

Perhaps it was worry about the harvest, or the Lebonathi delegation, or his mother and her political agenda, or the whereabouts of Senator Konik. More likely, it was the certain knowledge that he'd stalled off going to Mountain hold for just about as long as he dared, and the equally certain knowledge that another heat cycle would soon be upon him, that made his first night back in the royal apartments less than restful for the Thirteenth Dragonhorse.

He lay staring up into the high, ornately vaulted ceilings above the sleeping platform, listening to his wife's even breathing and trying to quiet the thoughts milling around in his head. Perhaps a horseback ride would be enjoyable. All seven of the moons were up this night, and it was nearly as bright as day, though the light was a cool blue and the shadows deep. Even a walk to the stables might get his mind off things enough to sleep. Ardenai rose, slipped into a long-sleeved tunic and loose fitting trousers, and carrying his boots, made his way past the bathing pools and out onto the private balcony which overlooked the sleeping city of Thura.

He put his boots on and went up the stairs to the top of the hill into which the royal apartments, indeed the whole of the Great House had been carved thousands of years before. He stretched, and yawned, taking in a long drink of the fragrant night air. Maybe a walk through the wooded gardens would cure his sleeplessness. He decided to try that first, since a walk to the stables would necessitate going back through the apartments and out through the main entrance of the Great House. If Lionel heard him opening the apartment doors he would come charging out from under Gideon's covers and bark, and the household would be awake. If he tried to hush the puppy up, or worse yet, leave him behind, he'd howl with indignation, a fact already proven to the detriment of everyone's sleep. He nodded to himself, stretched his arms back until his shoulders popped, and began to follow one of his favorite paths around the crown of the hill.

He had gone perhaps a hundred yards into the gardens when he became aware of grief, deep and heartfelt, emanating from somewhere close by. He followed the palpitations and on a bench in the shadows beneath a myrianotus tree he discovered the source – a small figure bundled in a heavy white robe, arms clutched tightly around her middle, rocking, sobbing softly, staring at the ground.

Ardenai hesitated a moment, not wanting to frighten her with the suddenness of his presence. Staying back several feet he went down on one knee to be at eye level and said, "Ahimsa, I wish thee peace, my lady."

Her head jerked up, and the motion allowed her hood to slide off her shining white hair. She had skin so pallid it seemed to be lighted from within, and her colorless, slightly bulbous eyes with their huge pupils blinked at him, squinting as though they were adjusting to strong light. They had an odd glow to them, like a lithoped's eyes in the dark. A Lebonathi. She rubbed the palms of her hands across her eyes and nose, and looked back at the ground in what seemed to be embarrassment.

"I didn't mean to startle you, and I didn't mean to intrude, but I thought you might be in need of some help, or at least of some company," Ardenai said. "It doesn't seem like you're enjoying your stay on Equus very much."

"I hate it here," she said bitterly, and her words spilled out in a rush. "I have never been so cold for so long in my whole life. I can't stay awake in this light. It's a world of peasants. There are no rules of conduct, no protocols, no one respects authority. No one has offered us a single bite of decent food to eat..." She caught her breath, shook her head and made herself look at him. "I didn't mean that," she amended, and he could see that her teeth were chattering a little. "I apologize. I did not mean that. This is a beautiful place, and the air is wonderful. You can see so far into the distance. It's just...very different than what I'm used to."

"How so?" Ardenai asked, not moving from where he had knelt. He was tempted to offer her his cloak, but refrained. She was very young, and Lebonath Jas was not like Equus. On Lebonath Jas there

were people who might take advantage of such a situation. Ardenai gave her room enough that she didn't feel threatened by his proximity.

"It's light here, all the time," she sighed. "Even at night. All I want to do is sleep when I should be preparing myself."

Her answer surprised him a little. Frankly, he'd expected to get an ear-full about the peasantry or the food. "For what?"

"Tomorrow night I am to be sacrificed to the Firstlord of Equus."

Ardenai looked no less distraught than she did. "What?" he squeaked. "What do you mean, sacrificed? Surely they're not going to..."

