“Hurry, they are about to start the ceremony!”

Doraini raised his head to see several of the younger elves unbow from their prayers and hurry out of the Sanctuary. The elders said nothing, nor did they move. Doraini bowed again, tracing his fingers across the spiral design upon his chest as he asked the Great Banueren tree for wisdom in the time ahead, then made his way from the Sanctuary as well.

For his tribe’s contribution to the Fellowship Feast, and his duty escorting the goods through the entire trip, Doraini had been invited to eat in the Grand Hall, located at the city’s keep, symbolic twin of the Banueren Sanctuary beside it. Elves and humans alike crowded the first floor and the stairs leading upward, but none forced their way through, they stood and chatted amiably with each other.

It was Doraini’s first time to the Fellowship Feast, and he was still having a hard time not staring at the hundreds of human faces all around. It amazed him just how different each could look from the others, and he simply couldn’t wrap his mind around the styles of hair they wore. Some men even had hair growing on their faces like rough patches of dead grass.

He spotted a brother of his tribe near the bottom of the stairs and moved to join him. “Hey, Doraini,” Torein said, and clapped him on the shoulder—a surprisingly potent gesture, and one he saw humans replicating. “What do you think? Pretty incredible, right?”

“It is more than I thought it would be, that is for sure,” Doraini replied.

Torein laughed. “I told you. There really is no way to describe this place until you see it for yourself.”

“Is this your first time?” a man next to Torein asked. Doraini nodded and other feast-goers around perked up.

“Welcome!” a woman said, and grabbed Doraini’s hand. She moved it up and down in the air before releasing him.

“Thank you,” he said, hoping it an adequate response.

“You are going to love it here,” said an elf from a different tribe.

“Just wait till you try some of the food,” a man said with a smile.

Doraini nodded politely, but couldn’t bring himself to engage those around him in conversation. His nervousness at speaking publicly aside, the words and warnings of the elders continued to swirl inside his head, and he still felt the need to guard himself from too much exposure to humans.

Torein patted him on the shoulder, more softly this time. “There is nothing to worry about, Doraini. Relax. When you are in the Grand Hall all these people will not be so close, and there will be music, food and drinks. You will have fun!”

Doraini nodded, trying to put the elder’s words about humans and their ways from his mind.

The line moved forward and people began to empty into the Grand Hall with excitement. When Doraini reached the top of the stairs he was stunned by the sight, blocking the entrance until Torein ushered him to a section of the hall filled with small potted trees where several brothers and sisters from their tribe had gathered. Doraini let himself be guided, taking in as much of the scenery as possible.

The Hall was made of intricately carved stone, much more impressive than the other buildings of the city, and was completely open to the elements. Long wooden tables with benches lined the area, while in several places there grew small groves which Doraini could see tribes of elves gathering in. The Hall had a raised wooden stage at one end flanked by two large braziers, and a wooden balcony extending from three of the four sides. Doraini realized they were actually on the rooftop of the keep, and gave a nod of appreciation to the human’s accommodation of his kind’s needs.

At first he had thought the elders were right in saying that he would have to eat and sleep inside places of stone during the entire Feast, that being the humans’ preferred way to live. But the green areas where his brothers and sisters stood in comfort, exposed to the wind and sun, gave Doraini much needed confidence.

Torein walked them into the welcoming aura of the nearest trees. “Are you sure you are going to be okay, Doraini? You are acting like a sapling.”

Several of their tribe brothers and sisters smiled and Doraini flushed. He shook himself out of his stupor and let the song of the trees wash over him. He put his warrior face on.

“I will be fine,” he said. He placed a hand on a young pine and felt the comforting roughness of its bark. He looked out at the polished stone floor and long tables, the

protests of the elders echoing in his head. They had been right about one thing: what he was experiencing would likely change him forever.

He gazed out past the edge of the distant balconies at the rooftops of the city, the sun hanging in the distance. “I cannot believe where we are,” he murmured.

“Do you mean in the Ashern, The Sacred City?” Torein asked.

“Yes, but also where we are right now. On the top of a stone-built creation. Up here we are higher than most of the Dweller Trees back home.”

“It is spectacular,” Torien agreed.

“And humans normally eat inside of places like this, not on top?”

“They do a good job of making the insides fairly comfortable, though, do they not?” asked another brother from their tribe, Formein.

