

Sample Chapters from

Warrior's Touch

The second book in the
Aenuk Chronicles trilogy

by Deb E. Howell

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Costly Entertainment

“It never comes.” Llew listened into the darkness of the crypt. Nothing, but an almost imperceptible sigh of the air moving through.

One of her hands cupped Cassidy’s cool one, while the fingers of her other hand trailed over his dry skin.

She laughed. “There’s just something about a dark place like this. Seems it should be dank, too.” But of course, for the sake of its inhabitants, it wasn’t.

She always found herself listening out for the drip of water. It never came. Not in the week she’d been coming to visit Cassidy, anyway. The crypt was below ground, so perhaps it would live up to its promises after a heavy rain, although the entire threshold was a grate and the air was forever moving, so it was just as likely to remain dry and unchanged no matter what happened outside.

“Karlani hasn’t said anything more.” Her own voice whispered back at her from the walls. She really was talking to herself. “She went straight and told Aris her nose was broken, but she didn’t even bruise. And like anyone would believe *I* could do damage to her.” Truth was, Llew had been worried. She’d expected Aris’ wrath. But it had never come; Karlani’s accusation dismissed as stirring. Two women parlaying over the affections of one man was never pretty. But Llew was not about to let Karlani swan off with the father of her future child. Besides, since leaving Cheer, Jonas was the only person, the only *place*, that felt like a home anymore.

As always, Cassidy offered no advice or alternative perspective. Llew puffed out a sigh. She’d been fretting over the aftermath of her fight with Karlani for a week. It was time to let it go.

She gazed across Cassidy’s limp form to the rows and columns of concrete drawers and tried not to think too much on their inhabitants. But she couldn’t help wondering, yet again, if they all looked as well-preserved as the recently embalmed Cassidy. Each day her fingers itched to slide one open and see for herself. But the space had such an ancient quality to it she was scared the whole place would crumble if she dared touch anything besides Cassidy, his platform, and the seat for mourners.

This place had a history Llew couldn’t fathom. Her home town of Cheer had existed for perhaps three generations, and was built with no

intention of standing through many more. But Lord Gaemil Tovias' home and all its outbuildings on the hills of Rakun, were built to last. Llew's own presence there would be fleeting.

"No one has said anything about when we will head for Quaver, yet." It was coming. They had to go. But it would mean leaving Anya and Cassidy behind, and Llew really would be alone.

A crypt was no place for one to spend great lengths of time, really, and an embalmed body offered little in the way of conversation, but Llew was lonely. She hadn't seen any of her friends outside of meal times since arriving back at the estate a week ago. They were too busy and Llew too much a liability.

Oh, she and Anya had spent a few moments here and there, silently perusing the estate's library books. But Anya had a whole new life to settle into, what with learning her duties as the future wife to Lord Tovias. She had a whole new city, region and country to get her head around. All so much bigger than the rustic Cheer she and Llew had recently departed.

And Jonas had tried to talk to her after meals, but he was too often rushed away to train Lord Tovias' troops, or encouraged to spend time with Karlani. His and Llew's conversations were becoming stilted.

Cassidy's non-judgemental ears had been a good place to unload her troubles. She was a long way from home and her future was only certain in that it would almost certainly mean captivity or grave danger. Or both.

She left the crypt, crossed the cobbled courtyard and took the low, sweeping, staircase up to the mansion's main entrance. Nearly twice as tall as Llew and framed in heavy, dark-stained wood, the glass in the doors was of a quality Llew had never seen anywhere. There was barely a ripple in it. One of the uniformed guards swung a door open for her. It always awed Llew to see such heavy doors pivot so silently and smoothly on their hinges.

Inside, the solid stone walls and high ceilings were at once both comforting and cold. She missed her Spot on the shore of Cheer's Big River, but she was a long way from the streets of Cheer, and as much as she may have wished to return, she couldn't deny she had landed on her feet.

The hallways of marble floors and heavily decorated walls were a shrine to money. The bedrooms were lined in dark, warm wood panelling and homely wallpapers to maintain a restful ambiance, or perhaps remind less wealthy guests of their less exuberant homes.

Immense paintings dressed the corridor walls. Great men peered down at her from gilded frames. In most, they were just a head and shoulders, looking upon those below with disdain. Some were full length portraits of one man or another standing proudly beside a prized horse, often wielding a sword, and wearing a heavily medalled uniform. Occasionally, a proud man might stand behind a chair, with a woman cradling a small child seated upon it. Perhaps less frequent – though Llew’s attention was drawn to them more often than she would care to admit – were images of women draped sensuously about one or other of the men, breasts and rounded buttocks bared for all to see. Llew wished she hadn’t.

She paused before a family portrait, the man standing tall and proud, not a weapon or beast – or breast – to be seen, just his wife smiling down at the tiny infant in her arms. Not for the first time, Llew’s hand went to her own belly and she wondered if one day she would gaze upon her and Jonas’ child with such love, or if the sick feeling, as opposed to the nausea of early pregnancy, would remain. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to have his baby; she just didn’t want to do it alone, but the chances of Jonas being allowed to be a father to her child, *their* child, were minuscule. Just as minuscule as the child itself. Her belly was still as flat as ever, the only outward evidence of the baby’s existence: the fact that Jonas lived. A fact taken for granted by those who had yet to learn he had died.

“Llew.”

Her hand dropped to her side and she turned to Hisham, Jonas’ best friend and fellow lieutenant in the Quaven army. Slightly darker in complexion than Jonas, Hisham wore his naturally ringleted, shoulder-length black hair tied back in a half ponytail. Quaver had sent a small contingent of soldiers to help shore up Lord Gaemil Tovias’ security, and it seemed those soldiers with Karan heritage experienced certain leniencies when it came to uniform. Hair length being one.

As excited as she was to see a familiar face, she was disappointed Jonas wasn’t with him and failed miserably in hiding it, but it only seemed to make him smile. He beckoned Llew to follow him. She gave him a quizzical look, but, with no more than a teasing smile, he had her interest piqued and she followed him to the stable where her horse was already saddled. She didn’t question where he was taking her, since Hisham didn’t seem inclined to enlighten her anyway, and mounted. Then she steered her horse to follow him across the courtyard, around the fountain, and through the gate.

“Hey!” One of the gate guards pulled them up short. “She isn’t

supposed to leave the compound without a full bodyguard. Earl Tovias' orders."

Hisham turned his horse, straightening in his saddle, displaying his uniform in full. He wore the same red jacket as the estate guards, but his cuffs were decorated by double gold banding and one shoulder bore a half-cape with the crest of the Syakaran line he was most closely related to embroidered in gold thread. Some sort of long-legged dog.

"Oh." The guard gave a nervous laugh. "Of course, lieutenant." The guard bobbed his head. "Carry on, then." He afforded Hisham a grin before sending them on their way. Hisham had been running exercises with the Earl's men for the past week. It seemed they liked him well enough, as well as recognised that a single Karan was bodyguard enough. Except, perhaps, against Braph. But Braph was dead.

Outside the stone walls, they turned from the road that led to Rakun's town centre, circumvented the estate and started up the lush green hill behind. The air was crisp with the dry chill of winter, the sky cloudless. Clear of the estate's walls, Hisham kicked his horse into a brisk canter and Llew followed suit, revelling in the cold air breezing through her hair. It was getting long, the ends touching her jaw and collar. Now that she was safely amongst friends, she didn't feel the need to trim it. She may have missed her home by Big River, but she didn't miss the Cheer locals, most of whom saw women as little more than a costly entertainment.

