

Hear Me, See Me, Know Me

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Hear Me, See Me, Know Me

by [Aansero](#)

Summary

He didn't want to die – didn't want to end like this. He wanted to do more, achieve more, get more and more and more out of life than what scraps he had, what life had given him.

The touch of air on his lips was all the warning he got before Vana kissed him, pushing his hand in his hair to tilt his head back.

'Art beautiful,' Vana whispered, pressing feather-light kisses across Csevet's lips and jaw. 'Were the circumstances different I would take thee as my lover and worship thee, and I would love thee more than anything in this world.'

Notes

We very much hope you enjoy this! It was a joy writing for you <3

With all our thanks to our incredible beta, [Island_of_Reil](#)!

The distant mountains were black against the dark-blue sky; half an hour ago there would have been a spectacular sunset, Csevet thought, as he waited in the entrance hall of the Pelevada manor.

This was the last message of the day; after this it would be an hour's ride out of Nelocho, to the relay station where he could finally eat, bathe, and sleep. Impatience pulled at him, but he'd been taught how to stand still, how to wait, and at least it was warm and dry and he had a decent view out of the window.

Finally the page returned with a slim letter that Csevet tucked into his dispatch case. Just before he could turn to leave, the page stopped him with a hand on his elbow. 'Wait,' he said.

He was older than the pages of the Alcethmeret – almost as old as Csevet. 'Odo wanted to speak with you,' the page added, as if whoever that was were one of Csevet's own superiors and not, presumably, a servant from a minor house in some small, insignificant town.

Csevet didn't let his expression change, though irritation flickered through him. It was likely someone wanting him to pass on a message, either to someone in Cetho or en-route, or a local message that was urgent enough that its sender wanted it delivered tonight, but not so urgent to risk one of the house's own staff breaking curfew.

Still, it was a good thing to foster good-will, and if it were too far out of his way he could always say no. Before he could dwell on it too long a woman – Odo, presumably – appeared from behind a servant door, holding a letter of her own. 'Good,' she said, without preamble. 'You off duty?'

'We're returning to the relay station,' Csevet said, dryly. 'Was there something you needed?'

The woman held out a letter and, with it, a coin. 'Can you deliver this to the othasmeire?'

The tilt of her ears showed no shame whatsoever in the bribery. She barely kept her voice down, for all that they were standing in the middle of the manor's entrance hall. It wasn't meant to be done – the Imperial couriers were for Imperial messages only – but it happened regardless, and even were he caught he could always claim he was paying a personal visit, having already finished his deliveries. And in this backwater town he would not be caught. Csevet took the coin and letter, pocketing both.

'If you go round the east side, there's a door set a few steps down. Knock on that and say that you have a message from Odo; they'll know.'

'All right,' Csevet said. His last visit to Nelocho had been years ago, but he remembered the othasmeire: run down and sprawling across the open land on the edge of town, it was made up of several connecting buildings that had been added on one after the other with little care for consistency or aesthetics. Visiting it wouldn't add much more than forty minutes to his journey. That was not so bad – and the extra coin would mean he could eat a better meal than he usually did, and some left over to add to his small pile of savings.

Down the front steps of the manor, Csevet retrieved his horse at the guardhouse and, with a brief consideration of the rooftops to orientate himself, set off. Under him, his horse sighed and resisted him nudging her on faster. She would appreciate getting to the relay station as much as he would, Csevet thought, and stifled a yawn.

The othasmeire was as he remembered it, with the east entrance on the oldest part. He tied his horse to the railing – he did not expect to stay long, and besides, the penalty for meddling with, much less stealing, an Imperial courier's horse was severe enough he knew he could afford to be careless. Down the steps, slick with moss, Csevet knocked on the door. He retreated back up a step whilst he waited, ears flicking against the whine of a mosquito.

The door was opened by a man – tall, not quite middle aged – who frowned at him with clear and unhidden suspicion. He had a narrow face dominated by an equally narrow, beak-like nose; his chin was weak and his sloped forehead exaggerated by a receding hairline. Regardless – or perhaps because of it – there was a kind of striking handsomeness about him, Csevet decided, whilst they stared at each other.

'Odo sent us with a letter,' Csevet said, when it became obvious the man wasn't going to open the conversation.

The suspicion cleared, and the man blinked through a second of confusion, then one of realisation, then another of decided pleasedness. Csevet wondered what was in the letter; he wouldn't have bothered to open and read it – he hadn't thought it worth it even had he the privacy or time – but now he wondered if he ought to have. Then he scolded himself for his curiosity.

'Yes, come in,' the man said, moving to one side, and Csevet stepped down into the othasmeire.

Now that they were standing on level ground, and him well within grabbing distance of the man – a distance Csevet liked to keep between himself and most people – Csevet realised just how tall the man was: well over six foot, head and shoulders above him. Csevet shifted to one side as the man turned back to close and lock the door, but followed obediently as he was led down the corridor. The man had a lamp, but it was not a particularly bright one.

