

## CHAPTER FOUR

Next morning I surfaced, gritty-eyed and sweating, to Mother standing over me shrilling that I'd overslept. I skipped about like a snake-bit cat, playing catch-up.

Granda had soiled himself in the night and was stenching at being left so long. Which I could understand. But he went all stiff-jointed on me when I was cleaning him and my work tunic was shit-smear'd by the time I was finished. I couldn't take Granda's soiled and piss-soaked clothing and sheets to the village laundry – they wouldn't accept it. So guess who ended up having to rinse it clean? On top of all the other chores piling up.

I explained this to him as I was feeding him breakfast.

"Gr... erg... er..." he grunted, while tapping that I was a lazy, ungrateful pumper who should be-

*No! I am not doing this any more.*

A red mist shivered my vision as I flung the spoon into the bowl of porridge and jumped up.

"You can roaching well feed yourself, then. And wash your own shit out of your clothes. I've got other things to get on with if all you're going to do is swear at me."

His porridge-spattered face froze in shock and he started to whimper.

But I was foaming. "Nah. I've got olives to pick and the animals to feed and muck out. You can wait."

Shaking with anger, I slammed out of his sleeproom and into the back yard, where I started mixing up Nana's feed. I was fond of the old nanny and hoped that milking her would lull me before I had to face Dance – and Granda. Who was now howling like a dog. I gritted my teeth. He could roaching well scream his voice to shreds, for all I cared.

"Jessob, what is wrong with your Granda and why aren't you dealing with him? I can't work with that row," Mother called from the Nodery waiting room.

*If I cadged a lift on an olive boat to Reseda, could I find Kale using my new map?*

"Jessob – answer me!" She stood in the door, turning away to an unseen audience of Node enquirers, "I'm sorry, but my family are being very unhelpful," she gave a little martyred laugh, "just for a change."

I plonked the feed bucket down on the ground. Hard. "I'm leaving Granda to lull. He *swore* at me." My voice shrilled like a wilting girl's. My face burned with shamed fury – when would I sound like a proper man?

Mother was still turned away from me, but I could clearly hear her. "Jessob's childhood fantasy about his secret language with his Granda sometimes stirs the old man up. Like now." She faced me, "You can't leave him making that ear-holing din. It's impossible to work in the Nodery." The edge on her voice could shave paper.

"Tell you what," a high note whined inside my head, "I'll take the Node enquirers and *you* sort out Granda. He's your Father."

Felina Keeper cackled loudly in the shocked pause. "He's got you there, Mai. Maybe you need to tell him some more about your happy Family."

"And maybe you should keep your long-nosed comments out of my business, Felina Keeper!"

Another hushed silence, only broken by Granda's nerve-scrabbling screams.

Mother buried her face in her hands and her shoulders shook. Kaila Player pushed forward and put an arm around her waist, her face lit by greedy sympathy.

“When I got back last night, the place was in chaos. I don’t know what Jessob got up to, but it made a mess. I had to tidy it before I went to bed...”

Mother leaned on Kaila’s shoulder as the folk behind her tutted. “Then he slept in late and woke up, hung over and stench. Of course the old man is upset... how can I cope?” She sobbed pitifully as the other women huddled around her, or glared at me.

I stared back, my mouth hanging open. *Surely, no one believes her. They must know she’s lying...*

“You’d better see to your Granda, before your mother has everyone thinking you’ve horns and a tail.” Felina’s voice made me jump. She’d come out into the yard, careless of the dust caking her skirt.

Mother looked once in my direction...

*I hate you...*

And then disappeared back into the house, surrounded by her gaggle of sympathetic friends.

“I-It’s not true. I wasn’t drunk. I swear it...” I was babbling.

“It’s not me you have to convince.”

*At least she seems to believe me.* My fury leached away, leaving me hollowed and shaking. “I don’t know why she hates me so much,” I muttered.

Felina shifted slightly, “She’s got her reasons. It’s time she sat down and told you.”

I’d been hoping that Felina would say, ‘Don’t be such a feeb-wit – of course she doesn’t hate you.’ But she didn’t...

I picked up poor old Nana’s feed bucket. She’d have to wait. Because if I listened to Granda’s wails much longer, I’d cut my own throat with a blunt knife.

