
Lives Forever Changed

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A firelizard's shrieks woke Forelen, and he jerked upright in bed, breathing hard. Then he recognized his own bronze Perdo, clinging to the window frame and rattling his wings as he warned off some encroaching treesnake. Sighing more with exasperation than relief, the Masterharper slumped back against the pillows, running a shaking hand through his hair. He didn't scold the bronze out loud, but he didn't have to. Perdo's head turned towards him, and the bronze chirped in a matter-of-fact way, not at all chastened.

The sun was up, at least, though by the angle of the light outside it was still early morning. Early morning at Cove, that is – which meant that it would be hours before the day started far to the west, in Thornblaze. He could go back to sleep, if he wanted to. If he was able to, he amended to himself.

If he was correct about the time, then he had managed only a few hours of sleep. Meetings with the surviving Lord Holders of Kadanzer had lasted well into the evening. That meant that it was the middle watches of the night when Cove's watchrider had finally delivered him home.

It was the privilege of being Masterharper that gave him an Eastern watchrider at more or less his beck and call. It was a privilege he tried always to remind himself should not be abused – no matter how eager brownrider L'sel was for any errand. These were hardly normal circumstances, though. Staying at Thornblaze had been out of the question – fortunately, as it was the last thing Forelen had wanted to do. Anyone would have given him rooms in which to rest, of course. He might have requested it himself and he doubted anyone would have gainsaid him.

But there was barely a Hold that looked to Kadanzer Weyr that was untouched by the tragedy and death of Thornblaze, not to mention the Weyr. And that was not his only reason. Forelen could admit to himself that it wasn't merely diplomacy that had made him turn away offers. It was his own selfish desire for peace and quiet, and familiar, comforting surroundings, that had brought him back to Cove. He'd wanted his own staff to serve him, and his own room to sleep in – even if he had needed to leave every glowbasket in it profligately uncovered to do so.

His mind wandered, the way it would on waking, and he briefly envied those who had been able to leave Thornblaze and return to the more active comfort of a loving family – a wife, perhaps, or like Weyrharper Andrian at Kadanzer, a lover... But that thought reminded him of the

odd, strained exchange he had witnessed between his old friend Andrian and bronzerider R'mal; he hoped he had been right when he'd reassured the bronzerider that Andrian's mood was only a reaction to their ordeal. It was a reminder, though, that friends, lovers, wives, families: they were all an edge that could cut both ways, be a comfort and a strength, or additional grief and trial.

Was that why he had carefully avoided marriage all these Turns? Forelen wondered. Easier to conclude, of course, that there had simply never been time, between his ambitions in his craft and then his meteoric rise to its head. Of course, as Masterharper, and unmarried, he hardly lacked for offers. There wasn't a Lord Holder on the Southern continent who did not eye him speculatively, not to mention his fellow mastercrafters. Forelen had joked from time to time that finding a wife was a task fit to tie a good harper in knots – requiring as it did the harper to abandon his customary stance of neutrality, in order to decide in favor of one party at the expense of all others.

There was more than a grain of truth to the joke, however. So far, the simple fact was that while Forelen could appreciate the *idea* of finding a spouse worthy to be his partner, let alone to be that of a Masterharper, he hadn't yet been impressed by the attempts made to ensnare him thus far. Were all the best ladies of the South married off already? Was that the problem? Or was the problem only that the Masterharper did not know what he wanted in a wife? He only knew that he hadn't met it yet, in any of the high-born girls paraded in front of him by their hopeful mothers.

Perdo left his perch on the window frame and came gliding over to the pillow beside him. Forelen absently stroked the little bronze's head. But for that performance just now, the firelizard had been all-but glued to his shoulder since he had been brought out of the ruins. The earthquake had frightened all of the firelizards away, and then when they returned, the utter darkness that had trapped Forelen and Andrian hadn't allowed him to give the bronze any way to come to him *between* -- even if there had been room for a firelizard, which he very much doubted.

With another sigh, he realized that there would be no going back to sleep, at least not immediately. He could have the bath that he'd decided to postpone the night before, and he knew he would find breakfast and klah waiting when he emerged, if he knew his headwoman at all. It would be after the noon hour before he could decently return to Thornblaze – and return he must, he knew that. Perhaps he could nap after he bathed, or after breakfast.

In the act of rising and drawing on his robe, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror set above the pitcher and basin on the sideboard. He stopped for a moment, resting his hands on the polished stone top and leaning on them, staring at the reflection critically. He imagined that he looked better than he had at this time yesterday, but the lines in his face were still pronounced, and there were still dark circles under his eyes. The grey starting to lighten his once-dark hair, he was used to – but his beard was coming in grey, as well, and for some reason that surprised him. A touch of grey in the hair was a distinguishing mark. A 'greybeard', on the other hand, meant an old man.