They crested the hill and Llew adjusted her seat for the downward slope only a little late, narrowly preventing a fall from her saddle. Amico threw his head once to show his contempt before continuing on with the rolling gait into the heart of the valley and up the next hill. He nearly unseated her again when he kicked his heels in the chance to run.

Hisham pulled up on the hill's rounded peak and waited for her to rein in beside him, letting her take in the view of the meandering river below. She hadn't seen anything so beautiful in nearly two months.

She beamed a wide smile at Hisham, which he returned with a knowing one of his own. Her freedom had been severely limited lately. She needed this, and he knew it. He also knew where he was taking her, and she was more than a little eager to find out. She was almost certain it had something to do with Jonas. About time, too.

He continued on at a walk, and Llew followed, breathing in the clean smell of fresh water surrounded by greenery – trees, grasses and shrubs, all

benefiting from their proximity to the river. It smelled like home.

At the base of the second hill, Hisham turned to lead Llew around a copse of trees sparse enough for her to see the water rushing past on the other side of the trunks, yet dense enough to block out the roar. The trees followed a bend in the river and nearby, in a small clearing just past the apex, Jonas' horse grazed. Llew looked to Hisham, who returned a cryptic smile, despite any sense of mystery having absconded. She twisted one way and then the other, trying to locate Jonas himself. Hisham dismounted and took Amico's bridle while Llew swung from her saddle, then he hobbled her horse beside Jonas'.

"This is where I depart," he said. "I think you'll be wantin' to walk through right about ... " He crouched and pointed through the trees. "There." Now she knew where to look, she saw the silhouette of a man in a wide-brimmed hat sitting on the bank of the river.

Jonas.

Hisham was already mounted when she turned back. He gave a small wave, turned and kicked his horse into a full gallop. Llew turned back and made her way through the trees.

What Choice Did She Have?

Jonas worked his fingers, rolling the pebbles round his palm. They scraped and chinked, not that he could hear much over the rushing river. He hoped Llew would like the spot he'd chosen. For one, it was hidden behind trees. Perfect for getting away from the rest of the household. For another, someone had once told him the best place to catch fish was at the apex of a bend in the river. Something about the slower current offering the fish somewhere to shelter.

And just downstream was a sloping beach that dropped away to an ideal swimming hole before rejoining the rush.

Perfect.

At least, he hoped it was perfect. Llew was a better judge of fishing spots and swimming holes. Give Jonas a horse or a field of wheat over a river any day. Not that he'd complain at a river flowing *by* a field of wheat.

His home in Aldia, his childhood home, had a river. Much like this one, but slower. One day, he hoped Llew would see it. More than see it. He hoped she would live there, raise their child there.

Gods, he hoped she liked this spot.

Something scuffed the stones behind him.

He turned to unfamiliar bare legs beneath the hem of a mid-length winter-weight dress. He craned his head round, sliding up the blue-grey fabric, so plain, with a line of heavy lace a few inches from the bottom and again at the waist and sleeves. Up, up ...

"Llew!"

Llew never wore dresses.

He jumped up, tossing the pebbles and wrapping his arms around her. "I've missed you." He hugged her slight frame firmly to his, their bodies touching: ear-to-ear, heart-to-heart, thigh-to-thigh. No kiss. All going well, that would come later.

"Yes." She brought her arms up around his waist, though her touch was lighter. She might even have been trying to lean back a little. Probably, she was still getting used to the Syakaran strength she'd gained from carrying his baby. Just in case it was something else, Jonas eased his hold. "Aris has

been keeping you busy.” Her voice was distant. Bitter, maybe.

Aris had been keeping Jonas busy since he, Hisham and Llew had returned from Turhmos. And it would be naive to think Aris weren't trying to keep Jonas and Llew apart.

'Course, now Karlani was on the scene and it was clear Aris was loving that fact. Jonas' captain had sent the Syakaran woman for several training sessions now, and every time she turned up with her blouse undone several buttons, breasts pushed up by a restrictive bodice, and boots with absurdly impractical heels for fighting. And every time Jonas told her so, and refused to go easy on her just because she had chosen not to come prepared.

He looked Llew in the eye.

“Which is why I'm here now. I mean it. I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.” It was so good to see her smile. “And I like your hair like that.”

Jonas suppressed a groan and brushed his hand through his hair. He'd worn it somewhere past shoulder-length as long as he could remember. The short look he'd adopted to maintain anonymity in Turhmos wasn't sticking for him. He felt every breeze across the back of his neck, and it made him look younger. Not something he needed so few years out of adolescence.

It didn't help that when she'd brought him back to life, she'd also wiped years of history from his skin. Scars collected from training sessions and true battles alike, obliterated, smoothed to nothing.

“Really,” Llew insisted.

“Yeah, well ... ” He ran his hand down his stubbly chin. He'd taken to shaving at night so he woke with a light scratchiness, otherwise Gaemil's men heckled him. Didn't want to be trained by a boy. Especially one who, by appearances, hadn't seen a day of real battle in his life.

“It's your job to catch lunch, and I'm starvin',” he said, offering her the fishing rod.

She took the rod, kicked off her shoes and walked sure-footed across the rocks, straight to the outcrop over the river's apex, and started feeding out the line. And, just like that, she relaxed. She even spared a glancing smile for Jonas. He followed her.

A cool breeze swooped through the valley, billowing Llew's dress, lifting the hem nearly up to her knees. Distracted by the sight, Jonas put his

foot down on a large round rock, nearly rolling his ankle. Only his reflexes kept him upright.

He put himself upwind of her, blocking the bulk of the breeze, and watched her tease the fish with her lure. It was beautiful watching her work. With great patience, she let her hook sit in the water, waiting for the fish to show interest. She wound the reel, quarter-turn by quarter-turn, giving them all one last chance before the weight and hook broke the surface. Then she repeated the dance.

Jonas took the chance to slip his arm across her shoulders.

Funny, really, to think she already carried his child, and yet here he was, afraid to make sudden movements in case he scared her off. One impulsive afternoon didn't exactly make for promises.

She rested her head against him and his heart gave a flip-flop. *Settle down, cowboy. You've known women before.*

"Thank you," she said.

He returned her gratitude with a simple smile and a squeeze of her shoulder, afraid if he tried to speak she would see, or hear, what she did to him. Oh, great and mighty Jonas the Syakaran brought to his knees by a girl. A Syaenuk girl. A clever and resourceful girl. But, still.

She rested her head again, leaving the hook to float.

He wanted to kiss her. Usually it was him with the girls clambering to get their turn. How did this sorta thing go again? Maybe if he asked?

He turned his head to speak against her hair.

"Llew – " He cleared his throat. Crazy to be so nervous, but there he was. "Llewella." Her full name, the one few knew her by anymore, might make her feel special. She didn't react and he wasn't sure she'd heard him, so he said it again. "Llewella." A little louder this time. He craned his head a bit more, moving his mouth closer to her ear. "Llewella."

She stiffened.

"Don't," she said.

Jonas pulled back. Of course, only her parents had called her that. And her ma was still held captive somewhere in Turhmos, and she'd just killed her own pa in a botched rescue attempt.

Dumb move.

"Braph called me that," she murmured.

Even worse. He boiled with that sickening combination of pity for Llew and rage at his half-brother. No point being angry at a dead man, though.