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Only good thing about Granda’s tantrum was that it tired him out. By the time I’d cleaned him up again, changed him (he’d smeared porridge in places I didn’t want to think about) and fed him – he was nodding off. He didn’t have the energy to say anything, which was as well. Because I didn’t want to speak to him, either. He went to bed and was asleep in no time flat and I figured that he might stay that way for most of the day. Giving me some catch-up time.

I finally got to the long-suffering animals. Dear old Nana gave me a greeting, despite her hunger; I was mugged by a feathered horde of grumpy hens, allowing the rooster to get in a couple of savage pecks, while I daydreamed about chicken soup. And Dance was just this side of outright dangerous. I *had* to take her for a ride. Giving me a chance to escape all the razored looks coming my way for being a drunken layabout; while waiting for Kale to contact me.

In the event - never mind dark looks - I got shouted and sworn at as Dance took off down Main Street, raising clouds of powder-fine dust in her wake. Busy trying to stay on, I didn’t have the breath to apologise. We were well down River Road before she slowed to a walk, sloshing through the shallows of the Salamander River and noisily slurping at the water. I watched warily. Jaspers wouldn’t attack anything camel-sized in broad daylight, but an adventurous maw-shark might risk the shallows for such a substantial meal.

Turning up my sunscreen, I blinked away the sweat trickling into my eyes and squinted along the surface of the sun-spilt water, looking out for a dark shape heading our way. A faint but welcome onshore breeze wafted around us, drying the sweat runnels across my forearms. I was tempted to dismount and paddle alongside Dance,

but thought better of it. She was at some risk, wading knee-deep. At least on her back I could quickly spot any approaching danger. At dawn or dusk, it was a pleasure taking her out. But in full sun, any views sent you cross-eyed with the heat shimmer – even with the sunscreen on max. And I’d never used a dust repellent worth the bother. At least there weren’t many other people out at this time of day. Just as well – talking at my datatab while sitting on Dance would probably have Beneth Healer prescribing Behaviour Modification pills for me...

Kale Brarian’s voice sounded tight-wound, “Jessob... Jessob Brarian, are you there?”

It took me a moment to open up my ‘tab one-handed, while Dance skittered and side-stepped at the unfamiliar sound.

“Gooo on, you feeb-wit! Yeah, I’m here, Kale.”

“What in dusting hells are you *doing*?”

*Ah... so he can see me. And I can’t see him.* I cursed silently. That put me at a roaching big disadvantage.

“Riding a camel, as it happens. It was the only way I could cut myself some free air. You?”

“Sitting in the boggery with pretended gutmelt. A camel, eh? That sounds like it could be bracing.”

My soul expanded at the envy in his voice. “Yeah. More glinted at dawn, though. The godding noonblast isn’t much fun this time of year – ‘less you like being fried to a crisp.” *So get on with it...* Apart from anything else, Dance was living up to her name.

“Uh, yeah. Thing is... well, er... I got myself on the, uh, dusty side of Uncle, you see...”

I didn’t. *What’s this got to do with me?*

“...he reckoned the only way I could dig myself out, was to snug up to you and find out... stuff.”

“Why?” *What could the Brarian Major possibly need from me that would matter more than a microbe’s bollocks?*

His laugh sounded a bit forced, “You like your questions, don’t you?”

“Look at it through my lens, Kale. You dropping into my orbit is just this side of weird. Whoa there, sweeting!” Dance pretended to shy as a fish jumped in the shallows. After an exciting moment involving lots of splashing and skipping sideways, I finally got her lulled. “So what are you s’posed to be finding out?”

“Gods, they’re lively things – camels, aren’t they? I’ve heard they’re difficult to ride. You been riding long, Jessob?”

“Kale, I don’t have time for this... Dance is wound tighter than a hunting nemmetpod, if she takes off – that’s it. No more talky talk. So give!”

“Dance? I thought her name was Sweeting... Uh, yeah. Thing is... Uncle wants to know how you got onto that <Music> site. And I’m not supposed to tell you why. Or anything else, come to that. But... you’re asking too many hard questions and I can’t...” he moaned, “I *told* him that you wouldn’t be that simple. I *said* that you’d scent the roachdirt. And I was right.” His voice dropped. “But he won’t take account of that. All he’ll say is that I’ve failed.”

