

# Talon

(by *Lissa Lysik'an* (copyright 2015 - 2016, *Lysik'an*) )

## Chapter 1

Marren stopped and watched the young woman look around then slip into a break in the wall of trees and bushes lining the road. Since it wasn't a regular path but an animal trail it seemed an odd thing for a woman in a city dress and no hunting gear to do. Particularly since she was brown and wearing the disfiguring tattoo of a slave across her face. Slaves were rarely allowed outside cities and towns without their owner, and certainly not to wander into the forest surreptitiously. He waited until he couldn't see the drab tan of her dress, then followed.

Talia looked for any slave hunters or guards, then entered the forest. She had been told of the deer trail and that it led to a pond where she could wash the fake tattoo off her face and get rid of her dress. She'd been waiting for a chance to escape the city for most of her life, and the fight at the gate between the guards had given her a chance, probably the only one she'd ever get. Coming upon the pond, she kicked off the hated shoes and pulled off the dress of a domestic servant, then tossed the boy's vest and shorts she'd been wearing underneath to the ground. Slipping into the pond naked, she bit back a squeal from the cold. Ducking her head under the water, she started scrubbing at her face, knowing it would take a lot to get the ink off.

His legs aching at just the thought of going into the cold water to get her, Marren sat on the grass at the edge of the pond beside the girl's clothes, stretching his legs out in front of him. Waiting seemed like a much better idea for a man with legs that complained about nearly everything, reminding him he was getting too old to be wandering the countryside. He looked over the vest, the kind boys wore, with only a leather thong to hold it closed, and the shorts, also only worn by boys, as they revealed bare legs, something a woman was not allowed to do in public. It wasn't difficult to guess what she planned to do, but he was curious how she was going to overcome the marks on her face that advertised her as a woman. Male slaves were only tattooed on the throat and shoulders.

Watching her back as she ducked in and out of the water, he realized her hair was braided down her back so far that the end never came out of the water and into view. It was unusual for slaves to be allowed long hair, since making them as unattractive as possible was nearly an unwritten rule among owners. His curiosity rose when he also noticed that her back had no whip scars, which contradicted what he'd thought he'd known about slaves.

Rising from the water one last time, hoping the ink was gone, Talia turned around to return to her clothes and noticed the old man sitting by them. Her hands rose to cover her small breasts instinctively as she tried to think of what to do. Being caught without a tattoo was pretty much a

death sentence, and she wasn't quite ready to die. She stood waist deep in the water, looking at him.

The old man didn't look large, nor like a hunter. Or at least, not one currently active in the business. His hair was long and going grey, as was his beard, and his clothing was distinctive, where hunters tended to try to blend in, since they were considered not much better than the slaves they hunted. His black clothing with silver adornments, well made boots, and black cane with silver dragon head handle were all too fancy. His mustache and beard covered too much of his face for her to guess at what his mood might be.

Smiling at the woman as she turned around, Marren was surprised again, as the tattoo across her face was gone. Her face was pretty by any standards he could think of, and the sight of her bare chest before she covered it had reminded him that he was still a man regardless of his age. Even from this distance he could tell she was cold and shivering. He tossed her dress closer to her.

"Use it to dry off," he ordered in his deep, quiet voice, the one he reserved for getting people to react automatically instead of think about what he was saying.

Talia stepped out of the water, briefly exposing her entire body to the man. Keeping her eyes on him, she crouched down and picked up the dress, then used it as he had said. She noticed his eyes inspecting her and started to worry, but she couldn't think clearly about a course of action. Panic was confusing her.

"Who are you? What do you want? What are you doing here?" As she started babbling she heard her voice run away into the childish whine it did when she was afraid she was in trouble. She bit her tongue to shut herself up.

"Calm down." He kept his voice quiet. "Breathe. I'm not going to rape you." Looking over her body, he was impressed. The end of her braid was almost touching the ground between her feet. Delicate feet that led up to narrow ankles and slender legs seeming too long for her height, meeting at slim hips that led into a slightly narrower waist, merging into the torso he'd already noticed. Her stomach was flat above a small patch of hair as black as her braid. His eyes looked upward, forcing himself to try to show some respect regardless of her skin color, which he found surprisingly attractive. It had never occurred to him that dark brown skin could be beautiful.

Talia reached out a hand toward the other clothes, and the old man tossed them to her one at a time. Quickly pulling on the shorts, she found they felt a lot more revealing with his eyes on her than they had when she was alone, with nothing to cover from her crotch down. Somehow bare legs hadn't felt naughty without a person looking at them, and the vest didn't seem to hide her breasts as nearly as much as she had thought it did. She was tempted to put the dress back on.

“Don’t tie the top so tight. Boys don’t wear it that way.” Rolling to the side to get on one knee, then using his cane to lever himself up, Marren walked to her slowly and untied the vest, then re-tied it looser. The top of her head was just at his chin, telling him he had overestimated her height by several inches. “See? Now as long as you don’t run and make your tits bounce they’re only noticeable if someone is looking for something wrong.”

Trembling, Talia stood still and let him fix the vest, shuddering when his fingers touched her skin while he was tying it. She didn’t feel quite as panicked, since it was obvious he wasn’t going to attack her, but she was still too frightened to think of anything to do or say. Interacting with men other than shopkeepers was new for her, and his actions didn’t seem to match what she had been led to expect from a white man.

“Now, though, you have other, more serious, problems.” He put a finger on the side of her neck and drew it slowly from one side to the other. “No tattoo. All boys and men have their name here.” Moving the finger to her left shoulder he traced a circle on the side, “and a symbol here.” He liked the feel of her skin and rested his hand on her shoulder, sliding it under the edge of her vest. “Without those marks you’re in as much trouble as you would be in the dress without the one on your face.” He looked closely at her face again, “And how did you get rid of that one, anyway? Tattoos don’t usually wash off no matter how much you scrub.”

“It wasn’t a tattoo. My owner doesn’t like tattoos so she just had them painted on us when we had to be seen. It was just ink.” She found herself looking up into eyes that seemed to be more like gemstones, sparkling way too much, as if faceted, and no real color of their own, except maybe a hint of blue at certain angles. His soft way of speaking was new to her and she found it hypnotizing, as if everything he said was the most important thing in the world. His hand felt comforting on her shoulder, not like the way people usually grabbed her to shove her around when they thought she wasn’t moving fast enough or doing the right thing. She curled her toes in the grass tightly.

“Hm. I suppose for a house slave that would work, especially if they didn’t care if you got killed when someone discovered it.” Releasing her shoulder, he put fingertips to her cheek and caressed it lightly. “Although I can see her point. A shame to ruin such a beautiful face.”

“That’s the point of the tattoo, sir. Make us ugly so no one will want us for, um, things. Mistress says boys don’t have to be made ugly.”

“Well, it’s the only part of girls that can be checked easily, as well, since you’re supposed to keep the rest of you covered, so there is another reason.” Marren looked her up and down again, his eyes lingering on her bare legs and feet. “A shame, really.” Looking at her crotch he frowned slightly, “you would also need a codpiece. Something to make it look like you have man parts between your legs. You’d make a pretty little boy, but it might work.”

"I don't know how to get those things." Talia started whimpering and tried to keep from crying outright. "I guess I didn't plan this right and now ... now" she coughed a little and her tears flowed.

Feeling uncomfortable at her crying, Marren put his arms around her and let her rest her head on his chest. For an old man, he had very little experience dealing with crying females of any age or color. He patted her back.

After a minute of silent crying she put her arms around his waist and leaned against him.

"What do I do now?" She let herself cry. "I heard there were places where we aren't slaves and I wanted to go so bad. I'm so tired of being hurt."

"There are no places you could get to where you wouldn't be a slave. In the north there are no brown slaves because there are no brown people. They kill them on sight. To the south there's the islands your people came from, but you can't get to them without a ship, and the only ships that go there go for more slaves, not to return them." Holding her as she shuddered, he tipped his head down to lay on the top of hers, "and a slave without an owner on the roads would be wearing a courier badge. The hunters would either kill you or take you to the nearest city to sell to the first person that wanted you. A girl as pretty as you would end up a lot worse off than you were." He lifted her head, "unless you were already a brothel slave?"

Talia's eyes opened wide as she shook her head back and forth strenuously, "we weren't allowed near men! My owner, well, um, she hates men. A lot." Sniffing, she wiped her face against his chest, "but she likes girls. A lot."

"Ah. That explains the false tattoo and long hair." Marren looked around and spotted a fallen tree. "Here, come sit. I'm old and my legs are reminding me that standing is one of the things they hate the most, along with everything else about being legs." He wasn't adept at humor, but figured the effort might help a little.

Sitting on the log, he pulled her to sit down beside him and put an arm around her back. The trembling in her little body made his heart ache.

"What did you plan to do when you followed me?" She asked in a small voice. "Take me, or take me back for a reward?" Neither of the two things she could think of fit the way he was acting.

"Nothing at all. I was just curious as to what a slave was doing entering the forest. The few slaves that travel are restricted to the roads and only because there is some reason they can be trusted to return." The usual reason they could be trusted, he knew, was because they had family being held hostage. It wasn't good for slaves to form a family, it made them even more vulnerable. The threat of slave hunters was not very effective against people who were already willing to die.

"Must be nice to be able to do something just because you're curious." Talia bit at her tongue, not intending to sound as bitter as it had come out. She was bitter, but the man had been being nice to her and she shouldn't take out her feelings on him. She wasn't really sure how she was expected to interact with him, but she was pretty certain misplaced aggression wasn't it.

"It is, sometimes." Marren stroked her hair. He looked up at the sky. "It's already after noon. Do you know if this clearing is safe? From discovery, I mean. The whole road from Yeslin to Tillron is safe from beasts."

"I don't know. Another slave told me about it, but I was never here before." Looking around, she shrugged, "I don't even know how to tell if a place is safe. Or a person." She looked at him pointedly.

"If someone else knows about it, it's not safe for a runaway." He returned her pointed look, "and people are never safe." Reaching around his back he tried to get at his backpack. "Someone needs to make a backpack you can get into without taking off."

"Let me help." Talia jumped up and helped him get his small pack off and handed it to him. "You don't carry much."

"I don't own much." Marren looked in the pack, then pulled out a pen and ink, "but I have this. Let me see if I can make a convincing tattoo." He looked at her face, "are you sure you want to be a boy?"

"Yes, sir. Being a brown girl is the worst thing that can happen to a person and I can't stop being brown. The best part of being a brown girl is being pretty, and they take that away from us, too."

It took him a while, but eventually he had a black dagger drawn on her shoulder that looked enough like a tattoo to satisfy him.

"Now, for a name."

"Talia, sir."

"No, that's a woman's name." He looked at the dagger, "Talon?"

Talia smiled a little, "I like that, sir!" He seemed less threatening as he tried to help her, and she felt less hopeless.

Lying her on her back on the log, he had her tip her head back. Caressing her small chin and throat, he admired the deep rich color and delicate lines before drawing 'TALON' in large letters. He stood and looked down at it.

“That should work.” Helping her sit up, he sat beside her again. “I’ve got the beginning of a plan. I know a man in the city up the road. No, not Yeslin,” he stopped her from interrupting, “Tillron. He’ll do real tattoos and not ask why you don’t have them already.” He looked at her face, “or even why a woman is getting tattooed as a man.”

“How would you know a man like that?” She bit her tongue too late to stop it from slipping out. Talia knew most of the people who tattooed slaves would be expecting to be working with a baby or a child, not an adult, or someone straight from a boat, and they worked for the slave dealers so would not be interested in breaking the law.

“I know a lot of people that don’t ask questions. Favors done, favors returned, that sort of thing.”

“I won’t ask questions, sir.” Talia smiled a little more. Slaves often helped each other that way.

Marren returned the smile, “then we might be able to keep you alive.” He hugged her tightly, “ah, adventure. Life was pleasantly boring there for a while.”

Talia giggled. “It would be nice to have a boring life.” She looked up at him, “um, maybe just one question. Now that you’ve given me a name, can I ask yours, sir?”

“Marren will do.” Putting his pen and ink away, he lifted the backpack, then looked at her. “Here, put this on. I think carrying my own backpack while I have a perfectly healthy slave with me might attract suspicion. Then help me stand up, and we’ll see how good a job I did. If we’re still alive in the morning you can thank me.”

Giggling at the morbid humor, Talia, now Talon, did as she was told. It took a few minutes to get the straps fitted so they didn’t make her breasts push inward noticeably, but eventually Marren was satisfied that she didn’t look too feminine to pass. A case where small breasts were good. When she grasped his hands to help pull him up she was surprised to find them soft, as if he hadn’t done much manual labor with them.

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The road was basically a lot of round stones pounded into place by gangs of slaves hundreds of years ago, primarily to make wars between the cities easier. The wars ended and trade grew, and over time the gaps between the larger stones became filled with smaller stones, wagon wheels pressed tracks deeper than the rest of the stones, and thousands of feet walking on the stones had worn down the bulges. The road was moderately flat and smooth, with four ruts slightly deeper than the rest collecting dirt, mud, and rainwater.

“Doesn’t walking on the stone barefoot hurt?” Marren looked pointedly down at her little feet. “You’ve always worn boots outside, haven’t you?”

“Yes, sir. I have and it does, a little. But boys don’t wear boots.” She shrugged. “You do what you have to do. Slaves that show hurt or discomfort are just adding to the ways they can be punished.”

They made it to the small city of Tillron before it was too dark to see the fake tattoos on Talon’s dark skin and had no trouble getting through the gate.

“They didn’t even look twice at you.” Marren felt almost let down by how easy it had been to walk past the guards. “They didn’t even seem to notice you’re an exceptionally pretty boy.”

Talon blushed slightly. “No, sir. Slaves aren’t people when we’re with our owners. We’re barely even things, then.”

“And men that look at pretty boys too much have trouble with their companions. I see.” Marren guided them directly to his contact and explained what was needed.

“Sure, Marren, but I thought you didn’t have any use for a slave?” The man looked at Marren, and after a moment of getting no answer, looked at the dagger on Talon’s shoulder, “can’t do that. No weapon tattoos on slaves. You’re lucky no one noticed, though guards don’t pay much attention.”

After thinking for a moment, Marren asked, “how about dragon claws? Could keep the same name and match the image.”

“Yup. Might annoy some people, but it’s not against the rules. Name doesn’t have to match the picture. Usually doesn’t. Has to be in black, though. Her, em, his, skin is too dark for colors. Other people might be able to make it work, but I’m not that good.” He grinned, “if I was I might be doing this for the traders instead of favors.”

“That’s fine. Can you make the letters of his name a little fancier?”

“Yup. One of the things I’m proud of is my letters.” The man lifted Talon’s chin and studied her neck. “This is gonna take a while, though, really need it tonight?”

“Yeah. I don’t think that ink will last or stand up to much daylight.”

The man, Crogan, set to work. Eventually, after what seemed like all night to Marren and Talon, he was finished and sat back to admire his work by oil lamp. After looking at it from several angles, he picked up a pot and dipped his fingers in. Smearing something over the fresh tattoos,



he seemed to be trying to be gentle. When he was finished he'd left a greasy layer over the marks.

"Okay, that's going to be raw for a bit, and obvious. If anyone asks, tell them you had to get it redone because it was getting faint. That happens some, especially on darker skin, so it won't be too suspicious." He looked at Talon, "it's going to hurt for a while. Getting that much done at once is a lot worse than a small bit at a time." He handed the pot to Marren as he talked. "Keep this on it for a few days to help it heal. Not as good as a poultice, but not as noticeable, either."

Sniffing, Talon noticed the faint scent of clove nearly covered by the stronger scent of cinnamon.

Turning back to Marren, the man added, "favors done, favors returned."

Marren nodded, and steered Talon to the door. "Favors done."

On the road, Talon looked up at Marren, "so it's not just an expression? It means something?"

"What?" Marren looked down at her.

"The favors done thing."

"Yeah, it means something. Pretty much means if I want any more favors from him I need to be ready to do one. We're even."

"Oh. So he was returning one."

"Yeah."

"Sorry, sir. Sorry I made you use it up."

"Don't worry about it." Marren felt uncomfortable being reminded that he had just done a favor without getting one in return or the likelihood of ever getting one. Slaves are not usually in a position to do free people favors. "Crogan and I go back a ways. It will come back again."

Walking past a large inn set back from the road, with a porch and lanterns by the door lighting it brightly, Talon expected Marren to head into it. "Sir? Wouldn't this be a good place?"

"Yes, it would be, if they didn't know me and didn't know I had just checked out this morning. It would raise suspicion for me to return with a slave they'd never seen before." He glanced at the door as they passed. "While it's an excellent source of rumors, it's also an easy place to become the subject of rumors."



“That wouldn’t be good.”

“No, so we’re going closer to the marketplace. Look for a place with a tavern that looks like it might attract merchants. As close to fancy as possible. I don’t know that part of the city well, which means they don’t know me well, either.”

They continued walking for a while, passing buildings that seemed to be gradually getting smaller and less fancy, although not rundown or neglected. The boardwalks were still maintained and the road itself reasonably flat. Eventually Talon noticed a signboard with a mug of ale and the words “Stop Inn” engraved and painted on it. “Sir? There’s a place. It has a name, as well, although it’s a rather weak pun.”

“Ah yes, named places are better. Hadn’t thought to mention it.” He looked back at her, “you can read?”

“Most house slaves can, Sir. We’re expected to handle anything that might come up without asking questions. A lot of times it’s needed because the owners can’t.” She looked at the door as they approached and listened. “It sounds like there’s still a bunch of people in there, but not rowdy. Although I guess even the worst places can have quiet nights.”

“Some of the best places can have rowdy nights, as well. I don’t think we’ll find better going this way, and I don’t recall being in this one before.” He opened the door and hesitated as his instinct to hold the door for women took over before he recalled that free people didn’t typically show courtesy to their slaves.

Inside the tavern Marren didn’t spend a lot of time looking around other than to see if it looked like reasonably decent. He was too tired and ached too much to care beyond that. Approaching the bar at a gap between stools he waited for the barman to notice him, which wasn’t long.

“What can I do for you?” The barman’s tone was neutral.

“A room?”

“Fancy?” The man glanced at Talon, then back to Marren, his expression revealing nothing.

“No thanks, just not too shabby.”

“Only got fancy and not fancy. Shabby rooms attract the wrong kind of customers. Got one at the top of the stairs, to the right. All the rooms are upstairs, so if that’s a problem,” he nodded toward Marren’s cane and trailed off.

"I'll manage." Marren negotiated a price for the room for a couple of nights to ensure he wouldn't have to look for another place the next night. "What about a bath? Would it be possible to get one here?"

Nodding, the barman added a small fee to the price. "Your boy will have to share it if you want him to have one. We don't have a bath for them."

Talon blushed and turned her head away to hide it from the barman as Marren agreed.

After checking the room, Marren took the backpack off Talon. Sitting on the side of the small bed, he found his legs were complaining about the stairs. "Think you could go down and get us some food? We can keep the door open so if you have trouble you can yell."

Talon felt a shudder run through her body at thought of trying her disguise without a free person near to take attention away from her. Nodding, she forced her voice to remain calm, although that made it soft and childish. "Yes, sir. I can do it."

"Some cut of meat like a steak or a chop. Ask for good. It costs a small bit more, but I'm old and don't want to be chewing all night long. Bread. Vegetables if you eat them, I don't. And no soup or stew. Bribe if you have to, but no stew. There is no telling what is in it or if it's even food."

Approaching the counter, Talon assumed the manner she'd been trained to use when dealing with free people for her owner, fighting down the urge to run back up the stairs and hide under the bed. Tipping her head down enough to look submissive, she waited for the man on the other side to acknowledge her presence, her head just high enough to see any indication he might make, as some free people would not speak to slaves, merely nodding or shaking their heads, as if being brown were contagious.

"What do you need?" The man's tone was brusque, but not mean, and he was looking directly at her.

"A plate of whatever meat you have ready, good cut please, and some bread, for two. Please, sir." Talon tried to make her voice as strong as she could without sounding insolent.

The man looked her up and down, then nodded. "Stew is cheaper."

"Yes, sir. I'm not allowed to bring stew, sir." Talon fidgeted, knowing that sometimes free people would try to get slaves into trouble by talking them into doing something that wasn't what their owner actually wanted. She suspected Marren wouldn't get mad at her, she wasn't even sure if he thought of himself as her owner yet, but lifetime habits overrode thinking for the most part.

The man behind the counter left toward the kitchen, then returned a minute or two later with what she had asked for on a tray, along with a pitcher. "No charge for the water."

Talon handed the man the coins he requested. Slaves were not allowed to haggle, even if they knew they were being cheated. She'd been beaten a few times for getting cheated because her owner didn't handle the negotiation directly, but this time the price the man had given felt right and sounded similar to what he'd asked of others while she was waiting, so she felt comfortable about paying it. Taking the tray, she went back to the room.

"So everything went fine?" Marren looked at her face but couldn't read anything from it.

"Yes, sir. Nobody paid any attention." She set the tray on the small table in the corner of the room, then noticed there were no chairs. "Have to sit on the bed to eat."

"Where's the knife?" Marren looked at the tray, "usually they put a knife with the meat."

"Not for a slave, sir. People don't give knives to slaves."

"Hm? I've seen slaves with knives strapped to their legs or belts quite a bit." Marren looked over at her, "or is that something different?"

"It's different. When an owner gives a knife to a slave, he's taking responsibility for what the slave does with it. If the owner doesn't trust a slave with a knife no one else is going to, either." Talon had never owned a knife, but she'd been allowed to use small ones in the kitchen. Her owner hadn't been particularly fearful, just didn't see any need to give her one.

Marren opened his backpack and pulled out a large black and silver hilted dagger in a matching thigh sheath and handed it to her. "Use this for now and we'll get you one later."

