



The Horse Thief

A NOVEL

LAURA S. FOX

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By

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M/M Erotic Romance

Intended for Mature Audiences Only

This book contains graphic depictions of sexual intercourse and strong language, and it is not meant for readers who are less than 18 years of age.

Chapter One

“Are you trying to tell me that you got that by falling off your horse?” the family doctor asked him as he dressed his wound.

Cezar straightened up with a wince. “Yes, that is exactly what happened.”

The man shook his head. “I do not believe one word. But I might suggest you take a break from riding a horse if that was the real cause of your injury.”

“And do what, instead?” Cezar pursed his lips and dressed up with short moves. “There is never anything to do around here. Could you prescribe something for extreme boredom, doctor?”

“Ah, do you mean the terrible affliction seemingly making young men today search for the meaning of life in the arms of sordid women, drinking, and gambling?”

Cezar offered an icy smile. “I have been known to give in to only two of the vices you have just enumerated.”

“So you don’t drink?” the other questioned, pushing his glasses up his nose.

“I suppose you know me well,” Cezar said through his teeth.

“Gambling is no good, either. As for women, that’s something your parents will try to find a remedy for, as well.”

Cezar stifled a yawn. “And I will try to resist for as long as I can.”

“Rumor has it that certain attractive prospects are in the cards.”

“Is that so? They just plan on parading me around like a prized horse. Some families must be desperate enough to throw their daughters at me.”

“And why would you say that, Cezar?” the good old doctor scolded him. “You are a handsome young man. Wealth wise, you might also be what certain families consider attractive enough, and, however, you will only have to convince their daughters. The old Cozman charm will certainly win battles. You only have to look at them with your blue eyes the way you must be looking at your mistresses, and they will fall at your feet.”

“I would rather not be the cause of such discomfort in the young ladies who would presumably take an interest in me as a prospective husband,” Cezar said with a small grimace.

He knew as much. Blond, tall, blue-eyed, and handsome, as he had heard on more than one occasion people describing him, particularly the female side, he was, at least as far as his looks went, a catch, or at least, a reason for a few fleeting sighs. Too bad he couldn’t be convinced to respond to that kind of interest if he were to be tortured.

That was, of course, something he couldn't confess in front of the good old doctor, or his family. They had managed to pull him back from his never-ending studies, on the grounds that he needed to take a young wife. As far as other aspects were concerned, his father surely had just one thing in mind. Cezar could bet that as long as the 'prospect', as the doctor said, was rich, he would have to accept her, and become, at least as far as appearances went, a loving husband.

Of course, letting his leg grazed by that damned blade during his last mock duel hadn't been wise. Now his father had even more aces up his sleeves to convince him that, as much as he enjoyed being a wandering son, he needed to return home and take over the estate.

His family was among the richest in the land, yet, they still wanted to marry him off to some rich woman. Greed had to be the Cozman family's middle name, and, until now, he hadn't cared.

"You have absolutely nothing to worry about," the doctor said as he patted his arm. "What some may consider a somewhat unsavory reputation could actually make you quite attractive for the ladies."

"Really?" Cezar mocked. "Are gambling, good for nothing, perpetual students, a good match now?"

"And duelists," the doctor added with an all-knowing smile. "Let's not forget about that."

"That is only hearsay and nothing more," Cezar replied. "To anyone asking, I can offer no such information."

"And the wound on your leg came from the same hearsay," the doctor added. "Don't worry, Cezar. I won't tell your parents about it. Your father might suspect it, nonetheless."

"As long as it's just a suspicion, there's no harm done," Cezar said. "Thank you," he added. "Is it healing well?"

"Yes. You won't need me anymore after two more visits. Your body heals fast. Just don't duel anyone anytime soon."

Cezar nodded shortly. It appeared that his carefree life was over, anyway. As unprepared as he was for the boring life his parents had in store for him, he needed to embrace the inevitable.

If it weren't for that damned heat, Cezar thought, as he pulled at his collar, earning a reproachful look from his mother right away. He stood up from his chair and went to the window.

His aunt, Cezara, the one he had been named after, was fanning herself, the large peacock feathers doing nothing but move the air in the stuffed room around. "Would you open that window, dear? We will end up boiling like tea in this weather."

His mother intervened. “And let all the insects in? They carry diseases, you know?”

The scientific magazine his mother was reading religiously was lying open on the lacquered table.

His old aunt snorted, and the rhythm of her fan increased. “Diseases,” she said in a displeased voice. “A little bit of air would do us all good. Unless you want us all to die of suffocation.”

Ignoring his mother on purpose, Cezar opened the window. There wasn’t even a breeze, and he could feel the shirt moist and unpleasant on his back. Nonetheless, he stuck his head outside the window.

Nothing was moving. Even the insects his mother worried so much about had to be asleep at that deadly hour.

Suddenly, there was noise, and Cezar looked, intrigued, at the cloud of dust rising from the road and heading for their gates, as it seemed.

“What is it?” his mother inquired.

“I don’t know,” he replied and continued to look.

The source of noise seemed to be shouts, and loud laughs, joined by what Cezar could only suspect to be cheerful songs. Who could be so damned happy and energetic in that kind of weather?

One of the servants hurried to open the gates, letting in the carriage carrying one of the young ladies supposedly interested in turning him into a faithful husband, and her chaperones. The horses drawing the carriage hurried in, making it shake dangerously.

Cezar was beyond intrigued now. Could it be that his presumably future wife had already hired a band of musicians to play for their good fortune? It seemed a daring move, and Cezar could not suspect any well-off young lady with a reputation to preserve of such a thing, especially not this one.

The servant was now trying to push back the gates, but he was soon overwhelmed by a strange, colorful crowd. What looked like an entire camp of gypsies poured through and surrounded the carriage.

Women in long dresses, painted in vivid colors, began executing a complicated dance, stretching their arms and clapping their hands. The men were beating a rhythm by slamming their knuckles rhythmically into copper pans. Cezar leaned over the window, laughing at the bizarre ceremony.

“What is it?” his mother’s voice became impatient.

He didn't reply. The women in long dresses opened the way to others, and Cezar's eyes widened. These ones, young women and children alike, wore almost nothing, except for willow branches and leaves that served only some to mask their nudity.

They were calling for the rain, he realized. "*Paparude*," he eventually replied to his mother's question.

"What? Here?" His mother hurried behind him.

He didn't move out of the way. "It appears that our guests have brought with them some rather interesting company," he said.

"Cezar," his mother warned. "Let me see," she insisted.

He moved just slightly, and his mother began shouting at the crowd below. "You should just go and help our guests climb out of their carriage, Cezar," she said, seeing how her voice was doing nothing to get through that infernal noise.

"Should I, now?" he said.

His mother turned on her heels, making her long elegant dress swish as it wiped the floor. Cezar was about to add something even more scathing when his eyes were drawn to a new addition to the dancing crowd.

A young man riding a horse went straight through the ceremony, making the dust soar. He was laughing, as he maneuvered his horse around, circling the other gypsies and whistling, both hands at his mouth. All this time, the beast underneath him was kept and made to move only by the muscular, lean thighs holding it firmly.

Cezar leaned over the window again, ignoring his mother's protests. The young man had long blond hair draping his sun-kissed shoulders in shaggy locks. He wore nothing but a pair of pants that seemed to have seen better days, hanging low on his hips, and Cezar yearned to look closer.

The rider was barefooted and didn't use a saddle. Nonetheless, the horse obeyed him and understood him well. The servant was overwhelmed now, trying hard to push the crowd back but to no avail. In the meantime, the people inside the carriage were obviously too scared to get out. The horses were getting impatient, irritated by all the noise, shaking their heads, snorting, and digging with their hooves into the ground.

The young rider looked up that moment, and Cezar stared back. He couldn't tell the color of his eyes from that distance, but he could swear they were luminous, borrowing some of the light from the skies above. The rider raised one hand and waved at him.

Cezar grinned and turned toward his mother who seemed to be in a heightened state of agitation now. "Of course, I will take care of our guests."

“And make these people leave,” his mother insisted, and she looked like she was almost on the point of crying.

“Certainly. Just send Maria with food supplies from the pantry. They won’t leave unless we give them something.”

His mother opened her mouth to protest, but a stern look from him convinced her otherwise.

“Ah, *Paparude*,” his aunt commented from her chair. “Cezar, here. Give them some coins, too.”

“Cezara!” His mother couldn’t keep silent anymore.

“What? I have plenty,” Cezara replied, as she fiddled with her purse. “And I would give half my wealth for a drop of rain now.”

“As if this primitive ritual would actually bring us any,” his mother replied.

His aunt seemed to be as good as he at ignoring his mother. He took the silver coins from Cezara and walked down the stairs. If he could only see what color the young rider eyes were, he thought.

The ruckus downstairs was just getting louder. Their servant was getting in some brawl with a few women, as they didn’t seem impressed at all by his livery.

“What is the meaning of this?” Cezar called, in a commanding voice, and some of the noise died down.

Brazen eyes turned on Cezar from all sides.

“Here,” he said and flipped a coin at one of the women who seemed to be in charge.

She deftly caught it and gave him a broad, toothy grin. Her fingers moved fast, hiding the coin into her long dark braid.

“Give me some, too,” one of the children hurried to him.

Cezar placed a hand on his head and kept him at a distance. “You’ll get some candy.”

He threw a few other coins at the women in long dresses who hurried to grab them. Maria came from the pantry with her arms full of gifts, and Cezar nodded at her and made a sign with his chin to split them among the crowd.

The noise from before was replaced now by small fights over who got first at the supplies.

“Now, out,” he ordered.

“Wait, young master.” One of the women caught him by his forearm. “You need to throw some water on the *Paparude*. We can’t leave otherwise.”

Cezar ordered the servant to pull water from the well, and the man scurried away, relieved that he was given something to do. In the meantime, the gypsies continued their dance, singing the well-known tune calling for the rain.

He felt that rhythm, like a rumble of thunder in his blood. Maybe his mother didn’t believe in such things, and he didn’t either, but it was like the heat became a bit more bearable.

Cezar searched the young rider with his eyes, but while he could still see the horse, its owner was nowhere to be seen, most probably lost in that colorful crowd.

The servant hurried back with the bucket of water.

“Well?” Cezar asked. “What are you waiting for?” he asked the servant.

The man seemed to shy away from the task.

“You do it, young master,” the woman still hanging on his arm said.

With a sigh, Cezar took out his coat, handing it to the servant, and rolled up his sleeves. He began dipping the tips of his fingers into the bucket and sprinkled some on the young children and young women who started squealing in delight. In that weather, he wanted to put his head into that bucket and then throw its content all over himself.

“Are we done now?” he asked the woman.

She smiled at him. “You shouldn’t ask. You’re the one who’s not.”

Cezar frowned. “Come; out with all of you.”

“But you’re not done yet,” the woman insisted.

Her smile was calling for him, and, from his height, he only needed to let his eyes travel lower and stare into her opened blouse. Cezar knew as much that she was barking at the wrong tree. Any red-blooded man would have answered that call, but not him.

“I didn’t get anything,” a brazen voice with a musical quality to it made itself heard, and Cezar looked up.

Only to stare into a pair of beautiful eyes, green like sin. The young rider was standing tall in front of him, and Cezar let his eyes travel down a slender body with broad shoulders tapering down to a small waist and hip bones jutting out above the low-hanging pants. There couldn’t be any undergarments beneath that thin layer of fabric. Cezar didn’t stare, as much as he wanted to do so and the thunder still echoing in his blood demanded.

The rider didn't look like any of the others. His hair wasn't dark, but a pale blond, as Cezar could see from up close now. A playful smile was curving his nicely-shaped lips upward, and there was something shameless in how the young man was staring at him.

Cezar could sense a little buzz raising in his blood, coursing through his body, as he looked at the blond gypsy. It was all familiar, irking him to no end, and the way the rider was staring at him made his fingers itch.

"You're not one of the *Paparude*," Cezar pointed out, accepting the unspoken challenge in the green eyes measuring him up and down shamelessly now. "I don't have to give you anything."

"Everyone else got something," the young rider gestured around. "Give me something, too."

"Well, if you insist," Cezar said and could feel his lips twitching.

He took the bucket from the ground and threw it all over the young man demanding his part. Raucous laughter erupted from all sides while the young rider stared at him with murder in his beautiful eyes after the initial shock of being drenched like that.

"You will pay for this." The rider took one step toward him, his hands curled into fists, but the seriousness of his words was contradicted by his lips, still curving up, with the same naughty promise in them as before.

"Are we done now?" Cezar asked the woman again, ignoring the young rider.

She was already with her back at him but threw him a knowing look over one shoulder. "Yes, you are now."

She grabbed the young rider by one arm, apparently melting with that simple gesture his bellicose attitude from before. The rider threw Cezar one last look. "We two will meet again."

"I am counting on it," Cezar said, his voice filled with meaning.

The gypsy woman dragged the rider with her, the rest of the camp following. Cezar looked after them. He was reading too much into things; most probably, the woman was the rider's wife, and some of the children dressed in willow branches and leaves were theirs.

"Sir," his servant called, waking him up from his reverie. "Miss Marcela is still afraid to climb out of the carriage."

Back to duty now, Cezar thought and rolled down his sleeves. The servant hurried to help him put on his coat, too, and also to brush some dust from his pants. "Enough," he said, and placed one steady hand on the handle to open the door to the carriage. "Miss Marcela," he welcomed his guest with a practiced smile.

“Cezar,” the woman said, beaming at him as if he was saving her from a horde of barbarians. “I was so scared! What did they want?”

“What they usually want,” he replied and helped her down.

She was so wrapped in lace and frills that Cezar wondered, for a brief moment, whether there was still a human being there, buried underneath all those clothes. He helped the other carriage passengers down, one of Marcela’s aunts, and her older sister, a spinster all dressed in black as if she was attending a funeral.

“It was so awful,” Marcela chirped as she leaned into the arm offered to her. “We didn’t dare to come out for fear of what they might do! Isn’t it so, Tamara?” she addressed her sister.

“True. One cannot know what these foul creatures might do. They should be banished from here,” Tamara replied.

“There was no harm done,” Cezar said in an appeasing voice.

“They are just so insufferable, with all those children begging, and their women ... Have you seen their women, Cezar? Such vulgar creatures,” Marcela rumbled on.

“I heard they fornicate with any men that want them,” Tamara whispered. “Not only with theirs. That’s why you might see gypsies that don’t look like them.”

“What do you mean by that, Miss Tamara?” Cezar asked.

“Some are blonds and even have blue eyes. What sort of gypsies are those? They are either the result of fornication out of wedlock, or stolen children.”

“Tamara, please stop talking about such beastly things,” Marcela said and hid part of her face as if she was embarrassed.

Her sister scoffed but fell silent. Cezar could think of beastlier things than gypsy women offering their love to men who desired them, but he thought it wise to keep it all to himself.

“And what do you think of it, Cezar?”

The change in Marcela’s monotonous voice let him know he had been asked a question. “About what?” he inquired. “I am terribly sorry. This horrendous heat makes me fall into a stupor.”

“Your aunt Cezara has been asleep for the last half an hour,” Marcela said with a small forced laugh. “This weather is awful, indeed. We wouldn’t have ventured on the road in such weather, but we heard that you were home and also promised to be here.”

“So, what was the question?” Cezar asked, a bit abruptly.

“Marcela and I were talking about the latest Parisian fashion,” his mother intervened, throwing him a sharp look.

“Oh. I wouldn’t know much about that,” Cezar replied. “For my time there, I preferred to be engaged in the pleasure offered by books.”

He was lying through his teeth and laughing on the inside. Even at home, in that lost corner of the universe, some of his unruly behavior and adventures must have made him famous.

“You studied a lot,” Marcela said as if she tried to offer an apology in his stead.

That made it quite clear what sort of wife Marcela would make. It was a relief, in a way; she was a lady to the tip of her fingers, and she wouldn’t let guests know her husband lay in a drunken stupor when he should have attended some boring function, provided that he would fall to the same affliction as many other bored men.

Cezar would have tried to like her if he had been younger. But, at twenty-six, he knew well what he liked and what he could try to like. His future wife wasn’t on that list for rather simple reasons. He had secretly hoped that his reputation would make most women stay away. Not every man on the face of the earth needed to wed, right? That was the loophole he had been hoping to use with his father. But his family wanted him to marry, and no loopholes could have made them think otherwise.

Maybe he just needed to make the best out of the situation, as it was. Marcela seemed a good choice. She was also brave enough to ignore his reputation as a gambler and a womanizer. He was the only one to know that only half of that was true. Apparently, even his imagined affairs with women of doubtful reputation, which he had carefully cultivated in the shape of rumors, hadn’t been able to keep her away.

They had known each other for years, and Cezar knew, for a fact, that he had never encouraged her in any way. Marcela was a bit past the marrying age, an arbitrary standard if someone were to ask him, and she looked a bit desperate. Cezar wished she would have set her eyes on someone else.

“This damned heat,” he murmured as he pulled at his collar again. He could sense the crushing quality of the air in the room, like that of his fate that was presently being written during those dull moments, over raspberry jam and lemon water.

Aunt Cezara was lucky to be able to sleep in such weather. The heat alone was enough to make him go a little crazy. And for how long were they planning to visit?

“Where do you come from like that? The river?” his father asked as he climbed into the caravan.

“Give me those,” his mother ordered as she started pulling at his pants.

Dimi resisted, holding them with one hand. “They’ll just dry in the sun.”

“Then why did you come up, dirty like this?” his mother scolded him as she pushed her kerchief higher on her forehead.

“I’m hungry,” he said.

“Then wait outside.” His mother ushered him out. “The stew is still cooking. And stand by the fire. You’ll get dry faster.”

“How come you’re hungry?” His father was playing with his tobacco pipe.

It would be hell to pay if he dared to smoke inside, as Dimi knew well. Good thing his mother was keeping them both in check. She used to say that one day, when she would get back, she would find them burning in the ashes of their filth.

She didn’t mean it. It was just her way of telling them to keep the caravan clean. Just like his father didn’t smoke in there, Dimi knew he wasn’t allowed to bring in the dust from outside.

“Dimi needs new pants,” his mother pointed out.

His father held the pipe in one hand and pretended to look Dimi up and down. “What’s wrong with the ones he has on? It’s not like they have holes in their bottom.”

His mother put her hands on her hips. “You either find new pants for Dimi or I won’t cook anymore.”

“Do you hear your mother?” His father was biting on his mustache, trying not to laugh. “She’s going to let us both starve just so that you have pants.”

“I’m going to buy pants on my own,” Dimi said proudly. “And shirts white like snow, and a waistcoat, and shoes!” He stared down at his bare feet. “And a tie!”

“A tie? What do you want to do with that?” his father questioned.

“I’ll strangle my neck as rich people do,” he replied right away and put both his hands to his neck, showing how he would be choking if he did that.

“You won’t buy any tie,” his mother said right away. “And with what money?”

Dimi grinned. “With the money I’ll get from a horse.”

“Do you want to sell Marica?” his father questioned.

“I would never sell Marica,” Dimi said passionately. “No. Another horse.”

“What other horse?” It was his mother’s turn to ask him.

Dimi shrugged. “A horse.”

“No stealing, Dimi,” his mother warned. “You know what they do to horse thieves.”

“Is that stew ready?” he asked, changing the topic.

“I’ll go see to it.” His mother moved with some difficulty. “You don’t go putting any ideas into Dimi’s head, Tabor,” she said to her husband.

“He doesn’t need me for that. He has plenty in his own head,” his father retorted.

They both watched the woman getting down from the caravan to see about her cooking. As soon as she was gone, Dimi hurried toward his father and began speaking in a conspiratorial voice. “*Dodoro*, I’m stealing a horse tonight.”

“Haven’t you heard a word your mother said?” his father whispered back, but his eyes were shining now.

Dimi smiled. Everything he knew about horses, he knew from his father, and that meant even how to steal them.

“I have to,” he explained in the same hushed voice. “Did you see how everyone got back with something? I got nothing! That rich *gadjo*! I’ll show him!”

“What rich *gadjo*?” his father asked. “Is he why you came back like this?”

“He gave me nothing but a bucket of water in my face!”

His father was biting his mustache again.

“Don’t laugh!” Dimi said, making faces. “Everyone got something! *Haleu, love*, and I got nothing!”

“So you want to steal his horse? It’s not a good time for that, Dimi. The sky’s too clear.”

“I won’t go during the day,” Dimi replied.

His father stared at him, reproachfully this time and bit hard into his unlit pipe. “Wait for the rain, when they’re all cooped up like chickens in their houses.”

“The rain will never come,” Dimi said dejectedly.

“It will come. It always does when it’s like this,” his father said. “Then you can steal the horse you want. Make sure no one sees you, and we’ll take it somewhere, far away, to sell it. Your mother won’t know.”

Dimi walked to the door and looked outside. “I’m going tonight,” he said.

“Dimi,” his father warned.

“I won’t get caught,” he said and jumped down.

That was a promise, but Dimi didn’t want to say that he wanted to get caught, too. He had seen the way the rich *gadjo* had looked at him. Dimi had never seen a man more beautiful in his life; it made his heart ache, just thinking of him. It was like a fire had been lit in the center of his chest with only one look from those blue eyes.

It didn’t matter that the man had mocked him and made a fool of him in front of the others. That just made the fire in his chest burn harder, scorching on the inside.

“Where are you going at this hour?”

“Riding,” Cezar replied shortly.

“It’s dark outside,” his mother pointed out. “You could have been more polite to Marcela --”

“I need to cool off. This damned weather is making me crazy,” he interrupted her as he went through the door.

Nightfall had yet to bring the slightest breeze, but Cezar wanted to be out of that house and into the open. He hadn’t been back but for several days, and that house was suffocating him.

The door to the barn was ajar, and Cezar frowned. Sensing something was amiss, he hurried, only to witness the stable boy snoring loudly in a corner, a most suspicious waft of cheap booze coming from him.

Cezar wrinkled his nose in disgust and took a look around. He frowned right away. One of the horses was missing. Distress neighing made him hurry outside. The thief couldn’t be far. Without a moment of hesitation, he saddled another horse by himself and rushed through the barn door.

dodoro (rromanes) = daddy

gadjo (rromanes) = stranger

haleu (rromanes) = food

love (rromanes) = money

Paparude = rain-calling ritual held during summer

Chapter Two

Cezar rushed after the source of the sound, hoofs biting into the stony road. It became more muffled as the thief made a sharp turn and headed toward the riverbank, dashing through the tall, dry grass. Cezar smiled. The river was too wide to be easy to cross on horseback. The thief would be cornered quickly.

He took great pride in what an excellent rider he was; although he hadn't done that as much ever since he went abroad to study, some things were never forgotten. Right now, the distance between him and the thief was getting shorter and shorter, and, as they reached the riverbank, the full moon above their heads threw enough light for him to make up the silhouette of the one riding ahead.

"Stop!" Cezar shouted.

It seemed as if the other rider turned to look behind him, but he couldn't be sure. What he could be sure of, nonetheless, was that the rider had no intention to stop. Cezar pushed the stirrups into the sides of his horse to make it move faster.

This good-for-nothing thief was no match for him. Cezar encouraged his horse verbally, decided not to use his riding crop; he had a different purpose in mind for that thing, as soon as he would reach the other.

The rider in front of him tried to take another turn, but Cezar managed to cut his maneuver. The stolen horse stopped with a loud neigh, rising on the back legs and throwing the thief to the ground.

Cezar had a mind to punish him, but he wouldn't have someone on his conscience, no matter how irresponsible that person was. He jumped down from his horse and hurried to grab the fallen man.

He managed to wrap his hand around what seemed to be a sinewy forearm and hiked the thief up. "What the hell were you thinking?" he asked, shaking the man who was now trying to break his arm free.

"I was stealing your horse," came the prompt answer.

Cezar stopped for a second upon hearing that silvery, musical voice. Could it be that the rider from earlier had dared to steal one of his horses? It would have been just his luck, but Cezar didn't believe in things such as that. He pulled the thief toward him and grabbed him by his slender waist.

They weren't quite eye to eye, as the thief was a tad shorter, but Cezar could feel his breath on his face now. Also, his heart had to beat wildly, as his chest was rising and falling fast. It was enough for him to lean in and have a taste.

He stopped himself in time. The gypsy was obviously trying to make a fool of him, payback for what had happened earlier between them. Cezar pushed him away. "You have some nerve."

It seemed like the other was rubbing his arm where Cezar had held him earlier. "You have too many."

"What? Horses? And that entitles you to steal?"

"You have too much. Of everything," the other spat.

"Well, that must be tough for you to hear, but some people work hard to have things in this world. They are not just given to them."

"Did you work hard to have them?" Another question, filled with venom, followed.

Cezar hesitated. All he did all day long was wasting his life away, and some of his parents' money in the process. They had enough, and whatever Cezar spent barely made a dent in their wealth. Maybe the gypsy was right, in his own way.

"Stealing is wrong," he replied.

"Are you going to drag me to the commissary?" the gypsy asked defiantly.

"No," Cezar said promptly. "But you did ruin my evening, and now I'll have to go back with two horses."

"I could ride one for you," the gypsy said.

"Nice try," Cezar replied, and smiled, mostly to himself. "No. I will require compensation."

He walked closer to the young rider who was slowly taking steps backward, most probably waiting for the right opportunity to run. Cezar grabbed him effortlessly, something that was telling him the gypsy didn't want as much to run but to be caught.

That was another trap, and one Cezar didn't plan on walking willingly into, on his own accord. This beautiful gypsy with shifty feline eyes could just entice him with false promises and then pull the rug from under his feet. Cezar couldn't care less about the world gossiping about his gambling habits, or duels, or imagined affairs with *femmes fatales*, but no one could know the truth.

That was under lock and key, and no matter how tempted he was to take that young gypsy into his arms and hold him tight, he needed to know better.

"I don't have anything. I'm poor," the gypsy complained, squirming and making half-hearted efforts to break free from Cezar's hold.

“You must have something. You’ll just have to give it to me.”

“You said you wouldn’t tell on me.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Cezar asked. “I’ll take my compensation now.”

“*San dilo?* Can’t you see that I have nothing?”

Cezar had an inkling that he had just been insulted but decided not to dwell on it. “You have your clothes,” he pointed out.

The gypsy stopped squirming. “I don’t have others to wear.”

“Then you should have known better than to try stealing from me.”

“Do you want me to give you my pants?” The other’s voice sounded incredulous.

Cezar laughed. “Yes. Come on. You can’t say that it isn’t much better than to spend the night locked away and get a well-deserved flogging in the morning.”

The gypsy pulled himself free fast and broke into a run. Cezar cursed under his breath and hurried after him. The sudden pain in his leg warned him that it wasn’t a good idea, but right now, the thrill of the hunt trampled all.

He rushed after the thief and grabbed him by the scruff of his neck within a few giant steps.

“Let go of me!” the gypsy protested, this time trying to get away for real.

Cezar was holding him tightly this time, too. He made the thief turn and shook him. “Are you going to take them off or should I do it for you?”

“You do it,” the other spat, his hands over Cezar’s wrist, trying to squeeze it.

“I’ll do it. But I’ll take my riding crop over your bare ass if that happens.”

The gypsy stopped, mumbled something, but eventually, he pushed down his pants. Hurriedly, he made a gesture to cover himself, as if Cezar could see much, under the light of the moon. “Here, take them. You rich *gadjo*,” he spat with disdain.

Cezar picked the pants from the ground with two fingers. “And what are you waiting for now? Go away before I change my mind.”

He could sense the thief hesitating.

“I’m all naked,” the young man said.

“And? That should teach you. It’s dark; no one will see you.”

The gypsy murmured something under his breath and began walking backward, slowly. Cezar followed his silhouette, just a tad paler than the darkness surrounding them, without moving.

He shook his head as he turned to tend to his horses. Dropping the 'compensation' in the tall grass, he took one last longing look in the thief's direction, but there was no longer someone he could see there.

His evening hadn't been ruined, after all. Actually, it had been more exciting than everything he had lived through the last few months, including his previous mock duel. Cezar shook his head again. He didn't plan on letting beautiful green eyes and a slender body mess with his head. After all, an entire world stood between them and rules no one could break.

That didn't mean he hadn't enjoyed feeling that young man so close to him. His skin smelled like the forest, the evening air and summer flowers. On his way back, Cezar let his mind wander; at least, he could afford as much.

"So you went to steal a horse and ended up losing your pants?" His father could barely keep from laughing.

Dimi looked down. He felt humiliated, like never in his life. That rich *gadjo*! Dimi no longer found him beautiful; he was mean and arrogant, and he had put him down as no one had ever dared.

He would find a way to get his revenge. They were to spend some time in those parts, and he only needed to wait for the right occasion. And then he would laugh, and that man would get what he deserved.

His father tapped his forehead. "Still thinking of stealing horses? You better think what we're going to tell your mother about what happened to your pants."

"Dad, can't you tell her something? I have other things on my mind."

"And what could be more important than thinking of a way not to walk around naked?" his father teased him.

Dimi pouted and threw his father a reproachful look.

"Now, you sit here, and I'll go find some clothes for you. You can't walk around like a savage."

"I have the good clothes," Dimi said hopefully.

He bet that rich *gadjo* would think differently of him if he saw him with shoes on his feet and beautiful garments.

“No,” his father said sternly. “After a day on the back of that horse, they would look good enough to throw away.”

“But dad --”

“Dimi, you didn’t listen. Just stay here, and I’ll make sure to find something for you to wear before your mom comes back. She thinks your stomach hurts, and that’s why you’re still here. She went after herbs.”

Dimi made a face. “And I’ll have to drink that horrible tea?”

His father grinned. “It’s little compared to what could have happened to you. Now hide under the blanket, so she doesn’t see you’re all naked.”

Dimi nodded shortly and began brooding as soon as his father was gone. If only he had beautiful clothes! Maybe he could brush his hair, he thought. He would ask his mother to help him.

For days, Cezar staved off his boredom by reading every book he hadn’t already read twice in their library, hoping that the heat would go down a bit. To say that he needed to keep his mind busy with something would have been an understatement. Green eyes often came, uninvited, whether he was awake or asleep, and it felt that he could do little to make them go away.

On the fourth day, he couldn’t take it anymore. He knew well that his mother would not approve of him going to cool off at the river, like the average folk, but he was good at sneaking out. No wonder he felt suffocated in that house and, for years, he hadn’t wanted to return home. The Cozman family had enough rules to fill an entire book of laws.

And he intended to twist and break each one of them, in due time.

Dimi knew horses well, and he knew this one, tied up to a tree by the river if he were in the dark. His eyes searched quickly for the river bank for the owner of the horse, but it looked like no one was in sight.

Attempting to steal a horse in broad daylight was a dare even he wasn’t capable of. So, he approached carefully, looking around, ready to run, if need be.

The fire in his heart hadn’t died down over the last days, no matter how upset he still was with how that man had humiliated him. As he closed in on the horse, his eyes fell on a heap of clothes left there, most probably, by the same person who rode that horse.

Dimi grinned. He knew he would get the chance to avenge his honor. As barefooted and broke as he was, he still had one, and it stood in balance with the fire in his heart. Both were bound to the same man, and, if Dimi couldn't get close otherwise, doing what he knew best had to help.

He crouched and began searching through the clothes. There was no money, but the shirt and the pants had to be expensive. Dimi checked the high riding boots with wonder in his eyes, and, for a moment, he considered trying them on. Maybe he would keep those.

He tsked as he checked the other garments. Rich people even had undergarments. Dimi had almost never worn such things. Except for winter, when he had to wear warm clothes, he behaved as if anything touching his skin more than was needed could give him leprosy.

His eyes searched the river, and he smiled when he saw pale skin through the small waves. As long as he wasn't seen, he could stare. And he was curious; the young master from that big house on the hill had seemed strong when he grabbed him. For a moment there, when he took him by the waist, Dimi had thought the man would kiss him.

But, instead, he had been humiliated. There wasn't much he could see, anyway, so he packed the clothes to make them a bundle underneath his arm and grabbed the boots with one hand, determined to scurry away.

He was busy with that when a voice called. "Hey!"

There was no time to look back. Dimi jumped to his feet and started running. Within moments, he heard loud curses, and the short neigh of the horse told him he would be reached fast.

Although it wasn't the wisest thing to do, he turned toward the other, holding his prey high so it could be easily seen.

"Give me back my clothes," the man shouted at him as he jumped on the back of his horse, completely naked.

"*Has mo car,*" Dimi shouted back, and this time started running to make himself scarce before he could be caught.

He cut through the trees, seeking the thickest underbrush, hoping the rider and his horse couldn't follow. As new as he was to these places, Dimi knew a thousand ways to disappear and lose whoever was following him.

But it seemed that the one on his tail knew one thousand and one because he was waiting, barring the way, just when Dimi thought he had managed to lose him.

Awestruck, he stared as the other jumped down from his horse and marched toward him. There were rippling, ropey muscles everywhere he looked, and his eyes traveled down, drawn by the thing that came to his dreams at night for years now.

“How much of a fool can you be?”

Dimi dropped the stolen clothes to the ground so that he could run faster. But the other seemed in no mood to be content with having his belongings returned and hurried after him. One hand on his shoulder made him turn before he could put in a few steps between them.

With a small gasp, Dimi fell to the ground, with the other on top of him. “Don’t beat me, young master,” he begged and put his hands up to cover his face.

A hard body was holding him down, and Dimi let his hands drop, curious why the man wasn’t pulling his hair or trying to punch him or kick him. From above, eyes like the summer sky were staring down at him.

Dimi licked his lips and swallowed. He wasn’t dreaming. He would be kissed. He let his eyelids drop, afraid that staring might make the other change his mind. Something hovered over his face, blowing hot air, but then, there was nothing.

He blinked, as the weight on top of him was lifted, as well.

“You’re a fool,” the man pointed a finger at him.

Dimi pushed himself up, feeling even more humiliated than before. “What? Are you taking me to the commissary now?”

“Why would I do that? Do you want a beating that much? Just keep it up with the stealing you’re so bad at, and you’ll end up getting what you deserve anyway.”

“I’m good at stealing,” Dimi said, clenching his fists.

“That is not something to brag about. Come on. Run away, boy.”

“I’m not a boy.” Dimi felt his blood boiling. “I’m twenty.”

And he had never been kissed like he wanted to.

“What’s your name?” The man’s voice seemed calmer now, appeased.

Dimi stared as the other put his clothes on. “Emir,” he lied on purpose.

A snort was the answer. “Like I can believe that. What are you? The king of ants?”

Dimi crossed his arms over his chest. “No. You only make fun of me because you’re rich.”

The other walked over to him and looked him in the eyes. “I’m making fun of you because you are nothing but a fool. What can you hope to achieve with such petty theft? You’re no good at it, on top of it all.”

Dimi cocked his head to one side. He could see the shape of the man's chest through the shirt since the wet skin made it stick to it. "What's your name?" he asked, putting his hands on his hips now, and moving them slowly like he had seen women doing when interested in a man.

"Unlike you, I won't lie. It's Cezar."

"Now you pretend to be an emperor." Dimi pouted and crossed his arms again.

"So you pretended earlier, then. What's your name, little thief?"

Dimi said nothing. The fire in his chest was a damned liar. This *gadjo* was still just mocking him. He turned on his heels and walked away, but a hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"Your name."

Something in Cezar's voice was different than before. It seemed softer now.

"Dimi," he said abruptly and shook off the hand.

This time, as he ran through the trees, no one followed him.

Cezar tossed and turned for the entire night. He couldn't take Dimi out of his head as much as he tried. Maybe he just imagined things, believing that the young gypsy had wanted to be kissed that day, at the river. As much as he was running, he always let himself caught, and that had to stand for something.

He pushed the sheets away. Even sleeping naked, it was impossible to get rid of the heat. And even at night. He went to stand in front of the window, hoping for a little breeze.

Was the way Dimi's body spoke nothing but a lie? His kind was treacherous, and Cezar knew he had to be insane even to consider the possibility. But Dimi's smooth body and bright green eyes were all he could think of.

It felt like a sort of drunkenness, catching him under a spell. He had sworn himself off going to the river or anywhere he could meet the young gypsy by accident. So far, it hadn't helped at all. Even worse, there was no possible way to get rid of the itch making his blood boil and his body hard.

The remedy was out of touch. Cezar knew well he needed to behave if he didn't want to feel his father's wrath. Even when he was not at home, the man's long shadow was everywhere, and, at least for the moment, Cezar wanted no complications.

With an exasperated sigh, he returned to the bed. As he let his eyelids fall, he knew he had to be resigned with the inevitability of dreaming of green eyes staring at him from up close, and a slender body covering him down to his toes, making his own ache with need.

“Why would you want to work there?” his father questioned him. “Dimi, once a horse disappears from there, they’ll know it’s you. Nah, I won’t let you.”

“But these pants are ugly.” Dimi pointed at the rags he was wearing. “And I won’t steal, I promise.”

“We’ll find money to buy you other clothes. You don’t have to go there. Rich people hate us.”

Dimi wanted to protest some more when his mother walked in. “What are you two bickering about?” she asked, watching them both with hawk-like eyes.

“Dimi wants to work as a stable boy,” his father said with disgust.

“Hah! Like anyone would pay the likes of us,” his mother said. “Maybe they’ll hire you, but then send you away with nothing. They spit on us, these rich people.”

Dimi frowned and looked down, his fists clenched to the sides. For days, he hadn’t seen Cezar at all, not even in passing. Maybe he left and went who knew where, but Dimi couldn’t bear another day without seeing him.

It didn’t matter that Cezar didn’t seem to like him at all. Dimi wanted just to see him, be close to him. His dreams were not enough.

“Let him try,” his father eventually said. “When you come back, tail between your legs, you better learn your lesson. They are there, and we are here,” he gestured, “and nothing would ever change that.”

Dimi just nodded shortly. He wouldn’t do anything without his parents, or at least *dodoro* knowing, except, maybe, for one thing. Only that no one wanted to do that thing with him, or perhaps he was too afraid to try.

“Don’t give me that, Cezar,” his father boomed. “You got hurt in a duel? To what lengths will you go to drag our family name through the mud?”

Cezar could feel his jaw hurting. His father hadn’t been home for more than one day, and he had already learned about the real cause of his injury. Well, the doctor had warned him that his father wouldn’t buy his lies.

“You will settle down, whether you like it or not,” his father said. “Comes October the latest, you will be married.”

Cezar stopped. He had hoped for at least one more year of freedom. “Did I leave my future wife with child without my knowing? What’s the hurry?” he asked scathingly.