“Yes, though it is strange that they would wrap themselves in hard rock only to bring wood and fabrics inside to make their furniture,” Torein said shaking his head in amusement. Doraini agreed. “You have been to a real human city have you not, Formein? Not a half-way city built by both races.”

Formein nodded. “One of the strangest experiences of my life.”

“Why did you go?” Doraini asked.

“To see what I was missing. To find out what their culture had to offer.” He let out a sigh. “Needless to say, I went back to Gorsynth after just one moon’s turn.”

Doraini nodded, glad that Formein had returned to their lands and not stayed with the humans in theirs. The elders considered that one of the greatest of offenses. Staying in Ashern was one thing—the city at least had Banueren sanctuaries, and was surrounded by forests—but human cities were said to go on for as far as eyes could see, with countless people crammed into small dwellings to live and serve under a handful of masters.

Just thinking about such a place made Doraini grieve.

“Tyler, is that you?” Torein said as a human man passed by their wood. He wore clothes that made him look smart and able, and held the arm of a woman who struck Doraini as both beautiful and impractical. The man waved in their direction. “I will be right back,” he said, walking away from the trees.

Doraini watched Torein and the man move their hands together in the human fashion, as the woman had done to his, then let his attention wander. Many more humans and elves had populated the rooftop since he had arrived and the benches were almost full. He noticed a group laying out cloth sacks behind the raised stage, a mixture of both races.

Wind swept over the rooftop suddenly, carrying a cool a breeze and scents Doraini had never known.

“This is wrong!” The shout carried over the rooftop as all other conversation quieted.

Doraini turned to see a tall human next to Torein and his friend. He stood with a threatening posture and wide, panicked eyes. Torein took a step back, but his friend and several other humans stepped forward, converged, and ushered the tall man away. The buzz of conversation resumed a few moments later.

The man was led to the edge of the hall by a contingent of other humans wearing heavy metal plates upon their chests and limbs—armor, Doraini knew it to be called. The tall man’s expression signified anger, and he walked with energetic steps as he left the rooftop. Fearful beings, he thought.

Torein returned to their tribe a minute later, and Formein placed both hands on his shoulders. “The perspective of that human shouts of his ignorance. Not all reflect his feelings.”

Torein nodded. “My friend said something similar just a moment ago. Perhaps a bit more like a human, but you both speak wisdom.” He smiled, but it faded quickly.

The rooftop had grown quiet again, and Doraini feared more anger was building. He looked past the trees to see feast-goers hurrying about, but on reflection sensed only anticipation in the air. He understood why when two figures hopped onto the wooden stage.

“Welcome to the Fellowship Feast!” one shouted. He was a young human, a boy, while his partner was an elf child of similar stature, no doubt a dozen times the other’s age. The humans cheered and slapped their hands together in response—collectively, the sound they made was almost like that of the wind rustling a forest’s canopy. Doraini let himself get caught up in the moment and slapped his hands together a few times as well, but hearing it more clearly he found it a strange noise, and the action hurt his palms.

“How many years has there been a Feast?” asked the elf, whose voice was strangely loud, as though he sought to project it all the way across the city.

The boy shrugged. “More than I have lived, I’m sure.”

“What was it that brought us into Fellowship?”

“That’s easy,” the human said. “One day a bunch of humans and a bunch of elves were really hungry, so they got together and ate a humungous meal.”

The crowd laughed and Doraini smiled—surely not, he thought.

The elf put his head in his hands, a strange, un-elven gesture. “That’s not it at all,” he said.

Doraini leaned to Torein and whispered, “Why do they speak so?”

“It is called ‘acting’,” his friend replied. “Think of it as a life song, but with many singers who each behave as though they have been enveloped by a spirit of the past.”

Doraini processed this for a moment. “In what way is that like our life songs? We do not—”

“Quiet. Just watch them,” Torein said.

Another human boy had walked onto the stage with grand, exaggerated steps, dressed in patchwork robes and a crown of yellow-painted wood. The elf child introduced him as High King Damien, and began to unravel the story of the first Fellowship Feast. But as he spoke, narrating the play with the human boy, Doraini found it harder and harder to watch the actors instead of the elf child.

He spoke the common tongue with clarity and used the forming of two words together, the way humans often did in their language, with ease, yet he also maintained the air and posture of an elf raised in Gorsynth. His ears came to a point, but they weren’t as sharp as they should be. His eyes were slanted and edged, but also a great deal rounder than normal. He was a half-elf, child of both human and elf parents.