"No," she said, and either her phrasing or his reaction must have struck her funny, because she laughed, exposing even teeth with a double set of small, sharp cuspids. "I didn't mean to say that, either. I am to be gifted to him. I will spend the rest of my life here as his consort. I may never see my planet, or my mother or friends, ever again. It is a selfish thought, I know, but right now, it is all pervasive."

"If it is not your wish to be so given to a stranger..." Ardenai began, and a wave of her hand cut him off.

"You don't understand. While it may not be my desire, it is my destiny. It is what I was born to do, and what I was raised to do. I have spent my whole life knowing that I was to be the greatest offering of peace my planet could make. The most beneficent gesture. The giving of the flesh of the royal line of Lebonath Jas to the imperial flesh of the Great House of Equus."

Ardenai's first thought was one of indignation, but he remained silent. He remembered the joy of being a creppia nonage teacher, of spending his days with tiny children clustered about him, discovering the wondrous order of things; the pleasure of being a simple keeplord with crops to tend and horses to train. The adventure of being an ambassador for a while, and the joy his travels had brought him when they brought him his beloved Ah'ree as well.

He remembered all too well that morning he'd put a list from his mother into his trousers pocket and gone off to the city for a meeting of the Education Council – a simple meeting of the Education Council squeezed in before his one hundredth birthing day celebration. He'd requested a late afternoon sail with family and friends, and was hurrying to get through lunch with colleagues on the council when, at the stroke of midday, the great Equi drums had begun to sound until all the city shook and the very pavers throbbed with their thunder, and the doors of the council chamber had been opened very slowly, as if there were a dragon being loosed upon the city, and Ah'krill had entered with her retinue behind her. When all the council members rose in her presence, she had come to him and knelt at his feet, and held up the slim gold coronet of the Firstlord on a horsehair pillow. "Thou, Ah'rane Ardenai Krush, art this day become Ah'krill Ardenai Morning Star, The Arms of Elohim, the Thirteenth Dragonhorse, and thou art rising to be Firstlord of Equus and her affined worlds."

And had he thrown up his hands in dismay, or refused the office, or sputtered, *But, but, but ... I'm going sailing this afternoon!* No. He had not. He had raised her to her feet, and allowed her to put the circlet with its seven gold chevrons about his forehead, and he had gone with her to be stripped of his clothing, his routine, and life as he knew it. He had stood in a device many thousands of years old and been clamped in place while molten metal was poured into the forms they'd placed on his biceps, marking him for all time as Firstlord of Equus. He'd fought the terrible pain of the burns, nausea from the potion he'd been given to drink, grief, exhaustion, confusion, fear and revulsion. He'd mated with the priestess who would carry the next high priestess of Equus in her belly – a child Ardenai would not even see for fifty

years. He hadn't seen his family or his world again for seasons after that. He knew the meaning of duty, and he understood the truth of her words. Not desire, but destiny. Well put.

She was aware that he'd fallen silent, and gave him a questioning look, to which he responded with a slightly sad, tight smile. "Are you afraid?" he asked.

"Yes," she admitted, "though I've been told by the people here that the Firstlord is a kind man, and a forward-thinking one. And he's a very old man, a hundred years old, so I don't imagine he's too..." She considered her words, and Ardenai chuckled softly.

"You do realize the High Equi have a lifespan of two hundred and fifty years," he said.

She gave a tiny shrug and looked baffled, and he realized that such a lifespan was beyond her ken. She probably thought he was joking. She paused a moment and picked up her thought. "It is within the history of our people that seven hundred years ago when Kehailan Firstlord, the Twelfth Dragonhorse rose to power, a delegation was sent with a fleshgift, and it was repulsed by him. She was killed, though not by him I don't think, but because she became a being without purpose, and an object of shame. A reminder of how futile it can sometimes be to try to make peace on another's terms."

She didn't say that her own people had killed the girl, but the implication did not escape Ardenai, who, with some alarm, filed it away for safekeeping, along with the still fresh and painful memory of his unborn daughter, Ah'leah, whose destiny it had been to be the next high priestess. She, too, had found herself without purpose. He took a deep breath and firmly, gently, pushed her memory to the back of his mind.