The corridor twisted, going upstairs then down again, open doors on both sides. Csevet tracked their path in his head, not trusting his natural sense of direction, for all that he could rely entirely on it nine times out of ten. The jumble of new and old architecture disorientated, with no apparent order – one room housing a second-hand shrine to Orshan, the next an altar to a god he did not recognise, and the third a storage room full of linens and empty buckets. One doorway was eroded, centuries old; the next one still had its first coat of whitewash. There were few windows, and what windows did exist were small and barred. His ears twitched, trying to catch the sounds of creaking, echoes he couldn't tell whether were real or imaginary. He wished, suddenly and very strongly, that he'd handed the letter over at the door and never stepped foot into this place. The prickle of hair on the back of his neck told him to get out.

His instincts were, occasionally, wrong. But he trusted them all the same.

He would have stopped, made up an excuse to go back – bolted, even – had the man not been walking close beside him, and at that moment turned to herd him, using Csevet's own sidesteps to avoid getting any closer, through a doorway and onto the top of a spiral staircase. Csevet looked down the dark stairs, and everything, from finely honed instinct to every shred of common sense he'd ever had, screamed at him not to go down them.

He walked down the stairs. It took him a moment to even realise he was doing it, because he had not meant to, but by the time he'd pushed past the sheer bewilderment he was at the bottom, opening the door there and stepping through.

The hall was perhaps forty feet by twenty, lit by dim oil lanterns hung around the door. Six uncarved pillars held up the roof, and water pooled knee-deep on the black-tiled floor. A narrow centre strip of the room was raised above the water, connecting the door to an altar: a solid stone table tiled in the same black as the floor. In front of the altar was a well, low-walled and gently overflowing into shallow gutters that emptied off either side of the raised floor. Behind the altar stood a statue of a goddess, and in the darkness it took Csevet a moment to realise she was Cstheio. Her white marble eyes stared down at the altar, the well, and Csevet.

The smell of something stale – stone and dead, waterlogged dirt – hung in the air. It was coming, Csevet knew, from the well.

'Vana,' the man behind Csevet said, voice gentle, and Csevet startled. He hadn't noticed the figure kneeling at the altar.

The man at the altar, Vana, rose and turned slowly, as if he were old and arthritic, though he looked no more than in his late twenties. 'Oh,' he said, and his voice was soft, breathless, and wondrously beautiful. 'Is this...?' he trailed off the word into a question, though no one answered him. 'Thank you, Lithis. Yes, please, go get the others.'

Lithis left, not closing the door behind him. There were white things in the water, dozens of them scattered across the black tiles, but it was too dark to make out what they were. Csevet pulled his eyes from them and back to the man standing by the altar. It was clear, even through his prelate's robes, that Vana was desperately, disturbingly thin. His wrists poked from his sleeves like bones; his eyes were massive in his hollowed-out face. He held himself like his body would break if touched in the wrong way.

They were alone; Csevet could best him in a fight within seconds. Csevet wouldn't need to – he could be gone before Vana could even reach him.

Something rooted Csevet's feet to the ground. He couldn't seem to make his throat work.

'An altar to Our Lady of the Stars,' Vana said absently, gesturing in no particular direction. His hands were trembling. In the singular he added, 'There aren't many stars down here, but we make do.'

He looked expectantly at Csevet as if waiting for him to speak. Csevet could not speak, even if he had had any words to say. He couldn't make any sound at all.

'Was it a clear night, tonight?'

No answer formed.

'We haven't seen stars in years,' Vana said. 'We don't think there's anything stopping us from leaving, but...' he trailed off, frowning, then shook his head. 'These are good enough. There is more here.'

His feet were bare, Csevet saw, as he skirted the well and came up to stand in front of him. He didn't step to avoid the gutter, and left wet footprints on the floor.

Vana reached out, fingertips seeking the curve of Csevet's jaw. Csevet flinched back, breath hissing through his teeth – and Vana stopped short, looking like Csevet had slapped him.

Seconds passed. Csevet didn't move – couldn't move – and Vana seemed just as frozen. He was suddenly aware of another presence in the hall, beyond him and Vana.

Footsteps. 'They're on their way,' Lithis said, as he entered the room. He had not been the third presence. Csevet turned his head to look for another person, but could not find them.

Vana took a sharp step back, tucking his hands into his sleeves. 'Good.'

Something in his voice made Lithis stop as he walked to the altar. 'Vana,' he said. 'Are you well?'

Vana made an impatient sound. 'Just get on with it,' he said, nastily.

Lithis opened his mouth, shut it again, then nodded jerkily. He turned back and went to light the lamps that had been stood and hung around Cstheio's statue – small, simple, smoke-stained, casting stark shadows. In the new brightness, without meaning to, Csevet turned to look at the things in the water. They were small, dice-like, but lumpen and without markings. They were knuckle bones, Csevet knew with sudden, terrible clarity, and knew in the same moment they were not from animals.

Horror broke through him, snapping something side him like a taut thread. Csevet turned to the door, even though he knew as well that it was too late.

He ran anyway.

