
Fragile

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The wedding party was over, the bride and groom had been seen off to their bridal bed, and his own retreat, long overdue, had finally been made. The wedding celebration for Kabald, the newly confirmed lord of Thornblaze Hold, had lasted near to dawn, as time turned at Thornblaze. Back at Drake Hold, it was only an hour or so past midnight yet – and Gibran felt the extra hours like weighted lead in the marrow of his bones.

"My lord," Tomrys said as he followed Gibran into the private library of Drake Hold. "May I bring you some wine?"

"That's not necessary," Gibran said. "Kabur made sure that I drank quite enough. It's a wonder he didn't see me folded under his table back at Thornblaze." Gibran shed his formal coat, draping it over the back of his favorite chair as he passed. Gibran settled in his favorite spot in the cushioned window seat which looked out over the dark main square of the Hold, and picked up the gitar that rested in its stand just within arms-length. "Leave it," he told Tomrys when his servant reached after the coat. "I'm quite fine, Tomrys. You needn't wait up on me. Go to your bed and your wife."

"M'lord, are you sure you wouldn't like klah, then? At this hour of night--"

"—all sane men are asleep, or wish to be," Gibran interrupted. "Tomrys, you're dismissed. Go to bed."

Tomrys bowed and ghosted out of the doorway, shutting it silently behind him.

Alone at last, Gibran gave a shuddering sigh and raked a wisp of hair out his eyes, then gave the closed door a wary look. The nimble, soft-footed manservant had been his half-brother Novran's valet since before their father's death. And Tomrys's full loyalty wasn't something Gibran would fully trust.

Although the Conclave had confirmed Gibran's inheritance of Drake Hold, he was not fool enough to believe all of Drake's household were automatically his as Lord. The loyalties between servants and Novran's widow, Lady Jerial, were too long established for that. And Gibran's sister-in-law had remarked one time too many for his comfort that she would rather see him pushing up sungazers from a nice, deep grave in the holding's hindmost pasture, than warming her dead husband's chair. She was equally unhappy with being supplanted by Gibran's wife, Cevana.

Jerial was fond of dramatics. And Gibran did not really fear finding himself poisoned by her favorites among the household staff. But on grim, miserable midnights such as this, any dark turn of events seemed a possibility.

They were at an impasse, Lady Jerial and himself. His sister-in-law feared for her son Elrial's safety and wanted to ensure that the boy remained Heir of Drake Hold now that Gibran had assumed lordship. But Elrial was far too young to face Conclave himself. Yet if Gibran had not satisfied Conclave, then it would have been every second-son's brawl to see who took Drake away from Elrial's bloodline – and first and foremost in that scrap would be Jerial's own brothers and nephews. Histrionics aside, Jerial knew as well as Gibran that Jerial understood and respected the risks of another regent stepping in Elrial's stead. A man who wanted Drake for his own bloodline could find any number of accidents an active, curious and trusting boy of Elrial's temperament could succumb to. It was knowing his sister-in-law was an intelligent, risk-savvy woman that gave Gibran faith in the table Drake Hold's cooks laid out before him every night.

No, as much as Jerial feared Gibran as Drake's lord, until young Elrial was old enough to stake a claim to his father's holding, then Gibran was the best of his sister-in-law's bad choices. Knowing that, Gibran had formally named Elrial as his heir before the full Conclave tonight – and that action had won him some uneasy ground with Jerial.

Unless, of course, Lady Cevana should produce a boy child to compete with Elrial's claim, or worse, some bastard son come out of the woodwork. Gibran was fairly certain he had accounted for all of his own dalliances, but wild oats coming back to haunt a man was always a risk for any lord's son.

Shards, but it was a miserable tangle. Gibran dismissed the wretched knot from his mind, struggling for a sense of balance regarding the events of the day. He settled back with the gitar in his arms, its weight as familiar as any lover's, and fiddled absently with the tuning pegs until he was satisfied with the instrument's voice. Then he let his fingers go, finding and building on whatever tune they would.

The chords his fingers stretched for came out melancholy. He wove around the notes, plucking strings in a reach for what should have sounded triumphant but instead came out defeated.

Lord Gibran. There was music in that title, or there should have been. Gibran had not been close to either of his brothers, Novran or Galim, since childhood. He was loathe to admit how little he had really mourned their deaths. No. He had mourned, certainly, but more for the death of the dream that had been killed by his inheritance. He had not won the hold he had wanted, and the last toasts he'd been forced to drink this night had been to the man who had taken Thornblaze and its real prize as his bride.

Gibran took the gitar into his arms for comfort, knowing Lady Audri was forever lost to his embrace. Gibran had made his play for her hand, but it wasn't to be. Novran's

death, and Galim's subsequent suicide, had ended those hopes. Today's marriage celebration at Thornblaze Hold had just been the lingering, bitter closing of that doorway.

'Fool,' he told himself sharply, wrestling the grief away. Someday, perhaps, he'd come to his senses and be grateful for today's loss. His chances of winning the Lady Audri had always been slight, and Thornblaze Hold came with its own inheritance of difficulties. The hold was still struggling to rebuild after the devastating earthquake of nearly a Turn and a half ago, and it would be Turns before it would fully recover – much less ever match Drake's wealth in gems, timber and grains.