The girl sighed and studied the pavers as she studied her words. "I have no desire to be pregnant by a man I do not know, nor to raise a child in a country strange to me. But I have no desire to die a failure, either. I have no desire to die at all, as a matter of fact. We have an old expression about burning bridges, and building bridges, and that's how I feel right now, like a bridge, either to be useful in the intercourse between our two peoples, or to be burned in the sort of destructive act which leaves only rubble, and strange, garbled legends which surround the wreckage. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"All too well," Ardenai responded.

He was nodding thoughtfully when there was a sudden shout, someone calling, "My Lady Eridi? Princess?"

She rose hurriedly, smoothing her robes and wiping at her eyes. "I shouldn't have slipped out. No one is supposed to see me until the ceremony. I must go at once," she said, brushing past him as he rose. She paused, and turned, giving him a gracious smile. "Thank you for listening to me bemoan my fate," she said. "I...don't suppose I shall see you again."

"Don't be too sure," Ardenai replied, shooing her off toward the sound of approaching voices. "And Princess Eridi," he added, "No harm will come to you, I promise."

Just then two men and what, from the features, seemed to be a woman, appeared abreast in the path, breathless, their eyes blazing with aggression and worry. Immediately the two men stepped forward, allowing Eridi to pass and closing the gap behind her. She was seized by the woman and dragged away, being shaken and scolded at every step. "And you," one of the men said, taking a step forward, "what have you to do with Princess Eridi?"

Ardenai shook his head and smiled. "We were just passing in our moonlight walks and paused to exchange pleasantries, nothing more."

“Well, she’s not for the likes of you,” the man said. “If I find out you’ve laid hands on her…” he paused, wondering which teeth to apply to the threat, since he himself was unarmed and the Equi in front of him was a head taller and considerably broader in the shoulders.

The Firstlord courteously hid his amusement. “Your princess is untrammled,” Ardenai said. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll continue my walk.”

There was a long moment’s glare before the same man growled, “Go on, then,” and turned with his companion back toward the royal apartments.

Ardenai continued his ramble and considered the words which the princess had spoken. Was it true? Had the Lebonathis approached the Twelfth Dragonhorse with overtures of peace in the form of a young girl like Eridi? He took a sharp breath of annoyance and shook his head. He needed to take himself to Mountain hold for his time of solitude and study. If he’d gone when he was supposed to, he’d have had this information at hand. He’d know what his birth-sire’s reasons had been for not accepting the overtures.

If he’d heeded tradition, he’d have left for Mountain hold directly after his rising ceremony, but instead he’d taken off across half a dozen sectors with Sarkhan panting after him. He knew one thing for sure, he didn’t want to go into a heat cycle, especially not an Imperial Dragonhorse cycle, here, and though it was still too early, it was once again close upon him – he could feel it – that creeping unquenchable fire. His last heat cycle had been kraalish in its intensity, and he wanted the isolation, the expertise, and maybe the tempering which his physician had implied Mountain hold could afford. He made up his mind that, no matter what was or was not settled regarding the disappearance of Ah’ria Konik Nokota, no matter whether his birth mother was speaking to him or not, once the Lebonathi delegation had departed, he was going to Mountain hold.

It was nearly dawn when he crawled back in bed and realized his wife was awake. “Out for a sorting walk?” she murmured.

“Um hm.”

“And you met someone interesting.”

Ardenai chuckled. “Do I smell like a Lebonathi?”

“Um hm.”

“I met Princess Eridi. She’s a child, and rather a young one. Apparently they’re giving her to me tonight.”

Io was now sitting up. “That’s obscene, Ardi. What did you tell her?”

Ardenai sighed and sat up beside her. “First, you need to know what she told me, so we can act accordingly and not jeopardize the child’s life. She is, just a little girl. I’m hungry. Let’s go have this conversation over breakfast, shall we?”

Io groaned, but she nodded and crawled out over him as she headed for the lavage. “You are going to owe me for this, I just know it.”

“You have no idea,” her husband sighed...