"Sorry," he said.

"Not your fault," she said, almost lost in the rush.

That all too familiar awkwardness returned. He kept his arm across her shoulders, but just lightly, unsure if she still wanted it there and equally unsure that if he removed it she might think it was because *he* didn't want to leave it there.

It was a little bit thrilling, this uncertainty, and he had a feeling that was half the draw. There weren't many women as would make him work so hard. Well, Jonas weren't afraid of a little work.

He let his arm fall from her shoulders and caught her around the waist, pulling her against him.

"Not your fault, either." He smirked at her, remembering a certain afternoon on which they'd assured themselves they didn't hate each other.

She grinned back and he stole that kiss.

They stood, just smiling at each other, until Llew started giggling.

Jonas let his head fall back in exasperation.

"You did it again." He pulled his arm from her waist, though he did let his hand brush her ass on the way past. "Why do you do that?"

"What?" Llew returned her attention to the fishing, drawing her line back in.

"Spoil it," he said. "When you should just let it be."

Llew shrugged and flung the line out again, sending out concentric waves.

Jonas watched her for a long time, but she didn't look back, seemingly singularly focused on her task.

Llew: the least romantic female he knew.

He couldn't blame her, he supposed. Her ma hadn't been around to teach her what to expect and, far as Jonas knew, her pa had drunk away most of their years together. Not much learning for a girl there.

Then again, there hadn't been much learning for a boy in Jonas' situation, either.

The idea of learning together was mighty exciting.

He returned his arm to her shoulders.

"Aris ain't talked of Quaver lately. Reckon we could be here another week, yet."

Still, Llew didn't look too happy.

"It'll be all right." He believed it and hoped saying so would be enough for her.

Llew remained silent, absently drawing her line in again, until it came up out of the water, once again empty.

Jonas' stomach was starting to ache. He'd spent most of the morning preparing this outing, and he hadn't stopped to snack. And if there was one downside to being Syakaran, it was the cost of keeping fed. Actually, that wasn't much of a downside, especially at Gaemil's where the kitchens churned out delicious experimental treats by the cartload. He reckoned they enjoyed having Karan guests as much as the Quaven soldiers enjoyed staying.

The fish were there, they just weren't biting.

Llew'd had little trouble catching meals on the road in Aghacia. Especially when Jonas put his Syakaran speed to good use snatching bugs for her to use as bait.

"Need me to catch one o' those critters again?"

"That would help," she said. "Don't know where you'll find any around here, though." She peered around at the rocky beach.

Ah, a challenge.

Jonas stepped back from her, holding up one finger. *One moment*. Then he dashed across the rocks, through the trees to where the grassy meadow met the needle-fall. He pulled up short. Several tiny creatures scurried from his feet. He watched. A grass blade shuddered, and ... *snatched!*

He was back before she'd had a chance to react to his departure, and presented the bait with a smile. Contagious, because she couldn't suppress her own.

"Cheat." She snapped her elbow out at him, but he snaked around the

strike.

They stood in silence, waiting for something to bite. Llew relaxed, leaning back into Jonas, and he looped his hands around her waist, letting them rest over her belly, just above his baby.

Llew proved to be too relaxed when the rod slipped from her fingers and skittered along the outcrop's edge. She flung out an arm to grab it, missed. Jonas lunged, caught it just before it toppled into the water, and rolled onto his back, brandishing the rod like a prize, for Llew to take over drawing in their lunch. She couldn't stop laughing. Better than watching her worry about her future.

They cooked the fish over a low fire Jonas had prepared earlier and drank wine from Gaemil's cellar.

"This is wonderful." Llew swallowed her last bite. Her gaze drifted to the water, turning wistful. "Thank you," she said. "I miss my home."

Stretched out on the picnic blanket, propped on one elbow, Jonas fidgeted with a twig and chewed his lip. Against the backdrop of her fears, he would do anything to make Llew's life happy. "You know you can't go back, right?"

Llew nodded, though it looked like she was holding back tears.

"I ain't gonna lie ... " He put his hand on her knee, rubbed his thumb over it. Some sort of attempt at comfort. "Braph would've found you eventually, whether you left Cheer or not. I'm real glad you found us. And I wanted you to know I think ... " Gods, this was hard. "I think you're special. And I hope ... I hope you can make a new home with me." He didn't say 'In Aldia'. One step at a time. Aldia was a long ways from Cheer. A long ways *inside* Quaver.

"Well, what choice do I have?"

He took his hand back, busied it with the twig he still held.

What choice *did* she have? With the kinds of enemies she had, she needed someone like Jonas backing her up. Only, there weren't anyone else like Jonas. Not much of a choice at all.

"I meant ... " She looked him in the eye. "I'm glad I found you, too." She managed a tiny smile. Appreciated no matter how reluctant.

"My ma's still there," Llew said after a while, her voice trailing off. She must have been thinking about Turhmos. Where Braph took her. Where her

pa died.

He put his hand back on her knee. "We'll get her back."

Llew pressed her lips up in a grateful grimace. Always, these days, the tears so close. She had reason.

Pa dead. Ma imprisoned. Herself on Turhmos' most-wanted.

"She's alive, far as we know," he said. "But there ain't much point doin' somethin' that could get you both killed, or worse." He hated to think of the worse. "We'll come up with a plan. Might not get the chance till we're back in Quaver, but we'll think o' somethin' keeps you both free."

Llew nodded. After her own efforts to save her pa, she'd be spooked about any plans to go after her ma. Whatever they came up with would have to be solid.

She picked up a stone and threw it into the water.

"This is really lovely."

"It ain't over yet."

Eager to keep her focused on the present, Jonas pushed himself up and dug through the picnic basket for the muslin wrapped-bundle. He peeled back the layers to reveal the treat.

"What is it?"

"Chocolate. Gaemil imports it from Tairak. I found it when we stayed here on our way to Cheer. Try it."

Llew took a piece, dubious. She placed it between her teeth, watching Jonas like she expected him to tell her he was playing a prank. She worked it around her mouth. Slowly, a smile appeared and Jonas found himself mirroring her.

"Wow."

Yes. He knew.

She put the rest in her mouth. "Wow ... "

They sat a while longer, watching the rushing water and savouring the sweet. He let Llew have most of it.

"You want to swim?" he asked as she chewed through the last piece.

"Doesn't Aris expect you back?"

Jonas shrugged. "Hisham won't tell him where I am." One person in

all the world Jonas could count on, Hisham was it.

“You rebel,” Llew said with a sly twist to her lips.

“Thought you might like it.” He gave her the grin that worked on all the ladies. Boyish, some called it. Not something he’d pull out for the troops, anyway.

Llew’s eyes flared, and then she looked like she was going to be sick. She looked away.

Before he could question it, she leaped up and pulled her dress over her head. Jonas followed her lead, unbuttoning his shirt as swiftly as the fiddly things allowed. But Llew had her breeches off and was in the water before he had his belt unbuckled. She skipped, squealing, into the swimming hole. The water must’ve been cold. He splashed in after her. Yep, cold.

Reaching her, he pulled her down, soaking her completely. Not to be an ass, he went down with her and they re-emerged, Llew clinging to him and laughing.

He sought and found her lips. She tasted good. Even better, she kissed him back.

A rumbled neigh and the chink of horseshoes on river stones sounded over the river’s white noise. They both froze and turned to the intruder. Jonas pulled Llew into him, giving her some cover.