Up the spiral staircase, almost slipping and falling in his haste. At the top he burst into the corridor and knocked straight into another man, sending them both sprawling to the floor. Csevet didn't spare him a glance as he rolled and scrambled to his feet, grabbing the man's lamp where it had fallen, its candle guttering. The stale smell of the well had crept up the stairs with him and flooded the hallway, chokingly thick, and he thought wildly that perhaps this was why the candles burnt so low. He realised that the other presence in the room had

been Cstheio, and her eyes were still on him.

Csevet ran, and as he ran he realised that the othasmeire, with all its corridors and shrines and storerooms, served no purpose but to lead to the well, like the path of a maze leading nowhere but in to its heart.

The smell did not abate the further he ran. It made him gag; he could barely breathe through it. He could barely see, even with the lamp. But he knew the way out. He could hear Lithis and the other man running behind him.

He knew the way, yet the walls pressed in on him, reeking, oppressive, trying to wind him around, to trick him with false corridors that lead only back to the well. Closed doors hemmed him in, and it were as if they slammed shut ahead of him, the open doors he knew were there always just out of reach, just around the corner. In his head he could hear the sounds of Tethimar's hounds baying with laughter. The memory made him stumble and sob with fear, but he grasped it all the same. He'd escaped Tethimar and Eshoravee. He'd escape this. He knew the way out.

It wasn't until he came to the dead end that he realised he was lost, he did not know the way out, and Lithis and two other men had cornered him. He fought but couldn't stop them as they tied his wrists and ankles and dragged him back to the spiral staircase. Down the stairs, Lithis hauling him and the two other men close behind, and there wasn't any choice but let himself be dragged, or fall and roll down the stairs.

In front of the altar they stripped him naked, rough and impersonal, as Csevet kicked and bit and swore. They dropped his clothes to the floor, undid and tugged out his earrings from his flattened ears. They pulled his hair from its braid, letting it tumble down his back in a dusty white sheet, tangling as he twisted, snarling, fighting against the hands holding him still.

Then they undid the ropes on his wrists and ankles and tossed him onto the altar, bruisingly hard. Csevet felt something deep inside him snag, like cloth on a nail. He tugged, panting as he rolled himself onto his back, but could not free himself, could not tear himself from the black-tiled altar. The men had stood back and were watching him, naked, struggling against nothing on the altar like an animal on display. His panting deepened to ragged sobs as fear and raw humiliation clutched at him, the horrifying unnaturalness of being bound by nothing on his body. The maz sunk into his bones, attaching him to the altar like a fly to a spider's web: strings stuck him down, letting him struggle but not escape.

More than the men, Cstheio's eyes burnt into his skin.

After a moment that felt like an eternity, Vana stepped forwards and laid a hand on Csevet's bare chest. Out of exhaustion more than anything else, Csevet let him. Each limb felt like it were tied to a dead weight; his spine trembled even to arch, struggling and failing to support his body as he fought to roll over, to sit up, to do anything at all but lie there, supine, spread out like meat on a butcher's block.

'How didst thou do that? How didst escape?' Vana traced a pattern on Csevet's neck with his fingertip. 'I can't have got so weak as to... Not so soon.'

His hand fell still on Csevet. His eyes were wet with tears as they stared up at the statue of Cstheio. 'Vana,' another man said, coming up to one side of him, a note of desperation in his voice. 'Here – come, one miscast maz doesn't mean nothing. And look: he's not escaped.'

'It was not miscast,' Vana said, snarling the words; then he blinked, and straightened, twitching his head as if shaking off flies. He looked down at Csevet, searching in his sleeve pocket. He was still looking at Csevet when he pulled out a knife – simple, barely longer than his thumb, with a leather sheath and worn bone handle. The sheath he dropped to the ground, carelessly; Lithis bent to pick it up. 'Never mind,' Vana said, then again, stronger: 'Never mind. She gave us our magic. She hears us still.' His fingers wrapped around the knife handle like spider legs.

'I think perhaps thou'lt be the last,' he said, leaning down to whisper it. 'Though I said that to the two before thee, so maybe not.'

He fisted his free hand in Csevet's hair and bent down to kiss him, hard. His tongue slipped inside Csevet's mouth; Csevet bit him.

Vana laughed as he pulled back. 'Good boy,' he said, blood on his lips. He kissed Csevet again, but closed-mouthed, and on straightening he used the blood and saliva on Csevet's lips to draw a pattern.

The maz wound a little tighter, sinking into Csevet's body through his mouth. The pattern burnt on his skin – Csevet opened his mouth, licking his lips to try wipe it away, but it had already set.

The knife poked through his skin on his left shoulder, just enough to let a few drops of blood well to the surface. 'Hold him,' Vana said, and had his fingertip in the blood even as Csevet arched his back and forced his lungs to throw out a wordless, animal cry. Hands gripped him and held him down, and the magic licked into the bones of his shoulder and collar and ribs like fire.

The next cut was to his right hip, the following two on the soles of his feet, and then two on the palms of his hands. They rolled him over and Csevet barely felt the pin-prick of the dagger on his lower back, but he rasped a sob as Vana painted him in magic and his own blood.

The blood bound him tighter to the maz, and the maz bound him to the altar, irrevocably, utterly. Cstheio's eyes stared down at him. Her awareness fell on him like deep water, rushing up over his head.