Doraini had heard of half-elves, but he didn’t expect to see one paraded in front of him at the Feast. A small part of him, the part nurtured and educated by the elders of his village, was appalled at how he was presented on stage. But as the performance continued, and the child’s joy in his performance became clear, Doraini found such feelings unworthy. What better way to celebrate the union of both races than by showing off their impressive result?

Doraini had become so caught up in his thoughts that he barely noticed when the play ended. The actors, all of them children, came to the front of the stage and bowed to the applause and praise of the crowd. Doraini admired their costumes more closely

while he had time. A small girl was dressed as a Gragesh mage, and made him chuckle with delight when she waved and one large, fake green hand too big for her own fell into the crowd.

Then the two narrators stepped forward and bowed in human fashion, and Doraini once again clapped his hands to produce noise for them.

“Let the Feast begin!” the actors chorused, and cheers and shouts rose from everyone present.

The wind carried into the hall the sounds of distant celebrations, and Doraini looked out over the city to see other gatherings on rooftops, even humans dancing in the streets. But his attention was soon drawn to the flurry of woman and men carrying out food and drinks on large trays. They circled the human tables and entered the small elven gardens, passing out their contents with impressive speed.

Doraini accepted a cup and saw Torein down the contents of his almost immediately.

“I missed this stuff,” he sighed, and happily accepted another.

An elf came by next with a platter of leaf wraps that Doraini recognized. He wanted to try some of the human food before he left, but would start off with something familiar first. He raised it to his mouth, but paused at the smell coming from it.

“Try it,” Torein said through a full mouth, without shame.

“What is inside?” Doraini asked, sniffing it again.

“One of the ingredients is called chicken, and the other cheese,” Torein said. “I asked what those are once, but received different answers. All I know is that it tastes great. Trust me.”

Doraini was about to protest, but Torein hadn’t let him down yet. He nibbled on a corner of the wrap. Hot flavors swirled into his mouth. His next bite was much larger than the first, his second and third put an end to the delicacy. He was in awe.

“I told you,” Torein said, holding out a goblet brimming with a shimmering liquid.

Doraini sipped at the drink, surprised to discover another flavor he had never experienced. He was beginning to enjoy the Feast far more than he thought he would.

As more and more servers moved about the hall, Doraini accumulated a piece of food or drink from each, keen to sample everything. Not everything was to his taste, but he soon accumulated a pile of second portions beside him that he was compelled to

defend from Torein's predatory attentions.

Several elves left their groves to stand by human tables. Doraini saw humans invite them to sit, and was momentarily shocked when the elves took the invitation, bending to press themselves against the benches and accepting morsels of food. But once again, Doraini knew that his shock was an old part of him, too similar to the elders of his tribe. He was not going to be as closed minded or resentful as they were, and told himself to get over such a sight.

What shocked him more, however, was when humans rose from their benches and made their way to stand with elves in their tiny forests. Doraini thought for sure that the trees would stop singing in protest at such a thing, but the trees of his grove continued to sing despite the human's presence.

Doraini chewed another piece of food. He decided he didn't need to think about the how or why, he just needed to enjoy the fellowship taking place. So he wasn't insulted or judgmental when Formein said goodbye, and left to sit next to a human woman at her table. Nor was he put out when Torein waved over his friend from earlier to join them.

The man was accompanied by two other human males, each as different in appearance from the others as could be imagined. One had hair growing only on his chin, the other's features made him seem sad yet hard at the same time, while Torein's friend smiled often and seemed a man who would be comfortable almost anywhere.

"Welcome, Tyler," Torein said. "Who are your friends?"

"This is my brother Gavin," Tyler said gesturing to the man with hair on his face, "and Walter, a fellow enlisted man." The other human raised a hand.

"Welcome," Torein said, then in Turish "Ash'va den tow."

To Doraini's amazement, both humans raised their hands when Torein did and returned the greeting in Tursih, "Ash'vados da."

"I am Torein, and this is my tribe-brother, Doraini," Torein said. "Doraini, close your mouth." Doraini snapped his jaw shut, but continued to stare. "Please excuse him, this is his first Feast."

"Really?" Tyler asked. "What did you say to me the first year we met, Torein? 'Fir quethrotah'?"

"Yes, very good," Torein said. "I'm glad you remembered."

“How is it that you know Tursih?” Doraini blurted.