“The hurry is your behaving irresponsibly. Marriage and children will make you mend your ways.”

Cezar had a mind to throw into his father’s face that he had no intention to produce an heir, let alone more. But there were battles he could win, and this wasn’t one of them. He straightened his coat. “Anything else?”

His father stared at him, his displeasure evident. “Get out of my face.”

He pretended to be unaffected as he walked outside. But there was anger, dark and deep, growing inside him, and no ways to quench it. He headed for the barn. A long ride on horseback would help him clear his head.

Cezar cursed under his breath as he pushed the barn door open. He stopped when he saw who was there. Dimi was brushing the mane of one of the horses slowly, and stopped, too, when saw him there.

A veil of darkness came over him. Dimi was as good as naked, with the rags he wore barely covering his ass and thighs. The need from the last days came like a flood, drowning any reason in its wake.

“What are you doing here? Trying to steal again?” Cezar walked over to Dimi, squeezing the riding crop in his hand.

“I got hired,” Dimi replied promptly, but his usually naughty smile was gone from his face, along with some of the color from his cheeks.

He was staring at Cezar, wide-eyed, probably sensing that something was wrong, and he was looking at the riding crop with unhidden unease.

“You’re a liar,” Cezar said through his teeth and in one step was right in from of Dimi.

“I’m not,” Dimi protested.

Cezar grabbed him by his long locks, determined to throw that good-for-nothing thief out the door. The last thing he needed was to be teased over what he couldn’t have.

“It hurts!” Dimi squirmed and tried to push him away.

Cezar knew he was too close. Dimi's smell of the forest and the river and freedom filled his nostrils, making his never forgotten need soar once more. The green eyes were reproachful now, and a bit moist, staring at him from so close that they could taste each other's breath.

What insanity drove him to do what came next, Cezar couldn't say, but while the hand he held in Dimi's hair didn't ease, he brought the other arm to wrap around the other's slender waist.

And he kissed him. At first, there were just lips pressing furiously against lips while Dimi still struggled to get free, but soon, their mouths were opening, and Cezar reached inside, pushing his tongue through, and drinking from the sweetness that welcomed him.

The desert in his heart was no more. He drank and drank from Dimi's mouth, his hands becoming frantic, as they moved lower, both busy pushing those ugly rags down so they could fill themselves with smooth small mounds of flesh.

He ripped the fabric apart, not that much was needed seeing how dried by weather and old age it was and pushed Dimi on his back into the hay. Dimi was still staring at him, his hands moving in reflex to hide his nudity.

There seemed to be something akin to fear in those usually playful green eyes, but Cezar was too far gone to care. "Open wide," he ordered as he pushed Dimi's knees apart.

He had no time to get undressed, too, so he just took out his manhood, now swollen and hard to the point that it felt like bursting through its own skin. Impatiently, he pushed his hands underneath Dimi's buttocks, bringing him to the position he needed.

Dimi must have been used before, Cezar thought. Who said only gypsy women offered their love to men who wanted them? Maybe some young men did that, too. He spat into his palm, making his cock wet and aligned it with the willing body spreading wide for him.

Dimi made a small strange sound, and Cezar stared at him. The fear seemed to be there still, but it was mixed with a naked desire that matched the one Cezar felt overwhelming him, too. "It will hurt a little at first," he found himself saying.

This used young man had to know that better than him. Dimi was still covering his cock, but Cezar was curious, so he batted his hand away. Dimi's manhood was slim, as its owner, and looked like the head still wanted to break free from its foreskin. Cezar pulled the skin down, grabbing Dimi's cock, making him whimper.

No wonder men liked to fuck such people. There was something lewd and unrestrained in how Dimi moaned, his nipples growing harder, his lips and eyes moist, his entire body singing and calling to be taken over. He was panting, and his green eyes wandered over Cezar's face, only to withdraw and look away the next moment.

Cezar hesitated no more. He pushed between the smooth buttocks, but the resistance there made him hiss. Dimi jolted and tried to move away, but Cezar caught him by his ankles and pulled him close again. “Just stay still,” he growled.

He spat again, on his cock, but on Dimi’s ass, too, and this time, he didn’t hurry. Dimi was making small distressed sounds, but he wasn’t fighting him. Instead, he seemed to turn rigid, which was not at all what Cezar needed him to do.

“Hey, easy,” he ordered in a voice he wanted to be soothing, but came out ragged and demanding.

Dimi was keeping his eyes closed now, and Cezar leaned over him and caught his lips in another kiss. That seemed to make Dimi let himself go softer a bit, and Cezar used the opportunity to increase the pressure. As the head of his cock finally pushed through the tight ring of muscles, he exhaled. He still kept Dimi’s mouth close, kissing and biting it softly, as he moved slowly to get inside.

There were tears at the corners of Dimi’s eyes, and Cezar wiped them with his thumbs. “It’s all right,” he said softly. “You’re good, Dimi, you’re good.”

His soothing words seemed to have the desired effect, as Dimi’s breath became a bit more rhythmic and not so troubled. Cezar kissed the beautiful lips, the smooth cheeks, the long neck, as he moved, finally the body under him easing into the invasion, allowing him to push deeper. There were still soft gasps and moans coming from Dimi, letting him know when it was too much.

Cezar wanted more, but he sensed that the body in his arms was far more fragile than he had imagined. He placed his arms over Dimi’s head for leverage and just moved his hips slowly while kissing the other as gently as he could.

“Touch me,” he asked.

Dimi’s hands were tentative, as they reached for him. They cupped Cezar’s cheeks first and then wrapped around his neck. They stayed there, unmoving, and Cezar felt a new sense of apprehension growing. If his lover wanted to strangle him for being too rough, he wouldn’t mind.

He bore his eyes into Dimi’s and found in them wonder. His soft lips were parted, enticing him, and Cezar kissed him again, and again, and his body was giving away all that he had kept bottled inside for so long.

“Damn,” he whispered and began shooting his seed inside the body, taking him so well.

Dimi's moans were growing louder, too, and Cezar moved a few more times, even as the waves of his release began fading. Dimi pushed against his chest, and Cezar looked down between their bodies only to see the other's beautiful cock spurting its essence without being touched.

There was something incredulous in Dimi's ragged breath now, as he was doing the same thing, wondering most probably at what his body could do.

Cezar pulled out and pushed Dimi's knees to his chest to take a good look. The image of his seed pouring out of that lithe body was a sight to behold. He laughed and placed a small kiss on a dusty ankle, without caring about how dirty it was.

His laughter died as he looked up and saw Dimi's eyes. For some reason, the young gypsy seemed upset with him.

san dilo (rromanes) = you're crazy/stupid

has mo car (rromanes) = eat my dick

Chapter Three

“What?” Cezar asked.

Dimi scoffed and looked away. Cezar had the feeling he was being played, but he felt too happy and free to care about that. He came closer, hovering over Dimi’s naked body and tipped his chin. They looked into each other’s eyes for a while. The stare in Dimi’s feline eyes was defiant.

“It hurt,” Dimi eventually said.

Cezar shrugged. “Doesn’t it always? How can you not know that? And I’d say,” he played with the droplets of semen drying up on Dimi’s taut abdomen, “you enjoyed it even if it hurt.”

“It was my first time,” Dimi protested and tried to push him away.

Cezar quirked an eyebrow. “Your first time? You cannot seriously expect me to believe that.”

Dimi looked at him and seemed genuinely hurt, but Cezar wouldn’t start believing a gypsy’s lies, no matter how beautiful he was. “Ah, I see what this is all about,” he said.

He rummaged through his pocket for the small purse he carried with him for emergencies. He took one shiny silver coin and threw it on Dimi’s chest. Quick fingers reached it.

“What’s this?” Dimi asked.

“Let’s call it my way of saying ‘thank you’ for showing me a good time.”

Dimi pouted and looked away.

“Is it too little?” Cezar asked, and took two more coins from his purse, dropping them on Dimi’s chest.

The gypsy seemed hesitant as he took them.

“All right, fine,” Cezar said.

He took the coins from Dimi’s hand and put them back into the purse.

“Hey, those are mine,” Dimi protested.

Cezar laughed and pushed the small purse into his hand. “They are all yours. I hope it’s enough for ... your first time,” he added with an all-knowing grin.

Dimi’s eyes grew wide, and then he emptied the purse into his palm, his lips moving fast as he was counting.

“Well?” Cezar asked and leaned in to capture Dimi’s lips into a kiss.

Their mouths locked onto each other, and Cezar indulged in tasting Dimi again for a little while. “You should be on your way,” he said with regret as he pulled away.

“You ripped my pants,” Dimi complained. “How will I go home? I can’t tell *dodoro* I lost my pants again.”

Cezar took a look at the deplorable state of Dimi’s pants. It was clear those were unusable. “Stay here,” he said. “I will bring you something to wear.”

Dimi nodded while holding the coin purse close to his chest as if he was still afraid someone might snatch it away from him.

Cezar went into the house, straight to his room. After a few minutes of deliberation, he found some old pants and shirts from years before. Dimi was shorter and thinner than him so he could not give him anything from his current wardrobe.

On his way down, he decided to visit the pantry, too. Into a small bag, he stuffed some bread, cheese, and cured meat; he doubted anyone in that house would go hungry without them.

Dimi seemed restless when he turned back.

“Here,” Cezar said as he handed him the clothes and the food.

Dimi hesitated, not knowing what to do with the coin purse in his hand. Laughing, Cezar took it from him. “Just get dressed, and I promise I will give it back to you.”

A grin splitting his face, Dimi began dressing up. The pants were a bit large, but not too much. The problem was that they were too long. Without hesitating, Dimi rolled them up, and happily put a shirt on, too. He still looked like a street urchin, but at least he wasn’t naked anymore.

“You can tell your wife to shorten them for you,” Cezar suggested.

Dimi laughed. “What wife?”

“Don’t tell me you don’t have one,” Cezar said, with a snort. “That woman who took you with her that day, when you came with the *Paparude*. Isn’t she your wife?”

Dimi shook his head and seemed amused. “She isn’t.”

“I thought your lot married young,” Cezar pointed out.

“Not me. *Dodoro* won’t give me away.”

“Give you away? What are you, a girl?”

“Many want me,” Dimi said, pulling his pants up, a bit dissatisfied of how they tended to slip down on his slender hips. “But dad doesn’t let them have me. They even promised him money. Lots.”

Looking at him, Cezar could understand that. He had barely had Dimi, and both his heart and his body wanted him again with so much intensity it hurt. It wasn’t fair to anyone how relieved he felt upon hearing that Dimi didn’t belong to anyone, except his parents.

“You should go now. Take this food to your family,” he said. “Do you have any children?” he asked, cursing himself for it at the same time.

Dimi shook his head and looked surprised.

“Not even the kind that you might not know of?”

Dimi cocked his head to one side and stared at him. Cezar wanted to ask more, maybe even if Dimi had been honest earlier when saying that it was his first time. But this wasn’t the kind of wide-eyed dream he could indulge in. Dimi could just lie. And a young man as beautiful as him must have sowed his wild oats plenty of times, surrounded as he was by willing females.

“It’s late,” he said instead. “Go and don’t come back here again.”

Dimi’s face fell. “Why?”

“You can’t work here. It wouldn’t be safe for you. Or for me. Do your folk plan to stay around these parts for how long?”

“For a while,” Dimi said vaguely. “Maybe until fall.”

Until fall. That was when Cezar was to get married. He could have that summer and maybe Dimi if he wanted him. “We’ll see each other again,” he said.

“When?” Dimi asked.

“When I can,” Cezar replied, wondering what sort of dangerous link he was creating between them.

Dimi looked down, seemingly unhappy. Cezar stopped him before walking away and pulled him close for another deep kiss. If that was all they were bound to have, the least he could do was to make it last for a few more moments.

“Come see me at the camp,” Dimi said, as they broke their kiss.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Cezar replied.

“No.” Dimi shook his head. “Promise you will come.”

Was he out of his wits? All he wanted was to say 'yes'. Hell, he wanted to grab Dimi, walk with him into the house, drag him into his room, and keep him there so that he could make love to him until summer was over. "I don't make promises I can't keep," he said, and set his chin high, pretending to be bored already.

Dimi removed his hands slowly from his shoulders, like a fleeting regret. "Come see me, Cezar. What's the use of being rich if you can't do what you want?"

Cezar opened his mouth in surprise. Could it be that Dimi had read him so easily? But the young gypsy was no longer there, the barn door sighing as it swung on its hinges.

"That good for nothing gypsy," his father mumbled, as they were at the table, having lunch the next day. "First, he begs me to let him work, and after not even half a day, he disappears. With some things from the pantry, it seems. Good thing he didn't steal a horse. I would have applied the flogging myself."

"I gave away the things from the pantry," Cezar said.

"For what?" His father stared at him over his glasses.

"For charity," Cezar replied. "As well-off as we are, I doubted anyone would miss a bit of bread and cheese."

"And meat," his father said with venom.

"And meat," Cezar said with a sigh. "I also sent the gypsy on his way. I don't think it's wise to let such people anywhere near temptation," he lied.

"We could have paid him close to nothing," his father mumbled as he buried his head into the plate in front of him.

Something of his father's physical appearance made me think of a wild boar. It was hard to believe this man with an oversized belly and an appetite to match could have been the charming young man who had managed to conquer his mother's heart nearly three decades ago. Some used to say that his father had been quite the adventurer back in the days. No stranger to gambling and scandalous affairs, he was, without a doubt, the one to sire Cezar.

But as he had settled down into the life of a wealthy country lord, his thirst for adventure had dulled and maybe even broke for good. Cezar had the future laid out in front of him and, at times, the mere thought was filling him with desperation.

"Let's not talk about such unpleasant things at the table," his mother intervened.

"Who did you give your charity to?" his father asked, ignoring his spouse.

“Who? To those unfortunate, of course,” Cezar replied icily.

His aunt Cezara, who had seemed out of it until that moment began talking. “Has that gypsy who makes jewelry been here yet? I heard his hands are made of gold, that beautiful the things he makes are.”

His father fell silent. Aunt Cezara was wealthy and old, two traits that made her very attractive as a relative to have over for an unlimited time, as far as his father was concerned. Cezar liked her, not only because he had been named after her, but because she was a fearless woman. She always spoke her mind. After she had lost all her sons to the war and disease, and her husband’s death, many had expected to see her fall to ruin, both within her soul, and in her financial affairs.

Cezara might have been old, but she was no fool. She often laughed saying that counting her money helped her forget about sad things. Cezar’s father could wait for this one to die and leave him everything, but it looked like the old lady had no intention to start preparing her own funeral. Not many would have expected to see so much life into a creature that frail. To annoy his father, Cezar often held toasts to her health, wishing her to live to be one hundred years old.

“Is there such a jeweler among them?” Cezar asked. “I thought all were poor as dirt.”

Cezara waved as if details were unimportant. “He works with what you give him. I have two old gold coins from my late husband, God rest his soul, and I want to turn them into a brooch. I want Cezar to have something beautiful to give his future wife.”

“Cezar could just buy something from more trustworthy sources,” his father intervened, his eyes glinting upon hearing about the coins.

As wealthy as they were, his father seemed only made of greed. Maybe that was why he was growing larger and larger day after day. His greed was growing inside him, taking over his body completely.

“And I want him to have something from me,” Cezara said in a tone that brooked no argument. “Go to the gypsy camp one of these days, Cezar. An old gypsy woman told my fortune and said to me, that’s where my nephew would find the most beautiful jewel.”

Cezar eyed his old aunt carefully. Her witty eyes stared back at him.

“Just a tactic to make you pay for counterfeited jewelry,” his father huffed.

“Was she telling your fortune or mine?” Cezar asked and smiled.

“I asked her to tell me about yours, too. She said she could only see this,” his aunt replied, with a sly smile of her own.

Cezar felt uncomfortable under that steady gaze. Could it be that his aunt was suspecting something? It seemed unlikely. He had been cautious, or at least, he thought that.

Until Dimi. He had been insane to fuck him there, in his parents' barn, where anyone could have walked on them. Not that he had any regrets, except for those growing like wild weeds from his decision to keep away from the young gypsy.

Maybe just one more time. Maybe they could have another moment that could last him a lifetime. He reached from the glass of water and took a long sip. The heat didn't look to give in yet. "I will go ask about your jeweler," he said.

"I'm sure he'll make you something beautiful," Cezara replied and nodded as if she was confirming something to herself.

Dimi was showing off his new clothes to a group of young men and women when his mother took him by one ear and pulled him after her. "Ouch, ouch, ouch," he complained but followed his mother while the others laughed behind him.

"Where did you get these clothes, Dimi?" his mother asked, as soon as they were out of earshot.

Dimi rubbed his ear. "I got paid."

"For what?" His mother put her hands on her hips and didn't look like she was buying that.

"For tending the horses," Dimi said.

"You were there for one day."

"They saw me walking around as good as naked and gave me some of their old clothes," Dimi replied.

"And this?" His mother showed him the small coin purse Cezar had given him.

Dimi could swear his mother could smell money if it were buried in the ground. He made a face. "Give me that!" He reached for the purse, but his mother moved her hand away.

"Tell me who gave it to you."

"They did. Their mare gave birth yesterday, and I helped. They said the foal could have died if I hadn't been there," he lied some more.

His mother put her hands on her hips again. "And pigs fly. What do you know about mares giving birth?"

"What dad told me," Dimi said right away.

“This goes back to whoever gave it to you.” His mother held the purse so that he could see it, but without being able to touch it.

“No,” Dimi said stubbornly.

“Dimi, what did the rich people want you to do for this money?”

Dimi frowned. “Nothing. They just have so much that for them this is like the money they use to buy socks. And it’s not just me they gave money. When we were there, with the *Paparude*, they threw silver and gold coins like they were bread crumbs.”

His mom shook her head. “This,” she held the purse again in her tight fist, “will bring you nothing good, Dimi. If they take you away from me, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

At that, she grabbed one corner of her scarf and patted her eyes. Dimi hugged her. “No one takes me away from you and dad. They’ll have to catch me first, and you know how fast I can run,” he joked. “Look, you take the money. I know how much you need it.”

His mother sighed. “No. I don’t want to have anything to do with it. But you can’t use it, either. We’ll give it to your dad; he’ll know what to do.”

Dimi smiled. His father was much more practical than his mother. He would use the money and wouldn’t be afraid of it. His mother just worried too much.

He could care less about it, anyhow. All he wanted was for Cezar to come to see him, as promised. Dimi wouldn’t go there again; if Cezar said it wasn’t safe, it wasn’t.

Part of his heart was telling him Cezar would come; the other told him to forget all about that *gadjo*. Cezar hadn’t believed him when he told him it was his first time. Only for that, and Dimi should have forgotten about him by now.

As much as it had hurt, Dimi could feel getting all dizzy just thinking of it. Cezar had kissed him, making his head spin, and then he had used him like men used women, and at first, Dimi felt so overwhelmed that he hadn’t talked or done anything. But then Cezar had kissed him more, and that pain had slowly gone away and got replaced by pleasure so deep that he still felt it inside.

His body was strange since yesterday. It still hurt when he tried to seat, but when he touched himself, he felt it quivering, like it wanted more, more of that thing between Cezar’s legs.

Cezar was wrong. No one had had him before. Some girls had kissed him and tried to make him touch their chests or push his hands between their legs and touched him, but no one in the world could do to him what Cezar’s kisses and hot rod inside him could.

Since that morning, he had thought only of Cezar. Even when he ate, or talked to others, or laughed, his mind was not there. It was locked behind the door of that barn, stopped in time

when Cezar had walked in, his handsome face all a frown, looking like he wanted to hurt someone.

Dimi was glad he had been the one Cezar had hurt. He wanted that hurt to happen again, only so that Cezar would kiss him and hold him and tell him how good he was, and then for that pleasure, hot like fire and thick like dark honey, to pour into his veins again.

But maybe Cezar wouldn't come at all, and Dimi was nothing but a fool to think that someone as rich and beautiful as that could want him. Maybe he would have to sneak into that barn again, and steal Cezar's kisses, and maybe his heart, too.

Cezar wasn't surprised that, as soon as he set foot into the gypsies' camp, a band of children surrounded him, asking him for things. Aunt Cezara better knew what she was doing, sending him there. He could hardly believe that there was some jeweler there, but the gold coins in his pocket seemed real enough.

A young gypsy woman caught his arm as he was busy pushing off the others. "Come, young master, come to have your fortune told."

"I don't have time for this," he said with a sigh.

"It will only take a few moments. What are a few moments when you can know your future?"

"Could you help me get rid of all these children?" he asked her directly.

The girl smiled, showing her white teeth, and then began yelling at the others. She even grabbed something from the ground and started chasing them away. Apparently, she held some sort of authority over the very young boys and girls since she managed to make them all scurry away.

"Where can I find a jeweler?" he asked the girl. "There will be a coin for you if you take me to him."

She seemed deaf all of a sudden and just proceeded to drag him to one of the tents spread on the ground, along the caravans.

"Fine," he murmured. "But then you'll have to take me to the jeweler," he added.

"You won't need him," the young woman said, "once you know your future."

Cezar found the whole fortunetelling thing a sham and a loss of time, although he could understand, to some extent, his aunt's fascination with such occult things. For the moment, he played along, as his eyes searched around for Dimi.

The girl pushed him through the flaps of a tent, and he found himself face to face with an old woman who was slowly puffing smoke as she dragged long breaths from a curved pipe. She seemed almost blind, and Cezar nearly jumped when her eyes set on him. One of them was strange like it had no color left in it, the white spreading over the iris.

“Ah, the young master,” she said and made a broad gesture with one hand, inviting him to sit across from her on one of the mats placed on the ground.

Without any encouragement from him, she began shuffling some cards, mumbling something under her breath. From time to time, she bit into her pipe with conviction.

“Come on,” he said, growing impatient. “Just tell me how beautiful the woman in my life is and how happy she will make me and let me go my way.”

“What woman?” The fortuneteller tapped the cards spread in front of her. “I don’t see any woman in your future.”

Cezar could feel the blood draining from his face.

“What I see is you,” she pointed at the jack of diamonds, “a green-eyed man,” she continued, as she caressed the jack of spades, “and a long journey,” she finally pointed at a ten of spades.

Cezar stood up brusquely.

“Don’t you want to know more about what the cards say?”

“I believe I heard enough,” he said.

With trembling fingers, he took out one silver coin from his pocket and threw it on the ground. As he went out, he almost pushed the girl who took him there. She was grinning at him, and Cezar felt his anger growing. Had Dimi just told anyone about them? He should have known better than to trust a gypsy and his lies.

Aunt Cezara would have to wait for her gold coins to be turned into a brooch by someone else, he decided as he walked back the same path he came.

Cezar was barely out of the camp and was heading over to the place where he had tied his horse, at the shadow of a few solitary trees when he saw someone coming down the dusty road. He grabbed the harness in one hand, squeezing tightly. Just one word he would have with that man, just one word.

Dimi walked over to him, swinging his hips suggestively. Cezar cursed under his breath. Maybe he just needed to jump on the back of his horse and disappear. Getting into a fight with Dimi right now seemed a bad idea, mostly because the only thing Cezar could think, as soon as his eyes set on the young gypsy, was how much he wanted to kiss him.

“Hey, Cezar, *sokeres*,” Dimi said and smiled as he nodded at him.

Cezar could feel his lips set into a grim line. “Whatever you’re selling, I’m not buying.”

“What?” Dimi stopped for a moment and then hurried to reach him.

Cezar put one foot into the stirrup, but Dimi caught his arm. “You better let go of me.”

“Why? You came to see me, right?” Dimi asked in a hopeful voice.

“No. I was actually looking for someone else.”

Dimi’s face darkened. “Who?” he asked.

He sounded jealous. Cezar could not believe just how far Dimi’s brazenness could go.

“How could you tell people about us?” Cezar asked through his teeth as he leaned menacingly toward Dimi. “I doubt even your people could tolerate such a thing.”

Dimi seemed genuinely surprised. Cezar had to remind himself that he was dealing with an inveterate liar. He jumped into the saddle, stirring his horse around Dimi.

The horse neighed as Dimi jumped in front of it and grabbed the reins. “I didn’t tell anyone!”

“Get out of my way,” Cezar said through his teeth, but Dimi didn’t move, staring up at him with reproach in his beautiful eyes.

The anger he felt was making him tremble. He raised the hand with the riding crop, and Dimi put his arms in front of his face, to defend himself.

A wave of shame overcame him, and Cezar let his hand drop, the riding crop slashing the air, away from Dimi. He pushed his heels into the horse’s sides. He didn’t have the heart to look back. All he could do was to stare at the path before him, letting the dust of the road get into his eyes.

sokeres (rromanes) = how are you?

Chapter Four

Cezar was in a foul mood. Even his father hadn't dared to scold him as much as he probably wanted to, afraid that he might make them look bad on their visit to his future in-laws. Marcela's parents were throwing a real feast, as they had invited them over to talk about the details of their engagement.

Despite knowing that Dimi had betrayed his trust, he could not think of anything else. Cezar was certain he had never met someone more beautiful. He had never wanted someone more than he wanted Dimi.

But there was nothing he could do. Should rumors appear, they would be easy to disregard. Who could trust what a gypsy said? Still, it was too close for comfort, and Cezar worried about what that might mean. He wanted to be angry at Dimi, but he couldn't find it in him. Instead, his growing resentment was directed at himself, for giving in to the temptation, in the first place, or for not giving in enough. He couldn't tell for sure.

These days, he was his own enemy. Nothing around him pleased him, and he had blamed his growing irritability on the heat whenever his mother tried to talk to him. Aunt Cezara seemed more astute, and she never brought his moods into the conversation. Instead, she was the only distraction as she was keeping him entertained with crazy stories from her youth.

Those weren't the only topics of conversation aunt Cezara liked to talk about. Apparently, she knew plenty about what happened at the gypsy camp. It seemed she had gotten a friend in one of the old women who were bringing her copper pans, and other small things made by the craftsmen there. His aunt surely had to have an entire collection of useless things by now, but Cezar had an inkling that she just paid for companionship and colorful stories from the camp.

Those were the stories Cezar devoured despite pretending he was bored out of his wits. Seeing that he didn't care about lashing out to anyone when he was in his aunt's company, his parents eventually left him alone.

"Did you use that gold I gave you?" his aunt asked him.

"I couldn't find the jeweler, *tante*," Cezar replied.

"What about the jewel?" She leaned toward him, watching him with her keen eyes.

"You shouldn't believe everything that old gypsy woman tells you," Cezar said, growing a little restless under her gaze. "What jewel could those poor people have?"

Cezara smiled all-knowingly. "Maybe you just haven't looked enough."

"This is what I'm giving Marcela," Cezar said and opened the small jewelry box he had with him.

His aunt threw a disinterested look at the necklace and earrings. “Pretty. And dull. Just like her.”

“*Tante!*” Cezar exclaimed.

Good thing his parents were already downstairs, and couldn’t hear her. Secretly, he enjoyed it, and that was a big issue since he needed to have definitely other feelings toward his future wife.

“What are those? Lapis lazuli?”

Cezar nodded.

“I could have sworn your favorite color was green,” his aunt commented.

Just what was aunt Cezara pointing at with that?

“It is said these stones are a symbol of harmony. I thought they would be a fitting choice,” he said.

Cezara scrunched her nose. “Hmm, harmony.”

“I suppose it is necessary for a marriage,” Cezar said.

“I’d rather have passion over harmony.” Her old eyes became slightly unfocused. “The colonel, God rest his soul, had such a quick temper. In our first year of marriage, we had to replace all the plates in the house three times.”

Cezar chuckled. “Don’t tell me you were the one busy throwing them at him, *tante*.”

“Do you find it that hard to believe? But he was so passionate after our fights,” she said dreamily.

Cezar shook his head. That was the kind of story he wasn’t that particularly interested to learn about; he smiled to himself. “Well, are we ready?” He offered his arm courteously, and his aunt took it.

“Let’s get this over with,” she said. “I wonder if her parents are as boring as her. Or maybe more boring? We will see.”

Aunt Cezara had a mouth on her, but she didn’t care if she offended others. Cezar wished he had half of her courage. Maybe he would dare to tell his father he didn’t want to get married and live the life he wanted.

The prospect of a family scandal didn’t sit well with him. There was no other option for someone like him, anyway. His fate was set in stone and had been drawn since his birth. What his heart desired, who he wanted to love, didn’t matter.

Cezar knew he would be miserable. He had kissed Dimi and realized that even more; in a way, he had done that to himself because now he knew how it would feel to be complete, and lose himself in the arms of someone he truly desired. Once before, he had thought to have experienced the same feeling, but it had been only fleeting. What he had experienced in Dimi's arms had no rival, no equal, in all the memories of his life.

He needed to take those beautiful, treacherous eyes out of his head. If that were the only way, he had to pull his heart out of his chest and feed it to the dogs.

"I was just joking," his aunt said as she patted his arm. "I didn't mean to make you sad. I know you don't want Marcela as your wife."

Cezar sighed. "Am I that obvious? But she is a good choice. Father likes her."

His aunt scoffed. "And her money. If he likes her so much, he should marry her, not you."

"It's not like there are other young women of a certain station who would want someone like me," Cezar pointed out. "I am getting old, and I do need to settle down."

"Who says that? And why do you talk like you're a spinster? You're young, Cezar, and you should live your life, the way you want to live it."

"Well, I cannot stay a student forever and indulge in squalid affairs," Cezar said.

"I doubt your affairs are as squalid as you think," his aunt replied. "Follow your heart, Cezar, before it is too late."

A servant knocked on the door, announcing them that his parents were getting impatient. Aunt Cezara gave him a long look, filled with sorrow and affection before they went out the door. Cezar had half a mind to ask her why she was looking at him like that, but it was not the time, nor the place to do so.

"It will not be that large of a ceremony," Marcela said, as they strolled through the garden. "Around two hundred and fifty guests, I believe. What do you think, Cezar? Should I have the dress made by a Parisian dressmaker?"

"Do you plan to travel there only for this?" Cezar asked politely.

"It won't be that much of a bother, but it's all in such short notice," Marcela said. "No, there is one in the capital, and I should only travel there. I heard everything she makes is a work of art. Unless you find all this too much."

"No, not at all. It is said the wedding day is the happiest in a woman's life. I believe you should do everything that can make you happy like that."

Marcela laughed, as if embarrassed. She stopped and gave Cezar a come-hither look. She even leaned in a little; Cezar pursed his lips and half-turned away from her.

“I believe they are waiting for us. Let’s not keep them. My father tends to hold a grudge when he is held back from eating for too long,” he said, ignoring the confused look in Marcela’s eyes.

“Yes, certainly. It wouldn’t be polite,” Marcela said quickly, as she looked away.

Cezar stared straight ahead. How could he think he would go through with this sham of a marriage? He had nothing against Marcela. Maybe she was pretty and dull, as his aunt said, but she was a good person. Cezar felt like a fraud, and wanted nothing else but to tell Marcela there would be no wedding, and run out of there, anywhere his horse could take him.

“Cezar, there had been rumors,” she started, as they walked back to the house.

“Yes?” He hoped his voice wasn’t strained as he talked.

“That you got into a duel over a woman,” Marcela added, and looked away, covering her face with her fan. “A married woman.”

“Oh, that,” Cezar said, struggling not to let his relief show.

“Is it true?” Marcela asked, without looking at him.

“Maybe a part of it is not,” Cezar said and laughed.

“Which part?” Marcela questioned, squeezing his arm.

“She wasn’t married,” Cezar said airily.

“Oh!” Marcela exclaimed but added nothing after that.

Their families were already rounded at a table, out in the yard, as Marcela’s father had decided that it was too hot to stay indoors.

“We will have some music, too,” he said, as they were all seated. “There is quite a talented band of musicians that I want to hire for our children’s wedding, and I thought of having them over so that we can all hear them.”

“What musicians, papa?” Marcela inquired.

“They are from the gypsy camp. They will still be here in the fall, so they will play at your wedding.”

Cezar took the glass in front of him, currently empty, played with it between his fingers and then put it back. Come October, he would be a married man; he remembered his father’s prophecy.

And Dimi would be soon gone after or even before that, out of his life for good. His future father-in-law shouldn't count on having the gypsy musicians playing at his daughter's wedding.

It looked like the musicians were already there, as the empty part of the yard filled quickly with gypsies dressed in white shirts and black pants, carrying musical instruments. Cezar looked curiously at them, and his heart stopped when he saw who followed them.

Dimi was dressed in the same fashion, and he even had his unruly hair brushed back and held in a small black hairband at the back. He seemed a bit out of his element, and he was stepping carefully, like on eggshells.

Looking at his feet, Cezar wanted to laugh. The cause of Dimi's predicament was quite evident; he disliked the idea of wearing shoes, or it was not too often that he wore them. Another look at his face and Cezar didn't feel like laughing anymore. Dimi was beautiful in his good clothes; he was beautiful barefooted, and in rags, Cezar thought and felt a jolt of desire coursing through his veins seeing him like that.

He looked down at his empty plate. His so-called wedding was a fraud, already; how much more torment did he have to endure?

Dimi appeared too preoccupied with talking with the other musicians, so he hadn't noticed him. Cezar wished the earth would open and swallow him whole that very moment. After a few moments of tuning their instruments, the musicians seemed prepared.

Opening his arms wide, Dimi began singing, and aunt Cezara started clapping right away, making a few other people at the table follow her example. A pleased smile lit Dimi's face, as he was lost in his song, his eyes closed, and an expression of beatitude on his handsome face.

The applause died down, and only his sweet voice could be heard for a while, until the musicians joined him and the rhythm changed, breaking into a fast tempo. Even Marcela's older sister was tapping her foot to the music, although she still fought to keep the same stern expression on her face. Cezar looked at the others, proud on the inside for the effect Dimi could have on all these people who mostly thought of him as the lowest of the low.

He had found Dimi's voice pleasant, with a musical lilt to it, but he didn't know he could sing. Cezar felt enraptured, lost in Dimi's song, like anyone else. Or maybe not quite like anyone else. He knew Dimi, he knew his heart or at least part of it, and he now knew he couldn't let go of that.

He would give everything he had so that he could touch Dimi again. He would lay everything at his bare feet, Cezar thought. If only he could find the courage to follow his heart, as his aunt said.

Cezar shook his head as if he could shake away the spell Dimi's sweet voice held him under, too. He was insane even to consider such a thing. No, he had to be practical and find a way out of that situation. Dimi wasn't anything special; Cezar was the one to mistake lust for something else.

And there were ways of dealing with lust, as he well knew it. Dimi finished his song and smiled. The audience broke into applause again.

"*Talian bahtali!*" Dimi said his wishes of good health to the guests, taking a bow.

"What a beautiful voice," Cezar's mother said, as she was still clapping her hands.

"And what a beautiful singer," aunt Cezara said, her eyes searching for Cezar.

Cezar stood up and murmured an apology. He needed a bit of air, his collar suddenly too tight. As he made himself scarce, his future father-in-law stood up to pay the musicians and thank them for coming over.

Taking advantage of all the moving about, Cezar found a way out of the large yard. He had to talk to Dimi and fast; the agitation he felt inside was just getting harder and harder to control.

Cezar only needed to wait for a few minutes, until the musicians began pouring through the gates. "Hey," he called in a whisper as Dimi appeared, again the last in the group.

He felt somewhat awkward, hiding behind a large chestnut tree, but he couldn't bother with details at the moment.

Dimi looked around and then straight at him. He set his chin high and began walking away.

"Hey," Cezar said, this time louder.

The other musicians were loading their instruments into a wagon and paid them no mind. Dimi hesitated and eventually moved to stand in front of him. He crossed his hands over his chest. "What do you want, *gadjo?*"

Cezar frowned. It was clear as day Dimi was upset. "You clean up nicely," he said, as he measured him up and down.

Dimi's lips twitched between a smile and a grimace. So maybe he wasn't that upset, Cezar thought.

"I just want to know how much," Cezar said.

That was the only way to do it. Dimi could understand that language, without a doubt.

"For what? Do you want me to steal a horse for you? I can do it," Dimi said proudly.

Cezar shook his head. “No. For letting me fuck you and keeping your mouth shut about it.”

Dimi’s face fell. “I never told anyone,” he said through his teeth. “And I wouldn’t let you touch me for all the gold in the world, *gadjo!*”

Cezar hurried and grabbed his arm. “Dimi, please. I need to see you.”

Dimi stopped. He gestured with his chin at the large mansion behind them. “That your house, too?”

“No. It belongs to the family I will marry into,” Cezar replied.

“So you’re to marry this fall?” Dimi questioned.

It hurt to be so close and not able to kiss him, Cezar felt as he looked at Dimi’s mouth.

“Yes, this October.”

“Then why do you need to see me?” Dimi asked.

Cezar knew someone would soon look for him. He let go of Dimi’s arm. “Forget it,” he said quickly.

Was he losing his mind? Not far away from where he stood now, trying to convince a handsome young man to let him bed him, was his future wife. Rumors wouldn’t ruin his reputation; he could do that on his own just as well.

“Come after nightfall, by the fire,” Dimi called after him. “I will be there.”

“When?” Cezar turned his head fast.

Dimi shrugged. “I’m always there. And bring all the coins you can with you. I’m not your cheap whore.”

The last word was spat in disgust, and Cezar felt it like hot iron through his heart. He stared at Dimi, aching to tell him not to say that. But how could Dimi think otherwise when he had been the one to offer?

“Cezar,” someone called for him.

He turned to look at Marcela who was taking in the scene before her with questioning eyes.

“I’ll be right on,” he replied. “I just needed to ask the musicians something. About what songs they would play at our wedding.”

“Only the most beautiful, young mistress,” Dimi said mockingly and bowed.

Cezar worked his jaw. Dimi threw him a look loaded with meaning as he finally straightened up from his exaggerated curtsy. He was sure he deserved it, but that didn't mean he didn't feel anger at the young gypsy's daring attitude.

Cezar hurried to join Marcela, without throwing Dimi another look. The last thing he wanted was his future wife to be this close to the one he truly wanted. It was like his true desire would be tainted by the lie that his marriage would be.

Dimi looked over the fire, through the darkness, as if he could see through it, and then pushed a few dried branches into the flames. At that hour, he was the only one still awake, and it was the third night in a row he was waiting.

Maybe Cezar wouldn't come now. Dimi felt his heart ache for that man, no matter how unfair it was. He could barely wait for Cezar to come and offer him money so that he could throw it all in his face and tell him 'no'. If Cezar wanted him, he would have to kneel and beg.

That was what Dimi had thought over the last days, but with each of them passing, his fury was giving way to longing, and he would be happy just to see Cezar now.

