

CHAPTER FIVE

I blundered straight into Felina Keeper in the gloom. She was a solid woman. While she staggered backwards a few steps, I went down in a winded heap.

Felina's hob-nailed sandal connected with my ribcage. "That'll teach you to go running around in the dark, you drunken pumper!"

I whimpered as my ribs jagged in molten agony.

"Jessob, you come back here." Mother sounded foamed.

My side flowered in painpeaks and her angry voice finished me off. To my shamed disgust, I was sobbing at Felina's feet – and I couldn't stop. Not for all the Facs on the Node...

"Jessob Brarian?" How come Felina's harsh voice sounded so soft?

Beyond answering, I just cried. Gulping hiccups that snagged my injured side. I wished I were dead...

Scale-stiff, brittle, shrivelling cold. Soon... soon his blood will thicken, his hearts will stop. And this dark, frozen uselessness will end.

"Jessob?" Mother was still calling.

"No, Mai. It's me – and that evil-tempered flea circus chewing the cud in your corral. And I'd be thankful if you'd stop your hollering and wait for the boy to return."

"Oh, Felina." Mother didn't sound any happier. "Have you seen Jessob?"

"Rushed past me as if a mantivore horde were on his scent. Time you sorted things out, Mai."

"That's just what I'm trying to do, Felina. Not that it's any of your business."

"So you keep saying. And of course it's my business. It's everyone's business if the Brarian to our only Node doesn't properly train her Apprentice for the post."

Mother's voice shrilled, "Are you threatening me, Felina?"

"No. I'm giving you a civil warning. Sort things out before the Elders do it for you."

Mother's reply was a slammed door.

Felina hauled me to my feet, bundling me through her front door with surprising ease, while I tried to stop my tears. Might as well have tried riding a hen. As she lowered me into a saggy, soft-cushioned chair, the ache in my ribs... Granda's constant demands... the silting sense of futility... fear of The Council... and Mother...

I hate you...

MMMMotherrrr...

I melted into a bawling tear-sodden mess.

Some time later – could have been minutes, or hours – I finally ran dry. Feeling as hollow as an empty water tank, I snuffled into my sleeve. A clean, crisp handkerchief was dropped into my lap.

"...ank you," I gulped, "but if I use it, you'll have to wash it."

"Why would I do that?" Felina plonked onto a large chair opposite me.

"That's what the village laundry is for."

I stared at her through swollen eyes. "But they won't take stuff if it's too messy. I have to do all Granda's soiled sheets."

Narrowing her eyes she leaned forward, placing her hands on her thick thighs, like a man would do. "Who says?"

“Well, Eswin complained to Mother that they wouldn’t take Granda’s mucky stuff.”

“When was this?”

I tried to think back. “Must have been a couple of years ago. That’s when I started having to wash out all his soiled bedding.”

Her eyes were the pale blue of a rain-washed sky. They’d be pretty, but for the puffy folds around them. She looked me up and down. Wriggling slightly, I stared at the dusty floor.

She sighed, “There’s an old saying, ‘What goes around, comes around.’ Ever heard it?”

I looked up and shook my head.

“That’s what’s happening here.” She sounded sad. “It was bad enough that no one did anything the first time around. We can’t let it happen again. But it will get crippling messy.”

I was too limped to wonder what she was on about.

“The situation regarding the laundry will be fixed.” Felina was her usual loud self again, to my relief. “You take your grandfather’s dirty sheets there. And if there’s any roachdirt about not doing them,” her mouth set in a thin line, “you refer Eswin to me - not your mother.”

Because? Because Mother cut a deal with Eswin that he wasn’t to take any of Granda’s things. Because she wanted me loaded with all his washing so I didn’t have time enough to learn more about the Node. Because-

I hate you...

My sore eyes stung. I scrubbed fiercely at them with Felina’s beautiful handkerchief.

Again, I was spiked by Felina’s bird-bright stare. “Now. Tell me what other daily chores you have to get through. Other than picking olives, palm nuts, pruning and watering the trees and tending your vegetable plot, of course.”

My normal caution seemed to have leaked out of my eyes, along with my tears. I didn’t think about keeping our affairs private, as Mother kept reminding me – I just told her. About feeding and cleaning Granda and trying to tend his bedsores as best I could, with Beneth’s help. About looking after the animals. About cleaning the house. About preparing the meals.

Felina didn’t interrupt. But she snorted several times. And shifted her feet. I sensed her anger, but wrung dry of any big emotion I really didn’t care.

“Jer realise that no one in the village knows exactly how much you do?”

“Of course. As the village Brarian Apprentice, I need to keep my own affairs to myself. Both Mother and Granda say how important that is.”

“Hmm. I’m sure they do.” She levered herself to her feet. “I generally have a drop about this time of night to help me sleep. Want to join me?”