Vana's hand were petting him, stroking the length of his back as if stroking a housecat. Csevet tried to twist away but couldn't. His body wouldn't respond to him, only lay there, panting and limp. It had become part of the well, the altar, the heart of the othasmeire, like the tile and stone. His blood would be washed away and his body cut up and buried, but he would remain, stuck to the altar like scorch-marks, a stain, a scar.

'Open up to us,' Vana said, his hands on Csevet's shoulders, his upper back. 'Let us own you.' He spoke in the singular, but it was someone else's hands pushing Csevet's legs apart. More hands on his flanks, the curve of his arse, fingers wet with oil pressing into him. They stretched him open and Csevet twisted, finding his voice at last.

'Don't touch me,' he snarled, but breathless and weak, dredging up the words from somewhere that felt further away than his lungs. 'Get the fuck off--'

Vana's fingers dug into his shoulders, but without the strength to be painful. 'Be still,' he hissed. Magic swelled beneath his fingertips and washed down Csevet, a wave like a slap. The marks drawn on him burnt with a sudden, piercing pain.

Hands on him again, yanking his legs over the side of the altar, and this time his body wouldn't move to fight them save a useless squirm beneath the heat and weight of the hands pinning him. Csevet clenched his teeth as the fingers returned – wet sounds, burning, two blunt, oiled fingers pushing into his hole and stretching him wide. A third finger, and all three pushed in knuckle-deep. A sound tore up his throat, but he swallowed it even before the maz could kill it. He wouldn't scream. Even if the horror were bottled in his lungs until they burst and the fear scraped his throat raw where he held it, he wouldn't scream. He was done being a crying child. He wasn't the terrified boy Tethimar had hunted through Eshoravee.

He wasn't. He wouldn't let himself be.

But he didn't want to die.

The fingers pulled from him, and for a moment he gaped open, cold and empty.

Vana's hands stroked his shoulders as a cock pushed into him, filling him, bright and sharp pain, and Csevet ground his forehead into the cold tile. He wouldn't scream. He wouldn't. It didn't matter that he couldn't. He wouldn't, and he held that mantra to himself, clutching at it like a lifeline.

The thrusts rocked him against the altar, knocking his hips into the hard edge. His toes found the floor but he could barely straighten his legs to brace himself, let alone push away, kick and struggle. His hands grasped uselessly at the altar face; his heart was racing. He could feel the wet friction of the man's cock inside him, the tug and push of his slow, shallow thrusts. It clutched at his lungs, made it harder to breathe – the sickness of violation, humiliation and helplessness, tore at him just as much as the pain. The terrible vulnerability of having four men at his back, his nakedness, his gulping breaths as he tried to control it all – he bundled up as small and tight as he could manage and shoved them away.

He wouldn't scream.

He could feel the fabric of the man's clothes and the wiry brush of his pubic hair; he hadn't undressed much more than unfastening his trousers. Heat seeped through the fabric as if it weren't there at all, and Vana was still running his hands up and down Csevet's back, slick with sweat. The man fucking him pressed down harder, forced Csevet's body to accept his cock, bottoming out and pinching Csevet's hips against the altar. Csevet lay there, struggling

against the maz, unable to even arch his back or twist to struggle away – the man withdrew then thrust back, hard, grunting as he sunk deeper, and for all Csevet was trying to keep the clawing panic down it was swelling and swelling, spilling out of control even as he tried desperately to contain it. It hurt and he couldn't fight – he didn't even have the choice to fight. He was pinned naked and they were going to fuck him and there wasn't anything he could do to stop them.

And then – only there wouldn't be a then, or later. There wouldn't be a time he could piece himself back together before he got home, because they were going to kill him. They were going to sacrifice him and use him and Cstheio's eyes were on him like razorblades, sharp enough to make him gasp.

He could suffer through rape, grit his teeth, relax into it as much as possible to reduce the damage. But he didn't want to die.

The sob escaped, and he clenched his jaws harder. The horror of being this weak, utterly helpless, tore at him worse than the man's cock rocking into him. It was worse than being bound; at least then he had something to fight against. At least there was a definite reason he couldn't hit and kick and struggle away. Now there was nothing but the deadness of his own body, unresponsiveness, uselessness with no true reason his mind could grasp. And deeper, the strings attaching him, not his body, to the altar. *Move; fight. Do something; don't let them win.* He was stuck inside his own body, clawing at the walls of it as it lay there. The panic was getting harder and harder to push down, shut away.

Hands on his hips, hot and rough, hauling him up, running down his thighs to lift his legs behind the knees. They pushed him up onto the altar so he was kneeling on the edge of it, legs splayed wide as they would go. The man's belly pressed down on him, crushing him, his hands on Csevet's shoulders pushing his chest and face down flat. Csevet could feel his face burning, hot with humiliation even through the fear, cheek rubbing against the tiles in rhythm with the thrusts. His legs burnt to be spread so wide; his knees, pressed against the hard tile, ached with a sharp pain.

The man lifted his own leg, nudging it up behind Csevet's, to force himself in at a better angle. Csevet moaned, not able to keep the sound back. His hair was sticking to his skin, catching under his face and shoulders; Vana moved his hand to Csevet's head and pushed his fingers into his hair, nails digging into his scalp.