"Yes, sir." Talon took it carefully, never having handled a knife the size of a dagger before and a little nervous, and pulled it from the sheath. It felt huge in her small hand. Handing the sheath back to him, she started cutting at the meat the way she would use an ordinary knife, startling herself with how much easier it was when the knife banged the plate. "I guess I never had a sharp knife before. This is a lot easier."

"Most people don't bother to keep their knives sharp, they just work harder at cutting until eventually they're mashing more than cutting, then pay a tinker to fix the damage." Marren smirked as he watched her cut the meat and tear the bread into small almost bite-size pieces, then carry the plate to the bed. As she sat cross-legged on the narrow mattress, he sat beside her, his legs hanging down. His knees would fuss later from it, but trying to eat lying down didn't appeal to him.

"Crossing legs is not something I do any more. Hold the plate on your lap and move closer." Marren put a hand on her knee while she moved, caressing the soft skin, then ran his hand over her thigh while she arranged the plate, watching her face flush at the touch.

He ate slowly, watching her as she nibbled delicately, her head down. Being around slaves for any length of time was unusual for people that didn't own them and he found her fascinating, not only for her appearance, but her mannerisms as well. Quiet and polite were not common features of the people he usually dealt with. They weren't good survival traits for people who were not wealthy.

Talon tried to be careful to not eat too much, to leave enough for Marren to fill himself. It was hard because she felt like she was starving. Her body was more accustomed to eating small bits all day long as she snatched them from the kitchen while doing other chores, not waiting all day for a meal. Being caught sitting and eating at any time was a good way to get punished.

While Talon returned the tray and plate to the kitchen, leaving the door unlatched, Marren removed his boots and shirt and stretched out on the bed, squirming a little to stretch his legs out straight. The bed was not much more than boards on a frame holding a straw stuffed mattress and a bit lumpy, but still more comfortable than the ground, and considerably easier for him to get on and off. After a few moments he felt some of the tension in his hips easing, relieving some of the constant pain he lived with.

Talon let herself back into the room, then latched the door, double checking it out of habit. The latch was flimsy and the gap between the door and doorframe would make it easy to open, but it would hold the door closed against casual intruders. Looking at Marren stretched out, she moved to the foot of the bed and started to lie on the floor.

"Up here, Talon."

"Yes, sir." Talon got back up to her feet and moved to the side of the bed, looking for space on the narrow mattress.

Marren patted the bed between himself and the wall. "Lie down on your side, facing the wall, and you won't hurt your new tattoo." When she hesitated he grabbed her around the waist with one arm and pulled her onto him, then rolled her to the place he had patted. For a moment he'd been tempted to just leave her lying on top of him. Her little body had felt good.

Stifling a giggle as she was moved around, Talon winced as she landed on her left side, an arm and leg still draped over Marren. It felt good, but not good enough to keep lying on the tattoo. Wiggling around, she turned over and faced the wall, folding her arms across her chest. The bed wasn't wide enough to have any space between them and feeling him against her back was both comforting and disconcerting, as she'd not slept in a bed with another person since she was a child, with some exceptions that she didn't want to think about.

Trying to plan for the next step on taking care of Talon, Marren found himself thinking in circles and decided to try to sleep. The warm body beside him was a little distracting, but as Talon

slowly relaxed it felt nice. Turning on his side, he curled up against her back and draped an arm over her body, nuzzled the back of her head, and started relaxing himself. Lying against another person was not something he was used to, but he thought he could get used to it.

As Marren's arm draped over her, Talon tensed, but when he just nuzzled and relaxed, she found it easy to relax again. His arm was too close to her tattoo, so after a bit she moved her arm out from under his, then hugged it to her chest.

"Sir? What did he mean?"

"Hm? Who? About what?"

"The tattoo man. Crogan. About you not having a use for slaves. You don't like us?" Her voice sounded fearful, even to herself. The statement had seemed like a contradiction to how he acted when she took it that way, but she had to be careful.

"Oh, no, that is not it at all. It was exactly what he said. I've never had a use for a slave. No house to maintain, not a lot of menial or heavy tasks to do. Nothing that would justify the expense of getting or keeping a slave." The fingers on her chest lightly stroked the skin above her vest, "now go to sleep. You've had a bad, rough day and need rest."

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Talon was wakened by a knocking on the door, not even recalling a drowsy time before sleeping. Slipping out from under Marren's arm and climbing over him, she opened the door to find a young serving boy waiting to tell them that their bath would be ready in an hour. Waking Marren, she told him.

"Do you have other clothes, sir? Usually slave boys only have one set and wash them at bath time, then wear them wet, but I know you people don't do that, and slave girls usually have at least two because a wet dress sticks and shows shape." She picked up his shirt from where he'd dropped it on the floor the night before and handed it to him.

"I do, in my pack. Same as these." He smirked, "never found anything else I liked. Carry my pack and boots down, please?" He rolled off the bed, turning to land on his feet. It was less painful than trying to sit up and then stand.

"Yes, sir." Talon liked it when he said please. Free people didn't usually do that with slaves and it made her feel good inside. Respected. Other slaves had respected her, but having a free person talk to her with respect felt different.

The bath was in a small room off the tavern kitchen. With the door latched, Talon started to become nervous, fidgeting with the lace of her vest when she went to untie it. The idea of getting naked in front of Marren made her feel a little squeamish, even though he'd already seen her body. Taking a deep breath, she pulled the lace free and set it aside and removed the vest, her face flushing, then turned her back and pulled her shorts off. When she turned back around Marren was looking at her and she blushed even darker, looking down at her toes as she tried to stop her hands from trying to cover her body.

"You look good." Marren found himself responding to her as a woman, not a slave.

"I'm brown, sir. Brown isn't pretty, it's the color of animals and slaves." Talon recited the response automatically, her eyes on her toes. She wanted to smile.

"You're wrong, now get in the tub." Marren was shocked by Talon's response, then remembered hearing owners saying that to younger slaves in marketplaces. Softening his voice, he added, "you really do look good."

"Yes, sir." Stepping over the side of the tub, she was aware of where his eyes were going, but forced herself not to hurry. She slipped into the soapy water with a sigh of relief. It was hot and soothing. The soap didn't feel as harsh as she was used to.

Dropping his shirt beside her clothes he started removing his belt, his eyes on her as she climbed in. The tub was large enough to hold both of them without making a mess. "The water won't stay warm long enough for us to take turns."

Talon looked away as he stripped, then gasped when he climbed in behind her, his arms reaching around her body, his hands holding her chest lightly. She picked up a washcloth from the side of the tub and started scrubbing herself, moving under his hands in the process. Biting at her lip and closing her eyes tightly, she held in a moan. Slaves were supposed to tolerate being touched by free men, not get aroused by it. Trembling, she tried to focus her attention on washing.

"Do you want me to unbraid your hair and wash it?" Letting her move his hands from her body, Marren pulled the long twisted hair out from between their bodies. He couldn't do much about the other part that he guessed might be making her uncomfortable.

"Um, no, sir, thank you. It has to be kept braided in public and we won't be in here long enough for it to dry, and then teaching you how to braid and," Talon giggled shyly, flustered over the feeling of the part of him touching her at the base of her spine but trying not to think about it, "um, it wouldn't be a good idea, sir."

"Okay." Marren smiled at the back of her head, then pushed her a little forward so he could wash himself. When he was done he draped the cloth over the side of the big tub, climbed out

and dried off with one of the big towels hanging near, then wrapped it around his waist. Taking Talon's hand, he helped her climb out, then dried her off as she stood still, her eyes tightly closed as his hands ran over her body with a towel. Together, wearing the towels as skirts, they used the now cool bath water to wash out their clothes.

Talon felt like her face was going to catch on fire, Marren's eyes constantly going to her chest keeping her aroused and embarrassed. The bulge in his towel was also drawing her attention. Curiosity warred with embarrassment, as she'd never seen a nude male. With her clothes washed and most of the water twisted out, she put them on hurriedly and waited for him to dress as well, finally feeling a little relief when he was done.

"You really don't need to be embarrassed. You have a very lovely body. A bit young, but definitely attractive." He smiled at her, then untied the lace from her vest, "and tying this too tight emphasizes your tits, it doesn't hide them."

"I'm not that young, sir. I think I'm near twenty five." Talon tried to distract herself from his hands at her chest.

"Think? You don't know?" Marren finished re-tying the vest and lifted his hand to brush across her cheek lightly.

"We aren't allowed to celebrate birthdays. Doesn't take long to lose count when you don't have a day to count from." Talon resisted the urge to kiss his fingers as they moved near her lips. "I have a vague idea because there was a celebration of some city event that was fifteen years old and I was old enough to know what it was about, so I had to be somewhere over five when it first happened, but I'm guessing a little older because my memory of it wasn't like my baby memories."

Marren cupped her cheek in his hand and kissed her forehead.

Talon looked up at him, her eyes finding his lips.

"You don't know anything about owning a slave, sir." She smirked, grabbing at the distraction.

"No. No, I don't. Never had a reason to care about it." He looked her over, then handed her his wet clothes, "drape these over your arm and hold them in front of you. The way your shorts are sticking to you it's quite obvious you're a woman."

Blushing as he inadvertently pulled her back from her distraction, Talon did as he said. "You need to know, sir, if you want me to stay alive."

His hand near the latch for the door, Marren stopped and turned back to look at her.



"Yes, sir." Talon looked down, "I am."

He opened the door and led her back up to the room, his mind starting to grasp the situation he was in. He owned a slave. Latching the door, he went and sat on the edge of the bed, his face unreadable behind its hairy mask.

"I'm sorry, sir. I can go, if you wish."

"No. I want you to tell me what I need to know." He laid on his back, then patted the bed beside him. "I hadn't really thought through everything, either, it seems." He grinned at her, "you'll find that outside of the favors I do, I tend to just act on the thought of the moment."

Biting her lower lip, Talon draped the wet clothes on edge of the table, then lay down beside him on her right side. As he put his arm under her, she leaned into him and draped an arm over his chest and a leg over his, being rewarded with a tight squeeze telling her she had guessed right about what he wanted. Her clothes, still damp, made the body contact feel more intimate than she had expected.

"There aren't too many things to know, but the details are terribly important." She rested her head on his shoulder as she talked, nearly babbling to distract herself. "First, I am property, not a person. You can't ask me to do things, you have to tell me. Second, slaves are boys and girls, never men and women, regardless of age. Third, you can do anything you want and I can't object or encourage it. I'm not allowed to express feelings unless you tell me to. Be careful doing that. It's best not to."

"So being friends is not allowed." Marren pulled her tight against himself. Her thin body felt a little harder than he remembered from the night before, but he passed it off as misremembering.

"No! Slaves don't have free friends." She ran her hand over his chest, "but it makes me happy that you want to be. I never had real friends. Politics made it too risky."

"Politics?" He reached over to caress her shoulder, then moved his hand down when she flinched, reminding him of the fresh tattoo. "Remind me to get that pot of goop and put some on your tattoos when I'm ready to get up again."

"Yes, sir. Telling tales to mistress was a good way to gain favor and reduce chances of getting punished. So girls would pretend friendship and learn stuff about you, then when they needed a way out of trouble they'd 'accidentally' blurt it out." She sighed, her fingers fidgeting with the lace of his shirt. "Or if they wanted to be chosen for her bed. Being the one she played with was a lot better than being the ones she watched."

"I have no idea what you mean."

Talon giggled, “you must have lived a very sheltered life to be so old and not know about sex.”

“Hey, I’m not that old!” He chuckled, “well, maybe a bit. But the sex life of a wanderer is mostly ‘how much? Sorry, can’t afford that’.” He tilted his head and kissed hers, “maybe a little old. Forty five is pretty old for a wanderer. And since it’s about sex, I’m probably better off not knowing the details.”

“Wanderer? I thought they were vagabonds that go from city to city, getting kicked out for begging.” Talon had seen a few around the marketplace, usually only noticing them when the guard would be chasing them out.

“Some, but not most. A person would starve to death on what he could get from begging, usually. More like doing things for people that they can’t do for themselves, quietly.” He fidgeted with the lace of her vest. “We get kicked out because we are unpredictable. The guard doesn’t know what we are there to do.”

“Favors done, favors returned.” Talon shivered as she felt the vest loosen.

“Yes.” Marren left the untied lace in her vest. Squeezing her with the arm behind her back, he looked toward her face. “You don’t want me to do that, do you? Be honest.”

Trembling, Talon turned her face away. “I don’t know.”

“Then I won’t. You may be my slave outside, but when we’re alone, you’re my friend.” He kissed the top of her head. “Nothing you aren’t comfortable with.”

“Thank you,” Talon whispered. She knew she wanted him to do it, but it scared her as it brought in memories she didn’t want.

“So yes, I wander from place to place lending my talents to solving problems that people can’t solve for themselves. In return I get favors and money that make begging for money pointless. And no, I never took on hunting. Not even once.” He rubbed her back.

Lying against him felt good. Snuggling without a goal was a new feeling and Talon indulged herself, letting time slip by.

“Sir?” Talon broke the quiet.

“Hm?”

“That voice you used when we met?”

“Yes?”

"You didn't need to. You're a free man, I'd have done what you said anyway." She giggled.

"Hm. That never occurred to me. It's become almost automatic when I think a person might react unpredictably. I'll be careful about telling you to do things, in any voice." Marren thought about it for a bit, "I'd tell you not to just obey me automatically, but that wouldn't be safe, would it?"

"No, sir, it wouldn't. And I don't think that voice can be ignored." She played with his shirt lace for a little while, "does it help your ego to know that it cut through my fear so I could move?"

"If I had an ego, I lost it somewhere long ago. Being a wanderer, it's not good to think too highly of yourself." He actually had a bit of pride, but tried not to let it influence his decisions or actions. The people that hired wanderers liked to think they were better than their hirelings.

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After snuggling, quietly again, for a while, Talon tipped her head back to look at Marren when his hand started playing around the lace of her vest again.

"Sir? You didn't have to do all this, you could just do what you want with me." She took a deep breath, "I would even act like I wanted you to, if you told me to. Or act like I didn't, if that is what you want."

"Hm? Oh. No, I wouldn't want that. Either of those. No." Marren stopped playing with the lace. After a few minutes of no response, he added, "your body is yours. You decide what you want to do with it. I'd even give you the option to choose your clothes if it were possible." He turned her head to look at her eyes, "you can tell me no, and you should when I do something that makes you uncomfortable."

Tears in her eyes, Talon rubbed her face against his shirt.

"Sometimes I had to pretend I wanted things I didn't, but usually mistress preferred it if I, um, resisted. Especially if she was just watching. Even if I did want something sometimes I had to resist it just to please her." She sniffled. "She liked seeing a little girl being abused, and the more degrading and humiliating it was the more she enjoyed it. She would say that's what cute girls like me were made for. The contrast between being cute and abused was art." Wiping her face with her hand, then wiping that on his shirt, she continued, "the only good thing was she didn't involve men." She paused. "It's not that I don't want a man, I just don't want it to be that way if I ever do, um, that." Her voice cracked as she whimpered, "I don't ever want to be a toy again."

Marren hugged her tightly, his own eyes watering. "You're not a toy. I didn't help you because you're a toy or a slave, I helped you because you're a person. I admit your looks are what attracted my attention, but I'm telling myself I would have helped a boy, too. I don't know that, I've never been in a position to help one, but I like to think I would have." Caressing her cheek, he kissed her forehead, "you are very cute and attractive and I am interested in you as a woman. Not as a toy, not as a girl. As a woman. You get to decide how much you want when. Even if it is nothing ever."

"Thank you, sir." She snuggled against him.

Making sure he paid attention to what his hand was doing to avoid absently playing with her lace again, he let her snuggle until she dozed off. He felt bad for her, and for not understanding. Holding her tight he waited for her to wake on her own.

"So. Lunch time, I think." He watched her sit up then get off the bed before he sat up.

Standing in front of Marren, Talon held out the ends of the lace in her vest. "Would you tie this for me, sir, so that it's right?" She shivered a little as he touched her while tying, but she enjoyed the feeling of his fingers, feeling a little confident that he wouldn't try to do more.

"I'm thinking of eating in the tavern, listen to the rumors. Would you be okay in the kitchen?" Rolling off the bed to his feet, he put his arms around her back and smiled when she did the same with him.

"Yes, sir, for a short time. I can see what other slaves think. They can be harsher than free people at times, though." She rested her head against his chest for a moment. "Sir, don't forget that there can be no sign of caring for any reason except value. The way you would care about your money pouch."

Chuckling, he squeezed her. "That might be less than you would think. I never was good at caring about money. I could have had a lot more than I do now if I did. Maybe I should try thinking of you as a good pair of boots. Those are important." He grinned when she giggled.

Finding his clothes dry, he rolled them up and put them in his backpack, then stuffed his feet into his boots. "You'll have to wear the backpack. I learned a long time ago not to leave even the most worthless thing in a room if I wanted to see it again."

"Yes, sir. The inn slaves steal from the rooms and get away with it?" Talon lifted the pack and started to pull it onto her back.

"And other guests. Probably some innkeepers do as well. Trusting people without a reason isn't a good idea." It didn't take him long to adjust the backpack on her, having learned the lessons on the best fit the first time. "Will people expect you to take it off while you eat?"

"No, sir. A slave never lets go of his master's property regardless of how inconvenient it is."

"I'll have to remember that, and not start filling it with a lot of junk for you to carry." He grinned at her as he looked around the room to make sure he'd gotten everything.

"I would appreciate that, sir." She grinned back. She was feeling comfortable with him in a way she had never felt with a free person before.

They went down to the tavern, Talon staying just slightly behind Marren and to the side so he wouldn't have to turn much to look at her if he needed to give her an order or see what she was doing. It was a common way for slaves and owners to space themselves in public. At the bottom of the stairs they separated, Talon heading back toward the kitchen as Marren strolled into the common room.

Talon looked around the kitchen nervously, then toward a long, rough table at the back with a few slave girls sitting on a bench alongside it.

One of the kitchen girls walking past smiled at her, waving toward the table. "You can eat there, if you want. I'll be sitting in a minute if you'd like to eat with me?" The girl patted Talon's hand. "We don't see very many pretty boys here, mostly just the big beefy ones. I prefer my beef on my plate." She smiled shyly. Talon noticed her tattoo was more ornamental than usual, looking flowery.

Blushing, Talon took a seat at the end of the table. She smiled at the girl when she was offered a chunk of bread and a small bit of steak, and didn't mind that it came with a caress across her chin from a soft hand. While she ate the girl sat down beside her and kept up a running commentary on the state of the city. Talon listened as big brown eyes stared at her.

Marren found the tavern's main room was more than three quarters of the floor space. A U-shape bar took a good portion of the center and one side while the rest of the floor was covered with tightly spaced chairs and tables. Even in the middle of the day the room was dark, weakly lit by sunlight seeping through the small panes of glass serving as windows at the front, candles on some of the tables, and oil lamps around the bar. The place smelled of unknown meats being cooked, fresh straw, and mead. As he took a stool, he noticed that the bar itself was made of polished wood with rounded edges that wouldn't catch on clothing and tear it, and the floor was of tightly-fit planks polished smooth. Straw was spread around to absorb spills but appeared to be fresh.

At this time of day the place was nearly empty, but the few people that were present were mostly sitting at tables near the bar and close to each other, making easy for Marren to listen to conversations without appearing to.

Marren didn't find anything of interest in the chatter, but he continued to listen after the barman brought him his bread, meat, and ale. It often took several days to pick up a bit of conversation that could lead to an opportunity to make some money or exchange favors. Patience was not only a virtue for a wanderer but a necessity. Even when none of the information was immediately usable he could get a feel for the current trends from listening to enough. Today's murmurs weren't even good for that as he'd just left the city two days before and not enough time had passed for there to be any significant change.

Finishing his meal he started to stand.

"Boy, get the pretty one with the claw." The barman called to the boy cleaning tables.

Smirking, Marren only had to wait a few seconds before Talon hurried out to him, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. Taking up her position behind him she followed him out to the street.

"Sir?" Talon asked quietly.

"Hm?"

"Do I really look like a boy?" Talon's voice came out sounding melancholy, even to her.

"No. Why?"

"Well," she sounded slightly relieved but confused, "the kitchen girls seemed to think so. I know I said I want to be a boy, but, um, it kind of hurt a little that they thought I am one. That I'm not the pretty girl I think of me as."

"I think they aren't looking any further than the free people are. They see boy clothes and boy tattoos and that makes you a boy. The idea that you might not be doesn't cross their mind." He gave her a quick smile, turning away again before anyone might notice. "But you're definitely too pretty for a boy."

Talon tried not to giggle, "they didn't seem to think so."

"Flirted a bit?"

"Yes, sir." She walked in silence for a few minutes. "I think I liked it, even though it made me sad about not being me."

Marren chuckled. "You know there are girls that prefer girls. Your mistress, for example, although not all are so cruel about it. Maybe they were looking at you that way. Would it bother you if that was what it was?"

"I guess not. That they wanted to flirt and no one was telling them to makes a difference." She sighed, "I don't really know what I like. I never had a choice."

"I think you don't want to be a boy, you just want the life you think they have. That's a different thing." Leading Talon to a high-end clothier, Marren paused at the entrance. "Try not to giggle too much at what you see, boys wouldn't find it unusual. We're going to find you something to make you look a little more like a boy."

"Yes, sir." Talon followed him inside.

Inside the shop Marren found a clerk. "Looking for a codpiece. Not something ostentatious, please. It is more for, um, protection, while showing, well, you know."

"Ah yes. Subtle, showing confidence, but noticeable enough to allow a proper evaluation?" The clerk had the sound of the unworking wealthy.

"Precisely." Marren disliked dealing with the people that the clerk was trying to imitate, even as he imitated them.

The clerk seemed a little surprised when Marren chose one a bit smaller than the ones he offered at first, but nodded approvingly. The customer with money to spend is right, as long as he spends the money. It was only a cup with a general shape indicating what it might hold with some string ties to hold it in place, not overly large.