I decided to toss him an info-byte. *Maybe he’ll tell me something in return.*

“I didn’t do it all on my own. Granda helped me get started.”

Kale’s voice sounded eager. “Granda? Who’s that?”

“My grandfather. Osmar Brarian.”

“But... he had a beating thirteen years ago and died of his injuries. Your Mother reported his death when she took over as Brarian.”

*A beating? Mother told me it was a farming accident.*

I shook my head. “He wasn’t killed. But...”

*Do I tell him? Or is it too dangerous?* There was so much I needed to *know* about the Node. If we were already being monitored because we were a Node they ‘weren’t sure about’, then we were already in a lot of trouble...

“But?”

“I’m trying to figure if I can trust you.”

“Oh.”

“And before you get all hackled about it, you need to realise that I’ve a lot to lose. If I don’t get to be Brarian, I either work as a farm labourer for Mother...”

*And wouldn’t she love that outcome!* “...or at the bogbox workings in Piss-town, shovelling shit.” I took a shuddering breath. It was the first time I’d said this aloud - and it sounded even worse than when scurrying around my brain at four in the morning,

“Pumping hells! And I’ve been self-pitying over having to work at my father’s olive press factory.” He lowered his voice, “Uncle’s wetting himself because when that <Music> site flashed across our monitoring system, it was The Council who got back to him, wanting the info.”

My world lurched sideways and my sweaty hands went chilly. *The roaching Council are long-nosing into our business! Why?*

Kale was still chattering, “...some roachdirt about how I snaketalked circles round you, getting the details of your grandfather out of you and in return, let you have the datatab coding as part of a deal get you to keep in touch with the Nexus.” He groaned theatrically, “Life is too roaching short to spend crouched in this hole while chatting.”

“And next time we talk – make it dawn, yeah?”

Kale spluttered, “Dawn? What are you – some godding priestling?”

Dance sloshed onto the riverbank out of the water and I breathed a sigh of relief as she started munching at the reed bed.

“Cnicus doesn’t have any heat diffusers. So, unlike you limp-sipped cititods, we get the full blistering force of noonblast.”

“Pumping hells! Alright... But in that case, you’d better have my personal datatab coding. I’ll be snugged up with my favourite dreamgirl at that hour.”

I loaded his coding onto my ‘tab, finally giving up the struggle with Dance and dropping the reins while punching in the digits. And typically, Dance behaved perfectly...

“It does look bracing. Maybe sometime, I could come and ride camels with you?” Kale sounded envious.

I laughed, feeling warmly surprised. “Yeah, but change out of your fancy robes, first.”

“Till next time, brov-Brarian...” And he was gone.

I didn’t pick up the reins, but continued to let Dance go on tearing at the long-bladed leaves while I tried to figure out what was going on. What made that <Music> site so special that it got the attention of The Council - and the Brarian Major?

*What nemmetnest have I landed us in?* Despite the scorching heat, I shivered and gathered up the reins.

I’ve never known a tractable camel. Probably something to do with having to pad long distances in brain bubbling heat because someone else thinks it’s a good

idea. But Dance was cross-grained and awkward, even by camel standards. She was also exceptionally fast. Like now. A flyer buzzed low along the river and Dance figured it was a good game to pretend to be afraid of it. With a rumbling belch, she took off. I grimly hung on. Just.

By the time she'd slowed down, even my marrowbone was bruised. No point in beating her with the stick I carried – it would only foam her further. And I had it coming. I should have taken her out yesterday. I promised myself I'd walk her again this evening, when it was cooler. And again tomorrow. And the next day. If I had the time and energy. We were halfway to Pistacia by then. I was nearly forced to use the stick before she finally obeyed me. I swished it by her head a couple of times and although the second time she snapped at it, with a whining grumble, she turned around.

She walked back to the village slowly, as if not wanting to return. I knew just how she felt. As the scruffy buildings danced on the superheated horizon and my heart sank.