If he couldn't fight then he should submit, move with the blows instead of against them. He knew that – knew how to close his eyes and rock his hips and relax against unwanted fingers and cocks and – on one occasion – the dry, cold necks of beer bottles. Against laughter and jeers, against *thou'rt a whore; courier boy; slut*. But he'd never had magic cast on him before, save the healing cantrip his mother had paid extortionate amounts for when he'd been a child, sick with a fever that wouldn't break. He'd been blackmailed, threatened, held down with brute force and rope and the weight of the unspoken knowledge that it was his word against theirs, and his word was worthless. But he'd never been so utterly, completely helpless as this.

And he didn't want to die. He didn't want to be bled out, sacrificed, tied to this altar with all

the other souls pinned naked and trembling at Cstheio's feet.

His mouth opened; he was suffocating with it closed. He was panting, hard and fast and hitching, and he couldn't stop or even make it quieter – he could feel the cock inside him, the friction of it, the way it forced his guts to conform to the hard, blunt shape of it. He could hear the oil squelching and the man's hard breathing, and feel the heat of his own body sunk into the black altar tiles reflecting back at him.

The man came with a groan, wetness inside Csevet that made him twitch when his body screamed to be able to throw itself forwards, away. He pulled out with a slick sound, and Csevet couldn't move from where he'd been placed, head and shoulders down and arse in the air, legs spread wide to display everything. Come and oil dribbled out of his hole, and he couldn't move even to close his legs.

The first sob broke out on a ragged exhale. Csevet shut his mouth, biting his lips, but the second tore through as if from a punch to his gut, and then the way was open for all the ones that followed. His whole body shook, silent. His fingers curled weakly where his hands lay either side of his head.

'Good, Ilia,' Vana said, softly, and his hand in Csevet's hair loosened its grip, stroking him gently. 'Ishaia, you now.'

Hands on his hips again, stroking him from the jut of them down to his flanks, thumbs pressing into the soft, sweat-slicked skin of his inner thighs. 'Turn him over,' Vana said. Csevet pressed his eyes closed as he was rolled over, knocking the back of his head against the altar edge, nearly crushing one ear before he managed to flick it free. Hands on his belly, his nipples, stroking the line of his throat. Hands picking up his legs to hook them over a man's shoulders, petting him through the press of a hard cock in the cleft of his arse, rubbing up and down.

Ishaia was larger than the man before. He grunted as he pushed in, deep and thick and stretching Csevet until he thought he'd split open and break. His eyes were wet – a thumb pressed lightly on his closed left eye, sweeping out to smear the tears across his skin.

'I could paint my maz with thy tears,' Vana said, low, like whispering a secret. Ishaia rolled his hips, dragging out before pushing slowly back in, as deep as he could. Csevet thought he should convulse; his body did nothing. 'But I don't think it would do anything. Tears are too thin a liquid for Our Lady to see.'

A pause. The skin of Csevet's thighs prickled as the rough fabric of Ishaia's shirt rubbed against him. Vana laughed – breathless, boyish. 'Do not look at us like that, Lithis. If we can't speak in informal to a man being fucked before us, whom can we speak it to?'

Lithis didn't reply, though Ishaia snorted in laughter. His steady pounding faltered for a moment, then continued but harder, faster, his hands tightening on Csevet's hips to hold him in place. His hands were large, strong, long-fingered; his grip reached around from his palms on Csevet's hips to his fingertips meeting in the small of Csevet's back. Lithis was breathing hard; each thrust felt like a fingernail pressing into an open wound. It hurt, sharp and

immediate; it felt like tearing, like something wrong deep inside him.

Csevet's mouth was open to pant for air, sucking in short, wet breaths. He wanted to beg them to stop. He wouldn't beg; he couldn't beg whether or not he wanted to. Without having to try he knew that even if he screamed there'd be no sound.

But he didn't want to die – didn't want to end like this. He wanted to do more, achieve more, get more and more and more out of life than what scraps he had, what life had given him.

The touch of air on his lips was all the warning he got before Vana kissed him, pushing his hand in his hair to tilt his head back.

'Art beautiful,' Vana whispered, pressing feather-light kisses across Csevet's lips and jaw. 'Were the circumstances different I would take thee as my lover and worship thee, and I would love thee more than anything in this world.'

His hands cradled Csevet's face, fingers stroking the lengths of his ears. 'I would thee bind to our bed and never let thee leave,' he said, and moved in time with Ishaia's thrusts to keep his lips touching Csevet's. 'Every night I would pleasure thee until thou wept'st, and thou wouldst love me. I would bring thee food and feed thee with my mouth, bite by bite. I would clean every inch of thy body with my tongue. I would wait on thee hand and foot as thy slave, devoted to thee heart and soul, and thou wouldst want for nothing.'

His mouth trailed down Csevet's jaw, peppering him with kisses. He sucked gentle bruises on Csevet's neck and collarbones, kissed and licked his nipples, pressing his tongue down to rasp across them each in turn. Csevet sucked his stomach in a little as Vana reached it, scraping his teeth across it, but couldn't do anything else save make a low, moaning whimper in the back of his throat. Vana's touch tickled – and worse, made his cock twitch with interest.

