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"I'm not going up to Marian's suite by myself." Elizabeth's hand tightened over Bri's arm. Bri'd known she'd be making a mistake in lunching with Elizabeth and Faucon, but he had the best food she'd ever tasted. Elizabeth had ulterior motives.

"What do the Castle medicas say of Koz's condition?" Bri asked.

Elizabeth frowned. "They smirk. They murmur polite assurances to Marian, then point out that she would probably feel better if she had the Exotique medica check on her brother."

"Wimps."

"Then she sends someone running to me. I tell her he's recovering well and rapidly and will be fine, as I told her the previous hundred times." Elizabeth's smile was thin. "You get to be in on the routine this time. Maybe she'll listen to both of us."

Bri snorted.

"Meanwhile, every time I see him, Koz lobbies to be moved back to his own rooms in Horseshoe Hall, says Calli and her family are in residence and they're next door...."

Chuckling Bri said, "Bet Calli keeps out of this."

"Way out. Marian still wants him close."

They'd reached the top of the stairs. Bri was nearly panting at Elizabeth's brisk pace. Bri said, "God knows I'm really getting into shape here—"

"Don't mention anything about that," Elizabeth said sharply.

Surprised, Bri glanced at her. "What?"

The narrow-lipped smile was back. "Marian's carrying some extra pounds, apparently was even plumper last year. Of course Koz teases her about that. His duty as a brother."

Bri stopped and put a hand on Elizabeth's arm. "Let's leave him to her. He deserves the aggravation."

Elizabeth paused too. "Well, well," she said softly.

"What?"

"Looks like you've bonded with Marian. And she's probably the last of the Exotiques for you to do it with. Right?"

Bri shrugged. "Guess so." She tapped her head. "I have a whole chorus in here if I want one."

"Mental connections to them all. I know," Elizabeth said. Her features tightened. "What does that mean about us going home during the Snap?"

"It means we'll miss them all, and too bad, so sad."

"You're right. You ever think that if the plague had been like the ones we'd imagined – dead and rotting bodies in filthy streets, rats, rampant infection – we'd have had an easier time of returning home?"

"No. Hadn't thought of that." Bri opened her mouth to ask about Elizabeth and Faucon, but shut it again. If she didn't ask, Elizabeth wouldn't tell and wouldn't ask about Sevoir. Elizabeth was being unusually mum about Faucon, and Bri sure didn't want to stir up any

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emotions that might weaken her sister.

They walked the rest of the way silently.

"Marian, go away. Can't a guy take a leak in private?" Koz's irascible voice could be heard outside the thick door.

"Don't you need help?" Marian's tones were equally sharp and penetrating.

"No. I wouldn't if I had to crawl. I'm bigger than you—"

"I'm sure crawling isn't good for you."

Sharing a look with Elizabeth, Bri straightened her spine as Elizabeth squared her shoulders. Bri ran a thumbnail up and down the doorharp.

"She's here!" Marian said, then, "They're both here, Elizabeth and Bri. Now we'll have some action." She opened the door.

"Song spare me from older sisters," Koz muttered. His voice came from behind the bathroom's slightly open door. "Ahem. Medicas, ladies. I could use a little help here."

"I'll—" Marian started.

"Not you, Marian," Koz said.

"We'll take care of him," Bri said with a smile to Marian.

"A man can only dream," Koz said.

"Sounds pretty good to me," Elizabeth said and now her voice held humor. It was good to work together.

"Twins," Koz said. "Have you two ever—"

"No," Bri and Elizabeth said in unison. Bri entered the bathroom to see a pale Koz propped by his arms against the wall. His loincloth was up and tucked, but his pants were down around his ankles. The scar on his leg was raw and red. "You're too thin," Bri said. She propped herself under his shoulder. "Lean on me a little."

"I'll take care of these," Elizabeth said matter-of-factly, pulling his loose drawstring pants up and tying them neatly at his waist. "Ok, I'll take your other side."

"A man can dream," Koz repeated.

His face was wet. So were his hands. A towel was crooked on the rack as if he'd swiped at it before needing both hands to steady himself. With her free arm, Bri snagged the towel and patted his face dry. Elizabeth found a washcloth and soap and rewashed his hands, took the towel and dried them.

"Some service," Koz said, but Bri noticed his breathing was easier. "Never thought I'd want my walker again."

"He's decent, open the door Marian," Elizabeth said.