*Home... is this as good as it gets? Am I ever going to open my eyes in the morning and look forward to the coming day with gladness?*

It was mid-afternoon when I finally slithered off her back in the corral. For once she wasn't trying to bite me as I took off her harness and saddle. Even allowed me to hug her while brushing her coat. And as I walked away from her, she followed for a few steps, making a series of farting grunts. Walking backwards so I could face her – even in her current good mood I wasn't about to turn my back on Dance – I rasped back.

I heard a muffled giggle behind me and spun around to see Mother standing in the middle of the back yard, her arms folded triumphantly. Beside her was a gawky girl with long, strawlike hair and unusual tawny coloured eyes. It was the girl who had laughed. But she wasn't laughing, as we looked each other up and down. Her face reddened, she bit her lip and her eyes watered, making her nose go pink. She was the ugliest girl I'd ever seen.

She shouted at Mother, "I thought you said that he looked like you." She jerked her head in my direction. "He's *hideous*."

*Who in roaching hells does she think she is?* I smartly scrambled through the corral fencing as I heard Dance approach, and turned to go indoors.

"Jessob?" For once, Mother appeared flustered. I stopped and looked back at her. "Er, I would like to introduce your second cousin. This is Allya Planter."

I refused to look in Allya's direction. "Right." I turned to go.

"Jessob," Mother was now her usual bossy self, "I think you've forgotten your manners."

I thought of how Kale would handle this, and lifted my eyebrows, "Manners? I'm sorry, Mother," I allowed my eyes to flick across to Allya, "I didn't think that *good* manners were required."

"And he smells!"

Our stares clashed. I've heard of love at first sight – but never instant hatred. Why not? The angry surge prickling the base of my spine sharpened every sense and lifted my weariness. I now knew why dogs with raised hackles sometimes wagged their tails. They *liked* the sensation...

Shaking my head, I took off my sunscreen and headed for the bathroom. Granda always hated it if I stank of the animals.

“Allya, that was uncalled for.” Mother sounded sharp. I enjoyed listening to her mouthwhack someone else. Before it was my turn. “Jessob, you are not being very hospitable.”

I turned back. “Granda’s going to need sorting out soon. So I want to get a shower in before then.” I paused, “If that’s alright with you.”

“Oh... yes.” Mother rallied, “Given how much you still have to do, I am surprised that you’ve been gone such a long time.”

*She wants me to continue working after supper again, then.*

“I’m not olive picking by candlelight, Mother. Not even for you.”

Her laughter was too tightly brittle to be convincing, but the furious look in her eyes was more natural.

It wasn’t until I was standing under the shower during the rinsing cycle that it occurred to me – perhaps Mother felt a thrill over her loathing for me.

*I hate you...*

The thought had me slumped against the smooth walls of the shower room. *One day, I won’t roaching well care any more...*

Granda was awake when I went into his room. As I fed him, Mother’s voice drifted through the walls. She was obviously explaining something to Allya. She sounded excited. I couldn’t hear the words, but she spoke in little rushes, her voice rising and falling. Had she ever talked to me like that? Not that I could remember.

Granda grunted and tapped a question.

“She’s showing a cousin of mine around. Allya Planter’s her name.”

Granda started again. I waited for him to finish, trying to be patient. I’d have to start supper, soon.

“I don’t know why she’s here, Granda. Visiting Mother, I think.”

Another series of taps and grunts. A few months ago, I’d made a few suggestions to shorten some of the words he had to fashion. He’d flung his stick at me and been in a stenching mood for the next week. Which was a roaching shame, because I spent long tracts of time I didn’t have, waiting for him to finish.

“I don’t know if she’s staying overnight. I hope not. She’s got a face like a nemmet and manners to match.”

He cackled with laughter, as I’d hoped.

“Why don’t I take you to the kitchen so we can talk while I get supper?”

He growled and kicked out with his leg, before starting another painful sentence. I wiped my hands across my tunic.

“Course we’ll be private. Since when does Mother ever go to the kitchen, other than to eat or give orders?” I’d tried to cut him an extra furrow, but I was running out of time. And patience. “I’ve got a mountain-high stack of chores she wants me to do before I get to bed tonight. I understand you’re not tired. But I’ve got to get on. So are you coming with me, or not?”