'Are you done with his mouth?' Lithis asked, dryly.

Vana lifted his head only just enough to say, 'Yes, yes.'

Lithis slapped Csevet across the face, hard. Only his other hand, fisted in Csevet's hair, stopped his head from smashing against the edge of the altar.

Csevet couldn't do anything but lie there, moving only as he was jogged by Ishaia's thrusts. Lithis changed hands and slapped him again across the other cheek, just as hard.

Face burning, Csevet waited for a third blow. Instead Lithis moved his hands to hold each side of Csevet's face, yanking at him until he could tilt his head down off the edge of the table, chin pointing up at the ceiling. Csevet tried to close his mouth but couldn't find the strength to stop Lithis pushing in two fingers to hold his jaw open. His fingers tasted like sweat and dust, sharp, salty. He couldn't turn his head. Vana was touching lower and lower, hands stroking and petting his stomach whilst kissing the skin of his hip, close to Ishaia's hand. Then he leant forwards and – at the same time as Lithis pushed his cock into Csevet's mouth – took Csevet's cock in one hand and licked it, the whole length, then put his lips around it and sucked.

Lithis was already hard, his cock long and pushing against the back of Csevet's mouth, nudging into his throat as he shoved in as deep as he could. His pubes scratched against Csevet's face; the smell was thick, musk and piss and sourness. Csevet gagged at the hot, heavy weight on his tongue, filling his mouth, inescapable. He felt himself move – back arching, convulsing, unable to breathe – but it was instinctive, his body acting of its own accord. Vana had his mouth around Csevet's cock, bobbing his head with his tongue curled tight around the underside of it. Pleasure, even through the pain of Ishaia's thrusts – slow and steady agony – rippled through him.

He barely felt the pin-prick of the knife and the shape Vana drew on him, low on his belly. His body shuddered, rocked with the thrusts of the cocks impaling him, twitching as his hips tried to push up into Vana's hot, wet mouth. He couldn't control himself – he couldn't fight, couldn't stop himself hardening and flushing with arousal like clockwork being wound in his guts, like embers being prodded and stoked. He sobbed as best he could around Lithis' cock fucking into his mouth, bruising the back of his throat as saliva dribbled down his face.

He could barely think. He was just a body to lie there and be fucked. Having his hands by his sides, unbound yet useless, was an agony. His legs did nothing unless they were moved by someone else. There was nothing he could do, nothing to fight back with – he had no voice, no movement.

How much longer would it go on for? His legs were trembling, slipping, and Ishaia hoisted them back up, pushed him down a little harder and picked up the pace of his thrusts. He was breathing hard – or someone was, though Csevet couldn't tell who over the sound of his own choking. The friction of the cock in his arse burnt; the oil was mostly gone but Ishaia still thrust without stopping, harder now, grinding in and out only a few inches from the base of his cock. He leant down over Csevet, bending Csevet's legs down with him. He let go of Csevet's hips to grasp his shoulders, and where his hands left Csevet's skin Csevet could feel the absence of them in cold sweat and the swollen, hot feeling of bruising.

He couldn't breathe. His lungs burnt. The cock in his mouth suffocated him, let him gasp in air in tiny breaths as it withdrew only to thrust back in, sloppy, hard and hot and like an iron poker tearing holes in his throat. His chest heaved for breath, body bucking and starting to twist. The mark Vana had made on his stomach burnt, but the pain was laced with pleasure and heat and tightness, and all of them mixed together into one dully beating torment. But the pleasure filled him up like a hand in his guts, fingers twisting around his organs and yanking them hard, inescapable.

Ishaia came, his groan loud, pushing further and further until Csevet was bent almost double. He couldn't feel the come inside him – he hurt too much, his hips like they'd been beaten with sticks, his arse like it had been torn open, a knife stuck inside him slicing his insides with every small movement. He knew it was there anyway, could remember the first man's come and oil pooling inside him, dripping out of him for everyone to see. Ishaia pulled out with a sigh, letting Csevet's legs fall, jerking his body almost free of Lithis' grip on his head and Vana still sucking his cock.

Lithis came only a few minutes after that, deep in Csevet's throat; Csevet gagged and retched

but couldn't spit it out, swallowing reflexively as he gasped for air. The last drops had landed on his tongue as Lithis pulled out, tasting like salt and the sharp tang of metal, but by the time Csevet managed to spit – still upside down, and it dribbled across his cheek – the taste had coating his mouth, his throat. Then it was just Vana on him, with his hand running up and down Csevet's sides, the thin bones of his arms pressing into his stomach and resting on his thighs. With his mouth free Csevet sobbed and gulped for breath, his body heaving with the effort of it, and the pleasure coiled tighter, his orgasm crawling closer. It clutched at him, arousal like knives scoring their way across his belly, his spine, making his fingers curl and tiny whines and whimpers push from his slack mouth. Heat and pleasure held him, and the mark on his stomach burnt hotter.

