories filled him with a creeping horror that made the sweetmeats curdle in his stomach.

“It won’t happen again, Sir,” he said in a faint, anxious voice.

“I know it won’t boy. Because after tonight, you will think twice about disobeying me.”

Rulan watched Metri carefully. His face was queasy with fear. Good. That was just how he wanted him. As the day wore on, his terror would strike him over and over again, cutting him deeper than any whip Rulan could use. By the time they reached the woods tonight, Metri would be terrified beyond words.

“Come on boy,” he said, putting his hand out to Metri. “We came into town to get supplies. So far we have nothing.”

“Yes Sir,” Metri said, taking his hand.

Chapter 7

Their first stop in the market was a dealer in slave supplies. Whips of every conceivable shape and size hung from the front of the stall. Even though Metri tried not to look at them, his helpless eyes became riveted on the whips, like a condemned man whose eyes cannot look away from the hanging rope. In his fear, he thought Rulan meant to buy a whip and punish him then and there.

To his great relief, he bought a leash instead. Metri despised leashes. Back at the castle he had fought like a wild animal and endured many punishments for his refusal to be leashed.

He tried to stop himself, but before he knew it, his lips had betrayed him.

“Sir, please, I hate leashes,” Metri said.

He regretted his words immediately. Had there been a God of Idiots, he would have uttered a silent prayer to him.

“What was that boy? Were you telling me how you’re going to submit obediently to the leash? Or have you forgotten how much trouble you’re in already?” Rulan said. He gave Metri a hard look.

Metri’s gut clenched and tightened painfully at Rulan’s mention of his whipping. Fear prowled through his mind like a hungry predator, stalking him, shadowing his every thought. He submitted to the leash meekly, lifting his chin for Rulan to attach one end to his collar. The other end went through a metal loop on the thick leather belt Rulan wore around his tunic.

“This is what happens to disobedient slaves, boy,” Rulan said.

He turned and walked down the crowded concourse. Not trusting himself to speak, Metri followed silently behind his Master.

It took them the rest of the day to get their supplies. By sundown, they were heading for the woods to find a campsite for the night. After they had set up camp and eaten, Metri cleaned up. They sat quietly by the fire. Metri's nerves were on edge, waiting for Rulan to speak of his punishment.

“You disobeyed me today boy,” Rulan said quietly.

He was staring into the fire. Metri tried to read the expression on his face, but the dancing firelight made it impossible.

“Yes Sir,” Metri said. He had never felt so afraid.

“Get some stones from the river. Make sure they are all round and smooth.”

Metri did not know what Rulan was up to, but he knew that his punishment was about to begin. He got to his feet and walked with slow reluctance to the river.

“Do not keep me waiting too long boy. Or it will be worse for you,” Rulan called after him.

He settled down by the fire to wait for Metri. A short while later, his sharp ears picked out the sound of Metri's returning footsteps.

“Here Sir,” Metri said, emptying both of his hands at Rulan's feet.

Rulan stood up and said, “Kneel. Here.” He pointed to a place in the dirt at the edge of the firelight.

Metri's heart thumped hard in his chest and tears of fear pricked his eyes as he obeyed. Rulan placed two small stones by Metri's knees, like markers.

“Okay boy. Up.”

Metri sprang to his feet, thinking that Rulan had changed his mind about the whipping.

Rulan squatted close to the ground where Metri's knees had left two small impressions in the soft dirt. Using the two stones as markers, he slowly filled the shallow holes with stones.

"Strip," Rulan said without looking up from his work.

Metri suddenly understood what the stones were for. *Oh Gods, no*, he thought.

"Please Sir, I - "

"You will strip now!" Rulan barked, looking up at him sharply.

There was no denying that command. Metri understood that if he continued to defy him, his punishment would only be worse. He slipped his tunic over his head with the solemn slowness of a condemned man baring his neck for the sword. Metri stood watching Rulan, a naked, trembling boy in the firelight.

"Come here," Rulan said.

Metri took the few steps separating them.

"Kneel here, on the stones."

Metri slid slowly to his knees. Before tonight, he would have thought it impossible for anyone to be as frightened as he was at this moment and live.

Rulan moved behind Metri, walking away. Again, Metri allowed himself one last desperate hope that his whipping had been canceled. He prayed that his punishment would end with the slow agony of the stones digging into his knees. But no, here came Rulan's shadow, and from his shadow hand hung the longest whip Metri had ever seen. The flickering firelight distorted it, bent it, twisted it into some horrible instrument of torture from the darkest depths of the underworld.

"Hold your hands out boy. That's it. Palms down, like a bird about to fly."

Metri obeyed, his heart thumping hard in his chest like the great god Thor at work with his mighty hammer.

Rulan walked around in front of him.

“Look at me boy,” he said.

Metri’s helpless eyes fell instead on the thick round leather whip hanging from Rulan’s hand. It was made of three strands of leather braided together that tapered almost to a point. His eyes traveled up Rulan’s well-muscled arm and met his cold eyes at last.

There was no mercy in those eyes. As if Rulan the man was gone and Metri was here in these dark lonesome woods with the Iron Hand of Wrath. Metri’s arms, which had grown stronger since he had left the castle, were still relatively weak and they began to ache with the effort of staying up.

“You will learn to be obedient unto me tonight,” Rulan said, looking down into Metri’s eyes filled with unshed tears.

“You will remain like that, with your arms out and your knees on the stones. Whenever your arms fall to your sides, you will be whipped until they return to this position. If you get up and try to escape your punishment, I will tie you to a tree and whip you until you bleed. Understand boy?”

Metri nodded, not trusting his traitorous tongue. He was afraid any word he uttered would end in a scream. Silent tears slipped from his light blue eyes down his soft cheeks.

Rulan leaned on a tree behind Metri and waited. His tool was rock hard. After his whipping, he was going to rape Metri’s ass while he kneeled on the stones. When a slave was well-behaved and obedient, he controlled the dark fire that burned deep inside him like an underground well spring, running through his blood, waiting to be ignited.

“Do your arms hurt boy?” Rulan said from behind Metri.

“Yes Sir,” Metri said.

His arms trembled and ached fiercely, sending throbbing pain to his shoulders and back. He knew they would drop any moment now. He fought desperately to keep them up, dreading the inevitable moment when they would fall and he would feel the whip for the first time.

“Who do you belong to now Metri?”

“To you, Sir.”

“Say it!” Rulan demanded.

“I belong to you Sir,” Metri said through his tears. His trembling arms fell to his sides. Metri’s gut clenched in anticipation of the whip.

Rulan walked up behind him and slowly raised the whip over his head. He felt the boy’s terror running through him like great violent waves, crashing into the wall of his reason. Soon terror would wear his reason thin. He would whimper and beg at Rulan’s feet, ready to submit, willing to be raped if it meant an end to the whipping. The moment he surrendered to Rulan’s will, he would become his slave property, fit to be owned, both body and soul.

Metri saw the great shadow whip rise over his head and suddenly his body was coated in a cold, slimy sweat, making him shiver in the cool night air.

He saw the whip descending to his shadow self and it seemed to fall as slowly as a feather falls to earth. In that endless moment before the whip bit into his flesh, urine spurted from him in a desperate rush, like a virgin slave squirting his seed.

Rulan brought the whip down hard across Metri’s back. Every nerve in his body exploded in agony and he screamed like a condemned soul enduring the torments of Hades. Bright red welts stood out on his back.

He brought the whip down again and again in short hard strokes that cut into Metri's back and ass like razor blades of pain.

Metri would have done anything, said anything to escape the tormenting agony searing into him.

"Are you going to disobey me again boy?"

"No Sir," he said, sobbing.

The whip came down again, on his shoulders this time. Short quick strokes that cut into him like knives with rusty blades. Metri screamed himself hoarse.

"You had better get those arms back up boy," Rulan said.

Metri's arms ached and throbbed in their sockets. He lifted them again with all the concentration of a man pushing brutally heavy iron weights uphill. They were all that stood between him and Rulan's whip. He stayed that way, sobbing uncontrollably, feeling the stones dig into the tender skin of his knees.

Rulan leaned against the tree again and looked at the marks on his slave's back.

"What are you now boy?" Rulan said from behind him.

A terrified Metri jumped at the sound of his voice.

"I can't hear you boy," Rulan said, taking a step toward the kneeling, terrified boy.

"Your slave, Sir!" Metri screamed in hysterical fear. "Please Sir, I'm sorry, please," he pleaded between his sobs.

"Please what boy?" Rulan said in a cold voice. "Do you know how easy it would be to kill you out here?"

"Please - "

"That's it boy. Beg for your worthless life. *Beg* me not to kill you."

“Please don’t kill me Sir,” Metri begged, sobbing. “Please. I’ll be good. Please.”

Metri had been waiting for this moment since they left the castle together. He had known Rulan would grow tired of him.

“Or maybe I’ll tie you to a tree and leave you for the animals. You wouldn’t make much more than a morsel for them. I suppose they would fight over you, tearing your flesh from your bones.”

“No!” Metri screamed. “Please, I’m sorry.”

“That’s what I’ll do boy. I’ll whip you bloody then I’ll leave you out here for the animals to feed on you.”

“Please don’t Sir. Please,” Metri begged, sobbing like a condemned man.

His heart galloped hard in his chest, knocking like a hell bound soul breaking down the gates of Paradise.

A primitive hunger lived within Rulan, like some barely tamed beast that fed on pain and fear. When he allowed that beast to feed on downright terror, it gave him a high like nothing else he knew.

“But I suppose the rats will get you first,” he said to the terrified boy. “They’ll crawl all over you, licking the bloody wounds the whip will leave on your back. Their sharp little teeth will devour your live, screaming flesh until they eat their way through your eyeballs into your brain.”

Metri shook his head back and forth madly. Foam flew from his lips in an ecstasy of terror. He did not exactly scream. The sound was more like the low moaning of a desperate, frightened animal caught in an inescapable trap.

The pain in his arms cut into him, tormenting him with a sharp throbbing ache that pulsed up and down his trembling limbs with every beat of his heart. He fought with a desperation born of need to keep his tortured arms from falling to his sides. But gravity won, and they fell again.

He heard Rulan coming and when he saw the shadow whip rise he sprang to his feet and ran as fast as he could, pursued by thousands of rats with sharp hungry teeth that glinted in the moonlight.

But that happened only in his harrowing thoughts, where terror had fused the world of his inner mind with reality. It took every ounce of his will not to get up and run from that coming whip.

Rulan brought the whip down on his back again.

“You’re *my* slave now boy. And you *will* obey me.”

He whipped him again, raining blows on his shoulders and back. Metri screamed like a new born babe freshly come into a world of horror and pain.

“I don’t see those arms coming back up boy,” Rulan said, bringing the whip down again. Metri screamed horribly, begging for mercy.

He brought his trembling, aching arms back up. He knew it would not be for long. Nauseating pain wracked him from head to toe. His back throbbed like a rotten tooth. Pain shot up from his knees, exploding and bursting through his trembling legs.

Moments later his arms fell again. This time when he saw the shadow whip rise, he had no urge to run. Metri was beyond that. Instead he bent his head to the ground and crossed his arms to his chest, hugging himself like a long lost lover.

“Please don’t kill me,” he said again and again.

He chanted those words in his broken voice like a mantra of protection. He was frightened for his life, and the stink of fear rose from him like a black cloud of despair.

Rulan brought the whip down on his exposed ass again and again. He screamed, like a madman screams when he sees the face of the devil in the nightmare depths of sleep. His agonized screams pierced Rulan's heart, although Metri did not know it. He did not like to hear his boy scream like that, but disobedience was all the excuse he needed to indulge his darker needs, and let the beast within feed. When he loved his slave, as he loved Metri, the feast was always bittersweet, tempered by love.

Rulan looked down at Metri huddled on the stones, sobbing, frightened beyond his senses. His welts were not bleeding yet, but if he continued, blood would soon flow. He felt the boy's will break and he stopped. He did not want him completely broken. He demanded only one thing from his slave lovers, utter obedience. Seeing Metri like that, utterly surrendered to him, made Rulan's tool throb so hard it ached.

"That ass looks nice boy," Rulan said, taking his trousers off.

"Please don't kill me," Metri begged over and over again, sobbing pathetically.

He kneeled, his round, welted ass trembling in the firelight, waiting for what would come next. Rulan kneeled behind Metri and put his throbbing tool just outside his hole. He grabbed the boy's welted ass in his hands. He had no intention of killing him. He had terrorized the boy because he liked the feel of a terrified slaveboy's quivering hole grabbing his hungry tool.

"You're mine boy," he said.

He forced his swollen tool deep inside his tight hole in a single furious thrust. Metri screamed, but he did not try to escape. He submitted to Rulan's rape, sobbing. Rulan used him brutally, every stroke grinding Metri's knees into the stones painfully.

Rulan grabbed Metri's welted ass in both of his hard, calloused hands and kneaded his tender, abused flesh while he used him. The boy whimpered in pain through his sobbing tears. His tight hole quivered around Rulan's hard tool drilling into him. Metri's quivering hole nearly drove Rulan mad with desire. He slammed into the boy again and again, like a desperate animal rutting with a bitch in heat.

"Don't *ever* disobey me boy," Rulan said, slamming himself into Metri again and again.

He used him with such force that the boy slid along the ground, tearing the soft flesh of his knees.

"You're *my* slave property now," he said, pumping him hard and fast.

Rulan gave one last mighty thrust and pumped his essence deep inside Metri's agonized hole. When he got up, Metri fell over on his side sobbing, curling up into a ball in the dirt.

Rulan picked him up, ignoring Metri's weak struggles.

"It's alright now boy. I'm done with you," he said.

He brought the sobbing boy close to the fire and looked at his knees. He gently wiped the dirt from Metri's wounded knees and applied an herb ointment he had brought from the wagon earlier. They were superficial cuts. The ointment would help them heal quickly.

He carried him to the sleeping furs and put him down, covering him. Metri curled up into a ball with his welted back to him, sobbing. Rulan returned to the fire and sat quietly, listening to Metri sob himself to sleep.

Later, when the fire had burned low and Metri's sobbing had eased into the regular breathing of sleep, Rulan slipped naked into the furs beside him. Metri moaned and whimpered in his sleep, fighting the demons of his inner mind.

Rulan gathered him tenderly into his arms, and ran soothing fingers through his hair. Metri turned in his sleep and curled himself into his arms, resting his head on his solid chest.

“That’s right boy,” Rulan said. He caressed his face and kissed the top of his head. “Sleep easy now.”

Metri slipped into a deeper sleep where he dreamed of fields of yellow flowers like oceans. He sank deeply into the ocean of flowers and slept in the warmth of the perfumed earth.

“It has to be this way boy,” Rulan said, running his hand over the welts on Metri’s back.

A long while later, Rulan fell into a troubled sleep and dreamed of his lost love. Each time the dream was the same. Each time he knew Merik would drown, and each time he sat on the shore, paralyzed, watching helplessly as the current pulled his boy’s fragile body down into dark eternal depths.

He woke just before dawn, his eyes burning with unshed tears and looked down at his new love asleep peacefully in his arms. He vowed never to lose this one.

Chapter 8

Five days later Metri's back was healing nicely, but it itched horribly. Because of his back and his sore ass, Rulan made him ride on his belly in the covered wagon to protect his healing back from the strong sun. The first two days, Metri cringed in fear whenever Rulan came near him.

Rulan pretended not to notice. He spent the days telling stories of the great battles of the Gods as they journeyed to Saphyra while Metri listened in uncharacteristic silence. Each night Rulan spread healing ointment on Metri's back, his ass and his knees.

No matter how gentle Rulan was, applying the ointment always hurt the boy, especially in his hole. After the ointment, Metri curled up into a ball and cried himself to sleep. On the third night Rulan's gentle persistence was rewarded when Metri let him hold him gently when the pain drove him to tears. Rulan knew then that he had won. Soon his whipping would be a dim memory, awakened only by Rulan's anger or displeasure.

Metri slowly forgot his fear of him and went back to driving him mad with questions. He preferred that to his past lovers who had cringed in terror if he so much as looked at them after a whipping.

By the fifth day, the boy was almost back to himself. He poked his head out beside Rulan and pestered him to tell him stories about all the far off places he had seen.

“Do they really wear animal dung in Narah?”

“Yes boy, they really do.”

“Why?”

“To attract a mate. The women smear it on themselves and dance naked on one side of the river while the men look on from the other side.”

“Who can blame them for watching from so far away.”

That made them both laugh. In a little while they camped for lunch. They ate a light meal and Metri put little things back in the wagon while Rulan did the bulk of the work. It still hurt his back to move around too much. When he finished, Metri asked something that had been on his mind.

“Rulan, who’s Merik?”

Rulan turned on him with such vehemence that he fell back two steps, frightened at the dark look in his eyes.

“Who told you that name?” he said, grabbing Metri’s tunic. “Was it Hanah?” His voice was low and dangerous.

“I’m sorry, Sir,” Metri said. His breath came in shallow gulps of air. “Please. I didn’t mean anything.” Tears sprang to his eyes. “Please don’t be angry, Sir.” Metri’s heart beat so hard in his chest, he saw tiny black spots in his vision.

“Who?” Rulan demanded, shaking him like a rag doll. The fabric of the tunic hurt Metri’s back where it rubbed against his tender, healing skin.

“You say it in your sleep almost every night!” Metri screamed hysterically into his angry face.

The memory of his whipping came back to him fresh and bright as though five minutes had passed instead of five days.

“Please. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything, Sir. Please.”

Fear weakened his knees and he slid to the ground, held up only by the bunched fabric of his tunic in Rulan's hand. Rulan suddenly snapped back to himself and let him go. Metri slid the rest of the way to the ground.

"Never mind boy. Get up. Get in the wagon."

He was disgusted with himself for losing control like that. He had been careful since the boy's whipping to keep his words and actions gentle. Now all of his hard work to win Metri's trust again was worthless.

Metri was crying softly in the back of the wagon. Rulan climbed in and laid down next to him on the furs. He was laying on his stomach, with his face buried in the furs. When Rulan reached out to touch him, he tensed and it made his heart ache to see his boy like that. He loved Metri. He didn't want him to be afraid of him.

"I'm sorry, boy. I didn't mean it. You didn't do anything wrong. It was my fault."

He stroked him softly, willing the tension to ease out of his body.

Back at the castle, Metri had been fond of magic mosaics. At first glance, they seemed to be merely a random jumble of colors. But with your head tilted just so, they magically changed. Suddenly the random chips of color rearranged themselves into a flower, a garden or even a sun god jumped out of the seeming chaos.

Rulan reminded Metri of those mosaics. His actions seemed random, unconnected, without reason. But now his gentle touch upon his aching body made the complex mosaic of his Master's mind come suddenly clear.

Metri's mind cast back to the alleyway at the market when he'd seen Rulan's fear of losing him in his eyes. The Inn, the waterfall, the alleyway, the whipping, the rape. The soothing ointment each night. His gentle caresses as he fell asleep in his arms. All these

memories cascaded through his mind like a magic mosaic. Suddenly it all fell into place and Metri began to understand the complex man who was now his Master.

He had never intended to kill him in the woods. Rulan stayed hard longer than any man who had ever used him. But that night, when he raped him after the whipping, he had come inside him almost immediately.

Now Metri understood. He had threatened his life because he *liked* to do it. It fed some kind of dark fire that burned hot deep inside him.

Within Rulan lived a dark hunger to possess and own another man completely. His insatiable hunger could not be satisfied until his slave lover kneeled naked before him, unresisting, trusting him completely to control the dark beast that raged within him. Metri found that core of darkness irresistibly sensual.

“I’m sorry,” Metri said, looking up at Rulan

“You did nothing wrong.”

He leaned down and kissed Metri softly on the lips. Metri reached up for him. He turned over onto his painful back and returned his kiss passionately.

Rulan laid on top of him, exploring his sweet mouth with his tongue. Metri wrapped his legs around him and rubbed himself against his Master. The friction of the furs hurt his back, but the pain felt good, like a warm, protecting cocoon.

“Please, Sir. I need to be used,” he said, begging him.

Rulan had not used his ass since the rape. He knew it would still be tender and sore inside the boy.

“It will hurt you boy,” Rulan whispered into his ear.

Metri was naked under his tunic. He felt Rulan's hardness pressing against him and he ground his hips up into his hardness. He reached down and slid Rulan's trousers down.

"I don't care. I'm your slave. Use me, please Sir."

Rulan knew he should not do it, but he found Metri's complete and total submission to him utterly irresistible. He slid himself into the boy slowly, feeling his tight, hot hole wrap around his aching tool. Metri clamped his lips together and groaned as the pain of Rulan penetrating his abused hole bit into him. He slid in and out of Metri's quivering wetness in slow, easy strokes.

Metri looked up into Rulan's eyes as he used him and he read the boy's inner feelings. He saw in Metri's eyes that he understood his dark side. But instead of the revulsion and fear that he had seen in the eyes of other lovers, he saw a raging heat that called to the darkness within him as the moon calls to the midnight tide of the ocean.

He felt as a man who has crossed miles of desert must feel when he stands before the roaring ocean at last. At first, it is an unbelievable mirage of fulfillment. At last Rulan had found what he had sought for almost eleven summers, a boy who needed to be enslaved and owned as other men need air to breathe.

"Touch yourself slaveboy," he said, stroking harder into him.

Rulan's hard strokes into his aching hole were equal parts pleasure and pain. He rubbed up against the furs with every stroke, making his back alive with pain. But the pain only made his hard tool throb more urgently. Metri stroked his engorged tool, moaning and moving under Rulan like a desperate dog.

Rulan kissed the side of his neck and whispered into Metri's ear.

“You’re mine boy. All mine,” he said stroking hard into him. “And if you ever disobey me again, I’ll whip your slave ass even harder.” He kissed him long and hard.

“Please Sir,” Metri panted into his ear. “Please can your slave come, Sir.”

“Go ahead boy. Come like a slave for me,” Rulan said, stroking hard into him.

Metri exploded, driving his hips hard up and down Rulan’s tool.

“Good slave,” Rulan panted. “Your quivering whore hole is making me come boy,” Rulan said, growling deep in the back of his throat like an animal and pumping Metri’s ass full of his seed.

He rolled off Metri and pulled him into his arms. He leaned down and kissed him softly.

“Turn onto your stomach boy. I know your back hurts,” Rulan said.

He took out the healing ointment and rubbed it gently into Metri’s back, his ass, his aching hole. When he winced in pain, Rulan used a trick of the Brothers to soothe the energies of his mind, smoothing out the pain, pushing him gently down into sleep.

Metri lay quietly thinking while Rulan put the ointment on him. His whipping had been the most frightening experience of his life, but in some way that he did not understand, it had bound him to Rulan with invisible threads stronger than any chains ever used to enslave him. He realized he would always be afraid of his Master’s anger, but without that core of darkness within him, Metri could not have fallen in love with him.

Soon Metri’s eyes grew heavy and his long lashes brushed his soft cheeks as his blue eyes closed to the world.

“I love you Sir,” he said, and slipped softly into sleep.

“I love you too boy,” Rulan said and pulled the furs gently over his sleeping body. He climbed to the front of the wagon.

A few hours later, Metri poked his head out beside Rulan.

“Where are we going Sir?”

“To Sapphya. I have to meet an old friend there in the Caverns of Pan.”

“The Caverns of Pan?” Metri said, excited. “I’ve heard of that place. Everyone speaks of it. What’s it like? Have you been there many times?”

Rulan told him stories of the Caverns from his many travels through Sapphya. It took them three and a half weeks to get there and by then, Metri’s back was completely healed. Rulan had left no scars. This time.

When they stopped outside Sapphya, Metri could barely contain himself.

“Can we go into town now Sir?”

“Yes. But come here first,” Rulan said, taking out the leash.

“Rulan, please. I’ll be good,” Metri said.

His voice had become whining and nagging at the sight of the leash. Metri was obedient, but Rulan had noticed that he talked back to him, trying to get his way in some things. He supposed that such tactics had worked with the pathetic slavers back at the castle. He would soon break Metri of that habit.

“Come here boy. Now,” Rulan said.

Rulan’s cold voice cut through Metri like a knife. He stiffened, his heart beating hard in his chest and looked up at Rulan across the clearing. He hurried over and stood in front of his Master.

“I’m sorry Sir,” he said, looking up at him.

Rulan grabbed his face and slapped him, not hard enough to truly hurt him, but hard enough that Metri knew he meant business.

“You will not talk back to me. That was your last warning.”

“Yes Sir.”

He didn't have to ask what came after the warning. He lifted his head and allowed himself to be leashed before they set off into town. Metri bubbled over with excitement. He tugged on Rulan's hand relentlessly, hurrying him along, dying to see the inside of the famous Caverns of Pan.

Rulan took pleasure in the boy's excitement. Metri's joy in his freedom from the cloistered life behind castle walls made everything brand new to him. He treated each new day as if he'd been born into a world bright and freshly made just for him. He saw no dangers, knew no fears, embraced everything with equal wonder and astonishment.

A wild innocence filled him. What had become dull and routine for Rulan were exciting adventures to Metri, filled with endless possibilities for discovery. His joyous enthusiasm in all things bubbled out of him, infecting Rulan and letting him see the world through his boy's eyes.

With Metri, he knew once more the simple joy of sitting with his feet in a mountain stream, feeling the cool water flow between his toes. Little by little, the boy was breathing life into a part of Rulan's soul that he thought had died with Merik.

He thought about all these things, heading into town, letting himself be pulled along by Metri, answering his unending flow of questions.

Chapter 9

“Where are the caverns?” Metri said, when they finally reached town.

He looked around, puzzled. He saw only a short flight of four stone steps that led down to a dark tunnel. Above the steps hung a sign with Pan playing his pipes.

“Down here. Come on boy,” Rulan said, guiding Metri down the steps.

A long winding tunnel began at the bottom of the stairs. As they followed the twists and turns of the stone tunnel, their way was dimly lit by torches set into the stone walls.

The noises of the town fell behind as they walked deeper into the flickering darkness. Metri noticed that their path tended slightly downward. He was reminded of stories he had heard as a boy of magical realms beneath the earth, carved out of living rock.

The torches threw dancing shadows all around them, as though they were followed by dark spirits of the shadow world, waiting to claim their wandering souls. He thought that at any moment a dark spirit with eyes of fire might rear up before them, demanding that they pay passage to travel his shadowy domain.

At last the tunnel turned one last curve and opened up ahead into a torch lit cavern. The first sight that greeted Metri inside the Caverns of Pan was the life size statue of the God himself - Pan, God of wine and pleasure whose lecherous grin greeted all who entered.

At six and a half feet tall, the black marble statue of the half man, half beast God towered over him on its pedestal. Pan’s lower half resembled the well muscled rump and legs of a racing stallion, while his upper body was that of a strongly built man. He held his musical pipes to his lips, his horned head tilted at a jaunty angle like a musician about to play a merry tune.

His cloven hooves were crossed, as if the sculptor had caught him dancing to his own lascivious melody of lust and desire. A phallus half the size of Metri’s arm and about as thick

around protruded from between the statue's legs. The veins snaking up and down its thick length had been carved with such care that Pan's mighty tool seemed to throb with a secret life in the shadowy torchlight.

Metri's delighted eyes traveled around the roughly circular room. The walls of the cavern were made of dark, rough hewn stone that seemed to absorb the light from the mounted torches. He saw that it was a naturally occurring cavern that now served as entranceway to the Caverns of Pan.

The statue stood between entrances to two tunnels. In front of the tunnels was a stone table behind which a slaveboy stood, ready to greet guests.

A bearded man had walked in ahead of them. The man's jet black hair shimmered in the soft torchlight, hanging in lustrous waves to his shoulders. His leather vest was old and worn. It laced in front and hugged the muscular contours of his chest and back. His arms were thick from hard work and his round belly showed his love of good food and strong ale.

"Do you care to buy tickets to our raffle tonight Sir?" the slaveboy said to him.

The boy had the face of a young God, with full pouting lips, thick blonde hair that fell just short of his shoulders and light green eyes.

He was nude and his petite body had been rubbed with gold Sparkle Oil. His erect tool gleamed in the soft torchlight of the cavern, sparkling and bobbing up and down with his every move. In the sensual glow of the dancing light, the boy might have been a golden statue of perfection come magically to life.

"Give me five tickets," the man said. He put ten small brass tokens on the stone table. "That's one ticket for each moon I've been at sea, boy."

The slave exchanged his tokens for raffle tickets. The sailor scooped them up and rubbed Pan's monstrous tool as he passed into the caverns.

"For luck Lord!" he said, laughing heartily.

Above the tunnel on the right hung the sign for food - a loaf of bread standing next to a wine goblet. Above the left, hung the sign for a House of Pleasure - a boy on his knees, servicing a man with his mouth.

"Will you be buying tickets for the raffle Sir?" the slave said, turning to Rulan and Metri.

"No," Rulan said. "I have no need."

"Then enter, and may you have all the pleasures of Pan Sir."

He bowed his head and Rulan and Metri followed the sailor into the tunnel on the left.

Metri walked slowly behind Rulan in the dark, winding passage that led to the next cavern. The way was lit by widely spaced torches mounted in the walls. In the dark up ahead, Metri heard a man moaning in pleasure. When they rounded a turn, they saw a naked slaveboy on his knees servicing a customer.

"That's it boy," the man said, moaning and grinding his hips into the slave's face.

"I'm startin' early," the customer said, smiling at Rulan as they passed.

"Oh yeah boy, here it comes, ahhh, yeah, take it all boy," Metri heard him saying as they passed.

In front of the entrance to the next cavern stood a small tableau showing two slaveboys serving Pan. It reached to about the middle of Metri's chest. The God was seated at a heavily laden table, his goblet held out to catch the eternal flow of wine poured by a slaveboy whose promise of youth and beauty had been captured and preserved forever by the artist. With his

other hand, Pan reached up under the other slaveboy's tunic, grabbing his round ass as he bent low over the table, serving him from a tray that offered all earthly delights.

As they entered, the smoky air was filled with the loud voices of drunken men and the subtle, sweet smell of Pleasure Oil. Metri had been rewarded with the oil on a very few occasions. It increased sensation and made a slave desperate to serve. It was used sparingly on slaves who attended parties to keep them eager to serve after many uses. Any slave rubbed generously with the oil would serve far into the night in ecstatic pleasure.

On either side of the entrance way, a slaveboy was chained with his hands high above his head and his feet spread wide, attached by manacles to hooks in the floor. A row of three fat red candles had been placed above the slaves and they dripped hot wax onto their quivering bodies, slowly making them into living sculptures of pain. Each time a drop of wax fell the slaveboy hissed as the burning hot wax dripped down his naked body. Their hard tools were already nearly covered in thick, drying red wax.

Rulan knew that although door duty was one of the milder punishments in the Caverns, the slaves would do any service, rather than be put on the door all night.

"I see nothing's changed," Rulan said. Metri gave him a puzzled look but said nothing.

As they made their way to a table, Metri saw that this cavern was almost identical to the entrance, only bigger. Here too, torches mounted in the stone walls shed a shimmering, liquid light. Round wooden tables were spread throughout the room. In the middle of each table burned a fat red candle in the shape of an erect tool. As the wax melted and dripped, the candles looked like exploding tools dripping red with desire.

The candles were made exclusively for the Caverns by the mountain sorcerers. They exuded the tantalizing scent of Pleasure Oil. The warm sensual scent clung to the tables, like a

sweet perfume of desire, making men's tools hungry for the hot embrace of a willing slaveboy's ass. The enticing scent made Metri's tool unbearably hard as they seated themselves on a couch at a table. Rulan attached his leash to a hook built into the table for that purpose.

Each table had a deeply cushioned couch, slightly curved into a half moon shape. Carved into the dark wooden back of each couch were scenes of Pan in the forest. Metri looked closely at the carving on his couch and realized that it told a story. Three frames had been carved into the dark wood, like the picture stories he had enjoyed back at the castle.