An apologetic Hisham sat astride his horse, the animal blowing thick clouds of steam in the cold air.

“Sorry, brother. He threatened my Karan rations.” Hisham almost looked ashamed to admit it, but the man did like his food.

Past his friend, through the trees, the legs of a pair of horses trotted through the long meadow grass.

“Shit.” Jonas had little else to say.

Hisham grimaced and turned his horse, presenting his back to them.

“Sorry,” Jonas muttered to Llew and released her. She just shrugged.

They both made their way back to shore, scrambling to pull their clothes over wet bodies before Aris showed up. Llew had the easier time of it on that score.

Jonas managed to get his trousers done up as Aris emerged through the thin line of trees. Bringing her unmistakable curves and dark, wavy hair,

Karlani rode behind.

Only Aris

Aris walked his horse across the stones, reined in and sat for several moments, letting his obvious disapproval do his talking. The older man had perfected the art of combining parental and military control over the years; quick to remind Jonas that his heritage and his fame gave him no free passes. When Jonas fired up, Aris cooled him down. When Jonas bolted for trouble, Aris held a tight rein. Only Aris could bring together the soothing calm of a mother, the stern pride of a father and the hard-line captain into one package. Even his body reflected this in his straight bearing and slightly portly tummy.

Only Aris knew Jonas better than Jonas knew himself.

Jonas was almost driven to apologise without his greying captain uttering a word.

Karlani brought her horse alongside Aris', her appreciative glance making Jonas pull his shirt on and button up in a hurry. The Syakaran woman looked past him and glared full hatred at Llew, her dark eyes even darker under a furrowed brow. Jonas took the half step required to block that line of sight.

"Enough." Aris spoke just loud enough to be heard over the background babble and roar of the river. "Hisham. Take Llew back to Gaemil's."

Jonas went to protest, but Aris levelled a no-nonsense look at him and Karlani moved her horse a couple of steps closer, like a menacing bodyguard. Like Jonas would've only weeks earlier.

No harm done letting Aris send Llew back to the mansion. Their afternoon was over anyway.

He nodded to Hisham, as if his friend had been waiting on his okay. The Karan lieutenant was already following the order, and Llew, thankfully, wasn't protesting.

Jonas watched Hisham lead Llew back through the trees, then he turned back to Aris.

"So," said Aris, "this is what you've been doing instead of running the training exercises with Gaemil's staff."

"I've run exercises every day since I got back from Turhmos. I needed a break. Nobody can work the schedule I've been keepin' without a rest."

Aris grinned. "I should have you arrested on the spot. It is Quaven army policy that a soldier take leave *only* at the say so of a superior officer. You may be Quaver's hero, Lieutenant, but you are still my flunky." Aris' smile turned ugly, doggish, before transitioning to something approaching sympathetic. "And we both know why, don't we?"

Jonas nodded. The hot-blooded Syakaran needed a firm hand, lest he make monumental mistakes in the blink of someone else's eye. And Jonas had made mistakes.

"Need I remind you," – Aris waved a hand at Karlani – "that you owe Quaver a Syakaran male child to lead the next generation of soldiers?"

Jonas stared flatly at Karlani. The woman looked like the cat that's left a rat at the front door, all sensual pride.

"That you owe Quaver their next hero?" Aris pushed.

Jonas thought back on all those nights he'd come home to his wife, Kierra, when she believed he'd been off doing as Aris asked – whether or not it was true *that* time. He thought back to those nights of her sobbing over dinner, of her crying herself to sleep. He'd hated it. Hated himself for doing it. But he hadn't known how to stop it. Could he stop it now? For Llew?

Karlani helped. The thought of that woman boasting to Llew made Jonas feel ill. Never mind the part he'd have to play.

"Well?" Aris said. "Do I need to remind you that only Syakaran women have Syakaran sons?"

"What would a Syaenuk have?" Jonas found he'd said it out loud. What would Llew have?

"Nothing. Llew will have nothing, not with you."

"But what if she did?"

Aris narrowed his eyes, but Jonas returned only open curiosity.

"Like I said, probably nothing. Or some inferior hybrid. Like a mule."

"Mules are kinda useful," Jonas murmured, still trying to get his head around the possibilities.

"Mules don't lead armies. They bring up the wagons at the rear."

What *would* Llew have? An Aenuk? A Karan? Or something else entirely?

"Don't waste our time even thinking on. Your country needs you to be

a soldier, not some over-sexed young buck off gallivanting with the enemy!"

"Llew's not – "

"Llew is Aenuk. She's about as far from our ally as it gets. And it's time you acted like it."

"She ain't like other Aenuks."

"You think the crowd that made their way across Quaver to kill your folks was like other Aenuks? Them folks passed for normal. We still don't know where they crossed the border, and Aldia's a long ways across Quaver, from any direction. They didn't raise a single eyebrow."

Fifteen years and the wound was still raw. Jonas felt very small, standing before the two riders. Like the seven year old he'd been when his parents were murdered.

"We've let Llew closer to you than any Aenuk should get. I think it's time we start behavin' like we remember what she is, and what she can do. That ... *girl* has the power to kill you with a touch. She could syphon your life from you faster'n you can draw breath, let alone a knife. And, yes, I'm talkin' about *you*, not anyone. You."

But she'd saved his life. The only reason they hadn't told Aris was because it would mean telling him Llew already carried his child. They hadn't had time to come to grips with it themselves, let alone deal with what Aris would have to say.

"Are you going to listen this time?"

Jonas was out of arguments. He nodded.

* * *

"It's a big change for him, Llew." Anya turned another page of the book laid out on the table in front of her.

The table stood at the centre of the estate's library, a huge room, three mezzanine levels tall, walls packed with row after row of books.

"I've done a lot of reading about Quaver, and they're all taught to hate Aenuks from a very young age. That's what Aris has known all his life. That's a very long time." She pressed her lips together. "I suppose he's not that old. Still, it's a long time to hold a belief. Hard to shift." She returned her attention to the book, running a finger down the page, on the lookout for something of interest. "Now, Karlani might be a problem. It's well-documented that Syakaran male children have only ever been born to

Syakaran mothers. So, it makes sense for Jonas to, ah, spend time with Karlani." Her finger continued down the page, then jumped to the top of the next.

Llew didn't need to hear this. What was best for Quaver certainly wasn't best for her. Whose business was it who Jonas ... spent time with, anyway?

Anya paused in her search, resting a sympathy-laden gaze on Llew.

"It's what happens, Llew. I always knew my husband would be chosen for me. I got lucky, I guess."

That was a surprise to hear. When they'd first arrived in Rakun, Anya hadn't exactly been overjoyed at the age gap between herself and her intended. Sure, she'd *known* Gaemil was older, but after travelling several weeks with Jonas and the cousins, Alvaro and Cassidy – three very attractive men only a handful of years her senior – meeting the somewhat portly, somewhat balding thirty-something lord had come as a bit of a shock for Anya, to say the least.

Anya smiled as if she'd been reading Llew's thoughts.

"I don't suppose you've looked at him the way I do. Especially not with your head already turned." The sympathy returned and she placed a hand over Llew's. "I'm sure once Jonas has done what he needs to do, Aris will be much more lenient about the two of you."

That wasn't helping. Anya seemed to sense that, as her reassuring smile faltered.