Tyler smiled. “I don’t know that much, just a few phrases. Your culture has fascinated me since the first time I was exposed to it. My father took me to a Fellowship Feast when I was a teenager, and I’ve been coming every year since. I’ve interacted often with your people, but Torein is the first I can call a real friend.”

“I met Tyler during my first year here. He explained to me what I should expect, much as I have been doing to you.” Torein frowned at Doraini. “Now, are you going to return his words or not?”

Doraini blushed. “Of course. Yon fir soy’went.”

Tyler wore a half smile. “I actually don’t know that one.”

“Oh, I am sorry,” Doraini said. “It would translate to, ‘It is good that we have met’.”

“I see,” Tyler said. “The same to you as well.”

“Let us sit here, amidst our grove,” Torein said, and Doraini watched with apprehension as his friend lowered himself to the ground. He flinched as all three humans seemed to fall upon their feet, but despite their speed they did so without apparent pain, their legs extending like felled trees, or crossed beneath them as though deadwood set for a fire.

Torein finally touched his torso to the ground as well, looking very pleased with himself. Doraini took a deep breath then copied his technique. At the last moment he placed one hand upon the tree trunk behind him as though for balance, but he kept it there even after the soles of his feet left the circle of earth, taking comfort from its touch.

“You speak our tongue well,” Gavin, the chin-haired man, noted.

“Thank you,” Doraini said, but he had a vague sensation that speaking was difficult in this strange new position. He drew another dish of new food closer and began scooping bits of it into his mouth, hoping to witness the conversation more than participate further. Torein had said the word “cake” many times in reference to it, and Doraini gave it his utmost approval.

“So, what do you think of this year’s Feast so far?” Tyler asked.

“Much the same as every year, my friend.” Torein looked around the hall with bright eyes. “I love it.”

“Here here,” said Walter, and took a large gulp of his drink.

“Though there was a slight problem earlier,” Torein said quietly.

“Stupid oaf, he was,” Tyler said. “I thought Rowan had met elves before, I didn’t know he was so set against you.”

“He is only one man. The majority welcome us.”

“I wonder how he would have taken the performance,” Gavin said.

“I doubt he would have sat quietly,” Tyler said.

“Tell me more about this ‘wife’ of yours,” Torein said, eagerly changing the subject. “You spoke of no such thing last celebration.”

Gavin barked a hard laugh, then as Tyler narrowed his eyes tried to pretend it was a cough. Tyler looked away from Torein as he spoke. “Ah yes, Gweneth. You’ve heard of politics, yes? Tedious administration and law, all the affairs we try to get away from by coming to this Feast once a year? Well, our marriage is all about politics.”

“Marriage,” Doraini said, “that is your union?” Tyler nodded. “Politics must be horrible if they force you into a bonding. To give up such control over one’s life is frightening.”

“You have no idea,” Walter said, and Gavin laughed again.

“Do you even like her?” Torein asked.

“Of course,” Tyler said. To Doraini, it seemed almost like his response was more of a reflex. Tyler looked at Gavin a moment, then added, “I mean, no one is perfect. I guess, if I’m going to be forced to marry for my family, it could have been worse.”

“That’s the truth,” Gavin agreed.

“I would have her meet you, but it’s her first Fellowship Feast as well. Let’s just say she isn’t handling it as well as Doraini is.”

“Me?” Doraini asked. “I will be honest, I am quite overwhelmed at this event. I feel for your bonding partner and wish I could help console her. I, too, am constantly baffled at everything there is taking place here.

“The food,” he said, holding up his next choice, “the people, the… look at where we are sitting right now. We are raised up high above the ground, surrounded by stone actually shaped by human hands. And we are safe! The floor is not going to give way,

or at least it hasn’t yet—” the others laughed, Torein too “—even the stairs leading up here impressed me. Words are not adequate, to be certain.”

“Just the fact that you can speak about it at all shows how well you handle it, Doraini.” Tyler threw up his arms. “Gweneth just shivers and says she wants to go home. When I ask her why or what’s wrong, she only repeats herself. She doesn’t even like the food, which is beyond me.”

“So,” Gavin said with an eyebrow raised to Doraini, “what do you think of the food?”

“Not only does my mouth rejoice in its discovery, but my entire body is sharing in the experience. My head swims in the delight and I feel pleasurable throughout my body.”

“Here, here,” Walter said, and raised his cup.

“Well said,” Gavin agreed.