Rulan watched as Metri took in everything around him. He had not spoken in almost ten minutes. For him, that was an age of silence. The boy was so intense, he looked like a scribe studying for his paper of completion.

"You like the Caverns boy?" Rulan said, caressing his cheek gently.

"They're incredible Sir. Look! These pictures tell a story," Metri said.

He sat with his back to the table and scrutinized the wooden pictures like a scholar studying ancient scrolls. His utter seriousness made Rulan laugh at his delight in the carvings of Pan.

In the first frame, Pan sat idly under a lush tree playing his pipes, his hard tool jutting out from between his legs. In the next, a beautiful, naked slaveboy walked by Pan's tree. By the last frame, the boy was on his knees with Pan's tool sliding up his perfectly carved ass. The boy's eyes were closed and his lips were spread in a smile of delight as the God used him.

"That's what happens to slaveboys who wander off in the forest," Rulan said, grabbing Metri playfully.

He let the boy fight his way free and sat back while Metri's amazed eyes took in the sights and wonders of the Caverns with the astonishment of a blind man opening his eyes for the

first time. As Metri's gaze traveled around the room, he saw that other couches showed the God doing salacious things to slaveboys who had wandered into his forest domain.

Round metal rings were set into the tops of the wooden couches. He didn't know what they were for until his wandering eyes fell on a slaveboy attached to the rings by his leather cuffs. His smooth round ass was up in the air and a customer stood behind him, sliding his hard tool in and out of the bound slave's writhing ass, riding him hard and fast.

In the center of the cavern stood a stone cube about three feet high. All four sides were decorated with murals showing slaveboys serving. Two beautiful blonde boys danced to the sensual rhythms of drums and musical pipes played by hidden musicians. One boy had a pleasure slave tattoo on his tight round ass - a boy on all fours, with his ass high in the air. As the slave's smoothly muscled ass twisted and gyrated to the music, the tattooed boy drawn on him seemed to raise his ass up and down, begging to be used.

From their table close to the stage, Metri was only able to see the mural on the front of the stone cube. It showed a slaveboy on his knees with his ass high up in the air. His hands were bound together before him, attached to a wooden spike in the ground.

Behind his perfect round ass was the god Pan, with his hard tool halfway up the slave's ass. The boy's face, which rested on the ground, looking out of the painting, wore a look of sweet innocence and ecstasy. In the wavering torchlight, Metri's eyes tricked him into seeing the half man, half beast God pump his tool in and out of the slave's ass.

"Rulan, what did you mean that nothing's changed?" Metri said.

"This used to be a good place to be a slave. Riah used to run the caverns like a man. Morwen, the cowardly pig who runs it now, treats these boys like little more than farm animals."

"They look like they're treated well," Metri said.

“Look around you boy, what do you see? Do you see any boys who aren’t blonde and young?”

Metri’s eyes scrutinized the cavern in the dim darkness of the torchlight. Slaveboys wandered in and out of the cavern, bringing food or drink, sometimes offering themselves to the customers. One slaveboy who slipped to his knees to service a customer met Metri’s eyes for a moment. Misery crossed the boy’s blue eyes like fleeting clouds of darkness, then vanished as he took the customer’s tool into his mouth.

Suddenly it struck Metri that Rulan was right. All of the slaveboys were blonde, blue-eyed youths. They were young even for slaveboys. They couldn’t all be blonde, he thought. But, like the pleasure slaves at the castle, there wasn’t a dark haired boy anywhere. All these slaves must be like him, captured and sold in their youth.

“He buys his slaves on the black market?”

“These boys lead a hard life. It used to be fun for the boys who served here. My friend Riah took care of his boys like a father.”

“How do they get them to serve so willingly?”

“You don’t want to know boy,” Rulan said, turning away from Metri.

But Metri was obsessed with knowing. He was sure that, without Rulan’s rescue in the marketplace, he would have landed in a miserable place like this.

“Please Sir,” Metri said, sitting on his lap and straddling him, “I want to know.”

“Why?”

Rulan’s piercing eyes seemed to look right through Metri, down to the bottom of his deepest fears.

“Because of the marketplace,” Metri said, dropping his eyes.

While Metri laid his head against his chest, Rulan spoke horrors that chilled him to the bone.

“You’re right about him buying on the black market. All the boys you see here were kidnapped, ripped away from anything they ever knew or loved. They’re brought here in the dead of night, with their heads covered, like damned souls condemned to the underworld.”

“Why do they cover their heads?”

“So they don’t know where they are. No way to get back home if you don’t know where you are. Then their training in service begins. Virgins are prized above all else. Those who are not virgins are taught to serve and pleasure a man. If they show any resistance, their punishments are horrible.”

“Like what Rulan?”

Metri was desperately fascinated by the lives of these boys who were so much like himself, without hope of rescue. He sat next to Rulan on the couch, looking up into his eyes earnestly.

“A slave rod is put up their ass, treated with herbs that itch and burn insanely. Every moment is torture. They are put in a box with their hands tied behind them. The box is placed in the hot sun for one entire day. Or they are bound to a chair that has a wooden slave rod built into it that goes up their ass and forced to sit for hours in a boiling hot, pitch black room that sits above an open sewer. The stench makes them vomit almost continuously. Most boys surrender after that punishment.”

Rulan looked up at the boys beside the cavern entrance briefly.

“That’s one of the milder punishments. Those boys probably committed a minor offense, like talking back or moving too slowly to obey a command.”

Fear ran up and down Metri's nerves like furiously busy ants, sending messages of loathing and disgust throughout his shivering body. He looked up into Rulan's eyes and saw his disgust at the way these boys were treated. That moment of compassion for these boys' miserable lives made his love for Rulan swell inside him like liquid light flowing from the deepest center of him.

"No need for you to worry boy. You're mine now. Nothing like this will ever happen to you. Do you doubt it after the marketplace? Or do you plan on wandering off again?"

All the horror of his whipping came back to Metri in a rush, like a tornado twisting through him, tossing aside his uneasy peace with that night like dry straw in a high wind.

"No Sir," he said, unable to give voice to the storm of fear within him.

Rulan saw the deep fear that crossed Metri's face at the memory of his punishment. Perhaps now he understood better the dangers of life outside the castle. But he didn't want such things on his mind tonight. He had been a fool to let the boy talk him into telling the true story of the Caverns. He leaned over and pulled Metri into his arms, kissing him passionately while his hand slipped underneath his tunic to caress his balls gently.

"Good boy," he murmured into his ear.

Rulan sat up again and Metri looked around the cavern with new eyes. He watched as naked slaveboys with hard, erect tools wove their way gracefully among the noisy tables, serving customers food and drink.

Sometimes the slaveboy was part of the menu. A boy came and laid food on the table next to them. Then he slid to his knees on a cushion between the man's legs and slipped his hard tool into his mouth.

"That's a fine piece of ass you got there," Rulan said to the man.

“Yeah,” the man said. “And when I’m done eating I’m gonna take him in the back Cavern and use the hell out of that fine tight slutboy ass.” He gave the boy’s ass a hard slap. “Service me good boy,” he said.

He ate with the slave between his spread legs, letting him slide his wet mouth up and down his hard tool in a slow, sensual rhythm.

As Metri watched, a man snaked slowly among the noisy tables leading a string of slaveboys attached to a long thick chain by the locks attached to the rings in their leather cuffs. The drunken men at the tables reached out to caress the boys. Greasy, hungry hands ran over their sleek, smooth bodies, grabbing their tight asses, slipping between their legs and pulling their balls, like traders trying merchandise.

A customer at one of the tables exchanged coins with the man leading the boys and a slave’s lock was detached from the chain. He slipped to his knees and put his smooth ass up in the air, moving it sensuously from side to side.

The man who rented the slave had spent too many years eating rich foods and drinking cheap wines. His thick, jowled face was puffy from too much drink and his body overflowed his chair in thick rolls of fat. His slicked back hair showed his scalp like pink islands in shallow receding swamplands of thin, stringy reeds.

The customer slipped a finger up the slave’s ass. He moaned in pleasure.

“It’ll cost you extra to take him in the back Cavern and use his ass. You get a discount on his ass if you use him here. You wanna buy his key?” the host said.

“Can’t afford no back Cavern or no key neither. Got to have all my fun right here,” the man said.

He laughed, showing off all four of his crooked yellow teeth and shoved another finger up the slave's ass. He moaned in ecstasy, moving his tight ass in a small circle for the man's pleasure.

At that moment Metri happened to meet the slaveboy's eyes. He saw the haunted, fleeting look of fear and disgust that seemed to infuse all the boys in this place. Despair hung over them like some unseen vapor in the smoky air, seeping into these lost boys. It was a thick fog that crept just beneath their thin veneer of graceful slaveboys who served for the sheer pleasure of serving.

Chapter 10

“Rulan please, can I go see the other drawings on the other sides of the stage?” Metri said.

“No boy. Stay where you are.”

“Please,” Metri said. “Why not?”

“What did I tell you about talking back to me boy?” Rulan said, suddenly serious.

Metri had completely forgotten Rulan’s warning in the excitement of the Caverns. His forehead broke out in a light sweat and his heart sped up, like a horse readying for a hard race. Some of the color drained from his face.

“I’m sorry Sir,” he said in a small, scared voice. “I didn’t mean to - I only - The paintings - ” He stopped, frustrated by his stammering voice.

“Come here,” Rulan said sternly, pointing at the floor.

He did not have the heart to punish the boy. Not tonight. But he refused to tolerate his disobedience. Metri kneeled at Rulan’s feet immediately, his eyes on the floor.

“If you kiss my feet and beg for forgiveness, I may be lenient with you,” he said.

Metri bent and licked his filthy boots, letting his tongue clean the dirt from them.

“Please forgive me Sir. I did not mean to disobey,” Metri said. A single tear slid down his cheek.

Rulan relented and reached down, pulling Metri up to sit next to him.

“Come boy. Sit by me. No more of that,” he said, wiping his tear stained cheek.

“You’re forgiven.”

“Truly Sir?” Metri said, looking up at him.

“Truly. Relax boy. I want you to have a good time tonight.”

A slaveboy came to their table and kneeled at Rulan's feet. The soft scent of Pleasure Oil wafted from his body. He was naked except for the two leather cuffs on his wrists. A small key hung from a golden chain around his neck.

"How may I serve you Sir?" he said, his eyes on the ground.

His rock hard tool rose from between his spread legs, inviting any customer with enough coins to use him for their pleasure.

"Two mugs of ale, boy," Rulan said.

"Do you care to buy the key to my cuffs this evening, Sir?" the slave said.

He lifted the small key that hung around his neck. Metri noticed that small locks hung from the rings in the slave's leather cuffs. They were just the right size to attach him to the metal rings in the back of the couch.

"No boy," Rulan said. "The ale and a vial of Pleasure Oil. That will be all."

The slave jumped to his feet and hurried off to get their order. Relief was clearly written on his face.

Metri sat straddling one of Rulan's legs. He relaxed, leaning back against his thick chest and stroking his Master's hard tool through his trousers. Rulan wrapped his arms gently around Metri and sat back, letting his boy stroke him while he watched the dancers on the stage.

The boys caressed each other like hungry lovers. They embraced and kissed, grabbing each other's ass and grinding their hard tools against each other in a slow sensual rhythm of need and desire. Jori and Eryn slid up and down each other's bodies like starving men served a gourmet meal.

The boys had been captured together and become friends here in the Caverns. Both had served for three years now. On frequent occasions, they stole away from Morwen's watchful eye

and serviced each other. It was a forbidden pleasure and both boys risked cruel punishment for indulging their desperate need. Morwen was especially skilled in punishing slaves who came without permission. He never let his slaveboys come except with a customer.

Jori and Eryn were two of his most profitable boys. They had a special chemistry between them that made men dig deep into their pockets for the privilege of ramming their tools deep up their hot, tight asses. Both boys would be raffled off tonight. But the excitement of being allowed to play together pushed their fear of the raffle far to the back of their minds.

Jori slipped to his knees, sliding his hands down Eryn's firm, tight body. He grabbed his bubble ass and squeezed him tight while he pressed his full lips into the leather thong that barely covered his bulging crotch. He licked the cool, smooth leather, feeling the heat of his friend's throbbing tool through the thin covering.

"I can't wait to plow that ass Jori," a drunken voice yelled out. "I got the winning ticket."

A drunken man waved a fistful of raffle tickets at the stage before collapsing back into his chair.

Eryn moaned, and grabbed Jori's face, pressing his aching tool into his sweet lips. He'd felt those lips wrapped around his tool and he wished he could let his thong fall and feel his tool slip into his friend's hot, wet mouth.

"Hey boy!" one of the customers yelled. "Don't give it all to him. Save that hot slaveboy mouth to service my aching tool when I win your slave ass in the raffle."

Eryn ignored the laughter that followed and pulled Jori to his feet. He pulled him close, grinding his hips into him while he grabbed his ass and kissed him, slipping his tongue into his delicious mouth.

They slipped their tongues in and out of each others mouths, breathing hard, moaning with pleasure. Eryn slipped his hand under Jori's thong and pushed his finger delicately up his ass. He slid his finger in and out of his wet asshole while they kissed. Jori slid his hand up under Eryn's leather and caressed his aching balls.

"If he sees us we'll get it," Eryn whispered into Jori's ear, sliding his finger in and out of his friend's slick asshole.

Dancers were forbidden to touch each other under what little clothing they were allowed to wear.

"I don't care," Jori whispered back.

He kissed Eryn's neck and wrapped his slim fingers around his friend's throbbing tool, squeezing him through the soft leather .

"Later we'll both have to serve some disgusting, smelly pig."

Both slaveboys laughed and kissed, caressing each other's young supple bodies. Eryn slid slowly to his knees, running his tongue down Jori's body in a slow sensual tease that slid over the wet leather covering his bulging tool. He ran his tongue over his crotch, taking his leather covered tool between his lips, and sucking like a man enjoying succulent, ripe fruit.

His hands slid up and down Jori's body, caressing his tight ass, sliding over his smoothly muscled thighs. He slipped a hand up between his legs and reached under the leather string in his ass, sliding his long finger in and out of his hot throbbing hole. He felt his friend's body quiver with pleasure and he stopped. If either of them came on stage, playing with each other, Morwen would be livid.

Jori pulled him back to his feet and they kissed passionately again, grinding their tight young bodies into each other, moaning, wishing for the pleasure denied them.

“Tonight I’m going to show the world that you’re *my* slave now. I’m gonna make you hot and use your slave ass real hard tonight boy,” Rulan said.

He kissed the side of Metri’s neck while his hand slid under the boy’s tunic to caress his hard tool.

“And everyone here will see what a slave you are when you take my hard tool up your slave ass.”

Metri stiffened in anxiety. He didn’t dare defy Rulan, but he despised the spectacle of serving in public.

Rulan felt the boy stiffen in his arms and knew that Metri would be humiliated at serving him in public. Back at the castle, he’d told him about serving in the pens like a man confessing to a shameful secret. But using his slave lover in front of others and humiliating him that way gave him a special thrill. He would tolerate no resistance from Metri. He would serve him in public and be used like the slave he was or he would pay a high price for his disobedience.

Metri turned around to face Rulan, pushing his leash over his shoulder and straddling both his legs. Tears stood in his eyes.

“Please don’t make me Sir,” he said.

If Rulan had not been so in love with Metri, he would have whipped him severely for daring to say even that. As it was, he was lenient with him. He slapped his face hard enough to make the tears in his eyes slip down his cheeks.

“You will receive no more warnings tonight boy. On your knees,” he said.

Metri slipped to the ground between his open legs and Rulan sat back, letting his slave service him while he watched the boys dance on the stage.

“You better please me boy. I still have the whip I used on you in the woods,” he said, lifting his hips to let Metri slide his trousers down.

Metri’s heart beat hard in his chest. He licked Rulan’s balls, then opened his mouth wide and took them gently into his mouth. He slid his warm wet tongue over his hard balls, making Rulan moan and raise his hips to his mouth.

Jori and Eryn kissed each other passionately on the stage as they stroked each other’s tools. Their table was so close to the stage that Rulan heard their low moans of passion as they kissed and played with each other.

Metri reluctantly took Rulan’s hard tool into his mouth as Jori slid to his knees on the stage and ran his wet lips over Eryn’s tool. He took his Master’s tool deep down his throat, slowly sliding his mouth up and down.

He desperately wanted to please Rulan. He knew any show of defiance would mean another whipping. On each stroke, he let Rulan almost slide out of his wet mouth and whirled his wet tongue around the sensitive head of his swollen tool before taking him deep down his throat again.

Rulan moaned with pleasure and let himself slide in and out of his boy’s hot mouth while he watched Jori run his mouth over Eryn’s bulging crotch.

Both boys were blonde like the sun and their fair skin glowed in the flickering torchlight of the cavern. Eryn reached down, pulling Jori to his feet. He kissed him passionately while his hand slid up and down the other boy’s rock hard tool, teasing him mercilessly through the thin leather.

Metri matched his motions to the dancers and slid up Rulan’s body. He straddled him again, and kissed him while he ground his naked ass against his hard tool.

“That’s how a good slaveboy behaves. Don’t be ashamed of what you are boy.”

Rulan kissed him in a fever of passion, entwining his fingers into his soft, blonde curls.

The slave came with two mugs of ale and set them down on the table. He placed a small vial of Pleasure Oil next to the candle.

On the stage Eryn slid to his knees and took Jori’s tool into his mouth, running his tongue over the leather barrier between them. Jori moaned as Eryn slid his hot mouth up and down his throbbing tool.

Metri matched his actions to the dancers once again and slid down between Rulan’s legs, taking his throbbing hardness into his mouth and sliding his lips up and down Rulan’s tool in a slow sensual rhythm that drove him mad.

“It’s time for you to show everyone what a slut you are boy,” Rulan said, grabbing his leash.

He laughed and threw Metri to his back on the cushions. He dipped his fingers lightly into the Pleasure Oil and slid two fingers into Metri’s tight hole. He teased him, sliding in and out of his hungry hole.

The Pleasure Oil set Metri’s hole on fire with need. He writhed around, aching to feel Rulan inside him, despite his shame at being used in public this way.

“Please Sir,” he begged. “Please.”

“Please what boy?” Rulan said, kneeling between his legs and teasing his hot hole.

Metri knew better than to anger his Master, but his lips betrayed him once more.

“Please take me and use me Master, but not here. Please,” he begged, squirming his ass around.

Rulan slapped his face hard twice, backhand and forehand. He jammed two more fingers up Metri's ass, making him cry out in pain.

“You have a lot to learn boy. I use you when I like, how I like. If you doubt that, then I will use you now as I used you in the woods . Many of these men would enjoy your screams of pain.”

He moved and put his throbbing tool just outside Metri's hole.

“Is that what you want boy? You want me to rape your slave ass in front of all these people?”

Rulan knew that Metri would submit to anything rather than be humiliated that way.

Metri's heart fluttered wildly in his chest like a maddened bird in a cage, beating its wings against iron bars in a desperate attempt to escape.

“Please don't Sir,” Metri said.

“Then do not anger me boy. You *will* submit to me. I *will* use you as I please. I told you. Tonight you will learn what it means to be *my* slaveboy.”

He slapped Metri's ass hard while his other hand reached up and twisted his nipple painfully.

“Now move that slutboy ass around and show everyone what a slave you are.”

Metri looked up at his Master. The hard unyielding look in Rulan's eyes told him all he needed to know. Resistance would be useless. Either he obeyed or he would find himself in the woods again, his screaming terror witnessed only by the ancient, silent trees. Tears slipped back from his eyes to the cushion beneath his head as he moved his ass around in slow sensual circles, moving his hips up and down, hoping he had not earned another whipping.

“That's it boy. Show me how much you want it,” Rulan said.

He dipped his fingers into the Pleasure Oil again and slid two fingers in and out of Metri's ass. His hungry hole closed greedily around his probing fingers, and he moaned in pleasure through his tears. He was helpless against the tide of hunger and need that rose within him. Despite his shame, he wanted Rulan inside him.

Rulan sensed the beginning of his surrender to his humiliation and shame.

"You want me to mount you and use you like a slave?" Rulan said.

He put himself just outside Metri's tight hole, teasing him with his throbbing tool.

"Tell me what you want boy," he said, rubbing himself against Metri without entering him. "Tell me how much this slave ass needs to be used hard."

He put the head of his tool just inside his hole, driving Metri crazy with desire.

"I need you to use me hard Sir," Metri said. He pressed his ass into Rulan's tool, but he held himself back, teasing him.

"Please Sir," Metri said, wriggling his hungry hole against Rulan's hard tool. "Use your slave's ass, please," he said.

He raised his hips again and again in feverish lust, aching to feel Rulan inside him. He didn't give another thought to whoever might be watching.

"How bad do you want it slaveboy?" Rulan said, sliding a finger into him. He twisted Metri's nipple, making the boy gasp with pleasure.

"Please Sir," Metri said, arching his back and moaning helplessly. "Please. I need to be used."

Metri and Rulan had drawn a crowd. A loose semicircle of men stood around them watching, some with slaveboys servicing their tools.

Rulan bent over him and laid full length on Metri, letting his hard tool press against his hungry hole.

“You want me to use you hard like a slave should be used in front of all these men boy? Only a slave puts his ass up in the air to be used like a rutting bitch in heat. Is that what you are now boy? My slave property?”

“Yes Sir,” Metri said, writhing his hot body against his Master, pressing into his hard tool.

Rulan held him by the hair and kissed him with an ardent hunger that would not be denied.

“Tell me what you are boy,” he whispered into his ear.

“Your slave property Sir,” Metri whispered into his ear, lost in a fever of hunger and crazed longing.

He slid his tongue up and down the boy’s neck while he pressed into him without entering his hot hole.

“You ashamed of what you are boy? You want me to stop?”

“No Sir. Please. Don’t stop,” Metri said, pushing his hungry hole up into Rulan’s thick tool.

Rulan got to his knees, straddling the boy. He slid his hand up and down Metri’s throbbing tool, making his hips rise and fall to the rhythm of his hand on him. He slapped his face hard, leaving a bright angry red mark on his soft cheek.

“Then get on all fours and show everyone what a desperate slaveboy you are,” Rulan said.

“Yeah,” a bearded man said, sliding himself in and out of a slave’s mouth. “Let’s see that slave ass get used hard.”

Metri got on his hands knees with his tight round ass high up in the air.

“Nice,” a man in a red tunic said.

He grabbed a passing slave and forced the boy to his knees between his legs. He held him by his hair while he forced his hard tool down his throat. He slid in and out, using his mouth in long, slow strokes.

“Move that ass around boy,” Rulan said, slapping his ass cheeks until they turned crimson red. “Show me how much you want it .”

Metri moved his ass slowly from side to side, moaning as Rulan slid his fingers in and out of his desperate hole. He had become obsessed with only one thought – getting Rulan’s hot tool inside his hungry hole. His shame had been pushed far to the back of his mind, waiting to come back and haunt him on lonely, sleepless nights.

Rulan put his rock hard tool just outside Metri’s hole again, pressing into him without penetrating him.

“Please Sir,” Metri said.

He moved his hot ass up and down and from side to side, trying to get Rulan inside him.

“You want me to mount you like a dog and use you hard boy?” Rulan said, holding himself just outside his hole.

“Yes Sir. Please. Mount my slave ass,” Metri said, breathing hard.

“My pleasure boy,” Rulan said. “Push that hot whore hole back into my tool boy. Yeah, that’s what you do when you feel something hard pressed up against your slave ass boy,” he said as Metri slid his hungry hole onto his tool.

Metri moaned with delight as his Master's tool entered his tight hole. Rulan slid in and out of his tight hole in long, slow strokes, grinding his balls into the boy's writhing ass.

"You feel so good Sir," Metri said, moaning and pushing his eager ass back to meet Rulan's long strokes.

"So do you boy," Rulan said, sliding in and out of his slave's hot hole.

He slid his tool almost all the way out of him then slammed his hips into his tight ass again and again, using him hard. The Pleasure Oil in Metri's ass made Rulan's tool throb madly and he plowed into him with wild abandon. Metri grunted with the force of Rulan's tool slamming into his ass.

The bearded man slid out of the slave's mouth, threw him on a nearby cushion and mounted his ass.

"Nothing like hot slave ass," he said, plowing the boy's hole in violent thrusts.

Metri's tool throbbed wildly as Rulan stroked in and out of his tight hole. His pulsing tool was on the ragged edge of exploding.

"Please Sir, can your slave come?"

"Yes boy," Rulan said, plowing his writhing ass. "Come like a desperate dog for your owner. Show everyone what a slut you are."

"Your slave is coming Sir," Metri said. "Thank you Sir," he said again and again.

Metri jetted hot liquid onto the cushions, moaning and slamming his ass back into Rulan, grinding his hot, wet hole up against him, as his throbbing tool exploded.

A man who was watching while a blonde boy serviced him on his knees grabbed the boy's hair and thrust himself hard down his throat, using his mouth violently.

“Yeah boy,” he said, shoving himself down his throat so hard the boy slid backwards on his knees. “Swallow every drop you whore,” he said, as he squirted his hot seed down the back of the boy’s throat.

Rulan moaned low in his throat and said, “Your hot hole is making me come boy.”

He jammed his tool hard into Metri’s pulsing hole and pumped his seed deep into him. Metri collapsed and Rulan lay on top of him, letting the last of his liquid drain into the boy’s throbbing hole.

“Nice. Wish I had a good boy like that,” a man said admiringly. “Zah Nar must be very pleased with that one,” he said before wandering back to his table.

Zah Nar was the god of slaveboys. Metri was pleased to have been given such a compliment. He had always been faithful to his patron god, following all the rules of His book. But still, a single tear of shame slid from his eye, unseen by anyone.

Chapter 11

The crowd slowly dispersed. A slave brought moist towels that Metri used to clean first Rulan then himself.

“I’m hungry,” Metri announced when he finished.

Rulan slid his hand under Metri’s tunic and caressed his balls while he kissed him softly. He raised his hand slightly and a naked slave came running over and kneeled at his feet.

“How may I serve you Sir?”

Metri noticed that no other table got such service. The slave seemed afraid to even look up at Rulan.

“Two of your best steaks, potatoes and more ale,” Rulan said to the top of the boy’s head.

The slave took their order with his eyes glued to the floor as though one look at Rulan might turn him to stone.

“Right away Sir,” he said, and left with the speed of a straw man escaping a burning house.

“Why is he so afraid of you?” Metri said. His head was resting on Rulan’s broad chest and he turned to look up at him.

“I have a reputation here,” Rulan said, stroking the top of his head.

Metri remained quiet, curled up under Rulan’s arm, watching the dancers. After his whipping in the woods, he could only imagine the reputation his Master had with the slaves here. He looked up as a fat, richly dressed man stopped at their table and bowed to Rulan.

“It is good to see you my friend,” he said to Rulan, giving him his best professional smile.

The man, who wore a midnight blue robe spun of the finest silk, gave another slight bow. His ringed fingers glowed with gold and precious stones in the soft light. His hair lay against his scalp in thin intricate curls, like Medusa's snakes twined into a deadly nest, waiting to strike. Metri knew from his time at the castle that it had been the latest style among courtiers.

Rulan was not fooled. Morwen had no friends. He was a cowardly little man whom Rulan despised. His predecessor, Riah, had been a good man who kept his slaves happy and treated them well. This one treated them like little more than domestic animals.

"Greetings Morwen," Rulan said, putting on his own professional smile for the owner of the Caverns.

"I trust everything is to your satisfaction?" He had the queasy look of a man treading eggshells.

"All is well," Rulan said.

"Your stay tonight is with my compliments," Morwen said, sizing up the boy sitting next to him.

Perhaps he might be spared anymore of Rulan's wasteful visits. Last time Rulan visited the Caverns, he left marks that took a full two weeks to heal completely. Most of his boys showed no marks after only two or three days, a week at most. That was not a concern since he had enough slaves to rotate them in and out of service frequently.

However for Morwen the greatest outrage was that the boy, one of his most profitable slaves, had refused to serve even after he was completely healed. He claimed to be too frightened to serve. It had taken fully one month to coax the boy into serving again. One month that he had to clothe, feed and house an essentially worthless slave. He had been on the point of selling him at auction. That would have been a great loss.

Tonight, when the boy saw Rulan come in, he went running into the kitchens like all the demons of Hades were after him. Morwen let him spend the night in the slave quarters. Better one night of no income than a whole month of supporting him for nothing.

He intended to forestall any such wasteful nonsense tonight. The boy kneeling behind him would all but lose his value once his virginity was auctioned off. He was a worthless pleasure slave, too frightened to bring anyone pleasure. Except perhaps The Iron Hand. And if the boy failed to please him, and Rulan marked him, no great loss.

“Please accept this sweetmeat for your pleasure, courtesy of the Caverns,” Morwen said.

He pulled on a leash of beaten gold and a beautiful blonde slaveboy came forward on his hands and knees from behind his voluminous robes.

“May the use of this worthless slave bring you pleasure Sir,” the slave said in a trembling voice almost too low to be heard.

He kneeled with his legs spread and his hard tool standing straight up. But it was obvious from his nervous fidgeting that his tool was hard only because of the Pleasure Oil.

“Speak *up* you worthless slut,” Morwen said through clenched teeth. He yanked the boy’s leash savagely.

“I am sorry Master Morwen. Please do not make me serve the Iron Hand,” the boy said looking up at Morwen with beseeching eyes.

He cringed when he saw the dark look of murderous rage that came into Morwen’s eyes. He put his forehead to the ground, hands behind his back, cowering in fear. Morwen could have cheerfully strangled him.

“Why you stupid, worthless –“

“I thank you for your hospitality,” Rulan said, interrupting him smoothly and taking the boy’s leash.

He knew that if he sent the boy back after such a mistake, Morwen would whip him without mercy then sell him to the mines. Two or three months ago, before Metri, he would not have cared one way or the other. But now he felt sorry for the trembling boy at his feet.

“His virginity was to be auctioned tomorrow night,” Morwen said, recovering his professional composure. “You will be the first to have him. He can at least offer that much if he keeps his foolish mouth closed.”

He looked down at the boy with disgust, as if he had discovered rotten meat in his soup.

“Anything else that you wish, you have but to ask,” he said, smiling.

He placed two fingers to his forehead and gave Rulan a courtly bow before turning to go with a graceful swish of his robes.

Rulan felt Metri boiling with jealousy over the blonde boy at his feet. He had sat up during the exchange with Morwen, and now he looked daggers at the boy on the floor.

“Do not be jealous Metri,” he said, attaching the slave’s leash next to his. “If I had sent him back, Morwen would have whipped him until blood flowed.”

“Pleasure slaves are not whipped,” Metri said, looking up at Rulan with narrow, suspicious eyes. “Say the truth. You desire a slave who is a virgin, do you not? One who has not been used in public for all to see.”

His blue eyes were alight with a fire Rulan had never seen before. He suspected that without his restraint, Metri would have simply ripped the boy limb from limb. He grabbed his slave’s face and looked straight into his eyes as he spoke.

“There is much you do not yet understand boy. You will learn to accept being used wherever it pleases me to use your slave ass.”

Rulan watched fear and anger battle in Metri’s stubborn eyes. Anger won out and his eyes flashed with a promise of fire like a god about to cleave the heavens in two with a mighty bolt of jagged lightning. At last, with a great effort he dropped his eyes. Rulan smothered the grin that threatened to stretch his lips in a proud smile. His boy was no simpering weakling like the slave at their feet.

“Perhaps in the castle where it takes years of training and expense to produce a pleasure slave, they are not whipped. But as I told you, Morwen buys from the black market. Any slave who displeases him and becomes scarred is sold to the salt mines.”

“The salt mines?” Metri said in disbelief.

A creeping horror filled him as though his veins carried not blood, but icy sludge that flowed to every part of him like wine poured by cold, dark Death. The salt mines were every slave’s worst fear. They were in the far southern lands where the heat could kill a man. Slaves sold there never left, except on the wagons of the dead after they had been worked to death.

“Is it not as I have said boy?” Rulan said, speaking to the slave at his feet.