"We never think, day to day, that we are growing that much older," he remarked out loud to his firelizard, who had flown over to alight on his shoulder. "And then one day we look up and it seems to have happened all at once." Perdo cocked his head at the reflection briefly, then flipped his wings to his back as if in a shrug.

It was not yet a full beard – not after less than a sevenday, of course. His face and jaw were bruised on the left side, though, and he didn't think he wanted to try to shave, just yet. By the time he could shave – it would be a full beard, then. He frowned at his image. There was no more grey in it than in his hair, at least; a little more on the side and a little less in front. Thank the stars for small mercies, it wasn't coming in white.

It made him look older, no getting around it. But that hardly mattered; after the last few awful days, he *felt* older; he felt almost ancient. An idea intruded, and he chuckled darkly. "Will that discourage all the ladies trying to match me with their daughters, I wonder?"

Perdo chirped emphatically. Perhaps, Forelen thought, he would leave the beard.



Thornblaze Hold hardly looked any less ghastly today than it had the day before. Smoke from many fires, some of them no doubt of grim purpose, created a brownish haze over the ruins and the few standing buildings and the makeshift tents. The air was humid and even at this early hour it was growing hot. What the place could use right now was a good, brief soaking rain, Forelen thought, as L'sel's brown Duorth spiralled in for a landing.

"Who else?" he yelled into the brownrider's ear.

L'sel – who had been a Harper journeyman as a young man, before Impressing, which explained his eagerness to serve as Cove's watchrider now that he and Duorth were too old to serve in the fighting Wings any longer – knew what he was asking. "Minecraft's dragon's here, and he says the Smithcraft's has just gone but the Mastersmith is still here. And that's brown Baseth, from Kadanzer Hold."

As Forelen had expected. Setting Thornblaze and the Potterhall to rights would take a long time, and both the Smiths and the Miners would be heavily involved in it.

L'sel directed his brown to land in the clearing in front of the largest of the tents. Forelen knew that was serving as an infirmary for those still too ill or injured to be moved. He pushed his eye-shields up onto his helmet, wincing as he released the pressure on his bruised cheekbone.

In front of him, the brownrider turned to look at him. "Shall I wait for you, Harper?" he asked, removing his own helmet. It was hot as well as humid on the ground in Thornblaze.

"I may be some time," Forelen warned him. Considering the heat and the stench in the air, he couldn't imagine wanting to hang around the Hold voluntarily.

"That's all right, Harper," said L'sel. The older man wore a worried expression instead of his usually cheerful one. "S'toris's Baseth says that the ridge they're on over there is stable, we can wait up there with them. You just send Perdo up to us when you're ready to go."

Forelen knew better than to argue the point with the brownrider. L'sel regarded the Masterharper's welfare as a personal duty, and he'd been badly rattled by how close Forelen had come to death himself, in the earthquake. If L'sel had thought he'd get away with sticking by Forelen's side as a kind of honor-guard now, then he would have done so.

"I'll do that," Forelen told him, sliding down to Duorth's politely-raised forearm. He thumped the dragon in passing and thanked him as he moved away so that the pair could take off again. He quickly unfastened his riding-coat as he did so; it really was miserably hot here today, even though it was still morning.

His mind was already moving on to the tasks before him as he tried to decide whom he should seek out first. He ran over the list of who was there, according to L'sel's report. The Mastersmith and the Masterminer, Forelen expected. He wondered if either man had yet left Thornblaze at all. The presence of Kadanzer Hold's dragon was more of a surprise at first – but then, as he reflected on it, he decided it shouldn't be. Dracir of Kadanzer had the good fortune to be one of the few Lords personally untouched by the tragedy. And, he was an ally of Rourke of Riverdance, who was still here in support of his daughter Audri, now the de facto Lady of Thornblaze. Of course Dracir would be on hand to lend what help he could.

Then, as Forelen entered the shade of the infirmary tent, another reason for the Kadanzer Lord's attendance struck him. Kadanzer was host to the Healerhall. And the Healerhall was now without its head; Masterhealer Darestin was one of those who had died under the rubble of Thornblaze's Great Hall, like so many others. He shivered, even in the heat, reminded yet again how narrow his own escape had been.

That thought came to him the moment he entered the tent, and caught sight of the young woman wringing out a cloth over the large basin set up near the entrance. Even though she was dressed like a drudge, with an apron on over a simple dress and a kerchief holding back her hair, he recognized her at once; but he still turned her name into a question when he called out, "Mariala?"

The young woman looked up instantly, confirming what he already knew. Catching sight of him, she gave the twisted cloth an extra squeeze and then laid it over the basin's edge, drying her hands on her apron as she came to greet him. "Masterharper! You really are up and about, I see." She gave him a smile, but it didn't reach her eyes.