"I mean ..." Anya sat back. "You know what? To hell with what I mean." Her cheeks coloured. "How does he know you and Jonas wouldn't make perfect babies? What does anyone know? There simply hasn't been a case of a Syakaran and Syaenuk, ah, *marrying* before. Nothing I've read, anyway." She leaned forward again, wide-eyed and eager. "Gosh. You could have anything!"

Llew lowered her gaze, resisting the urge to place a protective hand over her baby. It didn't need to hear everyone's speculation over what it might or might not be. It just needed to get born, preferably free and preferably with a pa. Actually, Llew had known plenty of fatherless children, even more parentless altogether, and they'd mostly managed all right. It was Llew who needed her child's pa. She wasn't sure she could do this on her own.

She blew out a breath. Admitting honest truth, even just to herself, wasn't easy.

"Of course, I suppose it could be like how you can't heal him," Anya continued, off in her own trail of thoughts. "Perhaps you can't even have children together."

Llew looked up, keeping all expression from her face. Anya didn't know Llew *had* healed Jonas, had brought him back to life, and could do so *because* she carried his baby. But she couldn't tell Anya. Not yet. She didn't know if the news would stop at Anya, and sure wasn't ready for Aris to know.

"I'm sure there are plenty of happy childless couples out there," Anya was saying. "But Aris is right. Jonas is Quaver's future, and if you can't give him Syakaran children, then ... " Anya stopped, pressed fingers to her lips, then gaped at Llew, all wide-eyed shock. "I'm sorry, Llew. I was thinking aloud. Just thoughts. No harm done, right?"

Llew gave her a weak smile. Speculation that she and Jonas may not be able to conceive was an argument already lost.

"Forgive me, Llew," Anya pleaded. "I grew up believing people fell in love despite being married, rather than getting married for love. Forgive me?"

"Of course." Did she really have a choice? And Anya was only saying what everyone else would be thinking. Better to hear it from a friendly source.

"Good. Now that's settled, we just need to find out something useful about Aenuks, or better yet, Syaenuks." Anya looked down at her book, flipped a couple of pages, then looked back up at Llew. "It would have been nice to have parents to learn from. But the next best thing is books. We'll find something." She patted Llew's arm.

Resting her head in her palm, Llew attempted to return her attention to her own book. She needed to learn about her power. If nothing else, it would provide a good distraction. The fact remained, she was little more than a passenger in her own body as things currently stood. Her power flowed through her, with or without her say so. Not knowing if control was even possible was nothing short of depressing, but Anya was so sure there would be something in Gaemil's library. He certainly had enough books.

Llew puffed out a hefty sigh and let her eyes move down one page and

the next. The words blurred together. So many words.

"You've not spoken of your time in Turhmos," Anya said.

"And I won't." Keeping head in hand, Llew swivelled in her seat so her arm blocked Anya's view. She didn't want to *think* about what had happened in Turhmos. She most definitely didn't want to talk about it.

"I'm here if you ever need to."

Llew shot up from her chair, slammed her book closed and let her scowl tell Anya what she thought about talking. Over dramatic? Perhaps. But clear.

Anya looked mildly uncomfortable about returning Llew's gaze, but otherwise she simply returned kindness. But now Llew had made a spectacle, she couldn't just sit down and pretend nothing had happened.

"I – I'm getting a headache. I'm just going to have a lie down."

"Of course. You should relax. I'll have a bath sent to your room."

Llew left the library unable to decide whether to accept or decline Anya's offer. So far, Jonas had walked in on her twice while she'd been bathing here, and now she was pregnant. Perhaps she should lock the door. Not that that had stopped him the first time. And she doubted she would let it stop him this time, if he came at all. *If*, that is, he wasn't too busy spending the afternoon elsewhere.

She paused under the family portrait again. The woman looked so happy. Llew had seen pictures of mothers before and they always seemed happy. Maybe something happened when you had a child. Maybe it would all work out.

All Better Now

“Llew.”

She turned from the portrait to face Aris, striding the huge marble corridor, Karlani half a pace behind.

Well, at least she wasn't with Jonas.

Aris stopped before Llew, looked her up and down with a scowl. Not anger. More like an internal disagreement.

“I understand you freed yourself from Braph,” he said, though Llew sensed a question in there somewhere. “Hisham told me he and the rest never made it to Braph's, but met you on the road. Impressive work. Braph is a powerful man.”

Llew shrugged. “He used most of his power capturing me.” The less said, the better, as far as she was concerned.

Karlani smiled. Probably pleased to hear Llew hadn't bested a full-strength Karan. As far as Karlani was concerned, the natural order was maintained.

“Good, good,” Aris said absently. “But he took you to his home?”

Llew nodded, wary of giving too much away.

“In ... ?”

“Duffirk.”

Aris' eyes narrowed and his lips twitched. “Duffirk is a big city. I don't suppose you know where in the city he lives?”

Llew shook her head, this time not omitting by choice. Fact was, she'd never been to Duffirk before, only been led into it by Braph and out of it by Fear. In neither case had she felt like asking about the city's highlights.

“No.” Aris nodded to himself, not surprised by Llew's answer, or lack thereof. “Still, you didn't happen to see a – a child while you were there?”

Llew shook her head again. She didn't know what Aris was after, but his obsession with children and who was having them was unsettling. What would he want with a child of Braph's? She shuddered to even think of Braph fathering a child.

A disembodied wailing repeated in the back of her mind. A wail that

had echoed down the halls of Braph's home, pinging off the copper piping and fading into its depths. It had been spine-tingling in real life, and lost little in recollection. Sometimes sounding like a child, sometimes several, it had also reminded her of cats. And she'd seen no child.

Then again, once she'd heard laughter ...

"All right." Aris seemed satisfied enough. "Look. About you and Jonas." Scowling again, like he was reluctant. "I've told him he ain't to see you no more." He shifted again, leaning back a bit to look down his nose. "Not in a romantic capacity, anyway."

Llew held her own against him, but she wouldn't dare a look at Karlani. The smug look on that woman's face would be like a magnet for Llew's fist and, again, Llew wasn't ready to explain how she could catch a Syakaran off guard.

"Now, I reckon you understand," Aris said. "Jonas is key to Quaver's military future, and we can't go having that future compromised. Now, this is the problem I see. You're Aenuk. I know what you're thinkin'. You're thinkin' I was born hating on Aenuks, and you wouldn't be far wrong. But, for the sake of argument, it ain't here or there, because you're not just Aenuk. You're Syaenuk. You can heal from *death*, killin' in the process. What scares me is you gettin' yourself killed somewhere there's no other life but Jonas. He's the kind of man who would give his life for those he loves. And I can't have that. Quaver can't have that. So, I think it's best for all concerned if the two of you keep a little distance. Okay?" He finished with a friendly flourish, eyes and face bright and open, like all the rest hadn't come before.

Llew nodded. Put that way, it did make perfect sense.

Aris assessed her a moment longer. Seemingly satisfied he'd got her scared enough, he nodded. "Thank you." He patted her shoulder, then headed back down the corridor.

Karlani didn't move, except to shift her weight to one leg and fold her arms. Her loosely-curved dark hair framed a symmetrical face with large, dark eyes, a long, straight nose and cushiony lips. Like Llew, she tended to prefer a shirt and trousers to a dress. Except Karlani had the purse to wear quality cotton that washed up proper white. She wore a leather vest over the shirt, shaped to perfectly accentuate her hour-glass frame and push up her bust.