Talon's face was a little darker than usual as they stepped outside, where she let herself giggle. "Sir?"

"Hm?"

"Do men really wear those, um, sticking out bigger than a horse, things? And think women would want something that big even near them?" Her face stayed dark as she tried to suppress more giggles.

"You would be surprised what some men think, and what they will do in response to that thinking." He chuckled, "and yes, it is funny."

Talon giggled again, several times, as they walked back to the inn. Imagining a man actually wearing one in public made her laugh out loud, drawing stares from the free people they were passing.



Back in the room, Marren helped Talon out of the backpack, then put the package on the table. "Do you need help with it, or rather I turn my back? I think you can figure it out on your own if you prefer." The cup and straps were not particularly complicated.

"Would you mind not looking, sir? I'm a little more comfortable, but, um, well," she couldn't think of how to express her embarrassment.

"Don't tie it too tight. Your legs will go numb." Lying on his side on the bed facing the wall, Marren resisted the urge to watch as Talon figured out how to attach the device to her body, fidgeting in impatience.

"Sir?"

Turning around he looked over her shorts with their new bulge. It was a more natural size and shape than he had feared and did the job he'd hoped. He looked up to her blushing face.

"Very good. Tight enough it won't move, loose enough it won't hurt?"

"I think so, sir." Talon tugged at a string through her shorts. "Doesn't feel too tight."

"Well, if your legs start to feel odd or ache, let me know. Tying things too tightly around that area can make them ache or go numb and if it lasts too long it might take a while to recover. Don't wait until you can't walk any more."

"Yes, sir." Talon took a deep breath and wiggled her hips a bit. "It feels strange."

Watching her wiggle, Marren almost resented being a gentleman. When she came to the bed and lay down with him, snuggling face to face, he was glad he'd been. He put an arm around her back, the feel of the small bulge against his thigh a little disconcerting at first, but not disturbing.

"Sir?"

"Hm?"

"If people are going to automatically assume I'm a boy, why bother with the thing? Even when they should see a girl they don't just because of the tattoos and clothes." The cup blocked her more sensitive place from pressing directly against Marren. She wasn't sure whether she liked that or not. The pressure of the edges around that area was still distracting.

"Because some people aren't so quick to believe their assumptions, even when they have only a little reason to doubt them. They think past what they believe. So the 'thing', as you call it, gives them more reason to accept the assumption and eases their doubts." He held her tight,

his free hand caressing her arm, trying to avoid the lace of her vest. "While most people are easily manipulated, there are exceptions, and those are the dangerous ones. Always be ready to do the extra things it takes to keep them from thinking too much."

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A knock came on the door and Talon rolled off the bed to her feet, smiling to herself as she realized she was copying Marren's method. It was easier and smoother than what she would have done in the past.

"The master would like your master to meet in his office." A little boy looked up at Talon as if afraid he would be hit. "The master said."

Marren sat up and rolled from the bed to his feet. "The innkeeper?"

"Yes, sir." The boy looked down at his feet, kicking against the rough floor. His toes still had the stubby softness of childhood. He seemed to find Marren a bit less intimidating than Talon, which Marren found amusing.

"Lead on, then." Marren nodded toward the backpack and smiled as Talon took the hint and picked it up before following.

In the office, a moderately large bald man was waiting behind a large desk clear of clutter except for two sheets of paper. He waved Marren to a chair, then did the same for Talon, an uncommon courtesy. He turned to the boy that had escorted them to the room with a smile. "Aro, we don't want people listening."

The boy, Aro, nodded to the man, smiling as if he had just been given a reward. "Of course, sir! I'll make sure, sir!"

"He loves his job," the man shook his head with a smile. He leaned back in his chair. "I'm Razo, owner of the place. You're Marren, and this is your boy Talon."

Marren nodded, taking note of the man's subtly fine clothes and relaxed manner.

"Don't worry, I'm not interested in causing trouble. Something came up that needed some attention." His smile looked genuine. "See, one thing innkeepers are required to do is check any slaves against the register and the runaway lists. It was very interesting to not find a Talon on either one." Looking toward Marren he said, "now, if people travel far enough and fast enough, it might be that the registers have not caught up the first day they arrive in a city." He twirled his fingers, "however, it's rare. People generally don't walk as fast as the couriers run. Then," he added, "there is the look of a new tattoo. Raw and irritated, even with the grease."

"I see." Marren was vaguely aware of the records, but had no contacts that could do anything about them.

Razo pushed the papers on his desk toward Marren and Talon, "your registration."

"I see." Marren repeated. He took the paper and looked it over. "Although Talon is a bit older than fifteen."

Razo shrugged, "it's hard to tell with," he winked, "brown girls."

Talon sucked in a tiny gasp through her teeth, biting back a response.

"So, I am thinking this is leading somewhere." Marren leaned back in the chair and patted Talon's arm to calm her. If the man had intended to turn them in they would have already been dealing with the guard.

"Well, I am curious about a lot of things, but I won't demand answers. Like how you found a way to get a boy tattoo on a girl, or why you would. But," he leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk, "I do have an interest in knowing how you came to own a girl who does not have a tattoo on her face."

"Magic?" Marren looked back just as seriously.

"No. The cost of magic is too high to use it so frivolously. I know mages pay a high price for using it. I am not your common oaf." He looked at the papers he'd handed to them. "An oaf, some would agree, but most definitely not common." His disarming smile returned, "I am the owner of this establishment, after all, and that is not a common feat in a city this size."

"I would hesitate to call you an oaf at all." Marren looked at Talon, "there are people who do not tattoo their slaves for aesthetic reasons. They are not always the nicest of people."

Chuckling, Razo leaned back again, "slave owners are never the nicest of people. It takes a certain, erm, disrespect of people, to purchase them." Putting his arms up behind his head, he studied Marren, "but your reputation doesn't paint you as one who would rescue a slave. Unless you were doing a favor?"

"I have a reputation?" He was aware of it, but only as vague mentions such as Razo had just used. "I'm slightly surprised that you are even aware of me at all. I didn't think I was all that remarkable."

Waving a hand up and down toward Marren's clothing, "there are places where your style is inconsistent with your business. Some people notice that and become curious. Your ownership of a slave would have been noticed. Since it wasn't, it must be a new thing."

"I didn't rescue her from a previous owner, only from her own mistakes. I couldn't leave her at the mercy of a world she doesn't understand." Marren shrugged, feeling defensive. He took a deep breath, slowly, to calm himself.

"A good man, Marren. That part does fit your reputation." He smiled, "so it seems you have been done a favor, perhaps without asking for it, but it's been done nonetheless. And you are of a profession that can help best with some things. I need something done, but I don't have the contacts that would do it. You do."

"I see. Currently I seem to be at a slight deficit with favors. I haven't been working very hard lately. Getting things done may cost money I don't have, at this point." Money wasn't all that scarce, but spending it on favors would leave his future a little less certain.

"Money is not a problem. Knowing who can be trusted to do what needs to be done is." He stood up, "I've updated the inn's book. You have the room for another week if you need it. Aro will come by with a request at some point. He'll ask for Talon if I sent him." Since no one ever asked for a slave by name, it would make a good passphrase. "Favor done?"

"Favor accepted." Marren stood, then picked up Talon's hand and lifted, the way he would assist a free woman.

Razo raised an eyebrow. "I think I have the right man for the job." He put his hand out across the desk, giving a firm grip when Marren shook it.

As soon as the door to their room was closed, Talon threw herself at Marren, whimpering. "Am I in trouble? He knew everything! Will he turn us in? They kill people for helping slaves escape! I don't want you to be killed. You were just being nice, you don't even know who I ran away from. You didn't make me escape." Talon found herself babbling and starting to cry, panicking.

"Hush, girl. It's okay. An unusual way to get a job, but there isn't really a usual way, either. He made things better for us." Marren petted her hair, holding her close as she gripped his waist with her arms, her hands bunching up in the back of his shirt. "I've been working less than usual and paying for a room, well, a free week will help." He patted her back, "and the papers have the right seals. You're safely Talon, now, unless someone looks in your pants."

Leaning against him, she pressed her face into his chest, the trembling in her body subsiding slowly.

"I guess I got too scared to hear. What did he say?" She shuddered, continuing to grip his shirt tightly.

Easing her over to the bed, Marren was able to lie down and roll her on top of him without making her let go. Putting his hands on her bottom, he held her lightly while she shivered and sighed, trying to regain her composure. Going over what was said, he made a point of showing how it was good for them.

Calming, Talon rested her head on Marren's chest for a few minutes, then pulled her arms out from around his waist. Pushing them under her chest, she lifted her upper body to look into his eyes, getting lost in the odd sparkles for a moment.

"Will you be okay, sir?"

"I'll be fine." Marren resisted the urge to pull her up to kiss. "We'll see what job he wants done. It's probably something I can arrange, since men like him usually know before they even ask. The asking is just a formality, or a test of wills, and he obviously knows enough about me to know I don't bother with the tests of will."

Realizing the position she was in, Talon flushed a little and wiggled to roll off Marren. Sitting up on the side of the bed, she rested a hand on his chest. "It's just waiting now, Sir?" Her fingers curled into his shirt loosely.

"Unless you need something, yes. Well, maybe go down and get dinner and a drink or three."

"Slaves don't drink in taverns, if you mean alcohol, sir." She turned to look at him, smiling. "And I had beer once. I think I'd rather drink piss."

Marren laughed. "It's an acquired taste for most people. I liked it from the first. I can't imagine forcing myself to learn to like something I didn't need. Piss is not something I would even try."

"I think I would rather wine. It smells so tasty, like little green grapes just past ripe, so they're extra flavorful and the sweet is starting to turn tart but isn't yet." Talon let herself think about the treats her mistress had given when pleased.

"Yes, that's wine. Some types, anyway. Wine comes in a lot of types. Some aren't even sweet." He patted her hand, "I could get some for you if you want. I know of a few types that may be what you're thinking of."

"I would like that, sir." Talon looked down at her hand on his chest, "if you don't mind. It isn't my place to put you out like that, though."

"Talon?"

“Sir?”

“Are you trying to be a slave?”

“Maybe a little, sir. That meeting reminded me that you could be in a lot of trouble because of me, that we’re not the same.” She pulled her hand to her lap and tipped her head down. “I have been getting above myself.”

“No. We’re friends. I don’t know much about owning slaves, but I know about being friends. The only important thing about your color is that I find it attractive.” Reaching out, Marren turned and put his arm around her waist and pulled her harder against him, holding her in a tight hug. “You have to be careful about how you look to others, but you should see yourself as an important person.”

Falling sideways against him, her back against his side, Talon let herself cry a little. “I like being your friend, sir, but I’m scared. I don’t know what I’m doing, you don’t know much more, secrets that aren’t secret.”

Chuckling softly, Marren slid his hand under her vest and caressed her stomach. “You were brave enough to run away, but being friends with a free man has you scared?”

“I was scared then, too, sir, but it was just me that would suffer if it went bad.” Talon put a hand on the hand on her stomach, her fingers tracing the lines of tendons. “I don’t want you to get hurt because of me.”

Someone knocked on the door and Talon jumped, then giggled. “I scared me.”

Aro stood at the door, smiling up at Talon, the nervousness he’d expressed the last time they’d seen him gone. “Master said to ask for Talon.”

Moving out of the way, Talon didn’t say anything and let him into the room.

Running over to Marren, the boy handed him a piece of paper. “Master asks if sir would kindly provide a quote for this change, at his earliest convenience at dinner hour on the day after this one.”

Marren chuckled at the boy’s attempt at formal speech, taking the paper and looking at it briefly. “Tell Razo I will get him an answer as quickly as I can.”

“Yes, sir, thank you, sir.” Aro hurried to the door and paused to look up at Talon. “Ivy likes you.” He ran out giggling.

“Ivy?” Marren raised an eyebrow as Talon returned to the bed.

“One of the kitchen girls, sir. One that was flirting with me at lunch.” Talon blushed. “She is cute and her tattoo is ivy across her face. It’s actually rather pretty.” She snuggled her back against Marren’s side again and pulled his hand back to her stomach, under her vest.

“Would it bother you if I asked about relations between slaves?” Marren ran a fingertip around Talon’s navel.

Giggling at being tickled, Talon pushed his finger away. “Relations, sir?”

“Friendships, love, that sort of thing. Like you said this Ivy flirted with you. Do slaves often have the freedom for things like flirting and romance?” He pushed his finger back to her navel, but didn’t tickle again.

Talon tensed as his finger moved, then relaxed. “Depends a lot on the owners, sir. I was allowed, even encouraged, to flirt with girls, but not allowed to respond to boys. Some owners even make arrangements for slaves to have time, like sending the boy to the girl’s home for a few days and reverse. Boys were often offered to my owner for that, but she always declined. Usually by punishing the boy.” She snorted, “I think she punished them for being boys, not for the offer.”

After a moment of silence, she asked, “Sir?” She didn’t wait for his ‘hm’. “Magic?”

“Yes.” His fingers caressed her stomach lightly.

“Is that why your legs hurt?” She knew magic cost the user a bit of pain and suffering. People often pointed that out to children who would get excited about the idea of magic.

“Yes. And why I look old. Don’t try to tell me I don’t. I do. I am old. Magic is not free.”

“Could you really remove tattoos with magic?” Most of the magic she’d heard of was for hurting people.

“Maybe, but changing people’s bodies with magic is dangerous, and the price too high. We don’t know enough about how bodies work to go playing around in them, and I’d be afraid of leaving worse scars. Using magic to solve a problem can be like getting rid of flies by burning down the house while standing inside.”

“Then why do you do it?”

“I don’t. Oh, you mean using magic in general, not the tattoo thing? Sometimes the flies are resistant to being swatted.” He chuckled at his own joke. “Sometimes it is the only way, or the



best way the people that pay for it can think of. It's something I can do and do well. I'd rather do that than beg. Or stay in one place. And once in a while it really is the better solution."

"I don't want you to die young."

"Too late for that. I haven't been young in quite a while." Running his hand over her tight stomach, Marren added, "it doesn't really kill us faster, it just makes us, hm, well, suffer the pains of age sooner. We can live as long as anyone else if we don't annoy someone important, we just ache longer."

"Rather you didn't have to ache longer, too." She pulled his arm tighter around her body, not even noticing that it rose up nearer her chest.

...

When a knock came on the door, Talon got up slowly, reluctant to leave the comforting arms. Opening the door, she hesitated.

"Master Razo said to help with the boy's hair." Ivy grinned at her. A large woman carrying a tub of steaming water stood behind Ivy.

"Um, what?"

"The boy's hair needs washing and braiding." Ivy grinned again at Talon. "Master Razo sent us to do it since Master Marren probably doesn't know how."

Talon looked over at Marren, biting her lower lip. "Sir?"

"It needs it." Stretching, moved up on the bed to be in a sitting position, "and Razo is correct, I wouldn't know how."

"Yes, sir." Talon returned her attention to Ivy, moving out of the way.

The larger woman carried the tub in and set it on the floor near the center of the room. It was large enough that Marren suspected he couldn't have carried it full of water at any time of his life, yet the woman seemed to carry it easily and set it down without splashing.

Marren looked at Ivy's face, noticing that her tattoo was a flowery design of ivy, not a scarring scrawl of a name or random glyphs. "Lovely tattoo, Ivy."

"Thank you, sir." Ivy beamed at Marren, then turned toward Talon as the larger woman left, closing the door behind her. "Want me to undo it, or just watch you?"

“Um, could you do it, please? I haven’t done it for myself before.” Talon sat cross-legged on the floor near the tub, her back toward Ivy.

Ivy quickly unbraided Talon’s hair, pulling it out straight carefully. “You have lovely hair. I wish mine would grow so long.” She sighed as she worked. “Master Razo says it’s okay, but you know how it is. Well, I guess you must. I bet you get lots of them people getting all mad just because you got pretty hair. I get too flustered soon as they start looking and cut it off again.” She continued to chatter about hair as she guided Talon to sit closer to the tub and moved the hair into it and started washing. Her chatter didn’t seem to need or want replies as she worked.

Once her hair was washed and wrapped in a towel, Talon sat cross legged on the floor. Ivy lifted the skirt of her dress to keep it from tangling in her legs and sat cross legged in front of her, looking into Talon’s eyes with a fawning expression.

“I’m sorry I’m being pushy and all but you’re so pretty I can’t help myself.” Ivy looked at her shoes. “I guess a boy like you that gets to go places and see new people all the time wouldn’t be interested in a girl stuck washing stuff in an inn, but I think you’re really pretty and since you’re not going to be around long I have to be forward and tell you I like you before you go to the next place.”

“It’s fine, I’m not offended.” Talon fidgeted with her fingers. “I think you’re cute and I like you, too.” Twisting her fingers together tight enough to hurt, she looked at Ivy’s face, “but I’m not available. I’m sorry.” She had a feeling that Ivy wouldn’t be upset to find out she was really a girl, but she wasn’t willing to take a chance on hurting her, particularly since she doubted they would stay in the city long and even with Ivy’s willingness to have a short fling Talon expected it would hurt at the end if they did. “If I was available, though, I would be happy to spend time with you!”

Blushing, Ivy fidgeted with her own fingers, keeping her eyes down. “It’s okay. I figured you might not be, but I’d be kicking myself for not saying anything and then not knowing one way or another.” After a couple of minutes of awkward silence she started chattering about the people that she saw go through the inn and was quickly back to her bubbly self. Moving around behind Talon, she unwrapped her hair from the towel and combed it out carefully while it dried, until it was dry enough that combing more would risk breaking and splitting, then started the long task of braiding it up again.

Marren watched the whole process while sitting up on the bed, amused at the way he was completely ignored. From what little he knew, slaves generally didn’t relax in front of free people. He wondered if either Talon or Razo had said something to Ivy about him being a wanderer. Even slaves considered wanderers odd enough to not count as either free people or slaves. Not beggars but not citizens either, with no social standing, good or bad, although often looked down on for not owning anything or having homes. Free people looked on them with

justifiable suspicion as it was known they were for hire for things citizens wouldn't or couldn't do and slaves looked at them as almost equals for the same reason.

"You could have spent time with her if you wanted to," Marren told Talon after Ivy left.

"I thought you would allow it, sir, but it wouldn't be fair to her." Sitting on the edge of the bed again, she looked at her fingers, "and I'm still not sure what I want or don't want or even can do without the past stuff getting in the way. I think it would have bothered her a lot if we got close and I suddenly couldn't do anything."

Reaching out to put his arm around her, he pulled her to rest her back against his side again, keeping his arm wrapped around her stomach.

"I won't say I understand, but I can listen if you want to talk, or let you not talk if you'd rather." Reaching over with his free hand he stroked her upper back lightly, "and if you want reasons to say no without explaining, you can blame me. You can say no to anything you don't want, even with me."

Giggling, Talon fell on her side, wincing at the pain on her tattoo, and pressed back against him. "You make it hard to worry about stuff, sir."

"Good. Worrying is my job, not yours."

After a short while of resting, Talon sat back up again. "Sir, does resting so much help?"

"Yes. It eases the aches and pains. After three or four days of rest they're mostly gone until the next time. Doesn't help with the aging. Weaker muscles, wrinkled skin, white hair, the usual stuff, stays. It might be possible to recover even some of that, if I could rest a lot longer, but I'm not rich enough for that."

"Then we'll stay here the whole time Master Razo gave you and you'll rest as much as you can between doing the jobs." Talon bit her lip nervously at her own audacity.

Chuckling, Marren rolled on his side to look at her, "yes, Ma'am."

Standing, Talon shook her head to shake out her braid, enjoying the swish against her calves. Slaves weren't supposed to take pride in anything, but she loved her long hair and the way it felt when it was clean.

"Dinner, sir?"

"Yes, Ma'am. And some good beer if you can." Watching the long hair move, Marren was glad he'd encouraged the washing.

"I think I can manage a pitcher or get the boy to help."

"That would do. And you're right, I should take the time to rest, since it's not costing more." He tossed his change pouch to her. "Whatever you want, meat for me."

After Talon left, Marren looked around the room. It really wasn't suited for people that were spending any more time than sleeping in it. There was plenty of space, but that was it. Bare wood, ill-fitted, formed the walls, floor, and ceiling. There was a dresser and wardrobe, but anyone who'd traveled at all knew better than to leave anything in them when they left the room. He'd been in fancier places, with pictures on the walls, rugs on the floors, and doors with locks. Talon might like a nicer room if they were going to stay while he recovered. He made a note to himself to ask about it next time he saw Razo.

Talon returned with a tray of meat, bread, and even some fresh vegetables that Marren turned his nose up at, along with Aro carrying a pitcher of beer and a mug. The boy had tried to get a second mug but Talon had assured him it wouldn't be needed, as water would do for her. She'd resisted the urge to mention her opinion of the taste of beer. Moving the small table close to the bed, Talon served Marren, then perched on the edge to nibble at the vegetables and bread.

Lying in bed after dinner, his body pressing against her back and his hand pressing against her chest, Talon felt comfortable. She felt a little guilty that everything he did and said seemed to be aimed at making her happier. Her feelings shouldn't matter. Smirking, she reminded herself that was one of the things that had been hurting her for so long that she'd risked death. Pulling his hand up under her chin, she held it tightly as she slipped into sleep.

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Being woken for the bath in the morning, Talon told herself she would allow Marren to touch her any way he wanted. He shouldn't have to pay for the bad feelings other people had caused her. The feeling of his hands on her when it wasn't sexual made her feel good, and she did have sexual desires. Not often, since they brought memories and feelings that she didn't want to deal with, but she had them.

Undressing while he watched, she felt shy and had to look away. Climbing into the tub and then feeling him climb in behind her made her tremble. She closed her eyes as his arms moved around her body. When his hands lightly rested on her chest she held her breath and for a moment she found it pleasing. Then feelings came. She gently slid her hands up between his and her body and started washing as nonchalantly as she could fake.