Forelen reached out and took both of her hands in his. "Mariala, my dear – I am so very, very sorry," he said, keeping his voice low. "But what are you doing here?"

She gave his fingers a squeeze, then drew back enough that he let her hands go. She raised her eyebrows at him, then looked over her shoulder at the tent's interior. "What am I doing here? What does it look like? Helping, of course. We've been promised that more healers will be flown in, later today," she explained, "but – everyone who's here has been on double-shifts for days, and they need all the help they can get."

She sounded a little defiant of even this reasonable explanation, so he only nodded approvingly. "And what of your mother? Is she here?"

"No, not now," Mariala sighed, using a clean corner of her apron to wipe her face. "She and I came together, of course, to join Darall, when we... when he sent us word that Papa had been found. But Mama wasn't being any use, and Lord Dracir was kind enough to take her back to the Hold."

Darall was Masterhealer Darestin's oldest son, a journeyman Healer in his own right. Mariala was the Masterhealer's second daughter, and Forelen knew her as a skilled herbalist and nurse, though never formally trained in the Craft. Old Darestin had had his occasional progressive flashes, when it came to women in his Craft – at least where the Weys were concerned. But his liberal impulses had not extended to members of his immediate family.

That was a pity, Forelen thought. Mariala had taken more after her briskly competent father than after her over-sensitive, quiet mother. Certainly, she wasn't afraid of hard and dirty work, as her presence here demonstrated. He had always admired that about her. Forelen thought she would have made a good Healer, if Darestin had allowed it. But, while he and the old Masterhealer had been on good terms, even friends after a fashion, and while they had shared some of the same values, Forelen had known it was no use pressing the older man on the subject of how he ran his own family. That would be going more than a few steps too far, even for a naturally meddlesome Harper.

Darestin's widow, Minaya, had never liked over-large gatherings. Forelen remembered Darestin telling him with a rueful laugh of how he'd left his wife reclining on her couch in the Healerhall, pleading a headache, on the morning of the Thornblaze wedding. Darestin had reported the ruse with a kind of fond exasperation, allowing his wife the polite fiction even though he saw right through it, and had for many Turns.

Privately, Forelen could well imagine that Minaya had been of little use here, after her husband's body had been recovered from the rubble. With Darall and Mariala on hand, there was little reason for the Masterhealer's widow to stay, and he approved of their sending her home. To tell the truth – though he wouldn't have said so out loud – he'd been dreading dealing with Minaya over the question of rites for Darestin. He was grateful that Dracir had removed her from the scene, for he much preferred dealing with Darall and Mariala instead.

"That was certainly kind of him," Forelen agreed with the young woman, adding, "To the Hold, and not the Hall?"

"Yes, Lady Khmarra invited her. We thought she would be better there than at the Hall." Mariala shrugged. Forelen could guess why. The Healercraft hall was apt to be in some turmoil, having lost the Masterhealer; turmoil unlikely to soothe a widow, let alone one with Minaya's delicate temperament.

Then Forelen wondered if there wasn't another reason. Minaya was indeed the widow of the old Masterhealer now, and the Masterhealer's apartments at the Hall would soon belong to another. If it had been up to Forelen to advise, he could have thought of no better solution than to distract Minaya by making her a guest at the Hold, leaving her children and the Healerhall's headwoman to relocate her to other quarters in her absence, and ready the suite for a new occupant.

Thoughtfully, Forelen squinted around the tent's dim interior. "Who is in charge here, if you don't mind my asking?" he said.

"Master Talloran," she told him, looking around as well. "I think he's stepped out. Lord Dracir brought him in last night."

The Masterharper nodded. Darestin had not exactly had a successor all picked out. He'd been fond of saying that that would be the Craft's business once he'd died, and his masters would do as they pleased then anyway. Talloran was certainly in the running, though. From Forelen's perspective, he would be a welcome choice.

"I will make a point of seeking him out while I'm here." He might be able to get a sense from Talloran how soon the Healercraft might move to name a new Masterhealer; or, whether they were likely to postpone the matter for a full conclave of the craft. Forelen knew that he himself would much prefer the former; he suspected that most of the craft would, too. But it would be up to the masters, and Darestin's loss would have unsettled them. They might dig in their heels at being rushed in the matter. "In the meantime, I had better find your brother, if he's still here –"

"He is," Mariala told him, "but he's sleeping right now. He was on shift all through the night. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Again, there was the slight lift of one eyebrow, and a bit of a challenge in her voice. Forelen knew, however, that it was a not a challenge aimed at him. He had known Darestin and his family well enough, been a guest often enough at the Healerhall, that he was a known quantity to Mariala, as she was to him. She knew quite well that his views on the capabilities of women were more liberal than her father's had been – he and the Masterhealer had debated the matter often enough, though they'd always been careful to keep it friendly.