"You heard the man," she said. "Jonas needs to be putting his efforts into the next generation of Syakaran heroes, not wasting his time with some

leech.”

Clever. Karlani had made up her own name for Aenuks. Llew might have found the funny side if she hadn't known full well how not funny her power could be.

“Why do you want to do this? You're not even Quaven?” There was a risk she would find out more than she wanted to know, but Llew had to know. *She* wouldn't volunteer.

“I'm half-Quaven,” Karlani said. “My father is Karan. He met my mother while travelling. Quaver don't hold their Kara captive like Turhmos do their Aenuks.”

“Except Jonas.” Some of Llew's fight returned.

Karlani conceded the point with a nod. “And the captain just told you why. I thought you understood. Or did I give you too much credit?”

“I am not in the mood for this.” Llew turned for her room, but Karlani followed. It seemed she intended this to turn into a fight. Llew supposed she should have seen it coming. Karlani couldn't stand that Llew had taken her by surprise barely a week earlier. And only a lack of bruising and Karlani's pride had kept Llew's victory secret.

Llew reached her door, gripped the handle. Karlani came up behind her. Intimidatingly close.

“Bugger off.”

Karlani snorted. “What in the world does that mean?”

“It means it's time for you to leave.” Llew spoke to her door. If she looked at the woman now, she didn't think she could control herself. She didn't want to fight. Regardless of the pain and what would happen if she beat Karlani, she had another life to think of now.

Karlani chuckled.

“You got lucky last week.” Karlani leaned close by Llew's ear. “Caught me off guard. And I think it's given you the impression you're my equal. I want to be sure you know that isn't the case.”

“Oh, I know.” Llew couldn't help herself. She turned to face the Syakaran, their noses hardly an inch apart.

Maybe she should have invited the woman to punch her, taken it on the nose and let that be that. Karlani's pride would be intact, Llew's child would be safe, and Llew would heal.

The smart choice.

But not the one Llew made.

She shoved the Syakaran back, moving faster than Karlani could have expected and using all her added strength.

“Wha – ?”

Karlani flew across the corridor, smashing into the opposite wall and crashing to the floor.

Llew panicked. What had she just done? Anyone on that level of the building would have heard that.

She opened her door and went to slink inside. But Karlani recovered quickly and pushed Llew through the door, knocking her to the ground. For better or worse, the fight was on.

Llew didn't know where the Syakaran had learnt to fight, besides her few lessons with Jonas. Llew had learnt on the streets of Cheer, where there were few rules about fighting dirty. She grabbed Karlani's hair with one hand, levered her head back and landed a punch square across her cheek, grazing her nose with the follow through. Karlani's hands clawed at Llew's face, but with her head pulled back there was no power in it. All she succeeded in doing was healing Llew's bruised fist. Llew pulled her knees up between them, booted Karlani off and scrambled to her feet.

“How – ?”

“Come at me or get out.”

Narrowing her eyes, Karlani ran at Llew. Llew planted her feet and put up a fist to catch Karlani's chin, but the Syakaran woman made a minute adjustment, skirted Llew's attack and slammed her own fist into Llew's cheek, knocking her back. Llew flailed, grasping for anything to prevent a fall, grabbed hold of Karlani's shirt, pulled herself back up and drove the heel of her hand into Karlani's nose. Karlani hit the floor, swearing, eyes streaming, her hands cupped over her bleeding, probably broken, nose. Llew stepped over her, gripped her collar and dragged her to her feet. She avoided touching her, choosing not to add insult to injury, despite her own aches. She wasn't too careful, though.

“That's twice now.” She pushed Karlani towards the door and into the gathering crowd that, thankfully, included none of her friends, or Aris. “Now, shove off, the lot of you!”

She shut the door, locked it and cursed repeatedly under her breath.

Her face hurt, aching well beneath the skin.

Karlani was a mess. There was no hiding anything now.

Llew turned her back to the door, fell back against it and slid to the floor.

What had she done?

* * *

The knock at her door put Llew on full alert. Silently cursing, back still pressed against the door, all her senses focused on clues to who it might be, expecting the worst. Of course Karlani would've run straight to Aris. He'd string Llew up.

"Llew?"

Not Aris.

Her breath exploded free and she nearly broke out in maniacal laughter at Jonas' voice.

"Llew?"

"Yes!" Her stifled laughter threatened to manifest through the word. She stood, unlocked and opened the door a crack to check it really was just Jonas.

"You all right?"

"Uh ... yeah." She opened the door wide enough for him to enter, and closed and locked it as soon as he was in the room.

"You're in trouble, missy," he said, half-comedic, half-bedroom husk, his eyes sweeping the room and coming round to face her. "Shit." He reached a hand for her cheek, but Llew neatly side-stepped him.

"Don't worry. She looks worse," she said.

"I know. I saw the burn marks on her. I thought that meant you'd be okay."

"I'm fine."

He took a step towards her again. She stepped back.

He kept coming on, and Llew kept dodging. This was exactly what Aris had been talking about.

“Come on, Llew. Let me fix it. It might tickle, but at least you won’t have to hide from everyone, or damage Gaemil’s garden.”

“She’s gonna tell him and then he’ll know everything.” She side-stepped and backed away in never-ending circles. He followed, never letting the distance between them grow by more than two paces.

He could have lunged at her. Could have grappled her. Or she could have run from the room altogether. It was a bizarre game they played and Jonas seemed to think it was quite humorous, going by his smirk.

“It’ll leave a scar.”

“Good. I been missin’ the old ones.”

Llew wasn’t ready to give in yet. Aris had warned her about this. Sure, it was only a bruise and a couple of scratches this time, but what about the next?

“Aris has locked himself away in Gaemil’s Communications office, talkin’ to Quaver – ”

“Talking?” Llew had never come across a way to talk to others miles away, but she’d never seen electric lights before coming to Gaemil’s either.

“Telegram.” Jonas shrugged and shortened the distance between them. “Point is, Karlani can’t get to him. Not for an hour or more, anyway.”

“He thinks I’ll kill you if we’re together.” Llew took a few steps back. Her calves hit something. Her bed.

Jonas laughed.

“Does he now?” His eyes grew dark as he took one last step, closing the distance between them.

“He’s right. What if this was worse? Or, what if something happened to me?” She glanced at the two windows. They were on the second floor, but that wouldn’t stop anyone determined enough. And anyone who came this far into Brurun looking for her would be determined. “What would you do? Right here, right now, there’s nothing living in here but us?”

“First of all ... ” He raised his hand, knuckles curled, holding it by her cheek a moment. Llew had nowhere to go. He pressed his fingers to her face, and sucked in a breath.

Her skin tingled beneath his touch.

She had been getting used to healing much more severe wounds, both

in herself and others, she had expected to cause him much more pain. She gave him a wry grin, which dropped as soon as she saw the pink of the skin down the backs of his fingers. Like a mild burn.

He shook his head.

"All better now," he said, hiding his hand from view by taking her head in a gentle grip. He pressed his lips to hers.

"I wouldn't let nothin' happen to you right here ... " He tilted her head and kissed her chin. " ... right now." He coaxed her head back just a little more and kissed under her jaw. "Second of all ... " He kissed his way down her throat. "If somehow you did get hurt ... " Kiss. " ... right here ... " Kiss. " ... right now ... " He spoke into the dip between her collar bones. Now, he straightened slowly to speak over her lips. "I'd heal you and you'd be so grateful you'd make love to me immediately." His breath still tasted like chocolate. "I'm afraid I'd be at your mercy, weak as I'd be. But I'll forgive you." He pressed his lips to hers, nibbling until she parted them.