Marren felt Talon's tension rise as he held her, and let her control the situation. He wanted to hold her and touch her, but he wanted her to like it. He didn't feel offended as she pushed him

away, just a little sad that she had to. He washed himself quickly, then climbed out of the tub and started drying, making an effort not to watch her body.

Climbing from the tub, Talon was relieved when Marren looked away as she tied the codpiece on and covered herself with a towel before starting to wash out their clothes. It hurt that she couldn't do what she'd set out to, and his being patient about it made it a little worse. Feeling that she'd let him down, she hurried through washing and dressing, then followed him back to the room silently.

Lying on the bed, Marren ran his hand up and down Talon's back as she sat on the side, slumped dejectedly. "We should probably get you that dagger I promised."

"Not a dagger, sir, a knife. Slaves can't carry weapons." Talon welcomed the distraction from her circular thoughts. "For most cases the only difference is the hilt guard. We can have a knife without one even if it's half as long as your arm."

"I don't know much about either. The closest thing I have to a weapon is my cane." He shrugged, "I know how to use a dagger in defense, in theory, but I'm not fast enough to make it actually work. So, we should get you a knife. For cutting steak. A big, aggressive steak."

Talon giggled. "If you wish, sir. Although that is about the only thing I could fight off with one. I've never been in danger from anything more threatening." Feeling him moving on the bed behind her, she stood up.

Rolling to his feet, Marren pushed her gently to the side and tried to reach down to get his boots, grunting. It didn't really hurt so much, but his flexibility seemed to be nonexistent.

Talon pushed him gently back onto the bed. As he sat down without complaint she knelt in front of him and started putting a boot on his foot. "You're supposed to be taking it easy, sir. Let me."

"Since you insist." While his hips had been feeling a bit better lately, bending was still very unpleasant. "You don't have to, though. I told you, we're friends."

"I'm doing this as a friend, sir. Friends help each other." She looked up to him, "please don't make it about anything else when there isn't anybody around. It reminds me I'm still a slave." Grunting, she had to pull hard to get the boot on. "Don't you wear stockings? Your boots would slide on easier."

"Putting the boots on is enough bending. Stockings, well, by the time I get them on I need to rest for an hour." He caressed the top of her head, "I'll try to stop saying what you should and shouldn't do, except as advice from a friend to a friend."

Once his boots were on Talon stood and pulled at his hands, helping him stand. "I wouldn't be a very good friend if I watched you do things that hurt when I could help."

Marren held onto one of her hands once he was on his feet. "Thank you."

Holding his hand felt good; reassuring. Reluctantly pulling her hand free after a moment, Talon picked up the backpack. Making sure everything from the room was in it, she let him help her get it on. "Thank you, sir."

Out on the boardwalk, Marren looked up and down the street. "Which way do you think would get us to a blacksmith or shop for knives?"

"I wouldn't know sir. This isn't my city."

"I try to avoid marketplaces. There's no money to be made, too many thieves, and the products are usually inferior. I suppose for food they would be useful, if I cooked." Sighing, he looked down the street toward the subject of his muttering. "Let's give it a try, anyway."

The boardwalk ended as the shops started looking poorly maintained, many of them closed. Their doors were still at boardwalk level, but makeshift stairs led from the road, which had also gotten rougher, the stones becoming more frequently missing, to the entrances.

"How do they even get the wagons down here?"

Wincing as she walked, Talon shrugged. "I think there is a road for them that doesn't go through the good part of town. This road probably doesn't get much use."

"What's the matter?"

"I always wore shoes, sir. This road hurts." She forced a smile at him, "I need the practice, sir. I'll be fine."

"Hadn't thought of that. And boys never wear shoes?" Marren was learning how little he knew of the lives of slaves.

"No, sir. Girls are never barefoot, boys always are. I think it's to make it harder for them to run away." She laughed softly, "it would be effective. I couldn't run right now."

Entering the market square they found the road was in better shape, with smooth stones and no random holes. Wagons lined the square with sides down to display the contents, while the center was occupied by large, cheaply-made stalls. Makeshift walls separated the stalls as if to keep the vendors from stealing from each other. Judging from the looks many of them shot at each other Marren guessed that was the real reason they were there.

The wagons around the sides were obviously from the farms outside of the city, so Marren focused his attention on the stalls in the center, mostly run by craftsmen. Perhaps better described as craftsmen in training. After a bit of searching he found a single stall selling metal work.

"I'm looking for a knife, about this long." Marren put his hands about half the length of a forearm apart. "With a thigh sheathe."

The craftsman sneered at Talon as he shook his head. "I don't sell nothing for slaves. Nobody does here." He looked at Marren with a bit more respect for a moment. Noticing Marren's unconventional clothing, his sneer returned. "You're in the wrong part of town, wanderer. Get lost."

"Thank you for saving me the money I might have given you." Marren nodded to Talon as he turned away. "Come, boy. Let us find a merchant that wishes to make money rather than sling insults."

Finding a quiet space a little up the road they'd walked down, Marren leaned on his cane as he rested against a wall. "Seems the merchants are a bit more concerned about being above slaves than they are about making a living. Does that happen often?"

"I don't know, sir. The only marketplace I know of was not like that, but it also catered to the more well off than this one does." She looked back over her shoulder, then added in a very quiet voice, "but yes, poor free people do make an effort to elevate themselves over slaves by being obnoxious. It is why most of us consider wanderers to be kindred. You don't insult us and we don't insult you."

"Let's go back where we belong, then." He resisted the urge to take her hand as he levered himself off the wall.

"Yes, sir." Talon felt relief at leaving the area in spite of the anticipation of walking painfully up the street again.

Arriving at the inn again, Marren nodded toward a gap between it and a shop that appeared to cater to people wishing to purchase alcohol in bottles. Standing at the edge of the boardwalk blocking the gap with Talon behind him, he leaned against the inn.

"Do you need to rest?" he asked softly.

"Only a moment, sir, if you please." She looked to be sure no one on the boardwalk could see her, then sat on the planks between the buildings rubbing her sore feet. "I think you won't find what you want at the better blacksmiths, either, sir, at a reasonable price. Most things made for

slaves cost more.” She smirked, “since people that can afford to own a slave can afford to pay more than a product is worth.”

“Makes sense. I price my services based on what the client can pay, as well.” He rested quietly against the wall for a bit, watching the people walk past. Most ignored him, but a few would look at him, sneer, then speed up. It amused him that they thought themselves better yet feared him at the same time. “Crogan. Let’s save us some time and go see what he can suggest, since we need to see him anyway.”

“Sir?” Talon sighed as her feet started to feel better.

“Hm?”

“How is it you do the stuff you do and meet the people you do, but don’t know too much about people?”

Marren chuckled. “I know too much about people.” Glancing back at her, he sighed. “I know people as single people. I hear what they say when they think no one is listening. That is more than I want to know about people but I need to know to do business. I guess I ignore the more obvious things.” He fidgeted with his cane a little. “And some things didn’t matter enough for me to notice before. I would have ignored the merchant before.”

“So you insulted him in return only because of me?”

“I suppose.” Standing up from the wall, he nodded. “Yes, I suppose I did.”

Talon felt a shiver run through her body. A pleasant one. “I think I’m ready to go on, sir.”

“I’ll have to remember not to do that. Some of those people do eventually get out of the place they are and I wouldn’t want them to remember me that way when they’ve fixed their attitude.”

Standing up behind him, Talon nodded even though he couldn’t see her. “Sometimes people are just that way because they feel so bad they need to feel better than someone else.”

“You have a point.” He turned to smile at her, “I’ll try to take that into account in the future.”

“Slaves have no future. There is only now.” She was surprised she could say that with less bitterness than she’d said it in the past. It felt less true.

“Wanderers have no future, either, but we have to plan for one.” He tapped his cane on the boardwalk as he stepped out onto it. “Probably why I don’t bother with learning a lot about the people I don’t do business with.”



“There’s a difference, sir. It’s possible for a wanderer to stop being a wanderer.”

“That stings a little.” Marren walked along the boardwalk a little, then stepped off and crossed the street, thinking. He hadn’t really thought about the difference having a choice would make. Not that he had really chosen to be a wanderer, he’d really just fallen into it from lack of motivation to do anything else. The knowledge that he had a choice to be something different would make a difference in how he felt about it, he had to admit. If he died from his life it would be the result of a choice, even if that choice was to just follow the easier path.

“Okay, that stings a lot. You’re right, it isn’t the same, it just looks like it on the surface. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to slaves, sir.” Talon smiled at his back, “at least, not where someone might hear you. Thank you, though.”

“You don’t even get to plan for a future, do you?”

“Making plans is for free people.” Talon looked around to see if anyone was within earshot. “Most owners that I have heard about punish us for making plans, for thinking beyond just obeying. Mistress would make sure that any plans she heard about were disrupted, even if they were only for small things like getting together for a little kissing and snuggling that wasn’t part of her games. Unless it was plans to do things that would benefit her, of course.”

“I’d like to think she was not a common example of an owner.”

“She wasn’t. She was one of the nicer ones.”

Marren winced at the thought.

Entering Crogan’s shop, Marren showed him the paper from Razo.

“Can you make tattoo changes like this?”

“Yup. Not easy, but I’ve done it before. As long as the slave takes time to heal.” He looked pointedly at Talon, “and doesn’t go out in public with the marks still irritated and swollen.” Looking over the design, he nodded again. “I can’t change the records, though. I assume those are taken care of? Bill of sale and what not?”

“Yes, not your part. No favors, though. A cash transaction.” Marren didn’t want to be tied too tightly to whatever it was that Razo was asking for. “Give me a quote and I’ll see if the other side likes it.”

Crogan studied the drawings for a few minutes. “It’s not too complicated. All in basic color?”

"I assume. There was no mention of color and it isn't in the drawings." Marren had forgotten to ask about colors. Some slaves had some rather garish colors, although usually they were the women.

Nodding, Crogan gave him a price. "That's not a favor. If the person needs to pay less, I think I could do it for less for someone that doesn't need paperwork."

"I'll mention that." Making it a favor would complicate things for Razo and Crogan, but might result in more work and favors for Marren. Taking the paper back, he glanced around the shop. "You wouldn't happen to have a knife and sheath that would be allowed on Talon, would you?"

Grinning, Crogan nodded. "It's what I do officially. I sell things people need to the people that need them." Beckoning them to a counter, he pulled out several knives. "These are good ones. Well made, properly tempered. Won't shatter if they accidentally hit a metal plate or something else hard, like banging on another knife or, well, something."

"That would be the sort of thing I'm looking for." Holding up each knife and studying it, Marren watched Talon's reactions. He discarded the bulkier knives and passed over the ones that looked too much like weapons. Selecting three long thin blades, he took his time over them, waiting for her to decide.

Crogan picked one of the three and showed off its finer points, including the lighter weight and narrow profile that would make it slice into meat easier. "For a smaller person, this would be best. Less strength needed to cut into tough meat, but it may break against unexpected bone easier, as well."

"I'll take it." Marren pulled out some coins, "and the sheath?"

"I'll toss you a thigh sheath as a tiny favor?"

"Favor accepted." Marren trusted Crogan enough about a tiny favor. There were people that would abuse the concept of small or tiny favors, but Crogan hadn't proved to be of that type.

Talon shivered as Marren knelt in front of her and tied the sheath to her leg, his hands touching her inner thigh high enough to make it feel sexual. Closing her eyes, she gritted her teeth until he was done.

Crogan smirked. "Might not want too many people seeing you do things like that. Might lead them to the wrong idea. Or the right one?"

Marren paused, then shrugged. "I have a feeling people already have ideas. Maybe not completely wrong, but not completely right, either." With Talon's help he stood up again, then

leaned on his cane, looking at the knife. "Good. It doesn't look threatening, but it's big enough to make people think twice."

Reaching for it, Talon found it was at a good height for grabbing the hilt without needing to feel around for it. "Thank you, sir." She didn't like talking around other people, but since Crogan already knew her secret it wasn't risky.

Leaving the shop, Marren noticed Talon was walking rather gingerly. "I think it's time to head back to the inn. Razo would probably like an answer to his question."

Talon smirked. "You don't have to cut your business short for me, sir. I'm used to ignoring discomfort." She really hoped he insisted.

"That's not how friendship works." He smiled at her briefly, "not that I'm an expert on that, either."

They walked in silence, Talon trying not to wince and Marren trying not to look concerned.

Sitting on the side of the bed, Talon sighed heavily. Just being off her feet helped immensely.

Pushing Talon onto her back gently, Marren turned her to lie along the side. Sitting down at the foot of the bed, he put her feet in his lap. He started caressing them lightly with one hand while preventing her from pulling them away with the other.

Whimpering, Talon jerked at her legs, closing her eyes tightly. "Sir, um, please don't."

"It's best for them. In a minute I'll get an ointment for them." He looked at them, "cute little feet in spite of the abuse they've taken over the last few days."

"Sir." She bit her lip, "um, people touching my feet, um, it makes me feel things." She wiggled her toes and sighed. Being aroused by her feet had always felt strange and embarrassing to her.

It only took a few seconds for Marren to realize what she was talking about when she squirmed and moaned softly.

"Ah, let me get the ointment. It soothes aches but it won't do much for the irritated skin." He lifted her feet and looked at them carefully. "Doesn't look like you made them too raw, though, so a bit of rest should help." He grinned at her, "two near invalids making each other rest. We might actually rest."

Talon giggled and sat up, moving her feet from his lap so he could get up and find the ointment in his pack. Taking the jar from him, she sat cross legged on the bed, putting her feet onto her

thighs, and started rubbing the greasy substance in. It smelled different from the one she had for her tattoos, bitter and spicy.

"How do you even bend your legs that way? You tied them in a knot!"

"I've had a lot of practice being flexible." She concentrated on what she was doing, suppressing memories. "Sir?"

"Hm?"

"Can magic make pain go away? Like not change anything, but do like the ointment does?"

"Yes. If I weren't still recovering I'd consider doing it for you. Right now, though, it would be like taking your pain and adding it to mine. You'd feel better and I wouldn't be able to walk." He smiled sadly at her, "I'm sorry."

"No, sir. I wasn't asking you to do it, I really was just curious about it as a general thing since you said changing people is too dangerous and this isn't really changing."

"It's okay to ask, once I take your advice and rest. In this case, if I were well rested I would hurt a lot less than you do by fixing it. The problem is that the more worn out I am the more it hurts to do something." He put his arm around her back, sitting close. "For example when I'm rested I can create a small fire and feel at most a slight ache that fades in an hour or so. If I tried now I probably couldn't even get through it since it would hurt too much and distract me."

"You must have done something really big!"

"No, I did a lot of very small things, each one multiplying the effects of the previous. Having a short time limit to finish a favor," he shrugged without adding details. "I'd like to say I learned a lesson, but considering how many times I've done it, that would be unlikely. I'll do it again if the task needs it." He watched her hands moving over the soles of her feet. The childish softness intrigued him.

"Sir?"

"Hm?"

"Should I not walk on this stuff? It stayed greasy. We have to go down and talk to Razo and I have to get dinner. We missed lunch."

"I'll see Razo alone about the business, and see if one of his people can bring up food."

Talon giggled. "I don't think I ever heard someone call us people. It sounded nice."

"I don't think I can use 'slave' so casually any more." He smiled at Talon as he stood up. "I'll be back shortly." Leaning over, he gave her a small hug, grinning at the surprised look on her face. "You want dead plants on your plate again?"

Nodding shyly, she looked down at her feet.

At the bottom of the stairs Marren found Aro wandering around in the tavern cleaning tables. It took a minute for Marren to realize he was actually listening to a conversation and acting busy. Most people would ignore a little brown boy even if he stood beside them, but Aro seemed to know that there were some who would pay attention. "Boy, is Master Razo available?" He disliked calling him 'boy', but using his name might draw attention to him.

"Yes, sir!" Aro smiled up at him, "if you would please wait sir then I can go and arrange a meeting at, um, right away." He looked a little disappointed in himself for not making it sound as fancy as he'd intended.

"Thank you." Marren smiled back at him, then watched him run toward the office. Walking slowly past the table the boy had been hovering around he tried to catch as much of the conversation he could. The chatter was bland discussion of the pros and cons of staying to eat or moving on to another tavern.

"Master will be pleased to meet with you in his office immediately if you would be so kind as to follow me, sir." Aro was happier with his speech as he looked up at Marren. He was pleased that he'd managed to get close before Marren noticed he'd returned.

Following the boy, Marren whispered, "you didn't miss anything. They changed the subject to dinner plans."

"Thank you, sir." Aro smiled. "How'd you know I was listening?"

"The way you moved around the tables, always staying close to the one you were listening to, and cleaning tables no one had used since the last time you cleaned them. Clean slower, and change directions more randomly. When it gets to uninteresting details you should take a minute to move out of range before returning."

"Thank you, sir!" Aro beamed. "You're good at listening?"

"I am. It's how I find the people that might want to pay me for something."

As Aro stepped aside to let him pass into the office, Marren nodded to him. "You're pretty good at your job, so don't take it bad, I've just had more experience."

“Oh no, sir! Thank you for helping.”

“Aro, no visitors.” Razo called out from his desk.

“Yes sir!” Aro ran off.

Closing the door behind him, Marren settled into a chair. “I really need to stop walking around for a day or two,” he complained. Putting the paper up on the desk, he nodded toward it. “The artist that can do the work was wondering about color. If it’s the standard then he can do it.” Marren gave the price. “He also expressed a willingness to reduce the cost as a favor. It seems there might be some reciprocal work involving getting some paperwork handled that he can’t do himself.”

“That might be doable, depending on the nature of his paperwork.” Razo leaned back in his chair. “I have certain goals in mind and if his are, eh, counter, to them, that wouldn’t work well.” He put his hand to his chin, looking upward thoughtfully. As if speaking to himself, he spoke softly. “I’d need to know a bit more about the man, his goals, what favors would please him.”

“You can always refuse a favor that goes against your standards.” Marren shrugged, “knowing the man, he’ll have something at some time that would be a fit. It would give you a chance to see if you want to continue business with him or find another source.”

“I admit I’m not as familiar with the protocols of the people involved here as I should be, but I like your suggestions.” He put his hands together under his chin. “Would half price be too much to ask as a favor? I’d appreciate a bigger discount but I’d like this done quickly so,” he shrugged, “I’ll pay a little more if it can be handled tomorrow?”

“Hm. As you can see, getting around is not one of my top skills at the moment, so running back and forth to negotiate this in one day may not work very well.” Taking a chance, he added, “I’d rather finish this up the day after tomorrow.”

Razo smiled, “it’s uncommon to do business with a man that admits to the limits of what can be done. So often I get promises and no delivery. What about taking the boy with you, day after tomorrow, and you finish the negotiations? I trust you as my agent and let you handle the details? If it can be done right then, that would fit my needs.”

“You’re putting a lot of trust into my reputation.” Marren wasn’t really surprised to be trusted so soon, but felt pointing it out might help him in the future.

“Not really. We already know that I know things that shouldn’t be known, as do you.” Razo stretched his hand across the desk as he stood up. “I’m sure we can keep it a business relationship where that sort of thing is not important.”

Taking Razo's hand, Marren nodded. "It's the way I prefer to work. Send Aro with the boy day after tomorrow, then, after breakfast? Oh, and speaking of meals, would it be an inconvenience for one of your people to bring some up to my room?"

"Not at all." Razo released Marren's hand and continued around the desk. "Aro, send someone up to Master Marren's room with a dinner for himself and his boy. They'll know in the kitchen what to send." He smiled faintly at Marren, "I like that turn of phrase. One of my people."

"Yes, sir!" The boy's cheerful voice echoed as if carried through a tunnel.

"He hears and sees everything." Marren grinned.

"He's working on it. Your tips should help him improve." Razo returned the grin, "I also hear a lot."

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Back in his room Marren grinned at seeing Talon spread-eagle on her back on the bed. "Enjoying a bit of space?"

Talon blushed, her cheeks darkening, "yes, sir. One good thing I had before was my own room and bed, when I was allowed to use it." Pulling herself together, she sat up and moved to the side of the bed. "Should I go get dinner, sir?"

"No, Razo is sending it up. We're taking the rest of today and tomorrow to rest." He sat down beside her. "Would it hurt your feet to help with my boots? I can get them if it would."

Talon slipped off the bed, the soles of her feet only touching the floor for a moment as she slid down to kneel. "I can get it, sir." She hoped he didn't notice the little wince as she shifted to kneeling. After pulling his boots off she put her arms up toward him. "I might need some help getting back on the bed, sir, if you don't mind."

Smirking at her, Marren took her hands and pulled her up, falling back with her and laughing. "So you do have limits!" As she landed on top of him he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her up the rest of the way. He held her to his chest, looking up into her eyes. "I was beginning to wonder just how much you would put up with without admitting it hurt."

"Quite a bit, sir. Mistress liked making us cry or yell. We learned to hold it in, since she wouldn't bother with little tortures as often if they didn't get the response she wanted." Folding her arms under her chest to prop herself up, she looked down at his face. "Admitting something hurt would also get us more of that particular thing. So instead of heading back, like you did, she would have found excuses to walk more when she noticed I couldn't walk easily."

“Well, I’m not like that. I don’t like to see people suffer, not even people I don’t like, and I like you. Tell me when you need to rest and we will if we can.” Sliding a hand up her back, he pulled her head down a little and lifted his own, kissing her lightly on the lips.

Talon froze, trembling, for a second. As she felt his lips move away from hers she forced herself to push her head down and return the kiss. It was a simple kiss, but it sent shivers through her. She’d never kissed a man before, and his mustache tickled her upper lip as his beard tickled her chin, distracting her a little. Her face darkening in a blush, she tipped her head down and to the side, resting it on his shoulder, and waited for her body to relax.

“Are you upset with me?” Marren stroked her back lightly.