No, he sense that her defiance here was aimed more at her father's memory. She was here, and she was helping because she could not imagine doing otherwise, and she and some of her sisters had become examples of the notion that in any Craft, a person did not always require rank-knots to be useful. It was the chief means of female contribution to many of the Crafts, and it always had been. But she knew, as did Forelen, that had her father been here, he would still have looked faintly disapproving, nonetheless.

"Well..." Forelen scratched at the stubble on his chin, almost wincing at the feel of it. Like his cheekbone, though, his jaw was still too bruised on the left side for him to want to try shaving just yet, so for now he had to suffer through the uncomfortable early stages of growing a beard. "Yes, I expect you can. It isn't a pleasant matter, but in this weather, it is a pressing one. Do you know what rites your father desired? Had he spoken of his wishes?"

The young woman winced briefly, but then she nodded. She looked up at him directly, and her expression was weary. "Darall and I discussed it yesterday. His body was put on the fire last night. That was what he wanted, and there seemed to be no sense to us in waiting."

Forelen laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. "That sounds very sensible to me," he told her soothingly. "It isn't my area of expertise, obviously, but even this Harper

knows the danger you would court here if you failed to act quickly.”

She nodded. “Almost all are being cremated as soon as they’re found – people and beasts alike. Thornblaze has been through enough, it can’t afford sickness to spread through those who remain. Lord Rourke advised it, and Kennar agreed immediately, even before Talloran arrived. Rubicon’s watchdragon took Lord Lacob’s body away –“

“Yes, the Rubicon tradition tends towards giving the remains to the sea,” he commented, and Mariala shrugged.

“Lord Dracir’s brownrider offered to take others to the Snowy Wastes, if anyone wanted, since they won’t keep here. But Darall and I thought Papa would find it fitting...” All at once, the young woman’s hazel eyes filled up with tears, and she turned her head away abruptly, wiping at them with the heel of her hand.

Forelen took a clean cloth from his belt-pouch, and handed it over without a word. Mariala gave him a quick smile. “I think he would, indeed,” he told her.

He wished he could do more to comfort her. He knew her well enough that if they’d had any privacy, he would have offered to take her in his arms, even as an analytical part of his mind pointed out to him that with her father gone, he must be careful of over-familiar seeming gestures to which he had no right. The thought that he had no right to it was an unexpected stab of pain, and carefully, Forelen put that thought away for examination at another time. Just now, he felt he knew Mariala well enough to know that she would not want such an intimate scene in so public a place.

“The Craft will want some sort of memorial, I’m sure,” she went on, after a moment. “But you’ll have to ask Talloran about that, he would know better than I. It’s not so pressing, now. Darall said he would collect some of the ashes from that pyre. There’s a meadow above the Hall where Papa wanted it done, if there’d been a choice, Darall said, but as it is...”

“Of course,” the Harper said briskly. “I’ll find out what the Healercraft wants done, but I’m sure it will be easy to arrange.”

Mariala gave him a shrewd look. She didn’t try to return the hand-cloth. “It will be up to you to arrange them all, won’t it?”

Forelen shrugged. “All those of rank, certainly. I would hardly do them less than the honor they, and their families, and their Holds or Crafts deserve.”

“No, *you* would not,” she agreed, with cryptic emphasis. On another day, he might have pursued that. Right now he guessed that she might be thinking of the trying matter of Cathay Hold’s refusal to send relief supplies, and that was a problem he could afford to put off until tomorrow.

Unexpectedly, then, she reached out towards the bruised left side of his face; he flinched, even though she stopped just short of touching. “Thank the Egg, at least we are not also mourning the loss of the Masterharper,” she said.

Forelen caught her hand and squeezed it, giving her a small smile. “The Masterharper knows how fortunate he was,” he told her. “And since this is the worst of it, he has little excuse to avoid carrying out his duties.” He saw a flash of disappointment cross her face before she hid it, and tightened his grip on her hand once more before releasing it.

“I will be sure to put my head in here again, before I leave. Though if you take my advice, young lady, you should be careful not to neglect your own rest, if you get the chance.”

“If I said the same to you, would you listen?” she shot back.

Forelen felt a pang, because in words and tone it was very much like something her father would have said. It reminded him of how much of what was good in Darestin his daughter had inherited. It also warmed him, to know that there was someone besides Headwoman Jessova at the Harperhall, or brownrider L’sel, who could look past his rank and see a man about whose welfare they cared. It pleased him that Mariala was bold enough to say it, too. It came to him, with a stab of surprise for the unbidden thought, that if he ever meant to marry, he could do far worse in the choice of a wife than Mariala.

“I just might,” he said with a smile, then turned and left the tent in search of Lords Rourke and Dracir.