"What madness drives you, people, to keep a fire in this weather?"

Dimi shot to his feet. "You came," he said in a heartbeat, forgetting that he needed to play Cezar and make him beg like he had seen beautiful women do with their admirers.

"I did," Cezar said simply and stopped, a bit away. "Anywhere we could go to talk?"

Dimi nodded. He touched Cezar on his forearm, and the other followed. For minutes, they walked in silence, and Dimi tried to remember everything he wanted to tell Cezar so that he would make him kneel and beg, but his mind was empty.

The silence was unbearable, too. Why was Cezar there? What did he want to tell him? Maybe that he didn't want anything to do with him.

Dimi was still lost in his thoughts when Cezar grabbed him fast and pushed him with his back against a tree. He struggled against him, but Cezar was strong, and Dimi felt weak compared to him. Cezar was taller, and his muscles were like granite; he was well fed and rich, and Dimi wanted to hate him, but couldn't.

Cezar pulled his shirt out of his pants and began feeling him up. His mouth searched for Dimi's, their lips like fire as they touched. Cezar had a way of kissing, pushing his tongue in, and Dimi had wondered why he didn't feel disgusted by that. Instead, he felt desire, like his entire body wanted to open up, not only his mouth.

“You’re so beautiful. I want you so much, Dimi,” Cezar whispered as his lips moved lower, caressing Dimi’s jawline.

He trembled as Cezar began kissing his neck. His shirt was pushed down, and Cezar’s mouth covered the naked skin, kissing and biting his shoulders. Dimi felt his desire soaring, and when Cezar’s hand brushed by the front of his pants, he moaned. Scared by the sounds he was making, he pushed one hand over his mouth. Cezar removed it only to kiss him again.

Then he turned him, making him face the tree now.

“Hang on,” Cezar whispered into his ear.

Dimi shivered as he felt cold air hitting his buttocks, his pants pushed low and a rough hand making his thighs spread as it reached for his cock. He dug into the tree bark with his fingers as desire took him. He closed his eyes, trying to convince himself that it wouldn’t hurt as much as before.

Dimi had known pleasure and wanted that but without that pain. Cezar had said something about pain being part of it, but Dimi still feared it, as much as he wanted it.

Cezar’s hand moved between his buttocks after teasing his cock for a little while and now was rubbing against his hole. Dimi tried to push his hips up, as much as he could so that it would be easier. Like before, he heard Cezar spitting and braced himself for it.

“Open up for me, beautiful,” Cezar cooed, as his fingers made small circles around his opening. “Your ass is so hot, it’s going to burn my cock to ashes, isn’t it?” he joked.

Dimi wanted to laugh, too, but his body just refused to be taken like that.

“No need to make it tight like this. You’re tight anyway. Damn, your hole feels so small, how can my cock fit in there? You must really want me,” Cezar said in a breathless voice.

His words were making Dimi’s skin catch on fire. Cezar bit his ear, then licked it, as his fingers continued to try making his ass give in.

“Ah, damn it, I don’t think I can hold back,” Cezar murmured into his ear. “Dimi, I’m going to fuck you now, all right?”

Dimi just nodded and mumbled an agreement. He gasped as he felt Cezar’s cock at his back, pushing. His moans turned to keen whimpers, as the pain took over.

“Push a little,” Cezar whispered into his ear. “What kind of men fucked you before me that you don’t know it?”

Dimi felt tears of shame coming to his eyes, but Cezar turned his head and kissed him, continuing to enter him. He struggled between telling Cezar off for insulting him and letting go so that he could reach that pleasure that was making his head spin and his bones melt.

Cezar held him tightly with one arm, moving faster and faster. Dimi tried to keep up, bucking his hips back to meet him, but the stinging sensation was still there, and pleasure was barely building.

“Oh, damn, you’re amazing,” Cezar praised him and pushed one time hard and kept Dimi there as he emptied himself inside.

Dimi whimpered in frustration now as Cezar pulled out, but then he was made to turn, and his mouth was taken once more. At the same time, Cezar used one hand to wrap around his cock, while the other was at his asshole again, rough fingers pushing in.

“You’re so brave, taking me like this. Take my fingers now,” Cezar whispered, holding him in place.

Dimi grabbed Cezar to hold on to him. The hand moving on his cock knew what to do, but the fingers in his ass were stretching him too much.

“Dimi, Dimi, Dimi,” Cezar said his name in wonder, and Dimi felt he could forgive him until he pushed in another finger. “Oh, you won’t be so tight anymore. You want it, don’t you? Don’t you?”

Dimi said nothing, too lost in having his ass attacked like that. The treacherous pleasure finally came, as Cezar curled his fingers inside his ass while whispering dirty words in his ear.

He moaned and thrashed as he began coming all over Cezar’s hand.

“That’s it, beautiful, that’s it,” Cezar encouraged him as he moved his hand a few more times over his cock.

Dimi pushed him away and pulled up his pants. Then he began walking fast.

“Hey, where are you going?” Cezar hurried after him.

“You’re mean, and I hate you,” Dimi spat. “My ass hurts! I don’t want you to touch me again!”

Cezar fell silent and then turned him sharply toward him. “Why didn’t you say anything? I thought you liked it.”

Dimi wished he could see Cezar’s face now. He felt a bit cold. “That time before was my first time, and now it was my second time, and you just try to put your hand in my ass,” he said reproachfully.

“Do you really mean it?” Cezar whispered.

“You don’t believe me,” Dimi said, feeling bitter, the pleasure from earlier almost all gone.

“I am your first?” Cezar asked gently and cupped his cheeks, wiping his tears slowly. “No man ever --”

“No woman, either,” Dimi said, sniffing.

Cezar took him into his strong arms and kissed him on his forehead, laughing. Dimi pushed him away, upset for being laughed at. “*Has mo car,*” he said with venom this time around.

“You said that before,” Cezar said. “What does it mean?”

“Eat my dick,” Dimi replied as he struggled to get away from Cezar.

“Do you want me to eat your dick?” Cezar seemed amused, just like before.

“That’s not what it means,” Dimi said defiantly. “It means to get on your knees and dirty your mouth with my cock.”

He gasped as Cezar sank to his knees in front of him. He had no time to protest or say anything else as Cezar grabbed his cock and put it into his mouth.

Dimi stopped moving. Cezar’s tongue was making slow circles around the head of his cock, making him tremble. He had heard the other boys talking about this when easy girls did it to them; Dimi had no idea a man would go down on his knees and do that to another.

If it only were more light so that he could see it, a rich *gadjo* kneeling at his feet. The sensation was overwhelming, his cock growing hard quickly. He grabbed Cezar’s head to keep himself from falling over, and the other just began moving his mouth fast.

Dimi keened softly, too unused to the sensation. Cezar was also using one hand to move it along with his mouth, and Dimi knew it would all be over soon. How could Cezar, so proud and mean, do that? Dimi felt not only his manhood but his entire self, sucked into darkness, deep and pleasant, the only image in his head Cezar on his knees doing things only common whores did.

He couldn’t hold it any longer. Bending from the middle, he leaned over Cezar, grabbing his shoulders and crying out. Cezar’s fingers now dug into his hips, but his tongue didn’t stop moving, making Dimi completely crazy.

Cezar stood up and held him, as Dimi almost fell into him. “Well, was it this how you wanted me to eat your dick?”

“You have that in your mouth,” Dimi said incredulously. “My cum.”

“I do,” Cezar confirmed. “You taste incredible,” he added and leaned in to kiss him.

Dimi turned his head. “That’s dirty, what you did.”

Cezar chuckled softly. “Maybe. But I can’t think of the word dirty when I think of you.”

Dimi sniffed Cezar, a bit cautiously. “You even smell of it.”

“It will go away. Unfortunately,” Cezar joked. “You will eat mine, too.”

“No,” Dimi said and shook his head vigorously. “That’s dirty.”

“You don’t wear shoes. How can you think a bit of male seed could be dirty?” Cezar questioned him. “So, you don’t want me to kiss you?”

Dimi shook his head.

“Then goodnight, Dimi,” Cezar said. “You should get some sleep.”

“Wait,” Dimi remembered, “did you bring me anything?”

“No,” Cezar said, amused. “I won’t pay you for this. You like it.”

“So you won’t give me anything at all? You have so much.”

“I will, but I will give you gifts.”

“Gifts?”

“That’s what you do when you like someone.”

“And do you like me?”

“Yes, I do,” Cezar said. “And I will bring you many gifts.”

Dimi was pleased with that. He hadn’t gotten many gifts in his life. His parents were poor, and their love was more than enough for him, anyway. Cezar kissed him quickly, pushing just a little bit of tongue inside his mouth.

“Eww,” Dimi protested, but he didn’t mind it as much as he thought.

Maybe everything tasted better when it was from Cezar’s mouth.

“When can I see you again?” He stopped Cezar by pulling at his shirt.

“We need to be careful,” Cezar replied. “I will come by the river almost day after day. At that place where you stole my clothes.” He laughed. “No man or woman in their right mind would go out in this heat. Will you come, too?”

“Sure,” Dimi said. “And I can fish.”

Cezar chuckled. “I had other things in mind.”

Dimi was grateful for the dark because he surely was blushing like some young girl now.

“Just kiss me one more time,” Cezar cooed and turned his head to give him another tongue kiss.

Dimi had to steady himself by grabbing Cezar by the shoulders. When Cezar moved away, he followed and kissed him in turn. Only when he couldn’t breathe anymore, he stopped. Cezar laughed and just kissed him quickly, one more time.

“I should go. Come by the river, Dimi. I will be waiting for you.”

tante (fr.) = aunt

talian bahtali (rromanes) = live long and happy

Chapter Five

Cezar wanted to believe Dimi would come. He had no reason not to come, right? Maybe he should have given Dimi something, not money, so he wasn't insulted, but a small gift. Cezar pulled another shirt from his closet, wondering why he cared what he wore since the moment he would meet Dimi, they would both be naked.

The truth was he found Dimi beautiful. His luminous green eyes were making his heart sing. His mouth tasted like forest fruits, and his body was lean and pliant under his fingers. Cezar knew well what he thought of Dimi. But what did Dimi think of him?

Dimi had been upset, and Cezar wanted to do right by him. He uncorked the metal flask and rechecked the content; no one could suspect he had just stolen some cooking oil from the kitchen. That would help Dimi feel less pain during their ...

Cezar swallowed hard. He had always taken pride in the restraint he showed in such dealings. Right now, he did anything but that. Maybe Dimi wouldn't even come today. Cezar had no idea what the young gypsy did all day, but maybe his parents and the other people needed him. Maybe he had to sing somewhere with the band like before and couldn't come.

He pushed away all the doubts and took another look in the leather bag he intended to use for transporting the foods and liquor he intended to spoil Dimi with. If Dimi weren't there, he would go there tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, until the summer was over. He felt as if he could wait forever, or couldn't wait at all, at the same time.

The tall, dry grass didn't move, as there was no breeze, nor someone to disturb it. Cezar took out his shirt and his boots after he tied the horse. He took a look around, wishing for Dimi to appear.

Maybe he could go for a dip while waiting. With one last look, he began undressing completely and was about to go into the lazy river waves smashing gently against the shore, when he heard someone whistling playfully. He turned, placing his hands instinctively in front of him, to hide his nakedness.

He relaxed, the moment he saw who it was. Dimi was coming down from the forest, with what looked like a fishing pole resting on his shoulder. A fishing pole was probably what its owner wanted to call it, Cezar thought, amused since it was merely a long tree branch, carefully cleaned to resemble a rod that could have been used for other purposes. In his other hand, Dimi was carrying an empty bucket.

Cezar put his hands on his hips and laughed out loud. "You were serious about fishing, weren't you?"

"I needed a lie to get away."

“Do your parents put you to work?”

“I go around, on errands,” Dimi explained. “But I will have to go back with some fish, or they’ll know I’m doing something else,” he added, as he shook his empty bucket.

“What do you think you can catch with that?” Cezar pointed at the improvised fishing rod.

Dimi threw a determined look at the tree branch, moving it for Cezar to see the thin rope and the hook at its end. “This river is swarming with fish. I’ll catch a lot,” he said with self-confidence.

Cezar shook his head and smiled. Then he caught Dimi staring at him, or better said, at his manhood. “This is one worm you can’t use,” he joked, as he grabbed his cock and flaunted it a little.

“What worm? That’s a snake,” Dimi said, and by how he talked, he sounded impressed.

Without another word, Dimi went to cast his fishing rod into the water, after fiddling with the hook, probably putting in the bait, and then used another small branch, split at one end to fix it to the ground. “There,” he said with satisfaction. “When the fish bite, I’ll know.”

“I admire your confidence,” Cezar said.

Suddenly, he felt a bit odd, standing there naked while Dimi still had his shirt and pants on. The clothes he gave him were better than his usual rags, but they were still too large.

“When can I take you to have some clothes made for you at a tailor?” he asked.

Dimi turned toward him and smiled. “Mom would kill me. She already thinks I did something bad when I came back with these,” he said pointing at his clothes. “She found my money and had dad spend it on something to ward off evil.”

“All of it?” Cezar asked, impressed with Dimi’s father’s ability to find something that expensive, yet so useless.

Dimi nodded and pulled something from inside his shirt. It was a cross hanging on a silver chain; in itself, it appeared crudely made, out of some wood. Dimi came closer, and Cezar noticed that there was a small cranny along its length, within which something resembling a small piece of a splinter, the color of burnt wood, was kept.

“It’s from the Holy Cross,” Dimi said with pride.

Cezar stopped himself before shaking his head again. “Do you really believe that will protect you from evil?” If all such artifacts being sold around were genuine, the Holy Cross must have weighed at least several tons.

Dimi nodded with conviction. “It will.”

“Maybe giving up stealing would work better,” Cezar teased.

Dimi threw him a disappointed look. “You don’t know anything.”

Cezar had no interest to antagonize Dimi; he was so happy he was there that he couldn’t give a damn about anything else.

Dimi was stealing glances at his manhood again but pretended he wasn’t. His Adam’s apple was going up and down. Cezar took his hand. “I’ve thought about you all the time since I came to you by the fire.”

Using his other hand, he pushed unruly locks of hair out of Dimi’s face. Dimi licked his lips and looked at him, first daring, then shyly, and then he moved his head away. Cezar stopped him and brought their foreheads close. “I’m in your hands, you know?” he whispered.

“You are? But you’re so strong and rich,” Dimi said softly.

“I must be crazy to say this, but I am powerless before you,” Cezar said and placed his lips over Dimi’s.

He just let their mouths stay like that for a while, without doing anything. Dimi was the first to move and attempt a clumsy kiss. Cezar had to remind himself Dimi was an innocent, and even if he wasn’t used to dealing with someone like that, he had to try to make him feel better when they were together. The men he had been with before had known much more than him, instructing him on what felt good for them. Maybe all that didn’t apply to someone like Dimi.

They were kissing slowly as they lay on the blanket Cezar had spread on the ground. He could feel Dimi trembling softly like a scared animal caught by a merciless hunter. Cezar had no intention to be merciless now; as challenging as that had to be for him, he had to try because he wanted Dimi to like him back, at least a little.

He undressed Dimi slowly, assuring him with small kisses that he wouldn’t hurry. Dimi’s breath was shallow, and he didn’t look at Cezar at all, his eyes squeezed shut, and his face scrunched up in an almost pained expression.

Cezar took the flask from his bag and poured some into his palm. He guided Dimi gently, helping him bend his legs from the knees and push his ass up. “What’s that?” Dimi asked the moment Cezar’s fingers touched him.

“Something that will make it less painful for you,” Cezar explained. “I want you to like it, Dimi, when I’m with you.”

Dimi just nodded, and Cezar proceeded to open him gently. The slender body was still tight, and Cezar wanted to make sure that Dimi wouldn’t be hurt again, not by him. To distract his delicate

lover from the uncomfortable intrusion, he moved so that he could play with Dimi's cock. He used his lips to catch it and just licked it slowly, making it becoming fully hard within moments.

Dimi began moaning softly, his hands at his mouth now, and Cezar didn't say anything about it. His fingers moved slowly inside while he swallowed Dimi's cock to the hilt. He hadn't done this too often, but there had been plenty of times when others had done it to him, and he knew what was pleasant and worked.

Dimi was squirming now, his body shaking, his moans becoming desperate. Cezar didn't mind doing this at all, and some of Dimi's feverish excitement was making something move inside him, hot and wonderful, like a flood of melted honey.

He drank Dimi's seed without missing a single drop. His fingers were moving now smoothly, having managed to make the entrance slick and reasonably open. Cezar hoped it was enough. He moved and poured some oil over his cock, too, as he aligned it with Dimi's ass.

A few attempts to make his lover more comfortable with the penetration were in order. So Cezar called all his power of restraint to help him, as he didn't push inside carelessly like before. Instead, he pushed only a little and withdrew, continuing only after a while.

Dimi opened his eyes slowly. "Cezar," he whispered.

Cezar kissed the inside of one knee and looked back. "Forgive me, Dimi. I don't want to hurt you."

"You can go in more," Dimi encouraged him. "It doesn't hurt so much."

"I need to take you slowly," Cezar explained.

Dimi smiled, a bit of naughtiness lighting up his beautiful face. "Not so slowly. I can take it."

"You shouldn't provoke a man at his wit's end," Cezar warned.

Dimi giggled, making Cezar's desire soar. He moved a little, making half of his cock enter his lover's body, and Dimi stopped, his eyes growing wide. But he didn't protest; instead, he batted his eyelashes seductively at him.

"You naughty boy," Cezar said through his teeth, the heat welcoming him too much to bear.

Dimi laughed, his laughter like silver bells and Cezar grabbed him by the back of his neck to pull him in for a kiss. It wasn't to shut him up, although that was, too, a reason to do it, but more to find something to hold on to, as he was falling. Dimi's mouth was the sweetest thing he had ever tasted, and, in that heat, it was the only ambrosia he desired.

He was no longer aware of moving inside Dimi, too lost in the kiss and the way his lover's hands came to rest on his shoulders, caressing them frantically and squeezing them.

Maybe he wasn't the only one falling, after all. Maybe Dimi was falling a little, too. With one last grunt, he released his desire inside his young lover, almost dizzy with the overwhelming pleasure coursing through his veins.

They spent some time there, entangled, feeling each other's breathing. With regret, Cezar pulled himself away. Dimi laughed and turned toward him. "Cezar, it didn't hurt!"

Cezar turned his head and stared into those beautiful green eyes that had managed to destroy his inner world and put it back together just by looking at him like that. "I'm glad," he replied.

Dimi came closer and placed his head on his shoulder while throwing one leg over Cezar's. They were hot and sweaty, and Cezar chuckled. "We should go into the water, to cool off a bit."

Dimi shrugged and jumped to his feet. Then Cezar noticed the white droplets all over Dimi's abdomen. "Did you come again while I was in you?" he asked.

A nod and a broad smile were his answer. "It was so good," Dimi said, shivered and rubbed his upper arms. "I'm all goosebumps even now."

Cezar could feel his heart swelling in his chest. He stood up and took Dimi by the waist, walking with him into the water.

"This river is treacherous," Dimi said. "All calm up here," he hovered his hands over the surface, "but quick below, ready to pull your legs from under you."

"You can just hang on to me if you're scared," Cezar said.

He knew that river, and also trusted his abilities as a swimmer.

"Who's scared?" Dimi said defiantly and tried to move away.

Cezar was taking no chances and knew nothing about what kind of swimmer Dimi was, good or bad. He grabbed Dimi and pulled him close. A long kiss convinced his lover not to fight anymore. They were floating together, Dimi's long hair wet at the tips, his long limbs soon all wrapped around Cezar's body.

They drifted for a while, lost into each other. Eventually, Cezar guided them slowly back to the shore. "Weren't you supposed to fish?" he pointed at Dimi's fishing rod that seemed to move, as soon as they were out of the water.

Dimi was fast to pull at the rod, and he began fighting a fish. Cezar watched in amusement as Dimi won his battle, a strange god from another time, all naked, with water hanging from his heavy locks, the soft waves of the river caressing his ankles, and a smile as big as the sun on his face.

"See?" Dimi showed Cezar a sizeable perch swinging from the hook, desperate for release.

Cezar nodded and hurried to fill Dimi's bucket with water so that he could throw the perch inside. Dimi was clearly proud of himself as he let the fish into the bucket, and methodically proceeded to cast his line again.

"Are you hungry?" Cezar asked, and Dimi nodded, a bit cautiously. "Come on. I can offer you something to eat without your suspecting me that I want to pay you for allowing me to hold you."

Dimi laughed. "How come you're no longer mean?"

"Mean? I don't want to be mean to you," Cezar explained. "I like you."

Dimi took with something akin to reverence the roasted duck and bread Cezar handed him and sank his teeth into the food hurriedly.

"Easy, or your belly will hurt," Cezar warned. "I brought a lot. You can take what's left with you when we have to part ways."

Dimi shook his head. "I can't," he said with his mouth full. "My mom will ask me again where I got it."

They ate in silence, except for the small exclamations of pleasure made by Dimi when he tried the cherry pie and sweetened water Cezar handed him once he was done with his food.

Cezar wanted to ask something but didn't dare.

"What?" Dimi asked, sensing, most probably, Cezar's eyes on him.

"Does anyone know? About you?"

Dimi stared at him, a bit confused, then his eyes widened. "No," he said quickly. "Not even dad."

"You're close to your dad," Cezar remarked.

"He found me," Dimi explained. "I was this little," he added, as he made a gesture to illustrate his words, "and crying, and he took me home to mom. And they loved me even if my real mom didn't."

Cezar remembered the words Marcela's sister said at that time. "Are you sure you were found? Maybe you were stolen," he teased.

Dimi shook his head energetically as he continued to eat. "No. I was found. My people don't steal children. We steal horses."

"Really? Why do you steal horses?"

“We need them. Sometimes we sell them to buy food and clothes. My dad stole Marica.”

“Marica? That your horse?” Cezar asked.

Dimi nodded again. “She’s old now, and she pulls our caravan. But when we sit in one place, I can ride her.”

“I could buy you a horse,” Cezar suggested.

Dimi made a face like he had been offered food gone bad. “I would never buy a horse.”

“Why? Because you don’t have money?” Cezar asked.

“Because I can steal any horse I want,” Dimi said with pride.

“Really? I remember well how you lost your pants because you failed to steal a certain horse,” Cezar teased him.

“I didn’t want to steal that horse. I wanted something else,” Dimi said directly.

Cezar smiled, a small sensation of warmth growing inside his chest. How free he felt, sitting there, by the side of the river, all naked, sharing food with a beautiful stranger who had come into his life like a force of nature.

“I wanted to catch a stallion,” Dimi joked, his eyes crinkling with amusement.

“Are you calling me a stallion?” Cezar pretended to be insulted.

“You’re hung like one,” Dimi pointed between his legs. “What did you eat to grow one like that?”

There was envy in the young gypsy’s voice, but admiration, too. Cezar laughed. “I don’t know. It’s just how I am. I like yours better,” he said and looked at Dimi through his eyelashes.

Dimi blushed and pretended to be too absorbed with his eating to reply to that.

“Here, something to drink,” Cezar pulled a small bottle and a small glass from the bag.

Dimi looked at the red liquid filling the glass. He took it cautiously and stuck his tongue out, putting it inside the glass. “It’s sweet,” he exclaimed as he pulled his tongue out.

“Do you like it? It’s pretty strong, so I won’t give you much.”

Dimi didn’t seem to listen and just gulped the content of the glass in one go. “More,” he asked, stretching the hand holding the empty glass.

Cezar filled his glass again. “Are you sure you won’t get drunk?”

Dimi shook his head. "I can drink anything."

Cezar had an inkling Dimi was lying through his teeth, but one extra glass couldn't hurt. He watched Dimi as he finished his food.

They lay on their backs, barely touching. Dimi didn't seem in the mood to stay still, though. He turned and straightened up to sit with his legs under him. For a while, he looked at Cezar's body as if there was some secret there he could decipher. He placed his fingers on Cezar's thigh, dragging them along the scar. "What's this?" he asked.

"I got it in a duel," Cezar explained, pleased with how closely Dimi was inspecting him.

"A duel?" Dimi seemed excited. "How is that? I only heard of it."

"It's something that happens when two gentlemen don't find it possible to settle an argument unless there are certain weapons involved."

Dimi seemed confused at his explanation.

"I got into a fight with another man," Cezar explained it in a different way. "We used swords to decide who was right."

"Did you win?" Dimi asked, more and more astonished with Cezar's adventures.

"Yes."

"What did you fight him about?"

"A woman," Cezar replied.

Dimi made a sour face and looked away.

"I had to pretend so that no one suspected me," Cezar added. "I had to lie that I liked women."

Dimi seemed relieved now. "You don't like women?"

"Not enough to want one in my bed," Cezar said.

"But you'll get married," Dimi said, now confused again.

Cezar sighed. "I must do it. I have avoided the duty I have toward my family for too long already."

"Mom and dad just want me to be happy," Dimi said.

Cezar's heart squeezed painfully. He was pretty sure his happiness wasn't something his father cared about too much.

“What will you do with your wife? Will you do the things you do with me?” Dimi asked.

Cezar shook his head.

“But have you done them? With someone else? Other men?” Dimi appeared to be full of questions.

“Yes,” Cezar admitted.

Dimi pouted.

“But no one had made me feel like you do,” Cezar added, his eyes set on Dimi, curious of all his reactions.

The pout turned into a smile. Dimi stretched and yawned, and this time decided that Cezar’s naked chest was the best pillow he could find. Soon enough, he was snoring softly.

Cezar smiled. Dimi was no drinker. A little alcohol and he was gone for the world. He caressed the blond head slowly, enjoying Dimi’s weight resting on him, his breath on his skin, how real he felt, how simple.

After a while, he let Dimi rest and stretched his legs. He smiled as he noticed Dimi’s fishing rod trembling again.

“Hey, it’s almost sundown,” someone chose to wake him up from the most beautiful dream he had ever had.

He was a king with thousands of horses and lived in a big house. But that wasn’t the most pleasant part of the dream; Cezar was there, too, riding with him on the most beautiful horses he had.

Dimi blinked and looked around. Then he immediately jumped to his feet. “I need to go back to the camp. Oh, no, I only have one fish!”

Cezar ruffled his hair and laughed. “Just look into your bucket.”

Dimi hurried and counted, in absolute wonder, five big fish. “Did you catch them?”

“I found your secret,” Cezar said and showed him a small ball of polenta, pressing it between his fingers.

Dimi grinned. “It’s all about this magic fishing rod,” he said. “An old witch enchanted it for me.”

“If you say so,” Cezar said.

Dimi looked at Cezar, feeling the ache from before coming back. “Will you be here tomorrow? And the day after tomorrow?”

Cezar nodded.

“I must tell mom and dad I only want to eat fish from now on,” Dimi said, nodding to himself.

Cezar pulled him into his arms and kissed him gently on his forehead. “Do that, Dimi. I want to see you again.”

Dimi buried his head into Cezar’s chest and smiled. He was so happy he hoped his mom wouldn’t suspect anything.

Chapter Six

Cezar took in the grey sky with growing impatience. As much as he minded the heat, he was in no mood for rain now, when he needed to meet Dimi by the river. The last days had been basked in wonder, and a warning feeling that dreams couldn't last long was just getting stronger with the fast-moving clouds covering the sky.

"Finally, a storm is coming," his aunt commented, as she continued to fan herself.

"It will be here shortly," Cezar replied and closed the window. "All the heat will rush inside until the storm breaks loose," he explained.

Aunt Cezara nodded. "I have another idea what you could do with those gold pieces," she said.

Cezar looked at her questioningly. "I doubt my fiancée would like another piece of jewelry so soon."

His aunt waved as if she could care less what Marcela wanted. "I think you should take them to that jeweler and have some rings made out of them."

"*Tante*, I already told you that he's not there, this fantastic jeweler you're speaking of," Cezar replied. "And there has been talk already about where our wedding rings will be made. I believe my father is the one taking care of them."

He was a bit upset that aunt Cezara, of all people, wanted to talk to him about the wedding. There was still time until fall, and he could postpone getting upset about it, at least for as long as it was possible. He only wanted to think of Dimi and his beautiful eyes, and how he looked when they made love.

"I'm not talking about wedding rings, dear," Cezara said. "I'm talking about having something you'll want to give someone you love."

Cezar quirked an eyebrow as he stared at her. "You mean my wife," he said with a forced smile.

The sly look he got back told him aunt Cezara thought of a different person. "I doubt something changed since we last talked about her. You don't love Marcela, dear, and don't start lying to me now. I may be old, but not as much as not to know what I'm seeing. You're in love, Cezar."

He turned away from her, pretending to be absorbed with the spectacle of light, making the sky bleed now. Through the windows, the sounds of thunder seemed muffled, except that, now and then, one managed to break through with its highest notes.

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about, tante," Cezar said.

With the storm raging outside, the heat in the room was hard to bear.

“Just open the window for a bit, Cezar.”

“The wind will bring in leaves and who knows what else,” he said.

“And your mother has plenty of servants to come to clean it all up,” aunt Cezara said. “I just want to feel the smell of the rain and the wind.”

Cezar complied, letting the wind break in his face and take his breath away. As expected, some of the wandering branches and leaves managed to get inside, too. With a grin, he turned toward his aunt. “I hope you’ll explain all this to my mother.”

Aunt Cezara smiled. “Ah, this is a little better. Find that jeweler. He is there.”

Cezar shrugged. His aunt could be quite stubborn when she wanted to be. But what was that she knew? Was it a way for him to ask her without giving himself away by accident? The cold wind on his face did him good. It managed to make his heart and the heat in his blood settle down a bit. He just hoped the storm would go away soon, and not much time would pass without seeing Dimi.

Dimi crouched and made small signs with his hands at the others. “No one’s here. They’re all inside, hiding like rats,” he said to another young man next to him.

His father was right. That kind of weather was all a horse thief could hope for. The storm had made the sky almost black. It wasn’t raging on, like before, but they had been on the move with the first drop of rain.

They were all drenched now, but it wasn’t that much of a bother for either of them. Two beautiful horses and a mare were enough of a compensation for all their suffering through that weather.

He took out from his pocket a small apple and enticed the mare. The others moved about fast, talking gently to the horses.

He needed to remove the saddle from the mare. The stable boy had probably run away to hide better from the rain than inside the barn without carrying to let the beast free of her burden. Dimi examined the saddle from up close and whistled. It looked like something rich people used. He needed no saddle. He had no idea how to feel what the horse beneath him wanted if he had one of those.

Slowly, he put the saddle aside. There were no fewer than ten horses in that barn. This family had to be richer than Cezar’s. Maybe that was why Cezar was marrying that woman. He ignored the painful squeeze in his chest. She could do without a few horses. After all, she would have everything come fall. She would have Cezar, and Dimi wouldn’t have him anymore.

“Sir, there is someone at the gates looking for you,” one of the servants walked into the library, after knocking softly on the door. “He just wouldn’t leave.”

“In this kind of weather?” Cezar asked, surprised. “And at this hour?”

“I believe it is someone from the, ahem,” the servant cleared his throat, “gypsy camp. He’s saying that it’s an emergency of sorts.”

It took Cezar all the restraint forced into him throughout the years not to jump to his feet. Could it be that something happened to Dimi? But why would anyone send word to him if that was the case?

He had no time for questions.

“I will see to it,” he said as he put his book away, and followed the servant with measured steps.

The servant held a light by his side, for him to see the way. The moment Cezar saw who it was, he took the lamp from the servant’s hand. “You can go now,” he said shortly. “I’ll take care of this.”

The servant scurried inside without being told twice.

“What are you doing here?” he whispered angrily.

Dimi was grinning and seemed quite pleased with himself, for some reason. “I wanted to see you,” he said as he leaned in.

He was ankle-deep into the mud of the road and had no hat. He didn’t seem to be cold. The smile on his face was enough to make Cezar feel warm, too.

“This is dangerous, and you know it. People could see us.”

“In this weather?” Dimi shook his head, making droplets of water from his hair land on Cezar’s face. “Just come out.”

Cezar sighed. “I can’t.”

“There’s only one light.” Dimi pointed at the house. “Is anyone else still awake?”

“You mean, except for the servant you woke up?” Cezar said.

Dimi shrugged. “He’s drunk already. I smelled it on his breath.”

Cezar took a look at the house behind him, too. Dimi's recklessness was contagious. And he wanted to touch him so much it hurt. "I'll go get the horse. Go around; I'll come through the back," he said quickly, trying to rein in what he was feeling.

Dimi nodded and began walking, not without throwing a seductive look at Cezar over one shoulder. Even in the faint lamplight, Cezar knew what that look meant, and his blood was boiling in his veins now.

With short moves, he blew the light off and headed for the barn. No matter how dark it was around, he could find his way. His horse neighed softly as he put on the saddle. Maybe the horse didn't want to go out in that weather, but Cezar's heart had other plans.

He was barely past the back entrance that someone came out of the dark, and he stopped the horse brusquely. "Come here," he whispered and helped Dimi climb in front of him, into the saddle.

Cezar pulled Dimi close, wrapping one arm around a slender waist. The wet clothes were glued to him, but none of them minded. Cezar inhaled, brushing his lips and nose against the side of Dimi's neck. "Where are we going?" he asked, his voice already breathless from too much want.

"I'll take us," Dimi replied and placed his hands over Cezar's to take the reins from him.

Cezar was more than happy to oblige; he let go of the reins and wrapped both his arms around Dimi. The heat from the other body was enough to make him tremble with desire. He didn't care where they were going. Even with the rain, calmer now than before, pelting their backs, he wanted the horse to take them both as far from that place as he could.

His eyes were closed, as he wanted nothing else but to feel his lover since he couldn't see him in that dark.

"We're here," Dimi said.

Cezar opened his eyes, but it was hard to see. Dimi jumped down and opened the door to what looked like an old shed. There was a small light flickering inside. He jumped down, too, and Dimi took the reins from his hand once more so that he could shelter the horse on the side of the shed, where it had to be dry and some hay.

There was only one thing on Dimi's mind, from the moment he had run from the camp up the hill to Cezar's house. His heart was beating fast; someone else had taken the stolen horses to sell them somewhere far from there, while his friends were probably sleeping in their caravans.

He felt something inside, from the moment he had left that rich house and the people living in it behind. Oh, how he hated them; he hated that woman, mostly, because she would have what he could only dream of, Cezar's love forever.

Life at the camp was happy and carefree for a young man like him; he wouldn't care about tomorrow. But for Dimi now, tomorrow was another day that got him closer to that of Cezar's wedding to that woman. Gypsies lived like there was no tomorrow, happy and free, but upon him, time weighed now, big as a mountain.

"Well, I'm here now," Cezar said with a smile, opening his arms wide.

The small light was too faint to see Cezar, Dimi thought. He would just have to see him with the tips of his fingers, with his body. Walking closer, he brought his hands to Cezar's face, feeling it slowly, tracing the line of a strong jaw, the firm lips, the straight nose. Cezar was a prince from a fairytale, and now he belonged to Dimi, if only for a little while.

"You're tickling me," Cezar whispered as Dimi's hands reached under the shirt, to feel the skin, too. "Why have you brought me here, Dimi?"

It wasn't possible to say it out loud, no matter how much he wanted to. He just pushed Cezar's coat down, and then pulled the shirt from him, making a puddle at their feet. Without a word, he took out his shirt, too, and closed the distance between them. Their chests were touching. Cezar's skin felt warm next to his, colder from the rain.

Dimi liked everything about Cezar's body. He liked where the muscles curved under his palms, and the strong ones, like cut in stone. Maybe he had seen naked men before, but he couldn't stare. Something was telling him he would get a beating if he did that. Cezar was the only not to mind; Dimi wanted to stare at him forever, and for time to stand still.

Cezar embraced him and brought their lips together in a kiss.

"Did you miss me today?" Dimi asked in a voice he wanted playful but came out ragged and unsure.

"Of course I did. I hate the rain now. Weeks before, it was all I wanted," Cezar said.

Dimi let his head back, and Cezar began caressing his neck with his lips. He felt his pants being pushed down and realized that tonight, there was something else he wanted. Fumbling with Cezar's pants, he tried to gain the upper hand.

"You want me naked that badly?" Cezar asked.

"Yes," Dimi said in a whisper. "Everything but your boots."

There could be splinters on the floor. Maybe Dimi didn't mind, but he doubted Cezar's feet would be as hardened as his. Cezar rested one elbow on his shoulder, taking out one boot so that he could get rid of the pants. Dimi took the riding boot and held it, waiting for Cezar to undress. Then he handed him the boots. "Put them back."

There wasn't enough light to see his lover. Dimi took the old lamp from the window sill and held it, looking at Cezar, taking in that beautiful body that was his tonight and tomorrow, and all the days until fall.

"There is something in your eyes tonight, Dimi," Cezar said softly and began walking toward him again.

Dimi stretched out one arm and kept Cezar away. He put the light back and suddenly pulled the other close. Cezar sighed into the kiss, and his hands moved again to grab Dimi's ass.

"No," Dimi said with determination. "Tonight, I want --"

What was it that he wanted? He could not put it in words. There weren't enough in people's minds or on their tongues for Dimi to say it. Maybe the old fortuneteller was right, and he should be afraid now.

But there was no fear in him. Inside him, there was nothing but an intense flame, burning with the power of a thousand suns. "Mine, tonight, all mine," he whispered into Cezar's ear, biting it harshly.

Cezar hissed and drew away from him, but Dimi wouldn't have it. He brought him close again, now sinking his teeth into a marble shoulder, then lower, into the tit.

Now Cezar was going from chuckles to small gasps, as Dimi's mouth moved all over his chest. His teeth were tingling, like his entire body. They lowered on the floor, and Dimi pushed Cezar on his back, on the stretched coat.

Dimi had seen Cezar doing it, or felt it, better said. There could be only one way to quench that desire burning inside him. He still had his pants on, and Cezar inhaled sharply when he pushed his clothed manhood into his.

Cezar was bigger than him there, and, for a while now Dimi had thought it had to be a natural law that Cezar had to be the one to take him. But that was not what his body wanted tonight. He wanted Cezar in the only way no woman could want him.

Cezar had had male lovers before. No matter how much he wanted to know about those men, shadows playing in his mind, Dimi hadn't dared to ask. He was afraid of what he would find; maybe they were more beautiful than him; maybe they were rich like Cezar, or they knew how to kiss and make their lovers tremble under their caress.