“No, sir.” Biting at her lower lip, she added, “I’m happy.” She spread her legs to straddle his thighs instead of lying on them, squirming as her codpiece pushed back against her as it took some of her weight.

Biting his tongue on a comment about her codpiece pressing on him, he petted her hair. “You’re allowed to resist, to pull away, if you need to. I understand.”

“You probably don’t, sir. Thank you, though.”

“Hm. That’s the second time you contradicted me, or at least challenged something I said.” He turned and kissed the back of her head. “I like that. You wouldn’t have done that yesterday.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be contrary. It just felt like, um, I don’t know. Like you can think about how it would feel to be used, but you can’t actually feel it, so you can’t understand it deep inside. Wanting things and not being able to have them because of the hurt in your center when you try. You can sympathise, I guess, but not really understand unless you’ve been used that way. When you say you understand it feels like it’s making light of my feelings in some way.” Talon moved her arms around to slide them between Marren and the bed and hugged him. “I appreciate the sympathy, though.”

Hugging her with one arm while stroking her back with the other, Marren nuzzled his head against hers. “That’s true, I don’t really understand in the sense of knowing what you feel. What I meant was that I understand you’ve been through a lot, no more than that. I don’t understand what it’s like and I didn’t mean to imply that I did. I’m sorry.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Someone knocked on the door and Ivy’s voice called out, “dinner, sir!”

“Want me to get it?” Marren asked softly.



"Please, sir?" Talon rolled off him, curling up on her side and watching as he stood up and went to the door. He seemed to be walking better even without his cane.

Marren opened the door and moved back, allowing the small girl with the large tray in. "Would you put that on the table, please, Ivy?"

Smiling brightly, Ivy nodded, trying to look around him at Talon. "Yes, sir!" Hurrying to carry the tray across the room she looked more carefully at Talon, her brow furrowing a little in concern. "Is your boy okay, sir?"

"You can call him Talon, Ivy, I prefer using names. Talon's fine, thank you for asking." Marren walked carefully toward the table as he talked. His legs were feeling a lot better but he knew that there could be sudden stabs of pain or numbness that might unbalance him and he didn't like it when that happened in front of witnesses.

Ivy put the tray down on the table and looked around. "There's no chairs, sir. If you'll excuse me I'll fix that for you right away, sir." She didn't wait for permission before hurrying out of the room.

Sitting on the bed beside Talon as she sat up, he patted her thigh. "She likes you, still." He prevented her from getting up to get the plates. "Give her minute for chairs. It'll be easier to sit at the table to eat."

"Yes, sir." Talon let him pull her against his side. His arm around her back felt good, and his hand sliding over her skin between her vest and shorts felt even better in spite of the shivers it sent through her body. She leaned against his side. "I think she still wants kisses even after what I said."

"I think she wants more than kisses in spite of what you said." He kissed her forehead. "You are free to do what you want to do with that, and use me as an excuse whichever way you decide. Making excuses makes it easier to change your mind later, if you make them well."

"Planning for a future that may not happen, sir?" Talon grinned up at him.

"Precisely. Always keep your options open, even ones you don't think you'll ever use. You might change your mind, things might happen that make you choose to go back. Lots of things can happen that you don't know about now and offending people you don't need to can cut down your choices."

"What if I gave her what she wants? Would that bother you?"

“Not at all.” Marren slid his hand up her back under her vest. “Being possessive is not in my nature. You may have noticed my lack of possessions?” He caressed her back lightly. “I know technically you are mine now, but I still don’t think of you as a possession.”

Talon smiled and looked down. “Thank you, sir.” She bit her lip, “sometimes I’m tempted.” Looking up at him suddenly, her face darkened in a blush, “not that you don’t, sir! But, well, it’s, um, different thinking about girls. It doesn’t scare me as much, even though it still makes me feel a little bad, like, um, I don’t want to feel like I did. I don’t want to feel dirty any more.”

“If you’re doing it because you want to and the other person wants to, it’s not dirty. The dirty part was your mistress forcing it on you, not you doing it.” He put a finger to her chin and lifted her face, kissing her lips lightly. “Do you want to?”

Kissing back, Talon nodded. “She’s so adorably cute. I’m scared she’ll be upset that I’m a girl or that I can’t stay with her. I don’t want to hurt her.”

“I think she knows both of those things.” Marren continued caressing her when she didn’t stiffen or pull away. “She pays enough attention to you to see past her expectations, and you already told her you can’t stay.”

“Sir?”

“Hm?”

“You want me to?”

“This is not about me, this is about you.” He kissed her forehead. “You have to do what you feel is best for you.”

“You’re not helping.” She smiled softly.

“You mean I’m not telling you what to do.” Chuckling, he hugged her tightly.

...

The door opened suddenly and Ivy stepped in, smirking as she saw them on the bed. “I have chairs, sir.” She stepped aside and let a large brown man carrying a couple of chairs into the room. “Odin had to carry them for me, if it’s all right by you, sir.” The tone of her voice indicated it wasn’t really a question as she moved to stand in front of Talon and look at her feet. “Odin can help get Talon onto a chair so he doesn’t hurt his pretty feet any more.”

Marren stood up and tried to reach for Talon’s hands to help her up.

Odin stepped in the way and lifted Talon easily. "Excuse me, sir. Let me help you with the little boy, please sir."

As Talon squeaked at being picked up, Marren smirked and moved out of the way, letting Ivy guide him to a chair.

Placing Talon on the other chair, Odin pushed the chair closer to the table, then patted Talon on the head as he smiled at Ivy. "You were right, he is very pretty." He bowed toward Marren, "if you will excuse me, sir, I have other duties I must attend to."

"Of course you're excused. Thank you for your assistance." Marren grinned at Talon's deep blush. He looked at Ivy with a raised eyebrow. "Have you been saying things about my Talon?"

"Oh no, sir!" Ivy smiled, "maybe a little." As the door closed behind Odin she looked down, blushing, "Master Razo said you're not too fussy about slaves keeping their place and I might have got carried away a little." She stepped close to Talon and caressed her shoulder and upper arm. "Master Razo always treats us like people, but around others we have to still act like we're not so it's really nice to be around another man that treats us like people."

"You are people."

Talon looked at the hand on her shoulder, then kissed the palm when Ivy tried to caress her cheek. Tipping her head back as Ivy leaned over her, she let Ivy kiss her lips, then returned it, pulling Ivy close. "You know I won't be staying. I don't want you to be hurt," she murmured.

"I know. I'll be fine." Ivy nuzzled her. "I'll be back in a little while to clear the table for you." Smiling shyly toward Marren, she hurried from the room.

Marren smiled at Talon as he started cutting into his meat. "Are you feeling okay about the kiss? Didn't feel pressured into it?"

"Yes, sir. I wanted it. Ivy's been so sweet I just had to push aside the bad feelings." She looked down at her food. "Maybe that's what it takes to get past it. Being persistent. A little pressure isn't always a bad thing."

Smiling, Marren started eating, watching her as she picked at her food.

Ivy returned while they were still at the table and stood behind Talon caressing her shoulders until she was done eating. She helped Marren get Talon to her feet and to the bed, then pushed her over onto her back before kneeling in front of her to lift her feet and look at them. She grinned as Talon moaned when she caressed them, and kissed the little toes.

“Probably just need to stay off them for a day.” Standing up, she stepped up to the bed between Talon’s legs. “Should stay in bed if Master Marren will allow it.”

“He’ll encourage it.” Talon smirked.

As she tried to sit up Ivy leaned over further, then climbed up to lie on top of her. “Like this?” she giggled, blushing. Pressing her lips to Talon’s, preventing her from answering, Ivy slipped a hand up under Talon’s vest and started caressing her breast. When Talon tried to push her hand away she held firm, biting gently at Talon’s lips.

Marren watched the girls kissing with a smile. “I’ll be down in the tavern for a couple of beers. Take care of Talon for me, Ivy?”

Grinning, Ivy lifted her head and nodded toward Marren, “yes, sir. I’ll take care of him very well sir.” As Marren closed the door she turned back to Talon and started unlacing her vest. “I’m not good about taking no for an answer.”

“I noticed.” Talon put her hands on Ivy’s. “I guess you already know I’m a girl. I used to belong to someone who made me feel bad about sex and love, so I might have to say no. I don’t want you to think it means I don’t want you, it would just mean it hurts too much.” She let Ivy kiss her. “I definitely want you.”

“Then I’ll be careful.” Ivy got off the bed and removed her dress and shoes, shaking her head when Talon moved to finish unlacing her vest. “No. I want to do that for you.” She grinned again, licking her lips. “Changing you from a boy to a girl slowly.” Running her hands over her own body, she smiled seductively, “do I look good?”

“Yes, you do.” Talon licked her own lips and patted the bed beside her. Desire was doing a good job of keeping her bad feelings suppressed. She briefly thought of Marren and considered asking him to be a little more assertive to get her past her blocks, since hinting hadn’t seemed to work. Ivy’s hand reaching for the lace of her vest brought her attention back to the girl.

As Marren finished his second beer and pushed away from the bar, not having heard any conversations of interest, Aro ran up to him.

“Master Razo said the girl needs to be in the kitchen when it’s time for making lunch, if it pleases you, sir.”

“Thank you, Aro. I’ll see to it.” Marren smirked. The bed would be rather crowded if she were to stay the night, but he could never bring himself to make a person sleep on the floor.

Opening the door to the room he paused to look at the naked women snuggling on the bed, kissing lightly and giggling softly, their arms and legs tangled together. When they jumped and

looked toward him as he closed the door, he smiled. "No need to get up. Razo doesn't expect you back down until lunch, Ivy."

"I don't want to inconvenience you, sir." Ivy liked the way he looked at her, looking over her body and then looking her straight in the eyes. Not many people looked slaves in the eye and it felt good.

Moving to the bed Marren sat down on the side, patting Ivy's bare hip. "Don't worry about it, you two are small. If I stack you up you won't take any more space than a full size person."

Giggling, Ivy rolled up on top of a blushing Talon. "Like this sir?"

Grinning, Marren nodded, "that'll work. Although with Talon blushing like that you might get a bit hot."

"Being this close to Talon makes me hot anyway, sir," Ivy grinned with a deep blush. Tipping her head down, she kissed Talon and moved to grasp her breasts in a way that allowed Marren to see what she was doing. Talon's moans told her it was the right thing to do.

Leaning over, Marren tried to take off his boots.

"Let me get that for you, sir!" Ivy rolled off Talon and hurried to kneel at Marren's feet.

Having a naked woman removing his boots stirred desires he was trying to suppress for Talon's sake. Marren tried looking away from Ivy, but looking at Talon's body stretched out beside him just increased the feelings.

Once his boots were off, Ivy lifted Marren's legs and turned him on the bed so he could lie down. Smiling at Talon, she climbed onto Marren, lying face to face for a moment, looking into his eyes. When he tipped his head up to kiss her, she let him, then rolled over onto Talon. Reaching out to Marren, she pulled his hand to Talon's breast while tipping her head down to kiss Talon on the lips.

"That might not be such a good idea," Marren started to say as he moved to pull his hand away.

Talon grabbed his wrist and held his hand in place, trembling and glad her face was hidden from him by Ivy's kiss. He'd know she was getting upset and stop and she didn't want him to. Closing her eyes tightly, she wrapped an arm around Ivy's waist and held Marren's hand to her breast.

Turning on his side, Marren snuggled with the two women, gently caressing Talon's body and listening to her breathing deepen as she grew excited.

Ivy lifted her head. "You should remove your clothes, sir, to make more room on the bed."

Talon giggled and squirmed, her breathing starting to get ragged as Ivy and Marren kept her excited. She let go of Marren's wrist and twisted a little to avoid seeing him strip.

"You don't want to see him get undressed?" Ivy whispered. She glanced over at Marren. She'd seen naked boys before, but not men, and she was very interested.

"It might make me get the bad feelings again," Talon whispered her answer, "and mess stuff up. Kiss me?"

Ivy did as asked until she felt Marren's naked body press against her from the side. "Close your eyes and turn toward sir." Ivy climbed off Talon, squeezing between her and the wall. "Lay on your back, sir."

Marren chuckled as he rolled onto his back. "You're very assertive!"

Leaning over Talon, Ivy took her by the hand, guiding it to Marren's erection. "Put your hand around here, not too tight. Move it like this." As Talon started stroking Marren's cock, her eyes tightly closed, Ivy kissed her and lay behind her again, moving down a little to put her hand between Talon's legs from behind and inserting fingers into Talon's pussy, smiling as Talon jumped and moaned. "When sir says he's ready he'll turn toward you, you keep holding his cock while he comes on you." She grinned, "don't worry about the mess, I'll help you get clean."

Talon kept her eyes closed as she did what Ivy instructed, concentrating on the fingers inside her each time she started to tense, until she was breathing heavy and trembling. "I'm going to come," she whispered.

Turning toward her, Marren whispered, "ready," thrust his hips toward her as her hips started moving, and spurted his come onto her stomach. When he was done he gently moved her hand from him to the mess on her stomach before much of it slipped away.

Letting Talon roll onto her back, Ivy climbed between her legs and put her face on Talon's stomach, licking at both her hand and the white mess.

Talon giggled and put her hands in Ivy's hair. "That tickles!"

Leaning over, being careful of Ivy's head, Marren kissed Talon, caressing her breast. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, sir." She was still nervous and embarrassed, but she didn't feel the shame she had been expecting. As Ivy moved her head down to lick between her legs, Talon lifted and spread her legs, putting her feet on Ivy's shoulders. Her face flushed even darker as she noticed Marren was watching what Ivy was doing for her.

When Ivy was finished and Talon was trying to catch her breath, Marren pulled Ivy up onto his body and cuddled her while putting an arm around Talon's shoulders.

Talon rolled onto her side and snuggled up against Marren, kissing Ivy when the girl tipped her head down. "Sir?"

"Hm?"

"Would you have sex with Ivy so I can watch? I think it would be easier for me if I saw how it goes first." She squeezed her hand between their bodies and found Marren was ready.

"Would you like it, Ivy?"

"You aren't supposed to ask, sir." Ivy turned and got onto her knees, straddling his hips with one leg squeezed between Talon and Marren. "You're just supposed to use me whether I want it or not." Reaching down, she positioned his shaft, then slowly lowered herself onto it, closing her eyes and scrunching up her face.

"Don't hurt yourself!"

"It doesn't hurt," she gasped, "I just never had a man inside me before and it feels so different from what I expected. I always use my hands and mouth for the boys so I don't get a baby." She started moving up and down, then leaned forward, resting her hands on his chest and leaning on them as he reached for her breasts. Moaning softly, she opened her eyes to look into his and smiled.

Cuddling again with the girls draping their arms and legs over him from the sides, Marren turned to Ivy. "If you don't want to have a baby, you probably should have said no."

"I can't say no to you, sir. That's against the rules. I know you and Master Razo say it's okay, but I wouldn't feel right." She shrugged, "it's okay if I have a baby, I just don't want one with one of the boys, but I would be happy to have yours. I could drink the tea that makes sure I won't have a baby if you tell me to, though. I just don't like the smell and probably won't like the taste. The other girls say it tastes terrible."

"I'll leave it up to you and Master Razo, then." He looked at Talon, "if you decide you want to have sex, you'll have to drink the tea, at least for now."

"I know, sir." She moved up to kiss him. "I think I want to have sex, but I don't want to be able to get away if I panic. I want to feel like you'll take control and help me finish."

"Sir, if you get on top of me and show her that way maybe it will be better?"

"You just want more sex," Marren grinned at her as they got into position.

"What I want doesn't matter, sir. You are supposed to just do what you want with me and Talon and stop asking." Ivy grinned at him as she lifted her arms and legs to wrap around him, moaning softly as he entered her.

Talon couldn't bring herself to say yes before it got late enough that Marren suggested sleeping first. With Ivy taking her place between Marren and the wall, Talon laid on Marren's chest. It took her time to fall asleep as she could feel his penis underneath her mound and it both excited and scared her.

Marren woke up with his morning erection deep inside Talon and Ivy's bum in his face as she gave Talon tips in between kisses and caresses. When Marren moved his hands on Ivy's thighs, Ivy moved up to where he could satisfy her while Talon explored her new found desire for sex with a man.

When Aro knocked on the door to announce the bath was ready, Ivy answered the door naked, causing him to stammer and giggle. Ivy gave him a hug and let him explore her body with his hands for a minute before stopping him. "You have to stop that. Master Razo said you're too young and you don't want to make him mad."

"How about you just don't tell him I did it?" Aro grinned as he hugged her, his face in her breasts.

"We don't do that here. Besides, you're his little spy. You're so used to telling him everything you know you'd probably tell on yourself." She held him to her body as he slipped his hand between her legs, sighing. "You're a brat. Get going before you get in trouble."

Grinning impishly, Aro ran out of the room licking his fingers.

"He's a bit young for that, isn't he?" Marren asked with a smile.

"Yes, sir. Me and him used to sleep together all the time until Master Razo found out what we were doing after dark and made him sleep with the other boys." She sighed, looking at the door. "I miss that a lot, but I guess Master Razo is right, he's too young for making a baby and we probably would have if we hadn't been separated." She picked up her dress and put it on as Marren and Talon dressed. "I think I love him. Like a boyfriend kind of love. He says he loves me, too, but you know how boys are."

Marren held the door for the girls. "Don't forget your boots, Ivy."

"I got em, sir." She held them up. "Talon likes my toes so waiting until the last minute."



“They are cute little toes.”

Ivy didn't put her boots on until they were at the kitchen door. She went into the kitchen while Marren and Talon continued to the bathing room.

Getting undressed shyly, Talon didn't turn her back on Marren, letting him caress her before she stepped into the tub. Once they were both in the water, she let him wash her even as her face darkened in embarrassment when he got to the place between her legs and made her moan.

“So over your fears and shame?” He asked softly, nuzzling her neck from behind as he caressed her under the water.

“Yes, sir. Mostly. Having Ivy be so excited about it and happy helped a lot with the shame. And being able to do, um, that, where you couldn't see my face and I couldn't see yours was good.” She leaned back and let him start making love to her with his hands. “I still get a little embarrassed at, um, your thing, but Ivy said that's normal for a while.”

“I'm glad it was so much better than you expected. Forcing you, like you asked, might have worked, but it might have made it worse. It's hard to know and it was better not to do anything than take that risk.” He kissed her neck, “I wouldn't want to hurt you even a little.”

They discovered that water is not a good lubricant for certain activities by the time they were done. Talon smiled as Marren insisted on dressing her, then insisted on dressing him in return. Being close to his penis was a lot less embarrassing than she had feared, although it still made her blush and look away. Buttoning the front of his trousers made her giggle as his penis started to stand up while her hands were still there.

Before Talon could move away Marren took her by the shoulders and pulled her close, kissing her softly. Wrapping his arms around her, he waited a minute. He smiled as she looked up at him shyly and put her arms around his waist and hugged tight, resting her head on his chest for a moment.

By the time they got back up to the room Talon was limping again. She sat on the side of the bed and let Marren put ointment on her feet, trying not to whimper. As he rubbed it in carefully, she looked down at her vest, then unlaced it and removed it, blushing as he looked at what she was doing and smiled.

“You don't have to do that.” Marren finished with the ointment, then coaxed Talon to lie down.

“I know. I want to.” Talon took his hand before he could pull it away and kissed it. “I want to make you happy.”

"You do." Marren lay on the bed beside her and caressed her gently. "Talon." He paused, then bit his lip. "Talía."

"No, sir. Talon. I'm your Talon. Talía was someone else." She turned on her side to face him, putting his hand on her breast.

"Talon, then." He caressed her gently. "I love you."

"I know, sir. I love you, too." She hesitated, then added, "Marren."

## Chapter 2

Marren cuddled Talon for a minute, kissing her softly. "I have to go take care of something. Will you be okay here by yourself? You should let your cute little feet recover." He smiled, "I only asked for the one day." Sighing, he kissed her again. "Aro will be here soon."

"I'll be fine, Sir. Marren. Sir. I guess I should stay with sir so I don't forget." Talon stretched and smiled as she watched him watching her. "Ivy will probably be up here soon after Aro if Razo lets her." She grinned at him, "she hasn't missed an opportunity to climb into our bed yet."

"It may take a little while. If things go well I'll be waiting for the tattoo to be done." Marren looked over Talon's body again. Talon's appetite for both cuddling and sex was nearly overwhelming now that she'd gotten past her fears, and his appetite had grown. Being close with a woman had been a rare thing for a long time and he'd nearly forgotten how good it was to have his feelings returned.

Dressing as she watched him, Marren was careful to keep his weight off his legs as much as possible. They were feeling a lot better after so many days of not using magic and getting rest but he didn't want to push his luck and end up limping. It didn't look good for a wanderer to show signs of weakness. Pushing his feet into his boots, he sighed and stood up just as a knock came on the door. Pushing the blanket over Talon, he went to the answer the knock.

Aro was at the door holding a boy not much older than himself by the hand. The boy looked at Marren and trembled, turning his face down.

"This is the boy, Master Marren. Master Razo said for us to wait until you was ready to go before knocking." Aro looked over at Talon. "Should I stay and help your boy, sir?"

Marren smirked, "that won't be needed. You could ask Ivy to bring a plate of food up soon, if you don't mind, though."

The boy with Aro looked toward the bed, confusion on his face. "Um, that's not a boy, Aro," he whispered.

"Yes he is. Master Razo said so. He's just really pretty." Aro patted the other boy's hand. "And Master Razo is always right." He turned back to Marren. "This is Vassal, Sir. The boy Master Razo said you are going to help."

"Vessel, Aro. His name is Vessel, now." Marren looked at the tattoo on the boy's shoulder and smirked. The original tattoo was already very close to looking like an urn or jug and the new touches would make it right. The boy was a bit younger than Marren had expected, but that just made it better. Younger boys healed faster. "Tell Master Razo we'll be back shortly." He reached for Vessel's hand, then pulled away as the boy flinched. "Don't worry, Vessel. You aren't in trouble and you aren't going to be punished for anything. I'm not your owner, I'm just going to take you to a man who'll change your tattoo a little to match your new papers."