They breathed each other in for a few moments and Llew's resolve melted. Let whatever would happen happen if she could feel like this.

She kissed him back, gave him her best bedroom-eyes and kissed him again.

He began work on his belt buckle, his lips not leaving hers.

At the chink of the buckle hitting the floor, loathing and nausea flooded Llew. Braph's belt had sounded the same.

"Shit."

Jonas paused, trousers halfway down his thighs. "I always dreamed of bein' seduced with a cuss."

She turned from him, hand pressed to her head as if she could somehow push those memories out. "Shit, shit. Shit shit shit," she whispered to herself, bashing her temple with her palm.

"Llew, I - "

She turned to face him, swallowing the threatening tears.

He'd already re-buttoned his trousers and was re-buckling his belt. He stood looking at her. Sad. Mirroring her. No blame. No disappointment.

He crossed the room to her, enveloping her in his arms. She clung to him.

"I'm sorry," she said into his shoulder.

"Shh." He rocked her a little bit, rested his cheek on her hair. "You don't owe me nothin'."

She sunk her fingertips into his back, pressed her cheek into his shoulder and tried to push Braph from her mind. Jonas was here now, and Braph was dead. Hopefully. Jonas was safe, and already the father of her child. And she was so grateful for him right then.

Her door thundered under the pounding of a heavy fist.

"Open up!" Aris boomed. "I know you're in there. Both of you."

Just How Dead Were You?

“Shit, shit, shit, shit ... ”

Jonas had to laugh at Llew’s whispered curses. Doing so gave him the balance of perspective he needed to think clearly. He needed his wits about him now. While Llew fell apart, he couldn’t afford to.

“Open up!” Aris bellowed and rattled the door with his fist again.

“Shit, oh shit, oh shit ... ”

“Shh. We got this.” He gripped her arms, and held her so he could look at her properly. “I *died*, Llew. And you saved me. He can’t fault that. What’s done is done, and it’s good, right?”

She looked so scared. But her breathing slowed even as the room echoed with another round of banging, and she nodded. “It’s good,” she whispered, though Jonas couldn’t tell if it was to agree with him or reassure herself. Either worked as far as he was concerned.

“All right,” he raised his voice and moved to the door, resting a hand on the handle and a shoulder into the wood. “I’m gonna unlock the door. Let’s all be civil, all right?”

“All right,” came the grudging reply.

Jonas looked to Llew, seeking her go ahead. She looked like she was going to be sick, all goggly-eyed and choked up. She seemed about as ready as she’d ever be.

“Here goes,” Jonas murmured under his breath as he turned the lock.

Aris stepped into the room, throwing the door wide. He acknowledged Jonas with a glower before laying all his attention on Llew.

“Apparently you did that. How?” He flicked his head to indicate Karlani just behind him.

The Syakaran woman’s face bloomed in distinct shades of purple and red, with a couple of finger-shaped burns – a dead give away to who had caused the damage. Llew had done a real number on her. Jonas bit down on the pride threatening to lift his face in a grin. Llew did that! She had only had the use of her child’s Syakaran power for a few weeks and already she knew how to use it to great effect.

Llew swallowed. Jonas scratched at his jaw; a silly nervous twitch.

There was only one explanation he could think of for what Llew had done, and that was the truth.

"I, uh ... I, uh –" Llew began.

"This ain't no audition for Gaemil's choir. Quit your singin' and get to the point," Aris said.

"All right." Jonas stepped between Aris and Llew. "But look, you gotta understand, if it weren't for things bein' as they are, I'd have died in Turhmos," he said. "Or, more truthfully, I'd have stayed dead."

Silence reigned while Jonas let his words settle and Aris' lips shaped the words in miniature.

"You died?" Aris finally asked, incredulous. His fury eased. He even paled slightly. Jonas dying was possibly Aris' greatest fear. At least, that was what he was counting on. Hopefully Aris would be so grateful that Jonas still lived that the how-so would be trifling.

Jonas gave a bashful nod.

"How?" Aris asked, eyes narrowed, but the heat had gone out of him some.

"I fought Braph, and he won." Simple seemed best.

Aris mulled things over for a moment, then his eyes narrowed to mere slits. "Just how dead were you?"

"Dead dead."

"And she healed you?"

Jonas could nearly hear Aris' thoughts. Aenuks could not heal Kara.

"How?"

"I think that would be best discussed in private." Jonas jerked his chin at Karlani.

Aris looked around at their audience. "All right. Karlani, wait outside with Hisham."

Jonas hadn't noticed Hisham just outside the door. So, Aris had brought a little back-up. Hisham was Aris' man just as much as Jonas. Only now, it seemed, Jonas was on the out.

"But –" Karlani pointed to her bruises.

"It's all right." Aris waved her out.

She clamped her mouth down on further complaint and stepped back into the corridor, muttering.

The three of them waited while the room emptied and the door closed, then Jonas flicked Llew another look before turning back to Aris. She looked so scared, her blue eyes wide. "Remember this is a good thing, right?"

Aris nodded slowly, apparently not entirely convinced. He folded his arms.

"Well, it seems ... It seems Llew might be ... " He couldn't believe how hard this was. All his life, Aris had wanted nothing more than for Jonas to procreate. What was the difference in truth? For all they knew, Llew's baby was exactly what they wanted ... unless it was Aenuk. Aris would be furious at that.

"I'm pregnant," Llew's quiet voice came from behind.

Aris stood perfectly still, his expression in stone, just staring at Jonas.

After a seemingly interminable silence, Aris spoke. "And you just assume it's yours?"

"What?" Of course it was his.

"Braph had her, what, a week? Ten days? You don't think he didn't feel he had needs that needed met? He's your brother. What do you think happened?"

Jonas didn't need to think. He knew.

"But she saved my life."

"So? For all we know an uncle could be a close enough blood tie to break the barrier. How many Aenuks have you known to carry Karan children?"

"None, but –"

"Exactly."

Jonas didn't know what to say. He'd been so sure the baby was his. He still was sure, mostly. Of course it was his. He'd been with Llew first. And she had Syakaran power, not just Karan. It was his. It had to be. He'd already lost one child, to lose even the promise of another would be devastating. Llew's child was his.

But Llew was Syaenuk. Could what made her Sy boost what made Braph Karan? Would that be enough?

“So, what happened, Llew?” Aris asked.

Jonas glared at Aris. How dare the old man ask? He should have said something, shut the questions down. But, he was ashamed to admit, some part of him wanted to hear the truth for himself. So far, they’d only spoken in insinuations. He wanted to hear the truth. It was only natural.

Was there a chance she was carrying Braph’s child instead of his?

“See? Her silence speaks volumes.” Aris smiled, like he’d just won one of those games he got the Karan soldiers playing. Never Jonas. That wouldn’t be fair.

“But the –” Llew began.

“This changes nothing.” Aris returned his attention to Jonas. “The future of the Syakaran line rests solely with you and Karlani. We don’t want Turhmos gaining Llew, so we will take her to Quaver. Assuming, of course, you do as you’re told. You know Quaver has no use for Llew, or her ... child.” Aris’ voice wavered on the last word, his attention shifting over Jonas’ shoulder to Llew for a moment, calculating, thinking. Perhaps only now realising that a child of Llew and Jonas could be more powerful than either of its parents.