So maybe Cezar had let some of them hold him like Dimi wanted to hold him tonight. He didn't want to ask about that, either. It didn't matter. He would have Cezar like his wife would never have him.

"How long are you going to torture me?" Cezar asked as he grabbed Dimi's ass through his pants again.

Dimi pushed Cezar's knees up. How he wanted to see that in broad daylight! Cezar's manhood was stiff now, pointing toward his bellybutton. Dimi brushed his hands over his balls, tightened now, and then he let his hand go lower, between Cezar's buttocks.

Cezar caught his hand. "Dimi," he said.

"I want ... too," Dimi replied.

The hand squeezing his didn't ease. "It's not something I do."

Dimi's heart leaped. "Never? With no one?"

Cezar nodded slowly. Dimi could not clearly see his eyes. "Let me. I want to love you as you loved me by the river."

"Dimi, I --"

He was a man; he wouldn't listen now. Dimi grabbed Cezar by the back of his neck and kissed him sharply. With one hand, he began to squeeze the hard cock between them. "Let me, please," he whispered. "I just want to love you."

Cezar was strong. He could just push him away. But he wasn't doing that. Instead, he was holding Dimi between his muscular thighs and was bucking his hips upward like he wanted more of that squeeze.

Dimi used his free hand to pull his cock out. It was so hard it hurt when touched. He spat into his hand and made his cock wet. More was needed; that much he knew. Cezar was pushing him away with one hand but was pulling him close with the other.

Cezar was now like a young colt that didn't want to let anyone ride him. Dimi wanted to break him in; there was nothing he wanted more. Firmness of hand was more important than strength. And trust, too.

Dimi sank his head into the crook of Cezar's shoulder and began whispering clumsy words of praise. He lifted one arm and placed it over Cezar's face, rubbing his armpit against his nose. Cezar inhaled and groaned.

Dimi encouraged him more, and Cezar seemed to enjoy his smell. Happy with it, he moved lower, between Cezar's legs, hoping his cock would find on its own the entrance to that body he wanted so badly.

Little hisses and grunts were coming from Cezar, as Dimi was fighting his way in. Just like a colt, Cezar was moving too much, but he was giving in slowly. Dimi put his fingers into his mouth and then reached the tight entrance again. His cock was happy to follow. As he entered, his eyes rolled in his head.

There was so much tightness. He would burst for sure, or maybe his heart would go first. Cezar was the one to grab him now, kissing him madly. Dimi moved, without a rhythm at first, just wanting to be there, until Cezar steadied his hips and taught him, without words.

He was the one to take Cezar now like men took women. The thought was so wondrous, so strange. Dimi grunted, thrashed, then fell and burned, as Cezar pulled him in, making their bodies slam, joined to the bone.

Cezar gathered him close into his arms as he cried softly. He had no idea why he did that; it was like his body wanted out of his own skin. Just like his cock had just shot its seed inside the one Dimi loved so much, tears wanted to come out of his eyes, and make him blind to anything else that wasn't his love for Cezar.

Cezar caressed him and kissed his wet cheeks. "Are you all right?" he asked, searching his face.

Dimi sniffled and wiped his eyes with the back of the hand. "Why do you like this so much? It's like dying."

"*La petite mort*," Cezar said and laughed softly.

"What?" Dimi asked.

He felt born anew, but like his bones were melting, letting him without support. He feared to get up on his feet; he was sure to meet the floor face first if he tried that.

"The French call it 'the little death'. It's about pleasure, the most exhilarating of them all."

Dimi looked at Cezar's face. If the other didn't hold him, he would fall for sure. "Did I die? A little?"

Now Cezar roared. Dimi pouted. It wasn't his fault he didn't know fancy things like that.

"No, Dimi. It's just a way of saying. You just experienced more pleasure than ever in your life."

"I can barely feel my body," Dimi said. "Is that how you feel when you take me?"

"Yes, and it's like nothing else I have ever felt in my life. It must be because it is with you."

Dimi grinned at that. He wasn't just one of Cezar's lovers; he was the one to make Cezar feel that little death he was talking about. Death was a serious thing, so Cezar must be serious about him, too.

"Can I still get up? What if I fall?" he asked hurriedly.

Cezar kissed his forehead, then his eyes. "There is nothing wrong with you, Dimi."

Dimi now felt a little guilty. Maybe Cezar hurt now like he had hurt that first time. "Did you like it?" he asked quickly and looked away.

"I barely felt it," Cezar teased him.

"You went ah and oh and all that," Dimi said, now worried that he had failed to show Cezar his love like he wanted to.

"It must be that your prick is too small," Cezar teased him again.

Dimi frowned. Cezar was challenging him, but why? He pushed himself up and felt happy since his legs were holding him. Palming his cock, he stared down at Cezar. "It's not small," he said. "You just fought me too much."

"Maybe you could try again," Cezar said.

Dimi could feel his entire face stretching into a smile. Cezar stood up and walked slowly toward him. "Why did you rub your armpit into my face like that?"

"So that you're not skittish when I mount you," Dimi explained.

"Oh, really?" Cezar asked, in the same teasing voice. "I thought mounting was also something else."

Never in his life, he had thought he would feel this. Men had offered before to enter him, but he had refused, scared of what that would mean. All worries of the past were long gone now, wiped by this young gypsy who came at him like a summer storm, not caring of what was in the way.

Now he needed to feel that again, that exhilarating feeling that he was wanted, that he could melt into another like never before. Taking Dimi had been that, too, but this, this was so foreign, so strange, that Cezar feared it could only be fleeting, something he had just imagined, without any substance or sense.

"Mounting," he said, as he moved to rest his forearms against the small railing that must have been used a long time ago to separate the living space for the animals kept there, "is when a stallion breeds a mare."

Dimi made a small strange sound behind him. Cezar stared over one shoulder and looked straight at him.

“*San shukar,*” Dimi whispered, as he came closer and placed one hand on his ass.

“What does that mean?” Cezar asked.

Dimi seemed absorbed by kneading his buttocks and staring at them intently.

“I know it’s not French,” he teased.

Dimi shook his head. “You’re beautiful,” he said with reverence.

Cezar shivered as Dimi’s hand traveled lower, caressing the inside of his thighs, going lower, stopping just above the riding boots. He gasped as Dimi went on his knees and began kissing the back of his legs.

Now he was following the same path, but going the other way. Dimi stopped when he reached the buttocks, but only for a second. Cezar gasped as he felt teeth sinking into one of them. Dimi had a thing for biting tonight. Not that he minded. Devoured in that manner by his lover sounded like a delicious way to go. There was a strong desire in Dimi that was making him shake in both fear and happiness at the same time. Fear of what it might mean and happiness like no other had made him feel in his entire life.

Dimi moved his fingers along his crack, inching closer to his asshole. Unlike earlier, his entrance was now wet with Dimi’s seed and easy to give in.

“Do you want me to breed you like stallions breed mares?” Dimi asked, his voice strained now.

“Do you feel up to the task?” Cezar teased him some more.

Dimi got closer, and Cezar closed his eyes when he felt the blunt tip pushing in again. His breathing became shallower, coming in short, sharp bursts, as Dimi entered him. It wasn’t only in his head. Without the sharp pain from the first contact, there was nothing but pleasure there. Cezar moved his hips to meet Dimi’s thrusts.

Sensations only soared when Dimi moved one hand in front to catch his cock. Maybe Dimi was clumsy due to lack of experience, but the way he moved his hand along Cezar’s length said that there was at least something he was much familiar with.

Cezar could hear his own groans and moans like they were something far away.

“Is it good now?” Dimi asked, his voice innocent and a bit hesitant.

“Fuck me, Dimi,” Cezar whispered. “You’re the only one for me.”

His words seemed to trigger something inside Dimi. His moves became frantic, his steady hammering short and hard while his hand on Cezar's cock went faster and faster,

Cezar wanted to make it all last, to move like that forever, but his young lover had yet to experience this kind of pleasure enough times to realize the importance of prolonging it. So he encouraged him, with both his body and his voice, as he spilled his seed on the ground.

Dimi took only a few more thrusts, and he collapsed on top of Cezar, mumbling incoherently. They stood there for minutes, trying hard to get their breath and hearts to slow down.

Cezar watched in silence as Dimi dressed up, with a focused expression on his face. "You were quite passionate tonight."

Dimi stopped and looked at him. Then he grinned. "Now I know why you only want to ride me the moment I'm near you."

Cezar laughed. "What made you come through all the rain? Did you think of it?"

"For some days," Dimi admitted. "You always looked so happy after using my ass. I can barely sit sometimes," he added and rubbed his perky bottom suggestively.

"I suppose you avenged yourself," Cezar said. "I feel like I'm going to be the one having trouble sitting down."

"You're so rich you can sit on seven pillows," Dimi said with a sly smile. "I must sit on the ground."

"Dimi," Cezar said softly and came closer.

He pushed the unruly locks from Dimi's face. The small lamp was throwing long shadows on that beloved face.

"So my prick is not so small?" Dimi laughed.

"I guess not," Cezar replied. "But tell me. Don't you like it when I take you?"

Dimi grinned broadly. "I don't know which one I like most. But I don't want to die all the time. You can have me as many times as you want," he said and wrapped his arms around Cezar's neck.

"You wanted this," Cezar said. "You wanted it badly."

Dimi looked away, but only for a moment. "I wanted to give you something your wife would never give you."

Cezar pressed his forehead against Dimi's and stood like that for a while. "It's not my choice."

"It is," Dimi said sharply. "Maybe you're not the one the fortuneteller told me about."

"That old woman at your camp? She tried to get a rise out of me with her cards. How could she know about us?" Cezar thought out loud.

Dimi stopped and pushed Cezar away only so that they could look at each other. "What did she tell you?"

"Some gibberish," Cezar said vaguely. "It was because of her I thought you told people about us."

"I didn't say anything," Dimi said. "No one knows. What did she see?"

"See? She didn't see anything. I doubt she can see much. I think she's half-blind."

"It is because of that blind eye that she can see the future," Dimi said with conviction. "One day, that eye turned inside her head, and now she sees other worlds, the ones we cannot see."

Cezar shook his head. "Dimi, I know you value your people, but no one can see the future."

"Just tell me what she told you," Dimi insisted, squeezing his arms almost painfully now.

"Something about me, a green-eyed man, and a long journey. I didn't wait for her to finish. I suppose you know who she was talking about."

Dimi let him go brusquely and took a step back.

"What?" Cezar asked, a bit spooked by the strange look in Dimi's eyes.

"Nothing," Dimi said, but it was obvious he was keeping something away from him.

"What did she tell you? It's only fair that you told me about what your future holds, now that I bared mine in front of you," Cezar said and smiled.

Dimi shook his head. "Something scary. I won't tell you."

"Seriously? I thought fortunetellers only tell people what they want to hear."

"It's not like that. The ones with the gift won't lie to you."

Cezar pulled Dimi close and kissed him. "You're just superstitious, that's all."

Dimi said nothing. He continued to dress up without a word.

"Let me take you to the camp," Cezar said.

Dimi nodded, and they headed out. The shed door closed on the moments they had just shared, with the finality of fate. Maybe fate did exist, Cezar thought, but it wasn't told by an old gypsy woman's cards. It was written by men like his father, who held the world or pieces of it into their greedy hands.

On their way to the camp, Cezar held Dimi tightly. But he already felt distant, as if the fall was already by their side, looming with its chilly days and Cezar's fate, set in stone.

la petite mort (fr.) = the little death

san shukar (rromanes) = you're beautiful

Chapter Seven

It was disconcerting to feel so full in his heart, but empty, too. With the first rays of the sun coming through his window, the last night's regrets faded a little, leaving a tender spot, like a dent in his soul, but not hurting as much.

They still had the summer. Cezar wished it would never end. It didn't matter what he knew, that faking he was blind to what awaited for him, come fall, was wrong; it didn't feel like that.

His aunt was right. He was in love, and it was that love filling him up, covering to the brim all the nooks and crannies of his soul, the chambers he had thought would remain deserted forever.

Summer was on their side. With that thought, Cezar dressed up and went down to breakfast. He greeted his parents politely and barely kept from gasping when he tried to sit down. Dimi hadn't lied about that discomfort, he thought, letting a smile give him away.

"What could make you so pleased with yourself, first thing in the morning?" His father noticed right away.

Cezar faked boredom. "An old joke, nothing more."

"Care to share it with us?"

"I doubt mother would appreciate it," Cezar replied promptly, ignoring the sour expression on his father's face on purpose.

He would be happy the moment the servants would start bringing food to the table. Nothing put his father into a better mood than a meal in his belly.

Aunt Cezara marched into the room like the storm from the day before. Everybody turned to look at her. "Cezar, I need you for something urgent."

He frowned and stood up. His aunt had a serious, even worried expression on her face.

"Before breakfast?" His mother intervened. "I am sure it can wait."

"Not quite, dear," Cezara said, slapping her lace gloves against her palm in a nervous gesture. "We'll take my carriage, Cezar."

"Where would you need to be so early in the morning?" his father questioned. "And why do you need Cezar?"

"It is just something concerning papers. It's about some properties," his aunt said. "We need to reach my lawyer and fast. Cezar would read everything for me."

His father stood up. "If it is so important, I will come with you."

“If I had needed you, I would have asked you,” aunt Cezara said sharply. “Now, Cezar, be a dear; we’re already late.”

His father seemed mollified by Cezara’s straightforward refusal and sank back in his chair. A servant was already pouring tea, while another was busy bringing an assortment of breakfast foods.

Cezar wasted no more time. He hurried to join his aunt, offering her his arm. As soon as they were out of earshot, he asked her. “Where are we really going, *tante*?”

“There were some horses stolen last night. The commissary must be sending his hounds as we speak,” his aunt replied hurriedly.

Cezar helped her climbed into the carriage and joined her. “Sending his hounds where?”

His aunt gave him a crossed look. “Where could he? To the people he suspects the most.”

What his aunt meant finally dawned on Cezar, and his face turned all into a frown. Dimi had been strange all right last night. Could it be that after they made love, he had gone to see about his usual thieving?

“And what exactly are we doing?” Cezar asked.

“We make sure no one is dragged to jail,” his aunt said matter-of-factly.

“Aren’t we getting a bit ahead of ourselves? They might have done it,” Cezar pointed out.

“And?” His aunt waved. “The Arpads won’t fall to ruin because of a couple of horses.”

“I am surprised with your lax perspective on others’ property, *tante*,” Cezar said at that. “Wait, did you say the Arpads? Did they steal from Marcela’s parents?”

“So it seems,” Cezara replied. “Aren’t you worried that they might drag to jail someone you don’t want there?”

Cezar thought fleetingly at Dimi, how serious and intense he had been the night before. Then he realized what his aunt was saying, in a not so veiled manner. “Who?” he murmured, his voice unsure.

His aunt threw a look out the window, at the fast-moving landscape. “I don’t want to be the first to say his name in this conversation.”

His? Cezar could feel all his blood rushing to his feet. “You must be mistaken, *tante*. I have not an inkling what you are talking about.”

“So you will let them drag him away? I heard he might be their most important suspect. It’s not easy for him to lose himself in the crowd of his own people with that hair,” she said.

Now Cezar felt ill. His aunt wasn’t letting him off the hook, and she knew what she was talking about. “Who told you?” he asked, in a strangled voice.

“I have quite an interesting view from my window, and I sleep little,” Cezara explained. “Don’t worry, Cezar. No one will hear anything from me. And I’m sorry for grabbing you from breakfast like that. I just think you would suffer a lot if something happened to him.”

“He may be guilty,” Cezar whispered.

It was so unnatural what he felt. His world just tilted on its axis, but it wasn’t fear what he felt, but relief, relief that someone knew and wasn’t judging him.

“And does it matter? No beast should be of greater value than a person,” his aunt said. “You know what they do to horse thieves.”

“I do,” Cezar replied. A shiver coursed down his spine, cold like ice.

“So, what do you choose? To be on the side of the law or your lover’s side?”

He had barely admitted it to himself. To hear someone speak so freely of his relationship with Dimi was from a different world. Any moment, he expected to wake up.

“Who told you of all this?”

“I have friends everywhere,” his aunt said.

She added nothing after that. Cezar stared in wonder at her. Until now, he had admired and loved her, but now he was impressed.

Cezar helped his aunt down and then to the row of tents. Why wasn’t he surprised that aunt Cezara wanted to see the fortuneteller first?

The young girl who had taken him to the half-blind woman before jumped in front of them. “They’re here,” she said in an agitated voice. “They go from one caravan to another, throwing people’s things in the mud,” she added, tears to her eyes.

“Go, dear,” his aunt encouraged him. “You will know what to do.”

The young girl walked in front of him, throwing looks at him from time to time as if she feared he would stop following her.

His aunt had been right. In the middle of the camp, a veritable scandal was taking place. The commissary's men, three, he counted, were busy making a mess of everyone's belongings, which they threw into a big pile. The women were making a ruckus, their high-pitched voices making his ears hurt. That wasn't just something they did to impress the policemen. They were truly distressed. Their men were trying to get close and save some of their things, but the policemen chased them away with their long sticks. Several kids were crying, and Cezar had to shout a few times until he made himself heard.

"What is going on here?" he asked, in the haughty voice he knew would work with people who recognized his station and authority.

One of the policemen threw him a long, stupefied look. He was sweating like a pig from all the exertion, and his underbelly showed from under his uniform. "We're searching for some stolen horses, sir."

Cezar looked around. Maybe the gypsies could tell instinctively he was on their side because they fell silent as if a spell had suddenly rendered them all mute, even the crying children.

"And could they be hidden inside these people's caravans? I doubt that's even possible, let alone probable."

The policeman scratched his head, pushing his cap back. "They stole some horses last night," he said with what appeared to be slight uncertainty.

"Who?" Cezar asked. "All of them?" He pointed at the entire camp, gathered around them.

"The stable boy said he saw someone," the policeman said. "But they don't want to make him come here," he added, gesturing toward the crowd.

"Who are you talking about?" Cezar pressed the matter.

"That blond gypsy. There's only one like that," the policeman replied. "Sir, let us do our job. If we press them enough, they'll give him away. Just wait until I set all they have on fire."

A few young women began shouting at those words and tried to reach the policemen with their stretched hands, stopped and carried away by their men.

"I know who you are talking about. I don't see how he could have gotten busy stealing horses last night. He came to bring me here yesterday, right after dinner, and we worked together hard to pull some of their caravans out of the mud. The soil is soft in these parts. It sinks sometimes," he explained while keeping a completely straight face.

The policemen, all three of them, stared at him in disbelief. The first talked again. "Why would he bring you here? Why would you come?"

Cezar's smile was crooked as he stared down the man of the law. "I doubt I have to give you any explanation on how I choose to spend my time and bestow my charity."

"A strange time to bestow your charity, sir," the policeman dared to say.

This was a sly one, despite his bovine face; Cezar could tell. Someone grabbed his arm, and he looked down to see a beautiful young woman leaning against him with a sly smile. She put her other arm on her hip and stole first a playful look at him. Then she looked at the policeman. "The young master is very generous with us."

She was swinging her hips and biting her lips as she looked at the three policemen. Cezar smiled as he observed her. That was quick thinking and helped his ad-hoc lie.

"He must be." The policeman touched his mustache and struggled to sit upright and suck in his belly, under the young gypsy's unabashed look.

"Look for the stolen horses elsewhere. You won't find them here," Cezar said with determination. "Don't tell me you only care about finding a culprit so that you can have someone to put in jail for this. The blond gypsy the stable boy thinks he saw didn't do it. And you have my word."

The policeman hesitated for a moment, but eventually, he gestured for the other two to follow him. Tipping his cap, he walked away. A few women cared to shout what could only be expletives at their backs, but they didn't seem to care that much.

Cezar exhaled. It had worked, but he was so angered at Dimi's carelessness that he saw red in front of his eyes. The moment the policemen were gone, he turned toward the young gypsy hanging on his arm still. "Where is Dimi?"

She smiled and gestured with one hand. "Away. The moment the pigs were here, off he went. He runs so fast he must be in another county by now."

Cezar quirked an eyebrow. If that wasn't a lie, he was a monk. "I need to talk to him."

"I'll tell him," the young gypsy showed her straight white teeth. "Come with me, young master."

"I'd rather not," Cezar refused. "I must search for my aunt and accompany her back home."

He needed to keep up appearances, even among Dimi's people, but that didn't mean he would lie with a gypsy woman just to prove all that he was not.

"Come anytime you want," the woman threw him a last playful look.

Cezar didn't care to look after her as she walked away. However, he had a mind to start ransacking the camp, just like the policemen before him, just so that he could get his hands on that daring thief. And some of the horses belonging to Marcela's parents? Cezar knew now that

there was more to the story. At least the stolen horses weren't there, and Dimi must have had accomplices.

All would have to wait. Now he needed to head back home. Lingered there only to make a scene the moment he found Dimi was not acceptable, mostly because Cezar wasn't sure what he was capable of doing once he would see that brazen thief.

The river moved rapidly, its rage from the night before not yet wasted for good. Cezar didn't hope to find Dimi there, but it had been the only place where he felt he could come to ease the turmoil in his head and his heart. He got down from his horse and swung the riding crop, decapitating a few long stalks standing taller than the grass.

Sensing someone approaching, he turned fast. Dimi jumped into his arms and kissed him, then started laughing.

He was laughing. Cezar could not believe his eyes and ears. Without a word, he grabbed Dimi by one arm and pushed him with his face toward the tree overlooking the river. His lover must have mistaken his intentions because his laughter got louder.

Cezar could hear now only the sound of his blood pounding in his ears. What madness could make Dimi behave so carelessly? He pushed Dimi's pants under his perky bottom and raised his riding crop. A surprised shout followed the first hit, followed by more subdued ones, as Cezar continued to smack his ass, over and over.

He knew that had to hurt, and the blushing marks blossoming on the pale skin made him stop. Compassion should have been what he felt, but his anger wasn't turning into that, but into something darker and deeper as his body reacted to the sight in front of him.

Cezar turned Dimi harshly and shook him. "What were you thinking? Stealing from my fiancée's family?"

Dimi's face held a pained expression, tears flowing freely down his smooth cheeks, but upon hearing him, his features contorted in anger. He pulled himself free from Cezar's hold, then grabbed the riding crop from his hand and threw it toward the river, putting all his strength into the throw. The crop disappeared right away, swallowed by the waves.

He turned toward Cezar with burning eyes. Then he did something that took Cezar entirely by surprise. Dimi slapped him across the face, hard, without holding back. Then he started walking away.

Cezar shook his head, quickly recovering from the shock, and hurried after him. "No, Dimi, you don't get to run away from me like this, after I put my reputation and my neck on the line for you!"

Dimi stopped. He spat at him venomously. "She'll never see those horses again!"

Cezar grabbed him again. "Did you do it out of spite? Have you gone completely mad? Do you have any idea what could happen to you if they caught you? Do you?"

"Let me go!" Dimi struggled to pull himself free. "Who do you think you are to beat me?"

Furious tears were gathering fast in the luminous green eyes.

"Hey, I could not have hit you that hard," Cezar said with a sigh, a bit appeased now at the sight of his lover's tears.

Dimi pushed the heels of his palms into his eyes, rubbing them. "Why did you hit me?"

"You made me mad with your carelessness," Cezar explained.

"You care about her that much?" Dimi sniffled.

"Her? This isn't about Marcela, for heavens' sake!" Cezar boomed. "It's about what could have happened to you!"

"And what do you care?" Dimi said with unhidden rancor.

"What do I care?" Cezar wanted to turn that perky bottom up again and give it a few more smacks with his hand if nothing else could be used. "Are you all right in the head? I cannot stand the thought of something bad happening to you!"

"Why?" Dimi pushed his chin up, defiantly.

"Because I'm in love with you!" Cezar exploded again.

Silence fell between them, following his words. Cezar looked away and let go of Dimi's arm. "I'm sorry I hit you. I just wanted you to feel some of the pain you caused me with your recklessness. I was worried about you."

"Are you in love with me?" Dimi asked, a tad hesitantly.

Cezar could feel Dimi's questioning eyes on him, even without looking. "I must be mad, but yes, I am in love with you, and I don't intend to hide it. Go ahead and laugh."

Dimi came closer and wrapped his arms around his waist. "I won't laugh," he said softly.

His breath was sweet on Cezar's cheek. Cezar moved his head slowly, fearful that Dimi might still push him away. Their mouths found each other and locked into a long kiss. Neither of them was in a hurry. Cezar's sudden declaration had brought with it something else, and now they were savoring its nectar, feeding off it with sated appetite.

Not the same could be said about what followed. Their hands became frantic as they struggled to undress each other. Cezar wanted Dimi from the front so that they could kiss some more, but his naughty lover had other plans. Dimi placed himself on all fours and pushed his ass into Cezar's crotch.

"Quick, Cezar, I want it quick," he urged.

Cezar felt suddenly clumsy as he tried to make his cock slick enough.

"Hurry," Dimi said impatiently.

He was moving his ass suggestively, making Cezar mad with desire. He could not have that; the red welts on Dimi's buttocks were enough to tell him that he went too far earlier. There was no possible way he wouldn't hurt his lover now by taking him too fast.

In the meantime, Dimi just made things worse by pushing his ass up and giving him glimpses of that delicious hole that could make him so happy. Cezar steadied his hips and leaned in closer.

It was not something he had ever done, but now he knew instinctively that he wanted to love that hole and not only with his cock that was bound to bring Dimi pain. He brought his lips down on Dimi's ass and pushed his tongue inside without overthinking things.

Dimi gasped in unhidden pleasure. "Cezar, more," he begged, quivering.

Cezar obliged, pushing his tongue in more, making it slick more and more. Dimi's salty and distinctive skin taste was there, too, but not unpleasant, and it made his desire soar so high that he was afraid he would spill himself before having a chance to enter his lover.

Dimi pulled hard at his buttocks and hurried him again. This time, Cezar wasted no more time and put himself behind him and pushed in. Dimi moaned loudly and pushed back into his crotch. There was something beast-like in their coupling now, but Cezar felt it was right, so right, deep into the marrow of his bones.

He moved fast, his body slick with sweat. It didn't matter that any moment he might lose his breath and fall to the ground, unconscious. His entire being was hanging from Dimi's next moan, or sigh, or gasp.

"Breed me, Cezar," Dimi whispered in a strangled voice. "Like stallions breed their mares."

He couldn't have waited if it had cost him his life. The sounds escaping his throats were guttural like he was a man turned into a beast. Dimi was thrashing under him, probably spilling himself, too, and his silvery voice was hoarse now, as far gone as his.

Cezar pulled out slowly, and his seed came gushing out of Dimi's ass. He laughed, surprised with the sudden sensation of calm and relief flooding him.

Dimi turned and kissed him quickly. "I don't taste bad," he said with a sly grin, as soon as he let Cezar breathe.

Cezar just shook his head slowly.

"I'll taste you, too," Dimi said with conviction.

Cezar laughed. "You won't take my cock in your mouth, but you want to eat my ass?"

Dimi pouted and looked away quickly. "That's something only easy girls do."

"And? Are you some easy girl? Am I? You know that I love doing it to you."

Dimi pursed his lips and frowned as that sort of reasoning was too much for him to grasp.

"Don't worry." Cezar pulled him close and kissed him. "Let's get dressed now. My family expects me at dinner."

"Will she be there?" Dimi asked, suddenly cautious in both his manner of speaking and the way he held his head.

"Marcela? We're not into each other's hair as much as you imagine. I barely see her, and only when our families are visiting each other."

"Good," Dimi said, now the hesitation gone from him. "Come by the camp after."

"Why?" Cezar asked.

"My parents want to thank you," Dimi said with a shrug. "For saving me from the pigs."

"Dimi, do they know anything?" Cezar asked, a bit reproachfully.

"No." Dimi shook his head energetically. "But they want to thank you. Mom cried all day, even more after hearing that the pigs were gone."

"You should not put your parents through this, Dimi. It makes me wonder how they're not the ones to turn your bottom all red."

Dimi giggled. "They never beat me. Mom pulls my ear," he said, and unconsciously rubbed his ear, as if he could recall plenty of occasions when his mother had to do that, "but *dodoro* never. Not even that."

"No wonder you grew up to be so naughty," Cezar replied to that. "You just think everything is allowed."

"I'm free!" Dimi shouted, raising his arms.

Cezar shook his head. "I envy you, you know?"

"Come later by the camp, Cezar," Dimi insisted. "Come see how I live."

Cezar nodded. "You know it will be torture since I cannot kiss you and hold you."

Dimi snickered again. "You can, but later. When everyone will be asleep."

Cezar remained there, staring after Dimi until he was nothing but a shadow through the trees. As happy as he felt, there was a revolt growing inside him, against his fate, against his father, and above all, against himself.

"Where are you going at this hour?" his father questioned him.

"Out for a ride," Cezar replied.

"It appears that you tend to disappear for hours on most days. I would have nothing against it if you sneaked out to visit your fiancée, but Marcela has already complained to her father that you are quite negligent in regards to the attention you should pay to her."

"She will be my wife. She will have enough of my attention after our wedding. Enough to make her sick of me," Cezar said, straightening the cuffs of his thin coat, to hide his restlessness.

"Marcela is an understanding young woman. Wise beyond her years, I'd say," his father replied.

"Well, wisdom is not exactly what a young groom would like to find in his wife to be," Cezar said scathingly.

His father's face darkened. "Do you have any idea what did I have to go through to secure this marriage for you? Your scandalous affairs --"

"Why would my scandalous affairs matter?" Cezar cut his father's words short. "I'm not a young maiden. Aunt Cezara is right. I don't see why I should be concerned with this as if I were a spinster. Assuming that you could spare some of your sizeable fortune when marrying me off, I should be an attractive prospect, regardless of my affairs. Or even the promise that I will inherit the said fortune should be enough to recommend me. I'd say it would recommend me if I only had one eye, a wooden leg, and the bad habit of drinking from dawn till dusk."

His father listened to his discourse without saying a word, but the frown etched between his eyebrows was growing deeper. "You will court your fiancée as she desires to be courted."

"I'd like to believe that I'm still a free man until that damned wedding," Cezar said through his teeth.

“Who is she?” his father asked out of the blue. “Are you planning to cause a scandal here, Cezar? I warn you. I won’t tolerate it. Not so close to home.”

Cezar stopped and swallowed hard. So his father had started to suspect something. “I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Oh, you know, and you know it well. Sow your wild oats if you must. Come fall, you’ll be the perfect husband for Marcela. Otherwise, I will see that you leave this house without one coin in your pockets.”

“Will you disown me?” Cezar asked, his voice completely neutral. He had heard that threat plenty of times.

“A career in the army would do you good again. I should have never let you give up on what looked like a promising path in life for you. For as long as you were in the army, at least you were disciplined. I listened to your mother and let you study. As if that was what you did abroad. All you cared was to drag your family name through the mud and soiled sheets.”

Cezar said nothing for a few moments, letting his father stew in his own anger. “Is this all?” he asked.

“What? Is your mistress waiting for you?”

Cezar ignored his father’s words and headed for the door. “Goodnight, father,” he said in a measured voice. “Sometimes, I wonder if you were ever young.”

His father said nothing. Cezar knew he couldn’t hope for him to change his mind.

It looked like the entire camp was still up and about, despite the evening setting in. The storm had left a lingering chillness in the air, and now Cezar didn’t think it unusual to have a fire going at the camp.

There were laughter and music, and young people were dancing, while the elderly were busy sharing around food on copper plates.

Dimi placed his food carefully on a log and ran to meet him. “You came!” he said excitedly and took his hand. “Are you still hungry? Come eat with me!”

Cezar was overly conscious of being dragged around by Dimi, but it looked like no one around cared. “I could not manage another bite. Please, see to your dinner,” he said.

Dimi nodded enthusiastically and dug into his food, some vegetable stew by the looks of it. “Mom and dad will be crazy when I take you to them.”

“Don’t disturb them if they’re already asleep.”

“Asleep? This early?” Dimi laughed.

Cezar watched him as he finished his food. Dimi thanked an old woman and then rushed toward what had to be his caravan.

“Wait here,” Dimi told him and climbed into the caravan.

He lit a lamp on the ground, the light allowing Cezar to examine his surroundings, as much as he could.

“Young master!” A middle-aged woman rushed to him, as soon as she was down from her caravan.

Cezar was too surprised by her sudden move that, at first, he didn’t react. But when she tried to kiss his hand, he withdrew it. The woman seemed taken aback, and Cezar hurried to take her hands in his. “Please, madam, you shouldn’t feel obliged.”

Even in the gas lamp light, Cezar could tell that Dimi’s mother must have been a beauty in her younger years. She wore the colorful attire her people were known for, and she smelled faintly of roses.

“Thank you for saving our Dimi,” she said, her eyes in tears. “He wouldn’t live through what they do to horse thieves in these parts.”

“I would,” Dimi protested.

“Let your mom talk, Dimi,” a male voice, with a baritone richness to it, intervened.

Cezar looked up to see Dimi’s father, too. The man took out his hat and seemed a little embarrassed. He was tall and thin, but he had an air about him like he wasn’t used to bowing to anyone, regardless of his humble origins. He was handsome, too, and his clothes were impeccable, a short vest and white shirt, matched with black pants. It was hard to imagine how Dimi could be such a ragamuffin, seeing how straitlaced his parents were.

“I beg of you. Don’t feel indebted to me,” Cezar said courteously.

Dimi’s father walked over to him and took one of his hands. He placed into his palm something, and Cezar opened it to see a gold coin, shiny and round. That must have been the most valuable thing Dimi’s parents had.

Cezar grabbed the other’s hand and gave him back the coin. “I cannot, please. And this means a lot more to you than to me.”

“Dimi is everything to us,” Dimi’s father replied and tried to force the coin back into his hand. “Accept this, young master.”

Cezar didn’t give in. “If you want to give me something, choose something you’re making. You have the reputation of being great craftsmen.”

Dimi’s father smiled and hurried back to the caravan, only to return with a beautiful pipe.

“Dad makes them,” Dimi said proudly.

Cezar took the object and looked at it. The craftsmanship was, indeed, exquisite. “I do not indulge, but I am sure to cause some gentlemen’s envy in certain circles, just by holding it,” he said.

They spent a little more time together, Dimi’s parents keeping to thank him profusely a few more times, until Dimi dragged him away, under the pretext that they were young and in much need to dance.

Once they reached the fire, however, Cezar declined Dimi’s invitation to dance. He was afraid he might give himself away, by reaching for Dimi and embracing him in front of all the others.

He watched in fascination as Dimi and another young man engaged into what looked like a battle of sorts. Dimi’s opponent took his shirt off and threw it on the ground. Dimi took one step back as if impressed and then did the same.

Cezar’s eyes traveled hungrily over that taut, beautiful body he now knew so well. Both Dimi and the other young man broke into a frantic dance, circling each other, moving their legs fast, and snapping their fingers while the band played a fast-paced tune. Everyone else was clapping and laughing, and Cezar found himself doing the same.

There was life there like nothing else he had known until now. Even when abroad, indulging in games of cards that tended to end up in scuffles more often than not over imaginary love affairs with fascinating women, and anything else that counted as the life of a good-for-nothing student, he hadn’t felt free like this.

There was another world there, one in which Dimi was king, one in rags, but happy and richer than anyone else Cezar knew.

When the musicians took a break, Dimi came to sit by him. “Did you see, Cezar?” he asked excitedly.

“That demonic dance? I saw it, sure I did. I wonder how come your feet aren’t worn up to your ankles,” Cezar joked.

Dimi smiled and didn't offer an answer. One girl came to drag him by the arms, and he stole one last look at Cezar. He sat within a circle of young girls and started singing a slow song, its words, unknown to Cezar, but sweet like honey on Dimi's tongue.

He was lucky to have that, Cezar realized. That moment lived outside of time, even if he could only look at it and live it as a bystander and nothing more. He would remember that moment forever.

"Did you like it tonight?" Dimi asked and took his hand as soon as they were far enough so that no one could see them.

"You people sure know how to enjoy yourselves," Cezar said as he caressed his horse, to assure him of his presence.

"I didn't ask that," Dimi replied.

"I liked it," Cezar said. "It was definitely much more enjoyable than being at home and listening to my father lecturing me."

"Lecturing you?" Dimi asked.

"He doesn't like many things about me, and he cares to remind me of his displeasure, as often as he has the chance," Cezar explained.

"You don't like it, staying in that big house," Dimi said matter-of-factly. "You like it here, with me."

Cezar laughed softly and, in the dark, he reached for Dimi so he could kiss him. "Of course I do."

"So leave that big house and come live with me," Dimi said then, holding Cezar close.

"Dimi," Cezar sighed, "I cannot. All we have is this summer. Come fall, I'll be married."

Dimi didn't let go of him and didn't push him away, like other times when Cezar mentioned his approaching wedding.

"It's not true. You love me. How can you marry that woman when you love me?" Dimi asked.

Cezar caressed his hair slowly, rough under his fingers from too much time spent in the sun. "I have obligations toward my family, Dimi. It cannot be summer forever."

Dimi took his hand and placed it over his chest, to feel his heartbeat. "It's always summer here."

He kissed him once more and walked away without another word. Cezar's heart squeezed painfully. Could he have that dream? Forever?

Chapter Eight

“How long will this trip take?” Cezar asked, feeling his frustration growing.

Marcela needed him on what she called a short leisure trip, but Cezar couldn't know for sure how many days he would be away from Dimi. So far, he had managed to avoid various obligations that involved spending time with his future wife, more than he felt necessary, and while he did spend most of his days with Dimi, he still thought he was being robbed of the time he wanted to spend with his lover.

“A week, ten days at most,” his mother said. “Marcela says that she is tired of wasting all her days indoors. With all this heat coming back with a vengeance, I cannot say that I blame her. You will visit their summer lodge. In this weather, I envy that you can escape to somewhere that's cooler than here.”

“I am in no mood to spend ten days in the mountains, surrounded by nothing but wild animals.”

His mother stared at him, reproachfully. “There's a town near, and you and Marcela will be busy socializing with other young people.”

“Don't you find it daring of her to have me over for such a trip when we're not yet married?” Cezar asked, no longer keeping in his irritation.

“Tamara will accompany you, dear. And Marcela is a wise girl. Her parents trust her to be nothing less but impeccable in her behavior toward you.”

“Do they trust me, too?” Cezar spat.

“Cezar!” His mother seemed stupefied at his outburst. “You wouldn't dare!”

“Why wouldn't I?” Cezar threw open his arms. “Because I'm such a great example of morality?”