“Thank you.” I preferred tea, but it seemed impolite to refuse. The pain in my side - along with everything else – had dulled to a distant ache.

Felina handed me a small glass full of a golden liquid that glowed in the light. The fumes smelled richly exciting. “It’s brandy. One of my little treats. Don’t gulp it down. Take a small sip and let it slide slowly down your throat.”

I closed my eyes as I brought the glass to my lips to sharpen my sense of smell. The taste was... amazing. That’s why the drink glowed - its warmth trickled right down into my belly.

“It’s how Bach’s organ tune would taste if you could drink it.” I blurted. Then flushed. What a crip-witted thing to say. Why had Bach’s music popped into my head, like that?

I tensed, waiting for Felina to slice at me for my sunslagged words.

But she just chuckled, “I never know what you’re going to say next, Jessob Brarian. Which makes a pleasant change in this village.”

She fumbled for her datatab. Trying not to wince at the way she jabbed at the buttons and yanked the pressureholds around, my jaw nearly bounced off the floor when lively music rippled into the room. “Know who’s playing?”

I shook my head.

“That’s Cupert’s grandfather.”

I nearly choked on the brandy. “You mean, that’s the Peaceman’s accordion?”

“Yeah.”

“Good job he’s long gone to dust, then. Because otherwise, listening to Cupert murdering his instrument would surely hoe him six feet under.”

Why am I babbling like a sun-stunned field-slogger? I should know better... Apart from anything else, I’ve probably stenchd her with my disrespect.

Her crinkled eyes widened for an instant before she threw her head back and hollered with laughter. Felina Keeper didn’t do anything quietly. All the village youngsters imitated her howls of merriment or fury. But I always thought that her laughing was glinting to hear. It was so... straightline. Nothing mean-minded about those deep-bellied chuckles.

I relaxed and sipped some more of her wonderful drink. *I must hold onto this moment. I must store it up.*

“Tomorrow, I’ll arrange for your camel to join the village herd. She’ll be happier with others of her own kind and you can still ride her whenever you want to.” Felina didn’t look at me as she spoke, “Same goes for the goat and her kids.”

I bit my lip as I thought of saying good-bye to Nana. But Felina was right. Too many times the animals had to wait for their feed, or to be mucked out...

“Don’t suppose you’d like to start up a village flock of chickens, would you? I love Nana and I’ll miss Dance. But I hate that roaching rooster.”

Felina laughed, again.

All these years I’d thought of her as a long-nosed nemmet. *She’s really nice...* I moistened the tip of my tongue with more of her wonderful brandy, hoarding it for as long as I could.

She started talking about Dance’s great-grandsire, who was apparently even fouler tempered than his awkward great-granddaughter. From camels we somehow got onto the subject of river journeys along the Salamander and our very favourite foods. Felina then served up some cheese with a generous slab of bread and the best ham I’d ever tasted. I tried not to eat it too fast, but one minute it was on my plate and the next minute it was gone. She didn’t even ask – just cut more bread and ham and cheese and loaded it onto my plate.

Somehow we got onto discussing variweave materials. Felina disappeared and came back with a wall-hanging of camels and trees that slowly moved across the desert landscape. I swiped my hands across my tunic, hardly daring to touch such a beautiful piece of work. I couldn’t recall ever feeling so glinted. She was clever and funny – but above all, *interesting*. She had something shard-sharp to say on every subject we talked about – and yet listened carefully to what I had to say. For the first time in my life, I felt that someone else really cared about what I thought – other than Larold, of course.

It was jolting to hear the warning curfew sound.

I stared at her, shocked. “Roaching hells, it’s half eleven. I’ve been here over four hours.”

She just grinned and waved her hand.

I sipped the last of my liqueur brandy and gently stroked the beautiful glass with my finger, leaving a smeary mark down the side. I hastily polished it off with a clean part of my tunic. “This glass is very old, isn’t it?”

“What makes you say that?”

“The old things are... finer than our stuff. And,” I grinned, feeling guilty, “I’ve seen glasses like it on one of the Node sites.”

“Hmm. It’s seen a few years’ service.” She suddenly fell silent. Probably sick of the sight of me. While it had been one of the best times of my life. Putting down the beautiful, delicate glass, I slowly stood up.

Why can’t I stay here? She’s glinting company. I haven’t been mouthwhacked or sliced at for a whole evening...

Swallowing hard, I tried to think about something else. I’d been here long enough – if I kept thinking along these grooves, I’d be bawling, again. I bowed to Felina Keeper. “Thank you for your kind hospitality, Mistress Keeper.”

Felina also stood and bowed. “You’ve been unexpectedly enjoyable company, Master Brarian. Please feel free to call again. Any time.”

“I shall be honoured to do so, Mistress Keeper.” And I meant it. I’d had a glinting time at Felina’s house. And I was going to visit her again just as soon as I could.