Then Vana gave Csevet's cock a lick across the head with the flat of his tongue, and lifted his head. He was panting as he kissed Csevet's hips open-mouthed, breath and saliva and tongue scaldingly hot, and he left Csevet's erection to rest against his stomach, straining, aching, leaking pre-come. Csevet's hips nudged up, desperate for friction and release, but none came.

Vana was on the altar with Csevet, kneeling by his side. He leant down until he was lying pressed up against him, and lifted Csevet's head to kiss him on the lips, long and drawn out. 'See how beautiful thou art,' he said, voice hoarse. 'Were we any others I would slay any man who so much as looked at thee.'

Csevet couldn't reply. His cock was just as hard as it had been the moment before Vana had left it. The heavy weight of orgasm that hadn't quite reached him lay over his stomach and chest and did not retreat, did not pull out its claws. Vana stroked his sides, rubbing his thumb across his nipples absently, but did not touch his cock. Csevet whined, trapped, hooked on a taut line. He couldn't retreat from the arousal yet couldn't plummet over the edge of orgasm, and pinned there between them he couldn't tell which he wanted more.

'Vana,' Ilia said, 'is there time to... can we, together–' he spoke in the plural.

'With thy brother?' Vana said, and even through the fog of pain and arousal in his head Csevet could hear the teasing, mocking tone in his voice. 'Why, Ilia, I didn't know wert into such things.'

'With – Vana, no, with Lithis–' Ilia fumbled over the words, his voice reedy with embarrassment. 'You know I would never – we would never–'

Vana laughed. 'Yes, yes, there is time.'

He thought he would beg, if only he could, but he couldn't. He couldn't do anything but moan open-mouthed and panting as hands pulled him up, onto Ilia's lap, and from there hands grabbing him, moving him, lifting him up then down to sit on his cock.

Csevet groaned, already feeling the burn inside him reawaken, the sharp pain starting to poke its way up his spine, through his bones. And still his own cock bobbed between his legs, aching, desperately hard, refusing to be ignored. The pain and pleasure knitted together until he couldn't tell where one ended and the other began, and he sobbed from the way it held his whole body and wouldn't let go.

Ilia sat on one end of the altar, Csevet in his lap; in front of them, Lithis climbed onto the other end. Csevet opened his eyes to watch him, tear-blurred, breath catching in his throat as behind him Ilia rocked his hips and ground his cock in and out of him, burning with dry friction.

Lithis had a bottle in his hands: oil, which he poured onto his fingers, holding them crooked and pressed together so the oil pooled in his hand. Kneeling between Csevet's knees, Csevet's legs pulled apart by Ilia's tight grip on his thighs, Lithis reached down and pressed two of his wet fingers inside Csevet's swollen, abused hole, forcing them in until his knuckles stopped them. He scissored them apart then tugged them away from Ilia's cock, stretching Csevet, and Csevet moaned brokenly, back arching, body refusing to fight any further against the sharp, impaling pain. Lithis added a third finger, reaching down to pour more oil, and Ilia panted in Csevet's ear as he shoved his hips and Csevet forwards for Lithis to better reach. Csevet shook his head; a sudden spike of pleasure rooting through him as Lithis' arm brushed his cock, and his hips bucked up.

The fingers pumped in and out and the stretch of it was sharply agonising, the pain of something wrong inside him. Lithis took away his hand and Ilia rolled his hips to fuck Csevet as Lithis positioned himself, forcing Csevet's legs up almost to his chest. Ilia held them there, and there were too many hands holding him, touching him. Fingers on his nipples, pinching and twisting. Hot, sweaty hands on his waist, his hips, his flanks. A hand on the nape of his neck, making his head fall back against Ilia's shoulder as Lithis lined himself up and pushed in.

A ragged cry forced itself from Csevet's lungs. It hurt; he sobbed a wet breath as Lithis started to move, thrusting slowly and carefully to stop himself from slipping out. The hand on his neck angled his head and Vana was kissing him again, tongue pressing into his mouth, hard and desperate and hungry. His lips moved against Csevet's; he bit Csevet's lower lip, hard, then his tongue. He licked across Csevet's teeth and tongue like he was trying to swallow him, and pinned with his back to Ilia and Lithis at his front, limbs entangled, Csevet could do nothing but sit there and let himself be fucked and kissed and caressed.

Vana's hand fell on Csevet's cock, fingertips brushing the length of it just barely. Csevet moaned into his mouth – a broken cry, an animal-noise.

'Wilt beg?' Vana said, no space between them, his words falling straight into Csevet's mouth. He sounded drunk, or fever-delirious. His hand made a small motion – the beginning of a grip, then sliding away. 'My loved one, wilt beg for my worship?'

There was no strength left, no resolve. Csevet sobbed, 'Please. Please–' The words felt like he was forcing them through cracks in brickwork, and they emerged twisted and scratched and barely recognisable at all. He felt like he would die from the yank of heat and pleasure and pain tangled up in his insides, tearing him apart, sitting inside him and draining the rest of his organs until his heart stopped beating, lungs stopped breathing. It was too much for him to contain. It swelled and burnt and Vana was touching him, and he could not tell whether his hand scorched pleasure or pain or something else entirely. His skin burnt like dry, thin paper, crackling like water in hot oil. His lungs gasped for breath. He could barely feel the shove-

and-tug rhythm of the two cocks inside him, stretching him wide. He thought, dimly, that if they pulled out, all his guts would fall from the gaping openness they would surely leave behind.