His mother looked away and pushed her handkerchief to her mouth in a worried gesture. Cezar sighed. He didn't want to hurt his mother in any way. “Did father tell you to convince me to do this?”

“He is worried, Cezar! And so I am! What could some gypsy girl have over someone like Marcela?”

Cezar stared at his mother in utter surprise. So now they were suspecting him he had taken a mistress, and one from the gypsy camp. It was a good thing they were oblivious to the whole truth, but it was clear that words traveled fast, and that was the result of all the gossip that must have kept the local gentry awake in those overwhelmingly hot days.

“You do not even deny it!” His mother shouted at him.

“Does Marcela know?” Cezar asked in a calculated voice.

His mother looked away, without saying anything for a while. “How could she know? She expects her future husband to have at least the dignity of not flaunting his affairs all over the place.”

Maybe she had to know, after all, Cezar pondered. The last weeks together had been shadowed by Dimi’s insistence that he didn’t need to marry. Dimi had been increasingly passionate and demanding, and Cezar could feel his skin getting all hot just thinking of his lover’s lips and hands touching him everywhere.

At first, he hadn’t even considered it. But, with the time passing, Cezar had come to realize that giving up Dimi in exchange for a life without hope next to someone he didn’t love no longer sat well with him.

It was pure madness to think of such an alternative. His father would surely disown him. His mother would be brokenhearted. Everyone he knew would turn their back on him. Yet, Cezar couldn’t bring himself to care about all that. His life no longer existed when he wasn’t in his lover’s arms.

If it had only been lust, it should have burned and disappeared by now. Instead, his desire was only growing stronger, to the point of consuming him. When he was away from Dimi, he felt restless, like a fever was coming over him. He didn’t eat and didn’t sleep much. He slept in the old shed, turned into a home of sorts for the two of them, with Dimi wrapped around him, and ate almost only when he shared his bread with his lover. When they were together, it was the only time when he felt alive.

“Just look at you,” his mother said in a reproachful voice. “You barely sit at the table with us. You treat us, your family, as if we are strangers. Even now, your eyes are distant as if you are staring at something only you can see. Did she cast a spell on you, that gypsy girl?”

“What spell?” Cezar grimaced. “And I thought you beyond such superstitions, mother. There are no such things as spells, and, by how much you enjoy reading your scientific magazines, you should be the last person to talk to me about such silly things.”

His mother pursed his lips. “I wish there were an explanation for your behavior. Marcela is beautiful. Don’t you find her beautiful?”

The look on his mother’s face was hopeful.

“And if I said ‘no’? What would you do? Would you call off the wedding? Over such a trifle thing?” Cezar could barely keep his anger in. “Seeing who we are, I don’t see what genuine feelings would have to do with anything.”

“What do you mean by that?” His mother was getting more and more upset.

“Rumor has it that you and father loved each other once. What I see now are only greed and machinations. Isn’t it all we have enough? Will it ever be enough? Do you need me sacrificed so that you can satisfy your insatiable appetite for money?”

“Cezar!” His mother seemed horrified as she was staring wide-eyed at him. “We only care about your happiness! Do you believe that gypsy girl could make you happy? You’re young, and you think that what you mistake for love could be enough. But can you really live with the sky above as the only roof above your head? Can you really be happier among people who’re not your kin? Your father and I have always made sure that you wouldn’t lack anything. We’ve given you everything!”

Cezar shook his head, his disposition growing darker. “Not everything, mother. You forgot something. You forgot to care about my happiness. You mistake it for having things and beautiful clothes, and five courses for each meal served in this house. But I don’t care for them.”

“You don’t care because you have them,” his mother said sharply. “You will go with Marcela, and I don’t want to hear another word from you.”

Cezar could feel his heart sinking. But he didn’t antagonize his mother any longer. After all, that trip was a good opportunity to talk privately to Marcela. His decision was taken. If his folks wanted him married that badly, what could they do once the prospective bride called the wedding off?

“Why do you have to go with her?” Dimi pouted and crossed his arms over his chest.

Cezar raised one arm and caressed his lover’s lean chest. “You won’t be so upset once I say what I plan to tell her during this trip. The chances are she will want to cut it short.”

Dimi pushed himself on his elbows and looked at him. Cezar hated that he had to go back so soon, but he didn’t want his parents to suspect him even more. There was nothing he wanted more but to take Dimi once more before they parted.

Dimi was comfortable in his nakedness. That gave Cezar plenty of time to look at him, at his slender, beautiful body, his manhood now appeased and sleepy in its little bush of blond hair. Dimi didn’t have much hair on his body, but that made the one there unique in a way. Cezar moved his hand to cup Dimi’s cock and balls, dragging his fingers slowly through the coarse hair.

“What are you going to tell her?” Dimi put his hand over his. “And stop playing with my cock. I know you have to leave.”

“And?” Cezar teased.

“And I don’t want everyone laughing at me for walking around with him like this,” Dimi pointed at his manhood that was slowly stirring.

“Him? Don’t tell me you have a name for ‘him’, too?”

Dimi made a face and looked away. Cezar reached for him and kissed him gently. Dimi pushed him away with a playful laugh. “I’m going to fuck you if you don’t stay still.”

Cezar chuckled. “I think my ass still remembers what you did to it yesterday. It will be a while.”

“My dick is smaller than yours, like by a foot,” Dimi said, his eyes twinkling. “How can you complain so much?”

“Maybe size is not everything,” Cezar joked.

Dimi had been untouched when they first got together, but he was naturally lustful, and Cezar had, at least partially, a reason to complain. The day before, Dimi had taken him three times in a row, each time lasting longer. Cezar did feel it in his body, so today he had been the one to mount Dimi from behind and ride him until they were about to collapse from exhaustion.

“So, what will you tell her?” Dimi asked.

Cezar let go of Dimi’s cock and placed his arms on his bent knees, looking away. “I’m going to tell her to call off the wedding.”

Dimi made a small sound of surprise and then jumped on Cezar’s back, making him lose his balance. “You’re going to tell her you’re not marrying her?”

Cezar laughed and let himself pushed on his back so that Dimi could straddle him. His green eyes were shiny gemstones in the semi-dark of the shed. It was still enough light from the windows, but the evening was closing in.

“Yes. I’ll explain to her that she could find a much better husband. My father may want this marriage, but if Marcela doesn’t want --”

Dimi put one hand over his mouth. “Don’t speak her name. I hate it.”

Cezar took his hand away. “It’s just a name, Dimi.”

Dimi shook his head. “It’s hers. I don’t want to hear it from your mouth.”

Cezar nodded in understanding and caressed Dimi’s hair slowly, pushing it behind the ears.

“And will you come with us? In fall?”

Cezar hesitated. “I’ll have to think about that. You know we can’t be out in the open even with your people.”

“But we could be together,” Dimi insisted.

Cezar exhaled. Maybe they just wanted the impossible. “We’ll think of something,” he promised.

“You know about horses. You could be a horse thief, like me!” Dimi said excitedly.

“That’s hardly a career I’d like to pursue,” Cezar said. “I don’t belong to your world, Dimi.”

His lover’s face fell. “You just don’t want me enough.”

“You’re unfair. What if I asked you to come to live in my world? To attend boring dinners and stay clothed in three layers of garments all the time?”

The expression of utter disgust on Dimi’s face made him laugh.

“My people are free. You would be happy with me,” Dimi said.

“That I know,” Cezar knew. “I’ve never been happier in my entire life. I never knew what happiness felt like until I met you.”

Some of Dimi’s upset from earlier seemed to dissipate with those words. “I could tell mom and dad.”

“No.” Cezar shook his head. “That’s impossible, Dimi. I know they love you, but, if you told them anything, they would hate me. They would think I did something bad to you. That I changed you.”

“Mom and dad only want me to be happy,” Dimi said with conviction.

“Sometimes parents have a totally different thing in mind about what would make their children happy,” Cezar said, sadness creeping into his voice. “You have wonderful parents, Dimi. Don’t get into a fight with them over me.”

Dimi opened his mouth to say something more but eventually fell silent. The sadness from Cezar’s voice was floating in the air now, and they were both breathing it.

“One week?” Dimi asked.

“Ten days at most,” Cezar replied.

“That’s forever,” Dimi said with bitterness.

Dim could get angry sometimes, or upset, but he was never bitter. Cezar felt he was the one to blame. “Tomorrow is Sunday. Let’s visit the town together. I heard there would be some merchants selling horses. We could go and take a look. What do you say?”

“Horses?” Dimi turned to look at him.

“No stealing,” Cezar wagged a finger at him.

Dimi made a sour face.

“You promised,” Cezar insisted. “I can always find another riding crop to turn your bottom red.”

With a sigh, Dimi nodded. “All right, no stealing.”

“There will be many other things to see.”

“Won’t people see us? Together?”

“Are you worried?”

Dimi shrugged. “I’m not.”

“To anyone seeing us, it will be like a gentleman making purchases, followed by someone he hired to help him carry everything back home.”

“So I’m your servant?” Dimi’s look was crooked.

“No. It’s just what they will think, nothing more.”

“What if I kiss you?” Dimi’s eyes glinted with mischief.

“Maybe you don’t want to come, after all,” Cezar replied, barely keeping in a smile.

“I do!” Dimi jumped to his feet. “What else will be there?”

“All right. We will go then. We will look at clothes and blankets, and pots, and we’ll eat smoked meats and drink beer.”

Cezar’s eyes were drawn by Dimi’s manhood, and his hanging balls, while the other was busy jumping around like a colt, barely keeping in his excitement. He caught his lover’s hand and pulled him near.

Dimi fell silent, and it was like he was no longer breathing. Cezar let his mouth hover over Dimi’s cock, now twitching with interest.

“Do that, with your mouth, Cezar.” Dimi’s voice was strained as he begged.

Cezar didn’t wait to be told twice. He brought Dimi near, and took his cock fast into his mouth, making the other gasp.

“Your mouth is so good, so good on my dick,” Dimi said in a breathless voice.

He didn't need any encouragements to offer his lover pleasure, but Dimi's words were making his own desire soar. Cezar used one hand to handle himself at the same time, keeping the other around Dimi's cock as leverage for moving his head up and down fast.

It wasn't like he was practiced. His adventures of the kind with men had been few and far between. Everything was new, and he was discovering it with Dimi by his side. He hadn't been a virgin, but true love made even sex into something even more thrilling and exhilarating like nothing else ever experienced. Whatever he had ever felt before was fading away.

How could he even dream of letting go of Dimi? He was, this young gypsy with eyes like a witch and lips like honey, his beginning and his end.

Dimi's hands were in his hair, first caressing, then pulling at it, making it a bit painful, but giving all he could feel a strange edge that made his arousal grow and grow. Cezar secretly loved it when Dimi began moving his hips, hammering his mouth with abandon, until neither of them could feel anything more.

Cezar began spilling his seed, aiming for Dimi's bare feet, another secret he had so far kept for himself. He would bathe Dimi in his seed if it were possible, to make sure his lover stank of him so that no one else would ever come neither, be it male or female.

Dimi steadied his head and offered his release with long, almost pained gasps and moans. Cezar knew why that was; Dimi was sensitive and, as arduous as they were in having one another, that was still something he felt. It was yet another proof that Dimi had never done anything of the kind before with anyone.

He stood up, licking his lips and stole a kiss from Dimi. Unlike the first time, Dimi licked his lips. Cezar would not press it, as he had an inkling his naughty lover would eventually return the favor, his curiosity and taste for his own seed growing with each day.

Dimi looked down at his feet, moving his toes as if he was curious about something. "You like coming on my feet," he said.

Cezar laughed. "I do."

"And on my belly," Dimi added, rubbing his taut abdomen muscles, "and on my tits, and on my back."

"You're just so good and beautiful everywhere; I cannot help it."

Dimi snickered. "I like it best when it's inside you. You're like my woman."

Cezar pretended to pout. "I'm not your woman, what could you be thinking?"

"You're right." Dimi leaned toward him and gave him a breathtaking kiss. "You're my man."

“Get ready for tomorrow. You can take your horse, or we could ride on mine,” Cezar said.

“What would people say if they saw me riding behind you?” Dimi asked as if there was no other alternative that has just been presented.

“We’ll take a path less traveled that I know. And you’ll get down before we reach the town.”

Dimi nodded.

“One thing, though,” Cezar said. “You won’t be riding behind me. I’ll keep you in front.”

At that, Dimi snickered. “You just want to rub your cock against my bottom.”

“Actually, I just wanted to let you take the reins for a while.”

A puzzled look from Dimi was the answer. “Why?”

“So I could freely rub my cock against your bottom, obviously,” Cezar joked.

Dimi’s silvery laugh was all he wanted to hear. With it, hope for the future was growing inside him. Maybe it was possible to love and be loved back and escape a life he didn’t want.

“Let’s stop here,” Dimi said, and gently nudged the horse to stop.

“Do you need to relieve yourself?” Cezar asked.

Dimi jumped down and placed one hand on Cezar’s thigh, enjoying the hard and supple muscles he could feel through the fabric. It wasn’t fair that Cezar had to be so clothed all the time. When they were alone, they were too busy fucking for Dimi to admire his handsome lover in all his beauty.

Cezar didn’t ask anything and dismounted, following him without a word. Dimi took a look around, but it seemed like no one would happen upon them in that wilderness. He tied the horse to a tree and turned toward Cezar.

How could he voice what he wanted? Cezar was ready to give up on his fiancée for him. And Dimi felt like he wanted to show Cezar how that made him feel. For weeks, they had made love to each other like they were all alone in the world, with the hunger and fear that it would all come to an end.

But it didn’t have to be that way. It could be forever. Dimi knew what the old fortuneteller told him and the slight feeling of fear at her words still returned.

How could he be fearful when all that he wanted was right in front of him? He took Cezar’s hand and pushed him with his back against a tree.

It was shameful for a gypsy to kneel in front of another, be him king of the world. No one could see him there, as he slid down at Cezar's feet and began fiddling with the front of his pants. Cezar said nothing, and Dimi just stole a look up to see him with his eyes closed and his beautiful arched lips set in a straight line.

Dimi took his lover's cock out and played with it in his hand. Cezar was hard; he had been like that ever since Dimi had climbed in front of him, and shamelessly rubbed his buttocks against his crotch.

He had said nothing, though, just burying his lips into the crook of Dimi's shoulder, kissing his skin there and whispering sweet words.

He had tasted his seed from Cezar's lips before. That strange flavor had awakened new desires in him, making him curious about how Cezar's was like.

Sticking out his tongue, he gave the hard cock in front of him a quick lick. It wasn't unpleasant. It was something Dimi wanted to taste more. He carefully placed his lips around the shaft, recalling how Cezar did it to him while he drowned in pleasure.

Cezar gasped, and his cock twitched, taking Dimi by surprise. He moved so that the engorged head didn't slide from his mouth. He could sense he was clumsy as he moved his head to and fro, making a tunnel with his lips and the inside of his mouth.

"Oh, Dimi, your mouth is making me crazy," Cezar whispered. "Do you like sucking my cock?"

Something of how Cezar said those words were making him feel goosebumps everywhere. He helped himself with one hand, wanting more control of the situation. In the meantime, he inhaled Cezar's musky scent. Cezar was always clean, always perfect to the last hair on his head, but he was still a man, and Dimi felt deep satisfaction at the thought that he was the only one so close to him. No one else could have him; Dimi couldn't allow it.

"Dimi, I'm going to come," Cezar warned, trying to pull himself away.

He wouldn't have it. If Cezar enjoyed it so much, he would enjoy it, too. He clamped his lips hard on the hard cock now twitching amply in his mouth. The sensation of warm cum on his tongue was strange and new, but he began drinking it, as more and more came out of Cezar's cock.

There was a bit of dizziness washing over him as he stood up. He smiled sheepishly at Cezar who took him and kissed him, mixing their spit and his cum into their mouths.

Cezar turned him around, making him stand with his back flush to him, and fumbled with his crotch.

Dimi whimpered as Cezar began moving his hand over his cock. He was bucking his hips into that strong hand, giving him so much pleasure.

“I love you, Dimi,” Cezar whispered, kissing his ear. “Do you have any idea what you’re doing to me? I love you like a mad man.”

Dimi bucked a few more times into his lover’s hand, his cum shooting hard and fast. Cezar kept him close and cradled him into his arms for a little while.

“I will tell Marcela I cannot marry her. I’ll put some money aside, and come fall, I’ll ride with you. God knows I lost my mind, but I don’t care. All I care is to make you mine, forever. Do you want me, too, Dimi?”

Cezar turned him so that they could face each other now. Dimi looked at him. “The fortuneteller told me my love would come to ride with me on a long journey. Come with me, Cezar, and I’ll know you’re the one.”

“So you trust an old woman’s words over what I tell you?” Cezar asked. “Fine. Since I love you, I suppose I can accept all your superstitions, too.”

“Superstitions?” Dimi asked. He had heard the word from Cezar before.

“When you believe in something that has no reasonable explanation, such as someone telling you your future.”

“She has the gift,” Dimi insisted. “And didn’t she tell you about you and me and a long journey, too?”

Cezar shrugged. “It must be one of her preferred make-believes. And she uses how many cards to tell your future? Twenty-eight, right? Provided that she didn’t want to tell us both the same lie, it could be just a coincidence.”

“I don’t know,” Dimi replied, to prove that he was miffed over not understanding all that Cezar was saying.

Cezar gathered him in his arms and then whispered playfully into his ear. “Cocksucker.”

Dimi pushed his elbow into his lover’s ribs and blushed.

“Ouch,” Cezar complained. “I’ll take it back. You’re not a cocksucker.”

Dimi turned to face him. “So you didn’t like it?”

“You’re joking, right? Of course I liked it. You know a bit too well how to suck a cock.”

He could tell Cezar was teasing him. So he sank his fingers into Cezar's flanks, tickling him. That had the desired effect. In a few moments, he was begging to be spared.

"Will she say 'yes'?" Dimi asked as they were back on their way. "When you tell her that you don't want to marry her?"

"She will. She's a good woman."

Dimi grabbed Cezar's hand and sank his teeth in it.

"Dimi!" Cezar exclaimed and pulled his hand free.

"Don't say she's a good woman."

"Not good enough to have her as my wife. Oh, are you jealous?" Cezar asked, satisfaction evident in his voice.

"I'm not," Dimi said and set his chin high. "Do you want the reins?"

"No. It looks like my jealous lover has just injured me."

"I'm not jealous!" Dimi protested again, and Cezar turned his head to shut him up with a kiss.

Chapter Nine

Dimi was in awe with everything he saw. Cezar had explained to him that during that month, the merchants would come on Sundays to sell their merchandise. There were fine clothes like he had never seen in his life and porcelain plates that looked like they would break if he did as much as look at them for too long.

But it wasn't that what Cezar told him he would be most impressed with. When they reached the place where horses were being sold, Dimi couldn't keep from shouting in wonder. There were horses of all colors, some big and strong, others with delicate ankles, made for running, beautiful mares with large hips, and young colts, not yet broken in.

The merchants were praising their merchandise to onlookers, and the most beautiful horses were then paraded in the large enclosure nearby where they could be made to show their skills and rise on their hind legs, to impress the possible buyers.

There were so many horses that Dimi didn't know where to look first. He hung on the railing, half leaning inside.

A black stallion with a long mane was brought in, and this time, Dimi almost fell from the railing. He was the most beautiful beast Dimi had ever seen in his life. The hooves were digging impatiently into the ground, as the merchant was shouting something Dimi didn't care to listen. That stallion wanted to be free to roam, just like him.

There were stories of beasts bound in heaven to their riders. If there was one written in the sky for him, that had to be that stallion. He just knew it. Dimi could feel his fingers twitching as he held to the railing. He wanted nothing more than to jump over the fence and mount that stallion. Oh, what a world Dimi could show him! He would be free like birds in the sky!

"*Shukar*," he whispered, his eyes seeing nothing but that fantastic beast paraded around for anyone to see him.

"So you think the same of me and an Arabian purebred," Cezar said, as he leaned against the railing. "Should I feel insulted or flattered?"

Dimi took his eyes from the stallion with much regret. "I almost like you the same," he teased.

There was nothing he was prouder of than having Cezar's love. But Dimi could not bring himself to say the words, too. He knew that Cezar waited for him to declare his love, but Dimi didn't want to tempt his fate. In his heart, the truth was at home. But Cezar had to come with him on that long journey the old fortuneteller told him about. Until then, he couldn't be sure.

He wanted Cezar to be the one, even if the ominous words of the fortuneteller stayed with him.

“Now I definitely take offense,” Cezar joked. “Let’s go, Dimi. There are many other things to see. Are you hungry? It’s almost noon.”

“Cezar, that stallion,” Dimi pointed at the beautiful beast, “how much is he? And what’s his name?”

Cezar made a small gesture for the merchant to come near, and the man immediately started to praise his merchandise. Dimi recognized in the merchant’s words the way any gypsy with something to sell used to convince a buyer of how a good deal they were getting.

Now, Dimi was pretty sure the merchant wasn’t praising his merchandise for nothing. He remained silent, not wanting to give himself and Cezar away in front of strangers. Cezar eventually leaned in, and the merchant whispered something in his ear. His eyebrows shot up in surprise, and Dimi sighed. That stallion had to cost a fortune.

“Well, you certainly have great taste in horses,” Cezar commented as he came to stand by him again. “His name is Habib. It means Beloved,” he added.

“Beloved,” Dimi said with reverence and sighed. “And how much is he?”

He made a face as Cezar told him the price. “Can’t I just steal him?” he whispered so that no one could hear him.

“No, you cannot,” Cezar said sternly.

Dimi sighed. “You buy him then. And let me ride him, too.”

Cezar would be the only man he would ever truly share a horse with. His dad no longer rode Marica except when needed, ever since Dimi had laid claim on her. She was just good enough to pull the caravan now and old, but she was his.

“I certainly don’t have that much money on me,” Cezar replied.

“Aren’t you rich?” Dimi questioned.

“My father is rich,” Cezar corrected him. “I only have an allowance.”

“What’s that?”

“Money I could spend right now on some cold beers and hot steaks,” Cezar replied with a small smile.

Dimi rubbed his belly. They had been gone since daylight. “Could your father buy Habib?” he asked.

“My father hasn’t been in a saddle once in twenty years,” Cezar said. “And he finds the expense rather useless. The only horses he keeps are the ones you know.”

“Maybe he can’t buy more because he doesn’t have money,” Dimi said.

Cezar laughed. “My father is wealthy. He’s just not crazy about horses.”

Dimi shook his head. “That’s why he wants you married to that woman.” He would never say her name. For him, she wasn’t real, except in that big fancy house of hers, where he had gone once to sing. “She has many more horses.”

“And the fact that you know that troubles me a lot, still,” Cezar said, throwing him a look like his mother when he did something bad.

Dimi had no regrets over stealing those horses. His parents now had plenty of money to take them through the winter, no matter where they went, and how few of his dad’s pipes and his mother’s baskets they could sell along the way.

“After we eat, can we come back to see Habib again?” he asked, as he rushed after Cezar.

“Your heart is really set on that horse,” Cezar said.

Dimi pressed his hands against his chest. “He is my heart’s true desire.”

“Again, I’m falling out of your favor because of a horse,” Cezar replied with a heartfelt sigh.

He couldn’t touch Cezar there, where people could see them. “You’re not; you’re always in my heart,” he mumbled, his eyes darting around. To anyone looking, they were just a rich man and his hired servant.

His dad’s words came to his mind. There was a world between them, but Dimi knew it wouldn’t be once Cezar left his world for good and joined him on the long journey the fortuneteller told him about.

“Did you say something?” Cezar asked.

Dimi shook his head. He sat gingerly on the wooden bench, as Cezar told him. He felt shy all of a sudden, surrounded by all those men and women in good clothes. But he could not have left home in his good clothes or his dad would have known he was up to no good.

They ate in silence, Dimi stealing glances at Cezar and trying to imitate his elegant way of cutting his steak using a fork and a knife. Maybe he didn’t have to learn about all that, but he didn’t want Cezar to be ashamed with him.

“Do you think the merchant would sell Habib fast?” he asked as soon as they were on their way again.

“At that price? The local gentry are well-off, but that’s not the kind of money just anyone could throw on some horse.”

“Some horse?” Dimi felt upset Cezar couldn’t see Habib for the beauty he was. “Have you seen his ankles? Or his head? Or his eyes? That horse is so clever he could know fancy words like you if he talked.”

Cezar laughed. “I see that I must apologize to you for insulting your Beloved.”

Dimi pretended he didn’t hear. He was too absorbed with climbing the railing and looking at where the merchant that had Habib kept his animals.

As much as Cezar wanted to chide Dimi over choosing to stare at that horse for half a day, he couldn’t bring himself to do so. Dimi was so happy, taking everything in with the eyes of a child. It was clear that he hadn’t been to many such fairs.

“The merchant will be here the following Sunday, too,” Cezar said. “If I’m back by then, we can come again,” he promised.

“Can we?” Dimi half turned.

Cezar was about to give his lover reassurance when someone patted him on the back.

“If it’s not Cozman, call me a fool!”

Cezar took a look at the stranger and started to laugh. “You’re a fool anyway, Cazimir! What brings you to our humble corner of the world? I thought you must still be studying! Racine has finally fallen out of your favor?”

They shook hands like old friends. If there had been someone with whom he had shared most of his sleepless nights when they were both students, that had to be Cazimir.

“You know the nose I have for money. I’m following its trail anywhere. And it’s still vacation time even for the most arduous students, such as I. Did I hear well? Are you settling down this fall? The woman to accept you and your horrible personality,” his friend teased him, “must be an angel. Does she have a sister who would accept an inveterate gambler as her lawfully wedded husband? And, of course, I must ask. Is she beautiful or rich?”

Cezar smiled thinly. “Would you kill me if I told you she’s both?”

There was no point in telling Cazimir about his plans. As close friends as they were, that was not something he could share, even if Cazimir knew a bit about his actual preferences in bed warmers. He had been, until his aunt Cezara learned about his inclinations, the only person close

to him to know that, too, and, gracious as he was, he had never commented on it either way. It had been a sort of tacit understanding that neither of them wanted to talk about.

“Yes, I would definitely kill you. In a fair fight, mind you, provided that I can take your place and marry this beautiful angel with coffers full of gold coins.”

“What were you saying about following some money trail?” Cezar asked, eager to steer the discussion away from Marcela and his presumptive wedding to her.

“It appears that there are individuals here eager to part with their hard-earned or not so hard-earned money. After seven, when everyone around is bound to be half asleep or at least half-drunk, at Toma’s, round the corner,” Cazimir pointed at their left, “there will be a fight to empty pockets in a sport that has us both as its arduous adepts and, dare I say, even champions.”

Cezar was suddenly interested in making more than just conversation with an old colleague. “Admission?” he asked directly.

Cazimir looked him up and down. “I’d say your half-decent clothes recommend you. I am just joking. You already look like a country squire. Where is your sense of style, man?” Cazimir pretended to be disgusted with his attire while taking out a silk handkerchief and wiping his forehead. “Just say we’re friends at the door. They won’t have an issue with letting you in. Just to make it clear. I take the tables on the left. You have the ones on the right all to yourself.”

“Deal,” Cezar said and shook his friend’s hand.

Dimi seemed too absorbed with admiring the horses to be interested in the conversation he had just had with his friend. Cezar felt a bit relieved. After all, Dimi would quickly take to heart if he heard him talking about Marcela, even to a stranger. Dimi hadn’t said directly that he loved him back, but for someone with little to call his own, he had a thorough sense of ownership when it came to Cezar.

And for now, he was willing to take that as a response to his affection.

“Where do we go now?” Dimi asked, keeping after Cezar with some difficulty since he tended to let himself drawn to the various stands selling merchandise even at that late hour.

“Somewhere we could make some magic work in our favor,” Cezar explained.

Dimi cocked his head and stared at his lover. Was Cezar making fun of him because he believed in fortunetelling? “What magic?” he asked.

“The kind that could turn this,” Cezar shook his coin purse, “into ten of these.”

Dimi’s eyes grew wide and hurried to fall in pace with Cezar, now. “What magic is that?”

Cezar smiled. It was a mysterious smile, and Dimi now wanted to know more about that strange magic that could spawn coins like mushrooms after rain.

“You’ll see,” Cezar said.

They were on the doorsteps of a tavern that looked like it was the kind of place where rich people came to eat and drink until they had their bellies full. It wasn’t like the tavern where he had had lunch with Cezar earlier.

Dimi shifted from one foot to another, stopping behind Cezar. He took a mournful look at his dusty clothes and regretted again that he hadn’t thought better of sneaking out in his good clothes that morning.

“I’m friends with Cazimir,” Cezar said to one massive ugly man who seemed to stand in the door like a guard dog.

Dimi had a deep fear of dogs, but he feared that man more the moment he took a look at him. The guard dog has small, beady eyes, covered by flappy eyelids. His nostrils were flaring as if he could sniff any wrongdoers.

“Dimi, come,” Cezar called shortly for him.

He followed quickly, trying to avoid staring at that ugly man.

“Him. No,” the guard said, pointing at Dimi.

“He’s with me,” Cezar said in a courteous voice.

“He is dressed like a beggar.”

Cezar stole a quick look at him, and Dimi made himself little. If anyone wanted to make him feel bad, how different he was from his lover, they could only say something about his clothes.

“And what importance does that have?” Cezar questioned. “And I have already told you. He’s with me. Or do you have something to say about my clothes, too?”

“No, sir,” the guard dog cowered. “So is he yours? They’re no longer slaves, or so I hear.”

“Yes, they’re no longer slaves. For decades now,” Cezar said thinly, “but he’s mine.”

Dimi stared at Cezar, sensing the restlessness and growing anger in him. He sometimes got like that, and Dimi felt something between awe and a bit of envy. Cezar was strong; that was what he thought. He didn’t have to put his fists up or get into a scuffle. He just had to say a few words, not even loudly, and people did what he said.

“Then you can go in. But please explain the situation to the other patrons.”

Cezar nodded shortly and then made a small gesture with his chin for Dimi to follow.

Once inside, Dimi stopped. There were thick carpets on the floor, and men dressed up in even richer clothes than Cezar were seated at tables made from lacquered wood, with glasses filled with amber liquid in front of them, speaking quietly, while from their pipes, silver-bluish smoke floated toward the high ceiling.

No wonder the guard dog didn't want him inside. But that was no reason for Dimi to feel out of place. They were all people, with two legs, and two arms. He set his chin high and sauntered after Cezar.

His lover stopped by a table, and some overdressed young man stood up to welcome him, shaking his hand and patting him on the back. He seemed to be an old acquaintance, by what Dimi could tell from the words they said each other.

This one was so nicely dressed, Dimi wanted to go near and touch the frilly lace coming out from the hem of his sleeves.

"And what's this apparition?" Cezar's friend asked, putting his pipe into his mouth, and measuring Dimi up and down through the wall of blue smoke.

"He's my lucky charm," Cezar said in a playful voice.

"A gypsy slave? How decadent of you, Cozman. And terribly backwards! Haven't your abroad studies taught you anything? And I thought life in the countryside had to be boring. Of course, I'd rather have a beautiful young woman as a slave to bring me my slippers at night and tuck me into bed."

Cezar threw him a brief look, and Dimi could read shame in his eyes. "He's not a --"

"I'm his," Dimi said quickly. "He's my master."

Cezar's friend threw him an amused look and shrugged.

His parents would kill him if they heard him talk like that. Not that they ever hurt him, but they still remembered how it was to be a slave. Dimi had been taken in, as an orphan, by a free family, so it was like he was born a free gypsy if he thought about it.

But this was Cezar's world, with its strange laws. And if that was the only thing it took for Cezar to turn gold into more gold, he didn't mind it.

"Then let me take you and your lucky charm to the place where you will either prove you didn't forget everything I taught you, or that you have succumbed indeed to being nothing but a country man," Cezar's friend said.

They followed him to another table, where he introduced Cezar as a dear old friend. Dimi placed himself behind Cezar's chair and watched with eager eyes at the cards being split between the men at the table.

"And how is it going?" Cazimir asked, eyeing the mounds of coins in front of Cezar.

"As you can see," Cezar replied.

Dimi was so curious to examine Cazimir from up close. He hadn't been so much around rich people, not so close to breathe their air, for sure.

"Your lucky charm surely likes to stare at me," Cazimir said and half-turned toward Dimi. "What does he like to drink?"

"Ask him yourself. He's not a dog. His name is Dimi," Cezar replied, "in case you couldn't be bothered to ask him that."

"All right," Cazimir said. "What do you like to drink, Dimi?"

"Anything," Dimi replied with enthusiasm.

"A man to my liking," Cazimir laughed and took him by the shoulders.

"That's a wrong answer to give someone like Cazimir," Cezar warned. "He is known to have the stomach of a pig when it comes to both eating and drinking."

Cazimir roared and didn't let go of Dimi's shoulders. "Can I borrow your lucky charm, Cozman? It seems that my luck needs a bit of a boost. I promise to keep him well fed and pour into him as much alcohol as he can stand."

"That's hardly a thought I want to live with," Cezar said. "Ask him if he wants to go with you. I'm not keeping him on a leash. But, Dimi, be sure not to drink everything Cazimir pours into your glass. He has the bad habit of trying to get people drunk just for the sake of examining their changes in personality."

"You give me too much credit, old friend," Cazimir said. "What do you say, Dimi? Would you come and change my luck, too?"

"Can I, Cezar?" Dimi asked, feeling shy over being addressed so directly by a man in such fancy clothes.

"Of course. And you don't have to ask for my permission. Just heed my warning about drinking too much. It's also Cazimir's favorite way to steal people's secrets."

“You two are talking like a husband and his wife. What sort of master-slave relationship do you two have?”

“You’re such a damned fool, Cazimir,” Cezar said as he counted the money on the table, splitting them into smaller columns of shiny metal. “I tried to tell you he’s not my slave.”

“But he said he’s yours,” Cazimir pointed out.

Dimi could feel the other’s sharp eyes on him.

Cezar remained silent, pretending to be preoccupied with the treasure in front of him.

“Oh, I understand,” Cazimir said with a sly smile.

Dimi searched the young man’s face. What could he want to say by that? Without another word to Cezar, Cazimir dragged him along. “What I’m going to tell you, dear Dimi, is better to remain between us. Until this moment, I haven’t won a dime, and it appears that Lady Luck wants to be a harsh mistress tonight.”

Dimi was impressed with Cazimir’s fancy way of talking. Even Cezar talked slightly different when with him.

“So what I want from you,” Cazimir said, “is to go tip-toe around the table and whisper in my ear what cards my opponents hold dear to their hearts.”

“You want to cheat?” Dimi asked in wonder. And people said only gypsies were thieves.

“Bluntly put, yes. Would you like to help me? Or Cezar doesn’t let you?”

Dimi shrugged. “What do you give me if I help you?”

“For every nine coins I make, you’ll get one.”

“For eight of yours, I get two,” Dimi said quickly.

Cazimir laughed and patted his back. “I like you, Dimi. Deal. Now, we need a bit of pretense so that you don’t appear to anyone as a threat. Can you pretend to be dim-witted?”

Dimi stared at him, not understanding.

“As if you’re slow.” Cazimir pointed at his head.

Dimi grinned. He threw one last look at Cezar’s back. The truth was he had gotten a little bored to watch Cezar win. What Cazimir was saying sounded like a good idea for him to make some money, too.

Cezar turned in his chair to look for Dimi with his eyes. Apparently, there was some ruckus around Cazimir's table. His friend seemed to be on a roll. He was about to turn back and gather his winnings when he saw Dimi.

Cezar frowned as he observed Dimi sneaking about. Most people were ignoring him, and those who didn't were turning away with something akin to disgust. Dimi was moving oddly, shaking his head.

For a while, Cezar just looked at him. Then, it dawned on him. Damned Cazimir and his games. It was time to call it a night. He gathered the coins from the table, using a larger pouch he had asked the innkeeper to bring him and was about to get up when Dimi passed quickly by him, followed by Cazimir.

"Time for all of us to leave this honorable establishment," Cazimir whispered at him.

Surprised, Cezar turned and saw a few patrons eyeing them curiously. Without a word, he followed.

"Hey, wait a minute," he heard someone shouting. "He put that gypsy to sneak around and look at our cards!"

"Oh, damn," it was all Cezar could mutter under his breath, as he sauntered after the two scoundrels that were now making the entire place get up in a flurry.

He pushed his friend and Dimi through the front door, and then pulled them both after him. Cezar knew the area like the back of his hand, and those out-of-towners would be lucky to catch them once he managed to turn a corner.

There was a scandalized group following them, but Cezar managed to push the other two in a dark corner. "Silence," he ordered in a strained voice.

The shouting men passed by them and then lost themselves in the dark. Cazimir and Dimi began snickering the moment they seemed to be safe.

"You damned fools!" Cezar turned toward them. "Cazimir, how could you get Dimi to do your dirty work for you? And you, Dimi, are you out of your mind?"

"We made a lot of money," Dimi said with confidence. "For every eight coins Cazimir made, two are mine."

"Quite a fair deal," Cazimir commented.

"Make that half, and be thankful I'm not beating the crap out of you," Cezar said.

"Half?!" both Cazimir and Dimi exclaimed at the same time.

“I’ll make it one third, but don’t push a drowning man,” Cazimir warned.

“What drowning man?” Cezar asked, in an irritated voice.

“I was that, until your lover saved me from my predicament,” Cazimir said gallantly.

Cezar stopped.

Dimi made a small surprised sound. “I didn’t tell him anything, Cezar, I swear.”

“Oh, Dimi, you didn’t have to,” Cazimir said. “I knew it from the moment you two walked into the place. Cezar never behaves so riskily unless he’s in love. Otherwise, he’s cold as a fish.”

“Cazimir, you talk too damned much,” Cezar said through his teeth.

“Of course. I think I took you two gentlemen too much of your evening already.”

“Stop it right there. First, give Dimi his money.”

Cazimir was a big joker and often tried to get away with things, and was never upset if he didn’t. They walked back to one of the taverns on the main street, and Cazimir judiciously split the money.

Dimi took them, and Cezar helped him put everything in the coin purse he had initially brought with him.

“And now I truly need to bid you farewell. Dimi, it’s been a pleasure to have you as a business partner. I hope we could do that again. Cozman, don’t be a total stranger once you’re married.”

Cezar didn’t comment on that, aware of Dimi’s beautiful eyes set on him.

“Are you still getting married to her?” Dimi asked the moment they were out in the street and alone.

“Of course not,” Cezar replied.

“Why does your friend think you are?” Dimi pouted, knowing that he was doing that for nothing since Cezar couldn’t see him in the dark.