“It is just as you say, Mas - I mean Sir,” he said in a low, voice without looking up. “I am sorry Sir,” the boy said, close to tears.

“What is your name boy?”

“Rafael Sir,” he said.

“Get up from there Rafael . Sit over there, by my slave.”

The boy got up, moving cautiously, like a rabbit in the lair of a hungry wolf. He sat on the couch, on the other side of Metri, as far from Rulan as possible. He refused to look up,

studying his fidgeting fingers in his lap as though their intricate movements held the key to the dance of life.

It was obvious to Rulan that the boy knew of his reputation in the Caverns. It was equally obvious that Metri would be dangerously jealous of any kindness he showed the frightened boy.

“Look at him boy,” Rulan said to Metri. “What do you think I want with a virgin slave who trembles at the mere sound of my voice?”

Metri looked at Rafael and saw that it was true. At the sound of his Master’s voice, the boy trembled uncontrollably, like a leaf in a high wind.

“Why would I want that when I can have a hot slaveboy like you?” he said, sliding his hand under Metri’s tunic between his open legs.

He leaned down and kissed him passionately. The boy’s tool hardened immediately under Rulan’s probing hand. He sat up, leaving Metri’s tool hard and unattended and looked over at Rafael. His fine features were lovely, but the pleasure of a virgin slave who served out of fear for his life paled in comparison to Metri’s hard won submission.

Not that he wouldn’t enjoy an evening spent toying with Rafael’s terror and using his virgin ass until he screamed, but he had no wish to hurt his boy’s feelings for a mere evening’s pleasure. He ignored Rafael, knowing that anything he said would be met with tongue-tied stammers and nervous, darting looks to see if his hands had magically grown whips.

Metri relented. Feeling guilty, he turned to Rafael .

“Do not fear him,” he said. He stroked the boy’s trembling arm gently. “He will not hurt you.”

Silent tears slipped down the boy’s soft cheeks.

“What is it?” Metri said, alarmed.

“That is the first kindness anyone has shown me since I came to this terrible place.”

“Watch yourself boy,” Rulan said. “If your Master sees, things will go badly for you.”

Rafael cringed at the sound of his voice. Rulan thought about putting him between his legs to hide his face, but the terrified boy would probably vomit into his lap out of sheer terror. It had happened to him already.

“Metri, put his head in your lap as if he is servicing you.”

He laid in Metri’s lap, his face turned toward his crotch. In the dim light, it was impossible to see that he was simply laying there, not servicing him.

“How did you come to be here?” Metri asked him, stroking his long thick hair.

“I journeyed to see my brother. I stopped in a marketplace. There was a sweetmeat merchant.”

“Sweetmeat merchant?” Metri said, unable to believe his ears.

“Yes,” Rafael said sadly.

“Was he a fat man with many rings on his fingers?” Metri said.

His heart beat slow and hard in his chest, remembering the jolly man’s smiling face.

“You know him?” Rafael said.

“My Master rescued me,” Metri said.

His throat was suddenly dry. He looked up at Rulan, feeling like a man who has narrowly escaped the bite of a poisonous snake. Now, looking down at the unfortunate boy in his lap, his whipping in the woods seemed like a small price to pay for being safe.

“I’m sorry Sir,” Metri whispered, looking up into Rulan’s eyes.

“You’re safe. That’s all that matters,” he said, speaking softly into his ear.

“He gave me some meats for free and told me there were more inside,” Rafael was saying. “Something about a contest is all I remember. The next thing I knew, I woke up in an auction and Master Morwen bought me.”

He buried his head further in Metri’s lap, and he felt himself become wet with his tears. His tool, hard after Rulan’s kiss, had wilted at hearing Rafael’s story.

“Men do unspeakable things to slaveboys in this place.”

An involuntary shudder ran through the slaveboy’s slender body as he sobbed in the darkness.

“We have to help him Sir,” Metri said, turning his wide blue eyes on Rulan.

“What would you have me do boy? Steal him away in the night?”

Metri looked up into his eyes, silently pleading with him.

“Absolutely not boy. It is enough that I have saved him from the whip tonight.”

“What about tomorrow night?” Metri asked. “What about every night after that? This place is nothing but a Hades for slaves. It could have been me Sir,” Metri said, grabbing Rulan’s big hand in his. “Please, can’t you do something?”

Rulan looked up as two slaves served them dinner. He pulled his hand out of Metri’s grasp.

“Enough boy. Sit up Rafael. You will eat with us. I know Morwen likes to starve his boys to keep them pretty.”

He sat up, but he would not touch the food. It seemed to Metri that he was too terrified to eat in Rulan’s presence. He felt sorry for him and put his plate on the floor. He purposely sat Rafael with his back to Rulan. That worked. Once his Master was out of his sight, he relaxed and even talked to Metri a little bit about his hometown while they ate.

As they ate, Morwen ascended the stage from the rear and the music stopped. All the guests paid attention.

“As you know gentle Sirs,” he said, pausing to let them laugh. “Tonight is the famed Cavern of Pans slave raffle.”

This was greeted with much hooting and drunken hollering.

“Who would like to ease themselves tonight with these beauties?” he said, caressing both dancers on the ass.

“Send them both my way!” a man shouted.

There were loud hoots and shouts as many fists banged on the wooden tables. Rafael paled at the commotion. Clearly, the prospect of being raffled off terrified him. Metri took his hand gently and Rafael grabbed onto him like a drowning man clutching a rope.

At a signal, a slave ascended and extended a golden bowl. Morwen stuck his hand into the bowl, stirring the contents theatrically before extracting a paper.

Jori, who happened to be standing close behind Morwen, noticed the ticket that he slipped into his hand from beneath his sleeve. He pulled it out, pretending to pluck it from the bowl. Someone must have paid extra to get either him or Eryn.

“The winner of Jori is number 01983.”

There was a moment of quiet while men checked their numbers.

“Send that hot ass over here,” a man said from back in the shadows.

“Did you think I didn’t know slaveboy?” Morwen said as Jori moved past him and jumped nimbly from the stage.

Oh Gods, Jori thought in panic, *he knows. He knows about me and Eryn.* As he walked slowly to the back of the cavern, his heart grew heavier with every step. He knew that the night ahead held unimaginable torments for him, dreamed up by Morwen's twisted mind.

Morwen stirred the contents of the bowl once more and removed another number. "The winner of Eryn is number 57264."

"That's me!" the sailor said, jumping up from his table. "Bring that sweet ass over here boy. Tonight is your lucky night."

"Remember," Morwen said, as the music started up again, "the back Cavern of Pleasure is free to raffle winners. So play every seventh night! The night is young and the slaves are hot here in the Caverns of Pan. Enjoy!"

When they had finished dinner, Rulan put tokens on the table for their meal. He refused to accept hospitality from a brute like Morwen.

"Come, boy. There is business I must attend to in the Cavern of Pleasure."

"Is Rafael coming with us?"

"No. He is safe now."

"But Sir –"

"I will have no more of your nonsense boy. He remains here. Rafael?"

"Yes Mas - Sir?" Rafael said, wringing his hands in his lap.

"When Morwen returns, tell him that I have decided to savor you and I will use your virgin ass at the end of night. That will keep you safe the rest of the night."

The boy looked up at Rulan from the floor with wordless gratitude.

"I will do as you say Sir."

"Good. Come on Metri," he said, detaching his leash from the table.

Chapter 12

As Metri followed Rulan on his leash through the tunnel to the Cavern of Pleasure, he realized that the Caverns were a naturally occurring network of caves linked together with a series of tunnels. The path to the back Cavern tilted down. The cavern itself seemed to be on the floor of a great depression in the ground.

Outside the entrance to the cavern stood another statue of Pan. This time the God had his hand tool up a boy's ass with a goblet of wine in one hand and a whip in the other.

Rulan reached into his waist pouch to give tokens to the boy at the entrance. But the boy said, "No Rulan, Sir. Master Morwen says your use of the Cavern of Pleasure is with his compliments tonight."

"Give your Master my thanks boy," Rulan said, entering the great Cavern. If he forced the boy to take his money, it would mean a whipping for him.

This cavern was different than the dining hall. In here, instead of tables with couches and pillows, there were only round wooden columns close to the ground like short tree trunks surrounded by soft pillows. Food was not served in here, only drinks. And of course, boys.

The short tables were spread along the circular wall of the cavern while the middle of the cavern was taken up with equipment for using slaves. Most of the equipment was in use tonight. Rulan found them a table opposite the entrance and attached Metri's leash to the loop in the ground.

A boy came over and Rulan ordered a mug of ale.

When the boy left, Metri said "What about me?"

“You will drink what I give you from mine. I know pleasure slaves are allowed only little strong drink. I’ll not have you vomiting your guts out from drinking more than you’re used to.”

Metri sat back, looking around the vast cavern. Torches were strung along the high walls that curved overhead but did not meet. They seemed to be the sculpted wings of a monstrous dragon, arching to a great height and stopping, like wings caught in mid-flight.

“Come on boy,” Rulan said, when his ale came. He detached Metri’s leash.

They walked slowly around the great cavern, followed by their shadows like conspirators whispering secrets all around them. As they walked slowly in the dim torchlight, Metri heard boys moaning in pleasure while others cried out to the harsh sound of leather biting into their tender flesh.

They stopped in front of a boy bound to a pleasure sling. Metri recognized him - one of the dancers from the stage. He was tied securely to the pleasure sling with his legs spread wide and his arms tied to the posts at his head. A man stood naked before him, his erect tool swollen in front of him, dripping thick liquid from its tip.

He was the biggest, blackest man Metri had ever seen. His muscled back was to them as he stood between the legs of the slave. Rulan led him around the sling, so that they stood to one side of the bound slave. Jori looked up at Metri in helpless misery.

Jori’s eyes fell to the man’s engorged tool. It jutted up past his navel, with thick veins snaking up and down the mighty shaft of hard flesh. He swallowed hard, shuddering at the thought of such a tool raping his tight ass. He was sure that was Morwen’s punishment. He had probably *given* him to the man for the night so that he could use and abuse him to his heart’s content. As long as no lasting marks remained.

Urson's lips twisted in a wickedly sadistic smile as he looked down at the slave in the pleasure sling. Jori looked up at him between his legs, taking in his thickly muscled arms and legs, his ridged belly and his muscled chest that rose like a granite mountain. His bald head gleamed in the mellow torchlight.

"Hey boy," the man said, unstopping the bottle of oil beside the sling.

"I am yours, Master," Jori said, looking up at him with pleading eyes.

"You ready for my fist up your slutboy ass?"

Jori felt himself falling like a stone dropped down a bottomless well. He felt like a foolish boy who's roused a sleeping dragon. How could he have thought to fool Morwen? He had been toying with both of them, allowing them to get away with disobeying him.

And tonight he would be the example for the other boys. Air moved in and out of his lungs in a rushing tempest of fear and unspeakable terror. Black spots filled his vision, flowering and blossoming into frightening colors that blocked out the darkness of the cavern around him.

"Please Sir," he said.

Tears slid from his blue eyes back to the fur.

"That's it boy. Cry for me. Before I'm through, I'll make you scream for me."

He stood by the slave's face and hung his huge tool in front of the boy's tear stained face.

"Open your whore mouth boy," he said, touching his tool to the boy's mouth.

The bound slave looked up at him, crying.

"Please Sir," he begged, shaking his head back and forth in helpless fear.

Urson dealt a savage blow to his pretty face. A thin stream of blood flowed back across his cheek to the furs.

"Open I said!"

Urson grabbed the slave's balls in a painfully tight grip and shoved his thick tool down his throat when his mouth opened in a scream.

"Shut up slutboy," the man said, sliding in and out of his mouth in deep, hard strokes.

"Yeah, you little bitch, you're going to scream 'til I'm satisfied," he said, hitting the back of Jori's throat with his swollen tool. "So you better pray I'm satisfied soon."

The slave gagged. He laughed and pulled his tool out of his mouth. He grabbed Jori by the hair and forced his face into his crotch.

"Lick my balls whore. Let me feel that tongue all over my aching balls."

He towered over Jori's pale frightened face like a mighty god with chiseled muscles of black onyx. His tight sculpted ass flexed and moved in the flickering torchlight. Urson moaned as Jori licked his hard balls, sliding his wet tongue over them. He took them into his mouth and sucked gently. He did all he could to please this man, hoping he would get away with just his tool raping his ass. He was sure he would die if he put his fist inside him.

"Lick my tool boy," the black giant said, twining his fingers cruelly into Jori's blonde hair. The slave slid his tongue up and down Urson's dark, veined tool, feeling the thick shaft of flesh that would soon ream his tight, quivering hole.

Urson let his hair go and slid his tool into his mouth again.

"It's gonna feel so good to slide this fist up that tight ass boy," he said.

He held his giant fist in front of the slaveboy's wide, frightened eyes while his tool slid in and out of his hot wet mouth. Jori closed his eyes against that vision of horror while the man's massive tool slid in and out of his mouth in hard, fast strokes. Urson let himself slip all the way out of his mouth and moved to stand between his legs.

"Here I come boy," he said.

Relief flooded Jori's mind like the cool soothing waters of a mountain spring. Getting raped was better than a fist up his ass.

Urson grabbed Jori's quivering ass and thrust into him savagely. Sweat ran down his thickly muscled body as he pumped hard into the slaveboy's round, ivory ass. His hard black body glistened in the liquid firelight as his thick tool slammed into the blonde boy's trembling ass again and again.

He used his tight, quivering hole in furious strokes like a demon fresh from Hades whose enjoyment of fleshly pleasures will soon end with his return to the dark depths of the underworld. Urson smiled down at Jori as he screamed in agony and struggled helplessly against his bonds, like a man pleased with a dog's trick.

"That's it boy," he said, driving his hips into the boy's ass. "Scream for me."

He pounded into the trembling boy's tight asshole again and again, moaning in pleasure as Jori cried and whimpered under him.

Jori was lost in a world of pain. Screams flowed from his lips like the tormented cries of a hunted, wounded animal. Every thrust shook his slender body, driving pain into him like digging needles spread in a blanket of agony over his sweating, trembling body.

"Alright boy," Urson said at last. He slid out of him. "I think you're ready for me now."

Jori watched in helpless terror as Urson oiled his thickly muscled arm to the elbow.

I am a slave, instrument of my Master's will. I am the clay, shaped by his desire. Thus do I please Zah Nar. The calming meditation ran through his mind, but did little to slow his madly beating heart. It raced in his chest like a runaway stallion galloping at breakneck speed.

Urson began by sliding his oiled fingers up into the boy's trembling ass, working his way into him slowly. In his fear, Jori had clamped his ass tight.

“You better open up for me boy,” Urson said, easing another finger into his quivering hole.

He eased one finger after another into the slave’s ass, ignoring his screaming protests, until all four fingers and his thumb were inside his hole.

Metri watched in unbelieving horror as the man’s fist slid slowly into the slave’s ass. The boy in the sling screamed horribly, filling his lungs again and again and screaming in agony as the man’s huge fist worked slowly into his bowels.

Men stood watching with hard tools as Urson slid his big, black muscled arm in and out of Jori’s pale trembling ass. Slaves kneeled at their feet, praying they would not be next.

One of the men watching was the sailor who had won Eryn. He kneeled at the man’s feet, watching in helpless horror as the black muscled giant used his friend brutally. He had also seen Morwen slip the ticket into his hand. He had known about them all along. Eryn knew that after this, he and Jori would never be together again.

“Help me!” Jori screamed over and over again in a high reedy voice that hurt Eryn’s ears.

The pain and terror had driven him beyond reasoning, beyond sanity. Spit flew from his lips as his head whipped back and forth in endless negation of the fist moving in and out of him.

A tiny, delicate drop of the boy’s spit fell on Metri’s arm. For him, that was the last horror. He backed away slowly, his heart beating so hard, he thought it might simply beat its way out of his heaving chest.

He backed right into Rulan’s hard tool, poking into his ass. Rulan grabbed his shoulders, spun him around and forced him to his knees.

“I need to be serviced boy,” he said in a voice thick with lust. He let his trousers fall to the floor and grabbed Metri by the hair.

A drop of liquid hung from his throbbing tool. He shoved himself into Metri's mouth and twisted his fingers deep into his blonde curls. He used his mouth hard, grinding his hips into Metri's face with every brutal stroke. The boy choked and gagged while Rulan took his pleasure with him, moaning while he watched Urson's muscled arm pump slowly in and out of the screaming boy's hole. Metri grabbed Rulan's legs so that the force of his strokes didn't knock him over. The slave's screams echoed in Metri's ears, bouncing and echoing off the distant walls, drawing a crowd of hungry eyes.

While Rulan slid his swollen tool deep into Metri's mouth with every thrust of his hips, Urson slid his fist out of the boy and slid his monster tool into his hole. He pumped into him in long, deep strokes, as the boy whimpered helplessly, holding his trembling ass.

"You scream good boy," Urson said, pleased.

He pumped his hard tool into his agonized hole in hard quick strokes working his muscular black ass, pumping him deep.

The agony in Jori's ass blocked out all other thoughts. He prayed to Zah Nar that soon his punishment would end.

"Here comes my load up your ass slutboy," Urson said, plowing hard into Jori's aching hole.

He grunted and pumped the slaveboy's ass full of his seed, thrusting hard into him. He moaned, deeply satisfied and pulled himself from Jori's ass.

"You better swallow every drop boy," Rulan said.

He was panting hard and driving his hips into Metri's mouth in short, hard strokes.

"Your hot mouth is making me come boy," Rulan said, thrusting into him again and again, pumping hot seed down his throat.

When Rulan let him go, Metri almost fell over. He caught him and pulled him to his feet with the leash.

“Good boy,” he said, pulling his trousers back up.

He turned Metri around so his ass rested against him and stroked Metri’s tool under his tunic.

“Rulan! My friend,” a man said, coming up to them.

“Kalen,” Rulan said, clasping his arm. “Good to see you.”

“And you. Come, let us find a table.”

They made their way over to a table and sat on the cushions. A slave took their order for two mugs of ale.

“This is my new boy,” Rulan said to the man. He attached his leash to a loop in the floor. “Metri, say hello to Kalen, one of my oldest friends.”

Metri looked up at the man. His jet black hair fell in soft waves to his shoulders. He was clearly a soldier like his Master, but Metri did not recognize the colors he wore. His arms were tanned and thickly muscled and his brown eyes were warm and friendly.

“Hello Sir,” Metri said, suddenly shy.

“Greetings boy,” Kalen said, giving Metri a friendly, open smile.

Both men were quiet while a slave set down two mugs of ale on the table between them.

“What do they want?” Rulan said.

The Brotherhood of Wisdom only sent Kalen when they wanted something from him.

“Your new boy is a beauty,” Kalen said, ignoring the question. “I saw you using him earlier. He looks like quite a find.”

“Yes,” Rulan said, looking over at Metri fondly. “I found him in Gunred. He’s a good boy.”

Rulan looked at Kalen, silent and waiting.

Chapter 13

Metri had grown bored of the conversation already. His eyes fell on the sailor who had won the raffle. Rulan and Kalen spoke of many things, but Metri ignored them, focusing on the sailor and the boy at the table next to them.

“You look nice like that boy,” Dareth told Jori.

The boy was kneeling with his ass high up in the air. His hands were linked together behind him by his leather cuffs.

“I been at sea five moons. All I had to service me is old slaves past their prime. Nothin’ on that ship as pretty as you boy,” Dareth said, caressing Jori’s silky smooth, tight ass.

”Nope. I ain’t seen nothin’ as pretty as this ass in all those five moons. I bet this hole feels real good,” he said, sliding his finger into the boy’s tight ass.

Eryn moaned in pleasure, moving his delicious ass slowly from side to side. After seeing Jori get punished, he knew he had to please this customer. Dareth stood up.

“Up boy. I need to take a piss,” he said, standing and taking out his tool.

“Open wide slaveboy,” he said, sliding his tool into the boy’s willing mouth.

“Nothing like a hot slaveboy’s lips wrapped around my tool while I piss,” he said, draining himself into the boy’s mouth.

Warm, bitter liquid flowed into Eryn’s mouth in a seemingly endless flow. His throat moved quickly as he tried desperately to swallow every drop of the man’s liquid draining into his mouth. He knew that if any overflowed onto the floor, he would be punished, like Jori.

“That’s it boy. Swallow every drop. Suck on it slaveboy. I better come out of your mouth all cleaned up. There better not be anything dripping boy,” he said, grabbing the boy’s hair and shoving his drained tool down his throat.

“Good. Now lick my balls slutboy. I had a long sweaty day on the docks and I’m dirty,” he said, pushing the back of the boy’s head down, forcing his face into his hairy crotch.

Eryn licked him, tasting the salty, slightly sour taste of his sweat. He ran his wet tongue over Dareth’s balls, cleaning the sweaty dirt of the docks from him.

“That’s it boy,” the man said, holding his head in place with both hands. “Lick the sweat from my balls. Your slaveboy mouth feels so good on my dirty balls,” he said, grinding his hips into the boy’s face.

“I’m gonna pound your whore ass hard tonight,” Dareth said, pressing his dirty balls into Eryn’s face.

“Now lick my tool boy.”

Eryn licked his throbbing tool, sliding his hot wet tongue up and down his thickness, desperate to please him.

“That’s it boy, get me ready for your whore ass.”

Dareth grabbed Eryn’s hair and forced his tool deep down his throat. Eryn opened his mouth wide and serviced him, sliding his tongue around his aching tool as he slid in and out of his mouth. He served him with Jori’s desperate cries ringing through his mind, knowing that he could be next in the pleasure sling if he failed to please this customer.

“That’s enough boy,” Dareth said, pulling out of Eryn’s mouth.

He looked down at the frightened boy on his knees. For a terrified moment Eryn thought the sailor was displeased and that he would send him back to face Morwen’s merciless wrath.

“I feel like whipping some slave ass tonight. Crawl over there to the cross.”

He reached down and undid his wrist cuffs. Dareth followed Eryn, watching his smoothly muscled ass move as he crawled across the floor. He secured him to the cross with his legs spread wide and his arms high up above his head.

The cross stood almost directly in front of the table where Metri sat with Rulan. From his position on the cushions, Metri could clearly see the boy's face. His tool jutted out hard before him.

Dareth rubbed Pleasure Oil deep into the boy's hole, massaging it in generously as the boy moaned in pleasure.

"You're going to have a good time tonight boy," he said.

He stroked the boy's hard tool with the oil until it glistened in the dim torchlight while he moaned, moving his hips slowly in and out of Dareth's cupped fist.

"You like that slaveboy?" he said, rubbing the oil into the boy's nipples.

"Yes Sir," Eryn said, moaning in pleasure.

"First I'm going to whip your slave ass. Then I'm going to use you hard and make you come like a desperate dog," he said, sliding his fingers in and out of the boy's hole. Jori pushed his ass back, meeting his fingers, moaning softly.

Dareth picked up a whip and said, "That's it boy. Stick that ass out. Show me how much you want it."

Eryn moved his ass deliciously from side to side. Dareth brought the whip down on his back and he gritted his teeth, breathing hard. Sweat popped out on his forehead. Dareth slid his fingers up the boy's ass and he moaned softly.

He stepped back again and brought the whip down on Eryn's back and shoulders. He cried out in agonized pain as the whip fell on him again and again.

“Please Sir,” the boy said, his head hanging limply on the cross.

“Please what boy,” the man said, twisting his nipple back and forth between his fingers.

The boy moaned in pleasure. “You want me to stop?”

Eryn did want him to stop. But a deep part of him didn't. It was a place within him that only the pain of a whip could reach. The pleasure in his pulsing hole made the pain of the whip a sweet agony that poured through his body like liquid fire, setting him ablaze with hungry desire.

“No Sir. Please don't,” Eryn said.

“I didn't think so,” Dareth said, fingering the boy's ass while he twisted his nipple.

“Take your whipping like a good slaveboy and I'll reward you,” he said, slipping another finger into his hungry hole. Eryn moaned, a sound filled with need and pain.

He stepped back and laid hard strokes on the boy's ass, showing him no mercy.

Punishing strokes fell on the slave's back, his legs, his round ass until tears slipped down Eryn's cheeks.

“Good boy,” Dareth said, fingering his ass again. He moaned through his tears.

“Ready for me to use this ass hard boy?” he said, sliding his fingers in and out of him.

“Yes Sir, please,” he said, moving his ass around in desperation.

“You want me to rape this tight slutboy ass?” the man said, sliding his fingers deep into the boy. Eryn moaned softly.

“Tell me boy. You want to feel my tool tearing into this hot hole?”

His back was throbbing in pain, but Eryn was filled with a deep aching need to be used hard, to feel this man's tool shoving deep into him, using him like an animal.

“Please Sir,” he said, moaning, breathing hard. “Please use my ass,” he said, begging.

Dareth moved behind Eryn and put his tool just outside his hungry hole.

“Please Master,” the slave said, pushing his ass back into the swollen tool just outside his wet, pulsing hole.

“Here comes your reward boy,” the man said.

He grabbed Eryn’s wetted ass and rammed into his hot hole. Eryn cried out as the man thrust into him again and again, raping his ass. He liked to be used hard up his ass, it made all his other thoughts fade away into the ecstasy of the pain. The Pleasure Oil made his ass alive with pleasure and each hard thrust burst through his body in explosions of pleasure and pain.

“This hole is so hot and tight boy. It’s been five moons I don’t have a hot piece of slaveboy ass,” he said, driving his hips into the boy’s ass, grinding his tool deep into his wet hole.

He reached around and grabbed the boy’s nipples. “You like my tool raping your tight ass boy?”

“Yes Sir,” Eryn said, pushing his ass back to meet his strokes.

The Pleasure Oil in his ass made the friction of the man’s tool pumping hard into him ecstasy.

Dareth pumped the boy’s hole in long deep strokes, grunting each time his hips slammed into the boy’s ass. The Pleasure Oil made his tool throb wildly inside the boy’s hot hole until finally he couldn’t take it anymore.

“I’m gonna come up this hot hole boy,” he said and pumped him so hard the cross shook. Metri heard the sound of his hips slamming into the boy’s ass, riding him like a demon.

“Permission to come Sir,” the slave said, panting hard.

“Yeah boy. Let me see that slaveboy tool explode onto the floor.”

The boy’s tool exploded, spurting hot liquid onto the floor between his spread legs.

“I’m coming boy,” the man said and pumped into the boy one last time, exploding deep inside his aching hole.

Chapter 14

“They want you to deliver this to the Minor Temple of Zah Nar in Jeh Lan,” Kalen said.

His voice penetrated Metri’s consciousness again. He looked up with interest as Kalen removed a red crystal from the leather bag at his waist.

“Do you not grow tired of being a pawn in their games?” Rulan said. He left the crystal on the table, untouched.

Kalen shrugged. His tunic moved slightly and Rulan saw the Temple of Pelay tattoo on his left shoulder. They tattooed their soldiers, like Masters marked their slaves. Rulan was glad to be shut of them.

“I’m a simple man Rulan. I didn’t study to be initiated as you did. I know only simple things. In the world there is darkness and there is light. The Brotherhood Of Wisdom works for the forces of light. I have no wish to see another dark age descend upon the world once more as it did in the Time Before.”

Initiated? Metri thought. Both men drank ale.

“Aye,” Rulan said.

“You my friend, are not a simple man. After Merik, you left the Path of Wisdom to follow your own path, as some of us must. Now you are a mercenary. You walk a dangerous path through the shadowlands between light and darkness, evil and good.” He gave Rulan a long hard look. “But you are changed since last I saw you Rulan. I see a new light in your eyes.”

He looked meaningfully at the boy sitting next to him on the cushions. Rulan took the crystal and put it in his leather bag without speaking.

“I will deliver their precious crystal,” he said.

“It’s the tenth crystal, Rulan. When it arrives at the temple, a Brother will meet you there to bring it to it’s final destination at the Major Temple before the dark moon of Souwen. But it must reach the Brothers in Jeh Lan first,” Kalen said.

“It will.”

“Sir? May I go and relieve myself?”

“Yes boy,” Rulan said, removing his leash from his collar. “It’s through there, in the baths,” he said, pointing to a door on the other side of the cavern.

Metri hurried off. Rulan looked after him, thinking of how good his tight ass had felt squirming under him that day in the wagon.

“You *are* in love,” Kalen said, watching him.

Instead of answering, Rulan said, “There is a slave here in the Caverns. His name is Rafael . I must ask a favor of you old friend.”

Kalen leaned across the table, listening to his friend closely. Neither of them saw a man follow Metri into the tunnel leading to the baths.

The back Cavern was the bath house. The baths were alive with merchants, soldiers and sailors using slaveboys in every position imaginable. Metri wandered through them, looking for the closet to relieve himself.

“Hey boy,” a soft voice said almost at his shoulder.

He turned around and looked deep into the shadows. He dimly saw a hooded figure standing back in the dim darkness.

“You want some Celestia boy? I got some good herb boy. Right off the boat.”

He passed a small blue packet under Metri’s nose. It smelled like it was from across the sea, the finest, most expensive herb.

“Yes Sir,” he said, looking around nervously.

“Over here, boy. No one will see,” he said.

He took Metri’s hand and guided him to a dark corner of the baths. Metri hesitated a moment, thinking of Rulan.

“Come on, boy. No one will know. You’ll be back at the table with your Master in no time.”

Metri took one last look around then sank to his knees. The soldier took his tool out and shoved it down Metri’s throat.

“That’s it boy. Do a good job and I’ll give you the best Celestia you ever had,” he said.

He slid himself in and out of Metri’s mouth slowly. Then he grabbed his hair and used his mouth in quick thrusts. Metri had to hang on to his legs for dear life. Moments later, he groaned deeply and hot liquid squirted down Metri’s throat.

The man dropped the packet at his feet and walked away without a backward glance. Metri had not seen his face.

Back in the Cavern of Pleasure, Rulan sat alone at his table waiting for Metri. He saw him weaving across the room toward him. He plopped down onto a cushion opposite him.

“What’s wrong with you boy?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all,” Metri said, smiling from ear to ear. He felt good. Really good.

“What did you drink?”

Metri looked at him in foolish surprise.

“Drink? I didn’t drink anything,” he said. His voice bubbled into ridiculous giggles.

Rulan's brow darkened with anger. "What are you about boy?" he said darkly. "What have you had?"

"Celestia," Metri said softly. His eyes looked like he'd seen the seven joys of the universe. "It feels so good. I haven't had any since I left the castle."

Rulan grabbed him by the front of his tunic, almost pulling him off the cushion.

"Where did you get it?" he said through clenched teeth.

"Relax Rulan," Metri said and fell into those ridiculous giggles again.

"You are a man who needs to relax more and work less," he said with the air of an oracle dispensing advice. His chin slipped to his chest.

Rulan opened Metri's loosely clasped fingers and removed a small packet of Celestia. He opened it and emptied the herb onto the floor.

"Hey," Metri said, coming awake. He made a half-hearted grab for the packet.

"Why did you do that? I had to work hard to get that, if you know what I mean." He slid his finger in and out of his mouth in an unmistakable gesture.

"Who?" Rulan said, grabbing his tunic again. There was murder in his eyes.

Metri blinked stupidly at him. "Who? I don't know. A friendly soldier in need of comfort," he said.

His eyes became unfocused and his chin slid to his chest again.

Rulan sat back. It was no use. He would have to get them a room in town and let him sleep it off.

Chapter 15

Metri woke up in dim candlelight, naked. His head ached slightly from too much Celestia and –

“How was your rest?” Rulan said, nearly scaring him out of his skin.

Everything came back to Metri in a rush. The baths, the stranger, the Celestia, and oh dear Gods, had he really laughed in Rulan’s face?

“Please Sir,” he said, his voice filled with trembling fear. “It’s not what you think.”

He shrank back in the furs when Rulan got up from his chair. Without saying a word, Rulan grabbed him from the furs and threw him across the room. Metri tried to curl into a ball, but Rulan picked him up like a rag doll and rammed his balled fist into his belly.

Metri screamed and doubled over in pain. He felt like vomiting.