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I walked back into the middle of a madhouse. Granda, still in his kitchen chair, was growling and tapping a string of obscenities about Mother. He was foamed because she’d got it into her head that the Node would tell her where I’d gone. I toileted him and put him to bed with promises that I’d come back later and tell him what was going on.

Mother was sitting in the Nodery with a flower in one hand, trying to operate the infopad with the other. Allya, huddled on a stool alongside her, was looking miserable and tired.

As I walked in, Mother turned to her. “Didn’t I just say that the Node told me he’d be back soon, Allya?”

The smile slid into a slit-eyed snarl as she turned to me. “This feeb-witted trick of running off every time you get foamed stops now, Jessob. You leave everyone else with extra work-”

“Did you really not know that we were betrothed?” Allya stood up, walked in front of Mother and faced me with her hands on her hips.

I blinked. I wasn’t used to seeing Mother disregarded like this.

Neither was Mother. “Allya! I was talking to Jessob and you’ve interrupted-”

“You can mouthwhack him any old time, Aunt Mai. This is important.” She didn’t even turn to properly face Mother, just turned her head slightly, keeping her gaze on me.

Mother jumped to her feet. “Well, excuse me, young lady. But I think that-”

Allya spun round to her. “And I’m thinking of demanding a flyer straight back to Pistacia this minute and charging you for the cost.”

Her loud voice drowned Mother right out, “Because if Jessob really didn’t know that I was coming here as his betrothed, then the Contract you and Mama drew up is only fit as an arse-wipe.”

Mother's shock was almost as enjoyable as drinking Felina Keeper's liqueur brandy.

"Allya! We don't have such crudities in this household."

"Nah. You're so lace-lined proper, I'm sure you don't. Papa..." Allya's voice wobbled, "Papa *said* to take it steadier. That you could snaketalk yourself out of a nemmet nest..." her eyes teared and she choked, "but Mama said it was a thriving chance – that you showed how a woman could rise above every gob of roachdirt thrown at her to make a success of herself..."

"Allya, my dear," Mother's voice was softly pleading, "this is a feeb-witted misunderstanding. I'm sure we can stack it right."

Why doesn't she ever talk to me in that voice?

She rolled her eyes and jerked her head in my direction. "You know how crip-witted boys can be. I thought I'd explained the situation to Jessob clearly enough." She looked across to me, her lip curling, "Clearly not."

I clenched my hands. She was trying to get me stenchd, so I'd yell or run away again. But I wasn't slithering into that wordpit. Not this time.

"No, Mother. You did not. To explain something, you have to speak the words." For once my voice sounded deep and firm, "First I knew of Allya's visit was when I saw her in the back yard this afternoon. And then all you said was that she was some kind of relation."

Allya looked at both us, clearly torn as to which one of us to believe. I suddenly felt sorry for her. She'd been put in a roaching tangle.

Even so, I wouldn't mate with her if she was the last girl on Arcadia – she's too crippling ugly...

I thought of Felina Keeper and how she'd smoothed my way earlier in the evening. Perhaps...

"It's too late to do anything tonight. Why don't I walk you to Ajene Stitcher's house? In the morning we can take this problem to the Elders. Ask them to sieve it for us."

Allya's face cleared as Mother's darkened. Her glare should have crisped me. But I smiled at her as I offered Allya my arm.

To my relief, she barely touched me as we briskly crossed the village square in the chilly night air. It was late and all the buildings were on <Standby> as we passed them.

"You got Ajene's keycode?" I whispered to Allya as we stopped outside her home.

"Why wouldn't I?" Her voice rose louder than it should.

"Shh. Or you'll have every long-nose in the village peering out to see what's going on," I muttered, stenchd at her spiny attitude. "Goodnight, then. And remember to quieten it down. You're not in Pistacia now."

Busy tapping out the coding, she didn't bother to reply. I was braced with that. Less I saw of her, the better.

I turned back for home, thinking that she'd probably be back with her parents this time tomorrow. Which just goes to show how crippling wrong I could be.

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As soon as I opened my eyes the next morning, I knew that I'd overslept. It was too godding bright and hot. The sun must be well up, by now. Cursing, I threw my sweaty sheets off and scrambled into my work tunic.

Granda was beating a steady tattoo on the walls with his stick. Probably been doing so for hours. I felt sickly guilty. Not fair on him. My head seemed stuffed with sand. Had I spent the night licking the floors clean? Because that's how my tongue felt.

I entered Granda's room, wiping my hands down my tunic, waiting for his growling curses. But he seemed pathetically pleased to see me.

I hugged him. "Sorry, Granda. Must've overslept."

Even then, he didn't poke me with his stick, or swear. Just patted my shoulder and tapped that I was a good boy. I bit my lip and got on with stripping his soiled sheets and cleaning him up.