Jonas let the thought curl his lips up.

“This is why I told you to keep your hands to yourself,” Aris hissed and Jonas’ triumph scarpereed. “Nothing good will come of this. Quaver won’t accept it. I doubt even Turhmos would. You’ve complicated an already difficult situation.”

“Aris. I’d be dead if it weren’t –”

“You wouldn’t have been in Turhmos to be killed if it weren’t for your getting involved with her.”

“Braph still would have come for me, and there would be no comin’ back if Llew weren’t carryin’ *my* child!”

“Every cloud, I suppose,” Aris muttered. “This changes nothing,” he said louder. “You have a duty to Quaver. We have fed you, clothed you, trained you, given you *everything* from the day you were born. Don’t go thinkin’ you can just turn your back on that.”

Duty. Always duty.

“What about what I want?” Llew asked.

“As far as Quaver is concerned, what you want don’t hold water.

You're Aenuk. You're less than the mite ridin' the ant that shovels shit." Aris silenced Jonas' objection with a raised hand. "But, for what it's worth, I'll listen. What is it that you want?"

"I want my life."

Aris broke out laughing. "I think you are going to have to come to terms with the fact that's well past. Even if you weren't Syaenuk, you're about to have a child. You think you can just pop one out and carry on your way? Have another think, girl."

"That wasn't what I meant," Llew said. Jonas turned so he could see her. "I want to live free of cages, or prisons, or – " She glanced around her room. "Prisons ... "

"Which brings me back to the point that you *are* Syaenuk. I ain't goin' to sugar coat it for you. Face the facts, girl, and you, too, Jonas. Turhmos will cage you, Braph will cage you, Quaver would sooner kill you than keep you, but, for Jonas' continued loyalty, I have managed to have them consider letting you live."

"For my loyalty?"

"Is that blackmail?" Llew and Jonas spoke in unison.

"I simply speak fact. It's the two of you against the world or with Quaver's backing. Which is it to be?"

Jonas had to look away from Llew again, her pleading eyes muddying already murky waters. She thought Jonas could protect her. As if stronger muscles made all the difference.

She'd lived several years alone, but now that everyone and anyone it might matter to knew she existed, there was no returning to her seemingly safe, solitary life. He could sense her wanting him to join her in that life. A life on the run. Hiding when they could, fighting when they had to. Fighting Turhmos and Braph, maybe even Quaver if they took great umbrage at his disloyalty. And they would. But even Jonas, with all his advantages, couldn't stand alone for long. And Aris was right. Jonas owed Quaver everything. He owed *Aris* everything.

"Now that's sorted," – Aris, apparently satisfied, clapped his hands – "you still have training exercises to run."

"I need to talk to Llew."

"No," Aris said, his voice cool. "Between now and us leaving for

Quaver, you are not to be seen anywhere near Llew. She is Aenuk. She is Quaver's enemy, while you are Quaver's son. I have been too lenient, and see where it's got me. You want Llew safe? You'll do as you're told."

Jonas' fists balled, but he couldn't lash out at Aris. The older man had always been there, the one steady, reliable feature in his life. The one person he could count on. The captain's presence giving structure to every other aspect of his life; the steady head when Jonas was too fired up to think straight. Always right. Always solid. Jonas needed him.

"All right."

Aris smiled. "Good. Prove you can behave yourselves and I might make concessions on our journey to Quaver. Now, Gaemil's troops."

"It ain't as if they're ever gonna see a battlefield –"

"We made a commitment to Gaemil and *we* are going to keep it! Now get!"

Jonas didn't look back at Llew before he left. He was doing the right thing. If he kept his head down, did as he was told, life would be more comfortable for them all.

He was barely through the door when Karlani stepped in front of him.

"Your boys did what they ought to, huh?" she said, reaching for his balls.

He gripped her wrist and twisted, forcing her to spin and pulled her into him.

"What my boys do and don't do ain't none o' your business. "

"Aris might beg to differ."

"Then Aris can beg."

"Jonas!" Aris roared from Llew's room.

He released Karlani, giving her a shove for good measure. He stalked down the corridor, Hisham following silently behind. He might have to appease Aris when it came to fraternising with Llew, but Quaver could be damned if it wanted any more kids out of him with other women.

* * *

Aris waited for Jonas and Hisham to go before turning back to Llew. "This don't change the fact that Jonas is Jonas." He kept his voice low, so only she would hear, despite the open door. "He's a Quaven hero, the only

one for his generation, and you're Quaver's enemy. You have no place in his life. Whatever hold you think you have, you don't. Best you get used to it." Without waiting for a response, he turned and left the room.

For a moment, Llew couldn't tell if the heavy feeling in her belly was her growing child or a physical ghost of the metaphorical kick she'd just received. Tears burned her eyes. She was trapped in more ways than one and could see no way out.

Anya stepped timidly through the door, closing it behind her.

"I heard. Just a little ..." Anya said as she crossed the room. "Is it true? You were able to bring Jonas back to life?"

Llew nodded. She had a feeling that that fact should have been the one to cling to, but right now she couldn't see past the fact she was alone.

"Don't let him upset you, Llew."

Llew looked up at Anya's reassuring tone. How could she not let him upset her?

"He just never figured on you being a part of Jonas' life, that's all. I think he had it all pretty well mapped out. Give him time. He'll come around. I really don't think it's as bad as he is making out." Anya watched Llew, eyes growing wide, a smile spreading her lips. "Did Karlani guess right? You're pregnant?"

Llew shrugged, and nodded.

"Are you not happy?"

"I don't know what I should feel."

Anya eased herself beside Llew on the bed. "To be perfectly honest, neither do I. I mean, I suppose I should be scandalised, you not being married, but ..." She sidled closer to Llew, head down, a sly smile lifting her cheek. "My cousin, in Ryaen, was supposed to marry Gaemil, but she couldn't ignore a local lad she fancied, especially when he returned her interest. And do you know what?"

"What?"

"They went on to marry. And they're very happy. And she's expecting another child soon." Anya lifted her head, pleased with her announcement.

"Okay ... ?" Llew had no idea what that had to do with her.

Anya's smile dropped. "What I mean is, I know life isn't like the

Aghacian highway. In Phyo, the highways branch in all sorts of directions. And sometimes, you can take a dozen turns and make several stops along the way and still end up in the same place you could've got to if you'd taken the straight line, just maybe not as fast." Anya's smile returned and she slipped her hands around one of Llew's. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that I understand. It feels like I was always meant to be here. Maybe that wasn't my parents', or even Gaemil's original plan, but it's working out. Now, maybe you should have made Jonas court you, or maybe he would never have been allowed to. Either way, you now carry his child, and that child saved his life, and there can be no greater outcome than that." Anya gripped Llew's shoulders, recalling her from the reverie she'd slipped into while watching Anya's hands tell the story. Then Anya stood and, grabbing Llew's hands, pulled her up from the bed. She started bouncing, dancing Llew in a circle. "You're going to have a baby!" Her eyes sparkled.

Llew didn't feel much like dancing, but she rocked on the balls of her feet and rewarded Anya's enthusiasm with a tentative smile.

Anya recognised her reluctance and came to a stop. Hands gripping her shoulders, Anya offered Llew sympathy in a look. Then she pulled Llew into a full embrace.

"It'll be all right, Llew. You'll see."