“Please Sir,” he gasped. “It won’t happen again.”

Rulan pulled him upright. “No. It won’t,” he said.

He smashed his fist into Metri’s mouth then punched his gut again. He screamed again, doubling over in pain and gasping for breath. Blood mixed with the weak stream of vomit that flowed from his swelling lips.

“Because if it does boy,” he said, grabbing Metri by the hair and forcing him to look up, “I’ll make tonight look like an easy walk through a spring meadow.”

He slapped his face hard, backhand and forehand. The force of the blows knocked Metri’s head into the wall behind him.

“I’ll make you wish I killed you back in the woods.”

His fist crashed into Metri’s right eye. Rulan let him go and spun him around, pressing him hard into the wall. Metri cried softly.

“I’m sorry, Sir,” he repeated over and over again.

Rulan undid his trousers and took out his hard tool. He pressed himself against Metri’s ass. At the feel of his thick tool against him, Metri panicked, but he was too weak with fear to struggle. He had never seen Rulan so angry. Not even after the marketplace. The woods flashed through his mind. In his panic, he had heard only that Rulan would kill him in the woods.

“Please don’t kill me Sir,” he begged. “I’m sorry, please Sir.” He was sobbing openly now.

“Kill you? No, Demetrius. I’m not going to kill you. I’m going to teach you a lesson boy. You’re mine now. And when you disobey me, this is the price you pay,” he said and rammed his thick tool up Metri’s tight ass.

He screamed and tried weakly to pull away, but there was no escape from Rulan’s iron grip. He raped him without mercy, ramming his thickness into him again and again, banging Metri’s trembling body into the wall with every violent thrust into him.

“You’re *my* property now boy. You’re mine. All mine,” he said, using him in deep, brutal strokes.

Metri had no more fight left in him. He whimpered softly and prayed to Zah Nar for it to end. At last, he felt Rulan pump his seed deep inside him and he thought his nightmare was over. But it wasn’t. Rulan grabbed his right arm behind him and twisted. Metri screamed himself hoarse. Rulan twisted until he heard a wet snap. Metri passed out from the pain.

After he passed out, Rulan picked him up gently and put him on the furs. He cleaned the blood and vomit from him, then forced a blue liquid between his lips. It would keep him asleep

for hours. While he slept, he set Metri's arm. It was a simple fracture. At his age, it would heal in a matter of weeks.

Rulan was a mercenary skilled in the deadly art of dealing death swiftly and efficiently. If he'd wanted Metri dead, he wouldn't have survived the first blow. But he didn't want him dead. He had seen Celestia addicts. Dunlon had been in the early stages of the wasting sickness.

He'd seen pathetic boys whose wasted bodies were covered with sores created by too much of the herb. He wanted Metri scared to ever use Celestia again. He examined his swollen lips and the perfect teeth behind them.

He'd been careful not to shatter his teeth or break his ribs. He pressed his stomach softly and Metri groaned in his sleep. There were no telltale signs of broken bones inside him or damage to his organs. He examined his swelling eye. No liquid leaked from it. Good. There was no permanent damage.

He laid down next to him and stroked his hair gently. *You're all mine boy*, he thought. Moments later, he slipped into a contented sleep.

Metri woke to a world of pain. His arm was strapped close to his body between two boards and it hurt abominably. His stomach was a dull, throbbing ache and his ass felt raw and torn. His right eye was swollen almost shut. It throbbed, sending a deep, nauseating ache through his head.

"Thirsty?" Rulan said softly.

He was sitting next to the furs, looking down at him. At the sight of him, silent tears slipped from Metri's eyes. Rulan brought cool water to his mouth and dribbled it slowly between his swollen lips. He knew that the mere touch of a cup to his lips would be excruciating pain.

“I’m sorry, Sir,” Metri said.

His swollen lips made it hard to form the words and his voice was so hoarse from screaming, that Rulan barely understood him.

“It’s alright, now,” he said soothingly. “Go back to sleep.” He stroked his soft curls tenderly.

“Please don’t sell me,” he said in his hoarse whisper of a voice. He broke into soft sobs and turned his face away from Rulan, ashamed.

“Never. I promise,” Rulan said.

He turned his face gently toward him and kissed his forehead like a father soothing a child’s feverish brow.

“Sleep now,” he said and tenderly pulled the furs up around him.

It took Metri’s arm weeks to heal. The first two weeks were agony for the boy. No matter which way he laid or which way he turned in the furs, pain followed him, twisting through him in unrelenting torment. Rulan knew of many herbs that would ease his pain. But he refused to give them to the boy. Pain was an excellent teacher. He tended Metri each day, keeping his arm immobile and feeding the hurting boy.

Metri was more afraid of him now than he had ever been back in the woods. He knew Rulan hadn’t intended to kill him, he had only believed that in his near total panic the night of his beating. But still, he frightened him. He knew there was no way out for him. If he tried to leave, Rulan would find him and then he *would* kill him.

But strangely enough, a small part of him did not want to leave him. His beating made him feel safe, loved for the first time in his life. After the pain eased, he was constantly caught between two emotions, fear of Rulan and fear of being alone.

After the first two weeks, Rulan locked him in the room while he went out on errands almost everyday. Little by little, his fear of Rulan diminished once again, but doubt nagged at him always, like a beggar at the back door of his mind. Over and over he planned his escape. Over and over his fear kept him riveted to the spot.

His mind battled back and forth with him, bombarding him with questions for which he had no answer. Where would he go if he managed to escape? Did he really wish to leave Rulan who had treated him fairly, and shown him kindness? He had seen many Masters worse than him. Back at the castle he had seen the slave of a guest whipped bloody for spilling wine on his Master.

Rulan was a hard man, but not a brutal or cruel man. But what if his disobedience made him lose his iron control? Back and forth these questions went in his mind until some days he thought he might go mad locked in that tiny room with only his own maddening questions for company.

By the time a few weeks had gone by, Metri's doubts had slipped to the back of his mind, and his love for Rulan seemed to have conquered his fears. One morning, he woke to find Rulan looking down at him with a strange look on his face. He reached down and stroked his cheek gently.

"I have to go and get supplies to continue our journey," he said.

"What about the wagon and stuff we came here with?"

"Well, we still have the horses and wagon, but I sold the food long since. I'll need to lay in new supplies of food, water – things like that."

Metri looked down at his hands, suddenly ashamed.

“It’s my fault we had to stay isn’t it?” He looked up at Rulan. “If it hadn’t been for me and the Celestia, we would have moved on weeks ago, wouldn’t we?” He looked down at the furs.

“That’s not your concern,” Rulan said kindly.

He lifted the boy’s head and made him look up at him. “Who makes the decisions Metri?” His voice had turned suddenly stern.

“You do Sir,” Metri said. His fragile voice quivered and his eyes widened slightly in fear.

“That’s right boy. And your punishment was my decision.”

“Oh I see young man,” Metri said in the trembling falsetto voice of an old woman.

He was doing a perfect imitation of a priestess of the oracle. He sat up, squinting his eyes and pointing at Rulan.

“So,” his cackling young voice continued, “this delay lo these many weeks is upon your head?”

Rulan laughed, something he did a lot more since he’d met Metri. He was a talented mimic. Rulan had learned that Metri fell back on his many voices as a way of handling things that scared him. Talk of his punishment had brought back frightening memories. Rulan’s merry laughter made Metri laugh along with him.

“Please Rulan,” he said. “I’ve been locked in this room forever. Please let me go with you.”

“No. You stay here. I will not have you exhausted from running around all over town with me after being locked in here for weeks.”

“Please?” he pleaded.

He got on his lap and straddled him, rubbing his naked ass against him.

“You said last night my punishment was over,” he added hopefully.

“No,” Rulan said. He wrestled him playfully to the furs and got up.

“We leave tomorrow at first light. Get things ready the way I’ve shown you.”

Metri subsided immediately. A few weeks ago he might have persisted, but his healing arm had given him a new perspective on things.

“Yes Sir,” he said quietly.

He was on his knees in the furs looking up at Rulan with the disappointed air of a child denied sweetmeats after supper.

Rulan stroked his head gently. “Cheer up boy. After this town, we’ll travel through the woods. You’ll have plenty of room to roam and be free.”

At the mention of the woods, Metri’s eyes sparkled.

“Will there be another waterfall?”

“Let’s see,” Rulan said, pretending to think. “As I remember there are two paths through the woods on the way to Jeh Lan. One passes the waterfall, one does not. I am having trouble remembering the path with the waterfall.”

Metri looked crestfallen.

“But,” Rulan continued, “if everything is packed up when I return, my memory may improve.” He gave Metri a meaningful look.

“It will be, you’ll see,” he said excitedly, jumping up from the furs.

“It’s just past dawn now. I should be back a little after sundown.”

Rulan got a few things and left, smiling. The last he saw of Metri, he was sweeping through the room like a dervish. His lustrous blonde curls caught the sun and he seemed to move

in a golden nimbus of light. He cherished that vision of him because it was perhaps the last time he would ever see him.

In town, Rulan went about the business of getting ready for the journey ahead of them. He visited many merchants, getting extra supplies - water, dried meat in case of emergencies, a hunting knife, arrows and an extra bow that was the right size for Metri. He wouldn't have the strength to draw Rulan's huge bow. When he was finished, he stopped in the tavern to hear what news of Gunred had reached here to Sapphyra.

It seemed that Commander Dunlon's army had killed so many men, that there weren't enough left to effect repairs to the war ravaged city. As a result, his soldiers were pressed into service rebuilding the torn city. There was much grumbling, he heard from a soldier passing through, and even more desertions. It was nothing more or less than what the fool deserved, Rulan thought.

By the time he left the tavern, it was after sundown and his thoughts turned to Metri. So far, the boy had stayed with him for two reasons. One was his fear of abandonment and the other was his fear of Rulan killing him if he escaped and got caught. After the Celestia, it had been more than two weeks before he could so much as get close to the boy without Metri trembling as though some great beast were stalking him with deadly intent.

Rulan had fought a life long battle with his dark side. He wanted to *make* Metri stay. He could do things to the boy that would make him cringe in terror at the mere thought of leaving him. But he had gone that route with others. They stayed, but they served and submitted out of fear for their lives, sometimes cringing in fear at his very touch.

He did not want Metri to be his slave that way. He needed to know that the boy chose to be with him of his own free will. Only then would he feel that Metri truly belonged to him, his loyal slave lover.

Now, Metri's fear had relaxed, moved to the back of his mind. But it was ever present. Sometimes, when Rulan corrected him gently in small matters, Metri's eyes widened in fear, as if waiting for him to perhaps break the other arm. Rulan did not want a slave who was with him out of fear. Today he had given Metri a chance to change his fate.

Usually, when he left him in the room, he locked him in. Today however, he had left several Sun Tokens where the boy was sure to find them when he packed their things. That and the unlocked door would beckon him to freedom if that was what he truly desired.

Sapphyra was a portal city on the sea. From here, a man could take a boat to anywhere or nowhere and disappear as easily as a shadow fading into darkness on a moonless night. He knew that Metri had spent weeks in the room observing the boats moving in and out of the seaport from the window. If he wanted to leave, Rulan had left him his key to freedom.

Back at the Inn, while Rulan bought provisions, Metri packed. When he picked up the last of Rulan's trousers to pack them, eight Sun Tokens fell out. For a moment, he simply stood there, staring at them like vicious rats that might bite if he went too close. He bent slowly, like a man in deep trance, and picked them up. He felt their weight in his cupped hands. Eight tokens. At least four times what he needed for passage on a boat. Not even Rulan could find him if he disappeared onto the open seas.

He put the tokens down on the table by the furs and looked out the window at the docks, where boats came and went in a delicate ballet of commerce. He checked the angle of the sun.

He had enough time to slip out and board a ship long before Rulan was due back. His hand crept up to his naked neck. Rulan had removed the collar to make it easier to tend his arm.

A whole world of freedom awaited him down there. All he had to do was slip out the door and – “What am I thinking?” he said aloud. Rulan always locked the door when he left. He tried it, and to his utter surprise, it opened softly in his hand. His heart thudded in his chest. Here was his chance at last.

Until now, Metri had felt like a man on a captured ship caught up in a storm at sea. Such a man must choose between uncertain survival at the hands of his captors and certain death in the boiling seas. To stay with Rulan was to risk the storms of his fury if he disobeyed. To leave was to invite certain death when Rulan hunted him down.

He looked at the golden Tokens glittering in the warm sunlight. There lay his passage to freedom. He did not wish to leave, yet he was afraid to stay. He was afraid because one day he would disobey again and perhaps Rulan’s iron control would break.

He returned to the tiny window, watching the ships depart to far corners of the unknown World. With thoughts of leaving Rulan heavy on his mind, they looked like messengers of the Gods, pregnant with tidings of dark days to come. He found Rulan’s anger less frightening than the thought of being alone. All his life he had feared to be alone in a world that humbled him with its vast unknown spaces.

He loved Rulan. Being his property fulfilled something deep within him that he did not understand. Rulan’s iron will made Metri feel safe and loved. Without that in his life, he was like a boat lost at sea without a captain, subject to the reckless yearnings and storms of the roaring sea that was his untamed mind.

The tokens had been left where he would find them on purpose. He was being given a choice. He knew that Rulan would never again give him such a choice. *I'm staying. For good or bad. Be it*, he thought, putting the tokens back. For the first time in his life he chose to serve out of love, not fear. The trousers with their load of tokens were heavy in his hands, for he knew that he had sealed his fate. Metri fully understood that from this day forward, there would be no turning back. He finished the last of the packing.

Later, with the moon high in the sky, he began to reconsider Rulan's reasons for leaving the Sun Tokens and the open door. Perhaps he'd left without him. After all, a man like him didn't need a boy who got on his knees like a worthless dog for anyone with a pocketful of Celestia.

He waited a little longer, watching boats depart in the moonlight, then he turned to the furs and slid deep under their cover, wondering what he would do tomorrow when he woke up alone and frightened. He was sure Rulan had gone, and with him his only chance to serve someone he loved. He fell asleep. The strong light of the full moon slanting through the open window glittered in the tears drying on his cheeks.

When Metri had tried the door, he had failed to close it properly. When Rulan came up the stairs to their room, he saw a narrow beam of moonlight escaping the crack between the door and the wall. His heart thudded hard like a runaway beast in his chest. He was gone.

His first instinct was to turn and go pounding down the stairs, make his way to the seaport and hunt him down and drag him back. But he stopped himself with a mighty effort of will. He'd promised himself that he would not go after him. He had left his fate in the hands of the Gods. *Be it*, he thought as he opened the door. He looked around the darkened room, hoping against hope to see the boy. But it was no use. He was gone.

He sank slowly into the furs like a man sinking into the deep, cold waters of death.

“Ow!”

He sprang up, drew his sword and ripped the covers back in one smooth motion.

“Rulan!”

His golden curls shone in the moonlight like the tresses of a young god. Metri pushed the sword out of his way and ran into Rulan’s arms with such haste that he almost knocked him to the floor.

“You didn’t leave me,” he said joyously.

He wrapped his arms around the big man as far as he could reach and laid his head on his chest.

“No, boy,” Rulan said in a choked voice, stroking his hair gently. He bent and whispered into his ear, “I told you, never.”

Metri slipped to his knees and undid Rulan’s trousers. He took his tool between his lips and slid his hot mouth up and down, taking him deep to the back of his throat.

Rulan stepped back, picked up the boy and carried him to the furs. He laid him back in the soft moonlight and used his hot ass. Rulan did not rape Metri, but he used him hard, as a Master uses a slave.

“You belong to me now boy,” Rulan said, stroking hard into him.

“Yes Sir,” Metri said, writhing under him, moaning softly.

“Today you’ve earned the right to call me Master.”

“I’m yours Master,” Metri said, raising his hips to meet Rulan’s hard strokes into his throbbing ass.

“If you ever try to leave me boy, I’ll hunt you down.”

“Yes Master,” he said as Rulan’s tool pounded into him.

Metri had no illusions about what would happen to him if Rulan ever had to hunt him down. He looked up into his Master’s eyes in the strong moonlight as he used his willing ass. Another slave might have been terrified by those words. But Metri felt like he had waited his whole life to hear those words from a man like Rulan.

“You’re mine boy,” Rulan said, stroking harder and harder into Metri’s hot hole. At last Rulan had found love again and Metri’s utter submission to him fulfilled him beyond words.

“Please Master, can your slave come,” Metri said, driving his hips into Rulan hard.

“Yes my slaveboy. Come for me,” Rulan said, grinding his hips into the boy with every hard stroke.

Metri touched himself and came within moments.

“I’m yours Master,” he said over and over again as his tool jetted hot liquid.

Seeing Metri explode like that in complete and total submission to him made Rulan’s tool explode deep inside the boy’s ass. He stroked hard into him, pumping deep into his ass and spilling his hot seed into his slave’s pulsing hole.

Later, they lay in bed together, Metri curled into Rulan’s arms.

“When we get to Jeh Lan, I’m buying you a collar boy,” Rulan said.

He ran his hand slowly through Metri’s silken curls, winding his hair through his fingers.

“Please don’t Master,” Metri said.

“Why not boy? You’re my property. And I like to see my collar on my property.”

“Yes Sir, I know.”

Metri disentangled himself from Rulan, sitting up in the furs and looking down at him.

“But what I meant was, I want the old collar. The one you gave me in the castle, with your ring on it. It would mean a lot to me Master. Please. It was our first time.” He looked down at his hands as an embarrassed flush rose to his face.

“Very well boy,” Rulan said. He reached up and caressed his soft cheeks.

Before he knew it, Metri was up and digging through a bundle on the floor. He came back and kneeled beside the furs. He laid the collar, the ring and the lock in Rulan’s hands. He took them from him and locked the collar and ring around the neck of his new property.

Metri smiled softly in the strong moonlight, and looked up at his new owner.

“I’m yours Master.”

“All mine boy,” Rulan said, pulling him back into the furs.

He curled up into Rulan’s strong arms again, his head on his chest, and fell into a peaceful sleep, his hand on the collar about his neck.

Rulan stayed awake a long time, stroking Metri’s back gently. Finally he slipped into the ocean of sleep, where he flowed past the land of nightmares for the first time in eleven summers and sailed on deep, still waters beneath open, clear skies.

Early the next morning, Rulan was settling their bill with the Inn keeper while Metri put the last of their things into the wagon. Rulan came outside in time to watch Metri climbing up into the wagon with an armful of bags. The muscles in his legs rippled smoothly as he climbed up into the wagon and his tunic lifted slightly in the mild morning breeze, giving Rulan a fleeting glimpse of his perfect, round ass.

Rulan followed him up into the wagon and stood behind Metri.

“Is that everything Metri?”

“Yes Sir,” Metri said without turning around.

He bent to stow the bags securely to the wagon floor, baring his smooth tight ass. Rulan shoved him hard, bending him over the high pile of blankets. He grabbed him around his waist roughly as he reached with his other hand to undo his trousers.

Metri gasped in surprise, steadying himself against the pile of blankets, trying to keep his balance.

“Please, Sir. I’ll get you oil,” he said when he felt Rulan’s thick tool pressed up against his dry, tight hole.

“Shut up boy. You’re mine now, get used to my tool up your slaveboy ass where I want, when I want,” Rulan said.

He kicked Metri’s legs farther apart and let his trousers fall to the floor.

“This is all the oil you need boy,” Rulan said.

He spit into his hand and rubbed his moist hand along his throbbing tool before sinking into Metri’s tight hole in one quick thrust. He grabbed the boy’s slim hips, pulling him close as he rammed himself deep into his ass again and again.

Metri buried his face in the soft blankets, crying out with every brutal thrust into him.

Rulan ground his balls into Metri’s smooth ass with every stroke, while the boy squirmed in his grasp, trying to escape the pain in his tight hole.

“Who does this tight slaveboy ass belong to now whore?”

“To you Sir,” Metri said.

He groaned in pain with every deep thrust into his tight quivering hole, squirming in Rulan’s grip.

“That’s right boy,” Rulan said, pulling out of him.

Metri collapsed to the furs, turning to look up at his Master. Even though Rulan had used his ass only a few minutes, he was sore from the violent thrusts into his tight hole.

Rulan stroked his face gently, smiling down at him.

“You’ll soon grow accustomed to it boy. You’ll see,” he said, pulling up his trousers.

He got down out of the wagon.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s find some decent food for breakfast in this town.”

Metri and Rulan found an Inn that served breakfast. Rulan made a deal with the Inn Keeper and rounded out the last of their supplies of water with two water skins. They would need the extra water in case anything went wrong out in the badlands.

After breakfast, he and Metri carried the water back to the wagon and Rulan made Metri get in the back over the boy’s protests.

“But Rulan, I’ve been locked in that room for *weeks*,” Metri said. He stood stubbornly beside the wagon, refusing to get in the back.

“Ride in the back for now boy. There will be plenty to see, but you haven’t had sun in weeks. You must grow accustomed to the sun again gradually.”

Metri hated the idea of being confined again, even in the back of a wagon, but he knew Rulan was right.

“Alright,” he said, climbing up into the wagon. “But I get down when we stop right?”

“Yes boy, of course,” Rulan said.

He went around and climbed up into the front of the wagon, taking the horses’ reigns. They set off out of town and Metri was left to sit in the back on the furs. He watched the road stretch out behind them, feeling a twinge of sadness as the buildings of the town retreated while they rode deeper into the forest.

The last he saw of Sapphyra as they came up over a hill was a bright twinkle of sunlight on sparkling water. He would forever remember Sapphyra as the place where he first woke up unafraid that the man beside him would abandon him on some dark, quiet night.

Chapter 16

Once the road out of town ended, there was no path that led into the forest. Rulan guided the horses between unending trees that soared into clear blue skies. All around them, great green giants spread canopies of leaves over their heads. Rays of brilliant sunlight shot through the leaves like golden shafts of light thrown to earth by the Gods.

There were faster ways to the temple in Jeh Lan, but Rulan chose to travel through these woods because it was time that Metri's lessons continued. There was plenty of time before Souwen. Their journey took on the easy pattern Metri had come to know. They rose at dawn and traveled for half the day. When the sun reached its greatest height in the sky, they stopped for their afternoon meal. After their meal, Metri's lessons began.

Rulan taught him the names and sounds of the forest animals. His natural talent to mimic others made it a simple task to teach Metri to make animal calls that blended with the true calls of the wild that filled the woods. As they traveled on, Metri's training turned to hunting.

"When you hunt an animal, you must learn to think like the animal and feel the fear your prey feels for its life. Above all, you must respect that, because animals kill out of fear. Humans are the only creatures who kill for pleasure."

He stood behind Metri and gently guided his aim toward the bag of sand he had left up in the branches of a tree. Metri released the arrow and it fell far wide of its mark, arching through the leaves and falling harmlessly to earth.

They had been practicing all afternoon and Rulan saw that Metri's arms trembled with effort as he cocked his next arrow.

"That's enough boy. We'll try again tomorrow," Rulan said, taking the bow from him.

"Just one more time Rulan," Metri said, holding on to the bow.

“Not today. We’re losing sunlight anyway. Come. We must eat and rest to continue our journey tomorrow.”

Each day when they stopped, Rulan taught Metri the art of hunting, first with bags of sand then with wild prey, until a passion for hunting the wild creatures of the forest swelled in Metri. Soon his silent footsteps and deadly accurate aim gave them a steady supply of roasted meat for dinner. In those moments on the hunt, when he raised his arrow to deal death, he felt like a wild creature of the trees who survived by his wits, taking what he needed to live from the bounty of the land.

Metri enjoyed hunting, but his favorite game was practicing his new skills on Rulan. Before their afternoon lessons began, Metri trailed Rulan through the forest, moving through the trees with the lean grace of a cat stalking prey.

Even Rulan’s ears, trained to the sounds of the forest, could not hear Metri’s stealthy steps through the trees. But the day came when he decided that it was time to further his boy’s training. Although he did not understand it, he had a feeling in his gut that hurried him on. Each passing day was filled with the pressing need to teach Metri to survive in these wild, open spaces.

One bright, hot afternoon when Metri stalked him and jumped into his path, Rulan grabbed him and threw him up against a tree, pressing his sword to his throat.

“Never sneak up on an enemy who is better armed than you are boy,” Rulan said, putting his sword away. “Unless of course you can trick him into doing something foolish.”

“Like what?” Metri said, following Rulan back to their camp.

“Like letting his guard down. Never let your guard down in the presence of your enemy.”

After that, Metri's training took a different turn. As they traveled through the forest, Rulan taught him the art and strategies of combat and dealing death.

Rulan was a demanding, merciless teacher. Hour after hour, day after day, Metri practiced his lessons. He kicked the branches from trees until his legs ached and trembled. First his hands bled then became hard and calloused as he practiced deadly strikes against the hard bark of trees.

Many nights he went to bed sore and aching from his punishing training. But when the next day broke he paid quiet attention to Rulan's words as they traveled through the forest, absorbing his lessons with the keen attention of a soldier new to battle.

As days and nights turned to weeks, Rulan trained Metri with relentless determination, turning his boy into a creature of the forest that hunted and killed for his food and who could stalk and kill a man if he had to.

Metri typically packed the wagon at night, before they went to sleep. Rulan lay naked in the sleeping furs, beside the fire, watching him load things into the wagon for their journey the next day.

Metri was no longer the city boy who had become his slave back in Gunred. He was no longer a pale pleasure slave with hands softer than a silken petal. Rulan knew that when men lived in a city long enough, they became yoked to their gold like beasts of burden, carrying their thoughts of profit like oxen straining uphill beneath unbearable loads.

Only living out here, among the creatures of the wild unleashed the primeval hunger that gnawed at the heart of every man draped in fine silks and imprisoned behind the stone walls of great mansions. Out here the primal thirst that was quenched only by the blood of the hunt

ripped and clawed at the belly of a man. In the wild places, the useless bonds that tied men to cities were consumed by the primitive hunger that dwelled in ancient memories of freedom.

Rulan grew hard as his eyes were drawn to the smooth, lean muscles in Metri's legs. His boy moved with the smooth, agile grace of a creature born to roam wild, untamed places. A breath of night air blew Metri's tunic up around his legs as he stepped up into the wagon, giving Rulan a heart stopping glimpse of the sleek muscles in his smooth ass.

"Come on boy. Time for rest," Rulan said.

He liked shoving his tool deep up his boy's ass now more than ever. With Rulan's lessons he had grown into a sleek young warrior of the hunt who roamed the untamed woods fearless, hunting and bringing down prey with the savage glee of a wild creature born to be free.

Metri slipped out of his tunic and came to lay beside him in the furs. When Rulan reached to pull him into his arms, he rolled out of his reach, and jumped on top of him, pinning his arms down with his body weight.

His lean spare muscle was no match for Rulan's bulky strength, but Metri had the advantage of speed and agility. They rolled off the furs onto the dirt, first Metri on top, then Rulan.

"That's not the way it's going to be boy," Rulan said, wrapping his thick arm around Metri's neck.

He held him like that, giving him the choice of struggling and causing himself agonizing pain, or laying still and submitting to him. Metri struggled against the pain a few brief moments before he surrendered and lay still. They had rolled back onto the furs and Rulan forced Metri onto his back.

He grabbed him and kneaded his tight ass in his strong hands. His heart pumped primitive lust through his veins, filling him with the need to take his boy and mount him with the hungry violence of a rutting beast.

“Spread your legs boy,” Rulan said.

“Let me get on my knees for you Master, please,” Metri said.

Rulan had taught him the inner mysteries of the secret brotherhood of the hunt. And now he would give him his ass out here in this wild place where men survived not because they were men but because they had become as the animals they hunted. Rulan had conquered him and his prize was his willing ass.

Rulan grabbed him and turned him onto his stomach, slapping his ass hard when he didn't lift his ass up in the air fast enough.

When the pink flesh of Metri's tight hole peeked out between his cheeks, a primal need welled up inside Rulan, coming from the deep, ancient part of him that lived in every man.

“Lift your ass up boy and spread your cheeks to me,” Rulan said, pressing his hard tool up against his smooth ass.

Out here in the wilderness, surviving only because he thought faster than his prey, Metri felt truly free for the first time in his life. He needed to be mounted and possessed, to feel his Master riding him, driving his tool deep inside him, marking him with his seed and claiming his territory.

Rulan grabbed his ass and rammed his throbbing tool into Metri's tight hole. Metri grabbed the furs, biting his arm, stifling his cries as Rulan plunged his tool into him again and again, driven by the feral lust rushing through his veins.

He ground his hips into his boy's trembling ass, feeling his tight hole quiver around his throbbing tool as he thrust deep into him. Rulan dug his big hands into the smooth skin of Metri's ass as he drove into him, groaning in pleasure, sinking deep into the boy's ass with every brutal thrust.

Metri bucked and writhed in his grasp, growling like an animal, sinking his teeth into the flesh of his arm, as he rammed his ass back to meet Rulan's violent thrusts into him. His boy's squirming, tight body made him drive harder into his tight hole, possessing him, taking his ass, claiming him for his own.

"Tell me who this tight slave ass belongs to boy," Rulan said, pounding Metri's tight hole without mercy.

"To you Sir," Metri said, thrashing and writhing in Rulan's tight grip on his ass.

His slim body shook with the force of every furious thrust into his tight hole. They growled and cried out like two beasts of the wild mating under the star filled sky. Around them the animal cries of the woods blended with their own grunts and groans of passion.

"Master!" Metri cried out and shot his seed onto the furs, unable to stop himself.

He drove his ass back into Rulan, smashing into him again and again as hot liquid shot from him. Rulan grabbed him around his slim waist and held him in a rough embrace as he thrust deep into his pulsing hole, groaning in agony and pleasure. At last he cried out, growling like a beast as he drove himself into Metri and spilled his seed deep into his pulsing hole.

Metri collapsed onto the furs, breathing hard. Rulan lay beside him and pulled him into his arms, pressing Metri's back into his chest. He stroked his hair gently.

"Good boy," he said.

Metri's ass ached, but he still pressed himself into his Master, wanting to lose himself in his strong embrace, where he was completely safe.

"Night Sir," Metri said.

He closed his blue eyes and slipped into an exhausted, content sleep. It took Rulan considerably longer to fall asleep. The crystal he carried weighed heavy on his mind. He would not feel safe with Metri again until it was out of his hands.

The temple of Jeh Lan was the temple where he first served the Brotherhood after initiation. He knew that it was no coincidence that he was being sent back there now, with his new slave. He held Metri close as he slid down into sleep, where the nightmares of the depths waited for him, like hungry demons with sharp teeth anxious to feed.

The days and nights went by to the rhythm of the wagon's wheels over the rocky dirt floor of the forest. Rulan guided their conversations along subtle paths, always steering Metri away from the crystal they carried. He knew that the less his boy knew of the crystal, the safer he would be. He was successful until the day he discovered that Metri remembered everything he saw and heard.

"Rulan, what did Kalen mean when he said that you walk a dangerous path?"

"We were talking about things that you know nothing of boy," Rulan said, guiding the horses through the lush forest beside a river.

Across the water tall mountains soared beyond the trees, great towers of stone that reached into the skies.

"But what are the shadowlands?"

Rulan looked at him for a moment with narrow eyes before turning his attention back to the forest.

“What did he say about the shadowlands?” Rulan asked. He suddenly had an idea about Metri, but he wasn’t sure.

“He said ‘You walk a dangerous path through the shadowlands between light and darkness, evil and good’. What did he mean?”

“How can you remember his exact words?”

Metri shrugged, more concerned with the answer to his question than Rulan’s interest in his memory.

“I’ve always been able to do that,” he said.

“What about things you see? Can you remember that too?”

Metri shrugged again.

“I suppose so,” he said. “I never thought about it. My memory has always been good.”

Rulan didn’t pursue it. He let Metri sink into his own reverie, as he looked out across the river to the mountains stretching into the clouds. Soon they stopped for lunch and Rulan pulled a book of writing from his bag.

“Read this and tell me what you remember,” he said, giving it to Metri.