"Yes, Sir." Vessel looked up at Marren, obviously straining to look at his face. "Are you really going to help like Master Razo said?"

"I am going to do what Master Razo asked of me. I don't want any details, and you don't want to give them to me. Details can be used against you. Your name is changed and your tattoo will be changed." Marren tried to look caring, in spite of knowing his facial hair hid most of his expressions. "The idea is for Vessel to be a person, and Vassal is gone. Oh, and I know this is pretty standard, but just to be sure, don't say anything about anything even if you are asked. Just tell whoever asks that they will have to ask me."

"Yes, Sir." Vessel let go of Aro's hand. "I'm ready, Sir."

Marren felt a little sympathy rising as the boy seemed more timid than usual for a boy his age. "Come along, then." He opened the door, resisting the urge to go to Talon and give her a kiss. "I'll be back as soon as I can, boy."

"Yes, sir." Talon and Aro said at the same time, then giggled together.

"See, I'm no one to be afraid of. They giggle at me."

Vessel giggled softly, covering his mouth. "Yes, sir. I'll try."

Walking to Crogan's with Vessel following him Marren missed the quiet whispers he shared with Talon when they were out on the streets.

...

“Hello, Marren. This the job?” Without waiting for an answer Crogan waved Vessel toward him. “Come here, boy. Let me see what I have to work with.” He looked over the tattoos carefully, then sighed. “I know I’m cutting my own throat here, but these are so badly done that fixing them up will be easier than I expected. Whoever did this should have his needles taken away. These are fading so fast the boy would need them redone soon anyway, even without change. Might as well have painted them on.”

“Good, because the client wants to pay half what you’d suggested.” Marren knew Crogan wasn’t acting, he was just an exceptionally honest man. “He’d consider it a favor. If you could do it now, that would be best.”

“How about I do him a favor and fix them at the same time? Recover a little of my lost income for being blunt.” Crogan started setting out his tools. “This kid shouldn’t have to go through this and then another fix in a year or so.”

“Go ahead. I’m pretty sure the client would say yes, and if I’m wrong it’ll be me that gets the brunt of it.” Marren was certain Razo would not object. The man cared too much about his people to get upset about owing a favor for helping avoid future suffering. Sitting in an old chair in the corner, Marren rested his cane against his leg and watched as Crogan moved the boy around and started working. Crogan often remarked that he was not as skilled as the tattooists that did it as their main profession, yet his work was always equal to or better than the standard. He might lack some skills, but Marren couldn’t see it. His lines were clean and sharp, unlike the usual wide blurs most tattooists made. There might be some artistic value in blurred lines sometimes, but for the names and identifying symbols it wouldn’t, or at least shouldn’t, be done on purpose. He hadn’t been thinking much when watching Talon being tattooed, but this was less personal and he had a chance to consider the work itself. His opinion of Crogan rose a little.

As Vessel started fidgeting, Crogan paused to let the boy move a bit. He’d learned how to tell when trying to continue would just end up making a mess. “Sit up and stretch a bit. Don’t get too active, though, or it’ll be harder to stay still again.”

## Chapter 3

Namia was lying in the grass by the lake, warming herself and enjoying her body when the sun went out. Black, freezing silence tried to crush her. As she did with all the attacks the world threw at her, she waited for it to end.

The light returned, excessively brighter, bringing with it heat and noise. She could feel her skin burning as the sound of loud, slow drumming echoed in her head. The sound of her blood flowing through her veins was deafening. Green tinted the world, except when the drumbeat in her head made a splash of red that faded rapidly, to return on the next beat. A bird screamed and brought tears to her eyes. The world blurred and the green faded briefly.

The grass underneath her stabbed at her skin. It had been a soft cushion, now it was a bed of needles. The tiny bit of cloth she had covering her pubic area, previously a nice soft satin, now felt as rough as burlap, scraping harshly over tender bits at even the tiniest movement. A bee landed on her bare toe, its claws digging into the delicate skin.

“Shoo.” She whispered, perhaps a little harshly as she was afraid of bees. Her voice deafened her as the bee exploded silently in a blinding burst of green heat.

Forest sounds returned slowly, growing louder and louder until they were drowning out the sound of her pulse, adding to her headache.

Closing her eyes, she concentrated on feeling the pains in her skin, paying attention to exactly where they were. Each time she found one it faded away, along with the burning around it, and she looked for another. The areas of pain relief grew each time a point vanished. After a time that felt extremely long, in spite of not seeing a noticeable difference in the length of shadows, her skin felt comfortable. Sensitive, but not unbearably so.

Choosing a sound, she tried to identify it, figure out what its source might be. The sound faded to a tolerable volume. Choosing another, she found the same thing. As she analyzed each one, it faded to a reasonable level. Bringing the sounds down felt like it went a lot faster than fixing her skin and her headache started to ease.

She opened her eyes and noticed the green was more intense. Looking at a large stone she knew should be white, she concentrated on seeing it as white. The stone grew brighter but stayed green. Closing her eyes, she sighed and tried to relax and not think about the color.

Taking the cloth off her crotch she set it aside, squirming in the sun and stretching. The air caressing her body felt intentional; a lover's touch. She didn't really know what a lover's touch felt like, but considering the reaction her body was having she considered the interpretation appropriate. The sensations distracted her for several minutes.

The stone was white. Blindingly white. The green seemed to have gone while she was distracted, but the brightness of the stone had not returned to normal. The nearby stones looked similar to her memory of them. Perhaps a bit clearer, but not significantly brighter. Trees to the sides seemed to have the proper colors, maybe a little more varied and detailed, but nothing like the difference of that one stone.

Rolling over and onto her knees, she winced and trembled as every blade of grass seemed to be made of tiny lightning, tingling where it touched her skin. The tiny grains of dirt had sharp edges where they touched her. It wasn't painful but it was a lot more sensation than she was used to. Even the slight movement of air on places that had recently become wet seemed exceptionally intense. She stood up, trembling, and stretched, her body feeling more alive than it ever had before.

Looking down at her clothes, she shuddered. Her current sensitivity made the thought of trying to put them on a little scary. Turning toward the white rock, she shivered and squirmed at each step. Walking should not be such an erotic exercise. Pausing to slow her breathing every few steps, she managed to wade into the water up to the white stone, then leaned on it, resisting the urge to do something unrelated to her purpose in walking to it. The vivid contrast of her dark brown skin against the glaring stone was moderately painful on her eyes until she thought about it, easing the strain. The knee deep icy water was a lot more enjoyable than it had been in the past, when she had merely tolerated the cold in order to enjoy the wading and swimming.

The stone was as intensely white up close as it had been from a distance. She couldn't see any color in it at all. Even the shadows in the cracks were too bright. She giggled as she thought that it seemed to be trying to be brighter because she had wanted it to be. The sound of her giggle was too loud, although it wasn't painful the way the earlier sounds had been. Caressing the stone, she found it to be rougher than she remembered, in spite of its appearance of being shinier. Her fingers tingled as they scraped the stone.

Something shiny flashed across the lake. Namia looked at it and grew dizzy as it seemed to grow, the world turning green again. The far shore seemed to leap at her, edged in a green haze. Two men in armor, that she shouldn't be able to see at this distance, were banging their swords on each other. They didn't seem to be actually fighting, just going through the motions,

their metal making the sunlight flash in random directions. She watched, concentrating on seeing them and not the green haze, until they fell against each other in a hug.

The urge to touch herself was becoming nearly irresistible. She didn't resist it often, but it felt important to pay more attention to the other things going on.

Returning her attention to the rock she was leaning on caused another wave of dizziness as the far side of the lake returned to where it should be. Closing her eyes and hugging the stone, she breathed slowly. When she opened them again after the dizziness passed, the green haze was gone. Looking carefully across the lake, she tried to look at it as she knew it should be and was comforted when it didn't rush at her again.

Trembling a little, she looked around her favorite clearing, concentrating on seeing it as she knew it should be. Details were too sharp, colors too varied, but it was close to what she expected to see. Focusing on a specific thing seemed to bring it close to her, the green haze reappearing around it, but forcing herself to see it in its context pushed it away again and the green faded.

Growing confident, she traced a circle on the stone with a fingertip, concentrating on the feeling. The world turned green as she felt details seemed to grow. What should have been a general feeling of roughness expanded into little, discreet but noticeably distinct, grains forming ridges. Even without looking at what she was touching she could see the pattern the grains made in the rock in her mind. Closing her eyes she tried to concentrate on the general idea of rough without details.

Leaning her back against the stone Namia gave in and satisfied the urge that had been building. She giggled as her legs wobbled and she sank down into the icy water in one of most intense orgasms she'd ever given herself.

As the after effects of her orgasm faded, Namia noticed the water didn't feel cold any more, just comfortable. Even the stone she was leaning her back against felt comfortable in spite of also feeling rough and grainy. Wiggling her bum in the pebbles under it tickled, as did scraping her feet and hands on them. She closed her eyes and concentrated on all the feelings she could find, ignoring the arousal it caused.

Standing up, she looked around the clearing. The shadows told her it was time to go back home if she didn't want her parents worrying about her. The slavers had never come this far inland, but that didn't make anyone feel safer. Too many towns had been razed along the coast, too many people taken.

Her silk tunic felt rough, but not painfully so. She couldn't bring herself to put the matching trousers on. Rolling them up along with her loincloth, she held them under her arm as she walked along the trail to her home. Having bare legs would be just one more reason for the

townspeople to raise eyebrows at her, as if her doing it was more significant than other girls. Everything she did was more remarkable just because it was her.

Walking from the path onto the polished stone road leading into town Namia had to pause, her feet noticing the difference much more than they had in the past. Sliding her feet on the stone she felt the ridges the polishing brushes had left behind.

“Namia!” A young man walked up beside her, easing her rolled up trousers from under her arm and holding them under his own. Putting out his free arm, he waited for her to take it.

Namia rarely thought about how slow she walked unless she was trying to walk with someone. Taking his arm, she was able to lean on it and let him pull her to move a little faster, setting a pace that was a middle range between her pace and his much faster one.

“Hello, Kano.” Her voice sounded loud.

Kano looked at her quickly, grinning. “Wow, you almost spoke out loud,” he teased. He always teased her about her soft voice and tendency to whisper. He didn’t tease about her walking.

“Am I late?”

“No, no.” Kano hurried to reassure her. “You’re actually earlier than usual. I finished early and came up to wait and got here just in time.”

“You know you don’t have to escort me any more. It’s been years since I got lost going home.” She liked him meeting her every time she went out to the lake, but she always felt guilty about taking up his time.

“Because I’m always with you making sure.” He grinned at her. “You know I like being with you. I come and walk you because I want to spend time with you.” Kano sighed, kicking at a stray leaf on the road.

“I like the purple nails.” Namia whispered as she watched his foot. She wasn’t going to encourage him to waste his time with her when he could be with someone useful.

“I could put it on yours.”

“No, it wouldn’t look right. It’s better for your black skin. I don’t think it would work with brown.”

“Hm.” He looked down at her feet. “Gold would be better.” His eyes moved up her bare legs slowly, then continued up her body. The silk tunic showed off her shape nicely.



Blushing as she noticed where he was looking, she looked down again. "I don't have any polish. I can't put it on right." The slow movement of her hands should have made them easier to control, but it didn't. She always made a mess when she tried.

"I have some gold. After dinner I'll do it for you." It was obvious from his tone of voice that he wasn't asking.

"If you have to." Namia tried to suppress her smile. She liked it when he insisted on doing things for her, even though it made her feel like she was taking advantage of him.

Kano had been the one to rescue her when an unfinished house had fallen on her when she was nine. He'd only been six at the time but he dug away enough of the rubble with his little hands to enable him to pull her out from under the wooden beam that was lying across the back of her neck. Ever since then he'd been a big brother to her in spite of being younger, always making sure she had what she needed and standing up to bullies for her.

Over the last few years he'd been hinting, stronger and stronger, that he was interested in her as a woman. Because of her tendency to temper when she didn't want to think about something he had only mentioned it directly once, but he never let it go completely. He did start being more insistent on helping her with even little things that she would normally do without rather than struggle with.

She didn't remember anything from before seeing his face covered in dirt and dust while he tried to get her to say she was okay. No one would tell her what she was like before the accident, or even if her slow movements and lack of a proper voice came from the accident. She had stopped asking many years ago. It didn't really matter since knowing wouldn't change how she was now.

Trying to walk faster to make it easier on Kano, Namia saw the world starting to turn green again. Clenching the hand that wasn't holding his arm she forced herself to let him pull her as usual, relaxing as the green faded. It hadn't seemed to change anything, but it still scared her.

"Hey, Mom, we're home a little early," Kano called out as he escorted Namia through the door. He'd been calling Namia's parents Mom and Dad since shortly after he'd pulled Namia from the wrecked house.

"Hello. You're staying for dinner, Kano? I made your favorite. Food." Dala came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron and chuckling.

"I'd like to, if that's all right. I promised Namia I'd do her nails for her after dinner." Kano hugged Dala, "although I'll have to run home to get my kit, first." He dropped Namia's trousers on the sofa.

“Go, then. Dinner won’t be ready for another half hour.” Dala took her daughter’s hand and tugged her gently toward the kitchen.

Namia was comfortable being led around like a child when she was at home. It was how things always were as far as she could remember. She sat at the table as close to her mother as possible, in case she had something to say, and watched her prepare some vegetables. Namia had never learned to cook, since it would be more dangerous than useful for her to try to work around fire.

“You know he’s not going to give up, Namia.” Dala diced an onion, setting aside a small pile to keep raw for Namia before tossing most of it into a pot on the stove. “You really should stop trying to be noble and let him love you.” She looked into the pot. “Your father is going to complain there’s not enough potatoes.”

“He’d complain about something no matter what you do.” Namia tried to help the talk of food deflect the conversation.

“True. He’s not like Kano.” Dala looked at Namia, “the boy adores you, you shouldn’t be so stubborn.”

“I don’t have anything to offer him. He deserves better.”

Dala sighed. “Namia, you have really got to stop thinking of your ability to move as a measure of your value. People are not measured that way. It doesn’t matter to him, and it’s his feelings that matter.” She smiled at her daughter, “he thinks your soft voice and whispers are cute, you know. He always has. It makes everything you say sound intimate, to him.”

“He’ll get tired of it and then it will annoy him the way it does everyone else.”

“It doesn’t annoy everyone, Dear. And it’s been fifteen years. I wouldn’t worry about his feelings changing all that quickly. Let him do the things he wants to do for you, let him make you happy. It will make him happy.” She tangled her fingers in Namia’s wiry hair. “Maybe while your nail polish dries you can let him fix your hair, too. You know he’d like to make those little braids you like for you.”

“I’ll think about it.” Namia always felt sad when her mother tried to push her to accept Kano. She adored him as much as he did her and she didn’t want to burden his life. Looking away, she tried to stifle the reminder that all her fantasies involved Kano, and had even when she was a child. She thought about changing the subject by telling about the blackness and then the green lighting, but decided not to. People already worried about her mind since it tended to wander a lot. Swinging her feet, she watched as they moved slowly front and back. Her bare legs were slender and pretty, and Kano seemed to enjoy looking at them. She might not bother wearing trousers under her tunic so much.

Kano's face was a little flushed as he banged back into the house with his make up kit. "I didn't miss dinner did I? I got stopped by a customer wanting her nails redone for a dinner party."

"And of course you couldn't let someone go to a dinner party not feeling their best." Namia teased Kano when he was close enough to hear her.

"That would be a sin! Beauty may only be skin deep but the hurt people can inflict criticizing it can cut to the bone." He put the make up case under a counter out of the way, then lifted Namia and sat on her chair, sitting her on his lap.

"You can't eat dinner holding me like this. You've tried before and we had to get a bath after."

"I seem to recall you enjoyed that bath considerably. And I was only half your size then. Now you're half my size. It should work better."

Dala shook her head, "no. You will not be making a mess all over my kitchen. Cleaning up after children is a parent's job but you aren't children any more. You will sit her on her own chair when I start serving." She smiled at Kano to let him know she was not irritated.

Caressing Namia's thighs with one hand, Kano held her tight around her waist with the other. "If you insist, Mom."

"I do." Dala returned to cooking.

"I'm bigger than half." Namia bit her lip as Kano pushed his hand up her thighs. The new extra sensitivity made it even more erotic than it usually was. She wasn't sure if she was more disappointed or relieved when he stopped just before lifting her tunic high enough to reveal her lack of underwear. She was definitely sure she was disappointed that he didn't try to touch her there, but that was expected. He was way too concerned with her feelings to risk hurting them in that way.

"Oh, and Namia would like you to make her some braids after you do her nails. The small ones all over."

"I'd be glad to." He lifted his hand from her legs to push his fingers into Nami's hair. "It will take a while, though. You haven't been taking care of it."

"You always do that for me but you've been busy and I don't like to take you away from paying customers."

"Maybe I should come out to the lake and take care of you every few days just to make sure it's done." He grinned at her, knowing she preferred to be alone at the lake. It was where she went to get away from people.

"If you want to." Namia bit at her lower lip. She hadn't intended to say it, knowing it would sound like an invitation. Shuddering, she let the invitation stand. The sudden pause of his fingers in her hair before they resumed pulling through it told her he had noticed. "You don't have to. I mostly just enjoy the quiet without people either hovering over me or looking at me weird." She patted his thick hair, "I don't think of you as hovering even though you do. You don't make me feel bad about it most of the time."

"Most of the time?" Kano pulled his fingers from her hair and put his hand on her stomach.

"Whenever I make you feel like I'm hovering or condescending or babying you, tell me. I'll probably keep doing it, but I'd like to know which I'm doing." He grinned as she hit him on the head gently.

Mede, Namia's father, came into the kitchen. Lifting Namia from Kano's lap, he kissed her on the cheek, then set her on the chair beside Kano. "You can't eat sitting there, you'll make a mess." He patted Kano on the back.

"Hey, Dad." Kano reached over to pat Namia's thigh. "We'll take care of your hair tonight. I don't have any early commitments so it will be okay if it takes a while."

"Okay." Namia smiled as he pulled her chair closer to his. She knew it was so that he could help her eat even though she didn't really need help. It would take her a little longer to eat without his help but she could do it. "Thank you." It was the same thing every time Kano stayed for dinner. It made her happy.

Namia didn't participate in the dinner conversation. She never did, but it didn't bother her or her family. On the rare occasions that she had something to say they would stop talking, or making any noise, so she could be heard. As Kano cut up her food into tiny pieces that wouldn't need a lot of chewing she rested her hand on his thigh, squeezing his muscles. She was always impressed by his strength, although she felt a little guilty knowing he maintained it just to take care of her.

After dinner Namia sat at the table and watched Dala and Kano clean the kitchen. She'd given up offering to help, as they always refused to let her do even the things she could. Her family were the only people she allowed to baby her.

While Kano dried his hands from helping wash the dishes Namia put his makeup case on the table and looked through it. She knew he wouldn't let her pick which things he would use, he never let anyone. He always said what he did was art, not a service, and people could trust him

to do what he thought best or go to someone else. They trusted him enough that he made a very good living from it. She moved away from the case as he came to her to paint her nails.

Sitting cross legged on the floor in front of Namia, Kano lifted her feet to his lap, caressing them lightly. "You have the softest feet I have ever worked with."

"You say that every time, Kano." Namia smiled, "but you don't have to stop saying it." She wiggled her toes against his palms. "Are you still planning to use gold?"

"Yes. I like gold on you." He smiled up at her. "Maybe I'll paint your face, too. What would you like?"

"Eyes." Namia didn't know why she wanted eyes painted on her face, but she knew she wanted them. "Maybe on my forehead and cheeks?"

"Okay, I like that." Kano studied her face. "Yes, I think I like that a lot." Looking through his case, he found the vial of gold nail polish. "I guess I'll be here all night again." He grinned. "I know you won't mind." His grin grew as she blushed.

Having him touching her feet had always aroused Namia and the new intensity of touch made it worse. That he kept looking at her legs, and up them, added to it. She knew he couldn't really see under the edge of her tunic but she kept feeling as if he could and was. The temptation to move her legs and lift the tunic was hard to resist but she knew he needed someone more capable than her as a partner.

Namia had to close her eyes and breathe slowly before Kano was finished with her toenails. She let him move her around to get her hands on the table for her fingernails, then squeaked as he moved her again to get her in a position to wet her hair so he could braid it, making her slide down in the chair. She kept her eyes closed tightly, afraid that her tunic had risen high enough for him to see her private parts, and half hoping it had.

Kano caressed her cheek. "You're being a bit tense tonight. Are you okay?"

Namia nodded as he put his hand on her knee, and tried to relax her face. "I'm fine." She trembled as his hand ran lightly over her thigh before he moved behind her.

"What about my face paint?"

"In the morning. It wouldn't set enough before you go to bed and you'd just make a mess of it." He patted her head with wet hands. "After I do your hair your nails will be dry and you can go to bed."

"Okay."

With her hair fixed in tight braids close to her scalp and trailing into many long tails, Namia let Kano carry her to her bedroom. His kiss on her cheek tempted her to remove her tunic before he left her room but her slow body didn't let her act on the thought before he closed the door behind him.

Namia woke up screaming silently. The green had returned. Every bit of her skin that was touching her bedcovers burned and her nightdress felt like fire. Concentrating on the burning caused it to fade a lot but not go away completely. She threw the covers off, then removed her nightdress. Standing up left only her feet still burning, the rest of her body merely itching at the feeling of the air moving over it. Looking at the bed, Namia whimpered at the thought of trying to lie down again. Trying to see her way to her door seemed to make the room brighter, although more green as well.