Cstheio's eyes lay on him, watching him, and the mark on his belly burnt like a brand.

It occurred to Csevet, very dimly and from a far-off place, that he could move now, at least a little. He could feel the marks of Vana's spells peeling from his body, save the one on his belly. Had that been intentional? Perhaps it was simply too late, now, to bother with fighting.

Vana's hand stroked him, pushed him closer to orgasm. He could hear something in the back of his head – something unbearably massive and bright, too cold and beautiful and large to comprehend. It was an ocean spreading out endlessly, down endlessly, black and speckled with light. It rushed through his head, and the wet sounds of flesh on flesh and panting laid on top of it like splatters of paint on the side of a mountain. Csevet realised dimly that it was the sound of the stars and night sky.

Vana was kissing him again. Lithis orgasmed with a hoarse shout, fingers digging into Csevet's shoulders. Ishaia came only moments later, and as the two of them pulled away and laid Csevet on his back on the sweat and come-slicked altar, Vana's mouth didn't leave Csevet's. His hands stroked Csevet, every part of him he could reach, patting and petting him, trembling hard. He took Csevet's cock again, tugging at it, and Csevet arched up into his hand without meaning to. His release was yanked closer but still out of reach. Csevet's hands clawed at the altar, at the fabric of Vana's robes.

Vana's thumb pressed against the head of his cock, rolling small circles. Csevet sobbed and moaned; he was falling, down through the black tile into true blackness, spotted in stars, and magic furled around him like wings. Vana's hand jerked, rough, and Csevet bucked up again, helpless in his own body. Cstheio's interest dissected him, flayed him apart. But something small nagged in the back of his head, and Csevet grasped at it – the threads that had bound him to the altar were coming loose. One of them had snapped, and Csevet pulled at it, scraping at it like scraping a fresh scab with a fingernail. The thread peeled, and the maz with it.

The fear that Vana would notice – and Cstheio had noticed, Cstheio had seen exactly what he was doing – sent Csevet stiff with a sudden fear, and he took desperate hold of all of the threads binding him and tore at them, shoving his fingers beneath them and prying them apart. They started to fray, snap, and as they did Csevet tore at them harder.

Vana fell still, his mouth and hands, then pulled away. His face was open in puzzlement.

Csevet twisted and kicked him, hard, in the chest. Even as hands grabbed him by the throat, the arms, he saw Vana trip backwards, off the platform, and fall into the water.

'Oh,' Vana said, as he sat there in the water. He lifted a trembling arm, laden with the wet cloth of his robes. The fabric around his forearm was growing darker, and the darkness was spreading. Vana rolled up his sleeve, and with the motion his short knife that he'd kept in his sleeve pocket dislodged from his arm and fell into the water. His blood fell with it.

None of them moved; Csevet let go of the tatters of the maz. Cstheio's full attention fell on him like a bell, sharp and ringing, like a cat on a bird.

He turned and looked up at the statue behind him, into Cstheio's marble eyes. Something touched him, like the clap of wet cloth, but instead of hitting him it swept through his skin and muscle and bone, into deep inside him, and he took it with both hands. Cstheio knew him, but not as the sacrifice.

Csevet raised his hand and with a motion pushed Lithis, Ilia, and Ishaia back, forcing them away under the weight of the magic inside him, that Cstheio had lent him for the price of blood. He swept the maz on him away like cobwebs and got up on shaky feet. He bent to pick up his clothes and earrings, and as he walked to the door he held the four men behind him in place, frozen to the ground. He closed the door, locked it, and twisted the lock so the metal melted and fused, and the stones of the doorframe huddled closer, holding the wood in place. He pressed a hand to the door and made it harder than iron, impenetrable, as deep as the roots of the mountains behind Nelozho.

Up the stairs, and he closed the top door as well, though didn't do anything more than push it shut. The first room on the left was a storage room, empty of everything save a few boxes of candles sitting on the dusty floor. He dressed, and wiped his hands against his clothes, feeling the magic drip from his fingertips. He left the room and walked down the corridors, finding his way out; he'd memorised the route, he remembered, as if from early childhood. The magic continued to drip from him, and he didn't turn back to see if it was puddling on the ground behind him.

His horse was still tied up by the othasmeire door. He untied her, and she pressed her prickly muzzle against his face and snorted, blowing away the last of the magic Cstheio had offered him. Csevet let it go with a shudder. He closed his eyes as hard as he could, tucking his face into the warmth and hair and animal smell of his horse's neck, driving out the staleness from his lungs.

Dark streets in towns he wasn't familiar with were never good places to stop, Csevet knew. He'd have to wait until he had a bath and bed before he shook apart, and only then start to piece himself back together. That was fine. The relay station wasn't so very far. He'd be too sore to ride, he knew, so he took his horse's reins and started walking.

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