“Because I didn’t care to share my plan with him since I was in no particular mood to have him ask me if I’ve gone completely mad.”

Dimi said nothing for a while.

Cezar stopped and took him by his shoulders, pulling him close.

“Did you love someone else before, Cezar?” Dimi asked.

By the short sigh that followed, Dimi’s worst fears got their answer.

“I thought so. But don’t listen to Cazimir. He tends to exaggerate everything.”

“Who was he? Was he beautiful? More beautiful than me?” Dimi began.

Cezar pulled him even closer. “There is no need for you to feel so insecure. The past doesn’t matter. And I’ve never been in love until I met you. I just didn’t know it until then.”

“Did he wear fancy clothes, like Cazimir? Did he know strange words, like you?”

Cezar sighed, this time even more deeply than before. “Here,” he said.

They were now near Cezar’s horse. Dimi felt Cezar’s hand on his and then something heavy. “Is this all you won tonight?” he asked.

“Yes. I was hoping to make you a surprise, but I suppose I cannot wait to prove you again how much you mean to me. Next Sunday, with this money, we will come again and buy Habib. For you.”

“Do you really mean it? Is it enough?” Dimi forgot all about being upset about Cezar’s past lovers.

“Along with your part from Cazimir, it’s almost there. I will see what I can do until next Sunday to complete the amount. In the meantime, you can keep it all.”

“Will you come back until next Sunday?”

“Once I manage to have some time alone with Marcela and tell her about calling off the wedding, there will be no reason for her to keep me by her side. I hope to be back home even before Friday.”

“Why should you be away for so many days?” Dimi insisted, holding both purses to his chest. “Can’t you talk to her right away?”

“It is a delicate matter. I need to make sure no one else will overhear us. Her sister will watch us like a hawk for the first days, I am sure, but she’s bound to get slack in her chaperone duties eventually. Also, I do not plan to hurt Marcela. I need time to convince her I don’t do this to humiliate her.”

“I don’t care about that,” Dimi said, feeling upset again.

Cezar treated her like she was made of glass. Dimi couldn’t stop hating her. He didn’t think she had a good heart like Cezar said. He just knew it.

“You’re mumbling to yourself,” Cezar said. “What more should I do to convince you that I love you?”

“Come back by Sunday.”

“I will,” Cezar said tenderly. “We’ll come here and buy Habib, and you’ll have your beautiful stallion.”

Dimi’s upset melted a little at that. “What if you don’t come? Can I buy him?”

“On your own? No, Dimi. There’s still a bit of money needed to pay the full price.”

“I could haggle,” Dimi said. “I know how.”

“Dimi, no. I have to be present. As much as I love you, I know that the merchant won’t want to deal with you alone.”

“Even if I have money?” Dimi asked.

“Yes, even if you have money,” Cezar said with a sigh.

Dimi said nothing. He was no beautiful stranger from lands far away, and he didn’t wear fancy clothes.

“Hey,” Cezar said softly and cupped his cheek. “I love you more than anything, Dimi. I will leave everything I have and know behind so that I can be with you. Isn’t it enough?”

Dimi turned and kissed him. Cezar stopped him, took the purses from his hands, and put them inside the bag hanging on the saddle. Then he embraced him, deepening their kiss.

They ended up there, on the bare ground, and Cezar took him gently, so gently that it only hurt inside his soul, not in his body. Dimi wrapped his legs around him, moving with him, enjoying Cezar’s hot cock inside his ass, touching him over and over again in that spot that made him lose his mind with pleasure.

Cezar remained inside him, even as he was going soft, kissing his face over and over again, whispering how much he loved him. Dimi couldn’t ask for more. If only the next Sunday weren’t so far away.

Chapter Ten

Cezar crossed his fingers, looking at the steaming cup of tea in front of him as if it could give him the right answers. He could not believe it was Thursday already, and Tamara still appeared to be as relentless in her chaperone duties as on the first day. That meant that he needed to do something apparently reckless and that without the risk of being misunderstood.

Marcela was exceptionally cheerful, and her happiness was getting a tad on his nerves. They had seen people almost for each breakfast, lunch, and dinner they had there, and that meant no opportunities for him to have her all alone so that he could talk to her about what weighed heavily on his heart.

That night, he would do the unthinkable and knock on the door of a woman to whom he wasn't married and had no intention to be.

He opened a book and began reading, but the words were dancing on the page, making no sense at all. Maybe his mother was right in a way, and Dimi had cast a spell on him. Cezar felt so restless, and it couldn't be for lack of physical activity. God knew vacationers who cared about having him, Marcela, and her sister, over for all kinds of things, appeared to have no shortage of ideas when it came to entertaining.

At least, he could ride, as even there, Marcela's family had plenty of horses, and that had helped him feel less like forced inside a jail cell. That was a good example of how his life married to Marcela would have looked like. Even without Dimi as the owner of his heart, he would have found that way of life terribly irritating.

As much as he had enjoyed his adventures as a feckless student abroad, it was in solitude that he most found his true self. Now, his preferred isolation allowed another one, but Dimi was so close to him, so much inside him, in all possible ways, that Cezar thought that they had to be like one, two halves of the same whole, as poets said.

He was about to close his book and make a daring attempt to wake up Marcela when the sound of the door to the library opening made him turn.

His eyes grew wide as he took in his fiancée. She was wearing what could only be described as an enticing nightgown, with intricate lace bordering the bodice, and waves of translucence wrapping her body down to her feet, comfortably covered by matching slippers. She had let her hair down, and there was something in her eyes that told Cezar he wasn't the one who wanted for them to be alone, even if it had to be for a completely different reason.

"I thought you would be here. I saw the light from under the door," Marcela said, throwing him a look full of promises.

“I am a bit too used to going to sleep late,” Cezar explained. “A good book is a boring book, I should say.”

Marcela giggled and walked over, placing herself on the chair opposite from him and putting her legs under her, after getting rid of the sleepers. “Isn’t this trip fun? We’ve seen so many people,” she began.

“If one prefers company, I suppose it can be fun,” Cezar said, feeling guarded in her presence now.

“Everyone likes you,” Marcela said, playing slowly with the lace bordering her bosom. “They believe I am so lucky.”

Cezar looked away for a second. He needed to start talking. Who knew when such an opportunity would appear? He should have been gone already.

“Yet, you are so far away,” Marcela added, her voice becoming softer. “Your eyes search for something and stop at nothing.”

“Marcela,” Cezar started, “I must beg your forgiveness --”

“That’s not what I want to hear from you,” she interrupted him sharply.

“I’m afraid I won’t be able to tell you what you want to hear,” Cezar said right away.

Marcela quirked her eyebrows. “You can’t possibly know what I meant by that.”

“I have my suspicions,” Cezar replied. “Let me --”

“And I have my suspicions, too. No, more like certainties,” she said.

Cezar remained silent for a second. Marcela appeared to be restless, too, and not at all the wise girl his father and her parents thought her to be. “What could those certainties be?” he asked, in a cold voice.

“You don’t love me,” Marcela said promptly.

“You are correct,” Cezar said and looked straight at her.

She wavered under his gaze, but only for a second. “I heard about your mistress. I heard she’s very beautiful.”

“You shouldn’t listen to such gossip. It’s beneath you,” Cezar said.

“And yet, it is true. You must think that I’m just a silly country girl who doesn’t know anything. But I do know. I know about how men have needs --”

“It is not about such a thing.” It was his turn to cut her words short. That conversation was going from bad to worse.

“Then what is it about?” Marcela asked, blinking hard, in an effort to control herself.

“It is about the simple fact that in these so-called emancipated times we’re living, two people who don’t love each other shouldn’t marry just for the sake of their families.”

“Two people who don’t love each other?” Marcela said slowly.

“Yes, that is exactly what I said. I must apologize for letting this drag for so long. I should have nipped it in the bud. Then I would not have had to hurt you now. Anything you might want to tell those asking, I am completely fine with it. I am, after all, known for having a certain reputation. No one would dare to condemn you.”

Marcela’s lips curled in a grin. “And for what should they condemn me?”

“For your decision not to marry me, of course,” Cezar said.

There was something deep and wild in Marcela’s eyes, and, for a second, Cezar wondered if he truly knew her.

“I have no intention to give up on marrying you,” she said with conviction.

Cezar remained speechless for a few seconds. “Why?” he eventually asked.

“You can have your gypsy girl for now,” Marcela waved. “Of course, once we’re married, I won’t allow such escapades.”

“We are not getting married,” Cezar said slowly, to make sure she understood him.

“Yes, we are, my dear,” she said.

“I wanted to be a gentleman and let you the opportunity to call off the wedding on the grounds that you could not stand a boorish man like me to be your husband. But I see that I must be the one to call it off. And then there will be gossip and surely not the kind that would be to yours or your parents’ liking. Not that I would say anything. It’s just the way people think, as you well know.”

Marcela suddenly started laughing, in a high-pitched, hysterical way, that made Cezar feel a slight frisson coursing down his back. What could be wrong with that woman, now?

“I’ve always wanted you, Cezar,” she finally said, when the last bouts of laugh finally let her breathe. “Why do you think I remained unmarried for so long?”

“What could you possibly see in me?” he asked, now perplexed by her words. “And save for when we were children, we barely saw each other after we grew up.”

“To much of my chagrin,” she replied. “Oh, how I waited every summer for you to come home. And are you asking me what I see in you? You’re a man, a real man, Cezar. Any woman who’s not a sour dried grape like my sister would want you. That’s why your gypsy mistress wants you, too.”

It should have been Cezar’s turn to burst into a fit of hysterical laughter, but there was sudden, unnatural calmness inside him. “I am a gambler and a womanizer. How could that be the description of, as you say, a ‘real man’?”

Marcela waved like he was dim-witted and couldn’t understand her words. “You are the kind of man who takes what he wants, Cezar. Even your affairs prove that. And that is what I want. No one else would do it for me.”

If he had been a man to take what he wanted, he would not have been in that situation, Cezar thought grimly. Marcela was seeing him with the eyes of a girl who thought of him as some rebellious blackguard that only needed a soft hand to caress him and help him see the error of his ways.

“I thought you to be much cleverer than to see me in such a romantic light,” he added. “I wanted to tell you, in the most delicate way I am capable of, that the wedding is off. I see that you beat me to it and put all the cards on the table, so it is my responsibility now to do so. I will tell everyone that you’re not to blame in any way and that everything is my fault. If they speak ill of you, it will not be my doing.”

With that, he stood up. He needed to be away from her. Never before had he felt such a thing in her presence, but right now, he wanted nothing else but to be in another room as soon as possible.

Marcela stood up and came in front of him. “The wedding is not off!”

Cezar stopped. Marcela walked toward him, but he didn’t step back. She looked small and vulnerable, in her lace nightgown, but Cezar couldn’t help thinking of her as an opponent.

Marcela looked at him daringly. “You don’t have a choice.”

“I do,” Cezar said thinly. “And I will be the man you’re talking about, the kind that takes what he wants, by calling off this damned wedding.”

“You don’t understand, Cezar.” Marcela’s grin appeared almost sinister in the warm light of the room and out of place. “It appears that I must help you put things in perspective. Your father is ruined.”

“What?” Cezar could feel the blood draining from his face. “My father is an obscenely rich man!”

Marcela laughed. “That is what you believe. He managed to hide it well, from you, from your mother. Maybe not so much from your aunt Cezara. She might suspect something, especially since she’s been picking up all the expenses with the Cozman name written all over them, down to the last money owed to your servants or your cook, for the last year or so.”

Cezar could feel a sensation of ill growing inside him. He walked back to the chair and crushed on it. He set one elbow on an arm of the chair, and put his forehead into his palm, looking down. Marcela could lie, but to what end? Her words would just be proven wrong the moment they would be back.

If that were true, why hadn’t his father told him anything?

Marcela moved and sat on the chair across from him again. “I am sorry you had to learn it from me. But gambling might be in your blood, after all, Cezar. Your father just bet on the wrong investments.”

“So, your parents are buying me for you so that my family doesn’t end up poor and dishonored?” he spat.

“That’s such an inelegant way of putting it,” Marcela commented. “I have more money than I know what to do with, Cezar. At least, your gambling some of it away might be entertaining, I suppose.”

His stomach was hurting. “Are you that all right with me ruining you after marriage?”

Marcela laughed. “You could try. But you won’t have access to everything. On the bright side, my dear, your father will be able to minimize his losses. Whether he would ever be rich again or not, it’s solely up to him, as my father says.”

“There must be family that could help him,” Cezar murmured, mostly to himself.

“Except for your aunt, no one’s that rich. But I overheard your father complaining that she has no intention of helping him more than what’s needed to keep up with the appearances.”

“That can’t be true,” Cezar said. “Aunt Cezara loves us.”

“Especially you and your mother, yes. That’s why she keeps you all fed and clothed, and doesn’t mind paying the servants. But there’s an old feud between your father and her that no one mentions except in hushed voices.”

“I will have to talk to my father,” Cezar said in a pained voice. “I can’t marry you, ruin or not.”

Marcela sighed dramatically. "You need me, Cezar. And you might feel right now that marrying me would be the end of your life, but, except for women, I have nothing against you doing as you please. We will have great fun together. You will see."

"Fun?" Cezar asked, bitterness creeping into his voice more and more. "That's the last thing I want."

"Now, now, Cezar," Marcela said in the same voice as before, as if he had only half a brain, "don't be such a sourpuss. What could those women offer you that I cannot? People often say I'm beautiful. And I could dress up to match your taste for Parisian fashion and whatnot."

Cezar stared at her as she was a lunatic. How could he have seen her as more than just a superficial girl who only thought about dresses and socializing with others as shallow as her?

"You cannot give me what I want," he said in a strained voice.

"I could have my father expose yours for the fraud he is," Marcela said cuttingly.

"If that's what he is, maybe he deserves it," Cezar said back.

"Then have you no mercy for your mother? She would suffer, too."

"How can you be so heartless?" Cezar asked. "I know I am to blame for not telling you 'no' from the start, but --"

"Heartless? I'm just like you, my dear," Marcela replied. "I take what I want from life. And I want you, more than anything."

"You're buying me. It's a difference," Cezar said.

Marcela laughed, throwing her head back. "There is no difference. Don't you offer your mistresses lavish gifts so they would take you to their beds? Yes, you are young and handsome, and they might have you without the money, but do you really believe your gypsy mistress doesn't lie, right now, with men of her own kind, probably laughing at you, the rich stranger who showers her dirty feet in gold?"

Cezar could feel anger growing, but it was followed closely by impotence, and he couldn't do anything. He covered his face. "I'm leaving in the morning. I will settle this with my father."

"You won't go anywhere. On Sunday, we'll go home, like a happy couple, and smile for everyone, telling them what a wonderful time we had."

"I wasn't asking for your permission," Cezar said.

"I suppose you'll need a horse to leave, and you haven't brought yours. You'll stay here until Sunday, whether you like it or not."

“Do you plan on keeping me as a prisoner? I could just walk to the nearest post-chaise,” Cezar said.

“Try that. It is the last thing your family needs. Just be reasonable, Cezar. It’s only two days until Sunday. Or do you fear your beautiful mistress has already found herself another rich man by now? It wouldn’t be hard for her, seeing what an easy woman she is.”

Cezar set his jaw hard. He could cause a scandal, and teach his father a lesson, but Marcela was right about one thing. He had no intention to hurt his mother. The scandal will be indoors and will have to wait.

“I will remain here until Sunday. Just let everyone know I’m indisposed. I am in no mood to entertain you and your friends, like a circus monkey,” he said shortly and stood up.

“You’re even more handsome when you pretend to be so determined,” Marcela said with a sigh. “You will come out of your room, eventually. What will you do, brood until Sunday? You’re bound to get bored.”

“If you’re willing to test my limits, I will be sure to rise to expectations and beyond,” Cezar said thinly.

He didn’t care to look at her, not even one last time, as he walked out. How could he be so blind? Small details like his father being late in sending him money a few times, or having to clear up what he believed to be some misunderstanding with payments in the past, now came to him.

No matter what it was, he would learn the truth, even if he had to wait. His heart was growing heavy in his chest. Dimi wouldn’t have his beautiful horse, after all. It was better if they kept that money for when they would be away from all that mess.

Dimi climbed on the highest branch of the tallest tree he could find and stared along the road. It was Sunday already, and Cezar had yet to come back from his trip. The sun was up in the sky, and that meant that there would not be much time left until Habib got sold to someone who wanted him more than Dimi.

But Dimi wanted him; he wanted that stallion with maddening passion. How could Cezar forget his promise so easily? He had said he would be back by Friday.

Dimi jumped down from the tree and headed for their shed. It was there that he kept their money hidden, away from his mom’s nose. He went there, counted everything to the last coin, disappointed each time for still being short of the price Habib’s master wanted.

Maybe Cezar wouldn't come back until Sunday was over, and then it would be too late, Dimi thought. Without another moment of hesitation, he stuffed his pockets with the coin purses and walked out of the shed.

He was still there. The merchant hadn't yet given Habib away. Dimi wanted to dance for joy.

"You, gypsy, get away from here," the merchant shouted at him. "You're scaring honest customers away."

"I'm a customer, too," Dimi said stubbornly.

"You're a customer if you have money to pay for things. You don't have shoes, let alone money to buy a horse," the merchant spat in disgust.

Dimi got closer and put his hands in his pockets. "I have money."

"Stolen money," the merchant said, but his eyes were drawn to the two fat purses.

"You didn't give Habib away. No one can pay for him. I can," Dimi said.

"Habib? What you have there is enough for a colt, at best," the merchant said, his eyes never leaving the money.

Dimi shook the purses, to make the coins clink seductively.

"You could just have stones and who knows what in there," the merchant said.

Dimi put one purse back into his pocket and opened the other so that the merchant could see the silver and gold coins.

"Hmm," the merchant said.

Dimi could tell he was considering it. He was a fat greedy bastard and wanted that money. "How come nobody bought Habib?"

"Habib is a noble horse. Not just anyone could ride it," the merchant said with disdain.

"If I can ride him, will you give him to me? I'll give you all this money," Dimi promised.

"You give me the money first," the merchant asked greedily.

He was moving his fat fingers fast as if he could barely wait to put his hands on Dimi's treasure.

"No," Dimi said and shook his head. "You'll just take my money and won't let me ride him."

"I tell you what. Let's see how much you have."

Dimi walked with the merchant to a nearby wooden table and poured the coins on the shiny surface. The merchant began splitting them and counting fast, and Dimi worried that he might make a few coins disappear if he wasn't careful enough.

"No. Not enough." The merchant shook his head.

Dimi had a mind to beg, but he doubted that fat bastard would have listened to him anyway. He touched the cross he wore around his neck and took it out. Then he placed it on top of the mountain of coins. "This one cost a lot," he said.

The merchant took the cross and stared at it with indifferent eyes.

"It has that," Dimi pointed out. "It's from the Holy Cross."

"Useless," the merchant said, but he wasn't leaving it from his greasy hands.

"If I ride Habib, and he throws me, you can have everything," Dimi promised.

The merchant seemed pleased with that. "But you don't come crying after that I took your money."

"No," Dimi shook his head, "I swear. But if he doesn't throw me, he's mine."

The merchant was no longer as pleased. "Fine. I'll have a laugh watching you get thrown into the dirt and leave here with your tail between your legs."

"I won't," Dimi said, sure of himself.

"Then try. Better men than you were thrown by that horse. Habib is fit for kings, not beggars like you," the merchant taunted him. "And I won't give you a saddle. You'll soil it with your dirty clothes."

"I don't need a saddle," Dimi said proudly.

Habib snorted as Dimi approached him. He was careful, walking slowly, circling the animal, and letting him move just enough so that he didn't become scared.

"I won't let you dance around him all day," the merchant said.

Dimi paid no attention to the fat bastard, his eyes trained on Habib. He wanted to have all day to get to know him and let Habib know him, too, but there was no time. He came at him obliquely, and put one hand on the elegant muscled neck, cooing words of encouragement.

As someone who had been on the back of a horse before he could walk, Dimi knew how dangerous it could be what he wanted to do. But he prayed silently that Habib would fast

recognize him as his rider. He moved his hand so that he could grab a handful of the horse's beautiful mane and sharply, he pulled himself up, placing the other hand on Habib's back.

The horse neighed, taken by surprise, but Dimi now grabbed him by his mane with both hands and lay flush to him, making sure to squeeze his thighs as much as he could. Habib tried to shake him off a few times, making him laugh and shout.

Habib attempted to free himself a few more times, but it was clear that he wasn't putting as much soul into that as before, probably sensing the freedom that was expecting him behind those gates. Dimi began steering him toward the exit. "He's mine!" he shouted at the merchant, as the fat bastard hurried to move out of the way.

He was so happy his heart could burst. The merchant was cursing at him, but Dimi couldn't care less. He had won Habib fair and square.

He could now let Habib into a trot so that they could both enjoy the coolness of the forest trail. Angry shouts from behind made him turn to stare curiously. Who could be?

Dimi frowned as he was quickly surrounded by riders. "Get down from this horse, you dirty thief!" one of them shouted at him.

"I didn't steal him," Dimi replied. "I bought him!"

"He's the one; he's the thief," someone from behind them called.

Dimi stared in disbelief at the fat merchant. "I gave you all my money," he said indignantly.

"What money could you have?" one of the riders spat.

"If you didn't steal the horse, where are the papers?" another asked.

Dimi looked at this one, an ugly man with a scar across his face. "What papers? Habib is a horse; he doesn't need any papers."

"The papers for the transaction. If you insist so much that you bought it."

The rider pushed hard against his chest, taking him by surprise and making him fall on his back. Another dismounted next to him and began searching through his pockets. "He doesn't have any proof on him," this one said.

"What proof? What proof?" the merchant oinked like a pig. "I told you he stole it! Right from under my nose! People saw him! Just grabbing my property and running away!"

"We should take him to the commissary," the first rider said.

Dimi stood up. "I didn't steal Habib. He's mine!"

"You'll explain that to the commissary, boy," the rider said. "I'm sure he'll not be so understanding of your lies. Confess now and hope for a light punishment."

"You could go and search the merchant's coffers," Dimi said. "He has my cross. I gave him my money and my cross! Find it!"

The rider seemed to consider, but the merchant began talking quickly. "There is no need to disturb the commissary, and on a Sunday like this." He spoke like his tongue was dipped in honey. "I just want my property back. The gypsy could just leave. I have no business with him."

"Trying to steal a horse is a crime," the rider with the scar insisted.

"But there's no harm done. I want to be charitable on this holy day," the merchant insisted.

"All right. Just take the horse," the rider ordered the others.

Dimi clenched his hands into fists. "He's mine!"

"Boy, you're lucky to be let off the hook," the rider said sternly. "Move out of the way."

"No," Dimi said stubbornly.

One rider with a halter in his hands moved closer. Habib whinnied and pulled his head away.

"See?" Dimi said with satisfaction. "He only has one master."

The merchant dismounted, too, and came closer to push Dimi out of the way. At the same time, the rider managed to put the halter over Habib's head and was working hard to make him obey.

"Watch that beast!" one of the men exclaimed.

The merchant stepped back just in time, losing his footing as Habib tried to kick him, neighing loudly.

Dimi laughed as the merchant struggled to get to his feet. "See? He doesn't want to go back with you! Just look for my cross in his coffers! Habib is mine!" he insisted.

"You damned fool!" The merchant walked to him and slapped him hard.

Dimi almost fell, but he gained back his bearings fast. Then he turned toward the merchant with burning eyes. He spat in the fat bastard's face and shoved him hard, making him land on his back again.

The riders now jumped to keep them apart.

“Should we take him to the commissary now?” the rider with the scar asked, in an angry voice.

“Just hold him down, and I’ll show him not to raise his hand to his betters ever again,” the merchant squealed.

The scarred man shrugged and gestured for two of his men to grab Dimi. He fought against them, but they were big and strong, and Dimi found himself lying on the ground with dirt in his mouth. He tried to shout at them, as he heard the sound of ripping fabric. His shirt was pulled from his back.

The merchant was mumbling something, and soon, Dimi felt a hard hit landing on his back, followed by searing pain. He cried out, and the merchant laughed. A second hit and a third pelted his back, making him see dark in front of his eyes.

“Let me give you what the commissary would,” the merchant said, through grunts of exertion.

Dimi could feel his entire back on fire, pain so deep and hard that he could feel his belly roiling, pushing puke up his throat. Tears welled in his eyes, and he begged through shouts of pain, but the merchant didn’t stop.

“Calling for your momma now? You dirty gypsy,” the merchant said through his teeth as he put all his strength into each hit he rained on Dimi’s back.

“I think he had enough,” the scarred rider said, and Dimi felt a weight being pulled from him.

His back was throbbing. He couldn’t get up, and he couldn’t see one thing in front of him. Someone, the merchant, or one of the riders, kicked him in the ribs. “Now move and be happy that the commissary won’t hear about this, you filthy thief.”

Dimi stayed there, on the ground, sobbing, as the others walked away. How could they do that to him? He had paid for Habib; he had won him fair and square.

Cezar walked into the house, going straight to his father’s studio. Such matters could not suffer any delay, he thought, as he climbed the stairs, two by two.

“Cezar, you’re back,” his mother tried to welcome him.

“Not now, mother. I need to have a word with my father,” he said as he continued to walk, without sparing his mother a single look.

“Cezar,” his mother called after him impatiently.

He didn’t stop and didn’t knock as he entered his father’s studio.

“What’s the meaning of this?” his father boomed. “Have you lost your manners, too, not just your head?”

“I thought I would at least have my dignity,” Cezar replied. “I didn’t know I would have to endure my own family selling me like a beast of burden to whoever had the money.”

His father stopped, as he was half-raised from his chair. “Close that damned door,” he whispered angrily.

Cezar complied. He was sure his mother wouldn’t follow or eavesdrop, but there were servants to be concerned about. As he had thought before, this scandal had to take place indoors.

“Marcela informed me about the sorry state of affairs concerning this family’s fortune,” Cezar said through his teeth. “How bad is it?”

His father slumped in his chair. “Worse than you can imagine.”

“And why didn’t you say anything?”

“To you? Why? You’re good for nothing,” his father replied, grimacing and searching for his glass.

“Except for being sold to whoever would pay for me,” Cezar pointed out.

“Yes,” his father said, with a small shrug.

“I will not marry her,” Cezar said.

“You will,” his father said shortly.

“We could borrow the money from aunt Cezara.”

“So that old hag could have even more on me than she already has?”

Cezar felt the word as a direct slap, even if not directed at him. “So you’re too proud to borrow from our family, but you have no issue with borrowing from strangers?”

“Arpad won’t borrow me the money. He will cover all my losses.”

Cezar could sense his anger growing. “In exchange for me marrying his daughter? I warn you, father. I will not marry Marcela.”

“Why? For that gypsy whore you’ve been lying with all summer? You’ve never done anything for this family. This is the least you could do. Don’t tell me you want to marry your mistress.”

“What if I do?” Cezar set his chin high.

His father threw him a dark look; his eyes were dilated, opened like dark pits. It made Cezar feel ill to his stomach.

“Then you’ll condemn us all. Do you think you can punish me as you like? You’ll punish your mother, too.”

“I will tell her myself. She will understand,” Cezar insisted.

“I don’t think you understand, Cezar, what falling to ruin means. What do you think? Just that your mother won’t be able to buy herself silk ribbons and her favorite magazines? It means poverty. It means that we would be lucky to have bread on the table every day.”

Cezar paled. “Just what kind of mess have you gotten yourself into?”

“And that is not all,” his father continued, excited as he was by the prospect of presenting Cezar the entire ugly truth. “We will be everyone’s laughing stock, even the beggars in the street. Your mother is a noblewoman. I might have known hardship in my life, but she never has. I wonder how she could survive the shame.”

“You can’t do this to me!”

“If you don’t want your mother to die in disgrace and rags, you will marry Marcela,” his father threatened him.

Cezar cast his eyes down. This couldn’t be it! He couldn’t be so easily defeated! Without another word, he rushed for the door, pulling it almost out of its hinges and slamming it hard behind him.

Chapter Eleven

Cezar stormed into the barn and saddled his horse with trembling hands. He needed to find Dimi and hold him tightly into his arms. His mind was like a storm of crows, and he could barely see what he was doing. He would talk with his mother; she couldn't just let him be unhappy because of his father's mistakes, could she?

"Get out of my way," he growled at the stable boy who had just gotten up from his drunken sleep.

The wind in his face was doing nothing to calm the howling gale in his soul. He had been almost happy, and now everything was ruined. Outside, dark clouds were gathering again. It had been sunny and calm all day.

He hadn't cared about tying up his horse a bit remote from the camp like other times. They could steal his horse, and his clothes, and the damned hair on his head if they wanted. He was no longer whole, and all he cared was to see Dimi now.

A few women threw him curious glances, but no one stopped him until he reached the caravan belonging to Dimi's parents. As he dismounted, he felt his heart heavy, all of a sudden. There was too much quiet around; there was no laughter, or dancing, or even the usual activities.

As he turned toward the caravan again, he almost came nose to nose with Dimi's father. "What are you doing here, young master?" the man asked softly.

The bad sensation in the pit of his stomach grew heavier, as Cezar took in the look on the other's face. He was pale, and his eyes were red-rimmed.

"I came for Dimi," Cezar replied right away.

He wanted to say more, but he could not put Dimi in jeopardy now just because his heart was split in two.

Dimi's father shook his head. "You can't see him."

Cezar felt all the blood in his head rushing for his feet. "Why?"

"It would be better if you left, young master," the man said.

"Where is he?" Cezar asked in a whisper.

Dimi's father looked behind him, stealing a glance at their caravan. Cezar walked over, and the other didn't keep him from doing so.

He climbed in and stopped dead in his tracks. Dimi's mother was bent over someone, applying some poultice on what looked like an injured person. She was cooing a small, sad tune, and wiping her eyes from time to time.

The patient was shaking and gasping, his entire back black and blue. Cezar's heart stopped as he saw the mane of shaggy blond hair. In one step, he was kneeling next to him. "Dimi, what happened?" he asked. "Who did this to you?"

Dimi's mother stopped and looked at him. "You should know better, young master," she said with bitterness.

"What do you mean?" Cezar asked. "Dimi, talk to me!"

"You gave him money to buy a horse," the woman said, her voice soft, but angry, too. "And buy that horse, he did."

"Did that merchant do that to him?" Cezar asked directly, the darkness in his soul flowing like a river now through his veins.

"Cezar," Dimi whispered through pained sobs, "Cezar, I didn't steal him! Habib is mine!"

"They caught him and took his horse, and they beat him like a dog," Dimi's mother said. "Leave now, young master. Don't come here anymore."

"I will take care of this," Cezar said, deaf to her angry words.

"Will you turn your back on your own kind for a poor gypsy boy?" Dimi's mother asked as she began reapplying her poultice on Dimi's skin, broken in places and oozing red.

"Turn my back?" Cezar could feel a manic grin twisting his lips. "I'm not that nice."

"Cezar," Dimi called for him, in another breathless pained whisper. "I didn't steal Habib! Don't listen to them! He has my cross, he does! Just look for it!"

Cezar couldn't help himself anymore. He took Dimi's hand, hanging on one side, as it was, with caked dirt under the blunt fingernails, and kissed it. "I know."

If Dimi's mother thought anything of his gesture, she didn't say. Without another word, he climbed out of the caravan.

Dimi's father looked at him, his shoulders hunched, and a pained expression in his eyes, dark as the sky above. "Do you believe him? That he didn't steal that horse?"

"Don't you?" Cezar said back.

"He's my boy. Of course I believe him. But what about you?"

“If Dimi had stolen that horse, they wouldn’t have caught him,” Cezar replied.

A small smile lit up the other’s face for a brief moment. Cezar mounted his horse and stormed away.

“Cezar, why are you coming and going like this?”

He could read distress in his mother’s voice. “I need air,” he said through his teeth.

“A storm is coming. Please, just remain indoors. Haven’t you had enough air for the last week? I doubt you and Marcela stayed cooped up inside all day.”

Cezar was starting to understand why Dimi hated to hear his fiancée’s name. Right now, he could not stand hearing it, either. He went directly to his room and rummaged through the drawers, throwing things directly on the floor.

At the bottom of a wooden box, he finally found what he was looking for. Grabbing the cold metal, he squeezed it for a couple of seconds, just to calm the blood pounding in his ears. With measured gestures, he checked the cartridge and then pressed the butt of the gun against his forehead.

His father was waiting at the foot of the stairs now, not his mother. Cezar let the pistol disappear in the long pocket of his coat.

“If you believe that you can come and go as you please --”

“It happens that I do believe so,” he said and walked fast toward the front door.

“Cezar, come back here immediately!” his father barked. “You’re scaring your mother.”

“Then let her be scared,” Cezar threw over his shoulder.

He had been far from an obedient son throughout his life, but it was clear that his stubbornness was taking his father by surprise. Cezar had feared, for a moment, that his father would grab him and make him stay inside.

The first droplets of rain began to fall, heavy and cold. Cezar sauntered through the yard to reach his horse again.

“Cezar!” His father appeared in the door.

He pulled hard at the reins and pushed his horse into a gallop. His father’s angry shouts faded in the curtain of water behind. Cezar felt only one thing, the heaviness of his pistol in his right pocket.

“The horse merchant? Where is he?” he asked the innkeeper at the third place he was trying.

“He’s in the back, in the private room, but if you have business with him, sir, you may go in. He’s in a rather good mood. Also, he offers a drink to anyone who wants one, which is rather rare, seeing what a cheapskate he usually is,” the innkeeper replied, with a small snort.

Cezar thanked the man in a strained voice and hurried to the private room. No doubt about it. The merchant was indeed in a good mood. There were glasses full and ruddy faces, everywhere he looked.

Without saying a word, Cezar walked over to the merchant, grabbed him by the front of his shirt and smashed him with his back against the table, making the full glasses spill and some crash on the floor.

The merchant squealed in fear while the other patrons jumped from their chairs, shouting. Cezar pulled out his pistol in one fluid motion and stuck the barrel underneath the merchant’s fat chin. He could read the naked fear in the other’s eyes, but he had not one ounce of human compassion left in him.

“I sent someone to buy a certain horse for me. To my surprise, not only that I have no horse, but my servant was beaten black and blue while my money disappeared. Why? Speak now, or I’ll blow your brains out.”

“What horse?” the merchant babbled.

“A rather peculiar one. Habib happens to be his name. I’ve had my eyes set on him since the last time I was here. You must have had a lot of people interested in purchasing an Arabian purebred if you don’t remember me,” Cezar said through his teeth.

“Sir, please, you’re indisposing my patrons.” The innkeeper intervened, patting his shoulder.

Cezar didn’t move. “Is my property some joke to people? My horse,” he said and pushed the barrel of his pistol further into the mass of lard underneath the merchant’s chin.

“Sir, put your pistol down, or we must hold you accountable for your actions,” someone else said.

Cezar just turned his head slightly. “Who are you?” he asked a scarred man with a wide-brimmed hat.

“We happen to serve people who need to be safe from those that disregard the law.”

“Brawn for coin,” Cezar spat in disgust. “You’re not a man of the law.”

“But we respect it,” the scarred man said. “And we helped return the stolen horse you’re talking about. Your servant must have tried to fool you out of your money and run away with the horse, too. May I inquire why a gentleman such as yourself would send a gypsy boy in beggar’s clothes to buy a horse?”

“I don’t have to explain myself to you,” Cezar said haughtily. “But seeing how my good reputation is put under scrutiny, I will tell you. I hired the boy because he’s skilled with horses. Not many could handle a horse like Habib, as I noticed since I examined him last Sunday. Isn’t that true?” he asked as he shook the merchant.

“Habib is a difficult horse,” the merchant whined. “Yes, yes, not many can ride it.”

“Yet, you praise him like he’s an angel when he’s a demon,” Cezar said.

There were murmurs among those present.

“We needed three men to walk it back,” the scarred man confirmed. “Yet, that doesn’t mean anything. Your servant didn’t pay for it. He stole it.”

“And you have evidence for your words?” Cezar asked.

“He had no papers. There was no transaction.”

“Ah, I see. You just took advantage of my servant’s ignorance. I would not have expected this from an honest merchant. Regardless of the buyer’s lack of understanding of such things, it is the merchant’s duty to respect the law,” Cezar said as he continued to threaten the merchant.

The man was trembling under him, but Cezar paid him no mind.

“It is a rather difficult situation, sir,” the scarred man continued. “Right now, all we have is a merchant’s word against that of a gypsy. Who should we believe?”

“Who, indeed?” Cezar let sarcasm seep into his words. “It happens that I do have proof. There’s a rather unique item that my servant used to complete the amount needed to purchase Habib.”

“Did you send him to buy a horse for you without giving him enough money?” the scarred man asked.

“I was late since I was detained on a pleasure trip with my fiancée. There was still a small amount that I had to supply. He was eager to please me, so he took it upon himself not to wait any longer. Are you going to verify my words?”

“No need,” the man said curtly. “What unique item are you talking about?”

“A cross,” Cezar replied. “You should check the merchant’s belongings for it.”

“On what grounds?” the merchant squealed again.

Cezar watched the scarred man as he exchanged a small surprised glance with another man that appeared to be in his service.

“To settle this, let’s see if the gentleman’s suspicions have any justification,” the scarred man said.

Cezar let the merchant to his feet, but grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and made him walk. The people present, eager to see the end of such an unexpected conflict, hurried after them.

The merchant’s room looked as if its temporary owner was determined to leave with the first rays of light. The scarred man ordered his subordinates to check the coffers. Cezar stood to the side, watching darkly, as coin purses, and other valuables were placed on a table, while clothes and other useless things were thrown into a pile on the bed.

“You’re making a mess of everything,” the merchant shouted. “You’ll help me put everything back, you fiends, do you hear me?”

“There is no sign of a cross, sir,” the scarred man turned toward him.

Cezar frowned. Could it be that the merchant had already sold Dimi’s artifact? But that must have been risky since a local buyer could be traced. Suddenly, an idea came to his mind, and he pulled the merchant toward him. Ignoring his angry squeals, he shoved his hand into his shirt and took out the cross.

“That’s mine!” the merchant yelled.

Cezar took it over his big head with some difficulty. “Didn’t you have enough money to order a longer chain?” he asked, making a few of those present laugh.

He examined the cross, pretending that he had no idea what he was looking for. “Is your name Dimi, perhaps?”

“It’s what my late mother used to call me,” the merchant whined, clasping his hands.