2854.01.02

It was the last day of the traditional Turn’s End Festival of Kadanzer Hold; but to Mariala of the Healerhall, the occasion felt anything but festive. To be fair, she imagined that the same was true all around the holdings of Kadanzer Weyr. The deadly earthquake at the Thornblaze wedding was still too soon in the past, the losses still too raw, everyone’s world still too unsettled for it to be otherwise.

Some tried to make of this Turn’s End an optimistic celebration of new beginnings. For the Southern Healerhall, however, it could not be anything but a time of final remembrance. This last day of the festival was that chosen for the funerary rites of Masterhealer Darestin, killed in the collapse of Thornblaze Hold.

Mariala stood in a line with her sisters and brothers, dressed in sober colors. As the oldest unmarried daughter, it was her duty to support her mother while her oldest brother Darall assisted Masterharper Forelen and the new Masterhealer Talloran in the rites that remembered her father. They had no body, nothing but a jar that contained ashes from the communal pyre at Thornblaze on which her father’s body had been burned. It would have to do.

Minaya, Darestin’s widow, was making as much fuss as Mariala had expected. She knew that her thoughts towards her mother were uncharitable, and ruthlessly restrained outward sign of them. But she had never been much in accord with her mother; Mariala had taken after her pragmatic father, and had never had patience with her mother’s supposed delicacy or her dramatic moods.

Granted, Mariala had had the luxury (or so she thought of it) of going to Thornblaze and throwing herself into the work of the healers, helping the demoralized hold to recover from its ordeal. That had brought home the reality of her father’s death to her very quickly, and forced her to deal with it; it had also given her something of importance to do. Her mother had had none of that. Not that Minaya would have wanted such a thing; her idea of recovering from her husband’s death had been to retire to a couch in Lady Khmarra of Kadanzer’s solar, to weep and be attended to. It

would have been utterly foreign to Minaya's thinking to imagine working at such a time, let alone in such a horrid place as the ruined hold that had killed Darestin.

A cynical part of Mariala's mind – a part that sounded a little like the ironic tones of her father's voice, and a little like the dryly careful observations Masterharper Forelen was given to – thought that her mother was putting on a spectacle now of the devastated, grieving widow because this might be the last opportunity she was given to impress such a lofty assembly. Already Darestin's family had been moved out of the Masterhealer's apartments in the Hall, those given over to Talloran, whose confirmation as the new Masterhealer was confidently expected to come at the next Conclave. What would become of Darestin's widow was unclear, and on some level, Mariala was quite sure that her mother knew it.

Darall was still just a journeyman at the Healerhall. He was not even married yet. He had remarked to Mariala that he expected Talloran to suggest his assignment to a Hold, and part of him was even looking forward to that idea. He had never had his father's ambition, and such a posting would suit him. It would likely allow him to find a wife and start a family. Their older sister, Minessa, had been married to a healer journeyman who'd taken her off to Maori Hold. She had kept in touch with the family through her firelizard, but Mariala knew that she was no more fond of their mother than Mariala herself was. It was no use expecting her to offer to take Minaya in.

It was equally no use expecting the widow to stay at the Hall. The truth was that Minaya had few skills to speak of; a bit of gardening, perhaps, but the masters in charge of the herb gardens at the Hall would not want her interference. They had barely tolerated her when she was their Master's wife, as it was. And while she was not hopeless in the matter of directing the Hall's domestic arrangements (indeed, she could be methodical and organized when she put her mind to it), Minaya's personality had won her few friends on the Hall's staff. She and the headwoman had never gotten along, and though the Masterhealer's wife had a right to a say in the way the Hall was run, Minaya had left the field to her rival long ago.

The disposition of their mother wasn't Mariala's only worry. There were her younger siblings to account for as well. Her younger brother Dinen was safely apprenticed to the Healerhall, and expected to walk the tables and receive his journeyman's knots within the Turn. But her father had never approved of formal craft training for her younger sisters any more than he had for herself; and all of them had been too young for him to begin considering arranging marriages for them. He hadn't even done so for Mariala, and she was past the age where she would have started being considered unmarriedable in the holds.

It was no use expecting her mother to stir herself enough to see her daughters settled, she added to herself. Darestin had always asserted that as his own right, and Minaya had acquiesced to it without an argument. Mariala realized that she would have to take her sisters aside on her own, and see if she could determine their wishes, at least. She could count on Darall's help, even if he had little influence.

Perhaps, she thought, she could appeal to Talloran for aid. The new Masterhealer had not been a close friend of their family, but his relationship with Darestin had been cordial, and he was known as a fair man. Minaya, of course, had had little good to say about him over the past few sevendays, blaming him for turning the family out of what had been their home – but that was hardly fair. It wouldn't seem unnatural if she asked him – on her mother's behalf, of course – if he would promise to act in a father's stead for the old Masterhealer's remaining family.