Metri took it from him, glanced at the words crowded onto the page for a few moments, then returned it to Rulan.

“I don’t know how to read such words Sir,” he said. He lowered his eyes in embarrassment.

“You don’t know how to read?” Rulan said.

Such a thing had never occurred to him. All slaves were given a basic education.

“No Sir. I was taken as a child. My schooling ended there.”

“Have no fear boy. I will teach you to read.”

Rulan went digging in one of their bags. He pulled out another sheet of paper, this time with symbols written on it and gave it to Metri.

“Look at this,” he said.

Metri took it reluctantly and glanced it over before returning it to Rulan.

“Okay,” he said.

“Draw the symbols, here in the dirt,” Rulan said.

Metri picked up a stick and drew the symbols exactly as they had been on the paper Rulan had given him.

“Incredible,” Rulan murmured while he watched him. “And you can do this with everything?”

“I don’t know Sir,” Metri said, getting up.

This part of the forest looked different. He wanted to explore and see what game was here.

“Sit down boy, this is important,” Rulan said, looking up at him.

Metri sat down, looking at him expectantly. He was anxious to be off hunting rabbits or whatever wild game the forest had to offer. He had completely forgotten his question to Rulan that had begun all of this.

“What is it Rulan? I’ve been able to do that since I was a child. It was a game we all played. Can I go hunt now?”

Rulan made him look at three more sheets densely packed with symbols. Metri looked at each of them for only a few moments, then drew the symbols with the precision of a man copying from a text next to him.

“Why haven’t you told me about your memory Metri?” Rulan said, putting the papers away.

Metri shrugged, looking over Rulan’s shoulder at a wild rabbit watching them from between the trees.

“I don’t know Sir. I didn’t think it was important I guess,” he said.

He watched with regret as the rabbit retreated back into the woods. Rulan followed his gaze and slapped his face lightly.

“Pay attention Metri. Is that how you find your way around the woods? You memorize what the trees look like?”

Metri thought for a moment. “I never thought about it Rulan. I don’t memorize them exactly. I just don’t forget what the patterns of the branches look like.”

“Alright boy. Go on and hunt if you like. We’re camping here for the night. No more lessons for now, we’ll be in town in a few days.”

Metri grabbed his bow and arrow and ran off into the woods. Rulan watched him go, wondering what it would be like never to forget anything he saw or heard. He had seen far too much in his lifetime for that idea to hold any lure for him.

They broke camp the next morning just before dawn and traveled all day, stopping at dusk just before a bend in the river they were following.

“It’s another waterfall isn’t it Rulan?” Metri said.

He had learned the distinctive sound of mountains of water rushing to earth.

“Yes boy,” he said, getting down from the front of the wagon. “And no, we’re not going to see it tonight,” Rulan said before Metri could start pestering him.

“Yes Sir.”

He had long since learned that arguing with Rulan only made him more stubborn. Metri went to the edge of the river and tried to peer around the bend, but in the uncertain light of dusk, it was impossible to see anything. Rulan watched him, amused.

“Come on Metri. We’re sleeping in the wagon tonight. We have another early start tomorrow.”

They ate a brief meal of left over meat from lunch before they both fell into an exhausted sleep.

Rulan woke to the sound of soft rain on the trees. He rolled over in the furs and reached for Metri. He wanted the boy to service him before they rode out today. His space was warm, but empty. He came fully awake immediately and rolled out of the furs. He headed outside, grabbing his trousers as he went.

“Metri!”

He reached out and searched the woods for the boy’s energy pattern. There. Behind him. He turned to the dense brush where he knew the boy was hiding.

“Come out here Metri. Now.”

Metri’s delighted laughter mixed with the soft sound of the pre-dawn rain. Rulan had a brief glimpse of his naked body gliding between the trees, away from him.

Rulan’s trousers were soaked, his sopping hair hung in his eyes and they needed to get going by dawn. He was becoming truly annoyed with Metri.

“Boy!” he said, climbing the steep incline behind the wagon. “The rain has soaked my trousers, the sun will soon rise and you are in great trouble Demetrius.”

As he said this, he lost his footing and went tumbling back down the hill. Wet mud coated him from head to toe as he rolled to the bottom. Metri's laughter echoed through the trees and Rulan couldn't help but laugh with him.

"You had better run boy! Because here I come," he said. He got to his feet, shed his mud caked trousers and bounded up the hill.

Their delightful laughter echoed through the forest, as Metri's lithe naked body darted through the trees pursued by Rulan, like a God chasing one of his nymphs. Metri was quick as the wind and silent as night as he darted in and out between the trees, sometimes turning to laugh and let Rulan come closer. Rulan circled around him and waited for him to pass his tree.

"Now I have you boy," he said, grabbing a laughing, delighted Metri.

The rain had washed the mud from him and he embraced Metri in a passionate kiss, grabbing his tight round ass close to him. Metri kissed him back, moving his hot wet body against his hardness in the rain. When Rulan's grip on him loosened slightly, Metri wriggled his rain slicked body from his arms and took off through the woods, laughing.

"Boy!" Rulan said, chasing after him. "You'll pay for that."

"Race you to the waterfall!" Metri called back over his shoulder.

Rulan laughed as he chased his lover through the tall trees, watching the smooth lean muscles in his back and ass work as he ran through the green woods. He burst out of the trees and found Metri standing in front of the waterfall, waiting for him. Behind him water cascaded down from ledges carved into the stone like steps, in sparkling white curtains that thundered to earth, releasing a fine mist that covered Metri's naked body.

"What took you so long Sir?" Metri said. Merry amusement danced in his eyes.

Rulan took in Metri's slick, glistening body, tanned and tight with lean muscle earned from day after day of hard training. His boy's tool jutted from between his sleek legs as he stood before the waterfall like a blonde God in his own right.

Rulan came slowly into the clearing, making a wide circle around Metri. The mist from the crashing water sprayed him, outlining the thick muscle of his naked body.

"Come on boy," he said to Metri. "Show me what I taught you."

Rulan crouched into a fighting stance and Metri circled back from him, looking for an opening. They stalked each other in the first rays of dawn's light. The cascading falls roared behind them like wild beasts come to witness their contest.

Metri closed in on him, moving with the slow, easy grace of a seasoned hunter stalking dangerous prey. His leg whipped out and caught Rulan in his chest, knocking the breath from him. Metri took advantage of his surprise and dealt a punishing blow to his face. A thin stream of blood slipped from the corner of Rulan's mouth.

"Come on boy," Rulan said, wiping the blood from his face. "I know I taught you better than that."

He struck out at Metri, but he blocked him. They sparred like the wild men of legend who lived in the untamed green places of the earth, their slick bodies moving with the ease and lithe grace of men born to the woods.

Rulan brought Metri down at last, breathing hard with the effort. He pinned him to the ground, looking down into his blue eyes, feeling his tight body writhing, struggling against him.

"Today's lesson is different boy. Before the sun is high in the sky you'll learn that I own your life. You'll see that if you as much as breathe it's because I let you," Rulan said, getting up.

"On your knees boy," Rulan said.

Metri kneeled before his Master in the mud, giving him a bewildered look. What did he mean, he let him breathe?

Rulan wound his fingers into his wet blonde curls and pulled, forcing his head back, making him look up into his eyes. His hard tool was inches from his lips.

“You’re gonna take me deep down your throat and you’ll see who your life belongs to boy,” Rulan said.

He gripped Metri’s hair hard and shoved his tool deep down his throat. At first he let him breathe through his nose, feeling Metri’s throat convulse around his throbbing tool.

Metri’s hair was caught in Rulan’s powerful grip. There was no escape. He stretched his mouth until his jaw ached and still Rulan pressed deeper down his throat, touching the back of his throat with every stroke.

“That’s it boy, take it deep for me. Soon you’ll see that you breathe only because I let you,” Rulan said, grinding his hips hard into his boy’s face.

Metri struggled to please Rulan and take him deep, but he gagged, choking on his thick tool. Rulan pulled back, but not all the way out, making him hold him inside his mouth.

“Better breathe while you can boy,” Rulan said. He gave Metri’s head a rough shake.

In his fear and surprise, Metri had held his breath when Rulan pulled out of his mouth. He breathed, feeling the cool air rush past his painful throat. His Master had used his mouth hard before, but not like this.

Rulan let him take a few breaths, then he jammed himself deep down his throat again. This time he grabbed his head, pressing him close to his flat belly until the boy’s nose was pressed up tight against him. Now he could not breathe unless Rulan let him.

“You hunt and fight like a man now Metri, but you still belong to me. If you eat what you kill, it’s because I let you.”

He ground his hips into Metri’s face, looking down at the boy’s jutting tool between his spread legs.

Metri choked and gagged again as Rulan’s tool filled his sore, aching throat. He wanted to struggle, push Rulan away from him so he could breathe, but he was too afraid of his Master’s anger to defy him that way.

“If you breathe, it’s because I allow it boy,” Rulan said.

He held Metri there, his tool shoved deep down his throat, the boy’s nose pressed into the muscles of his belly. Metri gagged again and again, his working throat muscles massaging Rulan’s thick tool. Black spots floated in his vision and Metri became afraid, skating up to the edge of panic. He began to tremble in Rulan’s grip and he slipped his thick tool from his boy’s mouth.

Metri doubled over, coughing and gasping as he filled his lungs with air like a drowning man breaking from dark depths. Every cough sent needles of pain digging into his throat until his eyes watered.

Rulan reached for him and Metri cringed away from him, as he drew great breaths of sweet air into his starved lungs. Rulan grabbed his hair, forcing Metri’s head back, making him look up into his eyes.

“You see boy? How I can do anything I want to your slave ass? It must be horrible to feel your throat choked up like that, feeling like you’re dying.”

He slapped Metri, then grabbed his face hard, looking down into his frightened eyes.

“But you do what I tell you no matter how much it hurts or how bad it makes you feel, because you’re my whore now and I do what I want with you. Understand me boy?”

“Yes Sir,” Metri said.

“Even torturing you like this. Who owns your life now boy?”

“You do Sir,” Metri said.

He struggled not to cough, trying to draw air into his lungs while he could. His bright blue eyes looked up into his Master’s dark brown eyes, afraid, but his tool throbbed with a dark need that he did not understand.

“You want to give your life to me, don’t you boy?”

Metri nodded, looking up at him from tear-filled eyes. Rulan backhanded his face, leaving a red blotch on Metri’s pale, frightened face.

“Answer me boy.”

“Yes Sir,” Metri said.

His eyes watered from Rulan’s hard blow but he was unable to look away from his Master’s cold, unyielding eyes.

“Then beg me to stop your breathing so you can see who your life belongs to. Beg me to teach you what it means to be a slave and belong completely to your owner,” Rulan said.

Rulan stood back, and waited. He needed to teach Metri that he held his life in the palm of his hand, like a fragile shell that could be crushed at any moment.

Metri’s sore throat ached and throbbed. The last thing he wanted was Rulan’s tool deep down his throat again. But a dark fire flowed through his blood, consuming him with the need to give himself to Rulan completely, holding nothing back, not even the right to decide if he lived or died.

“I better hear you begging boy or I’ll get that whip I used on you after the marketplace and show you what a *real* whipping feels like.”

Metri turned his tortured eyes up to Rulan, filled with fear and desire that twisted through him and twined together like twin wires until they became one unbearable need.

“Please Sir,” Metri said from his hoarse, painful throat. “Please let me take you deep down my throat.”

“Tell me why boy.” Metri needed to realize that he lived only because it was Rulan’s will.

“Because I’m your property Master and my life belongs to you to do with as you please.”

Desperation had brought the truth to Metri’s lips. His life had belonged to Rulan the moment he’d turned his back on freedom back in Sapphyra.

Rulan dug his fingers into Metri’s hair again and crammed himself deep down his throat, making him gag and choke on him. He held him like that, moaning as he felt his throat trying to close around his thick tool. He used his mouth in deep thrusts, gagging him on every stroke.

“Your life belongs to me boy,” Rulan said.

He shoved his tool deep down his throat, pressing his nose into his belly again, groaning in pleasure.

Metri’s tool throbbed between his legs as his heart pounded in his chest, demanding air for his starved lungs. But instead of struggling for life, Metri struggled to take his Master deep down his agonized throat, giving Rulan his life even as his body trembled on the edge of darkness. Metri realized in the deepest part of himself that he *needed* Rulan to own his life, because without that, his life would be meaningless.

Rulan looked down and saw tears of pain slipping from his boy's closed eyes and knew that he had conquered Metri's will to live without the sure knowledge that his life belonged to his Master.

If Rulan did not let him breathe soon, Metri would pass out. He slid his tool from his mouth and Metri doubled over again, gagging and coughing through his tears.

"Thank me for letting you breathe boy. Thank me for giving you life."

"Thank you Sir," Metri said, turning his tear-filled blue eyes up to him.

Rulan looked down past Metri's eyes to his tool, jutting between his legs, rock hard. When Rulan saw how hard his boy's tool was he plunged himself back into his mouth. He held his head still while he thrust in and out of his mouth in savage, deep thrusts, filling his throat with his thick, throbbing meat.

Metri gagged and choked on him, but he didn't pull away. Instead he pressed himself into Rulan, sending agonizing pain stabbing through his throat.

When Rulan felt the pressure of Metri pressing his face into him, even as his slender body trembled in agony, a savage joy filled him, ripping through him like a thousand suns exploding in his gut. The deep animal part of him roared in triumph over his conquest. Rulan exploded in Metri's mouth, grunting in pleasure as he spilled his seed down his boy's throat.

Metri couldn't take it anymore. Hot seed jetted from his tool, landing in the mud and on Rulan's muddy feet.

Rulan slid his semi-hard tool out of his mouth, looking down at his mud encrusted feet where Metri's seed had spilled on him.

He slapped Metri's tear-stained face.

"You think you can come whenever you want to boy?"

Metri flushed with shame.

“I’m sorry Sir. I couldn’t help it.”

“See what a slave you are boy? You shot your seed on your knees in the mud with my tool shoved far down your throat, grateful that you could breathe. Didn’t you?”

“Yes Sir,” Metri said.

“You know why boy? Because you were born to be a slave and have your life owned completely with no say in what’s done to you. Isn’t that right boy?”

“Yes Sir,” Metri said, not daring to look up at Rulan. He didn’t know what his punishment would be.

“You made a mess boy. Clean your seed off my feet,” he said.

Metri looked down at his muddy, filthy feet, appalled.

“Please Sir,” he said, looking up at Rulan. “There’s mud and dirt all over your feet.”

“Lick it up boy and be grateful that’s all I make you do. Or do you want me to take you to the tavern in town and let all those drunken sailors use your whore ass for my pleasure?”

Metri hesitated only a moment longer before he bent to the ground and pressed his lips to his Master’s feet.

“Get your ass up in the air boy. I wanna look at your slaveboy ass while you clean my dirty feet.”

Metri put his ass high in the air and touched his tongue to the mud and white seed that he had sprayed on Rulan’s feet.

“I don’t feel your tongue on me Metri. Do not anger me boy or I’ll take you into town and rent your slave ass by the hour to every fat, ugly, smelly sailor with Sun Tokens in his pocket.”

Metri slid his tongue through the mud and drying white liquid from his tool that coated Rulan's feet. Each time he swallowed mud, he choked, coughing into the dirt.

Rulan watched his boy at his feet, his tight round ass lifted high in the air.

"That's better. Aren't you grateful I don't use you that way? Making you whore around in taverns to pay our way from town to town?"

"Yes Sir," Metri said, running his tongue through the filthy mud.

"I don't hear you thanking me boy. You know we'll be laid up in Jeh Lan all day, until dusk. Plenty of time for me to make some money on your slave ass."

"No. Please don't Sir. Thank you Sir. Thank you for not using me that way Sir," Metri said. Tears tracked twin paths down his mud stained cheeks.

Rulan reached down and grabbed his hair, pulling his face up from his muddy feet.

"Tell me what you are boy," Rulan demanded.

"Your slave Sir," Metri said.

"That's right boy. And right now your Master needs to take a piss. Open your slave mouth."

Rulan slipped his tool into Metri's open mouth, waiting for his water to flow.

"You know some Masters don't even let their boys drink water. All they get is their Master's piss."

Rulan relieved himself inside Metri's mouth.

"You better swallow every drop boy," Rulan said.

Metri struggled to swallow the steady stream of hot liquid pouring down his stinging, aching throat. He hated the salty, bitter taste in his mouth, but he knew had no choice, no say in what his Master did to him. He was Rulan's slutboy now.

“Some Masters only let their slaves eat what they earn whoring around, selling their ass to the highest bidder. You should be grateful that all you have to do to get food and water is put your slave ass up in the air for me and service me with your mouth when you’re told to.”

Metri choked and gagged on Rulan’s tool, terrified when his urine dribbled from the corners of his mouth. Rulan felt him trembling in fear at his feet as he drained the last of his urine into his mouth. His tool became hard again in his boy’s mouth, thinking of how completely he belonged to him now. He slid out of Metri’s mouth and stood looking down at him.

“I’m very grateful Sir,” Metri said. His tears flowed down his cheeks falling to mix with his Master’s piss. “Please don’t take me into town and use me that way Sir. I’m sorry Sir. I can do better. Please,” he begged.

“Get on all fours boy, right there in the piss and the mud. If you show me what a good whore you can be, maybe I won’t let those sailors in town have their way with you.”

Metri fell to his hands and knees, his ass lifted high to his Master. Rulan kneeled behind him, his throbbing tool slick from Metri’s mouth and the fine mist that surrounded them. He teased Metri’s hole, pressing his tool to his ass without entering him.

“You want me in your ass don’t you boy?” Rulan said, sliding a finger into his pulsing, tight hole.

“Yes Sir,” Metri said, pressing his ass back to his Master. “Please use me Sir. I’ll be a good whore for you. You’ll see.”

“You’re grateful that I taught your city slaveboy ass how to survive out here, aren’t you?”

Rulan slid his hand around and gripped Metri’s slick, throbbing tool in his hand, sliding up and down his hardness.

“Yes Sir,” Metri said, moving his hips in time to Rulan’s hand on him.

“And you’re grateful I’m gonna mount you like a bitch and give your slave ass what you need most, aren’t you boy?”

Rulan slid two fingers in and out of Metri’s tight, pulsing hole while he spoke.

“Yes Master. Please,” Metri said, moving his ass in Rulan’s face.

His hungry need to be taken and used for Rulan’s pleasure roared through him, making him tremble in desire.

Rulan put his tool to Metri’s eager ass and mounted him, sliding into his tight hole slowly, savoring the feel of his wet hole grabbing his throbbing tool.

He stroked in and out of him, holding his hips, grinding his balls into him, moaning in pleasure as Metri pressed his ass back to him. But he wanted to see his boy’s face when he shot his seed. He pulled out of him and rolled him over onto his back in the mud. He mounted him again in one smooth motion, sliding deep into his hole.

He looked down into Metri’s eyes as he stroked into him, grinding his hips into his willing slaveboy.

“Please Sir, can I touch myself?” Metri begged, writhing beneath him.

“Not yet boy. You wait or I’ll whip you bloody,” Rulan said, stroking hard into him.

“You’re mine, you have pleasure when I *say* you can,” Rulan said.

He sank his tool into him in hard, brutal strokes that ground Metri’s ass into the soft mud. Metri slid his hot, willing hole up and down his Master’s thick tool, moaning in need.

“Here I come boy,” Rulan said.

He hammered Metri’s hole hard and fast, groaning deep in his throat as he emptied his seed into his boy’s pulsing guts.

He pulled out of him and laughed as Metri looked up at him expectantly, his hard tool throbbing between his legs. Rulan had never denied him pleasure before, but he had decided that he would Promise Metri in Zah Nar's Rite at the temple in Jeh Lan, if the boy would have him. He wouldn't let him come again until the night of the ritual.

"Sir please," Metri said, begging Rulan to let him have release.

"Please what boy?" Rulan said, looking down at him with hard eyes. "Release is a privilege for a hot slaveboy like you, not a right. Be grateful you were used and given pleasure."

The last thing Metri wanted was to anger his Master and be taken to a tavern in town. He got to his feet without further protest and they both washed in the sparkling, cold waters of the falls.

When they were clean, Rulan sat with Metri on a smooth rock beside the falls, feeling the cool mist cling to their clean skin.

"Have you ever been Promised boy?" Rulan said.

"You mean to Zah Nar?" Metri said, unable to believe his ears.

Rulan nodded and Metri looked out at the roaring waters before them. Could it be that the Gods had answered his prayers at last?

"No Sir. Never," Metri said.

His heart knocked slow and hard in his chest, as though his blood had become thick sap that pushed through his veins only with great effort.

"At the temple of Jeh Lan there is a Keeper who will perform the ritual. Do you accept me? Will you agree to be mine a year and a day after you've been Promised?"

Rulan looked out at the waters crashing into the rough rocks, wearing them smooth with the gentle passage of time. A slave could not be forced into the Rite of Zah Nar. He had to go willingly.

His heart beat hard in his ears pushing his blood through his veins in a great rush that made his vision pulse in and out. He had never wanted anything more in his life than to hear two simple words from Metri's lips.

"Yes Sir," Metri said in a soft voice that penetrated the roar of the waters surrounding them.

"You're mine forever boy," Rulan said. He lifted Metri's face to him and kissed his lips softly.

Rulan gathered him into his arms, and they held each other like long lost lovers returned home at last. Their tears of joy mingled with the mist of ancient waters that showered their naked bodies.

Chapter 17

After another day of hard riding, they arrived in the town of Jeh Lan in the late afternoon. The minor temple of Zah Nar lay well outside the town, surrounded by the desert badlands.

Rulan and Metri laid in supplies for their journey across the badlands, with Rulan taking especial care that they had enough water.

“Why do we need so much water Rulan? It’s not that far,” Metri said, loading the fourth water skin into the wagon.

“The badlands are a dangerous place Metri. If something happens and we’re trapped out there, this extra water could mean the difference between life and death for us.”

By the time they finished loading the wagon, dusk had fallen and they rode out of town, following the road as far as they could into the open desert.

“Why are the badlands like this Rulan?” Metri said.

He looked around the bleak, harsh desert where nothing grew. A soft, warm wind blew sand across their path that swirled round their wagon wheels like forgotten spirits bringing news from far off lands. The sun behind them was a great orange ball that sank slowly to the horizon.

“These are parts of The World that never recovered from the fall of Ast Royd,” Rulan said.

He concentrated on following the old path that only initiates of the temple could see. All others had to approach the temple by the light of dawn or risk becoming lost out here and dying of thirst in the hot desert sands.

They rode up to the temple in darkness. All the windows were lit with candles. The soft sound of Brothers and boys chanting their prayers to the Gods filled the air. The temple gate

towered above them, thick iron twisted into strange shapes that suggested the faces of unknown Gods of the dark. They stopped just outside the gate.

Metri had seen such gates all his life. He knew the gates of a temple were all but impenetrable. Before he met Rulan, it had never occurred to him to wonder why a temple full of peaceful Brothers of Wisdom should have a gate strong enough to guard a fortress.

Rulan took the hammer that stood next to the metal gong beside the temple gate and rang three times. The sound echoed in the darkness, blending with the chants of the Brothers. Soon Metri heard footsteps across the inner courtyard and within moments the great metal gate swung back on silent, invisible hinges to reveal two slaveboys in the sparkling white tunics of the Temple Of Zah Nar.

Both boys were slender with light brown hair that reached just above their ears. When they were initiated in the Rite of Zah Nar, their hair would be allowed to grow.

“We greet you and your companion, Sir,” one of the boys said.

“May I take your horses and tend to them Sir?” the other one said.

He didn't give Rulan a chance to answer before reaching up to take the reigns from his hands.

“Thank you boy,” Rulan said getting down from the wagon and handing the reigns over to the slave.

Metri jumped down from the wagon onto the cobble stone ground of the courtyard. He looked up at the windows of the temple, but his eyes picked out only the light of candles in every window. The distance between flickering lights told him the sheer size and bulk of the minor temple.

“Greetings Rulan. Welcome Demetrius. Enter our temple home and find happiness in the Gods,” a voice said from behind them.

Metri turned to see a slave standing in the in main doorway of the temple. His thick silky black hair fell in a straight curtain of lustrous sheen to his shoulders. His almond shaped black eyes met Rulan’s and Metri thought he saw a flash of recognition.

He motioned them both through the door, bowing slightly at the waist, like a gracious host offering his home to long-awaited guests. The thin sleeveless white tunic he wore showed his tanned arms and legs, sleek with smooth muscle from working the fields of the temple.

Metri walked past him and noticed that, like the gate, this door was also fit to keep the denizens of a fortress safe from harm. It reached far above their heads, and was probably about two feet thick, fitted with decorative thick metal plates like a knight’s armor.

“Greetings Khorhi. I trust you have been well?” Rulan said.

“Very well. Thank you for asking Sir,” Khorhi said.

“And your Master?”

“My Master is at prayer Sir. But he has left instructions for me to see to the comfort of you and your boy. There is a room prepared for you with fresh clothes. After you have bathed, my Master’s prayers will be finished and he will join you in his private dining room,” the slave said.

Khorhi walked past them through a doorway on the other side of the room. Rulan and Metri followed in his wake.

Rulan was suddenly sure that Symtar was not going to accept the crystal from him. He knew the Brotherhood well enough to know that when they wanted something, they wasted no time. He knew that news of him and Metri arriving in town must have reached the Bothers long

before their wagon pulled up outside the temple gate. If Symtar had wanted to greet him personally, he would be here.

He followed the slender boy through the doorway across the Great Hall of the temple and up the wide staircase that led to the upper levels and the living quarters of the Brothers. The slave led them to a room at the top of the stairs and opened the door for them.

“This room has been prepared for you and your slave Sir. I will return to escort you both to my Master’s dining room when you have washed the dirt of the road from yourselves. Should you have need of anything before I return, please ask one of the other boys to find me.”

He gave them a slight bow and left. Metri looked around the plush room. The sleeping furs were deep and soft. Clean clothes had been laid across the thick furs for both of them. There were even towels placed for them near the fireplace so they would be warm when they dried themselves after bathing.

“Some things just don’t change,” Rulan muttered, removing his sword and undoing his trousers. “Undress boy. We’ve no choice but to wait.”

“Is something wrong Sir?” Metri said, taking his filthy tunic off.

Out in the forest he hadn’t noticed the dirt, but here among clean things, he suddenly felt dirty.

“Never mind. Come on,” Rulan said, walking past him to the bathing room.

Afterward, when Rulan and Metri had scrubbed themselves clean and put on the new clothes laid out for them, Khorhi reappeared like a magician’s trick. Metri thought for a brief moment that perhaps he had been standing in the room all the time invisible, waiting for the right moment to reappear.

“My Master hopes that you will both join him in his evening meal,” he said.

He led them back down the wide steps, across the Great Hall and through an arched doorway that opened into a small room, lit with candles.

“Welcome my friend,” a voice said from a dim corner of the room.

Metri peered into the dimness of the room and saw a shadowy figure standing beside a table heavily laden with food. The delicious smells rising from the table made him suddenly realize how hungry he was.

“Thank you Khorì,” he said to the slaveboy. He gave his Master a bow and left quietly.

The man stepped forward into the light and Metri recognized his black robe as it swirled about his body in the soft candlelight. Only the Keeper of the Temple wore black. He had seen Keepers only on rare occasions, when they came to Harvest Festivals or other high holidays. He had never stood in the same room with one, not even to serve wine.

The hood of the Keeper’s black robe was pushed back and his long, black hair hung in thick waves past his shoulders. His full lips were stretched in a welcoming smile. Metri looked into his brown eyes a moment. They were dark and old, like a man who has stood at the edge of the world and looked down into the abyss to which we must all one day return.

A shudder ran through Metri. He lowered his eyes and stood just behind Rulan, unsure of what to say or do in the presence of a Keeper of the Temple.

“It’s been a long time Symtar,” Rulan said.

“Too long my friend,” the Keeper said. “Please, join me in my meal.”

Rulan pulled out a chair and sat down. Metri stood by Rulan’s side, unsure if it was polite for him to sit in the Keeper’s presence without permission. The Keeper noticed his unease and gave him a reassuring smile.

“Sit boy, here, next to your Master,” Symtar said.

Metri was mortified when the Keeper pulled out a chair for him. He sank into it, keeping his eyes down on the plates of food in front of him.

“Please Metri. Enjoy whatever you like from my table,” the Keeper said.

Metri hesitated only a moment to wonder how the Keeper knew his name before he tore into the food. Temple food was better than food bought in any tavern. The Brothers used the knowledge of the Time Before to create fields and plant food in the middle of deserts. Some temples had entire farms hidden behind their stone walls. He had even eaten freshly picked fruit that had come from a temple in the depths of Winter.

“Your new boy is truly a beauty Rulan, just as I have heard,” the Keeper said.

Both men sat quietly while Metri ate with hearty appetite. They barely touched the food on their plates. Metri became aware of the silence in the room and the untouched food before both men. He looked up at Rulan. But his Master and Symtar were looking at each other across the table in the dim candlelight, as though unheard words passed between them.

The blank silence of the small room made a tiny shudder run down his back. He suddenly itched to be outside, beyond these confining walls, curled up against his Master beneath a canopy of green leaves.

“So now, we have need of your help Rulan,” the Keeper said, as though they had been talking all along.

“Don’t discuss business in front of my boy. He remembers all that he sees and hears. I don’t want him dragged into this if I can help it.”

Metri was shocked. He had never heard of anyone ordering a Keeper to do anything. He risked a look up at Symtar, but his face remained calm, as if Rulan had offered him another piece of bread.

“As you like Rulan. But it may be too late already.”

Too late? Metri thought, *for what?*

When their meal was almost done, meaning that Rulan and Symtar had pushed the food on their plates around until it grew cold, a Brother came into the room.

“I’m sorry to interrupt your meal with our guests Brother Keeper, but we are about to do a Telling for the boys and I thought our guest might enjoy it.” He looked at Metri with an open, friendly smile on his face.

Metri perked up immediately. He’d been to many Tellings of course, but none of them in a Temple done by a Brother.

“Can I Sir? Please?” he said to Rulan.

Metri could think of nothing better than escaping this tiny room.

“Perhaps it is best Rulan,” Symtar said. “It is time we turned our talk to business.”

“Very well boy. But do not go wandering off in the temple. Even you will lose yourself easily in the maze of hallways.”

Metri shot up out of his chair, too excited to remember his thanks to Symtar. Rulan watched the Brother lead Metri away into the dimness of the hallway, resisting the irrational urge to go after him and watch over him. There was no safer place than a temple. He turned his attention back to Symtar.

“What has gone wrong?” Rulan said.

“News of your travel here to the temple has reached the Brothers of Enlightenment. They have soldiers who are perhaps five or six days behind you. The Brother who was to meet you here and take the crystal will not arrive before the coming soldiers. As I told you while the boy

ate, I cannot force you to help us. But if you do not wish to carry the crystal further on, you must tell me now and I will prepare a Brother for the journey.”

Symtar had known Rulan for many years before he deserted his vows. After he left the Path of Wisdom, his exploits as a mercenary became legend. That was why his answer utterly surprised him.

“A Brother will have no chance against seasoned soldiers. You know that. I will help the temple, but there are two things I want in return,” Rulan said, looking into Symtar’s eyes across the small table.

“You have but to ask my friend,” he said.

“First, no more tricks or lies from the Brothers. And second, I would have you perform the Rite of Zah Nar for me and my boy.”

After a lifetime in the Brotherhood very little surprised Symtar. But Rulan had managed to surprise him twice in less than five minutes.

“I shall be honored to perform the Rite for you my friend. I am happy for you. As for the Brotherhood of Wisdom, we are becoming a hunted people all across the land. The Brotherhood of Enlightenment has seen to that. I am sorry if we have caused you suffering in the past, but know that we act out of desperation, not malice.”

“Fair enough. Where is the crystal to go from here?” Rulan said.

“It must reach the far temple of Saphir before the last Harvest Festival. You have a little more than four moons to get it there. But it will be a treacherous journey for you and your boy.”