“Did you bring any wood creations this year?” Tyler asked. “Gweneth can say what she will about the Feast, the whole reason she wanted to come was because I showed her the wooden soldier you made for me. She decided she had to see more.”

“I have one or two,” Torein said. “What about you, Doraini?”

“I did also, like you told me.” Humans found their manipulation of Banueren wood something of a rarity, and Torein told him it had become common practice to bring figures along to the Feast for trade. Doraini had not known what he might trade his creation for, but knew he would be happy to exchange it for more chicken wraps and cake.

“What did you bring this year?” Tyler asked.

“Just these,” Torein said, withdrawing a bird and a five pointed star from his tunic. Both were well made and the humans all murmured their admiration, but Doraini was surprised at his friend’s lie—these were old and he knew Torein had been creating others for the Feast, pieces he had been reluctant to let Doraini see.

When pressed, he would say only that Doraini would learn in time. Now, Doraini thought of the gift he had prepared and felt a twinge of embarrassment.

“Very impressive,” Gavin said, eying Torein’s work. “I have a large Banueren carving myself. I watched its maker start working on it the first night of the Feast three years ago, and he finished before we left. Hangs in my bedchambers. I offered him an ingot of pure silver for it.”

Tyler rubbed his chin, then harumphed. “That’s a fair price, I think. What did the elf think?”

“It’s what made him work so well so quickly. I let him have it the first day, and he had it beside him every day after. I’m not even sure he did anything with it, he just liked the shine of it.”

“Before you ask,” Torein said, reading the expression on Doraini’s face, “Tyler, could you show my brother what silver is?”

“I have some,” Tyler said, reaching under his shirt, “and some gold too.” He removed a bright chain from under his shirt and handed it out to Doraini, who held out his hands as if about to cup water, not even aware that he had let go of the comforting tree at his back. The chain pooled in his palms, sparkling in the sunlight and cool to the touch. His eyes grew wide staring at it. It was probably the most beautiful material he had ever seen.

“You wear this?” Doraini asked.

“As a sign of wealth or status,” Tyler said. “Here, this is a gold ring I wear ever since marrying Gweneth.” He took the chain from Doraini and passed him a small object, dense despite its size, and even more beautiful than the previous. It shone like a small sun in his hands, and as he examined it he could see his own reflection.

“How do you make such a thing?” Doraini asked.

“Much the same way that we harvest Banueren or Ryker trees for their wood and leaves,” Torein said, “humans work deep within the ground, and find the gold’s light shining in the rocks they make their homes from.” Both elves stared at the ring as though hypnotized, and neither saw the smiles passing between the humans.

“It is incredible,” Doraini managed after a time.

“It certainly is.” Tyler looked pleased, and was content to let him hold the ring for a while. When he finally held out his hand again, Doraini relinquished it slowly. “You should see Gweneth’s,” he continued. “It’s twice the size of mine and with a good sized diamond set in it as well.”

“Amazing,” Torein said. “It’s a shame not more of our elders come to the Feasts. What if we could learn to manipulate the ground as we do the trees?” All the young people of the tribes had listened to the elders give excuse after excuse as to why they couldn’t travel to the Feast. Both elves knew it was pointless to even ask.

The conversation lulled, and the group stood listening to the commotion of the Feast

around them for a few moments.

“Have you been out to the balconies yet, Doraini?” Tyler asked.

“I have not.”

“Well, you should,” Tyler said. “The sun is setting, they’ll be lighting the lanterns soon. That’s when the balcony is the place to be.”

“Very well,” Doraini said, standing and luxuriating for a moment in the feel of his weight returning to his feet. “I shall discover these balconies now.” He grabbed a cup of red liquid from his pile of accumulated food and drink, and took several steps away from his new friends before realizing he didn’t know where he was going. He turned to ask, but saw them all smiling and pointing in the same direction.

“Thank you,” he said. And with that, Doraini left the comfort of the grove and crossed the grand feast hall. Alone.

He watched other Feast-goers sitting on benches and enjoying each other’s company as he walked. It was encouraging to see such friendships between humans and elves, and to know that his own new friendships contributed to this new whole.

At the edge of the stone rooftop he found a wooden balcony that extended out above the city. Walking on it was like being back amongst the treetops once more. Hyrian flowers were set along the railing and stained glass lanterns hung every few feet, as yet unlit.