Biting her lip, Namia made her way to Kano's room. Looking at him as he slept distracted her a little from her burning feet and itchy body. She lifted his covers and climbed into bed with him, lying on her side and pulling his arm over her body. As she pushed back against him he curled around her and cuddled her, nuzzling the side of her neck in his sleep. Namia sighed and relaxed, the sensitivity of her body, and the green, fading. She pulled Kano's hand tightly to her chest and smiled as she dozed off.

Waking up with Kano still curled around her, Namia smiled and wriggled. Her skin was still very sensitive and the feeling of Kano's skin against hers aroused her. After a moment she realized he was naked as well, and blushed as she moved his hand to cup her breast, a small shock running through her stiff nipple. She gasped as he squeezed it gently, then caressed it.

"You're awake!" Namia continued holding his hand to her breast lightly, letting him move it but not take it away.

"Yes, I'm awake." He nuzzled the side of her neck. "Is there a reason you're naked?" Waking up with Namia in his bed wasn't very unusual. Whenever she would have a nightmare, usually involving being crushed under a house, she would get into bed with him. She'd always had her nightdress on, in the past, and had never put his hand to her breast before.

"Yes." Namia pushed her bum back against his body, biting her lips as she discovered his morning erection.

"But you don't want to say what it is?" Kano tried to move away, feeling Namia stiffen when she pushed against his cock. He stopped trying when she just moved to be against him again.

"You'll laugh at me and think I'm crazy." Namia rolled over to face him and bury her face in his shoulder. She sighed happily as he moved his hand to capture her breast again, giving her

another, stronger, shock, when she was done moving. She pushed her hips to feel his cock rub against her mound.

“No I won’t. When you’re being serious I don’t laugh at you.” Kano moved his hips as the nightly automatic erection was changing into one of desire. “I’m not complaining about you being naked. I just want to make sure you’re okay. And know what can happen when a beautiful woman gets into a man’s bed with no clothes on.”

Namia giggled. “Of course I do. I’m not a little kid.” Lifting her head from his shoulder, she looked into his eyes. “I don’t know if I’m okay, though.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Kano tried to distract himself from the desire to make love to Namia.

“No, I want you to kiss me and help me not think about it.” She smiled nervously as he pulled her up to get her face close to his.

“Are you sure?” Kano watched her lick her lips, feeling her trembling in his hands as he waited for her answer.

“Yes.” Namia looked at Kano’s lips. “I want you to kiss me.”

Kano kissed her, both hands caressing her chest.

Namia gasped as shocks ran through her body, like being struck by lightning in many different places at once, the strongest in her nipples and clitoris, with a lot of branches from her clitoris to her vagina and deep inside her body, spreading up the sides. She didn’t know a lot about her body, but she knew enough to know the focus of the feelings was related to sexual parts. It was painful at first, but as Kano paused in concern she was able to think about the various places, reducing the jangling in her nerves to an excitement. “I’m okay,” she gasped.

Kissing her carefully again, he rolled her onto her back as he rolled on top of her. Releasing her breasts, he rested himself on her chest for a moment to reach down and pull at her thighs.

“Wrap your legs and arms around me. You’ll want them there in a few minutes.” He kept his voice soft to help preserve the mood. Once Namia started moving her arms and legs he put his hands to either side of her head to lift his weight off her, then shifted his hips to rub the head of his cock against her fold.

The feeling of his penis sliding against some of the most sensitive skin of her body brought the lightning back through her body. Namia’s legs and arms jerked, helping her get them around him, as she sucked in a deep gasp, arching her back at the intensity of the feelings. Moaning deeply, she slowly twined her fingers together behind Kano’s neck as she locked her ankles together over his bum.

“Are you sure, Namia? It would be very hard to stop if you change your mind after this.” Kano held back as his hips strained, preventing himself from pushing his cock into the hot wet opening it was pressed against.

“Yes.” Namia tried to use her legs to pull up as Kano thrust down and inside. Her body felt as if it exploded, starting from her vagina and expanding outward, and the world vanished.

“Namia?” Kano stopped moving as Namia’s eyes rolled up, then sighed in relief as she sucked in a deep breath and clawed at the back of his neck, her heels digging into the base of his spine. Moving slowly in and out, he watched her face carefully.

Returning to consciousness quickly from the overwhelming sensations, Namia tried to focus on the sources to damp them down as she had done with the other sensations that had been too hard on her. Instead of fading, as they had before, they intensified. Her hips bucked in orgasm as she squealed quietly. Tightening her legs and arms she held on to him as he continued pushing in and out of her. Her second orgasm came as a result of feeling his sperm inside her, adding an internal tingle to the feelings his thrusting had built up. An explosion of painful pleasure ran through her body.

After catching his breath Kano rolled over onto his back, pulling Namia to rest on top of him. He grinned as Namia giggled in what seemed to be a half sleep. Feeling her legs and arms slowly relaxing, he lifted his bum to help her get her feet out from under it before she lost circulation, then resumed holding her and waiting. “I love you,” he whispered, petting her braids.

Waking up in Kano’s arms made Namia feel safe. Smiling at him shyly, she moved up his body to kiss him. “I guess you got me after all.” It felt better than she had anticipated, a warmth in her body and spirit.

“I always knew I would. We belong together.” He caressed her cheek. “I can smell breakfast cooking. Wait here and I’ll get your nightgown.”

“I can get it. They’ve seen me naked lots of times.” She sniffed the air, wrinkling her nose as the green grew stronger along with the smell of cooking sausage and eggs. Thinking about her nose helped make the smell more tolerable and the green fade again.

“How long ago?” Kano smirked. He lifted her from his body and set her on the bed beside him.

“Um, okay, so maybe I was just a kid.” She sighed and smiled at him. “I still don’t think it would matter, but it’s on my bed.”

When he returned with the nightdress, he gave her a kiss, then put it on for her. “Don’t worry about trying to keep it a secret. Mom saw me bringing this back. I think she is pleased.”



"I wasn't going to try. She's been pushing me to get together with you for a while." Namia looked down at her feet as he unbuttoned the buttons of her nightdress that she had been trying to button herself, blushing as he intentionally revealed part of her chest. "I hope you don't regret it some day."

"I won't." He took her by the hand and pulled gently, helping her move toward the kitchen. "I've been with you for fifteen years already, I know you pretty good. You're who I want."

Namia bit her lip and walked as fast as she could, helped by his tugging.

"Hello, kids." Dala smiled at them, then winked and grinned at Namia. "Eggs and sausage for breakfast to replace energy used."

Once breakfast was done and cleaned up, Kano sat Namia on the table and pulled out a jar of gold face paint. Standing between her knees, he carefully painted small eyes on her cheeks, three on each side getting smaller as they went down and to the sides, like teardrops. "Don't forget, it takes hours to set well enough to stay on during sleep."

"I know, you've painted me before." She tipped her head up and kissed him when he leaned close enough. "I love you." Her stomach fluttered as she blushed, the green rising a little as she felt the strength of her love as a rush of heat through her body. She let it remain.

"I love you, too." Kano picked her up and carried her to her room, then removed her nightdress. "So, what clothes for today?"

"The dark green tunic. I can put it on myself." She held out her hand for it, feeling extremely aroused to be standing in front of him naked. It had happened a lot in the past, as he helped her dress frequently, but knowing that he would make love to her again made the excitement more intense.

"No, you'd mess up your paint. I'll do it. You can put your pants on by yourself, though."

"I'm not going to wear any." Namia smiled at him shyly. "I like the way you look at my legs, so I'm not going to wear pants much any more." She pointed at the front of the tunic. "It has buttons, it doesn't go over my head. I won't mess up my paint."

"I'll still do it for you." Kano knew she would rather he do it, as buttons were very difficult for her, but wouldn't ask. She rarely asked for help unless she couldn't do something at all or had a time limit on how long she could afford to take doing it.

“Thank you.” She grinned as he caressed her body before buttoning her tunic. “So now you’re just going to touch my body whenever you want?” The slight green and extra sensations that rose up were enjoyable.

“Yes. I think that’s what you want.” He grinned back. “I have noticed that you have a very pleasant aroma when you return from the lake, and at various other times. Many various other times.”

“I can’t help it! I just, um, have to. A lot.” As he kissed her she murmured, “I’m usually thinking of you when I do it, though.”

“I’m not complaining at all.” He kissed her on the nose. “If there are times you don’t want me to, say so, though. I won’t be offended. I suppose you’re going out to the lake now?”

“Yes. Will you come with me since it’s still early and you said you have free time this morning?” She held onto his hand and blushed, grinning. “I lay in the grass naked.”

“I wouldn’t miss it! Just tell me when to bug off so you can have your alone time.” Tugging at her lightly, he helped her to the door.

“I don’t need alone time from you. I go out there because it’s more comfortable to be away from the sounds of the town, knowing I’m not really welcome very much because of being weird. Sometimes it hurts a lot to hear people being happy and knowing that if I went out to them they’d get quiet and then have other things they needed to do.” She squeezed his hand. “I can’t really blame them. They can’t talk the way they normally do or they end up talking over me and they don’t want to be rude. Well, usually, though I know there’s some that don’t care about that. Can’t even walk down the street with them since I can’t keep up and it would be rude to ask them to slow down for me.” She grinned at him again, “and I get to be naked.”

“Yes, naked wouldn’t go over very well in town, although the way you are now would be fine. Lots of women dress like that. Well, I don’t know if they are without underwear. It would be rude to ask, and probably get me hit if I just tried to check.” He grinned and tugged her close as she looked down blushing. “You can come spend time in my shop. It’s always quiet and no need to move a lot. You could even be advertising for me. Let me keep making you up and doing your hair for you.”

“Maybe. You’ll have to talk me into it, though.” She didn’t mention that it wouldn’t be hard. Spending time with him was always pleasurable to her, even when they didn’t talk.

“I think I can do that.” He stopped at the trail Namia always took into the forest. “Are you sure you want me to come with you? It’s been your refuge for so long everyone in town goes other ways to get to the lake.”

"I never asked people not to come this way. I thought they didn't because it's a little painful. The path isn't very smooth." Namia kicked at some sticks that had fallen from the trees. "I never bothered to clear it since the deer seem to prefer paths that they make themselves and I like it when they come through while I'm here." Stepping onto the path she shivered as she was the one pulling for a change.

"People care about you, Namia. They don't know what to do or say around you, but they care. Seeing you always come out here alone they just assumed that you wanted it that way. They were thinking of you, not how easy or hard it is." Kano stepped on a rock and winced, "okay, if I knew you let it stay this rough I might have avoided it for that, too."

Namia giggled. "It was easier before yesterday." She stopped and closed her eyes, concentrating on the sharp feelings on the soles of her feet until they faded.

"What about yesterday made it different?" Kano looked at her, then waited for her to open her eyes again.

"Just follow the trail. It takes us to my place." She moved the hand holding his toward the trail as she opened her eyes. "Not really mine. The deer like it a lot because it has a small place between the big rocks where they can get to the water without stepping on stones. I can't tell if they kicked the stones out of the way or if it just happened that way." Concentrating on keeping her sensitivity down she stopped trying to talk as he pulled her along.

"Whoa, this is lovely!" Kano stopped a few steps into the clearing at the side of the lake. Looking at the big white stone he crinkled his eyes. "That white stone is bright! I don't think I've seen one like it before." He walked toward the stone, pulling Namia with him. "It's like it's glowing." Wading into the water by the stone he reached out with his free hand to touch it. "This is amazing. I wonder what caused it."

Leaning against Kano, her free hand grasping the hand he was holding hers with, Namia whispered, "I think I did." She tugged at his hand. "The water's cold and your trousers are getting soaked."

Turning around, Kano pulled Namia to the nearest grassy area. "So you think maybe you might want to tell me what happened yesterday?" Gently pulling his hand from hers he started unbuttoning her tunic.

Namia stood still in front of him. "It was strange and scary and still scary and maybe you'll not want me anymore." She lowered her arms to let him pull her tunic down them. "Hold me, please." She hadn't intended it to sound like an order and was glad it came out like a soft statement, although she would have preferred the request that she'd intended.

"I'll always want you, and I'll always hold you when you want it. Sometimes just because I want it if you'll allow it. Hold still a moment." Kano laid Namia's tunic on the grass carefully, then removed his wet trousers. Looking at her naked body had caused a reaction he didn't think she would find appropriate and he kept his tunic on while he pulled her gently to the grass. "Tell me about it so I can understand."

"How come I'm naked and you're not?" Namia squirmed against Kano, lying halfway on him to one side.

"I thought you would be more comfortable naked, and less comfortable if I was." Kano smiled at her. "It wasn't about sex this time. I want to hear about yesterday and want you as comfortable as you can be."

"Okay, as long as it's about sex next time." Namia giggled softly as she moved her hand to rest on his chest.

"You're not going to distract me. Tell me about it, Namia, or tell me you won't." Kano held Namia tightly. "I love you and it bothers me that something has you so upset."

Sighing heavily, Namia moved a leg over Kano's, shivering as the green grew stronger while the hair on his leg scraped against her skin. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on her skin until it stopped feeling like it was being torn apart. "Okay, but you have to promise to still love me after."

"I promise I will always love you."

"I'm not sure I believe that yet, but I like hearing it." Namia smiled and rested her head on his chest. "It started right after I did a thing, and I was thinking about you when I did it, I promise." She giggled nervously as she started telling him of the world going black and the aftermath.

Kano listened quietly without interrupting. Namia wasn't very good at keeping a train of thought when she was interrupted. Caressing her bare back and bum as she talked, he tried to remember as many details as he could to ask about when she was finished. He resisted the temptation to kiss her each time her face tensed at a part that bothered her.

"I'm not crazy. You know that white rock isn't normal."

"I don't think you're crazy." Kano pulled her head down and kissed her lips. "Can I ask questions?"

"Uh huh." She bit at her lower lip, worrying a little about what he would ask.

"The men in armor you saw. Were they like us, or were they slavers?"

“How would I know? They were people in armor.” She shrugged.

“By their color, silly. What color were they?”

“People color! What other color would they be?” Namia scrunched her face up tight in annoyance.

“The slavers are white, like the palm of your hand except all over, even their faces.” He caressed her lightly, “you didn’t know that?”

Namia didn’t answer as she looked at her hand, turning it up and down to look at the light palm and then the rest of it. “There are people that look like that all over?” As she tried to imagine it she felt the green growing again and forced herself to study the colors she could see. The idea of turning herself a pasty white all over made her feel a little ill. The green receded. “Then they weren’t slavers. I’d have noticed that even with all the other stuff.”

“Yes, the slavers are that color. If you ever see anyone that color scream for help and I’ll come get you.” He kissed her nose. “None have come this far inland yet, but with the towns raising armies and putting up walls it’s only a matter of time. Especially since we voted to try to take back the coast once we have enough armor and swords.” He resumed caressing her back. “Think you can make the stone darker again?”

“I don’t want to see the green again. It’s scary and makes me so sensitive everything hurts.” She grinned weakly, “although it makes me really really horny. And hungry.”

“I didn’t bring any food, but I do have a solution for the aroused part.” He tried to bite at her lips.

“I can make the sensitive stuff go away, but I have to concentrate on it.” She blushed as she added, “it doesn’t work about the aroused stuff, though. I think it’s because that comes from me and thinking about it would make me horny anyway.” Sighing heavily, she looked into his eyes. “You really think I should try to do the green thing on purpose?”

“If you can control it you’d be less afraid of it, wouldn’t you?”

“I guess so. Turn me so I can see it?”

Kano squirmed around on his back, carrying Namia around on his chest, until she was at angle to see the stone. “Can you remember what it used to look like?”

“Uh huh. I been coming out here for a long time. Hold me tight, I’m going to try.” As his arms squeezed her body gently she looked at the rock and started thinking hard about the way it had looked before, shuddering as the feeling of green came up again. She paused as she realized

she wasn't seeing green, she was just feeling as if it were there. The tingling in her skin grew stronger, but as she focused on the rock it subsided a little. The green remained.

Watching the brightness fade from the stone, Kano tried not to shiver. He'd heard of magic but never seen it in action, but he was sure he was seeing it this time. Forcing himself to relax, he caressed Namia's back.

"Now you can take off your tunic." Namia blushed as Kano rolled her off of him and onto her back. She could still feel the green, but she wasn't hurting. Watching him sit up to remove his tunic, she forced herself to ignore her embarrassment and looked at his body. It added to her arousal.

Lying together in the grass, Namia giggled softly. "I almost didn't black out that time."

"It's hard to tell that you black out. You giggle when you orgasm." Kano ran his hand over her body. "Do you still see green?"

"I don't see it any more. I just feel it. I know it's there but it isn't messing up what I see." She moved a hand to rest on his when he paused it on her breast. "I think part of me is figuring out what to do with it. I just wish I knew what was going on. But not right now."

Taking the hint, Kano snuggled with her as she rested, running his hands over her body since she seemed to like that even when sex wasn't involved.

"I'm hungry." Namia came out of her half sleep. "If you help me get home I'll go to the shop with you after I eat." She grinned, "and if you don't put your pants on I'll do other things, too."

"Women walk around without trousers. Men don't. I have a business to run that relies on people thinking highly of me." He pulled his trousers on. "I can go without tunic, though, if that would please you?" It wasn't a very common thing for men to do, but common enough to be acceptable.

"I'd like that." Lifted her arms so they would be in the right place when he reached for her hands to help her up. "I like looking at your body."

"I like looking at yours, too." Kano grinned as he fastened his trousers. He picked up her tunic and put it under his arm before reaching for her to help her stand. "I think I'm going like this new policy of yours of not wearing trousers."

Namia blushed and looked down as she let him put her tunic on for her. "Did you want me to look for the men in armor again?"

“Not right now. We’d never get back home if you keep needing loving after doing that sort of thing.” He grinned and took her hand, “not complaining, but I’m going to need to eat a lot more, too, to keep you happy.”

Giggling, Namia smiled at his back as he pulled her along the trail.

Dala looked up at Kano’s chest from cutting cold meat and cheese. “Oh, I can see why Namia gave in, Kano.” She grinned at him. “Since Namia ate extra at dinner and breakfast I cut a bit extra for lunch.” Putting the platter on the table, she kissed Namia on the cheek. “The only bread I have is the hard loaf Toma makes for keeping a while. Should I cut it for you?”

“I’ll cut pieces for Namia, Mom. Thank you.” Kano leaned toward Dala and kissed her cheek. “Namia’s going to come to the shop with me after lunch, if that’s okay with you?”

“I think it’s great!” Dala moved back to the counter to package up what was left of the meat and cheese. “Will you be coming back here after?”

“Yes. My room over the shop would be too hard for Namia. The stairs are narrow and steep.” Kano helped Namia sit in a chair, then pulled one close to hers and sat, draping his tunic on the table away from the food.

“I’ll have Mede move Namia’s things into your room, then, since you have the larger bed and it should be easier to move her things than try to move that. Is that okay with you, Namia?”

Namia nodded, “that would be nice.” She didn’t really care about which room she was in, since she didn’t spend much time in her room. Blushing, she realized that might be changing.

“I can move her things around.” Kano smiled at Dala, “I’m not exactly a little kid anymore, you know.”

“I forget that, and it’s a habit to think of Mede for heavy household jobs. You two will always be my babies.” Dala looked back at Namia and Kano. “Now quit blathering, son, and feed the poor girl.”

Grinning at Kano as he was mildly chastised, Namia opened her mouth and let him put a small piece of bread in. She leaned against Kano and let him feed her while feeding himself. Namia was happy and didn’t think about the green all through lunch.

Namia held onto Kano’s arm with both hands as he pulled her carefully down the street toward his shop, watching the faces of the people they passed. She wasn’t sure if it was her imagination, but there seemed to be less pity in their expressions and their smiles seemed more genuine. She suspected her perception was just a reflection of her mood, but she was willing to

accept it. Being happy was more important than worrying about what other people were thinking of her.

Inside Kano's shop he lifted her by her waist and set her to sit on one of the worktables that wasn't in use, tugging her tunic to cover her upper thighs and the fact that she was wearing nothing under it, teasing her by lifting it and looking under with a grin first.

Blushing, she kicked at him, smiling when he let her toes hit his leg. "You're terrible!"

"And you love me." He patted her knees. "Now I should get to doing some work before my customers think I closed shop. Will you be okay? I know this probably boring compared to the lakeside."

"I'll be fine. I can watch you paint people and fix their hair and if I get bored I can play with the green and try to figure it out. I'll try not to turn anything bright white if I do." She grinned at his smirk. The green still scared her a bit, but she had decided to try to work with it. In little bits.

Watching Kano was not as boring as he had said it would be. While each customer could take a while, the amount of work he put into making them look the way they wanted to was impressive. She'd seen him do hair before, even face and nail painting, but never all at the same time on one person, while giving them fashion advice as he worked. Concentrating on where he was painting, she found she could make it come to her so she could see the details, and with practice she could control how close it got. Getting too close revealed that soft pretty skin became much less pretty when you could see every pore and hair follicle in detail. Finding a good balance between too much detail and not enough, Namia watched him paint, feeling a little thrill as the use of the green slowly made her hornier.

Putting the last touches on a customer's nails, Kano smiled at him. "Don't forget to avoid touching anything for a bit. The paint dries harder than your nails, but it needs time to do it." He grinned, "that's why I make you pay first, so you don't have to reach into your purse with wet nails." Wiping away any excess paint around the nails, Kano nodded to the man, then stood at the same time and escorted him to the door. He turned to Namia.

"Are you okay? You look a little flushed." Kano put his hands on Namia's knees, then grinned as she leaned toward him raising her arms slowly. Helping her put them around his neck, he kissed her lips softly. "So, you're okay."

"Yes. I just did the looking at things too much and now I really need, um, you know." She nibbled at his lips as he pushed her tunic up and spread her legs to stand between her knees. "And something to eat. Maybe a couple of deer." Sighing, she leaned her head on his shoulder as he moved a hand up her thigh between her legs.