“What a strange coincidence. To be called by your dear mother exactly by my servant’s name.”

Cezar handed the cross to the scarred man so that he could look at it, as well. The man pushed his hat back and stared at the cross for a while. Cezar knew Dimi’s name had been cut into the wood on the back of the cross and he was thankful for it.

“Is that proof enough?” Cezar asked.

The scarred man handed him back the cross. “Yes, sir.”

“Do you believe him? Over me?” The merchant became agitated, shaking his hands and looking around at people as if he could win others by his side.

“A gentleman’s word? Yes, I do,” the scarred man. “Many apologies, sir. But please, next time you send a servant to do your bidding, make sure he is informed of all the formalities required.”

“Interesting that you didn’t care to verify the merchant’s quarters, and himself, for the cross,” Cezar said, as he let it slide into his pocket. “My servant must have mentioned it.”

Another short look between the scarred man and his subordinate let him know he was right. “There was no harm done, sir. You can now have your horse, and the papers, of course. I believe we can let this to settle down peacefully.”

“Not so fast,” Cezar said. “This man tried to steal from me, and, if I hadn’t been quick to return today, he might have escaped with both my money and my horse.”

The other well-off patrons murmured in agreement.

“Do you require compensation?” the scarred man asked. “I’m sure that part of the money --”

“That is not the type of compensation I want,” Cezar cut his words shortly. “There is always the possibility to take this to the commissary. Then I expect that all those involved will have to justify their actions.”

The scarred man seemed to lose some of his composure now. The merchant dropped to Cezar’s feet, groveling. “Forgive me, young master. It was a lapse of judgment, a --”

“This disgusting display of servility won’t save you,” Cezar said promptly.

“Is there a way to solve this without involving the commissary?” the scarred man asked.

“Who beat my servant?” Cezar asked promptly.

The scarred man pointed with his chin toward the merchant. “He did. But I don’t see how that could be relevant --”

“He’s lying!” the merchant shouted. “He did!”

Cezar didn’t believe him. The scarred man remained calm, regardless of the accusations thrown at him.

“He was supposed to train my horse. Now, thanks to the beating he got, I have a horse that will remain untrained for weeks,” Cezar replied.

Again, the others present murmured in agreement.

“What did you use to beat him?” he asked the merchant directly.

The man said nothing and just continued to grovel at his feet. Cezar began looking around the room until his eyes fell on a whip made of rawhide knots, thrown on a side table. He went around the bed and took the whip into his hand. “Was this what you used?” he asked again.

The merchant cowered. Without a word, Cezar squeezed the whip handle in his hand and walked over to the merchant’s side. He grabbed him by the back of his coat and began dragging him down the wooden stairs while the man shouted and groaned. “Release me, you fiend! Good people, help me! He wants to kill me!”

The others followed, most probably curious about what Cezar had in mind. They reached the street, and Cezar threw the merchant down the steps, making him tumble into the mud. The storm was heavy now, and the wind was blowing hard, so most men remained on the porch of the inn, preferring to watch the show from the partial safety offered by a roof.

Cezar grabbed the merchant, pulling down his coat. The man tried to escape, but Cezar kicked him hard, making him fall face first. The shirt came out from his pants, revealing shiny white skin. Cezar raised his arm and struck him with the whip, making him squeal. Under the roar of thunders, Cezar let his arm fall, over and over again while the merchant struggled like a fish out of water, wailing and shouting at him to stop.

“Did he ask you to stop?” Cezar asked through his teeth.

“Have mercy, master,” the merchant sobbed.

“I asked you something,” Cezar said darkly. “Did he ask for mercy? Don’t you dare to lie to me!”

“He did, he did,” the merchant said, crying like a baby now.

“And did you stop?”

“I did! I did!”

“I don’t believe you,” Cezar said, and his arm fell again and again until someone grabbed him to make him stop.

“I think it’s enough, sir. We don’t want to take this to the commissary, after all,” the scarred man said. “Even a gentleman like you would have a hard time explaining why he killed a man over a horse.”

Cezar shook the other away. “Have the innkeeper collect this garbage. I will pay him for the displeasure of dealing with such waste of a human being.”

“Of course, sir. And I will have someone prepare the horse and your papers,” the scarred man said.

Cezar watched him through the curtain of rain. The man seemed curious about him. Even as they stood like that, in the heavy storm, there was a sort of understanding between them. They both knew how far they had gone and how far outside the law they both stood. But neither was willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of condemning the other.

He stopped at home only to leave Habib in the barn, where it was dry and warm. For the demon some people claimed that horse to be, Habib had been rather docile while he rode back home, through the rain.

He knew where he would stop next. Some of his anger had washed away with the vengeance he exacted earlier, but his soul still felt crushed. He rode through the rain like a madman.

“I will compensate you for this,” Cezar promised.

God only knew with what money, but he was sure he would be able to borrow some from his aunt if need be. The doctor followed him in silence. The doctor’s carriage couldn’t squeeze through the rows of caravans, so they had to walk through the rain.

Dimi’s mother looked at him through the flaps of the caravan. “Didn’t I tell you not to come here anymore, young master?” she asked. “He’s resting now.”

Cezar dropped to his knees. “He needs a doctor. Please, I beg you,” he asked and put his forehead on the muddy ground.

The old doctor said nothing, but Cezar felt him moving, a sign that Dimi’s mother was letting him climb inside.

Someone patted him gently on the back. “There’s no need for you to kneel, young master,” Dimi’s father said.

Cezar felt like crying. His tears were silent, covered by the sound of the falling rain.

Chapter Twelve

“Your aunt Cezara would like to see you in her room, sir,” the servant informed him after knocking softly on his door.

It was late, and his parents were already in their beds, without a doubt, but the request from his aunt didn't surprise Cezar. The scandal must have reached her ears.

“Tell her I will be there,” he said, as he took out his wet coat.

The servant hurried to help him, and Cezar thanked him shortly.

“Should I prepare some tea?” he asked.

“No. You can go to sleep,” Cezar said.

He wanted to talk to his aunt, as well, and it was better for that to happen as soon as possible. Changed into dry clothes, he went out of the room.

His aunt was expecting him, rocking gently in her chair. “Cezar,” she said with affection in her voice and made a sign for him to come closer.

She just took his face into her hands and looked at him. “Are you all right?”

Cezar closed his eyes, to hide some of his hurt. “Let's just say that I've seen better days, *tante*.”

“Your mother was in such a state before going to bed,” she said.

“I don't want to worry or hurt her in any way,” Cezar replied.

“I know, but let me tell you something about parents and children. Parents are supposed to love their children and hurt for them and, yes, even because of them, and not the other way around.”

Cezar took a seat across from her. “How much of my father and his success in dragging this family to ruin do you know of?”

Aunt Cezara sighed. “Enough. Not that he would confide in me. Your father is a proud and stubborn man.”

“He's a coward,” Cezar said, pursing his lips.

“I see that you are judging him. I am from your mother's side, so it's natural for me to take sides with that part of the family tree, but I try to be impartial in this case.”

“What do you mean?” Cezar asked.

“Your father, he has a good side and a bad side. All men do. And women. I wish that he would just see the right way out of this situation. But that would mean giving up on his pride, and that’s not something he is willing to do.”

“You mean that you offered to help and he refused,” Cezar pointed out.

His aunt nodded. “At least he accepted that I took care of keeping up appearances and that no one in this house would want for anything.”

“Why didn’t you tell me anything?”

His aunt had a sad smile. “I wanted you to make a mistake because you wanted to, or you were feeling bored, or simply because you didn’t mind. Not because of your desire to help your family.”

“You’re talking about my marriage to Marcela,” Cezar said with a deep sigh.

“Yes. I was happy to see you falling in love and question that marriage yourself. I didn’t want to push you in either direction. When it comes to matters of the heart, people need to know that they do what they do because they truly want it, not because someone else tells them what they should choose.”

“Tonight, I whipped a man. I left him lying bloody on the ground,” Cezar said in a dispassionate voice. “Because of love,” he added, and let out a sudden sob.

His aunt just nodded and looked at him with compassion. “What happened?”

“Dimi is --”

There was too much inside, Cezar realized. His aunt understood and remained silent until he managed to speak again.

“He made a foolish mistake, one I told him not to. But he is who he is, and it’s maybe even this recklessness that I love about him. He went to buy a horse with the money I gave him, without waiting for me to be present.”

“Ah,” aunt Cezara said and nodded in understanding. “I suppose they tried to trick him out of his money.”

“If that had been all,” Cezar said grimly. “No, they let him leave with the horse, and then went after him with a posse.”

Aunt Cezara’s eyes grew wide. “Don’t tell me they took him to the commissary!”

Cezar waved. “They settled for beating him and taking from him the horse he had paid for.”

A small sigh followed. "I can only assume that he's not in severe danger since you're standing here, talking to me like this."

Cezar nodded. "I took our family's doctor to him. It appears that it is mostly the shock of having gone through such an ordeal that affects him now, rather than his wounds, the doctor says. I suppose he was lucky that the man who applied the punishment is nothing but a coward with little strength in his arm." He shook his head. "He's not so badly hurt, but for someone who almost never got a beating in his life, I can only imagine how awful that must feel. He cried like a child as the doctor poked him to see if he had any broken ribs or something worse."

"It hurt you, too, to hear him like that," his aunt confirmed what he was thinking.

"Dimi is a summer child," Cezar said softly. "Even in his wrongdoings, he has no evil in his heart. He sees the world in such a simple light. I envy him. And maybe it wasn't my place to take some of his happiness away like this."

"It wasn't you who did that, Cezar," his aunt said. "His parents love him very much; you make me believe. But the world has a way of getting even to the most sheltered people. Dimi would learn of the world's evil ways, no matter how much his parents want to protect him."

"I think he does know. Only that he followed, so far, his people's rules and those kept him safe. When he tried to follow the rules of our world, that was when he got hurt."

"No matter what you say, Cezar, it's not your fault. If he had followed his people's rules forever, he would have never loved you."

Cezar sighed and allowed himself to smile. "Do you think he loves me? He never says it. Not directly."

His aunt laughed softly. "He will say it when he's ready. They're known to be fickle people toward strangers. They have no reason to trust them, I believe. He wouldn't have come for you, in the rain, that night, or stolen Arpad's horses, if he hadn't been in love with you."

"Sometimes, I feel scared when I hear how well you know me or what happens around here."

Cezara smiled broadly at that. "What else is to do all day but to observe others when you're at my age?"

For a while, they both sat there, in silence.

"What do you plan to tell your parents, Cezar?" his aunt asked.

"I want to make it very clear that I don't intend to marry that woman," Cezar replied.

His aunt smiled all knowingly. "That woman. Do I notice a bit of disdain in your voice, my child?"

“She was the one to tell me about our family’s situation. Also, she made it quite clear that she has no qualms about buying me from my parents, on the grounds that she simply wants me.”

To his surprise, his aunt laughed. “A willful creature, that one. She may have to learn that arrogance is the kind of thing in a woman that’s not much liked by men. Well, maybe she thought she would strike a chord with you, by trying to buy you in the same manner that young brides are bought in the gypsy tradition.”

“Do you mean she used that as a jab at me because she thinks she knows I have a gypsy mistress? But I believe she planned to buy me from my beloved parents long before any such gossip could have reached her ears. Apparently, she thought about it for years.”

His aunt shook her head, still smiling. “As strong-willed as she may be, she found the wrong man to try to tie up with money. Your parents may not agree with your decision, but they will have to live with it.”

“I’m glad you think so,” Cezar said. “I know for sure that this is not a sacrifice I’m willing to make.”

“Then I believe I should wish you good luck when talking to them.”

“Just one thing, *tante*. Does my mother know about our situation?”

“She might have started to suspect something lately. I’ve always given money to your father in private, but at least once, she walked in on us. Your mother is a clever woman, though a bit air-headed. She will soon put two and two together. I just want to tell you, Cezar. Don’t hurt yourself by trying to spare her. She is also stronger than she looks.”

“I would like to speak to both of you in a matter that suffers no delay,” Cezar said, as only his parents and he were still at the table.

His father threw him a dark look. “I have important business to attend. I have no time for your silliness.”

“What silliness?” his mother inquired.

She was a bit pale, but she hadn’t questioned him about why he had been gone until late evening the night before.

“He knows better,” his father said and threw his napkin on the table in disgust.

“If our son wants to speak to us, we should listen,” his mother made a small attempt, but his father was already up and on the way to the door.

“Maybe I should talk to my mother alone, then,” Cezar said airily.

His father stopped. “It can wait.”

“It cannot,” Cezar insisted.

“We’ll talk tonight, then. Don’t bother me now.”

After his father left, his mother turned toward him. “What bothers you, Cezar? Where were you yesterday for half a day? Did you and Marcela get into a fight? Young people --”

“Let’s just talk tonight, mother, as father said,” Cezar said and stood up, too.

It was the least thing he could do for his father. He understood that there was no need for a scandal, but that didn’t mean he would postpone it forever. His father had until that evening.

“Why did you ask for me when my mother is not here?” Cezar inquired, the moment he set foot in his father’s studio that evening. “If you’re trying to convince me not to tell her that I have no intentions to get married this fall, you’re wasting your time.”

His father seemed in a foul mood, but Cezar didn’t feel scared. “I heard about the scandal you caused in town yesterday evening,” he said in a steady voice.

That meant he was trying to control his anger. Cezar frowned. “Someone tried to cross me. I exacted the rightful punishment.”

“Hmm,” his father said. “What exactly was that punishment for?”

“What do you care? The respective purchase was not made from your pocket. We both know you have no such money.”

“Don’t you dare to insult me, boy!” his father barked and slammed his palm hard against the table, making the windows rattle.

Cezar’s frown deepened. “What is this about?”

“It is about you making a complete fool of yourself! And for what? This time, it wasn’t even for some woman, but a boy! What is he to her to warrant such involvement on your part? Her brother? Or worse, her husband?”

“What preposterous things are you saying?” Cezar was the one to shout now.

“God knows you have no limit when it comes to making fools of us all,” his father said, his eyes burning. “How low are you going to stoop for this woman?”

“That’s hardly any of your concern,” Cezar replied.

“As long as you carry my name, it is my concern!”

“Seeing how often you threaten to disown me, I believe you want me to give up your name, anyway.”

“Cezar, you will stop with all this nonsense! There is only this much Marcela can stand! Any more scandals and she might think she should find another man to marry!”

“Great!” Cezar threw his arms to his sides. “That’s exactly what I want!”

“So you just want to see us ruined! In rags! Begging on the street!”

“You’re exaggerating! The rest of the family won’t let things go this far!” Cezar shouted.

“Provided that I accept the dishonor of being kept by them! So that I must endure their disdain and false pity?”

“Will you let this happen to you only because you’re too proud?”

“To me? I’ll drag your mother with me! She doesn’t have a choice!”

His father was beyond furious. His eyes were threatening to burst out of their sockets, his tie was strangling his bull-like neck, and his face had a frightening shade of red. Cezar felt that he needed to be the first to calm down.

“I will talk to my mother about this,” Cezar said. “If you dare to treat her like this, I can only assume that not even she would have enough love for you to allow it.”

“I will make your life hell!” His father shouted again. “I’ll find your mistress, and I’ll see that she never dares to raise her eyes to look at you again!”

“Are you threatening me?” Cezar could feel his jaw hurting.

“Not you, but her! I was an understanding parent, letting you fool around with her, but you only saw it as a way to test my patience! You’ll get married this fall or that woman, and all of her kin will suffer! Don’t think I don’t have any influence left in these lands. I could bring upon her head as much misery as she brought upon my family. The commissary will surely find something to shake them up.”

Cezar paled. He knew his father, and too often, he had seen him act ruthlessly. As far gone as he was now, it wouldn’t have been an empty threat, all he was saying. “It would be illegal. If you’re found out, your reputation and influence won’t save you.”

“Found out? As I said, the commissary will surely find something. What do you think? That they live off fortunetelling and making copper pots? They are thieves, and whores, and criminals!”

His father was heaving and brought a hand to his chest. Cezar hurried by his side. “Father!”

“Let me be,” his father said and pushed him away. “If I died of a worried heart, it would be because of you.”

“Don’t say that,” Cezar whispered. “Father, don’t you want me to be happy? Why do you want me to marry Marcela so badly?”

“Marcela will make you happy, boy, not some gypsy woman.” His father was still breathing hard, and he was trying to get back his bearings.

“Haven’t you ever been in love with someone? People say it was because of love that you and mother got married in the first place.”

His father stared sharply at him. “Do you dare to compare your mother to some filthy whore?”

Cezar fell silent. He could go on and hate his father. He could shout and say anything, but it was clear as day that his father wouldn’t let go. Like a cornered animal, he was biting anyone getting too close.

“I will still talk to mother, whether you like it or not,” Cezar said. “She is entitled to know everything.”

His father fell back into his chair. “She already knows everything.”

“She does? Then why did you let me think --”

“I know you don’t care about me, Cezar. I thought you would at least be less hardened against your mother. God knows we gave you everything, and, in return, you’ve been nothing but an ungrateful son.”

Cezar felt each of his father’s words like poisoned arrows aimed at his heart. Was that the truth? Was he nothing but an ungrateful child? Was he an egoist now to think only of his own happiness like that?

Without a word, he walked out of the room. Could it be that his mother thought the same of him?

His mother was fiddling with some embroidery she had been working on for quite some time. She put her needlework away as soon as he walked into her room.

“Do you know about the sorry state of affairs in this house?” he asked her directly.

She looked away. "I see that your father told you about our troubles."

"No, he didn't," Cezar said bitterly. "I had to find about it from Marcela. Imagine my surprise. A stranger is more informed than me concerning my own family."

"We didn't want to worry you," his mother said and looked at him with begging eyes.

"How strange. At first, father denied you knew, on the same grounds. Please, tell me, did you two decide together that I should be sold to the higher bidder so that you can solve the dire financial situation we are all in, due to father's bad decisions?"

"No!" his mother protested. "How can you say such a thing?"

Cezar covered his face with his hands and rubbed his eyes. He was getting weary; it was like his inner force got drained with each minute spent as a ball thrown between his parents. "I would much appreciate hearing the truth, mother. I hope that at least you won't lie to me."

"The truth is that we have no money left," his mother murmured and looked down.

"Aunt Cezara can help us," Cezar pointed out.

His mother shook her head slowly. "Your father hates being indebted to her."

"He should hate himself for what he's doing to this family."

"Cezar!" his mother scolded him. "You shouldn't say such things. He has always cared for us. Has it ever been something you were denied?"

"Actually, it is," Cezar replied thinly. "It happens as we speak. I am denied my happiness. I do not wish to marry Marcela, mother. Marrying her would be the biggest mistake of my life. I would never forgive myself if I did that."

"Stop talking like this, child!" His mother's voice was stern now. "All this opposition over that girl you believe yourself in love with? She'll be gone by fall, called by the road, as is her kind's way. And where will you be? What you feel, Cezar, may feel real, but it's nothing but a summer love. It won't last through fall or winter."

"You're wrong," Cezar said, pursing his lips and setting his jaw hard. "I love him with everything I have."

The words flew out of his mouth before he could realize what he was saying.

His mother stared at him in utter shock. "What did you say, Cezar?"

He stood up, ready to run. "Forget what I said. It doesn't matter anyway, does it?"

His chest was in a vise, keeping him from breathing. His mother hurried after him. “Not a word of this to your father,” she whispered angrily. “Do you hear me? He is already ill, as he is.”

Cezar turned to look at her. “What’s wrong with him?”

“The doctor doesn’t say, but it can’t be good. Maybe he doesn’t even know. Ever since your father lost all the money, he hasn’t been himself. Oh, Cezar, what have you done?” His mother closed her hands over her mouth, looking at him, with a terrified expression in her eyes, her mood changing from one extreme emotion to another.

Cezar felt more than just his heart sinking. “I saw him earlier, almost suffocating in his own anger.” He ignored her last question on purpose.

“Cezar,” his mother grabbed his arm and looked him in the eye, “don’t upset him anymore. I beg you. He is the man I love. Don’t take him away from me.”

“I won’t,” Cezar promised, his heart breaking into pieces.

The pain in his mother’s eyes was real. If he needed to fight the entire world for Dimi, he would. But as much as his parents seemed not to care about his happiness, he could not go against them. Not when such things were at stake.

“You will be happy with Marcela,” his mother said, with hope written all over her face. “You’ll see.”

Tears were hanging at the corners of her eyes but didn’t fall.

“That is a promise I can’t make, mother,” Cezar said softly and opened the door.

Dimi jumped on his back, taking him by surprise. Cezar turned, hoping his sadness wouldn’t show.

“Why didn’t you come to see me?” Dimi asked, pouting.

Cezar wanted to taste those pouty lips, to bite them and kiss them so that it could last him an entire life. “How are you?” he asked, keeping Dimi by the shoulders, looking at him.

Dimi worked one shoulder. “It still hurts a little. That fat bastard! I heard how you beat him up!” he said excitedly. “How you got him all naked and jumped on his fat belly with your boots!”

Cezar bit his lips not to laugh. “I see how this story has gotten to mythical proportions already. What will people invent next? That I got on a giant bird and had it eat that man’s intestines?”

Dimi made a disgusted face. “No. But you did put your boot in his ass, didn’t you?”

Cezar laughed softly. "Come on. I brought someone with me, which I'm sure you want to see."

Dimi followed him around their shed. Cezar took Habib by the reins and handed him to Dimi. To his surprise, Dimi didn't make one move. He was silent, and his eyes were darting sideways.

"Don't you want him?" Cezar asked.

Dimi moved from one foot to another. "He's cursed," he said quickly.

"Cursed with a bad master such as that man. It appears that the merchant beat Habib to make him mean so that he wouldn't let anyone ride him. He might have tried the same thing he tried with you with other people. Habib deserves a better master, don't you think, Dimi?"

Dimi hesitated still.

"I would hate to sell him," Cezar said. "Ah, wait, I can't do that anyway. His papers say you're his owner."

Dimi's eyes grew wide. "Do you mean it?" he asked in a small whisper.

"I handed the papers to your father," Cezar explained.

"You came by, and you didn't want to see me?" Dimi pouted again.

"Your mother was quite adamant about my not coming close to you. I respected her decision."

Dimi shook his head. "She never stays mad. And she likes you."

Cezar took Dimi's hand and placed it on the reins. "I came here because I wanted to make sure Habib is in good hands now."

Dimi looked up at him. He took the reins and caressed the horse on his long elegant neck. "Is he mine? Forever?"

"Yes, forever," Cezar said back, his heart growing smaller. He could tell Dimi was dying to get on his horse. "Don't you want to ride him?"

Dimi smiled. "Not him. You."

Cezar laughed at that, and Dimi blushed. "Is this your way of saying that you missed me?"

"No." Dimi shook his head furiously. "This is."

Cezar was taken by surprise when Dimi kissed him. It was raw and wild, and his decision to tell him that it was all over between them, that he had to marry, and forget all about being happy, melted away.

Dimi pushed him inside the shed, without even caring to tie up his horse.

“Habib,” Cezar pointed out, amidst their kisses.

“He won’t leave. He’s my soulmate,” Dimi said with conviction.

His soulmate. Cezar couldn’t find it in himself to feel bitter at that. Dimi was like that, a free spirit, and he had been wrong even to think he could leash this wild soul and bind him. If that kiss, that hungry touch, were all he would have from Dimi, he would take it, nonetheless.

Dimi laughed as he took away his clothes and stepped out of his pants quickly. They were both naked, and Dimi approached him with that mix of shyness and determination that was making Cezar crazy with desire.

He inhaled sharply when Dimi’s hand brushed by his cock. His body suddenly knew how long it had been. Dimi moved his hand along his hardened length, making him gasp in pleasure.

“Touch me here, too,” Dimi said and put his hand between his legs.

Cezar indulged in caressing the silky cock fitting in his hand so well and lost himself in Dimi’s kiss again. When he was pushed on his back with Dimi on top of him, he laughed. He didn’t mind being taken if that was their last time together.

Sensing that Dimi got on his feet again, he opened his eyes. He looked curiously at his lover as Dimi appeared to finger himself. “I wanted you so much, I did something,” he whispered.

Cezar grunted when Dimi placed himself on top of him and began sliding slowly inside his cock. The tight warmth was so familiar it made Cezar feel whole if briefly, nothing like he had felt during the last weeks.

“Weren’t you saying you wanted to ride me?” he joked as he steadied his lover’s hips.

Dimi’s face was ecstatic as the entire hard cock entered him. “This is the best way to ride in the whole world,” he whispered and began moving.

Cezar groaned. It wasn’t fair Dimi had gotten so good at this. Another man, in another time, would be like this with Dimi, someone who was happy and unafraid, and so unlike him.

For the moment, their pleasure was all that mattered and all they had. Dimi moved with grace on top of him, pressing his hands on his chest and squeezing his tits hard. Cezar moaned and thrashed, incapable of lasting long. He bucked his hips up, over and over again, almost throwing Dimi off him.

Dimi laughed and kept himself from falling. When Cezar stopped, exhausted and breathing heavily, he stood up and put one palm between his legs. “Look. So much!”

Cezar said nothing and just watched as Dimi began coating his cock with the seed in his palm and started moving his hand fast.

He closed his eyes as Dimi's cum fell all over him like warm rain. He didn't open them as Dimi giggled.

"You look good like this, Cezar," Dimi said.

"Hmm?" he barely managed.

"You look like you truly belong to me."

Cezar said nothing. He pretended to fall asleep and not hear as Dimi tip-toed out of the shed, now surely happy to ride his horse.

Chapter Thirteen

Cezar was dressing up when Dimi walked back into the shed with a smile as big as the sun on his face. His smile faded a little seeing Cezar getting ready to leave.

“So soon?” he asked. “I haven’t seen you in forever, and you’re already leaving?”

Cezar smiled. “It’s only been a few weeks.”

Dimi pursed his lips. “Forever,” he said stubbornly.

Cezar ruffled his hair. Then he remembered something and took out of his pocket the two gold pieces given to him by his aunt. He took Dimi’s hand and placed them in his palm.

“What’s this?” Dimi asked, staring at the two old coins curiously. “They’re strange.”

“They’re old,” Cezar explained. “My aunt gave them to me to make some jewelry for the one I love.”

Dimi cocked his head to one side and looked at him, waiting for an explanation.

“I want you to take them to the jeweler at your camp. I never got to meet him. Ask him to make something beautiful. Something that you would keep. I want it to remind you of me forever.”

Dimi seemed to ponder over something, as he weighed the gold in his hand. “I know!” he said excitedly. “You’ll like it, too!”

“I want it to be for you,” Cezar insisted.

Dimi just shrugged. “You or me, it’s all the same. We’re one, like this,” he said and took Cezar’s hands and placed them over his heart, with a tender expression in his luminous eyes.

Cezar could feel his chest heavy. Such words, how he longed to hear them. He knew he had to say something, but he didn’t dare. These moments, no one had the right to steal them from him.

“When will you come by again? Tomorrow?” Dimi asked.

Cezar shook his head. “My father needs me to deal with some business. I won’t be able to see you over the next days.”

Dimi frowned. “How many days? And why does he need you? Doesn’t he have servants?”

“I don’t know exactly. And no servant in his service can help him with what he needs me for. It’s rather delicate and concerning our family.”

Dimi nodded thoughtfully. Cezar knew Dimi valued his own family and he understood when such demands were concerned. “All right. But as soon as he doesn’t need you anymore, come see me or send word like today. I miss you already.”

Cezar pulled him close and kissed him until Dimi squirmed in his arms, out of breath. “I miss you already, too,” he whispered.

Dimi smiled and rubbed his mouth against his neck, making him laugh. “If it’s only a few days, it’s all right. Come fall, you’ll be mine forever.”

Cezar closed his eyes and kept Dimi close. “I’m yours forever anyway.”

For days, Dimi had been riding high and low, showing off Habib, lost in the pleasure of feeling the wind and the sun on his face. Summer would be soon over, but he wasn’t sad. It would be September, then October, and then they would leave.

And Cezar would be with him. This thought alone took his mind off how much he missed him. Cezar was caught up in important family business, and Dimi needed to understand that. Since Cezar would leave his parents and ride with him, Dimi knew he needed to be grateful. He had no idea if he could leave his parents, even for the man he loved. That made Cezar stronger than him.

He had to be the one, Dimi told himself. He had a mind to ask the fortuneteller directly, to ask her if the man she saw for him in her cards was handsome like Cezar and brave and strong like him.

For weeks, he had laid under blankets, shivering mostly from fear that bad men would come and grab him and make him pay for Habib with the skin on his back again. His mom had stood by his side all the time, and his dad had even cooked for all of them. No one had dared to laugh at him, though. They all knew what he was going through.

Then one day, word of what Cezar did to that fat bastard had come to the camp. His mother had wept, but still hadn’t let Cezar come near. That much Dimi knew, although he would have wanted Cezar to try harder to see him.

It was all good in his world. The jeweler would have the gift for Cezar ready today. And then, he would just have to wait. Dimi wasn’t that good at waiting.

“How come you’re at home, most of the days?” his aunt questioned him, once they were alone.

Cezar cast his eyes down. He knew his decision would make aunt Cezara disappointed in him, but he couldn't leave his parents in such a dire situation. After all, he had had his happiness, if only for a short while.

"Nothing much to do out of the house," he replied, pretending to be absorbed with the book he was reading.

"Dimi must have healed by now," his aunt said.

He could feel her eyes, set on him, questioning. "Yes, he must have."

"Cezar, have you told your parents?"

No beating around the bush with his aunt. "Yes, I have. And, to save you the trouble of wondering whether I suddenly fell out of love, I haven't."

"That's good to hear," his aunt said.

"But I still have to marry Marcela," Cezar added, without looking up.

"Oh, Cezar." His aunt sounded sad now. "What did they say to you to convince you? What chord of your big heart did they play on?"

He looked at her over his book. "Are you sure you don't know already?" he asked, with a half-smile.

"I am not that knowledgeable of everything," his aunt replied.

"My father is very ill. He is stubborn as a mule, and he won't take money from you. It appears that my mother knows everything about our situation. To prove that I'm not the ungrateful son they believe me to be, I must marry this fall."

His aunt sighed deeply. "And forget all about Dimi."

"As if I could do that," Cezar said.

His eyes were drawn to the window, through which a small patch of blue sky could be seen.

"Forget about your parents, Cezar. They would live."

"I can't risk it, *tante*. And it is, apparently, the only thing I can do to prove myself to them. I love them."

Aunt Cezara pursed her lips. "And I wonder if they love you back."

"They do," Cezar said with conviction. "They truly believe Marcela would make me happy."

“And I think they truly believe that her money would make them happy. I should have a word with them.” His aunt shifted in her chair as if she wanted to get up and find his parents that very moment.

“No, please, don’t. If this is what they need from me to prove that I’m their son, it is what I’m going to do. And I can’t risk making father ill, either. It is what I must do.”

“What does Dimi say about all this?”

“He doesn’t know,” Cezar said half-heartedly.

His aunt pursed her lips in disapproval. “You should be honest with him.”

“God knows I wanted to, but the words just couldn’t leave my mouth.”

“Which means that marrying Marcela is a big mistake. You’re in love, Cezar, and that’s not something you can just throw away. Aren’t you aware you will throw your heart away, too?”

“Don’t I know it?” Cezar said with bitterness. “But I could never forgive myself if something bad happened to my father because of me.”

“That damned stubborn man,” Cezara said, pursing her lips even more.

“He is my father, and nothing can ever change that,” Cezar said. “Not even my love for Dimi.”

“He will hate you, that boy,” his aunt said and shook her head.

“Then let him hate me. It would be easier for him if he did,” Cezar said.

“Oh, young people, how strong they believe themselves to be when their hearts bleed if touched by a single word. Don’t marry Marcela, Cezar. I truly mean it. You will end up hating yourself.”

“I would hate myself more if I brought unhappiness and misery upon this family.”

His aunt seemed more and more displeased with him, but there wasn’t much he could do. It was his decision, and he would have to live with it.

Dimi didn’t dare to get too close to Cezar’s house. What if it was because he was reckless that he did something to hurt Cezar? His parents couldn’t know. They probably were making his life hell now that he had decided not to marry that rich girl.

Cezar had to work hard now to be in his father’s graces probably because of that. But it had been a week already! How much did he have to wait? He needed to send a message somehow. But he didn’t know how to write and just asking a servant to fetch Cezar didn’t seem like a good idea. It

was another thing when Cezar just had to send word through one of the gypsies who sold things door to door. No one questioned what Cezar wanted with him at the camp.

In fact, everyone seemed very much in awe with the friendship they thought it was between them. Or some even suspected the truth, but except for a few giggles from young women, Dimi hadn't noticed anything. His people didn't judge him.

His father had told him how Cezar knelt in the mud that night, crying. People must have seen that. But they didn't say anything. Instead, there was a sort of respect they had now for Cezar, even if he was a stranger and a rich man. And Dimi could tell some were envying him a little.

He turned his horse and went back. Just long did he still have to wait? In two days, he would find a way to send word.

Dimi was busy crushing the petals of a yellow flower between his fingers when he heard the sound of an approaching horse. If there was a horse, there had to be a rider, too. Hopeful, he went out of the shed, and his heart leaped with happiness when he saw Cezar.

"I got your message," Cezar said curtly, as he dismounted. "What was it that it couldn't wait?"

Cezar was acting strange, Dimi thought. Maybe his father was making him toil like a slave. "I wanted to see you," he said and jumped into Cezar's arms, eager to kiss him.

But, unlike so many times, Cezar didn't hug him or pull him close. He even avoided the kiss. Dimi stepped back. "What's wrong?" he asked, but somehow, in his heart, he knew already, even if he didn't know what exactly.

"There is something I need to tell you, Dimi."

Cezar's voice was broken, hard, and jagged.

Dimi crossed his arms over his chest.

Cezar sighed and looked away. Dimi knew that. Cezar was ashamed of something.

"I talked to Marcela at that time."

"Don't speak her name," Dimi said, his heart growing heavier and heavier.

"Why shouldn't I? She'll soon be my wife."

Dimi felt the ground under his feet disappearing; for a moment, it was like he was hanging in mid-air, and had nothing to grab on so that he didn't lose his balance. "She will be nothing to you. You're coming with me this fall. You're not getting married!" he yelled.

Cezar threw him a look filled with hurt but added nothing.

Dimi wanted to punch him. He wanted to hurt him and grab him, and tie him up and drag him with him. "It cannot be. You promised!"

"Which was foolish of me," Cezar said. "We can't be together, Dimi."

"Why? Don't you love me anymore? After whipping that fat bastard who hurt me? After lying for me? After all the words you said? After how much love you made to me?"

Cezar seemed to recoil from every question like he didn't want to hear him at all. Dimi couldn't just stand there. He took one step toward Cezar and grabbed him by the arms, shaking him. "Just tell me! Did you lie? All this time?"

"I must have," Cezar murmured. "I don't love you anymore, Dimi. I'm sorry. I just don't. Go ahead and hate me. You would be right to do so."

Dimi could feel the tears welling up in his eyes. He furiously began pounding Cezar's chest with his fists. Cezar made no move to protect himself. "You're lying, you're lying, you're lying! They just make you marry her! Your father!"

"Dimi, stop," Cezar said softly and caught his fists and pulled him close this time.

Dimi stared into the beautiful blue eyes he knew and loved so much. But they were empty now, nothing like before. "You don't love her!" he spat in anger.

"I don't love you, either," Cezar whispered, his face contorted in a grimace as if he was about to start crying, too.

"I don't believe you!" Dimi struggled to pull his wrists free from Cezar's hold.

For a moment, Cezar looked like he were about to break. But his handsome face just turned to stone. "You must understand. It was a beautiful summer dream, and nothing more. And summer's almost gone."

Dimi could feel his bottom lip trembling. He took another step, back this time, and stared at Cezar, at his hunched shoulders, at his closed fists, now kept close to his body, at his haunted eyes. "You're such a lying bastard," Dimi whispered, and pushed the heels of his palms into his eyes, to wipe those useless tears away.

"For all that is worth, I did love you," Cezar said.

"You still do," Dimi said stubbornly. "You're just a coward!"

"Dimi," Cezar said softly and made a move toward him.

Dimi took another step back. His eyes still in tears, he searched into his pocket and threw the gift he had brought so that it hit Cezar's chest and fell on the ground. Surprised, Cezar stopped and picked it up.

Dimi jumped on Habib's back, urging him to take him away from there, as fast as he could. The tears were still streaming down his cheeks, but the wind in his face was drying them away as they fell.

Cezar searched through the dry grass and took the golden chain. He stared at the pendant hanging from the delicate thread. It appeared as if it was half of something, smooth on one side, but jagged on the other, where it must have joined with its other half. A small sun was carved into it, and the real rays of light from up above bounced off the jewelry, making it glint.

He stood there, with the pendant in his hand, staring at the rider and his horse losing themselves into the brush. It was for the best that Dimi hated him now. How was he going to deal with the dark abyss that just opened in his soul?

Dimi dismounted Habib in a hurry and tumbled toward his dad. His parent was carefully polishing a pipe, looking at it from time to time, to find imperfections, as he always did.

Dimi just threw himself into his arms, sobbing uncontrollably.

"What is it, Dimi?" His father put his work aside immediately and began caressing his hair.

"*Dodoro*," Dimi cried, "Cezar is getting married!"

His father sighed and hugged him, then kissed the crown of his head. "Oh, Dimi, so many men in the world, and your heart had to want this *gadjo* of them all," he said softly.

"I don't want him to marry," Dimi said through the sobs. "I want him to come with me!"

"What did I tell you? You and him, you're like the sun and the moon. You could not be together."

Dimi only cried harder. He didn't want to hear that, even if it was the truth.

"What's with the boy?" he heard her mother who, by the sound of her footsteps, was coming in a hurry. "Who hurt you, Dimi?"

"His Cezar is getting married," his father explained.

His mother came to caress his hair, too. "He wasn't meant for you, Dimi," she said softly.

His parents wanted him to be happy, but they couldn't understand his pain now. How could he ever be happy without Cezar loving him?

"I wish you would sit in the carriage with us," Marcela said, placing one gloved hand on the door and looking at him with questioning eyes.

"And I would rather ride," he replied in an icy tone.

She didn't press the matter. For the moment, she seemed content with his decision to go on with the wedding. Marcela was clever, choosing her battles like that. But Cezar doubted that, after the wedding, she would continue to be as courteous and understanding as she pretended to be now.

He was riding a bit behind, his eyes cast down. The last weeks had been hell. Dozens of times, he had woken up from his bed, or left what he was doing, to saddle his horse. He had always turned back, although there were times when he got far, halfway to the gypsy camp.