“The peril of our journey is unimportant. This is a thing that must be done. Our ways must not die Symtar. Not like this.”

“Forgive me Rulan, but I must ask. After all your years as a mercenary, you are the last person the Brotherhood would have depended on for help. What has changed your heart?”

Rulan walked over to the narrow window. He looked out at the stars crowded into the night sky like eager lovers basking in the light of the full moon. He felt Symtar’s eyes piercing into him, as though he sought some ultimate truth. The past weeks with Metri out in the wilderness had taught him more about truth than all his years behind temple walls.

“When I fell in love with Metri, I found the Gods again. The Brothers of Enlightenment want to take away everything in The World that is good and pure. They seek to bring new ways that will only enslave the minds of the people once again, as in the times before Ast Royd.”

“But Rulan, you knew all of this before,” Symtar said gently.

Yes, Rulan had known all of that before. But he hadn’t known that truth which your heart whispers in the dead of night when you linger on the edge of sleep, feeling the weight of your beloved in your arms.

“Yes,” Rulan said. “But I didn’t have Metri before.”

Chapter 18

Metri followed the Brother outside onto the grounds of the temple. He was relieved to be outside again.

“Where are we going Brother?”

“To the Telling circle by the fire of the nine sacred woods. We gather the boys there on every full moon to do the Telling.”

Their footsteps were silent on the ancient cobblestone as they crossed the courtyard and went through an inner gate. Inside was a circle of boys sitting around a fire beneath the star filled sky. The Brother led Metri inside.

“Boys, this is Demetrius. He will be our guest for a few days,” the Brother said.

A boy came forward and Metri recognized Khori, the dark haired boy who had first greeted him and Rulan.

“Welcome again to our temple home Demetrius. Please, join us,” he said.

All of the boys moved to make room for Metri in the circle around the fire. The Brother sat in an empty space that had been left for him.

“I am Brother Dayne,” he said, introducing himself to Metri with a smile.

He looked around at the circle of boys, watching the firelight play across their young faces. He began the Telling with the ritual words of invitation.

“Come one, come all who would hear the Telling of The World,” he said.

The full moon shed her mysterious light on the circle of boys as Brother Dayne spoke.

“Long ago,” he began in a voice as quiet as a gently flowing river. “The People were many. We walked upon the land, flew in the skies and even went beyond the very heavens themselves.”

The circle of boys was silent, lost in the wonder of such a thing.

“During that time The People spoke through wires to one another. Great balls of metal that hung beyond the skies sent messages all over The World in an instant. The distance of an ocean was as nothing to them. One man spoke to another on the other side of the ocean, and he heard his brother’s call at once.”

The firelight played tricks on Brother Dayne’s face, first making him look young, then ancient, like a mountain that has stood before time began.

“Yet, The People forgot the true Gods. We thought we had dominion. We thought that we were of flesh and The World was of earth and we were separate. We raped the Mother, our World, like a soldier rapes a captive enemy.”

The story of the rape of The World always saddened Metri. He saw that the other boys in the circle were saddened too. Many shook their heads back and forth sadly, murmuring the ritual response, “Never will it be so again.”

“The People prayed to the false Gods of wealth, luxury and comfort. We worshipped a box that showed false visions of The World. We lived in fear that all we had would be taken from us if we did not obey the false visions of the box. Our souls lived in darkness. We lived in great ignorance and dread, forgetting the true Gods of our hearts.”

Metri tried to imagine what it must have been like to live in such a time of darkness and despair.

“Our root in The World was forgotten. One day, the Gods became angered and a great stone fell from the skies into the ocean. Waves stood many times taller than the tallest building and great fires blazed upon the face of The World. All that The People had worshipped was gone in a moment when Ast Royd fell from the skies.”

Brother Dayne gazed into the firelight, as though remembering the Great Burning.

“Then was there misery in The World. The sun turned his face from us and there was great famine in The World. No longer did the wires across the oceans work. And if they did, there was no one to answer. The earth was scorched and impure. We could not eat of the fruit of the earth and we died in such great numbers that The World wept tears for her children. Then the Time of Darkness fell upon The World. For many generations, The People were little more than animals, wandering the earth in savage bands in search of food.”

“The Brothers of Wisdom predicted that The World would rebel at The People’s unkind treatment of her bounty. Our temples were in secret places beneath the earth, spread out all over The World. We stored within our temples the wisdom that would keep The People from falling into complete darkness. We remembered the Old Ways down through the ages. We were the keepers of the seeds of the crops, the animals of the farm, the keepers of the words and the keepers of the knowledge of The World and ourselves.”

“When many generations had passed, we went forth among The People and taught them the ways of the Old Gods. We remembered the names of things. Thus have the words been passed down to us through many generations. Thus we have now words such as horse, wagon, house, tree, grass, river, man and woman. Thus were these things called in the Time Before.”

“Now, in the New Time of The People, we do the Telling so that we remember always. The first Telling brings knowledge, which fragments our world. Each Telling thereafter brings wisdom, which makes our world whole and teaches us our place within it.”

All of the boys, including Metri recited the ritual end of the Telling.

“The World is our home. May we always remember the Great Burning.”

After the Telling, Khori took Metri back to his room. Rulan was there waiting for him between the furs.

“Come boy. It’s been a long day and you have a big night ahead of you tomorrow. Symtar has agreed to perform the Rite of Zah Nar for us tomorrow night.”

Metri slipped between the furs naked, but he hardly slept, thinking of the Rite tomorrow night.

Chapter 19

The following night found Metri at prayer. Everything had been readied for the ritual. Metri had been bathed with cleansing herbs and his hair shone cleanly as he kneeled at prayer in the center of the chamber, before the image of Zah Nar, God of slaveboys in his pristine white tunic. The white stone statue towered six feet above him, made even higher by his pedestal upon which the Six Laws had been inscribed.

The God was carved in the shape of a strong, well-muscled man, his hair flowing back from his high cheek bones and full lips. His erect tool jutted from between his spread legs. His eyes looked down upon his altar, ready to judge those who worshipped him there.

Around Metri shadows danced on the stone walls of the round chamber as the uncertain flames of torches and candles soared high then flickered low, close to extinction, like unsure spirits. The wavering fires filled the room with the soft scent of Moon Oil, a sensuous scent that clouded the mind and made illusion and reality merge into one. Through the stone walls of the high tower room came the soft chanting of the Brothers at prayer.

Metri looked to the God's hands, extended slightly before him, but the boy's eyes were drawn back to Zah Nar's eyes, seeking mercy there. Zah Nar promised forgiveness and eternal Paradise to those who served him well, but his eyes held a dark promise of pain and suffering before forgiveness could be granted to the penitent souls who kneeled before him.

At the feet of the white stone statue, stood the altar to the God. It was a bed laid in many layers of soft, white furs. Two stone columns from which manacles hung stood before the pedestal, so that any slaveboy manacled to the altar would be offering his ass to the God. Metri's eyes traveled along the length of the bed to the manacles which lay at the head of the fur covered

altar. He knew he would end the night there, his legs manacled high above him, his ass opened in offering to the God.

Upon the furs themselves lay the Book Of The Gods. As Metri's eyes took in the leather whip that lay curled next to the book like a sensuous black snake coiled and ready to strike, fear seeped into him, like ice water leaking cold, slow drops down his spine. Slaveboys dared not speak of the Rite of Zah Nar to one another. Those who passed through the Rite were sworn to secrecy on pain of death. Metri knew only one thing for certain. Whatever this night held in store for him, the whip would surely play a part in his ritual cleansing.

He heard Rulan and the Keeper enter the ritual chamber behind him, but didn't turn to look. As Rulan came into the room, he saw his boy kneeling before Zah Nar. His blonde curls caught the shadowy light as he kneeled at prayer, making him look like an angel sent from the Gods.

Before Metri, he had believed himself abandoned by the Gods. When he lost Merik, he thought the light had gone out of his life forever. For almost eleven summers, he had used slaveboys who meant nothing to him, ignoring the Old Ways. Now this boy was his life, he would kill for him. Tonight, before Zah Nar, he would offer the Gods his pure love for Metri.

He walked up behind Metri and kissed his cheek gently, speaking the traditional words that would begin the ritual.

"May the Gods find your offering pleasing," he said, his voice filled with pride and love.

"I shall struggle to please the Gods well Master," Metri said, giving the ritual response without looking back at him.

Rulan walked to his place in front of Metri to his left as the Keeper moved to stand on his right. Each man stood beside a stone column of the altar, their shadows writhing and twisting up

the uneven stone in the shifting firelight, like haunted spirits seeking release from their stone prison.

Rulan wore a long red robe, the big hood drawn up, so only his dark eyes shone forth. The Keeper wore a black robe whose hood showed only darkness and whose hem swept the floor and rustled softly with his every move. He stood almost as tall as Rulan's six feet and his lithe movements suggested a strong, well muscled body beneath the heavy, shifting blackness of his robe.

The Keeper looked down at Metri's bowed head and spoke to him gently from the shadowed gloom of his hood.

"What are you boy?"

The voice came to Metri's ears from shadowy blackness. His fiercely beating heart drove blood through his veins in a mad rush that made his ears hum and echo.

"A slave Brother," he said.

Metri took a deep breath to steady his madly beating heart, inhaling deeply the scent of Moon Oil that filled the chamber, feeling its light, sweet scent in his lungs.

"Remove your tunic and show yourself to your owner before the Gods."

Metri slipped the tunic over his head and kneeled in the slave position he had been taught, his hands clasped behind his back, his legs spread wide, his head bowed. The Brothers' chanting echoed through him, filling his mind like magician's smoke, making his mind a darkened glass through which he saw dark mystery and strange meanings in every word, every gesture, every glance.

The Keeper picked up the Book of the Gods from the altar, opened it to the Book of Zah Nar and read from the sacred text in slow, measured tones. His deep, resonant voice emerged

from the shadowy depths of his hood, like the quiet voice of the Gods sounding from a womb of darkness:

“And when Zah Nar had created slaveboys, he stood back and looked upon his creation. Pleased with their beauty and innocence, he spoke to them thus: ‘Thou art the highest of all my creations, for you shall be the right hand of your Master. You shall follow your Master’s footsteps, submitting to his leadership as a child submits to the will of his father, as a man submits to the will of the Gods.’ ”

The Keeper spoke to Rulan, turning the hooded darkness that concealed his face upon him.

“Do you find this slave pleasing in your sight?”

“Yes Brother,” Rulan said.

The sound of the Brothers’ chanting flowed through his mind like slow-moving fog on a moonless night, dulling his senses, shrouding the Keeper’s words in ancient mystery.

Symtar felt both men begin to succumb to the effects of the Moon Oil. He knew that soon reality would lose its sharp edges for Metri and Rulan, and this chamber would become a place out of time, caught between the worlds of magic and the mundane. If the Rite was successful, both slave and Master would enter the realm of the Gods.

“Have you found your slaveboy to be loyal and faithful?”

Rulan remembered Metri’s punishment in the woods. He had accepted his whipping for disobedience without question, offering himself to Rulan afterwards with the loyalty of an obedient slave.

“Yes Brother.”

“Has he submitted to you, offering his slave flesh for your use as you see fit?”

Rulan thought back to the caverns, of Metri's shame at the humiliation of being used in public. Yet he had submitted to him, offering his ass and suffering the pain of his shame with only silent tears afterward, as was fitting for a slave.

"Yes Brother."

"Has he shown himself to be worthy of Zah Nar, accepting his fate as your property, placed here by the Gods to be cherished and owned?"

Rulan looked down at Metri kneeling at his feet, innocent in his need to be owned, angelic in his desire to suffer for his owner.

"Yes Brother."

"That is good in the eyes of Zah Nar," the Keeper said.

He read again from the Book of Zah Nar, his resonant words coming from lips deeply hidden in the shadows of his hood:

"Then Zah Nar looked upon the Masters he had created to lead the slaveboys and spoke to them thus: 'You shall cherish these slaveboys that I have placed into your care. You shall own them as property. They shall belong to you and serve you in any way you see fit.' "

"Do you Rulan stand before the altar of Zah Nar ready to receive the blessings of the Gods as you guide this boy to redemption?"

"Yes Brother," Rulan said, feeling the dark core of desire rising from deep within him.

"Why do you come before the Gods tonight Rulan?"

"Because the Gods demand it of me," Rulan said.

"And what do you seek my son?"

"I seek the blessings of the Gods upon my union Brother," Rulan said.

And even as he spoke, he felt the truth of it within him. No more would he abandon the Old Ways. He had come tonight to prove the purity of his love for Metri before the Gods.

“The purity of love in your heart shall set you free, my son,” the Keeper said.

Rulan looked up into the shrouded blackness of his hood. He had performed this ritual himself many times in his days as a Keeper and he knew that those words were not part of the ritual.

Symtar seemed to know of his guilt over abandoning the Old Ways and committing brutal acts upon helpless slaveboys. After Merik and before Metri, he had committed atrocities that would shame him the rest of his life. The Old Ways were right, he realized. Only the purity of his love for a slaveboy as good and pure as Metri would set him free of his guilt and redeem him in the eyes of the Gods.

The Keeper read again from the Book of Zah Nar:

“You shall care for these slaveboys, make all decisions for them, feed them, clothe them and satisfy their slave needs. Only the Master who cares for his slaveboy as a father cares for his child, as I care for all of my creation shall be found pleasing in my sight.”

“For when all is done according to the Old Ways, the union of Master and slave shall be blessed by the Gods,” Rulan said, giving the ritual response.

“Thus should it be,” Metri said from his place, kneeling at their feet.

The Keeper read again from the Book of Zah Nar. His hypnotic voice came from the depthless darkness of his shadowed hood and blended with the chants of the Brothers which echoed off the stone walls like sensual whispers to the Gods.

“Only the Master who guides his slaveboy well, keeping him happy in his slavery and servitude shall be blessed in my sight. Only the Master who rewards and punishes his slave property with justice, shall receive justice from me.”

The Keeper looked up from the Book in his hands and turned to Rulan. Somehow Rulan knew that if he could see Symtar’s eyes in the murky darkness of his hood, he would see not

sanctified joy but the same rising lust that hardened his own jutting tool, the same aching need to use the young slaveboy flesh that kneeled trembling at their feet.

“Only when you have guided your slave to the Place of the Gods will you set yourself free and make your love pure in the eyes of the Gods,” the Keeper said.

Was that lust that thickened his voice in Rulan’s ears, or the joy of redemption before the Gods?

“Thus should it be Brother,” Rulan said.

“And ever has it been, my son,” the Keeper said.

“Is your slave property ready to be cleansed so that he might serve you and Zah Nar well?”

“His sins must be confessed before I can offer his flesh for purification and lead him to redemption.”

Metri looked up at them. Fear settled into him, like a dark cloak that sat heavy upon him.

“Your Master is kind enough to want you cleansed before the Gods, so that you might serve him well here in this world and enter into Paradise with him hereafter.”

Metri gave the ritual response, “Thus should it be Brother.”

“Rise to your feet slave.”

Metri rose slowly, feeling the weight of Rulan’s dark eyes on him as he came to his feet. Rulan lifted his hands gently high above his head and secured them to the metal bar that hung from the ceiling with leather cuffs. Rulan gently spread Metri’s legs wide. He stood naked and helpless, exposed before his Master, his flesh ready to be offered up to the Gods for purification.

The Keeper read again from the Book of Zah Nar:

“To submit and obey, that is your highest purpose, only thus shall you serve me well.”

Rulan looked at Metri's trembling body in the soft candlelight. His smooth ivory skin shone in the liquid light, like a being made of light, captured in perfect flesh. He caressed his quivering flesh gently, looking upon him with the love of a father for a son. He stood behind him, and kissed his neck softly, whispering into his ear.

"Tonight I will claim you as mine before the Gods my love," Rulan said, running his hands gently over Metri's trembling, round ass.

Metri pressed his tight round ass back into his hand, leaning his head back against Rulan's shoulder. The Keeper stood in front of Metri, the Book Of The Gods open in his hands. In the silence of the stone room, they all heard the soft, musical sound of Brothers chanting their prayers to the full moon.

Above Metri's head, a hole opened to the night sky. If the Gods were pleased with Rulan's offering of Metri's slave flesh for purification, they would bless this ritual with the brilliant radiance of Mes Eh Lene, Goddess of the Moon.

The Keeper looked down at the book in his hands and began to read again. The black hood covered his face in the dim light so well, that he seemed merely the shadowy, insubstantial shape of a man captured in black cloth. His deep voice came from impenetrable blackness as he read from the Book of Zah Nar once again.

"Only the slaveboy who submits to the will of his Master in all things shall please me."

Rulan gently caressed Metri's trembling body, standing behind him and rubbing the soft cloth of his robe against his smooth flesh as he kissed his neck softly. The Keeper's head lifted to Metri, but he saw no eyes, only felt the weight of his hungry stare as he watched him respond to his Master's touch on him. He read again.

“Only the slaveboy who willingly serves with love in his heart shall be pleasing in my sight. Only the slaveboy who gladly accepts his fate to serve and obey shall please me well enough to enter Paradise.”

Rulan ran his hands over Metri’s hard nipples as he kissed and licked the side of his neck. Symtar looked up at Metri. He felt his tool harden and throb under his robe as he watched the slaveboy’s pleasure at his Master’s caresses. He looked forward to feeling his seed jet down the boy’s throat once he had been redeemed by Zah Nar’s Rite.

“Has this boy served you well Rulan?” Symtar said, knowing full well that no slaveboy ever served well enough to avoid the whip of Zah Nar’s Rite.

That was why Symtar was here, in this temple. He had devoted his life to serving Zah Nar. And he served him well, bringing slaveboys to their knees before him, slipping his throbbing tool into their penitent mouths as he helped them take their rightful place before the Gods.

“He has Brother Keeper,” Rulan said, moving to stand beside the Keeper once again.

He looked down at Metri’s throbbing tool between his spread legs and felt his own tool throbbing at the thought of plunging deep inside his boy’s quivering hole.

“You have found him to be pure of heart and mind?”

“Before I claimed him for my own, he was used in impure fashions, Brother.”

Metri stiffened, his fear returning. The Keeper seemed to find this revelation of past impurities displeasing. He looked immediately upon Metri, his eyes barely sparkling and glinting back in the darkness of the hood.

“Tell me of your impurities boy.”

Metri stood helpless before both men, his head bowed in shame, remembering his time of service back at the castle. The Keeper approached Metri and he trembled in fear, not daring to

look up at his darkened, shadow-face. But Symtar caressed his cheek gently and spoke to him softly. He used the soothing tones of a healer who must convince a victim of grave illness to drink unpleasant medicine.

“You wish to be cleansed so that you may serve your Master with only innocence and purity in your heart do you not boy?”

“Yes

Brother Keeper,” Metri said, his voice trembling in both fear and shame.

Outside the room, the Brothers’ chanting to the moon sounded and echoed off the rough stone walls like a haunted plea for light to return to the world.

The Keeper lifted his face gently, forcing Metri to look into that dark, distant place beneath his hood, where only his eyes glittered in dark enjoyment.

“You wish to enter Paradise with your Master when this life is over, do you not boy?”

“Yes Brother,” Metri said, barely able to hear his own thoughts over the hammering beat of his heart against his narrow chest.

Sweat ran down his face, though the air in the high tower room was cool. Symtar soothed his fevered brow, gently caressing him with a cool touch upon his shivering flesh.

“Then you must confess your sins, so that you may be cleansed in the presence of the Gods.”

Metri dropped his eyes from the Keeper, shame bringing a bright red flush to his face.

“I was used by many Brother Keeper, in the King’s castle,” Metri said, his shameful words barely audible in the silent space.

The Keeper ran his hands soothingly over Metri’s flushed face.

“Yes boy. Tell us, so that we might cleanse your sins in the sight of Zah Nar.”

“They used my mouth, my ass, I was forced to serve, yet I did not belong to them,” Metri said, looking into the darkness of the Keeper’s hood as tears slipped down his cheeks.

“That is no sin boy,” the Keeper said soothingly. “You were in a position beyond your control. You found pleasure in serving these men?”

“No Brother,” Metri said, but he dropped his eyes from the Keeper’s soothing words, a red flush rising to his cheeks once again.

“You must not lie in the presence of Zah Nar boy,” the Keeper said, his voice suddenly stern.

Although he had raised his voice only slightly, his words filled the stone chamber, echoing long after he had finished speaking. Rulan came and stood close to Metri, watching as the boy remembered the pleasure his helpless young body had taken in serving.

Tonight Metri would learn that pleasure was forbidden to him now, except when it was the pleasure of an obedient slave in the service of his Master. He leaned close, resting his hand softly on his boy’s ass and whispered softly into his ear, “You must confess all your impure thoughts boy.”

The Promised slave who has passed through the Rite of Zah Nar, did not receive his permanent marking for a year and a day. During that time, it was forbidden for the boy to have release without his Master’s tool up his slave ass. After the slave’s Day of Marking, it was left up to the Master’s generosity to decide if and how his property received pleasure.

Rulan moved his hand gently on his boy’s ass, caressing his naked flesh, taking pleasure in his helpless response. As the boy’s tool grew between his legs, Rulan felt his own tool harden and throb, knowing that after tonight he would own Metri’s slave ass completely.

By the time he branded his name onto Metri's ass in a year and a day, the boy would crave his Master's tool up his ass, bending over and begging for it, because it would be the only pleasure he would know. It was the most effective training Rulan knew. And after the painful Rite, it was the only way to get even the most obedient slave to accept use willingly.

The Keeper stepped closer to Metri, lifting his head as Rulan caressed his ass, so that Metri was forced to look into the depthless darkness of the hood. A torch burned on the wall directly behind the Keeper, but the blazing light served only to make the darkness under the hood seem a black oblivion from which the Gods themselves spoke.

"You wish to go to Paradise do you not boy?"

"Yes Brother," Metri said, nodding miserably, unbearably aware of Rulan's soft touch on his ass, rubbing him, caressing him, reminding him of his slavery and the helpless pleasure he took in serving.

"Then you must confess your sins and be cleansed," the Keeper said, his voice soothing and encouraging once again.

"There was a man," Metri began haltingly, feeling the shame of his confession suffuse his body in a red glow of shame.

"Yes boy, confess before the Gods," Rulan said softly into his ear.

"He was kind to me. He used me gently and allowed me to pleasure myself and have release after he was finished with me."

Metri's tool, which had become semi-hard under Rulan's touch, hardened between his legs at the memory of the pleasure Lansad had allowed him. The Keeper noticed immediately.

"I see you have had impure thoughts about this man," he said, looking at Metri's fully erect tool.

“Such thoughts must be cleansed from you boy. You must confess all to us,” Symtar said softly.

Rulan moved slowly back to his place beside the Keeper.

“Did you have thoughts of him and the pleasure he allowed you as you went about your slaveboy duties at the castle?”

“He was the only one who showed me kindness, Brother,” Metri said to the Keeper, too ashamed to answer the question.

He had only told Rulan of the unpleasant men who had used him like a toy for their pleasure. In his shame, his tool wilted and he stood ashamed before the Gods and his Master.

“You will answer the question put to you boy,” the Keeper said.

His hooded head turned toward the altar and Metri’s eyes followed his gaze to the whip curled on the white furs.

“Did you have impure thoughts in your heart of serving him?”

“Yes Brother,” Metri said, admitting his shame. Tears shone on his cheeks in the flickering, uncertain light.

“What kind of thoughts boy?” Rulan said.

He looked into Metri’s suffering eyes from under his dark, red hood. Before the night ended, he would free Metri of his shame briefly and in that moment, the boy’s mind would belong to him without doubt.

“Please...” Metri said, unable to continue.

“We know this is painful for you boy, but your sins must be confessed before Zah Nar so that you may be cleansed and serve your Master in purity and innocence.”

The Keeper's voice had turned soothing and soft and again. Rulan felt a dark enjoyment twisting through Symtar as he watched Metri struggle with his shame.

“I thought of servicing his tool with my mouth, of him using my ass and allowing me to have pleasure and release.”

He looked up at the Keeper, his eyes pleading for mercy and understanding.

“Please Brother, he was the only one I had such thoughts of.” Metri hung his head, crying tears of shame and embarrassment.

“It's alright boy, Zah Nar knows all and understands all,” the Keeper said, his voice soft and soothing in the darkness of the chamber.

He ran soothing fingers along the soft, smooth skin of Metri's tear stained cheeks. Rulan stood in front of Metri and lifted his head, forcing the boy to look up into his eyes.

“But you know what Zah Nar demands before he gives you the blessing of forgiveness, do you not boy?” Rulan said to him.

Metri nodded, unable to speak in his fear.

“Say it boy,” Rulan said, giving his head a slight shake as he held his gaze.

“That we suffer for our sins before we can be cleansed of them,” Metri said.

His eyes looked past Rulan, over his shoulder to where the whip lay coiled on the altar, black and dangerous – a dark promise of forgiveness to come.

“That's right boy. Only through pain and suffering can our sins be cleansed from us,” the Keeper said.

He picked up the whip from the altar and held it high above his head in both hands, his sleeves falling back to reveal thick, strong arms.

“I consecrate this leather to the Gods, and ask that through this instrument, this boy will be delivered from impure thoughts and sinful desires.”

“Thus let it be,” Rulan said, giving the ritual response.

He handed the whip to Rulan, who held the leather to Metri’s trembling lips.

“Kiss the instrument of your deliverance from sin boy,” Rulan said.

Metri kissed the soft leather, longing to feel the stinging caress that would set him free of his shame.

“May this instrument cleanse my impure heart,” he said, giving the ritual response.

Rulan returned the whip to The Keeper who held it high above his head again and intoned,

“May all suffering, all pain endured in this chamber this night lead to forgiveness and redemption, and grant a true understanding of the Gods.”

He lowered the whip, and turned to Rulan.

“Come Rulan and stand before your new property, so that he might look upon you, the representative of Zah Nar here in this world, his deliverer from the sins of his former life.”

Rulan stood before Metri and pushed back his hood, looking down at him with the merciless eyes of a father who must punish his most beloved son.

“You must be cleansed boy,” he said gently, looking down into Metri’s tear filled blue eyes. “So that our life together will begin with the blessings of the Gods.”

The Keeper moved behind Metri, slowly caressing his trembling body with the thin, supple whip.

“You wish to be cleansed boy?” he said.

He slowly ran the whip along his smooth, ivory skin while Rulan watched. Symtar's tool stood straight up beneath his robe, a thick drop of liquid trembling on the head.

"Yes Brother," Metri said.

"Then you must beg to be punished boy," Rulan said, as the Keeper slowly ran the whip up and down the length of Metri's back.

"You must beg to be whipped hard enough to cleanse you of your impure thoughts of sinful pleasures," the Keeper said, as he ran the whip gently across Metri's trembling shoulders.

Rulan stood in front of Metri's quivering body, looking down at his boy.

"Please Master," Metri said, looking up into Rulan's eyes, "I wish to be forgiven of my sinful thoughts."

"And what do you need to be forgiven boy?" Rulan said, caressing his face gently, kissing his neck softly. "Tell us how slaveboys like you are forgiven of their impure thoughts."

"I need to suffer Sir," Metri said, feeling his tool rise and throb at Rulan's gentle touch on him.

"Then beg for what you need boy," Rulan's tender voice whispered into his ear.

His hands were gentle and sure as he caressed his boy's trembling body.

"Please," Metri said, "please whip me so that I might be cleansed before the Gods."

"Lift your ass for the whip boy," the Keeper said, as he stood behind him, caressing Metri's firm, round ass gently. "Show us how much you need to be cleansed of your sin."

Metri thrust his ass out, his legs spread wide, lifting it to the whip, aching to feel the stinging pain that he had been taught all his life meant forgiveness. The Keeper watched, his dark eyes gleaming in the full darkness of his black hood.

He saw the boy's puckered pink hole peeking out from between Metri's tight cheeks and thought for one brief moment of the pleasure of sinking into that tight, young flesh. But this one was not his to use. And besides, the boy's mouth would soon bring him much pleasure. He brought the whip down hard on his ivory ass, immediately raising a red welt.

"You feel the cleansing sting of suffering boy?" the Keeper said.

Metri's head filled with the fading pain, his ass out to receive more blows.

"Yes Brother," he said.

Symtar brought the whip down again, raising two more welts next to the first one. Metri hissed in pain, biting his lip against the stinging leather on his soft flesh.

"You must pray for forgiveness boy. What is the first prayer to Zah Nar?" the Keeper said.

He signaled Rulan and he came to stand behind Metri. He ran the whip gently over the welts on his boy's ass.

Metri repeated the words he had been taught in early childhood, "Let me always serve in purity. Let my heart be cleansed of impure thoughts."

Rulan brought the whip down on his exposed shoulders, making Metri twist and cry out in pain and fear.

"You must suffer to be cleansed boy," the Keeper said, as Rulan brought the whip down on his welted ass in three hard lashes.

Metri hung limp from the bar over his head, his head hanging between his shoulders, his eyes squeezed shut as he cried in pain and fear.

"I wish to be cleansed and forgiven Brother," he said through his tears, sticking his ass out for more of the unbearable pain.

“You will be my son,” the Keeper said, as Rulan caressed his stinging ass gently with his cool hand.

Rulan stood back from him, letting the pain fade, letting the boy’s need for pain rise within him until being without the pain became more unbearable than the whip itself.

As Metri stood crying quietly in the middle of the stone room, feeling the stinging pain in his ass slowly turn into something else, the Keeper read again from the Book Of The Gods:

“Zah Nar forgives all those who offer their flesh to be cleansed in his sight. Only the slave flesh that suffers the pain of purification shall be forgiven and made virginal once more before Zah Nar.”

Metri felt Rulan’s gentle caress on his ass while the Keeper read. As long minutes went by, he began to look forward to the next lash with a dark need that rose from deep within him. When Metri heard the subtle sound of Rulan lifting the whip again, he pressed his ass out to him, begging for the stinging, biting pain that would set him free.

“You’re ready now boy,” the Keeper said, as Rulan caressed his aching ass. “You’re ready to be cleansed by the Gods.”

Rulan brought the whip down on Metri’s ass in slow, measured lashes, each harder than the last. As each lash landed on his abused flesh, Metri’s body retreated farther and farther from him until he came to be in the Place of the Gods.

The Keeper’s voice seemed to come from impossibly far away. Within himself, his mind had become utterly still and each lash that fell upon his flesh became an ecstasy that filled the stillness, taking over his mind, his body, his every thought.

Rulan brought the whip down again and again slowly and deliberately, each lash strong and hard across his welted ass. Metri felt like a mighty eagle that had taken wing and soared

beyond the heavens, as the pain became a liquid light that flowed to every particle of his being. At last he felt himself purified, forgiven, exalted and he cried in joy and ecstasy.

Rulan looked down at Metri's welted ass and knew that a few more lashes would draw blood. He felt the boy's ecstasy and envied his union with the Gods.

Rulan could reach the Place of the Gods only through his boy's willing suffering. He felt Metri's pain blend into ecstasy that flowed into him, taking them both beyond the bounds of their flesh. In that limitless space was the Place of the Gods where Rulan possessed Metri as completely and undeniably as the Gods possess man, for he was Metri's maker. He made him all that he was, and in return Metri brought him to the Place of the Gods.

"Have you reached the Place of the Gods?" he whispered into Metri's ear softly.

The boy nodded, not caring to speak.

"Have you felt your sins forgiven and cleansed from you?" the Keeper whispered into his other ear.

"Yes Brother," Metri said, smiling the smile of a redeemed angel. The Keeper stepped back and motioned Rulan to stand by his side.

"Remove your robe so that this boy may see to whom his life will belong in a year and a day, should he prove worthy."

Rulan stood beside the Keeper and opened his robe, letting it fall and pool in redness at his feet. He stepped out of it, like a God shedding his mortal flesh.

"Would you Rulan, own this boy, taking him to yourself, to be your servant, your slave, your property,?"

Rulan moved close to Metri and looked down into his eyes as he spoke.