Or... Mariala's eyes then fell on Masterharper Forelen, standing in the center of the dais and chanting an elegy for the Masterhealer that he must have written very quickly, though it didn't show. His deep, measured tones gave his words a ringing stature suited to great deeds and great men, but he also somehow infused the very formal cadences of the elegiac chant with the warmth and respect he had held for the older master. Mariala could not relate the memory of her father with a stylized, heroic portrait, but when she concentrated at last on the Masterharper's words, she found she could recognize her father in them after all.

Yes, Forelen was also a friend to the family. If Talloran hesitated to help them, Mariala was sure that the Harper would. She hoped, in fact, that he had some brilliant suggestion to make regarding their mother, since she and Darall were at such a loss. Being Masterharper, Forelen could put a word into ears that Mariala would not dare herself to approach.

Beside her, her mother sobbed again and sagged as the Harper's words struck her in some particularly poignant way. Mariala managed to keep from rolling her eyes and stiffened herself and her arm, bearing Minaya up again. She thought she saw Forelen looking at them for just a moment, almost thought that she met his eyes, though he was too far away to be sure. It would be like him, though, to take notice of them, to study them in concern. Nothing escaped Forelen's notice, in Mariala's experience.

Now, she watched him fondly. She listened gratefully to the soothing rhythm of his deep voice. She marvelled again at how he could wear such rich, formal attire, and yet look so utterly at ease in it. She studied him critically, knowing that he had suffered as much as anyone these last few sevendays, wondering how he managed to hide the strain and look – or at least, sound – as if it hadn't touched him as deeply as she thought it must have.

No, she corrected herself. The Harper did not look or sound strained – but he did not look untouched, either. The beard that he had allowed to grow and that he still wore, neatly trimmed, made him look much older than she knew him to be. The silver in it had drawn attention to the silvering of his hair, that she had not noticed the last time she had seen him, in happier days.

She didn't want to think just yet about the fact that had occurred to her just days ago – that without her father here at the Healerhall, her family would no longer enjoy the Masterharper's friendly visits. Her family, indeed, might not be together as a family for very much longer. Who knew where they would all be a month from now? Scattered, perhaps. Even so, when the Harper came to visit the Masterhealer, it was Talloran he would sit and drink with. That was the way it had to be, but privately, Mariala

could regret it all the same. More, in fact, she realized very well, than she had a right to.



Forelen finished his elegy for Masterhealer Darestin, the last words ringing back to him off the the buildings surrounding the Hall's courtyard. He was aware of Talloran stepping forward, to say the words that would conclude this ceremony – the Masterharper's third in as many days – but Forelen's eyes remained fixed on the knot of Darestin's family, on his old friend's widow and her children ranged behind her. He had seen Minaya sink dramatically, and Mariala move to support her mother, even as most of his attention had been on the words of the chant. Now he was able to spare a thought for that tableau, for Minaya, for Mariala and her sisters, and what would happen to them now.

Minaya was a problem – not, Forelen admitted to himself, *his* problem, but he would hardly be the Masterharper if his natural instincts did not lead him to meddle in the affairs of others. Her sons were well-situated, but whatever fate befell Darestin's widow would affect her daughters profoundly. He cared about them, truly; he even cared about Minaya, although she was the last sort of woman he could ever have married himself. He cared, because he knew them, and he knew that Darestin would have wanted someone to be concerned for their welfare – someone with the power to do something about it.

The Masterharper wasn't sure that his meddling in this would be taken well, but if it came to it, he would do it. He owed his old friend that much. Yet, he admitted, too, that he cared the most about the fate of one daughter in particular.

It had been a hectic few sevendays since the wedding. He had nearly worn out even L'sel's sturdy brown, travelling across the continent and back many times, visiting many holds and halls, doing what a Masterharper ought to do. He'd soothed, he'd listened, he had taken charge of arrangements when those whose duty it was seemed at a loss. He had spent each day intruding on families, witness to how they dealt with the grief of losing one of their own, and how the complex ties of duty and love affected those reactions. He had returned each night to his empty apartments at Cove, feeling a dissatisfaction with that arrangement for the first time in his life.

He knew what was missing. And now, out of this tragedy, he had been shown where to find what he now sought.



Forelen took his leave of Lord Dracir and his lady with a bow, seeing that Talloran was headed for them and guessing that the new Masterhealer would want a word with his Lord without a Harper's sharp ears in proximity. The forecourt of the Hall was crowded with dignitaries – light on attendance by the lords and craftmasters who lived under Kadanzer Weyr, though most had tried to send some representative, but the rest of the South and even some of the North had made up for that. The vast majority were

Healermasters, of course, including the North's Masterhealer Heidris, a formidable old man barely able to walk, with two younger masters always in attendance. The trio was bearing down even now on where Talloran spoke to Kadanzer's Lord.