For a while, he had thought that not seeing Dimi at all would heal the open wound that was his heart. At night, he dreamed only of going to see him, dropping to his knees and begging for forgiveness.

He wore the pendant around his neck. He knew what Dimi meant by it. Dimi was his sun, and he should have known it. How could one live without the sun? And what was the other half?

His mother had noticed his drawn face and reddened eyes. To her attempts to soothe him, he only replied in an irritated manner. He knew he was petty, getting satisfaction from her pained expression. His father, at least, seemed pleased. All that mattered to him was for Cezar to marry Arpad's daughter.

At times, Cezar had doubts. Had he really been fooled by his parents to obey them, as his aunt said? It was too late anyway. That summer, he had lost his heart, in an old shed, hidden in the forest, to a beautiful gypsy man with eyes clear as the sky and bright as the sun.

He should burn that place to the ground so that no one ever used it again. Maybe he should throw the pendant away, too, so that he could heal his heart and forget about the love he still felt, but he couldn't do that. It was all he had left of Dimi.

His horse neighed, waking him up from his gloom. He stared at the gypsy man waving at him to stop. It took him a moment to recognize Dimi's father.

His heart was in his throat in an instant. "Is Dimi all right?" The words left his mouth without censure.

Dimi's father just nodded. "May I have a word with you, young master?"

Cezar looked after the carriage taking Marcela and her sister to the neighbors they were visiting that afternoon. He nodded and dismounted, making his horse follow him by the side of the road.

Dimi's father took his hat off and squeezed it in his hands, looking down, as if he was trying to find his words. "You broke my boy's heart, young master," he said softly. "He barely eats or sleeps and cries when he thinks no one is looking at him."

"Please don't call me that. I'm no one's master," Cezar said in a meek voice.

"You look tired," Dimi's father said.

Cezar looked away. "What did you want to tell me?"

"Did Dimi ever tell you how I found him?"

"A few dozen times," Cezar replied with a small smile.

Dimi's father smiled at the memory. "He was so small. Someone just left him in a crate, like he was some animal to get rid of. And it was raining, and he cried so hard. He cries easily, my Dimi. I took him home to my wife and told her: Look, Stana, look what God put in my way today."

Cezar nodded. "You're a good man, Tabor. Your wife, too."

"But that is not what I want to tell you. Stana is my heart. Her father had so many girls, and he was greedy. He wanted to sell Stana to a man who was known to be a drunkard. I had no money. So I just went and stole a horse. I took the money from selling him and gave it all to her father. And he said: Stana is the most beautiful girl I have; you can't have her. So I asked for my money back, and then he said: Let's see if you can win her. And took out his dice. I knew he was a dishonest man, always playing with fake dice."

Cezar could barely see the carriage. Marcela must not have noticed he wasn't riding by their side anymore. "What did you do then?" he asked.

"I let him cast his fake dice, but then I caught his hand, and showed him. It is fake, I said to him. So? He said. I won. Then I took out my knife, and I pushed it through his hand. He bled like a pig. Screaming like one, too. And I said: Tell Stana to come here, or I put my knife in your chest. I was fifteen and believed the sun went up with Stana and set with her. I still believe that, and I could've killed her father if he hadn't given her to me."

Cezar found it hard to believe that the gentle man walking by his side could have such violent deeds in his past. But he had been wrong about people before.

"They laughed at me when Stana couldn't be with child. They told me she was cursed because I stole her from her father."

“But you didn’t steal her. You paid for her.”

Dimi’s father smiled. “I had nothing. I didn’t want Stana to have nothing but the clothes on her. So I took the money from the horse and some more.”

“You never thought she was cursed, though,” Cezar said. There was a hidden meaning to all that, and he yearned to find it.

“No. Not my Stana. God gave us Dimi. I took him to her, and she has loved him ever since, more than the eyes in her head. That’s why she told you to stay away. She knows someday, someone would take Dimi from us, and he would go. She just wants her boy to be hers a little more time.”

“I don’t mean to be rude, Tabor, but why are you telling me this?” Cezar asked.

“Dimi learned everything from us. He learned to love from seeing me how I love his mother and how she loves me. You didn’t just break his heart. You stole it for good. He won’t forgive you or forget you. He’ll come to take it back.”

Cezar stopped, but Dimi’s father continued to walk, without throwing one look back. “Wait! What do you mean?”

“I wish you a beautiful wedding day, young master,” was all Dimi’s father said as he walked away.

Chapter Fourteen

“Dimi, why aren’t you washed already?” his mom scolded him and she started to pull at his hair with her good brush.

“Leave me alone,” he said, turning his back on her.

“Is this how you’re going to sing at the wedding?” his mom insisted.

“I don’t want to sing at that wedding!” Dimi managed to escape his mom’s hands and hid under the blanket.

“We’re all invited,” his mom said. “We’re all going. Are you going to just stay here, all by yourself?”

“I’m not by myself. I have Habib with me.”

“Will Habib give you food when you’re hungry? Or wash your clothes? Get ready, or I’ll pull your ear until I go across the river with it,” his mother threatened him.

“I don’t want to sing at Cezar’s wedding!” Dimi pouted, but let his mom drag him out.

His mother handed him the soap and showed him the bucket full of water. “If I see one speck of dust on you when I get back from ironing your clothes, you’ll eat dirt for a week, Dimi!”

He sighed but obeyed. Didn’t she know he didn’t want to sing at that cursed wedding? Inside his heart, Dimi knew that he wanted to go. He wanted to see Cezar.

It didn’t matter that his heart hurt still. He was too proud to tell the truth, but his parents knew. That was why they were forcing him to go.

Cezar’s bride was a mean woman, Dimi thought as he scrubbed himself clean. She had decided to bestow her benevolence upon the poorest people she could find. They would eat and sing and dance at her wedding. Dimi only thought that they wouldn’t share the same table with the bride and groom. If they were seated with the servants, it would be good, but he didn’t expect even that.

Other people were happy. They only thought of how they would fill their bellies and drink the wine those rich people would probably throw away anyway. But Dimi felt that as a slap in his face. That woman couldn’t know who he was or what Cezar was to him. But maybe she thought there was some woman at the camp who caught Cezar’s heart, and she wanted to humiliate her.

Dimi was too proud to let a rich woman do that to him, even unknowingly. A strange and daring idea came to his mind. No one tried to humiliate him and got away with it.

“I’m glad all the formalities are over, and now we can truly enjoy our wedding,” Marcela commented cheerfully. “My darling, stop looking so sour. Anyone seeing you would think someone died, not that you’re getting married. There will be the band, and they will play some happy songs --”

“They could play a funeral march, for all I care,” Cezar said brusquely.

His wife’s cheerful countenance was getting on his nerves. Everyone was so damned happy, except for him. And aunt Cezara. He found a bit of solace in that, although his aunt was still upset with him for obeying his parents’ wishes.

“Ah, don’t be like that,” Marcela cooed. “You can’t still be thinking about that gypsy girl, can you now? Although you might see her ... Or maybe not. They’re seated at the farthest table from us. I’m not that charitable as to put her at the same table with us.”

Cezar ground his teeth hard. His wife was clearly bent on putting him down like a rabid dog. She was enjoying herself, thinking of how she was twisting the knife into his wound, by inviting the entire gypsy camp at the wedding, as a sign of goodwill toward the less fortunate.

Would he see Dimi? The band was playing, so he had to be there. But would he sing, wishing the newlyweds all the best? Would he do that? Cezar hoped not. Yet, he still hoped that he would see Dimi one more time before his life was condemned to a living hell, forever.

All the gypsies and other poor people were seated at a short table close to the gates, away from the bride and groom and all the distinguished guests. Dimi looked around in disgust. They were all so happy; he couldn’t stand them.

He and the musicians were privileged. They would be close to the newlyweds and drink and eat at a table nearby since they were needed to sing from time to time.

Dimi walked around with confidence. A few women in rich dresses watched him from behind large fans. It was a sweet day in October, but it wasn’t that hot. These fragile flowers couldn’t live in any weather. Cezar’s bride was probably the same.

He took his place on the improvised stage on one side. As he looked over to where the newlyweds sit, his eyes met Cezar’s right away.

They were so close, yet so far away. Dimi stared shamelessly, and Cezar didn’t look away. There was hunger in those haunted eyes, Dimi could tell.

Cezar looked so handsome in his groom clothes. His blond hair had been brushed over his head, and it looked shiny, parted on one side. Dimi hated that; he knew how Cezar looked, with strands of hair getting in his eyes, sweaty and happy, after being inside him or after getting fucked.

This Cezar in rich groom clothes didn't look happy at all. He was still beautiful, so beautiful Dimi's heart hurt so much he couldn't breathe. His face was gaunt, and his eyes had dark circles around them. Dimi had never had those, always sleeping like a log, but now his matched Cezar's.

The violinist pulled at his arm. "Dimi, wake up. We should start."

Dimi cleared his voice and then started speaking, wishing the newlyweds all the best while his eyes slid away from Cezar. He started singing the first song, one dedicated to Cezar's mother, about how lucky she was to welcome such a beautiful bride into her family.

"What the hell, Dimi? Sing a little faster," the violinist whispered at him angrily.

He hadn't forgotten the tempo or anything. But he could only sing that as a wailing song. How could Cezar's mother be fortunate and happy when her son wasn't?

The guests didn't appear bothered by it since they didn't know the song.

"Now I would like to sing the next song for the groom," Dimi announced, and the audience clapped, seemingly pleased with his performance so far.

He bore his eyes into Cezar's. By how intense the gaze in them appeared, Cezar hadn't gotten his eyes off of him.

"Today, I come to see you, on your wedding day," Dimi began.

Cezar could only hear one thing, Dimi's sweet voice, covering everything, the small laughs, the low key conversation at the table, everything except maybe for the beating of his heart. Dimi was so beautiful, he took his breath away. The white shirt showed off his lean body, and the black pants fit him, making his legs appear longer than they were. Cezar could only think of how those slender limbs had been wrapped around him, so many times, as he had made love to Dimi, sometimes over and over again, until exhaustion.

The words of the song got to him with some delay.

"Your parents wanted you married to a rich girl," Dimi's song wailed.

Cezar could feel his blood rushing through his veins.

"Everyone's so happy, but I cannot be," the song continued.

People began whispering, heads turning toward the singer and then toward one another. From the table where the gypsies were seated, a few laughs could be heard. They seemed to know what that was all about.

“My heart is heavy, as I am not the bride,” Dimi sang.

Cezar stood up, and curious looks set on him. Marcela caught his hand, digging her fingernails into the skin, hurting him. She was livid. “Did she put him to sing this?” she asked him through his teeth.

“I only want to wish you well, and to forget about our love,” the song followed to the next verse. “Your father didn’t want me --”

By now, a few guests seemed scandalized.

“Did she put him to sing this horrible song?” Marcela’s voice reached him, like through a mass of water.

“I wouldn’t know,” he replied, without looking at her.

He only had eyes for Dimi, his beautiful Dimi who was looking at him like they were the only two people there.

Dimi couldn’t continue his song as a few men hurried to take him down from the stage. He looked at him over one shoulder as he was dragged away. Cezar moved, wanting to go after him, but Marcela’s fingernails were breaking the skin, making it bleed.

“Sit down, Cezar,” his father-in-law ordered him from one side. “You won’t turn this into a scandal as you always do.”

What great family he was marrying into, Cezar thought bitterly, as he sat down, like a good lap dog. He cast his eyes down. Dimi still loved him. He wouldn’t have sung that song otherwise. But what good could that do? He was already married.

The band began playing something happy, but without a singer, the music meant nothing to Cezar. He took the glass in front of him and started drinking.

“Couldn’t you wait to make a toast?” Marcela asked him, disgust evident in her voice.

“And endure thirst until then?” he replied in a frosty voice.

“You’re impossible! I should go to your mistress and drag her out by her hair for daring to try ruining my wedding,” she hissed.

“You invited them,” Cezar shrugged. “I suppose revenge is a dish better served cold, and you’re too hot-headed, darling.”

Marcela was seething, but, despite her attitude, she knew too well that she needed to keep up with the appearance of a benevolent host.

They were about to serve the third course, for which Cezar couldn't care less. He searched for his glass again.

"No more," Marcela hissed at him again. "People are staring at us. This is your fourth."

"I seem to be terribly thirsty, darling," Cezar said with a shrug.

He was far from being drunk. He felt only anger, mainly at himself. Dimi still loved him, and he stood there, like a trained monkey, doing other people's bidding, and ignoring his own happiness.

He got what he deserved. He should have run away with Dimi. He should have ignored his father's threats and his mother's tears. How could they love him so little? His aunt was right, after all.

He should have been a man about what he truly wanted.

"At least, smile once in a while," Marcela continued to annoy him.

He was about to offer her a scathing retort when he heard a horse neighing loudly. Cezar stopped, his hand in mid-air, still searching for his glass, his breath caught in his chest. Could it be ...?

The people at the table fell silent, and all eyes were on the front gates that looked to be under a veritable assault.

"What's the meaning of this?" his father-in-law asked in an irritated voice. "Can't I have peace here, in my own home?"

The gates gave up and burst open, letting a beautiful black stallion rush through the rows of tables. This time, Cezar was quick, and Marcela's hand failed to grab him. He jumped over the table, not caring about the broken glass and shouts behind him.

The stallion was galloping straight at him, but Cezar wasn't afraid. He knew the rider well. He knew him to be the best rider in the land, and he trusted him with his life. Dimi just stretched one arm to him, and Cezar took it, lifting himself fast and mounting Habib in one fluid motion.

"Hold on tight, Cezar," Dimi shouted at him, and he circled his lover's waist with both arms, praying that Habib wouldn't throw them and make them both look like fools.

Shouting victoriously, Dimi steered Habib back. A few servants tried to get in the way, but no one dared to face the stallion. From the table where the gypsies were seated, cheers could be heard.

The surprise must have been too much because whoever wanted to come after them had given up, as Habib put more and more distance between them. Cezar wrapped his arms tightly around Dimi. “Dimi,” he started.

“Don’t say a word, Cezar,” Dimi said in a grave voice.

Cezar felt a small chill. Where was the reckless summer child? Who was this determined man? He fell silent, waiting for Dimi to decide what he wanted to do with both of them.

He watched as Dimi stopped Habib only so that he could grab what looked like a bag hidden in the brush by the side of the forest trail, and then they rode further. All this time, Dimi said nothing, and just continued to steer Habib toward a destination only he knew.

They finally stopped by the edge of the forest. In front of them, a road stretched sinuously.

“Get down,” Dimi ordered.

Cezar obeyed without a word. Did Dimi want to punish him? Leave him there, to go back on foot, and on his own? He expected at least a punch in the face. That would have made things cleaner.

Dimi dismounted, too. He dropped the bag on the ground and then he stared at Cezar with burning eyes. “Open your shirt.”

Cezar began unbuttoning his shirt. He had an inkling what Dimi wanted to see. Could Dimi think that he would ever part with that thing? Maybe yes, that was what he believed, seeing how Cezar had been the one to tell him that he didn’t love him anymore.

Dimi took in the pendant hanging around his neck with scrutinizing eyes. Without a word, he opened his shirt, too, and Cezar could see where the pair of his pendant was. “The moon?” he asked.

Dimi nodded shortly. And then he moved fast and grabbed Cezar by the back of his neck, and kissed him with his lips closed and cold, just pressing against his mouth angrily.

Cezar didn’t know what to make of it all. He was glad Dimi wasn’t rejecting him, but this time around, he didn’t dare to assume that he knew what was going through his beautiful lover’s head. It was unsettling to feel Dimi forceful and cold like that.

Dimi let him and took one step back. “Why, Cezar? Why did you marry her?”

Cezar looked down.

“No!” Dimi shouted. “Look at me! I want to hear your lying mouth and what it has to say!”

“My father is ruined, Dimi,” Cezar said, looking up, as ordered. “I have nothing. I might be poorer than you are.”

Dimi seemed surprised, but his lips remained set in a deep, grim line. “So?”

“So I needed to save the family.”

“By marrying her?”

“Yes.”

“And you lied to me? About no longer being in love with me?” Dimi questioned.

“Yes,” Cezar admitted. “I wanted you to hate me.”

“I hate you. Are you happy?”

Cezar shook his head. “No. I thought it would be easier. You would forget about me. I didn’t realize that I will be the one unable to forget you.”

“I didn’t,” Dimi said. “And you didn’t, either. But, still, you married her.”

There was genuine hurt in those words.

“I did,” Cezar admitted. “I can’t change that.”

Dimi shook his head. He marched toward Cezar and took him by the hand. “You’re coming with me.”

“You’re stealing me?” Cezar finally realized what was going on.

“Yes, I’m stealing you,” Dimi said through his teeth.

“I’m not a girl, Dimi,” Cezar protested.

“So what? I don’t care. You’re mine, and you can’t run away from me.”

“Do you really want me still?” Cezar asked.

“I do. I hate you, but I do.”

Dimi made a gesture for him to climb on the back of the horse, and then followed, too. Cezar no longer questioned what that meant.

Dimi paid for a room and a place in the stables for Habib and turned toward Cezar with a small smile. “In these clothes, I can pass for a gentleman, too.”

Cezar smiled back at him. The innkeeper was a surly man who didn't spare them a second glance. He followed Dimi as they climbed the stairs to their room for the night.

It was already evening, and Dimi lit up a small lamp placed by the side of the only bed in the room. "Undress," he said.

Cezar could feel Dimi was still angry. It was wearing off, though, just as the smile from earlier had proven. But something was needed, still.

Dimi began undressing, too. Soon, they were both naked, and Dimi walked toward him. He took the pendant off his chest and then touched the one hanging by Cezar's neck. He put the two together, and Cezar saw that they fit. "The sun and the moon," he said softly. "You're my sun, and I'm your moon?"

Dimi nodded. "Ever since *dodoro* knew what was going on with us, he said that. That we're like the sun and the moon, he kept saying it. That we can't be together."

Cezar sighed and brought Dimi's lips to his. "But you don't think that," he said, after a short, gentle kiss.

Dimi shook his head. "I cannot. I don't care about anyone but you."

"And you don't care that I'm married now?" Cezar asked.

"She can't have you," Dimi said. "No one can have you but me."

Cezar laughed and caressed Dimi's cheeks slowly. "You're angry with me. For not being strong enough to want you as much as you want me."

"I am," Dimi admitted. "But the sun and the moon are together. They are up in the sky together, even if we don't see them."

"Quite the astronomer, aren't you?" Cezar smiled.

"What?" Dimi asked.

"Nothing. Nothing else matters. I'm here with you."

Dimi kissed him gently this time. He was strangely subdued, compared to his attitude from earlier. Cezar would have expected to be taken hard, and he would have accepted it since it was Dimi.

But instead, Dimi was getting back to being a bit shy, a bit wanting, just as Cezar knew and loved him best.

“Did you mean it? With that song? Did you want to be my bride?” Cezar teased him, but his voice was getting hoarse, as Dimi’s hands began touching him, rough thumbs going over his nipples, and descending lower, caressing his flanks.

“I know I can’t be that,” Dimi replied. “But you were meant for me, and only me. No woman can be your bride.”

“Do you want me, Dimi? Do you want to take me?” Cezar asked.

Dimi shook his head. “It is your wedding night. You’re the groom, and I am the one in your bed.”

“Only you,” Cezar whispered, and pushed Dimi gently toward the bed.

The sheets were coarse and nothing like the fine linen he was used to, but for Cezar right now, they felt like they belonged on a royal bed. Dimi was shivering slightly, and Cezar moved his hand to untie his unruly hair that fell on his shoulders. “I love you, Dimi,” he said tenderly while looking his lover in his eyes.

The sun and the moon. Dimi was right. How could anyone deny what they felt? In that small room, in a place away from anyone they knew, they came together like two parts of a half.

Dimi whimpered as Cezar began to enter him. They moved slowly, a bit too afraid to let go completely, but that didn’t make it any less exquisite. “Your body is a wonder, Dimi,” he whispered. “I could only make love to you, all my life.”

“Then make love to me,” Dimi demanded, and threw Cezar one of his looks, the one that was both naughty and nice.

Cezar closed their lips together. Dimi’s tongue was a small wild animal trapped, but squirming, not to get free, but to dig itself deeper. Cezar had never wanted to be inside someone as badly as he wanted with Dimi. And his lover had to feel the same, and that was why they were kissing so deeply that they could get so dizzy with lack of air to breathe.

Dimi wrapped his legs around Cezar’s body and lifted his hips. How had he succeeded to make this wonderful man his? Cezar began moving, taking Dimi with everything he had, and Dimi moved against him, murmuring, crying out, whispering, and demanding to be taken over and over again.

“So good, Cezar,” he said in the same voice that seemed to wonder at the pleasure they could share.

“You’re the one making it good,” Cezar replied, as he began pounding hard into the slender body underneath.

Dimi was throwing his head back, his eyes rolling in his head, and by the short moves of his hips, Cezar could tell that he was coming hard. He moved, again and again, wanting that moment to last forever, but his body betrayed him, and he fell, like a rock at the bottom of mysterious waters, and felt all the pain and regret of the last weeks washing away.

Dimi caressed his head as he rested it against his shoulder. "Is your wedding night all that you wanted?"

"It is everything I didn't hope to have," Cezar replied.

Dimi rubbed his eyes and yawned, making Cezar laugh. "What?" he asked and scowled.

"Your hair is something in the morning," Cezar replied.

"What? Do you want to brush it for me?"

"I would."

"Good. Then buy a brush. My mom won't let you use hers."

"Buy a brush? Did you forget that I'm poor now?"

Dimi pondered, looking at Cezar, how good he looked, stretched on the bed like that, wearing nothing but a satisfied grin on his handsome face. "If you're that poor, you're like a gypsy. Now you know that you must come with me. There's no place left in your world for you."

Cezar's smile faded a little. "First, I will need to go back."

"Back?" Dimi frowned. "I stole you from your wedding. You don't have to go back."

"I do."

"No," Dimi said.

He grabbed Cezar by his hair down there and pulled hard.

"Ouch! Dimi!" Cezar complained. "Are you planning on pulling my hair completely?"

"It's not like it's the hair on your head. No one sees that."

Cezar began laughing, and Dimi slapped him over one tit. By the look in Cezar's eyes, he had done something that he must have liked. Dimi slapped him again. Cezar's nipple got hard instantly. Curious, Dimi began pulling at it.

"All right, stop," Cezar warned, but it looked like his cock didn't mind it at all.

Dimi straddled Cezar and pushed the hard cock inside him without a problem. Cezar had come so much that night that he was full still. Dimi grabbed both his nipples and played hard with them while he pushed himself down over and over again.

It was good to ride Cezar like that. He could take from Cezar's cock as much as he wanted. And he was on top. Cezar groaned and closed his eyes, and bucked his hips helplessly. Dimi couldn't keep it in. He felt so much, and Cezar's cock was so big.

He liked it best when he didn't have to use his hands. He was coming fast and hard all over Cezar's chest and belly.

It didn't look like Cezar would take long, either. Dimi now understood what he heard women saying, about tying up their men with what they did between the sheets. He could do that with Cezar. And then he would forget everything about wanting to go back to that mean woman.

With a small sigh, he dismounted and crashed next to Cezar, putting his head on his shoulder. "Do you still want to go back?"

"I don't want to. I have to. That's a difference."

This time, Dimi pushed himself up and began dressing up angrily. Could it be that Cezar still didn't want him?

"You're angry for nothing, Dimi," Cezar said. "I only go back so that I can annul the marriage."

"Annul?" Dimi asked, staring at Cezar.

"I don't want to be tied up to her," Cezar explained.

"You will make marrying her go away?"

"Something like that. I hope to finish fast."

"But what if she doesn't want to let you go?"

Cezar smiled thinly. Dimi knew Cezar could be mean. He was glad he wasn't mean with him anymore.

"Not even she can stand a scandal like my running away from the wedding, with a handsome gypsy man," Cezar said, his smile turning softer as he looked at him. "Her parents care about her reputation and won't let her go too far with this. My demand for an annulment will be welcomed, and I can bet everything that I have on that."

Dimi snickered. "You don't have anything."

“You’re right. I forgot. I will need money to go back. Do you think you can spare some? I see you carry quite a fat purse,” Cezar teased.

“I took the money from that horse. Mom will kill me when I go back to them.”

“Just how many times has your mother killed you so far?” Cezar questioned.

Dimi laughed at that. “I will give you money. But once you’re done with her, come looking for us. We’ll ride south, where it is warmer.”

“I don’t know how long it will take,” Cezar said.

Dimi pursed his lips. He wouldn’t get back on his decision now, the one inside his heart. Cezar was the one, and not because of the reason Dimi had thought. It wasn’t because of how much Cezar wanted him, but because of how much he wanted Cezar.

There would be no freedom for him, Dimi thought, as he stole glances at Cezar, watching him getting dressed. But Cezar would not know that he was caught and tamed, Dimi decided.

He frowned as he noticed the flower fastened to Cezar’s lapel, the one he had to wear as a groom. He walked over to him and took the flower, then he went to the window and let the wind take it.

“I’ll come for you, Dimi. Don’t go around stealing men’s hearts. I wouldn’t forgive you.”

Dimi smiled as he looked over his shoulder. That was Cezar, the man he loved. His clothes were wrinkled, and his hair wasn’t brushed, and he had a big smile because of how much Dimi had loved him the night before.

One month later

Cezar encouraged his horse, but climbing the steep hill seemed a bit too much for him. He was about to turn back when he saw, finally, what he was looking for. His horse didn’t share his enthusiasm as he tried to make him break into a gallop.

At least, his shouts had the desired effect. The rider on top of the hill finally noticed him and he guided his stallion to meet him halfway.

“Cezar, you came!” Dimi shouted. “Did you get rid of her?”

Cezar couldn’t keep from smiling. He liked Dimi’s way of talking like they had a conversation just minutes ago and they were taking it from where they left it, although it had been almost a month since they last saw each other.

“It’s not a nice way of saying it, but yes.”

Dimi grinned. “Was she mad?”

“I can’t tell you that. I didn’t see her at all. Or my parents. They don’t want anything to do with me now. But at least they are all right, and my aunt Cezara will take care of them.”

Dimi eyed his horse with interest. “If you’re poor now, how come you have a horse? He’s not an old one, either, and he’s not lame.”

“Seeing how he can’t take me over the hill, I suspect that it’s either a hidden lameness or he’s simply lazy.”

“Did you steal him?” Dimi questioned, his critical scrutiny of Cezar’s horse continuing.

“Do you really want me to break the law that badly? No, I bought him.”

“With what money?” Dimi questioned him.

“Aren’t you a wife now?” Cezar said with a big smile.

The comparison had to be much to Dimi’s liking because he grinned broadly.

“All right. My aunt helped me.”

“Is she rich?”

“She’s the one I’ve been telling you about.”

“The one who knows about us?” Dimi asked.

“Yes, that’s her.”

Dimi nodded thoughtfully.

“I came to take you with me, Dimi,” Cezar said. “I’ve been on the road for days, following your camp’s trail, and I can’t wait anymore.”

The satisfied smile on Dimi’s face at his eager confession told him all he needed to know. Now and then, doubts had come to his heart over the last weeks, while away. What if Dimi got tired of waiting? What if he didn’t want him anymore?

“Where do you want to take me?” Dimi asked with curious eyes.

“Home. My home.”

Dimi seemed a bit taken aback and said nothing.

Cezar took his horse closer, to fall in synch with Habib. "I bought you from your parents already, as is your tradition."

Dimi turned toward him, almost making Habib stop. "I'm not a girl! How much did you pay?"

Cezar leaned closer and whispered into his ear the amount he had given to Dimi's parents.

Dimi giggled. "You're a fool, Cezar. That's how much you pay for a virgin!"

"And? I remember someone hadn't been even properly kissed when I took his virginity," Cezar said.

"What did they say?" Dimi asked.

"They were thankful for the money. And your mom cried a little. I know it will be hard for them without you. Aren't you adventuring a bit too far from your people these days?"

"I go ahead and check for places where we can camp," Dimi said promptly. "I have the fastest horse," he added, as he caressed Habib's neck lovingly.

"Dimi," Cezar insisted, his restlessness from before coming back to him. "What do you say? Will you come home with me?"

Dimi looked at him with his luminous eyes. "Just ride with me until it's summer again. Ride with me, Cezar. Then I'll know."

"What will you know?" Cezar asked.

Dimi was pushing Habib to go faster, and Cezar cursed under his breath. His man wanted him to work for it.

"Hey, Dimi!" he called after him. "I haven't even kissed you!"

"Ride with me, and you'll have all the kisses in the world!" Dimi threw over his shoulder.

Cezar hurried after him. His poor horse neighed dejectedly. "Dimi, my horse is not your Habib!"

Dimi stopped and made Habib trot gracefully until they faced each other. He grabbed Cezar hard by the front of his shirt and pulled him close. The kiss was hungry, and it had teeth, but Cezar didn't mind. It was sweet, too, and it told everything Dimi had yet to say to him.

"Ride with me until summer, and I'll come with you to the end of the world," Dimi promised.

Cezar smiled. "Do you want me to live like a gypsy?"

"And I will live like a gentleman, after that," Dimi promised.

They both burst into laughter.

“I don’t have that planned for you,” Cezar said.

“Then what?” Dimi asked.

“You’ll see,” Cezar said enigmatically. “You’ll have to wait until next summer.”

Epilogue

“My boys,” aunt Cezara said, with tears in her eyes, as they walked into her home, bringing the sun with them. “You both look so grown up!”

Cezar laughed and hurried to kiss her. Dimi stood a bit back, still a bit uncomfortable in his new clothes, and especially riding boots. Cezar had had to remind him at least a dozen times how much he wanted them and that he couldn't complain now. Therefore, Dimi was suffering in dejected silence.

Cezar just wanted to tease him and tell him that he didn't have to imitate him, but Dimi was bent on learning how to be a gentleman, like him. Of course, where they were heading, there would be little need for all the things that were going through Dimi's head, such as if he had to learn French, or how to drink tea the gentleman way.

“Come, Dimi,” Cezara said, and Dimi finally found the courage to walk closer.

Cezar loved how determined his aunt was and was more than pleased when she took Dimi into her arms and kissed him on both cheeks. By how Dimi's face became red instantly, he could tell Dimi was happy, even if a little embarrassed.

“How are my parents?” Cezar asked.

His aunt shook her head. “They might need a little more time, Cezar. But don't worry. They are well, and, as long as I live, they won't hear the end of how they should treat you as their beloved son, not as a stranger. Come now, I can barely wait to hear of your adventures.”

“So we're not staying with your aunt?” Dimi asked when they were on the road again.

“No,” Cezar replied.

“So where are we going?” Dimi asked again.

“Somewhere you will like it very much, I think,” Cezar said and smiled.

Dimi pouted, but only a little. He was getting rid more and more of his childish ways, as he was the only one to name them that, now that he was no longer living with his parents. Cezar could not help but find his efforts endearing.

The road was not hard, but it was long, so they stopped along the way a few times. Dimi was dying to ask him again about their destination, but he was quite the stoic so far.

Cezar didn't want to ruin the surprise. He hoped Dimi would like it. If he didn't, they would just find something else to do, but he had a feeling he wasn't off the mark.

Dimi's eyes grew wide as he took in the large pasture, and the horses grazing in the distance. "What is this?" he asked, his eyes filled with wonder. "Is it ours? I mean, yours? All of this? The horses, too?"

Cezar laughed. "Ours. And yes, the horses, too. We will take care of them and sell some of them for a profit. I need to take care of my parents, too, even if aunt Cezara doesn't mind keeping them with her."

Dimi threw him a furtive look. "Will they ever love you again?"

Cezar sighed. "Let's just take things as they go. If I help my father to get back on his feet, I hope he'll have a better opinion of me."

"Because of me, they hate you," Dimi said in a mournful voice.

Cezar caressed the blond head and pulled Dimi close. "They don't hate me; don't worry. They're just too set in their ways. And I know my aunt. She will torture them day after day by telling them how they should be more accepting of me."

"My parents love you," Dimi said, looking up. "If yours never love you, mine will love you so that you don't have to be sad about it."

Cezar laughed. "How about you go look at the horses from up close?"

"Can we have as many as we can?" Dimi asked excitedly.

"As many as we can take care of. We will hire hands on occasion, but for the most time, we'll do the work. And we will need to go to fairs, and find buyers, and all that."

"How come you don't mind working, Cezar?" Dimi asked him. "Aren't you a gentleman? But you know how to make fire, even to cook," he said in unhidden amazement.

"I've been in the army for a while before becoming a student with unfinished studies," Cezar explained.

"Why haven't you told me about that?" Dimi questioned.

"I didn't want to run out of things to say. Also, I remember my mouth being too busy kissing you the moment we were alone together."

Dimi touched his mouth gingerly. "I do, too."

"So, what do you say? Do you like it?"

"I adore it!" Dimi exclaimed, opening his arms wide. "Can I take off my boots now?"

“Sure,” Cezar replied and smiled.

Ever since they left the camp, Dimi had been suspiciously obedient, almost never talking out of turn or doing things the Dimi way. Cezar suspected that it had something to do with Dimi wanting to become a gentleman, and, for the moment, he had fun with it.

Soon, he would just tell his lover that he could take off all his clothes if he wanted and that he didn't want him to become a gentleman at all.

Dimi shouted in pure happiness as he freed himself from his boots and began running toward the horses. Cezar leaned against the wooden railing and stared after him. There, in front of his eyes, was everything he loved, and he couldn't ask the heavens for anything more.

Cezar wasn't that surprised to wake up to an empty bed. Dimi was a morning person, but somehow, Cezar suspected him that he didn't sleep too much in their bed after they made love, anyway.

The dawn wasn't there yet, and Cezar had to find his way outside without a lamp.

“Hey,” Dimi called from the dark.

“I should ask you what you're doing here, at this hour, but I bet it has something to do with horses.”

“No,” Dimi said. “Come here, Cezar.”

Cezar finally found his lover and sat on the grass next to him. “Were you looking at the sky?”

“Yes. It's so beautiful up here. The sky is so close.”

“Dimi,” Cezar asked, not wanting to let the worm of doubt gnaw at him, “did I make a mistake taking you away from your parents? Will you feel alone here?”

“Alone?” Dimi asked. “I'm with you.”

“But don't you miss your parents?” Cezar asked, feeling that it was his duty to insist.

“I do. But they will come here to visit. Just like your aunt. And we'll see them again.”

“All my life, I dreamed of this,” Cezar confessed. “Of having my own place where I could be alone.”

Dimi shifted in his place. “Don't you want me here, with you?”

“Why would you say that? If I never dreamed of being with someone, it was just because I had yet to meet you.”

Dimi exhaled. “You seem sad, sometimes.”

“I’m not sad,” Cezar protested. “Well, maybe a little. Do you love me, Dimi? You’ve never told me, not even once. You just say how much you want me, or how I belong to you, but --”

“I do. I love you, Cezar.”

As simple as that. Everything was simple with Dimi.

“Aren’t you just saying it because I told you this?” Cezar asked, not daring to feel hopeful.

“No.”

“Then how come you’ve never said it?”

Dimi sighed. “I was afraid of what the fortuneteller told me.”

“How come? Did I appear as a scary man in that old woman’s cards?”

“No. You appeared beautiful. She told me that. And she also told me that the love of my life would make me leave everything behind, my parents, the others, everything. That this love would swallow me whole and I wouldn’t be me anymore. And I got scared.”

Cezar laughed softly and shook his head. “You and your superstitions, Dimi. And I didn’t swallow you whole.”

“You did,” Dimi said in protest. “When you take my cock in your mouth and --”

“Dimi, I doubt that old woman thought of my cocksucking when she told you that.”

Dimi giggled. “Maybe. But I needed to know you were the one. Although I knew. The moment I looked up and saw you that first time, I knew. You were staring back at me, and the world stood still. I could not hear a thing. But I just had to make sure.”

“And are you sure now?” Cezar moved closer and took Dimi by the shoulders.

His lover cuddled and pressed against him head to toes. “You came on the journey with me. The fortuneteller told me that. It was how I knew for sure.”

“Oh, Dimi, you really needed me to live on the road for months so that you could verify the words of an old woman?”

“I had to make sure. What if it was someone else and I thought about him to be the love of my life, but then you would come along, but I was already taken, and that man didn’t care about coming on the road with me?”

“Your way of thinking sometimes flabbergasts me.”

“What? Stop using complicated words,” Dimi said, seeming pretty miffed.

“It surprises me; that’s all. I won’t have you learn complicated words, or French, or how to drink tea. I love you just the way you are.”

“But I want to learn. You have so many books. Are there beautiful stories in there?”

“Yes, and I can read them to you.”

“But will you teach me the letters?”

“If you want it so badly, yes.”

“Good. I want that,” Dimi said in a serious voice.

“I thought you only wanted horses.”

“No, not only horses. Any gypsy dreams. I dreamed of you and horses. I have those now, so I need another dream. And I am yours now; I must learn to be like you.”

“I like the sound of that. How you are mine. Does this place have enough of what you dreamed of?” Cezar asked, playing slowly with one lock of Dimi’s hair.

“Even more. You’re mine, too. And we’re so free here. We can make love any time we want.”

Cezar laughed. “I’m glad to see that I’m not the only one who got a little tired of sneaking around. Sleeping with your parents practically in the same room was a sort of torture. I felt like I needed to prove myself not to be a horny fiend every single moment.”

Dimi snickered. “We did a lot of sneaking around. And I stole your kisses when they weren’t watching.”

“Yeah, you were naughty like that.”

“But here, I can kiss you with no one watching,” Dimi said with a satisfied sigh.

“That’s true,” Cezar agreed. “So, are you still afraid?”

“Afraid of what?”

“Don’t tell me you forgot already,” Cezar said with a tiny bit of exasperation.

Dimi snickered. "I'm not afraid anymore. I know what swallowing me whole means now."

"You naughty boy," Cezar said and laughed, too. "I'll have you swallow me whole repeatedly, too, if you insist on teasing me."

"I'm not afraid anymore," Dimi said solemnly. "I love you, Cezar."

Dimi moved to straddle him, and, in the faint light of the breaking dawn, Cezar could make his silhouette against the sky. Above them, Cezar noticed, at one end, the moon was slowly fading away, while at the other, the first rays of the sun were announcing the coming of a new day.

Dimi was right, after all. The sun and the moon were together in the sky, as they were meant to be by fate and laws of nature.

THE END