“I claim this slave as mine. In a year and a day, I shall brand him with my permanent mark.”

The Keeper smiled, like a man well pleased with himself. He went to Metri and gently removed his tired, aching arms from the bar over his head. Rulan watched as the Keeper guided Metri to his knees before him. Symtar looked down at the sobbing, frightening boy at his feet, his face moving and jumping between shadow and darkness.

“Bend over boy. Put your slave ass up in the air,” Symtar said.

Metri bent over painfully, his back and ass sore from the whip, his heart pounding wildly inside him, unsure that he could bear anymore pain, terrified that his fear would rob him of this most important moment in his life.

Rulan watched the sobbing boy bend over obediently before Symtar, his weltd, trembling ass lifted high in the dim light. He ached to sink into his boy’s tight ass and feel his utter surrender as he raped his newly virgin ass on the altar of Zah Nar.

He felt the boy’s fear coming off him in waves. In some cases, Virgin Oil had to be forced on a slave. He hoped that Metri would not dishonor their Rite that way. Surely the boy must realize that, as a slave, it was his duty to prove his obedience and love by suffering willingly for his owner.

The Keeper turned and took a glass jar from a low stone table beside the altar. Rulan watched him dip his fingers into the jar and slide his slick fingers into Metri’s tight hole, moving around slowly inside his ass, letting the boy’s heat melt the ointment from his fingers.

“You know what this is boy?”

“Yes Brother,” Metri said through his tears. Every slave knew what Virgin Oil was.

The Keeper slid his fingers from his ass and took more ointment from the jar and slid his fingers again into Metri's hole.

"Tell me what it is boy," he said, sliding his fingers around inside him.

Metri didn't know if the Keeper's movements were meant to arouse him or not. He wanted to squirm beneath his touch, but he didn't dare.

"Virgin Oil Brother," Metri said, struggling to keep his welted ass still.

His tears were drying on his cheeks, as his wilted tool rose slowly between his legs at the Brother's gentle touch in his ass.

"Tell us what it's used for boy," the Keeper said, moving his fingers around inside Metri, making sure a generous amount of ointment melted from his fingers inside the boy.

"To make my ass virginal for my Master, so that I will be pure when he takes me on the altar."

As Metri spoke, the Keeper slid his fingers from his ass and scooped up more ointment from the jar, once again sliding into Metri's tightening ass. This time his fingers did not go in as easily and Metri groaned slightly at the expected pain. Despite his desire to belong to Rulan completely, fear battled within him, a mindless, enraged beast that made every fiber in him want to cry out and beg them for mercy, not to do this to him, please – anything but the oil. But instead, he kneeled there afraid, helpless, enslaved by his own needs.

"That's right boy. Tonight when your Master uses you on the altar of Zah Nar, your ass will be tight, renewed by the Gods. You will be a virgin once more. Innocent and pure in the eyes of the Gods and your Master."

Symtar moved his fingers slowly inside the boy's tightening ass, feeling Metri's fear build inside him as the boy felt his ass tightening around the fingers in him. When the ointment

had melted completely from his fingers, the Keeper rose to his feet and replaced the jar on the stone table.

“To your knees boy,” Symtar said, looking down at Metri.

Metri kneeled before the Keeper, his legs spread wide, looking up into the darkness of his hood. He felt his ass gradually growing tighter as the ointment melted inside him and began working.

“May the Gods accept your offer of thanksgiving from your purified mouth,” Symtar said.

He stood back from Metri, lifting his arms over his head, and like a magician doing a trick, his heavy black robe slipped open. He lowered his arms, allowing it to slide smoothly from him in one fluid motion. He stepped forth, his body tight and strong, his sculpted muscles outlined in the shadows of the flickering light. His erect, throbbing tool was inches from Metri’s mouth.

“You are now ready to show your gratitude to the temple for your cleansing,” he said, guiding his tool to Metri’s trembling lips.

“Open that slaveboy mouth and show the Keeper how grateful you are for his guidance,” Rulan said. His tool throbbed as he watched his boy’s lips wrap around Symtar’s thick tool.

“That’s it boy,” the Keeper said, sliding slowly in and out of his willing mouth.

“Service me well and you shall please the Gods greatly. Can you feel the Virgin Oil at work in your ass boy?”

Metri couldn’t help but feel the warmth of the ointment melting into his ass, tightening the muscles inside him more and more with every passing moment.

Metri's mouth slid along the Keeper's tool, taking him deep down his throat, then pulling back and swirling his tongue around his sensitive head, making the Keeper groan deep in the back of his throat.

Symtar grabbed Metri's hair and pressed his tool deep down his throat, almost gagging him before sliding back out of his hot wetness. He held his face still, looking down as he slid his tool slowly in and out of the boy's mouth, enjoying his reward for bringing another slave to the Gods.

"Soon your ass will be tighter than a virgin's ass and your Master will enjoy his first use of your virgin tightness upon Zah Nar's altar."

"You serve Zah Nar well boy," the Keeper said, twining his fingers into Metri's hair and thrusting his hips in and out of the boy's mouth. The Keeper's thick tool throbbed inside Metri's mouth as he held the boy's head still and used his mouth, sliding in and out of him in long, slow strokes, moaning softly. Metri let the Keeper use his mouth to satisfy himself, feeling his ass grow so painfully tight that he was sure not even a finger would fit inside his shrinking hole. He quivered in terror at the thought of Rulan's thick, throbbing tool tearing into his tight little hole.

Rulan watched Metri pleasure Symtar, his eyes on his welted round ass in the shadowy firelight. The Keeper looked up into Rulan's eyes as he used his property. Rulan knew that part of Symtar's pleasure came from knowing that Metri would end the night screaming in agony as he used his boy's newly virgin ass.

"Your boy has a sweet mouth Rulan," Symtar said, sliding in and out of Metri's mouth, grinding his hips into the helpless boy's lips with each stroke.

“And soon he’ll have a sweet, virgin ass,” Rulan said, watching Symtar slide in and out of his slaveboy’s mouth.

His own tool was throbbing unbearably between his legs. Animal lust roared through his veins, making him hungry to sink into his boy’s newly virgin hole.

“Your virgin blood will stain those furs before the night is out boy and the Gods will hear your screams as I take you, and all will know that you are undeniably my slave property,” Rulan said.

Metri heard his words and his guts clenched in fear as a shiver ran through him. As he serviced the Keeper, the ointment did its work, tightening his ass painfully, making fear stab into him like tiny sharp knives carving their way through his sanity with cruel precision.

The Keeper groaned again, feeling the shiver that went through the boy along the length of his throbbing tool. He twined his fingers deeply into Metri’s curls, thrusting hard into his mouth.

“Take my seed boy,” the Keeper said, breathing hard and grunting as his throbbing tool exploded deep down Metri’s throat.

He thrust hard into Metri’s mouth again and again, emptying himself in the boy’s mouth, forcing him to take every drop down his throat. He sighed, deeply satisfied, and slipped out of Metri’s mouth. Symtar stepped back from Metri, looking down into the boy’s frightened eyes.

“Well done boy. Your offering of thanksgiving has pleased the Gods greatly,” he said, helping Metri to his feet.

Symtar spoke to him softly as Rulan guided him to the altar of Zah Nar at the feet of the God.

“Now you are ready to give yourself to your Master as a virgin slave. You are cleansed of all sins, your ass has been renewed and made virginal .”

Rulan gently laid Metri down on the soft white furs of the altar and placed his hands in the manacles at his head as the Keeper gently lifted the boy’s legs and manacled them to the stone columns that rose before the altar of the Zah Nar.

Rulan stood between Metri’s legs, looking down at him, like an angel that had fallen from the heavens. Metri looked up at him and beyond him to the image of Zah Nar, who seemed to look down upon him without mercy or pity. His mercy would only be forthcoming when Metri’s screams of rebirth blended with the chants of the Brothers.

“Now you are ready to be reborn in the eyes of the Gods as a virgin slave,” the Keeper said.

Tear slid back from Metri’s blue eyes to the white furs beneath him. His legs trembled in the irons and his impossibly tight hole quivered in fear. Now he knew why this Rite was also called the Ceremony of Rebirth. He tried to turn his head from the Keeper, shamed by his tears of fear.

“It’s alright boy,” Symtar said, turning Metri’s head gently back to him. “Your tears bring you no shame. You will be reborn as a virgin here on this altar tonight. It is natural that your rebirth brings tears of fear into your eyes, for you will be born into the world again, a renewed, cleansed soul. But Zah Nar demands a great price for your rebirth, does he not boy?”

The Keeper’s eyes looked down at Metri, piercing into him, pinning him to the altar with more force than the manacles about his hands and feet.

“Yes Brother,” Metri said, nodding his head slowly.

“But it is the price of being the cherished and beloved property of your Master, is it not?”

Metri nodded again, looking up into the Keeper's calm, brown eyes, feeling his fear slip from him, become more distant.

Symtar leaned close and whispered into his ear as he soothed his blonde curls back from his tear stained cheeks.

“Is it a price worth paying?”

Metri looked past the Keeper, up into Rulan's dark, demanding eyes. His eyes traveled down his body to his engorged tool and fear possessed him once more, moving his blood through his veins in a savage rush that pushed spots before his eyes in the darkness.

He turned his bright blue eyes away from that promise of agony and answered the Keeper.

“It is a price I must pay Brother, for I am a slave and the Gods demand it of me.”

The Keeper stood again, looking down at Metri, his legs raised high, his ass exposed to the God, his blonde curls fallen back from the creamy smooth skin of his face.

“Come forward Rulan and promise yourself to your boy, for that is the price that *you* must pay the Gods.”

Rulan stepped forward and looked down at his boy, trembling in the candlelight, his blue eyes locked on him, his body offered willingly before the Gods.

“You Demetrius are now my property. I will be to you as a father is to a son. When you are hungry you shall be fed, when you are thirsty, you shall be given drink, when you are obedient, you shall be rewarded, when you are disobedient, you shall be punished.”

“Thus should it be,” Symtar said.

“Thus has it ever been,” Metri said quietly.

Rulan leaned over and kissed Metri's neck as he fondled the trembling boy's throbbing tool while the Keeper watched.

"Now you will serve your Master as a virginal slaveboy, as though he were taking you for the first time, here on the altar of Zah Nar."

Rulan stood before him between his legs, caressing his trembling ass and put his jutting tool just outside the boy's puckered hole.

Fear and terror raced through Metri's mind, battling to see which one would drive him over the edge of madness first. He laid his head back on the altar and closed his eyes, resigned, giving himself to his Master, trusting him completely to bring him forth as his reborn, virginal slave.

Rulan looked down at Metri's helpless, terrified body and felt him give himself to him, surrendering utterly despite his fear.

"You're my virgin slave now Metri," he said.

He slid his throbbing tool into Metri in one powerful thrust, feeling Metri struggle helplessly beneath him against the rape of his tight hole. He cried out, his screams echoing off the cold stone walls. Symtar stood back in the shadows, watching the boy writhe and struggle as he screamed in desperate agony while Rulan raped his ass without mercy.

Rulan pumped into his unnaturally tight hole in savage strokes, holding his welted ass in his strong hands, feeling his tight hole quivering around his throbbing tool. Metri sobbed and cried out again and again even as he felt his own tool throbbing with urgent need while Rulan's tool tore into his impossibly tight hole over and over.

The hole above the altar suddenly filled with the light of the full moon. The brilliant light poured down upon the altar of the God as Rulan used his screaming slaveboy's tight hole.

Metri's newly virginal blood leaked from his ass and stained the white furs as he howled in agony and writhed beneath Rulan like a mortally trapped animal.

The Keeper watched as the light of the full moon bathed both Rulan and Metri in a soft white light that seemed to come from within both of them, enveloping them both in the light of the knowledge of the Gods.

The Keeper said the prayer of union, blessing the Rite as Rulan used Metri's newly virginal ass, his soft voice lost below the boy's screams of pain.

“We see the light of the moon and know that the Gods have blessed this sacred union. Scream Demetrius and know that the God Zah Nar has heard your virginal cries of submission and obedience to His will.”

Metri's mind became filled with the pain until his screams seemed to become one with the chanting of the Brothers who called forth the light of the moon. Metri looked up through his tears, and for a brief moment, lost inside the pain, Rulan blended in the strong moonlight with the statue of the God behind him and it was Zah Nar himself raping his slaveboy ass. All at once, laying there bathed in the light of the Gods, the pain in his ass won the race over terror and fear, driving him over the edge of madness to the Place of the Gods where he found ecstasy inside the pain.

Rulan rode Metri's ass in deep relentless thrusts, sliding his swollen, throbbing tool in and out of his boy's quivering ass as he screamed and writhed beneath him, feeling his slave give himself to him completely, denying him nothing. His breathing became ragged as he rode the animal lust that flowed through his veins like blood made of fire.

“You're mine boy,” he said, grabbing Metri's ass tighter and thrusting into him savagely as his throbbing tool exploded deep inside the boy's agonized hole. Metri felt his tool explode in

agonized pleasure as Rulan drove hard into him one last time and he cried out in pleasure and agony as his seed shot from his swollen, throbbing tool.

Chapter 20

Metri heard soft, urgent voices in his sleep and dreamed that the Gods were warning him of coming danger. He woke in time to overhear the Keeper talking to Rulan.

“You and the boy must go now Rulan,” Symtar said, pushing his way into the room.

His black robe absorbed the dim light from the single candle of the room and he seemed to be clothed in shifting darkness.

He shoved Rulan aside and looked out their small window. Soft orange spokes of light reached from below the horizon, stabbing into the star filled night, announcing the coming sunrise.

“They’re coming,” he said, turning back to Rulan.

Metri was in pain and still tired from the Morfeus herb they’d given him after the Rite.

“Who’s coming?” he said, moving his eyes slowly back and forth between both men, unable to focus on them, feeling himself being drawn back down into comforting sleep.

Instead of answering, Rulan said, “Get dressed boy. Now.”

Metri turned his head, thick with sleep, first to Rulan then to Symtar, looking at them like two men gone mad. But there was no doubt of the urgency in Rulan’s voice. Metri got up, feeling the pain in his ass and the dull ache of the welts on his back.

He pulled on his tunic, trying to be careful not to rub against his tender flesh, while Rulan pulled on his trousers and tunic and strapped on his sword. He didn’t seem surprised. *In fact* Metri thought, rising slowly to his feet, *I think I’m the only surprised person in the room. Perhaps in the entire temple.*

The heavy thickness of sleep in his head from the Morfeus herb, made his legs want to buckle under him. Rulan reached to support him, but Metri almost fell over from the weakness the drug gave him in his knees.

“He needs more time Symtar,” Rulan said, looking back at the Keeper.

“We have run out of time my friend,” he said.

Rulan watched his boy with a critical eye. Any escape attempt they made now would be all but suicidal with Metri in this condition. When he turned back to Symtar to voice his fear, the Keeper’s hand was outstretched, holding a small vial filled with a dark, purple liquid. Rulan took it and held it close to his nose.

“Morning potion?”

“Yes,” Symtar said. His eyes went back to the window over Rulan’s shoulder.

“Give it to the boy. It will ease his pain and awaken his mind.”

Rulan was familiar with the potion and it’s effects. Metri would possibly be awake for days. But he had no choice. He turned to Metri, who had sat on the bed to pack their bag and almost fallen asleep again, his chin slipping slowly to his chest.

Rulan kneeled before Metri and gently lifted his head, holding the vial full of purple liquid to his lips.

“Here Metri, drink this, you’ll feel better.”

But Metri pressed his lips closed, and turned his head away from Rulan.

“Can’t we just sleep a little more?”

“*Hurry* Rulan,” Symtar said behind him, standing at the window again.

“No boy. I’m sorry. Here, drink,” he said.

He stood up and pushed Metri's head back gently while he pressed his lips open and poured the contents of the vial slowly down his throat. Metri swallowed, feeling the thick, sweet potion slide down his throat, warming him as it went.

"You have the crystal Rulan? That's what they're coming for," Symtar said.

He took another hurried look out the tiny window. Metri looked and saw nothing. But the night sky seemed alive with a subtle light that had not been there before, as though the air itself had many colors dancing in it.

"It's here," Rulan said, touching his waist pouch.

"Good. It is time you were both gone from here."

Symtar reached under his robe and brought out a map. Metri gave him a quizzical glance, thinking he looked like a magician who could command the spirits of the other world with a single word or perhaps cause a man to see things unseen by others.

"You're a magician, aren't you Brother Keeper?" Metri said.

Both men glanced over at him a moment. Rulan knew that to a select few, Morning potion granted a second sight that revealed the world as it truly was. Metri's eyes were seeing past the thin veil of reality for the first time. At another time he might have asked him what vision of truth had been revealed to him, but there was hardly time for such a word now.

"Finish getting our things together boy. We're leaving now."

"You know of the labyrinth beneath the temple?" Symtar said, drawing Rulan's attention back to him.

Rulan gave a curt nod, keeping an eye on Metri while he gathered their things into a small leather bag. He saw that the Morning potion was acting fast on the boy. Soon he would be filled with the exuberant energy of ten strong men.

“This is a map of the labyrinth. There is only one way out. You must beware the false paths. They will take you both to your deaths. Here at the mouth of this cave you will find horses and enough provisions to get you through the badlands,” he said.

He showed Rulan the paper in the dim candlelight of the room. He looked at the confusion of circles meant to represent caves and curving lines meant to represent tunnels that seemed to lead nowhere and everywhere at once. The map itself was ancient, but a heavy black line had been recently drawn that led through the maze of curving lines.

Rulan studied the map a few moments, but the lines and circles became hopelessly confused in his mind. He could not risk taking the map with them into the labyrinth and losing it in some dark, forgotten tunnel.

“Show it to Metri,” he said, shoving it back at Symtar. “He remembers all that he sees.”

Symtar gave him a questioning glance for only a moment before showing it to Metri. He took it from Symtar, feeling the thick fog of sleep left by the Morfeus herb fading faster and faster with each passing moment. He looked the paper over briefly, then handed it back to Symtar.

“I see the way,” he said to Rulan.

Symtar spoke as he gave another quick look out the window.

“You trust this boy with your life Rulan? There is only one way out,” he said.

“I’m trusting him with both our lives. You need have no fear for us. What of you and the Brothers?”

“We must remain here to give you and Demetrius enough time to enter the labyrinth.”

“They will kill you,” Rulan said, stopping his preparations a minute to look into Symtar’s eyes.

But Symtar's eyes turned again to the horizon, watching, peering into the predawn light. Metri followed his gaze and thought that he saw a dark cloud rising on the far horizon, like many horses heading this way at a furious gallop. But more than that, he felt the animal anger and hatred that flew toward the temple, coming for them like a maddened fury, eager to strike, hungry to sink talons sharpened on rotting bones into fresh, wriggling, screaming flesh.

Metri shook off this terrible vision with a shudder, thinking that he had traded the sleep of the Morfeus herb for the madness of Morning potion.

"It is time for my return to the Ancient One whose name cannot be spoken. Blessed be Her sacred name. But not for you or the boy. *Hurry*," Symtar said to Rulan.

He shoved both him and Metri out the door in a desperate rush. Metri barely had time to grab the bag with their belongings before their rapid footsteps were thundering on the stairs leading down to the Great Hall.

Down here, Brothers rushed back and forth, their footsteps echoing off the stone walls, but none looked afraid or nervous. They spoke amongst each other, giving directions calmly but with haste, like slaves preparing a large feast.

A Brother walked up to Symtar, almost knocking him over in his haste before falling into step with the three of them. He looked at Metri and Rulan.

"Why are they still here? The crystal needs be gone from here already."

"The boy had to rest. So did Rulan. I let them sleep as long as I could," Symtar said without breaking his rapid stride across the hall.

The Brother seemed barely satisfied with that, giving them a brief look before hurrying off across the quiet stones. Metri looked down at the stones and for a brief moment, he thought he saw them ripple, like tall grass in a soft breeze.

“Rulan,-” Metri said.

“Quiet boy. Not now. You remember the map?”

Metri closed his eyes and the map rose before him in three solid dimensions, the circles becoming caves and the curved lines becoming tunnels that connected them. Through it all he saw the line as a red carpet that flowed through the confusion in calm order, pointing the way out. Following the red carpet would be simple.

“Yes Sir, but - ”

“Good. Come on then.”

They had fallen behind Symtar’s mad dash across the Hall. Rulan hurried after Symtar, pulling Metri with him before the boy could so much as open his mouth to tell him about the stones or the red carpet.

Metri looked down at the rippling stones again, as he moved across what seemed to be an undulating sea of stones that rose and fell to the beat of his heart. Metri was so intent on the stones that when Symtar stopped, he ran into him, knocking him off balance.

Symtar pressed him back impatiently, looking down at the stones, searching for something.

“Do you see them rippling too?” Metri asked.

“No boy. You are seeing the world as it truly is. All is in motion, only our eyes fool us into seeing stillness,” Symtar said in a distracted voice.

His eyes scoured the stones at their feet. As they stood still in the middle of the Great Hall, Brothers hurried past them, parting around them like a restless sea parting around the wood of a motionless vessel.

“This door is the hardest to find,” Metri heard Symtar mumble under his breath. “I counted our steps across the floor. But I was thinking of other things. It should be here,” he said, tapping his foot against the stone, listening for the empty, hollow sound of a trap door.

Metri looked down at the rippling stones again and suddenly he saw a square whose edges had stones that seemed slightly out of place, forming a square of stones that didn't quite line up with all the others.

“There Brother Keeper,” he said, pointing to the floor.

“Quiet boy,” Rulan said, taking his hand and pulling him back.

He thought Metri was having another drug induced vision, but he pulled away from Rulan and slipped to his knees at Symtar's feet. He ran his fingers over the stones inside the square that neither Rulan nor Symtar could see, tapping to make the hollow noise that Symtar was seeking.

“By the Gods boy, you've found it,” Symtar said, slipping to his knees. He slid his hands over the smooth stones, looking for the crack between stones that was a little too wide, invisible to the untrained eye. He found the small crack and motioned Rulan to help him lift the heavy trap door. Together, they pulled the hinged, stone door back to reveal the top of a stone spiral of steps that led down into darkness.

They all heard the thundering of a battering ram pounding at the temple gate. A fleeting thought crossed Metri's mind as he watched the controlled chaos of Brothers shouting orders and running across the Great Hall, their long robes swirling past him in an intricate pattern of red, green and white robes. *Shouldn't I be afraid?* he thought. But he wasn't.

Symtar sat on the edge of the trap door, his legs hanging down, his feet touching the first step. He looked up at Rulan.

“We’ll need a torch,” he said.

Rulan hurried to the wall and brought a torch back, handing it to Symtar. He glanced at Metri’s face and saw that he was unafraid. He knew the Morning potion probably made Metri feel like he was having a grand adventure. He was glad his boy was spared the pounding fear that twisted through his gut right now.

“I will go first,” Symtar said. “Then the boy. Then you Rulan. Shut the door behind you as best you can. The Brothers will put it back in place properly.”

He headed down the dark, winding stairs, a spiral that took them deeper and deeper into the bowels of the earth beneath the temple. Metri followed slowly, his steps unsure in the dim light. He heard Rulan draw the trap door shut, sealing them in the near total darkness of a blind man’s dream of light.

Metri felt like he was living one of the adventure tales he had loved to hear as a child. He glanced down at the stairs leading into darkness, feeling like one of those boys in the adventure tales seeking an ogre guarding treasure in the hollow depths of the earth.

Symtar’s torch did a poor job of pushing back the darkness that pressed close to them, anxious to crowd in on them, like hungry beggars at a feast of light. When they were almost to the bottom, Metri looked down to see where the steps led, but they went nowhere. The last step left them all standing before a stone wall.

Metri looked around, searching for a door. Again his eyes showed him the outline of stones that did not quite fit with the others.

“Do you see it again boy?” Symtar said, looking at Metri closely.

“Yes here,” Metri said, running his hands along the outline he saw.

They all heard the thundering sound of horses in the courtyard and the savage screams of dying men. Symtar looked up over their heads a moment, then turned to the wall and touched five stones in sequence. The wall opened into a great door that revealed a long, narrow tunnel that led down into darkness.

Now the battering ram echoed far above them, directly overhead. Their pursuers were at the main door to the temple. But Symtar knew that the intruders would be delayed by the maze-like layout of the temple itself.

“Come,” Symtar said.

He pushed past Rulan and Metri through the door, holding his torch high.

“We entered through the third entrance of the Great Hall. Do you know where we are Demetrius?” Symtar said, guiding them down the twisting tunnel.

Metri summoned the map in his mind’s eye and saw the red carpet leading through all.

He spotted the entrance on the map. He saw the door they had just come through as a dashed line drawn across one of the curving lines. That meant they were *here*. On the map in his mind, a stick man materialized to represent their position. A junction was coming up. He saw why Symtar had led them into the labyrinth. The red carpet did not begin until the junction. At the junction, the carpet flowed to the right.

“There’s a junction up ahead,” he said to Symtar. “We are to go right.”

“You have chosen well Rulan,” Symtar said.

They followed his moving light, their hurried footsteps hushed and quiet on the ancient stones. In the silence, they heard the dim sounds of men crying out, furniture falling, running feet across the stones of the Great Hall.

They arrived at the junction and stopped. Symtar passed his torch to Metri.

“I can go no further with you,” he said.

“Come with us Brother Keeper,” Metri said, turning back to Symtar. He was sure that remaining here would mean the Keeper’s certain death.

“I must remain here with my Brothers boy. Now is the time of our return journey to the Ancient One from which we all come. Blessed be Her sacred name. *Please,*” he said, giving them a hard shove through the junction.

Rulan turned and grabbed his forearm in silence, knowing that he was looking down into the eyes of a dead man . Symtar returned Rulan’s rough embrace, grasping his forearm.

Rulan was, above all things, a realist. If the Brothers of Enlightenment were not distracted and delayed by the temple Brothers, it would mean certain death for all of them and the crystal would fall into their hands. But far more important than delivering the crystal, was keeping his boy out of harm’s way.

“Safe journey, my friend,” Rulan said. His eyes glittered unnaturally in the flickering light.

“Your journey through this world has yet many joys for you my Brother. Take care of the boy, he is strong in the Secret Ways. Be well.”

As they went right at the junction, Symtar went left, going back to the temple. The picture of the map flowed across Metri’s mind and he guided their way along the tunnel, following the red carpet deeper into the labyrinth of darkness.

Chapter 21

Symtar made his way quickly back along the dark tunnel, drawing closer to the chaos of the temple. He came to a stone wall and felt for the slightly raised stone that would grant him access to the slaveboy quarters. This was a much used entrance to the labyrinth.

The Brothers used it to ‘magically’ appear before the slaves. His boys had a good life here. Tonight their sheltered way of life would end forever. And it was his responsibility. He should have gotten some of the younger ones out.

He found the stone and stepped through the door into the slave quarters. It was quiet. No boys were in sight. Khori came to him.

“Where are the other boys?” Symtar said.

As eldest slave of the temple, Khori cared for the other boys.

“I have them at prayer, to still their minds Keeper,” Khori said. He gave a quick look over his shoulder to make sure no other slaves were nearby.

“They are frightened out of their minds Symtar. Where have you been?” he said.

In the bright torchlight of the room, his fear for the boys in his care showed deep in his black eyes.

“Call them to me,” Symtar said.

Khori left and he sat heavily on a chair, gathering his robe about him. He took a moment to compose himself. His boys needed to see him calm, completely in control. It was the only comfort he could offer them this terrible night.

Symtar watched them stream quietly into the room. His life had come full circle at last. He had led many of these boys through the Rite of Zah Nar himself, and branded the mark of the

temple on them a year and a day later. Tonight, their peaceful, comfortable lives would be shattered forever.

“Kneel quietly at my feet boys,” he said, watching them file in slowly.

“Be quick,” he said, clapping his hands briskly. “We’ve not much time left.”

They kneeled at his feet, their tired, frightened faces turned up to him.

“You know our temple home has been invaded by soldiers,” he said.

His eyes passed over his boys for the last time, looking into their eyes with the calm they had come to expect from the Keeper of the Temple. Khori leaned up against the wall behind the boys, looking directly at Symtar, his eyes level, unafraid.

“What do they want Keeper?” a boy said.

“They want to destroy the temple and everything that we stand for. We have practiced for such attacks many times over the years. You all remember where you must go?”

They nodded in silence. Symtar saw the disbelief on their faces and the resignation in Khori’s hard eyes.

“Remember that you are not to fight them. You are to bend over and offer yourselves to them. That will increase your chances of being sold well and given a good placement when this is over.”

Even as Symtar spoke, he felt the lie behind his words. Where the boys were sold would depend largely on the soldier who claimed them as a battle prize. He looked up and saw that Khori had seen the lie in his eyes.

“You must all go now. Hurry to your places and know that Zah Nar will reward you well if you are brave this night,” Symtar said.

He watched them as they got to their feet quickly. Shock was splashed across their faces. He resisted the urge to call them back and herd them all into the labyrinth through the secret door behind him. He would rather have died a thousand times over than send his boys to be captured and sold into slavery. They would be sold and made to serve in depraved ways their sheltered minds could not yet imagine.

The boys would hide themselves throughout the temple. Eventually the soldiers would find them. He prayed they would distract the soldiers long enough for Rulan and Metri to get a good head start. For one brief moment, he burned with anger at the Gods. Why was it the innocents who always paid the price of war?

Khori had not moved from his position against the wall. He saw Symtar's thoughts on his face.

"Don't Master," he said, coming to kneel at his feet. He looked up into Symtar's eyes.

"It's not your fault."

Symtar stroked his silky hair gently, feeling time slip through his hands like a greased rope.

"You have always served me well Khori. Now you must guide the boys. Save as many as you can from the black market," he said, looking down into his eyes.

Boys sold to the black market dealers would have particularly miserable lives, ending up in places like the Caverns in Sapphyra.

"Let me stay with you Master. I will die defending you if it comes to that," Khori said. Tears shone in his dark eyes.

“I cannot do that boy. I have already failed in my responsibility to all of you. You and some of the boys should have been gone before tonight. But we thought we had more time,” Symtar said.

His eyes suddenly looked old and weary. He pulled his robe around him like an old man pulling a ragged shawl around his thin shoulders against winter’s biting cold.

“Go. Keep watch over the other boys as much as you can,” Symtar said, standing up.

Khori bent to kiss his feet.

“I will miss you my Master,” he said, looking up into his dark eyes. Tears flowed down his cheeks as he rose to his feet.

“We will be together again in Paradise boy,” Symtar said, standing.

“Is it truly so Master?”

“It must be boy. This cannot be the end of things,” he said.

His eyes traveled around the room, but Khori knew his gaze fell far beyond the stone walls to The World beyond. Symtar slipped to his knees and kissed his boy’s feet with the tender care of a father for a son. Khori’s heart was touched by his Master’s show of respect and love.

“Go now. I have preparations to make,” he said.

He rose and turned his back so that Khori would not see his eyes filled with unshed tears. Khori hurried from the room. He never saw Symtar again.

Chapter 22

Balkon met Jarec coming down a dim hallway of the temple. The place had more hallways and staircases that led nowhere than a maze built by an army of rats.

“Anyone found him yet?” Jarec said.

Desert sand itched under his tunic and trousers. His thick black hair stuck to his head in streaks of dirt and sweat. It had been a hard two days getting here, ending with a hard ride across the badlands. Sweat poured down the bulky muscles of his tired arms.

“No,” Balkon said. “At least no one’s given the signal.”

He turned to walk down the hallway with his commander. His chest was bare under his leather vest. His ebony skin blended into the black leather that barely stretched across his smooth, thickly muscled chest. Beads of sweat glistened on his bald head, running down into his eyes.

“The elder slave has to be here somewhere,” Jarec said.

The slaveboy would be the fastest way into the labyrinth. He was sure that Rulan and the crystal were somewhere just below him. He regretted with each passing minute the rag-tag army he had come across the desert with.