He came to a man stood by the railing, leaning over it, and Doraini decided he would make his first contact with humans on his own. He approached the man. “Greetings to you, friend,” he said. “May I ask, are you enjoying the Feast?”

The man turned, and Doraini saw that it was the tall human who had shouted at Torein earlier. He felt a chill. The man gave him a hard look.

“What did you ask? If I’m enjoying the Feast?” He spoke with varied intonations and emphasized strange parts of his speech. “You think I’d enjoy something like this? With half-breeds running around like they belong here. You think I’d enjoy this, this… Crime? Because that’s what it is, a crime!”

Doraini took a step backwards, holding up his hands. “I am sorry, friend, I meant no offense at the question.”

“Friend!” the man shouted, turning on him. “Who in the hell do you think you are? You’re a freak, with no—”

The man was cut off as metal-clad guards rushed past Doraini from behind and took hold of him. They twisted his arms in a manner that seemed to limit his capacity for speech and made him easy to lead. He shouted partial sentences and obscenities as he was escorted down the stairs, presumably this time for good.

Doraini wanted to dismiss the confrontation as easily as Torein and Formein had earlier, but he found it hard to stop his hands from trembling. He felt exhausted, and rested his weight against the balcony railing, breathing deeply till his heartbeat relented in its pounding.

Sharp footsteps approached from behind and he turned, hoping that Torein had come to join him. Instead he found a human woman. She bobbed low to the ground for a moment then raised to her full height. Not knowing the proper response, he stuck out his hand in an attempt at the human gesture he'd witnessed earlier.

"On behalf of everyone here, I wanted to apologize for the way Rowan treated you," she said, tilting her head in the direction of the stairs. "He is a stupid oaf."

Doraini let his hand fall unnoticed. "It is gracious of you to offer an apology for him." He spoke slowly, determined not to stammer his words. He was abruptly aware that none of Torein's human friends were female, that her nature was not the same as theirs—nor quite like that of elven women.

She smiled, and Doraini's heart began to pound anew, as though it had forgotten how to function properly. She wore a simple dress of white, yellow, and green, but the fabric and the way it folded over her body was unlike anything Doraini had ever seen. Her hair was like the bark of a healthy oak, her eyes were the green of its leaves. Her appearance took Doraini's breath away.

"I do not want you to regret attending, so I…" she hesitated, suddenly not so confident, then continued, "I want to give you this."

She pulled something from a fold in the middle of her dress and held it out. It was a smooth, round stone with a swirling design carved into it. Doraini gasped when he saw it. Though lacking the correct intricacy, the design was clearly meant to be the same as that upon his tunic, the formal pattern used to decorate formal robes throughout his tribe.

"How could you know of this?" he asked.

"I saw the pattern on the clothes of visitors at the last Feast, and copied it to make a gift this year. When I saw your clothing now I knew it was a sign. I only brought one thing with me to trade, what are the chances that you would wear the same pattern?"

She spoke in a soft, melodic voice, but Doraini could hear nervousness.

As he took the stone his fingers brushed against hers, and he felt the barest flash of emotion at the contact. But something caught his eye as he held the stone to his chest. The woman wore a silver chain around her neck, much the same as Tyler did, except hers had an ornament at the end of it. A rosebud, mid-bloom.

With one hand still clasping the stone, Doraini reached into his tunic and withdrew the gift he had prepared. It was a piece of Banueren wood, taken from a branch that fell from an aging tree. He had smoothed away its bark, the wood beneath shining through dark and lined.

An elven gift, but a traditional gift, one that would have little meaning here.

He closed his eyes, putting the distractions of the Feast from his mind, putting all thought of tradition from his mind, putting even the image of the woman from his mind—and thought only of the rosebud.

He felt the form of the wood flowing beneath his fingers.

When he opened his eyes, the piece of branch had become thin and fragile along its length, but at one end had swollen into an imitation of the ornament the woman wore. He blushed at its rough simplicity, the work of seconds an unworthy gift. But when he finally looked up he saw astonishment, recognition and delight in the woman’s expression.

He presented it to her.

“I too only brought one thing to trade,” he said. “It seems we were meant to meet.” He did not think that her eyes could sparkle any more than they had already, but as she took the rose from him they did.

Around them, servants moved to light lanterns, replacing the light of the setting sun. Stained glass in dozens of different colors illuminated the twilight.

The effect was dazzling, but not enough to take Doraini’s attention away from her.