Forelen removed himself quickly from the older Masterhealer's sights. He doubted any of the healers would be much interested in him, anyway. He was being careful to maintain the appearance of neutrality in regards the craft's succession. He knew Talloran, and liked the other man well enough, but that fact would win the other master little support if the Healercraft got the notion that the Harpers were trying to influence their decision.

Purposefully avoiding catching anyone's eye, Forelen sought out the face that had occupied his thoughts for the past sevenday and more. Finally, he spotted her – Mariala was standing to the side and behind the chair into which her mother had sunk after the funeral had ended. Minaya might be a relentlessly superficial woman, Forelen thought, but she wasn't stupid. She must know that this feast following the funeral marked the end of her importance at the Healerhall. Indeed, the feast had not even begun and she was already fading as the center of attention, although there was still a steady stream of guests ready to bow over her hand and wish her well. Minaya was not an old woman, but Forelen doubted she would marry again. Her childbearing days were past, and she had little to offer a man of rank as she had little skill in domestic ordering, no influence, and few connections.

That being the case, the Harper found himself marveling at the woman's luck. First, to find in Darestin a husband who wanted nothing more than she'd had to offer: a very pretty face and a helpless manner that cried out for a husband to take care of her and provide for her, so long as she gave him healthy children. And now... now she had found another protector who would ask even less of her. To think, that a manner and approach to life that, in truth, he himself valued not at all could nonetheless be so successful for the person who employed it.

Thus it was with a grudging sense of admiration that he made his way to Minaya's side and, after catching her attention immediately (as none of those surrounding her at the moment were anywhere near his equal in rank), bowed and took her hand. His eyes flicked up to Mariala, standing quietly behind her mother, watching him with a raised eyebrow, as he covered Minaya's hands with his and said, "My dear lady. May I be the first to tell you how delighted I was to hear from Lord Dracir and Lady Khmarra just now of their offer to you?"

Minaya gave him a dignified smile. Behind her, he could see out of the corner of his eye that Mariala looked surprised. "I assure you, no one could have been more surprised than I when Khmarra told me this morning, Forelen." His long friendship with her husband let her forego the formality of his title. She didn't spare a glance for her daughters, but turned to include the wife of one of the other healer masters, seated nearby. "I suppose if they have told you, then I may tell everyone."

"Yes, Mama – what news is this?" Mariala asked, her eyes seeking Forelen's, a perplexed look on her face.

“Why, Lady Khmarra has invited me to become one of her waiting-ladies,” Minaya said, allowing herself to look pleased while holding onto the solemnity expected of a widow at her husband’s funeral. There were gasps from her younger daughters nearby, and Mariala’s hand went to her mother’s shoulder. Minaya covered it with her own. “Is that not excellent news? We shall all go to Kadanzer Hold after the feast.”

The younger girls looked surprised, and uncertain; Mariala looked shocked. Forelen was surprised that she, at least, hadn’t guessed that this might be the outcome. Kadanzer’s Lady had taken Minaya in directly after her husband’s death; there was nothing she was suited to better than the light gossip and embroidery of a high-ranked lady’s hall. Dracir was known to be a generous man, and he had been a friend to Darestin too. It did the Lord credit, Forelen thought, that he was willing to extend his protection to his old friend’s remaining family.

“It is excellent news indeed,” said Forelen warmly, although he could see from the expression on Mariala’s face that she doubted it. It *was* excellent news – for Minaya, at least. For the others, well, they would see.

“I am so grateful to them both that I cannot tell you,” Minaya was saying. “They have been the very picture of kindness – Darestin would be so pleased to know how they honor his memory and his family.” She directed a tremulous smile around at all of them, and Forelen nodded gravely in response.

“So he would. He always spoke of Lord Dracir in the highest terms.” That was even more or less true, Forelen reflected. The admiration between the two men had been real. “Minaya, may I ask if your younger daughters will be sufficient to attend you for a moment while I take Mariala away from you?” This time, he did not look at Mariala for her reaction, instead catching the eye of Daraya, the next-oldest, who straightened up and nodded with dignity.

“I suppose so, Forelen. Do bring her back,” said the widow, almost playfully, nodding her dismissal of them.

Forelen held out his arm to Mariala, and she took it automatically, still giving her mother a thoughtful, calculating look. The Harper put her hand in the crook of his arm and led her away, and when they were out of earshot of her mother, Mariala said in a low voice, “It’s true, then?”

“Oh yes. Dracir made it quite clear that he knew he was taking in all of you.”

“That *is* generous of him,” the young woman said, and then she grimaced. “I hope that didn’t sound tart,” she added, glancing up at him. “I just – I had been –“

“I imagine,” Forelen said slowly, “that you had been worrying about where your mother might go, not to mention what would happen to your sisters and yourself.”

Mariala nodded, tightly. “To be honest, I didn’t expect Mama to arrange anything herself...”