They were mercenary fools to the last man. But when the Brothers of Enlightenment got word to him that Rulan and the crystal was just two days march away, he’d been in a hurry for provisions, horses and most of all able-bodied men.

“You think I should have waited, don’t you?” he said to his friend of over fifteen summers.

“That is not for me to say commander,” Balkon said, refusing to be baited by his friend.

“But if it were for you to say?” Jarec insisted.

Balkon sighed. He owed his friend his honest opinion.

“I would say that you were a jack-ass for hiring these fools and expecting to come up with the crystal against a man like Rulan. Their only motivation is the credits you’re going to pay them and the boys they’ll get to keep as bonuses.”

He looked over at Jarec. Their years of friendship had long since inured the other man to his blunt manner of speech.

“Yes. I’ve captured three Brothers and all refused to show me the way into the labyrinth.”

“They know the way in, but they are sworn to protect the temple with their very lives,” Balkon said.

“I know. We have to find the Keeper of the Temple or his slaveboy. They both know. We can use the Keeper’s boy to make him talk. He’ll be the eldest boy they have. He should be easy to find.”

“It *would* be easy,” Balkon said, “if we had soldiers instead of tavern brawling drunkards for an army.”

“Truly said, my friend,” Jarec said.

He felt no anger toward his friend. He needed such a friend in his role as commander to keep him close to the truth of things. They came upon two closed doors.

“I’ll take this one, you take the other,” Jarec said, drawing his sword.

Jarec opened the door slowly, wary of traps. He had already had reports from the men. Two men had died when acid drenched nails fell on them when they opened a door. Two more had been killed when they entered a dark room full of ravenous bats that had eaten the flesh from their bones.

When Jarec entered the room, he knew he had found what he was looking for. He felt the boy's presence before he saw him. He stood against the wall in the dim light, a heavy wooden club gripped tightly in his hands.

"Drop it boy, I don't want to hurt you," Jarec said to the slaveboy.

He raised his sword and advanced cautiously into the room.

"I don't care if you do," Khori said, pressing his back against the wall behind him.

Jarec was unsurprised. The elder slave of a temple had many responsibilities. One of them was keeping the other boys safe. He had no doubt that he would be a fierce fighter to the death if he had to defend his boys. Of course, this boy's death would profit him nothing.

"I have no fight with you boy," Jarec said, lowering his sword.

"I have a fight with any man who brings dishonor to the temple," Khori said, raising the club. He was prepared to die fighting.

"What of the boys left to your care?" Jarec said, watching him closely. When he saw the boy's eyes narrow in concern, he knew he had him.

"No doubt your soldiers have claimed many as their bonus and used them for their dim amusements," Khori said. "I have heard their screams."

"I am sorry for that. I told my men to treat the boys well. This is not their fight," Jarec said, keeping his voice low and sympathetic.

He felt time slipping from him and with it, any hope of capturing Rulan and the crystal. Jarec inched closer to him. The boy was an inexperienced fighter. His back was up against a wall, the door behind his enemy's back. He was trapped.

"If you tell me what I need to know I will make every attempt to keep your boys together."

Khori lowered his eyes in thought a moment. Jarec took advantage of the distraction and charged him, knocking the club from his hands and pressing him into the wall. The boy was strong, but Jarec was bigger, stronger and a seasoned soldier. He pinned him to the wall without hurting him.

“Stop it,” Jarec said, struggling with the writhing boy. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

All at once, the fight went out of Khori. He rested his head against the wall, his eyes lowered.

“I’ve failed in my Master’s last task left to me. The boys have all been claimed as bonus by now. They will all be sold into miserable lives.”

“Not all of them boy. I’ve seen them and left them in their hiding places, telling my men to move on to other rooms. Many are still safe. How long they stay safe depends on you. I could order another sweep and all of them would be found.”

He looked down into Khori’s tormented eyes, giving him time to think. He stepped back, his sword still unsheathed, but lowered. He had no wish to hurt the boy. When he spoke, the light of rage was back in his eyes. Jarec raised his sword, unsure what to expect of him.

“I would rather commend all our souls into the hands of Zah Nar than help temple raiding scum like you,” he said.

He spat in Jarec’s face. His piercing eyes cut into Jarec with the fury of a valiant man fighting on the side of good. Jarec wiped the spit from his cheeks, holding his temper only with great effort. To be balked by a gods-cursed *slaveboy*.

Suddenly he laughed. He was being a fool, going about this the wrong way. Perhaps the dim wit of his mercenary mob of an army was rubbing off on him. He called out for Balkon. He

came running into the room, his sword raised high. He stopped short, looking back and forth between Jarec and Khori.

“Sir?” he said, puzzled.

“Find me a slaveboy. I don’t care who or where, just bring me one.”

“Yes Sir,” Balkon said, and left.

He stepped close to Khori, until their faces were inches apart and wrapped his fingers tightly into the boy’s long black hair, pulling his neck back painfully. He looked down into his eyes. His black eyes were dark and strange, a sensuous mix of fear and defiant outrage.

“You will tell me what I want to know boy.”

Khori tried to jerk his head away, but Jarec held him tight, looking down into his dark eyes alight with sparks of righteous wrath.

“And when you do, I’ll take you out of here and sell you to the Caverns over in Sapphyra so you can see what it *really* means to be a slaveboy.”

He let the boy go and stood back, waiting patiently for Balkon.

Chapter 23

Gathen and Mareq entered the dimly lit room where Rami was hiding.

“This isn’t a temple,” Gathen said in disgust, peering into the dim darkness.

“Yeah,” Mareq said. His voice was filled with loathing. “This isn’t a place built for a man. It’s more like a maze built for rats.”

“Or slaves who hide like rats and squeal like cowards,” Gathen said.

Both men laughed at their poor joke. They had been friends for many summers and had served as mercenaries, hired swords available to the highest bidder, for more than half their lives. But this was by far the worst job they had ever done together.

“Come on,” Mareq said. “There’s no one here. And I don’t see any trap door.” He turned to go.

“You know Commander Jarec’s orders,” Gathen said, walking over to the nearest wall.

“Yeah, right. ‘Search along the perimeter of every room, searching for any stones that rise out from the wall.’ ”

He looked at his friend. His boots were full of desert sand and his balls itched from the tiny grains that got everywhere, even up the crack of his ass.

“What am I now? A gods-cursed vermin hunter looking for rat holes?” He banged his fist into a wall. “This ain’t no work for a man.”

Gathen looked around suddenly. “What was that?”

“The sound of me kissing this miserable job goodbye,” Mareq said.

“Jarec would hunt you down. Quiet a minute,” Gathen said, cocking his head to one side.

He grabbed a torch off the wall and headed to a dark corner of the room. In his fear at being discovered, Rami didn’t move or speak, simply looked up at Gathen.

“Hey Mareq, I think I found something here you might like,” he said, looking down at the trembling slaveboy.

“What? A dead rat for Commander Jarec?”

“Crawl out here boy,” Gathen said.

“Now that’s something fit for a man,” Mareq said. “Come on out here where we can see you boy.”

The boy’s frightened brown eyes looked back and forth between both men for a moment before he crawled out from his hiding place.

Mareq looked down into the light brown eyes of the slaveboy trembling at their feet. His red hair looked like the finest silk and his ivory skin gleamed in the soft torchlight.

Rami smelled the stink of their sweat. He turned his back to them, bent over, spread his legs and lifted his tunic to reveal his tight, round ass. The mark of the temple branded into his smooth white cheek stood out in the dim light.

“I offer myself for your use and pleasure Sir,” Rami said, as he had been taught in the practice drills.

His heart hammered painfully in his chest, like a great iron weight knocking against his ribs.

“That’s a sweet looking ass boy,” Mareq said, undoing his trousers.

Gathen grabbed his friend’s arm, stopping him.

“Are you crazy? The Commander warned us about the slaves being distractions. If Jarec catches you, he’ll rip your head off your shoulders.”

Mareq looked down at the boy's trembling round ass in the flickering torchlight, feeling his tool harden and throb in his pants. He even saw his pink hole peeking out between his tight cheeks.

"No way I'm passing up temple ass Gate," Mareq said, letting his pants fall around his ankles. His hairy belly hung before him and his wide smile revealed a gaping hole between his teeth.

"Here I come for your slave ass boy," Mareq said.

He kneeled behind Rami and grabbed his ass cheeks, spreading them wide and rammed his hard tool into the boy's tight hole.

Rami cried out and sobbed while Mareq raped him.

"Shut up boy or I'll slit your throat when I'm done with your slave ass," Mareq said.

He rode his ass hard, driving his hips into him, grinding his balls into the boy's ass with every stroke. The soldier's stinking breath surrounded Rami as he panted while he rode his tight ass.

"You got to try this temple slave ass, Gate," he said, moaning as the boy's tight hole quivered around his hard tool.

Rami bit his lip until blood flowed, trying to keep his cries of pain silent, desperate to please the soldier who was riding his trembling ass like a rutting animal. He grunted in pain with every furious thrust into his tender hole, steadying himself on the floor so the force of the thrusts into his ass wouldn't knock him over.

"Oh yeah boy, here I come up your bitch ass," Mareq said.

His breathing became heavy and ragged as he drove his hips into Rami, hammering his tight hole with beastly need and hunger. At last Rami felt the soldier's seed jet deep inside his aching hole and his trembling body collapsed in relief as he pulled out of his ass.

"Go on Gate," Mareq said, pulling his trousers back up. "Try him. He's nice and tight and he knows how to take it good."

Gathen looked down at the boy who had collapsed in fear and pain onto the ground, watching his ass tremble in the flowing light as he sobbed in terror. Yeah. Some slaveboy ass would be nice. Who knew how long they would be stuck in this place searching dark corners.

"Get that ass up boy," Gathen said, undoing his trousers. "We ain't done with that slave hole yet."

When Rami didn't move, Gathen pulled him roughly to his knees and Mareq put his sword to the boy's throat.

"You wanna die in this rat maze tonight boy?" he said.

"Please don't kill me Sir," Rami said.

He was barely understandable through his tears. His entire body shuddered with the force of his sobs as he kneeled, trembling before them.

"Then get your slave ass up in the air and don't make me send you to Zah Nar."

Gathen threw him to the ground and Rami put his ass up in the air again and lifted his tunic. In the practice drills the Brothers had always used them gently, giving them pleasure, giving no hint of the horrors of the reality.

Gathen and Mareq smiled at each other, deciding to toy with the boy a while. Let someone else ferret out rat holes.

"I didn't hear him offer his ass for my use and pleasure. Did you Mareq?"

“No. Maybe this temple rat needs to be reminded of his manners,” he said.

He drew his sword and put it just outside Rami’s aching hole. The boy trembled in terror when he felt the cold steel at the entrance to his hole. Sour vomit blocked his throat, threatening to overflow past his lips.

“Back into my sword boy,” Mareq said, holding the point of his sword still.

“Please Sir,” Rami said, crying desperately. “Please don’t kill me.”

“Do it you little slavemeat bitch or do you want me to ram it up your slave hole?” Mareq said.

He brought the sword a fraction of an inch closer between Rami’s cheeks. He backed slowly into the sword, moaning like a frightened, trapped animal. Sobs racked his body and panic rode through him in a fury like spooked stallions with steel nails driven into their hooves.

Mareq pulled the sword back so that even though the boy felt it between his ass cheeks, it didn’t go any deeper into him. But Rami was too terrified to notice. He was sure he was backing into a slow death.

“You’ll die real slow like this boy,” Mareq said, toying with him.

“Maybe we should give him another chance to offer me his slave ass,” Gathen said, his tool jutting out between his fat legs. His hairy round belly jiggled with his cruel laughter.

“What about it boy?” Mareq said, moving the sword between the boy’s cheeks.

“Please use me Sir,” Rami begged. “Please don’t kill me. Please use my slave ass for your pleasure,” he said, breaking down into sobs again.

“You don’t think temple slave ass is too good for lowly soldiers like us, do you boy?” Gathen said, enjoying their game with the terrified boy.

“No Sir. I don’t think I’m too good for lowly soldiers,” Rami said, insulting them in his fear and terror.

Both men laughed at the helpless boy’s agony of fear.

“You got that right boy,” Gathen said.

He pushed Mareq’s sword out of the way and got behind the boy, mounting his ass and driving his tool into him with the savage fury that battle always sent rushing through his veins.

Gathen rode his ass in deep thrusts, feeling the boy writhe in pain underneath him, holding onto his ass and sinking himself deep into him with every stroke.

“You were right Mareq, this is good slave ass,” Gathen said.

He sank his throbbing tool into Rami’s quivering hole again and again as the boy sobbed underneath him. The boy’s young, tight hole grabbed his tool with every stroke, making him moan in pleasure as he used him.

“Yeah boy, take it all up your ass,” Gathen said, sinking into Rami’s ass hard, one last time.

His tool pumped the boy’s ass full of his seed as Gathen grunted and ground his hips hard into Rami’s tightness. He pulled out of him regretfully.

“You sure can’t buy ass like that in no auction or find it in a tavern,” he said to Mareq.

“Told you,” he said.

He sheathed his sword while his friend pulled his trousers back on and strapped on his sword.

“We’re definitely keeping this one. He’ll bring a good price. We can auction him off in town,” Gathen said.

Rami lay on the ground sobbing, terrified they were going to kill him, while a blood stain spread on the back of his tunic. Their savage rape had torn him inside. He had come of age to serve two summers ago. Never had anyone used him so savagely. He knew without a doubt that his old, sheltered way of life was gone forever.

“What’s going on here?”

A soldier stood at the entrance to the room. Mareq turned to the door. Balkon, Jarec’s lieutenant.

“Nothing,” Mareq said smoothly, glad they both had their trousers on. “We found this slave and were about to examine the walls,” he said, looking into Balkon’s eyes.

Balkon surveyed the scene, taking in Rami sobbing on the floor in his blood-stained tunic.

“Move on,” he ordered them. “There are other rooms to be searched.”

Both men left as quick as they could. Balkon went to Rami who had crawled back into his corner and was cowering away from him. He bent over to pull him out of the corner and Rami started screaming, begging him not to kill him, in a high screeching voice that broke Balkon’s heart. He reminded him of his own slaveboy safe at home. These temple slaves didn’t deserve any of this. It wasn’t their fault their Masters were on the wrong side of a war.

“Softly boy. I’m not going to hurt you. The Captain needs a slave to do a little convincing, that’s all.”

He pulled Rami out of the corner, being as gentle as he could and headed back to Jarec.

Chapter 24

He took Rami back to the room where he'd left Jarec with the elder slave.

"I've found one Sir," he said.

Khori gasped when he saw Rami's tear stained face, pale with fear and the blood trickling between his legs.

"Khori!" the boy cried out in relief.

He ran to him, paying little more heed to Jarec than a piece of furniture in his way. Jarec stepped back, letting the slaveboy run to him. He wanted Khori to see how frightened the boy was and feel him trembling in his arms. He looked with disgust at the blood staining the back of the slave's tunic. He would find out who had done this and deal with them later.

Khori held Rami while he sobbed, looking over his bent head into Jarec's eyes.

"It would be a shame to give him back to the men who did this to him. Wouldn't it?" He turned to Balkon.

"Are the men who used this slave for their amusement nearby Balkon?"

"Yes Sir," Balkon said, understanding his game. "Just down the hall."

Jarec turned back to Khori, still holding the sobbing slaveboy.

"What's your name boy?"

"Khori."

"Now Khori, I know you would rather die than help temple raiding scum like me, but what about that slave you're holding? Would you rather see him go back to those soldiers than help me?"

Khori looked at him with undisguised hatred while he soothed Rami as he sobbed into his shoulder.

“I could call those men who did this to him in here and have you watch while they have their way with him,” Jarec said, looking into Khori’s hard eyes.

“Don’t let them use me anymore Khori, please,” Rami pleaded through his sobbing tears.

Khori soothed Rami, running his fingers through his soft hair gently, remembering Symtar’s last words to him. He knew the soldier was desperate. He turned his desperation to his advantage.

“Alright. I’ll help you. But I want your word that the boys go unharmed. I want safe passage for them to the temple in Hal Thor.”

Jarec looked into Khori’s dark eyes, considering his demand. It would cost him dearly to give all of the temple slaves safe passage. The bonuses that would have gone to the men from the sale of the boys would have to be paid out of his pocket. But the crystal was far more valuable than mere credits.

“You trust my word boy? Temple raiding scum like me?”

Khori gave him a look of disgust.

“Surely you have not sunk to such depths that your word cannot be trusted?”

Jarec laughed. This slaveboy was unlike any that he had come across in a long time.

“I like you boy. When this is over I’m keeping you so I can have the pleasure of making you serve temple raiding scum everyday for the rest of your life.”

He thought Khori might spit at him again, but he clearly controlled himself for Rami’s sake.

“The other boys can have safe passage. But I keep you.”

Khori had known it might come to this. As long as the boys were safe, he had fulfilled his Master's last task left to him. Jarec would no doubt sell him to the Caverns of Pan as he'd promised. Be it.

"Agreed," he said.

"Very well. You have my word. They will be given safe passage. Balkon, take the boy and put him somewhere safe. Pass the word among the men that for every slave that comes back unharmed and untouched, each soldier will receive a forty credit bonus per boy. For every slaveboy that turns up harmed, fifty credits will be deducted from every soldier's pay."

"Yes Sir," Balkon said.

He tried to gently pry Rami from Khori's arms, but the boy fought him fiercely until Khori spoke to him.

"Go now Rami. You're safe. This man will take care of you," he said, wiping his pale, tear-stained cheeks.

"But he'll take you away from us Khori," he said, looking up at him.

"Yes. But you will all be together and safe. That is as the Keeper wished it to be. Go now," he said. He gently pushed Rami from his arms.

Rami had been trained all his life to obey those he trusted. He looked up one last time into Khori's eyes, then let Balkon lead him away.

When Khori looked up at Jarec again, all the tenderness had gone out of his eyes.

"What do you want of me?"

"An entrance to the labyrinth."

Khori was unsurprised. He knew that Rulan and his slave had escaped that way.

"Surely you must know that not even I know my way through the labyrinths."

“I know boy. All I want is an entrance. A way in.”

“You will not come out alive. It’s a fool’s errand to enter the labyrinth without a map.”

“Yes I know. This whole thing has been a fool’s errand. I have kept my word to you. It is time for you to keep yours.”

Chapter 25

Down in the labyrinth, Rulan followed behind Metri, his bulky body at a disadvantage in many of the narrow, twisting tunnels. He had to stay close because at any moment, a sudden turn could make Metri's torch disappear. He put a hand on Metri's shoulder.

"Wait boy," Rulan said. He closed his eyes as if listening to an inner voice.

"Jarec is here," he said, signaling Metri to go on.

"Who?" Metri said, leading the way.

"An old enemy. We've been at each other's throat for almost your entire lifetime. How much farther?"

Metri consulted the map behind his eyes, following the length of the red carpet to the end of the labyrinth.

"I'm not sure Rulan, perhaps two miles, perhaps less. It's hard to tell with all the twists and turns."

Suddenly they both heard the sound of men's voices behind them and Metri knew their time had run very short indeed.

"Hurry boy. Get us out of here."

They walked on, Metri guiding them through the twisting darkness. When they came to the next junction, Metri turned right, but Rulan stopped him.

"There's light over there," he said, pointing to a side passage.

Metri closed his eyes, letting the map flow before his eyes.

"No Rulan, it's this way," he said. "It must be false light. Remember the Keeper told us to beware of the false paths? That's not the way out."

He turned to go right, but Rulan stopped him again, unsure. He heard the men's voices behind them, but it was difficult to tell how close they were because of the echoing darkness. Metri came back to him, looking up into his eyes. He grabbed his Master's tunic and pulled him down until their eyes were only inches apart.

“Rulan, do you trust me?”

Rulan looked down into his eyes in the dim flickering light. Down here in death's dark womb, his warrior instincts were useless.

“I have never trusted anyone more,” he said.

“Then you must believe me. That way lies our deaths in a false light. The carpet goes this way.”

Metri turned and went right, leaving Rulan no choice but to follow after him.

“What carpet?”

“Never mind. I think it's just my mind's way of showing me which to go.”

Rulan followed behind him, thinking of carpets and getting trapped in these dark tunnels. One wrong turn and they would spend what was left of their lives waiting to see which killed them first, thirst or starvation. Metri and Rulan twisted through the labyrinth, the red carpet flowing before Metri like a beacon calling them forward into light.

“Rulan how did they get a map?”

“They have no map boy. They have Jarec and me. It's all the guidance they need.”

“Why?”

“He can read my energy and follow it like a beacon. That's why Symtar was in such a hurry to get us down here and give us a head start. They will not be as fast as we are with a map, but rest assured, they are on our trail.”

Rulan felt Jarec's deep sense of betrayal that had kept them apart the last thirteen summers. It permeated the labyrinth like the stink of something foul and dying.

Even as his adversary thought of him, Jarec felt Rulan's presence down here in the tunnels. Khori had kept his word, showing him the way into the labyrinth through the slave quarters. He stood still a moment, closing his eyes, feeling for the direction from which the energy of Rulan's life force came. He felt also the restless fear of the men behind him. All but Balkon, who trusted him without question.

"Have you been marking our turns with the liquid light?"

Balkon held up a tube filled with sparkling blue liquid that glowed softly in the darkness.

"Yes Sir. I have pressed the end to every junction where we have turned."

"Good."

"Which way Sir?" Balkon said.

"This way," Jarec said, leading them through the same tunnel Metri and Rulan had traveled.

Their progress was slow because Jarec had to stop every few moments and zero in on Rulan, letting his life force guide him like a beacon through the twisting tunnels. The men behind followed in superstitious dread, muttering how the Gods had banished them to the underworld for raiding a temple.

They came to the junction that Rulan and Metri had passed, and Jarec saw the false light. He felt that Rulan had gone the other way, but he was drawn to the light. Balkon headed that way, but he stopped him.

"No. Let two of the other men go and check. We'll wait here."

Balkon chose two men, Gathen and Mareq, the ones he'd caught with Arami. He had a feeling it would be dangerous for them. They went, muttering about underground tunnels and temples built for rats. They crept up to the cave cautiously, their swords held high. But they lost all caution when they saw sunlight streaming through a hole in the cave's roof.

"It's a way out," Mareq said, running into the cave.

Gathen followed close behind, so he was too late to save either of them from sliding down the sides of the pit that began just inside the mouth of the cave. The pit was filled with hungry rats whose eyes had long since adapted to the darkness of the deep pit.

They squealed like merry guests at a great feast as the two men slid down into their ravenous midst. The rats gave them no quarter, moving in for the kill, their loathsome, warm bodies jumping with vermin. Gathen and Mareq stomped them under their feet, lining the bottom of the pit with a red paste of broken rat bodies. But there were thousands of them.

They ran over Gathen and Mareq, jumping over each other to get at the fresh meat. They ate through the legs of their trousers, their sharp teeth biting into the soft, tender skin of their balls. They devoured the meaty flesh of their thighs, ate through the soft flesh of their eyeballs, consuming them, tearing the flesh from their bones as they writhed and screamed in agony.

Mareq's screaming stopped when he opened his mouth to scream and rats ate his tongue. They crawled down to the soft tissue of his throat and gorged on him like hungry diners at a buffet for the damned. In the end, they were not the vermin-hunters, but the vermin-hunted.

Balkon and Jarec got to the mouth of the cave just in time to see both men sink to their knees in the middle of a writhing mass of rats. Balkon looked up and saw that the sunlight streaming into the cave was a clever trick of light reflected down from many feet above.

Chapter 26

When Rulan heard the agonized scream of dying men behind him, he realized that Metri had led them away from death in the false light.

“How much farther boy?”

“We should be able to see light up ahead soon,” Metri said, rounding another turn with Rulan close behind.

They went on, their feet silent and swift on the cold stone of the labyrinth floor. Rulan felt death all around them, reaching out to caress their warm flesh with cold dark claws that stank of the grave, pulling them down into rotting darkness. Up ahead he thought he saw a dim smudge of light.

“Is that the way out Metri?”

Metri stopped and closed his eyes for a moment, then got moving again.

“Yes. That’s the wall of the cave. But we can’t go that way. It’s another trap. We have to circle around,” Metri said.

Metri traveled the tunnels with the sure steps of a guide of the underworld, pausing at branches in the tunnels, then guiding them on to daylight. Rulan saw the cave mouth up ahead, and the wagon that waited for them there. He pushed past Metri, forgetting his words about circling the cave.

“No!” Metri said, pulling him back.

“We have no time for caution boy,” Rulan said.

Metri leaned his weight against Rulan and pushed him back with a violent shove that sent him sprawling into the stone wall.

“We have no time to die either,” he said.

Metri pressed past him and followed a tunnel that curved away from the daylight back into the dank regions of the labyrinth.

“I pray to the Gods you’re right boy,” Rulan said.

He followed him close, not daring to lose the only light in this thick darkness. Behind them, the echoes of Jarec’s men came closer, or perhaps it was merely their voices bouncing off the deceptive stone walls of the tunnels.

Metri turned to him, holding his torch low so that Rulan could see the tunnel floor.

“There are stones here that are traps. This is the tunnel that leads to the outside. You must walk exactly in my footsteps. Step only where I step. If you miss a step, we will both fall through the false ground,” Metri said.

He closed his eyes a moment, feeling for the map in his head. The red carpet had become a series of small mats that criss-crossed the tunnel floor. He took slow, careful steps, walking only on the mats in his mind, which stood out for him like red stepping stones. Rulan followed close behind, watching every step Metri took so that he could place his feet in his footsteps.

They both heard Jarec’s men behind them, definitely closer now.

“Don’t worry. They’ll either try to follow us this way and fall through or they’ll go towards the light of the cave,” Metri said, speaking to Rulan while he concentrated on his slow progress.

“What’s in the cave?” Rulan said.

“I’m not sure,” Metri said. “I think that symbol means snakes.”

Metri slipped his hand into Rulan’s and guided his Master slowly across the false floor, pursued by the maddening echoes of men behind them.

At last, Rulan smelled the dank air of the labyrinth being replaced with fresh morning air.

“We’re almost there, aren’t we?” he said to Metri.

“Almost,” Metri said, stepping onto the last two mats in his head.

They walked into a tunnel that opened into a vast cave that let in filtered light. Ahead of them they saw the wagon and horses.

“Anymore traps?” Rulan said.

“No,” Metri said.

He looked past the horses to the other entrance to the cave, and approached the other opening into the labyrinth carefully. He heard a hissing sound that his ears refused to believe.

He stopped at the edge of the pit that filled the other side of the cave. At the bottom was a writhing mass of hissing snakes whose slippery bodies tangled together in endless, intricate patterns of death.

“That’s the entrance you wanted to come in through,” Metri said, pointing to the entrance on the other side of the pit.

Rulan shuddered. With bright sunlight streaming in from this side, the pit would be invisible until it was too late. He turned to ready the horses for their departure.

Metri looked across the pit into the deep darkness on the other side. A figure emerged slowly from the gloom and stepped into the dim, reflected sunlight on the other side. He was tall and well muscled with long black hair that clung to his head matted with dirt and sweat. The man looked down into the pit, then he looked straight into Metri’s wide, unbelieving eyes.

“Rulan,” Metri said.

The tremor in Metri’s frightened voice made Rulan whirl around instantly, his sword drawn. He raced to where Metri stood on the edge of the pit and pressed him back behind him when he saw Jarec on the other side.

“This isn’t over Rulan,” Jarec said.

His eyes were alight with fury that burned across the gulf separating them.

“You will get the crystal only when the Gods have taken my last breath from me Jarec,” Rulan said.

“I’ll get much more than the crystal Rulan,” Jarec said. His eyes crawled over Metri.

“And when I catch up to you and your new slaveboy, I’ll make sure every man in my army has their way with him before I brand his ass with my mark and put my collar around his neck.”

A shudder of horror ran through Metri at Jarec’s words. Rulan spat into the pit, making the snakes rise and hiss at the scent of fresh meat.

“Come on boy,” he said.

He pulled Metri back from the pit and turned his back on the helpless Jarec. He watched them go out into the sunlight as Balkon came running up to him.

“We’ve lost three more men. They fell through a false floor that leads around the other side of the cave,” Balkon said.

“It’s no use. We can’t get out this way. We’ll have to follow your marks back and lay up here until the sun descends in the sky again.”

Rulan and Metri emerged from the cave of the labyrinth like two souls narrowly escaping the torments of the underworld. Their clothes were stained and filthy. Metri’s light blonde curls were streaked with sweat and his face was smeared with dirt.

Rulan led the horses out of the cave then mounted into the front and took the reigns. Metri sat behind him in the back of the uncovered wagon. Their provisions sat beside him in a frighteningly small bundle. He looked out over the sand and saw only mile after mile of dry desert.

“Where are we going?” Metri said.

“We need to find a cave to hide from the heat of the sun. If midday catches us out here, the sun will cook and fry our skin like stewed meat.”

Metri kept a sharp eye on the mouth of the cave as they rode away across the desert. But already the brilliant light of the morning sun rising behind the temple hurt his eyes. A few minutes ago when they came out of the labyrinth, he had felt a slight chill to the air. The heat of the day had begun in the blink of an eye.

“But won’t they come after us?”

“Not yet. They can’t get out of the labyrinth without the map. Jarec will have to go back. By the time he gets back to the temple and gathers provisions, it will be approaching midday. No one can travel out here in the heat of the day, least of all an army of men.”

They rode on as the sun climbed higher in the sky. Across the sands, Rulan spotted what he was seeking. Almost invisible against the glare of the sun on the sands, a cave stood far off. Some caves out here had become infested with snakes, uninhabitable. If he was wrong, both he and Metri would bake out here on the hot sands of the badlands.

He looked back at Metri. The fierce sun was already turning his tanned skin an ugly, dark red. It suddenly occurred to Rulan that the Brothers would have thought of this.

“Metri look through the supplies. See if they gave us robes.”

Metri dug through the bundle and came up with two thin, shiny robes. Rulan stopped for a minute and they both slipped into the hooded, silver robes. He pulled up Metri’s hood and gave him a sip of water. His lips were already dry.

“Sit with your knees close to your body and your head bent over your knees. The robe will protect you from the sun’s fury.”

Metri sat huddled in the back of the wagon like a refugee of war. Rulan drove the wagon across the sand, watching the cave grow steadily larger and larger before them.

He pulled up before the cave and glanced up at the sun. Bright light burned down in cruelly hot waves of heat that made his skin stretch tight across his face.

“Stay here boy.” Metri was too hot and thirsty to argue.

Rulan slipped quietly into the cave, letting his eyes adjust to the dim inside. The shelter of the cave was cool and damp, but he smelled no decay of rotting animal carcasses. The cave looked clean of predators. It didn’t matter now anyway. He had to get Metri and himself out of the punishing sun.

He went back to the wagon and got Metri and their meager supplies. Inside the cave, he gave Metri more water and took a sip himself.

“We’re staying here until night?” Metri said.

“Until dusk,” Rulan said.

Rulan kept them close to the mouth of the cave, although he knew it would be cooler farther back. But the back of the cave was too dark to be safe.

“We have a dangerous road ahead of us boy,” Rulan said. He pulled Metri close beside him and stroked his hair gently.

“I know,” Metri said. Rulan had never heard him so serious. “But I am unafraid, so long as I am by your side.”

Rulan pressed Metri’s head gently to his shoulder and stroked his back softly. The heat of the desert sun had sapped the Morning potion from him. Soon he relaxed into Rulan and breathed easy.

At dusk they would head for the wilderness. He had no doubt they would make it there before Jarec's men caught up to them. Once they reached the woods, they would be forced to abandon the wagon. The tracks would be too easy to follow.

Tonight, when the fury of the sun abated, he would keep his promise to Symtar. Their hopes and dreams rested now on the crystal he carried with him. Within the crystal lay the power of all the temples of the Brotherhood of Wisdom. If the Old Ways were to be preserved, and men's hearts were to remain free, the crystal must continue its journey. Rulan looked out onto the hot sands, waiting with the patience of a seasoned warrior for the heat of the day to pass.

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