Marian did, her expression anxious.

"Baby steps," Elizabeth said. Bri moved with her and Koz easily. On rare occasions when they'd partied with friends in high school, they'd poured guys into a car and driven them home.

Long ago and far away. Elizabeth smiled at Bri. Carefully they returned Koz to the bed.

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Marian used a speed-housekeeping magic to strip the sheets and replace them with fresh.

"Nice trick," Elizabeth said.

"I've mastered it," Marian said drily, helping with the lowering of her brother to the mattress. He let her tuck him in.

Elizabeth gestured to some chairs and Bri and Marian brought them to the bedside. "I ran a little scan on you during our trip from the bathroom and you're doing fine. So well that your physical therapy will start tomorrow. I've instructed a torturer— a medica journeyman, I mean— in the exercises I want you to practice." She tilted her head and studied Koz. "This being Lladrana, your innate Power should heal you faster, too."

Marian said, "We don't have the bonds most do with Ameer planet. We aren't natives. The connection still isn't as strong for us — all of us — as it is for others."

"I'm sure his body, earth of this earth, has a good bond," Elizabeth said and Bri suppressed a smile. This was her sister talking such an interesting new age line.

Then Bri said, "You might be better for massage, too."

Koz had closed his eyes at the mention of the torturer, now he opened them and winked at her, grinning. "Oh, baby, baby."

Marian cleared her throat, sent a pointed glance at Bri and Elizabeth. "We haven't spoken of the future." Her voice was brisk but her eyes sheened with tears, she took her brother's hand.

Elizabeth met Bri's eyes in blatant consultation. "What he needs," Elizabeth said. "Is stimulation."

Koz leered at them.

"Mental stimulation," Bri said.

"That will lead to a new career," Elizabeth said.

"What?" Koz struggled to raise himself.

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## Chapter 33

Bri watched as Marian gently pressed Koz back onto his bed.

Elizabeth said, "You've had a serious closed head injury. I don't recommend you returning to your life as a Chevalier. Not unless you want to throw away this second chance." He sucked in a breath as if taking a blow. "I could be careful."

Bri patted his knee under the covers. "No, Koz. Listen to the doctor."

"I've listened to the doctors all my damn life," he said.

"Just how long do you want to live?" Elizabeth said.

"Man, you have some bedside manner, doc."

She gave him a sugary smile. "I was yanked here before I started practicing."

"Yeah, yeah," he said.

"You have enough Power to become a solid Scholar," Marian said, naming the level below her own Sorceress Circlet status.

"Nope," Koz rejected immediately. Marian blinked fast.

"What did you do back home?" Bri asked.

"Developed video games." His grin was back. "Man, one with volarans would really sell!" Then he frowned. "Not something I can do here."

"Sounds like magic to me," Elizabeth said.

"Boss gond would train you, or Jaquar," Marian said.

"I said 'no.'" A considering expression came to his eyes. "Boss gond," he muttered.

"Earth." He glanced at the twins. "You both wanted very badly to see Earth. And there's that new communication system Sevair is getting up and running." He glanced to the wall and the large mirror that had been positioned to show him a different view outside from a window he had to strain to see. "Mirror magic."

"Mirror magic?" Marian said.

"Yeah, a mirror's a little like a video screen. I'd like that."

"Good, good," Marian choked, stood, and hurried to the door. "I'll go find out who'd be your best teacher." She left.

Koz let out a big sigh. His grin twisted as he looked at Elizabeth and Bri. "Guess playtime's over. New job." He ran a hand through his hair. "Man, it was good while it lasted."

Bri's breath eased out.

He looked at her, them. "I bet I could get messages back and forth to Earth, even after the Dimensional Corridor closes."

Hope, panic rose in Bri's throat. "Soon?"

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"Depends on Marian and the teacher. Maybe."

"We aren't staying," Bri and Elizabeth said together.

Studying them, he said, "Guess I won't mention that I spoke to Luthan about you."

Bri's gut twisted, she reached for Elizabeth's hand. They stood.

"Forget the massage," Bri said.

"You shouldn't do that," Elizabeth said, "Punish him for—"

"—the truth," Koz said. "Destiny's a funny thing. You can't avoid it." Then he dropped into sleep.

"I don't want to talk about this," Bri said.

"I don't either," Elizabeth said. "Seems like we're not talking about much. Someday we'll have to break down and analyze this."

"I vote for way later," Bri said.

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