I was propping our breakfast when Mother entered the kitchen, looking sleekly happy. A knot tightened in my belly and Granda began to growl.

"Ah, there you are, Jessob. Late again, I see. I'm not surprised after all you got up to last night."

So she'd been speaking to Felina Keeper, then. I looked down at my feet and waited for the mouthwhacking to begin.

"Yes, I'd hang my head, too, if I was you. How could you have abused my trust in you?" Her voice was raised and she had her hands on her hips. But she wasn't really stenching. I could tell. I'd seen her foamed at me often enough. It was... as if she was acting out some kind of part.

What's going on?

Granda felt it, too. "Take care, boy. She's up to something." He tapped to me.

"What trust? You've never trusted me." That sounded too much like a whine.

"And it looks as if I was right after what you did." She shook her head. "I can't protect you from this. You're not a child any longer. The law must take its course."

I gaped at her, "All I did was to talk to Felina..."

She took a step closer. "Don't play games with me! This is too serious." Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were lit up. Mother was snaketales. It always blazed her.

A ball of fear rolled sullenly in my guts. I licked my lips. "What exactly are you accusing me of?"

She threw her hands in the air and shouted, "Are you really going to stand there and deny it?"

"Careful, Mother. You're overdoing it. You're right on the edge of being believable."

The look she gave me was poisonous enough to kill a camel. "You always were a roosting little piece of roachbait! This time, you'll pay for what you are."

Granda was tapping and growling that I shouldn't slice at her before knowing why she was trying to skelp me. He had a point – even if it took him too long to make it.

"So what am I supposed to have done?"

Her eyes gleamed. "You attacked your cousin last night as you walked her home – it was a wicked thing to do. And you now have the spiny nerve to stand there and try and snaketales your weaselling way out of it..."

Granda's roars drowned Mother out and she had to duck to avoid his stick as it flew across the room. Locked with shock, I watched the commotion.

This isn't happening - even Mother can't muckflick me with this...

But of course, she could. And her timing was pinpoint perfect. I was still harvesting my wits when Cupert Peaceman and Demri stomped in.

Cupert cleared his throat and shouted over Granda's yells, "Jessob Brarian-Trader, I am restraining you in the Cnicus custody suite for the alleged assault of Allya Planter."

As soon as he grabbed my arm, my stun-struck trance pitched into panic. I pushed him away, yelling that it wasn't fair – that I didn't do it – that someone needed to get Allya and just ask her...

Demri seized me from behind in a hug that would have done justice to an elephant-python. My ribcage flexed and the bruise from Felina's sandal jagged in agony. But instead of lulling me, it only increased my cripp-witted fear. I lashed out with my foot. I was only wearing house slippers, but I caught Cupert in his privates. He doubled over, groaning.

A crashing blow to the side of my head knocked any further fight out of me, felling me to my knees. But Demri didn't stop. He punched my face. Twice. Fireballs of pain had me sobbing and moaning as blood poured from my nose, which felt shattered. A sharp edged tooth chip snagged on my mashed lip.

I dimly heard Cupert shouting at Demri. Granda was crying. I was gulping, choking on the blood in my mouth and nose. I caught sight of Allya standing in the doorway with her hands over her mouth, looking like she was going to be sick.

Hope she pukes ground glass.

Cupert, his normally red face a weevil-grey, muttered to Mother, "Now he's learnt his lesson, I expect you'll want us to leave him here to get patched up. That face will need seeing to..."

Mother looked down at me as if I was a dog turd. "Don't be cripp-brained, Cupert. After his attack on Allya, I can't have him under this roof any longer." She turned away from me. "You'll have to take him away and lock him up. Beneth can sort him out in the custody suite."

Cupert and Demri hauled me up onto my feet and walked me out of the house. It was as well they had a firm grip. The bright sunlight seared my eyes, causing the ground to sway and disappear in sickening blotches as it felt like my nose was being hit with every step I took.

Bright sunlight slashes his eyes... crisps his baby scales... bakes their blood onto his body...

"What's happening, Cupert?" *Who called out? Will they rescue me?*

I felt Cupert rooster himself up. "Jessob Brarian is being detained on a very serious charge. Unfortunately he tried to escape and we had to stop him."

"Looks like you godding well half killed him!" I knew that voice. It was Larold. "Has Beneth had a look at him, yet?"

"Not yet. We're taking him to the custody suite and then-"

"No you're not. You're taking him straight to the infirmary, Cupert Peaceman. And hope, for your sake, that he doesn't come to any permanent harm." Felina's voice cut through the rising babble of voices like a laser blade through spongweed.

We stopped our stumbling progress and Demri roughly jerked me round in another direction. Which was too much. My knees folded under me as I started to puke. Knocking all the previous pain down into a different scale. The ringing in my head faded as everything greyed out.