The Harper shrugged. “She may not have. It wouldn’t surprise me if it was all Khmarra’s idea.” Perhaps they would never know for sure. That was his suspicion though, based on his knowledge of Minaya’s ways, and of how her husband had trained her just to sit back and seem helpless until everyone else rushed in to fix her problems for her. It wasn’t something that Forelen admired in a woman, admired

in anyone, really – but in this case, reluctantly, he had to admit that it seemed to have worked.

“Yes, I suppose so. That would make sense. I wonder –“ Mariala started, and then she bit her lip.

Forelen had walked her to the edge of the crowd, and there was, as he had planned, no one within earshot. “You wonder?” he prompted, giving her a smile of encouragement when she looked up at him.

She sighed, and seemed to come to a decision. “I wondered – I thought, perhaps, of asking my sisters if they had any ambitions towards the healercraft. I’m not sure about Talloran, but with Papa gone...”

The look she gave him dared him to be shocked; but she knew him better than that, or she ought to have. He nodded slowly. “Yes, perhaps. Though, more likely after he is safely confirmed by Conclave, don’t you think? I... somewhat expect Talloran to prove more progressive on that score than your father was. But I wouldn’t expect him to change the Craft overnight, either.”

Mariala shook her head. “No, of course not. And I don’t know what my sisters want, anyway. Maybe they will be perfectly happy to have Lord Dracir find marriages for them.”

She said that last in lightly mocking tone, and Forelen took a deep breath. “And what about you, Mariala? What would make you perfectly happy?”

They had come to a stop. She huffed out a breath, and looked out over the crowd instead of at him. “I don’t – to be honest, I don’t know. I think...” Finally, she looked up, her expression rueful. “I don’t want to go to Kadanzer Hold. I cannot imagine becoming another of Lady Khmarra’s companions, but what else would they allow me to do? I don’t even know if Master Talloran will support women in the craft – but I’m too old to apprentice, anyway.” She gave him a half-smile, as if she thought she sounded foolish. “What does the wise Masterharper think I should do?” she asked, lightly.

Forelen smiled back, and put his hand over hers where it rested on his arm. “Well, this Masterharper thinks the wisest thing would be for you to agree to marry him.”

He couldn’t quite believe that his suggestion came as such a shock to her, but he had to admit she looked genuinely startled. “You know me better than to wonder if I mean it,” he added. “Of course I do.”

“Of course you do,” she repeated, still staring at him. “I just never –“

“Never? Oh dear,” he said, teasingly. “I doubt it does my suit much good if you’ve *never* --“

That did spark a reaction from her. She hit his arm. “Don’t interrupt. I was about to say that I never for a moment guessed that *you* might think of me that way.”

“Too old a friend of the family?” Forelen asked. “Too many Turns your elder?” That part worried him, he admitted it. He knew of other high-ranking marriages between partners separated by the fifteen Turns that he and Mariala had between them – but that was amongst holders.

She raised an eyebrow. “Too eligible a bachelor for the likes of me?”

“The likes of you?” Forelen scoffed. “The daughter of the Masterhealer?”

“No longer that,” Mariala reminded him, sadly, and he nodded.

“A good thing, then, that I do not love you for that alone,” he told her seriously. “That it is perhaps last on the list of the reasons I love you.”

“You love me,” she repeated, frowning at him. Trust Mariala, he thought fondly, not to give him the type of answer that the harper ballads demanded.

“Yes, I’m quite sure of it. I respect you, I admire you, and I cannot think of anyone I would rather have at my side. And this Masterharper has learned, recently, that life may be short, and uncertain, and he thinks that he very much wants someone at his side. If, that is,” Forelen finished, in his most persuasive tone of voice, “you may be convinced to want the same thing.”

Mariala searched his face a moment longer, and then nodded once, decisively. “Actually,” she said, “it won’t take very much convincing at all.”

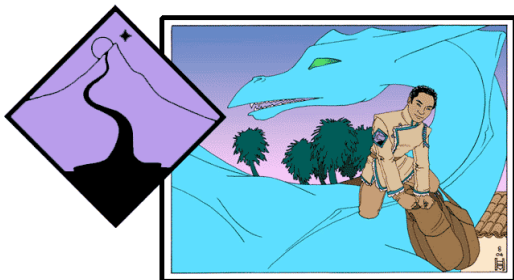
Forelen allowed himself a full smile then, and was happy to see it reflected in her expression. “Well, that was exactly what I hoped you would say. Come along then, my dear, and let me ask your mother for your hand.”

Beside him, Mariala laughed, still sounding a little disbelieving. “My *mother*? Do you seriously imagine she will say anything but yes?”

“It seems very unlikely. But proprieties are proprieties, and the Masterharper, above all, must uphold them.” Forelen was glad to see that that almost made her laugh.

They started walking again, and he steered them back the way they had come.

END



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