No. The lady Audri's considerable charms aside, Gibran knew that circumstance had given him better than he had dreamed of in Thornblaze Hold. And he had to remind himself, bitterly, that his present wife had once been equally sweet and charming. Perhaps time would turn the sweet young Audri into as cold a heart as Cevana had become.

Gibran hoped not. For Audri's sake, he hoped not. No, he wished for Audri only the best, and wished she would find love and companionship in her new husband.

Pity that Gibran knew Kabald too well to put much hope in such a fragile wish.

The tune he pulled from the gitar strings had turned into a lament. He recognized that and stopped playing, struggling to remember a different song. Nothing would come. So he sat in silence, head bent over the silent gitar in his arms.

He had lost the girl. It was time to accept the weight of that, and then move on. Move on. It was as simple as that, he told himself firmly. But when he closed his eyes, he saw the girl's pale, lovely beauty, wrapped in the red wedding gown, the up-swept tumble of dark curls framing those violet-blue eyes as they had turned toward him across the gater square, and the haunted look she had given him, like someone lost at sea.

Nonsense. His own imagination was simply taunting him. In truth, Gibran had hardly known the girl. He entertained the vision of committing the secret correspondence they had traded to the flames of the hearth fire, knowing even as he imagined it that he'd not do so. He treasured those letters too much to destroy them, even if they were witness to a failure he'd always be burdened with.

He had lost the girl. Accept the weight of it. Wish the better man well in his victory. And move on.

And value what he *had* gained. Drake Hold was an unexpected inheritance. Any pretty young girl would grow thick from child-bearing; time would fade her fragile beauty. But Drake Hold was beautiful in its own right, changing with the seasons, and loving her faithfully could be a man's lifelong challenge. Gibran knew he had inherited trouble enough upon his eldest brother's death. A man had to concentrate on what he held, not on fruitless, fragile dreams of what-might-have-been, and he did himself no favors mourning what he had forever lost.

The fire crackled in the library hearth, that whisper enough of sound to keep Gibran from drifting too far off in his misery. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes to

look into those flames, making an effort to will his ghosts away. It was time to let the dream go, for once and forever.

Drake Hold was what he held, and his first month as confirmed Lord had not gone smoothly. Lady Jerial was a continuing problem. She had held the reins of the household for more than a dozen Turns as its Lady, and did not want to give up her position easily. As the wife of Drake's new Lord, his wife Cevana should now reign as Lady of the Hold. Yet the servants continued to look to Jerial, instead. And as long as she truly feared Gibran threatened her son's life, then there was good reason not to trust his sister-in-law.

The easiest furrow to hoe there would be to marry Jerial off again, or send her back to her family at Maori. The latter would be problematic, however; Jerial was a favorite of her brother, Lord Kabur of Maori, and that was a profitable friendship Gibran valued and didn't want to jeopardize. Marriage was a risk as well – it would be difficult to find her a husband of rank who would want a middle-aged, barren woman. One of his lesser holders might well welcome the match, understanding the worth of her bloodline ties and the political friendships she had formed among the other lords' wives. But seeking to arrange a match for her with anyone beneath a craftmaster's rank would be taken by her family as an insult. And the woman was past safe childbearing years – so a husband who would take her would be doing so for purely political reasons... which could prove a serious complication, depending on that man's ambitions.

No. As uncomfortable as the course would be to take, Gibran figured it would prove wisest to keep Jerial close. He knew she was a woman of deep tempers and long-banked grudges; winning her trust might take Turns. But she was a valuable resource if he could win her over, and if he couldn't – she was a danger to let stray too far out of his sight or his reach. And as long as Jerial saw that his honest intentions were to keep her son as Drake's future Heir, there was the chance he would win her over.

Besides, the day had left a sour taste in his mouth toward weddings. No. No second marriage for Lady Jerial. She would give him reason enough to rue that decision, Gibran was certain – but for now at least, she would be more useful to him under his roof than sent away from it.

And he suspected Cevana would hold her own against her sister-in-law. Cevana had thirsted after rank for far too many Turns; now that she had it, she would hold on to it tightly with both hands, and even someone as fierce-willed as Jerial had little hope of wresting it away again. No. No doubt about that contest. There was another reason for an impasse with Lady Jerial, and from an unexpected quarter. There had been a time not so long ago when Gibran had known his wife as eager to be rid of him as he was of her. In her own eyes, if not her father's, Cevana had originally been meant for better things than a bastard Lord's son, and she had never forgiven Gibran the deal Lord Gilhran had arranged to marry them. That the children of their unhappy union had so far all been stillborn had only increased the distance between the couple. Gibran had always thought his wife a strange, cold fish – but she had warmed considerably

since he had become lord of Drake Hold. She was again angling for a child off him, if her womb would stand it. *That* would be unleashing a slasher in the sheepfold if it meant bearing a son to compete with Jerial. But either way, Lady Cevana would allow no threat to materialize to threaten her husband, since that would threaten her new-found rank as well.

Gibran blinked eyes made dry and mesmerized by the dancing flames. He stretched and settled the gitar anew in his arms, then let his fingers stretch comfortably across the strings again, rasping out the ghost of a tune against his fingertips. The tune came, haltingly at first, and then with increasing vigor.

It was time to hold what he held, and let the old dreams drift away, as sweet and fragile and empty as the gatherday tune Gibran could pluck from the strings of his gitar.