“One thing at a time. I think I would be distracted if you were chewing on meat in my ear while I’m trying to satisfy the other need.” He grinned as she giggled in his ear while he pushed his hand under her.

Resting against Kano when he was finished, she giggled. “It felt so bad to do that right here in the shop, but that just made it more exciting.” She nuzzled his shoulder and neck. “But I really need to eat something. I feel like I’m starving to death. I think the green takes all my energy.”

“Let’s go across the road to the cafe. Think a deer, two rabbits, and a squirrel will be enough?” He helped her sit up straight, smiling at the big grin on her face. “I think you’re happy.” Helping her off the table, he smirked as she blushed at her tunic being pulled up to her waist for a minute. “I’ve seen all of your lovely body. A little bit more now and then is not a big deal.”

“It’s different when it happens like this. I don’t know why, but it’s different.” She stood in front of him blushing and getting horny again as she waited for him to fix her tunic. Trying to look up at his face, she blushed more and looked down shyly.

“Ah, different, more embarrassing, but you like it a lot?” Kano chuckled as he straightened her tunic. “Will you be okay eating in the cafe or should I bring it here?”

“I don’t want people laughing at me when you feed me.”

“They won’t, they’ll think it’s cute. There won’t be many people, if any, right now. It’s just mid afternoon. Come. If you get too uncomfortable just whisper in my ear and I’ll bring you, and the food, back here.” Kano pulled gently at Namia’s hand. “We were just kids when they laughed at you, remember? You’re all grown up and adults don’t act like that.”

“I’ve kind of been avoiding people for a long time.” Reaching out slowly, she wrapped her hands around his upper arm. “I’ll try. It would be nice to be around people sometimes, maybe.” Sometimes she felt very lonely, then would remember how people treated her and decide not to take a chance. Having Kano with her might help keep her calm enough to put up with any bad looks or comments. “But if anyone teases me you have to beat them up like you did when we were kids.”

Chuckling, Kano eased her into walking toward the door. “Yes, My Love.” Pushing the door open with one arm and holding it, Kano pulled his other arm, watching Namia’s feet as they crossed the threshold, knowing she couldn’t move them fast enough to recover if she tripped over it. Once she was outside the shop it was easier, as the road was kept smooth and polished. While it looked like cobblestones it felt like one single smooth surface and she could slide her feet if they didn’t lift correctly in time.

Stepping into the cafe, shutters half-closed to lessen the effect of the afternoon sun, Namia pulled back, sighing, as she stepped onto the wooden floor. The cafe was one of the few

buildings in the town with floors that weren't perfectly smooth, and Namia's feet were thrilled to step on the rough wood. She knew it was not rough enough to have splinters, but it was rough to be teasingly enjoyable. Smirking at Kano's grin, she stuck her tongue out at him.

"You've always done that when coming in here. It's cute. I don't think anyone else appreciates the change in texture as much as you do." Looking around the room, Kano smiled. "There's almost no one here. Would you like to sit near the few people that are? Maybe that table over there, close enough to the ones at the counter to not look like you're avoiding them, but far enough away to not feel like you're in a crowd?" At her nod, he led her to the table he'd indicated. "If you come here with me enough times people will get used to seeing you around again and pay less attention except when you make it known you're okay with it."

"You're going too far into the future! I can see things at a distance in space, not time!" Namia smirked as he grinned at her. "Put chairs together and don't tease me or I'll tell everyone you love the town freak."

"That's not a threat, everyone already knows that. The question was did the town freak love me back, and now we know the answer to that. I don't mind if you want to tell everyone else." He stuck his tongue out at her as he helped her into a chair while she giggled, then stepped to the counter to order her something to eat.

Namia looked around the cafe. The other people, mostly sitting at the counter, looked away as she looked at them. She still wasn't sure if they had the expression of pity that she was used to seeing. It mattered a lot less now. She tried to listen to Kano as he talked to the man at the counter, then stopped trying as it just made every sound from that direction louder, making her ears hurt. There were too many sounds to try to eliminate each one. Leaning back in the chair, she waited, watching him.

Kano returned with two plates of an assortment of meats along with a plate of steaming rice.

"You're going to eat, too?" Namia looked askance at the rice. "And what's that for?"

"No, this is all for you, and that's to get you some more energy. You'll feel better faster." Kano picked up some of the rice with his fingers and offered it to her. "I know you'd rather just eat meat, but rice is good for you, especially now that you seem to burn up food so fast."

Looking at him, Namia opened her mouth and let him feed her the rice. After chewing and swallowing, she frowned. "It doesn't even have a taste!"

While Namia had been chewing Kano had cut small bits of meat for her and offered her one. "Taste is not the only reason to eat foods. You're an adult, you know that."

“Next time cook the rice with the meat so it’s food.” Namia tried to stick her tongue out at Kano and got a small bit of ham stuffed in her mouth. Stifling a giggle to avoid choking, she ate it.

Eating all of one plate of meat and half the other along with half the rice, Namia finally felt full. She leaned against Kano and looked around the room. “I forgot to look if people were looking at me funny.”

“Good. You don’t need to be looking for that sort of thing.” Kano kissed her forehead. “There are good people, pay attention to them, ignore the others. And no one was looking at you funny.” He nuzzled her head with his.

“You’d say that even if they were. Thank you.”

“Really, no one did. Someone even refilled your drink for you while you weren’t paying attention. For free.” He smirked at her as she scowled and looked at him. “No, I’m not telling. You’d just think it was someone special instead of accepting that people can be nice. You’ll just have to assume that everyone here is nice.”

“They might tease me when you aren’t around. You’re kind of scary looking, you know. Muscles sticking out all over the place.” She poked his bicep.

“Don’t worry, they can see we are partners. If nothing else, they don’t want me to stop making them beautiful.” He grinned at her, “and I will cut off any customer that hurts you or your feelings.” Kano looked down at himself, “and I do not have muscles sticking out all over the place. They are staying right where they belong.”

Giggling, Namia slid off her seat. “I’ve kept you away from your shop too long. We should go back.”

Kano stood up and held his arm out for her. “I don’t think I missed any appointments, but if I did I’ll give them something extra to make up for it next time.” He kissed her forehead, “you picked a good day to distract me.”

“I didn’t pick it, it just happened.” Namia pulled herself closer to him as a woman stopped in front of them.

Smirking down at Namia, the woman used the sing-song speech people used for speaking to children, slowing it down as if Namia’s hearing were as slow as her movements. “Hello, Namia. How are you today?”

“I’m fine, Miss Selan.” Being rude in return never made anything better, so Namia resisted the urge.

Selan smiled up at Kano. "Hello, Mister Kano. A pleasure meeting you here. I'm looking forward to my appointment this afternoon."

"You have no appointment with us, Miss Selan. This afternoon or any other time. If you'll excuse me, my partner Miss Namia, and I, have business to attend to." Kano's face was cold and the way he stressed the word 'Miss' made it clear he'd noticed the intended insult to Namia. "I'm sure there will customers waiting to sign up for some slots that have just become available in my schedule," he announced loudly before putting an arm around Namia's waist and lifting her enough to move her without her helping. Easing her around the stunned woman, his face returned to a smile once she couldn't see it. "You would think people would try to curb their rude tendencies," he murmured just loud enough for Namia and Selan to hear. "At least in public."

Once they were outside the cafe, Namia let herself giggle. "Thank you. No one takes it serious if I complain about them treating me like a baby. I'm sorry you lost a customer for it, though." She squirmed a little. "You can put me down now."

Letting her down, he smirked down at her. "Sorry, I wanted to have a more angry walking out scene than you can do. She would have turned all whiny and begging and apologetic and I'd have to forgive her even though we'd all know it was fake."

"I understand. Sort of. I kind of guessed it was something like that." She held his arm tight as he started walking. "You can pick me up and hurry me any time you think you should. I can wait for explanations." Letting him pull her, all she had to do was try to move her feet forward as fast as she could, which was a bit faster than when she had to push back to propel herself at the same time. "Is it going to cost you a lot of money to cancel her appointments?"

"No. She isn't a very regular customer, her tips are almost insulting, and that's why I announced I have slots loudly. Her time slot was one that was in demand because it's just before people go out and serving people start their shifts. They can go out or to work looking their best. I might leave it as a first-come, first-served time. Attract new business for other slots."

"Don't get too busy. You have to spend time with me, now." Namia grinned as he opened the door to the shop and let her in. "I mean time by the water."

"No, I won't get too busy for that. Watching you move in the forest is much too delightful." He leaned over and kissed her forehead before picking her up and setting her on a table. "You might want to use a little less magic or we'll spend all our money in the cafe."

"Magic?"

"The green. You didn't know that was magic?" He looked at her quizzically.

"It never crossed my mind, but now it's obvious." She blushed, her cheeks darkening, "I just hadn't thought about it. Now I feel dumb."

"Nah. You were kind of distracted by the effects, it's not unreasonable to not worry much about naming it correctly." He caressed her feet lightly, looking at her nails. "One nice thing about the way you walk. You don't mess up my work very fast." Lifting her feet, he kissed her toes, then let them down again. "I'm going in the back to check my schedule and remove Selan from it. You'll be okay?"

"I'm fine. I can sit idle for hours, and now I have magic to try to understand." She grinned at his smirk. "No, I won't make myself need, um, stuff, too fast."

"The 'stuff' is fine, it's the food that gets expensive." He grinned back at her and let her kick his thigh. Patting her thigh in return, he headed to a door at the back of the shop that Namia knew led to his office.

With the shop empty, Namia decided to try listening again and concentrated on the the door to Kano's office. As she felt the green, the magic, rising, she heard his heartbeat as a dull double thumping, his breathing as a high wind, and his footsteps as loud scrapings. The sound of him doing something with papers hurt her ears until she focused on it and made it settle to the normal level of papers moving against each other. Concentrating on the other sounds, one by one, she damped them down and smiled as she listened to his breathing and heartbeat. She let the sounds go and waited for a moment of dizziness to pass.

Namia watched Kano take care of business for the rest of the afternoon, resisting the urges to test her magic any more. She knew Kano really wouldn't mind helping her recover after, but she didn't want to interfere with his work or increase his expenses a lot. The little bit of arousal the listening had caused didn't fade the way a natural arousal would if it was left alone, and that gave her something to focus on and think about until Kano came to get her from the table.

Kano lifted Namia from the table and held her in his arms, kissing. Her feet dangled idly as she returned the kiss, her arms around him as she sighed happily. The door banged open loudly.

Scowling as she turned her head to see who opened the door, Namia scowled even more as Kano set her on her feet to go talk to Selan. Turning slowly, she watched Kano's face develop a scowl as Selan started to talk, too soft for Namia to hear clearly. Without thinking, Namia tried to concentrate and felt the green rise up as Selan's voice became loud and clear.

"And tying yourself to that weak-minded little girl is going to ruin you." Selan barely glanced toward Namia.

"I am not a weak-minded little girl!" Namia heard her voice fill the shop. It didn't sound like yelling, just a very loud version of her speaking voice. She started walking toward Selan, not

even thinking about how slow she was moving. "My body doesn't work right, but my mind is just fine." The anger in her voice seemed to be keeping it loud enough to have Selan and Kano shrinking away from her. "I have put up with your condescension and veiled insults for years because I was afraid of being pushed even further away than you and your kind had already pushed me. I am done with that. You will show me respect when you see me from now on. You will also get out of our shop and never come back." As she finished speaking she was walking into Selan's chest, forcing her to back up.

Stepping around Selan, Kano opened the door and moved out of the way as Selan turned around, her face showing her shock, and tried to storm out. She managed to walk past him without staggering, but that was the best her wounded pride could manage. Kano closed the door a little harder than necessary, then hurried to Namia.

"So, you can speak with magic." Kano held Namia's trembling body. "You might want to move your mouth when you do it, though. That was a very strange feeling, seeing your face frozen in anger but hearing you telling off the snob. Loudly. Very loudly."

"I wasn't talking?" Namia heard her normal quiet voice and felt her mouth moving as she spoke, then realized the green had faded and she was very horny. "You have to take me home and make love to me and feed me. I think I used a lot of green. Um, magic."

"You were talking, you just didn't use your mouth to do it." Kano held his arm out for Namia to hold onto, then opened the door and started walking her out. "So loud, but clear, not like shouting. The same voice you always have. Just loud."

"You keep saying 'loud' ". Namia smirked as he pulled her toward home. "I guess that means it was really as loud as it felt to me?"

"I don't know how it felt to you, but if you had been talking to me like that I would have crawled away before you even finished. My ears ached, and the anger felt almost solid." Kano patted Namia's hands. "Please don't ever get that angry at me."

"I don't think I could. I don't have years of resentment against you to feed it." She smiled up at him as he pulled her along. After a few minutes, she added, "I didn't mean to do it. I thought I was just going to think it. Then it blasted out. I guess it was because I was already using the magic to listen, and that was by accident, too, and it just came out that way."

"It was good that it did. She's going to treat you with more respect now, and that means a lot of the other people she associates with will, too. They might not know why, since I doubt she's going to admit to being told off by 'a little girl', but the effect will be the same. They won't be treating you like a little kid any more." He patted her hands again.

## Chapter 4

"It's my name. Wintry. Pronounced 'win' 'tree'." Wintry Sigh whispered, barely loud enough for the clerk to hear. She knew the clerk was being difficult because of her appearance, but there was nothing she could do about it. Any other clerk would be just as bad or worse, if they didn't outright refuse to do business with her. Having an odd name that matched her odd looks didn't help.

Under five feet tall, Wintry was more than a foot shorter than the average woman. Her bright, unnaturally white, skin was complemented by bright, unnaturally white, shoulder-length hair, and polished silver eyes. Even her finger and toe nails insisted on being noteworthy, looking as if they were highly polished silver. Her lips were remarkable only for daring to have a slight hint of pink and hiding her slightly silvery looking teeth.

"Why would you be wearing your name on a collar?" The clerk's curiosity overcame his impulse to pretend he couldn't hear her.

"My parents gave it to me." She didn't mention that it served the same purpose as a dog collar, nor that it was the reason she couldn't speak above a whisper any more. Her parents had treated her like an animal as long as the law required them to keep her, including jerking her around on a leash often enough to damage her throat. On her fifteenth birthday they cut the chain from the collar, gave her the required clothing and money, and sent her away, adding the name Sigh on her paperwork in ridicule.

"They had poor taste." The clerk was referring to their decision to let the strange creature live, but he didn't have to tell her that. Decent people would have put her to death as soon as she was born, not name her. Counting out her change, he dropped it into her hand from a few inches up.

Wintry was expecting the change to be dropped. People always acted as if touching her would somehow leach the brown out of their skin and did everything possible to avoid it. She had expected to be treated as an albino when she first left home, and had tried to prepare herself for being treated with pity. The reality was quite different, and worse. Disgust and fear were the two most common reactions, with a bit of anger and hatred making themselves known every time she had to interact with people. After trying to talk to people a couple of times to find out why she gave up and moved to the forest.



She took her packages and headed for the door, not surprised that the clerk omitted the traditional farewell. No one ever wished for her to have a good day, and many wished very much worse. Standing on the boardwalk, moving away from the shop door, she opened her backpack and put her purchases inside, then put the pack on her back. Clucking her tongue, she waited a moment for a large deer to step out from the side of the building where it had been hiding, and climbed on its back as if it were a horse. The deer walked up the center of the road out of town, not needing to avoid townspeople; they scurried away as soon as they noticed it.

The deer took its time meandering through the forest, heading generally east. Wintry didn't hurry it. She never pushed her friends to do things for her, she just accepted what they offered as they offered it. They always seemed to know when she needed something before she was aware of it herself. Petting the deer, she leaned forward to hug its neck as it paused to sample some buds on a tree branch.

It took more than four hours to get to the cabin she'd been building for the last few years, the sun setting as she slipped off the deer's back.

The cabin was made of standing poles dug into the dirt and held together with vines, overlaid with branches and long grass that Wintry had found growing along the banks of the river to keep the wind from blowing rain in. She'd figured out ways to nail and tie thin branches sideways across the standing pieces to keep them in place, and to hold pieces on top to keep out the worst of the rain. Not that she minded the rain, but it was frustrating when it fell into her face while she was trying to sleep.

Stepping inside the cabin, she left the door open, as usual. She'd only made the door to stop the worst of the winter winds, not to stop her friends from entering when they chose. Tossing the backpack onto the table, she returned to the doorway to watch the deer wander toward the stream as she undressed. Having spent most of her life chained outdoors naked, she found clothing uncomfortable. Folding up her clothes carefully, she put them in a chest she'd made watertight to protect them. Walking out to the stream, she got down on her hands and knees in the mud beside the deer and tipped her head down to drink. She'd tried picking up the water in her hands but that often startled the other animals, so she'd learned to drink as close to their way as she could.

Finished drinking, she rinsed the mud off her hands, knees, and feet, then headed back toward the cabin. She heard the deer splash across the stream as she got near the door and suspected another friend had shown up. Not all of her friends got along with each other, but they managed to keep their conflicts away from her home. She doubted it was deliberate. The cat was the only one of her friends that seemed to know how she felt about their natural relationships and intentionally kept her from seeing it.

A low growl warned Wintry too late and she went tumbling across the grass as a massive paw slapped her on the back. Having had that happen hundreds of times over the years she was



good at curling into a ball so she wouldn't get hurt as the big cat batted her around like a toy for a minute. When the cat started pushing at her head with his muzzle she straightened out and let him lick at her face and body, cleaning her as if she were a kitten. She loved the way his tongue scraped at her sensitive skin, becoming aroused when he licked her feet and other sensitive places.

Pulling at his ears until he moved his head up, she licked his face in return. He rumbled from somewhere deep in his chest and dropped his body on top of her, pinning her to the ground. They licked each other while she giggled and ran her fingers through his fur, his deep rumbling vibrating through her chest. She loved the big cat even though he weighed a lot more than she did and tended to hurt her by accident a lot. He treated her like a kitten most of the time, and a toy the rest. Perhaps he would have treated an actual kitten like a toy sometimes, too. She didn't know much about cats other than what she learned from watching him. Lying underneath him, she waited, knowing that if she tried to get up he'd grab her wrist with his mouth and toss her down again. The last time he'd done it he'd left a bruise on her arm that took a week to fade.

Dusk was turning to dark by the time he got off her and nudged her toward the cabin. She hurried to her feet and into the cabin before he decided to drag her by a leg. Again. Once she was inside and sitting down in the center, he prowled around, sniffing, then wandered out. Wintry went to her chest and retrieved a dagger, then sat in the dirt by her sleeping mat, cross legged, and waited.

A loud squeal cut off suddenly. After a couple of minutes the cat returned and dropped a large dead and bloody rabbit in Wintry's lap. Backing up, he sat and started cleaning his face, watching her.

Wintry knew what to do. She'd learned how to skin and clean animals through trial and error. Some of the errors had brought her to the brink of death, but she'd pulled through. Peeling the meat from the bones, she shredded it and swallowed it. She'd tried cooking before, but the cat and other animals had run away and didn't return for days after. Now she only used fire for heat in the worst weather. Her friends didn't seem to mind that. Her teeth, more like a cat's than a human's, seemed to work better with the raw meat. Over the years her stomach had gotten accustomed to it and it rarely made her vomit any more. Other friends sometimes brought her wild carrots and nuts, and she found berries a lot when she walked around. She wondered if she was eating one of the friends that brought her carrots, then pushed the thought away. It was her policy not to interfere between the other animals. She wasn't their boss, she was an outsider that they took care of.

Finishing all the meat she wanted, she tossed the remains toward the door to be picked up when it was daylight and tossed the skin to the side for working with in the morning. Putting her arms out toward the cat she smiled as he approached her. As he started licking her clean she moved to her sleeping mat, spreading her legs to let him clean up the guts and blood that had

fallen there. The little orgasm she got from it made her drowsy, as it always did, and she fell asleep as he cleaned her.

Waking up at daybreak she crawled out of her cabin on her hands and knees. Going to the stream, she crawled into it and then downstream a little to take care of bodily needs. The cat had knocked her halfway across the stream every time she'd done what she needed to near her cabin. She didn't know why, but she figured out what he wanted and always made sure she was downstream of the cabin. It did let her cabin stay smelling better than the yard she'd grown up in, so she did it the same way even when he wasn't there to bat her around. She wiped herself in the slowly moving water, then crawled back up toward the ever present mud of the stream bank near her cabin.

Mud felt good. Wintry liked to roll around in it a lot, even though sometimes it scared her friends a bit. Not enough to make them stay away, though, so most mornings that weren't too cold she indulged herself. Putting her muddy fingers between her legs, she made herself feel the same good feeling that the cat's cleaning gave her. Dozing off for a few minutes she woke again when she accidentally rolled into the water. Giggling at herself, she rinsed the remaining mud from her body and headed back to her cabin.

Opening the chest, Wintry pulled out the packages from her trip to town, putting the sack of nails to one side for the next time she felt like working on the cabin. She had figured out lots of ways to do things that didn't involve metal, but it was a lot easier to use them when she could get them. With the sack out of the way she was able to get to the things she had been needing for a while. A couple of knives, a whetstone, and some needles.

One of the few ways Wintry had of making money was selling skins and furs of creatures that she collected in the forest. She never killed anything herself, she scavenged from the kills the cat made, if he didn't tear things up too badly, things that hunters killed but never recovered, and from creatures that died without outside help. It didn't make for much but she didn't need much more than the tools to keep doing it and a few luxuries like the last package.

Unfolding it carefully, Wintry held a thin, thigh length nighty out and looked at it. It was almost as white as she was, with narrow shoulder straps to hold it up. It would be considered revealing by most people, but to Wintry it was covering. She'd never owned anything delicate and pretty and she had indulged herself with the money she'd found on the hunter that had fallen into his own trap. Pulling it on, she smiled. She wouldn't wear it much, just enough to remind her she was a person in spite of what everyone said.