Granda growled and spasmed angrily, but allowed me to haul him onto his feet without fighting and together we shuffled into the kitchen where I lowered him into his chair.

While he grunted and tapped, I peeled and chopped and progged the meal-maker. We were having savoury omelettes, again. I knew Mother would be stenchd, but the hens were producing so many eggs that it was hard to use them up.

Granda was full of questions about Allya Planter. Then spent a happy half hour slicing at me for not being more curious about her, while I prepared the animal feeds in the scullery. Then moaned about the heat and how sick it was making him. I turned up the air conditioning, hoping that he’d be lulled about it by the time supper

was cooked, when I'd have to turn it down again before Mother came in. She never seemed to find the heat too much. But then, the only physical work she ever did was to fiddle with her plants.

I sounded the meal buzzer and dished up. Granda hadn't wanted to go back to his room. I was glad to see him nose about Allya. He was more like his old self – grumpy, demanding and not so childlike.

Mother's eyes slid past him as she entered the kitchen.

Allya appeared at her elbow and frankly stared at him, her nose wrinkling.

"Who's that?"

"This is Jessob's grandfather. Unfortunately he suffered an accident and can no longer look after himself." Mother sat at the head of the table and made a face as I placed her plate in front of her.

Granda growled, tapped and rocked as I served Allya and myself. Allya gazed at him, her mouth crip-wittedly hanging open.

"Why's he making those horrible noises?"

"Ask her!" Granda tapped, swinging his leg about as if he was about to throw himself out of his chair.

I sighed. I'd get no peace during my meal if I didn't. "He wants to know when you're going home."

Mother clattered her spoon on the plate, "Jessob, that's very rude."

Allya ignored her, still staring at Granda, "So all that noise and jerking is his way of talking?"

"Yes."

"So Jessob likes everyone to believe." Mother wasn't letting me get away with that one.

Allya still zoned Mother out. "So what's he saying now?"

I watched Granda's frantic efforts. "That you still haven't answered his question."

She turned to Granda and said loudly, as if he was feeb-brained. "I'm not going back home. I'm staying in Cnicus with Ajene..." turning to Mother, whose face was sour enough to curdle cream.

"Stitcher?" I didn't want this to stop. It was bracing to see Mother's control sliding away.

Granda was in his element, grunting and tapping faster than I'd seen for the longest time.

"I think that's quite enough now. The old man will get over-tired and we'll have another tantrum." Mother was trying to make him lose his temper. Normally it worked, but this time Granda ignored her.

"He wants to know why you are here."

Allya turned to look at me, her mouth snaking with dislike. "Why don't you tell him, then?"

I glared back. "How should I know?"

She snorted, "Now you're just being a crip-wit." She turned to Mother with a sugary smile, "This is delicious, Aunt Mai. It will be a pleasure to stay here and eat such good food."

Granda cackled; Mother flushed and I tried not to smile.

Allya looked around the table, biting her lip and colouring up. A horrible sight. Borina Harvester's frog-face was bad enough, but Allya's ugliness was in a different league.

She flung down her spoon, “What have I done wrong, now?” She turned on me, as if it was my fault, “What’s he saying?”

I shrugged. She seemed upset and I didn’t want to see *that* face crying.

“That Mother doesn’t ever prepare food and he still doesn’t know why you’re here.”

Allya jumped to her feet, shrieking at me, “Don’t you *dare* snaketalk to me anymore, you wilt-faced skelper!”

Mother got to her feet. “It’s been a long day and it’s time-”

Allya did her ignoring trick again. Acting like Mother wasn’t there. Still knifing me with her watery eyes. “You *know* that we’re supposed to be getting betrothed. And I’ll tell you straightline – I hate the idea!”

*What?* I stared back at her.

*It’s some whacked-out joke - it has to be. Except Mother doesn’t do jokes.*

Allya was crying now. And it was a *foul* sight. Her face went blotchy and her nose leaked snot.

*Am I supposed to pump that?*

I jumped up, vaguely aware that Granda was still cackling and Mother was shouting at both of us.

My voice cracked, shrill and girlish, “*You* hate the idea? Roaching hells - I’d rather be gelded!”

And I fled.